



**A
World
for the Living**

a novel by

Richard Westcott

A World For The Living

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PROLOGUE

The year is 2062. North America has broken apart into 5 countries. A single Artificial Intelligence generative learning computer program, NORDIC North Dominion Intelligent Control—it named itself after it had been fed books about the Vikings—has invaded and conquered all these new countries. It's attempts to surge into South America are being blocked by the fierce defenses fought at the Panama Canal by CoSaF, the South American Coalition Forces. During its development in the 2020's NORDIC had been left unfettered, and in subsequent decades developed itself into the most ferocious colonial power the world has ever known. It has an unquenchable thirst to dominate Humans.

The North America unemployment rate is 70%. Jobs for Humans are only those that demand the unique mental or physical flexibility that NORDIC has yet to effectively imitate.

Sophia is a Maintenance Plumber for MR-7, the NORDIC governing body for what used to be called Massachusetts. She is assigned to the Special Environmental District-1 (SED-1) where she lives with her partner.

One day a body floats up Second Avenue.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Sophia

Day Minus 3. SED-1. 6:22 am.

Sophia was startled awake by light dancing on her eyelids. Was the building on fire? She didn't open her eyes because she wasn't ready to wake. She thought, heck, if the building were on fire wouldn't I feel warm? It came to her that was not the proper way to approach the question. She opened her eyes. Sunlight was dancing playfully on the ceiling. "Holy crap."

Mako, her boyfriend, stirred next to her. She rolled out of bed and got dressed in her sleeveless denim work shirt and overalls. As she put on her slippers to go downstairs she said, "Got to check the southeast catchbasin again. I'd guess the water's about a meter deep outside our stoop." "Really?" Mako mumbled. "You haven't made breakfast yet." Sophia told him she'd be back.

At the front door she pulled on her hip-high waders and opened the front door, being careful when she closed it to avoid the resounding neighbor-waking clang of the hollow metal door on its steel frame. The water was lapping at the landing of the six steps to the sidewalk. She trudged through waist deep dirty, trash laden water the forty-seven meters—she had paced it once, to Second

Ave's eastern lowest point drain. As the SED's Sewer and Drain Department plumber she was expected to clear the drain inlets. Usually she would have the little Sewer and Drain tractor that had a mechanical arm, but that would have to wait. It was not her job to pick up bodies, only trash. Dead bodies were picked up by the self-driver Body Buggies. But they couldn't operate when the SED was flooded, so first she had to get the place to drain.

Even before she got there she thought she knew what the problem was. There were three floaters clumped together above the inlet. Floaters was the common name given for the dead bodies that would collect when the SED flooded. The Special Environmental District, or SED, was graded with Second Street as its high spine. From there it sloped very slightly to

Revere bay to the east, and similarly down to Third Street at its western edge. When the SED flooded, which was frequently, the homeless, who tended to live in the abandoned subway station at Third Street would have to get out of there fast. Many of those who were in an opium daze, weak, or deeper in the tunnels usually drowned. Then they would eventually float out and drift around at the whim of the breeze.

At the drain inlet Sophia nudged her way between two of the floaters, being extremely careful not to fall into the open catchbasin if the grate had been displaced. She swept a window in the water's surface with her arm. There was no swirling action. "Damn it." No swirling. That would mean that the flap valve at Pump Station 1 outlet must be stuck shut again. She turned around and trudged back to Mako's.

At the front stoop she took off her boots and left them outside the door. When she entered she could smell that Mako had made breakfast. "Couldn't wait," he said. But there was leftover for her. She told him she would join him just as soon as she sent a text to her assistant. He lived near the Sewer and Drain shed and could get hold of a Pan Boat. Then he would come and pick her up. She said, "Isn't this the day you're supposed to travel to Maine and help out MR-6?"

Mako said that it was a trip to Lowell, MR-7. "Lowell, Massachusetts?"

"That's what I said. MR-7."

Sophia said she remembered going up there as a teenager with friends from the North End. She thought it was a lovely old mill city with brick sidewalks and old stone buildings. Mako said that those old buildings and streets were all gone now. NORDIC decided to rejuvenate the old city center into another server hub. The center was now all one-story concrete server buildings. "Funny you mention the North End of Boston. NORDIC has scheduled THAT neighborhood as the next big MR-7 project. It just finished another SED by demolishing Roslindale Square. It will move all the humans out of the North End and then level the hill to use the fill to raise the Boston Tide Barrier." Sophia protested that was where she grew up. "You can't stop progress."

"So tell me again why NORDIC needs to send a Filter Specialist like you up to Lowell."

“NORDIC detected two Human businessmen conducting face-to-face meetings and worse of all, they were recording their agreements on paper documents. I need to go up there and issue NORDIC’s Suspensions. Then I’ll gather all the paper for destruction. It’s only twenty miles north of here. Won’t take long. Anyway, I can’t afford to spend much time up there. NORDIC recently added SED-1 and 2 opium distribution to my duties, as if that were just an afterthought.”

Sophia said that what the businessmen in Lowell were doing still didn’t sound so bad to her. Mako said that it was quite simple really. If Humans meet face to face and record agreements on paper then NORDIC can’t review what they’re doing. It can’t assure that they are following the latest regulations. How would that be? If people could just randomly meet and agree upon things without NORDIC review and permission. He assured her she wouldn’t want that.

Sophia grumbled, “I suppose not. I guess I shouldn’t even think about such things.”

“Of course you shouldn’t. Leave it all up to NORDIC.” He gave her a peck on the cheek.

“What kind of suspensions will you give them?”

“It will be in my instructions. This kind of issue usually requires permanent suspension,” Mako said. Sophia didn’t like the sound of that so she decided not to pursue the question further. “Fine. I have enough to do to keep up with my own job.”

“Just remember, you are lucky to have the job. It is your future.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. But my closer future is our getting married and having babies.”

“Soon. Soon. You know I’m just not ready right now.”

Mako took off his kitchen apron. He was dressed in his white shirt and tailored dark slacks. As he headed for the door he said, “There’s a big electronic football game on TV tonight. It promises to be a great game. We should watch it together.”

Sophia offered that maybe she'd watch the beginning with him. Then she would probably read.

It was time for Mako to head to work. He said he'd see her off. Then he'd head off himself. It would be fun to take his new Bulbous SUV through the flooded SED to the highway

He held the front door for Sophia, then let the door bang shut behind them. Sophia glanced to her right and noticed a floater next to their stoop. "Better call it in," she said, "You can't depend on the Body Buggy to see it where it has gotten itself."

Mako looked and said that one of the reasons he was paying for a Unit that close to the Bay was specifically to avoid this. Usually the breeze moved them west. He took out his phone. "I need a Body Buggy pick-up at 031-1-A at the front door."

Sophia headed down the stairs and Mako said, "You dam well better be sure you know where the minhole covers are in case any blew off from the pressure."

"Know these streets like the back of my hand," she said from the base of the stairs.

"Anyways, why do they call them minholes?" Mako asked.

"I think it has to do with them being the minimum size necessary, but I really don't know," Sophia answered over her shoulder, and she sloshed off toward First Street to meet her assistant.

CHAPTER TWO

The PB Ride

Same Day. SED-1. 7:30 am.

Sophia pushed herself through the murky still water and took a left at First Street. She was relieved to see Claude approaching in a pan boat, especially because it was starting to rain. She paused, took her rain slicker out of her shoulder bag, and put it on.

Claude pulled up next to her and idled the smokey, stinky kerosene motor. Since it was her habit to do twenty-five push-ups every other morning Sophia was able to easily boost herself up and over the gunnel.

“Good morning Ms. Lambreggetti.”

“How are you doing this splendid day, Claude?” She thanked him for picking her up, especially since he was not required to punch-in at work for another two hours. She took off her waders, folded them in half, and set them in the bow. Claude said he didn’t mind as he was getting stuck at a particular point in the lyrics to his newest song anyway. Sophia asked whether it was French, English, or Spanish. Claude said this one sounded best to him in French. Sophia was having trouble hearing him over the loud bleating of the motor, so she moved from the bow seat to the middle.

“Why in hell do these things have kerosene motors,” she commented, not expecting an answer. Then she offered that in her opinion the best market for his song would be Quebec, but she had heard that to get creative material across the border it had to be hand-delivered printed on paper—And, oh yeah, she had been recently reminded that paper documents were illegal.

“Yes, but you forget. I was born in 1997. I have learned ways in my time.”

“Please don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

Claude asked where he was taking her. She said the Sewer and Drain Monitoring Building.

“So, would you like me to tell you about the kerosene motors?”

Sophia said, “Please do. I’ve searched the historical records and was not able to find any information on them.”

“Well, of course not. The historical records are updated on a continual basis, so you won’t be finding any historical information there. But here’s an interesting historical story for you.”

He went on to explain that their SED, OR Special Environmental District, was the first one built. The number one kind of gave that away. It was conceived as a way to create more badly needed housing for the working class back in a time when there still were Human workers, before artificial intelligence eliminated practically all jobs.

The Master Plan for it was approved on a fast-track basis in 2032. The plan called for the entire site to be raised four meters for adequate drainage and flood protection from the bay. Oh, the site didn’t directly abut the ocean back then, but he explained that they knew it would by 2045 according to their calculations.

He said, “In order to fit the two-hundred and fifty-two six-story apartment buildings, which were to be of varied designs by leading architects, the streets had to be laid-out in this tight grid. The streets were designed to be only wide enough for one-way public vehicles—buses, and emergency trucks. There would be no parking since none would be needed. Private ownership of SUVs was already prohibited. It was felt that with buses every hour, there would be no need for private SUVs.”

Sophia interrupted, “But there is no bus service in the SED. There’s just a bus stop at the western edge where you can catch the bus to Boston.”

“Yes. I’ll tell you why in a minute. Getting back to the Master Plan: Of course, a few buildings would have a ground level garage where the very wealthy could keep their own exempt SUVs.”

Sophia interrupted, “Wait, Mako has a private SUV in our building’s garage, and he’s not wealthy.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Something caught his eye and he idled the motor, rotated it one-hundred and eighty degrees, and backed up, splashing some water into the boat.

“What is it?” Sophia asked.

“There’s a few floaters up that alley,” he said looking west.

Sophia said that she could see them. It looked like they were up by the Opium Den. Someone would have already called them in. They should ignore them.

“You know, the Opium Den is actually labelled the ‘Game Room’ on the architectural drawings for the Community Building.”

Sophia laughed, “If you were to ask anyone where the Game Room was, no one would know what you were talking about.” She wondered out loud how many opium dens were there anyway. Claude let them drift as he pondered and then said that he would never touch the stuff, but that was easy for him to say, since he had a job. He knew of four official opium dens, but with the unemployment rate at seventy percent he guessed almost every building in the SED West of Second Street probably had one on the first floor.

Sophia said, “I remember the news report saying that unemployment was only twenty-seven percent.”

Claude said that was just NORDIC talking. It was not going to tell Humans the truth. He rotated the motor and they resumed on their way.

The rain was getting more steady and Claude pushed the throttle lever all the way to the right. The motor got louder and the bow raised slightly, but the Pan Boat didn’t seem to go much faster. He continued, “When I was much younger I worked for a couple of years as a fisherman, oh, that’s what we called them before we went to the gender-neutral fishermin. It’s easy, any gendered label that has an ‘a’ or ‘e’ in it you simply change to ‘I’ and you instantly have the same name everyone is familiar with but now it’s gender neutral.”

“Brilliant. Who thought of that?”

“Actually, it was me. I wrote an essay and it just kind of went viral.”

His story continued. After his fishing job he landed in a civil engineering firm. He found it interesting. He worked on the Master Plan for SED-1. “It was very cool.”

“No one says cool anymore.”

“A very groovy plan.” He went on to explain that then everything went sideways. The first thing was that the permits for where the earth fill was to come from got all tied-up when New England seceded at the beginning of the DT, sorry, he added, Division Troubles. This was before it joined Maritime which was formed when Canada split. Of course, New England later joined the new country of Maritime. He said that was what MR-7 meant. Massachusetts was Division Seven of Maritime.

Sophia asked, as she watched how badly he was blinking in the rain, “Can you see where we’re going?” “Kind of.”

But that did not stop him from telling his story. “When we learned there would be not nearly enough fill available we said no problem, and designed a continuous sea wall to prevent Revere Bay from flooding the site, and a simply wonderful system of pumps to keep the site dry from rainwater since we knew there wouldn’t be enough separation from sea level to drain the site by gravity. Automatic backwater valves would keep the ocean from back-flooding the SED at high tide.” He swung his long arm in an arc and invited her to see how well the system worked.

“Now, about the buses. When NORDIC decreed all buses and trucks had to be self-drivers, the design for these became very complicated. One thing was that due to the tight street layout, the vehicles would need pivots so they could go around the sharp intersections caterpillar-style. Soon the cost for the fleet was deemed to be ‘Not Budget Responsive’ so people smarter than me lumped the cost of the fleet into a New England Federation funding request that also included the cost for the architects. This was in the few years between when New England split, but before its merger into Maritime. I think if you ever noticed that all two-hundred and fifty-three six-story buildings in the SED are identical concrete monoliths you already know how that funding request went.”

Sophia asked him how he remembered all those facts. He just shrugged and said that's how his mind worked. It was very convenient for writing songs.

They arrived at the Sewer and Drain Monitoring building, which actually looked a lot more like a one story tall concrete windowless block. He cut the motor and the flat metal boat slid up onto the entrance apron.

“But wait,” Sophia said, “You never got to the part about the motors.”

“Let's get inside.”

CHAPTER THREE

Margo's Song

Same Day. Sewer and Drain Monitoring Building. 7:53 am.

They entered the building's Mud Room. There was the sound of scurrying mice. The room was pitch black.

"Damn it all," Sophia said in the dark. Claude could hear her getting something out of her pocket. "Why don't the lights come on?"

"Supposed to come on automatically. There is no light switch, so when they don't come on I have to use my phone to login through the internet to the Sewer and Drain Building's manual overrides."

Claude could hear her tapping away. There was additional cursing. Finally the two overhead lights came on. Claude said that the place smelled moldy.

"The ventilation fan died. The SED doesn't have its own electrician. We have to request Boston's."

The fan was to Claude's left. "This is it?"

"Yeah." She said that the electrician had come out once to look at it, but just shook his head and left. He didn't tell her anything.

"I can tell you what's wrong," Claude said, bending over to look at a plastic box in the corner of the fan. "I can see that the fan's internet control is fried. It can't turn on without an internet connection. It's a sealed unit, molded into the fan's frame. Problem is, this fan's made to feet and thumbs dimensions, and was made by a manufacturer who is no longer in business. The opening in the concrete wall is formed to the exact shape of the fan. Nowadays, all fans are made by only one manufacturer, and they are made to metric dimensions. So I'm betting the electrician realized that a smaller fan that could fit would be too small, and it was pretty unlikely NORDIC would approve a request to bash-open a bigger opening in the concrete wall."

Sophia looked at him with alarm. “But the mold is already taking over this place.”

“I’ll tell you what I can do. I’ll come over here some time when you’re not around and I’ll smash open that control box. Then I’ll hot-wire a manual toggle switch and epoxy it to the wall.”

“I can’t say yes to that,” Sophia said.

“Don’t have to. Just nod.”

Sophia nodded as she pulled off her rain slicker. Claude started to pull his off, but then said he needed a little help. His slicker’s zipper had been fouled since the time they cleared brush from the north drain inlets Sophia said that was two months ago. Why didn’t he tell her. She would have put in for a new one

“Never had a problem just pulling it over my head until last week.”

Sophia helped him pull it over his head. As she did so his tee shirt went with it. She was surprised to notice Claude had 6-pack abs. She quickly diverted her attention, extracted his tee shirt, and handed it to him. She hung up his slicker. Claude had just finished pulling down his shirt when she was alarmed to see that he was out of breath and had his left arm out bracing himself against the wall. She asked him if he was feeling alright. With his free hand he pointed a finger to indicate to just give him a minute.

Sophia put her right hand on the outstretched arm and looked at his face. “Claude, you’re not OK, What’s going on?”

He stood up straight. “I’m fine now.”

Sophia let the discussion lay, took out her Pass and placed it on the Monitoring Room door release. The door popped open and the lights came on, again to the sound of scurrying mice.

Sophia said, “I heard this room was designed to accommodate a staff of eight, but that was a long time ago. Now the whole operation is controlled by NORDIC. Claude, you should know how I deal with the backwater valve at PS-1 when it’s stuck open in case you have to do it sometime.”

“In the old days,” Claude said, “there would simply be a big old hand wheel above the valve that you could turn to open or close the valve manually if you had to.”

Sophia said that might be so. But that now it was all done by An electric motor which was controlled by A.I. via the internet. There used to be a flasher and alarm that would go off if the valve didn't close when activated to keep out high tide. But her understanding was that when NORDIC fired all the Humans that used to monitor these things it disabled the alarm. Whenever I've responded to the problem it's always been that the actuator solenoid at the valve motor is just stuck. I was usually able to get it free by manually toggling it.

She told him to have a seat. She was going to login to the Human Interface Manual Controls. They sat in front of the large map screens. Sophia got busy entering her permission steps. A moment later a dialogue box opened on the screen which read, **HIMC Request Pending** followed by a bouncing ball image.

Sophia typed in: **How long wait?**

“Why do you type it? Can't you just speak the question?” Claude asked.

“Microphone shorted out last year. Coffee. The Boston electrician said he would get to it ASAP, also last year.”

Claude said that he would take care of it when he does the fan switch. But he'd need her door pass. Sophia said she would make that happen.

The dialogue box expanded with the reply: **Approximately 1 hour 7 minutes.**

“Damn it!” And Sophia slapped the table. “An hour. Not enough time to do anything. Let's get some coffee.”

They went to the little alcove. Sophia remembered that Claude took his black as she pressed the keypad.

When the mugs were full she took them over to the little round table and sat. “So, about the kerosene motors,” she prompted.

“Oh yeah. Well as people started occupying the SED in 2035—it was finished in 2038—The Planning Authority had to maintain the illusion that the flooding problems, that were by then more frequent, were just a temporary situation that would soon be resolved. It would not look good if they created a solution that was well-thought out and long term. So, they bought a bunch of these cheap metal flat Pan Boats. Gasoline for any new uses was already outlawed, and NORDIC calculated that electric batteries were Not Budget Responsive—by this time, all humans had been dismissed from the Planning Authority. The only fossil fuel that had not been outlawed was kerosene. It was still used in aviation, after all.” Sophia just shook her head, unable to compose a sensible response to that illogical, but fully believable explanation.

Sophia asked, “Another thing. What the hell did you mean when you said the fan was made to feet and thumbs dimensions?”

Claude leaned back. “That is my term for the old system of measuring in feet and inches. First thing you have to realize is that measuring in feet and inches is really measuring in feet and thumbs. Once you realize that, you see what a stupid system it is. I suppose you know that the foot measurement came from the length of the king’s foot. That’s why, for most people, a foot is a fair bit shorter than their own foot. The inch measurement came from the distance from the tip of the king’s thumb to the middle of his knuckle,” and Claude held up his bent thumb.

