**All Fall Down by James A. DeVol copyright 2005 All rights Reserved**

It was that same damn dream again, but I couldn’t really remember it in detail. I knew it was there but the only thing I could remember was the climbing…well, that and there was a beautiful woman that I couldn’t remember, either. This had been going on now for weeks (or months?) and I was feeling that it was something that I needed to remember; that there was an importance to remember and put the pieces together. It just wouldn’t come.

So I just lay there in bed, waiting for the haze to retreat completely; something that seemed to take longer and longer as I got older. Even when I didn’t drink, I still got up feeling that I did, something that Mikey and I talked about at length. So why not drink? At least you had a little fun the night before. But, this was another Monday and the hard-wired responsibility took over and made me get moving.

It’s a pain in the ass to be fifty.

The pale green and grey walls always looked the same every morning. The floors always feel the same to your feet, the water in the shower feels the same on your skin. I think you get to the point that you don’t feel that stuff after a while…is it because you are fifty and have felt these feelings for so long? It would be cool to feel something new for a change. But I don’t really know what that would be.

I did know that the third job in 4 years waited for me as I tried to get moving: junior partner, junior fricking partner, working for people that hadn’t even been born yet when I graduated from college. At least I was working instead of spending what was left of my 401K. Well…I felt that way on the good days. On the bad ones, I just didn’t really care if I lived or died; is that the description of depression? If it is than everyone that I know is depressed. It was a giant pain in the ass to be the “old guy”. What was the alternative?

I didn’t really understand the whole of the work we did at the firm. I did know that when they hired me on that every aspect of my life had been probed by the F.B.I; they had almost rejected me for a little problem I had when I was younger and I had to take a couple of months off to make sure I cleaned up. I may be fifty but I still have my vices; I enjoy my vices, they are my friends and I depend on them as I do my real friends. I’ve always ignored the morality of this little part of the world; it’s artificial after all. I did know that there were times that we worked closely with local and federal officials and that the senior partners were treated with much deference when this happened. What did they have on these folks? I still didn’t understand why they hired me but it was good to have a paycheck coming in every two weeks. Maybe they needed some grey hair. Geez, was I just the token old guy? That’s a great thought for first thing in the morning.

My phone rang and I didn’t realize what it was for a moment. Is brushing your teeth a Zen-like experience? I shook out of the trance and ran to the living room to get it. Chad calling.

“What’s happening, Chad?”

“Squat, what’s up with you?”

“It’s 7:05 in the morning, what am I usually doing at this time?”

“That’s right, you’re working again. I get so used to you not working that I thought I’d call and see if you wanted to go to Detroit to see some friends.”

“I really do need to go to work Chad. It’s that responsibility thing that I have a hard time shaking.”

“Yeah, me too.” I could tell he was having a hell of time suppressing a laugh. “But I did shake it this morning and I’m heading out.”

“Well, I’ll think of you while I’m sitting in my office doing the 3 minutes of work I have to do today. Say hi to the guys for me.”

“Later.”

I looked at the phone and had to try not to call him back and say to the hell with work. But I didn’t really want to go to Detroit; it was just the lesser of two evils, neither of which was very attractive. I had to suppress my base philosophy this day: never do anything you do not want to do. I guess work was the only modifying corollary that I might allow. Maybe it only applied to leisure activities? Hey, I was still seeing how it fit my world.

I was feeling pretty adult when I locked the door and headed to the car. How can you be fifty and not feel like an adult? In my case pretty easily; most of my friends were in their 20’s and 30’s and we did the things that those ages do; drink too much, stay out too late, and pay for it the next day. The price gets higher the older you get, though, and I still felt to some of them I was the “weird old guy” that I had known when I was their age. I remembered that those folks were always on the periphery and could never really be part of the true circle of friends, would a 20 something really be friends with someone their parent’s age? And then there is the sex thing; I was still a guy in my head but in their heads I was the old guy that could give advice and be a confidant but was never considered to be a potential lover. I think that was the thing that troubled me most of all, especially when I saw some of the choices being made. Was it ego talking? Was there something wrong with me that I couldn’t see?

Who am I to pass judgment on their choices, anyway? I just know that the rejection still hurt like I was 16.

At least the weather was good. It had been cold but the February thaw had come and most of the snow was gone; it hadn’t rained enough to clean the salt and trash from the streets, though, and the whole city looked old and used. My car hadn’t fared well, either. I like to drive the old ones and Michigan winters went through them like acid. Leaving a shell that was like me I suppose; still serviceable on the inside but showing the ragged edges of too many years and not enough maintenance on the outside. Dependable. God, how I hate that word.

Traffic was normal as I drove out to the suburbs where our offices were located; a pretty non-descript low rise that would have been at home in Tulsa or Toledo. Who designs these things, anyway? Does anyone design them or do they just grow here like mushrooms?

 Lanning and Devereaux. I still couldn’t understand why they put my name on the firm. Especially when I was just a junior partner with only about 30 years of experience. I hope that doesn’t sound too sarcastic. No, I don’t.

I’ve even got a parking spot with my name on it. I think it’s my name anyway; they ran out of space so it reads J. Dever but the car has not been towed so it must be mine. One thing is for sure, the rest of the partners must make a lot more money than I do. There are way too many Corvettes and Mercedes in the other spots. Maybe they are company cars? As I said, I think they make a lot more than I do. Maybe I should ask for one. No, the license plates are from different states so they can’t be owned by the firm. Where do these guys live?

I didn’t bother to lock my car when I parked, there was not anything in it that anyone would want to steal except my pool cue and I think I remembered to put it in the trunk anyway. The remote release had broken a few weeks ago so there was not really any way to get to it except with the key and that only worked sometimes. Maybe I did need a new car? It was such a big pain buying one that I know that I would probably just adapt to its lessening capabilities as I had to my own. I do wear glasses to read now, you know?

As I walked up to the door of the office, I fumbled through my coat pockets looking for the electronic badge that would unlock the door and found it under my phone and eyeglass case. It was another of the mysteries of this company that I had a hard time understanding; In the year I’d been there I’d not seen anything that would explain the need for any type of security at all but all of the doors both on the exterior and interior were badge-keyed and kept locked. The projects that I had worked on were, for the most part, quite mundane with only one or two that even showed a whiff of secrecy. Oh, another strange thing was that most of the staff was armed.

Once I got through the front door and said hi to Angie at the front desk, I started my daily routine that had much to do with coffee…one at 8, one at 10, and another with the newspaper at lunch. It wasn’t so much that I liked coffee but that it helped to relieve the boredom and gave me a reason to move around and talk to people. I’ve found that I’ve started to grow a need to be social in my old age but I still need to control it, being social that is. I guess it goes with not having many friends in my younger years. That’s another story. The coffee helped keep me awake.

My assistant Kate came in with a few messages and a reminder that I had a monthly meeting with the senior partners. She dumped a stack of files that were about six inches thick on my desk that we would be covering in the meeting and I felt pretty good that I would have work to do for the day. It was a pain that they scheduled the meeting for 6 pm, though, since I had plans to meet up with some of the youngsters at about that time. It was Monday after all and we always met up at the Mill for beer and to catch up on what happened over the weekend. It was certainly a good way to start the week.

I got my first cup and started in on the files, mostly engineering summaries and consulting requests on business processes both from domestic and international companies and I hoped that at least one of them would give me an excuse to travel. I hadn’t been anywhere in almost 6 months and the last one had been to a little company in Virginia that seemed more interested in the paperwork I brought than anything I had to say. I didn’t really have anything to do with putting that presentation together and my participation appeared to be an afterthought when Robert Lanning fell ill just before the trip. I really had tried to get prepared for that meeting but as with many small companies, there was not much information available except that their business involved an importing relationship with China. But whose didn’t these days? I ended up giving them my take on how to streamline their purchasing function, had a nice lunch at one of the local restaurants and was back in town by 5:30. You need to travel by private jet.

I spent the rest of the morning going over the files that Kate had left and drinking more coffee than I had planned, most of them were quite boring and I was having a hard time staying awake since they only needed a notation here and an initial there. Not too challenging. The last one in the stack grabbed my attention and made me sit up straight in my chair. A building at a small firm in Virginia had collapsed without warning in the middle of the night three days before. No one was injured and the pictures showed a pile of rubble that was almost uniform in size and shape; none of the large slabs of concrete that you would expect to see and that I had seen hundreds of times from other sites. It looked more like the building had just come unglued and fell down. I wanted to see if there was more information available and was reaching for the phone when it rang with an outside call.

“Well….where the hell are you?”

“What time is it?” I answered remembering the lunch date that I had made last week with Bill.

“You’re late is what time it is.”

“Can we…….”

“ No way, you are not blowing me off again. Drag your butt out to the car and get over here before I get to my second beer.”

“Alright, okay….give me about ten minutes and I’ll be there.”

“Don’t make me come over there and get you….”

“Going out the door right now. Bye.”

I hung up the phone, closed the file and went out the door heading for Cleo’s. At least the day had gone fast to that point and I really did want to see Bill since it had been, what, 2 months since I’d seen him? He was one of my last friends from an earlier life in corporate America. Working 28 years for the same company was never going to happen for anyone anymore and I can say that I did miss it at times. Only at times, though. I still hated them for what they did to my life but also knew that I had survived it and was still alive. I don’t think it was corporate greed that had cost me my job; more like corporate stupidity. And stupidity could be forgiven.

It was such a nice day that I almost decided to walk the 15 minutes to Cleo’s but Bill was on his second beer and I didn’t want him to get too far ahead. Unbalances the conversation, you know? So I jumped in the car, opened the sunroof and took off. Cleo’s was one of those places that was trying very hard to be a neighborhood bar but without a neighborhood to support it. It was just another storefront in another strip mall but at least they were making the attempt; not just another clone of Friday’s or Bennigans’s. Not that there is anything wrong with that. I surely don’t want to be a snob about the places I go since quite a few of them should have been torn down long ago. The Dirty Shame comes quickly to mind.

Bill was waiting at our normal table (well, we did sit there before) and he had thoughtfully taken the seat that allowed me to see the rest of the room from mine. There was a cold Stroh’s at my place and he had the empties of his first two Heinie’s in front of him along with a quart glass of ice water.

“Long night last night?” I asked looking at the ice water and the empties.

“Longer than it should have been that’s for sure,” I could see the puffiness under his eyes and the faint hint of red that the Clear Eyes couldn’t mask.

“We actually golfed yesterday. You know what that means, a beer a hole for 18.”

“There are no courses open around here that I can think of this time of year,” I was a little confused.

“Who said the course was open? I can still go over fences with the best of them and we played three club; there’s no hockey so we had to find something to do.”

“Stan and Mark, I bet. Outside of me, they are the only ones that are crazy enough to do that.”

“Craig, too, but he lost 4 balls on the first two holes and got so pissed that he just drank from that point on. Only made it to nine and went home. We did find part of his shirt on the top of the fence and haven’t heard from him today. That should be a good story for later.”

Bill must have guessed that I wondered why I wasn’t invited to go along.

“I tried to call you but your phone was going straight to voicemail….”

“Oh, yeah, Karen and I had another ‘conversation’ that took quite a while. You know the drill, you’ve heard it how many? four or five times now? I want a relationship and she wants her space, that she is not sure what I want from her but it is surely not what she wants. Yadda, yadda.” It was the pattern that seemed to repeat itself in all of the interactions that I had with women; I gave and they took. At least that is what it looked like from my side of the eyes. Maybe I am being a little too harsh, I did get companionship but that is like kissing your sister; it’s a good thing but doesn’t keep you warm at night.

“You ARE an idiot when it comes to women. You’ve heard me say this many, many times. I’ll never understand it. I’ll say this for you, you are consistent but man, didn’t you ever think of trying anything different? Give up on the youngsters and Karen. You treated Julia and Sarah like queens, lent them money, gave them friendship, and hoped that something romantic would happen. What did you end up with? Being hurt and confused when they wanted to just be friends and yet you still keep putting in more and more effort. You are FIFTY years old and they will never see you any other way!”

“Yeah but what do you really think, Bill?” I just sat there, not stunned or surprised because I’d heard it all before. I just hated being reminded that I had a large capacity for stupidity when it came to women.

“I’m just getting tired of hearing it. You don’t like your life, change it.” He sat there and rubbed his temples slowly but there still was no color in his face.

We just sat for a few minutes while the waitress came to take our orders. The special was a Philly cheese steak with garlic fries that we both thought sounded good and Bill ordered another Heineken to go with my second Stroh’s. The conversation moved on to small talk about how things were going and if there was anything new. The answers were: going well and nothing new, and the critique of my sorry love life faded into the background as time passed. Things were still going well with Sarah and I was truly happy for him, especially after the nasty divorce from Karen. It hurt him to have only limited contact with the ex-stepson he had raised but that too was starting to heal.

We were getting ready to leave when the file on the collapsed building popped back into my head and I thought I’d see if Bill had heard anything about it.

“Nope, I had the news streamer on my computer all morning and I would have heard or seen something on it. Where was it? Virginia? I’ll take a look when I get back. The details sound kind of odd; you’d think that CNN or somebody would have picked up on it by now. Especially on a slow news day. Hey, I hope you’re not mad that I got into your shit earlier.”

“Bill, how can you get mad at anyone that is telling you the truth? I know I’m an idiot with women. All I can do is try to change things….hmmmm, how many times have you heard this before?” It had almost been turned into a set play that we did every time we saw each other. Maybe some day I could really change….nope, doubt it.

I walked back to my car and just in time; the weather had started to change and the sunny, fifty plus degrees of the morning was giving way to a darkening sky that had started to weep just a little. I thought briefly about taking the long way back to the office but I had already taken almost two hours with Bill and didn’t have a ready excuse why I would be gone longer. So I closed the sunroof, put on some Tommy Castro to give me a jolt of energy for what was looking like another boring afternoon and drove back just a little slower than normal. The two Stroh’s helped.

I got back in the middle of the afternoon lull. There were a few people around but most of them were moving quite slowly from lunch so I went back to my office to continue to prep for the monthly. I was looking forward to going over the rest of the Virginia file but when I looked for it on my desk it wasn’t where I’d left it. It wasn’t the first time something had disappeared on the swamp that I call my desk but I was sure that I’d left it on top. Maybe there had been more files brought in and put on top of it. I looked through the pile but the rest of the monthly information was still where I’d left it so I was just a little confused.

“Kate, did you take a file from my desk while I was out?”

“Nope, Jake. I was over in training until 11 and I went out to lunch about 12:30. Just got back a few minutes ago. Robert was looking for you around the time I left but I told him I thought you had lunch with a client.”

“Thanks for the cover. I’m missing a file that I was reading; maybe Robert needed it for something, I’ll call him to see.”

It was never a good thing when the senior partner was looking for you, especially when you were out drinking for lunch. In the year that I had been there I couldn’t remember him looking for me at all; he would usually send one of his assistants to summon me to the master’s chamber. This made me more than a little uneasy but I’d been unemployed before and I’m sure I would be again. Well, I may be exaggerating a little but only a little. I knew I wasn’t the best worker in the world and at times I would have fired me. Was I supposed to be doing more than I was? Probably.

I decided to take a little walk down to his office instead of phoning. I still kind of hate telephones, trauma from the days of cold-calling to sell soap for a well-known local company and from bill collectors looking for payments. Marilyn was at her desk but on the phone and computer at the same time so I leaned on the counter and just waited for her to come up for air. While I waited, I looked her over (I do appreciate women, you know) and thought that this is one woman that I wouldn’t want to cross. Well, that’s not entirely true. I love intelligent, challenging women and Marilyn was both; I couldn’t understand why she was not running the company instead of some of the idiots that were.

“Is he in?” I asked when she got off the phone.

“Why?” This was her normal response. I think she didn’t understand why I should even exist let alone ask any questions of her.

“I need to talk to him about some files for the monthly today.”

“No you don’t. Robert left about an hour ago and he’s cancelled the meeting.

“Wh…..”

“Don’t even ask. You know he doesn’t need a reason and I wouldn’t tell you anyway.”

“Whe….”

“If he wanted you to know where, he would have told you but that’s not very likely is it?”

I tried to think of a snappy comeback but when I had been standing there like a moron thinking for more than thirty seconds, I just gave up.

“Thanks.”

I walked back toward my office with a mixture of annoyance and elation. I was a partner, after all and I should be treated like one but that feeling was quickly extinguished by the fact that I didn’t have to stay for the monthly. Does everyone feel this good when meetings get cancelled? The afternoon had suddenly opened up to many possibilities and I could spend a while contemplating them since all of the work I had to do was no longer necessary. Who should I call? Chad was gone and Mikey was working later. Well, it was too early to leave anyway so I got another cup of coffee and went back to my office.

The Virginia collapse was still in the back of my mind so I thought I’d bring it to the front and do some research on the internet. I wondered if there could be such a big coincidence that it should be the same company that I’d visited a few months back. At least it may be nearby and I could put a “face with a name” and recognize the area. Yeah, I know, Virginia is a big state and the chances were quite slim but that’s what makes this stuff fun. It’s like when I was in Atlanta and visited CNN, I now recognize the set they use and can say I was there. What does it mean? Not a damn thing to most people I know.

I tried all of the websites that I normally use to get the news when I’m bored: The New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, and all of the others and did not see a thing. But is that so unusual? I wouldn’t expect CNN to cover a water main break here in GR. I didn’t even know exactly when the collapse happened so I could have been looking for old news that happened many cycles back and would have been dropped for the flavor of the day or a new, breaking development of another celebrity split-up. Brad and Jen ARE more important than death and destruction anyway. Took a long shot and googled for the generic building collapse and got a hit from the Norfolk paper that turned out to be some 80 year old that had driven through a drive through restaurant and it had pancaked on top of his car. Nothing else, in the USA that is.

Thankfully, it was moving toward 4 o’clock and getting close to the window that allowed us to make some flimsy excuse and leave early. Since all of the senior partners had left for the “undisclosed location”, I found myself in command and ordered myself to leave. Nifty trick. Told Kate that I would be available on my cell for emergencies to which she just laughed, shook he head and said have a great night.

“Out with the Twins tonight?”

“Nope, giving up on the youngsters completely,” I lied but there was some grain of truth to it. Bill’s admonishment earlier had sunk in somewhat and I promised myself that I would at least start to look for women that were my own age, Well, maybe not my age, geez, that would be OLD, but maybe nearer my age anyway.

# Chapter 2

The weather had gotten steadily worse since I had gotten back from lunch. It now resembled the true picture of February in Michigan: cold, cloudy skies with wisps of snow that that swirled as the traffic went by. I got to my car and tried the key in the door and, of course, the rain and mist from the morning had frozen the locks. The flame from my lighter was just enough to get the driver’s door open and I had to make a reminder to myself to get something to keep them from refreezing. Why the hell do I live here? There had to be places that this crap didn’t happen but then I wouldn’t have the spring or summer here either. You’d think I’d have gotten used to the weather after living here forever but the tease of the 50’s in the morning seemed to have wiped away my tolerance for the cold. Does even a little warm weather reset your internal thermostat?

As you can see, I live a pretty complicated life in my head.

The drive back to my apartment was kind of slick and I had to drive slower than normal; which is fast to most people. I found myself chanting “only six more weeks of winter” over and over to myself as the snow got heavier and the idiots got stupider (or more stupid to use the term properly). Do people have to learn how to drive again after every thaw? It sure seems like it…one notable in a Navigator blew by me (hey, I was already 15 over) but I DID get to wave at him as he tried to get out of the median where he’d spun it. I guess there is poetic justice, after all.

When I got back to my place, the same 850 square foot apartment I had lived in for the three years since Charlene and I split up, I was still thinking about that building in Virginia. Where had I seen something like that before? I read so many newspapers and magazines that they all started to blur together after a while. Or was that all in my head, too? I guess the bigger question was “why was it in a file that landed on my desk? What did we have to do with it, if anything? Why were we even interested in it?” I have cultivated my sense of paranoia to a very fine edge and it was starting to alarm me. Well, maybe not alarm but I was starting to get interested anyway. Can you tell I live a quite boring life? At least it gave me something to think about other than how much money I owed the IRS. And that also is another story for later.

Well….maybe now is the time to go over the IRS thing. You know how there is a penalty to pay when you take cash out of your 401K? Well, there is, ten percent over and above the taxes that they withhold. I didn’t really plan for that while I was unemployed and I guess I owe them around six grand, or at least I did for last year. Probably should pay them at some point so they don’t come knocking at my door. You do not want to piss these guys off.

I plugged my phone in and noticed that Bill had called me back but hadn’t left a message. I wasn’t so interested in finding out more about Virginia so I didn’t return his call. I really like being alone and I very seldom allowed any intrusion into that solitude. It was my habit to take a nap before I go out anyway. Hey, I am fifty after all. If you haven’t noticed by now, I am proud of that fact and I’m pretty comfortable inside this skin but there are a few things that I have learned that I think will unnerve some people. You don’t get more confident as you age and the things that concerned you at 25 will still concern you at fifty. Unless, of course, that I am just dead wrong about that and it’s just me. God, I hope not.

I did take that nap for about an hour and then got ready to go out. It was about 5:30 when I left my place to go to the Mill, early I know, but it was a school night and I didn’t want to feel like crap the next morning. I hoped to see a few of the guys (and girls) so I could run the Virginia deal by them. Or maybe I wouldn’t; the whole thing was probably in my head anyway and I didn’t need to look any crazier than I normally did. Didn’t need to get carried away. Sometimes I need to remind myself of that.

I was really surprised when I got downtown and I was able to find a parking spot on the first run through. GR is certainly not Chicago in that respect but with the new arena and the growth of night life, there were times that it was a pain to find something close. It doesn’t take much to make me happy; cold beer and a parking spot have been known to make me smile, sometimes a lot. That, and the fat one I smoked on the way down. Remember, I told you that I like my vices and that is surely one of them. You’ll find out about the rest of them eventually. It was good to see Chad’s truck parked a few spots away since that would mean at least one person to talk to.

Chad, and Mikey that is. Mike was a bartender at the Mill but more than that. Over time he had become one of my friends and was a ringleader of the friendships that I had formed since the breakup three years ago. Our group had followed him through GR as he moved from bar to bar and job to job. It was one of the tenets of the business; that you didn’t last long at any place. Mike was the first person that I had met in the stumbling months after Charlene and I had separated; a time when I didn’t know where to go or what to do so I stopped in the only bar that I knew. Mike happened to work there and introduced me to some of the others that I now call my friends. I don’t know if I should thank him for that or be pissed. It has been a challenging group to say the least. But still a hell of a lot more fun than I can remember having for a long, long time.

Was I in a rut? Yeah, probably. But it was the social thing coming out again. It felt good to have people call you and want to spend time with you. I just had to get my head around why. No, I don’t. I need to stop thinking about this stuff so much and just live. I guess it’s the Puritanical West Michigan upbringing coming out again; the guilt factor I think it’s called. It’s just the opposite of the old sixties dictum: “if it feels good do it”, in this area if it feels good, there must be something wrong with it and you should feel ashamed for doing it. Warped, I know.

I walked in the door, waved at a few of the servers and moved to “our” place at the end of the bar. Chad was in his normal spot, standing so he could see the rest of the front room and I took the last stool. The place was mostly empty (well, it was only about 6 pm) and the set-ups for the rest of the night were being done but with very little enthusiasm. I could understand that since, if you know anything about the bar business, you’d know that most of the wages of the people that work there come from tips; so they were not really getting paid much for this drudgery. Mike was on by himself for now but was not overworked, the dining room clearing out quickly, only the remnants of the happy hour crowd left. What was the attraction of the end of the bar? In every spot we followed Mike to we gravitated to one end of the bar or other. The view? The cliché of the gunfighters mentality came to mind and left just a quickly.

Mike moved down to our end of the bar as I sat down and had a weird smirk on his face.

“Hey, there were a couple of guys in here looking for you a few minutes ago.”

“Yeah, they looked like Feds.” Chad added “You pay those taxes yet?”

 “Yeah, right, you guys are full of crap. The last time it was a couple of beautiful women that were looking for me. And they turned out to be a couple of the homeless ones that hang out in front.”

I just looked at them and waited for the smiles to break.

“No, really. There were a couple of guys that look like Feds in here asking if anyone had seen you. You know that I would recognize Feds if I saw them.”

Chad had me there, if anyone in our circle could recognize cops or Feds it would be Chad. But that is another story for later, too.

“What did you say?”

“What the hell do you think we said…hadn’t seen you, couldn’t remember ever seeing you in here, who was that again?”

”Well, I don’t have a clue why anyone would be looking for me except the taxes but I haven’t even gotten a letter from them. The last time we did it all by mail.” I was a little puzzled by the personal attention but about then Kristin came in and by the time the first half-Stroh’s was gone I had put it out of my mind. Not completely, damn.

If you think that most of our activities revolve around some form of drinking you wouldn’t be wrong. Out at the bar, road trips, boating…hmmmm, yep, I guess it is a large part of what we do. But, since I didn’t drink hardly at all in my twenty-five years of marriage I have a lot of liver to give don’t I? Is using up your liver linear or does it get worse as you age? I mean if I am fifty is there a conversion factor that I should be using that would normalize it to when you are thirty? Something like a thirty year old can drink 1.5 beers to every one that I drink for the same damage? I wonder how I can find that out? Should I find that out? Or is ignorance bliss?

I told you I have a very active life in my head.

“Hey, hey,” I felt someone’s hand on my shoulder and slowly came back to reality.

“What’s happenin’, Micah?”

“Where the heck were you?”

“Just not paying attention, you know that’s pretty normal with me.”

 Mike brought a Stroh’s down and sat it in front of Micah. Yeah, we all drink Stroh’s; at least it’s not Bud Light. The group had continued to grow over the last hour or so and there were around 10 of us regulars in various serial conversations with some strangers getting sucked into them at times. We were paying the overhead for the Mill as always.

It was getting on toward 9 o’clock and I was running out of steam. After about 4 beers (yeah, I’m a lightweight) I was ready to go home and finish off the night with a couple of brandy manhattans. Well. I did tell you we drink too much, didn’t I? The couch and TV were calling my name so I said my goodbyes and headed out into the cold. Yes, you remember it is still February in Michigan but if you dress for it it is not so bad. The only thing is that with an old car, the windows fog up in the cold and you can’t really see until you get a few miles down the road. You don’t need to see anyway, do you?

Immediately after I walked out I remembered that I forgot to ask about the Virginia thing; that was a little tortured but you know what I mean. Probably for the best but the idea that the feds were looking for me still sent a chill that was in addition to the weather. Made it VERY cold. Now I knew I was not going to sleep.

I got home to my apartment in about 15 minutes (yes, I know it should take 25) and when I pulled into my normal spot I noticed a white Crown Vic backed into the space across the lot with it’s motor running. Panic started to set in and I debated even going into my apartment. Were they waiting for me? What the hell was going on? The local cops too? Until I remembered that I had a new neighbor that drove an old county sheriffs car; it shook me somewhat and I’ll admit that I had a little tremor in my hands when I unlocked my door. That would take a big brandy man to erase and I smiled a little to have a good excuse, not that I needed one you understand.

# Chapter 3

As I expected, I didn’t sleep worth a damn but that was not very unusual. I couldn’t remember getting a good night’s sleep; maybe it was the lack of sex. I guess that’s as good a reason as any and it did give me something to look forward to. Not that there were any prospects on the horizon but I was not going to give up hope any time soon. Hey, stranger things have happened. I haven’t described what I look like but I have hope that I’m not ugly. What if I am? Is that a question you can ask people and would you expect your friends to be honest? Damn, another bad start to a day. At least I was not hung-over. Well, not much anyway.

I had remembered to make coffee the night before and all I had to do was turn the coffee maker on to have some for the ride in to work. Well, I forgot to do it until after my shower so I was running a few minutes late, not that it mattered to Lanning and Devereaux. I got the feeling most days that they wouldn’t notice if I never showed up but one of the partners (me) would. I still have that work ethic that you should work to get paid but it was slowly getting extinguished by the fact that I could not connect any of my efforts to the success of the company. I had never seen billing to any customers so I really didn’t know how profitable the company was or even what we charged. For me I think there was a little of “if it’s not broke, don’t fix it” going on; and really, my job IS pretty easy. Not something you’d want to give up on a whim.

That dream was back again last night. This time I remembered more about it, more than just the climbing. I know we were being chased by someone and the setting was devoid of technology; unless you can call getting shot at with longbows technology. And the woman was not really beautiful but one of those Jennifer Garner types (at least the types of roles she played). Dangerous, someone that you’d want at your back. I’m beginning to think that this is like one of those old serials, well, I’M not even old enough to have seen those but I’ve read about them. One thing I will say and that I’ve always felt; dreams are like free movies and I like them even when I die in them. Yeah…I don’t believe the old saw that if you die in your dream you die in real life. This isn’t the Matrix, you know.

I’ll skip the description of the ride in this morning. It’s the same every morning and is not really that interesting to me so I’m sure it wouldn’t be to you. I don’t even remember it most mornings. Some days it’s like I just wake up and I’m there. You know that feeling, when you are driving and you look up and wonder if the stoplight that you just drove through was green or red? Autopilot is the term I think. I guess it’s enough to say that I did get there and early as usual.

Once I made coffee, got my first cup, and settled in, the Virginia thing came back to the front of my mind again and since I didn’t really have anything else to do I thought I’d try to find out more about it. Still nothing on the Internet so I decided to see if there was anything else in the company files that would shed some light on it. Luckily, I was still the only partner in the office at that time and for some reason they gave me a master key that would fit every lock in the place. The file I was looking for was from the engineering section (I think), so I walked down to the other end of our suite to where the geeks sat (hey, I can call them that because I am one) to get a look before anyone else came in. I vaguely felt that I was doing something wrong, just kind of an uneasy feeling but kind of exciting, too. You know you have to take your excitement where you can get it. Especially at my age.

The lights were still on when I opened the door and the room had that smell of too many computers running. I had never been in the section before other than when they showed me around when they hired me and I had to just stand and look to get an idea of where everything was. I know what you’re thinking, what the hell have I been doing for the last year to not have visited these guys. After all, it’s not like this office is a million square feet. It’s a good question that I really don’t have an answer for.

The end of the room just inside the door held a row of tall Steelcase file cabinets that I assumed held files like the one I was looking for. On top of the one nearest the door was what looked like an inbasket that was full of circulations that were waiting to be put away. I thought it was as good a place as any to start since the file cabinets were locked, so I picked up the stack and started thumbing through quickly for a reason I didn’t know. About eight files down I found the one I was looking for but, unconsciously, I kept looking at the rest of the ones in the pile. I think my brain was still a little fuzzy from the night before because even when I saw there were three other collapses that matched the first one (even one in GR), it didn’t register for a few seconds. All of the pictures could have been the same one from different angles; all of the buildings looked like they had just come unglued and the rubble had the same strange uniformity. This was way too weird to be a coincidence wasn’t it?

I knew that there was one thing I had to do (I don’t know how I knew it) and that was to get copies of these files before anyone else came in. I didn’t want to go all the way back to my office to do it but I didn’t see a copier near the door so I had to go deeper into the room to look around for one. I took a couple of steps and stopped, should I lock the door from the inside or not? Would that make it look like I knew I was doing something wrong? Was I doing something wrong? I was a partner, after all and I should be able to go where I want when I want. I didn’t really want to explain my being there either, though. Geez…just stop thinking and do something.

I left the door unlocked and cracked it a bit so it would look like I had nothing to hide and found the copier in a cube near the other end of the office. It was on but in “sleep mode” and when I hit the start button it gave me a warming up ready to copy in 3 minutes notice. I swear that three minutes was more like four (or it could have been five even) and when it started the noise it made reminded me of a Huey landing. You remember the Huey? That big helicopter they used in Vietnam. If you don’t then I can’t help you. Let’s just say it was VERY loud. I finished the copies (or the machine did), turned the copier off and restarted it. I’m not stupid, you know, if anyone came in after I left and happened to use the copier, it would be back at warming up and I hoped they wouldn’t think anything of it. I told you I had a well-honed sense of paranoia.

I put the files back in the order that I thought they were in when I picked them up but wasn’t sure. I didn’t think that mattered anyway. Pulled the door closed and locked it. There was still no one around in that end of the building. What time do these guys start anyway? I use guys in the generic here, our engineering staff was more than fifty percent women and there was no difference in what we paid them versus the men just in case you were curious. Did that sound defensive? This day at least it was in my favor that they started late.

I walked nonchalantly back toward my office. No, I wasn’t whistling as I walked but tried to make sure that I didn’t look unusual. Well, that’s kind of tough because I am, unusual, that is. I had to remember that I was the only one that knew what I had just done and it only looked strange from my side of the eyes. Damn! Were there cameras in that office? I didn’t know and felt the panic rise as I thought about what could happen if there were. I had no clue what to DO if there were, though. I turned and ran back to the engineering section, and no, I didn’t fumble with my key or any of that. I opened the door and took a quick look around at the ceiling (I assumed that’s where the cameras would be), checked the walls and didn’t see anything. I can’t say that relief flooded over me but I did feel better as I locked the door and started to my office, again.

When I got back to my office I stapled the files together, slid the ones I hadn’t seen before in an unmarked manila folder and put them in the briefcase that had been a gift from my daughter a few years back. A really cool, black leather Kenneth Cole Reaction (yeah, I know, I’m dropping names) that went everywhere with me. Oh, the daughter. That’s another story for later and at that time I’ll fill you in on my sons, too. I have three of those. I know, in these days four children is a BIG family. It started out as two but then Charlene wanted another daughter so Jennifer would have a sister and we tried two more times. My fault, I guess, if you know anything about conception.

But, it’s not the right time to do that. Fill you in, that is, or teach about conception.

The timing of my little excursion into espionage couldn’t have been better. A few minutes after I sat down in my office, the first few of the rest of the firm started to walk by and file into their offices, cubes or whatever you want to call them. I was lucky enough to have my own office with a door but had lived much of my career in those same cubes. I just loved my door! I didn’t want to close it since it had been closed maybe twice in the time that I had worked there and that would only draw attention to me that I didn’t want right now. I DO like attention, though, especially from young women but that didn’t happen very often. I still wonder if I’m ugly or not. Maybe I should find a blind woman to date.

There was not much extra in the Virginia file that I hadn’t seen before. I even remembered most of it which was quite a trick for an old guy. There were some notations about ohmage or wattage or something like that along with what looked like map coordinates but that had extra numbers that didn’t really fit. The margins also had some handwritten notations that looked like they were in Robert’s scrawl (his was even worse than mine) but confused me since they said “Okay, good!!” The double exclamation point was like him standing up to cheer. You have to know the guy.

 One other thing, it was NOT the same building that I had visited a few months back. It WAS the one next door to it, though. For some reason I found myself hoping that the building had been empty at the time.

The rest of the file was taken up with an e-mail discussion of some sort of electrode material (what was the best mix of palladium to platinum was the main thread) and insertion depths and placements that would give the best yield. Yield of what was not explained and I gathered from the notes that there were some manufacturing problems that still had to be overcome. They talked about power supplies and trucks too but there was no detail. I wondered why I hadn’t heard about any of this before since we were a small enough firm that there should be difficulty in keeping any secrets. I was beginning to have a new respect for the discipline of my co-workers.

A new thought popped into my head about the “feds” that had been looking for me the night before. How hard could it be for them to find me? Why hadn’t they come out here when they must know where I work? Would I find them waiting for me in the parking lot when I went out to lunch? Well, that’s more than one thought so sue me. They all have the same common theme so you could consider them one thought. Can’t you? My life had become more complicated in the last two days and I don’t know if I liked it very much. There is something to be said for routine. I think you know what that is.

I sat there with the thousand yard stare that had served me well over the years in helping me to focus my thoughts. I used it to prevent thoughts, too, to let my mind kind of unconsciously mix information that it had taken in and possible come up with new ways of seeing things and how they fit together. This time, though, there were no results. I came out of it in exactly the place I had been before. That happens sometimes and it is usually a cue to just stop thinking for a while. So I did. My coffee was cold (I don’t see how anyone can drink iced coffee, it’s just not right, like cold soup) so I went out to the machine to get another one and stretch a little. You’ll find that getting up and walking around gets more important as you get older, maybe just to prove that you can still do it. I find that I creak less if I do it occasionally. I looked outside toward the parking lot and saw that Robert’s car (and all of the rest of the partner’s) was not in his spot. In fact it looked like half of the lot was empty. Was there a holiday that no one had told me about?

When I got back I checked my calendar to see if there were meetings that I was missing. Nope. I was a little curious so I checked Robert’s calendar and those of a few of the other department heads and didn’t find any meetings at all. If you know anything about corporate America you’ll know that it runs on meetings. I don’t think anyone can make a decision without holding a meeting first. One of the best ones that I had ever attended was a meeting to tell us that we were having too many meetings. And then they scheduled meetings for a project to reduce the number of meetings that were held. I am not making this up! It WAS odd that there was a whole week without one in it, though. Not that I mind.

I ran into Kate in the hall going back to my office (not literally, smartass) and luckily thought not to ask her any more about the Virginia file. I don’t know why but I didn’t want to call any more attention to the fact that I had seen it. Just some uneasiness I guess. I CAN think on my feet sometimes.

“Well, you look pretty good for an old guy that stayed out late last night.”

“I look pretty good for an old guy period,” I said back to her as we passed.

“Smartass.”

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Got anything for me to do today? I know YOU don’t have anything to do but I like to earn my paycheck.”

“Nope. I do have a question for you, though. Where the hell is everyone? There can’t be more than ten cars in the lot and there are no meetings scheduled all week.”

“Don’t know. Nobody tells me anything either. Could it be that I work for you?” Her voice had traces of sarcasm but more of truth. “I do know that I saw them all take off out of her in a group yesterday and haven’t seen them since.”

“Can you check with Marilyn and see if she knows anything?”

“No, she’s out for the next two days, taking vacation and she asked me to cover her e-mail for her.”

“Well, if you hear anything, will you let me know? I’m just curious about this and want to know if I should be looking for a new job.” I wasn’t completely joking.

“Sure, but only if you’ll do the same.”

“You got it.”

I turned and walked back into my office with the now not too hot cup of coffee still in my hand. I do have an active imagination but there were coincidences piling up that pointed to something. Who knew what, though? Maybe I was just bored and reading way too much into this stuff. Although, if I would have paid attention at my last job I would have seen the end of my position coming before the e-mail that drove in the last nail. Yeah, that’s right; they used e-mails to axe people. I didn’t believe it either. I think they just didn’t have the guts to do it in person. Shouldn’t you be able to be fired by a human? It may make it hard enough that they wouldn’t do it so often. Or at least use it as a last resort. That whole thing made me very gun-shy and aware of the things going on around me. Probably should get the resume updated, huh?

I put the Virginia file in my briefcase with the others and then just sat there and started to think. I can do that sometimes. Not much about the files, though, but more about where I wanted to go for lunch. So now you know, I’m not that deep. It was 9:30 after all and once I finished with the stolen files (were they stolen?) I really didn’t have anything else to do. Who could I call? Or E-mail? One odd thing about my friends was that they were all pretty low-tech. None of them had e-mail accounts; some of them didn’t even have computers. So that left me with Karen and after the blowup Sunday, that option was even out. Or should I e-mail her anyway? I told you I was an idiot when it comes to women.

The phone rang (not my cell) and I actually had to do some work for about five minutes. Someone trying to set up an appointment to see me about a job that we had quoted on a few months back. I didn’t even remember it although I acted like I did. I think that is one of the most important things about being an executive; act like you know what you’re doing and most of the time people will believe it. Is that the phrase “baffle them with bullshit?” I made a note to actually look at the file before the meeting next Wednesday. I don’t want to sound like I’m just this huge slacker, maybe a medium one, but when I get bored with a job, when it stops challenging me I seem to adjust my efforts to match the minimum requirements. I’ll bet you do too.

I thought my calls were supposed to go through Kate. Why did it come direct?

I won’t bore you with the rest of the day. Lunch, a phone call, and a couple of e-mails and it was 4 o’clock and I was out of there. Oh, and I DIDN’T e-mail Karen, a small victory. None of the partners had shown up but once it was the end of the day it really stopped mattering. Tuesday night is a stay home night (I can’t go out and drink every night, can I?) normally and I usually cook so I’ll have leftovers the rest of the week. Do you want to hear about the trip home or the grocery store? I didn’t think so. I don’t even want to hear about it. I made a rosemary chicken with garlic mashed potatos and Chinese vegetables. One hint, whole chickens are very cheap so get some. My apartment keeps the aroma of whatever I cook for a long time and this is one of my favorites so I had that to look forward to as well. Chicken is supposed to be good for you, too, but I don’t really pay much attention to that stuff anyway. I eat what I want when I want and enjoy it immensely. I would hate to live to be ninety without being able to savor a standing rib roast. Or bacon, or gravy…you get the idea.

Spent the rest of the night watching TV and finishing the bottle of wine from dinner and a re-run of the X-files made me think about the Feds again. Since I’m sure they knew where I lived (they found me for last years taxes after all) I was beginning to think that it was probably just some of my smartass friends screwing with me. I couldn’t wait to find out who since you know paybacks are hell. About 10 or so I was getting ready to crash and started to wonder if there was anything I could do to make sure that I had the dream again. I hadn’t been to a movie in quite a while and they were still pretty good entertainment. And cheap, too, not that I minded spending money but I liked spending it on my vices instead. Nope, not the time to explain the vices. Not yet, anyway. Be patient.

# Chapter 4

She wasn’t really a Jennifer Garner type after all. More of a La Femme Nikita type or even a Wyoming Knott type. You don’t know who Wyoming Knott is? Not my fault. Go read “The Moon is a Harsh Mistress” by Robert Heinlein to get the gist of who she is. Of course, the dream came back again last night. Are you getting bored with this yet? I think it has something to do with this whole mess so bear with me as I sort it out as I go along. Do real life events influence your dreams or is it the opposite? Oh, one thing, I liked the show “La Femme Nikita” so much that I named my daughter’s cat after the primary character. The cat hates everyone. That doesn’t have anything to do with this but I thought you might like to know. Do I have a persecution complex? You’d think so after what I’ve told you about this dream and the rest of the happenings in my life. You decide.

There wasn’t much action last night, in the dream, that is. More hiding than anything else and I think we’re out of range of the longbows since I can’t remember the noise that an arrow makes in this part. I can’t remember any pain, either, so that is a good sign. Maybe it’s not going anywhere. I guess we’ll have to wait and see.

I did remember to take the copied files out of my briefcase before I started off to work. You don’t want hear about the morning routine again I’ll bet so I’ll skip that today. It is the same everyday after all and from the time I wake up until I go out the door is only about 14 minutes. Doesn’t leave a lot of time for improvisation. The paranoia was still active so I decided to try to hide them but that was quite difficult since this place is so small. One other thing, I live a pretty stripped down life, I bought my first piece of furniture just a couple of months ago (yeah…after 3 years here, that IS pretty strange), I have a couch now but I knew that wasn’t going to help. My other furniture was a pair of plastic lawn chairs that are now on my tiny patio. You know the type.

Since the files were only about six pages total I had a few options; the furnace room was a prime suspect along with my laundry nook but I settled on my cd player. It’s a Sony, five-disc with a drawer that slides out of the front of the machine and I just opened it, laid the papers on the tray and closed it. I had never seen anyone use that method on TV and I unplugged it to make sure that that there was no way it could be opened by accident. Would it being unplugged point someone to it? I HAVE to stop over thinking things. I should have taken the time to read through the new files last night but I was just in too lazy a mood and really, I had forgotten that they were even here. Why was I even hiding them? There’s that active life in my head taking over again.

I decided to take the long way into work and stop for a cup of coffee. Normally I make my own as you know but today I felt like something different. One of those frou-frou things like a latte or something. I didn’t even know what to ask for so I just ordered a regular coffee but used real cream in it. Yep…I’m in a rut. I had the Free Press and Tribune with me and sat down for a few minutes to look at the headlines and relax.

My cellphone rang and it startled the hell out of me. It was never good to have that phone ring this early in the morning; it usually meant that there was some emergency that I would have to deal with. The reason I got the phone a few years back was for an emergency phone (at least that’s what I told Charlene) where the kids would be able to reach me. This was before Charlene and I split but the real reason was so I could get calls from Karen. Yes that means I was having an affair with her. I know, I’m not the shining person that you thought, huh? I guess this would be as good a time as any to get that out in the open. I’m not making excuses, well, they are kind of excuses but you need to see my side of it too.

Well, back when I was working on my master’s degree (good looking and educated, too) Karen walked in to the classroom and it hit me like a thunderbolt. I don’t know if there is love at first sight but I couldn’t take my eyes off her and she took my breath away. A double cliché, I get two points. By some chance we were assigned to be partners on our class project, and over a couple of months started to grow a relationship or more a friendship. Then she invited me to her house on a Sunday afternoon to just hang out for a while, drink a few beers and indulge in another of my favorite vices. No, it’s not sex. We were sitting on her couch, I remember her old sweats that had a hole in the knee and she leaned over and kissed me. Everything about that kiss, the taste, the texture, and the excitement that I felt, is still there as if it was yesterday. My marriage had been so bad for so long that I didn’t feel any guilt at all, even being raised in the guilt capital of the world. That was six years ago. If you remember, it didn’t end up so well.

It was Kate on the phone not one of the boys.

“Jake, I think it would be a good idea if you took a vacation day today,” there was some concern in her voice that I didn’t her very often.

“All of the partners are back and there are bunches of dark suits that have been here since I pulled up. They asked about you and I’ve already told them that you weren’t going to be in. But they didn’t seem too concerned so I don’t know what that means if it means anything. They didn’t call you did they?”

“I haven’t heard a word until you called me. Where have they been, the engineering section? “

“Nope, Robert’s office and the main conference room mostly. Why did you think they’d be I engineering?”

“It’s nothing, really. I’ll tell you later. Maybe I’ll come in and just see what is going on; there could be something that I can help with.” The deal with the Virginia file was still too vague to share with anyone.

“Okay, but you are going to explain that you decided to skip the vac day; I don’t want it to look like I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Sure, not a problem. Maybe I’ll tell them that I just stopped in to get some work to do while I’m gone. It could be big brownie points.”

“Great, turn slacking into a positive. Bye.”

I could hear a tiny bit of sarcasm in her voice.

I had the counter girl put the rest of my coffee in a paper cup and headed out to my car still thinking about the conversation with Kate. You know I’m not too good with uncertainty so I had to go in and find out what was going on. That was a lot easier than waiting until tomorrow and I try to do the easiest thing most of the time. Why put in extra effort or worry when you don’t need to? The worst that could happen was they could find out that I pinched the files and fire me. I wanted to have the summer off anyway.

It was a Steely Dan morning and I had a little melancholy welling up so that’s who I put in the cd player on the way in to work. Their themes of loss, loneliness, and regret seemed to fit the cold grey morning that had no color; everything seemed to be a monotone, including my mood. I was still uneasy about what was going on at the firm and that was in addition to the problems in my personal life that you don’t know about. Should I tell you about that now? I guess so. I really don’t have a personal life at this point, you know about the end with Karen but not about my infatuation with one particular youngster. Nope, not going to go into that now, maybe later. You can get a pretty good idea of how I feel by listening to “Hey Nineteen”, or, for more of the things I do for this person, “Black Cow” from Aja. Hey, life isn’t easy; you have to do a little work for understanding at times. I’ll explain it later if you don’t want to do the work.

Are you getting an idea of who I really am from these little tidbits of information? Do you care? Skip this if you don’t. Let’s brush it in broad stokes. I am fifty. That probably puts some ideas in your head but I have to tell you that I am not a “normal” fifty year old; at least I feel that way. Just came out of along term marriage that had been unhappy for 15 years. Was it all Charlene’s fault? No, at least I feel that way now but at first I blamed her for the whole thing. I guess I had gotten to the point that I couldn’t remember being happy and just wanted the opportunity. At the time I was seeing Karen (I told you I wasn’t a saint) and no matter how much I protested at the time, our relationship did have an effect on the decision. Now comes the great big slice of irony: a week after I moved out Karen dumped me for what was the next to the last time. I had the “deep blacks” from that for a long time. I’m now just trying to make a life by selecting who my friends are and what I do, this time making decisions instead of letting things happen by accident. Not as easy as I expected it to be.

Well, if that didn’t bring you down too far we can keep going.

I pulled into the lot at work at least a little uplifted from listening to Aja on the way in. Yep, took my own advice. There WAS more activity than normal and some idiot had parked in my spot so I had to leave my car in the restaurant next door and walk the hundred or so yards to the door. It really didn’t bother me that much to have to walk, it felt good actually. I got to my office and confirmed what Kate had told me; there were a lot of dark suits around and the side chair was missing from where it normally sat. That must have been a big meeting if they we scavenging chairs. At least my desk chair was still there so I had a place to sit.

The message light was shining on my phone so I checked them, expecting to have one from Robert but it wasn’t there, just routine stuff that I could wait to deal with or ignore since none of it was very important. The thought popped into my head again that I’m not earning my money, which from what I’ve told you, you probably believe too. Maybe I’m just lucky. I decided to force the issue about why Robert was looking for me and headed toward his office but found him with a bunch of the “suits” in the main conference room.

“Jake, come in,” he said as I caught his attention from the doorway.

“I thought you were out on vacation today.”

“I came in to pick up some things to work on while I was out,” Brownie points come here. “I understand you were looking for me?”

“Yes I am, please close the door and sit down.”

Here comes the axe. The attention of all of the partners and the suits focused on me and I was not comfortable, there were no smiles on any of the faces but at least they were looking at me. The other times I was fired it was hard for them to look at me so that was a good sign. Or maybe these guys just don’t give a damn so I shouldn’t read anything into it. Hold it, I’m a partner, the most they can do to me is ask me to resign. Is that any different from getting fired? Aren’t they supposed to talk to me about it first?

Robert started it.

“With the projects that we have in progress here at Lanning and Devereaux, there is a need to reorganize the firm and to make some changes in assignments to realign our resources to the realities of the marketplace.” That is usually code for letting someone go. “To that necessity, I am asking you to take over some of Daniel’s responsibilities while his focus will change to manage a new project that has just been approved and funded.”

I hoped the surprise wasn’t telegraphed from my face since it probably wouldn’t look “professional”. If it was, no one said anything.

Daniel Susskind was the head of our engineering department and on the fast track to becoming a partner. I didn’t know him much but he was quite effective from what I did know. You remember that I’ve already admitted that I don’t know much, at least about the Eng section. I don’t think he is thirty-five yet and drives much better cars than my ’93 Mazda; a Porsche AND a BMW. What do we pay these guys? I couldn’t remember ever having seen him in a social situation but I did know that he had been out to Robert’s summer home a few times. Something I couldn’t say. The grapevine is still alive in our little firm and I seem to remember I’ve heard that he came from DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Project Administration or something like that (maybe I should take a look at his file).There’s that connection to the government again. Of the few people in the world that I didn’t like, Daniel was one of them

“The changes will take effect immediately and Daniel will be moving to Reston, Virginia by the end of the week for the duration of the project.”

Once I knew that I wasn’t getting fired, I started to watch the rest of the folks in the room to get their reaction and see if there was anything I could learn from it. Not really. Daniel had a smug look on his face and glanced over at Robert who returned it, actually just a flash that was more in his eyes than on his face. I couldn’t remember feeling as left out as I did, like there was some kind of inside joke and I was not aware of the punch line. It didn’t feel good. One of the first things that popped into my head as I sat there and listened to the rest of the meeting was just that I was going to have a lot more work to do. Would there be a lot more pay to go with it? I remembered that I was a partner and that probably wouldn’t happen. Crap.

I did wonder what the heck the project was and how and why we would send one of our people for an open ended commitment. What was the duration of the project? They certainly had not told me anything about it. Maybe I could find out now that I was running the Engineering Section. Probably not. Should I even try? Probably not. My curiosity was not strong enough to overcome the uncertainty of the new responsibilities. It was going to disrupt my life and that was a pain in the ass. I sound kind of negative, huh? I don’t mean to but you have to admit that most people don’t like these kinds of surprises.

Well….where was I? Oh, I walked back to my office and as I passed Kate I asked her to come in and close the door. Geez…was I scaring her too? No, I knew that she was confident enough in me (at least I hope that is the case) that I wouldn’t do that kind of thing.

“What’s the deal, Jake? I saw you get called in to the secret meeting.” She suppressed a smirk.

“We’ve got to cut the staff here by thirty percent and they want us to start with the support staff.” I stopped there and waited for her reaction. It didn’t come for at least a couple of minutes; a really long time when you just sit and stare. I think she was waiting me out.

‘Yeah, right. Can’t you come up with something new? You know I’m connected better here than you are and I’d know about this long before you would.”

I couldn’t argue with that, oh, I could but I’m not going to. Especially since it IS true.

“I guess I’m the new head of Engineering,” I said with the disappointment mostly masked.

“Ha, you mean you actually are going to have to work now?” She laughed and I couldn’t help but join her.

“We’ll see. You know how good I am a delegating. Maybe our esteemed engineers could be trusted to take on some of the management responsibilities. I don’t know what they are yet but I think it may be a possibility.”

Don’t get me wrong, I don’t mind working hard but that is more of a young person’s game; putting in the 80 hours a week and having no life. I had a life now and I wanted to keep it the way that it was. Maybe I’m not that good at uncertainty after all. Does life have to be one long series of changes? That was more work than I wanted to do right now. After all, there were beers to drink (not Budweiser) and young women to hang out with…oh, I forgot about swearing off young women.

“Can you please get a meeting set up with the engineering staff so I can meet them and start to get up to speed? And find out what you can about the personal dynamics of the area. You know what I mean, the soft stuff of who likes who, who the real workers are and the rest.”

“I suppose you want it today?” Sarcasm again.

“Not really, I don’t want it at all but when you get to it I’d appreciate it .I would like to see them this afternoon. One last thing, how would you like to be an engineering supervisor? No not really, just kidding. ” But I wasn’t.

“Oh, could you see if Robert has any time open today so I can talk to him about this mess? I probably should start paying more attention around here and that would be a good place to start I think.”

She started to get up and I stopped her.

“I just wanted to say thanks for all your help in advance. This is not going to be that easy for either of us I’m afraid. I will make sure that the extra work will be rewarded in some way. Start thinking about what would be the best way for you and let’s talk later in the week.”

“Let’s start with a new Ferrari and go from there.” She looked at me with that you can’t be serious look and walked out.

It was only ten o’clock and there had been a day’s worth of surprises already. I wanted to take off and have an early lunch but Marilyn walked in with the personnel files for our eight engineers and her normal look of distaste on her face. She didn’t say a word, dropped the files with a thump on my desk, turned and walked out. I couldn’t remember anything that I had done that would make her dislike me so much. Maybe she hated everyone. At least thinking that made me feel a little better. Then I remembered the work that needed to be done and the good feeling again went away.

The rest of the day went very quickly as they do when you have too much work to do. Isn’t that better than not having enough to do? I guess there are good points to both situations. The engineers seemed receptive to the change in leadership at the top but were not too thrilled at the idea of doing some self management. You know how most of them are, they just want to do their jobs and I couldn’t blame them for feeling that way. After all, that’s how I feel. Robert wasn’t much help either and didn’t provide much more illumination than he did with three sentences in the meeting this morning. I did find out that the project Daniel was assigned to was some kind of government thing that we had been working on since before I joined the firm. He made it clear that I didn’t need to know any more and I left it at that.

When I got back to my office the work had already started to pile up from the new responsibilities and I chose to ignore it. It was after five and I had plans for the night. The normal plans, you know, out to the bar and try not to drink too much Jack tonight. That’s Jack Daniels for you teetotalers out there. I have recently discovered the joys of bourbon whiskey (drank in shots of course) and it complimented the Stroh’s so well that it was getting very easy to get carried away. Well, I’ve never had to get carried away but I have seen people that have. One unnamed youngster that I have yet to tell you about is one of those. I’ll tell you about her later. Blame Chad for the Jack.

I waved goodbye to Kate and stopped. Why the hell was she still here?

“Go home, Kate. Now,” I said to her and waited for her to lock her desk and gather up her things.

“I get overtime, Jake. You just cut my pay for the week.” She looked tired and I was not going to let her keep this up.

“Got any plans for the night?” I asked as we walked out the door. “We’re hitting the Mill if you want to come. Chad and the rest of the guys will be there.”

“That’s exactly why I’m going home.” She appeared serious. “I’ll probably want to go over to Chad’s house again and that just scares me. Even Mike was saying that last weekend and I think I remember you being concerned, too.”

I couldn’t disagree with her.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Say hi to Cody for me.”

She waved as she headed for her car and I started walking toward my spot that was empty. I had to think for a minute and then remembered that I had to park in the restaurant this morning. The walk over helped me burn off some of the adrenaline from working hard and I started to loosen up physically; getting the stiffness from sitting all day out of my muscles was not as easy as it was when I was thirty. I am fifty you know…I think I told you that already at least once.

Oh, the Virginia file. I know I haven’t mentioned it in a while but the rest of this stuff has something to do with it I’m sure. Well, kind of sure. There is something going on here but I haven’t been able to tie the threads together yet. Maybe I never will. There wouldn’t be much point to this then would there?

Enough of that. I almost stopped in the pizza joint next door to grab something to eat before I headed into GR. I felt a little guilty about leaving my car there all day but not enough to get over the fact that pizza didn’t really sound that good to me. I AM trying to eat healthier and take care of myself. I even work out and run three or four times a week. Don’t let anyone tell you that doing that is fun, if they think enduring the pain that comes with exercise is fun they are crazy. It is necessary, though, if you don’t want to be fifty and not able to walk fifty yards. I have thirty more good years left and want them to end with me dying in the arms of my twenty-five year old lover. I can only hope that it won’t be murder.

I didn’t go home before the bar this time since it was almost 5:30 and that’s the normal time that I would leave from my place. I called Mike on his cell to have him ring up 4 beers at happy hour prices (no, I’m not that cheap) and to see who had come in so far. No Jack. I was going to be the only one except for Kelly if no one showed up in the next 15 minutes. That wouldn’t be all bad since getting a good conversation going with someone was much more difficult when there was a bunch a people around. Distractions, you know? And I take this huge ration of crap from the guys whenever I get immersed in a conversation (usually with Kristin) and ignore them. Good natured crap but still crap.

Wednesdays are the kick-off point for the weekends where all of the plans were made these days and I also wanted to tell the guys about the changes at work. Well, bitch about them was more accurate I guess. They’ve heard it all before and it was good to have someone that would listen and challenge me when I started whining. Yeah, I do that sometimes but not as much as I used to. I think I don’t anyway. Who knows? I started to think about the files that I had hidden at my place and wondered if it was something that I should share with the guys. Sometimes a new perspective was necessary and these guys never ceased to surprise me and make me laugh AND think. But I don’t know if it’s time yet. It probably will be after a few beers.

Parking was a breeze again (forget what I said earlier about it) and I only had to walk about 50 feet to the front door. That is the equivalent of three homeless people and I used my new line on them when they asked for money: “Sorry, I don’t carry cash anymore just plastic.” Is that cruel? I’m normally pretty giving but there comes a point that you get tired of being asked all the time. There are a lot of them that just stare, (I don’t think they know what “plastic” is), but there are a few that get it. One of them that I see all the time has even taken to calling me “plastic man” and just smiling. Him I give money to from time to time. He wasn’t there today. Am I at the bar too much?

Chad and Ed were both standing at our end of the bar when I walked in the door and I stopped at the hostess station to say hi to Noel before I moved over to my normal seat. Kelly moved automatically so I could sit down and it entered my head that maybe I WAS out at the bar too much. The picture of Norm from the TV show “Cheers” entered my head and I hoped that they didn’t think of me that way. I am insecure about what people think at times. I’ll bet you hadn’t guessed that yet. Another little tidbit.

“I’m surprised to see you’re still walking around,” Chad started with a grin.

“I thought we’d be visiting you a Leavenworth,” Ed added with a glance at Mike. “In Chicago, if the feds are looking for you you’re screwed; almost as bad as if the Chicago mob is after you. What’s the deal with the feds?”

“Oh, that’s right, you weren’t here Monday. Well, there were two guys that came in here saying they were feds and looking for me. I don’t have a clue why they would be looking for me here; they never showed up at my place or at work and those are the two places that I would look first. How they found out I hang around here is another mystery, you guys and a few people at work are the only ones that know that. And now it’s Wednesday and nothing more from them.”

“That is pretty strange. Any idea why they would be looking for you in the first place?”

“None at all, I haven’t paid my taxes yet is the only thing and I know that procedure from last year. This isn’t it”

Can I say that the next thought hit me like a thunderbolt? Well, more like a penlight coming on but you get the idea. A little bit of the puzzle started to fit, at least in my addled brain. Was there a connection between the feds and the Virginia file? This whole thing had started the day that I saw that file by accident but how could they know that I had seen it. Great, now I’m playing Devil’s advocate in my own head. Get a grip. I decided to tell the group about the files I had copied and hoped that they didn’t think I was too crazy. See, I told you I was insecure at times.

“If you think that is strange, listen to this.” I proceeded to tell everyone there about the Virginia file and the others that I had copied and how the wreckage all looked the same, like it could have been the same pile shot from different angles. Then I went over the details that I saw in the Virginia file on the electrodes and the rest and told them I had the others hidden in my apartment. Micah came in at about two-thirds through the story and I had to start over so everyone would know what was going on.

“I bow to the new king of paranoia,” Mike laughed and it certainly broke the seriousness of the moment.

“Only somewhat paranoid,” I countered. You had to kind of know what was going on to be paranoid and I didn’t know. The whole thing was just a jumble of facts (were they even facts or was I imagining the connections?) that had no real pattern to them.

“And, sometimes the paranoia is true.” I remember that saying or something like it from a movie I had seen in the past.

I forgot to tell them that one of the buildings was in Grand Rapids.

**Chapter 5**

When I woke up I felt pretty good that last night’s dream actually had some plot development in it. You see, I’m NOT obsessed only with the woman in the dream although it might look that way. Well, maybe a little, but I can’t help it. There is at least the possibility of having sex in my dream. Not like real life, at least the life that I had lived for the last two years. Yeah, two years without sex, maybe I AM ugly. I am cursed with needing to get to know a woman and to like them before I want to have any kind of relationship with them. Even though I’m a child of the sixties (actually the fifties but I grew up in the sixties) I’ve never been able to embrace the “free love” kind of thinking that came out of it. Maybe the brain IS the biggest sex organ in your body. It certainly is in mine. Oh, back to the dream. Well, the small amount of plot that was revealed was that, even though we are being chased, we are also chasing someone or something. A fight against some kind of evil is the feeling I get if I remember correctly. But with a dream, who knows? Should I start writing this stuff down? Oh, I’m sure you are curious about the two years, no sex thing. You remember that I just broke up with Karen Sunday? Well, that relationship had turned platonic and she seemed to be holding me at arms length for the longest time. I think that was the gist of the question that she asked “I don’t know what kind of relationship you want...” I can surely say I wanted one that had sex in it.

When I got back to my place last night I didn’t drink any gin and tonics or brandy manhattans as I normally do when I come home from the bar so I felt full of vim and vigor as I took my shower. I’ll bet you haven’t heard that phrase in a while. It was going to be a full day of going over all of the engineering projects that I had inherited and I knew that Daniel was not going to be any help. His thoughts were already in Reston and I really didn't want to spend any time with him anyway. I always do better just getting thrown into new projects and being allowed to “sink or swim” by my own efforts. I’m happy to say that I am a pretty good swimmer. I felt pretty excited.

As I dressed I started to get a little uneasy about telling everyone about the stuff going on at work. I know I can trust everyone that was there but there are times that I am not as circumspect as I should be. Especially in this case when the information might be subject to the non-disclosure agreement that I signed when I was hired at Lanning and Devereaux. If you’ve ever worked for the government (or these days business) you know about them. They contain the typical boilerplate that says, in effect, that you can’t share anything you learn as a part of your job with anyone. To me that puts way too big a part of your life off-limits and doesn’t give you an outlet for your complaints. When I told the guys about my new responsibilities last night and revealed that Daniel was moving to Reston, Chad recognized instantly that Reston was code for the CIA; maybe the agreements are there for a reason?

As I walked out and turned to lock my door, I noticed what looked like a business card lying face down next to the jamb. The people in this building are not as neat as I am so there is usually some kind of rubbish on the landing. Especially since the mailbox for the entire unit is just outside my door and I guess it’s easier to just throw your junk mail on the ground than to take it back to your apartment. I am always picking up after someone and I noticed the card had some writing on the back. “Please call me when you get the chance” was all it said and when I turned it over the chills came back. You know how it is when something happens that changes your life or puts it on a different path than a few seconds before? The card read: James Stickley, Special Agent, FBI, Chicago, Illinois.

Crap. That is the only word that came to my mind as I stood there and looked at the card. I turned it over and looked at the back again. Was I hoping that the writing had changed? Was it really for me? No matter how much I wanted to believe that this was intended for someone else, I knew it wasn’t true. I am too old for this crap. I think I literally started to sag a little like this had real weight, like gravity had changed and I weighed twice what I did the minute before. I couldn’t keep from staring at the card and it kept me mired in that one spot. Crap.

Then the wheels started to turn again. Thankfully, I can take a punch and keep moving. I slipped the card into my pocket and headed out to my car knowing that I could use the time on the drive in to figure out what my response should be or at least sort through and formulate a few options. What options were there really? They would come to find me if I didn’t call. I guess the only option I could see was “should I get a lawyer or not” before I talked to them. Or was my mind just running away? Why am I making the assumption that I’m in trouble? I strained to remember other things that I had done that might have deserved this response and came up with nothing. I tried to think if my background check had gone through the Chicago office and couldn’t remember but the paperwork was in my desk so it would be easy to answer that question. If it sounds like I’m still pretty excited about this whole thing you’d be right. But there was a plan coming together.

I had to discard the lawyer option or at least move it secondary consideration. I didn’t know any. The one that used to do my legal work for me moved to Florida some time back so his wife could pursue her medical career at a hospital there. The one that handled the divorce wouldn’t be a good choice and I really didn’t want to just pick up the phone book and select someone that I’d heard of before. Handling it myself was another option but what is the old saying? A person that acts as his own lawyer has a fool for a client? I don’t think I’m a fool. I could be wrong.

One thing that I did know about this was that I was going to think this time before I act. There have been a few times (well, most times really) that I just let the events carry me along and reacted as the decisions presented themselves. Not this time. I guess I had been reading too many books with protagonists that managed the events that affected them so I thought I could do the same thing. Or at least try. The problem that I see is that you can write that stuff and keep editing until you get the desired outcome. Can you edit life the same way? It would be cool wouldn’t it?

My initial thoughts leaned toward talking to someone about all of this but what would I say? I’m too independent to take anyone’s advice usually, and I was a little concerned that people would find out about it and change their opinion of me. Especially when there may be nothing to it. One of my major flaws is to talk to people about things when I shouldn’t. There are times that I think I just like to hear the sound of my own voice and you can’t take that stuff back once it’s been said. I told you I was a little insecure. Maybe this time it is an advantage? Hey, you can see that I can still learn from my mistakes.

One thing was for certain; I didn’t have enough information to act. I looked at the clock and it was still only about 7:15 am, 6:15 Chicago time. I had almost three hours to wait before I could make the phone call so that left me plenty of time to think and plan out some strategies. The first thing I wanted to do, though, was to try to relax and stop the vibrating that came from the excitement. The doomsday scenarios that had been flying through my head had already taken a lot out of me and I needed to do something that would distract me from the problem. So I read the paper and had a cup of coffee. There are priorities, you know?

For most people I think the main reaction to being summoned by the FBI would be curiosity since they haven’t lived the semi-checkered life that I have. You’ve heard about some of it, don’t know if the rest is relevant but it may be. I don’t think I want to reveal that right now. It’s probably less exciting than what you are imagining. I’ll bet you’d think I am idiot and had a huge quantity of misplaced concern. Doesn’t coming to the attention of the government concern you?

