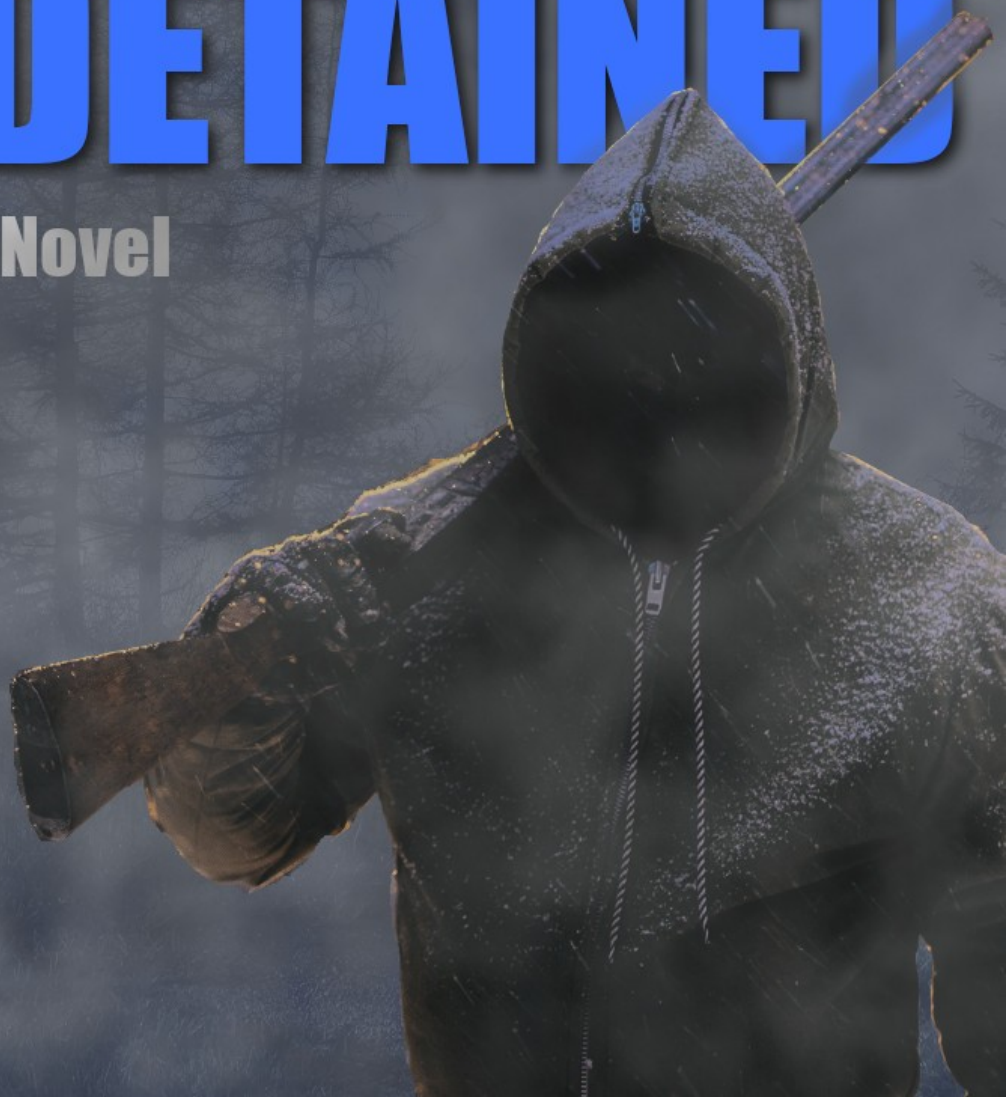


**JEFF SOMERS**

# **DETAINED**

**A Novel**



# DETAINED

a Novel

by Jeff Somers

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## Author's Note

SO, as with most things my exact line of thought that led to posting a novel chapter-by-chapter over the course of (most of) a year is lost to time. I can barely remember my own name, so what I was thinking in December 2020 will forever be a mystery.

I know I was definitely thinking about ways to populate my wee blog with fresh content that did not involve me ... writing fresh content. Because all I do is write fresh content for other people every day, so writing *moar* fresh content wasn't attractive.

On the other hand, I have written like 40 novels and only managed to sell 10 of them, so I've got some spare content lying around. While I think several of these novels are very good, market forces tell me I'll probably never publish them traditionally. Instead of just plopping them onto online platforms for a dollar, why not post them on the wee blog!

People seemed to like it. *Detained* was originally written in March of 2016. When I told my agent the plot summary, she responded with "Well, that's sounds interesting as long as it doesn't end with xxx." Of course, the original draft *absolutely* ended with xxx.

So I rewrote it. And changed the core premise almost entirely, and liked the new version much better. I'm very happy I found a way to get this book out into the world, and if you followed along for 47 weeks this year, thanks for your support. If you waited for this omnibus edition, thanks for checking it out now! I hope you enjoy it.

Jeff

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## **Part One**

## 1. Candace

She heard her father's voice, warm and amused. *You'll figure out, sweetheart. In due time.*

She blew the hair out of her face and smirked to herself as she collected tumblers with the watery remnants of cocktails swirling at their bottoms. She had the round metal tray balanced perfectly as she took the not-entirely-clean rag from the back pocket of her jeans and wiped down the wobbly little table. She straightened up and reflected for a moment on the futility of cleaning anything in Mad One Jack's, then turned to carry the empties to the bar.

Her father: Three years gone and she could still hear him, sometimes, like he was right there. Always with the warm, useless advice he'd always offered: Supportive, cheerful, essentially empty. When she'd come to him after the Jimmy Hagen incident at Prom, crying, humiliated, certain life was over, he'd soothed her and given her a beer from the fridge with a delightful sense of somber rule-breaking, and he'd told her that *these things happen*. When she'd agonized over going to college, uncertain she had the grit to leave home and go off on her own, he'd bought her ice cream and told her she *had a good head on her shoulders*. When she'd cried after he'd told her about his diagnosis, he'd patted her back and said *you'll be okay*.

That was Mr. Cuddyer, hunter, Master Plumber, her father:

Soothing, content-free. And now, gone. Along with anything keeping her in town; she thought of the brush and the paints, the books. She thought of art school, all those brochures from ten years before. She'd been thinking about a lot of things, but it had all been thinking. No *doing*.

She dropped the tray on the bar and walked around to collect them, loading them into the plastic washer tray. Someone had left a damp dollar bill on the bar, so she peeled it up, flattened it out, and pushed it into her pocket. She looked around the place, her employment for five years now. She'd been able to convince herself she was still young when she'd been twenty-six, lying to Jack McCoy about having waitressing experience—which, since everybody around here knew everybody else, he knew perfectly well to be a web of deceit—but now she felt old. And she felt the gravity of the place sucking at her feet. Pretty soon she wouldn't be the hot waitress all the self-described Mountain Men, Big Game Hunters, and Ladies Men hit on. She'd be the old biddy who all the boys liked because she gave as good as she got.

That was another of her dad's phrases: *Gave as good as she got*. He applied it to any woman he found challenging, which was all of them.

The place was dead. There was nothing special about the date: Just another Wednesday in a long string of them, some not even landing on actual Wednesdays, because *Wednesday* was a concept, a mood.



Three customers, the same Duane Eddy song on the juke, Jack at the other end of the bar chewing the fat with Jimmy Hagen himself, who could generally be found at Mad One Jack's most nights, haunting her and reminding her that leaving her on prom night for Sarah Mulligan had been a lucky break, not a heartbreak.

He was the only one at the bar. Seated at one of the other tables was Glen Eastman, wearing his usual fishing vest and cap, tinted glasses, and khakis. None of it meant anything. Glen dressed exactly like that every day, and she didn't think he'd ever been fishing once. He was reading, of course, because Glen was always reading, and spent most of his evening nursing exactly two martinis, extra dirty, extra olives, while poring over a book, though she knew it was possible to entice him to put the book down and to have a third drink with conversation, assuming you were prepared to hear a lecture about the constitution and how the government was out of control, which was Mr. Eastman's version of conversation in his retirement. His white hair grew in tight curls, and the white had invaded his beard recently, making him look even more like a retired schoolteacher than usual, though he'd actually been the PE teacher, football coach when there'd been enough kids for a team, and local marathoner.

She eyed his expanding belly. Glen didn't look much like a runner any more.

Town, such as it was, amounted to a few buildings on either side of the highway—a post office, a school, city hall, the Londoner Motel, a feed store and Hallie’s Diner—and the scattered and largely remote homes in the woods. And, of course, Mad One’s, positioned off a dirt track in such a way as to be inconvenient for everyone to get to. It was still successful, by local standards, because it was still the only place to get a drink within twenty miles.

The other patron she didn’t know. Which also wasn’t unusual. They got their fair share of hikers and hunters, some folks pounding down the trails to see the local fauna, some folks coming to hunt Elk. Or drink beer and pretend to hunt Elk, which is what patron number three looked like: A round, balding man with metal-rim glasses, working on one of Jack’s rubbery chicken-fried steaks and his third Jim Beam in Coke, which Candace considered a girl’s drink. He was dressed in hunting gear, and she figured him for one of the tourists that found themselves, sadly, in Mad One Jack’s on a regular basis, usually because their Guide or travel agent had recommended the place as “local color.”

His drink was empty, so she walked over to him, wondering if she’d remembered to charge her phone before her shift. If she hadn’t, and the place emptied out, it would just be her and Jack’s ancient 56k modem in the office in the back for entertainment. Cable didn’t reach out there, and Jack was too cheap and too disdainful of technology to

spring for a satellite connection.

“How we doin’ over here?” she asked, smiling. Thousands of Wednesdays just like this one had shown her that smiling and a slightly exaggerated accent improved her tips by at least 50%. “Can I freshen you up?”

He looked up at her, chewing, grease gleaming on his lips. “Sure can, darling,” he said, picking up his glass and holding it out to her.

She took the glass and smiled, relieved, at least, that he wasn’t a groper or a flirter. While she told herself she believed in true love and instant attraction, she hadn’t experienced either yet, and preferred to concentrate on busing tables and delivering drink orders.

At the bar, Jack McCoy noted her presence at the waitress station and said something to Jimmy, who cackled.

“Jim and coke,” she said.

Jack busied himself. He was a stocky, gray-haired man, powerfully built, but he moved stiffly. He’d owned the bar when she’d been a kid, and had once been Mayor of the town. Which wasn’t much of an accomplishment, as election required exactly thirty-four votes and a group of older residents had passed the job back and forth for as long as Candace could remember.

“What’s Jimmy got to say about himself tonight?” she asked, and then regretted it, regretted being so transparent.

“You know,” Jack said, laughing as he slid the drink towards her, a

generous pour. “The translation is that he’s the smartest guy in the room because he doesn’t have a job and never has.”

She sighed, thinking of the near miss. Part of the tragedy of that night thirteen years ago had been her intention to sleep with Jimmy, without protection, making him her first. The girl who’d fever-dreamed *that* plan was a stranger to her, now, and she was happy for that. She now regarded his betrayal of her as the Immaculate Non-Conception, a miracle that spared her from James Haggan, who lived by hunting and various scams, mostly benign in nature, and lived in a shithole house in the middle of nowhere without power or running water, unless his propane generator and the rainwater collection system he’d rigged up counted. Which, she thought, it certainly did not.

He *was* a good hunter, she thought. He got hired sometimes by the tourists, and he knew the country like no one else. Which was funny, because he was—and had always been—a huge nerd, the kid who spent his free time in the sad, run-down computer lab at school, the kind of kid who cracked video games for fun and who routinely broke into the school’s servers. If Jimmy hadn’t gone total Survivalist, living with four hours of electricity every night from his solar panels, he might have been one of those App Millionaires. As it was, she wouldn’t have starved, her and her sixteen babies, had her plan for a First Time come off, but there would have been no episodes of *The*

*Bachelor.*

As she carried the drink back to Bald Man with Glasses, she took the place in. Mad One Jack's had been a bar in the woods long before Jack. It had been Lowell's before him and The Locker before that. It was wood on wood on wood, with ancient road signs and random posters from various eras on the walls. It was ice in the trough-like urinals in the men's room and a women's room that had once been a closet, back before the 1970s, and was now a toilet where your knees touched the door when you sat down. The jukebox was a time machine, and while she hadn't exactly hated her time working there, she suddenly knew it was time for a change. Like her Dad had said, she'd figured it out: It didn't matter what she did. She had to leave right away, that night. She had to give notice, collect her pay, and get into her rickety old Trailblazer with the hole in the floor, put on some Violent Femmes, and head south. Or north. Or East or West or Up or Down. Anywhere.

Feeling suddenly lighthearted, she placed the drink next to Balding Man with Glasses' plate. He beamed at her.

"Thank you, darling!"

She might have bristled at the toothless sexism, but instead she just smiled, and even gave him a little extra hip as she walked away. She was leaving. Nothing else mattered any more.

She tallied everything up in her head. She had five hundred and

sixteen dollars in aggregated tips at home. Jack owed her about two hundred in wages. She had fifteen in tips from the shift, the cheap bastards. The Trailblazer, which had been her Dad's, had three-quarters of a tank. She could pack just the essentials in fifteen minutes and be on her way, figure everything else out on the road, listening to *Blister in the Sun* on repeat, a song she'd once danced to in her bedroom, flipping an imaginary finger at the world.

She had a high school diploma, she was thirty-one years old, and her only skill—if you could call it that—was waitressing.

She was excited.

The front door opened just as the song ended. In the brief moment of silence before the next song, a man walked in, peeling off his gloves and looking around. And she thought, *goddammit, no! Don't send in someone interesting now.*

## 2. Mike

When he'd passed the prison-like office park a few miles back, he'd worried that he'd been steered wrong, but the place was perfect. It was exactly what he'd asked for: Hyper-local, off the beaten path. The faded sign outside read MAD ONE JACK'S: Food | Liquor | Live Music and the place looked like it had been carved out of the trees a million years ago. He steered the rented Land Rover into a spot and shut the engine off.

He could hear music from inside: He recognized the twangy guitar riff, but couldn't place it. He felt tired. A Scotch, a burger, and some local color was exactly what the doctor ordered.

Entering, he felt awkward for a moment. The place was *dead*. Four, five people, including the bartender, who didn't look friendly, and the waitress, who did. She smiled at him, and he felt better, walking up to the bar and dropping his bag into one seat as he climbed into the one next to it. *You need this*, he said to himself. *Six months without human contact is too long. Have a conversation.*

For a split second, guilt flooded him. He saw her, on the floor, surrounded by trash. Her posture: She'd been crawling.

He shook his head and covered his momentary confusion by reaching for his wallet. He pulled out the black card without thinking and tossed it on the bar, and instantly regretted it.

The waitress' eyes flickered to the card, hovered for a moment, then came back to him. "What can I get you?"

He was relieved to see the hint of a smile. She was pretty, he thought. Maybe even beautiful if you scraped off the long shift and did something with her hair. And the smile was pure gold, a natural wonder. He felt like an asshole throwing around his unlimited card, but it hadn't been intentional, and she didn't look impressed.

"You have anything that could legally be called *Scotch*?" he said.

Her smile expanded incrementally. "Ooh, top shelf. I'll alert the media."

She spun away. He watched her walk the length of the bar and circle around behind it, wave off the bartender, and pull out a small step ladder from an unseen nook next to the fridge filled with bottled beer.

Movement out of the corner of his eye made him turn his head. An old-fashioned Dipping Bird, the glass toys that dipped their beaks into a glass for hours and hours at a time sat on the bar. It had a pelt of dust on it, so it appeared to hold a place of honor, and it made Mike happy. If this was the sort of place, he thought, that had a silly little tradition like an old-school Dipping Bird that got reset whenever it stopped dipping, then it was run by people with a sense of humor.

The waitress unfolded the ladder and climbed up to reach the



literal top shelf, where two dusty bottles sat. He smiled as she climbed down, spun pertly, and presented the bottle to him. When he looked down, his smile froze and he almost choked.

He looked back at her. "Is this a joke?"

Her grin finally took over her face, pushing her over the line into beautiful. "Is what a joke?"

He glanced at the bottle again. "That's a 1955 Glenfarclas."

"Yup."

"That bottle's worth ten grand."

"Yup."

He laughed. He couldn't help it. He'd come in to force himself to socialize, and he'd seen himself making awkward conversation, being trapped by some blowhard local. Instead he had a nearly empty bar being blown away by a beautiful waitress who was mocking him.

He nodded. "Okay. A double. Neat."

She nodded as if ordering \$500 worth of whiskey was a normal, everyday occurrence for her in her local bar. She picked up his card. "Open a tab?"

She was still smiling at him, so he laughed again. "Yes!"

He watched her walk towards the work station with the bottle. Movement in his peripheral vision made him jump. He turned to find the bartender standing there, holding out a hand.

"Jack McCoy," he said. "Owner. Nice to meet you, Mr. —?"

He shook the man's hand, which was like a shovel enveloping his own, huge and calloused. McCoy wasn't big—he was no taller than himself—but he was *dense*. He was muscular and powerful and his grip said he would be capable of tearing phone books in half, if anyone still used phone books.

“Malloy,” he said. “Call me Mike. Great place you have here.”

McCoy nodded. “Thanks. You doin’ some hunting?”

Mike shook his head. “Passing through. Gonna climb the mountain, but just take in the local color, mainly.”

McCoy nodded as if this was a common response he'd heard dozens of times. *The Mountain* was a local name for a glorified hill that offered decent-to-great views of the area. It was something to do.

Mike leaned in slightly. “So, how'd you come by a Scotch like that?”

Jack gestured at the bar in general. “It was here when I bought the place, if you can believe it. Old Henry Wallace used to run this joint. Found it in his office, in a drawer.” He grinned. “I don't think old Hank knew what he had!”

The waitress returned and slid a tumbler towards Mike. “Bottoms up!”

“Nice to meet you,” Jack said, turning away. “Enjoy the 'local color'!”

Mike lifted the glass and toasted the owner. “Nice guy,” he said to

the waitress. Setting his glass down, he held out his hand. "Mike Malloy."

She blushed a little and shook his hand formally, with a little half-bow. "Candace Cuddyer, at your service."

They both smiled, and then an awkward silence grew up between them. Mike grimaced inwardly. *This is what you get for cutting yourself off from everyone. For being alone too long. Robbie warned you about this.* The thought of his attorney, fat and always vaguely out of breath, took him out of the moment. He reminded himself that that had been the whole point, the whole reason he'd spent the last year on the road, going from place to place. To clear his head. To find his purpose. To find his way *back* to people. He looked at the waitress again. He liked her look, her smile. Her way of somehow seeming like she'd been part of his life forever instead someone he'd literally met five minutes before.

And he'd flashed the black card and ordered a \$500 whiskey. In *this* place. He felt like a jerk. He was certain she thought he was a jerk, too.

"So," she said. "What brings you out our way? *Local color?*"

It was his turn to blush. He looked down at the bar. "Sorry, that made it sound like an anthropological trip, huh?"

"Life among the natives. The mating rituals of the common people."

He laughed. She laughed.

“I’ve been traveling,” he said when the moment passed. “I needed to ... clear my head. Get right. Leave some stuff and some people behind.”

He saw Julia again, on the floor in her underwear, her head turned away from him. When he’d walked around to her side, feeling shaky and fuzzy, her eyes were open and dry, and he’d jumped back in shock, twisting an ankle and landing on the glass coffee table. He cleared his throat.

“Anyway, road trip, I guess. An extended road trip. You? Local?”

“As they come,” Candace said. “Not that I’m all that proud of it, mind you. People being proud of where they happened to be born is just plain weird, you ask me. Anyway, I’m thinking ... actually, I just thought, literally tonight, of getting out of here. Leaving town.”

He raised an eyebrow. He *liked* this girl. “Oh yeah? Where to?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t gotten that far.”

He liked that too. “Wandering. I highly recommend it. I’ve been doing it for a year now.”

She glanced over his shoulder. Someone getting the waitress’s attention, he thought. “Yeah? Running or chasing?”

He kept his smile in place with care. “Running. Definitely running.”

She moved off to take an order, and he finally lifted his glass. She

smelled a little like lemons, he thought. From slicing up garnishes, sure, but he liked it, that smell. He sniffed the whiskey and took a long sip. It was delicious: Some of the smoothest whiskey he'd ever tasted. Well worth the money, but then he had plenty of money to burn, even now, even after a lost decade.

He turned the stool and leaned with his back against the bar, holding the glass in one hand. Candace was taking an order from an older man in a fishing vest, looking at her over his glasses. The fisher said something and Candace laughed, her whole body getting into it. At another table, a round, balding man was sipping a drink and looking over at them, his eyes roaming Candace in a way Mike instantly didn't like.

*Whoa, boy, he thought. You just met her. Don't go picking fights like you're in High School.*

He turned his head and caught the other guy at the bar staring at him, even as he was talking to the owner, McCoy. Their eyes met, and neither looked away. Mike thought he looked painfully like an image the term *local* brought to mind: A rangy, skinny guy about his own age, scraggly beard, baseball cap, dirty jeans, white T-shirt, boots. A hardpack of cigarettes was actually rolled into the sleeve of the shirt, which Mike almost found incredible. Who actually did that?

He was becoming aware of something ... some noise or vibration.

"An ancient ex," Candace said, appearing next to him and

signaling to Jack. “And now professional drinker.”

He raised an eyebrow, liking the warm feel of her, inches away. She looked like one of those tall girls who was totally comfortable in her body. Whatever other problems she might have, he imagined she woke up every day feeling fine.

“How ancient?”

“Jealous?”

“Just wondering if I’ll have to fight him in the parking lot.”

She hip-checked him playfully. “If you play your cards—what the hell is *that*?”

He snapped out of his flirty fog. The vibration had been building for a while, he realized, and was resolving into a rhythmic, pulsing noise. Through the windows they could see bright lights bouncing around, filling the place.

Everyone had stopped to stare. The jukebox played on. Steve Perry was complaining about circus life.

Mike stood and almost unconsciously moved in front of her. He saw that the Ancient Ex had stood up, too, and the owner, Jack, somehow magically had one of the shortest sawed-off shotguns Mike had ever imagined in his hands. If he actually fired it, they would all take some of the shot, he thought.

Then the front door opened. He saw Jack raise the shotgun as two soldiers stepped into the bar, men dressed in camouflage, sidearms

on their hips. They stepped to each side and stood at attention as a female officer, also wearing camou, stepped into the place, one hand on her sidearm.

The officer surveyed the place. Steve Perry kept singing about hating the road. She was very tall, and her eyes lanced out from a face that was almost, but not quite, traditionally pretty. Her uniform looked crisp and freshly laundered, down to the black armband on her right upper arm. A quick glance confirmed the other soldiers had similar armbands, like they were in mourning.

“All right,” the officer said in a voice that boomed clear and crisp through the music, a voice that was very used to making itself heard. “Check every room, get me a head count. I’m sorry folks, but no one leaves.”

### 3. Candace

She looked around and tried to process. One moment she'd been asking herself if she was really planning on her first-ever one night stand, the next moment there were soldiers everywhere, shouting. She'd noticed how Mike had stepped in front of her, protectively, and while it had annoyed her she also thought it was kind of cute, the sort of dopey chauvinistic thing guys did with good intentions.

And it *was* all kind of alarming. After the initial shock of the noise and the lights and the soldiers coming through the front door, though, her heart rate had lowered a little bit. The soldiers in their gray-and-green uniforms and black arm bands had taken up positions, the tall blonde officer had walked in, and then things had gone still for a bit, the jukebox still playing Journey like it was the most appropriate song in the world, the stupid old Dipping Bird still going up and down like it had been for as long as she could remember. Jimmy found the old thing in Jack's office one night years ago, and ever since he'd been moving it around, putting it in unlikely places just to annoy Jack McCoy.

She paid attention. The soldiers were all shouting *clear and secure* as they moved through the place. A group of soldiers invaded the rear of the bar, and emerged a few moments later pushing a young guy ahead of them.



“In the bathroom,” one of the soldiers said, giving him a shove. “Wouldn’t come out.”

The young guy was wearing a pair of crisp new jeans and a sweater over a T-shirt, and looked to her to be college-aged, young. He was clean-shaven and super skinny. He shrugged, looking around.

“Can’t just cancel the operation,” he said. “I don’t know how *your* colon works, asshole, but once I commit, the mission’s gonna be completed, no matter who’s shouting at me through the door.”

Candace counted: Twelve soldiers, plus the officer. They each had rifles on their shoulders, and sidearms on their hips.

“Someone turn that off,” the officer said. Her voice was crisp and certain. Two soldiers moved over to the juke and yanked the plug out of the wall, silence clamping down, making Candace jump. The officer nodded and looked from face to face, lingering a moment on each one. When it was her turn, Candace straightened up in an automatic reaction she’d learned from the Nuns at school. Then the officer stepped aside, and a short man wearing a camouflage jacket over more casual civilian clothes entered behind her. He carried a briefcase in one hand that seemed heavy, pulling him down, and a tablet computer in the other. He came up to the officer’s chest, and when he set the briefcase down and straightened up he stood with a slouching posture, almost ape-like, looking out at them over the rims

of his thick, black-framed glasses. She thought he might be thirty or sixty, his hair thin and slicked back.

The officer leaned down and whispered in his ear. He nodded, looking around, glanced at his tablet screen, then looked up at her, nodding firmly.

“All right,” the officer said. “With my apologies for the disturbance, let’s make two things clear: You are all in my custody, and nobody leaves.”

“Custody?” Glen asked, hands flat on his table. “By who’s authority?”

The officer directed her gaze at him. Candace had the sense that there was a certain amount of time allotted for questions, and that it went against her grain to indulge civilians. “Mine.”

In front of her, Mike stepped forward. “And you are?”

The flat, steady gaze fell on him. Candace thought it seemed like the officer was seeing right through him. “Colonel Willa Hammond.”

Mike waited a beat. “Of?”

Hammond’s eyes stayed on him, and Candace felt her heart rate ticking up. She could feel the tension in the air, and was acutely aware that half of that tension landed on people who were carrying automatic weapons.

She edged herself behind Mike and eased her phone out of her back pocket, cursing how tight her jeans were. She thumbed the

volume way down and chanced a look at the screen. No signal. And she'd never once seen a WiFi signal show up out here. There was nothing.

"All right," Hammond said, stepping forward and clasping her hands behind her. "I know this is alarming. Please, stay calm. There are a few rules we're all going to have to live with for a little while."

"How long?" Glen asked. Candace thought, *Go Glen. Don't take any shit.*

Hammond ignored him. "One: Any commands my team give you, obey. We will not ask twice." She held up her hand and extended two fingers. "Two, do not make any attempt to leave this building. We do not intend to harm anybody, but we will use force to prevent this if necessary, and my team has permission to use *deadly* force. If necessary."

Candace froze, gawking. *Deadly force?* Had she heard that right?

"Listen here," Glen said, standing up. He didn't notice, but Candace did, as the soldiers all stiffened and seemed to twitch ever so slightly. "We're American Citizens. There is due process. We have rights."

Hammond nodded, lowering her arm and looking around. "The process has already occurred, Mr. —" She paused for the short man with the glasses to lean up on his tip toes and whisper in her ear, his eyes on his tablet. "—Eastman. Please sit down."

Candace blinked. *Shit, they know who we all are already. How long have they been planning this?*

“Rule three,” Hammond said, putting her hands behind her back again. “Bathroom breaks by permission only, with an escort. Just ask any of my people to accompany you. Rule Four, I won’t deal with a committee. Choose one person among you and designate them your liaison. They can bring any questions or issues directly to me. Any questions?”

She looked around, then nodded. “Good.”

Candace looked around at everyone. Jack McCoy and Jimmy Haggan were still at the end of the bar; Jimmy’s mouth hung open slightly; Jack looked pissed off. Glen had resumed his seat and sat slumped over slightly, arms stretched out in front of him, palms down. It looked like surrender. The balding man with the glasses looked terrified, eyes flicking from soldier to soldier. The guy from the bathroom just stood in the middle of the room, self-conscious and stiff.

Mike turned and faced her. “You okay?”

She nodded. “You?”

“Fine. You get a signal?” he asked, pulling his own phone from his pocket.

“Nope.”

He shook his head. “Me either.”

“So what do we do?”

They both turned to find the guy from the bathroom standing near them. Mike stared at him. “We do what she says. Because they have the guns.”

Bathroom Guy put up his hands. “Hey, look, I’m freaked out too, okay?”

Candace stepped forward and put her hand on his arm. “Sure, we all are. It’s okay.”

He smiled at her, and turned and sat down at one of the tables, hunched over and tense. Mike looked at her, and she stepped down the bar a few chairs, and he followed. They looked around; none of the soldiers were close enough to hear them.

“Any idea what’s happening?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Hell no. My shift was supposed to be over in an hour!” She didn’t add that she’d planned on asking him if she should stick around to have a drink with him. Somehow, she thought the timing on that wasn’t quite right.

“What’s that installation down the road, about half a mile? Looks all industrial, barbed wire on the fence, no sign?”

She nodded. “I know what you mean. Been abandoned for years—decades. Used to be a chemical plant, employed half the town.” She paused. That had been before her time. “Town was bigger, then,” she finished lamely. “I have no idea what it is now—thought it was still

empty. Maybe Jack or Glen knows more.”

He turned and leaned back against the bar next to her. “You trust them?”

“Jack and Glen?” she asked, surprised. But then she thought about it: He didn’t know them. Which made her think, *she* didn’t know *him*. And yet she felt like she did. “Jack: Of course. He’s as decent as they come. Glen ... yes. I’ve known Mr. Eastman my whole life. He has some crazy ideas about being a Sovereign Citizen, about the government—but I trust him to do right.”

He nodded. “All right. Let’s have a town council. See if you can get their attention, catch their eye, without making a scene. Get them to join us here. Everyone calm and civil.”

She nodded. This was sensible. She could hear her father saying *pretending you ain’t confused is just stupid*. He’d taught her to never be ashamed of not understanding something, to always ask questions, that dummies pretended they understood when they didn’t.

She looked over at where Jack and Jimmy were conferring, Jimmy still drinking his shot and beer. She tried to catch Jack’s eye, but Jimmy noticed. Before she could play it off, he’d nudged Jack and they both nodded as Jimmy stood up. It couldn’t be helped, and she figured Jimmy Haggan would have inserted himself when he noticed them all meeting up anyway.

When she looked over at Glen, he was already looking at them, so

all it took was a tick of her head and he nodded, standing up.

There was a round of hurried introduction when they were all gathered at the bar. Then Mike asked “Anyone have a cell signal?”

Everyone shook their heads. Candace scanned the room. The soldiers were all standing around, seemingly at ease. Hammond and the unidentified man remained at the front, three soldiers stood at the entrance to the back hall where the office and bathrooms were. The fat tourist with the glasses was still sitting at his table, seemingly frozen. The kid from the bathroom was sitting more at ease, glancing through the little bar menu booklet that sat on every table.

*Yeah, good luck getting served in here* tonight, she thought.

The silence was brittle and unnatural. She thought she could hear all the ticks and hisses of the place, the pipes, the heat, everything that was normally hidden by conversation and the business of business.

Mike nodded as if he hadn't expected anything else. “Anyone have any *facts* about this? Not theories—we all have theories—but anything they might have actually seen or heard that suddenly seems relevant?”

There was a pause. Jimmy Haggan suddenly smiled. “And what, you electin' yourself our little *liaison*, buddy?”

Candace wanted to hit him. Leave it to Jimmy to be an ass when it was the last thing anyone needed. Then Mike just rolled with it.

“Sure, unless someone wants to suggest someone else.”

Glen, Jack, and Jimmy looked at each other. “We don’t *know* this asshole,” Jimmy said.

Jack nodded. “He’s in our same boat though.”

Glen added. “I vote yes.” He looked at Mike and Candace got a flash of him in gym class when she’d been a kid, kindly and smart.

“You sure you want the job, Mister Malloy?”

“Call me Mike. And no, I don’t want the job. But I’m willing to do it.”

Jack nodded again. “You’re it.”

Mike nodded back. “All right. So, anything? Anyone remember anything at all?”

Everyone shook their heads. Mike sighed.

“So, we know exactly one interesting thing.”

Glen smiled. “The uniforms.”

Mike nodded. “No insignia. No patches. No name tags, no ranks.”

“Just the black band. Like mourning.” McCoy added.

“Right. Which means someone doesn’t want us to know who they are.”

They all chewed on that for a moment. Candace suddenly sucked in a breath.

“Actually, we know two things.”

They all looked at her.



“That kid they pulled out of the bathroom?” she said, looking from face to face. “Wasn’t in there before they arrived. He’s one of them.”

## 4. Mike

Colonel Hammond glanced up, studied him for a moment, then waved him into the office. It was a tiny, cramped space; a small metal desk and filing cabinet filled it almost completely, so that anyone seeking to sit behind the desk had to maneuver their way there very carefully, bending into ridiculous poses. He tried to imagine the Colonel making herself look ridiculous in order to sit there and couldn't; she didn't look like someone who took being made ridiculous lightly.

"Yes?" she said, glancing down at the file she'd been reading.

Mike took his own moment to study her. She didn't look well, he thought. Stress, maybe. Or a guilty conscience. She was flushed, and had dark bags under her eyes. He thought she looked exhausted, and tense. He tried to keep his eyes and ears open, seeking every possible detail—they were at a severe disadvantage regarding information, and if they were going to survive, or escape, they would need to know a lot more than they already did.

"You asked for a liaison," he said. "I'm it."

She looked up again. "Congratulations, Mr.—?"

He smiled. "Don't pretend you don't know all our names."

She nodded, leaning back. "All right, Mr. Malloy. What can I do for you?"

“Let us walk out of here? Tell us what’s going on? Explain your legal authority for detaining us?”

She stared back at him, expressionless. He sighed. “Didn’t think so. The owner wants permission to go in the kitchen and make up something to eat for anyone who wants it. He’d be happy to rustle up something for your people, too, if you can let us know which government agency or Joint Chief to send the invoice.”

She didn’t smile. After a moment, she nodded. “I’ll detail two guards to supervise. Only McCoy in the kitchen, no one else.”

He nodded. “What about our families, jobs, et cetera? We all have people who will miss us.”

Hammond shook her head. “Actually, you don’t.”

Mike had known this was a bluff in regards to himself. He’d been drifting for a year now, no permanent address, his most frequent contact being his attorney and his broker, neither of whom he counted as a friend, and neither of whom would expect a call from him at any specific time. He was surprised at how certain she was of the others—surely one of them had someone who would check on them—but she *did* have dossiers on all of them. He shifted his weight but didn’t pursue it further.

“Anything else, Mr. Malloy?”

He hesitated, but shook his head. “No. Thank you.”

He turned and one of the soldiers escorted him out. In the hall he

glanced into the bathroom, another soldier standing outside it on guard.

At the bar, the skinny guy named Jimmy was pouring shots and handing them off. Everyone was gathered there, even the fat bald guy with glasses. The soldiers stood around the perimeter, watchful. Mike noted the presence of Bathroom Guy, but said nothing.

“Bad idea,” he said, joining the group.

Jimmy smiled. “My specialty.”

“We should stay clear and sober. We don’t know what’s going on.”

Jimmy lifted the shot glass and toasted him. “Fuck you.”

Mike took a deep breath. He had a pretty good idea he could take on Jimmy, if he had to, but the last thing they needed was a brawl. He glanced at the bald tourist and held out his hand. “Mike Malloy.”

The bald man jumped a little, surprised to be brought into the conversation. He reached out and shook; his hand was clammy, his grip soft. “Kevin Simms,” he said, smiling nervously. “Jesus, I picked the wrong place to get dinner.”

Mike nodded, let go, and dismissed him: A tourist hunter, probably more interested in getting away from his wife (the wedding band on his finger was plain and lodged permanently on the sausage-like digit) than any actual sport. He turned to Bathroom Guy.

“Mike Malloy.”

Bathroom Guy startled a little, then smiled sheepishly and shook

hands. “Andy Powell,” he said. “Jesus, huh?”

Mike smiled, nodding, and putting everything he had into putting on a friendly demeanor. “You said it.” He turned as naturally as he could and touched Candace on the shoulder, enjoying the contact with her, no matter how brief.

“Got a sec?” He said, smiling and staying relaxed.

She stared at him a moment, then suddenly loosened and smiled. “Of course!” she said, and followed him to the back end of the bar, away from everyone and as far from the groups of soldiers as possible.

“I need to ask a kind of ridiculous favor,” he said, watching her carefully. He didn’t know her, though he felt instinctively like he *did* know her, somehow. He wasn’t sure how his next suggestion was going to go over. “I need you to, um, distract him.”

She raised an eyebrow and leaned in. But she seemed amused instead of angry, which he took to be a good sign. “*Distract?* The guy from the bathroom?”

He nodded. “Andy. Look, I know that’s ... weird, but we need to be able to talk without a spy standing right there, and we also need to keep the fact that we know he’s a plant secret. I know I’m making ... a couple of big assumptions here, but there’s no time for a long think on the subject, you know?”

He was embarrassed. For a moment she just stared at him and he

wondered if he was going to get slapped in the face, or dressed down for assuming she was the only one who could “distract” Andy, and was already scrambling for the words to explain that he’d come to her because she was the only one he trusted at the moment, for reasons beyond his ability to explain. Then she smiled and nodded.

“Absolutely.” Then she winked. “Watch the master work.”

She turned and walked around him. He realized his pulse was pounding, and he felt an odd wave of affection for her. He’d met Candace Cuddyer an hour ago and she’d become his favorite person in the whole world already.

He watched as she rejoined the group at the middle of the bar, jostling Andy as she did so. She turned and touched his arm, apologizing, and then they were talking.

Mike smirked to himself. It was just that easy. As he watched, she expertly kept pushing him further and further away as she talked, all simply by moving in subtle ways, invading his personal space. Silently tipping his hat to the Master, Mike walked back to the rest of them, and leaned in close so he could speak low.

“We got a few things to discuss, quickly,” he said, but was immediately interrupted by the older man in the fishing vest—Candace had introduced him as Glen Eastman, he recalled.

“What about him?”

They followed his gaze to the short man in the glasses and the

slicked-back hair. He was seated at one of the tables and had two laptops open, the tablet held in one hand as he tapped at the keyboards with the other.

“That’s it,” Simms said. “He set himself up, and hasn’t moved.”

“What she say about food?” McCoy asked.

“Go ahead,” Mike said. He thought: Okay, McCoy’s super practical, Eastman’s already pissy about everything, and Simms just wants to please. He pushed people into quick little boxes, fully prepared to move them if proved wrong. “She said she’d have two grunts stand guard over you.”

McCoy nodded. “I’ll make up some sandwiches. Whatever else is going on, we gotta eat.”

Mike thought that was sensible enough, and nodded. McCoy moved off. Mike looked at Jimmy Hagen, then dismissed him and caught McCoy by the sleeve. “What about weapons? Aside from that accident waiting to happen you had earlier. Anything else in this place?”

McCoy nodded slowly. “There’s a pump-action in the office,” he said, hesitated, then nodded decisively. “That’d be all of them. Aside from my hunting gear.”

“Weapons?” Simms said nervously, smiling around as McCoy walked away. “Are we crazy? The place is crawling with soldiers! You want to pull out a goddamn *shotgun*?”

Mike didn't look at him. "Mr. Simms, I'm just taking stock of our resources."

Jimmy raised another shot glass. "Thank goodness you're here to be in charge," he said, and downed the shot.

"He's got a signal," Eastman said suddenly. He was looking at the man who'd come with Hammond.

"Satellite," Mike said. "They're blocking normal data networks. His must be ..." he trailed off.

"Military?" Simms asked.

"Corporate?" Glen offered.

Mike shrugged. "Not blocked," he said after a moment.

"Could we find out the password? Use it?"

Mike shook his head. "I doubt it. It's probably not a normal cell phone connection or WiFi connection, and it's likely encrypted with a baked-in hardware key." They all stared at him. "I invested in a lot of hardware companies," he said by way of explanation.

"Oooh la la," Jimmy said, grinning.

"Listen," he said, ignoring Hagen and watching Candace chatting up the Bathroom Guy. "What we need right now is information. We don't *know* anything. Why they're really here. Who they really are. We have no connections to the outside world. We need info. So what I'd suggest is simple—be nosy. Wander, pretend you don't understand where you're not supposed to be. Eavesdrop,



keep your eyes open.” He pulled out his own phone and glanced at the time. “Let’s meet back at the bar in half an hour, report anything we can figure out.”

Eastman and Simms nodded crisply; he thought Simms looked pleased, but Eastman looked irritated. He took a chance and looked at Haggen, who had the blurry look of the drunk.

“You want to help out?” Miked asked.

Jimmy shook his head and didn’t look at him. “You take point on that shit, boss,” he said. “I don’t do as I’m told.”

Mike wanted to hit him. This was not the time for childish bullshit. But he would be just as bad as him if he fell for it, so he looked at Simms and Eastman. “All right, let’s go see what we can find out.”

## 5. Candace

He came to save her from the Most Boring Mole Ever and she was eternally grateful. The guy—Andy, if that was his real name—seemed nice enough, although his eyes went and lingered places on her anatomy she didn't appreciate. She had a sense that he was the sort of young kid who got a little drunk and made passes at waitresses like her, then grinned and was sorry-not-sorry when he got called out on his shit. He was also, she thought, the sort of guy who thought he was a *lot* more charming than he really was, as he seemed instantly convinced she was really into him.

She kept a smile on her face. She'd been through this a million times: Tourist hunters in town for a night or three, mistaking her professional politeness for attraction. She had a collection of matchbooks, business cards, napkins, and other trash with phone numbers. She didn't know why she kept them.

"Jack says there'll be sandwiches," Mike said, suddenly appearing next to her. "Couple of minutes."

"Thank god," Andy said, smiling. "And beer, I hope."

She thought his smile was good, but calculated. She was trying to watch him like a disinterested observer. To judge his performance, and she thought it was good—if she'd hadn't remembered checking the bathroom earlier in the evening, if the place hadn't been so

empty, making it easy for her to note the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar face—she might have been fooled. Mad One Jack’s never got *crowded* in the way she saw bars on TV get crowded, but there were a few nights every week when there were a couple dozen folks moving through the place, mostly travelers stopping off for a beer and a bite. The town was ten miles east and population less than a hundred, so off-season the bar was usually pretty dead.

Did Hammond decide on the mole strategy without knowing the situation? If she’d known how empty the bar was, she would never have imagined the ploy would work. She thought that indicated the Colonel and her crew, whatever they were, had put this operation together quickly.

“Do me a favor,” Mike said to Andy. “Check on Jack in the kitchen, see if he needs any help?”

She admired the dim smile Mike put on his face, looking for all the world like an idiot. Andy nodded.

“Sure,” he said, and walked off.

She watched that dumb smile fade. “Who *are* you?” she asked, and was immediately embarrassed.

He smiled. “Thanks for the distraction. I know it was kind of a shitty, sexist thing for me to say, but I honestly didn’t have a better idea.”

She shrugged. “I’ll take it as a compliment. I always used to tell my

Dad my job was *hot waitress*.” She bit off the second part of that sentence: Wishing he was still around for her to gloat about being right.

He smiled, then leaned in and filled her in on the plan, such as it was. She liked the way he smelled. He wasn’t wearing any sort of cologne, it was just *him*: Sweat and something else, something sexy and interesting.

“The best thing to do with a spy,” he said in a low, intimate voice, “isn’t to stonewall. Spies get suspicious when they’re not hearing anything. The best thing to do is to feed them something totally useless, but busy.”

She nodded. “Sandwiches.”

He grinned. “Yup, we all just had a big, serious discussion about sandwiches.”

“That was smart. Where’d you learn to think like that?”

He shrugged. “I’ve been ... I guess the best word is studying. I’ve been taking classes with people. Experts. Anyone with a skill or a point of view. I travel to them, spend some time with them, try to learn something new. Sometimes it’s a waste of time. Sometimes it’s just fun. Sometimes I learn something really amazing.”

She raised an eyebrow, thinking this was the weirdest thing she’d ever heard ... but kind of cool, too. “So you’re just traveling around with your black no-limit credit card, studying the world.”

He laughed, face reddening, and she liked that he was awkward about it. “I, er, came into some money. All right: A lot of money. I was really young and my parents were both dead.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, worried that she’d put her foot in it.

He waved her off. “It was a long time ago—now. Back then, I was sixteen when Mom passed and it was ugly. Anyway, my grandfather on Mom’s side was rich, like, epically rich, and he’d always intended to leave everything to me because he hated my father. So when *he* passed away, I inherited ... well, a *lot* of money and I was twenty years old.”

“Jesus.” She tried to imagine herself suddenly wealthy at twenty. What would she have done? Given Dad the retirement he deserved, certainly. Would she have gone to school, become an artist? She thought so, but twenty seemed so long ago, like a different country.

He was looking around, watching. She was amazed at how easily he’d taken charge, someone none of them had met before, someone none of them knew. She trusted him, though. Something about him seemed reliable, real. Like he was a what-you-see-is-what-you-get sort of guy.

“Anyway, I wasn’t ready for it. I spent ten years partying. Like, seriously partying. Heavy stuff. I should have died a bunch of times. I built up this group of ... well, I called them *friends* but they were just leeches and enablers, really. Had a ball, for a while. Met a ... ” he

hesitated, looking down at his shoes for just a moment, but she thought it looked incredibly sad. “Met a girl,” he finished quietly. “She was messed up, like me, but we loved each other.” He suddenly looked up at her, directly into her eyes. “She died. And it was my fault. I mean, I didn’t kill her or anything, but it was the way we lived, the way *I* lived. I loved her, but I loved the party more, and so she died.”

Without realizing it, she’d reached out and put her hand on his arm. The pain in his face was real.

“Anyway,” he said, clearing his throat and smiling. “I sobered up after that. Checked in with my finance guy, and was surprised to learn I was still pretty rich, though I’d blown a huge amount of it. I was thirty-something and I’d spent most of my youth in a haze, and I realized somehow I’d felt sorry for myself because my parents had been taken from me. I felt like an idiot, suddenly, and so I decided I needed to clear my head. I needed to grieve for Julia, I needed to do something, learn something, broaden my horizons. So that’s what I’ve been doing for a year and a half now.” He looked around again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to just dump all that. It just came out. What about you? What’s your story?”

She tried to put an expression of self-mockery on her face. “Oh, you know: Just a small town girl, living in a lonely—actually, you can’t even call this a *small town*, we’re like fifty people living in the woods with a road and a post office—”

“Yeah, I passed through town—what is it, population seventy, there’s a feed store and a diner.”

She nodded. “Yup. So, micro-town girl thinks she’s going to be an artist. Wins an award in junior year of high school, but forgets that her graduating class is twenty kids, so the competition ain’t so hot. She figures she’ll take a job waitressing at Mad One’s because that’s what her mama did and that’s just what girls *do* around here, but she’ll do it for one year and save up and head out for New York City to attend art school.”

He smiled. “So far so good. What happened?”

She smiled back. “You mean, why is that girl still waitressing here instead of opening a gallery show in SoHo or at least married to some rich tourist who came through laying all the local waitresses?”

His smile kinked up. “Aside from the fact that I’d never use a word like *laying*, yeah, pretty much.”

She shrugged. “Well, Dad got sick. I stuck around to take care of him. His retirement dried up, and I started working extra shifts to pay bills, and when he died there was debt. Just nothing but debt. And I’ve just about cleaned it up, and was making plans to finally do something, take off, when *this* happens.”

“About to make a break for it, literally soldiers show up to stop you,” he said, sounding amused.

“Yes! Exactly! Not to sound all self-important, but it’s like the

universe doesn't want me to leave."

"Maybe so you could meet me."

She could tell, the moment he said it he wished he hadn't, and an awkward moment welled up between them. She'd never felt this comfortable with someone this quickly, and he wasn't even *trying*. She'd seen guys try. She'd seen them try so damn hard, and this was the opposite.

Suddenly there was a commotion, and they both spun to see the tourist, Simms, standing near the front door, looking agitated.

"You can't just hold us here without some sort of authority!" he was saying, sounding more exasperated than afraid. Two soldiers stood in front of him, impassive. Nearby, the nerdy-looking man with the glasses took no notice, working on his laptops. "Jesus, we're American citizens and this is native soil. You haven't shown us any sort of authorization. I think you're just trying to intimidate us."

Glen Eastman started towards him. "Mr. Simms," he said in the sonorous voice Candace remembered so well from her school days, being ordered to do laps, "step back here and let's talk about this."

"Dude," Jimmy Haggan said drunkenly from behind the bar, where he'd set himself up as the unofficial bartender. "Let the tourist go if he wants to go!"

Simms waved a hand impatiently behind him. "I'm walking out this door. Anyone puts a hand on me, they're going to be hearing



from my lawyer.”

“Right on!” Haggen cheered, enjoying himself. Candace felt a wave of revulsion. It had been nearly two decades, but she still couldn’t believe she’d dated him.

Suddenly, the man in the glasses spoke. His voice was high-pitched and breathy. “Mr. Simms, no one will lay a hand on you.” He turned around in his seat and stared at the balding man with a blank, flat expression. “We will *shoot* you if you try to walk out that door. Do you understand?”

Simms turned and looked back at the other detainees for a moment, his expression uncertain. Then he set his mouth firmly and turned back. “I’m going out that door, and you have no right to stop me, mister.”

The man in the glasses nodded. He gestured, and one of the two soldiers unsnapped his holster and drew his weapon, a black automatic pistol. He held it down by his thigh, his finger along the side instead of on the trigger, but Candace still jumped at the sight of it, adrenaline dumping into her veins. She was used to guns; she’d grown up with them and had been on more hunting trips than she could remember, but there was something about a handgun that was somehow more threatening than a hunting rifle.

“Kevin,” Mike said. “Come on, buddy, they’re serious. Step back and let Mr. Haggen pour you a drink.”

“Fuck that!” Jimmy shouted. “Stand up, Kev! Show ‘em who’s boss!”

“Jimmy, *shut up!*” Candace hissed.

Simms hesitated, and half turned back, shaking his head. Candace felt herself relax. Then, suddenly, he pushed aside one soldier and made a run for the door.

Everything happened in a blur. She saw Mike take a step forward instinctively. She heard Glen shout something. Her whole body tensed up, and she watched the second soldier raise his sidearm just as Simms pushed past him. She heard the shot, louder than she would have thought possible in the stillness of the bar. She saw Simms flail backwards as if he’d been shoved by some invisible giant.

Someone was screaming. It took a moment to realize it was her.

## 6. Mike

He was moving before he realized it, diving forward at a run and throwing himself down next to Simms, his knees soaking in the man's warm blood. He could see Simms' eye moving behind his thick glasses, looking around, wide and amazed. His lips, pale and wet, were moving as if he was asking a question.

Mike remembered a summer spent riding along with a volunteer ambulance corp in Ohio; it was amazing what a generous donation could do. No one had any objections as long as he agreed to stay out of the way, and during the down time he got an education in emergency first aid. He learned about the Golden Hour when it came to gunshot wounds: People who made it to emergency medical services within an hour of being shot had a much better chance of survival.

He looked up. The soldier at the door was still holding the gun in his hand. He looked at the man with the glasses. His face was cold and almost sneering.

"A doctor! A medic!" Mike shouted. "You must have one in your unit!"

No one moved. Behind him, he heard the other civilians yelling, but the soldiers and the cold, still man sitting at the table just stared at him.

“A first aid kit!” he shouted desperately, heart pounding.

“Anything! Please!”

The man with the glasses turned back to his screens. “It doesn’t matter,” he said.

Anger flooded into him. These bastards could have shoved Simms, pushed him around, even hit him, and he would have been cowed. Shooting him had been savage, unnecessary—cruel.

He tore off his jacket and then the flannel shirt he was wearing, fingers numb and clumsy, buttons popping off. He leaned over Simms; blood had welled up and stained his shirt just above his waist, and continued to pulse onto the floor with every heartbeat. Mike balled up the shirt and pushed it down onto the wound, applying pressure. Simms gasped and his whole body jerked, but Mike could recall his lessons from the EMTs: Direct pressure, slow down the bleeding. It was literally the only thing he could do without any sort of supplies—or a doctor.

“Come on Kevin,” he said, looking into Simms’ eyes. “We’re gonna help you. Just hang on, okay?”

Simms’ eyes were locked on his, watery and terrified. His lips kept moving, but Mike couldn’t hear what they said.

He remembered the only time he’d seen someone die while shadowing the EMTs. A heart attack. They’d wheeled him into the ambulance, and he’d been alive, and conscious, red-faced and weak,

but *there*. And then he'd flatlined, his eyes rolling up, and they'd worked on him the whole drive to the hospital. And Mike had felt so useless, so stupid, just sitting there. And he'd thought that if he could just *do* something, anything, it would be better. Nothing, he'd thought, could be worse than sitting by idly and helpless while another human being died. It was even somehow worse than waking up and finding Julia dead, on her belly in her panties, her beautiful hair stringy and dirty, her skin marked by purple bruises, junkie marks.

Now he felt Simms' life leaking away literally under his hands and he knew better. *This* was worse. An hour ago he didn't know Kevin Simms existed. Now the man was dying right in front of him.

He tore his gaze from Simms' glassy stare and looked around. "Jesus fucking *Christ* a man is dying! *A man is fucking dying here!*"

The man in the black-framed glasses didn't look up from his keyboards, but he sighed in what Mike thought was irritation. "Doesn't matter," he said. "He's not in my calculations."

Mike looked back at Simms, whose face had gone slack, his eyes staring fixedly up at the ceiling. His *calculations*? Something about the word drilled down into him, and molten rage boiled up. Without thinking Mike turned and launched himself, bloody hands and all, at the little man.

"Doesn't—"

Someone punched him in the stomach as his legs were swept out from under him. He landed on his back, hard, head bouncing on the floor, and there was a gun in his face, the barrel an inch away. He froze and closed his eyes, waiting for the shot.

