Angel’s Story

James P. Lynch

Publishing House Name & Address

Copyright [©](http://www.BookDesignTemplates.com) 2025 by James P Lynch

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission.

Author/Publishing Company Name

Street Address

City, State/Province Postal-Code

www.website-url.com

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Book Layout [©](http://www.BookDesignTemplates.com) 2016 [BookDesignTemplates.com](http://www.bookdesigntemplates.com)

Voiceless Angel/ James P. Lynch. -- 1st ed.

ISBN 978-0-0000000-0-0

Dedication to Someone or a Quotation

Contents

[Jane’s Childhood 4](#_Toc192445584)

[Abandoned 4](#_Toc192445585)

[Getting a Job 9](#_Toc192445586)

[A Room Upstairs 14](#_Toc192445587)

[Settling In 16](#_Toc192445588)

[Jane's Travail 18](#_Toc192445589)

[Kidnapped 18](#_Toc192445590)

[Jane’s Recovery 21](#_Toc192445591)

[Recovery 21](#_Toc192445592)

[Self Defense 27](#_Toc192445593)

[A New Job 36](#_Toc192445594)

[Robbing the Mob 50](#_Toc192445595)

[Learning About The Merricks 50](#_Toc192445596)

[Mob Money 51](#_Toc192445597)

[Zhang’s Oriental Emporium 53](#_Toc192445598)

[Drugs, Interrupted 59](#_Toc192445599)

[Mob Money, Part Deux 63](#_Toc192445600)

[Human Trafficking 66](#_Toc192445601)

[Angel at Work 66](#_Toc192445602)

[Chinatown 75](#_Toc192445603)

[Jane’s Software Career 79](#_Toc192445604)

[Working Life 79](#_Toc192445605)

[Fighting Back 90](#_Toc192445606)

[The Handsome Policeman 95](#_Toc192445607)

[Officer Merrick 102](#_Toc192445608)

[Assassinating a Policeman 102](#_Toc192445609)

CHAPTER 1

Jane’s Childhood

Abandoned

My name is Jane Doe 413.

Why was I given a mechanical name so bereft of family and love?

I pondered this conundrum, looking out my second-floor window at the street in Chicago’s Chinatown. It’s quiet today, Wednesday, May 27, 2047, with no pedestrians in sight. I live at 234 West Alexander Street, a three-story building where I rent a two-bedroom flat on the second floor. The Chinese Catholic church at the end of my street is just a short stroll from my building. Walking just a little farther to South Wentworth Avenue, the Chinese businesses all have English and Mandarin signage. But my street is residential, tree-lined, a hodge-podge of apartment buildings.

It’s garbage day on Alexander Street, and I watch the Tesla AI-assisted humanoid robots pick up each refuse container and dump it into the electric garbage truck. Even inside, with my windows closed, I can hear the whirr-whirr of the robot’s electric motors. Tesla wraps these city robots in a transparent flexible plastic skin that makes them impervious to water. My building has two of these containers, and since I’m the youngest tenant, I usually drag the bins from the first-floor hallway to the street every Wednesday.

Walking over to the full-length mirror in my living room, I scan today’s running ensemble. I’m five foot eleven with natural blond hair, worn long, just past my shoulder blades. Today, I selected a light yellow cotton T-shirt and matching yellow running shorts for my daily run through Grant Park. My Nike running shoes cost me a pretty penny. I usually don’t wear a bra when I run.

The Weather Channel predicts afternoon temperatures will be 105º with high humidity. Due to the melting of permafrost in Siberia and the Yukon, global warming has accelerated beyond the worst fears of climate scientists. In Chicago, we get the extremes: hot summers and frigid winters.

I check to be sure I’m wearing my fake zirconium wedding ring. I do this because men find me sexually attractive: a pretty face, long natural blond hair, and an athletic body. I just can’t deal with their overtures at this stage of my life. If I’m approached on the street by men or occasionally women, I raise my ring finger and shake my head to say no. That usually works. There’s another reason I don’t want to speak to them.

I can’t.

I’m mute and have been so since birth. I know a little sign language but typically use text-to-voice apps on my cell phone or tablet computer to communicate. My heart tells me that once a man learns this, my malady disqualifies me from a long-term relationship, and their interest in me would only be for a one-off pump-and-dump.

As I reach for my fanny pack, where I’ll store my smartphone, water bottle, house key, and an illegal mini-stun gun, I hear the sound of raindrops. In seconds, it’s a torrent, a product of unbridled global warming. We get a lot of rain in the summer this far north, and the evaporation over Lake Michigan adds to it. I look at my treadmill in the living room and hope Professor Liang below is out since he can hear the thump-thump of my machine.

My parents were of Ukrainian descent and meth addicts. My birth must have been a home delivery in a squalid drug den because they abandoned me on December 23, 2027, in Grant Park on the Lake Michigan waterfront when I was just two days old. I lay there, wrapped in a dirty towel, for a short time in 35-degree weather before a pedestrian called the police. An ambulance rushed me to the hospital at 1 a.m.

During my home birth, something got into my mouth and throat that caused a severe allergic reaction. My tonsils, larynx, and windpipe swelled up, closing my airway. The ER staff woke up the pediatric resident to do a tracheotomy. Unfortunately, he had been drinking surreptitiously and was in no condition to perform such a procedure on a tiny patient. The hospital called for a pediatric surgeon to come in, but it took an hour before this specialist arrived.

Sadly, my swollen airway caused oxygen deprivation, resulting in brain damage, severing the neural pathway from my brain to my vocal cords and effectively destroying my cerebral cortex's ability to create speech or any other sound, for that matter. The pediatric surgeon inserted an endotracheal tube to restore airflow to my lungs, and my vital signs returned.

They saved my life, but I had no voice. The hospital created a birth record for me, naming me Jane Doe 413.

Foster families cared for me until I was six. They weren't abusive, but they couldn't do much since I couldn't cry out or speak. An ugly secret of the Foster Care System is that many couples foster children solely for the money. Fortunately, I have little memory of those years.

Child Protective Services (CPS) transferred me to a boarding school, the Alden School for the Deaf, in Rockford. The CPS staff thought Alden could teach me sign language. I was a mute child in a classroom of deaf children, but I made the most of the opportunity. I was the top student in my reading, writing, and math classes. I lived there for two years.

Unfortunately, state funding reductions reduced the number of children the school could educate. Not being deaf resulted in me, in an enormous mistake by CPS, being transferred to the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children outside of St. Charles, Illinois. This institution housed a hundred students who could not function as normal children. Their parents had given up on them. Doing puzzles or putting on their clothes are monumental challenges. Sadly, I had fallen between the cracks. The senior staff disregarded my Alden School for the Deaf records and just assumed I was another imbecile who could not talk. Formerly a minor Christian college, the main building had classrooms, a library, and a dining hall, while the students lived in an attached dormitory.

The teachers who supervised the children liked me because I'd help them calm kids with tantrums. I'd wipe noses and change the diapers of the girls who had accidents. The younger children would respond better to someone their age, and my blond hair and pleasant face put them at ease.

Fortunately, one kind teacher, Ms. Adams, recognized that I was bright, even brilliant. So, she started feeding me a succession of books to read, graduating from children's books to classics like Pride and Prejudice. Eventually, the Institution found it best to leave me alone to read whatever interested me in the library, which was empty and quiet. I was never a discipline problem, always on time for meals, so they generally left me to my own devices.

I read every day for ten years, starting with an old copy of the Encyclopedia Britannica. I taught myself English literature, philosophy, history, and science. In my last years at the Institution, I threw myself into mathematics, algebra, and everything I could find about computers and artificial intelligence.

Ms. Adams bought me a refurbished laptop computer from eBay. Using it, I taught myself four computer languages: C, C++, Rust, and Python. Even though she realized I was brilliant but couldn't speak, the school administration preferred keeping me around since the state paid for my residency.

I never considered running away. Where would I go? I knew my parents had abandoned me; I had no family anywhere.

There was another reason why they wanted to keep me out of sight. I was raped once by an Institution employee. I was 13 years old, beautiful, and had developed early, but I had no idea what he was doing to me. They fired the rapist, and the in-house doctor gave me the Morning After pill. When I didn't get pregnant or test positive for sexually transmitted diseases, they told me everything would be OK and to forget about it. Like some Christian churches, the facility thought its reputation was more important than justice for one of its charges.

When I turned 18, the school decided to release me. They gave me $200, a copy of my birth certificate, school ID, a letter of recommendation, two sets of clothes, shoes, a jacket, and a small duffel bag to carry them. I was also allowed to take the laptop with me. The Institution’s management gave me the address of the Ship of Hope Halfway House for Runaway Teenagers and Battered Women in Chicago, which would house and assist me in getting a job. I didn’t tell them that I had no interest in going from one Institution to another. So, after they put me on a Greyhound bus, I decided to go to Chicago and fend for myself.

Getting a Job

I bought a notepad and Sharpie at the downtown Chicago bus station. I found a McDonald's, wrote down my choice, and bought my first fast food. Next, I logged onto their WiFi and perused the daily help-wanted sites for Chicago. Finding an entry for a dishwasher at Bob's 24-hour Diner on South Canal Street, only six city blocks from the bus station, I wrote on my notepad:

*Hi, my name is Jane Doe.*

*I am unable to speak. I am not deaf.*

*I would like to apply for your dishwasher job.*

*I am 18 years old and have a birth certificate and a school ID.*

*Give me a chance, and I'll work hard for you. I promise.*

Walking to the Diner, I arrived at 4 p.m. I was surprised at how large the restaurant was. I handed my note to the lady at the cash register. Reading the message, she smiled at me and yelled.

"Bob, can you come to the register?"

A man with salt and pepper curly hair and a friendly face walked up, and the woman gave him my note. After reading it, he looked at me attentively.

"Let's talk about it in my office."

We walked through the diner. Bob stopped several times to chat with customers. Finally, passing through the kitchen, he sat in his office and motioned for me to sit across the desk.

"May I see your birth certificate and school ID?"

I handed them to him and got out my laptop, starting the text-to-voice app.

"It says that you are from a school for intellectually disabled children. Are you disabled intellectually, in addition to being mute?"

I started typing. The voice-to-text app spoke for me with a feminine, slightly robotic voice.

*"I certainly don't think so. A person who could operate a laptop computer would hardly qualify as intellectually disabled."*

"Do you have any family?"

*"My birth parents abandoned me one day after birth. A hospital accident caused me to lose my ability to speak. However, I hear very well and can easily obey spoken commands."*

"That school dumped you, didn't they?"

*"Sir, I need a job. I'll work hard for you. Please give me a chance."*

"Jane, my name is Bob Vicelli. From here on, you may call me Bob. Let's go into the kitchen, and we'll show you the ropes of our dishwashing operation. The job is the late shift, from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. You can work with the second shift crew to get acclimated and do the night shift tonight. I'll call the night shift manager before he leaves, and if he gives you a thumbs-up, you've got the job. We pay Chicago minimum wage here, $25 an hour. That's $52,000 a year, enough to live on in Chicago, albeit modestly. That's for everybody, but the servers do get tips. Wait in my office until I get back at 7 a.m."

*"Thank you so much, Bob. I won't let you down."*

We walked into the kitchen area; the cooks and dishwashers were males. Collectively, they broke into smiles when they first saw me.

"OK, everybody. Jane is trying out for the night shift dishwasher job. Now I know that look, you guys. If any of you harass her in any way, I will terminate you and enter your name and misdeeds into the Chicago Employee Review website.

Jane is unable to speak; she's mute. She has a laptop with a text-to-speech app if you need to have her answer a question. Shaquille, I was hoping you could give her a quick tour of the restaurant and teach her how we do the dishes here. I'll be back at 7 a.m."

Bob left, and Shaquille walked up to me.

"Hi, I'm Shaquille, the afternoon shift dishwasher. Let's get started. Here's a scrunchie; you’ll want to tie your long hair into a ponytail."

He extended his hand, and I shook it and smiled at him. I worked all night, doing everything Shaquille taught me.

Bob returned as promised at 7 a.m. and eventually entered the office. I was sitting in the chair, hoping I had landed the job.

"Good morning, Jane. Both Shaquille and Ben, the night manager, gave glowing reviews. The job is yours if you still want it."

*"Yes, I do. Thank you, Bob. Now I have a little glimmer of hope in my life."*

"Jane, do you have anywhere to stay?"

*"No, I don't. I guess it will be park benches for a while."*

Bob slumped back in his chair and looked at me studiously.

"Hold that thought."

He picked up his iPhone and dialed a number.

"Well, hello, Aunt Gianetta. I didn't wake you, did I? Oh, that's good. Do you still have that empty guest room in your home? You do. Why? I've got a young woman here just out of school, hoping to get started. Her name is Jane, and she needs a place to stay. She's charming. Will you? Oh, great. Aunt Gianetta, there's one more thing you should know: Jane is mute and cannot speak. No, she hears fine. She has an old laptop that she can type into, converting her typing to speech. Great! Is it OK if I bring her over right now? Good. She will be working the night shift tonight. Thanks, Aunt Gianetta."

Bob used his iPhone to recall his BMW I5 electric car.

"Jane, my aunt is 75 years old and has a guest room you can rent. You can pay at the end of the month. She lives in a brick, two-story house at 1236 South Tripp Avenue. Her home is about four and a half miles from here, just off West Roosevelt Drive outside. You can easily take a city bus to get to work. She's an adorable person; I'm sure you'll like her. You can stay there until you save enough to get an apartment of your own. Grab your stuff. The car's pulling up."

