

## The Shame Game

by

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Word count: 86751

## Chapter 1 - Birds of a Feather

In moments of panic, Benny's trusty mind spat out ornate and archaic bits of wisdom, with questionable provenance, like cards from a Blackjack dealer. Just now, *'Start how you mean to go on,'* whispered in his ear with a voice that could have been his mother's, a recently lapsed disciplinarian. The advice wasn't perfect, given he was crossing the main runway, at the Vancouver International Airport, in a rusted-out Richmond cab, while a Jumbo Jet lumbered towards him; problem being, he was low on gas.

Lest any residue of doubt remain, another choice saying sprang into his mind; this time, the voice was his father's, a devout anti-disciplinarian, and long since split from his mother; still it jived: *'Once you've passed the point of no return, going back is farther than going forward.'* That revived a memory of a hot August day, many years ago, hiking into a lake, which his dad believed lay at the end of an old logging road. What a tortuous hike! Benny was exhausted; his short

ten years-old legs felt like tree stumps. What he wouldn't have given to be on his dad's shoulders, or to turn around and go back to the car. Whatever was at the end of that road wasn't worth trudging another mile!

Much like his current predicament, both choices were tempting. Turning around and going back seemed like not a bad idea, or he could boot it and keep heading for the charter air shacks - and the fare, don't forget the fare - on the other side of the runway. Since he'd carefully ignored more than one No-Trespassing sign, he was now way off the beaten track, combined that with the fact he was low on gas meant it was likely too late to turn back.

Whatever, he had to make up his mind. He and the jet were about to collide.

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The events of the last month had frightened the wits out of Randal Liddle, and his wife Janey. The campaign of fear began when he made a passionate speech, in the provincial legislature, on protecting an individual's rights to privacy - the first of several speeches, in fact, which thrust him into the lime light as a must-have speaker on the Security And Privacy lecture circuit. Almost immediately, their house became a target for drive-by eggings. Someone even planted a burning cross on their front lawn. But the worst was when his oldest friend and mentor, Bruce Styles, was found at home - in his car - dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Bruce was a long-time privacy advocate and, strangely, Randal's strongest opponent. He repeatedly warned Randal against speaking out, insisting he would be stirring up a hornet's nest. Only last week, Bruce angrily pushed by him in the crowded hallway of the assembly

shouting, "Blast you, Randal! You're insane, if you think you can make the slightest difference *speechifying* over this! I won't support you - as a matter of fact, I will disavow you!"

It was the last time they spoke.

Randal found it impossible to grok this behaviour of Bruce's, and he mulled over his friend and their relationship, as he settled into his seat and tried to pass the time counting the islands below, while the amphibious De Havilland Otter made its bumpy way back to Vancouver. It simply wasn't in his friend's nature to back down from anyone. Of course, after several outrageous allegations against Bruce were made public, it became easier to imagine the man coming unglued, and perhaps even committing suicide. Randal received word of his death only hours earlier at the National Security And Privacy conference, on Vancouver Island, and he left immediately.

With the plane cruising low and his face pressed up against the pressurized cabin window, Randal had a spectacular bird's-eye view of the San Juan Islands draped along the coast like a jade necklace. The seaplane dipped suddenly and he gave himself a nasty bump as his forehead hit the window.

*Greenhorn*, he chided himself. The short hop to the mainland was as famous for its scenery as it was notorious for the often turbulent ride. Rubbing the sore spot, he sat back a safe distance and resumed his mental review.

The N-SAP conference was too important an event to miss, and reluctant to travel, Randal took precautions by covering his tracks with misleading entries in his calendar, and limiting his use of his cellphone and email. The conference was by invitation only and the guest list was private, so he felt reasonably secure. From what, he still had no

idea. The free-floating sense of being watched nauseated him; it was like being hunted in a house of mirrors.

Knowing that every channel of communication was open to snooping enraged him. His strange childhood with his sister taught him to fear and respect the power of privacy; how stripping it away could bring down the powerful and turn the meek into the mighty. Being the on the receiving end of such emasculation galled him into action.

The conference was a place to start, he needed contacts in the industry. People that would support tough laws against theft of personal information. But it was the wrong venue. The attendees were the sort that believed in wearing both belts *and* suspenders – they were ultra-conservative. Which should have worked in Randal's favour, except they were busy making a killing providing security solutions in a sky's-the-limit marketplace, where fear was the catalyst for funding leapfrogging technologies, and new vulnerabilities were uncovered and reported on a daily basis. Hand over fist. No one wanted to see Government crash the party.

On the second day of the conference, Randal got the news about Bruce's apparent suicide, and there was no concentrating. He felt like the last man in a leaky lifeboat, and he'd just lost the oar. He left the conference immediately and went to Bruce's home.

He remembered the day was cold and clear, and Bruce's shell-shocked wife, Beth, met him at the door in only a bathrobe, tear tracks staining her powdered cheeks and smelling faintly of Bruce's cologne. She greeted him with a brittle hug; felt vacant and fragile, like an empty crab shell, drying on a lonely beach.

"Why, Randal?" she asked. "Why?"

"I don't know, Beth. I'm sorry," was all he could come up with.

She drifted into the empty house, leaving Randal to look through Bruce's things. There were piles of papers and books scattered across every surface in the large office; he surveyed the scene feeling ill-equipped and deflated. Answers would not be found here – not by him – of that he felt sure, but he knew someone who could find them.

But still he needed a Rosetta stone, if she was going to be able to help, so he carefully disconnected Bruce's laptop and packed it away in the case that was tucked neatly beside the desk. He found Beth and tried to explain that he would do the best he could to find the answers both of them needed. She seemed vaguely concerned about the laptop, but Randal assured her he would return it unscathed as soon as possible.

If Bruce was Randal's oar, Janey, his wife, was his compass. He called her from the airport, before his flight out, and explained what had happened. She understood immediately. "You have to find out what happened to him, and she might be able to help. If anyone can, she can," said Janey.

"But she's got her own problems; I hate bringing mine to her."

"It's not just your problem Randal. It's much bigger, isn't it?"

She had a point. He needed to make contact despite their history, so he made another call and asked for her help. He gave no details over his cellphone, just that it was urgent he see her. She told him that he should come immediately – that she was there for him – and it brought sharp tears to his eyes.

As the small plane touched the tarmac, Randal began to worry that he was counting too much on her to provide the answers he needed. It was a pattern from the past. She always seemed to bring him a magical sense of optimism, mixed with a weird foreboding; he

decided to trust the feeling of optimism, telling himself that high-functioning humans, like sufficiently advanced technologies, are indistinguishable from magic.

On his way out, he poured himself a complimentary coffee; sipping the foul liquid, found a taxi-phone and called for a cab. He walked out into the bright sunlight to wait, rubbing his sore head.

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"To hell with the gas," Benny decided, and stamped the pedal to the floor. The old Chevy Impala roared in protest and lurched forward, shooting across the tarmac and onto the airport access road ... bare moments ahead of the Boeing, which thundered blithely past. Benny thanked the Chevy for pulling his ass out of yet another jam, and gave it an affectionate pat on the dash.

The narrow access road wound among a litter of small charter air companies, and Benny made several wrong turns before finding the right address. He was fretting that he wouldn't find the fare before some other cabbie beat him to it. He'd been drifting in a Sunday afternoon stupor when he managed to catch the call on the dispatch radio. Dispatch had tossed the fare out to anyone in the vicinity and Benny bolted from the stand at the South Terminal, imagining a fleet of cars all barreling down on the same address, and beating him to the fare. This image was bolstered by the sight of a competitor cab speeding down the adjacent road toward the charter shacks. His adrenalin shot up, triggering his creative, if risky, maneuver of darting down the hypotenuse, and crossing the runway.

The shift had been depressingly slow with several no-shows, just to keep things exciting; somehow it characterized what his life had become. He - or rather, the bank - owned one of the infamous 'leaky

Vancouver condos', and he was up to his armpits in damp renovations bills. A discrete green tarp encased his building; intending to hide from the road the fact that here was another victim of an unscrupulous developer, who built a poorly designed quick-seller, which simply rotted out from the inside. To Benny's mind, the tarp was nothing but a flag waving the word SUCKER for all to see.

After recovering from a long illness, Benny's life had lapsed into two stultifying functions: driving cab and paying bills. His uneventful existence as a cabbie, combined with the stress of his debts, apparently was a bad combination. He had a tendency to take risks, a certain need for excitement, something to get edgy about. This was how Benny had come to understand his impulsive nature. A perfect case in point was his recent shortcut, which included ignoring multiple large signs that warned, 'No Trespassing!'; 'Turn Back Now!' and 'Are You Blind?', and racing across a YVR runway, all to beat some other hack out of a few bucks, and a graceless tip.

What he wouldn't give for some real adventure!

Spotting his fare, Benny put his muse on hold and pulled up in front of an aluminum-siding charter air shack. It was a hot day and the large man, waiting for him in the business suit, was sweating patiently. He stood awkwardly with one shoulder hunched up, his hand holding onto his computer strap, and the other counter-thrust downwards, holding a Starbucks; he was watching his watch without spilling.

Benny pushed the shift into park, popped the trunk, pushed his door open and rolled out smartly, hitting the asphalt at a jog, to come around and open doors and make his apologies for any lateness.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, sir. Let me help you with your bag."

"No, I've got it, thanks," Randal said. "You made good time." He

pushed his laptop onto the back seat and slid in after it. When Benny got in the front seat, he told him, "I'm going to a residence; here's the address." He unfolded a note paper and handed it up to Benny. "How long will it take to get there?"

"That's a long way out." Benny said, looking at the address. "Could take an hour. Traffic's light - that's in our favour. Do you want to drive for speed or expense?"

"I'm in a hurry, so it's more important to get there quickly rather than cheaply. However, one would think that in a cab the two concerns are not mutually exclusive." Randal smiled.

"That's pretty much what most people think," Benny said with a puff of pride, "but when you drive for a living you start to realize there is a difference. See, the meter works both on time and distance. While you're travelling it's calculating by distance. When you're sitting at a traffic light, the clock is ticking and it's racking up the *dinaros* based on time." Benny pushed the flag down and shifted into drive. "The more we dawdle, the more it costs you, so I may take a few detours to avoid the time component."

Randal looked up. "Makes sense, but detours can be a trap too, and end up wasting just as much - if not more - time."

"But if you just hang in there with them, they can turn into real gifts. It's a variant of John Ettore's observation that the other line moves faster. That's why you don't change lanes when the going gets slow, because the other line, the one you were in, will start to speed up."

"Ah, a Reader!" approved Randal. "Well I agree. Probably the most effective way out of the trap of detouring is to stop and let the delay resolve itself." Randal was warming to the idea of an hour in this

man's company. "Don't the Buddhists say the first thing to do when you find yourself in a hole is to stop digging?" he asked. Benny nodded. He was listening with one ear as he pulled onto the access road and, in the other, mentally congratulating himself on his successful coup in snatching up this long-haul fare.

Out of nowhere, an RCMP cruiser skidded to a halt in front of them with red lights flashing. He checked his rear view mirror; the customer looked unperturbed, but beyond him Benny saw two white airport security vehicles pull up behind them with blue cherries twirling. He felt trapped like a cockroach caught in the kitchen after the lights are turned on.

"I think your theory about detours is about to be put to the test," Randal said. He groped around inside his jacket; pulled out a pair of aviator shades and put them on.

*Jeez - I hope he doesn't run without paying the fare,* was the silly thought that ran through Benny's mind. "Well, I can't charge you for this," Benny said as he reached to turn off the flag.

"Leave it on, " ordered Randal, getting in character.

"What? No, I can't let you pay-"

"Didn't you hear me? I said, LEAVE IT ON!" Randal's voice was as sharp and commanding as a troop sergeant's. "I'll handle this."

A burly RCMP officer, wearing body armour, pushed his head into Benny's driver-side window. The whiff of pomade and stale coffee filled the car. The nasty combination brought the reality of the situation into sharp focus; Benny flushed.

"Just what are you doing?" asked the Mountie, incredulous.

"Uh ... what do you mean, Officer?" Benny asked, rattled by the incongruity of the question. He was picking up a fare - wasn't it

obvious?

"Where are you coming from?"

"The airport?" Benny offered, but it didn't sound right. "N-no - the charter company," he corrected. "... I just picked up a fare and we're heading to Abbotsford," being helpful now.

"Not what I asked: Where. Are. You. Coming. From?"

The true purpose of the question had been prickling the back of Benny's mind, and this special emphasis finally jerked it into full-on obviousness. *He wants me to confess to crossing the runway.* Benny's flush deepened, and Randal chuckled in the back.

"Oh. You're asking about how I got here from the South Terminal!" Confession brought sudden clarity and it made Benny feel giddy. "It was easy-peasy! There's a gate about half-way down the road from the South and it's directly opposite the address of the fare. On the other side of the main runway -"

"Which you crossed," asked the Mountie?

"Well, yes." Benny said.

"What exactly was going through your mind?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time?"

"Get out of the car," said the Mountie. Benny reached for the door handle.

"Officer," Randal said. "I need this cab." He reached over and showed him an ID case; the Mountie stiffened. "Please return to your vehicle and move away. Call off your men too."

"Sir, this man just broke several federal laws. It's possible he's involved in a terrorist plot, and I have orders to detain him - possibly under a security certificate - until the facts can be ascertained -"

"There is no terrorist plot and he's mine now. Return to your

vehicle!" The crack of leather on horseflesh was back in Randal's voice.

The Mountie straightened and smacked his head on the door frame. He gave his head a shake, adjusted his hat, and lumbered away, waving the airport security guards back to their cars. He pulled out of the intersection, and they all reversed, neatly avoiding each other in a balletic maneuver and were gone.

Silence filled the cab. Benny dropped his head onto his hands, which were still clutching the steering wheel. *Man, that was close! Why do I do such stupid things?*

Randal was laughing in the back. It wasn't a happy noise, it was grating. Benny turned around and stared at his customer, who still had his aviator shades on, and looked final and smug, like a banker foreclosing on your mortgage. "Well, I guess I owe you big-time for helping me out there," said Benny.

"Oh - you owe me all right. Just remember that! Now please drive, I'm late." Randal took his glasses off and leaned back into the seat with his eyes closed. Benny turned around, put the car in gear, and proceeded to drive away slowly.

*All that time the engine was running, thought Benny. I'd better get some gas soon. One more thing to remember....*

## Chapter 2 - Team Spirit

*Thwack!*

The racket ball flattened as it hit the wall, it ricocheted off, flying towards the back wall with deadly force. Perry lunged for it, trying to catch it before it sailed by and avoid changing his position. He was good at conserving his energy, but it didn't always pay off. The ball smacked into the dead zone just above the floor and it double bounced giving Tim the point.

"YES!" Tim shouted.

Perry just grunted and positioned himself for the next serve.

"I'm going to lose this game," he told himself. "...Not!" he grinned as the ball came at him and drove it back up the court, neatly taking the point away from Tim.

"Not bad." called Tim.

Perry grunted again and smiled. It was ambiguous and designed to be meaningless.

Perry's a chubby fellow with a small mouth and, with that timid smile, you'd think he was a shy person... but you'd be wrong, Tim told himself. It's a reserved smile from someone who holds their cards close to his chest - and in that context, it probably means "bite me." He chuckled. It was Tim's nature to analyze everything and it was his passion to psychoanalyze people. Friends were his favourite subjects.

They had worked together as software engineers at a local university for almost two years. Before that, they had gone to technical school together and Tim had got Perry the job at the university. Perry had come to a certain level of, if not comfort, then acceptance of Tim and his ways. He thought Tim's wiry frame was much like his mind: agile and easily stretched, but prone to snapping.

On several occasions - often blamed on the job, or not enough sleep, or the nature of a creative mind - Tim flew off the handle. Ranting and blaming. When he got 'snotty' with folks, as he called it, he expected them to weather the storm. Often this presaged his disappearance for a day or two while the project lost ground. He would return exuding the warmth of the sun breaking through, grinning and affable, charming the women and 'mentoring' the men.

Perry and Tim began playing racquetball on their lunch breaks when the team won a large research grant over a year ago. It was Tim's way of 'managing the management,' he claimed it was important to strike the right tone. The message was clear: we work hard and we play hard. It was effective for establishing a norm of taking long lunches and the management never so much as cocked an eyebrow or raised a time sheet.

Over the months, Perry's game improved, while Tim's stagnated. Perry's opinion was Tim couldn't stay out of his head; he was always

wandering back to some brilliantly lit mental lab and running some thought experiment in the grand tradition.

*Not that Tim's an Einstein, Perry thought. No, his forte is mind-fucks. Styling with Freud, you might say.*

"Where do you want to eat?" Tim called and sent the ball whizzing towards Perry's head.

"...Milestones," Perry muttered as the missile shot past, into the corner, and sputtered to the floor.

"Point! You seem a little preoccupied today, *Perrier*." Tim's joke name for him. "Something, or someone, on your mind?" Another ball came whizzing by.

"You mean something besides your crappy serves?"

Perry caught it perfectly and pushed it along the wall with a burst of speed. It ricocheted off the back wall and sailed up the court in a parallel line that was impossible for Tim to touch. It crashed into the wall and earned Perry a point.

"Nice hit Perrier! You might just get outta here under your own steam. Carry you with a couple points?"

"You couldn't carry my gym bag, Tim."

"I wouldn't carry your gym bag, son!"

"Service!" Perry called from the serving line. It was a courtesy that was rarely observed outside of an official match, unless you were in the heat of battle and needed the assist of a some psychological pressure.

They played on for several sets without further banter. A weird quiet settled like a fog over the steamy court and the men became oblivious to the harsh squeak of their cross-trainers and the whack-thud of the ball hitting the walls.

It was a transcendent moment. Time slowed to a crawl and allowed their regard for each other to deepen.

Thwack! Eek-eek! Thud! Smack! Eeek! sang the dissonant ballet, accompanied by a poetry of grunts and curses.

They moved like gas molecules rocketing across every degree of the compass. They raced along edges: the edge of the court; the edge of the ball; the edge of the racket. The edge of stamina; edge of concentration; the edge of exhaustion.

Suddenly the rally was broken - one of them faltered and the state of grace collapsed. Try and try... but it was gone.

Perry and Tim looked and saw each other with a renewed camaraderie. Panting, with sweat dripping onto the hardwood floor, they began to pound each other on the back.

*Whadda game Man - that was awesome!*

*You killed me with that wall shot. You gotta patent that technique.*

*Yeah - but you gotta promise to come on the lecture circuit.*

They laughed and felt close... until like the rally... the moment was over.

*Okay. Let's get some FOOD!*

They hit the showers and then drove to the Whitespot in Tim's BMW. He simply vetoed the Milestone vote: "They serve crap."

They sat in the lounge, the lunch crowd had passed and it was quiet enough for Perry to hear Lyle Lovett singing "If I had a Boat."

*The mystery masked man was smart, he got himself a Tonto...*

The waitress came over and Tim ordered for both of them, which further irked Perry, then he sank back into his chair.

"What's been eating you, Perrier? You've been walking around

like half a stale sandwich all week."

"Let's not get into it."

"Come on Man. Be straight with me. I'm not going to drag it out of you, but I'm telling you, I want to know."

"All right, I'll tell you. You are really starting to piss me off! I'm getting sick and tired of being treated like your fucking pet dog. You're always busting my balls about this and that. I thought I had gotten used to it but guess what - I haven't! And while were on the subject, stop calling me *Perrier*. My name is Perry: P-E-R-R-Y!"

"Okay! Okay, I got it. But come on, Man, it's only a little nickname. You can't take a nick-name? You shoulda heard what they called me in school."

"I know what they called you. *Shithead*. I was there, remember?"

"*Shithead*? No, you're mistaken. Anyway, why haven't you spoken up before, why is it all coming out now?"

"How long have I been working for you?" asked Perry.

"I don't know, a year or so," said Tim.

"Two years. Two years and I'm still on the fucking ground floor. You give me all the shit projects. I'm either cleaning up some kid's spaghetti code or I'm installing software and fixing printers. Why are you doing this to me? I've got a lot more to offer, I can handle things. Big things. Just give me a chance!"

"Whoa Man - don't hold back!" Tim guffawed. "No, seriously - *Perriers*, I'm looking out for you. Don't worry, once you're up to speed it's going to happen. There just isn't an opening right now. What can I tell you? You've seen the specs in the proposal we sent to Shirk. It was a pittance, barely paid for paper clips. The way we're going, we may

not even get re-funded next year. We may even have to cut a few people..."

Shirk was the common term for SSHRC - the Social Science and Humanities Research Council - the federal funding source for their project. It rankled Tim, that they were unable to get funded by the National Research Council. It registered as some personal short-coming.

"That's so much bullshit, Tim! And it's not about the money. Have you even been listening?"

"Hey! Careful there. I'm being straight with you. I've got to watch every nickel and dime these days. And of course I've been listening." Tim sighed and blew out a stream of air. "...I might even have to stop expensing these lunches...."

"What! You're expensing the lunch? We always split the cheque."

"Well, what can I say? I've got ... additional responsibilities. You've been a tad slow in picking up some of the finer details of the job, so I've had to spend time mentoring you."

"That's a lie! If you're not happy with my performance just say so. Don't give me some lame ass touchy-feely mentoring bullshit."

"Look," said Tim, pushing his chair back, his face flushed. "If you're not happy with the way we do things ... the door's always open."

"Okay. Wait. Hold it. Time out. Let's not say something were going to regret. We're just pumped from that workout. Let's chill out and eat our lunch."

The waitress had quietly deposited their orders and snuck out of artillery range without a backwards glance.

Tim was breathing hard and gripping the arms of his chair. "Man,

if we weren't friends, I'd deck you!"

And Perry wanted to deck Tim - more, to simply be rid of him, but he knew it was the wrong time, he would pick his battles. Give him a few more weeks, then he might not have to deck Tim. He would walk over him.

"Come on, let's drop it. Okay?" asked Perry.

"Aw-right, sure. You just got carried away. It was all that adrenaline from the game, you were right about that. Now I don't agree with your assessment of our corporate strategy, but you hit the nail squarely on the noggin. From now on, I'm gonna give you more responsibility during our code walk-throughs."

"Really?" asked Perry.

"Sure. I'll let you operate the projector. How's that sound?"

Perry was stunned.

Tim broke into a braying laughter. Bits of food flew out of his mouth and a piece actually landed in Perry's. He spit and wiped his lips with disgust.

"I'm kidding," said Tim. "Lighten up."

"Bite me," said Perry.

### Chapter 3 - Game Plan

"Damn laptop! The battery's dead. *Fuck!*"

Pete Adamoski was in his motel room in Preston, BC and just starting a sorely needed therapeutic session with his novel - but no joy. It was becoming obvious he hadn't properly prepared for this trip in several ways: One, he had left the power cord at home; two, the laptop battery was only partially charged - about 20 minutes, according to the little battery icon on the toolbar; and three, someone had fucked with his clientele.

This was the first morning of his trip and it was a complete failure; now he was in his motel room with too much time on his hands. He was trying to lose himself in the creative process and just forget what the morning had brought - or at least stave off his thirst for revenge, and a fifth of whiskey.

His business was auto-parts, buying and selling them; he planned on hitting four towns on this run - was counting on it in fact

to pay the bills that were piling up. He was making a circle route through the BC Interior, and Preston was his first stop. He made this trip twice-annually and so far it was a complete balls-up.

Trouble began from the moment he arrived in town: Exiting the highway, some asshole in a pickup truck threw a beer bottle at his car. It hit the driver's side mirror, shattering the glass and making an ugly mess of the chrome. Pete was on his way to the motel and planned to check in and have a shower before his sales call at Denner Chev Olds. Instead he went directly to the dealership and booked himself in for repairs; then went around to the sales office to visit Sham Denner, the owner of the dealership, and offered to take him for breakfast instead of lunch.

Denner and Pete were large men who liked their food and they often had lunch together. Pete would take Denner to the local fine-dining establishment, where they would talk shop and eventually discuss his auto-parts order.

Today though, Denner refused to even see him. Mike, the sales manager was expecting him. He was a nervous chap with glasses and a bad skin rash; Pete found his incessant scratching very off-putting and wondered why the man would take a people-oriented career in sales. When Pete walked into the empty showroom, he was in a glass office lathering cream on his arms and neck; stuffing the tube into his desk drawer, he ventured his head out like a turtle.

"Hi-ya Pete. How's the road trip going?" Mike rubbed some imaginary streaks of cream on the back of his neck.

"Hey Mike! The trip up was grand. It's a lovely time of year to be on the road!"

"It certainly is!" Mike nodded.

For Pete, anytime was a good time to be on the road. The one thing he loved about this business was the driving, and a job behind a desk would be the surest and most direct route to his having a heart attack.

"How's Cindy?" Pete asked. "I didn't notice her when I pulled in."

"Oh, she's doing fine. The vet had to set her leg, after that truck hit her. Kept her indoors for a bit, but she's her old self again now. She's in the back. Did you want to see her?"

"No, that's okay, thanks."

Cindy was Mike's terrier, and nuttier than an Oh Henry, but a really sweet animal, unless you were a car or a truck booting down main street. Cindy seemed to think that stretch of road was her own personal territory and that it was her sworn duty to protect it from trespassers.

Why Mike didn't have her tied up at home Pete didn't know. Dogs like that get into trouble, as Cindy did last summer. She was chasing an exhausted shift worker driving one of Denner's pickups. The miner took a right hand turn, while Cindy was running along side, yipping and admiring herself in his hub cap, and caught her foot. Cindy's momentum caused the leg to snap.

"Where's Denner?" Pete asked. "Figured we'd go for lunch. I've got a terrific new line of stock. He's going to love this stuff!"

"Sorry Pete. He's not around. Said I should talk to you. He was pretty upset after that phone call of yours last week. Thought it was in very bad taste. Now if it had been me...." Mike blushed and rubbed his neck.

Pete put his sample case down on the tile floor. It was his backup case, and he was carrying it because his primary had been stolen from

the trunk of his car. This one was packing way too many catalogues and sales forms, and crap, but he didn't have time to sort through it before leaving on the trip. Anyway, it was too heavy to stand there holding it, while taking this in. This weird shit.

"Phone call? Excuse me? What phone call?"

"Come on, you know perfectly well. Were you drunk or what? Doesn't matter I guess, but drinkers don't go over very well with Denner. He's a bit of a teetotaler actually. His mom wasn't exactly shy with the bottle. Used to come to church all dressed up, but have her hat on sideways and her dress tucked into her pantyhose. Quite a sight. No, Denner's not around." Mike scratched his chest thoughtfully.

Pete was confused. He had not called Denner; and he hadn't been drinking – much, at least; he couldn't detect any bare patches in his memories of last week.... At any rate, he only allowed himself to commit phone-abuse in social causes, of which there had only been one, and he was dubious as to it's efficacy. He checked himself again – no, Denner was not a social cause.

"Now hang on a minute Mike..." he stalled. But what could he say, if Denner wouldn't even come talk to him? Better to just shut up and try to save the trip. Make at least a small sale to help pay for the gas...and the side-mirror.

"Okay. No problem," Pete backpedalled. "Tell Denner that I'm sorry we missed each other. Can I show you some of my stock? Like I said, I've got a new line that will...make your eyes blink!" He was going for a catchy automotive metaphor, admittedly not a very good one, but he was rattled.

It was lost on Mike. "No can do Pete, but thanks anyway. That Jennings kid is coming for a visit tomorrow. He's got a line of tools that

Denner's pretty interested in. Can't blow the budget, much as I'd like to. Maybe on your next trip,' he winked.

Mike backed into his office, leaving Pete in the showroom looking sorrowful. Then he had a brief change of heart and banged his knee on the desk when he started to come back out; then he changed it again and went back inside the office, shut the door and fished the tube of cream out of his desk drawer, began squirting and rubbing his arms.

Pete turned around, alone again in the showroom, the smell of new car in the air, and nobody buying. He felt his shoulders slump and remembered the glass walls, he straightened up and walked out.

At the motel, he was determined to shake the feeling he had done something wrong. Something he shouldn't have. Let someone down again. Was maybe going to be in big trouble. People wouldn't trust him, wouldn't like him. Was about to lose even more customers....

They couldn't afford it. He and Shirley were just barely managing the mortgage now, with her taking early retirement. The kids were gone. Finally! - he would joke, but he missed them all the time. Even though they were her kids and he'd barely gotten to know them, before the friends, the sex and the drugs - the typical things that robbed teenagers from their families - took over.

Shirley was forced to leave her job because of her health. She worked as an executive secretary in a law firm, but developed breast cancer and had to give up the highly paid position. Now she worried constantly about how they would get by. So did he, to tell the truth, but no need for her to know that - he worked harder, put in more hours on the road, did extra towns, tried to push the business further North and began looking at Alberta. They downsized as much as

possible; still the whopping credit payments pulled away the anchors on their safety net.

The drinking was under control, he assured himself. It was vital that he not screw this up, not while they were skating so close to the edge. He and Shirley had not been getting along of late; still that happens, it can be a good thing in the long run he told himself. His thoughts hunkered around a mood of despair, like homeless people around an incinerator.

Pacing back and forth across the small room, he happened to glance at the laptop and remember his fledgling novel. It was a shiny object in the gloom and soon helped him forget about the episode at Denner's. Until his computer problems began, and the self recrimination freshened: He was such a dope to forget the power cord. It made him so frustrated - like a helpless child, he dropped down on the edge of the bed, put his head in his hands and cried.

-

As usual, Mick, Timmy and Judd were hanging out in Judd's bedroom, in the basement of his parent's house. They were considered normal teenagers and got good grades - perhaps that was abnormal. Unknown to their parents and peers, they were obsessed with The Game.

Today, their mission was to bomb the career of Pete Adamoski. They had most of the requirements to run the mission. Adamoski's itinerary for his current sales trip, his contact list with the small personal details that could make or break his sales calls: For example, the birth dates and name of the wife and three kids, Amy, Andy, Arney - the three aces! - of his number one customer, Sham Denner. They also had Adamoski's client account number at Acme Auto-Parts

Distributing in Halifax.

Gathering these materials had meant doing more than a little distasteful, though creative, dumpster diving, which hadn't provided quite enough intel. They actually had to perform a minor break-in to Adamoski's car. Technically it was a break-in, but the car was unlocked, so it was fair game. The rules posted on the Shame Game web site were clear: No illegal activities encouraged or promoted.

-

They performed the break-in late Tuesday night of last week and rendezvoused in Judd's backyard, which looked like a construction site.

His dad always wanted a swimming pool, but waited until he'd made "a big kill." He made "a big kill" every year or so, practicing Law; usually that meant prosecuting some poor dope, who'd smacked some other poor dope's car, inflicting the driver with a neck injury. Recently, he made "a really big kill" representing the parents of a 12 year-old girl, who drowned at a friend's pool party after consuming a large quantity of liquor, left in an unlocked cabinet. The tragedy was paying for their pool, now just a large open pit, yawning in the moonlight.

Judd had waited outside for twenty minutes; his feet were wet from the dew, so he was hopping from one foot to the other.

"Finally! I've been waiting over half an hour!"

"We're right on time, Judd. You're too eager - must be an over-achiever like your dad," Timmy said. "Got your gear?"

"Got it," said Judd with a sullen look.

"Mick?" asked Timmy.

"Yup. I'm ready," said Mick. "Why didn't you put your boots on *Dingus*?" he chided Judd.

They carried backpacks with gumboots, rubber gloves, and long

sleeve shirts; it was sufficient diving gear for the late Spring climate. Timmy also carried a package of green garbage bags. The plan was to push Judd's car out of the driveway to a safe distance down the street, out of his parent's earshot, then drive to Adamoski's townhouse complex and see what they could find in his dumpster. They were all wearing dark clothing, in order to be less conspicuous. Riffing Adamoski's car would mean sneaking around the parking garage and they would blend into the shadows, Timmy said.

"All right, let's roll out," said Timmy. They got the car rolling down the street without too much trouble, piled in, turned over the engine, and drove to Adamoski's home.

Mick had the task of navigator and had prepared by writing up the driving directions from Google Maps. They were clear and succinct, as Mick was, much like his mother. According to his dad, his mother was one of those multi-tasking, excel-at-everything, high-achiever types. She was relentless about Mick's "mental habits," constantly reminding him to "focus Mick, focus!"

She got pregnant in high school. At the top of her class in Grade Ten, her focus strayed when she was given a seat behind Tom Krebs, a sexy nerd who wrote prime numbers - long ones - along his forearm, in permanent felt tip.

They dropped out of school and got married, ending his mother's dreams of a career in the emerging bio-tech industry. His dad quickly tiring of the grind of penniless parenthood, returned to school and shifted his focus on making his first million.

It wasn't clear to Mick whether they were still a family, his dad spent most of his time working in the United States designing software systems for the Porn industry. Mick saw him every couple of months,

when he happened to be in town and stayed at the house. It was an odd arrangement, but they managed to have fun anyway. Often they would ambush other players in games of Capture the Flag on a Half-Life server housed in Mick's room. Mick found it adequate.

In the car, Timmy went over the plan.

"Look for anything with his name on it. Don't waste valuable time deciding whether it's important or not, we'll sort it out later. I've got some garbage bags, just dump whatever you find with his name on it into the bags. Better yet, if it's already in a garbage bag, grab the whole thing. Like I said, we'll sort it out later."

"Sounds good. What about his car?" asked Judd.

"You get his plate number, Mick?" asked Timmy.

"Yeah, I got it... here." Mick passed a slip of paper with Adamoski's license plate number up to Timmy, who was driving. Timmy squinted, saw it was readable, and tucked it into his jacket pocket. The letters were drawn perfectly.

"How'd you snag his plate, Mick?" Judd asked.

"I went to his place early yesterday and hung out until I saw him leave the house; then I just watched for cars coming out of the garage - he's a big guy, it wasn't hard to spot him."

"Man, you coulda saved us some trouble and grabbed a load while you were there!" Judd complained.

"I draw the line at hauling garbage on the bus, *Doofus*."

"Nuff said," Judd agreed.

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The boys pulled up beside the dumpster in Adamoski's complex and tumbled quietly out of the car, careful not to slam the doors. They pulled on their gumboots and pullovers. The gloves were left off until

they were inside the dumpster, they didn't want to tear the rubber climbing inside the large steel box. Timmy motioned them into a huddle.

"All right guys, hit the dumpster, I'm going to find the dude's car. I'll meet you back here in fifteen."

Judd and Mick nodded and climbed into the dumpster. Timmy hunched over and moved quickly into the parking garage. He found Adamoski's car after searching license plates and cursing Mick for not having told him what model the car was, not even the damn colour. Once he found it, the rest was easy: it was unlocked and, aside from the registration and insurance papers in the glove box, the car was empty. He judiciously left the papers and found the pull-tab by the driver's seat which popped up the trunk. He went around and looked inside: He'd struck pay-dirt! There was Adamoski's sample case packed with samples, forms, and the holy grail: his customer-list.

Excellent! Timmy congratulated himself, dumping the big case into a garbage bag, so it would look like he was just hauling out the trash. He gently pushed the trunk closed and started for the dumpster when a voice called out.

"Hey you! Hang on a minute!"

Shit - it was a security guard! Timmy stopped, his head down, breathing short; he thought about running for it.

"Evening son. You live around here?" asked the elderly security guard.

"Sort of... I'm staying with my uncle for the night," Timmy improvised, "his name is Pete Adamoski. My parents are having a fight and my dad gets real ugly when he drinks. Uncle Pete said I should come over and stay with him. I was taking out the garbage, kinda

show how much I appreciate him."

"Oh? That's tough. Well - okay, have a good night." The security guard turned and began walking out of the parking garage, toward the dumpster.

Toward the guys, Timmy remembered. He ran and caught up with the guard. "Have you worked here very long? What's the job like?" Timmy scraped the barrel bottom trying to come up with a conversation starter so the guys would hear them coming. "Do you think I could get a job working SECURITY?"

"Hey - I may be a little dumb, but I'm not deaf!" The guard protested and then chuckled at his pun. "Sure, you could probably get a job working security. It's a lot of school though. See, you need a Master's degree in Baiting - but once you become a Master Baiter, then you'll be ready to do the job." He chuckled again at his hilarious stand-up routine.

"Great... thanks for the advice," Timmy said, slightly embarrassed. To his relief, everything appeared normal at the dumpster. He toppled the garbage bag containing Adamoski's sample case into the dumpster, it landed with a thud, Timmy flinched. "I better get back up and see how my uncle is doing."

"Sure, okay. See ya around," the guard's attention had shifted. "Wonder whose car this is? They can't park here."

"Oh - that's my car. Sorry, Uncle Pete said to just park close to the building. He said he'd look into getting a permit tomorrow, if I was going to stay long. I'll move it."

"Better put it in the visitor's stall, in front of the building. I won't let them tow you, now that I know it's yours. I'd better take the license plate down." The security guard took out a small wire bound

flip-top notebook and jotted down the license plate. "Okay. Got it." He put the notebook back in his breast pocket. "Nice car. Young guy like you is pretty lucky to have such nice wheels. Bet you pick up some sweet ladies with this!"

"Oh yeah, you bet! I take 'em down to the beach and we watch the submarine races. When it's slow, I just practice baiting..." Timmy winked. "Guess I better move it. Goodnight!"

"You're pretty funny," said the guard. "Goodnight."

Timmy got in, turned on the engine and put on a serious face that said he was going to drive away. Then he popped the trunk, got out, and started rummaging around as if he had forgotten something important. The guard sauntered off on his rounds. When he turned the corner of the building, Timmy stage-whispered. "All right, he's gone!"

Mick and Judd poked their heads out of the bin "Man that was close."

"Let's go!" Timmy commanded.

They tossed their bags and Adamoski's case down to Timmy, and jumped to the pavement, landing with soft smacks. Timmy and Judd put the bags in the trunk of the car. Judd started taking his gear off.

"Never mind, just get in," said Timmy.

"Okay, but we stink...."

"Live with it!" Timmy ordered.

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They met at Timmy's after school on Monday to plan the mission, which was to take place the next afternoon. Two days before Adamoski was due in Preston, at Denner Chev Olds.

They sat around Timmy's computer, drinking Lattes that Wendy, the housekeeper, had made for them, there was also fresh carrot cake

on a plate on the wide computer desk. On the bed was a large plastic sheet, on top of which was spread the material that they had acquired from Adamoski's dumpster. They'd scored some pretty nice stuff from the bin: The sample case, for example, which sat unopened on the floor.

Judd and Timmy were sorting the piles of refuse: Judd was sorting the papers and Timmy was classifying them, Mick was scanning the information into the computer.

"More phone bills and a pizza crust," reported Judd.

"All right, forget the food already. Just the paper," said Timmy.

"What about pill bottles?" asked Judd

"Yeah, we might need them. Better throw them over here," Timmy began making a separate pile. He picked up a pile of hand shredded paper scraps, which looked like phone bills. "Okay, Mick, type these phone numbers in. You never know when we might need them. So far the names don't ring any bells."

Mick took the shreds and scanned them. "Wait a minute, you don't recognize this name: Pop Butcher? He's one of the most sadistic guys in the Hell's Angels. He doesn't kill you! He leaves you broken and poor - you never come back from a beating from this guy. Wow, Adamoski was calling him pretty regularly for a couple of weeks!"

"Come on, his phone number's gotta be unlisted. How do you know who that is?" Timmy was skeptical.

"Do you live under a rock, Timmy? He's always in the news. The numbers were recently published online by a concerned citizens group, who figured they could harass this guy and get him to move out of their neighbourhood. Maybe Adamoski was one of them. I'm thinking Butcher got pissed off and either couldn't or didn't want to take care of

him personally, so he listed him as an easy target in the Shame Game monthly," Mick began typing again.

"You're probably right," Timmy said. "If that's it for the trash, let's work on the case, I want to get started scripting for the Monthly."

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The Shame Game provided monthly, quarterly, and finals competitions. The Monthly was usually played by beginners, they had a wider, more accessible, list of targets containing names of people that almost anyone could get next to without a lot of preparation. Just average folks who had pissed someone off. The entrance fees were smaller and helped them gain a ranking.

This would be their third Monthly competition. They didn't complete the first, because of logistics; the travel distance made timing difficult. They did much better in the second match.

The target was a high school teacher, with a reputation for sleeping with her students. The attack they took was to make one of her student's mothers believe that her son was being seduced by the teacher. They knew of the teacher, who taught at another school, and were slightly acquainted with the student that had chosen, from various sports events.