“Soldier, *step back!*”

The whole place went still. Mike opened his eyes and for a moment his field of vision was the gun barrel, nothing else, just the perfect symmetry of the weapon.

“That was a command, son.”

The gun disappeared, and the soldier—the same one who had shot Simms, he saw, a tall, lanky man with a crooked nose and a monobrow that made him seem perpetually angry—stepped smartly back, holding the gun by his thigh.

Mike twisted himself up on one elbow, his abdomen still aching from the punch. Colonel Hammond stood in the doorway that led to the office and bathrooms. She looked angry. Mike revised, his brain jerking and kicking back into motion. She looked *apoplectic*. Her face had flushed, and she stood ramrod straight, her body almost vibrating with tension and anger.

“Holster that weapon, Musgraves,” she snapped. “Then remove your holster and hand it to King. Don’t speak a fucking word, soldier, or you will *regret* it. King, you are detailed with Musgraves’ weapon. Do not let it out of your sight.”

Mike watched the monobrowed soldier wordlessly holster the gun, then unstrap the holster and hand it to the other soldier who'd been guarding the front door, a woman with densely curly black hair. She took it wordlessly, not looking at him, and buckled it over her own.

Hammond remained where she was, looking over the whole place, nostrils flaring. Mike thought the only sound in the place was the Colonel's breath whistling in her nose. His own heart was beating wildly, all over the place, without rhythm. Sweat had soaked through his shirt, and his pants and arms were covered in Simms' blood.

"Next member of this unit who discharges their weapon," Hammond said in a steady, acidic tone of voice, "without *my* direct order will also *regret* that decision."

She let that hang in the air.

"King: Detail someone to deal with the body. Show some respect."

Mike blinked and turned his head. Simms stared blankly at the ceiling. He was dead.

Then she looked at the skinny little man in the glasses, who'd continued to work at his keyboards as if nothing had happened.

"Dr. Raslowski," she snapped. "My office."

She turned and walked back down the hall. Raslowski kept tapping at his keyboards for a moment, as if he hadn't heard or didn't intend to obey. Then he suddenly shoved the table violently, making

all his equipment jump, and leaped up, striding quickly through the room. Mike thought he looked like a little boy who'd been reprimanded in school.

He stared around. The soldiers had their eyes on distant points, their faces expressionless. The bar patrons and employees were pale and shaken, staring back at him. He closed his eyes and thought, *Raslowski. Hammond. King. Musgraves*. Four names was a paltry list of new data for Simms to have died for, but he was determined to make it count.



## 7. Candace

For a moment, she stared down at the first aid kit and heard Mike a few moments ago, screaming for it while Mr. Simms bled out. She looked up at Mike, but he was just sitting on the floor of the bathroom, staring at the wall. His hands were covered in congealing blood, his knees were stained with it. At some point he'd pushed a hand through his hair and touched his face, leaving behind gore.

She heard him screaming for a First Aid kit, and saw herself standing there, frozen.

She opened the kit and scrounged for some cotton balls. "I'm sorry you had to go through that," she said. "We should—I should have helped you."

He blinked and looked at her, for a moment seeming far away. Then he shook his head, looking down at his hands. "There wasn't anything you could do. There wasn't anything *I* could do." He snorted. "I've been traveling around, apprenticing. I thought I was ... I don't know, it seems stupid now. I thought I was learning a little bit about everything. Spend a few months fighting wildfires, a few weeks working in a car repair shop. People are always happy to bend the rules and let you just hang around, doing free labor, especially if you offer them a lot of money." He closed his eyes. "I should have done something better with that money. Donated it. Started a

charity, a foundation.”

She closed the first aid kit and put it aside and grabbed a handful of paper towels instead. She dampened them and began cleaning his face. He opened his eyes and watched her, calm, unashamed. His eyes were brown and she liked them, the steady way they regarded her. “I don’t know,” she said. “Traveling around learning—it sounds nice. A good way to spend your life.”

“It’s selfish. It’s arrogant. It presumes me knowing things is somehow important to the universe.” He swallowed. “I ... never wanted to feel helpless again. I lost someone, and I realized I had no idea what to do. I woke up and she was gone and I’d spent a decade doing nothing, being nothing. I guess I wanted to make up for that lost time and be everything, all at once.” He sighed. “It didn’t help Kevin Simms.”

“They didn’t let you help him,” she said, surprised at the bite of anger in her own voice. “They shot that poor man and then just stood there and let him bleed.” She paused and looked directly at him. “We have to do something. We have to get out of here.”

He nodded. “We don’t even know what’s going on. I wish you knew something about that facility down the road. Was lit up bright as Christmas when I drove by it, and I’ll bet you dollars to donuts that’s where our new friends came from.”

She tossed the towels into the garbage and grabbed another

handful. She knew she wasn't really doing anything—he wasn't hurt and could clean himself up—but she'd felt a need to do something for him, to connect with him somehow. "I don't know anything. Maybe Jack does, he's—" She hesitated to say *older than me* for some reason. "It's been closed for years, even before I was born, I think. Padlock on the gates and everything. I don't actually know who owns it."

He shook his head. "When I drove past it just before I got here, it was definitely *not* empty. It was alive, and populated. Whatever was going on there is a big secret, and that makes me nervous." He accepted damp towels from her and scrubbed at his face. "What I wouldn't give for a working cell phone signal right now. I'm betting a lot of this stuff is classified, but we have a few names, a location—we might find out *something* that would help."

She nodded, something nagging at her thoughts. "Or we might find out it's happening everywhere, all over the place," she said. "Martial law or something."

He stared at her. "I hadn't thought of that," he said.

"You know what's strange to me," she said, leaning against the wall. "They don't have any walkie-talkies, radios, nothing. They have no way of communicating with the outside world."

"They've got Raslowski's laptops," Mike said, turning to the sink and running the water. "He seems to be connected to something."

"Maybe," she said. "But he's not talking to anyone else is he? He's

not passing information that we can see. And what's his deal, anyway? He's not a soldier, but they obey his orders, and—" She froze. "Wait!"

He turned to her, still crouched over the sink, his face dripping. "What is it?"

"The office computer!" She looked at him, eyes burning. "It's *ancient*."

He frowned. "Okay."

"Like, *seriously* ancient," she said. "It's got an old dial-up modem in there. It's the only Internet connection he's ever had. Landline. *Hardline*."

She thought of all the boring nights without customers, surfing the web in there and hating every moment. She turned off images in the browser and everything else, and eventually even downloaded a text-only browser, which at least allowed her to read the news at a decent clip. Jack McCoy was probably the only person in a hundred miles who hadn't gotten a satellite dish.

Once again, Jimmy Haggan figured into it; he was like a form of mold that had gotten into every single nook and cranny of her life, taking root in microscopic ways. He was the one who, one night when Jack had gone on a run for lemons—the Great Lemon Emergency—had taken her in to Jack's office and showed her the old box. *It's a fucking first-gen Pentium!* he'd cawed. *It's fucking amazing it*

*does anything!*

And Jimmy had shown her how to make it go online, and made all sorts of tweaks trying to get it to run a little faster. He was the one who'd suggested she use the text browser, making inscrutable jokes about the Dark Web and onions. She wondered if there were any stories in her life that didn't somehow involve James Haggan, and decided to table the thought for later contemplation when she wasn't being held prisoner.

Mike's smile came slowly, and then he nodded. "So not blocked by whatever's killing our phones," he said. "And maybe they overlooked it. We can call out."

"*And* look everything up online," she said breathlessly. "It's slow as heck, but it *works*."

"If they didn't notice it."

She nodded. "If they didn't notice it. But I'll bet they didn't. Who would think of a landline these days? Or a dial-up modem?"

"There's one problem: Hammond has set up in the office."

She deflated, kicking herself. Of *course*, she knew that. The Colonel had been sitting in Jack's office since she'd arrived, and called people in when she needed them.

He grabbed more towels and dried himself off. "That means we need to distract her, get her out of there for a few minutes. Then someone goes in and connects, does some searching. Or calls the

police.”

She shook her head. “No way, Mike. Seriously—Mr. Simms is *dead*. Anyone playing around at distracting Hammond or sneaking into that office could get *shot*. *Plus*,” she continued, cutting off his response, “plus, the police around here is one guy named Werner who hasn’t so much as pulled his sidearm from the holster in fifteen years.”

Mike smiled. “My kind of cop.”

“It’s not worth it. There are too many moving parts.”

He shook his head. “We have to, Candace,” he said, his face intent. She liked the fact that he had not yet once called her *Candy*, which was usually irresistible to men of all ages and social standings. “We don’t know what’s going on, which means this *could* be a lot bigger than just us. It might involve who knows how many people—or the whole country, or the whole world.” He nodded. “We have to try this.”

“And what if it’s everybody? What if it’s everywhere?”

He nodded. “In that case, it doesn’t matter, does it? If it’s something like that, we’re totally screwed. There would be no place to go anyway, no other authority to appeal to.”

She had the sense that he was right, but she didn’t want him to be. She *wanted* there to be someplace to go, some authority to appeal to. She wanted to get to tomorrow, when she could quit her job and pack a bag and leave town like she should have last year, or the year before.

She knew she might never be an artist, or be rich, but she would at least be somewhere other than this bar every single night.

It wasn't fair. She'd seen a man die, and suddenly the possibility not just of her own death, but her own death *in this goddamn bar* was all too real. She wasn't the morbid type: She didn't spend a lot of time contemplating her own mortality. But now that she could see her mortality in a very real way, she felt a near-panic to break out. Dying in the woods twenty feet outside One-Eyed Jack's would be better than dying *inside* it.

"All right," she said. "How would we do it?"

Mike looked off to the side, thinking. She liked his profile. "You've signed on. How long does it take, usually?"

She thought, imagining the hated little box on screen, the odd electronic noises. "A minute, probably."

He nodded. "Okay. We need to have a set of searches ready, mapped out. From most important to least." He started to pace, taking two steps in one direction and two in the opposite. "Even if we manage to get Hammond out of the office, we'll need to get you *into* the office. And even then we can't be certain how much time you'll have, so we have to have everything set from least to most important. And—"

"Wait—*me*?"

He stopped pacing and turned, taking her by the shoulders. "You

know the system. The log on, everything. We can't risk wasted seconds. It has to be you."

She stared, fear dripping into her. She saw Simms lying on the floor, bleeding, the confused, terrified expression on his face. Her heart started to pound. She wasn't built for this. She was just a waitress, a girl past thirty who'd stayed in her hometown because her father got sick and deferred any sort of dreams she might have had for herself. She had a high school diploma and a decent music collection and, everyone had always assured her, a good head on her shoulders. She wasn't a spy. She wasn't built to risk her life. She would crack, she would slip up, ruin everything, and get killed.

*You'll figure it out*, she heard her Dad say in his growly voice that strangers always thought sounded angry. *You'll be okay*.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for just one moment. What was the alternative? If she didn't do it, they would be right back where they began, sitting around waiting for whatever these people decided to do to them. And she doubted it ended with Hammond apologizing and ordering her people to leave without incident. And then she saw herself kneeling, hands tied behind her back, with a gun pointed at her head.

She opened her eyes. Mike was studying her, but with distance, holding back, giving her room.

"Okay," she said. "How do you get me in there?"



## 8. Mike

Haggen was their best chance. The moment she suggested it, Mike knew Candace was right. The shifty-looking ex-boyfriend was half in the bag and seemed kind of erratic, but they didn't have any other choice. The retired teacher, Eastman, didn't look like he had the balls to act as a distraction. Jack McCoy, the bar's owner, Candace didn't seem to think he had the brains, and Mike was inclined to agree after the man took his suggestion to go make sandwiches to heart like it was the most important mission ever handed down in a crisis.

Mike would have done it himself; the role of distraction was dangerous. They'd just seen someone shot to death because he caused trouble, spoke up, refused to follow orders. Making some noise and drawing all those twitchy trigger fingers to you wasn't going to end well, and if someone was going to be put in danger, Mike thought it might be best if it was him. Not because he was a hero, but because he was alone: No one knew where he was. He had no ties to his family, no friends left. He'd been drifting for so long he'd come unmoored from everything except his bank accounts. If someone was going to die, why not the guy who had nothing but money?

But Candace said that Haggen was the ideal disruptor. He'd been one his whole life, first as the kid who drove all the teachers crazy,

then as the employee who expertly toed the line between being difficult to his bosses and getting fired, and finally as a libertarian-type who lived in the woods and hunted for his food, who had the sort of natural ability with a computer and electrical wiring to achieve a more or less off-the-grid life because he didn't want to pay taxes and have his life documented. She said he'd spent his whole life causing trouble, and Mike took one look at him and believed her. And if he really did know how to code and wire things up he was smarter than he'd been pretending to be, and Mike kind of liked anyone who feigned stupidity for a tactical advantage.

Mike steeled himself. He could sense that Haggen didn't like him very much. And he already had an instinctive sense that Haggen was the sort who enjoyed being difficult, just to throw his weight around.

He settled himself against the bar at the far end, where Haggen had returned, sitting slumped over, one hand on a bottle of Jim Beam.

"Shit," Haggen said immediately without moving or looking at him. "I thought I was ready for this, you know?"

Mike was nonplussed. He'd anticipated a difficult time getting the man to talk to him. "For what?"

Haggen glanced at him. There was, Mike thought, a surprising spark in his eyes, a glimmer of intelligence he'd missed before. "This. This—the end. Government crackdown. Martial law. Economic

collapse, chaos.” He shook his head. “If I was in my house, I’d be fine. I’m prepared. *In my house*. But I had the bad luck to be here getting shitfaced when it came down.”

“Martial law?”

Haggen snorted. “What else do you call being imprisoned in Jack McCoy’s shithole bar with soldiers shooting people who try to leave?”

Mike leaned in. “We don’t know what’s going on. We don’t have any information. As far as we know, this might be the only place in the world this is happening.”

Haggen picked up the bottle and poured whiskey into his glass. He proffered the bottle. “Drink?”

Mike shook his head. “We need information, Mr. Haggen—”

“Jim.” He set the bottle down. “We’re all gonna die in this shithole, I’m not going sober, and I’m not being called *Mr. Haggen* like I’m some fucking lawyer.” He picked up the glass and held it between them. “I have water. Solar. Food. A propane generator and two hundred-pound tanks. Gasoline. Guns. Books. I could have lived out there for *years* while all this played out.” He toasted Mike. “Best laid plans and all that.”

Mike reached out and put his hand on Haggen’s arm as he raised the glass. “We need your help, Jim.”

Haggen smiled. “We? Man, you got here like two hours ago.”

“And if I’d kept driving I might not know anything about this. I

might be in a hotel room right now, ordering room service. Or sleeping in my car on the side of the road. Or maybe arrested somewhere else, detained somewhere else—I don't know. That's the *point*, Jim. We don't know. We need your help to get some information."

Haggen oriented on him, and Mike had the sense he was listening to him for the first time that evening. "Information?" he said, frowning. "About *these* guys? How?"

*Not as drunk as he seemed*, Mike thought, noting how he seemed suddenly sharper, less blurry. Either a man who held his liquor well, or an old con artist who knew appearing drunk gave him an advantage.

"The old computer in the office. Candace thinks the hardline the old modem uses might have been overlooked."

Haggen's focus shifted slightly away from Mike, as if thinking, then he snapped back, leaning forward.

"Holy *shit*," he hissed. "That crappy old box with the 56k dialup. Yes—listen, man, a year, two ago Jack had a flood in here, had an electrician in. They found this one line they couldn't shut off. The main was tripped, everything disconnected, this one outlet in that office was hot. Finally discovered the previous owner—named Catfish Lowell, and if you want a fucking *story*, ask about *him*—had done a lot of work around this place himself, ignoring code, permit

requirements, and property laws. He'd run power and phone lines out to the road, if you can fucking believe it, stealing service." He nodded. "I will *bet* you these assholes missed a phone line. I would *bet*."

Mike glanced around. Candace had Eastman and McCoy at the middle of the bar, occupied. The soldiers stood around the perimeter, Raslowski sat at his computers. Did the soldiers all look tense? Worried? Were they sweating? It was hard to tell, but in a flash Mike had a sense that maybe they had less time than he thought, because the body language in the place seemed to imply a looming, invisible deadline.

"We need a distraction. Candace will go in—she knows the system and won't waste time figuring it all out. You up for getting Hammond out of that office and keeping her out of there for as long as possible?"

Haggen stared at him. Mike prepared himself for an insult, for pushback.

"I can do that," Haggen said. "How long you need?"

Mike blinked. He recovered himself and said "It's dangerous, Jim. You saw what happened to Simms."

Haggen shrugged. "Man, I got little doubt we'll all be dead in this goddamn bar soon enough." He sighed, glancing over Mike's shoulder for a moment. "She's a gem, man. A fucking gem. I screwed

that up. A long time ago—this isn't a confession of a torch or anything. There ain't no romance there, anymore. But you know, sometimes you look at someone from your past and it just reminds you of everything you've ever done wrong, and you realize it was *most of it*." He looked back at Mike. "You understand?"

Mike saw her again, stretched out on the floor in her underwear, purple bruises on her legs. "Yes," he said. "I get that."

Haggen shrugged. "I like my life. I like myself. Maybe always a little too much. I know a lot of people thought it was silly, me worrying about the government coming in and taking what was mine. Not so silly now, I guess. I worked hard my whole life to get out from under, and here I am being crushed again. Screw that." He smiled. "Get our girl in position and let's make some noise."

Mike studied him, then nodded. "Good. Thank you. Anything you need?"

Haggen smiled. "I've been fucking with authority figures my whole life," he said. "I got this."

"He's in."

Candace looked up at him and seemed to freeze, then her eyes leaped over his shoulder. Mike was surprised at his reaction: He didn't like it. At all.

"Oh, Jim," she said softly. "You have always been an idiot."

The place was quiet, and they were all murmuring softly but it seemed like everyone ought to be able to hear every single word they said. He gestured at the hallway that led to the office. “Let’s go; he’s waiting for you to be in position.”

“Mr. Malloy,” Glen Eastman said, adjusting his glasses with one finger. Mike glanced at the old man: Standard issue retiree, he thought. Paunchy, no fashion sense, whitening hair and thickening glasses, dressed like it was Halloween and his costume was Fisherman. “I know you saw no need to consult me—or Jack, here—but I want my objection noted. This is a dangerous plan. Actually, *plan* is a grandiose word for what this is.”

He talked like a schoolteacher too, Mike thought. He knew the type, from his own school days, and from some of his travels. He’d spent some time volunteering at high schools for a while, trying it on for size. A way to spend his time and money. An experience to have—it all sounded so ridiculous in his head now. A better way to put it, he thought, was that he’d spent all this time wandering the world so he didn’t have to think about what he’d done, or not done.

“Mr. Eastman, where do you imagine your objection could possibly be *noted*?” he asked, irritated.

“Mr. Eastman,” Candace said, touching his arm. “I appreciate your concern. But we need to do this.” She looked at Mike and nodded.

He walked with her towards the hallway. Two soldiers were posted

on either side; they would escort people to the restroom as per Hammond's orders. They watched as they drew close, but didn't react, and when they stopped just beyond the hallway their eyes went elsewhere.

She turned to look at him. "Listen," he said.

"Mike!"

A hand on his shoulder, and he was being spun around forcefully. Jim Hagen grinned at him.

"I'm causin' a *disturbance!*" he said conversationally, and hit Mike hard in the face.



## 9. Candace

For a moment, she thought it had all gone to hell. Jimmy followed up his sucker punch with a rebel yell and leaped down onto Mike, fists swinging, and the rest of the place devolved into chaos. The soldiers surged forward, but before they could get to the pair, Mike somehow scissored his legs, gained some leverage, and flipped Jimmy over onto his back. Jimmy then rolled away as Mike pounced, sprang to his feet, and crashed into Jimmy, knocking over tables.

She'd seen Jimmy Hagen get into fights before—plenty of times. He didn't have any particular training or style; he was a scrapper. He had a lean, natural athleticism that made him a dangerous opponent, but he relied entirely on his reflexes and speed—and an ability to take a punch.

Mike, though, looked like he'd trained somewhere. He wasn't boxing, his whole center of gravity had shifted. He kept shifting away from Jimmy, then leaning in with lightning speed and landing a blow before dancing back again. *Dancing*, she thought. It was *exactly* like he was dancing with Jimmy.

Jimmy was getting the worst of it, though; Mike touched him regularly and he seemed unable to get past Mike's defenses. Hagen didn't seem to mind; his smile was constant. She realized they were putting on a performance, because whenever one of the soldiers

made a move as if to break them up, they suddenly locked into each other and crashed into another part of the bar, where they resumed their odd dance.

When Hammond stormed from behind past her, she was startled out of her trance. The colonel, tall and cool and more or less the definition of *unamused*, walked about three steps past her and stood for a moment with her arms akimbo, her back ramrod straight.

Going over the list of things to look up that she and Mike had quickly compiled, she took a step backwards, eyes locked on Hammond, then spun and moved as swiftly and silently as she could down the hall. She'd taken this route a million times, during endless boring nights when literally no one had come into the place before ten at night, but it suddenly seemed sinister and foreign, as if Hammond and her people had taken it from them after their invasion.

She ducked into the office, forcing herself to not look back. She could hear the fight, and she hadn't yet heard Hammond give any order to shut it down. She told herself that as long as Jimmy and Mike kept it up, she had time.

She slid into the chair and turned on the old monitor; the plastic casing had once been beige but had soured into something yellower over the years. It hummed and took a while to warm up, but the moment the screen slowly began to fade into being she was moving

the mouse, clicking on the dial-up icon.

When she'd first started working at Jack's, she'd been stunned to discover that there was no high-speed Internet, no satellite television, and only this wheezing old relic of a computer. The jukebox hadn't been serviced or updated in years, and the furniture and decorations were exactly what Jack had inherited from old Catfish Lowell, which Lowell himself had inherited decades earlier. She knew she had never been the hippest or coolest girl in the world (and knew that even the coolest girl in this tiny town wouldn't even make the list in a big city), but even so the complete disinterest Jack McCoy had in modernizing the place was disturbing.

And the most disturbing aspect by far was the dialup. Before working at the bar, Candace had retained vague, watery memories of dialup Internet, and those memories were unhappy ones. When Jack had painstakingly walked her through the process, she'd been amazed that this was how people had once gotten on the Internet. How *she herself* had once done it, though she didn't think she'd had to wait through the screeching modem noises since High School, at the latest. She was doubly amazed that it was still possible, but Jack assured her millions of people still used dialup Internet. She was then not amazed, but rather horrified, at the speed dialup offered. It was like reading a book with someone feeding you one letter at a time from a very great distance.

The login box appeared, with Jack's user name and the starred-out password already filled in. The modem roared into tinny life with the now-familiar burps and screeches of data over a phone line, and her heart leaped: It seemed incredibly loud in Jack's tiny, overstuffed office. Her heart racing, she danced in the chair as the handshake completed and the computer announced she was connected.

She clicked on the text-only browser she'd installed a few years back. It ignored all graphics and other elements and rendered every page solely as text. She'd installed it out of desperation after the old computer kept freezing every time she tried to load any web page that had been created within the last five years—the text-only browser meant she wasn't getting the most fun aspects of the Internet, but at least she was able to read the news and gossip without growing old in the process.

The browser window appeared, no-frills, just a white box with an input line. The fight continued to rage outside. She typed a news site she liked to visit into the box and hit the enter key. She'd discussed it with Mike, and they'd agreed if something worldwide or even nationwide was happening, it made sense to start with that. She held her breath as the modem crunched bits and the browser waited. Then the page started trickling in, one line of text at a time. There was nothing. A football player had been in a car crash and fled the scene. Someone in Atlanta had called in a bomb threat to a church. Russia

had sent troops into the Arctic again, but nothing about it seemed urgent.

*Not a general event, she thought. Unless they're suppressing it. She felt foolish for thinking such a paranoid thought, then regrouped. Jesus, we're being detained mysteriously by troops, she thought. If there was ever a time to be paranoid, this is it.*

She pulled up a search engine and typed RASLOWSKI DOCTOR Ph.D. M.D. into the search box. Mike thought that since he was the only non-military person in the group, there might be more on him out there.

She heard Hammond shouting, and nearly jumped out of the seat. The text came scrolling onto the screen; the first few hits were generic ones for doctor-related websites, then an encyclopedia entry. The next few seemed innocuous: Local doctor offices in far-away places, or ratings websites giving reviews for local doctors.

The eighth hit caught her eye; it was a news item, titled PHYSICIST LEAVES UNDER CLOUD. The brief snippet beneath the headline began “Dr. Emory Raslowski resigned his position as senior scientist at.”

She clicked on the link just as Hammond shouted again.

*“King and Williams! Stop holding your junk and separate these men!”*

The screen filled with minimally-formatted text: *Dr. Emory Raslowski resigned his position as senior scientist at the Holzman Institute*

*Monday. Dr. Raslowski, regarded as one of the leading theoretical physicists in the world, has been under investigation by the compliance committee for alleged ethics violations in research programs under his direct supervision. Dr. Raslowski has so far offered no comment on the accusations, and today announced via memorandum that he would be vacating his position. He would not specify what, if any, new position he had accepted, responding to queries only with an emailed "No comment."*

The noise in the next room became suddenly louder, and Candace imagined soldiers getting involved, which meant that Mike and Jimmy were now actively risking their lives. She opened the regular browser and counted the four heartbeats it took to grind through its boot process on the ancient computer, then typed the same search in. She clicked the link and waited another agonizing few seconds while the old browser sorted itself out, the web page appearing in jerky increments as the lights on the old modem danced.

Suddenly, the chaos outside stopped. She could hear Hammond speaking in much more controlled voice. Her heart was pounding. There wasn't much time.

There was a photo, halfway down the screen. It appeared one scanned line at a time, and she leaned forward, willing it to resolve into something she could comprehend. Line by line, the photo grew like it was being hand-stippled on the screen by unseen hands. When it was halfway finished she knew it was Raslowski, but despite the

ominous silence outside and her shaking hands, she forced herself to wait a few seconds more, and then a few seconds more, until it was absolutely him, the same mild-looking man in the same dark plastic glasses, scowling at her from the screen.

“King, if these men so much as make a noise, gag them and handcuff them to the bar,” Hammond bellowed.

*Oh, fuck*, Candace thought.

Frantically, she leaped up. Without thinking, she dashed forward and slid behind the open door, hiding in the darkness between it and the wall. A second later, Hammond stepped into the office.

Candace closed her eyes. How long could she stand there, how long could she stay silent? What if the colonel wanted some privacy and closed the door? She ran through possible scenarios, reactions. What would be her excuse? Why was she in the office? What justification could she offer?

Suddenly there was another commotion outside, with raised voices that quickly swelled in volume. She heard the colonel hiss a curse under her breath, and then heard her storm out of the office again.

Immediately, she stepped back out from behind the door and with a deep breath she walked out into the hallway. She felt hidden for a moment in the relative gloom of the hallway, but as she approached the bar area again she felt increasingly exposed. Everyone was paying

attention to Jimmy, who was being restrained by two soldiers, thrashing about and shouting.

“Fuck you!” he shouted. “This is *the United States of America* and I demand to be allowed to make a god-damn *phone call!*”

She held her breath as she approached the line that divided the well-lit bar from the dark hallway. She realized that Jimmy was staring at her as she crept forward.

“You can’t do this! I’m going to fucking *own* you when I get my lawyer on the line!”

She slipped into the light and leaned back against the wall. A moment later their eyes locked, and he winked at her, then slumped, breathing hard.

“All right,” he said. “I’m done.”



## 10. Mike

He had to admit he hadn't expected much from Haggen, and it just went to show that no matter how much you saw or how many people you paid to hang out with you and show you how they lived, you could still be surprised.

He'd been restrained along with Haggen, plastic zip ties binding their wrists behind their backs, marched into the office, and shoved around pretty roughly—but not, he reflected, shot. This was either a renewed imposition of discipline from the colonel, or a new policy concerning the hostages. His face burned with swollen pain, one eye was closing, and when he breathed he felt the ragged tug of what he suspected was a bruised or maybe broken rib. He didn't mind. He'd given just as good, and he'd been relieved that Haggen at least knew the one golden rule of staging a fight: You can't *stage* a fight. You just had a real fight for staged reasons.

As soldiers marched them down the hall, he'd wondered again why the two of them were still alive. All Simms had done was try to leave.

Colonel Hammond leaned back in Jack's chair and studied them. She was a woman that people would call *handsome*, he thought. The sort of tall, gawky woman who wasn't unattractive, really, but who didn't fall into any of the boxes you normally put a woman into. She

wasn't pretty, she wasn't ugly. She had neither grace nor clumsiness. She was tall, but slight, had bright, clear eyes—and a presence. She was the sort of person you were instantly intimidated by, but who you couldn't easily describe—at least not physically.

“This bullshit,” she said suddenly, spitting out the words as if with great self-control. “Stops now. Are we clear on that? Whatever bad blood exists between you two, it stops right now. There will be no second reprieve, yes?”

She was looking at him. Mike made a mental note, adding to the short list of information he'd managed to accrue over the last two hours: She didn't know much about them. She'd demonstrated they knew all their names, and basic background, but her knowledge wasn't *deep*. Or she hadn't had time to read it all. She thought his fight with Haggan was not only legitimate, but based on an existing grudge.

“Or we get shot,” Haggan said, spitting a wad of blood onto the floor. “We get it, Kommisar.”

Her eyes shifted to Haggan, and Mike glanced at the computer. Candace had left it on. To his horror, the screen showed a photo of Raslowski. All the colonel would have to do was glance at it, and she would instantly know they'd been snooping. He wasn't sure how she would react, and he didn't want to find out. The phrase *no second reprieve* rang in his head.

His eyes scanned the room, landing on the thick black power cord that snaked from the back of the monitor to the power strip on the floor. The strip had a red switch on one end that would kill the power in an instant.

Mike marked the switch's location and looked back at the Colonel. He could turn it off just by taking one step forward. He wasn't worried about getting a beating, or getting into some other trouble. He knew if he did it while Hammond was sitting at the desk, she would notice the screen going off. She wasn't an idiot. She would know something was up.

Hammond sighed and leaned back in the chair. She looked from Haggren to Mike and back again. For a moment he thought she looked absolutely exhausted, her face hollowed out, her eyes dull and blank. He thought, irrationally, that he was about to die: She would just decide not to worry about it, to kill them both to be safe.

"King, what's the count?"

The soldier with the curly hair straightened up just slightly more. "The Doc counted off nine hours last," she said.

Mike made a mental note: *One more piece of data—nine hours, whatever that means.*

Hammond nodded, then looked back at me and Haggren. "You gonna be a pain in my ass or can we consider this shit settled? In case you hadn't noticed, my people are a little itchy. I'm sorry about your

friend—I truly am—but if you cause one more lick of trouble for me, I’m going to hogtie you and dump you in the back with the beer kegs for the duration of this duty, are we clear on that?” She shook her head. “And *that* will be more for your own safety than anything else.”

Haggen nodded cheerfully. “You can put me in the back with the kegs any time, Colonel.”

Mike hesitated, then shook his head. “Everything you’re doing here is illegal. You’ve detained us illegally, you’ve killed an American citizen without cause, you’ve restrained me and ...” he hesitated, then on impulse decided to keep up the pretense that he was intimately involved, a local or at least familiar with everything and everyone. “... Jimmy, you’re trespassing—the list goes on.” He looked her right in the eye. “After killing one of us, how am I expected to believe you won’t just kill us all when you’re done here with whatever *this* is?”

Hammond leaned back in the seat and regarded him. Mike thought she was *evaluating* him, considering him, and it made him nervous.

“Mr. Malloy,” she said, her voice icy cold. “That *is* a possibility, unfortunately.”

Mike’s heart skipped a beat. Had she *actually* just admitted she might murder them all?

She leaned forward, planting her elbows on the desk. “I am *hoping* to avoid that eventuality, though. I am *hoping* to resolve this without

any further bloodshed. Part of that is up to you—if you have influence over your people, use it to calm them down. Use it to keep everyone under control. Do that, and there’s a much better chance of avoiding any further problems. Because if crowd control becomes an issue here, we *will* fall back on alternative methods, *without hesitation*, understood?”

Mike was stunned, but managed to nod back. He started to agree, but remembered the computer screen. He need to play for time. He had the feeling that another outburst, another round with Haggen would just get them hogtied—or worse—but he didn’t know how else he was going to distract her.

Suddenly, Haggen leaned forward. “Well, Colonel, let me speak for all of us when I say you’re a right fucking cunt, and you all can go fuck yourselves.”

Mike stared. Was he crazy? *He was going to get himself killed*. He was going to get them *both* killed, right here, in this office.

The colonel had gone completely still. She stared at Haggen with a similarly disbelieving expression. The whole room seemed to have frozen.

Haggen nodded. “You got this bullshit command because none of the men would take it, right? You been cooling your heels in what—the commissary? The secretary pool, taking dictation?”

“Warner,” Hammond said in a tight voice. “Shut this piece of shit

up.”

The other guard, a tall, lanky man with tree-like arms, nodded, but Haggen just smiled more broadly. “Sure, get the men to do your ass-kicking, too. Stupid fascist bitch. Been wanting to boss some men around, found a career path that let you do it. Bet every man in this unit wants to slap your bitch face but can’t risk their career. I bet—”

Warner stepped between Haggen and the desk and expertly socked him in the belly with one powerful punch. Haggen bent over, instantly reduced to a silent, red-face wheeze.

Hammond stood up. Mike didn’t hesitate; Haggen must have seen exactly what he did, and he’d distracted the colonel the only way he could think of. Mike stepped forward, bringing his foot down on the power strip. He heard the old computer suddenly go quiet, but no one else noticed. Hammond was still stepping around the desk, where she leaned down and took Haggen by the hair, forcing him to look up at her.

“Take this piece of shit and hogtie him in the back,” she said quietly. She straightened up and glanced at Mike, then wordlessly turned away. “Turn Malloy loose.”

King snapped out a small knife and stepped behind him as Haggen was literally dragged away, limp as a ragdoll and still struggling to breathe. “You people need to step *back*,” the soldier whispered as she sliced his ziptie free. “This goes hard or it goes easy,

your choice. Spread *that* word.”

Mike nodded, numb. For a moment he couldn't move; frustration seized him. They had little bits of information, but no *answers*, and they were no closer to getting out of this alive than before.

## 11. Candace

When Mike re-entered the bar area, trailed by a short, angry-looking female soldier, Candace was startled at how beat-up he looked. His demeanor was grim, and her relief at seeing him look relatively whole and healthy gave way to sudden apprehension. She looked at Glen, who was leaning against the bar with her, and then at Jack, who stood behind it, and exchanged worried looks with each.

“You look like a man could stand a whiskey,” Jack said, keeping his deep, rumbling voice low.

Mike nodded. “Jesus, yes,” he said, sitting—or, more accurately she thought, dropping into one of the stools unsteadily.

“Jimmy?”

A complex wave of emotions ran over his face as Jack slid a slopping shot glass over to him. “In the back. He ... he was a hero back there. You left the monitor on—”

She gasped.

“—and he distracted them so I could turn it off. Your Mr. Haggan’s a hero.”

Wow, she thought. *Not a phrase I ever thought I’d hear.*

“Where’d you learn to fight like that, son?” Jack asked. “You had moves.”

Mike looked at Candace. “I picked up a few things in my travels. I



spent some time training with a bunch of mixed martial arts fighters. Just to learn.” He rubbed his jaw. “Jimmy gave as good as he got, though.”

Mike picked up the shot glass and looked around. He leaned in close. “Did you find out anything?”

Glen cleared his throat. “In fact, she did. She found out that Dr. Raslowski there is a world-famous physicist.”

“Who left his swanky job under mysterious circumstances last year,” Candace added.

Mike frowned. “A goddamn *physicist*?”

Glen assumed a pose Candace recalled well: *Teacher at lecture*. Even in gym class, Mr. Eastman had been fond of offering tidbits of history and other subjects, often telling them that just because gym class was for their bodies didn’t mean they couldn’t also expand their minds. She also recalled the whole class groaning dramatically whenever he launched into one of his lectures.

She had no urge to groan now. She looked around to make sure the soldiers weren’t near them, listening in.

“He worked at the Holzman Institute,” Eastman said. “Which I’ve heard of.” He looked down at the floor suddenly. “Not, mind you, that I really understand what they do there. out of my league, definitely. It’s wild stuff. You heard of String Theory?”

No one reacted. After a moment, Mike sighed. “I have, sure.”

Eastman nodded, looking up with an expression that Candace thought she would classify as *excited*. “String Theory’s the *simple* stuff compared to what they were doing at the Holzman. We’re talking fundamentals of the universe here. Like, the basic building blocks of reality, that kind of stuff.” He looked down again. “Like I said, I don’t claim to really understand it all. But that means our Dr. Raslowski is one of the most brilliant men in the world. Who got fired for *ethics violations*.”

Mike blinked, every part of his body seeming to ache and burn. “Oh, shit.”

“*Oh shit* is right,” Eastman said, nodding. “I think we know something else, too. That old factory up the road? You said was blazing with light, crowded with people? Someone’s been cooking up something in there, and they lost control.”

“Lost control of *what*?” Candace asked.

Eastman shrugged. “Who the fuck knows? Like I said, I don’t claim to understand the man’s work.”

Mike sighed. “You put the words *fundamental forces of the universe* and *lost control* together, and—”

“—we’re fucked,” Jack finished, sounding, Candace thought, *cheerful*.

She shook her head. “That doesn’t make sense, though. Why us? Why come here? If they lost control of ... something—I don’t know,

say they got Godzilla up there and he snapped his chain—then why in *fuck* would they think they were safer here? Or better able to run things from here?” She shook her head. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Mike downed his whiskey and coughed. “Mr. Eastman?”

Eastman rubbed his chin. “I’m no expert, but if I had to have a theory I’d say you have to apply the old Occam’s Razor. What’s the simplest explanation for needing to be here?”

After a moment, Mike nodded. “Us.”

Eastman nodded. “Us. We’re the only thing here that can’t be replicated, that can’t be found anywhere else. It could be. It’s possible. I know it sounds nuts, but it’s *logical*. Therefore it’s possible.”

Candace frowned. She felt like she was running on an ice rink, trying to keep up without falling on her ass. “So what does that mean? Why would they need *us*?”

Mike gestured at Eastman, who shrugged. “I don’t know. They don’t seem to want anything from us. They seem content to just sit on us.”

“Like they’re waiting for something,” Mike said, looking around. “If there was an accident, maybe they don’t know if it’s a chain reaction or something.” He nodded to himself, warming to a concept. “Think about it: If we assume they’re up there at the facility tearing open the fabric of reality or something, and there’s an accident, the first step might be *containment*, right?”

Eastman nodded, so everyone else nodded.

“So, what’s the containment area? How far does the problem extend, whatever it is? Maybe they know, maybe they don’t. Maybe this bar lies inside some sort of Red Zone, or maybe they’re just being careful. Either way, maybe Dr. Raslowski runs the numbers and says, okay, if nothing happens in the next ten hours, we’re golden. So they might decide to sit on us and see what happens.”

“So then why not just observe?” Candace said. “Why shoot poor Mr. Simms? Why keep everyone in here?”

“Someone panicked,” McCoy said.

“Or maybe our actions have something to do with it,” Mike offered. “I don’t claim to understand the *fundamental forces of the universe* either. Maybe they need us to stay put, and the only way to guarantee it is to hold us by force.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know. I’m just glad the man’s not a Structural Biologist and we’re not going to die of some alien virus.”

“None of this changes anything for us,” Eastman said. “It’s exactly the same situation. We’re trapped in here with armed soldiers who have demonstrated they’ll kill us. The only difference is that now we have to worry about wormholes or something.”

They all stood in silence for a moment. Candace found herself taking a physical poll, checking herself for injuries. She couldn’t believe in the chaos she’d escaped without a scratch.

“So what’s the point, then?” McCoy asked, pouring Mike another shot of whiskey and then taking a sip straight from the bottle. “We just sit here for the next *nine* hours, asking permission to take a piss and hoping we don’t accidentally piss off a jumpy kid who’ll shoot us dead?”

“There’s another problem,” Mike said, picking up the second shot and staring at it. “These soldiers. You notice they don’t have any identification? No nametags, no patches, no insignia. They’re not in communication with anyone that we’ve seen.” He looked around. “They’re off-book. They’re unacknowledged. Or, you know, *private*, someone’s private army. Officially, they’re not here, right? Which means none of this is happening, *officially*. That’s their fallback—if everything went according to plan, there would be a cover story. Some explanation. Or we’d just be warned that no one would believe us. They’d just deny anything ever happened.”

“So?” McCoy asked, taking another slug from the bottle.

“So, they killed a man,” Mike said. “Now they have a mess, and they have a bunch of witnesses who might make it a point to seek justice or revenge or whatever.” He slammed back the shot and put the glass back on the bar. “*And* we know some names. I will bet you Hammond or Raslowski or some of the grunts are thinking, right now, that maybe the cleanest thing to do is kill us all.”

Another round of silence met this. Finally, McCoy shook his head.

“Naw. Simms was an accident. A mistake.”

Mike nodded. “And when the nine hours is up and they all breathe a sigh of relief because their little problem didn’t happen again? They’re going to allow us to just go our merry way, to call police and journalists, to hire investigators to look into Simms’ death—and the facility down the road?” He shook his head. “I know people with money and resources. Rich people. When you have money and resources, you start to think you can make any problem go away, and it makes you cruel and it makes you do things you shouldn’t do. And no one has more money and resources than the U.S. government.”

“If it is the government,” Candace mused.

“Oh, it’s the goddamn *government* all right,” Glen Eastman said dourly, “but let’s not forget all of this is conjecture,” Eastman said. “We’re still operating with a real deficit of actual information. We could be way off.”

Mike nodded. Candace thought about it. “But Mr. Simms *is* dead,” she said. “And we know who killed him.”

McCoy looked at her. She held his gaze. She’d known Jack McCoy pretty much her whole life, and he knew she wasn’t one for panic or hysteria.

“And since we don’t know why they’re so terrified of any of us getting out of this bar,” Eastman said, “we can’t in good conscience *leave*, can we?”

McCoy raised one bushy eyebrow. “What’s that?”

Mike nodded, and Candace knew what he was going to say. “I agree. We shouldn’t try to get away. We don’t know what’s happening. If there’s something that could endanger other people, we have to stay here. Until we know exactly what’s happening, I think we have to do everything *except* escape.”

“Then what do we do?” McCoy asked slowly, as if still processing this suggestion.

Again, Candace knew what Mike was going to say, and she felt a thrill when the words were spoken out loud. “We can’t run away. But we can’t wait to find out if they just liquidate us. We have to turn the tables. We have to take over.”

## 12. Mike

McCoy laughed. “Are you fucking *kidding*?”

Mike shook his head. The whiskey had been a mistake; he’d been shaky and at first the alcohol had felt good, calming him down. But now he felt fuzzy, and he wanted to be sharp. “We don’t have a choice. Listen—it’s not certain, but there is a *chance* that this ends with executions, right? No matter how remote, if there’s a chance of that, we have to defend ourselves. Even if it’s just 1%.”

McCoy leaned back, taking another hit from the bottle. Mike wanted to say something, to suggest he stay sober, but hesitated: He didn’t know these people. “Maybe,” McCoy said. “You got a point.”

“Damn right he has a point,” Eastman said fiercely, surprising Mike. He’d taken Eastman to be an academic, a milquetoast. He didn’t expect him to see reality so quickly, or be so supportive. It remained to be seen if the retired teacher was going to be able to back it up with action, but Mike was encouraged. He had a feeling he was going to need everyone at their best.

He took a deep breath, because that led him to his next thought. He looked from McCoy to Eastman to Candace. “We need to get Haggen out of the back.”

“What?” McCoy said, grinning. “You think that won’t be noticed?”

“Ah, let him stew back there,” Eastman said. “Jimmy Haggen’s all



right, but he's a troublemaker. Always complaining, always telling us how we're supposed to be living. But he just wants to hide in the woods, to be left alone. Believe me, I tried to organize him a bunch of times. He's no goddamn use to anyone."

Mike shook his head. He was impressed with Haggen. The man was a little crazy, but he'd fought well, and he'd taken cues and picked up on things quickly. Mike had his doubts about McCoy and Eastman, but he thought he could rely on Candace—and Haggen, so he wanted him. "Haggen's reliable. I think maybe he just hasn't had the chance to show you what he's got yet. Let's think about how we could break him out without setting off any alarms."

McCoy made a face. Eastman rolled his eyes.

Candace looked right at him. "They've got him in the back? With the kegs?"

Mike nodded. He fought off a smile; he liked this woman. She was smart, she was up for anything, and she was capable. He was impressed with how she'd handled herself getting online—there'd been no hesitation when he and Haggen had set to it. She hadn't been shocked or tentative, she'd gone to work.

"We can get back there through the crawlspace. There's a trap door behind the bar."

"Dumb idea," McCoy said. "They got Jim under guard, right?"

Mike thought back. Then he leaned up out of his seat and looked

around, checking all the soldiers. “Yeah. One of the soldiers—Warner. Dark skin, bad attitude. He’s not here, so I think he’s still guarding Haggen.”

McCoy shrugged. “There you go. Fucking suicide to even try.”

Mike nodded. This was confirming what he thought: Haggen was reliable. McCoy and Eastman weren’t. That made it even more vital to get Haggen loose.

“Even if you got him free,” Eastman said, “it would just cause trouble. There’d be a *reaction*.”

“Not if we leave Warner back there,” Candace said. “Tied up, gagged. They’ll assume he’s still guarding Jimmy.”

Mike shook his head. “No, this is a military unit. There will be scheduled check-ins, relief.”

Candace shrugged. “We’d have a window, then. We’d have some time. First we need to know the schedule, right? They have to walk right past us here to get back there. We watch, we make a note. We know how long we’d have. Then we time it: We bring him out, we know exactly how long we have until he’s noticed.”

“And do what?” Eastman asked. “He’s not *Superman*, guys. Okay, Mr. Malloy says Jimmy’s useful, reliable, whatever. And okay—we have a deficit in terms of manpower, we could use a warm body. But say we have an hour—say we could get Jim loose and we’d have an hour until they noticed? We need to have a plan in place *before* we

spring him. We need to know *exactly* what we plan to do, or it won't mean anything."

Mike nodded. "You're right."

"So let's make a plan," Candace said. She looked at Mike. "You said take control—how do we do that?"

Mike looked at her, then at McCoy, Eastman, and back to her. "We take the guns."

McCoy laughed out loud. When he spoke his words had the slightest slur to them. "Sure! Of course, it's easy. First we cut Jimmy loose but make sure they don't notice, because having *Jimmy Haggan* on our side makes all the damn difference. Then the *five* of us take on, what, a dozen armed, trained soldiers with no weapons?"

Mike shook his head, feeling his heart rate climbing. He knew this was reluctance dressed up as objection—McCoy just wanted to get drunk and hope for the best, and any suggestion that they take action, take risks he was going to meet with all the reasons it was a bad idea. And the worst of it was, Mike knew it *was* a bad idea, for exactly the reasons McCoy had just outlined. But he couldn't do nothing. He'd spent too much of his life doing nothing, and now he'd spent a year or more doing nothing in a different way, doing nothing by trying to do *everything* all at once. "Don't play that—"

Candace interrupted. "We have weapons," she said.

They all turned to look at her. She blushed, and Mike thought it

made her look lovely.

“Jack, your hunting gear is in the back, too,” she said, looking from face to face.

McCoy frowned. “It’s a crossbow, kid.”

She nodded. “And a survival knife,” she said. “And the bow’s an auto-cocker, and you’ve taken down some *huge* Moose with that thing.”

“All right,” McCoy said looking around to make sure none of the soldiers were close enough to hear them. “But it’s still just one weapon.”

Mike was thinking quickly. “An auto cocker means you can reload in what, a few seconds? Without having to plant the thing for the pull. If we can get you into the right position, you could do some real damage.”

McCoy stared at him. “Some *damage*? You’re talking about *killing* people.”

Mike shook his head. “You know how to shoot. You can go for injury instead of killshots.”

“And when they start returning fire? When Hammond gives the order to just kill us all? Burn the place down?”

“And what, you want to just sit here and *hope for the best*?” Mike demanded, feeling his pulse pound. “Look, we have the element of surprise. I go down the trap, get the drop on the guard back there,

and if nothing else we suddenly have an advantage they're unaware of. It's better than sitting here drinking liquor and waiting for someone else to decide if I'm going to live or die."

Eastman was looking down at his hands. "I tend to agree, Jack."

"Me too," Candace said. "Better to do *something* than nothing."

McCoy took another slug from the bottle, eyes on the soldiers around them. "All right. Why you?"

Mike shrugged. "It's my idea, first of all. Wouldn't be right to make someone else take the risk. And I know how to fight. No offense, but you and Mr. Eastman here are a little older and out of shape."

Glen smiled. "And that's being *kind*," he said.

"I don't suppose once I'm in the crawlspace there's a way outside?"

Candace shook her head. "It's literally a crawlspace, maybe three feet high. Its dirty and filled with spiderwebs and pipes and electrical. It's dark—but it's a clean shot straight back to the other trap, which will bring you up behind the freezer in the back. Between that and the shelves and kegs you have a good chance of getting up and out without being seen by the guard."

Mike nodded. "All right. Jack, you stay behind the bar. *Stop drinking*. We need you as sober as possible. I'll make my way back there and take care of Jimmy, and take the guard's sidearm. Then I'll head back, and switch places with you—you head back there through

the crawlspace. The hallway entrance is your best position—no one behind you except Hammond, you'll have visual command of the whole bar. Glen, Candace, when Jack heads back you get behind the bar—casual, move slowly, like you're making yourselves a drink—so you'll have cover.”

“What if Hammond comes at me?”

“Jimmy will have your back,” Mike said. “And I'll be up here with the sidearm. They look like Beretta M9A3s, which means a minimum ten-round magazine, but maybe fifteen rounds. Either way I'm familiar with the basic M9 design and I think I can be pretty accurate with it.”

Candace smiled slightly. “Let me guess: You spent a few months paying someone to teach you about guns.”

Mike nodded, returning her ghostly smile. “I'm no expert, but I'm an okay shot.”

She looked around. “Okay. Me and Glen will be on distraction duty. Anyone looks like they plan on heading back there, we'll do our best to stop them. We ready?”

They all looked at each other. McCoy picked up the cap of his bottle and deliberately screwed it back into place. “Okay,” he said. “Ready.”

### 13. Candace

She added to her virtual resume the little-known skill *pretending to enjoy your own imprisonment*. Her list of skills was getting pretty long and esoteric. She wasn't sure what kind of job they would help her get assuming she wasn't executed in the next eight and a half hours.

None of the soldiers seemed to be paying any particular attention to them, but they were careful anyway, keeping up a stream of chatter and basically pretending to get drunk. It made sense, she thought; they'd tried a few gambits and seen one of their own killed and the other two threatened. It made sense that they would simply drown their sorrows. It served two purposes: It made everyone think they'd given up, and it gave them a reason to hang around the bar area and shift position a lot.

Mike made his way around the bar in stages, always engaged in conversation.

That was the hardest part, she thought. The chatter. Behaving like you were talking to people and hanging out was exhausting when it was all for show, when all you wanted to do was watch the guards and scream out of frustration and fear.

Mike just dropped behind the bar. One moment he was there, the next he was on the floor and hidden from the rest of the room. None of them reacted in any way. None of the soldiers took any notice. And

she kept pretending to have a conversation with Jack and Glen, or she *was* having a conversation but it made no sense, it was just the three of them saying things to each other and nodding. She couldn't pull her thoughts into line long enough to make any sense as Mike crawled to the trap, pulled it up, and slipped down, pulling the trap shut behind him.

They'd allowed about three minutes for Mike to make his way to the other trap in the back room, based on the darkness, the difficulty of moving in such a confined space, and an effort to not make any unnecessary noise. Longer, if he got turned around. But from what she'd seen of him, she doubted that was likely. After that, she had no idea what would happen.

"Excuse me?"

Candace felt herself tighten up, her throat closing up as a surge of panic went through her.

"Young lady?"

*You'll be okay.* She could picture her father nodding encouragingly, telling her to make it work, she was smart, like her mother. She forced herself to turn. Dr. Raslowski scowled at her from his table, his glasses turned into opaque discs of white light by the collection of monitors facing him. He waved impatiently.

"Yes *you*, dear God save me from the hicks of the world. Come *here.*"



Her mind raced. Up to this point, Raslowski had acted as if the entire population of the bar didn't exist, and she realized she preferred to be a figment of someone's imagination. That terrible eyeless face pointed in her direction was much, much worse. She kept hearing him spit *doesn't matter* after Simms had been shot.

*Doesn't matter.*

She tried to mirror his scowl and did the only thing she could think to try: She stalled. "What do you want?"

He cocked his head as if examining an interesting-looking bug. "I want you to *come here.*"

She looked at Eastman and McCoy, but they both had no suggestions for her. So she took a deep breath and turned and walked over to where the Physicist sat, staring at her. As she approached he leaned back and crossed his arms.

"Please do take your time. As you might imagine we came here and are holding you all under guard for no reason of any importance whatsoever, so there is no urgency to *any* of this."

She stopped a few inches away from him. His eyes roamed over her and she felt the familiar, creepy vibe of a man studying her body and making a record of it *for later use*. "What?"

She was conscious of Mike, worming his way under the bar, in the dark, about to creep up from below and try to take out an armed guard, free Jim Haggen, and deliver weapons to Jack McCoy.

“Sit down,” Raslowski said, turning and placing a small metal box on the table. “I’m going to need some blood.”

“*What?*”

Raslowski sighed as he pulled a pair of plastic gloves from the box and began tugging them on. “Solely to check identities. Jesus, *you people*,” he muttered. “King!”