Damn, I got his voicemail. It was such a letdown to be ready to “take the bull by the horns” and then have to wait for someone else to move the whole thing along. I just sat there and looked at the phone for a moment and must have looked strange when Kate walked in with the morning’s mail.

“You can’t make it go away by staring at it.”

“How do you know, have you tried it?” I’m sure my body language was telegraphing that there was something going on.

“No, but I’ve tried to make you go away by staring and THAT never worked.” She smiled the smile that could make me forget my troubles at times.

“Not yet anyway.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Did you get a look at your calendar yet? You’ve got three project reviews this afternoon and the budget meeting has been moved out until next Tuesday so you can have a little time to get up to speed.”

“Did you move the meeting?”

“Of course, I knew you couldn’t be ready tomorrow. You know that I take care of you so where’s my Ferrari?”

I must have had a blank look.

“You remember, yesterday, asking me what I wanted for taking on all this extra work? I said a Ferrari. Boy, Jake, I want some of those drugs you’re using.”

“I’m just a little preoccupied. Did you get the project files so I can take a look?”

“Not yet. I’ll take a walk down there and find out why they’re not here.”

“Thanks, if I’m not here when you get back just drop them on the pile.”

She turned and left and I had a realization that I’d already made my first mistake in dealing with the FBI; leaving my office number instead of my cell. Now I’d have to stay at my desk all morning if I didn’t want anyone else to know I was talking to them. And I have to take a leak. Crap again. If I sent the calls direct to voicemail it would route to Kate first and I couldn’t change that. I knew I COULD trust Kate but I didn’t WANT to. I didn’t want to drag her into this, she certainly didn’t need it. Her son Cody popped into my head and I couldn’t picture him having to live without her. It’s that active imagination again. Damn.

I got back from the restroom before Kate returned and there was no message light on my phone so that worked out well. I busied myself working on the stuff that was left yesterday afternoon and found that it really didn’t take much work. Just a couple of phone calls and an e-mail or two and I was caught up again except for the reviews that Kate was bringing. Lunch was starting to loom in my thoughts and I remembered that I hadn’t eaten much the day before. One of my really bad habits I guess. I can’t remember feeling hunger so there are many times that I’ll just forget about eating even though I love to cook and eat. It’s just another one of those character flaws that I have to work on. Along with the other couple of hundred. A sub sandwich sounded good, though.

After asking Kate if she wanted anything, I was getting ready to go out and the phone rang. Kind of startled me even though it had been doing that all morning, the transition to running the engineering section in full swing.

“Jake Devereaux,”

“Mr. Devereaux, Special Agent James Stickley, FBI returning your call. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

My heart skipped and then started to race.

“Sure, just one second.” I put the phone down, took off my coat and closed the door.

“What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Devereaux, I understand you have a Daniel Susskind in your employ. We’ve been asked to update his background check for a security clearance that has been requested.”

My heart was still thumping but the rest of the questions were just routine and didn’t have anything to do with me. I had a couple for him.

“Agent Stickley, this is just pretty routine information, why did you make the trip over here and stop at my apartment?”

“Oh, that. That’s just a strange coincidence. My son just moved into the same complex you live in and I was in town to see that he got settled. I saw the file from your background check and thought I might be able to do this in person while I was in town. I like that better than the using the phone, puts people more at ease.” He sounded sincere.

“Oh, one last thing, why did you and your partner come looking for me downtown? I’m sure my hangouts aren’t in the background file.”

“Partner? I was there alone.”

I thanked him and hung up as quickly as possible. My paranoia was in full combat mode now. The sub had stopped sounding good. Kate was going to go hungry.

What the hell did all that mean? Maybe if I just talk for a minute things will start to make sense. It was obvious that the guys that were looking for me at the Mill were either a. fakes or b. from another organization. That in itself raised more questions. What one could it be? The government was notorious for not talking between divisions so that might not be as strange as it appeared on its face. The biggest one that I could see was why the hell was I suddenly drawing so much attention from anyone? I’m not that important. Or wasn’t until just lately.

I still am not convinced that the files I had were driving this whole mess. What else could it be? Let’s think for a minute or two, or however long it takes. Nope, I can’t think right now, I need to get moving and listen to some music.

“Kate, cancel those meetings for this afternoon,” I said as I walked past her.

“I’m going to be gone for the rest of the day, I owe you lunch.” I called to her as I pushed through the door outside. My heart had not stopped racing; great I’ll probably have a heart attack, too.

I looked around as I walked through the lot toward my car but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary so I started to relax just a little. It was a lousy day, windy and grayish with low clouds that seemed to sit on the horizon so you couldn’t tell where each ended. And cold, back to normal for February but I didn’t care, I just wanted to be on the road. It was time for thinking music as I pulled out of the lot and I put on some Miles Davis from 1959, “Kind of Blue” but only got through the first song before I got tired of it. It just didn’t fit. Tried some Joe Walsh and it was better but still not right. I hope I’m not the only one that this happens to. It would just make me weirder.

Once I hit the e-way I started to feel better, my heart had slowed to a dull throb and the Peter Gabriel that I tried was right. I found myself heading toward Grand Haven pretty much by accident; there was traffic backed up going into GR so I took the long way around to keep moving. I couldn’t sit in traffic right now. You’re getting the wrong idea, I’m not usually this much of a wuss. Trust me. I’m better than this. But right now I am so confused that it looks that way. Think what you want.

When I got to Grand Haven I drove though the town and out to the beach, using the parking lot that was next to the State Park. The park was closed and there was no one around so I suited up, locked the car and started for the beach. I was glad to be alone but I did miss Karen since this was the spot that we always came when we were on a road trip. I guess it was just familiar and I didn’t have to think at all, just be there. I sat in the cold sand looking out at the ice piles for what seemed like hours, until the wind started to ooze though the seams and I couldn’t take it anymore. My heart had calmed completely and I was starting to get hungry (I guess I do feel hunger once in a while) so I jumped back in the car and headed for the Tip. A craving for a burrito and more importantly beer, and lots of it, was the most important thing right now. I am starting to miss Karen.

I parked behind the building so no one could see my car (there’s that paranoia again) and walked in the back door. The table that I normally used had someone at it so I moved to the other corner and sat down. The TV was on with no sound and I just stared at it without recognition while I waited for the server to come.

“Why don’t you come sit with me?” A familiar voice cut through the haze and I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Karen? What are you doing here?” I felt more puzzled than anything.

“What am I doing here?” It looked like she was pouring some thought into the question. “I don’t know really. Work was going badly and for the first time I could say that I didn’t like my job. You know the rest of what is going on. I guess I’m hiding.” She kept her hand on my shoulder.

“Well, I certainly understand part of it,” I said as I looked at her but couldn’t keep the eye contact. After all, she had hurt me and not for the first time. How should I react?

“I’m sorry to hear that work is not going well. You’ve always loved that job.” I was trying hard to be civil and succeeding pretty well.

“Come over and sit down with me, please.” She slid her hand down my arm and squeezed it lightly.

Hey, I’m not an idiot. Or maybe I am if you look at our history but six years is a long time to throw away. There is just something about her that cancels all of my common sense. She was the first after Charlene (well, even before after Charlene as I said earlier) and the only one that I’ve had an intimate relationship with. Yeah, I know that is pretty lame but you know how I feel about that stuff. I didn’t go home with her so that redeems me somewhat doesn’t it? I did find out that this time she didn’t “overlap” me like she had done before. That’s something.

**Chapter 6**

Damn, this is just wrong. The woman is now Karen and I didn’t want her to be. I wanted an action hero type that I could stand and fight with not argue. What a waste of a night. Maybe the dream has changed so that I need someone that can think instead of fight? Whatever it is, there was no revelation of anything that would say that this is important, that I should keep paying attention to it. But what is the alternative? I don’t want to be bored when I’m sleeping. There was some really cool scenery, though. We climbed up huge roots that led up a sheer rock face and ended up on this wide, flat plateau that looked something like Utah or New Mexico. I don’t know how that could be because I’ve never been to either one of those places. Maybe I saw them in books? From the top, we were looking down into the clouds that had shielded us from the longbows and it was as bright as I could remember the sun ever being. It ended when she kissed me (as it does in real life usually) and then I woke up feeling a little frustrated. I think dreams do mirror real life.

Do you ever have to consciously change how you are reacting to your life? When I look back at the last day or so, I see I have forgotten the fun that life is supposed to be. I know that it is just perspective, the way that I’m looking at it and instead of it being a big pain to have all of these new things happening, I should be thinking of it as an adventure. Even though most of it is inside my head. Isn’t that where the best adventures are sometimes? You CAN control how you react to things. I promise to be more fun. Or at least try to be.

It’s Friday! Even at fifty I still get the TGIF feeling at the end of the week. It was dampened a little by having to catch up on yesterday’s work but I knew that even with that it was going to be a good day. See, I can control my attitude. Should I put on a happy face? Let’s not go that far. There were still a few unanswered questions, but what was the running away all about yesterday? As I said before, I’m not the most stable person you’ll ever meet and I do overreact on occasion. That was one of them.

It was jeans day on Friday and that little thing made me smile when I was getting ready along with a story on CNN about a guy who sued an RV manufacturer for the cruise control not working. Well, this person set the cruise, then walked back to the lav leaving no one driving and when the thing crashed he was injured. I picked up at the end that this was a story on “urban legends” but it was one that the Bushies had used to illustrate the need for tort reform. Wow, talking about tort reform at 7 in the morning; I’ve probably lost you, haven’t I. Hope not.

It never ceases to amaze me how good people really are. When I got in to work Kate had come in early and had my day mapped out and organized for me with everything I needed to catch up. There was even an apple fritter to go with my coffee and she had taken it upon herself to return a few of the routine calls that had come in while I was out. She had neatly typed summaries for each one and I saw that she had done everything right. Not as I would have done it but is there ever only one right way to do something? Maybe she did deserve that Ferrari. Well, I won’t go that far but a little recognition wouldn’t hurt so I started to think about it.

I’d have to put the engineers that I met with that day in the same good people category. They were prepared and professional (if a little stodgy) and we cleaned up all the reviews in about half the time allotted. When these little surprises happen I just have to grin; that, and it makes people wonder what you are up to. Leaving early briefly crossed my mind but I wanted to maintain the half-slacker internal picture I had of myself so I started in on the budget meeting prep. I’m sure you don’t want to hear about that. I can say that the rest of the day was pretty uneventful and I let Kate and the engineers go home an hour early. Yeah, I know, big deal.

Does thinking about how you react to things change how you react? That little thought ran in and out of my head over the course of the day. What’s the answer? Yes or no? Is it supposed to? Is it like quantum physics where the act of observation changes the thing being observed?

Musings.

The day ended with a whimper and I picked up a cheap pizza from Caesar’s on the way home for fuel for the night. I don’t see how they can sell these things for five bucks but it was good to not cook and that was the last I thought of it. Checked my personal e-mail and found a bunch of spam and a note from Karen. Damn, why does my heart still race when I see her name on an e-mail? It was just thanks for being a nice guy (crap that label again) and that she hoped we could still be friends. My first reaction was that I have enough friends, what I needed was a lover. Even though I have a huge circle of friends, there is still a tinge of loneliness that I have started to feel. To have someone to trust and that you can reveal yourself to, that you can hold hands with, that will look at you with that look that says they want to be there with you. You know what I mean? If you do then you understand, if you don’t then I hope it happens for you at some time. It’s pretty damn neat.

What is it about me that make women want to be my friend? That word coming from a woman is probably the worst thing that can happen to a guy and it happens to me all the time. I do all of the work of being a boyfriend and then they sleep with the guy that they are complaining to me about. Try on the old guy for a change, ladies! At least that is what I want to scream to them at times. I guess the bigger question is why do women that HAVE slept with me want only to be friends? Am I that bad in bed? Am I a better friend than lover? Well, I’ve had a lot more practice being a friend but I’m willing to practice, practice, practice, to be a better lover. Any takers? Yeah, I know, I’m still fifty and they’re not.

I gulped down a couple of slices of pizza and a big glass of milk walking around my apartment. Had my tax stuff spread across my table so I didn’t have any place to sit and I didn’t want to spill on the new couch. The plant that Jody had gotten me for Christmas was looking a little limp so I gave it some water grabbed a Vicodin and gave myself some water. There goes another of my vices if you are keeping track. Pay attention. It was going to be a good night. I was going to take Ed’s advice and “drink myself pretty”.

Why don’t people pay attention to signs? I rolled into downtown and the loading zone about thirty feet from the Mill was still open. The sign said nine a.m. to six p.m. but it was almost six thirty and no one had the guts to use it or just didn’t read it. Oh, well…it lets me park close so please people keep doing what you’re doing. There was even a hockey game scheduled for tonight that should have filled every space available but there were quite a few that I could see. They are in last place after all.

The Mill was filling up quickly as it always did on Friday with the overlap between the happy hour and dinner crowd and the noise level was quite high. The bar was full and Chad had staked out our usual spot but was being crowded by people that were not regulars. Unfortunately, the ones doing the crowding were guys and what I really wanted was to have conversations with women tonight. Maybe I’d have a chance with the ones that didn’t know me. Yep, still pretty insecure even at my age. The Vicodin was kicking in and I felt pretty good.

“Chad.”

“What’s going on Jake?”

“Well, it’s another Friday and we’re drinking again. Have you heard from John yet?”

“He called me when I was on the way here, he’ll be in later. He’s still trying to get caught up from the honeymoon.

“You talk to Mike since Wednesday?”

“Nope, what’s the deal?”

“He got suspended for a day for having a “bad attitude.” Chad had a small smirk on his face that changed to more of “here we go again” kind of look. “They gave him the choice of taking last night off or getting two write-ups in his file.”

Mike made his way to the end of the bar by us and moved in close.

“Did Chad tell you what happened? I feel like I got sent to the principal’s office. I wonder if they will make me stay after school.” His voice was dripping with sarcasm and he rolled his eyes.

 “Where are you going to be working next?” I asked being the smartass.

“I probably should start looking. This is the same crap they pulled at Taps so I think the end is near.”

I couldn’t understand, really. I thought Mike coped pretty well having an idiot for an owner and having to deal with the drunks and the stupid so much. There was a lot of politics that went on in these places, though, and I think because Mike is not 25 years old the management can’t intimidate him and that is the only style these guys know. Damn. Now we were going to have to change bars again. I was just getting settled. I like the perks of being a regular.

“Where’s the next place?” I asked

“I haven’t really thought about it but I know I’m going to make these guys fire me so it may take a little while. Maybe I can make it until boating season, you can quit your job and we can take the summer off.” He had that strange look in his eyes like there was going to be trouble tonight.

It WAS going to be fun to watch.

“Get this Chad, there were two set of feds looking for me, well at least two sets from what I can figure. I talked to one that left a card at my place, oh; I forgot to tell you that didn’t I? Well, yesterday morning when I was leaving I found his card on the landing by my door and it just about freaked me out. I called him and he was just doing a background check on the guy that I’m taking over for. I guess he would have done the interview by phone but was in town getting his son settled at my complex.”

Chad just stood and listened without comment.

“The weird thing is that he was alone and wasn’t down here looking for me. Different ones were down here. Did you guys get a look at any ID?”

“Nope, they didn’t offer and we didn’t ask. I didn’t need to have them give me any attention; you know why.” I did.

I had started to feel pretty good with the Vikey kicking in quite well now and a couple of beers in me so I dropped the subject when Ed and Terry came in. We had started to move the non-regulars out by sheer force of will (not really, we were just too loud for them I think) and the night was shaping up to be too much fun. I filled Ed and Micah in on the latest happenings with the feds and they thought it was weird as I did.

“Have you heard from the guys that were here?” Ed asked slowly. I think the Maker’s was kicking in for him.

“Well, you think I would have told you if they did?”

“Oh, yeah, probably, but you always screw with me so I can’t be sure.” He was right there.

The conversations were going along faster than I could keep up and some of them started to veer into territory that we knew better than to approach. But it is different with each one of my friends and sometimes too hard to keep track of it. With Ed it was politics, he had still not grown out of being a conservative Bushie (well, that is a little prejudicial) and with me being a born again liberal, there was not a lot of common ground. He was still a good guy. With Micah, it was religion, being brought up in a family of faith, his was still strong and I would have to say that mine had died years ago when my brother’s son was killed walking to school. What kind of a just God would allow that to happen? With Chad it was Budweiser and any Budweiser products but I supported him completely in his boycott, maybe this doesn’t fit like the others?

Mike’s only sore subject was the ex-wife and I could understand and support that hatred. I’d been there. No, I shouldn’t say that about Charlene. I don’t hate her, I just don’t have any feeling at all about her and we probably got along better after we split than we did when we were married. I know we had more sex. Weird, Huh? But there were times that three years passed between the times we were intimate and I could never figure that out. Are we back to the idea that when women have sex with me, afterward they just want to be friends? I will not accept that I’m that bad. Can I ignore the facts? Please?

The night went on with lots of beers and Jack and my face started to hurt from smiling and laughing. Not a bad thing to have happen to you. We were all getting a nice little buzz on when Mike came down to our end of the bar and nudged me.

“Hey, there they are.”

I was a little slow on the uptake; Jack will do that to you.

“There who are?”

“The feds, the ones that were in here earlier in the week.” He had a look of mock seriousness on his face.

“Where?”

“Over by the door, don’t look! I’ll tell you when.”

“Okay, Look, the guys in the suits.” Unfortunately there were more than two guys in suits.

“Which ones.”

“Beef and Beefier; the big ones.” I think Mike was having fun with this.

They looked around the bar area and then moved toward the back following Noel. It looked like they were being seated and I made myself as small as I could by reflex. If they were looking for me they weren’t doing a very good job of it. I reminded myself to not jump to any conclusions but it was hard to not have any concern. Well, not that hard, booze and drugs will do that for you and having a bar full of friends around me moved my “brave meter” over into the green. This was my place after all and I wasn’t going to let anyone screw with me in my place. Wow, that is the booze talking; I’ve got to stop listening.

Mike was being a smartass and kept pointing at the guys; part of his weird mood from the suspension probably (that, and the Rumpleminze) and I just had to laugh. It wasn’t bad to have friends that would give you reality checks. As I said before, though, paybacks are hell and I was thinking how to build a good one. I had stopped paying attention to them, and most everything else for that matter, when Mike started jumping and waving his arms.

“Here they come, here they come!” He was certainly more excited than I was.

The two men just walked out the door.

Mike had a look of disappointment on his face and I looked at Chad but he was busy talking to probably the only single woman in the place. She wasn’t even a lizard. All of the tension, what little there was, faded but I was still confused. Mike called Kelley over to ask her something and she went to talk to the server that had waited on the two men. She came back a minute later, talked to Mike and headed back toward the office.

“What was that all about?”

“I asked Kelley if the guys paid with a credit card so we could see who they were.” He was really enjoying this.

“And?”

“Nope, paid cash, damn.” Was his life as boring as mine? “I’ll check with the bouncers outside to see which way they went.” He pushed through the crowd to the front door and talked to both of them then came back quickly.

“They were parked right behind your car but they just left. No official car either, an Escalade.” He really did look disappointed.

“Why would the bouncers notice that?” I was starting to not care very much.

“Don’t know, but they did.”

“Oh, well, at this point I just don’t give a crap.” I was starting to believe it.

“It’s been fun anyway.” Mike gave up and went back behind the bar.

It was getting late and my fear and paranoia had been tamped down quite well by the beer, Jack, and conversation. I had even gotten a phone number that I knew I wouldn’t call but it felt good to have a little interest taken in me. Maybe that’s why I’m not getting laid? I should probably put in more effort, huh? The empty apartment sounded good, though, and I was happy to be going home alone. Yes, I am going to drive. You know, even with a few drinks in me I can still drive better than most people (old ones, anyway) and I do try to keep to the one drink an hour rule. I was either going to have to stay there for four more hours or take my chances.

**Chapter 7**

The woman was still Karen and we were moving across the plateau at a good pace. I think we had shaken our pursuers and there were tracks that we were following in the dust that looked like they were made by at least two and possibly three people. Karen had stripped off the thermal suit that been necessary overnight and I did the same since it was getting hotter with every step. The whys were still not coming but maybe there are times that you don’t need them? Was the action in the dream an end unto itself? Of course, Karen looked better in the dream than she did in real life; she is 42, after all. Don’t get me wrong, she is still a knockout but I think she looked like she might have when she was 30. Her hair was darker, too. It looked like Jennifer Garner was starting to take over the dream again. Maybe there was some fighting coming? I guess I’ll take whatever comes. What woman is next? Do I sound obsessed? Well, I’m not going to apologize for my dreams. Share your own if you think they’re better.

I thought I remembered that no one had come home with me but I rolled over to make sure. Didn’t want to be surprised. I wasn’t. I was going to be able to do the normal Saturday routine and that felt good. It’s pretty boring so I won’t say much about it except that it includes doing the grocery run for Charlene and the boys. I know, three years later and I’m still doing her grocery shopping? Well, it was always my job to do that and I think it started because she hated Meijers and the crowds. So all through our marriage I would make up the list and go. I’m better at it anyway; I only buy what is on the list and she made it into an outing that would last all day and cost me fifty percent more. I am not cheap but she still has a basement full of things she bought that were never used. That brings up another strange fact about our marriage: There are still wedding gifts in the original packages that are there, too. Anyone want a twenty-five year old Mirro stainless steel electric frying pan? NRFB (never removed from box). What the hell was she saving them for?

I couldn’t get over to her house before 10 a.m. (rules, rules, rules) since they wouldn’t have the list done before that so I had a little time to kill. Saturday mornings used to include a trip to the coffee shop to read the paper but it had gotten bought out by someone that changed the servers from the women that were my friends (built up from the two years of being there every day) to a couple of old guys. Yeah, even older than me if you can imagine it. That change had erased my regular status in an instant and the place just lost all it’s attraction to me. So I make my own coffee now on the eight dollar coffee maker I bought from Target. Still working a year later, the best eight bucks I’ve ever spent if you exclude the hooker in Costa Rica. That was a joke; I’ve never even been to Costa Rica.

While I was waiting for the coffee to brew, I got a glass of orange juice and flopped on the couch. Yes, flopped. It was one of the characteristics that I looked for in a couch; that I could stand next to it and just fall down into it without feeling any of the supporting structure under the cushions. And removable pillows for the back that I could arrange any way that I liked. I know, this is boring. I’ll stop now.

Flipping through the channels on my huge thirteen inch TV, I remembered that I had the stolen files still in the cd player and I hadn’t read them yet so I plugged it in and hit the eject button. Well, it probably wasn’t that smart to hide them there since the drawer jammed on the way out and turned the files into a wrinkled mess. It seemed like a good idea at the time. But they were still readable and I spent the next half hour looking at and comparing them.

There wasn’t a lot of information in any of the three files that was much different from the Virginia file that had started this whole mess. One thing that jumped out at me was a reference to a quantum physics term “spooky action at a distance and entanglement” and footnotes to a few papers that dealt with the subject From what I could remember from my obsessive reading, this term referred to the ability of an atom in one location to instantaneously affect another atom that was inches or light years away. I know that it defies all logic but experiments have shown that it does happen. I think they have been able to change the charge of an atom from distances of a few inches without any connection but that a carrier of some sort was required for longer ones. If I remember correctly (well, I used to have a great memory) many types of solids have been found to be able to transmit the changes.

What the hell did it have to do with our company, though? The notations on the files were somewhat cryptic: “missed” was a simple one, “pinger is calibrated to .0045” was another that really had no meaning to me. I wondered if there was more information back in the engineering section; there had to be since these files referred to pages that weren’t there. Were these edited for a certain audience? The GR file was one that really grabbed my interest since it was familiar to me. The building had been abandoned since I was a kid (yes, I can remember back that far) and the subject of at least a few renovation schemes that had all fallen through. The latest was to follow the fad of turning all of the old buildings in GR into bars or apartments but the old wooden beams and concrete were deemed to be unsafe so it sat waiting for demolition and sacrifice to the parking lot gods. I know that is harsh but it seemed like every corner In GR had a new parking ramp going up on it…who were all the people that were going to use them?

The final intriguing bit of information that was in the GR file dealt with capacitors of some sort and the handwritten notation said: “should meet goal of 1 day in next trial run” I recognized the handwriting to be one of my engineers. The only question that jumped into my head was why didn’t this project show up in the review yesterday?

It was still only 9:15 so I decided to do some research on the spooky action phenomena on the internet and have my first cup of coffee for the day. Payment for the fun night last night was still being extracted from my head and I hoped that the caffeine would help the aspirin restore me to some semblance of humanity. I didn’t feel as bad as I should, though.

Boy, there are a lot of people working on quantum physics in the world. My search on Yahoo generated over ten thousand hits when I typed in spooky action but after the third page (about 60 hits) they all turned into porno sites. I would love to meet the mind that can make the leap to connect quantum physics to porno; you’d think that these folks wouldn’t even have heard of the term let alone know how to spell it. Obviously, I was wrong.

I was finally in my element again. Research was one of the things that I had discovered I was very good at when I was in college, it complimented my curious nature. There were the usual scholarly papers that went as far back as Schrödinger (the guy with the famous cat, look it up if you’re interested) and some as recent as last month. One that caught my eye was an explosion in a lab in Geneva that killed three researchers when they were doing an experiment in SAAD. I’m going to use that as the acronym since I get tired of saying spooky action at a distance. Yeah, I know there is one more A, but it is the accepted usage and who are you to question it? Just kidding. A light went on when I got to the bottom of the article because they had been using electrodes of palladium, platinum and gallium arsenide, things that I remembered from the Virginia file. The uneasy feeling of paranoia was back again. No, I guess not, just an upset stomach from the booze. False alarm.

A plan was starting to crystallize in my head, though, on how to get more information on what our firm was doing with SAAD. We were not mentioned in any of the articles on the web so I would bet that there was no original research being done. Or not published anyway. Much of the information I saw dealt with applications of the research, the wildest being one futurist that thought it was just a matter of time until the transporters from “Star Trek” would be reality and the many rebuttals of the idea. Why are scientists so closed minded sometimes? It had gotten to be around ten so I shifted into task mode to get my responsibilities completed for the day.

Charlene was not there when I got to the house (thank God) and I spent a few minutes talking to Jonathan before I left. How much time do kids need with their father when they get to be 17? I know I’ve not been the best father since I only see him a couple of times a week for a few minutes but I lost my father when I was 15 and look at how well I turned out. Well, I could have turned out better, and yes, I am rationalizing. It’s a protective mechanism that I have honed to a fine art. He doesn’t seem to mind if I keep the lunch and movie money coming. I’ll try to do better.

Grocery shopping is one thing I’m sure you don’t want to hear about but there is one observation that I have to make. There is no good time to go. If you go early, you have herds of old folks that look like they are on their weekly social; you can’t get down any aisle for the groups of them talking and I feel like I’m in a movie that’s permanently in slow motion. If you go later, you’ll see the dreaded Familius Americanus that seem to think that they should do everything together no matter that their three screaming kids are not having any fun. Do they think they are passing on shopping skills? They are not hunter/gatherers you know. Their children will not DIE if they don’t know which aisle the Cheerios are in. I NEVER took mine.

Well, that rant done, I did finish the shopping, dropped the stuff off, and headed back to my place. I couldn’t remember if any of my engineers were working today but that was part of the plan that was formulating to find out more about the SAAD experiments. Well, not so much a plan. Do you have to plan to drive to work and open a few filing cabinets? The new responsibilities would give me a plausible cover and the fact that I wasn’t assigned a key for the cabinets would keep me above suspicion. The one thing they didn’t know was that I was the engineer when those filing cabinets were being designed. No, I don’t know any big secret of how to get into them from that experience. I DO have a master key that will open all of that style lock, though. If I can find it.

That was the next problem to be solved. Where was the key? I hadn’t seen it for a few years but I remembered that I had it on a floater (the key rings that you put boat keys on) and that it was a bright color. Even in my small apartment, there were places that things just disappeared, if I knew where they were, I wouldn’t have to look for things, would I? I did find it after about 15 minutes of looking; in the pocket of my coat that I use to work on the fleet of cars that I maintain for my family. It also held the key to my toolbox so finding it there is not as unusual as you think. I also found a couple of sparkplugs for a car that had been sold almost 5 years earlier; I guess it’s time to throw those away and wash the coat.

On the way in to the office, I found myself taking the same way in that I do on a normal workday even though that route was chosen for its speed and nothing else. Things look different in the daylight. Headlights create a strange sort of tunnel vision where anything outside of a few feet off the road are permanently in a murky form of existence, kind of an existential thing where they’re not real until the light comes up and you observe them. I know that’s kind of philosophy 101 but it doesn’t make it any less true. At least to me. I couldn’t remember driving this way in the daylight before and my head was on a swivel looking at the things that I passed everyday.

When I got to the office, there were still a few cars in the lot. I hoped that they were left there by people that had decided to group up and go out partying and just had not gotten up to come and claim them. After all, why would anyone in my group go home early on Friday and then come to work on Saturday? I’d done it before but I expected these people to have more sense. Or less dedication. I guess we’ll see.

After hours the only entrance we could use was the one in the back of the suite that opened with a normal key, not the card keys that worked the front entrance. How many keys were out there? I probably should check it out since I hadn’t seen an audit and the company was so fixated on security. I guess that would keep anyone from working Saturdays without one, huh? The system was in dire need of an upgrade and I need to get more involved so I know what is going on.

I walked to my office and turned on the lights. The white noise generator was off and the room sounded strange, echoing as I put my briefcase down on the desk. Oh, never heard of a white noise generator? Well, they are amplifiers that are used in open-plan offices to mask much of the sound that would normally drive you crazy. You wouldn’t want to hear all of the conversations in the office would you? Without the generator you can. Who designs these offices anyway?

I walked toward the engineering section happily noticing that the lights in the rest of the suite were off, only the nightlights left to light the way. The motion sensors on the lights turned them on as I passed, though, leaving a trail of light behind me that seemed to me to be like a boat wake. We’ll talk about boating later. I looked around when I got to the door for the section and didn’t see anyone (still a little paranoid), unlocked the door and went in. The lights were all still on but the hot computer smell was less than it had been before. I hoped it was because they were shutting them off at some point. Again I looked around and didn’t see anyone so I pulled the key out of my pocket and started to look at the file cabinets to see where to start.

“Jake?”

I hope I didn’t jump when I heard my name. I think I did a little.

“Susan, What the heck are you dong here on a Saturday?” I was trying hard to regain my composure.

“Weren’t you paying attention in the review yesterday?” She laughed just a small one.

“The restoration project on the Cascade dam is a little behind because the quote from the steel supplier was late. I got it just as I was walking out the door yesterday, by the way, thanks for the early out, and didn’t have time to revise our quote to the township. They need it Monday morning so here I am. You DO remember, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I remember…that’s why I’m here. I was going to call a friend of mine over there and see if there was something he could do to shake the quote loose and I needed some of the details. I hope you don’t mind the interference.” See, I CAN think on my feet.

“No, not at all.” I could tell she was not being truthful. “Do you think I’m not doing my job?”

“That’s not it at all. It’s just the old engineer in me coming out and its fun. I guess I should have called you first, huh?” I don’t think that was the response she was expecting.

“Well, you are the boss,” I could see her relax a bit. “I just don’t want us to be duplicating efforts is all.”

“I agree. I hope you’ll let me know when you do need some help, though.” I smiled and turned toward the door.

“Thanks, Jake.” Followed me as I walked out the door and back toward my office

I stopped for a second and turned around. I was curious about how Susan had gotten in and wanted to find out so I went back to the section. Turns out they have a communal key they share when they are going to be working weekends or after hours. I thought it mattered but couldn’t connect why at the time. It did put a little crimp in my plans.

I got back to my office and wondered how long I’d have to stay to make my story look true. Probably not that long since the excuse I had given Susan was already done and I didn’t want to try to wait her out. The problem now was when could I get to the files? I didn’t want to come back later and find her here again so I decided to try again Sunday. There was not much to do on Sundays anyway and it would be much less likely (I hope) that anyone would be working. I decided to take the long way back home and stop for a beer somewhere. I needed it.

They didn’t have Stroh’s so I had the old standby of Bass Ale that I used to drink before I got hooked on Strohs on the boats. The boats. I haven’t mentioned those yet have I. Well, Mike and Micah have boats that we go out and play with almost every weekend in the summer. They’re both Checkmates with Mercury outboards on them; Micah’s is a 15 ½ foot while Mike’s is a 19 ½ footer. They are both CRAZY fast (70 miles per hour is fast in a boat) and we put them in the Grand River and take them all of the way out to Lake Michigan through Grand Haven. The only problem with the boats on Lake Michigan is that I always come back injured in some way. Bruises, bumps, abrasions, and back injuries from banging around and trying to hang on were normal. Is that fun? Yeah, it is. But one of the phrases the best describes our trips is “oh, my God Mikey, No!!!” that came out of someone’s mouth when we almost flipped his boat on a huge wave. Broke the medium lens on my camera on that one. Still haven’t gotten it fixed. It usually took two weeks for me to heal after boating.

When I got back to my place I thought about the GR building that had collapsed and got the brainstorm to go and take a look around for myself. I didn’t know what I was going to accomplish but getting out of the apartment but wasn’t that enough? I called Chad to see if he wanted to go along but he was busy taking care of a few things so I told him I’d see him later. He mentioned we were going to play shuffleboard with a bunch of people at one of the West Side taverns but I didn’t remember making the plans the night before. Now I know that I should have felt worse than I did. What was it about the Jack? Maybe I should stay away from it for a while.

For some reason the e-way was jammed so I jumped off to the surface streets at 28th street and slid over to Division to head north. The street was in atrocious shape from freezing and the snowplows trying to keep it clean and I had to dodge the big holes to keep from damaging the suspension. Hey, it’s an old car after all, (over two hundred thousand miles) and I need to protect it when I can. How many more miles are in it after all? It felt like I had shaken a few thousand out and left them on the road by the time I got downtown.

I parked over by Veterans Park since the building site was nearby and walked the few blocks to the corner where the building used to be. I saw when I drove by the cleanup was done but there were a few random pieces of concrete left in the dirt that I picked up and pocketed. I don’t know why I did that, I’m not CSI you know. I don’t have a lab in the basement or a friend at the police labs like you read about everywhere. I just thought it was something I should do. They felt strange and powdery like loose sandstone and most of them crumbled easily when I pinched them between my fingers. One odd thing that I noticed while I was standing there was the sidewalk was soft nearest where the building had stood and I wondered why. I could chip it away easily with the toe of my shoe and it crumbled under my weight. Okay smartass, no I’m not that fat. I have always struggled with my weight but the running and working out has helped me keep it near one eighty; at least for the last couple of years. You do have to do the work, though.

I didn’t want to draw any attention by staying there too long but I didn’t know why I was worried. It was still cold and windy and I couldn’t see anyone else on the streets. Maybe that would draw the attention? I don’t know but I was freezing my butt off and needed to get inside or back to the car. Gee, inside a warm bar with beer or a cold car and back to my apartment. A tough choice to be sure but the beer was calling my name and the Cottage was closer than the car so the choice was made for me. They didn’t have Stroh’s either so I had to make due with a Heinie, well, actually two Heinies by the time I was done. It helps me think at times. No Jack this time. It is daytime after all. I know, I know, you think we all drink too much. I don’t smoke so some of it cancels out doesn’t it?

There is an idea that is starting to take shape on what’s happening. Nope, not going to share it yet, if I’m wrong I’ll look like an idiot and I do enough other things that do that by accident. I don’t need to help you confirm it. If you’ve been paying attention you have a pretty good idea anyway. If I’m an idiot, that is.

 One of the things that I was curious about was why there was very little coverage of the collapse in the local new media. I could only remember one small article in the Press and nothing from the local TV news outlets. In a town like GR it should have been the lead story for at least a day and one of the local “investigative reporters” should have done an expose on the dangers of all of the old buildings downtown. I’m sure it would have included payoffs to building inspectors and heart wrenching interviews with people that lived in other renovated old buildings that were now in fear for their lives. Fox news should have said that it was all because the liberals fought against the tax cuts they wanted and connected it to 9/11, Osama Bin Laden, and Social Security reform. The problem that I saw was that none of this happened. Just like the Virginia one, there was really no news about it at all. It’s only been three weeks, how did they get it cleaned up so fast?

It was even colder now and the beers couldn’t overcome the wind. Helped a little but not overcome. I didn’t have any plans for the night so I headed back toward the south end where I live. I hadn’t cleaned my place in a week or so and I had quite a bit of laundry to do so the idea of staying in one night started to have some attraction. You, see, my life is not all excitement and glamour. There’s really not ANY excitement and glamour. Well, maybe a little excitement at times. Nope, no glamour.

There is something about a warm car in the winter. You know what that is.

The rest of the day was pretty mundane, even superheroes have to cook and do laundry don’t they? I’m not saying that I’m a superhero but don’t you ever wonder how Superman’s tights get cleaned? Do these guys have to go to the bathroom like the rest of us? Why do you never see Batman yelling from the john “I’ll be out in a minute” when the Bat-signal shines over Gotham City? What happens when they have the flu? Do they have sex? If you were Spiderman and in bed with a gorgeous woman, would you get up and leave her to save the city? There aren’t any women that I know that would tolerate that more than once. Weird thoughts, I know, but you know I’m a little weird.

I did cook some center-cut pork chops with just a little thyme and some red potatos in a garlic butter sauce from a recipe that I got out of the newspaper. I hope I don’t sound like someone’s granny. Food is almost as important as the wonders of various alcohols are to me. Finished off the meal with some strawberry mead that I made and by about 9:30 I was ready to say the hell with it and go to bed. Oh, I haven’t told you about the mead yet. I’m too tired. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.

**Chapter 8**

Mead always screws up my dreams. I should have thought before I drank that bottle. Damn. The whole thing took on a Dali-esque quality with melting landscapes and people that shouldn’t be there. I mean a girlfriend that I had when I was 16? Where the hell did that come from? I do have a degree in psychology but I never learned anything that would explain that. I think there were some pertinent clues, too, but the memory of the dream wipes so quickly with mead that I couldn’t remember them. Crap. The only thing I did remember was the woman was now Sigourney Weaver; not from the Aliens movies but from Ghostbusters. No more mead before bed. EVER.

I had forgotten the mead hangover, too. Bad. My head was like concrete inside and the pain felt like it had motion, running from side to side and around in circles. Something like how Pink Floyd sounds on headphones. There is nothing that helps this either. Ow.

Well….I should tell you about mead so you know what it is. Don’t know if it will help you understand the hangover or not, I think that is something that has to be experienced to be understood. Mead is an archaic drink that is associated with England in the Middle Ages and in any of the movies about that time (Robin Hood comes to mind, not the Kevin Costner one but the good one with Errol Flynn) if they were not drinking wine they were drinking mead. It is made using honey as the fermentable sugar and is very easy to make. If you can make beer you can make mead. The question is whether you SHOULD. Feeling like this certainly makes me question why I make it.

I did make it to the couch with a stop at the refrigerator for a glass of orange juice. The pain in my head was becoming sensitive to movement so I did not flop on the couch this time; I lowered myself gingerly and wrapped up in the blankets that Gina had given me for Christmas. The only thing I wanted to move was my thumb as I switched channels on the TV. That even got to be too much so I put it on “Meet the Press”, turned the sound way down, and tried to lie VERY still. I entertained the thought of getting up for a couple of aspirin but it just seemed like too much effort. I was even going to skip the Sunday ritual of going out for a newspaper, at least for a while. I need a nap.

 When I woke up at around 11:30 I felt a little better and I knew that movement was probably the best thing for me so I got off the couch, dressed, found seven quarters, and headed out to get the paper. It had gotten COLD overnight and I had hopes that this was just the last gasp of winter. Well, we can HOPE can’t we? My car barely started (I think it was only about 2 degrees) and I could hardly shift it when I pulled out of the parking lot. Should have let it warm up a little then it would have been easier but the low fuel light was on when I got home last night and I didn’t want to run out of gas. Stick shifts are a pain when it is this cold. At least the sun was shining so I didn’t have to scrape ice from the windows. Hey, it doesn’t take much to make me happy. As you know.

I don’t know why I pay a buck seventy-five for this paper. Almost all of it is stuff that I don’t want to see; habit maybe? That’s as good an explanation as any, I guess. When you get used to reading the NY Times and the Trib, the GR press seems almost quaint in a way, like a small town newspaper that is trying to grow up. How else do you get the local news, though? I think it is people’s responsibility to know what is going on in the world. That’s just me. I finished the paper and started to think about going back into work to get a better look at the files that I had copied but I was still dragging quite a bit from the mead and it took about an hour to get showered and dressed. Melissa called to ask if I was going to come in and see her at Logan’s and I told her that it would probably be later in the day, I had a few things to get done first. She reminded me to not get there later than 4 or all of the free pizza would be gone but it didn’t even sound good. I wouldn’t have to cook today, though so I said I’d try, she said I’d better and we hung up.

It still hurt. Man, these are BAD hangovers. I did choke down two aspirin before I left so there was hope that I’d feel better at some point during the day. Kamakiriad by Donald Fagen was my favorite hangover music (I know you’re thinking “he does this so much he has ‘hangover music’?” I’m not that bad, am I?) And I put that on very softly for the drive out. Even though it was overcast, I put my sunglasses on to try to lower all of the sensory inputs that I had to deal with. I was starting to feel a little better as I pulled up at the office. For a moment I thought I’d forgotten the key but it was just in the inside pocket of my coat, don’t know how it got there. There were no cars in the lot this time and I parked in the fire lane around back to shorten the walk. You have to be in full conservation mode when you are dealing with a mead hangover.

The office was cold. Not enough to see your breath but almost. I wanted to get this done so I dropped my briefcase and headed back to the engineering section without taking off my coat. It shouldn’t take very long anyway and I hated to be cold. The lights were still on and the room was warmer than the rest of the office, I guess from all of the computers running. Where the hell would the files be? I decided to look alphabetically but what would the titles be? There weren’t any on the papers I had so I stood and thought for a minute and then just started to open the cabinets one by one looking for anything that would be familiar. I stopped quickly as I heard a noise at the other end of the room and closed the cabinet quietly. Damn. I should have looked through the whole section before I started this. I wasn’t thinking clearly enough from the hangover. Waiting to hear the noise again, I walked around the end cube and down the row that would get me toward where I thought the noise came from but I couldn’t be sure. The noise came again but I didn’t recognize it, I had walked past it and it was now behind me. Continuing around the end of the row so I could check the rest of the cubes, I heard the noise again but now in front of me and it started to become familiar. That damn copier. I walked into the copier cube and found that the thing was trying to restart itself for some reason. I pulled the plug and continued through the rest of the cubes with some relief starting to slow down my heart.

I made sure there was no one in the section and went back to the file cabinets trying to remember where I left off. There was a pattern to how things were filed and I found all of the ones I was looking for under the acronym SAAD. Logical, huh? It took me six cabinets to find it though, since there were no labels on the outsides of the drawers. It was hard to not just sit there and read the file but I knew (or felt) that I should get the copies made as quickly as possible and get out. I walked back to the copier with the file in my hand and had already forgotten that I had pulled the plug. Damn. I didn’t know how long it would take the one by my office to warm up so I plugged this one back in, restarted it, and then walked toward my office.

The copier by my office beat the one in the eng section by a long ways in warming up but I had to feed it more paper to complete the job. I think the total was over 100 pages and I knew it would take a long time to go over them when I got home. Went back to the section, pulled the plug on the copier (it was still making that strange noise), locked up and got out of there. There is nothing like a little excitement to cure a hangover and I felt much better walking out to my car. Could this be considered industrial espionage? Or did you have to share the information with someone else in the business to have it considered illegal? I was the head of the section now; didn’t that give me the right to see this stuff? Probably not.

Why do people have to take their jobs so seriously? When I got to my car there was a piece of paper under the wiper on the driver’s side that looked like a parking ticket. On a Sunday? I just can’t believe this crap. When I looked at it though, it was a warning from the county to not park in the fire lanes. I guess I have to remember to not jump to conclusions.

It was about 3:30 when I finished up with the files and got back in my car. My stomach was starting to settle quite a bit and the pizza at Logan’s was starting to sound good. I do have to remember to not eat so much, though. I think it takes like 5 miles of running to burn off one piece and I didn’t want to have to run 20 miles when I got home. I couldn’t do it anyway.

Logan’s was busy and Melissa didn’t see me until I had made my way all the way around the bar to the end where we normally stood. Yeah, I know it’s weird; we always go to the end of the bar. The more I think about it I think it must be habit. The conversation was the normal one, how she was doing, how was Ricky doing, anything new? There were so many people there that Melissa didn’t really have any time to talk and my thoughts were wandering back to the files and what might be in them. I skipped the pizza and took off after only one beer but I did promise to give her a call later in the week or stop in for her Thursday shift. I’d just have the leftovers from last night, or not, the beer had brought the nausea back.

I didn’t know where to start when I got back to my place, so I thought I’d skim the files first and then get more into the details. There were only three more buildings that had fallen and they were all in the eastern US, the one in GR was the farthest west and I couldn’t tell if this meant anything from the skim of the files. One thing that popped into my head was to look for a business connection between all of the sites. I guess I am thinking about the interconnecting board positions that permeate American business, the “good old boy network” kind of thing. How do you find this out? I think I’ll look on the internet.

Okay, this is what I’ve found: Guess who is on the board of all of the companies that had buildings fall? Robert Lanning. Yep, one of the senior partners of our firm. Daniel Susskind is on one of them, too you remember him? Just got transferred to Reston? But what does all of this mean. You tell me. I need to let this digest for a while. While I was digesting the information, I thought it would be a good idea to get some real digesting going on and put the files down to get those leftovers warming. I’d only had one beer that day so I felt that I could have some wine with dinner.

It was a good Retsina that went really well with the pork chops and I thought a good thought about Karen since she introduced me to it a few years back. I had it first when I met her parents at their cottage up north. Just thinking about her still brings a smile to my face. Do other people remain friends with their exes? I don’t see a lot of it from my vantage point. Maybe I value the friendships more than the relationships or do I think that there may be a chance to revive it? I’m not going to reveal the answer yet since I am still thinking about it but there is pain that goes along with taking that path and I don’t know if I would recommend it. I’ve even been asked for advice and listened to complaints about their new boyfriends. You probably think I’m pretty stupid to do all this. I can’t disagree. The pork chops are better the second day at least.

It was getting late and the files were starting to swim in my brain so it was time to stop and get good nights sleep for a change. I think I need a better way to take in all of the information. I wonder if I should have the guys come over and lay it all out on the floor, get a buzz on and try to make sense of it all? That sounded like a good plan so I stacked them back up and tried to figure out where to hide them. Do I really need to? It wasn’t going to be the CD player again that was for sure. I was getting the feeling that there was something going on here that was important but was I getting carried away? Probably. I’ve read way too much Jonathan Kellerman, I guess. I rolled the papers up, removed the grilles from my speakers and put them in the sound ports. There is something to be said about those huge 70’s speakers.

The feds were still looming in the back of my mind. The pair of them, not James Stickley.

**Chapter 9**

This was better. We were starting to catch up to the people we were following; small glimpses of them started to come as the sun rose to where it looked like noon. There were only two of them that I could see and I didn’t know if we should be trying to make sure they didn’t see us. I don’t even know why we were following them yet. That hadn’t been revealed. Sigourney Weaver was gone, replaced gradually by a person that looked like a composite of Carrie Ann Moss and Jennifer Garner again. She was constantly morphing as my glance shifted away from her and back. I couldn’t understand it yet but I knew for the first time that I was going to at some point. That’s progress I guess. I just wish the overall story would start to come together. Maybe it was and I just don’t recognize it yet. What do you think? I was beginning to doubt the dream had anything to do with my conscious life. It’s still fun, though.

The heat was getting to be unbearable and the sun was brighter than the last time and I couldn’t believe it. I was beginning to stumble, my legs were starting to not obey the brain and I knew I had to stop and rest soon. Carrie/Jennifer was doing better than I was at this point and had pulled out about thirty yards in front of me as I stumbled and fell to my knees. What the hell is that noise? A beeping noise started to get louder and the scene started to fade as I woke up.

I was sweating as I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling again. It happens sometimes. I think I’ll have to make sure that I turn the heat down before I go to bed. Could that have something to do with the heat in the dream? Cool, an experiment to try tonight. It can’t be that obvious, can it? Should I try it? What if it screws up the dream? Thinking too much again I can see.

Why was the fact that Robert was a director of all those companies important? It had started to become clearer in the first few moments after waking and I just needed to remember it. The question that came to mind immediately was if he had other roles as well. One of the things I was going to have to research today is what the connections are between all of those companies and us. I have an idea what that is but it’s not time to share yet. How the hell did Daniel get to be a director? What the hell is wrong with me? Shouldn’t I be one, too? I could use the cash.

I thought seriously about taking the day off but with the budget review tomorrow it wasn’t too good of an idea. Ted would freak out and it came to me in an insight, one of the best ways to find out what is going on in any company is to follow the money. Following the money took Nixon down, after all. And if it’s good enough for Nixon it’s good enough for me. Well, I did vote for him in’72 you know. The first election that I’m eligible for and I pick this guy? Hey, my judgment has gotten much better since then. At least I think so. What do you think? You are starting to get to know me a little but please ignore my judgment with women before you make your decision. We all have our weak points.

Oh, Ted is our CFO (Chief Financial Officer) if you didn’t know.

It had snowed again last night and I couldn’t help feeling a little depressed because we had been teased with a touch of spring last week. The run in to work was a skating rink and it took about twice as long as it normally did but I had a lot of fun watching the cars spin left and right as I drove past. I was following a Honda Civic on the downhill toward the office and he just took off across the street did a couple of 360’s and stopped. It was the coolest slow motion thing and I remembered something from NASCAR that really works; to avoid hitting someone you aim for where they are because when you get there they won’t be where you are aiming. Works like a champ if you don’t brake or steer. He was lucky, too, no ditch, just a stop on the shoulder and he could drive away. I’ll bet it scared the hell out of him.

I should have sucked it up and read through those files last night. It may help to put the financial information into context if I had an idea what is in the files. Well, I guess it will work the other way, too. I’ll have to pay attention in the meeting today that is one thing for sure. I am getting to the point that I want to. Figure that one out.

The only problem with these assumptions is that I expect Ted to tell me the truth and I don’t know if he even knows the truth. There are many examples in the news today that the CFO made decisions based on the information that he was given and it was patently false or incomplete. Who controls the information here? I wasn’t sure but maybe I could find out by asking some discreet questions. I had a sinking feeling that it was the senior partners and I don’t think they’ll appreciate me nosing around. But I have to don’t I? This whole mystery is fun and I couldn’t remember being so interested in life for a long time. Selfish reasons are valid, aren’t they? Even if there is nothing going on at least I’ll know more about my company and be more valuable. I told you I had a well honed ability to rationalize.

I found out one thing that morning; we own a holding company that owned that building in GR. Why that is important I can’t tell yet but it formed a real connection between the Virginia file and the SAAD project that I thought couldn’t be denied. I needed to confirm this from another source but I don’t know what that would be yet. I’m still thinking.

The budget review was moved up to this afternoon since Robert was supposed to go out to Virginia tomorrow for some update on the project that Daniel was assigned to. Most of it was just routine stuff, where we were in relationship to our cost goals and how many new projects should have budgeted for them in the next few months but one thing that was not there was any mention of the SAAD projects that were ongoing. I knew we were spending money on them, I had seen the PO’s for the raw materials and vouchers for the labor. Should I ask Ted if he had heard anything? That thought left my mind as fast as it entered since the one thing I was sure of was that I needed to keep quiet. At least for now. Maybe the files I have at home will add to the picture that is slowly building up in my head? I hope so.

I had skipped lunch to fit my schedule to Robert’s so when I took off early I really didn’t feel guilty (as if I ever do) even though Kate gave me one of her “you’ve got to be kidding me” looks as I went out the door. I am a partner, after all, and it’s one of the perks. Well, the only perk that I could see other than they pay me. I wonder what the rest of the partners do? I know that I’m there a lot more than they are but I don’t know how much that means.

I planned on not going out tonight so I stopped at the grocery store to buy beer and one of those self-rising pizzas for dinner. The files that I had hidden were starting to have this strange pull over me since I found out about the holding company that morning. It must be something important for me to skip a night out at the bar. Especially Monday when we compared notes from the weekend and set the tone for the rest of the week and I got three calls asking me where the hell I was. Maybe I DO spend too much time out drinking. Nope, don’t believe that.

I do have to relay one thing. You remember the IRS problem? Well, just did the taxes from 2003 (hey, it’s only a year late) and instead of owing them six thousand bucks, they owe me sixty one whole dollars! I didn’t remember that I had the brokerage withhold the maximum amount when I took the money out. It covered the tax and the penalty and now I have six G’s that I don’t know what to do with. That’s not entirely true, I am going to owe the state about twenty-five hundred but that is better than six grand. I know what I’m going to spend part of it on, those vices again, you know? I’m still a little pissed that I paid the feds almost twelve grand, though. I thought we got a tax cut? No, I forgot, only the rich people did.

I opened my first beer, grabbed a chunk of pizza and laid the files out all over my living room floor. There was a lot more detail in each of the files including the one from the Virginia site along with technical information that ran to about twenty-five of the hundred pages. I was confused by one file that laid out the progress on the project but then gave “talking points” that labeled it a failure and listed the insurmountable technical problems that would not allow it to continue. These contradicted all of the other information that I could see, though. Looking through the rest of the stack I was even more confused when I found a duplicate of the Virginia file that showed the building still standing and with new references in Robert’s hand again that said he considered this a failure. Almost too much for to get my head around. Maybe another beer will help.

The first thing that came to mind after seeing the duplicate Virginia file was to look for copies of the rest of them. The only one that was there was from a little place in Pennsylvania and it mirrored the Virginia file down to the failure notations in Robert’s handwriting. Why would they want this project to be seen as a failure? That would mean funding would be cut off as soon as the official report was issued to who ever was paying the bills. But I had never even seen the official funding. Was it official? I was starting to get a creepy feeling that this was one of the “black” programs that never shows up in detail anywhere but is part of special appropriations that few people in the government get to see. It’s like the whole “Stealth” aircraft program during it’s development that didn’t get exposed until someone forced the issue by taking pictures on their test flights.

This did put a whole new spin on the goings on. What that is yet I don’t know.

As I sat on the floor in the midst of the piles there was a knock on my door, just like a “cop knock” to quote Chad. I shoveled the files under the couch, put the grilles back on my speakers, and headed into my bedroom to get some clothes to put on. Yeah, now you know, when I’m home alone I’m usually just in a t-shirt and boxers. Even in the winter. The heat is included in my rent so I can keep it eighty if I want. Gina likes it, too. I looked through the peephole just as another knock came and I jumped a little. Crap. Beef and Beefier were outside the door.

I opened the door a little and braced myself against the back in case they tried to force their way in. It wouldn’t do much good but I wasn’t just going to throw it open.

“Mr. Jake Devereaux?” Beef said as I stood there.

“We’re agents Sloan and Carson,” Beefier added as I looked them over.

“National Security Agency. Could we have a word with you for a moment?” At least they were polite.

They both had their identification out so I didn’t have to use that cliché.

“What’s this about?” I said not moving or opening the door. I know, a cliché.

“Can we talk inside? This won’t take long and I’d prefer that we didn’t share it all with the neighbors,” Beef, or Carson made it quite clear that it wasn’t quite a request.

I stepped aside and opened the door so they could come in; my apartment seemed a lot smaller with those two in it. I pulled out a couple of chairs from my dining set but was a little concerned that Beefier or Sloan would crush it easily. There were a few corners of the files sticking out from under the couch and I kicked them under as I sat down. I am smooth sometimes.

“Mr. Devereaux, you are a partner at Lanning and Devereaux.” Carson stated the obvious.

“Your company is working on a project for a branch of the United States government that the NSA has become interested in due to its national security implications.” Carson continued and then looked at Sloan.

“And….” I said trying to keep things moving.

“And, we need some information that we have not been able to acquire through normal channels.” Sloan finished.

I sat there and looked a them for a minute, hoping the silence would get them to give me a little more information before I had to respond. It didn’t work.

“I really don’t know that much about the company,” There was a little truth in the statement. “And I’m not sure that I would share it with you just on your request. You should talk to Robert Lanning if you have questions about any activities or projects. I’m just a junior partner and have only been with the firm for a year.” I was playing the innocent for some reason but I knew it to be the right play. “I don’t have access to much except my direct area of the company which is business process consulting and engineering.” As soon as I said it I knew I shouldn’t have. Their faces looked like they had hit the jackpot.

“The project would fall under the engineering section we’re sure. It is just a simple physics project but the cost overruns have been significant and we have been asked to investigate why. We have come to you because we know that Mr. Lanning has been directing the project and we need someone that is not involved with it in any way to provide objective information.” Sloan was shoveling it I was sure.”

“What do you want from me?” I asked, knowing exactly what they wanted.

“We would like copies of the files associated with the acronym SAAD. What that means is not really important but any help you could give us would be appreciated.”

Another knock came through my door and I sat there with a puzzled look on my face. Who the hell could this be? I looked and remembered that I had invited Gina over to play cards and hang out when I decided to stay in for the night. As I opened the door, Sloan and Carson were already on their feet and heading for it. I guess the interview was over.

‘We’ll be in touch Mr. Devereaux,” was all they said as they pressed past Gina and out the door.

I watched them go and closed the door behind them. Gina had a curious look on her face, no the look was not curious, it looked LIKE she was curious and I knew I’d have to fill her in on this little meeting. What I didn’t know was how much to tell her. The stakes appeared somewhat higher with the appearance of the NSA and I didn’t want too many of my friends involved. Gina could handle it, though, and she just might be a help as this thing goes on. I didn’t want to go into all of the details yet, though, so I kept it broad and general and downplayed my feelings that this was gathering momentum and I wasn’t much in control. She kicked my butt at cards as always and I felt better at the end of the night. The beers helped in that regard as did a couple of my other vices. I know what you’re going to ask and no, she didn’t sleep with me. That’s what the couch is for. That’s ANOTHER story for later.

**Chapter 10**

I didn’t get the chance to test my theory on whether the temperature in my place affected my dreams since Gina stayed over and she likes it very warm. There wasn’t really any dreams at all that I can remember except for some innocuous little thing about Monty Python that I know didn’t have anything to do with the story. I was a little upset since the dream had become something I look forward to both for entertainment and for insight. I guess it wasn’t too big a cost to pay to have someone to wake up to (no, not in the same bed, I’ve told you that already) and Gina was fun to spend time with. There was something, though, but it wasn’t clear enough for me to remember it. Oh, well, maybe later.

My place smelled like smoke since Gina is a HUGE smoker when we hang out and drink. What is it with all of these young women these days? It seems like every one of them I know smoke cigarettes and don’t really care that they are bad for you. I guess it’s no different than me eating whatever I like even if it’s bad for me. But the cost of it? When I was growing up you could get a carton of cigarettes for about three bucks and now a PACK costs almost five? I don’ think I’d spend that much unless I was going to get a buzz from it. But that’s just me. Who am I to judge this stuff anyway? You know all about some of my vices.

She wasn’t up yet and I puttered around in the kitchen making coffee and cleaning up the empties from the night before. The remains of the pizza were still on the counter and I put them in Ziplocs and into the fridge. I was quite tired since we had been up until around three and it was only about seven now and I debated with myself on whether I should go in late or just take the day off. Robert had done me a favor by moving the budget meeting up and I couldn’t remember anything else on my calendar so the idea of getting some rest and just hanging out with Gina for the day was appealing. I hadn’t taken a day off since I started at L&D and while I didn’t know if I deserved one or not it was time to take one. Some of the files were out from under the couch and it looked like Gina had discovered them and read through a few at least. I don’t know how I feel about that, I am a little old fashioned and have a habit of protecting the women around me but is it assuming too much to think they need it? I really do believe in the equality of the sexes but at times I still find myself reverting to old behaviors. I guess I should let her make her own decisions, huh? Maybe she would like a little more excitement in her life just as I was getting from this whole affair? Maybe I should ask.

I covered her with the blankets she had gotten me for Christmas but didn’t want to wake her yet. The coffee had started to brew and I thought I’d go out to get a couple of papers to read while I waited for her to stir. It wasn’t as cold as Monday and the snow had started to melt but the cloud cover was still depressing. I couldn’t remember seeing the sun and I think I was getting a vitamin D deficiency. That, or it was a hangover but I wasn’t going to admit that. Lack of sleep I will admit to, though. I knew I hadn’t had enough and a nap was going to have to be part of our plans. I will say this again, not together. Not ever.

Gina was up and had a large cup of coffee in her hands when I got back. The Sci-Fi channel was on and I think she was watching one of the bad movies they had on in the mornings. A killer bee attack was the plot I think but the acting was so bad that I could not get interested.

“Good morning, you look like hell,” she looked at me and smiled just a small one.

“Good morning, same to you,” I said back to her. I think she looked worse than I did. At least she had more hair to be messed up.

“Got any plans for the day?”

“I’ve got class at 10,” she looked thoughtful, “but I could skip it.”

“You know how I feel about that,” I said to her trying to hide the disappointment.

“You should go, it’s your decision but you know you should go.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I’ve got a project to present and this is the last day to get credit.”

She got up and started to gather her things and get ready to leave. She had to go home before class to get cleaned up and it was getting on toward eight so we said our goodbyes and promised to talk sometime later in the week. I found I wasn’t all that unhappy since I didn’t think I had the energy left to raise any more hell for a while. The couch pulled me back in and I lay down to catch a little nap after I called Kate to tell her I wouldn’t be in. It felt GOOD and the pillows still smelled like Gina.

It wasn’t as hot this time and the sun was shrouded by high clouds that cut down on its intensity significantly. I was on my knees still, trying to rest and catch my breath when Carrie/Jennifer came back to help and offered me her canteen. The water was not cool, how could it be in the heat? I held it in my mouth for a minute to try to moisten my tongue and that helped some but not nearly enough. She helped me up and just pointed to the west from where we had come earlier and I could see what she saw: Two figures coming across the plain. They were too far away to see any detail but I knew they were the longbow pursuers and we needed to get moving. I was starting to understand this dream more metaphorically than anything else. I was chasing someone but there were others after me and it did fit real life. I think you can figure it our now, can’t you? Is it that simple? If it is I’m going to be very disappointed. I thought I was much more complex than that. Guess not. One question that came to mind was why was I having this dream before all of this started? I didn’t have an answer yet.

My phone rang to wake me up this time, the little doorbell chimes that I used would never cause any alarm or stress and that was why I used them. I still hate phones but at least I could make the intrusion softer.

“What’s happenin’ Mike?”

“Hello. Where the hell were you last night? I think we all tried your phone but no answer.”

“Had a couple of visits last night. First, Beef and Beefier as you called them showed up here around five to ask me some questions.”

“How come you didn’t call us? C’mon, details.”

“Well, it turns out these guys are feds but not FBI, NSA.” Mike was silent and just took in the info.

“National Security Agency, something like CIA but they deal with domestic issues. You’ll never guess what they asked.” I thought about filling him on the details and then stopped.

“You know, I shouldn’t say anything.” Why don’t you guys come out and play some cards tonight?”

“Okay…..” Mike sounded confused. “I don’t have the kids tonight so I’ll talk to the guys and we’ll be out around 8 or so.”

“Ahhh, who was the second visitor?” I think he knew who it was.

“Gina.” Was all I had to say.

“Bye.” Was all he had to say.

He hung up and I just sat there and thought for a few minutes. I read somewhere that the NSA had the capabilities to monitor phone calls, both cell and land lines, at least on the east coast. Now the paranoia was really starting to rev up. I needed to clean up my place before they got here and it was almost 6:30 so I got to work, put the tax stuff away (yeah, I still haven’t filed it yet, and got the rest of the 30 pack in the fridge. I wondered if I should cancel the night? Do you think they are watching my place? If they were, it would mean that all of the guys could be at risk, too. If they knew what bar I hang out in, they probably already knew who the guys are. I’m sure they are pretty thorough. Damn, I hope they’re not.

The guys showed up right on time and didn’t waste any time asking me about the visit from the NSA people.

“Well, what’s the deal,” Micah asked first.

“They want me to spy on my own company. At least they want some specific information on guess what? The SAAD projects that we are working on. You remember those. Guess what I made copies of a hundred pages of Sunday. Yep…pretty cool, huh?”

“Where are they, when do we get to see them? Mike was sounding excited.

“I’ve got them all here and was looking at them when they showed up at my door. You should have seen it. I was just shoveling them under the couch so they wouldn’t see them.”

I pulled the files out from under the couch and Chad got us all beers while I was re-organizing them to make sure they would make as much sense as possible.

“Why you? Chad asked simply

“I don’t really know yet. I think it’s probably because I…well two things, no three. One….I’m the newest partner of the firm and have only been there for a little while compared to the others. You guys know that, until lately, they really haven’t included me in much of the inner workings either. Two….They just put me in charge of the engineering section. You should have seen Beef and Beefier’s faces light up when I told them that. Third….They didn’t say it in so many words but I think that they are after Robert for some reason. They didn’t share it with me. You know, it just popped my head that I might have to start looking for a new job.”

I remembered the little balls of concrete that I had picked up from the site downtown and tossed one to each of them while they sat on the floor looking at the files.

“What’s this? Micah asked as he rolled it around in his hands and it crumbled.

“Take a look at the photos again,” I said as I dug out the close ups of the Virginia collapse. “See those little marbles spread all through the wreckage? They look just like these that I picked up downtown.”

“Downtown?” Chad looked interested.

“Yep, remember the old building at Fulton and Division? The one that just fell down if you believe the news accounts?”

“I remember it falling but not the news,” Chad answered.

“There wasn’t much news on it at all. I did some research and found just a little blurb from way back in the Press. No television that I could find or TV website coverage either. In this town, you’d think that would be huge news.”

“One other thing, when I went down there to take a look Saturday, I found those little marbles but I also found that the sidewalk next to where the building was is soft. When I stood on it, it crumbled under my weight,” I was watching for a reaction.

Nothing. I waited.

“Let’s try to get this organized,” Mike spoke first. “I think there IS something going on if the feds are involved. So you are not crazy to think it.”

I had to work to just listen and keep my mouth shut so I didn’t stifle their creativity.

“What else do we know?” Chad added.

“There must be a connection between SAAD and the buildings since the information was in the same file, unless it was a mistake or a plant to throw anyone off that stumbled on to it.” Micah said as he dug though the files.

I never considered that the SAAD material may have been misfiled or that there was the possibility that someone was trying to cloud the issue. I was starting to feel like I was getting out of my depth.

He continued, “I think the note about “pinging” is to find out the distance to something. Like what they do when they look for underground breaks in cables. They can tell where it is by the resistance, I think, in the wires.” He found the page about the pinging and handed to Chad.

“One thing that’s not in these files but I found interesting was an explosion in a lab in Geneva that killed three researchers who were working on SAAD, “I added to keep the conversation moving. “There is also nothing in the budget at L&D for this project. But, I just realized that that doesn’t mean anything if the project is not active. It won’t show up.” There was something missing still.

“So, basically, all you have is there were a few buildings that fell down and there is some sort of connection between them and your company.” Mike tried to summarize.

“There HAS to be something here if the NSA is interested. Do you think there might be more information that I’m missing? Should I go back and dig a little more?”

“Let’s think about this for a minute,” Chad broke in. “How about Robert’s background? I’d be interested in that if I were you. It may tell us where to look and what to look for. And the NSA doesn’t trust him but that may be an endorsement more than anything. I would expect the government to not like me.” He thought of something I would never have considered. “And while you’re at it, I’d do some checking on the guy that just got transferred." The new perspective that I’d hoped for was working.

“How about the PO’s and labor vouchers you mentioned earlier?” Micah rejoined the conversation. “You can get the detail of who is getting paid from them and that may give you another connection that would fill out the picture.”

