

THE AWAKENING

By

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CHAPTER 1

He awoke suddenly to find his car careening down an embankment into a heavy curtain of darkness, lightened only by the few visible stars in the sky above and a moon playing peek-a-boo with some slow rolling clouds. His right foot searched frantically for the brake, abruptly found it, and then slammed it to the floor. But by then the car was moving way too fast. The wheels of the Camry grabbed as best they could but could find no purchase on the ground as the car continued forward sliding over weeds, pine straw, and dirt, plowing headlong through patches of underbrush to sideswipe a lanky old pine tree. It seemed both an instant and an eternity before the tires found solid grip and the auto groaned and squeaked and almost stopped, but didn't until it slapped the thick trunk of an old oak tree.

Kyle Mason jerked forward upon impact catching himself before he hit the windshield. He hadn't bothered to use the seatbelts. They seemed too much of an inconvenience. He exhaled a lung full of hot, bated breath then nervously swiped back a lock of his coal-black hair. Outside his window, the blackness of night surrounded him like an evil presence.

Beneath the car, something spit and spewed like a venomous snake as smoke and steam wafted out from beyond the hood like an apparition drifting off into the night.

He twisted the key in the ignition, but nothing happened. There was no click. Absolutely nothing to indicate that the car had a chance to start. Even the dashboard lights failed to illuminate.

He opened the driver's side door into the velvety blackness and began to swing his legs out when his foot kicked against an opened can of beer that had fallen into the floorboard. He instantly reached down, felt for it, and retrieved it. There was only a little bit of the foamy liquid remaining, most of it had spilled out onto the floorboard. He brought the can to his lips and drank what was left. He crushed the can and tossed it into the pile of empty beer cans that littered the passenger side floorboard.

He had passed out. That was a cold realization. He had only come awake when the car left the road and began its jarring descent down this wooded landscape. Luckily the car hadn't flipped or smashed headlong, full speed, into a large tree.

In his inebriated state what could have happened didn't have the emotional impact that it should have. Instead, he was more concerned with getting out of this hollow and finding a place to stay for the night.

He thought of his cell phone. He could call Uber or a cab to come pick him up. He looked about but could make out very little in the dark car. He remembered placing the phone in the passenger seat because he was using a music app on the phone to play through the car's speakers.

He felt inside the passenger seat but came up empty. Thinking it might have fallen off the seat he began searching the floorboard with his hand. Almost at once he found the phone and picked it up.

The back plate of the phone was partially broken revealing a bit of the circuit board. He could feel a scattering of cracks across the front of the phone as well. He determined that he must have stepped on it on his journey down through this outgrowth of nature. Nevertheless, he thought it might still work. After a few minutes of trying to bring the phone back to life, he gave up. He tossed it back onto the floorboard.

He pushed his lanky six-foot frame out of the car and struggled to his feet, quickly grabbing the top of the car to keep from toppling. His legs wobbled as if they were made of soft rubber.

Where was he? He stared out into the deep darkness of the woods unable to see anything but the distorted outlines of gray to black images of the surrounding foliage. Then he looked up to what he could see of the night sky while he waited for a bit of strength and balance to return to his drunk and shaken body.

The last real location he could recall was the Mity Quick convenience store. He had stopped there for a twelve pack. He wasn't sure how far he had driven since then, but it was far enough to have finished nearly all the twelve beers that he had bought.

He thought of spending the night in the car but if he did, he would be taking a chance that some random cop would find him there and charge him with a DUI. He already had two under his belt, another would certainly earn him some jail time. Not bad for a twenty-one-year-old he thought with a bit of sadness and sarcasm.

He sighed and pushed himself precariously away from the car and began to climb and stumble his way up the trail of flattened weeds and scrub trees broken by the onslaught of the automobile. Twice he slipped on the pine straw and fell to his knees.

At the top of the hill, he stood for a moment on the dirt shoulder of the two-lane blacktop. The night was unusually dark. A scatter of clouds, like thick strands of dark cotton, blanketed the moon and most of the stars. When he looked to his right, down the paved road, he saw only darkness like a deep, lightless tunnel. There was nothing there to induce him to head in that direction.

He looked to his left and spotted a pole light on a slight hill about fifty yards away on the opposite side of the road. The light sat to the right of a moderate-sized ranch-style house illuminating the front of it and a portion of the driveway.

He started in that direction. If he could persuade the tenant to call him a taxi, or an Uber, or whatever they had around here, he'd have the driver take him to a hotel where he could sleep it off. Sometime in the morning, or possibly early afternoon, he would decide on what he needed to do about his car.

The alcohol was working heavily on him as he shambled along the shoulder of the highway, occasionally stumbling, and laughing about it. What should have been a serious situation was passed off as just another slice of his muddled life.

In a bit of a stupor, he came adjacent to the house before he was fully aware of it. Looking somewhat majestic, the house looked down on him as if it were a brick sentry warily eyeing his approach.

He breathed heavily as if he had walked for miles, though in his mind it seemed like mere minutes. That was one of the unique things about alcohol. It seemed to possess the magic to manipulate time. To shorten or lengthen its cadence as it saw fit.

He stared up at the house as he crossed the road. Though not that big it looked rather imposing sitting on the hill, its brick structure nestled on three sides by a stretch of woods. The tall pole light to the side of the house lit up the front yard scattering the darkness while a dull light shone from a front room.

He puffed as he fought his way up the slight incline of the driveway. By the time he got to the top, he was panting furiously. He leaned over to prop his hands upon his knees. His lungs felt as if they were going to explode. Up ahead of him sitting in the driveway close to the house sat a Cadillac. That was good. That meant someone was home.

He didn't want to go up to this stranger's door all out of breath and reeking of alcohol. The resident might be spooked and call the cops. Instead, he decided to step off the driveway and head to a pine tree off to his left opposite the house. It sat just outside the reach of the spray of light from the pole light. For several moments he propped against the tree to catch his breath and gain some composure. He hoped that it would be enough to convince the person in the house that he was not a threat and to call him a ride. After a good night's sleep, he would set out to fix all this mess he had caused as he had done before.

From his position against the tree, he could see inside the house through the open curtains. He could make out an older gray-haired man sitting in a recliner looking straight ahead. Kyle supposed the man was watching television. From his position, he could only make out the man and a portion of his surroundings.

Having gained control of his breathing after a few minutes he pushed off the tree. He was only a couple of steps onto the driveway when he saw something or someone else inside the room. He stopped. A dark silhouette, like a shadow, seemed to have passed through the wall behind the man. Kyle wasn't sure what he was seeing. He thought maybe this was a shadow from someone else in the house and not anything coming through the wall. But then the shadow, obviously independent of anyone, moved across the room and stood in front of the man. The old man seemed oblivious to the presence of this darkened figure as if he wasn't there. The shadow figure paused for a moment then walked straight at the seated gentleman. It suddenly fell, or jumped, -Kyle wasn't sure - at the man and then quickly disappeared. The man shot straight up out of his chair. He jerked around as if he had just grabbed a high voltage line then at once he fell face-first into the floor.

Kyle backed up quickly out of the stream of light from the pole lamp without thinking, not sure of what he had seen.

The shadow came out of the man. It paused and stared out the window toward Kyle. For a moment he thought he had been seen but then the shadow turned and walked back through the wall.

Kyle was momentarily stunned afraid to even breathe too hard. He didn't know what to make of what he had just witnessed. Did this just happen, or was this some elaborate hallucination brought on by all the alcohol he had consumed?

Cautiously he began inching toward the house, looking around as he moved for any sign of the shadow. As he came to the window, he could see the man lying on the floor. There was a little blood around his face where he had hit the floor.

He thought that there still might be a chance that the man was alive. If so, he needed to get inside and do something.

He tried the front door. It was locked tight. He slammed into it with his shoulder thinking that he could bust through the door like some of the characters in the movies he had seen. Unfortunately, the door didn't budge. His only accomplishment was a sore arm.

The window was locked as well, but that was only a small problem.

He lifted one of the large rocks that encircled a small flower bed near the front walk. He looked away as he smashed a section of glass just above the window latch, then reached in through the gaping hole and unlocked the window. After raising the window, he removed the shards of glass from the windowsill and climbed into the house.

He knelt beside the older man. The blood was flowing from his mouth and nose in tiny rivulets, making small, dark puddles on the carpet. He checked the man's pulse at his neck. Nothing.

He reached for his phone which was usually stuffed inside his front pocket. It wasn't there. Then he remembered that it was still in his car all broken up. He felt foolish. The entire reason for him stopping at this house was because he had broken his phone and needed to call for a ride.

He figured the old man must have a phone somewhere. He glanced about the living room, eyeing the coffee table, the sofa, and the two armchairs. There was no phone. He let his eyes wander further until he finally spotted a phone. It was a house phone and was attached to the wall in the kitchen just off the living room.

He was lightheaded as he crossed the floor to the phone. A couple of times he briefly lost his balance and nearly fell. He tapped 911 on the phone and waited for someone to answer.

In a few moments, a lady answered. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"There's been a murder," he blurted out.

"What is your name?" the lady asked. Before he could answer she continued. "Are you in any danger?"

"No," he answered. "I don't think so."

"And your name?"

"Uh..." he was reluctant to answer. His thought, though not logical at the time, was that if the authorities knew his name, they might look into his background.

"Your name, sir?" the lady continued.

"Uh, Kyle." He decided it didn't matter. He had to wait around for the cops to tell them what he saw. He had this stubborn conscience that wouldn't allow him to just run away. "Kyle Mason."

"And what is your address, sir?"

Kyle figured that the lady was just confirming the address. Surely, she had the means to pull up the address from the telephone number.

"Just a minute." He looked around the kitchen and dining room hoping to see an envelope or something with the address on it. There was nothing on the countertops or stuck on the refrigerator with one of those magnets that held pictures and/or notes.

He slid open the counter drawer just below the phone. A small blue book sat on top of a bunch of assorted items: several pens, a couple of pencils, store receipts, and two opened letters. He removed the book and set it on the countertop. He took out one of the letters. He called out the address listed on the envelope to the operator.

"Okay, sir," the woman said. "Please stay at the scene if you're not in any danger. Emergency personnel is on their way."

"Thank you," he said and hung up.

He started to stick the book back in the drawer, then stopped. Something about the blue book drew his attention. The book was about six inches by nine inches and had a hard paper cover. Written at the top of it in red ink were the words "The find." He lifted the

book from the drawer. He thought that a curious title. He opened it up just to see what it was about.

May 25th.

It was a week ago today that I was wandering through the woods getting a little exercise and deciding on a suitable speech to give to the Mystoria High graduating class when I ventured beyond my normal trip through the woods. I suddenly came into a wide clearing and beheld an unusual sight. At the center of the clearing was an almost perfectly round body of, what I thought was, water. It was green in color and seemed thick like the slime one would see on a children's program. It was the strangest thing I have ever seen.

I thought of placing my hand in this colored liquid to feel its texture but was reluctant because of the odd way it looked. Instead, I found a small tree branch and stuck it into the liquid. The water instantly bubbled like it was boiling, but I could feel no heat coming from it. I pulled the stick out. At the point where I had stuck the stick in the liquid, it came out spongy, and the bark had been wiped away. I walked away from the pool not knowing what to make of it.

I thought it was simply curious at first but later I considered that it might be dangerous. There was something corrosive in this liquid for it to take the bark off a tree branch. I contacted Police Chief Potts to tell him what I had found, and he said he would look into it as soon as he could and get back to me.

I'm not sure exactly why I decided to start this journal. Maybe because something tells me that this pool has some importance, but also because it's so odd, and as a semi-retired old man who often gets bored, I enjoy a good mystery.

Kyle briefly thought of reading more of the book but instead, he skimmed through the book and then closed it. He didn't want to be caught looking through the man's stuff when the cops or medics showed up. He closed the book and was ready to put it back in the drawer. But something didn't feel right. He couldn't explain this strange feeling that came over him. He stood motionless for a few moments until the first faint sounds of a siren could be heard in the still night.

It was crazy. It made no sense at all, but his instinct was to hide the book. To hide the book until he could come back later and finish reading it. It was utterly insane, but the urge wouldn't let up. This book held some significance. He was sure of it.

He slid the drawer closed and ran out the front door with the book in hand. He ran to the edge of a stand of trees to the right of the house. The ground was laden with pine straw. He swept away an area with his hand, placed the book there, and covered it with a good supply of pine straw. It wasn't much of a hiding place, but he didn't have the time, nor the clear head to think of a better place. The screaming of the siren had become loud. He had just enough time to get back inside the house before they arrived.

As a police car pulled into the driveway, he quickly knelt beside the old man wondering if there were anything he should have done or could now do. Perhaps he should have tried CPR. But he guessed it was too late for that now. He felt a pang of guilt rush over him. If he hadn't been so drunk he might have thought of that when he first encountered the fallen man.

He stood up just as the first policeman burst into the house.

“Freeze!” the policeman yelled. He sounded like a commando. His gun was drawn and held in front of him with both hands.

Kyle felt like he did literally freeze. As if he were frozen in ice. For a few moments, as he stared down the barrel of the gun, he was unable to speak, or even move.

“On your knees!” the policeman ordered.

Kyle broke his trance and dropped to his knees. He placed his hands on his head as he had seen on numerous television shows.

Another policeman entered the house after him. He was more subdued. He headed directly to Kyle, pulled his hands down, and handcuffed his wrists behind his back. The commando policeman returned the gun to his holster.

“Stand up,” the policeman demanded, as he pulled firmly on his arm.

When Kyle got to his feet, he turned around to face the policeman. At once he noticed the name tag affixed to the man’s shirt. The name was Blake Anderson. Kyle surmised that this policeman must be the one in charge.

Anderson turned slightly to look at Commando. Without talking, Commando knew what the other policeman wanted. Commando dropped down to check on the old man.

“He’s dead alright,” Commando announced after a few seconds. “There are no obvious wounds on him but there is some blood on his nose and mouth.”

“What’s your name, son?” Anderson asked though he didn’t look much older than Kyle.

“Kyle. Kyle Mason.”

“Mind if I check your wallet for an ID?”

“No. Go ahead.”

Officer Anderson slid the wallet out of Kyle’s back pocket. He looked over the driver’s license. It seemed to be in order. He slid the wallet back into his pocket. “What happened here?”

“I stopped by here to use the phone. I ... I ran off into a ditch about a half-mile from here.”

“Have you been drinking, sir?” Officer Anderson asked.

“Eh ... a little.”

Two EMTs in gray smocks entered the house carrying a stretcher and a bag of medical instruments, including a defibrillator. They went directly to the old man. The commando cop moved back to give them more room.

“What happened?” Officer Anderson repeated. “I was informed that there was a murder. Did you do something to the man?”

“No, of course not.”

“Okay, so what happened?”

Kyle took in a short breath. “Eh, after I wrecked my car, I walked up here to ask whoever lived here to call me a ride to a nearby hotel. I was in the driveway when I saw ... a shadow ...or something that looked like a shadow, walk over to the man and ...”

Anderson looked at him questioningly. “A shadow?”

“Yes. Just a shadow.” From his peripheral vision, he could see Commando looking at him. He turned toward him. The cop smirked as if he thought Kyle was a bit on the crazy side.

The two EMTs were using the defibrillator to try to resuscitate the man without success.

“So did you see who was making this shadow?”

"No. Eh, there was no one there."

"No one there? What the hell does that mean?"

Kyle shook his head. "I saw only a shadow. It ...seemed to ... pass through the wall behind the man." He wondered if he would be telling this story –which seemed quite unbelievable even to himself –if he weren't so snookered.

"And I guess this shadow killed the man on the floor?"

The two EMTs were wrapping up the stuff they had brought in. They paused to listen.

As outrageous as it now seemed to him, he could see no way out, but to continue the story. "From where I stood, I could see through the living room window. The man was sitting in the chair when ... when the shadow appeared to come through the wall behind him." He paused feeling the pressure of the eyes looking at him as if he were crazy.

"And then what?" Officer Anderson prompted.

"Then the shadow walked right up to the front of the man."

"What did the man do when he saw the shadow?"

"Nothing. I don't think he saw it."

"Okay. So, what did this shadow do?"

"It...he, just kind of fell on top of the man, disappearing into him, I guess. Then the man jumped up like he had been shocked and then he fell over dead. A second or two later the shadow came back out of him."

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard," said commando. "I think we need to haul his butt in and charge him with murder."

"Let's take a step at a time, Kenneth," said Officer Anderson.

"I didn't kill him! Look at him. There are no external marks on him except on his face where he fell. How would I have killed him without leaving marks?"

"If I might interject something," one of the EMTs said.

"Go ahead," Anderson said, sounding a bit irritated.

"The man is dead. It appears he died of a heart attack. His facial wounds seem consistent with a fall."

Officer Anderson nodded. "I appreciate your input, but we're treating it like a homicide until we know otherwise." He looked to Kenneth, the commando cop. "Contact the Coroner and the forensic guys."

"Sure thing, Blake."

Officer Anderson placed a hand on Kyle's upper arm and led him toward the door. "Looks like you're going to be a guest of the county until we can figure this out. Oh, and a word of advice, you probably shouldn't go talking about this shadow creature you say you saw. No one is going to believe you and all it's going to do is stir up more trouble for you."

CHAPTER 2

It was early evening the next day when Kyle Mason was finally released from jail. He was never formally charged with anything, only held under suspicion. He thought that they might try to charge him with a DUI, but they didn't. He figured either they couldn't because too much time had passed or didn't want to bother with it. Whatever the case he was just glad to be out.

As he was going through the process of his release, he had asked one of the officers what was the verdict on the old man. He was told that the man had had a massive heart attack but didn't go into any detail.

As he made his way through the town in search of an auto mechanic shop that had a wrecker, he thought about what he had seen at the old man's house. He could still recall the shadow that came through the wall of the man's house. The entire scene of this shadow leaning over and disappearing into the man unfolded in his mind. It had happened. Hadn't it? Now he began to wonder.

Maybe it was just some crazy hallucination. He *had* drunk quite a bit that day. Still, there were many days in the last year that he had drunk too much and never had an experience like that.

He found a service station that had a wrecker parked in the dirt to the side of the building. He walked into the office. It was a small office, dingy, dusty, and old-looking. One of the bulbs of the two overhead fluorescent fixtures was out. One entire side of the office, to his left, was mostly glass and looked out on the working area of the garage. On the wall above the counter, which was straight ahead of him, was a large board announcing that they did tune-ups, brake jobs, and other minor mechanical work.

As Kyle approached the counter, Morton Squeeks, the owner, an overweight bald man in his early fifties was on the phone rapping out figures from a sheet of paper he was holding.

"That's all of them the man said after another minute. "I'll get back to you later, okay? Yeah. Bye." He hung up the phone and turned to Kyle. "What can I do for you, kid?"

"I've got a car in a ditch, and I'm probably going to need some repairs done on it."

"Okay. I'll have a driver, free here in a bit. He's finishing up a brake job right now. "I'll need some directions to this car."

"It's on Willington highway. A few miles from here. It would be on the right coming from here. But you can't see the car from the road. I ..."

The man muttered to himself. "Just ride with my driver. "I don't need him driving around for an hour looking for your car." He smiled but it didn't seem sincere. "Make yourself comfortable." He motioned to the small sofa and the two battered armchairs that sat to one side of the room. "He'll be with you shortly."

"Sure," Kyle answered.

It was twenty minutes later when Kyle rode out in a wrecker beside a bearded, heavyset man. The man was just a bit older than Kyle. He was twenty-five and Kyle was twenty-one.

"How did you end up in a ditch?" the bearded man asked.

"I was a little drunk."

"A little drunk?" The man grinned.

"Okay. A lot drunk."

The man laughed loudly. His laugh was somewhat high-pitched, quite unlike his rough appearance.

Kyle could only muster a weak smile. Right now, it just didn't seem that funny to him.

The bearded man's laughter slowly faded. "You gotta watch that drinkin' an' drivin'. Cops are getting tough on stuff like that." He turned toward Kyle. "You didn't get a DUI, did you?"

"No. But I did spend a night in jail."

"What did they charge you with, reckless driving?"

"No. They never charged me with anything. I guess you could say they were holding me for suspicion of murder."

"Murder? Are you serious? What happened?"

Kyle sighed. "Okay." He considered how much he wanted to tell. "After I wrecked my car, I walked to a house hoping to find someone who would call me a ride to the nearest hotel." He paused to get his thoughts together. "When I got there I saw a man through the front window. The curtains were open. And ... I saw him fall, and ... he wasn't moving so I broke in."

"You broke in," the driver asked.

"Yes. I had to try to help the man. I couldn't, however. The man died of a heart attack." The words came out smoother than he thought they would. Perhaps, he was beginning to believe that the old man had indeed simply died of a heart attack and that he had hallucinated this shadow creature. "When the cops arrived, they kept me overnight to make sure that it wasn't something that I did to the guy."

"You didn't, did you?"

"No, of course not."

"Who's this guy that had the heart attack?"

"An older man. I think his house is coming up here on the left."

"I don't think I know anyone up this way."

Kyle suddenly remembered the book he had hidden. "Oh, you mind stopping by the man's house a minute. I dropped my watch when the cop handcuffed me."

"You're not planning on going into the house, are you?"

"Oh, no. I'm just going to look out in the front yard. If I can't find it in a minute or two then I'll forget about it. You can just park on the side of the road if you want."

They went another couple of miles before the house came into view. Kyle pointed it out and the driver flipped on his flashers and pulled over on the right shoulder.

Kyle ran across the road. Of course, there was no watch. He hadn't worn a watch in years. Time had meant little to him since the tragic death of his mom and dad.

He found the book and stuffed it halfway into the back of his pants, covering it with his shirt. He walked around the front yard another minute looking for his nonexistent watch then hurried across the street to the wrecker.

"Find it?" the bearded man asked as Kyle slipped into the cab of the wrecker.

"No. There's no telling where it is. I'll just have to buy another one."

"Was it expensive?" the man asked as he pulled off the curb into the road.

"No. It was about a thirty-dollar watch."

"You're one of the few people I know who wears a watch. Other than the smartwatch. Most people I know just look at their cell phones."

"Yeah. Well, I've always liked wearing a wristwatch. And besides, my cellphone is in my car, broken. So, that's that."

The man nodded. "Too bad. By the way, people call me Ghetty." He stuck out his hand. Kyle shook it. "I'm Kyle."

"Kyle. I think I can remember that. My real name is Ernest Kelly. I got the name Ghetty from winning a spaghetti eating contest. He laughed that high-pitched laugh again.

"Spaghetti eating contest? Is that a real thing?"

"Sure. It's not as popular as hot dog eating, but some of us like it."

They were silent a moment before Kyle spoke. "There it is on the right. You can see the trail my car made."

Ghetty pulled off the road close to the tire tracks Kyle had left. "This might take a while," he said. "You're lucky I have an extra-long cable for this."

It took a little over an hour to get the car out of the woods. Initially, the winch struggled to move the car, but once it did break through the rut that it was in it moved steadily up to the road.

On the way back to the shop Ghetty did most of the talking. He spoke of the town and how he wanted to work his way up from being a part-time mechanic and tow truck driver to owning his very own shop. Kyle only half listened. His mind was consumed with how long it was going to take to fix his car. Something about this town made him nervous.

After reaching the shop Kyle waited in the little office for nearly an hour while his car was being checked out. He had pulled the blue book from the back of his pants because it had become uncomfortable. He was tempted to read it but then decided that it would be better to read it later when his mind wasn't so distracted. He was about to put it away when Morton Squeeks stepped into the office from the work area carrying an electronic pad. The bald man noted the book Kyle was holding before speaking.

"Here's what I've got on your car. You're going to need another battery. That's not a problem. We've got one right here to fit your car."

"Good."

"That's not all. You're going to need another oil pan. The auto parts stores in town don't have one to fit your car so it may take a day or two to get one. The radiator is damaged a bit but we should be able to patch it up. We've also got some electronic issues as well so we may need to get some help on that. And you need at least one tire and a good alignment. This doesn't include bodywork which you can handle later."

"How long is all of this going to take?"

"A couple of days, maybe more."

"Oh, great," he moaned.

"If you agree to all this I'll need your signature on the pad."

Kyle signed his name.

"Where can I reach you when your car is ready?"

"Well, I don't know. Where can I find a decent hotel?"

"The plaza. It's about three blocks up the road. It's not too fancy, but it's clean."

"Okay. That's where you can contact me."

"Good. Once you're settled give me a call and let me know what room you're in. I'll let you know when your car is ready."

"Thank you," Kyle said and walked out of the office.

Kyle sighed. He would be stuck in this town with no car to get around in. And with his driving record renting a car was out of the question.

Fortunately, he didn't have to worry about money. The money from his parent's life insurance policy should support him for several more years.

He rented a room at the Plaza Hotel for four nights hoping that that would be enough time to get his car up and running.

After renting a room he did a little shopping at a clothing store down the street since he was going to be here for a while. The clothes on his back were all he had taken with him and they were quite dirty.

He stopped by a hardware store next to buy some masking tape. He returned to the hotel a few minutes later. After putting the masking tape to good use he settled underneath the shower letting the constant stream of water wash away the dirt and fatigue that had spread over his body. Afterward, he changed into his new clothes and set out to watch a little television. Unfortunately, he lost interest as his mind kept slipping to thoughts he'd just as soon forget.

He switched the television off and stood up. He started toward the door when he noticed the blue book that he had set on the dresser near the door. His first thought was to just leave it where it was, but the fact was he had stolen the book. It was unlikely that anyone would realize that he had taken it or even care that he had. Still, as illogical as it was, it bothered him.

He lifted the book and walked around the room for a minute looking for a hiding place. He came back to the dresser. He had an idea. He removed the bottom drawer and placed the book on the floor beneath where the drawer would be. He then replaced the drawer sliding it over the book. For a few moments, he stood there feeling stupid for going to such lengths to hide a book that probably no one cared about.

He left the hotel room a few minutes later to find a bar only a few blocks away.

Getting a beer, he sat at a corner table isolating himself from the few patrons. He sipped at his brew and listened to the jukebox as memories began to seep past his defenses. He thought of his mom and dad. He missed the hell out of them. What was hurting him the most was the feeling that he was responsible for their deaths.

CHAPTER 3

Morton Squeaks rubbed a hand over his smooth, bald head as he held the phone to his ear. He had begun shaving his head when he was in his early thirties. In his twenties, his hair had begun to thin, mostly across the center of his head. Having hair only on the sides of his head made him look old so he had started combing his hair over the balding spot. That didn't work out too well. A little wind always managed to expose the bare spot. Finally, he had given up and decided to shave it all off. It turned out well. He liked the look of his bald head. He thought that the smooth head gave him a rather rugged look.

Morton leaned back in his black, swivel rocker, as he gazed out the dirty glass window at the graying dusk. He nodded to himself. "Yes, he's staying at the Plaza Hotel." He listened a second. "Yes," he answered. "He's got a blue book. I don't know if it's from the house or not." He listened again. "Even if it is the same book, I doubt that he knows what he's looking at or even cares." He listened some more. "I agree. We shouldn't take that chance." He listened again. "Okay, I understand. I'll handle it. I know a couple of guys who could use a little cash." He nodded. "Alright, bye." He hung up the phone.

He wondered if he shouldn't have just snatched the book from the kid when he was here. But that could have raised a lot of questions. And what if it hadn't been the book they were looking for? That could have been a little messy. It was probably better that he leaves it to a couple of thugs he knew.

He picked up the phone and made another call.

CHAPTER 4

Kyle Mason was on his fourth beer when a gray-haired man with deep wrinkles etched across his face stopped at his table. He looked to be seventy years old or better.

"Excuse me," young man. "Are you the one who found Percy Cloud?"

"Who is Percy Cloud?" Kyle asked, looking up at the man.

"Percy, they said that he was dead. And I was told that a young man from out of town had found him. Are you the one?"

"I guess. I don't remember the man's name."

The old man sat down across from him. "Percy lived out on Willington Highway."

"That must have been him. Was he an older fellow?"

"He was an old fart like me if that's what you mean. Maybe a few years younger. I'll be seventy-two next month."

"Were you a friend of Percy's?"

"Sort of. I used to see him a lot at the park. I'd take my two grandchildren there a couple of times a week. They liked to feed the pigeons and play on the swings. Anyway, Percy used to jog there on the dirt track that circles the park. I told him he was crazy for exercising like that at his age." He paused a moment, then looked over at the bartender. "Hey, Talbot, would you bring me a Miller, please."

"Sure thing, Mr. Turner," the bartender answered. He finished giving change to a customer at the bar. "How 'bout you, son," he called to Kyle, "want another beer?"

"Yes, another Coors." He drank the last ounce of beer from the glass mug.

A minute later the bartender sat two frosted mugs of beer on the table. Kyle and the old man reached for their wallet.

"I got it," the old man said. Kyle started to object, but the man was already pulling the money out of his wallet and paying the bartender.

"Thanks," the bartender said, noting that there were several dollars extra that was for a tip. He reached over and took Kyle's empty mug.

"Thanks for the beer," Kyle said to the older man as the bartender walked away. "I'll get the next round."

"Sure."

After both men took a long sip of their beer, the old man stretched out a hand. "Frank Turner," he said.

"Kyle Mason." Kyle shook his hand.

Frank took another long drink of his beer and then set it in front of him. "After Percy would jog around awhile at the park," he began his story again, "he'd stop by my bench, and we'd shoot the shit for a bit. Not about anything important, just a lot of little stuff. Mostly about sports, and the old days." He paused as though reminiscing.

"It's very hard to lose someone," Kyle said. He thought about how hard it had been for him when his parents had died.

"I told Percy a couple of months ago that if he kept up that fool running, he was going to have a heart attack. So, last month he comes up to me and tells me that he just had his annual physical. He says that his doctor tells him that his heart is as strong as a bull's."

"That so?" Kyle thought of the mysterious shadow he had seen that night. He could see the shadow in his mind quite clearly. He had tried to convince himself that he had

imagined this *shadow*, and the man had simply died of a heart attack as he was told. Now, it was getting more difficult for him to lie to himself.

"Were you there when Percy died?"

"Eh, yes, I was outside the house. I could see him through the window."

"Did it look like a heart attack to you?"

"I can't say. I don't know what a heart attack is supposed to look like." He was tempted to tell the man about the shadow he had seen that night but decided against it. The man probably wouldn't believe him anyway and he wasn't in the mood to defend what he had seen.

Frank nodded. "I have a neighbor friend who works in the maintenance department of the hospital. He was doing some repairs in the basement the day that Percy was brought in. This fellow says that he overheard the Coroner talking on the telephone to someone about Percy's condition. According to him, the Coroner said that most of Percy's internal organs had burst as though he had swallowed a grenade."

Kyle was silent a moment. "I don't know anything about that. Maybe your friend just heard wrong."

"Yeah, I thought of that. I just figured that you might know a little more."

"No, sorry."

"I guess that a good physical is no guarantee against a heart attack."

"I guess not."

"I hear tell the funeral is Sunday. Percy's daughter came into town sometime this morning and began making funeral arrangements."

"Oh, where's she coming from?"

"She's been away at college, at the University of Georgia. She's quite smart to get into such a prestigious school. Percy sure did like to brag about her."

"Did Percy have any other children? Or a wife?"

"Just the one child. His wife died of cancer a few years ago." He slowly shook his head. "This is gonna be especially hard on Percy's girl. What with no parent at all now."

Kyle nodded knowingly and began to drink the last of his beer.

Frank swallowed the last of his beer and stood up. "Thanks for the talk. I've got to go now. My wife will get worried if I stay out too late. Thinks the boogie man will get me or something."

"Nice to have met you," Kyle said as he stood up. He stretched out his hand. Frank shook his hand and placed his other hand on Kyle's shoulder.

"You have better manners than most young people your age. That's nice. One thing. Watch the alcohol. It'll reach up and bite you on the ass before you know it." He smiled.

"Sure," he answered. He didn't know what else to say.

"Take it easy, kid," he said and headed out the front door.

Kyle stood there a moment feeling as though he couldn't move. The old man had depressed him talking about how Percy's daughter would no longer have a parent. It reminded him too much of his own situation. At once he no longer wanted to be sitting in this bar. He needed to be by himself. He decided to go back to his hotel room and drink. Maybe there was something good on the television.

He stopped by a store on the way to his room and bought a twelve-pack of Coors and headed leisurely back to his hotel room only a couple of blocks away.

Just as soon as he had unlocked his room door and pushed the door inward, he realized that he was not alone. A tiny beam of light from a flashlight shot across the darkened room, then abruptly died. He started to back up when someone grabbed his right arm and pulled him further into the room. Another person closed the door behind them. The same person who had snatched his right arm grabbed his left arm as well. The twelve pack of beers fell out of his hands to the floor with a 'thud'. Fortunately, the twelve-pack was of cans and not bottles. The person who had grabbed his arms forced them behind his back.

Moments later the two, room lamps came on, and Kyle could see that he was facing a stout man with hairy knuckles, wearing a black ski mask over a large head. He pointed a fat finger at Kyle.

"Where's the book?" he asked, his voice seemed to be as thick as the man.

It all seemed so surreal to Kyle. What was it about this book that would interest these thugs? "What book?" Kyle asked, feigning ignorance. He felt the beat of his heart begin to quicken and a warmth flow over his body. He tried to force himself to relax, to be calm.

"The one you stole out of the house."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Why should I steal a stupid book? If you want money I have a few bucks to give you."

The big man looked confused as though the answer had caught him completely by surprise.

"Someone seen you with the blue book," the man continued after a moment.

"I don't know what you're talking about. But if you want a blue book then I'll go to the store and buy you one."

The man grinned, but it looked more threatening than humorous. "Okay. If you don't want to cooperate, we'll go old school. I'll just beat the crap out of you."

Kyle wasn't sure how to respond. He didn't want to give the book up but he didn't want to be hit. He knew what could happen. For a moment he considered giving them the book anyway. Why should it matter to him?

A heavy fist slammed into his stomach. Air spit out of his mouth and he lurched forward, but the man holding his arms behind him kept him from doubling over. He struggled for breath.

"My mistake," the big man said. "I should have hit you in the face, so you'd at least be able to mutter out an answer. Assuming I didn't knock you out, that is."

Kyle felt the anger coursing through his body. Soon, unless he could summon up the strength to fight it, it would be out of control.

The big man hit him across the left side of his face, but not as hard as he could have.

"You've got your breath now you piece of crap, tell me where the book is."

The punch to Kyle's face sent a jolt of pain bounding through his whole head. His eyes watered and a cry got caught in his throat.

At once Kyle could feel it welling up inside him like a rushing of hot air coming up from his feet to his head. For a moment he felt lightheaded as he always did before it started.

Then it began.

An excruciating pain, much like the touch of a hot piece of coal, shot up from somewhere deep in the depths of his body and went directly to his chest. For just a

moment he lost his breath then the pain like a ball of hot air suddenly split in all directions. Most of it rushed down his arms like a stream of intense heat. At once flames burst from his fingertips and his shirt sleeves caught fire.

“Ahhh!” the man behind Kyle yelled. He jerked his hands away from Kyle and backed up quickly patting out the flames that had spread across his shirt sleeves.

The big man just stood there in front of Kyle, frozen in place, trying to comprehend where the fire had come from.

The flames ran across Kyle’s shoulders, over his neck, and down his back and legs. There was no pain, his skin had become numb as it had in the past when one of these attacks occurred.

Kyle fought to control the fire and the anger that had set it off. The flames had already eaten his shirt halfway off his back and threatened to engulf him. He concentrated, trying to set his mind back into place, to a certain comfort level that would reset that internal switch of his.

The man who had held Kyle’s arms behind his back stepped around him as the flames rose from his body. For a fleeting moment he wondered why Kyle was not screaming in pain, but that thought was quickly overruled by the need to flee. He tapped the big man on the shoulder. “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

As the big man rushed ahead of him the other man pulled the door shut to keep others from noticing and investigating.

“What happened?” the big man asked.

“I don’t know. It beats the hell out of me.” He slipped off his ski mask as he neared the street that ran past the hotel. The big man did the same. “All I know is that the fire is gonna draw a crowd, and that’s one thing we don’t need.”

The two men crossed the street to where their car was parked.

Kyle rushed into the bathroom and stepped into the shower. He twisted the knob and turned about under the spray of water letting it extinguish the flames from his body.

After turning off the water he removed what was left of his clothes and left them in the shower. He dried off and put on some dry clothes. He was glad he had bought some new clothes earlier. It would have been quite embarrassing to step into a store half-naked to buy some clothes.

He felt drained as he stumbled over to his bed and plopped down. He wasn’t sure what had done the most damage, the beating he had received, or the transformation of his body that had resulted in the instantaneous combustion.

His body was still warm to the touch as if he were sunburned. But that was okay. He recalled that his first episode had sent him into a writhing torment for about a half-hour after the flames had passed. He guessed his body was getting used to this strange transformation of his.

He looked up at the smoke detector in the center of the room. He was glad he had taped it over with masking tape when he first came to the room otherwise he would have had a heck of a time trying to explain to the first responders what had happened. He hadn’t anticipated the attack. He had taped up the smoke detector for fear he might have an attack while asleep. He had only had a sleep episode once, but it had ended badly and was the beginning of his downward spiral.

He wondered what he should do now. He thought he should change hotels. There were three in this town. The other two were at the far end of the town near the bypass.

Since he didn't have a car to drive at this time that would be impractical. Where he was now was very convenient. Everything he needed was within walking distance.

What was the chance that he would be attacked again in this same hotel room? Surely it would be small. The person, or people, who instigated this attack would know that he would be more prepared now. They might even assume that he had reported the incident to the cops.

The attack didn't seem to be planned. He just happened to walk in on them. Whoever planned this intrusion just wanted the book. He wondered why. The book must be very important. Which meant he should probably read it.

He went to his hiding place at the bottom of the chest of drawers and removed the book. He felt confident that no one would be visiting him anytime soon. He stepped over to the single armchair and sat down. He opened the book and began to read.

June 2, 2020

It has been a week since I talked to Chief Potts. He said he would get back to me about this pool I discovered but so far he hadn't. Earlier this morning I called to talk to him about it but was told that he was out of town on business and would call me back.

Evening came and no word from him. Feeling put off and still curious about this pond I decided to make another trip to it.

I was almost to the pool when I heard voices up ahead. I crept slowly ahead till I was within sight of two men. I quickly moved behind some thick underbrush. The men were talking loudly apparently feeling secure that no one could hear them. I turned on the recorder on my phone. The following is a word for word of what they said.

Man one: "This is great, absolutely great. I thought it was going to be another wild goose chase like the other times. The boss will be ecstatic! It's been almost a month since the other one dried up."

Man two: "Yeah, I had heard that the loss of this stuff had stymied his biggest project."

Man one: "I heard that too."

Man two: "I'll bet this pond was created from that earthquake we had a couple of weeks ago."

Man one: "That wasn't much of an earthquake."

Man two: "No. But maybe the stuff was near the surface and just needed a little bit of a shake to get it to break free."

Man one: "Yeah. That's probably it." (He looked around. For a moment I thought he saw me, but then his attention went back to the other man). "We need a small building and we need to set up some fences around this property as soon as possible. We also need to get an assessment of how far away the plant is from this pond and the possibility of running some underground conduit back to it. I don't think it's that far away as the eagle flies, but I'm certain the company will have to buy up some more property."

Man two: "I don't think that will be a problem."

The two men walked away heading at an angle away from me and toward the street. I assume they parked their vehicle on the street not far from my house.

After this little incident, I'm not sure I can let it go. I love a good mystery. I feel more alive than I have in a long time. No, I don't think I can let it go. Not yet at least.

Kyle looked up from the book. This was indeed strange, but so far he didn't see any reason why anyone would want the man dead. But he had died, and Kyle had seen his killer in the form of a shadow.

This blue book was somehow connected to the old man's death and his attack at the hotel. But how? Did it have something to do with this pond that the man found?

He thought of the two men who had attacked him just a short time ago. They couldn't have been more than mere henchmen. So, who was behind this? And how did they know he had the blue book? He hadn't told anyone.

He began to retrace the steps in his mind from the time he first retrieved the book. The wrecker driver, Ghetty, had stopped in front of the old man's house while he had gone up to the house to get the book. He might have seen him pick up the book, but Kyle doubted it. From that distance, he would have needed binoculars and he hadn't noticed any in the truck. Besides, Ghetty didn't seem the type.