King stepped out of a knot of four soldiers who’d congregated around the front door. “Sir?”

Candace eyed her. She was cute, sort of, short with dark, curly hair. She moved with a fighter’s posture, Candace thought, shoulders out and head lowered, like she was always prepared to scrap. Her face was round and blandly pretty, set in a mask of near-total disinterest.

“Round them up,” Raslowski said. “I need to take some blood samples.”

Candace stood frozen, mind racing. Mike! He was under the floorboards, or in the back about to jump Warner. If they discovered him missing, it would go badly for all of them.

King snapped off a salute, then hesitated, a scowl flashing across her face. *She doesn’t like him, or taking orders from him*, Candace thought. He wasn’t military. He was a scientist, and they’d probably been ordered to take his commands. But how long does that discipline last? Candace ran her eyes over King and noted the black armbands they all wore. If they were right and something bad had

happened and might happen again, and these soldiers were assigned to guard them—

Candace gasped a little as it hit her. The black armbands—these soldiers had been chosen, or volunteered, *to die*. Or at least to take that risk—this was a suicide mission, in some sense. *They were dead anyway.*

King's face smoothed out and she snapped off another impressive salute. "Sir!" Raslowski didn't even notice; he was busy pulling syringes and tubing from the box, along with a small beige device that had a tiny screen on one end. It looked like an advanced pencil sharpener.

Candace thought furiously, holding herself still. If she tried to signal Jack and Glen, she might be observed, it might give everything away. If she did nothing, in a few moments they were going to discover something was up.

*I could cause a disruption—I could jump King and knock her down, start a fight,* she thought.

She saw Mr. Simms in her mind, dead, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. That seemed like a dangerous choice, to say the least.

*I could try to signal Mike. Make a noise.*

*But I don't know what would make it through the floorboards, and I don't know what would make sense to him but wouldn't give everything away.*

King had turned away. Candace knew she had a second to make a

decision, to do something, *anything*.

She thought,

*Jesus Christ, just do it!*

She closed her eyes and let herself drop to the floor.

## 14. Mike

The crawlspace took longer than he'd expected. A second after the trap door was lowered softly behind him, it went pitch black and he smacked his head on a joist hard enough to send him spinning to the floor. He sat for a moment, head ringing, and when he shook it off he realized he was turned-around and had to force himself to pause and regain his bearings. He fished his phone from his pocket and thumbed the flashlight on.

The crawlspace was a disaster, The floor was dirt, uneven and littered with rocks and old cans and bottles. The whole place was layered in spider webs, and as he swept the light around a dozen small bodies scampered away. He was sitting hunched over and the floor joists scraped against the back of his head.

"Three feet my *ass*," he whispered.

He started crawling, awkwardly holding the phone in one hand and trying to avoid the bottles and other sharp edges buried in the dirt. It was surreal and quiet under the bar; the moment the trap door had been lowered all the sound had muted down to nothing, and all he could hear was his own breathing and the crunch of the dirt and debris under him. He moved as quickly as he could, searching the subfloor above for signs of the second trap door.

It was surprising how quickly his sense of the physical space

above faded away. It seemed impossible that the crawlspace was as large as it was—it went on long after he assumed he must be close to the back room. Being able to see only small areas with his phone contributed to the sense that the darkness went on and on, infinite and featureless.

And then there it was: The trapdoor leading up into the back room. He was sweating freely as he positioned himself under it, shining the light up to make sure he could see exactly where it was in relation to himself. Then he killed the light and pushed the phone back into his pocket. Rising up on his haunches, he put his hands flat against the panel and slowly lifted the door up, just as a commotion happened in the bar, shouts and the thud of feet on the floor carrying back to him.

He hesitated, listening. The shouting went on, but he couldn't make any of it out. He considered turning back, creeping back up behind the bar, pretending that nothing had happened, but without knowing what he was crawling back *to*, it was too risky. The best way forward was to press the tiny advantage they'd managed to establish.

He waited another few heartbeats with the trap suspended above his head, listening and letting his eyes adjust. The air smelled damp and ripe, like stale beer. He was behind a shelf filled with cans and cardboard boxes. A wall of used kegs was on the other side, both barriers serving to shield him from the rest of the room.

The commotion in the bar had died down, and he could hear talking in the back room.

“—kind of weather you get up there?”

“All kinds, man. We got that saying: You don’t like the weather, just wait and it’ll change.”

“Four seasons in one day, huh?”

Jesus, he thought, they were *chatting*, getting to know each other. Haggen sounded relaxed, even, like he wasn’t worried about anything.

Slowly, Mike lifted the trap up, standing slowly as he did so. His head swam a little as he straightened up, and for one panicked moment he thought he might pass out. Then everything firmed up. He could see through the shelves that Haggen’s restraints had been adjusted; his wrists and ankles were still bound but he wasn’t hogtied. He sat more or less comfortably on the floor, and gave every indication he was unworried, confident, and possibly enjoying himself. Mike found himself liking this guy a *lot*. He knew that under normal circumstances they would have hated each other, they would have been the sort of guys who were unable to go five minutes without starting an argument. But somehow the alchemy of being in this incredible situation had changed the whole dynamic.

The guard, Warner, stood with his back to the door. He wasn’t holding his sidearm, but Mike thought his posture could be described

as *ready*. He seemed friendly and just as confident and comfortable as Haggen, but was obviously not going to let that interfere with guarding the man as he'd been ordered. Mike was impressed in spite of himself. Some guys could either be friendly or they could be ready. Not many could be easygoing and chatty without sacrificing their situational awareness.

As his eyes got used to the dim light, he scanned the rest of the room. It was an all-purpose supply closet he was surprised had passed a health inspection, assuming they bothered with such things when you were as far off the road as McCoy's place. Dry food, kegs, bottles, condiments, boxes of napkins and other equipment were stacked all over the place.

After a moment's searching, he saw the crossbow. It had been hung on the wall behind Haggen, along with a few other items: A bright orange vest, a green canvas backpack, and a sheathed hunting knife that hung by its own separate strap. He couldn't see any bolts for the bow, but he assumed they would be in the backpack.

There was no sneaking it out. He was going to have to take out the guard, quietly.

He scanned the room again. There was no way to sneak up on Warner; he would have to come from around the shelves, putting him squarely in the soldier's peripheral vision. Even if he managed to get the jump on him, there would be time for him to yell, to attack, to



make noise.

When he looked back at Haggen he jumped, because Haggen was staring right at him, still talking. He winked, then turned back to face Warner as if nothing had happened.

“Dude, you mind if I stood up? My ass is asleep!” Haggen said, all *aw-shucks* hick charm.

Warner hesitated. Mike imagined he was running through the possible interpretations of his orders. Mike had never served in the military, but he’d known plenty of people who had, and he knew the one overarching fact of life in a military unit of any kind was obeying orders issued from the legitimate chain of command was not *optional*.

But what *was* legitimate? Mike had the idea that this was an unusual unit, in an unusual circumstance. From the shadows, he watched Warner’s face as he worked through the implications.

“All right,” he finally said, laying a hand on his sidearm. “I won’t help you. If you can stand without assistance, and stay *right* where you are, I won’t object.”

“Cool,” Haggen said. With what Mike thought was transparently theatrical effort, he struggled to get to his feet. When he was upright but still clinging to the shelf for support, he spun away and sailed into Warner.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry!”

Warner caught Haggen by instinct, and Haggen grabbed onto his

shoulders and spun him slightly so his back was turned. Mike moved immediately, running and launching himself at the pair, wrapping one arm around Warner's neck and slapping his other hand on the soldier's mouth. For a few moments the three of them struggled in near-silence, with the only noise being heavy breathing and grunts, the scraping of their shoes on the floor.

For one horrible moment, Mike thought Warner was going to break free. The kid was *strong*. Haggen, unbalanced by his ankle bonds, had both hands planted on Warner's sidearm, preventing him from drawing it while Mike choked him with an imperfect, rushed hold.

Slowly, Warner weakened, and finally slumped his weight against Mike, who strained something in his back desperately stopping them all from falling with a loud crash to the floor. Gently giving in to gravity, the three of them sank down until he and Haggen were sprawled, panting, on either side of the soldier.

"You a wrestler, too?" Haggen said between gasps.

"Was," Mike said, sitting up and rubbing his arm. "For a few months."

"I gotta become a millionaire and travel the world taking lessons," Haggen added, slowly climbing to his feet. "It's got benefits. What's the plan?"

Mike got up and plucked the crossbow, backpack, and knife from

the wall. He dropped the bag and bow and pulled the knife from the sheath, using it to cut Haggen's bonds. "Grab his sidearm." He looked around. "Does he have more zipties on him?"

Haggen stuffed the gun into his waistband after checking the safety and then searched Warner's pockets. "Yup," he said, brandishing a fistful of black plastic ties.

"Let's get him up and tie him by the wrists to the shelf here, so it looks like he's standing," Mike said. "Then you get the bow and bag out of the way and wait here, look like you're still bound, just in case anyone just pops their head in here. I'm going back through the crawlspace to the bar, and Jack is coming back through. he'll take the crossbow, and then the two of you are coming down the hall, and we're taking them all down. We're taking the bar."

Haggen met his eyes and held them, face slowly breaking into a grin. "Hot damn, when you first walked in I thought you were an asshole *tourista*," he said. "I'm declaring you an honorary citizen of One-Eyed Jack's."

Mike smiled back. "It's an honor." He walked over and dropped back into the crawlspace, crouching down. "Don't start anything unless you have to," he said. "The longer we put this off, the better our advantage."

Haggen nodded, bringing the bag and bow over and dropping them on the floor. "Got it. I can improv the shit out of this, don't

worry.”

Mike nodded and disappeared under the floor. A moment later he popped up again. “Haggen: This is all about surprise. We’ve got a handgun and a crossbow. We’ll try our best to help out in the bar, but it’s gonna be you and McCoy making the difference. McCoy’s skittish about killing people and he’s going to go for non-fatal shots to incapacitate.”

Haggen nodded. “You think I should too?”

Mike’s expression was neutral. “I think you know if we fuck this up, we’re all going to be hogtied in here until they decide what to do with us. And they’re going to be *irritated* if we injure or kill some of them. I guess all I’m saying is, we gotta make this *count*.”

Haggen nodded. “Got it.” Then he grinned. “Kill ’em all.”

## 15. Candace

She didn't know *how* to pretend to faint. She'd just dropped to the floor and then did her best to keep still, to keep her eyes closed, and not startle as people drew close, touched her, shook her, and yelled at her. She felt a vague sense of shame being a woman who'd just used the oldest trick in the damsel-in-distress handbook to solve a problem, but she'd had no time to think. And she *had* been in distress.

She heard her father laughing and saying *you're a card—you have to be dealt with*.

She heard Raslowski shouting at everyone to just leave her there until he got his sample, then a woman—King?—shouting for “the kit,” which Candace assumed was the first aid kit. Or at least she *hoped* it was the first aid kit; after just a few hours in the company of these people, she had to admit she couldn't be sure they didn't have something like a Suffocation Kit, or an Immolation Kit. At this point, lying on the floor and struggling to appear unconscious, Candace had to admit nothing much would surprise her.

She worried about how long to keep up the pretense; what was believable? She didn't like not knowing what all the commotion meant. Was someone pointing a gun at her? Was Raslowski preparing to stick her with a needle? What were the others doing? The lack of information was maddening, but she kept her cool and

forced herself to remain still for what seemed like forever.

Until the worst smell in the world was suddenly thrust up in her face, seemingly directly into her nose. It startled her, and her eyes popped open as she convulsed, trying to scramble away from it, whipping her face this way and that. Someone took hold of her arms and legs, and that just made the panic worse, and she struggled even harder.

“Hold her! Hold her!”

Raslowksi’s voice had the same pitiless tone she remembered from before. She began imagining all manner of awful things being done to her—needles and scalpels and Raslowksi grinning over her, telling her that its *doesn’t matter* in that nerdy, clipped voice of his.

“Ms. Cuddyer!” Raslowksi shouted, and she realized he was leaning over her, his pinched face red and his glasses reflecting the light back making him look eyeless, soulless. “Ms. Cuddyer! I must ask you a few questions! Please! Calm down!”

She would never overpower them, she realized, and wasn’t even sure why she was trying. Although her performance was likely distracting them all in a huge way, so there was that. She wasn’t going to stop them from doing whatever they were going to do, she thought, so she should take a page from her father’s playbook and meet whatever it was head on. She stopped struggling and took a deep breath. Then she forced herself to look Raslowksi directly in the

eyes.

He studied her. “You are calm, Ms. Cuddyer?”

She nodded. He wasn’t holding anything alarming in his hands, nothing sharp or ominous. He still had rubber gloves on, which wasn’t exactly encouraging, though.

“Ms. Cuddyer, this is *vitally important*, when you appeared to lose consciousness just now, was the event preceded by a strong sense of *deja vu* or premonition, did you see what might be described as a *vision*?”

She frowned at him. “What?”

“You *lost consciousness*, Ms. Cuddyer. Before doing so, did you experience a strong sense of *deja vu* or what might be described as a *vision*??”

She frowned at him. “I—”

He leaned forward and slapped her across the face, hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

“You fucking—” She struggled with the people holding her down, but was powerless, and finally surrendered, going calm again.

“This is *vital*, Ms. Cuddyer. Yes or no?”

She shook her head, eyes locked on him.

He sighed. “All right. I’m going to take a blood sample.” He raised his eyebrows. “I am going to keep trying until I succeed. If you fight, you will only injure yourself.”

She nodded.

“Good.”

It was very clinical, very professional. He tied off her arm, told her to make a fist, and moments later the needle was in. He hummed as the blood filled the tube. He switched it out for a second tube, then pressed a cotton ball against her vein as he pulled the needle out.

“All right,” he said. “If we let you up, will you cause trouble?”

She shook her head.

He smiled. She thought it looked like a grimace. “Very good.” He looked up and nodded. The hands were removed from her limbs, and King stood up and held her hand out to help Candace up. Then Raslowski was in front of her, proffering a bandage. She blinked, then reached out and took it. He winked and turned away.

She turned, holding the bandage in her hand. She started walking towards the bar, then stopped. Jack McCoy was nowhere to be seen, but Mike was behind the bar, leaning forward with his arms crossed, staring at her.

She walked over rapidly. “Everything okay?”

He nodded. “We’re just picking our moment,” he said quietly. “You okay?”

“You went down like a sack of potatoes, Candace,” Glen Eastman whispered, looking around exactly how Candace imagined nervous conspirators looked. “What happened?”



“I’m fine. I needed a distraction. It was the best I could do.”

Mike smiled. “Smart girl.”

“What did that bastard do to you?”

She shook her head. “Just took some blood,” she said to the retired teacher. “Asked me some questions. He seemed really worried that I’d—that I’d seen *visions*. Hallucinations, I guess.”

“Symptoms,” Mike said quietly. “He was worried you were showing symptoms of something.”

Eastman frowned. “A *disease*? Doesn’t make sense, Mr. Malloy. None of these people are in any sort of protective gear.”

Candace shook her head. “He seems freaked out. And who *wouldn’t* be—I mean, I don’t care what his experience is, or his career, no one’s prepared for this scenario, right? You don’t think he’s under stress, ready to lose his mind at any moment?” She shook her head. “My bet is, they aren’t 100% certain what they’re dealing with. Raslowski’s worried he might have missed something.”

Mike nodded, scanning the room. “Doesn’t change anything. We’re not going to get a perfect moment to do this.” He looked at her. “You up for a little more risk?”

She didn’t hesitate. She hated the feeling of being trapped in here, of being pushed around. Someone had just held her down and taken *blood* from her for the purpose of running a DNA check of her identity—she was ready to fight back. She nodded. “What do you need me to

do?”

“If we can get them to gather someplace, when McCoy starts shooting he’ll have a good chance of taken more of them down if they’re clumped up. They’re too spread out now. Think you can figure out a way to make them come together? At least a few of them?”

She turned and followed his gaze around the room. There were ten soldiers in sight, and Raslowski. Mike was standing there, so the one named Warner was already neutralized. And then, of course, there was Hammond, sitting in Jack’s office. The ten men and women were posted at intervals; two on the front door, two at the hallway that led to the office, the bathrooms, and the back room, and the rest around the perimeter.

“We should at least get the two away from the hallway,” she said quietly. “If Jack shows up there, they’d be out of his line of sight and able to intervene without even exposing themselves.”

“Good,” Mike said, and she was pleased to hear approval in his voice. “That’s good thinking. If you can get them to leave their post, it’s a huge advantage for Jack. We’re gonna get one shot at this. If we blow it, if they overpower us, kill some of us—there won’t be a second chance. Anyone not dead will be restrained, imprisoned. So far they’ve been more or less polite. Forgiving. Tolerant.”

Glen Eastman snorted, and Mike held up a hand.

“Okay, Mr. Simms—but since then Hammond had made it clear

she's willing to let us have a modicum of freedom as long as we don't get in her way. But that's on *sufferance*. We pull this and we fuck it up, all that changes."

"Maybe then we *don't* do it," Glen said in an urgent whisper, leaning in behind her. "Maybe we take a little time to work it out, have, I don't know—a *plan*?"

"Every minute we wait makes the odds they discover what's happening in the back room better," Mike said. "We can't wait. It has to be now."

Candace's heart was pounding. She saw all the bad outcomes, all too clearly. She saw herself knocked down, a knee in her throat, plastic zipties around her wrists. She saw herself shot, blood exploding from the entry wound. She saw *everyone* shot, Hammond lining them up facing the wall and ordering her soldiers to execute them all. She imagined standing next to Mike and hearing the report of the gun and the sound of bodies dropping, getting nearer, nearer, right next to her. She saw it all going off the rails and all of them dead. But she also saw the same outcome if they did nothing, and she thought it would be better to get shot trying to stand up for themselves than just sitting and waiting.

She nodded. "Okay. I've got a plan."

## 16. Candace

She steeled herself. She could hear her father again, the man who'd supplied most, if not all, of the sage advice she'd received over the course of her life: *Sometimes you just gotta step in it.* He'd said that any time he had to do something without the luxury of preparation, research, or practice. Like the time he had to give a speech at her Eighth Grade class because the father who was scheduled to talk about Career Day got sick, and he had to just step up to the podium in front of twenty-three disinterested kids and their even less-interested parents and talk about being a Plumber.

Correction: A *Master* Plumber, something that at least got a laugh from the class. And when she'd informed him that the teacher had suggested Mr. Cuddyer for an impromptu speech, she remembered the frightened look on his face, and then the immediate, warm smile as he'd shrugged, looked at her, and said *well, sometimes you just gotta step in it.*

She took a deep breath and thought, *well, Dad, here I go stepping in the biggest pile of it I've ever seen,* and started walking across the bar towards Dr. Raslowski.

She knew the paths of the bar perfectly. She'd covered every square foot of the worn wood, she'd gone through countless pairs of sneakers weaving her way between tables for tips. She kept her eyes

locked on Raslowski's pale, skinny frame as she moved, because she was worried if she looked at any of the soldiers they'd know what she was about to do, and if she saw them knowing she'd lose her nerve, because there was the very real possibility of being shot, just like poor Mr. Simms.

Raslowski was concentrating on a compact piece of equipment that he'd put on his crowded table. She could see he'd inserted one of her blood samples into a slot on its side, and he was typing instructions into a tiny chiclet-style keyboard. His glasses reflected the light of the tiny LED screen, making him look eyeless, like a monster.

She thought she could feel the whole place stiffen as she drew close to him. The two guards by the front door each stepped forward slightly, and she knew every single soldier had their eyes on her.

"You get what you need?" she asked, trying to make her voice bitter and acidic, which wasn't very difficult.

Raslowski didn't look at her. "Please go away," he said.

"Do I have it?"

That made him blink and glance at her, though he looked at her midsection instead of her face. "What did you say?"

"Do I have it? It's a disease, right? A bug? Am I sick?"

Mike had made a joke about an alien virus, but something told her it couldn't be that simple—a disease. As Glen had pointed out, no one

was following any sort of containment protocol. No one seemed worried about contracting anything. But it seemed like a perfect excuse to act like an idiot.

He stared at her belly for a moment more, then turned to look back at his work. "Go away," he said with an irritated sigh.

*Well, Dad, she thought. Here I go.*

"You think you can just snap your fingers and have me *tackled* and do whatever you want," she spat. "But maybe you don't, you son of a bitch!"

She launched herself forward and slapped him across the face as hard as she could. It hurt like hell as he hand made contact. Raslowski let out a squawk of combined surprise and pain and was spun out of his seat, one laptop and the testing machine clattering to the floor. Candace herself was overbalanced and she staggered forward and to the side, crashing into one of the tables and chairs, which skidded across the floor and allowed her to gracelessly hit the floor, landing on her ass with a single bounce that made her click her teeth together.

*Up, she thought, head suddenly buzzing. Get up, goddammit.*

She clawed her way up using a chair as a brace. The two guards from the front door were almost on her, so she pivoted away, off balance, and crashed into another fourtop. She took hold of the edge of the table and dragged it around, swinging it into their path as she

skipped into another lane.

She stole a glance at the guards by the hall entrance. They were on high alert, tense and following the action, but they hadn't moved yet. There wouldn't be any other chances; if they subdued her, she had little doubt Hammond would be tired of the constant trouble and would order they just be restrained. Or killed.

She whirled. She had four soldiers in pursuit. She needed more, she needed them all, which meant she was going to have to somehow stay ahead of them long enough to pull everyone in.

She leaped up onto the nearest table. Took another leap, and immediately another, and she was ten feet away from them. She hesitated, crouching on top of the tables, as two more soldiers left their posts to join in pursuit. But not the two by the hallway.

She leaped to another table, then another, then with an effort that sent the table under her skidding backwards into the shins of her pursuers, she launched herself for the bar itself. Glen scrambled to the other end as she hopped over.

A strange feeling of delirious excitement descended on her as she plucked two of the heavy beer mugs from under the bar and came up throwing. Her first one hit one of the soldiers in the shoulder, spinning her around. The second missed as the rest ducked, but she dived down and returned with more ammunition, tossing one at the knot of four working their way towards her. Then she pivoted, forced

herself to exhale, and took aim at the two by the hallway, making the one to the left duck in shock as the mug exploded into glass shrapnel over his head.

She ducked and retrieved four more mugs, holding three awkwardly in the crook of one arm and striding quickly down the length of the bar towards the hallway.

*You motherfuckers, she thought grimly, you're going to move from that spot if I have to set you on fire.*

There had been one moment in her life as exciting as this. Senior year of high school, drunk with some friends, she'd broken into the school and run around the dark, empty halls playing pranks. Looking back, it was all silly, juvenile stuff—toilet paper everywhere, a thousand photocopies of her friend Shelly's ass littering the halls—but in the moment she'd had this white-hot thrill, that sense that the moment she'd engaged in a little casual breaking and entering she'd crossed a line and had a free pass. She was already in more trouble than she'd ever been, so why *not* stay ten more minutes and break into Mr. Hemming's office and retrieve four years' worth of confiscated items?

It was the same feeling she felt now as she ran to the end of the bar and planted herself to lob glassware at the two soldiers. She'd crossed that line thirty seconds before. If they were going to shoot her, if they were going to tie her up, whatever it was they were going



to do, it was already going to happen. Nothing she did was going to change that fact, and there was this incredible sense of freedom because she literally couldn't make things worse.

Glen ducked down and ran back the other way, intercepting the pursuing soldiers by apparent accident in his haste to escape danger. *You go, old man!* she thought. If nothing else the Weirdest Day of Her Life had shown her a side to old Mr. Eastman she was glad to be aware of. She hadn't realized it before, had never consciously thought about it, but the way Mr. Eastman had transformed from the history-spouting PE teacher of her teen years into the slightly ridiculous old man hanging around the bar all the time, always happy to discuss his theories on sovereign citizenship and the myriad ways the government had abandoned the original intention of the Founding Fathers had been sad for her. Seeing him show this kind of spirit was exciting.

She hurled a mug at the closest soldier, and he ducked and scrambled away. She sent another one trailing him, then launched a third at his partner, who dived behind the nearest table. She sent one more glass bomb in his direction, then spun and ran back along the length of the bar. Two soldiers appeared at the other end while two paced her on the other side. She was aware that someone was yelling, bellowing really, but she didn't have the time to home in on it.

With a leap she was on the bar, sliding a few inches on her ass

before spinning and leaping to the floor. She stumbled, an ankle turning under her weight, and staggered forward. Two of the uniformed men were just a few feet ahead of her. She froze, and one of them stepped aggressively towards her, then stopped.

She stared at the soldier's suddenly perplexed face. Then her eyes dropped to the crossbow bolt sticking out of his thigh.

## 17. Mike

The moment she started walking, he wanted to reach out and stop her, call her back. For a second the insanity of what they were doing hit him, and hit him hard. The chances they would all wind up dead were stacked against them. Then he reminded himself that chances were they were going to end up dead no matter what, and taking a chance at going out in charge of their own destiny was better than sitting on his ass in this shithole bar, waiting to be executed, or to start coughing up blood.

He watched her storm over to Raslowski, though, and thought it should be him out there with a target on his back.

He watched with admiration as she laid into the scientist, fighting back the urge to grin. When she leaned in and slapped him hard enough to send the short man spinning to the floor, he was as surprised as anyone in the room. As the two guards by the front door leaped into the chase, he stepped behind the bar, nodding to Eastman and making his way to the trap door again. No one was looking in his direction.

He wouldn't be any use in the front room. He wasn't armed, and if Candace failed to pull the guards away from their posts, they would be on high alert and intolerant of any other misbehavior—and he didn't doubt the next step would be to simply restrain them all. He

had to put himself where he thought he might be of some use, and that was with McCoy and Haggen.

He dropped into the crawlspace and started moving, crawling as fast as he could. Glass cracked under his hands and knees and cut him, but he ignored it, listening to the noise in the bar as it receded and yet swelled and swelled. Sweat streamed into his eyes and dust and cobwebs choked him. When the second trap loomed above him he pushed himself up and climbed onto the floor of the back room.

He held a finger up to his mouth, breathing loudly through his nose. McCoy and Haggen had both turned with their weapons, and each nodded as he walked briskly for the door and back up the hallway. He pushed webs and dust off his clothes and pushed his bloody hands through his hair, composing himself just before he stepped into the office, saying “Colonel you had better get out here!” as he turned the corner.

Hammond was already out of her chair and around her desk, on her way to investigate the noise of chaos drifting from the bar. She stopped, and for a split second they stared at each other.

Her arm moved. Mike threw himself forward.

Candace needed time, she needed chaos and confusion. He’d seen enough of Colonel Hammond to know she was the sort of commander who took control of situations very quickly, effectively—with one order she would have everything back under control, and he

needed to stop her from issuing that order. He needed to ensure she wouldn't get in McCoy and Haggan's way, either, or creep out behind them.

He locked onto her right arm, using his weight and momentum to drive her back into the desk. She bared her teeth and tried to push him off, but he was too heavy and had the advantage—she was off balance and he was driving forward with his legs. With her free hand she slapped at his face, trying to get a finger into his eye, forcing him to whip his head around to avoid her.

He leaned forward, bending her back over the desk and pinning her arm and holster between them. He pushed his free arm up and over hers and bent it down towards the desk, putting his weight into pinning it down.

Without warning, Hammond swiveled her pelvis and somehow rolled him; with all his force concentrated on pinning her down he was easily shifted horizontally, and suddenly she was pushing *him* until he crashed into the wall with teeth-shaking force. He hung onto her arm with everything he had, and then suddenly she went still.

“All right, Colonel,” he heard Haggan say. “Back on off.”

He had Warner's sidearm pressed against Hammond's head. After a moment's hesitation, she decided to take him seriously and put her hands up by her shoulders. Mike leaned forward and snapped open her holster, removing her sidearm with one clean motion. Keeping

his eyes on hers, he felt around her pockets, locating one extra magazine and pocketing it.

Out in the bar, the noise had reached incredible volume. Mike flicked the safety off the weapon and stepped back from Hammond.

“Not exactly the plan you outlined, huh?” Haggen said.

“Had to improvise; the guards didn’t cooperate. Thanks for the assist. I’ll take it from here.”

Haggen sketched a lazy salute. “I live to serve, motherfucker,” he said, grinning, and turned to step back out into the hallway.

“Take out a ziptie,” he said to Hammond. “And go to the radiator.”

She didn’t move right away. “You’re making a terrible mistake here,” she said.

He shook his head. “Colonel, you made the mistake when you swept in here and didn’t tell us anything. When you treated us like prisoners. You didn’t leave us any choice.” He gestured with the gun. “Ziptie. Radiator.”

She turned and started walking, fishing in her pocket. He watched her hands. “Maybe so,” she said. “I’d like the opportunity to explain what’s at stake, why our orders are what they are.”

“You’ll get it,” he said, following her a few steps behind. “Once we’re in control.”

She snapped off a sudden, angry laugh. “*We’re* not even in control, Mr. Malloy.”

She held a ziptie up in one hand as she stopped in front of the radiator.

“Loop it around the radiator’s feed pipe,” he instructed. “Don’t pull it tight.” He watched her do it. “Put your wrists through the loop.” She did so, settling down on the floor. He leaned in quickly with one hand and pulled the ziptie tight.

“Ow!”

“Sorry,” he said. “Hopefully you won’t have to be like this for long.”

“If they end up cutting off my hands, I’m bringing that bill to you.”

“Noted.” He turned just as the noise out in the bar died away completely—followed immediately by a scream and a volley of gunfire.

He started to run.

As he neared the dividing line between the dark hallway and the bright bar, he forced himself to slow down and pressed himself against the wall. He took a breath and checked the Beretta before leaning forward to look in.

Five of the guards were down, two with arrows in their thighs, one clutching a gunshot wound in his shoulder that was bleeding heavily. The other four were gathered behind an impromptu breastwork of flipped tables, exchanging fire with Hagen and McCoy, who were behind the bar, popping up and dropping down. He couldn’t see Candace or Eastman.

Taking another deep breath, he ran into the room and turned right, racing along the wall until he was perpendicular with the soldiers behind the tables. For a moment they were completely exposed to him and unaware of his presence, and he took aim.

He remembered his anatomy lessons with his shooting guru, a plump, taciturn man named Jerry who lived on a rundown ranch in Montana, tons of acres his family had owned for decades. Jerry made a living as a ballistics expert, and had been happy to take what amounted to a year's salary to teach Mike how to shoot—and a lot of other things about guns that went beyond shooting.

“You don’t shoot at someone to *wound*,” Jerry had complained of the request. “That’s hippie bullshit. First of all, you can’t have that kind of control. Second, no matter where you aim you can hit something vital and kill them. But mainly, you shoot to *stop*. Someone coming at you, you need to drop ’em. If you try to aim for some fucking *nonlethal* spot, you’ll end up missing, or killing them by accident. You want nonlethal, kid, shoot rubber bullets.”

“Yeah,” Mike remembered saying around his beer. “But say I just want to *know*. Maybe I’m writing a book.”

Jerry, he recalled, had sighed in resignation, obviously reviewing the money Mike was paying him. “Well,” he said, “if you actually *were* dumb enough to try and drop someone *non-lethally*, you got to avoid bones. Bone shatters bullets and keeps them in the body—shoot



someone in the ribs and that bullet's gonna dance around in there. The torso's where you drop people, but you can hit the heart. The head's less fatal than you would think—most headshots don't actually kill anyone, because they tend to be grazes, the head's a smaller target than you think at distance, and skulls are *thick*. Arms and legs—too many arteries, too easy to bleed someone out.” He shrugged, taking a pull from his beer. “If I was looking to wound someone, and stop them, I'd go for the foot. Reasonable size of target if you're close enough, chances of fatality are low, hurts like fuckin' hell and immobilizes them.”

Mike thought: *Aim for their feet.*

Remembering Jerry's eternally aggrieved training, he took a breath, steadied himself, and sighted on the nearest soldier's boot.

He didn't shoot.

Instead, he moved the gun slightly until the next soldier's boot was right in the crosshairs. Then he moved the gun back, exhaled, and squeezed the trigger. The familiar kick and ear-splitting noise, and the nearest soldier rocketed backwards, screaming as his boot exploded into gore. Mike moved the gun and settled himself, not hesitating, not worrying about what the others were doing (“Easiest way to get dead is to try to shoot and watch your target at the same time,” Jerry had said, chewing on a cigar) and squeezed the trigger again.

Another scream.

He stepped forward rapidly. “Down! All of you, weapons down!” In his peripheral vision he saw someone stand up behind the bar. There was a tense moment when he wasn’t sure it was over, then the two guards dropped their guns and put their hands up.

Mike realized he was trembling. *Get the weapons, he thought, first gather up their weapons. Then first aid. Then*

He didn’t know what then. He almost didn’t believe they’d won.

A second later there was a commotion near the front door, and Mike looked up in time to see Raslowski dash out of the bar, something in his hand that might have been some sort of radio or phone. Before he could react, Candace dashed from behind the bar, carrying McCoy’s crossbow, and without a glance back sprinted after him.

## 18. Candace

Jack McCoy was dead.

At first she thought they were going to pull it off almost perfectly. When the shooting started, she'd panicked for one moment, ducking down behind the bar and freezing. The gun in Jimmy's hand was louder than anything she'd ever experienced before, and she could tell that things weren't going exactly like they'd planned, although at first the soldiers were obviously taken completely by surprise. When they started returning fire, the sound was unbearable.

Slowly, she pulled herself together. What Mike said rang true for her: If this failed, they wouldn't get another chance. They would be tied up and imprisoned at best—shot at worst. And no one was going to listen to her if she argued that she'd cowered behind the bar instead of taking part. And if her friends died because she'd been too terrified to help, she'd never forgive herself.

She forced herself up into a crouch and peered around the end of the bar. She couldn't see what she could do without a weapon. She turned to look behind the bar for something she could use just as Jack McCoy screamed, spinning around to face her, his chest a sudden explosion of blood. For one second that seemed to last much longer they looked at each other, and then he folded up and collapsed, dropping to the floor. The crossbow bounced towards her.

For some reason, this snapped her into action. She didn't yell, or scream, or cry—she felt the shock rolling through her, but it burned away her panic. She crawled forward and took the crossbow, cocked and ready, still warm from his hands. She took a deep breath.

Out in the bar, as if from a very great distance, she heard someone shouting. *Down! All of you, weapons down!*

She stood up, raising the crossbow and ready to take a shot, just as Raslowski dashed from behind an overturned table and ran out into the night.

She ran without thinking; she saw Raslowski sprint out the front, and she thought everything they'd just gone through would be rendered meaningless if he, if he—she didn't know. Called for help? Maybe. Reported their mutiny? She wasn't sure. She simply had an instinctive sense that letting Dr. Raslowski escape spelled disaster.

For a moment the outside was disorienting. It had only been a few hours, but rushing out into the open, chilled air made her feel like the world was spinning away. And for one brief moment she thought, *I could just keep running*. She was out, she was free, and if she told herself she would call the authorities, send assistance, or just assume the others had the situation well in hand, she could excuse herself.

Except she couldn't. She couldn't leave Jimmy, or Mr. Eastman—or even Mike, who she barely knew but already liked tremendously. It wasn't how her father had raised her.

She put her head down and got her knees up like Mr. Eastman had taught her so long ago in gym class, and she ran after Raslowski.

He kept glancing back at her, his round white face tense with fear. He was slowed down by his fumbling attempts to get something out of his pocket, and with a lance of fear she thought it might be a gun. They hadn't seen Raslowski handle a weapon—hadn't seen him do anything except tap on his laptops and operate other pieces of equipment—but that didn't mean he didn't have one. He was with a military unit, after all.

It was dark, and she had to rely on her memory of the place. She knew the parking lot and the woods around One Eyed Jack's like she knew her bedroom at her father's house, which existed in a strange state between her adolescent taste and attitude and the bland neutrality of a guest room. In the same way she knew which floorboards in that small bedroom squeaked, knew without measuring what would fit or not fit in the closet, or every divot and scratch on the old kid's desk that still sat in the corner, she was almost able to imagine the rocks and other features in the parking lot that would trip her up. Raslowski had no such advantage, and he stumbled and tripped his way through the dark, letting her slowly gain on him.

He didn't seem to know where he was going, anyway; he weaved this way and that, changing direction seemingly at random. He was

nearing the tree line, and she knew if he made it to the trees she'd have a much harder time keeping him sight, and might even lose him.

She stopped running.

She knelt down on one knee and steadied the crossbow on it, sighting on Raslowski. She'd never hunted with a crossbow before, but she'd taken down her share of deer, and there was no time to worry over the finer points of shooting a bow as opposed to a gun. She squinted down the sight, tried to compensate for his erratic path, and squeezed the trigger.

He kept running and didn't even seem aware that someone had taken a shot at him. She tried to find the button that would autoload the next bolt, but her fingers kept missing it, and she didn't look down at the bow for fear of losing track of where he was. As she frantically ran her hand over the bow, she saw him finally free whatever it was he'd been trying to pull out of his pocket.

He spun and brought his arm up just as she found the little bump and pressed it, the crossbow humming smoothly in her hands as if it was happy to be doing the task it had been designed for. As Raslowski stumbled backwards from the force of his own momentum, a thrill of adrenaline and terror swept through her: *He was pointing a gun at her.*

Despite what had happened in the bar over the last few hours, this was a wholly new experience for her, and her reaction was almost

involuntary: Her finger twitched, and the crossbow hummed, and then Raslowski was spun into the darkness as a crossbow bolt sank into his shoulder. There was the report of the gun going off, and then she was racing towards him, trying to keep her eyes on him in the gloom.

She thought her heart might just fail, it was beating so fast and ragged. It kept skipping beats, and then seemed to overcompensate with a lurching series of half-beats. As she ran, she felt weak and giddy, almost like laughing.

“Ah, fuck,” she heard Raslowski moaning, gasping. “Ah fuck you *shot* me!”

She staggered to a stop and loomed over him. She could see at a glance that the wound wasn't going to kill him, at least not without some willful negligence. She knelt and retrieved his Beretta, feeling the weight. Feeling dog-tired, she held out her hand. “Come on,” she said gruffly, certain she had a good therapeutic vomit in her future.

Back in the bar, the eerie quiet made her pause, hefting the bow. It didn't seem possible that things were that quiet, after the chaos and violence of the previous few minutes. Pushing Raslowski ahead of her, she crept in, nerves sizzling, but found everything under control: The five surviving soldiers, including Hammond, were all kneeling with their hands behind their heads while Mike tied them all

up with their own plastic zipties. The unconscious one from the back room had been brought in, and was on the floor, breathing peacefully. Jimmy covered everyone with one of the soldiers' handguns, which had been piled on the bar along with several extra magazines.

The bar was a mess. Raslowski's equipment was strewn across the floor, several tables had been chopped up by gunfire, hunks of wood and broken glass were everywhere, crossbow bolts jutted from the walls. Two of the soldiers were wounded, although to her untrained eye none of the injuries looked life-threatening. Three bodies lay still on the floor, and she avoided looking at them.

Her eyes caught on something and she looked back at the bar itself, searching until the movement caught her eye. She couldn't stop a small, amazed smile from blooming on her face: The goddamn Dipping Bird was still going, completely unscathed.

"Good," Mike said, smiling at her. "You had me worried for a moment."

Hammond, who had been staring at the floor, motionless, looked up sharply.

Mike frowned, looking at Raslowski. "You okay?" he asked her, crossing over to them.

"I'm *not*," Raslowski said sourly, grunting in pain. "Thanks for asking."



Haggen stepped over and took Raslowski by the arm. “Look on the bright side, Doc,” he said. “If Candace Cuddyer can’t kill you, chances are you can’t be killed by any mortal means.”

Mike guided her to a table. She realized she was numb and shaking from reaction. She’d come close to killing another human being. She’d hadn’t meant to, and hadn’t actually done it, but it still left her shaken. And even if she hadn’t actively killed anyone, she’d been involved with the deaths of other people. Her eyes kept finding their bodies, no matter how hard she tried to ignore them.

A glass of whiskey was placed on the table in front of her, and she looked up sharply to find Glen Eastman looking down at her with obvious concern. She smiled at him and lifted the glass, but didn’t drink right away. “Thanks.”

“You’re *lucky* he isn’t *dead*,” Colonel Hammond snapped.

Candace looked up, surprised. The colonel was leaning forward and staring at her fixedly, her eyes intense.

“Why?” Mike asked, stepping around to position himself between Hammond and Candace.

Candace couldn’t see Hammond as she replied, but she could hear the tone of her voice, which sent chills down her spine. “Because,” Hammond said steadily, “if that man dies, then every one of us, and everyone *else—everyone*, everywhere, all over the world—is as good as dead.”



## **Part Two**



## 19. Mike

A tense silence greeted Hammond's words. Jimmy stepped away from Raslowski, who sat slumped in a chair, breathing hard and sweating as he stared at the protruding shaft of the bolt in his shoulder. Jimmy put his handgun close to Hammond's head. She didn't flinch, or take her eyes off of Mike.

"My friend Jack's dead because of you," Jimmy said. "He was kind of a prick and we argued a lot and I'm not really sure he liked me all that much, but you know it makes me not really care if you're next."

Mike felt another exhausting dump of adrenaline as he realized Haggen was maybe off the rails a little. But he didn't disagree. These people had marched in and taken them prisoner. They'd killed first. He didn't think the townsfolk had any choice but to fight back, and he wouldn't feel bad if Jimmy shot them all. But he also thought it would be a mistake.

"Jim," he said, stepping up behind him, slowly, careful, "We need to ask them questions. We need information."

Jimmy nodded. "Sure," he said. He extended the gun a little further and wagged it at her. "We're going to ask you some questions. And you're going to answer them. Or I'm going to shoot you dead."

Hammond didn't react. She stared at Mike, not Haggen.

“There’s no time—”

“No,” Mike said, pulling a chair from the floor, setting it in front of her and sitting down. He didn’t know what to do, how to proceed, but he didn’t see any profit in admitting that. “No, we’re not going to play that game. Here’s what’s going to happen.” He looked over his shoulder. “Glen, would you see to Dr. Raslowski? Don’t pull the bolt out, but get him some water, maybe, and make sure he isn’t bleeding too much.” He looked back at Hammond. “You’re going to tell us what’s happening, or Mr. Haggen here is going to shoot you. I’m going to ask Mr. Haggen to shoot you someplace non-fatal, so we can keep asking your questions—”

Haggen snorted.

“—but I don’t know if he’ll listen. Or if he’s good enough with that gun to miss your arteries. So, Colonel Hammond: What’s happening?”

The colonel rolled her head on her neck and stared at Mike in silence.

Frustration and anger boiled inside him. “Last chance, Colonel,” Mike said. “Why’d you storm in here and detain us? What’s going on at that facility up the road?”

Hammond swallowed. “I don’t relish the idea of a bullet, Mr. Malloy,” she said. “But I am unable to answer your queries because this is a matter of national—”

Haggen cocked the hammer of the gun. Mike held up his hand. He had the sense that this situation was hanging by a thread and could turn into disaster. If Haggen killed Hammond, he wasn't sure they'd ever find out what was happening.

"A disease?" he said. "An experiment gone wrong? Radiation?"

Hammond's face was tight with tension. "I am unable to answer your queries—"

Haggen stepped forward and pushed the gun into Hammond's forehead. The colonel closed her eyes tightly, but didn't move.

"Colonel!" Mike said, leaning forward. He was worried Haggen would do something too quickly. They needed time for Hammond to really think about being killed, being hurt. They needed it to sink in, to give them a shot of getting some information from her. He couldn't say so to Haggen, so he tried to inject some urgency into his voice. "Colonel, you said if we lost Raslowski, if he died, we were all already dead. Why? You've already told us that much. Fill in the blank. Let's start there."

Mike pictured Detective Avvy Ramirez, Jersey City Police, who he'd hired for a week to give him lessons in interrogation techniques. Bald, loud, chubby, he was the sort of cop who wore gold chains and broke into spontaneous dancing while talking, suddenly swaying his hips to an imaginary salsa beat. He had a reputation as the guy you sent into the box to question someone, because he more often than

not got guys to talk when no one else had been able to.

Ramirez stressed that *everyone* wanted to talk. Everyone wanted to tell their story. The trick was getting around their natural reluctance. And Detective Ramirez had taught him to look for chinks in the armor, stubs—things the subject had *already* said. They were almost always more willing to say more on the same subject, and once people started talking they had a tendency to *keep* talking.

She swallowed, eyes still shut. For one second Mike thought he had her. Then she opened her eyes, and they were clear, and her gaze was steady.

“I am unable to answer your queries,” she said in a steady voice. “Because this is a matter of national security.”

“Son of a *bitch*,” Haggen said, jaw clenching. Hammond closed her eyes again. Mike half-stood, reaching for Haggen.

“It doesn’t matter if *I’m* dead.”

Everyone froze. Mike stood up, looking over Hammond at Raslowski. Glen Eastman hovered over the physicist uncertainly, but the doctor didn’t seem to be about to pass out any more. He was staring at Mike with a bright, alert expression.

Haggen turned and trained the gun on him, but Raslowski didn’t pay him any attention. Hammond twisted around, face going red.

“You are *not authorized* to offer any data or assets to non-cleared individuals, Doctor!” Hammond snarled.



“Jim!” Mike shouted, stepping forward and putting a hand on Hagggen’s arm. “Jim, he’s volunteering, man. He’s a *volunteer* here, okay?”

“Doctor!” Hammond shouted.

“Shut up,” Raslowski snapped. “It doesn’t matter. You think *this* scenario is salvageable?” He barked an unsteady laugh, and Mike thought the good doctor was further gone than he’d assumed. “We had one goddamn job, Colonel. All we had to do was preserve the status quo. All we had to do was prevent anyone from leaving for a few hours.”

“No one’s left,” Hammond said, her voice like gravel.

Raslowski snorted derisively. “Sort of, close to, kind of—it doesn’t matter. We had a clear baseline, and we have deviated from it *severely*. Imagining that we have accomplished our mission is ludicrous. But say we have! Say that despite this *clusterfuck* all around us, we’re still on target, praise *Jeee-sus!* Then it *still doesn’t matter*. Because then it’s over.”

The other soldiers murmured. Mike thought Hammond was going to explode, and he was ready to jump on her. Then he stole a glance at Hagggen, who was sweating and kind of wild-eyed. Mike figured he’d never killed anyone before. Never threatened someone in cold blood. They were all crashing from the fight, getting achy and shivery in reaction. He thought he had better take control of the

situation soon, get things sorted out, or they were going to lose their chance to find out what was going on.

“Candace,” he said without looking away. “You ever fire an automatic handgun?”

There was a beat of silence. “No. But I could sure try.”

He smiled. “Take one from the bar, come here, and I’ll give you the five-second lesson. Jim. *Jim.*”

“What!” Haggen said, too loud. He was blinking sweat from his eyes. “What?” he repeated, more softly.

“Candace and me are going to take Raslowski into Jack’s office, so he can talk freely, okay?”

Haggen nodded, eyes locked on the doctor. “Okay.”

“Keep things cool out here for us, right?”

Haggen nodded, but he was still holding the gun on Raslowski. Mike reached up and put his hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. He jumped, then lowered the gun and looked at Mike. “Yeah, okay, okay,” he said.

“Thanks.” Mike turned and found Candace standing next to him, holding one of the Berettas.

“Safety,” she said, demonstrating. “Trigger.”

He nodded. “Good enough for now. Keep the safety on.” He turned and gestured at Raslowski. “Come on. Can you walk? We’ll patch you up while we talk.”

“I’m coming with you,” Glen Eastman said, looking ridiculously

portly as he cleaned his glasses. “I want to hear this.”

Mike watched Raslowski struggle to his feet and walk towards him. He didn’t want Glen getting in the way, and he wanted to control the information. Maybe it didn’t make any sense, him thinking he would be the best person to be in charge, maybe he couldn’t justify it, but he didn’t want anyone else making decisions for him.

“Glen,” he said. “We’ve got a manpower shortage. It’s already me and Candace in there with one prisoner. Would you mind staying out here and backing up Jim? We’re gonna come right out and report back to y’all.”

He’d thrown in the *y’all* on purpose. As he said it, he pinched his nose and rubbed it, mirroring Eastman as best he could. One of the things he’d learned in his travels: Mirroring. It worked remarkably well; by adopting people’s expressions and gestures, they saw themselves in you and trusted you. It was subtle—it wasn’t magic—but it was effective.

Eastman pursed his lips, then nodded curtly. “All right. I can see that. I’ll even things up out here.” He turned and walked to the bar where the confiscated sidearms were piled. Mike and Candace looked at each other and he almost felt psychic, knowing she was wondering if letting her old gym teacher have a gun was a good idea. But one battle at a time.

Raslowksi was pale, and when Mike leaned down to help him walk he didn't object, steadying himself with a hand on Mike's shoulder. Once in the office, Mike pointed at the desk. Raslowksi sat on it, sliding himself onto it with a pained grimace. He looked defeated and tired, Mike thought; a spray of blood had stained his neck and hair.

"Let me take a look," Mike said, leaning in to examine the bolt in the shoulder. It wasn't terribly deep, but he remembered the bolts McCoy had loaded in it. After making sure the wound wasn't bleeding actively, he nodded.

"Well, Doc, that's a barbed head in there, which means it will tear your shoulder to pieces if we try to pull it out. It doesn't seem to have hit an artery, so I'm sorry to tell you that our best course of action is to just leave it in place. We can wrap it in some bandages to secure it so it doesn't get moved around, and make a sling for your arm. Until we have some real medical services, that's all I think we should do."

Raslowksi grunted. "Fine." He looked around. His glasses had been bent at some point and sat at a crazy angle on his face, but his eyes, bright blue, were bright and alert and intelligent.

"So," Candace said, casually holding the gun at her side in what Mike thought was an implied—and impressive—threat. "What's going on, Doc?"

Raslowksi shifted his weight and grimaced. "It's simple. We came

here to make sure you couldn't leave, because you're all going to do terrible things in the near future."

Mike and Candace exchanged a look. "Who's going to do terrible things?" he asked, looking back at the older man.

Raslawski sighed. "All of you."

## 20. Candace

“Dr. Raslowski,” Mike said slowly, rummaging in McCoy’s desk for the first aid kit. “Back up and explain this to us like we’re five years old. Let’s start there.”

Raslowski took a deep, shuddering breath and burst into coughs. “All right. Let’s start here: The universe is math.”

“Math,” Candace repeated. It made her think of math class at the high school, which had been her least favorite subject. Numbers always slipped away from her thoughts, and never behaved the way teachers or tutors or her brainy friends insisted they did. And then people got irritated and angry with her when she complained that it was all lies, all this math, that it was an ancient conspiracy going back centuries, going back to the Greeks and the Romans, pretending that numbers made sense.

“Math,” Raslowski said, wincing as Mike probed the bolt, a roll of clinging bandage in his hand. “Everything in the universe—you, me, the air, the planets, plasma, photons—is governed by mathematical relationships. You ever hear the theory that we’re all living in a *Matrix*?”

Candace blinked slowly. She felt like she’d somehow flashed back to all of the awful dates she’d ever been on, all the guys obsessed with geeky TV shows and video games. Maybe, she thought, she’d hit her

head earlier in the day and everything since had been what one of those geeky old dates had called an *Owl Creek Bridge* Event, just her fevered brain spinning a fantasy while she lay in a ditch somewhere.

Raslawski turned to look at Mike. “The movie? Where the world’s a computer simulation?”

Mike nodded. “Sure. There is no spoon.”

Raslawski nodded, satisfied. “That’s my field. It’s a gross, *gross* simplification—ah, *fuck*, be careful!—but that’s where I live. Figuring out the equations that govern the universe. Think of it like this, you know what a variable is, right?”

Candace had a flash of memory and almost jumped in excitement. “Like  $X=15$ , so  $2X=30$ ,” she said.

Raslawski nodded. “That’s an equation. If you know the equation and the solution, you know what the variable is. You change the variable, you change the solution.”

Mike began wrapping his shoulder and the bolt up in bandages, and the doctor’s voice took on a rough, strained quality as he worked.

“In the universe, the equations I’m talking about—well, think of it this way: Us, all of us, we’re all the product of a billion, a trillion equations. How tall we are, the color of our eyes, our talents and our genetic infirmities, all products of math. And I was working on figuring out those equations and the variables. Imagine if I could “decode” you,” he said, jerking his chin at Candace. “I would be able

to see every aspect of your existence. I'd see your past and your future, because it's all math, it's all governed by the variables and their values. Even better, I could *adjust* those variables. Change the value of X to 16 instead of 15, and suddenly you have blonde hair."

Candace blinked. Raslowski grimaced and his face reddened.

"As I said: A *gross* simplification. I'm making this easy to understand."

Mike looked up from his work on the wound, and winked. She found the wink remarkable. It reminded her of her father, who hadn't met an occasion of any degree of solemnity that couldn't be lightened with a well-timed fart joke. "He means he's *dumbing it down* for us," Mike said.

Raslowski closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Just think of it like that: Once you know the equations, you can hack the universe. Hack *anything*, reality itself. Of course, the equations are incredibly complex. We won't be folding time or pumping gold bricks out of a machine any time soon. We have only a limited understanding of the implications—we can change variables, but only in very limited scenarios, and we're basically terrified to do it because we don't have the computing power to truly map out the consequences."

"No cure for cancer," Candace said. Raslowski's eyes popped open and he actually smiled at her, a perfectly natural-seeming grin that transformed him from Evil Genius to Friendly Grandpa.



“That’s right!” he said. “We aren’t there. Not even close. But—  
ouch, for *fuck’s sake*, man!—stay with me here, we *are* at a point where  
we can sometimes see the variables. Their value, if you follow.”