“Why does one file say the test was a success when the other, duplicate says it was a failure?” Mike hit on the one thing that puzzled me most of all.

The conversation went on for about another hour but I had to cut it short about 11 so I could get some sleep. We’d gone through all the beer anyway and no one wanted to go get more. Just as well. As the group left, I started to feel a little bit better, the consensus was that I wasn’t crazy, that there was something going on but we still didn’t know all of what it is. I was a little torn between the idea that I wasn’t alone in this anymore but if anything happened to them I would not be able to deal with it. I walked them out and stopped at the top of the stairs leading down to my apartment and couldn’t help looking around to see if there was anyone watching. How would I know?

**Chapter 11**

They shot her. She was helping me over a small ridge of rocks and dirt and an arrow hit her in the right shoulder just below the rotator. I didn’t see it but her face changed without a sound from her mouth and she went down on one knee while two more arrows just skimmed over our heads. If she wouldn’t have fallen they would have hit us. I looked back toward the west and saw the archers nocking two more arrows and the flights were hard to see as they came in, a little short this time. Why were they trying to kill us? That hasn’t been revealed yet but right now it didn’t matter, I needed to get us moving to cover behind a small rise in the plateau that was about 30 yards ahead but I didn’t have the strength to carry her. She had almost been carrying me and the heat just sucked out every remaining bit of energy that I thought I had. How many arrows do those guys carry? Could we wait them out here in the open? The next flight slammed into the ground no more than six inches away and I knew the answer. There was no time to remove the arrow from her shoulder. I dug down deep, put her good arm around my neck, and started to stumble toward the rise as fast as I could. The energy ran out just as we got there and we fell over it and down into a little depression that hid behind it; landing with all of our weight on my left shoulder.

That damn beeping again. I woke up half out of my bed with my shoulder resting against my weight machine. How the hell did I get here? I could feel I was bruised a little and it hurt a bit when I extricated myself from the comforter and sheets. I wanted to go back and help her. That one was as real as any I could remember and this time I had feelings of sorrow that carried over into waking. I got a flash in my head for a second that made me question which one WAS real, I knew better but there had never been a look of hurt and pain in a dream before that captured it as well as on her face a few minutes ago. The connection remained for a few more seconds and I found myself shedding a tear for her. I feared she’d be dead before I could get back there.

I know, I used to be a lot more fun when you started this but don’t you think things have become a lot more serious? I’ll try to lighten it up some, okay? There are still things that should make us laugh no matter what is going on in our lives if you just look for them. I have just forgotten for a while and I’ll remember to try a little harder to find the fun. Or absurdity, either one will get us a chuckle I hope.

Okay, here’s the first absurdity. This whole thing. What the hell am I doing this for? It’s not really any of my business, is it? Except for the fact that I work for L&D and would like to keep my job for a while, there is no other rationale for me to keep going on this thing. If I do, keep going that is, it may even result in me losing my job. Why do I think a fifty year old and a group of ordinary friends like mine can go up against people that do this intrigue for a living and have an effect? Revolt against a mundane life? A last gasp of manhood? Sixties idealism? I don’t know but it has become part of our lives and to stop now just seems wrong in some way. I think I just don’t care anymore, I’ve lived a pretty good life and to be truthful, if I died tomorrow It wouldn’t matter to me. Of course it wouldn’t matter, I’d be dead but you know what I mean.

I don’t think I can un-involve myself anyway. So as Bette Davis said in one of her movies: “Buckle your seatbelts; it’s going to be a bumpy ride.” Were seatbelts even invented then?

There were a few things that came out of our meeting last night that gave me something to do other than work. Something I embrace whenever I can. The first thing I wanted to do was check out Robert and Daniel and see what they were up to before L&D. The second was to try to find the companies behind the materials and labor that had been going into the SAAD project. My third was a tossup between the duplicate files and the background of our company. I hadn’t even checked that out before I signed on, I guess I just wanted the work and prestige from being a partner. Not too smart, huh?

Oh, it’s Wednesday! I get to go out to the bar tonight. Yay!

I walked in the door at work, (yep, skipped the description of the drive in today), hit my office, dropped off my stuff, and headed for coffee. Kate wasn’t in her office and I couldn’t remember if she had a scheduled day off or not. There was a message on my phone that Cody was sick so she would be in later in the day if he started to feel better. I called her back to tell her to stay home for the day, that I could get by without her and she just laughed. I CAN get by without her and I can prove it. Just as soon as I can find my calendar.

Robert was still out of town or at least not here so I walked over to his office on the way to do my walk around with the engineers. Marilyn was back at her desk and was actually smiling for a change. I wondered what the joke was; did she see puppies being run over or kittens being drowned on the way in to work? There were times that I thought she looked like a young Cruella DeVille. Add a couple of white streaks to her hair and give her a long cigarette holder and she’d have a new job. Veal was probably her favorite food.

“Good morning, Marilyn,” I turned on all of the charm I could muster.

“What?” I was getting to her, that was at least 10 decibels less than normal.

“When’s Robert going to be back?” Sweeter than honey.

“He’s gone on business until Thursday then vacation until the first week of March.” She was actually looking at me.

“Can I get on his calendar for the week he gets back? Say Thursday around 10? Good, thanks.” I turned away before she had a chance to object. I wasn’t in the mood to listen to any more of her misery and some thoughts were coming to my head. Good ones, too. I had ten days to do what I needed to do. You know how it is, pretty cool when the boss is gone, especially when you are in charge when he’s gone. Lots of mischief.

I turned right and headed back to the engineering section to just say hi to my folks. I know it opens you up to having to solve some problems but that’s management. It’s not too hard if you are nice to people. Well most of them, anyway, with some of them you just want to grab them by the throat and shake some sense into them. There are true idiots out there. They should be treated like idiots. I had one that now worked for me. That’s another story for later.

The door was open for the first time I could remember and I pushed it open slowly in case there was someone behind it. The board over the file cabinets said that everyone was out for a conference today and it looked like the only one in the place was our rental IT guy doing some upgrades on the computers.

“Chuck, what’s going on?”

“Hi, Jake. You know, some of these guys don’t have much common sense. Damn, this is a pain. Can you tell them to stop surfing so much? It’s going to take me all morning to clean out all of the spyware!”

“Can we change over to Firefox? Would that help?”

“Thank you, thank, you, thank you. I have been trying to get Daniel to approve this for almost a year. I’ll do it while I’m cleaning them up.” I’d never seen someone so happy. Geeks.

With all of the things going on, I was starting to think like a criminal. At least trying to cover my tracks. I was going to use the internet for some research today but I didn’t want to use my own computer to do it so I thought of the best place so the trail to me would stay cold. Where does that leave me? I didn’t want to use Kate’s computer since she didn’t need to be involved in this. If I use one of them in the eng section, especially today, they would know it wasn’t one of the engineers since they were all out today and could prove it. And with Chuck in there working, it would be another witness or loose end that I couldn’t tie up too easily. Man, we do so many things without thinking about them that when we have to it just becomes seriously complicated. I don’t think I’d want to live this kind of life for too long, it’s just too much effort.

Is there a way to get to Robert’s computer? That would be the ultimate in irony. Nope, won’t work.

I don’t want to wait until I get home so what do I do? I stood in my office trying to think and it came to me. Not in a flash, but it came to me. I grabbed my laptop and headed out the door for the coffee shop across the street. Chuck had set up WI-FI capability for me so I could use it in any of the hotspots that were popping up all over the city and it was very cool. I guess it was the “brave new world” of computing or at least in internet use. Oh, I’ll bet you don’t know what WI-FI is. Well, it’s a group of wireless internet connections that operate something like a cell phone network that allow you to access the internet from anywhere from coffee shops, to parks and just about any place else. Seems like science fiction, doesn’t it?

Hey, even though I’m fifty, I still like to stay current. I can never understand why older people (geez, is that me?) are automatically assumed to be technophobes and illiterate when it comes to electronics. I resent the joke of the flashing VCR clock (well, now I guess it would be DVD clock) I’m not that person. I still won’t use my credit card for most purchases, though. Cash can’t be tracked.

First things first, I got my regular coffee and walked to the table that sat in the back of the shop. The early morning crowd had cleared out and the few people that were there looked like students (what do “students” look like?) or people looking for work. There were books and newspapers strewn across the occupied tables and it appeared like most of them had settled in for the day. It sounded like the table next to me had an insurance agent trying to sell something to an uninterested client who kept looking at his watch every couple of minutes. I feel for the guy.

As I sipped my coffee and waited for it to cool a little, the computer was doing its thing looking for a connection and finally gave me the okay sign. I needed to think a bit, though, on what the best approach would be to find out about Robert’s background. I started the IP masker that Chuck had given me to allow me to be anonymous on the web and went to Google to get started. It was getting to be a habit to begin there but I could have used Yahoo just as well. You would be surprised how much information is out on the web about everyone; have you ever Googled yourself? It was place to start anyway and I knew the trail would probably lead to some of the more obscure databases that the mainstream search engines didn’t reach. Luckily, I still had my access to some of them from when I was working on my master’s and I just needed to remember the passwords. That would be a trick in itself.

The returns were just the normal stuff, where he was born, where he went to school (wow, Columbia), and some jobs that he had held along with his marital status (divorced). He had worked for the Clinton administration in the mid 90’s and the blank space from ’96 to ’99 said that he had been working in some sort of classified job that had been withheld from the record. How do I find that out? His record from ’00 to now was with L&D (at the time Lanning Associates) and there was a hyperlink back to our website that didn’t work. I’ll have to check that out. The blank space as not that mysterious really. I’ve got a few in my record from being unemployed. Don’t think that’s classified, though.

While I thought about how to fill the gaps in Robert’s record, I typed in Daniel’s name to do the same kind of search. His was a little different, there were two gaps in his record, one from after he graduated from college (U of M) in ’96 until he joined us in ’00 and one that started from a couple of months ago. The record said that he no longer worked for us. Strange. I thought it was a transfer at least that is what I was told. So who did he work for now? I wonder if there are any hard copy records back at the firm? I’ll bet they are locked up in Robert’s office. How would I get to them? I knew I’d have to confront the dragon and I left my sword and armor at home.

Even if I didn’t know the detail of the gaps, it did confirm what we had all thought, that Robert and Daniel had a history of working in some kind of classified entity and there was still a current connection between the firm and that community. That’s all we really need to know right now. Just another piece of the puzzle. It was getting tough to keep all of this stuff straight, maybe I need to start writing things down? Not yet. It would just be something else that I’d have to hide. My speakers aren’t that big.

I looked up from the computer and took my glasses off to try to regain their ability to focus on things more than two feet away and return some sense of my surroundings. There hadn’t been much change in the composition of the people that were at the tables except the lunch crowd had started filing in and a few of them looked like they were waiting for a place to sit. I would have liked more time to search the web but I wanted to check back in the eng section to see if Chuck had finished so I could take a more thorough look at the files. This was going to take a lot of time and I hoped that none of my engineers had felt guilty about taking the day and come back to work. I shut off my computer, put it back in its case and started for the door. Cara stopped me on the way out and gave me a sample of the days lunch special (a pita with a cucumber cream sauce that is almost as good as sex, I said ALMOST) and asked me for a bottle of the mead that I make. A pretty good trade. I squeezed out past the line that was forming and back into the cold.

The walk back to the office was uneventful. Does everything I do have to be interesting? I hope you don’t think so or you’ll be disappointed. Well, I did drop the pita when I slipped on some ice (a choice between my computer and the pita, guess what won) but Cara had wrapped it well enough that the five-second rule could be enforced and no damage was done. I wasn’t feeling very social so I got a diet Coke from the machine and headed back to my office to eat and check my phone messages. Kate had called to confirm that she was going to stay home with Cody (that flu that was going around I think) since he needed some “mom time” and said she’d call my cell later to let me know if she was going to need Thursday, too. Hey, you can see I am getting along great without her.

“Hey, Chuck,” I said to him as he stopped at my office door and leaned against the frame.

“Got them all done. Have them give me a call if they have problems with Firefox or have any other questions. I think they won’t bitch too much, though. They won’t be seeing any more pop-ups or spyware and those things run like rockets now. Anything else you need done while I’m here?”

“Not that I know of,” I signed the service voucher and he headed toward the back door.

“Talk to you later.”

 I had the whole afternoon so I finished my lunch, signed a few papers, and returned a few calls before I thought about going back to look at the files. I still didn’t know what I was looking for and sitting there thinking about it hadn’t helped much. I was hoping that seeing some of them would trigger a connection to the ones I had and I’d just take it from there. Not much of a plan, I know.

God, I’m starting to feel lousy. I hope it’s not the flu. If Cara poisoned me I’m going to be pissed.

My stomach started doing the little flip-flops that say there is something going on and I reached for the antacids I usually carry in my briefcase. Don’t you have a kit that you carry? Mine Consists of antacids, Zantac, sinus medicine, and aspirin and I take it wherever I go. Geez, now I DO sound old, don’t I? What’s next, Depends? I guess it’s like my briefcase, I never go anywhere without it either. Okay, ladies I know you understand that. Do you ever go anywhere without your purse? Didn’t think so. I do wonder where that habit comes from, though. Do moms teach it to their daughters? What do my sons think about their Dad carrying a “purse”? I’ll have to ask them sometime.

If I was going to get the file search done it had to be quick. I could feel a little fever starting to rise and my energy was slowly ebbing, making it an effort to just sit there. The antacids were working, though and my stomach felt better so I got up and headed back to the section. I had remembered the key (put it in my briefcase) and had it in my hand when I opened the door. Chuck had turned off the lights (why can’t I get my guys to do that?) And none of the workstation light were on so I was confident that I was alone. That is, unless someone was sleeping back there. Would it be too careful to take a look? I did and there wasn’t. I turned the copier on as I walked by so it would be warmed up if I found anything and started in on the cabinet next to the door.

I would love to say that I found the solution to the mystery in the files but I can’t. It wasn’t there. One thing that popped out at me was that, if these were all of the projects we’d worked on since the firm was founded, we couldn’t be making enough money to survive. Which raised a new question; where was the money coming from? I was bringing in some cash flow from the consulting work but barely enough to pay my salary. From the project review it looked like the engineers had enough work now but up until I joined the firm a year ago they didn’t. Is this normal for a start-up company? Where did the initial investment come from to launch?

I could think just as well in my own office so I turned off the lights, locked the door, and started back to my office. I still needed to try to find some information on the PO’s for the material for the SAAD project but my head had started to throb with each step so I skipped the finance office and headed back to mine. I really wasn’t feeling any sense of urgency there anyway since Ted was always in his office and I hadn’t thought about what story to tell him why I need the information. Does flu always come on this fast? I think I can get the financial stuff without his help anyway, all I need is a PO number from the files but they were back at my place. As good an excuse as any for me to go home early. I do think I’m going to have to start writing this stuff down.

The flu (or whatever it is) was starting to warp my thinking. I could get the numbers I needed from the ORIGINAL files that were in the engineering section and I again marveled at my capacity to miss the obvious. At least this time I didn’t drive all the way home before I figured it out. I know you won’t believe it but this has happened before. Okay, so you do believe it. You’re getting to know me now, damn.

I copied all of the numbers I could find in the SAAD file that looked like PO or voucher numbers and made a copy of one PO that I had missed on the first run through. The name of the company that we were buying material from on that PO seemed familiar but I couldn’t remember where I’d seen it before. Maybe I had dealt with them in a previous job or something? The memory seemed newer than that and walking back to my office it hit me: it was one of the companies where Robert is a director. What did that mean? Isn’t that a conflict of interest? Can there be a conflict of interest if you own the company? Ow…my head is really starting to hurt and no, not just from the flu. It was looking like a hibernation night at home.

I don’t need this, not now. Damn, I thought I’d gotten through the winter without any sickness but a few sniffles from a cold and now this. That’s what I get for bragging to the guys that “I never get sick” when some of them were ill earlier in the month. I don’t really believe that bragging has any bearing on my getting this bug but don’t we all knock on wood sometimes? I guess superstition is a part of life even if we don’t believe in it.

This IS worse than a hangover.

I was going downhill quickly so I decided to pack up and go home. I threw the PO copy in my briefcase (how do you throw a sheet of paper?), put on my coat, and turned off the lights but had to go back to erase the web page records from my desktop computer. After I did that I remembered that I hadn’t used it today. I told you the flu had warped my thinking. On the way out I stopped to tell Angie that I was going home sick since Kate wasn’t there.

“Boy, Jake, you don’t look well. But you never do so how is this any different?” Is everyone a comedian these days?

“Goodbye Angie. If I feel like this I won’t be in tomorrow.” I just couldn’t muster the strength to banter with her. I was starting to hurt everywhere.

The drive home was endless and the other drivers just seemed like they were worse than normal; I got cut off in traffic four or five times but didn’t even have the energy to give them “the salute” or use the horn. It was a major effort to open the door and pick up my briefcase when I got home and when I finally got inside (it seemed like the walk was miles long) I just dropped everything by the door and flopped onto the couch. Woke up an hour later and felt even worse but being in my own place helped a little. It hurt to think so I decided not to.

Times like this, being alone just sucks. I’ve never had anyone to take care of me, even when I was married, and I think it is the only aspect of my life that I don’t like. It was always a competition with Charlene when we were married; when I was sick she was sicker and I got to the point that I just stopped telling her. But that doesn’t stop me from longing for someone to wrap a blanket around me, take my temperature, and make me chicken soup. I wonder how that would feel? Pretty good I’ll bet.

Well, there isn’t anyone so I had to do it myself and it was just too much effort. The chicken soup was replaced by saltines and a glass of water and I don’t have a thermometer anyway so I just draped the blankets over me and turned on the TV. I have to thank Gina again for the blankets, I didn’t have any before she got these for me and they were making me feel a little better. I hoped that this was the one day thing that was going around the office but if it lasted two I could take the rest of the week off. That’s something, I guess. Better call Ted and tell him he’s in charge.

**Chapter 12**

No dreams last night.

**Chapter 13**

She was alive when I got back to her. We were still tangled up together at the bottom of the small depression and the arrow had broken off with about a foot still in her shoulder. I think she was still conscious as I pulled myself from under her but her eyes were closed so I couldn’t be sure. I needed to take a look to see where the archers were so I rolled her over on her left shoulder so the arrow wouldn’t be pushed deeper and started crawling slowly to the top of the depression. I got about halfway there and had to rest, the pain in my left shoulder was starting to turn to an icy, deep sear that ran down my side and it was clear that I had used all of my energy to get us there. The fine dust that coated the plateau filled my eyes and mouth but I couldn’t do anything about it. All I could do was lay there, stare at rocks above us, and expect to die. I still didn’t know why I was here but the clouds above us were making interesting shapes so the thought left as fast as it had come. I wanted to save her more than anything but I was sure that I couldn’t and this time I didn’t feel anything. No tears.

I woke up drenched in sweat (yeah, sweat, nothing else) and remembered too quickly that I was still sick. The aches had started to recede but my head still felt like it was filled with cement and the only thing I wanted to do was takes some aspirin and go back to sleep. My phone was beeping in the kitchen and I debated whether to get up and see who had left me a voicemail. The debate continued for a few minutes and I lost, so I got up (slowly) in a process that had multiple false starts and ended with me making my shaky way to the bathroom for that aspirin. When I looked in the mirror it scared me; I’m usually quite pale but Casper the Ghost looked suntanned next to how I looked. I looked old enough to be my own father. I couldn’t remember the last time that I had something to eat and since the thought was not turning my stomach, breakfast was in order.

The sun was too damn bright! The one day in February that the sun shines and I have to close my shades to keep it out. That’s about right for how things have been going. I’ve never heard of sunlight tuning into pain other than sunburn but I could be wrong. Well, I am wrong, it hurts. I almost wanted to put my sunglasses on in the house Please work faster aspirin.

The phone was still beeping and I just looked at it for a moment like it was some kind of alien sitting on my counter. It was after nine and I thought I’d better give Kate a call to let her know I was going to be out another day. I was really sick this time. I still felt guilty, though, since I had used a few sick days when I wasn’t and I think I was getting a reputation for taking advantage of the system. When I’m bored and not challenged, my dedication does flag somewhat I’ll admit. I still think they are getting their money’s worth. The phone felt like it weighed about two pounds when I picked it up.

“Hi, Kate.” It was a habit to sound as sick as possible.

“Jake.” She sounded a little annoyed. Yep, I can tell with just one word.

“I won’t be in again today, I’m still sicker than a dog,” I reflexively added a couple of coughs for effect.

“Yeah, right. How come it only took Cody one day to get over it?”

“Cody’s not fifty, is he?” I was already running out of energy and wanted this over

“Geez, Jake I guess you are sick,” she sounded like there was at least a little sympathy in her voice. “I’ll take care of everything, just go back to bed. NO bar tonight either.”

“I could feel better by then,” I knew I wouldn’t.

“No, you won’t, trust me. Hang up and go back to bed.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was all I could think of to say and shut the phone off.

I wasn’t feeling well enough to return any of the other calls so I plugged it back in and laid it on the counter again. I was curious enough about who had called so I did a quick scroll through and only found Gina and Mike that I knew. Neither one of them left a message so it must not have been important, so I put it back down. I thought about turning it off but what if a good looking woman calls me? I’d hate to miss that and even the smallest of chances of it happening was enough for me. I have won at Keno, you know.

The third call was the problem. It had a D.C. area code (how do I know that? Jennifer lived there when she was going to college) and I had a feeling who it was. The card that the NSA guys had left was laying on the counter still and I picked it and the phone up and the numbers matched. Damn, I knew they wanted a decision from me on the spying but I wasn’t ready for them yet. I needed to know what was going on first; I still didn’t even know who the good and bad guys were yet. How could I stall them? They weren’t going to give me too much more time before they did something so I needed to get moving. But why today? I still feel rotten; do you think they would let me call in sick? I’ll bet I only have until Monday. Damn.

I still feel like crap. Have I said that enough so you’ll understand? It took a grand total of twenty seven minutes before I was ready to go back to bed. So I did.

The aspirin had taken effect and I felt a little more human when I woke up a couple of hours later. No dream addition. This time getting out of bed was much easier and I was even hungrier since I didn’t have the energy to make anything earlier. This time it was just cereal and the glass of orange juice gave me a nice little sugar rush. I remembered to take my vitamins with an extra dose of vitamin C and hoped that the iron wouldn’t tear up my stomach. The cereal was sitting well after all. Life was beginning to be possible again and I MIGHT feel well enough to go out to the bar later. Yeah, I know, I’m a glutton for punishment. Something smelled terrible and I realized it was me, I hadn’t taken a shower in two days after all and I hadn’t even changed my clothes. Might even make me feel better.

As I get older, I find that I need to continue to go over things in my mind to make sense of them (and to remember at times) and as I said before, I think I need to start writing these things down. My brain was still fogged by the flu but the specter of the feds falling on me again drove the few operating brain cells into action. Now where the hell is a pen?

What do we know now? Quite a few things, actually, if you’ve been paying attention. You’re still reading aren’t you, that makes me feel good and tells me that there IS something here. That I’m not crazy, well a little crazy, but not about this.

Here’s what we know:

1. We are involved with something called the SAAD project, part of a body of research that is going on around the world.
2. The buildings falling down are connected to that project in some way.
3. Robert is involved in trying to get the government to believe that the project is a failure when the files say that it is a success.
4. The feds (NSA) are so interested and suspicious of Robert that they want me to spy for them.
5. Daniel is connected to this somehow.
6. There is still too much that I don’t know.

Damn, I was hoping that listing this stuff would make something pop out at me and point at a path or actions to take. Didn’t work. Nope, it did. I need to get my hands on the summary report or a draft of it. Where the hell would that be? It wasn’t in any of the files that I had looked through back at the firm but those were just the engineering portion anyway and they may be stored in two places. The next question that popped into my head was: who would be writing the report? Let’s think about this. It wouldn’t be Robert; partners just didn’t do that kind of thing. That left Daniel as the only one that I knew of that was involved. I think ‘knew of’ is the operative term here, though, I still didn’t know enough to make assumptions. I wonder if he left any files behind in his office? Or on his computer?

How would I get to them? I’d seen his office after he left and it was cleaned out except for the things you always leave behind when you move, the paper clips, post-its, and rubber bands. Even his furniture was gone. Now that is something, why would they move his furniture? Just another weird puzzle piece that didn’t fit just yet.

I’m not a computer geek but I have three sons that are. But, do I want to get them involved in this? I am beginning to feel like there could be real danger here. Could they be at risk just because they are my sons? If that is the case, shouldn’t I use all of the resources I have to give us the best chance to avoid the danger? If it isn’t, though, dragging them into this would certainly expose them. How can I keep their involvement secret? Should I have thought about this when I brought the guys in? Maybe I should just forget it and hope that what I’ve done so far is not irreversible? Whoa….stop the madness. My mind felt like a runaway train; it had to be the flu talking.

Or, is this whole thing a delusion of grandeur and a way to get people to pay attention to me? I do kind of like the idea that I’m important (in my own mind) now and that my actions will be the key to some big mystery. Does this stuff really happen to ordinary folks? I’ve never known anyone that has been involved in anything like this. Have you? Probably not. Do they keep keep this stuff secret? If so, how? Why am I taking the hard path? That’s never been part of who I am and the change in me was puzzling. I’ll place my bet on the fact that I’m getting older and finally can see the end. I would hate to have the only thing that people remember is I hung out with young women and drank too much. Not much of a legacy.

So what if it is? A delusion of grandeur. I’m still having fun and it’s keeping me thinking and moving so can we just leave it at that? Thanks.

I was starting to feel better. Thinking seems to be a tonic for me and when I come up for air I have a calmness and clarity that I didn’t have before. It seems the older I get the less I want to procrastinate and the idea of action to an end was more and more appealing. So I called my middle son Jameson (yep, going to get them involved) and without telling him too much, got he ball rolling on getting access to both Daniel’s and Robert’s computers.

“This is what I need,” I started. “I’ve got to get access to a computer and take a look at some information without the owner knowing it.”

“LAN or web?”

“One LAN, one web,” I didn’t think our LAN extended to Virginia.

“Do you know when they will be using them?”

“No, not really. But the LAN one is in an office here in town and the web is in Virginia.” I was beginning to think this might not work.

“Do you want server access and hard drive?”

“Probably both, I’m not sure where the files would have been stored but I’ll bet they have them password protected and somewhere they can control access to them.”

“Don’t care about passwords; has your LAN address changed? No, I can see it didn’t. I don’t know how he knew that. “Who’s the target on the LAN?”

“Robert Lanning. That should be LanningR for the user.”

“Not a problem. Not really even much of a challenge. I’m already in. I’ll set up a ping for every 30 seconds or so and when someone uses the computer I’ve got a program that will establish a link and clone the hard drive to the server and then to my website. Is that okay?”

“What about traceability? Can anyone figure out that this is being done?”

“Dad,” one word conveyed the idea of ‘don’t be an idiot’. “You know I’ve been doing this since I was a little kid. This is something I COULD HAVE DONE back then. No, they can’t trace it.”

“How about the other one? Daniel Susskind.”

“Just as easy. If he’s ever logged in to your server over the web, I’ve got him. His IP address will be there and all we need to do is backtrack. Do you want keystroke records, too?”

“Why don’t you capture everything and we’ll sort it out later. Can you e-mail the stuff to me when you get it?”

“I’ll link the whole thing and you’ll get it as soon as I do. Oh, I’ve got a problem with my car. When I use the expressway, the temperature gauge goes all the way up to hot. When I get off it goes back down. I don’t smell that sweet smell like this summer when you replaced that hose. No steam or anything.”

“Have you checked the coolant lately?”

“No……how do you do that?”

“Make sure the car is cold and then twist open the little silver cap that is on the left side of the radiator. It sounds like you’re low on coolant. If you can’t see any green stuff, there is a gallon jug in your garage that says anti-freeze on it, fill the radiator until it’s full and put the cap back on. I’ll check it tomorrow when I’m over for the grocery run.”

“Thanks, Dad. See you later.”

Not even a question why I needed the information or what I was looking for. Was that a ‘guy thing’ or was it that when they’ve asked me for help I never questioned it? Just did it. It was neat to have that kind on unconditional trust from someone, especially your kids.

I’ve always marveled at Jameson’s capabilities from the time he was old enough to talk. When we could keep him interested and motivated, there was nothing he couldn’t do. Ninety-ninth percentile on all of the standardized tests he ever took and straight A’s with little or no work. But, even more than that is that he is a good person. It’s one thing that I can say about all of my children; not one of them turned out to be an asshole. They are people that are genuinely well liked, good and kind, and I think Charlene had a lot to do with it. Thank You.

This is one thing I just don’t understand. When we were kids our whole world revolved around cars and all of us could take one apart, put it back together and do all of the routine maintenance like brakes and oil changes. It pains me a little that none of my sons had any interest in cars at all except as appliances to get them around. And as sound systems. How can you be 20 years old and not know how to check the coolant in your car? Maybe it’s my fault. These kids are great with electronics and computers so maybe those things are these generations’ cars? They probably think the same about me and computers. I hope not. Jennifer was more interested than any of her brothers.

I forgot to ask Jameson if there was a way to check to see if Beef and Beefier were booked on a flight to go back to DC. I did want to know if I could expect to see them again before Monday but his phone went to voicemail and I didn’t want to leave a message. I’ll try him again later.

It looked like everything I wanted to do for the day had been accomplished in a very short time so I made a cup of tea and sat down to look at some old movies. “Flying Down to Rio” was on and the sight of chorus girls dancing on airplane wings just made my day. What were these guys on when they thought this stuff up? I’ll watch anything with Fred Astaire in it; I think I’ve always wanted to be him, to have some of his elegance, grace, and wit. That’s never been part of my life. I know, the lines were written for him but doesn’t there have to be a grain of truth in it? I can hope anyway.

I fell asleep again on the couch and woke to the light having changed to that late afternoon slant that was softening its intensity. At least it was staying light until after 5:30. One of the most depressing parts of winter in Michigan is when you get up to go to work in the dark, and the drive home was in the dark, too. Spring was on its way. As you know, I’m an optimist. Sometimes. It WAS getting to look like I’d feel well enough to go out. I just CAN’T stay home three nights in a row. It’s not natural.

I don’ think it’s going to be a full-blown night out, though, probably be home by nine or ten but I will be out. I was still thinking if there was something else I should be doing but I couldn’t think of anything that I wanted to do. After all, I still had until Monday and the information that Jameson was getting me surely would shape the direction that I needed to take and the decisions to be made. Putting the whole thing away for a night was probably the best thing for me. That, and taking a shower. Which I did.

After the shower I called Gina to see if she was working and remembered that she was going to be out of town snowboarding with some friends up north. Got her voicemail and told her to be careful in her travels and to call me when she got back to town. Chad was gone, too, but I did get hold of Micah and John and we decided to go over to Logan’s to start the night. And probably end it for me, I was already running out of energy just from taking a shower.

Logan’s was a small bar that that was a converted house in an area of town that was trying hard for a renewal but coming up a little short. The whole place consisted of the bar, three booths, and four tables and I guess the biggest draw was that Melissa worked there. Oh, they added a pool room, too, but Melissa was still the attraction. I think the saying is “too much fun” and she was another of the good ones that populated my little world. It was nicer in the summer when you could sit on the deck but the atmosphere in the winter reminded me of the places that I had started going to when I was eighteen; yeah, the drinking age was eighteen back then and there were no trendy bars, just places where people went to drink, shoot pool, and play pinball. I kind of miss those times but I also enjoy the new spots once in a while.

As always, I was the first one of the group to show up and Melissa had just started her shift at six. She warned me that they were running short on Stroh’s so I had her put my three in the well and left Micah and John to fend for themselves.

“How are you baby?” She called as she brought over the first one and sat it in front of me.

“Just wonderful, dear,” I said back to her in our little ritual.

“Well, you look like shit; the guys said that you were sick. What the hell are you doing out?”

“Can’t stay home three days in a row,” I said with more conviction than I felt.

“Don’t be puking on my floor, I’m not cleaning it up,” she smiled as she came out from behind the bar, gave me a hug, and checked my temperature with the back of her hand. “You’re just faking it anyway, I’ve got more of a fever than you do,” she said as she went out to the floor to wait on one of the tables.

The place was filling up pretty quickly for happy hour and I couldn’t help but notice that most of the people filing in looked younger than my kids and I felt a little out of place even though I was a regular. I am fifty after all. Have I told you that yet? Well, Micah and John are still in their twenties and they were coming to hang out with me so maybe I’m not so out of place. I was the only one that ever brought the age thing up so maybe I should make an effort to stop and just enjoy life. I think I’ll try anyway. Man, this is a young crowd. No Jack tonight, that’s for sure.

There was still a little room at the bar so Micah and John elbowed their way in when they got to the end where I stood talking to another of the regulars that I usually only saw on Sundays. Micah was wearing his old Fender hat as always and John looked like he had put on a few pounds since the last time I had seen him. He was married now (didn’t I tell you?) to Jamie, a great woman that tolerated all of his flaws, no that’s not right, she accepted him, and us for that matter, even with all of our flaws and stupidity. Their wedding last month was the best party of the year so far and I think Mike’s Fourth of July party was going to have to be pretty damn special to beat it. I very seldom use the superlative “hoot” to describe a party but their reception certainly qualified as a hoot.

“What’s happenin’ John, Micah?”

“Just getting ready to party like a rockstar,” John used one of his patented openings.

“Hello, Jake,” Micah grabbed his first beer and started to look around the place.

“What’s new?” I asked knowing the answer.

“Nothing, what’s new with you?” Was always the answer.

“Same old crap,” I got the normal opening lines out of the way.

“What’s this I hear about some big mystery you’ve got going on?” I knew this was coming. “You called everyone else but me Tuesday.” John was trying to sound hurt.

 I pulled out my phone and started scrolling down through the dialed calls.

 “Right here, John. 5:54 PM Tuesday, I left a message and you never returned my call.” I was starting to love this new technology. I held the phone up to him and then just stood there waiting for a response.

 “It never showed up on my phone,” John looked serious. “Doesn’t matter anyway. What’s the mystery?”

 We grabbed the last empty booth for a little privacy and I filled both of them in on the things that I had discovered since last week and the computer hacking that I had Jameson working on. I think I saw a little flash of disbelief on John’s face but Micah just looked interested. I had a question that I needed to ask but I needed to phrase it just right, I was still not convinced that there was any danger in what I was doing but I thought it wouldn’t be ethical to not ask it.

 “I can’t, I don’t know how to say this so I ‘m just going to spit it out. With the NSA involved, do you think that….do you guys see any danger in this? Geez…what I mean is should I be telling anyone about this?” I was nervous about asking them but I was more uncomfortable not knowing. “I’m stealing files, Jameson is hacking into our system, and I’m breaking my confidentiality agreement just talking to you guys. This whole thing has just become too weird.”

 “A little melodramatic isn’t it?” John had a look on his face that said he thought I was feeding them a line. The problem was that I had done that before as a joke (as we all had) and I couldn’t blame him.

 “This time it’s all true. I certainly don’t want to have the feds checking out you guys just because you know me.”

 “Do you really think you’re right?” Micah didn’t show anything in his voice or face.

 “I wouldn’t have said anything if I didn’t, you know I’m kind of paranoid at times but it sure feels real now. The big thing to me is the feds are involved. Why would they do that if there wasn’t something going on? You know these days you don’t even have to do anything wrong to get picked up and jailed. I just don’t want you guys to be the collateral damage.”

 “Nice of you to think about it now, bitch.” John had a smile on his face and reached for another cigarette. “I’m still in.”

 “Me too.” Micah raised his hand and a smile broke. “I don’t think there’s any danger but I want to see how it comes out. Anything I can do, just ask.”

 “What do you think Chad’s take would be?” I had to ask the question.

 They looked at each other before John answered.

 “Chad’s a little more careful than you are,” John was being extremely understated. “I think he’s going to want to know what’s going on but you should try to keep his name out of it.”

 “I agree but do that for all of us if you can,” Micah sounded like he was attempting irony and succeeding somewhat.

 “What’s the next move?” John asked and Micah nodded.

 I filled them in a on the plan to do nothing until Monday. So we just drank and talked after we moved back to the end of the bar so we could have the chance to talk to Melissa and see the rest of the place. I was still a little concerned that I brought the guys in on this mess but Stroh’s will make that all better. It only takes about four, and one shot of Jack. I know I said no Jack but I’m feeling better and it’s my choice isn’t it? It sure felt good to be out again.

 We talked and joked for awhile and saw a few people we hadn’t seen in forever. While it was getting to be fun but I knew that if I didn’t extricate myself soon I would have the biggest relapse of the flu the world had ever seen. The flu and a hangover? Ow, that was really going to hurt if I didn’t leave now. I said my goodbyes. I wouldn’t let Melissa kiss me because of the flu but her hugs are the best sex I’ve had I years. It lasted a while and I didn’t rush her. I smiled a bit on the way home. Wouldn’t you? If you knew her you would.

**Chapter 14**

The sun was still hot and in my eyes and I looked at the clouds as I lay there still trying to decide what to do. There was as stirring of energy that I felt and I knew that I needed to do something; there was an urgency to moving but the why still wasn’t there. I rolled a little so I could see Carrie and she still was still where I left her with her eyes closed. I couldn’t tell if she was still breathing but I had hope she was and that was about all I could do. I remembered I needed to look for the archers to see if they we coming but I didn’t know what to do about it if they were. I rolled back onto my hands and knees and the left shoulder reminded me that it was terribly damaged; it crunched and popped as I tried to put weight on it and thought better of it when the pain finally got to my brain. Motion in the rocks to the right and above me caught my eye but I couldn’t tell what it was at first look. I flopped back to my stomach and looked to the rocks again and the motion turned into two figures that were trying to stay hidden. Not from me, though, they were looking out across the plain toward the archers. I crawled back to the top of the depression and had to slam my face back into the dust to avoid an arrow that streaked over my head and landed only a few feet from Carrie. I was paralyzed but looking at the rocks when I saw a flight of arrows arching out away from where the figures were.

Man, I’m glad that it’s Saturday. I did a really good job of not over-indulging last night and I think I deserve a gold star for it. Yep, got one right here. I felt like I could take on the whole world, chew it up and spit it out and all before breakfast. Then I unwrapped myself from my sheets, stood up, and remembered that I still had a touch of the flu. No hangover, though so that is a positive. I always look for the positives, can’t you tell? The sun was shining again (I know, two days in a row, in Michigan, in February?) but the weather report said there would be another snow storm later Sunday so I thought I’d enjoy it while I could. I opened the shades to let in the light and be able to look outside and it didn’t hurt this time. You’ve already heard about the Saturday grocery run so I won’t bore you with that again; let’s just say that I did it and got back to my place by 11:30. It’s almost March. Why is it still snowing?

I was trying quite hard to not think about the mess at work but mid-Saturday afternoons forced thinking sometimes. Usually, the thoughts were about how much of a fool I’d made of myself the night before or introspection on why I kept up some of the more trying friendships (you know which ones) when all they did was frustrate me. This time, though, it was more trying to figure out the moves that I needed to make in advance depending on what action the feds and Robert took. I’ve never been good at chess. Trying to “wing it” in this instance didn’t seem like a good idea either since there were so many possibilities that the chance of making the right choice without thought seemed a long shot at best. I really had no experience doing this kind of thing. Are movies a good source of the actions to take? Sometimes, I find myself falling back on the thought of “What would Bogart do?” to help frame the decision but I’m not Bogart and don’t have anywhere near as good a team of writers doing my life. Could you imagine your life written by Raymond Chandler?

It was hard to just wait and do nothing, though. So I didn’t. I fired up my computer to check my e-mail and found the usual spam (thank you Yahoo for filtering that stuff) and some real mail from friends. Karen had sent me a note thanking me for some support in a recent crisis (yeah, I know, get over her) and the note made me smile a little. I still had her picture up in my living room (she is a babe, you know) and thought about removing it for a minute but it wasn’t time yet. I think I was still hoping for reconciliation but this time felt different. It had a finality to it that was never there before and that made me sad for a while. Damn, why do I react so much to her?

I sent an e-mail back, you know the kind of non-committal type that you write after a breakup but it’s not the kind you want to write? I wanted to say “how could you hurt me again?” In screaming block capitals but I didn’t want any more pain to come from it. Just scared of having to face some of the truth, I guess. There was also a note from Jameson.

“Dad, nothing on the LAN ping yet but I’ve got the Virginia computer cloned and ready to be sent. Going to break it up in about three pieces since I know Yahoo won’t take a file this big. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Hey, it’s a guy thing. We don’t really need to talk to each other much. We just get to the point. Or I am I just fooling myself? You already know I’m not the best parent in the world.

I had something to do for the day! The only problem was the files were coming in over my dial up connection and it was going to take a couple of hours until they were complete. That gave time to make coffee, get the laundry started (my life is a lot like yours), and run the vacuum to clean up after my two days of sickness. I’m not usually a slob but I do kind of let things go when I’m sick. Don’t you? As I said before, I don’t have anyone to take care of me so I have to do it myself. I’m not whining. Really, I’m not. I washed the plastic table that I use for my ottoman/coffee table to remove the spills and get its nice green color restored and sat down with a cup to get started on the files.

Chad called just then and I didn’t mind the interruption.

“What going on Chad?”

“Squat, what’s up with you?” Always the same introduction, it seemed easier.

“Not a whole lot, just going over some files that Jameson sent me. You know the game stuff he was going to get me.” I lied but I still didn’t want to talk about any of the SAAD stuff on the phone.

“Oh, okay, what games? I talked to Micah this morning and he filled me in on what you guys talked about last night.” Chad picked up on the lie.

“Okay, then what’s your reaction to my paranoia.” I was curious, after all.

“You DO need to keep my name out of it. Let’s talk about it later at Billy’s.” Chad understood.

I had forgotten that we already had plans to go see some friends of ours that played in a band at one of the local blues clubs. It was going to be a “lizard” night; we were going to a place that women our own ages hung out and there may even be some good conversation to be had. And other things. Well, I can only hope. Plans were finalized: I was going to stop at Chad’s before we headed out to the bar and I prayed that I would still be shape to go out afterward. Chad’s place is scary sometimes.

It was almost four and since we were meeting up at Chad’s between 6:30 and 7:00, I thought I’d get dinner started before my workout and run. I had been marinating some western style ribs since I got back from the grocery run (olive oil, Balsamic vinegar, fresh garlic, and basil) and I needed to get them cooking since to do them right, they required slow cooking. The files could wait since they were not done downloading yet but there were titles that piqued my curiosity and I had a good feeling that some of the veil would be lifted. I would have to remember to have Jameson maintain the cloning process so any updates that Daniel made would be mine.

It takes about an hour and a half for my entire fitness routine (4 days a week) consisting of an hour on the weight machine and a half hour run but I had been slacking a lot lately so I was really sore from the weights. I don’t think that people realize that working out with weights is good for the brain as well as the body since it gives you set aside time to just think while you torture yourself. Do you get the idea that this is not one of my favorite things? Do you ever see people smiling when they work out or run? Didn’t think so. I know it’s necessary but do not ever tell me that you think it’s fun. I’ll just think you are crazy. Do you care?

I had the radio on while I worked out as usual and the only thought that came to my head was that radio used to be a lot better than it is now. Was it the media conglomerates that were screwing it up? When I was a youngster, we had a station in GR that would play everything from the Allman Brothers to Frank Zappa with stops in between ranging from John Prine to Led Zepplin. Joni Mitchell and Cheech and Chong were also part of the eclectic mix we used to get from these guys but now if you listen for more than an hour there would begin to be repeats. I am a great Who fan but why can’t we hear “Eminence Front” for a change instead of “Squeezebox”?

Just a little more whining. Am I getting old? I think this is too much like “in my day things were much better” that we used to hear from the older folks and I should try to not act that old. But radio WAS much better then.

When I got back from running my place was starting to smell great from the fresh garlic on the ribs and the new extra virgin olive oil I used to coat them. The only bad thing about the cooking aromas was they infused everything that they touched with the smell and it would last for days. Have you ever cooked something with heavy garlic and the next day your bath towels smelled like it after your shower? At least it wasn’t cigarette smoke. That did the same thing.

Bored yet? It’s been a kind of stream of consciousness day and I hope you don’t mind this little group of musings. I won’t describe eating dinner. I’ll get to the point soon. I promise.

There WERE some interesting things in the files that I will share. Daniel being in on the attempt to convince the government that the project is a failure is one. Those guys trying to sell the technology to someone was another. Hadn’t seen that before. Pretty big stuff but I wasn’t sure what the technology was FOR. What the heck did this equipment really do and why would it be worth anything? I was a little pissed that my company appeared to be involved with something illegal and the thought immediately came back to my culpability. They were not going to be allowed to hang this on me if I could stop it. Thank you paranoia. There had to be more to the cover story of the failure and I was sure it was somewhere in Robert’s computer. I just hoped we’d have access to it in time. I almost wanted to skip the night out to keep digging deeper but I had all day Sunday to go through them and by then the download from Daniel’s computer would be complete. I did have a little to share with the guys, though. I wish dial-up was faster.

 I decided to skip the pre-bar bash at Chad’s house since I didn’t need to be blasted before I got to the bar so I called him and begged off. I had a few errands to run anyway and the files that Jameson had gotten me were keeping me in my apartment longer than I had planned. Do I have a voyeuristic tendency? It was a little creepy to see some of the personal e-mails but most of them confirmed my first impression of Daniel: I just wouldn’t want to spend any time with him. Pompous ass comes to mind very easily. No tact at all.

 But, I needed to put the files down and get going so I turned off the lights, locked the door and headed out to the car. The sun was just setting and the sky had that fading azure blue that was darkest near the horizon and I knew it was going to be cold overnight. I stopped and looked overhead to take in the clarity of the sky and saw a few planets visible before the stars came out. The moon was nearly full on the other horizon and it was going to be something to see before the night was over. I just hoped that it being full didn’t bring out the crazies like it normally did. Should I stay home? Nope. I think I’ll just join the others.

The drive to Billy’s ended with a stretch of brick pavement that again shook a few thousand miles out of my car and that I called terrible but what the city called quaint. The frost of the winter had not been kind to it and I knew that it would have to be torn up and repaired before summer was over. It was one of only a few roads that I paid attention to the twenty-five mile an hour speed limit; but just for self-preservation, not for any innate sense of abiding by the law. I’m a speeder I’ll admit. I parked right across the street since I was early and if Doug or Ricky were working, I could probably get in without the cover. Not that I can’t afford five bucks, it’s the principal of the thing.

Harry and the guys were setting up and I stopped to get a Stroh’s then went over to say hi and to catch up since I hadn’t see them for a while. I wondered if the new CD was ready yet since I had the first two and played them regularly. I have always been amazed at people with talent and when they are your friends I guess I feel an obligation, no that’s not it, I WANT to support them and I can say “hey, I know those guys” when their stuff is played on YCE. Oh, WYCE…the public radio station here in town.

There were a few people starting to file in but I didn’t expect to see Mike, Chad, and Micah for a while since they all were starting at Chad’s. Hadn’t heard from Ed or John but expected to see them at some point during the night so I took a stool at the bar for a little conversation with Doug before the place got busy.

Billy’s used to be a dive. As had been done to many of my other favorite places, it had just undergone a rebuilding that had made it much nicer but had taken away a lot of its character. The tin ceiling was still there but the worn linoleum that used to line the dance floor along with the memories of all of the feet that had scarred it had been replaced by industrial tile. One good thing was the bathroom didn’t overflow into the basement anymore but the same cracked fixtures were still there as always. Who designs a place that the drunks have to go downstairs to get to the restroom? Was it a test? It was nice to have barstools that had padding without holes in them though.

Had a nice little talk with Doug and Ricky while I waited for the others to show up and I finally got to move down to the end of the bar as a couple of the regulars finished up and left before the band started. Yep, another end of another bar. What the heck does it mean? We’ve talked about it before but if you have any ideas, I’d like to hear them. The crowd looked like it was going to be an older one, by the first few that came in anyway. I don’t think the youngsters have discovered this one yet or maybe it’s just that they don’t even go out until after we go home. I might have to change that. I noticed a little interest from a couple of older women (okay, in their thirties) that sat down a few stools over and thought it might be a good night after all. What am I saying, every night out is a good one.

John came in followed a minute later by Ed and the night was getting ready to get started. I was on my second Stroh’s and Doug and Ricky had gotten busy so the timing was just right. I just had a thought, though; maybe if I’d stop hanging out with these guys I have a chance to get a date. It was usually so interesting and fun just to talk to the group that meeting new people became an afterthought. Should I set aside a night every week that I didn’t hang out with the guys? It was an idea to ponder but not right now. Now was the time to talk to the guys, listen to music, and have too much fun. I didn’t really want to do anything that even looked like effort.

I wanted to wait until the rest of the group showed up before I got into the update on my clandestine project and I hoped that would be before the band started. We filled the time with small talk on work and other happenings and all of us couldn’t wait for winter to be over. That got to be the major topic since we were supposed to get six to ten more inches of snow Sunday night and into Monday. I guess it is the major topic throughout winter and even into summer. I think we had all become “radar junkies” and somewhat addicted to the weather channel and their ‘local on the eights’ where they showed the weather radar for the area. Had we changed plans because of it? I remember at least once that we decided to not go boating because there was a storm coming. Well, it fell apart before it got here and we wasted a day. Made Mike’s Dad laugh, though.

Chad, Mike and Micah came in looking like they had those old red eye blues again, but the update would have to wait since it was almost ten and the band had just started with “Stormy Monday (one of my favorites) and Harry was in great form. After the first set, we decided to take the table under the front window so I could tell the guys what was going on and we could sit next to a group of women that Chad had been talking to when they came to the bar. I guess the servers weren’t keeping up or they just wanted to talk to Chad. I didn’t know if Mike and Micah were going to understand any of it from the looks on their faces; blank stares that were only interrupted by brief flashes of recognition.

“Well, here’s the what I know so far. Daniel is involved in making the project look like a failure. Jameson got that information from his computer and it looks like Robert is in on it too. I haven’t had time to go over all of the files yet, you know that the damn dial-up is so slow. It probably won’t be done until tomorrow.”

“You know they’ve invented broad band” Ed smirked as he stated the obvious.

“I know that smartass, who needs that just for e-mail?”

“We still haven’t gotten into Robert’s computer yet, we need to have someone turn it on and he is still on vacation. It shows you how much Robert uses his, and I’m starting to think there is nothing important on it since Marilyn hasn’t used it in the week he’s been gone. Maybe I’ll go in tomorrow and start it so Jameson can get it copied.”

“When do we get the rest of the information?” Mike had come up for air and must have been listening.

“I’ll have all of Daniel’s stuff tomorrow. Do you guys want to come over to take a look? I could certainly use your help”

“I’m in,” Ed started it off. “Oh, not until late. I know I’m going to feel like crap.”

Mike and Micah agreed that I couldn’t call them until at least three and Chad said he’d call me when he got up so there were plans made that I wasn’t comfortable would be carried out. I had some questions on what I should do but it was not natural for me to depend on others. I wonder how other people feel about this? The guys very seldom ask me about anything but I don’t know if they have been involved anything that is this serious. Oh, there was one last thing to add that I had forgotten.

“Oh, one last thing, they are trying to sell the project to someone.” I paused for effect but I had lost them to the crowds that had started to pour into the place. I guess it would wait until tomorrow.

Someone remembered that it was time for shots of various liquors that would jump start our little party. I was even becoming interested in a few of the people around us (yes, women) and the two that were at the bar earlier had moved to the next table and were trying to start conversations with Mike but he wasn’t having any of it. The lights over the stage seemed to have a hypnotic effect on both he and Micah and they were about worthless conversationally. I, on the other hand, was in fine form and actually got a phone number from the shorter one. I know it’s probably a fake but it made me feel fine at the time. Harry came over to talk and I bought one of the new Cd’s from him (cheap, only ten bucks) that I couldn’t wait to play on the way home. The guys wandered away one by one and when they didn’t come back for what seemed like an hour, I gave the table up to two couples that kept staring at me. I almost sat there just for spite but that was too much effort and I wanted to talk to Doug anyway. Why couldn’t they just ask?

It was starting to get late and I promised myself I’d only stay until the end of the second set. That was until John started dancing and almost fell over a guy in a wheelchair a couple of times. I couldn’t leave yet, it was just too much entertainment. Hey, I even got out on the floor for “Sex Machine’ (I’m a huge James Brown freak) and only embarrassed myself a little. I was leaving the floor to get a beer and one of the youngsters grabbed me and dragged me back out for a little funk song that I don’t remember. She was VERY good and I had a hard time not staring at her like most of the other guys in the place. Being great looking and wild, I guess I understood. I needed a beer and left her on the floor dancing with a couple of other young women. Something I don’t really understand. Or need to. After that I needed more Jack. Oh, didn’t tell you, back on the Jack.

It had gotten too crowded for me so I found Mike (he had started to come out of the coma), told him I was out and asked him tell the rest of the guys. I’d seen Chad go out a few minutes before with a woman whose name I couldn’t remember and I didn’t know if he’d be back. Ed and Micah were nowhere to be seen so I waved at Ricky ad Doug and headed out. I remembered I had Harry’s new Cd and took it out of my pocket to unwrap it as I walked across the street. “Junkyard Dog” was the title and it was all original songs. I still can’t understand how people can write these things. It was another good one and I almost drove back to the bar to tell the guys but the last Jack was hitting my eyes and I didn’t want to take the chance. Good move.

It felt good to walk into my apartment and know that there would be no one there. I think I’ve said that before but I need to repeat it. I’ve heard the roommate horror stories from my friends and I don’t think I could ever tolerate living with anyone again. Hmmmm….well, that kind of precludes any long-term relationships, Huh? I wouldn’t mind having a sleep over but sort of like John Mellencamp says “a girl who will thrill me and then go away”. Boy, I guess I’m a little more damaged than I thought. I am open to the idea of a relationship though I just don’t know how I’d handle it. Midnight musings.

It was a brandy Manhattan night (you know I always do that when I get home) and I made a big one and reclined on the couch to do the slow wind down. How can you have 65 channels and not find anything except news to watch? Well, news and religion. Who are the people that watch these religious shows? Aren’t most them in bed before 10? I’ve never met one. But would I, given the people that I hang around with?

I was resisting thinking about the SAAD stuff but some of it bled over and the Manhattan didn’t kill it so I started to plan the approach for tomorrow when the guys came over. Damn, that’s today. I knew we were going to have to give something to the feds but I was starting to think like a chess player and the idea came to me to feed them small tidbits under the ruse that I was having a hard time getting any information. After all, that is one thing that I can control and they didn’t know any better. How long could I keep up that charade? I guess I wouldn’t know until I got started and that would drive a lot of the other decisions. I should write some of this stuff down. You know my memory is going.

Should I have a second Manhattan? Yep, it’s two man night and I just found “the Shining” on AMC, the good one by Kubrick, not the made for TV one with that Wings guy in it. I just love the way Kubrick’s films look. I think I need to rent “Full Metal Jacket”. I crashed at the typewriter scene with Jack Nicholson . Go rent the movie and you’ll know which one I mean. It’s pretty scary.

**Chapter 15**

The arrows had stopped coming. At least I hadn’t seen any for what seemed like forever but I knew was only a few minutes. Carrie was starting to move and moan softly and I knew that I would have to do something about the arrow in her shoulder. But did I have time? It was SO hot. The figures in the rocks were still there but not moving so I lay there for a minute more to gather some energy. A cascade of small pebbles and dust fell from the top of the ridge and I rolled over to see a small animal making its way through the loose dirt. My heart was racing from the thought that it was the archers getting to me and the pain shot from my shoulder after I rolled on it. I needed to do something. I was getting tired of waiting for things to happen. I crawled up to the top of the small ridge to see where the archers were and they appeared to have stopped moving about fifty yards out from where the flights from the rocks had landed. They looked stopped for a while but I waited and watched to make sure and to try to gauge how much time I’d have if they came on a dead run. The heat waves coming off the plateau shimmered the archers in and out of view so I couldn’t really be sure. It looked like about half a mile but my brain was too preoccupied by the pain, heat, and dust to be accurate. A noise form the depression made me look back at Carrie and she was starting to try to get up but fell back on the arrow and let out a small cry like she knew that any more sound would be dangerous. I needed to help her and slid down the rocks, stopping next to her but raising a cloud of dust that made her cough as it rolled over her. I looked at her face and she had changed again. Karen. Why?

What the hell time is it? I was still on the couch and AMC was playing a movie that I recognized but I couldn’t remember the title. The second brandy Manhattan was still on the table with only about an inch gone from the top of it and there was just the starting of light coming through the shades. I never do this. It was the first time that I had fallen asleep on my couch and stayed there overnight and from the way my back felt it had to be the last. I couldn’t feel my left leg much and there was a sharp pain that felt like someone had stabbed me in my lower back. How do I know what it feels like to be stabbed? I don’t, but you know I have a vivid imagination and can guess.

I hauled myself up (that’s what it felt like) from the couch and tried to guess what time it was. Did it really matter? I was going to move to my bed no matter what time it was since it was Sunday and I could sleep as long as I wanted. I tried to not open my eyes too much so my brain would not come out into full wakefulness. Hey, it works sometimes. My bed felt so good that I knew that I’d get at least a couple more hours so take a break, get a cup of coffee, and come back in a couple of hours.

Okay, I’m up…it’s hard to sleep when you know someone is watching you. It was around 8:30 and I felt quite good considering the mixture of alcohol I had consumed the night before and the back pain that was there when I hit the bed. Most of that was gone, replaced by just a little twinge in my back that was there almost all of the time anyway. I am fifty, you know. I had done a pretty good job of keeping my place clean so I wouldn’t have to do much before the guys came over. I shifted into low and slow mode to enjoy my morning of coffee and the newspaper. Skipped the TV news shows in favor of “Jazz Brunch” on the radio and the hard drive noise coming from my computer made me remember that I needed to get the rest of Daniel’s files downloaded. I left the damn thing on all night. Could it have been working that long?

I gave the mouse a little bump to get the monitor to wake up and it WAS still working. 99% of the files were done but it still read about another hour on the dialog box and I could feel the anticipation of what I had start to grow. There was time for another cup of coffee and to finish the paper, so I got another one, toasted a bagel, and picked up where I had left off. It wasn’t very interesting for a three pound paper.

I started to plan what to talk about in my head but it wasn’t working so I got a pen and paper and began to write things down. The computer gave me a beep saying the files were done and I did a quick scan of the file names to see if any of them were familiar. I immediately went to the summary file but it was from another project from a couple of years ago and I wasted almost a half hour finding that out. This was going to take longer than I thought. Maybe I should cancel the “board meeting” until I had a chance to digest this stuff? No, I had a few hours to go and I knew I could get through enough for it to be worthwhile; I don’t think I have much more time from the feds anyway and there was action that had to be taken Monday. The decisions I had made so far had worked out but I felt we were getting to the point that I needed objective input and some sort of a plan. This was getting complicated.

If I’ve started to sound a little more serious lately it’s because I am. There have been things happening that I haven’t told you about that kind of take some of the fun out of my life. Maybe I’ll tell you about that later and I’ll try to lighten it up some if I can but I just don’t feel like it right now. Okay? Just more confusion about women. As always. Or maybe I’m just now growing up? Hope not, but it looks that way doesn’t it?

I kept slogging through the files hoping to find more interesting information than we already had from the copied files. One thing that jumped out at me was that Daniel’s job looked like a front. He certainly didn’t have anything about the work he was supposed to be doing at the firm before the transfer. No engineering files, no project files, not much personal correspondence. Who was running it then? I’ll have to think about this one but speculation without any information to go on was not going to be any help. There was one note that was written to Robert before Daniel joined the firm, though, and that raised all kind of new ideas. It was written in the time that there is no record for either one of them. I wonder if they recruited Daniel straight out of college? The tone of the note said to me that they were nearly peers, not the relationship as it was at our firm. What does it mean?

Video files? As I searched, I found a folder that contained some kind of video files that I hadn’t seen before. I clicked on the first one (is there a better place to start?) and waited as the media player started and loaded the file. The inside of a lab of some sort came up and in the center of the frame sat a block of concrete that was enclosed by what looked like plexiglass and had two cables running out through the plexi to some sort of console. A time stamp in thousandths ran in the lower right hand corner and after about five seconds elapsed the block started to change and small pieces dropped off the sides until the entire block exploded in a cloud of dust. The file stopped there and I had to re run it to make sure that I understood what had happened. Or try to understand, anyway.

The second file was essentially identical to the first except that the date showed that it was from about three weeks later. Same results. File three was the same lab but the block had been replaced by a small model of a building that looked familiar to me but I couldn’t quite place where I had seen it. This one happened slower but by the time the film ended the steel beams (they looked like steel beams anyway) and the concrete had changed into the small particles that I had picked up at the GR site. I guess that because it was not solid, there wasn’t the huge explosion that I had seen in the earlier videos. Of course that IS just a guess. I wished I could get this in super slow motion to see what was actually happening. Maybe Jameson could help.

I hit the jackpot with the last file. It was the building in Virginia that had started the whole thing. Same time stamp in the corner but with the addition of the time of day that read 2:44 AM but with no date. The video had that green tint that said that it had been shot using some kind of night vision camera and after about five seconds again, little puffs of dust started around the base then the building changed into a pile of rubble. The whole process took about a second by the counter and I had to run it over and over to see that the change happened from the bottom up but so quickly that the material from the top of the building never moved until it was transformed. It looked like something out of a cartoon. One strange thing that I noticed was the camera’s aiming was off, more centered on the building next door. I thought for a second and remembered a notation on the photo of the site but couldn’t remember what it said until I got the file out of my speakers. All it said was “missed”.

I was exhausted from just watching the videos. Seeing the collapse happen in real time brought home that this was not a random act and my company was involved. Everything had changed. It was no longer an abstract, sterile concept but a horrendous, ugly scene that I needed to share this with someone. I called Chad to see if he was up and around yet.

“This is Chad, leave me a message.” The call had gone direct to voicemail so he must not have the phone on. I wonder why?

“Hey Chad, call me as soon as you get moving.” I said, hesitated for second, then thought it was enough.

Micah and Ed had said to not call them until at least three but it was pushing one and I thought they’d want to see this stuff. Got voice mails for both of them so I left the same message and went back to looking at the rest of the files. Can you see what this means? I don’t want to alarm anyone but the pattern here WAS alarming. I’m sure you’re not stupid so I won’t spell it out for you but I know that this was starting to take my breath away as the realization of the use of this new tool came to me. It was a sickening feeling. Something like hollow but more than that; like every part of me just wanted to run somewhere and hide.

I didn’t have the energy to keep digging so I got up and wandered around my place, looking at things but not really seeing them. You know what I mean? My life had been changed again for the second time in two weeks. How many more could I take? Now do you see why I’m more serious? Serious things are happening. I found myself staring out my slider toward the church behind my apartment and studying the movements of the bare tree branches in the wind. Small birds were flitting from branch to branch eating some kind of dried out berries that hung there defying the winter. I had to keep telling myself that things in the rest of the world were still normal and there was a solution to this to keep the despair at bay. It wasn’t working too well. Maybe a drink would help.

I decided against the drink and instead made a cup of tea. Maybe I was wrong about the despair. I did feel like I was losing myself, though. I was starting to get angry at myself for letting these events change me so much and take the fun out of my life. How do I fix that? Can it be fixed or have I permanently changed? Nope. I’ve worked too hard to get to be who I am to let these idiots change that. Or should I change? What do you think? Is the sight of a fifty year old doing what I do just too weird? I like my life so that’s all that counts.

I took a deep breath and let the thoughts swirl around without picking any of them to think about and began to feel better. I needed to stop being such a wuss and get on with it.

Boy, that was ugly wasn’t it? I promise it won’t happen again until the next time. I did need to get this whole big mess organized so I started to write a few things down but my curiosity got the best of me and I went back to the computer. Good thing, too. While I was looking at the folder names I came upon one that just said next, and it was so simple compared to the rest that I had to open it. There was a video file there that showed what looked like an abandoned building but it was in daylight and included the entire site the building sat on. It reminded me of the scene for movies where the criminals were “casing the joint” or the handheld motion of the “Blair Witch Project”. The text and e-mail files revealed that the building was in Muskegon, part of an abandoned paper mill near the lake and mentioned that the video had been taken only about a week before. I’m sure you figured out what next meant before me. This is the NEXT target. That just came to me in a flash.

 There was a knock on my door that surprised me since none of the guys had called back yet and I couldn’t think of anyone that would be just stopping by. I was wrong, I could think of him I just didn’t. I opened the door to a friend of mine I hadn’t seen in months. One of my best friends from my growing up days in Ada. Tom and I had known each other since he was 16 and I was 18 and we had seen the normal ebb and flow of our friendship that had started to reform as he was going through this last divorce. I had been his best man for this wedding in Las Vegas that was held at the Paris casino and I really thought this one was going to last. Well, I thought mine was going to last, too, and you know how right I was about that. Maybe it was the age thing; she was only 27 and he was 45. Do you see a theme here? Well, this one ended badly and I helped Tom move into his apartment and start the single life again. He isn’t doing it as well as I am.

“What’s going on, Tom?” I said as I shook his hand and waved him in.

“Hi, Jake, how the hell have you been?” There wasn’t much conviction in his voice. “I just dropped the girls off and I thought about you and thought I’d stop and see how you are. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Tom, geez, you know you can stop by any time. I was just thinking about calling you anyway. I’ve got something going on that I could use your help with if you’ve got the time.” I wasn’t really going to call him but I felt I needed to lie here. “Anything new going on with you?”

We talked for a while about his kids and mine and his job search that wasn’t going well. He was quite depressed and overwhelmed about everything that was going on in his life and I started to question whether I should tell him anything or not. Maybe it would be good for him to have something to do other than sit in his apartment and drink. I had gone through that when Karen dumped me once and I understood completely. But he wasn’t moving on at all and I knew you had to do that to maintain your sanity. At least I did. Maybe he’s different. I did know that I hadn’t been a very good friend to him over the last few months but I had an excuse. I just don’t know what it is right now.

I decided to roll the dice and give him the choice of what to do. I couldn’t make the decision for him anyway or shouldn’t; he is a big boy, you know? So I filled him in on all that was going on from A to Z and then just waited for the reaction. It wasn’t what I expected.

“I can’t do this right now,” is all he said as he got up, said goodbye and walked out the door. I was stunned and just stared at him as I stood with door open and watched him go up the stairs to the parking lot. What had happened to him? I didn’t know what to think but luckily didn’t have to for long; my phone was ringing. Is that a little harsh? I hope not. I’ve got my own problems and you know all about them.

Chad was on the phone.

“What’s up?” after talking to Tom I was struggling to even talk.

“I’m on my way out. I had to drop someone off and get some beer, just got on the new e-way and I’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

“Okay,” was all I could say. I wanted to ask about who he had to drop off but I didn’t have the energy to banter right now.

As soon as I shut off the phone it rang again, the caller ID said it was Tom.

“Hey, sorry about being such an asshole but life is a bitch and then you die. If you need anything, call me. I’ve got plenty of free time.” I could tell he was trying.

“I think I’m going to need your help on this at some point. Think it over and I’ll give you a call Tuesday or so. Okay?”

“That will be good. If I think of anything I’ll call you.”

“See ya.” I felt better and promised myself I’d do better at being his friend. I don’t know how, yet.

Having empathy is a pain. Literally.

It was hard to change my train of thought back to my problems but I knew I had to if I was going to accomplish anything this afternoon. I still hadn’t heard back from Micah or Ed and I had forgotten to call Mike. No, he’s got he kids today and won’t be able to come. I did remember that from last night. Tom was going to be there in the back of my head though, he didn’t have the support system that I had in place with the guys and I knew that MY life would be much harder without them. How do I get him into our circle? I’d have to think about that.

