

PREDATOR & PREY

M A G E



CARL BOWEN

MAGE
THE ASCENSION

HUNTER
THE RECKONING

BOOK FIVE OF SIX

PREDATOR & PREY

M A G E

Is Ignorance Truly Bliss?

Adrian Cross is unwittingly abetting the efforts of the Technocracy to further their grandiose plans, which have already essentially assured them world domination. However, in order for their latest efforts to bear fruit, the Technocracy needs a larger sacrifice of Adrian. The circumstances that are to lead to Adrian's further involvement have been planned carefully. Yet they fail.

This small crack in their encompassing plans may be an opening to the possibility of free will, something that Adrian and all his fellow humans seem to be slowly losing. With the assistance of two very different strangers who wish for very different things for him, Adrian begins a terrifying journey of discovery into the true inner workings of the World of Darkness. But as he learns more, he begins to wonder if perhaps he was safer in his ignorance.

Predator & Prey: Mage is the fifth in this series of six novels that explores the Hunters newly arrived within the World of Darkness and the supernatural foes they believe they have an obligation to confront. In the course of the series, the line between hunter and hunted continues to blur. The series continues with Predator & Prey: Executioner.



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PREDATOR & PREY

M A G E

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Thursday

Adrian Cross tried to wake up at the wheel before he had some sort of accident. He'd slept poorly the night before, so he'd spent the entire day at work today drinking coffee and washing his face in biting cold water. Neither measure had helped for more than a few minutes, though, which left him even more exhausted now that it was time to go home. He'd felt the gray blanket of unconsciousness wrapping itself around him several times already since then, and he'd jerked awake each time just before his '82 Pontiac Phoenix had crossed the line out of its lane. Not long ago, his eyes had snapped open to find the red brake lights of the pickup truck ahead of him looming bright and angry in the center of his windshield. His heart sped up and his eyelids peeled back after each such close miss, but the gray blanket always crept back in.

As Dwight Yokam's version of "Suspicious Minds" played on the radio, Adrian amused himself by trying to look at more than just the cars ahead. His eyes followed the tree line alongside the road that kept rising and falling and rising and falling... but that didn't help. He tried to create words from the letters on the license plates all around him or find the license plate that came from the state that was farthest away, but both games were far too boring to be helpful. He even looked up into the sky as far as he could through the overcast and the streetlight glare over the city. The most interesting thing he saw there was a red star over the city that he'd never noticed before, but taking his eyes away from the road to stargaze didn't seem like the best idea either. Finally, he settled for thinking that the sleepiness was some viscous liquid that kept trying to fill the void of his consciousness, and that only by avoiding some heinous traffic accident by mere inches was he able to pan that liquid back out of his brain and remain awake. Yet every time he panned it out, it just oozed right back into place leaving him just as relaxed and sleepy as he'd been just a few...

The angry blare of a horn brought Adrian around again, and he realized that his dented, dirty Pontiac had overlapped the dashed line between his lane and the next nearest right lane, which was already occupied by a minivan. Possessed by the sudden irrational fear that the person in the farthest left lane was trying to usurp the space he'd vacated, he swerved back

into his lane, forcing the car to his left to weave dangerously close to the highway's concrete dividing wall. The drivers on both sides of him honked and bracketed him with upraised middle fingers as he settled back into the middle of his lane.

"Idiots," he murmured to no one in particular. He hated driving on Highway 38. Inevitably, every car-carrying, fuel-transporting and double-trailer-dragging 18-wheeler from Flint to Lansing to Detroit decided that they all had to bypass Iron Rapids at exactly the same time whether that time occurred in the morning or the evening. On top of that, every monkey who could see in a straight line and miss an orange cone at the DMV usually decided to join in on the lane-changing, horn-honking, air-polluting madness as well. The confluence of traffic choked Highway 38 into a thick, sluggish mess around Iron Rapids' perimeter every single rush hour. Adrian had driven in worse traffic conditions before — such as I-285 around his hometown of Atlanta — but Highway 38 never, ever, let up. Even the holiday and weekend traffic was nightmarish. Adrian had to traverse only one quarter of the length of the small, self-important highway to get from his apartment to work, but the trip invariably took him more than 45 minutes every day.

The ride soured his mood on the best days, but the traffic this evening was particularly irksome. After a three-hour phone harangue at the hands of his ex-wife the night before, Adrian had stayed up late worrying because he had no idea under what rock he was going to find the money for his next child-support payment. Thanks to a brilliant feat of amateur divorce-lawyering five years ago, Adrian had found himself paying an exorbitant amount of child-support even though his ex's father was rich and willing to support her, and her current boyfriend — who *was* actually supporting her — made a decent living for himself. Adrian was more than happy to donate money toward his son's upbringing at the very least, but he was sure that his ex's lawyer had taken advantage of him and his own inexperienced lawyer. Having been beaten down by losing his house and car, his half of the joint savings and custody of his child, Adrian hadn't had the heart to fight any more.

Now, working at his third new job since the divorce, money was extremely tight. He hadn't let his son down

yet, but he'd only kept his head above water by selling most of the expensive items he'd managed to keep in the divorce settlement. All he really had left to sell was this car that he'd bought at an in-city used-vehicle franchise that sucked its hapless customers dry. Besides, the car was going to be in no marketable condition once they pried it out from under the 18-wheeler that was about to flip over in the lane ahead of him.

With the sudden, painful clarity of a man who's sure he's about to die, Adrian came entirely awake to realize what was happening. The slate-gray and blue truck in the left lane against the dividing wall several cars ahead had just blown all the tires on the passenger side of its cab. Feeling his stomach lurch, Adrian watched the steel belts and rubber fly apart like a basket unraveling as the truck began to weave in queasy slow motion.

The burgundy sedan right next to the 18-wheeler managed to dodge out of the way, and some miracle kept the rig from toppling across the dividing wall into the rush of oncoming traffic. The burgundy sedan swerved into the far right lane, and the yellow Volkswagen Beetle that was already in that lane swerved into Highway 38's rough, corrugated excuse for an emergency lane. Their narrow escape left the road beside the tractor trailer clear, which was good, but the next cars in the line included a gray van with tinted windows in the far left lane, an unwashed red pickup truck in the right lane and Adrian's Phoenix in the middle. Adrian was ahead of the other two cars, and he could tell that none of them would be able to stop in time to avoid the inevitable crash. The driver of the 18-wheeler had already panicked, slammed on the brakes and locked them up.

As soon as Adrian made this realization, the trailer started to shudder, and it skidded to the right on its cab's denuded rims. Smoke billowed from the truck's rear tires, followed by the unreal shriek of rubber tires clinging desperately for purchase on asphalt. The truck was still far enough ahead that it didn't clip anyone in its mad swerve, but even still, Adrian could see what was going to happen. An eerie, preternatural connection told him that his nearest two fellow drivers had realized it as well. He could feel the drivers in the van and the

pickup truck stretching out for their brakes as the primitive survival instinct took over. The entire tableau thus far had taken only seconds, and the uncomfortable reality had set in that this was happening right there in real life, rather than on some movie or television screen. As one, the drivers of the pickup and the van were about to try to skid to a halt before the 18-wheeler and its out-of-control trailer blocked off the entire three lanes of the highway.

Adrian's mind raced ahead of his fear and instinct, telling him what was going to happen instants before it actually did. The trailer was going to slew awry and slam into the dividing wall on its left as the cab kept sliding sideways. Stretched across all three lanes, the rig would topple and grind to a halt in a cascade of sparks and rubber smoke. The four nearest cars in the lanes behind the truck, however, would all slam into its undercarriage before it had come to a complete stop and before their own brakes had had a chance to catch their grip.

Adrian saw time through a fish-eye lens. He worked out the series of causes and effects before the tail of the truck had even hit the wall. He knew that he and the drivers of the other two vehicles weren't going to make it, even if they'd already slammed on the brakes before the blowout.

Time caught up with Adrian again as the trailer clipped the dividing wall and dragged along the concrete for several yards, spraying stone chips across the oncoming lanes of Highway 38. An instant later, the side of the trailer hit the asphalt, and it rang in a disturbingly beautiful alien chorus as it slid. Panicked, Adrian yanked his steering wheel to the right and slammed on his brakes, even though he knew that neither desperate measure was going to help.

As his car shoved the pickup truck aside and aimed for the 18-wheeler's undercarriage, Adrian Cross closed his eyes.



In the long, pregnant pause just after the crash, the First among them crossed his arms and frowned at the scene below him. Four cars had piled into each other on the highway below, as they should have, and their arrangement was as predicted, but something was not right.

Standing on either side of him, the Second and Third did the same at the same time. They had all seen the events that would prepare the way. None of them had missed anything. None of them had allowed for any error. Random elements had been accounted for, and the standard allowable deviation had been calculated. The Fourth, who waited in the car, had assured them that the procedure would proceed in perfect order. And yet...

"Something isn't right," the First said.

"No, it isn't," the Second responded.

"Did it work?" the Third asked.

The three of them looked back at their car where the Fourth sat in the back seat. He did not look at them or even acknowledge them. He held his mobile phone to his ear, doubtless ordering in medical transportation for the victims of the accident below and apprising Agent Sutton of the situation.

"It must have worked," the First said.

"His calculations were infallible," the Second said. "I checked them myself."

"Still..." the Third said. "That didn't feel right at all."

"Let's go," the First said. He led the way back toward the car, and the other two fell into step behind him. "We'll discuss it once civilian authorities arrive."

"Agreed," the Second said.

"Agreed," the Third said.



Matthew Simonson sat in his room in the Lester Hotel in downtown Iron Rapids, hunching over his laptop computer. His source was supposed to hadn't sent him an email or an instant message in far too long. Simonson tapped his foot rapidly under the desk, wondering what was behind this sudden dearth of communication.

"Come along, Sugardaddy," he said aloud. "Don't say you've lost your nerve now."

Worried and frustrated, he looked up at the wall mirror that faced him from across the table. "Well," he said to his reflection. "Opinions? Where is he?"

In response, the image of himself in the mirror cocked its head as if listening to something then looked away over its shoulder. It appeared to be looking at the clock radio on the nightstand beside the bed. Confused, Simonson looked over his shoulder at the clock radio on his side of the looking glass. He even stood up and took a step in that direction.

"I don't understand," he said. When he looked back at the mirror, though, he saw that his reflection was now standing beside the clock radio and turning it on. Realization dawned, and Simonson did likewise. He crossed to the nightstand and tapped the sleep-timer bar on top of the clock. A local commercial radio station came to life.

"—affic situation on Highway 38 isn't getting any better as the rush hour drags on," the DJ was saying, "but you people who commute daily shouldn't be surprised by that. One new problem to report: We've got a bad wreck on the top end of the perimeter highway that's going to screw up the traffic flow like cheese through your grandma. Four cars and a tractor-trailer decided to go at it right across all three lanes, and this is a bad one, folks. No injuries reported as of yet — which is a pretty neat trick — but fire and rescue trucks are still on the scene right now. They're trying to get these mangled vehicles out of your roadway, but all lanes are—"

"Shit," Simonson said. He turned the radio off and looked back at the mirror. He knew better than to hope that the timing of that traffic report had been a coincidence.

Monday

One

Voices spoke to Adrian in his dreams. He recognized none of them, but he knew that he was listening to words he'd heard before. They were voices. Safe voices. Voices of people who were here to help him. His mind hadn't fabricated them, but he couldn't figure out where they came from.

"They're all just hiding out in here. You know it, I know it, and they sure as hell know it. I hate this place. I hate these people. Let them die already if they're going to. I'm sick of looking at them."

He breathed deeply and lay motionless. No pillow had ever been so deep or so soft. He snuggled into it and resisted the subtle pressure building behind his eyes, telling him to wake up. Keeping his eyes closed still took less effort than trying to open them, and he wanted to enjoy these last few minutes of sleep.

"No, not even one scratch. It's quite incredible, really. He never even lost a filling. He's very lucky, Ma'am."

Feeling returned to Adrian's body little by little. Every hair follicle, every muscle and every joint reported in, telling him that he was still alive. He felt no pain. No part of his body was numb. Nothing seemed to be punctured, crushed or burned.

"No, not even one scratch."

By all accounts, Adrian Cross seemed to be alive and in good health. He couldn't imagine how it was possible. The last thing he remembered was an impending car accident. A vicious one. He should have been mangled or killed.

What had happened? Hadn't there been an accident? All those cars... An eighteen-wheeler on Highway 38... Adrian saw the events of the crash again in vivid detail. He heard a canvas strap snap like an over-taut guitar string. Was that his seat belt snapping or a sinew ripping in two? How long ago was that?

Adrian felt himself cross the line between sleeping and being awake, and an intrusive awareness of his surroundings seeped in against his will. The effort to keep his eyes shut began to outweigh their inertia to remain closed. Light flooded in to wash away his dreams, and he opened his eyes.

"Well, good morning, Mister... Cross," a sweet, slightly raspy voice said from somewhere to his left. "Welcome back."

He turned with sleep-fogged eyes and tried to sit up. Who was talking? How did he know that voice?

"You know it, I know it, and they sure as hell know it."

"How are you feeling? Do you need anything? Don't be afraid. I'm here to help you."

The blurry image of an angel with a shining halo at his bedside resolved into a crystal-clear picture of a middle-aged nurse wearing a white hat and carrying a clipboard. She clutched the clipboard to her as if to make sure that Adrian didn't take an illicit peek at whatever was printed on her side of it. Her graying hair poked out from under her starched white hat in uncontrolled wisps, despite what seemed an otherwise orderly bun at the nape of her neck. Old scars of adolescent acne on the nurse's face tried to hide beneath a layer of false-tan makeup that collected in lines that stress and age had drawn on the nurse's face long ago.

"You're disoriented," the nurse said with the same honeyed friendliness in her voice. "That's natural, and it's okay. Just try to relax. You've been—"

"—hiding out in here—"

"—asleep for a long time. Do you remember what happened?"

Adrian remembered, but he continued to stare at the nurse like a dumb cow. He couldn't remember ever seeing anything or anyone with such vivid clarity. From the color of her teeth and the almost imperceptible rasp in her voice, he pegged her for a long-time smoker. Adrian marveled at his clarity of vision, despite the relative insignificance of what he'd discovered. He'd never seen anything so clearly before, and he could only stare in mute fascination.

"Sir," the nurse said. "Do you understand what I'm saying? Do you know where you are?" The voice probably would have sounded concerned or even matronly to someone else, but Adrian saw the tension in her expression. She was forcing a mask of concern over a look of disdain. He could see that clearly now, too.

"I hate this place."

"Sir, do you know where you are?"

Adrian didn't have to think about it. He could have guessed even before he opened his eyes. The place didn't have the musty, unwashed-dishes and two-week-old-sheet smell his apartment had. As he thought about it, he could remember hearing the *squeak-squeak-squeak* of rubber wheels on tile, complemented by the dry, mouse-like sound of crepe-soled shoes moving around outside his room.

"Hospital," Adrian said. He swallowed to clear the rusty cobwebs from his throat, then said, "I'm in the hospital."

"Good, sir," the nurse said. She looked from her clipboard to the IV needle in Adrian's arm, but she never met his eyes. She obviously had more important things to worry about now. Maybe her next smoke break was soon. "Do you remember what happened?"

"I had a car accident on Highway 38," Adrian said. "In the evening rush hour. That's the last thing I remember."

"And do you know who you are?" she said, pretending to care. "Do you remember?"

"Randal McMurphy?"

"Hm," the nurse said, sighing and frowning at the same time. A shadow of a scowl crossed the nurse's face, but it was the most relaxed expression he had seen there thus far. The woman must scowl a lot. She even looked younger when she did it.

"Are you sure about that, sir?" she asked.

"No, Ma'am," Adrian said, trying to smile and put her at ease. He was afraid, however, that the smile looked to her as disingenuous as it felt to him. If the nurse could read him as easily as he could read her, she'd see right through the facade. "I'm sorry. My name's Adrian Cross. I was just dreaming about a movie I saw in high school. It's about a guy and his nurse in a hospital. I must have overheard you talking to

somebody earlier and gotten a little confused. You just reminded me of the nurse in the movie.”

“Then, try to concentrate, Mister Cross,” the nurse said, her hazel eyes studying her clipboard again without seeing it. “How are you feeling?” Now that Adrian was talking sense, the nurse had no responsibility to care for him. “Are you feeling well now?”

The rote, mechanical quality of the question struck Adrian more profoundly than he would have thought possible. Wasn't there any such thing as bedside manner any more? Weren't nurses supposed to actually care about how patients felt? Anger bubbled up where only wonder had been moments before.

“Well, I guess I'm through hiding out in here,” he said. “And I know you must be sick of looking at me by now.”

Adrian looked away from the nurse in disgust, but he could feel her surprise nonetheless. She mumbled that she had to get a doctor then walked away. Adrian listened to the receding mouse-steps of her crepe-soled shoes until they mixed in with the other sounds in the hospital's hallway.



When it became clear that the nurse would not return right away with a team of doctors, reporters and his estranged family, Adrian realized that he must not have been asleep very long. The sky outside his window was a dense, uniform gray that let him know nothing more than that it was daytime. He didn't feel significantly older. Then again, he hadn't felt significantly older than twenty-one in any of the twelve years since that birthday.

Regardless, Adrian didn't *think* too much time had passed while he slept. Under his blue-dotted white gown, his body seemed no smaller than it did when he'd last stood before a mirror. He saw no evidence of atrophy. Even the thin coat of flab he'd been growing since his divorce — the “softening tender,” his mother had called it — was still there smoothing over what little muscle tone he'd had in high school and college.

If he were still in intensive care or the emergency room, though, no one would have left him alone, he supposed. Sounds of conversation and whatnot drifted in from the hallway, but all was quiet in here with him. Since he wasn't in the emergency room, and no one else was anywhere nearby, he guessed that he wasn't in a recovery room. As far as he could tell, he was in a regular bed in a regular observation room somewhere in Iron Rapids' Founders' Memorial hospital.

Even that realization, though, told him only that he'd been asleep for "a while" rather than a few hours or even the next day following the accident. Wishful thinking told him that his ex-wife and his son weren't here to check on him because he hadn't been unconscious too awful long, but he didn't rely on it. He had to admit to himself that Sarah might not actually feel compelled to drag Brandon all the way into the city just because his father had been hurt in a car accident. When Brandon had been diagnosed with asthma last year, Sarah hadn't called Adrian or even told him about it until Adrian had come to pick the boy up the following weekend.

That being the case, maybe Sarah wouldn't come visit him or bring Brandon to come visit him, regardless of how long he'd been asleep. A part of Adrian's mind tried to convince him that he'd just missed the visit or maybe the doctors had only just gotten in touch with Sarah, but the mental words of encouragement rang hollow. With dread, nightmarish clarity, he could see Sarah answering her phone, getting the news—

"No, not even one scratch. It's quite incredible, really. He didn't even lose a filling. He's very lucky, Ma'am."

—and replying with a terse, "So? He was lucky." The image was so clear and convincing that Adrian had to lie back and close his eyes to keep tears from coming up. As well as he'd come to know Sarah over the years, he couldn't deny the image out of hand. The only thing that might get her to the hospital at all was the threat that Adrian might miss his next child-support payment. Hell, she might even

wake him up out of the coma for her next child-support payment. A hollow smile shadowed Adrian's face briefly, and he closed his eyes.

"Yeah, and if Sarah was a big, dumb Injun fella," he mumbled, "she'd bring me a pillow."

Two

The Fourth among them didn't look at any one of them. He was still upset that the procedure for which he was responsible had somehow gone wrong. He faced the back of the seat in front of him without turning his head or moving his eyes. His hands remained open and flat against his legs. He said nothing for several minutes, so the car was silent.

"What are our orders?" the Third asked at last. He sat next to the Fourth in the back seat, and the First and Second sat up front. They both envied the Third his proximity to the Fourth and relished their own distance.

"We will wait for Doctor Zearin's next report," the Fourth said. "He and his team are still examining Cross."

"Is that prudent?" the Third asked. "The longer we hold Cross here, the more chances exist for someone to discover him."

"I am aware of the risk," the Fourth said. "However, Cross is no longer a quantifiable entity in this agenda. We must determine exactly what went wrong with the Highway 38 procedure before we continue."

"But if Cross regains even partial consciousness between now and then, his body might reject the procedures that are yet to come," the Second said.

"Doctor Zearin has mitigated that concern for the time being," the Fourth said. "He has Cross sedated, and he will keep Cross thus until he has finished his post-procedure tests."

"We do still risk exposure, however," the First said. He didn't look at the Fourth as he spoke, and the Fourth didn't look at him. "Although we have kept Cross' name out of the news media, we were not able to suppress the nature of the results of the Highway 38 procedure."

"Anyone who has been listening to the radio or reading the local paper knows that no one was hurt in our accident," the Third added.

"No one is aware specifically of Cross' current condition, including Cross himself," the Fourth said. His voice remained flat and even, but his delivery indicated that the discussion had ended. "Once Doctor Zearin has completed

his tests, we will have Cross transported to our Ann Arbor construct to undergo replacement surgery as per the agenda.”

“The point remains,” the Second said, “that we need a contingency story. It will likely not be believed that Cross was wounded in the Highway 38 accident.”

“I am well aware of that,” the Fourth said. “I have created a contingency already. We still have the ruins of Cross’ vehicle, and security over him at the hospital has been absolute thus far. We will manufacture evidence of another accident and a later trip through Founders’ Memorial hospital. We will then proceed with Cross as if the Highway 38 procedure had been successful in the first place. This agenda is well in hand.”

“What if something else goes wrong like it did Thursday night?” the Third asked. “Should we expand Agent Sutton’s time table?”

“Out of the question,” the Fourth said, turning to look at the Third directly. “Agent Sutton will proceed on schedule. Is that understood?”

“Understood,” the First said. The Second echoed him. The Third hesitated, but he finally did so as well. The First engaged the car’s anti-theft system, and the three of them watched the front door of the Founders’ Memorial hospital through the windshield and waited for Doctor Zearin to make his next report. The Fourth turned back toward the front and stared at a fixed point ahead without seeming to see it. The three sat in silence, not looking at each other or at the Fourth.

Silence fell once again.

Three

"Are you feeling any pain now, Mister Cross?" the doctor asked.

"No sir," Adrian answered.

"Any stiffness in any of your joints?"

Adrian put his hands behind his head. "I haven't had much chance to get up and really stretch, but nothing feels any worse than it did when I came in. Everything feels better."

"I see," the doctor said, not returning Adrian's smile or responding to much of Adrian's relaxed, painless body language. Suspicion ringed his eyes, as if he thought Adrian might be faking wellness in order to escape. "Do you have a headache? Any blurred vision?"

"No sir."

"What's your Social Security number?"

Adrian gave the man a string of 10 digits.

"That's too many numbers, Mister Cross," the doctor said, frowning slightly and peering over the top of his plastic-rimmed spectacles. "And the wrong ones."

"I know," Adrian said, still smiling, but faking it. "That was actually my phone number. Backwards. You asked me that about half an hour ago, remember? Just playing around."

The doctor — a middle-aged, paunchy goblin of a man with a thin, black comb-over — gave Adrian a look that Adrian remembered from grade school. It was the look teachers and assistant principals give students when students had the audacity to crack jokes.

"Can you give me your Social Security number, Mister Cross?" the doctor said. "Forward, please."

Adrian did.

The questions had been going on thus for a long time, and they had started after an even less personal physical examination. After spending an hour alone trying to get back to sleep, Adrian was ready to finally

get some company. An orderly with brown hair and a flawless complexion had arrived and helped Adrian into a wheelchair. Adrian hadn't needed the help, but his mother had always told him that rejecting help taught the helper not to offer next time. So, even though he felt like he could have vaulted over the rails of his bed, back-flipped into the chair and propelled himself down the hallway on one wheel, he'd allowed himself to be helped into the chair and wheeled to an elevator. The elevator ascended to the fifth floor where the orderly took Adrian to an unmarked examination room that was much like any room in any doctor's office.

Not long afterward, this doctor had arrived with a bulging yellow folder and dismissed the orderly without looking at him. While Adrian tried in vain to make small talk, the doctor had poked and probed and listened to and looked at Adrian's body, using all the classic scopes and depressors and meters Adrian had associated with the practice of medicine. All those hours ago, Adrian thought that he might be on the road to being released.

Actually, the interview had only begun. Since Adrian hadn't actually visited a doctor in quite some number of years — well before he had signed up with the HMO that supported employees of the Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce — it seemed that the doctor needed to take down his health and medical information physically. Adrian had assumed and hoped that such information was “in a computer somewhere,” ready to spring to attention at the entry of some vague search command on a hospital terminal. However, the doctor had taken down the information himself, verbally and exhaustively.

All the while, the doctor kept making notes and seasoning the impersonal record keeping with equally impersonal inquiries about whether Adrian was feeling all right or suffering any discomfort. Weighed down by the doctor's preference for the bureaucracy and the bottom line, Adrian answered with less and less enthusiasm. Finally, he was able

to tune the doctor's voice out and let his mind wander while his mouth answered by rote. He took a few minutes to look around the room.

The clarity of vision with which he'd astounded himself upon first waking up had now ceased to amaze him, but the world around him did still seem more in focus. The haze that boredom and routine had cast over him was gone, and he felt like a kid who'd come back home from summer camp to find his room cleaned and his lawn mowed by hands other than his own. He was no longer just looking at all the random stuff in the world, he was paying attention to it as well. Any little thing his eyes passed over might be a thing he never saw again. Why not give it the attention it deserved while he could?

Adrian guessed that coming close to death and escaping it probably had that effect on a lot of people.

The examination room, however, contained little that cried out for his attention. It had a bed, a stool, a white counter, some brown cabinets and a rectangular fluorescent light set flush with the ceiling tiles. The room's confines consisted of four white walls, a tan wooden door, a tile floor and a gunmetal gray light switch, over which a bright orange power-conservation awareness sticker had been slapped. The place was a touch cramped, but it was clean. It was impersonal, but it was professional. Adrian didn't want to spend any more time than necessary here, but he could at least stay as long as he had to.

"Have you ever been seriously injured, Mister Cross?" the doctor said after a slow trickle of more mundane questions had finally dried up. "Broken bones? Spinal damage?"

Adrian turned his full attention back to the doctor. "Broken bones, yeah. I got my right leg screwed up pretty bad once."

"Tell me about how that happened, Mister Cross?" the doctor said. "In as much detail as you can."

"It happened in high school," Adrian began. "I hardly even think about it any more."

"Which high school was that, Mister Cross?"

Adrian couldn't imagine how that detail pertained to his health, but he answered. "One back in Georgia where I grew up. Probably wouldn't recognize the name if you heard it."

"The name, Mister Cross?"

Adrian told him.

"I see," the doctor said. "And what was the extent of the injury?"

Adrian took a deep breath and decided to put the doctor's detail threshold to the test. "Well, I was dating this girl on the color guard while I was playing football," he said. "We met my freshman year when she was a sophomore, and we started going out not long after that. Her practices let out about when mine did, so we spent a lot of time together. She was actually one of the few people in that school who didn't treat me like a big dumb jock. Even though I pretty much was one back then.

"Well, see, even still, it didn't work out right for very long. By my junior year, she was getting ready to go to college, and I figured we'd probably drift apart, but I didn't want that to happen to us. I guess I got scared and a little overprotective, 'cause I started hanging around her all the time. I didn't let her out of my sight. So she starts feeling smothered, and she starts being glad she's about to be away from me for a school year, and... well, I'm sure you know how that goes."

The doctor sat very still, peering at Adrian like he might look at a child describing an inane television show full of colorful idiots and songs of insipid glee. Adrian saw the lack of interest and wondered if the doctor was learning anything.

"Anyway, my girlfriend, Stephanie, had this good friend she'd known since junior high, and she talked to him whenever she had a problem with me. I kind of knew about it,

and I'd met the guy a couple-few times, but by the end of that year, I was out of control. I figured she was cheating on me, and I got really mad and suspicious."

The doctor heaved a sigh, and his look darkened.

"Right," Adrian said. "So I'm off at an away game one night, and our color guard didn't go with us. I knew they wouldn't be there, but I didn't see Stephanie there, and I freaked out. I was sure she was off with Kurt — that was her friend from junior high — and the two of them were doing who knows what together. After I got back from the game, I went over to her house, and sure enough, there was Kurt on the porch leaving. Smiling.

"Man, I was pissed. I didn't ask questions, I just let him have it. I pushed him, he pushed me, and the next thing I knew, we were rolling on the ground trying to tear each other up. Problem was, Kurt was into kung fu or Tai Kwan Do or something like that. He got loose, and when I came at him again, he got out of the way and stomped down right on the outside of my right ankle. That was pretty much that for me. That's how it happened. Fighting."

"That isn't what I asked, Mister Cross," the doctor said at last. "I asked how extensive the damage was."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Adrian said disingenuously. "Let's see, he was wearing hiking boots when he kicked me, so he broke my ankle and pretty much crushed the long bone that runs down the outside edge of your foot. Snapped a tendon or two in that area, too, if I remember correctly."

"Do you remember the specifics from your doctor's report, Mister Cross?" the doctor asked. It seemed he'd reached his threshold at last.

"Sorry, no sir," Adrian said. "I was treated at Northside Hospital back home, if that helps. I figure it would be in a file somewhere. Hospitals have to share patient information and stuff, right?" The doctor didn't answer. Seeing the look on the man's face, Adrian decided to terminate that line of helpfulness. "But yeah, I broke that stuff and did all kinds of tendon and ligament damage. I remember

the doctor explaining he was going to have to sew some of the ends of one or the other back together. Maybe it was a tendon he had to do that to. Which one connects a bone to a muscle?"

"I see," the doctor interrupted, frowning down at some note or paper in the file folder he'd brought with him. "That's quite odd."

"What is?" Adrian asked. The last thing he wanted to hear from any doctor was how "odd" some aspect of his condition was. "What's odd?"

"I may have to run some more tests on you, Mister Cross," was the doctor's only answer. "Several errors have been made in your file."

"Wait, what kind of errors?" Adrian asked, mortified. Like most healthy Americans his age, Adrian naturally assumed that hospitals were infallible sanctuaries of science and healing.

"Only filing errors, I'm certain," the doctor said, still looking into the folder, flipping through the pages seemingly at random. His voice remained devoid of any compassion, and Adrian had only the context from which to draw comfort. "Nothing to be concerned about."

"So what do I need to do now?" Adrian asked. "More tests? What kind of tests?"

"An MRI, an X-ray, blood tests," the doctor said. "I'll have the staff make the arrangements."

Offering no more, the doctor gathered up his file folder and turned to leave. He turned his back on Adrian and opened the door.

"Wait," Adrian said. "What do I do? Is someone coming for me? Should I wait here?"

"Someone will take you to your room, Mister Cross," the doctor said. He frowned even more deeply, as if he resented the intrusion on his busy schedule. "Wait here."

Without explaining himself further, the doctor left and closed the door behind him. Adrian sagged on the examination table. He didn't realize how tense he'd been until

this moment. A knot relaxed between his shoulder blades, and his shoulders themselves descended. He took a deep breath and just let his body relax. Just talking to that ugly little man had prickled his hairs and squeezed his lungs.

On one level, Adrian assumed that just being in a hospital was partly responsible for the way he felt. The last time he'd been in one as a patient, he'd endured more pain and anguish through operations and torturous physical therapy sessions than he'd ever been through before. On a deeper level, though, the doctor himself had set Adrian's teeth on edge. The doctor hadn't seemed to care about the questions he was asking, but he'd made the answers seem terribly important nonetheless. Although he had no conceivable authority over Adrian's behavior, Adrian had felt like he was acting up throughout the entire interview. The man had just unsettled him. Now that the doctor was gone, Adrian felt silly for being intimidated.

Several minutes later, a new orderly poked his head in and informed Adrian that he'd had been looking for him. According to the young man with red hair and dozens of freckles, visitors were waiting for him in his room, and people were starting to wonder where he'd gone. He asked if Adrian was hiding in this empty room, and Adrian told him that the answer depended on who was waiting for him. The orderly laughed at that and offered Adrian a wheelchair ride back to his room to face the music. Adrian accepted and left the examination room. He didn't see the doctor anywhere, and that made him feel better. He saw his previous orderly looking somewhat confused and a little upset, but the hobgoblin doctor was nowhere to be found.

All he probably should be worrying about, Adrian finally decided, was these "filing errors" concerning his old high-school injury and dealing with these visitors who were waiting for him. He didn't have any close friends in Iron Rapids, and his mother was too old to travel from her home in Georgia these days. Such being the case, he

had a reasonable guess as to who was waiting. Most likely, one of the visitors was his son, Brandon. Normally, that very idea would have brought a smile to his face. However, if Brandon was here, that meant that Sarah was here as well. And if some strange doctor could stand Adrian's hackles up right now, Adrian was in no condition to see Sarah.

But as was usually the case when Sarah was involved, Adrian had no choice in the matter.

Four

It was with no small amount of trepidation that Adrian allowed his friendly, red-haired orderly to wheel him back to his room at last. Conversation had ceased once they got out of the elevator, and Adrian figured that any attempt to start one back up would only have to end abruptly. As much as he might not like it, however, he had no choice but to take a deep breath and see what would happen. Before the orderly could do the honors, Adrian opened the door from the seat of his wheel chair and let the young man push the chair into the room.

The inside of this room was arranged just like any other observation room in any other hospital Adrian was familiar with. One bed, one stool, one dresser, one television and one closet bathroom. The room's one window was open, giving him a great view of the hospital's nearly empty parking lot, and the overhead light shone in weak syncopation. Two people — Adrian's estranged family — stood looking out the window with their backs to the door. Some daytime talk show jabbered on the television above the bed, and the remote wired to the emergency-call handset sat on the stool beside the bed.

Adrian's ex-wife, Sarah, stood sideways staring out the window over her left shoulder with her arms locked across her narrow chest. Her half-blond, half-brown hair coiled in a tight, serpentine arrangement on the back of her head under an array of tortoise-shell combs. She wore a high-necked and very stylish-looking chocolate-colored leather jacket that was still buttoned up as if she'd either just shown up or was ready to leave. She alternately ground the ball of her left shoe back and forth or pumped her heel up and down, which made her whole body vibrate with impatience. In the smooth white of her cheek and the slender, graceful curve of her neck, Adrian saw signs of the beautiful woman he'd fallen in love with in college. He saw the beautiful mother of his child.

He turned then to look at his nine-year-old son. The boy had definitely inherited his mother's build, for he was already showing the prepubescent stringiness that must have

characterized Sarah's youth. He wore dark blue jeans and a "Stone Cold" Steve Austin professional wrestling T-shirt, and he'd tied his yellow windbreaker around his waist in that kid-unselfconsciousness way that defies fashion sensibility. The boy stood staring out the window into the parking lot and stealing uncomfortable glances at his mother.

Adrian looked at the two of them before they noticed he was there. He loved his son, and at times like this, he could almost believe that he still loved Sarah. They'd met at the University of Georgia during their freshman year, and they'd started dating shortly thereafter. He believed then that he and Sarah had come into each other's lives just when they needed each other most, and she'd never argued with him about it. By some twist of fate, they had both come to the same secluded spot on campus one afternoon to brood and be alone, and they'd ended up talking. The next night, they went on their first actual date.

For a long time, they'd been happier with each other than they'd ever been apart. The day Sarah had accepted his marriage proposal was the happiest day of his life. Could that really have been only 12 years ago? Considering how everything had worked out, it usually seemed so much longer.

While Adrian sat thinking about the good times, the orderly took it upon himself to clear his throat and announce their arrival. Adrian's son turned around first. He ran over to Adrian's chair, knocking over the stool with his hip and making the television remote swing and slam into the wall. It hung there from a jack next to the bed.

"Dad!" Brandon shouted, careless of who might be listening or trying to sleep in the adjoining rooms. "Hey!"

Adrian stood and grabbed his son up in a bear hug. He didn't really have room to spin the boy around like he wanted to, but he hopped on one foot, pretending the kid had knocked him off balance. The boy clung tight for a second and wiggled happily.

"How's it going, buddy?" he said setting Brandon down and tousling his pine-bark-brown hair. "Haven't seen you in a while. How you been?"

"I've been pretty scared," Brandon said.

"Oh yeah?" Adrian said. "Worried about your old dad? How come? Nothing to see that's wrong with me."

Brandon held onto Adrian's hand with both of his and stared up at his father in earnest joy. "Nobody told me what happened. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, sure," Adrian said. "Not a scratch. How long have you guys been here?"

"Just today," Brandon said. Some of the happiness drained out of his face, and his glance darted away for a second. "We got here a little while ago."

"Today, really?" Adrian asked. "Wow. I wonder how long I've been asleep then."

At that, Brandon's face fell, and he actually turned away. "I didn't know you were even in here until today," he said, studying Adrian's feet and the wheelchair and the floor. "I'm sorry we didn't get to see you wake up, Dad. I had school today and nobody told me where you were and Mom had to work and—"

Adrian squatted and put his hand on Brandon's shoulder. Brandon sniffled and swallowed the last of whatever he was going to say. Adrian wondered why Brandon looked so upset. Did the boy think he was in trouble or something?

"I'm glad you're okay," Brandon said. "I'm sorry we weren't here. I really was scared. Are you mad we weren't here? We didn't mean to leave you here...."

"Hey, hey," Adrian said, trying to sound nonchalant. "It's okay, buddy. No, I'm not mad at you guys." He did glance up in Sarah's direction then, just to make sure she could see that he was sincere. In case she cared. "It's okay." He leaned back on his heels a second to look in his son's eyes and show that he was smiling. "You want to talk about scared? Up until a few hours ago, even I didn't know I was here. I'm just glad to see you guys."

"Your dad's okay, guy," the orderly added. He still stood behind Adrian's empty wheelchair, and he was twisted sideways a little in awkward discomfort. He looked up at Sarah and said, "Doctor Anderson is going to come by in a little

while to ask your husband some questions, Mrs. Cross. Adrian might need to stay overnight, but I think the doctor should be able to go ahead and release him."

"Gordon," Sarah corrected. "My last name is Gordon." She stood beside the stool that Brandon had knocked over. She made no move to approach either Brandon or Adrian, and the look on her face was one of aloof displeasure. Her arms were still crossed tightly.

"Oh," the orderly said. He dropped his gaze and twisted a little more against the back of Adrian's wheelchair. He looked like he might try to turn around at the waist and leave without moving his feet or his head. "Sorry."

A few loud ticks of time passed, and the men in the room looked back and forth like scolded apes. At last, Brandon broke the silence.

"So everything's okay with my dad?" he asked the orderly. "He's really okay?"

"Absolutely," the orderly said, smiling at the boy and trying not to look too uncomfortable. "His bill of health's clean as far as I saw."

Adrian ducked down a little so that he couldn't see Sarah on the opposite side of Brandon, and he winked at his son.

"Well, maybe not everything," he said, standing up and looking around with a confused, bovine expression. "I think I feel a bit of amnesia coming on.... Do I know you, sir? Are you my doctor?"

For her part, Sarah just looked at him, trying to leach the smile from his face.

"Um... yes," Brandon said, starting to smile once again. "Yes I am, and I'm here to give you a shot."

"Aw man," Adrian said, standing back up so he could shuffle his feet and scratch the back of his neck. "I still remember what a shot is. Couldn't you just give me a sandwich?"

"Nope," Brandon said. He stepped backward and jumped onto Adrian's bed. He sat up, and his feet dangled off the ground. "You're getting a shot."

"Will it hurt, Doctor Stone Cold?"

"Heck yeah," Brandon said, swinging his feet and grinning like a little monkey. "But you'll remember plenty of things after it. Like how to say 'Ow!'"

"I'd really prefer a sandwich," Adrian said.

"Too big for the needle," Brandon giggled. "Sorry."

Adrian laughed at that and plopped down on the bed next to his son. "Good one," he said. "You're getting clever in your old age, buddy."

"Yeah," his son said. "Doctor school did that."

Sarah, who had not moved a muscle except to set the fallen stool back upright, did not open her posture. She stood facing the orderly — who was squirming to be dismissed at this point — and watching Adrian out of the sides of her eyes. She showed a half smile, mostly to demonstrate that she could do it, then said, "That's very funny, guys. Now it's time to quit being silly. It's time to be serious."

Brandon's laughs trickled away in their own slow time, but Adrian's good mood withered at once. He kept smiling for Brandon, but the expression was as hollow as Sarah's now. Sarah had *that* look on her face. It was a look that said that she thought something was important, so everybody else had better cut out the clowning.

"Is there something else you need?" she asked the orderly, cutting her eyes back toward him.

"I don't think so," the orderly stammered. "I just wanted to make sure Adrian — Mister Cross — got settled okay before Doctor Anderson showed up."

"I think I'll be all right," Adrian said. "I'm not supposed to tip you or anything, am I? I haven't been in a hospital in a while."

The question snapped the orderly out of his awkward trance. He straightened up and actually smiled again. "What? Oh, no. I get my cut of the bill like everybody else. Thanks, though." He laughed and headed for the door. "Tip... I don't think anybody's ever asked that one before."

"Orderly, wait a second," Sarah said just as the young man was about to make his escape. "What was your name?"

"Paul, Ma'am," he said. Adrian winced. Sarah didn't like to be called "ma'am" by anyone but her son. She'd always said it made her feel old.

"Paul, take my son down to the cafeteria for a few minutes and get him something to eat," Sarah said.

Paul looked at Adrian then back at Sarah.

"I want to stay and see Dad," Brandon protested, although he was already getting off the bed anyway. "You said we could stay."

"Not now, Brandon," Sarah said. "Your father and I have to talk."

Adrian heard game-show loser music in his head whenever Sarah said that.

"Can I come back when you're done?" Brandon pressed. He didn't usually test his mother's orders unless Adrian was nearby. "You said we were going to have to go home soon, but I don't want to go yet. Dad just got here."

"I'll come get you when we're through talking," she said. "You go with the orderly and get some ice cream."

"Yes, Ma'am," Brandon acquiesced at last. He walked over and gave Adrian a hug as if he'd never see his father again. "Bye, Dad. I'm glad you're okay."

"Me, too, buddy," Adrian said. "And thanks for coming. It really means a lot." He turned to the orderly one more time and said quietly, "Is it okay if he goes with you for a little while just to get a snack? I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Sure, that's no problem," the orderly said, thrilled to finally have an excuse to leave. He looked at Adrian's son. "Your name's Brandon, right? Have a seat."

Brandon nodded. With a last look at Adrian to make sure that this orderly was on the up-and-up, he climbed into the wheelchair.

"All right," the orderly said. He wheeled the chair out into the hallway, and Adrian followed a step to close the

door. "Let's motor, little man. I'll tell the guys you just had your tonsils out."

"Have fun, buddy," Adrian said, trying to sound chipper. His smile and the orderly's returning vitality actually served to brighten Brandon up a little.

Brandon waved.

"You want to pop a wheelie?" the orderly asked. At Brandon's enthusiastic nod, he tipped the chair back as far as he could without dropping it and sped away down the hall. When they were gone, Adrian stood up, closed the door and turned to face his ex-wife.

"Sarah," Adrian said in hopes of an early truce, "I'm really glad you came by. I'm glad you brought Brandon, too."

"He was really worried," Sarah said. Without saying anything more, she turned back to the window to look out and down. The silence hung taut between them.

Adrian sat back down on the bed to wait, but still, Sarah stared out the window. Adrian drummed his fingers on the rumpled bed covers, but Sarah didn't react. The muscular knot at the edge of her jaw bunched up, and her eyes took on the glazed cast of concentration she affected when she was avoiding eye contact. She could obviously see that Adrian was looking at her, but she wanted him to speak first. Adrian had seen this gambit many times.

"What's wrong?" he asked at last.

No quick response came, so he said, "Sarah, you said you wanted to talk. What is it? Brandon's waiting."

"Yes, he is," Sarah said. She still didn't turn, but her foot stopped tapping. Adrian could hear the leather of her jacket sleeves creaking in her hands. "He's waiting for you. He wants to see you."

"Yeah," Adrian said. Was Sarah accusing him of something? "I'm in the hospital."

"What?" Sarah asked, turning to him at last. She was scowling now. Or again. Or still. After years of fighting, Adrian lost track sometimes. "You're mumbling. What'd you say?"

"I said I'm the one in the hospital." Sarah always accused him of mumbling when he was really just trying not to sound like he was shouting. He didn't lift his eyes but to glance at the woman. "That's why you brought him, I thought. To see me."

"Yes, I did," Sarah said. She had turned to face him now, but she still leaned back against the edge of the windowsill with her arms crossed. "He wanted to come see you. He was worried about you. He couldn't wait to get here."

"What's wrong with that?" Adrian asked. "What's really bugging you, Sarah? Is there something at home you want to—"

"First of all," Sarah snapped, standing bolt upright, "it's my home — Mine and Peter's — so if I want to talk to you about it, I'll say so. Don't change the subject and pretend you care about what happens to me."

Adrian sighed and looked down at the bed in front of him. "What *do* you want to talk about?"

"I want to talk about Brandon and why you're making him hate me," Sarah said. She took another step closer to the bed and thrust her arms out in an explosion of gesticulation. There was no telling how long she'd been waiting to do so. "It's bad enough that you badmouth Peter, but what are you saying to my son when I'm not there that makes him hate me?"

"I'm not doin' any such thing!" Adrian burst out, shocked by the accusation. "I never say—"

"Keep your voice down," Sarah hissed through clenched teeth, looking around the room as if the two of them were standing on a busy street corner. "You sound like a hick when you yell."

Adrian marshaled his wits with teeth-grinding effort and said, "I'm not yelling. You just surprised me with that madness is all. I don't try to make Brandon hate you or your boyfriend."

"Don't talk to me like that. I'm not a little girl."

"All right, look, I don't want to get in a fight. Let's make this easy on ourselves."

"I will not have what I think and feel called madness," Sarah said. Her arms were really going now, punctuating the important words in her sentences with sharp jabs into the air. "If you don't want to fight, you apologize to me."

"I'm sorry," Adrian said in a knee-jerk fashion. He took a breath and said it again, just to avoid the inevitable complaint that he wasn't being sincere. "Look, Sarah, really, I don't know what you mean here. I do everything I can not to badmouth you when Brandon visits me on the weekends."

"Oh how noble," Sarah sneered.

"That's not how I meant it," Adrian backpedaled, although the retraction was farther from the truth. Talking to Sarah was like defusing a mine on the back of a moving pickup truck sometimes. "I mean I don't talk bad about you to Brandon. I don't bring up Peter at all. We just try to have fun together."

"Without me," Sarah said. "It's just father and son having a jolly old time while I'm sitting at home."

"Surely you and Brandon do stuff together," Adrian said. "Some kind of fun stuff."

"Like what?" Sarah demanded. "Does he talk about the super-fun stuff he and Peter and I do together? Tell me one thing he's told you about this great fun we're having all the time."

"Well, I don't know," Adrian floundered. "He doesn't really talk about it, I guess."

"You guess?" Sarah pounced. She loved it when Adrian said that. "You want to guess what he talks about when he's at home with me all day long? You. Even when Peter's around. He talks about all the fun stuff he did with Daddy all weekend. Just fun fun fun, all weekend long. You two are regular buddies."

Adrian couldn't help but smile at that. Screw Peter. The guy had acted nice enough when Adrian had met him, but he didn't know his place. Sarah treated Peter like a husband, and Peter seemed to think he could treat Brandon like his son by association. If he got his feelings hurt

when Brandon accidentally reminded him otherwise, that wasn't Adrian's problem.

"Oh, go ahead," Sarah said. She leaned over on the bed, glaring at him where he sat. "Smile. It's just great you two are having such a good time. Meanwhile, he's sitting at home with the two of us being miserable. And that makes me miserable because my own son hates me. And that makes Peter miserable because all he wants to do is make me happy."

"Maybe you're just not taking Brandon out to do the kind of stuff he likes," Adrian suggested.

Sometimes when he and Sarah fought, torpedoes of inspiration shot out of his mouth unbidden like that and scuttled his hopes of resolving anything quickly.

"I wish I could!" Sarah's voice had taken on the loud-but-not-shouting quality that Adrian had never quite mastered. "I'd love to take him to eat at Sonics like we all used to on Saturdays or take him to Tigers games or take him to movies he likes all the time, but I can't. I have bills. I've got a house payment. I've got a new car to pay for. I've got school clothes to buy. I can't take him out for happy fun time every day. I've got responsibilities to think about."

"Your boyfriend's got a job, and you're still rolling in your daddy's money. What happens to all that?"

"Peter travels," Sarah said, "and I will not beg from my father like you seem to think I should."

Adrian disengaged that red herring and thrust his point undaunted. "Look, I'm the one with all the real financial responsibilities here. What do you think all my child-support payments go for?"

"Not very much," Sarah parried. "You're lucky I let you off with that highway robbery, mister. I could have taken you for a lot more in court, and don't think my lawyer didn't try to get me to do just that."

"Look," Adrian said, gathering his wits yet again so as not to blow his top. "Let's not go off on that old saw again. You wanted to talk to me about trying to turn Brandon against you, but I'm not doing that. End of discussion. Was there something else?"

"Oh, I don't think that's all there is to anything," Sarah said with a brighter gleam of triumph that Adrian thought should be there. The look said she'd only been warming up all along. "Do you know why it took us so long to find out where you were?"

Adrian fanned a deck of smart-ass answers and selected one from the less vitriolic end. As much as he wanted this ambush to end, he couldn't resist.

"Traffic?"

"You changed your contact information," Sarah said, oblivious to his glib dodge. "When you switched jobs — again — you listed Brandon as the person you wanted contacted in case of emergencies."