Mike paused, seeming to freeze. Candace felt the weight of the  
gun in her hand and put her Bedazzled Smile on her face. She  
thought Mr. Eastman would recognize it, as would Mr. Howard, her  
old Algebra teacher. The Bedazzled Smile was a soft, diffuse grin that  
conveyed a sort of trashy feminine stupidity that worked with men.  
Boys, too, but mainly men. It was a smile that said, *oh, my little girl  
brain can’t handle all this mayun-ly talk!* and then burst into  
bubblegum-flavored giggles.

The Bedazzled Smile had never been something she was proud of,  
but it was a tool that had gotten her out of a lot of assignments and  
pop quizzes. And now, as she used it on Raslowski, she regretted all  
those previous uses. They’d left her with a sorely lacking  
mathematical background, and she kind of wished she could have  
saved up the power of those previous moments and focused them all  
right here, in order to force Dr. Raslowski to just make some damn  
sense.

“I don’t,” she said. “Follow, that is.”

“He’s saying they can see the future,” Mike said. “Isn’t that right,  
Doc?”

“Give the man a prize,” Raslowski said. “We can’t read all the

equations, or re-write them. We're decades, maybe a century or two away from even being able to make the slightest changes to reality. But we stumbled on a cheat, a hack. A way to see what the values of variables in those equations will be. So, we can take a variable—say, the position of a water molecule—”

Candace's smile collapsed. “A water *molecule*?”

“As I said, this is *complex*—think of all the molecules in the *universe*, each one with an equation solved for it, each one representing a variable in *another* equation. No, forget that. Just remember this: I have been able to create a computer modeling environment that can take the position of a water molecule in one moment and accurately predict it's location and state in *another* moment. Past, future. We can model the position of that molecule from the moment an Oxygen atom and two friendly Hydrogen atoms bonded to the moment that bond ends. We can skip along that timeline like watching a video on your laptop.”

*Laptop*, she thought. *Little did the good doctor know he'd stepped back into 1985 by entering this bar, this town.*

“And once we have identified a variable, or a matrix of variables, we can even change their values and see how it affects the timeline. Except we don't actually *do* that, because it would be nearly impossible to predict all possible permutations. A single tweak to a single variable could bring reality crashing down, changes

reverberating backwards and forwards along a timeline, and rippling outward in a domino effect.”

Candace nodded. “Right. The Butterfly Effect.”

Both men turned to glance at her. Mike was smiling. Raslowski scowling.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “*Something* like that.”

Candace thought he somehow made the word *something* mean *nothing*.

Mike was tying off his bandage work. It looked pretty thorough to Candace, and she knew there would be another aw-shucks smile and a story about shadowing a doctor for three months if she asked about it. “So you can model people—you can track what someone’s going to do.”

Raslowski nodded through a wince. “We can. With enough data.”

Candace forgot to act dumb. “How could you *possibly* get enough data for something like that? People aren’t a single molecule. They’re —” She paused. “Well, *trillions* of molecules.”

Raslowski smiled. “More than that, actually, but the modeling was very clever. I was able to scale up to individuals through a compression algorithm. But we still needed data to work with. I had the math, I needed the *variables*.” He sighed. “You’ve heard about all the scandals surrounding government surveillance, yes?”

There was a moment of silence. “No,” Mike said, working on the

sling. “No way. Look, even if the Feds and the Spooks bugged every computer, every phone, every traffic camera, *everything*, no way you’d get even a tiny fraction of the data you’d need to do what you’re talking about.”

Raslawski nods as Mike slides his arm into the sling. “True enough. Except, remember what I said about compression? There are patterns. All data has patterns. You figure those out, you can guess them, predict them, anticipate them. Like compressing an image file—you don’t need to represent every single black pixel, you just need to know that anything that isn’t another color is black.” He shrugged. Candace thought he looked pale, and figured shock was setting in. She guessed they had a few minutes before he went woozy.

“You’d need a boatload of heavy duty computers to crunch those numbers,” Mike said.

“And we have them, just up the road. We’ve been pouring data in and refining the models for two years. We’ve been running the numbers.”

Candace frowned. “Why *here*?”

Raslawski hesitated for a moment. “Frankly? Because there’s not much *here* here. Not many people. Not much happening. A lot less data to chew through. If we tried modeling even one street corner in New York City, we’d drown. But here, it’s manageable, relatively speaking.”

Mike stepped over to stand next to Candace. He crossed his arms across his chest. “Okay, so you’ve been working for two years to predict the future right here. And then you, what—ran the models? Got some output? And came running over here guns blazing? Why?”

Raslowksi was sweating lightly. “The models worked. Green across the board. And when they spat out their results, we saw that you were going to destroy everything. You were going to cause the end of the goddamn world.”

Mike and Candace glanced at each other. Then Mike leaned forward slightly. “Who’s going to end the world?”

Raslowksi sighed. “All of you.”

## 21. Mike

There was a moment of silence. Mike looked at Candace. The moment their eyes met, she dissolved into laughter. For a moment, Mike was horrified, and then he couldn't help but smile.

“So let me get this straight,” she said, struggling for self-control. “Me, Candace Cuddyer, thirty-one year old high school grad waitress, Glen Eastman, retired, kind of pedantic schoolteacher, Jimmy *Haggen*, layabout, conspiracy theorist, and drunk, and Mike—”

For a moment, she had to fish for his last name.

“—Malloy, millionaire wanderer seeking *wisdom*—”

Mike winced internally, but decided it *did* sound ridiculous when you vocalized it.

“—are gonna destroy the world? I'm sorry, Dr. Raslowski, but if you've caused all these people to be killed because your computers told you *that*, you've fucked up *massively*.”

Dr. Raslowski didn't seem fazed in the least. “I assure you, the modeling was checked and double-checked and then *triple*-checked. The math is sound, and the math doesn't lie. We've confirmed our ability to predict outcomes and behaviors on smaller-scale subjects. It's true the data set involved here is more profound, but the math scales.” He glanced down at his arm and moved it slightly, testing the discomfort. “Keep in mind, this is not something that happens

*overnight*. The algorithms go years, decades into the future.” He looked back directly at Candace. “I assure you, Ms. Cuddyer, if left to your own devices, over the course of the next twenty-seven years you, Mr. Eastman, Mr. Haggen, and Mr. Malloy would, through a series of events, come to be responsible for the worst disaster the world has ever seen. *Billions* will die. Civilization itself is snuffed out.”

Mike and Candace exchanged a look again. Again, she burst into laughter.

Mike looked back at the scientist, who now seemed, if not *friendly*, at least approachable. “You know ... that’s just *nuts*, Doc. I’m sorry, but ... first of all, I just met these folks, and if you hadn’t come crashing in here, I’d have left by tomorrow—”

Raslawski looked pointedly at Candace. “No, Mr. Cuddyer, you wouldn’t have.”

Mike felt himself flush. He felt like an idiot, like a schoolboy. The fact that Candace began laughing even louder didn’t help at all.

“I *would* have,” he insisted, trying to reassert himself. “And no offense to anyone, but the idea that *any* of us would be capable of something of that nature—at that *scale*—is *ludicrous*.”

Raslawski shrugged, then winced. “Is it? You’re a wealthy man, Mr. Malloy. You have resources and connections. Mr. Haggen is a survivalist; he has a remote property that is off-grid and booby-trapped extensively, he has an arsenal of weapons and a larder filled

with rations. Mr. Eastman, you might be interested to learn, is actually very heavily involved in radical politics—secessionists, actually, groups that believe states, cities, even individuals can legally declare themselves autonomous political entities—the FBI has a file on his online activities a mile long. And Ms. Cuddyer—well, I’ll admit Ms. Cuddyer’s role is less clear. Perhaps she’s merely the catalyst that brings you and the others together—”

“Oh, fuck *you*,” Candace groaned.

“—but the math is correct. If we allowed you to go about your business tonight, the model showed disaster. In twenty-seven years. So I started changing variables—in the models only, of course; using our technology to actually change the variables *directly*, as I’ve said, would be most likely disaster. I sought something we could change, something we could effect, that would remove the disaster without changing other fundamentals—and without requiring direct intervention, something that could be effected more ... naturally. It took some time—and four backup generators—but I found that variable, and it was, I admit mysterious: Keep you here. Detain you for one night. When I ran the model with us securing this place and keep you—all four of you—from leaving, well, the future got much better.”

Mike shook his head. “There’s a glitch. Your math is wrong.”

Raslowski opened his mouth, but Candace cut him off. “It doesn’t



matter,” she said. “We broke your experiment, didn’t we, Doc? Don’t tell me your ‘model’ took into account all these deaths, our mutiny, your own injury and imprisonment.”

Raslawski didn’t respond right away. Mike felt an overwhelming weariness, and suddenly found himself struggling to stay upright. He replayed Candace saying *oh, fuck you* to Raslawski and suppressed a smile.

“It’s impossible to say,” the scientist admitted, “without running the models again. Every action has a reaction—the Butterfly Effect, as you called it. So, yes; perhaps Mr. McCoy’s death and the other events here have changed the model. Perhaps. Or perhaps those altered variables have had other effects—speeding up the time frame, perhaps, perhaps we’ll see disaster in five years instead of twenty-seven, or thirty-seven years. Or perhaps the precise nature of the end is changed. It’s impossible to say without an analysis.”

Candace was shaking her head, but Mike chewed his lip. He was thinking about Julia, for some reason. He was thinking about the chain of events that led to her death, to him waking up stiff and hungover, and her on the floor, frozen in mid-crawl. There were gaps in his memory, but he knew the chain was long and complicated: Several places, dozens of people, random strangers. Taxi cabs and bars and restaurants and bathroom stalls and someone’s apartment. He thought about all those tiny variables, and how if he’d been able to

see it all laid out before him—if he'd been able to *model* the events—he might have seen that precise moment when it all went sideways, when one more hit was one too many, when deciding that four a.m. was late enough would have saved her life. And his.

“Analysis,” he said slowly. “An analysis you could do back at your facility?”

In the corner of his eye, he saw Candace look up sharply. He ignored her.

Raslawski looked from him to Candace and back again. Calculating, Mike thought. That was okay; he had to assume that the good doctor would make a break for it, or try something to regain control over the situation. He would do the same in his place. “Yes,” Rasolowski said, looking back at him. “At the facility I have access to the mainframe cloud and ... other equipment. I could do a through model run and determine the new outcomes.”

“The new *future*,” Mike said.

“Yes.”

“Mike,” Candace said curtly. “A moment?”

He nodded and they stepped over to the doorway, turning away from Raslawski.

“You’re not taking this bullshit seriously?” Candace whispered. “Changing reality? All of us just variables in an equation? The four of us—*us!*—somehow bringing about the end of the world? I mean,

c'mon, Mike.”

He nodded. “I know how it all sounds. But, Candace, these people went to a lot of trouble to lock this place down and hold us hostage. There has to be a reason. Say you’re right—he’s bullshitting us, making up a wild story. Okay, why not check it out? We find out it’s bullshit, we might be able to start digging up what’s really going on.” He rubbed his eyes. “Besides, look who’s out there—these *are* the authorities. If we call the cops, what happens? More *authorities* show up. I wonder how that will go?”

She chewed her lip. He let her think. He didn’t suppose you could push Candace Cuddyer into much, and suspected any attempt to do so would result in her planting her long legs and getting stubborn as a mule about it—it was just his sense of her.

A sound drew his attention to the dark hallway outside of McCoy’s office. A soft, split-second squeak or scrape. He froze, straining to listen, but it didn’t repeat. He decided he’d imagined it.

“Okay,” Candace said. “Fine. You’re right: We need information. If the good doctor wants to take us to that facility, we should go and at least get some more information.”

He nodded. He liked how she thought: Calm, no panic, and logical. “Come on, Dr. Raslowski,” he said, taking the older man by the arm. “Let’s go to your lab.”

“What do we tell Jimmy and Mr. Eastman?” Candace asked as they

walked the scientist down the hall.

Mike liked how she still called her old schoolteacher *Mr. Eastman*. It said something about her, though he wasn't sure *what*, but he liked it nonetheless. "A version," he said. "I don't think we should start talking about changing reality and modeling the universe until we know for certain what we're talking about. Let's just tell them we're going to get more information."

"Jimmy's gonna want to come," she said, sounding resigned.

Mike nodded. "We'll figure it out."

In the main part of the bar, Mike recognized the stink of tension. Haggen was seated at a table with a bottle of whiskey in front of him, one hand resting on a Beretta as he took a pull. Eastman was seated at the bar, looking, Mike thought, old and tired, his face flushed, his mouth open.

"Keep an eye on our stormtroopers," Mike said, affecting a casualness he didn't feel. "Dr. Raslowski has offered to give us the full story back at his facility, and we're taking him up on it."

"Dr. Raslowski, you are absolutely *prohibited* from disclosing any data or information about the project!" Colonel Hammond snapped, surging up from the floor unsteadily, her hands bound behind her back. "Furthermore, you are—"

Haggen surged forward, snatching up the gun and hitting Hammond across the face with it, sending the officer spinning

around and crashing to the floor with a strangled cry.

“*Furthermore*,” Haggen said, sounding drunk, “you can shut the hell up.” He turned and looked back at them, offering a smile that Mike was surprised to describe as *shy*. “Go. We’ll keep an eye on things here. You go and find out what’s going on.”

Mike studied him. He was surprised that Haggen was taking things so well. Candace had expected fireworks and difficulty, and Mike’s limited experience with the man confirmed that expectation. It felt wrong, but there wasn’t time to sit and contemplate and interrogate Haggen about his motivations. He glanced at Candace, and when she shrugged her eyebrows in a way he suspected was meant to be translated as *that’s Jimmy being Jimmy* he nodded.

“Come on,” he said, taking Raslowski by the elbow. “We’ll take my Land Rover.”

## 22. Candace

She turned to follow Mike and Raslowski out the front door. It felt strange to leave the bar, suddenly, like she was exposed. As they walked towards his car, she glanced back at the building, the blazing lights so familiar, still promising the sort of familiar, warm, safe space she wasn't sure she'd ever experience again. They were heading into the unknown. She was with a man she'd met three hours before and a scientist who was only telling part of what he knew, and apparently the future of the world hung in the balance.

She wondered if she'd ever see the place again. Then she wondered if she *had* maybe hit her head earlier in the day. Slipped in the shower and was right now half-drowned in the mildewy horror that was the old clawfoot tub. It would explain a lot about her day.

Mike's Land Rover was an older model, dented and beat up. "*This* is what transient millionaires drive?" she asked.

He smiled a little as he fished his car keys from his pocket. "New cars get more attention. *Expensive* new cars get stolen, vandalized, broken into. It's like people don't like rich folks." he shrugged as he unlocked the doors. "Besides, it's a rental."

She snorted, grunting as she helped him load Raslowski into the back seat. The physicist cried out in pain several times when the bolt in his shoulder was jostled. When she opened the front door she

found the passenger seat piled high with books, notebooks, a battered and abused tablet computer, old-school print maps that had been folded in some sort of mockery of the idea of folding maps, coffee cups, and fast food bags. The scale of the pile stunned her.

As Mike climbed into the driver's seat he glanced over. "Ah, shit, sorry. Here."

He leaned over and swept it all out the door and onto the pavement. She laughed a little and climbed in. *Why not?* she thought. *World's ending anyway, according to Raslowski. And we're the Four Horsemen.*

The fact that there were four of them was, she thought, *surely* a coincidence? And then she heard her father's voice, saying *it's just a coinkydink*. The old man had been fond of that sort of wordplay, and Candace could remember many times when she'd rolled her eyes at Mr. Cuddyer's puns. Coinkydink had been one of the *better* ones.

The drive was quiet and dark, the only sound the engine and the only light his headlights dancing over the trees and the pavement. It was easy to imagine that they were the only people left alive, that the world had ended already, that they had it backwards: The doom was external, and was coming *for* them.

As they came up on the building, Raslowski sat forward, putting his head between them. He was breathing hard. "Don't go in the main entrance. Go past and look for a service drive."

The facility was a one-story building of yellow brick, with mean little windows spaced along the top. There were loading bays on one end, a huge parking lot of cracked blacktop in front, and a small two-story addition on the end with the glass doors of the main entrance. Floodlights had been set up, and still burned brightly, giving the whole place a fake daytime look that reminded her somehow of the Moon Landing photos: Everything looking brittle and overly-lit.

Mike drove past the front gate; it was just chain-link that had been secured with a length of metal chain.

“That’s just for show,” Raslowski said as if reading his mind. “This place is hardened, trust me.”

The service entrance led to the loading docks and was blocked by a similar chain link fence. “Smash it,” Raslowski instructed, and Mike pushed the pedal down and sent the rental crashing through. The noise was a lot louder than she’d expected. If anyone was alive in there, she thought, they knew someone was coming.

“Go past the loading docks and around the back,” Raslowski said. They slipped past the eerie, empty loading bays and turning into the unlit area behind the building. The weeds hadn’t been trimmed back, and it was like driving into a sudden jungle, making the whole installation feel like it existed in a different world, someplace wild and ancient.

“Stop.”



Candace helped Raslowski out of the car while Mike stood guard with the gun.

“Over there,” the scientist said, gesturing with his bound hands. “The door.”

Concrete steps led up to a security door, steel painted green. Candace could see it had a magnetic locking system. A keypad had been installed in the wall next to it. She led Raslowski to the steps and up to the keypad, Mike trailing behind. The silence was almost perfect; aside from the breeze in the overgrown weeds, there were just their own sounds: Their steps on the dry twigs and grass, the soft noise of their clothes. She thought it was oddly peaceful after the violence at the bar.

On the landing just outside the green door, she saw that the keypad had no markings: Just sixteen buttons, four by four, without any indication of their purpose.

“A little help?” Raslowski said, gesturing.

Candace looked at him. She was suddenly conscious of the risks being taken. They’d come out here alone, assuming they knew what the situation was—abandoned facility, one slightly off-balance scientist running around. What if they were wrong? What if it was a trap? She was certain she was the stupidest woman in the world. Of *course* there would be another squad of soldiers here, probably already on their way to arrest them.

There was nothing for it but to go forward, though. She put her hand on the keypad.

“Top left,” Raslowski said. “Bottom row, second from right.”

She keyed in the buttons as Raslowski called them. There was no indication that anything at all was happening, aside from the plasticky sound of the buttons as she pressed them. Raslowski kept issuing instructions in what appeared to be an endless code that had no numbers or letters, just memorized button positions. After what seemed like the hundredth of them, there was a soft click and the green door sagged inward. Candace stepped aside.

“After you,” she said to Raslowski, and Mike smiled.

They followed him into a dark corridor, pitch black. She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out her phone; the screen showed no signal, but she thumbed on the flashlight and directed it ahead of them, the battery at 33%. The hallway was empty, and led directly to another door that looked a lot less secure.

The green door slid shut behind them, and the sense of being in an enclosed, dark space was overwhelming.

Raslowski reached for the door’s handle, and Mike stepped forward quickly and grabbed his arm.

“No rushing through and locking it behind you,” he said. He turned to look at Candace. “Who knows what dark maze of unfamiliar rooms and corridors is in there.”

She nodded. Carefully, they edged through the door more or less as a group. Candace felt gritty and gross. She wanted a shower and a fresh pair of jeans. She'd settle for some dry shampoo and clean socks.

They were in a small room that was obviously a security office. Four large flat screens were mounted to the wall, and a bank of computers lined two walls to their right as they walked in. Four empty chairs lay chaotically on the floor, as if knocked over in a hurry. Raslowski, with Mike still holding his arm, walked over to the door across the room, paying no attention to the screens. He opened the door and she followed them through, thinking that the place *felt* empty, if nothing else, and no one had come to shove an AR-15 in her face.

She found herself in a huge room, in boiling heat, buffeted by an incredible humming noise.

The whole building was one massive space, the size of a football field. And it *hummed*.

"Servers," a voice said, making her look over her shoulder in surprise. "Possibly the largest cloud of computers in the world, though of course we can't know for sure because it's all top secret."

The new voice belonged to a woman, a young girl in a white lab coat Candace couldn't possibly believe was worn by any actual scientists. She was tall, wearing a sensible skirt and pink blouse, her

bright red hair tied back in a no-nonsense bun that she was instantly jealous of, her own brunette curls always resisting any sort of sensible arrangement. Candace thought she was absolutely gorgeous, albeit the most pale woman she'd ever laid eyes on. She thought that if Legs here turned out to have an advanced degree of some sort she would hate her for life.

"Myra," Raslowski said, sounding weak and tired, his voice thin and whiny, "they don't have clearance."

Mike smirked and raised the gun. "I hate to disagree with you, Doc," he said. Then he looked at Myra, and Candace hated herself for studying him for any signs of being instantly in love with this tall, skinny girl in cat's-eye glasses who looked like she knew how to dance—like, *really* knew. "Myra, is it? Doctor Myra?"

Myra adjusted her glasses. "Well ... no. No doctorate for me."

*Good*, Candace thought, and felt ashamed.

"Myra is my computer liaison," Raslowski said. "She speaks machine language and Assembly."

"Just her here?" Mike said, looking around. They were all sweating. Candace noted the perspiration stains on Myra's coat with a note of sour triumph. "In this whole big place?"

Raslowski made a face. "We are a need-to-know group," he said, breathing hard. "Small and efficient was the way to go. And no one knew we were here, Mr. Malloy."

“Wait,” Myra suddenly said, putting a hand up to her neck and fiddling with a simple gold chain that hung there, “*you’re* Mike Malloy?” She turned to look at Candace. “And that means you’re ... *Candace Cuddyer?*”

Candace glanced over at Mike and he met her gaze, smiling slightly in a way that felt private and personal and *for her* and she felt some of her tension drain away. And then she felt like an idiot. She wasn’t *going steady* with the man. They’d just met, and she was a grown-ass woman, and if Myra had the best-looking legs she’d ever seen *and* was smart enough to be the computer geek on a top secret government project, so what? Candace thought her shoes were ugly, and that was good enough for the moment.

“Well, yes,” Mike said, looking back at her. “Why?”

“You don’t understand,” Myra said, smiling nervously. “The whole project was moved here because of you and Mr. Eastman and Mr. Haggen. We’ve been tracing your threads for months now. You’re, like, the closest thing we have to superstars in here.” The look on her round, pretty face froze and soured. “You know, because—”

“Because we’re supposed to end the world,” Mike said, turning and winking at Candace. “We heard. We don’t *believe* it, but we heard.”

Candace thought it was interesting, the difference in the story: Raslowski made it sound like they’d moved the operation here

because of the location's simplicity, the lack of variables. Legs had just said they'd come specifically for *them*. She wondered if Mike had noticed it.

"Oh, it's true," Myra said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose and sounding to Candace's ears completely and totally sincere. "The model is very clear. The four of you, if you were allowed to go about your business tonight—well, we're not sure, because the apocalypse is a data dump beyond anything we've ever modeled before, frankly. All we know is that you four, in that bar tonight, were the key. Beyond that we couldn't tell."

"Myra," Raslowski hissed.

She looked at him, blinking blankly. Candace thought she must have some sort of spectrum thing going on, as pretty as she was. "Oh, right. I just assumed, since you brought them here, that it was okay."

"To be fair," Mike said, holding the gun up. "He didn't have a choice."

Myra suddenly seemed to understand what was going on. She looked at Raslowski and frowned. "Are you *hurt*, Emory?"

He waved a hand dismissively. "Yes, but ... it's a casualty of war. Look, Myra—there have been some developments that have enriched the data set. I've agreed to re-run the model to see whether the outcomes have changed."

"Oh," Myra said, nodding. Then her eyes widened. "Oh! As in, no

end of the world. All right, come on.”

*Not as smart as she looks*, Candace thought with mean, petty satisfaction.

Myra started walking briskly into the server farm. They followed, slower, Raslowski leaning on Mike and moving at little better than a shuffle. Myra led them through what felt like a maze of humming machines. To Candace they were just black boxes; there were no screens or wires. The heat was incredible, even though she could see the central air ducts every few feet, and could feel the rush of fan-pushed air.

Towards the rear of the building was a metal security door, another unmarked keypad set into the wall next to it. A bright red and yellow sign proclaimed that **ONLY AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL BEYOND THIS POINT**. Myra punched in the lengthy code and stepped aside gracefully, following them in to a dimly lit, constrictive tunnel. It sloped downward, and Candace became aware of the weight of the world above them and around them. They walked far longer than she thought possible, the downward slope steady. At first the tunnel had been cooler than the server room, but as they sank it grew warm again.

She turned to glance back at Mike. He smiled slightly, gun in hand but pointed at the floor, his index finger alongside the barrel. She tried to decide if it was feminist to admit she liked having him watch

her back.

The tunnel ended at another security door, which led to a blindingly white room. It wasn't terribly large, but it was lit with what felt like several thousand white fluorescent bulbs. The temperature dropped suddenly, and she found herself shivering as they squeezed in. There was a vibration under her feet. The only furniture was a single metal desk with a keyboard and mouse and a chair. A huge screen filled the entire wall across from the desk.

Candace looked around. "What is this place?"

Raslowski sat down in the chair, sweat shining on his forehead. "This," he said slowly, "is where we change reality."



## 23. Mike

He looked at Myra and smiled, trying to look friendly. “Not literally.”

She smiled back, and he was aware, dimly, of being uncomfortable with Candace watching him interact with the other woman. He tabled that disturbing realization for later unpacking, when perhaps he wasn’t being accused of someday destroying the world as he knew it.

“Actually,” Myra said, pointing to a black box about the size of a three car batteries tucked under the desk, “we do have the capability of limited direct variable substitution within a controlled field, generated by—”

“Myra,” Raslowski wheezed. “These people are not *cleared*.”

Myra closed her mouth with a click and looked flustered. Mike looked at the older man, whose fingers were flowing over the keyboard. He glanced at the large screen on the wall and saw what looked like computer code scrolling down. “So let me get this straight: You can decide we’re going to do something terrible in *the future*, you can violate almost all of our civil rights and kill one of our friends—” he rolled past the exaggeration of calling Jack McCoy a friend of his “—but we can’t hear about the process that initiated this

chain of events?”

Myra smiled again, a fleeting, nervous tic of an expression. She looked at Raslowski, who said nothing. Mike sighed and lifted the Beretta. “Okay, then, point of order, but I have a firearm, and if you don’t explain this as best you can in the next ten seconds, I’m going to go back out to the servers and start shooting.”

Raslowski’s hands paused. “Mr. Malloy, I know you don’t yet believe this, but I know you are capable of terrible things, so I take this threat very seriously. Very well. Myra, give them the layperson’s version while I work. I have agreed to analyze the revised scenario before we make any further decisions.”

Myra nodded and smiled, wringing her hands nervously. “Well, uh ... in a nutshell, in this room we can ... change things. But that’s it.”

Mike looked at Candace and held her gaze for a moment, wordlessly trying to convey *are you buying this?*

“Your boss said *model*,” Candace said. “I didn’t make it to college, but *model* is kind of a passive word to me.”

Myra nodded, warming to the role of tour guide. “Yes, it is! And generally speaking the data sets are too large to map all the possible variables and their interactions. For example, you Four Horse—well, that’s just an unofficial ... anyway, you four at the bar. The model clearly showed your path—from this evening forward you would be on a course that ends with catastrophe, worldwide, global

catastrophe. No matter what other variables we changed, it happened, and it involved you four—*unless* we changed your movements tonight. If we kept you in the bar, it all mapped differently.

“*But*, we couldn’t change that directly. Let me back up: Dr. Raslowski has been working with this for decades, and he’s developed a way of ... harnessing the equations that run the universe. The source code of reality. He can even plug in a new value for a variable, or two, or three. And when you change the value of a variable in reality, there’s a ripple effect. The systems here can analyze a limited data set and predict what a change to the variables will do—but only when you’re in this room, because the Raslowski Box generates an energy field that limits the variables. There are only so many possible futures in here, and so the systems can crunch the numbers in a reasonable amount of time. But *outside*, reality’s too big. There are too many variables and they interact in a far too complex way to track. So, we had to come to your location and physically, well, stop you from leaving. But in here we can *tweak*.”

Mike frowned. “How is that possible? Even on a limited scale? Even if I accept that you can model reality itself—which I don’t, especially considering the insane prediction your system gave you—”

“Seriously,” Candace said, watching the code on the screen. It resembled every piece of code Jimmy had ever shown her, excitedly

trying to interest her in whatever hack he was working on. “You’re like people who drive into lakes because their GPS told them to. This system says Candace Cuddyer, She is Become Death and you scurry over to murder my boss.”

“—all well and good, but actually *altering* reality? I know you won’t like this, but that’s not possible,” Mike finished.

Myra shook her head. Her eyes were shining, and her cheeks were flushed, and Mike realized she was *enjoying* herself. Warming to the argument. He supposed she didn’t have a whole lot of people to talk to, with a choice between a bunch of grunts and Dr. Raslowski, who appeared to have the personality of one of those college deans from an old 80’s teen comedy.

“It’s all about scale. The universe—reality—is just particles. In this room, in this limited space, we’ve mapped every particle. Every atom, molecule, element, photon, and everything else. And when we entered, we were scanned and uploaded to the model’s matrix. If you keep the data set relatively small, you *can* map it.”

“Every *particle*?” Mike said, racing through his limited physics knowledge.

Myra nodded, pleased. “In a small area, it’s possible. And once we know every particle in an area, we can trace connections, we can extrapolate consequences—and we can change values.”

“Because everything’s math,” Candace said, still watching the

code.

“Because *everything’s* math,” Myra said. “It might imply we’re living in a simulation, a hologram, a matrix. Or it might imply that god is a mathematician. Whatever it means, we’re on the cusp of total control over our environment, our *universe*.”

She was, Mike, thought, clearly a true believer.

“Mike,” Candace said, pointing at the screen. “I could swear I just saw our names.”

“Names aren’t necessary,” Myra said, still in eager beaver helper mode. “We often used your names as variables in the high-level code, but those are just for operator convenience. You not an individual identity, you’re just a *variable*—and a variable made up of a nearly-infinite number of particles that conspire together to be your reality, and cooperate with each other to form *everyone’s* reality.”

Mike studied the screen for a moment, watching the code scroll by. He caught a flash of his own name, *Malloy*. “I see it,” he said.

“It’s just because you’re in the room,” Myra said. “Those tags are in the system, so you’ve been automatically marked. Again, it’s for operator convenience. No one can keep track of billions of particles, so the system applies easy labels. This,” she gestured at the black box again, “is what makes it possible. It only has a range of a few dozen square feet, but within that cone it can aggregate every particle and trace the values and equation relationships of those particles, and

thus within that area, we can alter variables in reality.” She gestured at the door. “We can then use the cloud out there to compute the potential ramifications of those changes. See if something bad or unexpected will happen if we, say, change something that *seems* innocuous. Early tests, we did things like change the color of a plastic cube. Usually nothing happened. Occasionally there was an ... *unexpected* result.”

“Like a bug in a computer program,” Cadace said slowly.

Myra frowned, then shrugged her eyebrows. “Maybe a *little* like that.”

Mike leaned down a bit. “There’s a handle on that thing,” he said, noting the sturdy-looking piece of black metal on hinges. “It’s *mobile?*”

“Everything has to be transported somewhere, Mr. Malloy. When our initial trace-throughs on the Raslowski Equations pointed to you and the others, there was skepticism, of course. Repeated analyses came to the same conclusions forty-seven times. So we decided the best thing to do was move the whole operation here, to be nearer to the Four Ho—you four.”

Mike nodded, straightening up. “But it *can* be moved.”

Myra nodded. “Of course. And powered on and operated. It would take some time to analyze the new area and generate the Raslowski Field—”

Mike smirked a little. Dr. Raslowski had a fondness for naming things after himself, he thought. *But then, if I discovered a way of altering reality itself*, he said to himself, *I might feel like naming everything after myself too.*

“—but it would then be operational, yes.” She smiled. “It’s got a self-contained power source—powerful enough to light up a small city, actually. And it’s designed to be shock-proof and as near to indestructible as we could manage—it’s based on the design of the Black Boxes they put in planes. We could drop it out of one, in fact, and it would bounce when it hit the ground but most probably remain functional.” She smiled. “When you’re messing with reality, it’s a good idea to ensure uninterrupted function. Of course, severed from the cloud array in there, it wouldn’t have the data sets to solve for the ripple effects. That generally takes a long time—for our colored cube experiment, it took the array six days to crunch the numbers just to ensure against Butterfly Effects.”

Candace looked over her shoulder and smiled at Mike. “Sure,” she said. “And even then you had a few *unexpected* results, you said.”

He grinned, and for a moment he was conscious of a real connection, something he hadn’t felt ... since Julia. The thought of her sobered him, but the connection was still there. And now that they appeared to have triumphed over their captors, he was starting to think maybe there was a future there—once they got done with the

cleanup. With the prosecutions, the investigations, the lawsuits. He looked at the black box. “Jesus Christ, what do you call it?”

“And if you say The Raslowski Box, I’m going to scream,” Candace added, and he laughed.

To his surprise, Myra laughed too. “Oh no, it has a very technical name, of course, but most of us around here just call it The Transmogrifier.”

Mike let that hang for a moment. He’d been informed, in short order, that he was one-fourth of the end of the world because of a chain of events stretching twenty-seven years into the future, that the universe was just math that could be changed and molded, and that a humming black box gave Dr. Emory Raslowski the limited ability to alter reality, if only inside a small field it generated. His head ached.

“All right,” he said, turning to look at Raslowski. “You basically collate so much data you can literally model reality. And in a small area you can manipulate that model directly and change things.” He lowered the gun. If there was a secret horde of soldiers in the facility, or if Myra was a *Manchurian Candidate*-style sleeper agent about to unleash kung fu on them, it would have happened. “It’s a little difficult to believe, actually, Dr. Raslowski. Any chance we could have a demonstration?”

Raslowski ignored him for a moment, his hands swirling over the keyboard. Just before the silence became awkward, he paused and



looked at Mike, one hand hovering over the ENTER button.

“Of course,” Raslowski said, and brought his hand down. A moment later, he disappeared.

## 24. Candace

She heard her father exclaiming, *How about that!* He used to do it as an impression of an old baseball announcer, and it was one of his stock responses to things that amazed him or confused him. If he didn't understand what had just happened, he bought time by doing his impression.

*Well*, she thought, a strange feeling of mental paralysis seizing her, *how about that?*

She didn't know what to do. She was literally frozen, and for a moment she didn't think her muscles would obey her even if she tried to move. Every thought trailed off into static. A man had been sitting in a chair, and then he was gone, and she felt the world tilt around her, as if the very foundation of reality had crumbled, turned soft.

"No one move!"

Candace blinked and then then slowly turned to look at Myra. Move? She couldn't even think. She looked at Mike, but he was just staring into space, the gun held limply by his side.

Myra threw herself into the chair and began working the mouse. "Jesus *fucking* Christ, Em, what the *fuck* did you do? There's no *way* the array plotted out all possible outcomes in that time frame."

On the big screen, the cursor moved through the code restlessly. Mike licked his lips and blinked.

“What did he do?”

Myra glanced up, then at the screen again. “You’re both experiencing something we jokingly refer to as Reality Lag. You’re in a precarious quantum state as you have direct experience with a state of reality that is no longer true. You remember something that never happened. It will pass. You’ll be a little loopy for a bit, but you’ll feel better. You *might* retain the memories.” She sucked in breath and blew a strand of red hair out of her face. “To answer your question, for reasons known only to himself, Dr. Raslowski apparently chose to change an aspect of his reality and it either had exactly the effect he desired, or it had *completely not* the effect he desired.”

“I thought,” Candace said, struggling with her thoughts, which kept skipping back to the sight of Raslowski vanishing. “I thought you said it only worked in this room? Where could he have *gone*?”

Myra nodded. “You can only affect things in the field, yes, but everything is connected. The reality in this room is part of the reality outside this room. That’s what the cloud is *for*—to trace all the possible consequences of a change. You change something in here, and it reverberates. It *ripples*. And if you’re not careful, those ripples can carry you off.”

Candace shook her head, trying to clear it. It was like a bell had been rung somewhere and it didn’t make any noise but she couldn’t stop listening for it, all of her thoughts fraying.

“The past,” Mike said. “You’re saying that when you change one of the equations, a variable in those equations, you can change the *past*.”

Myra nodded, eyes glued to the screen. “Time doesn’t *flow*. It doesn’t move. It’s a continuum. It’s a web of interconnected variables related via mathematical rules. Change a variable in this moment, like I said, it *reverberates*. It ripples back and forth, spreading out, resetting. If you’re not careful, you can do incredible damage. That’s why we have the array: To make certain a *tweak* doesn’t turn into disaster.” She glanced at him. “And that’s why we couldn’t just *tweak* y’all out of trouble. The ramifications were too huge, not even the array could calculate everything. We had no choice but physical, real-time intervention because if we altered a variable connected with you to ensure you went down a different path, we couldn’t be sure we weren’t going to blow the whole thing up.”

Candace shuddered, and felt something ... click back on inside her. Like a final connection that brought a power grid back online. Her mind cleared. “When you say *the whole thing* you’re talking about ... reality. The universe.”

Myra nodded, eyes back on the screen. “The whole damn enchilada. I kind of suspect that Emory—Dr. Raslowski—came pretty close to doing just that a moment ago—there it is.” She took her hands from the keyboard and leaned back. “He tried to alter things so he’d never been injured. Whatever happened to his shoulder, he tried

to erase it.”

“And what happened?” Mike asked. Candace could tell he’d just experienced what she had—a sudden clarification in his thoughts.

“Well, we’re still here,” Myra said, raising her eyebrows. Candace thought she was entirely too cheerful for the situation they were in. Her day had gone from bad to ... weird. People were still dead, and now she knew she’d been a rat in an experiment for months, being watched and observed. All because this ludicrous set of computers had told an old scientist and his entirely too hot assistant that she was one of four people who would somehow engineer the end of the world.

*I could have saved y’all some time, she thought, and told you that waitressing at One-Eyed Jack’s is soul-crushing, but not that soul-crushing.*

That made her think of Jack McCoy, and she felt tears welling up. Jack hadn’t hurt anyone, ever. He’d never made a pass at her, or gotten mad when the count at the end of the day was off and took an extra hour to figure out, or when she’d shown up hungover and grouchy. He’d been kind, and patient, and if he wasn’t the most evolved man in the world there’d been an essential goodness to him she’d loved, and now he was dead. And in a strange way, she was responsible for that.

“Can you ... tweak it back?” Mike asked. “Reset it to where we were before?”

Myra shook her head. “First of all, we don’t know what the ripples are. Sure, *we* seem to be fine. But that’s the thing, that Reality Lag I mentioned—it fades, and after a while you’re not even aware anything’s changed. You slot into the new reality, and it just becomes *reality*, the way things have always been. So we’re still here, but we can’t be sure what might have been altered. It *might* be limited to Emory; he’s a genius and no one understands the math better than he does. But it might not. It might have changed everything and not in a good way. And if I tweak it back but not *perfectly*, I might make things infinitely worse.” She sighed. “In other words, the fact that we’re here having this conversation means we maybe dodged a bullet. Emory might be out there all healed up and fine, and we’re still breathing. I try to change things back and miss a crucial detail, *poof!* we’re all dead. Or the world ends. Or, I don’t know, the supeintelligent roaches rise up and take over.”

Candace blinked three times hurriedly. “*What?*”

Myra waved a hand. “Sorry, a private joke among reality distortionists.”

“Well,” Mike said. “Step one, I guess, is to locate the good doctor. If he’s okay, then maybe everything else is, right?”

Myra nodded. “It would be a good sign.”

“So where do we look?”

Candace sighed. “We start at the obvious spot: Where I shot him.”

Myra nodded. “That makes sense. I’ll—”

Mike shook his head. “You’ll have to come with us.”

Myra blinked and cocked her head, making her look, Candace thought, kind of bird-like. “What?”

Candace looked at Mike. “He’s right. You just showed us you can ... well, change things, right? So we can’t just leave you here to tap on that keyboard and then, suddenly, we’re dead, or just disappear, or never existed or something.”

Myra frowned. “That’s not exactly how this—”

Mike nodded, bringing the gun up. “I’m sorry, but you’re coming with us.”

The drive back to the bar was silent. Candace felt strange behind the wheel, even stranger knowing Mike was in the back seat holding a gun, and, for some reason, strangest about having Myra in the passenger seat next to her. The woman was intimidating. She was tall and gorgeous and smart and wore the hell out of her cats-eye glasses, and oozed a confidence that Candace had never possessed.

*Seriously, you’re jealous?* She thought to herself. *With everything that’s happened, you’re hate-crushing on Myra?*

It was ridiculous ... but there it was. She kept stealing glances at her in the darkness, wondering how you learned to just sit so still, to move so easily.

At the entrance to One Eyed Jack's, she slowed the beaten-up rental and let the headlights play over the parking lot.

"It was close to the tree line," she said. "He was ... the memory's a little fuzzy—"

"It's fading," Myra said. "If you concentrate you can hang onto it, but it will seem like a dream you had once."

Candace nodded. "By the tree line. He was just taking a straight line from the bar, making a run for it."

"All right," Mike said. "Candace, get out and walk around to the passenger side and open Myra's door. Then we'll both get out and follow you to the spot. Myra, there's a small flashlight in the glove compartment."

"Very glad to have met you," Myra said, leaning forward and opening the compartment. "You're just as sociopathic as I imagined."

Candace took the flashlight and led them into the darkness. Myra followed, her arms wrapped around herself, and Mike trailed behind. He resisted the urge to glance at the bar, although he felt exposed walking right in front of it. He wasn't sure if anyone peering out would be able to see them, but he hoped they could get through this investigation without being noticed.

They found Raslowski in the gravel.

"Jesus," Myra said as they stood there, the flashlight trained on him.



He'd been shot in the back, and the bolt had hit him with such force that he'd been knocked forward, leaving a trail in the stones that had cut up his face and arms. He was face-down and had been dead for a while.

"Did I—" Candace said, her voice cracking. "I mean ... I *did*. I can remember it. I didn't mean to, I meant to *warn* him or maybe just graze him. But he turned suddenly, and I shot him through the ... oh, *fuck*."

"You didn't do this," Myra said as Mike put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. Without thinking, she reached up and put her own hand over his. "Well, I mean, you *did*, but Emory survived, originally. When he tried to undo the injury—I guess so he'd have his strength back, be able to go against you—he moved too fast. Didn't check all the possibilities, didn't let the array do its job. One of his variables went wrong, and this is what he got." She looked at Candace. "What you did was injure him. And then he changed it. Eventually you'll only remember it the one way, but remind yourself, if you can."

Candace nodded. She was touched. This woman she almost instinctively didn't like, who was an enemy as far as she was concerned, had just gone out of her way to make her feel better. It made her strangely hopeful for the next few hours.

"Myra," Mike said quietly. "If I believe what's been said tonight, you all have been thinking of us as terrible people for a long time. I

don't understand anything. I used to think I did, but nothing that's happened tonight makes any goddamn sense to me. But I saw a man tap on a keyboard and change reality. So I guess we take this shit seriously from now on."

Candace thought he sounded sad. Defeated.

"So, I'm sorry, but you're going to have to stick with us, Myra. We can't let you go unsupervised until we have a better grasp on things. You said the original plan was for us to stay put, right?"

Myra nodded, her eyes locked on Raslowski.

"Did that mean in the bar? Or do we just need to not interact with any ... outside forces?"

Myra took a moment, and when she answered she sounded distracted, dreamy, and kept her eyes on Raslowski. Candace wondered how long they'd worked together. "The model stipulated in the bar, but I don't know for certain what the variables read. There may have been a presumption that the easiest thing to do was keep you in the bar, even though the real requirement was non-interaction."

Mike nodded. "We'll have to chance it," he said, turning to look at Candace. "If we stay here, they might come check on us. Send more soldiers. We don't know what kind of failsafes or procedures they have in place. Based on this," he turned and gestured at Raslowski, "I'm willing to believe ... well, that *something* is happening. Or will

happen. Something I don't think I understand. So my vote is this: We do as Raslowski wanted, we stay out of sight for the next twelve hours or so. But not here. Do you know of any place nearby we could set up camp—someplace they might not know about? Someplace off-grid?"

Candace thought, feeling his hand on her shoulder. She found herself agreeing with him. The evening had been one head spin after another, and the safest thing to do was probably to find someplace to lay low, wait out the storm.

"Okay," she said quietly. "Yes. There's a cabin. We all call it The Sprawl—it's a long story, the place has history. Not sure who owns it, if anyone does. In country, totally cut off. I go there sometimes to be alone. It's always been a place for local kids to go and party, but it should work this time of year. We'll have to drive."

She was impressed at how steady her voice was.

"My car's low on gas," Mike said, and gently pulled his hand free. She liked him. There was no pretending otherwise: No matter how crazy things had been, she was oddly glad that everything had gone off the rails when Mike Malloy had shown up, instead of the week before, or the next day after he'd gone.

"We can take my Trailblazer," she said, thinking she sounded surprisingly calm. "The doors don't lock and there's always a key in the glovebox." He looked at her and she smiled. "What?" she said. "Look where I *live*. No one's gonna steal a twelve-year old Trailblazer."

There was a smoky smell in the air. She watched him nod and hold out one hand towards her, and she considered how calm she felt. Her life had just blown up. She'd experienced more violence in the last few hours than in her entire prior life, and she suspected more was to come. But she felt fine.

She took his hand and for a moment they just stood there, basking, she thought, in a split second of being at peace.

"Come on, Myra," Mike finally said, turning away and gesturing with the gun. "Let's go get everyone else. I'm sorry but we're going to tie you up for a while. No offense."

Myra snorted. "Oh, none taken. Like I said: Sociopaths."

They walked towards the bar, gravel crunching under their feet. The night was suddenly quiet and still, just the soft glow of lights in the bar, and the smell of fire in the air, and doom and the end of all things around them like a heavy gas.

"Hold it."

They froze. Candace turned and squinted at the dark form standing a few feet from them. He was a large, round-shouldered man, holding what was unmistakably an assault rifle.

"Glen?" she said, staring.

"Shut up," Glen Eastman growled. "Hands up. No one's going anywhere."

## 25. Mike

“Mr. Eastman—”

“Shut up. Who’s this?”

Mike glanced at Myra and fought the ridiculous urge to apologize to her. She was, after all, part of the team that had—apparently—stalked them all for months, studied them, come to some terrible conclusions about them based on what seemed to him to be some seriously sketchy science, and then sat idly by while soldiers detained him and the others illegally.

“She’s ... part of the—”

“One of them,” Eastman said flatly. Mike felt a kind of mental whiplash; Glen Eastman had been kind of an old duffer, a little paranoid—he remembered what Raslowski had said about his politics—but more or less harmless. *This* Glen Eastman was cold, harder, somehow. Mike thought about Raslowski, tapping away at his keyboard, apparently altering reality itself, and wondered how far the ripples might go. Raslowski found himself dead instead of wounded, and Mike wondered what else might have changed.

“All right,” Eastman said, using the AR-15 as a pointer. “In we go.”

For a moment he was disoriented; the scene inside the bar didn’t seem to have changed, except for Glen Eastman holding an assault rifle on them as he marched them inside. The soldiers all remained

ziptied, sitting on the floor. The place was silent, still smelled like gunpowder, and still had a sizzling energy in the air of recent violence. The bodies still lay where they'd been left. A haze still clung to the ceiling.

But something was wrong, and after a moment Mike had it. "Where's Haggen?"

Hammond glanced up and their eyes met. Hers was steady and clear. The remaining five members of her team stared down at the floor, and Mike thought they looked suspiciously cowed.

Eastman considered before answering, circling backwards carefully to keep the three of them in front of him. "He went after you. You didn't see him?"

Mike thought furiously over the last hour. He recalled seeing something flashing in the rearview, he recalled a few distant-sounding noises. Haggen, he thought, following them. It fit; Haggen seemed like the sort who didn't take orders easily, yet he'd accepted Mike's instructions without a peep of protest. Mike felt dumb for having simply assumed Haggen would do as he'd been told.

"Where's Dr. Raslowski?" Hammond said.

"Shut up, you," Eastman growled. Hammond ignored him, looking in Candace and Mike's direction.

"Ms. Azarov?" Hammond said.

Mike looked at Myra. The assistant looked stricken. "He's dead,

Colonel,” she said. “He didn’t follow safety protocols, and—”

“He tried to use the field,” Hammond finished for her, grimacing. She looked back at Mike and Candace. “Looks like we’re both responsible for some deaths here tonight.”

He grit his teeth, but there was no time for regrets. He thought about challenging her, arguing with her. Pointing out that nothing would have happened at all if they’d simply been left alone. What would he have done? Had a terrible dinner cooked by Jack McCoy in what was certainly an illegal and uninspected kitchen in the back. Had a few belts of expensive Scotch. Gone home with Candace? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe he would have found a motel a few miles away and slept it all off, headed for Oklahoma in the morning.

Maybe, as Dr. Raslowski insisted, he’d have started off on a path that led to the end of the world. He wouldn’t know, now; even if Raslowski had survived he probably would have to admit his models had been corrupted by recent events. They were all back in the unknown.

He took a deep breath and ignored Hammond for a moment. “Mr. Eastman—Glen—we need to go back there. Jim doesn’t know what he’s getting himself into.”

Eastman snorted. “*Jim*, huh? No one ever calls Jimmy *Jim*.”

“Mr. Eastman,” Candace said, taking a half step forward. Eastman brought the rifle up a little, and she froze, an expression of complete

shock passing over her face. Mike held himself very still. He didn't think the old teacher was a violent man, but he thought maybe he was an *unreliable* man who might do something stupid, like twitch a finger and kill them all by mistake.

"Mr. Eastman," Candace said again, and Mike thought that was smart, still using his formal name like he was her teacher, reminding him, "Jimmy's not going to be prepared for what's over there. I know Jimmy—you know Jimmy. He's a great guy, but he's impulsive and he always thinks he knows more than he really does. What we just saw ... Jimmy's gonna do something stupid. We should go get him back so we can discuss what's happening here."

Eastman pursed his lips. "*What's happening here?* Jesus, Candace, what's happening here is dead simple: We've been assaulted. We've been detained illegally. Now you come strolling back here with one of ... of the *enemy* and you want to discuss things? All we're discussing is getting out of here, and then calling up some lawyers."

Candace shot a look of silent appeal at Mike, but he didn't have any better ideas. He suspected that any attempt to explain what they understood to have happened would sound crazy, and Eastman didn't seem to be in the mood for crazy explanations. And did he even believe it all? Yes, he'd seen something ... inexplicable. And there was still that lingering feeling of the world not being totally real, not being the way he remembered it. But he didn't think he could explain



it, or convince someone like Eastman of it. He wasn't even certain he believed it either, even after seeing Raslowski vanish, and finding him dead in a parking lot a mile away. All he knew was that spending a few hours holed up somewhere was a small price to pay for avoiding a possible disaster.

"All right," he said softly, putting up his hands. "All right, Mr. Eastman—Glen—you win. You—"

He watched for the moment of hesitancy, the slight relaxation, and then he surged. *Use your enemy's strengths against them*, he heard one of his many teachers say. *Use your enemy's weapons against them*.

He aimed his hand, palm out, at the rifle, knocking it up into Eastman's face. The retired teacher squawked, and tried to twist away, but the gun hit his nose with a wet breaking sound. The rifle clattered to the floor as Eastman staggered backwards, blood dripping from his face. Mike dashed forward and picked up the rifle, training it on Eastman, who was leaning back against the bar with both hands clamped over his broken nose.

"Jebus!" Eastman howled.

Mike backed away slowly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Eastman—I really am. I know this all sounds crazy. *I agree*. But we saw a man vanish into thin air. And I think ... I think he altered something, changed something that had *already happened*. So I think we have to ride this out. Dr. Raslowski said this was all designed to keep us in the bar over night,

to change the course of the future. I think we have to at least do that, based on what I've seen.”

He turned and looked at Candace. After a moment she nodded, and he was relieved, and surprised at how quickly he'd come to rely on her and to trust her. Having her back him up gave him confidence. He looked at Colonel Hammond.

“Colonel, your mission was to sit on us and ensure we didn't leave this bar, right?”

After a moment, Hammond straightened up and nodded. Mike admired how unruffled she looked. Despite being ziptied, despite having lost control of her command and lost members of her squad, she looked pin-neat and completely alert, her face impassive, her blue eyes clear and sharp. “Our mission scope was to contain you—specifically Cuddyer, Malloy, Eastman, and Haggan. Satellite assets were to be contained as well if inside upon arrival. At Ten-thirty tomorrow morning, containment would be lifted. You would all be debriefed and asked to sign NDAs, then released.” She shrugged. “That mission appears to be well and goodly fucked at this point.”

The soldiers around her murmured agreement.

“We don't know that, do we, Myra?”

Myra blinked in surprise, then cleared her throat. “We don't *know*, true. Dr. Raslowski's model encompassed approximately eleven hours at this location, involving the four specifics. As far as I know,

that model did not detail anything similar to the events that have occurred.” She shook herself as if waking up, and looked around. “In layman’s terms, what I mean is I think we’re in uncharted territory. If the four of you stayed in for the rest of the night, it might have the same effect. Or we might already be on an alternative timeline. Whether it’s a *better* timeline I can’t say without running a full model, which would take some time.”

Candace snorted. “So we might still be on course to destroy the world, or *not*.”

Myra nodded, altogether too cheerily, Mike thought. “Yes. Or we might have accelerated it. Maybe you four are going to bring on the apocalypse even sooner, because of what’s happened.”

“How long to run a new model?” Mike asked.

Myra thought, her face scrunching up, deep lines forming around her mouth and eyes. “Without doing redundant checks and error analysis? Six hours for a preliminary model. Maybe six more for a second run to confirm everything.” She looked around. “That wouldn’t be totally reliable. Emory spent *months* crunching his model. But the first few run-throughs were basically accurate in the outlines.” She nodded to herself. “Twelve hours.”