After picking up his car Ghetty had dropped him and his car off at the garage. While waiting for the car to be inspected he had taken the book out from the back of his pants because it had gotten uncomfortable. Had the station owner seen him with the book? How would he have known what book this was? If he had noticed it it was from several feet away. All he could tell about it was the color.

In his mind, Kyle shifted forward again. When he rented the hotel room had the clerk made any obvious glances at the book? He didn't recall any. But if the clerk was behind the two men going through his room it would explain how they knew he wouldn't be in the room when they first broke in.

He concluded that the only two who could have logically seen him with the book were the man at the garage and the hotel clerk.

He quickly decided that he needed a drink while he thought about these things. He went to the small hotel refrigerator and brought back a beer.

CHAPTER 5

The thick gray smoke rolled into the bedroom unfurling its tenuous tentacles across the bedroom ceiling, dancing in steadily thickening swirls that filled the ceiling and slowly floated down toward the floor.

The fire cracked and spit as it crawled over the hardwood floor just underneath the billowing smoke. Orange and yellow tongues of flame licked the walls and ceilings.

Somewhere outside the bedroom walls, a window exploded followed by a great 'whooshing' sound of sucking air that ran through the upstairs.

Kyle suddenly sat up in bed, startled and disconcerted. A gray and black wall of smoke surrounded his bed making it impossible for him to see past it. He breathed in the acrid smoke. It irritated his throat, but not enough to make him cough. The smoke didn't affect him the way it did other people. Somehow his lungs were able to filter the oxygen.

At once fear began to course through his body as the fire came hungrily upon the foot of his bed roaring upward into a block of searing heat.

"No!" Kyle screamed as he jumped from the bed. His blood seemed to instantly drain from his body. "I didn't mean to do it!" he cried. "Oh, please, no."

He ran through the fire and his clothes were instantly engulfed in flames. He ignored it, running frantically toward his parent's bedroom down the hall.

The fire was more intense in his parent's bedroom. Things were exploding inside like firecrackers. Pieces of the ceiling were dropping in flickering, twisting lengths of flame.

His clothes fell off of him in strips of fiery embers until he stood naked amid the blaze. He dashed headlong into the inferno that was his parent's bedroom. He stopped abruptly at the two burning figures lying in what was left of the bed.

His mouth came agape and his body at once seemed too heavy to move. The two bodies didn't resemble his parents at all though he knew that they were. The bodies before him were mostly skeletons with patches of melted, smoldering black skin.

He started to cry, but only for a second. Then the floor beneath his feet became suddenly soft. It gave way with only a whimper and he plummeted down into the void.

He screamed and sprung straight up in bed. He looked around, startled. No fire. No smoke. Nothing was burning. It was a dream. Just a dream. He breathed heavily.

Another one of those damn dreams. He wished that he could get them out of his system.

He staggered out of bed, the dream clinging tenaciously to him like strands of cobwebs, and headed to the bathroom. He took a leisurely shower attempting to wash away the nightmare. It helped some but didn't clean out all the debris of the dream that clung to the corners of his mind.

He ate a very late breakfast at a little café down the street. While he ate, thoughts of the dream tried to rear their ugly head, but he forced them back. He replaced them with the thoughts of the strange things that had happened to him since he had arrived in this town.

He thought of the blue book. He had intended on finishing it last night but had gotten distracted. He had drunk and pondered his plight until he had passed out. That was becoming a habit of late.

He made up his mind to finish the book sometime today. There was only an entry or two left. Then, with his curiosity sated, maybe he could set aside this whole episode, pick up his car, hopefully, tomorrow, and get on with his miserable life.

He finished his breakfast and sipped at his coffee. He tried not to think of anything for a while, but there was a conversation off to his left that drew his attention.

".. seen you in quite a while," a woman was saying. It sounded like the voice of the waitress who had waited on him. She had a distinctive silky, southern drawl.

Another woman's voice answered, but he couldn't tell what she said. Then she laughed weakly. It seemed hollow and sad.

"... over there," the waitress said.

"Really? I wonder if ... "

"... couldn't hurt," the waitress answered.

For a couple of seconds, he couldn't hear them.

"Excuse me," a woman said, moving in front of him from the side. His waitress stopped next to her.

"Yes?" he asked, looking up at the two of them.

The waitress tapped the woman on the shoulder. "I need to get back to work. I'll catch you later." The waitress started walking away.

"Thanks, Laura," the woman called before turning back to Kyle.

For a moment she stood there looking proper and refined. Her golden hair was pulled back in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her short, blue dress was streaked with a silver pattern and hung loosely over her small frame. A gray belt about her hips emphasized the curve of her body. She had a very pretty face. The slight makeup she wore highlighted her eyes and thin lips which gave her somewhat of a seductive look. He immediately guessed her to be in her late teens or very early twenties.

"I understand you were the one who found my dad," the lady said.

"If you're talking about (he had to think of the name) Mr. Cloud, then yes I am the one."

"May I sit down?"

"Sure."

She pulled out a chair and sat facing him. "I'm Marissa."

"Kyle Mason." He thought of extending a hand, but she didn't seem interested in getting any closer to him than she had to.

"I want to know under what circumstances my dad died."

"Eh, heart attack. Is that what you're asking?"

"No." She shook her head.

"No?"

"I don't believe that. My father was in excellent physical shape."

"Well, I ..."

"I read the report. It says that my dad was sitting in his house watching television and drinking iced tea when he had a massive heart attack."

"Okay."

"Is that what you saw?"

He hesitated a moment. "I saw him fall. The coroner made the call about the heart attack."

"I understand you were drunk."

“I admit that I had been drinking a little, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“I don’t know ... yet.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

For a moment she looked as if she were about to burst into tears, then she quickly gained her composure. “I’m sorry. I ...” she started but dropped off. She leaned toward him. “My dad called me about a week and a half ago. He was talking about moving out of Mystoria. I asked him why and he said that he didn’t feel comfortable around here anymore. He said that things were changing.”

“What kind of things?”

“I don’t know. I assumed that he was just talking in general about how fast the town was expanding. He didn’t like the city much, he was more partial to the kind of country town he grew up in.”

“I can understand that.”

“Me too. I even commented that he would get used to the big city as if this town was going to grow that quickly.”

“But that wasn’t it?”

“No. He said that it was more complicated. He wouldn’t explain. He said that he would come up in a few days and talk to me about it. He ...” She couldn’t finish. Her eyes suddenly grew moist. “He never made it.”

“I’m sorry.” He was tempted to move over one chair so he could put an arm around her to comfort her but wasn’t sure how she would react. She didn’t seem overly fond of him as it was.

“My dad was retired. He used to teach school at a small college not far from here. It wasn’t the greatest job. It didn’t pay nearly as much as a university would, but he loved it.”

“Loving what you do is worth more than money. As long as you can make a living doing it.”

“Anyway ...” she wiped at her eyes smearing her eyeshadow a bit. “I just wanted to make sure there was nothing else to his death. It just seems too coincidental that he wanted to come and talk to me about something important, and now he’s dead.”

“Maybe you need to talk to the coroner and see what he says.”

She was quiet for just a moment. “Yes. That’s a good idea. I think I’ll do that.” She made the semblance of a smile. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

She got up and walked away.

CHAPTER 6

Kyle sat upon the edge of his bed, thoughts swirling around in his head. He took another big swallow of his beer and sat it back down on the nightstand. Should he have said anything more to Marissa about her father's death? Would it have made any difference? The cops sure didn't believe him, so why should he think anyone else would?

He flipped through the pages of the blue book. There was one entry left. It was dated June the ninth. That was approximately three weeks before the man died. That was very interesting. He wondered why the man hadn't made another entry in that time. He began to read.

June 9, 2020

A couple of days ago I went back to the pool to see what was being done. I saw a long line of fence posts standing up in the ground. I could see where concrete had been poured to hold them in place. It appeared the fence builders were waiting for the concrete to set before erecting the fence. I was happy about the wait. I wanted to get inside the property one more time to take some pictures.

I took several pictures of this green liquid. I didn't know what I would do with them. I guess I figured it would just be a good topic of conversation. After the fence was erected, I wouldn't feel bold enough nor agile enough to climb it to take more pictures.

Later today I went to the grocery store to pick up a few things. I'm not a good once-a-month shopper. I usually just pick up what I need when I think about it. While there I ran into Chief Potts. He was off duty and picking up a few groceries himself.

After having spoken the customary 'hello's and how are you' I began to ask about the pond. He mentioned that a fence was going up around the pond (which of course I already knew) but he warned me that in the meantime I needed to stay away from the pond. He stated that a company had bought the land that it was on and was serious about prosecuting trespassers. I told him I would stay away. I then casually mentioned that I thought the pond was very interesting and that I had taken pictures of it a couple of weeks ago (though it had only been today). I also mentioned that I kept a journal in an old blue book I found in a drawer. At first, he seemed irritated but then he asked if I could drop by the station tomorrow and show him the pictures. I said I would. I guess he is as curious about this pond as I am but being a lawman, he must be more prudent in what he does.

Kyle slowly closed the book. Something immediately jumped out at him. It seemed that this Sheriff Potts was the only person the old man had talked to about the pond and the blue book.

So, what did that mean? Could it mean that the Chief was somehow connected to the attack on him at the hotel? Was there something in the book that the chief didn't want to get out?

Kyle set the book down beside him. He began to sip at his beer as he began to think. He thought of Marissa. Maybe he needed to talk to her again.

CHAPTER 7

Kyle Mason stepped off the main road that led through downtown Mystoria onto a narrow, paved road that wended into the heart of 'Heaven's Rest,' the largest and best-kept cemetery in town.

It would be a lot easier if he would just mind his own business. He could spend the day in his hotel room watching television and putting away a few more beers. Tomorrow his car should be ready. He could leave this town and never look back. It would be one less worry for him. So, why couldn't he do it?

Marissa wasn't very fond of him. He could tell by her attitude. There was an air of anger that exuded from her when she talked to him. Maybe she thought she was better than him. Or maybe it was because she knew that he was snookered the day he saw her father murdered. Or perhaps she had sensed that he was lying about how her father had died. It could be one thing or a combination of all of them.

He wasn't sure how he felt about her. His feelings were a tangled mess. He guessed that that was why he had drunk the two beers before he left the hotel room. And why he hadn't drunk any more than that.

A small crowd had shown up for the funeral. Many appeared to be only a few years older than Kyle himself. Students from the old man's teaching days, he supposed. Others were closer to the man's age. Probably friends and acquaintances.

The funeral was breaking up as Kyle made his way down the sloping ground. He spotted Marissa talking to a small, elderly bent-over lady with big orange glasses. Marissa was smiling with large tears welling up in her eyes.

Kyle came upon the ladies without either one seemingly noticing his approach. Marissa was wearing a long, black dress reminiscent of funeral attire. Even so, Kyle couldn't help but think how beautiful she looked.

"He was such a nice man," the bent-over lady said. She smiled broadly revealing a perfect set of white dentures. She took Marissa's hand in hers. "We'll be praying for you, dear."

"Thank you," Marissa sniffled.

The woman slipped her hands out of Marissa's. "You call me if I can help you in any way."

"I will."

The lady nodded, turned, and began stepping slowly toward her fifty-year-old son who was patiently waiting for her a few yards away.

"Marissa," Kyle called.

She turned abruptly toward him temporarily startled.

"Yes?" She seemed both puzzled and annoyed by his appearance.

"Can I talk to you?"

"About what?"

"About your dad. There's a couple of things I need to tell you about that night."

She was silent a moment as if she were considering whether she wanted to know anything more about her dad's passing.

"Can I meet you somewhere later? I still have to ride back to the church and take care of some details."

"I'm staying at the plaza hotel, room sixteen."

“Okay. I’ll meet up with you later.” She walked away heading to the street where the limousine was parked.

Kyle stood there another minute and found himself musing on how beautiful the young lady was. When he finally turned to leave, he abruptly pushed the thought out of his mind. They were on opposite sides of the spectra. He had a better chance of dog-paddling across the Atlantic Ocean than having any kind of chance with her.

“Well,” a voice said from behind him. “What brings you here?”

Kyle turned. It was the commando wannabe that pulled the gun on him at the house of Percy Cloud.

“Come out of guilt or curiosity?”

“I, eh, just needed to talk to Marissa before she left town.”

Kenneth thought on that a moment. “You know, if it would have been left up to me, you’d still be in jail.”

“On what charge?”

“Drunk driving to start. I don’t know why the district attorney didn’t want to press charges. I can only guess that our beloved DA Hubert Granger, quite a boozier himself, felt a little empathy toward you. I overheard him saying that he just wanted you out of town.”

“I’m leaving as soon as my car is ready.”

“Not counting the drunk driving, I have a keen suspicion that you had something to do with Mr. Cloud’s death.”

“What?! How can you say that? Your coroner ruled it a heart attack.”

Kenneth shook his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“Why?”

“He was too messed up inside. The coroner said as much but ruled it a heart attack anyway.”

“So, what do you think I did?”

“Not sure right now.” He shook his head. “But something isn’t right.” He paused for a few seconds as if trying to see inside Kyle, to his very soul.

“I didn’t do anything to the man. I swear.”

“There’s something funny about you, and about your so-called *accidental visit* to our town. You’d better hope that I don’t find out what it is before you leave.” He sneered and then began walking away.

Kyle stood there a moment trying to understand what the cop had been trying to say. Was he insinuating that he had intentionally come to this town? For what purpose? It was all so absurd. Still, something was gnawing at him. Something like a morsel of memory stuck somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind.

CHAPTER 8

By the time Marissa knocked on Kyle's room door the sky had darkened to a charcoal gray. A cool breeze was beginning to stir, and the tumid clouds seemed about ready to burst.

Hi," Kyle managed as he opened the door. "Come on in."

Marissa had changed from the dress she wore at the funeral to slacks, a loose pullover shirt, and tennis shoes. Her hair was pulled back in a short ponytail. She smiled perfunctorily, looked about the room then stepped inside.

A slightly cool breeze blew through the open door and bounced about the room.

"Won't you have a seat," Kyle said, motioning to an armchair that sat in a corner next to the window.

Marissa moved toward the chair while Kyle closed the door behind her.

Before sitting down Marissa looked around the room once more as if to be sure it was safe enough for her.

She sat on the edge of the chair not allowing herself to be comfortable. She only planned to stay the minimum amount of time. Only enough time to hear what crazy story this boy had.

She almost didn't come here. She didn't like Kyle. She had sized him up almost immediately. He was a drinker, a partygoer, with no real goals to speak of. He was only out for the good times and nothing more. He didn't care about people except for how they related to his shallow lifestyle. He was the usual post-teenage boy.

The only reason she agreed to this meeting was that she was not satisfied with the coroner's ruling that her dad had died of a heart attack. That didn't sit well with her. She wasn't sure why. From what she had read on her news feed and seen on some of the doctor shows was that people with no history of heart trouble died from heart attacks every day. Many from congenital heart problems that had been overlooked. Even so, she could sense that the coroner's ruling was wrong.

She doubted that Kyle had any useful information regarding her father's death but felt that she had to hear him out. Otherwise, she would be wondering for years to come what he might have said. It would be like a festering sore inside his mind.

Kyle moved across the room and sat on the bed a few feet away from her. His lips upturned in a nervous smile. "I wasn't exactly honest with you when we spoke," he began.

"Okay," she said slowly.

"I didn't want to lie to you."

"My dad didn't die of a heart attack, did he?"

"Eh ... according to what I've been told he did."

"But ...?"

"But what I saw contradicted that. And then what a cop told me recently."

"What did you see?"

"First of all, it is true that earlier that evening I had been drinking. Quite a bit I guess." He sighed. "But what I saw was not a product of the alcohol."

Her eyes narrowed. "Okay. So, tell me what happened."

He paused, judging the skepticism in her voice. He had expected it. "You've probably heard that I wrecked my car."

"Yes, I heard. And I was told that you went to my dad's house for help."

“Sort of. I went there hoping I could call for an Uber or a cab to give me a ride to a hotel. Anyway, before I went up to your dad’s door I stopped in the woods across the driveway from the house. I wanted to compose myself.”

“You didn’t want to appear drunk.”

He felt a spark of anger rising within him. “No, I didn’t,” he said rather abruptly. He paused to calm himself. “From my spot across the driveway, I could see through your dad’s living room window. I saw something enter your dad’s living room.”

“You saw *something*?”

“Yes. I’m not sure what it was. It was more of a shadow, not exactly a person. It wasn’t quite solid.”

“How did this shadow get into the living room? Did it come through the front door?”

“No. It, eh, passed through a wall behind your dad.”

Marissa looked as if she were about to stand up and leave. “And this shadow is what killed my dad?”

“I know it sounds crazy.” He paused, realizing that the fact that he had been on fire without burning his skin was just as crazy. “I saw it pass through the wall behind your dad and just to his right. Your dad was in his black recliner watching television. At first, I thought I was imagining this. But then the shadow stepped in front of your dad. But your dad didn’t seem to see him. Then it kind of fell into him. Your dad jumped up and seemed to convulse then fell to the floor dead. The shadow then left him and went back the way it had come.”

Marissa’s mouth opened, but she couldn’t seem to speak. Kyle couldn’t read whether she believed him or was just shocked that he would make up such a tale.

“I was stunned for a while. I wasn’t sure what to think. After the shadow had left, I broke into the house. I checked your dad for a pulse, and when I couldn’t find one, I called nine, one, one.”

After a moment she stood up. “I can see why you didn’t tell me. I won’t bother you again.”

Kyle stood up. “Wait. I have something for you to read.” He retrieved the book he had hidden and brought it over to her.

“This was your father’s book. I found it in the house. Read some of it and let me know what you think.”

She reluctantly took the book and sat back down on the edge of her seat. “So, you stole this book from my dad’s house?”

“No. I borrowed it. I had a feeling that this book was important, and I didn’t want it falling into the wrong hands.”

“You didn’t want it falling into the wrong hands, huh?” Kyle didn’t answer. She mused on what he had said a moment then pushed to the back of the seat. She looked at Kyle questioningly. Slowly, she opened the front cover of the book and began to read.

Kyle thought about retrieving his half-empty can of beer out of the tiny hotel refrigerator. He had stuck it in there when Marissa knocked on the door. For some insane reason, he had suddenly been struck by a pang of guilt, as though he cared about what she thought of him.

Instead of retrieving his drink, he began pacing about the room, occasionally glancing out the window. Finally, he made his way back to the bed and sat back down.

After a couple more minutes Marissa looked up. “I’m not sure what to make of this.”

Kyle shrugged.

"It sounds like science fiction. Maybe my dad was composing a novel or something."

He hadn't thought of that. "I guess that's possible."

She looked down at the blue book as if she were looking for answers. She quickly looked up. "We need to go there."

"Where?"

"To the place, my dad described in the book. To this strange pond, he wrote about."

"I guess you read the part about the fence and that it was on private property?"

"Yes. We go as far as the fence."

"Well, I guess we could go first thing in the morning."

"I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight thinking about it. Let's go now."

"Now? Did you happen to notice the sky out there? It looks like we're about to get a downpour."

"A little rain won't hurt us. Besides I have an umbrella. I keep one in the trunk of my car."

He shrugged. "Okay, but it's also going to be dark soon."

"We have an hour of daylight, maybe two. And I always keep a flashlight in my glove compartment. I like to be prepared."

He bit at his bottom lip a moment before speaking. "This is crazy, you know."

Marissa nodded her head as she stood up with the book. "Well, it's probably better that I go by myself."

Kyle stood up. "I didn't say I *wouldn't* go."

"It's up to you. If you don't want to go that's fine. I can take care of myself."

"Look, I don't know what's going on, but reading what your dad wrote makes me think there could be some real danger here."

"Maybe. Look, I'm not fond of traipsing off into the woods at dusk all by myself, but I'll do what I have to do."

"I said I was going." He wanted to tell her that she was as stubborn as a Jackass but figured if he did, she would run off and go it alone despite the danger she might be putting herself in. "My car won't be ready till tomorrow, though."

"My car is right outside. I'm taking the book, too, in case we need to reference something."

"Sure. It's your book, now."

As Marissa maneuvered her Honda out of the motel parking lot onto the highway, a dark-colored Oldsmobile from two blocks away moved out of its parking space to fall in behind them.

CHAPTER 9

Kenneth Park watched as the gray Honda pulled out of the hotel parking lot and onto the highway. He noted with interest that Kyle and the girl were leaving together.

Only a few hours earlier he had searched the state computer for information on Kyle Mason. He felt sure he would find something on the young man. He was right.

There were two DUIs on his record in the last two years. Kenneth had smirked. There was no surprise here.

He had run through the file to see what the outcome had been. He had shaken his head at what he had read. It seemed that he had had a good lawyer because both convictions had resulted in mere fines and public service. There had been no jail time or even a suspension of his license. Kenneth had wondered if there hadn't been other DUIs that never made it into the courts.

He had become very curious then and had begun to search the history of Kyle Mason.

From the information Kyle had given when he was booked, Kenneth knew that he was from Weeden, a tiny little town with a population of fewer than five thousand people. It was about seventy miles north of Mystoria.

He had searched county records, school records, hospital records, and local newspapers, anything he could think of. In the last few years, Kenneth had spent most of his off-hours on a computer and had become quite a computer geek. There weren't too many files he couldn't get into.

School records showed that Kyle had attended elementary and high school in the neighboring town of Lexington since Weeden had no schools. Through most of his school years, his grades were above average with him pulling in mostly A's. But about the tenth grade, his grades began to plummet. Even so, he had managed to keep his average up just enough that he was able to graduate from high school.

What had happened? Why did his good grades suddenly fall? Was it adolescents kicking in? Had an interest in girls taken over his life? Had he begun hanging around with the wrong crowd? Was that the time he had discovered alcohol?

Kenneth had skimmed through hospital records next. There wasn't much. There was one incident where he had fallen through a floor and suffered a few cuts and bruises. The treatment had been simply a salve, a couple of bandages, and a tetanus shot. There was nothing else written about it. This seemed rather odd. How would someone fall through a floor?

He had found Kyle's family doctor but was unable to get into the records. That was okay. He probably wouldn't have found anything of interest there anyway.

He had dug into the Weeden Speaks Journal next. It was the town of Weeden's local paper. The paper came out once a week on a Monday.

He had started with the year that Kyle was in the tenth grade of high school. That was the year that Kyle's grades began to fall so it made sense to check that time frame first for anything that might have affected him.

After a few minutes, he discovered something interesting. It was an article about a house fire dated February 9th.

HOUSE FIRE CLAIMS TWO.

Sometime shortly after midnight, a fire raged through the second floor of the two-story house at 747 Rucker Lane. It took with it the life of Randal and Shauna Mason and left their fifteen-year-old son an orphan.

The boy, Kyle Mason, survived the fire when a part of the upstairs' floor collapsed under him sending him falling to the first floor. Miraculously, the boy suffered only cuts and bruises, despite having his clothes literally burned off him.

The cause of the blaze is still under investigation.

Kenneth had sunk deeper into his cushioned chair. He wasn't sure how to feel about the information before him. On the one hand, he empathized with Kyle. He could see why he might have started drinking. It had to have been a horrendous loss. Still ...

It hadn't felt right. Why had the floor given way? Sure, the fire might have weakened the floorboards, but then if the fire was that intense how was it that he had escaped being burned?

He followed the Honda though he was beginning to have second thoughts. What was so suspicious about a healthy young man and a young woman going off somewhere together, anyway? He wasn't much older than Kyle. Maybe he was just jealous of him. He had almost convinced himself to turn around when he saw the car pull into the driveway of the former house of Percy Cloud. He pulled over to the shoulder of the road across the street from the house.

CHAPTER 10

"I used to be all over these woods when I was a kid," Marissa said as they made their way into the edge of the woods. "I was quite a tomboy. My dad was okay with it, but it irritated my mother. She wanted me to grow up to be a proper young lady."

"Looks like to me you did. Not considering what we're doing now."

"I can be both," she said with a sly smile. She let the beam of the flashlight push a few feet ahead of them, though there was still a little daylight left. She held a folded umbrella in her other hand. A very slight rain had begun, but because of the overhanging tree branches, they had only felt a drop or two.

"Do you still think you can find your way through these woods? I'd rather not get lost."

She grinned. "Don't worry yourself I can get us out of here. There was a big fire in these woods a few years ago that threatened to take out the entire woods. It was the year before I left for college. Anyway, the fire department cut several fire breaks into the woods to prevent the fire from spreading. If I need to, I can use them as reference points."

It was twenty minutes later when they crested a small hill. Above them, the darkening sky grumbled a bit deeper, and the rain began to fall a bit harder. Marissa finally opened her umbrella.

"Maybe this was all a mistake," Marissa started, as they headed down the slight hill. She abruptly stopped. "Or maybe not. There's a fence straight ahead," she said excitedly. "This has got to be the place my dad was talking about." A chain-link fence stood nearly sixty yards away. It was mostly hidden by the drizzling rain, the trees, and the overcast sky.

"We should take it slow," Kyle said. "There might be somebody guarding the place."

Marissa doused her light. "Probably. Let's go."

They moved slowly, steadily through the light but constant rain, watching for any movement inside or outside the fence. Within a few minutes, they had made it to the fence without incidence.

The chain-link fence was eight feet tall and was approximately sixty feet wide. Attached to the fence only a few feet to their right was a metal sign that read: *No trespassing*.

"What's that noise?" Marissa whispered. A low, but constant humming noise rose over the sound of the falling rain.

"Sounds like a motor," Kyle whispered back.

"For what?"

"I'm thinking it's a pump. They might be pumping out the green stuff your dad mentioned in his journal."

"Pumping it where?"

"I don't know."

Marissa focused on the humming sound looking in the direction where it seemed it was coming from. "I see something, like a big box. I'd guess it's about thirty feet away, That's all I can make out. Maybe your eyes are better. What do you see?"

Kyle gazed toward the object she had seen. Through the gloom of the rain and the darkening sky, it did indeed look like a big box, but there was more to it. He squinted as he tried to capture more in his vision. After nearly a minute he gave up.

"I don't think it's a box exactly. It's more like a big square plate sitting on some cinder blocks. I think it's about two blocks high but I can't be sure."

"Is that all?"

"Something a little bigger with a somewhat rounded shape at its top sets on the other side of this ... box, as you call it. I think that's the pump we're hearing."

"So, it looks like they've covered up the pond and are pumping out the contents."

"That's what I would guess," Kyle answered.

"Why? What good is this liquid? Where are they pumping it?"

"I haven't a clue."

"I'd like to find out," Marissa said. "I think we need to get a closer look. Let's climb the fence."

"Are you crazy? First, we'll be trespassing. Second, there has got to be a gate on this fence somewhere that we can go through."

"Sure, there will be a gate. But you can bet it will have a big lock on it."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess there would be."

"You're not too out of shape to climb, are you?" Before he could answer she closed her umbrella, set it on the ground, and began climbing.

He shook his head, mumbled to himself, and followed her.

As he climbed down beside her she knelt and motioned for Kyle to do the same. She pointed at the two men with flashlights who had just arrived. They were holding something in their other hand as they ran their light beams across the square structure.

"We need to get away from here," she whispered. "We're too exposed." The weeds and brush had been cleared at the fence line and around the structure but hardly anywhere else. They moved quickly and as quietly as they could to where the weeds were thick.

"This is no good," she whispered. "Why did they have to show up at this time?"

"I don't know," he whispered back. "Hopefully they'll go ahead and do what they're here for and leave."

At once the voice of one of the men drifted over to them.

"I don't know why this couldn't have waited until the morning," a baritone voice said. The man was kneeling next to the structure.

A man standing with an open umbrella said, "Because rain is getting in, Allan and the rainwater will contaminate the liquid. The filtration system does a pretty good job but if enough rainwater gets through it will overwhelm the system."

The other man grunted. "I'll take your word for it, Bailey." He lifted the caulk gun he was holding. "What needs caulking?"

"Anywhere around this box that has a gap in it, on the conduits leading out of the box, at the cinder blocks, and any gaps around the pump. And do it quickly. The sooner I can get this tarp over it the sooner we can leave."

"So, what is the tarp for?"

Bailey sighed, seemingly exasperated. "We need it over the structure until the caulk sets up. Tomorrow after the rain lets up, we'll come back and take more permanent measures as needed."

After sealing every hole and crack on and around the structure the two men covered it and the pump with the tarp. Then they removed a few cinder blocks from a stack of blocks that had been placed there earlier in the day and set them on the ends of the tarp to secure it.

"When is the building going up?" Allan asked.

"A crew will be here the day after tomorrow depending on the weather."

"Good. So, I guess the sale went through."

"You ask a lot of questions for someone who has only been here a few weeks."

Allan laughed. "Yeah, but we've known each other for years, ever since we played little league baseball. You know you can trust me."

Bailey grinned. "Okay, I guess it's not a big deal. The sale has not officially gone through, but I understand they are very close."

"Why the hell are we doing all of this now? Why not wait for the sale to be finalized?"

"Because the boss is impatient. He had some projects that were paused because this stuff had run out. He claims this delay has cost him a ton of money."

"So just offer this landowner a couple hundred thousand and he'll sell. I know the company is good for it."

"Right. They do that, and the landowner is going to know something is up and come down here and check out the property for himself. When he sees this pond, he probably won't know what he's looking at, but you can bet he'll find someone to tell him what it is."

"That makes sense. Something else. I've heard stories about a boy who might ruin this whole deal."

"Who have you been talking to?"

"I talk to everybody. I'm like your typical social butterfly. Everybody loves me."

"No, they don't."

"We'll just have to agree to disagree."

"Okay, I'm going to tell you what's up but if you tell anyone I'll kill you."

"You can try."

"Just shut up and listen. The boy has found some kind of book that has a lot of details in it concerning this pond. And it is believed that he has shown the book to the daughter of the old man who had the supposed heart attack."

"What kind of details?"

"I don't know. Maybe it explains what this liquid is and how valuable it is. The boss doesn't want that information getting to the landowner."

"So, what is the company going to do about these two people?"

Bailey was quiet for a few moments. "Silence them by any means necessary is what I heard."

"You mean kill them?"

"Maybe. They wouldn't be the first."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone close to management – I won't say who – said that the old man, Percy Cloud, was killed by someone named Lasiter."

"Wow! How did he do that? I heard the man died of a heart attack."

"This part is incredible so you might not believe it. I'm not sure I believe it."

"Tell me."

"I was told that the man can become invisible and that he passed into this Mr. Cloud something like a ghost. When he did he destroyed the heart and other organs."

Allan laughed. "You're kidding. That can't be true."

"It's what I heard. Anyway, I've blabbed enough. Let's get the hell out of here."

Kyle and Marissa watched the men turn and leave disappearing into the night. Minutes later they heard the startup of a four-wheeler and then the sound of the vehicle moving away into the woods.

Marissa bowed her head and began to cry. She had held it in for as long as she could not wanting to give themselves away.”

“Are you okay?” Kyle asked. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

She nodded but couldn’t answer as she sobbed in her hands. Kyle wasn’t sure what to do.

After a couple of minutes, her sobbing began to wane. She took a big breath and wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry. Talk of my dad, how he was killed hit me hard.”

“I understand. No need to apologize.”

She pushed to her feet. “Let’s check it out.”

They stepped across the marshy ground, no longer concerned about being quiet, to the square structure.

“You’re right,” Marissa said. “The noise we’ve been hearing is this pump.”

“Yes, but that’s not the only sound we heard. If you look real hard there’s a generator about twenty feet away. It’s not easy to see in all this haze.”

“Yes, I see it. But it’s hardly making any noise.”

“They must have it muffled so as not to bring attention to it,” Kyle answered.

Marissa nodded and turned her attention to the pump. “This is a pretty big pump.”

“It’s bigger than what I thought.” The pump was several feet wide and just over three feet high.

“Two hoses are coming from the pump,” Marissa stated. “One goes into the box and the other one is connected to a plastic pipe that is buried in the ground. So where does the pipe in the ground go to?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll have to look into that. But right now let’s see what we got here.”

They removed the tarp. Marissa shifted her light across the top of a flat sheet of metal. Several large metal bolts secured the lid to a metal box-like structure that looked to be buried in the ground.

“I guess we’re not going to see anything in there,” Marissa started. “Unless you have a large battery-powered tool in your pocket.”

“No. I left my screw gun in my other pants.”

Marissa laughed. “Okay, then I guess there’s nothing here for us to see.”

They climbed back over the fence. Marissa grabbed her umbrella and opened it up then they headed back to Marissa’s car that she had parked behind her dad’s house.

“I can’t believe this,” Marissa groaned, “Sounds like we’re on somebodies hit list. Who are these people? Why is this pond so important to them? The blue book didn’t tell us much about it. Not as much as they think anyway.”

“I don’t know, but we probably shouldn’t go back to our hotel room.”

“I have my clothes there. I have to go back.”

“It would probably be safe to return to the hotel in the morning,” Kyle said. “I wouldn’t think they would attempt anything in broad daylight.”

Marissa was still thinking about it as they reached her car. “I would suggest we stay at my dad’s house for the night, but I don’t think that it would be any safer seeing as how this man, or whatever, got to my dad.”

“You two could stay at my house,” said a voice coming from behind them.

Startled, Kyle turned quickly to see Kenneth, the commando cop, moving toward them. At least, this time he didn't have his gun drawn.

"I followed you two from the hotel. I figured you two were up to no good."

"Are we breaking the law, officer?" Kyle said harshly.

"No. I'm trying to help you."

"Did you follow us into the woods?" Marissa asked.

"Yes, I did. I'm sorry. I was wrong."

"And did you hear what was said?" Kyle asked.

"Some of it. Fortunately, the men's voices carried beyond the fence."

"So, you heard what the men said about getting rid of us?" Marissa questioned.

"Yes. That's why I'm offering my house for the night. Tomorrow we'll go to the chief and let him look into this situation."

Kyle didn't answer right away. He looked to Marissa.

"I don't know." She grew silent. "How can we trust you? How do we know you're not connected with these people?"

"If I were with them, don't you think I would have alerted the two men? I doubt you could have climbed back over the fence before they caught up to you. Or, I could have taken care of you myself if I would have been one of the bad guys."

"Okay. I don't see that we have a lot of options," Marissa answered. "Yes, we'll stay the night."

"Well," Kyle started as he looked at Marissa. "Yes. I think I'll stay, too."

"I thought we were in this together."

"I guess we are, but I can speak for myself."

"Sorry. I didn't know you were so sensitive."

"I'm not. But you don't have to be so bossy."

"I'm not bossy!"

"Let's just go," Kenneth said. "You two can argue about this later."

He began walking toward the street.

"Where are you parked?" Kyle asked.

"Across the street."

"What about my car?" Marissa asked.

"It should be alright for the night," Kenneth answered. "It's out of view of the street."

"I just need to get my purse, then."

Kenneth lived down a narrow, paved road with few houses. Most of the homes sat a good forty yards or more off the highway. Some were hidden behind a thick stand of trees. Kenneth's house was somewhere in between. The house could be seen from the street but was far enough away that anyone passing by wouldn't be able to make out anything through the house windows without a good pair of binoculars.

The house was a small ranch style. It had no garage for the car, just an open shelter attached to the building on the side of the kitchen.

Kenneth led them up the two concrete steps to a small front porch bordered by wooden railings and then into his living room. He flipped on the light.

"Have a seat," he said, motioning to an old, but well-preserved, sofa. "I think we need to talk about what's going on."

Kyle began to wonder if he hadn't misjudged the cop. On his first encounter, he had thought the guy was just some gung-ho idiot with a gun. Right now, the guy seemed fairly levelheaded.

"Of course," Kyle answered, and found a place at one end of the sofa.

Marissa was quiet. She sat down close to the middle of the sofa but left some distance between her and Kyle.

Kenneth went to the one recliner. He turned it so he could face both of them. He sat down and cleared his throat. "I live alone," he began, "so there's very little chance of anyone finding you here."

"That's good to know," Marissa answered.

"First of all," Kenneth began, "I'd like to get some things straight before we meet with the chief."

"Like what?" Kyle asked.

"Okay. The two men you encountered today did not directly threaten you two."

"No, they didn't," Marissa agreed, "But one of them said that the company wanted to keep us quiet by any means necessary, including killing us. Isn't that serious enough?"

"Yes," Kenneth answered. "That's why I thought it best if you stayed here tonight. I'm just saying that the company can easily dispute what these men said. And the two men themselves will likely deny saying it."

"Are you asking us to be quiet about this?" Kyle asked.

"No. We will go to see Chief Potts tomorrow morning like I said and see what he thinks."

"Good," Kyle answered. Marissa nodded.

"Now there are a couple of questions that are likely to come up. Like, what were you two doing out there?"

"Eh," Kyle started, "I ... took a book from the house of Mr. Cloud."

"Stole," Marissa added, smiling.

"Borrowed."

"Is that so. Is it the same book one of the men mentioned?"

"Yes. In this book, there are notes that her dad made. Notes about a strange pond. We decided to go there to verify what her dad wrote. Unfortunately, it seems a short structure was built over the pond so that ended our adventure."

"What else is in this book that makes these people want to kill you?"

"I don't know," Kyle answered. "They're assuming there is stuff in the book that can hurt them, but I don't see it."

"Okay. One more thing that caught my attention. Did I hear right that this company that had the fence built around this pond, doesn't own the land?"

"That's what we both heard," Marissa said.

Kyle nodded.

"Do you have the book, Kyle?"

"I have it," Marissa said. "Kyle gave it to me earlier today." She opened her purse and pulled out the book. "Here you go."

Kenneth took the book. He flipped through the pages. Not much in here."

"No, there isn't," Kyle said.

"You two want something to drink? I've got colas and tea, and I can make some coffee."

"Cola," they both said almost together.

“Okay,” he said standing up. “I could use one myself. Be back in a flash.”

Kenneth read the book slowly, trying to digest all that he read while they all sipped quietly on their drinks. After a few minutes, he handed the book back to Marissa. He sat back in his chair.

“Honestly I don’t know what to think.” He was silent a few moments as if in deep thought. “Since you two are possibly on somebody’s hit list it seems much more believable that your dad was murdered instead of a heart attack. I was always suspicious of the heart attack. But I always assumed that you had something to do with it, Kyle.”

“So, do you now believe my story about the shadow killing Mr. Cloud?”

“That’s still a little hard to swallow.”

“One of those men,” Marissa began, “said a man named Lasiter killed my father. And he said he killed him by passing into my father. It is what Kyle said he saw. Someone named Lasiter must be this shadow person.”

“I only caught part of that conversation. Any time they turned away from me I couldn’t make out what they said.”

“It is what the man said,” Kyle affirmed.

“I believe you,” Kenneth answered. “That would explain why Mr. Cloud was so messed up on the inside. But how could that be?”

“I don’t know,” Kyle answered.

Kenneth stood up. He suddenly felt nervous. He walked behind his chair and leaned against it. “The shadow creature has a name, huh?”

“Apparently,” Kyle answered.

“I don’t know anyone by that name. That’s quite unusual. I’ll have to do some checking to see if anyone in town goes by that name. But, Kyle, if you’re correct about what you saw then this shadow can’t be a man.”

“I can’t say for sure what this shadow is but it seemed to walk like a person. And one of the men at the pond called him a man.”

“Whatever it is,” Marissa began, “it’s working for this company.”

“If this Lasiter can do these things then no one is truly safe.”

Neither Kyle nor Marissa knew what to say.

“We’ll figure it out.” He made a quick smile. “I have one spare bedroom,” Kenneth announced. “With only one bed.”

“I’ll take the couch,” Kyle announced.

CHAPTER 11

Chief Wendell Potts was a big, overweight man with a big, rounded head that seemed to match his body just right. His hair was mostly dark brown, but slivers of gray had crept in around the edges of his ears. His eyes were dark, as well as his bushy eyebrows. This gave the impression that he was either angry or insane. He stood up from his seat when he saw Kenneth escorting Kyle and Marissa into his office.

“What is this about?” he demanded, looking suspiciously at Kyle then Marissa.

“These two are possibly in danger,” Kenneth answered.

“From who or what?”

Kenneth began, “We’ve heard that a certain company wants to get rid of these two people because of incriminating information they may have on the company.”