It was fairly easy to plant a pair of panties in the boy's backpack as evidence, and make several hot, breathy, phone calls to his home. The kicker was leaving a voice-mail imitating the teacher and promising to pass the boy, if he got her off in the classroom without anyone noticing. She – well, Judd, who was a natural impersonator – left it up to the boy what methods he chose to use, but 'she' gave several graphic hints about being flashed.

The student's mother reacted fiercely by forwarding the

voicemail, not only to the school, but also the local CBC news office. Since the story got picked up by other news services across the province, the boys scored very well and won the Monthly.

The most difficult part about these missions was keeping themselves under control. It was such a tense experience, and so outside the normal, that they kept bursting into fits of laughter. They had to have several dry runs just to get the giggles out. Timmy's mom and Wendy thought they were just having a good time studying, but expressed concern they weren't getting enough outdoor recreation.

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"Okay, let's step it up," Timmy said. "We still have the case to go through and we haven't come up with a way to nail old Petey. You guys get that crap off the bed and I'll open up the case."

Judd abruptly tugged on the plastic sheet as Mick picked up his corner and caused Mick to tumble onto the bed, landing with his face in a pile of garbage.

"Hey you fag! Are you trying to get me into bed?" Mick retorted.

"You wish!" Judd laughed.

"Hey - wait a minute," said Timmy. "That's a good ploy to use on Adamoski! He's in an old boys network, selling macho auto-parts, and pestering bikers... I'll bet he's got some homophobia going on there, or his associates do!"

"Not bad!" Mick agreed.

"Perfect!" chimed in Judd.

There was a knock on Timmy's bedroom door. "Just a minute," he answered. "Throw a blanket over that," he whispered, as he let himself out into the hallway. He came back a few minutes later. "It's dinnertime and Wendy wants to know if you guys will be staying. I told

her you both had homework and were heading home.

"We still have to work out the script, but we'll have time tomorrow. I'll go through the case and call you guys tonight, if I find anything interesting."

"Okay, later then," said Mick.

"Sounds good," agreed Judd. "Hey Mick, gimme a ride okay?"

"What's the problem, your car out of gas again, *Doofus*?"

"Bite me, buddy. My mom needed it. She was supposed to pick up your dad, they were going for a little afternoon delight."

"Yeah, right." They laughed as they tromped down the stairs and out into the setting sun of the late afternoon.

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After school, the boys met in Judd's basement for a final review of their battle plan. Today was D-day and they would begin by going over their mission. The plan was to make several phone calls to Sham through a Bell Canada calling card - this would show a 416 area code, originating in Ontario, on Denner's call display; it was the best they could do, but would serve to screen their identity and create some confusion. The first two calls were intended to establish that Adamoski was trying to contact Denner, but having line trouble. These calls would fail because of a 'bad' connection. The final call would be the impersonation of Pete Adamoski himself. Any of the other boys could make the first two, but the third would be made by Mick, he was the expert impersonator.

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After Judd made two calls, which were picked up by Denner, before Timmy disconnected them, they judged the preliminary 'line problem' calls as successful - Denner was now psychologically

prepared to accept a call from his auto-parts sales rep, Pete Adamoski, regardless of where it appeared to originate. The broken cell connections induced him to suspend his critical thinking and believe the call was coming from Adamoski himself.

Timmy had attached a special microphone for generating static on the cellphone, he handed it to Mick and tapped in Denner Chev Olds' number. After several rings, again Sham Denner came on the line.

"Pete, is that you?"

*(static)* "Yes, it's me Sham. We need to talk...."

"Looks like we've got a bad line here, Pete... But, good to hear from you! What can I do for you?"

*(static)* "I need to talk to you personally something very important," said Mick. "Something personal."

"Sure, what is it Pete?"

*(static)* "I've got a problem, and I don't think I can continue as your Rep."

"What's the problem?"

*(static)* "Well to be honest - I'm in love with you."

"What? That's crazy, are you drunk?"

*(static)* "I'm going to be in town next week and I have to see you! Please tell me we can meet. I can't stop thinking about you. We can go away together. Please. I need to be with you!"

"I'm a married man!"

*(static)* "That doesn't matter. In time your wife will understand. Let me tell her for us, or we can go to her together. I'll come by your office at the dealership as soon as I arrive in town. We'll tell her it's something we can't ignore any longer..."

"You're nuts!"

(*static*) "I'll see you soon, darling!" Mick whispered, and hung up.

The boys burst out laughing. Timmy detached the microphone and switched off the tape recorder. "I'll package this up and upload it to the site as our entry. We're golden!"

#### Chapter 4 - Do It

Alice gingerly descended the front porch stairs, shivering in the early morning air. There were just three steps, but at her age - 82, if she remembered correctly - you had to be careful about such things and carry yourself like a priceless treasure. She slowly made her way down the path, detouring around the large rain puddle that collected last night in her driveway. It poured buckets and the sky was looking like it still had a few big ones that needed emptying.

Rain was just fine with Alice, it washed things off and fed her roses. Meaning to collect the mail, she was side-tracked by several American Beauties that hadn't weathered the downpour very well. She neatly pinched off their heads with her arthritic fingers hardly noticing their ache. Glancing around for other items that needed tending in the flower bed, she spied the mailbox which reminded her why she came out this morning without a coat.

*That lid isn't quite closed. The box is probably stuffed with soaking wet bills...* She imagined them swelling like brown paper bladders.

Cinders, the neighbourhood tabby, appeared out of nowhere meowing and twining herself around Alice's ankles. Alice stumbled, trying to avoid stepping on the cat and almost fell.

"Oh, you little fiend. What's the matter with you? You're going to get one of us killed if you don't learn to stay out from underfoot!"

"Meow," announced Cinders.

"Lot of good that does now." Alice noticed the dish she kept out for Cinders was empty. "What – didn't I just fill your dish yesterday?"

"Meow," insisted Cinders.

"Well, just let me get my mail and then I'll get you something."

Cinders was short for Cinderella, a name bestowed by children who had vacated the isolated mill town long ago. The nickname was more appropriate for the black cinder colour of the tabby cat's fur which puzzled many people. Not noticing the faint classic "M" pattern on her forehead, they didn't believe what they saw was a tabby; yet there she was, as real as rain.

Alice scratched Cinder's back and straightened with an effort; it was chilly on the ground. The mailbox's winking lid caught her attention again.

"Better get the mail and get moving - I'm going to catch my death!" she thought aloud.

"Meow," agreed Cinders.

Alice padded along the path to where the black tin oblong box was

attached to the house. She lifted the creaking lid and sorted through the damp contents.

"Bill. Bill. Cheque, hmm, GST rebate eh? God Stop the Taxes!" Alice cackled over her joke at the Goods and Services Tax rebate which she and other low-income earners received once a year. She continued sorting, "Flyer, and a credit-card application - whoot-whooot! I'm *pre-approved!* Guess I can file these under: Money-out; money-out; money-returned-that-was-stolen; please-spend-money; and please-borrow-money. Pretty much the same old doo-doo!"

Alice chuckled again as she made her way back down the path and carefully climbed the stairs to the house. Her hip twinged. "That fall I took last spring was a real terror. Guess I'm lucky I didn't break my neck..." Alice stepped into the house. The gloomy interior took her eyes a few moments to adjust.

*Eyes are still pretty good, she thought, no sense buying more 'lectricity than I need. She looked at the damp wad in her hand, Better file this batch.*

The bills and the cheque went into the mouth of a dark green ceramic frog squatting on the kitchen worktable. There was a small, fake, wooden sign planted on the frog's white lily pad that said "Do It!" This was a gift from her granddaughter Zena, and Alice treasured it. Zena had immortalized her grandmother's favourite motto in the ceramic frog hopper.

'Do It, Dump It, or Delegate It.' *Words to live by,* Alice thought as she fed the important bits of the day's mail to the frog and the left-overs into the recycling bin. "It's getting full, better tell Maggie to haul it away when she comes on Tuesday." She picked out a pen from the

motley assortment bristling from the unidentifiable soup-can on the worktable and scratched a note under Tuesday on the large format monthly-planner hanging on the cupboard beside the worktable.

*Maggie - Pls dmp recyc. Thx!*

While she was looking at the planner, she jotted down on the grocery list *p/u vanilla, raisins, t.p.* and mused aloud about other items she needed.

"Must bake some butter tarts and monkey bread for the kids on Sunday. What else? Oh. Cat food – better go feed the last of it to Cinder's and pick up some more when Ruby takes me shopping - that's today! Better get a move on. Daylight's wasting, as they say in the movies. Oh - better put the DVDs out to take back."

Her lap vibrated and she jumped! It was her cellphone, buzzing in the front pocket of the apron she wore around the house. The call display announced that Ruby, her neighbour and cohort, was checking in.

"Hello Ruby!"

"Hi Alice, how you doing?"

"Just fine for an old gal, still breathing anyway," she chuckled.

"Don't let the boys find out," Ruby giggled.

"It's too late – they just left!" They both laughed. "And what can I do for you, Ruby Tuesday?"

"Bear was in my yard today. Got my garbage. Don't forget to tie yours up tonight, Hon."

"Always do, dear. But thanks for letting me know. Is that all?"

"That's it. Just wanted to let you know. Will you be ready in an hour?"

"Perfect. See you then."

Alice clicked off. "What a dear - lonely though. Too much time on her hands, since Jack died.... Now, what was I doing? Oh, Cinders still needs to be fed."

Alice got a cup and filled it with the last of the cat food. She went to the door and saw that she had forgotten to close it.

*Mustn't get too forgetful. That's a bad habit, forgetting to close the front door, especially with a bear wandering about.*

"Cinders!" Alice called. She climbed down the stairs and dropped the food into Cinder's dish with a clatter. "Here Cinders!" She looked around expecting to see the tabby.

A massive hulk loomed above her, reeking of rotten fish and dog shit. Startled, Alice wrinkled her nose in disgust.

The grizzly snapped her neck with a single swipe of its massive paw smashing her to the ground. Rearing and falling; rearing and falling it pulverized her frail form spraying blood and cat food across the yard.

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The police arrived in the late afternoon. Ruby had called them from her cellphone when she arrived to take Alice shopping. She had pulled into the driveway and halted the car, stunned. She stared through the windshield at the carnage in disbelief. She was afraid to get out of the car - didn't want to - had no desire to step over the remains of her dear friend.

At first she kidded herself that it wasn't Alice. No, it was some poor animal that got mauled. A dog, maybe. But then she made out Alice's apron. It was horribly torn and mashed into the bloody pulp now resolving undeniably into Alice's body. Ruby imagined Alice bustling around her house, laying out goodies and coffee for her constant stream of guests, and wearing that unmistakable apron. It was festooned with sunflowers – her favourite flower, next to her roses.

Alice and Bill had nurtured the garden, putting in rows of sunflowers along the fence and rose bushes everywhere else. Bill had long since passed, but Alice kept the place just the way they always had. Now she lay scattered among the roses. *Probably a good place to bury her*, Ruby caught herself thinking, and was ashamed. Her fear that she had stumbled into a monster's lair was replaced rudely and without warning by a burning hot embarrassment. Her face flushed. She felt like she should cover Alice up, but where to start? Run about with a pail and garden gloves; put her in a neat pile and then drape an apron over her, or just dig a hole among the roses and plant her?

The tears gushed down her cheeks. She rocked back and forth in the driver's seat, pounding her hands on the steering wheel. Keening in a high pitched howl that came from both her mouth and her nose. How long before it passed? Minutes probably. It seemed to go on forever, like she was lost in some timeless grey zone of grief.

Finally, she was back and practicalities kicked in. Call the police; call Alice's family; close the door to the house, but whatever did this – surely it was the bear that got her garbage this morning – might still be lurking in the yard. Maybe even was hiding in the house.

"Stay here in the car Ruby Tuesday!" She heard Alice's voice in her

head and broke down in another gale of grief; then came back, rocking slowly with her hands pressed between her legs.

She dug her cellphone out of her purse and dialled 911; pressed talk and waited for what seemed like hours until a calm voice picked up and carefully led her through what the matter was and where exactly she was.

"Are you in any danger right now, Ma'am?" asked the operator.

"No. I don't think so. I don't see ... anything around," Ruby swivelled her head and surveyed the scene.

"Just stay in your car until the police arrive. I'll stay on the phone with you, but I've got to put you on hold for a minute. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I'll be right back. If you need me just call out, I'll hear you. Okay?"

"Okay," Ruby said. "Hurry."

The police treated the situation like a crime scene. They strung tape around the roses bushes and along the driveway. They chalked out strange circular shapes around pieces of 'evidence' along the path and laid rocks on more tape on the lawn, and as far back as the road where the largest part of Alice had been flung in a mad frenzy.

Ruby was in no shape to give them any information – not that she had anything to add beyond what they already knew – so they assigned an officer to drive her home. She lived just down the road, so they didn't bother sending another patrolman along with a car. The officer could just walk back to the scene after he had dropped her off.

The young RCMP officer who drove Ruby home came into the house

and helped her settle down. He put the kettle on so she could occupy herself with making tea. He poked around a bit mostly looking at the photographs. There were dozens scattered – just as pieces of Alice (*deceased*) were scattered – throughout the hall and the living room. They were mostly of Ruby and her husband, Jack. They had no kids of their own, but there were many photos of her son and his family, and some of Jack's children. Her son's kids were mostly grown, but there were some recent grad photos. One of the boys, Ruby's grandson, looked familiar.

"Have I seen this handsome fellow around before, Mrs. White?"

"What? Oh, yes, that's my grandson, Daemon. He's been up to see me from time to time. He's talked about him and his girlfriend moving up here. He likes the place; says he'd like to move out of the city, but doesn't know what he'd do for a job. He works in computers. Frankly, I'm surprised he's even thinking of it. Always struck me as a big-city boy. I think this country living would be too boring for him. Not bearable... Oh!"

Ruby broke down again. She sobbed and held herself, then stopped rocking as suddenly as she had started.

"I have to get over this," she said.

"It's all right, Mrs. White. You have plenty of time. Don't rush it. Is there anything else I can do?" the officer asked.

"No, I'll be okay," said Ruby.

"Do you want me to go through the house and check the rooms before I go?"

"Thank you, Officer, but I don't think that's necessary."

"Will you show me where you saw the bear getting into your garbage this morning?" he asked.

They went out through the patio doors and Ruby led him into the back yard. They walked to the end of the large yard where several fruit trees had dropped the last of their leaves during last night's storm. Among the leaves were bits of garbage that Ruby had missed. The officer picked up a few pieces of plastic wrapper and carried them over to the green plastic bin.

"You can see where the bear pried the lid off. You can just make out the claw marks there ... and there." Ruby pointed to several rows of greenish-white tracks along the lid of the the trash bin where the bear had worked the lid free. Whether it was the same bear, the officer had his doubts.

"Do you remember what the bear looked like, Mrs. White? You know what a Grizzly looks like?"

"Well of course I do. I've been living here for over 20 years."

"I'm sorry, didn't mean to offend, Ma'am," he said.

"I really don't want to do this, but if it will help you catch it, I will."

"We're going to keep a close eye on things, don't you worry. I suppose we'll mount a search, but in the meantime it would help us if we had a description."

"What can I tell you, Officer? It was a bear. Big. Brown. Bad! A bear ... and it killed my Alice. Dead. Dead. Dead!" Tears spilled over yet again and swept her along. There wasn't any bottom to her grief yet and she kept losing her footing. The undertow pulled her back into that grey timeless place where Alice was chatting on the phone ...

laughing about boys ... in the supermarket joking with the zucchini....

The young RCMP officer moved in awkwardly to console her. Standing out there with this sobbing woman in her big empty yard required a response that wasn't found in the manuals; he tenderly put his arm around her shoulders – she was tiny, really tiny – and guided her back to the house with all her many photographs.

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Maggie came to the house the next day. She had heard what happened to Alice and wanted to get the cleaning done before the family started arriving from the city to take care of Alice's effects. Maggie picked her way around the tape and let herself into the empty house. For some reason, the door had been left unlocked. Not too surprising, she thought, lots of people still didn't lock their doors in this town. She didn't imagine the police would lock up either.

She did a thorough vacuum and scrubbed the floors, hauled out the trash, and loaded the recycling into her truck. The wind gusted and caught some of the loose papers from the top of the recycling bin. Maggie put the bin in the truck and ran to pick up the papers, glancing at them briefly. Bills.

Cinder's appeared as if out of nowhere and rubbed up against Maggie's leg.

"Meow?" she asked.

"Oh, sweetie. You looking for some food, or is it Alice you're missing? Sorry, I don't have either one." Maggie reached down and stroked the tabby's back. "This is a sad place now. You go on home, Alice isn't coming back." Maggie climbed into her truck and drove off

to the dump with Alice's trash.

## Chapter 5 - Shaping

Benny drove the cab in silence for almost 30 minutes, which was a record for him. Even with the cab empty, he would usually be talking and singing to himself. It was a habit he picked up years ago on a salmon trawler, working as a deckhand in the unforgiving Hecate Straits. Often he was down in the hold, icing fish and, surprising to him, it was a perfect place, perhaps the only place onboard the ship, for reading out dialog from a sci-fi screenplay he was writing at the time.

Benny would brace himself 15 feet below a choppy sea with scant light from the hatch diffusing the chilly darkness; surrounded by dozens of freshly gutted Coho, and the occasional Spring Salmon (if they were lucky), he would pack their bellies with bloody ice and line them up tier-on-tier like an attentive audience, frozen in place, smiling vacantly; watching him with their dead black eyes, waiting expectantly for another brilliant line.

Benny laughed, remembering how he acted out many scenes in front of the iced fish. Now when you've played for an audience like that, you're ready to play in Ottawa, he thought.

"What's the joke?" asked Randal.

"Oh, sorry - forgot you were there. Just thinking about how technology can get away on us."

"And that's a funny thing?"

"Nah. You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"Well of course it's funny. It's only un-funny when we take ourselves too seriously."

"Fair enough," Randal said, "but, I've seen a nasty side of technology...seen bad things happen because of it, and it wouldn't matter squat whether you were taking yourself seriously or were the great Jerry Seinfeld himself."

Benny glanced in the rear view mirror. His passenger had those cheap sunglasses on again and looked very un-funny. "Yeah - and you've probably seen 'Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion.'" Benny muttered to himself.

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing."

"Are we getting close?"

"Still about 15 minutes away."

Randal grunted.

They drove on in silence; Randal spoke, "You don't want to get too comfortable with technology. I know people say - and maybe you're about to say it yourself - 'It's a tool, that's all, neither good nor evil, it's how you use it.'"

Benny didn't say anything. Didn't like people thinking they could read his mind.

"Try telling that to the Napalm Girl, Kim Phuc," Randal continued. "Or any of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Technology shapes you. And that can be very un-funny."

## Chapter 6 - Wishing Makes It So

Perry didn't go back to work that afternoon. After Tim dropped him off at the elevator and went to park his Beamer, he ran up the three flights of stairs to his cubicle, grabbed his keys and his pack, signed out for the day and went home. He needed to be alone.

His apartment was in a rough part of town; hookers were known to rent rooms in the building and anonymous scruffy males hung out in the parking lot, but the rent was cheap. His one bedroom apartment cost \$600 a month and it was close to work. Sure he earned enough money to live in a better part of town - and one day he would, he told himself - but this suited him for now. Besides, he reasoned, moving because you didn't like your neighbours would almost guarantee you wouldn't like the new ones either.

He lived on the second floor, opposite a rail-line and over a playground. Some days you couldn't hear yourself think, especially when the weather was good and the kids were outside. It was a toss-

up who hollered the loudest, the trains or the kids. One girl had a scream that felt to Perry like somebody was pushing a pencil into his ear, and she used it for everything. If she was excited, she'd scream; if she was angry, she'd scream; if she dropped her ball, she'd ram that pencil home. It drove him nuts.

Then there were the trains. They went by at all hours and made a horrendous racket - which he actually liked. The roar was physically jarring and it reminded him of the night he hopped a freight train out of Toronto, with pregnant Sheila, the mother of his son.

-

It was a hot summer night, too hot to sleep; with no air conditioning in their small flat, it was impossible to cool off. They'd pushed the sheets to the floor and lay naked in their double bed, spitting into the air and enjoying a brief chill as the spit rained down and evaporated on their bodies. Its cooling effect, however, was as short lived as its entertainment value, and so they wandered out into the night in search of a breeze. They stopped at an overpass on King Street West and watched the trains trundle by. The next memory was of them jogging alongside a flat-car and climbing it like a pair of hobos. A pair of best friends....

The cool air was delicious; it was exciting riding out of town, watching the city glide past them, but as the train left the city limits and picked up speed the temperature dropped. Suddenly they weren't hot anymore, they were freezing their asses off. They climbed under the trailer that was riding piggyback on their flat-car and hunkered down in the lee of its rear wheels, but that offered little shelter from the driving wind. Sheila thought Perry had better try to get up to the engine and ask someone to stop the train and let them off.

Perry remembered he resisted. What an embarrassment that would be. *Excuse me, Mr. Engineer, but my girlfriend and me are too cold to continue our big adventure of riding the rails – and by the way you sure do have a nice freight train here - so could you stop and let us off?*

*Why certainly son, but why don't we just turn the son-of-a-bitch around and drive you home? It's no trouble, really!*

Sheila, dressed in light summer clothes, was suffering from the cold much more than him. She held herself with both arms, teeth chattering, and just looked at him. So he resigned himself to an untimely death and picked his way up the train, scuttling under trailers, lowering himself onto car couplings packed with slippery black grease, crossing from one to the next. The herky-jerky motion made each crossing a gamble and his mind insisted on showing slo-mo images of himself bouncing ass-over-teakettle in a bloody cartwheel down the rail-bed. Why did they ever leave their warm safe bed?

Miraculously, as he reached the engine car, the brakes began to squeal and the train slowed. Wonder of wonders, they were pulling into a station!

-

*Be careful what you wish for,* Perry thought as he let himself into his apartment and felt the big Welcome Home lick of warm air rush out to greet him. He shrugged off his coat, kicked off his boots and went over to the thermostat and turned it down. The apartment smelled homey, like coffee and forgotten farts. He prowled around the rooms making sure everything was the way he'd left it. This had become a habit since being robbed shortly after moving in. The thief had somehow climbed onto his balcony, pried the sliding glass door off its

tracks, and taken his stereo. There was a lot more in easy reach: his computer, his Les Paul, his Native American spirit mask collection. *Now those would have earned the bastard a few crack-bucks.*

With the perimeter secure, Perry walked through the small kitchen into the dining room, turned on the computer, and sat down at his dining-room table-cum-workstation. Given the floor plan, the limited space, and the fact that he was against his work encroaching on his bedroom, it was a workable configuration. He logged into SociallyArrested, his current favourite site. While it was loading, he checked his email and found messages from several people he'd started threads with. Maybe people he could become friends with.

And he needed friends.... It was lonely starting over in a new town and the bullshit at work was getting to him. He swatted the keys. *I don't get no respect*, he thought, and then laughed at himself. He sounded like Rodney Dangerfield.

He went back to his email. Several messages came from a hacking forum. The group didn't interest him; from what he could tell they were mostly 'script kiddies'. Juvenile nerds unable to write an original line of code. They thought damaging computer systems was a way to impress people. *Some peoples' kids!*

In Perry's mind, the only defensible form of hacking was the more socially responsible 'white hacking'. Finding vulnerabilities and reporting them. Much like walking through a neighbourhood and putting notes under any unlocked doors that you find. In the virtual world, the note would be posted in a public forum on a security site, accessible to all concerned. This was usually excellent incentive for the site owner to implement some level of security, and that was where he came in, or had.

In a past life (one with a picket fence, a wife, a child, and a mortgage), Perry wrote security software; and password cracking tools were his specialty. He was the original White Hat and he often bent over backwards to help anyone with a security problem, but he'd been burned for his trouble. Now he avoided the scene entirely.

There was a personal email from someone named 'MsYou'. It was an invitation to join a private forum called Multiple Identities: Acquisition and Utility. That caught his attention. Whoever MsYou was, she had picked up on his interest in role playing. He clicked on the forum link and logged in with the username and password she had provided in the message.

The discussion was intriguing, if somewhat viscous. From a quick scan, he learned they coordinated attacks on selected targets by assuming their identities and upsetting their lives with a barrage of orchestrated events. It appeared their goal was to fully and completely embarrass and confuse their host. But why?

Perry poured over the forum for hours. He could be extremely thorough, bordering on obsessive. He finally found the answer. They were role playing, but the roles not imaginary; they were of real live people and the objective was recognition on an international stage. It made Dungeons and Dragons pale in comparison.

An invitation to a role playing game on this scale, and the thought of actually meeting these people in face-time, particularly MsYou, gave Perry a lift he hadn't felt in a long time. He quickly composed a reply and sent off his acceptance, but he was careful to downplay his enthusiasm. He was sure they would despise joiners.

A thunderous roar and a piercing whistle from a freight train shook his small apartment and made him smile.

## Chapter 7 - Paths of Separation

The comments from the man in the back seat irritated Benny; they carried an odour of condescension, like the dude had tasted everything Life had to offer. But what was probably just honest reflection from an older man, translated into criticism in Benny's mind and put him in a mood.

*I may be just a taxi driver, but I've done my share of living and sure as hell don't need anyone's approval.*

He'd done way too much of that.

Years after his wife Linda left, it dawned on him that it would have been okay to refuse her. To let her down. Disappoint her. Perhaps it would have even helped them. Some people, he discovered, thrive on brutal honesty.

Too often he would struggle for long minutes, trying to find a safe way to say "no dear, i don't want that." While Linda looked on, claiming to not understand what he felt or why he was angry.

Anyway, he swore he wasn't.

Why won't you tell me, she'd ask?

But he had nothing to tell. His feelings were not bold enough to bare themselves; he could not bring himself to disappoint or hurt her. Caught in avoidance of conflict, he would look down for his heart and vanish; look up again...peek a boo, here I am...look down – whoops! - where'd I go?

A desert of intimacy spread around them, while he became lost in trying to understand himself, mistaken in the belief that once he got through, she'd still be there. That's what friends did, right? They hung around until you were ready to play, right? Wrong-o. In a strange disappearing act, Linda evaporated from his life over the course of a few weeks, leaving behind a stain of unwanted clothes and old photographs...

-

The wheels of the cab thrummed on the highway and Randal gently snored in the backseat. Benny shifting his driving position and adjusted his bag, which was going to need emptying soon. They were still a long way from their destination; he let his mind return to its wandering.

-

After much railing against the fact of Linda's absence, Benny began to accept his solitary life. Even enjoy it... Good thing too, as it turned out.

Looking back, Benny couldn't imagine complicating a life with a chronic disease more than sharing it with someone who needed a weather report every fifteen minutes. (What was that about anyway?) Every time he pissed Linda off because he couldn't explain why he

didn't want to do something, go somewhere, wear something, eat something, need to shit, need to sleep, need to breathe, need sex, there was a parallel question that never got asked: Why do you need to know? But his survival, his anxiety about upsetting her and just going with the moment, had drowned out that question.

Everything becomes moot, he discovered, once your bowels turn on you. There is no betrayal quite like starting out on a bus trip, a short one, a fifteen minute trip...weather's fine, the day's ahead of you...your destination is waiting only three stops away and -oh no!- that sense of urgency has crept up from another world, from somebody else's life and burst into yours:

*Get up, get up! Get off the bus. Go now! While the door is open.  
No - don't wait!*

*Okay, dammit. Stop. Let me off!*

Ah, but it doesn't end there.

*Where will you go? Is there a bush you can hide behind?*

*What here in the middle of the city? In broad daylight? Of course there are no bushes!*

*Can you walk then? Waddle? Certainly don't run! (horrible pun)  
Well, take your pick. Find a spot to duck into, drop down and drop your pants; or lose it, even while you undress clenching your butt and praying to God to please help me hold on.*

But it doesn't work that way, prayer doesn't alter the circumstances. It may have that power for some, but it's not something that Benny ever witnessed. Prayer simply became something that helped him live through it all. But for a long time he wouldn't pray at all.

Linda was everything he wanted. She was his ideal woman; a

friend, partner in crime, soul mate. Together, they were the strings of a lute, separate but playing the same sweet melody. They felt sure their souls would travel the many worlds of God together, because they were two halves of a whole. Destined; made for each other.

And one day she left. Took the colour T.V. and left a four page letter in longhand. She hoped they would remain friends. It left Benny baffled. Eventually, he concluded, it was Linda who couldn't say what it was she didn't like. Just gave up and went away.

Such a sneaky affair. It started with,

*I'm just going to stay over at my girlfriend's for the night. You remember her, we met her at the mall.*

Couple days later, she called,

*Oh, I'm going to stay a few more days. She needs me here. You don't mind?*

Then a week later,

*I'm going to come by and get my things. All I want is my clothes and the colour TV, my mother loaned us.*

That's when he stopped praying.

## Chapter 8 - Last Chance Abbotsford

Randal spoke up from the back of the cab, "I feel like a kid, whining from the back seat of his parent's car on the way to the cottage: 'Are we there yet?'"

"Just about," Benny replied. "Mind if I ask you why you didn't just catch a flight out here to Abbotsford? It would have been a lot cheaper."

"Let's just say it seemed like a good idea at the time," Randal winked. He had chartered his flight back from Ottawa to Vancouver's South terminal, because there wasn't a connecting flight available to the smaller airport in Abbotsford. *A little nose, but reliable enough*, Randal thought. For now he'd keep Benny on a need-to-know basis.

"Fair enough, Chief," said Benny. He was pulling the cab up in front of a faded, white, two story house set back into a large treed lot. He watched a gorgeous woman come out to meet them, holding a blue terry towel bathrobe closed, while the wind tried to tug it away from

her long bare legs. She was wearing sandals and Benny imagined she had been lying by her backyard pool. She opened the rear door for Randal, just as Benny was coming around to do the same. Randal tucked his shades into his breast pocket and buttoned his jacket; he slid out of the cab and kissed the woman on the cheek.

"Hi Sweetie, it's good to see you."

"Randal, you look great! What a sight for sore eyes."

"You working the night shift?"

She yawned. "Yeah, I just got up."

"What do I owe you?" Randal asked Benny.

"Make it seventy five dollars, even."

Randal dug into his wallet and handed him a hundred dollar bill.

"Keep the change," he said.

"Thanks," said Benny, "that's generous!"

"You earned it. Got us here in just under an hour like you promised. I can still use you, if you don't mind sticking around. I'll make it worth your while." Randal took another fifty dollars out of his wallet.

Benny felt like it was an odd offer and thought he would rather head back to Richmond than hang around Abbotsford all night. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather call a cab when you're ready. They've got a pretty good service out here. Save yourself fifty bucks."

"Okay - not a problem. I thought maybe you could use the business, instead of dead-heading back to town."

"You can use my car, Randal." The woman said. "I just need a ride to work." She had a pretty face that didn't need makeup and blond hair pulled back in a pony tail. Benny thought she could be a manager for the local Ramada Inn. She had that facilitating, but-don't-

fuck-with-me, look the big hotel chains seemed to go for. Then it occurred to him that the attitude might very well be entirely his own.

"It would be safer – better - to drop you at work, Connie. I don't know my way around. We'll use the cab. So, are you available?" he asked Benny.

"Sure. I guess so. Let me check in with dispatch. And I'm going to need to use a washroom. It was a long ride." Benny said.

"Come on up to the house after you've talked with your dispatcher," Connie said. "I'll leave the door open. Come on, Randal. Let me fix you a coffee. I'll bet you're hungry. Is that all you brought, just a laptop?"

"Yeah. Let's talk inside, Connie," said Randal as he pulled the case out of the cab.

She took his arm and they walked up the path.

She's sweet on him, that was plain. And him? Well, he was plain weird, Benny thought. He called his dispatcher and told her he had a fare that was keeping him on call. She wished him good luck and said to check in every hour or so.

"...cause cabbies have been known never to return, once they've gone bush in Abbotsford," the dispatcher chuckled.

*What a maroon,* Benny thought.

The sunlight was draining away and rain clouds were piling up on the horizon as the day slowly died. Seeping from a house on the empty street, Benny could faintly hear the voice of Rickie Lee Jones singing "Last Chance Texaco."

*Who would even notice?*

## Chapter 9 - Cut-Away Cure

After a long time, it all came back. Well the prayer part anyway, Benny mused. He was sitting alone in the trusty old Impala and not in a hurry to go up to the house. He never saw Linda again and it was still difficult running into their old friends, but as he wasted away, the fluids draining with no sign of stopping, he began again to pray. There was no big god-like voice that urged him on, at least not from up above. Rather, people appeared in his life and said things that made him think. Made him think of angels. So he began to pray for miracles.

*Please God, help me find something to stop this!*

And each time he came to the end of his rope, a new treatment or research study would magically appear, giving him new hope and new possibilities. Until the disease cracked its knuckles and got down to working him in earnest.

Benny had been in a steady decline for about four years. His doctors said he needed surgery to remove his ulcerated colon, but

there was no way he was going on a bag. Somehow he would make it through the horrible episodes, the embarrassing events that were occurring now almost daily. Yes, he was draining away, slowly becoming a shadow of his former self – a playful, self deprecating description, he often used to describe himself - but the pain had never been unbearable. Until the Hemorrhoids struck.

They came several months after a failed attempt at healing his Ulcerative Colitis through Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy. This was a relatively new field of consumer medicine that was being used quite successfully with diabetic patients who suffered from gangrenous foot wounds that resisted healing. At the end of his magical ever-lengthening rope, Benny thought this just might do the trick. He had a wound that resisted healing (albeit it was internal), so he might as well give it a shot. The doctors at the clinic were very encouraging; and he met a sweet physical therapy assistant, who quit on his last day of treatment. Disillusioned? She never came out and actually said as much; certainly he was.

Every day for a month, he drove to the private clinic in a beat up Honda Civic he rented from a friend. Once he arrived, he put on paper slippers and padded into the treatment room where he changed into a hospital gown. The room was dimly lit. It was a soothing light level and made it easier to watch the TV monitors that were hung above each chamber. Along the wall on his left, were four curtained gurneys, the curtained area contained a set of shelves and miscellaneous medical supplies, bandages and cremes; this was where his physical therapy nurse, Bonita, took his vital signs, blood pressure and pulse, recording them on his chart.

Along the wall on his right, were arrayed four HBOT tanks.

Individual tubes of the type that were used by scuba divers suffering from decompression sickness, brought on by surfacing too quickly. Each chamber was seven feet in length and three feet wide, they lay horizontal on waist level stands - glistening cocoons made of steel and Plexiglas, capable of containing several atmospheres of pressurized oxygen. He would lie down on the gurney, Bonita covered him with a light sheet and a blanket, then another nurse would help her roll him across the room and into the open mouth of the waiting chamber.

"Watch your elbows!" they would warn, as they slid him down its throat until his toes touched the steel surface at the end of the chamber. Then they pinned his anti-static bracelet to the chamber lid and closed the door.

Benny remembered the dead sound of the chamber, all the echoes had been contained. Bonita would appear beside him, sitting in the control chair, she would start the preselected DVD or video tape from their film library. She would adjust the volume and look at him until he gave the first of many to come hand gestures: thumbs-up, sound is fine. Then she would start him on his 'dive'.

Benny had lots of practice with pressurized descent and clearing his sinuses to avoid the painful "ear squeeze" that happens when the pressure in the air spaces between the sinuses and the middle ear need to be equalized. He'd spent several winters vacationing in Mexico and Cuba where he dove in luscious blue water and floated among schools of Manta Rays, which reminded him of Canada Geese, flapping their wing tips as if they were flying. This descent had none of the poetry. Before shutting him in they asked if he needed to use the washroom, as often as not he would, then once the descent began, and throughout the hour and a half that he was at depth, they would

nervously monitor him in case he had a sudden urge to move his bowels. In that case, it was a minimum wait-time of five minutes for them to de-pressurize him, get the door open and pull him out of the chamber before he could jump off the gurney, rush to the washroom and relieve himself.

The worst thing that could happen...had, twice.

His time inside the HBOT chamber, became a meditation practice, relaxing his bowels, calming his mind. The DVD movie was a distraction; on rare occasions, it was entertainment.

The course of thirty treatments cost him something like \$10,000, but was not covered by his medical insurance. When Benny attempted to claim some of the money in a letter to the Ministry of Health, the minister of the day wrote back that while she commiserated with him for his poor health, HBOT must be administered in a hospital for the treatment of a deep sea diving accident only.

*Sorry Pal! You should have been more careless on your vacation, if you wanted to get an inside look at a Hyperbaric chamber - not suffering from an incurable illness. What the hell were you thinking? Thanks for writing!*

The results from those thirty treatments were not dramatic. However, when he started taking them, he was hitting the toilet as much as twenty times a day. After a month of daily treatments, his average number of toilet trips was down to ten per day. It seemed promising; the doctor in charge of the clinic, shook her head and made noises about giving him some free treatments, if he could manage to take more time off work. She would have preferred him to take another twenty sessions.

That was pretty much impossible. Work had been understanding

enough, giving him the month off with pay. But sick-leave was at an end, he wasn't dying, so back to work. Another four months passed and his small improvement slipped away. By February, his number of daily trips was back up to twenty. This was an unbelievable number to most people with a normal, perhaps even problematic, schedule of bowel movements. Things couldn't possibly get any worse.

Wrong, they most certainly can... Things can always get worse.

One fine day, the Hemorrhoids from Hell arrived and stubbornly refused to leave. Ever. They were his new buddies, loyal to the end. You and me together, forever.

The pain was excruciating. This was likely the one condition that women would concede men could share in, when they discussed what the pain of childbirth was like.

Benny spent the early hours of each morning in the bathtub; often fell asleep there, hot water flooding his painful partners, numbing them into submission. This went on for weeks. It was the only relief he could find. He'd tried all of the creams, ointments, suppositories, and Internet quackeries (*have you tried "Butteze?"*) without so much as a whisper of relief.

Finally, one Monday morning, too exhausted to go into work, he called in sick and planned to go back to his doctor and ask for another dose of medication. Perhaps some pain killers. Novocaine – anything! He sure wasn't looking forward to taking the bus down to the doctor's office and sitting – no, he'd be standing – around, waiting to renew a prescription that hadn't make a spit's difference to begin with. His mother, who was freaking out because she couldn't help with his illness and lived so far away, would say she wished he had an advocate, someone to go to the doctors and make them listen. An angel. Well, he

wished he had one too.

And then the phone rang.

It was a friend from work who heard he wasn't coming in that day. "Do you need anything, Benny? Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

He was about to blow off her offer when a voice inside said, *Maybe she could drive you to the doctor's, heck of a lot better than taking the bus.*

"Ah, actually Dorothy, can you drive me to the doctor's office this afternoon, at one?"

"Of course, I can," Dorothy said. "See you later then."

As they were pulling into a parking space in front of his doctor's office, Benny heard that voice inside pipe up again.

*You know, she's supposed to do more than just drive you here.*

There's no way I'm asking her to come into the examining room.

*Why not?*

Good question.

"Dorothy ... would you mind coming in with me?"

"Of course not, I'd love to!" Dorothy said in her big-hearted way.

"You can ask questions, if you want..."

*Man - am I a wimp or what?*

"Wonderful! I intend to," Dorothy said.

After a short stand-around in the waiting room, they were ushered into the doctor's office. Benny couldn't remember what they talked about during the ten minutes or so before Doctor Lee came in.

Benny introduced Dorothy.

"Great! I'm glad you came along," he said.

Benny began describing how the prescription wasn't helping; was

there anything else he could prescribe? Doctor Lee seemed distant and pre-occupied – as usual. *Here we go again*, thought Benny.

Dorothy broke in, "You know I'm really worried about Benny, and not just about his hemorrhoids."

"So am I," said Lee. "I'm afraid he's going to die. He really needs to be in a hospital. He's malnourished and is losing too much blood. I've told him this, but he doesn't seem to be concerned."

His words stunned Benny. He had been coming to this doctor for a couple of years now, looking for advice, treatment options, and just recently had been asking about getting admitted to the hospital for TPN. Total Parenteral Nutrition, food through a tube, to give his overwrought digestive system a break. Now the doc was recommending the hospital, like it was his idea.

"I agree, I think he needs to be in a hospital." Dorothy was saying.

"If he went to the hospital, they could treat his malnutrition and maybe do something about his hemorrhoids too. I've never seen anything like them before and there isn't much I can do." Said Lee.