Chad came in and handed me the beer, I handed one back to him, took one for myself and put the rest of them in the fridge. I hoped that twelve would be enough or that Micah would bring some. It was going to be a long afternoon and I didn’t want to have to go out. It was cold outside still. My place was warm. I’ve said that already, haven’t I? I did turn the heat down some since I knew that both Chad and Micah kept theirs a lot lower than I did mine; WAY lower. I think I’ve had a beer freeze sitting at Micah’s, well, not THAT bad but I knew there were times that I could see my breath there in the winter.

“I’ve got some new stuff to share,” I said get things started.

“Oh, yeah, what? Not about Gina again I hope.” Score one for Chad.

“No, not Gina, the reason you’re here. The project.” I couldn’t help but smile. Chad had taken it on as his job to stab me about Gina. That’s another story for later. About Gina, that is.

“The big deal is they’re going to test on another building.” I got it started.

“Test? Then the one in Virginia and downtown…”

“Were part of the project and were being used to calibrate something that is not clear yet.” I was getting excited again. “I’ve even found video of the Virginia collapse. It looks weirder than hell. I haven’t gotten through the rest of the files yet but there are a couple of other things that are really interesting.”

I showed Chad the videos of the lab, the Virginia collapse, and the Muskegon building and by then it was time for more beer so I got up and headed for the fridge.

“What’s this one?” Chad asked as he clicked on a file that was part of the Next folder and it opened. I hadn’t gotten that far. “It looks like a project schedule or something. Is this date this week?”

I brought the beers back and sat down next to him again to take a look at it.

“Looks like it,” I said trying to take it all in as quickly as possible. “I wonder if the test is scheduled for Tuesday? If it’s like the Virginia test, it will be at night I’m sure.”

“How are they doing this? Chad asked the question that had just occurred to me. “What else should we be looking for?” I think it wasn’t a question directed at me but more of a rhetorical question.

“Let’s just start opening the rest of the files in this folder and take a look. Take a disc and copy about half of them over and I’ll get my laptop and get started on them.” Breaking up the files was the only way we were going to get through them this afternoon. I wonder if I should call Ed and have him bring his computer?

There was a knock at the door and I knew the call to Ed was going to be too late. He and Micah came in carrying a 30 pack of Stroh’s (thank goodness) and some snacks and the files were ignored for a while while we caught up on what had happened after I left Billy’s. Which brought us to the big question: Who was the woman that Chad took home and where did she sleep? Ed and Micah didn’t have any stories so we all focused on Chad. Hey, we do need to get to the important stuff.

“Well, what’s the deal?” Ed opened up bluntly as always.

“Yeah, Chad, did you take her home and sleep with her?” Micah had that little smartass smirk on his face. “Or did she pass out on the couch like they all do? And, by the way, who was she?” I told you Chad’s house was dangerous.

I was staying out of it for now.

“You remember her,” Chad started. “She used to work over on the west side and then at the BOB until she moved to Lansing last year. She came over for a reason that was not sleeping with me. She is WAY too unstable for me to get into that crap. And yes, she did sleep on the couch. It only took her about 15 minutes and she just fell over. I left her there and went back out to the Scoreboard until last call and she was still sleeping when I got back. I dropped her off at her car this morning and that is the end of it.”

I was waiting for the inevitable catcalls but they didn’t come. Ed and Micah were being very relaxed about the whole thing which was so unusual that I just sat there for a minute waiting. Giving each other crap about our failed relationships was the national sport of our group after all. I just felt lucky that it was someone else in the box this time but the reaction was so mild that I was not going to allow this one to count. They never cut me this much slack.

“Who was the one you were talking to all night, Micah?” Chad seemed to be regaining his footing.

“No one, just a friendly lizard and I couldn’t get away from her. Every time I moved she followed and I felt like I was being hunted. And not in a good way. She was scary.” Micah had a smile on his face, though.

“Did you leave alone?” Chad was pressing the point.

“No……… I gave Ed a ride home.”

“I thought Mike took me home.” Ed looked puzzled.

“Nope, Mike was working on a lizard of his own and you weren’t so I dropped you off.”

“Oh.” Was all that Ed had to say.

The dissecting of the night was slowing down with only a few other comments about some of the people we saw and what they were doing. We all remembered the gorgeous dancer and I felt bad when I heard that all of the guys had been singled out at one time or another to dance with her. I thought I was special. Guess not. Hey, at least I remembered how I got home (well, parts of it) and I didn’t feel as bad as Ed looked. Maker’s Mark will do that to you. While the guys were moving to the finish of the post-mortem, I went back to the computer to select the files I wanted to copy and got that process started. I was hoping to get some organization out of the jumble in my head but wasn’t sure if any more beer would help. They tasted good anyway.

I brought Ed and Micah up to speed on what I had already told Chad, and Micah looked at me with a strange look on his face. “Did you call John and ask him to come over? He was bitching to me yesterday that we don’t include him any more since the wedding.” I couldn’t disagree.

“Nope, didn’t even think of it. You think we should?”

“I’ll beep him and see what’s going on,” Chad got his phone out and hit the button.

“No answer. I can’t remember if he had plans or not. I think he was going to spend the day with Jamie.”

“Well, we tried.” I wanted to get back to the files and didn’t want any other interruptions.

We spent the next two hours reading and taking notes from the info that was on both computers and agreed there was one thing that was important. They WERE going to do another test, Tuesday night between 2:30 and 3 am. Micah was transfixed by the video of the building falling and must have run it twenty times but little else was learned from it. We did discover photographs of a small panel van that was filled with some sort of electronic equipment but no videos of it in use. Where had I seen it before? It was in the files so it must be connected but how? One odd piece of equipment that was in the back looked something like a powered ice auger (you know the things that ice fisherman use to make their holes) but the screw seemed much smaller. Or it did in the picture; I couldn’t be sure from the one photo.

We all studied the photo for a while and Ed came up the observation that the size of the cable in the van would allow it to carry quite a large amperage and other equipment looked like large scale version of the capacitors that he had used in his work. Some of the first files had mentioned capacitors so maybe this is the connection?

“Road trip.” Was all that Chad had to say.

“Road Trip?”

“Yeah, road trip.” I just looked at Chad with must have been a pretty stupid look.

“Let’s talk to Mike, get the motor home, and go watch.” Sometimes it takes me a while to get up to speed. “Wouldn’t you like to see one of these in person?”

“I’m in,” Micah said.

“Me, too, no damn, I can’t. I have to go to Chicago Monday night and I won’t be back until Wednesday night,” Ed sounded really disappointed.

“Do we really need the motor home? We can all fit in Micah’s truck or Mike’s Jeep.” I was still trying to get where Chad was coming from.

“Who’s it registered to?” I could see that Chad had an idea. “Mike’s dad during the divorce. So it won’t raise any red flags if they are watching the area around the site.” See, I told you a healthy paranoia could sometimes be creative, too. Chad’s was healthier than most.

“Beep Mike.” I said ready to get on with it. “Let’s see what he thinks.

Chad beeped him on the Nextel but he didn’t answer so I called him and left a message on his voicemail. I’m sure he’ll want to do it; Mike’s usually game for anything. There was another big subject to work on; what and how much do we give the feds? I didn’t really want to reveal anything of value to them but I’m sure they are sharp enough to know what IS of value. What if I didn’t give them anything? Maybe that’s the way to go? I could just tell them to go to hell. I’ve still got all of the information in the files to give them later if they try to squeeze me. I had to think about this for a minute. Taking this path would significantly increase the risk but I was in the position to do it. Wasn’t I?

What the hell, let’s roll the dice and see. I can always spy for them later if they start to pressure me. Now this was like a real detective, I was starting to feel like Sam Spade or at least Jim Rockford. It felt good to be on the offensive for a change, to be making decisions instead of having them forced on me. Cool! The guys thought it was a pretty good idea, well, maybe a kind of good idea but when do I take anyone’s advice anyway? I’m usually the one giving it. I certainly felt better.

Once the work was out of the way it was time to drink quite a few of the Stroh’s. It was still only about four so I could play some cards for a while and break out some mead and still get to bed at a reasonable hour. Well, reasonable to me but way too early for the rest of them. I am fifty, you know. I guess I told you that already. We kept going until about nine and the mood was noticeably lighter than when we started the afternoon. Beer works pretty well for that usually and all of the twelve and most of the thirty were gone. Stroh’s usually treats me well so I had hope that the hangover would be mild. Hey, I can hope, don’t take that away from me. Oh, but we had mead, too, damn. That’s gonna hurt.

“What’s going on Mike?”

“I got your message, what do you want to use the motor home for?” He did sound interested.

I gave him the capsule version of what we had done that afternoon, the videos of the lab and buildings and finding out that there was going to be another test. I filled him in on the plan for a road trip Tuesday night and he agreed to go since he didn’t have the kids that night. I was even going to take Wednesday off to recover since I knew there would be beer involved. Priorities, you know?

“I’ll have to get Chuck to help me get it running. It hasn’t been started since we stole it from Lori back in the fall. I think he’ll enjoy having something to do. Should I tell him about why we want it? Probably not, huh”

 “I think we’d better wait until we see how this whole mess shakes out. Afterward we’ll have a big party at Rainbow Lake, Invite everyone, and have story hour.” That sounded like a good idea. I have them sometimes.

“Damn, it still has that bald tire from the trip up north last year; we’ll have to take it pretty slow.”

We finished up the conversation and I promised that I would call everyone and get the times set. Should we do a pre-test run? The only time that I had seen the building was from the water when we had the boats on Muskegon Lake. I’ll call Micah and we’ll do that after work Monday. I’m sure he’ll be up for a little cruise. I called him and he couldn’t go, there was a big deal sprinkler test that he was running for a customer that was going to go until at least eight or nine and I wanted to get a look at the site in the daylight. Maybe this is the place to get Tom involved? Or is it too soon? Won’t know unless I call him.

Tom was game to give the trip a try and I told him I would come over to his apartment and we could leave from there. I was still a little paranoid that there may be people watching me and I didn’t want my car anywhere around the building that was being collapsed. They didn’t need to know that I knew what was going on. I do, kind of. It was getting late, well, around ten, and I needed to end this day. But not before I cleaned up the place and hid all of the files again. No need to take chances if you could avoid them. Ugh, another Monday coming.

**Chapter 16**

I sat on my knees for a minute just looking at the woman that was now there. Carrie was gone and Karen was back but he pain that showed on her face was the same as before. A tear rolled down her dusty face and I knew it was from the pain of falling back on the arrow. I had to rest from just sliding down the hill but I felt I was recovering faster after taking time to drink some water and I held up her head and dripped a little in her mouth. She looked up and smiled and I knew that would have to end soon when I started to take the arrow out. How could I hurt her? Why was it Karen again? Was it as simple as seeing her picture before bed or was there something more? I looked up at he rocks and the two that were there had moved closer to us but had stopped about twenty yards away. I took the chance to stand up and look for the archers and found they had started to angle away from us and I could see they had slung their bows over their shoulders so the danger had lessened at least. Who were the people in the rocks? I had to let my guard down some to help Karen and if they wanted to harm us there wasn’t anything I could do anyway. I picked up the arrow that had fallen in our hideout to see what type of head it had so I would know how to remove it. It was just a smooth head that should come out easily but I wondered if she was too weak to take it. I started to pull on the broken shaft and she didn’t make a sound. Certainly tougher that I am.

The dreams were starting to make me a little angry. You know was well as I do that they haven’t really gone anywhere over the last few days. Maybe I should just stop telling you about them until something that is pertinent comes up? How will I know what that is? For a while it looked like there was some great insight that was going to come from them but as the days go by I am starting to think I was wrong about that. Damn. I thought it just might make my life and the decisions in it easier. I need all the help I can get. You’ve seen that. Oh, well.

As I lay in my bed, the thought of the recon run to Muskegon was starting to excite me and even thought it was the start of the day I couldn’t wait for work to be over. Then I remembered that I was going to have to call the feds to tell them I wasn’t going to spy for them and some of the excitement was replaced by a need to start to think what my response would be to their reaction. I told you I was starting to think like a chess player. What information would I give them if they threatened me? I need to think that through and the shower was a good place to do that kind of thinking. At least it is for me.

I did come up with something in the shower. No not that. The idea to give them information that they probably already had (I’m not sure who came up it) like the first couple of pages from the Virginia file would stall them for a little while at least and maybe the whole thing would be over before they find out? I can’t see the end yet so I don’t know how much time I have is the biggest problem. How can I find out how much time? From where I sit, I don’t think I can. Just a little more uncertainty that have to deal with. Hey, I can always claim that I didn’t understand what they wanted and get them to explain it better. That ought to take at least a week or so. Breathing space is a good thing.

I felt pretty good. The flu was completely gone and I was looking forward to going into work for the first time in quite a while. It was going to be pretty busy from being out the few days last week. Who am I kidding? Even with the new responsibilities I still didn’t really have full time job and I could probably get caught up in a couple of hours. I’m sure Kate took care of all of the routine stuff and if there was anything big that had happened she would have called. She didn’t so I could look forward to a pretty easy day. I know, how can I keep taking their money if I don’t work too hard? I think that’s what partners do. I WAS going to try to get at Robert’s computer so Jameson could clone it. I don’t know if we really need it after what was in Daniel’s but you never know.

The sound track for the run into work was Peter Gabriel this morning and I drove a little slower than normal. I had been admonished by a friend of mine that it was probably not a good idea to keep speeding all the time and that it would catch up to me soon. Well, the last speeding ticket I got was in 1974 (before she was born) so how true can that be? I do know that it is a lot less work to drive the speed limit and at times I need the relaxation in the car. Not very often, though. No breakfast again and the weather was okay, at least it was not snowing. But it shouldn’t be In March. Spring, where are you?

I was still thinking about how I was going to get access to Robert’s computer as I pulled in to work and walked in the front door. Marilyn wouldn’t be in yet and maybe now would be the time to take a crack at it? I did have a master key but I didn’t know if it would fit Robert’s door unless I tried it; why would they key one door differently? I dumped my stuff in the office, grabbed the keys, and started toward his office making sure that there was no one around that would question why I was there. The lights were still off in most of the office and the wave effect worked again as I moved to the back of the suite. I still think that’s pretty cool.

As I reached for the door my cellphone started to vibrate and I debated on whether to answer it or not. As I told you before, calls this early in the morning were usually for pain in the butt emergencies and I didn’t need the distraction. It stopped and vibrated again. Damn, I’d better answer it. I moved over to a corner of accounts payable and pulled the phone from my pocket to see who it was. Jameson’s number came up and as I was calling voicemail I looked out the window and noticed that Robert’s car was in the lot but not in its usual space. What the hell was he doing here? Was he here? I got through to voice mail.

“Dad, it’s about seven am, just got access to the LAN computer and I’m getting the files cloned now. Call me.”

 Someone had turned on the computer. Robert, or someone, must be in his office. Damn, my heart was starting to race with the thought that I was about a step from having to explain why I was trying to get into his office. I put the phone back in my pocket and walked back toward the front of the suite and my office. It never felt so good to get back there and I tried to resume my normal routine as I calmed down. I made the coffee and took a cup back to my office, turned on my own computer and tried to decide what phone to use to call Jameson back. Better yet, I’ll IM (that’s instant message for you computer illiterates) him and use the masker again. I couldn’t be sure if my e-mail was being monitored but this would make them work a lot harder to get the message.

 ‘got your message…IM me when the files are done….don’t want to talk about it on the phone.’

 ‘okay…..I’ll have them all in about an hour…..delivery same as before?’

 ‘yep’

 ‘talk to you later…’

 It was still too early to call the feds so I thought I’d take a little down time and read the first of many newspapers that I read every day. You know what those are. I’ve been at work for about twenty minutes and I’m taking downtime? I can’t start my day without a dose of the news to go with my coffee. My hands were still shaking from the near miss but I knew that time would be the only thing that would help with that, or a beer but that wasn’t going to happen. Nope, I shouldn’t. Maybe at lunch?

 Kate came in with one of those “don’t you ever work” looks on her face but sat down and caught me up on her weekend. She was having boyfriend problems (okay, how old are you when you stop calling them boyfriends?) and the conflict was on how to raise her son. I don’t know how to describe her parenting style but undisciplined is probably the most polite way to put it. A normal 9-year old is a handful (I know, I raised four of them) and an undisciplined one can be a monster at times. I knew Cody and he could be one. But he was also a good kid. The topic then turned to my weekend and what I’d done and then to the weather, plans, and just the general talk of friends. It was nice to catch up and be reminded that there was normal life still out there. I can’t wait to get mine back.

 After a couple of meetings, some phone calls, and returning five e-mails, it had gotten to be about 10 O’clock and time to call the feds. I decided to use my office phone since I was going to refuse them and it would look more like I had nothing to hide just in case Robert got wind of their offer. I had to dig the card out of my briefcase and try to remember who was who. I wanted to talk to Carson since he was the more reasonable of the two. Maybe they were playing “good cop, bad cop” and I shouldn’t read too much into their behavior? It’s all I have to go on so I guess it’s the best I can do.

 “Agent Carson speaking,” was the terse opening.

 “Agent Carson, Jake Devereaux. Just wanted to call you to let you know that I can’t perform the request.” Why was I being so cryptic? I waited for his response for what seemed like minutes.

 “Mr. Devereux, I have to say that I am disappointed that you would decide to not help your government in this very important matter,” it sounded like the call was being recorded. “I will pass it on to my superiors with my recommendations,” that sounded something like a threat. “Thank you for your time.”

 I didn’t say another word. I couldn’t, he had already hung up before I could process what he had said and react. This was too weird. But, what did I expect? That he’d threaten me over the phone? The NSA wasn’t the Mafia, after all. I just stared at the phone for a minute thinking. What was my next move? Is there a next move? I decided to not think about those guys for a while and get ready to go out to lunch. I needed fuel, and food. Damn, it’s too early for lunch. Another cup of coffee sounded good, too, so I went over, made more (doesn’t anyone else make coffee here?) got another cup and settled back in to read the second paper of the day. I’ll do some work in a little while, or this afternoon. I am a partner, after all. The NSA was still in the back of my mind.

 I remembered that I was supposed to meet up with Kelly at the bar tonight but that would have to be postponed with the mission Tom and I were going on later. I e-mailed her and let her know that if I could make it would have to be later then the normal 6 pm starting time and she immediately sent one back saying that later would be better for her anyway. I hadn’t seen her in a while and it would be good to catch up. Another youngster, why do I spend so much time with them? Am I starting to look ridiculous? That was the comment (aimed at me or not) that I overheard from one of my younger female friends discussing how creepy it is to have old guys hit on them. Hey, we ARE guys after all, get over yourselves. You’d rather have a shallow, inexperienced guy that is only in it for himself? Just a little rant. Sorry.

 The rest of the day went pretty well and I think I accomplished great things. Well, that’s the way it looked to me and I did find a way to save the company almost 100K in material costs for one of the engineering projects. See, I do some work. Kate was not at her desk when I was ready to leave so I left her a note saying goodbye and call me if she needed me for anything. I had remembered to run a Yahoo map of the Muskegon site so finding it would be pretty easy but I almost forgot to put in my briefcase. Sometimes the memory doesn’t work too well at my advanced age. When was the weather going to break”? It was still cold and the temperature was falling as I walked out to my car and the low, grey clouds said snow. I hope it's not lake effect or Muskegon would be buried by the time we got there.

 The drive home was uneventful but the snow had started again. I was still in “low and slow” mode driving and thought some Steely Dan would be a good accompaniment to that mood. It was strange not being the fastest car on the road for a change and I stayed in the right lane to let the rest of the traffic get by. I wanted to go out in the left lane to gum up the works but just didn’t have that much spite in me. Might have been the beers for lunch. No, we don’t drink too much. Just the right amount. My apartment was still empty when I got there and I stopped just long enough to change clothes and grab my little cooler and a couple of Stroh’s for the trip. No, we don’t drink too much.

 On the way over to Tom’s I noticed a car that had been following me almost the entire way. A big Crown Vic in a solid dark color that screamed cop and I found myself looking in the mirror more than out the windshield. Not the best way to drive. Being the paranoiac that I am, I turned off before I got to Tom’s and made a run through one of the cookie cutter subdivisions that sprawl all around GR. It made the first turn but didn’t follow me through the rest of the convolutions I made getting myself lost. Well, not lost really, I don’t think you can get lost here but I wasn’t sure exactly how to get out of the identical streets that made this one up. I guess you just keep driving until you hit a main street that you recognize. I was not going to be overconfident that I lost him so when I hit 44th street again, I went the wrong way, down to 36th and then doubled back to come in the back entrance of the complex. No copmobile in the mirror. Or in the lot that I could see.

 Tom was ready to go when I got to the door of his apartment and I agreed we should get going since the snow was starting to pick up. I had the maps and the cooler and as we walked across the lot I couldn’t help looking around for suspicious cars. What’s a suspicious car? You know the typical cop car. Wouldn’t you think that if the cops were going to tail someone they would use something other than a Crown Vic? We got in Tom’s old Buick, after a little work on the passengers door, and headed out to the e-way toward Muskegon. He was still a “car slob” and I had to make a place to put my feet in the trash on the floorboard and clear off some of the papers and other things that were on the front seat. It is hard for me to not be the driver.

 We really didn’t need the maps yet so I put them aside and opened a road beer for the trip. Tom was on another of his not drinking phases so he opened the bottle of water I brought for him as the heater finally started to blow at least tepid air. I had remembered to bring one of my cameras (the new little digital) and got it out to make sure that the battery was charged and the thing worked before we got too far out of town. When we got to Coopersville, Tom cut across to the exit from the left lane and stopped in one of the gas stations that lined the road.

 “What the hell was that for?” I was surprised but not confused.

 “Just checking to see if there is anyone following us,” Tom has a sense of paranoia that is as finely-honed as mine and climbed out of the car to look around.

 “Good move, I wasn’t even thinking about it.” I climbed out and stretched like we were just tourists on a long trip.

 Tom walked inside to get a pack of smokes, I know I’ve tried to get him to quit, and I followed a few seconds later. I think I’ll need more beer anyway, the two that I brought were already gone and they went down really easily. Nothing that even remotely looked like a cop car had pulled into the lot but I stopped to make sure there weren’t any cars pulled up on the e-way past the exit as I opened the door. The rest room was very clean for an older place and I used it before I bought beer. I guess it’s an old military saying that you should always pee, sleep, or eat whenever you can when you are on an operation. You never know when you’ll have to do without the three. Maybe it was Heinlein that said it, I can’t be sure but it has always seemed like a good idea to me.

Tom had pulled the car up in front of the door as he waited for me to finish buying beer. I had to wait behind about twelve little kids that each had some candy to buy and normally it would bother me but this time I remembered what it was like with my kids and I showed more patience than I thought I had. A little victory on the road to self-improvement. I think we Americans have lost the ability to wait. And not get pissed off, that is. I even held the door for them when they left. Have I hit the age that you automatically get slow? The driving today and now this? I hope not.

There was more traffic than I expected, this is Coopersville after all, and it took a few minutes to get back on the e-way. The car had finally gotten up to temperature and the frost that had been on the inside of the windows had melted but had left streaks in the gunk from all of the cigarette smoke. I had forgotten what a smoker’s car smelled like and was thankful that Tom was adding some fresh smoke smell as we drove. Weird, huh? I just like fresh smoke better than stale. Tom was playing the speed-up slow down game and watching for any cars that might be matching us but neither of us saw anything. So far so good. He did need a tire balance, though, at about 68 the interior of the car would do a little dance and the steering wheel would shake like crazy. Old cars.

When we got near Muskegon, I got out the maps so I would know how to direct him to the target. Gee, we’re even talking military talk. I feel like G.I. Joe. It was pretty easy to find but the complex was surrounded by a chain link fence that was going to keep us at least 200 yards away unless we could find a way in. No place to park a motor home, though. I wanted to get the recon done in one pass to keep the suspicion down in case they were watching the site but there were a few other old cars that passed us so we fit in quite well. Across the street there was a bunch of abandoned semi trailers that looked like they would allow us to blend in and get a good view of the building but I wanted to get closer if I could. Tom found a service road that looped about 50 yards from the building and there were a couple of old trailers that had enough space between them to fit the motor home. I think. I can’t remember how big it really is. This would be the primary and if needed we could always park across the street.

I shot some photos as we rolled past each spot so I would have something to show the guys tomorrow and to make sure I hadn’t missed anything. It was getting dark and there was not much else to see so we slowly crawled our way back to the paved roads and out of town. I hadn’t seen anything that I could tell was preparation for the test around the building; there weren’t even any tracks in the snow around it that jumped out at me either. It just looked like an abandoned building, like the 15 or so others that were on the site. Why didn’t they have to prep the building? Where was the test being controlled from? These questions popped out at me as we drove back to the e-way but I wasn’t going to think about it on the way back. Tom wanted to talk.

It was good to be able to lend an ear and let Tom just vent about everything that was going on. Sometimes, you just need someone to listen and I think I’m probably the only one that Tom still trusts to spill all of this stuff to. I certainly won’t judge him on any of his decisions since mine were never the best either. You know about all of the bad ones I’ve made with the youngsters and Karen. You don’t know about the rest of them. Maybe I’ll tell you later. It was some effort to listen and comment, though, and I was questioning whether or not I had the energy to meet up with Kelly but had a brainstorm. This may be the spot to start getting Tom into the group but I had to clue him in on some of the characteristics of this life that I think he doesn’t know.

To start with, there is this touchy feely, hugging thing that goes on with the youngsters that can be confusing if you’re not used to it and understand it. I certainly wasn’t when I started keeping company with them and I misconstrued the expression of general affection for them being interested in me. I think it was my ego talking or it may be that I just wanted someone in my life again. Whatever it was, I learned over time the reality of the hugging, hand holding, and the phone calls asking me out. It wasn’t that they wanted me, that was for sure, it was just what they did with all of their friends male and female. Things have changed a lot since I was young when these actions were a much clearer signal that there was some interest. Not now. If I could clue him in on this I think the rest will just fall into place. Well, I can hope can’t I? The only problem with assuming that there is no interest on their part is that you may miss it if it's there. Ladies, please be clear about your intentions for us old guys, okay?

Tom didn’t feel like going out tonight and I wasn’t sure if it was because he really didn’t want to or that he was broke. He is a proud guy and I guess I’d feel the same way about charity from my friends if I couldn’t afford to go out. It just makes it less fun. So I left him at his place and told him I would call him later in the week to drag his butt out. Sometimes you have to do that, too. He’s never been that social of a person but neither was I until I started to hang out with this group. It’s amazing what a little practice will do.

I almost went home instead of the bar (I said almost) but Kelly called and wondered where I was and I wanted to talk to Mike about the timing for the road trip for tomorrow night. I know he said that Chuck got the motor home running but I needed to get the rest of the details nailed down. I guess I should call John and see if he wants to go too, since we hadn’t been able to contact him Sunday. There was plenty of room after all and in these kinds of exploits the more the merrier. When I talked to Kelly she told me that Chad was already there and Micah was on his way so we could get everything set. I couldn’t make it late, though since we all had to work except Mike, and it was going to be a long day Tuesday. I think I need a nap already.

There was no one in the bar except our group and Mike was looking quite bored along with the servers who were standing around talking and reading. I didn’t remember seeing it so slow and wondered why. I know it’s Monday but there was usually the first day of the week crowd that did the same things we did on Monday: Catching up on the happenings from the weekend. Not this Monday. At least it would make it easier to talk the details through without any interruption. I felt bad for Mike, though, since he was not going to make anything for putting in nine hours. We’ll have to take up a collection for the gas for the motor home.

“I’ve got some photos for you,” I said to the group as I walked in. I got to the bar, Mike gave me beer, and everyone was looking at the screen on the back of the camera as I scrolled through the images of the next site.

“Here’s where I want to hide the motor home when we get there.” I showed Mike the closer of the two spots and asked him if he thought it would fit.

“Looks tight, but I think it’ll go,” Mike looked at the photo for a while and handed the camera back to me. “Is there another spot if it won’t?”

“Yeah, this one right here,” I showed them the lot across the street and the view that we would have.

“We can see a lot better from the first one, “Micah commented.

“The second one would let us use the side windows, too,” Chad pointed out, “and give a better view for the video camera.”

“I was thinking about getting out of the motor home to watch because I want to hear what it sounds like and I don’t want to shoot my cameras through the windows anyway. But that brings us back to them being able to see us if they’re using night vision,” I was just thinking off the top of my head.

“It depends on what angle they are shooting from and we won’t know that until tomorrow,” Micah added. “We may have to stay in and shoot through the curtains if we’re in the background.”

“From the ones we’ve seen, they usually set up on the recognizable front of the building; I think that puts them at a right angle to the good spot.”

“I wonder if they’ll do a check of the area before the test?” Chad was thinking again. “We should probably think about what we’re going to do if they see us. Just take off as fast as we can?”

“Yeah, right, in the motor home?” Mike was almost laughing. “That thing won’t go better than 70 wide open.”

“Well then, just take off. I don’t think it will matter how fast anyway. How can you hide a motor home?”

“They’re not going to know that we’re there to watch anyway.” I started. “They’ll probably think it’s drug deal or someone parked for other reasons. They don’t have any reason to suspect anything so I don’t think they will. I’d be willing to bet that they don’t want to draw the attention of the locals so their presence will minimal. Just to check the building for homeless people. ”

The discussion continued for a while but we had the basics set. John called back and said he was in but had to check to see if he could get Wednesday morning off. Kelly had set through the whole session with a kind of bewildered look on her face and I remembered that we had not told her anything about what was going on. I thought about telling her for a minute but decided against it. There wasn’t really any need to get her involved, I made a note to include her in the post-mortem party at Rainbow Lake and then just told her that we would tell her later. She was a good sport and didn’t press the issue. Thanks Kelly. The night wound down from there, only one more beer and a little conversation and I had to go home to get to bed. No gin and tonics tonight. Well, maybe one.

**Chapter 17**

Well, this is weird. No dreams last night again. Or not any that you want to hear about. Hey, I was waiting, too. The only thing I can remember is something about a roof leak and my daughter Jennifer complaining to me about it. How she got in my dreams I don’t know and it is so odd because she never complains to me or about me. One of her sayings when she was younger was that she was going to build a shrine to me. Not that I deserve one, far from it. I’m not making this up. Some of the rest of this stuff, yes, but not this. The roof leak is real, though, and I have to remember to get someone over to Charlene’s to take a look at it. But why Jennifer? Maybe I feel guilty since I haven’t talked to her in awhile? Nope, I’ve never felt that way with any of the children and I don’t think they feel that way about me. Damn, now I’m going to have to think about this today, or not, I haven’t decided.

One thing that does strike me as odd that just came to the front of my mind, when I got home last night there WAS a dark Crown Vic just pulling out of the street that leads to my apartment. It didn’t register then (maybe the beer?) but I remembered it vividly now. Maybe the dreams didn’t come because I skipped the G and T’s? What does that have to do with this? Nothing, just more random musings that sometimes interfere. I can’t remember seeing that Crown Vic anywhere on the complex during my runs and I’m such a car geek that I think I would have. A visitor? Possibly? Whoa, here’s a thought; what if the NSA bugged this place last night because I decided not to spy for them? How would I know? My heart started to race at the irrational fear that was rising, but how irrational is it?

I know you’ve seen all of the spy movies where it is so easy to find the listening devices. Why would anyone do it if they are so easy to find and defeat? The fears had already stopped me from using my cell phone to talk to the guys about our project, now do I have to stop talking in my own place? That would be a fate worse than death for a person like me. I like to talk, sometimes way too much and I have to think to shut up and listen. Now that I have a feeling that there is something going on, what is the point of them listening anyway? They can’t bug every place that I go, can they? Stop, slow down, this is what happens when I don’t get out some of this creativity in the dreams. I need to get out of bed and take a shower. Maybe they have video cameras? They’re going to get a show if they do. I usually sleep in the nude. Who would want to see a fifty year old nude anyway? Someone, I hope.

The shower slowed down my brain somewhat, thankfully. I started to feel better but still performed the cliché ritual of looking in the lamps and other normal places where they may have placed microphones. Of course I didn’t find any. I did find the lighter I had been looking for a while so the search was not a total loss. It still felt a little creepy that they may be watching me but I did a little dance for them and then put it out of my mind. I wonder if I can get copies of the tapes if there are any good ones? I decided that I would leave work early to get a nap before the road trip. Damn, I forgot that Jameson had Robert’s computer cloned and it should be waiting in my e-mail. There is just getting to get to be too much to keep straight. I really do need to start writing this stuff down.

Here’s a disturbing thought, what if they have just tried to bug my computer? I’ve read about the “sneak and peak” excursions that the feds have been allowed to do over the last couple of years that were specifically targeted at the computers of suspects. Do I think I’m a suspect? I hope not. How can I get word to Jameson about this without them knowing? How about a pay phone? Do they still have those? I decided to put the download on hold until I could contact him and find out if he could tell if my computer had been tampered with. I had to think where there might be a pay phone. Since cellphones had become so commonplace I had just stopped needing to know where they were. I guess I’ll just drive over to the little mall that has my grocery store in it and take a look. Sounds like a plan.

I debated with myself whether I should turn the computer off before I left but it’s always on so I decided to leave it that way. Damn, first week of March and it is still cold. I forgot to warm up my car and the windshield immediately fogged over when I started it and the fog turned into a nice even sheet of ice. For once the sun was shining (well, not really, I know I’ve told you of at least two other times it was) which made driving through the ice and glare almost impossible. Almost, I said, I had driven the route to the store so many times I could do it by feel and I started off with the side window open a little so I could make sure I was at least on the road. Dangerous? Probably.

I did make it to the lot without incident and even found a pay phone by the McDonalds. I had to get out my cell phone to get the number to dial, though. Once you program the number into your phone do you ever look at it again? I never do and it was strange. When you think back to your youth, didn’t you have just huge amounts of phone numbers memorized? I don’t think I can remember any except my own these days. I called Jameson and got him.

“Hey,” I said we don’t need to talk much.

“I’ve got a question for you.”

“What?”

“Is there a way to find out if anyone has been in my computer?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, like the sneak and peek stuff the government is doing. Is there a program that we can use to find out if someone is monitoring it?”

“Is there anything hard you want me to do? Did you leave the computer on?”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to do anything different today.”

“Give me a couple of hours and I’ll check and find out. How would you like me to give them a bunch of fake commands and information if they are?”

“You can do that?”

“Yeah, I’ll just build a shadow on the hard drive that I’ll point the program at. Pretty easy stuff.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve done this before.”

“Okay, I won’t.”

“Bye, Jameson.”

“Bye, Dad.”

It IS cool to have a computer geek son.

Since I was sitting at McDonalds, I decided to get a cup of coffee for the ride to work. I had forgotten to make it last night and the distraction of looking for the bugs and cameras had taken too much time. They make pretty good coffee anyway but I forgot my travel mug that usually prevents me from looking like a slob when I get to work. No spills today, though, and that made me fell pretty good both for me and my car. Hey, I told you little things make me happy.

I was a little later than normal and Kate had beaten me in by at least a few minutes. I stopped at her cube to say hi and to tell her I was leaving at noon and she just shook her head and asked me how she could get a job like mine. I’ll admit I have a pretty good one. I got busy returning some phone calls and had a couple of update meetings with my engineers that really didn’t generate anything for me to do but listen. I told you I had a good group. My calendar said I had a meeting with Robert but when I opened the notice to look at the details it had already been canceled with no reschedule. Not that strange but I hadn’t even talked to him in over a week and that was strange. At this point I didn’t really care since I had other things on my mind.

An IM (you remember? Instant Message) notice came up on my computer and I opened the program to see who it was. Jameson, of course, and he had some news.

‘got one”

‘one what’

‘there is a spy program on your computer. it looks like it was installed in person so I’d get your locks changed.’

‘have you seen this one before?’

‘yep, got paid to clear one last week. can’t tell who…but not a private firm. dad the spy.’

‘not by choice, that’s for sure.’

‘i set it up to feed them right-wing web site information and tossed in a little fox news for good measure. i even encrypted some of it to make them work harder.’

‘can they get at the files that you got me from the LAN?’

‘nope, they’re not that good. you can just use you computer like normal.’

‘cool, thanks.’

‘bye.’

I told you it was cool to have a computer geek son.

See, it was not all unfounded paranoia. Why am I happy that these guys are spying on me? I guess it does confirm that I’m not crazy. At least when it comes to this. About younger women, yes, but not this. I wanted to let the guys know what Jameson had found out but thought about it and decided to wait until tonight. I don’t think there is any urgency in them knowing and it will be another story to tell to keep us busy while we wait for the test. I decided to give Gina a call since we had a little falling out over the weekend and I wondered how much damage had been done. You remember about the comments about the old guys creeping out younger women? Well, that comment came from Gina and I was hurt a little by it. I AM an old guy after all. Why does she want to hang around with me if old guys creep her out? I probably should ask her, huh? Do I want to know the answer? Probably not.

I got her voicemail so I didn’t have to face her, left an innocuous message, and asked her to call me if she wanted to. I don’t know if I wanted her to or not. That is the problem. I don’t know why I beat myself up about this stuff all the time. I need to just relax and have fun but then my brain intrudes and I start to think. Thinking is normally a good thing but sometimes I do too much of it. I wonder what it would be like to be an idiot. Well, some of my friends would say that I am. I try not to be.

The day was quickly coming to a close (remember I’m going home at noon) and I had a few things to get done before I leave. Just mundane, work stuff so I’m not going to describe much of it to you. Or any of it, for that matter. I gave Kate a few things to do to cover (I do need to get her a raise), said goodbye, and headed out the door. It hadn’t warmed up as much as the sun said it should have and I was glad to still have my winter clothes with me. A good pair of gloves is a godsend in a Michigan winter and I didn’t have to scrape any ice since the sun had heated the interior of the car enough to melt it all. It was getting a little numbing to have the cold hang on so long. That was not an intended pun. But it worked didn’t it?

Another drive home.

When I walked in the door to my place it felt kind of unsettling knowing that someone had been in it to set up the spy program on my computer. What if it wasn’t the NSA? Who else could be involved in this? I guess it didn’t matter right now since Jameson had bought me some time with his counter programming and with so many variables it was easier for me to think about our road trip. You know sometimes I take the easier route. I was starting to get tired (I told you I was fifty) and fixed a plate of leftover stir-fry beef that I had made the day before. It was pretty good but a little too sweet. Next time I’ll leave out the sugar. The couch was calling me again and I hoped that I could get enough sleep to make it worth it so I wouldn’t be a vegetable later in the night. I’d have to remember to bring coffee, too.

It was a good couple of hours of sleep until my phone rang and ended it. John.

“What’s happening John?”

“What’s the plan for tonight?” I don’t think I told him about the possibility that someone could be listening.

“I’m not sure.” I lied. “Mike will be able to tell you better. I haven’t talked to him today.” I was hoping he would give up and call Mike.

“Boy, you sound a little grumpy.”

“I’m just tired and need to take a nap,” I lied again.

“I’ll let you get back to it, see you tonight.”

“Bye.”

No damage from that one. I’d have to remember to tell everyone that someone may be monitoring the calls and we’d have to be careful for now. It was a pain in the ass when you were used to instant communication. How do you regress from using the latest technology? What’s next, smoke signals or jungle drums? It was getting to be time to get the details set for the night so it was back to the pay phone again. I had a couple of calls to make and grabbed a bunch of change for the phone and headed out. I remember when it was a dime to use the pay phone, don’t you? I was more than a little surprised this morning when I found that it was now fifty cents. At least I had a bunch of quarters left over from washing my car the other day so I didn’t have to go get change. Would the feds be suspicious if they see me using the pay phone? Maybe I should use a different one? With that thought in mind, I turned left instead of right and headed toward another pay phone that I remembered was behind a Burger King a couple of miles away.

It felt kind of weird to be using the pay phone, though. Somehow it seems you are a second class citizen because you can’t afford a cell phone. At least I felt that way; it’s probably all in my head like so many other things. I had started to think a lot again and wondered if it was too much. The first call went to Tom. I was going to ask him to be a decoy for me, to take my car and just drive it around for the night. I knew he didn’t have his girls tonight so maybe he could help.

“Hey, Tom, what’s going on?”

“Hi, Jake, nothing, just sitting here with some Jack trying to get drunk.”

“Well, stop. I need your help tonight on that little project I’ve got going.”

“What?”

“I need you to be me for a while. Really, I just need you to drive my car around for while tonight and then crash here overnight.” I hoped he wasn’t too far on the drunk. “You can even drink my Jack.”

“Sure, why not. When do you need me there?” The response I expected came.

“As soon as you can. But park in the unit to the left when you turn in the driveway and then come down the back sidewalk to the slider. If they are watching the front I don’t want them to see you.”

“You really think they’re watching you?”

“Well, they bugged my computer yesterday so yeah, maybe.”

“I’ll be there in about a half hour or so if the damn car will start.”

“Cool, thanks.”

I hung up and felt pretty good that I could do two things, get Tom involved and out of his apartment and keep control of the situation with the project. The next call was to Mike. Fifty cents for a phone call?

“Hey, Mike, what’s going on?”

“Hello, Jake. Motor home is ready to go, where do you want to meet?”

“Can you pick me up at the church in back of my apartment?” I filled him in on the break in and the computer bugging and the misdirection that I was using Tom to do.

“Sure, where?”

“I’ll slip out the back door of my place and meet you on the drive that winds in off 60th street. What time were you thinking?”

“I’ll get you first about 8 or so and everyone else is meeting at Chad’s house and we’ll go from there.”

“Sounds good. I’ll meet you then. Oh, did you talk to John?”

“Yeah, he called me a little while ago and said you were in a grumpy mood for some reason.”

“Well, he called my cell and I couldn’t remember telling him that we weren’t using the cells to talk about this stuff. It wouldn’t have been cool to have our plans screwed up just from one phone call.”

“He’s not mad or anything, just confused. I talked to him and it’s okay.”

“Good. I’ll see you around eight.”

“Bye.”

Don’t you love it when a plan comes together? I know, that’s from an old TV series but it is still appropriate. It was about 7 so I needed to get my cameras packed, get my cold weather gear, and pack the beer in my medium cooler. Yeah, I have a cooler for almost every situation. We do drink a lot of beer and some of it traveling and a good set of coolers is an essential for those excursions. I knew Mike would have one, too, but too much is always better than not enough, especially where beer is concerned. I threw in a couple of bottles of mead for good measure and filled it the rest of the way with the ice I had left in my freezer. I hope Tom drinks his Jack neat. I did remember to make the coffee and filled my thermos with it, black.

“Hey, Tom,” he came in through the slider that I had left unlocked.

“Damn, it’s cold out there.”

“You can turn the heat up as far as you like. You know it’s included in the rent.”

I walked over and added 5 degrees to the thermostat so he wouldn’t have to. Always the good host. We went over the schedule for the night and when we’d be back in the morning and I showed him the clothes of mine that I wanted him to wear when he took the car out. When I thought more about the car, I told Tom that he only needed to take it out for a few minutes, just so they’d know that I was here. I gave him one of the hats that I normally wear to complete the ensemble, showed him where the Jack was, and headed out the back of my place to the church. The hedge that surrounded their parking lot had been breached in a few places by the neighborhood kids and I took one of the paths that were shielded by my building trying to avoid the lights as I moved toward the front drive that Mike would use to pick me up. It WAS cold out and I was glad I had dressed for it. No snow, though, so that is a good thing.

Mike was right on time and pulled up just as I was getting to the front of the church. I slung the cooler and my camera bag in the side door and climbed in the front passenger’s seat. The motor home was warm and I took off my hat and gloves to let some of the heated air get to my skin. We wheeled through the turnaround in the driveway and headed back toward 60th street and the e-way and the adventure was underway. Everyone should have adventures and I feel sorry for those folks that are stuck in lives that won’t allow it. I was for a long time and I like this life better. A LOT better.

“Hello, Jake,” Mike said as he passed me the first of what would probably be many Stroh’s for the night. Yes, we do drink and drive. Kids, don’t try this at home.

“What’s happenin’, Mike?” Our normal greetings, shorthand. “The rest of the guys ready to go?”

“Yep, I talked to them about an hour ago and they’re getting started at Chad’s. That is going to be dangerous.”

“I think I’ll pass on that,” I said with just a little conviction. “I don’t want to fall asleep before we get to see anything. And one of us is going to have to be able to think relatively clearly.”

“I think I’ll make it two of us,” Mike just smiled. “I’ll let Micah, Chad, and John get goofy.”

“That will be fun to watch,” I said with a big grin. ‘It will give us something to do while we wait.”

It was kind of strange driving at the pace of the motor home. Mike had it settled in to about sixty and I had to recalibrate my mind to the extra time it would take to get anywhere at that speed. As you know, my normal speed is fast, I mean really fast and it was not unusual to go more than twenty over the limit. It made me kind of uncomfortable and antsy to trundle along at that speed but I guess I’ll have to get used to it. I wanted to urge the beast on to get it going but remembered the bald tire and was sure I didn’t want to change one in this cold. I don’t think there is a spare anyway. Relax.

When were getting close to Chad’s, Mike got out his phone and beeped to makes sure they would be outside and ready. Chad’s street was quite narrow and in the city where there is not much parking even for regular sized vehicles. For something the size of the motor home, parking was impossible to find and we didn’t want to block the street for too long while we waited for the guys to come out. It was getting late anyway and I wanted to make sure we could get to Muskegon before the set up started. I did the math in my head and it was going to be close. I hope not too close.

John came out of the house with a thirty pack of Stroh’s under one arm and a bottle of Jameson in his other hand. Micah had something in a paper bag that he was carrying and almost fell down the stairs on the ice and snow that was still there while Chad was locking the door. He was laughing as he got to the street and the three of them piled in through the side door and fell into the “breakfast nook” trying hard not to spill the Jameson that John had opened on his way across the street. This was going to be fun. No Jack.

“Mikeeeey, let’s party like a warlord,” John was already quite a way toward blasted. Maybe I should have done this on my own. Nope, it wouldn’t be nearly as much fun.

The trip to Muskegon was slow. I know, I should stop complaining about it. But there is just something wrong about going under the speed limit. I got out my camera to start documenting the trip so we would have visual aids for the stories that would be told over and over throughout the summer. When is summer going to get here? I burned through a roll of film in my old Canon that I wanted to finish and then handed the digital over to the guys so I would be in at least one or two pictures. That’s the problem with being a photographer, in almost thirty years of taking pictures of the family, events, and the guys, I think I can count on two hands (well, and maybe two feet) how many pictures I’m in. I still don’t know if that is a bad thing.

The trip had been slow but fun. I had to stop after a couple of beers so I would be alert when we got there and Mike was doing the same. I couldn’t say that for the rest of the guys but this WAS supposed to be fun after all. I had remembered to put the maps in my camera case and it was a good idea since Tom and I had made the scouting trip in the daylight and it had long been dark on this trip. There was not much traffic but we had seen a couple of new cars that had seemed kind of out of place since there was nothing around the area that was still in use for any type of business. There were a few old, run down houses that still had light coming from the windows but they certainly would not be the home for those cars. Maybe drug deals? We probably looked as out of place and I wanted to get us into the hiding place as soon as possible.

After just a few wrong turns, I found the little access road that ran near the building and we turned down it after a slow run past to see if there was any activity from the test. Nothing.

“I guess that spot is going to be tight,” Mike turned off the lights and climbed out of the motor home to take a look.

“Will it fit,” I asked the obvious question.

“Fold the mirror on your side and let’s give it a try,” Mike got back in the driver’s seat and backed slowly into the opening. “Nope, need to try again.”

It looked like there was enough room but I knew what he was doing; trying to keep it as far to the driver’s side as possible so we could get out the side door if we needed to. The second try was better and the nose ended up recessed just a little from the trailers while the moonlight cast a shadow that hid us nicely. Mike had bee running the heater on high for the last couple of miles so we would have a store of warmth that would last a while with the motor off. I suited back up with my warm clothes so I could take a look around the area before the action started. From my watch, we had about 4 hours to wait for the test to take place and I had to take a leak anyway. Mike got busy pulling the curtains across the windows and asked me to check them out for leakage when I was outside. No one else offered to go along and I was kind of relieved. I didn’t know what was out there and I knew I could be quiet but I didn’t know about them.

Mike had the lights down to one small night light as I slipped out the smallest crack that I could both to save the heat and to let out the least amount of light. The night was still clear with a few high clouds that slid across the moon changing the shadows from dark to light and back. I stood still for a few minutes letting my eyes adjust down to the moonlight and just taking in the layout of the site. There was a sheet of plywood leaning against the trailer on the right side and I picked it up and moved it in front of the motor home to gain a little bit of camouflage. I was a little concerned about leaving a trail that could be seen but there was enough snow on the ground still that I could kick it over the tracks to mask them pretty well. I remembered Jennifer’s mini binoculars that I had slipped in my pocket on the way out of my place but when I put them to my eyes they fogged up instantly. I would have to let them adjust to the cold before I tried again.

There was no movement that I could see so I started to move to the right of the test building but a noise made me freeze where I stood. Micah and John had stumbled out of the door and were relieving themselves at the back of our parking spot but I was too far away to tell them to be quiet safely. I didn’t need to. I watched as they got back in the door and couldn’t hear another sound and I was only about thirty feet away. I kept moving near the line of overgrown thicket that lined the property to try to keep myself hidden. It was a stroke of luck that my warmest coat was a black Columbia and I had put on my only pair of black jeans that I hadn’t worn in years. They still fit. I could see the test building but there was still no activity that I could see and I wanted to get a closer look. That would mean crossing about fifty yards of open ground and I didn’t know how to do it. Too risky. Good thing too. There were a couple of trucks moving across the lot with their lights off.

I froze where I was and looked around to make sure I didn’t stand out from the background. I slid slowly down onto the ground and held still. They were still too far away to see me and I started slowly back to the motor home so I would be able to wait inside and watch the set up. There was someone else outside next to the trailers making himself small as I was and I knew it was Chad. He was watching the building intently and gave me a hand signal that meant go. I stayed low as I moved with one eye on the building and the other on Chad. We didn’t say anything as I moved up beside him and then slid through the darkness back to the motor home. It was a little bit of a relief to get back inside. I just sat for a minute in silence to let my heart slow and think. Geez, this was real.

Mike had opened a slit between the curtains and was watching intently with Micah and John crowded in behind him. His video camera was perched on the dashboard and running and he had thought to tape over the red record light on its front. It was on full zoom and the light from the viewscreen was enough for me to see to get out my camera and open another beer. Hey, I was thirsty after the outdoor mission. These guys are pretty good at this. I passed one to Chad and he handed it up to Mike. I think we all needed a beer about now. I looked at the guys and hoped I hadn’t gotten them into something that would get them hurt.

I guess the only thing to do now was wait and watch. The view from the screen on the camcorder was better than the one out the window so I didn’t feel the need to get up and look and let the guys stay where they were. I had my long lens on the Canon but I didn’t know if I wanted to lug that with me the next time I went out, maybe I’ll just take the digital. Mike’s camcorder was one of those new Sony’s that had both regular and night vision capability and I hoped we’d get a good independent confirmation of what was going on. I still can’t believe you can get night vision for under 400 bucks, pretty cool.

There wasn’t much activity at the building; the two trucks only held six men that I could count and all but two of them were involved with setting up the camera equipment at the front of the building. The other two disappeared into the building for about a half hour and then came out and started a sweep around the outside but stayed inside the chain link that circled it. I was relieved that they were limiting their search of the grounds but one of them did look like he either had an infrared camera or some sort of night vision goggles. I was happy that I had moved the plywood in front of the motor home just in case they were looking in infrared; the radiator and engine would stand out like a flare from the heat of driving. I hoped that the curtains would do the same for the interior but was getting a little nervous that it wouldn’t. We’ll just have to wait and see. John and Micah came back to the breakfast nook and sat down; Mike closed the curtains around the camera, and turned the driver’s seat to face the living quarters.

“Well, what do we do now?” Micah’s face had a light blue glow from the camera.

“Break out the Jameson,” John answered and I could see the grin on his face.

“You guys know this could be dangerous, don’t you?” I injected a little sobriety. “One of us needs to watch the screen and make sure the two searchers don’t come over here. I want to go out again when the set up is done. Anyone else?” Chad and I were the only ones that had dressed for the temperature.

“I can stay inside,” Mike answered, “and I’ll watch the screen.”

“I want to go out and take a leak in a while, if that’s okay with you captain,” John saluted and smirked.

“Me, too,” Micah raised his hand.

I was being somewhat serious but wasn’t this serious? I hated giving orders but right now someone had to and I didn’t want to complicate our lives by being discovered or losing the pictures we were shooting. Mike had brought enough tape to shoot for the whole four hours but I didn’t think it would be necessary. I just wanted the setup and knockdown and then to get the hell out of there before they came back for their equipment. Or should we stay until the cleaned up? I hadn’t thought about it. Damn, I should have.

“Should we stay until they come back for their equipment?” I asked the question to all of them.

“How much beer do we have?” Micah came back. “Just kidding.”

“I’m in,” John answered, “I took the day off tomorrow so I’m good.”

Both Chad and Mike gave me the “what the hell” looks and the issue was decided. While we talked, the setup men were finishing up and getting back into the trucks. They hadn’t paid any attention to us so there was a little relief at least on my part and we all watched as they backed out with their lights off and moved onto the road that led into the complex. One of the trucks went right but the other stopped at the street and turned left toward our direction slowly moving toward the access road and us. There wasn’t any other reason to be coming this way since the access road was the only turn to make once you made the first left. Damn.

Mike turned the seat back toward the front and we were all watching the truck through the slit in the curtains as it continued toward us, stopping every few hundred yards to look at something that caught their attention. The lights were still not on and we couldn’t see flashlights or spots so it made me think they were using the night vision stuff to see what I didn’t know. I was glad it hadn’t snowed here since the dirt access road didn’t show any fresh tracks from us driving in and it hadn’t thawed enough for the tracks to show up in the mud. One good thing that had come from the extended cold that we had been seeing. The truck pulled into the access road about fifty feet and then stopped. The passenger’s door opened and one of the men got out, looked around and walked to the front of the truck. He just stood there for a minute looking around and we realized what he was doing and relaxed. The guy was just taking a leak.

John and Micah moved back to the living area and sat down in the seats reaching for the cooler to get another beer for each of them but Mike kept watching out the front toward the truck. Chad had moved to the passenger’s seat to do the same thing and I kneeled on the engine cover to give my back a rest. The guy got back in the truck but it didn’t back out like we expected but continued up the road toward us. Mike was tensing like he was ready to go and Chad just looked at me like “now what” but I really didn’t know. They kept coming up the drive at about walking speed and then sped up just as they got to us but went past without a look. We watched as they turned around in the abandoned lot and headed back toward us again with the lights still off. As they passed the driver looked right at us and I wanted to make myself smaller by reflex but they kept going, turned out of the road and back to the main street. It was only about fifty in the motor home but I could feel the sweat drip down my back. Give me the Jameson.

“What the hell was that all about?” Mike broke the silence.

“What was what all about?” John asked as he got up and moved up front.

“Didn’t you see it? One of the trucks just drove right past us as you guys were gabbing in the back.”

“Where?”

“They’re gone now,” Chad added.

“Yeah, right,” John looked like he didn’t believe him. “You’re just screwing with me ‘cause I’m drunk.”

“You’re a pretty easy target, John, but it’s true. They just drove by, looked right at us, but kept on going,” I added.

John stood there and waited for the other shoe to drop, for us to tell him we were just putting him on but we all just looked at each other and shrugged. He could believe us or not.

It was time for all of us to have a beer and a shot so we moved back to the living quarters, opened a few and poured some Jameson into the cups that I had brought along for the occasion. It was only about 1 AM so we had a little time but I wanted to get back outside to see the collapse in person and I didn’t want to be drunk when I did it. Mike had turned on the low night light to add to the light from the viewscreen and it gave us all a kind of sickly yellow glow that looked like we had jaundice. There wasn’t much talk to be had and I was glad since I wanted to think for a minute anyway. What the hell were we doing here? We could have just stolen the file again once it was on Daniel’s computer. I was getting tired and suddenly this didn’t look like so good of an idea.

“Hey, lighten up,” Mike said as he kicked my foot. “You’re just way too serious about this stuff.”

“Yeah, I, know, I know, I was just thinking we could have just stolen the video from Daniel’s computer and we wouldn’t have had to go through this.”

“Through what?” John chimed in. “I’m having a “hoot” to quote you and can’t think of anywhere else I would want to be. What’s next? You want to go out and look around?”

Micah raised his hand again, “I want to go, let’s finish these shots and get out there. I need to pee again anyway.” He had that “I want to have some fun” look on his face.

“I’m game, let’s get going then. It’s starting to get to the time for the test anyway. Let me go out first and look around.” I grabbed my gloves and hat, lifted up off the floor, and slipped back out the door.

I was snapping out of the funk that had almost claimed me a few minutes before. I told you I think too much sometimes and that usually leads to the depression coming back and then I’m a pain in the ass to everyone around me. I’m getting better, though, don’t you think? This WAS fun after all. An adventure to share with your friends is certainly something to look forward to and enjoy while you can. But I am fifty you know. I haven’t told you that lately have I? Let’s have some fun, that’s an order.

I slid out the door and closed it softly, still trying to be careful even if there was no one around. But how would I know that until I looked? The clouds had cleared off leaving about a half moon for light and it was plenty once my eyes got used to it. It was a little colder that just an hour ago but with the wind gone it didn’t feel too bad. I walked back to the front of the motor home staying in the shadows of the trailer and scanned the area for anything that may look out of place. Nothing. I did the wait and watch to try to detect movement and didn’t see any except for what looked like a dog and hoped wasn’t one of the coyotes that had been spotted in the area. The rest of the guys came out and want to the back to relieve themselves and I thought it looked like a good idea so I joined them. You remember what I said earlier about peeing when you can? Well, it’s still a good idea.

Chad came up to me and held out his phone to remind me of the time; it was getting close, no more than another ten minutes if they were on time and I think we all wanted to be outside to see it happen. John slapped me on the back and looked around with a grin on his face, he was really enjoying this and I could see that Micah was too. Mike had the bottle of Jameson and passed it around I’m sure for a way to ward off the cold, not to get loaded. Hey, that’s what I believe, you believe what you want. It was warm going down. I thought about getting closer to the building through the cut in the chin link that I saw earlier but there wasn’t time.

It was the damndest thing. We were all looking at the building and even in the moonlight you could see the little puffs from the base of the building and in about two seconds the entire building had changed into rubble. The weirdest thing was the sound. You would expect it to be loud but it was the strangest soft sound, something like rain falling, no low frequency at all but almost light and delicate. We just stood and looked for what seemed like an hour, time had changed for that short time and none of us moved even an inch. There was just a little dust and that had settled before any of us could say anything.

“That was cool,” John said what we all felt I think. I couldn’t disagree, it WAS cool.

We all just looked at each other wondering what to do next. It was kind of an anti climax with not much sound or fury when the building fell and I felt a little let down. What was I expecting? Bugles? Well, more than had happened anyway.

“Let’s take a look at the tape,” Mike snapped us out of trance and we headed back to the side door. Not too soon either. The trucks were back to get the equipment.

We watched them through the curtains again but this time for only a couple of minutes. Mike left the camera running to get the whole sequence and it couldn’t have been more that three minutes until they were backing out of the site, turning back to main road, and disappearing around the corner. There wasn’t any need for us to stay any longer and it was getting cold inside so I jumped out the door and removed the plywood sheet from the front of the motor home so we could get going. Mike started it up and slowly crawled out of our hiding space keeping the lights off until we got next to the rubble pile from the building.

“Stop!” I shouted a little too loud. Mile slammed on the brakes and just looked at me. “I want to get a sample of the leftovers to take back with us. I’d like to see what the steel looks like.”

I jumped out of the side door without my coat and ran as fast as I could toward the pile. There was an empty big gulp cup lying next to the pile and I used it to scoop up a couple of pounds of the particles that I hoped would contain both steel and concrete pieces. I did take a look around while I ran and didn’t see anyone or anything that shouted danger so I slowed a little on the way back since I had been a slacker on my fitness program. I know when you get to my age you have to keep it up or you get fat and lazy. I’m not too fat, but at times I can be lazy. The trip back was just like the one there, slow and I had a couple of shots of Jameson and a small nap. Nothing else to tell. I did remind everyone to not talk on the cell phones. Yep, that paranoia again.

Tom was gone when I got back and so was the fifth of Jack. I didn’t mind because I was going to have him take it with him anyway. The note said “thanks for helping me have some fun and I’ll call you tomorrow” and I was kind of glad that he had gone home instead of staying. You know how I feel about being alone in my place; I just love coming home to an empty apartment. And I’ll be honest; I like to sit around in my underwear, so sue me. I did remember to come in the back way when we got back but Mike almost drove in the driveway until I woke up and screamed a little too loudly for him to pull back into the church. We only hit one curb on the way back in the driveway and I thought for a minute that they should just drop anchor in the lot and wait there until morning but there were always county patrols that came through from the vandalism that had been done there. I hope they got home okay.

**Chapter 19**

The dream was in bits and pieces last night and I couldn’t make much sense of it. I did get the arrow out of her shoulder without much blood and the wound dressed but I couldn’t tell who she was this time, her face was constantly out of focus and I didn’t recognize the color of her hair. The rest of the scene was frozen, I could move in it but everything else seemed to have gone to two dimensions with a flat, almost monotone that looked like the old sepia tone photographs. Damn, I know I want to know what the connection is, don’t you?

We didn’t get back until about 3:30 in the morning and it is about 8 o’clock now. I don’t know why I don’t sleep well. I wish I did. Could it be the lack of sex again? I know I told you about that earlier, but what else could it be? We had enough to drink to knock out an elephant on the way back so you’d think that would help. It didn’t. I felt lousy from the Jameson, oh, that’s not it, we had mead too. I have got to stop that. I like it but it doesn’t like me. I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to get back to sleep even with the few hours that I had, so I got up and walked to the kitchen for a glass of water. I was glad that I had taken the day off so I could afford to be lazy and recover gradually. I remembered that I had a new set of files to look at from Robert’s computer and Mike had left his camcorder for me to convert the tape to a digital file. But not right now. Aspirin first and then the couch to watch TV with a glass of orange juice.

I looked at my phone and the only call was from Gina; I had forgotten to call her back yesterday but I knew she wouldn’t be upset about it. We were past that. I’ll call her back later since she wouldn’t be up until late having closed last night. I started my computer so it would ready when I was and got the files started downloading so by the time I felt human I would have something to look at. That was enough work for now and I hit the couch, pulled the blanket up to my shoulders, and turned on the TV. The building was on the news.

It was a local station feed and it was over before I could get the sound up to hear it. Damn. I spent the next hour trying to find another report but here wasn’t anything that I could find. I would have to go out to get the GR press later to see if it made the papers and watch the local news at noon to see if they repeated the story. Maybe it wasn’t the building. I was still a little hazy so I could be wrong but I didn’t think so. This could make it interesting if this gets any airplay or even if a national service picks it up. What if they discover our firm has something to do with it? Too much thinking for this early in the morning, I changed the channel to TCM and watched a Myrna Loy movie. Did I ever tell you that Karen looks just like her, acts like her too? Weird.

Damn, I wanted to take a nap (yeah, I know I just got up) but this piece of news started my brain working again and I wanted to get to the files that Robert had. I made some coffee, opened the shades to let some light in, and sat down in front of my computer. I needed to call Kate and remind her that I was not coming in and see if there was anything that had come up that warranted my attention. I still wondered if there was going to be any clues on who they were working with to try to sell the project and why. I couldn’t imagine that there were people in the world that would sell this technology to anyone. And just for money or was there an ideological part that I was missing? The background information that I had on Daniel and Robert didn’t show any connections to the well known political movements but how can I be sure? I still didn’t know.

I’m a little confused, aren’t you? What do we need to do to make some sense of this? Hey, another list might work. What do we know:

1. We know this works. Seen it with our own eyes.

2. We know my firm is involved.

3. We know that Daniel and Robert are trying to convince the feds it’s a failure.

4. We know they are trying to sell the project to someone.

5. We know there are no more tests scheduled.

6. We know the feds are still interested in me.

7. We know that we still don’t know how they are doing this.

8. We know that this is beginning to get very complicated.

9. We know that I don’t have a clue of what to do next.

Well, that’s not entirely true. I was going to spend the day looking through Robert’s files and hope that something in them will break this logjam and get me pointed in the right direction. I really wanted to know who they were trying to sell this to; that would probably be the key to the whole thing. I wonder if the feds were going to fall for the fake failure (say that three times fast) and who the information was being forwarded to in the government. I would have to try to find that out. Maybe in Robert’s files. This is starting to make my head hurt. Or was it the Jameson? The result is the same.

The first files were done and I started to look through them for some of the things that were on the latest list. Most of it was duplicates of Daniels but there were some tantalizing hints of what was to come in the rest of them. I did get an address that I hadn’t seen before that appeared to be connected to a manufacturer of electronic equipment that was based at the airport. I started up another Firefox to see if there was any website for the company and got a hit that had a little history of the company and a listing of the capabilities they were selling. Interesting, it included high voltage portable generators and capacitors and the pictures in the second page looked too much like the van that was in Daniel’s files. Not identical but the same make and model. I know, there are thousands of these vans out there but connections are connections.

An IM came in.

‘hey, dad, something weird is happening’

‘what?’

‘they are trying to remove the spy software from your computer’

‘who?’

‘i can only get back about 3 nodes but it looks like somewhere in Virginia. Do you want me to stop them?’

‘no, we don’t want them to know anything, what have they gotten so far?’

‘just the junk that I told you I was giving them’

‘let it go. maybe they just gave up.’

‘okay. i’ll just watch. do you want me to spy their computers?’

‘nope, I think we’ve got what we need.’

‘later’

‘bye’

Why the heck would they spy for only one day? I wonder if they were looking for time sensitive stuff? Or we did a good job of telling them I don’t know anything? I wanted to believe the last one and it was going to be the premise that I worked from. Okay, one less thing that I had to think about but I will keep it in the back of my mind. Damn, this was making me tired again and I need more coffee. Oh, I get it. I told the feds I wouldn’t spy so they were checking me out to see if I was telling them the truth. That’s the reason for the one day spying and the reaction of Agent Carson when I told them I wouldn’t. Cool, I did something right. I just needed to make sure that I stayed under their radar until this shakes out. Whew.

One problem solved. But there were so many others that I needed to take a break and let my head clear for few minutes so I, took off my glasses, made a toasted bagel with soft cream cheese and a glass of orange juice, and zipped through the TV channels while I ate. I had gotten the video from last night downloaded to the computer and watched it a few times and noticed that it was a mirror of the others. No new information there. The sound was the thing that stuck in my head more than anything. It was kind of a nice sound if you can look at it without the baggage of what the sound came from. Restored, I got back to work on Robert‘s files with a renewed vim and vigor. Bagels will do that.

It was a hard slog but there were much fewer files than Daniel had on his computer. It came to me that I wondered if the “official” video would be on Daniels’s computer later in the day and made a note to IM Jameson and have him take a look. It would be good to have their view along with ours if we had to show them to anyone else. Without the confirmation of our tape, they could always say that the whole thing was a fake and I’ll bet they could come up with evidence that it was. Okay, the brain is working again. Yay. What we were going to do with the evidence I hadn’t figured out yet. Maybe just dump it all on a reporter and let them blow the whole thing up? I don’t think we are at that point yet. I think I had that idea before. It’s still a good one. Geez, I’m starting to enjoy this whole thing too much.

Okay, I need to get a better focus on what’s happening. Maybe take it one part of the problem at a time? I was still curious on how they made the buildings fall down and that was not very clear. The rest of the problem would wait for now. Or should I find out the why and who first? Yep, that’s the way to do it. Forget about the mechanics of it since that can be filled in later and that is not urgent but the sale of the technology was. The mechanics of the thing seemed to be set anyway.