A Room Upstairs

Bob dropped me off at Gianetta Corridini's home, four miles west of the restaurant. I rang the doorbell, and an older woman with long white hair tied into a ponytail opened the door.

"Oh, you must be Jane. Please come in."

Her home was tidy; there were pictures on the walls everywhere. With a noticeable tick-tock sound, a grandfather clock stood at the oak staircase leading to the second floor. She gave me a tour of her home; the guest bedroom upstairs was her daughter's old bedroom, decorated in a feminine style, pink and pastel blue. She showed me where everything was in the kitchen, and we went down into the basement, where the laundry machines were. Finally, we returned to the living room to talk. I opened my laptop.

"Tell me, Jane, about yourself."

I used the text-to-voice app to explain my background. When I described the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children, Gianetta’s expression was quizzical.

"Jane, you don't sound intellectually disabled."

*"That's my opinion also. I guess I just got lost in some bureaucratic shuffle, so to speak."*

"Don't answer if this sounds impertinent, dear, but were you abused at that Institution?"

I didn't want to relive those situations, but Gianetta deserved an honest answer.

*"Yes, Gianetta, I was abused. It's an unhappy memory, but I don't want people to feel pity for me."*

Gianetta leaned forward and looked at me intently.

"There's no pity in this house, Jane. Here, you will be treated like family, with love and kindness. I offer my daughter's room to you as a boarder. The rent will be $100 monthly, payable on the last day of the month. You're welcome to share meals with me; anything in the kitchen is yours to use or consume. You're a pretty young thing, but I ask you not to bring anyone else to the house for overnight visits. Is that satisfactory?"

*"Not just satisfactory, but unbelievably generous, Gianetta. I want you to know that I will vacuum the carpets, mop the floors, wash the windows, and do anything you need while I'm here."*

"That's very gracious, Jane. Let's get you some breakfast before you go to bed."

Settling In

Later that night, Bob was still there when I arrived by bus at the Diner for the night shift. Bob gave me a four-year-old Apple iPad that had been gathering dust in a drawer and that it was mine to keep. He gave me the diner's WiFi network name and password and said Gianetta had WiFi. I was so excited that I hugged him.

My first year in Chicago was indeed a happy one. Bob steered me through the process of getting a social security number and an Illinois ID card, which is not a driver's license but has the same information. After my first paycheck, Bob took me to the bank behind the diner and introduced me to the manager, who set me up with a bank account and a debit card. After that, I began to feel like an adult.

Of course, at work, I had to deal with men. While daydreaming of love, I had a sixth sense concerning men's intentions. I made it clear that I wouldn't fraternize with anyone who worked at the restaurant. That seemed sensible; a relationship gone wrong would create drama at the diner.

I had often dreamed about the possibilities of love for myself. I had read plenty of romance novels, even some trashy ones. But what kind of man, at least like the ones I read about, would want a long-term relationship with a woman who can't talk to them? Of course, I have what most men want: a pretty face and a sexy body. Sadly, I reasoned that anyone who reached out to me was probably interested in only one thing: a one-night stand.

After one year of living frugally, I saved up about $21 thousand in my savings account, allowing me to buy a Dell Galaxy Plus supercomputer system. This unit was a supercomputer in a box, and my knowledge of computers and software grew exponentially. I also bought a Microsoft Super Surface laptop computer.

I told Gianetta that it was time to look for permanent lodgings. I figured that $1,500 a month was my high bar, so I searched for an apartment. The ones meeting those criteria were all in Chinatown. Luckily, I found a 2nd-floor apartment on 234 West Alexander Street for $1550 monthly. It had two bedrooms, about 1000 square feet, with a bathroom framed near the door. I furnished it initially with a frugal bed, a work table for my supercomputer, and a small chest of drawers. This location was only a mile and a quarter from the diner, but there wasn't a convenient bus route. Fortunately, there is so much competition among RoboTaxi companies that the price is now about a dollar a mile. The only drawback is standing by the curb, waiting for them to arrive in the middle of Chicago's freezing winds during winter. I never told Bob, Gianetta, or workers at the diner my new address. I just said that I had moved and was still settling in.

CHAPTER 2

Jane's Travail

Kidnapped

I was just over 19 years old on a snowy night in January. I noticed at 5 a.m. that two men sitting at one of the booths were staring at me while I was placing containers of clean glasses behind the counter. They both had black hair and black leather jackets, and one had a noticeable scar on his face. The taller one, whose hair was greasy, had a sullen expression, a five o'clock shadow mustache, and a goatee. The next time I came out with two more containers of coffee cups, he raised his iPhone and started talking to someone while giving me a lascivious stare.

When I put on my jacket to leave at 6 a.m., I waved goodbye to everybody and went out. It was still dark as I crossed the street, and nobody was on the sidewalks. I used my Samsung phone and called for a RoboTaxi. It responded that a vehicle would arrive in ten minutes.

The Chicago winds buffeted me, and I started to shiver. Six minutes later, a van pulled up to where I was and stopped. Then, I sensed someone behind me. Turning, I was startled to see the tall man with the five o'clock shadow goatee and mustache glaring at me just a few feet away. He stepped forward and grabbed me by my jacket collar. At the same time, I heard a van door slide open, and someone put a black cloth hood over my head. I tried kicking but stopped when they punched me in the stomach. They forced me into the van and sped off. One of them handcuffed my wrists and ankles. They drove for over an hour, finally stopping somewhere.

There wasn't much ambient noise, so I thought this must be an industrial area. The abductors dragged me into what I thought was a warehouse since it was church quiet. After going up a factory elevator, they pulled me into a room, handcuffed me to a vertical steel drainpipe, and left the hood over my head. I heard one of them tell another to take me to the bathroom at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.

I spent the rest of the morning and afternoon quivering in fearbecause I knew what was coming. Eventually, a group arrived, laughing and talking about the good time they would have with me. One of them removed my hood. The room was very bright, almost like movie lighting. I was weeping, but I counted eleven of them disrobing. There was an additional one with a video camera filming it.

The one who appeared to be the gang leader walked up to me. He was slightly shorter than me, with closely cropped black hair and a pronounced widow’s peak. His eyebrows slanted upwards from his nose, giving him a threatening countenance. All the men referred to him as the “Boss.”

Brandished a folding knife, he said menacingly:

"Blondie, if you bite any of our peckers, I'll cut you and bleed you out. Understand?"

I could not answer; all I did was weep. When I resisted, a man struck me in the face, causing me to fall to the floor. After lifting me back to my feet, the men disrobed me with lewd catcalls. I endured four hours of gang rape, incredibly violent and devoid of humanity. I can't even describe it to myself anymore. I did have the presence of mind to notice things during my torment. The one who kidnapped me off the street was called Yilka by the others. I got his last name when the camera guy called him Mr. Kartallozi.

When they finished putting on their clothes, the gang Boss had them restrain me tightly over an ottoman. He used his folding knife to mutilate me, carving an 'X' over my entire left breast, purposefully cutting slowly through all three layers of skin. He made several cross-cuts to give the scar a Frankenstein monster look. It started bleeding at once. I screamed, but it came out as just a staccato exhale.

My face and body were covered with blood, bruises, and their seminal discharges. I looked down at my legs, and red blood dripped down my thighs. The Boss grasped my neck and squeezed.

"You report this, and we'll kill you as easily as we snatched and fucked you! Do you understand?"

I just glared at him.

"I've gotta admit," the Boss said, "of all the girls we've gang-banged, you're the only one who didn't cry out. I admire your dogged determination. I've got a wife to go home to."

The gang leader left, and the others let me dress; I was handcuffed, hooded, and dragged to the van. After an hour of driving, they removed my handcuffs, pushed me out of the vehicle, and drove off.

CHAPTER 3

Jane’s Recovery

Recovery

They dumped me four blocks from the restaurant in the center of South Canal Street. I pulled off the hood and looked around. No cars were bearing down on me, so I stumbled to the sidewalk. It was about 1 a.m., so I walked through the deserted industrial district less than a mile from home. Climbing the stairs to my apartment, I was in pain from seemingly everywhere. I removed my clothes and turned on my shower to wash away what they had done to me. After bleeding through one of my towels, I found my first aid kit and tried to affix an 'X' of gauze over my left breast; even then, it was still oozing blood.

Finding one of my notebooks, I found the tear-off for that underground doctor that I saw on a Chinatown bulletin board. I dressed warmly, pocketed $500 from my emergency box, and set out for the location. The tear-off note said: George Spelvin, 24-hour Emergency Treatment, cash-only. Reaching the run-down building, I buzzed his apartment, and after several rings, someone answered.

"Hello, who is this?"

I typed my response using my iPad and pointed my smartphone display at the door camera. The text-to-voice app did the talking for me.

*"My name is Jane; I have been raped and hurt. I cannot speak. I have $500 with me. Can you help?"*

"Come on up, Apartment 306 on the third floor."

Climbing the stairs, I knocked on his door. He opened it and looked at me, somewhat shocked.

"Please come in. I'm a defrocked ER doctor who got busted for showing up to work drunk, resulting in an injury. Not to worry, that was nineteen years ago. I'm still an alcoholic, but at the moment, I'm stone-cold sober."

He led me through his apartment, which was surprisingly kempt for this part of town. One of the bedrooms was a mini-clinic with an old eBay heart monitor, blood pressure unit, oxygen tanks, etc. He turned on the lights over a metal table.

"Jane, let's get right to it. Remove your clothes and get up on the table while I scrub and get my gloves and mask on. Call me George, by the way."

I complied and sat on the table; the cold metal was uncomfortable. I clutched my iPad so that I could respond to him. I also surreptitiously took a photograph of him.

"Oh, Jesus Christ! Who did this to you?"

*"Several men snatched me off the street after my late-night shift at the restaurant where I worked. They took me to a warehouse where eleven men gang-raped me, with another filming it. They lacerated me as a warning, I assume."*

"Do you have any idea who they were?"

*"No, except they all had black hair."*

"Hmm, that sounds like the Albanians. I get a lot of overdose business from them. You know, Jane, you should go to the ER and have the police get involved."

*“Absolutely not! A woman who cannot speak? I would be humiliated and ignored, just like how everyone else has treated me throughout my life."*

"Fair enough, let's get started,"

Dr. Spelvin was knowledgeable and efficient. I refused his offer of morphine for the suturing of my mutilated breast. I bawled my eyes out, but all he heard was labored breathing. Watching him work, I took scant comfort that the mob boss at least kept the center of the 'X' above my nipple, not damaging it. Dr. Spelvin used a speculum and a microscope camera to inspect my vagina and rectum. I felt outraged and humiliated to endure this, but there was no choice. What lacerations he found were minor, and he just douched me and rubbed a gel into those areas, recommending that I fit a tampon when I got home. He gave me the Morning After pill pack and instructed me to return to remove the stitches in one week. I paid him $500 cash, and he said the returnvisit was part of the price. He recommended a rape counseling center, but I told him it would be of little use.

It was still dark when I returned home. I had nasty bruises on each cheek and a black eye, which was not a pretty sight. I fretted for an hour and decided I could never return to the diner. It was 6 a.m., and I set up my cell phone camera to take a selfie. After a few tries, I got a decent image. I sent Bob at the diner the selfie and the following message:

*Dear Bob.*

*I am sorry for missing last night's shift.*

*Yesterday morning, three men abducted me right in front of the diner.*

*They drove me to a warehouse somewhere and chained me to a pipe all day.*

*In the evening, eleven men arrived and gang-raped me for four hours.*

*They mutilated my breast and then dumped me four blocks from the diner.*

*I sought help from an underground physician.*

*I cannot return to the diner ever again. You don't know my address; let's keep it that way.*

*You and your Aunt Gianetta have treated me kinder than anyone has. To lose this just kills me.*

*Please don't try to find me, and please delete this message.*

*Love, Jane*

Once again, I had to start over. Nonetheless, I was determined to get a new job and find some way to get justice.

Self Defense

A month after my abduction at Bob's 24-hour Diner and subsequent rape, Doctor Spelvin removed the stitches, and I tested negative for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. I checked myself for the next three weeks to be sure. The scars remained ugly red with Frankenstein-like raised crossmarks. George insisted that, in time, the wounds would lose their redness and appear as white marks across my breast, which was not exactly a comforting observation.

Resolving never to be a feminine pin cushion again, I searched Chinatown websites and bulletin boards for a self-defense class. There were scores of schools with more fighting disciplines than one could imagine. One evening, I picked out one school, stood outside its front windows, and watched the Master train about twenty students. He was an older man with white hair and bushy eyebrows, right out of a Chinese Kungfu movie. Joining a class was not one of my options, but I thought he might give me a lead on private instructions. After the last student filed out, I entered the school and approached the Master. He turned and cast his gaze on me and bowed his head slightly.

"What can I do for you, young lady?"

I got out my iPad and started typing. He looked bemused.

*"My name is Jane Doe. I am unable to talk. May I ask you about private self-defense lessons?"*

"Tranquility and enlightenment to you, Jane Doe. I am Master Yang. We do not offer private lessons at this dojo. I am 76 years old, and teaching one evening class is all I can manage. Why do you want such lessons, Miss Doe?"

*"I was attacked, raped, and beaten, Master Yang."*

"I see," Master Yang replied. He looked at the floor for a brief time, concentrating. Looking up, he said.