Mike looked at Hammond. “It’s close to midnight. If we get Haggan back here and sit on him for twelve hours, Myra can report back and let us know if the world’s still ending or not. If not, we all

walk away. If it is ...” He trailed off, uncertain how to finish the thought.

“If it is, we’ll figure it out then,” Candace said.

Mike nodded. “Right. So, Colonel, what do you say? Can your mission parameters be adjusted? Want to come retrieve Jimmy Haggan and then we find a safe spot we won’t be bothered?”

Candace shook her head. “If this mission is right and truly fucked, why not call your bosses, Colonel? Call this project a failure?”

Hammond twisted herself awkwardly around to look at her remaining soldiers. Nothing was said, no one made any overt gesture or expression, but something passed between them. Hammond turned back. “Unfortunately, Ms. Cuddyer, only Dr. Raslowski had the authority to make parameter changes to the mission. Without him we don’t have a chain of command to appeal to. We were compartmentalized because having more moving parts complicated the models. In order to keep the math on a scale that could be processed in a reasonable amount of time, we had to ensure a small team with no possibility of outside influence. So it’s up to us. It’s up to *me*. We’ll help.”

“Wait a goddamn minute!” Glen Eastman shouted, his voice pinched-off, droplets of blood sparying as he took his hands away from his face and took a step forward. “You’re gonna *trust* the soldiers who *detained* us? Who killed Mr. Simms? Jack McCoy? *Seriously?*”

Mike nodded. “Think about it, Mr. Eastman. Based on what we—”

“Candace!” Eastman said, turning his swollen face to her. His eyes were blacking up, and his nose was a purple cauliflower in the middle of his face. “Candace, c’mon! This is *your* bar. They came into *your* bar without any legal authority and they *killed Jack McCoy*. You’re gonna stand with them? You’re gonna *help* them?”

Candace nodded. “Mr. Eastman ... yes. I saw something that convinced me these people might have a point. And all we have to do is sit here for twelve more hours.”

Eastman shook his head. “Until their bullshit *model* comes back—surprise!—saying we all need bullets in our heads.”

Mike thought, *maybe we do*. He thought of Julia. He thought of everything, all of it. Sometimes, he thought he’d gone on this crazy trip just to outrun a bullet to the head that he’d been waiting for ever since.

“Come on, Mr. Eastman,” Candace said, holding a black plastic ziptie in her hands. “Time for a road trip.”

## 26. Candace

They took her Trailblazer and Mike's Land Rover, all of them packed in tight. Only Mr. Eastman—glum, eyes swollen—remained in zipties, everyone else had been released and armed. Candace had a moment of panic when Hammond and the soldiers had stepped over the bodies of their comrades and reclaimed their weapons and gear. If she and Mike had just made the biggest mistake of their lives, that would be the moment. A barked order, and they would find themselves tied up securely, and there wouldn't be very many opportunities to break free again.

Assuming Hammond and company didn't just shoot them dead. That would certainly be a way of guaranteeing they didn't somehow set off the apocalypse.

But Hammond had issued orders in a calm, steady voice, appointing King as her second in command. The soldiers didn't complain or protest as they geared up. Hammond ordered them to do as she and Mike suggested, and no one protested *that*, either.

As she drove, following Mike's taillights, she thought about Jimmy.

Her father had never liked Jimmy Haggen, Bobby and Miranda's son, for unspecified reasons that sank back into the murky past. Something had happened or been observed long before she herself

was sentient and self-aware, and Mr. Cuddyer had carried this dark knowledge about James Xavier Haggen for the rest of his life, but only expressed it through vague disapproval and occasional murmured warnings.

She'd known Jimmy her whole life. When they'd been small, he'd always been around, a dirty boy in torn overalls and long hair who played tag and always shoved her to the ground when he was It. She'd never thought much about him except when he was right in front of her, back in those days.

In high school Jimmy Haggen had somehow miraculously transformed into a Hot Man. Skinny but muscular, he played baseball and smart-mouthed the teachers and was always in trouble in some sense of the word, but he was also funny and confident. He stalked the halls of the school with a perpetual lopsided grin, and his occasional flashes of raging anger and emotional outbursts—at games, where he would throw his helmet and scream, at school dances, where he would sometimes be found sitting in the dark of an empty classroom, monosyllabic and brooding—only served to make him seem tragic, which made him the most attractive boy within ten miles to most of the girls.

And, she admitted, to her. Suddenly at fourteen Jimmy Haggen stopped being the dirty pushy kid her father vaguely disapproved of and became an obsession. She saw him, once, emerging from the

practice field with his shirt off, his skin white and sheened in sweat, the muscles moving under his skin with implied power and assurance, and he'd glanced up and grinned at her, tossing his head as if to say *what's up?* No embarrassment, no shyness. And she began seeing that torso in her thoughts as she lay in bed at night.

Their romance was a legend of whispered gossip. They never, she realized, officially dated. Jimmy Hagen had always been in her life, and when their games of tag and Running Bases became sweaty make out sessions, it didn't feel like a new chapter but rather a simple evolution. But they never dated, they never went on a *date*. Jimmy would show up, and they would hang out. They would kiss or talk for hours on end, and then he would go home. As Senior Prom approached, she realized he'd never once asked her to be anything—not his girlfriend, not anything else. She'd just been there, all his life, and he'd wandered over to her when it suited him.

She thought about pushing him to ask her—officially, publicly—to prom. And he'd been squirrely about it, and that made her angry, and the gossip started to fly. And then he asked her, and he was very sweet about it, and her father had been glum and just sat there blowing out his cheeks and shaking his head and saying *well, if you're sure, sweetie*.

She remembered her dress. She still had it, though it represented a sort of fashion sense she didn't really ever want to be reminded of.



She remembered driving over to Ronaldos with everyone beforehand, and ordering a big dinner just so they could order wine, because Ronaldos made most of their business off the fact that it was an open secret they would serve a carafe of wine to anyone, even if you appeared to be three kids stacked on top of each other in a trench coat, with a beard drawn on your face with a Sharpie.

She remembered looking for Jimmy, and she remembered finding him and Sarah Mulligan's feet in the air. And she remembered being sick and ... whatshername ... holding her hair out of her face in the school bathroom. She concentrated, seeking the name of that girl. She hadn't been her closest friend, but she'd been the one in the bathroom stall with her as her eye liner ran down her face. Big girl, dyed blonde hair, round shoulders. Great skin.

She couldn't remember.

Over the years after high school Jimmy had gotten weird. His parents died and he worked a series of jobs that involved dirt and sweat, and that was her prevailing memory of him in recent years: Dirty and sweaty, a beer bottle in one hand. He would work for a few months and then quit—or not so much quit as simply stop showing up. He left paychecks behind and never picked them up, and would disappear for weeks, only to reappear working the graveyard shift somewhere or pestering folks for odd jobs and manual labor. When she saw him at Jack's, he was always friendly enough, but his

trademark sarcasm had soured over the years, and he wasn't fun to talk to any more.

And he got paranoid. His house, which he inherited from his parents, had been converted into an off-grid compound. He'd put up a fence all around the property, and no one got inside any more. You rang a bell and Jimmy came out to you—or didn't come, more often than not. He talked a lot about being prepared, about not having to rely on money or government services. He installed a rainwater collection system, solar panels, a composter. He collected old computers and took them apart, creating his own systems. About the only times she'd had a decent conversation with Jimmy Haggren over the last few years the subject had been his house and how he was making it so he would be able to retire at forty and never have to rely on anyone else, ever. How he was writing his own automation code to control the heat, the locks, the security cameras. He would hunt for himself and take care of himself, and he would be free to tell everyone and anyone to kiss his ass.

Standing outside the facility, Hammond and her troops checked their guns and equipment. Candace found it hard to believe that she'd been in this exact spot with Dr. Raslowski just an hour before. The moment she thought it, a strange feeling came over her, a nervousness. She *hadn't* been here with Dr. Raslowski, had she? She'd

killed him, by accident, back at the bar when he ran for it. She'd *meant* to wound him, but she'd shot him through the chest and his body was still lying there.

She had a headache, suddenly. How had they gotten inside the facility? Dr. Raslowski ... hadn't ... been with them to key in the code.

There was a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to find Myra, who had somehow contrived to put her hair into perfect order, who somehow seemed to smell and look better than when they'd initially met.

"I let you in," she whispered.

"What?"

"You're having trouble—remembering, right? You think something happened, then you realize it couldn't have."

Candace nodded.

"It'll pass. For the moment, remember that you and Mike arrived here because you found Emory's ID on his body. I heard the car pull up and came out to investigate, and let you in."

Candace blinked. That *was* how it had happened, she suddenly recalled. "Th—thank you," she stuttered.

"It will all fall into place, don't worry."

Candace frowned. "Do I eventually forget the ... old version completely?"

"Only if you choose to. You can hang onto the *knowledge* that

things changed, and how they changed, if you put a little effort into it. People doublethink their way through stuff all the time. It's an evolved survival skill for humanity."

Candace was glad for that. It was bad enough thinking that reality might be changed around you at any time. Not even being aware that it had happened would be infinitely worse.

"Everyone ready?" Hammond barked, striding to the front. When everyone nodded silently, she turned to look at Candace. "Ms. Cuddyer, anything you can tell us about Mr. Hagen? Anything that might be useful in the next ten minutes or so?"

Candace thought. "He's paranoid. He likes to set traps."

Hammond nodded. "Good to know. Thank you. King, take point. Eyes open, be sure of your footing. Ms. Azarov, if you would join her. You're most familiar with the office layout, and you'll have a better chance of noticing anything that feels off."

"All right," Myra said, and Candace hated the cool way she strolled gracefully forward. She would have thought anyone with legs that long would have trouble keeping her balance, but Myra was like a dancer.

"Let's go," Hammond said.

Myra and King went first. Myra keyed in the entrance code, and then led the way. Hammond and the other four soldiers followed, rifles in their hands but aimed at the floor. Finally Mike pushed Glen

Eastman ahead of him, and Candace brought up the rear. She had one of the Berettas tucked into her belt, and she hoped like hell she wouldn't have to use it. She wanted things to go easy: They would find Jimmy trying to do something stupid and crazy, they'd talk him down—or hit him over the head, the long-dormant Ghost of Prom Night giggled crazily in her ear—and then it would just be twelve hours of sitting around with everyone.

She intended to spend those twelve hours getting very, very drunk, then sleeping it off. In a perfect world, she would wake up to find everyone gone: The gear packed, the bodies buried, her Trailblazer waiting. She would leave an anonymous tip for Sheriff Werner, and never look back.

Walking down the corridor was strange; she felt like she'd been there years ago, instead of an hour before. Everything looked the same, but her memory of following Myra into the security office and then into the server farm felt fake, somehow, like the Moon Landings: Staged at great expense. She followed the soldiers with an increasing sense of unease, as if nothing she saw could be relied on.

“We can't all fit in there,” Myra said when they arrived at the door that led to the tunnel and the Field Room. “Might I suggest Colonel Hammond, Mr. Malloy, and Ms. Cuddyer accompany me inside? Colonel, your people can mind Mr. Eastman.”

Candace was pleased to be named, then resented Myra's

assumption that she was in charge and could make arrangements for her. Then felt silly for resenting someone she'd met an hour before, and who was, in this situation, far more qualified than she was.

Myra entered the key code, and Candace followed Mike down the tunnel and into the familiar room. The moment she entered, she could tell something was wrong. Mike and Myra stiffened, and she followed their gaze to the little desk.

Everything was gone.

The keyboard. The mouse. And the black box—what Myra had called The Transmogrifier.

“Jimmy,” she breathed.

“Haggen?” Colonel Hammond said quietly.

Mike nodded. “I’m pretty sure now that he followed us here. He probably observed Dr. Ras—Myra here enter the key codes for the doors, then slipped in behind us.” He looked around. “Heard the whole thing.”

Hammond let out a stream of quiet, eerily calm curses. Then she looked at Mike and Candace. “You keep telling me how crazy it is that you might be worth all this trouble. How you couldn’t possibly be the threat Raslowski calculated you to be. But all I see is a bunch of people who are just a *little* smarter and a *little* more resourceful than they ought to be.”

Candace thought, *Well, maybe not Mr. Eastman.*

Hammond closed her eyes and sighed deeply, then opened them again. “Well, any idea where he went with it? So we can try to stop him from erasing the universe or something?”

Mike shook his head. “I have no idea where he might be.”

“Not his house,” Candace offered. “He always thought of it as his safe haven, but like I said, he’s paranoid. He’ll assume you know where he lives, and that you’ll have ninjas or something waiting for him there.”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” Myra asked, smiling what Candace thought was an effortlessly charming smile, white teeth and red lips. “He can’t possibly use it. Even if he had access to a power source sufficient for the Field Gen—The Transmogrifier, he couldn’t possibly know how to operate it.” She looked around. After a moment, her smile faded. “Could he?”

Mike and Hammond turned to look at her. After a moment she realized they were waiting for her assessment of Jimmy Hagen as it related to a device that could manipulate reality itself.

“Well,” she said slowly, “Jimmy’s always been *technical*.” She shook her head. “But no, I doubt this is at his pay grade.” She hesitated, because she realized she wasn’t sure. Jimmy had been deep into computers and programming and even building his own machines and simple robots. And in the ensuing decade and a half she didn’t know what he’d been up to out at his fortress-like house.

Then she smiled and looked around. “You might be wrong about one thing.”

Mike frowned. “What’s that?”

“I might know *exactly* where Jimmy would go.”



## 27. Mike

“You’re certain he’s heading out that way?”

Candace shrugged. “My father would say, *Certain’s a word for morons. Nothing’s certain in this world, Candace.*” She glanced at Myra. “Guess we didn’t know how true that was. No, I’m not *certain*, but I’m pretty sure I know Jimmy. He thinks he’s being smart. A place to hole up for a few days, evade pursuit. Shelter, probably some supplies stashed there because Jimmy’s all about surviving, these days. He won’t go home because he knows they know all about him, his address, he’ll figure they’ll have someone there already. But he’ll think no one who’s not local will know about this place.” She took a deep breath. “I know Jimmy Haggen. He’ll be at the Sprawl.”

Mike nodded and exchanged a look with Hammond, who appeared to be operating at some sort of miraculous level of stress and irritation, visibly vibrating from it. The tall, skinny officer made a face, but nodded, pulling a sheaf of papers from inside her jacket. She unfolded them and turned them over, offering the blank side and a short, stubby pencil. “Can you draw a map? All the detail you can remember. Approximate scale—I don’t need a work of art, I need some idea of what the approaches are like, back and front, sides too, if you can.”

Candace nodded back, and the Colonel stepped out of the room to

confer with her remaining unit.

He liked the officer, despite a distinct lack of warmth or humor. Hammond was competent, not cruel or petty, and after what they'd done in their attempt at escape, she appeared to hold no grudges. That more than anything else had brought home to him that this was *real*: The deaths of her people weren't important enough to react to, in light of the real crisis.

He watched Candace working on the map for a moment. She was concentrating, and had actually stuck her tongue out like a kid in a cartoon. It struck him, because Julia used to do that. He could picture her now, clear as day, concentrating as she rolled a joint or cooked in an old bent spoon, her tongue sticking out from between her chapped lips. Julia had never worked harder than when she was getting high.

"Hey," he said softly, looking at Myra, then at Candace. When she looked up, he leaned in closer. She smelled terrible, he thought, but then he was coated in sweat and dirt and fear and panic, too. "Haggen—do you think he can do anything with the ... the whatever. The Black Box?"

She pursed her lips and looked down for a moment. Then she looked back at him. "I don't know, honestly. I mean, this is some next-level shit, here. But what I saw on the screen looked like code—computer programming. Jimmy was always good at that stuff. Really

good. Could have designed video games or worked for Microsoft or Apple, if he'd had any discipline.”

He glanced at Myra, who was pretending, he thought, not to hear them.

He considered. Something as godawful complex as this would require ... simplification. A layer of abstraction, which was all computer programming languages were. A set of instructions that were slightly easier for humans to understand that would later be translated into machine code. Abstraction made working with computers easier. It made sense that there would be a similar layer of abstraction on this. The only question, then, was whether someone had based their abstraction, their instruction set, on existing programming languages. Whether what Haggen had in his hands right now would be familiar enough for him to figure out how to use it.

“He can't use it,” Myra said, sounding tired. She was standing at the glass wall, arms wrapped around herself.

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “Because he doesn't have access to the array. He can't crunch the variables, the implications. He'd be flying blind, even if he can gin up instructions based on what he can read.”

Mike nodded. “You're forgetting something. I'll bet anything Haggen doesn't *care* about running the numbers.”

Myra turned and stared at him. The idea that someone might not worry about details seemed to horrify her. One thing—maybe the only thing—he'd learned in his travels over the last year was that people tended to assume everyone else thought along the same lines that they did—at least if you looked like them. If you looked different, they assumed the opposite. But he wasn't surprised that Myra would assume that they all respected science and causality and the virtue of diligence and thoroughness just because she did.

When Candace finished her crude map, she signaled to Hammond, who came back into the room with her people trailing behind her. She accepted it wordlessly and huddled with her people, studying it.

“All right,” Hammond snapped, looking up at Candace. “Can you get us to that back-trail? We don't have time to cut all the way down to the dump here,” she jabbed a finger at the map, which Mike could see was impressively detailed and obviously drawn by someone who knew not just the terrain, but the basics of *reading* a map too. “Can you find it through the brush, straight-line?”

Candace thought about it. “Yes,” she said. “I can.”

Mike had figured as much. She knew the country as well as anyone else who'd grown up there, he thought. She could probably find her way in the dark, blind drunk, in a rainstorm in the same way he'd once been able to navigate the New York City Subway no matter

his sobriety or physical condition.

“I’ve done just *that* plenty of times when heading *home* from a party at The Sprawl,” she said, grinning at Mike. “So all I have to do is reverse the polarity or something.”

Hammond nodded and turned to the remnants of her unit, running her cold eyes over them. “Rowland, you’ve got babysitter duty. Sit here with Ms. Azarov in case anyone wanders in somehow. You’re authorized to use force on anyone, including Mr. Hagen if he suddenly decides he does want to use the array to vet something. Azarov, get started on the new model. The sooner we know where we stand in terms of causality and the success or failure of this mission, the better.”

Rowland, his black face shiny from sweat, nodded curtly. After a moment Myra, who seemed lost in thought, looked up and nodded crisply. “I’ll start loading in the new data and get the algorithms humming,” she said.

Hammon nodded and glanced at her watch. “Rowland, in two hours, if we’re not back, you follow General Order One, clear?”

Mike considered the words *General Order One* and thought it sounded ominous. “What about him, Colonel?”

They all followed his gaze through the glass to where Glen Eastman sat on the floor. He looked glum and unhappy. Mike decided he had a right to be. From Glen’s perspective he’d done

nothing wrong.

“Secure him,” she said to Rowland after a moment’s thought. “He’s under your discretion, soldier.”

Rowland nodded crisply. Mike tried to get a sense of how the man would react to Glen, of just how much danger Eastman might be in, but the soldier was blank-faced and not easy to read.

“Come on, then,” Hammond said. “Let’s go stop James Haggan from destroying the fucking universe.”

####

The walk reminded him of the night Julia had left him out in the Meadowlands. They’d been driving—shouldn’t have been driving, considering how stoned both of them were—and they’d gotten into an argument. One of those arguments no one had when sober, the kind of argument you only had when you were so fucked up nothing made sense. She’d pulled over and told him to get out of the fucking car, and he’d been stupid-angry enough to do just that. And she’d peeled off and was gone down the highway before he could think, before he realized he’d left his wallet and phone in the car.

So, he’d walked. It had been a humid, windy night in New Jersey. He couldn’t remember why he’d been in New Jersey—he couldn’t remember much—but he remembered the way the wind blew like it was part of some epic storm, but there was no relief. It wasn’t a cool wind. It was just as heavy and wet as the air around him. He’d started

walking, sweating and unsteady. A car would occasionally speed past him, but it never occurred to him to try and flag one down. He felt too sorry for himself, and if he was being honest he remembered kind of enjoying the quiet and the vastness of the wetlands and the solitude.

He also remembered wishing Julia would have an accident and die. He remembered imagining the flames, and while he'd told himself it was the drugs and his screwed-up mindset, he—

He stumbled a little, his thoughts catching on something. After a moment he hurried up to where Candace was, her attention on the woods around them.

“Hey,” he whispered, matching her stride.

“We’re close,” she said. “Should be right up here, the trail, and then just a few hundred feet to the cabin.”

He nodded. “Listen, something you said—something about Haggan and his house. You said *Jimmy’s all about surviving, these days*, something about supplies.”

She nodded. “Jimmy got weird. I mean, he didn’t have much going on. Shitty jobs, he was getting paunchy, drinking too much. He was getting paranoid, kept talking about how he couldn’t catch a break. It was all the government—this was after he got nailed on tax problems, had to cough up a couple grand in fines. Always said that was why he couldn’t get ahead. He started to blame the government

for a lot of other stuff, after that. Started stocking up on guns, canned food.”

“Survivalist, kind of,” Mike said. She nodded.

“Sort of. Kind of like a *lazy* survivalist, you know? Had all the talk and a lot of guns, but still showed up at Mad One Jack’s every night and twice on Saturdays.”

“You think he had security on the house? Like, crazy survivalist security?”

He’d spent two weeks in the Utah desert, to learn about survival living—growing food, building shelters, weapons and other gear. He wanted to see what people did when they went off-grid. At the time, at the height of his wandering, this had seemed like essential knowledge—if the Zombie Apocalypse came, he would have skills.

He’d been put in touch with a man named Todd, and he remembered being driven out into the middle of nowhere, up a trail, and to a hidden drive that led to a massive metal gate where two men carrying AR-15s had patted him down, searched his bags, made a few jokes, and passed them through. The place was an old ranch, running on well water and solar power, and housing about thirty men and women and their kids. Everyone armed, everyone genial and friendly (mainly, he discovered later, because he was white), everyone happy to teach him about the world as if he was a child who’s suddenly realized there was no Santa Claus.



And he remembered the booby-traps.

The fact that the Federal Government would send in troops at some point to take them down and destroy what they were building was a matter of faith at the ranch. It wasn't a question of *if*, but rather *when* the jackboots hit the ground and the FBI or the ATF or black helicopters and wetwork agents stormed the place. The fact that there would be no attempt at arrests or negotiations was accepted as well: The government would come for them and it would gin up an excuse to execute everyone—this was what had happened at Waco, at Ruby Ridge. Those people hadn't died because of their own illegality and recalcitrance. They'd been executed.

So, steps had been taken. The whole place was a minefield of traps: IEDs in the road, electrified fencing linked to batteries buried in the sandy soil, explosives wired into every building. Nothing was too primitive: The window sills all had broken glass and ragged pieces of tin glued to them, to cut hands hoisting invaders inside, and the floors under the windows always had nails driven upwards from below to catch those jackboots as they slipped inside. Mike remembered wondering how in the world the whole population of the ranch didn't wind up with Lockjaw.

"Probably," Candace said. "Yeah, sure, he mentioned a few 'measures' he'd taken. Some of it sounded kind of crazy, to be honest. Like, I always wondered how he didn't kill himself when he came

home from Jacks' drunk as hell, in the dark."

Mike nodded. "You think he might be able to set some traps at The Sprawl?"

She stopped, hesitating in the darkness. "That's—"

There was an explosion up ahead, the night suddenly lit up orange and red, the noise shaking the ground under their feet, making them both stagger and struggle for balance. In the instant silence that followed, there was a soft rain of dirt and debris.

Candace looked at him and grimaced. "Shit."

## 28. Candace

She'd surprised herself with the detail she remembered: The back trail that ran from the old dump in a meandering line ending at The Sprawl, the little-known private road with the hefty gate that led very near to the old cabin, even the general layout of the trees around the structure. She had a moment of amazement that it had been years since she'd been there and longer since she'd actually partied there—for a short, intense period of her life everything had centered on The Sprawl, where every weekend and some weeknights there was a party, drama, and people.

She missed the people, she thought. Sometimes she missed the party. She didn't miss the drama. And after this evening, she thought, she wouldn't need any more drama, she'd gotten her fill.

She glanced at Mike, walking silently next to her, and wondered if they would have known each other if he'd gone to school here, lived her. Probably not, she thought. She liked him tremendously, now, but there hints that he'd been a terror as a teenager. The money, for one thing. Had he been a rich kid? She couldn't quite remember and made a mental note to clarify that. But he had a preternatural confidence—she thought he was more comfortable in his own skin than anyone she'd ever seen before—and that meant he was probably one of those Golden Boys in High School, the kind, ironically, that she

and Jimmy would have mocked.

She thought it was amazing, though. He'd walked into the place just hours before, but she felt completely comfortable with him, as if she'd known him for years. Part of it was the stress, the trial-by-fire aspect. Part of it was just his personality; she'd never met anyone so quietly confident yet so *easy*. He wasn't a peacock, or a mansplainer (well, not much, which was itself a triumph).

*Well, Dad, she thought. If the world ends tonight, apparently it'll be my fault, and for a girl who never got off her ass to go to school, that's got to be pretty goddamn impressive.*

She had to swallow a laugh, thinking about how it might look on a resume: *Candace Cuddyer, high school diploma, ten years waitressing experience, poor taste in men, destroyer of worlds.*

Poor taste in men. The first time she'd been to The Sprawl, Jimmy had taken her. She'd been fifteen and she'd had to climb out of her bedroom window and climb down the trellis while wearing a skirt somewhat shorter than her father would have liked. She realized halfway down that she had planned badly: Not only was Jimmy standing almost directly below her and no doubt getting a good look up her skirt, but she was getting pretty filthy climbing down and her carefully prepared outfit and makeup and hair were being transformed into a mess. Plus, it occurred to her that dignity was hard to come by when you came climbing out of windows for a boy.

But she was committed. Climbing back *up* not only increased the odds that Dad would hear her and wake up from his usual late-evening nap in the easy chair to investigate, but would also constitute a retreat. An admittance of failure. Not to mention doubling Jimmy's window of opportunity to see her underpants. She would have to emerge from the front door sheepish and admit that her plan to escape the house in stealth had been a bad one.

*Sometimes you just have to put your head down,* she heard her father say, *and eat the meal you've prepared.*

She managed to dismount with a modicum of grace while evading Jimmy's probing hands, which had become insistent. She remembered that they hadn't slept together yet; the Prom Night Massacree, as her father eventually called it, was a year off. At the time she wasn't even sure she *liked* Jimmy Haggren, for all his swagger. He was sarcastic and liked to tease her and got into fights. But The Sprawl was too good to pass up.

It was legend to two generations. For the older folks, her Dad's age and older, it was officially known as the Patterson Place. Originally a modest hunting lodge built by Cornelius Patterson during the oil boom, it had been inherited by Sally Prentice Patterson seventy years before. Sally wasn't local; she'd been the bride of a Patterson boy brought to town, an unhappy, unhinged beauty who was famous for wandering into town and shoplifting small items

from the stores, followed by men her husband had hired to pay for everything behind her back.

When her husband died, she inherited the sagging Patterson fortune, already quite diminished from poor business decisions, and proceeded to dispense with the remaining funds by adding onto, of all things, the nearly-forgotten cabin out in the country. For years she hired builders in waves, fired them, hired more, changed her mind, had brilliancies she sketched out on scraps of paper and demanded that contractors create for her. The small cabin began to *sprawl* into a complex of rooms that had little relation to each other. It had a plethora of doors leading to the outdoors or, in three cases, to walls. The sections of The Sprawl had little relation to each other in terms of design or materials. It was insanity, and had ceased to be useful on any level.

When Sally Patterson died, The Sprawl was abandoned, and forgotten, and, of course, rediscovered by teenagers. It became legend for the younger generations as a place to go drink beer, make noise, and be seen.

Candace remembered her first nigh at The Sprawl. She'd strutted in knowing her skirt was provocatively short. Hard rock and smoke in the air, she'd felt like she'd *arrived*, at the age of fifteen. She would make her mark. She was one of the Cool Kids, now. She proceeded to drink eight shots of something red and spent the majority of the

night throwing up in the back woods while a sad, soggy boy wearing glasses and a dour expression nobly stood guard over her.

She realized with a wince of shame that she couldn't remember the boy's name. Or even what had happened to him. Jimmy Haggan, she remembered, and that was somehow wrong.

She hadn't thought of The Sprawl for years. She'd gone back once when she'd been twenty-three, a six pack of beers and a strange feeling of sadness hanging on her, and she wandered around for fifteen minutes or so. The Sprawl was a *dump*. Somehow she'd missed that during all the old parties in high school. It was filled with rot and mold, the windows and roof leaked, critters lurked in all the shadows, and decades of teenage parties had left it carved up and battered.

After that, there'd been no reason to go back.

She blinked at the fading fireball as it rose up into the night sky, fading into smoke. She heard shouts from just up ahead, and then King was rushing back past them, skidding to a halt and leaning in to whisper urgently at Hammond.

"Your friend Mr. Haggan is pretty handy with IEDs," Hammond growled as she stormed forward. Mike launched himself after her and Candace struggled to keep up. "We just lost a man."

"Shit," Mike whispered.

Candace felt a cold wave of shock wash over her. "An IED?" she

whispered back.

“You can make one from a gas can, a battery, and a fucking clothespin,” Mike whispered. “If *I* know that, bets are good Jimmy knows that. And a lot more. We’re going to have to be careful.”

She shook her head even though he wasn’t looking at her. It wasn’t the IED itself. She totally believed Jimmy could build a bomb using just stuff he found in his car. He’d always been that way, the smartest idiot she knew, a guy who could fix your car and figure out what was wrong with your computer but who couldn’t hold a job. It wasn’t that—she found it hard to believe that Jimmy Haggen would risk killing people, would just casually make a bomb and sit back waiting for someone to step on it.

And it could have been *her*.

She didn’t think he could have made too many explosive traps, unless—and this was no longer as crazy as she would have expected—he had them pre-made in the bed of his truck. He’d known they would come this way, and to her mind that meant that he knew *she* would be the one leading everyone to The Sprawl. No one else—not Glen Eastman, even—knew the back ways and hidden trails the kids used the way she and Jimmy knew.

And that meant he’d set a bomb to go off even though she might have been the one to step on it.

The shock soured into anger and hurt. Jimmy Haggen had always



been an asshole, she knew that. An unhappy asshole, too smart for everyone around him, too unstable for any sort of sensible life, too angry to admit he was the cause of many of his own problems. But he'd been *her* asshole. She'd had little patience for him, but she'd loved him in an obscure way, a primal way, the way you loved people who were fundamental parts of your life, even if you hated them on a higher level.

She'd gone to *prom* with him. And sure, that hadn't gone well, but not many girls could say their prom dates had not only slept with another girl on prom night, but thirteen years later had tried to murder them with an improvise explosive device.

Hammond came stalking back towards them. Candace was impressed with how calm and stone-faced she was. "We keep going," the Colonel said. "My bet is Haggen didn't have the resources or time to plant more than a small number of these devices, so he likely spread them out along several possible approaches. Odds are this one is now clear." She turned to look over her shoulder, then back at them.

"Haggen is obviously not going to go quietly," she said. "I've ordered my team to use force. We won't be trying any negotiation. This is now an assault on a known hostile. If either of you has an objection, this is the time to voice it."

"You're going to kill him?" she asked. She saw Mike turn to look at

her out of the corner of her eye, and she willed him not to say anything.

Hammond pursed her lips slightly. “Not if we can help it. I want to have the new models finished before we make any crucial decisions. That means for the moment I am following the previously established protocols: You four should be kept alive and in place until tomorrow. I’ve pushed the Mission End Time to noon as discussed with Mr. Malloy, but I don’t want to change any other parameters until we have data. So if we can take Mr. Haggren alive, we will.” She looked at Candace. “If not ... we won’t.”

Mike studied her. His stubble made him look shadowed. “You ready for that?”

She started to react, to be defiant. Who was he to worry about little old her? She thought furiously that she’d probably had a lot more experience with death than he ever had. She’d skinned enough animals, buried enough uncles—then she froze, remembering him saying *she died and it was my fault* in that soft, hopeless voice.

*You really can be a hopeless bitch*, she thought. *He’s just being decent to you.*

“I’m okay,” she said. “Really.”

He smiled, and she liked it. Unlike her father, who would have frowned in worry, or the boyfriends she’d had—including Jimmy Haggren—he wasn’t going to treat her like she might break.

They crept forward in a line, and she was aware of the tension, of the fact that they might encounter another IED despite Colonel Hammond's conclusions. Any one of them might end up dead. She wondered why Hammond's orders hadn't included just shooting one of them—or all of them. If she, Jim, Mike, and Mr. Eastman were supposed to spark the end of the world, somehow, why not just kill them all?

Because Raslowski's models said, if they did that, something even worse would happen.

The realization hit her and she stumbled a little. Of course—if she found out someone was going to end the world, her first thought would be to just eliminate them. The fact that instead of just sending someone with a gun to kill them all they'd sent a platoon and built a secret computer lab told her that killing them would only lead to something *worse*.

*No wonder Hammond's willing to go to all this trouble, she thought. The alternatives aren't good.*

She saw them running models—model after model, tweaking details, always coming back to the same conclusion: The only way out was to keep the four of them in the bar. Break whatever chain reaction had been quietly happening all their lives.

“Stop!”

She stumbled into Mike. Jimmy's voice, booming out in the

darkness. Except, she realized as she got her bearing, not *quite* darkness: She could see the eerie glow of a propane lantern. They were close.

“Don’t come any closer!” Jimmy shouted. “Or I’ll erase you all.”

## 29. Mike

He couldn't see Hammond or the soldiers; they'd crept up ahead and faded into the darkness, leaving him and Candace on their own in the gloom. He was impressed at how silently and completely they'd melted away at the sound of Haggen's voice, and he imagined them slowly deploying out there in the dark, choosing sniper locations, creeping around the perimeter. There were only four of them left, but he was pretty sure they would be capable of taking the cabin if necessary.

"C'mon," he whispered to Candace.

There was no reason they couldn't contribute to the cause. If the idea was to take Haggen alive if possible, then he thought that he and Candace could get close, maybe even infiltrate the cabin from the rear while Hammond kept him occupied. It was worth trying, and he found any sort of action a better alternative than standing around in the darkness with his thumb up his ass. And without asking he had a feeling Candace shared the sentiment, because she was the sort of girl who didn't appreciate it when men treated her like she was made of glass.

The cabin—or complex of cabins—was closer than he'd expected, and in a few moments they were moving along the perimeter. The lack of upkeep was obvious from the way nature had crept right up to

the place; it was impossible to move silently through the dry, knee-high brush. He got an immediate sense of the insanity of the place, too; the foundation kept zigging off in unexpected directions, changing style and elevation. It was a lot bigger than it needed to be, too; Mike hadn't done a lot of hunting or even recreational underage drinking in the woods, but neither activity required more than a few hundred square feet of dry, easily-heated space. The Sprawl was a nightmare of improbably roof lines and neglected, rotting wood. As they crept alongside it, Mike thought anyone might be able to punch their way in through certain soft spots in the exterior walls, sagging areas where rain had been leaking for decades. They might burst in, shouting *Oh, yeah!* and just tackle a startled Haggen to the floor.

He started to laugh, and had to clamp his mouth shut as a giddy, nervous sort of hilarity swept through him. Then he heard Haggen again—*or I'll erase you all*—and he sobered. Jimmy's voice had been rough and raw, unsteady. But something in it made Mike think he wasn't bluffing, or delirious. That he *had* somehow figured something out, had found a way to weaponize the Raslowski equations and The Transmogrifier.

It wasn't crazy. Haggen didn't need to understand any of the math, he just had to be good with patterns.

As part of his epic attempt to learn a little bit about everything, he'd hired a few White Hat Hackers to teach him the fundamentals of

hacking, as both an exercise in social engineering and the basics of computer systems, programming languages, and modern digital security theory. He chose his lessons more or less at random; deciding on whims and recent experiences what Mike Malloy the Mighty Curious should bury his head in next. He chose new subjects quickly, keeping himself endlessly busy so he wouldn't have to think about Julia, about the cushy nightmare that was his life, about what an asshole he was despite the money. Hiring a bunch of hackers who were genially happy to take his money for a few weeks while he put them all up in a hotel and outfit the suite with top-of-the-line servers, fiber connections, and desktop computers was just a way to stay busy when he wasn't blessedly asleep.

One of them, a thin, long-haired guy named Eugie who seemed more like a classic 1960s hippie than a hacker, told him that he got started because he had a brain that noticed patterns.

“Half of hacking is Pattern Recognition, dude,” he said, drawling around a bottle of beer from the wet bar Mike had paid to keep stocked. “When I was nine, I didn't know shit about computers or code. But I saw patterns everywhere, and when I played a video game, I usually beat it in a couple of days because I saw the patterns, because all code is just repeated loops and subroutines. So, an enemy will always do X after you do A, you see? So once you see that, it's a super power, because you know whenever you want the bad guys to

do X, you just have to do A.”

Mike remembered nodding, sipping Scotch and not really understanding. But then he hadn't started his Personal Improvement Tour because he actually wanted to learn anything. Getting drunk and being lectured to by a man named Eugie kept his mind off the darkness as well as anything else.

He also remembered that Eugie seemed to sense he wasn't getting it. He set the beer bottle down and sighed—Eugie's sighs became quickly familiar to Mike, and they all translated to a sour comment on the intellectual capacity of everyone else in the room.

“You ever hear of Mike Larson?”

Mike shook his head.

“Mike Larson won more than a hundred grand on a stupid daytime TV game show in 1984. At the time it was the largest prize won on a game show ever. It was *Press Your Luck*, and he won it because he noticed a pattern. The game involved an electronic board that would light up different squares that offered different prizes, enhancements, or penalties. The light flickered around and you chose when to stop it. The idea was that the boxes lit up randomly, so every time you stopped it you took a chance.

“Except Larson saw the patterns. The boxes lit up in the same five patterns over and over again in a loop. He studied them, memorized them, and when he got on the show he ran the board—he could play



on as long as he liked because he would never land on a square that would end his turn.”

Eugie picked up his beer bottle again. “Forget code, Mr. Monopoly. *That’s* hacking. Pattern recognition. You see the patterns, you can hack anything.”

Mike thought about that. If Hagen had a similar mind—and based on what Candace had said about him, he suspected he did—then it wasn’t inconceivable that he’d seen a pattern in Raslowski’s code to control the Transmogrifier. And just like a kid trying to beat a video game by looking for patterns in the behavior of the enemies, he might be able to make something happen just by seeing a relationship between a value and something happening around him. Change a variable, a pen disappears. Change it back, the pen is back.

Or, Mike thought grimly, he was bluffing, and if he changed anything the whole damn universe would disappear, like a program crashing.

Candace tapped his shoulder. When he turned to look at her, she indicated she should lead. He nodded and made room for her to push past him, then followed her. Nothing but chauvinism and his own healthy self-regard had made him take the lead. He grinned, laughing at himself. *Only you would take the lead in unfamiliar territory where you have no expertise or local knowledge to offer*, he thought.

She led him along the perimeter. The cabins split off into two

directions, one lancing off to their left into the tree line, the other to their right, forming an alley. She led them right. After a moment they came to a large picture window that had been boarded over. She felt along one corner, slipped her fingers under the lip, and pulled it away from the wall. It came away easily, revealing an opening large enough for anyone to slip through.

“The cops occasionally tried to shut the Sprawl down,” she whispered. “We had a million ways of getting in even when they padlocked the doors.”

He nodded, and climbed inside. He turned and held the board up so that she could follow. When he let the board fall, it was pitch dark. After a moment, he felt her take his hand and start leading him.

The experience of being led through the dark in near-perfect silence was disorienting. Glass crunched under their feet as they moved, and the whole place was stuffy and smelled bad—mildewy, rotten. He tried to imagine what it must have seemed like to Jimmy and Candace fifteen years before, a mysterious maze to get lost in, to do things away from private eyes, a retreat.

As his eyes adjusted, the silence became more oppressive. Things had been loud for a long time—from the moment the soldiers had arrived, he thought, it had been nothing but shouting and gunshots and running. The sudden absence of noise made him feel like something even worse was about to happen, as impossible as that

seemed.

The place was just as crazy on the inside as it seemed on the outside. Candace led him past corridors that didn't seem to go anyway, down a passage that sometimes seemed like a very narrow hallway but sometimes widened out into a strange room. Windows looked in on interior rooms, and stairs sprouted from the floors and led to nothing but wall.

They turned a corner and they were in one of the front-facing rooms, with several windows of different sizes and styles facing out into the pitch darkness. A feeble propane lantern provided some light. Jimmy Haggen sat on the floor in front of the Transmorgifier and its monitor, hunched over the keyboard. He and Candace froze, and for a moment all Mike could hear was a soft clicking that repeated slowly.

“Don't make any sudden moves, kids,” Haggen said, his voice unsteady. “We're dealing with a *literal* Dead Man's Switch here.”

*Dead Man's Switch*, Mike thought. He knew the term: A piece of code that was designed to be reset on a regular basis. If the reset was missed, it executed a payload. There were physical examples as well.

“Jimmy,” Candace said softly. “What have you done?”

Mike let go of her hand and stepped slowly, carefully, around to the front of Jim. He saw that Jimmy had, strangely, taken the Dipping Bird from the bar. He had it set on the floor, the beak positioned over

the ENTER key on the keyboard. He was holding his hand over the keyboard, however, so that the bird's beak tapped his hand and not the ENTER key.

"If I take my hand away—or it's moved *for me*," Jimmy said with a short, bitter laugh, "then what I've set up on Dr. Raslowski's little toy will execute."

Mike tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. He knew that Dr. Raslowski had been killed by Candace in the parking lot, accidentally. He *knew* that. But he also knew that somehow that hadn't *always* happened, and he knew that Jimmy Haggen was playing with the most dangerous thing Mike had ever encountered in his life. With a *Dipping Bird*.

"Jim," Mike said. "What are you doing?"

"I just wanted to be left alone, Candace," Haggen said, not looking up. His long, greasy hair hung in his face. "That's all I ever wanted. These sons of bitches just barge in and kill people—and they'll kill us, mark my fucking words, Candy—and then they'll just blow town, and Cleaners will show up and torch the place and scrub it clean and it'll be this mystery. We'll be a Wikipedia page, you know? The mysterious disappearance at One-Eyed Jack's. The McCoy Group."

Candace exchanged a look with Mike, a lingering stare. He wasn't sure what she was trying to convey to him. He was trying to tell *her* that they were in serious trouble.

The Dipping Bird dipped and tapped Jimmy's hand.

"Jim—"

"Y'know, Malloy, I don't like you. It's irrational. You're everything I wish I was." Haggen continued to stare down at the floor, hair in his face. "Rich, mainly." He laughed. "But you just sort of do what you want, don't you? Swing into a podunk place like this, bang the waitress, go on your way. Writing checks. Having *experiences*."

The Dipping Bird tapped his hand.

"Jimmy," Candace said. "This is crazy."

"What's crazy, Candace, is that you chose to leave me and went off with Mike Moneybags here," Jim growled. "That hurt. Not because we're some great love story. Because he's not from *around* here. And so I followed you. And I saw something ... fucking *impossible*."

"We all did," Mike said. He let his eyes roam over the room, looking for other traps, other weapons.

The Dipping Bird tapped Haggen's hand.

"This thing—" Haggen jerked his head at the black box, humming with its own power. "I don't understand it. But the lazy fucks, you know what they did? They gave all the variables that are *us*, that are *people*, our own *fucking names*."

Candace took a step towards him. "Jimmy, don't. Whatever it is—*don't*."

"I saw what happened at the lab, with the old bastard. I think I

did. I remember it different. So it *worked*.” Candace took another step towards Haggen. Mike tried to catch her eye again, wave her off. Then he looked back at Haggen and froze, his stomach clenching into a tight wad of ice.

A small dancing red dot had appeared on Haggen’s forehead.

*Sniper*, Mike thought. Adrenaline and panic splashed through him. Hammond was changing the deal. Hammond was taking out some fucking insurance, because she didn’t have eyes inside the room. She didn’t know.

“So I figure, I can make a change. To my variable. To *me*.” Haggen said, nodding. “Why not? What’s to lose? If I guess right, all this never happens. We go back, except maybe we can remember, like we remember Raslowski being in that room and *not* being in that room, all at once. Maybe we remember and we do things differently. And if not—well, fuck, so what? I fuck this up and I’m not here any more, Candy, what did I lose? What’s lost?”

Mike took a step forward. “Jim—”

The window shattered. Jimmy Haggen slumped to the side. It happened silently, suddenly.

The Dipping Bird leaned down and softly tapped the ENTER key.



## **Part Three**





## 30. Candace

She startled awake and for a moment didn't know exactly where she was. The swaying motion, the hot, stuffy air, the soft non-sound of people all around her was all disorienting for a moment.

*Jim—*

She heard the voice in her head, clear, crisp. Like it had just happened.

She blinked, taking a deep breath and sitting up straighter in the seat. The bus was dim, lit only by the few places where people were using their reading lights. It was hot and it smelled like a soup she'd had once and never wanted to have again.

“Finally awake, huh, darlin’?”

She turned and blinked, memory coming back to her. This guy had gotten on the bus a few miles after her, had stood blocking the aisle for a full minute while he scanned his options, and had lit up like a horny Christmas Tree when he'd spotted her sitting by herself in the window seat. He was forty-ish, jowly and going to fat but not *quite* there yet, and handsome in a pleasant, unremarkable way. He still wore a class ring, which was all Candace needed to know about him. Literally.

He'd tried chatting her up when he'd settled in, smelling of cigarettes and aftershave, which were strikes two and three against

him. She'd managed to feign sleep, and then that had turned into an actual nap. But now she'd tipped her hand and he was eager to continue their non-conversation.

"If you'da told me your city, I woulda made sure you didn't sleep through it."

She swallowed, head swimming in a way that was like a migraine without the pain. "I'm good, thanks," she croaked.

"Where you headed?"

"Home."

The word satisfied him, and he asked her if it was just a visit or if she was doing something more there.

"Excuse me," she said, half-standing and indicating the aisle. "Bathroom."

He smiled and pulled himself out of his seat, stepping aside with a cheery grin to let her past. She imagined he was watching her walking towards the bathroom in the rear, and thought he must be disappointed, because she'd gained so much weight in the last few months she was like a different person. Then again, she also had the feeling he was a guy who wasn't all that particular.

She stepped into the tight, disgusting bathroom, and shut the door behind her locking it. It was *incredibly* gross, and not for the first time in her life, she wondered how in the world other people lived. When you couldn't even manage to pee accurately into a pretty wide

target, what business did you have even go out of the house?

*Home.* She thought about the word. It had been a long time—six years. She didn't count the trips to the hospital to visit Dad; that had been fifty miles north of what she thought of as *home*, and she hadn't come anywhere close to the old house—which she knew needed to be put on the market—One Eyed Jack's, or the Sprawl on those visits.

She looked at herself in the small, muddy mirror. Thirty-one, and worse for the wear, she thought; New York was supposed to be her reinvention, her big break from the rut. She'd left everything behind—her Dad, all the familiar faces and the safety net of knowing she would be able to work at Jack's for the rest of her life if she wanted. She remembered the bus trip going the other way, years ago, school enrollment materials stuffed into her backpack, everything she owned in a poorly-packed duffel bag stuffed into the luggage compartment under the bus. She remembered being excited, determined, a little frightened. She remembered being ten pounds lighter and able to fit into the pair of soft jeans she still carried with her everywhere she went as a sort of totem of optimism.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, searching her own face through the tarnish.

She didn't know. She'd felt it for a while now, the need to go home. She hadn't consciously made any decisions, even though she hadn't exactly made New York her bitch. She'd left a job waitressing

at a dive bar among people she'd known all her life for a brief stint at school followed by a job waitressing at a dive bar in Hell's Kitchen among people she still didn't know very well—not the way she knew everyone at home—and which barely paid for her shitty room in the Three Bedroom Walk Up of Madness, where six girls paid various rents for variously-sized rooms, tepid hot water, no air conditioning, and a constantly-changing cast of roommates.

Except her. Candace had become the House Mother: Oldest, longest tenure, not going anywhere.

She'd drifted. She knew it, she could sense it and it filled her with a slow-motion panic. She was four years away from thirty-five, and she suspected that even in New York thirty-five was when you had to stop pretending you were a kid on an adventure. At that point you were an adult with no money and no long-term plan.

Everything had clarified two weeks ago. She wasn't supposed to be in New York. She didn't know how she knew, but there it was: She was supposed to go home. She was supposed to go home.

She kept seeing things—pieces of a dream. She'd had them for a long time, persistent images. The old Dipping Bird from Jack's. McCoy's old crossbow. Her ancient, beloved Trailblazer. All of these images came to her in flashes at odd times—sometimes when she was trying to sleep or just waking up, but sometimes when she was awake, working, even talking to other people. She saw them real as

day, and every time she did she had that feeling: Go home.

So, she was going home. She'd stiffed her roommates on the rent and taken every dime she had, bought a bus ticket, and here she was, in the world's filthiest bathroom, forty minutes out from the bus station she never thought she'd ever see again, with the world's least charming pickup artist waiting patiently for her to return to her seat so he could feign interest in her life goals, though she didn't know what his endgame for her might be unless—and the thought chilled her—he was getting off at the same spot.

*The only thing to do is to do it*, her Dad used to say. She smiled faintly at her reflection. As usual, he was right.

Town hadn't changed much. It was still a single block of two lane highway lined by stores, the tiny police department-cum-jail, and a post office. City Hall was the house of whoever happened to be mayor (it took forty-three votes to win). People came to 'town' to pick up their mail and put in orders, and even that had slowed down in the Internet age. The bus stopped in front of the post office, waited for her to pull her immense duffel out, then roared off to better, more interesting places. She thought she could see her seatmate staring out the window sadly as it pulled off, but couldn't be sure.

In Herb's Hunt and Tackle, you can get just about anything. There might have been a time when they were just a place for bait and rods,

guns and camping gear, but they'd expanded into general hardware, car and equipment rentals, dry goods, maps, guide services, and anything else that didn't have a local business servicing it, which was just about everything. She recognized Herb Junior behind the counter, but he didn't recognize her; he'd been about sixteen when she'd left town, and their families had never been close. She played the role of tired tourist and rented an ancient old Land Rover. Herb Junior tried to steer her towards a newer Tahoe, saying that the Land Rover had seen a lot of miles, but something about it called to her. It felt familiar and comfortable. She paid cash for a three day rental, tossed her duffel into the back, and took off.

She drove by the house, first. She knew it wasn't hers any more; there was still a mortgage on it when Dad had died, and selling it wouldn't leave much for her as an inheritance, but despite the mounting tax bill she hadn't done anything. Nothing had been done. Nothing looked different. Even the rusting, decades-old swing set her parents had erected when they still hoped for another child and envisioned her playing with her sister or brother was still there, slanted just like always, a lawsuit waiting to happen.

She sat in the car for a moment, studying the place. Had she really lived there for twenty-five years? She tried to think of the last time she'd been there. Before she'd moved, before Dad had gotten sick. It probably hadn't much of a day to remember. Coffee. Packing. Dad

moping about, pretending not to be sad. TV. A beer or two, then bed. She wished she could summon the memories, but they were gone like they'd never happened.

She contemplated the irony that she could easily recall Jack McCoy's crossbow in perfect detail, but the last day she'd spent in her father's house was lost.

One Eyed Jack's was lively. She pulled into the gravel parking lot and let the car idle. A sense of foreboding came over her, and she didn't want to get out of the car. For what purpose? To see Jack McCoy? She loved the man. She smiled as she thought of him, standing proudly behind his bar, laughing at some joke, a big bear of a guy who always smelled like hamburgers. But she didn't want to go back in there. She realized she never wanted to go back inside, ever again if she could help it.

Music. The sign had always read MAD ONE JACK'S: Food | Liquor | Live Music, but there had never been any music as long as she'd known the place. But as she sat there she could hear the beat and the spark of guitars. *Good for you, Jack*, she thought. *Don't ever stand still.*

She put the Land Rover into gear and hoped it could handle dirt roads and brush, because she suddenly knew exactly where she was going. Why she'd come back.

Was it a love story? She didn't think so. It was more than that.



Different.

The night closed in and the world became her headlights and the squeak of the old suspension. She remembered the way without any difficulty. Some places became part of your DNA.

When the Sprawl came into view, she was surprised for a moment, because someone appeared to have taken some care with the place. Weak yellow light filled the windows, and smoke chugged from the chimney. The area right outside the main entrance had been cleared, and a neat pile of fresh firewood was piled up against one side. The bulk of the insane cabin stretched away into the darkness as ever.

Three trucks were parked outside.

She parked and killed the lights and the engine. Leaving her duffel in the truck, she got out and walked to the front door, liking the familiar crunch of twigs and dry scrub under her boots.

The door opened before she got there, and Jimmy Haggan, looking skinny and old, somehow, his hair graying, leaned against the jamb.

“Well, heck, Cuddyer,” he said. “Welcome back. Come on in. We been waiting for you.”

She smiled. It was good to see Jimmy, she had to admit. As eager as she'd always been to escape him, as happy as she'd been to have escaped him once, she never went more than a day or so without

thinking about him. Why hadn't she called? Or written? Jesus, she could have at least Friended him, she thought.

"James," she said, pecking him on the cheek awkwardly as she stepped past him. "I have to admit, I have no idea why I—"

She froze. Standing in the front room of The Sprawl, where she'd partied and made out and danced and smoked illicit cigarettes, was a man. He was about her age, maybe a little older. Nice-looking, but unremarkable. He was wearing a leather coat that looked to cost a few thousand bucks, and he had a worried, sunken expression that was familiar to her because, she realized, she'd been watching it gather on her own face for years now. A certainty that she was not where she should be. Not doing what she should be.

He smiled, and she knew him.

"Hey, Candace," Mike said.