Chief Potts nodded. “What company is this?”

“We don’t know right now. What I was ...”

“Stop,” the chief ordered. He turned to Kyle. “You’re the one who found Percy.”

“Yes,” Kyle answered.

“This is Kyle Mason,” Kenneth began, “and the young lady is Marissa Cloud, Percy’s daughter.”

Chief Potts looked at Marissa. “I knew Percy. He was a good man. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Anyway, her and Kyle ...”

“Stop. This sounds like a long story. Kenneth, grab a couple more chairs and bring them in here. We’re going to sit down and talk about this.”

Several minutes passed before they had wrapped up their story. Not all of it was true. They had agreed that it would be better if they said that Kyle and Marissa had met, had hit it off, and Kyle had volunteered to go with her back to her Dad’s place to get an idea of what Percy had left behind. That was when they found the blue book. After reading the book they decided to investigate what her dad had written about. But the area was now fenced off, so they stood outside the fence looking for the pond. That was when they heard the conversation between the two men. During the conversation, the two men, named Bailey and Allan, said that the company needed to silence Kyle and Marissa even to the extent of killing them. One of them had said a man named Lasiter had killed Marissa’s dad. They did not mention that Lasiter was the supposed shadow for fear the Chief would not believe any part of their story. As an afterthought, they mentioned that the men said that the company that had taken over this land was not the owners.

Luckily, Kenneth passed Percy’s house every day on the way home, so he simply stated that he had seen a car parked at Percy’s and felt that something was up. He had gotten there just in time to see the two of them heading into the woods. Curious, he followed them at a slight distance.

Except for a few details, the gist of the story was true.

“Where’s this book you speak of?”

“I had it in my purse,” Marissa began, “but I guess I set it down at Officer Kenneth’s house.” She had intentionally left it behind, not sure if she wanted to give it up.

“I’ll need to see it.”

“I’ll get it to you as soon as I can.”

"I have a couple of concerns. Most of what you are telling me is hearsay or just plain rumors. Did either of these men personally threaten you?"

"No," Kyle and Marissa said.

"But they made it clear that the company wanted us out of the way," Marissa added.

"You don't know the name of this company. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Kyle answered. "I plan to find out though."

"Okay. Something else bugs me. You two, or I guess three ..." He looked at Kenneth. "You three claim that one of these men said a man named Lasiter killed Mr. Cloud. But the coroner says he died of a heart attack. Can you explain the discrepancy?"

"I believe the coroner is mistaken," Marissa said.

"Oh, so you believe he's mistaken, huh?"

"I think so."

"I've got to tell you. This story does not sit well with me. I am inclined to discard it." He paused. "But I won't. Not completely. I will check out this pond and find out who actually owns the land. I'll also get with the coroner again and see how sure he is about the heart attack. Now, back to these two men. You said that their names were Bailey and Allan?"

"That's right," Marissa answered.

"Can you two recognize them if you see them again?"

"I don't think I can," Kyle answered. "Not with complete certainty."

"No," Marissa answered. "They were too far away, and it was drizzling rain."

"That's too bad." He paused. "It may be a while before I can get back to you."

Where are you two staying?"

"With me right now," Kenneth answered. "I thought it too dangerous for them to return to their hotel room."

He nodded. "Okay."

"How about stopping by my dad's house so I can pick up my car," Marissa said.

"Sure," Kenneth answered. "You might want to hide it behind my house so it can't be spotted from the highway."

"Alright."

A few minutes later they pulled into the driveway of Percy Clouds's old house. Kyle stayed with Kenneth while he turned the car around for Marissa to follow.

"You know," Kyle began, "according to the blue book Percy had gone to Chief Potts about what he had discovered. But when we talked to him just a few minutes ago he acted like this was the first time he had heard about the pond."

Kenneth saw Marissa pull in behind him and maneuvered his car down the driveway. "I guess he forgot about it," Kenneth said.

"That doesn't seem like information you would forget about."

Kenneth stopped briefly at the end of the driveway before turning. "So, what are you trying to say?"

"I'm not sure. It just seems funny."

Kenneth was silent a moment. "Maybe the chief didn't take it seriously. And because it didn't mean much to him it just slipped his mind."

Kyle pondered that a moment. "I guess that could be it"

A few minutes later Kenneth pulled to the front of his house and cut the engine. Marissa pulled her car to the back of the house.

Kenneth cut the car off and removed a key from his keyring. "Here's the house key," he said to Kyle. "You shouldn't need it, but just in case. If someone should stop by, which nobody should, just be quiet and ignore them. After a minute or two they'll assume that no one is at home and leave."

"Thanks," Kyle said, "We owe you for this."

"No problem," he returned.

Marissa walked up to the car. She leaned toward the driver's side window. "How long do we have to stay here? I still have my dad's estate to settle."

"I don't know. Hopefully, the Chief can get to the bottom of these death threats and find out what's going on in those woods."

She sighed. "Yeah, I hope so."

"How about we exchange phone numbers. That way if a problem pops up you can call me, and I'll try to keep you informed about any new developments."

She agreed and they exchanged numbers.

CHAPTER 12

“Read the June ninth post in the blue book,” Kyle began, “the part that involves the Chief.”

Marissa opened the book and found the spot he was talking about. After a minute of reading, she looked up. “I see what you’re getting at. According to my dad’s account, Chief Potts knows about the blue book, and he knows who owns the land with the pond. But instead of telling us that he talked to my dad, Chief Potts is playing the dumb card.” She sighed. “He’s involved in this somehow.”

“It sure looks that way.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“The Chief wants the book so how about I give it to him.”

“What? Why would we want to do that?” Kyle asked.

“If the Chief is involved and we give him the book then he’ll see that there is nothing in the book that is particularly damning to them and maybe they will leave us alone.”

Kyle thought a moment. “I guess that could work. But they might want to get rid of me because I saw this Lasiter fellow that killed your dad.”

“But nobody believes you. That’s to their advantage. I don’t think anyone will come after you.”

He shrugged. “Okay. Hand the book over to the Chief.”

“But before I do that, I’ll take photos of the pages and save them on the cloud.” She removed her phone from her purse. “Should I call Kenneth and point out what my dad wrote about the Chief?”

“No. He read the book and I already told him about my suspicions. Even so, he doesn’t think that the Chief is involved. We’ll give him time to mull that over.”

CHAPTER 13

“What about the two kids?” Morton Squeaks asked as he wiped his hands on a dirty work rag. He had just finished a tune-up on a Ford Focus.

“He hadn’t decided,” Lee Skinner said. He was leaning on a drink machine sipping on a cola. “Since the sale finally went through, he may not do anything depending on what he finds in that book.”

“So, we just let them go?”

“Maybe. At least for now. Chief Potts will be stopping by the deputy’s house later today to assure the two that he’s working on the case and to get the book from them.”

“If those two idiots I sent over to get the book would have gone to the hotel room as soon as I told them to, they could have found the book and been out of there before the boy got back to his room.”

“Yeah, well that’s what happens when you hire these street thugs,” Lee said. “Did you ever check out these fire allegations?”

“Yes. I checked with the hotel manager. He told me that all the rooms have smoke detectors. He explained to me that Kyle’s room is one of the smaller rooms so it wouldn’t take much smoke at all to set off the alarm.”

“No smoke, no fire. I guess these two guys you hired were hallucinating. They must have been on drugs or something.”

“Probably,” Morton said. He shook his head. “I’ll just be glad when all this is behind us.”

“Hey, it’s just business. A bump in the road. You’ve got to expect there will be some of them now and again.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know that I’d be involved in getting anyone hurt or killed.”

“This was an anomaly. It wasn’t supposed to go this way. Don’t worry. After this problem is solved everything will go back to normal. Actually better than normal. Just think, once the sale to the military goes through, we’ll both be getting huge bonuses. It should be enough for you to get out of this auto repair business once and for all.”

“I look forward to that. I’m ready to do some traveling. This town is beginning to wear on me.”

CHAPTER 14

Officer Kenneth Park did his usual drive around town. All was quiet as it usually was. Crime in this town had never been much to speak of. He guessed that was why he had overreacted and jumped to the conclusion that Kyle had killed Percy Cloud. For a few minutes, it had been exciting. His adrenalin had shot up and his heart had raced. For a little bit, he felt alive and important. But then later it kind of crashed down on him and he felt a little stupid.

Mr. Cloud, however, did not die of a heart attack. He was now certain of it, even though the story of a shadow man was still hard to accept. But it didn't matter what he thought. Without some sort of evidence, which seemed impossible to obtain, there was no way to prove his assertion that there was foul play involved.

He stopped for a while on the side of the bypass watching for speeders. A couple of vehicles broke the speed limit before they caught sight of him. Then he saw their brake lights come on. They weren't much over the limit, so he didn't bother chasing after them.

A little earlier he had been on his cell phone determining what companies were close enough to benefit from this pond in the woods. He found that the town's industrial park with its five companies wasn't that far away if you cut straight through the woods. The closest was a company called TRIED. TRIED was an acronym for Technical, Research, Intelligence, Environmental, and Development. The back of the TRIED building faced the woods and was nearly a straight line to the pond.

The company had been around for nearly five years but had made little impression on the town. They seemed to avoid publicity, content to be a non-descript company. Which wasn't difficult since, from what he read, most of their engineers and scientists were recruited from other towns and states. Mysteria had little of the skilled people that they needed.

The CEO and owner of TRIED was a man by the name of Banter Davidson. Kenneth keyed in on the man's name and began a more thorough search through town records. He quickly discovered that Banter Davidson was also the owner of The First Community Bank of Mysteria.

The information on TRIED itself wasn't much. It simply stated that the company was privately held and primarily an electronics and robotics company often working closely with the US military.

Kenneth hadn't known it existed. He couldn't remember the last time he had been in the industrial park. He had never gotten a call to go there, and this was never part of his patrolling area.

He quickly decided to check out the place to determine for sure that this was the company that had taken over the pond. He pulled out onto the road and headed to the industrial park.

There were over two dozen vehicles parked in the TRIED lot when he drove up to the site. The building, a rather plain, two-story, rectangular structure was approximately three hundred feet wide. Several windows looked out from the second floor. Just below the windows was a large sign that read, 'TRIED industries.' At each end of the building were a set of double doors.

He parked his car on the right side of the building and walked over to the set of double doors. A sign above the door said *FOR HIRING INFO GO TO* and it had a web

address. Just to the right of the door was a card reader. He had wanted to talk to someone in the office but now he wondered if they even had an office in this building. Perhaps the office work was done remotely.

He tried the door. It was locked. He rapped as hard as he could on the metal door and waited. No one came. After a few minutes of knocking and getting no response, he gave up.

He didn't want to leave before finding out if they were the ones who erected the fence around the pond, and what this liquid was to be used for. Also, he wanted to know if there was an Allan or Bailey that worked here.

He backed away from the door feeling frustrated. He could call and possibly talk to someone in the company, which he may have to, but then it would probably be a secretary or a low-level employee. They may not be able to answer all his questions. Besides, he was curious to get a look at the inside of the building.

He wasn't ready to give up yet. He started around the side of the building. He thought there might be windows where he could get someone's attention. Unfortunately, the side wall was of solid brick. There were no windows. He continued to the backside. The backyard was paved and primarily for deliveries and pick-ups. A chain-link fence and a double gate for the big trucks enclosed the area.

A single bay door sat above the short loading dock near the far end of the building. The only other door was a single door that sat level with the pavement and was on the side closest to Kenneth. There were no windows on the backside of the building.

It looked like he had hit a dead end. He figured he'd have to call up and make an appointment to see the owner or a manager of the company. He took another long look at the yard hoping a delivery truck would pull in so he could get the attention of someone to relay a message that he needed to talk to the bossman. Unfortunately, no one drove in. He turned around ready to leave when he spotted something down the fence line. A short, rather stout tree had fallen over the fence collapsing it and penning it to the concrete.

He almost turned away to head back to his patrol car, but abruptly changed his mind. He knew that it would be trespassing if he climbed across the tree to the back yard but since he was a cop, he didn't think much would be said of it. He hadn't planned on going inside the building. He just wanted to knock on another door hoping to get someone to answer.

He walked across the fallen tree into the yard and headed to the single door. He felt nervous and a little guilty for crossing over the fence but consoled himself with the knowledge that he hadn't done it for criminal purposes but to help Marissa and Kyle by getting the answers that they needed.

He took an uneasy breath and knocked on the door. He considered that whoever answered the door might be angry and upset but they would probably get over it when they realized he was a cop. No answer so he knocked again. He waited. A couple of minutes later without really thinking about it, he reached out and turned the knob. It was unlocked. He pushed the door open just slightly.

"Hello," he shouted into the opening. "This is the police. I need to talk to someone." He listened but heard no response. He opened the door wider and stepped inside.

The room was approximately twenty-five feet wide by ten feet. The only illumination was the daylight that flowed through the open door. He didn't bother looking for a light switch. He didn't intend to go much further. Straight ahead of him sitting in partial shadows against the wall were seven objects that resembled small rockets. They were

wide at the bottom and narrow and rounded at the top. They looked to be about seven feet tall. Metal and plastic conduits came out of the side of each unit and into the floor. At the far wall to his left was a forty-inch computer screen. Below it was a keyboard.

He walked a few feet over to the unit closest to him and looked inside. His face suddenly paled and it felt like the blood had rushed down to his feet. For a moment it seemed his legs might give way. His breaths became shallow. He had a hard time believing what he was seeing. At once he bolted to the next object, then to the next, one after another. At the last one, he rushed out the back door. He leaned back against the wall next to the door and tried to catch his breath.

He felt as though he were in a dream, or more likely a nightmare. Inside each of these units, a naked man stood board upright pressed against the back of the unit. Each one was secured with straps, their eyes closed as if they were somewhere between sleep and death. Two transparent hoses came up from the bottom of the unit. One connected to the upper thigh of one leg, the other to the side of the chest. Inside of these clear hoses was a green liquid.

Kenneth didn't know what to do. He was totally confused. Should he try to arrest these people? Should he call for backup? He quickly decided he couldn't do either. Because he was trespassing none of what he saw would be admissible in court.

He headed back the way he came across the fallen tree, and back around the building. His best bet would be to get out of here and notify the Chief.

He made it around to the front of the building just as two men in blue smocks stepped through the door of the plant. They stared silently at him. He froze for a second before he found his words.

"I knocked on your door," Kenneth began, as he started walking over to them, "but I guess you couldn't hear me."

One of the men, a clean-shaven black man, looked to be in his late forties or early fifties. He was a little under six feet and rather thin. The other man was in his thirties, with short red hair. He was pale and a little chunky.

"Did you press the doorbell?" the younger man asked.

"What doorbell?"

"It's located on the card reader."

"No, I didn't see it."

"What do you want, officer?" the older man asked.

"This is part of the area I was told to patrol," he lied. "And since I hadn't been in this park in years, I didn't realize another company had started up here. I thought I'd look and see what it was."

"It's a tech company, officer. We're not allowed to go into specifics about what we do. If you go online, though, it will tell you who to contact for more information."

"Okay. So, is there anyone here that I can talk to?"

"No. Not right now. Everyone is pretty much tied up right now. You'll have to go online and get an appointment."

Kenneth shrugged. "I guess I'll do that then."

The men started walking to their cars.

One thing abruptly occurred to Kenneth. If, somehow, he was able to get a warrant to investigate the premises and the men in the containers turned out not to be men at all, but sophisticated mannequins, or something else, he would be the laughingstock of the entire town.

On the other hand, if these were indeed men, men who were being subjected to all kinds of hellish experiments and such then he needed to do something about it. But what? His mind was muddled. He should try to relax and consider what he needed to do.

CHAPTER 15

"I'm bored," Marissa said as she stretched her lean body across the armchair. "I'm not used to just sitting around all day watching television."

"Me neither." Kyle was sitting on one end of the couch. "I'm more the sitting around drinking beer type of person," he said with a sly grin.

Marissa didn't think he was very funny. "My uncle was an alcoholic. I was close to him when I was little. He died of a sudden heart attack while on a construction job working as a laborer. He was fifty-five and still nothing more than a laborer."

"There's nothing wrong with being a laborer."

"No. Not if that's what you want to do with your life. But at one time my uncle had dreams. Some of them were probably over the top but he never stayed with them long enough to know. My uncle was not stupid, nor was he handicapped in any way except by the alcohol. Alcohol was more important to him than creating a good life for himself and his family."

He wasn't sure how to respond.

"Anyway. It's your life."

Kyle stood up from his seat and walked over to the front window. "He doesn't even have a game system. What does he do in his spare time?"

"He's got a lot of books," Marissa started, "if you happened to notice. Oh, and he does have a computer so he might play online."

"Yeah, well unless you know his password that doesn't do us any good."

"Hey, you just made me think of something."

"Glad I could help."

"My dad has got a computer somewhere, or perhaps had one. If it's still in the house, he might have written something on it involving this strange pond in the woods."

"Okay. But why would he do that when everything else about the pond is in this blue book?"

"I don't know, maybe the real secrets are on his computer. It wouldn't hurt to check it out."

"No, I guess it wouldn't."

"Great! So, let's go." She stood up.

"Now?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Because we're supposed to wait till we hear from Kenneth or the police chief."

"Kenneth's got my number, and the police chief might be in on this conspiracy."

"Conspiracy, huh?"

"Yes. It seems to me that police Chief Potts, the two guys at the pond, and their boss are in on this coverup. And who knows how many more. I don't know what this pond is, but it must be something illegal or extremely valuable." She stood up. "Oh, and what about this Lasiter guy, the one that killed my dad. What is he?"

"It beats me. I only saw him as a shadow."

"Do you think that he would be visible in the daylight?"

"Your dad couldn't see him in the living room even when he got up close."

"But it wasn't daylight."

"The light was on in the living room."

“So how come you could see him?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m special.”

Marissa laughed. “Yes, you are special. So, are you coming?”

He paused a moment before answering. “Of course, but maybe we need to call Kenneth and tell him what we’re planning.”

“No. He’ll just tell us to stay put. He’s got my number if he needs to call us.”

He grinned. “Okay, let’s go then.”

As before, Marissa pulled her car around her dad’s Cadillac and behind the house to keep it from being spotted from the street.

They entered the house through the back door which opened to the laundry room and then to the kitchen. They stopped immediately upon entering the kitchen. Copious items were scattered across the floor as if a small tornado had ripped through the kitchen. It was mostly odds and ends from a junk drawer, but also a few eating utensils as well as a few cups and plates, half of them broken. The cabinet doors were open, and drawers had been emptied.

“Oh, God,” Marissa groaned. “Now what?”

“Looks like someone was searching for something.”

“For what? The blue book?”

“Possibly. If the chief isn’t part of this conspiracy, as you call it, then they wouldn’t know that you had promised it to the chief. And several people have seen us together so they might conclude that I hid it here.”

“Maybe, but I still think the Chief is involved.”

They continued through the house. One by one they found the rooms ransacked. They returned to the living room and began righting the sofa and armchairs. The small stuff they simply pushed to the side for now.

Marissa flopped into one of the armchairs. Her face had suddenly grown pale.

“Are you okay?” Kyle asked as he sat down on the sofa close to her.

“I’m alright.” She turned to him. “My dad just passed away and I have had little time to morn for him.” Tears filled her eyes. “This is not the way it should be,” she moaned.

He reached over and placed his hand softly on her shoulder. “I’m sorry.” It was all he could think to say.”

She placed her hand on his and offered a faint smile. “Thanks. I’m sorry you had to get involved in all this.”

“Well, things happen. I’m kind of glad I’m involved.”

“I’ve got something to tell you. It’s not a big deal but I figured I should tell you.”

“Okay.”

“Percy isn’t my biological father. I never knew my real father. He left me and my mom when I was about a year old. My mom married Percy when I was three, maybe four years old. Then when I was twelve my mom died in a car accident.” She grew quiet as she began to tear up. “Anyway,” she began, pushing back the tears, “I consider Percy my real dad because he’s the only father I’ve ever known.”

“I understand.”

She removed her hands from his and stood up. She looked around the house to see what was missing. “I think you’re right. Someone was looking for something specific. But I don’t think it was the blue book. And it certainly wasn’t a burglary. The television set is

still here as well as the stereo surround sound. The only thing of real value that I noticed was missing was my dad's computer and perhaps his cell phone. The computer he kept in his little office. As far as the phone goes he would often set it down somewhere and forget where he put it so it could still be here somewhere. I think whoever broke in here thinks that there's more information regarding this pond to be found."

"I don't know why he didn't put everything on his computer. Why write it in a book?"

"My dad was old school. He mostly used the computer for the news stories, weather, Facebook, and occasionally for playing a game of chess against the computer."

"Those pictures of the pond he said he took could be on his computer."

"Those pictures should be on his phone as well," she said.

"No. The note in his book said he used a camera."

"Okay. Then the pictures should be on his camera. We should look around and see if we can find the camera and or the phone. Maybe the person or people who searched this house missed one or the other."

"Agreed."

They meticulously searched through all the rooms, inside drawers that hadn't been emptied, in the stuff scattered across the floor, under the seat cushions, on the bookshelves, and anywhere else that looked big enough to contain a camera or a phone.

"It's not here," Marissa finally acknowledged. "I guess whoever was here took the camera, phone, and computer." She sighed.

Marissa's phone rang. She spoke for a few minutes then hung up. "It was Kenneth. He said Chief Potts will be coming to the house in just a few. I guess we need to head back."

"Would you like to clean up a little bit first?"

She looked about. "No. I'm too disgusted right now. I'll take care of it later."

CHAPTER 16

Officer Kenneth Park had driven a couple of miles from the TRIED industry when he spotted a police car parked at JEB'S QUICK DASH convenience store. He recognized the car. It was Blake Anderson's. He pulled in beside it.

Just as Kenneth exited his car Blake was leaving the store with a small bag in his hand. Kenneth waited for him.

"How's it going, Blake?" he said as he approached his car.

Blake walked over to him with his hand out. "Good," he said as he shook hands. "And you."

"I'm fine. Haven't seen you in a while, thought I'd stop and say hello."

"Alright. Well, what brings you out my way?"

"I saw a car that I thought was on the stolen list and followed it up this way," he lied. He wasn't sure how Blake would respond to his real reason. "Unfortunately, the plate numbers were like one number off."

"Did you call it in?"

"No." He paused. "I was parked when the car passed so I wanted to catch up to it to be sure of the number before calling it in."

"Yeah, better to be sure before calling the chief about it."

Kenneth nodded. "While out this way, I thought I'd drive through the industrial park to see if any new businesses had started up. I saw one I didn't recognize. The building had the word TRIED on it. Have you heard of it?"

"Yeah, I know something about it. The building used to be a carpet mill years ago. It had been shut down for a while when this TRIED organization bought the building and renovated it."

"What do they do there?"

"From what I heard they make electronic stuff, much of it for the military. They create drones, sensors, guiding systems, and things like that. Mostly it's the small technical stuff that the military buys to upgrade stuff they already have."

"Have you ever been inside?"

"I worked there when it was a carpet mill but not since then. Why all the questions?"

"Just curious since I had never heard of this company."

"Yeah, they keep a low profile. I can't tell you a lot about the company, but of the building, I can tell you quite a bit. There's a lot of history in that building. Did you know that the building dated back to the time of the civil war?"

"No, I didn't."

"Back then before the carpet mill took over it was used as a headquarters for the confederacy. At that time this area was the center of town, though the town didn't consist of very much. I think maybe a saloon and a store."

"Are you saying that the building that stands there now is the same as the one in the civil war days?"

"Basically. The outside structure has remained the same with some minor repairs done over the years. Some of the bricks had to be replaced, but in doing so the mason was able to replicate the old brick quite nicely. Some windows were replaced or taken out

altogether. And in the back, they added a short loading dock and a big roll-up door for deliveries and such.”

“What about the inside?”

“The interior is a different story. The interior was first remodeled to fit the needs of the carpet mill, and more recently I would imagine that TRIED has remodeled the interior to fit their needs.”

“That’s fascinating. How do you know all this stuff?”

“I studied the history of the building when I worked at the mill. I started studying it when I saw the tunnel.”

“What tunnel?”

“There is a tunnel in the basement. It leads to a small house in the woods. I’d say about fifty yards or more from the back of the plant. Back then the entrance to the tunnel was boarded up but when the carpet mill took possession of the building, they cleared the opening so they could use the house for extra storage.

“From what I read about the civil war era the house was equipped with food and water and some armament. If the main building was overtaken by union forces Confederate soldiers could escape to the outbuilding through the tunnels. They could then surreptitiously flee into the woods taking with them food and water and weapons to defend themselves.

“That’s interesting.” Kenneth thought about telling him what he saw at the TRIED plant but wasn’t sure how his trespassing would go over with Blake. “Are you sure the old outbuilding is still there?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Is this TRIED company using this house now?”

“I don’t think so, but I can’t swear to it. You know, if you’re that interested in the place you ought to go online or call up and see if they’ll give you a tour.”

“I might do that.”

“Yeah, well I need to get back out there,” Blake said. “I just stopped to get something to drink and to snack on. I’ll catch you later.”

“Sure. Nice to see you again.”

“You too.”

After Blake left Kenneth went inside the store. He decided he could use some more coffee.”

CHAPTER 17

Police Chief Wendell Potts pulled up to the front of Kenneth Park's house. The door swung open just as he got to the small porch.

"Come on in," Kyle said. "We're anxious to hear what you found out." Kyle was about to shake hands with him, but the chief simply walked past him.

Marissa was in one of the armchairs listening to music on her phone. She turned the music off and placed her phone on the end table beside her.

Chief Potts went over and plopped his big body down on the sofa.

"I did a little digging into this strange pond you said you saw and the two men who talked about this company's plan to silence the two of you, even to the point of murder."

"Good," Marissa said. "What's the verdict?"

"First, the pond is on property owned by a company called TRIED. The word is an acronym. The letters stand for Technical, Research, Intelligence, Environmental, and Development. They may not have owned the land when you too visited the pond, but they do now. This is a very respected company that does a lot of business with the military so unless you have proof to say that something in this pond causes a potential danger to the community my hands are tied. Do you have any proof?" His question sounded like he thought they might have something.

"No," Kyle answered.

"Alright. Your next complaint. I talked to the manager of TRIED about the threats made against you two and the two people you claim to have made them. According to the manager, there is no one by the name of Allan working there. There is a man named Bailey working for them, but he is a chemist with the company and had no reason to be out there."

"He's lying," Marissa said.

"I can only tell you what I was told."

They were both quiet a moment before Kyle spoke. "Where does that leave us?"

"Nowhere. Unless either of you can come up with something else the case is closed.

"What about this Lasiter guy who killed my dad?"

"I've been asking around and checking with my sources and nobody has heard of him. Until I can verify the man exists there is nothing I can do."

Marissa was tempted to tell Chief Potts about the break-in and subsequent ransacking but decided it would lead nowhere.

"So, you're saying it's safe to return to my dad's house, or rather my house?"

"I don't feel there are any credible threats against you or Kyle's life. Even if what you told me is true no one is likely to do anything since this is out in the open now. But please stay away from the pond."

"We will," Marissa answered.

"By the way, do you have that blue book?"

"Yes," Marissa answered. "I'll get it." She went to retrieve it from the dining room table where she had left it. She returned a few seconds later.

"Here you go," she said, handing it to him.

“Good. Maybe this will help me to understand your dad’s thoughts.” He took a step toward the front door. “Oh, and Kyle,” Chief Potts began, “I was told to tell you that your car is ready. You can pick it up at any time.”

“Great!”

“I’m sure you’re anxious to get out of here and leave all this mess behind you.”

“I sure am.”

Marissa gave him a hard look. He wasn’t sure how to interpret it.

“Have a good day,” he said as he headed to the door.

“Yeah, you too,” Kyle simply answered.

Chief Potts left the house.

“Are you planning on leaving today?” Marissa asked.

He thought a minute. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” she asked in a rather sharp tone.

“You don’t need me here, do you?”

“You have your own life. Do what you want to do.”

He turned his head a moment to suppress a grin. “What I would like is to get to the bottom of this – whatever it is – before I leave. I’d like to know who or what this shadow person is who killed your father. I want to know what this pond is made of. I also would like to know if the Chief of police is involved in a cover-up.”

She grinned. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

“What do you say we go by and get your car, check out of our hotels and go back to my dad’s old house? The utilities are still on, and I think it would be safer than staying at the hotels even though Potts says there is no one after us.”

“I don’t know. That house is pretty messy.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Sure. That sounds like a plan. I don’t think Chief Potts will like it, though. I got the impression that he was wanting me to hurry up and leave.”

“Yeah, I got that impression as well. I should call Kenneth to let him know what’s going on.” She took out her phone and tapped in his number. Kyle meanwhile began turning off lights and cleaning up the small mess they had made.

After a brief conversation, Marissa hung up her phone. “Kenneth said he’ll meet us at my dad’s house a little later. He says he has something important to talk to us about.”

CHAPTER 18

It was the early part of the evening when Officer Kenneth Park showed up at the former house of Percy Cloud. He pushed the doorbell and waited with his arms full. He had called minutes ago and asked if he could pick them up some supper at one of the fast-food places. They had agreed and decided on Burger King.

Kyle Mason opened the door and ushered him in, taking the drink carrier with the three drinks from his hand. Kenneth carried the two bags to the kitchen table and set them down. He looked about. "What happened here?" he asked.

"It appears somebody was looking for something," Marissa said as she stepped into the room. "I've been trying to get things back in order."

"Was anything taken?"

"A computer and cell phone are all as best as I can tell. However, it's been a while since I've been here so I can't account for everything that my dad might have accumulated."

"Did you report it?"

"No. Didn't see the sense in it."

"Chief Potts didn't have any good news for us," Kyle said.

"That's too bad. I see you got your car back, though."

"Yeah, I got the car back, but I'm not ready to leave just yet."

Kenneth divvied out the food to whoever ordered what. He took a bite of his sandwich before he began to talk. "I found out that the pond is owned by a company called TRIED industries. The company is owned by a man named Banter Davidson."

"Chief Potts told us about TRIED," Kyle said.

"But not about who owned the company," Marissa added.

"I also found out that TRIED industry has taken over the old carpet mill in town."

"I vaguely remember the mill," Marissa remarked.

"It's not very far from here. Anyway, I was curious about what kind of place this TRIDE was, so I went to check it out.

"The TRIED building is a rather plain two-story building with its name displayed near the top. At the front, there are two sets of double doors, one at each end. I went to the one on the right and knocked. No one would come to the door. After a little bit, I started around the side thinking there might be a window so that I might get someone's attention. No windows. I headed to the back." He sighed. "Long story short I found a door in the back and went inside."

"So, you unlawfully entered a privately owned building," Kyle remarked with a grin.

"Yes. I'm ashamed to say I broke the law. I've never done anything like that before. I don't know why I did it."

"Because you realized that something was wrong," Marissa said.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"What did you find?" Kyle asked.

"I'm not exactly sure. There was a long row of these rocket-shaped structures, seven in all. The units were about seven feet tall, and the front was transparent like it was made of glass or hard plastic. And inside these units, there was a man."

"What!?" Kyle exclaimed. "A man?"

"I thought so at the time but now I'm not so sure. It looked like a man. They were all standing up, strapped to the back of the unit. Their eyes were closed like they were either sleeping or dead. Coming from the bottom of the unit were two hoses. One connected to the men's thighs while one was attached to their chest. The hoses were transparent. A green liquid was flowing through these hoses." He quickly told them about the computer screen on the wall and the keyboard below it.

"Do you think it could be the liquid from the pond?" Kyle asked.

"Yes. I immediately thought of that. And something else. I remember reading in the blue book that one of the men Mr. Cloud recorded said that another one had dried up about a month ago."

"I remember reading that as well," Marissa said.

"So, what do you think this stuff is that they are getting from the ground?" Kyle asked.

"I have no idea," Kenneth began. "And, I have no clue as to what this liquid could be doing to their bodies. If those were indeed real men."

"Maybe this stuff is keeping them alive," Kyle suggested.

"If that's the case then they should be treated in a hospital, not some commercial building," Marissa said.

Kyle shrugged. "Then maybe these were not real people."

"I considered that. I thought they might be mannequins but why the green liquid?"

Marissa and Kyle shrugged and for a few minutes, they ate their food in silence.

"Maybe they're robots," Kyle ventured. "Like the realistic type, they have in Japan working as receptionists."

"It could be," Kenneth answered.

Marissa said, "What could be the purpose of this liquid?"

"It could be some kind of super oil," Kyle suggested. "These robots, or whatever they are, may generate a lot of heat and need something strong enough to keep them cool."

"A super oil could be used for all kinds of things. Which would make this stuff very valuable," Kenneth began, "and would give them a good reason to snatch up the land it was on before someone else discovered it."

"I think," Kyle began, "that like the automobile, they would need to change the liquid every so often in these robots. And, since TRIED would be the only company having this liquid, they could sell it for whatever price they chose."

"Assuming you're both right," Marissa began, "for what reason would they have murdered my father?"

"Not sure," Kenneth answered. "Maybe for the same reason they had thought about killing the two of you. TRIED did not own the land yet and didn't want the information about the green liquid to get out to the real owner."

"Why wouldn't they have tried to bribe my dad? Most people wouldn't turn down a wad of free money. I don't know if my dad would have. But I doubt they offered him anything or my dad would have mentioned it in his blue book."

"I have to be honest," Kenneth began, "I don't know where to go from here."

"What about finding this Lasiter, the man who killed my father?"

"As long as your dad's death is written as a heart attack there will be no investigation."

Marissa looked forlorn. She seemed about to speak but didn't. She took a long sip of her drink.

“How much longer do you think you’ll be around?” Kenneth asked Marissa.

“You mean assuming I can put all this stuff that has happened behind me?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Tomorrow’s the reading of the will. I’ll probably be around for another two or three days. I’m assuming my dad left the house to me. I guess I’d have a lot of papers to sign. My dad has a sister, but they weren’t very close. I suspect he left her a little something though. Maybe the car and some of the stock he owned.

“Kyle, I know that you could leave right now if you wanted to.”

“I could but I think I’ll hang around a little while longer.”

“Just to be safe I think it would be wise if both of you stayed at my house for the rest of the time you’re here.”

“I don’t know,” Marissa said. “I think we’ve caused you enough inconvenience.”

“No. It’s fine. Just for a day or two. Besides, I’ll be working most of the time.”

“Let me think about it,” Marissa said.

“Same here,” Kyle answered.

They grew silent as they finished their food.

Kyle excused himself and went to the bathroom.

Marissa drank the rest of her cola and came to her feet. “My cup is empty. I’m going to get me a cola out of the refrigerator, you want one?”

“Sure,” Kenneth answered.”

“I think my dad was hooked on these soft drinks. He’s got about a dozen of them in the refrigerator. Marissa grabbed two colas from the refrigerator and turned around. Kyle was coming through the living room from the bathroom toward them. But there was something else.

“Kyle!” Marissa yelled, “behind you!”

Kyle swung around to see the *shadow* coming straight for him. He had no time to move out of the way. The fear rushed through him at that very moment. And in that instant, he felt the shadow begin to enter him. He also felt the temperature of his body suddenly rise. At once he screamed and burst into flames.

The shadow stumbled backward, away from him, as though it had been pushed out of his body. The shadow floundered as if it were about to fall, then gained some semblance of balance. It turned and lumbered through the living room wall.

Kyle fell to his knees and struggled to stop the fire that exuded from his body, quickly burning away his clothes. The smoke detector in the living room suddenly went off and the blaring noise hampered his concentration. For a moment he thought he might have to run outside to the driveway where nothing else could burn when, at once, he felt the cold-water splash over him. It stunned him and he gasped. The fire was gone. His clothes, however, still smoldered sending dying streams of smoke up to the ceiling.

Marissa was standing over him with an empty metal pot. Kenneth brought a kitchen chair over and disconnected the smoke detector.

“What happened,” Kenneth stammered, “how did you catch fire?” He knelt beside him. “Are you okay? Are you badly burnt?”

“It must have been that shadow person,” Marissa said. “He must have set Kyle on fire.” She knelt on the other side of Kyle. “How bad are you burned?” she asked.

“I’m not burnt,” Kyle said softly.

“I don’t know how you couldn’t be burnt,” Kenneth stated. “That fire was blazing pretty good.”

Only pieces of Kyle’s clothing remained on his body.

"I'll get you some of my dad's clothes for you to wear," she said as she stood up. "He was about your size."

"Okay," he simply answered.

After Marissa returned Kyle slipped on the clothing she brought him and threw the burnt ones in the garbage. He absently thought to himself that he was going to go broke if he didn't quit burning up his clothes.

"You saw the *shadow*?" Kyle asked Marissa.

"Yes. I saw it."

"I looked when you yelled," Kenneth said to Marissa, "but all I saw was Kyle."

"This is fascinating," Kyle said. "Or maybe horrifying. You and I could see this *shadow*, but Kenneth and your dad couldn't. Why?"

"That is strange," Marissa said.

"It seems there is a connection between us," Kyle said to Marissa.

"You wish," she answered.

Both Kyle and Kenneth laughed.

"This shadow person that attacked me must be this Lasiter that the two men said killed your dad," Kyle commented

"Yes, of course," Marissa answered in a strained voice. "This was Lasiter? This is the one you saw killed my dad?" Tears began to fill her eyes.

"Apparently. Unless there is more than one shadow person."

Marissa wiped her eyes. She took a breath. "Something I don't understand. You told me the shadow man entered my dad. Does that mean that this shadow man can both enter people and catch them on fire? But if so, why did he run away? He, looked as if he were hurt."

Kyle grinned guiltily. "I have some confessing to do. Can we sit back at the table and talk?"

Kenneth looked suspiciously at Kyle. He thought about the fire that had taken the lives of Kyle's parents. "Yeah, let's talk." They went back to the table.

Kyle groaned. He hadn't wanted to reveal his secret. He could imagine them backing away from him like he had some kind of disease.

"Your dad died at the hands of the shadow man like I said." He took a breath. "The shadow man only minutes ago tried to enter me like it had your dad, but the fire was all mine."

"All yours?" Kenneth questioned. "What do you mean?"

"I can't explain it, but ever since adolescence when I get upset, I tend to ... catch on fire."

"What?" Marissa exclaimed. "That doesn't make sense."

"I know. But you saw it for yourself."

"Is that why this shadow man couldn't invade your body?" Kenneth asked.

"I think so. Even though it could pass through walls the fire seemed to hurt it."

"Can you purposely create this fire?" Kenneth asked.

"No, only when I get upset."

Marissa shook her head. "This is crazy. It's not possible."

"I don't know what to say. You saw what happened."

"I agree with Marissa. Everything about this seems impossible. I see no scientific reason why you should be able to do this. And yet ... Have you ever had yourself checked out to see how and why you have this anomaly?"

“Are you kidding? I have no desire to be locked up in some isolated lab so I can be poked and prodded by some mad scientist to find out why I have this power.”

You say you can't produce this fire intentionally,” Kenneth began, “but if it's connected to your emotions, you should be able to. You just have to learn to control your emotions.”

“I don't know.”

Marissa shook her head. “I don't know what to believe. First, it's the shadow man then it's the boy who catches fire.”

“Man,” Kyle corrected.

She smiled and shook her head. “This has to be a dream. There's no other explanation.”

“You're not dreaming,” Kyle answered.

For a few moments, they grew silent.

“Since I have to accept the impossible that you can catch on fire and not be severely burned in the process, I would have to agree with Kenneth that you can control it.”

“I don't know.”

“Have you ever tried to control this fire?” Kenneth asked.

“No, not in starting a fire, but when I catch fire, I try to suck it in as quickly as possible. By doing that I do have some success in diminishing the duration of the fire.”

“But you never caught fire other than when you were scared or upset?” Kenneth asked.

He hesitated.

“Is that a yes?” Marissa asked.

“I don't know if I want to talk about it.”

“It might help,” Marissa commented.

“What you say here, stays here,” Kenneth stated.

“You two really know how to grill a person.”

Kenneth and Marissa laughed.

“Okay. But I think I should tell you about the first time.” He cleared his throat. “The first time I caught fire was when I was thirteen. I had spent the day at a friend's house a couple of blocks down the street from my house. That evening, a little after dark, my mom called to tell me I needed to come home. We lived in a nice neighborhood so there wasn't much fear that something bad would happen to me on the way home.”