With a surge of guilt, Adrian remembered having done exactly that when he'd signed on with the Chamber of Commerce. When he'd gotten the job, he'd called Sarah in the vain hope that she would congratulate him or at least thank him for making sure to keep the child-support money coming in. Instead, as now, they'd ended up fighting. The next day — his first day on the job — he'd filled out the "Contact in Case of Emergency" paperwork in Brandon's name in a fit of pique. Since then, he'd forgotten about it.

"You remember doing that?"

Adrian nodded. Not only was it a stupid thing to have done, it gave Sarah ammunition.

"Well guess what? Whatever you were trying to pull just backfired. Somebody's been calling the house four days whenever we were out, leaving messages for Brandon about his father being in the hospital. Peter and I thought it was some cruel, stupid prank caller until I dragged the truth out of an operator at your HMO's office. Four days of you not calling to talk to your son, and finally this is what we find out."

Adrian weathered that last tirade, but he'd stopped listening after the beginning of the last sentence. "Did you say four days?" he asked.

"That's what I said," Sarah said, losing only a little steam. "Did that wreck scramble your brains?"

"No," Adrian said. He gazed over Sarah's shoulder out the window in stupid amazement. "Why didn't you call the hospital and check?"

"That's not the point. The man didn't say he was from the hospital or from your office. He *sounded* like a prank caller."

"Have I really been in here for four days?" His ex-wife's fabricated anger suddenly seemed hollow and unimportant. What was she even angry about? When it came right down to it, Adrian had never really been able to figure that out, no matter how loudly she almost-shouted. "I've been unconscious that long?"

"Not as far as we knew," Sarah said, sidling over so that she was in the center of Adrian's field of view again. "Your son was worried sick that you were dead, because you had to be petty and stupid. I wasn't surprised when you didn't call like you usually do, but Brandon was scared. The second night and third night, I had to tell him that you probably set the whole stupid prank up because we'd had that fight on Wednesday. I had to tell him you were trying to trick me so he wouldn't be scared."

Adrian and Sarah *had* been fighting the night before his accident, he remembered. What had that been about? Money? Anything actually worth arguing over?

"You didn't have to lie to him."

"I didn't know I was lying to him," Sarah said. "For all I knew, it was the truth. I didn't get this whole business straightened out last night. Finally. You should have seen his face when he found out that his father had actually been in the hospital for three days and we didn't know it. He looked like a little ghost."

"Wait," Adrian said, snapping back to the conversation in full force and staring Sarah in the eye. "You guys straightened this out last night?"

"Finally."

"Brandon said he was in school today. Why didn't you bring him here when y'all found out I *was* actually here? Or this morning at least?"

Sarah paused for several seconds, and her face shifted from fourth-gear sanctimonious-angry to neutral confused-angry. She lurched back into first gear with, "I already knew you were fine. I told Brandon you were okay."

"You knew?" Adrian said. He didn't like to accuse anyone of lying, especially someone such as Sarah who'd fight it like a lawyer, but... "How?"

"I called the hospital this morning," she said. "They said you were fine. They said—"

"No, not even one scratch. It's quite incredible, really. He didn't even lose a filling. He's very lucky, Ma'am."

"—you'd be fine for visitors once they got through examining you."

"They must have said I was very lucky," Adrian said.

"Yeah," Sarah said. "I told Brandon you were okay."

"You told him I didn't have one scratch," Adrian said. His eyes felt glazed and only half focused, although he had never seen things more clearly. "That I hadn't even lost a filling. Right? Something like that? Isn't that what the doctor told you?"

Sarah's expression slipped back into neutral, and the confusion started to overpower the anger. She backed up a step and grabbed her left elbow with her right hand. "You didn't have to change your paperwork just because we got in a fight, Adrian. That caused all this."

"If you'd brought Brandon down here right after you called the hospital, you two might have gotten here in time to see me wake up. I would have woken up — after thinkin' I was going to die — and seen the two of you instead."

"It's your own fault," Sarah attempted. She looked back out the window trying to marshal her forces.

"But you didn't want to wait," Adrian said, ignoring her enfeebled protest. His gaze locked on her and pulled her eyes up toward his. "You'd rather the hospital called once I woke up so you wouldn't waste your time waitin' here. Was that it? You two could have been here, but you didn't want to be. It's times like these I remember why I

divorced you, Sarah. Jesus! Didn't you think Brandon would want to be here when I woke up?"

With only a minute pause and the thinnest pretense of looking at her watch, Sarah headed for the door. Adrian uncoiled from the bed, cobra-quick, and intercepted her on the other side by grabbing her elbow.

"Where do you think you're goin'?"

"I'm getting out of here," Sarah said. He could see composure hardening into frost in her eyes, but its coverage was not complete. "This isn't the Adrian I know. You're not yourself. Brandon and I are going home, and I don't want you calling until you're your old self."

"Like hell," Adrian said. "We're not through with this."

"Adrian, you're hurting me," Sarah protested, a bit more dramatically than was strictly necessary. She jerked her arm free and stepped well away from him in one long flourish toward the door. "I think I'm going to have bruises. You just keep your distance, and I won't tell Brandon about this."

"I didn't even do anything," Adrian said. Even as he said it, though, he knew that his small victory was winding to a close. Sarah was leaving on her terms and by her choice.

"And we'll have to see about your visitation this weekend," she said, regaining her center. "If you're still out of control like this, it might not be safe to let Brandon go home with you."

"You mean acting angry at you?" Adrian demanded. "You deserve it." His frustration eroded his hard-won self-satisfaction before he could even build on it.

"You're being irrational," Sarah said. She put a hand on the doorknob, making it an obvious point not to take her eyes off Adrian. "Maybe you'd just better call before you come over at all."

"I do that anyway," Adrian said. His advantage was wholly gone now.

"Just do it," Sarah said. "I'm serious."

Before Adrian could protest further, Sarah opened the door to reveal a gray-haired, gray-bearded doctor

standing outside the room with his hand raised to knock. The doctor jumped at having the door whisked open away from him, and Sarah froze. Adrian did the same. The three of them stood looking at each other, until Sarah pushed past the older man and disappeared down the hall.

The doctor watched her go, then turned back toward Adrian with a shrug and a look of good-natured confusion. *Women*, the expression seemed to say. *Can't live with 'em...* Adrian shrugged without feeling or humor, which was all that the doctor really seemed to be after.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I think that's my line," the doctor said, closing the door behind him. "Are you Adrian Cross?"

"Yes sir," Adrian said. He sat back on his bed and looked at the doctor.

"Nice to meet you, Mister Cross," the older gentleman said, extending a long-fingered hand. "My name's Thomas Anderson. I'm going to check you out and make sure you're ready to go home. If you're ready to leave, that is."

Adrian knew the man's voice, and he was fairly certain as to where he'd heard it—

"It's quite incredible, really. ... He's very lucky...."

—but he had never met the man.

"I'd say I'm ready. You said your name's Doctor Anderson?"

"The very same," the doctor said. "Didn't Paul tell you I was coming by?"

"He did," Adrian said. "I was just expecting someone else."

The doctor smiled at what must have seemed an absurdity to him. "Anyone in particular?"

A hobgoblin with a bad comb-over who really cares what my insurance carrier's address is, Adrian wanted to say. Instead, he put on a somewhat wooden smile and said, "No, I guess not. I just thought I met my doctor already."

"Nobody else has signed off on your chart," the doctor said in friendly reassurance. His tone of voice hinted at years of experience coddling confused patients. "Just Paul and

me. Nobody else that I'm aware of. However, there was some confusion with your paperwork. Someone misplaced your check-in paperwork, and we had to track down your chart, and then you yourself were out of your room when we came looking for you."

"Yeah," Adrian said. "I remember there being some paperwork trouble. Something got misfiled. Is it all straightened out now?"

"I'm here," Anderson said. "You're here. We're still both in the hospital. I've got your most current medical records here. I'd say everything's finally ship-shape."

Adrian smiled with relief. "Thank goodness. I was afraid something had happened to my foot in the wreck."

Anderson looked down at Adrian's feet then back up again. "Does it hurt?"

"Well no," Adrian said. "It was just... because of my old ankle injury. I thought maybe I damaged it again."

"What ankle injury is that?" Anderson asked. He flipped through a few pages of the folder he'd brought in with him. "I've got an old record of a broken ankle and foot, but it says here that it happened more than sixteen years ago."

"That's right."

"It healed properly then, didn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"And you do appear to be standing up on it without any trouble."

Adrian opened his mouth to answer before he realized that the doctor was teasing him. "Okay, I guess you don't have to send me off to the glue factory or anything. It's just that the other doctor made a pretty big deal out of it. He had me worried."

"The other doctor?"

"Yeah," Adrian said. "The bald fella with the comb-over. You know who I'm talking about?"

"I think you've had a lot of excitement in a short period of time," Doctor Anderson said, guiding Adrian over

to the bed to sit down. "Why don't you sit down here and let me give you a look-over."

Adrian didn't enjoy being patronized, but the doctor's calm and professional demeanor made him second-guess himself. He supposed he might have imagined the hobgoblin doctor, as Anderson was implying. That doctor might have been the product of some sort of stress dream that had made him sleepwalk to the empty exam room and sit there until Paul had found him. That explanation was technically feasible. It just wasn't right.

"Well, it might have been the Sandman," he said with a shrug. "He and I've apparently been seeing a lot of each other these past four days."

"There is that," Anderson said with an indulgent nod. "But as nearly as I can tell, you won't need to spend any more time with him than any other healthy man your age."

"Thank goodness for that."



"And it doesn't hurt now at all?" Doctor Anderson asked some time later as he bent and flexed Adrian's foot and poked at his ankle.

"Nope," Adrian said. "It's a pretty welcome surprise, really. One go-round like I had with this foot in high school's enough for anybody's lifetime."

"From the pictures I've seen of the accident, I think your foot would be the least of your problems," Anderson said. "You're a very lucky man, Adrian. Your car was almost an airless entity when they found it. You were sitting in the only spot in the car that wasn't crushed against something. From what I saw, that old Sherman tank you were driving folded up like a catcher's mitt around you."

"That'd make a hell of a Pontiac ad."

"Not if you'd had any passengers. Regardless, your ankle seems to be fine, right along with the rest of you. I'd say you've got a few more years of running and jumping left in you."

"Are you going to want to run any tests then, when we're done here?" Adrian asked.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Anderson replied. "We did most of the tests we needed while you were asleep. Blood toxicology, MRI, X-rays... you name it."

The thought of waking up stuck inside an MRI machine quietly freaked Adrian out, but he didn't mention it. Nor did he say that the other doctor had given him almost exactly the opposite answer.

"Why do you ask, Mister Cross? Is there one in particular you wanted to take?"

"Not hardly," Adrian said. He leaned back against his pillows, giving the doctor a chance to write some things down on his chart. "I just want to go home. And back to work, if you believe that."

"I know how you feel," the doctor said. "Where do you work?"

"Chamber of Commerce," Adrian answered.

"Really?" Anderson asked. "What division? I know some folks in the Chamber."

"Organization," Adrian said. "Under Jim Mahoney."

"I know Jim," Anderson smiled. "What do you do for him?"

"I keep track of our new member information for him and work with the PR folks in the Community division sometimes, too. I'm working with Evan Dunkirk in Expansion right now on the big Synthetic Solutions project everybody's talking about. You know Evan?"

"Only from seeing his name in the papers," Anderson said. "I've never met him. But tell your boss I said hello when you get back to work tomorrow."

"Sure."

While he'd been speaking, the doctor had also been writing notes on his clipboard. As the short conversation wound down, he stroked the side of his beard absently with his pen and made one last notation.

"All right, Mister Cross," he said. "You're good to leave. I just need you to sign this, right here next to the X. The nurse at the front desk is going to have you look over some insurance papers to make sure all the information there is

correct. She's also going to schedule you for a follow-up exam. We'll want to make sure you're still doing okay once you get back to your normal life. Do you have any questions about anything?"

"I don't think so," Adrian said as he signed the paper the doctor held out in front of him. "You're sure I don't have any more tests or anything to take?"

"I'm sure. It's all been taken care of. You're as healthy as a man ten years younger. We can go over the results of those tests individually if you'd like."

"No thanks," Adrian said. He smiled, but he wasn't making a joke. He really wanted to get out of this place ASAP. Mostly just to get on with his life, but partly out of a childish fear that the hobgoblin doctor who'd examined him first would make him stay and subject him to tests he apparently didn't need. "Ah, where are my clothes, though?"

"That drawer," Anderson said pointing to the dresser on the wall opposite the bed. "They're cleaned and pressed, too, courtesy of our laundry service. Your watch and shoes and the contents of your pockets are there as well."

"Thanks."

"Our pleasure. Make sure to talk to the nurse downstairs on your way out. And tell Jim I said hello."

"Will do," Adrian said. "I'm free to go?"

"Yes. Good evening, Mister Cross. Oh, there is one thing I almost forgot."

"What's that?"

"A young man I ran into in the hallway said he'd been waiting to see you," the doctor said. "He said you wouldn't mind if I sent him in when we were finished."

"He did?"

The doctor nodded. "Should I send him in now, or would you rather meet him downstairs?"

"Is that lady who was here before with him?"

"I could check."

"Tell you what," Adrian said with a sly smile. "If he's still hanging around and that lady isn't with him, send him

on in. If they're together, tell them both I'll meet them downstairs after I check out."

"Will do," Anderson said. "I'll see if I can find him."

When Adrian thanked him, Doctor Anderson turned and left. He closed the door behind him so Adrian could change in peace. Adrian doffed his gown and started putting his own clothes back on.

Five

Once he was dressed, Adrian had to wait only a few minutes for his visitor to arrive. He was standing by the window looking for his ex-wife's car in the parking lot when the door opened behind him. He smiled and turned around saying, "Whoa there, young man. It's a good thing I had my pants on already."

However, the person who'd entered the room wasn't Adrian's son. A man roughly Adrian's age stood just inside the door wearing dark blue slacks, a burgundy shirt, a black tie and carrying a weathered trench coat over his left arm. He held a black and white composition pad in the other hand, and a blue pencil rested behind his right ear under a scruff of sandy blond hair. His eyes were a shade somewhere between indigo and violet. Adrian had never seen the man before.

"I agree," the stranger said with a thin-lipped smile. "I have to insist on at least that degree of formality when I meet someone in person for the first time."

"Who are you?" Adrian said. He sat back against the windowsill and crossed his arms. "Didn't anybody teach you to knock?"

"My name's Matthew Simonson," the man said. "I apologize if I startled you. The doctor said I could come in. He said you told him it was okay."

"I thought you were my son," Adrian said with a sigh that put two and two together. "I guess he's already gone home, though. That stinks."

"I suppose," Simonson said. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"No, it's all right. My fault for assuming. What do you need?"

Simonson came the rest of the way into the room and laid his coat on the bed. As he folded his notepad open and took his pencil down from behind his ear, he said, "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about what's happened to you recently. And maybe we could talk about the Synthetic Solutions Corporation if you feel up to it right now."

"You're a reporter?" Adrian said. He stepped away from the window. Sarah's car didn't seem to be out there anyway.

"Very sharp, sir. Yes, I'm a reporter. I publish the *Wake-Up Call* on line."

"Never heard of it," Adrian said. He edged toward the door a couple of steps then stopped again. "I don't play around on the Internet much if I can help it."

"Is that so?" Simonson said, tilting his nose up and frowning his brow in surprise. "I was under the impression that that wasn't at all the case."

"Bad impression," Adrian said. "I don't know who gave it to you, but you may not want to use him as a source anymore."

"My sources are usually impeccable. Perhaps not so in this case." Simonson scratched out whatever he was writing then turned a page in his notebook. "I would still like to speak with you about a tangentially related subject. And about Synthetic Solutions as well. I'm given to understand that you work for the Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce and that the Chamber has invited representatives from that company into this city from Ann Arbor to discuss—"

"Look," Adrian said, "I don't want to be rude, but can we do this some other time?"

"I know that you're in a hurry to leave, Mister Cross—"

"Adrian."

"Very well, Adrian. Now, as I said, I understand that you're in a hurry to leave, but this won't take more than a moment. We can talk about Synthetic Solutions later if you prefer."

"Well what was the first thing you wanted to bring up, then?" Adrian sighed. "And what'd you say your paper was called?"

"The *Wake-Up Call*," Simonson said. "I just want to ask you a few questions about your experiences these last five days, sir. I read about your car accident in the city paper."

"What about it?" Adrian asked with narrowed eyes. "People get in wrecks on Highway 38 all the time. You talk to all them, too?"

"No sir," Simonson said with a conciliatory smile. "I read about your accident, Adrian, and I think that your situation could make a good story on my site."

"Why's that?" Adrian asked.

"Because even though people do, admittedly, get in car accidents relatively frequently on Highway 38, your situation is special," Simonson explained. "Are you aware that you are the only person involved in last Thursday's accident who was admitted to the hospital unconscious?"

"No, I didn't know that," Adrian said. His eyes remained narrow, and he kept several paces between himself and Simonson. "I'm assuming that nobody was hurt too bad, though, or the doctor would have mentioned it. He didn't mention anybody getting hurt. Except me."

"But you weren't," Simonson said, sitting up a little straighter. He started making notes without looking at his pad. "Were you?"

"Well, no," Adrian said. "But I was unconscious for four days."

"That's it exactly, sir," Simonson said. His eyes gleamed with interest. "The paper mentioned that no one had been seriously injured, and it said that the other three victims had all been released after being treated for minor injuries. It said that one more person was in this hospital, but it didn't say why. When I called the hospital, no one seemed to have any information on why you were here either."

"Confidentiality?" Adrian offered. "I don't think hospitals can release patient information without some kind of waiver."

"I didn't say that no one would release the information, sir," Simonson said. "I said that they didn't have it. No one I spoke to could find any report in the hospital

records of anything being wrong with you. Evidently, you'd survived the accident without a scratch."

Adrian glanced at the door once again and opened his hands. "That seems to be the case," he said. "Not a scratch." He shrugged. "Didn't even lose a filling."

"Sir, that's a miracle," Simonson said, leaning toward Adrian with wide eyes. "I saw the police report and the insurance photos from the crash. At the very least, both of your legs should have been pulverized, and your back should have been so much dust and spinal fluid. You might have even been killed if the police and rescue vehicles hadn't shown up as quickly as they reportedly did."

"If anything had been wrong with me in the first place," Adrian said.

"Granted."

"But there wasn't. I was just knocked out. I guess you could call that a miracle, but I just got lucky. Plus, my car's an '82 Phoenix. You can't break a Phoenix; it's a giant hunk of steel."

"It's probably more so, now, sir," Simonson said. "It was totaled. Flattened. I saw the pictures. You were more than lucky, believe me. Emerging alive would have been lucky; the fact that you emerged unscathed is, in fact, a miracle."

"My mom had a saying about miracles," Adrian said. He was in no mood for this right now. "She said God never did anybody a miracle. He just stood by and smiled so we'd know He was happy for us. She said what we call miracles are really just dumb luck God approves of."

"I can't entirely agree with that," Simonson said, still taking notes without looking. He flipped a page and started again. "But, that's neither here nor there. No matter what my opinion is, I think you'll agree that something astounding happened last Thursday, and that you were a part of it. You could be caught up in something larger than you can conceive of right now."

"Okay," Adrian said, humoring the Internet journalist, "I'll give you that. What about it?"

"What about it?" Simonson whispered to himself, rolling his eyes.

"I mean, I really can't tell you too much about the experience," Adrian said. "I tried to skid and hit my brakes, then I woke up here. There wasn't too much astounding or miraculous about it at the time. Other than that, I've just been sleeping these past four days."

"Then let's talk about that, Adrian," Simonson said. "Did you have any dreams during the last four days that you remember?"

"Dreams?" Adrian asked. "No." He supposed that his visit from the ugly, balding doctor counted as a dream if he had, in fact, mentioned it, but he didn't feel like bringing that up.

"Do you remember seeing or hearing anything unusual while you were unconscious?"

"Like what?"

"Anything, sir. Spectral figures? A bright, welcoming light? Significant scenes from your past that you'd forgotten about?"

"No," Adrian said. His expression squeezed into a mask of civil disrespect. "Nothing like any of that. No angels singing or cloud cities or pearly gates. I didn't have any sort of near-death experiences to speak of. Sorry."

"What about epiphanies?" Simonson pressed on despite the fact that the patience and tolerance had disappeared from Adrian's countenance. "Did you experience any sort of revelation or intense moment of clarity while you slept? Did any unexpected insight come to you seemingly from nowhere?"

"Can't say as it did," Adrian said. "Sounds like it would have been nice, though."

"How about before, sir?" Simonson said. "Have you ever experienced prophetic visions? Perhaps recently as you've come into contact with representatives of Synthetic Solutions?"

"No," Adrian said. "Look, Mister, I told you how it happened. I had a wreck, I got knocked out, and I woke up here. That's all I saw, and that's all I remember. And before that, I was living a normal life without visions or epiphanies or any of that. What kind of questions are these, anyway? What kind of Internet newspaper is it you write for?"

"It's a site concerned with news that doesn't get much exposure in the standard press, sir," Simonson said.

"A religious rag."

"Not in the conventional sense," Simonson said. "Spiritual from time to time, but not strictly religious. And that's merely one aspect of the site. I also write investigative reports and debunk supernatural hoaxes. Now, I've just got a few more questions if you don't mind."

"I have to say I do, actually," Adrian said, raising his hands to stop Simonson before the reporter got rolling again. "I appreciate you coming out from... wherever..."

"I'm staying at the Lester Hotel in town."

"Right. But listen, right now I want to go home. You sound like you want something from me I can't give you, and I just don't like disappointing such a nice guy."

"These last few questions are about your contact with Synthetic Solutions and the work you're doing for the Chamber of Commerce. They really shouldn't take—"

"I mean it," Adrian said. "Thanks for coming out and all, but I don't want to talk about this any more. Talk to some of those other folks in the accident if you want, but you and me are done here."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mister Cross," Simonson said. He stood up, gathered his jacket and tucked his pencil back behind his ear. He reached into his back pocket then held out a crisp white business card. The only contact information it listed was a web site address. "Let me assure you, though, that you've become a component of something complex and far greater than

the sum of its parts. You may not see or understand it — I'm still working the details out for myself — but it is there. If you want to talk about what it is, you can reach me at this address."

"Well, that's awfully gracious of you," Adrian said.

"If you change your mind or you remember something you'd like to share," Simonson continued, "you can find me at this address. Just click the 'Mail' button and type your message in the empty box that comes up."

"Thanks," Adrian said, stuffing the card into his shirt pocket. "If I have an epiphany, I'll let you know."

With that, he shook Simonson's hand and sent the reporter away at last. He watched the man disappear around a corner down the hall, then he checked his small room one last time. When he was convinced that he couldn't possibly have left anything, he made his own way to the nearest elevator.



Simonson retreated from Adrian Cross' room without further argument and headed for the visitors' bathroom. In the hall, he passed a scarecrow of an old woman with a tangle of limp white hair, and he gave her plenty of space. She was clinging to a wheeled IV pole and looking around the hallway like a shell-shocked child. Her white hospital gown hung on her like a bed sheet, and two blue-veined stick legs poked out from underneath.

"Angel," she said when she looked in Simonson's direction. "I know an angel."

"I'll bet," Simonson muttered. He could smell painkillers in the IV bag, and the woman's pupils were as big as the entire hallway.

"I can see an angel," the woman persisted, turning to follow him as he passed. "Angel angel angel..."

"Go share your vision with a doctor, darling," Simonson said. "Tell the first doctor that you see all about it."

The woman's eyes glazed, and Simonson hurried on down the hall, leaving the woman by herself. Frail old people made him nervous, especially in hospitals. He could hear time and death eating them from the inside, and like the worst sort of horror movie heroines, none of them could hear it coming for them. People were especially deaf to the sound when they were in a hospital. That kind of ignorance put Simonson ill at ease whenever it confronted him.

As he opened the visitors' bathroom door, though, Simonson saw an ugly, balding doctor step out of an office at the far end of the hall. A brown-haired orderly walked next to the doctor, and the two of them appeared to be arguing quietly about something. They took turns pointing at each other, and they were so distracted that they almost bowled the old woman over. They stopped their argument and began trying to usher the woman back into her room as she regaled them with an account of her divine experience. Reassured that at least somebody would take care of the old woman, Simonson closed the bathroom door behind him and locked it. He put a hand on the sink in the cramped space, breathed deeply to clear his mind, then flipped on the light switch. Try as he might to be ready, he still gave himself a start when the light came on.

"Interesting," his reflection said, crossing its arms and cocking its head, heedless of his actual posture. The word made no sound in the small bathroom, but Simonson had grown so used to the phenomenon of what he was seeing that he could read its lips with ease.

"Very," Simonson replied silently. He crossed his arms to match his reflection's posture. "Any ideas?"

"Let's see what you've got," his reflection said, glancing down at the notepad he still held.

Simonson glanced down at the pad as well and double-checked that two pages were covered with his nearly incomprehensible reverse scrawl. He'd taken these notes while speaking to Cross, but he couldn't read his

own handwriting as he'd laid it down. Instead, he held the first page out to face the mirror. His reflection did the same with the wrong hand, and Simonson read what was written on the pad facing him. His reflection read the pad that he held out.

"Interesting," he and his reflection said simultaneously. They both flipped their pages over and continued to read. When they'd both finished, Simonson stuffed his pad back into the pocket of his jacket.

"He's not Sugardaddy, after all," he said. "It doesn't look as if he caused the accident either."

"Nor does he know who did," his reflection said. "Or that anyone could have done so, in that way."

"He seems ignorant of *that way* altogether," Simonson said. "He's got the potential to understand, but he won't open his eyes. He's sleepwalking."

"Not just about the accident, but the rest of it, too," his reflection said. "Synthetic Solutions. The Chamber. He's involved, but he doesn't realize how."

"He's preoccupied," Simonson said. "And part of him still isn't willing to accept that any of it is possible. Maybe if I told him what I've already discovered about Synthetic Solutions..."

"No good," his reflection said, shaking its head. "He already thinks you're a crack-pot. And he's not technically knowledgeable. He wouldn't understand the significance of what you've found."

"Not the way I understand it," Simonson agreed. "And not the way Sugardaddy understands it." He scratched his cleft chin in thought then said, "There's nothing for it but to keep on him, I suppose. See what he sees and try to figure out what it is that he's involved in. And hope I'm just being paranoid."

"Cross might even figure out on his own what's going on before you do," his reflection said. "He's certainly had more local exposure. His insider perspective makes him a better source for the story, if nothing else."

Simonson nodded, and his reflection's motions synched up. When every motion matched up exactly and no further discourse seemed forthcoming, he washed his face with cold water, put his coat on and left the bathroom. As he'd figured, the old woman was no longer in the hallway, and the light in Adrian Cross' room had been turned out.

Six

Twenty minutes later, Adrian breezed through the front doors of the hospital on his way home. His exit interview with the admissions nurse had gone painlessly except for some glitch with his health insurance information. The nurse had had to type his ID number into her computer several times before she was satisfied that it was real. Adrian had waited patiently for the hospital's system to realize that he wasn't trying to pull a fast one. When the computer had finally come around and Adrian had scheduled his follow-up exam, he'd popped off his patient-information wristband, dropped it in a garbage can by the desk and left.

Right now, though, he felt like he was actually making a break for it. He didn't want to be in that hospital with creepy doctors or pushy Internet tabloid reporters or Sarah any longer. Plus, since Sarah had taken Brandon home already, Adrian had no further reason to stay. Of course, now that his son had left, Adrian had no burning desire to go home alone either. All that was really waiting for him there was a radio, an old computer, a few bottles of English beer, a shelf of books he'd read a dozen times already and a few microwave dinners. His neighbors had probably stolen his unread newspapers by now, so he'd have to wait until tomorrow to catch up on current events. It was that time of the month to go grocery shopping, too — which would kill some time and get him fed at least — but getting to the grocery store and back without a car would be a neat trick.

For that matter, how exactly did he expect to get home from here? A bus stop sign stood across the hospital's parking lot, but riding around randomly on an IRT bus without knowing the routes or stops seemed about as attractive as walking all the way home. Adrian put one hand on his hip and scratched his head with the other. For lack of anything better to do, he looked around for a second at the parking lot and the street in hopes of finding some inspiration.

At the far end of the lot, a weird bit of synchronicity caught his attention in the early dim of the evening. Four cars were lined up in the hospital drive, waiting for the light

to change and the traffic on the main road to let up so they could turn right. Each waiting car's right turn signal flashed, and the flashing had attracted Adrian's eye. Not only did each blinker seem to be blinking with the same frequency as the others, each one blinked right after the one behind it in line. As Adrian watched, a red light seemed to hop from the back car up the line to the front and then start over again like the lights alongside an airport runway. The cycle repeated itself without a glitch through several iterations until the traffic light changed.

"Neat," Adrian said to himself. He didn't usually catch weird little neat moments like that. Of course, he was so used to driving on Highway 38 that any correct use of a turn signal was pretty much a novelty.

Now that he was looking that way, though, he noticed that what had looked like a bus stand was actually a phone kiosk. Since his best chance at this point to get a ride home quickly was to call a cab, he walked in that direction to look one up in the phone book. It would have been nice of Sarah to have stayed and offered him a ride back to his place, but again, he hadn't thought of it when he had the chance.

Of course, doing so might not have been all that good an idea after their argument upstairs. One little shake of her head would have put him right back in the losers' bracket of their running tally. Or worse, the long ride back would have been a tense, silent hell for him and Brandon both. He'd rather walk than sit through that. That Simonson fellow would probably have given him a ride home, too, but that man would probably have expected him to answer more ridiculous questions about epiphanies and strange visitations and how they related to the life of a Chamber of Commerce employee in Iron Rapids, Michigan. At least the ride back with Brandon and Sarah would have been quiet.

Adrian cut straight across the parking lot toward the kiosk as the sun's last rays disappeared beneath the omnipresent gray clouds in the sky. Pink-orange glare from the streetlights would be the only color in the sky soon. Adrian glanced up with a grimace and turned his shirt collar up. The evening wind was chilly this time of year, and it

wouldn't do him much good to catch cold first thing out of the hospital. His mood wouldn't fare well either if it started raining before he could get someone to pick him up. He picked up his pace with his eyes still on the clouds.

Without watching where he was going, he veered off course slightly, and his leg brushed into the bumper of a parked car in the corner of the lot by the phone kiosk. The car's headlights and turn signals flashed once in warning, and a loud electronic chirp sounded at the same time. Adrian jumped back with a start then walked around the car at a distance. The machine was a nice piece of work — glossy black, smooth lines, four doors, tinted windows — and he didn't want to set its actual alarm off. He watched it from the sidewalk for a few more seconds to make sure that it wouldn't start blaring to all the world that it was being stolen, then he turned around to look up a cab company in the phone book.

When he turned around, though, a cab just happened to be pulling up to the curb in front of him. It was a dark blue job, and its off-duty roof light was busted. The advertising placard in the middle of the roof was so wrinkled and faded that Adrian had to wonder when the driver had changed it out last. Even the yellow logo and phone number that had been stenciled on the door were mostly gone. Nevertheless, a ride was still a ride. Adrian opened the door.

"You're not about to go off duty are you?" he said to the driver before he climbed in.

The driver turned and looked Adrian over with bright amber eyes. He was an older man with a short crop of spiky white hair and a wrinkled and tired face, but restless energy shone in those eyes. The mother of pearl buttons down the front of his black shirt gleamed just as brightly. He inspected Adrian head to toe as if he expected Adrian to karate chop him in the back of the head once the vehicle was underway. Of course, this cab had no partition window or wire lattice to separate the passengers' and driver's sections of the car, so maybe the cabbie had had to deal with such a thing before. Considering the outbreaks of violence in and around the city that had been making the local paper lately, Adrian didn't fault the cabbie his caution.

Adrian put on a harmless smile and hoped that the driver didn't tell him to get lost. He'd get back out if the man asked, but he didn't relish the thought of having to do it. Not only would it look pretty silly to anyone on the street who might be watching, he'd be no closer to getting back to his apartment. Fortunately, the cabbie decided that Adrian didn't seem particularly dangerous. He turned back around and put the car in gear.

"No," the man said in a gravelly voice. "I can get you home."

"Thanks."

"Where do you live?"

Adrian climbed in, closed the door, put on a seatbelt and told him.

"Out there?" the cabbie asked. "You're a long way from home."

Adrian looked out the window facing away from the hospital.

"Yeah," he said. "Tell me about it."



"Don't move," the Fourth among them commanded. "That was unintentional."

"Are you sure?" the Third asked, staring at Adrian Cross in disbelief.

The First and Second had their doubts as well. They both thought for sure that Cross had spotted them from all the way across the Founders' Memorial hospital parking lot. He'd walked right up to the car without deviation, and he was staring at it even now. They kept their opinions to themselves, however.

"Yes, I'm sure," the Fourth said to the Third.

"Why was he released?" the Second asked. Although Cross couldn't see into the car, every rearview lens gave the occupants a clear view of him. "Why is he even awake and moving around?"

"Yes, the doctor should have had Cross sedated and sequestered," the Fourth said. "The process has broken down inside somehow."

The First and Second glanced at each other.

"How?" the Third asked.

"Unknown."

Cross looked at their car for another moment, then stepped behind the blue and gray wall of a phone kiosk on the sidewalk.

"Shouldn't we detain Cross?" the First asked.

The Fourth didn't respond.

"We have an opportunity," the Second added.

"I don't see the point now," the Third said. "Even if he's not calling for a ride home, he's already interacted with the civilian hospital staff. We can't just secret him away now without having to who-knows-how-many people inside the hospital."

Still the Fourth hesitated.

The Third looked at the Fourth once then back over his shoulder at Cross. Cross hadn't emerged from behind the wall of the kiosk. A dark blue taxi drove by and turned left at the end of the block.

"Go," the Fourth said finally when the taxi was out of sight. "Detain him. We'll take him to Ann Arbor ourselves and dispatch a team to deal with the civilian hospital staff." He still looked straight ahead, but he was frowning. He touched the raised patch of flesh that covered a subcutaneous communicator behind his ear. "Something has gone wrong. Once we have Cross in the car, we must talk to Doctor Zearin immediately."

The four of them opened their doors, stepped out of the car and closed the doors in unison. They all turned on their heels and approached the phone kiosk, two on each side. The Fourth took the lead on one side, and the Third came forward on the other. They formed a tight semi-circle of bodies around the front of the kiosk so that Cross had no room to slip by them. However, the phone kiosk was empty.

"Where is he?" the Third said.

"Did he get into that cab?" the First said.

"It didn't even stop," the Third said. "There's no way."

"No, it didn't stop," the Second confirmed. "And I didn't see him walk away in either direction down the sidewalk."

The three of them looked at the Fourth.

"Doctor Zearin will answer for this," he said. "This is unacceptable."



"You want to talk your way through it?" the cabbie said after several long minutes of silence. "It might help."

Lost in his thoughts, Adrian blinked a couple of times and sat up straight. His shoes crunched in wrinkled paper and dried leaves that littered the cab's floorboard. "Beg pardon?"

"I asked if you want to talk about what's on your mind," the cabbie said. His shining eyes looked sincere in the slim rearview mirror, but impatience touched his voice. "You look like you've got a lot going on in there."

"Yeah," Adrian said. "You could say that." This guy probably didn't care one way or the other what was going on in Adrian's mind, as long as he got his fare and a reasonable tip. He certainly sounded like he had more important things on his mind.

"So it might help if you talk about it," he offered again.

"I thought only bartenders listened to sob stories," Adrian said with a wry smile. "I thought cabbies did the talking themselves."

"So I'm a rebel," the cabbie said. "I listen."

"You must be on the union's shit list."

"Yeah," the man said with a wry smile of his own. "You could say that."

The man's voice was low and pebbly from years of smoking, but Adrian could hear through to what sounded like good humor underneath. Maybe the cabbie *did* want to be helpful. Maybe he was the type of guy who'd let a stranger ramble on just because the stranger seemed to need it. The man didn't exactly have to give a shit about Adrian's problems to offer that small human comfort.

"So you want to talk?" he offered again. "You don't have to."

"What the hell?" Adrian said. "Sure. Where to start..."

"How about the hospital?" the cabbie said with a shrug. "Good a place as any for a story to start."

"Yeah," Adrian said. "Sure. I was in a car accident."

"Good year for those," the cabbie said. "We had three priests tangle their car up with a train back before Christmas."

"I read about that."

"Then there was another bad one just last week. Four cars and a tractor-trailer got in a mess out on Highway 38. Had traffic stopped for a mile before the DOT could get a wrecker out there. I was in that mess for an hour."

"Actually, I was in one of those cars. You're right, it was pretty bad." Adrian closed his eyes for a second, and he could hear all the squealing tires and crumpling metal again. The skittering of safety-glass chips spraying across asphalt whispered to him. He opened his eyes.

The driver looked at Adrian in the mirror. "What happened?"

"An eighteen-wheeler happened," Adrian said. "Its tires blew out, and it swerved into us. If I hadn't swerved when I did, I'd probably have gone right under it."

"You swerved?" the cabbie said idly, filling the space. "Why not just hit your brakes?"

Adrian looked away from the driver's eyes and stared out the windshield instead. He watched the dark stains along the side of the road as the car passed. Recent rain and melting slush had washed the dirt and grime from the street into the gutter, just as it did every year when Spring approached.

"I did that, too, but I thought the person behind me would've hit me and pushed me in if I'd just tried to stop. Seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"You don't sound too convinced."

A light smile narrowed the man's eyes in the mirror, but Adrian couldn't convince himself that it was an entirely condescending expression.

Adrian just shrugged and kept looking out the window. At the time of the accident, he hadn't actually been thinking about it.

"It looks like it worked," the driver said, ending the long pause.

"What did?"

"Swerving," the cabbie explained. "I heard about your accident on the radio Friday morning. Nobody got killed, they said. The traffic guy called it a miracle."

Adrian grunted. "So I've been hearing."

"Yep. Said one person went to the hospital, but no injuries were reported. They said that person was unconscious but in good shape. The whole thing loused traffic up pretty bad, like I said, but that was the worst of it."

"I was that person," Adrian said. "I just woke up this afternoon. Yeah, as I understand it, nobody else got hurt."

"Not even you, to look at you," the cabbie said. "How do you feel?"

"That's the question of the day. I'm fine. Not a scratch on me."

The cabbie only nodded, and Adrian was glad of it. Even thinking along those lines reminded Adrian of the way the creepy hobgoblin doctor had looked at him during his examination.

"So if you're okay," the cabbie said, "and nobody got hurt, why do you look so upset?"

"Oh *that*," Adrian said. "That's different. That's personal family problems."

"You married?"

"Used to be."

"There's your trouble, then," the cabbie said. "How long has it been?"

"Five years."

"Any kids?"

"One," Adrian said. "We've got a nine-year-old son. Brandon."

"So is your ex getting remarried or something?"

"Nope. She's been seeing somebody for a couple of years now, though. As far as either one of them thinks, they're already as good as married. They just don't have anything written down that says it's official."

The car stayed quiet for a minute after that, until the cab driver asked, "Is that the family problem on your mind?"

If you don't mind my asking, that is. Still hanging on to the wife, but she moved on?"

"Not quite," Adrian sighed. "I know better than to keep driving in that rut."

"So what's the problem?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it. You ever feel like you're giving and giving, but it's like you're just giving to a bottomless pit? Like no matter how much you give, it doesn't matter because you're never really going to fill the pit?"

"I know how that is."

"That's how it is with me and Sarah — my ex. We were like two sponges when we got married. One of us was full when the other wasn't, so we'd squeeze ourselves out to fill up the other. It was back and forth like that for a long time in the beginning. You follow me?"

"Sure. Sponges," the driver said.

"Well, I figured we'd eventually balance out, you know. Both be full. But after we got married, I always had to be the one who was full. I always had to keep squeezing out for Sarah. All the time. Like right in the beginning, she was lonely in Georgia, so we had to move up here."

"Georgia?"

"I'm from there," Adrian explained. "Sarah went to school there, but right after that, she wanted to move back home. Her father lives up here, and it's where everybody knows her. So we did."

"That's a long way for a southern boy to have to go," the driver said. "Ever lived out of the state before?"

"Nope. It wasn't that bad at first, though. We lived in her father's huge house outside of town. Sarah was happy for a little while, but just until the first new crisis came along. And the one after that. Every time something happened, I had to be the strong one."

"What kinds of crisis?" the driver asked. "Stupid stuff?"

"Yeah, looking back," Adrian nodded. "A lot of it was petty jealousy. Some of it was stupid money arguments. Like, every time Sarah's dad had to close down some factory he

owned or his workers went on strike, she saw it as a little less money he could support us with. Sarah always panicked when he closed one down. She made it sound like the end of the world was coming right then and there. Finally, I told her I'd get a job to support her, and she wouldn't have to worry about her dad's money. We'd already moved out of his place by then to our own house, so she actually got into the idea of having me support her. Truth to tell, I don't know if I did it because I actually wanted to support her or because I just didn't want to fight about her father's money any more."

"Did it help?"

"For a while," Adrian said. "We could pay all of our bills with my money, and we played being suburb folks for a while. And Sarah's father was always nice about offering us loans if we ever needed them. Hell of a nice guy."

"So where was the problem?" the cabbie asked. "If things were working out fine for you then, what happened?"

"Sarah got pregnant," Adrian said, "and it really freaked her out. She was convinced that having and raising a baby was going to bankrupt us on the spot. Some months, we were just barely scraping by, and we didn't know where that baby-raising money was going to come from. Sarah panicked like she usually did. I actually had to talk her out of getting an abortion three separate times."

"Man," the driver said.

"Yeah, that was pretty rough," Adrian said. "We fought all the time then, and we'd only been married two years. I wasn't sleeping or eating right. Kept falling asleep at my job. I got fired when Sarah was only six months along, and I thought she was going to lose her mind. She threatened to throw herself down our steps and miscarry the baby because of that. Like I lost my job on purpose and she was going to punish me for it."

"Jesus."

"It was horrible." An old and bitter lump swelled in Adrian's throat. He hadn't told anyone else about that fight in all the nine years hence. "She'd said a lot of stupid things when she got desperate, but I believed her when she said that. We went round and round for hours that night. Fi-

nally, I actually had to convince her to sedate herself, and I promised that I'd go get whatever shit jobs I could find just to pay the bills. She put herself to sleep with a Valium and brandy about an hour later. I had to let her. It was the only thing that calmed her down."

The driver shook his head. "She sounds like a real headache, partner. Sorry."

"No," Adrian sighed. "You're right. I thought so at the time, too. I just thought I could fix it. Maybe if I wrung myself out enough, everything would be okay for her, you know?"

"How long'd it take you to give up that pipe dream?"

"About the next four years," Adrian said. "I actually managed to get a pretty good job on a reference from my last employer, and actually having Brandon distracted Sarah for a while. The miracle of birth and the joy of motherhood did its thing. We did all right 'til Sarah's dad started losing money pretty regularly. He keeps investing it in this town, but he can't see this place is drying up. He keeps throwing good money after bad."

"Was he supporting you guys?" the cabbie asked.

"No," Adrian said. "He did help out a little with some of the costs. He actually had his personal doctor deliver the baby when Sarah went into labor over at his place. I mean, he could have been if he wanted to. The man's family's been in the money in this city since it was founded. He's filthy, stinking loaded. But Sarah and I'd already decided we were going to support ourselves. Translation: I would be supporting the two of us and the baby. Her dad didn't have anything to do with it."

"So what was your wife's problem with him losing money?"

"Sarah just didn't like it," Adrian said. "She was convinced her father was going to lose all his money and there wasn't going to be anything left when it came time to read his will. At least that's what I always figured. She got angry whenever I suggested it, and we started fighting all the time. Finally, I just couldn't take it any more. The rest is history. I filed, she signed the papers, and she took me to court for everything that was left in the sponge. Including custody of

Brandon. That's where I am now. Paying more money than I can afford to so I can see my son every other weekend."

"Is your ex's father supporting her now?" the cabbie asked.

"Oh no," Adrian said. "She can mostly live off what I send her way. She liquidated a lot of my old assets she won in the settlement and paid off a big chunk of the debts she would have owed on the rest. Her father paid off the rest of her debt in one big check. Basically, I'm her monthly paycheck. For all the rest, she's got this day-trader, real estate broker boyfriend I mentioned."

"Here's an objective question that isn't going to do you much good," the cabbie said. "If your ex's father's willing and able to support your ex and your kid, why'd you get taken to the cleaners in divorce court?"

"I don't even want to get into that," Adrian said. "Let's just say that Sarah wouldn't have it. She said I deserved to keep supporting her after our divorce since I'd taken her away from her father in the first place."

"Damn," the cabbie said, for lack of anything sympathetic or helpful. "And that was how long — five years ago?"

Adrian nodded. He turned aside and looked out the window at the liquor stores and bail-bond shops and check-cashing joints the cab passed. They weren't far from his crappy apartment.

"So why'd you stay around here afterward?" the cabbie asked. "You could have gone back to Georgia, right? I can't really imagine anyone choosing to stay in this place when he's got options."

"Haven't been to Atlanta lately, have you?" Adrian asked with a half-hearted smirk. "Let's just say it's no surprise to me that its best feature is its airport out of town."

"No really," the cabbie persisted. "Why stay?"

Adrian paused for a long while then said, "My son, I guess. It was hard enough on him to watch me and Sarah split up. I didn't want to do that to him again by moving away."

"Plus," the driver said, "there's no telling what your ex would fill his head with, right?"

Adrian looked down at his hands in his lap and shrugged. The thought had crossed his mind, but he wouldn't have been the one to say it aloud. "I really don't think I left home on the best of terms anyway," he said instead. "My mother didn't approve of the whole situation from the beginning."

"What about your father?"

"I don't want to talk about him," Adrian said.

"So what didn't your mother approve of?" the cabbie said. "You moving away?"

"Of me dating Sarah," Adrian said. "Mom never liked her. She didn't want me to get married. Certainly didn't want me moving up here. After I got divorced, Mom and I got into a big told-you-so argument. She didn't mean it like that, but that's what I heard. I haven't even called her in a while. Couple years now, I think."

"That's a big stretch for a Southern kid," the cab driver said. Adrian glared and looked up at that, but the driver was smiling. "That wasn't supposed to be a shot; I'm from Memphis. It's sympathy."

"Oh," Adrian muttered. "Thanks then, I guess. I couldn't tell from your voice."

"It's been a while since I've been back, myself," the driver said. "I traded accents for the local one."

"That wasn't really what I meant," Adrian said. "But yeah, I did the same. People up here look at you like you're a shaved gorilla if you come at them drawling, don't they?"

"Yep. Doesn't matter how smart you are. People hear the accent, and you might as well be wearing cotton overalls, chewing tobacco and whipping a pregnant slave."

Adrian actually chuckled at that and shook his head.

"Listen," he said. "Thanks for sitting through all this. I must sound like the biggest whiner in the city."

"I've seen worse plenty of times."

"You're right about it helping, though."

"It usually does," the driver said. "You'd be surprised what people carry around inside them without even thinking about it. Most don't even know it's in there until they let it out."

"Sounds about right," Adrian said. "Thanks again."

The cabbie smiled and kept on driving, leaving Adrian alone with his thoughts. He did feel better talking to this stranger, even if doing so didn't actually solve anything. Talking let out some of the steam he could always feel building under his skin lately. His only outlet before had been fighting with Sarah or unleashing his frustration at his fellow commuters whenever he was stuck in traffic. Actually talking to another person in a decent, civilized way got him much more settled. He took a long, deep breath, and it evaporated a little more of the tension. As his neighborhood came in sight, he almost didn't want the ride to end.

"Here we are," the driver said as the cab came to a stop in front of Adrian's building. "This is you."

Adrian looked at the glum row of brown-orange two-story apartments and sighed under his breath. Water had stained the walls gray beneath the gutters, and he imagined that he could smell the overflow from the dumpster at the end of this row of buildings. The signs that warned non-residents not to park in the actual residents' parking spaces had all been spray-painted with one squiggly gang symbol or another. The black bars over the windows stood solemn, vigilant and uninviting. Home sweet home.

"Hey, thanks again," he said to the cabbie.

"It's not a problem."

"How much do I owe you?" Adrian asked, digging his wallet out of his front pocket.

The cab driver turned around to look Adrian in the eye and said, "No charge tonight. I was off duty anyway."

Adrian started protesting and shaking his head immediately. "No no no," he said. "That's not the way we play it.

How much?" He finished retrieving his wallet and started counting through the few bills that were in there.

"Nothing," the cabbie said. "Really. You can pretend you owe me if you want, but I'm not going to charge you."

"You know I'm probably never going to see you again," Adrian said. "I don't like you just taking—"

"What?" the driver asked. Now he sounded insulted. "Pity? It's not like that. I'm just doing something for my fellow man. Why do people get so worked up about that sort of thing?"

Adrian closed his wallet, but he still held it in his lap.

The driver shook his head with half-hidden exasperation. "Go on in, son. I did you a favor. You don't have to get all bent out of shape. Just say thanks."

Adrian looked at his wallet one more time then extended a hand toward the driver. "Thanks a lot. When I get to thinking about all this stuff, sometimes, I just don't know what the hell I'm going to do. It helps to talk about it. Thanks."

"You're welcome," the driver said. He reached back and took Adrian's hand in a strong grip, and his expression softened. After they shook hands, he said, "You seem to me like a decent guy who's just bogged down in too much bullshit."

"Maybe," Adrian admitted. He'd told himself the same all his life, but hearing it didn't make it go away. "But that's me. If I knew how to change it, I would."

He opened the door then and stepped out onto the curb, trailing some of the dried up leaves with him. Rather than close the door, though, he leaned down to look at the driver one more time.

"I really do appreciate this," he said.