So how do I go about it? I wonder if I should just go and talk to Robert with the excuse that I found the file accidentally? What would that accomplish? It wouldn’t get me to knowing more of what is going on I’m sure so let’s just discard that right now. Why were they taking the spyware off my computer? I’ll bet it’s because they didn’t find anything. Thanks Jameson. Can you tell I’m still confused? I’ll bet you are, too. Don’t lie to me. Jameson’s misdirection bought me some time I’m sure and I can fly under the radar for a while more. I think I’ll start putting together the package for what information is necessary to end this thing no matter who it is I give it to. I don’t know any reporters, though, so how do I do it?

I thought I’d let it sink in and decided to just look at the rest of Robert’s files and see if there would be a revelation in them that would take away some of the confusion. Man, my brain is not working. Okay, I know what to do. Let’s try to find out if the government is buying the idea that the project is s failure. How? I started to look through Daniel’s files again to find out who he has been dealing with and found a few names that I could check out. Robert’s computer confirmed the names and I had something to get moving on. But I didn’t have to. There was a letter from the defense department that was shutting down the project as of the first of February. We were to turn over all of the files but could dispose of any equipment as we saw fit but they wanted a confirmation that the disposal had taken place. Nice and neat. But where was the fake file that Daniel was going to send? It hadn’t been in any of the ones that I had seen yet but there were still a few left to go.

Hey, at least I don’t have to worry about #6 on the list anymore. Go back and take a look and you’ll know which one I mean.

My eyes had started to swim again so I decided to go get a newspaper and have coffee. It would do me good to get out and about for a while and maybe there would be something in the paper that would help. If it sounds like I’m grasping at straws I am. This certainly is not as easy as I expected. But how would I know? I’ve never done this before. And you have to remember one thing: I am fifty, you know. Not an excuse but a fact. Is it ever going to warm up?

I got dressed and went out the door; I had forgotten to warm up the car and had to scrape ice again. There was something that was trying to come to the front of my mind but just wouldn’t. I had read so many files that I must have come across something that I needed to solve this mess, where else could the information be but in these files? What if I never get everything I need to do it? Ow, this is starting to hurt again. Maybe I should go have a beer instead? Nope, just coffee. I think I’ve got to cut down on the drinking. At least before ten in the morning.

The coffee shop was the same as always and I don’t think I’ll describe it again, although they did hire a young woman instead of the old guys that had been there before. One small good thing that did indeed brighten my morning somewhat. There wasn’t any Chicago Tribunes in the box this morning so I bought a Free Press and GR Press then sat in the back. After about an hour I left. Not too interesting. But I was feeling quite a bit better and had a whole day to use as I saw fit. The weather was still depressing and I thought for a moment about taking a drive but didn’t have the energy. Or desire. So I went back to my place to rest awhile and think. I had to remember that Robert and Daniel were just crooks out to steal.

I found it. No, not the solution to this whole affair but where they are storing the truck. It was the place by the airport and guess what it was listed under? Storage fees for Mitsubishi truck and cross referenced to the project number. That was easy. Another piece of the puzzle falls into place. Robert’s files didn’t have any mention of the truck, storage fees, or anything else about the airport company and I was beginning to think that his were being sanitized for the government report. It sure looked that way. I wonder what the deadline is for submitting our reports? That was another easy one and was contained in the letter that was sent from the defense department, the end of the month. Wow, that’s a short time, since when does the government work so fast? I was starting to think we could figure this out. Again.

This wasn’t good. There was another set of files that were hidden on the server that Jameson had downloaded for me and it was just what I did not want to see. If they were true the whole project just took a new, much more sinister turn. Have you figured it out? I’ll give you a clue. They are not just trying to steal the technology from the project. It’s much more than that and a lot meaner. Damn, now I’m getting pissed and it was just about sure that I was going to get dirty by association. I couldn’t even claim that I didn’t know what was going on even though that had been Robert’s plan. I’m not going to explain the whole thing right now since I might not be right and then I’ll look like an idiot. I know, I do already. How could they be so stupid to keep all of the plans in the computer? I think I’ve said that before, too but it does bear repeating. Have you learned anything from this? I think I have.

I might even know what to do. There was a plan that was starting to take shape in my mind and it wasn’t too complicated. Just stop them. Forget about the newspapers and reporters and all of that. They wouldn’t be able to confirm any of the information I could give them anyway. At least for a long time and they probably wouldn’t believe it either. After all, would you? That makes this harder but easier at the same time since it simplifies the decisions that have to be made. At least it pushes me down the track that appears to be harder than just handing over a disc to a reporter. That would have been easy. Oh, well. I wonder if they have more than one van? Could we just snatch it? That’s an idea that I’ll have to keep in mind as this thing unfolds. An option anyway.

As I get older I don’t think I can go like I used to. You remember those days? When you could go out all night and get up with a couple of hours of sleep and go to class or to work and function reasonably well? Well, those days are over for me anyway. I feel like crap. But maybe if I get out and do something I’ll be better. The airport is only a few miles away so maybe I’ll go take a look out there. I really don’t know what I’m looking for but it’s better than sitting here saying ow every few minutes. I’ll say it in the car.

I ran a Yahoo map to be sure where it is and got dressed kind of slowly. Yep, said ow a few times. Hey, I’m fifty after all. The weather was still lousy but I didn’t have to scrape the windows a second time since the temperature was finally getting above freezing and the snow that had fallen last night (or was it this morning) has started to melt. I didn’t remember it snowing on the way back from Muskegon but I slept most of the way anyway so maybe it did. I was getting tired of wearing all the clothing to keep me warm and my skin was taking on the look of curdled milk. I’m not very dark anyway (French and Irish are not the nationalities you think of when you think dark skinned) but this winter I was just too pale. Unhealthy pale, and I needed sun. I felt like a dying plant.

I needed music with energy to it for the drive to the airport so I put in some old Supertramp (I’ll bet you don’t even remember those guys) on tape and the damn player ate it. I hate tapes. The backup was a little Zep on the CD player and that did work and I got going a little. I needed sunglasses even with the overcast but the sun was trying to break through but not having much luck. My head hurts. I forgot to take aspirin before I left (yeah, the first ones were wearing off already) and hoped the headache wouldn’t get worse as I drove. I opened the sunroof to let in what little sun there was and turned up the heat to keep my feet warm as I drove. Can’t wait to get a convertible again. I used to have one, a ’71 Fiat (remember Fiats?) and I’d put the top down even in winter, it would go down early in the year and stayed down until winter. The one problem is that it had a plastic back window that folded in the middle when the top was down and one cold day I reached back to pull the top up and did it too fast; the plastic window split across the middle and from that point forward I had a duct tape stripe that crossed the middle of it. I told you duct tape had many uses.

I didn’t have to look at the map much since I’ve lived out in this end of town for more than twenty years and was pretty familiar with the streets and I did stop to get a road coffee pretty much sentencing myself to no nap that afternoon. Oh, well, I was even starting to like the taste of coffee. There was no traffic and the drive went quickly. I remembered the building quite well since I had driven past it almost everyday for ten years when I worked for that big company that cut me. I’m not bitter about that anymore; well, not much anyway. There was a chain-link fence that blocked the entrance to the parking lot so I drove by and looked at the building next door that was for sale, parked the car, and made like I was interested in that building. I can be sneaky and think on my feet sometimes. I hadn’t put on my boots and it was good that the snow had mostly melted since the shoes I was wearing were not made for hiking through the slush and slime.

I started around the back of the building on the drive that circled it looking at the target building as I walked. There were piles of non-descript industrial machinery rusting behind the building but the loading dock area was clear and a large roll up door was open so I could see inside. The inside of the building was mostly open with storage racks that held what looked like electrical equipment and cartons that I didn’t recognize. There was one other thing that I could see. A Mitsubishi panel truck just like the one in the picture from Daniel’s files. I couldn’t tell if it was the same one since there were thousands of that model on the road around GR but maybe it was? I kept walking around the back of the vacant building making like I was really interested in it in case there was anyone watching me and I had a thought. I have them sometimes, you know that. Well, the thought was to really act like an interested buyer and go to the neighbors and talk to them, maybe that would let me see if the truck was the one or not. A little dose of chutzpah goes a long way sometimes.

I walked across the grass verge that separated the lots trying not to get my feet too wet and having some success at it. But not completely, I knew I was going to have orange feet (from the dye in my shoes) when I got home and these shoes would be drying for a while. I stamped my feet on the pavement to remove some of the mud that stuck to them and act innocent like someone that WAS looking for a business location. As I walked across the lot toward the roll up door I noticed that there were holes in the pavement that were about the size of the auger we saw in the van picture and were spaced about two feet apart; six pairs that I could see. As I walked through the door into the lower light, I took off my sunglasses and saw the rear door was open on the van and someone was inside. I stopped and looked around for a minute like I was looking for someone to talk to and the man noticed me and climbed down form the back of the van and came over to me.

“Can I help you with something?”

“Yeah, I’m thinking about leasing the building next door to expand my packaging business and wondered if there was anyone that I could talk to about how you guys have done out here,” I was laying it on pretty thick. “I mean, like how reliable are the utilities and that kind of stuff.”

“The bosses are gone right now but I can’t remember the power going out or any water problems,” he was really trying to be helpful. “That building was a chemical distributor so I’d have that checked out. I remember them dumping some stuff out back and there hasn’t been anything growing out there since.”

We turned and looked at the back of the building and he pointed out the bare spot that I had noticed earlier when I was walking around the building. I wanted to get a better look at the inside of his building and had another flash. I turned and looked at the truck and inside the open back door.

“Mitsubishi?” I asked as I pointed at the truck.

“Yeah, we’ve got a couple of them. Pretty good trucks.”

I walked toward the back of the truck and then moved to the side so I could act like I was looking at the size of the truck and made a show of it.

“I’ve got to replace a couple of GMC’s that have been a pain in the ass. I can barely keep them running and they’re only a couple of years old.” I had seen what I wanted.

“Well, this one’s been a good one but it doesn’t have lots of miles on it so I don’t know how good they’ll be after they’re more used.”

I kept the show up and walked around the front of the truck so I could look under it but wanted to see more of the inside of the building. I kneeled to look under the truck and it was high enough to see the rest of the interior; there were work benches along one wall with lights over them but no one working at them right now. I decided to take a chance.

“What do you guys do here?” I tried to put on my most innocent face, I do have one I’ve been told.

“We build electronic equipment,” he started to look at me with some suspicion and I knew it was time to get out.

“Cool, well, maybe we’ll be neighbors if I can get those guys to come down on the lease price. One last thing, how long has the building been empty? I may be able to use that to beat them down on the price.”

I walked with a little more pace toward the door, the man followed.

“About a year, I think,” was all he said.

“Well, I gotta go, thanks” I said as I offered him my hand. He took it but looked at me strangely.

I walked out the door and across the lot trying to be nonchalant, looking around as I went back to the grass verge that I had crossed earlier and tried to pick a drier path this time. The man watched me as I went and was still in the doorway when I got back to my car. I was glad that I had parked around the front of the building far enough away so I was pretty sure he could not read my license plate as I drove away. At least I knew where the truck was. The holes in the parking lot raised some other questions that I couldn’t answer but they did tell me what the auger was for that was in the photos. Why were they drilling holes in the pavement? I hoped that the guy would just chalk the whole thing up to curiosity; I also hoped I was a good enough actor to have pulled it off. Don’t we all think we’re great actors? At least I do. Hollywood, here I come.

It was getting on to noon and I was starting to run out of steam again, my little acting job had taken a lot out of me and I was willing to attempt a short nap even with the caffeine that was keeping my head awake. It wasn’t doing much for my body, though, and I couldn’t wait to get home and rest a while. None of the guys would be up yet I was sure so I tabled the idea of calling any of them to tell them what I had found but made a note to do it later. That thought that had been percolating in my brain was starting to take shape and I was getting closer to knowing how they were dropping the buildings. The holes were the key. Did you figure that out yet? Well, they are the key to the how but not to the why. I think I’m even getting to the why of it, aren’t you? I may even take a shot at telling you, I’m getting less concerned about looking like an idiot. What do we do about the truck?

I remembered that I hadn’t called Gina back yet and wanted to make sure that I remembered to. I looked at my phone and remembered that she had worked ‘til close last night and wouldn’t be up. Maybe that would be better right now. I called her cell and got the voicemail that I expected, left her a message to call me later, and hung up the phone. Voicemail is a good thing. There are times you just don’t want to talk to someone; I think you should be able to choose if you talk or leave a message, hey, maybe that would be an idea? Sometimes, when I actually got connected, I didn’t know what to say. It surprised me. That’s just me. Is it time to talk about Gina yet? Nope, not ready.

I got back to my place, walked down the stairs, and unlocked my door noticing that there were almost no cars in the lot. I had to think back to my unemployment to remember that this was pretty normal during the day. There weren’t any Crown Vics out there if that is what you are thinking, just the neighbor, and I wondered why he was home. They probably thought the same thing about me. It was good to be home and I stripped as soon as I got in the door and headed for the couch. I had just settled in when I remembered that I wanted to check my e-mail to see if Karen had sent anything. I hadn’t heard from her in a few days and it was not that unusual but I always worried about her. Well, I worry about everyone if you really need to know and even though I’m better at uncertainty these days I still appreciate that there is some regularity to things. Like e-mails form Karen. And phone calls from Gina. And going out to the bars on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Maybe I am in a rut? I like my rut and I will fight to the death to keep living in it. Well, maybe not the death but I still like it.

No e-mail. I was a little disappointed but not surprised and that let me go back to my couch and settle in to try for a nap. Try is the operative word here, no such luck so I thought I’d get back to looking at the files from Robert’s computer and try to make more sense out of the situation. You remember the hidden file that was on our server? Well, that one was making me think that the sale of the technology was a scam, too. Why would they do that? I don’t know if it was a scam but there looked like there were two separate things going on here. I was sure of the sale but the second path was cloudy at best. There were some references to discussion that had taken place when Robert was in Virginia but the discussion notes weren’t to be found. At least not here. Where would they be? Would this be too sensitive to put on the computer? I would have to get to Jameson again to see if there were any new files that had been added after the meeting along with the new videos of last night’s test. No time like the present.

‘jameson, you out there?’

‘hi. dad.’

‘do me a favor. can you check to see if there were any files added to the virginia computer after last week? I need a video that may have been added today, too’

‘no problem, i’ve got them on a permanent clone so anything that gets added i have. I’ll dump that stuff to you later today. anything else?’

‘that’s it, thanks.’

‘later.’

Damn, it’s Wednesday. I forgot that today is a workout day and all I wanted to do was go back to the couch and rest but I knew that if I didn’t stay on my schedule, I would look like a small whale for summer. Can’t have that, I do have some vanity after all, and need to look as good as I can. Never want to be one of those guys that can’t run fifty yards when they are fifty. I am fifty, you know. I CAN run more than fifty yards; I can go three miles actually. Pretty good for an old guy, huh? It does take work, though and I needed to do it, it’s a pain in the ass while you are doing it but afterward I get at least a little satisfaction and I will admit I feel better, too. But I’m tired.

I won’t describe that to you, let’s just say there was a lot of pain, sweat and grunting involved and leave it at that. Kinda sounds like sex. Geez, I need to get my mind off sex. Hey, I thought exercise was supposed to do that for you. Didn’t work. I did have to take a shower afterward and that felt good and I think I looked better. Better than what I don’t know.

Hey, it’s Wednesday. I just said that didn’t I? This is the good part of Wednesday, the part that I get to go out to the bar and hang out. I told you it was good to have some sort of a routine, not a rut but a routine. I’ll have to make a few calls and see if any one is up for it. Maybe I should stay home and rest tonight? Ha, that’s funny; I remember once that I did that. Never again. I called Chad and Micah but got voicemails for both of them and left a message that I’d be out and about at the regular time and to call me if they were going out. Mike was working tonight so he’d have to be out but I think John was going to be home with Jamie so I didn’t call.

My phone started to ring its little doorbell sound and I walked over to pick it up. Mike.

“What’s happenin’, Mike?”

“Were you planning on coming downtown tonight?” Mike sounded a little strange.

“Yeah, regular time, why?” I was a little apprehensive.

“Don’t come to the Rose, I got fired today.”

“For what?” I didn’t know what else to say.

“You know what it always is, “Bad attitude.” He didn’t sound too upset but more tired.

“Bad attitude? If that was true they’d have to fire everybody including the owners,” I was starting to get pissed. “I’ll never walk into that place again, but you’ve got to stop getting fired, I don’t have any more bars to go to.”

“I know, god what a pain in the ass. I hate looking for work,” the note of tiredness was clearer now.

“Where are we drinking tonight?” I asked knowing that that would be the right thing to do.

“I guess it’s the Scoreboard, Chad and Micah will be there about six,” there wasn’t the enthusiasm in his voice that was normally there when we had plans to go out.

“I’ll be there, the night will be on me, though,” I could afford it since I had cut back on my expensive vices.

“We’ll see, I can still afford beer for another day or so, I’ll see you there.”

“Bye.”

Damn, I was just getting to be comfortable at the Rose, too. Just like my coffee shop, I hate change and I liked to be treated like a regular. Well, I guess the whole process will have to start over. Maybe he’ll get a job somewhere they know us already so we can short circuit the process a little and make it easier. I sure hope so. Geez…Mike’s out of work and all I can think about is how it is going to affect me. Some friend. Well, all we can do is support him when he gets a new one and take our “regular” money with us. Those idiots at the Rose don’t know what they are giving up. I’ll have to e-mail Kelly and see what she knows about this, I hope she wasn’t involved or I’ll lose a lot of respect for her. No, she wouldn’t be, I know that. Don’t have to write her. I’ll wait until I see her later in the week and we’ll talk then. Changes.

Well, this kind of puts a damper on things, huh? One thing that I didn’t mention is that Mike did say is that he was going over to talk to a friend of ours that ran another place in town to see if he had anything for him temporarily. It will probably work out, not like me, when I was out of work it took a couple of years to find work. No one wants to hire an over educated, over experienced fifty year old. That’s just how it is. They want a thirty year old with twenty-five years of experience that they can pay ten thousand dollars a year. Sick, I know. Oh, well, I’m working now so I need to put that behind me. But not too far.

I’m almost getting to the point of just telling you what is going on the way that I see it. Almost, not quite. You guys need to do some work here, too. Think about it for a while and then we’ll talk.

It is Wednesday after all, and I need to get ready to go out and have some fun. Here’s a little hint: I think someone is going to get framed for something that is going on here, some subterfuge is happening or is one of the end results that is being planned. Go back a couple of pages and take a look and I think you may be able to figure it out. I hope so; I wouldn’t want to think that I’m the only one that knows what is going on. It WOULD be the first time that has ever happened. No more clues for now, you’ll just have to wait like I am.

It was still a little early to go out so I thought I’d get a little more work done reading the files from Robert’s computer and take a look to see if there was anything in my e-mail from anyone. I was kind of looking for one from Karen but I thought I would have heard from Kelly or Melissa. Nothing from either of them but I had one from Jameson that was both text and video so I had hope that there was something from Robert’s trip to Virginia. I opened the video file first and it was kind of neat to see the collapse of last nights test building from another angle. Hey, there we are! The camera had an angle on the lens that was wide enough to cover the area where we had hidden the motor home and I could see it because I knew we were there. I hope they don’t look too closely, I could see some reflections from the beer cans that John and Micah were holding but they were just twinkles that shouldn’t raise any suspicions. At least I hope not.

I ran the video a couple of times but it was different without sound. More sinister in some way, like there was danger there that the sound had somehow reduced. I’ll have to talk to they guys about that. I need to fix the sound in my head, don’t know why but it may be important. Cripes, I don’t know if any of this is important, it’s all just assumptions anyway. What if all of this is like the episode of the old TV series Dallas where a whole season was explained away by being a dream, could this be the dream that proves that I’m crazy? That would just be great, none of you would ever respect me again, you do respect me now don’t you? Pretty needy, I know. Well, do you?

Enough of that. I started to look at the latest files from Robert’s computer and didn’t find anything that looked like notes from any meetings that he had attended. Maybe they would be in e-mails? Robert was too big of a big shot to be doing his own notes anyway but who would he trust to do them for him? The only person I could think of was Marilyn but I didn’t have any of her files and hadn’t accessed her computer. That was something I’d have to ask Jameson to do but how far afield do I have to keep going to get the information that I needed? Wasn’t what I had enough? No, not really when you think of it. I needed dates of when all of the nefarious (cool word, huh?) actions were going to take place. It wouldn’t really take any or much more work to get those files so I probably will. I just don’t want to get so overwhelmed in the details to stop being able to see the big picture here. The dates would probably be enough if I could find them before the whole plan took place. Man, too much thinking for a hangover day. I needed to rest my brain so I stopped, shut off the computer, and turned on the radio. I am trying to wean myself from the TV since it is pretty difficult to multitask while you are watching TV. I love TV but it is bad to get too wrapped up in it. At least for me.

I should be outside in the nice weather anyway, maybe wash my car before I go out. The day had turned into one that was just teasing us with the promise of spring; blue skies and spring birds were calling to me to get outside so I did. Have you ever washed your car? If you have, you know the drill and I won’t bore you with the details. I did find that the winter had been harder on the Mazda than I thought and the rust around the windshield had started to make leaks. When I finished and got back in the car there was water all over the console and the headliner was wet. Damn, I still like that car, too. I wonder if it can be fixed. I told you I like to drive the old ones but sometimes I keep them just one year too long. It still runs SO good, though. Well, I wanted a Miata anyway. Maybe I should start looking for one. I’ll probably have plenty of time to do that if this whole thing turns out like I think it will. I hope not, I hate looking for work as much as Mike does.

It felt good to get moving and I had much more energy when I got back. Even though the car was leaking. It was getting on toward the time to go out so I took another shower and changed into my going out clothes. They’re the same as all of my other clothes and usually include jeans and a sweater of some sort in the winter and whenever it is below seventy degrees. I have a question for you. How old are you when you stop wearing jeans? I couldn’t envision any time when they wouldn’t be part of my wardrobe but are they appropriate say when I’m sixty or seventy? Do I need to even worry about that? I don’t know where that came from but I guess it just goes with the rest of the things you think about when you start to get older. I am fifty you know. At least I never wear leather. Pants, that is. I do have a leather jacket that saved my skin when I fell off my motorcycle but that’s about it. No motorcycle, though.

 I was going out the door and thought since we were going to the Scoreboard I’d give Gina a call and see if she was working. Nope, she doesn’t work Wednesday. I guess we’ll have to just see Meredith. Not a bad person to see when you are out having a few beers but she’s no Gina. I guess I’m a little prejudiced since Gina and I are friends and hang out together occasionally. It was good to have clean windows in the car and I opened the sunroof even though it was only about forty. The sunshine made it seem warmer and I was ready for a fun night. But not too fun because Mike was out of work and I needed to get up and go to work tomorrow. I do miss being unemployed sometimes, I never really stayed out that late when I was but it was nice to have the option to stay out if a miracle happened and I met someone. How was that going to happen if all that I do is go out and drink with the guys? Don’t know. Getting dates was not that burning of a desire anyway. I have been hurt by every woman that I have ever dated so why would I want to do that again? I guess hope springs eternal, especially in spring. Oh, I know that was bad but you know what I mean. I am an optimist after all. Well, most of the time.

 There wasn’t much traffic on the e-way and I could make my normal eighty plus on the way over to the north end. I have a question. Why are the north and south called ends and the west and east called sides? It just came to me, you know a little of how my brain works by now, that kind of stuff just pops in sometimes. At least that’s what it is here in GR; it’s always the west side or the south end but never the opposite. Doesn’t mean anything really but I was just wondering. Do you know?

 Chad’s truck was in the lot when I pulled up but I didn’t see Mike’s Jeep or Micah’s truck but they didn’t live just around the block like Chad so I didn’t think anything of it. There were only a couple of cars in the lot and it looked like a reasonably normal night, at least for this time of the day. I walked in the front door into the only room of the bar; long and slim that had the bar on one side and a single row of booths on the other side. What could be called the back room held the pool table and jukebox along with the big screen TV that we used to watch the races sometimes. I was right; there were only two people besides Chad it the place and he looked like he was on his first Stroh’s. Meredith was leaning on the bar in front of him talking and looked over at me when I walked up and sat down next to Chad.

 “Hi Meredith, Stroh’s, please, what’s happening Chad?” still the same greeting.

 “Not much, you talk to Mike today?”

 “Yeah, he called me a little while ago. I just can’t believe it, another job gone.”

 “Well, he kind of knew it was coming. We talked about it last week and he said that they were just looking for an excuse to make him go away.”

 “You know I’ll never set foot in there again, but I AM running out of bars in GR.” I watched Meredith come back to the bar with my beer.

 “Thank you, Meredith,” I said as she put the beer on the bar in front of me and turned to take care of one of the other two customers.

 I wanted to tell Chad about the things I had found in the files but only wanted to do it once so I decided to wait until Mike and Micah got here. We sat and rehashed the night and what each of us had done for the day. Nothing much of consequence, just the regular what time did you get up, what did you do, and how do you feel today. Pretty standard stuff for the day after an outing. It was the fun part anyway. Almost as fun as the activity and it seems to me that the fun always got better with the retelling. I’m not saying that we don’t have lots of fun while we are doing these things but you know how it is with fish tales? Same thing. That beer went down way too easily, Meredith brought me another one and I had to remember that I have to work tomorrow and I don’t want to be hungover. At least not too hungover. It is Wednesday after all. I DID accomplish great things today, though.

 Chad and Meredith were talking about subjects that didn’t include me and I was content to just zone out and stare at the Keno machine and the small TV that hung over the bar. It was nice to not think for a minute, yeah, I know, you think I do that all the time but I don’t. It had been about forty five minutes and I was starting to think that Mike and Micah were not going to show up so I got out my phone and dialed Mike. No voicemail this time.

 “Hello, Jake,” Mike answered

 “When are you gonna be here,” I asked straight off.

 “In about three seconds,” the phone started to echo and I turned around to see Mike coming in the door.

 “Hello, Chad,” Mike said with his normal smirk on his face.

 “Mikey, you find a new job yet?”

 “Funny you should ask. I talked to Tony over at the Boss and he said I can start tomorrow.”

 I just looked at him and wondered how he kept doing that. As I told you before, I took almost two years to find a job after I was axed and Mike was not much younger than I was. I guess the bar business is different. What the hell good were the two bachelor’s degrees and the master’s degree? I think they made me more unemployable not less. Before I got my current job, I had started to take my masters degree off my resume just to get through the first hoop of the initial interview. I know, it’s sick, but that is life as I see it. And I can still see quite well, even for an old guy. I was happy for him though, one less person to worry about.

 “Oh, and Tony said that he will give all of the regulars a twenty five percent discount off their tab,” I looked at him and smiled.

 “Better than sharp stick in the eye,” I said but meant to say congratulations.

 Micah walked in and we went through the whole process again, starting with the greetings and the new job, then moved to one of the empty booths so we could all talk and for a little privacy even though there was no one in the place. It was still early but I was on my third beer already and I knew I’d have to slow down or cut the night short. Probably cut the night short since we only had a few things to talk about and after all, we had just hung out for hours the night before. It was weird to have friends.

 I went over what I’d found out that morning and filled them in on the trip out to the airport and that I had found the truck. They were most curious about he holes in the parking lot and asked if I thought there was a connection to the electrodes that had been mentioned in the first files from the Virginia collapse. I hadn’t thought about it and it came to me that four heads were better than one. I thought the most important part was that there was a two tiered something going on, misdirection. Look, I’m usually sure enough about my abilities, some people say too sure, and it is hard for me to take advice from anyone. Am I a little conceited about that? Yep. Doesn’t being first in your class earn you some of that? I know, sometimes book smarts and common sense are mutually exclusive but I hope not in my case. How do you know?

 We kept up the discussion for a couple more beers but it was getting late and I DID have to get up in the morning. Or did I? I had enough vacation time left to take the rest of the week off and still have some in reserve but tomorrow was Thursday and it was only two more work days until the weekend. I wanted to make sure I had enough days left to take the time off for Mike’s Fourth of July party. I’ll tell you about that one later, let’s just say that it usually goes about five or six days. Too much fun.

The drive home from the bar was uneventful but here was an accident that reminded me of a Donald Fagen song that had the line “hey there’s a wreck by the side of the road, lots of blood and broken glass” and the traffic was backed up a while so I just sat there and waited while they cleared the traffic lanes. I don’t understand how people can get into a wreck on a straight stretch of road; it would seem you’d have to try pretty hard to do that; especially when there is no snow, rain, or other problem. Oh, well. I got through, drove a little slower (not much) and got home a little after ten. I had a little burst of ambition that I did my best to defeat with a couple of gin and tonics and didn’t look at any of the files. After all, I could look at them at work in the morning if I wanted to since they were downloaded to my Yahoo account. Hey, I can rationalize with the best of them. I was tired anyway. Bedtime.

**Chapter 20**

She was Karen again and I leaned over her and smiled. The wound in her shoulder had stopped bleeding and she looked up at me, raised her good hand to shade her face and smiled back at me. The sun had brightened again and it was getting to be too hot to lie out in the open. The figures in the rock above us had started to move closer and I had to decide to just let them. There was nothing much I could do anyway, no weapons were near us and I wouldn’t leave her to save myself. Probably couldn’t anyway, I was still weak from the heat and walking and there was a new soreness that was creeping into my shoulder making it so stiff I couldn’t really move it without a lot of extra effort. There was hope again, though, the archers that had been following were not to be seen and all of the actions of the rock figures were for our protection. But why? Who were they? They were almost down to the flats where our little depression sat and I still could not make out their faces but for some reason it didn’t concern me. Am I getting delirious? Right now, taking care of Karen was the only thing in my mind and I just watched as they closed on our position, stood above us, and looked down. The sun was behind them and their faces were black in the shadows. I waited for them to say or do something. Then that damn gong again.

I think the new mattress was helping me sleep and dream. Or the new mattress pad. One of those new “memory foam” things that are quite soft and feel neat to lie on. It was better than a thirty year old mattress anyway. You don’t care about this do you? Sorry.

I felt better that I was dreaming again but I was still amazingly confused about what the whole thing meant. I hold out hope that it DOES mean something whether or not it is connected with this little adventure that I’m on. Or should I say we’re on? Misery loves company and you’re not getting off so easily. I need a coffee maker that has a timer. That would be cool. I got up and felt great even anticipating going to work and getting some stuff done. I hope it doesn’t look like I haven’t been doing my job, I just haven’t been telling you about work since you work ,too and the last thing you want to hear is about someone else’s job. It’s certainly not an adventure and there are times that I’m not even interested in it. If anything comes up that you night find interesting, I’ll be certain to tell you and you can judge whether it’s interesting or not.

I had been thinking about the project while other things were going on and one thing that I decided was that I had to IM Jameson and get a clone of Marilyn’s computer. There may be some correspondence that she had a hand in that would help me figure out what was going on. And really, I just wanted to know what the heck she did and maybe find something that I could use as an excuse to cut her. I’m not vindictive, well, not much anyway. You know there are people that just needed to understand that there are consequences to being a nasty person. Well, maybe she wasn’t one, I didn’t really know her and what she was like away from work and maybe I was jumping to conclusions. You know people like that, I’m sure and I know you’ve entertained ways to have them get what’s coming to them. That’s all this is, I’m not really a bad guy, am I? I fired up my computer and waited for it to run through the start up routine, I know, I need a faster one but it still works. Jameson built it for me out of spare parts when my laptop screen died and it was in for repairs and I guess it just wasn’t much of a priority. The IM window was already open and I think Jameson was waiting for me this time.

‘hey,”

“hey dad, the spyware is gone. i couldn’t get any farther back on where it was coming from. tried a few things but it didn’t work. their guys are pretty good.”

“that’s okay, i need you to clone one last one for me. mblock, same drill, send it to my e-mail.”

“okay, have a few more files that were hidden that i’m sending along with it.”

“thanks, see you later.”

‘later.”

I was running a little late since I had been dawdling around my place trying to decide if I did want a vacation day or not. If I did it wouldn’t make any sense to just take today and come in on a Friday. I looked at my schedule and the decision was made for me. Daniel had scheduled a meeting for ten (three hours) and all of the partners that were in town were asked to be there. Couldn’t miss this one so I got a move on and went out the door as fast as I could. Walking out to the car, I looked around to see if there were any unusual cars there (how long will this paranoia go on?) got in my car and picked some Joe for the ride in; the weather had turned warm enough that there was no ice or snow to be scraped. About time. What the heck was the meeting about? We’ve never had a three hour meeting except when I started at the firm and the title of the meeting notice had been blank. Why do they do that? All it does is fuel speculation and gets people to waste time thinking and talking about it. Well, I guess that is what makes the office go ‘round, huh? I used to love that stuff when I was working for the big company that I won’t name and I guess it helps to make life interesting. Work life can get boring, after all.

Kate was sitting in my office when I walked in and I think she was reading my mind (as she often did) because I was going to call her in to see what she knew about what was going on. That’s what I get for taking a day off in the middle of the week. The look on her face said she was just as confused as I was.

“Good morning, Kate,” I said as I took off my coat and dropped it with my briefcase on the floor; Kate was in the chair that I normally used to store them.

“Morning, Jake. Did you see the meeting at ten? Robert was out here personally to make sure you were going to be here. What the hell is going on?” She really looked concerned this time.

“I have no clue. I see the rest of the partners were invited. How many of them are here?”

“None as far as I can see. He’s got it set for the conference room and I think it’s a teleconference; a new computer guy was in getting it set up from the time I got here. Should I be worried?”

“Hell, I don’t know, Kate. I know I am, I don’t want to be looking for work again right now. I was just getting comfortable here.” I wasn’t any comfort to her.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait until the meeting is over. Robert didn’t say anything about the information for you to bring so you might want to call Marilyn, no I’ll do it for you. Should have thought about that. Sorry, Jake.”

She was getting more upset by the moment and I was too slow in trying to make her feel better. She got up and went back to her office and the only thing I could think about was if they had discovered that I had been spying. There wasn’t enough time to fabricate some answers so I thought I’d just wing it and try to get through with the smallest amount of damage possible. Crap, I just wasn’t ready for this. Kate called to tell me that Marilyn couldn’t or wouldn’t give her any details and said she was sorry. Why should she be sorry? It was getting toward the meeting time and I needed a cup of coffee to take with me. Kate read my mind and brought in my big cup that I got from a friend for taking care of her cats while she was in the Bahamas. If you must know the friend was Karen. Doesn’t have anything to do with this does it? I need to focus.

I took my cup and planner and headed to the back of the suite where the conference room was and watched a few of the faces as I passed by. Nothing unusual there but a few of the faces showed some concern that I wasn’t sure was normal or not. It was not something that I would have noticed on a normal day anyway and it came to me that it would have been nice to have time to go back and talk to my engineers before the meeting. One of them might have picked on something but I wasn’t sure that they would share it with me anyway, I had only been the boss for a week and I didn’t think they trusted me enough yet. Can’t change that now. Just have to hope that I’m quick enough on my feet to take anything that comes and deal with it. Why do I feel like this is an execution?

The door to the conference room was ajar and Robert sat at his normal place at the head of the table. He was looking at some papers that sat in front of him and didn’t notice me at first but I bumped into a chair and it brought him out of his concentration.

“Jake, great to see you,” he said as he stood and shook my hand.

“Robert, it has been awhile, anything new?” Geez, that was inane.

“Well, Jake, that’s why we’re here. Do you know how to work this thing?” he pointed at the teleconference equipment.

“Yeah, I can get it going,” and I dialed up the location numbers that Marilyn had printed up on the agenda cover. Everyone connected and we got started.

“This won’t take three hours in case you are interested,” Robert started with a smile. I couldn’t remember him being so relaxed. “Let’s get right to it. I have decided to sell my share of the company to the rest of the partners and get out of the day-to-day operations. This will be effective immediately and I would like to propose Jake Devereaux as the new managing partner of Lanning and Devereaux.”

He looked at me with another smile and I hope I didn’t hesitate too long and make myself look like an idiot. I think I did, though.

“Well, what do you think, Jake?” I was still staring at him.

“I don’t know what to think,” I said honestly. “When did you make this decision?” I looked straight at Robert.

“Over the last day or so and I have already gotten the approval of the rest of the directors so all you have to do is say yes,” I was still stunned.

“Of course, Robert. I’d love the opportunity to do more for the firm and repay you and the rest of the directors for the faith that you’ve shown in me over the last year. I don’t know what else to say right now.” I really didn’t, I was that surprised.

“Well, then, I’m hoping you can jump in and get ready quickly. I will be leaving Friday and you will be taking over full time on Monday. Marilyn has a group of files for you to study and if you have questions, I’ll be available for the next two days and the rest of the directors will be happy to provide whatever assistance you need.” He was still looking at me. “Marilyn has taken this opportunity to retire from the firm to pursue other interests and I assume you’ll want to promote Kate to her position?”

“I’ll discuss it with her when I get back to my office,” I looked at the video screens and the other directors looked pleased, too.

We did the usual round of congratulations and some small talk and Robert got up and the meeting ended. I shut off the teleconference equipment and was thankful for the physical work to do so I could let these events soak in. I was a little dizzy and had to think for a minute to figure out what to do even though it was just to go back to my office. So that’s what I did. When I got back there I just sat for a few minutes wondering when Kate would come in and hoping she would wait a little while. No such luck.

“Okay, Jake, what’s the deal?” She looked kind of scared.

I was still a little stunned and just looked at her for a second gathering my thoughts.

“Bad news,” I really thought it was. “They just promoted me to managing partner.”

I waited for her reaction and it wasn’t what I expected.

“Hah, hah, hah, right, Jake and I’m going to take over Marilyn’s job at twice my salary.”

I looked at her trying to keep a straight face and hers’ changed as she realized I wasn’t kidding. She sat down in my side chair and looked at the floor but when she looked up she was smiling.

“Am I getting Marilyn’s job?”

“I’m thinking about it, of course you’ll get the job if you want it. Do you?”

“Let’s see, twice as much money and less work, hmmmm, well, let me think about it.”

We went on like that for a while trying hard to keep from laughing at what appeared to be our good fortune. It hit me that it would be easier for them to hold me responsible for the transgressions of the firm but I wasn’t going to let that in my mind for too long. Managing partner. The Miata was mine, maybe even a new one this time.

I got up and closed the door so we could sit and talk for a while. It was still too strange that they would promote me over some of the others that had been with the firm since its inception but what if no one else wanted it? Was that why they didn’t say anything until today? Was I their last choice? I’ve had women do that to me before but it had never happened in my work life. I was better at work than the rest of life anyway. It’s a lot easier don’t you think? Kate wanted some time to think about what the whole thing meant and I wanted to give her the rest of the day off to do it but she wasn’t having any of it. I think she does deserve that Ferrari. I thought about the request that I’d made to Jameson to clone Marilyn’s computer and now it had to happen today. After Kate left, the urgency to get to Jameson came back and I IM’d him.

‘jameson, you out there?’

‘hi dad, i do have a job, you know. Lol.

‘mblock is on right now, can you get to it?’

‘already started. she is deleting the files as she goes but doesn’t know that delete doesn’t mean gone.’

‘how long?’

‘another half hour, no more.’

‘cool, thanks.’

‘bye.’

Marilyn knocked on the door and didn’t wait for my okay to come in and I was relieved that I had already finished talking to Jameson and had let the computer go over to screen saver. She had a large stack of hard copy files that she dropped on my desk along with some disks that were not labeled and she didn’t say a word to me about what was on them. What a bitch. Sorry about that but she is. At least one of my problems had been solved; I wouldn’t have to figure out how to fire her. Probably wouldn’t have been able to anyway, since she worked for Robert and I couldn’t remember anyone ever challenging anything that she did. Good riddance.

It hit me then that I’d have to hire someone to do my job. I know you don’t think I do too much around here but there are quite a few things that I haven’t told you about. You’d get bored if I did I’m sure. Or maybe I should promote someone from within the company. You don’t want to hear about his stuff, do you? I guess I’ll only tell you about things that are related to the mystery we’ve got going on from now on. It might be a little slower coming now since I have to work for a living again. Damn. I stared at the stack of files that Marilyn had left and thought I’d better get to it. After coffee, that is.

The rest of the morning was taken up with people coming to my office to offer their congratulations and I will have to admit that I didn’t recognize some of them but Kate helped by giving me some clues to where they worked in the firm and who they were. Hey, I get Robert’s office. Much nicer than mine and a window that looked over the parking lot. I hope I don’t fall into the trap of watching the people that work for me come and go. I’ve always hated that when people did it to me. My mind was still racing and the coffee wasn’t helping, maybe some lunch and a couple of beers would help calm me. I called Bill to see what he was doing for lunch and got a voicemail that said he was on vacation for the week and to leave a message, which I didn’t, I wanted to tell him in person.

An IM came in from Jameson that said simply ‘done’ and I wanted to take a look at the files but I was hungry and wanted to get going so I asked Kate if she wanted to go. She was on the phone and had a stack of files on her desk that were even bigger than the one that Marilyn had left on mine and she waved me off. I decided to stay in and look at the files since I really do hate to eat alone and I could cope with the caffeine overload with a pizza from the restaurant next door. I had a brainstorm (no they don’t hurt) and ordered ten pizzas for the whole office and anyone that wanted some. I can think about others sometimes. It was neat to say that I could afford it, too, but we hadn’t talked about money; I wonder if I’m getting a raise from the promotion? You’d think I would, wouldn’t you? I hope so.

The files from Marilyn’s computer were almost a complete bust in regards to the mystery but it was kind of neat in a voyeuristic kind of way to see how they interacted and to read some of Robert’s mail. I know you like to do that stuff too. Were they having an affair? It sure looks that way by the tone of some of the notes but maybe it’s just a close working relationship like mine and Kate’s? The summary of the project was there, though, and I knew it to be a fake since they stated that the equipment from the truck had been destroyed on Monday. Funny since I had seen it intact on Wednesday. This is neat; they are trying to recover some cost overruns for equipment that they never purchased. Milk the cow while you can, I guess. Am I supposed to run the company honestly? The thought popped into my head that the company was profitable from cheating the government on every project, could it be doing it honestly? I got the flash that I didn’t think they cared anymore. This was going to take some thought, but pizza first.

That was better, I had fuel to get my mind working again and let the mystery stuff run in the background while I took care of the stacks of work that seemed to be multiplying as I worked my way through them. One thing I was going to do right away was to appoint an engineering manager and I thought that Susan would be the one for the job. I’ll talk to her later today or tomorrow and get that done. One less thing to think about. The balance sheets and income statements started to run together and I had used up the whole afternoon without noticing it. It was about five and Kate was still there so I went out to her office and told her to go home and not come in until she felt like it in the morning because that was what I was going to do. Man, this IS going to be too much work. Bear with me for a while as I get this sorted out and get back to the mystery, I’m still thinking about it, aren’t you?

I was grinning on the way home and thought about stopping at the Mazda dealer to look at a new car and it hit me that I could probably afford whatever car I wanted. Maybe even a BMW if I chose one. That was a neat thought that fit well with the music that I chose for the ride home; Zep’s “Houses of the Holy”, “Dancing Days in particular. I was pretty geeked but it was tempered by the thoughts that this whole promotion may be the result of the rats abandoning the ship as it sinks. Maybe I should hold off on the new car. Why can’t I just enjoy good fortune for once? I couldn’t wait to tell the guys.

With the events of the day I got the feeling that Robert and the rest of the participants in the conspiracy were not suspicious of me at all and that made me at least a little relieved. Unless they were ten moves ahead of me and just keeping me off balance until they could finish the scam. I didn’t want to believe that since we had gotten this far and they had not discovered my activities. But I am an amateur in this intrigue business and sometimes my confidence in my abilities is not grounded in reality, don’t we all think we’re smarter than we are at times? With Robert leaving there is one thing that is certain, things were happening quickly now and I would have to get moving on figuring out what was going on and building my response before it was going to be moot. Moot, that’s a great word, too.

Should I call a “board meeting” for tonight? Was I relying on the guys too much? Maybe I should keep them out of this for the time being with the new developments. I could tell them about the promotion, though, since that didn’t have anything to do with the mystery, at least that was what I wanted the firm to think. The best way to do that was to use the cell phone if they were still listening (or if they ever were) so I dialed my calling tree and let everyone that cared know what had happened. The response was almost all the same: that I was going to have to do some work now. Do I have a reputation as being a slacker? I’ll have to think about that, I’m not the hardest worker in the world (I’ve already told you that) but I do have my moments. Maybe I should stop telling everyone about my job and what I do? I surely didn’t want to do what most people do, that is exaggerate how hard they work. I’ve been doing this long enough to know better. Maybe a little façade would be a good thing to have, though.

After the phone calls were made it was time to get back to seeing if I could make sense of the most recent files and tie them into the bigger picture. I could see that one of the keys was to find out who the people were that Robert and Daniel were trying to sell the project to. I had hoped that there was going to be one letter that explained it all but no such luck. It was looking like a night long slog through a few gigs of files so I settled in with a beer and a cold sandwich of some pork ribs that I had made earlier and got started. It felt good to stay in and just take it easy (I know, I’m good at taking it easy) and the files went by faster than I expected since most of them were just daily b.s. that didn’t relate to anything I was interested in. I made a note to be careful tomorrow when I talked to Robert and Marilyn and not clue them in that I had these files; there was information here that I wouldn’t have if Jameson hadn’t cloned them for me. One thing that hadn’t been mentioned was what Daniel’s role was going to be. Damn, I’ll bet his transfer was part of the sinking ship scenario and he was the rat that had deserted first.

There were a few companies that we had corresponded with over the last couple of months that I hadn’t heard of and it immediately made me think of just how much I didn’t know about our firm and it appeared that Robert didn’t care or he would have made more time for the hand off. When I thought about it, the files that I had been given by Marilyn earlier looked more and more like busy work to keep me occupied with nothing while they disappeared. Good, that just confirms that they are underestimating me and gives me much more latitude to operate. It was going to feel good to take these guys down, and now it was getting to be a little personal but I had to make sure that I didn’t underestimate those guys, too. They didn’t get to where they are without some talent but as time goes on I am getting to think that we can match them. I sure hope so, anyway. The consequences of failure were getting clearer as we get deeper in this. Is there a way that I can hide what we are doing? Even after we bring them down? That would add a layer of complexity that I didn’t know if I could handle but I had to think about it. After all, something this big can’t be run just by two guys. What happens when I piss off the other people involved? Can I just stay home and hide?

I checked out the companies that were listed in the files and most of them looked legit except one that didn’t have a website or any listing on the web that I could find. That was pretty unusual these days but if it was a bogus firm wouldn’t they do their homework and fake it a little better? I would, that’s for sure but maybe they were just out of business. But, how can that be when the letter to them is dated just last week. The letter looked innocuous but then I started to think about codes that it might be in and what it said may not be what it really said. Hide in plain sight is the term, I think. Aren’t there better ways to communicate in these days of encryption that is available to anyone who wants it? But, encryption would raise a flag of its own and bring some attention to snoops like me. You remember how it was when you were a kid; if something was forbidden or hidden it just made it more attention getting or attractive. Well, maybe that’s what’s happening here, encryption would make me (or anyone) take a harder look at the encrypted files and make me want to see what was in them. But what could the code be? I’ll bet there has to be a key in Marilyn’s files somewhere. Maybe that’s why she was erasing them?

I started to wonder if there was a pre-coding version of the letter that was still available somewhere in this mess. It wouldn’t hurt to look but what to look for? It was worth a little time to check even though the chances of my being right on this guess were small at best. The rest of the files had not shown me anything, though so to keep this mess moving forward maybe I had to just make some assumptions and test them. I worked back to the disc manager to find out when the file had been modified last and it was just Tuesday afternoon so the idea that the company was out of business was not a good one. I wonder if Jameson could get me a keystroke record of what she had done that day? That may be able to tell me what program had been used to produce the letter and get me a true e-mail address where it had been sent. I’ll bet he already thought of it and started to look for the record. Got it! Guess what file? Jameson’s magic. Geez, that kid has a bigger ego than I have. Which is not easy.

I had to take a break, though. My glasses had started to hurt my nose and I was sore from sitting for such a long time. I AM fifty after all. The sun had gone down and I walked out my slider to take a look at the really cool pink and blue streaks that remained in the western sky. It was getting cold again and it was not that good of an idea to be standing out on my patio in shorts, well, boxer shorts anyway. The neighbors probably wouldn’t appreciate seeing these fifty year old legs even though they are good ones. I work out, remember? The air had given me the jolt that I needed and allowed my eyes to get back a little of their long-range focus that goes away when you use the computer too much. The grass was still matted and brown but there was just that slight hint of the smell of spring that came in whiffs that intercut with the winter smell. Hope was rising that winter was finally over. I can hope, can’t I?

Jameson’s file WAS magic, at least to me. It pointed me toward the file that was used for encoding the letter but I couldn’t find a pre-code version anywhere in the directory but that shouldn’t surprise anyone. You’d want it to convert the letter without leaving the uncoded version for prying eyes to see, at least that’s what I would want if I was doing it. Can it be run backwards? The thought came to my head that if you can code you should be able to decode but I didn’t know enough about the program to understand if it would be possible or not. If the uncoded version was ever saved there should be a shadow of it in the files somewhere. This is one thing that everyone should remember; deleting something from your computer doesn’t mean that it is gone. The file is still there; the computer just won’t look for it anymore and if you get to it before the program overwrites the section where it is stored the original will be intact. The only way to ensure that your data is not readable is to take the hard drive out and smash it with a hammer. Trust me.

The letter looked like Chinese when I ran it back through the coding program. Well, that didn’t work. What next? I just sat there and stared for a few moments thinking about my rudimentary computer skills and kicked myself for the opportunities that I have wasted to upgrade them. Damn. I didn’t want to lean on Jameson more but I didn’t know what else to do. I vaguely remembered the technique that I had used in a crash of my home computer a few years earlier and got up to dig through the computer manuals that were stored in a huge pile in my closet and found the recovery program that I had used to repair it. Cool. I ran it and found there were two different versions of the letter and opened the one with the latest date, Tuesday afternoon, and just sat there for a minute while the meaning of it sunk in. I had them. I think so, anyway. The letter was full of the details of the sale of the project. This path was clear. There is still one more to figure out. Fifty million dollars! How can I get my cut? Just kidding, but it would be neat wouldn’t it?

The letter still didn’t answer who the buyers were. I know, we have the name of the company (if it is a real company) but there is nothing behind it. Are there incorporation papers filed somewhere? This is boring, I know, but did you think that this kind of detective work is all glamour? I’d like to have a car chase or two that I could tell you about or even a shootout with the bad guys but it just doesn’t happen. At least in this life. Wow, I guess you’re going to stop reading now aren’t you? Damn, well, I’m sorry but that’s just how it is. It’s still kind of exciting anyway, isn’t it? It is to me but you should have seen my life before this, can you say boring?

What are these other files? I was looking through the supposedly erased files and found a bunch more that I hadn’t seen before and felt a little stupid for just focusing on the one letter. There were at least twenty others in various stages of completion that told of what I thought was the other path they were taking. Yep, this confirms it. But now the how of what they were doing started to become the most important thing to me. Well, I think this confirms the other path but as I said before, I’m not going to say anything right now just in case I’m wrong. You know I hate to be wrong and especially when so many other people would know about it. Well, the five of you anyway. But that’s enough.

The idea of putting a package together that would explain the whole thing started to make even more sense so I started a new folder on my computer that I could copy the files to, from the first Virginia file through these latest letters. I would need the originals as backup so I tied them together with links that would take us back to them if we needed to. I told you I wasn’t bad on the computer. As I worked I found what looked like the same thing I was doing in a compilation file that was on Marilyn’s computer containing videos but with another letter that looked like it was to be sent to the NSA. It was dated next week, though, and has the letterhead of the company that they were trying to sell the project to. Why would that be? I had to stop and think for a while about that one and it didn’t come so I put the whole thing aside and got up to walk around again. I do that a lot. The urgency was starting to get to me; I knew that if this letter was true, I only had until next week to figure this out. But did I really have to? Couldn’t I just give the raw data to the feds and let them take care of this? Oh, right, it’s the feds we’re talking about. They don’t know how to move very fast and I’d probably be the one left holding the bag. That’s just how my life has worked until now. No need to tempt fate.

I need a beer, or four. Yeah, we do drink a lot. You know that. Don’t be so shocked. Geez. I called Gina again to see if she was up to anything and again got her voicemail. Okay, she has to be screening me for some reason. What did I do now? Left a message and thought of who else may be available to go out for a while and didn’t find anybody so I got dressed, locked the door, and got in the car to just drive and see where I ended up. There are no bars out where I live, though so any trip was going to take me into downtown GR and I finally thought of someone to call. Yeah, I know, I keep telling you I’m okay with being alone but then I have to keep trying to find someone to hang out with? It IS a little sad when you see the old guys in the bars sitting and drinking alone and I don’t want t be one of those guys. Kristin actually answered her phone (most youngsters these days don’t for some reason) and she sounded like she was glad to hear from me so I told her I’d meet up with her at O’toole’s where she was hanging out with her sister.

Have I told you about Kristin and Karrie yet? I may have earlier but even if I have I’ll bet you’ve forgotten so I’ll repeat it. They are twenty five year old identical twins, red haired and gorgeous. But to me that’s not the attraction, well, they DO make me look good when we hang out. Their real attraction is that they are nice people that are trying to find their way in the world and for some reason have included me in that search. I have no clue why. I DO know how to listen. Maybe that’s it? I could say that it’s just because I’m just so damn good looking but you and I both know that’s not true. They’re not a part of any of this but I needed something else to talk about so you guys won’t get bored. I walked in the door and they were looking for me and had saved a seat at the bar. I won’t describe the rest of the evening but let’s just say it took my mind off the project for awhile and I got to play Ann Landers. That’s my normal role for many of the youngsters but as I said I don’t know why, you know about my bad relationships and they do too.

It was five beers. But over the span of three hours, how bad is that? I am concerned more and more everyday about DUI’s and it sure takes a lot of the fun out of my nights. Please don’t preach to me about this. I am an adult even though I don’t always act like one, but is it a wink by the authorities that people drink and drive every day? At least if you are out at the bars at all you see it every day. Why is everything so serious these days? When I was a kid and you got caught, all they did was send you home and then check to make sure you got there. Does everything have to be a crime these days? If you detect a little bit of nostalgia for the old days you wouldn’t be wrong. I’m not that way usually but have bouts with melancholy that triggers this stuff. I kind of feel one coming on. Damn.

I really am trying to drive slower. It’s hard, though. After the goodbyes were said at O’tooles, I walked the three blocks to my car and didn’t really care since the weather was getting better, at least in my mind. The moon was up in the sky that was as clear as I’d seen it in a while and if it wasn’t for the cold, these would be very nice days. Well, they were anyway. Michiganders are pretty tough. I hadn’t been paying any attention to my phone and saw that Gina had called me back and left a non-committal message that she would call me sometime. Sometime? Well, I know I did something to anger her anyway. I really didn’t care, though. None of the guys had called but we had hung out so many times this week that that was not unusual. I opened the sunroof on the way home and DID drive slower. It takes a long time to get places when you do that and it is just not as much fun. Oh, well.

Bank accounts. The thought came to me as I was driving home and I wondered why I hadn’t thought about it before. From Watergate to Enron the way to find out what was really going on was to “follow the money” as Deepthroat had said to Woodward and Bernstein. You have GOT to know who they are, don’t you? The guys that broke the Watergate scandal in the seventies. Don’t tell me you don’t know what Watergate is. Don’t they teach history I schools any more? The capsule version is that the Nixon administration bugged the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in DC and the guys they used got caught. There was a coverup of Nixon’s involvement and an administration official whose identity is still not known (nicknamed Deepthroat) helped Woodward and Bernstein (reporters that worked for the Washington Post) break the story and bring Nixon down. Go rent the movie “All the Presidents Men” if you want to know more. Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman play the leads and it is a pretty good mystery flick.

What does that have to do with this? Well, we know that Robert and Daniel are involved but who else? The only problem using this method is that it is an after the fact piece of information. The transaction will have taken place already and the project will be gone. Maybe this isn’t such a good idea. Damn, and it looked like a good one, too. I’ll keep it in the back of my head anyway just in case it does fit somewhere. Man, the back of my head is getting cluttered. It hurts, too. Maybe from the beer? Nope, those damn allergies are starting again already. There isn’t even anything green growing yet. Why me?

I walked up the stairs to my apartment (you have to go up to go down to my place) and noticed that the guy next door was moving out and had his stuff spread out across the lawn as he loaded up. I don’t know if you’ve ever lived in a complex like mine but this is a ritual that happens at the first of every month when the leases are up. I counted four trucks at my building alone and it made me wonder what was wrong with me that I had lived here for more than three years. I know my entire building had changed over at least twice in that time and the thought came to me that maybe it was time for me to do the same? But I like it here and don’t want to spend the money for a house right now. Damn, more things to think about. I just hope the next tenant is as quiet as this guy. I’ve only heard him a couple of times in the six months that he’s lived here and didn’t want anyone like the idiots that lived there before, loud stupid arguments that went on at all hours. Maybe I should buy a house. I made myself a promise to start getting rid of the things I didn’t need so when I do move it will be easy.

I wasn’t too tired so I thought I’d play a little music (vinyl this time) and just sit and think for a while, maybe I’d come up with actions to take before I go to bed. Lee Michaels this time, another obscure artist that had one hit back in the seventies but I still like his stuff. I think I have 4 of his albums (yep, they are still albums or records) and play them when I get to feel strange like I am tonight. Just got my turntable working again and it felt good. You know that little things make me happy and this is one of them. People look at you like you are from Mars when you tell them you still have vinyl; some of the youngsters don’t even know what it is. It does help, though.

 The guys from the NSA are in on it!

It fit. The connections that Daniel and Robert had in previous lives and the fact that they stopped looking at me once I declined to spy for them and only looked at my computer for a day. I wonder who at the NSA the letter was going to be sent to? It wasn’t in the file but I’ll bet that beef and beefier were going to help the letter get to the right people. It will be a coincidence, too. Damn, these guys are pretty good. Okay, if they are involved that means that the whole scam is going to have to be run in parallel. But if they can get fifty million from this other company, why is there a need for them to do the second path? Greed? Or is it just because they can? I’ll bet beef and beefier are going to make sure that any investigation will stall before it gets going; at least until their part is done. But what is their part? That still isn’t clear yet and I haven’t found anything that would tell me what it is. I started looking through the rest of Robert’s files to see if there was anything that would point me in the right direction. It was going to be easier now that I knew more of the outlines of the scam. I had to hand it to them, this was good one. One thought that came to me was how long had they been planning this?

I wonder if any of the other partners knew what was going on? I had never seen any of them mentioned in the files so I didn’t think so. If I have time, it will be interesting to see if they were but from the looks of things it wasn’t going to be necessary to know. Not right now anyway. Damn, I wish I knew what the second part of the scam was. I have an idea but if I’m right it’s pretty frickin’ audacious. If these guys would have applied this much thought to our company they wouldn’t need to steal. With some people there is never enough. Never enough money, power, women, or whatever else drives them. I have never been able to understand people like that since I’ve always lived a pretty austere life and those kinds of things have never meant much to me. I mean, Robert must have socked away millions from our business and from his earlier exploits, probably enough to be comfortable the rest of his life and he does this? I guess it’s kind of like the guys from Enron and any of the other corporate scandals over the last few years; they were all wealthy by any measurement and yet they still needed more, more, more. I wonder how much Robert was getting from the sale of his stake in our firm?

These developments made me even more wired than I had been when the plan had started to reveal itself. I put “Four Way Street” by CSNY on the record player (still vinyl), sat back for a few minutes and had to admit that on my equipment at least, vinyl did not sound as good as a CD. Maybe it’s that I’ve lost some hearing over the years and the high notes just don’t come through like they used to. I AM fifty, you know. I had poured myself a glass of mead that I hoped would take off the edge and I think it was starting to work after a fashion. The clock said tick tock, I know, an old joke, it really said 12:47 and I really didn’t care how I was going to feel Friday. Oh, it is Friday. There was no sense in going to sleep yet, though, since I was still grinding my teeth which to me was a sign that sleep was not going to come any time soon. What was my next move? The mystery was intruding again even though I was trying hard to not think at all but I didn’t want to go back to the computer right now. Nope, time to just let the music wash over me and try to wind down. It worked.

**Chapter 21**

Salvador Dali visited again last night and the dreams were not in the series that I was expecting. I’m reluctant to even tell you about it but it included Bill Clinton and everyone was wearing a kilt. Even me, I’ve got good legs but it’s not what I would normally wear and I know I’ve never worn one. Strange is the word for this one. Okay, there was just a little snippet of the dream we’ve all been following but it had lots of melting rocks and chorus lines of dancing men in kilts and I still didn’t see who the figures in the rocks are. Maybe tomorrow?

I jumped right up out of bed and got my morning routine started; you’ve heard it all before so I’ll only tell you about the things that were different today. TGIF! I had to think for a minute to realize that it is Friday and another weekend is coming along with my taking over the firm on Monday. That is just too cool. But I still wondered why me, there were at least three other partners that I would have chosen over me but the choice had been made and I need to remember to let myself enjoy things once and a while. I wonder if it’s that West Michigan puritan ethic coming back to haunt me; that you never deserve the good things that happen to you but you always deserve the bad things that happen to you. I was going to look at a new Miata at lunch today, though, just for the hell of it. I was even going to have something for breakfast today, that is something unusual so I’ll tell you about it. Well, it was just an orange but that is unusual for me. I could really use a bagel but the ones I had left I could pound nails with so that would probably be a bad idea. It was coffee and out the door, then I remembered it was jeans day and I had to go back and change but I left feeling great.

How could I keep working with Robert when I knew what he was up to? I can be a pretty good actor but he was slime and it was going to be hard to not let any of that bleed through today. I wonder if I can stall the transaction for the sale of his part of the firm? Why should he get anything when he is just a common crook? This can be taken care of later if his plan can be stopped so I decided to stop thinking about it. At the very least, the rest of the partners need to be told at some point but what is that point? I think that even crooks don’t forfeit legally gotten gains but what if the whole firm was built on illegality and scams? Crap, it’s like being appointed captain of the Titanic about five minutes before it hits the iceberg. I’m not going down with the ship, though. At least I hope not.

The meetings that had been scheduled with Robert had all been canceled before I got to work. It looked like he had abandoned any pretense that he gave a damn about the firm and was just making a run for it. I walked to the back of the suite to his office and it had been cleaned out overnight along with all of Marilyn’s gear. Well, I was still going on the assumption that the firm was going to go on after Monday but it was looking bleak. I called back to the accounting department from my office to try to get a look at the most recent financial reports but then I realized that it was only about 7:30 and they wouldn’t be in for a while. I had just seen them earlier in the week and it did look like we were in pretty good shape but it wouldn’t hurt to ask for a more in depth analysis now that I was in charge. Kate was still not in yet and I had been through the files that Marilyn had left for me so I decided to make coffee and get to the newspapers that I had picked up on the way in. I checked my calendar for next week and found it to be blank. Not one meeting scheduled. Damn, this was not good.

After my first cup of coffee Kate came in and sat down so we could talk for a while in private. I asked her about my schedule being blank and she told me there had been a server crash after I left last night and the entire database we used to run the firm was being reconstructed as we spoke. That answered that question but didn’t do anything to explain why Robert had taken off like a thief in the night. Were they erasing the server, too? I’ll bet the backups wouldn’t have any of the files that I had stolen in them. I’d have to ask Jameson to do a quick compare late to see if that was true. I had to hand it to them again, they were trying to cover their tracks but I wonder if they understand what I told you before, that erasing isn’t enough. I wanted to go back to IT to take a look but didn’t want to explain to Kate, not yet anyway. We sat and made small talk for a while and I asked her to make an appointment with Susan for later in the morning. I was going to at least act like we were going to go on and I wanted to get the engineers on the right track today. Those guys aren’t too good with uncertainty so that needs to get done. Hey, it will look like I know what I’m doing for the rest of the firm, too, another benefit. I told you I could act a little.

I knew it. These guys are better at this than I thought. When I walked back to our IT section I could see that three of the four servers that we used to run the firm were new. Damn, that means that there is no shadow for Jameson to check and all of my decisions were going to have to be made on the information I had. I think it’s enough anyway, don’t you? Where were the old ones? There was a new IT rental working on them and I thought I’d just ask.

“Hi, I’m Jake Devereaux, what’s the deal with the servers?” I think I startled the guy.

He stood up slowly like he had been kneeling a long time and looked me over before offering his hand.

“Hi, Stan from DDI. All I know is that there was an emergency call that came in last night around 6:40 with a request that we bring three 7200 servers out here for replacements. When I got here there was a guy removing the bad ones and I installed the new ones. Working to reconstruct them right now and should be done in about another hour.”

“Did anyone tell you why they failed?”

“Nope, just that it was an emergency and you needed these installed ASAP.”

I was thinking but needed some time to digest all of this. I DID have one more question for him.

“What did the guy look like that was taking the old ones out?”

“Early thirties, expensive haircut, blonde hair. One thing that was odd was the watch, it was a Rolex I think and he was wearing it on his right wrist. Didn’t say one word to me either.”

One thing you have to understand about this server business is that most people think they are these huge things that fill up a room. Not anymore. I could probably carry all three of them out the door if I stacked them on top of each other and they didn’t weigh very much either. At least the 7200 models were like that. Do you have an idea who it was taking the servers out? The Rolex on the right wrist gave it away for me. Should I tell you?

I just wanted to know when Daniel had gotten back to town.

I thanked Stan and headed back toward my office with more thoughts swirling through my head that I had to consciously tamp down or they were going to drive me crazy. I should have expected this but there was nothing I could have done about it anyway. Not if I wanted to keep my part in this mystery a secret. Even if I would have been here last night I’m sure they would just have waited until the weekend and would still have ended up with the servers. Okay, they are better at this than I thought. Will that change my reactions at all? Nope, not yet. Just have to remember to not underestimate them again. I wonder if Daniel is staying somewhere downtown? I’ll bet he’s out at Robert’s so there won’t be a trail. That’s what I’d do anyway. This DOES mean I’m right about when the whole thing is going down. I need to get to work to make sure I’m ready for them. Better call the guys, too. I’m going to need help.

I get it! Do you remember the notation from one of the earlier files that said they’d be down to one day for the next test? Let’s reason this out. Think capacitors and their characteristics. No, I don’t want this to be a science lesson but it really does have something to do with the project so just listen for a minute. Capacitors usually take time to build up their charges, especially large ones. And the ones for this project are some of the largest ones that I have seen; they take up the majority of the truck that we saw at the airport. Remember the truck? I think they can only use it once a day; it takes that long to charge up the capacitors. I hope they haven’t had time to change that in the last couple of weeks. I’ll guess not since I haven’t seen any files that even mentioned it except for the early stuff. I hope I’m right on this one. Hey, I’ve been right on just about all of this stuff. I know, it surprises the hell out of me, too.

Susan showed up just as I had gotten back to my office and I closed the door as she sat down. There wasn’t any way to read her face but I was sure she knew that I had been promoted; the grapevine probably let the whole place know before me. I was sure she couldn’t know what I was going to tell her since I hadn’t told anyone but I had been surprised before.

“I’m sure you’ve heard that I’ve been asked to take over Robert’s duties as managing partner,” I started right at the point, “look, I want you to take over as the engineering manager.” She didn’t look as surprised as I had hoped. “You can start Monday if you want the job.” She looked like she was thinking about it, what is there to think about?

“Well, of course I’d like to try the job,” she sounded somewhat non-committal. “Why me? You know Ted has been here longer than I have.”

“Because I think you’ll be best for the job. You know Ted has always made it clear that he just loves being an engineer and from what I’ve seen, he’s tried to avoid any management role at all. So, who else should I pick?”

“Thanks, Jake. Or is it Mr. Devereaux now?” She had a little smirk on her face and I recognized that she had a sense of humor for the first time.