"Go to the Gold Dragon Wushu school. There, seek out Master Yong Wu, the owner of the dojo. Wu is the best in the city; he attained the international rank of 9th Dan, the red belt. Tell him that Master Yang sent you and remind him of past courtesies from Master Yang. Miss Doe, be truthful with him, for he has little patience with subterfuge."

*"Thank you, Master Yang. You have been most kind."*

I smiled at him and put my iPad back in the bag.

"In martial arts schools, Miss Doe, it is customary to slightly bow to each other when parting as a sign of honor and respect."

He bowed his head slightly, and I responded in kind.

The next day, I studied the Gold Dragon Wushu School website; there was a 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. class that night. Arriving before nine, I waited outside in the shadows until all the students filed out. A hallway led to the school, and the door was open. I walked speedily up to Master Wu. He was young, in his early forties. Dressed in a black crew shirt and a Puma training jacket, Wu was big, over six feet tall. He turned towards me, observing me warily, and bowed as I approached.

"How may I help you, woman with golden hair?"

I retrieved my iPad from my canvas bag. He raised one eyebrow and looked fascinated as I aligned it to type.

*"Master Wu, my name is Jane Doe 413. Unfortunately, I am unable to speak. May I communicate with you using my iPad?"*

"Jane Doe 413 usually refers to a corpse in the city morgue."

*"It also might refer to a baby abandoned at birth on the edge of Lake Michigan, Master Wu."*

"How do you know my name, Miss Doe?"

*"I was referred to you by Master Yang. He said that you are the best instructor in martial arts in Chicago and asked me to remind you of past courtesies."*

Yong Wu laughed.

"Master Yang has trained many, including me as a teenager. I have suggested that he retire, but my wishes go unheeded, for Karate is his life, his passion. Why are you here, Miss Jane Doe 413?"

*"I request private training in self-defense."*

"There is usually a reason for self-defense lessons. What is your justification, Miss Jane Doe 413?"

*"I was gang-raped three weeks ago."*

"Did you go to the police, ask them for a rape kit, and identify your attackers?"

*"I did not. There are two reasons, Master Wu. The first is, who is going to believe a voiceless outcast like me? The second reason is that these men are Albanians, a ruthless criminal gang."*

"How do you know they were Albanians?"

*"I got the name of one of them, Yilka Kartallozi, during my rape. That is an Albanian surname.”*

"Do you desire vengeance on these Albanians, Jane Doe 413?"

*"With respect, Master Wu, the correct word is justice. I want to bankrupt these people, ruin their organization, and make them easy targets for the police. Such an endeavor will take years, and your training may keep me alive long enough to do this."*

Master Wu looked at me intently as if pondering what he should say.

"Jane, there is something still hurting you. Something you are ashamed to reveal. I am a good judge of character, Angel with golden hair. What you say to me will never be revealed to anyone. What still troubles you?"

I trembled as I lowered my iPad to the floor. Rising, I couldn't help it, my eyes watered. I pulled the T-shirt's collar down enough to reveal the scar on my left breast; I wasn't wearing a bra. I stared at him, measuring his response. Master Wu looked at the mutilation momentarily and returned his penetrating gaze to my eyes.

I hastily smoothed my T-shirt, grabbed my iPad, and faced him. He stepped close to me, staring into my eyes intensely.

"Angel with golden hair, the first lesson in Wushu is eye contact. Always look at your instructor or opponent right in their eyes. The eyes reveal much, like deception, fear, and contemplation of a move against you. You will learn that Wushu is not just about physical fighting but also about mental and spiritual strength, which gives you an advantage over others in the direst of situations.

“The mark over your heart will fade in time, but you should not consider it a personal failure. No, it shall signify your decision to be no longer a voiceless outcast, to no longer be a victim and hide in the shadows.

“There is physical beauty, Angel with golden hair, of which you are epically gifted. But there is also inner beauty underneath the skin that you possess. I will train that part of you as part of our work together.

“One other thing: I am married with three children. You must never fear me, for I will never abuse you as others have. Sometimes, our hands might be placed in private areas during our training. Such actions are inadvertent, and I ask your forgiveness if it happens. Let's get started."

I became visually excited, though I could not vocally express it.

*"Does this mean that you will train me?"*

"Yes, Jane Doe 413, I will train you. Do you have a job?"

*"I can't return to my old dishwashing job at the Diner. The mob knows I work there. No, I'm looking for a computer software development job. I'm quite good at it, albeit self-taught."*

"I'm sure you will be successful. Lessons will be $40 for two hours. We will meet every Thursday, like today, at 9 p.m. You will only start paying me when you have employment and can pay."

*"With respect, Master Wu, that seems like a meager price for two hours of your time."*

"Listen carefully, Angel with golden hair. In my dojo, you do not question my instruction or financial arrangements. I contemplated training you for free, but you might consider that an insult. Training will consist of physical exercise, followed by fighting techniques. Please follow me to the treadmill."

Wu's facility was large and had an assortment of weight machines, exercise bikes, and a couple of treadmills. He closed the Venetian blinds on the front windows by the street so no one could see us. Hemotioned me to step on the treadmill and programmed it for a 30-minute session. The belt started to move.

"I will order some food for myself, as the family has already eaten. When you finish your treadmill run, I will teach you in self-defense."

I watched him eat his dinner; it looked like Ramen noodles. My 30-minute run ended, the treadmill belt stopped, and I gripped the rails to get my wind back. I was dripping with sweat but assumed he was used to such a thing. Wu walked toward me.

"In the future, use thumbs-up for yes and horizontal hand sweep for no."

He demonstrated each signal as he spoke.

"Come with me, Jane, and I will give you your first lesson in self-defense."

We walked to an expensive mannequin bolted to the floor with a computer terminal next to it.

"This is Li Kang, our target droid. There are pressure sensors everywhere, for example, seven on the head, four on the neck, and so on. Anywhere you strike, it will register the kilograms of pressure you applied. It's an expensive Chinese product that is worth every penny.

“I will instruct you on a striking tactic in close combat. First, Jane, never clench your fist and strike anyone bare-knuckled. When mixed martial arts started in the nineties, the fights were bare-knuckle. They quickly learned that all competitors broke their hands in those contests. That's why they introduced padded gloves. They distribute the force better and save the hands. If you strike someone bare-knuckled in a fight, you might break your hand and subsequently lose the battle.

“You will learn to strike your opponent with body parts that are less likely to break on you. Listen carefully, Angel with golden hair. The heel of your hand can deliver quite a lot of force if appropriately trained. A strike to the side of your opponent's neck will momentarily stun him. That gives you a split-second advantage to do other damage to him.

“I will hit Li Kang on the neck with the heel of my hand."

It was quick, sudden, a flash to my eyes. The heel of his hand made a loud thump. He took me to the computer screen; it showed an impact force of 350 kilograms.

"Jane, this is similar to the force that an elite boxer could get. It's a combination of strength and speed. You give it a try."

I approached Li Kang and punched him in the neck with my open*-*hand heel. The computer screen, which showed a paltry 65 kilograms. I gave Master Wu a disappointed expression.

"Again, Jane."

I punched again.

"Sixty-six. Again, Jane."

We did that twenty times. I was determined and got to 73 kilograms.

"Strength and speed. We will train both. Follow me to the rowing machine."

I situated myself into it, and he programmed it for 30 minutes. I started rowing, and he went to his desk. At the end of the rowing exercise, he led me back to the target mannequin, and I resumed striking it with the heel of my hand. I consistently got my score up to 75 kilograms.

"This is enough for today, Jane. Let's close the school and return to our homes.

“Angel with golden hair, I will always leave you with one bit of wisdom I have acquired through years of study and interaction with people I respect. You, Jane Doe, will never be a voiceless outcast here. You will be part of a family of martial arts devotees trained to avoid violence where possible and protect themselves and others when violence is unavoidable. It is an honor to be your teacher, Jane Doe."

I responded to his bow of respect with one of my own.

"Do you live close by?"

*"Alexander Street."*

"Good, that is not far away. I recommend a daily run of a couple of miles. Grant Park is accessible via public transit."

I helped him turn out the lights and straighten some chairs, then we locked up and went to the street. He said goodbye to me, and I turned to go home, exhilarated by the feeling that I had rounded one corner in my life. Now I had to get a job.

A New Job

I needed an income, and software engineering seemed to be my best option. In the 2050s, AI-assisted software development had become ubiquitous. You could ask an AI tool, such as Microsoft’s SoftGPT, to develop a database of restaurants in Chicago with their menus and opening times, and it would generate a sophisticated C++, Rust, or Python program to accomplish this task. The trick, of course, lies in accurately specifying the job, a skill at which I excel. I can create elaborate software programs without writing a single line of Rust or C++ code. Humans created the AI software used for this purpose, and inevitably, it will have bugs and errors that must be identified and resolved.

Obtaining prompt and accurate results is crucial for success, especially when developing real-time applications. Many programmers who use these AI-enhanced tools express frustration with the time-consuming debugging process required for such systems. There is no substitute for a thorough understanding of Computer Science and the languages available, such as Python, C, C++, and Rust.

I enrolled in many free online computer science courses from MIT and Johns Hopkins, took some free Microsoft courses, and received several certification documents. I also designed and built some hardware using parts from Adafruit and Digikey. It was time to look for a journeyman software job, maybe as a private contractor.

I opened a new bank account in Chinatown, got a new debit card, and set up a Post Office Box as my official address in Chicago. I started looking at online ads for software positions. A big Chicago software house, Chicago Cyber Engineering, advertised for software programmers but required a computer science degree. Finally, I found an ad for a smaller company, Chicago Advanced Software Engineering (CASE), looking for Python, Rust, and C++ programmers. They didn't list any required credentials; the advertisement said: "If you can code, we want to talk to you."

Their office was 454 West Division Street, west of the Gold Coast. I could get there via the Red Line subway, just a short walk away. The only problem is that the trip required ten stops, taking over an hour. Determined to give it a try, I put on my best dress and packed my canvas bag with my documents, iPad, laptop computer, and an Internet protocol analyzer, a hardware device I had designed. I put on my coat and set out in the late morning for Chicago Advanced Software Engineering.

Their office was less than a half-mile from the Clark/Division subway station, but I lucked out and boarded a city bus, which dropped me off at their building. It was a six-story structure with a bank and other businesses on the first floor and what seemed to be companies above. I found the building map and took the elevator to the fifth floor.

The reception desk had a Tesla Optimus humanoid robot managing the phone system and guest interactions. I have encountered these devices at banks and big box stores, so I retrieved my iPad and prepared a message.

*Hi, I am Jane Doe.*

*I am responding to your employment advertisement for software coders.*

*I am mute but can communicate using my iPad.*

The TeslaBot beeped and replied, "Understood, Miss Jane Doe. My name is Lysha 517. I will arrange an interview."

The TeslaBot beeped two more times and started a telephone call. I could only hear one side of the conversation.

"Dr. Cottrel, this is Lysha 517 in the lobby. There's a Jane Doe here who wants to apply for a job. Mr. Tulson is at an HR conference in SanFrancisco and won't return until next week. Will you interview her? OK, I'll send her in. Dr. Cottrel, Jane is mute. She communicates via an iPad. OK, here she comes."

Thirty years of development have made these TeslaBots somewhat life-like. The face, whilst mechanical, can show expressions of surprise, curiosity, kindness, and other emotions. Lysha 517 beeped and looked at me.

"Miss Jane Doe, Doctor Cottrel is this company's president and CEO. He will speak to you. Go down that hallway to the end. His office is on the right."

I walked swiftly down the long hallway, and could see dozens of programmers huddled around workstations. None of them noticed me walking by.

I opened the glass door and walked in. Cottrel was behind his desk, and a woman was seated with him, an assistant, maybe? He stood up and smiled.

"Hello, Jane. I'm Colby Cottrel. Pull up that chair from the conference table, and let's talk."

I smiled and grabbed the chair. I lowered my canvas bag and clutched my iPad, starting the voice app. Colby Cottrel was young, maybe 35, with long, unkempt brown hair parted in the middle. He wore a suit jacket, but his light blue dress shirt had no tie. He pointed to the woman on my left.

"This is Doctor Tillie Cottrel, my wife and co-founder of the company."

She was his age, stunning, with chin-length highlighted brown hair wispy on the sides and cut higher in the back. She smiled and nodded.

I started typing into my iPad; they looked on with curiosity.

*"Thank you for seeing me, Doctor and Mrs. Cottrel. Abandoned on my second day of life, an allergic reaction and a hospital accident resulted in losing my ability to speak. It indeed takes me longer to communicate. But most employees I saw walking to your office were using a keyboard themselves, so am I really that different?"*

"No, of course not," Dr. Cottrel said, "do you have credentials and any previous experience?"

*"I'm an orphan. The state bounced me from institution to institution until I turned 18. My last job was as a dishwasher in a diner. My knowledge of computer science is self-taught."*

"May I see your credentials?"

I handed him my birth certificate and the letter of recommendation. He scanned the birth record but spent some time on the reference."

"You're from a State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children?" he asked with a quizzical look.

*"I had no choice in the matter. I was misdiagnosed, in my opinion. I used my time there to educate myself. A kind teacher procured a refurbished laptop for me, and that's how I taught myself computer science."*

I remembered Master Wu's advice to make eye contact, which I did.

"All right, Jane, may I ask you a computer science question?