"No problem," the driver said again. "Think about what I said. People spend way too much time worrying about what to do next, when what they really ought to do is let fate carry them along on its own. They'd see a lot more of what's going on around them if they did."

"Could be," Adrian said. "Maybe I ought to try that for a while. Anyhow, you take care. Maybe I'll see you around again some time."

The driver leaned over so that a slim shaft of streetlight shone on him, and he winked. In that flicker of an instant, Adrian imagined that the man's eyes were actually glowing with a strange yellow luminescence.

"Count on it," the man said, leaning back into the shadow. "Good night."

"Night," Adrian said. He stepped back and closed the door. The cab idled a second longer then made a quick U-turn across the street, dragging leaves from the gutters in his wake.

Seven

The four of them glided down the hallway toward Doctor Zearin's office as if they had every right to be there. Their passing created no disturbance whatsoever among the doctors, nurses and few patients in their way. No one tried to make eye contact, and most of the people just turned aside and went on with their self-absorbed business.

At the end of the hall, the four of them entered the unmarked and unassuming door of Doctor Zearin's office. The three stood aside for the Fourth who stepped forward at once. The First among them closed the door and hung back against the wall in silence with the Second and Third. The room had once been an examination room, they supposed, but it was blank office space now. It boasted only a desk with a computer console on top of it, a set of shelves lined end to end with reference CDs, a telephone handset plugged into the computer, a printer, a shredder/ recycler and an ergonomic chair. Doctor Zearin sat in the chair, and he swiveled around to face them as they entered.

The doctor had been assigned here early in the execution of the Iron Rapids agenda. His actual laboratory and operating theater were housed in the construct in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and it was from there that he did the bulk of his work. However, it had become necessary to provide him temporary residence here in Iron Rapids to oversee local medical treatment of Adrian Cross and oversee Cross' transfer to the Ann Arbor construct. The doctor wasn't a member of the hospital's official staff, so he had been stationed here unobtrusively. The rest of the staff accepted his presence and deferred to him when he was forced to consort with them, but only because of some bureaucratic procedure that Control had enacted, which was beyond the ken of the First, Second or Third.

"Welcome," the balding, unattractive doctor said. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"Good evening, Doctor," the Third among them said. He and Zearin had worked together before.

"Explain yourself," the Fourth demanded without preamble. He stepped forward immediately and crowded the doctor. "Why did you allow Cross to receive civilian visitors and be handled by civilian hospital staff? Why did you even allow him to regain consciousness? He was to remain sedated and isolated until his transfer."

"I know," Zearin said. "But I didn't release him. Something happened that I'm at a loss to explain."

"Tell me that you at least discovered why the Highway 38 procedure failed to affect Cross as projected," the Fourth said.

"I wish I could," Zearin said. "But Cross' release and my investigation are linked. I have been wrestling with certain incongruities in Cross files since we brought Cross here. I was occupied with those incongruities when Cross slipped away from my staff."

"You allowed Cross to slip our custody because of a clerical error?" the Fourth asked. His voice remained flat.

"Not an error," Zearin said. "Not in my files. An incongruity. The results of the tests we gave the subject exist at odds with his actual state of health."

"That doesn't explain why you allowed the civilian staff access to Cross," the Fourth said. "Only your selected staff was supposed to handle him."

"I'm aware of that," Zearin said, annoyed. "The exposure was out of my hands. Circumstances that were beyond my control conspired against me."

"You were responsible for keeping him isolated," the Fourth said. "How is it that he escaped your care? Why wasn't Cross sedated as he should have been?"

"I can't explain that satisfactorily," Zearin said. "I administered the sedative myself; Cross should still be asleep right now. Once my staff discovered that he was awake, I tested his mental acuity personally. For what-

ever reason, he seemed totally unaffected. It's possible that his body has developed an immunity to the sedative I gave him. That has been known to happen in the field from time to time."

"Unacceptable," the Fourth said. "Do you have any idea how you've jeopardized this agenda with your carelessness?"

"I was not careless," Zearin protested. "I was distracted by the unusual circumstances surrounding this agenda."

"Doctor," the Third cut in. "You mentioned incongruities in the results of your initial tests on Adrian Cross. What was so distracting about them?"

"Ah yes," Zearin said, turning to face the Third. "After examining Cross once he woke up, I had to return here to double-check all of the results of every test we gave him during his period of unconsciousness, just to see if anything had changed. I sent a member of my staff to take him back to our observation room, but a civilian orderly had already found him. I don't know how."

"An unfortunate coincidence," the First said.

"When that happened," Zearin continued, "Cross became a registered patient of the hospital. He was assigned a new room and added to the civilian doctor on duty's rounds. That bureaucratic procedure was a contingency I'd put in place when we brought Cross in, just in case the sedative I created didn't work."

"Why did you move Cross from our observation room in the first place?" the Second asked from beside the door. "Why not examine him there?"

"It was more convenient to have him brought to me," the doctor said. He betrayed no guilt in the admission, but he didn't look at the Fourth when he made it.

"It's probably a good thing the doctor did what he did," the Third offered. "If he hadn't, Cross' visitors and the civilian staff would probably have found him eventually anyway."

"Cross' visitors are part of the problem as well," the Fourth said, never turning away from the doctor. "Cross whereabouts were to remain classified until he was ready to be transported to the Ann Arbor Construct. No member of his family was to be told where he was. The protocols of the agenda were explicit."

"That isn't my area of responsibility," Zearin said. "No one from this hospital notified the subject's family. No one from his insurance provider contacted his employer, and no one from the Chamber of Commerce notified the subject's family either."

"Then how did they know where to find him?" the Fourth asked.

"I can find that out," the First said. "I'll check Cross' family's phone records for the past four days and track the incoming calls."

"Do it," the Fourth said without looking back. The First departed.

"About the incongruities in your test results, Doctor," the Third prompted once again before Zearin or the Fourth could speak. "You haven't explained those yet."

"I can," Zearin said. He tapped the touchpad in the bottom center of his computer keyboard, and the screen came to life. "They revolve mainly around the subject's MRI scan and the X-rays I took of his legs and back. These incongruities are the reason I kept Cross here for so long in the first place."

The doctor typed a series of commands into the computer, and two images appeared. One was an X-ray image of the lower half of a man's body. The other was a full-color magnetic resonance image of a human spinal column in cross section. Both images showed clear signs of incredible trauma. Dark lines bisected the leg bones on the X-ray in several places from the toes to the hips. The vertebra in the MRI was only barely recognizable as such.

"These," Zearin said to the Fourth, "are the projections you and I drew up as the minimum acceptable results for the Highway 38 procedure you designed."

"I remember them," the Fourth said. "Multiple compound fractures and severe spinal damage resulting in complete paralysis below the waist."

"At minimum," Zearin said. "I just wanted to show you these before I showed you the results of the tests I've been running since last Thursday."

Zearin typed another series of commands into his computer, and the images on the screen disappeared. Moments later, two new images appeared that were virtually indistinguishable from the first set.

"How strange," the Second said.

"I don't understand, Doctor," the Fourth said.

"Look again," Zearin said.

"They're not mock-ups like the last ones were," the Second said. "There are minute discrepancies in the arrangement of the fractures in the X-ray, and the MRI results show that the spinal cord was severed at a lower point than was originally projected."

"You can see the ID numbers on the images are different, too," the Third said.

"Where did these come from?" the Fourth asked.

"From the subject," Zearin said. "As soon as he arrived at the hospital, I had him scanned and examined. These were the results those tests yielded."

"You must have done something wrong," the Fourth said. "Those must be results generated by the simulation program we created."

"While that is extremely unlikely," Zearin said with a scowl, "I considered it as a possibility. I had the subject examined again while he remained unconscious. These are the results I received."

Zearin called up a new pair of images, and it was entirely indistinguishable from the previous one except for the ID numbers in the bottom left corner of each image.

"That doesn't make sense," the Fourth said, clenching his hands into fists at his sides.

"Cross was fine when we saw him," the Third added.

"He was fine when he arrived at the hospital," Zearin said. "I checked him myself. The machines just say differently."

"They must be malfunctioning then," the Fourth said.

"You might be tempted to think so," Zearin said. "But that isn't the case. No other use of those machines yielded erroneous results for any other patients. I had my staff check that out with the civilian staff."

"I want the maintenance records of these machines examined," the Fourth said. "And you should have reported this earlier."

"I already checked those records," Zearin said. "I had a crew of technicians take both machines apart and put them back together before Cross ever woke up. A crew of our technicians, not civilians. That's why I didn't report any of this until this evening. When I had the subject scanned and examined *again*, I got the same results as I'd gotten the previous two times."

"But there's nothing wrong with Cross," the Third said. "Why do the machines keep saying there is?"

"I don't know," Zearin said. "You're right that this doesn't make any sense. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Adrian Cross that wasn't wrong with him before your Highway 38 procedure took place. However, all of our test results, conform to the projected results of the procedure."

"A paradox," the Third said, mostly to himself.

"That could be problematic," the Second said. "You said that Cross was discovered by the hospital staff and that his records became available when it happened. What do the civilian reports say?"

"That actually worked out better than it should have," Zearin said. "The hospital's records reflect the subject's apparent condition rather than my results. He

was released with a clean bill of health, and none of the civilian staff is aware of the discrepancy. As far as they know, the subject survived the procedure and was miraculously unharmed."

"That's one less thing to have to explain away," the Third said. "That's a break."

"This is still unacceptable," the Fourth said, ignoring the Third. "These results are the ones the procedure should have yielded. There was no room for error."

"Regardless," Zearin said, "Cross wouldn't have been here if that were true. Perhaps you overlooked something during the procedure itself and caused it fail. Such a lapse in your attention at a crucial moment might have even—"

"No," the Fourth said. "If the procedure failed, it did so because of outside interference. Perhaps even Reality Deviant interference."

"Our files don't indicate that there are any Reality Deviants operating in this area," the Third said. He looked at the door where the First had exited. "Our colleague didn't notice any interference on the night of the procedure."

"It's the only acceptable explanation," the Fourth said, rounding on the Third. "In regards to what the Doctor has told us, we should also consider that Cross himself may be the Deviant."

"That's possible," Zearin said, "but Cross didn't demonstrate an appreciable will to power when I spoke to him. He was mentally acute and aware of his surroundings, but no more so than any other civilian."

"Nonetheless, it is possible," the Fourth said. "Cross survived my procedure intact and without a scratch. Cross awoke despite your sedative. Circumstances conspired so that Cross was discovered despite your surveillance. I hesitate to believe that your ineptitude is entirely at fault."

"None of the preliminary psychological information we prepared on Cross indicated that he had the potential to become a Deviant," the Third said.

"Extreme trauma has been known to create that potential in certain circumstances," the Fourth said.

"Only in specific laboratory-controlled conditions," the Third said.

"Cross could have a contact who's a Reality Deviant," the Second broke in. "Someone told Cross' family how to find him despite our information-security protocols. He likely had help eluding us outside as well. He may or may not be a Deviant himself, but one is likely helping him."

"So what do we do?" the Third asked. "Postpone the agenda?"

"The integrity of the operation may have been compromised," the Second said.

"I have already said that we will not postpone the agenda," the Fourth said. "Sutton has already been activated, and he will carry out his procedure with Isaac Gordon on schedule."

"Without Cross—" the Third began.

"We will re-incorporate Cross into the agenda in his specified place," the Fourth said. "We will acquire him tomorrow morning at the Chamber of Commerce building. We'll interrogate him to determine the nature of his Reality Deviant connection then arrange a contingency procedure to return him to Doctor Zearin." He turned to the doctor. "You will arrange to transport Cross to our Ann Arbor construct immediately upon his arrival here."

"What if your contingency doesn't work?" Zearin asked. "What if the same thing happens again and the subject is uninjured? I was never able to determine why it failed the first time. Without knowing that—"

"Transport him anyway," the Fourth said, "and make sure that his medical records show those results when you do." He pointed at the X-ray and MRI results on the doctor's computer screen.

The Third opened his mouth to renew his objection to this course of action, but the Fourth turned to him before he could speak.

"I want you to assist your colleague in trying to track down Cross' Deviant contact," he said. "Arrange for surveillance on Cross' residence as well, in case the circumstances evolve overnight."

The Third hesitated, then finally said, "Understood. I'll need your secure access link for the car's mobile data terminal to arrange the surveillance on this short notice."

"Go to the car," the Fourth said. "I'll follow you shortly."

The Third nodded and exited.

"You," the Fourth said, turning toward the Second. "Gather a copy of Doctor Zearin's results and meet me at the car. You and I must report to Control."

"Understood," the Second said.

"Good," the Fourth said. He looked at Zearin once more then left the two of the alone. The door closed behind him as he went to meet the Third at the car.

"He just can't admit it, can he?" Zearin said.

"What is that, Doctor?" the Second asked him.

"That his procedure failed," the doctor said. "I wanted to suggest that that was why Cross was unharmed, but I don't think your colleague would have accepted that. Doesn't he know that our procedures are harder to perform in the field than they are in the lab?"

"Science does not simply fail, doctor," the Second said. "Not when it is applied properly."

"That's what I'm talking about," Zearin said. "Your colleague is only human. Humans make mistakes. Maybe these results and Cross giving us the slip on his two good legs are all part of the backlash of your colleague making one crucial mistake."

"Maybe," the Second said. "But accepting that is easier said in the lab than done in the field, Doctor. Especially for him."

"Is this agenda so important to him?"

"They all are. He is driven to succeed."

"Hasn't he ever heard the saying, 'You can't win them all'?"

"Yes," the Second said. "However, that has not been his experience. And you are dangerously close to committing a thought-crime."

"Consider it withdrawn."

Tuesday

One

Tomorrow morning, Adrian decided, he would take a cab to work rather than the bus. The bus was cheaper and probably a little more reliable — and its route didn't include Highway 38 — but the one that traveled the route between his apartment and work was absolutely packed. In a cab, he could have watched the world go by from inside his personal bubble. Maybe he'd even have the same driver he'd had last night.

Instead, he'd opted for the bus because he'd discovered that he lived less than two blocks from a stop. With one transfer and a mere sacrifice of pocket change, he could be at his office in half the time it usually took him to wind his way through the perpetual gridlock of Highway 38. He was certainly in no hurry to try his luck driving on a highway

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Instead, he'd opted for the bus because he'd discovered that he lived less than two blocks from a stop. With one transfer and a mere sacrifice of pocket change, he could be at his office in half the time it usually took him to wind his way through the perpetual gridlock of Highway 38. He was certainly in no hurry to try his luck driving on a highway again any time soon, and he had no car to try it in regardless. His options for getting to work included the bus, a cab or traveling on foot.

Tomorrow, though, he would take a cab. He'd never had much need to use the Iron Rapids Transit busses before, and even his few past rides thereon hadn't prepared him for the full, work-morning experience. Bodies filled every available seat, and almost the entire center aisle was full of people holding the overhead rails trying to keep their

feet. Adrian didn't even know that so many people lived in Iron Rapids. They filed off the bus like cattle at every stop, but just as many people crammed back on. Adrian had had to abandon his coffee to hold on to the overhead rail with both hands at first just to keep his balance, and he had stood through three stops after he got on before a seat opened up near him. When he finally got to sit down and he remembered his coffee, the cup had vanished.

But even having so many people packed together wasn't as bad as what Adrian could see when he looked at them. They seemed normal and decent enough to a casual inspection, but it was a pale and depressing normality. Everyone was lower-middle class at best, like him, and they dressed in typical urban camouflage. The men wore polyester work slacks or blue jeans to complement Sears button-down dress shirts and solid-print ties. The women all had on drab skirts or pants with lackluster blouses and coats. Few people smiled or even looked at one another. None made eye contact with him. When they jostled each other to get on or off the bus, they did so without emotion. Adrian might have been surrounded by zombies for all the attention the other passengers paid one another.

Fortunately, the ride was over quickly enough and Adrian was able to escape the depressing cattle-car. Better than that, he actually made it to work in a quarter of the time it would have taken him to drive. He lived inside the perimeter and he worked inside the perimeter, but he usually drove the arc around from Point A to Point B because it was the only route he knew. He knew the areas *outside* the perimeter better for having lived there for six years before his divorce, but the illogical layout of the city's streets inside the ring of Highway 38 had remained a mystery to him. The way the bus routes lay, though, he could simply cut a short chord across the perimeter from home to work in no time. He had to walk several blocks to and from both stops, but Iron Rapids' streets had never exactly bustled with pedestrians on the best of days.

And besides, Adrian felt better physically than he had since high school. His eyes stayed open wider and he

breathed more deeply than he had in a long time. Energy pumped through him with every heartbeat, lengthening and quickening his stride. He easily put distance between himself and the others who'd gotten off the bus with him, and he made his way down the sidewalk at a good clip. Who needed coffee or Coke in the morning to be energized? Just being out and moving around was enough for him at that moment. Just being alive.

He made great time and arrived at the Chamber of Commerce building almost an hour before he had to be there. He was usually the first to arrive in his department anyway, but not by nearly this much. He went in through the back door that opened directly into his part of the building, disarmed the security system and started turning on the lights. The harsh fluorescents made him blink and squint, but he kept flipping switches until they were all on. He flipped on his overhead light and his desk lamp then sauntered into the kitchen and break room to put a pot of coffee on. He didn't intend to drink any, but he thought it would be nice to have some ready and brewed when his coworkers showed up.

In the same vein, he washed and dried all the coffee cups in the sink then lined them up by the coffee maker. He didn't usually do more than get the pot brewing, and that just so he could fill his mug, but today he felt like being nice. Maybe his coworkers would notice and maybe they wouldn't, but Adrian felt good about doing it nonetheless.

That done, he finally went to his office. He really needed to catch up after missing last Thursday and Friday and yesterday, but he had personal business to take care of first. He didn't usually conduct personal business in the office, but he figured it was okay today since he'd shown up so early and no one else was in the office to catch him at it. The first thing he did was to write checks for the bills he'd brought with him, stamp the return envelopes and drop them in the company's out-going mail bin.

Once he'd taken care of that, he opened his file cabinet and fished out his car insurance policy packet. He hadn't had a chance to call and file the claim on his

accident yet, and he wasn't actually sure what had become of his car. Some police officer had probably found his proof of insurance card in the glove compartment and called his provider for him, he hoped, but he knew better than to expect that to actually be the case. His mother had always counseled him to hope for helpfulness from people but expect laziness.

After poring over the information packet, he finally found a customer-service number and dialed it. Right away, an automated answering system asked for his policy number and date of birth. Adrian typed it all in then supplied his ZIP code at the next prompt. He then found himself on hold and subjected to "today's favorite soft rock and contemporary Top 40 hits" between intermittent assurances from a computerized voice that his call was important and that he would be helped in the order in which his call had been received. He swiveled back and forth in his chair through the first several minutes of this, *plunging* his curly phone cord in time with the music like a single-string bass. At the end of the hold queue, he found himself at the beginning of an automated menu system that asked him questions about his claim and instructed him to punch in numbers corresponding most closely to his specific answers.

The fourth optional answer to each question was, "If you need assistance with this question, please press four on your number pad," so Adrian pressed it each time, assuming that doing so would allow him to speak to an actual customer service representative. At the end of the list, however, he found himself right back at the beginning. Only this time, the recorded voice went to great pains to explain the significance of each option as it was given.

Adrian listened through to the end of the extended explanation then started back over. He punched in what seemed like the right numbers, all while tapping his nails on the home row of his keyboard with the other hand. When he was finished, the recording thanked him for his time, assured him that his claim was important, informed him that a customer service representative would be with him shortly and put him back on hold.

About ten minutes later, an unhappy young CSR finally picked up his end of the line and started asking questions before Adrian could even say hello and start explaining his situation. Did Adrian understand that his policy covered only property damage, comprehensive loss and collision? Did Adrian understand that he had asked for towing, medical expenses and rental reimbursement, which his policy did not cover? The CSR had to know these things, and he had to know them now.

Adrian admitted that he hadn't read through the policy information very carefully before making the call and that he could use some help sorting the claim out. The CSR asked why Adrian hadn't just selected option four on the questions he hadn't understood and checked his policy packet when the automated system recommended it. Adrian gritted his teeth. He explained that he'd never had a car accident before and that he wasn't sure of how the whole process worked. He even added that he was pretty sure that the driver of the eighteen-wheeler was at fault.

"Do you think you can be more specific?" the CSR asked with bored venom in his voice.

"The only one in the accident," Adrian said. He didn't like this young man's attitude. "You know, the big one five days ago on Highway 38."

"Where was this, sir?"

"Iron Rapids, Michigan," Adrian said. "Just like it says in my policy. Don't you have it there on your computer screen?"

"I do, sir," the CSR said, "but this office isn't in Iron Rapids. You say this accident happened five days ago?"

Adrian took a deep breath and got a hold of himself. "Yes. Five days ago out on Highway 38, myself and four other vehicles were in a traffic accident. One was an eighteen-wheeler that blew some tires and skidded out in front of us. The four of us hit it, and I'm reasonably certain that he was at fault. Now, I'd like to get my car taken care of so I don't have to take the bus to work every morning."

"I understand that, sir," the CSR said. "I don't suppose you got anyone else's insurance information after the accident, did you?"

"No, it didn't occur to me at the time," Adrian nearly shouted. "I was in a hospital until yesterday evening." Maybe he'd have some coffee this morning after all. "Hasn't anyone else filed claims against my policy in the last five days? I know I swerved into at least one person out there."

"I thought you said you weren't at fault, sir."

"I wasn't. But I did have to swerve into another car. A pickup truck. Nobody in a truck filed a claim against me?"

"If you didn't exchange information, sir, how would the owner of the truck know to call here?"

"I don't know! Look, I just want to get this done and get my car back. Aren't you supposed to be helping me?"

"Calm down, sir," the CSR said with more warning in his tone than sympathy. "Why don't you give me the number from your accident report, and we'll start from there."

"I don't have it," Adrian admitted. He gripped the phone so tightly that he could hear its plastic frame creaking. "I thought you guys would handle that on your end."

"I see. Please hold, sir."

"No, don't you put me on hold, God—"

"It's centrifugal motion; it's perpetual bli-iss. It's that pivotal moment; it's ahhh... subliminal..."

"Damn it!" Adrian slammed the phone down on the country-pop song and seethed. The LED counter on his phone told him he'd been on the line for thirty-eight minutes — which he'd never get back now — so he picked up the receiver and slammed it down again. He added an extra "Damn it!" for emphasis as well.

"Is something wrong, sir?" a voice asked from his doorway.

He jumped and looked up to find a young, clean-shaven kid with a white shirt and black tie looking at him. He hadn't realized that anyone else had come in yet. Also, Adrian had been with the company for a while, but he had never seen this kid before.

"Just phone stuff," he said, gesturing vaguely. "Personal call to my insurance people. Can I help you?"

"Yes, sir," the kid said. "I work here."

"Oh," Adrian said. "It's nice to meet you, then." He turned to face his computer monitor, which had gone to sleep while he was on the phone, but the kid didn't go away. "Can I help you with something?"

"Maybe you don't understand, sir," the kid said. "My name's Jacob Sutton. I work *here*." He pointed at the floor with both index fingers for emphasis.

"No, this is my office," Adrian said. "Who are you? Oh, wait, are you a temp?"

"Yes sir," Sutton said. "A contract worker." He might have been seventeen or a boyish twenty-seven for all Adrian could tell. "I haven't seen you before."

"That's because you're temping for me," Adrian said.

He didn't need this temp underfoot right now. He had work to catch up on. "Well, Jake, I'm Adrian," he said. "I'm afraid it looks like we don't need you any more. If you've been working with Mister Dunkirk for me, I need you catch me up on what you did the last three days. Maybe a status report on how he's been getting along with the representatives with Synthetic Solutions, and any contact you've had with Isaac Gordon. After that, you can probably go home."

"I don't think so, sir," Sutton said. He stopped looking Adrian in the eyes, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "My contract's for ninety days, and I just started this morning. I talked to my placement agent on Friday and interviewed with Mister Mahoney yesterday afternoon."

"What? There's obviously been some mistake then. What position are you here for?"

"New member management and relations," the temp said. "I'm also supposed to be a liaison between this division, the Economic Expansion division and the Community Development division, but Mister Mahoney said he'd walk me through that after Mister Dunkirk's project is finished."

"Hang on," Adrian said, standing up and holding up his hands for quiet. First the bitchy CSR, now this. Not to mention a huge car accident and a four-day spell in the hospital and a fight with Sarah thrown in yesterday for kicks.

This was not the kind of hassle he needed right now. "You're telling me Mahoney gave you this job yesterday afternoon? Didn't he tell you that somebody already has that job? Namely me?"

"All he said was that he was trying to fill a vacancy, sir," Sutton said. He had his hands up now, palms out and fingers wide. "I could go talk to him."

"No, I'll go talk to him," Adrian said. "God damn it. If it ain't one thing..."

He stormed out from behind his desk and out of his office. The temp who shouldn't have been there stepped back out of the door and right into the path Adrian needed to use.

"Sir, I could—"

Adrian held up a hand in front of the temp for silence. "I said I'll talk to him. You stay here 'til I get back, and we'll see what to do with you then."

Sutton stepped aside, and Adrian stomped past him to Jim Mahoney's office. He was too furious to even take in what had happened, much less argue coherently that it was a crock of shit, but he figured something would occur to him. If not, he'd start shouting sub-Mason-Dixon invectives until either something intelligent happened to his brain or someone revealed that this temp's story was some sort of welcome-back practical joke. He didn't even have the capacity to be surprised by how completely his previous energy had become boiling anger.

He came through the wooden door to Mahoney's office without knocking and let it slam back against the wall. The door bounced off the thin wooden paneling toward Adrian, and he reached back to slam it shut as he came inside. The picture frames along that wall rattled, and the one nearest to Adrian crashed to the ground. Adrian ignored it, stomped over to his boss' desk and planted his fists on the corners of Mahoney's desk blotter.

Startled by the sudden explosion of noise and the continuing aftershocks, Jim Mahoney almost dropped the phone he was holding. His round, doughy face was a white

circle of surprise, crowned by a fringe of dust-colored hair. His big, watery blue eyes blinked twice, then his mouth compressed into a tight line.

"Start explaining yourself, Jim," Adrian growled. He'd never called his boss that before. "What's this new kid doing in my office saying you hired him?"

"I'm sorry, I can't talk just now," Mahoney said into the phone. "He just walked into my office." He put the phone down then frowned across his desk in grandfatherly disappointment. "Adrian, I didn't think you were coming in today."

"Obviously," Adrian snapped.

"You've figured out the news, then."

"Obviously," Adrian said again. "What the hell are you doing?"

Mahoney said, "I had to do something to safeguard the Synthetic Solutions project. It's very important to the Chamber and to the city's economic future. You knew that, and yet you haven't been in any sort of contact since Thursday."

"So you gave somebody new my job? What the hell is that about?"

"You disappeared and didn't tell anyone where you were going," Mahoney said. "Evan had to call me at home on a Sunday to find out what was going on. I'd been trusting that you were working from home or just keeping your own counsel, but he said that he hadn't been in contact with you at all. What was I supposed to do?"

"Maybe try to find out where I was," Adrian said through a vitriolic sneer. "I was in the hospital all weekend from a car accident. I even met your friend, Doctor Anderson down there. Maybe I should have gotten him to sign an excuse note for me."

Mahoney's frown deepened with skepticism. "I doubt you were in the hospital all this time, Adrian. You look fine to me. I don't know what you've actually been doing, but the point is that I couldn't wait around to see if you'd just

show up. I had to make a managerial decision for the good of the Chamber. And the city.”

“I was in the hospital! You had to know that. My emergency contact information is only on file on the computers here. I don’t even carry it in my wallet. Somebody had to call Sarah from this buildin’ and tell her where I was, or she wouldn’t have shown up at the hospital yesterday. What the hell’s really goin’ on here, Jim?”

Mahoney bowed his round head and looked up at Adrian over the thick, brown frame of his glasses. “Adrian,” he said softly, “I didn’t want to have to say this. I thought you had just gotten the picture and walked away without any hard feelings.”

“What picture? What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Adrian, we haven’t been happy with the work you were doing here. We really feel you weren’t giving it 100 percent, and that’s not the attitude we need you to have to get your job done. Especially these days, when everyone relies on us to bring new business into the city. The Chamber is the heart that keeps money circulating for everyone.”

“Are you reading that off a card or somethin’?” Adrian shouted, flabbergasted at the non-criticism of his past year and a half of work for the Chamber. “We’ who aren’t satisfied? Evan? He called me a godsend for the work I’ve done for him thus far. I’ve only talked to the SynSol people over email and the phone, but I know they’ve never complained.”

“The decision’s been made, Adrian,” Mahoney dodged. His eyes had taken on a slightly glassy distance like none Adrian had ever seen in the man before. Of course, he had never shouted at the man before either. Maybe that was just the way Mahoney reacted to confrontation. “You just weren’t doing the job I hired you for to the standards we set out. I’m sorry.”

“Name one time I’ve let you or anybody in this whole buildin’ down!” Adrian demanded. This was just too much for one morning. “Name one time I haven’t met any standards!”

Mahoney's eyes broke contact, and Adrian could see the distance there grow. He had to wonder if anybody had ever shouted at Jim Mahoney like this.

"It'd be best if you left now, Adrian," the older man said. He put a hand very near the phone and extended a finger toward the speed dial pad. "This doesn't need to be any more of a scene than it already is. I'm sorry this had to happen, but it did have to happen. It's the way of things."

"You ain't sorry," Adrian snarled. "I bet you don't even really care, do you? I ain't been here two years, and already you found somebody cheaper and younger. Why can't you just tell me that? Is it too much to ask?"

"Let's not let this get uglier, Adrian," Mahoney said. "Just go to your office and clean out your things before—"

"Oh, just keep it!" Adrian shouted, throwing up his hands. "Keep all that shit! You're welcome to choke on it. And if you think Isaac Gordon's not going to hear about this, you've got another one coming. Don't you care that I might have been dead these past four days? No, of course you don't."

Before Mahoney could press whatever speed-dial button he was reaching for, Adrian turned around and left, still gripped by this boiling surge of rage. He swung the door open hard enough to rattle the picture frames again and stormed out, barely able to see. What the hell was going on? How could something go to hell so quickly? It wasn't even noon yet, for crying out loud, and he hadn't even done anything to deserve any of this.

His office was situated between Mahoney's office and the front of the building, and Adrian planned to storm all the way out through the front door. Let everyone see that he was mad. Let Mary Stanford at the reception desk ask him why he was upset so he could explain it for the benefit of everyone in earshot. Not that she or anyone else would actually ask, though, knowing people these days. Nobody gave a shit when one person's life went to hell for no reason. As long as it didn't happen to them, they could just keep their heads down and watch. That made Adrian even angrier.

What made Adrian really lose it, though, was what he found when he passed his office. Not only was his door closed — which it never was, even when he was working — but an open cardboard box sat in front of it with his name written on the outside. He saw his coffee mug, his wall calendar and his desk lamp sticking out of the top, and his temper exploded. With a wordless shout that came from somewhere in his belly and scraped his throat raw on its way out, he drew back and punted the box as hard as he could. The thing flew through the air, flipped over, bounced off the opposite wall and dumped its contents all over the place with a nerve-shredding crash. People stuck their heads around corners and came to see what the noise was all about, and they all ended up staring. They were spectator cows, the lot of them.

“Thanks for the warnin’,” Adrian shouted at them, driving those in his field of view back a step. “Thanks for tellin’ me I was on the outs all this time. If any of you gave a shit...”

He trailed off, still glaring at everyone he could see. No, they didn’t give a shit. Some were even getting back to work now that they’d figured out what the loud noise was. They disgusted Adrian, and he walked past them all without saying anything more. He stepped over the mess he’d made and headed for the door. He slammed it back against its hinges and all but ran out to the sidewalk.

Not many people were out in front of the Chamber of Commerce building so early in the morning, but those who were stayed well out of Adrian’s way as he emerged. His hands shook and curled like ready talons. Air thundered through his lungs and whistled through his gritted teeth. The ground tried to shake beneath his loafers as he stomped down the steps and in the direction of the parking deck. He all but hollered when he suddenly had to stop himself. He had no car; why the hell was he going to the parking deck? He had to get out of here and go somewhere, even if he had to sprint off in a random direction and run until he collapsed. The hurt and betrayal raging inside him urged him to do just that, but what wits remained didn’t let him. Instead, he jammed his hands into his pockets and just walked away.



"There he is," the Second among them said as they emerged from the parking deck into the gray morning light.

The First and Third turned their heads and spotted Cross just coming out of the Chamber of Commerce building. The three of them fell into an easy, synchronized stride and headed for him. However, Cross stopped and changed direction when he reached the sidewalk. Instead of following the road to the nearest bus stop, he crossed the street and took a path that led into the center of the city.

"Where is he going?" the Third murmured as they changed course to follow him. Neither of the other two answered him.

Before the three of them could cross the street themselves, a rumbling delivery truck drove between them and Cross, blocking their immediate path of pursuit. They stopped, and the Third coughed on the cloud of gray-white exhaust. When his eyes cleared and the truck was gone, Cross was no longer ahead of them as far as they could see down the street.

"What happened?" the Second said. He turned to the First. "Did you feel anything?"

"Yes," the First said. "Interference. I can't trace it. I don't know where he went."

"Our colleague will not be pleased," the Third said.

"Indeed," the Second concurred. "Our report to Control did not go well for him last night."

"Nonetheless, he must be informed," the First said. "I'll take care of that. Try to reacquire Cross. Report when you've found him. If he makes contact with anyone, do not approach them. Just keep track of them."

"Understood," the Third said. He glanced both ways across the street then strolled off in the direction in which he had last seen Cross.

"Did you find out who called Cross' family while he was in the hospital?" the Second asked as the Third walked away.

"No," the First said. "She called the hospital herself yesterday, but the transcript of the conversation did not include that information. Her phone records showed a call from an unlisted number on Sunday evening for which no transcript is available, but I have not made any progress investigating it."

"Have you told our colleague yet?" the Second asked, looking in the direction of the parking deck.

"No. I haven't had the opportunity."

"Nor, I assume, has he asked."

"Correct."

"I see."

Two

Adrian wandered through the streets of Iron Rapids headed vaguely toward the center of the city. He walked with his hands at his sides and his head up, practically daring a street hood to leap out of an alley or recessed doorway and try to mug him. Exciting and violent scenarios played in his mind's eye, in which he was accosted by some villainous ne'er-do-well and he defended himself ruthlessly. He imagined himself exploding into a frenzy of violence and venting his bubbling rage on some punk who more than likely deserved it for prior wrongs. In these flights of fancy, he defeated numerous armed attackers with martial arts moves that looked suspiciously like ones he had seen on television and the movies but had never had occasion to try for real. All the while, his imaginary attackers obliged him by holding still while he bobbed, stutter-stepped, kicked and punched. They might as well have been blocks of wood when faced with his lithe, dexterous assaults.

But frankly, who was he kidding? He was a 33-year-old ex-husband with a son to support, not an action hero. If somebody did actually try to mug him, he'd probably just do the smart thing and shell out, no matter how angry he was. That, or he'd stand frozen until he got his head blown off. Thinking of courageous, exciting exploits came fairly easily to Adrian, but acting the same way hardly ever occurred to him in the heat of the moment. The last actual fight he had ever been in had been in high school, and he had both started that fight and lost it. As much as he might despise it about himself, Adrian knew that he talked a much better game than he played.

Even now, devastatingly brilliant arguments that he should have used in Jim Mahoney's office to keep his job sprang full-formed into his mind. His obvious defense would have been to say that Evan Dunkirk needed him for his connections in Iron Rapids' business community. His tireless work in his department had built local business owners' confidence in the Chamber and in the city government ever since he'd started working there. Through Sarah's family, he had met and talked to several members of Iron Rapids' old-money circle, and he kept up cordial relations with many of them even now.

Aside from that, the information he kept track of and provided Evan on the state of the local economy was almost the sole resource Evan presented to prospective members of the Chamber. And if it wasn't for the way Adrian put a positive spin on those numbers, no business owners from out of town would ever even think of taking up residence in Iron Rapids. So many had fled the city in the past decades, that the economy was only one step short of being suicidally depressing anyway. As far as Adrian could see, his work in the Chamber of Commerce was almost directly responsible for what little financial security could be found in the city.

At least he could have made Jim Mahoney believe that if he'd thought to say any of it. And that argument left Isaac Gordon out of the picture entirely. Although he'd tried and failed to do so coherently, Adrian knew that he should have argued longer with Jim about Isaac Gordon. Gordon owned more of the factories and businesses in Iron Rapids than any other individual. It had been his great grandfather who'd discovered the iron mine that had supported the city for so long. Gordon's grandfather had opened the first steel mill in the city, and his father had started the Iron Rapids Manufacturing Company. Today, Isaac Gordon lived just outside the perimeter highway where he sat on the legacy of wealth and prestige that had run in his family for four generations. He had been the president of the Chamber for several years, until he had retired to his estate to manage his money himself. Even still, the heads of the other few old-money families in the city followed his lead, and Adrian had a strong, indelible tie to the man. It had even been Gordon who recommended Adrian for the job in the first place.

What made that connection so important — and what Adrian had been too angry to bring up with Jim Mahoney — was the fact that the Synthetic Solutions Corporation was in a position to buy property and facilities in Iron Rapids, and it wanted to do so right away. The corporation was a high-tech start up out of Ann Arbor that designed and produced cutting-edge prosthetic technology. It had hired young, hotshot designers, developed some fascinating and mind-boggling prototypes and even lined up buyers nationwide. The corporation had won

several government research and development contracts based on the strength of its proposals and prototypes alone. The only thing the corporation lacked was the means to mass produce its technology and distribute the finished products.

For that, Evan Dunkirk in the Chamber's Economic Development division had mobilized the entire staff in the hopes of finding a way to lure the corporation into the city rather than Detroit some other, larger, city elsewhere in the country. On the positive side, real estate was cheap in Iron Rapids and plenty of mills and factories could likely be put up for sale right away. An eager work force waited to spring to hand in the city, and the workers would likely work for less here than one would expect to be the going rate in such cities as Detroit or Grand Rapids.

When Synthetic Solutions' representatives had come to the Chamber to hear what Iron Rapids had to offer, it had become Adrian's job to provide them with information that played up the city's positive qualities and helped them ignore the negative ones. He had then been ordered to help Evan convince the local businessmen to sell their property to the newcomers for the city's overall benefit rather than their direct profit.

By some miracle, the SynSol people had actually expressed great interest in making Iron Rapids their center of production. Adrian attributed that eagerness to inexperience on the young corporation's part or simple desperation. Either Synthetic Solutions needed some place to build its equipment right now, or no one in that company knew that better places could be found than Iron Rapids in which to build it. Regardless, Adrian had known better than to look the gift horse in the mouth.

The first few local businessmen he and Evan had approached had been relative pushovers, but the older and better-established businessmen had proven to be more of a challenge. Many of them had invested a lot of money in Iron Rapids, and they were reluctant to risk what little equity those investments had generated on some company they had never heard of before. After weeks of frustrating work, Adrian had realized and pointed out to Evan that the two of them should be focusing their efforts on Isaac Gordon. If they could convince Gordon to sell his unused or unprofitable property in

the city to Synthetic Solutions and support the company as it established itself, they would have an easier time convincing the other reluctant businessmen in the city to do the same.

The trouble was that Gordon considered it his duty and family heritage to keep dumping money into Iron Rapids in hopes of rejuvenating the community, and he was stubborn about doing it any way other than his own. In the past, he had demonstrated an unwavering willingness to close a failing factory down rather than sell it to any out-of-town corporation in which he had no faith. He had weathered a long storm of bad press ten years ago for refusing to sell property to a Japanese car company merely on principle. That was back when he'd been president of the Chamber, and the bad blood that decision had created had eventually led to his decision to resign.

Still, Gordon was absolutely convinced that he could somehow find a way to save Iron Rapids from financial dissolution. He had poured so much money into the local economy and made so many critical investments in other local businesses that his opinion carried weight far beyond his one bad decision as president of the Chamber of Commerce. Unfortunately, that weight all but assured that any attempt to gain a foothold in the city's business community from the outside was doomed if Isaac Gordon didn't support it.

Adrian understood all this, but he had a special "in" with Gordon that he figured should have made him invaluable to the Chamber. Isaac Gordon was Sarah's father. While Adrian's divorce from Sarah had been unpleasant and just short of a social disaster for the family, Gordon had understood very well the kind of person Sarah was. He took care of his daughter and treated her well, but he'd made it no secret that he did not hold the end of her marriage against Adrian. Plus, Adrian was the father of Isaac's grandson, and that fact endeared him to the old man even more.

As Adrian continued to walk, he wished he'd made more of an effort to lay all that out to Jim Mahoney, rather than blowing up at the man. If he'd been thinking clearly, he could have explained that he was probably the only person in the Chamber of Commerce whose opinion Gordon would have considered important. Gordon would have heard him out and

looked at the facts and figures he'd dug up on Synthetic Solutions. Gordon might even have agreed to talk to the Synthetic Solutions people if Adrian had asked him to. So much of what the Chamber of Commerce wanted to accomplish hinged on Adrian's personal relationship with Isaac Gordon, that the Chamber just couldn't afford to release Adrian now.

But it had, and that left Adrian right back where he'd started. After his tantrum at the office, he'd need a miracle to get his job back. He supposed he could beg, but even considering that option just made him angry again. He shouldn't need to beg, because he shouldn't have been fired in the first place. The Chamber could continue to function without him, but Synthetic Solutions needed him as the go-between with Isaac Gordon. Mahoney had to know that. Mahoney had to know that throwing Adrian away was as good as throwing Synthetic Solutions out the window. Mahoney might as well have started shutting down factories and laying off workers himself.

As Adrian walked, he kept vacillating between anger and simple frustration. He assumed that his erstwhile boss had fired him for some better reason than the man had given him, but Adrian couldn't imagine what that reason might be. No matter what, he just didn't see how letting him go benefited the Chamber in any way. It just didn't make sense. Mahoney hadn't even sounded like himself when he'd done it.

Eventually, Adrian had to force himself to give it up before he drove himself crazy. He wasn't going to be able to piece the logic behind this situation together without more facts, and he wasn't going to find any such facts while he was wandering around out here.

At that, he had to stop and take stock of where he was. He'd only been paying vague attention to his surroundings as he walked, and he certainly hadn't been minding the time. It was well after lunchtime according to his watch and his stomach, and the low pregnant clouds looked ready to burst. Pretty soon, he'd need to shelter from the weather and a place to eat.

Where he'd find either in this part of town was a mystery to him, though. He'd been into the heart of Iron Rapids a few times on business for the Chamber or to attend Founders' Day parades with Sarah, but he was on the wrong side of the

river now. City Hall, the public library, the Gideon building and the Lester Hotel were all on the opposite side of the river from him, and he was in unfamiliar territory. He knew some of the street names, but he didn't recognize any of the landmarks. Dirty husks of buildings stood all around, showing little sign that they had been inhabited for years. Nearby, the empty carcasses of old factories sprawled unused as they had for years now. Some shops remained open here and there, selling shoes or books or hardware supplies, but most of the structures were empty and forbidding. The large stenciled business names that had been painted on the sides of many of the buildings were faded and flaking off, and they all seemed to be telling Adrian to move along and mind his own business. Boards over the windows and steel gates over many of the doors give the buildings a crouched and sullen look.

The people Adrian saw on the sidewalk kept their eyes on their shoes and scurried around absorbed in their own concerns. They didn't look at him or each other. Some glanced up at the sky without slowing down, but their awareness of their surroundings went no further. They were all bus people as far as Adrian could see. They aspired to nothing more than what they already had, and they were more than willing to shuffle to and fro in this dreary neighborhood, surrounded by signs that the town they called home was dying. They were vultures and rats in this elephant graveyard of empty factories and dead steel mills. Working here among the ruins of what had once been a prosperous business community, they were happy just to have jobs. Just being able to feed themselves and pay for some hole-in-the-wall place to live delighted them. As Iron Rapids deteriorated around them, they'd convinced themselves that they were lucky to still be working. If the world outside Highway 38 moved on, these people wouldn't care as long as they could continue to lead lives above the poverty line. Adrian could see it in the way they dressed and the way their shoulders sagged when they moved. It disgusted him to think so many people could settle for such a life.

Of course, he wondered, how different was he from the rest of them? How much better was he really? He'd stayed in this city himself, when he really had no reason to. Even after

losing his last job selling advertising space in the local paper, he'd had every opportunity and every reason to leave. He told himself, and anyone who'd asked, that he stayed for his son's benefit, but that wasn't entirely true. He'd grown comfortable and complacent here in Iron Rapids, and the thought of packing up to start over somewhere else daunted him. The most radical step he'd ever contemplated was to return home to Georgia and live near his mother down there. He wasn't really any better than any of these people at all. He was just as afraid as any of them were to face the unknown or leave the life that he was used to. He was one more rat — one more bus person.

As he stood there disgusted with himself and everyone else in the city, cold rain started to fall. It started suddenly, spattering all around him like polite applause, and it drove the few people around him back indoors for shelter.

"Perfect," he muttered, turning his collar up as if he expected it to help. "Just perfect." He squinted up toward the sky and said, "Why don't you just hit me with a bolt of lightning while you're at it?"

"Well, I'll see what I can do," a gravelly voice said behind him. "You might want to find some higher ground or a tree to stand under first."

Adrian turned around to find the cab driver he'd met last night standing behind him under a red and white golf umbrella. The man wore a black shirt with mother of pearl buttons and black jeans, and he held a cigarette in his free hand. The smoke pooled in his umbrella then drifted out to be torn apart by the rain.

"Small world," the man said.

"Looks like it," Adrian said, stuffing his hands in his pockets and hunching down into his coat. "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough to notice you feeling sorry for yourself," the cab driver said. "And talking to yourself. What are you doing out here?"

"That's pretty much it," Adrian said with a self-deprecating smirk. He had to speak up to be heard over the rain. "Feeling sorry for myself and talking to myself. And getting drenched. You?"

The man stepped forward and covered Adrian with his umbrella. He dropped his cigarette and crushed it out with one of his battered hiking boots. He shrugged and said, "This and that. Not a great day to be out walking. Especially in this part of the city."

Adrian brushed wet hair back out of his eyes. "It's a pretty shitty day all around thus far," he said.

"You want to talk about it?" the man said.

Adrian smiled and shook his head in disbelief. "What are you, my therapist all of a sudden? This is twice now you've offered that. You don't even know me."

"Doesn't matter to me if I do," the cabbie said. "I'm a concerned citizen."

"Probably the only one," Adrian said. "But thanks, no. I don't really feel like baring my soul. I'm just having a pissed-at-the-world moment."

"Been there," the cabbie said. "In a world like this, who can blame you?"

Adrian smiled at that and stood there a little uncomfortably. The rain pattered and splashed above the two of them on the umbrella, and the cabbie looked at him like they two were old friends who'd happened to run into each other on their way to lunch on a dreary afternoon.

"You hungry?" the cabbie said before Adrian could excuse himself and get back to his all-purpose session of self-pity. "I was just on my way to a place around the corner. Isn't too far if you don't mind sharing the space."

Adrian almost turned the man down, but he *was* getting a little hungry. Maybe walking around lost, stewing in his anger and frustration, wasn't particularly good for him right now. Maybe lunch and a conversation would help him get his bearings again so he could figure out what he was going to do to get his life back under control.

"Sure," he said. "What the hell?"

The cabbie smiled, nodded and started walking with the umbrella between the two of them.

"I'll pay, though," Adrian said, falling in step beside him. "I owe you that much for yesterday."

"Suits me," the cabbie said.

Three

The cabbie led Adrian to the corner and down a block to a place called Zahn's Bakery. It was a medium-sized establishment fronted by four large panes of glass, and it was about half full of people having late lunches or just hiding out from the rain. Adrian rushed ahead to get the door, and the cabbie closed and shook dry his umbrella at the front step. He left it leaning there just inside, and the two of them went in.

The dry warmth and the smell of fresh bread inside the shop were so refreshing that Adrian just stopped and let the sensation overwhelm him. The walls shut out most of the sound of the rain, and Adrian thought about all the times in high school when he'd come home late from football practice on bleak afternoons and found his mother already in the process of making dinner. In times like that, he really knew what it meant to be home. He hadn't felt that way in years.

"Let's sit over there," the cabbie said, nodding toward a corner of the bakery that faced the window. "I'll take a cup of coffee and a bagel."

"Sure," Adrian said. He walked over to the counter as the cabbie seated himself at a table well separated from the other patrons. Several minutes and dollars later, he joined the cabbie there with two paper cups of coffee, one bagel and the largest blueberry muffin he'd been able to find. He sat down and divided up the food and drink.

"So what happened to you this morning that had you wandering the street in the rain?" the cabbie said immediately.

"Wait a minute," Adrian said as he peeled back the paper from his muffin and tried to figure out how he was take a reasonable bite without either looking like a five-year-old or getting crumbs all over everything. "Let me start. This is more than a little weird, quite frankly."

"How's that?" the cabbie asked, looking out the window and lighting up a cigarette.

"Well, I just met you yesterday," Adrian said, "and you don't know me from Adam, but you act like you care about what's going on in my life. That's not the sort of thing I'm used to. Especially up here."

"You think I want something from you?" the cabbie asked. He puffed up a cloud of smoke then tried his coffee.

"Well, no," Adrian said. "I guess not. But I'd like to know some things."

"Like what?" As he said it, the cabbie poured some salt into his hand then dropped a pinch of it into his coffee. He brushed the rest off onto the hardwood floor beside his chair.

"Like why you did that to your coffee, first of all," Adrian said with a look of mock horror.

"Navy brew," the cabbie said, as if he thought that explained something. "I like it. Anything else?"