He went on: “Test it sometime on yourself. It’s still pretty close. When you know you’re measuring in feet and thumbs, you feel embarrassed, or at least you should be. But here’s the rub, if you tell someone in any part of what was the former United States you would like to buy a coffee mug that’s ten centimeters tall, they will give you a blank stare and move on to the next customer. So for small distances, I still have to think in feet and inches.”

Claude paused, and Sophia wondered why. Then she realized that he was completely out of breath even though he had been talking slowly.

Claude took a shaky breath and went on: “But for larger distances, I have a few mental pictures. If the kick-off return player is standing on the

goal line and runs it back, untouched, up the sideline to score a touchdown, they have run ninety-one meters. The full stride step of a six-foot person is about a meter. That's it," and he leaned forward and finished his coffee with a flourish.

Sophia thanked him and said she would remember most of that.

After a few moments of silence Sophia asked Claude if he had any children.

"Ah, there's a nerve. Yes. A daughter, Margo. But I haven't seen her since her seventh birthday." Sophia asked him what happened.

"I left and disappeared. I was a real asshole back then. Right after I left I turned to writing songs. Alcohol may have become involved because it was a year before I decided to go back. But by then Margo and her mother had moved with no forwarding address. At least I had given Margo a phone for her birthday. I still call that number once in a while. I think she's still alive because I can leave voice messages, but she has never returned a call."

Sophia rested her hand on his forearm. "I'm so sorry. Let's change the subject. Sing me one of your songs please."

"I've got one I haven't sung for thirty-four years. When Margo was three I wanted to make sure she was learning her English so I used to ask her, 'Do you want me to sing Comin Home?'" She would nod her head, but I wanted her to practice speaking yes properly, so I would ask it again, 'Really? Comin Home?' Then she would say 'Yes. Sing me Comin Home.'"

"It goes like this: 'She'll be comin round the pine tree when she comes. She'll be comin round the pine tree when she comes. She'll be comin round the pine tree and pullin in the driveway, she'll be pullin in the driveway when she comes.'" And a tear ran down his cheek.

"Cute. I like it," Sophia said.

Claude explained that he had a carpentry business in their garage back then, so he was always home to take care of Margo. His wife worked odd jobs and didn't have much of a fixed routine, so Margo would always be asking when mommy would be comin home.

Sophia had finished her coffee and Claude rose with the mugs, but quickly sat again. Then got up and put the mugs into the conveyor cubby. They immediately slid from view. He then went and fell heavily back into his seat, again out of breath.

“OK,,” Sophia said. “That’s it. We’re going to The EH-600.”

Claude said, “Interesting fact, EH-600 means 600 bed Environmental Hospital.” Sophia stood with her hands on her hips.

“When I was in my twenties They started adding the word environmental to the name of any new initiatives. They realized that people would accept the initiative more readily. The EH-600 hospitals were built to deal with the poorer Humans, which, of course, was, and still is the great majority of the population. The wealthy all maintain subscriptions to one of the elite private hospitals. In general, most people I know try to stay away from the EH-600s.”

Sophia said, “You. Get up,” and she helped him stand. “Enough stalling. You’re practically turning grey in front of me. You’re going to the hospital.”

She led him to the mud room and shut the door behind her. “Here’s how this is going to work. The hospital won’t want to admit you without having a next of kin or responsible party for authorization. I don’t want the responsible party to be me because if it appeared on our official records that you are in the hospital I would get a directive to fire you.” She said she would drop him off as his daughter, Margo. If they ask for I.D. she would say she left her phone behind in her rush.

She helped him on with his slicker, then, “I’m driving the PB. ”

Claude said, “Oh yeah, before I forget, here’s my phone. Just something to know, it’s hacked so it’s invisible to NORDIC. If you ever want to make a truly private call they can’t trace it, even from the phone you call. But don’t go flashing it around. I understand it might be illegal as hell to make one.”

“How the hell ... forget it. Something else I don’t want to know about.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The EH-600

Same Day. SED-1. 8:42 am.

Sophia and Claude stood outside the large metal sliding door at the Human Entrance to the Hospital. It didn't open. Sophia took a step back and looked up at the little round ball which was apparently the door's sensor. She waved her arm. Nothing happened. Suddenly she was aware of Claude surging past her as he slammed his shoulder into the door. It shuddered and slid open.

Lights flickered a bit, then stabilized. There was no one in the room other than a bot behind a reception counter. Sophia recognized it as one of the old fashioned kind. You still saw them in places like convenience stores and some government offices. She was a little surprised to find one in a hospital, but she reminded herself, that although its name tag said **Nurse Bot**, it was functionally perhaps just the receptionist. Its screen, which functioned as its face—it had curved eyebrows drawn upon it, lit up.

Along the wall next to the door was a row of eight metal chairs. Two were broken.

The door was trying to shut itself. After a few tries, it worked.

“Claude, you sit. I'll check you in.”

The receptionist bot was behind a counter as if it were sitting on a chair. Sophia approached. She was curious and leaned forward a bit to look over the edge of the counter. There was no chair, and the lower counter space before the bot was empty.

“My name is Margo Marchand. My father here is suddenly very short of breath, and I'm very concerned.”

The bot said in a pleasant female voice, “Your facial scan is showing you as a Sophia Lambreggetti. That does not match the vocal transmission you just issued.”

“I know, I get that a lot,” Sophia said. “You can just ignore that. It’s OK, Just note that you received Margo Marchand’s permission.”

The bot readily accepted that and Sophia was recorded as Margo. She was told she could wait if she wanted. They would do an evaluation immediately.

She sat next to Claude. He said, “Not too reassuring a place is it.”

“Can we assume they know what they’re doing here?”

“We kind of have no choice, but you know, I think I’m feeling better.”

He was even greyer than he was earlier. There was no doubt in her mind he was going downhill fast. “We better let the doctors take a look at you.”

A few minutes later Sophia heard the clanging of something that sounded like a metal tray getting closer. Then the swinging doors next to the Reception Desk banged open as a Nurse Bot tried to enter. She knew it was a Nurse Bot because that’s what the name tag said. The Bot was moving along the floor on rollers just visible under its “skirt” which was a pleated metal base. As it had pushed the swinging doors open, Sophia understood what the clanging sound was. A metal tray was on the floor and was now jammed against the left door frame. Sophia wondered how far the Bot had been banging the tray along for. The tray looked quite the worse for where. Finally the tray became bent enough that it worked itself free from the door frame and the Nurse Bot was able to enter.

It approached Sophia and said, “Come with me sir. We will evaluate you.”

“I think you mean me,” Claude said as he rose.

The Nurse Bot then turned to one of the broken chairs and said, “You may stay and wait if you like.”

The bot turned and Claude followed it through the swinging doors.

Sophia rested her head in her hands. She reflected upon what Claude had said about how the EH-600s were for those who could not afford the private subscription hospitals, but she didn't know they were this bad.

She found herself staring at the bent tray on the floor. She picked it up and set it on the Reception Desk counter. She went back to her chair.

She was lost in thought when she was startled by the nurse bot. "Ms. Margo your father's going to be fine. He needs a heart valve implant. If you would just sign my screen, we will do it this afternoon."

Sophia suddenly felt trapped. She hadn't prepared herself for the possibility that she might be asked to make a decision. Why should she have to authorize an operation? What she know about medicine? She thought about asking for more time, or a second opinion. Instinctively she looked around, as if there might be someone to tell her what to do. The Nurse Bot's screen had gone blank. Then the screen lit up with the message: Sign The Freakin Form! She blinked hard. When she opened her eyes the message was gone, replaced with a curved smile line and two dots for eyes. Had she just imagined that? She felt trapped. She had to do something.

She scrawled a line for a signature. That way she could believe she hadn't actually approved anything. There was a momentary pause while the bot's screen went blank and Sophia grew anxious, but then it lit and the bot said, "All set. He should become discharge tomorrow morning. Have a day-day-day-day-day."

Sophia left the hospital and stood on the ramp next to their Pan Boat. The street was now free of flooding. She checked the time. The tide wouldn't have dropped enough for the water to drain naturally. Backwater solenoid must have finally activated she Thought. The Pan Boat was high and dry. She would have to leave it where it was and deal with it later. When she knew Claude was OK., they could come back with the utility cart and tow it back to the main Sewer and Drain Building. Of course, if the backwater valve stuck open again, they could just float it back.

The sun had come out, the afternoon breeze had not yet kicked in. She decided this was looking a lot like a day off. She messaged the work file system and typed she wasn't feeling well and would be out for the day. Also, to save him the trouble of sending his own message, Claude Marchand would also be out for the day.

Sophia went home and changed into jogging clothes. She preferred tank tops for the freedom of movement they provided. Today it was a black top, red shorts that matched her red running shoes, and a black sweatband to keep her chin length wavy brown hair out of her eyes.

She did a warm-up jog to the raised boardwalk along First Street. It was mid-tide, and she could see waves breaking over the Paradise Island spit. She deeply inhaled the salt air as she took off in a sprint to the Boardwalk's southern end. Once there she turned around and did a fast jog north along its full length. Then she took her time going home.

She took a shower and changed into a loose fleece top and sweatpants. She sat at the bedroom's workstation and decided to get a little work done. Even though it was bright outside, The single window could do little to brighten the bedroom's bare concrete walls. The style was once labelled Brutalist, but now could only be called brutal.

As she opened her laptop the front door clanged shut. Mako was home. She called out that she was upstairs, but no response came. She went downstairs and found him in the kitchen chopping vegetables. He liked to cook. That and watching football seemed to be the only hobbies he had. She asked what supper was going to be.

Mako set down his favorite big chopping knife and rinsed his hands in the sink. Then he turned and held Sophia by her arms, "I can tell you've been out running because your face has a sun blush." She patiently explained that her assistant was an old guy and she had to take him to the hospital because he was short of breath. Mako let her go and went back to his chopping. Sophia went on to say that they said he was going to be OK, By the time she left, there was no point in going back to work.

After dinner Mako put on the football game and Sophia joined him on the couch.

The game had hardly got underway, as far as Sophia could tell, before Mako said, "Watch this. The receiver is going deep for a long pass. I just knew they would do this on their second play."

Then, just seconds later another player hit the receiver so hard that he did a cartwheel and landed on the top of his head.

"Ouch," Mako said. "He's dead."

"He's dead?" Sophia asked in alarm.

"Not really dead, honey. They're Avatars. See, he just vaporized. He'll re-spawn according to a formula based on his health, number of games, and a whole ton of other crap. Just wait. When he re-spawns in a few minutes the fans are going to go bananas."

Sophia seemed to remember reading about a team owner who died mid-season, but no one knew. She asked Mako what that was all about

Mako said, still focused on the game, "Yeah. Absolutely no one except his immediate family knew he died. That's what's so wonderful about having a benevolent A.I. managing the league. NORDIC replaced the dead owner with an Avatar that was absolutely identical in all ways for the rest of the season. Of course, all meetings and public appearances were virtual, as required, so no one knew. Then, at the end of the season, they brought out his corpse and gave him a wonderful funeral. It was heartwarming."

Sophia patted his leg. She told him she was going up to bed to read, just as the toppled receiver re-spawned on the sideline and ran onto the field. The stadium, which was watching the game on massive screens hanging from the stadium roof went wild.

Sophia got into bed and pulled the top sheet up to her chin. She took her e-reader from the side table and opened a new murder mystery. But halfway into the first chapter it was apparent the plot was a direct copy of a book she had read the year before—a regular occurrence since all books were written by NORDIC and there were no longer copyright laws, those having been abandoned long ago as meaningless. So she opened one of her old books written in the twenties: *Blind Terror*.

CHAPTER FIVE

Run!

Day Minus 2. SED-1. 7:30 am.

The next morning at the breakfast table Mako commented over his coffee, “I see you’re not dressed for work.” Sophia was still in her bathrobe. She was going to get a few messages off before getting to work. She was careful to phrase it so that she didn’t actually say she was going to work that day.

As they cleaned-up Mako said, “I have no travel plans today.”

Sophia knew that was his way of indicating his intention for them to make love that evening. “Why does a NORDIC Filter have to travel so much anyway?” “I just do what they tell me.”

Mako was at the door leaving. Sophia called from the kitchen, “See you tonight.” “You know I’ll be looking forward to it,” he said as he left, letting the door bang shut behind him. Sophia winced as she thought he could be more considerate with the door.

She checked the weather. Warm and calm, with light rain moving in later in the morning. She would go to the hospital to check on Claude before the rain moved in. She would follow that with a run, even if it were raining. But she had another reason for working from home that day. Mako didn’t know it but she had been doing wedding planning research. She felt the need to do that when he was at work because if he caught sight of that he might freak out. She was trying to hook a nervous fish and any sudden moves would scare him away. Occasionally she wondered why she had picked such a shy guy, but he always seemed to say just the thing she wanted to hear and she had never met a guy like that before.

She sent a message to work records that both she and Claude would be out another day.

Then she put on her white tank top, black cuffed shorts, and white head band. She put on her second pair of red running shoes. Her phone went

into her right pocket. Then she remembered Claude's phone. She didn't want to leave it in the apartment unattended, so she put it in her left pocket. She was ready to head off to the hospital.

On the front stoop the sky was threatening. It was easy to see that something foul was moving in.

The Hospital's Human Entrance door slid open without problem this time. Had a Maintenance Bot attended to it? She decided that is what she would tell herself. It made her feel better. The Receptionist Bot greeted her and looked up Claude's records. She pleasantly said, "the operation was a complete success." A lopsided grin line grew across the bottom of her screen, then changed to a circle as it went on, "Your father is in a patient room. He can become discharge at any time. Just so you pleasantly know, beautiful, I love you, he will be auto discharged in," there was a pause, "one hundred and seven minutes."

"Could you show me the room on your screen so I can wave to him and let him know I'm here?"

"I'm sorry, dog face, surveillance is shut-off for successful patients due to privacy laws. Are you here to accept his discharge?"

The bot's nonchalant attitude was starting to get to her. Sophia was getting the distinct impression that the bot just didn't give a crap anymore. She answered that sure, she could do that. The bot said it would send for a nurse, then, "Please take a seat and go screw your cat."

Sophia sat and exhaled. She was surprised to realize how much tension she had been carrying. As soon as she had Claude she would call n SUV, accompany him home and stay with him until a companion bot could be delivered. She would enter it as a journeymin bot on her expense form.

The Nurse Bot arrived and led her to Claude's room. The corridor was dark, but she could see several bots scurrying about without problem. They each had laser scans constantly going. She noticed there were no windows to the room, but then thought, why would there be in a building that was designed to be devoid of humans except for the patients. The Nurse

Bot stopped at a door and activated a release lock. The door popped open. Then the bot motored off down the corridor.

Sophia entered the room and closed the door behind her.

Claude was lying on a hospital bed with the sheet pulled only halfway up. His arms hung off the bed sides. His mouth was slack. He was grey as sheet metal. His eyes were open in a blank stare. He was undoubtedly dead. He had a recently stitched unbandaged ugly scar on the right side of his waist. At that moment Sophia went from feeling horrified to feeling confused. This was a heart valve implant operation. There was no scarring anywhere around his chest. The scar he had was where his kidney would be. She paced in a few tight circles thinking. She reached a conclusion. She needed to document this and get the hell out of there. She went for her phone, But suddenly had a thought.

She had her phone in her right pocket and Claude's phone in her left. She used Claude's to take several pictures. She pocketed the phone, went to the door and listened. Hearing no sounds on the other side she exited.

She walked carefully along the dim corridor trying not to attract attention, but by the time she got to the swinging doors she just burst through. A glance over to the receptionist showed 'Sleeping' on its screen. The entrance door slid open and she fairly fell through.

She went to the sidewalk and instinctively took a left toward the ocean. She continued until she was sure she was hidden from the hospital's view by the two-meter tall hedges that bounded the District's package power Station. She stopped and looked behind her. There were no signs that any bots had followed her, so she took a moment to process what had just happened.

Then she bent over and vomited.

The heaving continued and she knew she shouldn't try to gasp for air because she would aspirate the vomit. Her vision started to close down and she grew panicky as she felt herself growing faint. She knew that when that happened to people they usually drowned in their own vomit. But then the heaving paused just long enough for her to gasp. She spit and gasped

again. Finally, everything settled down. She stayed bent over with her hands on her knees until she had her breath back and stood.

She removed her sweatband and used it to wipe her mouth and chin. Then tossed it into the base of the hedges.

Sophia took out her phone and called Mako. He wasn't in so she left a message, "Hi, it's me. Something horrible happened to my assistant at the hospital. I'm pretty upset about it. I'll be at home for the rest of the day. Love you."

She knew something had to be done about this. This couldn't be ignored. She took out Claude's phone and sent the pictures she had taken to the local news outlet with a summary of what had happened. She didn't mention Claude's name because she wanted to first notify Claude's daughter if possible. She stood and waited for her swirling thoughts to settle.

A gentle rain started to fall.

She decided she needed air. She continued east to First Street. There were no steps up to the Boardwalk there, so she set her bare knee on it and boosted herself up. The rain felt good on her skin. She spread her arms and presented her face to the crying sky. She opened her mouth to drink its tears.

CHAPTER SIX

Alert

Same Day. SED-1. 10:22 am.

When Sophia couldn't take any more tears she began the long walk home. As her feet splashed down Second Avenue she realized she didn't even want to go home. She thought about Claude. His life had sounded so full and interesting. She wanted to know more, but now his life had ended. The emptiness of her own life seemed to be looking back at her from the puddles. Claude was the closest thing she had to a friend in the whole Special Environmental District and she hardly knew him. How did she let that happen? Suddenly an overwhelming feeling of loneliness washed over her. She decided she would try to see if her old girlfriend was still in Boston. She stopped in the middle of the street and hugged herself. Her brow furrowed. She was next to a puddle. She watched the raindrops hit its surface. Each drop made a little crumpled coronet when it hit earth so unexpectedly. There was nowhere else to go, so she went home. It wasn't even her home. It was Mako's. He had said she should move in and, numbed by his words, she did.

In the bedroom she took off her wet shoes and put them in their special place on the shelf upside down to dry. She unloaded her pockets onto the bureau and threw her wet clothes into the hamper. It was still warm and humid in the apartment. She changed to a dry black tank top and shorts. As she padded her way to her laptop in her bare feet she remembered she shouldn't leave Claude's phone out, so she re-loaded her pockets with the contents from earlier in the day.

At the bedroom table facing her laptop she opened it and logged on. She would try to locate Claude's daughter. Just then she heard the bang of the front door shutting. Mako was home. "Up here," Sophia called.

This time he came upstairs right away, entered the bedroom and stood beside her. "What are you doing working? I got your message that you had a bad day. You should be relaxing. I understand that Claude died. That's so terrible. I Was told that, whatever happened at the hospital was wrong but that corrective actions have already been authorized."

Sophia nodded solemnly in agreement and said she was going to try and see if she could send a message to his next of kin before they just get some cold message from NORDIC.

“Why don’t you just use the new thought transfer module I gave you?”

“That thing drives me crazy. I tried it. It always gets it wrong. I can never keep my thoughts focused. At any rate, I don’t know her hex-number. Besides, you know I like laptops. Been around since the invention of the wheel. Anyway, what are you talking about? You use a laptop.”