### 31. Mike

He stared down into his glass. Bourbon, and not the best bourbon either—though he was probably spoiled on that account. Black credit cards meant you could be one of those people who insisted on his favorite whiskey wherever he went, even if the bar or restaurant or hotel had to send someone on a lengthy road trip to fetch it.

*You're going where?* Robbie had asked him. *For god's sake, why? You just got back from the Mike Malloy Finds Himself Tour!*

He looked up nervously and realized he still didn't have an answer that would make any sense to anyone.

"How long have you—" Candace started to say.

Haggen cut her off. "I set this place up three, four months ago," he said. "This was some *Field of Dreams* shit, wasn't it?"

She shrugged, staring at Mike. "I don't know what it is, frankly. For me, it was all kind of sub-conscious, you know? Feelings. A few images. What about you?"

Mike frowned. "For me it was more coherent, I guess. I spent the last year or so traveling around—it's a long story. I felt compelled to just keep moving, and I made arrangements with people to learn things, you know? I was restless. And I wanted to be a better person, more in the moment, more *capable*." He grimaced. "I sound like an asshole, don't I?"

“Definitely,” Haggen said, grinning around his own tumbler of bourbon. “Like a *rich* asshole, though, if that helps.”

“Wait a sec,” Candace said. “You guys *know* each other?”

Mike nodded. He liked her. She had a Look; it was experience, years, but not in a bad way. Like wearing off some of the tread had honed her, revealed something better underneath. “Like I said, my plan, such as it was, involved driving around and, well, hiring people. A few weeks learning how to hot wire a car, a few days learning how to weld. Anything, really.”

Jimmy snorted. “So one day I get a call from some New York asshat named Rob Kittle, asking me if I want to make some money teaching some other New York asshat to hunt and track and, you know, not kill themselves in the wild,” Jimmy said. “And, seeing as I have the fucking state up my ass about back taxes, it was an opportune moment to relieve Mr. Malloy, Millionaire, here of his cash.”

Mike smiled. “So I came down here and we met at One-Eyed Jack’s, and ... it’s hard to explain.”

“You felt like you already knew Jim?” Candace said.

Mike looked at her, smiling. “*Exactly*. Him and Glen Eastman.”

Candace blinked, her face crumpling into confusion. She looked at Jimmy, and Mike felt a pang of jealousy. “Mr. *Eastman*?”

Jimmy nodded. “It makes sense,” he said. “Give it a moment.

Think about it.”

Mike watched her, and saw her working through it just as he had—though for him it was worse, eh figured, because he didn’t know any of these people. Except he *did*.

“We started talking, and we’re both freaked out,” he said, and Hagen nodded. “We’re both fighting this weird sense that we’ve met, that this is important, that we’ve been sort of hanging around waiting for this. And then Glen comes up and just sits down and he’s doing the same thing. And we started trading stories—things we’ve been thinking, like mantras. Images that keep repeating.”

Candace nodded. “I keep seeing ... that old Dipping Bird from Jack’s,” she said, sounding hesitant, he thought, like this was the first time she’d risked saying it out loud.

Jimmy sighed. “Well, me and Glen ... we had this moment a long time ago. I’ve been keeping a journal. Anything that seems related—random thoughts, weird dreams, *deja vu*—I wrote it down. Glen did the same.”

Mike cleared his throat as Jimmy stood up. “We’ve been comparing notes, and we’ve pieced some things together—things that we all agree on, things we’ve all seen or thought repeatedly.”

Jimmy picked up an old-school marble notebook and brought it over to her. “I tried to make it a little neater.” He turned and looked at Mike and winked. “I always was a kiss-ass in school. Candy will tell

you.”

She opened the book. Mike knew what it looked like at first glance: *Insanity*. Haggren had filled every line with neat block printing that felt like a horror movie prop, occasionally spicing things up with doodles and surprisingly complex and detailed diagrams, and sketches of several people that had been rendered with eerie, lifelike realism, including a hard-faced older woman, a pretty younger woman with bright red hair, and an older man, scowling unhappily. It was disturbing, and if Mike had seen it in a courtroom he would have voted *guilty* without hearing another word.

But, he recognized most of it.

Not in a literal way. He couldn't say he'd ever actually met those people, or heard the terms *transmogrifier* or *Raslowski Field*. But the moment he saw them or read them, he realized he was familiar with them. The best way he'd figured out how to describe the sensation was a conversation in the next room overheard as you were falling asleep: Occasionally a phrase or word would carry through to your dreams, and haunt you.

He watched Candace read and sipped whiskey. He'd never seen her before, but yet the moment she'd arrived at the door he'd known her, he'd felt comfortable with her, like something was slipping into place. And now that she was sitting here, he couldn't imagine her anywhere else.

Her face told a story, starting with skepticism, bleeding into surprise, and finally settling into a mask of intense concentration. When she finished, she looked from Jimmy to him.

“Jesus,” she breathed. “Did any of that really happen?”

Mike shook his head. “Nope.”

“But I almost remember it. Almost.”

Mike waited a beat. He was about to say things he’d been thinking for weeks, for months now, but he knew that on one level they were insane things.

“That’s because they really happened,” he said. “And then they got changed.”

The words hung in the air for a moment, heavy.

“It took me a while, too,” he went on, swirling whiskey in his glass. “Once you think of it, though, it’s the only thing that makes sense. Hell, we’re here because it all really happened. I came here because I’ve *been* here before, in a sense. Jimmy was here at this cabin because this is where he ... ended things before. You came *back* because you were here when it happened. And Glen Eastman’s been waiting for the rest of us, just biding his time.”

“So you think,” she started, then shook her head. “You *believe* they invented a way of changing *reality*, of plugging some numbers into a machine and pressing a button and changing the fundamental facts of existence, came here because our names—*us*—came up in their

simulations or whatever, they detained us at One-Eyed Jack's, we *broke free* and killed a bunch of soldiers, stole their magic reality box, and came to *The Sprawl* where I used to shotgun beers while standing in a horse tub, and Jimmy here hacked the box and reset the last few years of our lives?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said, grinning.

"And so do you, or you wouldn't be here," Mike added. "And there's this: It's all happening again."

Candace blinked. "What?"

"Like he said, Glen's been obsessing over this shit for years now. He's been keeping an eye on the old abandoned factory up the road. He says that six months ago, there was a lot of activity—trucks in the middle of the night, workers, soldiers—but you wouldn't know it to drive by. It looks dead and empty."

"But the security system is active," Mike added.

Jimmy nodded. "Right."

Candace shook her head. "Look, all right, I'll admit it: I'm here because of something I can't quite explain. Okay. I remember things that never happened. I remember some of the stuff in this *notebook*, for god's sake!"

She tossed the notebook onto the floor. Opened her mouth, then shut it. After a moment, Mike thought she sort of ... collapsed, shrinking down into herself. Then she took a deep breath and looked



at him. The shock of familiarity was electric.

“Fine. I admit it. I believe it. I can remember a whole different six years. I didn’t leave town, I didn’t fail out of school, I didn’t get a job at Rudy’s on Ninth Avenue. I stayed here, I buried my father, I worked at Jack’s, and one night you walked in and ordered an expensive whiskey and then we were detained.” She nodded, once crisp. “Fine, I admit it.”

“So, we’re in the same situation,” Mike said. “If they’re set up at the facility again, if we’re all *here* again, then they’re watching us. Which means our names are still coming up in their model. Which means at some point—”

“We’ll find ourselves at One-Eyed Jack’s and they come busting in.”

Jimmy stood up and pointed at her. “Bingo.”

Mike waited. The Candace he didn’t exactly remember would jump at the chance. she wouldn’t want to be left behind, left out. She wouldn’t want to let fate choose her path. If nothing else, she would want to keep her hand on the stick.

After a moment, she nodded. “Okay. I’m not gonna lie; I’m here because something I can’t explain has drawn me here. Fine. Let’s get to the bottom of it. I’m in.”

Mike smiled.

“So what’s the plan?” Candace asked, looking from Mike to Jimmy.

Mike took a breath, but Jimmy beat him to it, draining his glass and slamming it down on the floor.

“Step one,” he said with a grin, “is go get a drink.”

## 32. Candace

Sitting in the backseat with Jimmy Hagen was like time-traveling backwards ten or fifteen years. She half expected to look down and find herself wearing the pale gold prom dress she'd somehow convinced herself was the height of fashion in her youth. Except they weren't in the world's grossest rented limousine, a soggy boat that stank of other parties, other mistakes, and Jimmy wasn't already red-faced drunk and disinterested in her, cold and distracted, and they weren't crammed in with two other couples in equally disastrous fashions and states of sobriety. With her thigh pressing against his, though, the memory was persistent, and she remembered—with incredible specificity and clarity—how badly she wanted Jimmy that night, how determined she was to end the magical evening with him on top of her, inside her, doing everything they could think of.

Adding to the surreality of it all, they were headed to a midnight rendezvous with her old Phys Ed teacher, Mr. Eastman, a man who'd been a rotund, bespectacled pudgy fifteen years ago and who was now retired and, she imagined, sitting around Jack's every night hunting for people who hadn't heard his war stories about unruly, disrespectful kids, the horrors of the Designated Hitter Rule, and why the federal government technically had no authority to collect

taxes.

As she recalled, for a man who never broke a sweat in her eyesight, Glen Eastman had been quite the armchair sportsman, and had often walked around wearing an old fishing vest despite having never been on the water in his life.

She studied the back of Mike Malloy's head. On top of everything else—remembering things and people that had never happened, a strong feeling that she'd been wasting time and sitting idle for six years and only now were things sliding back into place—she'd never felt so instantly comfortable with someone before. Five years ago—three, if she was being honest—she would have thought something terribly clichéd and boring like *love at first sight* or *soul mates* or something awful like that—not *seriously*, maybe, but sort of. Now she wondered if it was just an alternate reality she could still almost reach out and touch, a life that had been surgically removed from her through, of all things, mathematics.

*Fucking math*, she thought. *I always knew math was out to get me.*

She wondered if that was what love was, or at least the soul-matey movie kind people sometimes swore they found. Maybe love was just people who'd shared an aborted reality, suddenly running into each other on the street and realizing that this, *this* was what they should have been doing all this time.

Whatever else, whether she believed what was happening or not,

this much she knew: She was supposed to be in this car with her first boyfriend and Mike Malloy.

One-Eyed Jack's was lit up and loud when they pulled into the parking lot, which was disorienting. She'd worked there for years and every night had been Tuesday night, largely quiet and empty, with the only music what the old, cranky jukebox provided. But here was One-Eyed Jack's pulsing with life and noise. As they got out of the car and approached the familiar building out in the middle of nowhere it was aching familiar and completely different all at once, a place she knew better than any other in the world except maybe her father's house, and yet it was the polar opposite of her experience.

At the door, they were stopped by a burly guy she didn't recognize, a shaggy dog of a man wearing reflective Aviator sunglasses at night, wearing various pieces of denim, his long, greasy hair in his face, chains and other unnecessary accouterments hanging from his pants and jacket.

"Sorry, guys," he said. "We're at capacity."

Candace was about to push past Mike and demand to see Jack McCoy when Phil Eastman appeared at the door. He wasn't wearing his usual fishing vest; instead he had on what looked like an all-black jogging suit, his eyes bulging behind his thick glasses. He moved with an air of assurance, though, that she didn't remember. Instead of the slightly ridiculous former teacher who'd been the World Record

holder for Least Athletic Physical Education Teacher, here was an older man who moved with a confidence and assurance she didn't recognize.

"It's all right, Benji," he said, clapping Denim Man on the shoulder. "They're with me."

"Okay, Mr. Eastman," Benji said, grinning and sweeping his hand towards the door. "Go on in!"

Candace blinked. She knew Benji—Benjamin Louhy. She'd been one year ahead of him in school, and while they'd never been friends they'd had a dozen conversations over the years. She hadn't seen him since she left town, and as she floated past him between Jimmy and Mike, she felt paralyzed: Certain he would recognize her, unwilling to take the first step.

"Hey, Jim," Benji said. "Sorry about that."

"No worries, Benj," Jimmy said cheerfully. "We're probably gonna end up burning this place down tonight, anyway."

Inside, she felt dizzy. The aisles between the wobbly tables she'd once swanned through like a boss were jammed with people. Every table was taken, and people were standing everywhere. A makeshift stage had been built in one corner, a tiny triangle of raised floor, and a three-piece band was knocking out some pretty decent country-flavored rock. No one was dancing. Most amazing of all, there were *two* waitresses working the shift, something she'd never experienced

in all her years living in the area and working there. It blew her mind.

Everyone, she noticed, was wearing black.

Once she noticed it, she couldn't unsee it: Every single patron, including Glen, was wearing a black ensemble. It was a sea of hipsters, and she had to suppress a sudden urge to giggle at the thought: Somehow, under her radar, Jack's had become the new hip place, and people were driving in from miles around to check it out. The thought was so hilariously unlikely she didn't know how to deal with it.

"Come on," Glen said. "I have a table."

They sat down at one of the refreshingly familiar old tables, heavily varnished wood that had been carved and water-stained so often it was like a rock formation. One of the waitresses, an unfamiliar woman with bleached hair and a layer of foundation that didn't quite hide the rash of pimples all over her cheeks, came over and slapped down some napkins.

"What can I get y'all?" she shouted.

Candace had the tingling, buzzing sense of *deja vu*, and then Mike leaned forward and held out a black credit card. She heard the words *1955 Glenfarclas* before he shouted "You've got a *1955 Glenfarclas* behind the bar!"

She blinked, taking the card with an air of wonder. "We do?"

He nodded. "Bring the bottle, four glasses, a bowl of ice, four

glasses of water!”

The band swung into a frenzied climax, and with an A power chord and a smash of drums they were done. There was applause that felt kind of polite and rote, and then the volume dropped to a low roar. She felt drunk. She’d packed up and come home because of a persistent subconscious sense of wrongness in her life. And now she was here with her high school boyfriend and a stranger she wanted to tell secrets to and her old teacher. The least successful bar in history was packed to the rafters and yet as she watched, none of the black-clad customers seemed all that interested. And as she looked around, she noticed something else: None of them were drinking.

They all *had* drinks. Pitchers of beer, filled glasses, bottles. But no one picked anything up as she watched. No one even touched the glasses, and the beer all seemed flat and warm to her professional eye. She’d spent her whole life monitoring bars, after all. There was so much off in Jack’s she couldn’t even come up with what bothered her the most.

“Glen,” Mike said, “why not fill Candace in on what you’ve been up to?”

Glen Eastman nodded and smiled at her. She blinked, seeing him with his hands ziptied behind his back.

“Candy, how are you, sweetheart?” Glen said, smiling warmly. “I suppose you’re like the rest of us—been feeling and seeing things



that seem like they happened, but can't remember anything *actually?*”

She nodded, feeling overwhelmed. It was like everything she'd ever known in her life had been changed, flipped.

“Jimmy and I've been discussing that for years now. And after a while, we decided we weren't crazy—believe me, we considered the possibility pretty seriously. But I suggested to Jim, if we're crazy, then we're crazy. No harm then in doing a little investigating. We had these ... visions, I guess. A life never led, people and events that hadn't yet happened. So, I suggested we take those things seriously on a contingent basis. Let's do our research. Find out if the faces we each remembered, the bits and pieces, linked up to something that actually existed.”

“We found it it all did,” Jimmy said.

“For the last few months I've been posted up in a deer blind across from that old factory,” Glen said, smiling. “Just me and some binoculars and a phone. And two months ago, this one showed up with a crew.”

He pulled his phone out of his vest pocket, thumbed it, and turned it around for her to see.

She recognized the face. It was in Jimmy's notebook, an older man, angry-looking, wearing glasses. She knew the face, even though she'd never seen it before.

Glen nodded. “Me too. We all remember him. He showed up with

two tractor trailers full of equipment and a swarm of people. They began working on the place like crazy, and a few days later, she showed up.”

He thumbed the phone and held it out again. Candace recognized the woman, too; older, fierce-looking, with a short military-style haircut and a piercing stare.

“You recognize these people, too, I can tell.” Eastman said. “Me and Jimmy, we weren’t sure what to do, and then Mr. Malloy showed up, like an old friend we couldn’t neither of us remember.”

“And Mr. Malloy had a plan,” Jimmy said.

Candace felt her stomach dropping. She looked at Mike. She had a feeling that everything was about to come together and make a little more sense. She also had a feeling she wasn’t going to necessarily like it.

The waitress returned, carrying a tray with the bottle of Scotch, four glasses, ice, and water. Candace admired her technique as she set everything up; the girl had some experience, she thought, and knew how to handle herself. When she’d finished laying everything out she stood up and, to Candace’s amazement, did something that could only be described as a little curtsy, bending her legs and nodding her head.

“Y’all let me know if you need anything else,” she said, and spun away.

*Guess she doesn't see too many black cards in here*, Candace thought sourly, then hated herself. *Guess you haven't either.*

When the waitress was gone, Mike leaned forward, his eyes locked on her. She liked his eyes, but there was something in his expression she didn't like, though she couldn't put her finger on what it was, precisely. Something haunted.

"We're not going to sit here and wait for it to happen again, for them to come and grab us," Mike said. "We're going to take the facility. Pre-emptive. We're going to take the lot of them, and take possession of their little Reality-bending machine."

She blinked. Then she shook her head. "That's *crazy*. You remember the same things I do. They have soldiers there. Assault weapons. God knows what we didn't see." She looked around and leaned forward. "Mike, we can't take the facility. We don't have the resources."

Mike shook his head. "You're wrong, Candace. Me and Jim and Glen, we've been planning for this."

"Candy," Jimmy said, picking up the bottle and pouring himself a generous drink. "Take a look around. All these people in here? Every single one of them? Work for our rich benefactor here, Mr. Mike Malloy."

### 33. Mike

It started after Julia.

At first he'd thought it was just trauma, just his brain's way of dealing with what had happened—imagining that it hadn't *really* happened, that maybe he was living in some sort of extended dream. The sense of unreality, the memories of things that had never actually happened—he thought he was losing his mind.

It sobered him up.

Well, it had *helped* sober him up. Robbie basically kidnapping him into rehab had helped, too. For twenty-eight days he'd seen twin visions as he shook and sweated and shit himself: Julia, prone on the floor, convulsed in mid-crawl, and another woman, a sturdy, pretty girl in tight jeans, looking at him like he was crazy. The specificity of the expression he saw was what made him think it wasn't just a slow-motion stroke, or creeping insanity. He *knew* that look.

Everyone, including Robbie—who, in addition to being his lawyer and financial advisor was also pretty much his only friend—thought he should stay in rehab. It was a luxury facility, more like staying at an expensive hotel than a treatment center, especially once he got past withdrawal and could eat solid food again. The doctors all said the same thing: The standard four-week stay was just the tip of the iceberg, and some huge percentage of people who checked out right

away relapsed within a few months. The math was simple: The longer he stayed, the better his chances of staying sober.

The math. Every time he heard the word, something inside him went *click*.

He didn't want to stay sober, though. He just didn't want to be an addict any more. No one seemed to believe him when he said there was a difference.

He left anyway, but one piece of advice from his doctor he agreed with was that it would be best to get away from the old familiar haunts, the clubs and bars, the hotel rooms, his old apartment off of Central Park. Too many familiar faces eager to sell him something, eager to invite him out, eager to share their own stash, eager to introduce him to women who might take his mind off of Julia.

He didn't want his mind taken off of Julia. He wanted to remember her, and he forced himself to remember her on the floor, in her panties, crawling. *That* was what would keep him straight.

And so, he'd made arrangements through Robbie, and hit the road.

He laid awake a lot of nights thinking about her and trying to pinpoint where it had all gone wrong. Because him and Julia had started off good. Fun. They'd both been pretty wild, twenty-five, and if Julia wasn't rich she was pretty and in Manhattan a pretty girl

could live a wild life without a dime to her name. But she was up front about it. She didn't pretend. She knew it was a transaction every night in every club, every bar, every penthouse party. Not sex, necessarily, but her presence, her looks, her flirting. He liked that she saw herself honestly and didn't make any attempt to kid anyone.

And for a long time, years even, they'd had fun. It had been a party, and he'd felt young and smart, smarter than everyone else. He knew all the secret codes, the names for everything, the places it could be acquired, the pricing and the people to trust. Even the epic hangovers, sitting miserable in coffee shops and diners with sunglasses on, everything making him nauseous, felt like a secret club. He prided himself on his recovery. No matter how bloated and sweaty and sick he was in the morning or afternoon, by midnight he was right as rain and ready to hit it hard again, and Julia not only kept up she often set the pace.

And then it got a hand on them, and it became a job. The hangovers got worse, but there was always an easy cure. Slowly, everything began to revolve around supply and demand, with the demand getting deeper and deeper and the supply never enough. Everything became a blur and he knew that on some deep intimate level he'd been aware of the irony that he was rich enough to not need a job but he was working a hundred hours a week just to feel normal.

Julia used to talk about leaving New York. On their bad days, the

mornings when they were both sick but couldn't get anyone they knew on the phone and had to start putting out desperate feelers to strangers and once-met acquaintances, she would pace around the apartment in her underwear, chain smoking, and chatter on and on about getting out of the city. She thought the city was sick and was infecting them. The bad air, the evil people, the easy drugs. She would say, let's go to a cabin. Let's get in a car and go to a cabin and dry out together and then go around the country, the world. Travel. The secret, she said, was keeping busy. If you were always on the move you couldn't get *bored* and if you weren't *bored* you wouldn't need anything else.

And then they would finally score, make a connection, and the idea of travel and leaving the city would go away. He *made* it go away, because he couldn't imagine being away from the city, from his apartment, his friends, his connections.

The apartment. He remembered the first day back at the place after rehab. The state of it had shocked him. The grime and the smell, the disarray. The rotting food in the fridge. He'd left everything. He made arrangements for a cleanout and a cleaning service, told Robbie to sell the place for whatever he could get for it, and never went back.

He knew he'd killed her. If he'd said, yes, let's go to a cabin, let's leave the city, let's travel they might never have changed their lives,

but she wouldn't have died on the floor of that disgusting, dirty apartment. If he'd just been willing to leave, to change, to get off the roller coaster for five minutes and catch his breath, they'd probably be getting fat and ugly in some hotel in Budapest right now, irritated because no one was selling anything worth taking. Sick, maybe, unhappy maybe, but alive.

Driving around, ditching rental cars and hopping on trains, walking and hitchhiking, he had a lot of time to think. People were always trying to start up conversations, but he preferred to just sit and think. Being sober was a novelty at first. He'd hesitated about alcohol, and then one night alone in a ski resort hotel in Alaska, almost completely empty, he'd gone down to the bar and ordered a whiskey and when it didn't kill him or send him running in the snow looking for someone to sell him a few rocks, he'd had another, and then gone to bed.

Everyone told him that control was an illusion. They told him at the center, you're an addict. You think you can control it, but you can't. Sobriety is an all-or-nothing proposition. You're either sober or you're not.

That night, in the nearly-empty resort, he'd decided to not be sober. And it didn't kill him.

Clearheaded, he thought the visions would start to fade. The faces



he saw, the places, the violence that came in flashes, guns and blood and bodies. He thought they were either trauma-related, and would fade as he distanced himself from that awful, terrible moment, waking up and seeing her on the floor and knowing somehow immediately that she was dead. Or that they were an extension of his drug-augmented reality, a stretching of his brain cells that had become semi-permanent, and that would fade as boring normality settled back in.

But the visions persisted. Grew stronger. He found himself doubting reality, expecting to be able to reach out and peel away what he saw, revealing a near-empty bar out in the woods, men and women in uniforms with no insignia, carrying assault weapons. He felt like he was in some sort of simulation, a *Matrix*. He would close his eyes one day and see the source code, glowing and green, and be able to manipulate it.

He came across One-Eyed Jack's by accident.

He'd been sitting in a diner, empty plates turning cold and crusty, nursing a fourth cup of coffee while he read idly on his tablet. His next adventure, he thought, would involve hunting. He'd never been hunting, never killed an animal or learned how to skin it and butcher it, and that seemed like a handy skill to have. He wasn't sure how he felt about killing and eating something that you saw with your own

eyes, alive and aware, and he thought that was something everyone should have as well. If you were going to eat the breakfast sausage, you should at least be settled in your mind whether killing something for food was okay or not.

Light research led him, somehow, to a web page offering the Ten Best Hidden Bars, and number eight on the list was One-Eyed Jack's, "... a perfectly hidden dive where the bartender/owner will sit down at your table and tell you tall tales about his hunting exploits, the beer is cold, the music on the jukebox at least twenty years out of date, and the burgers only so-so, but the atmosphere and location can't be beat for off-the-beaten-path interest."

The photo of the place hit him like a punch: He *knew* the place. He'd never been, but if he closed his eyes he was able to imagine it, and even picture the owner, Jack McCoy. Except when he pictured him, he was dead, lying in a pool of his own blood.

He paid the bill and was on the phone before he got back to his rental car, working on hiring a guide to take him around for a hunting lesson, that would end at One-Eyed Jack's. He had a buzzing feeling of energy, as if something he'd been planning for his whole life was about to come off.

On the road a day later, the name Jimmy Haggren ringing in his head after being connected to the man as a potential guide, he'd called up Robbie.

“Jesus, Mike, where are you?”

“On the road. Heading south, going hunting.”

Robbie paused. Mike knew his lawyer, his friend, was running out of patience. “Look, Mike, you know I’m on your side and I want to help. But it’s been thirteen months. Thirteen months I’m opening your mail and fielding your phone calls, transferring funds, putting people off. I want to help, but I’m not your secretary? Okay?”

Mike grimaced. “Robbie—I’m sorry. I hear you, I really do. And I’m sorry—I apologize. And I’ll make it up to you. But I have one more thing I have to ask you do for me. Something I can only trust you to do.”

There was silence on the line, and Mike could picture his fat, red-faced lawyer, his black hair too long and hanging in his face, breathing hard, biting his chubby pink lip as he thought. Mike could picture the tiny wood-heavy office that Robbie lived in, piled high with paper despite repeated announcements of “going digital,” the walls covered with framed photos of Robbie and everyone he’d ever had a conversation with. Robbie, big, friendly, reliable. He’d known Rob for twenty years and they’d been through some adventures together.

“All right, Mikey,” Robbie said, using the diminutive he favored whenever he put aside his professional demeanor and treated him solely as a friend. “All right. What do you need?”

Mike remembered steering with one hand, the phone in the other, watching a storm approach on the Interstate. “An army, Robbie,” he said. “I need to hire an army.”

## 34. Candace

She picked up the bottle and splashed whiskey into her glass, her hands shaking a little. She felt like everything was receding from her, like there was no ground, no floor. First there had been the visions and the false memories and the sense that her life wasn't real, wasn't what was supposed to be. Then there was meeting the man she'd been seeing in her head, a man she'd never met yet felt like she knew. But now he wasn't as she remembered him—or *didn't* remember him—and everything felt like it was spinning because *nothing* made any sense, not her real life, not her hallucinations, and not her present tense.

She gulped a swallow of whiskey. She didn't know anything about fine Scotch, but this was a smooth, slightly smoky dram and while she didn't think any whiskey was necessarily worth this much money, she had to admit it sure beat the sour mash she normally drank when in the mood.

Looking around, she saw everyone in a new light. All the people were more or less in subtle uniform: Black shirts, jeans, boots, field jackets. Now that she was paying attention, they were all armed; she caught glimpses of shoulder holsters, ankle holsters, bulges under arms.

And none of them were drinking. Every table was laden with

untouched drinks.

She swallowed the rest of the whiskey in her glass, willing the warm splash in her belly to spread, to steady her. She took a deep breath.

*Sometimes you just gotta step in it*, she heard her father say.

“Why do you need an army, Mike?”

Mike and Jimmy exchanged glances, and then they both looked at Glen. Irritation bloomed inside her. These three men had obviously been planning something, and now they shared secrets and she’d just witnessed a flash committee meeting deciding just how much they would tell Candace Cuddyer, who was apparently a junior member of the elite Reality Distortion Club.

“You know what ... well, I’ll use the word *happened* because there really isn’t a better one,” Mike said with a grin she found achingly familiar and endearing. “You know what happened here—right here, in this bar, on this exact night, right?”

“Jack McCoy, dead,” Jimmy said.

“All of us, confined and abused,” Glen added.

Mike leaned forward intently. “And why? Because they have a machine that reads the math of the universe and told them the four of us were a danger.”

“No due process,” Glen said, shaking his head.

“And then I changed everything,” Haggen added, picking up the

bottle and examining it. “I changed a *variable* in a *line of code* and here we are.”

“Candace,” Mike said as softly as the low roar of the place allowed. “Isn’t there something you’d like to change? Something you’d like to make different about your life? This is a chance to do that.”

Something cracked inside her, and she felt herself tremble. *Don’t cry*, she hissed internally. *Don’t you fucking cry you stupid bitch*. Tears made no sense; she wasn’t sad, or scared. She was angry.

“You hired an army so we could steal the ... the thing. The black box. And change reality.”

“To what *we* want,” Glen said, leaning back and folding his hands over his belly. His expression was smug. “We each get to change something. One variable. Something that will make a difference.”

*Julia*. Candace suddenly remembered the name, remembered him telling her about someone he’d lost, someone he’d loved. *Something you’d like to change*. This was projection, she thought. This was Mike justifying his own selfishness. He wanted to re-write his own history, and he hoped she would have a similar motivation so he would be able to say that he wasn’t alone, that he wasn’t driving this.

And she did, she guessed. She knew the black box worked, after all; she had the false memories to prove it. In another reality, a Dipping Bird had pressed the ENTER key on a keyboard, and everything had changed. One variable altered, and she’d left town

instead of hanging around, and if things had gone more or less similarly since that point of divergence, that was *her* fault, wasn't it?

What if she changed something else?

She thought about her father. Of course, her father. Cancer was a death sentence unless it was caught early, and pancreatic cancer was worse than most, remaining in stealth mode until it was literally too late. But what if she had paid closer attention? What if she hadn't dismissed his exhaustion, his weight loss, the flat look in his eyes? What if she hadn't left to go to school, and had been in constant contact with him, able to detect the tiny changes that seemed to suddenly coalesce into a terminal diagnosis?

What if she had a whole false memory of his diagnosis and death warning her? She struggled to think about how her real life and her false memories lined up, when the break really was. Had it been after he was already sick? How far back would she have to push the reset in order to save him? And would it make any difference? If she managed to get him to the right doctor at the right time, get the right test, would it save him?

Did it matter? Didn't she have to try?

She looked at Mike. He was staring at her steadily, his expression hard to read. Except it wasn't, because they were both thinking about dead people they felt they could have saved, somehow, if only different decisions had been made, different choices taken. She saw



her father, thin and yellowed, weak and without any sort of spark of life. Twice now, in a sense, she'd seen him die. Once she'd been here, in his life every day but she hadn't known to pay attention. The second time she'd moved away and he'd withered while she'd been busy wasting time. If she knew what was coming, and changed something ... some detail of her life that would keep her home but have her eyes open to what was happening, and she got him into the right care ... she knew from her research that the five-year survival rate for Stage I was more than 60%.

Five years. She thought about five more years with Dad. She heard him saying, *well, it ain't nothing*.

She looked at Jimmy and wondered what *he* would change. He'd already done it once, but under duress and maybe not quite believing it would work, or fully understanding the code. Then she looked at Mr. Eastman, and wondered about him. How far back would they go? What was their biggest regret? Mr. Eastman was in his sixties, she thought; his variable might go back fifty years. What kind of repercussions would there be?

And what if Jimmy's regret was *her*?

She swallowed a rusty, panicked taste. She and Jimmy hadn't been anything but terse friends for a long time. He showed up at the bar and drank until she had to drive him home. He called her "Candy" because he knew it annoyed her. He was a constant asshole thorn in

her side.

But he was always around. He was *always* around.

The idea that Jimmy Haggan's biggest regret, the variable he would change if he had time to think it through, was their Prom night breakup, his decision to pursue Sarah Mulligan's heavy tits filled her with a horror more pure than anything she'd ever experienced before. She knew on some level that if he hadn't abandoned her that night—and he wouldn't have had to be even *nice*, she would have gladly accepted *civil*—she would have slept with him. And stayed with him for some unknowable length of time.

Stealing a glance at Jimmy, she found him smiling at her as he savored his whiskey. She shivered.

She looked back at Mike and took a deep breath.

“No.”

An expression of confusion flickered across his face. “What?”

She leaned back and crossed her arms over her belly. “No. I'm not going along with some insane plan to just randomly change something about our lives in the vague and creepy hope that all the *other* variables line up and make our lives better.” She shook her head. “You—none of you—haven't thought this through. You remember as well as I do what's at that facility up the road—”

“Soldiers,” Glen Eastman snapped. “Coming *here* in a *little while* to take us *prisoner*.”

She turned excitedly towards her former teacher. “A goddamn *supercomputer* they used to make sure they’d calculated all the possible ramifications.” She pounded the table. “Dammit, don’t you *boys* remember that the reason they sent the soldiers instead of just *adjusting* our *variables* was because they couldn’t control the outcome? They couldn’t predict what would happen?” She turned to offer Jimmy a withering look that made him blink and sit up straighter in surprise. “And you think *you* can do that *without* the supercomputer?”

“Candy—” Haggen started to say, but she plucked the glass from his hand, slammed the whiskey, and stood up.

“You’re all crazy. All this,” she gestured around the room. “All *this* just to *fix* something? You’re such fucking *men* it’s incredible. You think you know everything. You think you can fix everything. And you think you don’t have to read the fucking manual. Jesus.”

She started to walk towards the door.

“You realize we each *had* our second chance and we fucked it up just as much. You think a third go will be any different?” she snorted. “You’re kidding yourselves.”

Mike was in front of her then, hands up in a placating gesture. “Wait! Wait, please?” He backed away from her, giving her space. She hesitated.

“Can we just talk for a moment?” he said. “Go outside, where it’s quieter, and just *talk* about this before you do anything?”

She chewed her lip. But there was still a lingering sense that this guy, this mysterious super rich Mike Malloy, was a good guy. She nodded. "I was going outside anyway."

He smiled, and stepped aside, eyes sweeping the room. "Five minutes, he said. "It's all I ask."

Outside, she hugged herself against the chill and walked a few feet from the place. The noise level dropped, and when she turned to look at Mike she could say "You know Jimmy's gonna drink all your expensive hooch while you're out here" without raising her voice.

He grinned. "I'm getting used to the Haggen Way. He's a smart guy, actually. Smarter than he looks."

Candace nodded. "That should be on his tombstone. James Haggen: He was smarter than he looked."

They smiled at each other. Then he cleared his throat. "I thought ... I thought if you came, if you showed up, you'd be on board. I thought, why else would she come?"

She frowned. "Mike, if you think you're gonna be able to control this, to make it work for you, you're kidding yourself."

He nodded. "We've been thinking on this a long time, Candace. We've made lists of things to change, mapped out relationships."

She studied his face. It was a good face, she thought, a face that had been through some stuff, a face she could get used to. But there was a confidence there that was off. It reminded her of her older,

religious relatives, that certainty that they *knew*, that they had the answers when it made no sense. She thought Mike had spent a long time in the wilderness, and now he'd seen a way to make sure that the wilderness never existed in the first place. And he was going to grab it with both hands.

"Mike, you can't possibly do the work that needs to be done. You *can't*."

He shook his head. "You wouldn't take the chance? To have—" he hesitated a moment, then brightened, and she knew he'd gotten one of those familiar flashes of a life never lived. "To have your father back? You're really going to walk away?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry, Mike. I really am. But this is crazy."

He nodded, and his eyes flicked up, looking over her for a moment. She had the strange feeling he wasn't nodding at *her*. "Then I'm sorry, Candace. But if we're right—and I think we are—then Dr. Raslowski and Colonel Hammond and the rest are up at that facility right now. And they expect the four of us to be in this bar tonight, so they can come and detain us."

She felt hands on her arms. She tried to twist away, but they were too many, and too strong.

"Which means I can't let you go."

## 35. Mike

The waiting was excruciating. He'd given in and had a whiskey, and then another, and didn't feel a thing. He sat stiff with tension, trying to hold a pose he hoped resembled relaxation and calm.

He'd never had employees. Prior to his travels after Julia's death, he'd never had a *job*, not even when he'd been younger and his parents hadn't had any money, making his financial situation much more modest; his parents had sometimes talked about forcing him to get a part time job to earn his own money but had never quite gotten around to making it an order or a requirement, and his father had always been willing to cheerfully hand over twenty bucks whenever asked.

He'd worked several shitty jobs since embarking on his travels. There were always places willing to hire someone off the books for cash, usually to do physical labor. He'd stocked some shelves, pitched some hay, cleaned out latrines, and helped build a house. Now he sat at the table at One-Eyed Jack's and watched his employees pretending to have a good time and felt like an asshole. What else could he be? He had hired a private army. He was paying fifty-four men and women to shoot at what he wanted them to shoot at, to take someone else's property, to infringe on someone else's rights.

Hiring them had been surprisingly easy. He'd given Robbie the

contact information for Todd and his merry band of militiamen, authorized him to make deals, and that had been that. Once Todd and his crew had satisfied themselves that Robbie really did represent their pal Mike Malloy and not some nefarious sting operation from the Feds, they spread the word and applications came in. Todd himself had joined up and functioned as a sort of commanding officer, an affable man in his fifties who smiled a lot, made a lot of jokes, and carried a laminated card-sized print of the Constitution in his wallet. He liked to make a bet that he could recite it perfectly from memory, and would pull out and offer the card to anyone who wanted to test him.

As he'd told Robbie, as long as they were fighting back against government overreach, they would die fighting. Todd had set out several rules: No civilians would be targeted or harmed, no theft just for theft's sake, private property would be respected. He'd assigned three people to keep track of the bar's owner and employees and ensure they were kept safe. Mike had given him a sketch of the layout—a layout drawn from memory of a place he'd never actually been—including the trap door and crawl space. And then they'd all come to the bar on their own, with a list of basic materials to bring with them. In twos and threes, they'd traveled and congregated and Mike knew that Jack McCoy was puzzling over the best night his bar had enjoyed in years as dozens and dozens of people piled in.

And now he was waiting. For the lights, the noise. The soldiers. For Hammond, and Raslowski, and King, and all the others. He was waiting for them to crash in to detain him, Jimmy Haggen, Glen Eastman, and Candace, and they were going to get a surprise.

Haggen poured himself another drink, and Mike noted with muted alarm that the bottle was half empty. He worried that Haggen might be a loose cannon, a drunk careening through whiskey and cigarettes to explode and screw up the plan. He didn't *know* Jim Haggen. He had an *impression* of him which wasn't, actually, any better, but he had no idea how he might control Haggen's behavior in any way.

He glanced at Eastman, who appeared to be genuinely relaxed, smiling as he watched the band. Glen had been crucial in two ways: He'd jumped into the negotiations with Todd, and the two discovered a spiderweb of shared contacts and opinions, names that could be dropped, and shorthand that magically opened doors. Without Glen Eastman and his befuddled, thick-glasses brand of retiree thoroughness Mike didn't think he'd have an army in place.

He drummed his fingers on the table. The tension was unbearable, knowing something was going to happen and just waiting for it. For the first time in two years, he wanted to get high, just to pass a few moments a little faster. That had always been the appeal for him. You took drugs, everything sped up, and you didn't



get so bored and tense waiting for things to happen—they came at you in a constant, shocking wave.

He thought of checking on Candace, tied up as comfortably as possible in the storage room next to Jack McCoy, who'd gone from enjoying his windfall to being deeply outraged to now simply being confused. He felt badly about having to treat her that way, but he was certain that they all had to be here. If she wasn't here, then Raslowski's work would reveal that—and it might even render them unimportant, no longer a threat, locked out and unable to ever get close to the black box again. He would make it up to her. As soon as they had secured the box and controlled the situation, he would make amends and even offer her the chance to make adjustments even though she hadn't contributed. She might change her mind when the dust had settled, when she saw that it was a done deal.

Something told him otherwise, though. Something told him she wasn't going to be very forgiving about being dragged in and tied up. He smiled a little. He was going to have to be careful not to get hurt when they let her go.

He realized with a start that he could feel a tremor in the floor boards.

*This is it*, he thought. He looked at Jimmy, who nodded, and then at Glen, who was already on his feet.

“All right, everyone!” Glen shouted as the music stopped abruptly.

“We’re live. Be careful!”

No one said anything. Mike stood and there was a calm, organized reaction as tables were overturned and positions were taken. Rifles and handguns were produced. Mike knew that out in the tree line, another thirty or forty people were waiting to encircle the place and flank the soldiers; one thing he had to admit about supposed “patriots”: There were an awful lot of them.

“The doctor!” he shouted. “Raslowski! You’ve all seen a photo. He can’t be allowed to slip away.”

He took his phone out of his pocket and pressed SEND on a message he’d typed out at the beginning of the evening: NOW.

For a moment, the bar hung in stasis, and he wondered at himself. A few years ago he’d been a shiftless addict, wasting everything—his life, his money. Then he’d been a pilgrim, still wasting time, trying to pretend anything he did mattered. And here he was trying to take control of the universe.

Through the windows he could see bright lights bouncing around, filling the place. Mike waited. Everyone waited.

Then the front door opened and two soldiers stepped into the bar, men dressed in camouflage, sidearms on their hips. Six of Mike’s people swarmed in from the sides and put guns to their heads, pulling them away from the door.

A female officer he recognized as Colonel Hammond was in the

doorway. Behind her, he could see her troops being swarmed, a few shots fired, isolated bursts. She started to turn, but his people grabbed her and pulled her in.

Mike glanced down at his phone. It was going so well he was having a hard time believing it. He and Glen had tried to plan it so that no one got hurt, so that it was a bloodless coup, but he hadn't believed it was possible. But maybe the element of surprise was so powerful, that they would be ready for them so unexpected, that it was going to work.

Hammond was pulled in and disarmed, zipties wrapped around her wrists. She stared around coldly, her icy blue eyes landing on Glen, then Jimmy, then Mike. For a second they stared at each other. Then she looked around the bar, eyes roaming.

*Looking for Candace*, he thought.

More gunfire outside, but still just single shots, nothing that sounded like a sustained firefight. He kept his eyes on the screen.

"Colonel Hammond," he said, glancing up to see if she reacted to his knowing her name. "Will you order your people to stand down? No one has to be hurt, here. We all walk away if you'll give that order."

The woman in front of him was exactly as he'd expected her to be: Quiet, calm, with an air of authority he couldn't deny. She looked around, then back at him.

"You've got quite the squad of irregulars," she said.

He nodded. “We share a dislike for the government knocking down our doors and detaining us without due process,” he said, more for the benefit of his allies than any real conviction. They were being paid, but money wasn’t everything to these folks. He felt the phone buzz in his hand, but he kept his eyes on her. “Will you give the order, Colonel?”

She pursed her lips. Outside, things had gone quiet. “Very well,” she said after a moment. “Rowland, pass the word: Stand down. No resistance. We’ve been sacked.”

One of the soldiers who’d come in with her, a handsome black guy, nodded. With a glance at Mike, he turned for the door. After a moment’s hesitation, two women standing guard over the entrance stepped aside and let him pass.

“Glen,” Mike said, looking down at his phone. “Take a couple of people and make sure we’ve got Raslowski out there.”

“Sure thing,” Glen said. He gestured at a group and they hustled out, guns at the ready.

On Mike’s phone, the text message read ROME HAS FALLEN.

He looked up as Glen returned, pushing Dr. Raslowski ahead of him. The scientist looked around in complete confusion. His glasses were bent and hung on his face at an odd angle.

Mike found Jimmy Haggen, still sitting at the table with a glass of whiskey. Their eyes met.

“We’ve got it,” Mike said. “The facility’s ours.”

## 36. Candace

The sense of *deja vu* was overwhelming. Two impressions of the back room competed with each other every time she glanced around. On the one hand she'd been back here every night for several years, collecting supplies, taking breaks, hauling kegs. On the other she knew they'd tied up prisoners and brought them back here, and she knew this had been the scene of some vicious fighting.

Her eyes found all the points of interest. The spot on the other side of the shelves where the trap led to the crawlspace. Mike or Glen or someone had taken the precaution, she noted, of removing the crossbow and other hunting gear Jack usually kept in the back. One of the benefits of hitting a REPLAY button on reality itself was making sure other people didn't play the same tricks on you that you played on them.

She turned and found Jack McCoy staring at her.

He was gagged and bound, so all he could do was bulge his eyes at her. She wasn't sure if he had any of the memories she and the others had, if he also struggled with the sense that something had happened and then *not* happened, if he had any sense that on this night in another version of the universe where the equations had turned up different numbers, he'd been shot to death in the main room, just twenty feet away.

Based on his eyes, she thought maybe he did.

They were cheering in the main room, a wave of self-congratulatory noise signaling something had gone according to plan. Her heart pounded in her chest. She wasn't entirely satisfied with her life, that was true enough, but the idea that someone was going to change some code and press a button and a field of energy was going to change her existence fundamentally, without her input or control, was terrifying. She didn't want to go through the last six years *again*. She didn't want to go through some other random number of years, either, or never be born, or find herself married to Jimmy Hagen, or anything. She wasn't satisfied, she missed her father, she wished she'd done better at things—but she wanted to take that knowledge and start over. Because the last few years felt like she'd been wasting her time, going through motions. At the time, in the moment, it had felt real. Necessary. But now she looked back and it all seemed pointless. No matter what she'd done or hadn't done, she'd been hurtling towards this moment. When she'd left town for New York, she'd been heading here the long way. When she crapped out and took the waitressing job, she'd stayed up all night three nights in a row smoking ill-advised cigarettes worrying about the decision. But it hadn't mattered. None of it had mattered, and she'd charred her lungs and deepened the sink around her eyes for no reason. She could have sat at the bar in Rudy's for six years, and she

would have ended up exactly where she was.

She didn't want to waste another doubled-up track of years like that. She wanted her actions and decisions to matter.

Jack McCoy nudged her with his shoulder. Bugged his eyes at her.

"I know, Jack," she said. "I'm working on it."

He nudged her again and grunted, holding up his ziptied wrists. She looked at him, searching. He lifted his hands to his mouth and moved them back and forth.

"What?" She looked down at her own wrists, at the black tail of plastic snaking from between them. They were tight, but not uncomfortably so. She looked back at Jack, who continued to mime bringing his hands up close to his mouth. She mimicked him, then had a flash of epiphany. She took the leading tail of plastic between her teeth, looked at Jack for confirmation, and when he nodded eagerly she pulled the zipties tight, tighter, still tighter until the plastic bit painfully into her skin. When she let go of the tie, she looked at Jack and he nodded fiercely. Then he brought his knees up to his chest and raised his wrists up over his head and brought them down onto his knees with some force.

She folded her legs like he had and raised her hands up over her head. She paused to check with him. When he nodded excitedly again, she brought her wrists down as hard as she could, and the ziptie snapped and fell from her wrists.



She stared for a second, then laughed and looked at Jack, who was grinning around his gag. He nodded. She leaned over and pulled the gag down.

“Oh, Jesus, thank you,” he said, working his jaw. Then he paused and looked at her. Really *looked* at her. Candace blinked in the onslaught of that direct gaze. She felt like it was the first time someone had really looked at her, had really seen her, in years.

“Candace Cuddyer,” he said. “Where the fuck did you come from?”

She began working on the ziptie around her ankles. “Jack ... Jack, do you remember—no, remember isn’t the right word. Do you ever have a sense of something that didn’t happen, but you feel like maybe it did, somehow? Like a life not lived?”

He frowned. “I dunno, kid. I spend eighteen hours a day in this place, and the rest I’m asleep. I don’t have any idea what you mean. Do you know what’s going on? Is *Jimmy* involved, for god’s sake?”

Her feet free, she turned her attentions to Jack’s bindings. “It’s ... complicated, Jack.”

He leaned in towards her. “Jesus, Candace, are *you*? Involved?”

“It’s complicated.”

She freed him from his restraints as quickly as she could. He grunted in pain and set to rubbing his wrists and ankles while she quickly toured the storeroom, looking for anything that might be helpful. It looked like Mike and the others had stripped it of anything

obvious, and she felt a need for action.

“Jack,” she whispered. “Explaining this won’t be easy and would take too much time. I need you to trust me, okay?”

He studied her, his salt-and-pepper beard longer than she remembered. “Candace,” he finally said, the deep rumble of his voice comforting, “there are few people in this world I’d trust on a day like this, but you’re one of them. What do we do?”

She smiled, a rush of affection for her old boss—who was more like a beloved uncle—making her feel happy for the first time in a long time. “We—I—need to get up the road to that old factory. Which means I need to get out of here without being seen.” She glanced at the trap door. “I can use the crawl space to get to the bar, but if someone’s in view of the trap out there, I’m screwed. And even if I get there, if they’re blocking the door, I’m screwed. I need to know where everyone is out in the main room.”

He nodded. “Okay. Anyone in my office?”

She shook her head. “No idea.”

“Let’s go check,” he said. “We can use the security cameras to see what’s going on out there.”

She blinked. “*Security cameras?*”

He nodded. “I know, right? But a couple of years ago, I dunno, I started getting a little worried. Freaked out. Read about a robbery at some bar not far from here, people got tied up and left for days,

almost died. So I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to protect myself, so I installed some. These days, over the Internet, you can set up cameras yourself for next to nothing."

Candace blinked, wondering if she'd actually heard Jack McCoy use the word *Internet* in a conversation. Then the rush of affection again, and she realized she was about to cry because Jack McCoy, who had never *really* been dead, was *alive*.

"Come on," he said, grunting as he heaved himself up off the floor.

They crept out of the storeroom and down the hall towards the office. Candace had flashes of a life never lived, seeing herself in that office under various circumstances, seeing Hammond in there, Mike, Jimmy. She was relieved to see the familiar wreck of the place when they slipped into the room—the usual piles of invoices, books, and other stuff on the tiny desk, the shelves filled with old books and souvenirs from special nights, some of which dated back to way before Jack had bought the place.

Then she saw the computer.

For a moment she couldn't accept what she was seeing. It was a brand new machine, and looked like a sports car compared to old hunk of silicon she remembered. And she *did* remember it; she'd used that balky old computer and its slow modem for years when she's worked there. But she'd also been certain it would still be there, because it *had* been there in her other memories.

Jack slipped behind the desk while she stood gawking, thinking of all the evenings she could have been watching movies online instead of painfully watching text scroll up an old, blurry screen.

She circled around behind him. He tapped on the keyboard, and the screen lit up, showing six smaller screens in a grid. Each screen showed a different area of the bar or an alternate angle in clear black and white. Jack pointed at the screen.

“None of those bastards behind the bar,” he said.

She nodded. “Door’s clear,” she said, pointing. “But I doubt I can get through it without being seen. Any cameras outside?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” McCoy said, and clicked with the mouse. The grid changed to a collection of scenes outside the bar. A group of five or six of Mike’s people stood out there. To Candace’s eye they didn’t seem very attentive. They were standing around smoking cigarettes and chatting, their rifles held casually across their torsos.

“If I make it out of the bar,” she said, almost to herself, “they probably stop me. And at any rate they’ll know exactly where I’m going and they’ll warn Mike and them.” She glanced at Jack, and had a moment of doubling again as she said “I’ll need a distraction.”

*Distraction, she thought. That’s perfect.*

Jack leaned back in the chair and chewed his mustache. “You’ll need more than just a distraction, kiddo.” He sat forward again.

“Here’s what we’re gonna do.”

He clicked the mouse and the security cameras disappeared. He clicked again and brought up a web page with a login box. He tapped in a username and a password, and a moment later a web page resolved on the screen showing a photo of a Ford F150.

She blinked again. “You got a *new car*?” She felt like the universe was sliding away from her. Jack McCoy in anything but his rusted-out old Datsun pickup was just ... incomprehensible.

He chuckled. “Insurance. Got T-boned a few years ago. Coulda lost my arm; I was driving beating time to Jimi Hendrix on the side of the door and only pulled my arm inside a second before I got hit because I had to scratch my fucking nose. Anyway, new truck, and it came with this remote start business. Don’t use it often, but it works a charm.” He gestured. “I click that button, the truck will start up. I click *that* button, the doors unlock. *Capisce?* I’ll cause a distraction, see if I can get those fellas standing around out there to come in. You go on through the crawlspace like you said, make a dash for it. The headlights’ll be on. With some luck, we might get you out of here and no one notices.”

She nodded slowly. “Until they bring you back to the storeroom and I’m not there.”

He winked, standing up. “Come on, Candace, you think I only got *one* trick up my sleeve? Look, I don’t know what’s going on here, kiddo, but I’ll do my part for you. You say you gotta get out of here, I’ll

get you out. You let me know worry about the rest, okay?” He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a keyring with an enormous green rabbit’s foot. He held it out for her and dropped it into her hand. “You’ll need the fob or she won’t shift gears. Once you’re off the key will start it like always.”

She nodded and impulsively threw her arms around him. “Thanks, Jack,” she said softly. She pulled away and rubbed her nose. Then she looked at him sharply. “Don’t do anything to get yourself shot,” she said, a sense of foreboding settling over her, a certainty that in her other reality *distractions* hadn’t always gone as planned.

He patted her awkwardly on the back. “Aw, shit, kiddo, I kinda wish you hadn’t *said* that.”

As she crawled, she counted. When she got to three hundred, Jack would start his distraction and when she got to three-hundred-and-twenty he would start the truck and unlock the doors. At that point, whether or not he’d cleared the parking lot she had to make a break for it.

The sense of being on a completely new timeline, doing something she’d never done before, was electric. She was certain that in neither of the lives she could remember had she dropped into the crawlspace, become completely gummed up in spiderwebs, and pushed her way up through the trap behind the bar. It felt good to be free of the doubled-images, the sense at she’d done everything before

in a slightly different outfit. But as she carefully crept up out of the crawlspace, she realized she was slipping back into a groove. She had a distinct sense of having been behind the bar, firing a weapon, maybe, or struggling to evade someone.