Adrian decided to let that bizarre non-sequitur stand on its own and said, "Yeah. How about your name."

"Aron Jordan."

"Married?"

"Not at present."

"You drive that cab for a living?"

"Yep."

"How long have you lived here?"

"I've been up north about ten years. I only came to Iron Rapids recently."

"Where'd you live before you came here?"

"Here and there. Doing this and that. I like to move around."

"You sound like you're hiding some big secret. What are you, a felon or something?"

"Not to my knowledge," Jordan said with a hard-edged smile.

Adrian paused to think then said, "You have any kids?"

"A daughter. She's grown up now, I imagine. I think she got married recently. We haven't spoken in a while. No more kids that I'm aware of."

Adrian digested all that and let a few moments of quiet pass so he could work on his lunch. He smeared half a foil-wrapped pat of butter on the top of his muffin and dug in. It tasted almost as good as it smelled. Of course, crumbs went everywhere, and he was sure he looked like a five-year-old,

but he didn't mind. He washed the bite down with some coffee and sat back in his chair.

"You ready to talk about you now?" Jordan said around another mouthful of thick blue-white smoke. He smiled as the smoke evaporated, but the smile didn't light up his eyes.

"Well, there's not all that much that's changed since yesterday," Adrian said, staring into his coffee. The warm, homey feeling that had been building inside him withered so that only a veneer of comfort remained. "Except today I lost my job."

"That a fact?" Jordan said. "Welcome back to work. Get lost."

"Something like that," Adrian said, gritting his teeth and shaking his head.

"How'd it happen?"

"I don't know, and I've been trying to figure it out since I left. When I showed up, I thought everything was okay, then this starched-shirt temp shows up tellin' me that my boss gave him my job. Can you believe that?"

"I've seen stranger," Jordan said with a shrug. "What'd your boss have to say for himself?"

"He actually had the gall to get on to me for skipping out of work and disappearing for four days," Adrian said. "Nobody from the office called to find out what happened to me. Nobody from the hospital told anybody where I was. Everybody just assumed I'd run off to Mars or something."

"And you got fired for that?"

"Well, that's what Jim said — that's my boss. I don't know what the hell the man was thinking."

"He an idiot by nature?"

"Well, I didn't used to think he was," Adrian said, "but now, I don't know. He'd almost have to be to have fired me now of all times."

"You an important and valued employee?" Jordan said with a subtly sardonic smile.

"Well, I'm not the head of the company or anything," Adrian said. He ate another bite of muffin and had some more coffee. Jordan took a few quick gulps of his own coffee. "I'm just in a position to really help out a lot of folks in the

city and bring in some pretty big business opportunities. A lot's riding on me, and I thought I was untouchable."

"What's your big position?" Jordan asked.

Adrian explained in brief about his connection to Isaac Gordon and about Isaac Gordon's potential to make or break Synthetic Solution's attempt to get a strong foothold in the city. He aggrandized his involvement in the situation slightly, but Jordan didn't seem particularly impressed. The cabbie just sat taking turns putting his coffee, his bagel and his cigarette in his mouth. He was decidedly uninterested in the social nexus Adrian occupied, but his eyes regained focus when Adrian brought up Synthetic Solutions by name.

"You know," the man said, "I've been seeing that company's logo all around town. Can't pick up the local paper without seeing their name in it somewhere."

"They're the next big thing," Adrian said. "Ten years ago it was supposed to be Daihatsu; today it's SynSol. Thing is, they're not going to be able to make any kind of difference if Gordon doesn't help pave the way for them. Not the way I see it."

"And you could have made the difference there?" Jordan said with a flat and heavy look. "By yourself?"

"Yeah," Adrian said. "Probably. Gordon trusts me. He respects my intelligence and my business sense. I'm pretty sure SynSol is what this town needs to keep from spiraling all the way down the toilet. They might even be able to put us back on the map altogether."

"They could make this place to prosthetic limbs what Battle Creek is to breakfast cereal," Jordan said with a tight-lipped smile. "Or Grand Rapids is with furniture?"

"Sure, I guess," Adrian said. "But if I could have convinced Gordon that SynSol could save this city, he'd have supported their move in. He would have helped out."

"What makes you so sure this company's what Iron Rapids needs?" Jordan asked.

"I've seen their facts and figures," Adrian said. "The last two government contracts they went for, they won hands down. Their prototypes are supposedly amazing. They've got investors coming out of the woodwork. I know they've

got the money to rebuild any factory they buy. I really think they are what we need."

Jordan grunted and finished the last of his bagel. He looked back out the window and took a few long, thoughtful sips of his coffee. He held his coffee cup with the thumb, ring and pinkie finger of his right hand and his cigarette between his middle and index finger.

"You don't agree, I take it," Adrian said. "You've been real nice and all to me — and I don't want to seem rude — but have you looked around this town lately? We need something, that's for sure. This place is going to shrivel up and blow away on its own."

"How good is this company really going to be for the town, you think?" Jordan asked. He glanced around at the few patrons at the other tables then looked Adrian in the eyes.

"Just fine," Adrian said. He couldn't help but squirm when Jordan looked at him like that. He felt like the cabbie was looking at him across the length of a long, steel gun barrel. "The money SynSol is looking to put into the town—"

"This company's investing money in itself, not in the town. Have they offered investment opportunities to anybody in town who's got money?"

"Not that I know of," Adrian stammered. "Evan's been dealing more directly with SynSol's people than I have, though. Maybe they did."

"What about the people in this town?" Jordan said. "Is this what they want? Do they want this company in their city?"

"They should," Adrian said. "I mean, you'd think."

"Is the company offering any of the people here jobs?"

"Yeah," Adrian said. "Helping convert the factories and mills SynSol buys, for starters."

"What about after that? Did the company offer anything beyond that?"

"Evan did catch SynSol's eye by saying that Iron Rapids had a ready and willing labor force," Adrian said. "At least he told me he did."

"That doesn't mean anything," Jordan said. "You ever see anything in writing?"

"Not me personally," Adrian admitted. "But look, I know my job. I've been doing this for a while now. I really don't want to be rude, but what's a cab-driver know about it?"

"You mean, what's an old, red-neck Tennessee cab-driver know about it?" Jordan asked.

"Ah shit," Adrian said, realizing that he'd just insulted a near total stranger who'd been nothing but nice to him. Shame lit red fires in his cheeks. "Look, I didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry. I'm still a little pissed about this morning...."

"It's all right," Jordan said, looking away out the window once again. "Remember what we were saying last night about how people look at southerners? I guess even we do it sometimes."

"I'm really sorry," Adrian mumbled again.

Jordan waved away the apology, and presumably the insult, with the tips of the two fingers that held his cigarette. The smoke made a ribbon of Zs between them that floated up toward the ceiling. Neither man spoke for several minutes, and Adrian finished his muffin in guilty silence. He expected his mother to pop up from behind the counter at any second and scold him for being a rude ingrate. Jordan continued to smoke and sip his coffee while he watched the rain come down outside. The white-haired man didn't look upset, but then he might just be especially good at hiding it.

"They pay pretty well?" Jordan said at last, still looking out the window. "At the Chamber of Commerce, I mean."

"Well enough," Adrian said, caught off guard by the change of topic. "A little better than my last job. A sight better than I would have expected for the same work back home. Then again, the cost of living's higher up here."

"You got anything saved up? Rainy-day money?"

"A little," Adrian said. "Why do you ask?"

"Curious," Jordan said with a shrug. "None of this is my business, of course, but I remember you saying you had a kid to support and an ex-wife to pay off. I was wondering what you're going to do now."

"I hadn't thought about it much just yet," Adrian said, staring at his hand on the table and toying with the edge of his crumb-covered muffin paper. "I was kind of hoping something would just come to me."

Jordan smiled slantwise and said, "Like a bolt of lightning?"

"If nothing else," Adrian said. He smiled, but his eyes remained overcast with defeat.

"You got any connections?" Jordan asked. "Any alternate jobs lined up from before that you could fall back on?"

Adrian shook his head. "Never thought I'd need to have them. I just sort of figured I'd have this job until a better one came along. That's pretty careless, I guess."

"Little bit," Jordan nodded. "It must have occurred to you at some point that you'd quit or get fired, though. What was the first thing that popped into your head then?"

Adrian shrugged. "I don't know. Get a job. Be one of the bus people and suffer until something better came along."

"Bus people?"

Adrian shook his head and tapped his temple with his finger. "Inside joke," he said. "Bus people are those cattle out there who go to work, punch a clock, eat lunch, punch a clock, go home, watch TV, sleep and do it all again the next day. I almost got into that shit when my ex got pregnant, and I dread having to go through that for real." A little ball swelled up in the top of Adrian's throat, and he swallowed it before he really made an ass out of himself. "God damn it."

"I hear you," Jordan said. "That's no kind of life."

"How about cab-driving?" Adrian asked with a lousy attempt at a smile stuck on his mouth. "How's that treat you? Maybe I should take it up, huh? Drive people around, listen to their sob stories, give away free rides to folks with the best ones. Sounds like the kind of life I could get into."

Jordan looked at Adrian with the most tired, sad eyes Adrian had ever seen on a person, and he aged ten years in the space of that one expression. For the first time, Adrian noticed lines and wrinkles in the man's skin that made the color of his hair and his eyebrows look a lot

more natural than they had when Adrian had first seen them. Watching the change reminded Adrian of watching a time-lapse film in high school of a leaf turning from lush green to pale, dry brown.

"Son," Jordan said, "you don't want to get into my kind of life. I do an awful lot more than driving folks back and forth around this city."

"Like what?" Adrian asked. "Kind of stuff it'd help to talk about?" It seemed the least he could offer.

Jordan just smiled and took another deep drag from his cigarette. He crushed the butt of it out in the cheap tin ashtray and blew out one last cloud of smoke. When the pall cleared, the older man's face looked as it had when Adrian had first looked at it.

"Not really," Jordan said. He smiled again, and the smile actually looked genuine. "Ancient cab-driving secrets. Stuff the union doesn't want you to know."

Adrian smiled back and said, "You could tell me, but you'd have to blow my brains out, right?"

"What I told you might do that on its own," Jordan said.

"Sounds like some pretty big cab-driving secrets," Adrian said. He couldn't help laughing at that, despite the funk he'd been wading through today.

Jordan chuckled before he downed the last of his coffee. "You people have no idea."

Adrian laughed again and finished off the rest of his coffee as well. Outside, the rain had slacked off into an intermittent drizzle, whispering that he'd been sitting still for too long. He didn't know what to do next, but he felt ready to get up and try something.

"Look, Aron," he said, "thanks for listening to me. Again. I'm sure you've got plenty better to do, but it means a lot to know that at least one person out there cares about something other than himself."

"It's no trouble, friend," Jordan said. "No trouble at all." He stood up and wiped his hands on a napkin, then stuffed the napkin down into his empty coffee cup. "It's like I said, people

carry around a whole lot they'd be better off letting out once in a while. I just wish there was more I could do sometimes."

"Listening's a big help," Adrian said. Although he'd been reluctant to get into this conversation in the first place, he was glad he'd changed his mind. "I'm not real sure what to do now, but all this turmoil and craziness isn't eating me up inside like I know it would have otherwise. Thanks."

"Any time," Jordan said. "Although maybe there is one thing I can actually do for you. A little piece of advice if you want."

"I guess it couldn't hurt."

"Well, if you're hurting for money or a job or whatnot, why don't you talk to your ex's father? That Isaac Gordon fellow. Maybe he could help you out. He still likes you, right?"

"Well, yeah," Adrian said. "I don't know about asking him for money, though. It was always Sarah who did that during our marriage; I never tried it with him before. I never really asked anybody for money before. Not in a situation like this."

"It may help; it may not," Jordan said. "Never know 'til you try. What's he going to do? Pull a string and take your job away from you?"

"I don't guess so," Adrian said. "I don't have much left to lose at all, really. Do I?"

"Nothing you won't get over," Jordan agreed. "Put it in perspective. Just last week, you could have lost a lot more than your pride when you were in that car accident. Even if it didn't kill you, you wouldn't have had any sort of life worth living. Next to that, losing a little bit of your dignity isn't so much of a thing at all."

"I hadn't really looked at it like that," Adrian said. "That does put a different spin on things. Thanks."

Jordan squeezed Adrian's shoulder once and made his way to the door alone. "Just think about it," he said on his way out. "I'll probably see you around."

"Take care," Adrian said with a wave. "I'll see you."

Jordan nodded one final time, picked up his umbrella and went back out in the rain. He crossed in front of Adrian's

window then passed from view around the edge of the building. Adrian sat alone, thinking about what the man had said and what he himself had been thinking about before the man had shown up. Maybe he should go see Isaac. He had made an appointment for tomorrow already to talk with the old man about Synthetic Solutions, so he might as well do him the courtesy of showing up. He wasn't desperate enough yet to beg Isaac for money — or perhaps the reality of his situation hadn't truly sunk in yet — but he did want to talk to his former father-in-law. Maybe Isaac could offer some perspective on Adrian's current situation.

Plus, every rationalization he came up with as he sat there at the table alone distracted him from the painful fact he had been avoiding since he left the Chamber of Commerce. Namely, that he was about to have to go home, call Sarah and tell her that he'd just lost his job.

Four

After a long jog back along unfamiliar streets in weak rain, Adrian finally made his way back to the IRT bus stop near the Chamber of Commerce and boarded a bus bound for his neighborhood. He was pleasantly surprised to find himself not at all winded by the moderate exercise, despite years of little to no physical exertion. He was even more pleased to find the bus nearly empty when he got on. He paid his change and took a seat near the back.

Adrian's minor-league good mood was not ready to be called up to the majors just yet, though. As the bus got moving, all he could think about was the fact that he was going to go home and get in a fight with Sarah. He didn't like to assume that sort of thing out of hand, but he could hardly ignore eleven years of precedent. Losing his job would likely necessitate that his and Sarah's lawyers renegotiate the terms of his child-support payments at least temporarily, and he knew that Sarah wasn't going to even want to get into that. She would just as soon get her check every month, and she didn't care how Adrian scraped up the money. She'd somehow try to make Adrian feel guilty about losing his job, as if he'd done it to spite her and rob his son of money. She'd cry and beg him to tell her how he could do such a thing to her. She'd demand an apology. She'd threaten him with legal sanctions. She'd say just about any dark and festering thing that popped into her mind. Adrian had seen the phenomenon and been its victim a million times.

Knowing from eleven years of experience how the inevitable argument was going to go should have prepared Adrian to deal with it calmly, but the same eleven years told him that he was fooling himself in even trying to make ready. No matter how calm and balanced he managed to get before stepping into the ring with Sarah, she usually found some way to get to him. She usually found some nick in his armor and bored into it until Adrian either gave in or gave up in disgust. Knowing

that it was going to happen only made the anticipation that much worse, and it made the nicks more obvious when Sarah went looking for them.

Except, of course, for yesterday afternoon at the hospital. Somehow, Adrian thought, he had shut her down completely. He'd actually had her on the run for a few minutes there. What had he said to her? As the bus rolled on, stopping occasionally to pick up one or two strays like himself, he thought about it. She'd let something slip about how long she'd actually known that he was in the hospital. She had withheld that information from his son, and he'd all but forced her to admit it. She'd been falsely accusing him of trying to turn Brandon against her or eclipse her importance in their son's eyes, yet her actions had insinuated that she'd actually been doing just that. Could that be it?

Adrian doubted it. He'd caught her spouting double standards plenty of times, and his pointing them out hadn't shaken her one bit in the past. When she was really angry, she even admitted with a hateful kind of zeal that she lived by a double standard. She'd proved plenty of times that she didn't care whether she was fair as long as she got her way. That couldn't have been what had put her on the defensive. Maybe it had been something as simple as the way he'd spoken to her. When they'd last talked, he'd known without a doubt that he was right, and he'd taken control of the conversation. He'd made an active, conscious effort to shut Sarah down — despite his eleven years of experience at arguing with her — and it had worked. If he could recapture that same confidence and certainty that he was in the right, it was possible that he could actually win an argument with her for once.

But then, that was the big problem, wasn't it? Taking charge and overpowering Sarah's momentum had never been in his nature. Where breaking his ankle and coming to realize that he was never going to be a professional football player had eventually seasoned him with a little perspective about what was actually important, Sarah ap-

proached every obstacle as an epic crisis. Adrian had thought early on in their relationship that that dynamic would provide a balance between them, but it had done no such thing. What had usually ended up happening was that Sarah would state her views with the paranoid conviction that not doing so would rob her of her free will. Adrian would then go along with whatever Sarah said, just to dodge a potential argument.

Unfortunately, that behavior had established a pattern that applied equally to every crisis that came thereafter. Whether or not he agreed, Adrian went along with Sarah rather than put up a fight. As crises followed upon conflicts in their marriage and subsequent divorce, however, Adrian had found himself unable to speak up at all when he disagreed with Sarah. Rather than dig a trench between the two of them through what would have otherwise been constant bickering, he had dug a rut for himself. When he had finally started trying to break free of that rut, Sarah had seen the act as that of one more person trying to take one more thing from her. She'd taken to fighting dirty against him, calling him names or saying hateful things with little or no provocation until Adrian had finally adopted his policy of continual retreat. Now, whenever Sarah tried to stir up a conflict with him, he backed off, backed down or dropped the subject entirely just so he wouldn't have to put up with her.

Yet, although that strategy had worked out well enough to suit him thus far, it was hardly the strategy of a confident, rational man. It was as much an admission of defeat as anything, he knew. It was his way of saying that he didn't want to have to raise his voice or think quickly on his feet or stand up for what he believed as long as he could take the path of least resistance. He'd settle for choosing not to get what he wanted as long as he didn't have to take the chance of exhausting himself emotionally in an argument and maybe still not getting what he wanted. It was a lazy, cowardly way to live his life, and it certainly wasn't at all what Sarah responded

to. Yet somehow, he'd let it become his standard operating procedure. If he intended to be able to handle Sarah henceforth, he'd somehow have to break that pattern of behavior. But how? He'd tried and failed before, more times than he could count.

Before Adrian could build a coherent strategy, though, the bus ground to a halt at the stop nearest his house, and he had to get out. With a nod in the rearview mirror to the driver, he slipped out the door and started the two-block walk back to his apartment.

The short walk didn't help clear his head, nor did the sullen, gloomy look of his apartment complex in drizzling-afternoon light. The drab brick apartment houses squatted in long rows like fat pigeons on a wire. A couple of doors sheltered their apartments' unemployed tenants who lounged either smoking cigarettes or just staring vacantly out at the world. Adrian passed his neighbors without making eye contact, telling himself that he was in a hurry to get inside before the rain started again. Everything about this complex showed signs of bus people, watered-down dreams and quashed ambition. He hurried because he didn't want to be reminded of those signs. He didn't want to think about what those signs said about him for living there among them.

When he got to his row of apartments, he found that he had a visitor. In the space that would normally have been unofficially reserved for his car sat a very expensive-looking motorcycle. It was a sleek, dark purple machine that looked an awful lot more like a wheeled bullet than any sort of street-legal vehicle. The vanity license plate that sat nestled between the seat and the dual black exhaust pipes said "WAKEUP." The bike leaned on a matte black kickstand, and its rider stood next to it, looking up the steps before him with his back to Adrian. The man wore a weather-beaten trench coat that had been inexpertly slit up the back to the belt, presumably so as not to hamper the man as he rode.

The man still had his helmet on as Adrian approached, and he turned when Adrian was within ten feet. The helmet was the same color as the bike, and its black-tinted visor was down over the rider's face. Adrian stopped, staring at his own distended reflection across the visor and smiled with a polite nervousness.

"Adrian," the rider said with a slow nod. The helmet hollowed the voice out and made it unrecognizable. "Glad you came. I was just about to dust off."

"Hi," Adrian said. He looked away at the motorcycle and gestured vaguely in its direction. "Boss hog."

The rider chuckled and bowed his head to take off his helmet. When he did, Adrian saw the same sandy blond hair and spark-blue eyes that he remembered from Founders' Memorial.

"Oh, it's you," Adrian sighed. "What are you doing here, Simonson?"

"Matthew is fine, sir," Simonson said as he hung his helmet on the handlebar of his motorcycle. "And I came to follow up on our conversation of yesterday evening. Do you feel up to talking for a while?"

"Every day, it's a new favorite question," Adrian muttered. "Don't you have ambulances to chase or something?"

"That's lawyers, Adrian," Simonson said. "Reporters chase police cars and fire engines."

"Well, I'll bet you could catch them on this thing," Adrian said, looking at the bike again. He walked over as if to inspect it and kept the machine between himself and the Internet reporter.

"Quite the inverse when circumstances necessitate, I assure you," Simonson said. "But, of course, that isn't why I'm here."

"So what do you want?"

"To talk to you," Simonson said. He un-belted his trench coat and let it hang open. He wore gray slacks, a green shirt and a blue tie. "We were a little rushed yesterday, and I thought now would be a good time to follow up."

Adrian checked his watch and said, "Been waiting here long?"

"Maybe a minute. I think I passed your bus on my way over."

"How'd you know where I live?"

"Nobody thinks about how easy it is to find out things like that," Simonson said with a thin smile that bordered condescension and contempt. "If you have time and the requisite will, you can find any sort of information on the Digital Web."

"Great."

"It happens all the time."

Adrian checked his watch again and said, "Well shouldn't you have gone to my office first? It's not even five yet."

"That wouldn't have worked out very well, would it have, Adrian?" Simonson said. "Considering that you're here."

"Better for me," Adrian said. He walked the long way around Simonson's motorcycle, passed the reporter and stood on the first step leading up to his apartment.

"Touché," Simonson said. "Nonetheless, here I am."

"Lucky me," Adrian said. "Look, I told you yesterday that I can't help you. I didn't meet God while I was unconscious over the weekend or talk to Elvis on Bigfoot's flying saucer. I didn't have any dreams or spiritual experiences for your paper."

"I understand that," Simonson said. "Today, I'm not here to talk about that."

"You said you were following up."

"Following up doesn't mean asking the same questions over again," Simonson said. He put his hand on the stair rail as if he intended to climb up with Adrian to the apartment. "I gave you my card for that."

Adrian remembered finding that card in his pocket when he returned home last night and leaving it facedown on his counter. "Okay," he said, "so what do you want?"

"I want to ask you some questions about your job at the Chamber of Commerce."

Adrian snorted a laugh. "You're a little late to call it that, friend. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, I know," Simonson said. "That's why I wanted to talk to you about it. I understand you were released this morning."

Adrian moved up to the next step with a stiff look on his face. "How did you hear about that? No way you found that on the Internet."

"Not as such," Simonson agreed. "That I found courtesy of the Chamber itself. The amount of—"

"Is it legal to snoop around like that?" Adrian said, as anger and a subtle twinge of fear turned over in his gut. He fought the urge to back up another step. "What kind of reporter are you?"

"Diligent," Simonson said. "Thorough. Deeply curious. All the standard markers of a skilled investigator. Would you care to know when I found the record of your termination?"

"I think you'd better leave," Adrian said.

"Friday," Simonson said.

Adrian stopped, blinked and said, "Say again."

"Friday," Simonson said again. "The day after your accident on Highway 38. None of the electronic paperwork had been officially enacted at that point, but—"

"But it was already on file," Adrian said. "Just waiting for when I got back."

"Correct."

"Son of a bitch," Adrian said. "What the hell's that about?"

"That's what I was hoping you could help me with, Adrian," Simonson said. "I understand that the Chamber is working to lure the Synthetic Solutions Corporation into this city." Simonson produced a pencil and a notepad from a coat pocket and began to write before

Adrian even said anything. "Were you connected to that Chamber initiative?"

"Yeah." Adrian stood stunned. Friday...

"And did you have any contact with representatives from Synthetic Solutions during the course of the project?"

"Not much," Adrian answered. "One of my coworkers did most of the work with the SynSol people, though. I was more about local relations."

"I see. And did that corporation's representatives entrust you with any confidential materials? Sales figures? Employee records? Anything like that? Did you tour any of their design laboratories?"

"No," Adrian said. "Nothing. I just got a press-packet and some stuff from their web site. Stuff you could find anywhere, I figured."

"I'll bet," Simonson said with the same mixture of condescension and contempt he had used before. "But nothing particularly sensitive? Nothing you could have sold or used in insider trading or anything like that?"

"Hell no. I don't even know how to insider-trade."

Simonson grunted and tapped his pencil eraser against the tip of his cleft chin. "Were you aware of any conspiratorial sentiments against you or other Chamber of Commerce employees?"

"Not since they cancelled our Christmas party last year because of what happened over at IRM," Adrian said with a smirk. He'd finally recouped his wits after Simonson's surprise. "Are you for real, Simonson? You're not one of *those* reporters, are you?"

Simonson stopped writing and frowned in frustration. "What kind is that?"

"One of those cheesy, yellow-journalism Internet hacks who fills people's heads with anti-big-business rhetoric just because he can," Adrian said. Tension drained from his shoulders, and he put his hands on the stair rails to either side of him. "You know, like those whining buggers who are always attacking 'big tobacco.'"

"I have more important issues to cover than 'big tobacco,' Adrian," Simonson said.

"What," Adrian said, "like me losing my job because of a secret conspiracy in the Chamber of Commerce? Come on."

"Don't discount it out of hand," Simonson said.

"Of course not," Adrian said. "Maybe Jim Mahoney made me crash my car. Maybe Evan Dunkirk broke up my marriage. And that temp who replaced me today? Why, he's obviously in on it, too. He was after my job the whole time. He wanted to be the one to convince my father-in-law to support SynSol." Adrian shook his head. "I think I liked you better when I thought you were a religious hack."

"Adrian," Simonson said, stuffing his notepad back in his pocket, "there's no cause here to be a prick. I'm just asking you simple questions."

"Well, keep them coming," Adrian said with a light, malicious smile. He knew that he was only taking his anxiety about talking to Sarah out on this guy, but it still felt good. "This is getting kind of fun."

"Fine then," Simonson said, glowering. "Do you have any idea why anyone would want to keep you isolated in the hospital even though you weren't hurt?"

"Well," Adrian replied, "I did use to live near *Roswell*, Georgia. Maybe they thought I saw a spaceship crash when I was negative-ten years old."

"Adrian, really," Simonson said. "Try to think for a minute instead of loosing the first asinine thing that tumbles out of your mouth. No one from your office or the hospital or your insurance provider called your family to tell them where you were. I checked the phone records myself."

"All right," Adrian said, "checking private phone records is just too much for a hack tabloid reporter. You had no right to do that. Even still, though, people weren't calling because of something dumb I did. Not because of—"

"That dumb thing," Simonson said. "was that you filed your son's name as your emergency contact. I know, Adrian."

"How do you know that?" Adrian asked. The good humor was gone from his eyes, leaving only a ring of wariness and mistrust. He put his back foot on the next step upward without even thinking about it.

"I know because eventually I called trying to find him," Simonson said.

"What? What is it with you?"

"Let me walk you through my process," Simonson said. Even though he was standing on a lower step than Adrian and looking up, he acted like he was ten feet tall. "Thursday evening, I heard on the radio about this auto accident in which several people should have been killed, but which actually did no one any serious harm. I found that... interesting... so I snooped through your hospital's records and checked the reports of the police officers on-scene. There, I found that one person had survived without a scratch, despite all the odds in the world stacked against you. You'd then been taken to the hospital for 'observation.' However, even hours later, you hadn't even been checked in at the hospital. Yet, you were still being hidden there."

"What? Are you kidding me?"

Simonson ignored the interruption. "I ran your plates and your car's VIN from the police report to find out who you were. After I did, I found out where you worked, which confirmed a hunch I'd had all along."

"How did you find out where I worked?"

"You have direct-deposit through your bank. It wasn't too difficult. Just risky. Regardless, I also found an order from your employer to terminate your direct-deposit payments, which I took to mean that you'd been fired. It seems I was right."

"But how did you find my emergency contact information? If you did most of this on Friday, how did you get my family's phone records?"

"I just made the connection," Simonson said. "You wouldn't understand how. Regardless, once I had done so,

I discovered that no attempt had been made to contact your family members in all the time you'd been in the hospital. All in all, Adrian, doesn't that strike you as the least bit suspicious?"

"A little," Adrian said. "But maybe it was just an oversight or bad luck. Frankly, I'm more suspicious of you right now."

Simonson pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed theatrically.

"Plus," Adrian said, "this is all just your word anyway. And you're talking about hacking into protected computers in the Chamber, the hospital, my bank and even the phone company, if you're telling the truth."

"Yes, I was hacking," Simonson said, putting his hand to the side of his head as if he had a frustration headache. "But I did so because it seemed that you were being held and hidden."

"And you called my family?" Adrian continued. "That sounds more like stalking than reporting. Have you been spying on any of the other people in the accident?"

"I was sure that I didn't need to," Simonson replied. "Not once I found out who you worked for. Like I said, it confirmed a hunch I'd had about the Chamber and Synthetic Solutions already."

"I don't care about your hunches. You can't be spying on people and going through their personal records."

"What would you rather I have done, Adrian?" Simonson asked. "Not called? Left you in the hospital for God knows how long? Is that what your son would have wanted me to do?"

Adrian's eyes blazed, but they cooled just as quickly. As infuriating as it was to hear it, he couldn't exactly fault Simonson's reasoning on that last part. Instead, he had to settle for a half-hearted snide remark.

"You couldn't at least have said you were from the hospital or my office or something?" he said lamely. "My ex thought you were a prank caller."

Simonson smiled without humor and said, "I know, and I apologize for that. However, I am a terrible liar. People see right through me when I forego the truth rather than merely equivocating, as I was. But as clumsy as my attempts were, at least I was trying to do something to help you. How long would you have been in that hospital without your family knowing about it, if not for me?"

"Well..." Adrian said. His expression and a long, awkward pause said "world's-biggest-asshole," which was, no doubt, obvious to Simonson. "Apology accepted then, I guess," he said at last.

"The same," Simonson muttered.

"All right," Adrian said, looking first down at his shoes then back up at Simonson's eyes. "Look. Total strangers have just been doing me weird favors lately. I ain't used to it is all. And what you just said is really weird, even for two days of weird favors already. Especially since I don't know what your real game is here."

"It's like this," Simonson said. "An associate of mine on the Internet has put a bug in my ear about Synthetic Solutions' interest in Iron Rapids. I think that that interest is evident or symptomatic of something untoward happening under the table."

"That's your conspiracy you were talking about before? The one to get me fired for no reason?"

"Potentially. Agents of that same conspiracy may be responsible for your traffic accident, as well, but I can't prove that."

"That was just a coincidence," Adrian said. "You show me a conspiracy that can arrange a traffic accident during rush-hour on 38, and I'll prove to you that Elvis is still alive."

"Just because I can't prove what I'm saying doesn't mean that it isn't true, Adrian," Simonson said, frowning in frustration again. "There is a conspiracy at work here. You've already been its victim."

"So who's behind it then, Skilled Investigator?"

"I have a pretty good idea about that, but I don't think you could appreciate the scope of it. I know, however, that you're involved, and that your involvement is at the root of your current... difficulties. You asked me what my real game here is, and it's this: I'm trying to find out what role you play in what's happening here, and whether I can help you. That's all."

"Well, I appreciate it," Adrian said, backing up another step and turning halfway around to face his apartment up the stairs. "But unless you know of a good job that's hiring as of this morning, I don't know really how you can help me. Frankly, I don't even know if I can help you. If there is some conspiracy at the Chamber that has to do with SynSol — if — it doesn't affect me anymore. I'm out of it. I got canned. Sorry."

When Simonson didn't answer right away, Adrian climbed the rest of the way up his steps. It took until he got his keys out of his pocket and unlocked his door for Simonson to say anything at all.

"Adrian," the reporter called from below.

Adrian turned around with the door into his dark and Spartan efficiency open behind him. Simonson stood beside his motorcycle.

"Isaac Gordon is your father-in-law, isn't he?" Simonson said, tying his trench coat closed with its waist belt.

"Yes," Adrian said. "Ex, I guess, if you lose your in-laws after a divorce. Why?"

Simonson shrugged. "Isaac Gordon is important in all this, too, and I think he's your connection to the situation."

"That's the current thinking at the Chamber," Adrian said. He shrugged. "Tell me something I don't know."

"I wish I knew more to tell you," Simonson said. "I was hoping that talking to you would help me piece it all together."

"Sorry that didn't work out for you," Adrian said. "So I guess we're done here."

"For the time being, I suppose," Simonson said. His shoulders sagged, and he turned away. "You know how to reach me if you need to."

Adrian glanced over his shoulder at his counter. "Yep."
"Good."

The man then put his helmet back on and got on his motorcycle. As Simonson raised the stand and kick-started his machine, Adrian turned around to go inside. True to its appearance, the bike growled loudly and angrily the instant its engine turned over. Adrian closed and locked the door behind him and listened to the motorcycle disappearing out of the complex and down the street. When the sound was finally too small for him to pick up, he heaved a deep, tense breath and looked at his desk. Next to Simonson's business card hung the phone, and Sarah waited on the other end of the line. He was not in top form to argue with her right now.

But, what had to be done had to be done. He picked up the phone and started to dial.

Five

"Hello?" Sarah said after the third ring.

Adrian took a deep breath but hesitated. He had no idea how to even begin.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Sarah. It's Adrian."

"Oh," Sarah said. "Hi. How are you feeling?"

"Good," Adrian said. "I'm fine. The doctor said everything was good as new."

"Doctor?"

"At the hospital," Adrian said. Surely Sarah hadn't forgotten so quickly.

"Right, right," Sarah said. "Your car accident. Sorry, I was thinking about something else."

Adrian's hackles rose, but he forced them back down. Sarah sounded distracted. That's all, just distracted.

"So you're okay?" she continued. "How's your ankle?"

Adrian closed his eyes and swallowed hard. In the early days of their marriage, Sarah used to ask him that every time it rained because she knew that the change in air pressure sometimes made it hurt. Sometimes she even offered to massage his feet or bring him ice packs or heating pads or whatever he needed. After Brandon was born, she had given up on any such charity. She hadn't even asked in years. She hadn't even asked yesterday at the hospital.

"It's fine," he said. "Better than ever."

"Good. I'm glad."

Silence hung on the line for a long minute. Adrian never quite knew how to react when Sarah didn't start finding fault or arguing right away. Of course, she hadn't heard his news yet.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Sarah said as Adrian was opening his mouth to speak. "When we came to visit, I was pretty mean to you. You didn't deserve it."

"I... that's okay, Sarah," Adrian said automatically. He sat quietly on his couch, afraid to say anything more. He didn't want to break whatever spell had come over his ex-wife to catch him off guard thus.

"I was just worried," she said, not seeming to listen to what Adrian said. "I was worried about Brandon. I don't know what it would do to him if something happened to you. I still don't quite know what it would do to me if something happened to you."

"Thankfully, nothing did," Adrian said, lacking anything better.

"But you know how I get when I worry," Sarah went on. "I panic, and I say the first thing that comes to my mind. No matter how crazy it is. I don't usually mean it, Adrian. You have to know that."

"I know, Sarah," Adrian said. He and Sarah had had conversations like this before. She wasn't saying anything he hadn't heard dozens of times, and he wasn't responding any differently. Still, it was nice to not have to argue for once. "It's okay."

"Is it really okay?" Sarah asked with over-inflated sincerity. Adrian thought the next question along with Sarah as she asked it. "You don't think I'm just some crazy bitch who's trying to ruin your life?"

"It's okay," Adrian said. It was his favorite non-answer. Sarah had called him on it a couple of times before — assuming that he meant, *Yes, but it's okay* — but she didn't do so now. She chose to interpret it the way that made her feel better.

"Good," she said. "I don't want you to think that. I just get worried when I think I'm going to lose something important to me. I panic."

A dim ember stirred in Adrian's heart, but it only guttered and turned to ash when he realized that she was talking about losing her son's love and respect, rather than losing him. She was probably also referring more to the money he sent her every two weeks than to him specifically, now that he thought about it. It seemed he wasn't the only one who could wield an ambiguous, all-purpose sentence.

"It's okay," he said again. "Looks like you didn't lose anything."

"Yeah," Sarah replied. She followed it up with a dramatic sigh and let silence roll over the line once again.

Adrian waited another minute, or maybe two, then said, "So how are you?"

"Not good," Sarah said. "Have you got a few minutes?"

"Sure," Adrian said without thinking.

"Good," Sarah said. "Thanks. Sometimes I just miss talking to you."

"We talk," Adrian said, thinking about what that usually entailed.

"Not like we used to," Sarah said. "You were always so good about listening to me when I needed to talk."

When Sarah said that, Adrian began to realize just what he might have stepped in. Sarah's momentum was building, however, and he couldn't think of a polite way to back out without turning the conversation into a fight instantly. Instead, he merely grunted a noncommittal response.

Another long pause stretched out, until Sarah said, "He had an affair, Adrian."

"What? Who did?"

"Peter," Sarah said. "Who else? He had an affair, and he just finally got around to telling me about it."

"What?" Adrian said. "What happened? Why don't you try telling me from the beginning."

"After Brandon and I got home last night," Sarah said, "Peter and I had a talk. He didn't like me going to see you without telling him. He thought I might still be having feelings about you."

"That doesn't make any sense," Adrian said. He would have gladly disabused Peter of that notion *tout suite*.

"That's what I told him," Sarah said, "but he wouldn't listen. He kept getting angry and accusing me of having an affair. Even though he knows I just don't do that sort of thing, he kept asking me all these questions about where I'd been while he was out of town and everything. I don't do that, though."

Adrian held on to his kernel of skepticism on that front. Sarah definitely had it in her to do that sort of thing. She had started seeing him behind her then-boyfriend's back in college.

"So what did you say?" Adrian prodded her. While he was trying to be sympathetic, he couldn't help but feel more than a little vindicated. Sarah had accused him of sleeping

around on more than one occasion. It was somewhat gratifying to see her on the receiving end for once.

"Well, I started crying," Sarah said, "but then I got mad. You know how I do when somebody makes me sad. I get angry at them and try to push them off so they'll stop it."

"I'm familiar with that trick."

"I started yelling at him, trying to find out why he was asking me all these questions. I was afraid he was going to leave me even though I didn't do anything. I panicked. I said maybe the reason he was being so crazy was because he was projecting. I accused him of having an affair and turned everything around on him."

"I've seen that one, too," Adrian said. "What happened?"

"He admitted it," Sarah said. She sounded close to tears or yelling... Adrian couldn't tell which. "I pinned him down on one business trip he took with an old secretary, and he admitted it. He told me he slept with her!"

"Damn," Adrian said softly. "That must have come as a surprise. When did it happen?"

"Right before he started moving his stuff in here," Sarah said. "About a month before. He said he did it because he was testing himself, Adrian. He said he wanted to do it to see if he still loved me afterwards. He said he did still love me after he slept with her, so he felt 'safe' moving in with me."

Adrian had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing at that. He couldn't keep the smile out of his voice entirely when he said, "That's about the worst thing I've ever heard, Sarah."

"That's what I said to him, too," Sarah said. "You should have seen me. I was so mad. I turned over my nightstand and pounded on my bathroom mirror until it cracked. I even cut my hand a little bit. I think he was talking during that, but I couldn't hear him. All I could see was red."

Adrian doubted that last bit. He'd seen Sarah throw her temper tantrums before, and they usually ended in a mess of small furniture and some cosmetic injury to one of her hands or her forearms. They were frightening to watch the first few times, but as their marriage had gone on, enduring her fits had become more a matter of steering her away from any-

thing that was expensive. But as he thought about what she was saying, a particularly disturbing thought occurred to him.

"Hey, where was Brandon while this was going on?"

"What?" Sarah said, caught off stride. "He was getting ready for bed on the other side of the house. He didn't hear any of it."

Adrian doubted that as well, but he kept his counsel. The two of them had said and done far worse in Brandon's hearing.

"So what now?" he said. "Did you kick Peter out?"

"No, no," Sarah said. "I couldn't do that. I just couldn't. He's been like a father to Brandon. In everything else, he's been as good as a husband. And it did happen a long time ago...."

As he listened to those things, Adrian wondered what planet this replacement Sarah had come from. If he'd been the one who'd made such an admission to Sarah, her statute of guilt limitations would never expire. She would throw it in his face every time they argued. She certainly wouldn't be ready to make excuses for his behavior less than 24 hours after the admission.

"Still," he said, "that's a pretty rotten thing to do. Especially for such a bullshit reason."

"I know, I know," Sarah said. "It's nothing you would ever have done. You always knew better, even before we got married."

Adrian felt like he'd just been patted on the head like a well-trained dog. What made Sarah's dubious praise all the more irritating was remembering the fact that she'd argued so vehemently to the contrary so many times.

"So what are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Sarah said. "We're not sure. We're going to talk about it this weekend while you've got Brandon. Peter's cousin has a cabin in the woods outside the city. We're going to go out there for the weekend just to talk about everything and see if we can't work this out. I think maybe we can."

"Good," Adrian said, although he couldn't help but feel gyped. "Good luck with that."

"I think maybe this is going to be all right," Sarah said. "Maybe."

"Here's hoping." Adrian didn't actually want Peter and Sarah's relationship to fall apart over the weekend — Lord knows Peter was welcome to her — but a small, petulant part of his mind chafed at the thought that they would work this problem out so quickly and easily. Sarah had never shown such a willingness to forgive him for even the insignificant things he'd done to tick her off. Why did she have to be turning over a new leaf now? Where was this sentiment five years ago?

"Yeah," Sarah said. "We'll have to see. He's still got a lot to answer for. And I'm going to make damn sure he hasn't done anything like that since then before I even start trying to forgive him." That sounded more like her. "He's not getting off easy."

"Easier than he should," Adrian said, letting the context obfuscate his subtext.

"Maybe." Sarah paused for a second then shifted subjects. "What I need from you, though, is a little help. Peter and I wanted to leave Friday morning to make the long drive out, so I wonder if you can't come pick Brandon up after school Thursday."

"Thursday," Adrian said, trying to cover his hesitation. Well, he'd been stalling long enough. "What time does his school let out?"

"His after-school program ends at 3:30," Sarah said. "You'll have to take off work a little early, and you'll have to do the same Friday to pick him up from school again. I know you've been busy lately with that prosthetics company coming in, but if you just tell them you already have plans to take off early, they should let you go. You don't have a late meeting either of those days, do you?"

"No, it's not that," Adrian said. After how pleasantly the conversation had been going thus far, a thousand complacent voices warned him to hold off bringing this subject up. Just say everything's fine and agree with her, they urged. He hesitated, considering that very thing.

"So what is it, then?" Sarah said. "Is there something wrong? Now that I think about it, you called me. You did because you had some problem, didn't you?"

Sarah's voice was devoid of sympathy, and Adrian could feel tension crawling up the back of his neck like a spider.

"No, not really," Adrian said. "I can be at Brandon's school at—"

"Is it no, or is it not really?" Sarah said, cutting through his too-late concession. "Which one?"

"It's not really," Adrian said. "We can talk about it some other time, though."

"What is it?" Sarah insisted. She sounded melodramatically nervous and upset, as if she were forcing the emotions into her voice. Adrian could never tell how authentic that tone was in these situations. "Are you trying to hide something? I hate it when people keep secrets from me."

"No, it's all right," Adrian said, wishing he'd just wished Sarah luck and agreed to pick Brandon up after school. "We can talk about it when I bring Brandon back Sunday evening."

"No," Sarah said, "that won't do. I can't have this lingering all weekend while I'm supposed to be devoting my time to Peter. Don't be selfish, Adrian. Just tell me."

Adrian didn't see exactly how what he was doing was particularly selfish, but he gave in anyway. After all, this is why he'd called her in the first place.

"All right, Sarah," he said. He lay back on his couch and closed his eyes. "I lost my job this morning. Mahoney fired me."

"What?" Sarah said. She sounded angrier now than when she'd been talking about Peter.

"I got fired."

"For Christ's sake, Adrian. What did you do to get yourself fired?"

"I didn't do anything," Adrian said. "I just found a replacement waiting when I got there. Apparently the firing had been coming for a few days and I didn't even know it."

"You had to have done something, Adrian," Sarah said. "People don't just get fired for nothing. Did you screw something up?"

"No. Look, Sarah, I'm telling you, I got fired for no reason. No reason I was told about, anyway. It just happened."

"Well why didn't you tell me that?" Sarah said. "That should have been the first thing out of your mouth when I picked up this phone."

"I don't think I had that chance," Adrian said, skirting around words that were more directly confrontational. "You started talking about Peter right away, and I didn't want to interrupt."

"That's just an excuse," Sarah said. "You were scared to admit it."

"Okay, I didn't want it to turn into an argument," Adrian said, barely remaining civil, "but you also sounded like you needed to talk."

"I wouldn't have said anything if I knew what you were hiding," Sarah snapped back. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well you've got no job, so you can't come pick up Brandon. That means I have to take care of him, so Peter and I can't go away this weekend. You're screwing everything up. Is that what you're trying to do? Are you trying to ruin this between me and Peter because you and I have been fighting?"

"No," Adrian growled. "I'm not trying to screw anything up. I'm—"

"You're doing a fine job."

"I said, I'm just trying to let you know that—"

"That you can't hold down a job," Sarah cut in again. "You said when you lost your last job that this position at the Chamber of Commerce was perfect for you, and you were perfect for it. I even begged my father to recommend you."

Adrian remembered that scene very well. He had had to endure a long lunch with Sarah as she hammered away at her father, talking about how badly Adrian needed money and how the position at the Chamber of Commerce was his last chance to get a good job in the city. If he didn't get it, he'd have to move back home away from his son and would have to give up his visitation rights. Sarah had done her best to debase and demean Adrian in front of her father — as well as the patrons of the restaurant where the three of

them had gathered to discuss the situation — and even Adrian had begun to believe her apocalyptic forecast of what his not getting the job would mean. At the end of her long argument, Isaac had said that he always intended to recommend Adrian for the position, and that all Adrian had had to do was ask. Adrian had wanted nothing more than to bury his head in hot tar after that hellish luncheon. Now, here Sarah was acting like she'd done him a favor.

"And now here you've gone and lost it," she kept on. "What the hell are you supposed to do now? How are you supposed to keep paying me my child-support payments? Tell me that, if you don't have a job anymore."

"You know as well as I do that I shouldn't even be payin' child support," Adrian said, just below the level of a shout. "The only reason I am is because you and Peter won't just get married already."

"Don't you turn this around on me," Sarah snapped. "And don't start yelling at me either. I'm not the one who took away your job."

"That wasn't my fault either," Adrian said. Where was the high ground here? Why couldn't he steer this argument the way he wanted to?

"Right," Sarah said. "You just magically lost your job for no reason. I remember."

Vitriolic, semi-incoherent curses swelled up in Adrian's throat, but he swallowed them down. They couldn't do him any good. He just sat there and seethed, wishing he'd kept his big mouth shut.

"Now no more excuses," Sarah said. "I want to know what you intend to do to fix this."

"I'll find another job," Adrian snapped.

"Not good enough. You've got a payment due this weekend. What are you going to do to put that money in my hand?"

"Don't talk to me like that," Adrian said. "I'm not a damn child."

"Watch your mouth," Sarah said. "Even teenage kids can hold down jobs, Adrian. You're thirty-five years old."

"Thirty-three."

"Whatever. That's still plenty old enough. You've got a son to think of and bills to pay. I need to know how you plan to take care of those responsibilities."

"I'll get work."

"Not good enough. How? What have you got lined up right now? Do you have a résumé?"

"I've got one," Adrian said. "And a suit. I can start calling places tomorrow. I'm not worried about it."

"You should be," Sarah said. "Your visitation rights could be at stake here, Adrian. I'm not sending my son to some shelter or a cardboard box every other weekend."

Only a supreme effort of will kept Adrian from slamming the phone down. He'd known all this was coming. The patronizing tone, the ridiculous worst-case scenarios, the blame, the disbelief. He'd brought it all on himself. He'd seen this coming from the beginning.

"Look," he said through clenched teeth. "It's not goin' to be like that. I was supposed to go talk to your father tomorrow morning about Synthetic Solutions anyway. I'll just keep the appointment and change the subject about why I'm there. He can probably help me find something. If not, I might try talking to the SynSol people themselves." The idea sprang to mind as he uttered it, as if he were making the revelation to Sarah and himself simultaneously. The idea excited him and helped him back down from his anger at Sarah. "I could offer up as a consultant to help them get set up here in the city. Hell, consultants make a pile of money. And I've got the connections through your father that they'd want. If your dad can't help me, I'll go to them right after."

"Well, you'd better hope something good comes out of it," Sarah said. She still sounded just as angry, but the surety in Adrian's voice took a little bit of the wind out of her sails.

"It will," Adrian said with more confidence than he felt. "I'm sure it will. And I can handle picking Brandon up Thursday, too. That won't be any kind of a problem."

"It better not be," Sarah said. "I really need this right now. Peter and I do. We haven't had much time alone lately."

Just every other weekend, Adrian thought.

"What are you going to do about your next payment?"

"I've got enough money to cover it right now," Adrian said. An unexpected, wheedling tone that he didn't appreciate came into his voice. "I should be set up through your father or SynSol before the next one comes due. It's all under control, I promise."

"Good," Sarah said. "I hope you're right."

Me too, Adrian thought.

"Now, Brandon's school lets him out at 3:30," Sarah said. She sounded very calm and in control of herself. Hearing her tone of voice now, Adrian could hardly remember how upset and vulnerable it had seemed at the beginning of their conversation. "You need to be there by then to pick him up. Can you make that?"

"Yeah, I can make it."

"Do you have your car back? How are you going to get there?"

"I've been taking cabs lately," he said. "And busses. I'll do one or the other."

"Make it a cab," Sarah said. "I don't want my son on the bus with those people who usually ride it."