I nodded my head.

"What is a pointer in the Python language?"

I gave him a Cheshire cat smile and started typing.

*"Pointers are not supported in the Python language. That was a trick question."*

His wife, Tillie, giggled at my outwitting her husband.

"OK, score one for Jane, the brain. Fair enough. What are pointers in the C and C++ languages?"

*"A pointer in C language is a variable containing an address of another variable rather than its value. The specific CPU instruction set supports this with specialized addressing modes that facilitate indirect addressing, including auto-incrementing the pointer based on the accessed data's size. Pointers access dynamic data structures at runtime, pass parameters to functions, and efficiently process information in arrays. The problem with pointers is that an errant pointer can access and damage critical areas of a program or the operating system. Therefore, modern languages have dispensed with pointers altogether."*

“That’s excellent, Jane. As you know, modern software engineering uses AI-assisted tools to generate programs. I see you brought your laptop, so I’ll write down our WiFi login details and the name and layout of our employee data file. Show Tillie and me how you’d access this file and publish a list of employees sorted by age.”

I rapidly logged onto CASE’s WiFi and mirrored my laptop screen to Dr. Cottrel’s computer so they could watch.

*“Thank you, Dr. Cottrel. I am accessing Microsoft’s SoftGPT to perform this task. After giving the AI system the file details, including the structure definitions you supplied, I’m asking it to create a Python program to access this file, sort the employee records by age, and print the desired result.*

*OK, here is the Python program that SoftGPT generated. I’m running it on my laptop’s Python compiler, and here are the results as you requested.”*

"Outstanding, Jane. You're doing well. Next question: What is a mutex?"

Again, they patiently waited as I typed.

*"A mutex, standing for mutual exclusion, is a locking system built into a real-time operating system to synchronize access to a resource, such as a buffer. In a multi-tasking system, simultaneously allowing access to a buffer from multiple tasks could be disastrous. Thus, the OS includes a mutex lock that only one task or thread can possess at a time, preventing corruption from other tasks that may want to access the same information. My only experience with them is with the Linux kernel and the OpenRTOS operating system for microcontrollers."*

"You have experience with real-time systems?"

*"I've built some things."*

"Really? What things?"

*"I designed an Internet protocol analyzer that I can show you."*

I reached into my bag, retrieved my device, and handed it to him. I designed a plastic case and paid a company to 3-D print it for me.

*"Plug it into your Cat-10 cable and hit the single black button. Everything else is capacitive touchscreen buttons."*

He did as I asked, and the little device quickly blossomed into life.

*"Send Mrs. Cottrel an email with a word we can search for," I suggested.*

He sent the email and then looked at me.

*"Hit the search button and enter the term you used in the email's text."*

Colby Cottrel broke into a wide smile.

"Would you look at that? There it is!"

*"You can swipe up and down to view the entire packet. Double-tap any part, and it will provide more detail. My device gives you everything that Wireshark can provide."*

"You wrote this, Jane. Can you show me your code?"

I retrieved my laptop, walked around his desk, and booted it up.

Smiling at him, I leaned over and brought up the Microsoft Design Studio project with my Python code. He started perusing my code and took his time with it. I returned to my seat.

"This is very nice, Jane. You built all this on this laptop?"

*"Not exactly, Dr. Cottrel. As soon as I had saved enough money from my dishwasher job, I bought a Dell Galaxy Plus computer system. Here's a photograph."*

I showed him my home computer.

"That's as powerful as the rigs we use here. Very nice, Jane. May I run a quick background check on you? It's standard procedure."

*"You have my birth certificate. Enter the name Jane Doe 413."*

I waited with some trepidation as he gathered the background report.

"This report is all in order. It shows you living with the aunt of the diner's owner for several months. That shows that the owner trusted you enough to help get you a room. Your current address is a Chinatown post office box. May I ask why?"

Now I was nervous. My answer could be a deal-breaker.

*"My safety requires that I keep my actual address secret."*

"I don't understand, Jane," Colby said.

Tillie Cottrel leaned towards her husband, touched his forearm, and looked at me.

"Who hurt you, Jane?"

My mouth went dry, a nervous reaction to stress. I guessed that it was time for the truth.

*"I was abducted outside the diner by three men who drove me to a warehouse somewhere. Eleven men gang-raped and mutilated me that night, then dumped me on a Chicago street like yesterday's garbage."*

"Did you go to the police?" she asked.

*"Why should I? How much effort will they make for a voiceless outcast, a refugee from an institution for half-wits? My rapists were Albanian mobsters. What if they had the Chicago Police Force paid off? I'm not an idiot!"*

"No one is saying that you're an idiot, Jane. To the contrary, you appear to be intellectually brilliant," Tillie said.

I stood up, leaned over his desk, and unhooked my Internet analyzer. Stuffing it into my canvas bag, I typed one last time.

*"I have wasted your time and mine. I have too much baggage for nice people like you. I'll try to sell my services to one of those Internet coding farms. Maybe I can make enough eventually to start my own business. I don't see how It could work here. You have been kind to me, and I appreciate it. I'll show myself out."*

I stood up and headed for the door. Colby Cottrel rushed from his desk and met me by the door.

"Jane, please return to your seat. I gave you a chance. Now give Tillie and me a chance."

I wasn't smiling. I guess I looked suspicious. Nonetheless, I returned to my seat and fetched my iPad.

"Tillie," Colby said, "tell her."

She turned to me, eyes glistening.

"Jane, when I was a sophomore at Ohio State, my roommates talked me into attending a fraternity party. I was reluctant, but it was a Saturday night, and I didn't want to be a spoilsport. I didn't get drunk, but I was a little tipsy. One of the frat boys struck up a conversation with me about contemporary music. He said that he had a fabulous vinyl record collection in his room. I stupidly followed him up the stairs. Once in the bedroom, another boy came in, and they started pawing at me, trying to kiss me. I resisted, but they were too strong for me. Removing my clothes, they raped me. After they left, I dressed and fled the house. I went to the campus police and told them what had happened. The Columbus police got involved and took me to a clinic that had a rape kit. I picked out the two boys from photographs of that fraternity's residents. The DNA matched, and the police arrested both boys. It went to a preliminary hearing where the boys claimed it was consensual and produced a couple of witnesses who testified that I was acting like a slut at the party. Then, the expensive lawyers moved in, promising that if a jury trial went against me, I would lose my scholarship and be in their debt for the rest of my life. At that point, I gave up. I wanted to be a computer scientist, just like you. I am still ashamed for not standing up and saying 'Hell, No' to those boys and their lawyers."

"What happened to Tillie, Jane," Colby said, "can never happen here at CASE. All employees get yearly training on sexual harassment protocols. What might be acceptable at a singles bar has no place in this building. You will be safe here, and if you're uncomfortable working here, we can set up a work-at-home situation with high-speed Internet service."

*"Are you offering me a job, Doctor Cottrel?"*

"Yes, we are," Tilly interjected, "you're the brightest and most resourceful person we've seen coming through these doors."

"Jane,” Colby asked, “I'd like you to be a part of the CASE family on your terms. Tell us how you'd like this relationship to be?".

*"May I work completely at home? I wish to stay in the shadows, learn my craft, and expand my horizons. I could communicate with the staff using GabBot or something similar; I'd rather not use Skype or Zoom. I could attend meetings as an invisible avatar, so to speak."*

"Jane, we will have to meet face-to-face sometimes. How about meeting Tillie and me at our home, whenever you like? It's on North Orchard, just a short walk from the North/Clybourne subway station."

*"That would be fine."*

"Great, Jane. Our HR guy is away. Tillie will take you to the Human Resources office and give you a quick drug test; we all take them, including Tillie and me. She'll get you all the brochures, other sign-up materials, pension, and medical insurance. I'll be making up a petabyte thumb drive with a copy of our development system and a piece of a software development project that we are doing for you to dive into."

*"May I ask about the salary you are contemplating?"*

"Sure," Tillie said, "normally, we start people with CS degrees at $105,000. Colby, I suggest a 6-month probation period at $85,000. After that, if you do as well as we both think you will, we boost the salary to $105,000."

"I'm OK with that. Jane, how about you?" Colby said.

*"I am more than pleased by your generous offer. I won't let you down, Doctors Colby and Tillie Cottrel."*

For the rest of the afternoon, I filled out forms and gave my bank details for auto-deposit. Colby spent an hour with me reviewing their software development system and the project he wanted me to join. I went home with my head full of hope. It was one of the best days of my life.

CHAPTER 4

Robbing the Mob

Learning About The Merricks

I reinstalled my exploit into the Chicago Police Department’s computers and searched for Officer Merrick's records. He had cleared his probationary period, and the Chicago PD assigned him to a squad car with a more experienced officer patrolling Precinct 9. There were recommendations to promote him to the prestigious FBI-Chicago Joint Task Force on Organized Crime.

His home address is Apartment 1404 in Grant Park Tower, one of the most expensive condominiums in Chicago. Digging into public records of his parents, Anne and John Merrick, I discovered they were founding partners of Merrick, Dawson, and Brant, one of Illinois' most successful law firms. The family lived in a three-story mansion overlooking Lake Michigan in Highland Park. Merrick’s sister and brother work for the firm as Junior Non-equity Partners, while Mac (Mackenzie Merrick) attended St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and received a BA in Criminal Law. Was he the family radical? Are his parents OK with him being a Chicago Policeman?

Of course, my rational intellect lectured my emotional self.

*“Stop stalking this man. You have no chance. You’re wasting your time. Give it up!”*

I knew I had to get back to more important things, but occasionally, as I lay in bed waiting to fall asleep, I’d think of the handsome and dashing Officer Merrick. A girl can dream. Right?

Mob Money

I realized that to really undermine the Albanian Mafia Shqiptare, I’d need some serious cash to invest in costumes, a safe house, and other troublemaking. Who better to pilfer from than the mob itself? By monitoring Doctor Morton’s chat system, I looked for the opportunity to steal from them, and my chance came when this series of chat exchanges appeared.

*“Murka wants $5 million in laundered cash. Can somebody assemble that much from our storage locker?”*

*“Tariq here. I’ll get it. Where do you want it?”*

*“Bring it to Gichi Gami Recycling this evening. I’ll get you a Tesla. We’ll have you nursemaid it to Murka in Queens, New York. Take a couple of days to enjoy the nightlife in NYC before returning.”*

*“Making a delivery today. Will be at Gichi Gami about 8 p.m.”*

*“Great, we’ll get you a couple of duffel bags.”*

I couldn’t believe my good luck. I called for a Tesla and opened the maintenance app. I programmed it to drive to the Mafia Junkyard and positioned myself so that I could watch the site with binoculars. Sure enough, somebody drove up in a VW electric, and several people helped transfer the $5 million into two duffel bags. The driver, Tariq, parked his VW vehicle and boarded the Tesla SUV.

I sprang into action. I identified Tariq’s vehicle using the Tesla maintenance app and set myself into “convoy” mode, with a following distance of 500 feet. As he left the junkyard, my car started tracking my quarry.

I had another trick up my sleeve. As I traversed down any street or highway in the Chicago region, an app I designed on my supercomputer rig penetrated every public and private security camera in that area using the CloudView WiFi Mesh standard. It commanded the cameras to loop the previous fifteen minutes, masking my passage through their surveillance area. After I left, my security camera exploits erased themselves, leaving no trace of my tampering.

I followed Tariq and the $5 million on Interstate 90. I stayed well out of sight by following in convoy mode. He abruptly exited the highway and headed towards Calumet City. I dutifully followed. Tariq pulled into a small shopping plaza containing several stores, including a bar with a sign advertising Serbian food. He got out, walked to the rear door of the SUV, and pulled the handle. Satisfied that the door was locked, Tariq headed for the Serbian bar.

I looked around the parking lot. It was now dark, and no one was walking nearby. Knowing that every security camera was in loop mode, I walked up to his Tesla SUV and used my smartphone to unlock the rear door. Grabbing the two duffel bags, I ran to my vehicle after commanding Tariq’s SUV to close the back door. Throwing the two duffel bags with the five million into my Tesla, I entered a new destination, back to my home in Chinatown.

My home supercomputer restarted all surveillance cameras and erased my exploit as I drove away.

Zhang’s Oriental Emporium

Although I occasionally refer to myself as a voiceless outcast, in truth, I have allies. The Cottrels, for instance, are supportive friends. My Sensei, Yong Wu, is another. Vincent Zhang, the owner of Zhang’s Oriental Emporium, is also a kind and loyal collaborator. I first met him shopping inside his store in Chinatown when I heard one of the salespeople cry out in frustration.

“Oh no! Vince! My terminal has stopped working.”

I watched Zhang fiddle with the terminal, looking surprised and worried. He rushed to the small office in the corner of the large store. Looking at the establishment’s computer, which controlled the sales terminals, Zhang’s expression was grim as he came out and reported what had happened.

“We’ve been hacked. Russian pirates have encrypted all our files and business records. They want $75,000 to unencrypt our records.”

“Are you going to give in?” one of the employees asked.

“There isn’t much choice. Tell the customers the store is closing in fifteen minutes. Till then, cash sales only. I’ll see if I can contact our computer consultant.”

Zhang retreated to his office and made some telephone calls. I spent a few minutes preparing a set of text messages for him. When he got off the phone, I brazenly strolled into his office and started a text-to-speech app on my smartphone. Zhang’s eyes widened in surprise as I played the first message.