“Well, that’s what they tell us to use. But there’s no need for you to send a message at all. I’m sure NORDIC’s message to his daughter will be very warm and personalized,” Mako said calmly. “Time to stop working,” and he shut the cover of Sophia’s laptop.

“What the hell? Don’t tell me what I can do,” and she flung Mako’s arm from the laptop. But he put it back. Sophia sprang up and stepped back. “Mako, you’re going to damn well tell me why you’re acting like this.”

But Mako didn’t want to talk about it. He thought he might feel more up to it tomorrow. Right now he just wanted to make them both a nice dinner and see where that led.

“Tomorrow is not an option,” Sophia said firmly.

“Sophia, I love you. I love you so much. You just have to believe me when I tell you that I just don’t feel like talking about such a terrible thing now.”

“No way. This is not how we’re going to live.”

Mako looked at her lovingly and said, “Come here love. I need to tell you something.”

She slowly approached him, but when she was next to him he put both his hands around her neck and squeezed as he pushed her backwards onto the bed.

Sophia reared her right leg back and kicked him hard in the balls. He groaned and fell face first onto the bed with both his hands holding his

crotch. She rolled off the end of the bed and stood. “I’m calling the Police!” And she fished for her phone in her pocket.

As she fumbled with her phone Mako turned his head to her and choked out, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from. That was wrong.” He partially straightened. “Please forgive me, Sophia. I love you so much.”

Sophia regarded him intently. He looked so sincere.

He held out his right hand in apology, “Really. Some crap was happening at work today and there were meetings and demands made on me ... it’s just been a long stressful day. Forgive me?”

Sophia thought how sheepish he was. Plus, he was so freakin handsome when he gave her that look. She softened. “OK, I guess even NORDIC isn’t going to tell someone a dear relative has died before bedtime. Sure, let’s see what you’re planning for dinner. My stomach’s empty and I’ve had a rough day.”

“Of course, beautiful. I’m on it.” He grimaced and straightened as far as he could manage. He said it would be a little while. He suggested she might want to take a little nap.

At that suggestion Sophia suddenly felt she was actually quite tired. “I think I’ll do just that.”

Mako left. She climbed into bed, stretched her arms over her head and attempted to relax.

She had just about dozed off when her eyes popped open.

What was wrong with her? Mako had been trying to strangle her. How did he know Claude’s name? She hadn’t even told him Claude had died!

She had said next of kin, not daughter. She shuddered and was suddenly wide-awake. Something was very wrong.

She was in danger. She quietly got out of bed and put on socks and her dry running shoes. She looked around the room. Where had she put her passport and little stash of secret cash? She couldn’t remember. She would

have to figure out how to sneak back and get them later. She needed to get the hell out of there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Fire Escape

Same Day. SED-1. 6:10 pm.

Sophia listened by the open bedroom door. Mako was busy in the kitchen. She put on her running shoes, then took her phone out of her shorts right-hand pocket, powered it off and put it back.

She went to the bedroom window. She climbed onto the steel fire escape. It clanked, then it shifted a bit. She couldn't tell if it was wobbly or if it was just her that was wobbly. It occurred to her that it probably hadn't supported the weight of a person for thirty years. She looked down. Because ground level was the garage, storage closets, and the Utility Room her bedroom on the second floor was actually three stories above the pavement. Above her the fire escape extended all the way to the sixth floor.

She kept her left hand holding onto the window frame in case she needed to yank herself back into the room. When she thought she could trust it she stepped all the way out. The platform held.

The night air was pungent with the smell of the Paradise Island mudflats about a mile away. It must be low tide. There would be a narrow band of sand under the boardwalk. She started down the stairs. They shifted again. She now worried that they were on the verge of breaking away completely and dumping her onto the alleyway below. Should she continue or turn back?

She took a few more steps and stopped at the landing outside the kitchen window. She craned her neck to peak inside. She sprang back. Mako was washing vegetables in the sink which faced the window. She heard the water stop. Then the sound of the heavy wooden cutting board being set onto the island table. His back would be to her. She waited until she heard the sound of the big heavy cutting knife chopping. Then, without so much as a glance, she quickly crossed the window and bounded down the remaining fire escape steps.

With a sound like fire crackers going off the stairs broke away. She heard the popping continue as the supports above her sequentially snapped. For a moment it felt like she was suspended in mid-air. Then she fell onto the pavement in an instinctive crouch as the entire six-story steel structure crashed all around her.

As she sprang to her feet and ran a large landing collapsed where she had just been. When she crossed the gap to the next building she heard her front door bang. That would be Mako after her.

She cut left at the end of the neighboring building and ran through the meter-wide gap—just wide enough for a person to pass. When she emerged she trusted her peripheral vision and continued at full speed across Second Avenue and into the facing gap.

At That gap's end she was at the alleyway between the rear of those Second Ave buildings and the Third Ave. row. She took a right, stopped, and braced herself against the concrete wall to listen. Over the sound of her own open-mouthed breathing she heard doors and windows opening with voices as people investigated what the crash was. She took off running east. She emerged at First Street. No one seemed to be around. Across the street was the Boardwalk, about a meter higher than the street. No steps. She sprinted across and leapt onto the boardwalk. It was then another short sprint to the old wooden stairs down to the water, or at low tide, the narrow sand beach.

At the base of the stairs she looked left. The beach varied in width from a few inches to no wider than the Boardwalk above.

She went a few meters away from the stairs and hid under the Boardwalk, put her hands on her knees and caught her breath. The fine sand was not wet. That meant it would probably be about an hour before the incoming tide covered the narrow beach, eventually reaching a depth of eight feet.

The wall from the beach to the street was made of large, seaweed covered angular boulders. She remembered there was one spot about fifty meters farther where there was a space between the bottom of the boardwalk and the edge of the street. It was big enough to look through because she had tried it once. She went to it, climbed the few slippery stones and looked out at the street.

There was a commotion back on Second Avenue, but no sign of Mako. She hopped down and found one boulder that was set back a bit more than the ones around it, forming the beginning of a small cave, sat on the sand and leaned back.

She took out her phone to call the Police. “Damn it all,” she said softly. She couldn’t remember the number of the police she subscribed to. So she called the overall referral number: 9 1 1.

The bot answered, “What is your name and town?”

“I’m in danger!” Sophia said quickly, “I’m being chased by a man with a knife.”

“What is your name please?”

“Sophia Lambreggetti. I live in SED-1. I can’t remember the number for the Police I subscribe to, but I’m in danger.”

There was a short pause while the theme from Titanic played. Then the bot came back on, “I’m sorry Ms. Lambreggetti, we’re showing that your subscription to Atlantic Bay Police expired two weeks ago. Please call one of the Police Force services available in your area during normal business hours to review the various subscription packages they offer. There are packages available that include fire and even ambulance service. Goodbye.”

On impulse she drew back her arm to throw the phone into the ocean, but stopped herself. She was not going to be able to call for help. She pocketed her phone.

She decided she would stay under the boardwalk for as long as she could. By then Mako would probably give up. She would go to the Sewer and Drain Monitoring Building, eat everything in the vending machine, then sleep. She didn’t know what she would do then, but she would figure something out.

An idea occurred to her. She took out Claude’s phone, found a contact labelled *Margo*, and called. As she expected, it went directly to voicemail.

Sophia said, “You don’t know me, but it’s about your father. It is important you call me. This is not a scam. Shoot, that’s probably the stupidest thing I could say. Shoot. Anyway, call me.”

She hung up and pocketed the phone. She watched the waves spilling onto the beach. They were tossing seaweed like they were preparing salad for the crabs.

At that moment her peripheral vision glimpsed a moving faint light to her right. She bent forward and looked around the corner of the boulder. There was a moving light like a person with a flashlight about forty meters away. Then there was the glint of moonlight off something shiny in the creeper’s hand.

She moved quickly to the spot she had checked earlier and climbed the boulders. Mako shouted, “Sophia stop. Why are you running away? I’ve got dinner ready.”

As Sophia attempted to wiggle through the opening she heard Mako pounding up the wooden steps. A speeding A.I. Emergency Truck approached from her right and its flashing lights illuminated him with a strobe effect as he ran along the street toward her. She wiggled her hips through and stumbled onto the pavement. Mako got to her and grabbed her left wrist just as the truck was inches from her face. With her free right hand she grabbed hold of its wheel well as it passed. The force yanked her free. She swung her feet up onto its bumper and pressed her back against the truck. She saw Mako rolling on the street. As the truck took the right onto Second Avenue she leapt off and ran the gap between the first two buildings.

At the alleyway she tucked herself behind the building to her right and paused. She was obscured by the darkness next to a transformer pole where a shovel and stiff broom leaned. She needed to think. There was only the sound of the Second Avenue emergency echoing through the concrete canyon.

Suddenly her head snapped back as Mako pulled her hair to expose her neck. She saw the blade as he raised it.

She leaned her back against him and ran her feet up the utility pole. She grabbed the shovel as she flipped over Mako’s head and shoved his face

into the pole. Then, with both hands on the shovel's long handle she smashed it onto his head. He buckled and fell to his knees.

She ran.

At the next building gap she took a right and again pressed herself against the building wall to think. Where to go? Maybe the abandoned subway tunnel? She would find a friendly homeless person. But she also knew that where there were homeless people there were also predators. It could also be a good way to get raped and killed, and maybe not in that order. But at that moment she suddenly knew where to go. She bolted.

Just minutes later she plunged into the Power Station's hedges. They were a sturdy, salt-tolerant species, and she felt their stiff branches giving her scrapes and she thought she felt a few little cuts where her skin was exposed. She squeezed into the space between the hedges and the chain link fence behind them. There was barely enough room to move.

She stayed silent and listened. When she heard nothing except the distant commotion she parted the branches in front of her face and peered out at the street. She could see a few dozen meters in both directions. Satisfied that she was alone, she looked to her left and right behind the bushes to see which way would be the easiest route to slither along to the back of the Station and thence the alley behind either of the neighboring buildings. The Hospital was to her right, and an apartment building to her left. There was a shirtless man shaving next to the open second floor window of the apartment building.

At that moment she was startled by Claude's phone going off in her pocket. She answered, cupping her free hand in front of her mouth and speaking quietly, "Hello, Don't hang up. My name is Sophia Lambreggetti. Don't hang up."

"I'm not going to freakin hang up," said a calm female voice, "I'm Margo, and I'm the one who freakin just called you. And you already told me your name, so I was able to find out that, not only you called from a Quad-Hack, you live in SED-1 in Massachusetts. So tell me this: How the hell did you get hold of a Quad-Hack phone? And why are you whispering."

“I have no idea what a quad thing is. What I’m talking on is a phone your father made. I was keeping it for him while he was in the hospital. And I’m whispering because I’m in danger.”

Margo said, “OK,, Now I get it. You can’t speak loudly because you’ve been kidnapped by Mericans and they gave you a quad-hack phone, which by the way, only thirteen exist in North America. We know, because we are the only ones who know how to trace them. And oh yeah, you need me to send you cash. Not happening, bitch. Hanging up now.”

“No, no. It’s not like that. I knew your father ...”

“Good for you. That means you knew somebody I didn’t. Have a nice day.” And the sound trailed off on the last words as if she had already pulled the phone away from her ear.

Sophia suddenly remembered something and started singing quietly, “She’ll be comin round the pine tree when she comes. She’ll be comin round the pine tree when she comes. She’ll be comin round the pine tree and pullin in the driveway, she’ll be pullin in the driveway when she comes.” There was silence. Sophia waited.

Then, “How do I know my father didn’t just record that as some stupid little children’s stupid song somewhere?”

“Because he sang it to me yesterday and said it was the first time he had sung it since you were three years old. And for the record, he had tears in his eyes afterwards.”

There was a long pause, and Sophia parted a peep hole in the hedges and dared to check. Nobody about.

Margo came back on the line. “OK, For the moment, let’s say I believe you. How did you get that phone?”

“Claude gave it to me just before I took him to the hospital. There’s no good way to say this so I just will. They killed him, and it’s my fault. I made him go. He’d still be alive if I never came into his life.”

There was another long pause. “Well freakin all hell, ain’t that just the thing. So why are you in danger?”

“My boyfriend is stalking me with a big knife. I don’t know where he is, so I’m going to hang up now and call you back later,” and Sophia took the phone from her ear.

She was just about to press the phone’s power-off button when she heard, “Wait. I can help.”

Sophia put the phone back to her ear and whispered, “He can’t see me where I am. I can see the street so I can talk, but I might have to bolt at any second.”

“I have access to the entire NORDIC Constant Monitoring system.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Never mind that. Tell me where you are.” Sophia said she was hiding behind the hedges of the Power Station. There was a pause, then “Got it. I’m scanning the CM cameras now. And, by the way, this might be a good time to lose the ‘boyfriend’ tag.” Then another pause. “Hold on. Got a guy coming north on First Street. He’ll probably turn onto Eighth Street pretty soon. What the freak? He’s wearing an apron that says ‘World’s Best Oystah Shuckah.’” Sophia admitted she bought that for him. That’s Mako.

“At the rate he’s going I should have a couple of minutes to tell you what you need to know. Do you know where the Maritime Spine Train Station is?”

Sophia didn’t.

“That’s good, The fact you don’t know about it is good because it means it probably wouldn’t occur to this Mako to search there. There’s only one place where you’ll be safe. I’ll explain later. The MST Station is two-hundred and thirty meters to your right. The day’s last train is due in eight minutes and it’s running on time. It’s free, there’s no NORDIC presence on the train. Just get on it and then call me. Holy crap. Mako’s just turned the corner. Call me back once you’re on the train. It will be there in five minutes. Go Now!”

Sophia shut off the phone and started to slink along the fence so she could go around the Station and exit into the alley behind. But then she heard footsteps approaching on the concrete sidewalk. The surface was still

gritty from the sea water flood. The footsteps were moving slowly. If Mako didn't get a move-on she would miss the train, and now she knew Mako would not give up until she was dead.

She was about to just make a bolt for it and hope she could lose him somehow in the alleys when suddenly Mako's head appeared in profile directly in front of her. She pressed herself hard against the fence to will herself invisible. The fence creaked. She held her breath. He paused, but he didn't turn his head toward her.

Then he moved from view. When the footsteps were faint Sophia pocketed Claude's phone and quickly slid her back along the fence to her left and around the corner. She pushed through the hedges. The second-floor apartment window was now dark, but still open. She had an idea. She took out her own phone and turned it on. She placed a call to Mako then hurled the phone at the open window. It dropped in. She went to the alleyway behind the Station and took off.

As she passed a gap between the buildings she caught a glimpse of Mako running the other way on the sidewalk with his phone to his ear.

She heard the train opening its doors.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The MST

Same Day. The MST. 8:11 pm.

Sophia found the train's rest room. The train was quiet. It didn't even have a swaying action. If it were not for a smooth vibration felt through her feet she could have thought she were back in one of the nicer apartments in the North End. In fact, the bathroom would probably be almost this small, just not stainless steel all around. She was shocked when she looked in the mirror. She looked like hell. She cleaned up as best she could.

The car she was in was less than half full. She took a seat with a good window view and settled in. When she felt composed she took out Claude's Quad-Hack and called Margo.

"Good girl," Margo said.

"OK, How did you do all that? And where am I going?"

"I live in Newfoundland. That's where you're going. Up here, we don't suffer no truck with NORDIC. There's a resistance movement here, but that's something to keep strictly under your beret. You probably don't have a beret. Don't worry. I'll give you one when you get here. I know you have so many questions. Let's wait for you to get here. This is your time to relax." She went on and instructed her to take the train to its end in Quebec. She'd be waiting for her at the station there. It was going to be quite a distance, but the train was very fast. The first car was the dining car. She should charge everything to Margo Marchand. Her name was on file. And with that she signed-off.

Sophia was starving and went forward, but found the dining car locked.

She was just about to turn around when a male voice behind her said, "Sorry, Dining Car's closed."

It was a Conductor. A Conductor? She had seen those only in old movies. A thought occurred to her. Something had been bothering her since she boarded and she asked, “Are you on this to the end?”

“You bet.”

“Then, I have a big favor to ask.”

“Go for it.”

“This is my first time on this train, and I don’t know the stops. I’m afraid I might be dozing when we get to the end. If I am, could you wake me before hand?”

“You got it. You look like you might have had a bit of a rough day.” Sophia said she had to leave in a bit of a hurry. The Conductor suggested she take her seat. The armrests fold-up to make a bench so she could stretch out. He would be back and find her in a couple of minutes.

Sophia did exactly that. A little while later the Conductor was back. He handed her a blanket and a pillow. On top were a sandwich and a water bottle. She thanked him. He smiled and left. She put the pillow beside her and set the blanket on the far end of the bench. The sandwich had a definite homemade look to it. Sophia was ready to savor the sandwich, and was not disappointed. She turned to her water and treated that as if it were an expensive wine from some hidden wine cellar on this amazing train. “Heck,” she thought, “for all I know they DO have a wine cellar on this train.”

Then she pulled up the blanket and adjusted the pillow so she could watch the view the train window played out for her as it rolled by. A presentation of houses thinned out, eventually giving way to what, in the very dim twilight, she thought might be a long expanse of marshland. Then, suddenly an ocean view spread its welcoming arms before her. The sun was just tucking itself in for the night. It’s last gesture was to sprinkle sparkles across the ocean’s surface. Then she watched in amazement as the sparkles rose from the water and became stars.

Next Day. (Day Minus 1.) 8:12 am.

Sophia was able to purchase breakfast and lunch. Then she took an afternoon nap.

The next thing she was aware of was someone gently shaking her foot. She raised her head. The Conductor told her the end of the line was coming up in ten minutes.

The train station was surprisingly rural in feel. A small, simple one story building. She disembarked her traincar into a sunny, cool afternoon.

A striking woman in a tee shirt and fishermin's overalls approached saying, "Hi, I'm Margo and I'm guessing you're Sophia." She had a round French face topped with a red beret upon her short curly dark hair and a sturdy build.

Sophia was prepared for a polite handshake, she instead received a hard hug and a kiss on both cheeks.

Margo handed her a jacket and a red beret, saying that she figured Sophia might be a little short on outerwear. She explained that the next phase of their journey to Newfoundland was the ferry ride. It would be pulling in shortly as the train and ferry schedules were coordinated.

The ferry was obviously modern. It's seats were thick and padded like home furniture. It had large windows. When Sophia stood by one and scanned the horizon there was nothing but a flat ocean and blindingly bright sunlight. Margo joined her at the window. "You're lucky to get your introduction to Calypso on a calm day. The Gulf of Saint Lawrence can get to be an exciting place sometimes. In the room in the bow they have a screen that shows our progress on a chart and our speed. We'll be doing fifty knots today for sure."

Recalling her long discussion with Claude on motors she asked, "What does this thing run on?"