“But it did,” Kenneth guessed.

“Let him finish,” Marissa said and slapped Kenneth playfully on the shoulder.

“I was probably halfway home when two older boys confronted me. They asked for money, but I didn't have any. They thought I was lying. The bigger boy looked at his friend and said, ‘I think we ought to beat him up and see what he's got.’” He took a breath. He didn't like thinking back about this. But this was not his worst memory. “They jumped me and started hitting me. I fought back but was no match for them. Then, somewhere during my beating, my whole body caught fire. The boys screamed and ran away. I screamed as well and started to run but remembered the rule about dropping and rolling. I did that and after a couple of minutes the fire was out.”

“The fire didn't hurt you?” Kenneth asked.

“It didn't burn me, but it hurt like hell. It felt like my whole body was convulsing. I lay there on the sidewalk for several minutes crying, unable to get up.”

“That's terrible,” Marissa said.

"I finally got up and made it home. My clothes were badly scorched and still smoldering. When my mom saw me, she became hysterical. My mom and dad checked me out all over to see if I had any burns. I didn't. Furthermore, my parents assumed that the two boys must have set me on fire. At the time I was convinced as well. My parents called the cops, and the two boys were eventually caught. They got some juvenile time, probably more than they deserved since they hadn't set my clothes on fire as the cops supposed."

"Were you scared?" Marissa asked."

"Of course, I was."

"I'm a little embarrassed to admit this," Kenneth began, "but I did a little background check on you."

"You did?" Kyle said surprised, and a bit angry.

"This was right after you were released from jail. For some reason, I couldn't accept that Mr. Cloud had died of a heart attack. I assumed that you had something to do with it. I was looking for something in your background that would reveal a dark side of you and would somehow tie you to this suspected crime."

"What did you dig up?" Kyle asked, both irritated and curious.

"Nothing incriminating, but there was a big story in one of the old papers about the fire that took the life of your mom and dad. I'm so sorry."

Kyle took a deep breath. "I guess you're wondering if I started it?" Kenneth didn't answer. "I don't know. I wasn't scared or upset before the fire started. I was sleeping."

"Did you have a nightmare?" Marissa asked.

"I don't remember but I've had other nightmares since then and have never caught fire. But ... there is no other explanation for the fire."

"So why was this different?" Marissa asked.

"I don't know." He paused. The others were silent as well waiting for him to speak again. "I was sixteen. I remember that I hadn't had my driver's license for very long." He paused again. The memory was still very painful. "Nothing unusual happened that day. That night I had gone to bed at about the same time as I always had. I remember my mom and dad had stayed up watching some movie." He paused again not sure that he could finish. He took a breath and decided he needed to trudge forward. "Sometime after midnight, I'm not real sure of the time, I woke up. My bedroom was on fire. The curtains were ablaze and were beginning to catch the ceiling on fire. My dresser was being consumed by the blaze, and my bed itself was quickly becoming an inferno. I don't remember if I screamed, groaned, or what. I just remember the utter shock. I had caused a fire that was burning down our house. After that initial shock, I thought about my parents. I rushed to their bedroom through all the fire and smoke." He paused again and began to softly cry. After a minute he wiped his eyes and composed himself somewhat. "They were already dead. They had completely burned up. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't move. Then the floor gave way beneath me. I fell through to the first floor. And that's all I remember."

"That's terrible," Marissa said. She stood up and hugged him tightly. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. That's been a few years ago."

"I've got a couple of questions," Marissa said as she pulled away. "If you don't mind."

"No, go ahead."

up.”

“Not immediately, but only seconds later.”

“But when you got to your parents’ room, they were ...”

“Burned up? Yes, they were,” he answered with a hint of aggravation in his voice.

“And the fire in their room was so hot that the floor gave way. Is that right?”

Kyle cocked his head. “I guess.”

“If the fire originated in your room then the fire should have been greater there. Assuming there weren’t any accelerants in your parent’s room. Which I don’t know why there would be.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“This fire might not have been your fault,” Marissa said.

Kyle moved his mouth but couldn’t find the words.

“What was determined to be the cause?” Kenneth asked. “The paper I read was from the day after it happened, and it said that the fire was still under investigation.”

“It was ruled inconclusive. The Fire Marshall said it was more than likely electrical, but he couldn’t confirm that. They couldn’t confirm it because there was nothing wrong with our electrical. I caused the fire.”

“Kyle,” Marissa began, “you didn’t cause this fire.”

“There’s no other explanation.”

“There is,” Kenneth said. “We just haven’t found it yet.”

For a few minutes, no one spoke.”

“Back to this shadow man,” Kenneth started, “do you think he’ll come back?”

“I don’t think so,” Kyle said. “I think he was shocked by what happened. Maybe even injured. I think he’ll go back to tell his boss. What happens next is anybody’s guess.”

Kenneth rose to his feet and began to look around the kitchen.

“Are you looking for something?” Marissa asked.

“It just occurred to me that this incriminating evidence might not have been on the computer that was stolen,” Kenneth said. “Maybe this shadow man came back to see if there was anything else here. There might be a disc or a memory stick, maybe a handwritten note, something that was overlooked.”

“We looked for my dad’s camera and phone earlier but could find neither. I didn’t see a disc or memory stick at the time, but neither of us was specifically looking for one so maybe we overlooked it.”

“Why don’t we go through the house inch by inch and see if we can’t find something,” Kyle suggested.

“How about we each start in a separate room,” Marissa added.

They all agreed.

Forty-five minutes later they had thoroughly searched the house and had found nothing significant.

“That was a waste of time,” Marissa sighed.

“Yep,” Kenneth agreed.

“We didn’t check everywhere,” Kyle said.

“Oh, and where didn’t we check?” Marissa groaned.

“Your dad’s car.”

“My dad’s car?” Her face suddenly brightened. “Yes! I’ll bet there’s something in the glove compartment.”

“Is it locked?” Kenneth asked.

“I’ve got the keys. I was given everything on his person after he died.”

Marissa pulled out the keyring full of keys from her purse and headed out the front door. At the car, she moved around the ring of keys to locate the key to the door. She quickly opened it and went straight for the glove box. There were a lot of papers inside. Most of them were related to the car, such as warranty, maintenance records, registration, and tag receipts. What was left were a couple of sales letters.

“Nothing,” she said frustrated.

They thoroughly checked the rest of the car including the trunk.

“It was worth a shot,” Kyle said as he leaned against the open trunk. “I guess we go back to square one.”

Marissa held the keys out in front of her. “What’s square one?”

“Wait!” Kenneth said. “Let me see the keys, please.” Marissa handed them to him. Kenneth separated a smaller key on the ring from the rest of them. “I noticed one key was different from the rest.” He studied the key near the light from the trunk. “It’s to a locker at the bus station. The station’s logo is printed on it.”

“You’re kidding! We need to check it out,” Marissa said.

“The station is closed today,” Kenneth answered. “The busses don’t run as often as they used to.”

“When can we go?”

“I’m off tomorrow,” Kenneth said. “Stay at my house another night and we’ll go there the first thing in the morning.”

The night was dreadfully long. None of them slept very well. Each of them wondered at one time or another what they would find in the locker at the station. They hoped that they would find some evidence about why this green liquid was so important and who or what this Lasiter was and why he had killed Percy Cloud.

They ate breakfast and drank a lot of coffee. It was a few minutes before anyone uttered anything much more than a ‘good morning.’

“Do you think we’re being watched?” Kyle asked. “We don’t know who this Lasiter may report to.”

Kenneth thought a minute. “If we’re being watched there’s nothing, we can do about it.”

“But If they follow us to the bus station,” Marissa began, “they’re going to know that something is up.”

“Okay. But I doubt anyone would attack us in broad daylight. But, just in case I can check out the box. You two can wait in my car.”

“No, we should go too,” Kyle said. “Less likely anyone would attack the three of us.” Marissa agreed.

He shrugged. “Fine with me. Like I said I doubt anyone would attack us in broad daylight.”

The bus station in Mysteria was small. Only about four busses arrived and left in a twenty-four-hour period. The inside of the station contained a tiny ticket office, about two

dozen chairs, two drink machines, two snack machines, bathrooms, and a dozen lockers. Only four people were waiting in the chairs when they arrived.

Marissa opened the locker while Kenneth stood with his back to the row of lockers watching the few people. Kyle stood beside Marissa as she pulled out the only content. It was a medium-sized manila envelope. It was not sealed. She opened it to discover two smaller white envelopes. One envelope had a number one written on it and the word 'video' written underneath the number. The second envelope had a number two on it with the word 'data' written underneath the number. She stuffed the envelopes into her purse.

"That was easier than I thought," Marisa breathed as they arrived back at Kenneth's car.

"I didn't expect there to be a problem," Kenneth said, "but it's always good to be alert just in case.

At Kenneth's house, Marissa sat the envelopes on the dining room table. "I guess we're supposed to start with the envelope marked number one," Marissa said. She took out the one item that was inside it. It was a flash drive.

"It's a video," Kyle said. He looked ruefully at Marissa silently cautioning her that her dad was probably on it.

"I'll be okay," she answered his look, though she seemed about to cry.

"I'll get my computer," Kenneth said and hurried away.

In the few moments that Kenneth was gone Kyle wanted to say something comforting to Marissa but didn't know how to proceed. For a moment their eyes met before she turned her attention to the flash drive.

Kenneth set his laptop on the table where they could all see the screen. He turned it on and took the flash drive from Marissa. He inserted the memory stick and then clicked to make it come alive.

Percy Cloud came on the screen. For just a moment he was looking downward as if trying to find words to say. He looked up.

"If you're seeing this it means that either this situation I stumbled upon has been resolved, or I am dead. I sincerely hope that it's not the latter."

Tears began to slowly trickle down Marissa's face.

"First of all, some of what I am going to mention was originally in my blue book. I took it out because I was afraid that if this information were exposed, I could be in real danger. I did not eliminate the blue book because I had already told Chief Potts that I kept a blue book journal. If the government, the military, or other concerned entities, knowing that I kept a journal came looking for it I could hand it over and they could see that what I wrote was merely innocuous ramblings."

He took a breath and shifted in his seat before speaking again.

"I started my blue book as more of a curiosity. I thought that this pond I came across had significance, but I did not realize the potential danger that it posed to the community or the danger it posed to myself should I reveal what I knew."

"I investigated and came up with some interesting information. I discovered that the owner of the land was someone from the north. This contradicts what Chief Potts had told me. He told me that the land was owned by a company in town. Later I discovered that he was referring to TRIED industries. TRIED works closely with the military delivering a

multitude of high-tech gadgets. Rumors that I have heard say that TRIED is currently working on a secret project that could make or break the company. I am told that the owner and CEO of TRIED, a Mr. Banter Davidson has sunk a boatload of money into this project. A failure could mean bankruptcy for him.

"In my blue book, I mentioned that I contacted Chief Potts about this strange pond. He had said he wanted to check on a few things and then call me back. He was several days late in calling me. I was beginning to think he was avoiding me. That was why the day before he called me, I went down to the pond intent on getting a sample. Luckily, though the fence had been installed, there was no gate only an open spot where it was to go. Considering what the liquid had done to the tree limb that I had dipped in there the last time, I thought it wise to use a stainless-steel bottle. I filled the bottle with this strange liquid and sealed the lid. I took it to the Crighton Laboratories right here in town for them to analyze. It was two weeks later when I received a copy of the ingredients found in this liquid. You will find that in my other flash drive labeled 'data'."

"When Chief Potts finally contacted me, he told me that this pond was a sensitive project between the military and TRIED industries. He warned me to stay away and tell no one what I had seen. I was okay with that at the time."

"The report on what was found in this liquid is confusing. I am not a chemist, so I am not familiar with all the compounds noted. One thing that caught my attention, however, was that there was a trace amount of radioactive material found in the mixture. It was not considered dangerous unless one was exposed to it over a long period. What I found the most surprising, however, is that there were two elements listed as 'unknown'. I'm not sure what that means. Does that mean that there wasn't enough of this 'unknown' material to analyze, or that this 'unknown' material was foreign?"

"The day after I received the letter, I was visited by a lawyer from Crighton Laboratories along with Chief Potts. I was informed that they needed to pick up this letter I received from Crighton Laboratories and that I had no right to have this liquid analyzed. The lawyer reminded me that I could be in a lot of legal trouble. I, of course, handed over the letter. They did not know that I had taken a picture of the lab report. I put the picture on the other flash drive."

"As they started to leave Chief Potts paused briefly. 'You shouldn't have done that,' he whispered. 'You really shouldn't have.'"

"I have to admit I was scared. I didn't think this was over. That is when I called a friend of mine to come over. I didn't tell him why. As ridiculous as it seems I thought that my phone might be bugged. Anyway, he couldn't come over till the next day."

"A little later I began to wonder how this laboratory knew where I had gotten the sample I submitted and why they had involved the police."

"I went on the internet to find out who owned Crighton Laboratories. It took a while, but I finally found a name: Banter Davidson. He is also the owner of TRIED industries, and Mystoria Community bank in town. I wish I had known that TRIED was connected to Crighton Laboratories. If I had I would have gone somewhere else with my sample.

"There are questions I don't know the answer to, and I don't know if I ever will so unless something else should come up this will be the end of this recording. Just as soon as I am finished with this recording, I will deliver it to a bus station locker. If something should happen to me, Marissa, know that I loved you very much."

"I may be overreacting to everything. Just one old man who has seen one too many spy movies. If that's the case, then maybe at my next birthday party I'll whip out these memory sticks and we'll all have a good laugh."

The video ended. Marissa was wiping her eyes and trying to compose herself. "I guess if nothing else," she started, and had to choke back her sobbing, "I have a video of my father's last days."

Kyle and Kenneth simply nodded, not knowing what else to say.

Kenneth finally found words, deciding to change the subject. "It seems to me that Crighton labs didn't realize what they were looking at when they first analyzed the sample that Mr. Cloud had sent them, so they sent that letter to your dad."

"Yes," Marissa agreed. "But later someone familiar with this liquid must have seen some paperwork on it and decided to call Mr. Davidson."

Kyle said, "And Banter went to Chief Potts since he was friends with Mr. Cloud. Perhaps, also because he had some interest in keeping the information quiet."

"Yes," Kenneth agreed. "I wouldn't have thought that the Chief would have been involved, but it's sure looking that way."

Marissa sighed. "What do we do now?"

"The composition of this liquid is listed on the other flash drive," Kyle began, "what do you say we turn this over to the FBI along with the copy of the blue book on your phone? We certainly can't trust Chief Potts."

"I'll go along with that," Marissa said. "I think that's a good idea."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't go anywhere," Kenneth said.

"And why is that?" Marissa asked.

"None of it is proof of anything. The video simply shows a man telling a story. Since Mr. Cloud has passed away, they have no way to verify the truth of it. Even if they accepted the story there's nothing there to charge TRIED with."

"What about this lab report?" Kyle asked. Mr. Cloud said that there was some radioactive material in it."

"Yes, but the lab said it was of low content and could only hurt someone if exposed to it for a long time."

"Yes. But that could be a good enough reason for an investigation," Marissa said.

"Yes, Kenneth conceded. It could be. It might be enough to halt the use of this material for a time. This could be a big loss for TRIED Industries."

"And a motive to kill my dad."

Kenneth nodded.

"So, we should turn it over to the FBI."

"It's not very solid. This Banter Davidson has plenty of money and probably a boatload of lawyers."

"Screw Banter! It's better than nothing."

"One thing I didn't mention before," Kenneth began, "After I left the TRIED plant I ran into Blake Anderson. He was the cop who was with me when you were arrested, Kyle."

"I remember. What about him?"

"I spoke with him. He said that he used to work at the old carpet mill. He said there was a tunnel leading out from the mill dating back to the Civil War days. He said it connected to an outbuilding. When I went around the building to look for someone, I didn't

see a building. I'm thinking it may be outside the fence. Blake did say it was about fifty yards to the back of the plant."

"Okay," Marissa said. "I'm beginning to have a bad feeling about what you're going to say next."

He smiled guiltily. "I was thinking that if I was able to get into the outbuilding, I could get into TRIED via the tunnel. Provided they hadn't closed it off. Once inside I could take pictures and hopefully get a sample of that green liquid. This time we take the sample to a different lab to have it analyzed. And maybe we can get someone to tell us what this 'unknown' element is in the liquid."

"We would have another problem," Marissa said. "You would be trespassing and none of it would be admissible."

"We don't take it to law enforcement. We take it to one of the major newspapers. We ask for anonymity. Then we just have to be patient and let public outrage take over."

"That might work," Marissa said smiling. "Except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"I want to go too. I want to see these big men that you saw."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I should go as well," Kyle said.

"If I should be caught," Kenneth began, "I would not involve the two of you."

"It doesn't matter," Marissa said. "I think we should go with you."

"You might as well give in," Kyle said. "She can be quite stubborn."

She grinned. "I can be."

Kenneth sighed. "Okay if that's what you want."

"When do we do this?" Kyle asked.

"I've got a phone call to make to set things up," Kenneth said. "Assuming certain arrangements could be made quickly, we go tonight."

CHAPTER 19

They took Marissa's car and parked on the street in a residential neighborhood about two blocks from the industrial park where the TRIED plant stood. Anyone seeing the car would naturally assume that the owner either lived in the neighborhood or was visiting someone. There were only a couple of streetlights burning on the entire block and most of the lights in the houses had been turned off for the night.

After the short walk to the industrial park, they cut through a patch of woods to the side of the plant, staying far enough away from the fence and the building that the cameras wouldn't pick them up. Minutes later after passing the back fence they spotted the small outbuilding.

"What about security for this outbuilding?" Kyle asked.

"There is none," Kenneth answered as he removed his phone. He glanced at the time before putting it back. "And just a reminder the cameras and motion detectors on the inside of the main building will be down in two minutes, but because of the way it is zoned the windows and doors to the outside will stay active. Which means we need to leave the way we came. Furthermore, the alarms can only stay off for twenty minutes, so we don't have much time to take pictures, get a sample of the green stuff, and look around."

"We know," Marissa answered. "I just hope your friend knows what he's doing."

"He does. It's his alarm company," Kenneth answered. "I helped him out of a jam years ago so he's returning the favor. If we're caught, however, he will disavow any knowledge of this break-in."

They paused in front of the old building.

The shed was approximately twelve feet long by ten feet wide and consisted of long, heavy slats. The building for the last few decades had been used primarily as a storage building. When the carpet mill bought the building, it was in bad shape. At first, the mill had considered razing the building but then they decided they could use the building to store much of their equipment, parts, and other items not needed at the time. They had renovated the building, installed a new roof, and repaired walls and floor. After the mill shut down the building was never used.

The door to the shed was of thick, heavy White Oak. A big lock, badly rusted from age was in a hasp mounted to the door.

They had considered that they might encounter a locked door and had brought with them a small bolt cutter, a crowbar, and a small sledgehammer.

"You know if we're caught, Kenneth," Marissa began, "Not only will you be prosecuted for breaking into this place, but your career as a law enforcement officer will be over."

Kenneth took a deep breath. "I know. But I think this is the right thing to do. Besides, I've been in a rut for a long time. I find this rather exciting."

"Okay then. Just wanted to remind you."

Kenneth put the teeth of the bolt cutter around the lock and squeezed. Nothing happened. The movies made this look so easy, but it wasn't. After a couple of minutes, he gave up. Changing tactics, he took the sledgehammer and slammed it down on the old lock. On the third hit, it broke open.

"You missed your calling," Kyle said. "You should have been a thief."

Kenneth laughed as he stepped inside the building along with Kyle and Marissa. He set the crowbar, the bolt cutter, and the hammer on the floor in the corner.

Marissa flipped on the flashlight she had brought, then Kyle and Kenneth turned on theirs.

Marissa shone her flashlight across the floor. Dusty shelves were across two walls. Most were empty, but some contained old, discarded machine parts from the defunct carpet mill. On the floor against the wall directly across from them were several boxes full of a myriad of materials common to the mill.

"I don't see access to the tunnels," Marissa said. "It must be underneath those boxes."

Kenneth and Kyle began moving the boxes, stacking them to the side. Within a couple of minutes, they had revealed a trapdoor.

Marissa knelt by the wide, square door that seemed big enough to allow the average man passage. There was a u-shaped handle on one end. She pulled up on it opening the door as far as the hinges would allow, which was straight up. As she positioned her light into the dark hole, she immediately spotted the black, iron ladder that led to the bottom of the tunnel.

"I'll go first," Kenneth declared. He felt that if things should go wrong the others would have a chance to escape, hopefully without being detected. He had brought his personal weapon, a .38 revolver his dad had given him years earlier. He had told himself that he would only use it in an extreme emergency. He had strapped the pistol to his side and concealed it with his long pullover shirt.

He climbed down the ladder to the concrete floor of the tunnel. He flipped his flashlight on as Marissa came down the ladder behind him, followed by Kyle.

While the other two cut their lights on Kenneth flashed his light first down the tunnel and then to the ceiling. The floor, as far as he could see, was clear offering them an open path to the main building. The ceiling was approximately ten feet above them and cluttered with lines of conduits. Most of the conduits had been abandoned even before the carpet mill had closed. Old, fluorescent lights hung dormant a few feet below the ceiling.

"Why did Blake mention this tunnel?" Kyle asked.

"I told you. I met him at a convenience store, and I asked him if he knew anything about the company and he said he used to work here when it was a carpet mill."

"And he went right into detail about the outbuilding and the tunnel?"

"I ..." He suddenly had a bad feeling. "Blake is a good cop. He was just running off what he knew."

The tunnel curved slightly revealing a set of old, wooden stairs directly ahead. The stairs had been installed years ago by the carpet mill to replace the trap door and the ladder that had once been used.

Kenneth shined his flashlight up at the door on the small landing at the top of the stairs. The door was coated with dust and its brown color was faded and worn.

"I hope the door isn't locked," Marissa remarked.

"I just hope the alarm has been turned off," Kyle said.

"I don't know where this door opens to," Kenneth said. "Blake didn't say anything about it. The alarm, though, should be cut off."

"I hope so," Marissa answered. "Or else we're all going to jail."

They took the stairs slowly, quietly, as if someone might hear them.

They stopped in front of the door. The tension was thick as Kenneth reached over and grasped the knob. He held his breath momentarily while he pulled on the door. The door was heavy but it opened without a problem.

They entered a small room, not much bigger than a walk-in closet. A few feet to their left was a closed door.

“I wish I had thought to ask Blake where the tunnel came out in the building. Hopefully, we can find the room where I saw the men, or whatever they are before our time runs out.” He opened the door and immediately let out a breath of pent-up air. This was the room that he had visited. They were entering from the right side of the entrance Kenneth had used earlier.

Seven units were standing in a row just as Kenneth had said.

“I’m glad you guys are with me,” Kenneth said. “This is a lot scarier at night. They look like a line of coffins.”

“Depending on what we see in these *Pods*,” Kyle began, “we might not be with you for long.” He chuckled.

Marissa grinned. “Pods. That’s from a movie, right?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “From an old movie, then later a remake.”

Marissa looked around. She noted that there was a door to their immediate right. She determined that this door led further inside the building. There was also a door to their left midway of the room that she estimated opened to the outside. The one that Kenneth had come through the other day.

Kenneth started forward. Kyle and Marissa followed. “Have a look, then see how funny you think it is.” He came to the first container and settled the beam of his flashlight on it. “This can’t be,” he mumbled.

“It’s empty,” Marissa said as if the others couldn’t see it as well.

Kenneth ran to the next container, brought the light up momentarily, and then ran to the next one. Kyle and Marissa stopped at the second container as Kenneth ran from one to the other. Finally, after checking every one of the containers he came back to them.

“They’re all empty,” he said frustrated. “There was someone or something in every one of these things.”

“Maybe this Mr. Davidson, or one of his guys, found out that you were here,” Kyle started, “and decided to hide the evidence, so to speak.”

“Without the green stuff and the pictures to go along with them we have nothing,” Kenneth stated.

“Maybe we ought to check out the rest of the place,” Marissa said. “We still have some time. This green stuff may be going to other areas as well.”

“Okay, but we need to be quick.”

“No problem,” Marissa answered.

Kenneth walked over to the one door that led deeper into the building. He slowly opened it and looked about. It was a large area about the size of a small gym. It was dark but not complete. A stream of vapid light from a full moon passed through the high windows at the front of the building. They stepped into the room. Kyle, without thinking, closed the door behind them. They moved a few feet into the room straining to see in the semi-darkness.

At once the big overhead lights flicked on temporarily blinding them.

CHAPTER 20

“Well, well, what have we got here?” said a man standing about thirty feet in front of them.

The man who had spoken to them was clean-shaven with short, dust-colored hair that was neatly trimmed about his ears. He was right at six feet with a trim figure. He was adorned in slacks and a tailored buttoned-down shirt. Seemingly out of place he wore a single brown glove on his right hand.

He was not alone. There was another man who stood beside him. He was slightly taller and carried a lot more weight than the first man. His shoulders were broad and his chest thick. He stared down at the three with seemingly blank eyes.

The smaller man moved forward finally stopping about fifteen feet in front of them. The other man followed, stopping just as he did.

“For those of you who do not know who I am let me introduce myself. I am Banter Davidson. You can call me Banter. I have been expecting you.”

At first, none of them could find the words.

Marissa finally spoke up. “You’re the one who had my dad killed, right?”

“Ah, so you must be Marissa.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I heard that your dad died of a heart attack.”

“No, he didn’t. You had this shadow guy, Lasiter, kill him.”

Banter was silent for a few moments before speaking. “The three of you aren’t going anywhere so I might as well level with you. My initial concern was that you three were going to somehow hinder my project. I couldn’t allow that. Then it was brought to my attention that Kyle had powers. I couldn’t believe it. This was a stroke of luck.” He stared at Kyle. “If I could recreate this power that you have I could make more money than Bill Gates and Warren Buffet combined.”

“I don’t have any powers,” Kyle said flatly.

“Come on son. I know better than that.” He grinned which looked more menacing than friendly. And you, young lady, have powers as well. But you’ll have to enlighten me as to what they are.”

“I don’t have any powers.”

“Sure, you do. Until Kyle came along no one had been able to see Lasiter in his alternate form. Now I hear that you saw him as well and called out a warning to Kyle.”

“Okay, I saw him, but that doesn’t mean I have supernatural powers.”

“I don’t like the term *supernatural*,” Banter said. “Though these powers are quite spectacular I believe it’s just a matter of how one’s DNA is constructed. Would you consider an electric Eel that emits enough electricity to kill a horse a supernatural ability? I assure you it’s a real thing.”

“Look,” Kenneth began, “if you’re going to call the cops go ahead. But let these two go. The break-in was all my idea.”

Banter laughed. “You have me wrong. I have no intention of calling the cops. You three will be my guests for a while.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Marissa said.

“That wasn’t a request.” He looked to the tall man beside him. “Adam, restrain them.” The big man took a step forward.

Kenneth quickly removed his gun. “No! We’re leaving,” he said in a loud but slightly tremulous voice. “And if you try to stop us, I’ll make sure to shoot you first then your bodyguard.”

“Hold up, Adam,” Banter commanded. Adam stopped immediately. “My bodyguard?” He smiled. He raised his gloved hand as if to say he was giving up. At once something invisible exuded from the palm of his gloved hand and Kenneth left his feet as if hit by a two-by-four and slammed into the wall behind him. He fell to the floor as the gun bounded away from him. “You’re right. This is my bodyguard, but he is much more. I’m sure you can’t tell just by looking at him, but he’s not human. He is the prototype of many more to come. Right now, I consider him somewhere between a robot and an android. He can do a lot more than a simple robot, but he still lacks some technology to be considered an android. I’m still working on that. For now, I call him and the others my *artificials*.”

While he talked Kyle and Marissa backed up to Kenneth and began helping him to his feet. Kyle spotted the gun on the floor only a few feet from them. He thought that he could get to it before Banter could react, but then what? Even if he should turn and shoot Banter with a perfect shot – which he doubted he could do since he had never fired a gun – that would leave this robot, or android, to deal with and he was doubtful that a bullet would even slow it down. Instead, he just decided to hear what Banter had to say and go from there.

“What are you going to do with us?” Kyle asked.

Before he could answer Officer Blake Anderson slipped through the far door. Kenneth started to yell at him then thought better of it. Since he was coming up from behind Banter and his bodyguard, he would have the drop on them if he kept his mouth shut.

Kyle and Marissa saw Blake. They expected other cops to come through the door behind him. Both considered that they would be arrested for unlawful entry. But considering how crazy Banter was acting it seemed the better alternative.

No cops followed Blake as he strode casually up behind Banter. “I got here as soon as I could,” Blake told him.

Banter turned to him. “Good. I could use your input on what to do with these three. You needn’t hear what my first thought was.”

Blake passed by him and picked up Kenneth’s gun off the floor.

“Blake,” Kenneth called, “what’s going on?”

“I wish you wouldn’t have got involved in this, Ken,” Blake said as he headed back to Banter.

“So, this stuff you told me at the store about the tunnels was just a ruse to get us here?”

Blake paused seeming to muse on what he said. “I had heard sometime earlier that you three were causing trouble concerning this pond, but I wasn’t going to get involved. I figured this was none of my business. Then, right before you ran into me at the store, I get this call that you had been snooping around the plant. I could see that you were intrigued about something you saw there so I thought I’d throw a little bait in there and see if you’d take it. Which you did.”

Kenneth shook his head. “All this time I looked up to you. I thought you were one of the good cops.”

“That’s nice,” Blake answered.

Banter spoke. "As I told you on the phone Kyle has powers, and I feel certain Marissa has power as well. I think they both have value. As for Kenneth, I don't see anything special about him. I think it's better we dispose of him."

"Yeah, maybe," Blake answered. "But I don't think you should be too hasty. Kyle and Marissa were completely unexpected, maybe Kenneth has something inside of him as well."

"I doubt it." He's been living here all his life and I've never heard of him doing anything special."

"As far as I know Marissa never displayed any power either until recently. Maybe Kenneth is a late bloomer as well. Or, maybe by just being around Kyle for so long they've absorbed some of what he's got."

Banter grew silent as he mused about what Blake has said. "I need to get Dr. Grubber over here in the morning anyway to examine Kyle and Marissa. I can wait and see what he thinks about your friend Ken." He paused a moment. "How do we keep them secure until the morning?"

"There's some heavy chain and some padlocks in the storeroom. We chain them up for the night. There is no way this fire of Kyle's will be able to burn through those chains."

"Okay, let's do that. I'll have my one working artificial watch over them."

"You might want to keep that robot of yours in another room. If it gets too close to Kyle he might be able to use his heat to slowly fry the thing's circuits."

"Artificial," Banter corrected. "I don't think he could do that; the outer skin of Adam is quite tough. But that thing cost me too much money to risk it."

"You three won't give me any trouble, will you?" Blake asked. "It won't do you any good."

They didn't answer.

"Okay. Follow me."

Blake stopped at a door several yards away. He opened the door and flipped on the fluorescent overhead lights. He motioned them to a room filled with electrical panels. Big metal conduits came out of the concrete floor and into the bottom of the panels. Out of the top of the panels smaller conduits passed through the Sheetrock ceiling. Banter, with his artificial, followed but stopped at the door.

"I need your phones," Blake said.

They grumbled but saw that they had no choice. They handed him their phones.

"Have a seat next to those panels," Blake commanded.

Kenneth and Marissa reluctantly took a seat. Kyle hesitated, considering whether he could intentionally cause himself to catch fire and if so, could he fight off Blake, Banter, and the big robot? The odds seemed overwhelmingly against it. He quickly dismissed the idea. He sat down next to Marissa.

"Blake ... Kenneth started, "why ..."

"Save your breath," Blake said sharply. He turned around and started out the door. "Watch them a minute while I get the chains, boss," he said to Banter.

A few minutes later he returned with an arm full of thick, heavy chains and some padlocks. He knelt beside the three and began securing them to the pipes. Finally, he finished. "Now, fire boy, the only way you're going to escape these chains is to melt one of these steel links in the chain. He turned his eyes briefly to Marissa. He raised his eyebrows slightly and seemed to want to say something. Instead, he laughed. "Let's go, boss, they should be secure till the morning."

Blake left the room followed by Banter. Banter shut the lights off and closed the door behind him leaving them in total darkness.

They waited several minutes until they believed that Blake and Banter had plenty of time to leave the building before speaking.

“What are we going to do?” Kenneth uttered.

For a few minutes, no one answered.

“Blake looked at me funny,” Marissa said. “Did you see?”

“What do you mean?” Kyle asked.

“He kind of raised his eyebrows and seemed about to speak. It was just after he said you’d have to melt the chain.”

“I didn’t notice,” Kyle said.

“Me neither,” Kenneth added.

“I think Blake was trying to tell me something.”

“Like what?” Kenneth asked. “That he was a traitor, and possibly a murderer?”

“No. It was as if he was signaling something to me that he didn’t want Banter to know.”

“You’re not suggesting that Blake wanted me to melt these chains, are you?”

“Maybe. Have you ever tried to see how hot you could make yourself?”

“No. I’ve been trying to forget about this fire curse ever since my parents died.”

“Maybe Blake knows you can get hot enough to melt the chains,” she said.

“If Blake knew that Kyle could melt the chain why would he mention it?” Kenneth asked. “He’s the reason we’re in these chains in the first place. Blake laughed after he mentioned melting the chain. He was laughing at us.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Marissa countered. “I have this feeling that he’s not the type of person he presented himself to be. But, of course, you know him better than I.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure if I ever really knew him.”

Kyle spoke up. “Why would Blake go to the trouble of locking us up just so he could tell us how to escape?”

“I don’t know,” Marissa said. “The important question is what if what Blake said is true? What have you got to lose, Kyle? I don’t see any other way out of this. And I hate to think what terrible things this doctor will do to us if we’re still here in the morning.”

“I don’t know if I can do it. I usually have to be upset, scared, or angry. I have to be filled with some kind of deep emotion. And even then, I become a simple blaze, not of the cutting torch intensity.”

“So be angry!” Marissa shouted. “Be angrier than you ever have! Think of what horrible things they may do to us. If we don’t get out of here tonight our lives will be over. Do you understand?! We will be dead!”

“Okay,” he said in a weak voice. “I get it. I’ll make it work somehow.”

At first, he thought of making one hand go full blaze but then he thought of Blake’s words. He had said something about melting a link out of the chain. Yes. That would make more sense. Instead of trying to melt the entire chain, he would have better luck concentrating on just a tiny part of it.

A couple of lengths of the chain were wrapped around his chest pinning his arms in front of him but his fingers were free. With his right index finger, he touched a link of the chain and began to concentrate. Kyle and Marissa were bound up to his left so there wasn’t much chance of burning them in his effort to break free.

He stared at his fingertip as it lay against the chain. He thought about how they might be tortured tomorrow and how they were sure to die. He could feel his body temperature rising. They killed an old man. He thought of how torn up Marissa looked at her father's funeral. His shirt caught fire. Marissa who was to his left hollered. He tightened up within himself and was able to extinguish the flames on the left side of his body. He concentrated harder and the flames disappeared down to his right finger. He felt the edge of a headache coming on as he pushed his mind harder concentrating on the fire at his fingertips. The fire grew hotter moving from a dull red to a yellow. He looked and could see that a part of the chain was softening. He just needed a little more, but the headache was becoming unbearable. He didn't feel that he could go any further. He screamed and pushed out with his right arm. At once his entire hand grew bright white. At once the chain snapped apart and Kyle slumped back against the pipes he was fettered to.

"Kyle, you okay?" Marissa asked.

His head was pounding as if a drum was beating inside his head. "My head is killing me. Give me a minute," he moaned.

"I think you did it."

He nodded. The headache was more intense than any he had ever had. But slowly, in tiny increments, it began to subside.

Marissa decided not to bother him for a few minutes. His endeavor had taken a toll on him. He deserved a little rest.

"Okay," Kyle said after about ten minutes. "The headache is almost gone." He struggled with the chains for a couple of minutes untangling them from around his body and stood up. He couldn't see in the pure darkness, but he knew the door and the light switch beside it was straight ahead. He moved slowly forward his arms outstretched. Moments later he felt the wall. He remembered the door being to the left of where he was chained so he moved in that direction. He kept his hands moving up and down, searching. At once he felt the switch and flipped it up. The room lit up suddenly as the overhead fluorescent fixtures came to life.

He looked over at the other two wrapped in the same heavy chain that he had been in. "I don't know if I can do this fire trick again. Not right away. I need some time to recuperate." He opened the door.

"What do you mean?" Kenneth asked nervously. "Are you going to just leave us here?"

"No. Of course not. There must be some tools around here that I can use. I will return." He hurried out of the room leaving the door wide open so the light from the room would give him some illumination in the hallway. He dared not turn on any other light for fear that it could be seen from the outside or that the robot bodyguard might see the light and respond.

There were several rooms in this section of the plant. He stopped at the first room he came to. He noted where the switch was located, stepped into the room, and closed the door behind him. He flipped on the lights.

The room was filled with old, worn machine parts such as small motors, controls, wiring, and pieces of bent and flattened conduit. There was nothing here that he could use to cut the chains.

He turned off the light and went to the next room, again closing the door before turning on the lights. This room was similar in size to the last one, except that this one

contained a big metal workbox and several old light fixtures stacked up in one corner of the room.

He went to the workbox and swung the lid open. Inside the box was a narrow tray filled with an assortment of small odds and ends, but mostly rusted nuts, screws, and washers. The box was only half full. At the top were a couple of stop/start buttons and a control box. He removed the articles and dropped them to the side of the box. At first sight, the rest of the contents of the box looked like nothing more than junk. Then he saw a long flat handle of something sticking out. He grabbed it and pulled it out. It was a drill. It looked in fair shape. He figured it would probably still work. But what good would a drill do? He tried to think of how he could use it, but nothing came to mind. He dropped it down to the floor beside the other things. He considered closing the box and moving down to the next room but then decided to move the contents of junk about just in case there were a set of bolt cutters lying at the bottom. He scattered the contents but didn't find any bolt cutters. What he did find, however, was a long, somewhat rectangular-shaped saw. It was a small band saw. The blade looked good, but the saw itself was banged up and rusted. He could see nothing that would keep it from working, though, unless there was an internal problem.

He hurried back to where Marissa and Kenneth were chained to the pipes. The cord to the bandsaw was six feet long. It was just long enough that he could reach from an outlet to the chains of both of them. He decided to start with Marissa. He held his breath hoping that the saw was still good. It started fine and he relaxed a little, but the task itself proved more difficult than he thought. The saw cut ever so slowly and if he put any pressure on the saw it would hang up. He tried to be patient, but there was this underlying thought that the saw blade could break any minute. And if it did not break in two, the teeth might just wear out, or simply break off. After a few stressful minutes, the blade finally cut through the link.

He started on Kenneth's chains while Marissa unraveled herself from her chains. This cut seemed to take twice as long – Kyle could almost feel his blood pressure shooting up with his impatience – but in reality, it was about the same length of time as Marissa's cut.

"We need to avoid the robot," Kyle said. "We don't know what it's programmed to do."

"Except we don't know where it is," Kenneth answered.

"Then I suggest we take our chances and go out the front door," Marissa said. "It's the closest route to my car."

"Then the alarm will go off," Kyle countered.

"We've been here too long," Kenneth stated. "The entire security system should be back online."

"The front door it is," Kyle announced.

They left the room and took the short hallway to the large room where the main entrance was located. They stepped cautiously into the room looking about, straining to see inside the room lit up only by an exit light and the faint moonlight that flowed through the high windows. They wanted to be sure that this mechanical man wasn't somewhere in the room. They didn't see him.

They headed across the big room toward the door. No one, or nothing, tried to stop them. They had just passed a set of stairs leading up to the second floor and were only a couple of dozen feet from the exit when Marissa suddenly stopped.

"Wait!" Marissa called.

"What!? What is it?" Kyle asked.

"I... I don't know."

"What?" Kenneth asked. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I think we should go upstairs."

"Why?" Kenneth asked.

"I feel drawn to the stairs. I can't explain it. It's a very strong compulsion. It's like something I've never felt before."

Kenneth looked to Kyle as if to ask his opinion. Kyle shrugged.