“Well, smartass, you know how I feel about titles; Jake has always been fine with me so let’s keep it like that. Let’s schedule some time for next week to get you up to speed and then it’s yours.”

I walked with her back to the engineering section to make the announcement in person for a couple of reasons; one, it’s the right thing to do and two, I wanted to see the reaction on the faces of the rest of the engineers to see if there was going to be any bad reactions and problems that I was going to have to deal with in the next couple of weeks. The announcement went well and I couldn’t see any bad reactions just congratulations so I shook her hand, said mine, and got out of there so she could get on with the transition. She hadn’t asked about pay, vacation, or anything else about her compensation so I knew it had been the right move and I walked away with a little smile. Hey, sometimes you make good decisions.

But this business stuff was getting to be too much of a distraction. Do I dare to take a week off next week? It probably wouldn’t set a good example but how am I going to get the plans set to head off Robert and Daniel if I’m working? I was getting a really good mad on for that little bastard, Daniel that is, and couldn’t wait to take him down. No, it’s not getting personal, well, yeah it is but damn how should I feel? That little puissant had everything handed to him from what I could see and now he was taking away my livelihood and I was not going to let it go easily. The only problem was that I had no plan, I knew a lot of information but I didn’t know how to use it yet and now this time crunch. Well, I have a weekend and I think I’ll take the rest of the day off to get the guys together and try to figure out what to do. I’ve got some more information for them, anyway. I was more concerned with Kate’s reaction to my taking the rest of the day off than I was about anything else. She can kill with just a look. I’ve seen it. It’s true.

When I got back to my office, I thought I’d do at least a little of the work I was getting paid for and turned on my computer to see if the servers were up and running yet and found that there was still no access to the local files but my internet connection worked when I started up Firefox so I could at least look at some of my external e-mails. The IM window came up and I knew it would be Jameson.

‘dad, there is something really screwy going on with that IP address that you asked me to clone in virginia. someone else is looking for it with just massive amounts of firepower. i backed off once it started but have a coded message for you that i grabbed before the whole thing started. i shouldn’t read any of this should i?’

‘don’t think it would be a good idea if you did, i don’t want you involved any more. just send me the message and then close up shop.’

‘one thing, it’s not in virginia any more, i got that before the avalanche started, it’s now here in the area somewhere but i couldn’t get where. they haven’t found it yet, they’re not as good as i am’

‘you’ve done enough for now. i can’t tell you what is going on but maybe later.’

‘cool, the message is on it’s way. dad, be careful, bye.’

‘bye.’

I couldn’t remember Jameson ever being concerned about me before. He is a pretty smart kid and I’m sure he has put at least some of the stuff together. I hope he hasn’t read too much of it, though. I would die if anything happened to him, or any of the other kids. It would be the worst thing that can ever happen to a parent; to have to bury one of your kids. No, not going to think about it. Sometimes it is just better to not think. Especially about this.

The only thing that all the computer traffic could mean was that Robert’s plan was being started and I was running out of time. Crap. I’m just not ready. Damn, I should have gotten off my butt and worked harder to put his together. That’s what I get for procrastination. I’ll never do it again, procrastinate, that is, oh, that’s right, you know me. I’ll try to do better anyway but I guess I shouldn’t promise, huh? I remembered the file that Jameson had sent to me and went to my Yahoo account to open it and see what was in it even though my brain was swimming with the new developments. Maybe it was the key. The question that came to me first was why the huge attack on Daniel’s computer?

Man o Man, there were two letters that were in the file and it was easy to see which one had caused the hornets nest to explode. The first was an acceptance of terms and a confirmation of a wire transfer of fifty million dollars to an account that I knew had to be Robert’s from the fake company that we had found out about a few days ago. The other one was the killer. The second path was now clear. Those audacious pricks! The second letter was the summary file that I had found the other day and it looked like it had been sent to the NSA just as I expected but it included text that hadn’t been there before. They were asking for a payment of one hundred million dollars or they would start using our project to collapse a building a day until the payment was made. It gave them until Monday to make the payment and described four buildings that would be the group the target would be selected from. Every day they missed the deadline, the payment would go up by fifty million. They were blaming the terrorist act on the company that had already paid them fifty million! What a cool misdirection. I had to admire the complexity of the scam but my heart was racing since I didn’t know what to do.

When I started to think again one thing immediately came to mind: how do they think they’ll get away with it? People inside the government know we were the project’s prime contractor so they’ll be here in a few minutes to start tearing this place to bits trying to find them. God, beef and beefier, I’ll bet they were the project liaisons and have taken the files and destroyed them. What about the rest of the folks that paid the bills while the project was going on? It came back to me that this was a “black project” that was outside the normal appropriation channels and I didn’t know enough about them to know who would have been paying the bills. At the very least, this would delay any reaction and might just keep any reaction from happening. These guys are good. But they didn’t count on me. Oh, that sounds pretty conceited, huh? Isn’t that what all heroes say? I’m a hero in my own mind anyway. No, that’s not true; hero is a word that has almost lost its meaning in these days. I mean, you call someone a hero because they lose weight or stop smoking? I just hope I can get through this and be able to find another job when the firm crashes and burns.

What if it doesn’t. Crash and burn, that is. It’s going to be pretty boring just running a company. Damn, stop thinking so far ahead. I guess it’s like that line from “Butch Cassidy” where they’re trapped on the ledge and Robert Redford is worried about jumping into the river because he can’t swim. Paul Newman looks at him and says something like “why are you worried about that, the fall will probably kill you.” That’s kind of how I feel right now. Doesn’t feel that good to be honest. Hey, at least we know the whole thing will be over in a few days. I’ll kind of miss it. I’m a little pissed that they ruined my weekend. No beer for me. They are going to pay for that.

It was almost two and there were no black helicopters landing in the parking lot or any agents at the door so I thought I’d find Kate and let her know I was taking off for the day. She was sitting in her office sorting through the contents of one of the filing cabinets and didn’t see me come in so I sat down in her side chair to wait for her to notice me. I can be a smartass at times.

“Damn, Jake, don’t do that. You could at least cough or something as a courtesy, Crap, my heart is going about a million miles an hour. Don’t you dare be pulling this baloney when we move down to the other end.” She DID look like she was mad.

“Sorry, just wanted to come in and tell you I’m taking off for the day.”

“Big surprise, what took you so long?” She had turned her chair to face me and a small smile broke.

“Hey, perks of the boss,” I said and matched her small smile. “I’ve got some things to get done at home and need to get on it. You can leave when you want and I’ll even pay you for the rest of the day.” I thought I was being clever.

“Oh, you’ll pay me for the rest of the day and for tomorrow when I’m in here moving all of this crap.”

“You can take care of it Monday, or Tuesday, or never. Set your own time but let me know will you?”

“Don’t start being a boss now; you’re not very good at it. I’ll take care of everything if you’ll just stay out of my way.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was all that I wanted to say since I knew it irritated her.

I got up, said goodbye, and headed back to my office to gather up my stuff and head out. Once you are the boss that’s not as easy as it looks. There is always someone that needs something from you and I ran the gauntlet of accounting, engineering, and sales that took me almost a half hour just to make the fifty feet or so back to my office. It WAS pretty cool to be important or to have people think you were. If this place survives, this job might just be fun. I do want Robert’s office, though. Private bathroom, do I need to say more?

They finally did leave me alone and I took the opportunity to get while the getting was good. It had turned into a glorious day that you only get in Michigan in spring. I didn’t even care that it was going to snow again by Sunday since the sunshine and warmth was here now. Was it time to get out the shorts? See what I’m up against? All of this stuff going on and my little mind just thinks about getting the shorts out of storage. And stopping these guys is left up to me? Everyone’s in trouble for sure. It was almost seventy, though, and my skin didn’t know what to think about being exposed to air. It felt good and I needed the energy that it was giving me, I had doubts I could pull this off.

Oh, one thing that doesn’t have anything to do with anything except how I look. I thought I was doing so good keeping to my fitness program over the winter and even told you guys I was. Well, it was kind of a lie. When I got out some of my summer knit shirts, you know, the polo type? Well, let’s just say I need to lose about twenty pounds so I don’t look ridiculous. I don’t think I’ll ever eat again. Or drink beer…well, I won’t eat, anyway. You know I’ve always struggled with my weight but I need to get committed to doing better and looking better. Do you think this is why I’m struggling with the sex thing? I don’t think I’m gross. What do you think? Don’t answer if you have to lie. Thanks for not answering.

I went through Cascade on the way home because the drive just looked better and there wouldn’t be as much traffic so I could drift a little and think while I was traveling. I hadn’t thought about the truck or place where it was stored but when I found myself a couple of miles away I thought I’d drive by and just take a look at the place. What good that would do I didn’t know, but sometimes you just need to wing it and just do. The traffic had gotten worse and I was stuck behind a couple from the anti-destination league that felt that driving the speed limit was too much for them so they had to make sure that everyone else did the same and drove fifteen under. If I ever get that way, please shoot me. I think I’ve said that before but I can’t repeat it enough.

As I turned down the street to their building, I saw lots of activity in the front and it hit me that I should have asked Tom or someone to sit on them just in case they made a run for it. I drove past and turned around in a lot a couple of buildings down where I could still see both the front and side of the building and backed into a parking spot that would hide my little car but still give me a view. The capacitor truck was still parked inside but there were a couple more just like it that were being loaded up with boxes that I assumed would be the parts that I saw on the shelves a couple of days ago. Crap, what if they left? Should I follow them? One thing was certain, I was not going to let the truck get away, it is the key to this whole thing and I needed to know where it was. But then the how of doing it intruded and I knew it would have to be a “stake out” of some kind; someone was going to have to watch them from now until the end of this mess. I called Tom to see if I could count on him for this. Damn, voicemail.

I thought about the danger of using the phones but there was no other way right now. If they suspected me something would have happened by now, right? I worked hard to convince myself that there was no way they could cover the phones especially since I thought beef and beefier were busy now that the extortion letter had been delivered. Another place to wing it, I guess. They must be convinced that I’m not involved or wouldn’t they have made a move? Everything else was happening now so my elimination would have been triggered wouldn’t it? I know it sounds like I’m trying to convince myself that things are going to be all right and I am. This is pretty scary when you think about it. I’m going to stop, thinking about it, that is.

I didn’t have to think too long since the trucks started to move out but I left the parts trucks alone and waited for the capacitor truck to leave. It pulled out about five minutes later and I wanted to take a look at the building to see if they had emptied the place but didn’t want to lose the truck in the traffic so I let it get a little ahead and started to follow. There was another car between me and the truck and to my good luck, it was making all of the same turns the truck was so I was not going to be too obvious. They were heading farther south and I was glad that I had broken my habit of just putting a little gas in my car that morning; I had filled it and it was one less thing to worry about. Trying to remember all of the detective and police shows and how to properly do a “tail” was the only thoughts that were in my head but that was a mistake, I need to get started thinking about what the next move would be. What if they just keep going? That would screw up the whole deal. But I have the key in front of me, don’t I? At least I could stop them from carrying out the threat to collapse another building. That’s something, isn’t it?

We had gotten south to 100th street when the truck made a right and then another sharp right into a pole barn with a huge paved parking area around it. There was no place for me to hide so I kept going south for about a quarter mile until a two track path appeared on the left and I pulled in and got out of the car. My phone rang and it as Tom.

“What’s going on, Jake?” Tom sounded like he was happy to hear from me.

“Hey, Tom, what do you have going on right now?”

“Nothing much, just laundry, I don’t have the girls this weekend so I was trying to find something to do.” It was the answer that I was hoping for.

“How’d you like to do a stakeout for me? The shit is hitting the fan of the little mystery that I told you about last week and I need some help.” I explained what I dared to on the phone and got the response that I knew I would.

“I’m in. Where do you need me?”

I gave him the directions to the pole barn and told him about the road that I had turned into but he would need to get closer if he was going to be comfortable. I didn’t expect him to sit in the woods to watch so he would have to find a way to get the car closer than the road that I was on. I’d leave that up to him. Until he came I wanted to get a better look around the area and make sure the truck didn’t leave before he got there so I walked across the road to a grove of trees and made my way to the south side of 100th that was directly across from the barn. I had remembered to bring Jennifer’s little binoculars (really I just left them in the car as I always do) and took a look around from the cover of the grove. Hey, being lazy sometimes is a good thing. Serendipity, I think it’s called. They had moved the truck into the building but had not closed the door yet so I got a look inside but there was not much there; a tractor of some kind and a boat but not much else. There were four guys that I could see sitting in some plastic lawn chairs at the back but no other activity was apparent. They didn’t look like they were involved in anything except what guys do in pole barns: drink beer and shoot the shit. There was no house on the lot but the barn did look like it had an office of some sort on the right hand side so maybe it had been used as a business at some point. I hadn’t been out here in a while and couldn’t remember when it had been built but there was so much growth happening in southern GR that it didn’t surprise me at all. Why was the building fed by its own transformer?

As I watched, two of the men opened the back of the truck and removed the piece of equipment that looked like the ice auger, laid it on the ground a few feet outside the door then went back inside. Another man came out with something that looked like a gauge of some sort and placed it next to the auger then painted something on the ground through the gauge. What the hell were they measuring? The first two came back out of the door, picked up the auger and started drilling holes in the pavement where the third man had marked it. I watched for a while and they finished by drilling the second hole next to the first and I remembered that I had seen six pairs of the same type of holes in the parking lot of their building by the airport. What the hell were they for? Six pairs of holes? Six buildings that collapsed. Crap, they were getting ready to drop another one. It wasn’t just a threat. But how?

A Jeep came up 100th street from the west and turned south heading toward my car and I was surprised when it pulled up in the road blocking it in. Had they seen me? I slid along the tree line heading back in the general direction trying to keep hidden and I was starting to get pretty scared. I said that before but I hope you don’t think I’m a chicken, but the realization was coming to me that I’m not that good at this kind of stuff. Maybe I’ll get better, I certainly hope so. I stopped behind a large oak and got the binoculars out to see what was going on. A man got out of the Jeep and just leaned back against it to light a cigarette like he belonged there and casually looked at my car and around at the surrounding fields. The light was getting bad and I couldn’t make out his features at all but I knew I wasn’t in the mood to wait him out so I kept moving through the grove until I was about a hundred yards south of him and then crossed the road to the side where my car was. I walked up the road like I belonged there and was about to walk by when I heard a voice that I recognized.

 “Jake, where the hell were you” Tom was finishing the cigarette and was just getting ready to light another one.

 “Where did you get the Jeep?” It was the only thing I could think of to say.

 “The damn Buick died and I won’t get it back til next week. I borrowed this from Kathy since she’s out of town for the next week. I thought it may come in handy out here in the boonies.” Tom had an easy smile on his face that I remembered but hadn’t seen in along time.

 We talked for a while about what had been going on and I brought him up to speed on all of the things that had happened this week in our little mystery. As I talked he interrupted:

 “I’m free until next Wednesday, Jake. You can count on me for whatever.” I looked at him and just smiled. Don’t see a guy for almost a year and that’s the response? Crap, it almost brought a tear to my eye to have someone trust me like that. I said almost.

 “Damn, Tom, I just realized something. I don’t think we have to watch them until after Monday. They’re preparing to trigger a collapse and have been digging in here. I don’t think they’re going anywhere until after that.” As I talked it started to make more sense. “I’ll show you.” We crossed the street and back through the grove until we could see the building again.

 “Check out the holes that are just outside the door, they have something to do with it I think. There were six pairs of them in the pavement outside their building by the airport and that matches the number of test shots they made.” I handed him the binoculars and he took some time looking over the whole site.

 “Damn, they’ve got a lot of power going in,” I knew he’d notice, Tom’s pretty sharp. “And the whole lot is concrete, no one does that anymore.”

 I hadn’t noticed and didn’t know if it was important but it was strange to have a slab that size. One thing that hit me was there were no other vehicles that I could see. They must be bunkered in until they get the word unless someone else was coming. I’ll bet not. It’s got to be part of the plan that these guys stay isolated until next week. The next thing to think about was what we were going to do to stop them. I certainly don’t know yet. Do you?

 It was almost dark and getting hard to see anything so we made our way back through the trees to our cars; not as careful this time since the moon was in new phase and it was almost impossible for me to see Tom five feet ahead of me. We waited for a car to pass anyway since there was no need to take unnecessary chances and then cut across the road to the cars. We agreed that it would be a good idea to go south before we cut across west, or in my case a little east, I promised him I’d call him with any developments and he assured me he would be on site early Monday to take over the watching. It felt good to be back in the car since I wasn’t dressed to be out in the cold and Michigan was still teasing us with the promise of spring. Right now it was still a promise, though, the warmth of the day had retreated and it was getting damn cold. Heaters are nice.

 It didn’t take much time to get home and I was surprised to find my apartment was cold, almost as cold as it was outside. I remembered that I had turned the heat down before I left in the morning since it had been so warm. So my normal ritual of stripping when I get in the door was going to have to wait until the furnace caught up. I turned on the TV, grabbed a beer, and flopped on the couch to just run through the channels for a few minutes and relax. I stopped on one of the local newscasts when I saw a report about a car accident that had happened earlier in the day. Marilyn was dead.

 I switched from local channel to local channel to see if there were more details but there was nothing. Now I was really scared. They know where I live. I didn’t see this coming, really, I expected Marilyn to be part of the scam and to be taking off with Daniel and Robert to live on a desert island somewhere. But they knew that she knew something. They don’t know that about me. Do they? No, they can’t or I’d be dead like Marilyn. Now I know they’re serious. Man, I’m babbling. Don’t mean to.

The only thought that was coming to me was that I wanted to crawl in a hole and pull it in after me. I walked in my bedroom and looked out the window that overlooked the parking lot (yeah, great view) for some reason, I think I was on autopilot for the shock of leaning about Marilyn and nothing was registering. I am only fifty after all and didn’t want to die just from someone else’s greed. I had to go back and look again to actually see if there as anything of danger that I could see out there. There wasn’t. Right now, anyway. I kept telling myself that if they wanted me gone I would have been before they triggered the scam. I thought hard but couldn’t think of anyone else from the firm that would be in danger. If there was I would have to warn them. Damn, who was the engineer that wrote the report we had? I dug out the hardcopy files that were still hidden in my speakers and couldn’t find it. I was tearing through them and finally found the page at the bottom of the stack. Crap, it was Harry Doan. I kept looking through the rest of what I had to see if there were any other names but didn’t see any that I recognized. Would those guys kill everyone that knew about the project? They had started the process so I knew it wouldn’t end with Marilyn. Damn, do I have Harry’s number here? I looked through my briefcase for the company directory but only found his internal number and I hadn’t been the engineering manager long enough to have programmed his number into my phone. How do I get it without going back to work? Yeah, I’m stupid, that’s what telephone books are for. Geez, I was kicking myself as I looked through the closet to get the book and realized that I had thrown away this years because it had kept falling on me when I opened the door. I did have last years in my other closet flattening some pictures that had gotten wet, grabbed it and looked for his number. It was there and I dialed it but got a message that the line had been disconnected and there was no other number. Okay, we now have three involved. I added his name to Daniel’s and Robert’s.

Kate. What if she had seen some of the scam material by accident? After Marilyn, I knew they wouldn’t hesitate to eliminate anyone they suspected could skewer their plans so I called her but got that damn voicemail again. Doesn’t anyone answer their phone anymore? I left a message for her to call me as soon as she got the message and tried to not sound too upset but what would I do if something happened to her? Was I responsible for Marilyn’s death since I knew about the scam and didn’t go to the cops? Man, I can’t think about that right now, maybe later, but not now. My heart started to sink from the weight of the realization, though, and I just sat on my couch and stared. Until the phone rang.

“Geez, Jake, what’s the deal? I do have a life, you know.”

“Is Cody with you?” I knew the answer but needed to be sure.

“You know it’s his dad weekend, what the hell’s going on?”

“Do you trust me, I mean really trust me, Kate?”

“You know I do, why?”

“Kate, please get out of your house right now and check into a hotel. Is there anyone else’s name you can use?”

“Jake, you’re scaring the shit out of me, what’s going on?” Her voice had started to rise.

“No questions right now, just do it for me okay? It’s important is all I can say. Call me later to tell me where you are. Now please just get going.”

I hung up the phone to stop the questions and to get her moving as I hoped she would. What more could I do? I think it’s time for a board meeting; I’m going to need more help than Tom.

Who else may have seen anything? I couldn’t think very well but I needed to. Damn, I should know more about what goes on at our firm. Why have I been so lazy? I took a deep breath and knew that this behavior wasn’t going to protect anyone or do any good at all so it needed to be gone. What to do? Mike was working but I knew that Micah and Chad were not so I called them but got that damn voicemail for both of them but couldn’t let that stop me. How do I find out what the government’s response would be to the extortion demand or what the list of buildings were? Oh, I have that already. I started up my computer and pulled up the files that Jameson had sent me earlier in the day and found the list. Okay, they are choosing them for effect, that’s certain since all of them except one were government buildings. None in DC, though which I couldn’t understand but didn’t need to. The Empire State building was the only non-government building on the list and I knew they were going to drop it since it was iconic in the minds of the people of the US and the scars from the World Trade Center still hadn’t healed. Was the front company they were blaming this on Islamic based? It would be the one way to stir up a misdirection that they could use to escape.

No. I’ll bet they’re not waiting to get out of the country. They have to know what kind of lockdown happened after 9/11 and must have plans to get out of here before they do any damage. They probably have so many connections from their intelligence days to get out anyway but that would bring more people into the scam that they couldn’t control. Why couldn’t they do this from anywhere? I had the TV turned on low to MSNBC but an alert cut through my thought and work on the computer. There was a fire in the Empire State and all of the people were being evacuated. I didn’t see the fire from the helicopter shots they were using but that didn’t mean anything. How were the NY cops going to keep it empty until Monday? It had to be a lie but how are they going to maintain the lie in this day of twenty four hour news?

Crap, what if there is more than one truck? I never even thought about it and I had to kick myself for focusing on the only one that I knew about. Is there anything in the files that would give me the answer? Daniel and Robert were too smart to hang the success of their whole scheme on this one weak link weren’t they? They certainly felt strongly enough about getting rid of the data to risk Daniel grabbing the servers personally so maybe the key is still in the files I have. I don’t have all of the files, though. Calm down. Take a deep breath. Let’s think about this. What if these guys collapse the building even if they get the money? They can’t be that amoral, can they? Yeah, they can, they just killed Marilyn for knowing a little about what they were doing and I’m sure they won’t hesitate to do whatever it takes. What about the guys that are manning the truck? I don’t think they are going to live much past Monday. I wonder how much they think they are getting paid?

I needed a second beer so I got up to get a cold Stroh’s and try to stop my brain from self-destructing with all of the speculation that was coming at me from all directions both inside and outside of my head. Where did my weekend go? I just wanted to get back to my routine but it was dawning on me that my life would never be the same. I’ve changed too much. Things have changed too much. I’m tired. The phone started to ring and I came out of my trance to answer it before it went to voicemail. Chad.

“What’s the deal?” Chad was still adhering to our no cell talk rule.

“Shit, Chad, everything is going to hell. Can you beep Micah and come out? I need a few more hands to juggle all of the eggs that are in the air. There are so many things going on and I need a little help.” It was hard to completely ignore the rule, it had become habit.

“No problem, Micah’s right here and we’re on our way.”

“Oh, could you guys both drive out? We may need to do some traveling in all three vehicles before the weekend is over.”

“Yep.” Was all Chad had to say.

Okay, that felt better. It took away a lot of the uncertainty that I was feeling from not being able to get moving on any of the things that I knew. I don’t know if it’s the right move to drag these guys back in but that’s what friends are for isn’t it? I wanted to know about a second truck before the guys got out here and I knew finding the evidence was going to be easier since I knew what I was looking for this time. I pulled up the earlier files that had the purchase orders and parts lists and a new thought hit me. They didn’t have to have a second truck; they just had to make people believe they did. It would keep the government from looking for the real one if they thought there was a second or even a third one. That would go a long way to protect the one they had. I wonder if they had told the government just that? I would have.

I kept looking through the files and the action made my head stop hurting; the action helped burn off the excess adrenaline that I was feeling. My heart was still racing but I could feel the beer starting to help so I got up and got another one. Yeah, solution of this whole thing being trusted to a bunch of beer drinkers? Scares the hell out of you doesn’t it? Not me. Who else could do it? Do you want to try it? I didn’t think so. Just sit back and enjoy the ride for a while. Trying too hard to be funny? Well it helps me cut the tension; I promise I won’t try again unless it really is funny.

The purchase orders weren’t much help but the combination of the PO’s and the parts lists pointed me to the fact that there couldn’t be more than one truck. There weren’t any duplicates of the electrodes or the capacitors in any of the lists and the only conclusion that I can draw is that there is just one. Some good luck for a change. I know, I shouldn’t complain, I’ve had more luck in this mess than any one person could hope for in a lifetime let alone a couple of weeks. But some of the luck I made. Didn’t I? Hey, that master in management degree really works. It came to me that this was just a project to be managed and that was what I was doing. Cool.

Okay, one truck and I know where it is. Two good things. I sat back down on the couch and started to think again. I didn’t know if we were going to need all of the vehicles but I had to start thinking ahead instead of just reacting. Why did I drive by the airport building just at the time they were packing up? What if I would have taken the normal way home? Just calm down and take it as a stroke of good luck. I’m not talking to myself, it just looks that way. It’s all in my head so they would be thoughts. Whew.

I don’t have any clocks in my place so I didn’t really know how long it had been since I had talked to Chad but it felt like a long time. I started to think about Robert and Daniel and whether they were still in the country and what they were doing. Could we find them and sit on them, too? That might be a role that I could ask Micah and Chad to do since I already had the truck covered with Tom’s help. Wouldn’t hurt to ask them if they think it’s a good idea and it might be the least dangerous thing I could ask them to do. Jameson might be able to help but what happens if I get my own son killed? My life would be over. I mean that.

I decided that the risk was necessary for our success so I fired up the IM program to see if he was online. I KNOW he’s online, that’s what all of my boys do all of the time.

‘jameson, you on?’

‘yep, dad, what do you need?’

‘i hate to ask but can you find the virginia computer again?’

‘i know you told me to stop but I’ve been tracking it all day. it’s right here in GR now but i can’t give you an address. it’s on 29th street just east of east paris but not as far as patterson. that’s the best I can do.’

‘any new messages that you can get at?’

‘they’re on their way. no, i didn’t read them.’

‘thanks, i may need your help again, can you stay online?’

‘we’ve got a LAN party going so we’ll be up all night. i’ll keep a window open for you.’

‘are they still looking for the computer?’

‘yep, but they haven’t found it yet. i’ve never seen so much power being used, over 20% of all the internet traffic is from the search.’

‘thanks.’

I had to trust that he was as good as I hoped he was and I’m sure that Daniel and Robert are too busy now to do anything but play out their endgame. I’m sure he would have told me if they were looking for him but I don’t think they are going to. I’ll bet they are too busy defending against the search to do any of their own. That is what I have to assume or it’s going to get in the way and I won’t be able to think. Not going to let that happen. I opened the new files to take a look for anything that would help end this thing and I wanted to get it done before Chad and Micah got to my place. The response from the government was there and it was what I expected; they were not going to negotiate with terrorists. One thing that stood out was the deception was working; the government was addressing the correspondence back to the fake company that Daniel and Robert were pushing as the guilty party. The letter going back in response from them gave the deadline of midnight Monday for the payment to be made. Crap, only three days to get this done.

The last notes had an interesting sidelight that confused the hell out of me. Why were they buying dynamite? This one was from a couple of months ago but I hadn’t seen it in any of the other files that I had lifted. What the heck were they using dynamite for? What would they want blown up? It’s not part of the project I’m sure and it raised a bunch of new questions that I couldn’t answer. Damn, I do not need more complications right now. Put it aside and take a breath.

The knock at my door was not the normal “cop knock” so it must have been Micah instead of Chad. I opened the door and they were both came in, Chad carrying the extra thirty pack and Micah had a bag full of snacks that were the same as those that we always took on the boats: beef jerky, rod pretzels, and a couple of tubes of Pringles. I remembered I hadn’t eaten and the snacks looked pretty good to me. We all got a beer and moved into my living room so I could bring them up to speed on the happenings of the past couple of days. There was a lot to talk about. Lots of things had happened since Tuesday. Was it only Tuesday that we had watched the final test? It seemed like forever.

They just sat and listened as I talked for what seemed like an hour and neither of them said anything until I finished and then there was still not much comment. I think we all understood that this was moving into something that we had never experienced and I wanted to make sure that they understood that these guys were dangerous and would not hesitate to kill, they had killed already and if we were found out I knew they would again. I didn’t want to do this to them but what else can I do?

“Oh, one last thing, Robert’s secretary, Marilyn Block, was killed in a car accident this afternoon,” I looked at them for a response.

“Could it really have been an accident?” Micah started first.

“It’s possible I guess, but it would be one of the biggest coincidences I’ve ever seen,” I answered. “I think we need to assume that it wasn’t, and just make sure that we are careful in everything we do from this point out. I’ve been thinking about going to the cops with what I’ve got, what do you think?”

“How long will it take you to get them to believe you?” I expected that Chad would be the devil’s advocated where the police are concerned.

“I don’t know if they will believe me but don’t you think we should at least try?”

“It’s up to you but you know how I feel about it, it would be a waste of time and what if Robert and Daniel find out. You’ve said they have people inside the government and what’s to stop them from dropping all of the buildings if we go to the cops?”

Chad had a point. I didn’t know who to trust in the government and if we made that choice we run out of time to do anything on our own. Better to continue on our own since I knew we could stop them, well, I hoped we could stop them anyway.

“I think we’ve made a decision,” Micah was rubbing his hands together as if he was really excited we were going to take this on ourselves. “Let’s get thinking about how to handle the next three days. I’ll call Darrell and take Monday and Tuesday off.”

“Yeah, I probably should do the same,” Chad seemed to be getting into our project as much as Micah.

My cell rang and I had to look for it for a minute, I had forgotten to put it back on the counter and the ringer was turned so low that I could barely hear it, but I found it on the computer and answered it. Kate.

“What the hell is this all about, Jake?” Kate sounded excited but not angry.

“Have you seen the news yet,” I started slowly.

“How the hell could I have seen the news, I’ve been running since you called and have just gotten settled in at a hotel downtown,” maybe she was angry.

“Marilyn Block died this afternoon in a car accident,” I waited for that to sink in.

“Oh, my God, Jake, and she just retired.”

“There’s more, but I can’t tell you right now. I’m not sure it was an accident, there are some things going on at Lanning and Devereaux that you don’t know about but may be connected to her death. That’s why I needed you to get out of your house, I thought you may be in danger, that you might have seen some files on what is going on and they would come after you.” I wanted her to understand that the danger here was real.

“What files?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you or not,” was the only answer I had.

“Stop protecting me, Jake,” now I knew she was angry. “I’ve been taking care of myself my whole life and I think I can handle it. What if you need my help? How can I do that unless I know what is going on? I’ve got a right to know and you know it, you scare the hell out of me and then tell me that I can’t handle it?” She was right, but you know I’m still a little old fashioned, that I take it as a man’s job to protect the women in his life. I AM fifty, you know. Okay, I won’t use that as an excuse again. She can probably handle it better than me anyway.

I gave her the capsule summary on what was going on and what we had been doing to set ourselves up to stop them and it just made her more angry. I could see her point as she unloaded on me and I just stopped talking to let her go, she deserved it after all. I did want to make it clear to her that I did trust her, but that didn’t help too much, it was almost five minutes before she came up for air and stopped yelling at me. My ears hurt.

“What can I do, Jake? It’s my job that they are taking away, too. And I like my job; I guess there goes the raise and the Ferrari.” It was good to hear the tone lighten.

“Not much right now. We’re still trying to figure out the best way to handle this and don’t have anything set yet. I haven’t figured out what to do to be honest. Maybe you could think about it and then call me back if you come up with anything.”

“You’d better not leave me out when things start to happen,” the tone of her voice said she was serious.

“I won’t. Why don’t you call me first thing in the morning and let me know what you’ve come up with,” I was happy she was safe and I didn’t have to lie to her any more.

We said our goodbyes and when I shut off the phone both Micah and Chad had what we call a “shit eating grin” on their faces. I knew I was going to pay for the conversation with Kate, even hearing just one side of it they could tell I had been bested. There was no way for me to put any other spin on it and just resigned myself to what was to come.

“She works for you? It sounds like the other way around to me,” Chad was the first to pile on. “You’re not married to her are you?” Micah started in. “It sure sounded like it to me.”

I guess I deserved it so I just sat there with a smile on my face as they kept it up for a few minutes but I didn’t have to like it.

“Don’t they call that PW’d?” Micah had to keep going.

I think they got tired after a while because I stopped paying attention to them. I only deserved so much but I understood since they DID know my history with women and the troubles with them that I had brought on myself. What did they expect me to do? Yell at her? Never going to happen with anyone.

While they were winding down, a thought came to me how Kate could help. She was the only one other than me in our little Scoobie gang that knew what Daniel looked like and that may come in handy if we decide to tail him for some reason. Do we need to do that today? No, Jameson told us where he was and it was late enough at night that I was going to assume he would stay overnight. What time would he be leaving in the morning? My phone rang again, nope not my phone, Micah’s. I thought about calling Kate and decided it would be a good idea to see if she was willing to sit on Daniel for us so I dialed and got her on the second ring.

“Kate, Jake.”

“I was just going to call you. Do you think we should try to find out where Daniela and Robert are?” I had neglected to tell her that Jameson had found Daniel.

“That’s exactly what I was calling for. We know where Daniel is, or kind of know where he is. My son found his computer a little while ago on 29th street between East Paris and Patterson.”

“He’s at that new hotel that just opened out there, I don’t remember what kind it is but I know it’s on the south side of 29th just behind Sam’s.”

“How would you feel about following Daniel tomorrow? You and I are the only ones that know what he looks like and it would be a big help,” I was still a little uncertain about getting her involved.

“Do you think I should go out there tonight?”

“I’m guessing that he will stay the night but we may need you out there first thing in the morning.”

“Okay, I’m in. What do I do if he starts to move?”

“Just call me and let me know then try to keep tabs on him as long as you can. I don’t know why but I think it will be important to know where he is and what he’s doing. What time do you think you want to be there?”

“I’ll get out there about six or so. We don’t want to lose him just by my being late.”

“Don’t take too many chances, Jameson will be able to find him again if he signs on his computer and he needs it to make the whole scam work. And Kate, be careful in your travels.”

“Will do, boss. I still don’t know if I think you’re crazy or not but this little adventure is going to be fun.”

“Bye, Kate,” I hung up and didn’t know if I felt better or not. I was still troubled by getting her involved but it appeared safer to be on the offensive so it would have to be that way. At least we’d have some good stories to share when it was over. If we were still here to talk about them. Don’t think like that.

Micah’s call was from John and he was wondering where everyone was on a Friday night. He was ready to go out and have some fun but it was getting a little late for me but I wanted Chad and Micah to go since there was not much left for us to do right now. I wasn’t going to need them to follow Daniel and we had until midnight Monday until the plot was triggered so I told them to go have fun. I thought about going with them but realized that I was quite tired form the events of the day so I begged off and they got ready to leave I felt a little bad about dragging them out in separate cars but they didn’t seem to mind as I apologized. They DID understand why I asked and said they’d call me tomorrow to see if there were any new developments that needed attention. They were going to see Mike for a while and told me they’d bring him up to speed on what I’d told them and what was happening in our little adventure. I was kind of happy to see them go since you know how much I liked to be alone. And they left the beef jerky.

After they left, the paranoia came back in full force and I wondered if I should get out of my place for a hotel like Kate. Wouldn’t they have moved on me by now if they suspected me? I know, we’ve talked about that before but I’m still a little scared so I put my clothes on and slipped out the back of my place for a walk around the complex. It was still nice, around sixty degrees so a black sweatshirt was enough to wear to be comfortable. I walked the length of the building on the back sidewalk that curved around to the parking lot and just stood for a minute in the shadows looking over the lot and the rest of the complex. You can’t be too careful, especially now, and I waited for my eyes to completely adjust before I moved past the shelter of the building and into the lot. Nothing suspicious, but, for some reason, that did not lower my paranoia level at all. Maybe it’s better that it didn’t, I’d need to be overly alert for the next couple of days if I was gong to pull this off.

The walk did me good. I meandered around the whole complex over to the little strip mall that contained my coffee shop and stopped to look at the construction that was going on behind it. I was going to have to move. There was just going to be too much congestion here when the theater was done in November and the restaurant across the street would compound it I’m sure. Why does there always need to be more and more development? When I moved out here it was almost all farms and now there were none. Just more and more stores, houses, and congestion that would continue to grow until you couldn’t tell where GR stopped and Gaines started. Oh, well, I’m not a Luddite but where does it end? I was a little depressed with the idea of moving as I walked back to my place but I knew I had a few months so I stopped thinking about it. Stopped thinking about anything, really, and just walked for another half hour looking at the clear sky and marveled at the other people that were out doing the same thing. I guess all of us Michiganders get out and celebrate the coming of spring the same way; just getting out in it and enjoying. It was nice.

There was nothing that I could see that raised any suspicion on my part so I walked down the front of my building toward my end and remembered that I hadn’t brought my keys to get back in that door. Is my memory going as I age? I hope not. I NEED at least thirty more years to get everything done I want to do, like skydiving or my “lap of America” that I had planned to do but something had always postponed. I promised myself that I would do one of them when this was over; I’d probably have the time since it was looking more and more like the firm wouldn’t survive the mess that Daniel and Robert had gotten it into. I would do my best to save it but if we were connected to the Empire State Building collapse there would be nothing anyone could do. Damn, I like my job.

 The back door was still unlocked and I went in, locked it behind me, and let the fatigue wash over me. A gin and tonic sounded good so I made one, drank it, and fell asleep on the couch. It was three am when I woke up with the TV still on with a bad movie playing on the SciFi channel but I didn’t want to wake up enough to see what it was so I shut the TV off and went to bed. Rest was essential for what was coming in the next few days. And I am fifty, you know.

**Chapter 22**

Damn, no continuation of the dream for two nights in a row. I wonder if it’s gone? I hope not. The one that replaced it was of a woman that I used to work with who just showed up at my apartment with a bunch of people that I didn’t know and for a reason that I couldn’t figure out. There was a romantic involvement with her that I never thought of in real life and then it ended when they left. I know, it doesn’t make any sense and if it’s not connected to the real dream, why am I telling you about it? I don’t know really, habit I guess. What am I doing different? I wish I knew then I could get back to it and we could figure out how it fits into this whole mess. As I said before, I’ll be quite irritated if there is no connection and I think you’ll be, too. Won’t you? It could be the stress from what’s going on but who knows? Damn I’m starting to get frustrated but I need to put it aside and get this thing done. Where to start today?

Damn, I forgot about Kate going out to see if she could find Daniel. I jumped out of bed to get my cell to see if she had called. I should have put the damn thing in my bedroom instead of the kitchen so I would hear it when it rings. I didn’t hear it at all and it was about eight am, maybe that’s why I’m not dreaming the dream, I’m sleeping too well. Kate had called about 6:30 and had left a message so I accessed my voicemail and the message said she was in the parking lot of the Sam’s and could see the hotel without being seen. I had to laugh when she said that she had taken Cody’s play binoculars with her and the picture of an adult using the yellow and blue plastic binoculars on a stake out made me laugh. She was always good for one anyway, we had being skewed in the way we looked at the world in common and I appreciated it more than she knew. Maybe I should tell her? Should have a long time ago.

Nothing else from her so I assumed that she had not seen Daniel yet. I started my computer to see if there were any IM’s from Jameson and there was only one that said the computer hadn’t moved but was being used about six am but he had no new files for me yet. I wonder if they had been up all night? Probably. I had to think about what moves needed to be made over the weekend but couldn’t do it without a cup of coffee so I started the coffee maker and got in the shower with it hot enough to work out the sleep kinks. I was terribly sore from the night and I couldn’t think of why except the walk and that shouldn’t have done it. I have been running after all, and that’s a lot more strenuous. Who knows, I’m beginning to think I don’t have a clue about anything.

After the shower, I checked my computer again and there were a couple of new files there but nothing that was important that I could see. The dynamite came back into my head and I was really curious again about why they bought it. What was it going to be used for, or had it already been used? There hadn’t been anything on the news about any type of explosion that could be connected to it so I’ll bet it was still in play somewhere. Why did Daniel steal the servers but leave the paper files behind? The idea just came to me as I had my coffee and looked at the NY Times online. Did he leave the paper files behind? Harry Doan, he’s probably been taking them out for the last week. I know if I go back and take a look, they’ll be gone. I should have thought of that but what good would it have done? I had copies of all of the important ones and if I had taken them it would have pointed to someone in the office and it would have bought some major scrutiny down from Robert. Sometimes good things happen by accident. Not to me usually, but to other people. I’ve heard of it, haven’t you?

My phone rang and it startled me a little but not much. I had been expecting a call from Kate soon but I was surprised to see that it was from Tom.

“Hey Tom, what’s going on?”

“Not too much, Jake. Just wondered if there was anything new that I should know about or if the plans for Monday had changed.”

“No, nothing’s changed so far. I’ve got my assistant Kate trailing Daniel. Oh, I didn’t tell you yet, we found him in town. He’s back from Virginia and stole the office servers. Of course, he has a cover that they failed but they just needed to make sure that no one could get at any evidence.”

“Do you think I should go out and watch the truck before Monday?”

“I don’t think it’s necessary yet. But keep your phone with you, okay? If things change, we may need to act pretty fast and I want to be able to.”

“Cool, oh, do you want to borrow one of my pistols until next week? You can have the .357, I’ve taken to carrying the nine millimeter since yesterday and I think you should have one.”

“Damn, Tom, I never even thought about it. Why would I need a gun? I’m just thinking out loud. I don’t think I could ever shoot anyone. I wonder if I can?”

“Jake, take it. I’ll drive over and drop it off this morning.”

“Okay, I guess it wouldn’t hurt. Better to plan ahead.”

“I’ll see you in a couple of hours. Still have to do the grocery run this morning?”

“Yeah, damn. I almost forgot it. Thanks.”

I hung up and the phone rang again almost immediately and it was Kate this time.

“Jake, they’re moving.”

“They?”

“Yeah, Robert just showed up and picked him up. I’m heading down Patterson following them south. Damn, they’re turning toward the airport, what do you want me to do?”

“Just follow them, I guess. There is no way that I want you to try to stop them. Promise me, NOW.”

“Okay, I wasn’t going to anyway. Don’t get so worked up, geez.”

“Kate it’s just that I don’t want anything to happen to you, these guys are crazy and I don’t know what they’re going to do.”

“I do, they’re turning into one of the private hangers and I’m going to go past and see if I can find a spot to watch. If they’re leaving, there’s not much we can do.”

“Stay on the line until you see something. I’ll be here.” It was too damn early for this stuff. I wanted to jump in the car and head out there since it was only about ten minutes away but what good would that do?

“They’re talking to someone outside of the hanger but the doors are shut so I don’t think they’re going anywhere right now. No plane outside either, wait, Robert’s getting back in his car and leaving Daniel behind. Daniel’s getting in a car that was there when they pulled in. Who do you want me to follow?”

“Take Daniel again, I think he’s more involved right now and I want to know where he is.”

“Okay, we’re heading back north on Patterson again. Oh, the hanger was Kent flight service if you want to know.”

“Great job, Kate. Thanks. Where are you now?”

“Back at the hotel, Daniel just parked and went in. Do you want me to wait and watch?”

“For a while if you can. I don’t think he’s going anywhere for a while and we know how they will be leaving. Kent flight Service is the one we used when we leased the jet a few months back.”

“I know that, Jake. I just wondered how long it would be before you tumbled to it. You’re not too bright sometimes.” There was a laugh in her voice. I hoped she wasn’t enjoying this too much, it wasn’t a game.

“Let me know if anything happens in the next hour or so, then I think you can take off and go back to your hotel. You probably didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“More than you probably. Are you still having that dream?” I didn’t remember telling her about it.

“Nope, just dreaming about you.” I DID sometimes so it wasn’t a complete lie.

“I’d better not be naked.” There was still brightness in her voice.

“Not the last time, anyway.”

“Bye, Jake, call me if you need anything.”

“Bye.”

Okay, we’ve got how they are getting away and that made me feel better. What we could do about it or should do about it I didn’t know. Not yet anyway. Hadn’t had enough time to think about it. I was reaching the point of brain overload again for all of the things that I had to think about and it was worse because there were no actions to take yet. All we could do was wait. I’m not too good at it, as you know. I wonder if Jameson can hack into the computers at Kent and see if there was a flight plan filed yet? We couldn’t do anything now or it would give them time to react, I think we need to just sit tight until their schedule works to our advantage and narrows their options.

This whole thing was getting confusing so I sat down and thought about outcomes. What were we trying to do? What were we trying to accomplish? Was it enough to just stop them from collapsing any more buildings or should we be trying to make sure that Daniel and Robert get caught, too? I don’t know if I can accept these guys getting away with a hundred and fifty million dollars after all of the pain they have caused. Does this sound like it’s getting to be a crusade on my part? Yep, it is. Do you blame me? What would you do? Well, at the very least we need to stop them from doing any more damage. If we can do that I think we will have been successful. I’d like the icing on the cake, though, and have these guys in prison for the rest of their lives. Sounds like a good set of goals to me.

I went back to the files that Jameson had just sent me because something had bubbled up through my brain while I was thinking about goals and I needed to see it again to make sure that I was right. I was. There had been a new concrete floor poured in the pole barn that we had paid for about a month ago. Why would we be doing that? Damn, I’ve got it, do you? I’m not going to tell you again because this one is a little far fetched even for me but I will say that it will tie up a mystery that came up in the last set of files. Think about it, I’ll bet you can get it.

The coffee was giving me a massive case of heartburn (no, it’s not the booze from last night) so I switched over to orange juice but thought a bloody mary would be better. I didn’t have the fixings for a BM, though, so I settled for an orange juice but made a note to get the makings when I did the grocery run later this morning. Just what I need, more ways to drink. I think I’ll stop for a while when this is over to let my body dry out. Man, When you start thinking you drink too much you are, aren’t you? Well, I guess I’ll stop thinking about it. Problem solved.

The grocery run went quickly since there was not much on Charlene’s list this week and I was not thinking about food. You know I need to lose twenty pounds and the only way I know how to do it is to just stop eating completely. Well, not completely but there will be days that I won’t. You know, the weird thing is I feel a lot better when I don’t eat. How about you? It’s probably the western Michigan guilt thing happening again. Where would this world be without it? Guilt, that is. Maybe we’d be better off without it. Who knows?

When I got back, Tom was sitting in the parking lot in his Buick having a smoke and just looking around at the other buildings in the complex. Why, I don’t know. I parked and got out and he did the same with two small pouches that I knew were the carrying cases for his pistols. He had two boxes of ammunition in his left hand and gave them to me when he got to the steps that went up and down into my apartment.

“What’s going on, Tom? Been waiting here long?”

“Nah, not really, about ten minutes or so.”

“I thought you weren’t getting your car back until next week,” I unlocked the door and let us both in.

“Just a reverse lock out switch. I remembered that I had to hold the shifter a couple of times to get it to start so I took a chance and spent fifteen bucks and put one in. Started right up and has been fine since.”

“Cool, at least it was something you could fix,” I knew that most cars you couldn’t these days.

Tom walked in, sat on the couch, unzipped both cases, and opened them. He pulled out his Browning and then got the .357 out and handed to me after he had checked to make sure it was not loaded. It was heavy in my hand and I didn’t remember ever seeing this one; it was a Colt with a six inch barrel and custom rubber grips that felt good and fit well. Tom looked at me and watched as I opened the cylinder and spun it then closed it. You can’t be too careful with guns and I wanted to be sure that it was not loaded. I knew enough to not dry fire it.

“You remember when we used to shoot this out the back window at my parents house? I wish we could do that here.”

“That WAS fun, but if I knew how loud it was, I would have put in some ear plugs. I think I left about twenty percent of my hearing in your kitchen,” I laughed at the memory of shooting at pipe bombs that we had made but that hadn’t gone off when we were kids.

“Yeah, well, we were young and stupid, what more can I say? Oh, I need to go pick up the girls in about a half hour so I need to get moving. I know you know how to load it and shoot it so I won’t show you. So load the damn thing and keep it loaded.”

“You, too,” I said to him as he got up and started for the door.

“What the hell good is a gun unless you keep it loaded? What would I do, beat them to death with it?”

“You probably could, I have a problem with it, though,” I shook his hand and it seemed like it was a grave parting, like we may never meet again. Kind of strange.

Tom walked out the door, turned and waved as he went but his car wouldn’t start. Seemed like old times, and I went out with my small tool kit to see what I could do. Nothing, it turns out. He got it running before I got out to the sidewalk and I just stood there as he drove off. I couldn’t help thinking about the guns and wondered how it had come to this. I was drawn to the .357 again when I got back inside and picked it up and loaded it. It was like a piece of alien technology as I looked at it, turned it over and over in my hand and aimed it at my imaginary adversaries. Could I pull the trigger if someone was standing in front of me? I would like to think I’ve got the guts but the doubts came back the more I thought about it. After all, I don’t even kill spiders when I find them in my apartment, I take them and put them out the slider and make sure they are okay. I’m not a wuss but you might think that, I’ve never even once been in a fight, never, even as a kid.

We do need that flight plan. I thought about just calling them and asking for a confirmation since I worked for the firm and it wouldn’t look that unusual but it would give away that I knew something and it wouldn’t be good to tip my hand. The stealth method would be better, right now anyway. Even if we know, what could we do to stop them? What if I called and just cancelled the flight and the plane wouldn’t be there. What would their backup be? I stored the idea in my “last resort” file and thought that it may be possible to get away with it if I waited until late Monday but then the plane would still be there and they could still get it and get away. Man, this is getting complicated. Is it time to make a new list? Nope, not yet. Got the whole weekend. I’ll give Jameson a couple of hours to sleep and then ask him if he can get into the Kent computers and take a look.

It was almost noon and I thought about Kate and decided to give her a call to pull her off the stake out. Her phone rang and went to voicemail and I wondered why, I asked her to keep the phone on and with her and I started to get worried. Damn, what if they found her? My nerves were getting raw and every one of these little glitches set me off and got the adrenaline rushing through my system again. I’m going to sleep for a week when this is over. Should I drive out there? I didn’t really have anything else to do for the rest of the day and a ride might just be the tonic that I needed to calm down. As I said before, I love to drive and there have been many times where it has saved my sanity, I might even take up smoking again. No, bad idea, see how screwed up this has me? The phone rang, my land line, no one ever calls me on that line except Jennifer so that’s who I expected. It was Kate.

“Jake, do I have to stay out here all day?” there was no alarm in her voice.

“I just called your cell to tell you to go home and got your voicemail. Didn’t you have your phone on?” I was more stressed than I thought and it must have come through.

“I forgot the car cord and the battery died. Sorry about that. I called this phone because it’s the only one listed I the phone book and I don’t know your cell number. You know we just store the numbers without looking at them.” See, I’m not the only one that does that.

“Well, go home, or back to the hotel. I don’t think Daniel’s going anywhere soon. I think he’s going to just hole up there until Monday, or if he goes out it won’t be to leave permanently. Let’s just roll the dice on that one and get you back to safety.”

“Okay, I need a nap anyway. Call me if there is anything else I can do.”

“Keep thinking if there is anything that we need to do that we’re not doing. I’ll need you Monday, so plan on taking the day off or at least part of it. I’ll probably go in for a while but won’t be doing much work on company business. I think we need to keep up appearances, though, damn, we have to go in to work, we can’t change our routine at all or they might know we know. I’m getting a headache.”

“Geez, Jake, I’m getting a headache just listening to you. Are you okay? I’m getting worried about you. I’m coming over right now and we’ll sit and have a drink for a while. Just to talk, don’t get any ideas, you are fifty, you know.”

“You know, I wouldn’t mind having you come over but you’ll have to excuse the place, I’ve been so focused on this mess that I’ve kind of let it go. You know where it is?”

“I can find it, I’m sure. You don’t even remember, do you? I picked you up to take you to the airport when you just started at L&D. Man, Jake, you are stressed out. One neck rub coming up. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Put some clothes on before I get there.” I could see the smile through the phone.

“Thanks, Kate,” was all I had the energy to say.

I WAS losing it. My entire body felt like a coiled spring that could snap at any minute. Why? I’ve dealt well with stress my entire life and it never got this bad before; this time the stakes were so much higher than losing a job or having a child, though. One person is dead and it could be my fault. I could have stopped it if I had gone to the cops. No, we’ve talked about this already. The quote of Scarlett O’Hara from “Gone with the wind” came to mind as I sat there:” I’ll think about that tomorrow.”

I tried to straighten up the place while I was waiting for Kate, well; at least I got the pile of newspapers out to the recycle bin and took the clothes that were drying on my chairs to my room. It didn’t matter what my room looks like since I don’t think there will ever be anyone in it again except me. That’s not the stress talking, I am fifty, you know. As Kate just reminded me a few minutes ago. It was warm enough to get the windows open so I did that to let in some fresh air. I couldn’t really be sure if the place smelled or not, you know that you get used to the smells of your house and they disappear after a while? I sprayed some air freshener around just to make sure and a knock came from the door. I HAD put clothes on, shorts anyway.

“You look like hell, Jake. Are you sure you’re just fifty?” There was a look of concern on her face and she hugged me as she came in. That had never happened before.

“I feel like I’m ninety today. I wonder if I’m coming down with something?”

“Yeah, a need for a couple of bloody marys if I’m right. Go sit down and I’ll make a bunch.” She was carrying everything she needed for them. I had forgotten to get the fixings on the grocery run. I KNEW there was something I had forgotten. That’s kind of strange, remembering that you’ve forgotten.

I sat down on the couch, turned off the TV, and got back up to turn my receiver on. You remember the old equipment I have? They were made before remote controls were invented and you have to actually touch them to change the station or volume. I don’t know why I still have them except they still work. Kate came in with two of the biggest bloodys I’ve ever seen and handed one to me while she just stood and stirred hers with the pickle she had added. I think she was debating whether to sit with me on the couch and the connotations that may have in my addled brain. She just walked around for a minute, not saying anything and looked at the few pictures that I had propped up on my speakers; there was the latest one of her and Cody that she had given me the week before and it made her smile a little. It must have been about five minutes that she looked out my slider and didn’t say a word. I was getting concerned but thought better about saying anything and just sipped my bloody and watched her. It felt right to not say anything. I just waited for her.

“What do you think of me, Jake?” The question came from outside of left field, way outside.

“I think you’re a pretty cool person. I’d like to know you better before I make any concrete judgment, but from what I see I’d certainly want to put in the time.” It didn’t come out exactly like I wanted but I hoped she got the gist of it.

“I mean could you ever be interested in me, romantically?” I’m sure I looked like an idiot just sitting and moving my mouth but no words coming out. I was in shock. I think I waited too long to answer.

“God, Jake, I’m sorry. I’m going now,” She put her glass on my plastic table and headed for the door.

“Kate, wait, I didn’t mean anything by taking so much time to answer, I was just surprised. Yes, I could, can and will be.” I got up and stopped her before she got to the door, turned her around and hugged her. I didn’t know what else to do right then. You know I don’t have a lot of experience in this stuff. What do I do now? Please tell me. I’m dying here.

I didn’t need to worry. Kate kissed me. And very well.

I couldn’t think. Everything in my head was bright light and my chest was pounding as I held her closer than I should have but I was sure that if I let her go she would change her mind. I got the feeling she didn’t mind since she returned it and more. We stood by my door for what seemed like an hour but I wasn’t in any hurry to have it end so we just rocked back and forth in the embrace and she laid her head on my shoulder. I thought I saw tears in her eyes and didn’t know how to react except to have a few of my own flow down my cheek and fall into her hair as I touched her head with my own.

She picked her head up and looked at me, still hanging on for what felt like dear life and smiled the most beautiful smile that I had ever seen.

“Thanks, Jake. I needed that. You know how long it’s been since I’ve had anyone in my life and I’m sorry if I got carried away.” She pulled away a little and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and sniffled.

“I don’t know what to say except the same thing. I only have one question, when did you start to feel like this?”

“You know all of the idiots I’ve dated, and all of the times that I’ve come to you and you’ve listened and given advice when I wanted it and kept quiet when I didn’t and I just realized yesterday that maybe I should give you a chance. I was right, wasn’t I? You’re attracted to me?”

“Of course I am, but I long ago put that out of my mind since I didn’t want our friendship to end and you know I’m so insecure that I never felt that anyone like you could be interested in me. I am fifty, you know.”

“If you ever say that to me again I’ll kick you, how old are you in your head? I’m still twenty two in mine.”

“Twenty five,” was all I could say, I’m new at this.

“So there is only a three year difference in our ages. That’s how we’ll look at it from now on. Uh, how old do you think I am?” Damn, not a loaded question already, I knew this was going to be the record for the shortest romance in the history of time.

“Do you really want me to answer?”

“Yes, it’s important to me.”

“I think you’re in your early to mid thirties if I have to guess.” She looked at me with a smile so I might have said something right.

“Damn, you’re a good liar. I’ll have to watch out for that from now on. You missed, by quite a mile, I turn forty this year. I know I brought it up but can we drop the age stuff now? You’re the youngest fifty year old that I know and you might just have to grow up a little if this is going to work out.”

She took my hand, led me back to the couch, and we spent one of the most wonderful afternoons that I could remember just being together; talking when we felt like it, drinking some more bloodys and savoring the silences. Our little mystery went completely out of my mind and before I knew it, the sun had started to slant through the blinds telling me that it was getting late. I didn’t want the day to end, if it did I knew it was going to end up being a dream and I would be crushed again, could I survive another one?

Kate had fallen asleep and I laid her gently down, covered her with the blanket that Jennifer had brought me back from Scotland, and just walked around my place not knowing what to do. I know what I wanted to do, I wanted to go outside and shout to everyone how happy I was but that would only make me look more crazy wouldn’t it? Instead of that, I stretched for a minute and then went back to her side, found her hand under the blanket and held it. I couldn’t get enough of just looking at her. You’d do that too, wouldn’t you? That’s not creepy is it? Man, I’m no good at this. Is it strange for a fifty year old to act like a lovesick puppy?

I’m not going to tell you about the rest of the night because I’m a gentleman and gentlemen don’t tell. Let’s just say that I have to start the clock running again, it’s no longer two years and counting. You know what I mean. Don’t you? Geez, I hope I didn’t disappoint her. Boy, something else to think about, but a good thing.

**Chapter 23**

Forget what I said about enjoying waking up in the morning with no one in my place. This is MUCH better. Kate was curled up next to me face to face and her hand was outside the blanket touching my face and what little hair I had left. She smiled at me and said good morning and it was one. I hadn’t expected this. Are the unexpected romances the best ones? I have something to admit. In the last three years there had never been anyone in my place that had spent the night, in my bed that is, and it feels good. I don’t want to get ahead of this but a beautiful woman is lying next to me and she made it clear that she wants to be here. VERY clear. Oh, the dream. Well, last night there were no dreams, none at all. No Dali, no Karen, no Jennifer Garner, none. Are you disappointed? I’m not, not yet anyway, can you give me a couple of days to see if they come back? If they do, you’ll be the first to know.

I watched her when she got out of bed and headed to the bathroom and all I could do was grin like an idiot. I got up and found a t-shirt and a pair of shorts she could wear and thought that one of my fantasies was going to be realized this morning. I’ve always wanted to have someone that I could spend a Sunday morning with, reading the paper and sipping our coffee, and being lazy figuring out what to do for the day. Well, let’s not get to far ahead here. What if that’s not what she wants to do? Man, stop thinking so much. Kate came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her and I was just a little disappointed. But she had taken a shower and what did I expect? I gave her the clothes that I had picked out and she looked genuinely happy that I had made the choices. I had never let anyone wear my Manchester United jersey before and it looked better on her that it ever had on me. Okay, you can see the flaw here, can’t you? I’m getting carried away already and when I need to take it slow and let things develop. Shared emergencies develop bonds between people and how long do those kinds of bonds last? Jake, just enjoy this one day and let the rest of the days come if they do. Cripes.

I won’t describe the rest of the morning but let’s just say it came very close to being an ideal one, we did have coffee and read the paper (two actually, she knew where to get the NY Times and even went out to get it) and did just laze around until early afternoon. It WAS bliss for me but the project started to intrude as we sat there and I looked at her. What if something happened to her from the things that I have started in motion? No, I can’t start thinking like that or I won’t be able to make the right decisions when they need to be made.

“Okay, I know you’re thinking about what’s going on so let’s talk about. Is there anything important that I didn’t get in the capsule version?” She held my hand and looked at me with the face that I had come to realize meant business.

“I didn’t tell you about some dynamite that was charged to the firm in some files that Jameson had gotten from Daniel’s computer but that’s about it.”

“Could it be for one of our projects? I mean, we boss a lot of construction that might use it.” I had been so focused on the sinister use that this fact had not even occurred to me.

“You know, I never really thought there may be a legitimate use. Damn, thank you. Maybe there isn’t anything wrong with the dynamite.” I had to reconsider my earlier assumptions. What do you think?

“I need to go, Jake.” Kate got up and headed back to my room to get changed and as always I thought I’d done something wrong to make her act that way. I stared at her back, wondering if I should say something.

“Why? Do you have other plans?” Geez, I hope that didn’t sound to her like it did to me; very needy.

She came out of my room still wearing my jersey but had traded her jeans for my shorts and gave me a look that I couldn’t read, if this was going to go on I’ll have to get better at that. She just shook her head as she looked at me and I knew it had sounded needy.

“Do you want me to keep paying for the hotel room on your credit card? Yeah, I used your card number to rent the room. You don’t mind, do you?” She looked a little worried.

“Not at all, in the confusion I forgot to give it to you. Are you coming back here?” That did sound needy.

“Of course, damn, Jake, you ARE going to have to get better at this. I understand, though, you’re not really my type,” she came to me, pulled me up from the couch and kissed me. The kind of kiss that was a blend of intimacy and passion but very short. Do you know what I mean? It’s hard to explain.

“Come with me and we’ll get some lunch while we’re out. I need to pick up my suitcase and you have no food here for dinner. We can stop at the grocery and I’ll make you my Portobello mushroom caps for dinner.” It had only been a few hours since her revelation but it felt comfortable to have her with me. My doubts were rising, though, on whether she should stay through Monday. I didn’t want anyone second guessing the decisions I would have to make, not Kate, Tom, or the guys. A little conceited, I know. But you know me by now and shouldn’t be surprised.

The trip to the hotel and the grocery store was uneventful except that the same families seemed to be at Meijers and I couldn’t resist commenting as I had before. You remember about the hunter and gatherers and the parents teaching the kids about that stuff. Well, Kate didn’t think it was as funny as I did and I think you did. It WAS funny. Not quite our first argument but I could see her point. She always took Cody shopping with her. Oops.

We got back to my place about two, and she put the groceries away (how did she know where they went?) and busied herself with another pass through the paper and looking for some paper to write on for some reason. I didn’t want to intrude so I just sat, watched, and thought about the day we were going to have Monday. After a while, she moved over next to me, took the paper out of my hand and showed me the pad she had been using.

“You know you’re not too organized so I thought I’d try to do some of it for you. I put down what we know and what our reactions should be. We do need to start getting out in front them, though. If we knew when the flight is scheduled, we’d know a lot about the timing. Is there a way to find that out?” She was thinking out loud and sounded a lot like me. Her list is a good one.

“I’ll IM Jameson and see what he can do.” She looked at me with a face that was full of concern.

“You’ve got you son involved in this? Jake, how could you?” She sat up straight and looked at me with a look that felt like contempt.

“I’m as concerned as you are but there was just no other way. Who else can I trust more? He’s the best I’ve ever seen with computers and without him we’d be sitting here with a few paper files still trying to puzzle this whole mess out. He’s MY son and I have to believe that what I’ve exposed him to is worth it. Please don’t question me about it.” There were boundaries, after all.

“I’m sorry. I know you wouldn’t do anything unnecessary, but I can’t imagine getting Cody involved in something like this,” she had softened a little. “I’m not questioning your judgment even though it looks that way; please don’t be too mad at me.”

“Kate, there is one thing that always want from any relationship and that is equality. I want it to be equal emotionally and intellectually and never want there to be a time that either of us can’t say what’s on our minds. Don’t be careful around me, okay? I’m a big boy and can take it.”

She leaned over and gave me a hug that turned passionate. How else can I say that and still be a gentleman? Let’s just say the next thing I remember (or will tell you about) is getting ready for dinner. The mushrooms were great by the way.

Things were going great until she found the gun. Can you say shit hitting the fan? I was meaning to tell her about it but with the start of our relationship going so well it just slipped my mind. Man, this stuff is harder than I remember it. Isn’t there supposed to be a grace period where you get a pass on some of this? I understand that some people have an aversion to guns in any form but I’ve never been one of those people. I still believe that it’s the person holding the gun that does the killing not the gun. If they want to kill, the gun just makes it easier. Boy does that make me sound too right-wing? I don’t buy that hooey but gun ownership is one of those things that I believe should be a personal choice, just like wearing helmets when you ride a motorcycle or using whatever substances you choose. Then you suffer the consequences of your actions. Personal responsibility is one of the things that I’ve based my life on after all. Maybe this relationship WON’T work out.

We talked about that one for over an hour and I don’t think either of us budged an inch but we did get to understand each other a little better. I think that is part of a good relationship; or is it just wishful thinking? Who knows, I’ve never had successful one so how can I know? She was still here so maybe things weren’t as bad as I thought. She did look at me differently or was I imagining it? I told you I thought too much about this stuff. She was going to stay another night, after all, and the only thing that I hoped for was that it was not going to be on the couch. Monday was coming faster than I wanted it to and the project was intruding more and more as the day passed; I hoped I wasn’t getting too distant but I think she was withdrawing some, too. I think we’d better take two cars to work in the morning.

We did what couples do (I know, getting ahead) for the rest of the day and just enjoyed being I the same room together; watched some TV and put Peter Gabriel in the DVD player and watched “Secret World Live” from start to finish. I have a question for you, is it weird to repeat patterns in relationships? I mean this particular Peter Gabriel DVD was an important part of my relationship with Karen (we were intimate with it playing often) and now it is taking on the same function with Kate. Or is it just because we both like PG? There I go again, thinking too much, I always do that. But you know that by now. Even though it has been a long day, I knew I wasn’t going to sleep well, Monday was coming.

**Chapter 24**

Damn, she’s now Kate. The men that were in the rocks were still standing over the little depression we were in but I still couldn’t see their faces over my shoulder; the sun was too bright. Kate was looking at me when a canteen of water landed at my left hand and all I could do was look at it for a minute, then looked back over my shoulder to see that the men had turned and were looking back out across the plain toward where we had seen the pursuing archers last. Kate’s eyes were asking for a drink but the damage from the arrow wound in her shoulder wouldn’t let her reach the canteen without using all of the energy she had left. The men were still looking away so I thought I’d chance picking up the canteen and giving her a drink, I needed one, too. Kate did her best to sit and only spilled a little as she tried to make her lips move to fit the spout but I didn’t do much better; it was warm but tasted good anyway. An arrow slammed into the spot that Kate had been lying missing her by not more than a foot. I pushed her back down to the ground and covered her as I twisted to look back in the direction the arrow had come and saw that one of the men had taken one in the side and fell to his knees but was working it out as the other knocked his own and returned the fire. Jake, Jake.

“Jake, damn, Jake, wake up, it’s 8:30, we need to get going,” my eyes opened but the look on Kate’s face said I wasn’t quite there yet. She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her hand on my chest stroking it lightly wearing a t-shirt that Jennifer had gotten me when she was in the Virgin Islands for a conference. Again, it looked better on her than it did on me. Is she going to wear all of my clothes? I hope so.