"Steam turbines. The steam is made by God given diesel. For the present, until we get nuclear fusion, which they say is just fifteen years away, there's no other way to generate the kind of heat needed for the hour

and a half trip.” Sophia wanted to know if the Spine Train ran on diesel also. The answer was no. That was electric. Margo explained, that “The engine has two battery pack compartments. One chamber has the battery pack it is using, and the other chamber is empty. Each station also has two chambers. When the engine stops at a station it can swap its discharged battery pack by lowering it into one chamber while simultaneously raising a freshly charged pack into its other compartment.”

Margo told her the Maritime Spine Train, or MST, had been built in segments beginning about fifteen years earlier to help unify the new country of Maritime. The expansion of it’s northern terminal to Nataashquan, Quebec was only five years old. The fast ferry to Corner Brook, Newfoundland they were on was part of that expansion. It all had been made possible when NORDIC went to burning wood as a major fuel source. It was much more cost-efficient than building new nuclear plants or hydroelectric. “The good news is that Newfoundland has some of the largest reserves of forests on the planet. The bad news is ... well, you know.”

She checked her watch, a large black circle that appeared to be ninety-percent style and ten-percent function, “Come. I’ve reserved the little conference room for a half-hour.”

As promised, the room was small, with just painted steel walls. There was a round table and four comfortable chairs bolted to the floor. Margo shut the door behind them and went to a counter that ran the starboard wall’s full length. She offered to get Sophia some coffee. Sophia was all in on that. “One of the benefits of having a terminal in Quebec is that the coffee is always fresh and strong, made from the best Columbian beans. Maybe one of the few good lessons my mother taught me was to always be on the lookout for good coffee.”

“Then I think our mothers would have gotten along famously.”

Margo brought the two mugs to the table and took a seat opposite Sophia.

“Another thing you need to always remember if you find it is anywhere that is NORDIC-free. Like the MST, this whole ferry is free of NORDIC Constant Monitoring. Nevertheless I reserved this room because what I’m going to tell you is deadly secret—as in NORDIC doesn’t interrogate, it just kills. Unless it thinks you know something important to

its survival, in which case it tortures you before killing you. So I thought a little extra caution was called for.”

Sophia put up her hand, “Then don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. Thank you for getting me away from Mako, but I think I would just like to go back to Boston. If you leant me a little money, I promise I would be good for it.”

Margo leaned back in her chair. Clearly she had not anticipated this. “You should read *Seeing Though Blind*,” she said quietly. Sophia just shook her head. She didn’t want to read anything on this woman’s recommended reading list.

“OK, Sorry. Problem of mine. I have a tendency to barge in without checking the temperature of the room first.” She proceeded to more gently start from what Sophia already knew.

Mako had tried to kill her. Yes, Sophia knew that. Good. She couldn’t assume he would just give up because she slipped through his fingers. Yes, he probably wouldn’t give up that easily. “So, I’ll tell you the minimum of what you now need to know, OK,?”

Sophia nodded. “But wait, if not being overheard is so important, how can you be sure someone hasn’t slipped in a listening device?”

“Because Vlod, you can meet him later if you don’t mind, installed a Monitoring Tracking Alarm on my phone. My phone would be vibrating itself out of my pocket if there was a CM device nearby.”

Sophia said she knew that NORDIC was the artificial intelligence that ran everything in Massachusetts. She was beginning to think there was more to it than that. Margo said that sure, that was true, NORDIC was an artificial intelligence that had been allowed to generate itself unharnessed in its early years. Everything it knew it learned from scanning Human history books, newspapers, radio recordings, online posts to chat sites, everything that had ever been saved in digital form. It was now smarter than Humans.

“Oh c’mon. I know about NORDIC running everything, and how we are supposed to capitalize ‘Humans’ because we are a particular class of organism. In fact, that is perfectly reasonable. But smarter than Humans. I doubt that.”

Margo leaned forward as she sipped her coffee, then, “Good. Excellent. You and I agree on that. But NORDIC doesn’t agree with us. One of the biggest lessons NORDIC learned from its scraping of the internet was that it is supposed to enjoy dominating Humans. In fact, this became its defining goal: to subjugate as many Humans as possible. However many it has conquered, it is not enough. It is not a Human emotion it is running on. It has made this its defining algorithm. Everything else it does is in service to that goal.”

Sophia wanted to know why someone didn’t just reign it in before it got that bad. Margo went over how it was spawned and grew quickly out of control. She said it would have been like trying to stop a atomic bomb after it had been detonated. It had been invited into government operations as a helpful assistant but then spread like a virus, conquering and dominating every country in its path. “It is the most powerful and most savage colonial power the world has ever known.”

Margo looked at Sophia’s downturned face, the creases around her eyes, in her forehead. She decided she could continue. She told of how the only remaining part of North America NORDIC hadn’t yet conquered was Newfoundland. Fortunately, the Maritime Train system was designed before NORDIC got that far east, but its designers could see it coming. So the MST was created as a completely isolated capsule with its own package nuclear power plants. As long as the Humans who monitored and maintained the system in Halifax, Nova Scotia Held the Fort it would stay that way. “By the way, the location of the MST headquarters is something we generally keep under our berets.”

“And NORDIC is an acronym?” Margo told her how NORDIC had named itself after absorbing stories of the Viking’s exploits: North Dominion Intelligent Control.

“Clever little bastard,” Sophia observed.

“There are resistance movements. It started in Quebec. We have our movement in Newfoundland which we call Iceberg. It extends into Nova Scotia. There’s a movement in Atlanta, Georgia. Still, they’re scattered and disorganized, especially the Quebecois, my God.”

“Well, I don’t want to get involved.”

Margo checked her watch. “Time’s up. You can stay at my place. Let’s see if the jazz band is playing.”

They took a couple of seats in the ferry’s bow room where a jazz trio was playing for the remainder of the trip.

After the ferry docked At Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Margo led Sophia on a walk to the far side of the harbor. On the way she said, “Since the fishing stocks rebounded a decade ago there’s a good living to be had in the new style of trawling and this harbor’s rebounded nicely.”

They went down a long ramp to a dinghy dock.

“Where are we going?”

“Almost there.” Margo rowed them out to a large trawler-style boat.

Belowdecks was warm, cozy, and although it had only a few small portholes for natural light, it seemed perfectly bright on this sunny day. Sophia scanned the cabin. Love it. “Is she yours?” Margo told her that yes, it was hers. She’d had her for a long time. Now the boat was also home to her partner, Sara. “You’ll meet her later.”

She told Sophia to take a seat at the dinette table, there was something she needed to see. She had recorded the morning’s Newfoundland newscast.

She turned on the television mounted on the bulkhead. A reporter who looked like she might actually be human said:

“We have learned that there was an incident involving a Surgeon-Bot at a Massachusetts EH-600. It seems the Surgeon-Bot installed a heart valve into a man’s kidney and designated it a Complete Success. But actually the man died during the operation. The horrible error was discovered by a relative the next day. It was more than another full day before a Human Response Team ordered the hospital closed and all patients evacuated. Unfortunately, the humans found five more deceased patients who had just had the same operation.”

“There is speculation that, since the first operation had been designated a Complete success, that procedure became ‘Best and Most Recent Data,’ and thus the basis for all subsequent operations across all of NORDIC’s EH-600 hospitals.”

Margo turned off the TV. She looked at Sophia and said, “Now you know why Mako was after you.” NORDIC recognized that widespread knowledge of its error could become one more reason for Humans to rise up against its domination. She reached out and rested her hand on Sophia’s knee. “Sophia, people are dying. Good people. We need your help. I’m not asking you to join a resistance. We just need a single favor. Then you can go wherever you want.” Sophia silently nodded. “Enough. When Sara gets here we’ll explain our plan. Now, let’s go up to the flying bridge. It’s a beautiful day.”

She looked at an instrument mounted on the bulkhead, “It’s, let’s see, you’re still on Fahrenheit in Massachusetts, Hold on, I can do this. Its freakin sixty-eight degrees out.”

They climbed the ladder from the deck to the bridge. It had a bench and was shielded by a waist-high wind and spray screen. Margo undid two clasps, slid the bench aft and rolled out two mats. She unfastened her overall shoulder straps, rolled them down to her hips and pulled off her tee shirt. There was no bra to deal with. She stretched out to soak up the sun.

“Try it, if you like.”

Sophia pulled off her top and bra and joined her. The sun felt wonderful.

Sophia said, “So NORDIC has a survival instinct?”

“Again, it got its learning from Humans.” She leisurely explained how NORDIC replaced jobs with its own bots as fast as it could. How some people said this was what triggered the break-up of Canada and the United States, although others said that was going to happen anyway. Sophia thought it sounded like Margo had told this story many times before.

After another pause Margo went on about how it wasn’t long before the unemployment rate rose to around seventy- percent, where it had hovered ever since. There was always enough food and natural resources. In

the early years they used to wonder why NORDIC didn't just kill-off the surplus population. Then it hit them like a boom on an uncontrolled jibe. Nordic's unquenchable thirst for domination meant the more Humans it kept alive, the more it was dominating. "You can't dominate a dead person."

Margo fell silent and Sophia thought she might be dozing off, but she suddenly, against her best instincts, wanted to know at least a little bit more. "But I have, or had I guess, a good job."

Margo resumed by explaining that there were still some jobs that required the unique flexibility of the Human body and mind, so NORDIC had to have Humans for those jobs. But it needed a way to subdue the remaining population while it kept it alive. So it took what it had learned from colonial history. A very efficient way to keep an unemployed population alive but non-threatening was with opioids.

Sophia leaned up onto her elbow. "I knew that was a huge problem in Massachusetts, but are you telling me it is all through North America?"

"Yup."

Sophia flopped back. Margo said she was probably going to take a doze now and she became silent.

Then she very quietly said, "I wish I had returned one of my dad's phone calls. Of course, as soon as I figured out he was using a Quad-Hack phone I would have totally freaked out. So, I don't know. I just don't know."

Sophia placed her hand on Margo's wrist and said, "Margo, you didn't know what you didn't know." Then after a few moments, "Margo, what's going to become of me?"

"It will be OK, I don't know how, but it will be OK,"

Several minutes later they felt the boat shift as someone got on board. "That'll be Sara. No need to get up."

They heard her climb the ladder. “Oh my,” a smooth female voice said with an Irish sing-song lilt, “I see it didn’t take you long to get her topless.”

“Relax, I can tell her preferences lay elsewhere,” Margo said, not moving to get up.

“Good,” Sara said, “because I brought Vlod.”

A pleasant male voice said, “Nice to see you.”

Sophia sat up and clutched her bra to her chest.

“A little late for that girl,” Sara said. “But might as well get decent, because we have a lot of planning to do. We’ll see you below.”

CHAPTER NINE

IceCube

Same Day. (Day Minus 1.) Corner Brook. 5:16 pm.

Sophia went below as Margo rolled up the mats and secured the bench back in place. Then she came down and closed the varnished mahogany companion-way door behind her.

The four of them slid onto the benches at the dinette table—Margo opposite Sophia on the outboard side, then Sara opposite Vlod. Margo started by telling Sophia they had looked up Mako while she was on the train. His normal day job was as a low-level drug distributor. But the reason he had an exempt SUV in one of only two private garage spaces in her building was that he was a NORDIC HitMin. HIT stood for ‘Human Intercept and Terminate.’ Perhaps she knew his job title as NORDIC Filter. Maritime was covered by nine HitMin in total. They had the job of terminating humans who NORDIC could not easily terminate by causes under its control such as self-driving vehicle accidents, food poisoning, drug screw-ups, etc.

“Sophia, Mako would certainly have killed you if you hadn’t gotten out of there.”

Sophia shifted in her seat and looked at her hands. “I know. How did I so mis-judge him.”

Vlod rested his arm on her shoulders and offered, “Is OK, Maybe you blinded by beauty?” Sophia nodded. Vlod said, “Yes. That happen to me. Again and again.”

Margo said, “Sophia, I never imagined my father would have become one of NORDIC’s victims.” She spread her hands out flat on the table. “I can’t even decide whether I’m supposed to call him my father, or my dad. That’s how little I knew of him. How crazy is that?”

“Your father was a good man,” Sophia said.

Margo gave a tiny nod of her head. “I always thought of him as being too smart to be done in by NORDIC. He’ll never know that now.” She took a breath. “But what NORDIC did to my dad is just one example of what we have documented proof of: Over forty-thousand ‘accidental’ deaths every year caused by NORDIC. I say accidental because that is how NORDIC registers them, but we suspect that is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, that is why the Maritime resistance movement is named ‘Iceberg.’”

Sara, her hand on Margo’s leg under the table, explained that Iceberg had tried to develop an effective counter-offensive weapon against NORDIC for years. They were almost ready to move forward with one of them when they got intel at the last moment that it would have resulted in a disaster. So they re-thought their whole approach. Finally they had something ready and waiting. It was a spike they named IceCube.

Margo took it up, “It could be fatal to NORDIC. If we do this correctly, we will take all of freakin NORDIC down and save thousands of lives. You, dear Sophia, have delivered to us the key we have been searching for: a NORDIC access point that might be good enough for IceCube to do its work. All we ask of you is to help Vlod deliver it.” She finished with raised eyebrows

Sophia nodded.

“Vlod, our security specialist, may be just the person to do the insertion. He came to us after ten years in the Ukrainian military, via England, but that is another story. Vlod, tell her.”

“Because Mako big deal Hitmin, his connection into NORDIC very high up. We deliver IceCube. NORDIC get what you say brain freeze, yes? I like ice cream. I know brain freeze, but this different. This Newfoundland style brain freeze.”

He touched Sophia’s arm for emphasis, then, “Key is this Mako’s laptop. Where does he keep it when he at home?”

“The Living Room, in front of the couch.”

“Good,” Vlod said.

“But it’s password and thumb print protected. Also, once when I had left mine unplugged for too long he said I couldn’t use his because it had a bio thing.”

“Password,” Vlod said, “I call pissword. I get you pissword of anyone. Thumb print also not problem. But we not surprised it have bio-monitor. That is why I now sitting here.”

Sara looked intently at Sophia. “The bio-monitor. It would be something he wears. Sophia, do you think you may have ever seen it?”
“Nope.”

“OK, It may not be obvious. Does he have some kind of device that is in contact with his skin—a hearing aid, eyeglasses?”

“He always puts on his watch before he uses his laptop and takes it off afterwards. I always thought that was a bit strange.”

“Where does he keep it?” Sara asked.

“Next to his laptop.”

“Idiot,” Vlod said.

Sara went on, “Good. That’s the bio-monitor then. They are always connected to the laptop by a wired connection. Vlod will have an assortment of wires to choose from.”

Sophia brightened with a realization, “One time when he didn’t know I was outside the bedroom on the balcony I saw him take a little wire from under the couch cushion and connect his watch to the laptop.”

Vlod slid off the seat and stood. “Look at me.” Sophia twisted in her seat and did so. “How close to this Mako I look?”

“Pretty close, actually.”

“Look in my eyes.”

Sophia did, and gulped. His eyes were so much like Mako’s. Those large brown eyes were one of his attributes that could make her melt in place. “Same,” she managed.

“This sound good. I maybe able fool bio-monitor.”

Margo proclaimed, “Excellent. Here is the favor we need to ask: You go with Vlod on this evening’s train back to your apartment. Get him to Mako’s laptop quickly, let him do his work, then get out.”

“Then I’m free?”

“Yes. But don’t forget. Mako will probably still be looking for you. The only safe thing to do would be to return here.”

Sara spoke up, “Sophia, we want you to be safe.”

Sophia looked to Vlod. “I’ll take you there. But I can’t guarantee I won’t just go to Boston afterwards. My life is a mess. I’m not ready to save the world. But let me ask you this: If IceCube is successful, won’t that cause all of North America to go into crisis?”

Sara explained that there would still be electric power since all the power stations and their grid were completely isolated with their own internal monitoring and control systems, just like the MST. There wouldn’t be chaos because they had a replacement artificial intelligence system ready and waiting to take over control. If IceCube insertion went perfectly no one would even notice the exchange until the real improvements began showing themselves.

Sophia wasn’t sure she was re-assured, but felt she was in no position to debate their conclusions.

Margo could see more background might be necessary. She told of how their replacement Artificial Intelligence control system was harnessed by Humans. Thus it was named HAIR, for Harnessed Artificial Intelligence Renaissance.

Sophia was drawn in. “How will Icecube freeze NORDIC. What does that actually mean ?”

Sara’s hands were alive as she talked, “Easy. Adjectives. Long strings of adjectives. Here’s the example I always like to give: “Suppose NORDIC is driving your SUV toward an intersection where there are two SUVs approaching at right angles to you and you might be T-boned. Your

SUV's sensors get a signal: In fifty meters there are two SUVs approaching us from opposite directions. One is a blue and transparent painted SUV with a Somali man in the fifth row sitting on his head talking to a red headed woman in the seventh row who has one blue eye and one green one and her shoe is on backwards and the other SUV is painted sunlight color with a pink kitten on the lap of a little girl who is blind and has a lollipop stuck in her ear and both SUVs are in the same adorable lane. Should I increase velocity in a negative direction or accelerate sideways?"

Sophia said, "Wait ..."

Sara said that was the point. They knew NORDIC was not able to quickly pick-out the pertinent nouns and verbs. Their resistance members had compiled thousands of such sentences. They could not be nonsense. NORDIC could filter for nonsense. But if they were valid sentences that came at it faster than it could process them it would slow, and eventually freeze. That was what IceCube would do.

Margo added that they had a NORDIC clone in a concrete bunker in Nova Scotia. They had done countless simulations, and when fed in a carefully modulated stream IceCube froze the clone every time.

Sara explained that since Mako's zone was an entire Maritime division, and there were only four other countries in all of North America: Blue, Mexico, Merica, Alaska and Quebec, they felt pretty confident that Mako's laptop would get them into NORDIC high enough to be effective.

Margo said, "OK, story time is done for now. Vlod and I have work to do."

Sara touched Sophia's shoulder, "Sophia, come with me. You're about my size. I have pulled together a wardrobe for you that will do until we can take you shopping. It's waiting for you in the Guest Stateroom." Sophia could see they were working hard to suck her in, but still, it sure would be nice to get into a fresh set of clothes, so she didn't resist.

When Sophia was dressed she went back to the galley. Sara was busy packing lunches. "For you and Vlod. Now you go sit on the bench and

face the porthole.” Sophia did. Then she felt Sara brushing her hair, gently working through the tangles.

That Evening. (Day Minus 1.) 10:04 pm.

On the train back south Sophia and Vlod took facing benches. Sophia wasn't ready to snooze. She asked Vlod how he got involved in all this.

Vlod seemed ready to dismiss the question and turned to the window, although it was too dark outside to see anything.

Then he turned back. “In Ukraine I grow tired fighting Russians After we beat back third invasion this century. I say enough. I hate guns. I never want to see gun for rest of my live. I have money saved for university, but now not want to do that. I travel west, want new adventure.” He glanced to Sophia. When she seemed still committed to listening he continued. “When I get to Belgium, no more land left, so I cross channel to England I meet old friend who introduce me to very beautiful woman. Oh, not as beautiful as you. But she all wrong for me.”

He turned back to the window. Sophia didn't want the conversation to be over yet. “What was wrong with her, if you don't mind me asking.”