"I completely agree." Dorothy said.

"But Benny needs to agree as well."

"I agree! Take me to the hospital. Anything, as long as I can get rid of these damn hemorrhoids!"

Later, after the worst of it was over, Benny would tell people that the sure cure for 'roids was surgery. *Yes my son, have your colon removed, that's a definite fix!*

## Chapter 10 - Dumping Fashion

Freezing cold rain was pissing down the neck of Vancouver's downtown east-side. It'd been raining for days across Metro, so why hadn't she brought her umbrella and worn a sweater, Zena Marsh asked herself. But then, in the movies, you never saw sexy leading ladies going to clandestine meetings carrying umbrellas and wearing sweaters. Umbrellas and sweaters didn't figure large in novels either, she pondered. She saw her life as an unfolding story and it was her nature to dress for the part; therefore the rain was just her bad luck. Quickening her pace, she promised herself the next time she wouldn't forget her golf umbrella, which sat chubby and comfortable like a portable Taj Mahal, in her hallway at home. Damn fashion.

She dodged into an anonymous doorway set into a grey stucco wall. It was easy to overlook this place, even the chipped and faded blue paint on the trim failed to register, but of course that was the point. It was twisted, she thought, but wasn't that was the point of the

downtown east-side's nasty-poor reputation? It would be impossible to drive this level of business up in Shaughnessy, they wouldn't allow it.

The inner door was plate glass; an ancient Bakelite buzzer was mounted on the frame. Zena leaned on it.... The lock clicked and she pulled the door open and went in. A tired bare bulb hung from the ceiling, sighing faint yellow light onto a steep staircase. Holding her breath against the smell of moldy garbage and printer's ink, she climbed to the top. Hearing movement on the other side, she knocked on the thin board. It went quiet.... The creepy sensation of being watched stole up her back. *Fuck this*, she banged on the door with her fist. "Spatz. Open up. I'm freezing my titties off!"

The door swung open and revealed a man in his early sixties. He wore a tight black hood, which covered his entire head, so that only his baby-pink skin was exposed: like a scuba hood, only this wasn't; the head-gear sported a white cotton hem, so that his face was ringed in white. The overall effect was that he appeared to be looking out at the world from inside a *spat*, an accoutrement from the 1920s, only they were designed to be worn stylishly over dress shoes. As a fashion statement, it was the oddest Zena had ever seen. Only it wasn't; this was therapy, but you didn't want to go there.

"Please. Come in, Ms. Zena." Spatz spoke with the slow gravity of Boris Karloff.

"I don't like standing around Spatz, and I don't like people watching me."

"I was simply taking necessary precautions. We live in interesting times...wouldn't you agree?"

"I'm not here for your interest, Spatz." Zena stepped inside the cavernous room and felt a moment of vertigo. The ceiling soared thirty

feet above them; from the rafters hung sliding pulleys coiled with snakes of thick chains and yawning hooks, their tails anchored to the walls. The ancient hardwood floor was shiny black with wear. A free standing office stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by isles of boxes. At the far end of the warehouse was a shipping elevator, clogged with orange and green garbage bags. Boys were carrying the bags from the elevator and emptying them on rows of long tables. Girls sorted, standing or sitting on stools along both sides of the tables, bouncing to tunes from their music players. Stacks of matched items (telephone bills, medical prescriptions, even passports) slowly migrated to the front of the room, where they were carefully labeled, boxed, and stacked around the warehouse.

"Is my shipment packed?" Zena asked.

"Let's get you a towel for your hair," Spatz reached out and gently fingered several wet strands. "Bolo!" Spatz called to one of the boys. "Bring Ms. Zena a towel!"

"Will you have a cup of coffee?" His eyes lit up at the thought. Zena was torn; she desperately needed a cup: it was late; she was wet and cold; and there were still miles to go, as they say, but she had tasted Spatz's wicked brew before. He was forever experimenting with different blends and the last batch had given her visions of lying on her death-bed wishing she had listened to her mother by eating all her vegetables and taking mega quantities of anti-oxidants.

She sighed and asked "It's not ready, is it?" The words were interchangeable with "Has the governor called yet?"

"It is, and my people are just finishing up. Say you'll have a coffee with me."

"I'm in a rush, Spatz. This isn't a social call."

"It will only take another minute or so. Come and sit down. This blend is Sulawesi, and I've got Half 'n Half."

Zena was weakening. "Do you have honey?"

"No. Sorry. No honey. Rats get into it. Makes everything sticky. I've got Sweet 'n Lo?" He said hopefully.

"That's alright, just cream." Zena followed him into his office. The Sulawesi smelled thick and delicious and masked the prevailing aroma of garbage; she hoped it tasted as good. Although extremely cluttered, the spacious office was essentially a glass box with blinds covering each wall. Spatz had created a cozy living room area with several chairs and a low coffee table piled with National Geographic magazines. Zena picked an easy chair and sat down, absently checking her teeth.

Bolo, a teen-aged boy with angry acne across his forehead and nose, came in with a towel, "Here you go." He gave her a shy smile and handed her a freshly laundered beach towel with the words *El Jonco, Mazatlan Mex* written in large orange letters down its length.

"Thanks," said Zena and she began tamping her long black hair between her hands with the towel. The boy hung inside the doorway studying the calendar. Spatz was fixing coffee in a drip rig behind his desk. He took the Half 'n Half from a small bar fridge underneath the coffee equipment and took a tray of cups and spoons down from a neat shelf overhead.

"Bolo, shove off now and get Ms. Zena's shipment finished! Tell Diesel we must get Ms. Zena on her way - *pronto!* Now *vamoose!*"

"Fine coffee always makes me feel like traveling."

Zena was beginning to realize how the towel had found its way so far north. She briefly wondered whether Spatz took his weird head

garment off when he was on the beach in Mexico. An image of him, rotund and hairless like a baby hamster in loud beach shorts, came unbidden to her mind. She tried to focus and took a big gulp of her coffee.

"Hmm - not bad. So what do you have for me?"

Bolo was back in the doorway making throat clearing noises, trying to get Spatz's attention.

"What is it?" Spatz snarled; his avuncular manner was slipping.

"Diesel said to tell you that Fingers got picked up by the cops."

"For what - dumpster diving?" He asked with contempt.

"No. Diesel said it was for vagrancy. She says to tell you we're not going to be able to finish Ms. Zena's MLA package."

"What?" In anger, Spatz's face became a red moon. "Tell Diesel to get in here!"

"I need the MLA package, Spatz." Zena said.

"I assure you, I understand," said Spatz. Diesel appeared at the door, knocked once and stepped into the room. She was a tall and muscular 15 year old girl, wearing a cap (backwards), a hoody, baggy jeans and gum boots. Diver's gear.

"You called?" Diesel asked.

Spatz spun around. "Yes, I called. What's taking the order so long - what happened to Fingers?"

"He got picked up - it was a bogus rap. They can't hold him for vagrancy. It was the private security dicks that grabbed him and called the cops. He was diving in Point Grey; you know they gotta low tolerance up there."

"Right - I know. Fuck! What good is that? He should know!" Spatz flicked out his cellphone. To Zena: "I'll sort this out, shouldn't

take long." To Diesel, and Bolo who was hanging back in the doorway, he shouted: "Get back to work!"

Zena looked at her watch. It was after eleven. She still had to meet the team for a final check before they ran the scene. They still had time, but she wanted to be prepared for contingencies.

"We've got to talk about Plan B." She said. She needed to be ready in case they had to switch scenarios. She didn't have a lot of confidence that Spatz could do anything to deliver her MLA package, if his boy was in the custody of Vancouver's finest, all the way over on the west side. She waved Spatz to get on with his call. He left the office and strode into the warehouse clutching the cellphone to his cloth covered ear.

Zena pulled her own cellphone out of her mini pack. It was a small backpack with thin straps; it didn't hold much, but it carried the essentials – and it looks damned cute, she thought.

She wasn't worried yet. If absolutely necessary, they could postpone the MLA event. She punched in De Niro's number - not Bob, but Marc - although if wishing came true, he would be - and not her wishing either.

De Niro answered on the first ring. "Zena. Where the hell are you? Everyone's ready to go. What's going on?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I'm at Spatz's and one of his boys is late – got picked up with our stuff. We might have to ditch this one."

"No can do. We've already spent the commission."

## Chapter 11 - Fashioning Personality

In most ways, Zena's business was a labour of love, but she had overhead. Materials for one – her shipment from Spatz was a good example, and there were logistical expenses. Spatz was likely to charge anywhere from three to five thousand USD for the materials. These consisted of a packet of identification, plus an assortment of POLS, or Proof of Lifestyle documentation. Everyday items that ranged from the common: phone bills; tax returns; pharmacy receipts, to the more exotic: labels from champaign bottles; theatre ticket stubs; cardboard inserts from packages of pantie hose. POLS were essential to assembling a parallel life for the person in the identity pack.

What Niro meant by the commission already being spent, was they'd accepted money to run a Scenario on a local politician, a Member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. They had accepted money in the form of a donation from a Patron, through a private Pay-Pal site, and used it to compete in a high-level Quarterly-

Scenario competition in the Shame Game. The Scenario was a pre-scripted high-contact event; it was more or less loosely scripted, depending on how much the Patron paid for certain specific events to occur - not that money was a major motivating factor for these folks. Exposure and glory were fundamental - for a few, even Projection: It was Oxygen. The Quarterly competition took place on a global stage and Zena's team would be in the running with eight other International teams for big points and major bragging rights. Secondarily, the prize for winning first place was a Ferrari California.

Zena was watching Spatz pace up and down the warehouse floor, cellphone clutched to his ear...her own, and Niro, half-forgotten at her own, while she mulled the situation over.

The Scenario outlined the game plan (who would make contact with the Host, where it would happen and when, plus alternative timelines) these deciding factors pretty much limited the range of their expenses. There was enough surplus material in their Scenario that Zena's team could make a last minute switch - or just go 'naked' without expensive POLS, which was a lot harder to pull off, but also a lot bigger thrill. Sometimes a team would simply pull out. A good team leader, and this was Zena's responsibility, would make this ultimate decision.

Patrons tended to get very annoyed at having their Scenario 'rained out'. Particularly after having spent large change to have, for example, their local politician (the Host), first cause a brawl in the Railway Club; then weave drunkenly in a stolen cab through the downtown core; and finally take a hooker up to a room in the Georgia Hotel, and spend the night hourly calling room service for more champaign, bubble bath, and Clorox bleach.

Visual verification with coverage on the morning news provided the Patron with glee factor and earned players the points that allowed them to maintain their standings. The Quarterly was a moderately important game. They were competing against some pretty sophisticated teams. The Japanese team was running a scenario on a principal at a girls' school. The U.S. team had committed to a scenario that showcased an up and coming governor of California, which, if they pulled it off, would bury Zena's team.

A variety of other teams were running scenarios, but Zena couldn't remember them all. At this point, she focused on acquiring the materials and hiring bit actors, so her team could roll out and do its thing. She thought of herself as their stage manager preparing for opening night - that would be tomorrow. Tonight - now - everyone was assembled at Niro's; going over the dialog and getting the timing of events perfect. As in Life, there would be no dress-rehearsal.

"So what do you want us to do, Zena?" Niro asked. "I'm up for going naked." She could hear the grin in his voice. Niro was hardcore: the closer the contact the better. Most of the Shame Game teams seemed to prefer working with characters who were deaf and dumb, meaning hosts that were totally oblivious to the fact that someone was spoofing them. Other teams tried to get away with (and could afford) shooting the entire scenario on a sound stage and then submitting video or leaking a tape to the news companies.

Amateurs - Zena's players were purists. They habitually needed their fix of vicarious shame.

She came out of her reverie and stood up, letting the El Jonco Hotel towel fall to the floor. "Hang on Niro. Spatz is coming back, let me talk to him. I'll call you."

Niro muttered something and clicked off. Spatz was in the room; he seemed pleased. "Everything is A-Okay, Ms Zena! I've got a man bailing out Fingers. They'll be here as soon as they pick up the merchandise. Fingers ditched it - smart fellow. Good thing about this product, you can leave it lying out on the sidewalk and people just walk around it." Spatz chuckled. "Shall we go over your order then?"

"How long do you figure, once they get here. How much prep time will you need?"

"Not long. I've got most of it assembled," Spatz said, stooping to pick up the towel. He folded it carefully and placed it on the coffee table. "There are a few key pieces we had to get from the mark's house. You should be good to go within the hour - once Fingers arrives. He's 20 minutes away at the most."

Zena's face clouded and she crossed her arms. She was counting on being at the studio by midnight. She wasn't going to make it. "I don't know. We might just have to go with what we've got...which is?" She looked at Spatz and raised her eyebrows - she was pissed.

"Look, I'm sorry," said Spatz. "I'll give you a *buenísimo* deal!"

"Stick to english, Spatz, and just tell me what we've got to work with."

"*Si Senorita*. Ah let's see...." He took a thick plastic covered spiral bound notebook out of his inside jacket pocket. "I'll give you the rundown on my inventory, you can decide what you need."

"I don't need to hear your entire fucking inventory, Spatz. Shit! I told you what we needed weeks ago. What do you have on hand?"

"Fine." Spatz blew out his cheeks. "Temper, temper!"

"You want to find yourself on the receiving end of one of my Games, just keep up with the fucking attitude."

Spatz winced like he had been slapped. "Sorry."

"That's three." Said Zena.

Spatz was about to speak. Zena glared. Tension shimmered in the space between them.

"Okay," said Spatz. "Down to business. I've got four complete sets of identification for Mister MLA and his entourage. That's driver's license, birth certificate, and a credit card – Visa Gold. That should cover him, his wife, and two aides, well assistants to be correct. What I'm waiting for are his day-timer and rolodex. We also pulled his file from his G.P.'s office. Man, are those guys loose with patient records. Every blessed piece of information is on paper. It's a gold mine of POL documentation; most of those doctor's offices don't even have security guards!"

"So we could mount the production tomorrow, but we won't know where the host is going to be. We'll need the day-timer or access to his calendar to figure that out.

"Puzzles," Zena smiled and Spatz basked in the glow.

I do love a good puzzle, she thought.

## Chapter 12 - Puzzling Power

For as long as Zena could remember, she had loved puzzles; and like all great loves, it had started with her father. On many mornings, she would come down to the kitchen early and wait while he made his ritual cup of hot-water coffee, which he swore was absolutely the only way to drink coffee. He would put a heaping spoonful of Nescafé Instant coffee into a mug – running the hot water tap - then pass it under the tap until it was full and topped with a slick of brown foam. It had to be thick and stiff, otherwise it would be weak and not fit for consumption. Finally he would sit down with the morning paper and she could climb up into his lap.

*Want to do the crossword puzzle?* He would ask, nuzzling her neck. She would giggle helplessly and nod, while he riffled through the paper, pretending to look for the crossword. The smell of his aftershave would blend with the newsprint, and the Nescafé, and strangely make her think of wild horses.

Her father used these puzzle sessions as an opportunity to teach her a sort of...moral vocabulary.

*Okay Sweetie, can you give me a nine letter word meaning to live life through someone else's experiences?*

He would say the word in her ear and then spell it as she penciled it in,

V. I. C. A. R. I. O. U. S.

*Excellent! Vicarious is when you're watching the other kids play out on the street and enjoy it almost as much as they are. Now, give me a 12 letter word for stealing company funds.*

E. M. B. E. Z. Z. L. E. M. E. N. T.

(Her uncle's life had been fraught with troubles.)

*Terrific - you're brilliant! You know about stealing, right? It's not nice, is it? That's my girl! Now another one - this is a toughie. Let's have an 11 letter word for letting an offense pass without punishment.*

F. O. R. G. I. V. E. N. E. S. S.

*You're my angel! And don't angels forgive us for our faults?*

*You have such beautiful printing!*

Usually by this time, there was a honk of a horn out front. Her father would frown and they would do one more.

*Alright, a really big one to finish with. A 13 letter word that means Has No Manners.*

I. N. C. O. N. S. I. D. E. R. A. T. E.

*We know a few people like that don't we Angel?*

Then he'd tickle her until the tears were running down her cheeks. *Kiss Mom goodbye for me, Angel.*

Her father had been late for work so often they started sending a car for him, which irked him. Especially, because he liked to walk in

the mornings, and the government building was just a short stroll away. Zena didn't realize until she was much older that most people would have been fired if they'd been late for work as often as her father.

It didn't bother her that she didn't know what puzzles he solved for the government; however, it did bother her that they stopped picking him up, the moment his mind began to lose its power.

A ten letter word,

A. L. Z. H. E. I. M. E. R'. S.

### Chapter 13 - Night Moves

Zena's cellphone jangled in her hand startling her. She gave Spatz a look; he got up and drifted into the warehouse giving her some privacy. It was De Niro.

"Yes Niro?"

"I got tired of waiting for you. Any word on our material?" He asked.

"It should be here soon; then it'll take Spatz an hour to clean it up and make it presentable. I don't know what he's going to do with it - maybe give it a bath." She sounded a lot lighter than she was feeling, but this was the nature of the game; she would enjoy it.

"Maybe he wants to copy them for himself," said Niro.

"You think? I thought I'd put the fear of God into him, but you could be right," said Zena.

"It's your call, but we're ready to go with or without the POLS. We can pick one of the MLA's known hangouts and just play it by ear.

At least we'll be in play."

"What do we do if he walks in? No - I don't want to risk it."

"Like I said, it's your call."

"I'll wait another 15 minutes. If Spatz's boy doesn't show up by then, I know a cracker that can probably get into our guy's online address book. One way or another, I'll be there with the material by one."

"We'll be here."

-

Perry was shutting down his equipment for the night, when the phone rang. He looked at the call display: Unknown Name.

*Shit!* He hated it when people did that. He let it ring.

Only three rings: they hung up before voicemail could pick up.

It rang again. They weren't interested in talking to his machine.

He picked up. "Hello."

"This is MsYou. Sorry to call so late, I've got a favour to ask."

*Whoa!* His heart jumped. *They get back to you in person!*

"Okay. I'm listening."

"Not on the phone. Can I come over?"

*Do bears shit in the woods?*

"Ah sure. No problem. My address is..."

MsYou clicked off.

*Of course, you already have it.* Perry was grinning - he liked her style. *TTFN!*

-

Back in the warehouse, Zena told Spatz she wanted the shipment; she wasn't waiting any longer. Of course, Spatz whined about availability and quality and pride of workmanship, and then tried

to hike the price. Zena told him he should run his tongue up her butt, 'cause she liked a little passion while she was being screwed. Of course, Spatz's eyes lit up. She dropped three grand on top of the El Jonco beach towel and he gave her the ID sets and the POLS. She told him *Adios* and left the building; called a cab from a block away from Spatz's entranceway; then called Perry to tell him she was coming over.

She already had his address.

## Chapter 14 - Hacking The Man

"Okay, let me get this straight," Perry said. "You want me to hack into a politician's *frickin'* email?"

Zena had just blown into his apartment and was already blowing his mind.

"His calendar and address book, actually," Zena said. "You led me to think you could do this gig."

"I'm not saying I can't."

"But you won't?"

"I'm not saying that either."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm just trying to understand you."

"I'm not here for therapy. Just tell me you'll do it. If it's the money, it's worth a thousand to me."

"I was hoping we could talk about getting serious."

"What? We just met. Not even, actually."

"No no - I mean with the online stuff. You guys are wimps, if you don't mind me saying. I had some ideas about how you could do that stuff in real-time. Forget the role playing crap. That's for children."

Zena laughed. *This guy is a natural.*

She had walked through his kitchen like she'd always lived there and went straight to the computer. Now they were sitting side by side in front of the monitor: Zena navigating, Perry driving.

"We know his email is stored on a web server somewhere here in Canada - the U.S. Patriot Act makes that a requirement for all government and publicly funded organisations. We don't know where it's located, but their portal should handle redirecting us to his webmail." Zena said.

"You make it sound easy," said Perry.

"Well, you're the hotshot, it should be easy for you."

"I've oversold myself, obviously."

"Are you having another problem?"

"No I'm not. Look, aside from locating their portal, the real difficulty will be logging in as our guy...do we even know what his username is?" asked Perry.

"No we don't, but that part shouldn't be too hard. They've got an online directory. We can use that to look up his name and then see if it lists his username."

"You're kidding, do you think they would be dumb enough to list his username online?"

"You'd be surprised...which surprises me, actually."

"It might work - let's give it a shot. Perry was starting to enjoy this. Zena's confidence in him sharpened his senses. Her warm thigh rested against his own, but she seemed oblivious, pointing at the

screen; telling him what they knew about the guy.

Perry's heart was opening; his cautious nature, normally a dense block of frozen principles, awkward and immutable, was melting in the warmth of Zena's regard. He bid a silent goodbye to his reformed attitudes on breaking into private sites. It surprised him how easily this was happening. Just put him in the same room with a pretty woman, hand him a keyboard and say *go fetch*; and bingo!, he was your Dawg, rolling over and taking orders.

Zena was talking to him, he focused.

"Google his name: Randal Liddle, their political party, Democrats, and the words 'contact us'." Perry did so. He had a pretty good idea how to go about this, but it felt good letting her direct him.

They got a few good hits, but Zena had to tell him which ones to click on. She pointed out the links that had the party's name in the URLs. His choices were not very astute; his approach was to scroll to the top of the page and start clicking until Zena made the right noises.

"You're not very good at this," she observed.

She was probably in her forties; older than him, Perry thought; her age shows around her eyes and mouth. He found himself tracing the wrinkles around her eyes. It didn't look like she laughed very often. He wasn't put off by her remark, she didn't fling it at him with contempt the way some might. She just stated the obvious. Very left brain.

"Yeah. I'm out of practice."

"I wish I had known you were bullshitting, before I came all the way out here," she told him.

*Ah, here it is: I'm about to get the brush-off.*

"I'm good at what I do. I just don't do this hacking scene

anymore."

"Look, I'm kind of desperate right now," she said. "I'm sure you have talent lurking somewhere, but if you're going to help me, I need those talents now. What exactly do you think you can do for me here?"

"I can get you the password..." Perry was desperate too. He needed her to believe in him. So he went out on a limb. "I can do it in three."

"In three?" Zena turned and looked him in the eyes, nailing him there; skeptical. "Three what?"

Perry grinned. She was sharp. He swallowed and put all his weight on the narrowest part of that limb. "Minutes. I can do it in three minutes."

"This I've gotta see." Her hand was on his knee.

*She likes me! If a woman touches you, it means she likes you, right? Man what a loser. Where did I learn this crap?*

"Okay, let's do it," said Zena. "What do I do?"

"Get me the login page and the username. I'll do the rest."

"Move over then, and let me drive."

Perry rolled his chair back from the dining room table, leaving a space for Zena to drag her kitchen chair up to the monitor. Taking the mouse, she clicked, typed, and scrolled and, within minutes, was into the Party's contact page. She grinned with pleasure as another small puzzle opened to her.

Perry watched with admiration.

Zena had found the riding party's internal site. If things were in their favour, it was put up by a hobbyist volunteer. It certainly looked generic, like something that came out of the box. This was a good sign.

Zena hummed to herself, clicking and typing...she gave the air a soft punch with her fist. "Yes! Here it is!"

"Okay, great! Now we only need to get into his email, right?"

"No, we need access to his calendar and address book. What are you asking?"

"I want to know if we need to be careful about locking his account, if we try too many times."

"I don't know. Guess we'll find out."

"Give me a minute then..."

"That will leave you two."

"Give me a break," Perry muttered and smiled. He opened up his 'programmer's toolbox' and loaded up a program called PsswdCkr.

"Okay, what's his username?" He flipped back to the page that Zena had found, "This is great: they've even given us the path to his mail file. Good! The mail server name is here too." He typed the username and mail server name into the PsswdCkr screen.

He checked an option that would cause the program to run as fast as possible, performing key decryption using heuristics and genetic algorithms, rather than simple brute force method. This meant rather than attempting to crack the Minister's password by exhaustively checking every combination of words and numbers in the PsswdCkr's dictionary, it would apply rules of thumb that were known about the way people create passwords and also generate its own dictionary of password possibilities, using such strategies as mutation, selection, and adaptation.

As Zena said, he only had two minutes; this thing had to work quickly. He was betting on the password being something simple, in which case it wouldn't take long to come up with the correct key;

much quicker than brute force, but to get to this simple password would require using human reasoning. It was going to need some help.

"To get this to work fast, we will need some deep knowledge about Liddle."

"Well I've got plenty of that."

"I thought you might," said Perry. "Let's see what secrets you're carrying around with you in that cute little backpack of yours?"

"Settle down tiger."

From her backpack, Zena pulled out a manila envelope, which Spatz had given her. She riffled through it: "I've got his driver's license, birth certificate, income tax returns...and a copy of his mother's divorce decree. She changed her name, during the separation, so we've got her maiden name. What do you need?"

"Let's feed all of it into the program." Perry typed the dates and names into the program's database. "Okay, here goes."

PsswdCkr began processing and displayed the message

**Thinking...**

Such an inane phrase, Perry thought. Obviously designed to appear innocuous and helpful. Even harmless. *How ironic.*

A log of its progress was displayed on screen, as it reported each password attempt. Combinations of various words began scrolling down the screen:

**ScubaBrunch, AdapterCloak, GardenerErgo...**

**Dictionary search completed. Building custom dictionary...**

"This is going to take forever," Zena said.

"No it won't. This baby is really fast," said Perry.

**Common passwords skipped.**

**Common numbers skipped.**

**Generating population...**

"You're just about out of time, my friend."

"Give it another minute."

**Establishing random associations. Seeding...**

**Genetic algorithm beginning...**

**Mutations selected...**

**Trying...**

**Success! Correct Password is: *chomski1*.**

**Continue with another decryption?**

"Interesting," Perry said.

"Wow. I'm impressed!" said Zena, grinning like a safe cracker on her first job. "Okay, now the fun begins. Let's hope we can get to his calendar. I need to find out where he's going to be tomorrow night. Now this is interesting!" Zena had found Randal Liddle's calendar entry for the month and quickly scrolled down to the next day's entries. He had left town and was booked into a conference in Victoria. "He's going to be away all weekend," said Zena. "Perfect!"

She opened her cellphone and called Niro.

-

"Zena, what's the word?" Niro answered on the third ring. He sounded out of breath.

"We're clear for the weekend. The MLA will out of town, he's attending a conference in Victoria."

"So it's a go."

"It's definitely a go. I'll be there in 30 minutes. I may bring a friend."

"Oh?"

"You'll like him, I think. He's one of us."

"The more the merrier," said Niro.

"By the way, what are you guys doing?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You sound like you had to run to get to your phone."

"Yeah. Diamond's giving us a lesson in visualization – it's a deep relaxation technique. Something she learned at The Playhouse...you thought we were screwing around, didn't you?"

"I still do."

"Is that a joke?"

"Of course it is. Lighten up."

"I told you it wouldn't happen again, when are you going to trust me.

"I'll see you in a half hour," Zena closed her cell with a snap.

-

Sitting beside Zena, while she was on the phone, made Perry tense; so he went into the kitchen and put on a kettle of water. While he was there, he washed a couple of mugs sitting in the sink, dried them, and put them on the counter. It was a small apartment, so he did what he could to obfuscate the conversation.

"Do you want some tea?" Perry asked from the kitchen.

"Maybe another time. Right now I have to get down to the studio, before I have a mutiny on my hands." Zena grinned and it made her eyes crinkle. Perry grinned back. Neither spoke. The refrigerator hummed into the space they had opened.

"I thought you might like to come with me?" she ventured. "See the studio, meet the gang...."

"Sure! That would be great. You came by cab - I can drive."

Zena stood up and walked over to him. He could smell her

perfume; she smelled like candy. "Thanks, Perry." She brushed her lips against his cheek. "You're sweet."

They rode the elevator down to the garage in a comfortable silence neither felt they had to fill. At the parking level, Perry beeped his car, walked to the passenger side, and opened the door for Zena. It was a chivalrous gesture he had learned from his father; something he did whenever the family went out in the car. Dad always opened the door for everyone. Mom first, then the back door for the kids. Mom would get in, lean across the bench seat, and unlock Dad's. Dad always thanked her.

Perry knew plenty of guys who used the door lock as a test; if the lady reached over and unlocked his, she was a keeper. This wasn't possible now, with modern remote locking cars – the woman didn't have the opportunity to unlock her guy's door. Perry wondered what would be a suitable replacement test? The toilet seat, perhaps, or simply trust and time.

## Chapter 15 - Getting the Call

"So, what's your story?" asked Zena. "I read your post today - is something eating you?"

"Why do you ask?" Perry parried the opening and started the car. The radio, whose volume was forgotten at a level capable of ending a hostage-taking, blared out a tune by OMC: ...*Policeman taps his shades, 'Is that a Chevy 69?' How Bizarre!* - Perry mashed the knob, shutting it off, and pulled out into the street, apologizing under his breath "Sorry 'bout that."

Zena relaxed her death-grip on the door handle and answered his question. "Most people who get involved with us have some kind of beef they want to settle. It might be a wrong they have to right or there's some prick that needs to be put in their place. And on rare occasions it's someone who's simply seeking recognition, however vicariously."

She was getting too close to the truth for Perry's comfort. His

moaning about getting his chance to prove he had some great ideas came back to him with a sting.

"I work for a research group that has a real prick for a team leader."

"You mean your boss Tim?" She winked.

Perry was impressed, and a little frightened. If she had this much information about him after only a day of having made contact, he would be laid bare in a week.

"You better give me directions to where were going," he said.

"I like a man who can take direction. Head to Yaletown, you know where that is, right?"

"Yes, I do."

"So, go on. Tell me more about this team leader prick."

"I'm more interested in knowing how much you know about me. Here I was thinking I'm the rare bird in your crowd - I do need recognition - that's been my complaint with Tim for a long time now. He treats me like I'm his personal miracle machine. Now I'm getting so much literal recognition from you, that I'm wondering how badly I'm leaking."

"Don't worry about it. You're not leaking any worse than most people; better than some."

Perry wasn't ready to trust her. He had been around people who traded information for a living; he'd never seen someone get so much in such a short period of time.

"Are you tailing me?" Tim asked.

"We don't need to do that. People leave tracks, simple as that."

"What tracks of mine have you picked up?"

"Like I said, don't worry about it."

In Perry's experience, people who gathered information about other people only shared it when it suited them, when it would give them an edge. Some never shared, but enjoyed 'wearing' it secretly - like cross-dressing underclothes in public. It was anti-thetical to needing recognition. The thrill was in being found out. Surfing a wave of fear that crested on exposure and ridicule.

"I'm betting you're wearing boxer shorts, Zena."

"You're bold," She laughed. "Now if you could tell me where I bought them, I'd be impressed. But you can't, so don't worry about it. I know you've done time for *phreaking*," Zena told him. "You were still a kid when they caught you and you did time in a correction facility for juveniles. It was probably the wrong place to put you, but because you were pushing the envelope, they decided to make you into an object lesson."

"A misunderstood boy, you rebelled and made several untraceable phone calls. 900 number charges began showing up on the phone bills of the workers at the institution. Nice!" She paused considering what something like that took. "However, they soon caught on. Denied you access to any and all electronic equipment."

"And here I was feeling under appreciated," Perry said; he smiled. "Watch what you ask for, you just might get it."

"You can relax. No one in our group is going to have any problem with you. I think you'll find quite a few kindred spirits. We're all the same type."

"And what type is that?"

Perry was being coy, he wasn't sure himself what type he was. Knew that the power he got from being able to commandeer a telephone switch was pretty intoxicating. Eavesdropping on other

people's lives was addictive, but he didn't have any formal experience with psychology and much of his own motivations were a mystery to him. No matter that he worked for a psych department at a university; it was to write software, not analyze personality types.

"You like to watch, Perry - so do we. But that's not what attracted you to us. Ever wonder why you like *RPGs*? You even made a remark in our forum about it. It's the thrill of escaping your own skin, stepping into someone else's. Body snatching. You become someone else and all your troubles disappear. You can do whatever you like as this new person and you can always step back into your old life. Mess theirs up as much as you want; have total freedom to fuck up; look like a fool; take credit for someone else's accomplishments and when you're done, shed the skin and slip back into your own!"

Perry tried to match up his own experience with *RPGs*; they paled in comparison. Was this 'body-snatching' what he was after?

"It's an amazing sense of freedom," Zena continued. "When the host's life begins to look worse than your own, you simply abandon it. You become 'you' again and suddenly all your old problems look tame in comparison, like taking a vacation. You come back after being on holiday, everything is familiar, and you're refreshed, ready to tackle those niggling little issues. But maybe they're not so little? So you snatch another identity - take over someone else's life - and away you go again."

"People are actually doing this?" Perry was stunned.

"Of course. It happens all the time; for a host of reasons. My team does it as a competition sport. Teams are competing in Canada, the US, Japan, Great Britain and Russia right now for a hefty purse. Actually, the Monthly play-off starts tomorrow night and runs for three

days. My team is competing at the Master's level. A panel of judges reviews the media reports, makes their decision based on the quality of the acting and post the results on a public site. It gets a little tricky keeping your personal anonymity, but that's the secret to being a master body snatcher. You learn to stay transparent."

"This is legal?" Perry asked.

"Well, it depends on what country you're in and what actions you're caught performing. We aren't trying to blackmail anyone, usually."

Zena said this last with an air of false bravado; Perry took note, but didn't press it, just played along.

"So, what kind of 'acts' do you perform - if that's the right terminology?" He asked.

"In a way we're like an acting troupe. We put on performances. The audience is the public. They don't know that we're acting. The winners of the game are those who manage to pull off the longest running scene, each day of the competition." Zena said.

"So, something is happening this weekend? With this politician we hacked?" Perry asked.

It was after midnight and they had been driving freely through the city unobstructed by the typical congestion and construction bulges.

"We're here." Zena said. "Just pull in and park on the curb next to the parking lot up on the right."

Instead Perry pulled into an Impark parking lot; he opened his door to get out and buy some time.

"Didn't I say park on the curb?" Zena asked.

"What's the matter with the lot?"

"It's a habit I get into. I never pay for anything that comes with a tracking number. Ever. I'll walk for blocks to avoid parking lots."

"But how are they going to use that?"

"The attendant comes around and scans your plate, then the ticket on your dash. Bingo, Zingo. They've got you in their computer. It doesn't take much after that to find out where you went and what you did."

Perry bought the ticket anyway and put it on his dash. It was late and he didn't want to move the car.

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The team's rehearsal space was in Zena's apartment, in a converted warehouse in Vancouver's Yaletown, a hi-tech, hi-rent commercial/residential district in the downtown core. In Perry's mind it was the domain of the ultra-cool uber-geek; the term 'Living and Working in Yaletown' was tweaked to deliver the message one had 'arrived', but didn't give a shit.

Zena and Perry took a converted service elevator from the brick and marble main floor up to the fourth floor and stepped into a cavernous space that held aquariums, potted palms, leather sofas, a free standing Jenn-Air range in a kitchen nook, bean bag chairs and loud colourful painting hanging on exposed brick walls. Six bored people occupied themselves in different locations, some reading, some eating, some napping in chairs or on couches. When Zena and Perry stepped out of the elevator a sweet *bong bong!* announced their arrival.

Niro and Diamond looked up from a script they were discussing and Niro broke into a grin when he saw Zena. Diamond, a tall actress in her late 30's with short blonde hair and the visage of a monarch, was leaning comfortably on Niro's shoulder; she caught herself when he suddenly stood up to greet Zena.

Niro was not a tall man, but obviously looked after his physique. His out-of-season, bottled Vancouver tan glowed on muscled forearms as he walked over and kissed Zena on the mouth; Perry stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting to be introduced. Zena dislodged Niro and muttered: "your fly's undone." He fumbled with it and looked at Perry.

"Who's this then?" asked Niro.

"This is Perry; he's just found his way to us after dropping down

the rabbit hole. He was good enough to riffle Liddle's email account and get what we needed. Perry, this is Marc De Niro, he's our leading actor in the production we're putting on this weekend. We call him Niro..." As an afterthought, Zena introduced Diamond. "And this is Diamond. She's starring with Niro in tomorrow's performance.

Not a lot of good chemistry between these two ladies, Perry thought. He extended his hand; Niro ignored it, but Diamond put out the effort and stepped in to take it.

"Hi Perry," she said.

It was an awkward moment or two until Niro turned his charm Perry's way – his deflation with Zena's cool welcome evidently past.

"Welcome Perry. Sorry, I don't shake. Too many bugs going around. So are you here to help us with our little production? Oh - that's right, Zena told us - you helped crack our MLA's email. Well done!

"So, Zena. We've been waiting for you. Can we get down to it?"

Zena walked in to the main area of the studio and announced, "Hello everyone. This is Perry."

"Hi Perry," several people replied. They all slowly got to their feet and gathered in around Zena. She stood beside a worktable that fronted a raised platform which could have been a stage. It took up half the studio space and had tape lines drawn on it; several light wooden boxes, used as props in a street scene, were spread around the stage. Pot lights hung from the rafters and a number of ropes on pulleys could also be seen hanging from the ceiling. Perry figured this was an actual working actor's studio.

"I have the POLS with me, so now we can decide how we're going to perform the scene tomorrow. We also have material for

Sunday and Monday." Zena took off her coat and hung it on a coat hanger on a dressing rack stuffed with costumes.

"Let's go over the scene from the top. We'll need something to go with a dinner party. Our MLA and his wife are scheduled for an awards dinner at the Vancouver Hotel."

Perry took a seat on a very comfortable leather couch, wondering what he was doing there. Sure Zena asked him to come along, but beyond checking out her snazzy décor, he felt about as useful as a microwave in Bangladesh. He was starving for attention. He sighed and gazed at the art hanging on the walls, wondering about types; wondering what Zena was doing with Foghorn Leghorn.

Zena was breaking the troupe out into small groups and getting them started working on their parts. "Perry, if you could join us please," she called. "We need a homeless person who can handle an altercation with a reckless and hopelessly out of touch MLA..."

Perry jumped for it.

## Chapter 16 - Love Conquers

Stepping into Connie's living room, Randal set Bruce's laptop down on the couch and took off his jacket. Connie's house was cool and dimly lit. The last light from the late afternoon sun was filtering through the large window, streaking the walls with lazy orange shadow trees. The living room was neat in an un-lived-in way and filled with, what Randal considered, Manly furniture: Leather couch and chair, Lay-z-Boy, heavy coffee table. Original paintings from several modern artists, hung on the walls, plus a few prints from people Randal recognized. A couple of Escher prints and a Bev Doolittle, Indian Horses. This was Connie's taste. Karate trophies stood dusty and proud on the mantle; these belonged to their son.

"It's so good to see you, Connie!" He gave her a long hug. Where's Tommy?"

"He's at his dad's for the weekend."

"Oh, right.... And you have to work the weekend night shift - is

that by choice?" Randal felt awkward, he had forgotten about the breakup.

"I usually work alternate weekends, when Tommy is away, but I would have taken this weekend off, if I had known you were coming."

"That's okay, I'm sorry to drop in on you on such short notice. Are you making out alright?"

"Tommy and me? We're just fine. What about you? You know I love to see my big brother, but you sounded... I don't know, rattled when I talked to you on the phone. How's Janey? Is she okay? Are you guy's getting along?" His little sister's words came out all in a rush. She'd been through a rough time with Tommy's dad, and Randal thought she was checking on him to make sure his marriage was still solid. Connie was always picking up strays and getting bit for her trouble, thought Randal. She reminded him of the woman in the old Johnny Rivers tune "The Snake." Only Connie could bite back. He'd seen it firsthand and had a healthy respect for her.

"We're fine, Connie."

"Then what's going on, Randal?"

She took his jacket, folded it thoughtfully over her arm and looked into his face.

Randal started to shake. "Jeez, Connie. Someone killed my best friend!" Tears welled in his eyes.

"Hey hey." Connie put her arms around his neck and hugged. "It's going to be alright. Come on, sit down." She led him to the couch. The hands of his sister felt strong and reassuring to Randal; they brought the feeling that everything would work out just fine flooding back.

"If anyone can figure out who killed Bruce, it's you Con."

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Connie was an IT specialist in data warehousing, but her gift was the ability to link massive amounts of data to the movements of people. She could extrapolate individual patterns and predict what people were going to do with astounding accuracy. She was one of the few who could answer the tantalizing question of who knew whom along the popular six degrees of separation, the principle that everyone on the planet is linked by, at most, six people.