The routine was a little different, you know how it is when you have a big change in your life, all of the mundane stuff takes on a new look and feeling. That’s what was happening this morning. Was I feeling crowded? Am I able to let anyone into my life? I’ll have to reserve judgment on that for now I think, it’s still too new and as I said; I don’t want to get too far ahead of things here. Just remind me to not sabotage this by being an idiot, okay? She was still smiling at me after all so maybe it will be all right. Kate had brought a bag with her for her stay at the hotel and had thought to pack a set of work clothes; her navy blue suit that I’ve always liked. Can I say that now or will that be too creepy? I mean, can I say that I found her attractive before we were involved? She was the one that started this after all.

I was surprised that it didn’t take much longer for the two of us to get ready than it normally did for me solo. We worked like a well oiled machine and read each other’s minds when we needed to move aside to use the one mirror that I have in my bathroom. It DID help that I really don’t care what I look like and my only preening is limited to running a brush through what’s left of my hair. I AM fifty after all. Oops, I promised her I wouldn’t say that anymore, can I still think it? About twenty minutes after Kate had awakened me we were going out the door and I had just an obscene grin on my face. I was happy, at least I think that’s what this is; I don’t remember it too well as you know. I walked her to her car and kissed her, hoping that the neighbors would see since Kate is such a babe and the first one that had stayed the night in my bed. You remember that? Yep, three years. I asked her to take it easy so I could follow her and she said she would but I knew better; she was probably the only person I knew that drove as fast as I did but I was better at it and had the car for it. Her mom-mobile was a ’96 Accord that was a nice car but not built for the things she asked it to do. She got about he same mileage out of tires and brakes that I did which was not good; I think the best I’ve gotten from a set of front tires is about 11,000 miles. That, from 65,000 mile tires. Oh, well. Joe Walsh was the sound track for the way in since he always makes me smile and with the budding relationship with Kate my face was going to hurt by the time I got to work.

We were almost there when they got her. No, maybe that’s an assumption but at the last corner a car ran a stop sign and hit her just in front of the driver’s door and by the time I got to her the person from the other car was gone. I was dialing 911 before I stopped running, expected the worst and saw it; there was blood running out from her hair, dripping down her ear and she wasn’t moving. DAMN THEM! I couldn’t get the door open so I ran around the back of the car to the passenger’s side front door, opened it and climbed in to see there was more blood that had splashed across the inside of the windshield. The phone picked up and I think I screamed at the operator, I don’t really remember and the weird thought ran through my head that I hoped the tapes wouldn’t get played on the news; I knew I wouldn’t come off well but I needed them to get there and save her.

I threw my phone on the floor and started to unbuckle her belt but thought better of it; it was holding her up and I knew enough to not move her after and accident like this but I needed to know how she was. There was glass everywhere from the shattered side window and I gently tried to brush some of it off her, I didn’t know what else to do. I picked up her hand and felt for a pulse and got one, at least she was still alive but the blood continued to pour from somewhere under her hair and I hoped it was just a scalp wound like I had gotten crashing on my skates, they bleed profusely but are not bad, why her? I was still holding her hand when the paramedics slid to a stop behind our cars and I wasn’t going to leave her for any reason, they could just go to hell. The noise from them opening her door must have gotten through; she opened her right eye, looked at me and said “ouch”.

“Kate, Kate, are you okay?” I know, lame but let’s see you in this situation.

“What the hell happened?” She tried to look at me but the paramedics held her head still as they put a collar around her neck and pulled it tight. Another one came around to my side of the car and very gently asked me to let him do his job but it took two times of the asking for me to understand and react by letting go of her hand and climbing out of the car. This was REALLY personal now; those pricks were not going to get away with this if I have to hunt them down myself. The .357 was in my briefcase and I wondered if I was going to need it. I caught Kate’s eye over the shoulder of the paramedic that was working through her door and she gave me a little smile that cracked the dried blood that covered the side of her face. They were trying to lay her down on the backboard that a third paramedic had brought from the ambulance and while I couldn’t see her I thought to go to the other car and check it, at least get the license number to see if Jameson could trace it and find out if we could tie it back to Daniel and Robert. The driver was still there.

I yelled for the paramedics that they needed to get here quick and one of them left Kate and saw what I did, a kid that couldn’t be more than seventeen lying on the front seat, barely moving but still showing life. The paramedic reached for his radio and called another ambulance and was told there was one in route and would be there in a few minutes. The doors of the old Impala opened easily and the girl looked up at both of us with confusion still on her face but no injuries that I could see; no blood anyway but the seat belt was hanging from it’s clips so there would be other injuries. The steering wheel was bent over at the top that told me the impact had been severe and I would guess at least one broken wrist and probably internal injuries. Kate was already on the stretcher and being wheeled to the waiting ambulance as the other pulled up and three more paramedics swarmed over the Impala and the young woman that was in it so I left them and returned to my car to get it to the parking lot that bordered the street and out of the way. I WAS going to ride to the hospital with her and grabbed my briefcase, locked the car, and ran back to the back of the ambulance. They TRIED to keep me out but Kate wasn’t going to have it; it felt good to have her coming out of it.

“Robert and Daniel?” was all she said and I knew what she meant.

“Don’t talk to much,” I don’t know why I said that but that’s what I’m supposed to say, right? “I thought so at first but now I think it was just an accident, the other driver is tiny little girl that looks about seventeen.”

“Is she okay?” Just like Kate.

“She’s moving and talking to them but she wasn’t wearing a seatbelt so I’ll bet she’s hurt pretty badly.” Even though the accident wasn’t her fault I could hear the concern and guilt in her voice.

“She just didn’t stop, I didn’t see her until it was too late to get out of the way,” a tear fell from her eye as she lay there and I knew she was more concerned for the girl than herself. I brushed it aside and felt like I was falling deeper for her as we sat there waiting for them, they had not started an IV so she must be okay, the relief pushed me over and I hugged her as gingerly as I could and my tear joined hers. I had almost lost her. What would I do if I did? The paramedic assigned to this ambulance came over, got in, and closed the door and we got started to the hospital. Kate did what she could to get his attention but was strapped to the board and couldn’t move much so I asked him to move to her.

“Is she going to be okay?” Her voice sounded small and the fireman had to lean over to hear her.

“I think so, she was talking to us and knew what had happened and that is a good sign. She dropped her Ipod and was reaching for it when she came to the stop sign. This happens all of the time, unfortunately, if it’s not an Ipod it’s a phone or a drink or a cigarette. I wish people would just drive.” The paramedic sounded weary like he’d seen this one too many times.

The rest of the ride to the hospital was silent and I just held Kate’s hand and watched her as some of the bumps looked like they were causing her pain but she could still smile at me when I caught her eye. When we got to the hospital, the normal confusion reigned and we had to fight again to keep from being separated; it was just not going to happen. I stayed with her until we were in one of the exam rooms; she wanted me to go out and call Todd (the ex) to tell him what had happened and ask him to keep Cody for a few more days until she felt better. I had forgotten about our little mystery but it came back full force when I remembered it was Monday. Today was the day.

I called Todd and he was cordial since I was her boss and there was no way that he could know we were involved; I wonder what the reaction will be when she tells him? He seemed pretty concerned but I didn’t expect him to come see her since he had already remarried; I don’t think she wanted that anyway. The one thing that I needed to get across to him was that Kate wanted to tell Cody what had happened, she didn’t want him to hear it secondhand; it would scare him less I’m sure. I left it at that and made the second call that she had asked me to make, the one to her parents who I had met once when they stopped to see where she worked. They took it well, too since I could be honest with them and tell them that she was going to be okay but they made me promise that I’d update them every couple of hours and especially if there was any change they should know about. I said my goodbyes and headed back to the exam room and Kate was gone. I walked over to the nurse’s station and asked about her and was told that she had been taken to x-ray. They were very nice for being so busy and one of them even offered to take me to her but I knew my way around from the multiple times that Charlene’s parents had been there near the end of their lives. I just hoped I didn’t run into her; Monday was one of the days that she worked in the lab at the hospital. I didn’t know how she’d react if she knew I was involved again; she had taken my “affair” with Karen better than I had expected her to but who knows now?

Kate was coming back up the elevator as I was getting ready to go down so I followed her back to the exam room. The restraints had been removed from her neck and it made me feel good to see her able to move again; she reached for my hand and looked at me with a face that I knew was going to be bruised and purple later. A doctor came in with the x-rays and spouted the cliché that she had been lucky and I immediately didn’t like him but I could tell that he was skilled when he removed the bandage from her head and stapled the wound closed. Eight of them. I remembered how much it had hurt when they did mine from my skate crash and her reaction confirmed what I had already thought, she was tougher than I was. She didn’t flinch at all when he was pulling the wound together or stapling and I could remember the pain had made a few tears drip from my eyes. Not hers. I wonder if she could beat me in a fight? I told you I go off on tangents at times. This is one of them.

The doctor wanted to admit her for an overnight observation but she wasn’t going to have any of it; she volunteered that I could take better care of her than she would get being admitted and I could just smile at that. She trusted me and it made me feel good. I called a cab after I called work to let them know about the accident with the additional story that I just happened to be following behind her when it happened and would take her home. I had to think quickly so none of her friends at the firm would go to her house to see how she was since she wouldn’t be there. I was taking her back to my place and I hoped the story that she was just shaken up would hold. We could sort it all out later; anyway, I had to put this in the back of my mind to be sharp for what was to come today. Relief is a great feeling. I kept the cab waiting at my place while I took her inside and got her set up on the couch so she could rest while I was gone to get my car and then headed back out toward work. I think we’ll have to tell our co workers about our relationship, huh? I could see problems down the road if we didn’t but that may be moot anyway; we may not even survive the day.

I had time to think on the ride back to my car and it seemed like it was much later that noon; but my phone had to be right and the clock on the meter of the cab confirmed it. Twelve hours. That’s all we have until the deadline and I knew I needed to get our moves figured out soon or we’d be too late. That building is not going to fall. I made the promise to myself and had to keep repeating it to stop thinking about Kate and it did work some. The first thing I wanted to do when I got back to my place was go over the details of what we knew and figure out where to apply our resources. Damn, I’m talking like business again. It IS hard to not use the jargon when you’ve done it for so many years. I’ll try to speak in plain English. Apply our resources means who is going to be where and doing what. How do we cover all of the things that are going to be happening? I hadn’t heard from Tom yet but I knew he’d do his job. I just needed to leave it to him and wait for a report. I would call him once I got home and made sure that Katherine was okay. Oh, that’s her given name. Katherine, like Katherine the Great. I know, I’m getting carried away but I haven’t felt this way in a long time. Sorry, Karen.

When I got back to my place, Kate was up and sitting at my computer and I was just a little upset both since she shouldn’t be up but also to have someone using my computer felt like an invasion of privacy. Hey, I’ve lived alone for a long time and you know how I feel about it; I know I’ll have to get over it if this relationship is going to work but I can still have feelings, can’t I? The side of her face that had hit the window had some small scratches that I hadn’t seen before and was starting to turn that ugly yellow/blue/black that comes from a bad bruise and I had to resist touching it. It had to hurt. I hope the Vicodin’s helped but that she doesn’t need them all, well, you just found another of my vices. Please try to not remember it. Thanks.

“You’re son is looking for you, I started the IM program and he was waiting. He says he has something on the flight plan.” I just looked at her and I hoped she didn’t see the violation in my face.

“How did you get into that program? I’m sure I never gave you the password.”

“Jake, I know all of you passwords,” she looked up at me but didn’t smile. “Geez, you always use one of three: racecars, cars1043, or 1043cars. You should be more creative or doesn’t your old man’s brain have any storage left?” My face must have betrayed how I felt since her only response was “I’m sorry.”

“Kate, I’m just not used to having people get into my private files. You know how I feel about it; I don’t know if you’ve earned the right to do this.” Exactly the wrong thing to say. Can you say idiot?

She just looked at me and I couldn’t figure out if she was hurt or pissed. Pissed, yep, pissed. She got up and stared at me for a second, then walked over and sat on the couch and went into the “thousand yard stare” that I had seen before when the volcano was bubbling. I wasn’t going to give in, well, okay, I am.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said it that way,” I sat next to her and tried to hold her hand, didn’t work.

“No, you’re right. I should have asked first. I’m sorry, Jake. I haven’t done this in a while either and I guess I’ve made assumptions I shouldn’t have. I’ll ask next time. Will there be a next time?” I heard real concern in her voice.

“Katherine, you know this is going to be effort on both our parts,” I picked up her hand and she let me. “There are going to be many times, if that’s okay with you. As I said before, don’t be careful around me. Be the Kate that I have the feelings for and think is one of the neatest people I’ve ever met. Okay?”

She leaned into me for just a minute, looked at me and said “well, let’s get moving on the flight plan.” That was what needed to happen.

I got on the program and IM’d Jameson to see if he was still on.

‘jameson, you there?’

‘is that you this time? who was on earlier? i know your style and almost dumped everything and made a run for it.’ Kate looked at me with the “I’m sorry” look and I just smiled back at her.

‘yep, it’s me. that was my assistant, kate. i’ll tell you about it later.’

‘okay, i’ve got the flight plan, it’s in your e-mail. no, i didn’t read it.’

‘thanks. something big is happening tonight so shut down and be careful.’

‘will do. oh, i’ve got another note that went to the virginia computer before he went dark.’

‘when did he go dark?’

‘about an hour ago, but he hasn’t showed up anywhere so i think he’s not moving yet. do you want me to trace him if he comes on?’

‘only if they can’t find you.’

‘lol…dad, it’s not possible for them to do that. i’ll be okay.’

‘if you get anything, call me on the cell. time is going to be important today.’

‘got you. talk to you later.’

‘bye.’

I started my Yahoo mail and scrolled down though the unopened ones to find the two that Jameson had sent me and hoped that the kid was as good as he thought he was. So far he had been but, no, no but, he is that good and I’m more scared for Daniel and Robert than I am for him. I’m sure if he wanted to he could crash all of the computers in the world and sit home and laugh about it. I hope he still has the sense of right and wrong that he was taught growing up or the internet is in trouble.

Kate got up and came back from the kitchen with two glasses of ice water and it was weird that he was starting to read my mind already. But also nice in a way. We sat and opened the flight plan file and found that the jet was scheduled to depart for Florida and then a leg that got them to the Cayman Islands by early tomorrow morning. They were going to be out of the country before the collapse. Jameson on the IM:

‘dad, just got an outgoing from the virginia computer. it’s to another one over in cutlerville near 100th. just says execute 2100 and gives a set of coordinates that i don’t understand. the note’s on its way.’

‘okay.’

I knew he couldn’t resist staying with the project.

I looked in my inbasket for the other letter that came back to Daniel from the NSA and opened it. I expected there would be some negotiation of the ransom demands but that wasn’t the case. The NSA had agreed to pay the entire 100 million and would transfer it later in the afternoon. Beef and Beefier must be doing their jobs in clearing the way. One thing I didn’t understand was an attachment that Jameson had sent that said that the acceptance note was open; it was going to be traceable with much less effort than they were currently putting in and the IP address was a new one in Virginia that we hadn’t seen before. I know what it is. They are giving up the company that paid the first fifty million as a smoke screen. You remember them? The Arabs that wanted to buy the project for whatever use but you know it wasn’t going to be good. When did this letter come in? Damn, that’s right, Jameson said it came in about an hour ago.

The coordinates were the same ones that I had seen earlier so it looked like the Empire State was still the target. Damn, and the execute 2100 can only mean that the bastards are still going to drop it even after getting paid. Okay, calm down, how do we stop this? We’ve only got until nine. Crap.

Okay, okay, things aren’t that bad. We know when they’re leaving and from where. We know how they are going to trigger the collapse and where it will be triggered from. We just need to figure out what our counter moves need to be. I wonder if Jameson could steal the money back from them? Damn, I never thought of that until just now. Should I get him started on that? Kate was just looking at me since I had the last two conversations in my head and had fallen silent to the outside world and I had the blank look that I get when I think. I know you guys think the blank look is permanent but it’s not. I hope.

I tabled the idea to get Jameson going on the money since there would be time for that later and I needed him to be my eyes and ears with Daniel for now. That was more valuable but I couldn’t think of anything that could happen that could derail our plans. I was starting to get a little confident that we could at least stop the collapse but I needed to get Tom out there to observe and make sure things didn’t change.

I dialed him and it went through.

“Tom, Jake. What are you doing right now?” Why do I always start that way?

“I’m on my way out to 100th, I didn’t hear from you and thought it would be a good idea to get out there. I don’t have anything else to do and it’s a nice day.”

“Cool, kinda thought you’d do that. Just watch for now, but if you see them loading the electrodes in the holes they drilled yesterday call me. Fast. That means they are getting started with the collapse.”

“I’m not stupid, Jake, you’ve explained how the thing works and I’m not fifty; I still have my memory,” he laughed and I did, too, he was getting close to the barn and hung up.

It was almost four and I left messages with Micah, Mike and Chad to call me as soon as possible since I had started to think that we should at least get someone out to the airport to watch the plane. The flight plan said they were leaving about seven but I knew that could change in an instant and even though there wasn’t anything we could do we could watch and find out who was on the plane. That might be information that would have some value in the future. I’ll have to ask Mike to bring the video camera and get a video of whoever gets on the plane. Damn, I need to start taking notes again. Nope, Mike has to work tonight; maybe Chad or Micah can borrow it? Call me back guys.

They did. Micah first and then Chad. They both wondered why I hadn’t called them all day and I filled them in on what had happened to Kate this morning. From their reactions, I remembered that they had never met Kate and I hadn’t had time to gloat about having a relationship going yet. Hey, all of us have trouble starting and maintaining relationships but Chad had one going along with mine. It was the first time since I had met these guys that any of us except Micah had any sort of relationship and it did feel kind of strange. Would this affect our friendships? Man, more stuff to think about, but not today. Oh, Kate had never met them either. What would she think? I looked at her with those thoughts racing and she knew something was going on in my head.

“Well, when do I get to meet them?” She CAN read my mind.

“Meet who?” I couldn’t resist the chance to screw with her. I told you I’m strange.

“Chad, John, Micah, Mike, Tom, and the rest of your friends.”

“Oh, probably never, I don’t think they’d like you too much,” I was keeping a straight face. Is this too mean? Yep, too mean.

“Jake, you wanted me to be honest with you, right? Well, this isn’t funny. Don’t try to reach so much to be funny. You don’t have to. I think people will like you even if you pull back a little and don’t try so hard.” I was slapped but it didn’t hurt; she was really trying to help. Do you think I need it?

“Katherine, thank you. I’m still new at this but I’m also pretty comfortable with you; that’s why I joke with you,” I really meant it.

She touched my face tenderly then slapped it.

“Just don’t let it happen again because I bite. And not in good ways. Well, sometimes in good ways but I won’t if you keep it up.”

Chad and Micah agreed that someone should sit on the jet out at Kent and with discussion they volunteered to be the ones to do it after they picked up the camera from Mike. I filled them in on the rest of the timetable that we had gotten from Daniel’s computer the misdirection that was being played on the Arabs, and the fact that the government had agreed to pay without negotiation seemed strange to them, too. They had to stop for some Stroh’s on the way but were sure that they could be there before five and I started to get a craving for a cold one, too. Hey, it’s almost the normal time to start and Mondays ARE usually a night out at the bar; you remember the Monday routine? Catch up on the happenings of the weekend? Man, you’ve got a worse memory than I have and I’m fifty, you know?

I had completely forgotten about dinner but Kate hadn’t. We had missed breakfast and lunch and I wouldn’t have noticed without her starting to re-heat the leftovers and I wondered when the pains from the accident were going to hit her. I got up and went to her, her sleeveless blouse revealed how bad the bruises were going to be on her shoulder and I stopped her, had her put down the pan she was holding, and lifted the cloth to see that her side hadn’t fared much better. How the hell was she still walking around? I took her hand and led her back to the couch without a word and she let me lower her against the back pillows with just a small grimace. It was my turn to take care of her. And I did.

She fell asleep a little after six and I knew she would be out for the night. At least I hoped she would with all of the pain she had been masking. One tough woman was all I could think when I stood over her and looked at the bruises that seemed to be changing color in front of my eyes. The phone rang and it was Mike.

“Jake, what’s gong on?”

“I thought you had to work tonight?”

“Without you guys here the place is empty so they closed the upstairs and I asked them to cut me so I could have some fun. Have you talked to Chad or Micah?” He sounded ready.

“Yep, they’re out at the airport watching the jet. Oh, crap, you haven’t heard about today, have you?” I waded through all of the happenings of the day for a second time and got him up to speed.

“What’s the deal with your assistant? When did this whole thing happen? Did she stay the night and not on the couch?” I could hear the smile in his voice as he said it.

“I’ll fill you in later. Let’s just say she’s on my couch now but won’t spend the night there,” I had a smile in mine, too.

“Okay, I’m going to try to find Chad and Micah out there and watch along with them. Can we stop them if we can figure it out?” He was having too much fun.

“You guys better not get hurt, you know how bad I am with guilt,” I knew he understood what I was talking about.

“Not a problem, Jake, we’ve got too much fun coming up for the summer and I’m not going to be the one that screws that up.”

“Bye, Mike.” He hung up and I plugged my phone back in to make sure it would be ready when the crunch came. It came too soon.

The IM chime on my computer rang and I knew it was Jameson since I had never gotten an IM from anyone else that I could remember.

‘dad, you there?’

‘yep’

‘a new IM just went out from the Virginia computer. it’s moved to the airport, by the way. all it says is change execute 1900. is it important?’

‘i think so, stay on and keep tabs on them.’

I looked t the clock and it was almost 6:40 (18:40) and if the message he had intercepted is right they were going to collapse the building in a little less than twenty minutes. Why had they moved it up? I called Chad and he answered.

“Chad, is there any activity around the plane?’

“Shit, Jake, you scared the hell out of me. I’m glad I had the phone on vibrate or it would have given us away.” He was whispering and I didn’t know why. “Yeah, us. Mike got here and we had a brainstorm on how to stop the plane. We’re lying under it right now trying to flatten one of the tires. Your boys showed up about ten minutes ago in a hurry and we needed to do something.” There was something in his voice that wasn’t fear but I couldn’t recognize it.

“Get it done and get out of there,” I was whispering too for some reason.

“Okay,” was the last thing I heard except a loud noise that sounded too much like a gunshot.

I dialed Tom to get an update on the activity at the barn but it went straight to voicemail and I started to panic but left a message for him to call me ASAP. What the F to do. I stood in my apartment vibrating with uncertainty but a plan started to form and I moved for the door on a dead run but Kate stopped me with a small cry. I stopped and turned back to my living room to see her standing by the couch looking for her purse.

“I’m going with you,” her face seemed adamant.

“I can’t do this now, Kate, I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I left her standing there as I grabbed my keys and went out the door. I knew she wouldn’t be able to catch me with her injuries and I didn’t want her with me for this. I knew what I had to do if I couldn’t get Tom. I had left my briefcase in the car when I got home and dug through it for the .357 and put it on the passenger’s seat as I pulled out of the complex. It was 6:50 by my phone clock and I called Tom back as I ran the stoplight at Kalamazoo and just about t-boned a pickup that has the same idea coming from the other direction. I was about five minutes away and the traffic was not helping; you remember what I said about all of the development out here? Well, the worst part is all of the damn cars; get the hell out of the way!

The Mazda was doing it best to take the abuse that I was heaping on it but some of the noises that were coming back said that this was going to be it last drive; the road was in bad shape out this way and going over ninety was beating it to death. I swerved over the double yellow to miss a truck that was turning into an orchard and almost drove it into the ditch but the rear end slid just enough to push it back to the southbound lane without losing any time. I called Tom again and still no answer. Damn, damn, damn, I’m not going to make it, Tom pick up the damn phone. 6:57, I had a mile left to go and I still didn’t know what I was going to do when I get there. I picked up the gun and put it in my lap so I could find it and came screaming up past 92nd with all four tires in the air as I cleared the crown of the road. The car landed hard and everything shook from it; I lost the gun down by me feet but couldn’t stop to look for it at over a hundred. 100th street was coming up fast and I got on the brakes hard but they were protesting and not slowing enough so I leaned on them as I shifted down to third and started to slide right so I was looking right at the barn as I came to the intersection. Damn, the electrodes are in place!

I didn’t even look for traffic as I pulled the shift down to second, let off the brakes, and the car shot straight into the driveway of the barn. I knew what to do. I floored the gas and aimed right at the back of the truck and the electrodes that were connected to it with wrist thick cables. The car jumped over a small curb and I held on and braced myself as my Mazda slammed into the electrodes and over them into the back of the truck. It was all slow motion as the air bag fired and everything inside the car rushed to smash itself on the inside of the windshield in a cloud of debris. Then silence.

I was stunned by the impact and couldn’t move. My car had sheared off part of the box of the truck and sparks and smoke were everywhere, filling the inside of the barn and the Mazda. Intellectually, I knew I should get out of the car but it was all still slow motion and I was having trouble moving my left arm at the shoulder. I looked at it and couldn’t see anything wrong with it, there was a face at the window that I think I recognized but couldn’t be sure.

The door of the car wrenched open and someone was leaning in to unbuckle the belt. My senses were coming back and I could see it was Tom but what was he doing here? He wasn’t with me was he? The haze cleared and I started to help to get out, we needed to get out and right now. I pushed Tom out of the way and fell out of the door and the pain was white hot as I landed on my injured shoulder.

“Tom, your .357 is on the driver’s floor, get it! We need to go NOW!” I was screaming at him for something that had just become clear to me; we needed to get as far away from this building as we could. Fast. I tried to get up and get moving but needed Tom to grab me under the arms and help get me to my feet. He dragged me with as much help I could give until we were across the street and falling down the ditch into the stagnant water that filled the bottom of it. Just in time. A huge flash lit up the sky over us and the loudest sound I had ever heard blew the air out of our lungs as the fireball rose. The trees above us were moving from the blast and debris that skimmed over our heads and rained down; splashing in the water and peppering us with steel, wood, and concrete. As the splashing stopped, we dragged ourselves to the top of the ditch to see a crater where the barn had been. The truck and my poor car had crushed together and you couldn’t see where one started and the other ended from where the wreckage lay. It. must have been over two hundred feet away from where I had slammed into it. You know what the dynamite was for now? Daniel and Robert weren’t going to leave any witnesses, or anything else for that matter. The only thing I could think of was that all of my music was gone.

“Jesus, Jake, you just about ran over me,” Tom looked at me and his voice felt like it was filtered through cotton.

I laid there and had a hard time reacting when Tom talked or when my phone started vibrating in my pocket. The doorbell of it’s ring chimed and Tom had to reach into my left jean pocket and fish it out. My arm was still not working and he put it in my right hand with it opened so I could answer it. The screen had been shattered in the crash but the phone still worked, I could barely hear Chad through the cotton.

“Jake, what the hell’s going on? We saw the explosion from the airport. Was it the barn?” Chad sounded excited but his words were still kind of abstract to me, they weren’t making sense.

“Jake, you there?” Tom looked at me, took the phone back and talked to Chad for what seemed like an hour but the only interest I had was to look up at the sky and watch the trees move in the breeze. I think I’m in shock.

“Jake, we need to get moving.” Tom leaned over me and waved his hand over my eyes. “This place is going to be crawling with people real quick. I can hear sirens so we don’t have much time, Jake, let’s go!” He half picked me up and luckily some of the haze was lifting from my head and my limbs too, I could help him as we navigated back through the trees to where the Buick was parked. Tom helped me get in the passengers side and I noticed that the dome light didn’t work when the door opened; either one. When he got in the driver’s seat the light stayed off, he got the car going in the dark, and left the lights off until we were a couple of miles away.

“We’ve got to go back,” I mumbled and hoped Tom would hear it. I looked over at Tom and my head was clearing; there as something we had to do. “Tom, we’ve got to go back,” he looked over at me and I think he got it; he wheeled the Buick around and floored it, taking the shortest route back to the wreckage. We couldn’t leave the license plate on my car. It would get reported and then Daniel and Robert would know I was involved and all hell would break loose.

“We’re going to need to cut out the VIN number if we can find it. I think the fire probably burned the paperwork but if I can find the dash I’ll make sure.” Tom was reading my mind as we slewed to a stop in the road about ten yards from where the combined wreckage had landed and he opened the trunk and got a pair of tin snips and a couple of screwdrivers that would help remove the plate.

Tom crashed through the brush line that separated the road from the wreckage as the sirens got closer, the fire from the barn had burned itself out but my car was still on fire. That’s what I get for filling the tank. It couldn’t have been more than a few minutes when Tom came back through the bushes carrying what looked like the rear bumper cover from my car, tossed it in the trunk, and bungeed it down. He threw the little metal VIN plate to me as he got in and was moving before I caught it. We headed straight south away from the approaching sirens and then started to angle back toward my place by going east and then back north. I think I remember a phone call from Chad but don’t remember what he had to say, maybe Tom knows. I’m starting to feel better and the cotton is almost gone form my ears. That’s something isn’t it?

“Did you talk to Chad?” Tom was focused on driving but looked at me and lit a cigarette.

“Yeah, they took care of the plane so your boss couldn’t leave; I guess they flattened the tires and there wasn’t another plane available so the bad guys jumped in a car and took off. They’re following them now and I’m waiting for them to call back. Micah had his tire blow up when he couldn’t get the cap off so he stabbed it with a knife; I guess he’s got a nice little gash on his forehead but he’s laughing about it so it can’t be too bad.” Tom handed my phone back to me and I opened it to see the screen inside was intact but the small screen was cracked but still working. Pretty tough piece of equipment. “Mike’s on his way back to your place in case you need him.” Tom had taken care of a lot while I was hazy as I knew he would.

“Did you get the license plate?” I was still a little fogged and didn’t see it I my lap with the VIN plate.

“Nope, got the whole rear bumper cover. It was lying there separated from the rest of the car and it was quicker to just shove the whole thing in the trunk. The dashboard was a melted mess so I don’t think your paperwork survived. You’ll have some time until they find the engine number and trace you that way; do you think this will be done by then?” Tom had something else on his mind from the way he was looking at me.

“That’s not all is it?”

“Nope, Jake, there were parts of at least four bodies that I could see, well, there were four heads that I could see but not much else,” Tom was a tough guy but wading through four bodies to get the numbers must have been hard.

“Crap, Tom, I knew there had been at least four men there when I found the place Friday and you know something, I don’t care. They were perfectly willing to kill as many people as they could in the Empire State so I have no feeling one way or the other about them and you shouldn’t either.” I looked at him and he nodded then put his attention back on the road. We didn’t say much else until we got back to my place. My body was seizing up and he had to help me out of the car but once out, I could walk pretty well. I couldn’t wait to see the bruises on my chest form the seatbelt and I knew my face had hit the airbag so I expected there to be a few abrasions at least. That wouldn’t help. I’m not the best looking guy in the world and it felt like I had done some damage; don’t lie to me when I ask how bad I look, I can take it.

Mike was already there and was waiting in the parking lot when we pulled up, leaning against the front of his Jeep and looking around to see what, I don’t know. I hoped Kate was still awake when I got to the door since my keys had stayed with the car when it blew up and I had left the spares I normally carry in my jacket on the chair in my dining area. My ears were almost back to normal when I got to the door but when I looked down I could see blood on my knees that I hadn’t noticed before. This was going to HURT tomorrow. I knocked with my good arm and then leaned against the building next to my door; my energy was draining too fast and I couldn’t stand on my own. Kate opened the door just as I started to slide down the wall I had been leaning against but Mike and Tom caught me before I hit the concrete and half carried me inside. I’ve been in accidents before and I’ve never felt this way. Is it because I’m fifty?

“Jake,” was the only word Kate could muster as they carried me in past her. She closed the door and passed Mike and Tom as they carried me toward the couch, putting one of the blankets that Gina had given me on it to keep the blood from staining it. They lowered me as gently as they could and it felt so good to just lay there for a minute and stare at the ceiling. Kate was staring at me and I thought she was going to break right there but she surprised me when she ordered Tom and Mike out of the way and started in on fixing me up. Lying on the couch was doing me a world of good but suddenly I was so thirsty I couldn’t stand it so Kate got me a glass of water and I proceeded to spill most of it trying to lift it with my injured arm. Seeing her made me forget that I had damaged it. I hope it will work the same on the rest of the injuries.

“Kate, this is Tom and Mike,” I said as I pointed to each of them in turn. “Guys, this is Kate Johnson, my assistant.” I knew I had made another huge mistake with the introduction since Kate looked at me with a puzzled look on her face. “And I hope to say my girlfriend?” I had the question on my face and hoped she would give the answer I wanted.

“Yes, Jake, your girlfriend,” she smiled at me and I tried to smile back but found that one of the abrasions from the airbag was hardening across my lower lip and chin. Mike and Tom looked at each other with the “when did this happen” look on their faces since I hadn’t told anyone about her yet. Didn’t want to get too far ahead of it with my track record. This IS the longest relationship I’ve had since Karen after all. Two days, not bad, huh?

Mike replaced the water with a Stroh’s and I started to feel a little better as the can emptied and he brought me a second one. Kate worked over me with the little first aid kit that I kept in my place and announced that it didn’t look like I’d need any stitches but there were going to be bruises to match hers, maybe even worse. I’ve never felt someone so gentle. Or maybe I’m just numb, nope; let me have my little fantasy.

“What was the loud bang that I heard?” We hadn’t had time to get Kate up to speed so we looked at each other and Tom started to fill her in. We handed the story off in tag team fashion until we had gotten through everything including Micah’s injury from the exploding tire but edited out the mangled bodies and heads that Tom had seen. There would be time for that later with some distance from the event and I didn’t want to worry her. Not now, anyway.

Mike’s phone rang:

“Hello, there,” it was Chad.

“Hey, Mike, tell Jake that we’re still following those guys. They got to this huge joint in GH and after about five minutes, came out carrying something, and now they’re heading back toward GR,” Mike did the relaying.

“Ask him about Micah’s head,” I asked Mike as he talked.

“Not a problem, just a little cut that a band aid took care of. They want to know how you are. That was one LOUD explosion.” Mike updated them for a few minutes and I think I heard him tell them that Kate was a babe. Well, she IS. “They’re going to stay on them until they stop and then they’ll call.” Mike closed his phone and we sat there and didn’t talk for a few minutes. I think we’re all tired. It’s been a long day.

Mike’s phone rang again.

“Hello, John, what’s gong on?” Mike moved toward the slider to get a better signal and talked for a few minutes. “John’s coming out. I told him to bring beer since we’re down to your last two and I want more than that. I didn’t tell him about what’s going on but I think he’s got an idea that something’s happening with all of us out here. Did you call him earlier?”

“Nope, I thought his Monday’s were with Jamie and there really wasn’t anything I needed him to do. Is he pissed?”

“Nah, just feeling a little excluded I think. He’ll get over it.” Mike was right.

Kate had been listening to all of this and just taking it all in; I could see from her face that she was getting antsy with the conversation and beer drinking. “Now that everyone is all caught up, what do we need to do next? Are we going after Daniel and Robert?” With the events of the day and the fact that they would know I was involved from the engine number from my car, I don’t think there is any choice. We couldn’t let them just get on a plane and get to the Caymans; I know both of them are going to be so pissed that their plan had been screwed up by someone that they won’t rest until they find out how it was done and what went wrong. I’d want to know, wouldn’t you? I want the money back, too. The hundred million from the government ARE my taxes after all. Well, part of it anyway.

“It will be a hell of lot easier for us if we can keep them in the US,” I looked at Kate and she smiled, I think she wanted to get them as much as I did. “How do we do that?” I asked the room but it looked like fatigue had set in and there were no responses. My phone rang and Kate got up to get it and handed it to my good arm.

“What’s happening, Chad?” Same old greeting.

“We’ve got your boys getting back off the e-way at 44th street. They’re going east toward the airport but taking their time. What’s the plan?”

“Shit, Chad, I haven’t had time to think that far ahead. Just watch, I guess. But be careful, they’ve killed at least five people in the last three days and with the flat tires they know someone is on to them. If they go to the airport just let them go.” I was starting to think that wouldn’t be that bad of an idea, the farther away they are the harder it would be to get to any of us. And I’ve got my ace to play, Jameson can take the money back, I hope. I’ve got an idea what to do with the fifty million from the terrorists. Can you figure it out? I’ll tell you later.

A knock at my door said that John was here and Mike got up to open it since Kate had lain down next to the couch and had fallen asleep. She had been through a lot and she needed it so I didn’t get up and disturb her. Not then, anyway, but after John had the beer in the fridge and we opened a few new cold ones, I dragged myself off the couch, over her, and woke her up for the trip to my bedroom. Nope, our bedroom. That sounds weird. She said goodnight to everyone and didn’t notice that someone new was there, the Vicodins were making her a little dazed and I hoped they would do the same for me later. But not yet, there were still plans to be made.

After Kate had gone to bed, John gave me a little wink and a nod of the head that said “what the hell is this?” and I had to explain the whole relationship thing all over again. He got up, came over and gave me a hug (John’s a hugger) and his smile said that he was happy for me. I had never been in a relationship since I’d known him and I think it was a strange to him as it was to me. We continued with all of the things that had happened since I had talked to him last including Marilyn’s death and the explosion at the pole barn that had taken my car and the lives of four others along with the tail that Micah and Chad had on Robert and Daniel. That took a couple of beers and they seemed to be directly related to how tired I was. Tom had leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed and I think asleep but I couldn’t tell, I turned the stereo down anyway and gave him a pillow in case he needed it. John was a little pissed that he hadn’t been included but was trying hard to not show it; not too successfully. I’ll leave it to Mike to smooth that over.

The thing that was starting to worry me now was that it wasn’t going to take much time for Daniel and Robert to start to narrow down who the fly was in their ointment and I still think they have the resources necessary to cause a lot of pain for those people. That means us. How long did we have? I think we have to start thinking like football where the best defense is a good offense but what would that be? One thing is for sure, when I show up at work looking like I do there will be questions that I’ll have to answer and I’m sure they have snitches that will report everything. I don’t think I can take any more time off with the promotion that I was just given (I won’t say earned) so how to explain it? Too much to think about.

Mikes phone rang.

“Hello Micah, what’s going on?” I’m glad he called Mike and not me.

“They’ve stopped at a hotel on 29th street, I don’t know why they went to 44th and then back to here but I hope they didn’t see us and figure out we were following them, it’s been about 15 minutes and no activity. Chad walked across the street to the hotel and they’re not in the lobby so they must have a room. The car is parked right in front so I don’t think they saw us. What’s next?” Mike relayed the information from Micah and handed the phone to me.

“Why don’t you guys just leave them and come back over here. With the problems their plan has had, I think they’ll be back on the computer for the alternative plan and I’ll get Jameson to check it out. One thing that popped into my head is now they know someone is on to them, they may be listening so let’s try to be a little cryptic on the cells, okay?”

“Gotcha, Jake. When Chad gets back we’ll be over.” Micah shut off the phone without a goodbye.

My energy was dropping fast and the pain had started to override the adrenaline so I knew my night was about over but I needed to get Jameson going on tracking them. Maybe I should send John to take over watching Daniel and Robert? Nope, what would he do if they took off? I think the idea to just let them go and get back at them by taking the money was the best one. Leaving these guys running around free scared me, though, and maybe with thought we could figure out how to end this. I certainly hope so. I’ve got a girlfriend now and want to enjoy it at least for a little while. Wouldn’t you?

Jameson was on (when does that kid sleep?) and he had some news already. I told you he was good.

‘dad, they’re back on at the same location on 29th street. Something strange is happening, no one is looking for them anymore. the traffic stopped around 7. is there someone on the inside at nsa?’

‘don’t know but that is my guess. think about how to gather some info from them that may help. don’t know what that would be but just take a look. can you let me know when or if the virginia computer moves? call my cell and let me know if anything happens.’

‘okay, i’ll e-mail if there is anything else.’

‘bye’

My shoulders sagged as I finished up the last task that I had for the day but left the computer on for the guys to monitor if they wanted to. It was hard to even hold my left arm up to use the keyboard and the skin that had been scraped off my hand had started to do that oozing thing they do when you get scrapes or carpet burns. I put a bandage on it, came back into the living room and said goodnight. Tom didn’t hear because he was sleeping in the open space between my speakers and John and Mike were talking and I think I interrupted them. I walked into my room, closed the door, and just kind of melted to the edge of the bed. I wasn’t too worried that Kate would wake up with the Vicodin’s and I remembered to take one from her prescription and swallow it without water. It was just too damn much effort to get up again to get a drink and I don’t think I have the energy anyway. I crawled my way into the bed and touched Kate, then sleep hit.

**Chapter 25**

Vicodin dreams are ugly. There was no revelation of anything that would help solve the mystery and the whole thing centered on Kate wearing a new pair of shoes that I bought a few days before. I didn’t tell you about that because who would want to know that. It’s not that interesting. But what was interesting was that the dream had shifted to be current, it was about what was going on now with the same cast of characters but just a replay of Monday’s events. That had never happened to me before. How about you? There were some subtle differences but they were only of detail not of substance. What the hell good was it if I didn’t learn anything from it? But, like I said, the focus was on the new shoes. Why did they fit Kate when I wear a size nine and she wears a 6 ½ women’s size? Probably doesn’t mean anything. One thing that did come from it that did mean something was a new idea; we’re never going to be safe unless we can smoke everyone out that was involved. If we leave anyone walking around free there will be hell to pay.

Kate was gone from my bed when I woke up and when I realized the gushing noise I heard was the shower I smiled just a little. I could get used to this domestic stuff. When I tried to get out of bed, I was given a rude reminder of the trauma that my body had been through the previous day. My hair even hurt. What there is left of it. I couldn’t wait to see what my face looked like, kind of a badge of honor for the things we had accomplished and I would wear it proudly even though I would have to lie how I got that way. What would the excuse be? I guess the best explanation would be the simple one with the most truth in it; I was in a car accident and I totaled out my Mazda. How that happened I would have to create. I’m pretty good at telling stories as you know, so it won’t be hard.

My right arm was still useable so I used it to drag myself out of the bed and into a sitting position but it took a lot of energy so I rested for a minute and just stared at the floor. The shower was still running and starting the day by seeing Kate in it focused my mind and masked the pain from getting up. I pushed the door open and went in but got an unpleasant surprise, Micah was in the shower and I was thankful that my new shower curtain was almost opaque. I backed out quietly since I didn’t want to generate a new joke that would be told for the next couple of years (yeah, in our group you pay that long) and walked into the kitchen where Kate was busy making breakfast with Chad’s help. John and Tom were watching TV and Mike was doing something on the computer, the dining table had been set and the apartment smelled great from bacon, eggs, and sausage. I was getting hungry.

“Morning, everyone,” I said as I walked into the kitchen and gave Kate a kiss on the unbruised side of her face. She turned to me and I saw that the damage to her face was still maturing and the swelling next to her left eye had gotten worse.

“Have you looked in the mirror yet,” she looked me over slowly and then touched my face and asked if it hurt too much. Damn right it does, but I’m not going to tell her that, I‘m supposed to be tough, right?

“Not yet, I wanted to see you first,” sometimes you have to go for the brownie points. Didn’t work.

“Yeah, right, geez, Jake, don’t start feeding me a line of BS this early in the morning,” she looked at me and smiled, though, so I knew it was all right.

“Will you two please get a room or eat breakfast,” Chad was carrying the food to the table and the rest of the group was sitting down as I hugged her carefully and then slowly went to sit down. Micah came out of the bathroom wet and dressed but right on time. It was time for a “board meeting” to get our plans in place.

We talked and ate for a while but there was not a lot of business being done; Kate was the topic and was getting all of the attention and I could see that they all like her (I hoped so anyway) which gave me some time to think and get my thoughts in order. I know, they’re never in order so why do I hope I can do it now. Man, you guys know me to well. Maybe I’ll just stop talking to you. Nope, not yet. I was getting some ideas that I wanted to run by the group and I waited for a lull in the conversation to get started. I think it’s going to be a long wait. Kate was giving as good as she got, zinged Chad a couple of times, and was very good natured when someone challenged her. I just watched the process unfold and couldn’t help but smile. I also couldn’t wait for the time that we could talk about her in private; I was still kind of in shock that she picked me. I am fifty after all. Just thought it, didn’t say it.

“Your son sent you a message a little while ago,” Mike started. “I guess your boss is still in the same place from the computer signature he’s getting but there has been a lot of traffic in and out. He said he sent you a few notes but I left those for you to check.”

“Cool, I’ll check them in a minute, I want to run something by you guys and have you tell me what you think. Daniela and Robert know someone is screwing up their plans, right? Well, I don’t know if they are going to make a run for it or not, but, I think we can keep them here for a while by using the “I know what you did last summer” ploy.” Micah jumped in.

“I get it; we send them a note that says that we know what they are doing…”

“And if they want the evidence they have to pay us, say, twenty million dollars,” Mike added with a big grin.

“The money part never came to me but it’s perfect, it will give them the idea that we are just out for the cash when all we want to do is put them away,” I told you these guys were good.

“Whoa, who said we just want to put them away,” Chad jumped in. “Money is good, and twenty million dollars is REALLY good, you wanted to save your company and this might be a way to do it and get the bad guys.” Chad had a point, the extortion of money would cloud the issue and just maybe give us a little more of an edge.

“Whatever we do, it’s got to happen today, preferably this morning.” Tom jumped in. “It will force them to react to something that is outside their control for a change. And it will be fun to see,” Tom was saying what we were all thinking and we grinned a little. I was a little uncomfortable with the grinning; this was serious, after all, not a game. It brought to mind the scene from Crocodile Dundee II where Linda Kozlowski says to Dundee when they were getting chased by the bad guys “be careful, this isn’t a game” and he says back to her “it is to me”. But that was a movie and I don’t think we’re that good. What do you think? We’ve done okay so far but I don’t want to have to tell you about one of these guys dying, it would break my heart. We’ll be careful.

My IM chime rang from the computer.

‘dad, they’ve been moving the money all morning, i’ve got four steps so far.’

‘can you keep up and get at it if we need it?’

‘no problem, you need any cash? i can skim off a few million if you want.’

‘not yet, but i do need you t send them a note that can’t be tracked later this morning.”

‘just e-mail it to me as an attachment and i’ll get it off as soon as i get it. i think i’ll run it through about a hundred proxy servers, but even with one they’ll never know where it came from.’

‘after you send it, i want you to track all of the traffic that comes from that computer. It just might flush out more of the people that are in on it.’

‘okay, get me the note and i’ll get it going. bye.’

‘bye.’

Now all we had to do was write the note that Daniel was going to get from us. Simple and to the point would be the thing to do, No, let’s do two notes. The first one will be just to let them know that someone is on to them and see how they panic. Their reaction may set our course, anyway. Let’s let them stew for a while. They deserve it. I ran the idea past the ‘Scoobie Gang” and to a person they all thought it would be the best way to handle it but I was surprised by the severity of Kate’s reaction; I think she would have killed them with her bare hands if they had been there. In my head, I attributed the reaction to the fact that they had hurt me. I can dream can’t I? What if it is true? I’d never had anyone feel that way about me before (yep, even Charlene, you remember her, married to her for a long time?) and it felt good I think. Crap, doubts already.

The note read “we know you are involved. Empire State, SAAD.” And that was it. I sent it off to Jameson and expected some sort of a reaction from Robert and Daniel to happen quite quickly. Damn, I forgot, I called Jameson as soon as I hit the send button. We need to have someone sit on them in person before we send the note. What if they just make a run for it? I talked to Jameson for a minute and asked him to hold up, that I’d get back to him when we were ready. John, Micah, Mike, and Tom decided that it would be nice to get out in the sunshine and volunteered to go watch in Micah’s truck. They did help to clean up the leavings from breakfast since both Kate and I were still sore and I had to get ready to go to work to keep up appearances. It wouldn’t look good to change the routine. Those spies in the firm again, remember? Who could we trust? Right now, I’ll go with just who are in this room. It had been hard to find enough electrical outlets in my place to get all of the cells charged but we had done it; they would be needed if things went the way we expected. The crap was going to hit the fan by ten.

We said our goodbyes to the guys and closed the door behind them, making sure we locked it as they went out. Can’t be too careful, I know, it would be easy for anyone that wanted to get to us to do it, but it makes me feel better anyway. I’ve got a girlfriend now and it seems that life is a little more important to me than it was last week. I’ve got a question for you, when do women stop being girlfriends? I mean, Kate is almost forty and I’m fifty, there has to be a better word for it, and no, not “significant other” that just doesn’t roll off the tongue well enough. Any suggestions? Well, get back to me when you have one.

It was nice to be alone with Kate again, even if it was going to only be for the few minutes that I had left before I needed to leave for work. After we closed the door, I took her hand to just hold it for a moment, I needed to get the intimacy back that we had shared to make sure that I wasn’t mistaken, I have been many times before and I guess you could call that needy. We just aren’t at the point yet where I’m sure enough to not touch, it felt good too. When I touched her she squeezed my hand and smiled at me a small smile, the only one that wouldn’t hurt her face but I could see the meaning there. It does feel good and I’m not going to apologize for feeling this way.

I hadn’t really looked in the mirror to see the damage that the wreck had done to my face but I could feel that it wasn’t going to be pretty. Not as bad as I thought. The abrasions across my lips and down my chin had stopped weeping but were still a little puffy but other than a couple of small bruises, I looked okay. Presentable even. It hurt like crazy to shave, though, and I had to be careful to not re-open the wounds with my razor. I still use blades, a little old fashioned I know but still effective. I DID have a really nice diagonal bruise across my chest that was left by my seatbelt and I knew the pain in my neck and back were going to get much worse as the day went on. Car accidents will do that.

Kate was sitting on the couch watching TV when I came out of the bathroom and I got the first look! You know the look that I told you about earlier, where you can tell that the person WANTS to be there with you? I damn near fainted (well, not really) and sat down next to her wondering what I’ll do when that look turns into one that telegraphs a different emotion. Geez, Jake, don’t get too far ahead again. Just enjoy it for a while. We kissed gingerly and I grabbed Tom’s keys and headed for the door, it was getting late and I needed to get to work. It was tough to remember that I still had a job to do and there were people at L&D that were depending on me to keep them employed. They didn’t know that yet, though, and that might make it easier on me. Is it easier to lose you job when you don’t see it coming? At least you don’t have to worry about it for too long.

It had been a long time since I had driven a car that was a big as Tom’s and it felt quite weird both physically and emotionally. You know you get attached to your car and part of your identity is that car? Well, it is for me, and driving the Buick just wasn’t me at all. I missed my radar detector and had to concentrate too much to maintain the speed limit or below. It was good camouflage, though, and I felt like I was pretty much invisible to the rest of the world. At least no one looked at me like they did when I drove the Mazda and it was certainly different. Luckily, Tom has some of the same taste in music that I have and I was able to make it a Joe Walsh morning that lifted my spirits some; not really necessary knowing that Kate would be there when I got home but nice all the same.

It was almost 9:30 when I got to my office and I was starting to get a little anxious about pulling the trigger on Daniela and Robert. I hadn’t heard from any of the guys yet and they needed to be in place before we could do anything so I got my coffee and headed back to my desk to see if Jameson had sent me anything while I was traveling. I was still not sure what we could do if they made a run for it but we had achieved the best objective in wrecking the truck so I felt more confident that we would figure something out. There had only been a few “what the hell happened to you’s” from the rest of the staff and they seemed much more concerned about Kate than they were about me. I could understand that since I was here and she wasn’t; that always makes it look worse than it is. I did my best to assure everyone that she was going to be okay without letting on that we were an item, and I also lied to them, telling everyone that she was staying at her parents in Kalamazoo for a few days to recover. I’d have to remember to tell her that when we talked, to give them a “heads up” that they may be getting flowers etc. Damn, there are just too many balls to juggle.

Jameson was waiting.

‘dad, what’s going on? Still ten? the computer is in use and not moving’

‘give me a minute and i’ll find out.’

I called Chad to see where they were and got the go ahead, they were in place at the hotel but had to stop on the way to get cigarettes since everyone but Chad smoked the damn things. Okay, another bias, coming from a reformed smoker, I just can’t understand the attraction anymore but I guess it’s their choice. I just wish they’d choose to not smoke. Even another of my sons, Joseph, and my friend Gina smoke and they both have asthma, that I just CAN’T understand. I guess it’s not the only thing I don’t understand. I told Chad that we were going to light the fuse at ten as planned and he said they were ready so go ahead.

‘ten it is. are you sure they can’t tell who sent the message?’

‘dad, how many times are you going to ask me that? i can even make it look like it came from someone else.’

That turned on a light bulb over my head and I started to think if that may even be a better idea than sending it anonymously. That would add a level of misdirection but also of complexity that I didn’t know that we could manage. G.W. Bush would have been my first choice or maybe Rush Limbaugh and I laughed out loud that this could be fun to do after we get this little mystery solved; Tom Delay raising money for the Democratic National Committee would be a neat one to put out there and it would be fun to watch him and his minions trying to explain that. I think just flushing out Robert and Daniel will be enough for now, but we should keep that new tool in our back pocket for later use. It is cool to have a computer geek son, I’ve said that before, haven’t I?

‘nope, just send it so it can’t be traced. keep a eye on the computer afterward.’

‘okay, i’m set up to get both a keystroke log and to clone any messages or e-mail that gets sent, i’ll stream the whole mess to you in real time. do you have enough memory for a couple of gigs of crap?’

‘yep, so don’t edit, just send the whole thing and we’ll wade through it.”

‘talk to you later.’

‘bye.’

It was almost ten and my heart was starting to race a little with what we were about to do. Any time you poke a big mean animal with a sharp stick you should be at least a little afraid, it was good for self-preservation and keeps the thoughts sharp. Well, I can hope can’t I? I called Kate to tell her that we were a go and to have her start looking at the files as they come in, I didn’t know what the next move was going to be and I hoped that it would pop out at us as the files arrived. It was getting hard to concentrate on work but I needed to, there was a steady stream of people waiting to see me for this or that and I wondered what they did when Robert was managing partner. I couldn’t remember ever seeing a lineup outside his office but it was at the other end of the suite so maybe it did happen. The most curious thing about the morning was the lack of mention of Marilyn’s death on Friday. No cards, no flower collection, nothing. Maybe I wasn’t the only one that she was a bitch to. I know it’s not right to speak ill of the dead but I was certain she would not be missed, well, not certain but it does look that way; at least at L&D.

I was playing my own assistant and cancelled the meetings that were on tap for the rest of the morning so I could focus if the note did what we expected. I needed to start to compose the follow-up letter that would detail our demands if they bit on the first one and try to figure out how to maintain control of the situation whatever happened. This was not going to be easy. It WAS good that I was going to be able to explain my whereabouts if Robert or Daniel were to start suspecting my involvement in their problems. Maybe I should be online doing something so I would have an airtight alibi? They will probably check our servers, after all, and I wanted them to keep thinking I’m not the brightest bulb in the package. Maybe that’s why they hired me? I’m hurt.

I couldn’t help but watch the clock on my computer as the minutes clicked away toward ten. I had closed my door as a signal to everyone that I wanted some privacy and most of them were honoring it; I did have to wave away Susan but I made a mental note to go back and see her after the letter was sent. Ten o’clock hit and all I could do was wait. I wanted to call everyone to see if there was an effect but I knew better than to use the phone right at ten. That good old paranoia of mine was still working well but I was getting antsy as the clock hit 10:01 and then just kept on going with no effect. No IM yet, no calls from Kate or the guys. Okay, maybe we weren’t that clever. This was going to be more difficult a chess game than I expected. 10:22.

‘dad, they’re looking for me. it’s kind of funny, they’ve got a second computer running at the hotel but they’re just using it for an interface to another one over on the west side of GR. it’s a good one, too. blazing fast, maybe like a cray but probably just a few serial processors. the virginia computer is sending bunches of notes, virginia, and the west GR got a note. you’ll have them in a few.’

‘okay, just keep monitoring, don’t do anything else unless they get close.’

‘can i crash them just for a little fun?’

‘not yet, the computers have been our best way of keeping ahead of them. maybe later. can you just make it a little harder for them?’

‘yep, i can set up a little proxy server that will ping them a couple of thousand times a minute, slow their processing way down.’

‘not yet, no, do it. but shut it down every fifteen minutes or so for fifteen so it will frustrate them a little.’

‘got it. notes are in your inbox.’

‘bye’

We had gotten the response that was expected but I was still a little uneasy that we had covered everything. The nice little touch that Jameson was going to provide made me smile a little though, it’s about time that they were a little uncomfortable and everyone relies so much on computers these days that I hoped they had no backup. I know, they could use their phones or text messaging on the phones to get around it but I’ll bet there isn’t enough bandwidth to do what they needed. Hope so anyway. Maybe I shouldn’t have had Jameson screw with the computers? Nope, it felt too good. I know where Harry Doan is. You remember him, the engineer on the project that disappeared? I needed to make a phone call. Someone needed to sit on the west side location and had all of my resources on Daniel and Robert. It was almost lunch time and I thought the best way to get that done was to go out to the hotel and bring one of the guys back to get another vehicle from my house. That will be what I have to do.

I called Chad to tell them what we had discovered from Jameson’s snooping and to figure out the best way to watch both locations. I gave them a description of Harry Doan so they would know who to look for when they got to the west side but then remembered that Jameson hadn’t given us a location. Damn, I can’t keep making these mistakes, one of my friends is going to get hurt pretty soon if I do. We agreed that we needed to split the group and since the hotel wasn’t that far from my office, I pushed aside the suggestion that they take a cab back to my place. I wanted to see Kate anyway and take a look at the notes that had been sent by Daniel to whoever he was sending them to. It was starting to look like he was the mastermind of this whole mess. We’re still in front, though. I hope.

It took a while for me to get out of the office since I did remember my promise to go back and see Susan before I took off. She was fuming about a project that had gone off the tracks and needed me to use what little muscle I had on a reluctant supplier. I guess we were late in paying for the steel for the Cascade rebuild and I was a little uneasy that this was just the start of the downward spiral that was going to lead to the end of L&G. Probably should go back and talk to the CFO sometime, huh? Not now, the company should be able to survive for a few more days without my attention. What were we paying the guy for anyway?

I had just gone out the door when my phone rang.

“Jake, they’re moving,” Micah was on the phone and sounding excited. “They just came out a minute ago but they’re taking it very easy; talking, smiling and laughing. These guys are pretty cool.”

“Which way are they going?”

“Heading up East Paris toward Cascade road.”

“Did they have any luggage?”

“Nope, just what looks like a briefcase. I’m guessing they’re heading downtown.”

“Where are you now?”

“Just getting to Cascade road, where are you?”

“Right behind you, why don’t you slide over to the right lane and if we can get some cover, tell Chad and Tom to get ready to get out. Make sure they can’t see you when you do.”

“We’ll turn into one of the streets just before the beltline if the light is red.”

“Okay, I’ll follow.”

We hung up and drove the speed limit toward GR as we followed them. I didn’t know why we needed to have the team split up anymore but it still felt right to do it. Flexibility, I guess. We were approaching the beltline and were having some luck, the light was red our direction and had just turned as we came over a little crest and there was enough traffic that our turn off wouldn’t be noticed. For once I was happy for the extra cars on the road. Chad and Tom were out of the car before mine stopped and Micah passed me going back to Cascade road with a wave and a grin. Stop having so much fun guys. He, John, and Mike got back heading west before the light changed and were only about six cars behind Daniel and Robert when the traffic began to move. Chad and Tom got in and we made the “Michigan left” to head back south on the beltline. A thought came to mind that I should stop and rent a car since both Kate’s and mine were out of commission and then we’d have one to share. I wonder if my insurance would cover it? Nope, there was no way that I could explain to them what had happened to my car without looking completely crazy. I know it wasn’t worth much but it was a shame that I was going to have to just take the loss. Maybe I’ll add that cost to the extortion note.

There was a rental shop on the beltline out by my house so I pulled into their lot and hoped I could get one without a reservation. The counterperson looked at me like I was an alien when I walked in and asked for a car and wanted to pay cash. Doesn’t this ever happen? It took a while, but I walked out with the keys to a relatively new Taurus that would be the best camouflage that I could think of; there are so many of them on the road that they are almost invisible. But it’s not my Mazda. I’m not a Taurus person that’s for sure. I wondered if I could rent a Miata until I found a new car but just dismissed it as musings; this one would be better for our purposes and one thing I didn’t know about Kate was if she could drive a stick shift. I won’t get an automatic in the Miata even for her. Priorities, you know.

I called Kate to tell her the new developments and saw by the clock on the dash of the car that I wasn’t going to have enough time to get to my house to look at the files before I had to be back to work. Remember that I’m trying to keep a good alibi going for Daniel and Robert and keeping to the normal routine was a big part of it. Tom and Chad were going back to my place to get Chad’s truck and see if there was anything that Kate needed. Other than that, they were looking at some downtime and I was kind of envious. It still hurt from the crash and I was getting so damn tired from everything going on that I almost turned around and headed home. Didn’t the crash buy me a little sympathy time off? Nope, not when you are managing partner. I’m beginning to wonder if that is such a good thing. Damn, I wanted to see their e-mails and knew I couldn’t do that at work; I am taking off early at least.

The trip back to work was as non-descript as the Taurus and so much more boring than it used to be in my car. At least it felt that way to me. I got back to my office by 12:30 and found a forest of little yellow sticky notes had landed on my desk and chair. Did you know there is s hierarchy to where the sticky notes go? If they are on your chair, the person leaving them thinks it is really important, on your computer somewhat important and when on your desk you can basically ignore them. At least that’s how I look at them. How do you see it? I took the ones off my chair and looked at my phone to see if the message light was on and it made me feel good that it wasn’t. Most of the sticky notes were not important and I got to work composing the extortion note that I was going to send to Daniel and Robert. Hard copy in my planner; there was no way I was going to put anything like that on my computer. Those guys might not be the best but they were good enough to see what I was doing on the computer.

I struggled a bit with the amount of money to ask for, it was a balancing act between asking for too much and pissing them off so they wouldn’t consider it or asking too little and getting them thinking that they didn’t need to take us seriously. It seemed poetic justice to ask for the fifty million the terrorists had given them so that’s what I settled on and felt pretty good to have figured that out. My thinking had changed quite a bit in the last couple of weeks and I wondered if I could ever go back to the wonderful naiveté that I had reveled in for so long. It is just so much easier to think that way. Damn, I forgot to set up where to send the money. Nice, it would have looked great if I would have sent the note without that information or maybe it would be better? Maybe they wouldn’t take us as much of a threat if we make some mistakes? Too much thinking, simplicity is the key. I remembered one of the tenets that had guided me during the years I had been an engineer: K.I.S.S. or Keep It Simple Stupid. Good advice here, too.

I IM’d Jameson and got him started on the account so I could get the note sent by the end of the day; I wanted to keep things coming at Daniel and Robert so they would have less time to react but I needed to see the notes they had sent to their co conspirators to make sure I wasn’t missing something. I am going to have to take a couple of days off to finish this. My calendar was current and I didn’t know who was taking care of it for me so I walked back to talk to Susan to see if she knew anything. She had asked her assistant to take care of it for me and I knew that I had made the right choice in promoting her. The only meeting I had was not until Thursday afternoon so I told Susan I was taking off for the day and felt I wouldn’t be in tomorrow either; my head had started to hurt severely (yeah, another lie) and I didn’t feel up to work. I think she was happy that I was going to be gone and almost gave me the “bum’s rush” out the door. Could she be involved in the mystery? That thought hit me as I walked out and I recognized those thoughts as my paranoia shifting into overdrive as it did sometimes. It’s been right so far, hasn’t it?

The drive home was boring, boring, boring. My brain was in full combat mode but the Taurus didn’t allow me to let any of it out in fast driving that was the normal outlet. I wondered if I’d still be invisible when I got out of the car. I told you I was weird, have you ever had thoughts like that? I’ll bet not. I walked in the door to my place and was surprised that it was unlocked and Kate was nowhere to be seen. The panic started to rise as I looked in the bedroom and bathroom and Chad and Tom were gone, too. Damn, had they found us? I went back out the door to see if their cars were in the lot and both the truck and Tom’s car were there but locked and I stood at the top of the steps looking around the complex trying to see anything. I started to take out my phone to call Micah and see if he knew anything when I saw some movement out of the corner of my eye and followed it to the path that led over to the grocery store that was in the little strip mall on Kalamazoo. Three figures were walking my way carrying shopping bags and I recognized Tom’s small limp from his continuing back problems. It felt like the adrenaline was draining out of me through my feet and I had to lean on the stair railing for support as relief replaced it. Kate waved as she recognized me and I smiled like an idiot even though I knew she was too far away to see it. I told you I get carried away with women.

“I know, Jake, I didn’t lock the door but you haven’t given me a key yet,” Kate kissed me as she handed me one of the bags and took the other one into the kitchen.

“Why do you think you’re going to get a key?” Damn, stop trying to be funny. I think Kate was getting used to my lame humor.

“Because I had one made to my place for you,” she reached in her jeans pocket and came up with a shiny new key that she pressed in my hand and then held it closed with hers for a minute. It was hard to think when I had been happier. Is that worse when the relationship dies, though? Keep thinking that way and it will die you idiot. All I could think to say was “thank you”. I kissed her, too. She kissed back, very well. I told you she was a great kisser, didn’t I? Well, now you know. Tom and Chad weren’t used to seeing me have any kind of intimate moments but they were gentlemen and looked out the slider as Kate and I finished. Good men.

“We had to go to the grocery if you want me to keep feeding this crew,” Kate looked at all of us as she spoke. “And I wanted to take a walk to start getting rid of some of the soreness form the accident. I don’t want to have my shoulder freeze on me again. You remember when I fell off the horse and had to rehab it?”

I said I remembered (I really didn’t but I will not admit my memory isn’t what it used to be) and we got the groceries put away, opened a beer and got to the files that Jameson had gotten for us. I was surprised at the lack of response to the first note but I supposed it was pretty normal really. They wanted to understand the threat before they responded to it, just what I would do. Or you.

There were not many notes in the files that Jameson had sent but one of them instilled a little fear in me. Beef and Beefier were asked (told?) to fold up the operation and get on a plane to GR. There must be someone that they are leaving behind to keep their end of the charade going unless we were to the point that they were going to just make a run for it. Whey would they want the NSA guys here? Is there a reason to keep up appearances? They already have the money and so far none of the letters have even remotely hinted that any one knows that Daniel and Robert are behind it. It would probably be a good idea to get a news streamer going to see if any of the “terrorists” from the front company had been arrested. With the showboats that are running the government, I’m sure that if something of that magnitude had happened the whole world would be treated to endless rounds of newscasts that would tell us how wonderful they are and how that group of terrorists were responsible for everything from 9/11 to global warming and to vote for us. But nothing on the news yet. I think Daniel and Robert just want some muscle here from the NSA guys; after all, they had killed at least four of their own when they blew up the truck. How many more were there? Harry Doan should be watching his ass.

Kate sat next to me looking through the files and she did one thing that I hoped had the same meaning to her that it had to me. You remember my thoughts on touching that I talked about earlier? Well, she sat and touched the back of my neck with a gentle stroking that was not sexual but something more to me, it was real affection, those unconscious, unplanned touches that make you shiver. I cannot be falling for her so fast; it’s only been a few days. Get a fricking grip. I couldn’t help but look at her and smile. Hey, it’s been a long dry spell for me. Can I get carried away just this once?

There were other files that were almost as interesting as the Beef and Beefier recall note; they had been busy little boys and had sent the dogs off on a chase that would take at least few days to figure out they were on a false path. There were reams of investigative reports, contacts, and leads that pointed to an organization that I had never heard of but was probably well known in the intelligence community. Good covering guys. As I said before, if Daniel and Robert had put as much work into L&G, we’d all be billionaires. One thing that confused me, though, was there were no notes of reaction to the “I know what you did Last Summer” note other than to recall Beef and Beefier. Would they have assumed that we can read their e-mails this fast? Damn, should I have used the tried and true method of cutting out letters and pasting them on a note and having it hand delivered? Nope, too cliché and the computer note has taken away one of their tools.