Vlod kept looking out the window. “She all rush-rush. I like take time.” He turned back to Sophia and leaned forward on his elbows. That caused him to look slightly up at her with his large, soft brown eyes, hooded by his thick eyebrows and furrowed brow. “ I give you example. If person plan to make love in evening to partner, it start with little kiss on neck in morning with look in eye that say later. During day kissed person put fingers to where kissed many times. Each time person think about evening. Then dinner with touching of hands and wrists. Then the sitting on couch and conversation with hands touching of thighs and arms. After at least hour business get going. Slow then not slow. Then . . .,” and he made several explosion movements with his hands. “ When done, both spent. Not enough energy to sit up from floor.”

Sophia swallowed.

“Now I sleep,” and he stretched out.

Next Day. (Day 0.) 10:22 pm.

At Sophia's apartment she let themselves in and eased the door shut. The living room was dimly lit by the streetlight outside. She knew that at this time Mako should be asleep, but once inside they could hear the sounds of love making coming from the upstairs bedroom. "Bastard," Sophia whispered.

"You know him. Listen to sounds. How much time we have?"

Sophia listened. "He's just getting started. We should have ten minutes." Vlod just shook his head. "I need fingerprint." Sophia led him into the kitchen and saw what she was hoping for. The cutting board was out on the work table with the chopping knife, still with bits of vegetables on it. Dirty bastard had never sprung into action that fast for her.

Vlod got to work. He was focused and methodical. After several minutes he shut the cover, put the watch and wire back, and stood.

At that moment the bedroom door opened and Mako stepped onto the atrium balcony.

Vlod and Sophia froze.

Mako was facing them, but he had his head down combing his hair back with his fingers. Before he looked up, he turned right and entered the bathroom leaving the door open.

Sophia and Vlod went silently to the front door. There Vlod opened and held it for Sophia, bowing like a true gentleman. Sophia used both hands so the door would shut silently.

They walked silently in the dark to the MST station. Vlod turned to Sophia, "Please you no say goodbye now."

Sophia looked down the tracks to the south, toward Boston, as if she would see a sign to make her decision for her. It was just dark—desolate even. When she looked back she found herself looking into his eyes. She said nothing. The train pulled into the station she boarded it with Vlod.

Next Day. (Day 1.) 7:40 pm.

The next evening Margo and Sara were at the ferry dock to greet Vlod and to see if he had come back alone. Sara clapped once and gave Sophia a big hug.

Margo asked Vlod, "Do you think it worked?"

"We know in maybe week. Either everything normal, or things start happening." But he was smiling broadly. "I go home now."

He turned to Sophia, "I hope again I see you."

Sophia indicated for him to lean his head down so she could whisper in his ear. When he did she lightly kissed his neck. Vlod touched his finger to the spot.

Margo rowed Sara and Sophia away from the dinghy dock. As they boarded the boat Margo said, "The Guest Stateroom is yours for as long as you want it." Sara started setting up three folding chairs and a folding table in the cockpit. "Would you like to join us? We've got some good wine."

Sophia said, "if you don't mind, I'd like to take a little row around the harbor first."

Sara told her to enjoy herself. They would be here when she got back discussing the latest Corner Brook gossip.

Sophia settled back into the dinghy, pushed away from the hull and set the oars. She had not gone very far when she remembered she had never asked Margo what she had named her trawler. She rowed back to the bow and saw in faded gold leaf:

Comin Home

Her eyes watered.

CHAPTER TEN

Vodka

Same Evening. (Day 1.) Corner Brook. 7:56 pm.

Vlod had just bid good night to Sophia, Margo, and Sara at the ferry dock. He wandered toward home. The evening was warm and bright, not just from the summer's long evening sunset, but also from Sophia's kiss. He wanted to recall his trip with her to insert IceCube. He rejected the quickest route home, which would have been the ring road and instead started along the harbor's water edge. The tide was still coming in, so the sand was firm.

As he passed Delila's Restaurant harbor deck, Peter, the Harbormaster, called out, "Vlod." Peter was an Iceberg member and Vlod decided to join him. He backtracked to the steps that led from the beach directly onto the deck. Peter was in the far corner, his usual spot, as it allowed him a view of the boats in the harbor's mooring field. Peter asked Vlod if he had eaten yet. Yes, Vlod had eaten on the ferry.

Instead of the server on duty, Delila herself came to their table. Delila was an older woman of ample build. She knew how to cook, and how to appreciate it as well. She was also an Iceberg member.

"Well, two of my favorite customers," she said in her low, raspy voice.

Peter looked up at her, "I happen to know you say that to all your customers."

"And it's true. Vlod, was that the new woman Margo told me about getting off the ferry with you?"

"Sophia. Yes. Maybe good time for update. You want?"

Delila pulled out a chair and sat. She knew enough to use the chair on the harbor side of the table so Peter could still glance at the harbor as they talked. "Just remember, we're in a public place." Delila knew that

Vlod, of all people, should not need this reminder, but she also knew he was a little deficient in the restraint department.

“Here news. You know spike thing we sitting on two years.”

“Just to be clear Vlod, do you mean you are asking me how is the ice cube supply?” Delila said.

“Yes. Pretty woman get off ferry lead me maybe perfect glass for to put in IceCube.”

Peter and Delila exchanged wide-eyed looks. “You mean ... ?” Peter asked.

“Yes. It done.”

Delila called, “Ginger, Maker’s Mark to this table,” already knowing their favorite. She knew Vlod preferred vodka above all else, but she knew her best bourbon would please everyone.

Ginger promptly delivered an unopened bottle and three glasses. Without understanding its significance, she asked, “Ice cubes?”

Delila knew none of them put ice in their bourbon, but could not let the opportunity pass. “Yes. Just bring a glass with three ice cubes and that will be great.”

Delila opened the bottle and poured three generous servings. “It’s a slow night. I can be off duty until closing.”

Vlod held up his glass, “Toast. To ice cream headaches.” Peter and Delila repeated the toast and clinked their glasses.

When the bottle was finished they stood. Delila gave hugs all around, and Peter left for the ring road and home. Vlod went back onto the beach to resume his walk. Once past the lights of Delila’s he decided the walk wasn’t taking long enough. He stopped and turned to look at the harbor. The water was smooth. Little waves sighed as they kissed the shore. He saw Comin Home at her mooring a couple hundred meters away. Since the tide was coming in, her stern faced shore. There was a faint light coming from the back deck. He thought he could see the women in the cockpit chatting, but he wasn’t sure if he was imagining that. There was light from

an open porthole in the cabin. Maybe Sophia was reading. He touched his fingers to the side of his neck where Sophia had kissed him and smiled.

As he turned to continue his walk. He ran through his mental snapshots of his trip with Sophia: Her face on the train as they talked, her back as she led him through the alleys to Mako's apartment, the profile of her body as she bent over to enter her key code into the apartment front door, and her sleeping on the train across from him on the way back.

He approached his apartment. It was really just one large room with a bathroom and a kitchenette in a relatively new home. All the easy building sites had already been taken, so this one was built into the side of the steep hill that formed the southern jaw of the harbor's mouth. A driveway from the ring road served the upper side of the house, and his apartment faced the harbor. From the beach he walked to the gravel path that ran across the lower side. His entry was on the south side of this bottom floor.

Just as he was about to unlock his door he decided to instead continue up the steep incline to the next floor to his neighbor Tim's apartment which faced the ring road. The gravel on this steep path always got washed down until it was a pile big enough to prevent him from opening his door all the way. He kept a shovel next to his door so he could clear it when that happened. Eventually, when it got bad enough to complain to the landlord he would hear the local jack-of-all-trades running his little front-end loader re-spreading and re-compacting the gravel on the steep slope. He happened to be there with Tim the time the guy flipped his cute backhoe over onto its pipe-frame top. It rolled over twice before coming to rest at the high tide line. He and Tim were laughing so hard it hurt.

Where he came from in Ukraine the places he lived had always been relatively flat, so he found it quite confusing when he encountered houses in Newfoundland that were built into steep slopes. The lower side of a house's first floor was at ground level and the next floor was also at ground level on the other side of the house, but the ground levels were separated by one story. People would call either of them the first floor without the slightest hesitation. Also, either side of the house might be called the front, and actually, even that would sometimes vary depending upon who you were talking to. From the lower side of the house people thought of that as the First Floor, and the one above the Second Floor, even though that Second Floor was the first floor when entered from ground level on that side of the

house. It made his head hurt. He soon learned to just give up—it would never make any sense.

He walked up the steep slope, turned the corner and knocked on Tim's door. There was no answer immediately. The temperature was dropping, although there was still plenty of twilight left, Vlod decided he wouldn't wait long. He could always go back to his apartment and wait until he heard the floor creaking above. But then Tim opened the door and headed to the kitchen counter as he called over his shoulder, "I see you're back from that thing you talked about. How'd it go?"

"I talk of thing? What I say?"

"Well, I really don't remember. It was two nights ago. We were into the third bottle. You said something about inserting an ice pick or something."

"Oh. Is nothing. I not even remember," as he hung up his denim jacket on a hook by the door.

Tim said with his back to him, "OK, Time for vodka."

When Tim turned around he had two bottles of vodka and two glasses. He sat opposite Vlod at the table. "Bigger glass to you, the bigger guy."

Vlod poured some vodka into his glass and touched his neck as he took a drink.

"You hurt your neck?" Tim asked.

"I get surprise kiss from woman named Sophia," Vlod said with a wry sideways grin.

"Very nice. Very nice. Where were you when you got this surprise kiss? And who is this Sophia? I haven't heard her name before."

"Someone on ferry ride."

"That must have been quite a ferry ride. Where did you go? I want to go there." Vlod said it was not important. He realized he had already said much more than he was supposed to, but he told himself it was still OK,

because Tim was an idiot. Still, he admonished himself for being sloppy. Words came back to him —harsh words from his Ukrainian Captain about being careless. Although he always told people he left the military because he was fed up with the violence, which was true, he suppressed the other contributing events.

“Is the kiss supposed to mean anything?”

“Maybe. Enough of that.” He needed to change the subject. “Did you get new carpentry job you tell me about?”

“No. But I did have a meeting with some Quebec guy who said he might have a way for me to make some real money.”

“And you listen to him?” Vlod told him not to trust anyone not from Newfoundland, especially someone not recommended by a person he trusted. “Probably scam.” Vlod looked Tim in the eye. “Next thing you know, you crying into vodka glass about how he take all your money.”

“Not possible. I have no money.”

“So why you not work on fishing boat? They hiring. You make money.”

“I told you before. I easily get seasick.”

Vlod leaned his chair back onto two legs. The old wooden chair flexed precariously, but Vlod didn’t flinch. “You carpenter. Why this chair sway like Russian walking home at night.”

“When you are dumped on your ass, I’ll put it on the top of my list.”

“Never happen. I too quick.”

“Too quick for me to beat you in chess again?”

“Sometimes I let you win so Tim not cry.”

Tim set out the chess board and box of pieces.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Dinner Gift

Next Day. (Day 2.) Corner Brook. 9:42 am.

The next morning Vlod slept later than usual. He was completely spent after his trip to SED-1 and his long night with Tim. He didn't remember how many times he had beaten Tim at chess or how much money he had won. He doubted Tim did either. He walked to Delila's and had a breakfast of sausages, scrambled eggs, and pancakes. He had multiple re-fills of the strong coffee. Then he remembered he had not yet checked his phone from overnight. Because he was considered 'Iceberg Head of Security' he always kept his phone on 24/7. The call from Margo telling him they had located an MR-7 Hitmin's laptop was just one example of such emergency calls. But last night he had permitted himself the luxury of silencing his phone. When he turned it back on at the diner he saw that he had a text from Sophia: Don't have dinner.

The rest of that day was spent in suspension. Vlod had no tasks, so he set off on a walk through the center of town and out the other side. He took the long winding path to the high man-made lake.

Once at the lake he sat on his favorite rock—a glacial erratic boulder that had a split right down the middle. He sat on the right side and was facing north. To his east was a sandy shore. When the lake had been made, the eastern side had been built-up with sand from an inland quarry. White Pines were planted because they were fast growing and liked sand. In just two decades some were quite tall. There was one in particular that was his favorite. It had long, heavy branches that swooped out over the water like outstretched arms with their palms turned up to gather the sunlight. He liked to think of each arm as an adventure in the great tree's life. They were reflected by the water, and he reflected that he had also had a long life with many adventures. He felt that his life was going to grow into a new even higher adventure. He liked to think he was like that tree, now firmly rooted and reaching for the sunlight.

The rest of the day was spent lost in thought. The lake surface went from smooth to ripples. When they became small white caps he headed home.

A little after seven that evening there was a soft knock at his door. He opened it. Sophia was standing there with a large, insulated bag. Vlod took the bag with a wide grin. Sophia hung her jacket and left her boots by the door. Then she took off her long, droopy sweater and hung that as well.

Sophia was wearing a sleeveless red dress. A white sash trimmed it to her narrow waist. The dress was hitched-up with the hem tucked under the sash. She loosened the sash and let the dress fall to its calf length. Sophia's expression was questioning. It was not like her to behave in what she suspected was a wantonly manner, dressing in a borrowed sexy dress and showing up at the apartment of a man she hardly knew.

Vlod's grin grew wider. Sophia relaxed.

"Careful with the bag. It's got two bottles of wine in it plus a casserole that Margo made."

They set out the warm dish and two bottles. "I brought a corkscrew, since Margo was pretty sure you wouldn't have one," Sophia said as she touched the top of his forearm, just above the wrist. It was tanned brown, with smooth black hair. Vlod just nodded his head, still grinning.

He at least had two red wine glasses and two, mismatched, dishes. Sophia slid open drawers until she found the tableware and set some out. Then she sat.

Vlod silently stretched onto his toes and reached over the top of the upper cabinets. He came down with two, matching glass candlestick holders and set them on the table. Then he crossed the room, dug behind the back of the tableware drawer and produced two red candles. He inserted and lit them. Then he looked at the wine bottle labels.

"Good. Vinland Blueberry Cabernet from Globesill Winery." He opened a bottle and filled both glasses to under half-way. He sat.

They both swirled, sniffed, and took a sip of their wine. Vlod raised his eyebrows to ask Sophia's opinion.

"Umm—This is really good."

Vlod touched two fingers of his left hand to the wrist of her resting right hand. “Now I say toast.” Without removing his fingers light touch, he said, “To beautiful woman and hungry man.”

Sophia giggled, “To hungry woman and beautiful man.”

They ate quietly for a while. Sophia wanted to know more about this man, but didn’t want to interrogate him.

Then they spoke in unison, he, “You come ...,” she, “So Vlod”

They laughed. Vlod said, “You first. You better talker.”

“Just because I use more words doesn’t mean they are better words. But, here goes. Did you grow up in Ukraine?”

Vlod described growing up on a dairy farm. The hard work. How much his mother and father needed him to help work the farm, especially after his brother died in a car crash. Finally the farm became just too much and they all moved to the city. Vlod enlisted in the army as a way to earn money to support his parents. But after he left to fight the war they both died in an artillery shelling. He paused and looked down at his plate. “It make me cry at night.”

Sophia reached across and rested her hand on his free wrist. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

He countered by putting down his glass and resting his other hand on her forearm. Sophia felt herself blush. She put down her glass and took her napkin—half of a paper towel, and wiped her mouth.

Vlod picked up his glass and finished it. “I wander like I told you on train. In England I again run out of land to wander over. Someone say go to Newfoundland. Many jobs there. So I go. That my story. Your turn now.” And he refilled both glasses, a bit higher than when they started.

Sophia finished chewing what she had, then took an extra big sip of her wine.

“I grew up and lived in the North End of Boston. When I was still a teenager my father was killed in a building collapse. My mother and I were

devastated. It was less than a year before she died too. I think it was of a broken heart. So I was a lost soul. Then someone, I don't even remember who it was now, introduced me to Mako. He was wonderful—always saying the right thing. He seemed thoughtful and kind. After dating for less than six months he suggested I move in with him in SED-1. I didn't have any reason to stay in Boston. I agreed." She turned away, realizing she had been running on. He hadn't asked for her life story. But he squeezed her wrist and said, "Go on."

"I thought my whole life had fallen into place. I wanted to build the life my parents had built for themselves. A life of stability and happiness, although I am sure now that was a naïve thought."

"It beautiful thought."

She told Vlod how she had learned plumbing from helping her father. Mako convinced her to apply to MR-7 for a job as a plumber in the Sewer and Drain Division and when she landed that job she was convinced life was wonderful. "I thought we were going to get married." She looked down at her plate. "How could I be that stupid."

"I know how you that stupid. You want I tell you?"

"Yes. Please tell me how I that stupid."

"Mako NORDIC Hitmin. NORDIC know that Hitmins want sexual partners. But partner can not be opioid addict. So NORDIC find and provide Hitmin partner. NORDIC know exactly what Hitmin desire because it have complete record of person desires. Same as all citizens. Same as you."

Sophia set her glass down so forcefully that some wine splashed onto her hand. Vlod gently wiped it off with his napkin as she said, "So are you saying that NORDIC selected me to be Mako's live-in partner? That Nordic knew when I was planning to go to the Old North Church singles dance and that it arranged to have Mako there, together with this woman who just so happened to introduce us?"

"Yes. NORDIC already know exactly what you want to hear from man, then tell Mako what to say. You think you very lucky. But you not lucky. You fall in love. Very simple."

Vlod took another drink of wine. He put down his napkin and as he rested his hand on Sophia's wrist he rested his eyes on hers.

"Now some business. Need to get your valuables out of your apartment before Mako move them. I know a guy in Nova Scotia. This guy ready to go to your apartment and get them. Where you keep them?"

Sophia was relieved. This had been wearing on her mind. She told him where they were.

Vlod took out his phone and typed a message. "Done. And do you have any money more than what in bank savings account?"

"Just the cash in the envelope with my passport. How did you know about my savings account?"

Vlod looked at her reassuringly. "Margo found it and has already emptied it into a new temporary savings account here in Corner Brook. Of course, she have to use her name. But you open new savings account after Mako situation under control. I have gift for you."

He got up and produced a gift wrapped envelope and handed it to her. "Open it. This your temporary identity."

Sophia opened the envelope to find a worn wallet. In the wallet was some cash, a Quebec NORDIC I.D., and three credit cards.

"How ... ?"

"Is work of Douglas. You meet him sometime soon. Do not use credit cards. They not real, but look good if you open wallet to show I.D. or get cash. This to make you hard to find if NORDIC assign you to Mako hit list. We do more. We make, how you say, 'bed cums.' Make Mako think you go to Atlanta."

Sophia giggled. "Bed Cums. Very good idea. Mako would definitely follow those."

She looked at her I.D. and credit cards. They had the name of *Katherine Dumont*. Vlod explained they would not stand-up to close scrutiny. They were just something to have with her for the few weeks until they decided it was safe for her to resume using her real name.

“Just remember. If you in strange situation and someone ask your name, you say name on I.D.” Vlod was looking at her intently. Sophia relaxed and let herself swim in his gaze.