*“Mister Zhang. I am a software engineer with experience in computer security. I can attack the pirates who did this, use their computer system to unencrypt your files, and prevent them from attempting this again. However, my methods are patently illegal, and you may not want to accept my help.”*

“Miss, why are you speaking through a smartphone?”

*“I have been mute all my life, Mister Zhang.”*

“Young lady, I am one of the national directors of the Chinese Hope and Freedom Coalition. We repatriate Chinese women kidnapped and brought to the United States for sex trafficking and indentured servitude. What we do is also highly illegal. Can you really help me?”

I held up a petabyte thumb drive attached to my keychain. It had a copy of the Linux operating system and my software.

*“If you can get me one of your laptops from the storeroom, I can place this copy of the Linux operating system with my software onto it and get to work.”*

“How much will you charge for this assistance?”

*“I will do it for free if you agree to protect my anonymity.”*

“Wait here. I will get you a laptop.”

Zhang stood behind me, fascinated at my work. The perpetrators were a hacking group based in Kudrovo, Russia, a suburb outside St. Petersburg. It helped that my hacking studies on the Dark Web made me somewhat conversant in Russian and the Cyrillic alphabet. I installed my exploit on their computers and went to work. Finding Zhang’s Oriental Emporium as one of their targeted customers, I used their software to send a command to unencrypt Zhang’s files.

*“Mister Zhang. Your files have been unencrypted. Please reboot your system, and then make a copy to a petabyte thumb drive.”*

Zhang gleefully rebooted his system and made the backup copy. He announced to the employees that the store was open for business again. While he was doing this, I looked around at the Russian hacker’s cryptocurrency accounts and spotted one account that had $300,000 in it. Zhang returned to the office, smiling.

*“Mister Zhang. These Russian pirates have many cryptocurrency accounts. This one has $300,000 today. If you have a crypto wallet, I can transfer this money to your account. They will be unable to track it. To do this, of course, would be patently illegal.”*

“I have no qualms about stealing from people who attempted to extort me. Please set up the transfer.”

I arranged a crypto transfer. All Zhang had to do was enter the destination crypto account.

*“Mister Zhang. After I turn away, please enter your destination wallet and hit the transfer button. The screen will erase after.”*

Zhang completed the transfer. I resumed work on the laptop, disabling several of the Russian gang’s computers, erasing their files, and leaving them with a message warning that any attempt to attack Zhang’s business again would trigger a more destructive reprisal. Zhang pulled up a chair. He wanted to talk.

“Why won’t you tell me your name?”

*“I must remain anonymous for my safety.”*

“Can you explain why? I will keep whatever you say a secret.”

*“Very well. I was gang-raped two years ago by the Albanian mob. My mission is to bankrupt them and make them easy targets for the police. My efforts to undermine the Albanian mob would endanger you.”*

“Respectfully disagree. These Albanian criminals are killing the people of Chinatown with their drug sales. I will help and protect you in any way I can. Tell me something you need?”

*“I just stole 5 million dollars from the Albanian mob. I need a false ID to rent a storage locker and stash it. Do you know anyone in the false ID business?”*

“Absolutely. We use Freddy Chan and his wife Dagmara to make all our false IDs. They are very discrete. Dagmara, by the way, resembles you. She’s Norwegian and has blond hair, just like yours. I will call and ask them to come over.”

The Chans turned out to be a delightful couple. Our relationship was quite productive. Over the next week, I engineered a web craw of Social Security records, looking for people listed as deceased, an only child, and parents also dead. The list was several thousand people. After altering Social Security records to remove the deceased notation, these people’s names would make excellent candidates for false IDs.

For their part, the Chans created a false ID for me under the name Sarah Scott. Dagmara used the fake ID to rent two storage units at different facilities. That’s where I stashed the five million mob cash. She also rented a safe house in Park Ridge using the name Sarah Scott. Dagmara purchased a Chevy Malibu gasoline-powered vehicle to park in the garage. Now, I had a place to escape if my Chinatown apartment was compromised.

Dagmara is my most helpful coconspirator. She has an uncanny ability to procure illegal items, such as tasers, stun guns, and the advanced pepper spray that only Homeland Security is authorized to use. This pepper spray, DemonFyre, has secret ingredients that make the eyelids swell up immediately and render the victim temporarily blind.

Over the next year, I developed a stock trading app, using my mob money to execute trades. I specialized in high-tech companies, identifying promising startup IPOs. At the end of a year, I had amassed a profit of $1.3 million, which allowed me to return the original five million to the IRS, using a RoboTaxi to deliver the booty to the IRS parking lot.

I still maintained my interest in Officer Mackenzie Merrick. Encountering him often after his daily run through Grant Park, I stayed discreetly out of sight. I never used my skills to break into his apartment out of respect for his privacy. Fortunately, I viewed a Grant Park Tower marketing video where Merrick’s apartment was the subject of a promotional walk-around. The presentation showed every room, pictures on the wall, everything. I often viewed this, trying to learn more about his life and family.

Drugs, Interrupted

The dark web provided helpful information about the Albanian Mafia Shqiptare. The organization is vertically integrated and worldwide. The Albanian mafia deals directly with suppliers, whether opium growers in Columbia, Fentanyl manufacturers in Mexico and China, or OxyContin from pharmaceutical manufacturers in Mexico and the United States.

The extraction of cocaine from the opium leaves requires a factory using a succession of acid washes. The Albanian mafia owns two such factories, supposedly in Columbia and Mexico, but the dark web did not indicate where these secret installations are.

Fentanyl, the most dangerous recreational drug, is produced by a Mexican pharmaceutical company that Shqiptare purchased outright. The mafia has ties to the Chinese underworld, so additional Fentanyl arrives in shipping containers from China. I assumed the gang bribed customs officials in one or more American West Coast terminals.

Getting illegal cocaine and Fentanyl into the United States is a challenge. The Albanian Shqiptare has several methods, including drug tunnels in the Mexico-American border towns and drug submarines on the east and west coasts.

Some of Dr. Morton’s chat messages suggested that a drug submarine was operating on Lake Michigan. These submarines, arriving in two standard shipping containers, are sophisticated and challenging for the Coast Guard to intercept. The subs cool the diesel exhaust with adaptive seawater heat exchangers so the Coast Guard’s infrared drones cannot detect the sub’s snorkel.

Most illegal drugs get in via underground tunnels in the many border towns on the Mexican boundary. The idea is simple. The mob acquires warehouses on either side and digs a tunnel to connect them. The Albanian Shqiptare purchased a small European tunneling machine that installed a Chinese metamaterial on the tunnel’s roof to spoof the Border Patrol’s ground-penetrating radar.

The drugs eventually make it to Chicago. Some of the chat messages suggested that a drug-processing facility exists in Chicago. The mob transfers the product to their distribution network once the raw materials are weighed and placed into small plastic bags.

The Albanian mob employs primarily young and unemployed workers to distribute the drugs and accept payment. Sadly, these distribution employees are themselves addicted to the very drugs they sell. The mob is quite generous to these distributors; drug sales are lucrative.

I located one of these distribution centers, a large auto parts store owned by the mob. I could observe them loading a Tesla Cybertruck with the week’s drug orders by tapping into their CloudView surveillance cameras. When I determined that the loading of the Cybertruck was nearly complete, I couldn’t resist the urge to pull a fast one on these criminals.

I fired up my Tesla Maintenance Manager exploit and located this particular Cybertruck. When the auto parts store opened its garage door to allow a small motorcycle to leave, I programmed the Cybertruck to drive directly to the FBI building on West Roosevelt Road. The truck roared away at full acceleration and was a block away before the mobsters realized what had happened.

Dr. Morton's staff attempted to regain control of the Tesla Cybertruck when informed of the runaway truck with the week's distribution. Fortunately, I was ready for that. I removed this particular truck from the In-Service list, and they could not locate it.

They gave chase in a private vehicle, but the Cybertruck had a head start and arrived at the FBI entrance gate well ahead of its pursuers. I sent an anonymous text message to the FBI receptionist.

*Dear FBI.*

*A Tesla Cybertruck, Illinois plate HQT-458, has just stopped at your entrance.*

*It contains the Albanian Mafia Shqiptare’s entire drug distribution for this week.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sarah Finn (a concerned citizen)*

I acquiesced to the perverse pleasure of watching the mob’s reaction to my caper, from the store’s staff screaming at each other as the Tesla Cybertruck sped away to the desperate text messages from Morton’s staff trying to regain control of the vehicle. Across the street, the mob’s pursuit vehicle watched helplessly as FBI personnel poured out of the building and surrounded the Cybertruck. As my last act in this adventure, I unlocked the truck and put it into manual mode. Unfortunately, the Cybertruck did not contain the requisite distribution list and other information, but the FBI had the Mafia Shqiptare’s weekly drug shipment to inspect and destroy.

While I paid for training on the handling of Glock-50 pistols and AR-15 assault rifles at a gun range in neighboring Indiana, I made a personal decision never to use such weaponry in my efforts. Surveying the staff at the mob’s auto parts store, all the employees were packing, and some carried illegal AR-15 class assault rifles. It would be foolish to tangle face-to-face with these people so armed, no matter how good my street fighting skills are.

Mob Money, Part Deux

My next opportunity to cause the Albanian Mafia some discomfort presented itself with chat messages arranging the transfer of $20 million in cash to Arsen Murka in New York City. Researching Arsen Murka, I learned he is the uber-boss of the North American Albanian Shqiptare. I had a week to plan my interference.

The mob’s staff hired a service company, Great Lakes Trip Outfitters, to prep the Tesla SUV before delivering it to Gichi Gami Recycling. Outfitters would kit the vehicle with sandwiches, other goodies, and a six-bottle supply of Rakija, Albanian alcohol similar to Vodka. If I could spike the Rakija bottles with Rohypnol (Roofies), I could put the delivery boys to sleep and make off with their loot.

Dagmara jumped into action, procuring six bottles of Rakija and a supply of Rohypnol tablets. We spiked the Rakija and six water bottles together, but I declined her request to come along, for I never want to put her in danger.

This time, I installed my exploit on the Trip Outfitters business computer and began monitoring their usage of the Tesla RoboTaxies. The action started on a Thursday when the order for a Tesla SUV was placed. After they kitted the vehicle with snacks, chilled water bottles, and Rakija Vodka, they sent it to Gichi Gami Recycling. I took control of the Tesla SUV right after it left Trip Outfitters and directed it to a Recharging Station. At the Recharging Station, I set the surveillance cameras to loop mode, brazenly pulled my Tesla alongside, and swapped the water and Vodka bottles with my spiked versions. Nobody questioned my activities.

Like my previous caper, I parked outside the Mafia junkyard. I observed them putting the $20 million cash, about twenty duffle bags, into the Tesla SUV. The two mob delivery boys got in, programmed the trip to New York City, and started their journey. I followed dutifully in Convoy mode, crossing Indiana and into Ohio on Interstate 90. Near Cleveland, Ohio, I directed the mob vehicle into an Ohio rest stop, parking it away from most travelers. Using my smartphone, I set the Rest Stop’s surveillance cameras to loop mode, effectively masking my activities. Sure enough, the two mob delivery boys were sound asleep, almost catatonic. To be safe, I used industrial-strength zip ties to bind their hands and feet.

I quickly transferred the twenty duffle bags of cash to my Tesla SUV and erased my tampering with the Rest Stop’s surveillance cameras. I drove away with the loot in my Tesla SUV, leaving the delivery boys sleeping. After recharging, I made it back to Chicago in four hours. Getting out near an “L” station, I vectored the Tesla SUV to the Chicago IRS facility. At home, I watched the SUV find a space in the IRS parking lot and shut down.

My last move in this act of defiance was to send a text message to the IRS management informing them of the twenty million in Albanian Mafia cash in their parking lot.

As a final dirty trick, I sent an untraceable text message to the Ohio State Police, informing them that a Tesla SUV with two unconscious and tied-up occupants was at the Cleveland Interstate 90 Rest Area. It turned out that one of the delivery boys had an outstanding warrant for his arrest.

Once again, I allowed myself the perverse pleasure of reading Dr. Morton’s text messages about the stolen $20 million in cash. He remained clueless that my exploit was resident in his system and that I was monitoring his chat messages. Some chat exchanges suggested that Morton and his staff blamed the Chicago Police for the thefts.

CHAPTER 5

Human Trafficking

Angel at Work

A visitor to Chicago's loop might surmise that the city is prosperous, with skyscrapers and spectacular city parks dazzling to the eye. The sad truth is that large sections of the metropolis are zones of crushing poverty. Nowhere is this more evident than in the South Side, especially in a neighborhood called Englewood.

With a population of one hundred thousand in the previous century, Englewood experienced a precipitous white flight from the area, resulting in a 95% minority population of just twenty thousand. The current 2050 unemployment rate is thirty-four percent. With two out of three homes abandoned, homeless squatters and the drug-addicted occupy many of these vacant houses. Crime is rampant in Englewood and is a challenge for Police Precinct 7, tasked with patrolling this area.

A vacant three-story apartment building lies between Marquette and 68th on Halsted Street. The first-floor business, long-abandoned, has a dreary plywood sheet replacing the display window. A weather-battered front door leads to a stairway to the unoccupied second and third-floor apartments on the north corner. Since the building is in receivership, city MowBots regularly mow the large yard adjoining the structure.