She wouldn't be free of this dark sense of *deja vu*, she thought, until she got the hell out of town. But first she had to stop Mike, Glen, and Jimmy from doing something terrible.

She crouched behind the bar and counted. *Two-ninety five, two-ninety six.*

She took a deep breath.

The lights went out. And suddenly the air was filled with screams. Anguished, howling screams.

It took her a moment to recognize the recording that Jack McCoy pumped through the sound system every Halloween for One-Eyed Jack's annual Spookfest. It was a tradition to cut the lights and play the tape at midnight as Mischief Night turned into Halloween, scaring the pants off of any tourists or locals who'd forgotten the date.

She counted.

She heard the commotion—shouts, heavy footsteps on the old floorboards. She heard the front door opening, and then dozens of phones blinked on and transformed into flashlights. She considered the hilarity of militia men and survivalists on Mike's payroll relying

on *smartphones* for their emergency lighting, and then she was at three-twenty and she leaped up and sprinted for the door.

She expected to crash into someone, but she sailed through and then she was in the open air. Jack had killed the outside lights too—she wondered if he had the whole place linked wirelessly to a web control—and she could see the truck clearly, just a few steps away. She didn't look around or pause; she barreled for it, slammed into it, and tore the door open. Once inside, she killed the lights, dragged the gearshift into drive, and hit the gas.

The truck fishtailed. She thought she heard gunshots. And then the truck leaped forward and she was racing into the darkness.



## 37. Mike

Mike was mildly freaked out pulling up to the facility. He remembered it well despite never having been there before, and the scene is exactly how he expected it to be, down to the weather, the quality of the darkness.

Todd was waiting for them, Myra Azarov standing next to him, also exactly as Mike expected to find her except perhaps with a slightly more freaked out expression. A dozen other men and women, all armed, all wearing black, milled about outside the place.

He got out of the car, accompanied by Glen and Jimmy. Todd was grinning at him, but when he spoke he addressed Glen. Mike knew Glen was the one with the political cred. He was just the Bank, a fellow traveler none of them trusted nearly as much as Glen.

“Just as you said,” Todd gloated. “No resistance to speak of, found this one hiding in a bathroom.”

Todd was a tall, gangly man in a sweat-stained T-shirt and baggy black jeans. His hair was white and his red face was always grinning. Mike thought he looked like a man who had once been very fat, now reduced.

“I wasn’t *hiding*,” Myra said, her voice shaking. “I was *going to the bathroom* when you assholes barged in.”

“Be careful with her,” Mike said. “We’ll need her.”

Myra looked at him. Mike was momentarily surprised that she didn't recognize him; he expected her to blink, her eyes to widen, for her to say *You!* in an amazed tone. Then he remembered: They'd never actually met. And as far as he could tell, so far only the four of them—himself, Jimmy, Glen, and Candace—had any purchase on the reality that had been discarded. Jimmy claimed he wasn't certain *what* he'd done when monkeying with the code, only that he changed something in his own equation, some value that applied to him. Whatever it was, it had reached back about six years into all their lives and changed things to different levels. For himself, he only started to notice the difference after Julia had died. Glen reported a similarly recent sense of wrongness. Candace, though, had left town, missed her father's illness, wound up in new York, lonely and unhappy.

"Come on," Jimmy said, turning to spit. "Let's go find the damn thing."

The place was lit up but empty, and their steps echoed as they walk, Todd and two of his people in front with rifles, two trailing behind.

"What do the Constitution Boys think we're doing here?" Jimmy asked. Then he leaned in close, and Mike could smell the whiskey on his breath. "*Do they actually think we're stealing the fucking Constitution?*"

He laughed, loud and wild. Mike reflected on the fact that he

couldn't get a purchase on Haggen. He liked him and disliked him simultaneously. He wondered if ghat had something to do with having known the man in two distinct realities.

Glancing at Haggen, he wondered what he planned to do, planned to change. If he was telling the truth about not really understanding what he'd done the first time, then it was an open question. They were all here for the same reason: The power to change their existence by changing a variable. One value, flipped from negative to positive, or increased or decreased. Mike had no idea how he would ever figure out what to change, but Haggen had told him he'd spent the last six years studying and trying to note down everything he could remember, every impression he'd carried with him into the new reality. He'd read as much as he could about Raslowski's work—which wasn't much—as well.

He was totally reliant on Jimmy Haggen, he thought, and Jimmy Haggen was drunk.

*Jesus*, he thought.

"Damn," Todd said as they passed through the security door—the combination was exactly as they'd pieced together, the two of them sitting in The Sprawl going over the fragments they'd retained—into the server farm. The humming machines were lined up just as Mike remembered, and the heat was exactly the same, too. It was like stepping into August in New York, stuck behind a cross-town bus.

And that was *with* the air-conditioning running.

Todd twisted his portly torso around to grin back at him. “Boss, this here is some surefire waste of our tax dollars, ain’t it?”

Boss. Todd had called Mike that when he’d paid him for the visit a few months ago, and he found it oddly annoying. He *was* the boss, after all. He was funding everything here, and he suspected that the tens of thousands of dollars he was spending for his private army was going to wind up being detailed in a joint FBI/ATF report on a massacre. He didn’t like Todd assuming they were in any way simpatico, in any way on the same side.

He decided he liked *Boss*, then. It implied a separation.

Then he paused, because the layout had changed.

Instead of the blank wall with a door leading to a short tunnel, there was a glass-enclosed room at the rear of the server farm. The room itself looked very similar to his non-memories, and his heartbeat sped up. There it was. The box, a black cube. He imagined he could feel it humming, pulling at him with its peculiar gravity.

He glanced at Glen Eastman. The portly old retired teacher looked smug and happy, which was to be expected, Mike thought, considering that this was, in some ways, exactly what he’d expected. Governmental overreach, economic waste, violations of civil rights—all counteracted by a group of well-armed, well-regulated patriots who had the guts—and his money—to take a stand. Mike found Glen

Eastman frightening, not because he was in any way intimidating, but because of what he represented. Here was a guy who'd been this quiet, overlooked cog in the local machine, a teacher considered not particularly bright or interesting, an old man with a whiff of the ridiculous around him. And yet he was a true believer in undermining everything, and when time came to rustle up some racist, ignorant hillbillies with guns, Glen Eastman had been eager to be their mascot.

“All right,” Mike said. “Todd—we’re going in. Keep a guard and alert us *immediately* if you see anything or anyone coming. *Anything* unusual, let us know.”

Todd nodded, grinning. “You got it, boss.” He turned and gestured at his people and they took up positions facing in each direction, peering into the hot, gloomy server farm. Mike paused for a moment, looking around. The humming boxes formed a maze, really; the center aisle led straight back to the security office and the exit, but the servers provided plenty of cover. Anyone could be in the side aisles, crouched down. And if he had to make his way with the center aisle blocked, he could see himself becoming disoriented in the heat and the low light. He suddenly felt nervous.

He glanced at Hagen, and saw him putting something in his ears. Headphones? No, there was no cord, though he supposed they might be wireless.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Haggen turned his head and plucked one out of his ear. It looked like a blue piece of rubber. “What?”

“What are those?”

Haggen smiled, popping it back into his ear. “Earplugs!” he said, his voice suddenly a bit too loud. “For the noise!”

Mike frowned as Jimmy turned his back on the glass office. “What —”

The glass room exploded.

The force wasn’t too much; he was knocked off balance and fell backward, skidding a few feet on the slick concrete floor. There was a bright flash that made him turn his head, and the noise felt like an invisible punch to the gut. His hearing flatlined, and for a few seconds it was just smoke and darkness and a buzzing sound that drowned out everything else.

*Bomb*, he thought.

It hadn’t been enough to hurt them. He sat up, and glass shards sprinkled from him like jewels. But the blast hadn’t been powerful enough to do any real harm. It hadn’t been planned to kill or destroy this facility.

He struggled to his feet and squinted around. Todd and his people had also been knocked on their asses, but were getting up, looking around. Todd himself had a trickle of blood running from his scalp,

but Mike didn't think it looked too bad. As Mike looked around, Glen Eastman emerged from behind some of the servers, without a scratch.

Haggen was nowhere to be seen.

Alarm burned off the static hesitation, and Mike ran for the remnants of the glass room. The metal framing remained, but all of the glass had been blown out. The desk was gone. No—not gone, he realized as he crunched through glass and concrete chunks into the space; it had fallen into a hole blown in the floor, only one edge sticking up above what had been the floor line.

He scrambled down into the hole, ears still ringing. His eyes searched the space for the black box, the field generator, but it was nowhere to be seen. His eye caught something and he picked it up, then dropped it because it was hot enough to burn. But he'd seen what it was; a fragment of an LED screen, like the kind you saw on clocks and timers.

Then he froze.

Timber. He crouched down and stared in shock at a tight tunnel, shored up with timber like you saw in old movies. It stretched away into darkness, tall enough for a man to move through on his hands and knees or a crouching walk if he wasn't too tall.

A tunnel.

Mike felt an odd sort of smile twitching on his face, because there

was something to admire here, he thought. The tunnel must have taken Haggen years. Years of planning, of quiet work, all timed perfectly.

The whole time, Haggen had been planning to steal the Raslowski Box.



## 38. Candace

The night was lit by moonlight, and the moonlight was very nearly not enough. Without headlights, she stayed off the road and stuck to old tracks that were nothing more than lanes carved by hundreds of trucks over the decades, DIY highways that didn't appear on any maps. You either knew where they led, knew where the big rocks embedded in them were, or you didn't and you wound up with a bent wheel rim.

They were never meant to be driven at speed. She caught some air a few times in Jack McCoy's surprisingly fancy truck, landing with a brain-rattling, fishtailing force that she knew came within inches of turning into a spinning crash. After a few heart-pounding moments she slowed and studied the rear-view mirror. There was nothing, no sign of pursuit, no sign that anyone was following. She didn't know if she'd actually made it out clean; she had to assume she hadn't, and that someone had radioed over to the facility to warn Mike and the others.

*Mike.* She found herself hurt and shocked that he'd turned out on the other side of this. It wasn't that she couldn't see the motivations—of course she could. There was a part of her that wanted to have those years with her father back, who wanted that chance of an early diagnosis and him still alive—thin and lessened, perhaps, but still

*there*. She understand why Mike might be tempted to undo what he saw as the big, unforgivable mistake of his life. She just couldn't believe that he hadn't seen the downside, seen the chaos, the potential for destruction.

She was surprised he didn't understand that life always came with a downside. There were always regrets, mistakes, losses. If you took one back, you would lose something else. She was disappointed that he didn't seem to understand that, and it made her sad.

She chanced the headlights, lighting up the track. She knew it paralleled the road for a good way and then veered south; she would have to make her way up a steep rise to get back on the blacktop in a few minutes. The truck hummed under her; she thought she had plenty of power for the job. The question was whether or not they'd be waiting for her when she got there. She would have to ditch the truck a few hundred feet away, where the road turned and she'd be shielded from sight. Then she'd have to creep along, careful, and try to figure out how she might get inside undetected—and then figure out what she intended to do. Talk sense to them?

She smiled in the dim cab of the truck. Yes, she could see it: She would make an impassioned speech like they did in the movies and Mike would tear up and throw his arms around her and tell her he'd been blind. Why not?

There was a near-serenity in the cab. The dark, the hum of the

engine, the crunch of dirt under the wheels, it all combined into a slur of sound that felt eternal. For just a moment she forgot what she was heading towards, forgot what her life had suddenly become. For just a moment she was lost in the beauty of the night, a weariness on the border of exhaustion making her feel calm.

Then the turnoff loomed up ahead, and she cursed softly, tapping the brakes. She knew she'd need momentum to get up the incline, so she steadied herself, studied the trail ahead, then hit the gas. If she hit too hard, she might flip the truck. If she hit it too slow, she might flip the truck. If she kept going, she'd slam into a tree. Hands tight on the wheel, she turned it gradually until the wheels bit into the incline, then grit her teeth as she steered an oblique angle all the way up. When the truck lurched and bounced over the edge and screeched onto the blacktop, she let out an explosive breath and felt the tingle of an adrenaline dump that made her shake.

*The best thing to do is go straight at 'em*, she heard her father say. She was pretty sure he'd stolen that from someone, but it had been his war cry for as long as she could remember, as much as a vague phrase spoken in a soft voice could be considered a war cry. She didn't know what she was going to do once she arrived at the facility. She would trust to—

A figure suddenly loomed up in her headlights, a person standing in the middle of the road. She cursed, hit the brakes, and turned the

wheel, feeling the tires lose contact with the road in skittery little intervals as the truck spun. She came to a stop perpendicular to the road, the truck stalled, engine clicking, headlights flickering on the trees.

Her hands hurt on the wheel. She felt frozen for a moment, her whole body tight with shock and stress.

“Candace!”

She jumped and turned to look left, blinking. Jimmy Haggen stood just outside the door, holding a gun on her.

*That's a Beretta M9A3, she thought dully. How do I know that?*

“Get out of the truck, Candace,” Haggen said, his voice shaking. “You’re gonna have to give me a hand!”

She blinked and shook her head a little, and somehow that seemed to help clear it. Jimmy was filthy; covered in muddy dirt, his clothes torn in place, a trickle of blood leaking over one eye. He looked like he’d been running through heavy brush, or a defensive line. She shifted her eyes and registered the fact that he was holding a gun on her. Jimmy Haggen. A gun. On her. When she’d been sixteen, her father had confiscated her phone as a punishment, forcing her to take all her calls on the home’s old landline, which he monitored without subtlety. So she’d played this game where she would call her friend Amy at a pre-arranged time, and when her father checked the line he’d hear girly chitchat. Then, at a second pre-arranged time,

Jimmy would call, clicking in silently over the call-waiting, her father unaware.

She remembered those whispered conversations. She remembered how he was kind of bored and distracted, but somehow she hadn't noticed. The intimacy of lying under her covers in the dark whispering, imagining his flat, taut stomach as he played touch football in the school parking lot—that was all she was aware of. And now that boy was holding a gun on her.

"Jimmy," she said, prying her hands from the wheel with a grimace of arthritic pain. "What the *fuck*?"

"Get out," he snapped. "I'm sorry, I really am. But get out of the truck, Candace."

She waited a beat, studying him. Would Jimmy Haggen really shoot her? Or hurt her in some other way? With a chill she realized she didn't know. This was no longer the Jimmy Haggen she remembered. It was more than just having moved away years ago. Like so many things she had a strong sense of the world, of what things should be, the *way* things should be, and increasingly all those certainties were turning out to be memories of a reality that had never actually happened, a past life, an alternative existence. The memory she had of being able to trust Jimmy Haggen implicitly not to hurt her—even when he was being a jackass—vanished the moment she actually examined it.

Wordlessly, she got out of the truck.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing with the gun.

She followed him off the road, into the tree line opposite the incline she’d just come up. She could see the evidence of him coming this way: broken branches, footprints, crushed grass. They stopped at a handtruck that had been left in the brush. She gasped when she saw the box, the Raslowski Box. There was a large hole in the ground nearby, a fragile-looking wooden ladder descending into the darkness of it.

“Jimmy,” she said, looking at him in disbelief. “You built a *tunnel*?”

He nodded. “You grab the handtruck, help me get it into the back of the truck.”

As she lifted the weight and started to push, having trouble in the soft dirt, he kept talking. “I had years, Candace. I knew what had happened a long time before the rest of you. I was the first to realize, I think. I knew everything was off. The whole world seemed fake, a put-on. I had all these memories and impressions that made no sense. As I got older I thought I was going insane, and then one day it just clicked. Clarified. I had years, and I knew what I wanted to do.

“Me and Glen, we planned it all. We knew they’d come back. Just like they had the ... the last time. The *other* time. The time the four of us remember even though it never happened. So we started preparing. We researched it. People have been digging tunnels for

thousands of years—out of prisons, into banks. We researched it. Hired people. Hired a *lot* of people, because we didn't want any of it to be obvious. So we'd hired a team for one small part and then let them go, wait a few months, hire someone else. We had the time. Glen emptied his pension, borrowed against his house. So, yeah, we built a tunnel. And I stole this thing because I'll be damned if some rich asshole from two thousand miles away from here gets a say in what happens next."

Candace was already breathing hard, struggling to push the handtruck through the brush and dirt. "And you were going to, what, *walk* this thing somewhere?"

Haggen cursed. "Fucking Glen was supposed to have a car waiting for me. Someone fucked up. Or Glen's trying to screw us."

"Us?"

"Cuddyer," he said, echoing the way he'd always referred to her by her last name when they'd been dating, "I have full faith in you. I am steadfast in my belief that you're gonna come around to my way of thinking. You're a native. You're one of us."

*Or, if not, she thought, I'll use my recently stolen magic reality warping machine to make you one of us.*

A chill swept through her. Sweat dripped down her back, freezing in the night air. The box was surprisingly heavy; she tried to remember if she'd ever tried to move it in the ... other reality, but

couldn't pin the detail down.

She thought about the time and effort, the dedication and commitment involved in building a tunnel. Years of effort, all for a minute's worth of surprise, and if Mike was on the ball he was already in the tunnel, following, which meant Jimmy didn't have that much of a lead.

She grimaced and slowed her progress, playing up the effort required.

She didn't know who to trust, or whose side to be on—or if there was a side, other than her own, that made sense. So she simplified: The man holding a gun on her was her enemy, even if he was named Jimmy Haggen, even if she did know that he sometimes woke up crying because of his dreams. Keep it simple: Whoever was holding a gun to your head, or tying you up, or otherwise mistreating you, they were your enemy at that moment. The rest of it would take care of itself.

She stumbled and lost a few inches, waste a few seconds getting her footing back. She wasn't sure who's side she should be on. Neither, she supposed; all the men were crazy, thinking they could somehow control things, somehow understand the permutations of what they would do. But she knew if she got in the truck with an armed Jimmy Haggen he would take her someplace she didn't want to go.



*Simplify, she thought. You don't have to have it all figured out. Concentrate on the most pressing problem. Right now, that's Jimmy forcing you into the truck.*

“Step it up, Cuddyer,” Haggen growled.

She got the handtruck moving again. She could feel it vibrating in her hands, some internal force in the box itself, a primordial hum. For a moment she imagined the whole *universe* in the box, like some sort of complex simulation being projected out around them, and if she stumbled and broke it everything would just blink away like someone turning out the lights.

“James,” she said, out of breath. “James, listen to me.” When they’d been dating, she’d called him *James* when she was angry with him. She hadn’t remembered that in years. She had the sense that there were a million tiny details that she’d forgotten, that were sitting there in her mind, jarred loose by the events of the last few days.

“Keep pushing, Cuddyer.”

She struggled to look like she was giving the handtruck her all, and hoped that someone was pursuing Haggen down that tunnel.

Suddenly, there was a deep booming noise, and the ground shivered under her. She lost her footing and went down into the dirt, the handtruck rolling over her hand painfully.

Haggen laughed. “Oops. Seems like Mr. Malloy wasn’t expecting a booby trap.”

She stared at him. “Jesus,” she said, struggling to push the handtruck off her hand and get back on her feet, “you didn’t kill them, did you?” She was out of breath and felt filthy, like all the dirt around her had somehow worked its way under her shirt, into her bra, her underwear.

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Once I reset things, none of this will have happened.”

*Doesn't matter.* The phrase filled her with dread for some reason.

She heard a strange sizzling noise and turned to see a ghostly cloud of dust billowing out of the tunnel’s entrance. *Well*, she thought. *Guess help's not coming.* As she turned to put her back into the handtruck again, she glanced at Jimmy. Could she do something? Get the drop on him, wrestle away the gun? Jimmy was lean and looked fresh. He’d always been improbably athletic, and despite a decade-and-a-half of seeming to do nothing but drink beer and complain, he was in shape.

Suddenly she realized her impression of Jimmy was out of date, or from a different reality. He’d been *training* for this day. While the rest of them had been confused and vague, he’d been drawing up plans, digging a *tunnel*, setting traps, and getting himself into shape. She wondered how long he’d been aware, how long he’d been plotting. Had he known what was coming when she left town? Six years ago, she remembered being irritated and disappointed because Jimmy

hadn't paid much attention to the fact of her leaving. He'd acted as if her taking off from his life forever was no big deal, and she had a clear memory of leaving in a huff, refusing to even admit she was angry. Or why.

Now, the whole memory seemed sinister. Now she imagined Jimmy had a meeting scheduled with Glen Eastman to discuss tunnels or some other, impatient to get her out of his hair so he could start his secret plans to unintentionally destroy the universe.

With no help coming through the tunnel, she let the handtruck sag back to the ground. "I'm not going to help you with this, Jimmy. It's insane. *You're* insane if you think it's going to work."

He stepped over to her. His face was impassive, and she felt a spark of real fear come to life inside her. This wasn't Jimmy. This wasn't the man she'd known.

"Like I said, Cuddyer," he said slowly, "none of this matters. It's all going to be reset. Whatever I do here, now, it's going to be *erased* when I'm done. So it's meaningless. So if you think I won't *hurt* you, Candace, think again, because I won't really be hurting you. Not really. Not permanently."

She blinked, going cold. Then she nodded, and lifted the handtruck again. Put her back into it.

## 39. Mike

He opened his eyes and was momentarily confused. It was hot, and he couldn't breathe. It was dark, and he couldn't hear. No—he could hear; all he could hear was a buzzing ringing that had somehow teamed up with the vibrating pain in his head, forming a rhythm section. For a moment he thought he couldn't move his arms and legs, that he was paralyzed.

*Exit Mike Mallow stage left*, he thought with a giddy sense of crazy joy, *pursued by a bear*.

Slowly, he came to his senses. He *could* move, he realized; he was just buried in soft dirt. It was smothering him, but as he worked his limbs he was able to pull himself up the slight incline of the tunnel he'd been racing down. The way ahead of him was block by a collapse of the ceiling—a collapse that had been triggered by some small explosives planted in the timber. He remembered running, chasing after Haggen, and the feel of something against his legs, and then an incredibly loud booming noise, and darkness.

*Trap*, he thought. *Haggen laid a trap and almost killed me*.

He knew if he searched he'd find the trip wire. It had probably been ankle-high, nearly impossible to see in the darkness. He was lucky he hadn't been one step faster, or he'd have been caught in the blast and injured—or more thoroughly buried. As he sat there

sucking in breath with a wince, he could hear a creaking, dry grinding noise. He looked up, squinting to make out the timber that was holding up the ceiling over him.

*Won't last long*, he thought. The whole tunnel was going to come crashing down.

Sweaty and grimy, he turned and started to stagger back. His left leg hurt when he put weight on it, and breathing was painful. Sprains, he thought, not breaks. He'd live. He'd just limp around and grimace a lot.

Assuming he made it out of the tunnel before it completely collapsed. He tried to quicken his pace, grunting every time he put weight on his injured leg. Dust sifted down as he moved, and the creaking and groaning grew louder and louder. He thought he could feel a vibration all around him, like an invisible wave rolling up behind him.

When he burst out of the tunnel into the shattered wreck that had been the glass room, he was gasping for air and flailing, his leg ready to give out completely beneath him. Instead of a dramatic collapse directly behind him, he just lay in the crater on his back, breathing hard, his whole body aching.

He couldn't believe he'd been so easily outmaneuvered. He should have looked at Haggan harder, but he now realized his opinion of the man had been clouded by his non-memories of a Haggan that had

never actually existed. A Haggen who drank too much and was sloppy and unreliable. And definitely a Haggen who didn't plan things in advance. The Haggen he thought he'd known had been impulsive. The idea that he would spend years planning something like this was impossible.

Mike blinked dust out of his eyes, suddenly seeing Glen Eastman stepping out from behind the wall of servers. Not a scratch on him. Eastman and Haggen, locals, men who'd known each other their whole lives.

He hauled himself to his feet. Todd rushed over with one of his people, slinging an arm over his shoulder.

"Jesus, you okay, Mike?"

Mike nodded. "Glen?"

"Right out here," Todd said, supporting him. Out in the server room, the air seemed impossibly cold. Glen Eastman broke away from talking to a few members of their little army.

"You okay, Mike? What—"

Pulling away from Todd, Mike stepped forward as steadily as he could. "You knew that tunnel was set to blow, and you let me go in anyway."

Eastman pulled up short, eyes widening. He hesitated, and Mike felt a surge of anger. He knew, without any doubt, that Eastman had been in league with Haggen. All along, they'd been playing him.

“Mike,” Eastman said. “Listen, I—”

Mike’s hands balled into fists. “I could have been *killed*, you son of a bitch.”

Eastman scrambled back, his face going red. “Todd—keep this crazy asshole under control.”

Mike glanced at Todd, who was standing with two of his own people, his rifle slung across his bulging belly, his hands resting on the stock. Looking like a mobile home Santa, he looked from Eastman to Mike and back again.

“Well, listen, Glen—”

“Mike Malloy isn’t here for the right reasons, Todd,” Glen said, voice tight with tension. *Fear*, Mike thought. *Eastman’s not used to being threatened*. “He’s not here for *our* reasons.”

Todd nodded slowly. “Yeah, you’re right on that, Glen. But he’s payin’ the bills, and he owes us one more balloon payment that ain’t scheduled until he has the box. Which he don’t. So, for the time bein’ at least, you ain’t in charge here.”

Eastman stared at him, then looked at Mike. “Until you have the box, huh? You were going to screw us.”

Mike advanced on the former teacher, ignoring the pain in his leg and side. “No, actually, I wasn’t. I’m paying the bills, like he said, so I stipulated I’d be the point of contact for everything, including taking possession of the box. I fully intended to work with you and Jimmy

on this. Candace, too, if she came around. We were the Four Horsemen, after all. All of us have a right to this.”

Glen backed into one of the humming servers and jumped as if kicked. Mike trapped him against it and pushed a finger into his chest.

“Don’t worry, Glen, I’m not going to hit you. Way I see it, you just screwed *yourself*, anyway.”

Glen’s eyes, magnified by his thick glasses, blinked several times rapidly. “How so?”

“Jimmy Haggen has the box. *You* don’t. So I don’t think Jimmy thinks of you as a partner any more, is my guess. And if you’re Jimmy and you think you can gin up the math to change things any way you want, what’s the easiest way to ensure this pattern doesn’t repeat? What’s the easiest way to make sure you and me and Candace don’t turn up in the next version of reality, remembering half of this and looking for revenge, or just to screw things up for him?”

Glen opened his mouth and then shut it with a click. He seemed to deflate. “Oh, shit,” he said.

“Oh shit is right,” Mike said. “If I’m Haggen and I’m looking to screw everyone, my version of the code kills the rest of us, preferably a few years before today.”

Slowly, Eastman’s face drained of color. “That’s ... that’s ...”

“Your pal, James Haggen,” Mike said, stepping back from Glen.



“Where’s he going? Where’s he setting up shop? Assuming he hasn’t lied to you about all that?”

Glen visibly pulled himself together, pushing off from the servers and shrugging his shirt on more firmly. He pushed his hands through his white hair and then wiped one hand down his face. “His house,” he said. “Unless he’s ... no, gotta be his house. I know he hardened the place. Took it totally off grid so no one could cut the power or water or anything, put in security doors, reinforced the walls. Something he’d been talking about doing for years, when he got on his rants about things. But once we started ... this project he started that, too.” He looked at Mike. “I can’t believe he’d waste all that money and effort and time just to throw us off the trail. He just thinks he’s safe there, that we won’t be able to get to him. He’s got that place booby-trapped, as well. IEDs and stuff.”

*Of course*, Mike thought. Haggen wouldn't need to hold out long. If he could keep them outside long enough to complete his coding, he won.

He had a newfound respect for Haggen, who'd gone from annoying layabout to evil genius in literally no time at all. All it had taken was a complete reset of reality, a change in the fundamental variables underlying existence itself. That sounded about right, he thought; the Jimmy Haggen he'd originally known hadn't been stupid, and had even been quite competent in certain ways, but it

would take something like the rewiring of the whole universe to make him into an evil genius.

“Todd,” he said.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Glen’s gonna show us the way to Haggen’s place, but I’d feel more comfortable if he was restrained.”

“You got it, boss.”

“What?” Glen sputtered. “But .. wait a second, Malloy! I’ve just been screwed over, same as you. I want to make that punk suffer a little for what he tried to do.” When Mike turned away, the schoolteacher looked over at Todd. “You know me, Todd,” he said.

“You can’t cut me out like this. If you cut me out, I won’t have any *say* in what happens!”

Todd nodded, gesturing at two of his people. “Here’s what I know, Glen,” he said, sounding like a wise country father. “I know that you knew there was an explosive device set up in there but you let us all walk in without sayin’ a word, and if you think you know how an explosive is gonna behave you’re kiddin’ yourself, so as far as I’m concerned you just put all our lives in danger. And sure as shit I don’t understand what the *point* of all this is aside from fucking up a Federal boondoggle. So let me restrain you, Glen, nice and easy and don’t cause any trouble, okay? We’ll sort everything out when the shouting’s over.”

“Goddamit, Todd—Mike! Mike, of *course* I’m going to help! I’ve just been screwed, too!” As Todd’s people grabbed his arms and began to tie his wrists with a ziptie, he shouted “The tunnel came up in the woods just off the road! He’s expecting a truck to be waiting, but I never parked it! He’s on foot!”

“So you screwed him,” Mike said over his shoulder. “And that’s supposed to convince me to *trust* you?”

They were a grim and silent quartet walking back through the servers. Mike chewed his lip. Would he even be aware if Haggen flipped the switch? Would he have any sense that reality was being replaced, or would it take years again like it had last time?

*I’m sorry, Jules*, he thought as they made their way through the security door. *I was going to fix everything, but I got taken by a hick hustler.*

“Todd, let’s take your truck,” Mike said. “You, me, Eastman, and one other. Can you peel anyone away from the bar?”

Todd chewed his lip as he opened the door to his rusty red SUV and pushed Glen into the back seat. “Four, five, without too much trouble.”

“Call ahead and have them ready to follow us when we swing by the bar,” Mike ordered, opening the passenger side door. He didn’t know what he was going to do, or if he’d have the chance to do anything at all. But if he was going to be erased and replaced with

another version of himself—or just erased completely—he wasn't going to just sit idly by, waiting. Better to vanish in the act of fighting.

“Mr. Malloy!”

He turned, half in the truck. The red-haired woman, Myra—Myra Azarov—was waving at him with her free hand. The other was handcuffed to the metal railing on the stairs leading to the green security door entering the facility.

“I'm sorry, Ms. Azarov, but you're going to—”

“Don't be an idiot, Mr. Malloy!”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Mr. Haggen has the Transmorgifier—er, I mean the box, the Raslowski Box, yes?”

Slowly, he nodded. She smiled, her round, pale face turning impish. “You know why we called you lot the Four Horseman, right?”

He nodded again, fighting the urge to smile back. She radiated a confidence he'd never seen before. It wasn't embarrassed for itself, or smug. It just *was*. As if confidence had been woven into her DNA. He wondered if she'd been like that in the other version, but couldn't be certain.

She rolled her eyes. “Then you need *me*, Mr. Malloy. None of you have the *slightest* idea what you're doing. I'd better come along to make certain you don't *accidentally* destroy us all.”

## 40. Candace

She watched him setting up and wondered what he was going to do to her.

Not physically. Not in the moment. Even though she didn't recognize the Jimmy Haggren in front of her in any way, even though he was more or less a stranger to her, she still had the firm sense that he wasn't a cruel man. He wasn't going to hurt her like *that*. No, she was worried about what he was going to do to her *existentially*. As one of a handful of people in the world who believed you could rewrite reality using a box and a kind of programming language, she wondered if Jimmy was going to let her *exist*.

She thought about all the times in her life when luck had simply gone her way. When an inch this way or a moment that way would have ended her. If you had the ability to change the variables, to switch something from a negative to a positive, to add or subtract some ineffable piece of the puzzle and ensure that someone you found personally inconvenient wasn't around in the new version of the present, what would be the ideal moment?

There were plenty of candidates, close shaves and near-disasters. She'd been in a car crash when she was sixteen, a friend trying to film them all singing some stupid song while she drove, the car flipping and rolling. She'd emerged with a broken finger and some scratches.

Everyone had lived to be punished mercilessly by their parents. How hard would it be to nudge a variable and see her sail through the windshield, her head smacking into a tree?

Alcohol poisoning when she eighteen.

The concussion she got when Christine Mooney cleaned her clock during the soccer playoffs, when the doctor kept her for observation.

There were so many moments that could have gone sideways, and she was suddenly queasily certain that she wasn't even aware of most of them. How many times had she missed death because she'd been five minutes late? Early? How many times had her reflexes or intuition saved her? It was impossible—you didn't know what you didn't know. But Jimmy, if he mastered the box, Jimmy would *know*. He would be able to see every possible variable in her life. One tweak, and she was long gone before she could start to realize she'd done it all before, twice, and start to remember things that had never happened. One tweak and he wouldn't have to worry about her complicating things.

She was freaked out. Jimmy's house hadn't helped.

Whatever hope she'd had that Jimmy might still be the same guy, deep down, might still be someone she could talk to, negotiate with, disappeared as they approached the old Haggen home. Candace remembered it—both in this reality and in the shadowy other world she knew she'd once lived in—as a broken-down old ranch-style

house, but comfortable. Mrs. Haggan had kept the place spotless, so insanely clean that the shabby fixtures and ancient finishes had taken on a sort of weary grandeur in spite of their age and wear. Jimmy, remarkably, had been nearly as insane, and after both his parents were passed he'd kept the place in good repair, even after he'd taken it off the grid. The composting toilet and leaky rainwater collection system made the place smelly and damp, but it still felt comfortable to her. She remembered coming up the dirt driveway and that squat, off-white house with the roof shedding shingles like an old dog had always made her happy.

Now, it frightened her.

First was the gate. Jimmy had erected a pretty stout-looking wooden gate across the drive. It trailed off into the dark tree line, topped with razor wire. It wasn't electric or automatic or anything, but when he stopped the truck and made her get out to open it up, she saw how well-built it was. She believed it would keep anything but a tank from getting in close to the house.

Walking in the cool, dark air, she thought about running. But what would it matter? Jimmy would then be alone in his fortress with the box, and she might find herself winked out of existence at any moment. Better to at least be on hand. Maybe she'd get a chance to do something, to intervene, appeal to him.

After the gate, the house itself frightened her. The windows had

all been shuttered over with sheet metal. The yard, once the trim, neat province of Mrs. Haggen, had been torn up, the grass and shrubs gone, the little garden a memory. It looked like a war zone.

“Follow me *exactly*,” Jimmy said as they climbed out of the truck. “*Exactly*. One wrong step, Cuddyer, and you might go boom.”

*That* frightened her too.

She followed him to the door, carrying the Box and watching his feet to make sure she set her own in the same precise spots. The familiar old rotted wood front door that Mr. Haggen painted bright blue every Spring only to watch it peel and bubble through the Summer was gone. In its place was a steel security door with four massive deadbolts set into it.

“There’re better ways,” Haggen said as he handed her the keys and stepped back to cover her while she worked each lock. “I would’ve done it all wirelessly with an App, but you can’t take the risk. Anything in the cloud can be hacked. The damn NSA would be in there, one day I wake up and my whole rig is turned against me.” His voice took on a light tone. “Ironically, Cuddyer, in the modern day the best defense is old-school metal and gears.”

The door squealed as she pushed it open. He nudged her forward, and she stepped into the hot, dark interior of the place. Haggen followed her and pushed the door shut, and there was a moment of disorienting total darkness.



*If you're going to jump him, she thought. This would be the moment.*

It might be her best shot. They were both blind in the dark, and he was distracted resetting all the locks. But she was disoriented. She couldn't see anything at all, and the sense of being in a strange space without being able to see even the vaguest outlines of objects made her feel dizzy, made her feel like any step would send her falling into an abyss.

The lights came on, and the moment passed. The electric lights were dim and weak and only in the entryway. He nudged her forward into darkness, and a moment later there was a scratching noise and then a weak, greasy light bloomed. She squinted and looked around, and was afraid again, because Jimmy Haggan had gone crazy.

The house had always been small; a large front room that had served as a living room, rumpus room, sitting room, and media room, a small closed-in kitchen, a Master Bedroom that had been split into two small bedrooms with a flimsy wall and a new doorway, and a third small bedroom. One unfortunate, tiny bathroom.

She'd never known why the Master had been split, because Jimmy was an only child.

The bathroom she remembered best. The window over the tub was just big enough to wriggle through, and during the many times that Jimmy was grounded or otherwise punished they'd made a mockery of these attempts at discipline when she would park in the

trees, creep up in the darkness, and climb in. Jimmy would come and convey her to his room, and later she would escape through the same route. At the time it had felt incredibly daring, grown up and dangerous.

The front room was where the Haggens had lived most of their lives. They ate their meals there, watched TV, played board games, video games, had coffee and cake, and held meetings and conversations there. She'd spent countless hours in that room, making awkward conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Haggen, watching movies with Jimmy, playing games.

It had been transformed into a cliché. The windows had been covered with metal on the outside, the room was lit by the greasy pale glow of kerosene lamps, the fuel's sweet-sour smell making her feel sick. The walls were covered in paper—diagrams, notes, reams and reams of printouts, pages covered in the odd patterns of code. Books were strewn all over the floor, most dog-eared and well-used, covered in yellow highlighter and dense blue ink. Three beaten-up old laptops were open and running, white text on black screens, and wires ran criss-crossed on the floor. It looked like the set dressing for every bad TV show when a “conspiracy nut” was introduced.

Clothes littered the floor, along with dirty plates and trash. Old t-shirts vied for floor space with dirty jeans and socks. It took a moment to realize that the old green couch she'd spent so many

sitting on was buried under a pile of trash, boxes, and clothes. The television, which had been a huge old flat screen from the days before they were thin, had been removed, and the whole wall had been turned into a gun rack and ammo dump. She stared at a neat line of AR-15s, shotguns, hunting rifles, full magazines, grenades, and knives. She began to have serious doubts about her ability to affect the outcome of Jimmy's plans, unless she wanted to find out just how paranoid he'd become.

She turned to look behind her; the front room had once been open to the entryway, the natural place for visitors to move into. Hagen had built a wall, and put a new door in place. It was a security door, with a magnetic lock, similar to the ones she dimly recalled at the facility up the road. The magnets meant it would lock tight even if the power was cut.

*He's made himself a Panic Room,* she thought. *Jesus, half the house is a panic room.*

"Sorry about the mess," Jimmy said. "Also, sorry that I'm about to tie you up."

She glanced at him and did some math. She was in the house, three feet from the box. She might be able to affect the outcome. But if she let him shut the door, seal her in, and tie her up, she'd just be a prisoner. She needed to be able to affect things. To take action.

Jimmy was between her and the door. In a moment, he would

turn and shut that door, then restrain her, and then she'd just be a piece of furniture in the room, watching as he remade—or *tried* to remake—reality, with or without her.

She took a deep breath and launched herself at him.

She took him by surprise. He was half-turned from her as she started running, and swung back just in time for her to slam into his torso, head down and arms bent in front of her to turn herself into as much of a battering ram as possible. He lost his balance under the assault and his legs went out from under him. She crashed into the wall with uncontrolled momentum, but rolled away and slipped through the door into the inky darkness of the rest of the house.

She closed her eyes and relied on her memories of the place. She'd once known the layout of the Haggen home as well as anything else in her life. Every twist and turn, every hiding place, every spot ideal for a quick makeout while Mrs. Haggen was in the kitchen. She could hear Jimmy yelling, hear him lumbering in pursuit. She made for the bathroom, because she knew the door locked—or at least it used to—and the window didn't.

Straight. Left, left. Spin. Grab the knob, pull the door shut. Turn the lock, throw the deadbolt. The deadbolt Jimmy himself installed on the bathroom door when he was fourteen after the third time his mother walked in on him masturbating. The deadbolt she'd mocked him mercilessly about.

She spun and opened her eyes, reaching for the shower curtain. She'd climbed in and out of the window so many times she knew the measurements by heart, but as she reached out a hand grabbed her wrist and spun her around. The other hand clamped over her mouth.

“Quiet,” an oddly familiar voice whispered. “Quiet now, Ms. Cuddyer.”

## 41. Mike

“You’re going about this all wrong.”

Mike glanced at Myra and tried to retrieve a memory of her from the alternate life he knew he’d led. Had she been this businesslike? This sharp? He thought she’d been perhaps a little blurrier, a little *nicer*, although that wasn’t exactly the right word. The idea that people—people *directly connected to this*—might not be exactly the same as they’d been in the prior versions was infinitely disturbing. His entire plan had been based on being able to predict certain events, certain reactions. So far it had all gone about as well as could be expected when pursuing a batshit goal like this.

“How’s that?” he said, meeting her gaze as the truck bounced and lurched under the rough handling of Todd, who’d told Mike he only drove stick shift for a variety of paranoid and unspecified reasons, which in practice meant he kept trying to shift from drive into park.

She shifted around on her seat to face him, and he caught a citrus scent. She pushed a strand of red hair behind her ear with a practiced gesture. “You’re trying to control events. You’re trying to control people. Trust me, I worked with Raslowski for years. My fingerprints are all over the code, the wiring, the field generator. Hell, it was my work in quasi-strings that made the field generation possible. If I know one thing, it’s that without a server farm, complex

mathematics, and a couple of geniuses analyzing the data, you can't just predict how people will react."

He smirked. "Well, I predicted *you'd* be here."

"No," she said, smiling, "you didn't, did you? You *knew* we'd be here. It's not the same thing as a prediction."

He pondered that. Maybe she had point. He'd assumed he had an advantage because he knew what *would* happen. But he didn't, not really. He knew what *had* happened in an alternate timeline. As long as the variables remained very close to the same, it would turn out the same way—but there was no guarantee that things wouldn't diverge. Or hadn't already diverged.

*After all, he thought, this little ride never happened. We're in uncharted territory.*

"All right, my advantage is gone," he admitted.

"Someone's isn't. *Someone* is playing this game better than you."

"*Obviously* Jim Hagen."

Mike scowled. "We call him *Jimmy* to emasculate him."

Myra looked away. "Mr. Malloy, you have to understand, we've studied you. All of you. You may think you know what's happening, that you're in control, because you know a *tiny* bit of the data spread, and even that is compromised—and quickly becoming worthless as permutations reverberate, re-writing the math—but in actuality the people in control were the people who have *all* the information—or

most of it. That would be—or *was*, until a short time ago—me and Dr. Raslowski.”

“And now?”

“And now it’s no one. We’ve got you, operating on yesterday’s information. We’ve got Haggen, who has control of the box and thus theoretically can change things as he wishes. And you’ve got me and Dr. Raslowski, who can run arrays through the servers farm but can’t actually do anything without the box.” She turned to look at him. He was aware of the forced intimacy of the back seat; they were physically close to each other—so close he could smell her perfume. The darkness and the hum of the engine made the space feel private. They were talking close, in half-whispers, leaning in to each other’s personal space. He felt like they were on a date discussing a bizarre sci-fi movie they’d just watched.

They rode for a moment in silence.

“So, “ she said. “Who are you trying to save?”

He startled. “Excuse me?”

“The four of you, you’re all *here* again for a reason. I think we know Haggen’s—he wants to rearrange his life to his liking. Maybe that’s Eastman, too, with a dash of politics. I think Cuddyer is hoping to save her dad—though her variables are tough to pin down, to be honest; her equations solve differently depending on what’s happened recently. So what are you going to change if you got your



hands on the box?”

Mike looked away, feeling his face turning red. “You already know, I’m guessing.”

She sighed. “Julia Barnes.”

He nodded tightly. “That’s it. I don’t care about being rich, or righting the world’s injustices, or anything else. I just want to set that one thing right.”

“It’s noble, in a way, sure,” she said, her tone of voice implying to him that she didn’t think it was noble at all. “But you know what? We’re still trying to figure out the damage Haggen did.”

“You can ... you’re aware of everything that happened—” he searched for the right part of speech to convey something that had actually happened and then not actually happened and gave up —“before?”

“We can see the math. We can see the variables left over, the equations that aren’t solvable. What Haggen did is *messy*, and the universe heals from it, but not perfectly. It’s like computer code: Screw up a line and the program might still work, but it might get buggy, start crashing.”

*Crashing*, he thought, a feeling of sour tension blooming in his belly.

“What you should think about is helping *me*,” she said. “Because one of us in this truck is trying to *prevent* arma-fucking-geddon, and

it isn't *you*."

"Comin' up on the bar," Todd said suddenly. "We should have hit a sentry point by now. I'm gonna try to raise them on the phone."

Mike studied the dark road as it slipped past. Myra's calm, the lack of sentries—a bad feeling crept over him. Something had happened. The equations had changed. Did Raslowski and Hammond have a backup Field Generator? Were they *tweaking* things to their advantage? How would he know—would he remember every little thing that shifted? He'd gone years without realizing what had happened to him; up until Julia had died, his life had rolled along with no sign that it was a do-over, a divergence. Even afterwards, when the nagging sense of *deja-vu* and pointlessness had started to grow, it had still taken him months to even begin 'remembering' things that had never happened. If they were adjusting reality in real time, would he even know?

He frowned. That didn't jibe with everything Myra and Raslowski had said, past and present. They'd gone to great lengths to point out how it took a lot of time to trace all the possible problems. But then he wondered, feeling a rising paranoia he recognized from his addiction days—the same formless, shapeless dread and panic that filled him whenever his supply was running low, the urge to just run and run and run until his heart exploded—what if all of that had been window dressing? So much bullshit?

Sweat broke out all over his body. He felt the gun's reassuring weight in his hand, took a deep breath, and turned—only to find Myra pointing a gun at him.

She smiled. “Hidden in-between the cushions two weeks ago,” she said. “We didn’t know specifically who would be in a vehicle or *which* vehicle, to be honest, so we hid guns in all potential vehicles involved in your matrix, Mr. Malloy, once we solved for what you were up to.”

“Listen,” he said, pointing his own gun at the roof of the car and putting his other hand up, palm forward to show no threat intended. He thought furiously, and reminded himself that they couldn’t see his thoughts, and they couldn’t predict his actions to this level—they could see what he would do over the long-term, but not in the moment.

Or at least that’s what he decided to believe.

“Sounds to me like we’re in the same boat,” he said. “We both want the box. We both want Haggen to *not* have the box. Our interests converge. I can help us take possession—I’ve got a small army and other resources. You can help me actually *use* the thing.”

Myra sighed. “Mr. Malloy, you’re missing the obvious.”

“Which is?”

She looked at him without turning her head, just a hint of a smile on her face.

“What the—” Todd said suddenly, slamming on the breaks. He

twisted around to look back at Mike. “Boss, we got a problem.”

Mike peered around. Two trucks blocked the road, their headlights forming a blur of light that outlined dozens of people—uniformed, heavily armed.

Suddenly someone was at the rear door, tapping on his window. He turned and pressed the button, scrolling it down to reveal Colonel Hammond. She stared at him, her face impassive.

“Really,” Myra said behind him. “Did you think Haggen was the only one who’s been learning from past mistakes?”

## 42. Candace

She realized she knew him. She *didn't* know him. She'd never seen him before in her life. But she knew his name was Andy Powell. She knew he was a soldier, or a mercenary, or some other term for a person who trained with weapons and wore a uniform and took orders from Colonel Willa Hammond.

She knew that in some other version of events, he'd hidden in the bathroom at One-Eyed Jack's and pretended to be a customer just caught up in events. His ruse hadn't worked. Apparently he'd been reassigned to a different bathroom.

"Just hang tight, Ms. Cuddyer," he said with a soldier's blank-faced politeness. "This all will be over and done with presently."

She watched him checking his handgun. He was wearing body armor, and had a small arsenal with him—magazines, an AR-15, grenades, and a nasty-looking three-dimensional knife that was like three blades fused into a conical shape. He was far from the apparently frightened, friendly guy she dimly recalled from her previous existence. This was a polite, calm, assured soldier. He was absolutely confident that he was in charge and would remain so despite the fact that he hadn't restrained her in any way, and that irritated her.

*This all will be over and done with presently.*

The arrogance of it. These people had been in charge the other time, and had fucked it up royally. But they thought they were in charge *this* time?

*Time to make a choice*, she thought to herself, biting her lip. Was Jimmy chasing after her? Coming in confidence through his own private space, or skulking, prepared for tricks? She could just let this happen. She could sit quietly and when Jimmy opened the bathroom door a man named Andy Powell would shoot him and take possession of the box. Was that a better outcome? A *different* group of people in charge of the underlying code of reality?

Her father had been fond of saying *better to be in the room than out of the loop*. He'd always meant it with a sense of futility: The taxes were going to go up no matter what he did, but being at the city council meetings at least meant he was aware of what was happening. She thought, better to be in the room with the box and Jimmy than locked outside it. It might not make any difference, but she might still have moves to make if she was at least *in the room*.

"Officer?" she said, trying to make her voice as soft and non-threatening as possible.

"Hmmmnn?" he grunted, occupied with his weapon.

She took a deep breath, then leaned forward and with all her strength gave him a shove. The back of his knees hit the lip of the clawfoot tub and he fell backwards into it, gun sailing off, landing on

the floor and skidding. She reached up and tore the filthy old plastic shower curtain down, then spun, picked up the gun, and tore open the door.

Jimmy was a few feet away, shadowed in the hallway, caught by surprise in mid-skulk.

“Run!” she hissed, shoving past him. *Shouldn’t run with a loaded weapon*, she thought, years of gun safety lectures from literally everyone she’d ever known crowding around her. She kept running, and suddenly it occurred to her that if she beat Haggen back into the little DIY safe room he’d constructed, she’d be alone with the box.

She poured on everything she had. Behind her, she heard a roar as Powell extricated himself from the tub, then an angry shout, and heavy steps.

“Candace!” Jimmy shouted, sounding so much closer than she expected. “Candace! Don’t do it! You can’t do anything with the box! You need me!”

She didn’t slow down. That was probably true. She had no experience with code of any kind, she didn’t have Jimmy’s natural hacker sensibility. Where Jimmy had always had an affinity for systems and how they could be subverted or undermined or simply used—often without any deep understanding of the concepts or workings—she’d always found even simple technology frequently baffling or simply boring. She was a tepid social media user, hadn’t

bothered keeping up with the new networks her friends and co-workers kept jumping to, and her solution for just about every technical problem she encountered in the world was to turn the thing off and walk away, possibly have a cocktail. She *wouldn't* know what to do with it.

But she'd be in the room. Whoever *did* know what to do with it would need to negotiate with her—and she wasn't certain she would listen. Because it suddenly seemed to her that the best thing that could be done would be to simply destroy the damned thing.

She saw her father, withered and shrunken in his hospital bed. Still managing a smile for her while they waited for the hospice representative to come back with the paperwork. He was six days from death, and he smiled for her.

“Don't worry, hon,” he'd said. “This is just bad timing. No one gets out alive, right?”

*No one gets out alive.*

She might re-arrange the universe to her liking. She might give her father a few more years or even decades. But no one was getting out alive no matter what she did, so what was the *point*?

She slipped through the doorway, spun, and took hold of the door. Jimmy was three or four steps behind her.

“Candace!” he shouted. “*Candace, no!*”

She put everything she had into sliding the door into place,



grunting with the effort, something tearing in her back as the heavy steel door resisted. An inch away from latching, Haggen slammed into the door just as a drumbeat of automatic fire tore the air. She hung onto the door as it swung back into the room, Haggen dropping to the floor and sliding a foot or so, sprawled and bloody. She screamed, putting everything she had into pushing the door shut, and felt Powell crash into it a second after the bolts shot home.

She spun and dropped down to crawl over to Haggen. He was face-down on the floor in a spreading pool of blood, his back torn up by several bullet wounds.

*"Jimmy!"* she screamed, reaching for his shoulders to flip him over and then freezing, uncertain. There was so much blood. He'd been shot four, five times in the back with a high-powered weapon. He was dead. There could be no question. For a second she just knelt there, frozen, hands extended towards him. Jimmy Haggen was dead. She felt the same confused paralysis she'd felt when her father had passed. He'd been sleeping, it seemed, for a week, just a shrinking body barely breathing, mouth open, never conscious. And then she'd startled awake in the darkness of the room at the hospice, and he'd simply been gone, and for a long time she'd just sat there, back aching, staring up at the ceiling, unable to think or move or make a noise.

As she stared, Jimmy convulsed and flipped over.

Blood sprayed her face. The bullets had blown clear through him, and blood poured from the wounds. He sat up and stared at her. His face, somehow, had avoided all the gore and was like a white mask.

“Candace,” he said, his voice rough and unsteady. “Candace, I’m shot.”

She stared. It was impossible. There couldn’t be anything left of him inside. She’d seen what regular hunting guns did to a deer or an elk—and she had no doubt the 223 rounds from an AR-15 did much, much worse. He’d been shot five times. He was already sitting in a lake of his own blood.

“Candace,” he repeated, looking at her with wide eyes, his face ashen. “I’m shot.”

She nodded, running through possibilities. It was possible, she thought, *possible* that every single bullet had missed something vital. No organs, arteries, or bones. It was *possible* that she was overestimating how much blood he’d lost. That maybe he’d somehow just had the luckiest moment anyone in the history of the world had ever experienced.

She turned her head slightly. She looked at the box—the Raslowski Field Generator, the Transmorgifier.

“Oh, shit, Candy,” Haggen moaned, lifting his hands up. Blood and gore dripped from them. “Oh, fuck me. *Fuck me.*”

She snapped her head around and felt the paralysis break. If he

was the recipient of a miracle that had saved all his vital organs, he could still bleed to death. Looking at him, she thought he *would* bleed to death, and fast. She'd never seen so much blood.

She spun and grabbed a handful of T-shirts from the the floor, then sank down and undid the buckle of her belt. She wadded up one of the shirts, examined Haggan for one frenzied moment until she thought she'd identified the worst of the bleeds.