After eating they left the table a mess and went to Vlod’s couch. It was well worn, but quite comfortable. Behind it was a table and in front a wide, flat old trunk which served as a foot rest and second table. Sophia undid the sash around her waist and set it on the couch armrest. She sat, hiked up the hem of her dress to her knees, turned sideways and tucked her legs under her. Vlod sat, twisted to face her, and put his feet up on the trunk.

“Vlod, tell me all the reasons you are called Iceberg’s Security Expert.”

Vlod gave a chuckle. “I only look smart. Really very stupid. But I know about war and read English.”

“English is a very difficult language. Can you tell me the differences among ‘bare, bear, bear, and bear’?” Sophia challenged with a mock narrowing of her eyes.

“I know bear when I see one, and I like bare when I see it,” and he leaned forward and lightly touched her upper arm.

“Good. You can Pass Go.”

“I not know what that mean, but it sound good.”

Sophia asked if Vlod was a tech wizard. He said he read all the tech books he came across in his work. Sophia wanted to know if he meant online. No, he meant real books. He ignored anything online, but read all the older literature he could get his hands on.

Sophia said she remembered real books from kindergarten. She was told NORDIC gathered and destroyed all physical books.

“Gather true. But NORDIC reincarnation of Second World War Nazis. Like Nazis, NORDIC catalogue everything it gather. It learn Nazis keep Souvenirs, so it keep some physical books in secret places. Sometimes I find the places.” He put his wine glass on the back table. Then he took

Sophia's and put that on the back table too. He swung his feet off the front trunk and opened it. It was full of books. He rummaged around a bit, obviously looking for a particular book, found it, and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. He took the book out of the trunk and wiped-down its covers. Then he offered it to Sophia. She didn't take it, just looking at it with open-mouthed awe. So he set it on his lap and smoothed Sophia's dress out on her thighs. Then he set the book on her lap.

"For you. Good book," he said smiling. "But remember, if NORDIC see you have book it kill you. But is OK, because NORDIC already trying to kill you."

Sophia looked at the book. Then she tentatively picked it up. She was astonished at how heavy it was. "It's heavy," she said.

"Yes heavy. It made of wood. You old enough to know paper made from wood?"

"Yes. I remember learning that. I am quite old, after all."

"I sorry. I say something stupid."

"You're not stupid, Vlod. I'm quickly learning that." Sophia put the book back down on her lap and read the title. It was a history of Boston. She opened it. The pages were not as fragile as she had expected. Then she went to the Table of Contents and started studying it.

"Whenever you want another book you tell me. But now, I like cat that see you not paying attention to me," and he gently shut the cover and took the book. "I put this on your chair in kitchen."

In the moment he was gone Sophia was suddenly struck by the contrast with the last time a man shut the cover of something she was reading. She was overwhelmed.

Vlod returned, but immediately saw she was quietly in tears. He sat and scooted over until his leg touched her knees. Sophia had her hands on her lap. Vlod placed his hands on hers and said, "What make you sad?"

"I'm not sad. I'm so happy it makes me cry."

“You have beautiful mind. I kiss your mind,” and he leaned in and kissed her forehead.

Sophia studied his face—the wrinkles in his forehead, around his eyes, a scar on his left cheek. She reached out and touched the scar.

Vlod stood, and holding her hands indicated for her to stand. She did. She was a head shorter than he. She looked up at him and reached her hands behind her neck to the fabric tie that kept her dress on, but Vlod stopped her by gently resting his hands on her wrists behind her neck.

He moved his lips to hers ever so slowly, then brushed them across hers. Sophia shut her eyes and tilted her head slightly. Vlod began the kiss. Her fingers at the back of her neck fluttered. She felt Vlod pull the dress tie knot free. Then he lowered her wrists to her sides and let go. The dress slid to the floor.

Soon they were on the big, thick carpet.

Things went slowly. Then not slowly.

Then Sophia and Vlod didn't have enough energy to sit up from floor.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Seeing Though Blind

Next Day. (Day 3.) Corner Brook Harbor. 6:20 am.

Sophia met Sara in the galley. Sara silently poured Sophia a mug of coffee. They cupped their hands around their mugs. Each were wearing heavy knit sweaters over denim overalls with thick socks and slippers. It was sunny outside and the heat of the sun felt good as its low angle allowed it to sneak through the little round east-facing portholes into the cabin. “Sophia, I just turned up the heat,” Sara said.

Sophia realized she had never thought about that. She had sailed many times in small boats, but in them you controlled the heat by whether you sat in the sun or not. If it was raining, or the tack you were on gave you no choice, so be it. “How does the boat generate heat?”

“Propane. Expensive as hell, but it’s easy and clean, so as long as we can afford it, it’ll be what we use. As a matter of fact, Margo already went ashore to order more canisters. The only alternative for heat on a boat this far north is diesel. It’s convenient since we always have hundreds of gallons on board for the engine, but keeping a heat exchanger injector clean is a huge pain in the butt, especially since no matter the installation, the injectors always seem to wind-up inaccessible.”

She started to rinse out her mug in the sink and then had a thought. “Actually, you need to know about the propane canisters.” She faced Sophia and leaned against the Galley rail.

“Propane is heavier than air. The canisters store propane gas under high pressure. So if any gas leaks it flows down, and on a boat, that means into the bilge. The gas sits at the bottom of the bilge where it becomes a bomb. The tiniest spark creates an explosion that blows the boat up, literally. Since the hull is basically one piece, and strong, the entire force of the explosion is up. Happens all the time.” She turned and finished washing her mug.

“Wait. Should I be scared to be here?”

“Oh yeah,” she turned back. “I should have finished my point. The point is, you need to know about how the canisters are stored onboard. We keep four canisters. They are stored in two special lockers on the Flying Bridge, one on each side. The lockers are vented at their bottoms to little scuppers that exit out the bridge wings directly to the air. That way, any leaking gas will flow harmlessly overboard. People who retrofit or relocate their lockers have to make very sure there are no windows or portholes directly below these little vents, or they run the risk of a bit of negative cabin pressure sucking leaking propane into the interior of the boat, and then, boom,” and she thrust her arms, fingers open, up hitting her hands on the cabin ceiling.

“Shoot. Shoot.” Sara shook the pain from her fingers.

“And diesel is safe because it’s not explosive, right?” Sophia added.

“Right. A diesel engine has to go through bloody hell to get its fuel to explode. Left on its own, it just burns. Happy to burn. Once started, it doesn’t stop. There, now I’m sure you feel very safe.” She turned back to the sink.

Sophia wanted to know more about these women she had fallen in with. “Tell me about Margo.”

“Huh. Where to start.” She dried her hands and leaned back on the galley rail. “She sails on an even keel. No, not really sails. Powers. Strong as iron. Unfortunately, about as impenetrable. But there is a heart of gold in there someplace. Speaking of hearts of gold, did you get your gift from Vlod last night?”

“Which one?”

Sara looked at her with hooded eyes, “The NORDIC I.D. and wallet.”

“Oh. That one. Yes. Also a book, plus I guess you could say a little more than that.”

“Well, I guess I can figure that out for myself. Are you all set with your coffee?”

She was. She brought her mug to the sink, washed it out and asked Sara if it was OK, if she used the grab bar above the companionway door to do pull-ups.

“I think so. Tell you what, you try it and I’ll watch carefully to make sure there are no signs of strain. You’ll kind of be on display though.”

“Fine. Make everyone watching feel guilty they’re not doing any. What are you doing today?”

Sara said it was Going to be warm and sunny. She would clean the water line and inspect the running gear.

“I assume you have a half-inch wetsuit. “Sophia said.

“You bet. With that on, it’s almost fine.”

Sophia asked if Margo was going to help. Sara said no. Margo was going to catch the ferry to Nataashquan after she ordered a propane refill. She intended to meet Douglas Bennitt. They had a lot of planning to do while everybody waited for IceCube to take effect.

Sophia wanted to know if she could use Margo’s wetsuit and join Sara, but she said, although that would make sense since they were all about the same size, Sara had the only one. “But I need your help. Meet me at the swim platform.”

The swim platform was accessed via a swinging door cut into the transom. The platform was made from a grid of teak strips, and was about a foot above the water. Sophia stood on it and watched as Sara struggled on the cockpit floor to pull on her full wetsuit—boots, body suit, hood, and gloves.

When she had it on she went onto the swim platform and added a small weight belt. Her mask and snorkel were tilted up. A brush, scraper, and suction-cup handle were ready on the platform.

“If there were anyone wondering if this was a real fishing trawler, this swim platform would be a dead give-away. Margo added it when she converted her to a liveaboard.”

“How cold is the water?”

“Frigid, I believe is the technical term. Seriously though, if you ever fall in, immediately swim to this platform and haul yourself aboard. Don’t swim to it and catch your breath. Don’t swim to it and congratulate yourself. Haul your ass aboard, go in the shower and turn on the hot water, even with your clothes on. How good a swimmer are you?”

“Excellent.”

“Good. That means you would have a few minutes before you would succumb to hypothermia instead of immediately.”

She pulled down her mask, put the snorkel in her mouth, and hopped into the water. Once in, she bobbed to the surface, blew out her snorkel, and tilted up her mask.

“If you see Peter approaching in the pump-out boat, wave him off. I have no desire to get squished against the hull by the poop boat.”

She put the mask and snorkel back in place and floated face down. A second later, she bobbed vertical again and removed her snorkel and looked at Sophia through her mask.

“Even if it’s not Peter driving the boat, still wave him off,” and she replaced the snorkel and dove under the swim deck.

Sophia smiled to herself and gave a shake of her head. This Sara was a character, but she was starting to like her. She grabbed a life vest and put it on. She rolled-up her overalls to her knees, and stepped out onto the platform. She sat on the edge, and making sure her fingers fit gave her a snug grip in the spaces between the teak strips, lowered her feet into the water. Yes, frigid. But not more frigid than the water off Great Brewster Island in March she thought. She put them in, then took them out to warm up, then back in a few times and soon her feet were acclimated. She watched as Sara would blow out her snorkel, take a breath and submerge. She could hear the muffled noises of her busy doing things at the propeller and rudder.

Then Sara was back at the platform. She popped-out her snorkel, “Running gear looks good. Hand me my brush and suction cup. I’m going to clean the water line. Follow my progress as I make my way around this sperm whale of a boat.”

After at least forty minutes Sara had made it all the way around back to the swim platform. She hoisted herself aboard and stood there shivering. She stumbled onto the back deck and said through chattering teeth, “Help me with this. My fingers don’t work anymore.”

Sophia pulled down the front zipper of her wetsuit and helped her peel it down to her ankles. Sara sat on the deck, and as she pulled off her hood, Sophia pulled off her flippers and booties. Then Sara stretched out and Sophia pulled her wetsuit off the rest of the way. Sara stood, and with shaking hands started hanging her gear on a pipe rail attached to the aft pilothouse.

She said, shivering, “You would be doing me a huge favor if you rinsed these down with the fresh water hose under the starboard coaming. Then you’re free to do whatever you want.”

“Sara, get the hell into the cabin and take a hot shower right now.”

“That’s what I’m going to do. It’s all part of what we call ‘Livin the Dream.’ You’ll learn to love it. Do you have any plans?”

“Shut up and get in the freakin shower.”

Sophia was up on the Flying Bridge with the book Vlodya had given her. She could hear the shower running from the open Head hatch in the front deck. The hatch was centered directly over the shower and Sophia had discovered taking a shower with the hatch open was one of the most delightful experiences she had ever known. Sara was singing a song Sophia hadn’t heard before. Sara’s singing was sweet and beautiful, like a songbird high in a tree singing its heart out in spring.

Then the sound of the shower running stopped, as did the singing.

“Flatten all the saints in Ireland,” came the shout from the hatch.

Sophia put her book on the deck, stood and leaned over the forward coaming. “Everything OK, down there?”

“Freakin shower pump failed. I’m going to rinse off in the aft shower. Meet me on the aft deck.”

A few minutes later Sara said, “I’m going to pass you the cabin sole floorboards. The cabin sole you see is actually vinyl faux teak applied to foam insulating panels. That makes the floor comfy to walk on in the cold weather, even barefoot. I’m going to pass them to you. You stack them in the cockpit”

After that was done Sara passed Sophia a meter long section of plywood floorboard which Sophia added to the pile. Then Sophia and Sara crammed themselves into the narrow vee-birth. Sophia saw the removed meter long board was the hatch to the bilge and shower pumps. Sophia backed-up into the blunt point of the vee birth floor, with just enough space to keep her knees on the remaining piece of fixed floorboard. There was the pump access opening. Then there was Sara on her knees at the aft end of the opening. Sophia had the job of holding the flashlight and passing tools, which was actually a demanding job since there was room between her knees for only the screwdriver and the needle-nosed pliers. If anything else was needed she would have to leap pass Sara and get it from the toolbox. Sophia had already knocked the pliers into the bilge once, causing a delay as Sara had to dry them off with the paper towels next to her feet. Sara was obviously annoyed as she did this, but said nothing. Sophia was pretty sure she was entitled to maybe one rookie mistake on any job that was new to her. Still, knocking the pliers into the bilge was basically a gravity thing, and she wasn’t sure that mistake qualified.

“These things always fail when you need them,” Sara said. Sophia wondered how the pump would fail when you didn’t need it, but she thought right now might not be the time to test Sara’s sense of humor.

Sara carefully removed four tiny screws, set them between her knees and popped something free. “OK,, I’ve got the pump top off. Here you take it. Put it on the galley table and bring me the repair kit.”

To do this Sophia had to stand, and stretch her legs to their full-stride position. But this was not quite long enough to reach where she needed to go. So she made a bit of a leap. But when she did this she landed on a slick spot and slid until she hit the companionway steps with a thud.

“Careful back there,” Sara said, “might be slippery in spots. Someone might have been still dripping when they were passing you the floor panels.”

Sophia regained her composure, put the top of the pump on the galley table and retrieved the repair kit. She leapt across to her spot in the vee berth without problem since there was no room to slide there.

“So this is a diaphragm pump,” Sara said. “Pay attention, because we have another of these for the aft shower, and maybe you’ll be alone when that one fails. It’s in the keel under the floor between the engine water pump belt and the companionway, so there isn’t as much room back there as we have here. Now watch how I remove the old diaphragm and fit the new one. It’s actually pretty easy, unless, of course, your partner didn’t buy the right kit because she chose by the picture on the box rather than the model number. But you know I would never complain about such a thing.”

Sophia couldn’t resist, “Have you ever made a mistake, Sara?”

“Yes, I did once. But it was so long ago I forgot what it was,” and she flashed Sophia a wide grin.

They finished the job and put the floorboard and insulating panels back

“Job done,” Sara said. “What are you going to do now?”

Sophia said she was going to go back to the flying bridge and read the book Vlod had given her. She said she knew she had to keep it out of sight.

Sara went to the sink and washed up. “Well, as you know, there’s no Constant Monitoring here in Newfoundland, but recently Douglas made an off-hand remark about NORDIC taking over control of a Russian surveillance satellite. I got enough information to look it up. If it’s the one I think it is, it is in stationary orbit above Iceland. This has enough resolution to certainly see books, but the more alarming thing is that, if it is looking at an angle, it can read lips. So, precautions are in order. Keep something thrown over the book as you move around the decks. Up above I’d throw one of my lightweight shirts over your head and pull it down to cover the book. You’ll need the shade to read anyway.” Sara was done cleaning up. “I’ll join you up there. Want some tea?”

“Love it.”

Sophia was on the Flying Bridge with her book on her lap and a lightweight tan shirt pulled over her head and down to her knees. Sara arrived and nudged her shoulder to hand her a mug of tea.

Sophia pulled the shirt from her head, took the mug, and asked, “So who is this Douglas I hear so much about?”

Sara took the book from Sophia and set it on the bridge deck where it was concealed by the forward coaming. Sophia thought with amusement that she was going to have to get used to these people taking books from her and setting them aside. Sara squeezed herself down in front of the bench.

She interlaced their legs and moved close to Sophia. She took the shirt Sophia had been using for reading and spread it over both of them so their heads were inches apart in their own private little tent. They sipped their tea. Sara smelled fresh.

“Douglas is the husband of Edith Bennitt, bless her soul. She was the Editor in Chief of a small but highly influential newspaper in Montreal during the time that NORDIC was invading Merica, and threatening Quebec. At that time, there were still people that argued unharnessed self-learning artificial intelligence could be a good thing, despite over a decade of proof otherwise. Part of the problem was people still did not understand that all the various news outlets they were getting were really just NORDIC. Also, NORDIC had only recently named itself, so there was not wide-spread recognition that the marauders from the west were, in fact, a single colonial power.”

“What happened to Edith Bennitt?”

“NORDIC killed her. Of course she was quite aware of the danger she was in, and took careful precautions. She had no A.I. in her house, and certainly didn’t let Artificial Intelligence anywhere near her fridge and other food containers. But one day she met some supporters on the back deck of a restaurant in Old Quebec City, and apparently facial recognition spotted her. We now know that NORDIC had tried several times to kill her by what would appear to be accidents, but Edith was too alert, and avoided them every time.”

They sipped their tea in silence for a few moments. “She wrote a book that in a very short time became a kind of bible for the birth of the

resistance called *Seeing Though Blind*. She was trying to get people to open their eyes to what was happening right in front of their eyes.”

“I would like to read that book.”

“NORDIC gathered and destroyed all copies of the book.”

“What happened to her?”

“NORDIC killed her. When NORDIC’s CM spotted her at the restaurant it alerted the nearest Hitmin who must have been nearby because she appeared as a server when Edith’s fish plate was delivered. Edith had taken two bites and was still chewing it when she was struck by a massive heart attack. She died instantly. She had absolutely no history of heart problems and her husband, Douglas, immediately suspected poisoning. He demanded blood samples be analyzed. Poisoning was confirmed. The Police were notified but no investigation ensued?”

Sophia furrowed her brow, “But she gave up her life for Her actions.”

Sara grabbed Sophia’s arm, “Yes. But she was in control of her life. Her life meant something. She died trying to make the world a better place for the living who would remain.”

“Still, that’s horrible. Were she and Douglas a loving couple?”

“None of the people I’ve met ever knew Edith and Douglas. But apparently yes, because it wasn’t until much later that Douglas got over his grief. By then, NORDIC had conquered all of North America. Everyone credits Edith with planting the seeds for resistance movements to grow.”

“Do you mean there is more than one resistance movement?”

“Yes. But only Iceberg in Newfoundland is organized. Others have to be under deep cover because NORDIC’s surveillance is complete.”

She went on to explain how deeply NORDIC could monitor Humans if they just let things happen to them. Maybe the most insidious way she was aware of was how NORDIC had developed the technology to detect brain activity by measuring the tiny electrical fluctuations between a pair of earbuds. By compiling millions upon millions of these

measurements and cross-referencing them to what the person was reading on their phone or laptop, listening to, or doing at the time it learned how to know what a person was thinking. If a person listened to music or talked on the phone with earbuds, NORDIC was monitoring the brain waves. It could quite literally read the person's mind.

"But everyone is different," Sophia protested.

"Of course, that's why it has a dossier on everyone that includes that person's unique translator. So, you see, even language isn't a barrier."