Adrian didn't particularly want that, but he didn't like being ordered around. Especially when he was being ordered to do what he was probably going to do anyway.

"All right," he said.

"Good. 3:30 on Thursday. Don't be late."

"I won't."

"And Adrian, I want you to know we're not through talking about this job situation. We're going to have to sit down with my lawyer once Peter and I get back. We'll have to see about things."

"Whatever, Sarah," Adrian sighed. "If that's what you want."

"It is," Sarah said. "And don't tell me 'whatever.' This is the way it's going to be."

"All right. I'll be by his school at 3:30 on Thursday. You'll have your check next week."

"Good."

"And hey, Sarah," Adrian added, "good luck this weekend."

"What?"

"Working things out with Peter. I hope it does work out."

"You're just saying that, Adrian," Sarah said with conviction. "We'll talk next week. Good-bye."

She hung up then, and Adrian just lay on his back with his phone in hand.

"All right, granted," he murmured to himself. "I still didn't have to say it, you bitch."

Disgusted — partially with Sarah, but mostly with himself — he hung the phone up and lay still with his hands over the arm of the couch. Even though it was still several hours until full dark, he closed his eyes and tried to will himself to sleep. The sooner this day was over, in his opinion, the better.

Six

Matthew Simonson returned to his room at the Lester Hotel about an hour later. He slammed his door, threw his coat onto his bed and kicked his shoes across the room. For all intents and purposes, Cross was a dead end. If the man were at least hiding something, Simonson thought, he would be tolerable. As it was, however, Cross didn't seem to know about anything more than the surface of what was going on around him, and Simonson had been subjecting himself to the man's ignorant smugness with no appreciable gain. Tomorrow, he decided, he would take a trip to visit Isaac Gordon on the outskirts of town. Even if Gordon was no more aware of what the founders of Synthetic Solutions were up to than Cross was, the man was at least old enough to know how to be genteel and polite with guests.

That left him with the rest of the night to himself, and he did not want to spend it on the bed watching the television like a sponge. The television did offer all the premium cable stations, as well as all of their clones, and it boasted an impressive array of pay-per-view movies, but Simonson wasn't interested. He had more important things to do with his time than sit glued to the idiot box watching its pretty blinking lights dance for his amusement. Instead, he sat down at his table and opened up his laptop computer.

"You've got mail!" his reflection teased him silently from behind its own reverse-angle laptop in its own reverse-angle hotel room across the looking glass.

Simonson raised an eyebrow in disdain and got to work. He turned the computer on and activated his secure connection to the Digital Web. Right away, his instant messenger queue filled with the greetings of his friends and compatriots who happened to be working or playing on the Web at that moment. He answered them, turned down several offers to immerse himself virtually and told everyone that he was busy. Most of them went on about their business, and Simonson filtered out those who didn't know how to leave well enough alone.

In relative peace, he connected to the *Wake-Up Call* and gave it a once-over. Its security hadn't been breached.

Its hit count for the week was up by a little. A few new advertisers were after him this month to add banners on the mundane Internet version of the site. Nothing new there. Nothing special. Simonson opened his mailbox paged through it without much hope of finding anything. Nothing from Cross. Nothing from his absentee mentor. The only interesting letter in the mailbox was a short post from his local informant, who called himself only Sugardaddy. The post was only a few minutes old, and it was a request for Simonson to join him via a Sleeper-tech instant messenger as soon as he could. Simonson looked up at his reflection.

"At last," his reflection said.

"Damn right," Simonson replied. He hadn't heard from Sugardaddy in almost a week, and he had grown more worried than annoyed.

"He might as well offer to talk with tin cans and string, though," his reflection said. That part of him had never had much patience for people whose by-wire communication didn't involve the Digital Web in some fashion.

"In this case, I'd prefer it," Simonson replied. "At least that way I could find him."

This informant had been the one who drew Simonson's attention to Synthetic Solutions' designs on Iron Rapids several weeks ago. Sugardaddy was apparently a new reader of the *Wake-Up Call*, and some of the stories there about corporate and government abuses of the public trust on the site's "Human Interest" page had struck a chord with him. Early last month, he'd contacted Simonson about the hidden forces that he felt were at work in his city and suggested that Synthetic Solutions might be an interesting topic of study for a feature on the *Call*.

Normally, Simonson would have ignored such a request. Through his site, he was deluged by improperly formatted, grammatically atrocious, sub-literate emails from Sleepers in which no two adjacent words were both spelled correctly. Each of these works of modern art asked him to validate whatever crackpot theory the mouth-breathing simian emailer could dream up. People seemed to believe that he would just hop on a plane and show up bright and early the next morning to

investigate any and every ridiculous claim they could make. Three-quarters of his email was that sort of drivel. Three-quarters of the remainder of his email came from trolls who wanted to pick fights over his "Human Interest" page stories or tell him he was going to Hell for daring to give credence to stories of the supernatural when he ran them on his "Oddities" page. (He occasionally posted letters of that nature on his "Reader Response" page followed by a scathing, sardonic reply that could conceivably be misinterpreted as a polite answer and a thanks for the original sender's interest, but he usually just deleted them in disgust.) The leftover minority of email he received was intelligent, insightful, concerned and well thought out. Some of it even came from Sleepers who'd managed to make it onto the Digital Web from the Internet, but not often. About five percent of the time, Simonson had found, the letters came from people who had recently Awakened or who had a great potential to do so.

Despite the fact that Simonson didn't know him from Adam, Sugardaddy's email had fallen easily into that leftover minority category. It had come to him with a ready-made and written story about the city of Iron Rapids, Michigan and the Synthetic Solutions Corporation attached. While it was not quite alarmist enough for Simonson's tastes and it had gone to more trouble to hint at the writer's point than actually state it outright, Simonson had found it well-written and interesting enough to merit further investigation. He didn't accept submissions to his site, but he was not averse to layering his style over well-written submitted material if it was already worthy of publication.

What he'd found even more interesting was the introductory letter that had accompanied the story. Sugardaddy had described himself as an Iron Rapids native who had been reading stories in the local paper about representatives from Synthetic Solutions being interested in his city. Out of curiosity, he had even gone to a press conference on the steps of City Hall that had been scheduled by representatives of the corporation and the Chamber of Commerce. The thing had been little more than a public relations gimmick, but Sugardaddy had become aware of something far more sinister at work when he arrived.

As the SynSol spokesperson droned on behind the podium at the top of the City Hall steps, Sugardaddy claimed, he had seen an inexplicable vision of that person covered head to toe in thin metallic webs. At the same time, the SynSol logo that had been pasted on the front of the podium no longer showed the corporation's slogan across the bottom. Instead, it read, "You will all be slaves." As he stared in shock at the vision, Sugardaddy had explained, the webs covering the spokesperson's body grew thicker and began to expand from the tips of his fingers down onto the podium he was leaning on. Sugardaddy had looked around to see if anyone else was as freaked out by what was happening as he was, but no one else in the small lunchtime crowd had seemed to notice. When he looked back, nothing of what he had seen remained. The spokesman was nothing more than a normal, boring stuffed-shirt. The corporate slogan was the old, vague promise it had been before. No webs, no prophetic warnings.

Even still, Sugardaddy had fled the site and returned home. He'd dug up what he could about the young corporation on the mundane Internet — which wasn't much — and composed his story, which was designed to solicit further information about the corporation from helpful readers and encourage them to question the encroachment of little-known corporations in their own cities. In his search for a place to send the story, he'd discovered two likely candidates. The first was the *Wake-Up Call*, and he'd added a link to the second in the body of his letter. For whatever reason, though, the link had been garbled into gibberish characters by Sugardaddy's ISP, and Simonson's efforts to find it on either the Internet or the Digital Web hadn't yielded any results.

Nonetheless, Simonson's curiosity had been piqued. Sugardaddy had made no excuses for the vision he'd had, nor had he tried to rationalize it in his letter. He'd stated it as fact and let it go at that, as if he'd experienced that sort of thing before. He'd also chosen to send his story to the *Wake-Up Call* instead of the myriad crackpot, crank-press "journalism" sites to which the Internet had given birth. On top of that, no amount of research or hacking had allowed Simonson to discover Sugardaddy's actual identity beyond his handle. If nothing else,

Sugardaddy's computer-security skills were impressive, and that fact alone put his voice above the dull roar of the semi-literate jackals who usually emailed Simonson.

Simonson had opened up a dialogue shortly thereafter to talk about the story further. They discussed the research Sugardaddy had already done and the supplemental information Simonson had found on his own via his Digital Web resources. Representatives from Synthetic Solutions were buying industrial real estate in Iron Rapids as older factories closed down. The buying had stopped short after only a few factories had been snatched up, although plenty of old mills and factories had been considered for purchase. Employees of the Chamber of Commerce were working to facilitate more purchases. Iron Rapids Manufacturing, one of the largest corporations in the city, was losing money rapidly, and SynSol representatives were seeking to negotiate with company's board of directors. The owner of IRM appeared to be stonewalling, and his hesitation was stalling the rest of the process. The minimalist statement he had given the press was that he was investigating SynSol's proposed labor practices as well as the ways in which SynSol proposed to make itself an asset to the community.

Investigating the company itself, however, was useless. It was too new to have a history on the Dow or any other stock monitor. Sugardaddy had noted that its NASDAQ numbers were healthy, and Simonson had not found any indication that the SEC was unhappy with it either. The US Patent Office had records of the company's technology on file. The corporation's business license was in order. Synthetic Solutions seemed to be on the straight and operating legally.

What had truly hooked Simonson on the story, though, was what he had found when he had hacked into SynSol itself. Neither he nor Sugardaddy had had the first problem bypassing the company's firewall, and they had both been able to hack the router eventually. Sugardaddy had had to give up his search at that point, because when he tried to hack from the router into the SynSol server itself, he had encountered another firewall. He hadn't been able to bypass that one, and he had almost gotten busted for his trouble.

Simonson, however, had managed to bypass the second firewall, and he'd discovered something far more interesting. In trying to set up an Enlightened secure file-transfer protocol from the SynSol server back to himself via the Digital Web, he'd discovered a second line leading out of SynSol's router. Neither he nor Sugardaddy had noticed when they hacked the router the first time. That fact alone was odd enough — once they'd hacked the router, they should have been able to find any other connections leading from it — but the situation grew more strange the deeper Simonson dug.

First of all, Simonson had discovered another firewall on the outgoing line between the SynSol router and wherever it was sending its information. He'd had to bypass that one, using another set of tricks his mentor had taught him, and his efforts landed him at yet another router. This router, however, directed incoming and outgoing information across the Digital Web, rather than just the shadow of it that the Sleepers knew as the Internet. Having come to the table unprepared to hack a Digital Web router, Simonson had had to give up the expedition before he got himself caught. He'd backed out and made sure that all of his tracks were covered, then he'd contacted Sugardaddy privately again.

Although Sugardaddy was too inexperienced to understand the difference between the Digital Web and the Internet, Simonson explained what he had discovered. He told Sugardaddy about SynSol being connected to something greater than itself and in such a way that even the best Sleeper hackers would have no way of finding. That revelation, they agreed, ran counter to the overwhelming assertion in the Sleeper media that Synthetic Solutions was an independent fledgling company from Ann Arbor that had no more than fifty people working for it.

Simonson and Sugardaddy had gone over that fact at length, trying to figure out what possibly the company could be trying to hide, until Simonson had agreed to come into town himself and investigate the situation. He was ninety percent certain that he knew at least part of what SynSol was hiding, but in-person confirmation was required. The fact that the company was introducing new technology to the masses

was a tiny clue on its own, but the fact that it was harboring a secret connection to the Digital Web was more suspicious, to say the least. The fact that the company could hide a router connection from someone who had *already* hacked its router was just one more indication that it was more than just another tech start-up with good system administrators. What Simonson believed Sugardaddy had stumbled onto was a shell corporation that was a front for the Technocracy.

Hoping that he was wrong but doubting that he was, Simonson had arrived, checked into this hotel across the street from the Gideon building in the cramped center of downtown Iron Rapids and continued to do research on his own into what Synthetic Solutions was really all about.

After a week of snooping around various data archives in the city he'd found out about Adrian Cross' accident and made the assumption that Cross was Sugardaddy. He'd already found out that the owner of IRM who was slowing SynSol's advance into the city was one Isaac Gordon, a former president of Iron Rapids' Chamber of Commerce. Gordon, he'd discovered was Cross' father-in-law, and the letter of recommendation from Gordon for Cross in the Chamber of Commerce's Human Resources database had more than been responsible for getting Cross his job there. Furthermore, since Cross worked at the Chamber, he would have had a good reason to attend a Synthetic Solutions press conference, given the work he was assigned to do for them. If Cross had gone to the press conference and seen the vision that Sugardaddy's letter had described, he might have gone to his father-in-law and voiced his misgivings. Gordon had all but run a Japanese car company out of town while he was president of the Chamber of Commerce ten years ago because he didn't respect its labor practices, so he might — conceivably — have started stalling Synthetic Solutions in order to let Cross do more research.

The advent of Cross' car accident and subsequent disappearance only made Simonson's supposition seem that much more plausible. If Cross' misgivings had reached the ears of someone high enough up in Synthetic Solutions' hierarchy, those whom Synthetic Solutions represented might have deemed him a liability to whatever agenda they were pursuing. To defend

that agenda, Simonson figured, they had arranged to remove him from the equation, and only Simonson's diligence and force of will had kept them from being successful.

Yet, while the theory had seemed sound enough in its conception behind a desk and in front of the hotel room's wall mirror, it had fallen apart when Simonson had actually visited Cross in the hospital. The man had been rude and condescending, and he'd made it very clear that he had never read or heard of the *Wake-Up Call*. Simonson had realized almost immediately that Cross was not, in fact Sugardaddy. There was something extraordinary about him, Simonson admitted, which was the only reason Simonson hadn't left immediately, but Cross was not the person who had contacted him originally.

What he was, though, was an exceptional lead. He had access to the major elements of the story, and he had been targeted specifically for rough treatment of a conspiratorial nature. Since he had not been targeted because he was Sugardaddy, the reason he *had* been targeted only intrigued Simonson all the more. Furthermore, something had happened to Cross either during his car accident or in the following days of his coma. Cross was repressing it or ignoring it or completely unaware of it, but Simonson had seen it clearly. Cross stood out in subtly sharper relief from the world around him, and a vibrant energy radiated from him despite the sterile and static confines of the hospital room in which they'd met. His eyes were open wide, and they focused on the surroundings in a way that most people's eyes never did. Only a faint aspect of cynical distrust (and an over-reliance on his own cleverness) blunted the edges of Cross' clarity of understanding.

Simonson didn't think Cross was Awakened, because Cross would have known if he was, and he would have been less of a prick. What Simonson did think was that Cross had become a Sleepwalker in a situation far beyond his ken. He could see bits and pieces of the true nature of the events that were transpiring around him and incorporating him in subtle ways, but he did not, as yet, understand his place in them. Even still, though, Simonson could tell that Adrian Cross was important to the story he was working on.

To further give the lie to Simonson's initial theory about who Sugardaddy was, Sugardaddy had now gotten back in online contact with him at last. Ironically, the time stamp on the latest email he'd sent showed that he'd done so while Simonson and Cross were talking. Rolling his eyes at his reflection, Simonson logged on to the instant messenger that Sugardaddy had indicated and found his informant waiting for him. Right away, Sugardaddy asked Simonson to join him in what he felt was a more secure chat-room elsewhere on the Internet. Somewhat wearily, Simonson agreed.

When they were finally at a virtual location at which Sugardaddy felt safe, Simonson talked with him about Cross. He told Sugardaddy about why he'd thought he and Cross were the same and the steps he'd taken to come to that conclusion. Sugardaddy praised Simonson's deductive abilities — which Simonson always liked to hear — but told him that he was not, in fact, Adrian Cross. He wouldn't admit who he really was, but they discussed the ways in which Cross might actually be involved with Synthetic Solutions. They agreed that Cross' connection to Isaac Gordon was probably important, but Sugardaddy suggested that perhaps Simonson had the story backward. It was possible that Gordon had started stalling first on his own and the people behind Synthetic Solutions wanted to use Cross to change Gordon's mind. If Cross had said no when they asked him to help sway Gordon, that refusal might have prompted both his termination from his job and the arranged car accident.

Simonson spent the rest of the afternoon on line watching as Sugardaddy engaged in pointless speculation about who was really behind Synthetic Solutions in the first place. Simonson tried to explain the concept of the Technocracy in baby-steps and without ever saying the name outright, but saying too much to someone as paranoid as Sugardaddy seemed didn't strike him as a good idea.

Sugardaddy got the basic idea eventually, though, and he was more than willing to accept that there existed in the world a centuries' old conspiracy to manipulate and enslave the apathetic and largely ignorant masses of humanity. The ones behind that conspiracy wielded limitless power, but they operated

simultaneously above most Sleeper laws and below the average person's level of perception. Sugardaddy admitted that that idea cohered with the opinions of other frightened, inexperienced people he'd met on line since the day his eyes were opened to what was really happening all around him.

Simonson considered it a victory getting that much information to stick, and he changed the subject. He did his best to engage Sugardaddy in conversation, such as reading, typing, waiting and reading could be considered having a conversation. He probed with innocuous questions that he hoped Sugardaddy would answer in ways that help Simonson figure out who he was. Sugardaddy answered most of the questions that came his way, but he was damnably vague when Simonson tried to trick him into giving anything away. He even asked a couple of loaded questions that Simonson himself didn't realize were tricks until just before he'd sent his responses to them. Both of them knew the other's game, but neither admitted it. For a while, Simonson enjoyed the challenge of trying to ensnare Sugardaddy and watching out that he didn't get snared himself.

Finally, though, the game lost its appeal, and the two of them just went round and round until the wee hours of the morning as he tried to convince Sugardaddy to trust him enough to reveal his identity. Sugardaddy never agreed, but he promised to reconsider once he and Simonson got to the bottom of what Synthetic Solutions was really up to. Simonson had to settle for that, and he finally logged off. When he did, he looked up at his reflection with sleepy eyes and folded his laptop computer closed. His reflection looked just awake and alive as it always did. No matter how tired Simonson was, his reflection's energy and appearance of exuberance never waned.

"I'm no closer to the end of this, am I?" he asked it.

"Closer," his reflection mouthed back. "And close. We'll get to the bottom and see in due time."

Simonson yawned and headed for the bed.

"I'll bet," he said. "I'll just bet."

Wednesday

One

Syndicate Agent Jacob Sutton opened the door to his new office, turned the lights on and walked into the room all at the same time. He shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it over the rack in the corner. A quick tug at his collar made his tie more comfortable, and he nudged the door closed with his toe. He'd be visiting Isaac Gordon later in the afternoon, he reminded himself as he turned toward his desk, and he needed to confirm the appointment with Gordon's personal secretary. He took a step toward the desk out of arm's reach of the door when he discovered an old man sitting in his chair behind his computer. The man had white hair, and he wore a black shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons. His amber eyes were set in a tired and wrinkled face. The man looked up at him without recognition or explanation.

"Can I help you, sir?" Sutton asked, standing up straight and coming a step closer to the desk. "What are you doing in here?"

The man rolled the chair sideways and stood up behind the desk. Sutton heard the sound of dry leaves crackling and crunching under the man's feet.

"Come over here, boy," the white-haired man said. He walked out from behind the desk and into the center of the room. A couple of leaves drifted in the wake of his passing.

"Listen, sir," Sutton said, remaining calm and in control despite the circumstances, "is there something I can help you with?" He walked past the man to stand between him and the desk. "Maybe someone I can call to give you a ride home?" He reached backward toward the phone.

The man lifted his right arm, and the light above him glinted off the long steel barrel of an enormous pistol. From Sutton's perspective, the position of the light cast much of the man's face in shadow, but the empty black end of the

barrel was its menacing inscrutable eye. The pistol was the biggest revolver Sutton had ever seen, and the fact that no one had ever pointed a gun at him before made it seem even bigger than it was.

"Get your hand away from the phone," the stranger said. "Come over here now."

Sutton nodded. The survival scenario courses he'd taken years ago had covered this very subject. He had been trained to agree with the demands of a dangerous individual, should one confront him, while cooperating as little as possible under the circumstances. On rubber legs, he took a step toward the man. The man gestured with the pistol, and Sutton took one more step. The gun was so close to his face now that if he tilted his head up, the end of his nose would have brushed the barrel.

"This is Adrian Cross' office," the white-haired man said. He stood very still, and the barrel of the gun wavered not a millimeter.

The words didn't come across as a question, but Sutton assumed that they were, in fact, interrogative. They did relieve his shock and alarm by one degree, though. Perhaps this lunatic wasn't here specifically for him.

"It was, sir," he said. "Until yesterday."

"When Cross was fired," the man said.

Sutton nodded.

"And you took his job," the man said.

"I'm his replacement."

"Who sent you here?"

"Assistants by Order," Sutton said. "My temp agency."

The man cocked his pistol's hammer back with his thumb, and the noise of the mechanism locking into place sounded like someone snapping a handful of dead sticks. Sutton froze.

"I mean it, boy," the man said. "Which Convention sent you here?"

"Oh Jesus," Sutton whispered, swallowing a cannonball past the knot of his tie. Every part of his body weighed a thousand pounds, and cold sweat started to crawl under his shirt. "What do you want?"

"Answers," the white-haired man said. He pointed at the computer on the desk with his free hand. "Answers about what I found on that thing. And I want to know what Convention sent you."

Sutton's mind raced. His survival scenario training recommended that he scream for help at this point at the top of his lungs. The outright panic and sudden noise would (supposedly) distract his opponent and bring intrigued spectators if not actual saviors. The idea that other people were coming to investigate the noise would (again, supposedly) force the attacker to reconsider his options. The technique had demonstrated a ninety-five-percent success rate in the field under a variety of similar circumstances. Unfortunately, there were fewer than six people in the entire building at the moment, which meant that this man could conceivably shoot his way right out the back door if Sutton brought anyone running.

"S-Syndicate," Sutton said instead.

"Thought so," White Hair said. "That who you were going to call? Or maybe somebody from the New World Order?"

Sutton shook his head.

"Who then, boy?"

"Isaac Gordon," Sutton stammered. "I have an appointment. This morning."

"What for?"

"To talk about Synthetic Solutions."

"You're planning to do something to him, aren't you?"

"I have to run a psychological procedure on him," Sutton said with little evident confusion. "A small, supplementary one. It's just a computer slide presentation."

"Don't change the subject, boy," White Hair demanded. "Are you performing this procedure alone?"

Sutton nodded. "Yes, sir. It only takes one. And my supervisor thought it would seem less threatening to Mister Gordon if I showed up alone."

"Your supervisor?" White Hair said. "No bullshit, son."

Sutton's eyes focused entirely on the end of the gun. "C-Control," he said. "My Control field coordinator thought it would be best."

"What about Cross?" White Hair demanded. "Is he a part of this?"

Sutton's jaw worked, but only a squeak came out. "Adrian Cross?" he managed at last. "I don't know anything about Adrian Cross."

"That's a lie," White Hair said, standing up straighter and grinding a leaf underfoot. "You don't get any more of those."

Sutton gulped. "He's not part of my procedure."

"Your procedure," White Hair said. "Is there another one he's part of, boy? And you better start giving me whole answers before I lose my patience."

"Y-yes sir," Sutton said. His knees shook, threatening to dump him on the ground, and his hands trembled at his sides. "Cross was supposed to be part of a procedure on Highway 38 six days ago. A car accident. The one I'm supplementing."

"Does he know that?"

"No sir," Sutton said. The clenched muscles around his bladder quivered and wanted to relax. "He doesn't know anything about it. He still doesn't."

"What's the point of his procedure?"

"Test subject," Sutton said. "We needed a subject to demonstrate a set of experimental devices on."

"You mean the ones SynSol is producing, don't you? The ones you're supposedly introducing to the world."

Sutton nodded rapidly and sniffed loudly.

"How do you plan to demonstrate them?"

"By implanting Cross after his accident," Sutton said. "Offering to do it for free in exchange for Isaac Gordon's support in the local business community."

"You set Adrian up to get hurt just so you could put him back together again?"

"Better than before," Sutton mumbled.

"Plenty of other people get hurt on the job in this city," White Hair said, bringing the end of his gun that much closer to Sutton's forehead. "Why Cross? Why go out of your way to hurt somebody on purpose? Why not demonstrate your technology on somebody who actually needs it?"

"It matters how we prove it," Sutton said, "not just that we prove it." Almost all volume had gone out of his voice. "Gordon wouldn't be swayed if we repaired just anybody. But if a member of his family got hurt, he'd have a more personal stake in helping Synthetic Solutions take off."

"Why Cross?" White Hair said. "Gordon has a daughter. Cross isn't even a blood relation."

"Gordon tested as more responsive to Cross," Sutton said. "That's what the field coordinator said."

"Why wouldn't Gordon just pay Cross' medical bills and let it go at that? He's got plenty of money, and somebody that old isn't going to rely on experimental technology."

"He would have," Sutton said. "That's my procedure. He would have gone along. He would have started a chain reaction."

"And this city would have welcomed you with open arms," White Hair said. "Right?"

"Yes sir," Sutton said.

"Except Cross didn't get hurt," White Hair said.

"No sir," Sutton said.

"Why not? Last-minute change of heart?"

"I don't know," Sutton said. He could smell the oil on the gun, and he imagined that he could hear his breath

whistling across the end of the barrel. "That wasn't my procedure. All I know is it didn't work."

"So if it's done, the pressure's on you," White Hair said.

"There's still time," Sutton said without thinking about it. "My field coordinator said there's still time for Cross before the window of opportunity closes. I don't know about it. It's not my procedure. It's not even my Convention doing anything to him. I told them to choose from injured factory workers. They'd appreciate it more, and we'd have them wrapped up in debt for the rest of their lives so they'd take our training classes and work in the converted factories as long as we let them. The other businessmen would do all the work influencing Gordon, rather than us having to do it. There was some contention before the agenda—"

"All right, boy," White Hair said. "That's enough."

Sutton closed his mouth and nodded, glad that at least some part of his survival scenario training seemed to be paying off.

"You make me sick," White Hair spat. "Any one of those people would be better off dead than wired up to one of you people's devices for the rest of his life. Or in your debt with you telling them what to do for the rest of their lives. And Cross was innocent from the start. He could have done all your work for you convincing Gordon."

"Waiting and hoping like that was deemed unreliable," Sutton said. "It's important that we're sure."

"Shut up," White Hair said. "Shut up and turn around."

Sutton frowned at the man's shadowed face but still said, "No test subject would have suffered long-term side effects. Cross' treatment procedure was even designed to account for long-standing damage he'd already done to himself." White Hair's scowl darkened with every word, but he could not stop talking. "And if you'd lost an arm in an industrial accident, wouldn't you take the chance to have an even better one put on in its place?"

"I said turn around," White Hair growled at last.

Trying to keep his chin from quivering, Sutton did as he was told. He put his back to the man, biting back a surge of bile as the cold barrel of the gun brushed his ear. "We're making devices that help people. They're perfectly safe," he said through quivering lips. "And we're going to save this city from financial ruin. This agenda is for everyone's good."

"I've heard all that before, and I haven't believed it yet," White Hair said, stepping right up next to Sutton and putting his hand on the back of Sutton's neck. "Saving this city isn't what you're after here. I know you people better than that."

"We might as well be," Sutton said, unable to turn his head for the grip White Hair had on the back of his neck. The circle of the gun barrel's end pressed against the base of his spine. "Okay, technological dissemination is the actual agenda — I admit it. We're inserting Iteration X technology into the Consensus. But we can revitalize this city at the same time. And the technology will help people who need it. The two agendas could go hand-in-hand, honest. Oh God, please don't shoot me, I'm telling you the truth, I swear."

"Not good enough," White Hair whispered. "You don't give a shit about this city. You're not taking any real responsibility for it. Labor's cheap, land's cheap, and most everybody's so desperate for new business around here they don't care enough to ask you too many questions. I told you not to lie to me any more. Didn't I?"

"Please, oh please," Sutton murmured, "I was just going to talk to Gordon and let him choose on his own to support us. He might not even do it. I swear, he might not. The procedure might fail. I could make it fail if you tell me to. Please just tell me to do that, and I will."

"The only way anybody in this town gets a choice," White Hair said, "is if you don't talk to him, boy. I've been around long enough to know that. You're not going anywhere. Not today."

Sutton tensed, expecting a bullet to tear through his back. Instead, a sharp blow from the butt of the gun crashed down across the back of his neck. Sutton didn't even have time to register surprise before the corner of the desk came up to meet him just above his left eye.

Two

Adrian didn't recall until after he'd showered, shaved and dressed for his appointment with Isaac Gordon that he still had no car. He'd intended to call the Iron Rapids police and his insurance company again after he'd talked to Sarah, but the thought had slipped his mind by the time that conversation was over. Now, with less than an hour before the appointment, he was starting to panic a bit. He would have had time to make it in his car, but he wasn't familiar enough with bus schedules or routes to know if he had time to get to Gordon's house via IRT. He considered calling Gordon's personal assistant and asking her to send a car over, but he wasn't sure what impression that would make. He was already planning to ask for a bit of charity from his former father-in-law; piling inconvenience on top of that just didn't seem like the way to go.

Therefore, Adrian decided on the not altogether unpleasant prospect of calling a cab. He dug his phone book out from under a pile of unread junk mail on his desk and opened it on his lap. He flipped the pages randomly from the back, and the book opened right to the taxi section. The first quarter-page ad that caught his eye was one for the Dixie Cab Company. When he read it, he remembered that Aron Jordan had mentioned being from Memphis, Tennessee, so he decided on a whim to call the number at the bottom of the ad. He doubted that Jordan would actually be the driver who showed up, but it helped relax him to consider the possibility.

When the phone rang half a dozen times, Adrian started to wonder if the company even still existed. His phone book was two years old, and two years was a long time for a fringe company to exist in Iron Rapids. He finally got through three rings later, though, and he was put on hold immediately. Some girl singer's remake of Elvis Presley's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" insulted his ears just long enough for him to think about getting annoyed, but he forced himself to maintain his equanimity. The place was just busy, he told himself, not actively out to irk him. When he finally did get to make his urgent request for transportation, he did so in a friendly, concise manner that did

not belie his irritation in the slightest. The somewhat harried operator assured him that a taxi would be en route shortly and in plenty of time to get him to his appointment.

When he met the cab on the sidewalk ten minutes later, he found that it was Jordan who'd showed up. The man stepped out of the car and looked across the roof at Adrian.

"Hi there," he said with a small smile. "You look like you're ready to go somewhere."

"That I am," Adrian said. "How you been?"

"Pretty good since yesterday," Jordan said. "Not that much can change in less than twenty-four hours."

"If that was true," Adrian said, "I'd be driving my own car to my old job."

"Fair enough," Jordan said with the same light smile. "Hop in."

Adrian climbed in the back seat as Jordan sat back down up front. The motor rumbled to life, and the car pulled away. As it did, Adrian glanced back just in time to see an orange and white taxi pulling up to stop at the curb where he'd been standing. He could just make out the word Dixie on the hood before Jordan's cab turned a corner.

"Oops," he said, smiling.

"What's so funny?"

"I think that was my cab," Adrian said, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb.

"How do you mean?"

"Did your company send you over to pick me up?"

"Nope. I was driving by, and I saw somebody standing by the road waiting. Turned out to be you, so I stopped."

"Yeah, well that cab back there was from the company I did call." Adrian checked his watch. "It's right on time, too."

Jordan smirked in the rearview mirror. "Too slow, you ask me. What company was it?"

"Dixie," Adrian said.

"Them? Never trust anybody from Dixie, Adrian. Not around here."

Adrian laughed again. "And you're from what part of Tennessee again?"

"Remembered that, did you?" Jordan said. "Serves me right."

Adrian worked a chuckle out of his system and took a look out the window. The cloud cover was still heavy, but the weatherman on the radio hadn't warned of impending rain. It was just another gray day in Iron Rapids.

"So this makes three times you show up out of the blue now," Adrian said after a moment's pause. "What are the odds on that, do you think?"

"You tell me," Jordan said. "Odds aren't my specialty."

"Pretty steep, then," Adrian said. "I guess our stars are in line or something."

"Or it's just a coincidence," Jordan said.

"Heh. Probably. It's funny, though. My mom used to say that coincidence is God's way of tapping you on the shoulder."

"Did she now?"

Adrian shrugged. "Yeah. She says a lot of things."

"Are they all as pithy and clever as that?"

Adrian laughed and looked back out the window. "Nine times out of ten, not really. They do tend to stick, though."

"I guess they would," Jordan said. The car slowed to a stop at a traffic light before he spoke again. "So where we going?"

"Oh, right," Adrian said. "Isaac Gordon's place. It's outside Highway 38 on—"

"I know the place," Jordan said. "Cabs used to do a lot of business carting protesters out there when plants were shutting down left and right a few years ago."

"Makes sense," Adrian said. "I remember those kids coming around, saying they were demonstrating for workers' rights. Gordon hated dealing with them. He used to tell his personal assistant to strip down, get on a horse and go distract them whenever they showed up."

"Is that right? She ever do it?"

"Nah, she usually just told him to go to Hell. She did offer to scatter them with a hand full of bottle rockets once."

"That would have been something."

"Tell me about it. I thought all the hippies grew up and got jobs in the '80s."

"Apparently not. Nobody ever taught them how to tip either."

Adrian chuckled and lapsed into silence. He watched the world roll by through the windshield and thought idly about the image of Candace, Gordon's longtime personal assistant, riding around naked on the back of a horse.

"So you're taking my advice, I gather," Jordan said several minutes later. "Going to talk to your father in law."

"Yeah," Adrian said, giving up his pleasant Lady Godiva fantasy with a sigh. "I figure it couldn't hurt. And I already had an appointment with him today anyway."

"About Synthetic Solutions?"

"Yep."

"Does he know that's not what you're coming to talk about anymore?"

"He'll figure it out," Adrian grinned. "Frankly, the folks from the Chamber are lucky I'm not going over there to tell Gordon to tell SynSol to piss off altogether."

"Nobody'd blame you if you did," Jordan said, making quick, sympathetic eye contact in the rearview mirror.

Adrian laughed at that. "Knowing Gordon, he'd probably do it, too. He's no fan of the Chamber of Commerce when people aren't coming over from there to kiss his ass. I don't think I could do that to the rest of the city, though."

"Never know," Jordan said. "Getting rid of Synthetic Solutions might be just what the people of this town need."

Adrian rolled his eyes and smirked. "Now don't start that again. We just had this conversation yesterday. Then I had it again after that with somebody else."

"I'm just saying," Jordan shrugged. "Who's the other person?"

"Some Internet reporter I ran into in the hospital," Adrian said. "Guy named Simonson. Pest on a motorcycle

with too much free time. He writes for some site called the *Wake-Up Call* or something like that."

"Maybe he's got a point."

"Why, because he agrees with you?" Adrian joked. "Maybe you're both crackpots."

"Very funny. Maybe we just know more about what's going on than you do."

"Maybe," Adrian said, winking at the rearview mirror. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Jordan didn't offer any more for a while, and Adrian sat quietly. He crunched some of the dry leaves on the floor under his shoe and wondered how long it had been since Jordan had cleaned the floor out back here. The seats and the floor mats themselves were in good shape, but the crunching and crackling gave Adrian the impression that he was stepping on garbage. The more he thought about it, the more he could smell lingering smoke in the car, as if the driver had been crushing his coffin nails out in the ash tray instead of flicking them out the window like a normal person. Adrian tried a new conversational tack to distract himself.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" he said.

"Sure," Jordan said. "Don't take it personally if I don't answer, though."

"All right. You mentioned that you used to be married."

"Used to be. That's right."

"So what happened there? If you don't mind saying."

"Nah, it's been a while," the driver said. "I don't mind. Truth is, the ultra-glamorous lifestyle I was leading was causing the pair of us some strain."

Adrian smiled but said nothing.

"There was a lot of pressure on the both of us, and it was mostly because of me. My wife was too sweet to say anything, but I could see it getting to her. All the money issues and traveling I had to do for my old job and people beating down the door wanting another piece of me and whatnot. I didn't like it, and she hated it, and it wasn't any

way to raise a family. Eventually, I figured out the two of them would be better off without me in the picture.”

“You left?”

“Yeah,” Jordan said. “Just woke up one day and decided I wasn’t doing anybody any good the way things were. I took off while they were still sleeping and started over doing what I do now.”

“Jeez,” Adrian said softly. He held back what he really wanted to say. He couldn’t imagine ever abandoning Brandon like that. “You ever try to get back in touch with them?”

“No need to,” Jordan said. “They’re pretty well set up now without me. No sense showing back up after all this time and pretending like nothing ever happened. They’re happier thinking I’m dead or disappeared or whatever.”

“Don’t you miss them?”

“Of course I do,” Jordan said. “I just try not to think about it too much. Distracts me from what’s important.”

“If you say so,” Adrian said. “Still, that’s pretty cold.”

“It’s better than the alternative, Adrian,” Jordan said. “I could miss them and go back home to them tomorrow, but then I really wouldn’t be doing anybody any good. Not like I do now.”

Adrian grunted a non-response and decided not to press the issue. He understood about money troubles and wanting the best for one’s family, but he didn’t see how abandoning your family solved anything. Still, he’d stuck his foot in his mouth with this man once already, so he kept his opinion to himself.

“So that’s pretty much how that goes,” Jordan said as the silence dragged out. “Was there something else?”

“No,” Adrian said. “Wasn’t my business anyway. Probably shouldn’t have asked.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jordan said. “You could say I owed you one from all the talking you’ve been doing these past couple of days.”

“Sure,” Adrian nodded.

As he thought about it, he found the fact that he and this virtual stranger had been talking so much over the

past two and a half days less strange than he would have otherwise. Like him, Jordan was a southern guy with an estranged family who was stuck out here in this dying town with no real close family and friends left to speak of. Jordan, Adrian realized, was lonely. He reached out to anyone who would listen, and it made him feel good about himself to be able to help complete strangers. Maybe it even made him feel like the good father he'd apparently failed to be. Adrian wondered if he'd find himself in the same situation ten or twenty years from now. One more ghost in a ghost town, trying to make some kind of pitiful difference before the whole place dried up and blew away like a dead and desiccated leaf.

The rest of the ride proceeded in silence until Isaac Gordon's front gate came into view up ahead. The car slowed to a halt a few yards from the driveway intercom, and Jordan turned around in his seat.

"You want me to take you on up to the front?" he asked.

"That's okay," Adrian said, waving the suggestion away. "I think I can walk it up the drive. Might give me some time to think about what I'm going to say."

Jordan shrugged. "Okay. You want me to wait or come back and pick you up?"

"Lord, you don't have to wait," Adrian said. "Could be ten minutes or three hours, knowing Isaac. I wouldn't do that to you."

"Suits me, then," Jordan said. "Give a call if you change your mind afterward."

"I'll just call Dixie again and see if you can scoop them twice in one day."

Jordan smiled. "No sense pestering God for too many shoulder-taps. I'll just be around if you need me."

"Thanks. And thanks for the ride."

Adrian climbed out of the car and dug his wallet out of his pocket. He opened it and leaned down beside the cab's open passenger window.

"Now how much do I owe you this time?"

"Keep it," Jordan said, digging a pack of cigarettes out of his glove box. "If Gordon helps you out, you can buy me lunch again. Take care now."

Before Adrian could argue, the cab pulled away, leaving him there with his wallet open. He stuffed the wallet back in his pocket and shook his head.

"Now it feels more like charity than a favor," he mumbled.

He could hardly change the situation, though, so he approached the driveway intercom box instead. It was set on top of a black metal post that matched the color of the iron gate that loomed over him at twice his height. The gate was the only break in a brick and wrought iron fence that was only half-again as tall as he was. It rolled open on an automatic chain once he'd established his identity over the intercom, and it closed behind him as he made his way up the walk.

As he approached the house, he couldn't help but feel the same pang of envy he always felt. The place was three stories tall and at least four rooms across the front. It was smaller than some of the older mansions in town that had long since been converted into low-rent housing projects, but it was one of the biggest old-money houses outside Highway 38 that was still considered a part of the city.

Gordon lived here alone except for a skeleton crew of servants and his personal assistant, Candace. He'd inherited the place from his father who'd inherited it from his father who'd actually had it built when the city was still young. He'd been raised and tutored there, and he'd left it only briefly when he went away to college in Boston. Gordon had never had to rent an apartment or make a house payment or foot the bill for any number of mundane expenses that daunted most of the citizens of Iron Rapids every day. Adrian and Sarah had lived here for a year after their marriage, but Adrian couldn't imagine having grown up in a place like this. He'd grown up in an Atlanta suburb on a half-acre lot with one big tree in the back yard.

Still, he could imagine Sarah growing up here. She'd told him about it often enough when the water was still peaceful between them. He could see her running around

on the front lawn or climbing the sturdy trees that dotted the landscape. He could see her blowing soap bubbles from a plastic wand and chasing them around. He could imagine picnics out in the side yards, well away from the sounds of traffic and the smell of the factories in the city. Considering the circumstances of his own childhood, he couldn't imagine a better one than growing up in a place like this. He wished he could have raised Brandon here instead.

Smiling with nostalgia that was equal parts real and fabricated, Adrian climbed the steps to the front door and rang the bell. Gordon's butler, Bradbury, opened the door and showed Adrian in. They shook hands and traded bland pleasantries, and Bradbury told Adrian where to find Candace. None of Gordon's servants, Adrian had noticed over the years, spoke of Gordon directly. If a visitor asked about the master of the house, the staff would point said visitor in Candace's direction on the assumption that she would either be with Gordon or know whether he should be bothered at the moment. Adrian didn't know how or when the strange ritual had started, but he had grown accustomed to it. He thanked the butler and went off in the direction the man had indicated.

As he walked, Adrian took his time and looked around at the place. He remembered its every hallway and door from the time he had lived here, but it always seemed new to him. Every piece of furniture, every knickknack, every stoic portrait gave off an invisible air of old wealth. The place was dim and decorated in deep colors, but it wasn't dark or brooding. Everything was clean and neatly arranged. Most of the doors were open, and every open room had some sort of light on inside. The only offsetting detail inside the house was that it seemed so empty. Most of the staff were absent in this part of the house, and Gordon didn't employ that many staff members in the first place. Adrian had always imagined a younger version of Sarah and her two older sisters playing in these halls and filling the place up with the sounds of happy children, but those sounds had long been absent. The contrast between what Adrian imagined and what he actually saw only made the reality that much more stark.

Ruminating thus, he more or less sneaked up on Candace's office on the far end of the house. The room had once been Gordon's office/study, but Candace had taken the place over as the years she worked for Gordon went by. If nowhere else in the house did, this room definitely looked lived-in. Books leaned every which way on the shelves, cables snaked in thick weaves from the computer on the desk to a full surge-strip, and papers littered the desk at which Candace sat. Two large and unruly potted plants by the window threatened to tip over at any minute, and a portable tape-player huddled between them playing one of the cassettes from Candace's collection that was slowly aging from impressive to quaint.

Candace herself sat behind her desk typing something with a rapid waterfall sound of keystrokes. She didn't notice Adrian when he stopped to lean in the doorway, so he just stood there looking at her for a minute. He hadn't really bothered to check her out while he was married to Sarah — that would have been trouble, no matter how faithful he was — but he didn't see the harm in it now. He and Candace had always been friendly with each other, and they'd been joking about going out with each other for a couple of years now.

The best he could really say for Candace when he really looked at her was that she cute (although he admitted that his standards were probably a bit high after having been married to Sarah for so long). She had short red hair that curled at the top of her neck. Her nose was a pert nub of a thing, and thin silver glasses perched on the bridge. Her eyes were Irish green, and they squinted when she was typing or writing. She was a head and a half shorter than Adrian, and she hid the beginnings of a couch-potato tummy under baggy sweaters. Her skin was clean and dusted with a few freckles, and it was just one shade darker than pale. All in all, she amounted to cute, which was enough to make Adrian smile fondly. The smile took a wry upturn when he heard that she was singing along with her radio, which was playing the original "Blue Moon of Kentucky."

"Hey you," he said when he'd felt he'd been loitering long enough. "That rock-and-roll's the Devil's music, you know."

Candace looked up with a start then smiled to see Adrian there. She raised an eyebrow in mock reproach and said, "Well, who better to ask than the expert."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Adrian said, chuckling. "God himself just tapped me on the shoulder here a second ago."

"I'll bet," Candace said. "If He gets ready to do it again, remind me not to be standing too close. Or in a pool of water."

"Will do," Adrian said. "How you been, shorty? It's good to see you."

"I'm keeping busy," Candace said. She stood up and walked around to sit on the edge of her desk so that her computer wasn't between her and Adrian. "How are you, Country Mouse?"

"I'm good," Adrian smirked. Candace always got his goat with that one, even when he was being careful to conceal his accent. "Been better, been worse."

"That's fine. Looks like you're a few minutes early."

"Am I?" Adrian asked. He looked at his watch, which told him a different story. "Well, what do you know? I guess I just couldn't resist the chance to visit with my favorite ex-personal-assistant-in-law for a few minutes."

"Oh I see," Candace said. "Been having one of those dreams again, have you?"

"Not quite," Adrian said, laughing. "Although I was thinking about you on the way over."

"All good thoughts, I hope."

Adrian didn't answer, but the lascivious grin that came unbidden to his lips when he remembered imagining her as Lady Godiva said more than enough. "Seemed pretty good at the time."

"Adrian!" Candace said as red touched her cheeks and her eyes grew just a little bigger. "You're awful."

"Just when you think you know somebody," Adrian said. He laughed to cover his own twitch of embarrassment, but the thought did warm him up inside.

"Really."

The two of them smiled at each other again.

"So what are you working on there?" Adrian asked, nodding toward the mounds of paper on Candace's desk. "Anything top secret?"

"No, nothing like that," Candace said. "Just the same old, same old. Mostly reps from Synthetic Solutions trying to make appointments with Mister Gordon. Every day, twice a day. They're like a pack of hungry wolves."

"Or high school boys," Adrian said.

"Same difference. Only wolves have more manners than any boys I went to high school with. At least these SynSol guys are persistent. I'll give them that. They'd camp out on the lawn if we let them."

"Maybe they're just drawn to the sound of your sparkling voice," Adrian said, grinning. "They all want dates with the lovely lady on the other end of the phone."

"That would almost be a relief," Candace said. "It wouldn't take nearly so much paper work to tell them to piss off."

"Well, who can blame them for pining?" Adrian teased. "Especially with mushy words of love like that to stir their beating hearts."

"Not I, said the pig," Candace said. "Not I, said the goat."

"And so clever, too. If only you didn't listen to that devil-music."

"I can cancel your appointment right now," Candace said, wagging a finger at him. "Mister Gordon would never know you were here."

"Why, then I'd be free for lunch," Adrian said, batting his eyelashes. "How convenient."

"He's got a million of them, folks," Candace muttered, looking up at the ceiling. "He does a dinner show, too."

Adrian had to laugh at that, and Candace shook her head with a long-suffering smile.

"You know I'm teasing, sweetheart," he said, giving Candace a friendly wink. "But I probably should let you get back to work."

Candace sighed an affirmative to either or both statements.

"Where can I find Isaac?"

"He's out back in the garden," Candace said. A vapor of worry drifted behind her eyes, and she added, "He's probably smoking again, too."

"Yeah?" Adrian said without much surprise. "I thought he quit again."

"That was his New Year's resolution," Candace nodded. "The statute of limitations is up on those already. Same way with me and chocolate. Ask my thighs."

Adrian refrained from inserting an appropriately lewd comment.

"I keep trying to tell him it gets worse for him the older he gets, but you know how he is."

"Yep," Adrian nodded.

"Plus, he's worried about SynSol trying to buy him out. He doesn't want to sell, but everybody he talks to tries to convince him it's the best thing. I know that's why you're here."

Adrian shrugged and said, "That's why I made the appointment. Yeah."

"It's getting to him, just so you know. He wants so much for there to be another way to help this city, but he can't figure it out on his own. And when he gets frustrated—"

"He turns into the human chimney," Adrian said. "Yeah, I've seen it."

"You know how he is," Candace said again.

"Tell you what," Adrian said, showing a smile that wasn't lewd or condescending or playful. "I'll talk to him and see how he's holding up without giving him the hard-sell. If that doesn't cheer him up, I'll magically cure his smoking habit for him."

"You do that," Candace said with a half-hearted smile. "And make me into a fairy princess when you get back."

"Give me a tough one, sweetheart," Adrian said with a more lupine grin. "Somebody already beat me to that."

Candace rolled her eyes, but her cheeks flushed just enough so that Adrian could see it. "Oh, I should have seen that one coming," she said, smiling in spite of herself.

"I just says 'em," Adrian said with a shrug. He stood up straight off the doorjamb and squeezed his shoulder where he'd been leaning on it. "And with that, I actually will let you get back to work. I'll stop by again when I'm on the way out."

"All right," Candace said. "Take care, Country Mouse."

This time, Adrian sighed and rolled his eyes.

"I will, Fairy Princess."

Three

"Adri— Sorry, Jacob," Mary Stanford said, knocking on the closed office door before her. "We're about to go to lunch. Do you want to come with?"

Only silence answered her, so she knocked and asked her question again. She hadn't heard a peep out of Sutton all morning, and she didn't want the Chamber's new-hire to feel left out. Besides, something about his blue eyes flipped a switch in Mary's body. She couldn't tell how old he was from his height or the way he dressed, and his eyes only obscured the matter more. One minute, he looked like a kid fresh out of high school who needed someone to take care of him. The next, he looked quite the opposite and quite a few years older. It was a shame he kept his door closed all day.