She had possessed this talent for as long as Randal could remember and putting her in front of a computer simply magnified it. In school, she continually amazed her instructors; for her first-year project, she designed a program that linked her students to their courses entirely from their interests. She was extremely modest about the deep knowledge she had encoded in the system and, when pressed, claimed a lot of information could be gleaned from knowing which television shows students watched.

Randal suspected Connie's biggest puzzle in life was herself; and he stopped pressing her to explain her insights when he realized it would only initiate another episode of nail biting, which could last for weeks, and left Connie's poor finger tips looking as naked and raw as peeled shrimp.

Not all of her marks on the world were as lighthearted as connecting students and classes by correlating their interests to television viewing habits. She had helped Randal over some rough patches during their childhood. Both of them found it difficult to make friends, growing up in Winnipeg, and they spent much of their free

time together. Their parents had a ban on television (which only propelled Connie's fascination) and they were strict about who the children could play with. They insisted that Randal come straight home from school and do homework, determined this would produce a doctor.

Because Randal was teased relentlessly in school; he quickly decided it was just easier to play with his sister. Connie didn't think that was a healthy thing for her big brother, so she set out to help him fit in.

Many afternoons, after they had finished the homework and put away the books, Connie would invite Randal to play a special game she had invented. She called it Who's Who in Winnipeg. Connie made little people out of tin foil and coloured paper and gave each of them names belonging to the various folks around town. She would place them on a large sheet of newsprint and draw lines connecting them. The goal of the game was to name the relationships that connected each person. She would start by putting common interests next to two connecting pairs: Bowling would join Mr. Shannon (plumber) and Mr. Handle (florist). Romance novels would join Mrs. Anderson (fifth grade teacher) and Shelly Brian (baby-sitter). Archery would link Mr. Scott (phys-ed teacher) and Tom Baker (furniture maker).

This was fine; Randal wasn't sure how Connie established the initial links, and at first he was skeptical, but he played along - she was his kid sister. The next level was to place secondary links that would tie the primary paired members to other deeper pairs. She would make Randal go first; since he had no idea what made sense, he would guess. A typical afternoon went,

"Tom Baker is linked to Shelly Brian because he makes doll

furniture in his spare time."

"You're so smart, Randal!" She encouraged him. "That was really close. Actually, they're linked because Shelly baby-sits Tom's kids." Connie would draw a line between Tom Baker and Shelly Brian.

"Now it's my turn. I'll link Tom Baker to Mrs. Anderson," said Connie. Randal saw an obvious relationship appear, now that he saw the secondary link, but held himself in check and waited while Connie took her turn. "Mrs. Anderson is linked to Tom Baker because one of his kids is in her class. There, that connects that group. Your turn."

And on it would go. By the end of the afternoon, they had a tightly connected network of local neighbours and Randal knew their names, their kids names, and their hobbies. They would break for supper, and Connie would say they could finish at bedtime, with the all important Mystery Level!

By the time bedtime rolled around, they had finished their homework and Randal was eager for the Mystery Level. He still wasn't sure how his sister got all her information; wasn't even sure if it was correct. The important part, he figured, was that she was teaching him to think about the people around him and that fascinated him.

"Okay, time for the mystery level. This is the level that most of us hide. But it's the most important. I'll go first, unless you want to, Randal?"

Randal would shake his head. Usually, he was lying across Connie's bed, in his pajamas. He preferred her to go first; often, it gave him a clue.

"I think there is a link between Mr. Shannon and Mrs. Anderson; they both want to hold hands and kiss, but they can't because Mrs. Anderson is married. Mr. Shannon is so upset by this that he can't

concentrate on his work and last Friday made a mistake and forgot to hook up the toilet in the new house he is working on. When the new people move in they will get water all over their bathroom floor and it will flood the downstairs."

Randal was in awe. "How do you know these things, Connie?"

"It's easy, I just pay attention. You can learn to do it too. It's your turn." She absently began chewing on the nub of one fingernail.

They would continue until their mother came up to say good night. Randal would go to his room, and lie in bed thinking about how people meshed, or didn't.

During his middle years in high school, Randal was bullied by Stead Mackenzie, who waited patiently with his gang outside the school doors to viscously clobber those he had chosen to make as miserable in life as himself. In particular, Randal. Stead had the build of a failed hockey player and the disposition and vocabulary of a teething toddler; all of Randal's attempts at defending himself ended badly with him getting a severe beating.

One day Stead was waiting for Randal as usual, and Randal, who was tired of dealing with the guy, ignored him and continued into the school. Stead refused to step out of his way.

"You're going to fight, Chicken Shit. I'm not letting you pass until you do. You're going to have to go over me or go home, bloody."

Stead's gang was cheering him on "Yeah, do him! Do him!"

The fight didn't last long. Randal refused to turn around and it cost him a torn shirt, and a bloody ear. Stead was carrying a picket from a fence that was now missing one of its teeth, and he smacked Randal on the side of the head with it. Randal grabbed the picket and pulled; Stead let go and Randal fell to the ground. The gang laughed,

while Stead kicked Randal and spat on him, refusing to let him up.

A voice came from within the crowd,

"Stead's father lost his job at the department store because they caught him playing with himself. He had a little hole in the wall, so he could look into the children's dressing room; and he spent his coffee breaks masturbating, while he watched the kids get undressed."

This announcement rocked Stead. He knew his father had been fired but had never been told why. Connie stepped forward. Her face was red and she was furious.

"You take off, you little bitch!" Stead hissed.

"Your mom's going to divorce your dad. Her and Frank Billings (Billings' Bowling) are going to live together. Where will you live? No one wants a boy who spills gasoline on his dog and throws firecrackers at it." Connie taunted him; clutched in her pockets, her hands were bleeding fists.

Stead's mother had indeed been spending more time down at the bowling alley; she had joined a team recently and was away six nights out of seven. As for Stead's dog, nobody knew about that incident except Bob Shannon, who had stolen the gasoline. Bob was quietly separating himself from the gang, thinking about going home.

"You're a lying cunt!" Stead screamed. "Bob you're an asshole!"

"You have the soul of a murderer, Stead Mackenzie!" Connie shouted back; she was shaking.

Randal picked himself up off the ground, seeing Stead, and his sister, in a new light. Stead looked puny, while Connie thrummed like a high-voltage line. He moved in front of her protectively, but Stead didn't have any fight left in him. Mr. Scott, the P.E. teacher, appeared on the school steps and called out. "Break it up, people. Time to get to

class!" He came down the stairs, "What's going on here? Is it more important than your classes? No - it's not - so get a move on, people!"

After that incident, Stead never hassled Randal again. Years later, Randal learned that he had been charged with murder for throwing an army cadet off a train bridge. He often wondered if Connie had foreseen that event, long before it manifested itself.

It was an difficult time for Randal. His little sister had vanquished his enemy, thus preventing him from solving his own problem at school. The method she used illustrated a valuable lesson about the power of information, which he never forgot, but the fact that it came from his little sister was one that he still found hard to accept. He began to spend less time with her...and they stopped playing the game. They grew up; managed to stay in touch, intermittently, but did little else to prevent growing apart. She always greeted him with a radiant smile and a warm hug, whenever he and Janey managed to visit, but he sensed a minor chord of regret that he wasn't more of a presence as her older brother; not to mention as an uncle to her son Tommy.

These thoughts played across his own strings of regret and, while he reassured himself that what he did was of significance and a benefit to the world at large, he often struggled with that familiar strain of embarrassment.

Now here he was needing his little sister's help again.

## Chapter 17 - Identity Clones

Randal sat slumped in the deep leather sofa with his hands clasped between his knees, looking around the room, searching for a place to begin. Connie sat beside him and rubbed his shoulders. "It's okay, take your time."

"Bruce and I worked together for years; he helped me get my start in politics and became a mentor of sorts. Janey loved him. He brought her roses whenever he came for dinner.... She called him a real ladies man; said I shouldn't learn too much from him, except the roses." Randal chuckled. "He was over for dinner just a couple of weeks ago...seems like it was only yesterday. That was the last time we talked. He was scared; said we should back off. Even begged me! We were working on revamping the security and privacy legislation, with a private member's bill. Bruce said he didn't want me to go through what happened to him. He was vague about that; he seemed embarrassed, which was unusual. He was such a solid guy, confident,

but you could see he was rattled. He refused to go into it. There were a couple of incidents that made us wonder about him...they were bizarre. Completely unlike him."

"Can you tell me about them?" Connie asked.

"Well, news reports and rumours that developed. I never believed them; it was tabloid stuff. Photos of him cruising for girls. He was arrested for rape and then released after the charges were suddenly dropped. But he had spent days in jail, working through his lawyer to prove he wasn't even in the neighbourhood when the rape was committed; basically, he had to prove his innocence."

"The system's not supposed to work that way," said Connie.

"No, it's not. But it does." Randal sighed. "Someone was trying to ruin his reputation, but he wouldn't talk about it. He was old school; his reputation would stand on its own and clear his name. But somehow his troubles never let up...."

"And then he killed himself," Randal muttered.

Connie gently hugged him. "Was there an autopsy?"

"Yeah, there was. The police don't think it was foul play, but I'm not so sure. I asked around at the conference, others have had their reputations attacked in suspicious ways. It's too much of a coincidence. Someone, or some group, is orchestrating this."

Benny appeared at the open front door. "Knock. Knock! I'm clear for the rest of my shift. Can I use your washroom?"

"Sure. Come on in," Connie said and pointed, "it's down the hall."

Benny walked down the carpeted hallway, gently holding his stomach like he either had a stomach ache or was going to drop

something from under his shirt. (In fact, his ostomy pouch was full to bursting and he was obscuring the buldge from stranger's eyes.) Letting himself into the bathroom, he turned and locked the door, noticing a bright red fireboat lying on its keel, marooned in the bottom of the tub. *Child at work*, he thought to himself, smiling.

Benny positioned himself; and, glancing at the bathroom door, pleasantly discovered the poem Children Learn What They Live, by Dorothy Law Nolte postered there. He smiled as he remembered seeing it hanging in the doctor's waiting room - so many times during his childhood - he and all the kids there with Mom, for the umpteenth bleeding, broken, or swollen time.... His eyes scanned down,

*...If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them...*

Mom was there too, during his recent surgery. Benny wondered if he had learned to be faithful?

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"How long do you think he was standing there?" asked Randal.

"A minute or so. He might have heard what you said about Bruce, but I wouldn't be too worried - he's a good man," Connie replied.

"You've got a feeling about him?"

"Yes, I do."

"Ah, Connie, you've still got the touch...and I'm afraid we're going to need it."

"You're wondering why I never used my abilities with Rick, aren't you Randal? It's all right, I'm not angry. I know it's only out of concern and you just want me to be happy. Well, the answer is that love makes me blind, and you know what? I wouldn't have it any other way."

He'd always been proud of his sister, and it was moments like these when he wished he had the words to tell her...the moment didn't linger, and his opportunity was lost. Connie got right down to business.

"If I'm going to help you find who killed your friend, I'm going to need some background information. How much time do we have?"

"A day or two at the most. I've got to be back in Ottawa on Monday, but I can't go without getting some answers first. The laptop might help you. It was Bruce's. His wife said he wanted me to have it."

Connie's eyes lit up. "That could be a very big help!"

"What time do you have to be at work?"

"I've got an hour or so, but I have to get dressed first."

"So we have, hmm," Randal looked at his watch, glanced up with a worried expression, "- just ten minutes!" and winked, breaking the tension. Connie laughed and tickled him in the ribs.

"I'm relieved you haven't lost your sense of humour, Sunny!"

"Bruce used to call me Sonny. When I started to worry about the project, he'd say 'Relax Sonny, and remember: the Ark was built by amateurs and the Titanic was built by professionals.'" Randal gazed out the window and watching the sun sink into the mountain side.

Connie broke in. "Randal, I'm going to book off work tonight. It's more important for me to help with this. The sooner I can start working on Bruce's laptop, the sooner we will have some idea of what really happened to him."

"I can't ask you to do that!"

"You don't have to, I've already made up my mind. But I'm still going to need to go into work. I've got some tools there that will help me piece together what Bruce was doing. And there are people that

can help me if he's protected his laptop with a password, or encrypted the drive. Or both... Connie nibbled on her finger-tip thinking.

"We've got some time before I have to leave. Tell me what you meant about some group orchestrating these 'attacks,' what did you mean by suspicious methods? Wait - come and sit in the kitchen, I'll fix you that coffee. Just cream, right?"

Randal followed her into the kitchen. It was a bright room, and there were chilies decorating everything everywhere: Chili curtains, chili wallpaper, chili pot-holders, a string of red chili-lights tacked over the sink, and of course, real dried chilies hanging in the window. It felt warm and safe. Randal settled himself at the kitchen table, Connie poured two cups, added cream and sat beside him. "Okay, go."

"First I have to ask..." said Randal.

"Yes?"

"When did you fall madly in love with Chilies, and how soon is the wedding?"

Connie laughed! The sound was as welcome as a gust of fresh rain on the dry summer lawn of Randal's memory. It revived him and made him think of the carefree summers they had together as children.

"I think it happened when I spent a summer in Oregon," Connie told him. "They grow them in the Willamette Valley, you know? Not very exotic," she said wistfully. "Bet you thought I discovered them while I was trekking through India." She grinned.

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Benny washed his hands and checked himself in the mirror,

"*And his hair was perfect,*" he thought and winked at himself. He came out of the bathroom and stood in the kitchen doorway. "That

coffee smells good!"

"You want some," Connie asked?

"Are the Kennedy's gun-shy?" Benny said.

"If so, they're the only people left in the U.S. of A. who are," said Randal.

"Yeah, the rest just love their guns." Connie laughed

"To death," Benny finished! "You'll have to pry them from my cold dead hands," he cackled. They all laughed and Connie got up to fix Benny's coffee.

"What do you take in it," She asked?

"Just cream. It's the only way," said Benny.

"That's how we both take it." Connie said.

"It's Benny, right" asked Randal?

"Yup," he slurped his coffee and turned to Connie. "This is good! I have a friend who likes to say coffee is better raw than cooked. Yours would make a convert out of her!"

"She's a co-worker, isn't she?"

"How did you guess?"

"She just does," said Randal. "It's her gift."

"It's not so mysterious," Connie told Benny. "We all have the ability to read people, some are just more...tuned into it. Anyway, thanks for the compliment!"

"You're welcome." Benny looked at Randal, "So how do you know my name?"

"Just a lucky guess." Randal said with a wink.

"You're kidding," Benny said. He was incredulous. "Can I open a window? It's getting awfully Twilight Zone in here. Doo doo, doo doo." They laughed and Benny thought he actually heard Connie snort, much

to his enjoyment.

"My big brother's gifted, but not that way. He read it on your taxi license on the drive here," Connie said.

Randal's face hardened. "Benny, we're about to discuss something...sensitive."

"I'll go into the living room then."

"No. You can hang out here. We both trust you, but you should know that one person is dead because of what we are about to discuss. So, sure, you might want to leave the room and go out, sit in your cab, maybe go get some dinner, but you're welcome to stay, if you want."

"So you trust me? Funny, I feel the same way about you. You're a little odd, but I trust you. Both of you. But I'm not getting mixed up in anything illegal, no drugs, no guns, no sin. Right?"

"Of course not. I just need you to drive, that's all. Nothing dangerous, nothing illegal. I guarantee you'll be safer with me than racing 747s with your hack!"

"What's this?" asked Connie.

"Okay, I'm in," Benny said; effectively stalling further explanation of his episode at the airport. Somewhere during the conversation, Benny could not pinpoint precisely, he had apparently elevated Connie to the level of 'Someone to Impress'.

"Good – but I'm curious why you're so easy-going about throwing in with us."

"He's a Feynman, Randal," Connie said. "Benny sees the world in two colours: The paint is either wet and fresh or dry and dull, interesting or not. New experiences always fall into the interesting category for him - but they haven't always.... There's been a tragedy

in your life, hasn't there, Benny?"

Benny cleared his throat, a nervous tick that belied the fact that he felt perfectly at ease with these people.

"I feel like I'm about six months old; living a life that I have no right to be living. I should be dead. The tragedy is that I lived so long on the surface of my life. Just skimming along; never getting wet. Not really involved - afraid actually. I don't play it safe anymore. I've learned there are no guarantees and no second chances. If there's a detour coming down the road I'm on, I want to see where it takes me. And yes, I do look at things from the perspective of whether they're interesting or uninteresting. I don't know what a Feynman is, but I might be one. Besides, don't I owe you one?"

"You can forget about that. I'm glad you're here with us, Benny; and so you won't have to guess, I'm Randal Liddle and this is my sister Connie MacKenzie. She was making a reference to the late Nobel Prize winning physicist, Richard Feynman - I think."

"Oh that Feynman - of course!" Benny smiled. "Nice to meet you both, I'm Benjamin Harper. My friends call me Benny, as you already do."

"And nice to meet you too, Benny," said Connie. "The reference was a complement, Richard Feynman was well known for relishing adventure."

They shook hands all round.

"Now, " Randal said, "I'll try to explain why I'm here: Two days ago, one of my oldest friends killed himself. No one expected it. Those who knew him best think he may have been driven to it, or worse."

"You mean he was killed and someone tried to make it look like suicide?" asked Benny.

"Yes - it's possible; and even though the police have ruled it out," said Randal, "I think it's highly probable. Bruce had accumulated some spooky enemies, after what happened to his son, Christopher.

"Two years ago, his son was killed in a case of mistaken identity by a Detroit gang, who came up to Toronto to hunt down one of their own members who'd ripped them off for drugs and cash. The member fled into Canada, thinking he would start a new life - as Bruce's son...."

Connie gasped. Benny wasn't sure what he was hearing.

"He had several stolen ID's and one of them belonged to Christopher; they looked similar, so he used it to cross the border into Canada," Randal continued.

"The gang traced him through the customs record - don't ask how - and decided he was hiding out in Toronto as Christopher Stiles. What followed was a nightmare...." Randal said in a bitter voice.

"One night, just as the family was sitting down to supper, four masked gunmen walked in through the unlocked patio door and started firing automatic weapons..."

"No!" cried Connie.

"They killed Christopher, and seriously injured Bruce's wife, Margie," continued Randal. "Luckily for Bruce, he was in Ottawa at the time."

"Or not," said Benny.

"As far as I know, the man they were after - the one pretending to be Christopher - is still walking around Toronto to this day. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"I can't believe it," said Connie; she had tears in her eyes.

"I can," said Benny.

"Anyway - after that, Bruce devoted himself to bringing a Crime Bill into law that would allow the courts to hand out tougher sentences for Identity Theft. He asked me to join him when things started getting out of hand." Randal paused, remembering his friend.

Connie got up and refilled their coffee mugs. "You don't have to go on, Randal, unless you want to. We get the picture."

"Yeah," agreed Benny.

"No - you need to know this.... and I need to talk about it," said Randal. He sipped some coffee and continued.

"Bruce fought back with the only weapon he knew - the Law. He began by defining stricter legal definitions of Identity Theft and tougher sentencing. The reaction was frightening - no doubt, as was intended. At first, it was mostly damned inconvenient for him. He began getting calls from Bill Collectors for some of the most bizarre purchases; next, he was refused a renewal on his mortgage. He seem to take it all in stride; said it was the price he was willing to pay...but then he was arrested on suspicion of rape, and that really hit the mark! Friends began to avoid him, conversations would stop when he came into the room; people would turn and stare. Clients stopped returning his calls. It wore him down. He stopped going home and took to sleeping at the office. I think it made him depressed."

"He probably was," agreed Connie.

"And he was the kind of friend that - during all of the crap that was coming down on him - he still worried about my welfare. He asked me to ease off on the Bill; said he didn't want the same thing happening to me!"

Randal sighed. He care didn't what happened to him. It was Janey he was worried about, and his friend's death that he wanted to

avenge. "I'm not going to back down, someone has to get to the bottom of this!"

"Randal – are you concerned about Janey? She must be going through a lot too!" Connie asked.

"Yes, she is, Con! She can't take anymore stress. The worst thing for her would be if this spilled over into her world...."

"The pattern doesn't fit classic identity theft," said Benny. "It's usually done for some financial motive, like when a thief takes out a loan in someone else's name. Why would someone steal an identity to commit rape? It's too easy to disprove...DNA evidence and all of that."

"So you were listening while you were on the porch," said Randal.

"Sure, I was," said Benny. "It was pretty hard not to, with the door wide open; and you seemed upset, so I was debating about interrupting your conversation or just staying in the cab, but Mother Nature was calling and she wins out with me. Hands down."

Connie was watching them closely. She knew the value of their small unit and was hoping Randal would realize that Benny was vital to the team, without her interfering."

"Fair enough Benny," said Randal. "Connie told me I could trust you, and I will." At that, Connie felt their odds of success improve by a small percentage.

"There's more to this than meets the eye, Randal. Benny raised a good point," Connie said. "It doesn't make sense to commit a violent crime and attempt to conceal it with a stolen identity. But with a whole series of uncharacteristic events, it starts to look like a campaign to destroy Bruce's reputation."

"Exactly!" said Randal. "Not long after Bruce got me involved

with the Privacy Bill, I discovered a bizarre game being played on the Internet, called the Shame Game."

"Never heard of it," said Benny.

"Me either; sounds bizarre." said Connie.

"Its purpose is to ruin the reputations of innocent people - if you can believe it. In most cases, the games are random tournaments that target unconnected people, who are chosen because they have some social weak-spot. They're high enough in the food chain that nailing them makes a nice trophy on the gamer's mantel. However, occasionally somebody who is influential gets targeted, and it's been happening too often to be a coincidence. I think these targets are orchestrated, and I believe Bruce became one of those targets," said Randal.

"Do you think an organized crime group is feeding these people to the Shame Game?" Benny asked.

"Yes, I do," Randal answered. "There's certainly no doubt the Shame Game is involved. Several high-level politicians, and at least one supreme court judge, have been exposed in very embarrassing circumstances to the glaring eye of the media; and after investigation, it turns out they were impersonated with a great deal of planning and sophistication. But the trail ends there. No laws were broken - it goes no further. And by the time the truth emerges, the damage has been done and the press has moved on.... So a politician or a judge's reputation is destroyed, and who does that benefit?" Randal left the question hanging.

"Well obviously, the crime group," said Connie "they don't have to run the risk of getting caught trying to eliminate someone in the justice system who is usually well guarded and trained to be on the

alert."

"Let me see if I've got this straight," said Benny. "This crime group - for arguments sake, we'll call them the Hell's - want to stop Bruce Styles from getting a law passed that protects individual rights to privacy. My first question is, why are the Hell's concerned about Privacy laws?"

"Because without them, Benny, it's much easier to get away with crime. Imagine you've infiltrated a person's life and 'cloned' their identity. Now you can simply conceal your own criminal past and slip off the radar, or commit new crimes as your victim and let them take the fall. Or sell the clones to others more adventurous than yourself. "

"Okay, I get the picture," said Benny. "Meanwhile a game is being played on the Internet, whose object is to portray high-level politicians engaged in sinful acts to the media, all for bragging rights?"

"There doesn't appear to be a requirement to target a particular strata of society, in the Shame Game, just that they are important enough to attract media attention." Randal clarified.

"Right, that would make sense," said Connie. "As long as it's someone news worthy, the effectiveness of the game could easily be gauged using something like Google Trends."

Benny was impressed but had no idea what she was talking about.

"If this were a Star Trek Next-Gen episode, the high scorers would probably be empath's, like Betazoids," Benny joked.

Connie picked right up on it, "Yeah, except there's already so much free floating personal information polluting our environment that a child could get a hold of enough material to be a major contender without needing special powers. I mean how often have you had a pre-

approved credit card mailed right to your doorstep?"

"Right, eight-six the Betazoid," agreed Benny.

"So to complete your analysis, Mr. Spock?" Connie asked in her best Shatner.

"Yes, Captain. The Hell's are using the Shame Game as an instrument to ruin the reputation of anyone who doesn't bend to their demands. Have I missed anything?"

Randal was shocked. "What the hell are you two playing at? The Hell's have not used this Internet game simply as an instrument - they've used it as a weapon! And not only have they destroyed Bruce's reputation - but somehow, Bruce - my friend - has ended up dead."

"Sorry Randal. I got carried away," said Benny.

"Me too," said Connie. "It's still not real for us." She put her hand on Randal's shoulder. "Forgive us?"

"Of course - I should apologize. Neither of you knows Bruce. And the tale I'm telling you does sound outlandish." Randal forced a smile.

"Actually, you've summed it up nicely, Benny. You've got a good mind and you listen well. Now, I know I'm going to sound stupid - but what the hell's a Betazoid?" Randal asked.

Both Benny and Connie laughed.

"A Betazoid is a person from the planet Betazed," Connie explained; and Benny jumped in,

"They have highly developed empathic powers. If you remember the TV series, Star Trek - The Next Generation, you'll remember Councilor Troi. She was a Betazoid."

"Of course, I don't. When it comes to television, I feel like I'm at a social dunce, but that's nothing new."

Benny was incredulous "You've never watched Star Trek? Wow! I

guess I'm not surprised, but you should sometime; I think you'd get a real kick out of it," Benny said.

"I've heard of Star Trek, but I don't watch TV. I don't even own one. Just sitting down in front of one makes my skin crawl. I feel like I'm being assimilated into some universal mind that's as dumb as a post. I sit there and have this horrible image of a slimy creature with suction cups on the end of tubes coming out of it's head; they clamp over my eyes and ears with a juicy smack and I'm rendered unconscious. It's not unpleasant, but much later I wake up and can't remember where I've been." Randal smiled to show his good humour was back.

"Yup - that sounds about right," said Benny. You have watched TV, and you could probably write a pretty good Star Trek episode!"

Randal was reminded what Connie had done to Stead, his high school nemesis. She got into his mind; read his thoughts; traced their roots to his deepest fears, and then brought it all out into the open. Under certain circumstances, he believed it could be therapeutic, but in Stead's case, recognizing that his parents were failing him, and his family circle was disintegrating, it proved to be a terrifying thing. In desperation, Stead struggled to maintain control by making everyone around him weak and insignificant.

"I'll take that under advisement," said Randal. "but I think it's too late for me..... That's my worst nightmare, having someone or something get into my mind...."

Randal mentally congratulated himself; he had come a long way in reconciling the demons of his past, but one lingered: his sister frightened him. He glanced over at Connie; as usual, she seemed to be reading his mind. She gave him a wink. He smiled back weakly. He'd

have a talk with her, he promised himself, when all this was over.

"So how has Janey been taking all this?" Connie asked.

"Not well; she rarely leaves the house these days.... I'm sure once this is over, she'll be fine though," Randal said. "She's very happy that I came to see you...."

"Randal," Connie faced him, compassion and concern on her face, "have you thought about going to Al-Anon?"

Benny got up from the table and became absorbed in cataloguing the various species of chili bric-a-brac adorning Connie's kitchen.

"Yes I have, but this isn't the time to talk about it. Let's get back to the matter at hand. Okay?"

"Okay. So, what's our game plan?" Connie asked, drawing Benny back into the circle. He sat down.

"Well, I want to find out who managed Bruce's suicide. That's got to be our top priority. I think whoever was trying to get Bruce to back off on the privacy legislation simply got tired of his cussedness and decided it was easier to just kill him and fake a suicide, and I'm afraid they'll start using that method for leverage with other people. I spoke to several folks, at the conference, who suspected they were targets of this Shame Game. The problem is we don't know for certain. It's not like a typical blackmail or extortion case where a demand is made and the victim is told what he must do to get clear of the threat.

"They hide in the shadows and strike where people are most vulnerable. I don't know what their goal is, but they seem to be plotting a global takeover, and they're using bullying tactics - fear basically - to force others into co-operating."

"You know what we should do," Benny said. "We should turn the

tables on them."

"Exactly what I was thinking," said Randal.

"Now I like the way you boys think," said Connie. She raised her mug, the coffee now cold, but still fit to toast with. "To The Game!"

"The Game!" chimed Randal and Benny.

They clinked mugs.

"The people I'm expecting to be at work are there now. Randal, do you and Benny want to drop me off, and I'll call you when I've got something?"

Benny's eyes widened. He looked at Randal and then back at Connie. Randal smiled, "Oh, that's another one of her gifts. She's telepathic."

"I am not," said Connie. "It's time for them to go on shift. Now, if you'd rather hang out here, I can drive myself..."

"No, that's okay, Connie. We'll drive you," Randal said.

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They dropped Connie at the front door of a two story building in a research park on the outskirts of town. Benny parked the cab and came around to open her door. Randal got out and handed her the laptop.

"What time should we pick you up, or do you want to call me on my cell when you're ready?" asked Randal.

"I'll know whether we can get anything out of this in a couple of hours; and if I need to do more digging I can do it at home, so give me two hours. Call when you're outside."

"Okay. Good luck, Connie. I really appreciate this!" Randal kissed her cheek.

"Break a leg, Connie," Benny said.

"You fellas should get something to eat. There's a good Indian restaurant back in town."

"I think I know the one you mean," said Benny.

"Okay, see you in a couple hours then." Connie walked up the drive and a security guard met her at the door to the complex.

"So, do you feel like Indian?" asked Randal.

"Does the Pope wear a pointy hat?" asked Benny.

"Boy, you've got a million of 'em, don't you, Son?" groaned Randal. "Okay, let's go then."

He opened the door and climbed into the front seat. Benny went around and got in behind the wheel, he turned the car around and drove back towards town.

"I appreciate you not running the meter," said Randal. "How are we going to pay you for your time?"

"You're not. I'm no longer working for the cab company. I'm taking the weekend off."

"I can't ask you to do that!"

"You didn't. I want to help, so I'm driving. If you're really worried about it, you can pay for the gas."

"Fine, and the dinner's on me as well."

"Great - I'm starved!" said Benny.

## Chapter 18 - Blue-Sky Time

With Randal sitting up front, Benny drove the cab into town and they began to talk. It was blue-sky stuff (and this chapter you can safely skip over, dear Reader); something he hadn't done with another man since his stepfather died. It made him realize how much he missed the gentle giant who was unbeatable at Trivial Pursuit.

"You seem to know something about everything, Randal...bet you spent a lot of time in school," Benny said. He was impressed; thinking wistfully of his own short lived scholastic career.

"I did, but I haven't been back in years. I sure don't miss it," Randal said, "but I still read all the time."

Benny was a big reader too, but he had dropped out of high school; the formal structure of the classroom just didn't agreed with him. As a young boy, he was fascinated with science and dreamed of becoming a chemist, but it never happened.

He had a sophisticated homemade chemistry set in his bedroom,

in the basement of their house in Burnaby. He spent many afternoons in rapture; mixing noxious solutions in shiny glassware, and heating concoctions over the flame of a Bunsen burner. It was in that basement lab that he learned the word Taboo from his father and the value of making do with what you've got from his mother.

His father's lesson was quick; sharp; and to the point, the day Benny was discovered making gunpowder in his bedroom. The bedroom was in a converted kitchen suite in their basement and for a kid like him it was perfect, because it had a sink; a long counter; and plenty of cupboard space. Somehow he'd learned from friends at school the magic ingredients for making gun powder; it took most of the term to acquire them: Sulphur; Charcoal; and Potassium Nitrate.

Finally the day of truth came: wearing his heavily stained lab coat, Benny located a large board; placed it on the yellow Formica counter which ran along one bedroom wall, and proudly displayed an extensive inventory of hobby store bought chemicals; and carefully mixed the materials into a sizeable mound of even grey powder. It looked plain and understated, like fine grey sand; yet it was pure and magical, and laden with mystery; like something a wizard would gift you for having freed his Stallion from a briar patch.

With trembling fingers, Benny struck a match and touched it to the magic mountain and jumped back, holding his breath... The result was a combination of disappointment and thrilled amazement. The sky was not rent, nor did the ground shudder; instead, the mound flared and sputtered in a brilliant white display of smoke and sparks; and that was all.

(His father later explained, after his own fury had subsided, that an explosion would only occur if gunpowder was packed into a small

airtight space.)

After several demonstrations to his friends, his father discovered he was experimenting with the forbidden gunpowder. This was strictly against the condition of receiving the chemistry set; and his father, a tolerant man who rarely raised his voice, shouted down to the basement, at the top of his lungs, from the top of the stairs: "Benny!"

Benny, squelched the smoky mountain by sweeping it into an plastic bucket reserved for emergency situations.

"Yeah, Dad?" Benny appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking oh-so innocent; what could possibly be wrong; tendrils of smoke curling off the oversized white lab coat (shirt) that belonged to his father.

This wide eyed, who-me-getting-up-to-mischief demeanour would appear again, when he was caught smoking cigarettes; and then again when he was caught smoking marijuana.

"Benny, do you know what the word Taboo means?"

"Uh...something to do with tobacco?"

"It means FORBIDDEN! I've told you before: Gunpowder Is Forbidden! Now pack it up and send your friends home; that's it for today!" Earning his father's ill-regard was a sufficient reward to douse further interest in gunpowder from that day forward.

His mother's lesson with the chemistry set came when he first discovered he had a burning passion for the glassware and steel rods, and the thick glass bottles containing unknown wonders in bright crystals and shimmering liquids. When the Sears Christmas catalogue came to the house and he found the full colour pages displaying double and triple walled chemistry sets, 'for that budding chemist in your family,' his mother took the opportunity to leverage this new

passion into a learning opportunity.

"I want you to think about how you can show us that you're ready for a chemistry set," she told Benny. "It's not a toy."

Benny mulled this over. It was a puzzle...how would he demonstrate to them that he *needed* the chemistry set?

Thinking back, Benny found he couldn't remember the strategies he employed to convince his parents of his readiness for the chemistry set. The task seemed so abstract as to be unsolvable; and when he discovered that the Owl Drugstore on Kingsway (a treacherous street, which he boldly crossed on training wheels with his first bicycle; foreshadowing the airport runway crossing) had a hobby section and they would sell small bottles of chemicals to anyone – even kids - he soon forgot about the task altogether.

He started saving his allowance and every few weeks bought some new and exotic substance: Bright blue Cobalt; dense yellow Sulfur; pure white Borax. He also began collecting a set of instruments: scissors; a knife; a long narrow spoon; tweezers; a small mixing bowl, with a strange and unique curving rim, which was a prize possession from his Grandfather, and was in reality an antique eye wash cup. Benny was thrilled when the gruff man told him he could have it, for keeps!

Benny carefully packed all these items into a sturdy shoe box, lining the bottom with absorbent paper. It was enough - he had his Chemistry Set. And one day his mom came into his room, while he was making yet another New Improved Household Cleaner (his most popular product) and told him "I think you've proved that you deserve a chemistry set, Benny. Would you still like one for your birthday?"

*Can Bugs Bunny see Updoc in the dark, Mom?*

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Benny and Randal pulled into a gas station, and Randal got out and filled the tank. Benny thanked him as they made the short drive across the road to the Tandoori and Lucky Donair Sweet Shop, where they parked and went in for dinner. They settled in behind the long line of customers already waiting to be served; they began to talk.

"Like you, I was always interested in science," Randal told Benny. "My father insisted I go into Law, so I studied both by reading the science in my spare time. After I wrote the bar exam, I went into the Public Defender's office. I wanted to do something with my life and believed it didn't matter whether I chose one over the other. Choosing was the important thing; everything would flow from there. As they say, 'It's all good.'"

"It sounds like you don't believe in a Good versus Evil universe..." said Benny. "Maybe that's putting it too strong - do you think there is a right path and wrong one?" Benny asked

"Yes, of course I do. But I also believe the universe is a self correcting system. I believe our world is constructed to evolve toward goodness. I don't believe evil can win out," Randal told him.

"How does that work? If you mean only good things can flourish, it doesn't really explain how shitty things can happen in the world. I'll admit it's a cool concept though."

"Let me try to explain it. In a self-correcting universe, all things...coalesce, or form hierarchies. Not in a rigid sense, but in an evolutionary sense. It's a part of the in-built design - assuming, of course, you accept the concept of a universe that's *designed*."

Benny nodded, "I'm not sure I do, but go on.... This is interesting."

"See, we are *Holon*, and as such we form higher groupings of Holons."

"And Holons are?" asked Benny.

"Holons, according to Arthur Koestler, are both parts and wholes. Everything is a Holon. You me, cars, trees, birds, rain, even information. And everything is linked through a hierarchy of Holons. A holarchy, if you prefer. Let's start with an atom, for example; like everything else, it's a holon, but it's also a separate unit, complete unto itself. Meanwhile, it's also a part of a molecule. The same way a molecule is a whole and also a part of a cell, or a mineral, or a crystal. Every cell in your body is a whole; and at the same time, they are a part of your skin; your bones; your eyes; your hair. Each of those,"

"Okay, I get it," interjected Benny; "each of those parts are also wholes and parts of greater things. Cool!"

"Oh yeah. It's very cool!" agreed Randal. "As you move up the Holarchy, there's a certain willingness or tendency to create order."

"There's that word again," said Benny. "isn't that just a fancy way of saying Hierarchy?"

"We don't like to say *hierarchy*, because that smacks of an imposed order and isn't really workable; over time, it actually leads to a decay of the whole."

They had moved to the front of the line; each ordered beef and chicken donairs, and while the woman juggled the pita's; the fixings; the sauces; and the line-up at her till, Randal continued to espouse Holons and evolutionary theory. Benny quietly observed their surroundings, evaluating the new-found concept and assessing the presence of Holons at every level of his focus.

He joked, "People have said we will evolve out of our present

human forms. First to go will be our little toes, next our little fingers. But I just can't see it. Maybe the toes, but how would we manage complex tasks that require multi-tasking like fixing donairs and managing the cash register without poisoning each other?"

The woman fixing the meals completed Randal's Interac payment by pressing a key on the cash register with her little finger. She had just washed her hands and was holding a partially completed donair in her hands; she didn't want to put it down and wash her hands again to operate the till. It was an unconscious time saving effort, and it made Randal's point, which he launched into as they sat down at a table and began munching on their donairs.

"Evolution is a mysterious force," Randal told Benny; "infinitely more complex than the common idea that some master balance sheet in nature is mechanically tracking whether things like toes, gills, and legs are being used or not." He stopped talking for a minute to get a better grip, and taking a bite, savoured the big messy donair. "Mmm! This is good!"

"See, there's a problem with evolutionary theory, for the Design theorists:" explained Randal. "It fails to answer, satisfactorily, how complex parts evolve. How, for example, did the lizard develop wings and become a bird? I mean think about it!"

It was a fascinating topic for Randal, and he was sharing it with great enthusiasm, along with bits of donair, which he sprayed at Benny every time he waved his donair to make a point.

"Benny, for an animal to develop wings successfully, first it needs to have two. One simply won't cut it. The poor thing would fly around in circles. It would never get off the ground. Second, it would need these wings to be exchanged for legs; practically overnight. It wouldn't

do to half walk; half fly for weeks; perhaps years, while your enemies are prowling around on four perfectly good legs of their own. Never mind catching your own dinner.

"And finally, our friend, with the shiny new pair of wings, will need to find some fetching member of the opposite sex that also has a pair. How else will they pass these wonderful things on to the next generation?" Randal asked.

Benny chuckled in appreciation. There was an undeniable logic to the question. "So that's the hole in evolutionary theory, eh?" But he wondered why such an obvious flaw wasn't common knowledge. "Has anyone else stumbled into this conundrum?"

Randal shook his head and smiled, "It could have something to do with politics; getting published; upsetting the apple-cart. Take your pick; it's hard to say."

The theory was known as Intelligent Design. A recent article Benny had read used a mouse trap to explain the argument. It said that a mouse trap could never evolve on its own because without any one of the five parts that go together to make a mousetrap, it would not work. It couldn't have evolved from fewer parts because it couldn't have worked with fewer parts.

This argument for Intelligent Design was being made in public schools in the United States. A 'Designer' was responsible for creation, some scientists were saying. For years Creationism was taught in the schools, until it was edged out by Darwin's Theory of Evolution. The pendulum had swung all the way to the left and it became forbidden to teach religion in the public schools. God was out. Science had ascended, and its practitioners had gained a legendary reputation for reducing the physical world down to its tiniest constituent parts. The

nitty-gritty. The amazingly small and ultimately fundamental particle of the day seemed to announce itself in waves; then the discoveries would taper off and hover at a barrier of ultimate smallness, beyond which, it could not be crossed; and then another breakthrough would occur in some lab somewhere on the globe and then everyone was off and running, reproducing the results and finding new spaces to push the envelop into.