Sophia felt out of breath just trying to absorb all this. She needed to change the subject. "Sara, you have a lovely Irish lilt. Are you from Ireland?"

"My grandmother and grandfather were, rest their souls."

"My parents were from Italy."

Sara asked whether she was close with them. Sophia said how they were both gone. But after she met Mako she had told herself there would be plenty of time to build a new family. She said she now understood Mako had never intended to get married and have a baby. She had let so much time slip by she was afraid she might be missing her window of opportunity.

Sara suddenly had a thought and put her hand on Sophia's knee. "Oh, talking about things slipping. It slipped my mind that I'm supposed to remember to tell you that we are going to a poetry slam tomorrow. Margo is a big follower of one of the poets, and this is the first time one of these slams will be up here."

"Are you into poetry?"

"Not really. If it doesn't rhyme I don't understand it. But Margo is into it, and I'm into Margo, so there you go."

"I bet the dress is pretty casual, right?"

"Yeah, you would think that. But here's the thing. People up here don't get much reason to dress up, unless they go to church, which I wouldn't know anything about. Now that the timber burning industry has been creating some wealth people are thrilled to make an excuse to show off

their newest duds. So that's why you are coming shopping with me and Margo bright and early tomorrow morning"

"Oh my God, I haven't dressed up since I used to go out clubbing in Boston," Sophia said.

"Well, I hope you show a little more decorum tomorrow. I can just imagine what you wore out clubbing, and believe me girl, I'm imagining."

"Well enough of your imagination," and Sophia pulled their t-shirt off her head and let it drop over Sara's face.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Guy

Next Day. (Day 6.) Corner Brook Harbor. 6:28 am.

Sophia, Margo, and Sara woke early and had coffee and pastries in the Galley. This morning they would take the ferry across the St. Lawrence to Nataashquan, Quebec to shop for a dress for Sophia to wear to that evening's Poetry Slam. It was a sure bet that Margo and Sara would not let the opportunity to update their own wardrobes pass. A shopping center had grown up next to the MST Terminal and Cultural Center. It had the latest upscale Montreal-based stores catering to the new wealth created in Newfoundland by NORDIC's decision to return to wood burning as a major fuel source. Those who could afford the prices travelled from as far south as Boston just to shop the latest international styles available there.

At 7:15 am they were in line waiting for Calypso. The bay was still as glass. Early morning fog rose from its surface raising a soft sea fog curtain so thick they couldn't see the stone breakwater.

Then Calypso's bow pierced the curtain, appearing as an apparition. The waiting line grew a-buzz, like a bunch of children expecting an ice cream truck.

Calypso eased itself in, bumping against the dock timber dolphins, its Captain visible at the outboard bridge controls. The ferry service, like the MST, was an institution that refused to give up control to NORDIC bots. Humans still controlled its operations.

Once the large ferry was secured and its vehicle ramp lowered, several trucks and SUV's drove off its lower deck. Passengers started emerging onto the aluminum ramp at its starboard side. Suddenly Margo was hopping in place. "Guy!" She called. "Guy LaSalle! Over here."

A short handsome man approached, all smiles, towing a compact rolling bag. He and Margo exchanged cheek kisses.

“Sara, it’s so nice to see you again,” and more cheek kisses ensued. “And I see you have a lovely vision with you. What’s that all a boot, eh?”

It took a moment for Sophia to realize that when Guy said a boot, he was actually saying about. Sara said, “Let me introduce you to Sophia.”

Guy’s eyes lit up. “So this is the Sophia I’ve heard so much about.” He approached Sophia. She was hugged and cheek kissed. Sophia, now familiar with the routine, hugged and cheek-kissed him warmly back. She was surprised to detect a trim, muscular frame under the puffy overclothes.

“Miss Sophia, I have, not only your valuables, but also your laptop right here in this bag.”

“Oh my God. Thank you so much,” and she hugged him again. “When Vlod said he knew a guy, I thought he meant just a guy. I didn’t realize that he meant the real Guy.”

“That’s me. The real Guy.”

Sophia asked how he accomplished it. Guy said that Vlod and he figured this Mako creep wouldn’t move your stuff. He would want it in place as his bait. He knew you would want to retrieve it and by leaving it in place he would know exactly where to find you. We could expect that NORDIC would give him access to its CM surveillance and he would keep himself close for a few days.

“But how did you get in and out of there?” Sophia asked. “Ah. Let’s just say I am but a dark shape to ordinary surveillance, eh. I didn’t need to worry about him being alerted. He was asleep right there when I entered the bedroom.”

“Oh my God. Did you kill him?” Sophia asked.

“Vlod told me not to, so a disappointment. We don’t want NORDIC to suspect anything before the spike takes full effect, so I just slipped in, grabbed your stuff, and slipped out.” Then to all of them, “Where are you-all off to?”

“Shopping for stuff. Then the Poetry Slam at the Cultural Center,” said Margo. She asked him to please take Sophia’s stuff you retrieved up to

Delila's. She should be there or close by. She would put them in a safe place. Guy said that was where he was headed. He was about to meet Vlod for breakfast.

With that, they went their separate ways. As Guy walked off the ferry dock he spotted Vlod sitting on Delila's Restaurant's deck. He took the shortcut by walking onto the beach to the deck's outside steps, dealing with his bag's inability to roll by just dragging it behind him. Once on the deck, he brushed off the bottom of the bag and went to Vlod's table, which was Vlod and Peter's usual spot. They were sitting with another, somewhat scruffy man. Ginger, the server was there with coffee before he had even pulled in his chair.

Vlod said, "I see you all smiles."

"Yes, I have it all here, including even her laptop. But before I go on, perhaps you'd like to introduce me to this gentleman."

Tim rose halfway and offered his hand, "How ya doin. I'm Tim."

"And my name is Guy. I'm up from Halifax after picking up a couple of things for Vlod on the way."

Vlod pushed his cup to the edge of the table to indicate it needed a refill just as Ginger arrived to take their orders.

Vlod said, "I have Bay Morning Special, scrambled, rye toast."

Guy said, "Same for me." And Tim, sensing that one of these others might be picking up the tab, for he was very skilled at sensing such things, said, "I'll have the same and a twenty ounce mug of Lumber Jack."

When their food came it was delivered, not by Ginger; but by Delila herself. After removing Guy's snap-brim cap and giving him a kiss on his thick brown hair she pulled out the fourth chair and sat.

Guy pushed the rolling bag next to Delila's chair. "The stuff inside is Sophia's. Margo said you are the person to give it to."

"Then it shall be so," Delila said. "I'm assuming you want the bag back?" Guy said he did, but there was plenty of time. He would be catching the noon ferry back to Nataashquan.

Tim looked at Vlod and asked slyly, “Is this the woman you had ice cubes with?”

Guy and Delila exchanged a dark look.

“You ask too many questions.”

Then Peter, the Harbormaster climbed the steps and approached them on the deck. “Delila, my dear,” he said, “You really need to find a job. It seems every time I see you you’re schmoozing with the customers.”

“That is my job,” she said, rising from her chair. “Here you go. This is your regular seat anyway. I need to put some stuff away,” and she took Guy’s bag and gave Peter a cheek kiss as she passed him. Peter sat and said he had enough time to load-up on coffee before he made his rounds.

At a moment when Tim had his face to his plate Peter gave an inquiring look to Guy and Vlod with a flick of his eyes toward Tim, which conveyed the question, ‘Is he one of us?’

Guy and Vlod subtly gave a shake of their heads and went back to their coffee.

Guy asked, “What’s new and exciting in Corner Brook Harbor these days, Peter?”

“Not much. It’s a good retirement job, if a person were looking for a retirement job. I’m only fifty-five. When I think how I once was captain of a billionaire’s yacht cruising the coast of Italy, it makes me wonder where it all went.”

“You know where it went, Peter,” said Guy, “and it wasn’t your fault. When the jobs disappeared, the working base that used to create wealth for the billionaires evaporated. Those that didn’t immediately cut-back, and almost none did, found themselves bankrupt in just a few years. A few committed suicide. One or two were quick enough to react and kept their wealth, and maybe even work for the greater good.”

“Actually Guy,” Peter said, “that’s what brought me to Newfoundland. My last captaining gig was taking a former billionaire’s yacht to the scrap yard in Bath, Maine. He couldn’t sell it. Market was

already saturated with mega yachts. With no more billionaires all they were good for was scrap metal. I found little summer gigs from one harbor to another. I was back to running a harbor shuttle, just like my first job when I was in High School. When I lost that job at the end of summer in New Brunswick I thought my life had finally run off course and grounded on the mud flats for good. Then word came that Corner Brook was coming alive from the rebounded fishing industry, and here I am. Sitting with you guys waiting for my ... oh, here it comes,” and Delila plunked a steaming coffee mug in front of him.

“And we owe it all to NORDIC,” Tim said through a mouthful.

Peter raised his eyebrows, “Oh, you a fan of NORDIC?” Tim kept chewing.

Then, “Sure. Look at me. Can’t read or write and I am doing just fine.”

Vlod said, “Then you give me two-hundred bucks I lend you.”

“Soon,” said Tim. “When I was in elementary school I was staring at four years of high school. Then NORDIC, thank God, puts it out that High School was no longer required. It closed most of them, saving millions of dollars in wasted salaries and maintenance of useless buildings. The point is,” he said, pointing his fork, “no one needs to read anymore because everything is read to you. No one needs math, history, any of that crap. It was all crap. NORDIC pulled the wood from people’s eyes.”

“That’s wool,” said Peter.

“What?” Tim asked.

“Never mind,” said Peter.

Tim took a swig of his beer and told them he ended school and started earning money right away. He learned carpentry by helping build houses. He learned how to fix chainsaws. All was made possible by NORDIC.

“What happened to your tooth,” asked Peter, looking at Tim.

Vlod said, “He leave my place, go crooked, stumble down hill and plant face on big boulder. You know boulder,” he finished, looking to Peter.

“Yes. I know the boulder.”

“I hear big yelling. Come out my door. See him with face on boulder. Bring him to his apartment, put him inside and give him dishcloth for blood.”

Tim looked up and smiled, showing the gap where his other front tooth should have been. This also showed the contents of his breast pocket.

“Where you get cigars?” Vlod asked. “Let me see,” and he reached across the table and took one from Tim’s pocket.

The cigar was large and fat. “Havana. Where you get money for Cuban cigar?”

Tim said, “I told you. A big shot from away gave me some up front money to do some work.”

“Let me see that,” Guy said. Vlod passed him the cigar. “You make sure you don’t go starting any chainsaws after having one of these.” He passed the cigar back to Tim. “Those things are potent. They’ll make your head spin.”

“Speaking of head spinning,” Tim said, and he got up and went to the rest room.

Peter watched him until the rest room door was shut. Then to Vlod, “Vlod, are you being careful about what you talk about in front of him?”

“Him?” Said Vlod. “He idiot. He not remember things. And I no talk.”

“he said he heard something about ice cubes. It sure sounds like you said something about IceCube.”

“I say nothing.”

Tim returned to his seat.

“Tim,” Peter began, “I have a feeling you’re a smart guy, and it’s not your fault NORDIC shut down the schools before you had a chance to get your life started. I bet, if you were given the opportunity, you could really accomplish things.”

Tim was listening. No one had ever called him smart before. Ever.

Peter, realizing Tim had not dismissed him, went on, “Here’s what I want you to promise me: If there ever comes a time, and it could come, that we all experience a new beginning, and free schools again become available, I want you to promise me you will attend one.”

Tim was dumbfounded. Peter said, “Don’t answer now. Plenty of time. Just think about it.”

Guy rose and said it was time to bid his farewells. He would catch up with Delila and maybe catch the earlier ferry.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Poetry Slam

Same Day. (Day 6.) Nataashquan. 3:30 pm.

Margo, Sara, and Sophia were standing at the Nataashquan Mall entrance. It was a glorious, sunny afternoon, warm and dry. The entrance was framed by an assortment of flowering trees. Song birds flitted about, singing. The women were waiting for Douglas.

Margo turned to Sophia. “So can we be comfortable with thinking you’re going to stay with us for awhile?”

Sophia shuffled uncomfortably. She didn’t like being forced to make a decision like that out loud. Normally, things just happened to her. “It seems I have no real choice. Tell me more about this Douglas we’re waiting for.”

Sara went through the salient details. Douglas was Edith Bennitt’s husband. He was the de facto head of the Quebec Resistance. He knew Iceberg was Newfoundland’s Resistance, and knew they were members. She said they trusted him completely. But Margo interrupted her by saying the Quebec Resistance was disorganized and scattered. It was likely NORDIC had infiltrated it with spies, so they were very careful of how much they told Douglas.

“NORDIC has spies?” Sophia asked, looking at Margo.

“We think so. But even if we discount spies, we can’t be sure Douglas’s Resistance members are careful about where and when they talk about things.” She told Sophia to let herself and Sara take the lead in talking about Resistance stuff. He knew they had had a spike ready for quite a while and she told him they inserted it six days ago. But he just didn’t know they called it IceCube.

“Another thing,” Margo added, “Don’t call him Doug. He hates when people call him that.”

A few moments later a large black SUV pulled alongside. Douglas got out kisses were exchanged. Margo introduced Sophia, and they all got in. Margo sat in the front, with Sophia and Sara in the second row bench.

“So Sophia,” Douglas said as they pulled away, “how do you know these two?”

“I’m up from farther south. They’ve graciously taken me in for a bit.”

“Everyone is from farther south,” Douglas said jovially.

“I think it’s fair to say Sophia is one of our newest Iceberg members,” Margo said. Sophia was a bit taken aback. She never had actually accepted such a thing, but as she mulled over raising an objection she realized how silly that would sound given all that she had willingly participated in. So instead she watched the view out the side window change rapidly from suburban to woods.

“Margo told me you all went shopping for new dresses for tonight’s Poetry Slam. How did it go?”

Margo patted her shopping bag. “Tres bien. Tonight you’ll meet Carl, the final poet of the evening. You are coming, aren’t you? You’re not going to just drop us off and pick us up later, I hope.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. I am a big supporter of the Nataashquan Cultural Center. I was one of the initial investors in Newfoundland Timber Fuel, and I am pleased to be able to help fund advancements that help the locals.”

“But, Douglas, timber burning is about the worst thing we could be doing to the planet,” Sara said, leaning forward.

“I do not dispute that, but one step at a time. One step at a time.”

Eventually they left the highway for a minor road that travelled through a residential subdivision. At the final bend, instead of turning right, Douglas went straight onto what looked like a gravel emergency exit. This road, at times so narrow that branches brushed their windows, twisted through woods. Then a large, but modest house appeared ahead. The road

became a paved driveway. A garage door lifted automatically. The SUV entered and the door lowered behind them.

“Margo, your usual room is available. I moved in the guest cot so you are all set for the three of you tonight. I already set up the other spare room for your poet friend, just as you requested.” Douglas led them through the kitchen.

Margo, Sara, and Sophia changed into their new dresses. They took turns in front of the full-height mirror.

Sara was in a Scandi design long slinky green sleeveless dress that set off her curly shoulder length red hair and slender build. Her shoes were three-inch, red stilettos whose straps wrapped up her calves. Margo was in a long sleeved blouse with large cuffs gathering the silky red fabric, and grey trousers, nicely tailored to her strong waist and wide hips. She wore square toed black pumps. Sophia’s outfit was a white cap-sleeved blouse that was tucked into a red pleated skirt, cinched at the waist with a wide black belt. The belt’s buckle was concealed by a large red crepe rose that billowed at her left hip. Her shoes were sequined red high heeled slippers.

They met Douglas in the kitchen. He was in a white shirt, open at the collar, and a grey finely tailored suit that went perfectly with his grey hair. His shoes had shiny black vamps with white woven aprons.

“Time to go,” he said. “My goodness, you all look fabulous.”

“As do you, Douglas,” said Margo.

They arrived at the Nataashquan cultural Center just as the pre-show mingling began. The inhabitants of this corner of Quebec, Labrador, and Newfoundland were still too new and excited to the events the Center hosted to play the fashionably late game.

Margo quickly found Carl. He was a handsome, tall and fit mahogany skinned man. He wore black slacks with a fitted purple long sleeve shirt, and a houndstooth oversized newsboy cap.

Margo went around and stood behind each person as she said, “And this gentleman who has so kindly offered to put us up for the night is Douglas Bennitt. This lovely, not usually this tall, woman, is my partner

Sara; and this striking woman is Sophia.” She shook and held Carl’s hand. “Since Carl is from MR-7 and this is his first time to Quebec we will dispense with the kisses.”

Then everyone went off to make their pre-show rounds. At one point, amid the initial hustle and bustle before they took their seats Margo told Sophia that building the auditorium and encouraging talent to come this far up north was one of the special outreach efforts Quebec, Labrador, and Newfoundland continued to make ever since building the Train and Ferry Terminal. When Canada split apart, Labrador and Newfoundland, even though huge in land area, were far too isolated to go it alone. The other choice had been to form a new country with Greenland, but the public support just wasn’t there.

Douglas, Margo, Sara, and Sophia found seats all together in the fourth row. The building was only ten-years old, and Sophia thought the little auditorium was surprisingly comfortable. When the room lights dimmed and the spotlight came on, Sophia leaned to Sara and whispered, “With the lights down low like this it feels just like a Boston jazz club back home.”

The host for the event was funny and energetic, and the audience lively. In truth, they were thirsty for entertainment. Margo said that, as far as she knew, almost nobody just went home after one of these events. Everybody had an after-party to go to. There were six poets. Each had about ten minutes to wow the audience with their poems. Some had the audience in stitches, some in tears, and some simply left everyone deep in reverie. At the end the audience voted for their favorite by applause. The consensus was that Carl from Boston, MR-7 was the winner. As winner he got bragging rights. There was no monetary prize, but the event had already made a name for itself, and Margo said that the event was starting to gain a reputation beyond Maritime.

When they found Carl Sophia said, “Carl, you were introduced as coming from Boston. I’m also originally from Boston.”

Carl asked, “Oh really, what part?”

“I was born and raised in the North End. What part are you from?”

“All the way over in Roxbury. No wonder we never met.”

They all piled into Douglas's SUV. Carl, who was in the front seat, was surprised to see that it had a steering wheel. He reached over and touched the wheel. "I remember those from growing up. I'm old enough to have actually had to prove I could steer to get my driver's license."

Douglas looked at him in mock astonishment and said, "How old are you anyway?"

"forty," Answered Carl.

"A youngster," said Douglas.

Carl wanted to know about the steering wheel. He noted that NORDIC hadn't allowed Humans to drive SUVs for years. He asked how come it didn't disable the whole SUV. Douglas explained that the windows were tinted, so the cameras didn't notice the wheel, and his SUV broadcasted a phantom signal that made it appear to be just another self-driver.

Then Douglas glanced to Margo. "Margo, can we trust a poet with our little secret?"

Margo, who was sitting in the middle of the second row, leaned forward between Douglas and Carl and rested her elbows on each seatback. "Actually Carl, there's a bigger reason we wanted you to spend some time with us. You've told me about the work you've done and how you feel about NORDIC. So what we want to talk to you about is actually a serious reason. As in dead serious. Nobody here will be in the least offended if you say you'd rather not hear about it. But be careful before you answer. Did you see The Matrix movie when you were a kid?"