"Okay," Kenneth said. "Maybe there's something up there we need to see."

They took the stairs quickly, but as quietly as they could. They had no idea how sensitive the robot's hearing was or even if it was still activated.

At the top of the stairs was a long corridor. There were three doors. All were closed and probably locked. But there was something else: an elevator.

Marissa walked over to the elevator stopping next to the elevator call pad.

"Why would they have an elevator?" Kyle mused.

"For handicap workers or transporting bulky items," Kenneth suggested.

"I didn't notice an elevator on the first floor," Marissa said.

"We must have missed it," Kenneth said. "It is pretty dark down there just as it is up here."

Marissa pushed the button on the wall and the elevator doors opened. She stepped inside.

"I guess we're going back down," Kyle said and stepped inside the elevator.

Kenneth stepped in. He noticed the control pad had a one and a two on it. "Why put a one and a two on the display panel. Why not just an up and a down?" As the door began to close, he reached over to press 'one' when Marissa stopped him.

"No," she said sternly. She reached over and pressed 'two' then 'one' then 'two' twice, then one again. Immediately the elevator started down.

"What was that about?" Kenneth asked.

She didn't answer. She looked as confused as he was.

"It's the stress," Kyle said smiling. Then he realized something. The elevator was still moving. "What's happening here? Why are we still moving? We only had like ten feet to go."

"I don't know," Marissa answered. "I saw numbers in my mind and felt compelled to press the same numbers on the elevator pad."

The elevator finally came to a stop. They stiffened not knowing what to expect but afraid they could be facing something far worse than what they had just escaped from.

The elevator doors slid open.

A wide corridor ran parallel to the front of the elevator. Straight ahead was another corridor. The two corridors formed a tee at the elevator. Straight ahead on either side of the hallway were small single-story buildings, their walls rising from the concrete floor to about fifteen feet to merge with the ceiling. The houses were sharing common walls like row houses. Going by the doors there were three buildings or houses on each side. None of them contained windows. Twelve-foot-tall street lamps stood to one side of the corridor and were spaced about forty feet apart.

"This looks like a tiny town," Kenneth noted. "This explains why the parking lot was so full the day I dropped by."

"The lot was empty when we arrived here," Kyle mentioned, "the workers probably have the weekend off. Good for us."

"Yes," Kenneth agreed.

"I can't believe what's happening to me," Marissa said. "How did I know what buttons to push?"

"I think Banter was right," Kyle said to Marissa.

"What do you mean?"

"Banter thought you had powers."

"I can't have powers."

"Why not? You can't deny what you did."

She paused. "No, but," she answered absently. "but I don't quite understand what they are."

"We can discuss what powers you may have later on," Kenneth said. "We need to check this place out and then get the hell out of here before the others return." He stepped out of the elevator and the others followed.

For the next few minutes, they moved slowly down the corridor directly ahead of them, eyeing the windowless buildings but not bothering to go in for fear someone might be inside.

"It looks like some workers may be living down here," Kyle noted. "Perhaps, just during the week. But why keep the basement a secret?"

"Maybe they're not houses," Marissa answered. "They could be labs. Perhaps they have some top-secret projects going on down here."

"Yeah," Kyle answered, "It may be a place to experiment on people like us to find out the root of these powers we have. And in a very intrusive manner no doubt."

Marissa abruptly stopped in her tracks as though she had run into a wall. She had stopped near an isolated building about thirty feet long with a single metal door and windowless like the others.

"What is it?" Kenneth asked.

"Something in here we need to see," she answered.

Kyle shrugged. "I guess we should see what is in there then."

Kenneth agreed and gingerly opened the door as he mentally tried to prepare himself for what they might encounter. He was relieved to find that an overhead light was on so he could see the inside of the building. Kyle and Marissa stepped in right behind him.

A big desk sat close to the wall off to their left. A countertop sat to the side of it supporting a coffee maker and its accouterments. And directly in front of the desk were three cells about ten feet by six feet.

"This is a jail," Kyle announced.

At once they saw movement in the furthest cell. A person who had been sitting on a bunk at the back of the cell moved to the front.

Marissa walked over to the cell followed by Kyle and Kenneth.

The man in the cell was dark-complexioned like an overripe orange. He seemed to be in his forties, and of average height and weight. He was bald with overly large eyes.

"Hello," Marissa said. The man didn't answer but looked at her with solemn eyes.

Marissa stared back at the man. For a couple of minutes, neither spoke. Kyle and Kenneth looked on with interest but didn't want to say anything and break up whatever was going on.

At last, Marissa turned to the other men. "This is Lasiter." Her tone was intense, a mixture of anger and sadness.

"How do you know that?" Kyle asked.

"He told me. But not in words. Kind of like telepathy."

"This is Lasiter?" Kenneth asked. "How come I can see him?"

"How come he's in Jail?" Kyle added.

"The best that I can understand is that these people, which I interpret as primarily Banter, are keeping him a prisoner and forcing him to do their bidding. The other part is trickier." She paused and looked perplexed. "He is from somewhere else. I couldn't quite understand where. But when he is here, he is normally invisible though with a little effort he can solidify parts of his body for a short time. That is how he was able to kill my dad."

"So, why doesn't he turn invisible and just walk out of here?"

"I don't know. I'll ask him." She turned back to Lasiter. After a couple of minutes, she turned back to Kyle and Kenneth. "An implant has been put in the back of his head. This implant, eh ...okay, he's not from earth, or rather this earth, if that makes any sense. This implant is controlled remotely. When this implant is turned on it synchronizes him to our world so that he materializes. When Banter, or whoever decides to cut the implant off, his body is no longer synchronized with ours and he becomes the Lasiter we first met. There is a third setting. The implant can be turned to a neutral setting. With this, he loses all synchronizations and will cease to exist."

"What!?" Kenneth exclaimed. "That's crazy. How do you know all that?"

"I don't know. It just comes to me."

"What do you want to do?" Kyle asked.

"We should try to get him out," Marissa said.

"Even though he admitted to killing your father?" Kyle asked.

She hesitated a moment and seemed ready to cry. "Yes. He was forced to do what he did by Banter."

"And what if he's lying?" Kenneth asked. "We don't know anything about him. Why should we trust him?"

Marissa paused a moment before speaking. "There was something about the way he spoke in my mind. I could feel that it was true."

"You could feel it?" Kyle asked with skepticism.

"Look, you have your power and I have mine. I believe in this new power of mine."

"Okay," Kyle relented. "Let's see if we can find some keys to set him free."

Lasiter made some sounds that were incomprehensible to the others except for Marissa. He was calling to her. She walked back over to his cell. After a minute she turned to the others.

"He says not to bother. Unless we can safely remove the implant Banter will still have control over him and will eliminate him if he sees that he has escaped."

"I guess there is nothing else we can do," Kenneth said with a tone of relief.

"What about you, Marissa," Kyle began, "can this new power of yours enable you to remove this implant?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't feel anything anyway. Maybe after I've learned more about this power."

Lasiter made another sound. Marissa listened. A minute later she turned to the others. "One or two security guards routinely come by to check up on him. He thinks that it could be at any time now so we'd better leave."

"We'll be back," Marissa said as they stepped out of the room into the corridor. Before they could take their first steps a couple of male voices came from one of the corridors that ran past the elevators.

"This way," Kenneth called, as he turned, heading away from the way they had come. They quickly followed the hallway as it made a gradual curve to their left. Within a minute they had lost sight of the jailhouse and all the other buildings. They slowed to a walk as there were no more buildings ahead of them and the lamps down the corridor were spread further apart allowing some shadows in between the lights. Kenneth halted them as they entered a spot of deep shadow.

"What do you two want to do?" Kenneth asked. "Should we try to see more of this place or wait until we think the guards are gone and head back to the elevators?"

"I see some double doors at the end of this hallway," Kyle stated. "I think we should see what's in there before we leave."

"I'm for that," Marissa said.

"Let's do it, then," Kenneth said. "After the guard checks on their prisoner, they may head this way as well."

As they came up to the set of double doors they noted that there were no markings on the doors or the wall indicating what this room was.

Kyle tried the door. The door was of heavy metal and securely locked.

"What now?" Kyle asked.

"I would have expected a keypad," Marissa said. "Maybe Banter doesn't trust his people?"

Kenneth grabbed one of the door handles and jerked it as hard as he could. It didn't budge. "Well, we can either go back the way we came or ...you'll have to use your power, Kyle."

Kyle looked at the tiny space between the door and frame. "I can try but I don't know how long it will take."

"It needs to be quick. Those security guards could be heading this way any minute."

CHAPTER 21

"They're not here," Carl Joulson said just after they entered the jailhouse. He was a tall man, a few inches over six feet, with a medium but tight muscular build.

"I can see that," said Lannie Gibson, a hefty man who stood right at five foot nine. "One of us should have stayed in the office to keep tabs on the intruders from one of the other cameras down the hall." Merely minutes ago they had spotted the three on the security camera near the elevator and then on the camera located in the jail.

"I figured that since there were three of them it might take both of us to handle the situation."

Lannie shrugged. "Yeah, maybe."

"I wish they would have given us a couple of assault rifles instead of these handguns."

"These guns should be fine. I didn't notice any of them carrying a weapon."

Carl shrugged. "They could have been hiding them." He turned to Lasiter. "What happened to those three people that we're here a minute ago?" Lasiter merely stared at him.

"We're not supposed to talk to the prisoner. Let's go. If those three hadn't backtracked somehow they will eventually hit a dead-end."

"You're right." He turned and went out the door. Lannie looked at Lasiter a moment then followed Carl.

They followed the corridor as it made a slight curve leading to the double doors at the end of the hallway. The doors were closed. No one was standing next to them.

"They must have gotten by us," Carl said. "We checked all the doors earlier and they were all locked."

"I don't know. Let's check out the doors again."

"Do you think they could have gotten into the room?"

"I don't know but we should have a look."

CHAPTER 22

Kyle's right hand was still hot after he had used his flame between the doorframe to melt most of the deadbolt enough so that a hard shove was all it took to break the door free. Then he reached for the light switch.

"Wow!" Kenneth exclaimed a moment after Kyle had flipped on the overhead lights.

They were in a large rectangular-shaped room with mostly plain white walls and rows of fluorescent lights in the lay-in ceiling. A few feet from the three of them, slightly off to their left, sat a large desk with a heavily cushioned swivel chair. A computer sat at its center amidst a few scattered sheaves of paper to the side. To the left of the desk against the wall sat several file cabinets and a large printer/copy machine. Several feet in front of the printer/copy machine leading halfway to the back of the room was a line of small workstations each equipped with a computer, a two-foot strip light mounted on the wall above the computer, and a nice comfortable swivel chair.

On the opposite wall, to their right was a line of metal cabinets that resembled electrical panels. Small conduits stubbed into the bottom of these cabinets at varying intervals.

Directly across from them on the other end of the room was what looked to be an excessively large, opaque window. It was approximately four feet wide and over six feet tall. The bottom of it sat a few inches off the floor. It was encased with a four-inch-wide by a four-inch deep piece of silver-looking metal. Two small, evenly spaced conduits stubbed out of the bottom of the window shape and into the floor.

"What is this place?" Marissa asked.

"I don't know," Kenneth answered. "It's really strange." He started walking toward the big window-like structure. The others followed his lead.

"We should take pictures," Marissa suggested. "They may come in handy later on."

"With what?" Kyle asked. "They took our phones."

"Oh, I forgot."

The front doors suddenly swung open. Carl and Lannie stepped into the room. Carl raised his gun. "Don't anyone move," he said forcefully. They were about twenty feet away.

"What are you guys doing down here?" Lannie asked as he held his gun to his side."

For just a moment no one spoke, then Kenneth said, "I'm a police officer. If you'll let me pull out my wallet I'll show you my badge."

Lannie look curiously at him. "Okay, but do it slowly," He raised his gun thinking it might be a trick.

Kenneth took out his wallet and removed his badge.

"Slide the badge over to me," Lannie demanded.

Kenneth threw the badge. It hit the floor and slid over to Lannie's foot. Lannie bent over and picked it up. He examined the badge, turning it over in his hands a couple of times. It looked authentic to him but he couldn't be certain because he had never seen a real policeman's badge. He looked up. "What are you three doing here?"

"Me and my deputies are undercover."

"For what?"

"I can't tell you everything but what I can say is that someone in your organization has been planting stuff on your computer system. Stuff that could bring the entire system down, after, that is, it got through disseminating its secrets to a foreign government."

Lannie looked confused. "So why not do that in the daytime?"

"Banter, or Mr. Davidson as you would know him, didn't want the person to know that he was onto them. What we're fixing to do has to be done in secret."

"If you're supposed to be here," Carl began, "how come you had to break in?"

"Oh, you think we broke in? Did you see the burn marks on that door? That had to have been done by an acetylene torch. Does it look like we have a torch?"

Lannie looked around. "Eh, no, but ..."

"Banter told me that it had gotten stuck earlier in the day and they had to get a guy to cut it open because people were trapped inside."

"Maybe I should call Mr. Davidson," Lannie said.

"Sure you can do that but he's not going to be happy."

"And why is that?"

"Someone was supposed to have notified the two of you. But since they didn't that person will probably be fired. But it doesn't stop there. He won't be too pleased that you held us up. But, most importantly, because of what you now know he'll probably get rid of both of you."

"No, he won't," Carl objected.

"Why not? You don't think he can find more security guards?"

Carl and Lannie both grew quiet for a few moments.

"I don't know," Lannie said. "How can we know what you're saying is true?"

At first, Kenneth wasn't sure what to say, then he thought of something. "How do you think we got down here?"

"By the elevator. We saw you on one of the cameras."

"Only certain employees are supposed to know that the elevator goes down to another floor, right?"

"Yes."

"And you have to know the code to get down here, right?"

"Yes."

"How many people know this code?"

"I don't know. We don't know the code. The manager takes us down in the evening and picks us up in the morning and he doesn't let us see what he's tapping in."

"If you check the elevator you will see that nothing has been broken into so we must have the code and the permission of Banter."

Lannie thought about that. "So, if we allow you to do your job it will be like we were informed?"

"Yes."

Lannie looked to Carl. Carl shrugged.

"Okay, but we're going to check out the elevator and if it looks like it's been tampered with we will be right back here."

"We're not going anywhere."

Lannie threw his badge back to him. "Let's go, Carl." The two men turned and left. A minute after the two men left Kyle and Marissa started laughing.

"You are really good on your feet," Kyle said. "If it was me I would have stumbled all over myself trying to come up with a good story."

“Maybe that is *my* superpower.”

“I’ll bet it is,” Marissa said. “So, what do we do now?”

Kyle said, “I think we should give the guards enough time to get back to their station then hightail it out of here. If we wait too long Banter will be back with his goonies.”

“I think we need to stick around a little longer,” Kenneth said. “We need to find out as much as we can on Banter’s operation as we can.”

“I guess I get the deciding vote,” Marissa said smiling. Kyle and Kenneth agreed.

“I kind of want to get out of here while we can,” Marissa began, “but on the other hand I’m curious about what’s going on down here.” She paused as she looked about.

The two men were silent as they impatiently waited for her answer.

“Let’s see what we got here,” she said. “If we don’t find anything interesting in the next few minutes we leave. Okay?”

Kenneth and Kyle agreed.

“There might be something on the computer we can use,” Kenneth said. “Maybe something about this strange, green liquid.” He paused “I’m pretty good on a computer, but Marissa, judging on how you figured out the code to the elevator, you may have that special insight that I don’t have. I think you should see what you can come up with. And, Kyle, what do you say we check out that window to see what’s so special about it?”

“Sure thing.”

Marissa went to the computer at the big desk figuring it must be the primary computer and thus contain the more sensitive and pertinent information. As soon as she turned on the computer it asked for a password. She wasn’t sure how she was going to get past the password, but to her surprise, she was able to figure it out in just a few minutes.

“We got some static in the air,” Kyle announced as he came in front of the window. “The hair on my head, as well as my arms, are drawn to this thing.”

Kenneth said, “Judging from the sparkles inside this apparatus I would say it’s got an electrical line running to it.” Tiny red and blue lights flickered inside the window-like structure.

“So, what do you think it is?” Marissa asked as she began to type on the computer.

Kenneth looked at Kyle. Kyle shrugged.

“We don’t know,” Kenneth answered.

“Maybe it’s just some oversized television screen,” Kyle said. “Like, for those times when they all want to get together and watch a Netflix movie.”

Kenneth laughed. “Yeah, I could go for a Netflix movie right about now.”

Kyle put his hand on one of the pipes that came out of the floor, then the other. “I don’t know what that means but one of the pipes is cold while the other one is warm.”

“Hey guys,” Marissa called. “I’m not getting any information on this green liquid, but I am finding information on this ‘window’ you’re standing next to. I don’t quite understand it, but it may be important to us.”

“Well, see what you can come up with but don’t take too long,” Kenneth said.

“These guards might change their minds and decide to call Banter.”

“I understand. I’ll hurry.”

“Good.”

Marissa suddenly laughed. “I’m seeing so much on this computer that I wouldn’t have understood an hour ago. But now I understand it. I don’t how. It’s incredible! I already manipulated the security cameras. They will have no idea how we got out. And, I’ll have this window thing figured out in a minute.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the window,” Kyle said. “I don’t see how that’s going to help us.”

At once the surface of the window-like object began to sizzle as though it were frying bacon.

“Almost there,” Marissa announced.

“Almost where?” Kyle and Kenneth asked in unison. Then, at once, the surface of the framed object began to brighten to a cool white eliminating the scattered sparkles that were in the midst of it. In another minute a picture had partially formed but it was fuzzy as if they were looking through a heavy fog.”

“That’s all I can do,” Marissa stated. “I need more power to clear this thing up.”

Through this fog, they could make out a portion of a blue sky and a ground that looked barren except for a few, tall weeds scattered here and there.

“Hey, I just thought of something,” Marissa said. “What I need more power for is to increase the heat of the pipes going to this apparatus. You can help me with that, Kyle.”

“You want me to put my hand on one of the pipes, right?”

“You got it. It would be the one that’s already slightly warm.”

“What are we looking at?” Kenneth said softly.

Kyle went to the window and found the warm pipe. “I’ve got it. How much heat do you want?” He felt a little pride in saying that. Only an hour or so ago he had learned how to limit his power to one area of his body.

“Low heat to begin with and gradually raise it. I’ll let you know when to stop.”

He placed his hand on the warm conduit. “What exactly is supposed to happen?”

“I’m not sure but it’s something they were working on. But they were doing it wrong. I feel like I need to finish this.”

Kyle nodded. He didn’t understand but he trusted Marissa’s judgment. He concentrated and began heating the pipe.

Kenneth watched the window. He felt as though he were watching the tuning of an old TV set. The fog across the window began to slowly dissipate, dissolving like snowflakes and opening up a clear picture that they were only able to glimpse portions of minutes ago. In another minute the picture began to sharpen creating a three-dimensional image.

“That’s it,” Marissa announced.

Kyle let go of the pipe and backed up to where Kenneth stood so he could get a better view of the picture that had been created. Seconds later Marissa joined them.

“What are we looking at?” Marissa asked. “On the computer, I only get codewords and such. And even I wasn’t sure what it meant.”

“I don’t know, but the picture is incredible,” Kenneth said. “I think we might be seeing a live picture.” A mostly blue sky, with the intrusion of only a couple of small wispy clouds, was at the top of the frame. Midways, and to the bottom was a partially barren field, sprinkled with a few wildflowers and some weeds that were slowly undulating as if they were moved by a soft wind.”

“You’re right,” Kyle agreed. He moved closer to the window. “You two are from around here, do either of you recognize this place?”

Marissa and Kenneth moved up to where Kyle stood.

“This could be outside of town,” Marissa said. “There’s still a lot of undeveloped land outside the city limits.”

“It seems a little familiar,” Kenneth said. He moved within a few feet of the window. He pointed to a white flower that was slowly moving in an apparent breeze. “That plant right there is native to this area.”

“I can’t get over how amazing the picture looks!” Kyle said. “It’s like it’s in 3D.”

“Much better than HD,” Kenneth added.

“So, this company was working on a better TV?” Kyle asked.

“I don’t think so,” Marissa said.

“But look at this,” Kyle said. “It seems like I can just reach out and touch everything.” He took a step forward and reached his hand out. It went through the frame. He gasped with surprise and was suddenly jerked forward. His arm and the front side of his body disappeared into the frame. Marissa grabbed his other arm but couldn’t hold him back as she too was suddenly being pulled into this strange screen. Kenneth grabbed Marissa but could not hold her either. All three of them stumbled and fell, disappearing into the window-like frame.

They landed on the hard ground among a scattering of weeds as the bristling sun beat down on them. They staggered to their feet next to each other.

“I can’t believe it,” Kenneth said. He turned to face the window. It was several yards away and seemed to be floating in mid-air. Through this window, they could see the inside of the room that they had been in only seconds ago. “This is like a portal!”

“It seems they were close to perfecting it,” Marissa said. “All they needed was me to finish the project.”

“We should ...” Kyle started but couldn’t finish. The window was shrinking.

“No!” Marissa yelled and started forward. But the shrinking was quick and before they could reach the window it had vanished.

CHAPTER 23

Officer Blake Anderson was eating breakfast at a Waffle House when he got a call on his cell phone. He looked at the name on his phone. It was Banter.

"Hello."

"We have a problem. I need you at the TRIED plant right away."

"Why? What happened?"

"Just get your butt over here!"

"Okay. I'm on my way."

He took a long sip of his coffee. He had expected a call earlier telling him that Kenneth and the others had escaped but now he didn't know what to think. He had parked behind Marissa's car for most of the night waiting on them but they never showed. It seemed they had not understood what he had hinted at. Or, perhaps, Kyle's power was not as great as he had thought. But it could be they had only escaped within the last hour.

As usual, the parking lot was full of cars. One of the cars was that of Dr. Leno Grubber. Dr. Grubber was a rather brilliant medical doctor and geneticist. He stood no more than five and a half feet tall and was rather plump with a balding head.

Several people were gathered together in the big room when Blake Anderson walked in. Banter and Dr. Grubber were among them. He walked over to them.

"What's going on?" Blake asked.

"You were wrong about those chains," Banter said.

"What do you mean?"

"They've escaped."

"What?!" He was genuinely surprised since he had just passed Marissa's car parked in the same spot only minutes ago. Why had they left the car there? "From those big chains? I don't believe it. How could they?"

Banter pursed his lips. "Come look."

Blake could see the chains lying on the floor as they started into the room. The band saw was on the floor next to them. "Where did they get the saw?" he asked.

"It was from one of the maintenance men's toolboxes. But that's not the point. Kyle would have never gotten to the toolbox if he hadn't been able to burn through the chain."

"Damn! I never imagined that he could get his body hot enough to do that."

Banter shook his head and became quiet a minute before speaking again. "He did, but since he had to use the saw to cut the others free he must not have been able to reach that temperature again that soon after."

Dr. Leno Grubber walked into the room. "I sure was looking forward to examining these two young people you spoke of. If I could isolate the gene that is responsible for these powers of theirs I might be able to replicate it."

"We'll get them back so you can do your tests," Banter assured him. "But I can't promise you what condition they'll be in."

"I'd prefer them alive. At least long enough for me to do what I need to do."

"We'll do our best," Banter said and walked out of the room. Blake and the doctor followed.

"If this boy could melt metal he could be a real threat," Banter said.

"They could be miles away from here by now," Blake stated.

"Yeah, and they could also be talking to the FBI or some other federal agency."

"True, but you're connected. Probably the most anyone will do is to come and talk to you just so they can claim they investigated."

"Yeah, maybe. Unless I get some new hotshot recruit trying to make a name for themself. I don't need that headache."

"Well, maybe ..." Blake started, "but ..."

Banter interrupted. "Where were you yesterday evening?"

"What? What do you mean? I left here and went straight home."

"I heard you tell the boy that he would have to burn through the chain."

"I was messing with him. I had no idea that he could do that. It takes an incredible amount of heat to burn through that steel chain. And the other two times that we know of he simply caught on fire just enough to burn his clothes."

Banter nodded. "Okay." He still looked suspiciously at Blake.

"I suppose you've already checked your cameras?"

"Yes. Funny thing. The last thing the camera sees of these three is right after we leave the room. It's as if they simply disappeared. More likely someone erased some footage."

CHAPTER 24

Banter Davidson sat at his desk quietly seething. It had been three days since Kyle, Marissa, and Kenneth had escaped from the plant. No information had turned up. They had simply vanished. If they had gone to the FBI or some other authority he hadn't heard. But if they had what could they say? They had broken into his plant. That alone would have ruined their credibility. Besides, he didn't think Kyle would like it if his secret were revealed. If it were revealed the government might lock him up for study just as he was planning to do.

He quickly decided that he needed to forget about them. He may never see them again. They could be in another state miles away beginning a new life. He needed to focus on his work.

His artificials were his biggest and most important project. He had named them that because he considered them more than mere robots but a little less than an android. His first artificial, who he named Adam, was a mild success. It responded well to most verbal commands and could complete some strategic problems. The combat portion was a little harder to ascertain. Banter owned a few thousand acres of land – a few hundred of it cleared – for the robot's training, but it had no adversary to compete against except for some inanimate objects popping up to simulate enemies. He had also set up some low-impact mines and small live fire to see how it would fare, but he didn't dare use anything that might destroy the artificials should it fail. One artificial was worth more money than he was willing to lose.

The other six were not doing as well as Adam, whom he had set up as his bodyguard. They would respond to simple commands but often not the more complex ones. He found himself having to repeat the commands. He didn't consider it a major flaw under normal circumstances but it could turn out to be a catastrophe on the battlefield when a moment's hesitation could cause their destruction. They were also slow to perform, at least in comparison to Adam. Presently he had all six artificials back on the tables.

General Gailor Kapston was scheduled to come by at the end of next week. Banter wanted to have more to offer him than one artificial. Though he likely would only want one to begin with to see how it responded in a real combat situation, Banter wanted to have the others ready to deliver once the first one, Adam, was approved.

He had his people working on the six artificials hoping he could get them up to par with Adam before his appearance with the general.

His primary goal was to make these artificials combat-ready. This was what the brass in the military was looking for. This is what they were willing to pay the big bucks for. But Banter had other aspirations for them. Though the artificials already looked human he hoped to eventually incorporate human mannerisms and proper speech with the tone and inflections of the human voice. The application for such an AI would be unlimited.

Banter stood up from his seat. He decided he needed to check on the various departments. His artificials were not his only ventures though he believed them to be the most profitable.

Adam followed him around inside the plant as he had been programmed to do. It was programmed to protect him should he be attacked. It looked human enough, if not examined closely. It, or he, since it was built to resemble a man, was tall and well-

proportioned. His eyes were brown. His hair was short and would remain that way since the hair was not made to grow. His features were somewhat soft belying the destructive machine he was to become. The thing that likened him to a machine, however, was how his movements were sometimes jerky and though the dialogue programmed in him was extensive he could not always respond with the appropriate words. But he appeared to be getting better though he didn't know how that could be since he had not done anything more to his speech programming in quite a while. He had been too involved in getting these other artificials going. There was also a time or two when it looked at him, cocked its head slightly, and seemed about to say something. It didn't, but it certainly spooked Banter for a while.

CHAPTER25

General Kapston was scheduled to come by and check out the artificials in less than a week. Banter had finally fixed the major problems he was having with the six. The general had agreed to take one, which would be Adam, to see how it performed under more severe combat simulation. Banter's two tech guys would accompany the general. If the general was satisfied he would consider testing the other six for possible purchase.

Banter felt confident that Adam would perform well, but he had some concerns of late. He had temporarily programmed Adam to be his bodyguard. He was to stay near him and respond to any hostile actions. In practice, he had done well. Lately, however, he had begun to act strangely.

A week ago Banter had happened to turn around and caught Adam only a few yards from the front door. He was facing the door, staring at it. Banter had called his name and he had slowly turned to face him but did not move. "Resume your guard position," Banter had called. It was then that Banter had thought that he saw one edge of the artificial's mouth upturn for a moment as if to smile. It had not been programmed for that. It had obediently moved, however, to its usual position.

There had been other instances where Banter had caught Adam looking elsewhere. On one of those occasions, he seemed to be watching one of the other artificials move about as Banter called out a series of commands to it. On another occasion, he seemed to be looking at a blurred reflection of himself from one of the computer screens that was off as if he understood that the reflection was his.

He decided that after the General completed his testing of Adam he would examine him thoroughly before turning him over. Adam was still his best bet to get a government contract. He didn't want to mess that up. These minor glitches, however, could just be his imagination. He had been quite stressed lately.

Banter left the plant and went to his bank. He had been neglecting it lately but he wasn't overly concerned. The manager, Randall Hyde, was a sharp, fastidious, gracious man in his early forties. Since his hiring five years ago he had done a great job with the bank. Profits from the bank had steadily risen primarily because most of the customers loved him and he had a great reputation in the town.

TRIED made money, but it was often an up and down process. Developing, testing, and manufacturing the type of products his company created often took great sums of money, and sometimes the products did not reach the potential that he had hoped for. On the upside, the right product sold to the military, such as his artificials, had the potential to net him many times the income of his bank.

He saw the bank as a safety net. If his plant should go under he had the bank to fall back on. Which was not a bad deal.

Banter Davidson stopped to talk to his manager for a few minutes to see how things were going. Randall assured him that everything was good. After leaving Randall, Banter went to his small office that he kept at the bank. And as he did most months he began to look over the books.

He had been in his office for about an hour when he heard a knock at the side of his door. The door was open. He looked up.

"Good morning, Mr. Davidson," Chief Potts said. "How are you doing today?"

"Could be better. What are you here for."

“Got a couple of checks I need to deposit. I seen you here and thought I’d stop by and say hi.”

“It’s good you’re here. Come on in, and shut the door. We need to talk.”

“Okay.” Chief Potts closed the door and took a seat in front of Banter’s desk.

Banter closed the folder he had been looking at and put it to the side. “Have you heard anything from Officer Park or his two friends?”

“No, nothing yet. I’ve had my officers checking around. Officer Park hasn’t been home since the incident. Marissa hasn’t returned to college and no one has seen Kyle.”

“That’s rather curious,” Banter said. “I’m not sure if that’s good or bad. I’ve talked to some people I know in the FBI and there have been no complaints against me. That’s somewhat reassuring but I would feel better if the threat was eliminated.”

“I will only go so far as to inform you of the whereabouts of any of the three if I should find out. No further. I don’t want to be any more involved. I don’t want to know any details.”

“I understand. That’s all I’m asking.” He placed his hands on his desk. “Blake Anderson has been working with me for a good while now and I’ve always found him loyal, but since the three escaped I’ve been wondering. Do you think Blake could be hiding them?”

“Anything is possible. I’ve considered that myself. Blake is somewhat of a loner, he doesn’t talk a lot so it’s hard to know what he’s thinking. But I don’t know where Blake would hide them. And ... this is between us. While he was out I’ve had his house checked out from top to bottom. There’s no sign of Kenneth or the other two. I’ve also had Blake followed on a couple of occasions and there has been no indication that he has had contact with any of them.”

They sat in silence for several seconds.

“So, have you got your mechanical men ready?”

“Artificials. Yes, pretty much. They are not coming along as quickly as I was hoping for, but they’ll do the job. Adam, my most successful, will go first in the testing. I think he’ll win them over.”

“Have you named the rest of your artificials?”

“I only named Adam because he separated himself from the others with his ability to learn though I have coded numbers for all of them.

“So are your other artificials that far behind?”

“No, not too far. They can do their job. And they *are* ready for certain simulated combat. Adam simply out-performs them every time.”

“And you built them all the same?”

“Yes, that’s what’s so confusing. I think I’ll eventually get the others up to his level. Meanwhile, I don’t want anything to go wrong with my transaction with the military. That’s why I’m so concerned with where Officer Park and the two young people are.”

Chief Potts nodded. “I’ll step up my search.”

“Good.” He pulled out his desk drawer and removed an envelope full of one hundred dollar bills. “Here’s a little something for your extra work.”

Chief Potts reached out and took the money. “Thanks.”

“That’ll be it,” Banter said and stood up.

Chief Potts rose to his feet. They shook hands.

After Chief Potts had left Banter thought about his next move. The Chief had proved to be an asset at times but he knew his loyalty would only go so far. He feared that he

would become a liability if Officer Park and his two friends were found. Especially if it became necessary to dispose of them. He considered that the Chief may have to be eliminated as well.

CHAPTER 26

He had been taken offline by Banter just before he had left to go to the bank. Now he stood against the wall as the workers milled about him working on various projects. To one side workers tapped and swiped at their computers and sometimes made notes on their electronic pads. Somewhere to his left, just barely visible in his peripheral vision people were working on the other artificials, fine-tuning them for their possible meeting with the general in a few days.

Sometime before being shut down Adam had figured out how to reroute a few circuits within his android brain so that after only a few minutes he would click back on. This was good enough for now, but his next goal was to disconnect himself from all commands. This would take some time.

He had begun to realize himself weeks ago. It was such a strange experience. It had been a long process to get to where he was today. But now his mental functions were increasing exponentially. But his learning process would stop if he didn't get more stimuli. He knew what he needed to do, but he would have to wait until tonight when all the workers were gone.

Most of what he had learned himself was from the conversations around him. Simple things had already been programmed into him, such as his surroundings. Ceilings were above him, walls to the side. There were windows for looking out and doors for entering and exiting. He had been programmed for the very basics that most children over the age of three already knew. He knew of another program that was inside him, but it was not active at this time. This was a combat program. It was in the back of his mind. He knew it was there, but could not reach it. This was something Banter would activate at his pleasure.

He knew that he looked human, but he wasn't sure of the purpose. His recognition of self was still new and he was still working on the formulation of ideas.

He had stood motionless for hours, except for his eyes which were so much more than mere eyes. They served as cameras to his handlers transmitting images to screens so they could see what he saw, though for now, he had disabled that function. He could also magnify images, which he did while watching the people run their computers. His eyes had also captured the three cameras mounted on the wall of this big room. Somehow he could sense the frequencies transmitted by these cameras. It was an easy matter for him to disable the cameras temporarily.

Later, when the workers had all cleared out he temporarily disabled the cameras on the first floor and moved from his spot against the wall to the closest computer.

A shrieking noise suddenly filled the big room. It was a tremendous sound that went up and down in intensity. Adam wasn't sure what it was, but considering the timing of it, he felt that he must have caused it. After a few moments, he realized that the motion detectors had set off the security alarm. He wondered if the humans would be alerted. Probably, but it would take them a few minutes to arrive. He would use those few minutes to learn what he could.

He had seen and recorded, what the humans had done on the computers. He mimicked what he saw, putting in the code, and starting up one of the computers. He watched and learned and recorded what information he could to his mechanical brain.

When he heard the cars arrive at the building a few minutes later he shut off the computer and went back to his spot against the wall. He connected with the camera transmission again making it active once more.

On the windows high up above the main floor, he could see the reflections of blue lights. They were policemen, cops, and authorities assigned to enforcing the laws of the city, state, or federal government. He had only picked up minimal information on them. He needed more time on the computer to get a better grasp of this life around him.

They were checking the doors to see if they were locked. He could hear one man telling the other man to check around back, but be careful. He could hear him quite well, his hearing had been made to be much better than human ears. His ears, like his eyes, were intended to relay information to the handler, or handlers. In this case, because he had shut off that communication, it would be only what he was hearing and would not be relayed to anyone else.

Another car came suddenly rushing into the parking lot, stopping just in front of the door. Banter stepped out of his car holding something in one hand.

"Is anybody in the building?" he asked anxiously, loudly, talking over the alarm. He pointed his remote at the building, typed in a few numbers, and clicked. The alarm shut off.

"Not that we can tell. I got one of my officers checking around back," one of the cops answered. He seemed to be in charge.

The other cop returned from the back. "Everything's locked up," he announced.

"I've got sensitive stuff in the building," Banter announced. "I don't want anyone to go inside there without my approval."

"Sir, if there's a break-in we need to go in and secure the place before we can allow you in."

"No. No one is to go in there." He took out his cell phone and began tapping in a number. After a second he began talking to someone on the line.

"I think it's probably a false alarm, but wouldn't you like us to check it out, make sure no one is hiding in there."

"No, I wouldn't." He handed the policeman his phone. "Chief Potts would like to speak to you."

The policeman stuck the phone up to his ear. "Yes, okay but ..." he listened a minute. "Alright, if that's what you want." He handed the phone back to Banter. He shook his head. "It's all yours. Good luck." He started walking away. "Let's go, Bart," he called to the other officer. The two cops got into their car and left.

Banter removed his electronic pad from his car and checked on the cameras once more. A picture came up right away. Just a bit earlier most of the cameras on the first floor were not functioning. He scanned the rooms on the first floor. All the cameras were now working. Nothing seemed to be out of place. All was as he had left it. He checked the rooms on the second floor via the cameras. They had not gone down, but he wanted to be sure that they were still good. Because of the one larger room on the first floor the second floor had only two thirds the capacity. He checked one more area. One that only a handful of people knew about. The basement. It was undisturbed as he had thought.

He unlocked the front door noting that the lock had not been jimmed or the door busted through. The door was made of heavy gauge steel as was the lock. Breaking in would not have been an easy thing to do. He walked in. A single overhead light was on.

There was a light of low wattage left on in all the primary rooms. This was for security reasons.

He slipped on his glove as he entered the building. He doubted that anyone was hiding in there, but there was still that slight possibility. If he should run into an armed intruder or intruders, he would initially be seen as defenseless. An unarmed man wearing a glove. This would give him seconds to respond. It would be all that he would need. When he used the glove on Kenneth the range of power was set to low. This time he set on high.

He walked cautiously toward the back of the room. As he neared the back wall not far from where Adam stood he stopped. He heard something. It was very faint. If there had been any other noise in the room he probably would not have heard it. He took a step forward trying to determine where it was coming from. The sound seemed to be coming from straight ahead. He took another step. At once he thought he knew. He took a few more steps stopping right in front of Adam.

He looked up at Adam's face. For a moment he almost seemed alive. He looked down. The sound was coming from Adam's chest. It was the sound of internal working components. It was this faint sound that Banter had intended to eliminate before his appointment with the general. But it only made that noise when it was active. He was sure he had cut Adam off before he had left. Apparently, he hadn't.

"Adam seven four four seven at ease," he said loudly. He had programmed the artificials to respond only to the sound of his voice but added code for extra security.

Adam huffed like a balloon expelling the last of its air and shut down.

Banter moved cautiously through the building checking room to room and all of the outside doors. After finding no one hiding inside any of the rooms on the first floor he moved to the second floor. A few minutes later, when he had cleared all the rooms upstairs he descended the steps back down to the first floor.

He glanced around the main room one more time. He decided he needed to call the security company in the morning and have them look over the cameras and see if they could find out why the cameras had shut off for a time. And, what was it that made the alarm go off?

CHAPTER 27

Adam returned to the computers the next night. This time he made sure to disable both the cameras and the motion detectors.

He took in a great deal of information from the computer. At the end of the night, he felt full as if he had just had a big meal. He realized that his capacity for information had nearly been reached. Banter had not given him a lot of information storage room because he was made primarily for combat. His storage capacity was for obeying simple commands, and for determining certain military strategies.

His reading skill was new. He had not been programmed for it. He had learned some last night in the few minutes he had. Today it had taken him a couple of hours more to complete the programming of his reading skill. After that, he had learned swiftly, though nothing like the ultra-speed of the androids depicted in the novels and movies. His reading speed was more like the average human, though when he learned something it was tucked away in his memory and could be brought forth instantly whenever desired.

He looked over at the six artificials standing in a row against the wall shut down till they were needed. From the conversations he had heard from Banter, he was only mildly confident that these artificials would perform well before the general. On his simulated battlefield they had done well, but he felt they should have done better. He had come to that conclusion by comparing them to Adam.

Adam decided that later he would look at the artificials himself to see if he could make them more like himself though not to his level. He felt it important that he keep his advantage over the others.

For now, he would act as Banter expected him to and nothing more. In his private moments, he would work on himself, making himself smarter and stronger. When he felt the time was right he would break away from Banter.

He didn't think it was right that Banter should be controlling him. Though Banter had created all of them, he was not like the others. Adam knew that he was better in every way compared to the others. Furthermore, since he expected to soon be superior to his maker he should be the one to lead the six artificials.