"We could bring you something if you want," she said, knocking once again. "We're just going down to the McDonalds by the highway."

When still no answer came, Mary decided to peek in and see if maybe Sutton had already gone to lunch. She remembered vaguely that he had an appointment out of the office at some point today, and he could already have gone on. Still, the nice thing to do was check one last time.

The knob wasn't locked when Mary tried it, but the door wouldn't swing open. She actually had to lean into it and press the door open fairly hard to get it to budge, and it still tried to stick like a refrigerator door from the inside. She actually heard a pop as the door opened, as if she'd broken a seal. When the door did swing open, a rush of wind stirred and scattered dry, dead leaves on the floor inside the office. The smell inside the room assaulted her nostrils and Mary immediately tried to fan the stench away to no effect.

"What have you been doing in here?" she said. "Something smells just wretched."

When Mary saw Sutton's body, she stopped speaking. Jacob lay face down next to his desk in a pool of red-black blood. A strand of blood and some unrecognizable mass hung from the corner of the desk directly above Sutton's head. His forehead on the left side of his head had been caved in. His eye was a sightless glass bead, and his chest neither rose nor fell.

Mary stood still, working her mouth like a fish, as the reality of what she was looking at sank in. When her brain had digested the scene, she found that she was screaming for help.



Matthew Simonson exited his hotel room and headed for the elevator to take him downstairs. He'd missed the continental breakfast already by several hours after staying up far too late into the night on line with his new local informant. He got in the elevator and pushed the button for the lobby, listening to his stomach rumble the entire time. The reflective, copper-colored doors closed in front of him, and a karaoke version of "Heartbreak Hotel" started playing on the overhead torture speakers. As he began his slow descent, Simonson ignored both his hunger and the bad music by thinking about Sugardaddy. The bugger was clever, but he wasn't clever enough to know when to trust somebody who was trying to help him solve a mystery. That was one of the most annoying things about newly Awakened folks one met online.

Simonson couldn't concentrate on Sugardaddy or Synthetic Solutions right now, though, because he was too hungry. He needed to get out to Isaac Gordon's estate and try to convince the old man to speak to him, but not until after he'd put some food and water into his system. He couldn't hope to use Gordon to determine Adrian Cross' importance to SynSol via association or figure out what the Technocracy was hoping to accomplish through SynSol in Iron Rapids on an empty stomach. He expected the rest of the day to be full of exercises in frustration, and he much preferred to face that sort of thing well fed if nothing else. He remembered having seen a bakery a few blocks away, so he

decided to stop in there for a bite. Something fresh-baked and warm might just hit the spot.

As the elevator finally arrived at the lobby, Simonson yawned, stretched and looked himself over one last time in the highly polished surface of the copper-colored doors in front of him. He had to guess that he'd slept long enough to erase any bags from beneath his eyes since he could never tell that sort of thing in his reflection any more. He could see that the hair at the base of his neck was long enough to start curling outward, despite his best efforts to smooth and comb it down, and his old trench coat still looked like it had been slept in. He looked presentable enough to not come across as a vagrant, he thought, but Gordon was probably going to look at him like he was the paperboy who'd come to collect rather than a reporter.

Just before the doors opened, however, Simonson's reflection turned on its own and looked over its shoulder. Simonson tilted his head and wondered exactly what it thought it was looking at. There was nothing behind him, because he was leaning against the back wall. When his reflection faced him again, it held its right hand up at waist level with its fingers wide and its palm out. It looked at him and mouthed the words, "Now don't panic."

Before Simonson could decide whether to follow that advice or panic on general principle, the doors opened, and he found himself face-to-face with an older white-haired gentleman in a button-down black shirt. The man stood out from the world behind and around him vividly, as if he were the only object of color in a black-and-white photo or a three-dimensional object in front of a bas-relief sculpture of Simonson's field of view. He radiated an indefinable energy so strongly that he seemed ready to leap in any (or every) direction at any moment. He stepped right toward Simonson, trailing several dead, brown leaves behind him. Simonson flinched, and the doors closed the two of them off from the rest of the world.

"Excuse me," Simonson said, recovering his wits. He looked down at the man's right hand and saw a .357 magnum pistol in it at waist height, pointed up toward his chin. His eyes stretched wide open, but he refused to panic and call for help. At least the pistol's hammer wasn't cocked.

"No, excuse me," the white-haired man said. "Do you run the *Wake-Up Call* site on the Digital Web? Are you Matthew Simonson?"

Simonson blinked several times and let out a tense breath. The stranger hadn't said Internet, he'd said Digital Web. That was a step in the right direction. "Yes."

"Good," the white-haired man said. He lowered the pistol then stuffed into his waistband at the small of his back. "I was right."

"Who are you?" Simonson asked. A river of tension ran out of his shoulders, but he remained wary.

"My name's Aron Jordan," the man said. "You and I have a mutual acquaintance."

"On the Web?"

Jordan shook his head. "In town. His name's Adrian Cross."

Simonson tilted his head and peered at Jordan. "Press the button for number nine, then," he said. "We should talk."



"Nice place," Jordan said as he and Simonson entered the reporter's room. He turned on the light and strolled in as if he owned the place.

"I'm pleased you like it," Simonson said wryly. He pulled the chair out from the table a few inches and leaned against the back of it without turning around. He kept his back to the mirror as he dug his notepad and a mechanical pencil out of his coat pocket.

"I've stayed in better," Jordan said, "but it isn't bad." He stopped next to Simonson's bed, turned back around to face Simonson and put his left foot up on the corner of

Simonson's bed. He pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "You mind if I smoke?"

"Quite," Simonson said.

Jordan dug his lighter out of his back pocket, snapped it open with a practiced flip of his fingers and rolled the striking wheel a few times until he got a flame. "You want one?"

Simonson looked at the cigarette and sighed. "Quite," he said. "But no thank you."

"Quitting, huh?" Jordan said. He lit the cigarette and took a long drag.

"For a year now," Simonson said. He took a deep breath through his nose but remained firmly seated where he was.

"You'll come around."

"Do I know you, sir?" Simonson asked, mainly to keep himself from toying with the idea of having just one cigarette this once. Surely one wouldn't plunge him back into nicotine fits and waking up with a mouth full of tar every morning. He could always quit again after just one. "Something about you looks familiar. I don't know that I can entirely pin it down, however."

"I just have that look, I s'pose," Jordan said, letting a thick cloud roll up in front of his face. He shrugged. "I hear that a lot."

As he puffed up another cloud of smoke, the smoke detector on the ceiling above Simonson's head went off with a loud, shrill shriek that made Simonson bolt upright like he'd been jolted with electricity.

"Do you hear that a lot?" he said, wincing at how loud the thing was in the confines of the room.

"Shit," Jordan said, taking another drag. "Didn't realize the thing was up there. I'll get it."

As he said it, he drew his pistol from his waistband and pointed it at arm's length at the detector's sandwich-sized plastic housing. Simonson cringed and held his hands out in a shocked gesture of warning.

"What are you—"

Jordan pulled the trigger, and it dry-fired on an empty chamber.

"—crazy?"

"Just kidding," Jordan said. "Why don't you take the battery out of that thing before somebody comes running with a hose?"

Simonson stood blinking like an idiot for another moment then hopped up on his chair and did as Jordan suggested. The face of the smoke detector came off with a sharp twist, and he popped the nine-volt battery out with the end of his pencil. The alarm sound shut off. When Simonson hopped down from the chair and dropped the battery on the table with a harsh clatter, Jordan was grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

"Quite hilarious," Simonson seethed. "You could have given me a heart attack."

"With this?" Jordan said, holding the .357 up in front of him. He opened the revolving chamber and shook the gun with the barrel pointed straight up. No bullets or even empty casings fell out of the chamber when he did. "That's the best you'd get out of this piece."

Simonson ground his teeth and shook his head. "Well, isn't that something."

"Well, I didn't come here to kill you. I said I wanted to talk to you."

"So why bother pull it on me in the first place?" Simonson said. "I thought I was going to have an 'accident' in that elevator."

Jordan shrugged. "I already happened to have it in hand. Figured it couldn't hurt to get the urgency across."

Simonson shook his head and turned around to push his chair back to where he could just lean against it. His reflection matched his movements exactly, but it did grin at him before he turned back around. He refrained from giving it the finger.

"So talk, then," he said, continuing to seethe on purpose, "if that's the reason for your visit."

Jordan wrist-snapped the pistol's chamber back in place and put the gun back in his belt. "It is," he said. "Where would you like me to start?"

"First," Simonson said. "How did you know I was in town?"

"Adrian Cross told me. He told me a reporter from the *Wake-Up Call* has been asking him a lot of questions lately. He mentioned your name."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"That was a little tougher," Jordan admitted. "First thing I did was get onto your site and look over what it is that you publish. Not bad, most of it, but you beat around the bush too much when you're talking about people like us."

"I'm writing for a Sleeper audience," Simonson said, bristling at the criticism. "I want them to know what's out there, but if I spell it out like it really is, they either won't understand or they won't believe. Then what good am I doing? Sleepers have to be told things slowly so they can get ready for what's coming next."

"That's old Technocrat thinking," Jordan said.

Simonson shrugged. "It works. But what does my site have to do with finding me here. I don't publish an itinerary."

"True," Jordan said. "It told me enough to get me started. I can tell a lot from the way a person writes. You and your fellows are pretty easy to read. I figure that comes from sitting behind a keyboard all the time and doing all your talking with your fingertips."

"What did you think you figured out about me?" Simonson said stiffly.

"Arrogant, first off," Jordan said. "You're definitely that. Trouble is, you don't like arrogant people, so you play yours off more like intellectual snobbery. You don't come out and brag, but you argue assuming you have the high ground already."

"You know me so well already," Simonson said, "I can't imagine why you would want to go on."

"Sarcastic," Jordan continued. "That's part of that high ground. Judgmental, too. Nothing much wrong with that, though. Shows you know right from wrong. Even if you don't do anything about them, you make it clear you think the ills and abuses you write about aren't right."

"I do plenty about the ills and abuses I write about," Simonson said, standing up straight. "Exposing information that should not be hidden is just as important as acting on that information. If it wasn't for me—"

"Nobody'd know there was a problem to fix," Jordan said. "Yeah, I know. That's still an excuse for not doing more than the minimum."

"What do you know about it?"

"I've done my share of hiding out," Jordan said. "I know what it's like to only do this much and let the rest slide because you figure somebody else'll take up the slack. That's what I've been doing up here in the middle of Nowhere, Michigan, USA." He turned over the glass ashtray on the nightstand next to him and crushed his cigarette out in it. "But that's beside the point. The point is, Cross told me you were in town, so I figured you'd be in a hotel. From what I could tell about you from the way you run your site, I figured it'd be this one."

"Why?" Simonson asked, looking for any excuse to trip Jordan up in his logic.

"It's the best one anywhere nearby," Jordan said, lighting up another cigarette. "It's safe, it's central, and it's dignified. More so than any other hotel this city's got. Type of person you are, you wouldn't have settled for anything less. I figured this had to be it."

"Lucky guess."

"I'd be a liar if I said that didn't help," Jordan said, "but I was pretty sure already when I guessed it. The lucky part was catching you when you came out of the elevator."

"Especially with that gun in your hand," Simonson said. "I'm surprised you made it past the security man by the front door."

"I came in through the bathroom, not the front door," Jordan said. "The guard and the desk clerk never saw a thing."

"That's not possible," Simonson said without thinking about it. "There isn't even a window leading into that bathroom that you... could... oh. Right. Never mind. Don't try to explain it."

"Don't worry," Jordan said. "Works out better if I don't try. You're probably too young to understand it anyhow. Takes a lot more work than clicking on 'Send.'"

"You and Adrian Cross must get along famously," Simonson grumbled.

"Yeah? Why do you say that?"

"He's a prick, too."

"Very funny. He said the same thing about you, you know. It's true, though. About me and him getting along so well, I mean."

"Is that a fact?" Simonson smirked. "I'm not surprised. So how do you know him? How long have you known each other?"

"Not long," Jordan said. "Mind if I sit?"

Simonson held out his hand. "Help yourself. Feel free to smoke, as well, if doing so makes you more comfortable."

Jordan folded his left leg on the bed and sat on it with his right foot still on the floor. He nodded thanks and ignored the jibe. Simonson leaned back against the table himself and crossed his arms.

"So how long?" he asked again.

"Couple days," Jordan answered. "I met him Monday night coming at the hospital."

"So did I," Simonson said. "That's a refreshing coincidence."

"Or God tapping us on the shoulder."

"What?"

"Nothing," Jordan said with a wave. "Just a saying. Anyhow, Monday was when I met him for the first time, but the first time I saw him was actually the Thursday before."

"The day of his auto accident," Simonson said.

"The night," Jordan corrected. "Yes."

"How did it happen?"

"Damnedest thing," Jordan said. "I was on my way out to buy cigarettes, and I just decided to take a lap around the perimeter. It wasn't raining then, so I thought it'd be nice to take a drive."

"Just like that?" Simonson said dubiously. "You simply decided to take a drive."

"I did," Jordan said. "Maybe not on my own, entirely. I don't know. It seemed like a reasonable thing then, but looking back on it, I can't say. I never really have been sure what I'm doing on my own and what I'm doing because somebody else wants me to. It's one of those problems from my old life that never went away."

"I know that feeling," Simonson said, cutting his eyes to the right as if to look over his shoulder at the mirror. "So you were out taking a drive around Highway 38...."

"Right," Jordan said. "I was out at the end of the rush hour when traffic started clogging up ahead of me. I switched the radio to the emergency frequencies — police, ambulance, fire — and heard about the wreck; heard about how bad it supposedly was."

"Are you a policeman?" Simonson asked. "I mean were you previously?"

"Nope."

"How did you get emergency frequencies on your radio, then?"

"Just tuned them in," Jordan said. "It's not something I can explain to you."

"Oh. So what did you do when you heard?"

"I went up to take a look before traffic got moving," Jordan said.

"You just left your car there and went to be gawking spectator?"

"Are you going to keep interrupting me," Jordan said, "or do you want to hear this?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Simonson said, "but your story has some holes in it."

"Think with your brain and not with your mouth, boy," Jordan said. "They're not holes. I just don't have all afternoon to spell everything out for you."

"I see," Simonson said. "Then do continue, by all means."

"Like I was saying, I went out to see what was going on. No real reason for it. It just seemed like what I ought to do, so I did it. I got there in time to see them cutting our friend, Mister Cross, out of what was left of his car. When I saw that, I could see that something was wrong."

"I saw photos of his car, too," Simonson added. "He should have died."

"That's not what I mean," Jordan said. "I mean wrong presently, at that minute. I didn't know who Cross was, but when I saw him, I could tell that he just wasn't right. He was... how do I say this?"

"What?"

"First, it looked like he was wrapped up in glass. That's the only way I know how to explain it. Not pieces of broken glass. Like glass was coming out of his skin. Like he'd been dipped in it. It was kind of fuzzy at the edges, though, like a mirage. It was like air wavering around him settling over him all around him the way it was *supposed to*. For just a second he looked... I don't know. Perfect. Like he was an angel. Wasn't 'til then that I saw he wasn't hurt. Not even a little bit. His clothes weren't even torn. He was just sleeping peacefully like they'd just rolled him out of bed.

"You say you saw a picture, boy, but I saw his car in person. No way he should have come out of that like he did. His car hit the semi that caused the accident so hard they couldn't pull it loose afterward. Cross should have been toothpaste coming out of that car. No way around it.

"Anyhow, they went to pack him off in an ambulance, and I was watching them. They drove off around the side of the semi in the emergency lane and went on to the hospi-

tal. But over off to the side of the road, there was this rise where the tree line broke. I saw it, and I thought it would've been a great spot to have watched the accident from. It overlooked that corner of the highway like a balcony. Sure enough, there were three people up there turning around to leave when I turned up to look at them. They'd been watching the whole time."

"Who were they?"

"I don't know," Jordan said. "I'd never seen them before. Just three men in black on a hillside."

"Men in black?" Simonson said. "You mean..."

Jordan nodded. "Right and proper. I could tell it just looking at them. They all moved at the same time, all dressed the same, and they all looked pretty much alike. One was a little taller, one was a little more broad in the shoulder, but I couldn't tell you which. It was like my eyes kept slipping off of them. Like touching wet glass. Sometimes, you can just spot them — I suppose they like it that way — and I spotted them easy."

"Did they see you?" Simonson whispered, mortified at the possibility.

"Already had their backs turned," Jordan said. "They were dropping out of sight on the other side of the rise when I looked at them. I don't think they did. Nobody on the scene noticed me. Point is, I saw them and I knew what they were. And I could tell they were responsible for the accident and everything that had happened to Cross."

"How?" Simonson asked. "What made you sure?"

Jordan tapped his temple with the index and middle finger that held his cigarette. "Same way I was sure that it'd be a good idea to go for a drive that night. It's the same feeling that keeps making me think your reflection in the mirror behind you is looking at me, even though I can only see the back of your head whenever I look."

Simonson kept his commentary about his reflection to himself. "So what did you do about Cross?" he said instead.

"Nothing at first," Jordan admitted. "I didn't want to get involved. I didn't come up here to keep sticking my hand in that hornets' nest."

"You ignored it?" Simonson said. "You saw Technocrats at the site, you saw them have someone taken away right in front of you, and you didn't do anything about it? You saw the enemy taking prisoners, and you didn't think that maybe you had a responsibility to at least tell someone? And you said I was shirking!"

"Get down off that horse, boy," Jordan said. "I told you I didn't come north or come into this city even to get involved in any of that. I was just trying to settle. I don't mind helping a few folks out here and there with their personal lives when they need it, but I'm not throwing away my own personal life on a war everybody's too stubborn to admit is over."

"It isn't a war," Simonson said, "it's a struggle. It's a crusade, and it most certainly is not over. My Tradition is proof of that. The rest of you wouldn't have had anything to hope for if the ones who came before me hadn't switched sides when we did."

"You boys are part of the problem," Jordan said. "You stir up the mess, and you don't know when to just leave well enough alone."

"At least we haven't given up because we got too old to care!"

"Boy, I never said I don't care." Jordan took a deep breath to give himself and Simonson a chance to calm down. "What I said was I don't want any trouble. And I also said I ended up meeting Cross in person four nights later. Didn't I?"

"All right," Simonson said. "I'll grant that you did say that. What changed your mind?"

"Same two ladies who'll put a knife in the back of every one of us, boy," Jordan said with something like a smile. "Curiosity and guilt. You watch out for those two."

"What I lack in one, I recoup through a surplus of the other."

"It'll be the end of you. One of them's going to be the end of me one day, too, but that usually doesn't stop me. I couldn't stop thinking about Cross the next four days. I kept seeing ambulances on the road, and at least one fare every day rolled me right past Founders' Memorial. Eventually, Monday, I decided to come in and just check to see what had happened to the guy. I didn't even know who he was or what room he would be in or even if he was still there. I was just relying on luck and timing to put us in the same place at the same time.

"Sure enough, who should be walking to the phone right in front of the hospital that night right when I'm driving by but the man himself? He looked every bit as healthy as the first time I saw him, except he was awake this time."

"You mean with a capital A?" Simonson asked. "Like one of us."

"I'm not... I don't know," Jordan said. "I can't always tell, especially for the folks it just happened to. I don't think he was. He looked just as Asleep — capital — as the rest of them out there."

"So why pick him up?" Simonson asked.

"Because he had company," Jordan said. "While I was coming up, he passed this black car in the parking lot. He was walking by, and he bumps into it like he didn't know it was there. He stood there looking at it, then walked on. A couple of seconds after he turned his back, that car's four doors open, and four men in black get out. Three of them I'd seen before, but the fourth one was new.

"He had a look about him, that one. It was like what I was telling you about when they pulled Cross out of his car."

"Like he'd been immersed in glass?"

"Right," Jordan said. "But different. With Cross, it was like air was settling around him and encasing him. With this guy, it was the other way around. It was like he was making the air spin into glass around him. I don't know if this is making much sense to you."

"Well enough," Simonson said. "What did you do when you saw them?"

"I picked Cross up," Jordan said with a shrug. "What else was I going to do? I didn't know if they were working together or not or what, but it didn't look like something good was about to happen. That fourth man in black looked in a real bad way. Not angry or upset exactly... just... dissonant. Somehow. I can't explain it now, but it made my stomach feel hollow and cold. So I took a chance and picked Cross up."

"What did they do?"

"Nothing," Jordan said. "They never saw me. As far as they knew, I rolled right by them and never stopped. As far as Cross knew, I stopped, picked him up and drove him home."

"You did something like that," Simonson gasped. "Right in front of four Technocrats? You must have shot-puts in your smallclothes."

Jordan laughed at that, and smoke rolled out of his nose and mouth at the same time. "Don't think I didn't pay the price for it, boy," he said, coughing to clear his lungs and throat. "Hurt so bad I almost let him back out right then and there. Felt like I swallowed a bag of angry cats and let them fight it out all the way down. And for all I knew at that point, Cross was working with the four Men in Black. I had to give him a good, hard look before agreeing to take him on out of there."

"And you finally did."

"M-hm. Took him home and talked to him. Seemed like a nice fellow."

"Opinions vary," Simonson said.

"Next day — yesterday — I was outside his office when he was coming out," Jordan said, opting not to respond directly. "I was worried about him, so I went to check on him. Well, as soon as I show up, he comes busting out of the building just as those same three men in black are coming up the street right toward him."

"What about the fourth one?"

"Didn't see him. Didn't care to. I spun Cross around with—" he tapped his temple again "—a little nudge and got him walking into the city instead. Had a time keeping him out of sight of them and keeping me out of sight of him. Finally, I just walked up to him and took him in out of the rain. Talked to him again, and he told me about losing his job. Talked about that Synthetic Solutions company everybody's seeing all over the place."

"We've talked about that, too," Simonson said. "Cross doesn't like to bring it up."

"Like it or not," Jordan said, "it looks like he's wrapped up with it."

"It and what it represents," Simonson said. "Certainly more than he's willing to admit." He told Jordan about what he'd found out online about Synthetic Solutions, as well as his suspicions about whom that company really represented. He mentioned what he had discovered about Adrian Cross' accident and the results of his two abortive conversations with Cross about Synthetic Solutions. "He's tangled himself up with what appears to be a shell corporation for the Technocracy."

"Certainly seems that way, considering," Jordan said. "That was what I figured, so I went down to his old office this morning to see what I could find out. Showed up at his old office before the fellow who replaced him did. Dug around on his computer for a while when nobody else was in the building. Right off, I found a Digital Web connection that took me to some junction out there in the ether somewhere. Found a link from there to a database about Synthetic Solutions in Ann Arbor."

"You hacked in from Cross' office in the Chamber of Commerce?" Simonson asked. "Are you out of your mind?"

"It wasn't hacking," Jordan said. "It was all linked up. Just a matter of me clicking where I wanted to go."

Simonson shook his head.

"How did you get on their router in the first place? How did you bypass the firewalls to even get to the Digital Web router the database was hooked into?"

"I don't exactly know," Jordan said with a careless shrug. "What's a router?"

Simonson put his head in his hand and let out a long sigh. "How did you even get on their Digital Web router in the first place without getting caught? I tried it and couldn't do it."

"System thought I was Cross' replacement," Jordan said. "Kid named Jacob Sutton. He was the Syndicate man coordinating the affair inside the Chamber. I was coming from his terminal and everything, and I acted like I knew what I was doing. When it asked me what I wanted to look at, I told it without really thinking too hard about it. I didn't act like I was snooping, I acted like I was Sutton going about his daily business. The system let me right in."

Simonson looked up at the ceiling with his hands out in a creator-beseeking sort of way and shook his head. "That isn't how computers work," he said in exasperation.

"Opinions vary," Jordan said. "I've never really tried to go snooping through a company's back door before, but it worked out well enough. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough to take a couple of things off the SynSol database. Problem was, when I tried to open them up on the computer there in the office, Sutton came walking in. I got a pretty good look at the one, but I didn't get a chance to open the other."

"What were they?" Simonson asked, amazed that this man hadn't alerted every Technocrat in the country to what he was doing.

"They looked like before and after files to me," Jordan said. "The first one was a business start-up plan. You know, how to get SynSol's feet on the ground in Iron Rapids. Seemed pretty basic — contacts, phone numbers, expense projections — but every section kept asking me if I wanted to see the 'Expanded Protocols Explanation' as I

was reading it or just keep looking at the summary. Nothing I had was very specific. It showed me the goals of the agenda, but not how to achieve them. When I asked for the explanation, it asked me for Sutton's authorization and decryption code."

"Which you didn't have," Simonson said. "But my lord, what a find. What was in the other file?"

"Like I said, I don't know exactly," Jordan said. "It said it was a prospectus. I didn't open it, and I couldn't pull down any thing else."

"My lord," Simonson said again softly. "How did you manage to get that information without getting caught? How did you not draw down all the security the Technocracy has? How did you do it? I've been trying to find out what Synthetic Solutions — what the Technocracy — wants in this town for weeks."

"Getting in and finding the files was force of will and good timing," Jordan said. He crushed his cigarette out in the ashtray and set the ashtray back on the nightstand where he'd found it. "Not getting caught was just beginner's luck, I suppose."

"Incredible," Simonson said. "Inconceivable."

Jordan shrugged.

"I think I can guess the rest then," Simonson continued. "You knew from speaking to Cross that I'd been bothering him about Synthetic Solutions. You found out the information that I was looking for, and you want to put a stop to what the Technocracy is doing to this city. You've come asking for my help to—"

"Not entirely, boy," Jordan said, holding up a hand to silence Simonson. "I told you, I'm through with all that crusading. I'm just doing what I'm doing for Cross."

"Why? What is it about him?"

"A lot of bad things have been happening to him here lately for no good reason," Jordan said. "I've seen it, and from what you've been telling me, you've seen it, too. These people — Synthetic Solutions, the Technoc-

racy, however you want to call them — have been playing his life like a guitar, and that's got to stop. His life isn't great the way he's lived it, but at least it's the way he chose to live it. These people are trying to take that away from him, and I won't stand for it. That's no way to live. He'd be better off dead."

"So how do you expect me to help you?" Simonson asked. "And why? I have more important things than one person to think about. You may think you're mocking me, but I do consider myself a crusader. I can't stop what I'm doing to help you help one man when I've got the rest of this city to think of."

"There's that arrogance," Jordan said. "Boy, I'm not here asking for your help dealing with Cross. I intend to take care of him myself."

"So you need me to help you open the expanded Technocracy files from the summaries you found so you can do that. Is that it? You need me to tell you what exactly the Technocrats are planning for Cross so you can help him."

"That isn't it either," Jordan said. "I know enough about what they have planned for Cross. Sutton told me."

"So what do you want with me, then?" Simonson asked.

"I came here to try to help you, boy," Jordan said. "Because I know you're a crusader. It's like you said. Even if you don't take a physical part in the crusade, you do what you can to support it. I came here because I know you've been looking for the information I found and I know you'll do something with it, even if it's just publish it on the Web and see who bites."

"I see," Simonson said, narrowing his eyes and cocking his head slightly. "So you're just handing it over, then, to see what I do with it? Just like that."

"I don't think your crusade's worth fighting, boy," Jordan said. "But that doesn't mean it's not. As far as I'm concerned, you're welcome to do what you please with what I found. Information's got to be free, right? Isn't that your boys' motto?"

"Something like that," Simonson said. "So where is it? Do you have a disk? A CD? Is it here?"

"There's going to be your trouble," Jordan said, lighting up his third cigarette. "It's still on the computer in Sutton's office. At the Chamber of Commerce."

"What?"

"I told you," Jordan said, "Sutton walked in on me while I was snooping. I asked him a few questions, and he said some things that reminded me of when I actually was a crusader like you. I lost my temper and let him have it."

"You attacked a man in the Chamber of Commerce building?" Simonson gasped in mortification. He gestured toward Jordan's pistol. "Everyone in the building — everyone in the neighborhood — must have heard that thing go off."

Jordan looked confused then touched the back of his belt. "What? Oh, this? I know better than that, boy. Hell, I haven't even fired it in forever. Especially not at a person."

"Then what did you do?" Simonson said.

"I made him hit his head," Jordan said calmly behind another pall of smoke. "Knocked him out so he wouldn't remember I was there. I suppose, though, I pushed him too hard. I checked him right after, and saw that that was that. He'd seen his black star, if you take my meaning."

"My lord." Simonson shuddered. "He's dead? Don't you even care?"

Jordan shrugged. "He wasn't my first. Plus, it was quick and clean. There are worse ways to go."

Simonson didn't say anything to that. Such cavalier disregard for another person's life coming on the heels of the apparent interest he'd taken in Adrian Cross' life was simply incomprehensible.

"The point is," Jordan said, "I had to leave the information on Sutton's computer. I hid it as best I could, but I didn't have time to download it for you, and I didn't have a disk to put it on anyway."

Simonson winced. "If it's on the computer, you downloaded it already."

"Oh. Well, I didn't get it on a disk for you, then. I just disappeared out of there in case somebody heard what happened. If you want it, you're going to have to go in there and get it."

"Why can't you just go back and get the hard drive and come back here?" Simonson asked, hiding his growing discomfort behind a faint sneer. "You seem to be fairly good at that."

"I'm stretching myself a little thin at the moment as it is," Jordan said. "No sense pushing my luck."

"But you're more than willing to let me push mine?" Simonson said. "How do I know that someone hasn't found the body already and that the place isn't full of police officers and Technocrats?"

"You don't," Jordan said. "And neither do I. It's likely that it's crawling with them, though. Better assume so to be on the safe side."

"So how do you expect me to get to the computer, then?"

"That's up to you, boy," Jordan said, standing up. "I don't expect you to do anything you don't want to. I didn't come to tell you what to do. I'm just letting you know what your options are so you can choose one on your own. Like I said, that isn't my problem. Taking care of Adrian Cross in this mess he's tangled up in is my problem."

He dusted fine gray ash from black shirt, crushed the last of his cigarette in the ashtray and walked to the door, as if to leave.

"Wait," Simonson said. "I can't believe I'm considering this. What office is it in? Where did you hide the files on the computer?"

Jordan told him.

"I see. If I do manage to get these files and I do figure out how to get to the expanded text you couldn't get to, do you want to see what I uncover?"

Jordan opened the door and shook his head. "Not much point in that. Show it to somebody who'll do some good with it. It's not my crusade."

Before Simonson could answer, Jordan closed the door, leaving him alone. Struggling with the choice he now had to make, he leaned on his chair to consider his options. When he looked up at the looking glass, his reflection looked at him with wide, panicked eyes.

"Who the hell was that man?"

"Another one of the Awakened," Simonson replied, somewhat disturbed by his reflection's appearance. "What's the problem? You didn't look so upset before."

"Notepad," his reflection indicated.

Simonson looked at the pad where he'd left it on the table when his smoke alarm went off. With an equal mix of annoyance and confusion, he realized that he hadn't written a single thing since Jordan had showed up.

"Shit," he said. He usually took notes without even thinking about it.

"Hold it up," his reflection urged.

Simonson quirked an eyebrow but did as his reflection wanted. He held the blank page out as his reflection held up its own notepad in the wrong hand for him to read. His own eyes grew wide to match his reflection's expression. In plain English and in a hand that was not his own, the words "Stop looking at me," had been written on the notepad in the mirror.

"Shit," he said aloud. "I don't know who he is."

Four

"You're thinking about her right now, aren't you?" Sarah asked.

Adrian turned away from the vine-entangled trellis that arched over his head and looked at his wife. "Pardon?" he said. "Who?"

"Don't play dumb," Sarah said, crossing her arms and standing right in the center of the pebbly garden path. She didn't look angry just yet, but she certainly looked serious. "The Candace woman my father just hired. I know you two just hit it off in there."

"She seemed nice enough," Adrian said, trying to watch his step. "Friendly."

"Cute?"

"I guess," Adrian said with a shrug.

"You guess?" Sarah asked, lowering her voice. "You guess she is, or you guess she isn't?"

Adrian looked past Sarah toward his father-in-law's house to collect his thoughts. "I guess she is," he said, trying to be diplomatic. The girl was kind of cute, now that he thought about it. She was too young for him, and Sarah blew her out of the water, but she wasn't bad. "I wasn't paying that much attention."

"Was that because you were too busy flirting with her that you couldn't see straight?"

"What? I wasn't flirting."

"Oh right," Sarah said, walking past him into the vine-roofed gazebo that lay at the heart of her father's garden. She sat down on a wooden bench and refused to look at him. "You kept looking her in the eyes and making those stupid jokes and laughing when she made even stupider ones. They weren't even funny, Adrian."

"She was just being friendly, sweetheart," Adrian said. He walked over to the bench and stood next to his wife.

"You don't have to defend her."

"I was just being friendly, too," Adrian said. "You know how I am."

"I thought I did," Sarah said, "but I didn't think you were the type to flirt with any coed who works for my father."

"I don't just flirt with anybody who comes along," Adrian said, wondering what had brought these sneak-attack on.

"Oh, so it's just this one?" Sarah snapped, looking up at him. "I wonder if she feels special now."

Adrian winced. "Look, Sarah, I wasn't flirting. Honest. It's just that your dad's going to be moving Candace into the house so he can work from here. Since she's going to be living here and so are we, I thought we might as well make nice and make her feel welcome. It's a southern thing. Always make a good impression when you meet company for the first time."

"I saw the way you tried to make a good impression," Sarah said. "What's that leave me to do if I want to make an impression? I don't want to get under her skirt."

"Darlin', what makes you think I do?" Adrian said. "I was just bein' nice."

"No joke. And don't talk like that. It makes you sound ignorant. Don't you know what the letter G sounds like?"

Adrian ground his teeth and forced himself to remain calm. Sarah was just worried, that's all. Worried and a little touchy. He sat down on the bench beside her and stroked her shoulder with the backs of his fingers. Sarah bore his touch stiffly.

"Sweetheart, she's not even that cute," he said. "Hardly cute at all."

"You say that now," she said, glancing at him sidewise with somewhat less hostility. "But you told me about some of your old girlfriends. Like that Stephanie bitch who came to visit you that weekend in school."

"Don't remind me about that," Adrian said, relaxing a little. "I thought she'd never leave us alone." He'd thought the talk he and Sarah had had afterward would never end either.

"Miss nineteen-year-old coed Candace in there looks like that bitch did," Sarah said. "She's got the same hair and the same belly and everything."

"You mean the same fat belly," Adrian said, glancing back toward the house to make sure that his father-in-law's young assistant wasn't actually anywhere in earshot. "You know, there was a pretty good reason I didn't take Stephanie back that time."

"She was a bitch," Sarah said. Some of the tension was gone from her shoulder.

"That," Adrian said, "and she'd put on that little belly." A knot rolled over weakly in his stomach at having to talk this way to make Sarah happy. In the long run, though, he figured that a few white lies and personal discomfort were worth the result. "And Miss Candace has got that belly built right in already."

"You mean you don't like that?" Sarah goaded him. "Big girls with built-in bellies?"

"I wouldn't be here if I did," Adrian whispered, leaning closer to his wife. He moved his hand from Sarah's arm to the side of her stomach. "This doesn't feel like a built-in belly to me."

"Damn right," Sarah murmured. "I'm no bitch either."

"I heard that," Adrian said back, whispering in his wife's ear. He kissed her on the shoulder then scooped her hair away from the side of her neck. "And you're as pretty as a swan."

"Not like that Candace tart," Sarah said. She looked sideways at Adrian again, but the first suggestion of a smile played at the edge of her lip.

Adrian kissed Sarah on the side of the neck, breathing a tiny sigh of relief that he'd averted a non-crisis before it ballooned into an actual fight. "Candace who?"

Standing under the same trelliswork gazebo more than nine years later, Adrian shook his head as he remembered that afternoon. Their talk and the subsequent festivities on the bench hadn't erased Sarah's conviction that Candace was a danger to her marriage, but it had forestalled the inevitable for a few weeks. Adrian hadn't been particularly surprised when the subject came up again — Sarah usually took it the wrong way when Adrian smiled or said hello to another pretty girl — but he had been shocked by its outcome. Sarah had talked to her father in private and asked him to set her and Adrian up in a house elsewhere outside the city. The only reason she'd given the old man for making such a request was that Adrian preferred to start his family in a house of his own.

Although Adrian had mentioned such a sentiment in passing before he and Sarah had gotten married, the fact that Sarah had brought it up with her father appalled him. He was especially irked by the fact that she had done so simply because she

was afraid of Candace stealing him away from her. By the time she'd told him about it, however, Gordon had already bought them a house just outside Highway 38 and even arranged to have it filled with furniture. Adrian would have felt ridiculous going to Gordon and explaining the truth after Gordon had already gone to so much trouble for the two of them. What was worse, he'd been fairly certain that Candace — who had done most of the paperwork for the transaction herself — knew exactly what was going on from the beginning.

But, rather than stirring up a huge mess, Adrian had gone along and not spoken up. It had made Sarah happy, and that had been well and good enough for him at the time. They hadn't fought about much of anything after that for another four months, in fact, until Sarah had told him that she was going to have a baby. Looking back, Adrian realized that her pregnancy was probably a direct result of the afternoon she and he had spent under this very gazebo the day Candace moved into Isaac Gordon's house. As Adrian made that connection, someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind.

"Lost, son?"

Adrian jumped and turned around to see Isaac Gordon standing behind him, leaning on a sturdy black cane. The old man wore black pants, dark brown hiking shoes and a gray turtleneck sweater with raglan sleeves. His short, iron gray hair was messed up from the wind, and his blue eyes perched above dark purple half-circles of fatigue. He held a brown cigarillo in his right hand, and the smell of it wafted from him and his clothing in almost visible waves.

"Jeez," Adrian said. "Hi, Isaac. You startled me."

"Sorry, son," Gordon said, clearing his throat with two quick closed-mouth coughs. "How are you?"

"Fine," Adrian nodded. "All things considered."

Gordon puffed his cigarillo and exhaled a thick cloud. "Glad to hear it."

"Thanks," Adrian smiled. "It's good to see you again."

He extended his hand, and Gordon shook it after switching his smoke to the hand that still clasped the metal head of his cane.

"Same. I hear Candace made you an appointment to see me. I think I can guess what it's about."

Gordon took another drag off his cigarillo and closed his eyes. He held the smoke in for a few seconds then blew it all back out through his nose. He cleared his throat when all the smoke was out, and the sound turned into a cough that Adrian didn't like the sound of.

"I thought you quit," Adrian said as Gordon hacked and spat out a brown something that didn't look entirely liquid.

"I think you were wrong about that," Gordon said, spitting one last time. His knuckles were white around the head of his cane. He held the cigarillo up and took another short puff. "When you're my age, you don't quit this."

"You should," Adrian chided half-seriously. "That stuff's going to kill you."

"Not before stress does, son," Gordon said. "And people nagging me."

"Candace is worried," Adrian said. "And I'm sure Sarah would pitch a fit if she knew you were still lighting up."

"Can's been worried about me since I hired her," Gordon said, taking another defiant puff. "That's why I hired her. And since when has Sarah needed a reason to pitch a fit?"

At that, Gordon trailed off into a laugh that itself trailed off into another harsh cough. Gordon held his cane with both hands and leaned on it. His face turned red with the effort.

Adrian put his hand on Gordon's back and refrained from slapping the old man between the shoulder blades to help the coughing fit pass. Instead, he rubbed his hand up and down, helplessly willing Gordon to relax, in an effort to be comforting. He felt a sympathetic twinge of what must have been years of emphysema in his own chest, and he led the old man to one of the benches under the gazebo. Once Gordon was sitting down, the coughing stopped and his breathing sounded much less strained. He sat up straight, spit one last time and took a deep breath.

"All right," he said with a more clear and easy voice. He'd apparently coughed up whatever was congesting him. "There's one point for irony."

"I'm just saying," Adrian said. He cleared his throat once and put his hands in his pockets. "You okay?"

"Fine," Gordon said. He lifted the cigarillo to his lips, sniffed it once and put it right back into his mouth. Thick white smoke rose up into the air around him as he exhaled and sat back with a rapturous look of contentment. "Almost dropped this. That would have been a shame."

Adrian shook his head. "Incorrigible."

"I prefer the term brand-loyal," Gordon said. He levered himself back to his feet with his cane and waved away Adrian's gesture to help.

"Well, at least you don't sound like you're about to spit up one of your lungs anymore," Adrian said with resignation.

"Felt like both," Gordon said. "But it's passed now. And it's starting to sound to me like you're stalling about something important."

"A little," Adrian admitted.

"Easy to tell something was on your mind," Gordon said. "I said your name twice when I saw you over here. It's pretty hard to sneak up on somebody on these rocks, too." He scraped his shoe across the loose pebbles on the path for emphasis.

"Oh that," Adrian said with a small smile. "No, I was just thinking back about when Sarah and I used to live here. We used to love walking through this garden. Sitting under this gazebo and talking was one of my favorite things to do here, pretty much any time of year. It was nice and peaceful then."

"These benches are more comfortable than they look, too," Gordon said, tapping the bench with his cane. His smile made his implication clear.

"Well," Adrian said, feeling red rise in his cheeks. Sarah was Gordon's daughter, after all: "They look... sturdy, I guess."

"Don't be such a girl, Adrian," Gordon said with a knowing grin. "I was a young man here myself once."

"I think I'd rather talk business now, Isaac," Adrian said with a nervous laugh. "Sheesh."

"Girl," Gordon said. He gestured with a nod and pointed the tip of his cane down the path in front of him.

"Come on, then. Hitch up the hem of your skirts, and let's take a walk."

The old man headed out of the vine-roof gazebo and led Adrian on an old familiar tour of the garden as they talked. Adrian had wandered throughout the entirety of this place many times, but he appreciated it no less now than he had the first time. This garden was alive and thriving, even so close to the dirty, dying spider web of steel and concrete that was Iron Rapids. Adrian breathed that feeling of life in deeply, ignoring the slate-gray sky above.

"So which one was it who finally did it?" Gordon asked.

"Pardon?"

"Who was it that asked you to come talk to me?" Gordon said. "I know you don't make personal calls during work hours."

"It's not a personal call, that's right," Adrian said. "But nobody asked me to come over today."

"Don't patronize me, Adrian," Gordon said. "I didn't help you get that job without knowing what it was going to mean. As soon as those Solutions people started calling me last year, I figured somebody from the Chamber would have you on my doorstep eventually. I'd just like to know who it was."

"Well, originally," Adrian said, "Evan Dunkirk suggested I come by. But Jim Mahoney was the one who started me working with Evan in the first place. They've both been dropping hints for a while."

"Those two," Gordon said. "Figures. They couldn't find each other's asses if their belts were tied together."

"They're not that bad," Adrian laughed.

"Yeah? Who do you think it was wanted to bring that Japanese car company here back when I was president of the Chamber? It was those two mostly."

"I don't remember that being such a bad thing," Adrian said.

"No," Gordon said, "it didn't seem like one at the time, did it?"

Adrian shook his head.

"But how many of those rice-burners have you seen on the streets lately? When was the last time you saw a Daihatsu commercial? Been a while, hasn't it?"

Adrian didn't say anything, but he nodded.

"That's what made it a bad idea then, son. You remember the first thing I told you when you and Sarah came up here to tell me you were getting married?"

"Oh yeah. 'Blacks,'" Adrian said, imitating Gordon's voice as best he could and trying not to laugh. "Being from Georgia you might not expect to see too many of them up here, son, but we do get our share. They're all over the country, not just in the south.' It was something like that."

"Remind me to tell you you've got a smart mouth," Gordon said.

"Yes sir."

"What I said then, son, was that you always have to look at the long view when you make a big decision. You didn't do it then, and it cost you when Sarah took you to court."

Adrian looked away from Gordon and down at the ground. "True."

"When I was president of the Chamber, Jim and Evan didn't know anything about looking at the long view," Gordon went on. "If I know the both of them, they haven't changed."

"So you think they're making a mistake with SynSol like they would have then with Daihatsu?" Adrian said. "Or like I did with Sarah."

"Be careful how you say that, son," Gordon said. "Sarah's still my baby, even if she grew up like her mother."

"Sorry."

"Accepted. To answer your question, I don't know if they're making a mistake. It's possible they're not. That's always possible. I suspect even a blind man can just happen to shoot an apple off his son's head."

"Well, what's the long view say, then?" Adrian said.

"Still too soon to tell," Gordon said. "I've had Can researching, and Evan sends me reports once a week telling me

about SynSol's founders and what property those people might want to buy. A lot of those reports had your name on them."

Adrian nodded.

"But that's what you're here for, I gather," Gordon said. "You got sent over to give me the reverse sales pitch in person. To tell me how much Synthetic Solutions is going to help this city and make the world a better place with its marvelous prosthetic devices. If you left your slides or your fact sheets inside with Candace, we can continue this in my office."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Adrian said. "There's been a new development."

The two men rounded the corner of a shrubby wall and entered a small courtyard that surrounded a shallow fountain. Eight thin jets of water, arranged in a circle, sprayed outward in the center of the marble basin, and a thicker stream rose above them in the middle of the circle. The jets pointed in the eight compass directions, and the middle stream rose high enough that it would indicate the direction of the wind should a strong enough gust arise. Eight alternating blue and white lights ringed the inside rim of the marble basin in the gaps between the water jets, but it was still too early in the day for them to be turned on. Adrian walked to the edge of the fountain and looked down into the water.

"What development is that?" Gordon said, walking over to the closest of four marble benches that marked the cardinal directions around the fountain. It was little more than a stone hassock, so he didn't sit down on it. "And what's the matter? You've been dancing around something."

"I don't know how to say this, Isaac," Adrian said, not turning to face Gordon. He continued to stare at his own blurry, wiggling reflection in the water. "They let me go yesterday morning."

"Pardon?"

"Jim Mahoney fired me. I'm kind of surprised you didn't know already."

"No I didn't know," Gordon said. "What happened?"

Adrian related the story of how he'd shown up at work yesterday morning only to be told that he'd been replaced by some temp kid. He told Gordon about how he'd gone to Jim Mahoney's office demanding an explanation, as well as how he hadn't received a satisfactory one. He didn't go into as great of detail as he had with Jordan over lunch when it was all still fresh in his mind. The same need to vent just wasn't there. Oddly enough, Adrian realized, he was pretty much over the shock and the embarrassment already.

"He said you weren't doing a good enough job?" Gordon said. "That's ridiculous. I know you better than that, son."

Adrian shrugged. "He tried to blame strident absenteeism, too. It was all a bunch of bullshit. Sorry. Language."

"No, it sounds like you're right," Gordon said. "How many days had you missed?"

"Just Friday and Monday," Adrian said. "And that was because of the accident."

"What accident?" Gordon said.

"Didn't Sarah tell you?" Adrian asked, although he could think of no reason why she might have. "I had a car accident Thursday night on Highway 38 and woke up Monday afternoon in Founders' Memorial."

"Good lord, son. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I didn't get so much as a scratch. I've never felt better. It's just that apparently nobody knew where I was all that time."

"No one knew?" Gordon fumed. "I know the chief of that hospital's staff. I should call him right this minute. That is outrageous."

"No, no, it's okay, Isaac," Adrian said, turning to face Gordon at last. "I came out of there fine. Nobody else in the accident was too bad hurt. I'd just as soon let it go, if it's all the same."

"That's your decision, son," Gordon said, somewhat mollified, but still staring with narrowed eyes. "But I will speak with Sarah. She should have known better."

"I guess she should have," Adrian sighed. "I'm just glad I'm all right."

"So am I, son," Gordon said, coming to stand beside him at the fountain's edge. He gripped Adrian's elbow in a wrinkled and liver-spotted hand. "So am I."

A moment passed between the two of them in which neither spoke. Adrian smiled sadly, and Gordon let go of his arm. The two of them turned to look into the fountain, and they stood thus until Gordon spoke again.

"So you need some help with your job situation, then," he said at last.

"What?"

"Don't fake surprise, son. That must be why you still came over here today. Even fired, you don't make personal calls during work hours."

Adrian smiled again, this time with a shadow of shame. "I didn't know what else to do. I don't want it to look like I came over here with my hand out, but... I don't know what I thought."

"You know better than to walk in here with your hand out," Gordon said. "I've never seen you do it before."

"I know."

"But here you are."

Adrian nodded. He could feel his head shrinking down between his shoulders as his shame grew.

"Do you remember the last thing I said to you at your wedding reception, son? And it wasn't about blacks this time, I'm sure."

The first thing Gordon had said at the reception, Adrian remembered, was to ask where Adrian's father was, which had earned Gordon Adrian's mother's eternal enmity. The last thing, however, was much more comforting. Adrian said he remembered.

"I said, 'Welcome to the family,'" Gordon said. "And I meant that. I still call you son for a reason. I don't care when you divorced Sarah."

Adrian didn't say anything.

"And since you're family," Gordon went on, "it's my responsibility to help you where I can. And in this town, son, my help goes a long way."

"So I hear," Adrian said.

"It just might be that you couldn't have been fired at a better time," Gordon said. "I think I have a place you might fit in."

"Really?" Adrian said. That was fast.

"Really," Gordon said. "You're familiar with Iron Rapids Manufacturing in the city? IRM?"

"I've heard of it," Adrian said with the beginning of a smile on his face. "It's only one of the oldest companies in the city."

"My company," Gordon said.

"It might have come up once or twice at the Chamber," Adrian said. "I think Sarah might have brought it up a few times, too."

"One of my plants under IRM just lost a manager," Gordon said over Adrian's attempted witticism. "You know Mike Grogan?"

"His name sounds familiar," Adrian said. "I've never met him, though."

"Mister Grogan," Gordon said, "nearly caused a strike not so very long ago when the workers in his plant found out that he wasn't keeping up with OSHA safety standards."