Tom and Chad sat on the couch looking at the .357 and the Browning when the phone rang.

“Jake, Micah, your boys just went into and old building on 6th street but nothing since. Do you want us to take a look?” Micah still wasn’t taking this as seriously as I needed him to.

“Nope just sit on them for now. How hard is it for you guys to blend in with your new truck? I’ll guess it’s probably the best one in the neighborhood.”

“”Yeah, I thought about that so we’re hiding around the corner but can still see the door they went in. It’s a pretty big building, though, and there has to be other doors. I think I was even in it to do a refit quote for the fire protection. Can Chad and Tom come and help out?” Micah was reading my mind as the same thought came to me.

I asked Tom and Chad if they could help out and they looked relieved, I told you they were uncomfortable with our PDA’s (public displays of affection) but more than that they aren’t very good at just waiting to do something. And Tom’s Buick would fit in much better in that environment; the gentrification of GR hadn’t made it that far yet and the area could be generously called run down. More like a ghetto.

“They’re on their way,” I told Micah as they went out the door. “Let me know if anything happens.”

“Oh, one last thing, Jake. John walked over to take a look around and saw another truck like the one in the photos that you showed us earlier. I think they’ve got another one.” Micah sounded concerned.

I was too. But there was not much I could do right now. One thing was sure; they would be protecting this one with everything they had. But why do they even have it? They’ve got the money they wanted, no one is looking for them, and things seem to be going all their way. What use would a second truck be? Sell another one, this time for real? It was getting to look like this mess was getting too complicated for us to manage and I was leaning toward just dumping all of this info on the Chicago FBI and making my own run for it. But that wasn’t nearly as much fun. Yeah, I’m starting to have fun doing this. Maybe the guy’s attitudes are the right ones. I guess I like running the show, too. What do you think? Should we just end this or do you want us to go on? This is getting to be a competition to me just like a good game of chess or backgammon and I like to win. I think we’ll keep going. Thanks for listening.

I made lunch for Kate and I that included was some wonderful salami and hot mustard on pumpernickel bread that we washed down with some diet tea that she had picked up with the rest of the groceries. I think she WAS concerned with all of the beer drinking and had thoughtfully provided an alternative that I could get used to. But it certainly was not going to replace beer. Beer is life. Beer is good. But beer has calories that I don’t need and summer is coming. Do I look fat to you? We took our plates to the computer, sat, ate, and read through the rest of the files while I thought about the content of the extortion letter. Jameson IM’d.

“dad, they’re encrypting all of their messages as of a few minutes ago. it’s only 128 bit so i can crack it pretty easily but it’s going to slow me down. the virginia computer is on again at the west GR location and it looks like they are using the parallel one for the encrypting. kinda clumsy if you ask me. the reston computer has gone dark, nothing from it for a few hours.’

‘do you have any new files that have been sent?’

‘just a couple but i haven’t decrypted them yet . you’ll have them in a few minutes. the account is set up and i’m sending the number now. when will the note be done you want me to send?’

‘about an hour or so. i’ll e-mail it to you as soon as i’m done.’

‘no, don’t do that. they can probably read your outgoing e-mail. IM me and it will be more secure.’

‘okay. you’ll have it in an hour.’

‘bye’

I sat for a minute, finished my sandwich, and didn’t say anything for a few minutes. The extortion note was occupying almost all of my thoughts and I was trying to decide how much information to give them and how to best make sure they understood the threat without giving away any clues to who it was making the threat. Some of the information would have to be revealed or they wouldn’t take is seriously; probably just someone on a fishing expedition. A light just came on over my head. How can we make it look like Harry Doan is the one making the demands? After all, he is the only one left alive that I know of that would have access to all of the information that I had stumbled on at the start of this adventure. Hey, if they can use misdirection on the government, why can’t we use it on them? I took the grate off the front of my speaker where I had the copies hidden and tore through them looking for something that was obvious but not too obviously only possible to have come from him. It would be cool to see the reaction, too. Daniel was so sure of his superiority that it would feel good to tweak his nose with this and plant a little uncertainty that would surely grow over time. Cool.

I found a report that had been in the files from our engineering section and as such, would have been accessible to all of the engineers in the section. Harry was the author, though, and I hoped that it would be enough to at least plant the seed of suspicion that I was looking for at the same time opening the possible suspect list to include at least six more people. I’m betting they will jump to the same conclusion that I would. I just hope they don’t take action before we stop them, six more people dead, and these WOULD be my fault. I decided to not send any proof until they asked for it, it might take longer to flush them out but why give them anything unless it absolutely necessary? I’ll have the file ready to go quickly if the request does come, though, since we DO want to create some dissention on their side. I’m glad I’m dealing with my friends, I can trust them completely.

As I sat there thinking about the note and its contents, I realized that I hadn’t heard a thing on the news about the explosion that had taken my Mazda. GR is just a big “small town” as I’ve said before and something like that should be the news lead on at least one of the local channels, or at least make the special local sections of the GR press where the birth of a cow in Caledonia is big news. With the cult of the firefighter taking hold in the country, why wasn’t there any interviews with the ones that had responded to the fire at the barn? Maybe I just haven’t seen it yet. I asked Kate to take a look at the news as I finished the extortion note and in the half-hour that it took she didn’t come up with anything that was even remotely connected to it. I would have expected the cops to come looking for me at least. Just then I realized that the car was still registered to the address that I shared with Charlene and I would have to call her to see if anyone had been there. One thing about her, she was almost as paranoid about the authorities as I was; I could be sure that she wouldn’t give them anything until she checked with me. I can hope anyway.

I waited for the call from Tom and Chad to say they were in place before I sent the note; we needed to cover all of the escape routes from the 6th street building before I stirred up the hornet’s nest. As I set back, I wanted to be there with them but knew that the best place for the rest of the operation was for me to be here, not nearly as much fun, though. Kate called to me and said she found something about the barn on the local NBC station and I sat down on the couch next to her to listen and look at the film from the site. When she saw that the only thing left of the barn was a small crater that was still smoking hours later, she reached over and softly held my hand as she looked at me with what I took to be concern. Still don’t have all of the emotions down yet, that could take a while. The wreckage of the truck and my Mazda were assumed to be vehicles that were stored in the barn and the explosion was explained by the blow-dried commentator by the storage of fertilizer and a leaking diesel fuel tank making the same kind of explosive that was used on the building in Oklahoma City. Good, make some assumptions, folks, give me some time to finish this. My only question was whether or not I would explain any of this when it was over. It would be nice to get a few thousand dollars from my Mazda for a down payment for another car. How do you explain that to your insurance company, though?

The extortion note was a simple one, give me fifty million dollars or I’ll expose your scheme and name names, etc. The account that Jameson had set up offshore was ready to receive the money and the guys were in place to watch. The only loose end that I could think of was where were Beef and Beefier? Since we were getting to the dangerous part of the plan, I was getting more and more reluctant to use Jameson to get the information for me, there was no way that I could protect him if his identity was breached. I knew he could do his magic from anywhere, should I tell him to get at least a little farther away? Nope, keep it simple. Chad called and I sent the note to Jameson on IM and his response was that he would have it gone in about a minute. Now all there was to do was wait. I’m not too good at that as you know.

The lull waiting for the response was a welcome one and I got up and walked around the apartment stretching and rubbing my eyes to help them regain their ability to focus on something farther away than the computer screen. It was getting to look like I was going to need a new pair of glasses. Damn, it’s a pain getting old, and I AM getting old. The pains from the accident were getting worse as they normally do the day after the injuries and with nothing to distract me from them I walked to the bathroom to get some aspirin and hoped that it would at least take the top off the pain. Kate understood that it was not the time for talk and just sat on the couch going over the files that I had copied what seemed like years ago. I realized that I hadn’t shown her any of this stuff since she was not part of the Scoobie Gang when I had stolen them. I couldn’t remember if I had brought her up to speed since then, the days were kind of running together and it was getting tougher and tougher to keep things straight. I needed to stop thinking about that and remember to focus on the only important thing we had going; the reaction that was to come from Daniel and Robert. We waited.

“How long has this been going on?” I looked at Kate as her voice startled me out of my thinking.

“I’ve got to think, it’s only been a couple of weeks.” I sat down next to her after moving some of the papers from the couch.

“My next question is “why did you get involved,” I mean, Jake; no one could understand why you were brought in as a partner in the first place. Don’t take that wrong, please,” I hoped she could see the hurt on my face but it was false. You know that I asked myself the same question over and over I the first year I worked at L&D but it DID hurt to know that you were thought of as unnecessary. The old ego had just taken a huge bruising from someone that shouldn’t be doing that but I expected honesty so should I be upset? Nope, not going to fall into that trap of false outrage that I use to hurt other people at times, not this time, Kate deserves better. Am I finally growing up? Hope so.

“You remember the day I came into your office to ask if you’d taken some files from my desk? Well, that was the day.” I continued and explained the file mistakenly given to me and it’s disappearance along with all of the things that had happened since and she just looked at me.

“How the hell did you make the leap from a file disappearing to this conspiracy? Jake, it is going to be fun getting to know how that brain of yours works, or maybe scary.” She looked at me and smiled and I promised myself that I wouldn’t fall into the normal traps that I had used to ruin the other two relationships I’ve had. I told you I wasn’t that experienced for an old guy.

“I guess I was bored,” was the only answer I had but as I thought about it, it was the truth.

“Thanks for not getting me involved earlier, but I hope it was for protection, not that you didn’t trust me,” still can’t read her.

“When this whole thing started I didn’t know who to trust. Except my friends, anyway. Who would think our company would be involved with something like this? For the first time in my life I kept my mouth shut and it worked out. At least I hope it will work out. To answer your question honestly, no, I didn’t know who to trust so at the time I didn’t trust you.” She just looked at me again with a look I couldn’t fathom.

“Do you trust me now?” I could see real concern.

“Of course, you know it’s my nature to trust everyone and you’ve shown trust in me that I didn’t deserve at the time. When I called you and told you to get out of your house no questions asked and you did it I knew I could trust you because you trusted me. It’s convoluted logic but makes sense to me.” I picked up her hand and she squeezed mine lightly, leaned over and kissed me, then laid her head on my shoulder. I was pretty damn happy.

Jameson IM’d and I jumped a little from the little bell that told me that I had a message.

‘dad, the note has been sent and I have a couple of letters that I’ve decrypted, i’m sending them now, any response?’

‘nope, not yet, i’ll let you know.’

‘later.’

‘bye.’

No response. Had I made a mistake? If I was in their shoes, I would be doing what Robert Heinlein had said in one of his novels: “When in danger or in doubt, run in circles scream and shout”, if the thing that I worked years for was crumbling around me, there would surely be some reaction or action that I would take. Whey weren’t they doing anything? They were.

My phone rang and it was Micah with a note of concern in his voice.

“Hey, Jake, you remember those guys that were supposed to be from the NSA? Well, they just pulled up and drove into the building. Anything you want us to do?”

“Not really, just keep watching. Geez, I just realized you guys have been there all day. You want me to come over and give you a break so you can get something to eat?” It was pretty easy to just sit in my apartment when I had everything I needed here, including a beautiful woman.

“Well, John needs to get home to see Jamie, Mike needs to pick up the kids, and it would be nice to have some dinner and get out of the truck for a while,” Micah sounded relieved that I had suggested that I spell him for a while.

“Let me get a few things together and I’ll come over. We need to figure out how to keep a rolling watch on them anyway. Have you talked to Tom and Chad?”

“Yeah, they walked over here about an hour ago and we had a smoke. I’ll tell them you’re coming, my truck is right around the corner by a really ugly purple house; you can’t miss it.”

“Be there in about a half hour.” I hung up and started to get ready. If I was going to be out there for a while, I wanted to get my small cooler ready with some tea (yeah, no beer) and water, and I remembered to use the rest of the salami and pumpernickel to make a couple of sandwiches to take along. I knew Tom and Chad hadn’t eaten either and I was getting hungry again, too. I completed the feast with a few beers (Micah, Chad, and Tom might want one, wink, wink) and the ice pack to keep everything cold until I got there. I grabbed my flashlight, binoculars, and some warm clothes and piled them in the back of the rental Taurus, said goodbye to Kate, and took off toward the west side. The damn new expressway is loud but it is also convenient; the drive that comes into my complex dumps out about fifty yards from the entrance ramp and cuts fifteen minutes off my travel time to everywhere. I still want to move, though. A house would be nice.

As I drove the e-way over to the west side, I tried to figure out what the best schedule would be to keep watch on Daniel and his crew. We were all on the same sleep schedule so that would make it much more complicated. It would be nice to have some third shift friends that would be used to staying up all night but Mike was the only one and he had family obligations that none of the rest of us had. I guess it will be up to me to stay up all night for the first one and then try to work out getting at least one more person in the rotation. I will miss sleeping with Kate tonight. Damn, that realization just came to me and I hadn’t told her. I got out my phone and called her but got a busy signal, I couldn’t remember getting one of those in these days of cell phones and voicemail and it was odd but probably just a glitch. The traffic going north was ugly for late afternoon and I remembered there was construction going on at 28th street that was going to take the e-way from three lanes down to one and I was thankful the Taurus had an automatic transmission; my knees were swelling and sore from crashing my car and I was not sure that I could take the traffic pushing in the clutch of my Mazda every few seconds. A moot point anyway, but I still missed that rusted old thing. I should have brought coffee, damn.

Micah’s truck was easy to find with the glow in the dark house he had parked in front of. I pulled up behind him and could see that the spot that he had found was a good one; you could look through the small spaces between houses and get a great view of the roll up door that they were using to go in and out. Well, in anyway, no one had come out all day. I walked up to the truck as John and Micah got out and we went over the happenings of the day and just BS’d for a while until John needed to go. Micah asked if I wanted him to take another day off and I could see that he wanted me to say yes so I did. I can use all of the help I can get. They got back in the truck, waved goodbye, and I moved the Taurus up to their spot so I could sit and still see the door but I wanted to find Chad and Tom so I opened my phone and gave Tom a call but remembered that his phone had died earlier so I dialed Chad and got him. They were on the back of the building a couple of blocks away so I retrieved the cooler from the backseat and started to walk over to them but thought better of it. I called Chad back and asked them to come over to where Micah had been parked since I wanted to cover the door that they had used the most. As I waited, I wondered if Daniel would be triggered into looking around the building to see if he was being watched now that the extortion letter had been sent. Another thought came into my head and I was glad that I had brought the .357 with me; this was not a good neighborhood and I would have to remember to watch for the more mundane threats that were a part of this end of town. It would just be too ironic to get killed by a mugger when I’ve survived everything so far wouldn’t it? I called Kate again and got through to tell her I would be gone overnight and there were voices in the background that I couldn’t really make out. She told me she had decided to go for a walk and there were lots of people out in the complex since the weather was so nice and she would miss me. It was nice to have someone miss me again and not when they are shooting at me.

Tom and Chad walked up from the direction opposite where I was expecting them and it startled me a little. They had decided to take the long way around and get a look at the rest of the block that the building sat on and found there was a little alleyway that cut through the property that was impossible to see unless you were looking for it, but was so overgrown that it looked like it had not been used in years. I made a note to take a walk around later in the dark to take a look when I knew I was going to need to stretch and pee. We sat and talked for a while and the lack of traffic made me think that all of the houses that sat on the street were unoccupied and the thought came to me that I may have problems explaining why I was there if a police car happened to come by. The new Taurus was going to scream “stolen” if I left it out where people could see it and I didn’t relish the idea that I was going to have to spend the night out in the elements. It wasn’t supposed to rain but the low was supposed to be in the thirties and I wasn’t sure I had brought enough clothing to fight that off. My mind wandered back to the time that I stood in the snow and cold outside Chicago Stadium waiting to buy Led Zepplin tickets in much worse weather than this and I wondered when I became such a wuss. I’m not really, I hope.

The sun had dipped behind the buildings and the shadows were starting to telegraph the chill that was going to come later. Chad and Tom finished the beer and left one sandwich for me for later, got up and headed back to Tom’s Buick. He was going to take Chad back to his truck and Chad promised he would come back to spell me around four am. Tom had the girls Wednesday but promised he would try to get Marcy to keep them for the rest of the week. I hadn’t seen him as upbeat and happy in quite a while so I thought being a part of this was good for him. Just as long as he stayed alive, that is. Yeah, I’m still worried about that. We said our goodbyes and when they left I started to feel a little alone but decided to take a walk around the area to shake it off. I needed to find a place to hide the Taurus anyway and I wanted to get to that before it got completely dark. I was glad that I had brought along my old winter coat that had been moved lower in the hierarchy of clothes to be one that I used to stay warm when I worked on cars in the winter; the oil and grease stains that couldn’t be removed anymore seemed in my mind to be great camouflage and a fit for the area. Not the thing a managing partner of a company would normally wear and I completed the ensemble with and old black Guinness hat that Mike had given me when he worked at the Mill and my retired Nike running shoes that had lost their bounce but were still in pretty good shape.

The lack of traffic was getting to be kind of eerie as I started my walk and was twenty minutes in before I saw the first car, truck actually, but it belonged to one of the local electric suppliers I knew had a warehouse in the same area so I guess it wasn’t strange to see it. I found the little alley that Chad and Tom had talked about and the thought entered my head that maybe I could hide the Taurus there but some of the trees that had grown in were six inches in diameter and it wouldn’t fit. Damn. I stopped for a minute and looked around and saw what looked like a small catering business (you know, with the trucks that go out and sell to people on job sites) that was across the street and down about a hundred feet from the roll up door on Daniel’s building. The trucks sitting out front looked relatively new and were parked with a space between them for the front door that looked about Taurus sized and if I could fit it in there, the view to the door would be perfect. I just hope the cops don’t get too curious if it does fit. I angled across the road and through a vacant lot to come up behind the Taurus and used the electric fob to unlock the door after I remembered to make sure there wasn’t anyone around, got in and started around the block to come up to the catering building from the opposite direction. It was still twilight so I kept the lights off as I parked (it did fit) and made sure there was enough room to get my door open.

I wondered when the employees of the catering company would start to show up in the morning, I understood enough about how those businesses worked that there would have to be hours of prep work to be done before they went out and if they offered breakfast there would be people arriving before daylight to get started. Maybe this isn’t such a good spot? My abbreviated walkaround hadn’t shown me any other places to hide that were as good but once I saw this one I stopped looking so I got out of the car and started another one. I wanted to see what the back of the building looked like anyway and the nervous energy had built up to the point where I needed to relieve it with some kind of activity. The coffee didn’t help either, I had to find a place to relieve myself of the coffee but I was thankful for the caffeine boost; there was no way I was going to stay awake all night without it. As I cleared the back side of the building my phone rang.

“Dad, it’s Jameson, I’ve been trying to IM you for a couple of hours and didn’t hear from you so I thought I’d call instead.” He sounded excited. “They’ve responded to the extortion note but want proof that you have the evidence. What do you want to do?”

“I’m out on a stakeout watching these guys and I don’t have a WiFi like you do. You’ll have to wait until I get back to my place about 5 am.” Damn, I forgot all about having to have a response ready and how to make it. I took a chance. “Did you store all of the files that you’ve gotten since we started this?”

“You never know when you might need a copy so yes, I did,” not the first time this kid had not done what I asked him to. “What if something happens to you, I couldn’t let that go by and I guess I was right, huh?” Geez, this kid was getting to be like me, poor kid.

“I should be mad but not now, look through the files for one that has Harry Doan’s name on it and send it to them. I don’t care which one, just pick it but as soon as the response comes, call me.”

“Will do, give me about fifteen minutes and they’ll have it. Dad, be careful.”

“I will, don’t worry about it, everything will work out.” It was the first time that I could remember a note of concern coming from any of my children and it brought home the seriousness of the whole mess sending a chill through me even though I was dressed for the weather.

I closed my phone and looked at it for a moment thinking about when Jameson had been a little boy taking apart everything in the house to see how it worked and couldn’t help but choke up a little. It had been so long since that time and the memories of those days seemed to be reduced to snapshots instead of the movies that they used to be in my memory. The snapshots were even fading and I didn’t like it much; I probably deserved it, though, I’ve never been a very good father and I wonder why they still like me at all. Really, I wonder why anyone likes me, I am a pain in the ass and more complicated in my relationships than I have to be but can’t help it. Maybe I should just sell everything and move as far away from people as I can so no one has to deal with it anymore. Maybe after this is done.

I snapped out of the maudlin thoughts with the lights of a passing car and thought it might be fun to keep count of how many of them I saw during the night, it might relieve the boredom anyway. There were piles of trash mixed with the crumbling concrete of the sidewalk and more than once I had to move over into the street to keep from fouling my shoes and stumbling over it. When is this part of town going to get a makeover? I remember when there was no active downtown in GR (yeah, I’m that old) and look how far it has come. I could see the seeds of the renewal that had been sown in the area by the small projects like the catering company and a few of the nicer brick buildings that were being renovated into apartments but who would want to live here? There weren’t even any dogs or cats on the streets but luckily I hadn’t seen any rats either so that is a plus. I wonder if I’ll live to see this completed.

I checked the back of the building as I walked but didn’t see any doors that had been used in a while; most of them were padlocked from the outside so it would be difficult for them to make escape that way. Abandoned semi trailers blocked the rest of them and I wondered what kind of business had been there. Just curious and a way to keep my brain working and sharp. I tried hard to imagine when this must have been a bustling manufacturing center and thought about the people that had worked and what had happened to them. Probably the same thing that had happened to my job, bad management or economic change that the management had not seen coming. Either way the jobs were gone.

The wind had died and it had become a pretty nice night with a clear sky that said it was going to get cold as the night went on. But now it felt pretty good, fresh but with that little smell that said things were going to get warmer soon. Well, that’s my hope anyway, I was tiring of wearing these heavy clothes and my transparent skin needed some sun to make it look like I wasn’t ill. I didn’t see any cameras on the building as I walked but that’s not saying much, these days cameras can be so small that you could be standing next to them and not see them. I decided that my disguise was good enough to not be recognized so I walked past the front of the building and the roll up door that they were using like I belonged there but with a fake little limp that probably wouldn’t deceive anyone. Hey, it’s fun at times playing the spy. I was not looking forward to seven hours of looking at nothing but I didn’t know what else to do. As I got back to the Taurus, I started to think about a fall back plan that we could use to salvage this mess if something went wrong. I wanted there to be a fail-safe that we could use to get them if they got us; kind of a mutually assured destruction that had driven the cold war and kept the both the US and the Russians from launching a nuclear attack. Damn, that should have been part of the extortion note. I called Jameson to see if he had sent the proof note yet and couldn’t get him. I left the message on his cell to hold up until he talked to me, shut off my phone, and waited for his return call. The Taurus was losing heat as fast as I was in the deepening cold and I wondered if I dared to start the engine to get some heat flowing and decided to do it. I would watch out the back of the car to see if the steam rising from the exhaust could be seen and it was at first but after a couple of seconds most of it dissipated and I left it running to warm my toes from the cold.

“Hey, Dad, what’s the deal? I got your voicemail so I haven’t sent the note yet. Why do you want me to hold it?”

“I know you won’t know what MAD is but I want to build a little protection into that proof note.”

“Mutually Assured Destruction, geez, Dad, do you think I’m an idiot? I did listen to some things in school. I could damn near build you a nuclear weapon if I had the materials,” he sounded genuinely offended.

“Sorry, bad assumption. I want you to include in the note something to the effect that if they make any move on us or if it even looks like they are looking for us, we’ll dump everything we have on the FBI in Detroit and let them sort it out. Add to it that we know there is enough information to put them away for life so don’t try anything. Oh, tell them it’s on an automatic timer or something like that that we need to reset every hour or so and if anything happens it will be sent without any action on our part.” At least I think this is a good idea.

“Dad, you watch WAY too much TV, but it’s not a bad idea. I was thinking on those same lines but didn’t know if you wanted any advice from me,” He didn’t sound hurt but there was something in his voice that I couldn’t put my finger on.

“Any idea you get, don’t hesitate to tell me. I need all the help I can get,” I hoped he understood that I really meant it.

“Cool, I’ll probably just use what you said and send it. Five minutes or so and I’ll be done. I’ll let you know if there is any response.”

“See ya.”

I felt better that we had tied up the biggest loose end or at least had given Daniel and his boys something to think about. It was hard trying to keep them off balance and I thought the comment about the Detroit FBI was just subtle enough to get by unnoticed. The only FBI office I had ever had contact with was the Chicago one and that was where the material was going to go. Now we had to get busy tomorrow to make sure that that there was a device in place that would do what we had boasted we could do. They were not going to get away with this even if something happened to all of us. There was a feeling that was starting to bubble up the back of my mind, though; there was something that was not quite right. It reminded me of the time when I had first started working at the big company that had axed me; when we were goofing off, I could always tell when the foreman was coming and got up from the break area before he got there to make it look like I was working. I got so good at it that the rest of the guys would watch me and when I got up they all did. This one was not exactly the same feeling but there was something going on that I could recognize in my subconscious but it had not gotten out yet. Damn.

I’d like to say that there was all kinds of excitement, car chases and gunfire that happened overnight but I can’t. It was probably the most boring night I’ve spent in a while and I dropped off to sleep at least twice. Not for long I’m sure but there are snippets of time that I can’t account for so I must have been sleeping. Or there was an alien abduction but sleeping is probably the best explanation. What the hell are they doing in there? It was getting to be almost four and I expected to hear from Chad shortly so I made sure that I could see my phone; I’d dropped it earlier and thought it may have been on the walkaround but found it in between the front seats. I was getting the feeling that someone was coming so I started up the car and decided to move it back to the spot that Micah had found and take my chances with the cops. Chad would know where to look for me, too, so that was a plus. Just as I pulled out and turned left to go around the block, a car turned into the catering lot and I saw someone get out and unlock the front door as two more cars pulled up. Now I know how the food is going to be prepped for the breakfast run. Sometimes things just work out.

I had turned my phone over to vibrate for some reason and it started jumping on the console as I looked at it. Chad was on his way but running a little late so I left the car running to start to drive out the chill but wanted to take a walk to get the kinks out so I told him where the car was and got out. It was DAMN cold, no more than thirty five but the need to pee and stretch overcame it quite well. I looked up and down the street but didn’t see any cars or lights so the vacant lot would serve the purpose well and I walked behind some of the overgrowth to get it done. I was kind of glad that I hadn’t brought any coffee with me earlier but now a big house blend from Kava would taste great. And some breakfast. With the lack of activity from the building, I was beginning to believe that they had gone out another door and I wondered if I should go and take a look since there was only a hint of the coming sunrise that had started to color the eastern sky. I was getting tired of waiting, too, and what better time than four am to take a look? My phone vibrated again, it was Jameson.

‘Dad, something strange is going on, someone is using your computer with a masker similar to the one that we use on our IM’s.”

“Are you sure it’s not the one we use?”

“Yeah, different signature completely, I’ll have it cracked in an hour or so. What do you want me to do?”

“What can you do? I mean, can you monitor it like you’ve been doing on the Virginia computer?”

“I can do a keystroke capture and a clone of everything that’s being sent and received. I’ll store it until you tell me where you want it sent. Can you use your laptop for a while? I would be a little careful about using the desktop.”

“Okay, do that. How hard would it be for you to pull up stakes for a while and get out of your mom’s house? I’ll pick up the tab for a hotel for a few days and I think you should pack up as soon as you can.”

“Dad, what the heck’s going on? Is this dangerous?”

“I’ll fill you in later but yes, it is getting dangerous. You’ve seen how much money is involved and what these guys are capable of. You haven’t seen it on the news yet but they blew up four of their own to just clean up the loose ends.” The phone went silent for what seemed like forever as he was processing what I just told him. “They got my Mazda, too, when I tried to stop them from collapsing a building in New York.”

“How about Mom and Jonathan? Shouldn’t they get out, too?”

“Your Mom told me that she was taking Jonathan to visit Jennifer in Chicago tomorrow. I think that will be soon enough and far enough. Don’t tell her anything about any of this, okay? She’ll just blow up and I don’t need her interfering right now.”

“Okay. I’m not going to a hotel, though, I’ll just go to a friends house that will be better equipped for what you need me for.”

“Can you take time off from work?”

“Don’t need to, I can do my job from anywhere and they’re really good about me working from home. I’ll just tell them I’m not feeling too hot and won’t be in until next week.”

“Can you call your brother and ask him to disappear for a while, too?”

“Joseph is mountain biking until Saturday with Matt. Will that do it?”

“Just call him and tell him to not come home early, you can tell him a little but keep it to a minimum, okay? I think the less he knows the better. I wouldn’t have gotten you involved but I needed your “magic” and these guys would have gotten away with it without you.”

“Dad, this has been a lot of fun for me, you know I live for this stuff. Don’t worry about me, I’m a heck of lot better than they are and Steve is even better. I’m not going to tell Steve what is going on but he’ll help anyway.”

“Please be careful and keep me up to speed on what’s happening on my computer.”

“Okay, I’ll call you when I get anything.”

This was certainly not what I wanted to hear. I’ll bet you know what is going on but I don’t want to believe it, and I’m not going to jump to any conclusions either. That’s a problem that I normally have but it’s not a luxury I can afford right now. Damn, another complication, one more and I don’t know if I can handle it; we are quickly approaching the straw that is going to break this camel’s back. I was feeling deflated like someone had let all of the air out of me in a big burst and it left me limp inside. If you have figured this out, you know I’m not as smart as I think I am. Not only that, but now I don’t know who to trust. Except Jameson and the guys, that is. I was starting to hurt inside like something had been lost and I didn’t know what to do about it yet but knew that something had to be done. I called Jameson back.

“Can you run a background check on a Kate Sullivan, she’s my assistant where I work?”

“Do you have her address?”

“Not with me, but I know she lives in Cascade somewhere. Is that enough?”

“Yeah, I can get it from that. Why do you want it?”

“Can’t tell you yet but it’s important. As fast as you can, but don’t let it keep you from moving. Move first, then look, okay?”

“It’ll be about an hour, I woke Steve up and he’s getting the modems ready so I’ll be going in a few minutes.”

“Okay, call me when you find something.”

“Will do, dad, promise me you’ll be careful, too.”

“I will, I’ve got lots of people helping and I know we can do this.”

He hung up and I did too with the realization that I just wasn’t meant to be happy. I wonder how long it will be until I can accept that? Getting closer every day when I think about it. No pity party, it’s time to keep moving ahead and finish this no matter what the consequences are for me or anyone else. They made their choices just like I have and will have to live with them. But, damn, when is it my turn to have at least the chance to be happy? Chad pulled up behind the Taurus and I suddenly felt tired and in need of about four days sleep. I brought him up to speed about the latest developments that Jameson had discovered and his only response was that he was sorry. He’s known me for a while and could see the effect that being happy had on me for the past few days; I was a better person and felt like I finally belonged. So much for that.

I had left the car running while I talked to Jameson and taken care of the necessities so it was toasty when I finished talking to Chad and got in. Fatigue had started to slow my motions and I was having to think about movement that should have come naturally while I was driving home. The thought that came back to me over and over was “can I control my reactions toward Kate so my little discovery can be kept a secret?” Women are pretty perceptive and I was not sure I could pull it off but I did have the tiredness to blame and that would probably be a good explanation. I hope so. The only thing I wanted was to get back to my place and sleep for a while, maybe that will help me get my bearings again. I hope the dream doesn’t come back, I can’t take it right now.

**Chapter 26**

I slept like a rock for about eight hours and the dream didn’t come back. Well, not that dream but I did dream and it was dominated by Kate in a trenchcoat doing something that wasn’t clear to me. The explanation was always somewhere just out of my reach and I woke up frustrated that I couldn’t see it. Does it have that much importance? Probably not. How many people get insight from their dreams anyway? Kate was already up when I finally got to the point that I knew there would be no more sleep and allowed my eyes to open all the way. It’s always been a trick of mine that if I feel that I will be able to go back to sleep I keep my eyes half-closed; I’ve always felt that opening them triggers my brain to come all the way awake. Not scientific, I know, but a habit that I have. It’s worked so far. I was a little relieved that Kate wasn’t there; it would give me time to think a little about my responses and work up the best way to mask the revelations that had been given to me the night before. Thinking about it made me go just a little more hollow when the realization came that this was going to end soon. Why does it have to be this way? Why do people have to be this way?

I pulled myself to the side of the bed and it felt food that the pain from my accident had started to turn into a dull ache without the sharpness that made every movement too much effort. My head hurt from thinking and I knew it wasn’t going to get much better until this thing ended. Kate was making noise in the kitchen and I hoped it wasn’t for breakfast; I wasn’t in the mood to eat but I knew that I’d have to for the act to be accepted. I pasted a smile on my face and headed for the bathroom to get cleaned up for the day and the person looking back from the mirror looked about sixty not he fifty that I am and I finally realized how much this adventure was taking out of me. Ugh. I didn’t want to see Kate but knew I had to to keep up the charade and realized that I was doing exactly what I couldn’t; jumping to conclusions on the flimsiest piece of evidence. Think, don’t feel, you idiot. The shower brought me back to some semblance of humanity and I felt better and ready to finish this adventure. Today.

I had a few calls to make and needed to make them in private since I was not sure about Kate anymore so I picked up my phone and sipped it into my pocket as I walked into the kitchen. She had her back to me working on something while she looked out my tiny kitchen window so I walked up behind her, put my hands on her shoulders, and kissed her on the neck just like I had every morning since we had started our relationship. I can act, you know.

“Morning, Jake,” she half-turned and kissed me on the cheek and went back to her cooking.

“Morning, sorry I slept so late. I was just used up. Anything new while I was out?” I hoped there wouldn’t be since that would be more that Daniel knew.

“Nope, everything is quiet. No messages from Jameson, no phone calls from anyone else. Is there something going on? It hasn’t been this quiet since we started this, I expected you to get a few calls at least.” Damn, I think she was getting a feeling that something had changed. I told you women were pretty perceptive.

“I’m a little surprised, too,” I lied, “I think everyone just needed some sleep after running wide open over the last couple of days, this lull is a good thing, I need to have time to think anyway. My head hurts.” I was trying to play the sympathy card and get a little misdirection going. I don’t think it’s working.

“Well, let’s have breakfast and get back into it when were done,” I hoped my suspicion was only visible from my side of the eyes.

“That sounds wonderful,” I lied again, hey, this IS getting easier but there was going to be fallout later but I needed to ignore that for now. There had to be messages on my phone so I excused myself and went into the bathroom to check; almost all of the good guys had called but Mike but I hadn’t expected to hear from him. Chad’s call was first and there was nothing new at Daniel’s hideout except that Harry Doan had gone out and then back in about a half hour later. He had made the decision t let him go since we all felt he was a little fish and not long for the world anyway. Micah just wanted to know when his shift was and was looking for an update and I realized I hadn’t told him about Kate yet. That will be the second call I make. Jameson called to say that he was moved and back on line and had given Steve just a little bit of information that had geeked him up and I felt good that he would have some help. I couldn’t figure out how he was always awake when I needed him but when you’re twenty I guess you can go a lot longer than you can at fifty. Mountain Dew helps, too. I was getting concerned how I was going to keep looking normal and be able to communicate with everyone without Kate knowing. But there had to be some things that she would have to be involved in or the whole thing would blow up. No, it won’t matter if we end this today. It’s got to be today. How do I get out of here without her being suspicious?

I came out of the bathroom and found that Kate had cleaned up already and was watching TV with the news on, I didn’t know what she was looking for, if anything, and I sat down beside her and took up her hand and held it. She looked at me and I made the decision to not read anything into the look; there didn’t appear to be anything there anymore but I knew that this time it was just me. I made the quick decision to make an excuse to get out of there for awhile but knew I wouldn’t be coming back until we had the end in sight. I had been betrayed by women before but the stakes were never this high, just a broken heart and some pain to work through not the chance of bodily harm. None of them had cared that much and had been able to walk away with little more than a goodbye; with Karen there wasn’t even a goodbye, just a kind of fade out.

“I need to go out to the office for a while. Susan needs a few signatures so she can get the Cascade project back on track and Stan wants to talk about some past due payables. I won’t be too long, just a couple of hours and I’ll be back.” This lying stuff was getting easier; I just hope it won’t become a habit. Not to my friends, anyway.

“Okay, I’ll clean up a little around here and just wait, I guess. Is there anything you want me to do while you’re gone?” She WAS sensing the changes.

“Nope, but call me if anything comes up on the computer. I need to know what’s going on,” I looked at her for what I knew was going to be one of the last times, gave her a smile and a small kiss and went out the door. This was harder than I expected it to be but I had to remind myself why she was there; you’ve figured it out be now haven’t you? Yep, she’s a spy for Daniel. You didn’t know? Well, the signs were there. Go back and take a look, I’ll bet the car accident was even staged. Yeah, I know, thinking with other parts of my body instead of my head but if you have any ego at all, there are times when you think that just maybe someone will be interested in you. Not this time.

I didn’t know if Kate knew Susan very well but I assumed she would make a call to her to confirm my story so I decided to go into work for a few minutes to make my cover stick. I needed to think about how to isolate Kate from the actions we were going to take today and just to figure out what those actions were. The car is one of the best places to do that thinking and I was getting used to not having to shift; something I’ll have to fight if I want to ever get that Miata. I called Jameson to tell him to send any information to my second Yahoo address (hey, they’re free) but to continue to send innocuous stuff to the primary. He had a computer ready for me that did have wi-fi capability (his old laptop) and dropped the big news that the response from Daniel and Robert had come. It had come with baggage, though, they were looking for us with all of their resources and I could hear the laugh in Jameson’s voice when he told me about it. The kid had even started to put the package together for the FBI and said he’d have it ready in a couple of hours. Geez…maybe I’m not needed anymore, I’ll just let him do the whole thing and I’ll go get a beer. Not really.

He had the background check done on Kate, too, and it was basically what I expected. She had a blackout in her record that matched the ones that we had found for Robert and Daniel and that meant that they had a connection that went back to the late 90’s and I kicked myself for not doing the check earlier. I guess it’s just part of trusting everyone until they give you a reason to not trust them; a philosophy that I’ve told you about before that I adhere to. She was sleeping with me, too, and that just completely screws up my thinking. I’ll bet it would for you too if you’re honest about it.

I wanted to see the response note so I decided to stop at Steve’s and pick up the computer since I didn’t know what to do with Kate yet and she was isolated enough so she couldn’t do too much damage. At least I hoped that it was going to be enough but I had to remember to makes sure that Jameson had continued with the keystroke and file transfer record. I was a little curious who she had been talking to and wished that I could listen in on her phone calls. Damn, I could have looked at her phone before I left the apartment if I would have thought. I pulled up to Steve’s and Jameson was waiting outside for me with the computer and the notes that I wanted to see were already on the screen. They had agreed to our terms and were set to send the money but wanted to see us in person before they’d do it. Do they think we’re that stupid? I wonder if they forgot about the fail-safe that we had told them about? I wanted Jameson to send another note back to them that would remind them of the fact and refuse the meeting. There was no need for it and I didn’t want another complication. These guys were professional killers and I knew I’d be out of my league in a face-to-face with them. Just not going to happen.

We talked for a while about who Kate had been sending notes to and I filled him in on my suspicions about her. The notes had ended up at Daniels computer but had been routed through a bunch of servers to mask the trail but she hadn’t done a very good job of it. There were only two of them and they were somewhat cryptic but she was telling them about some of our moves including the fact they were being watched. Probably the reason why there hadn’t been any activity so far. I was glad she didn’t know where any of us were and there hadn’t been any notes since I left the apartment. Did she have her own computer? I didn’t remember but didn’t think so; it hadn’t been in the bags she had brought but I didn’t look through them. Probably should have, huh?

Jameson and I wrapped up our meeting with him showing me how to connect through the wi-fi connections that were sprouting like mushrooms around the town. This would help us to stay connected without having to go back to the apartment or use the phones too much and I felt better that I wouldn’t have to keep up the charade with Kate. I knew she was going to get suspicious when I didn’t come back in a couple of hours but we’ll know if she reports in and that will give us a small advantage. I’m not sure if it’s going to matter anyway, I couldn’t see how she could stop us. I called Micah as I drove to work and told him about my suspicions about Kate and he was surprised because he liked her. I guess that just shows you that I’m not the only gullible one but Micah has the same philosophy that I have on trust so I’m not really surprised. I asked him to call Mike and John and get them out of their places since I didn’t know how far Kate had gone in ratting us out and the last thing I wanted was for them to get hurt. We made plans to meet up later in the day to go over our endgame and I just felt that it was safer to have us together than spread across the town. Jameson called.

“Dad, they sent a file that was supposed to look like the money had been sent to our account but it’s a fake. It’s just a shell file that most people would think looks legit but I think they are just buying time for something else. What do you want me to do?” I had to think for a minute and pulled over to the side of the road as I did. This was using up all of my attention and it was getting dangerous to try to multitask; I wanted to mull it a little anyway. I DID have an idea.

“Can you still get at the money and take it all?” I wanted to slap them a little to make sure they knew we were serious. “I mean the whole hundred and fifty million.”

“Give me a minute…” I sat in the car and waited.

“Yep, I can still get to it.”

“Then do it. Now. Then send back a note saying that they’ll get their part of it back when they stop trying to screw with us. Tell them we know the money transfer file is a fake, and they are just one more mistake from us sending all of the information to the feds.” I wanted to stir them up a little and stealing their money looked to me to be the best way.

“Got the cash, I’m going to hide it by moving it around automatically. Can’t we just keep it? I’ve got an idea, you want me to shut down their personal accounts, too? It would be a shame to have them still be able to use their credit cards, wouldn’t it?” He was laughing and I couldn’t help but join in. There was no need for stealth anymore since Kate had exposed us and it was becoming liberating and opened up whole new avenues of action. It WAS going to end today.

“Do it. But make sure you get all of them from Harry Doan through Beef and Beefier and do the same to Kate. We want them to be scared and off balance for the rest of the day. We may be screwed if they have a hoard of cash to use but it’s a risk that we have to take. How long before they are all shut down?”

“Steve went to work on that last night, not really that, but he’s been mining data on those guys and we’ve got the stuff we need. Probably about a half hour and their credit will no longer exist. Oops, just got a note back from them on the money. They don’t believe we can do it…nope, next note just came in and they have agreed to stop if we give the money back. I guess they believe now, huh?”

Chad called.

“Jake, Beef and Beefier just blew out of here in a hurry. Do you want me to follow them?” Chad was calm as always.

“Nope, I think I know where they’re going. They’re coming after me. I’m supposed to be going into work for a while and that’s where I know they will look for me. We just took all of the money so I think it’s having the effect we wanted. One thing, they know we’re watching them so be really careful and keep an eye out for anything unusual.” I brought Chad up to speed on the events of the morning and why we had taken the money from them including their attempt to screw us with the fake money transfer. He laughed like crazy when I told him about shutting down all of their accounts and then asked me to make sure that Jameson never got mad at him.

“What’s the plan on watching them, then? Do we pull off?”

“Not yet, I still want to know where the second truck is. They may try to use it because it’s the only leverage they’ve got left. If they threaten us with dropping another building I want to be able to tell the cops where they are. I’ve asked Micah to tell everyone to hide out until they hear from me; we’re going to all meet up later to make the end plans. I want this done today; I don’t think I have the energy to go on much longer. I want Kate out of my house, too.”

“Cool, I’ll just sit tight then.”

“Oh, one thing that just came to me, Can you take a walk around to see if they have enough electric service to power the truck? They’ve had plenty of time to charge the capacitors and I don’t want to let them do any more damage.”

“I know they do, this used to be a manufacturing plant and they’ve got their own substation out back. I saw it yesterday when Tom and I were watching the back of the building.” Not what I wanted to hear but should have anticipated. These are not amateurs after all.

“Okay, just watch them, then. Did you see anything like they may be setting up inside when Beef and Beefier left?”

“Nope, too dark but I can try to get a look inside if you want.”

“No, I think we’ll just assume they’re going to do something. You and I both know that they won’t sit still for what we’ve done to them today. They know we’ve got them by the short hairs but they’ve surprised us before and we need to expect it again. I may have overdone it with backing them into a corner and we need to expect a huge pushback, especially since I let it slip to Kate that we were going to end it today.” That may not have been too big a mistake.

“Okay, Jake, I’ll sit tight and wait but to be safe I’m going to take my truck over to Duff’s and leave it there and watch from the back porch of the purple house. It’s empty and been broken into at least once.”

“Good, call me if anything happens.” I wondered if we could stop them if they decided to drop a building. Certainly didn’t know how.

I realized I was still sitting by the side of the road on the way into work and started the Taurus back up to get moving. Not to work, that was certain but where? I needed real time information and had forgotten that I left Jameson on call waiting.

“Jameson, you still there?”

“Yeah, are you going to pay my cell phone bill this month? I’ve been waiting for twenty minutes. Oh, there’s bad news, too. Kate sent a note telling them you were going to be at work this morning but she didn’t know where anyone else is. There’s not been any other traffic from her other than she told them this is going to end today. Is it?”

“Damn, I hope so. Get the file ready to be sent to the FBI and keep it idling until I tell you to send it. Do you have the address I gave you for the guy in Chicago?”

“Yeah, but I think you may be cutting it too thin. You know how long it takes for the government to react (geez, he had been listening to me all these years) and if something needs to happen quickly there’s at least a three hour lag in travel time alone.” I knew it but it hadn’t sunk in. Damn.

“Dad, just got another note, this one’s bad. They are going to destroy the Sears tower unless we give them the money back and show ourselves. They want all of the files we have on them, too,” the world had just come crashing down and all I could do was sit in that damn car stunned. What the hell do I do now? I couldn’t breathe and there was a rushing in my ears that overwhelmed the traffic that was two feet from my door.

“What do I do? Dad? Dad?” I couldn’t answer. I just sat and thought about what I did wrong. Why were they doing this? There was no way they could get away with it. Every FBI agent and police officer in the country would be looking for them. Okay, calm down. Maybe they don’t have another working truck. They know we’ve seen how they work and that it’s a possibility they might have one but it doesn’t make any sense that they’d use it. We still control the money. This whole thing would be for nothing if they dropped that building. They wouldn’t do it just for spite would they? One thing was for sure, we were not going to show ourselves.

“Dad, you still there?” Jameson sounded worried.

I sucked it up.

“Yeah, I’m here,” but I answered in a much smaller voice than I wanted. My heart was pounding. “Send the file; we need to make sure that we can stall them for a few hours. What was their deadline?”

“They gave us an hour to make all of the arrangements. I’ll send the note to you. Are you online?”

“Yeah, answer them that it will take about three hours to get the money back from where it is. Can you rig it so they can never get the money whatever happens? I mean corrupt the files or something.”

“I can do better than that. I’ll set up a little trapdoor program that will take it back the second time they access the files, that way everything will be fine when they check that the money is there but when they try to use it, poof, it’s gone.” This was one dangerous kid.

“Add to the note that I’m the only one who will come out in the open. That’s our final offer. Got it?”

“No, I won’t send it. Dad, we can beat these guys without you doing that. It’s not going to get us anything anyway, you know that.” He was right but I knew we had to dangle something in front of them to get them to bite. Hey, I’m fifty, after all. I’ve lived long enough.

“Send it, but tell them I’ll be at the west side location at around four. No, let’s make them come out in the open. Let’s make it the Meijers parking lot on Alpine and tell them I want Daniel and Robert there. I don’t know what I’m going to do but it will give us some time to think. Now, get the money prepped and send the note. Let me know what the response is as soon as you get it.” I was just winging it and it didn’t feel good, but I knew their were cameras covering that lot so anything they do will be recorded.

“Okay, but I don’t like this. If anything happens to you I’ll track these guys down and they will never be able to use another computer or credit card the rest of their lives.” I could tell he would do it, and could do it.

“I’d be pissed if you didn’t,” was all I had to say and shut off the phone. Things were going to happen fast from this point forward and I was going to need everyone to be part of it; I just wish that Kate hadn’t betrayed us, damn, why am I thinking about that now. You can’t wallow in that crap now, be a damn grownup and get on with it. The note that Jameson had sent to me didn’t help at all; he had told me the gist of it and reading it didn’t change my response at all. What was the outcome we wanted from this whole thing? That would drive our responses or should we even be reacting? Does reacting to their threats give them the upper hand? Damn, slow down the head a little, the file has been sent so that should be the priority now.

I called Agent Smith’s number and got him on the second try.

“Agent Smith, Jake Devereaux. Did you get the files I sent you?” He paused for a second and I knew it wasn’t going to be good.

“Exactly who are you Mr. Devereaux? What is this about?”

“You did a background check on me here in Grand Rapids a couple of weeks ago. I live in the same complex as your son.” I hoped he had a better memory than I did.

“Right, what can I do for you Mr. Devereaux?”

“Agent Smith can you check your e-mails for some files I sent you a few minutes ago.” I explained as quickly as I could over the next few minutes and he was good enough to not interrupt.

“You know who the people are that threatened the Empire State building and you didn’t come forward to tell the authorities?” He had the typical cop attitude and I was beginning to think this was a bad idea. But what choice did I have?

“Just look at the files, please. Be honest, if I came to you with this a couple of weeks ago would you have believed me? They hadn’t done anything yet and I would have been locked up as crazy and you know it.” I was getting too pissed and knew it.

“Okay, that part’s over. Let’s get on to the next one. You say there is a new threat to the Sears Tower?” His calm was starting to get infuriating.

“If we don’t turn over the money they extorted by 4 pm this afternoon, yes, they said they will collapse the Sears Tower.” The clock is ticking, get off the dime, idiot.

“Who exactly is ‘we’.” God, more typical cop crap.

“I meant I, are you going to do something or not? Tell me right now or I’ll try to handle it myself,” I was getting pissed but was still smart enough to try to insulate the guys from any consequences.

“Please calm down Mr. Devereaux. I’ve sent the files to our analysis section and as soon as you hang up I’ll make a call to the local Grand Rapids office and get the ball rolling on that end. Did you say you know where these people are?”

“Yes, in an old factory on the west side of GR. At least the last I knew that’s where they were.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m sitting in my car along the East Beltline near 60th street.”

“I want you to drive downtown to the federal building and go to the FBI office there. They will be waiting for you and can protect you.” I wasn’t sure they could.

“Look, they’ve been dealing with me and if new people get involved it’s going to spook them and they’ll be gone. I’m not going to sit on my hands, we’ve only got four hours and I know these guys; they are just mean enough to destroy that building if they’re trapped.” I was becoming sure they would.

“Mr. Devereaux, you will be liable for criminal action if you interfere with our investigation,” I knew now this was a mistake.

“Look, Agent Smith, I’m the only one that can stop these guys and I guess I’ll have to take my chances with the law. I’m not going to sit while you try to figure out what to do. I KNOW what to do and I guess I’ll just have to do it. Thanks for your help,” I hoped the sarcasm would get through but the talk with him had done one thing; I knew what had to be done. Jameson called.

“Dad, they agreed to the meeting. Four pm at the Meijers lot on Alpine. They wanted everyone there but I told them no. I hope that’s what you wanted.”

“Exactly right, nice job. Any new contact from Kate?”

“She thinks there is something going on but her notes make it clear she doesn’t know what it is, but she thinks you’ve figured out that she is working for them and is getting ready to abandon your apartment. Oh, here’s a new one. Daniel wants her to go over to the west side building before three but there’s nothing else in the note.” I filled him in on the set-to with the FBI and the fact that we couldn’t count on them.

“What are you going to do? Dad, you’ve said they’ve already killed at least five people. You can’t go into this by yourself.”

“It’s too late to do anything else. Jameson, I should have brought the FBI in earlier but I guess I was feeling important and now I just feel stupid. We’ll just have to do the best we can,” It was looking like this may be my last day. Oh, well.

“Is there anything else I can do,” he sounded defeated.

“Just keep me up to speed on anything else that happens, and Jameson remember how much I care for you guys. I’ll be okay, don’t worry.” I couldn’t take my own advice.

I needed to pee. The excitement of the last few minutes had speeded up my metabolism enough (or was it the three cups of coffee?) that I had a sudden, uncontrollable urge to eliminate the liquid from my bladder and I was relieved there was a fast food restaurant just ahead. I hadn’t remembered starting to drive the car; it was like there were a few minutes that were gone from my memory because the last street was 60th and I was now at 44th. I can’t have this happen, not now. After I used the facilities, I went back out to my car and started to make the phone calls to muster up the troops. Three hours left.

I got Mike, Micah, Chad, and John but had to leave a long message on Tom’s phone telling him what was happening and to call me as soon as he got the message. We agreed to meet in a half hour at a restaurant on Alpine that Chad knew had a lot that went around the back of the building where we could park and try to figure out what we were going to do. I was curious to where Beef and Beefier were so I called Susan and made up a reason for calling her to see if they had actually been looking for me. I couldn’t think of a way to do it subtly, so I just came out and asked her, they had been there but that was about noon. She hadn’t seen them but the receptionist had called her since she didn’t know what to answer; I hadn’t told anyone but Susan that I was not coming in. Okay, we know they’re out there somewhere, I can just about guarantee they’ll be in the Meijers lot at four. Better to know where they’ll be, I guess. Maybe not, but I knew Daniel and Robert didn’t need backup. I wonder what they think about the public meeting. They’ve got to assume I’ve got something planned. The irony is I don’t. Not yet.

I pulled in the lot and made my way around the back to find that the rest of the gang except Tom had already arrived and were sitting on the cars talking amongst themselves. They looked relaxed and there were smiles on some of the faces that couldn’t understand. This is serious, guys. I got out and dragged the new laptop that Jameson had given me along just in case he needed to reach me and it looked cool, too. Yeah, maybe I’m not taking this as seriously as I should. Maybe I’m already resigned to it ending badly. I certainly couldn’t think past four o’clock and it was a really strange feeling, like my future ended there and there was just a wall of white past that time. You know the worst part? I didn’t care all that much. I know, I’m only fifty but the rest of my life looked like just repeats of things I had done before. There was no new milestone to achieve, no new promotion to be striven for, no new degree to pursue, no new love to energize me. If it ends today, so what?

I asked Chad if there had been any action at the building and he said there hadn’t been except for a delivery from a Chinese take-out about noon but that was it. He had the binoculars when they opened the door but there was some sort of partition that was set up just inside it and all that could be seen was the grey cloth and the top of the truck in the background. At least we knew the truck was still there and Harry Doan was still there. I asked how big the bag looked and it was way too large for one person’s lunch so I had to assume that Daniel and Robert were still there but I was curious if there were any technicians other than Harry to run the truck. Something we wouldn’t know.

Two hours.

We kicked around what we needed to do for the meet at Meijer’s but there were no good suggestions for going up against a group of professionals that were surely armed to the teeth. The plan was taking shape in my head that I should go alone and try to wing it; maybe try to make them believe that all I wanted was some money and that the file for the FBI did not exist, it was just a threat to get the money. After all, L&G was going to collapse and I was going to be out of a job and probably responsible for the debts that the company had incurred since I was now managing partner. Maybe make them believe that I had figured that out from the day that they had promoted me? I could explain the destruction of the first truck by saying that I needed to keep them here until I could figure out a way to get some of the cash and I thought it would be easier if they had not destroyed a national landmark. How much had Kate explained to them? Except for the possibility that she called them, there was nothing in the notes she sent that had explained all of the actions of our little group. I can hope, can’t I?

When I explained my thoughts to the guys it went over as the clichéd ‘lead balloon’, but they didn’t have any better ideas so we started to think about holes that may be in the plan. After we kicked it around for a while and tried to anticipate what the bad guy’s actions were going to be, the consensus was that there was no other answer. I was going to go it alone but they were going to be in the lot to watch and make sure Daniel and Robert couldn’t take me away without them knowing where that was. I expected they’d try.

One hour.

I still had the .357 with me in the car but I had to leave it behind to go into the restaurant to relieve myself again, I told you it was all that coffee but I’m going to be honest, it’s nerves. I was sweating through my shirt even though it was only about sixty-five degrees outside. A gorgeous day if it wasn’t for what was happening, I wondered what tomorrow was supposed to be like and I remembered Thursdays in the past as a great day where everyone was starting to anticipate the weekend and there was only one day left in the work week. I still couldn’t see past four PM. Damn. When I came out we went over where everyone was going to be while I talked to Robert and Daniel. There was normally enough activity around the store that the guys could hide in plain sight and blend in with the rest of the shoppers and I wanted to make sure I was in view of one of the cameras even though I didn’t know what good it would do. Evidence after the fact, I guess. They would just have to follow me and find their watching spots on their own; they’ve had practice over the last few weeks and I trusted them with my life, no really, damn, it really was my life this time. Please tell me why I don’t care too much.

Thirty minutes.

I was walking out of the restaurant and my phone rang it’s little doorbell tone. Jameson.

“Dad, I had to tell you, they’re pinging again. I think they’re going to go through with it and collapse that building.” They did have a second truck. I had no clue what to do about it.

“When did you see the ping?” I don’t know why I asked.

“Just before I called you. Three sets of pings but all t the same area, I think they’re zeroing it in.”

Damn, my assumption that they wouldn’t drop a building just for spite was wrong; I couldn’t fathom the depth of evil in these people, I had underestimated it before and they had killed Marilyn and their own guys. Why did I think they wouldn’t do it? My chest started to tighten and the pains that had come the day before were back but much worse. Neat, die of a fricking heart attack before they can kill me. God does play dice with the universe.

“Can you jam them? Or give them a false location?”

“No, the ping didn’t go out over the net, it goes through the ground. The only way I knew they did it was I saw the command in the keystroke log that I’m still monitoring.” The despair was clear in his voice and it broke my heart because I couldn’t do anything about it.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure something out. They will NOT be allowed to do this.”

“Okay, Dad, just be careful and call me when you’re done at Meijers,” I don’t know what I did to earn the faith he had in me.

“I will, keep watching them, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” I hoped it would not be the last time I talked to him, we had talked more in the last two weeks than we had in two years and I wanted more of it.

Fifteen minutes.

How can we stop them? My mind raced back to the first truck but I knew that the brute force method I used then wasn’t going to work again. I was not going to ask any of the guys to do it anyway; I wasn’t even going to tell them about the pings because I knew that one of them would make the leap and do something stupid like I had before. The point was rendered moot by the next call. Tom.

“Jake, I got your message,” he sounded like he was whispering. “I’m on the roof of their building and I can see the same type of truck that they had at the pole barn. It’s set up and the electrodes are in the floor. It looks like they’re ready to do something,” I couldn’t think, should I tell him about the pinging? What could he do? We needed to do something.

“Jameson just called, they’re pinging the Sears Tower. It looks like they’re going to drop it no matter what we do,” I was so tired right then it was hard to talk. “I don’t really know what to do.”

“I do. Jake, you know how unhappy I’ve been for the last couple of years, I think I’ve got one last thing I can do. I’ve got the Browning with me and a couple of clips and they’ll make a hell of hole in all of that sensitive electronic equipment.” He finally sounded happy.

“No, Tom, you know they will be ready for you, they know we know where the truck is, you’ll never get to it,” I was trying my best to stop him but I also knew it was no use.

“Jake, there’s only one guy that I can see and your ex-girlfriend just came in. If I can’t take them I deserve to die. Look, you’ve said we’re running out of time so there are no options except me. Let me do something that makes a difference for a change.” He was going to anyway, so why not support him?

“Go! But hit it and get the hell out as soon as you can, nothing stupid, okay?”

“Got it Jake. I’ll see you later. Call me when you’re done with those idiots at Meijers,” I could hear the smile and I still didn’t understand the confidence these guys had in me.

There were looks of question when I got across the lot to the car where the guys waited for the endgame to begin. It was too late for them to do anything to help Tom so I decided to tell them about the pinging and Tom’s crusade against the west side building. Wow, that just pissed them off and I got the feeling that I shouldn’t have told them; I didn’t want them to do anything rash but the bad guys’ actions had primed them for some bad decision making. Please don’t. We needed to be calm and cool but I wasn’t so why should I expect that of them?

Five minutes.

I extracted promises from all of them that they would just watch as we got in our cars for the two minute trip to Meijer’s. I pulled in the lot and parked near the entrance to the building so the cameras would be certain to pick up all of the activity that was going to take place, got out of the car and leaned against it, making sure that I would be visible to Daniel and Robert when they arrived. As I stood there, the sweat started to flow again and make cold streaks that sent a chill through me as they rolled down my back. I was scared silly, but you know that, don’t you? Micah had hidden closest to me and he was the only one that I could see, his truck was tall enough that I could see the Checkmate sticker above the roofs of the other cars and he had a clear view of where I stood.

Time.

A black Mercedes rolled slowly into the lot from the south entrance off Alpine and I watched as it came diagonally across the parking spots, ignoring the lanes that had been painted for cars to follow. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a white Escalade turn left when the Mercedes turned right and headed toward me; moving around behind me and parking about two lanes over. Beef and Beefier.

Daniel and Robert rolled up into the spot next to me and I reached around behind my back to feel that the .357 was still there under my shirt that was now soaked completely through. I waited for them to get out while trying to watch for action from Beef and Beefier out of the corner of my eye but they just sat there motionless. Good. Daniel and Robert got out and I had not seen them look so haggard, I couldn’t remember seeing Robert in anything other than his thousand dollar suits and the jeans and running shoes were just not right. They looked better on Daniel but he looked like he hadn’t shaved in a few days and the bags under his eyes showed his sleep had probably become as bad as mine. Poor baby.

“Daniel, Robert. I won’t say it’s good to see you,” I had to try to appear more confident than I was.

“Jake, let’s cut the bullshit,” Daniel WAS the one in charge. “You have fucked with us for the last time. I’m going to make sure you never do it again.” It looked like I wasn’t going to get the chance to try to convince them of anything as Daniel pulled a silver automatic from his waist. Beef and Beefier had gotten out of the car and were heading toward me with their weapons held low against their legs. “Keep your hands where I can see them and move toward the car,” he waved with his other hand while keeping the gun low so it wouldn’t draw attention.

I put my hands up as high as I could hoping someone would see what was happening and moved around to the rear drivers door where he pointed when I saw a silver blur come around the corner of the lane and Micah’s truck caught the back of the Mercedes, slammed it into me, and I rolled across the lot with huge pain shooting through my head and hip. Gunfire erupted from Beef and Beefier but Daniel was down and when I rolled over I could see Robert heading across the lot toward the Escalade in full sprint. Bullet holes pocked across the windshield and passenger’s door of Micah’s truck and the two killers stood there and calmly reloaded to make sure they had done their job. I tried to move but the pain was so great that it was white in my eyes and I felt like I was going to pass out at any moment. Daniel started to move and I knew that I had to, the .357 was lying about five feet away on the pavement and I rolled over to it and tried to make my hands move to pick it up when a black Crown Vic came howling up the lane and slid to a stop between me and the killers. I could hear gunfire that seemed like it lasted for about an hour combined with too many other tires that screamed nearby. Then it was quiet.

I lay on the pavement and looked at the sky, the clouds were quite pretty when you think about it and the blue behind them was almost too intense to bear. My head hurts. My leg hurts. My shoulder hurts. Everything hurts. I blinked back some tears and found that I could move my right hand so I used it to wipe them away and realized there were people standing over me and some of them I knew. There’s Mike, and Chad, and John. What are they doing here? Oops, there’s some strangers, too. I wonder who they are? I moved my head a little and the bullet holes in Micah’s truck started to bring me back. Where’s Micah? I tried to get up and only got to sitting when I got dizzy and found some hands were helping me stay upright that belonged to the guys and one paramedic at least. Where’s Micah? I needed to get up and find Micah. I couldn’t talk but I was going to get up and find him so I pushed the hands away and got up to find Micah lying on the pavement next to his truck. There was blood on his shirt that had soaked through and had left a trail from the driver’s door of his truck to where the medics were working on him. All I could do was stand and watch. As the medics moved aside I could see a look on his face that I had seen before, he smiled at me and shrugged his shoulders as to say “what the hell”. He was alive.

I sat down on the pavement with a thump and was immediately surrounded by another set of paramedics that loaded me on a stretcher, shined lights in my eyes, and started what I though was a quite thorough check of my vitals while a familiar face started to ask some questions that I should have known the answers to but couldn’t think what those answers were. I started to clear some as I laid there and I recognized the questioner but didn’t know why he was there. Agent Smith was being very gentle as he waited for me to come out more and provide him what he needed. I had questions for him, too. How had he found us? I looked around and saw that the guys were talking to other men in those dark blue suits and I assumed they were FBI, too. The paramedics sat me up and said that I could get up as soon as I felt good enough but no hurry, the two that had been working on me then went over to where Micah was sitting (yes, sitting!) and started to help pack up their gear.

“Mr. Devereaux, how do you feel? Can you answer some questions now?” Agent Smith sat down on the stretcher beside me and took off his sunglasses so I could see his face.

“I’m okay, I think. How did you know we would be here?” I started because I needed to know before I answered anything.

“Your son, Jameson, I think, called me in Chicago just after I talked to you and told us about your plan. A pretty stupid one if you’ll allow me. What the hell did you think you’d accomplish with this stunt?” He had a slight grin on his face but maybe not, it could be that’s how he always looks.

“I couldn’t take the chance that you guys would be late, they were going to drop another building and I needed to do something. What about the west side building? Did you find it?”

“Your son was quite helpful and gave us the address to the building but we didn’t really need to go, you know a man named Thomas Bruinsslot? When our agents got there we found a truck with eighteen nine millimeter holes in the electronics inside and a man and a woman lying on the floor with Mr. Bruinsslot holding an empty Browning on them. Quite the scene if you ask me,” this time I knew it was a smile.

I filled him in on the rest of the details and identified Robert and Daniel for him along with the bodies of Beef and Beefier and he said that I could go home if I felt good enough just as long as I came to the local office in the next couple of days to tie up the loose ends. I was getting sharp enough to recognize that he hadn’t mentioned anything about any sort of charges and I hoped that it would be the same for all of us. Things had worked out, hadn’t they? Agent Smith got up and I felt like I could so I tried and was somewhat successful after a couple of times, rolling a little to my right and using that arm for leverage. Micah was standing near the rest of the guys and they all looked at me as I shuffled over to them; the pain in my hip was nice and pure but nothing I hadn’t felt before and the Vicodin the medics had given me was starting to dull it. I like Vicodin.

“Micah, what the hell?” was all I had to say as he grinned that funky, somewhat sheepish grin and shrugged again.

“It just came to me; it worked for you on the first truck so I thought I’d give it a try.” The bandage on the wound from the flying glass was moving as he smiled. “Worked okay, huh?” The guys cracked up and we all walked over to look at his truck as it was being loaded on the flat bed for the trip to the body shop. Micah was concentrating hard as he walked around and I couldn’t figure out what he was doing until I saw he was sticking a finger in each hole as he walked around.

“Twenty two,” was all he said as we watched the truck pull away. The only thing I could think of was that we all needed lots of Stroh’s, and Jack. Yep, Jack by the barrels tonight.

**Chapter 27**

The campfire felt good as it warded off the chill that had started to settle in as the sun went down. Rainbow Lake looked serene as the boats and jet skis had been nestled in their docks and quiet again took over. The small ripples in the water were silver, blue, and green and I stared at them as if they were going to give me some answers to the questions on the meaning of life. They didn’t. It looked cool though, and it felt good to not have that gnawing at the back of my mind that had followed me around for the last couple of weeks. We’d beaten them. I still couldn’t believe it but I looked around the fire and everyone was there. How the hell had we done it? Tom was even lost in a conversation with Chad and I was glad that he had decided to try to be one of the group; it made me very happy. I didn’t want to talk and I think everyone realized it; after all, I had lost someone that had been special to me and even though she had been one of the bad guys, for a few short days I had been happy. The best thing was that I knew that I could be happy again but even alone was okay. It didn’t hurt that Jameson had stolen ten million dollars either. That is one dangerous young man.