"I read a fair amount of popular science, sitting around in the cab," said Benny. "When I'm not chasing airplanes, you understand."

Randal smiled and waited.

"In science, reference to a higher power is considered a sign of woolly thinking. Religious pondering is guaranteed to sink your career and ruin your reputation. But God was not going to be overlooked, left out in the cold, for long. I remember reading about a great interest in performing laboratory experiments that demonstrated relativity and Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty. Labs around the world were documenting the path of a single photon as it travelled through a double slit created an interference pattern, if the choice of path that the photon travelled could not be known in advance. In effect, the photon would take every path possible, unless the observer arranged to know what slit the photon would travel through. At that point the path became fixed. Scientists were stunned at the implications of this phenomenon and for a time they would leave their labs after work and go home shaking their heads; unable to share with the common folk, friends, wives, kids, what they had witnessed.

"Then a flurry of books came out; written by literary scientists wanting to discuss the nature of God - it seemed Science was allowing that God must exist. Even if God was only an amalgamation of forces,

science had opened its door to the inclusion of a creator, or at least an intelligent designer.

"Next, parallel universes emerged as a logical manifestation of this concept of quantum physics. This topic quickly became popular and was the subject of many a heated debate over beers around campfires. Researchers were sought to write articles and give pithy quotes to magazines such as McLean's and Time. The time was ripe for another swing of the pendulum. The average person was now aware that the odds on the conditions for life in the universe were so minuscule it made more sense, using Occam's Razor, to accept that Life was planned. Under something called the Anthropic Principle, the charge on an electron could be considered an 'intelligent' make-or-break point: a fraction of a charge plus or minus would make the difference between abundant life and unending galactic plasma as far as the eye could see, so to speak." Benny finished with his own flourish of vanishing Donair. He wiped his mouth with his soggy napkin.

The owner was making moves to close up. They got up and took their trays to the counter, thanked the owner and said good night.

"I'm fascinated by the possibility in life; by the idea that things will work out for the best." Randal said.

"That certainly is a hopeful attitude," said Benny.

"You sound like you have reservations, I don't blame you. We suffer in this life. It's hard sometimes to see that it all makes sense."

"I'm a bit surprised, that's all. It is a little unusual to find someone who has seen as much evil as you have in your legal profession and not find them carrying a chip on their shoulder. Don't these people scare you? I'm not worried for myself, but what about

your sister and her son they could get hurt. That's not exactly something I can translate into a positive evolutionary outcome. Have I got the lingo down?" asked Benny.

"You sure do. Look, I'm not trying to convince you of anything. I'm not offering some kind of magic mantra. This stuff works over the long run. For me it provides a reason to get out of bed in the morning. And to answer your question about my sister. I'll take care of her anyway I can. I'll do what's necessary to protect my family and friends."

Randal's cellphone rang; it was Connie. "Randal, you'd better come and get me. I've found some extremely interesting information on Bruce's laptop. I can tell you exactly why he died."

## Chapter 19 - Needing Satisfaction

Connie sat at the kitchen table, agitated and struggling to keep her fingers away from her mouth. Benny watched her hands, like birds in constant flight landing on her chin, the fingers pecking at her lips; swooping away to nest in her lap.

"Bruce was murdered, just like you thought, Randal. Only, what you didn't consider is that his wife killed him and made it look like an accident. I found threatening messages in his email from the Hell's to give up on the crime bill you were both working on. When that failed, they took a more direct route and began working on his wife.

"They convinced her that Bruce was beyond help in his sexual deviancy and that he was after her inheritance. Her mother recently died and left her a huge amount of money; apparently, she was mauled by a grizzly bear. The Hell's found out through contacts that were close to her mother, so they created a climate of fear and loathing with the purpose of forcing his wife to take action and kill

Bruce."

"That's unbelievable," said Randal. "She's a sweetheart, you must be wrong!"

"There's a trail through Bruce's email that's extremely incriminating, Randal. There are messages taunting him for picking up young women – well, prostitutes – and they include photos! They're probably faked, but they've been copied to Margie. Then there are messages he's written to himself, like journal entries, where he tries to understand what's happening to his life. He's quite detailed in recording dates and times of each event.

"And finally, there are messages which appear to be sent by Bruce to an address that turns out to be a mail drop for a local hit man. In these messages, Bruce asks for someone to kill his wife and offers twenty thousand dollars in payment."

"No - I can't believe he would do that!"

"You don't have to Randal - he didn't. It was all a setup to frighten his wife into turning on him."

"My God!" Randal turned pale and looked like he was going to topple over.

"Hey, take it easy," said Benny. "Sit down, I'll get you some water." He pulled out a kitchen chair and Randal dropped into it.

"So Margie thought Bruce was sleeping with prostitutes and trying to kill her for her money; so she killed him.... Why didn't she just go to the police?" Benny asked.

"It's hard to know," said Connie, "she may have been looking for a reason to believe it, and a motive. The hitman provided the reason; the inheritance provided the motive," Connie said.

"How do you know the Hell's tried to scare Bruce into dropping

the crime bill and then decided to turn Margie against him?" asked Randal.

Benny came back to the table with two large glasses of water and handed them to Randal and Connie.

"Thanks," said Connie, taking a long swallow ... "exactly what I needed." Randal just looked at his own; turning the glass absently. She continued,

"The messages with the faked photos of Bruce propositioning prostitutes can be traced to servers and email accounts that belong to the Hell's. One name in particular keeps coming up, Pop Butcher."

"He's one of the bosses for Western Canada," said Randal. "He's been worming his way into international circles and gaining legitimacy on the business scene. He was featured recently in McLean's - bastard! Okay, so we know who's behind this - how do we bring him down?"

"Why don't we just turn over the information that Connie's got to the police?" Benny suggested.

"I don't want to put Margie through that. I can't imagine what it would do to her to find out she had been tricked into killing her husband. Besides, I need some satisfaction."

"Okay - I can think of another way," said Connie. "He lives in Vancouver, so he's within easy reach..." She smiled wickedly. "I know exactly how to reach out and push his buttons."

"We're listening," said Randal.

"If we want to hurt him, we need to strike where he lives. He's trying to establish himself as an international businessman. We could hire the Shame Gamers to do a number on him..." She watched while smiles spread across the men's faces.

"I managed to track down a local gamer, while I was tracing

Bruce's email. I took the liberty of calling her and explaining the situation. She was quite sympathetic, but she also made it clear she couldn't stop any of the games in progress, but that doesn't mean she can't start a parallel game with another 'host' as the target. What's more, she's willing to do it for free; said it was the least she could do. I like this woman!"

"How are they going to pull it off?" Randal asked.

"She said she didn't know yet, because she doesn't know anything about him. But we do, and I told her we could provide a plausible story line. I'll need to do some research first, and she's going to get a hold of what she called 'proof of life docs.' Randal, you're supposed to continue with your plans and go back to Ottawa on Monday, exactly as you have scheduled."

Randal raised his eyebrows, miffed. "She knows I'm scheduled to be in Ottawa on Monday?"

"Oh, yes, she knows what your schedule is ... she also wanted to apologize."

"For?"

"All she said was, 'Tell Mr. Liddle that we never meant to hurt anyone. If we knew, we never would have used him. He should just roll with it. It will blow over in time ... after all, it's only a reputation.'"

"What the hell did she mean by that?" Randal fumed.

"I think she was trying to lighten you up, to prepare you for their game. Are you going to be okay with this?"

"Do I have any choice? Anyway, if it means bringing Bruce's murderer down, I don't mind getting a little muck splattered on my reputation," said Randal. "Maybe we depend on them too much, anyway."

"Alright, then let's call it a night. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day for me. You guys can keep an eye on the news and think about how we're going to handle this Pop Butcher, once the shit hits the fan." Connie gave them a sly smile.

"I need to call Janey ... can I use your den, Connie? I'd like some privacy."

"Of course, help yourself."

As Randal left the room, Connie began putting the cups into the dishwasher.

"Here, let me help you with that," offered Benny.

He came up behind her with the dirty spoons and saucers from the kitchen table, noticing her perfume. As he put the dishes into the machine, their hands collided and they smiled shyly at each other.

"Connie, I want to tell you something," said Benny.

"Yes?"

"I really admire the way you handled things today."

"Oh - great, I'm glad! I really get charged when I can help bring some justice into this world." She picked up the remaining items from the kitchen table and stacked them in the machine.

"No, actually, I mean you're terrific. I really like you! When this is over, will you have dinner with me?"

Connie looked at him gravely; considering the long road ahead; considering her son, Tommy; considering the man before her, who was only six months old. "Ask me again when this is over, Benny."

"I will. You can count on it."

-

In the den, Randal was on the phone with Janey, "You've got to act like nothing unusual is happening, Janey. If anyone

calls, just tell them I'm not available, okay?"

"I'm going to tell them whatever the hell I damn well please."  
She had been drinking all afternoon and was in a belligerent mood.  
"When are you coming home?"

"I'm not sure, maybe late Saturday or early Sunday."

"And then on Monday you're off to Ottawa like a good little boy.  
Wonderful. Another weekend shot."

"I'm just not sure how things are going to work out. It's important that I don't change my schedule, but I'll try to come back early next week so we can spend some time together. Maybe take a few days off and go away somewhere. Maybe Sechelt?"

"Ugh! You know I can't stand that ugly little town."

Randal mentally smacked himself. What was he thinking, mentioning the place where their son drowned in a freak boating accident. What was it, five years ago now?

"Okay. Well, we'll go somewhere nice. I promise."

"Promises, Randal. They are the easiest things to give. If you'd only keep them, I'd be the happiest woman alive."

He was reminded, unnecessarily, of his failed promise to look after their boy on that disastrous trip."

"Well, I'd better get going.... I love you, Janey."

"Randal?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful."

"I will - "

But she had hung up.

-

Connie knocked on the door. "Randal, I'm going to put Benny in

Tommy's room. Are you okay sleeping on the couch in there?"

"Yes, this is fine, Connie."

"I've got some blankets for you - can I come in?" She opened the door; her radar was pinging. "Is everything okay?"

"Every thing's fine." He knew that would be no defence against her mothering instinct, but he had no desire to discuss his marital situation, nor Janey's drinking problem, with his sister. Or anyone else for that matter. He was proud of his wife; proud of her accomplishments and her strong mind. They had met in law school while she was doing a double major, in Law and Fine Arts. So he applied precision and romance, and finally won her heart. She agreed to put her career on hold while they had a family. They had a boy, and once he was in preschool, she went back to school.

On a summer vacation in Sechelt, he took little Dougie out in a rental boat and got caught in bad weather. An inexperienced boater, Randal misjudged the waves and took them from the side instead of head on. Dougie was tossed overboard, but Randal didn't notice until he turned the boat around to head back in. He frantically searched for him and finally found him inside the cavernous troughs, bobbing in his life jacket, but by then Dougie had swallowed so much water, he'd drowned in his own vomit.

"I'm really tired, Con. Thanks for the blankets." He stood up and took them from her.

"She didn't take being left alone all weekend very well, did she? I can't say I blame her." Connie took the top sheet from his stack and started making up the couch. She was telling him she was there for him if he wanted to talk, but she wouldn't pry.

"Tomorrow is going to be difficult. We don't know what the

gamers have planned. Are we just supposed to sit around and wait or are they going to contact us? How are we going to know they've kept their word?" Randal was agitated; he didn't want to think about his problems at home. It was all too much; too far out of his control.

"I'm expecting her to get in touch sometime in the afternoon," Connie said. "She calls herself MsYou, by the way. Strange name.... Anyway, whatever happens, we're supposed to stick to our plans and not change anything or draw attention to ourselves. You're not where you're supposed to be, according to your calendar, are you? You should be at home, right?"

"Yes, technically."

"Well, tomorrow make a day of it; go up to the mountains for a hike and take your mind off things. When you get back, catch up on the news. You can go home Sunday and it'll all be over."

"You've done so much for me, Connie, and you really came through tonight! Janey wanted me to thank you for her too." He stepped forward and wrapped her in a bear hug. Connie hugged back.

"You know, Randal, at some point you're going to have to accept the changes that life brings. You can't take responsibility for everything that happens, and you can't pretend that it's all going to work out the way you want it to. Sometimes shit happens and you just have to deal with it."

"I know that." He stepped back defensively. "I'm dealing with a lot of things!"

"I know you *think* you are, but what you're doing is holding an image in your mind of the way you think things should be and refusing to see how they actually are. Sometimes you just have to let go and let God." Connie put a pillow case over a cushion and laid it on the

freshly made couch. "It's called trust."

"That's a hard one for me."

"It's hard for all of us. No matter how well you trust, sooner or later, someone comes along and sets you back to square one." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

"Good night, sonny." She poked him in the ribs and Randal laughed.

"Good night, sweetie," Randal said as Connie left.

-

Late that night, Randal woke to the sound of love in the next room. Trust had found his sister and he was happy for her; he also worried that for Benny, with his new lease on life, she might only be a novelty. He had trouble falling back to sleep.

-

When Randal came into the kitchen for breakfast, Connie and Benny were already up. They had the look of Christmas morning about them; gifts had been exchanged and all was right with the world.

"Good morning, Randal," said Benny, smiling.

"Coffee's made and eggs and toast are in the oven," Connie said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I slept like a log! It's wonderful out here, I hit the pillow and was out like a light. In the city, I toss and turn until I wear myself out.... I suspect just the opposite happened to you two last night," he commented.

"Glad we didn't keep you up," said Connie. She picked a piece of fruit off Benny's plate and put it in his mouth. "Benny's going to run me down to the office. Will you be okay here by yourself? You can borrow my car; there's a really nice hike not far from here."

"I'll be fine. I think I'll just hang out here and do a bit of reading. I might go for a walk later on. Just leave me a key."

-

Benny opened the passenger door for Connie and noticed her legs; she was wearing a skirt. "You're looking good this morning, my dear."

"I'm glad you approve."

"Oh, I do ... Randal doesn't though."

"You noticed. It's an old story; nothing for you to worry about. Now, to the office, James, and don't spare the horses."

They arrived at Connie's office and parked the cab in the visitor parking area. Connie led them into the building and signed out a guest badge for Benny. The security guard asked her how Tommy was and watched Benny closely as they passed through the metal detector.

"Tommy's at his dad's for the weekend," she told him. "I'll tell him you were asking about him. I'm not sure how long we'll be..."

"That's okay. Just drop the badge off if I'm not here when you leave."

Connie worked in a small private office with a window looking onto the well-tended lawns that surrounded the building.

"It's nice," she said. "though, sometimes it can be a distraction. I like the natural light; I don't often come here during the day." She pulled out her chair and sat down behind her computer. "Have a seat," she said. She logged on to her computer, quietly humming to herself.

"You haven't said much about how you're going to help the Shame Gamers give Pop Butcher the shaft."

"The woman I talked to last night?"

"MsYou?"

"Right."

"Strange name."

"I know. Anyway, she said they need a plausible story line. Something their actors can sink their teeth into. She's got enough documentation to put on a game with four players, starring Pop Butcher, of course.

"Wow, they have someone willing to play Butcher? I'm impressed."

"She said a couple of her team were fighting over the part." She continued to click the mouse and her concentration focused. The humming resumed.

"So?"

"So, what?"

"So howzit you can help?"

"Oh - our company has access to some substantial databases, and I've written a pretty little piece of code that can create a fairly comprehensive biography of almost anyone in North America. MsYou should be able to come up with a story line from that."

Benny marvelled at Connie's tech savvy. *Man, a smart woman who likes me! Almost an oxymoron.* He chuckled. *What a maroon!*

"You don't give yourself enough credit," Connie said and went back to her humming.

Benny was startled. He shook his head. He didn't remember speaking out loud.

"There! Now we can go get a coffee while it sifts. We'll have to fill in some blanks once it's done, but that shouldn't be difficult. So, are you up for one?"

She pushed her chair back, brushing Benny with her bare leg.

Her short skirt slid back, exposing her thigh, flashing a white cotton hem.

"I'm up for anything you've got in mind." Benny replied with a dry swallow.

Connie straightened her skirt, stood up, and started for the door. "Okay, cafeteria's this way."

"Right, coffee. Of course." Benny followed her out of the office. *What a maroon!*

## Chapter 20 - Speaking of Oranges

Randal was locking up Connie's house, to go for a walk, when a black stretch SUV Limo with three assholes in it pulled up at the curb.

"Excuse me," the back seat passenger called through his open window, "we're lost."

Randal walked over and put his head close. The dark interior smelled faintly of beer and pot. "I don't know the area very well myself," he said. "Where are you trying to get to?"

"I'm trying to get to heaven on roller skates," giggled a dark shape, mid-ships, "and you're coming along." A tubby fellow quickly jumped out of the middle door and put a gun in Randal's side. "Take it easy on him, I want to ask him for a rhyme."

"Just get him inside," someone ordered from within the cavernous vehicle.

The back door opened and a thick tattooed arm, the size of a presto log, pulled Randal in. The owner of the presto log smacked a

wet rag over Randal's face. It was only wet from bottled water, but it served to seal the cloth around his nose and mouth; with the intense pressure from the big arm around his head, Randal quickly lost consciousness. Inexplicably, he heard the men discussing oranges and then he was out.

The stretch-SUV snaked away from the curb and out of town.

-

Connie and Benny picked up double-shot lattes and some cinnamon buns in the cafeteria, which was almost empty except for the serving staff who joked with Connie while fixing their drinks and taking their cash. One lone employee was occupying a table, munching on a sandwich and flipping through a Wired magazine. He glanced up, with bloodshot eyes, Benny noticed, and nodded at Connie as they passed.

*Wired does that to me too*, Benny thought.

"Everyone seems to know you around here. How long have you worked here?" Benny asked.

"Oh, a couple years. I took the job after Tommy's dad left. We had a consultancy together and he got involved with one of the clients. He up and left us one weekend, and they moved in together. They're still together, actually, which is good for Tommy. He doesn't get enough mothering from me, so it's nice to know there's someone else to help fill in the gaps." They got in the elevator and rose three floors.

"Does he have your ... powers?"

"Tommy? Have my powers?" She laughed. "Thankfully, not!" They walked down the corridor, with Benny trailing his fingers along the wall, feeling the texture, going to a place where he accepted this person. Connie moved over and took his other hand. They lightly

linked fingers as they walked.

"These 'powers' are sort of a curse, Benny. Not so much because of what I can do with them, but because of how people react when they find out about them. They get self-conscious and start to avoid me. It's like they think I'm spying on them or reading their intimate thoughts. I find most people aren't comfortable with their own thoughts, never mind having someone else reading them; but it's not like I can actually read minds, it's not like that at all. No one is a book; I get impressions, that's all. Sometimes I don't even get those, but the reputation sticks. People don't hang around very long."

She dropped Benny's hand and nibbled on her fingers. The habit was never far away and she thought of it only when she noticed other women's hands, their beautifully manicured nails.

"Like what happened in your office, earlier?"

"What happened?"

"Exactly!" Benny laughed. "Never mind, it's not important."

"No. I want to know what you mean. It must have been important if you brought it up."

Benny searched back and thought of the many levels that people related on. He struggled to find one that he was comfortable with. "It seemed like you were reading my mind, and then suddenly it changed. Maybe I imagined it."

They had reached her office and she unlocked the door. Benny held it for her and waited for her to enter. She looked up at him, "For me, what counts is what we say and do for each other. It's not what we think that's important; it's how we act. Let's be clear on that. Okay?"

"Okay," he said.

She stood up on her toes and kissed him on the mouth. They lingered for a few moments.

"Mmm, that was nice," Connie said. "But you know what? I can't seem to shake this feeling that I should call Randal."

"You think something might be wrong?" Asked Benny.

"I don't know. Let me call him." She punched in his cell number from her desk phone ... and his service picked up.

*The subscriber is either away from the phone or out of the calling area,* came the automated reply.

"Hmm, he probably went out for a walk; I'll try him later. Now, let's take a look at what the computer came up with." She sat down at her monitor and paged through the virtual biography that had been created for Pop Butcher.

"Wow, this is great! Here I'll print it out...."

She sent the copy to the printer; swivelled around and picked several sheets off the Laserjet and put them on the desk for Benny to read. He sat down across from her and picked up the pages.

He whistled, "Is this true? I mean, like how does your computer know this stuff?"

"It's a close approximation. There are a few things we need to clarify: His relationship with his mother and father, siblings; I can handle that. But do you think this will give the Shame Gamers something to run with?"

"I think this'll steal the show!"

"I better try Randal again..."

## Chapter 21 - Pond Moonlight

"You were not supposed to hurt him ... just to bring him to a meeting!"

Pop Butcher's voice rose only slightly, but the venom in his delivery made the men's skin crawl. They glanced at each other as if it was the other guy's fault; each one shifting the blame with the force of his eyebrows.

They stood hovering over Randal, small, medium, large, like Goldilock's three bears. He was lying on a black leather couch in Pop's office, which was decorated in high-tech, neo-riche style and outfitted with shiny computers and classic rosewood furniture. A fine Persian rug covered the hardwood floor; black and silver lamps and tables matched the black and white photographs on the walls. Through blurry vision, Randal observed the grisly photos of murder scenes; however, the centre piece in the gallery was a serene photo of a moonlit pond. He thought it might be an Edward Steichen; in this context, it seemed like the ideal location to dump a body. He'd regained consciousness,

along with a splitting headache, and was coughing up water from the improvised chloroform technique.

"Someone get a drink for the Honourable Mr. Liddle. Would you like a drink, your Honour? Something to help you swallow?"

"Yeah, a drink - some water, please...." How the hell did he end up here? Randal's head was throbbing. *Just out for a walk; answer a question; try to help, and wake up in hell....*

"I can see you're a little confused, your Honour. I must apologize; the guys acted improperly. Please forgive their exuberance."

"I'm not a judge; you don't have to call me Your Honour. Randal will do fine."

The tubby gunman, who forced Randal into the Limo, sidled up and handed him a glass and a bottle of water. "Never did get a chance to ask you my question..." he said.

Pop shot a glance at him from across the room, and he flinched as if he'd been struck; in fact he had. In a flash, the middle Bear, had stepped forward and viscously pinched his sideburn, pulling him back into line and the large Bear, wrapped him in a containing arm. A credit to their professionalism, not one uttered a sound, throughout the entire realignment.

"I stand corrected, Randal. "As I said, you must forgive my men. I only asked them to bring you here for a short meeting. Once we conclude our talk, you will be returned to your sister's home, or somewhere else if you so wish."

This was the crime boss of the west coast chapter of the Hell's Angels, and to Randal's eye, he seemed nervous and agitated. He paced around the large office picking up objects and absently putting

them down again.

"Tell me, Randal, how's your head now? Would you like some Tylenol or something a little stronger, perhaps?"

"No, it's fine." Randal's voice came out tight as he struggled to maintain the charade of civility. "Why don't you say what you brought me here to say?"

"Certainly ... as long as you're comfortable? I didn't want us to get off on the wrong foot."

"We're already off on the wrong foot, and I'm uncomfortable as hell - get on with it."

"Hmm." Pop observed, and the other men in the room stiffened, but then he brightened.

"Fair enough! I have a little Powerpoint presentation I'd like to show you. You know what they say? 'A picture is worth a thousand verbs!' Actually, I put my own little spin on it. I like doing original, creative work, and that's in the way of the reason why I brought you here. So, without further adieu..." He gestured at his man by the wall switch, who fumbled with the switch until the lights dimmed. Randal heard the fan of a projector and a screen on the wall in front of them lit up. The title slide proudly announced "Profit Through Privacy."

There followed a series of charts and graphs establishing the emergence of a lucrative trade in personal information. Pop commentated, "You see, Randal, I believe everyone is entitled to make a monetary return on their personal information. It's a revolutionary concept, I know, but one based firmly on the laws of supply and demand. The demand for access to personal information, in the form of email addresses alone, is staggering. Witness Spam! The daily average of email traffic is approaching one billion messages! Of that,

over fifty percent is spam. That represents roughly 500 million, largely unsuccessful, attempts to sell a product or a service. This is a huge market!"

"Wait a minute. I don't follow you. What exactly is the product in this market?"

"A valid email address, of course. But that's thinking too small. You have to step back and view it from the perspective of our global economy. The desire for contact with real live warm bodies is tremendous!

"Now why shouldn't the average citizen take advantage of that desire for information? Why shouldn't it be as simple for someone to sell their personal information as it is for a company to generate a million marketing messages, the vast majority of which are deleted, lost, ignored, sworn at ... and generally just gum up the works?"

"We can possibly end world poverty here?" Pop beamed a huge toothy grin. "Brilliant isn't it?" He hit the light switch to emphasize his point. "Well?"

"Have you heard the expression 'there's no free lunch'? Your scheme sounds vaguely like a perpetual motion machine, and they're a physical impossibility." Pop's face dropped. Randal continued "It could be that I just don't follow you, but that's okay. Just tell me, what do I have to do with this grand scheme of yours?"

Pop was dismayed. "I thought it was obvious." He looked around at his cohorts for support, "Isn't it obvious?" Everyone nodded vigorously. "If your current bill passes into legislation, you're going to make this free market economy in information illegal, at least in Canada. I can't have that - the world can't have it. We're fighting poverty here and you're putting road blocks in our path." Pop was

getting more agitated; striding around the room, gesturing out the window at his vision of the impoverished masses huddled on the streets below.

"That's crazy!" said Randal. "We're not trying to make it illegal for someone to sell their personal information, just illegal for anyone to impersonate someone else."

"So, you're fine with the free trade of identities then?" Pop's grin was back, wearing a wolfish aspect.

"Well, no. I'm not."

"Yet you say it's fine for the average Hoser to sell his personal information, but there's no way for him to drive up the price if you don't allow him to compete freely."

"Just what are we talking about here?"

"Simply supply and demand. A businessman ought to be able to purchase a block of identities the way he can purchase a pallet of iPods. He sits on them until the price is right and he can see a reasonable profit in selling them, and then he strikes the deal."

"Who would he be selling these identities to, and for what purpose?"

"Why is that important? It's their business what they do with them. We sell guns, or land minds, for that matter, without asking what the buyer is going to do with them, don't we?"

"It's not the same thing at all, and we do require that people don't commit crimes with the guns they buy. We can't control what people do with land minds, because they're exported, and we don't have jurisdiction over them once they leave our country."

"I'm not suggesting anything different here. Of course the rules of law apply. I'm actually trying to find ways to move our organization

into a more - wholesome - environment. To leave behind our primitive past and make the transition from those dark times when we might have strayed into certain grey zones of legality in a effort to establish profitable ventures.

"I admit the toll on society has been costly, but our organization has grown - evolved even. We're ready to make an evolutionary leap. We're going legit and here's your opportunity to help, Randal." Pop looked at his watch; his hand rested on his desk phone.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you to trade in identities."

"That's final? I can't convince you otherwise?"

"No. You can't." Randal had a bad feeling as the words left his mouth. He swallowed; waited for the worst.

Pop took his hand off the phone and nodded to his men.

"So what are you going to do?" Randal asked with a dry throat.

"Nothing. You're free to go. My men will return your cellphone and drive you back to your sister's. I assume that's where you want to go?"

"So that's it? Just a pleasant discussion? I turn you down flat, and no problem; no hard feelings; no repercussions?"

"There are always repercussions, Randal. You know that."

## Chapter 22 - Dressed to Kill

Wearing a tux, Niro was strapped into the front passenger seat of the speeding Hummer. He was in makeup with some grey in his hair and extra flesh on his cheeks, which made him look distinguished, if jowly. Janey, his wife played by Diamond, was driving the hulk, and wearing diamonds. She was gloriously smashed, her closet alcoholism recently outed to great fanfare, and now she was strutting her stuff down the catwalk of infamy.

They were supposed to be play acting this wicked little scene, but Diamond was truly tanked. This both frightened and excited Niro. He loved living on the edge; it was why he did what he did - why most of them did what they did. Bringing down the Minster's wife, whose drinking was a closely held family secret and a source of great disappointment to Randal Liddle, was stage one of their little show. The sketch called for running a few traffic lights and getting pulled over for driving under the influence. Niro was feeling naughty; he

wanted to ramp it up a notch.

"Come on Janey, boot it!" He stretched his leg across to the driver's side and tromped on her foot. The Hummer bellowed a war cry and barrelled through a red light.

"Ouch! You fugg!" Diamond slurred. "Ged your foot offa me!" She laughed and twisted around to smack him.

-

A future potential voter, ten years old Jimmy Roberts, was out shopping with his mother. It wasn't a happy occasion. He had orders to spend all of his Savings - not to spare a single Looney - in replacing the sadly mangled Alpha Model P-51 Mustang "Marie", Electric Remote Controlled Airplane, whose proud owner, past tense, was his older brother Jack. All of his Savings meant raiding his travel fund, which he was building up to attend the finals competition of 6.270, the Autonomous Robot Design Competition at the famed Massachusetts Institute of Technology, next February. This was a long cherished dream of his: to attend the competition in Boston, U.S. of A. His own creations were numerous enough to start their own colony in his bedroom. Each machine explored some concept in robot design; negotiation of obstacles was his current project. Robots were his joy and the competition was a treat he had been looking forward to all year.

He'd borrowed his brother's P-51 Mustang purely for research purposes, thinking that an autonomous airborne robot would solve a lot of problems, and be pretty cool too. "Marie", Jack called it - Jimmy didn't know why he named it after a dumb girl; something he'd been told he would understand when he was older. "*As if!*"

Disaster struck when he underestimated the distance that would

be needed for take off, after setting up "Marie" in the backyard. The runway was too short.

Aloft, it was a thing of beauty ... which lasted approximately 42 seconds. In hindsight, he shouldn't have pointed it up the yard, toward the house; probably, it would have been more prudent to point it down the yard, toward the lane and the neighbour's fruit trees. "Marie" just managed to clear the deck railing. And then she hammered into the big kitchen window with an explosion of glass and metal, which sounded like the house had been clobbered by a giant baseball bat.

Their poor dog, Fraser, got caught by the back door, napping, when the shower of shrapnel descended on him. He lit out across the yard like his tail was on fire and hadn't been seen since. *Man – we'll be picking glass out of Fraser's fur for a week!* Jimmy mused as he crossed the intersection with the big box, containing the fresh unassembled P-51, safely clutched in both arms. His mom was about fifteen feet behind him; slowing down, saying,

"Jimmy, wait for the walk sign. Wait for the white man, Jimmy! JIMMY!"

'White man' was the last thing Jimmy heard. The Hummer plowed through the intersection and veered left, as Diamond swung her right hand out to slug Niro. Jimmy was ten feet through the crosswalk; he turned to look for his mom - *what was she talking about 'the white man?'* And saw the Hummer.

The left front headlight struck him first, squarely in the head, and the massive tires flattened his small body.

His mother screamed. She couldn't look; she couldn't look away.

Diamond and Niro felt a slight juttering beneath their feet; gave it only a moment's notice, as they bumped up and down, crushing a

woman in a white Ford Mustang, waiting in the oncoming lane for the light to turn. After a second series of bumps, they came to a grinding halt, tilting forward at a crazy angle, nose down the hillock of an empty blue Toyota Echo, which had been parked at the curb.

"Oh Fuck! Did we just hit someone?" Diamond twisted around, but saw only blue sky through the upward looking rear window. "Niro, what's the matter with you? Niro! Can you hear me!"

Niro was stunned by the snap of his chin hitting his breastbone when the inertia lock caught on his safety belt. It knocked him unconscious for a moment, but he was coming around; his neck hurt like a bitch. He looked across at Diamond with wild eyes and a goofy grin and said, "That was so cool!" Diamond was struggling with her seat belt; she was panicking and needed to get out to see if anyone had been hurt.

"You're crazy! What if we killed someone?" Diamond shouted; struggling with the release; completely sober. "I can't get this fucking thing off!"

Niro undid his belt, then reached over and undid Diamond's. "Take it easy - *you* didn't do anything. It was Janey Liddle who was driving. This is perfect!"

Freed, Diamond pulled on the handle and the door fell open; she climbed out. "Stay in character," Niro called after her.

They were a good four feet off the ground, and Diamond, still dazed, stumbled to the pavement. People were milling about in awe; taking pictures like it was an exhibition; yet, an urgent sense of catastrophe was present and cellphones were clapped to ears; reports were being filed. A crowd was starting to gather around the scene of the Toyota mashed beneath the beached Hummer; another crowd was

forming around the flattened Mustang, while several people were trying to get the trapped and hysterical woman out. But a larger crowd was surrounding Jimmy's mother, and Jimmy who lay under a gentleman's fleece jacket. Jimmy's mom was kneeling; keening in grief.

Diamond staggered toward the pitiful sound; Niro came up beside her and stage whispered, "Stay in character. Remember, you're Mrs. Janey Liddle; I'm Randal Liddle, your husband, the revered politician ... God - isn't this great!" He clutched her in his right arm, slowing her rush toward the mother and the boy, whom she'd crushed.

Emergency vehicles could be heard approaching, the sirens emoting and amplifying the tragedy as they rushed to the scene.

Diamond pulled free from Niro and pushed her way through the circle of people, attracting odd looks. They were dressed in formal evening attire, and it was only late afternoon; their dishevelled and affluent appearance made them look shiftless and irresponsible. Diamond reached Mrs. Roberts, and before Niro could stop her, she put her hand on her shoulder. Mrs. Roberts didn't react. Diamond knelt beside her to console; to repent.

"I'm so sorry," Diamond whispered. "I wasn't even looking! Is he ... she okay?" Diamond asked, hope in her voice.

"My Son. It's my Son." She turned her head toward Diamond.

"I'm sorry! Oh, God! Has someone called an ambulance?"

"You've been drinking! I can smell it on you. You were driving drunk, and you killed my son, you bitch!"

It was like a slap in the face. It worked wonders. Diamond's shoulders snapped back; her tentative hand on Mrs. Robert's shoulder became a firm grasp; then she rubbed her back with a pacifying

gesture. The aristocratic daughter of a lumber baron stepped on stage, contrite, but keen with inborn survival instinct.

"We will see that your son gets every possible medical treatment," Janey Liddle promised.

"My son is dead – you fucking bitch!" Jimmy's mom was insane with rage. She was a small woman, mousy, and often easily dismissed. Now she flew at Diamond. Niro jumped forward to intercept her; her wedding ring cut a gash across his right cheek.

"Fuck!" he shouted. It hurt, but he struggled to stay in character. He put his arms around her and held her in a bear hug. "Ma'am, please. Get a hold of yourself. My wife and I are very sorry. We take full responsibility, whatever the cost; however, this is not helping the situation."

"This situation can't be helped!" She broke into whooping sobs and started to hyperventilate. Niro looked around for help. Diamond was hovering but didn't offer any assistance.

"Get her to bend over and take deep breaths," a homeless man, dressed in freshly rumpled garb, suggested, pushing his way in from the edge of the crowd; cueing Niro.

"Mind your own fucking business, Crack-head!" he blurted, shifting scenes to add further fuel to the flames of Randal Liddle's calm and collected reputation.

"Have another drink, your Honour!" retorted Perry, and melted back into the crowd.

Two paramedics and a policewoman shouldered their way into the circle; they were pushing a gurney. Triage demanded they see to the boy under the fleece jacket first. Blood had pooled around his body; if still alive, he was in the most immediate danger.

The policewoman supervised the examination. The paramedics looked up at her after a moment and transmitted some unspoken code; she nodded.

One paramedic stood up and took control of Mrs. Roberts; he put a blanket around her shoulders and a paper bag in her hand, asking her to breathe into the bag. He was gentle and succeeded in calming her down.

The policewoman was joined by an older male officer; they conferred and then approached the group. "Who was driving the vehicle?" asked the policewoman looking around. The crowd started to point helpfully.

"The Politician!" someone called out.

Stiff legged with an erection, Niro eagerly stepped forward, right on cue. "Officer. I'm Randal Liddle; my wife and I were in the car."

"Who was driving, sir?"

"I was," said Diamond.

"Can we talk over here please?" the policewoman asked. The officers culled Diamond and Niro away from the crowd. "Can I see your license, ma'am?" Prepared, Diamond handed it to her. "So what happened here? Are either of you hurt?" Diamond noticed she wore a pink breast cancer survivor lapel ribbon.

"No, we're both fine," Niro said. "My wife's a little shook up though. We were on our way to a dinner party..."

"You sure you didn't just come from one?" The second police officer broke in. He was much older than Pink; his grey hair was the length and texture of iron filings.

Retirement around the corner and still fighting bad guys, Niro calculated.

"Mrs. ... " Grey glanced at the driver's license that Diamond had given to Pink, "Liddle. Have you had anything to drink today?" This was the question Niro and Diamond had been waiting for, only they never imagined it would be asked under these circumstances. Niro held his breath.

"Perhaps I had a small drink before we left for our dinner party, Officer, but I can assure you I am perfectly sober."

"Would you close your eyes and touch your nose with your left index finger, please?" Grey asked. Diamond was shaking so hard she almost poked herself in the eye. "Fine. Now please stand on your left foot and lift your right off the ground." Diamond couldn't do it; she tipped over immediately each time she tried to get her weight off her right leg. Niro moved to prop her up. Grey reached between them and steadied Diamond by the shoulder. "That's fine. Ma'am. My partner is going to take you over to our van and ask you to give her a breath sample."

"I am completely sober, it's just that I'm poorly co-ordinated. Give me another chance; I can stand on my head, when I want to."

"That little boy lying there could probably stand on his head. Bet he'd like another chance too," Grey said and turned away.

Diamond hitched in her breath. Careful, thought Niro. Don't lose it. He gave her a look, but she wasn't watching. She was following the lady cop over to the bat-mobile and was way down inside herself thinking. *No. Don't start thinking now, Diamonds!*

All she had to do was answer the cop's questions, Niro thought. Act haughty, act placid, act dumb, or act negligent, it didn't matter. She just had to walk through the scene with the cop; get to the part where she was given a fine, or even hauled into jail on impaired

driving charges, and that would never happen. The worst anyone got was a road side suspension; that is, unless you were a maniac three time loser; someone who drank and drove defiantly, which she wasn't, and Janey Liddle certainly wasn't either. *Just get to the part about the charges, Niro was mentally coaching her. Once they lay the charges on us, everything is by the book. You either take the ticket or we go to jail and call our lawyer to come and bail us out. There's nothing to worry about!*

Their lawyer had been briefed about the game they were playing and he was expecting a call from either Diamond or Niro. Niro watched Diamond while trying to focus on Grey's questions. She was too nervous - kept wringing her hands and looking off at the accident scene. He wished he could get next to her.

"Sir? I asked you a question," said Grey.

"Sorry, officer. Would you mind repeating it, please?"

"No at all. What time did you say you and your wife left for the party?"

"Uh, we left our house around four PM."

"And where were you last night?"

"I don't see what that has to do with any of this."

"Well, if you don't want to co-operate, we can talk about this in my office. I think you can cancel your dinner plans though."

Niro wasn't too concerned about being questioned at the police station; still, he didn't want to stray too far from the script. "No, that's fine. I'm certainly willing to co-operate. Last night, I was at home with my wife; we had dinner out, but spent the evening at home."

"And for the better part of the day?"

"You mean yesterday?"

"Yes. Yesterday."

Niro sighed, he had no idea where this was heading. I was at the office, working. Finishing up after a long hard week."

"And your office, sir. Is that here in town?"

"Yes ... it's downtown." Niro was ad libbing, badly, now.

"Okay, thanks for co-operating. I'll just be a minute."

Pink finished interviewing Diamond when Grey walked over. Diamond had been distracted, which was to be expected under the circumstances, but she had also been evasive when Pink asked her where she was coming from, where she lived, how long she had been married to Randal. They were all easy questions she should have been able to answer on autopilot.

Pink felt something just wasn't right.

Chapter 23 - A Fish Yarn

Grey signalled Pink to walk a little ways with him. When they were out of earshot, he said,

"Much as I hate the expression, something's rotten in Denmark."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Something stinks," said Pink.

She pulled a couple of sticks of gum out of her pocket and offered one to Grey. He nodded his thanks; unwrapped it and put it in his mouth. Pink did likewise. They both chewed in silence.

"Are you getting the feeling these people aren't telling the truth?" asked Grey. "They act like, well, like they're actors. It's weird."

The ambulances had left and now a fire truck had brought out a hose to wash down the street. The gas and oil had formed a treacherous slick across the pavement. It was a hazard that needed to be cleaned up before the traffic could be allowed through, and of course, there was all the blood.