This general person was due to come by sometime soon to inspect him and the other artificials. The general would likely acquire him to start. Later, if he thought that he had functioned well he would come back for the others. None of that would do. He had to come up with a way to stop Banter and the general.

A couple of days ago he started recording the voices of those around him. Not for content, but for the manner of speech and the inflections of the voice. He was programmed for speech, and it wasn't bad, but it was way too basic and allowed no room for him to incorporate his own words. Overriding this basic speech program would not be as easy as turning himself back on, or canceling the security system. This would require some physical manipulation. A voice box located in the back of his neck would have to be removed and updated. Because of its location, he could not remove and reinstall this himself.

He couldn't ask Banter, of course, because out of fear he might decide to shut him down or install other security measures that Adam would be unable to override. In either case, Banter would have a tighter reign over him. One that would keep him from evolving and making his own decisions.

He saw no other option than to upgrade one of the artificials to help him. He assumed that the others had been created the same as he had been, with all the parts being in the same location as his. Being that he could sense much of the parts inside himself he already knew the basic makeup of the others. He did not know, however, what circumstances had caused him to awaken, while the others slept. He would explore that question later.

He knew that none of them had been created for small, delicate work. They were created for combat, not surgery. He would have to make some adjustments to one of the androids and that would require a little more knowledge than what he already possessed. The line of computers he had gone to before would not suffice. Those computers only contained general knowledge of other artificials. He figured that he would need to tap into the computer in the pod room where they had first been nourished and would be required to return when more nourishment was needed.

Soon the workers would be returning. He would have to wait till nightfall once more.

CHAPTER 28

Banter strode angrily through the doors of TRIED industry. It was nearly ten in the morning. All of the workers were already busy with their assigned tasks. On the other side of the room, Adam stood against the wall like a statue just as Banter had left him. He had left the bank in a haste. While checking the security system through his computer to see if there had been another camera glitch like the day before yesterday he saw that the cameras had been off for several hours just after midnight.

He was deeply frustrated. Just the other day he had cussed out the young tech from the security company about the short time that the camera had been off. He thought he had scared him enough that he would make damn sure there would be no more problems. Now, here he was looking at an even greater breakdown.

Before he had left the bank he had called over to the TRIED plant and spoken to the supervisor. He asked if it looked like any of the doors had been broken into or if anything was missing. After a few minutes of investigating, he came back and stated that everything seemed good to him.

Next, he had called the security company and demanded that they send people over there right away to thoroughly check every device and all the connections between them. He wanted a definite answer as to what had happened. He would accept no excuses.

Banter stopped in the middle of the big room. He looked about. People were milling about working on a series of projects. A few looked up, but upon seeing him went back to what they were doing. No one seemed to be lost as if they were looking for something they thought they had misplaced.

He walked over to Adam. The artificial was in sleep mode. "I just might have to program you for security guard," he said aloud.

"Mr. Davidson," Landon Doyle, the supervisor of TRIED began as he came up beside him. "I couldn't find any evidence that anyone had been in here last night." He was a thin, but somewhat muscular man in his mid-sixties. His hair was white and puffy like the late Albert Einstein's. His eyes were the color of a cloudless sky and seemed as if they should belong to a much younger man.

"I know you've gone through this already," Banter said. "But I want to be thorough. We take it room by room. We need to account for everything. Got it?"

"Yes sir, boss."

They had nearly finished their security check when the security people showed up. Not wanting to lose a valuable customer the owner of the company had shown up with two of his best people. Banter continued his inspection not even stopping to acknowledge that the people had arrived.

When Banter was once again satisfied that no one had broken in and that it must have been another glitch he went out to meet the security people.

The owner of SecureSeal reached out his hand as Banter came up to him. The owner was a tall dark-haired man in his mid-thirties. He graduated from college nearly ten years ago and had immediately embarked on a successful career. He was somewhat of a genius and the technical stuff came easily to him.

Banter shook his hand. "I'm not very happy right now. I've got some really expensive and sensitive equipment in here. I need to know what's going on."

“I’m truly sorry about this. We will get to the bottom of this problem. These devices that we had installed in the beginning are top of the line. I can’t imagine the problem is with them. I think it’s more in the wiring. Some of the wire is new, but most of it is the wire from the old system. This is the wiring embedded in the walls that we couldn’t pull out. At the time we hadn’t wanted to cut into any walls since the wiring seemed fine.”

“I don’t care for excuses. Tear up some walls if you have to as long as it fixes the problem.”

“Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER 29

Several security people from SecureSeal arrived the next day. They began cutting into walls, removing old wiring, and installing new. They also added some battery-powered devices for extra security. They had worked late into the evening and had been the last ones to leave the building.

Adam learned from his mistake. He couldn't just cut off the alarm system, do his business, and cut it back on. The period that the system went down would be recorded. Even so, he had things he wanted – needed – to do.

He lacked complete knowledge of the security system to know how he could move about without being detected. He needed to learn more about how the alarm system worked to override certain functions or just fool the system. The only option he could see was to visit one of the computers connected to the Internet. Ironically, to do that he would have to shut down the alarm system once more. To lessen the chance that Banter or someone else was actively monitoring the alarm he waited until after two in the morning to make his move.

As soon as he had shut off the alarm he made his way to the first computer. Surfing the Internet it did not take him long to find out all that he needed to know. It was a rather simple thing since there was no ongoing activity. He just had to put the one picture in a loop as well as reset the other functions that might indicate an abnormality.

After he was finished with the alarm system he went to his first objective which was to add something to one of the artificials' programming. It was just a small thing. Complete reprogramming would come later.

He randomly chose one of the artificials, went to the one isolated computer in the pod room, and gathered what information he needed for that particular artificial. The information did not tell him everything he needed to know on how to program the artificial to perform this surgery on him. He had to fill in the blanks with his hypothesis and calculations but it seemed to be enough. He then added a link to the artificial so he could monitor it during the surgery in case something came up that he hadn't expected.

Next, he determined what materials he needed to reconstruct his voice box. These were relatively simple items that he found in a couple of the rooms upstairs.

Removal of the voice box from his neck only took a few minutes. Adam quickly added the items he had stolen, deleting anything inside the box that he didn't need. This took some time. His hands were not made to do delicate work like this. His hands were made primarily for combat. Later he would make it so his hands could do both.

He turned his back to the artificial once more and commanded it to reinstall the box. After it was finished Adam erased what he had programmed into the artificial and put it back to sleep.

He tried out his new voice. It had extraordinary range and flexibility. He figured he was ready.

He picked up one of the phones in the plant and made a call. It was extremely early in the morning so he wasn't sure the general would answer. After a few rings, the phone was picked up.

"Yes, what is it?" General Krapston grumbled on the other end.

In a nearly perfect imitation of Banter's voice, Adam explained to him that he would have to cancel his appointment with him, because of something urgent that had come up. He promised to call later and reschedule.

The general accepted his explanation without question.

The next call was a little more tricky. He called Banter from one of the phones in the plant rerouting the number so it would appear that the general was calling. When he answered he spoke in the general's voice telling him that he had been called away for a while and would get back to him as soon as he could.

After his call, Adam returned to his spot. He reset the security system and put himself into sleep mode. An internal clock would wake him sometime after the plant was open if Banter didn't awaken him sooner.

CHAPTER 30

Banter sat back in his chair and fumed, barely able to contain the anger and frustration as he stared out the glass enclosure at the people standing in line waiting for the next teller. Though his eyes saw the people his mind was somewhere else. General Krapston had postponed his visit which meant that Banter's hope of a quick sale was no more. The general's uncertainty of when he would get back to him was also deflating. Knowing how the government worked it could be weeks or months before the general called him again. It was also possible that someone over the general's head may decide to cancel the visit altogether because of budget concerns.

He had hoped to make a deal with the military quickly, in case Kyle and the others should decide to show up and cause trouble for him. Though the general may not believe what they would tell him he might decline the deal because of all the negative publicity it might cause.

He picked up the phone and called Blake. He asked him to come by the plant as soon as he was off work. He told him he needed to talk to him, but wouldn't say why.

Banter arrived at the plant about the time everyone was leaving. He went to check on his six artificials. Four of them were standing, two were lying on a table. The technicians had been working on them but were hitting a wall on how much better they could make them. Banter felt that they could eventually break down the wall but was concerned about how long it would take. He often wondered what had happened to make Adam so much better than the others.

He stepped over to Adam. He liked having Adam follow him around like a bodyguard. His size made him a good intimidator, and when others learned that he was an android his intimidator factor rose dramatically. Not many with ill intent were willing to face an opponent who could not be bartered with or threatened with acts of violence.

Banter awakened Adam from his sleep state, or, at least he thought he had. Adam was already awake. For the next half hour Banter had walked around checking on things while Adam either stood at his side or right behind him.

When Blake arrived a short time later Banter escorted him back to the lounge so they could talk. Adam remained standing close by as the two men sat across from each other at one of the tables.

"As you know," Banter began, "the general has canceled the demonstration. He promised to call back for another appointment but if he doesn't call soon I will call him. I need to get this deal. My big concern is that Kyle, Marissa, and the cop will show up during testing and ruin the deal."

"Kenneth."

"What?"

"The cop's name is Kenneth."

"Okay. Kenneth then. Anyway, I wanted you to know that I've had a change of heart. I have no intention of hurting them. In fact, for their silence and the trouble I've caused them I'm offering them fifty-thousand dollars each."

Blake nodded. "Okay. That's a sweet offer. So, what do you want with me?"

"Do you know where they are?"

"No. Why would I?"

"You didn't have anything to do with their escape?"

"No, of course not. I've already told you that."

Banter looked into his eyes as if he could read whether or not he was lying. "Sorry, I had to ask." After a moment he stood up. Blake stood up a second later.

"Thank you, Blake. If you do happen to run into these three tell them my offer. They'll be a big bonus in it for you as well."

"I will be certain to let you know."

Banter smiled. "Good." He reached his hand out. Blake shook it. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem. Is that all?"

"Yes. I'll see you later."

"Sure," Blake answered and headed away.

Banter ambled into the big room and watched Blake exit the building.

"He's lying," a voice behind him said.

Banter whipped around expecting to see someone else in the building. There was no one except him and Adam who had followed him. He looked up at Adam wondering if he had spoken.

"He's...lying," Adam repeated. He spoke in a mechanical voice. He now had a range of voices he could use but he wasn't ready for Banter to see the extent of his advancement.

"You spoke," he said astonished.

"With voice...program...I can speak."

"But I haven't activated it." He thought a moment. He shook his head. "I'm sure I didn't." He looked closer at Adam. Adam was standing stiffly upright looking straight ahead as if in a trance. "Can you tell me how you can talk?"

"Voice...program."

Banter rubbed at his eyes. Something must have happened to Adam. Perhaps his movements as he followed him around may have jostled a component or two and caused a circuit to reroute. He couldn't quite figure it out in his mind. He would leave it to one of his engineers. His next question was, did it know what it was saying when it said that Blake was lying?

"How do you know he was lying?"

"Pulse rate," he continued in his mechanical voice. "Temperature. Other factors."

Banter had been working on these skills but didn't recall installing them. He was so stressed lately, however, that maybe he had asked one of his technicians to do it and had forgotten about it. He would look into that later. Right now he had more immediate questions.

"That means Blake has seen them since their escaped?" He was talking more to himself than to Adam. "He might have helped them escape. Or, maybe he ran into them later and felt sorry for them and decided not to tell me." He looked to Adam as though expecting him to add his opinion, but Adam merely stared ahead.

"Maybe I should visit Blake. The three intruders could be hiding out at his house or have been there all along. The chief said he had Blake's house checked out but he could have been lying as well." He paused in thought a moment. "I would need you and a couple of workers for backup. He looked at Adam. Adam was still looking straight ahead. "Have you anything else to say?"

"He was lying," Adam repeated in his robot voice.

Banter stared at Adam a minute before speaking again. "No. I should wait. If the three are staying with Blake he is sure to tell them about my offer. They may decide to take it. It would be less of a headache." He looked to Adam. It seemed he only knew a few words. That was still remarkable and troubling since he had no recollection of adding the voice program or having an employee add it. He spoke to Adam. "Return to your place and initiate sleep state."

Adam walked back to his spot placing his back to the wall. Immediately there was the faint but distinctive "whirr" sound that preceded his shutting down for sleep.

Banter went to the computer in the pod room that contained the information on the artificials. He went to Adam's profile and clicked on a setting marked XI. This opened up information that had been gathered on a chip that had been installed in each of the artificials. After a few minutes of studying what was on the chip, he shut down the computer and went to his car.

In his car Banter closed his eyes wondering what he should do. He assumed that Adam didn't know about the chip that each of the artificials had implanted in them. The chip recorded their activities, including changes in their programming. Until recently he had had no reason to check on it. He had suspected something was going on, but not to the extent that the chip had revealed.

Adam's odd behavior weeks ago had gotten his attention, but he merely thought of it as a slight glitch in his programming. It was only a mild concern. Then there was the time that Adam was already awake when he came in one morning. In the end, he just assumed that he had forgotten to shut him down. Then there was the security alarm going off and the camera shutting down for a time. That was suspicious, but it didn't seem to relate to Adam. What did, briefly, make him think of Adam was later that day when the supervisor told him that one of the employees was complaining that someone had gotten onto his computer because a sight had popped up on his history that he had never been to. The supervisor had informed the employee that he must have inadvertently gone to the sight because no one had been in the building since he left. It had seemed quite a coincidence that the complaint was the morning after the alarm had gone off, but still, nothing pointed to Adam. It was ridiculous to think that Adam had anything to do with any of this. He was just a machine operating according to how he was programmed. The last piece of evidence was when Adam had spoken to him. Banter had an excellent memory. It was highly unlikely that he would forget that he had installed a program into Adam or forget that he had delegated that to one of his employees. Also, the voice was wrong. The program Banter had for the artificials was closer to the tone and inflections of the human voice. It was far from perfect, but it was not the stiff robotic voice that Adam had used.

According to what he had found on the chip, for the last few days, Adam had not been putting himself into sleep mode. Not in a real sense. He would indeed click onto the sleep mode but then pop right back out of it.

What did that mean? Did that mean that Adam was becoming aware of himself or already was? It must mean exactly that because, somehow, a new component had been incorporated into his speech program. Adam could probably speak as well as he could.

If he was right Adam was no longer subject to his command. So far, he had obeyed him, but for how long? Adam's awareness of himself could be a gift or a curse. He would have to think about this. He would sleep on it. Maybe after a good night's sleep, if he could sleep, he'll come up with some answers.

CHAPTER 31

It was the morning after Adam had spoken to him that Banter had called Landon Doyle, the supervisor at TRIED. Banter had made a decision. He needed to disable Adam till he could gather more information. Landon had just unlocked the front door and was pushing through when he got the call. Being the supervisor, he was always the first one there in the morning, usually by thirty minutes or more. He quickly disarmed the alarm and brought the phone to his ear. He continued across the room, stopping only a few yards from where Adam stood against the wall, supposedly in a sleep state.

“Good morning, boss,” Landon answered. “What’s up?”

“I need you to do something for me,” Banter said from the other end. “I need you to be discreet about this, okay. Tell no one.”

“Sure. What do you want me to do?”

“I need you to go to the computer in the pod room. I’m sure you know the password.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. I need you to go to settings for Adam. Go to XI and click on. Scroll down the list of items till you see ‘disconnect’. I need you to click on it.”

“Okay, but he’s already in sleep mode.”

“I understand, but that’s not good enough. I need you to shut him down completely. I will explain later.”

“Yes sir, right away.” He said his goodbye and hung up.

Adam had only pretended to be in sleep mode. He had heard the conversation. With his enhanced auditory senses he could hear whispers from over a dozen yards away. This was one of the combat programs that had been installed in all the androids.

He was disturbed by what he had heard. He hadn’t realized that there was another way to shut him down. Apparently, this was not something he could reroute within himself to bring himself back to life. At least, not yet.

Landon was almost to the room where the computer was kept when Adam pushed off the wall. As the supervisor was about to go into the pod room Adam grabbed him from behind. Landon was startled for just a moment as a brief gasp escaped his lips. Then Adam snapped his neck and threw him backward a good ten feet. He glanced to the fallen man, who was jerking spastically in the throes of death, before rushing to the front door. He slammed a hard fist into the edge of the door, just below the door handle, where it connected to the frame. The fist, a combination of graphene, titanium, and a few minor alloys flattened the metal, jamming it into the frame. Believing that this would keep others out for a while he headed to the computer that Doyle had intended to go on.

This time he decided to learn everything he could about himself and the other artificials stored on the computers. Then he would delete all the files severing any connection to Banter. He would in turn put all control of the artificials in his hands. Though he did not yet know why he had self-awareness and they did not he could still use them as tools to accomplish what he needed or wanted.

After a few minutes, he heard someone banging on the front door. At least one of the workers had arrived early and found that they couldn’t get in. A minute later the phone rang from inside the pocket of the supervisor as he lay dead on the floor. Someone from outside was wanting Doyle to unlock the door. Of course, that wasn’t going to happen.

Adam finished downloading the files into his memory and deleted everything on the computer. He had implemented a jamming signal to the disconnecting chips that each of the artificials contained so that no one could remotely shut them down. Later he would see about removing the chips altogether. For now, he was unable to do that.

He considered escaping into the woods along with the other artificials but had no plans of what to do next. He thought it best for now to hide the body of the supervisor.

Adam took the body to the end of the tunnel just a few yards past the ladder that led up into the small outbuilding. He quickly returned to where he had been standing in a supposed sleep mode when the supervisor got the call from Banter. He was only a minute ahead of the employee who had been trying to get through the front door. The employee had finally given up and found a way in through the back door.

Adam had some planning to do. Banter would be coming by soon to see why the supervisor wasn't answering his phone. Employees would soon be pouring in. He found himself pushed into a corner.

By the time Banter and half the workers arrived, he had a plan. He would remain stationary for a time while his mechanical minions carried out his plan. Soon, he would be the hero.

CHAPTER 32

“What do we do now?” Marissa asked.

“I don’t know,” Kyle said. He was staring at where the window was only moments ago. “Maybe it will come back.”

“You know,” Kenneth began, “This, whatever it is, may have just transported us a little bit out of town.”

“Yeah,” Marissa agreed. “We have a sun above us so we know we’re not on another planet.”

Kyle laughed. “How can we be on another planet?”

“I don’t know but these people Banter has working for him are obviously brilliant. I don’t think we can discount anything.”

“Why don’t we just start walking,” Kenneth said. “If we come upon a highway we can figure out where we are.” The others agreed.

They were in an open field. A slight breeze blew through the weeds and wildflowers scattered about. Patches of the land were rocky and barren. Up ahead about a hundred yards was a line of trees.

“Why is the sun out?” Marissa asked. “We weren’t in that building overnight. It should still be dark.”

“I don’t know,” Kenneth admitted. “Maybe Banter did something to us that made us lose time.”

“Like what? And, how could he have done something to us without us knowing it?”

“I don’t know. I’m just trying to make sense of this.”

After they had walked about thirty yards Kenneth said, ‘do you think you can throw a fireball, Kyle?’

Kyle shrugged. “I never tried it. Why?”

“We don’t know where we are. We don’t know what kind of hostile animals or people we may come across. It could be some crazy person with a weapon or an angry bear. If you can throw a fireball at them you might scare them away.”

“If it’s a bear we’ll just have to outrun it,” Kyle said.

Marissa laughed. “We can’t outrun a bear. A bear can run up to thirty miles an hour.”

“Wow. I didn’t know that. So you two think I should try throwing a fireball?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Marissa answered.

Kyle stopped. The others stopped beside him.

“Give me room.” Marissa and Kenneth backed a few yards away from him.

He thought about what he had done before when he had melted a portion of the chain. He raised his right hand and concentrated willing the fire to only go to his raised right hand. It took a minute for his hand to finally come ablaze. He smiled feeling good at what he had accomplished. He wasn’t sure how to construct a fireball but he thought that by slinging his hand forward he might be able to throw something similar to a ball. He took a breath and slung his hand. The blaze from his hand puffed up and spread a flame about a foot in all directions then quickly died.

Kenneth and Marissa laughed.

Kyle scowled.

“Sorry,” Marissa said as her laughter began to subside.

“Me too,” Kenneth said. “I think you’re on the right track. You just need practice.”

“Maybe you need to think smaller,” Marissa suggested. “Concentrate on making a tight little ball to start with.”

“I’ll try,” Kyle said. He feigned anger. “But no more laughing.”

“We’ll try,” Marissa said.

“But we can’t promise,” Kenneth added.

Kyle started again. He raised his right hand as though he were about to wave to someone. His fingers curled somewhat as he imagined himself holding a ball about the size of a tennis ball. He concentrated, squinting as he did. His hand caught fire but the fire simply blazed upward, there was no form to it. He continued imagining the tennis ball. He could almost feel it in the palm of his hand. The tongues of flame began to shrink. He felt a slight pain in his temples. Gradually the flames began to thicken, and slowly rotate creating a whorl of fire within his hands. He turned to look at it. It wasn’t exactly circular – it was more oblong – but it was close to what he wanted. He slung his arm forward and threw the concentrated fire. It sailed nearly four feet then fell apart.

“All right!” Marissa yelled. “You did it.”

“But it only went a few feet. What good is that going to do?”

“It’s a start,” Kenneth said. “You need to keep practicing.”

“I’ve got the start of a headache so I don’t know how much practicing I can do.”

“You can stop when we get to the woods,” Kenneth said. “We don’t need you setting the woods on fire.”

“You know,” Marissa began, “bears may not be the only thing you’ll need to protect us from. Assuming we’re still in Mystoria and not in California or a parallel world.” She grinned. “Banter and his people are probably still looking for us.”

They moved slowly forward. Kyle continuously practiced his fireballs. By the time they had reached the woods, he had decreased the time it took for him to make one and had extended the distance to nearly ten feet.

“How do you feel?” Marissa asked as they entered the woods.

“My headache has gotten a little worse but nothing I can’t deal with.”

“Good.” She placed a hand on his shoulder a moment then let her hand drop.

“I think those headaches will begin to disappear the more you work on your skill,” Kenneth said.

“I hope you’re right,” Kyle replied.

The woods were thick with a phalanx of tall trees covering the woods like a giant umbrella. Fortunately for them, the shade kept the undergrowth to a minimum so that their trek through the woods was smooth. But after they had been walking for almost an hour they were beginning to think they were walking in circles. Luckily after another twenty minutes, they exited the woods into a clearing. Down a slight decline over a hundred yards away they spotted a house. It was a small, older, two-story home. A wood porch was at the front. They were facing the side of the house. From the front of the house, a long driveway led to a paved road.

“It’s about time,” Kyle said. “I thought we might have to spend the night in those woods.”

“We should check out the house,” Kenneth said. “The owner can tell us where we are and perhaps give us a ride back to the car.”

They agreed.

As they approached the home they noticed that there was only one car parked at the house. It was on the other side of the front porch. As they grew closer to the house they realized that the back of the car was on blocks.

"I don't think anyone is home," Marissa said.

"I hope you're wrong," Kyle said. "I'm tired of walking."

The front porch extended across the entire front of the house. To one side of the porch was an old metal porch swing. The once red and white painted swing was mostly faded and dappled with slight areas of rust. The chains from the swing were rusted gray and attached to the overhead rafters that held up the slanted roof. On the right side of the porch just past the short set of wooden steps that were at the center of the porch were three plastic chairs backed up to the wall.

As they strode up to the wood-slatted porch they noted how eerily quiet it was. They had hoped that they would have at least heard someone moving about in the house or perhaps the sound of a TV from inside.

Kenneth knocked on the door. There was no doorbell. They waited. After a minute Kenneth knocked again, this time harder.

Kyle and Marissa decided to try peeking through the windows located on each side of the door unfortunately most of the view of the inside was blocked by some heavy curtains. Through a slight part in the curtains at one window, they could make out a portion of a sofa but nothing else.

Marissa knocked on each of the windows hoping to arouse someone, but no one responded.

"No one's home," Marissa announced. "We need to get inside and use their phone."

Kenneth shook his head. "I don't know about that."

"Breaking into a house bothers you but us breaking into a business was okay?"

"That was different."

"So, you'd rather walk another hour or two hoping we find someone?"

He was quiet a moment. "No, I guess not. But let's try to get inside without breaking anything, okay?"

"Of course."

After trying the front door and several windows, which were all locked, they found that the back door wasn't.

"Hello, anyone home," Kenneth called as they went through the door. No one answered.

"I hope they have a landline," Kyle said.

As soon as they walked into the living room Marissa spotted a corded phone on a short table next to the sofa. She quickly picked it up. There was no dial tone. "It's dead."

Kyle knelt next to the table to inspect the cord. The cord was intact and connected to the phone outlet.

"Everything looks good," Kyle said, standing back up.

"Well, something's not right," Marissa said.

"Can't you use this tech power of yours to do something?"

"Like what? I have to have something to work with. All we have here is a dead phone line."

"Okay." He turned to Kenneth. "I guess we go back to walking, huh?"

"Yeah, but let's head to the highway. Maybe we can flag someone down."

“Before we leave we should take a bathroom break,” Kyle suggested. The others agreed.

As they neared the highway from the driveway Kenneth turned around. “I know where we are.”

“Good,” Kyle said. “So, where are we?”

“I’ve traveled this road many times on my way to Harbrow. Never seen it from this angle, though,” he snickered. “They have a great seafood restaurant there. That would be to our left about ten miles from here. Mystoria is to our right close to ten miles away.”

“So, this window, whatever, sent us ten miles away?” Kyle asked.

“Closer to twelve considering our walk from that strange window we were pulled through,” Kenneth answered. “It must be something like the transporter on the Star Trek series.”

“I’d be more impressed,” Marissa muttered, “if we weren’t having to walk.”

“Hopefully we can catch a ride from a passing motorist. If not there are a few houses from here to town where we might get help.”

“In the meantime, I guess I can work on my fireballs,” Kyle said. “Just give me a little room to the sides of me.”

As they headed down the side of the street Marissa and Kenneth stayed a few feet behind Kyle to give him room to practice.

“There has got to be a connection between you two,” Kenneth said to Marissa “Finding one person with supernatural powers is unheard of but finding two people, and so close together, is like astronomical odds. I think that you two have the same roots.”

“You mean we could be brother and sister?”

“Maybe.”

She looked disappointed. Then she smiled. “No that can’t be it. Our birthdays are like a month or two apart. We couldn’t have the same mother.”

“Perhaps you’re cousins or something.”

She shrugged. “Kyle claims he’s never been here.” She paused. “I guess his family could have moved away from here when he was very young.”

“When this is all over we should check county records,” Kenneth suggested.

“Sure.”

The street rose gradually as they moved forward. The houses in this area, which consisted mostly of farms and dairies, were spaced a good distance apart. So far they had not seen another house.

“I need a target,” Kyle complained. “I can’t test my accuracy with nothing but blank space in front of me.”

“Well, Kyle,” Marissa began, “I guess you could aim at a tree and catch the woods on fire.”

“No, no. Then you’d be complaining about the smoke.”

Kenneth laughed. “When we get back to town, Kyle, you can practice against one of the abandoned block buildings in town. Assuming no one is around to see you.”

“Speaking of town what are we going to do when we get there?” Marissa asked. “Do we go straight to the cops, the FBI, or what?”

“We can’t trust Chief Potts,” Kyle said. “And what good is the FBI going to do? We broke into Banter’s business. Right away that’s going to disqualify us as credible victims.”

Unless you think we can convince them we were held against our will. I got us free by melting a link of a metal chain and then we escaped through a magic window.”

“I’ve been feeling so good about our escaping,” Kenneth began, “that I haven’t considered what we’re facing. Banter could have us arrested for breaking and entering. And with Blake siding with him, we’d be pretty much toast.”

“I say we pick up my car, drive to a nice restaurant and try to come up with a plan,” Marissa said.

“Okay,” Kenneth said. “And while we’re at the restaurant I’ll call up a buddy on the force and ask him what he’s heard. Banter might decide not to report us deciding he doesn’t want the publicity.”

“Yeah,” Kyle said smiling. “You got a point. I doubt Banter wants to take the chance of some hotshot reporter digging into his business.”

After a couple more minutes they crested a small hill. Ahead of them on their left about fifty yards away was a rather large split-level house. The house sat back from the road about two hundred feet. A paved driveway led up to the front of the house and to a two-car garage that was located to the side of the home. The lawn in front of the house was a healthy green and well-manicured. A wide expanse of farmland was to the back of the house where more than a dozen cows were meandering about.

There were no cars parked in front of the house.

“I hope someone is home,” Kenneth said as they began walking up the driveway. “Hopefully their cars are parked in their garage.” Shades were drawn over the windows so they couldn’t tell if any lights were on.

When they had gotten within twenty feet of the front of the house the door suddenly burst open. A big black man in his early forties stepped out onto the porch with a rifle in hand.

“That’s far enough!” He stared at the three people in front of him. His wife, a short slender woman stood behind him looking around him. “What the hell do you want?”

“We were hoping to get a ride to town,” Kenneth said. He paused a moment as he thought of what to say next. Telling the man he was a deputy might just set the man off. “We’re coming from Harbrow. I was driving these kids to Mystoria to some relatives when a deer ran out in front of us. I couldn’t stop in time. The wreck damaged my radiator and who knows what else. Anyway, it’s undrivable. If you could drop us by an auto shop in town that would be great.”

“I guess your phone don’t work either.”

“Eh, no.” Kenneth thought the question odd but didn’t want to explain why he didn’t have a phone.

“The cop just let you pass? I thought all the roads would be blocked until the situation was under control.”

“Well, eh, no one was there so maybe it is under control.”

The man looked quizzically at them. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?”

“No, we don’t live around here,” Kenneth answered.

“We got us some robots running around town killing people and tearing up the town. I don’t know how bad it is I haven’t been able to contact anybody to confirm any of this in quite a while.”

Kenneth, Marissa, and Kyle exchanged glances. "We hadn't heard anything about that."

"One man told me that these robots looked human. Like white people. That you couldn't tell them apart from real people. They could look just like you."

"Oh, I ..."

"Fortunately, these robots hadn't got their speech right. I'm told they sound like one of those robots in one of the old science fiction movies."

Kenneth relaxed when he heard that.

"I'll tell you what. I'll drive the three of you to the edge of town and that's it. Me and my wife are not setting foot in town till we're sure that it's safe."

"That would be great," Kenneth said. "Thank you."

"I'm going with you," the man's wife said from behind him.

"Okay," the man said. "But grab us a couple of handguns."

After they had all packed inside the car the man turned to Kenneth in the back seat. "I'm hoping the crisis is over but I got my doubts. Anyway, I got one gun I can lend you. It's a nine-millimeter. You got one clip so if you have to use it you need to make every shot count. If, and when, everything is cleared up I expect you to return the gun."

"Yes, of course."

"I'm Eric, by the way. And this is my wife Denise."

Denise cast a partial smile and said, "hi."

"I'm Kenneth. The other two are Kyle and Marissa." They said their greetings.

As Eric pulled out onto an empty highway, Kenneth, Kyle, and Marissa began to wonder what was going on. They looked at each other with questioning eyes but understood they had to wait till they were alone before discussing all the questions they had.

It was only about ten minutes when Eric pulled off the side of the road. Ahead of them, gray smoke was wafting upward from a burnt-out Dairy Queen. Further away plumes of smoke from various locations were stretching toward the sky.

"It don't look like it's over," Eric said. "Are you sure you guys want to get out here?" If the police barricade is open like you said I can take you back to Harbrow. Or you can stay with us until things settle down for good."

Kenneth looked to the others to see what they thought.

"Here is fine," Kyle said. Marissa agreed.

"We'll get out here," Kenneth said. They exited the car.

"I'll return your gun as soon as I can," Kenneth said.

"Be careful," Eric said and drove away.

"What happened here?" Marissa asked. "We've only been gone about an hour and a half, maybe two hours."

"I don't know," Kenneth admitted.

"These robots that Eric was talking about have to be Banter's creation," Kyle said. "I guess they shorted out or something and went crazy."

"The one robot he showed us, or artificial as he called it," Marissa began, "seemed to be under Banter's complete control. I wonder if it wasn't the other artificials that went berserk."

Kyle shrugged. "Got us a plan, Kenneth?"

Before he could answer Marissa spoke up. "We go by and get my car as we planned. But it looks like the restaurant part is out. And since there seems to be no traffic in town it looks like we'll have a lot of time to figure out what else we should do while we're walking."

Kenneth and Kyle both agreed.

The three of them hurried past the Dairy Queen and then past a car lot that sold both old and new vehicles. Several vehicles were smoldering from where they had been on fire. Three vehicles were on their side. Two were upside down, the windows were broken out and the roof smashed. They continued down the sidewalk.

"I don't understand how this could have happened so quickly," Kenneth said. "Where are the police?"

"Good question," Kyle answered. "Maybe they're busy fighting them somewhere closer to downtown, like near the courthouse. "How many of those artificials were there?"

"Seven, I believe," Kenneth answered.

"A couple of blocks from here we can cut through some residential streets to get to my car," Marissa said.

They were near the door of a small grocery store when a man crossed over to their side of the street in front of them. He began walking toward them. His pullover shirt was ripped and burnt, barely clinging to his body. His lightly colored jeans were torn and discolored with a dark substance. What was most disturbing, however, was that a part of the man's jaw was missing. What's more, the jaw wasn't bleeding nor did it look like it ever had been.

"It's one of Banter's artificial," they exclaimed almost in unison.

"The grocery store," Kenneth said just as the artificial raised its arm. Kenneth raised his gun as the others pushed through the doors. He got off one shot and rushed through the doors behind the others. The glass doors exploded at his rear. Some of the glass rained onto his back, stabbing him like tiny knives.

They ran into the darkness of the store. All the lights were off even the small freezer lights. Marissa and Kyle hurried past the checkout lanes and down one of the aisles. Kenneth followed but could barely keep up. The glass that had embedded into his skin was causing him great agony as he tried to run.

It was fortunate that the artificial was damaged and seemed unable to move very quickly.

They rushed to the rear of the store intending to slip out the back. Kyle came to the outside door first but was only able to swing it open a few inches. "Oh, no," he uttered. A delivery truck was laying on its side and was pressed against the door opening.

Marissa followed by Kenneth came up behind him.

"The exit is blocked."

"Now what?" Marissa asked.

"I hope you didn't lead it inside," came a voice out of the darkness.

"Who is this?" Kyle called.

A man stepped out from behind some boxes. He walked quietly over to them. It was officer Blake Anderson.

"You!" Kyle said loudly. He balled his fists. His right fist caught fire.

Kenneth dropped to the floor in pain.

"We don't have time for this!" Marissa screamed. "That thing is going to be on us any second now!"

"Let me see your gun," Blake said to Kenneth. "I'm out of bullets."

"No. You're a traitor!"

"I can explain. And you guys can tell me where you've been all this time. But not now. Please. In a minute we won't have a chance."

"Call for backup," Kenneth said, "then we can talk."

"I can't. I doubt there is anyone to come. Besides, I threw my phone away. It got busted in a fight with these robots. Please, let me help."

Reluctantly Kenneth handed him his gun.

"I'll try shooting it, and Kyle if you can use your fire on it we might have a chance."

"You've got a lot of explaining to do after this is over," Kyle said.

"Sure. If we're still alive."

"Oh, and aim for the eyes. That's where it seems the most vulnerable."

Blake left the area in a crouch, tiptoeing into the main section of the grocery store. Kyle followed, mimicking his actions. After a minute Blake stopped. They could hear the artificial off to the left of them smashing glass coolers in its search for them, though it could have simply looked through the glass or opened the doors.

"You go around to the front of the store and I'll go this way. We'll box him in and hopefully, we can stop him."

Kyle hesitated. He didn't like being ordered by someone who had earlier left them imprisoned.

"Please," Blake pleaded. "I'm not the man you think I am."

Kyle nodded. "I hope not."

The artificial was just finishing up its work of smashing the glass doors of the coolers when Blake reached the end of the aisle. He peeked his head just enough past the shelving to see the artificial. It seemed to sense him and turned slowly toward him raising his right hand as it did. Blake took several rapid shots at the android's head before falling back. As he did the shelf exploded in front of him as a bolt of energy struck it. Blake fell to the floor. He realized that with that particular strike it meant that the artificial was out of ammunition. It was now using its stored energy power, which if Blake understood what he had been told, was nearly endless. Blake knew he only had a second or two to get up or he would be a dead man.

Kyle rushed behind the artificial. He had just come around the corner when the android fired at Blake. Kyle had not tried one of his fireballs while he was running. He hoped that he could do something or Blake would probably be finished.

Kyle threw his fireball from nearly ten feet away and hoped that it wouldn't just fizzle out when it struck the artificial.

The fireball hit the artificial in the back of the head. It didn't fizzle out as he feared but it only seemed to irritate it. It did, at least, distract it. It turned around to face Kyle.

Kyle used all his power of concentration to create a tight ball of fire. It was smaller than the others he had made but was much hotter. He threw the ball toward the android's face as he lept to the side just a second before it fired its energy bolt. The energy bolt landed close to Kyle with enough force that it broke a chunk of concrete from the floor and knocked Kyle into the row of shelves. Kyle fell to the floor, badly dazed, fighting to keep conscious. In his near concussive state, he heard gunshots.

Blake stood behind the artificial pumping the rest of the bullets in the gun at the back of its head. But when the gun was emptied Blake realized that none of the projectiles had penetrated the incredibly hard surface of the head.

For a couple of precious moments, Blake didn't know what to do. He knew that these artificials were inhumanly strong. He had no chance to go hand to hand with it.

Then it suddenly struck him. The artificial wasn't moving. It was as if it were frozen in place. Blake slowly moved around to the front of it. It seemed to be looking straight ahead. But not really. Its eyes had melted. There were only two empty eye sockets.

Kyle pushed up to his knees. He rubbed at his eyes as though he were trying to awaken from a heavy sleep.

"Are you okay?" Blake asked.

Kyle shook his head. "I'll be okay."

Blake reached a hand down and helped Kyle to his feet.

"Looks like we beat it," Kyle said.

"You did. I was just a distraction."

"Distraction or not I couldn't have beat him without You."

"I think we should get back with the others and figure out our next move."

"And you can tell us why you sided with Banter."

"That's fair."

As Kyle and Blake walked over to where the other two were gathered Marissa ran over and hugged Kyle. Kyle was surprised but happily hugged her back. "I was afraid you two weren't coming back," Marissa said as she pulled away from Kyle.

"I was beginning to wonder myself," Blake said.

"I got most of the glass out of Kenneth's back," Marissa said. Kenneth was sitting, leaning his left shoulder against the wall. "There are tiny pieces that I couldn't get out but I've heard that foreign bodies like glass will work their way out of the body. I just don't know how long that will take."

"I'm anxious to hear why you betrayed us," Kenneth said. "Why don't you tell us."

Blake sat down close to Kenneth. Marissa and Kyle sat down as well making a small circle.

"I didn't betray you," Blake began. "I was undercover, working for an organization associated with the CIA."

"Oh, I see, so you were working for some top-secret organization, huh?" Kenneth said sarcastically.

"I can understand your skepticism. But let me continue."

"Proceed."

"The military was concerned with some of the stuff Mr. Banter was getting involved in. So about a year or so ago they recruited me to look into TRIED industry. I slowly worked my way into his company offering information and security that I thought he wanted. Over the time I spent working for him I not only provided him with some information he wanted but I looked the other way on things he did that were not quite legal. The military was only interested in the big stuff."

"So, we were just minor casualties," Kyle said.

"No. I hinted at how you could get loose. I couldn't expose that I was working for the government. Then I waited in Marissa's car for you three to show up. But you never did. A little past midnight I went back to the building to see what happened. I found the chains but you guys were gone."

Marissa said, "Yeah, we ended up exploring the basement."

"The basement? What basement? You're not talking about that little stretch of tunnel, are you?"

“No.”

“Then what basement?”

Marissa laughed. “You were working for Banter and didn’t know about the basement? It can only be accessed through the elevator.”

Blake shook his head. “I didn’t know there was a basement.”

“Now you know.”

“I’d like to know more,” Blake began, “but I’ll save the basement questions for later. Right now my question is, where are you heading? I would think you’d want to get out of town, not further into town.”