Lurking in the clump of trees and bushes at the corner of the yard, Mac’s Angel staked out the abandoned unit for most of the afternoon. Somebody had run a long extension cord from the neighboring building's outdoor receptacle to provide enough power to run a few lights. Hearing the toilet flush periodically, Angel assumed someone had illegally turned the city water back on.

Angel's rented Tesla SUV was across the street, snuggled out of sight behind the abandoned church. She was patiently waiting for a delivery of human cargo to this weather-damaged flophouse.

A Volkswagen electric vehicle rolled to a stop. Simultaneously, a single individual exited the building to meet the car's occupants. The Volkswagen door opened, and a large, burly man pushed a young, handcuffed Asian woman toward the building. She looked frightened and confused; Angel surmised she was in her teens. The husky mob grunt handed the person from the building the girl's passport and handcuff keys. The mobster quickly pushed her into the building, and the Volkswagen drove away.

Angel, needing a respite from pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic, waited for twenty minutes before making her move. She carried a Taser pistol, and a DemonFyre pepper spray canister on this mission. At the right moment, Angel sprinted to the front entrance with her favorite lock-picking tool. In a few seconds, she unlocked the door and quietly slipped inside.

Years of abandonment and moisture seepage have promoted mildew, giving the building an aroma of dirty socks and rotting wood. Padding silently up the stairs to the second floor, Angel listened. The building had three apartments on the second floor, accessible from a long hallway on the north side. She could hear voices coming from the middle doorway.

"Velmir, Hi. It's Milosh. Yes, the last one just arrived. So, all five are ready to ship to St. Louis tomorrow. Yes, I have all five passports. Erik? He's here, in the chair, listening to music. I think he's asleep.

Velmir, the girl who just arrived, is pigeon material. That's right, here's a picture of her. Is she a virgin? Yeah, I checked. Let me know if you want her for pigeon duty.

OK, I got it. Ship four out tomorrow to St. Louis, and you'll pick up the cute one. Don't worry. They're all chained to the radiators. Mirupafshim, Velmir."

Angel unholstered her Taser pistol and moved silently towards the middle apartment where the mobsters held the women prisoners. Her Taser has a 12-foot range and would incapacitate the target for thirty seconds. That’s how long she would have to subdue the others.

Angel sprang into the middle of the apartment's living room. Her training and dedication made her subsequent actions instinctive and swift. Scanning the room, she observed five women lying on four dirty mattresses arrayed on the floor. The mobsters tied handcuffs to their ankles, tethered to ten-foot vinyl-covered steel cables connected to the radiator pipes. The thugs covered the windows with dark paper, so only natural light from the hallway illuminated the room. A large table in one corner contained several boxes, some duct tape, and a stack of passports. Two small dining room chairs were touching the table.

One man was sleeping in a rotting comfortable chair, eyes closed, earbuds playing music. The other man was standing, facing Angel, with an astounded expression on his face.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Angel's response was immediate. She pointed her Taser pistol at him and fired. The two tiny darts hit Milosh near his sternum, and 50,000 volts of low-current electricity made him collapse to the floor in agony. Angel dropped the weapon, knowing she would have thirty seconds to subdue the other crook.

Milosh's cries and similar shrieks from the five women woke the man in the chair. Eric attempted to rise, but Angel painted him with a face full of pepper spray from her DemonFyre canister. He stood up, clawing at his burning eyes, barefoot due to the oppressive heat in the room. Angel took swift advantage. First, she stomped on his right foot, making him yelp and drop to one knee. Then, Angel pirouetted and delivered a toe kick to his jaw; she could feel the jawbone break as he fell unconscious to the floor.

Milosh didn't fare any better after the Taser wore off. Angel flooded his face with pepper spray as he rose. He foolishly raised his arms to rub at his burning eyes, and she clobbered him with the nearest dining room chair. The force of the blow cracked one of his ribs. As he leaned forward, howling in pain, Angel turned sideways and delivered an elbow smash to his chin. Milosh toppled to the floor in a heap, the cracked rib punching through the skin, oozing blood.

She went to work, uncoiling her industrial zip-ties and binding both men's ankles and hands behind their backs. Angel photographed the chained women and the two restrained mobsters. She inspected the table, finding two large boxes of cocaine packaged as 8-balls. There was also a satchel bag containing cash, about seventy thousand dollars.

She found the handcuff keys and unlocked the restraints from the women's ankles. By this time, the Asian women had calmed down, interested in what she was doing. Angel attached the five steel cables to the two men. Using duct tape from the table, she taped over their mouths so they couldn't cry out. She also removed the Taser barbs and tiny wires from Milosh and stowed them in her fanny pack.

Angel, looking at the passport pictures, handed each woman their documents. While China has eight spoken languages, seventy percent of the Chinese nation speaks Mandarin. So, Angel started a text-to-Mandarin application on her smartphone. As she typed, the smartphone voiced her text into robotized Mandarin.

"Do any of you speak English? Raise your hand if you do."

None of the five women raised their hands.

"These evil men were going to sell you into slavery or prostitution. They will make you drug addicts. I can take you to safety. If you choose to stay, you will not live long. Raise your hand if you want me to take you to safety."

In response, all five women raised their hands.

"OK, I will take you to an organization called the Chinese Hope and Freedom Coalition. They will give you a choice. You can go home or stay in the United States. If you stay, they will educate you, teach you a skill, provide forged citizenship papers, and integrate you into a family in the United States. Get dressed. We have to leave."

As the women dressed, Angel text messaged Vincent Zhang, Chinatown's director of the Chinese Hope and Freedom Coalition. She explained that she had five Asian women, victims of human trafficking, who needed repatriation. They agreed on a remote area north of Chicago for the transfer, an empty field with no people and no surveillance cameras. Angel explained that she had seventy thousand dollars of mob money to contribute; Zhang said he would appreciate the financial support. He ended the text conversation with a compliment.

"You're an Angel!"

Angel prepared a text message with two photographs (the chained women and the injured thugs) to send to the Precinct 7 dispatcher. Her dispatch was curt and to the point.

"Send Emergency Medical Technicians immediately to 6735 South Halsted Street. Two Albanian mob grunts, holding five Asian immigrants prisoner for human trafficking, now have multiple contusions, broken ribs, and dislocated jaws. I have taken the five women to safety. Have a nice day!"

Once the women were ready, Angel explained their escape with the text-to-Mandarin app.

"Move to the bottom of the stairs. I have a car waiting. When its gull-wing doors open, run into it as fast as possible."

Angel summoned her Tesla SUV, and as soon as it opened its gull-wing doors, she and the women ran and clambered in. Angel commanded the destination, and the vehicle started moving. As it exited Englewood, she sent the text message with the photographs to the police.

Officers Rosie Juarez and Robert Lyle arrived at 6735 South Halsted just as the Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) van pulled up. Getting out, they drew their service revolvers and opened the unlocked door to the vacant building. They could hear some muffled moaning, even at the bottom of the stairs.

"Jesus, this place smells like shit," Officer Juarez observed as they ascended the stairs. Entering the scene of the crime, they encountered the wounded men. The EMTs made a quick examination.

"OK, Robert, this one has a compound rib fracture. The other one has either a broken or dislocated jaw. We'll need two ambulances."

"Robert, have a look at this," Officer Juarez said, pointing to two large cardboard boxes of 8-Ball bags.

"Jesus, Rosie, there’s over a hundred thousand dollars of cocaine in these two boxes. We've got some big-time drug dealers here."

The two EMT technicians peeled the duct tape from the men's mouths.

"Who did this to you?" Officer Robert Lyle asked.

Milosh's voice was shaky.

"Some fucking woman beat the shit out of us!"

"A woman did this?"

"Yeah, she was a God damned Amazon. She used a Taser on me, then hit me with a chair."

Robert Lyle called his father, James Lyle, the Precinct 7 Commander.

"What's up, son?"

"Dad, you had better come down here to 6735 South Halsted. I've got two injured mob gangbangers with at least $100k of cocaine. It looks like we have a vigilante at work in the Precinct."

"OK, I'll be right there with a forensics team."

Ten minutes later, the abandoned building was crawling with cops. Erik couldn’t speak with a broken jaw, so Commander Lyle turned to Milosh.

"Who beat you up?"

"We don't know. Some fucking white Ninja woman. She fought really dirty. Hit me with a chair and didn't say a word."

"Who are the five women shown in this photograph?"

"We want to speak to an attorney."

"Look, dumbass," Commander Lyle said, "you've got over $100,000 in cocaine here in 8-Ball bags. You're a drug dealer. We can send you to prison for a long time. Maybe you should reconsider and cooperate with me. Robert, what did the surveillance camera outside show?"

"Just talked to them; the camera doesn't show anybody entering or leaving the building."

"So we've got a vigilante at work in our Precinct. I've got enough problems without some white woman taking the law into her own hands. If this lady vigilante rears her head again in my Precinct, I want her arrested!"

"Dad, these two mob grunts aren't exactly Boy Scouts. This woman has done us a favor."

"She broke the law, Robert. Lawbreakers go to jail. That's the way I run my Precinct.”

As Commander Lyle escorted the injured mobsters to the ambulances, his son, Robert, stared out at the lawn.

"Who is this woman who would take on one of the most violent criminal gangs on the planet? Why is she doing this?"

Chinatown

Imer ordered Daniel Hoti and Gezim Zenelli, to get more protection clients. When they entered Zhang's Oriental Emporium, many customers were milling about, admiring all the Chinese-made products. This store was first on their list of several that day. Leaning over one of the counters, they asked the Asian saleslady if they could speak to the manager.

She called out to Vincent Zhang, a ninth-generation descendant of the Chinese immigrants who built Abraham Lincoln's transcontinental railroad. Vincent walked toward them.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"Is there somewhere we can talk privately?" Daniel Hoti said.

"No, there isn't, What's this about?"

"All right, we represent a company offering specialized security services for businesses in this area. Crime is at an all-time high, and junkies desperate for fixes are burglarizing other shops on this street. We have ways to prevent that."

"And just how much does this service cost?"

"Just five percent of your gross receipts. We visit every two weeks to look at your books, and then payment is due."

"This is just a standard protection racket. I'm not interested. Now, please leave my store immediately."

Gritting his teeth, Hoti grabbed the elderly Zhang by his shirt collar, pushing him back into the counter. A few display items fell to the floor, and all the customers froze, unsure what would happen next.

One female customer, lurking behind a display of Chinese garments, started moving toward the two men. Tall, in tight-fitting jeans and a white T-shirt, she silently positioned herself close to the mob thugs, who were unaware of her presence.

"We are not people to be trifled with," Daniel said.

The other mobster, Gezim, stepped forward and pointed a pistol at Zhang's temple.

Once again, Angel's intervention was swift. She yanked forcefully on Gezim’s back collar, extending her leg to trip him backward to the floor. Angel stomped on his gun hand; the gun came loose, and she kicked it away. A short kick to his chin put him on queer street. Daniel lunged toward her, but she deftly deflected his left arm and struck him on the neck with the heel of her hand. The blow momentarily stunned him, so a groin kick and a knee to the chin sent him straight to the floor. She quickly restrained them with large cable zip-ties, and Zhang knelt to assist her.

Zhang noticed that one customer was recording all this with her iPhone.

"May I see what you got?"

She smiled and gave the phone to him.

He watched a bit of the recording and then erased it.

"Here," he said, returning the phone. "Recording is not permitted in our store."

He looked at Angel.

“Go to the back of the store, turn right, and run just a few feet; you'll find a path between the stores across the alley to get you away from here. Run, Angel. We'll take care of these criminals our way."

Angel flashed a smile and turned toward the back of the store. All the customers started clapping and cheering. Like a wisp of wind, she disappeared.

Zhang called for his loading dock crew and two other employees.

"Let's take these two thugs to Fei's Tattoo Shop down the alley. They need some artwork.”

They dragged the two trussed-up mobsters to the loading area, placed them on a dolly, and carted them to the tattoo shop near the block's end.

"What do we have here?” asked Johnny Fei.

"These two criminals tried to force me to buy protection services. I'd like you to tattoo the word 'asshole' on their foreheads. Then my boys will drive them to an industrial area and dump them. How much will that cost, Johnny?"

“No charge,” was the answer.

CHAPTER 6

Jane’s Software Career

Working Life

I plunged myself into work and quickly became the most productive employee in Chicago Advanced Software Engineering's history. After finishing Colby and Tillie's assignments in record time, they got me involved in troubleshooting other employees' work. Using only a chat application to communicate, I had a natural knack for bug hunting, especially in real-time microprocessor applications.

CASE employees would contact me at all hours, asking for help with code that would "fail when I do this." The employees knew me only as the mysterious Jane working from home and willingly used my expertise in their coding efforts. I eventually got to know all of them, not personally, but I had their employee photographs on my home rig even though there was no photograph of me on the CASE system.

I was curious why this computer science field came so effortlessly, so I took an online IQ test. The result was an IQ of 195, traditionally regarded as a profoundly gifted genius score. The testing company invited me to join MENSA, but I declined since I didn’t want to draw any attention to myself.

I typically get by on 4 hours of sleep, so I investigated that. A gene mutation, ADRB1, allows people to live with just 4 ½ hours of sleep. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher thrived on only four hours of rest, so she, like me, must have been born with this mutation.

The Cottrels became my closest friends; they often invited me to their modest home to discuss problems with big software jobs or potential businesses they looked for. These visits always included dinner, and Tilly was an enthusiastic cook specializing in Italian and French cuisine. They were patient with me, waiting with anticipation as I typed a response to a question. I worked hard to make sure my answers were persuasive and memorable.