"It looks like we've got the woman on impaired driving, causing

death. That's enough to hold her overnight anyway." Pink had been on the force for six years; she just recently returned from short term sick leave. She'd had one breast removed, thanks to the big C. It had changed her. She was in love with life again; with her kids, and her husband. She was really too mellow now for her job, so she thought. But her captain wanted her back out on the street. Said a desk job would be a waste of her talents.

"Captain," she laughed, "if I'm reported for singing and dancing while on duty, are you going to tell them you didn't want me wasting my talents? 'Cause lately, that's all I want to do."

Kristy, her captain, gave her a tearful hug and then shooed her out of the office.

Grey snapped his gum. "The husband, if that's who he is, is a fake. I was having a beer last night with one of my buddies who works airport security up at YVR, and he was telling me about this crazy loon of a taxi driver who blasted across the main runway yesterday - so he could pick up a fare at one of the charter shacks!"

"Those guys are nuts."

"Yeah - he actually cut in front of a bird that was cleared for take off! But wait, it gets better. The fare, this maniac picks up was ... guess who?"

"No?"

"Yup. As far as I can make out: It was our Minister of the Legislative Assembly for Vancouver/Shoughnessy, Randy Boy."

"I guess that's not impossible."

"Oh yeah? He swore to me, up and down, that he was at home last night, and at the office all day yesterday. But my buddy tells me he was on his merry way out to Abbotsford."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. He made a big fuss too. A Mountie tried to bust the crazy cabbie, but Randal does a number on him. Pulls rank like he's some hot shit officio from Ottawa."

"So Randal blows off the Mountie. Kinda funny!"

"I got beer up my nose when my buddy described how the trooper smacked his head on the window, getting his head out of the car so fast." Grey and Pink chuckled and chewed their gum, while they savoured the image.

"So what do you wanna do?" Pink asked. "We don't have anything really substantial, eh?"

"Yeah, we can't hold him for long. Maybe overnight though, as an accessory on his wife's manslaughter charge. Could give us some time to look into his fish yarn."

"His lawyer will have him out quicker than you can lose a Tooney on the Lotto," bet Pink.

"Nope. You're the one who lost the Tooney," countered Grey. "I've got the winning ticket."

"Dream on."

## Chapter 24 - Guttered Bird

The police went all the way; the whole nine yards. They took Standard Procedure and turned it into an art form. Diamond looked like she was about to pass out, but they spared her no pity; they even cuffed her and Niro. Niro, however, blustered for the cameras; it was his cameo spot, and he played it to the hilt.

"You bulls won't get away with this treatment. I'll have your badges. You'll be shovelling snow and serving bagels in Prince George, by Christmas!

"I'm someone to reckon with - you can bet your pension on that! My wife needs treatment, not manhandling and jail time." This reference to his wife's predicament got a few nods from the crowd, which had stood around watching the tow trucks pull the massive Hummer off the hood of the squashed Toyota.

"I want my lawyer!" bellowed Niro, but it was lost in the screech of Hummer steel scraping across Toyota poly-alloy sheet metal.

They had to walk through the crosswalk and past the few remaining Looky Lous to get to the patrol car. The crossing was empty now and the road had been hosed down; debris had gathered at curb side and left for the city to sweep up. In the gutter, Diamond noticed a large brightly coloured box with the image of the P-51 Mustang "Marie" Fighter soaring through a clear blue sky. The box was soaking wet and crumpled; one wing of the shattered "Marie" poked through the plastic skin like a green-stick fracture; she seemed to be reaching, valiantly, for the night sky. Diamond jerked away from her escorts and started toward the gutter to pick up the wounded bird. Grey shot out his hand and grabbed the shoulder of her black evening jacket; it ripped along the seam where it joined the collar. Diamond whimpered but didn't resist; the soft tearing noise might easily have been the sound of her mind coming apart.

Pink gently put her hand over Grey's fist and coaxed it loose. "Let's leave that for the street cleaners, Mrs. Liddle." She gave Grey a look that said "I'll handle this." Grey rolled his eyes.

Niro stuck his sizeable bulk in Grey's path.

"You keep your fucking hands offa my wife!"

"Sir, at the moment you are both in considerably deep poo-poo. Also, I have a responsibility for your safety while you are in custody. It's not clear what your wife had in mind there, but it could be construed as fleeing the scene of an accident. I'm almost positive you don't want that to happen. Am I right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Where's she gonna flee to with cuffs on her wrists?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. She's not saying anything."

They were at the patrol car and Pink put Diamond in the seat

behind her on the driver's side of the unmarked police cruiser; Grey took Niro by the arm and palmed his head into the back seat on the passenger side.

"Don't go anywhere, sir," Grey said with a small grin on his face.

Diamond was lost in some place far away. Niro tried to bring her back. They were behind a thick plastic shield, and it didn't seem like they could be overheard, still you couldn't be sure about where microphones were likely to be hiding these days. Niro squeezed Diamond's fingers and whispered "We're going to be fine; don't worry. We'll get on the phone to Lutz", Lutz was the club's lawyer, and on a retainer by Zena, "and be having dinner down at the Granville Island Keg before you can say Prime Rib!"

## Chapter 25 - History Repeating

Someone was talking to her, but all Diamond heard was a vague mumbling buried in the accident noise. The speaker was drowned out by the roar of shattering glass and crushing metal, which her mind played over and over. The sound made her think of adults in Charles Schultz's televised version of Charlie Brown's Christmas.

Wah-wah! Wah, wah-wah. Wah!

She saw the face of the little boy clearly in her mind; he had straight brown hair, a little too long in the front; it was hanging in his eyes. He was squinting into the sun reflecting off the Hummer's chrome and high polish detailing. He was a little on the heavy side and had rosy apple cheeks. His eyes were a startling blue ... the bluest eyes she had ever seen. They held surprise, curiosity, affable good humour ... but, inexplicably, no terror.

How could someone look death squarely in the face and not feel terror? She was puzzled by this question, but only momentarily. The

bulk of her guilt filled her to overflowing with shame and remorse, sweeping every other person/place/thing aside. She was trapped somehow, inside herself, watching as the scene played, unrelenting, over and over again. Laughing, she and Niro careened over the body of the small blue-eyed boy, but instead of laughter, she heard only the sick crunch of bone and the rending shriek of metal.

-

Are we doomed to repeat our worst mistakes? Diamond was remembering a well buried incident which occurred while driving her first car. She (Jackie, as she was known in this life) had taken driving lessons - two, anyway - and was still quite timid in traffic. It was a bright day in late spring and it was the weekend, so traffic was heavy in Vancouver's west-end, as people massed on foot and bicycle upon the shops and beaches and emerald green tree-studded ring roads surrounding Stanley Park. She and her new boyfriend, Chris, were heading up to the mountains to do some end-of-season skiing. They had overslept and just come out of the Whitespot restaurant on Bidwell, after a hurried breakfast. She was proudly driving her little ruby-red Volkswagen Beetle and trying to get them all safely across Georgia street. Traffic was hopelessly busy in both directions, and she was being her timid self - the self she hated - and was languishing at the intersection, anxious and fretting, certain she would never get across, that they would die there and never see the ski mountains again.... Maybe she was having a reaction to the food.

"Come on, Jackie. Get the lead out!" Chris shouted from the passenger seat, irritated and impatient, as usual. "What are you waiting for? An invitation? You're such a scared Wabbit!"

She hated it when he called her that. It was a name her father

called her, when she chewed with her mouth open, or did pretty much anything that he thought was uncouth. Which was everything. She should never have confided that to Chris. Seething now, she ignored him, getting madder, and colder. The stream of traffic was endless; the car was hot and small. Its floorboards were rusted out... *What a pushover I was to buy this piece of crap!*

Chris continued to goad her, "Let's go! You shouldn't be driving this pile of shit anyway - Wabbits don't drive ... better let me drive!"

With that, Chris jumped out of the car. And as he crossed in front of the car, perhaps thinking he would easily do what she had failed so successfully at, she spied an opening in the traffic. She looked ahead and saw him directly in front of her,

And floored it.

Chris looked at her with shock. His blue eyes wide open in terror; his small mouth a perfect 'O' of surprise. And then he was under the tires and she was flying - her wheels rumbling, trundling, crumbling, over him and into a miraculous space of empty intersection. She swung the steering wheel hard left and made a neat merge into the westbound traffic.

"I'd better pull over and see if he's all right," she told herself, but there was no stopping in the curb lane on Georgia. "I know; I'll turn left on Denman and go around."

But the left turn lane was filled with cars, stretching back up the street; she had missed her chance to get into it when she turned onto Georgia. Now there was nowhere to turn, unless she went into Stanley Park, but it would take forever to find her way back. It might be better to just go across the bridge, and into Park Royal, turn around, and come back. As she crossed the red-green ribbon of Lion's Gate bridge,

she felt a wonderful euphoria. The snow capped Lions seemed to be guarding and protecting her; the blue-black water of Burrard Inlet beckoned her and she decided to take a long swim after an afternoon of gliding down the world famous ski slopes. On the Upper Levels highway, heading for Whistler, thoughts of turning around and going back to see about Chris were utterly forgotten.

She never told anyone about what happened that day. It was a shameful secret that she even managed to hide from herself, most of the time. No one came looking for Chris; no one asked. The two of them had only been going out for a month or so. Her girlfriend April knew she was seeing someone, but they hadn't met. Jackie/Diamond had been excited about the prospect when she decided that Chris and she would hook up. She often chatted about him with April, but now she never brought him up. When April asked about him, the once, Jackie said,

"He was uncouth, so I dropped him."

End of story.

Eventually, she forgot him - it - them.

## Chapter 26 - Missing Pieces

The two officers, Pink and Grey, led Diamond and Niro down a long grimy green hallway, littered with the day's collection of newspapers, styrofoam coffee cups, and people waiting. They were buzzed through a door with a wire mesh window and another long green corridor. Finally, they walked through a door and the cops didn't follow. It was shut behind them and locked.

"Hey! What about our phone call?" Niro shouted at the door.

"It's coming," was the muffled response.

"So is Christmas!" Niro said. He heard that in some movie; thought it sounded tough. He didn't feel it though; he wanted that high that he'd had on other jobs. They hadn't screwed up like this one. Still, this could work out all right. He just had to get to their lawyer. A phone call would do that. *To hell with Diamond. She had fucked this up majorly; now she's lost in some zombie zone.*

"Fuck," said Niro! Okay, relax he told himself. *Breathe. Breathe.*

"What would Bob do?" he asked himself. *He wouldn't lose his cool for starters. Okay. Stay cool. Forget Diamond. Her part is over.* As long as they got out of this without her breaking down and giving the game away, they'd be fine - in great shape, actually!

-

"So what do you want to do with them?" asked Pink.

"Let them cool their jets," said Grey. "We can use the time to do some sniffing around."

"I'm a little worried about the woman."

"What? You think she's going to take a swing from her shoelaces?"

"Stop playing the hard bitten cop!"

"I thought that's why you loved me?"

She grinned. "You're still doing it."

"Whaddya want from me?" He laughed and spread his hands. "Okay. If you're worried about her, go ask her if she wants to use the washroom, whatever. Give me an hour. Then you can give them their phone call. Their attorney will probably be raising hell inside of two hours; they'll be away in three, unless we have something."

"You're such a Dick ... Tracey, that is." She winked at him and left the room.

"You're always coming on to me - why not just come out and admit you want to leave your husband and run away with me?" Grey called after her.

He was sitting at what he guessed was an imitation oak-veneer workstation. It was littered with books and magazines, papers, and pens. He shared it with two other plain clothes officers, one from each shift. They also had a floater workstation for overlap, which happened during shift change or when one of them was working overtime on a case, but they all preferred to use this one.

It sported a new computer and a telephone, a desk lamp and a tray filled with odds and ends, brightly coloured paper clips, an ancient bottle of Wite-Out, a dinner knife, and a picture of his wife, deceased. He put the picture of Carol on the desk when he arrived for his shift and tucked it away in the drawer when he left. Not like the other two detectives that he worked with. They left their personal belongings

scattered about. Pictures of kids and their drawings pinned to the cubicle wall, and coffee cups and water glasses left for somebody's mother to come along and wash up.

Carol had been a self proclaimed *Neatnik*, her word, not his, and it had rubbed off on him after her death. Up until then, he was just as much of a slob as the next guy, always expecting someone else to clean up after him. Now he put his things away, and not because Carol wasn't around to do it ... it was because she wasn't around - period.

Grey figured that the place to begin, in getting to the bottom of the hinky feeling he was getting from Mr. and Mrs. Randal Liddle, was to start with Randal, the politician, and the place to begin with that was finding out whether he really was out of town for the weekend, like Grey's buddy from airport security at YVR seemed to believe. A phone call could possibly answer that question.

Grey dug out the white pages and started looking for the riding office's phone number. "Jeez - are these ever useless," he muttered to himself; routed through his pockets for reading glasses. He finally located a home phone number for the Minister, but wasn't able to find a listing of riding offices. *Guess I'll start with a call to his house.* And got lucky.

To his surprise, Randal Liddle's *wife* answered on the third ring, "Hello. Liddle residence."

Grey took off his glasses, "Hello. This is Detective Jerry Rizwell from the Vancouver police. May I speak with Minister Randal Liddle please?"

"I'm sorry, Detective, but he's out of town. Can I help you, I'm his wife."

*Bingo!*

"I'm sorry to disturb you ma'am. Can you tell me when you expect Mr. Liddle back?"

"I'd rather not give out that information over the phone; I'm sure you understand. Perhaps, you could tell me what this is about?"

"I'm just looking for background information at this point, Mrs. Liddle. I'd prefer to talk to Mr. Liddle about this first; it's nothing to be concerned about. Let me give you my number; I'd appreciate it if you could have him call me as soon as he returns."

"You're sure there's nothing wrong? Nothing at all?"

"Like I said, I'm only looking for information. When did you last talk to your husband, Mrs. Liddle?"

"He called me last night."

"Well that's fine. Please, just have him get in touch with me when he gets in."

"Okay. What's your phone number then, Detective?"

He gave it to her and hung up. He had an urge to go grab that prick Liddle, or whoever he was, and ring his neck. But he wondered whether that would really help them get any information about what Randy Boy was doing impersonating a minister. He doubted it.

Politicians had their place in the world, in Grey's opinion; most were sincere about trying to get things right, but con artists deserved to be strung up by their thumbs, naked, in the town square. Anyone who wouldn't play straight, who had some game they wanted to run on you, they were the scum of the earth, as far as he was concerned, and he wouldn't rest until he had exposed them.

Carol had been conned by a snake oil salesman who called himself a Holistic Health and Healing Practitioner. He assured her that together they would find the best treatment for her and improve her

quality of life by at least 35 percent. Instead she had a massive hemorrhage ... slipped into a coma, and never regained consciousness.

Grey reached into the bottom drawer of the rolling file cabinet of the fancy workstation. It was 'his' drawer; each of the detectives had their own and it contained his survival equipment: electric razor, a fresh shirt still in plastic, a box of business cards, and his Big Hug coffee mug. He lifted the mug out of the drawer - it was big all right and had *Big Hug* written up and down the sides about a dozen times in different fonts and colours. It was a gift from Carol; it had been a planter with a fuzzy bear tied to the handle and some type of shrub spilling over the rim. She'd given it to him when he was in the hospital, last spring, with angina. She teased him saying it was the result of all the coffee he drank. She even quoted a study from the Netherlands and told him that too much coffee would raise the *Homocysteine* in his blood to dangerous levels. But she gave him the Big Hug coffee mug, anyway.

Grey carried it into the kitchen and began building a coffee. The department believed in making the office like a home away from home. With that, came the kitchen. He figured it probably saved the department in the long run, because people took shorter lunch hours and usually ended up eating their meals back at their desks. Grey put on the kettle and took down his filters and personal dripper. He took his Sumatra out of the freezer and shook a couple of big tablespoons into the brown paper cone.

And pictured Carol Tsk-tsking him. *Moderation in all things, Jerry*, she reminded him. He spooned some back, and let himself drift.

That guy Liddle, or whoever he was, really pissed him off. He

was so smooth and gave them such a hard time; after he, and his - what? Not his wife - his partner maybe - after they drove a truck over a little boy carrying a model airplane across Granville Street. *How do people like that live with themselves?*

The kettle was boiling; Grey forced himself to calm down and slowly pour the water over the grind. He inhaled the steam; the sweet nutty smell soothed him.

A sergeant came into the kitchen and pulled a plastic lunch container out of the fridge. "Oh... that's smells good!"

"You want some?" asked Grey.

"No, no thanks. I just love the smell." He cracked the lid on his lunch and stuck it in the microwave. He dialed it up and then left the kitchen. "See you later!"

"Yeah. See you," Grey said. People were funny about coffee. Just about everyone loved the smell, but few people in the department ever took him up on his offer to make them some. They were paranoid about drinking it for some reason, or preferred tea. Most preferred tea these days, he found.

*To each his own, Jerry,* Carol said.

She would drink only herbal tea. Particularly, a smelly concoction that her "health coach" prescribed for her. Grey had personally made huge pots of the evil stuff, toward the end. *Damn!* He made tea while Carol lay dying - when he should have insisted they go see a real doctor. *Fuck!* He should have carried her to the car and went straight to emergency the first time she passed blood. Her cough was the only symptom that she ever complained about, but she wouldn't trust anyone else to treat it.

He poured Avalon milk into his mug, from a glass bottle that he

kept in the fridge; blew on it rather than dirty a spoon and absently gazed over at the magazines on the kitchen table, while he sipped the tasty coffee. He stopped mid slurp - his eyes resting on Randal Liddle staring back at him from the cover of a fresh issue of Computing Canada.

Business and Computing magazines were not unusual around the department. Most cops were just geeks in uniform - geeks that did better with the ladies, Grey liked to think.

The article was about the Minister, Randal Liddle, promising to bring a beefed up FOIPOP bill through parliament. FOIPOP stood for Freedom Of Information and Protection Of Privacy. It was an act of parliament, which laid out policies that governments and organizations were required to follow to ensure that citizens' personal information was not compromised. The current act had the teeth of a toddler - it didn't have any real bite to it, not to mention the whining the government did, whenever advocates insisted FOIPOP be enforced.

Their department had a Computer Crime Centre, which was set up to handle identity theft, fraud, child exploitation, and hacking, but they were overloaded. Too much of the workload was spent helping the public do simple tasks on the computer, such as filling out forms and filing reports with various agencies, rather than going after the burgeoning info-criminals. Internet fraud was by far the fastest growing sector for the CCC. It amazed Grey, how many people were willing to bid \$15,000 for a car on eBay, without asking the seller a single question, and then cried bitterly when they received a piece of junk, or worse, nothing at all.

In the past, Identity Theft was not quite so technology dependent; initially cases were filed concerning personal information

taken from garbage bins or stolen wallets or mailboxes. More often than not, they went unreported. Canada Post recently reported that approximately 4,000 pieces of mail were stolen from community boxes in one weekend, and only a hundred or so people reported that their mail was missing! Grey shook his head. It was hard to understand; people were so careless when it came to their personal information.

The Computing Canada article discussed Liddle's claim that organized crime groups were developing high-tech tools, similar to - if not surpassing - the capability of the FBI's information gathering gadgets. Of which, there had been several well publicized devices over the years - usually with hokey names that made you think of insatiable meat eating beasts: Carnivore and Omnivore were two. What caught Grey's attention was the mention that Liddle would be attending a highly secretive conference on information gathering technologies, known as N-SAP.

It was scheduled for that weekend, in Victoria.

Pink walked into the kitchen while Grey was reading the CC article. "Hey, I was looking for you. It's been an hour. Should we let the Liddles have their phone call?"

"Hang on ... here check this out." Grey handed Pink the article and got up to put on some more water. "You want a coffee?"

"No thanks," said Pink, "think I'll just have tea. It sure smells good in here though."

"Just checking," Grey grinned, filled the kettle and took out the tea and a second mug.

"What the heck is this about? Is this our guy?"

"Sure is." Grey dropped a tea bag into the mug. "I think we've got an angle."

"Which is?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"But we know something, right?"

"Right."

"Well ... lay it on me."

"The guy in our holding cell isn't Liddle – that's number one."

"Number two?"

"The woman isn't Mrs. Liddle either. I spoke to her on the *phone*, and she thinks Hubby is out of town."

"And we know differently?"

"My buddy at the airport placed him arriving in Vancouver yesterday afternoon. According to that article, Liddle is actually attending a conference at a 'highly secret location.'"

"However, it's not a secret to us?"

"You're no slouch, Shorty."

"Thanks. You're just trying to get into my pants, but you should know by now, flattery won't do it. I want diamonds - big diamonds."

Grey sighed. Poured the water and handed her the mug. "Your tea, your Highness."

"Thanks." She cupped it in both hands and sipped. "Also, it's not a secret to your airport buddy. Not the cab driver either, assuming he reads Computing Canada." She rolled her mug in her hands and blew on the tea. She grinned; on the mug read: *I'm not a complete idiot, some pieces are missing.*

"I'm wondering whether our guy was hired by the real Randal Liddle to make it look like he was in town during the weekend."

"That's a possibility," Pink said, "but why do that and not tell the wife. It makes more sense that she would be in on it; so wouldn't she

play along and say he was in town?"

"Besides, this conference is public knowledge, at least to those who read this magazine," said Grey

"My bet is that our drunk driver and her companion are putting on a show for an entirely different reason. Not as an alibi..." said Pink.

"But to discredit Liddle," Grey finished.

"My thought exactly - so what do you want to do with them?"

"Let them go."

"Why?"

"They're bit players. We're not going to get anywhere with them."

"This is going to backfire on them, anyway.... Well, on *someone* - likely whoever did the shitty research," said Pink.

"So, we give them their phone call. Let their lawyer come down and do his thing; then we show them the door."

"And tail them."

"Right. We just follow our noses to whoever hired them."

## Chapter 27 - Somewhat Irresponsible

Niro was exasperated with Diamond; she had been so eager to put on this scenario, and now she was little more than a rag doll. She sat on the bench in the corner of the cell, limp, with her hands between her legs and her head hanging like a cock-eyed lampshade. She needs a good slap across the face, he thought, getting angrier as the minutes ticked out. They were scheduled to make an appearance at a fund raising dinner, where they were supposed to show up and shake a few hands; then Diamond, as Janey, was supposed to make a drunken scene. Their disguises would need some repairs before they arrived at the dinner; his face putty was cracked in places and flaking. He'd noticed small bits of flesh coloured material dotting the front of his scuffed dinner jacket. Aside from a somewhat dishevelled appearance, and the rip in her jacket, Diamond looked pretty good for having come through a major motor vehicle accident. She was a dead ringer for Janey Liddle and didn't need makeup ... they would definitely have to

change their jackets, he decided. Somehow, he had to bring her back though, or the question of her costume was moot. She was an important character in the scene they were going to play and he did not want to do it alone; although, if it was absolutely necessary, he would.

"*Diamonds*, hey are you in there?" Niro was hovering over her with his back to the holding cell door and speaking in a low whisper. He bent down and put a hand on her shoulder. She slowly raised her head. "Are you in there? Come on; wake up. We've still got a show to do."

-

Diamond had lost a ring that day, with Chris and the Vee-Dub, and it bothered her. She remembered catching Chris poking around in her jewellery drawer that morning; she'd come back from the shower and had startled him. He was standing in front of her bureau and turned suddenly when she came into the bedroom, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his Levis. It didn't make much of an impression on her at the time; he just turned quickly and shone a big bright smile at her, like he'd been missing her for hours, rather than the twenty minutes it took her to shower and put on her makeup. But after that day, she never saw the ring again.

It was a nagging detail that refused to let her forget him. She was gazing at a stain on the wall in the holding cell when Niro put his hand on her shoulder, and there, on his left hand, on the little finger, was the exact ring.

Something about seeing that ring again was exactly what she needed. It caused a welling up of strong emotion in her; it was pure *Diamond* brand cussedness. She might just as easily have lapsed back

into a pit of despair; on one level she felt incredibly alert, and she marvelled at her presence of mind, and on another she was still very distraught at being responsible for such a tragedy, but something about seeing the ring again brought her back to herself. It reminded her that Chris was a prick - he'd stolen a ten dollar Value Village ring ... make that a cheap prick. And the kid? Well the kid was an accident. End of story.

-

"Where did you get that?"

"Get what, this ring? It was a gift - from my ex-wife actually. It's pretty nice, so when I lost the wife, I kept the ring." Niro smiled, contented with his adjustment. "I'm glad you're back with us. You *are* back with us, aren't you? Hello?"

"Yes - dammit - I'm here. Stop talking to me like I'm a retard!"

"Hey, all right, *Diamonds!* You ARE back ... you've been a bit out-to-lunch for the past couple of hours."

"What do you mean? Where the hell are we ... oh, yeah ... right. Okay, I'm with you."

The door opened and Pink came into the cell; Grey stood in the doorway and said, "You get one phone call. Who wants to make it?"

"I will," said Niro. He glanced at Diamond; she nodded.

"Follow me," said Pink. She turned and walked out of the holding cell. Niro followed her. Grey brought up the rear and they walked down the hallway to an alcove with two pay phones and no chairs.

"Uh - do you have a quarter?" Niro asked the officers, patting his pockets.

Grey flipped him two bits. "Here you go, Big Spender."

Niro took out his wallet and found the lawyer's phone number, scribbled on the back of his therapist's business card.

The receptionist answered on the second ring; Niro asked to speak to Lutz. "Who may I say is calling?" she asked.

"Tell him it's ..." he turned around to see if the cops were lurking; they had wandered down the hall and were safely out of ear shot. "it's Marc De Niro from the Masquerade Modernes. I'm in need of his assistance."

"Certainly, I'll see if he's available."

Niro waited for what seemed like hours and finally the lawyer, Reynold Lutz, picked up the phone. "Hello, Reynold Lutz here." Lutz spoke in a crisp professional manner.

"Hi Reynold - it's Marc De Niro."

"Oh, hello. I understand you have a problem. What can I do for you Mr. De Niro? Can you talk?"

"I'd rather not ... I'm in the police station with my ... ah ... wife. Can you come down and get us out?"

"Sure - not a problem. Can you give me some idea what the difficulty is?"

"I was under the impression that you had already been briefed."

"I do like to be prepared, sir. I'm not familiar with any particular instructions regarding you or your, ah ... wife. Should I be?"

"Are you able to get us out? We need bail, I imagine. Have you spoken to Zena Marsh? She would have made arrangements for your ah - *ass-istance*." Niro said, getting a little testy.

He forced himself calm down, it wouldn't do any good to blow his cool, not while they were in jail and needed this guy's help.

"No, I haven't spoken to Ms. Marsh; there is a message here

from her though. Give me a minute." He put Niro on hold. After eight minutes, he was back on the phone.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting. Now, you were saying you're in jail? Are you under arrest?"

"No, they haven't said anything about charges, but they put cuffs on us and brought us down in a squad car. Do we have to talk about this on the phone?" There was silence. "Are you still there?"

"Sorry about that. All right ... I can be there. It'll take me about 20 minutes. Actually, I need to revise that. I'll be there as soon as possible. Okay? Don't worry Mr. McPhee!"

"It's Marc De Niro. People call me Niro – not McPhee!"

"I'll be there within the hour. Sit tight."

"Okay. Good bye." Niro hung up. Up until now, he hadn't been worried.

-

When Lutz finally arrived Niro and Diamond had been waiting almost two hours. It was late in the evening and there would be very little reason to go to the dinner party. The police officers were not very pleased either, since they were both due to change shift and had to arrange overtime to go through with their plan to follow Mr. and Mrs. Liddle to their headquarters, or hideout, or wherever they were going to go.

Lutz, a thin, efficient, youngish looking man in his early 40s, wearing an expensive business suit and cowboy boots, was shown into the holding cell. "Good evening. Sorry to take so long getting down here, but I had a very distraught client come in just before you called. It was impossible for me to get away a moment earlier!" He politely asked the young female officer in attendance to see his clients in a

private room.

Once they were in private, Lutz began taking papers out of his briefcase. "Here are the bail papers; you are free on your own recognizance, but must appear in court on Monday. You need to post a \$20,000 bond - each, or ..."

"What? That's crazy!" Niro interrupted.

"They've got some serious charges here, sir. They're trying for Accidental Homicide."

"Come on - how long have you been doing this job?" asked Niro. "People get off all the time for drunk driving."

"I've been doing my job for five years, sir. If you're not comfortable with my qualifications, I can have my secretary recommend someone else to you."

Diamond said, "We need to talk to Zena. We - at least I - don't have that kind of money."

"Is there any other way? Can you talk to the judge or the police? Someone?" asked Niro.

"I've already talked to the judge. That's what I was doing before coming down here. The judge has read the arrest report; the police are of the position that you were driving recklessly, while under the influence. They want to book you on manslaughter charges; I've been able to convince them to just let you post a bond and come back on your own recognizance. As I was trying to say, I believe we may have a contingency fund that will post the bond for you."

"Well find out, Pal!" Niro said.

"I've got to use a pay phone, they don't allow cellphones in here. I'll be back in a moment." Lutz got up and knocked on the door ... the police woman came and took him to the phone where he called Zena.

She was at the studio and answered her cellphone on the first ring.

"Yes?"

"Hello, Ms. Marsh? This is Reynold Lutz. I'm calling from the police station. Two of your associates have been picked up for drunk driving; there was a serious accident and a boy was killed."

"My God! Are they okay?"

"Yes, they are. However, the judge wants a \$40,000 bail bond, posted on their own recognizance, for court on Monday morning."

Zena was silent - she was doing the math. This was getting expensive. They would have to skip bail and forfeit the 40 Gees. They couldn't return to court - they would be fingerprinted. As a matter of fact, it would be extremely lucky if they hadn't been fingerprinted already. This might play into their hands - the accident and the unfortunate death - as long as they could maintain the masquerade.

"Who's the judge?" Zena asked. Lutz told her. "Let me put you on hold. This will take about six minutes." The line went blank, and then a robotic voice spoke,

"This is Radio Spam! All the Spam - all the time! Suck it up - it's good for you! Our headlines this hour are ..."

Lutz was forced to listen to the equivalent of hold music, which was actually random samplings of spam, provided as a subscription service by her ISP. "She's got one sick sense of humour," Lutz said to himself; unconsciously a grin started to spread across his face. The spam radio was surprisingly entertaining.

"Okay, Lutz? I'm back. Here's what I want you to do. Go back into the office and ask to speak to the arresting officer - tell him that Judge Fritz Warren has agreed to release the Liddle's on their own recognizance, and without the need for a bond. They can contact him

at home if they wish."

"How did you manage that?"

"Never mind ... just remember that I can."

Lutz was walking back up the hall to talk to the police officers when Grey came out of an inner office and met him half way.

Lutz spoke to him, "I believe you're one of the arresting officers of Mr. and Mrs. Liddle?"

"That's right. We just got a call saying they're to be released on their own recognizance. I find that extremely interesting and, I might add, not altogether a disappointment. If I hadn't been occupied arranging for shift coverage, it probably wouldn't have come to this. We were willing to release them without the need for a bond anyway."

"Well ... shall we release my clients then?"

"Just hang on a minute, Junior - the collar of your natty jacket is turned up.... Does your mother let you go out of the house like this?"

Seeming in a touching paternal gesture, Grey carefully turned Lutz' collar down ... gently brushed off a few flecks of 'druff, and then escorted him into the private conference room where Niro and Diamond were waiting.

Lutz announced: "You're both free to leave on the stipulation that you appear in Provincial court on Monday morning,"; then addressed Grey, "Officer, would you please get my clients coats? I believe they are in the other room."

"They can pick them up themselves," Grey said. "Follow me."

Finally, they were out in the street. Niro breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Terrific! Now how do we get back to the studio?"

"I'll drive you. My car is parked in the lot," Lutz told them.

They followed Lutz to the police parking lot where he led them to

a small black BMW. It chirped as Lutz disarmed the alarm and unlocked the door with his keyless entry fob. Diamond climbed in the back behind Lutz while he held the door open for her. Niro got in the front passenger side. The car interior was leather and smelled like overripe bananas.

The ride to Zena's studio was uneventful, but for one pseudo random note: as they pulled into the street and turned right, an old man stumbled, crossing in front of the car. He shuffled up to the window with a dirty wad of newspapers and began 'cleaning' the windshield. It was dark, but they could see he was shivering in the reflected light of the Beamer's beams.

"Here - take this," Lutz said and pushed a five dollar bill through the one inch slot he made in the window.

"God bless ya, son! By the way, 'f I'ere you, I'd keep my eye on the rear-view ... looks 't me like you might have some comp'ny, wherever you're off-a to."

The old guy snatched the bill and stuffed it in the back pocket of his trousers, and watched while they pulled away.

"He says we're being followed," Lutz said to his passengers as he sped away from the curb. "Don't turn around - I'll let you know."

"Who would be following us?" asked Diamond. "The cops who brought us down here?"

"Could be," said Niro.

After they had driven for twelve blocks, Lutz said "I don't see anyone. The streets are practically empty." It was now 1:30 in the morning and there was almost no traffic, other than party-goers, going home.

"All right. You probably heard wrong. Let's just get to the studio.

Why would the cops be following us anyway?" asked Niro. "We're just two, somewhat irresponsible, members of society."

"Who've killed a young boy and have a magic friend who can reverse a judge's decision about granting bail," said Lutz, sprinkling a few grains of salt in their wounds. "You're right, there's no reason to follow you ... but just maybe they're checking to see if either of you are driving?" The condition on their release was that neither drive for 48 hours.

"Would you just fuck off about the poor little boy! You guys just keep rubbing it in - there was nothing I could do. He just appeared in front of me. You make it sound like I drove onto the fucking sidewalk, gunning for him."

"Hey, relax, *Diamonds*. He's not trying to make any points," said Niro.

"No? I'm not? You two should take a reality pill sometime."

"You're the one who needs to take a reality pill," said Diamond. "No one is following us; are they?" she asked, more a statement than a question.

"No; it doesn't appear as such," Lutz said, glancing in his mirrors.

"So you're paranoid *and* you're an asshole.... Just drive."

## Chapter 28 - Stakeout

The old man straightened his back; ducked down the alley behind the police station and jogged up to a waiting car, its engine running. Pink was inside.

"You sure age well, but you stink.... Kinda like cheese."

"It's these clothes ... I borrowed them from the drunk tank. They're thin as a soup line on welfare day - how do these guys stay warm?"

"They drink whatever they can get their hands on."

"My door, please?"

Pink popped the locks. Grey came around and got in the car. "Turn on the GPS, eh? I planted the transmitter in the wheel well, while I was cleaning the Lawyer's windshield. He liked my work so much, he gave me five bucks!" Grey grinned. "Okay, let's get a move on."

"Right." Pink put the car in gear and pulled out of the alley. She

followed the directions displayed by the navigation system.

"The signal might be a little erratic."

"Why's that?" Pink asked.

"I told them they were being followed."

"What? Why'd you do that?"

"I figured we weren't having enough fun. Why make this easy?"

"Give me a break. I want to go home sometime this week. I've got a family, you know?"

Pink - Ruth Evans - was married to Dave, a gentle forestry worker; he picked up the trash left around camp sites, posted fire hazard warnings in the summers, and recorded the flora and fauna as he trekked the Squamish Valley. His job was similar to hers, but the clientele was much more appealing.

They had two boys, Simon and Paul, named with a tip of the hat to one of their favourite musicians. The boys were twins, both nine years old now. They missed their mom. It was expensive and a hassle, them both working, simply because they needed someone to care for the boys while they were both at their jobs. They had a house keeper, who was there when the boys came home from school. She made sure they did their homework and would fix them supper. If either she or Dave were going to be late, she would stay over and make sure the boys got their baths and went to bed on time. She was priceless, but expensive.

Ruth preferred to be home in the evenings; she wanted to see her boys grow up. She sometimes wondered whether she should quit the force, but she knew it would eventually drive her crazy just looking after the kids. It wasn't something she could do for long, no matter how much she missed them. She tried being a full-time mom when

they were born. She took a two year maternity leave ... by the end of it, was climbing the walls.

"Your little rug rats must be missing you. You're a lucky woman, Evans!" Grey said.

"Yeah, of course they're missing me. But they've got Mrs. Adams, our housekeeper, and Dave will be home tonight. I'm missing them too - they're going back to school on Monday and I have a bunch of things to get ready."

"Look - the signal has stopped moving," said Grey, sitting up and watching the GPS receiver. "Can you find them?"

"No problem - like white on rice."

"Be careful though, I don't want to spoil their confusion about being followed. I worked hard at giving them a paranoid mindset."

"Would you mind going over that for me? Why do we want them thinking that we're following them? I don't understand that."

"For one thing, they don't know *who's* following them - it could be anyone. I didn't say it was the police, so, as far as they're concerned, it could be their buddies the Hell's."

"You're convinced they're working together?"

"Well, one of them is," said Grey. "It might not be Mr. or Mrs. Liddle; maybe it's their boss. Someone is. I talked to some people in communications; they have a wire tap in a couple of the gang club houses and they're picking up lots of talk about the Minister and his wife. Pretty interesting stuff too."

"We're almost there ... want me to park?" asked Pink.

"Yeah, lay back here in the shadows. I want to see who else shows up."

"Just before we go into what we're doing here - run that by me

again. Why did you tip them they were being followed? I can't quite get up to speed with your bursts of genius. You wouldn't consider checking things out with me every once in a while would you?"

"Relax. This is going to be good! I'm sure they have a connection with the Hell's - someone in their group does, anyway. So they're impersonating the Minister and his wife - to trash his reputation, as far as I can figure - meanwhile, someone from their little group is dealing with these nasty fuckers! Excuse my French, but I'm fed up with cockroaches overrunning my town!"

"Got that out of your system now?"

"Nope. Not yet. But I'm ready to move on." Grey wiped a faux tear from his cheek and they both grinned.

"I'm sure these two have some connection to the Hell's, but I just don't know what exactly. We need to find out, because, right now, we only have them on the vehicular manslaughter charge."

"Technically it's impaired driving causing death. But go on," inserted Pink.

"Right - *impaired driving causing death* - same difference really. And we only have the woman on that. We know that the poor sap they're impersonating - Randal Liddle - is a privacy freak, and now we find these creeps are hooked up with the Hell's, and I'm thinking, well maybe the Hell's are doing a little creative extortion...."

"You mean they make Liddle's life hell, unless he withdraws his support on the privacy legislation?"

"Yeah, exactly. I'm hoping we'll catch them making contact with the Hell's, then we may have a case to wiretap them and get something substantial. Then we can cross match with the Hell's wiretaps and prove there's a conspiracy."

"Get down!" Pink said. "There they are ... Lawyer's driving."

"No surprise there; I can't imagine him pulling over back up the road and saying, Hey! Anyone wanna try my Beamer?" Grey snorted.

"I'm only saying they are obeying the rules of release."

"Give them time; they'll break 'em."

Chapter 29 - Pro Bono

Inside her Yaletown studio, Zena was watching the news; flipping between CBC and CNN. Their play had made it to the networks. It was believable; even more so by the tragedy of the boy's death, which made Zena sick at heart.

A pretty woman news anchor, with a heavily made up face and a low cut blouse, was speaking, "We have a report that early this afternoon, Janey Liddle and her husband Randal Liddle, the MLA for Shaughnessy South, were driving a vehicle while under the influence. A ten year old boy, Jimmy Roberts was struck and killed by their vehicle as he was crossing the intersection. His mother, Celia Roberts, was with him and narrowly escaped being struck as well. We have a report from the scene coming in ... Jack have you been able to speak to Mrs. Roberts?"

"Yes, I have, Barbara. She's here with us now."

The coverage switched to an on-scene reporter, standing in front

of the mother, still extremely distraught, but appearing quite willing to go on camera.

"Mrs. Roberts, tell us how you feel about what happened here today?"

"My son was senselessly killed," Celia Roberts stated. Her obvious anger keeping her from becoming overwhelmed with grief. "We were out shopping ... he was looking forward to going on a trip for school. We were just talking about how important it is to be careful and responsible ... and then he was killed by a drunk woman. Randal Liddle's wife! They were together, drinking and driving. Going to some party. My son is dead! I'll never get to speak to him again, never hold him, never kiss him goodnight!"

She paused to take a deep breath.

"Thank you, Mrs. Roberts. We're so sorry for your loss," said Jack the reporter.