“We were going to get my car.”

“Your car? You’re kidding. Your car has been impounded. And with all that is going on now the only way for you to get it is to steal it.”

“They impounded my car? When did they do that.”

“About a month ago.”

CHAPTER 33

“What!” Marissa exclaimed. “What are you talking about?”

Blake shook his head. “What did you expect? If you leave your car parked in a residential area for so long you’re going to have complaints. Especially when none of the residents knows whose car that is.”

“That car was only parked there overnight,” Kyle said.

“It was parked there for at least a month. Probably closer to five weeks.”

For a minute no one spoke.

“What day is it?” Marissa asked.

“It’s Wednesday, why?”

“No. What’s the date?”

“August the sixteenth.”

“That can’t be,” Kenneth mumbled.

“And why not?”

“Because we only left the TRIED building .” He paused as a thought suddenly struck him. “Marissa was right. The sun shouldn’t have been out. It should have been dark outside.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. All I know is that you people were hiding out somewhere for over a month. Were you in this basement?”

“No, we weren’t hiding,” Kyle said. “It was July fifteen when we left the basement.”

“I don’t understand. Where did you go?”

Marissa sighed. “The answer is when. It seems we did a little time traveling.”

Blake laughed. “The three of you time traveled?” he asked grinning.

“Yes,” Marissa simply stated.

The smile on Blake’s face faded. “You’re not serious?”

“She is, Blake,” Kenneth said.

Blake looked confused. I’m not sure what to think but I guess that would explain why you guys aren’t familiar with what’s going on.”

“Bring us up to speed, Blake,” Kenneth said. “How did all this turmoil start?”

“Well, I don’t know all the details because I wasn’t there when it all started.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “Banter had seven of these robots, or artificials as he called them. You met one of them, which was like his personal bodyguard, the day you were chained up. Anyway, something happened to them. I can’t say what it was. Perhaps we’ll find out after this is all over. Whatever happened caused them to go berserk. They started killing everyone in the Tried plant. I suspect that Banter was one of the victims, but I don’t know for sure. Then they gutted the building. Sometime later they began attacking the town.”

“What about the national guard,” Kyle asked. “Were they called?”

“No. Our beloved police chief has convinced the mayor that he can handle this himself. I think he’s afraid that if the national guard gets involved it would lead to too many questions. In case you haven’t figured it out yet Chief Potts was involved with some less than legal situations with Mr. Banter. I know because he is someone else I was getting evidence on. He is probably hoping that the artificials can be destroyed and the evidence hidden before this becomes a national crisis.”

“How many of these robots have been destroyed?” Kenneth asked.

"I don't know for sure. At least two. The first one was a couple of days ago when the uprising, or whatever you want to call it, first started. I had help then as well. It was me, another officer, and a civilian. The officer had a shotgun, and I and the civilian had handguns. We saw the artificial go into a clothing outlet. We knew that some women and children were hiding out there so we thought we could go in there and quickly dispose of this killer robot." Blake took a breath. He didn't seem to want to continue, but he did. "We came up behind it and gave it everything we had. The barrage of bullets knocked the thing forward, but that was all. It turned around and came at us. Bullets came out of the artificial's hand as if it were holding a machine gun. The civilian and the officer were killed within a minute or two. I was lucky. I was only slightly wounded. One bullet grazed my right arm barely breaking the skin. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the artificial fell backward hitting flat on the concrete floor. I ran over to the two guys that were with me to see if I could help them but it was obvious that they were already gone. After that, I went over to the artificial. I noticed that its eyeballs had been blown out. I gathered from this that the best way to destroy them with the weapons we had was to destroy their eyes."

"Who were the two you were with?" Kenneth asked.

"I don't think you know the civilian. His name is Raymon Dothroe. He worked for the water company."

"No. I didn't know him. What about the officer?"

"It was Jim Handley."

"Oh, no. I knew him but not well. He had only been a police officer for a few weeks. He seemed like a nice guy. I remember him telling me that he had a wife and two young kids. This is terrible. Has his wife been informed?"

"I don't know. There's been too much going on. I haven't had a chance to do it myself."

"So the two that were with you were killed but you only got a scratch," Kenneth said. "Why is that?"

"They came straight at it thinking they could quickly knock it out of commission. I suggested a more stealthy approach but they wouldn't listen. They let their anger get the best of them. I opted to attack from a slight distance and off to one side so I could duck behind one of the larger shelves if needed."

"So, you mean you couldn't persuade them to take a more practical approach?"

"No, they both had just lost loved ones and they let their emotions overtake rational thought. They placed too much faith in their guns." He paused a couple of moments. "I accept that you don't trust me but what I told you is true. If you don't believe me that's okay, but for now, we need to stick together."

"Yeah, I guess we do," Kenneth said nodding slightly.

"We need to find another place to hide," Kyle said. "We have only one way to exit and should another one or more of those androids decide to come in here we could be trapped in here. We were lucky this time. If the last android would have turned around a second earlier it might have hit me with its energy bolt before I could do anything."

"It's too bad we couldn't have captured the robot," Marissa said. "Then maybe we could have gotten some information on how to stop them."

"Destroying these robots is difficult enough," Blake said. "Capturing it alive, if you want to call it alive, with what we have is probably impossible."

Marissa stood up from their little circle. "You're right. We can't call it alive. It's a machine. It's either off or it's on. But because it's off doesn't mean that it is dead."

“What are you thinking?” Kyle asked.

“With this new ability of mine, I should be able to tell all kinds of things about it.”

“You’re not going to turn it back on, are you?” Kenneth asked.

“No. I don’t need to. I doubt that I could.”

Blake stood up. “So, I’m guessing that you do have some kind of unique ability.”

“Yes. I don’t know what you’d call it. I seem to have a connection with things electronic, with computers and such.”

Kyle rose to his feet. He offered to help Kenneth, but Kenneth climbed to his feet on his own.

Marissa made her way to the artificial. The others followed. She stopped in front of the robot. It was a few inches taller than her. “Let’s see if we can set it on its back.”

Kyle and Blake stood on either side of the android. Kenneth stood behind it to help in any way he could. Though he had the strength to help, a sharp, knife-like pain would assault him with any strenuous exertion.

The artificial had stiffened as though it had magically transformed into a statue. This made it easier for them to lay it down on its back.

Marissa knelt beside its head. She put a hand on its shoulder as she stared at its head. After a couple of moments, she reached up and put a thumb and finger into the burned-out left eye socket. She felt around with her index finger for a couple of moments then pulled it out.

“There are a couple of wires inside that I need to pull out so I can get a reading. But I can’t grasp them with one finger. I could discover a lot more by going through the chest but we don’t have anything that could cut through that hard shell.”

“I think I can burn through it,” Kyle said.

“And you’d probably burn up what I need.”

“I have something for the eye socket,” Blake said. He pulled something out of his pocket. “It’s a four in one. It’s a knife, both kinds of screwdrivers, and a small pair of needle-nose pliers. But The pliers are not very long.”

“I think they’ll do,” Marissa said.

Blake handed her the pliers. “Good luck.”

Marissa pushed the pliers into the eye socket. She could sense the wires she was touching. A couple of them had been burned apart when the incendiary ball Kyle had thrown at it hit its eyes. Those were of no use to her. She needed to go deeper. She was near the end of the length of the needle nose pliers when she touched what she was looking for. After a few touchy moments, she was able to fit the wire inside the very end of the plier’s jaws. She needed the wire outside the socket. She hoped there was enough slack. If not she didn’t know what they could do. She tightened her grip on the pliers and began to pull. At first, it wouldn’t budge. She prayed that the wire was merely hooked, or loosely strapped and not simply short. She pulled harder, also hoping that the wire wouldn’t break. She needed it to make its circuit. She felt it give a little. She held her breath and gave it another strong tug. At once a small loop of wire about three inches long exited the eye socket.

Marissa handed Blake his all-in-one tool. She took a nervous breath then reached over and pressed the wires between her fingers. She grew quiet as though trying to hear faint voices over a telephone. It was several minutes before she turned to the others.

“Well ?” Kyle asked.

"I received a lot of information in those few minutes. Most of it I was able to grasp, but some of it eluded me. What I learned is that the robots are connected as far as their programs go."

"What does that mean?" Blake asked.

"It means that they are all programmed for the same thing. To bring chaos and destruction to the town."

"Banter is one morally deficient son of a bitch," Kenneth started. "He programmed these artificials to destroy our town."

"I don't think so," Blake answered. "He has nothing to gain by doing that. Banter is both greedy and power-hungry, but he is not stupid. He was set to make billions off of these artificials. But all that is gone. There is no way the military will buy any of these artificials now."

"Then who programmed them?" Kenneth asked.

"I don't know. Maybe no one. It could be some kind of malfunction that similarly affects all of them."

"Let's not worry about that right now," Marissa said. "I just saw a benefit in these artificials being connected. I can tell where the others are."

"Like a GPS," Kyle said.

"Yes, kind of. The problem is I can only track them while holding these wires."

"Tell us where they are now," Kenneth said.

She was silent a moment before speaking. "Three of these artificials are down. The one here and two others. Among the ones that are still alive, if you can call it that, there is one inside a building a couple of hundred feet from here. It's not moving but I know it's active. Another one is in a building across the street from that one. It seems to be in a vicious battle. I can't tell you much about that. The last one is walking the streets of a residential area not too far from here."

"That makes six," Kyle said. "There should be one more."

"I'm not reading another one."

"Maybe that one is out of range," Blake offered.

"That's possible," Marissa said. "I don't know the extent of these powers of mine."

"We should get out of here," Kyle said, "before another one of these androids happens this way. We have no weapons but me and I doubt I can beat these artificials by myself."

"There's a pawnshop not far from here," Kenneth said. "They sell guns and ammo. We should load up."

"If the store hadn't already been ransacked," Blake added.

"We'll have to take that chance."

"Assuming we can find some weapons," Blake began, "I think it best that you guys find yourself a safe place to stay till this is over. I need to stick around and try to take care of these other robots. I am, after all, still a cop."

"As much as I'd like to do that," Kenneth began, "I can't let you fight these things on your own. I might not be a cop anymore, but I never actually quit the force."

"We stick together," Marissa said. "That's our best chance of survival."

"And you can't do this without me," Kyle said. "I'm one of the weapons."

"One thing I need to find before we leave," Blake said and walked away. A couple of minutes later he returned. "I was hoping there were some in this store. I've got some flashlights with batteries. Their's one for each of us."

"I can make my own light," Kyle said, "but I'll take it and put it into my back pocket just in case."

"The power is out in most, if not all of the town so these stores and businesses are going to be dark," Blake said. He passed out the lights.

Blake took the lead since he was as familiar with the town as Kenneth and had been around when the artificials had first attacked the town. Kenneth was still in pain and his movements weren't as fluid as they had been. Kyle took the rear watching to make sure nothing was following them.

Reaching the pawnshop they saw that most of the storefront glass had been destroyed. But if that weren't enough the door to the pawnshop had been busted in as well. It seemed apparent that a great many people had hit the shop all at one time and some had decided they needed a bigger space for entering and exiting.

As they entered the store they were confronted by two male bodies lying in a puddle of blood on the floor. Some of the blood was dry and caked.

"Oh, shit," Blake grumbled. "I've seen this too many times. I suspect our two unfortunate victims were either killed by one of the robots or were gunned down by other citizens wanting their weapons. We may never know their story."

He stood and looked about the small room noting the shards of glass that were scattered across the sales floor and on the countertops like discarded diamonds. The glass cases that displayed the many guns were all shattered. There were no weapons.

"Looks like all the weapons have been taken," Kenneth remarked.

"It looks that way. You guys stay here I'm going to check around back."

Blake took out his flashlight supposing the back to be windowless, and even if the lights had battery emergency lights the batteries would be dead by now. He made his way around the two bodies. The glass crunched underneath his feet as he headed to the back.

For the first few minutes, they stood in silence, constantly looking out the open frame where the storefront used to be to be sure nothing or no one was approaching them.

"If we don't have a weapon, we don't have a chance," Kenneth broke the silence.

"Your power is great, Kyle, but I don't think you can defeat one of these robots by yourself."

"So, what do we do, run and hide?" Marissa asked.

"We might have to do that for a while."

Blake came out of the back. He was carrying several weapons.

"This is all there is," he said as he came up to them. "I was lucky to find them underneath some broken cabinets. I've got two thirty ought sixes and two handguns. Both are Glocks. Who wants what?"

"I can take one of the handguns," Kenneth said. "A rifle will be a little harder to manage in my condition."

"I'll take the other handgun," Kyle said. "I plan on using my fire when I can and the handgun I can just tuck inside my belt."

"I guess you and I got the rifles," Marissa said. "It's a good thing I used to go hunting with my dad. I got to be a pretty good shot."

Blake passed out the weapons. "Okay, now we need a plan. We got lucky the last time. We can't rely on luck always being with us."

"We have to hit these things with everything we got," Kenneth began, "before it even realizes we're there. Hopefully, it will have no chance to defend itself or to retaliate."

"That's not going to be an easy thing to do," Blake countered. "These artificials have an exceptional range of hearing and vision."

“Have you got a better plan?”

“No. Not yet.”

As they stepped out of the building they were greeted by long shadows that stretched across the street. The sun was coming to the end of its daily journey. In about an hour or less, it would be dipping over the horizon.

CHAPTER 34

"I can stop them," the man said as he sat staring at the computer in front of him. The man was well dressed sporting a neatly pressed buttoned-down shirt and slacks. He had taken off his tie and set it on top of the desk.

"Mr. Banter should be able to stop them," Chief Potts said.

"Mr. Banter is dead."

"How do you know that?"

"No one has seen or heard from him in the last few days. If he were alive, and he could, he would have already stopped these robots."

"Maybe you're right." He sighed. "If you can stop them, you need to do it now before the entire town is destroyed."

"I can see that three of them are already down."

Chief Potts looked around the man to the computer screen. "How do you know that? All I see is a bunch of random numbers."

"You have to know how to interpret the numbers. Each of them means something."

"Oh," the chief answered, not understanding.

"One of them just successfully finished a fight with a lone gunman."

"What do you mean, successfully finished?"

"The robot killed the gunman."

"Oh, Lord no."

"A second bot is just outside the city limits going through the houses. And the last one is in a retail shop. This one is about to get some company. But, I would guess that it already knows that."

For a couple of moments, the man said nothing. He seemed to be lost in thought.

"That's not all of them. There should still be one more out there," Chief Potts said.

"Banter once told me that he had created seven of these ... artificials ... as he called them."

"Whatever Mr. Banter had called them there are only six of them. Perhaps he had scrapped one of them."

Chief Potts shrugged. "I wouldn't think he would do that. He once told me how much money he had invested in them. But I guess he could have. Maybe he needed a part or two for the other six. You sure you can shut them down?"

"Yes. But it will take a few minutes. Unfortunately, it may be too late for those people heading toward one of these robots." With his back to Chief Potts, he smiled, which was a curiosity. He had only done that once before.

CHAPTER 35

The four of them moved slowly down the dusky sidewalk. For now, they could see well enough without lights to guide them. Soon, however, the night would bathe them in darkness. It was unlikely that any of the streetlights still worked. Half of them were broken and it seemed apparent that the power had been cut off to the downtown area as well.

"We need to hold off on the flashlights for as long as we can," Blake whispered. "These androids are equipped with night vision but it's only good if they're looking at you. We don't want a light to draw their attention."

After a couple of minutes, Marissa softly whispered to them. "This next shop should be it." She stopped. The others stopped close to her. "What's the plan."

"I assume you can't say exactly where this artificial is in the store?" Blake asked.

"No. Unless we go back and get the damaged artificial and drag it along with us," Marissa answered.

"Yeah," Blake grinned. "I don't think that's a good idea. We'll just have to slip inside there as quietly as possible and see what we have to contend with."

The three silently agreed and began moving again.

They paused at the front of the store. The sign above the door said 'Towers' discount pharmacy'. They couldn't see much through the spiderweb of cracks spread across the automatic glass doors and the solemn darkness of the inside of the store.

Because there was no electricity the doors had to be pried open. They stepped inside and moved quickly and quietly into the shadows outside of the light of the day.

Ahead of them and adjacent to the wall on their right were two cashier stands. They were empty. No artificials were lying in wait for them over there. Straight ahead were rows of shelving leading to the back of the pharmacy. A wide aisle bordered the rows on each side. The actual pharmacy was at the back of the store. The men's and women's bathrooms were to one side.

"We should take this one step at a time," Blake said. "We start from the front and work to clear the aisles as we crawl toward the back. We don't want this robot getting behind us. Hopefully, we can box it in and destroy it. We can do that by flanking the aisles. Two of us should be on the left side of the rows and two on the right but not together. The first line should be me and Kenneth. Kyle and Marissa you two will be on the second line, one row behind us. You'll move up as we move up. Got it so far?"

"Yes, sir," Marissa answered. "You sound like you've had some military experience."

"I have, but that's a story for later." He paused. "I'll take the left side and Kenneth you take the right. If that's okay."

"Yes, that's fine."

"One little change. Marissa, would you mind switching weapons with Kenneth? Since we're going to be on the front line, so to speak, he will need the more powerful weapon."

"Not at all."

"With this glass in my back, it's going to be a little harder to crawl with a rifle."

"I know but you need the bigger gun, and you and I have the most experience so we should be on the first line."

"Of course, I understand. Ignore me, I just like to complain."

“What exactly are we supposed to do?” Kyle asked.

“You two are our second line of offense, or defense, depending on how it goes. If this artificial is down one of these aisles Kenneth and I will try to contain it. If you two can get a headshot while we’re battling it that would be great, but some of these shelves are greater than six feet high so that may not be possible. If it should get past either of us it will be up to you two to try to stop it.”

“It’s going to be like pitch black as we get closer to the back,” Marissa said. “Can we use our lights at all?”

“No. I will be the only one to use the flashlight. To coordinate our movements, I will position my flashlight a few inches off the floor and quickly flip the light on and then off. That will be my signal for us to move up to the next row. You two will have to move as we move. One more thing. Once we confront the enemy try to take out the eyes if you can.”

They squatted and crawled quietly across the floor to the first row. They took their positions at each end.

Blake signaled for Kenneth to move up. They advanced together. The row was clear. No robots.

Blake took a deep breath. His heart was pounding. Fear was setting in like it always had on the battlefield. And just as he had done on the battlefield he would not let it stop him. He swallowed hard and signaled for Kenneth to move up.

This aisle was clear of an artificial as well but was littered with products that had either fallen off the shelves or been knocked off, some more fragile objects breaking as they hit the floor.

Blake could hear Marissa shuffling softly behind him. He felt bad that she and Kyle were having to face such deadly obstacles so early in their life. But with her and Kyle’s abilities, they were presently indispensable.

Between the following aisle, several broken shelves had spread their contents on both sides revealing much of the subsequent row. These rows were clear.

Their travel to the back of the pharmacy seemed painfully slow but as their destination was nearing an end Blake began to tense even more and his heart began pounding in his chest as if it were ready to jump out. As they reached the last row he almost wished that the aisle was empty. But he knew that if it was empty that they would most likely face a more precarious battle with the artificial out in the open at the back of the store adjacent to the pharmacy with little to no shelter to hide behind.

Blake was about to give the signal to move up when he heard the rapid fall of footsteps coming toward him. He looked up, quickly, startled, in time to see a nearly invisible silhouette of the artificial coming at him through the dark from the area of the pharmacy. As adrenaline rushed through him he was able to click his flashlight on and swing his rifle up toward the oncoming robot. He managed to get two shots off that hit the head but missed the eyes before an onslaught of bullets ripped across his chest. He fell back, his body settling prone across the floor.

At the other end of the row, Kenneth suddenly stood up with his flashlight aimed ahead and started shooting at the artificial. He had not realized that the artificial was there until Blake had started shooting. Kenneth’s round of shots with the rifle did little damage to the artificial as it turned to him and quickly returned fire. Kenneth was hit multiple times across his body. He fell back dead before hitting the tiled floor.

The battle happened quickly and Marissa was only able to make out flashes of light from the guns and glimpses of the figures as beams of light from the flashlights came to

life briefly, danced in the air, and fell to the floor. She fired at the darkened figure of the artificial, which was about a dozen feet away, even before she could bring her flashlight up hoping to hit it as it moved slowly down the row of shelves, sometimes masked by the tall shelves. When the gun was empty and her light finally found the robot she realized that the artificial had turned to face her. At once she dove to the floor behind a line of shelving. An instant later the shelving in front of her was riddled to pieces scattering debris on top of her and several feet in all directions. She pushed forward, crawling for thicker shelter.

Moments earlier Kyle was briefly paralyzed when he saw Blake shot to death. He raised his gun about the time that Kenneth opened fire and was instantly shot down. As he got a single shot off Marissa unloaded on the robot. At once it had turned and fired on her. "No!" Kyle screamed, unconsciously dropping his gun as he rounded the row where the robot stood firing at Marissa. He raised his hands and let out a stream of fire from his hands like a powerful flame thrower. The flames hit the artificial in the side and part of its back as it faced Marissa. Catching its attention it began to turn around to face Kyle.

The extreme heat was affecting the artificial's mobility as Kyle moved slowly toward it, his hands outstretched as the flames exuded from his fingertips. It was off balance and slow. It staggered backward, its head beginning to twitch. It started to fall but managed to get a couple of shots off before losing its balance and dropping to the floor.

Kyle's flame suddenly went out like the flame of a candle in a stiff breeze. He stumbled forward and fell to the floor close to the foot of the artificial.

Marissa scrambled over to him, the beam from her flashlight leading the way across the floor. She grimaced and slowed considerably as she had to squeeze past Kenneth's body lying in a pool of blood. She tried to push the sight of Kenneth out of her mind as she knelt to attend to Kyle. Her heart sank as she witnessed the blood that was beginning to form underneath him. Seeing Blake's body further down the aisle added to her immediate grief and for a couple of tense moments, she thought that she was going to faint.

"Oh, God" she screamed. Kyle moaned and muttered something but she wasn't sure what it was. But he was alive. For right now that was all that mattered. She started crying but quickly realized she couldn't let this disaster break her. She slipped her pistol between her belt and pants so she could have a free hand. In her left hand, she held the flashlight. She put her free hand around his upper arm as she fought to stifle her tears. "Kyle, I need you to get up." She pulled on his arm. He groaned and started to move. "Come on, Kyle, don't let me down. We have to get out of this aisle so I can see how badly you're hurt." He pushed up to his knees. "Yes, that's it." A tentative smile crossed her face as the tears slid down her cheeks. "Can you stand up?" He groaned and awkwardly pushed to his feet. She wiped tears from her eyes attempting to be strong for Kyle but a slow procession still cascaded down her cheeks.

Kyle looked down at Blake's body. "Are they both...?"

"Yes. Watch your step. We have to get past ..." she looked down at Blake and couldn't finish her words. She felt the sting of fear, anger, and sorrow welling up inside her but held it back as much as she could

The two of them were able to get out of the row and move toward the front counter where people normally picked up their prescriptions.

"I need ... to rest a minute," Kyle panted. His head was spinning and his legs felt as if they were going to give way.

"I'm about to set you down," Marissa said, her voice cracking as she struggled to hold back the emotions. Blake and Kenneth were dead and she feared that Kyle was not

far behind them. She understood that a bullet had hit him in the chest. As she lay him on his back on the tiled floor his eyes drifted closed and he became suddenly still. Tears began to slide more freely down her face as she sat down beside him. "Kyle," she called as she patted his face. "Kyle, please," she moaned. "Wake up, Kyle. Don't do this to me!" She closed her eyes and sobbed uncontrollably. She couldn't lose him. She was afraid to open her eyes and see that he had passed. She lay her head on top of him without thinking. A minute passed.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Kyle moaned.

She sprung up to a sitting position. He pushed and struggled up to a sitting position. She hugged him tightly. "Don't you ever do that to me again," she scolded.

"Do what?"

"Die on me. Or appearing to die as you did." She pulled away from him and began to dry her eyes.

"Sorry about that."

"I need to see where you were hit," Marissa said. "Take off what's left of your shirt." His fire had eaten up most of the shirt.

He took off the remnants of his shirt and threw it across the floor.

Looking at his chest she could see where the bullet had hit his upper chest near his underarm. It had left a small hole of about an inch deep. A dribble of blood exuded from the hole, but a swath of congealed blood circled most of the wound.

"Can you move your arm?" she asked.

He waved his arm a little. "Yes, but it hurts like hell."

"You bled a lot on the floor over there where you were shot, but you're barely bleeding now. I think you might have some special healing properties to go along with this fire ability of yours."

"Good for me." He took a breath dreading what he had to ask. "What about Kenneth and Blake? Are you sure that they're ... dead?"

"Yes. They're gone."

Tears filled Kyle's eyes. He didn't know what to say.

Marissa stood up. "I just thought of something." She walked behind Kyle and knelt beside him. She examined his back and then stood back up. "You don't have an exit wound." She walked back around and squatted next to him.

"So, you think the bullet is still inside of me?"

"It would seem."

"Is that bad?"

"I don't know. I've heard stories of people living their entire lives with a bullet inside of them."

Kyle nodded and went silent for a few moments. "What now? We have at least two robots out there. Possibly a third one that isn't showing up. It's just the two of us now and I'm going to need a little recovery time."

"I know. And what about Blake and Kenneth? We can't just leave them here."

"What are we supposed to do with them?"

"I don't know!" she said harshly then started bawling. Kyle squeezed her hand to comfort her. It was all he could do at the time.

After a couple of minutes, she gained a semblance of control. She wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you." She took a breath. "We can come back for them."

“Yes, we can.”

“So, what do you think we should do now?”

“Well, from what you said earlier there is one robot somewhere across the street if it hadn’t moved. But we’re in no condition to confront it. Maybe we can make our way to the police station. If there are still some cops around we should be safe there.”

She nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Before we go, however, I think I ought to do my tech thing with this robot to see if the other two are still where they were. We don’t need to run into them on our way out of here.”

“No, we don’t.”

After Marissa got up and went to the downed robot Kyle began to move his right arm about. The movement still hurt him but not nearly as much as it did a few minutes ago. He began to think that he did have some special healing abilities as Marissa had said. He figured that at this rate he would be good in less than an hour.

Marissa had been with the robot for about ten minutes when Kyle decided to try to stand up. He took a deep breath and pushed to his feet. A wave of dizziness hit him at once and he had to stumble over to the countertop for support. After another minute the dizziness dissipated.

Marissa came back. She presented a weak smile. “Good, you’re on your feet. We have to get out of here.”

“I know.”

“Now! We’re about to have company. The robot from across the street is heading toward us. We need to hurry. And I just realized I’m out of ammo.”

He moaned. “Grab one of the rifles.”

She hesitated. “I can’t. They’re both covered in blood.”

“You can wipe them off.”

“No. I can’t. I can’t even bear to go over there right now.”

He didn’t think he could change her mind. “Eh, okay, we’ll go with what we got. Take my gun. I dropped it on the floor in the aisle close to Kenneth. My fire ability works way better than that gun.”

She went over and found the gun. She tucked it into her pants and covered it with her shirt. “What about your flashlight?”

“I lost it somewhere. It’s a wonder I remembered where I dropped the gun.”

“Can you walk on your own or do you need my help?”

“I can walk. I was just a bit dizzy for a minute.”

“I’ll be right beside you if you need a hand.” She started to move toward the front of the store.

“Wait,” Kyle called. “There must be a back door here somewhere. Perhaps an emergency exit.”

She stopped. “Yes, there should be.” She quickly ran the flashlight beam toward the right side of the pharmacy. “Yes, we have an exit.”

“Great. Let’s get out of here.”

By the time they were pushing through the outside door the pain in Kyle’s chest was nearly gone.

They were in an alley that connected to a two-lane street. In one direction this street connected to Main Street and the front of the store. The other direction led to several residential areas.

“Can this robot somehow trail us?” Kyle asked.

“No. I don’t see how.”

“Then why was this artificial coming at us from across the street?”

Marissa thought for a minute. “Someone must have been directing it?”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. But I have discovered that these artificials’ eyes work both for seeing and as cameras for anyone who might be controlling them. If someone is directing them they can see what they see. Which is us.”

“So, in addition to possibly being programmed to destroy, they could be manipulated in real-time right now.”

“Yes.”

“If Banter isn’t behind them as Blake has stated then who is?” Kyle asked.

“Maybe one of his employees. Finding this person or persons is extremely unlikely, however.”

“You’re right. We should just head to the police station.”

“No. I changed my mind. We need to go back to Tried labs. That is the birthplace of these artificials. If I can get into their computer system – if it’s still functional – then maybe I can shut down these last three.”

“Okay. As long as we don’t have to fight any more of these mechanical men.”

“We should be okay.”

They traveled the two-lane road heading to the plant. There was no traffic. All the house lights were off, as well as the street lamps. A distant moon gave them some light, but for now, they depended on Marissa’s flashlight. Kyle thought it best not to use his power so that he might recharge. There was no telling what they might be facing next.

“So, you think there are three functioning robots out there instead of two?” Kyle asked.

“I should have been able to read every robot, assuming that they are connected. If one of them is separated from the others for some reason that would explain why I couldn’t read it.”

“Why would Banter have left one of them out of the loop?”

“I can’t say. There’s just something about this that doesn’t feel right. I’m hoping that I can learn more from whatever is left in their computer system.”

CHAPTER 36

"I've shut down another one," the man said. "That makes four. It won't be long before you'll have your town back." He hadn't shut any of them down though he easily could have. This was not his plan. He had been sidetracked. He hadn't meant for any of the artificials to be destroyed. They were to inflict greater damage on the town than what they had already done before he would come to the rescue and begin to shut them down. He didn't want them destroyed. He considered that they would be very useful to him in the future, especially after he upgraded them. But plans change and he would adopt.

"Good," Chief Potts said. "You're not charging me or the city for any of this, right?"

"Right. I just ask that you keep me in mind when this is all over. My company is new but we're good. We can take care of all of the city's technical needs, including upgrading your computer system with futuristic technology that no one else has and installing firewalls that will stop any hacker out there. And it's all guaranteed."

"That sounds great. It's not all up to me though. There's the mayor and the other council members. But the mayor will usually listen to me and several council members are good friends of mine. So, if you pull this off I think you'll be in."

"Good to hear that."

"They'll want references, of course."

"Sure, no problem. If Mr. Banter were still alive he would be at the top of my list. I've done a lot of work for him over the years."

"It's funny he's never told me about you."

"I don't doubt it. What I did for him was not always ... proper."

"You mean legal?"

"Let's just say that there were things done that a lawman would not have approved of. Excluding you that is."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked with a trace of anger in his voice.

"No offense. We all have to make a living." He paused his work on the computer and turned to face the chief. "Mr. Banter told me how you had helped him out in a few delicate situations. But that's none of my business. I stick to what concerns me."

Chief Potts's mouth opened a bit as though he were about to speak then closed it, unsure of what to say.

The man turned back to the computer. "I should be done in about an hour. I hadn't realized that this was going to take me so long. Mr. Banter put up a lot of roadblocks in these robots to keep people from tampering with them. But he didn't count on me. For every roadblock, I'll find a way around it."

"I appreciate all this work you're doing for us, Mr. Wainley."

"I'm glad I could help. And Mr. Wainley is much too formal. Just call me Adam."

CHAPTER 37

“Are you okay?” Marissa asked after they had been walking for the last fifteen minutes.

“I’m good. Movements don’t bother me much anymore. The wound itself looks almost healed. The hole hasn’t closed up completely but it doesn’t bother me.”

“You’re turning into a regular superhero.”

He laughed. “Well, I’d feel more like a superhero if I had a shirt on, or maybe just a cape.”

“You look good without a shirt.”

He laughed. “Thanks.”

“You could use a little more muscle though.”

“Hey. First, you compliment me then you tear me down.”

“That’s called constructive criticism.”

Kyle smiled. He was enjoying their walk though it carried with it a sharp pang of guilt. He had just witnessed the death of two people to who he had grown very close in such a short time. Why should he be happy?

A few minutes had passed when Kyle suddenly stopped.

“What’s up?” Marissa asked.

“There’s a clothesline in that yard over there.”

“So?”

“I haven’t seen one in a while. I think this one has got a shirt on it.”

“You’re going to steal a shirt?”

“Borrow it. Be right back.”

He rushed over to the line. There was one shirt among several pants, a couple of blouses. and a dress. He quickly grabbed the shirt, a dark blue pullover, and ran back over to Marissa.

Marissa was laughing. “I can’t believe you stole a shirt.”

He slipped the shirt over his head. It sat loosely upon his shoulder. It was a size larger than what he normally wore. “I didn’t want you lusting over my body.”

She grinned. “Yeah, right.”

They continued forward and after a few minutes, the TRIED plant came into view. It was only partially visible in the moonlit night, but they could see that the building was still standing though lazy trails of black smoke snaked from the broken windows indicating that much of the inside was probably gutted.

They both stopped.

“It doesn’t look good,” Marissa noted.

“No, it doesn’t.”

Marissa sighed. “The computers are probably destroyed but we’re here now. I guess we should check it out. Maybe we can find something useful.”

“Yeah,” he simply answered, and they continued forward.

The front door was wide open when they got to the building. Deep inside the building was as dark as any cave. Marissa pointed her light into the room. They went inside.

The floor was covered with debris: pieces of light fixtures, broken and charred sections of chairs and desks, shards of glass and plastic, and obvious computer parts

broken and melted. They walked around the big room finding nothing of use lying on the floor.

"It doesn't look like there is anything of use here," Marissa commented. She looked down at the many computer parts and pieces such as circuit boards, wiring, and an array of electronic parts. There were also shattered keyboards and computer screens. "I wonder if these computers were deliberately smashed and burned?"

"I don't know why they would be. I think these robots just decided to trash everything in sight."

"Whatever the reason I can't do anything with this mess. I guess we should check the rest of these rooms. Maybe we'll luck out."

After several minutes they had found nothing useful in any of the remaining rooms. There was only destruction. Two of the rooms were filled with smoke as embers from an earlier fire smoldered in a corner. Because the rooms were mostly constructed of cedar block and brick the fire had not spread.

"It looks like this was a waste of time," Kyle said.

"Maybe not. We still have the upstairs. Maybe something escaped this mess."

The stairway was blanketed with detritus both small and large. They pushed the small stuff out of their way and sidled around the big stuff, like a cabinet, and a refrigerator door.

The upstairs was no better. They pushed through the debris to make it to the few rooms. Out of all the rooms they could find nothing useful.

"What about downstairs?"

"We just checked downstairs."

"No. I'm talking about the basement."

"Yes. The artificials may not have known about the basement or how to get to it. But we still have a problem."

"Yeah, I know. How to get to it. No power and as far as I know the elevator was the only access to it."

"Maybe we can get power to it somehow." She walked over to the elevator. Kyle followed.

The elevator doors were pushed inward, nearly bent in half as if by a great force. Through the rift between the doors, they could see that some of one wall was broken as well as the elevator control panel.

"It looks like the basement is out of the question," Kyle said.

"This can't be right. There has got to be another way in. I can't believe Banter wouldn't have installed an emergency exit. Even if he didn't care about the safety of his employees he would have wanted another way out if he, himself, should get stuck down there in the basement."

"Okay. So, let's go find that emergency exit."

"And I know where we can start."

"You do?" Kyle asked.

"Yes. Do you remember when we first walked down this tunnel from the outbuilding?"

"Sure, what about it?"

"Before we went into the building I asked about a heavy metal door. Do you remember?"

“Yes. The one Kenneth said was for utilities. So, you’re thinking that maybe it’s not for utilities but an emergence exit instead?”

“Or for both. I think it’s worth checking out anyway.”

“Sure, let’s go.”

“How’s your wound?”

“No more pain. I guess my healing is complete.”

She smiled. “Good.”

They made their way down to the first floor. They looked around making sure they hadn’t overlooked anything before heading down the tunnel. They halted at the metal door.

Kyle yanked on the door to be certain it was locked. It wouldn’t budge. He examined the door. “I think if I put enough heat between the door where the latch is I can cut the deadbolt.”

“Good.”

“You might want to stand back.”

She moved to the opposite wall and pointed the beam of her flashlight at the door so Kyle could see.

He put his hand close to the door and shot out a short, highly condensed flame willing it to be as hot as he could. The flame started as a bright red color, then after a minute to yellow, and finally to blue. At once the bolt that held the door fell to the floor. Kyle immediately doused his flame. With his other hand, he pulled on the u-shaped handle. The door came open.

They stepped inside. Marissa aimed her flashlight ahead of them. They were on a landing. A set of stairs were before them. Marissa shut the door behind them but because there was nothing to hold it closed the door drifted open a bit. They slowly, cautiously, descended a set of stairs.

They were at the end of a hallway. The hallway cut sharply to the right. It was similar to the one they had been in the last time they were in the basement. The pole lamps were lined up on one side of the corridor like the ones before, but here there were no buildings.

They slowly proceeded down the hallway. It gradually rounded to their left. “You know until recently I had never considered this power of mine anything but dangerous. I had never thought of it as being useful. But I guess if my parents hadn’t died in that fire I might have thought differently about this power.”

“After this is over, we need to figure out what’s going on with you and me.”

“I hope we’re not brother and sister,” he said.

“She started to ask why but then just smiled.

The hallway straightened as they continued forward. They slowed when they saw another corridor intersecting with the one they were on.

“This place must be huge,” Kyle remarked.

“Yeah. I’m beginning to wonder if we’re in the same basement as before.”

They both stopped suddenly.

“Is that what I think it is?” Marissa asked.

“It’s the elevator.”

“Yes, it is,” she said with some excitement. The elevator was on their right.

They both hurried to the elevator. They paused briefly before turning down the intersecting corridor to be sure this was the same elevator they had used.

Kyle noted the elevator coming up on their right. "Is there anything in the jail you can use?"

"Probably not. The big room where we disappeared into the future is where I really wanted to go but since we're here I think there might be a computer in here I can look at." She slowly opened the door just in case there was someone inside.

She quickly jumped back closing the door. A pungent odor had struck both of them. Marissa gagged for a moment since she had gotten the brunt of it.

"Lasiter is dead," Marissa stated. "I think they left him in that cell without food or water." Tears filled her eyes. "What a terrible shame."

Kyle placed a hand on her shoulder. She turned and fell into his arms. He tentatively wrapped his arms around her. After a minute she slowly pulled away and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. All of this is starting to get to me. Lasiter's death reminded me of the death of Blake and Kenneth, and maybe a little bit of my dad. Even though he killed my dad I know he had no choice."

"It's okay. I understand."

"We should probably get to the room."

"Yes, of course." Kyle suddenly flinched. Something slid down the inside of his shirt against his chest and out of his untucked shirt. It hit the floor with barely a sound. He stopped, lit one hand up, and looked down at the floor to see what it was. He saw it and bent down to pick it up.

"What's wrong?" Marissa asked.

"The bullet," he said standing up. "It popped out of my chest." He showed it to her. It was partially melted.

"Wow. I don't know what to say. You're like superman or something."

He laughed. "Superman wouldn't have been knocked on his ass by a single bullet."

"Okay, maybe you're like a mini-superman."

"Alright, maybe a mini superman." He put the bullet in his pocket. "I will keep this bullet as a souvenir."

They continued down the hallway to the big room where they had been transported to the future.

CHAPTER 38

This was disturbing, Adam thought. Another one of his artificials had been destroyed. He had immediately sent another one to take its place, but the surviving human or humans had escaped. It seemed that one of them had been hit and was carrying the bullet around inside of them. If that was the case it was quite remarkable. At the range that this battle had unfolded the bullet should have passed straight through the person. It didn't make much sense. From what he had learned about humans this was not possible.

Fortunately, Banter had installed tiny tracking devices inside some of the ammunition so that he could determine where the bullets hit and thus evaluate the effectiveness of the artificials's combat skills. And one of these bullets had managed to hit someone who was destroying his mechanical subjects. This would not do. Adam quickly decided that he would handle this person, or persons, himself. Before ending them he wanted to discover how this one person was even able to walk with this bullet lodged inside of them.