They started taking me on client visits to evaluate a proposed software development job. I had saved enough money to buy a couple of business suits and accessories. Customers were fascinated by Tilly and me. Tilly was a beautiful executive with a countenance that commanded respect. But I was a mystery to the customers, an enigmatic silent partner continually typing on a large tablet computer, sharing my observations with the Cottrels. The Cottrels would say, "Jane is our best programmer but is mute. She is here to advise us." Occasionally, I'd use the text-to-speech app to ask a question or make an observation. When one of the male clients would inquire about my marital status, Tilly would deftly change the subject and get me out of the building unscathed.

Still, my quest to learn about the Albanian mob and how I might interfere with their operation remained a driving force in my life. I continued my weekly training with Master Wu, who occasionally invited his best students to participate in my lessons, and I became increasingly proficient in the Wushu discipline. Many students commented that I was nearly as good as the Sensei.

To avoid males hitting on me when I ran through Grant Park or shopped in stores, I continued to wear a fake zirconium wedding ring on my left hand. I'd show my fake wedding ring to the random male attempting to chat me up, shake my head “no,” and quickly exit.

I’d never use my real name online on message boards, preferring colorful monikers like “BitchBucket413 and CyberWench413. I’d put up a photo of a decidedly dowdy woman with a face only a mother could love for my screen avatar on message boards.

In 2050, almost all Western computer devices employed chips from two microprocessor vendors. One popular chip was developed and licensed by the UK firm ARM. Arm licenses its processor designs to the dwindling number of chip manufacturers. The second chip family is RISC-V from The University of California Berkley. This family of chips is open source, meaning that licenses to use it are free. In the 2040s, even Intel stopped pushing their computer architecture evolved from 1990s technology in favor of the ARM and RISC-V designs.

A similar Chinese processor, the Great Leap chipset, never caught on in the West due to China’s penchant for secrecy, so they also gravitated towards the RISC-V processors. Almost all Internet routers, servers, smartphones, and supercomputers use ARM and RISC-V systems as their foundation. I knew their instruction sets by heart and all their pitfalls regarding reliability and security.

Of course, my interest in ARM and RISC-V computer architectures gravitated towards exploiting weaknesses in the design to allow me to penetratethe innards of an operating system, like Linux or Windows, or any application using popular languages like C++ and Python. Simply put, I acquired the skill to gain unauthorized access to any computer.

When I think of the most important invention in the last hundred years, I rank the Internet over atomic power, genetic engineering, and space travel. We all interact with powerful computers on our smartphones, self-driving cars, tablet computers, and toasters. The Internet connects these devices, so the computer at the grocery store can connect to my refrigerator and figure out that I need to order more eggs and milk.

The US Military developed the transmission part of the Internet, essentially a packet-switched network. If, for example, one wishes to send a packet of information from Boston to Chicago, and the fiber optic cable connecting the two cities has malfunctioned, a hardware device called a router would find an alternate route to make the connection. It might send the message to Ottawa, then to Toronto, Detroit, and finally to Chicago. A sophisticated computer in the router solves this re-routing problem.

The European nuclear research agency CERN turned the US packet-switched network into today's global powerhouse. Two prominent computer scientists, Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau, developed the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1991. Among its achievements, two innovations stand out. First, the WWW changed the numerical addresses of the connected computers to more understandable text, such as “Dell Technical Support.” Second, the web allows the source computer to send a software program for the destination computer to execute. For example, the program may request the destination computer to stream a popular movie back to the source computer.

That ability to send a program to a destination computer would ostensibly permit a malicious party to steal valuable information or trigger a system crash. Fortunately, the chip designers created operational modes to address this. The program cannot access the operating system code (Linux, IOS, etc.) in User mode. Only in Supervisor, System, and Interrupt modes can one access secret files and Linux code.

Of course, tricking a computer into switching to Supervisor, System, or Interrupt modes and executing code you have planted is the heart and soul of hacking. I had to get involved in the Dark Web to learn theart of hacking.

The Dark Web is a vast group of Internet addresses that are not indexed and cataloged by the popular search engines ChatGPT, Google, or Bing. The US Military developed the dark web as a means of communicating anonymously. Detecting who sent a packet over the Dark Web is nearly impossible. The military needed a method for spies and informants to send secret information and not reveal their source address and location. The Dark Web has its own specialized browsers, again developed by the US Military.

While some of the Dark Web contains repulsive information such as child pornography, how to buy illegal drugs, stolen credit card data, and firearms, I was interested in the 5% of the Dark Web that dealt with hacking.

Fascinated by this, I became an active member of the hacking community on the Dark Web. My handle was “bitchbucket413,” and I made friends worldwide through the chat rooms and message boards. They, of course, had no idea who I was or where I lived and worked. The dark web had technical documentation and source code of every commercial Internet router and cable modem.

I taught myself how to implement software exploits that trick the computer into executing bits of my code in "executive mode,” allowing me to force the computer to do anything I wanted.

I developed some unique exploits unbeknownst to the Dark Web hacking community. I discovered an undocumented feature of the ARM and RISC-V designs: secret instruction codes allowing me to manipulate and override the memory management circuits.

Most modern computer designs include a Trusted Platform Module, which uses hash algorithms to safely boot up a Linux system. My memory management tricks allow me to relocate the operating system code elsewhere in memory, leaving my modified boot image at address zero. After executing all the boot steps elsewhere in memory, they get my modified version running when they start the OS and are none the wiser.

I even broke into the Open Software Foundation’s computers and modified their C and C++ compilers to install my modifications whenever an auto-patch was needed. As far as I could tell, no one in the hacking community is doing anything like this.

I hacked Colby and Tilly's company computer, never using it for harm. It was just practice. Then, I graduated to Internet routers, servers, and cable modems. All these devices used ARM or RISC-V computer architectures. I could get into these devices, plant myself secretly in their operating code, and monitor any Internet message running through these systems.

When I was 21, Dr. Lewis Morton of Chicago Cyber Engineering (CCE) approached the Cottrels about contracting overflow work. We had competed against them on several jobs, underbidding them on a few smaller projects. However, they always won the bigger jobs since CCE had a reputation, and we were the upstarts. Tilly was reluctant to get involved with them, but Colby insisted that we at least take the 11 a.m. meeting and maybe look at their operation.

Chicago Cyber Engineering was eleven miles away from the Cottrel's home. That morning, I brought my A-game: a gray business suit, a white embroidered blouse, and stylish flats for shoes. Ihad taught myself to apply makeup but was careful not to upstage Tilly, my boss. Taking the Red line to their home, we set out at 10 a.m. towards the CCE complex at South 17th Avenue and West 19th Street in Hines.

The complex was a modern, seven-story office building, sides clad in glass, using the latest liquid crystal shading systems. The north side was a fenced-in garden, beautifully landscaped with picnic tables for the lunch or coffee break crowds. The south side was a spacious parking lot with some spots labeled 'visitors.' The Cottrel's Tesla pulled up at the entrance, and we got out, with Colby commanding it to find a parking place

After entering the double glass doors, two security guards directed us through a walk-through metal detector. They forced us to empty our pockets and run our bags through an X-ray machine. The guards gave each of us a visitor's badge and informed us that these badges required an escort to be in the facility. This level of scrutiny seemed excessive to me. The receptionist told us that Dr. Morton was running thirty minutes late and we were to stay put until somebody came for us.

I looked around the reception area and was amazed at the money spent decorating it; there was modern art everywhere and a dazzling water fountain in the center with surrounding benches for visitors to sit and chat. The reception area was busy, with people entering and leaving.

Then it happened. A man got out of a Mercedes electric car at the entrance and came through the doors. The guards didn't even bother to check his briefcase or business suit.

"Good morning, Mr. Kartallozi. Go right on through."

It was Yilka, the man who abducted me, raped me, and held me down while the mob boss mutilated me. A gripping feeling of fear hit me like a flash flood. I gasped and turned my face away as he passed by on his way to the elevator. I started shivering, and my eyes watered.

Tilly noticed it first. Touching my arm, she asked.

"Jane, do you know that man?"

I could not respond. As the man waited for the elevator, I turned my back to him, hoping he wouldn't recognize me. Colby, suspecting that something was amiss, turned to Tilly and me.

"Tilly, what's wrong?"

Again, Tilly asked me, almost whispering so no one in the reception area could hear.

"Jane, is he one of the people who raped you?"

I must have looked like a frightened rabbit; I could only nod to Tilly. Tilly looked at her husband, her eyes wide with surprise. Colby decided to act.

"Tilly, recall our Tesla. Get Jane out of here right now. I'll tell the receptionist we have to leave. Let's go."

Colby handed me a handkerchief to dab my eyes and headed toward the receptionist. Tilly watched Yilka enter the elevator, and we stood up when the doors closed. I don't think he noticed me. We gave our badges to the guards, collected our belongings, and scurried outside just as Colby's Tesla pulled up. Tilly and I scrambled into the back seats, and I kept my face pointed away from the building. Colby came out quickly, jumping into the driver's seat. He programmed home on autopilot, and the Tesla moved from the parking lot towards the highway. As Colby's Tesla moved north on 17th Avenue towards the 290 expressway, my respiration rate returned to normal, and I retrieved my tablet computer.

*"Colby, I cannot work for that company."*

"Tilly and I will never enter into a contract with them, Jane, not after this. We don't do business with mobsters. We have a law firm, Farkas and Lloyd, on retainer. If you want to go to the police, Tilly and I will provide you with any legal representation you need."

*"That would be fruitless, Colby. After my rape, I sought the help of an underground doctor in Chinatown. He treated me, stitched up the lacerations they made on my left breast, and gave me the Morning After pill. As the weeks passed, I did not test positive for an STD or get pregnant. While this was just two years ago, there is no physical evidence of the crime but my mutilation. Taking this to the police will expose me to the mob and guarantee their retribution."*

"Jane, they can't be allowed to get away with this. You deserve justice. That's not all; we now have evidence that a mob runs a top-flight software company. Sure, they may be doing legitimate software projects. What if CCE used all that high-powered talent for nefarious purposes?"

*"Colby, I will have to devise some way of getting justice. When I do, I'll sever my relationship with CASE. I will not expose you to any danger, legal or otherwise."*

Tilly looked at me intently, her face expressing her determination to stand up for something.

"No way, Jane. You stay with us through clear skies and stormy seas. We will protect you in whatever way we can. Maybe it's just legal representation; maybe researching those bastards. Rely on us, Jane. We will help you get back at those criminals."

I leaned back as the Tesla moved east on the Eisenhower Expressway. I stared at the industrial areas passing by, thinking.

*"It's time to start fighting back."*

Fighting Back

I accessed the Chicago Cyber Engineering (CCE) website when I got home. Perusing the Management section, I was shocked that the co-owner with Dr. Lewis Morton was a man named Imer Bisha. My heart sank to the pit of my stomach as I stared at his photograph. The man who raped and mutilated me was smiling in a tailored business suit. How could this be? Looking at the other managers, all with advanced degrees, Yilka Kartallozi was not listed as an employee. Yet I saw him enter the building, bypass security, and enter the elevator. Then it dawned on me this was indeed an organized crime front company, an Albanian mafia den of iniquity.

Searching the Chicago news sources for articles about Bisha, I found that Bisha and his wife, Lendina, were portrayed as model citizens. They founded the Ship of Hope Home for Battered Women and Teenaged Runaways and received city funding to operate it. I remembered that the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children had arranged for me to go to the Ship of Hope upon my release. My decision to ignore that recommendation was, in hindsight, prescient.

One reporter inquired about Bisha’s father, who was serving a life sentence on a RICO charge. Bisha said an aunt raised him after his mother died, and he had no contact with his father. Suspiciously, Lendina claimed that her father left when she was a toddler. I wasn’t buying any of that.

To fight back, I had to be a ghost. If someone snapped a photograph of me, I wanted no images of me on state, federal, and Interpol databases. The same goes for any fingerprint data. To do this, I broke into FBI and CIA mainframes in Washington and Langley and used their facial database tools to look for my name and photograph. Fortunately, there weren’t many images listed under Jane Doe 413. I deleted all data and backups from every facial and fingerprint database the FBI could access. I couldn’t delete photos saved to thumb drives and obsolete CDROMs, but chances were slight that someone would look there. I followed up with similar scrubbing of the Chicago and Illinois State Police databases.

I penetrated the computer systems of the Chicago Child Protective Services, the Alden School for the Deaf, and the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children. I copied and then removed all digital records about myself. Sometimes, I had to drop my name from a list of students and then adjust the number of students accordingly. I did this work from my home in Chinatown.

To excise all paper documentation about myself, I embarked on a two-month campaign of breaking and entering. I had previously trained myself to be an expert lockpicker. For those facilities that employed swipe cards, I broke into their computers and made a clone of a card used by a female employee. The swipe cards and the equipment to program their chips are readily available on the Internet, so I made perfectly acceptable swipe cards in my apartment in Chinatown.

The best way to enter the facilities with paper records of me (the hospital where I was born, Child Protective Services, and the Institutions where I lived) was to disguise myself as a service technician for AT&T Communications, the principal Internet Service Provider in Chicago. To that end, I bought a new computerized sewing machine and used it to create the appliques for the AT&T Comms uniform. The uniforms with the correct sizes and colors were also available online. I used a Post Office box in Chinatown rented under a fake name for all my Internet purchases.