Celia Roberts pushed back in front of the camera, taking the microphone from the reporter. "I hope they are both arrested and thrown in prison for the rest of their lives!"

"Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Roberts. Back to you Barbara."

"Thank you, Jack! We have another report from the local Vancouver police station. Hello Rupert, what do we know about the arrest of Minister Randal Liddle and his wife?"

*Bong! Bong!* announced Zena's chiming elevator.

Diamond, Niro, and the lawyer, Reynold Lutz, stepped off the shipping elevator, and crossed into the living room where Zena was in front of the big screen television. "You're just in time to see yourselves on the news," she said. "Have a seat."

"Nice to see you too." Niro said, slumping into the couch, looking tattered and spent. He brushed flaking makeup off his chest.

"I don't want to miss this - welcome back!" She patted his knee, "There's a repair kit in the bathroom. Help yourself." Diamond stood behind the couch, her eyes glazing over as the news reporter described their release from the Vancouver jail. Reynold Lutz went around the couch and sat in one of the easy chairs.

"I have to leave soon," he said.

"Hang on. This will only take a minute and then we'll debrief. They're wrapping up."

[CNN Rupert reporting] "...and his wife were, apparently, not formally charged; they've been given a conditional release - without bond - on the condition they report before the court, Monday morning."

"Is that unusual, Rupert?" Barbara asked.

"Actually Barbara, it happens fairly often with high profile individuals who've caused injuries, while driving under the influence of alcohol."

"What is likely to happened to them? Will they serve any jail time?"

"Randal Liddle's wife was driving; therefore, any charges will be laid against her. What usually happens in these types of cases is the defendant pleads guilty to the charge of driving under the influence. Sometimes jail time will be incurred, especially if it's a repeat offence, but for first-time offenders, most get off with a fine, and possibly a driving ban; second-time offenders are guaranteed jail time. Those causing death can face up to life in prison, but it's unlikely in this case, as I've pointed out, Barbara."

Zena turned down the volume. She turned around and looked at Diamond, taking in her torn jacket and general disarray. "How are you holding up?"

Diamond had done all of the shaky-girl routine she was going to do in public. She wanted to go home and go to bed and just forget the whole damn thing. It didn't look like that was going to happen soon.

"I'm fine, but I want to go home."

"Sorry, but you're in this for the duration," Zena told her. "There's no going home until this show has come to it's conclusion. That won't happen until late Monday."

"Are we supposed to appear in court on Monday?" Niro asked.

"From what I understand, yes, you are supposed to appear" Zena said.

"That's not what I meant."

"That's what I want to know too," said Diamond. "Why do we even have to go to court? This whole thing is fucked up!"

"Just chill out - let's ask the professional," said Zena. "Reynold, what are our options?"

"You seem to have the judge pretty well in hand. If you can convince him to simply fine your people, that should put you back on track without any risk of finger printing and exposure."

"I'm not sure about him. He was willing to let Niro and Diamond go without posting bail, because he knows me. I don't have a whole lot to pressure him with. It was mostly a favour."

"I think we should just throw in the towel. Cut our losses and let it go." Diamond said. "I'm willing to forgo payment for my work."

"You damn well better forgo payment! Who the fuck do you think is going to pay for that Hummer? I've got so much to clean up,

because you couldn't *act* like you were drunk; instead you had to *be* drunk. What is that - Method Acting?"

Niro tried to defend Diamond. "Come on. She was doing a fine job. She just didn't see the kid..."

Zena shot him a look. "Didn't see the kid? He was right in the middle of the fucking crosswalk on a perfectly clear day!"

"There's another problem here most of you don't realize," said Lutz. "You can't just walk away. You're committed; you have your patron to consider, and I strongly advise against irritating him by going 'off-script'."

"Lutz, I'm beginning to see you're not just some entry-level law clerk called in to post bail," Niro said, sitting up and looking at Lutz with new distrust.

"It's not really any of your business what my part in this is," said Lutz.

"We're your bloody clients. What do you mean it's none of our business?" demanded Niro.

"Zena is my client; you are her employee."

"And who else is your client?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're working for two customers, at least."

"I merely recommended Zena's talents to another client."

"You're getting a finder's fee, conditional on us pulling this off, aren't you?"

"Actually, I've already been paid the finder's fee. I have a rather large bonus at stake."

"Isn't that conflict of interest or something?"

"I don't see a conflict," said Lutz.

"You don't, or you don't give a shit?" Niro asked.

"Both," said Lutz. "Now, I must be going.... Zena, whatever you do, don't screw this up. You do not want to piss off your patron! That's Pro Bono."

But Zena was a million miles away. A news report had caught her attention. Police had shot the grizzly bear that killed an elderly woman in Powell River, the previous week. The photo montage was faded, and from another era, but ... it was her grandmother.

### Chapter 30 - Greatly Exaggerated

Benny and Connie returned to the house, but found the door locked and the house empty. Connie was both relieved and frightened. She had a nagging feeling Randal was in some kind of trouble; everything appeared normal, but there was no sign of him.

"He's probably out having a terrific hike," said Benny.

They called his name and looked around back

"You said there were some beautiful trails around here. He probably took your advice and is having a blast getting some exercise and breathing in that wonderful fresh air."

Benny's efforts to ease her fears only put Connie further on edge.

"My brother's a bookish guy, in case you didn't notice. He didn't get that bulge hiking the Walbran valley."

She laughed, trying to take the harsh tone out of her remark.

"Anyway, I made that suggestion hours ago."

Connie flipped on the TV and started flicking across the stations, hoping to find some news about Randal, and as luck would have it, a news station was finishing a report in which she caught her brother's name:

"...Randal Liddle and his wife were not formally arrested; they've been given a conditional release, without bond, on the provision they report before the courts Monday morning."

"Benny, did you hear that?"

"Yeah... I'm listening." They sank into the living room sofa and watched the report. When it was over, they both grabbed for the remote. Connie recovered it and scanned the channels for more news. They found plenty, and it was bad. A boy had been killed. No wonder Connie caught Randal's name so easily ... it was the lead item on almost every news program, either as the main segment or side-bar, delving into more lurid and convoluted details. "Give us dirty laundry," thought Benny.

Soon they had the whole bizarre story; it left more questions than answers. How could Randal have returned to Vancouver, had a few drinks with Janey, and then gone off with her to a dinner party, fatally injuring a child along the way?

And then he walked in.

"You won't believe what happened to me!" Randal said, looking tired and pissed off. He was wearing jeans and a Canucks sweater; not the formal dinner clothes he was seen wearing on the five o'clock news. He dropped into an easy chair, opposite Benny and Connie. "What? You two look like judges at a skating competition, and you're about to either give me a medal or take some blood!" He laughed at his own joke, sans mirth.

"Man, it's good to see you!" Benny said, smiling.

"I don't know whether to shit or cry - where were you?" Connie demanded.

"Well I was about to tell you, but it looks like something worse is going on here."

"Go first, Randal, then we'll fill you in. We're just glad you're safe and sound," said Benny.

Connie nodded and said "I had a feeling something was wrong ... we didn't know where you were. But here you are!" She leaned forward and hugged him. Her smile was back and it lit up the room. "Now tell us what happened."

She sat back with Benny, their fingers twined, while Randal filled them in on his lunch meeting with Pop Butcher.

-

"Now I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Or has Pop already made good on his ominous 'Everything Has Repercussions' speech?"

"Looks like it," Benny said with a grim smile. "You and Janey are the lead story on the evening news. You're obviously the latest target on the Shame Game hit parade..." He described the news reports.

"So, Pop could have called the whole thing off, if I had only agreed to his offer," said Randal, picturing Pop's hand hovering over the telephone. "And now a little boy is dead. This is madness! We have to stop him before someone else gets killed."

-

They spent several minutes discussing ways they could prove Pop Butcher was responsible for the Shame Game attack; none seemed promising. Connie and Benny showed Randal the automated

biography of Pop Butcher's life, which they had created using the computer at Connie's work. He was impressed with the results.

"Nice work! It gives a sense of what turned him into the twisted bastard he is. I almost feel sorry for him," Randal said. "It doesn't explain how he got involved with the Shame Game, of course. Which reminds me, has MsYou contacted either of you?"

"No, we're still waiting for her to call," Benny told him.

Randal smacked his head; he took out his cellphone. "She was supposed to call *me*. Sorry, I forgot to mention it.... And I see that Pop's boys turned off my phone during our little side trip." He turned it on and checked his messages.

"There's a message from Janey.... Apparently, a police detective called looking for me; wants me to contact him. Yep, there's a message from MsYou. Hang on.... Says she's sorry. Sorry for the kid, and - shit - she's backing out! She won't run a game on Butcher now. Says she can't, but didn't say why."

"Call her back, Randal! Find out what her reason is. She must be pretty upset, after what they did to that boy and his mother."

"I'm trying now," Randal had pressed the return-call button and waited for her to pick up; instead he got voicemail and left a message: "This is Randal Liddle. I just received your message, and I've learned what your group has done. Please contact me immediately!"

"Voicemail," he explained to the others. "I'm going to call the detective who's been trying to get a hold of me." He punched in the number and got an operator.

"Detective Rizwell, please."

"Sorry, he's not available at the moment. Can I have him call you?"

Randal left his number and hung up. Immediately, the phone rang - it was Zena, in her persona as MsYou. Brisk and business like; she clearly did not want to make this call.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Liddle; things went rather badly. It was unexpected.... No - that's shameful - it was tragic what happened, but there's nothing I can do about it!"

"Apologies won't fix this, MsYou. You're right, there is nothing you can do to make up for what you've done to that family - never mind my own - but you can do the right thing and stop that bastard Pop Butcher from creating more havoc. Help us bring him down!"

"You don't understand. I can't! I've got to do this his way. He's got people everywhere and they're watching me - and *my* family. I just found out my grandmother was killed. And they were there!"

"Do you think his gang did it?" Randal asked, hoping they might have a clear shot at a murder charge.

"No, but he's made it extremely clear that I can't get away from him ... he's been in my e-mail!"

Randal could hear panic mounting in her voice.

"Okay ... it's okay...." he soothed her. "You with me, MsYou?"

"Yeah, I'm here," said Zena, feeling never so horrified, or so dirty, as tonight.

"I'm sorry about your grandmother. But please, reconsider. He's a nut case! Who knows what he'll do next? He's already killed one of my best friends, and through this stunt you performed for him, he's killed an innocent boy. Where will it end?" Randal listened and heard her breathing slowing ... she was re-considering.

"My sister put together a background on Pop Butcher and there are three of us here ready to help you in any way we can. Just look at

it - maybe we can still turn the tables on him.

"Here's Connie. Please talk to her." He passed the phone over.

### Chapter 31 - Rhymes With Orange

Pink and Grey settled in for a long night. They had decided to nap in shifts and Pink took the first shift. She rolled her jacket up and put it against the door frame, shifted her body so that her legs extended past the accelerator and took a long stretch. In minutes, she was snoring.

"Man - between the twins and the job, she's burning the candle at both ends." Grey mused to himself. He tried to remember what life was like when he and Carol had kids at home. That was before he'd started in the force; it was tough making ends meet, he remembered that. They met at a barn dance in Smokey Lake, Northern Alberta. After burning up the dance floor, they stepped outside to get some air and he took her to his car to meet his dog, Bingo. He just arrived in town and hadn't found a place yet; the hotel didn't allow animals inside, so where he went, Bingo went too.

Carol loved Bingo from the moment she set eyes on him. No

surprise that - Bingo was a charmer! He'd put his head on his paws and look up at you with big sad eyes that said, "Come on ... play with me!" Hard to resist, that guy! That night, she called him down from the truck, ruffling his fur, and said, "We're going to be famous friends, Bingo. Now what do you think of that?" It was love at first sight. All around.

"Psst, Evans! Wake up." Grey shook Pink. A black SUV limo had pulled up in front of the Yaletown studio building.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Damn!" She swore and shook her hands in minor frustration. "I always forget my training on that: 'Never rub your eyes when you're tired, it makes them fuzzy.'" Reciting from the manual.

"Okay, Evans. Enough with the Stakeout 101. Can you see that Stretch SUV in front of the building? It wasn't there when you started napping, right? It just arrived."

"Yeah, I see it." Three large men, wearing Hell's Angel's colours stepped out of the stretch carrying what looked to her like fuzzy clubs. "Hmm, ugly buggers.

"Better call for backup," said Pink. Grey was on it.

"This is Detective Rizwell on stakeout in Yaletown ..." He gave the address. "We need backup. Believe we have some organized crime members here about to incite a situation. We're going inside the premises immediately and would appreciate you sending another unit along to help us out."

"Will do, Detective. We have a car about five minutes away. Can you wait for them?"

"No can do. Don't know what type of situation is about to transpire. We need to be in there now."

"Okay. I've sent the car. Take care."

Pink and Grey crossed the street. The three men entered the lobby and rang for the service elevator. It was on 'gregarious mode', since Zena had been expecting her team to come and go over the weekend; it responded immediately ... and disappeared up the shaft as the officers arrived in the lobby. They stood and watched two pairs of cowboy boots and a pair of suede loafers rise into the ceiling.

"Let's take the stairs," Grey said.

"I don't see an access door," Pink replied.

They looked around the lobby ... mailboxes lined the walls with the door to the street behind them and the elevator in front. No stairs. "All right, elevator it is." Grey pushed the call button.

-

In the elevator, Pop Butcher's men were trying to find a word that rhymed with orange.

"Your ranch?" suggested Noodles. He was the largest of the three men and seemed to swallow the space around him. Complaining noisily, the normally spacious shipping elevator ground its way up to the fourth floor, carrying the men like it was lifting heavy machinery.

"Not bad, Noodles, but I couldn't sing that." In a sweet tenor, he went, "My heart is filled with *orange*, because you're down on *your ranch*. Da-da, da-da. Da!" He tapped his pointy toe and slapped his baseball bat on his open palm keeping time. "Sorry, but it doesn't work." So said Salty Timmons, the dimmest of the three bulbs, and part-time professional lounge singer. In his pursuit of original material, which is how the discussion of how to rhyme orange got under way in the first place, Salty was developing a love song that, for some reason, compared his heart to oranges.

"You gotta use Door Hinge. It's the officially recognized rhyming word for Orange. I read that somewhere ... it might of been Reader's Digest - one of their vocabulary tests, I think. They always have a rip snorting vocabulary test. I usually do pretty good." The great reader was Farley Smit. He wore loafers and was in charge of planning. He would also be the chief negotiator in the upcoming proceedings.

"How 'm I gonna use Door Hinge?" asked Salty. "'My heart is filled with *orange*, because you're down on your *door hinge*?' No way, it doesn't scan."

"Try changing the idea," Farley advised. "'You left me with a bag of *oranges*, after taking everything but the *door hinges*.' Give it a little country twang and it'll rhyme like Lyle Lovett on crack!"

"Hey - that's pretty good. Thanks Farley!"

The elevator lurched to a halt. The chime in the foyer announced their arrival.

"Okay you guys, get in character," Farley ordered. They all took a deep breath, held up their bats menacingly, and stepped off the elevator.

## Chapter 32 - Micro-management

Pleased with his parting remark, Lutz swept up his briefcase with a flourish and marched importantly toward the elevator; arriving just as the doors slid open and revealed a dark and rotten core. Three bad seeds rolled out.

"Lutz, you're not leaving now are you?" asked Farley with a big grin. "The party's just starting."

"Oh, hello guys. Sorry, but I've got to leave. Got an early appointment ... so I've got to get up early. You know, lawyer stuff." He frowned and shook his head; made like they all understood what a tough job it was being a lawyer. This particular 'element' in his work made him extremely uncomfortable.

Noodles' big hand clamped down on his shoulder, turning him around. The men continued into the living room, stick-handling him like he was a puck.

"Hey - watch the suit!" he protested.

"Just happy to see you, is all. Easy guys." said Farley. "Interesting arrangement you have here. Proves what I say: Always a lawyer around when you need one! Maybe you can do a little advising for us since you're here anyway." Lutz started to protest, but Farley turned to face the room, demoted his demeanour, and noisily cleared his throat. Niro broke off a discussion with Perry on the relative merits of Shame Gaming versus D & D and stood up. The other actors turned as Farley pointedly addressed Niro in a loud stage voice which commanded their attention:

"You didn't show up at the dinner last night. We were worried something happened to you, and then we heard on the CNN that you'd been in an accident, but that you'd been held for questioning. That's bad, and then we heard you'd been released. That's good, we say. Just as long as they dump the Minister down the toilet with his buddies before Monday. Now we need to know if you're going to finish with the plan. The plan we paid so much money for. We're going to be awfully disappointed if you don't ... as a matter of fact, my heart is going to feel like an orange, if this gets stuck like a rusty door-hinge!" He laughed and his buddies did too.

Everyone else just stared blankly.

"It's an inside joke. Never mind," said Farley.

Zena stood up. "Listen. I don't know who the fuck you idiots are, but you're leaving my studio - now."

She was shaking with anger. The scene reminded her of how, years ago, two men invaded their home after her father lost faith in a project he was assigned to. His conscience was suffering over it and he wasn't sleeping. Several times, she found him sitting at the kitchen table, in the early morning hours, staring into space, coffee forgotten,

not noticing she was there. Finally he just stopped doing the work, or tried to.

Until that night. It began with a loud bang on the front door. When her father came out of his study and opened it, two men pushed inside, backing him into the stairs leading to the second floor so that he collapsed onto the steps. They smacked their fists menacingly with baseball bats - just as these men did. She'd watched the scene from the top of the stairs, noticing, with repulsion, a dark blue tattoo of a glaring eye on the top of the bald headed man who pushed her father down.

She never forgot his next words: "You will finish it because your life and the life of your family now belong to us." Then the second man swung his bat squarely into her father's knee with a wet smack; he screamed in agony.

"And we want it by the end of the week. No more delays, smart guy."

"That's bloody impossible," he grimaced. "And you're an idiot, as well as a brute, if you think otherwise!"

Which earned him another smack. "You will do it, or we'll come back and perform an adjustment on your daughter's knees."

Her father was not the type to be easily bullied, but, with his family threatened, he had no choice. After they left, her mother, who also watched from the second floor, helped him into the living room and made an ice pack for his knee - her last act of tenderness toward him that Zena could remember.

### Chapter 33 - Free Agent

"Oh - but we know who *you* are," said Farley, addressing Zena. It was suddenly very quiet; everyone in the room seemed to be holding their breath. She could hear the faint sound of the safe-crossing signal at the intersection below the building. "As a matter of fact, we work for someone you're closely associated with. Lutz, here, knows him quite well." Lutz managed to look sheepish and pissed off at the same time; he opened his mouth ... closed it.

"Anyway, our boss was quite pissed off that things didn't go according to the script. But that's okay. He realizes you gotta be outta sorts ... losing your dear grandmother. He sent us along to lend a hand with the management side of things. Oh ... he also sent you a gift, so you'd know he's watching over you and your loved ones." Farley reached into his pocket, and stopped, a sour look on his face.

"And by the way, I take exception to being called an idiot," he said.

Salty joined in. "Jeez - you don't even know us - how can you assume we're idiots?"

"The woman's just upset at having lost a dear family member, Salty. You could probably write a song about it."

"Yeah, I bet I could," Salty mused, encouraged.

Farley rolled his eyes. "So what's it going to be? Are you folks going to finish the game or are we going to have to rearrange some of your major organs?" Farley reached down and brushed some lint off of his slacks.

"So, these are your other clients, eh Lutz? You sure know how to pick them." Zena said.

"You might be surprised if you heard their estimate of you as my clients," Lutz said with a smug grin.

Zena looked at Niro, "It's Sunday. You and Diamond have to show up at a ribbon cutting ceremony for a new Safe Injection site in West Point Grey. It's not until two this afternoon. You can still make it."

The Safe Injection site was a place where drug addicts could get clean needles; typically a nurse and a security guard were present. They were springing up all around the city. They were a good thing for the addicts and made political points for the governments of the day, making them appear to have their finger on the pulse of society. A 'win-win' for everyone they would say. For the Shame Gamers, it was a good place to be seen, without being scrutinized.

"Sure, we can do it, but we just drop in right? No one is expecting us? We turn up corked and dishevelled and then we get into a little domestic dispute in which I get ugly with the Missus?"

"That's right. The real Liddle is still out of town; he doesn't know a thing about this," said Zena. She turned to Farley, "So what's this

about a gift?"

Farley made a sad face and reached into his pocket. He handed Zena a ceramic frog with a little sign that said "Do It!" Zena took it in her hands, turned it over, she felt confused. "Where did you get this?" she asked.

"It's an expression of sympathy. Mr. Butcher thought you would appreciate having it. Friends of his were on the scene when the bear got your grandmother. He said to tell you how sorry he is."

Zena forced herself not to react. As far as she was concerned, she was now a free agent.

"You up for this *Diamonds*?" Niro asked, concerned about the far away look on her face.

"I told you, I've had it. I quit."

"You can't quit now!" said Niro. "I need you for this scene. Just hang in there; it's only a couple more days."

"I don't care. I'm done, and I'm outta here!" Furious, Diamond started towards the elevator.

Farley said, "I think not. Noodles?"

Noodle's big hand reached out and caught her as she stormed passed him. He pulled her back like he was sweeping change into a sock drawer, throwing her off balance. Diamond tripped over her own feet and fell, screaming. She struck her head on the corner of the coffee table, landing with a crash on the white carpeted floor.

Niro reacted first and rushed over to see if she was okay; the rest of the group clotted up, watching, while Farley, Noodles, and Salty tensed themselves, prepared for anything.

Pale and still, Diamond lay in a morbid heap, blood pooling

around her head. Niro examined her. She was breathing, but unconscious.

#### Chapter 34 - Drafty

The elevator finally arrived; Grey and Pink walked inside. Grey hunted for the buttons; pushed the one for the fourth floor. "What the hell do they need such a big elevator for?" He looked around the large wooden cage, "It's drafty too."

"It's swank," said Pink. "You gotta be swank if you live in Yaletown."

"I understand swank, but what's that got to do with elevators? Must be expensive to operate one of these; never mind maintenance."

"Are you nervous or something?" Pink asked.

"No. I'm just saying."

"Can we focus?"

"No problem."

"Drafty fucker."

### Chapter 35 - Party Crashers

The gentle sound of *Bong Bong!* announced the arrival of the elevator. So welcome was the distraction from the horrible scene in the apartment that everyone turned. The doors slid open and the police stepped professionally into the foyer, but paused there, scanning the crowd and raising the tension in the room another notch.

"Good evening, folks," said Pink. Noticing the tight grouping, she asked "Is there a problem here?"

"No. No problem," Farley spoke from the living room. "A guest tripped is all; they'll be fine. You're not needed. You can go. Salty, catch the elevator."

"Sure thing, Farley."

"And who are you?" Grey asked Farley with his eye on the bats. "Captain of the little league?"

"We're in the majors, Pig! You got a warrant?"

"Why? Do I need one?"

The men locked their eyes on each other. Ancient rivals.

Zena, who'd been kneeling beside Niro monitoring Diamond, interrupted, standing up. "I live here, Officer." She looked at Farley and his crew and considered a few choice terms, but changed her mind and said, "These *gentlemen* were just on their way out." Lutz separated himself with a side step, wishing he'd left five minutes ago. "Get those bikers out of here, Lutz!" Zena ordered under her breath.

Grey and Pink entered the living room like pieces moving up a chess board; they were blocked by the three 'gentlemen', who acted as a tactical barrier that first had to be negotiated.

"Excuse me sir," Grey said. He was face to face with Noodles' chin. "Would you step back, please?"

Noodles remained in place, impassive.

"Lutz!" Zena hissed.

"Yes, of course. Come on boys. Let's go. Farley?"

"Yeah. We were just leaving. Noodles, let him through."

Noodles gave way and the scene was revealed. "Well look who's here," said Grey. "Mr. and Mrs. Liddle!"

Diamond lay with her head in Niro's lap.

"She's hurt," said Pink, pushing through the line to get to Diamond. She knelt beside Niro, putting her finger on Diamond's pulse. She was unconscious; her breathing was shallow and her eyes flitted back and forth beneath her eyelids. "What happened?" Pink asked Niro, her voice hushed, counting.

"She tripped over the rug and hit her head on the coffee table," he told her. He was morose. This whole thing was going to hell in a hand basket; he just knew it. "She'll be okay," he said.

Finished with her pulse, Pink rolled back her eyelids. The pupils

were unresponsive. "Like hell. She needs a doctor," she told him; thumbing the mike clipped to her Kevlar vest. "We need an ambulance. We have a woman down with a head injury."

The dispatcher came back, "Roger. We have one on the way. Your backup should be there now too."

Pink glanced up at Grey; he'd caught the transmission. Word of backup gave them some leeway. Over his shoulder, he called to the bikers, "Hang on, Little League. We may want to talk to you." Then he waded in; taking out his pad and a pencil. "All right, what happened here?"

Zena spoke up. "We were having a conference and, like Mr. Liddle said, his wife tripped over the rug as she was getting up to use the washroom."

"And who are these bozos - excuse me - gentlemen?" Grey hiked his thumb at the bikers who were now helping themselves to beer and sandwiches spread out in the dining area.

"They're clients of Mr. Lutz's," she replied, shrugging. "Perhaps you've met?"

"Yeah, we met. Busy night, eh Lutz?"

"Business is good, Officer. Thank you."

## Chapter 36 - Boys Will Be Boys

Lutz wasn't paying attention. He was fiddling with his briefcase and anxious to leave for his early morning meeting with Pop Butcher.

The boss bozo.

Butcher had become erratic; even nasty at times. There was no telling what would set him off. Lutz couldn't afford to be late for the meeting and he still needed to prepare.

He'd been warned about getting involved with the Hell's Angels; still he felt an old fashioned infatuation with the biker mystique. The Hell's Angels roots went as far back as the second world war. Originally, they were an air squadron and their colours were derived from the skull and flames motif sported on the fuselage of the elite fighter planes. Lutz's granddad was a fighter pilot and often spoke with admiration about the tough rebels; guys who only flew the most dangerous missions; dropping in behind enemy lines, with dynamite strapped to their legs.

This was the stuff legends were made of and, as far as Granddad was concerned, if you were a Hell's Angel then you were a real man. Apparently Lutz's father failed miserably in the Real Man category. He ran a flower shop in Winnipeg; paid the bills on time; didn't drink or carouse; had no friends outside of Lutz's mom. In other words, he was an ideal husband and father, but in his grandfather's estimation he was a sissy and a bore. Lutz sometimes wondered how his father turned out the meek person he was. It certainly wasn't from example; his father was the antithesis. Lutz settled on the simple, obvious, explanation: his dad chose to become the opposite of his own father.

Granddad drank his beer with whiskey chasers; played poker on Friday nights with the guys, and stayed out all night, whether or not he was working his cab, which he'd bought when he came home from the war, along with a black and white television set. He owned the town's first TV set, which was a marvel at the time and something he was fiercely proud of.

Lutz's father would shrink in embarrassment when his granddad pushed people around, playing the tough guy with everyone, calling them 'dumb newfees' in the derogatory of the day. His wife couldn't utter a word without Granddad telling her to shut her mouth; calling her a dimwit. Ironically, Granddad died in a motorcycle accident; not surprisingly, his father refused to attend the funeral.

After the war, Granddad discovered from a television advertisement that motorcycles - the coming thing - were selling cheap. Immediately he went out and bought one. The freedom was addicting. He started taking weekends off and going to all-night drinking parties on the outskirts of town. His son was left to drive the cab and look after the house.

One particularly drunken weekend, on his way home (some said going the other way - Lutz's father for one), a truck hit him head on. The driver claimed Granddad crossed the line and was in the oncoming lane. They didn't test blood alcohol levels in those days, but it's likely both would have blown over. Anyway, Granddad was flattened, so he wouldn't have 'blown,' literally. Word spread about that the coroner had to hit the sauce early the day he worked on Granddad, but not before he pronounced him dead of a heart attack, which helped speed up the insurance money, and reminded folks that Granddad had influential friends, which he squandered, in Lutz's mind.

For Reynold Lutz, a similar antipathy toward his own father grew. His dad didn't encourage displays of machismo; wouldn't show him how to defend himself or take him out for sports events. When Reynold started playing hockey, and getting noticed for his scoring, his dad would only ask whether he had done his homework. If the answer was yes, Dad would say "Then it's time for bed. You need to get your sleep. Morning comes early."

His mom wasn't much help. She doted on Reynold's dad; he was the sun and the moon in her universe. She would tell him "You could do worse than to grow up like your father, Renny.", her pet name for him. But Renny was having problems getting along at school and nobody was helping him deal with them. The problems followed him to the hockey rink.

Reynold wasn't a big boy and he often got the worst of it during the games. The fact that his father ran a flower shop made him the butt of many a joke about being the Flower Man's son, *and was there any truth to the rumour that he belonged to someone else, because his dad was a fairy and couldn't have gotten it up on his wedding*

*night.*

The jokes led to scuffles both on and off the ice, but they finally ended, tragically, one night in the locker room. After the game, one of the bigger lads, Dinger, was tormenting Reynold by snapping him with a towel and calling him a girly-man. For months Reynold had endured this type of treatment from Dinger; he was frustrated and close to the end of his tether.

*Snap!* went the towel and Dinger laughed as Reynold jumped. *Snap!* went the towel again. This time, Reynold grabbed it and pulled just hard enough so that Dinger put his weight into it and pulled back. Reynold rushed forward and ploughed into Dinger, pushing him backward into the coat hooks lining the wall.

*Pop!* - a coat hook skewered the soft base of Dinger's skull. His eyes shot open and the life drained out of him. He hung there, permanently startled by Reynold's retaliation.

Reynold was forced to leave school as a result of that 'incident', although he was never formally charged with anything and was officially exonerated for defending himself in a locker room scuffle. Boys will be boys they said, but please be a boy somewhere else.

### Chapter 37 - Paper Scissors Rock

Lutz noticed blood on the floor where Diamond had landed after hitting her head. It brought him back. "Look," he said to Grey, "I've got to get going. Do you need me for anything or can I leave?"

Paramedics had arrived along with the backup squad, two plainclothes detectives. The large studio was filling up. In response to Lutz, Grey raised his finger – just a minute; turned and had a word with Pink who was clearing room for the paramedics who were push-pulling a gurney to where Diamond lay on the floor with Niro, cradling her head in his lap. "Do we need the lawyer for anything tonight?"

"I don't know, Rizwell, it's your show. Think he might lead us somewhere interesting? We could follow him; might run into another body along the way."

"Shit. What's eating you? Never mind."

Too late. Pink lit into him. "Well, I don't really have time to go into it, but let's just say two bodies in 24 hours is a little more than I

like to spend my time with. It's not the bodies so much as it's the paperwork."

"Okay. I'm letting him go. This place is way too crowded anyway. Bloody fire hazard."

Grey turned back to Lutz. "You can go Spiffy, but we'll need to get in touch with you. We'll call you later ... today." Grey looked at his watch trying to figure out whether his circadian rhythm was bullshitting him or not; it wasn't. "And listen, I hate to sound like one of those TV dicks, *but don't leave town.*"

Lutz was relieved. He didn't know or care why the cop was telling him he was going to be calling later that day. To him, it was a day in the life. Same shit, different day. Since he'd started working for Pop Butcher and the Hells, it seemed like he was spending most of his time talking with police. Lutz sighed and headed for the elevator.

"Hey Lutz, are we free to go or what?" asked Farley. "The guys are getting restless."

The bikers were in a holding pattern; Salty and Noodles were bored and goofing off.

"I'll find out. What is the situation with the Minister and his wife?" asked Lutz.

"We're going to have to rethink this one," replied Farley.

"Well then you better hang around and see whether the wife can perform today," said Lutz. "If not, the Minister will have to go to the ribbon cutting without her -

"Hey!" Lutz yelled. Noodles and Salty had been passing time playing Paper Scissors Rock. Noodles had won a round and gave Salty a blow on head that stunned him. He stumbled back into Lutz and trampled his toes under the heels of his cowboy boots. Lutz gave him

a push.

"Shit. Watch where you're going," said Lutz.

"Sorry, Reynold," Salty said.

"You guys stop clowning around," said Farley.

"Anyway,' said Lutz, "you better hang around and make sure everybody knows what to do."

"But what's he going to do alone at the ribbon cutting ceremony?" Farley asked. "Piss on the flowers?"

"It's an idea," said Lutz.

"Good one! Always thinking outside of the box! Eh, Farley?" asked Salty with obvious pride. He nudged Noodles, looming above him grinning timidly.

"Excuse us - coming though!" Pink was clearing space for the paramedics who were now push-pulling the gurney with Diamond strapped aboard back through the crowd. "Come on - move back you guys! Jeez, you're like the wall of China," she said to Noodles. "Move!"

### Chapter 38 - Muscle on Standby

Grey was talking with two detectives who responded to his call for backup; they arrived at the same time as the paramedics and were evaluating whether they were needed. Grey wanted to question the bikers further, particularly without the lawyer around, and he wanted the extra muscle on standby.

They observed them feasting, from a distance, careful and practised as herpetologists studying a nest of poisonous snakes. "I've never met the lawyer, but I recognize one of your guys," said Danny Smart, a tall man with a pronounced jaw; he thrust his chin as he spoke. "The medium build casual dresser, carrying the bat and putting his smoke out in the potted palm, that's Farley Smit. He's a Hells Lieutenant and a real reptile. Don't turn your back on him. Do you want us to take their toys away?"

They drifted along the edge of the crowd toward the dining area.

"Let's wait 'til Evans finishes helping the paramedics move the

woman out," said Grey.

"Okay, it's your show, Rizwell. As for the other two, I don't know their names, but I've seen them around. As a matter of fact, my wife and I were at The Yale a couple nights ago and the short stocky guy, playing the spoons, came on between sets." Danny pointed with his chin. "He sang a couple numbers to keep the audience primed. Bad or what? They should have saved themselves the trouble. He was terrible! A bunch of people left. The big guy cleaning out the potato salad bowl with his finger", Danny chin-pointed again, "was sitting right up front; hardly moved an inch through the entire set, maybe tapped his toe twice. Instead of clapping when it was over, he just pounded the table, boom boom boom. Very weird. My wife figured they were guests of the owners. Guests ... a polite way of saying jerk-off underlings of Pop Butcher's."

"Yeah. Pop's the head of the snake around Vancouver these days," Grey said.

"We're watching him," Danny told him, "but it's been damn hard catching him with his nose in the sugar bag. The word is he's given himself a makeover. He's becoming a tight-ass executive; wears business suits, jets to Tokyo and the U.S., pays his taxes; very legit.

Dan's partner, Sandy Waters, spoke up. "The FBI asked the Mounties - who asked us - to keep an eye on him. Something about him blackmailing one of their senators."

They called him Clams - not because he was the silent type, or in any particular reference to his parent's genius in naming their children, but because he was a research hound who dug up information in places where no one thought to look. He was well known for having uncovered a child trafficking ring. They were masquerading as

homeless people in order to literally cart the children, bound and gagged, through the downtown core of Vancouver in covered shopping carts. Apparently, Clams spent several chilly nights sleeping on the streets himself, in order to get his inside information.

"What I'm hearing," said Clams, "is that Butcher has found or developed some super computer and has the FBI running around with their hair on fire thinking they've missed the next big wave in intel gathering."

"They say war fuels innovation," commented Grey.

"It's war all right. But no one's really sure what this thing is or whether it even exists. The rumour got started after some stuffed shirts got their reputations blown away like just so much dander on the shoulder in a summer breeze. Someone mentioned Moscow and computer in the same breath and now everyone's on the lookout for some Russian deep-thought device. But I have my doubts."

"If it exists, and has anything to do with the Russians - two big ifs -" said Grey, "Butcher couldn't touch it. The Russian Mafia would cut his nuts off if he went anywhere near their tech. End of story. No, he's much more low-level. Very much a hands-on man. This makeover baloney is just him putting lipstick on the pig. He's tapped into an information source and is using these actors to blackmail anyone who won't dance to his tune."

"These are actors?" asked Danny. "I thought this was some kind of fund raising dinner. Isn't that one of our local politicians?"

"Nope ... he'd like us to think so, of course," Grey said. "And his so-called 'wife', who's on her way to the hospital, is a part of the act. Although the concussion looks real enough."

"Then I'd say Pop's in a bind," said Clams. "This act is

unravelling rather dramatically."

-

With Pink piloting, the paramedics ferried Diamond to the elevator on the gurney. Pink arrived first and pushed the button, Zena and Niro trailed behind. "One of us should probably go with her," said Niro confidentially to Zena.

"The paramedics said it could be hours or days before she regains consciousness," Zena told him. "You can't just hang around the hospital waiting. We'll go down and see her once this is over. We've got a job to finish. The show must go on, right?" Zena tried to sound enthusiastic, but her heart wasn't in it and her pep fell flat.

"Right - but the whole scene has changed. I'm supposed to play the drunk, wife battering, husband. How am I going to do that without Diamond?" asked Niro.

Zena moved them further from earshot.

"We're going to have to do a little re-write, that's all. Maybe you could make a pass at the mayor's wife. Explain how your wife ended up in the hospital from a ... concussion from her driving accident. Play it up, you know; then when there's a lull in the ceremony, you sidle up to Her Honour and put your hand on her ass."

"That might work. Do we have to okay it with these goons?"

"I'll tell them that you're going ahead tomorrow without Diamond. That just leaves us with the finale on Monday. We'll work it out when the time comes."

"What if they have some scene of their own they want me to play?"

"Forget it, that wasn't part of the deal. We're in this for the game, remember? They're patrons, not employers; they get side

benefits from us playing the game. We're playing to win and boost our scores in the standings. That's the important part, that's the thing to remember."

*Bong Bong!* chimed the elevator. Zena and Niro paused and watched while Pink held the doors open and the paramedics rolled Diamond inside.

"Are you coming?" Pink asked.

Niro turned to Zena. "I feel like I don't know my ass from a hole in the ground, Zena ... I don't know whether I can pull this off. I'm a mess. Maybe I should go with them. What if Diamond needs me?"

"I need you Niro."

"You do?"

"Of course, we all do! And all you need is to get some sleep. It's just the willies. They'll pass once you're fresh. You can sleep here if you want."

"Okay - yeah! You're probably right."

"Cool," Zena said and, turning to Pink, she passed on the ride saying, "No. We're good." Pink released the elevator and nodded her thanks to the paramedics as the door closed. She left to rejoin Grey.

To Niro, Zena said, "There's fresh linen in the hall closet. You can make up the couch as soon as people start clearing out."

Under the cracked and peeling makeup of the elder statesman, Niro's face clouded over with disappointment ... and then brightened. He realized he really was tired. He hadn't slept in two days. "Thanks Zena," he huffed, "you're my girl!"

"Was. Now I'm your friend," was her curt reply as she scanned the room looking for Farley. Perry was standing among the actors and she felt a small happy-spark watching him. Farley could wait she

decided and, without another word, left Niro.

"What the hell did I do to deserve that?" he asked, but she didn't hear him.

### Chapter 39 - AWOL

The paramedics, Mike and Lou, came down in the service elevator with Diamond on the gurney, apparently concussed. She had a hospital blanket covering her; her arms were under the blanket and the whole thing was strapped down. Mike was discussing Lou's golf swing.

"You really need to get out and practice more. Try the driving range; I go out there for a couple hours and feel great. It's therapeutic," said Mike.

"I'm getting in as much practice as I can; it just doesn't feel right. I'm watching videos, got magazines, and I've even called the golf pro on Sports Talk. You know "All Sports for All You Sports - Raadio! I don't have time to hit the driving range too. Man, when do you do it?" asked Lou.

Diamond cracked her eyes open, looked from side to side. Closed them.

"I go after work. It's beautiful out there when the sun comes up.

It's so peaceful that the noise of the arc-lights shutting down scares the little bunnies into the bushes. *Ker-chunk!* The fresh air; the birds chirping. I love it! You oughtta try it. Guaranteed, it'll improve your swing. Probably improve things at home too."

"I don't know. Bill is pissed at having to get the kids off to school himself. He doesn't like me on the night shift. Besides, I like to be there."

The elevator settled at the main floor. Mike pulled the doors down and Lou bent her back and started pushing Diamond over the sill. Mike lifted the front of the gurney so that it cleared the sill and then walked back and held the lobby door open while Lou negotiated the passage. Then Mike again took the front of the gurney and eased it down onto the sidewalk.