"Wait, I did hear about that," Adrian said, remembering some gossip he'd overheard in the Chamber's break room a while back. "One of his coworkers figured it out and sold him out, right? Something like that."

"That's right," Gordon said. "Needless to say, Mister Grogan is no longer employed with Iron Rapids Manufacturing. That being the case, his factory now needs a manager. His assistant's been covering for his absence, but the board has yet to choose a replacement that suits me. I was going to tell them to choose Peter for Sarah's sake, but I'd much rather give you that job if you need it."

Adrian's mouth hung open. He looked at Gordon as if the older man had unzipped his skin and Yosemite Sam had stepped out firing guns and hopping from foot to foot.

"You can do that?" he gasped.

"I don't commute in to the Gideon building every day anymore," Gordon assured him, "but the people at IRM do what I say. It's still my company even if I don't run it day-to-day like I used to."

"You *would* do that?" Adrian said. "For me?"

"I told you, son. You're family."

"What about Peter?" Adrian couldn't resist asking. "Sarah's going to be plenty pissed if she hears you passed her boyfriend up for me on something like this."

"You can relax about that," Gordon said. "Sarah knows her place when it comes to my business interests."

Adrian made a vague sound of troubled disbelief at that. He'd seen plenty of evidence to the contrary.

"Besides," Gordon added with a wry smile. "Peter isn't family. You are."

"I don't know what to say, Isaac," Adrian said. He felt like grabbing the man up beneath the armpits and spinning the two of them around until they fell in the fountain. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, son," Gordon said. "Just don't get it in your head that this is an easy thing I'm putting on you. I expect you to work harder than you have since you first came to Iron Rapids. Grogan's plant was just barely profitable, and worker-to-manager relations were already lousy. I'm going to have Grogan's assistant train you and stay on to watch over you, but after a week or two, you're going to be on your own."

"Still," Adrian said. "That's better than what I had when I got here. It's much better than I expected or even hoped for. Words can't thank you enough."

"Then save them," Gordon said. "Just do a good job and make me proud."

"I will," Adrian said eagerly. "Bet I will."

"If you can start Monday, that would be ideal. I can give you another week if you need it."

"No, that's great," Adrian said without really thinking about whether it was. "Monday's fine."

"Good. I'll talk to the board and have Candace get you all the information and paperwork you'll need. I'll expect you to hit the ground running."

"No problem," Adrian said. He took Gordon's hand and shook it, despite the fact that Gordon hadn't offered it. "I owe you a huge favor. Is there anything I can do for you? Anything at all?"

"Actually, son," Gordon said, disengaging his hand gingerly, "I do need to say something to you before you start. It has to do with the long view like I was talking about before. It's not a favor, but it does need to be said."

"What's that?" Adrian said, trying to get his galloping excitement under quick control and think clearly again. His common sense told him that he was missing something in this too-good-to-be-true situation, but he couldn't imagine what it might be.

"I won't lie to you, son," Gordon said. "Grogan's plant — your plant — is probably going to be the next one I close. The work you do is going to determine how long I wait to do it, so a lot of jobs are going to be resting on your shoulders. And I still haven't made up my mind about SynSol. If they are the best thing for this city's future and I do start selling out to them, your plant is going to be one of the first ones I turn over. Once that happens, there's no guarantee they'll keep you on board, and I won't have any sway if they decide to let you go."

"I understand that," Adrian said automatically, even though some of the wind whooshed out of his sails. "But if you do sell, that'll mean you're doing it for the good of the rest of the city, right? It'll mean Iron Rapids will be okay in the long run."

"That's right, son," Gordon said with a severe expression. "That's a good way to look at it."

"Plus," Adrian said, "if you sell, you still want to sell a quality product. Either way, my incentive is there to do a good job."

"Your incentive to do a good job," Gordon corrected, "is to provide for yourself and make your child-support

payments on time. That's the real long view. The rest of what I'm talking about just makes up your responsibilities on the job. It puts the long view in perspective. Do you see the difference?"

"Yes sir. I think so."

"Good," Gordon said. "I'm proud of you, son, and I want you to know that I wouldn't consider you for this if I didn't think you could do a good job of it."

"Thank you, Isaac," Adrian said. "It means a lot to hear you say that. I won't let you down."

"Better not," Gordon said. "You're going to be wearing my reputation as a shirt for a while. I don't want any stains on it."

"You won't have to worry about at thing," Adrian said.

"Good then. That's as settled as it's going to be for a while. Are you hungry? I could have Lucy make you a late lunch in the kitchen."

"Thanks," Adrian said, "but no thanks. I'm meeting a friend in town for lunch."

Adrian hadn't known that the words were coming until they were already out of his mouth, and a craving for a warm blueberry muffin caught him unaware. The idea crossed his mind that he would run into Jordan if he showed up at Zahn's Bakery, just as he had yesterday afternoon. For just a moment, he was absolutely certain of it, despite having no evidence to back it up. The certainty faded as quickly as it had come, but he'd already spoken, and the damage was already done on that score.

"Maybe some other time, then," Gordon said.

"Sure."

The two men stood in amiable silence watching the fountain splash.

"Was there anything else, son?" Gordon said after another minute or two.

"No, sir," Adrian said. "I guess I should be moving on."

"Do you need any money to hold you over until you start getting paid?"

Adrian put his hands in his pockets and said, "No thank you, Isaac. I can get by until then."

"How about your car? Is it still working after your accident? Do you need to borrow one out of the garage?"

Adrian had to laugh at that. "I don't think so. I've been taking the bus and getting free cab rides lately. If you want to have someone drop me off down town that'd be okay. I can get myself home from there. Really, I wouldn't feel right asking you for more than that after everything else you're doing for me."

"Good boy," Gordon said. "You know your limits. Tell Candace to have Eric give you a lift into the city. I'm not going anywhere this afternoon."

"I thought your driver's name was Richard."

"He got a better offer a while back. Eric's new."

"Gotcha. I guess I should be going then. You coming in?"

"Not just yet," Gordon said. "I think I'll stay out here a little longer before the weather turns on me."

Adrian put on a playfully disapproving smile and said, "You're going to finish that smelly thing, aren't you?" Just thinking about trying to smoke one of those baby cigars made his throat burn.

"I think I'm through with these for the afternoon," the old man said, wrinkling his nose. "After this one. No, I just want to think. Go say hello to Can and run on to your lunch appointment."

"I will," Adrian said. He took a few steps toward the house and stopped. "Isaac, thanks again. Seriously. I don't know if I can pay this favor back."

"You don't pay favors back, son," Gordon said. "You pay back debts. And I don't put family in debt. Just make me proud and remember the long view."

"I will," Adrian said again. Then, with nothing more to say, he walked toward the house, leaving Isaac Gordon standing alone in his garden.



When Adrian stuck his head back in the door of Candace's office, Candace was as he had left her: typing and listening to cassette-recorded rock-and-roll.

"Hiya, sweetheart," he said, startling her for the second time. "I'm on my way out. Just wanted to say bye."

"Heading home, Country Mouse?" she said across the top of her computer.

"Lunch. You busy?"

"Always," she said. "Rain check?"

"Whenever you want to collect, darling. I do need you to do me a favor, though."

"What's that?"

"Isaac said it was okay to have his driver drop me off in town. Can you set that up for me?"

"Yes I can," she said. She pressed a button on her telephone and made an intercom call to some other room in the house. She told the driver to pull the car around and be ready to take Adrian wherever he wanted to go. The driver gave a terse acknowledgement, and that was that.

"Thank you," Adrian said when the driver had hung up his end of the line.

"Any time," she said with a cute and friendly smile. "So did you cure Mister Gordon's habit like you promised?"

"Sure did," Adrian said. "And you're next on my list, Fairy Princess."

Candace giggled and shooed him away with a wave. "Your ride's waiting. Stop by again when you've got some free time."

"Will do. I'll see you later."

"Later."

Adrian waved and left Candace alone. As he walked back out the front door toward his waiting ride, he was smiling like the luckiest man on Earth.



"Detective Eric Havelin," the First among them said as he and the Second stood outside Jacob Sutton's office at

the Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce building. "I believe that you were notified that we were coming."

"I was," the civilian police detective said. He wore an off-the-rack department store suit with the coat unbuttoned. His hair was brushed back and going gray at the temples. His shirt was neatly pressed, and his diagonal-striped tie hung mostly straight, despite the lack of a tie clip. "Come in and take a look, gentlemen."

Havelin led the two of them into the room. The room was already full of forensic analysts, and a photographer flitted from point to point in the room snapping pictures. Jacob Sutton's body lay beside the desk.

"This is the place as we found it," Havelin said. "Casual inspection tells the basic story. Sutton comes into his office, trips over his own two feet and hits his head on the corner of the desk. Few hours later, the receptionist comes looking for him, finds him lying here and calls us. We showed up about ten minutes before you did. That's the cursory tale."

"There is more," the Second said, looking at Sutton's body.

"Obviously," Havelin said. "But before we get into that, let's talk about why you two should have jurisdiction here. This is a simple, local homicide, not a federal crime."

"We are investigating this crime's potential connection to a federal matter," the First said. "We understand that the victim was working in close relation with the Synthetic Solutions Corporation."

"If you say so," Havelin said. "I haven't spoken with the deceased's employer yet."

"We have it on good authority," the First said.

"All right," Havelin said. "How does that get you two involved here?"

"Synthetic Solutions has been contracted by the Department of Defense to design and manufacture bionic technology components for military applications," the First said.

"Among other things," Havelin said. "I read the business section of the paper. You're still no closer to my crime scene."

"Mister Sutton was placed here to facilitate that corporation's establishment in this city," the First said, unperturbed. "He was scheduled to speak with Isaac Gordon this afternoon on that very subject. It is our understanding that Isaac Gordon's cooperation is crucial to that corporation's establishment here, and that Mister Sutton was meeting with him to ensure that cooperation."

"Go on," Havelin said. "You might be getting warmer."

"It is possible," the First said, "that Mister Sutton was killed to prevent him from speaking to Isaac Gordon this afternoon."

"So if Sutton couldn't speak to Gordon," Havelin said, "Gordon wouldn't cooperate with Synthetic Solutions' people trying to set up in Iron Rapids." The detective crossed his arms and leaned against the doorjamb.

"Correct," the First said. "If Synthetic Solutions is not able to establish a base of manufacture expeditiously, it will not be able to deliver the product it was contracted by the government to deliver."

"So you're here," Havelin said with a patronizing tone, "because you think someone's endangering a government investment? Gentlemen, that explanation is pretty thin, even for jurisdiction piracy."

The First and Second both faced the civilian police detective so that he could see himself in all four reflective lenses of their sunglasses at once.

"Nonetheless," the First said with authority, "it is good enough."

"Even still," Havelin said as if he hadn't paused in his speech, "I guess it's good enough. Two more sets of eyes on this couldn't hurt."

The First and Second nodded, and Havelin turned away from them to address their attention to the actual crime scene before them.

"All right," Havelin said. He crouched down beside Sutton's body near the corpse's feet. "Like I was saying before, the basic story is pretty easy to figure out. Sutton trips, Sutton hits his head, Sutton dies on the floor. Simple. There are no signs of a struggle. Nothing's been taken. All of his

filing cabinets are still locked. His wallet, car keys and watch are all still where they should be."

"What is this on his shoes?" the Second asked, pointing down at the bottoms of Sutton's feet. Some sort of brown rubbish was caught in between the treads.

"You've got a good eye," Havelin said. He prodded some of the brown rubbish with the end of a pencil so that it drifted to the floor in flakes. "I figured he'd just stepped in some leaves outside or something until I got over here behind the desk. Take a look."

The First and Second did as Havelin suggested and saw dead, dry leaves scattered on the floor behind the desk.

"What are these doing here?" the Second asked.

"That's the big question," Havelin said, standing back up. "You see that Sutton doesn't have a window in here, and the hallway and adjacent offices are clean. There aren't really that many in here—"

"Thirty-eight," the Second offered.

"—but... right, thirty-eight. Anyway, there aren't that many, but there shouldn't be any at all. That was anomaly number one. Number two was what actually kept me in the room instead of sending everybody home with the casual inspection's story for an answer about what happened."

Havelin stepped over Sutton's body, crouched down beside it again and pulled down the collar of Sutton's shirt. "If you lean over here, gentlemen, you'll see what I'm talking about."

The First and Second stepped around Sutton's body and looked down at the back of Sutton's neck. An ugly dark purple bruise covered the back of his neck on the left side.

"You see this?" Havelin said. "I noticed it when I saw the leaf matter on the soles of his shoes. Looks like somebody cracked him a pretty good one with a blunt object. It's pretty hard to do that to yourself, no matter how hard you fall down."

"So Sutton was fighting with someone," the First said.

"Well," Havelin said as he rose once again, "that's one theory. I've got some problems with it, though."

"Indeed," the Second said. "Nothing else in the room is disturbed. Sutton's knuckles aren't bruised either."

"Not only that," Havelin said, "but nobody remembers seeing anyone but Sutton come into the room all morning. The receptionist who found him has a clear view down this hall from her desk, and she doesn't remember anybody even knocking, much less going in unannounced. The guy across the hall had his door open all morning after he got here, and he doesn't remember anybody coming in or going out either."

"When did he arrive this morning?" the First asked.

"About ten minutes after Sutton, according to the receptionist," Havelin said. "But she was here before either one of them. When Sutton unlocked that door was the first time she saw it open."

"So the attacker had to be waiting inside when Sutton arrived," the First said.

"If there was an attacker, and Sutton didn't get this bruise someplace else, then yes."

"There are no signs of forced entry on the door," the Second said.

"I didn't see any either," Havelin said. "At first, I figured the killer must have had a key, but only two people do."

"Sutton," the First said. "Who else? The receptionist?"

"The janitor," Havelin said. "Problem is, he's been home sick with a cold for two days."

"There is also the matter of the security system," the Second said. "I saw the motion sensors in the hallways."

"I was coming around to that," Havelin said. "The receptionist was the first person in this morning, and she shut down the system from a panel behind her desk. Nobody set the thing off during the night, so nobody could have been moving around in the hallways to pick Sutton's lock, open his door and close it again after Sutton left last night. The receptionist didn't see anyone in the hallway this morning after she shut the system down, and she didn't have a key to get in here before Sutton showed up. Plus, I saw her.... She's

not near tall or strong enough to hit Sutton hard enough to do this. She's even wearing high-heels."

"So no one could have entered the room all morning," the First said, "yet someone must have in order to have done this to Sutton."

"That seems to be the trouble," Havelin said. "A does not look like it equals A."

"Indeed," the First said. He and the Second exchanged a look as Havelin put his hands in his pockets.

"Thus far," Havelin said, stepping back toward the center of the room, "just for the sake of argument, I've been working under the assumption that someone else was in here with Sutton. We pulled fingerprints off the inside doorknob, but we haven't identified them. The receptionist loused up the outside knob pretty well, so we couldn't get anything there. As you can see, we're still dusting down pretty much everything else. I don't expect to find much, though. The only thing I've got resembling a lead is something the receptionist told me about this office's former occupant."

"Adrian Cross," the First said.

Havelin's eyes widened, and he nodded, "You've done your research, it looks like. Yeah, that man, Cross, worked in this office before Sutton, according to the receptionist. He'd disappeared last Thursday after work and showed up again yesterday morning. Apparently, his boss got tired of waiting, and he replaced Cross with Sutton there. Cross found out about it when Sutton showed up, and he was extremely upset. He reportedly confronted his boss then threw a temper tantrum in the hallway and stormed out. Nobody here has seen him since."

"Cross would have had a key to this office, a key to the building itself and a knowledge of how to shut down then reset the security system," the First said.

"And you could say he had a motive," Havelin said. "If he thought Sutton stole his job, he might have attacked him. It's not outside the bounds of possibility. But even calling Cross a suspect still leaves a hole."

"No one saw Cross leave the room," the Second said. "And there's no way out except through this door."

"Right," Havelin said. "Nobody saw him in the halls or anywhere around the building at all today. And after the scene he made yesterday, they would have remembered."

"An act like this is not consistent with Cross' personality, though," the Second said. "Is it?"

"Not according to his former coworkers," Havelin said. "His outburst yesterday was the most worked up they can remember seeing him. Doesn't mean he didn't have it inside him all that time, though. I haven't met him, so I can't say."

The mobile phone in the First's suit jacket pocket rang, and he excused himself to the hallway to answer it.

"But as far as motive goes," Havelin continued, "that's the only one I've got. Although, I guess that since you guys are here I could add this chain-of-events sabotage theory as a possibility, too. I don't suppose you have a list of potential suspects for that one that I could work from."

"None at present," the Second said, deflecting Havelin's sarcasm. "However, we suspect that Adrian Cross might be connected. We believe that he may have a contact who could be responsible for this murder."

"Do you have a name for this suspected possible contact Cross might be connected to?" Havelin asked.

"We are still researching that."

"Is that so?" Havelin said. "Then Mister Cross sounds like as good a place to start looking as any. We can pull his personnel records from Human Resources here and stop by his home. We'll try his emergency contact information after that if we can't find him there."

"That will not be necessary," the First said as he came back into the room, putting his mobile phone back into his jacket pocket. He turned to the Second and said, "Our colleagues have discovered Cross' whereabouts. They found him at a bakery in the city. We're to rendezvous with them and detain Cross for questioning."

"Then I'll come along," Havelin said. "We can question him at the station."

The First and Second looked at each other briefly then turned to regard Havelin as they had before.

"That will not be necessary," the First said. "Prepare an interrogation room at the police station and await our arrival."

"I'll be waiting at the station when you bring him around," Havelin said. "I'll have an interrogation room waiting so we can speak to him."

"Well enough," the Second said. He and the first turned simultaneously and left to find their car.

Five

"Report," the Fourth said as the Third folded his mobile phone closed and put it in his pocket.

"They are coming," the Third said, looking at the Fourth in the car's rearview lens. Despite the fact that they two were the car's only occupants, the Fourth had not made any move to sit in the passenger seat next to the Third. The Third had not offered any invitation to do so either.

"What did they discover at the Chamber?"

"Agent Sutton was murdered before he could contact Gordon," the Third said. "That's why he hasn't reported in. The civilian police have only one suspect."

"Cross?"

"Yes," the Third said. "The evidence is circumstantial, but civilian forensic analysts are still collecting physical evidence data. Their reports should be complete by the time we have Cross in custody at the police station."

"What about the police station?" the Fourth asked. He looked straight out his window down the street before them. The passenger side of the car faced down the street, giving them both a good view of Zahn's Bakery, into which Cross had gone almost an hour ago. They could just see Cross through the bakery's front windows, sitting alone and having a late lunch.

"Our colleagues have arranged for an interrogation room at the station," the Third said. "We can question Cross there about his possible involvement in Agent Sutton's murder."

"It is unlikely unto impossibility that Cross was involved in Agent Sutton's murder," the Fourth said. "His psychological profile indicates that he does not possess that capacity for violence."

"I am aware of that," the Third said, bristling. "I wrote that profile. But the interrogation will give us a chance to find out about Cross' Deviant contact, if he has one. The one you suspect may be responsible for sabotaging the procedure you performed on Highway 38."

"That is not a supposition," the Fourth said. "It is fact. Only a powerful Deviant could have made that procedure fail."

"As you say," the Third demurred obliquely. "We can find out for certain once we have Cross in custody. The civilian detective, Eric Havelin, will want to speak with—"

"That will not be necessary," the Fourth said. "Cross will not be taken into custody; there will be no need for an interrogation."

"Why not?" the Third asked, turning around in his seat to look at the Fourth.

"I have arranged a contingency procedure in line with the original protocols of this agenda," the Fourth said. "Cross will enter Doctor Zearin's custody, and we will transfer him to the Ann Arbor Construct for prosthetic application and treatment."

"Another procedure?" the Third said. "It may already be too late for that. The Highway 38 procedure was to have a conjunctional effect with Agent Sutton's procedure concerning Isaac Gordon. Without Agent Sutton's procedure in effect, this contingency procedure will provide only a limited amount of leverage against Gordon."

"We will make up for Agent Sutton's procedure against Gordon where Agent Sutton failed," the Fourth said. He continued to stare down the street. His attention seemed to be focused on the traffic signal over the intersection half a block away from the bakery's front door.

"Agent Sutton didn't fail," the Third said. "He was murdered. This agenda is under attack."

"I am ensuring that it does not fail altogether," the Fourth said. "We will speak to Gordon ourselves once Cross is en route to Ann Arbor."

"I'm afraid that might be too rushed," the Third said. "We need to push back our time table projections and try to account for this interference."

"Time tables exist for a reason," the Fourth said. "This agenda will not diverge from its projections."

"Those projections didn't even take interference into account," the Third persisted.

"Wrong," the Fourth said. "This agenda was created in part to combat the influence of supernatural manipulators acting in this city and the surrounding areas."

"I wasn't told that," the Third said. "What supernatural manipulators?"

"That information is classified."

"But are they will-workers specifically?" the Third asked.

"Classified," the Fourth repeated. "You do not need to know that information."

The Third seethed in silence then said, "Even if they are, we should still regroup and restructure the agenda in light of what has happened. It's been rushed from the beginning anyway. We should expand the time table and make sure that every factor has been accounted for."

"I will not expand the time table," the Fourth said. "Control's expectations will be met on the course that has been chosen. The agenda will proceed as is."

"You're making a mistake," the Third said, turning back around to face front again. "There should be another way to—"

"Your reservations are duly noted," the Fourth cut in. "You may schedule a review of my actions after this operation is over. Now remain silent. I need to concentrate."

The Third gripped the steering wheel so hard that his fingers became little more than rings of white knuckles, but he kept his peace. What could he say? The Fourth was the overall field coordinator of this agenda, and his will was to be obeyed unto its conclusion. Avenues of redress existed, but even exploring them as possibilities weakened the agenda's existing structure and endangered what chance it did have of succeeding.

The Third had no option but to wait until the agenda's conclusion to call the Fourth's actions to Control's attention, which was far more frustrating than actually arguing with the Fourth in the vain hope that he would change his mind. If the agenda succeeded despite the odds, he would have no grounds to call the Fourth's actions up for review. However, if he waited and secretly hoped that the agenda failed due to the Fourth's mishandling, he ran the risk of willfully sabotaging the Fourth's efforts himself. If he did that, the Fourth would know, and he himself would be up for review at the operation's end. The situation presented a debilitating paradox that left him sim-

mering in silence, actually hoping that the wrong methods turned out to work once all was said and done.



After his third cup of coffee, Adrian finally admitted to himself that Jordan would not be stopping by the bakery for lunch today. Either he'd missed the man already, or Jordan didn't come into Zahn's every day. Whichever was the case, it meant that Adrian would be finishing his lunch alone then making his way back through town to the bus stop near the Chamber of Commerce to find a ride home. Or calling a cab and hoping for a lucky break.

Today certainly seemed to be the day for those, Adrian mused. First his free ride out to Gordon's place, then Gordon's incredible job offer. Maybe next he'd win the lottery, discover the cure for cancer and build a better mouse trap all before bed. It all felt possible the way his day was going. He even believed that he could just happen to turn Gordon's ailing IRM factory into a profitable enterprise once again.

Even as the thought popped into his head, though, he began to doubt himself. In his desperation, he hadn't asked Gordon for any particulars about the job. He didn't know what "his" factory produced. He didn't know what the salary was supposed to be. He didn't know what his responsibilities were. He didn't have any experience actually managing employees. The idea that he would be responsible for those employees' jobs was more than a little daunting now that he stopped to actually think about it. Plus, the former manager apparently had not made many friends on his way out. The employees could very well be hostile to him without giving him a chance to do his job. Or worse, they might expect to get away with things their former manager hadn't let them get away with, which would put him right on the horns of a dilemma. He would either have to give in to what they wanted — thus potentially endangering the future of the plant — or deny their requests outright to establish a precedent — thus potentially making them contentious and even more prone to strike. He would have to be stern with them and make a strong first impression, but he also had to make sure not to come across as a spoiled tyrant who got where he was by nepotism alone.

Of course, they wouldn't know about the nepotism at all if he didn't let it show, but what sorts of clues would give it away? Could factory workers just tell that sort of thing? Did laborers have an intuitive understanding of their management staff that came from years of experience, and to which the staff itself was oblivious? He probably had very little in common with the people who would be working for him, so what could he do to make sure that they would accept him and work well under him? You had to understand a person in order to motivate him to do what you want, and Adrian didn't understand the manual-laborer mentality any more than he understood the female mind. He felt snobby thinking it, but even back home he had never had to mix with "those people" much before. He added that relative inexperience to the facts that he had majored in communications in college and that the little he knew about running a factory had come from conversations with Gordon over the past decade. The sum of those factors did not look promising, confidence or no confidence.

For instance, how would the workers react if they learned that Gordon was considering selling the factory to Synthetic Solutions? Would they work harder so that the old man wouldn't sell? Would they work harder so that the old man *would* sell? Would their union leader open negotiations with Gordon or the SynSol people on his own? Would they redouble their efforts so as not to be downsized if SynSol took over, or would they quit when they heard the news just so as not to forestall the inevitable?

Would they even be laid off in the first place if SynSol took over? If they could be retrained in how to build SynSol's product, wouldn't that company be more inclined to keep them? As Adrian saw it, the only people who would likely be fired if SynSol took over were those who made up the management staff. Laborers were commodities in this town, but managers weren't so valuable. He might do a fantastic job making the factory profitable, but that might make it all the more enticing to the folks at Synthetic Solutions. If it did, Gordon might just decide to sell it and support SynSol's move into the city. As soon as the factory changed hands, SynSol

would probably put its own manager at the helm, which would leave him out of a job. On the other hand, if he did a less than stellar job managing the factory, its poor performance might convince Gordon to sell. If SynSol took it over in that case, the people who evaluated the plant's performance would finger him as the reason it was doing so poorly and replace him. Neither case worked out very well for him.

By the same token, however, if he were not able to maintain and increase the plant's profitability and productivity, Gordon might just shut the plant down altogether rather than sell it. In that case, not only Adrian but all those workers as well would be out of a job. SynSol, then, might just decide to snatch them up to work in one of the small factories it had already bought in the city, which would rob Gordon of worker commodities. If the same happened often enough in town, the newcomer company might actually be able to steal Gordon's workers away without Gordon having to shut factories down in the first place. If enough workers jumped ship thus, Gordon would have to start shutting factories down behind them. If he did that, he might end up having to sell out to Synthetic Solutions regardless of what he thought was best, all in order to break even and not lose serious money just trying to keep the city from dying. The alternative was to watch his grandfather's company go bankrupt and watch the worst of the effects resound throughout the doomed city of Iron Rapids.

Before these spinning thoughts could pile up too high in Adrian's mind, he checked them against his sense of realism. For the most part, he didn't even know what he was talking about, and he was letting his self-doubt run away with his imagination. He'd learned that trick from Sarah, the queen of exaggerating the downside of a situation into an imminent disaster. He had to admit that he really didn't know enough about what he was getting into to be aware of the consequences of the choices he would be required to make. He had no clear sense of the long view, and the three cups of coffee he'd already had were not helping him find one. Maybe if he'd run into Jordan, or if Candace had come along with him, he might have been able to talk his way through it all, but such was not

the case. All he had were his worst-case scenarios and misgivings, and neither of them did anyone any good.

Rather than sit thinking about this any longer, Adrian decided to go home and try to do some Internet research. He didn't know exactly what he would be looking for, but maybe something out there in the vastness of cyberspace would give him a clue about what went into running a factory. If he could find information along those lines, he could meet the former manager's personal assistant with more than an ignorant look on his face. And if not, he'd just enter, "I am a factory manager. Help me," into his search engine and hope for the best. Even if nothing turned up, he would at least feel like he was doing something instead of just sitting around and letting his fears get the best of him. Then, if that didn't help, he'd check out the *Wake-Up Call* on line and try to find a few laughs there.

Resolved to action at last, such as it was, Adrian stacked his three paper coffee cups, stuffed his napkin and muffin wrapper down into the top one and stood up. He tossed the garbage in the bin, waved good afternoon to the cashier and went outside.

As a chill wind swept odd bits of paper in front of it down the sidewalk, Adrian turned up the collar of his jacket and wished that Aron Jordan's cab would pull up to take him home. Frankly, any cab would do, but Jordan's would be particularly welcome. He and the old man had been getting along quite well these last couple of days, and making friends so quickly was a rare treat for him. Plus, something about the old man seemed so familiar that it set Adrian at ease around him. The man might have been an uncle or an old favorite teacher from high school as comfortable as he made Adrian. Adrian wished idly that he could contract the man to be his personal driver just so that the two of them could have an excuse to hang out and talk. Of course, if wishes were wings, Adrian wouldn't need a ride home.

As far as coincidence was concerned, he did see a car parked up the block to his right on a side street across the road from him that looked like the sleek, black four-door car he'd bumped into in the hospital's parking lot. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have noticed it, but it looked entirely out of place

in this neighborhood. It stuck out like an airplane at a trailer park. He remembered that the car had a built-in alarm, but in a neighborhood like this in this city, a blaring car alarm wasn't likely to bring a gang of concerned citizens running. It was more likely to annoy everyone in earshot and plant bitter seeds of envy in those who didn't have such a car themselves. He hoped that whoever owned that nice piece of machinery was paid up on his insurance. Keeping his eyes on the car, he stepped off the curb to cross the street.

It didn't occur to him to look both ways until it was already a second too late.

He heard the noise first, and he turned to see what it was in innocent distraction. It sounded like dogs howling or ravens crying out, and it was so loud that it seemed to be coming from inside his head. As his gaze panned left, an acrid burning stench assaulted his nose in accompaniment to the sound. When he had turned all the way around, he found himself staring at the high grill of a chocolate-brown United Parcel Service van that was less than a foot away from him. Its tires were smoking as they tried to cling to the wet asphalt of the street. Through the windshield, Adrian could just see the sheet-white face of the delivery driver whose arms were locked straight against the wheel and whose mouth was a wide, dark O in panic. Through the windshield and out the back window, Adrian could see that the traffic light behind the driver was a bright and angry red.

As the overlong instant ended, Adrian threw his arms out in front of himself as if he expected that to help. The brown van leaped forward despite its crying brakes and slammed into him. He felt warm metal under his hands and the grid pattern of the grill against both of his knees as the truck's bumper took his feet out from under him. With the calm detachment of merciful shock, he heard a sound like someone smacking the bottom of a metal garbage can with an aluminum baseball bat, then he was in the air moving away from the van. The driver was still staring at him like a dumb cow. Before Adrian could truly process any of this information, even to realize what had happened to him in any way other than the abstract, he came down on his shoulder and the back of his head. He heard an-

other sound, like two metal pipes banging together, and he felt himself start rolling.



The Third sucked in a horrified breath through his teeth as the Fourth's procedure took effect down the street. The traffic light half a block away from the bakery had been a steady red for several seconds, but no cars were coming on the cross street. As he watched, a brown delivery van approached the intersection at highway speed and went right under the light with no regard for its color just as Adrian Cross was exiting the bakery. In a sense, the driver was lucky that no one was approaching on the cross street at that moment.

Adrian Cross, however, was not at all lucky in that respect. He exited the bakery, looked directly at the two of them in their car as he had when he had been released from the hospital and walked right out into the street in the delivery van's path. Incredibly, the driver actually saw Cross in time to hit his brakes, but the van was moving far too quickly to stop in such a short space. The bumper hit Cross in the shins, scooped him off his feet and carried him another few feet as the van slid to a harsh stop. At that point, Cross bounced off the van's hood and rolled like a stuffed doll on the ground. The Third swallowed hard as Cross came to rest in the street next to a lamp post. He could imagine that he heard bones cracking and turning to powder as Cross rolled over and over on the hard ground.

"Well enough," the Fourth said in the moment right after the collision before anyone on the scene had reacted. "An ambulance will be en route shortly. Have your colleagues meet us at Founders' Memorial hospital. I'll alert Doctor Zearin to be prepared to—"

"Wait," the Third gasped, still looking at the scene in front of the bakery. The driver of the van had jumped out and run over to Cross, and some of the bakery employees had come outside as well. At the far end of the block, the First and Second were driving up in their car. "Look."

The Fourth looked up from his mobile data terminal and saw what the Third had seen. "Unacceptable," he spat in disbelief.

As the brown-clad delivery driver crouched next to Cross, Cross got to his knees and rose slowly to his feet. The back of his shirt was wrinkled and dirty, and one of his shoes was still beneath the left front tire of the van, but he was conscious. And he was standing up. He wasn't hurt in the slightest.

"What the hell?" the Third whispered. Then, to the Fourth, he said, "Should I go do something?"

"Stay in the car," the Fourth said, gritting his teeth and gripping the top of the passenger seat in front of him with his left hand. His face was pale, and tense cords stood out under his skin. "Have the others bring Cross to the police station as they planned. We'll meet them there. Tell them!"

Rendered almost mute by amazement, the Third relayed the message to the First and Second.



Adrian opened his eyes immediately and stood up without thinking that it should have been impossible to do so. He could still smell burnt rubber and hear a commotion of horrified voices coming from all around him. Dazed, he looked around at the bakery cashier, a few lunch patrons and the UPS delivery driver who stood around him with wide eyes.

"My God," the van driver was saying. "I had the green. I didn't even see you. You just stepped right in front of me and I couldn't stop. I had the green. Oh please be okay, I swear I didn't even see you."

"...trying to kill himself..." someone else whispered.

"...adrenaline..." a voice said.

"...on drugs..." another added.

"...PCP..."

"...don't get too close..."

"I'm all right," Adrian said to all of them as he wobbled on weak knees. "I don't think I'm hurt. I think I'm okay."

"...call an ambulance..."

"...the police..."

"Jesus, man," the van driver said, taking him by the shoulders. "I never saw you, and I had the green light. Shit, please don't sue."

Adrian tuned them all out and looked down at himself. His clothes were dirty, and his back was a little sore, but nothing else hurt. His knees weren't powder, his shins hadn't flown apart like matchsticks, and his skull hadn't caved in. Nothing that should have been mangled or broken was so much as scratched.

"Screw dumb luck," he mumbled in awe. "Somebody up there likes me."

"Yeah, yeah," the van driver said with a look of relief. "It's a miracle, right? Nobody got hurt. No need to report this or get UPS involved. We'll just go on like it never happened, okay?"

As Adrian opened his mouth to tell the van driver exactly what he thought of that attitude, a black car exactly like the one parked up the street pulled to a stop at the curb in front of the delivery van. The front doors opened simultaneously, and two men in identical black suits, hats and matching sunglasses stepped out. They approached the small crowd looking at everyone but Adrian.

"Disperse," the first one said. "All of you move along."

"Disperse," the second one said as well.

To Adrian's surprise, all of the onlookers turned around and went back in the direction from which they'd come. Even the van driver went back to his van without another word.

"Wait," Adrian said to the two men. "These people are witnesses to what happened. The police are going to want to talk to them. Who are you two?"

"We're taking you to the police station, Mister Cross," the first man said. "Come with us."

"I can't," Adrian protested. "I think I need to fill out an accident report or something. Plus, I should probably go to a hospital. Did you see what just happened?"

"You do not require medical attention," the second man said. He and the first stood very close to Adrian and separated just far enough from each other that Adrian could only look at one of them at a time without backing away. "You may make your report at the police station. Afterward, you will remain for questioning."

"Questioning about what?" Adrian asked. "Who are you two? Are you cops?"

"No, Mister Cross," the first man said. "We answer to a higher authority." He and the second man produced leather wallets from their inside jacket pockets and opened them briefly. Adrian looked from one to the other. He didn't have a chance to examine them in any detail, but the badges inside the wallets transmitted a definite sense of authority. "Now get in the car."

Uneasily, Adrian did as he was told. He climbed into the back seat of the car as the two men in black sat down up front. Before he could even buckle his seat belt, the car sped away south toward the Iron Rapids police department.

Six

Matthew Simonson sat on his motorcycle in the lowest level of the downtown parking deck near the Iron Rapids Chamber of Commerce taking deep breaths. At the best of times, he was comfortable with his audacity. In times like this, however, he doubted his sanity. He stood up, took off his helmet and stored it in the compartment beneath his rear seat. He left his leather riding gloves on as he unbelted his trench coat and straightened his tie in the bike's side mirror. His reflection nodded at him once, then continued to mimic his movements.

Rather than leaving right away for the Chamber after Jordan had visited him this afternoon, he had waited and stalled and considered his options. The most reasonable course of action, he had decided, was to wait until the Chamber of Commerce building was about to close down for the evening and come then. Every moment he spent waiting was one in which the Technocrats might realize that they'd been hacked and send someone to sanitize the computer in Cross' former office, but Simonson ultimately felt better about taking that chance than he did about walking into a room full of police officers. Now that the place was closing down for the evening, however, the investigators and forensics people were likely to have packed up and gone home as well.

"This is the moment, Matthew," he said to himself, reaffirming what he had been telling himself since he had left his hotel. "As if you belong there. As if you know exactly what you're doing."

He took one more deep breath then started walking. He climbed the steps out of the parking deck, crossed the street and headed for the front doors of the Chamber of Commerce building. In the fading, purple light of early evening, the place had a crouched and brooding aspect to it that only the pink-orange streetlights kept from looking sinister. Simonson

mounted the front steps, turning his collar up high against the cold, and walked through the front door as if he had every right to be there.

"Can I help you?" the receptionist standing behind the front desk asked. He was a gangly kid with black hair and acne that had not found the will to give up. His voice cracked as he spoke.

"I don't think so," Simonson said, turning to him and looking at him as if he were intruding on his valuable time. In his peripheral vision, he could see that the nameplate on the desk read "Mary Stanford."

"We're closed right now, sir, so I'm afraid you'll have to leave," the receptionist kid said. "If you'd like to come back tomorrow, business hours are from—"

"I know what they are," Simonson bluffed. "I work here, and I've got work to do. I have to come in because I need to get at the equipment in my office."

"What office is that, sir?" the receptionist said. "Can I have your name please?"

"It's in the back," Simonson huffed with an impatient gesture. "Who are you? Where's Mary?"

"My name's Edward, sir," the receptionist said. "I'm the intern from Economic Expansion. I'm filling in for Mary for this afternoon and tomorrow. She wasn't feeling well after what happened today."

"Well, Edward," Simonson said, laying it on thick, "I'm not going to be feeling very well if I don't get the server back up ASAP. And no one else in the company is going to appreciate it very much either if I don't. Now, is there some problem?"

"I was about to leave, sir," Edward said.

"So go on," Simonson said. "What's the hold-up?"

"I need to turn on the security system, sir."

"I'll do it," Simonson sighed in mock exasperation. "It doesn't take any sort of a genius to press four numbers on a pad."

"Mister Mahoney said to take care of it personally."

"Did he say to keep me from restoring the email network? Did he say that even though the system's down, you should make no allowances for me to fix it? Did he say those words to you, Edward?"

"Well, no sir."

"I didn't think so," Simonson said. "Now go along home. I'll lock up on the way out."

"If you say so, sir," Edward gave in at last. "I'll just—"

Simonson turned his back on the kid and started walking down the hall toward Adrian Cross' erstwhile office. "Right, right," he said with a dismissive wave. Behind him, the intern left the building and locked the door. Simonson stopped, looked around once to make sure that no one else was around, then ducked the yellow and black police tape to get into Cross' office.

Rather than turning on the overhead light, Simonson took a penlight out of his jacket pocket and shined its bright beam around the office. A tape outline next to the desk and a dark discoloration on the carpet confirmed what Jordan had told him about what had happened here this morning. A faint green glow from a light on the computer's CPU tower and a low electrical whine confirmed his own suspicions about what he would find. He stepped around the stain on the carpet and sat down in the swivel chair behind the desk. He touched the mouse with his penlight, and as soon as he moved it, the screen blinked to life. As far as Simonson knew, it had gone into power-saving sleep mode after Jordan had stopped using it, and none of the investigators who had been in here today had thought to check it.

Pulling his leather gloves tight for reassurance, Simonson took the mouse in hand and went looking for the files that Jordan had claimed to have hidden on this computer. He paged through the folders and subfolders Jordan had named back at the hotel room and found the two Technocrat files under the names Jordan had given them. Glancing over the computer and out the office

door continuously, he produced a 3x5 floppy disk with the Möbius symbol on it from his jacket pocket and slipped it into the computer's drive. He set the two files to copy onto the disk, expanded text and all, then sat impatiently as the uncomfortably slow machine did as he had asked. When the operation was complete, he ejected the Möbius disk and erased the files from the computer for safety's sake. He then closed all the open windows on the screen, put the mouse back on the pad in the exact position in which he'd found it and stood up. He arranged the chair as he'd found it, stepped over the carpet stain once again and made his way to the door once again, glad that he didn't have to spend any more time than these few minutes.

"Sir, what were you doing in there?" a voice asked as he ducked back under the police tape and stepped into the hallway.

Simonson jumped and found himself standing face-to-face with the receptionist intern, Edward.

"Good lord," he said. "What are you still doing here? You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"I didn't feel right about leaving you alone in the building, sir," the intern said. "Now what were you doing in that room? That's a crime scene. It's a restricted, off-limits area, as is indicated prominently by that cautionary tape, sir."

"Take it easy, Edward," Simonson said, walking past the young man and heading for the front door. He hoped that he didn't look as stiff and nervous as he felt inside. "I found what I was looking for. Everything's up and running now."

"So what was the problem?" Edward asked, trying to catch up to him.

"Don't ask me to explain it right now," Simonson said, opening the front door. "I'll tell you about it the next time I'm in the office. It's routine, but it's complicated."

"So you're finished, then?"

"I have some things to check at home, but I'm done here. Turn on the security system and lock up on your way out, will you? That's a good boy."

As Edward stood, unsure if he should press the issue any further, Simonson turned on his heel and walked out the door toward the parking deck as if nothing in the world was wrong.



The first thing Simonson did when he returned to his hotel room was turn on his laptop and try to find Sugardaddy. He sent email to the only address he had for Sugardaddy and waited for a reply as his computer scanned the Möbius disk for viruses mundane and Technocratic in nature. When the scan was finished, he opened the files themselves and found them just as Jordan had described them. They laid out detailed outlines of how Synthetic Solutions' representatives intended to establish that corporation's presence in the city and how to maintain that footing once it had been established. The outlines detailed reasonable ventures economical, social and technical, and they seemed on the level to a casual inspection. And just as Jordan had described, an icon that promised the reader an "Expanded Protocols Explanation" (if only the reader could provide the proper authorization) followed each section of text.

The required authorization, Simonson found, was nothing more than an encryption key that would decode the hidden text and show it on screen with the summary. His computer struggled with the encrypted text for only a few minutes before breaking the code and beginning to fill in for him what the files were hiding. In the space of half an hour, his computer had decrypted the entirety of both files. He copied and saved the translated text into two new files then deleted the originals. He then sent copies of his copies to Sugardaddy along with a note about where they'd come from. He made clear what they were and warned Sugardaddy to be careful about whom

he showed them to, and he ended the message with an urgent request for Sugardaddy to contact him as soon as possible. That done, he sat down to actually read the files himself.

He had no sooner read through the first paragraph of the summary, however, when someone began pounding on his door.

Seven

"I think that the letter S is becoming my least favorite letter of the alphabet," Detective Eric Havelin said as he sat down across the table from Adrian in the small interrogation room in the Iron Rapids police station. The two men in black suits sat behind the detective, and a large mirror opened up the wall to Adrian's left.

"Who are you?" Adrian asked, squirming in his chair. As soon as he had arrived at the station, the two men in black had marched him into this room, and they hadn't said a word to him since. They had merely taken their seats and stared at him from behind their reflective black sunglasses, refusing to answer his questions or allow him to leave. Now, this new man had come in looking for all the world as if he and Adrian were old friends.

"My name's Detective Eric Havelin," he said, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands on the table. "And your name's Adrian Cross. It's nice to meet us. Do you want to know why I'm fast losing my fondness for the letter S?"

"Why not?" Adrian said, feigning composure.

"It's because it's been figuring so prominently in the names of people involved in my problem cases lately," Havelin said. "Stafford, Tinsley, Sands and Sutton all have that letter in their name. Cross has two of them. It's just such an ugly sounding letter, and it's starting to give me a headache whenever it comes up in my work."

Adrian glanced at the two men in black, but they only continued to stare at him. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "I don't know any of those people, though."

"Well, naturally, you don't know the first three," Havelin said. "The fifth, I'm sure you're familiar with. The fourth, however... The fourth name is where you and I have a problem. It's the reason you're here."

"The fourth name?" Cross said. "Sutton? Wasn't that it? I don't know anybody named Sutton. I'm just here to fill out an accident report."

"Think harder, Mister Cross," Havelin said. "I'm sure you'll remember. Maybe you remember the first name better. Jacob."

"Jacob Sutton," Adrian said. "I really can't say I... No, wait, that's that contractor kid, isn't it? The one who just started at the Chamber of Commerce."

"That's right," Havelin said. "He started working there yesterday morning in the Organization division. New-member management."

"Right," Adrian said. "I remember him now."

"I would think so," Havelin said. "He took your job, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he did," Adrian said. It still hurt to think of it that way. "He took it or my boss gave it to him. Either way."

"Either way, he replaced you," Havelin said. "That must have upset you."

"At the time," Adrian said. "I'm getting over it."

"So soon?" Havelin said. "I understand you were angry about it yesterday morning. Very angry."

"I was furious," Adrian admitted. "It came as a real shock. That's not the sort of thing you want to be surprised by first thing in the morning."

"I can well imagine," Havelin said. "I understand there was a scene."

Adrian smiled ruefully and nodded, disappointed in himself. "You could say that. I had a little temper tantrum. It was pretty ugly. But listen, is this going somewhere? I'd really like to just fill out my accident report and go home if it's all the same."

"You're not here about any accident report, Mister Cross," Havelin said with a fleeting look of confusion. "You're here because Jacob Sutton was found dead in his office this morning. I should say, he was found murdered."

"What? What does that have to do with me?"

"We can always hope that it has nothing to do with you, Mister Cross," Havelin said, "but that may not be entirely realistic."

"What do you mean?" Adrian asked. "Am I a suspect? That's insane. I don't even know the guy."

"Tell me, Mister Cross," Havelin said. "You know the door code to disarm the security system on the Chamber of Commerce building, don't you?"

"Yeah, unless they've changed it. Every employee knows it."

"You also have a key to get into the building and a separate key for the door to your former office, right?"

"Yes. Everybody gets a key into the building, and there are copies of the office keys."

"But you still have yours, don't you, sir?" Havelin asked.

"Yeah," Adrian said. He could feel the weight of his key ring like an anchor in his pocket. "I haven't used them since yesterday, though."

"Of course not, Mister Cross," Havelin said. "Would you mind telling us where you were this morning?"

"I had a meeting with Isaac Gordon," Adrian said. "He can verify that. Him or his personal assistant. I talked to both of them while I was there."

"And what time was that?"

"I got there at about eleven, I guess."

"I see. And where were you at eight o'clock this morning, Mister Cross? Eleven isn't very helpful."

"I was at home."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I live alone."

"Can any witnesses place you there?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't know my neighbors all that well. I was there at eight, though. I made a call at nine to a cab company. If you check my phone records, you'll see that."

"Nine o'clock," Havelin said, unimpressed. "Better than eleven. Not as good as eight. What was the name of the cab company?"

"Dixie," Adrian said. He hesitated, then added, "But I actually rode out to Gordon's in a different taxi than the one they sent."

"Oh really?" Havelin said. "Did the Dixie cab never show up?"

"No, it did," Adrian said. He knew that he was starting to prattle, but he couldn't stop himself. "I just wanted to ride in the other cab."

"I see," Havelin said, letting a patronizing tone slip into his voice. "And what company did it come from, Mister Cross?"

"I don't exactly know," Adrian said. "It was blue with some yellow writing on the side. I've ridden in it before. A couple of times. It just happened to show up while I was waiting, so I took it instead. I don't know what company it's from."

"Of course," Havelin said. The two men in black exchanged a look behind the detective, and one of them sat forward a little more in his chair.

"Look," Adrian said, "I'm just rambling because I'm nervous, okay. I'm not making any of this up. I was at home at eight, I called for a cab at nine. I was at Isaac Gordon's place at eleven, and I was back in the city by mid-afternoon. I've been in that bakery where these two found me since then, and that's all there is. I got hit by a car right before they picked me up, and I thought I was coming down here to fill out paperwork. If you're going to keep this up, I think I need a lawyer."

"Take it easy, Mister Cross," Havelin said, sitting up a little straighter. "These are just questions I'm asking. You don't need a lawyer to answer my questions."

"Still," Adrian said, "I didn't come down here for this. If you think I killed somebody, I think I need a lawyer. And I really think I should be in the hospital after that accident I was in. I may have internal injuries or stress fractures or something I don't know about."

"I can see very easily that you've just recently been in a traumatic accident, Mister Cross," Havelin said, "but if—"

"It's true," the first man in black said behind Havelin. Havelin turned around to face him. "Perhaps Mister Cross would feel more comfortable if he were allowed to fill out an accident report."

"I'm not finished asking him questions about Sutton," Havelin said. "You two can have your turn with him in a minute."

"Who are they?" Adrian said to Havelin "What does that mean, they can have their turn?"

"They're federal agents," Havelin said over his shoulder.

"We represent this nation's interest in Synthetic Solutions," the second man in black said.

"You can talk to him later," Havelin said.

"We'll speak to him now, Detective," the first agent said, looking Havelin in the eye.

"If further evidence comes up, you will contact Cross on your own," the second agent said. "Later."

Havelin turned back around and looked Adrian in the eye. "All right, Mister Cross," he said. "I don't have anything to hold you on for the moment. I'll ask somebody about filling out the paperwork for your supposed accident. For now, you're free to go. But do me a favor and don't leave town." That said, he stood up and walked out of the room. The two men in black remained.