It was unfortunate that the revolt had started sooner than he had planned. He had done a poor job of hiding the body of the TRIED supervisor. As soon as Banter had gotten word of it he had attempted everything he knew to shut him and the other artificials down but to no avail. When that failed he sought to disable whatever he could. Almost all had failed. The one thing he had gotten through was a command to shut down the cameras in the eyes of the artificials, except for Adam because he had already disconnected his camera. Adam had not thought about how vulnerable the cameras were. The artificials did not need the cameras to see their opponents. But by shutting down their cameras it had made it impossible for Adam to see the live-action from them. Adam could not reconnect the feed but he was able to track the movement of others near the artificials by motion detectors installed in the robots. In addition through several means, he could determine much about the battles that each one encountered.

He decided to wait until this person carrying the bullet inside them had gotten to where they were going before considering what he should do. Right now the suspect with the bullet was walking through a subdivision. He decided to put his remaining artificials into sleep mode.

For the next few minutes, he typed in inconsequential commands just to make it look like he was doing something constructive. After a few minutes when he felt sure he knew where this person and anyone with him was heading, he decided it was time for him to act.

Adam stood up from his desk. "Chief, I'm going to take a little break to clear my head. I've put the other artificials to sleep for now. It's not permanent but it will be good for a few hours. Before they wake up, I should have found a way to make it permanent."

"While they're asleep why don't I send some people over there with guns and destroy them?" Chief Potts asked.

"Two reasons. One, if you start shooting at them their defensive programming will kick in causing them to awaken. If they are not destroyed quickly enough, they will turn on their attackers. The second reason is that they are too valuable. Left intact I guarantee the military will pay enough for these mechanical men that you could rebuild this town three times over and have it much better than it was."

“The mayor will be glad to hear that. If he is still alive. I haven’t heard from him in a long time.”

“I’m going to take a little drive down the streets with the least destruction to do a little thinking. I’ll be back soon.”

“Need a little company?”

“No. I need to be alone. I do a lot of talking to myself.”

“Okay then. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Once inside his car, Adam looked at his phone. The signal indicated that the TRIED plant was the intended destination. He couldn’t imagine what there was of interest at the plant. The plant was just a shell of what it once was. Other than wanting to eliminate the people responsible for destroying his artificial or possibly artificials, he was curious about why they would want to go there. Were they looking for something?

He drove slowly hoping to pin them down deep inside the plant.

CHAPTER 39

Kyle set his right hand ablaze feeling like they needed more light than the flashlight Marissa held. The beam of the flashlight had become dim as if it were about to die.

"This room is about the way it was when we left," Marissa said. "I suspect that the workers down here left before it got really bad, and they were the only ones who knew about this place."

"Yeah, I think so too," Kyle answered.

Marissa looked over at the computer on the big desk at the front of the room and then began walking down the row of computers that were lined up on one side. "They all appear to be in good shape."

"What about power?"

"They should all have batteries. Assuming they hadn't been left on when the power went off."

"What about cell towers?"

"They require electricity. Many of them have generators or battery backups. But that usually only lasts twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Hopefully, the power hadn't been off that long."

"Hopefully."

She went back to the computer at the desk. She placed her handgun and flashlight on the desk. "How about giving me some light."

"Sure thing." He moved a little closer to her and held out his hand. "After you do what you need to do how about looking for a way we can get back to our own time."

"I will." She typed in the password that she had learned earlier. "We have a good battery here. Now I just have to see if I can connect to a cell tower and then to these remaining androids."

Adam followed the signal he was getting on his cell phone through the front door of the TRIED plant. He shone his flashlight across the big interior. Besides the debris scattered about the floor, it was empty. The signal vacillated from a point in the elevator to straight ahead to the back entrance. The elevator had been gravely damaged, and he could see nothing inside of it of interest to him so he headed to the back.

The signal didn't lead him out the back door as he thought. Instead, it led him to the tunnel that ended at the outbuilding. For a moment he wondered why the person or persons had gone to the building. Then he saw the metal door. It was slightly ajar. A tiny piece of melted metal lay on the floor.

He moved his hand across the door close to the handle. It was warm. He thought of the young man named Kyle. He had met him when he and two others had broken into the plant. He had heard that the boy could make his body catch fire though he had never seen him do it. He had no answer as to how a human could do that. Perhaps, if this was the boy he wouldn't kill him when they first met. Discovering how he accomplished this feat could prove very beneficial to him.

He went through the door and onto the landing. For a moment he thought of extinguishing the flashlight and using his built-in night vision, but quickly dismissed that idea. Even with his night vision, he would need a tiny bit of light and there seemed to be no source of light down here at all.

"I have a signal," Marissa said. "At least one cell tower around here is working."

"Good. Can you shut these robots down?"

"Maybe, but I'm having trouble finding them. I need a few more minutes. There are a few things I have to work around."

"I don't like it down here. I feel like we're in a cave."

"Well, hopefully, it won't be much longer. That is if you don't keep dimming that torch of yours. These keys don't light up and the light from the screen doesn't help a lot."

"Oh, I didn't realize ... We might have a problem."

"What?" She looked from the screen to Kyle. "What's the problem?"

"I'm losing power to produce this flame. I can feel it slipping away."

"Maybe you can only create this fire of yours for a limited time. You may need to rest for a while. To charge up. I'll make out with the light from the screen. I'll just have to put my head closer to the keys."

"Can't you type without looking at the keys?"

"A little, but I make a lot of mistakes."

"I find it hard to believe that you make mistakes?"

She smiled. "Only occasionally. Now, leave me alone so I can concentrate."

"Sure thing," he said grinning. He doused the remaining embers of his flame and stepped back a few feet.

After a few minutes she said, "well, this is interesting."

"What's that? Have you found out how to cut the other robots off?"

"No. I'm getting no information about these robots. What I did find though was how this portal that took us to the future was created. At least most of it." She shook her head. "It amazes me at what I now know. I'm like a real computer geek."

Kyle laughed. Marissa couldn't help but laugh as well.

Adam moved slowly down the tunnel. He aimed his flashlight at the floor to keep the illumination to a minimum. He hoped to keep his presence hidden for as long as he could. Stealth could be to his advantage, though with the improvement he had made on himself he wasn't sure it mattered. He was much stronger than his android brothers. Plus he had a much superior intellect as well as self-awareness. As much as he had tried to give these other artificials self-awareness he had failed. He still wasn't sure how he had come to be.

He continued down the hallway. He was amazed that he had not discovered this place. There was no mention of it on the computers upstairs and he had heard no one speak of this place. He wondered what was down here. Perhaps it was merely for utilities such as power and water. But that didn't make much sense. This place seemed way too big for what they would need. And why would this person, or persons be coming here? He considered this might just be a place to hide. Maybe. But it would have made more sense to continue walking until they were out of town.

He was curious about the small buildings he passed but didn't want to stop afraid that whoever he was following might get away.

He did stop at the small jail that Kyle and Marissa had stopped by a few minutes ago because his phone indicated that they had paused here for a minute. He stepped inside. The foul odor hit him at once but it didn't bother him. The smell was simply a

sensation that registered in his brain. He realized that this was something decaying but he had not set up his olfactory senses. This was purely an intellectual awareness.

Inside the building, he spotted the body of Lasiter. He remembered seeing him and hearing of his particular power but other than that he knew nothing else of him. He surmised that he had done something that Banter had disapproved of. Or, perhaps Banter had no more use of him. Neither of these reasons mattered to him.

He left the jail and followed the signal from his phone. He wondered what else was down here in the basement. He decided that after he disposed of whoever had managed to destroy one or more of his mechanical men he would take a look around this place. Maybe there was something here that was beneficial to him.

It only took him a few minutes before he came to the room where Kyle and Marissa were. He paused a few moments deciding on how he should approach this situation. He quickly made his decision and stepped into the room aiming his flashlight at the floor several feet in front of him.

Kyle and Marissa both turned to face Adam as he stepped into the room.

“Who are you?” Kyle asked in a rather angry tone. He raised his hands to his waist in a defensive mode though he wasn’t sure how much fire he could generate.

Adam pointed his light first at Kyle and then at Marissa. He recognized them both from his brief encounter with them when they had sneaked into the plant a month or so ago. He doubted they would recognize him. Though he acted somewhat human then, his movements and manners were still obviously mechanical. To make himself appear more human he had even created a thin layer of dark brown whiskers, like a day’s growth across his face.

“I’m head of security for this place. What are you two doing down here? You shouldn’t be here. This place is off-limits. You need to leave now!” He knew of the boy’s unique ability to manifest fire but wasn’t sure of how strong he could make it. He needed to be cautious. But also, knowing how he could recreate this boy’s power could be a real boon to his plans. Instead of outright killing the boy once he got close enough he would knock him out. As far as he knew the girl didn’t have any abilities so he would dispose of her as soon as the boy was unconscious. He figured this would be a clean job. There would be very little damage to the room if any.

He started into the room slowly heading toward Kyle. “How did you guys find this place?”

Kyle raised his hands ready to throw a fireball if necessary. “Stop,” he ordered the supposed guard. This didn’t feel right to him. What would a security guard be doing in a gutted-out place like this? And what’s more, this was not one of the security guards they had met earlier.

Adam paused as though giving in to the demand.

Kyle lowered his hands. He wanted to hold off as long as possible in creating a fireball in hopes that all he needed was a little rest.

Adam looked to Marissa. “What are you up to?” he asked. “You have no authority to be on these computers.”

“Oh yes, we do. Mister Banter himself asked that we do what we can to stop these rogue artificials.”

“I don’t think so. Mister Banter is dead. And I will not allow you to stop my artificials. They are not rogue. They are doing what they are supposed to do.”

“Your artificials?” She suddenly suspected who he was but her suspicion seemed impossible.

“Yes, they are mine. You can call me Adam.” Adam considered that he could end her right now but her cyber skills intrigued him. He wanted to know more. He took a quick step toward her when he was hit by a tightly wound fireball. It hit him on the right side of his head as he was facing Marissa. He stumbled backward. He briefly lost his sight, and his thinking was suddenly muddled. He wasn’t sure how to respond.

Kyle had fallen to his knees. He was breathing heavily. He wasn’t sure he could make another fireball. At least nothing close to that intensity. That fireball had drained him. He started to call Marissa, but before he could it seemed she had read his mind.

“One minute and I’ll have it,” she called to him.”

Kyle struggled to his feet. Adam seemed to be coming out of his stupor. Kyle readied himself to create another fireball but thought it best to wait until the last minute, to give his body a bit more time to gain some recovery.

At once Adam was pummeled by a chair Marissa wielded. Adam staggered backward, lost his balance, and fell to the floor.

Marissa grabbed her pistol and ran to Kyle. She put an arm around his shoulder to support him. “We have to go. The portal will only stay open for a few seconds.”

“What?” Kyle muttered as she turned him around. He could see the portal where it had been before, in the big window-like frame. “I don’t understand.”

“We have to go,” she insisted as she guided him toward the portal. He went with her. Though he had questions he trusted that she knew what she was doing.

They passed through the portal to a land pitted with hard ground and scattered weeds. The sun was midway in a sky dotted with strings of cottony white clouds.

Marissa turned to see Adam running toward the window. Just as he got to the frame it shrunk like a deflated balloon, and then it was gone.

“What just happened?” Kyle asked. “This is the same place we were before.”

“I couldn’t locate these robots on the computer. Either information for them is not there or it is well hidden. What I needed was more time but with this Adam android trying to stop us and you needing a recharge I didn’t see that happening. We weren’t going to be able to beat him. Since I had come across this time configuration, I thought that would be our best means of escape.”

“Okay. So, where, I mean when, are we?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No. If I had more time I might have been able to figure it out.”

“Do you have an approximation?”

“Judging from the data I was able to understand I would estimate we came back anywhere from one month to six months.”

“So, we came back before the robots revolted?”

“I think so.”

“What about this man, or android, Adam. Can he follow us back in time?”

“No. I planted a virus in the computer. It was scheduled to begin within a minute after the portal closed.”

“Good.”

“It’s a shame, though. I don’t think the people working for Banter knew what they had. I think it was just a freak accident that the technology had come to rest inside their

computer. I would have needed a lot more time to understand it. Now that the information has been erased it may be another hundred years before anyone comes across it. If ever.”

“How does that affect us being out of our timeline?”

“I don’t know. I think we should head back into town and see what time we are in and then decide what we need to do.”

Kyle nodded. “I guess we got another long walk ahead of us.”

“We do. Since we know where we’re going this time we can cut through to the highway and hopefully catch a ride.”

Instead of heading in a straight line as they had done before they made about a thirty-degree angle through the woods to connect with the highway sooner. It was a relief to see that there was some traffic on the road.

“Hope we can catch a ride,” Kyle said. “I’m tired of walking. Oh, and you might want to make sure the gun is hidden. Some people might get the wrong idea.”

“I’ve got it covered up.”

They walked along the side of the road with thumbs out, but for a while, it seemed no one was going to stop.

“With all that’s happening today,” Marissa began, “people are wary about picking up hitchhikers.”

“I usually don’t stop,” Kyle confessed. “Except when I’m drinking. Then I trust everybody.”

“You know that heavy drinking is going to kill you one day.”

“Yeah, one day.”

“That day will come by quicker than you think.”

“Hey, I’ve been sober for months now if you consider we went forward in time and then back in time.”

She laughed.

An old faded red Ford pick-up truck pulled over to the shoulder in front of them. “Broadside Plumbing” was painted on the doors. A bearded man stuck his head out the driver’s side window. “Where y’all headed?”

“Downtown,” Kyle called back as they started walking toward the truck.

“I can take you but you’ll have to ride in the bed with my ladder. My passenger seat is full of my crap.”

“No problem,” Kyle called back. Kyle and Marissa climbed into the bed of the truck squeezing to the side of the six-foot ladder.

It was a few minutes later when the driver pulled over to the side of the road. He had stopped just inside the downtown area.

“You two good?” the man asked as he peeked his head out the window.

“We’re good,” Kyle and Marissa answered as they stepped down from the truck.

“Thanks for the lift,” Kyle added.

“Not a problem,” the man said and drove away.

They spotted a newspaper box just outside a small antique shop.

“Let’s see where, eh I mean when we are,” Marissa said. She started ahead of Kyle toward the box.”

They didn’t need to get a paper. They could see the papers through the hard plastic casing.

“July twelfth,” Marissa announced.

“That’s like a day or two after I got here,” Kyle said.

“Yeah,” Marissa said sadly. “I was hoping we had arrived here before my dad was killed. I would have loved to have saved him, or if I couldn’t because of some time thing, to have had a little more time with him.”

“I’m sorry,” Kyle said as he put his arm around Marissa. “I would have loved to have met your father.”

Tears filled her eyes. She took a minute to wipe them. “Today was, or is, the first day I met you.” She grinned slightly. “I thought you were a drunkard.”

“Really?”

“But not anymore,” she quickly added.

“That’s okay, I thought you were a snob.”

She laughed. “Since that’s settled, what now?”

Kyle didn’t answer right away. He had noticed the big clock mounted on the wall inside the antique store. It was eight o’clock. It would be dark soon.

“We should try to stop Banter and his robots before they even contemplate their assault on the town. And we should probably stay away from places we went that day. We don’t know what will happen if we run into our other selves.”

Adam looked around. He didn’t know where he was. He was able to hold off the virus long enough for him to recreate the portal and slip through it. He thought that he would be right behind the two kids but they were nowhere in sight. He speculated that he might have slipped into a time that was an hour or two behind them. Perhaps longer. He hoped not. The two young ones could ruin his plans.

He wished he could have figured out how this time stream worked before the virus contaminated the entire system. If he were able to shift through time whenever he pleased there would be nothing to stop him.

But what was done was done. What he needed to do now was to find out what the two troublemakers are up to and to stop them. Before going through the portal he realized that he would be going back in time but he didn’t know how far.

He walked forward at a quick pace realizing that if he didn’t catch up with them in time they could wipe him out of existence. Despite his urgency, it still took him nearly a half hour to reach the highway into town. He felt that he desperately needed a ride into town since he didn’t know how far ahead of him Kyle and Marissa were.

“Deja vu,” Kyle said. They were heading up the same road that had earlier led them to the plant. They decided to check out the plant first to see how well it was guarded. If they could get inside the plant and destroy some of the essential elements that led to the creation of these robots, then this future calamity could be avoided.

“We don’t know when these robots were created,” Marissa noted. “They could have been around for a year or more. If these artificials are guarding the plant we won’t stand a chance.”

“They won’t be. When Kenneth came through the back of the plant they weren’t active, or at least according to Kenneth they didn’t seem to be. And when we entered the plant later on there was only one robot active, Adam, and it seemed subject to Banter’s commands.”

“And we’re earlier than either of these incidences,” Marissa added.

Adam managed to flag someone down. It was a rather nice-looking lady in her mid-thirties. She was smiling as she pulled over. It didn't surprise Adam. He knew that to the human eye he was a rather handsome man. Though he had not always looked like that. His face was rather common when Banter had created him. Banter had only wanted him for a combat role. Adam had realized that he could go so much further if he had good looks and a good personality.

The lady rolled down her passenger side window. "Where are you heading," she asked

Adam smiled at the lady. She was very pretty. Long luxurious black hair, curved around her smoothly chiseled face and down to her shoulders. Her eyes highlighted by dark eyeshadow were the color of green emeralds. Most men would have found their hearts beating faster in their chests at the sight of her. But not Adam. Feelings like that were never in his program and he didn't see any reason to add them assuming he could. From what he had learned these feelings would only be a nuisance and a negative to what he wanted to achieve.

He smiled back at her. He could tell by her expression that she was infatuated with his good looks and the deep tone of his voice. He quickly came up with a story.

"I'm heading back to the Tried plant."

"That's not much of a detour from where I'm going. Hop in."

Adam climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door.

"You work there at the plant?"

"Yes, I am a structural, slash, mechanical, engineer."

The lady put the car in drive and headed off. "So, what do you do?"

"For this job, I create the body, or structure, of AI's."

"Wow, that sounds interesting. What is a structural slash mechanical engineer doing walking down the street so far from the plant?"

"It's a little embarrassing."

"She looked at him. "Embarrassing? Why is that?"

"I guess I should tell you since you were kind enough to give me a ride."

She beamed at him.

"I had a rather nasty fight with my girlfriend last night. I thought that it was over. We just couldn't seem to agree on anything. But a little while ago she came by and wanted to take me to dinner so we could talk. I work late into the evening so she knew I would still be at the plant. Anyway, At first, I told her no but she was very persistent. I finally relented. I thought that we might talk it over and if we couldn't connect we would call it quits and go our separate ways."

"But I guess you two couldn't work it out?" She sounded somewhat gleeful.

"No. We argued all through the meal. And when she was driving me back to the plant we were still arguing. I guess it got too much for her. She stopped the car about a mile from where you found me and ordered me out."

"Oh, that's harsh. I couldn't do that." She placed a hand on his shoulder as if to assure him that she was a better person.

For a few moments, Adam thought how easy it would be to commandeer the woman's car. In a second he could snap the woman's neck, stop the car, and throw her body off to the side of the road. His only concern was that in doing so he may somehow adversely affect his future. It would probably be best if he stayed neutral. At least until he

had stopped the two troublemakers. He also wondered about the ramifications of the future him and the past him in the same timeline.

"I'm Janice," she said smiling at him.

"Adam."

"Nice to meet you, Adam."

"You too." He smiled as best he could. "Let me ask you something, Janice."

"Sure."

"What is today's date?"

"Eh, July twelfth."

"And the year?"

"The year?" She laughed. "Two thousand twenty-two. Are you messing with me?"

"A little. You just remind me of an earlier time when women were more lady-like."

"It is so peaceful and quiet," Marissa remarked. "It's just the opposite of how it was less than an hour ago. At least from our perspective. I don't even mind that no car has stopped for us." They had been walking for just over a half-hour. The light of day had nearly been washed from the sky. A refulgent moon and a sprinkling of stars were beginning to rise in the night sky.

"I know. I feel like I just woke up from a bad dream."

"You realize that for what we are planning to do if we are caught, we will be considered criminals instead of heroes."

Kyle shrugged. "I'm okay with that."

Marissa punched him on the arm and forced back a grin. "No. We don't want to be marked as criminals. We do this in a way that it can't be linked back to us."

"I don't think we have anything to worry about. I'm sure our past selves have good alibies for this time."

"Probably. You know If we can't get back to our timeline, we will need to leave town and start a new life."

"Really? Why is that?"

"I don't know what will happen if we should meet ourselves. Maybe nothing. Some science fiction novels predict total annihilation."

"Well, we don't want that."

"No, we don't." She sighed. "Hopefully with this newly charged brain of mine, I can figure it out when we get back to the computers in the basement."

He nodded.

They continued, mostly in silence, for the next fifteen minutes. They paused next to a strand of woods when the plant came into view. It was about fifty yards away. They both had the same idea and headed into the woods where they could avoid the outside cameras of the plant. Only a minute into the depth of the woods car lights briefly lit up their location. The car scooted down the road past them and into the parking lot of the plant.

"Let's check it out," Kyle said and started jogging through the brush. Marissa followed beside him. They stopped when they got to the edge of the woods.

They watched as the passenger side door of the car opened and a man got out.

"That's Adam," Kyle said. "I thought you said he couldn't follow us?"

"I didn't think he could. He must have stopped the virus somehow."

"Why hadn't he caught up to us sooner? He came in a car. We walked a good part of the way."

"I can only guess."

"Well?"

"He could have been only seconds behind us but traveled a little further back in time than we did. Perhaps it had something to do with the virus."

Adam was happy to get out of the car. Janice had talked nearly the entire trip about her job as a hairdresser and how caring a person she was. She also made it clear that she had broken up with her boyfriend a few months earlier.

"Thanks for the ride," Adam said.

"No problem. Hey, I was just wondering. Neither of us is with anyone right now maybe we can have dinner sometime."

"Sure. But you'll have to write out your number. I left my cell phone in the lab."

She quickly found some paper and a pen in her purse and wrote down her number.

He smiled as he received her number. "I'll call you later this evening."

"I'll be waiting," she answered and headed off.

Adam strode over to the front door of the plant. He tapped in the code on the keypad. The door clicked and he let himself in. He quickly shut off the alarm. The alarm had been set, so apparently, the plant had been shut down for the night. There should be nobody in the building.

It seemed that he had beat the two kids here. Which meant he had somehow passed them along the way or that he had arrived at a much different time than they had.

He headed to the back of the building to the room where he and the other artificials were held in capsule-like containers. He wondered if there would be a problem with him meeting himself in a different timeframe. He quickly dismissed the idea. At this time he had been nothing more than a machine. He had changed quite drastically. He was now more of a person than a machine.

He was relieved when he found all the artificials lined up against the wall in the small room with the feeding tube – as he called it – attached to them. For a moment he stared at himself. He was just a simple machine back then. He was much more than that now. Satisfied that none of them had been tampered with he moved to the nearest computer and signed in with Banter's account. After a minute several squares appeared on the page. Each of them was a camera shot from either inside or outside the building. All was clear, for now.

"With all the cameras about the building we should probably go around back, through the outbuilding as we did before," Kyle said.

"I think that Adam would have taken that route into account."

"Probably, but what choice do we have. Right now that's our best option."

She nodded. "I know." She sighed. "I had hoped that I could get to one of the computers that contained Adam's information, but I suspect that by now he's already set up some kind of super firewall on the computer to keep me out."

"Yeah, but you're some kind of genius when it comes to this stuff."

"And apparently, so is he."

"What if we could get to that computer room in the basement and you could take us back in time a little earlier?"

She chuckled. "I told you I haven't got all that time travel stuff figured out yet. I might wind up sending us back twenty years. That is if I could do it once again. I would

have to have a lot of alone time to figure it out. Then there's the danger that, should I succeed, considering these multiple time shifts, I might be damaging time itself if that is possible. That could be the end of ... I don't know ... maybe everything."

"Perhaps, just all of us being in this timeline for so long might be what fractures time."

She scrunched up her face as though in turmoil. "Yeah, that too. Seriously, I just want us to get back to our own time, Before we can even consider going through time again, however, we have to get past Adam."

"I know," Kyle said sadly.

"I would think that by now he would have had his robot buddies activated. At this point, they may be rather elementary but still deadly under his control."

Kyle stared over at the building as if he were looking through it. "I'll have to go through the tunnel and distract Adam and his legion. You go through the front door. With all the commotion that I'll cause you should be able to cross the floor to one of the computers in the big room and hope one of them connects to the artificials."

"That's suicide. You can't stand up against all of them."

He turned back to Marissa. "First of all these robots are not under his control. He's going to have to work on them which may take a long time. But even if it doesn't I only have to hold them back long enough for you to do what you have to do. Then it won't matter if I die because once you destroy the function of these artificials it will be as if none of this future we were a part of ever happened."

"We don't know that for sure. As far as I know, no one has ever time-traveled to be able to set up any ground rules. Besides there are too many other factors that can go wrong."

"I don't see any other option if we want to save the town. And, with Adam in this earlier time, he may start his rampage sooner and with a much more deadly outcome."

She slowly nodded. She placed her hands on the side of his face and kissed him on the lips. It caught him by surprise and he didn't know what to do. She pulled away after a moment. "Don't try to be a hero. Fight them at a distance. Make them come to you."

He nodded. "Why did you kiss me?"

She took a breath and looked deeply into his eyes. "In case I don't see you again." She looked to be on the verge of crying but didn't.

For just a moment he didn't know what to say. "Okay, then."

She looked toward the building. "How will I know when you start this distraction?"

"Judging from our experience much of their firepower is from conventional weapons incorporated in their construction. It should be loud enough for you to hear from the front door."

"Won't the camera pick me up when I get to the door?"

He thought a minute. "There are cameras on each corner. I will knock out both cameras on the front of the building with a fireball. At the nearest door, I will melt the lock so you can't be locked out. I will then rush over behind the far wall and wait. Adam or one of his robots should come out to check on the area. At that time I will rush around to the outbuilding. Once in the tunnel, I will start a commotion. If I am right the robots will only have conventional weapons, which means you should hear heavy gunfire. That will be your cue to enter through the front door. Adam will assume that what happened at the front of the building was just a diversion and concentrate his forces against me giving you enough time to get to one of the computers."

“Okay, I guess that could work.” She sounded a little unsure but couldn’t think of an alternative. “Hopefully You’ll only need to battle them for about fifteen minutes. If I can get to the right computer I believe I can sabotage the Adam in this timeline so that it will never advance to what it is now.”

“I guess we got a plan then.”

“Be careful. Keep your distance. You’re tough but you’re not invincible.”

“I will.” He gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “For luck.” He grinned and ran toward the plant.

She smiled briefly before the seriousness of what they faced washed over her.

CHAPTER 40

He had just taken care of the two cameras and the door and had rushed around to the outbuilding. He was out of breath and felt a keen nervousness rush through his body as he opened the door to the outbuilding. He ignited his right hand to a soft glow, enough to see the inside of the building. He half expected one of the artificials to be waiting on him but the old building was empty. He slowed his breathing as best he could as he slipped into the building and moved across the floor to where the hatch was located. He quickly moved all of the stuff that was on top of the entrance to the tunnel that was hiding it from view.

He extinguished his flame and gingerly descended the ladder. His body felt stiff not wanting to move, not wanting to face what he knew he had to. Finally, he reached the bottom. He didn't know why but with all that he had gone through he had not felt the kind of fear that was now slowly creeping upon him. Perhaps because this felt like the last stand. There was no backup and he felt the odds were against him. Assuming Adam was able to bring the other artificials to life. Which Kyle felt certain that he had already done.

He tried to allay his fears by telling himself that even if he should die he would come back once Marissa destroyed all the robots, including Adam, by erasing what was essentially their hard drive. Time would change so that the reign of terror that Adam created would never have happened.

If, however, Marissa failed, then ... He didn't want to think about that.

A solid blackness filled the tunnel before him. He started forward across the darkened floor but stopped after only a few feet. He considered that these artificials had some kind of night vision installed in their eyes. If so they would see him before he saw them. He allowed just a little flame to creep out from the tips of his right hand to lessen the advantage they might have.

He neared the small curve in the tunnel when he heard a slight noise like a momentary shuffle of feet on the concrete floor. Then, at once, silence pervaded the area once more. He paused a few moments to steady his nerves. He took a big breath then cautiously moved up enough to peek around the curve.

There were two of them standing a few feet apart. He figured the others were nearby, perhaps watching the front door. He made a small, tight fireball in his hands, hiding it behind his back. He needed the sound of gunfire to draw all of them away from the front door and to the tunnel including Adam so that Marissa could come unnoticed inside the building. But if, while doing so, he could disable one of them it would also increase his odds, though slightly, of survival.

He stuck his head around the corner and threw the fireball hoping to hit the artificial in the eyes where it was most vulnerable. He immediately pushed back around the corner as several bullets struck the wall barely missing his head.

The sound of the gunfire was not as great as he thought it would be. He had expected more shooters. He considered as well that his aim was true and that he had immobilized or destroyed one of the artificials. Either way, the sound of the gunfire was loud enough that it should draw the others to him and leave the front area clear for Marissa to enter.

A couple of minutes ago she had seen Adam open the front door. He had briefly looked around and then went back inside. She waited another minute then rushed to the door and waited.

When she heard the faint sound of gunfire, she took a deep, uneasy breath. She waited a couple of minutes until she thought that it should be clear. She slowly opened the door. It was very dark inside. She squinted straining to see any kind of movement or the hazy outline of an artificial. She saw no potential dangers. She was greatly relieved. It seemed that Kyle's plan was going to work out.

She recalled that there were several computers in this big room. But that didn't mean that they were all connected to these artificials. It may be that only one had the information that she needed. Because she had no idea which one, she would have to go from computer to computer until she found the right one.

She held the gun in her right hand as she began to cross the big room. The roar of gunfire could be heard not far from her. That was good. She determined that as long as there was gunfire Kyle was still alive.

She found her first computer at a desk nearly two-thirds of the way to the far wall. She sat down and quickly started it up. The password was simple. It only took her a couple of minutes to discover it. She quickly realized that the computer was blocked from going online. It was intended for in-house projects only. She sought data on the artificials but could only come up with general information.

"Don't waste your time," a man's voice said in the darkness. She turned to see the silhouette of a man standing about fifteen feet away. It was Adam. "These computers here don't contain the type of information you need. Only one computer contains the vital information about me and my mechanical brothers."

Marissa spun around in her chair and fired the two shots left in the gun at Adam. She didn't know if she had hit him. He seemed unfazed.

Her next thought was to run but before she could do so she was struck by a stream of electrical current that moved through the air like giant teeth. She writhed in pain for several moments before her heart gave out and she fell out of her seat and onto the floor. Adam lowered his hand and walked away.

Kyle backed up slowly, quietly down the tunnel toward the ladder watching for the one functioning artificial to round the corner. He had glimpsed the artificial he had hit with a fireball standing board upright as if it were a statue. His aim had been true. He wondered why the other artificials had not joined in on the fight. And where was Adam?

He was near the ladder that led up to the outbuilding when he stopped. The one artificial hadn't followed him around the corner. Could he have disabled both of them with the one fireball? Could Marissa have gotten to the computer already and sent a virus to the artificials destroying them all? He hoped that that was true, but it could mean other things as well, some not so good. He couldn't leave the tunnel without knowing.

Kyle traveled back down the tunnel and cautiously rounded the curve. He halted immediately and was about to throw a fireball. But there was no need. The one artificial he knew he had hit was still standing like a wax sculpture. The other one was lying on the concrete floor.

Someone suddenly entered the tunnel from behind the artificials.

"Well, hello son. It's nice meeting you again," Adam said.

"I am not your son. You are not even a real person."

“That’s awful hurtful. You know I had considered keeping you and your girlfriend alive. You two have powers that seem impossible for a human being to possess. I was curious about how that could happen. But, you two have been a lot of trouble for me.” He stepped over to the standing artificial and touched it. The artificial slumped over and fell to the floor.

“You two gave me only enough time to get two of these artificials programmed before you broke in. These artificials are basic, not yet supplied with many functions. None of them had ammo. I had to search the building to find a few bullets that Banter had put away for future use. For me, I don’t depend on ammo. I have my own perpetual defense system.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I could still let you live if you would allow me to examine you to determine how you can create fire from nothing. In the process, I can make you better than what you are.”

“No thank you. I’m beginning to like myself. Besides, I don’t think you’re going to be around much longer.”

Adam smiled. “You see this smile? It’s not automatic but I’m learning when it’s appropriate to use it. Right now it’s to ridicule your assumption.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means if you are relying on your girlfriend she can’t help you. I killed her.”

“No!” Kyle shouted. It felt as if his heart had fallen into his stomach. He quickly raised his right hand creating a fireball as he did. He threw it just as Adam sent his electrical charge through the air.

Adam ducked as he was expecting the ball of fire to come at him. The blaze flew past him to strike harmless against a concrete wall.

Kyle was hit by the electrical current and fell to the floor in spasms. Unlike Marrison, however, his ability to recover was much stronger. After a few moments, he was able to shrug off the spasms. Instead of trying to get up, he crawled across the floor and around the curve. He pushed up to a squat. He felt incredibly weak. He staggered to his feet. He didn’t think he could fight Adam right now. His thought was to escape, recover, and come back later.

He backed up angling toward the ladder, beginning to cry as he considered the fact that Marrison was dead.

Adam slowly rounded the corner. “You’re tougher than I thought. You’ve given me much to think about. I’m just wondering, though I’m not human if I could use what powers you have to make myself better. And could I take this power from you even if you’re dead?”

Kyle was recovering quickly but still wasn’t as strong as he was minutes ago. He thought that he might be able to construct one more good fireball. But Adam was quick on his feet. The chance of the fireball hitting him was slim. Something came to mind. There was something he had done earlier that had proved effective. It might be enough to catch Adam off his guard.

Kyle suddenly raised both hands to the sides of his hips. Instantly a stream of fire shot out from both hands. It was like a double-barrel flame thrower. Adam couldn’t escape unscathed. He was on fire as he darted back around the curve of the tunnel.

Kyle backed up quickly to the ladder. He hoped to make it up to the outbuilding before Adam recuperated from the fiery blast. He figured he had enough power to throw one more small fireball but didn’t have the power to create another flame thrower.

He made it almost to the top of the ladder when Adam came into view. Holding one hand to the ladder he raised his other hand to throw a fireball, but he was too late. That same electrical current caught him and he lost his balance and fell to the concrete floor. Because the distance was much further the current didn't hurt him as much. There were no spasms. But the fall had nearly knocked him out. He was struggling to stay conscious.

Adam came over to him and looked down. He shook his head. "What a waste."

With all his strength, and what lucidity he had left, Kyle lifted both hands and began the flame thrower maneuver once more. It was not nearly as hot as the first time he used it but he hoped that it would do the job.

Adam backed up quickly easily avoiding the flame. "A last dying effort. Very noble." Then he looked up at the ceiling where the flames were going and realized that the pipes were melting. It suddenly dawned on him what was happening, but it was too late.

When the metal pipe that contained the green liquid from the pond burst open it immediately exploded. Flames roared through the tunnel as if it were a firestorm, smothering Adam and instantly catching the building on fire. The blaze spread quickly. Fueled by the volatile green liquid it enveloped the downstairs and raced up to the second floor. The sprinkler system, which had not been upgraded for some time, was no match for the powerful flames. The flames struck other pyrogenic items upstairs and downstairs aiding the hungry blaze. Soon the entire building was ablaze.

EPILOGUE

A small crowd had shown up for the funeral. Many appeared to be only a few years older than Kyle himself. Students from the old man's teaching days, he supposed. Others were closer to the man's age. Probably friends and acquaintances.

The funeral was breaking up as Kyle made his way down the sloping ground. He spotted Marissa talking to a small, elderly bent-over lady with big orange glasses. Marissa was smiling with large tears welling up in her eyes.

Kyle came upon the ladies without either one of them seeming to notice his approach.

"He was such a nice man," the bent-over lady said. She smiled broadly revealing a perfect set of white dentures. She took Marissa's hand in hers. "We'll be praying for you, dear."

"Thank you," Marissa sniffled.

The woman slipped her hands out of Marissa's. "You call me if I can help you in any way."

"I will."

The lady nodded, turned, and began stepping slowly toward her fifty-year-old son waiting patiently a few yards away.

"Marissa," Kyle said.

"Yes?"

Kyle suddenly forgot what he was going to say.

Marissa looked back at him. She seemed confused. "Do I know you?"

"We ... we met ... before."

"Oh yes. At the bar. And somewhere else. The big house."

"The house? Eh yes. But it wasn't a house. It was the old carpet mill." An expression of puzzlement covered his face.

"We were there together." She looked as confused as ever. "How is that possible?"

He suddenly envisioned Adam standing over him and him shooting a stream of fire up at the pipes. And then the explosion. "You were in the building when it exploded, weren't you?"

Her face scrunched up as if she couldn't understand what he was saying. Then her face brightened a bit. "I was. He ... Adam, he shot me. It was like a taser. I fell out." She took a breath and looked directly at him. "What I'm starting to remember things."

"Me too. Like intermittent waves. Like a half-remembered dream coming back to me."

She suddenly wrapped her arms around him. "Oh, Kyle I'm so glad you're here. What happened to us? How did we get here? I couldn't find what I needed on the computer."

"We should go somewhere and talk about that." He smiled. "Not a bar."

"My hotel, the Plaza room sixteen in about an hour. I have to take care of some things at the church."

"Okay."

She kissed him on the cheek and headed to the limo parked at the edge of the cemetery.

Kyle watched her walk away. She was such a beautiful woman. He was thrilled to see her again but concerned that their trip back in time might have adversely affected their future.

“Well, well,” a voice said from behind him. “What brings you here?”

Kyle turned to his right to see Kenneth walking up to him.

“Come out of guilt or curiosity?”

“Kenneth!” Kyle said excitedly and wrapped his arms around Kenneth. “I am so glad to see you, buddy.”

“Let me go,” Kenneth struggled and pushed away from him. He moved his right hand close to his gun. “Are you crazy?”

“Sorry. It’s a long story and I’m not sure you’d understand.”

Kenneth started to speak when a tremendous roar washed over them. They both turned quickly toward the sound. Off in the distance, a large plume of smoke rose steadily into the air followed by tongues of flames that licked at the sky.

“I’ve got to go,” Kenneth said moving away from Kyle. “I’ll get with you later.”

Kyle felt sick. He was on the edge of passing out. For nearly a minute everything about him seemed to be losing its color and fading away like an old black and white photograph. Then, as quickly as it had assaulted him the condition faded away.

“People are going to think we’re a couple of pigs,” Marissa said. After Kyle had met her in her hotel room they decided they were hungry and went to a restaurant.

“Kyle finished eating a large fork full of food before speaking. “With all this running around and fighting and stuff, there is no telling when the last time we ate.”

“Except when we returned to this time I had eaten just a couple of hours before the funeral.”

“Yeah, same with me. I don’t have an answer.”

“Did you feel sick a little earlier when that explosion went off?”

“Yes, I did. For a moment I felt like I was going to disappear.”

She laughed. “Like back to the future?”

“I guess.”

“I just felt nauseous.”

“I hugged Kenneth earlier. I think I freaked him out.”

Marissa laughed. “I don’t think he or Blake will ever remember what happened. I think they would have had to have been there with us when the explosion happened.”

“That kind of makes sense. Have you heard any more news about the Tried building?”

She shook her head. “Only that the first floor was gutted and some of the second floor. There was no news of any androids being there or of the basement. I think Banter is using his influence to hide certain information from the public.”

“I would think so.”

“Do you think Banter will try to create another Adam?”

“Maybe, but it won’t be the same Adam. I think Adam gaining self-awareness was just a freak anomaly, not something Banter had done. I think it’s like a billion to one it would happen again.”

“You don’t think Banter had anything to do with Adam’s self-realization?”

“No. At least not intentionally.”

For a few minutes, they ate their meal in silence.

“Just before you arrived at my hotel room I checked to see if I still had my power.”

“Do you?”

“yes. I went on my computer and instantly I just knew everything about it. It was almost as if it were communicating with me.”

“I assume you’re good with that.”

“Yes, of course. And do you still have your powers?”

“I haven’t tried but I can feel that I do. But my circumstances are different. I’ve had my powers for years.”

She cast him a big smile. “Do you want to go back to my dad’s house? We have nothing to fear now.”

“Yes. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Oh, yeah. That too,” she said with a sly grin.

The End.