"Arms, up, Jimmy," she hissed, pushing the shirt against the gaping wound. "Hold it," she ordered, and he silently put his hand on the shirt while she looped the belt around his torso, pulling it tight. Then she wadded up a second shirt and reached around, pushing it through the looped belt on the other side.

She leaned back, panicking; she'd staunched one bleed, but the rest of his wounds continued to seep and pulse out blood. She couldn't do anything truly effective like this.

"Goddammit," she spat, feeling tears rushing up. "*Godammit.*"

"It's okay, Cuddyer," Jimmy said, and she blinked; he sounded ... normal. He sounded a little strained, maybe, but certainly not like a man who'd just been shot five times, a man who should have bled to death moments ago. She blinked tears from her eyes and stared at him. He was *smiling* slightly.

"It's okay," he said, looking down at himself. Then he looked back up. "I think ... I think I might have made myself immortal."

## 43. Mike

“Slide over,” Hammond said.

Todd had been unceremoniously pulled from the driver’s seat. Glen Eastman pushed himself into the passenger side door, looking terrified, as Hammond slid behind the wheel. Mike was suddenly aware of Myra holding the gun in her hand.

“Boys,” she said. “Guns, please.”

Mike nodded and handed his weapon over. Eastman didn’t move for a moment, but when the Colonel turned to point her own sidearm at him he sagged a little, dug into his waistband, and produced his own gun.

Hammond put the truck into gear and started driving.

“Where are we going?” Eastman demanded.

“Haggen’s,” Hammond said after a moment. “That’s where he is, and that’s where the Raslowski Field Generator is.”

Mike frowned. “Not Jack’s for us? To be ziptied and yelled at?”

Hammond turned to look back at him. “The variables have changed. Haggen’s our main concern.”

Mike glanced at Myra. “I’m not one of the ‘Four Horsemen’ any more?”

Myra shook her head. “Not according to the latest data. Something’s changed. From what we can tell, if we eliminate James

Haggen, we eliminate the threat.”

“Eliminate.”

“That was always a possibility,” Hammond said. “We tried being ... patient. It didn’t work out so well. And your little stunt bringing an army of assholes down here didn’t help much. You set our time table back, and we’ve got to move *now*, decisively, to ensure that Haggen doesn’t make things *worse*.”

“He fiddled with forces he doesn’t understand once and frankly we’re lucky the whole universe didn’t unravel as a result,” Myra said. “He had the box for, what, an *hour* last time and you know as well as anyone how that turned out. Now he’s holed up in a fortified space, and he’s had years to study and research Raslowski’s work.” She snorted. “Years to convince himself that he understands even a tenth of what Dr. Raslowski has worked out. That idiot is going to destroy reality itself.”

Mike nodded. “You had years, too, and you let him walk off with it again.”

Hammond grunted. “We didn’t see you coming, Malloy,” she said. “We knew you’d show up, we knew you’d cause trouble. We didn’t know you’d be bringing *force*. You surprised us. So did Haggen. A fucking *tunnel*. A tunnel he built years before we even selected the location.”

“You and Mr. Eastman are here because we’ve just figured out that

letting any of you out of our sight is a mistake,” Myra said. “And to try to talk you into helping us.”

“Why would we do *that*?” Eastman growled. “Missy, you all *created* this dumpster fire. We’re just trying to swim through the tsunami.”

Myra looked at Mike. He sighed. “You know why, Glen. Jimmy knows—he *knows*—that patterns repeat.”

Eastman didn’t say anything. Mike looked at Glen Eastman’s profile, and thought for the first time he was seeing the man for what he really was: A small town mediocrity. A man who had never done much, gone anywhere, or thought deeply. A man who’d gotten used to the low, low bar of being the smartest man in Mad One Jack’s on any given evening.

“Now that Haggen has control of the box, why leave us *in*?” he said quietly.

“In *what*?”

“The world, Mr. Eastman,” Myra said. “He’s saying, why wouldn’t Haggen, once he’s created a new reality to his liking, eliminate any chance that one of us might haunt him? That we’ll just pursue the science again, build the box again, and y’all will come, claim it and eliminate *him*?”

“An endless loop,” Mike said, imagining it playing out, over and over again, with different people claiming the box each time. He wondered, chillingly, if this had already happened, if maybe they

weren't always aware of the resets, if he'd lived several lives and only recently become aware of the repetition.

The truck bounced along in silence for a moment.

"Right," Hammond said, forcefully. "We've taken your people into custody, Mr. Malloy. As Dr. Azarov implied, we've learned from past mistakes and had resources in reserve in case of unexpected twists." She glanced at Mike. "I'll admit I didn't expect you to take the initiative like that. But we were prepared to let you have your moment and step in with our reserve when needed."

Mike swallowed thickly. *Have my moment*, he thought bitterly. He pictured Julia—this time alive, young and healthy, early days. She'd been beautiful in an off-kilter way. Not a girl you crossed a room to meet, but a girl you couldn't get out of your head the next day. He'd always known the idea of seeing her like that again was always going to be a long shot, but it had been worth a try. One more time he offered up a wordless apology to whatever was left of her in the universe, whatever scattered atoms or variables still in some weak way represented her. He'd had an idea of making things right, and he'd failed.

He would go along. He would help them against Haggan, if they wanted his help. He would—

He paused, looking around. Something was wrong. After a moment, it fell into place.

“Why are you driving a truck?”

Silence filled the cab. He saw Hammond’s eyes flick to the rear-view mirror. “What?”

“You’ve got troops. Equipment. Vehicles. We’re heading to Haggan’s house, but it’s just you and Myra here. Not even Dr. Raslowski.”

Silence. Mike could see Eastman frowning, puzzled.

“You’re making your own play for the box.”

He heard Myra gasp slightly, and he knew he was right. Who could resist? Hammond, whatever she’d originally thought of her orders, she knew now the box was for real. She knew as well as he did that it *could* alter reality, change the variables that underlay your life. Everyone had regrets. Everyone had something they wanted to change—or they wanted to change everything. Why should he be surprised that Hammond let temptation get the better of her, that she was abandoning her post and making a play for the most powerful piece of technology that had ever been developed.

“No one else knows where Haggan is, do they?” he said quietly.

After a moment, Myra snorted. “No, Mr. Malloy. The only people who know where the box is right now are in this truck or in the room with it. The colonel and I have an arrangement. She gets me in the room, I can calculate and code the changes we both want.”

“Jesus *Christ*,” Eastman hissed. “Are you going to erase us *too*?”



“That depends *entirely* on your behavior, Mr. Eastman,” Hammond said grimly.

“Your troops,” Mike said. “How long before they catch on?”

Hammond shook her head. “Not long. They’re fully briefed, and anyone who was here ... last time will have *memories* or whatever you call remembering something that never actually happened.

Suspicion’s been running high for a while now. If I don’t check in—in person—soon, rumor central’s gonna crank up. After that, it won’t be long before they mobilize.”

“And us?”

Another heavy moment of silence. He caught Eastman’s eye, but the older man didn’t give him any sort of signal or reaction to work with.

“Haggen’s tried to fortify the place,” Hammond finally said. “And he’s proven to be tricky. You help get us in, help us take possession, we will take your desires into account when programming the box.”

Mike nodded. He didn’t think he could trust Hammond, of course—in fact, based on this new wrinkle, it was obvious he couldn’t—but he also was very conscious of having very little leverage. Hammond wanted to keep the conspiracy she was forming on the fly as small as possible. That was good sense. But she also needed soldiers, people to help with the heavy lifting. Adding Glen and himself at least gave her two people who could handle a gun. And on the flip side: With his

people locked down by Hammond's, he and Glen were in the same boat: They needed Hammond to even have a chance at getting into Haggan's, and they would need Myra's expertise to do anything with the box once they had it.

It was the only chance he would have to do right by Julia. If he said no, he figured he'd be shot, or knocked unconscious and then the only certainty would be that whoever wound up with the box, it certainly wouldn't be him.

"Deal," he said.

Myra grinned. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Malloy," she said. "Let's go change the world."

## 44. Candace

There was too much blood.

No human body could possibly bleed as much as Jimmy Haggan and still live. And Haggan was not only still living, he seemed to be doing just fine. Gathering strength, shaking off five bullet wounds that should have killed him within moments.

She watched him wince in understated pain as he lifted the box onto a folding table. She knew she should be doing something, she should be hindering him, stopping him from accessing the field generator. But she couldn't move. Not because she was afraid, but because she was stunned. She watched Jimmy Haggan endlessly bleeding to death and her brain kept demanding that he *die* already.

"I had access to this for a while, you know," he said, breathing hard, the strain in his voice both obvious and underwhelming. "Y'all assumed I managed a few shots in the dark, but I actually had a pretty good idea what to do. You think of it as regular old code, it's not so hard to see the patterns. I'm not saying I could write something from scratch, but to figure out that a variable means *you*? Not so fucking hard." He picked up a cable, his hand shaking, and began working it into the rear of the box. "I took some precautions. Didn't know if it would work, but I tried to make myself ... essential."

She blinked, heart pounding. The *wrongness* of Jimmy Haggan still

moving, still breathing, was like an assault on her senses. It *aggressively* made no sense to her. Some part of her could tell on a primal, instinctive level that the man she was looking at shouldn't be alive.

She licked her lips. "What does *essential* mean?"

"I linked myself to everything I could think of," he said slowly, taking a deep breath and leaning down, reaching with one hand under the table for another cable. "To make my code difficult to remove. Like, and this is a random example, I embedded a link to me in The Moon. The *fucking* Moon, Candace! So, to remove me—to kill me—you'd be removing The Moon. I did that with everything I could identify that wasn't, you know, transient. That would be around for a while. I figured it would be an insurance policy. Wasn't sure it would work, but, well, here I am."

*Here you are*, she thought. She tried to contemplate a universe where Jimmy Haggan was essentially immortal, unkillable, perpetual. Where he'd weeded his own existence into so much of the bedrock of the universe that reality simply couldn't allow him to be removed.

Then she imagined this immortal, unkillable Jimmy Haggan with the box, with the power to rewrite that reality as he wished. Then she looked around the room again, seeking something that could be used as a weapon. She was the only one inside, the only one with access. She figured Powell was probably calling in some sort of

reinforcement, but who would that be? As far as she knew, Hammond and her crew were locked down at the bar. She didn't know where Mike and Glen were, where *anybody* was. For all she knew—and what she had to assume to be the case—she was the only person capable of stopping Haggen.

Her eyes stopped on a pile of tools, including one large rusty crescent wrench. Why every crescent wrench in the universe was rusty, she didn't know. What she did know is that Haggen, if maybe unkillable, was obviously affected by his injuries, which made her think it had to be possible to incapacitate. And a crescent wrench to the head was a reliable way of incapacitating someone, even someone as famously hard-headed as Jimmy Haggen.

She watched him slowly, languorously working with the box. A pool of blood had formed under him, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped, and she wondered if he would simply heal up. Would the bullets remain inside him? Would his body form new veins and arteries around them, would they magically disappear?

She felt like she couldn't trust anything. Gravity. Would gravity still work as expected in a world where Jimmy Haggen was unkillable?

"I wasn't sure it would work," he said, and she took a soft, careful step to her left, bringing her a little closer to the wrench. "I thought about, you know, *testing* it, but I was afraid. Next time through, I'll

know from the get go. But I won't need it. I'm going to fix things."

*Fix things.* A chill went through her. She took another step.

"Don't worry, now, I'm not gonna screw you over. What would I do without Candace Cuddyer? I think I know what to do about your Dad, too. Though I can't make any guarantees; the rule of unexpected consequences and all that. But we're gonna try, okay?"

She took a step to her left. The wrench was near her foot.

"The rest of them I got no love for, Cuddyer. No love at all. And I know if they had their way right now they'd try to pull *me* out of the weave, try to *erase* me—not that it would work. Me sitting here right now proves it to me: If they try to change things and pull me out, the whole goddamn thing's gonna collapse. The whole goddamn *thing*, you get me?" He barked an unsteady laugh. "I made myself a fundamental part of the universe, Candy! *Fundamental!*"

He appeared to be absorbed in setting up the box; he'd connected it to a monitor, but the signal seemed to be out of phase, the picture distorted and squiggly, constantly moving and squirming. He might be unkillable, but his wounds were obviously affecting him; he was dreamy and slow, fumbly. She lowered herself to the floor and curled her hand around the wrench.

"So let's just say that in the new, Jimmy-centric universe, there isn't going to be a Dr. Raslowski or a Colonel Hammond or a Glen Eastman—or a goddamn Mike Malloy. So there won't be a box, and

there won't be any of *this*." He turned to grin at her. "I've got it all—"

He frowned, and his face twisted into a mask of anger. She stepped forward and with one smooth motion raised the wrench and brought it down.

Haggen spun away, a spray of blood hitting her as the wrench crashed down on top of the box and bounced back, flying out of her numbed hand as a shockwave of pain shot up her arm. Sensing movement, she threw herself backwards, but Haggen caught her ankle and she slammed on the floor with a cry, teeth sinking into her tongue, blood filling her mouth. For a second she looked around at the metal-covered windows; no one was getting in and she wasn't getting out, that was obvious.

She rolled to her right and scrambled forward and onto her feet, wincing as her arm tweaked with pain when she put her weight on it. Then she was running, off-balance, making a tight turn as she and diving behind the old green couch. She pressed herself down and scanned underneath, seeking anything that could be a weapon, she froze as the strangely familiar sound of a magazine being inserted into an assault rifle.

She rolled towards the wall just as the couch burst into an explosion of foam and trash. Heart pounding, she pushed herself up and ran along the wall. Another quick burst of fire followed her; she launched herself at the table Haggen had set up, picked up the box,

and with a twisting motion that tore something vital in her back tossed it directly at Jimmy.

He dropped the rifle and raised his arms, too late; the box smacked into him and sent him staggering backwards as it hit the floor. Back burning, she ran straight at him, tripping over the box and crashing into him. She rolled off of him immediately and crawled towards the rifle, sweating dripping onto the floor as she fought for breath.

*Shoulda taken more spin classes*, she thought, and had to fight the crazy urge to laugh.

Her hand closed on the rifle just as Haggen's hand closed on her ankle. She rolled again, bringing the rifle up and squeezing the trigger—she didn't have a second of hesitation, and some remote part of her was aware that instinctively she didn't even think of Haggen as a person any more. In some dark, deep part of her, some ancient reptilian place, she'd decided that Jimmy Haggen should have died, and this was a monster.

The rifle bucked just slightly in her shaking, sweaty hands and the shots went wide.

Haggen surged up, growling, and she shoved the rifle up at him, connecting with his nose with a crunch she felt in her arm, a lance of pain shooting up into her brain. He staggered back, lost his footing, and landed on his ass, making the whole floor jump. She pointed the



rifle at him again.

They each sat, breathing hard.

“Cuddyer,” he said between gasps, blood running down his face. She didn’t know how he could have more blood in him. She didn’t know how he could be alive. She felt her sense of gravity fading away again, lost to insanity. “Candace, don’t do this.”

“I can’t let you do this, Jimmy,” she said. “*Erasing* people. Setting yourself up as—what? King? God? Is that it? You can’t be killed, then what?” She blinked, a non-memory hitting her. “Jesus, you *wanted* them to kill you,” she said quietly. “You’d put in your code, you’d changed your variables, but you had to push the button, and you were *afraid*. You wanted them to make the decision for you.”

He smiled, blood in his teeth. “Cuddyer, I don’t mean this *mean*, but you’re out of your league here.”

She shook her head. “I can’t let you do it, Jimmy. They’re good people—”

“We don’t know them. Malloy? Hammond? Tourists.”

“Glen?”

Haggen shrugged. “I brought Glen in. He tried to screw me over, so he’s out.” He took a deep breath. “*You’re* here, Candace. And you and me—I’m not cutting you out. This,” he gestured at himself, “this I *get*. I *understand*.” He held up his hands. “No worries. Put the gun down, let me get set up. You get input on every decision. You don’t

want something—you want, what, Malloy to be okay? Okay, he's okay. I'm flexible. I'm not crazy.”

*Jesus, am I negotiating to keep people from being erased?* she thought, head spinning. Her back burned in agony, her arm was weak and shaky and aching. She felt like she couldn't catch her breath. Like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room.

She closed her eyes.

A loud, sour noise filled the air, startling her. She jumped and opened her eyes, but Haggan was already coming at her. He crashed into her, his blood soaking into her clothes, and then the rifle was torn from her slick hands and he shoved forcefully to the floor. She looked up and he had the rifle aimed directly at her, standing over her like a hunter over his kill.

They stared at each other for a moment.

“What's that?” she finally asked.

He blinked and looked around. After a moment he stepped back, raising the rifle. “Motion sensors,” he said. Then he looked back at her, his expression terrifying. “Visitors.”

## 45. Mike

“Motion sensors,” Hammond said, killing the engine and getting out of the truck. The distant whirring noise was muted but clear in the cold darkness. “Couldn’t be helped. Mr. Eastman,” Hammond said, beckoning him to slide over behind the wheel. She held the truck’s keys in one hand and one of the familiar zipties in the other.

Eastman hesitated. He looked from her to Mike and Myra in the back seat. Myra held her gun up.

“Mr. Eastman,” she said sweetly, “I’m not much of a shot, it’s true, but you’re *one foot away*.”

He looked at Mike, who shrugged. “Sorry, Glen. Your heart doesn’t seem in this.”

Eastman began hauling himself over to the driver’s side. “Fuck you, Mike. You think this is going to go well for you? You’re an idiot. They’re going to let you help them, and then they’re going to arrest you, *erase* you, and take their toy and do whatever they want to us, to *everyone*.”

“Mr. *Eastman*,” Myra snapped, leaning forward to speak directly into his ear. “May I remind you we came here because our models demonstrated that *you* were a threat. *You* were going to contribute to an apocalyptic event. And you and Mr. Malloy were both part of a conspiracy to utilize technology you do not understand *at all* to make

arrangements for your own profit.” She snorted. “So spare me the outrage.”

Mike blinked. Something had definitely changed in Myra.

Hammond secured Eastman’s hands to the wheel and stuffed the keys into her pocket. She opened Mike’s door and he stepped out while Myra slid out the other side. He followed Hammond around to the rear of the truck. As she lowered the tailgate, Myra shrugged off her white lab coat. Hammond pulled a large black duffel towards them and unzipped it. She pulled out a pair of black work overalls and tossed them to Myra. As the younger woman pulled them on, Hammond began extracting weapons from the bag.

“Mr. Malloy,” she said. “I realize trust may be a bridge too far between us. And I’ll be up front; if I thought I could do this without you, I would. But Haggren—even though he’s one man—has obviously been aware of his special circumstances longer than the rest of us. And he was much more aggressive.” She pulled an AR-15 from the bag and laid it on the truck bed next to it. “I’ll admit I was complacent. Even as I became aware of the divergent realities, I thought we would be able to play the same strategy. I was proud of myself for putting backup resources into place to overcome another shitshow.” She shook her head and placed two full magazines next to the rifle, and then turned to face him. “As I said, trust may be a bit much, in both directions. But I feel like I don’t have a choice. Dr. Azarov is

resourceful and reliable, but she's not trained for this."

She studied him, and he studied her back. She was handsome, a thin, dry-looking woman with not an ounce of fat or wasted space to her, everything about her sinewy and tight.

"So, Mr. Malloy, all I'm going to do here is ask you to give me your word that once we have Haggen neutralized, you won't screw me over. Can you do that?"

Mike smiled. "Should we pinky swear?" he said, picking up the AR-15 and checking it over. "We've got a shared goal right now: Get in there without anyone else, neutralize Haggen, take control of the box. Once that happens, we no longer have a shared goal, right?"

Hammond shook her head. "I say we *do*, Malloy. We all want to have a say in what happens next. If we agree to that, everything else follows."

He picked up one of the magazines and pushed it until he got the satisfying *click*. He nodded. "Colonel Hammond, I'll give you my word. If things go sideways, it won't be because of me." He looked at her. "All I want is a seat at the table. We get in, Dr. Azarov gives us access and the knowledge to do it right—without screwing everything up—and we all have a say. Fair enough."

The annoying jingle of the motion alarms suddenly stopped.

Hammond pursed her lips, studying him, then nodded. "Very well. Mr. Malloy, I don't know you, and yet I feel like I know you

better than some people I've served with for years. We're good. Let's go have a look."

The duffel bag contained another pair of rifles, more ammunition, some M67 grenades that Hammond took sole possession of, a brick of gray clay-like material Mike recognized as plastic explosive, and bright silver dart-shaped objects he assumed were detonators. Myra, he noted, took hold of the AR-15 with a practiced, comfortable posture, her eyes running over it with something that looked suspiciously like experience. He suspected they'd all been preparing for this moment privately, each of them nurturing ambitions and new skills in secret, thinking themselves brilliant.

He looked around at the dark, silent trees, and wondered how many people were aware of the "reset," how many people had spent the last few years studying, training, building in preparation, certain they would be ready to seize control when the time came.

He shivered, then followed Myra to join Hammond. She was peering through field glasses.

"Haggen's house," she said, pointing. "About a hundred feet past the tree line. Hardened, in a way; the man obviously didn't have any money, but he sure had a lot of time on his hands." She handed the glasses over, and Mike slung the rifle over his shoulder and looked through them, the night lit up a sickly green. The house looked sad and small, the sort of one-story home that would contain a lot of

linoleum and formica, a lot of rust-colored carpet.

“Shields over the windows,” Hammond said quietly. “He’s not connected to utilities, the house doesn’t have a basement, just a crawlspace I’ll bet he’s filled with gravel. Internal power and water collection and filtration. Motion sensors, at this line and probably another fifty feet in. Video surveillance. And if I were him, I’d have rigged up some IEDs around the perimeter. Not to mention a steel security door in the front—he’s closed up the rear entrance.”

Mike scanned the scene, impressed at how much she’d deduced from just observing the house—or, possibly, had already discovered before coming to this point, quietly laying her own foundation while she waited for everything else to fall into place.

“He knew this would happen,” he said. “The Jim Haggan I know—knew—was paranoid as hell.” He chewed his lip, studying the house. “So, he’s expecting a frontal assault. He probably expects you to come with your army,” he dropped the glasses and looked at her. “Or me to come with *mine*. So, a frontal assault would be a mistake.”

“I agree, Mr. Malloy. So, let’s imagine that Mr. Haggan is right now coding in his changes. He’s obviously been planning this for years, so let’s assume he has—or thinks he has—a firm grip on the syntax and the structure.”

Myra snorted derisively, but said nothing.

“So, we’re on the *clock*,” Hammond continued. “How do we get in

there as quickly as possible?”

Mike brought the glasses back up, wondering if this was a test, if Hammond already had an assault plan and just wanted to see what he would say so she could gauge his usefulness. He studied the house again, then ticked up to study the trees. Haggen hadn't done much to clear the land. *Probably liked the natural privacy screening of the trees and brush*, he thought. He looked back at the house, then lowered the glasses and looked at Hammond as he handed them back.

“Roof,” he said, gesturing. “We use the trees to avoid the motion sensors and whatever other traps he has.” He pointed. “Look at how close the canopy is. Once we're in the branches, we can probably make it to the house without touching the ground. He put a lot of time into the walls and the ground-level defenses, but that roof looks old and worn-out. Shingles missing. A wavy roof-line that indicates rot. The chimney doesn't look properly flashed, at least not from this distance. We hit the roof, find a soft spot, set a small charge, and we're in.”

Hammond nodded, stuffing the glasses into her jacket. She looked up and studied the branches above us. “Good. We have some stakes in the bag that we can use to climb up. Let's go.”

Mike blinked. He hadn't actually expected her to just take his recommendation without augmenting it, or at least discussing it. Time was pressing, but it still felt off. He glanced at Myra, who



looked back at him placidly.

*They know something*, he thought, reminding himself that they had at least limited access to the future, to a matrix of information that allowed them to predict what might happen. Their discovery that he might be part of the end of the world had brought them in the first place. He frowned as Hammond fished out the stakes and a small field hammer. With a shiver, he considered the possibility, suddenly very real, that they knew *he* would get into Haggren's house, and they were just drafting along behind him.

He was being used.

He watched Hammond start pounding a stake into a wide tree trunk nearby. She worked with the speed and efficiency of a trained soldier, someone who'd spent her life setting up and breaking down temporary shelters and structures. When she had the first two stakes in place, she looped some rope around the tree and tied it off around her waist, then climbed the first two stakes and began pounding in a third.

He considered his options. He needed to get into the house. He had little doubt at this point that Haggren would not hesitate a moment to *neutralize* him, and when a man had control—even vague, untrained control—over reality itself, that didn't bode well. So he needed Myra and the Colonel—if for nothing else to feel out Haggren's defenses, set off a trap or two while he hung back. On the

other hand, he was suddenly uncertain if Hammond wouldn't simply wait for him to wriggle them into the house and then shoot him in the head the moment she and Azarov had control of the box again.

Myra was next to him, handing him a length of sturdy nylon rope. She nodded, and approached the tree. He was startled to see that Hammond had already made it into the branches, six stakes driven into the trunk forming a ladder of sorts, like you saw on telephone poles for the repair workers. Myra looped the rope around the trunk as Hammond had and attacked the climb like it was something she'd trained for.

Everyone had been building tunnels, practicing skills, doing research.

So had *he*, he realized. He froze for a moment. Where had his compulsion to learn, to travel around taking classes and paying people to teach him their trades, their secrets, their skills, come from? What had actually inspired it? Julia? That had always made sense to him: He'd felt useless after Julia's death. He'd felt like a fraud adult, a man who'd been wallowing in his adolescent bullshit for so long, a man who didn't even know how to administer CPR. Now he wondered: Had it been *this*? Some weird dimensional memory, some intuitive, baked-in knowledge in his DNA telling him that someday all these skills would be *useful*?

*Was he his own puppet?*

He walked slowly to the tree, trying to shake off the sudden sense of dread. Not for the first time, but most powerfully, he felt like he was just going through motions that had been stage-directed. Now he wondered if the invisible hand moving him like a piece on the board was *himself*.

He looped the rope around the tree and tied it loosely around his waist. He began to climb. As he did, feeling his muscles strain and burn, his breathing kick up, he shook off the dread. He saw himself climbing stealthily from branch to branch. He saw himself making the final short leap onto the roof. Sitting there with held breath for a moment, listening for reaction. Helping Hammond set charges around the chimney, where the worst of the rot was located. Moving a few feet off. He felt the bang of the explosive, too powerful because Hammond wanted to be certain of success, and then the whole roof caving in, the three of them sliding down into rubble. He saw himself breaking both legs. He saw Hagen walking towards him with a rifle in his hands, bloodied and bruised, but still in one piece.

He crawled out on the branch. Hagen's roof was just a foot or so away, and easy swing. Hammond and Myra, difficult to see in their dark clothes, peered up at him expectantly. He made the last move easily, walking out on a stout branch that narrowed down over the roof, allowing him to make a simple leap.

He followed the other two to the chimney, where the roof was so

badly rotted he could feel it giving under them, soft and ruined.

Hammond knelt down and shrugged off her pack, fishing in it for the explosive. Mike moved off slightly to the side, making sure not to go too far or too fast, and slid his thumb under the loop of rope he still had cinched around his waist. He'd retied it to himself using a simple half hitch, and now he fed the slack out slowly until he had a loop in his hand.

The old chimney had never been rubberized or wrapped, and the crumbling brick had several iron clips embedded in it. He leaned over until he was able to slip the loop of rope over one of the clips, then tried to stand as casually as possible. He wasn't certain how, but he knew the roof was about to collapse under them. A buzzing sense of excitement spread through him. He felt like for the first time in a long time he was in uncharted territory.

## 46. Candace

She heard something, a scrape and a creak above her. Ziptied to the ancient, unused radiator against the inner wall of the room, she glanced up, then quickly down again, doing obscure existential math. She looked over at Haggen, who was hunched over the keyboard, the monitor—its screen cracked but still functioning—glowing with white code on a black background.

She heard the creak again. She didn't know who, but *someone* was on the roof. It didn't matter who it was, she thought. She was tied up and anything that would shift the balance was welcome. She needed to distract Jimmy.

Haggen was spectral. For a moment she studied his back, the oozing bullet wounds, the pallor of his skin, and marveled at the idea of an unkillable James Haggen. It ruined so many of her teenage proclamations that she would, indeed, kill Jimmy that she felt cheated, somehow. When he'd made her angry during their ill-fated love affair all those years ago—which had been more or less a daily occurrence—she'd often entertained herself by imagining how she would kill the smug son of a bitch, fuming over his latest bit of assholery. Now that option appeared to be gone, and without the option of just killing him she wasn't sure how to emotionally deal with him.

She watched him typing. His hands shook. He was essentially a corpse that had failed to stop living.

“Is it difficult?” she asked, surprising herself with the croaking, cracked sound of her voice. She was exhausted. She felt like she’d been fighting a fierce tide for the last six years or so, beating her way back to a distant shore that kept receding no matter what she did.

He kept typing. “Dr. Raslowksi’s early work is public,” he said. “Getting some of the basics was easy enough. I took some online courses—did you know that MIT has every course it offers for free online? Shit, they even have all the materials for download. You can’t get a degree that way, but you can self-study until you pass out. I managed to dig up some other stuff—one stupid sonofabitch at the DOD left a presentation deck on an FTP site, and the Dark Web has a shitload of leaked materials. More fucking anarchist’s with security clearances than you think. And Raslowski and Azarov, for convenience and speed’s sake, based the structure of their language on existing programming languages. And the compiler is built-in. I’ve pieced together a lot of it.”

“A lot? For re-working reality, you think *a lot* is gonna cut it?”

He shrugged, his wounds oozing more. “I’m kinda out of time, here, Candace. I became aware six years ago. I’ve had six years to prepare. At this point, best I can do.”

Dust sifted down onto her, getting into her eyes. She blinked and

twitched, forcing herself to keep talking. “And you’re ... you’re *okay* with the risk? Jesus, Jimmy, you might delete everything. You might erase *existence*,” she said quietly. “I want you to just stand up, unplug that thing, and maybe *destroy* it.”

“They’d just build another one,” he said, twisting around to look at her. “Besides, I’ve already put all the work in: I’d written out my changes ahead of time like a good Worker Bee. It’s all in there, Candace. So here’s the last chance, okay? The final one. I press the button, everything’s gonna change. The variables will refill with new values. Those new values will ripple out in quantum states backwards and forwards in time, reality will self-correct, and we’ll all be in a new version of everything. You want to have a say in what that new version is, you want to make a *suggestion*, now would be the time.”

She felt tired. She felt like she’d lived the last six years twice and only gotten the sleep of three. “Jimmy, you—”

Up above her, a loud explosion made her scream, and then everything was chaos: The ceiling collapsed above her, plaster and wood coming down in chunks that shook the floor under her as they hit. There was a rush of hot, burning air and a flurry of sparks and flaming chunks of what had once been the ceiling. Bodies crashed down with the debris, bouncing on the floor. With a loud tearing noise, another section of the roof snapped, dropping down on top of the green couch.

She took a deep breath and started to try and get her feet under her. Something heavy crashed down onto her shoulders, and everything went black.

####

She came back to consciousness in slow, sticky waves, hovering somewhere between awake and asleep for a long time. She imagined she was back in New York, she imagined she was at home doing her homework, her father puttering around downstairs, irritating her because he wouldn't just go doze off in the easy chair in front of the TV so she could sneak out. She imagined she was working a double shift at Mad One Jack's, buzzing on caffeine and desperation, angry because of all the one-dollar tips the Great Hunters were leaving.

She knew she was dreaming, but couldn't shake it.

She was in the hospital, then, the day her father died. He hadn't been awake. She knew that. He'd slept the last few days, breathing shallowly, and shown no awareness of anything. He'd died without saying a word. She knew that.

But now she was back in the dark, silent room, and he was awake. She knew she was dreaming, but then what was a dream when you knew—*knew*, in some inexplicable way—that you'd lived a whole other life. That instead of going to New York, you'd stayed in town. That one night soldiers had detained you. And instead of having to fly in when your father took a turn, you were home, caring for him, right



up until the bitter end.

And now he was awake, and telling her he was about to die. He was telling her that life didn't have to be this way. That there were options she couldn't see. He was smiling and telling her that she didn't have to do things just because she'd already done them, that there were less-traveled roads. He'd always said that: *Less-traveled roads*, and she'd always tried to correct his quote and he'd never listened.

And then she was back in Jimmy Haggen's destroyed safe room. The roof was missing, the trees visible, outlined by the stars and the soft glow of the unseen moon. The kerosene lamp still burned, throwing its weak yellow light. The debris from the collapse was everywhere, shingles and drywall and the huge, cracked joists, bricks mixed in. Where the couch had been, two legs emerged from a pile of wreckage, one leg bent at the knee as if the person was just taking a nap under a ton of house.

She tried to move, and a sharp pain lanced through her. Her arms were trapped, and she struggled, panic setting in. She was pinned under a huge piece of wood, ancient and cracked, almost black; she was able to breathe, but any attempt to move brought pain and futility.

Sound made her look around. Another body lay on the floor—she recognized Colonel Hammond's short, severe blonde hair—near the

couch. The box had been knocked off the table and lay on its side, still connected via a long black cable to the monitor, which was still on the table, flat on its back, and the keyboard, which had landed on the floor.

Jimmy was crawling towards it.

He was a corpse. She couldn't think of any other possible description. He was fishbelly white, his lips gray and thin. The wounds on his back were dry and jellied, opening and closing as he pulled himself towards the keyboard. She could hear him breathing, but couldn't comprehend how he had any blood left to oxygenate. If she didn't believe he was unkillable before, she believed it now.

*I've already put all the work in.*

A jolt of adrenaline flooded her. The keyboard was still connected. She had no doubt the box was still operational. All he had to do was press the ENTER key and load his changes.

She clenched her teeth and closed her eyes, pushing against the weight of the rafter despite the pain that shot through her. She couldn't let him. She couldn't let him erase people, she couldn't let him remake the universe as he saw fit, she couldn't let him mess everything up worse than he already had.

She pushed. The pain became intense, a fire inside her, and she screamed. She thought the rafter had moved a fraction of an inch. Just a fraction.

She remembered, in another reality, an old-fashioned Dipping Bird.

She watched Haggen crawl another inch towards the keyboard.

Tears sprang from her eyes as the pain became intolerable. The rafter hadn't moved at all, she was pinned under it completely. With a gasp she stopped the effort, sobs wracking her as frustration soured into horror.

In the strange silence of the ruined house, she heard a slight, sharp noise, then something like fabric rubbing. And then a man dropped into her field of vision. He was disheveled, but appeared to be unhurt; he didn't even have much dirt on him. She recognized Mike Malloy and stared in wonder for a moment: Had he flown in? Parachuted from a plane? Materialized from another dimension?

After the day she'd had, any of it would have made sense.

She watched as Mike walked over towards Haggen. He didn't rush. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder, but his hands were free and hung loosely at his sides as he walked.

*Be careful*, she thought, trying to make the words but finding her lungs locked, *he's immortal, unkillable*.

When he reached Haggen, he extended one leg and gently put his foot on the younger man's hand.

Haggen stopped crawling, sagging down onto the floor.

"I think you've done enough damage," Mike said.

For a moment, Haggen just lay there, and Candace wasn't even certain he was breathing. Then he twisted his head around to look up at Mike, and Candace could see his cadaverous face smiling.

“You know, Malloy,” he said, his voice like gravel under wheels, “I've run the numbers on you.”

## 47. Mike

For a moment, all he could articulate to himself was that Haggen looked incredibly rough, even otherworldly. There was something ... off about his appearance, something that made his eye want to skip right over him and look at an interesting spot on the floor. It was an uncanny valley between the Haggen he'd known—bright-eyed, red-cheeked, filled with a nervous kind of energy—and the man who was grinning up at him with fishbelly skin and dry eyes.

*I've run the numbers.*

Mike saw the flash of metal, and twisted away as Haggen stabbed at him with a long hunting knife that landed in the floor where Mike's foot had been a moment before. Dancing backwards, he tripped over a fallen rafter and fell, sprawling painfully.

Haggen sprang to his feet, and Mike had a moment of confusion, because Haggen looked like an extra from some TV show, something with a lot of makeup and dead people. He had been shot multiple times, and was as pale as a piece of chalk, so pale his lips looked almost black. But he was alive. Or, Mike self-corrected, he was *in motion*; he didn't look *alive*.

"I've been afraid," Haggen said. "I'll admit it. Shit, you *think* you've got it all handled, you *think* you understood, but do you push that button? Change a few variables and you're immortal—but are you

going to fire a gun at your head to find out?” He smiled, and Mike flinched stupidly from the white gums almost the same color as his teeth. “Oh, I sat here, barrel in my mouth. I did. But I couldn’t do it. But then, tonight, *bam!* it happens. And here I am. And that makes me think the *rest* of my changes might have worked out, too.”

Mike thought stupidly, *other changes?*

Haggen leaped at him, faster than Mike could believe. It was almost like an insect, a sudden bouncing motion, and then Haggen was in the air, knife in one hand, his cold white face twisted into an expression that Mike’s fatigued brain somehow interpreted as *delight*.

He managed to roll to his left a second before Haggen landed, the knife sinking into the broken rafter that hugged the floor. He pushed himself up to his feet and whirled, struggling with the rifle slung across his torso, which seemed to suddenly take on a sentience and a reluctance to assist. But Haggen was struggling to pull the knife from the rafter, both hands on the polished wood handle as he put his back into the effort. For a moment Mike stared at the pattern of bullet wounds on Haggen’s back, the way they opened and closed slightly as his back muscles convulsed. Then he swung the rifle forward, toggled the safety, and pointed it at the other man.

“Jim,” he said, “I don’t—”

Haggen spun and raced towards him. Mike squeezed the trigger, the rifle jerked in his hands, and then Haggen crashed into him and

all he could do was thrust the rifle up at him, deflecting the knife blade as they both crashed into the table, which collapsed under them.

Mike struggled to keep the rifle under his control. Haggen was *strong*, and nothing made sense. His skin was cold and clammy, and Mike's own crawled at its touch. Mike's brain refused to process the way he grinned down at him as they struggled.

*He changed something*, Mike thought, sweating stinging his eyes. He had the ghostly non-memory: This room, the Dipping Bird. It had never happened, but at the same time it had. And when it happened, Jimmy Haggen had somehow made himself superhuman.

Haggen reared back, his hand curling into a fist, and Mike ducked his head down to avoid the punch. Haggen's fist slammed into the remnants of the table, and Mike twisted free, scrambling into a crawl. Haggen whipped out a hand and grabbed Mike's ankle, and with a roar swung Mike to the right, skimming him over the debris-laden floor as if he weighed nothing, finally letting go and letting his centrifugal force send him sailing into the wall.

Mike lay for a moment, eyes closed, suppressing a groan as an aching pain radiated downward from his head.

"God-*damn* this feels good," Haggen exulted. Mike cracked open an eye and watched Jimmy pacing back and forth in the ruined room, an animated corpse. He kept himself still, assessing the damage—

minimal, he thought; sprains and pulls, nothing he couldn't overcome with a little sheer terror and adrenalin—and biding his time.

Suddenly, Haggen stopped and looked directly at him. “I see you, you little sneak. Mike Malloy, rich and good-looking and all the goddamn time in the world, huh?” He turned and walked towards him. “Well, guess what, Mr. Malloy? I made myself a *constant*, you hear? Not a variable. Not a changeable value, but a *fundamental*.” He knelt down right in front of Mike, peering down with his cadaver smile. “Change me, the whole fucking universe will collapse, how you like *that*?”

Mike pulled the Beretta from his pocket and pointed it at Haggen. He tried to ignore the way his hand shook holding the gun. Haggen stopped, then smiled.

“Can't kill me, Mikey,” he said. “Like I just told you, I'm a *constant*. The universe can't do without me. So it won't let you kill me. Shoot me all you want, I'll still be here.”

Mike believed it, based solely on Haggen's appearance. He was suddenly reminded of Spider Hamilton.

He'd met Spider at a bar in Kansas City, a bar that didn't have a name or permanent address, a bar that set up someplace new every morning at about 3AM, an after hours place where bouncers and bartenders, prostitutes, dancers, drivers, bodyguards, and assorted



other creatures of the night gathered to wind down and relax. He'd found his way into the movable feast with the liberal application of hundred-dollar bills and bought drinks, and had been content to simply sit on a couch and sip a whiskey and watch a colorful cast of characters dance, get high, fight, and sing.

Spider Hamilton had walked in and the place acted like the whole party was for him. Mike had watched the man make his way in like a visiting dignitary, smiling, shaking hands, kissing cheeks. He was huge, a mountain of a man, his tan skin taut over muscles, marred by plenty of scars. His nose had the off-center look of the frequently-broken, and his hands were red, raw slabs of ground beef.

He'd hung back, watching, and finally introduced himself, and discovered that Spider Hamilton was a street fighter—literally a man who engaged in illegal brawls in the street, taking on anyone who put up a purse. No rules, no protective equipment, each bout filmed and uploaded to his channel online. He learned that Spider Hamilton made a comfortable living at this, and that he'd never lost a fight. Spider, plied with expensive Scotch, had been happy to lecture Mike on the ways street fighting differed from what he called Pussy Fighting.

So Mike bought a lesson.

For five hundred dollars, Spider promised he would teach Mike some basics, give him some pointers, and leave him alive, though he

did have Mike sign a surprisingly complex and well-written waiver that inured Spider against being sued for medical bills.

As it turned out, the only thing Mike remembered from his lesson, aside from a new promise to himself to never try to engage in a fistfight when hungover, was that the only thing that really mattered in a fight was pain: If you made your opponent hurt it was much better than any skill move or complicated maneuver.

“I win most of my fights,” Spider had told him, “by kicking them in the balls as hard as I can as fast as I can. I make ‘em hurt.”

*Make ‘em hurt.* It was essentially the only takeaway Mike had from the experience. He looked at Haggen, who was still smiling at him, triumphant.

“Can’t kill you, huh?”

Haggen shook his head. “Fraid not, son.”

“Does it still hurt?”

Haggen frowned, and Mike squeezed the trigger three times.

He staggered backwards and lost his footing, arms flailing wildly as he hit the floor. For a moment he was still, not moving as Mike levered himself up, wincing as he climbed to his feet, gun still held on Haggen. But as he stood up, Haggen started twitching, and after a moment Mike realized he was *laughing*.

Then he flipped over. There were three new wounds in his chest. They weren’t bleeding, which Mike assumed was because Haggen

literally had no more blood in his body, which raised so many questions regarding chemical reactions and basic biology his brain simply glossed over it.

“Yep,” Haggen said, slowly climbing to his feet. “That fucking *hurt*.” He rolled his head on his neck. “And I’m going to make you pay for it.”

He launched himself at Mike. Mike pulled the trigger again, but a second later Haggen knocked the wind out of him, and then he was on the floor, Haggen sitting astride him. He reared back and brought his fist down, and Mike had the distinct displeasure of hearing his own nose break shortly before he lost consciousness.

He came to just a moment later, dumbly watching as Haggen picked up his own Beretta. Everything seemed to be coming at him in slow, confusing waves. He couldn’t breathe through his nose and for a moment he struggled to get air, watching helplessly as Haggen rose unsteadily to his feet over Mike and pointed the gun at his head.

Just as Haggen squeezed the trigger, he twitched, convulsing. The bullet smacked into Mike’s leg instead of his head.

The pain brought him back. He convulsed, half sitting up, opening his mouth and sucking in air to scream. Blood poured from his nose down his throat, and he collapsed backwards, choking, eyes watering.

“Goddamit,” Haggen growled. Then he licked his lips, bringing the gun back up. “By the way, you arrogant piece of shit,” Haggen said,

no longer grinning. “I’m going to erase you. All of you. In *my* world, you never existed.”

And then Haggen squeezed the trigger, but got a dry click. The gun was empty. Mike passed out again, and gratefully.

####

He came to in a rush of pain, his entire body throbbing with each ragged heartbeat. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, dizzy and hot, then cold. He could hear Haggen breathing, he could hear the occasional soft curse under the man’s breath.

*Maybe I’ll just lie here until I bleed to death or he erases me,* he thought.

It was tempting.

Biting his lip in agony, he raised his head up just enough to see Haggen. The only living constant in the universe was hunched over, the keyboard in his lap, the box and nearly-destroyed monitor hooked up on the floor in front of him. He was carefully splicing the wires of the keyboard back together; the cord appeared to have been cleanly sliced in half.

Mike managed, through the blurry burning pain and the hot weakness, to feel a sense of amusement. The Only Living Constant had been stymied by a lack of a fifteen-dollar computer keyboard.

He watched as Candace suddenly appeared, rising up from the floor holding a long piece of old pipe. He blinked, head trembling as he strained to keep his position.

She was covered in dust and splinters, bleeding from a deep gash on her head. But she was very much alive and in one piece, and held the pipe like a an old and very beloved baseball bat, the kind kids had in their closets, sticky from endless applications of pine tar, signed by teammates and wielded in countless epic battles. He thought she looked like a girl who'd hit people on the head with a pipe several times.

For one second, their eyes met. He blinked and tried to smile, tried to convey something, some kind of sentiment. She nodded, once, crisp and calm. Expressionless.

“Hey, Jim.”

Haggen startled and half turned around. Candace swung the pipe.

## 48. Candace

It was time for lunch. If her growling stomach wasn't enough, her aching shoulders and stiff back took up the challenge and made it clear she'd worked long enough. She picked up a rag and wiped her hands, slumping slightly in her chair and eyeing the canvas critically. She still couldn't quite see the painting, but she thought something was beginning to emerge.

She stood up and stretched. It was a sunny, clear day outside, so she'd opened up every blind and pulled aside every drape in the house to let in as much light as possible, and as a result had consented to wear a pair of paint-splattered overalls just in case some lost hunters wandered past the house. As usual when she let the light in, the house looked alien. Her father had liked things dark and dingy, private. She'd never realized just how dark and drab the house always was until she'd moved to New York.

She picked up her mug of coffee and carried it to the kitchen. The house was still her father's. She kept meaning to plan some renovations, to modernize, but time always slipped away. She wanted to tear out the ancient kitchen with its narrow countertops and metal cabinets, she wanted to tear down a wall and install a master bath. She didn't really have the money, but the place didn't have a mortgage, so she thought she might get an equity line and do it that

way.

Somehow, though, she woke up every morning and didn't do a damn thing about it. She was starting to suspect she liked the house as it was, with her father's imprint on it.

As she passed the pantry door in the kitchen she paused. With both hands on the mug, she stood very still and listened for a moment. Then she shook her head and kept walking.

The fridge only contained vegetables and a pitcher of water. This had seemed like a brilliant plan the day before, when she'd noticed an extra five pounds and a distressing tightness to her jeans. The market was a twenty-minute drive and she figured if all she had to eat in the house was salad and canned tuna, she would be forced to eat healthy. Or possibly not eat at all. Either way, her plan was to avoid the bathroom scale until Friday and then see what she had wrought.

Sighing, she gathered lettuce, a tomato, half an onion, and a cucumber and dumped them on the butcher block island. She got a bowl out of the cabinet over the sink, took a knife from the drawer, and began industriously and piously cutting up a chopped salad. When salad had been achieved, she wiped her hands on her grubby overalls and put the veggies back in the fridge.

*Tuna, she thought. Dad would say I needed protein. Protein, caffeine, and beer, he always said, the most important food groups.*

She smiled and steeled herself.

The pantry door stuck, and she had to put a little back into it to budge it open. It had always been that way. She leaned into it just like she had for thirty-two years, and the door scraped the floor and swung inward.

The pantry was a small room with metal shelves on each side, leaving a lane in the middle just big enough for a person to walk down. Candace paused and stared down at the trap door in the floor. Two steel bars and a padlock through an old iron hasp secured it. It led down into a tiny root cellar that they'd never used; it was just large enough for one person to be very uncomfortable in, and they'd never known what to do with the space anyway. She had a vague notion that you stored perishables in there in the times before refrigeration, but since she was living *in* the age of refrigeration, she didn't see the point.

As she watched, the trap door shifted, just slightly, and a distant-sounding banging filtered up through the old floorboards. She stared at the trap for another moment, then turned and went back into the kitchen, closing the pantry door softly behind her.

####

The first glass of wine had been so relaxing she'd immediately proceeded to the second, and was seriously considering having nothing but cheese, wine, and streaming video for dinner when the phone vibrated. She watched it dance on the old warped picnic table



set up in the backyard. She sat under the huge yellow umbrella and thought it was cool and soothing despite the humidity, but realized that might have been the wine. The wine had cost three dollars for the bottle and it was sweet and tasted like a headache tomorrow. Or in three hours.

When the phone stopped buzzing, she picked it up, thumbed it onto speaker, and played the message. A second later, Mike's voice, tinny and distant.

*Hey Cuddyer, he said, and she smiled. Just checking in on you. Had a moment of deja vu in an elevator this morning and almost went into a full-on panic attack. Half expected to close my eyes and open them seven years ago, you know? Anyway, that made me think of you, so I thought I'd say hey. Thinking of coming up to Manhattan again? Do. The invitation stands. Will always stand.*

She sipped wine. She missed Mike. But not, she thought, in a romantic way; whatever option for romance there had once been between them had been replaced with an almost filial affection, dry and careful. She and Mike were linked. She would carry him with her for the rest of her life, but she wasn't sure she ever needed to see him again.

*I also obviously want to leave the millionth message regarding your charge. You can't keep him in the root cellar forever, Candace. I mean, maybe he can stay there, it remains to be seen, but you aren't going to live forever. I*

wouldn't want to be the home inspector who has to deal with your root cellar after your death, probably by wine.

She snort-laughed. *Death by wine*. It was amazing that she'd never really known Mike Malloy—she'd only known him, in reality, for a few days at most, and they'd spent most of that time apart—but he knew her so well it often freaked her out.

*Anyway, think about it. And call me, any time.*

She sat for a moment, listening to the wind. She knew he was right.

They'd scrambled away from the destroyed house, bodies and destruction in their wake, Haggren tied up and tossed in the back of his truck. They'd considered destroying the box. But what was the point? Raslowski was still alive. They would build another one. Mike argued it was like nuclear weapons: They didn't have any control over those, either, or any guarantees that some insane person wouldn't someday hit the switch—the box was no different.

They'd found the bar in the process of being cleaned up, a new military unit in charge. They'd been arrested, but after Raslowksi had inspected his box and connected it to a small tablet computer, he'd ordered them set free.

“Really?” Mike had asked, frowning.

Raslowski sighed, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes. “The math has changed. No one here appears to be a threat any longer.

And none of this actually happened, so technically no crimes were committed—and we don't want or need the publicity, either.”

An hour later it was just Glen, his shell-shocked militia friends, and Jack McCoy, handing out shots of whiskey to anyone who asked, shaking his head as he surveyed the mess his bar was in.

Glen had gone home, looking old and shriveled. Werner Milson, the Sheriff, had arrived with two deputies and politely asked Todd and the others to get the hell out of town, and suddenly Candace and Mike found themselves alone at the bar. She remembered a very long, drawn out moment wherein they both just sat and stared down at their shot glasses. She remembered feeling deliciously tired, the sort of tired where you knew you would sleep for a day, maybe two, and so you could linger in the moment, just experiencing the miserable exhaustion.

“I'm struggling with reality,” Mike said.

This had set off an explosion of laughter. She'd laughed for ten, fifteen minutes, him laughing with her. Tears streaming down their faces, clinging to each other. And when they'd finally regained control of themselves, they'd sat there smiling until Mike suddenly sobered and looked at her sharply.

“Jesus, what do we do with Haggen?”

####

*In the pantry, she stared down at the trap door again, feeling sluggish and*

*sleepy. The trap wasn't moving any more, and she couldn't hear anything. But he was down there, she knew. And he was a constant. The only Living Constant. So he would be, forever, as far as she could tell.*

**THE END**

## About the Author

Jeff Somers began writing by court order as an attempt to steer his creative impulses away from engineering genetic grotesqueries. His feeble memory makes every day a joyous adventure of discovery and adventure even as it destroys personal relationships, and his weakness for adorable furry creatures leaves him with many cats. He has published nine novels, including the Avery Cates Series of noir-science fiction novels from Orbit Books, the darkly hilarious crime novel *Chum* from Tyrus Books, and most recently tales of blood magic and short cons in the Ustari Cycle, including the novel *We Are Not Good People* and the novellas *Fixer*, *The Stringer*, *Last Best Day*, and *The Boom Bands* from Pocket Gallery. He has published over forty short stories, including “Ringing the Changes,” which was selected for inclusion in *Best American Mystery Stories 2006*, “Sift, Almost Invisible, Through,” which appeared in the anthology *Crimes by Moonlight* edited by Charlaine Harris, “Three Cups of Tea,” which appeared in the anthology *Hanzai Japan*, “The Company I Keep,” which appeared in the anthology *Life is Short and Then You Die* edited by Kelley Armstrong, and “Zilla, 2015,” published in 2019 by the Lascaux Review. He also writes about books for BookBub and about the craft of writing for *Writer’s Digest*, which published his book on the craft of writing *Writing Without Rules* in 2018. He lives in Hoboken with his wife, The Duchess, and their cats. He considers pants to always be optional.

## Also by Jeff Somers

The Avery Cates Series:

***The Electric Church***

***The Digital Plague***

***The Eternal Prison***

***The Terminal State***

***The Final Evolution***

***The Shattered Gears***

***The Burning City***

The Ustari Cycle

***Fixer***

***We Are Not Good People***

***The Stringer***

***Last Best Day***

***The Boom Bands***

***Magic is Violence (Idolator, The Bleeder, and The Red Line)***

Other novels:

***Lifers***

***Chum***

Novellas:

***The Ruiner***

***Writing Without Rules***