The sun was coming up, but it cast a grey light through the heavy clouds. A soft drizzle of rain fell on them. Drops hit Diamond in the face and she flinched in surprise. Neither paramedic noticed. Mike unlocked the back door to the van and helped Lou wrangle the gurney off the sidewalk and onto the road. They pulled it up behind the van.

"Watch your fingers, Mike." Lou flipped the release on the accordion legs and the gurney collapsed. On the count of three, they hoisted it, and Diamond, into the van. Mike climbed in and pulled the doors shut and locked them. He clapped metal stabilizers across the wheels of the gurney preparing it for transport.

Lou came around and jumped in behind the wheel. "You good to go, Mike?" She started the engine.

"Sure thing. Take off, eh!" She heard him laugh as she put it into drive and flicked on the flashers. She shook her head; he never got tired of that old line. A genuine hoser! She smiled, checked the side-

mirror, and put the gas down; they raced off for the hospital.

Eight minutes after leaving the studio, and only one traffic light where they needed to use the siren - always a nail-biter, so they counted themselves lucky, again - they arrived at the emergency entrance to Saint Paul's hospital, aka e-merge. Mike had the back door open and the wheels unclamped. He jumped down as Lou came around and they lowered Diamond's gurney to the pavement; the accordion legs extended automatically.

The rain was still falling as they wheeled Diamond up the incline and through the emergency doors into the hospital. A warm wall of fetid air licked them in the face. It was like opening a box of stale farts. Something they never got used to.

"I'll check her in, Lou." Mike walked up to the admitting window and caught the pretty nurse's attention. Lou pushed Diamond down the hallway and started undoing the straps.

Diamond opened her eyes half-mast and observed the scene around her: Lou carefully folding up the grey blanket that covered her during the ride; street people, relatives, and security guards milling about the waiting area; emergency personnel chatting with hospital employees; ranks of patients, dressed in gowns, sitting in chairs along the walls or forgotten on gurneys, all waiting for beds, some with their eyes closed, others looking around watching for somebody - anybody - to come take care of them, to please deliver them from this noisome purgatory. *What the hell was she doing here?*

Lou turned around to see if Mike was scoring any points with the admissions nurse (some progress there) and noticed a golf pro magazine lying on a chair. She picked up the magazine; gave it a browse, looking for articles on technique, and admired some nice clubs

before tossing it back on the chair. While her back was turned, Diamond rolled off the gurney, darted through a clot of patients, crossed the waiting room, and disappeared down another hall into the women's washroom. Lou turned back and did a double-take.

"Damn!" She hated it when patients used them for a taxi service. Mike was still busy working on his swing; Lou walked over to the counter.

"Hey, Don Juan, we lost our load."

"What?" Mike swivelled his head to verify that yes, the patient had indeed vanished. "She came in with us, right? She was on the gurney when we came into e-merge, right?"

"Yep. I took the straps off, turned around and then turned back, and surprise, surprise, surprise! Our package had vanished. She up and bugged out."

"AWOL?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"Better call dispatch," said Mike. "Shit! She didn't even leave a tip. Your driving wasn't *that* bad."

Dispatch relayed the information to Pink who'd made the original request for assistance. Thought she'd want to know.

#### Chapter 40 - Fumble

After a lingering conversation with Perry, Zena's mood was greatly improved and she sought out Farley. "Sorry to interrupt, Farley, but we need to talk."

Farley was caught up in an impromptu bet with his associates. The question was whether Salty could do ten chin-ups. Noodles had improvised a chinning bar by extending one arm straight out and placing his hand on the wall so that it supported all his weight. Salty was hanging under Noodles arm doing his chin ups. His face was red and he was struggling to get to ten; Farley was holding two twenties and Lutz was counting. Noodles looked unconcerned with the outcome. He was eyeing the bowl of mints just beyond his grasp. There were three left and his mouth was pursed. He was sucking on something - probably fellow mints.

"Certainly. Cut it out you guys. Grow up, eh!" He folded the money and put it in his jeans.

"Obviously, there's going to be a change in our performance," Zena told him. "I wanted you to know that we've got it worked out. We're going ahead as scheduled, minus 'Mrs. Liddle'. Niro is going to handle the rest of the show. He'll be performing as scheduled this afternoon."

"That suits me fine. Just one thing."

"And what's that?"

"Well, there's Monday. Do we have to come back down here to make sure your people are on the ball?"

Pink, Grey, and the detectives, meanwhile, walked over. Grey was standing quietly behind Farley listening to the exchange. Zena made eyes at Farley, trying to shut him up.

"S'matter Zena? You tripping out on me?" asked Farley.

"Cute little workout routine you guys have," Grey said, addressing Noodles and Salty. "You ever consider the Cirque du Soleil? They're a cut above and you guys strike me as a cut above. I hear you even sing," he said to Salty.

Farley swivelled and Salty's head snapped up, mid-chin-up. "You heard me?"

"Naw, just that you sing. Detective Smart, here, caught your act though. Said it was inspirational." Danny nodded.

Salty grinned.

"I thought I smelled pork," sneered Farley.

"So what's happening Monday, Minister?" Grey asked Niro who'd followed Zena over, intending to back her up should she need it. Grey waited, pointedly ignoring Farley.

Zena looked around at Niro. Half asleep, he'd missed the question Grey addressed to his character. She jabbed him. "Oh, you're

talking to me!" he fumbled. "Monday? Ah yes, Monday. Well, I have to fly back to Parliament, it's in session you know. I'll be ...um, flying out. I said that. Big day, Monday. Leaving.... Yup!"

"I see, and your wife? Aren't you concerned about her health?"

"Yes! Of course I am. I will be meeting her in the hospital shortly. I'm assured she's in capable hands. There's little I can do at this point. Just a matter of time, and prayer. Prayers will help. Your prayers will be greatly appreciated. It's a tough time for us. For her. Especially for her." Niro was starting to riff. "And Officer, I want to thank you. You and your department."

Grey examined him, "For?"

"For - your service. It's been a trying time for us."

Lutz cleared his throat. Bless him, thought Zena.

"Officer, my clients would like to leave. Do you need them for anything at this time?"

"Lutz, you still here? Yes, we need them. There's the little matter of manslaughter. We haven't exactly established how the lady 'tripped' over the non-existent rug."

Pink reached up and put her hand to her ear concentrating on a transmission from dispatch. She thumbed the mike on her vest and acknowledged receipt. She stepped up behind Grey. "I need to talk to you." She spoke into his ear.

A grin slowly spread across Grey's tired face.

#### Chapter 41 - Opportunity Needs to Pee

Down a cluttered hallway from Emergency, Diamond scooted across the dirty wet floor of the women's washroom and ducked into a stall. She pushed the door shut and locked it. How long did she have before they came looking for her?

A bizarre line of graffiti caught her eye: 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?'

Feeling used and abused in a white man's world, the phrase from the Merchant of Venice spoke directly to her and she gulped down a lump in her throat. Obviously she was taking it out of context, or perhaps it was exactly this context that was intended by the felt-pen writer. Another desperate woman hovering here in this washroom, hiding from the misogynists of the world.

What to do?

"Are you going to be long in there?"

Through the absurdly wide gap in the stall door, Diamond saw a

woman, dressed in street clothes of about her size, peering in at her.

"No, I'll be out in a minute." Was this an opportunity?

"Good, 'cause I've got to pee somethin' fierce!"

"I'm coming out." Diamond flushed. Took a deep breath of sickly sweet air and opened the stall door, coming face-to-face with:

Beryl Simms, a forty-something brunette whose father, a pipe-fitter, was brought into e-merge after experiencing shooting pains down his left arm. She was standing - or rather: jiggling - first on one foot, then on the other, at the door waiting for her turn.

"Here, I'll hold your coat while you go," Diamond told her. "There's no hook and there's water all over the floor. You wonder who cleans up around here?"

"Yeah, all these cutbacks. Nobody has enough time." Beryl took off her coat and handed it to Diamond. "Thanks, I'll just be a minute. Would you mind holding my bag too?" Diamond shook her head and held out her arms while Beryl piled on her possessions, including a golf magazine from the waiting room.

"You're a dear!" Beryl went into the stall and closed the door. "My dad's not doing so well. Might be having a heart attack.... How come you're here?"

But Diamond was gone. She was out the door, shrugging on the slightly-tight fleece jacket, and hustling down the hall, away from the emergency ward.

*Free at last!*

In the grey morning drizzle, she flagged down a Blacktop cab and climbed in the back seat.

And realized she'd lost her purse somewhere along the way.

*Shit!* Now instead of just going to her apartment and grabbing a

few clothes, packing a bag, and heading to the airport – *she would be so gone!* - now she had to figure out how to get into her bank account. She had her passport at home; she could pick that up and go into the bank and tell them that her wallet had been stolen. They would issue her new cards. But the bank wouldn't be open at this time of the morning, surely.

She sighed in defeat and hung her head. And stared at a golf magazine in her lap, and beneath that Beryl's bag. Opening.... It contained a wallet, and cash, and a credit card. *No, two!*

To the driver, she leaned forward and said, "I need to make one stop first and then we're going to the airport. Is that all right?"

"That is mighty fine, ma'am!"

## Chapter 42 - Cop a Feel

The threat of a manslaughter charge hung in the air; Zena and Niro waited nervously to hear what Pink had whispered in Grey's ear. When he turned to address the group even the bozos stopped goofing around and paid attention; however, Lutz's arms were crossed and he kept glancing down and monitoring his watch.

"Well, well," said Grey, "it looks like Mrs. Liddle just flew the coop, or 'took a powder' as they say in the pulps. Maybe the head injury impaired her judgement? I mean why would she leave the hospital when her 'husband' is jetting off to Ottawa?" Grey studied Niro who squirmed under his gaze searching for something to say. To his credit, he didn't squirm long.

"*Victoria* - I'm off to Victoria."

"Huh?"

"I'm a minister for the people of British Columbia and Parliament is in Victoria. Surely you knew that Officer? Now if I was a *federal*

minister I'd be going to Ottawa."

Grey rolled his eyes. "Well excuse me. *Victoria* -"

Zena jumped in. "We don't know what the fuck you guys did with Mrs. Liddle, now get off our case! Do you have a formal charge or anything? Reynold, don't you want to step in here and earn your *frikin'* retainer?"

Reynold jerked himself into the present, "Yes, of course. Look here Detective, my clients have already been terribly inconvenienced once today by being dragged into the police station after experiencing a traumatic event. You can't be seriously suggesting you want to do that again?"

"Yes. And it was terribly inconvenient for Jimmy Roberts to get run down by your clients, and Mrs. Roberts was terribly inconvenienced by losing her son," mocked Grey. "Yes, I can be serious! In fact, I want to take all of you clowns in for questioning. I believe there's a conspiracy here to commit murder."

Reynold knew he wasn't going to get anywhere arguing with Grey; he wasn't the type of man who would back down. He considered other methods of persuasion. "I apologize Officer. You and your team have been extremely efficient in dealing with the unfortunate situation my clients have regrettably found themselves in today. Would you consider allowing them to return to the police station on Monday, on their own recognizance, as originally agreed to?"

"No, but keep up the flattery, Lutz, it makes me feel all sexy."

"Well then, I suggest you consider the rational side to your proposal to detain my clients again. This meeting is entirely legal; the fact that a woman was injured is both regrettable and unfortunate, but certainly not a reason to bandy about conspiracy charges."

"Oh no, you've got it wrong. I'm talking about Jimmy Roberts - his murder. But nice try, Lutz." Grey thumbed the microphone that was clipped to his vest and gave their car number to the dispatcher. "We're bringing in six suspects, we'll need a van at ..." He turned around to Pink for the address; and groaned.

*I'm such an asshole!*

Noodles was holding Pink in a bear hug. He was standing behind her with his huge arms wrapped around her. She was struggling and barely able to breathe. Noodles had one paw over her mouth; the other wrapped around her chest.

Salty had unsnapped her shoulder holster and taken out her Taser. He stood grinning like a forgotten child in front of the Christmas tree, helping himself to the presents; his eyes gleamed as he examined the weapon.

"Do these things really hurt?" he asked.

Grey watched in disbelief as Salty turned the Taser and pointed it at Pink's chest. Noodles obligingly adjusted his grip, exposing the area over her heart and lungs. Pink's eyes bulged in fear. Farley was grinning an evil smile. He had his back to Grey and was swinging his baseball bat like he was going to knock Pink's head out of the park. He glanced over his shoulder at Grey and taunted him, "What do you say Pig, shall we light up your girlfriend?"

"Let her GO!" Grey shouted. He pulled out his Beretta and pointed it at Salty's shoulder, aiming to maim him if he didn't comply. But Salty was oblivious; he was so focussed on his cruel little experiment that he didn't hear the command.

Farley did though, and spun around; seeing Grey poised to shoot, he panicked and swung the bat at Grey's gun. He succeeded in

clipping Grey's wrist, causing him to flinch and alter the direction of the gun barrel by three crucial centimetres, up and to the left. The gun went off.

At a speed of 304.8 meters per second, Salty likely never heard the explosion; he certainly never felt the 9mm hollow-point bullet shell penetrate the back of his skull and enter his brain. The sound was terrifying and it caused everyone to turn in surprise. Farley dropped the baseball bat in shock and watched Salty stumble a few steps before collapsing in a heap.

Noodles, witnessing his best friend's head explode, shouted in horror, "Allah!" He thrust Pink away like she was a rag doll and rushed to his aid. But Salty was no more. Bawling like a calf searching for its mother, Noodles bent down and tenderly scooped up Salty's lifeless body.

Pink lurched into Grey and he put a hand out to steady her. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine - thanks! How's your wrist?" Danny and Clams closed in beside them, their guns drawn.

"It's fine. Let's save this for later," Grey caught Clams' eye and motioned to Pink, silently requesting he guard her. Clams came forward.

"That asshole sure fucked things up! Let's take him down before it gets any worse," swore Clams.

"Leave him be. Help Ruth will ya, she pretty shaken up," said Grey in a calm voice; inside he was seething.

"Yeah, sure - but that guy's trouble; keep your eye on him," warned Clams. He took Pink back behind the line they had formed, still grumbling, but distracted now, his eye had settled on Lutz, on his

cellphone deep in conversation. Danny moved forward filling the space; his gun drawn and trained on Noodles, although he didn't pose much of a threat cradling Salty in his arms. Grey's Beretta was aimed at Farley who was sputtering like a wet firecracker.

"What the fuck! You shot Salty!"

"That's debatable," said Grey under his breath.

"The fuck you mean, Pig?"

"Shut up," Grey said. "You're in a heap of trouble. Now up against the wall. You're under arrest."

"You and your little girlfriend are fucked now, Pig. You're going to pay for what you did to Salty. You're going to pay in blood!"

"Yeah, yeah. I feel like a bag of door hinges. Now I said -" Grey pushed Farley into the wall, "turn around, *and shut the fuck up!*"

Always ready, Pink appeared at his side; began putting cuffs on Farley. Grey blew out a hot stream of air and raised his eyebrows. She chuckled.

Grey nodded his head toward Noodles and Danny and asked, "Danny's not much of a go-getter - you think you can manage to get little Buddha to put his buddy down. I mean, do you feel up to it?"

Farley sneered, "Good luck!" He was cuffed and ignored.

"Yeah, no problem. I'm fine," Pink said as she turned away. Grey squeezed her shoulder. She looked back at him and winked. "Always trying to cop a feel, eh Rizwell? Guess you earned that one."

It was the last time she would speak to him.

### Chapter 43 - Brothers In Arms

Reynold Lutz could see things were not going according to plan: Salty had just been shot and now Farley and Noodles were having their rights read to them.

*Who the diddley-squat knew what the plan was anyway?*

One thing was for sure, he wasn't going to make his 'breakfast meeting' with Pop Butcher.

*Man! Why doesn't he have his bloody meetings during business hours like normal business people? Instead, he comes back from Japan and every thing's about the Art of War. Who needs war with their orange juice? Well Mr. Butcher can have all the war he wants; it's a freaking battlefield here!*

*Better call him.*

Lutz flipped open his cell and said "Dial Pop." His cellphone recognized the command and dialled Pop Butcher's private number. It rang twice.

"Lutz," Butcher's voice carried an enormous freight of disgust, "why aren't you here?"

Lutz cleared his throat. "I'm sorry Mr. Butcher; it's why I was calling. I'm going to be late; things are not going well here...." Pink was putting cuffs on Farley.

"You're already late, Lutz - what I want to know is why?"

"I'm at Zena's studio; some of your fellas are here. There's been a shooting. One of them is dead, I think..."

"What do you mean 'you think'?"

Lutz watched while Pink tried to coax Noodles into putting Salty down. Noodles wouldn't budge. His face was an empty slab; only the dry track of a tear recorded his grief as it trailed down his cheek and into his all-day five o'clock shadow. Salty's body remained firmly cradled in his arms.

Pink turned and explained to Grey that she didn't think Noodles would be a problem. It would be better to let him carry Salty out, or at least hold on to him until the paramedics arrived.

Grey was busy; Zena and her boyfriend were yammering at him in both ears; he nodded at Pink. Dan was distracted from Noodles by Clams, who was debating some procedure; Dan was shaking his head. Both had holstered their weapons. Noodles was standing alone holding up his burden of grief.

"Lutz? Answer me, Lutz," ordered Butcher, but Lutz wasn't listening. He was watching in horror as Noodles hitched Salty's body up to get a better grip, unfolded one arm and produced the bright yellow Taser, which Salty had dropped, pointed at Grey and fired.

"NO!" Lutz screamed.

#### Chapter 44 - Tasing

Two tethered stainless steel bolts, with barbed tips, flew at Grey like angry hornets. The upper bolt hit him squarely in his angina ridden heart, burying itself in his Kevlar vest and piercing both his dress shirt and his T-shirt. The medical examiner would later note a slight scratch on his skin from the tip of the barb. The lower bolt dropped eight inches, embedding itself in Grey's abdomen and making a perfect hit. With both poles firmly grounded in Grey, the electric circuit was closed and 18 watts of surging power haloed his nervous system.

Arching his back, he let out a bloodcurdling scream and fell to the floor, kicking his feet and smashing the back of his head and shoulders as if he was running for his life. The man was being tortured to death. Slowly his muscles began to contract and he rolled onto his side, curling up into a foetal position.

Noodles stood over him with his finger on the trigger, delivering cycle after cycle of current to the attached electrodes. It was at this

point Lutz threw down his cellphone and ran to help Grey, shouting, "NO! Noodles, stop!"

Pink swung around thumbing the snap on an empty holster. The instrument was in Noodle's hands, of course. She grabbed the nearest object - a floor lamp - and yanked it off the floor, its cord came free and the room dimmed. She launched herself at Noodles swinging the heavy globe at his head. It smashed into his skull spraying glass into the air and he stumbled slightly, but continued firing.

"Drop it!" ordered Dan and Clams in unison, pulling out their guns. But still he held onto Salty and continued to pump the trigger of the Taser.

Lutz managed to pull the lead ends from the muzzle, stopping the flow of current into the now dead, and somehow peaceful, form of Grey. Lutz stepped back from Noodles and his grisly burden. Blood trailed down his neck from a gash in his ear and mingled with the blood on Salty's upturned non-face. Glass shards from the lamp covered them both. Noodle's eyes blinked slowly in time with each click of the trigger, but remained focussed on Grey's still body.

What to do with him?

#### Chapter 45 - In Each of Us

In Noodle's mind, it was a cold rainy day. He was twelve years old again and standing in a school yard surrounded by other children – they didn't call him Noodles though, they called him Chubby Chinky. He didn't want to be the oddball/hero, he was only protecting his little friend, Freddy. But Freddy was in pretty bad shape and Noodles had to keep his foot on this kid's throat, otherwise he would get up and start in on Freddy again. Freddy couldn't handle anymore. He was lying in a heap, not moving; hadn't moved since Noodles came out for recess and saw the kid hit him with a huge rock. Just snuck up behind him and smacked him as hard as he could. Now the kid was much better behaved. Except he wasn't breathing. Then Noodles saw himself do a strange thing: He lifted the kid off the wet ground, tossed him over his shoulder, and ran to the nearest tree. It was a huge cedar that had been left to grace the front of the school building. Up he climbed into the boughs and settled down on a thick branch. He shrugged his

shoulder and dropped the kid so that he was slumped across the branch. He put one muddy foot on his back. This was his prey which he would guard and feast on in time.

Freddy came and stood on the ground beneath the tree and looked up at him in adoration. The authorities came much later.

#### Chapter 46 - A Knack

"There's no getting through to him," Danny told Pink, referring to Noodles. "The lights are on, but no one's home." Danny's spirits were in the tank. "What do you want to do, Ruth? It's your call."

"I want to sit down and have a good cry, is what I want," replied Pink. "No. I want Gerry back, but I won't get that."

"I hear you," said Danny.

The paramedics had arrived and hauled Grey's body away to the morgue. They wanted to get a look at Salty, but every time they tried to pry Noodles' arms loose, he would growl and swing Salty out of their reach. They wanted Pink to return to the hospital with them for a stress evaluation, but there was no way she was leaving the scene without the 'bozos'.

"If he takes one more swing at me, I swear I'm going to pop him," Clams said as he dodged Salty's limp shit-kickers, which flew by his head, as Noodles swung Salty away protectively. Clams was furious

at himself for becoming distracted at a crucial time when his primary job was to provide backup for Rizwell and Evans. As far as he was concerned, he'd fucked up. "Get this over with, Evans. Use your prerogative and *Tase* him!"

She'd seen the results of that and wasn't going there again if she could help it. Farley stood by with a glum face, watching; his hands cuffed behind his back. "Farley," Pink said, "talk to him, please!"

"The fuck you expect me to do? Talk to him like he's a child or a weirdo? Kitchy, kitchy, koo. Pappa says put the body down like a good boy? Give me a break!"

Zena emerged from performing host duties as paramedics and guests came and went. "I believe I have a solution," she said. "Do we know what his name is? Anything about his family?"

"Yeah. His name is Garth Daliwal and his mom's name is Naomi," said Farley. "They came over from New Delhi in the eighties. She used to have us over for dinner and talked a lot, back in the day."

"Give me a minute then," Zena said.

She disappeared into an office deep in the apartment. After several minutes she returned and walked over and faced Noodles.

"Garth Daliwal. Your sister is dying of breast cancer in New Delhi. What are you doing here carrying a dead man in your arms? Your father and younger brother have been arrested for crimes they did not commit. What are you doing here carrying a dead man in your arms, when you could be using your strength to bring them justice. Your sweetheart is pining away for you and she is wondering when you will ever propose marriage. She has many demands from her parents that she consider two other suitors. What are you doing, I ask you? Why are you carrying a dead man in your arms when you could be

using them to wrap her in love and tenderness?"

They waited.

There was a spark of life and Noodle's dull eyes shot wide open. He looked down and saw he was indeed carrying a dead man in his arms – he grimaced and suddenly dropped Salty, whose head cracked against the hardwood floor. Pink, Danny, and Clams surrounded Noodles quickly and put handcuffs on him. They led him to the elevator.

"Will the police officer be okay?" Noodles asked. "Please tell me he will be all right. Yes, he will. Won't he?"

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"You used it, didn't you?" asked Niro. He'd been staying well away from the action, keeping himself out of harm's way, as actors will do when they realize the scene needs a stuntman. Now he was feeling quite chipper. It looked like the police had forgotten about both him and Diamond. Lutz and the rest of the crew had left too. It was just him and Zena, and he was pretty sure she had taken the few minutes in her office to do a little data-mining with a mysterious machine he was sure her father had left her.

"You're not supposed to know about that," she deadpanned.

"What do you mean?" Niro asked, offended.

"You're an actor - what do actors know about Google?"

Zena had a knack of seeming to read people's minds. Niro knew for certain it was a talent of imitation rather than one of prescience – he had tested her, in his own way - and he was pretty sure she was faking it.

"All I know is you have a piece of equipment that should be registered with the FBI," Niro told her.

"It's a Macbook. Anyway, this is Canada, Niro; we don't have an FBI - you mean CSIS, and I think they already have one, or maybe a PC." She sat down on the couch and put her head in her hands; she was exhausted and on the verge of meltdown.

She restrained herself, refused to think of Grandma, but the tears were not far. She had said her good-byes to Perry and knew she'd be seeing him soon; still she felt like calling him.

Niro broke in, "Where do you think Diamond is?" He didn't wait for an answer. "God, I'm tired. I can't go on today, not without some sleep first. I'm gonna just curl up here on your couch.... Get a little shuteye."

"You can sleep for an hour and then you have to get prepared. I'll get the blankets." When Zena came back with the bedding, Niro was snoring softly; his face had the innocent look of a sleeping child.

Too bad it doesn't last, she thought.

## Chapter 47 - Rabbit Ears

On the street, Pink watched Noodles and Farley climb into the paddy wagon looking unperturbed. The uniforms locked up and drove the van away at a sedate pace with no siren. She watched until it disappeared into the grey dawn without a trace. Despite appearances, the bad guys were getting away.

Danny stood with her; he put his hand on her shoulder and said with a sad thrust of his chin, "Evans, I'm sorry!"

"Yeah, I know," she said and shrugged off the hand. Neither knew what to say for a moment. Danny looked over at their unmarked police car in which Clams sat, deep in despair, very clam-like.

"Got any use for this?" Danny asked. "Clams picked it up after the ruckus. It belongs to Lutz. Clams was trying to get close enough to find out who he was talking to and ... well, that's when all hell broke loose." He handed her the cellphone that Lutz dropped when he rushed to stop Noodles from frying Grey with the Taser.

"Maybe ... thanks!"

"What are you going to do - about Grey?"

"He was putting a case together; he tied those bikers and their boss into some weird conspiracy with the Minister and his wife and that woman in the loft. I'm going to close it."

"So, you want to go back up there and roust the woman and the Minister?"

"No - I'm after bigger game."

"Pop Butcher?" he asked; she nodded. "How are you going to pin this on him? Do you even know where to find him?"

"Jerry always said: 'You want to find the perpetrators, follow the money. And in lieu of money, follow the lawyers.'"

Danny gave an appreciative whistle, in a surprisingly rich tone. "Not bad!"

"Yup," Pink agreed. "And I think you've handed me the key to doing just that, following the lawyer." She held up the cellphone, "This'll tell me who he's been talking to. I'll just bet it was with ... hang on a sec." She fiddled with the phone. "Hmm, it keeps asking me to 'voice authorize.'"

"Let me see that," said Danny. She handed him the phone, and he cleared his throat and said in a passable imitation of Lutz: "This is Reynold Lutz. *All your base are belong to us!*" The cellphone burbled in acknowledgement and he handed it back to her with a small smile of satisfaction saying, "There you go, Evans, have at 'er."

"Hey - I'm impressed!" she marvelled.

"Just a lucky guess the voice recognition software wasn't trained on proper English grammar," he said. "Also, it's nice to know you can still baffle a machine with bullshit."

"Definitely," Pink agreed. "Now let's see what we have here." She resumed fiddling... "Yep, his last call was to Pop Butcher!"

"Okay, but how are you going to locate him now?"

"He was griping to Grey about missing an early appointment, and my guess is it was with Butcher. He's with him now, no doubt. I want to be in on that conversation." She looked towards the car with Clams behind the wheel, angrily chewing on a fingernail.

"All right, give me the cell," said Danny, "I'll talk to Clams; see what we can come up with. A remote listening post would be ideal."

"That's what I was thinking," said Pink.

"Then you're going to need some rabbit ears," Danny said, climbing into the car. "We'll get on it."

"Thanks again, Danny."

"No problem, Ruth."

Pink walked to her own car to check in with dispatch; she noticed Grey's homeless man's costume lying forgotten on the back seat and suddenly felt a wave of fury sweep over her.

*Yep - big fucking rabbit ears - and we'll be hiding in the weeds recording every fart those assholes make!*

Chapter 48 - Moot

Clams had all the gear in place within an amazingly short span of time. He, Danny, and two uniform operators were packed in with an array of listening devices, inside a converted CTV remote production truck, and parked on a busy street, clogged with construction cranes and traffic in the gentrified section of Vancouver's downtown east-side, outside of Pop Butcher's offices. Amplifiers had been placed, and a large dish on the roof oscillated back and forth like a March Hare cocking its ear, listening for 'tea-time'.

"It's quiet as a church on Saturday in there," complained Clams.

"Yeah, I don't understand it," agreed Danny, pulling on his chin, "Lutz has to be in there. That's his BMW parked on the expired meter up the street."

"Someone should go in. We need visuals," said Clams.

"Okay. Roberts can do it," Danny said, and one of the uniforms popped up his head.

"Wait - " said Clams, his hand up, "the phone's ringing. I'm putting it on speaker." He pressed a button on the board and the echoey sound of a vintage telephone bell filled the truck.

After several rings, a man's voice was heard giving a blunt directive, "Leave a message," followed by a click.

"Shit! There's nobody in there," exclaimed Clams.

Chapter 49 - Lair in the Air

Lutz was trembling with fear; this man was a maniac. They were flying relatively low for a Gulfstream, a few thousand feet above sea level. Just a quick jaunt over to the Island, he'd been told. *It won't take a minute.* Now he was sitting in the dining cabin, watching while the man tore off the heads of live quail and drank their blood.

Pop Butcher reached into a large straw-filled wicker cage, with a grubby red hand, and extracted a struggling bird, changed his mind, put it back. Tied around his neck was a long white bib, speckled with red dots. Pigeon feathers, floated in the air; one or two rested in his greasy black hair.

"You agree to be at a meeting, you should come on time. You're missing a feast; they taught me about this delicacy in Tokyo; but you don't come on time, you don't get to dine!" He cocked his head and admired himself. "I want you to know we're ramping things up with the Randal Liddle deal. He's not a reasonable fellow - I talked to him - he

wouldn't listen. The woman, Zena, too. I paid her so much money and she screwed this up totally. I hold her personally responsible. If it wasn't for her incompetence, my guys never would have been at her place and Salty never would have been killed; Farley and Noodles never would have been arrested. They'll be coming for me next and it's her fault!"

"But they don't have anything on you, Mr. Butcher. Unless they can tie you to Bruce Styles' death, and I don't see how they can do that. Your entire 'campaign' has been a model of good management and careful planning," Lutz placated.

"Yeah, I'm careful all right; it was a master stroke manipulating his wife into staging a suicide. I should have set her up with a stomach full of barbiturates though, instead of listening to you. She better not turn out to be a loose end. I look after my loose ends, Lutz, and that woman Zena, is not going to have any legs to break the next time she tries to put on one of her plays."

*How did I get mixed up with this monster?* Lutz was wracked with guilt as Butcher recited their recent history. *How could I sink so low?* He thought his influence would turn Butcher from, well, a butcher into a business man; it had been his idea that Pop take the trip to Japan, but the change was short lived. It was a case of the leopard and his spots, Lutz figured. Time to cut himself loose.

"I'm plan-ning on a trip of my own soon," Lutz began.

"Oh real-ly, some place exotic?"

"China, actually. They're emerging as a world power, but why am I telling you. You've already been, haven't you?"

"Nnot yet, but I will ... probably next year." Butcher got up and stretched. Picked up his fork and began cleaning it on the tail of his

long bib. He wandered across the dining room and sat down beside Lutz, gazing out the cabin window. "So when are you thinking of going?"

"Umm, very soon. I'll be leaving next week."

"Will you be gone long?"

"Two or three months, I expect."

"Well, don't *fork-et* to write!" Butcher laughed, and with that, buried his fork in Lutz's windpipe. Lutz gasped and struggled, but Butcher pinned him against the cabin wall, holding his arms down, while he gagged on the blood gushing into his throat.

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Minutes later, a body could be seen falling from the sky and splashing into the, cold, dark green waters of Georgia Strait.

## Chapter 50 - Show Time

In his mind, Niro was flying solo. He had scant information about the dignitaries attending the event and the confederates in the crowd - he knew that Zena had enlisted several young, new, actors, and he should be prepared for anything, but he was on his own as far as interacting with the target went. He imagined the street people - the vendors, the shop owners, the pan handlers, the squeegee kids, the hookers, and the users - all playing a part in this grand play from their own little piece of pavement.

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The mayor and his wife had just finished addressing the crowd and were starting to mingle. It was a ripe spring day and they were wearing light summer clothes and sandals, which was odd dress for most folks in the downtown east-side anytime of year; so, in the awkward way of politicians, they stood out. Niro was overdressed in an expensive black business suit, well wrinkled and smelling of Canadian

Club, which he'd slapped on like aftershave. It was good and true that all eyes be upon him.

He decided to start with the obvious. In a loud obnoxious voice, he said, "Excuse me, Mr. Mayor - you may remember me - I'm Randal Liddle, MLA from Shaugnessy South. May I say, you and your wife look awfully spiffy! Are you planning on some yachting later this afternoon?"

"Oh. Hello Minister Liddle," replied the mayor. "Glad you could drop by today; we're happy to see our provincial leaders taking an interest in things at the municipal level."

"Of course we take an interest," enunciated Niro, "we've got to keep up appearances. Speaking of which, I must say your wife is looking damn fine! I wish mine had kept her looks as well as yours. Do you mind if I introduce myself?" He staggered toward them.

"Actually, we have quite a few people to thank for coming here today -"

"Well, you just go ahead, I'll bring your wife along - whassamatter, you don't trust me with your beautiful wife? Does she remind you of your secretary? Not a bit, right?" Niro gave him a wolfish grin and walked up to his wife and began to introduce himself, going for the two-timing lecher and nailing it.

"Well hello there! I don't believe we've met. Such a pity - god, you're gorgeous!"

"I'm also happily married Mr. Liddle," said the mayor's wife, "and no, we haven't met, but I've heard good things about you."

"Every one of them is a lie," Niro retorted, smiling an evil grin. People were milling about; the mayor had been intercepted by some reporters. Niro moved closer.

"No," she defended, backing up, "I've heard you're quite active in the fight to protect people's right to privacy."

"Yes, it's an interest - but not as interesting as getting some private time with you," he whispered, "We could play Hide, and go seek. Why don't we meet up tonight? I'll bring the pharmaceuticals." He leaned forward and stroked her thigh. She pushed him away with a gasp. "Come on, you know you want it!" Niro panted.

He weaved towards her and she dodged him. The mayor was standing directly behind her and put his arms out for his wife, but he wasn't needed. She slapped Niro across the face, and he yelled in surprise.

"Behave yourself! Think of your poor wife," she said.

"I think you should leave, sir," the mayor told him. Security guards had caught up with them and were forming a menacing wall.

Niro retorted, "This is a public space and I'll leave when I'm damn good and ready, you phoney! The things I know about you - I could ruin you! And your wife! I should lay charges!"

Suddenly, from different locations in the crowd, eggs flew in and exploded on Niro's back and head, followed by angry accusations from what was reported to be 'disruptive youth.'

First Mick called out, "Drunk drivers don't belong in office!"

Then Judd shouted, "Killers belong in jail!"

Finally Timmy screamed, "Jimmy Roberts did not deserve to die!" Immediately others in the crowd took up the rally cry and hurled their own invective. The security guards fanned out ready for trouble. The boys slipped away into the throng.

Niro swayed proudly, in his moment of glory, with egg dripping down his face and the back of his expensive black suit. The mayor

shook his head with condescending weariness and said, "I'll see if we can find you a towel, minister" and, with his arm around his wife, turned away in disgust, only to be presented with a whole new ball game.

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Few people noticed the unmarked police car, taxi, and black SUV Stretch Limo pull up in a line at the curb. Randal and a large man, wearing a pony tail and a Hell's Angels jacket, got out of the limo and strode to the centre of the crowd, excusing themselves as they passed. The crowd parted willingly. The pony tail man stepped forward and introduced himself.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Liddle. Your Honour, I'm Pop Butcher, the chief of operations for the Hell's Angels B.C. chapter."

"What are you doing here?" asked the mayor.

"I have a few fences to mend, sir," he replied. "First, I'd like to commend you on your efforts with the Four Pillars Drug Strategy. I want you to know I wholeheartedly believe in what you are doing to reduce harm, by introducing these safe injection sites." He paused and there was a smattering of applause, which he and Randal joined in. "And I want to go on record with a formal apology on behalf of my organization for anything we have done - and it's been plenty - to create this problem, and profit from it. I'm hereby committing two million dollars to opening another safe injection site!"

The crowd began to applaud in earnest, but he waved his hands.

"Please, this is a problem my organization has helped to create; we don't deserve your thanks or gratitude. Only your forgiveness."

But this only got the crowd more enthused and they began cheering. Pony-tail continued, "Finally, I wish to set the record

straight. This person here," he pointed at Niro, "is an impostor. He's the phoney! Here's the real Randal Liddle, and he's a true champion in the fight to protect your rights to privacy and ensure the security of your personal information."

This was starting to sound like so much BS, but the people let him finish, "The reports of irresponsible and drunken behaviour over the weekend concern the phoney; not Mr. Liddle. Now I'll let him speak - if that's okay, your Honour?" Pop Butcher asked, addressing the mayor.

"Of course, we were expecting him. Welcome Randal - you never fail to surprise!" The mayor and Randal embraced like old friends. "I don't think you need an introduction, but just let me ... Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Minister Randal Liddle."

This really got the crowd's bullshit meter pinging, and they responded with only polite applause.

"Thank you, Mayor. Folks, I won't take much more of your time; this event is too important to side-track with other agendas." As Randal spoke, and the reporters pushed in with their microphones and cameras, Pink, escorted by Danny and Clams, quietly came up and put handcuffs on Pop Butcher.

"We're arresting you on conspiracy charges and gansterism," said Pink. "Read him his rights." Danny began rattling off Butcher's Miranda rights in sonorous tones and Pink muttered to Clam's under her breath, "It's a shame you guys couldn't find the real Butcher. I sure hope this pays off!"

As they were doing this, Zena emerged from the crowd behind Niro and whispered in his ear, "Time to make an exit, Cowboy. Stage Left. Or they'll have you next."

"I'm confused - isn't that Raphael?"

"I'll explain in the car, let's go." They melted into the crowd and came out by the limo; a taxi was parked behind it. Not far away, Benny and Connie were standing, listening to Randal's speech. Benny nudged Connie, and they watched Zena and Niro climb into the vehicle.

"That must be MsYou, and Randal's trouble-making impersonator. They're so lucky the police aren't all over them." said Benny.

"Well, since Randal's not pressing charges, there's not much they can do," said Connie.

"Yeah, small potatoes, seeing's how they don't have the woman who was doing the driving. Maybe it's for the best. I can't imagine what good it would do to drag her into court."

"She's lucky to have someone so compassionate worrying about her," Connie said and kissed his ear.

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Niro opened the luxury passenger door of the Stretch for Zena and then climbed into the driver's seat. "That was the real Randal Liddle, right?" Niro asked.

"Right, but not the real Pop Butcher," Zena said.

"Ah, it *was* Raphael! But why'd he clear Liddle's name - and *expose me?*"

"I'm sorry, DeNiro. It was part of the deal I worked out with the partner of the cop who got Tasered this morning; and with Randal Liddle, late last night."

"You have been busy," he said with a withering look.

"I didn't have much of a choice, actually. Butcher was leaning

pretty hard on us.... Anyway, he's disappeared, along with Lutz, and this seemed like good insurance to prevent him from reappearing like some psycho in a bad movie sequel."

"Fair enough," Niro let it go. "So, we've lost the game?"

"Well, no. As a matter of fact, when Liddle talked me into putting Butcher into play, I registered a second entry in the Shame Game. A little late, but it was accepted. With all the media here, I'd say it's playing well. I have a feeling we're going to come out pretty fine in the standings." She smiled, but she looked tired.

"I'm sorry about your grandma," said Niro.

"So am I." Zena sighed. "I've got to go up there and look after things. I'm not looking forward to it."

"Maybe Perry would be interested in taking a trip," Niro suggested. Zena smiled, and this time it reached her eyes.

A reporter, who followed them over, walked up to the limo and tapped on the driver's window; Niro lowered it. "Yes?"

"Excuse me for bothering you, I'm from the CBC. I just heard some statements at the mayor's ceremony that sounded pretty remarkable. They claim you were impersonating Randal Liddle. So I wanted to ask you: Are you one of these fabled players in the Internet Shame Game?" He pushed his microphone into the cab, closer to Niro's mouth.

Niro cleared his throat ... not sure where to go with this.

"Niro," Zena warned. "This would type-cast you forever. The doom of many a career. Think about it."

"I'll give you an exclusive," said the reporter.

"Tempting," said Niro.

The End.