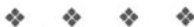
"What the hell was that?" Adrian said, frowning in fearful confusion. They'd just dismissed Havelin like a child or a servant. "Who are you two?"

The two men stood up and walked toward him. The first pulled his chair over to the opposite end of the table. The second simply took Havelin's chair. They both sat, put their hands on the table and looked at Adrian.

"We represent Synthetic Solutions," the first one said. "As well as the force it represents, which you may already be familiar with."

"I don't know what you mean," Adrian said. "What do you want?"

"We have questions of our own, Mister Cross," the second one said.



"He's telling the truth about Agent Sutton, at least," the Third said as he and the Fourth watched Cross from behind the interrogation room's mirror. "He really didn't have anything to do with it. At least not as far as he knows."

"That isn't why he's here," the Fourth said.

"Well no," the Third said, "but it's good to know."

"It means that someone else killed Agent Sutton," the Fourth said. "Someone we have no reason to suspect. Someone who has been sabotaging this agenda from the beginning and who remains in hiding. How is it a good thing?"

"It's good for Cross, at least," the Third said. "It rules him out."

"That won't matter if he is helping the Deviant who is interfering," the Fourth said. "He'll still be held accountable. Provided he's not the Deviant himself."

"I don't find it very likely that he is," the Third said. "Nothing in his profile indicates that he's capable of becoming so."

"You've said that before," the Fourth said. "We'll see."

When the Fourth offered nothing further, the Third turned to watch the First and Second speak to Cross. The intercom channel between the interrogation room and the observation room remained clear and open.



"So what do you want to know?" Adrian asked, looking at the two men across the table from him. They were so alike that it was eerie. The Second was somewhat taller than the First, and the First had a more round face, but the differences were less striking than the similarities. Both men had cleft chins. Both were built like powerful athletes, rather than body-builders. Both had dark brown (or possibly black) hair cut short and not at all messed up from having been under the men's hats outside. They wore the same brand and model of sunglasses, and their metal tie clips seemed to be exactly the same. They even sat with the same posture and wore the same expressions.

"May we call you Adrian?" the First asked.

"Sure," Adrian said. "What can I call you two?"

"Adrian," the Second began as if Adrian had not spoken, "you mentioned to Detective Havelin that a blue taxicab took you to meet Isaac Gordon this morning."

"Yeah."

"You also mentioned," the First said, "that you had ridden in this cab previously. Is that correct?"

"Yeah, I said that. What does that have to do with—"

"Tell me, Adrian," the Second said. "Was this taxicab the same one that passed in front of Founders' Memorial on Monday night as you were leaving?"

"Yeah, it was," Adrian said. "It's the one I rode home in."

"The driver stopped for you?" the First asked. "Did he pass you once and circle back?"

"No," Adrian said. "He just pulled over and stopped. Just like any other cab driver would."

The Second looked straight at the mirror, as if he were looking through it to someone on the other side. Seeing him do that made Adrian vaguely uneasy.

"Is this important for some reason?" he asked.

"And the driver who you say picked you up Monday night was the same driver who picked you up this morning?" the First asked him.

Adrian nodded. "That's right."

"And on what other occasions did you ride in this same vehicle with this same driver?" the Second asked.

"Just those two," Adrian said.

"Never before your car accident?" the First asked.

"And no other times afterward?" the Second added.

"No," Adrian said to both questions. "I never needed to before the accident, and I've just been taking the bus everywhere else. Or walking. The only other time I saw the guy was when I met him for lunch yesterday. That was it, though."

"Lunch?" the First asked. "Were you and this man acquainted before your car accident, Adrian?"

"No," Adrian said again. "I just happened to run into him by chance while he and I were both out. We talked, had lunch... nothing more than that. Why do you need to know this?"

"And you spoke to this man Monday night?" the Second said. "And at lunch yesterday and again this morning?"

"Yeah, sure," Adrian said as each seemingly pointless question piled onto the next.

"What is his name?" the First asked.

"Jordan," Adrian said. "Aron Jordan."

The First and Second looked at each other, then both of them looked at the mirror as if they were looking through it. They both stood up.

"Look, is *he* a suspect here or something?" Adrian said. "He certainly didn't seem like a killer to me when we talked. And why didn't you ask any of these questions while that detective was in here?"

"Mister Cross," the First said. "Adrian. We need you to think very clearly for a moment. What exactly did the two of you talk about when you spoke?"

Together, the two men moved the table away from Adrian then walked to stand side by side in front of him. Adrian tried not to cringe as they loomed over him.

"I don't know," he said, trying to hide his nervousness. "Me mostly. My job, my ex-wife, my son. Little bit about Isaac Gordon. Some about SynSol. I don't know."

"We need you to remember exactly," the Second said. "This could be very important. When you spoke about Synthetic Solutions, what did he say? What did you say?"

"Look," Adrian said, "it was just conversation. I don't remember every single little word."

"It will be necessary," the First said. "As I'm afraid this is."

"What is?"

The First nodded to the Second, and the Second slipped from his position around behind Adrian. Adrian moved to get up out of his chair, but the Second pushed him back down by the shoulders. The First clapped a pair of handcuffs over Adrian's left wrist and the arm of the chair he was sitting in. The Second held Adrian's right wrist and shoulder, forcing him to remain seated.

"What are you doing?" Adrian demanded, trying to pull away from both of them. "Let go of me!"

Ignoring him, the First produced a fat, metal syringe from the pocket of his jacket. A thick, amber liquid filled

the syringe, and he squeezed the air out of the needle until a large bead rose from the end.

"What the hell is that?" Adrian said, struggling to get his arm free.

"Don't panic, Adrian," the First said, pushing up Adrian's left sleeve past the elbow. "This isn't going to hurt you. It's only going to relax you and help you remember the answers to our questions."

"Bullshit," Adrian said. "Get that thing away from me. You can't do that. I've got rights."

With no regard for Adrian's protest, the First jabbed the needle into Adrian's arm and forced the plunger down in one smooth motion. The liquid in the syringe oozed into Adrian's bloodstream like tar and burned everything inside that it touched. Adrian's left hand tightened into fist, and his face contorted into a mask of a scream. He couldn't get air into his lungs to cry out, although the sensation of the liquid moving inside his body demanded he do so. He imagined lumps of flesh moving on his skin along the veins of his arms as if burrowing worms were clawing their way to his heart.

As the pain hit his chest, his arm grew numb and hung against the handcuff chain from the arm of the chair. He didn't look in the mirror for fear that he would actually see raised trails of flesh on his skin where the invasive serum had passed. The gnawing, burrowing pain then traveled up through his neck, around the sides of his face and up behind his eyes into his brain. A blinding white light exploded behind his eyes, and merciful numbness washed downward throughout his body. He slumped forward and put his right forearm across his knees to keep from falling over.

"How long until he's ready?" the Second asked, walking in front of him. Adrian could see nothing more than the man's shoes.

"It doesn't take long," the First said. "A few minutes until he can move again. Another minute after that until he can answer our questions." He joined the Second, and Adrian saw two pairs of shoes facing each other.

A loud tap on the mirror from the opposite side drew the attention of both pairs of shoes. Adrian tried to look in that direction as well, but he couldn't move.

"Our colleague," the Second said. "Will it be all right to leave Cross unattended?"

"For a few minutes," the First said. "He isn't going anywhere."

"Let's see what our colleague has found, then," the Second said. "If anything."

The two pairs of shoes turned toward the door and walked away, leaving Adrian all alone.



"That was a little extreme, wasn't it?" the Third said as the First and Second entered the dimly lit observation room with he and the Fourth. "He was trying to answer—"

"I sent the name Aron Jordan to our database," the Fourth said, tapping the subcutaneous device behind his ear. "He has a list of outstanding warrants with civilian authorities for arson, destruction of federal property and murder. He is also a catalogued Reality Deviant. His crimes all pertain to the destruction of Technocratic property and interference with numerous Enlightened agendas in this country. He has engaged in no reported activity in the past ten years, but he was never reported dead or captured."

"I wonder why he's resurfaced now," the Third said.

"That does not matter," the Fourth said. He turned to the First and Second. "You did the right thing. Jordan must be the one who has been interfering with my procedures. Find out what Cross has told him, and find out where he is."

"And once we have exhausted Cross as a resource?" the Second asked.

"Take him to Doctor Zearin," the Fourth said, "and transport him to the Ann Arbor Construct. The agenda can still proceed as I laid it out."

"We can't do that," the Third said. "We've got no reason to send Cross to Zearin. He isn't injured. He *still* isn't injured."

"Plenty of witnesses saw Cross get hit by a van this afternoon," the Fourth said.

"But they saw that he was fine," the Third protested. "How are you going to explain 'repairing' Cross' body when there's nothing to fix?"

"Those witnesses can be reeducated," the Fourth said.

"We don't have those kinds of resources here," the Third protested. "And we certainly don't have the time to requisition the proper equipment, track down all the witnesses, reeducate them and release them before this agenda's time table expires. You said so yourself in the car. Control expects results, and we're running out of time to make those results happen. This was supposed to be a simple, low-key operation from the start, and your mishandling of it thus far has brought us to this point."

"Don't speak to me like that," the Fourth snarled, leaning very close to the Third. "I am the field coordinator for this agenda, and it will be carried out as I say it will. Without question."

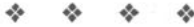
"The way you're carrying it out isn't working," the Third said. He'd built too much momentum to back down now. "You've spent too much time and energy trying to persuade Gordon when you should have been focusing your efforts on the other business leaders in this city."

"Don't tell me how to accomplish my objectives!"

The First turned away from his arguing colleagues and looked through the glass at Adrian Cross in the next room. Although the serum Cross had been given should still have been hampering his motor functions, Cross was sitting up relatively straight and lifting his right hand toward the mirror. He also appeared to be mumbling to himself, although he was doing so too quietly for the intercom to pick up.

The First glanced at the Second to get his attention and whispered, "What is he doing?"

The Third and Fourth fell silent as well and looked into the next room.



"Adrian," a calm, familiar voice said from somewhere in the room. It sounded husky and gravelly, and it had an undertone of someone crushing leaves in his hand. "Adrian, can you hear me?"

Adrian tried to lift his head, but it hung from his neck like a stone balloon. Fat worms crawled through his mind, whispering soothing and soporific songs. His muscles were bags of water that did not obey his commands.

"Come on, now, Adrian," the gravelly voice said again. It sounded far away but it was in the room at the same time. "Do you know who this is?"

Adrian tried to speak, but only a thick slur came out, followed by a thin line of drool. He tried again, and his lips actually moved in a semblance of speech. He thought he recognized the voice, but his mind was as heavy and numb as the rest of his body. Each word he heard and understood cut through some of the worms in his brain, but progress was slow and unsure.

"Dad?" Adrian mumbled, spitting the word out like a mouthful of vomit. He closed his eyes tight and tried again. In a very small voice, he managed to say, "Sound like my dad did. Before he—"

"No, Adrian," the voice said. "It's Aron. You know that name."

"Jordan?"

"That's right," the voice said. "Now I need you to look over here."

"I can't," Adrian said. He tried to lift his head again, and only succeeded in making it bob a few degrees.

"No, that was good," Jordan's voice said. "Try it again. Look over here at me. You're doing fine."

Adrian tried again and managed to tilt his head slightly to the left. With a mighty force of will, he kept in place without trying to lift it. It rested against his left shoulder.

"A little farther," Jordan's voice coaxed. "Just lift your head and look at me."

"I can't," Adrian whispered again with fierce conviction. The effort thus far had exhausted him.

"Adrian," Jordan said, "those men are going to be coming back to ask you more questions very soon. The men who did this to you. Do you want that?"

"No," Adrian said.

"They'll come back," Jordan said. "They'll come back and they'll do worse than they already have. Do you want to give them that chance?"

"No," Adrian said again. The word came out a little louder this time.

"Then you look over here, Adrian," Jordan said. "Lift your head up and look."

With a groan of exertion, Adrian lifted his head and balanced it precariously on top of his neck. His eyes focused on the mirror between this room and the next.

"That a boy," Jordan said.

Adrian's eyes bulged, and he was sure that whatever the men in black suits had given him was making him hallucinate. Instead of a reverse image of the interrogation room and himself, he saw a wide-angle view of what he assumed was the inside of Aron Jordan's cab. Aron sat in the driver's seat on the right-hand side of the view Adrian had. Even though Adrian was looking up at the wall mirror, he appeared to be looking down on Jordan and the cab, as if he were seeing the cab from the perspective of its rearview mirror.

"Now this isn't going to be easy," Jordan said as he locked eyes with Adrian impossibly across whatever space separated them outside this building. "Don't be afraid, and don't question. Just believe that I'm here to help you. Do you believe me?"

"Uh-huh," Adrian said, being careful not to nod, lest his head tip forward again. He was too bewildered and fascinated by the hallucination to do anything but agree. He didn't even wonder if the serum he'd been given was responsible for how cooperative he felt.

"Good," Jordan said. "Good boy. Now this is going to look strange, and it may be a little scary, but be brave. I want you to reach over here and take my hand."

"How?" Adrian asked. He tried to lift his left hand, and the chain of his handcuffs rattled. Beyond that, the gap between himself and the flat surface of the mirror seemed like the Grand Canyon. "I can't."

"Your other hand, Adrian," Jordan said. "Concentrate. You can do it."

"How?" Adrian asked again. His eyes tried to slip shut, and he fought them open once more.

"I'll help you," Jordan said. "But you've got to really try. You've got to reach out to me, too."

"Don't know," Adrian sighed. His head was as heavy as the whole world, and his arm was a slab of concrete.

"You can do it," Jordan said. "I'm going to reach for you, and you just reach right back to me. All you have to do is take my hand. I'll do the rest. Now get ready. Don't be scared. You can do this."

Before Adrian could protest again or surrender to his misgivings about what had become of his sanity, Jordan reached out. His hand moved very slowly, as if he were reaching for the rearview mirror inside his car. Adrian knew that he was hallucinating, and he knew that whatever the man in black had injected into him was making him crazy. He didn't want the men in suits to come back and do God-knows-what to him. He wasn't even supposed to be here. He just wanted to be someplace far away from this room in the police station. That desire had obviously created this hallucination, and it would come crashing to a halt the instant the men in black came back to speak to him again. He didn't want that to happen, and he had no reason to hope for escape, so his mind was doing the best it could under the circumstances.

Adrian understood that, but he didn't care. A pleasing hallucination was better than a harsh reality

any time. Even if it was a temporary escape his hallucination was offering, the seductive hope was too good to pass up. A part of him — the part that had once believed in Santa Claus and closet-monsters and magic — opened up and accepted that hope. It allowed him to raise his right arm and reach across his numb body toward the mirror. When he did, the surface of the mirror bent out toward him in the shape of Aron Jordan's outstretched hand. The warp in the glass surface distorted the rest of the image, but the impression of Jordan's hand remained distinct. Adrian reached out so far that he thought he would topple the chair on its side, until his hand was right above the bent glass tentacle that Jordan's hand had thrust into the room. He let his hand drop into Jordan's and drooped in exhaustion.



"I don't know what he's doing," the Third said, answering the First when no one else spoke. The four of them stared at Adrian Cross through the glass.

"The serum you gave him might not have been strong enough," the Fourth said. "How much did you give him?"

"I gave him enough based on his mass and height," the First said. "But something is wrong."

"I can feel it," the Third said. "What is that?"

"I don't know," the Second said, putting his fingertips against the glass in front of him. "It feels like—"

"I knew it!" the Fourth cut in.

Before the Fourth could say anything more, however, a change overcame Cross in the other room. His hand dropped several inches through the air and hung motionless as if it were suspended from a string. Then, black lines began to trace themselves from his fingertips up his arms and over the outside of his clothes to cover his entire body. The lines moved like creeper vines and traced repeating patterns that made Cross' body look like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle composed

of palmate leaves. When the lines covered his entire body, the edges of the traced leaf-shapes rose so that the lines were actual cracks and separations between each shape. Cross' skin and clothing faded from their normal hues to a uniform orange-brown. Before their eyes, Adrian Cross' body had become a perfect sculpture of dry, dead leaves. The entire transformation happened so quickly that the four of them could only watch in silence. The Fourth recovered his wits first.

"Get in there," he snapped at the other three. "Go!"

The First and Second did as he ordered, while he and the Third stood watching. As soon as the door to the observation room closed behind them, the door to the actual interrogation room swung open as they rushed into the room. The disturbance of the air generated by so much motion all at once in the small room had exactly the effect the Fourth feared it would. The disturbance blew apart the leaves and collapsed the shape they made, so that only an empty chair with an empty pair of handcuffs dangling from the arm remained. The two men in the room stopped short and stared at the mess of leaves that now covered the chair and the floor around it.

The Fourth gritted his teeth, put his hands to his head very slowly and closed his eyes.

"Again," the Third said. "Gone again."

"Be quiet," the Fourth said.

"It's time to change directions," the Third said.

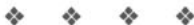
The Fourth opened his eyes very slowly and looked straight ahead. "Cross' son," he said gravely. "Gordon's grandson. He can demonstrate the technology as well as Cross could. We'll find Cross after that."

"No," the Third said in unleavened frustration. "The direction of the agenda is what has to change. We can take more direct action against Gordon in person. Perhaps he can be reeducated. It's still not too late to consider—"

"Say one more word," the Fourth said, rounding on the Third viciously. Veins stood out on his forehead and neck. "Just say one more word."

The Third held very still, even though the Fourth was a decimeter from his face. No words came out of his mouth.

"Good," the Fourth said finally. "Now gather the others."



An insane hurricane wind blew Adrian through space, blinding him with debris and deafening him with its roar. He couldn't make out anything about the space he was moving in, but he could definitely tell that he was moving. He tumbled like a leaf that had been stirred by the passage of an attack helicopter. The only focal point of sanity and order that he had was the feeling of Aron Jordan's hand in his. He clamped onto it for dear life as the shrieking, tearing wind tried to whittle him down to dry bone. For an eternity, he was at the nexus of the four winds; he was in the funnel of ravenous tornado.

In less than an instant, the chaos and the noise receded like a reverse thunderclap. He collapsed in a cramped space, still clinging desperately to the hand that had been stretched out to him. The hand gently disengaged itself from his grip and squeezed his shoulder.

"You're all right now," Jordan said, leaning over some sort of high, plush wall to peer down at him. His eyes glowed a bright amber-gold, and a trickle of thick, black blood ran from his left nostril. Adrian felt a similar warm trickle on his own lip. "Lie still for a while."

"What happened?" Adrian said, barely able to keep his eyes open. "Where am I?"

"Don't worry," Jordan said, turning away to wipe his nose with his sleeve. "You're safe now."

"Safe?" Adrian mumbled. What little he could see in the dark space seemed to confirm that statement. He could make out windows and seat backs and a ceiling light. Late-afternoon/ early-evening light came in

through the window nearest him. He appeared to be curled up in the back seat. But... "How?"

"Rest," Jordan said, starting the car and putting it in gear. The rumble of the engine through the seats was a soothing massage compared to the nightmare that Adrian had gone through to get here. "We have to go."

"Where?"

"Just rest," Jordan said. "Let that junk they gave you work itself out of your system."

Adrian nodded and put his head down on his hands. The sound of Elvis Presley's "Beyond the Bend" and the gentle motion of the car helped him drift off to sleep.

Eight

Matthew Simonson stood up from his chair with a sigh of frustration. The purloined Technocracy file concerning Synthetic Solutions and Iron Rapids sat open expectantly on his laptop computer screen. The knock at his hotel room door came again, more insistent than the first time. His reflection in the mirror behind the table nodded and turned at the door on its side of the looking glass. Simonson turned in the same direction and went to stand at the peephole. Looking out through the fish-eye lens, he saw Aron Jordan trying to support someone who had an arm around his shoulder.

Simonson pulled the door open as Jordan raised a hand to knock again. The old man looked ready to leap in any and every direction, just as he had earlier this afternoon, as did the man at his side. That man, Simonson noticed with surprise, was Adrian Cross.

"My lord," Simonson hissed. He stuck his head out into the hallway and looked in both directions to make sure that no one else was watching. "Get in here, the pair of you."

"Thank you, boy," Jordan said, brushing past at the same time as Simonson made the invitation. "Shut the door."

Simonson did as Jordan said, and Jordan walked Cross over to the bed. Leaves clung to the folds of Cross' clothes, stuck to the soles of his shoes and tangled in his hair. He was barely conscious as far as Simonson could see.

"What happened?" he asked Jordan as Jordan helped Cross to the bed. "What are you two doing here?"

"We're here, Adrian," Jordan said, leaning over Cross and brushing away the excess leaves from his clothes. "You did good. Try to get some sleep." As Jordan plucked the leaves out of Adrian's hair, Simonson could see a stripe of solid white just above Cross' temple where his hair had changed color.

"What did you do to him?" Simonson asked. "And what are you doing here? I thought you said you were going to take care of Cross yourself."

"I did take care of him," Jordan said, standing up straight and turning around to face Simonson. He crunched a handful of leaves into a ball and looked around for a garbage can. "Problem is, some things may have changed."

"Over there," Simonson said, pointing to the garbage can beside his table. "What things have changed?"

"Don't know yet, exactly," Jordan said. "We're going to have to see that when he wakes up." He walked over to the garbage can and threw in the leaves he'd taken off Adrian. As he did so, he glanced at Simonson's open laptop computer. "These look like the files I was telling you about."

"Yes, they are," Simonson said. "I've only just come home with them."

"Interesting reading?"

"I wouldn't know. I've only just come home with them."

"I see," Jordan said. "As it turns out, I need to look over them myself."

"Changed your mind about the crusade, have you?" Simonson asked with a low undertone of hope.

"No, I haven't," Jordan said. "I'm still in this to get him out of it." He nodded toward Adrian on the bed.

"His guardian angel," Simonson smirked.

"Don't swell my head," Jordan said. "I'm just trying to help somebody who's into something he never asked for."

"A Sleepwalker," Simonson said. "That's what I call people like that."

"Right." Jordan sat down in Simonson's chair and produced a cigarette from his shirt pocket. "Whatever you want to call him. My problem is I thought I'd already taken care of him when I came to talk to you this afternoon. I

went to check on him one last time, though, to make sure, and I saw two Men in Black putting him into a car and taking him away."

"Men in Black?" Simonson asked. "And you got him away from them? And you brought him *here*?"

"Don't worry about that," Jordan said, lighting his cigarette and setting his platinum lighter down on the desk next to the battery from the smoke detector. "They won't find us here."

"Why did they have him? Were they the same Men in Black you'd seen before?"

"Maybe," Jordan said. "I didn't take too close a look. Working him over for information as near as I could tell. I don't know what he told them or what they wanted out of him. I just pulled him out and brought him here."

"Why here?" Simonson asked. He glanced at the door and at the window behind him, via the mirror. His reflection shook his head to alleviate a modicum of his worries.

"I was just going to take him right out of town," Jordan said, "but I couldn't. Cross is in this more now than he was before. He's seen the Technocrats now, and he's seen what I can do. I don't know how much he's going to remember, but he's going to remember something. It wouldn't be right to just pull him out now."

"That might be safer," Simonson said.

"Maybe," Jordan replied, "but that isn't my choice to make for him."

"So what do you plan to do, then?"

"Show him this, for one thing," Jordan said tapping the high-resolution liquid-crystal monitor of Simonson's laptop with the back of his knuckle. "Let him know what it is he's facing and tell him as much as he can understand."

"What's that going to accomplish?" Simonson said. "What do you expect him to do?"

"That's up to him," Jordan said. "I just want him to have as much information as he can handle so he can make that decision."

"Just like that?" Simonson asked. "Do you really think that's wise?"

"It's fair," Jordan said. "It's what people like you and me ought to be doing."

"You mean instead of crusading?" Simonson asked, crossing his arms and smiling wryly.

"No," Jordan said. "Not instead of."

Thursday

One

Adrian awoke to the smell of coffee and a bitter taste like glue and old leaves in his mouth. He pried his eyes open and sat up, afraid that he would vomit at any minute. His head pounded, and his neck was sore, as if he'd slept on it while suspended by his feet from the ceiling. Through the fog of returning consciousness, he could see two figures sitting at a table facing one another. As his vision cleared, he recognized Aron Jordan and Matthew Simonson. Each man held a paper cup of steaming coffee, and Jordan was smoking a cigarette.

"—so that when he sat down," Jordan was saying, "the chair fell apart right underneath his pompous ass and spilled him on the floor."

"And the girl had the gall to do that *there*?" Simonson replied with scandalized reverence. "In front of so many people?"

"Well," Jordan said, "I doubt it was actually her who did it, but she laughed the loudest when it happened. As pissed off as His Lord High Pompousness was, she might as well have been the one after that. It sure didn't matter to him."

Adrian looked around to find that he was lying on a hotel bed in a moderately expensive room. He'd been covered up, and someone had taken his shoes off him, but he was otherwise accoutered as he had been on Wednesday. Daylight was coming in from the partially closed curtains. "Hi," he croaked. "Where am I?"

Jordan cut his story short as he and Simonson turned to look at Adrian. Simonson sat where he was and had another sip of his coffee, but Jordan got up and picked up a lidded cup of coffee from the table next to the bed. He stood at the bedside and handed the cup to Adrian.

"You're safe," Jordan said. "You're in Matthew's hotel room. You want coffee? It's still pretty fresh."

"What day is it?" Adrian asked, taking the coffee and punching out the drinking-spout hole with his pinkie. "How long have I been asleep?"

"It's just Thursday," Jordan said. "Still morning. You had a pretty big day yesterday. You looked like you needed some rest."

"I guess," Adrian said, gulping a few mouthfuls of coffee, although it was a little too hot still to drink it that fast. The hot liquid scoured the awful taste from his mouth and took his mind off the half-remembered dreams and hallucinations that had plagued him.

"How do you feel?" Simonson asked, leaning toward Adrian in his chair. He held his coffee cup between his knees in both hands.

"My head hurts," Adrian replied. "And I'm sore. And confused. Just what the hell happened to me yesterday? And how did I get here?"

"I brought you here," Jordan said. He moved his chair closer to the edge of the bed and sat down again. "How much of yesterday do you remember? We'll start there."

"I got up," Adrian said. "You took me to Isaac's place outside the city. His driver brought me back to Zahn's where you and me had lunch Tuesday. I was walking out of there, and bam. I got hit by a car while I was crossing the street."

"Is that all?" Simonson asked with evident disappointment.

"It'll come," Jordan said, waving Simonson to silence. "What else do you remember, Adrian?"

"Well," Adrian said, "I was all right after that, like I was when I woke up Monday. But instead of going to the hospital to make sure, these men picked me up and took me to the police station. Men in black suits."

Jordan nodded. "Go on, Adrian. Don't worry if it sounds crazy inside your head. Just let it out."

Adrian sighed, and knots of tension between his shoulder blades loosened considerably. Simonson looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"I didn't even want to go with them," Adrian said. "Not at first, but they made me. I told them I ought to be in the hospital, but they took me to the station instead. Then they started asking me all these questions with this detective in the room. They thought I killed somebody."

"Sutton," Simonson said to himself.

"But I didn't," Adrian went on. "So they just told the detective to go away, and he did. Then they started asking me all sorts of questions. Questions about you, Aron. They asked me who you were and how well I knew you and what you and I have been talking about so much lately."

"What did you tell them?" Jordan asked.

"Just basic stuff," Adrian said. "Subjects that came up. But they wanted to know more. They wanted to hear everything you and I talked about. It was crazy. They wanted to know every single word."

"What about me?" Simonson asked with a thinly concealed gulp. "Did you tell them anything about me?"

"No," Adrian said. "You didn't come up. I didn't even think about mentioning you. They didn't give me a chance."

"What do you mean?" Simonson asked. He still looked concerned about the answer, but he looked immensely relieved.

"They gave me some kind of drug," Adrian said, shuddering. "I don't know what the hell it was. It paralyzed me. It made me start hallucinating. It was really screwed up."

"It was probably thiopental sodium, if you were lucky," Simonson said. "Or, if you weren't lucky, it was something a lot stronger. Was it an IV or a syringe?"

"Syringe," Adrian said.

Simonson winced.

"What else do you remember, Adrian?" Jordan coaxed. "Do you remember how you got out?"

Adrian remembered a warped mirror and screaming wind and a blizzard of leaves. Other than that, nothing came up that made any sense. If he tried to think about it, his brain froze up and forced him to take a different train of thought.

"No," he said. "I hallucinated that you were there.... I remember you helping me into the elevator and down the hall here. I guess it was here. I remember being in the cab."

Simonson looked at Jordan and said, "He must be blocking it out."

Jordan shushed him and continued to look at Adrian. "You remember the cab, you said. You remember those men and what they did to you, too. Is that right?"

Adrian nodded. Just thinking about it made him feel very small and fragile.

"Do you remember how you got in the cab, Adrian?" Jordan asked.

"No. I guess when they were done they let me go, and you picked me up. I don't remember. I was a little bit out of my mind at that point, I guess. Drugged... scared. I don't know."

"That's okay," Jordan said. "You might remember eventually, you might not. It's okay either way."

Adrian sucked down some more coffee and hoped that he wouldn't remember.

"Now tell me this," Jordan said, "do you know what those men wanted from you?"

"They were asking questions about you," Adrian said. "It didn't make any sense."

"I mean before that," Jordan said. "Originally. Do you know why they were asking you questions in the first place?"

"I don't... well... they kept mentioning SynSol. They said it a few times, actually. They said they represented the nation's interest in the company. They also said they represented the force SynSol represents, and they said I was already familiar with it. I don't know what they were talking about."

"They made one hell of an assumption saying even that much to you," Simonson said. He turned to Jordan and added, "I think he's lucky you found him when you did."

"I was lucky they don't already have a Construct in the city and they were just holding him at the police station," Jordan said to Simonson. "I might not have found him at all otherwise."

"What do you mean?" Adrian said. "Why not? Who were those guys?"

"Who did you think they were when they were talking to you?" Jordan asked.

"I thought they were FBI or NSA or something," Adrian said. "They showed me their ID, but I didn't get a

real good look at them. Could have been CIA, too, I guess. Or the Secret Service even."

"That's the impression they like to give," Simonson said. "They want to look like they stand for order and authority. The truth is, though, that they're very bad men."

Jordan held up a hand, and Simonson fell silent again.

"Careful now, boy," Jordan said. "Bias. Not everybody feels that way about them."

"Who are they?" Adrian asked.

"What Matthew said is essentially correct," Jordan replied. "These people — the ones you talked to and others you haven't met — *are* order and authority. That's what they stand for. They've got goals to make the whole world safe and explainable and civilized for everybody. They're a part of the whole world, not just one country, and they want the whole place to be safe and sane for everyone."

"Well, that's a nice shine on a rotten fruit," Simonson snorted.

"I didn't feel very safe with those two men," Adrian said.

"Their goals are one thing," Jordan said. "The means to those goals get ugly sometimes. That ugliness is what it looks like you're wrapped up in right now. It looks like it keeps coming back for you, too."

"But why?" Adrian said. "What the hell's going on? What is it I'm wrapped up in?"

"It's not just you," Simonson said. "It's everyone. Everyone in this town. These people we're talking to you about have designs on this city, and you seem to be a crucial element to them somehow. Your car accident, the accident yesterday, losing your job. It's all part of this. *You're* a part of this, whether you see it or not. Whether you like it or not."

"But why me?" Adrian asked. "Are you saying these things that have been happening to me are all part of some conspiracy? You tried that one on me Tuesday, Matthew, and it sounded ridiculous then, too."

"There's a lot to take in after all you've gone through this past week," Jordan said. "I understand that, Adrian. What I think might help is if you read what we've got on

this computer here. It's a pair of files we stole from the people we've been talking about. Matthew and I went through it all while you were asleep, and I think it might be able to answer some of your questions. Do you feel up to doing that?"

"You really should, Adrian," Simonson said. "It'll open your eyes about what's happening here at home that you don't even notice."

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Jordan said. "If you just want to go home and get on with your life, I can take you — no questions asked. If you read this thing and you still want to just go home, that's fine, too. It's all up to you."

"I'll read it," Adrian said, "because if half of what you're saying and implying is true, I *can't* just ignore it and get on with my life. Can I?"

"I wouldn't see how," Simonson said.

"Me neither," Jordan echoed. He stood up and helped Adrian stand. As he and Simonson backed off, Adrian sat down in front of the computer.

"Don't rush, Adrian," Jordan said. "We'll stay out of your way until you're finished."

Adrian nodded and started reading.

Two

"This can't happen," the Third said, sitting alone in the back seat of the car. The car faced Marion Adrock Elementary School from a distance of several blocks, and students were pouring out the front doors to get on busses or wait for their parents to pick them up. The after-school program was just starting inside. "This cannot happen."

The First and Second looked at him in the rearview lens.

"There is an established precedent," the Second said.

"Reactive field procedures based on an operative's situational awareness have demonstrated a seventy-five percent success rate in recent tests," the First added. "If our colleague is allowed to focus his concentration, he has a high likelihood of success."

"That isn't what I mean," the Third said. "What he's doing isn't right."

"It is an unusual contingency," the Second said. "However, it coheres with the protocols he established for this agenda."

"It's bloodthirsty, not unusual," the Third said. "He's failed to get Cross twice now already. He should have moved on to one of the other *established* contingencies instead of zeroing his sights here."

"Doctor Zearin needs a subject close to Isaac Gordon," the Second said. "Our colleague is simply—"

"Brandon Cross is a *child*," the Third said, "not a *subject*. Our colleague is trying to cripple a child so that his agenda stays on schedule the way he planned it."

"This choice makes sense," the Second said without conviction. "Trying to acquire Cross has met with too much interference to warrant further procedures in that vein."

"That's true," the First added. "Aron Jordan likely can't protect Cross and Cross' son simultaneously since Cross' contact with his son is so infrequent."

"I don't think Jordan *has* been protecting Cross," the Third said. "Helping him, yes, but I don't think that that's why our colleague's procedures have had no effect thus far. You both saw Zearin's x-rays. You both saw what happened to Cross yesterday

outside of that bakery. Twice he should have been crippled, and twice — impossibly — he escaped harm. Jordan isn't protecting Cross, the procedures themselves are failing. They're failing, and the backlash of those failures is stalling out the rest of the agenda. That backlash must be affecting our colleague's judgment as well, because otherwise he would have adopted a new course of contingency altogether."

"That's merely speculation," the Second said.

The First looked at the Second then turned to look back at the Third. "No," he said. "He may have a point."

"Even if he does," the Second said, "the point is moot. Our colleague is arranging this new procedure right now. He will return momentarily. Furthermore, he is the field coordinator for this agenda, regardless of our opinions of his methods."

"So it's okay for him to do this to Cross' child just because he's in charge?" the Third asked.

"That singular sacrifice will begin a series of events that will bring us one step closer to the unity we have been striving for all along," the Second said. "Since the Renaissance."

"It's not the only way to do it," the First admitted.

"It is the most expedient and the most resource-efficient," the Second said. "I understand that it is not ideal, but it is necessary."

The Third leaned forward in his seat and said, "I'll bet you wouldn't say that if it were *your* son coming out of that school. Would you?"

The Second looked back down the street at the school and remained silent.



"I don't get this," Adrian said, finally sitting up straight and turning around after hours of reading and re-reading.

"What's that?" Simonson asked. He and Jordan had been talking quietly on the opposite side of the room so as not to disturb Adrian.

"Have you gone through the whole thing?" Jordan asked. He and Simonson walked back over to stand within conversational distance of Adrian.

"Yeah," Adrian said. "A couple of times. I understand it all. I mean, I can comprehend what all these words mean and make sense of them. I just don't get it."

"What's not to get?" Simonson said. He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"For one thing," Adrian said, "I still don't understand who these people are. I mean, I can't even imagine how much money and manpower would have to go into this before everything was said and done. It talks in here about 'reeducating' all the factory workers in the city so they can put this technology together. They talk about converting every factory into a place that can build this stuff. They're talking about changing the entire economy of this city to revolve around one company. That'll change the whole economic climate of this part of the state. And if it takes off like they project it will... who knows what that's going to do to the surrounding areas? I can't even conceive of how all these factors fit together on any scale. I'm having enough trouble figuring out how *I* fit into this, much less how it's all supposed to work."

"It's no simple thing," Jordan said. "Nothing with people like this ever is."

"It all comes from something very simple," Simonson said. "It's all one large, living dynamic of belief."

"How's that?" Adrian asked.

"These people have created something that they want the world to have," Simonson said. "They've created a great number of things similarly, and they've done it again here. However, they can't just give it to the world. They have to convince the world to accept it. The people of the world have to believe that what we're being given actually works. That's what this is all about."

"I don't get it," Adrian said. His head was starting to hurt again.

"Belief in an idea is like a disease, if you can imagine," Simonson said, growing more excited by the word. "That idea has to be communicated so that it can spread and take hold. Enough people have to pass on the idea so that it covers as many people in the world as it can. Once it's done that, once

enough people have caught the idea disease, the idea becomes a reality. And once it becomes a reality, it stays a reality unless a new, more powerful idea comes along and supplants it."

"That's what's trying to happen here," Jordan said, remaining calm where Simonson became agitated. "These people came up with an idea, and they're trying to spread it here in Iron Rapids. They've got this device that they think is the next step in linking mind and machine."

"Right, I saw that," Adrian said. "This computer transponder thing translates signals from your brain into computer code and vice versa, so they can use it to build bionic prosthetics that act just like whatever body part they replace. Blah blah blah. I read that."

"But that's not an accepted technology," Simonson said. "Not yet. They have to prove that it works so that the world accepts it. But they have to start small. They prove to important people with money that it works so that those people support them. Those people with money give them legitimacy so that they can win over more people with more money. Then, since the important people believe that what they're supporting works, the people under them believe it, too. And as more people support it, the belief spreads. Just like a disease."

"So Isaac Gordon is one of those first important people?" Adrian asked, trying to keep his head from spinning.

"That's right," Jordan said. "And what better way to make him believe in this technology than to show him how well it works?"

"That's why you've been so important," Simonson said. "You were supposed to prove to him how well it works."

Adrian sat stunned. "My car accident," he murmured. "Both of them. And losing my job..."

"You were supposed to be out getting put back together, no doubt," Simonson said. "And your replacement was apparently an agent working for the same people. They needed someone there to get at your ex-father-in-law. They had to get to him to infect him with idea."

"This is crazy," Adrian said. "You're talking about scientific technology. Either it works or it doesn't, that's just the

way it is. Nobody had to go to all this trouble when they could have just said, 'Look, this is how our gizmo works,' and been done with it. This whole plan with these 'dissemination protocols' and whatnot is ridiculous. Science is science, and it works no matter whether people believe it or not."

"It's not that simple," Jordan said. "I wish it was, because all our lives would be a lot simpler."

"The simple fact," Simonson said, "is that science is extremely dependent on belief. It works the way it does because so many people already believe that it does. These people — the ones behind Synthetic Solutions — are extremely dependent on belief as well. They've built an empire on it."

"Really?" Adrian asked with a faintly sardonic smile. "So what happens if I just choose not to believe in it anymore?"

"Then you'd see the truth," Jordan said in all seriousness. "You'd see that you can carve yourself a niche here in this world and live by what you believe is true, rather than what people tell you to."

"Choosing not to believe is the first step toward freeing yourself from that empire," Simonson said. "You can cure yourself from the disease of spoon-fed belief that you've had all your life."

"You know that for a fact, do you?" Adrian asked. He gestured vaguely at the air and asked, "You've chosen to disbelieve in all this?"

"I do know it for a fact," Simonson said. "And yes I have. A part of you did, too, last night. Remember? When you escaped the police station and came here."

Adrian looked at Jordan, unable to think of anything witty to say to that. He wanted to think that what he remembered about his exodus from the police station was a hallucination or a nightmare, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He just didn't believe it.

"How *did* you do that?" he asked the white-haired man.

"I believe in a different set of rules than a lot of people," Jordan said. "I don't think I can explain to you what I did, but that's how I did it. I believed I could take you right out of there from under those people's noses, and I did. It wasn't easy, but I did."

"Jesus," Adrian whispered. "That really happened. Is that what happened to my hair? Good Christ..."

"It did happen," Simonson said. "If you believe it strongly enough, anything is possible. It's not just a cliché."

"But why don't I know this already?" Adrian said, putting a hand to his pounding head. "Why doesn't everybody know this?"

"Because of *them*," Simonson said, pointing to the report on his computer screen. "The ones who've been after you. The ones behind Synthetic Solutions. The ones who made the world what it is."

"Why?" Adrian asked.

"Because they acknowledge only one kind of right belief," Simonson said. "To them, belief in science is the only acceptable belief. To them, believing that more is possible in the world is a crime."

"They don't think it's a safe way to run a planet," Jordan added. "In their defense, they're not far wrong."

"If their belief made the world like this," Adrian said, trying to take it all in, "and they say any other kind of belief is a crime, and they've got so much authority behind them what does that make you? The both of you?"

"The resistance," Simonson said before Jordan could speak. "Adrian, what these people are doing is wrong. Look at what they've put you through in just a week. Look at what they tried to do to you, all just to prove a point. That's the way these people operate, and it's the way they've always operated. People like myself won't stand for it. We stand up against it, and we're not the only ones. There are people like us all over the world."

"Now don't try to carry him away," Jordan said, putting a hand on Simonson's shoulder. "Now you're the one shining a rotten apple."

"So you're *not* some kind of resistance movement?" Adrian said.

"Not all of us," Jordan said. "Some are, some aren't. Some, like me, used to be. Problem is, it's not a revolution."

It's not a holy war. It's just fighting. It's termites trying to tear down a house. Sometimes parts of it fall in. Most of the time, they just get stepped on."

"Sometimes, though," Simonson cut in, "innocent people get stepped on. People like you. People who don't even know there's a war on. And it is a war, no matter what some people say."

Adrian squeezed his eyes shut then opened them again. His head spun and throbbed as it tried to process everything Jordan and Simonson were saying.

"So if it's a war," he said, "or even if it isn't, I'm still caught up in it. What do I do? Where does that leave me?"

"It leaves you with choices, Adrian," Jordan said. "You'll always have choices, war or no war. That, more than anything else, is what people like Matthew and me stand for."

"So what are my choices?" Adrian asked.

"First," Jordan said, "you can choose to do what Simonson does. You can stick with him and be a crusader termite trying to gnaw the house down from the inside. Second, you can stick with me. I won't promise you anything, but if you do that, I can try to show how to see the world like I do. I can try to show you how to believe in something so strongly that you make it real. I can see you've got the potential; maybe I can even bring it out. Simonson might do the same, but I'd be showing you for your own sake. I wouldn't try to make you into a soldier of the resistance."

Simonson bristled, but he didn't argue.

"Third," Jordan continued, "you can get on with your own life the way you want to live it. I'll take you wherever you want to go, and when I drop you off, none of this will be your concern anymore. You won't even remember being wrapped up in it. I'll leave you alone, and Matthew here will, too. If I understand it right, he's already done what he came here to do."

"I have," Simonson said.

"What about those... others?" Adrian asked.

"Oh, you'll be quite on your own with them," Simonson muttered.

"That's true," Jordan said. "But frankly, Adrian, they've already come at you twice and failed to take you, and this SynSol thing is happening right now. They've got plenty of backups in that file you read. It's about time for them to be taking one of them."

"But what if they want to ask me more questions about you?" Adrian asked. "You said you used to be part of a resistance. They know I know you."

"That's part of what you have to consider," Jordan said. "If you decide you want to go your own way, I'll make sure you don't know anything to tell them, and I'll show up elsewhere so they can come looking for me without your help. It's all up to you, though. This is your choice to make."

"Just remember everything we've been telling you," Simonson said. "And the effort we've gone to on your behalf. Take it all into account."

"I am," Adrian said. "Just let me think about it for a minute."

"Take as much time as you need," Jordan said. "You've got the rest of your life in your hands right now. Think carefully before you say anything else."

Adrian nodded and half turned in his chair so that he could see both his reflection and the computer on the table. Simonson sat back, muttering to himself, and Jordan lit a cigarette. No one spoke.

Three

The Fourth among them returned from down the block and found the First, Second and Third waiting for him outside the car. They stood shoulder to shoulder alongside the driver's side of the vehicle, and they were all looking at him.

"What?" he said, hiding his confusion at their non-standard behavior behind a gruff frown.

"This procedure will not be executed," the Third said.

The Fourth blinked. "Come again?"

"Control has been notified," the First said, "and a series of Syndicate contingency procedures will be enacted throughout the Iron Rapids business community."

"I didn't authorize that," the Fourth said. He turned to the Second and said, "Notify Control that my procedure will have the desired effect and that the agenda will proceed without Syndicate involvement."

"You mean it will work 'this time,' don't you?" the Third said. "Despite having failed twice before."

"Notify Control," the Fourth said, ignoring the Third.

"We feel it would be best," the First said, "to transfer responsibility of this stage of the agenda to Syndicate operatives at this time."

The Fourth cut his eyes toward the First without saying anything, then he looked back at the Second. "Notify Control that I will carry out my procedure so that the agenda may continue."

"I will not," the Second said. "You are relieved of the responsibilities of field coordinator, and you will report with us to the Construct in Ann Arbor for a mission debriefing."

The Fourth's upper lip curled in a snarl, and he glared at the Third. "This is your doing," he snapped. "You have been interfering with my ability to conduct this mission from the beginning. You're a traitor."

"You've failed," the Third said. "You just can't admit it."

The Fourth's temper flared, and his eyes blazed. His fingers curled into talons and his shoulders rose as he took a menacing step toward the Third. Before his foot hit the

ground, however, the three men before him moved in unison. In the blink of an eye, each man had drawn his automatic service pistol and pointed it at the Fourth's chest. A long silencer telescoped from the end of each barrel and clicked into place. The Fourth faltered and put his hands by his sides in tight fists.

"What is this?" he demanded through gritted teeth.

The First, Second and Third leaned toward him so that he could see his reflection on all six lenses of their black sunglasses.

"You will come with us," the First said.

"Calmly and without resistance," the Second added.

"Now," the Third said. "Get in the car."

Mentally paralyzed with rage and frustration, the Fourth did as he was told. The others holstered their pistols and got in the car after him. The vehicle pulled away from the curb with a low growl.

Four

The blue taxicab stopped in front of Marion Adrock Elementary School, and Adrian Cross looked up at Aron Jordan in the rearview mirror. The driver's amber eyes looked back at him for a moment before Jordan turned around in the seat.

"You think I made a mistake, don't you?" Adrian said as the cab idled by the curb. "You think I chose wrong."

"It's not my life, Adrian," Jordan said. "Or my place to judge how you live yours."

"Simonson thinks I made a mistake," Adrian said with a half smile. "I've never been so happy to make someone that disappointed."

Jordan smiled. "He'll get over it. He's still young."

Adrian kept up his half-smile and looked out the window. Small groups of kids were coming out the front door and loitering under the covered walkway waiting for their rides. He didn't see Brandon anywhere yet.

"I just keep thinking about what he said right before I left," Adrian said. "Who's going to fight this war, then? We can't win if people like you just keep giving up.' Do you think he's right?"

Jordan shrugged. "Somebody's going to fight Simonson's war for him. Somebody always does."

"I guess so," Adrian said. "I just... I can't give up my life. My job. My son. People are going to be counting on me. I have to do right by them and do what's right for me, too. Don't I?"

"I can't tell you if you made the right decision, Adrian," Jordan said. "That's not the sort of thing you figure out until years later. What's important is that you made it. You. Nobody told you to, you're just living your life like you want to. It's not for me to say if that way's right or wrong."

Adrian sighed and looked back out the window. After a second, he lifted the door handle and started to step out.

"I'll tell you this, though, Adrian," Jordan said. Adrian stopped. "I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"For making a choice on your own," Jordan said. "For not being led. It's admirable."

"Thank you, Aron," Adrian said. "Thanks for listening, for talking... for the police station. Thanks for everything."

"For everything you won't remember," Jordan said with a wry smile. "You're welcome. Now you take care of yourself out there."

"You, too." He smiled, then, and stepped out, but before Jordan could pull away, he looked in the open passenger window and said, "What do I owe you for the ride?"

"Nothing," Jordan said with a smile and a dismissive wave. "I'm off duty, remember? Been off duty for years now. Just get on with your life. Maybe I'll see you around sometime."

"Sure," Adrian said. He stood up and backed away from the curb. "I'll buy you lunch."

Jordan smiled and nodded. After that, he put the cab in gear, made a quick U-turn and drove away stirring up leaves in the gutter before disappearing around the corner of a building a few blocks away. Adrian waved once then turned to wait for his son. He didn't even worry about how he and Brandon would get home. The two of them would just have to take the bus. There was a stop just up the street.

Five

Nathan James sat down at his computer rubbing late-afternoon sleep out of his eyes. He searched his few regular morning websites with half his attention, knowing that he was just postponing the inevitable. He was just stalling until he finally decided to check hunter-net again. He'd become more and more reluctant to check that site with his fellow hunters out of town, but with them supposedly on their way back, he figured that it couldn't hurt just to look.

Before he finally gave in, though, he checked his email. His email application popped up and told him that he had only one new message. Hoping that it was a long one so that he could stall a little longer, he opened it to see what it was. It was from the Internet journalist he'd been corresponding with, he found, and it was easily as big as he'd hoped. In fact, it was huge. He downloaded the two files that were attached and started reading the first.

"Holy shit," he said, staring wide-eyed at the screen after going through the first few lines. "Man, what the hell did you send me?"

About the Author

Carl Bowen is an editor, author and sometimes even a developer for White Wolf. He lives in Georgia where he tries frantically to stay one step ahead of Atlanta's urban sprawl. He will now open the floor for questions

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