It only required four weeks to find and remove all paper documentation concerning myself from City Hall, the hospital where I was born, and the institutions that housed me. The Alden School for the Deaf and the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children were 3 a.m. burglaries when the staff was asleep. My familiarity with the grounds and entrances was crucial to getting in and out without detection.

I was only challenged once in the City Hall basement, looking for my CPS records. A staff employee inquired why I was there. I used my smartphone to explain that I was recovering from laryngitis, and my doctor wanted me to refrain from speaking for a week. Using my text-to-voice app, I also explained that I was checking WiFi levels in the building. Showing them my digital oscilloscope did the trick; the employee smiled and suggested I carry on.

I needed a way to get around Chicago without being tracked, so I found the Internet address for the Tesla dealership in Chicago and penetrated their computers. Fortunately, they used a network of Dell Galaxy Plus supercomputer systems, just like my rig. I found the Maintenance Manager’s machine, planted my software, and quickly found a maintenance app and manuals describing its operation. Fortunately for me, the Maintenance Manager’s desktop supercomputer was always left on, even after hours. His maintenance app enabled me to request a Tesla vehicle, program its destination, and remove any usage records after I finished. I wrote software to use my smartphone to control the RoboTaxi’s. Not wanting to cheat the Tesla Corporation, I used a $500 burner debit card to pay for my journeys. At the end of the trip, I programmed a benign trip around town equal to the actual miles I traveled into the car’s onboard computer. In other words, they got their money but had no idea where I went.

In reviewing the hospital records of my birth, I encountered a surprise. The hospital’s night-shift Pediatric Resident, Dr. Alan Neubauer, was drunk and in no condition to do a tracheostomy on a newborn. The Hospital called in an outside Pediatric Surgeon, but that took an hour, resulting in my brain damage.

The hospital investigation resulted in Dr. Neubauer’s expulsion and loss of his medical license. When Dr. Spelvin treated me, I surreptitiously photographed him with my iPad. Comparing that image with the Hospital’s image of Dr. Neubauer revealed that he and Dr. George Spelvin were the same. I didn’t have anger or resentment towards him since he paid a heavy price for his mistake.

I concentrated on Tilly and Colby Cottrel’s projects on weekdays but developed all the tools I needed to investigate Imer Bisha’s company on the weekends. Chicago Cyber Engineering has a Samsung Pulsar All-Flash Storage System supercomputer, essentially a sophisticated corporate cloud computer.

By breaking into the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) computer in Manassas, Virginia, I used their machine to do a web craw to index every Internet address in Chicago and Washington. This supercomputer analyzes weather patterns and uses a gargantuan-sized number of petaflops daily. They never noticed my usage, essentially a burp in a derecho.

Using my map of Chicago Internet addresses, I quickly found the URLs (Uniform Resource Locators or Internet addresses) associated with Chicago Cyber Engineering. I buried my exploit and software tools into their router, mainframe, and every Microsoft Super Surface laptop connected to their Samsung Pulsar All-Flash Storage System. Morton didn’t know that I was in his system.

I spent every free hour studying Morton’s cloud computer and the users working on it. Many of their projects were legitimate, such as building large station displays for San Francisco’s BART transit system. When I tapped into their in-house chat system, it became clear that they were running a criminal enterprise on the side. Morton’s chat system, allowing employees to text back and forth, had a five-second limit for a response, or the software would do multiple erasures of the message. Not even the CIA could resurrect the chat messages after erasure. Naturally, I wrote an app to intercept all chat messages and send them to my home. Since I installed another app in Morton’s cloud machine to tamper with the Internet usage statistics, he was unaware of me transmitting anything in and out of his shop.

Early on, I got lucky. I caught Doctor Morton plugging a petabyte thumb drive into his laptop computer in his office. He must have left the office briefly, so I transmitted the whole shebang back to my home office. This petabyte module had all his hacking software, source code, and documentation. It was a gold mine for me. I spent a couple of months studying his exploits and learned how to defend myself if he ever tried to invade my system.

The Handsome Policeman

I continued unabated the weekly training with my Sensei, Yong Wu, who advocated a daily run through Grant Park. I take the Red Line from the Cermak-Chinatown station near my home to Jackson Station, which is underground. Rising to street level, it’s less than a half-mile walk to Grant Park. I enter the park just north of Buckingham Fountain.

I usually run on the Lakefront Trail adjacent to Lake Michigan in the late afternoon when the sun is lower in the sky. The picturesque Lakefront Trail is tree-lined and cooler than running in the open in summertime. There‘s a public drinking fountain near the Chicago Horizon Pavilion, where I’d rest briefly before jogging back north to the Green Line to go home.

One Sunday afternoon, I watched an incredibly handsome man finish his run at the Pavilion. He was tall, maybe six foot three, with a face like a Greek Adonis. His brown hair, cut short around the sides, was spiky and unruly in the front, which was the popular style these days. His smile projected warmth, and he had kind eyes. I was captivated.

I started watching for him. No other man had this effect on me. Sometimes he didn’t show, but on those days I did see him, my heart would palpitate the moment he appeared. My intellect would immediately quarrel with my emotional self.

*“Jane, give it up. You don’t have a chance with him. Move along!”*

One day, a police officer walked up to him, and they talked. Possibly they knew each other? That just made me more curious. Who was this gorgeous mystery man?

It was a Thursday, I recall. The afternoon summer temperature was brutal, just over 105 degrees and humidity above 95 percent. I was sitting on the grass near the Pavilion, refilling my water bottle from the public drinking fountain. I watched my mystery man approach the pavilion, covered in sweat. It only made him look more desirable. As he wiped the sweat from his face with his forearm, a voice nearby shouted.

“Somebody help!”

I looked south at the end of the Lakefront Trail, where a man had collapsed onto the pavement, lying on his side. My mystery man turned and sprinted straight towards him, and I followed. A small crowd formed around the stricken person.

My Adonis went right to work, positioning the man on his back and feeling for a pulse. He tried to get a verbal response, but the man was unconscious. The mystery man lifted the victim’s T-shirt to expose his sternum. Whipping off his own shirt, he folded it underneath the victim’s head, tilting it back slightly.

I gulped. Mystery Man’s bare chest was as taut and muscular as an Olympic athlete. After asking a woman nearby to call 911, he started CPR. He knew what to do, performing chest compressions at one hundred a minute with two mouth-to-mouth lung inflations every fifteen compressions. A sizable crowd had gathered around when a uniformed Chicago police officer ran up and barked an order.

“All right, everyone back up. Give Officer Merrick some room. Back up, do it now!”

*“Oh, so he’s a cop,” I thought.*

“You heard me, everybody. Back up some more!”

The crowd obeyed, and a few dispersed, replaced by runners stopping to rubberneck. I was fascinated, watching Officer Merrick trying to save this man’s life. It had already been ten minutes, and the sweat cascaded off Merrick’s head like a mountain brook. But there was no quit in Merrick as he doggedly pressed on. He looked up at the Policeman, who had a smartphone at his ear.

“Ben, where the hell are the EMT guys?”

“They’re five minutes away, Mac. Can you hang on?”

“Yes, I can. Every second counts in a cardiac arrest case.”

We began to hear a siren approaching. The police officer, Ben, ordered the crowd to get off the pavement and clear a path for the Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) to arrive. The Chicago EMT truck rumbled to a stop, lights flashing, but at least the siren silenced. Two men exited, opened the rear door, and retrieved four molded plastic equipment cases. They sprinted to Officer Merrick.

“This is Officer Mac Merrick, fellas. He’s been applying CPR for fifteen minutes,” Ben explained.

“How quickly did you get to the patient, Mac?” asked the EMT Technician, who knelt on the other side of the victim.

“Within thirty seconds, I believe.”

“OK, Mac. I’ll take over CPR. Give us some room.”

I watched, fascinated by the speed and efficiency of the EMT crew. While the chest compressions continued, the other technician attached an automated external defibrillator (AED) to the man’s chest and fitted a bag valve mask over the face. They turned on the AED unit, whose robotic voice told them to stand clear. The machine shocked the patient, whose body jerked noticeably from the electric discharge.

“Still flat line. Crank it, Raul.”

The onlookers remained silent in this life-or-death struggle. After an adjustment, the EMTs tried again. Their patient’s body stiffened again from the electric shock.

“We’ve got a pulse,” said Raul.

They removed the bag valve mask and checked for normal respiration.

“He’s breathing,” said the other EMT technician.

The man blinked several times and focused on Raul, hovering over his face.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“You’re in Grant Park. You’ve had a cardiac episode, so we’ll transport you to Northwestern Memorial Hospital.”

Officer Merrick was off to the side, resting on his knees with hands on the pavement, breathing hard.

“Does anyone have any water,” Merrick asked.

I quickly unzipped my fanny pack to retrieve my water bottle when a flashy bitch with raven-colored hair barged past me and reached Officer Merrick first. He looked up at her and smiled.

“Could you pour it over my head?”

She dumped the contents on his head as Merrick exhaled in relief. When the bottle had emptied, the woman asked the appreciative crowd.

“Does anyone else have a water bottle?”

I stepped forward and handed it to her; she hardly looked at me. I, of course, looked at her, as she was wearing a Louis Vuitton embroidered T-shirt, Stella McCartney gym shorts, and Adidas running shoes. Once again, my intellect scolded my heart.

*“Back off. This woman can actually talk to him. You can’t.”*

Officer Merrick looked appreciatively at her after she poured my bottle on his head.

“Thank you, Miss …?”

“Oh, I’m Roma Maria Alverez. I’m an attorney with Jasper and Conklyn. We do contract law. Are you, by any chance, related to Anne Merrick?”

“That would be my mother.”

“She gives our firm some of her overflow work, which we appreciate.”

“Trust me. My mother is a force of nature. She’s unstoppable.”

“On that, we agree, Officer Merrick. If I may be so impertinent, are you in a relationship?”

“I do have a girlfriend, but she’s out of town a lot.”

“Well, when she’s away, are you monogamous?”

“It’s more like I’m concentrating on my career right now, if you get my drift.”

Roma Maria reached into her fanny pack and retrieved a business card.

“Here. Take my card. It has my personal cell phone on the back. Call me anytime. You won’t regret it.”

Officer Merrick stuffed her business card into the pocket of his running shorts.

Roma Maria stood up and offered Mac her hand to help him stand. He accepted with a smile. They looked at the paramedics, strapping the patient onto a gurney. He still had the AED unit, an IV bottle, and an oxygen mask attached. As they wheeled him to the van’s rear door, one of them shouted to Officer Merrick.

“Mac, well done, buddy. You saved a life today!”

The assembled spectators started cheering as the EMT van started its engine, turned on the flashing lights and sirens, and headed for Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The Chicago Policeman handed Mac his T-shirt, and he quickly put it on as another police officer on an electric scooter pulled up. He seemed to know Mac.

“I heard what you did, Mac. I’ll take you home to the Grant Park Tower.”

Mac climbed on behind the officer. Looking one last time at Roma Maria, Mac grinned, his eyes twinkled, and I nearly melted into a pile of hopeless but unredeemable love.

“Thanks for the dousing, Counselor. Maybe we’ll meet again?”

“Anytime,” was her appreciative answer.

The crowd started to disperse as the electric scooter moved away. I turned and started my long run north to the L station. I had just encountered the man of my dreams, handsome, heroic, kind, and rich. So close, but he never even noticed me. I returned home with one mission in mind: to learn more about Officer Mac Merrick.

CHAPTER 7

Officer Merrick

Assassinating a Policeman

The date was Tuesday, June 19th. I worked intensely on a Python application for Colby Cottrel, testing it repeatedly until I was satisfied that it was ready to deliver to our customer. At 10 o’clock, I found the time to inspect the recent chat messages Dr. Morton and his staff exchanged. The content shocked me to my bone marrow.

*“Chicago Police are planning an undercover op to attempt a drug buy from us. Some cop named Mackenzie Merrick is planning to approach Besim Morina at Bar Etna tonight around midnight.”*

*“Does Merrick have a backup?”*

*“Yes, a black cop named DiOtis Williams.”*

*“There’s a new construction site on Green Street 300 feet north of West Randolf. Let’s have Besim play along and lure Merrick there.”*

*“Do you want to wax both?”*

*“No, just Merrick. Leave the other cop alone.”*

*“Imer, you can’t be serious. Killing a policeman is too risky!”*

*“These Chicago cops are stealing our money, Lewis. Somebody has to pay the price. This nosy undercover cop is the right one to rub out.”*

*“I’ll have the staff help, but you’re taking a hell of a chance, Imer.”*

I glanced at my watch; I had three hours to act. I donned black jeans, running shoes, and an oversized black hoodie sweatshirt, stuffing several assembled and coiled 27-inch industrial zip ties in the hoodie’s pockets. The hoodie covered the holster for my stun gun and DemonFyre pepper spray.

Dashing out of my apartment, I raced to Cermac-Chinatown Red Line station. I could reach the construction site by taking the Red Line north and the Green Line west to Morgan Station, just a block and a half from my destination. The problem is that the Red Line is incredibly busy with many stops.

Getting off the Green Line at Morgan Station, I sprinted to the construction site. It was empty and unlit, the full moonlight the only illumination. Positioning myself behind the pile of wood pallets next to the dumpster, I waited patiently for the Albanian Mafia thugs to arrive with Office Merrick.