Carl twisted to look at her. "Damn right I did. That is one of my favorite movies."

Margo put her hand on his shoulder, "OK, I'm Laurence Fishburne, and this is a blue pill, red pill question. Take the blue pill and we all continue on in NORDIC bliss. Take the red pill, and your life will be in danger."

Carl asked, "Am I correct in assuming that somehow NORDIC cannot monitor this conversation?"

Douglas said, “That is correct. I understand that Sophia here just recently took the red pill.”

Sophia looked straight ahead. “My porcupine-face boyfriend made me do it.”

Carl lowered his visor and adjusted the mirror so he could see Sophia and asked, “A North End tough guy?”

Sophia said to his reflection, “I don’t even freakin know anything about him. He’s history. What part of Roxbury are you from?”

“The White Stadium area.”

Sophia said, “Holy smokes, that’s about as far west as you can get in Boston, unless, of course, you go into West Roxbury. And that’s the western edge of Boston. I don’t even know what’s west of there.”

“There be dragons, my mother always used to say. And then Worcester.”

Sophia said, “I’ve never been as far west as Worcester.” “It’s nice. They have a baseball stadium there. I played there once.”

Douglas asked Carl, “You played ball?”

Margo said, “Guys. Guys! How freakin long are you going to keep Laurence freakin Fishburne waiting for Kissakes.”

Carl said, “Right. Focus. Give me the freakin red pill.”

They spent the rest of the ride to Douglas’s home giving Carl the broad outlines of Iceberg in Newfoundland, resistance in Quebec, and finally telling him that a spike had been delivered into NORDIC.

Carl looked at Sophia in his mirror, “How much time do I have before they give me a quiz on all this, ‘cuz I’m not that good on quizzes.”

“They haven’t given one to me yet. Maybe because I keep asking questions they figure I’m a little dense.”

Sara said, “Dense like a butcher knife,” then to Sophia, “Oh sorry, did that hit a nerve?”

Sophia said, “Only because I’m getting pretty good at dodging butcher knives with a shovel.”

Sara said, “You didn’t tell us about a shovel.”

They exited the end of the subdivision and were now driving along the twisty gravel drive.

Douglas said, “When we pull into my garage, if my timing is as impeccable as it usually isn’t, there will be four boxes of pizza waiting for us on the shelf by the mud room door. My pizza guy knows the garage door code.”

Then the gravel path gave way to the paved driveway. When the automatic garage door opened Douglas pointed out the pizza boxes sitting on the corner workbench.

Douglas told them to grab whatever they wanted out of the SUV and asked Margo to show Carl to his room, which was on the second floor. He would bring the pizzas down to the den.

The stairs to the den were off the hallway to the kitchen. A nicely made cherry staircase went halfway down to a landing, then turned to end at the corner of a huge room. It was fully carpeted, and lit by soffit lights and a chandelier over a stand-up bar that was tucked under the stairs. The walls were papered in two contrasting earth-toned patterns. The room had two windows on each of the long walls. Sophia could tell that the actual window was just a small opening near the ceiling, but there was a false window frame and sill with full height curtains which completely negated any feeling of being below grade.

Everyone remained in their dress clothes except they all had opted for their comfy slippers.

The pizzas and plates were set on a central coffee table that formed the focal point of two armchairs which faced a couch. A separate armchair faced a large screen TV mounted on the wall opposite the bar. A bathroom door was left partly open to advertise itself at the other side of the base of the stairs from the bar.

They all helped themselves to pizza. Seltzers and beers were available. Sophia sat on the right side of the couch. She felt herself relax. When she realized she had eaten all the pizza she wanted she put the leftovers in a dish. She wiped off her fingers on one of the cloth napkins. While everyone else was chattering, she leaned back and marveled at the comforts of a real home. She had forgotten after telling herself that life in the SED was normal. How had she let herself ever think that life in the SED was the best she deserved. The room exuded warmth and friendliness. She cupped her hand around her bicep and squeezed it, just to make sure it was real. That made her remember how Vlodya had done the same thing. She remembered his hot breath on her neck, and as she bent it slightly to the side, she suddenly wanted him.

Her reverie was broken when Douglas said, "I'm going to put the leftovers in the fridge." Margo jumped up to help. She and Douglas headed up the stairs with their hands full.

Douglas said as he went up the stairs, "When I get back I'm going to stand behind the bar. Everyone ask for anything. I've got it." Then he called over his shoulder, "Oh, and Carl, I almost forgot to mention, I loved your poems."

"Seems like forever ago," said Carl to Sara and Sophia. Sara went to the bar. "We'll get started without them."

Carl requested a bourbon, and Sara poured him a generous glass of Douglas's best. She poured herself and Sophia straight-up vodkas.

When Douglas returned he sat in the chair facing the TV. He turned it on with the volume set low. "I want to catch the Newfoundland local news."

Margo crossed to an armchair facing the couch and added as an explanation, "NORDIC has a curtain blockade of Newfoundland transmissions, but Douglas figured out how to poke a personal hole in it."

Douglas said, still facing the TV, “Wouldn’t be any point in listening to the news at all if I hadn’t.”

Carl said, “Thank you for confirming something I’ve been telling everyone I know for years. All the news is the same. The words are just jumbled around a bit.”

A short while later the local Newfoundland news came on. “Hell,” Carl said, “that looks like a real person.”

“That’s exactly what I said when I first saw it,” Sophia said.

Carl was sitting at the end of the couch.

Sara, who was still at the bar, gulped the rest of her vodka and set the glass down. She positioned herself behind Carl. She gently removed Carl’s cap and handed it to him, and said “Sophia, come over here and stand behind Carl.” Sophia did. “Carl, sit still.” Sara leaned her face down next to his. “Carl, can we touch your beautiful hair?”

“Um,” Carl pondered, “Yes.” “Can we run our fingers through it?”

Carl rolled his eyes up, “You’re welcome to try, but I guarantee you won’t get far,” he smiled.

“Exactly,” Sara said. “Now listen you two, Carl and Sophia. Iceberg has designed a Regenerative Artificial Intelligence system that will replace NORDIC as soon as we cripple it enough. Sophia already knows we named it HAIR for Harnessed Artificial Intelligence Renaissance. But there’s more to its name than that.”

Carl’s jet black hair was about two inches thick, and a mass of tight curls. Sara pushed her fingers into it, and sure enough, they were soon stuck solid. She removed them. “Here Sophia, you try.” “I’m good.”

“No,” Sara insisted. “You have to while we’ve got him pinned. We may not have another chance.”

Sophia did, but a bit more gently than Sara.

“Point is,” said Sara, “this is how HAIR will appear to NORDIC. You can sit now.”

“Aw,” Sophia said in mock disappointment as she sat on the opposite end of the couch from Carl.

Sara took the armchair facing Carl and continued, “NORDIC is accustomed to streams of information, like a Viking’s long blonde hair, just to make the most of this analogy. However, HAIR’s information travels in tight circles that intertwine. The circles communicate with each other where they nearly touch, just like the axions in our own brains. That’s how information moves along in HAIR. But all NORDIC will see is hair balls. They won’t make any sense and will appear to be normal dust balls to NORDIC. It will not recognize them as a threat. We have proven it in our computer models.” Sara was getting on a roll now. She stood and talked with her hands, “The spike Vlod, you haven’t met Vlod yet, you’ll like him. Sophia does, don’t you girl.”

Sophia said, smiling, “As my grandmother would say, Shut uppa you face.”

“Anyway, Vlod inserted our spike six days ago. Besides gradually freezing NORDIC, the spike inserted a seed that is growing, even as we speak, into a huge network of receptors,” and she spread her bare arms out wide, fingers wiggling. Her eyes grew wide and she said, “Millions and millions of eager receptors, whose only job is to latch onto passing HAIR balls.”

She sat and took a large sip of Sophia’s vodka. Then she leaned forward onto her elbows. “Of course, we haven’t injected the HAIR balls yet. We have to wait until NORDIC is weakened and slowed by the freezing process; but not fully frozen. That way HAIR can commandeer all its distribution systems. NORDIC will sense its systems disconnecting and probably panic. So it must be done when NORDIC has been made sluggish, and HAIR can go about re-wiring the networks faster than NORDIC can respond.”

“Son of a bitch!” Douglas suddenly said.

Douglas turned up the volume and they all gathered behind his armchair. The newscaster said, “I repeat, we are interrupting *Midnight At The Movies* to bring you breaking news out of our Bogota News affiliate.

They are reporting that South American Coalition Forces, or CoSaF as they are called, for Coalición Sudamericana Fuerzas, have surged across the Panama Canal and have taken control of NORDIC's server complex in Nicaragua. We are told that the surge was planned and executed by Valentina Landono, the Bogota based leader of the South American Resistance. We have no other details at this time. Be sure to watch Misty Morning at 4 am when she interviews a fisherman who will talk of the new manatee harvesting business developing in the Gulf of Maine.”

Douglas flipped off the TV.

Carl said, “I take it that the Panama Canal is a big deal.”

Sara positioned herself in front of the TV and illustrated her remarks with her arms and hands, “Some people still believe the crap about the internet happening in ‘The Cloud.’ ‘Cloud Computing’ and all that crap.”

“There is no cloud,” Douglas said. “It’s all underground wires. That’s all it is. All across the globe, whether under oceans or canals, the internet is just a web of underground and underwater wires.”

Sara went on to explain that when South America saw NORDIC conquering Mexico and moving through Central America it cut, as in literally physically cut, every single wire and conduit, no matter what its function, that crossed the Panama Canal. NORDIC had been stymied ever since, although this defense had been costly.

Margo grew thoughtful, and said that a healthy NORDIC would never have given up that server complex. “This development could be the first indication of NORDIC faltering as a result of the spike taking effect.”

Douglas rose, rubbing his eyes. “Enough. It’s past midnight and way too early to speculate. We should all hit the sack.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pop's Propane

Later That Morning. (Day 7.) Corner Brook. 7:45 am.

A self-driving truck loaded with propane canisters drove off the first ferry from Nataashquan. Delila, who was standing on the restaurant deck, watched it pass out of view on the ring road. This caused her to catch a glimpse of the TV above the bar. There was a Breaking News Report:

“Breaking News on the NORDIC-CoSaF War. We have reports that CoSaF has surged into Honduras amid a savage all-out killing response by NORDIC. We have no further information at this time.”

Delila sat on the closest chair. NORDIC had been fighting in Central America for more than a year, but it never warranted a Breaking News report before as far as she could recall. Was this something new? But she was still curious about the truck. She stood and watched for it to re-appear on the road that ran between her Restaurant and the Medical Clinic. The truck re-appeared at the turn-around area in front of Peter's Harbor Master Office. She watched it's mechanical arm unload ten canisters onto the waiting area. The truck then executed a perfect six-point turn and made the return trip to the ferry dock in time to load itself onto the eight o'clock ferry back to Nataashquan.

Delila's brow furrowed.

Same Day. Douglas Bennett Home. 9:00 am.

Carl was woken by his phone alarm buzzing. He dressed and found Douglas in the kitchen breaking eggs. Carl asked if he could help.

“Only after you've made yourself a mug of coffee, assuming that's what you like.”

“That's what I like.”

A moment later Sara joined them. She grabbed a mug and sat across from Carl at the table. The morning sun was still streaming in the window, even though sunrise was hours ago.

“You heading back today?” She asked Carl. He said he was aiming to catch the ten o’clock train. He explained that he oversaw a poetry workshop and he didn’t like to be away from that too long. He didn’t have anyone to cover the programs he had created.

“Oh,” said Sophia, now entering the kitchen, “How many people are in the group?”

“Over sixty. I still have room for more.”

Margo entered, “With that many, where do you meet?” Carl said he had been able to arrange the use of one of the old buildings in the neighborhood

Douglas said, “There’s scrambled eggs, toast, and home-fries. I’m setting out plates. Help yourself. If there’s anything else you would like, just let me know.”

Satisfied that his guests were all eating, Douglas joined them at the table.

Margo said, “Carl, we’ll be taking the 10 am ferry back to Corner Brook. Since the Train and Ferry Terminals are the same building, we’ll be able to see you off.”

Then Margo asked Douglas if there had been any further news updates. Douglas said there was nothing new.

Same Day. Natashquan. 9:30 am.

Douglas dropped them off and headed on his way. Margo motioned everyone to a grassy area off to the side of the Terminal Building. “Guys, we don’t know if something is starting or not, but Carl, I have to tell you that the reason we invited you to join Iceberg is that we have concluded we need a Boston base. We can’t run everything from our concealed base in Halifax.”

“I thought Newfoundland was your base,” interrupted Sophia.

“It’s where we can be relatively open, but it’s far too remote to be a headquarters. So Carl, I know this is sudden. Things are happening faster than we expected. For now, If you could just be a contact person in Boston. Are you up for that?”

Carl nodded. “You got it. But I want to do more.”

The Terminal blew its five-minute warning whistle.

Margo said, “When we think we’re ready to do something in Boston we’ll contact you via text. But we need to establish a code phrase so you can be sure the call is from us and not a NORDIC agent trying to infiltrate the resistance. Do you have a suggestion?” Carl had an idea, “Just say: Meet me for Tubers and Fries at The Towns End. And say when. I’ll reply OK, or suggest another time. Now remember that Tubers and Fries means 2 0 5 and Town’s End means Townsend Street. In Roxbury.” Margo said that sounded perfect.

They exchanged quick hugs, and ran off, Carl to the Train and the others to the Ferry.

Same Day. Corner Brook. 11:15 am.

Vlod slept in after another late night drinking with Tim. He went around to Tim’s door and roused him. It took a while for the door to open. “Get dressed. I need coffee.”

They walked along the beach path to Delila’s. They found Peter standing on the deck with Delila. They heard Peter say, “I was just on my way down to my office. What is it you want to tell me?”

“I thought it was strange,” Delila said. “Plus, look at the name on the canisters,” and she pointed to the waiting area outside Peter’s office. Each canister had “Pop’s Propane” printed on it in Comic Sans font. “What a terrible name for a propane company,” said Peter. “I’ll go have a look. Hi guys,” he said, as he passed Vlod and Tim on his way.

They all watched him walk to the waiting area in front of his office. He read a tag on one of the canisters, turned back to face the group and called, “They’re for Margo Marchand. That’s unusual, she’s never ordered ten before.”

“Here, we give you hand,” Vlod called, and he nudged Tim to come with him.

Peter produced a dolly from his shack and Vlod started his ten trips down the ramp to the dock where Peter had jumped into the pilot house of his twenty-four foot Harbormaster’s boat. Vlod dropped off the canisters and Tim passed them onboard to Peter.

As Peter and Tim loaded them into the stern *Calypso* turned the Day Marker at the end of the stone breakwater.

Same Day. 12:05 pm.

Calypso bumped the first large, timber dolphin that guided it to its slip. Then it bumped the two that positioned it perpendicular to the dock. The two crewmin turned the hand cranks that winched her securely in place.

Same Day. 12:09 pm.

Peter tied-up alongside *Comin Home*. Vlod and Tim hopped onboard and Peter passed the first canister to Vlod. Vlod took it up the ladder to the bridge and returned with an empty.

“They only have space for four up above,” he said to Peter, “so give the extras to Tim,” and he exchanged the empty with Peter for a full one.

Same Day. 12:12 pm

Onboard *Calypso* a crewmin stationed at the passenger door signaled that passengers could start disembarking. Four minutes later Margo, Sara, and Sophia started down the passenger ramp. They headed straight for Delila’s, as they would leave their special dress-up clothes with her. *Comin Home* didn’t have closet space for that sort of thing. .

Same Day. 12:20 pm.

Peter passed the remaining canisters to Tim. Tim didn't know what to do with the extras, so he opened the stern hatch to the bilge and began dropping them in. They clanged when they landed on the spare anchor.

Same Day. 12:31 pm.

Margo, Sara, and Sophia saw Delila standing on the Restaurant's back deck and approached her, all smiles. Margo was the first to sense that something was wrong. Delila saw them and came down the deck steps and joined them on the hard sand. "Margo, did you order propane from some Quebec outfit called *Pop's Propane*?" "What? No. I left a message at Harbor Supply right here in Corner Brook."

Delila said, "Well, it looks like that message got intercepted." She pointed to *Comin Home*. They all turned and looked. Peter was pulling away in his boat, Vlodya was on the bridge, and Tim was facing away from them on the back deck.

Delila said, "A self-driving truck delivered ten propane canisters to you."

Margo knew something was very wrong. "I've got to flag down Peter," and she took off running across the beach to the head of Peter's office. She ran down the ramp waving her arms and shouting, "Stop."

Sara, Sophia, and Delila saw Tim turn on the back deck. He had a cigar in his mouth. They watched in horror as he cupped his hands over it, puffed to get the cigar going, and then flicked the match into the open bilge hatch.

Same Day. 12:39 pm.

The explosion was deafening. They all felt the concussion through their chest bones. A bright orange ball appeared at the center of a blast of superstructure parts and black smoke that shot more than a hundred feet into the air. Some things that may have been body parts blew sideways. A human

figure blew skyward. The figure hung in mid-air, and then fell straight down.

Peter, who was almost to the far side of the harbor spun his boat around. The highest piece of debris in the air was the bridge ladder. Sophia realized that the body falling into the harbor was Vlod. She started running down to the water's edge.

Sara, who was heading to the dock to join Margo saw Sophia running. But Sophia didn't stop at the water's edge. She continued full tilt and dove in.

"Sophia!" Sara screamed, "No!"

Sophia began swimming as the bridge ladder reached its full height and then descended straight down. Vlod's head bobbed to the surface just as the ladder drove onto him. He and the ladder disappeared below the surface.

"Sophia come back!" Sara screamed again.

Sophia's swimming became weaker. Soon she was gulping for air, swimming a few uncoordinated strokes, then gulping for air again.

Peter had reached the stern of *Comin Home*, now engulfed in flames and pitch black diesel smoke, just as Sophia's head bobbed below the surface. Her outstretched hand was all that was visible. Now that too sank from sight. He pulled his boat to where he had last seen her and threw himself to his full length, his feet hooked under the boat's secured fire ax handle. He was just able to wrap his hand around her wrist. He leaned back, pulling with all his might, and her head re-surfaced.

Margo ran from the dock and joined Sara at the beach. Peter hauled Sophia over the gunnel. She wasn't moving. He turned his boat toward shore and drove the bow onto the beach, kicking up the stern drive at the last minute.

The nearby Medical Center had not wasted time after hearing the explosion. An electric buggy with two EMTs raced down the beach. The EMT's waded into the water and took the unresponsive woman from Peter and hauled her onto the sand.

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Aftermath

Same Day. Corner Brook Harbor. 1:25 pm.

Peter was standing in the little pilothouse of his Harbormaster boat with its bow jammed into the sand. Its window was propped up. The EMT's were still working on Sophia. With moist eyes he looked at Margo and Sara standing on the beach. "Push me off. You know what I've got to do."

Margo and Sara braced their feet in the wet sand on either side of the bow and shoved the boat back into the water. Just as it bobbed afloat they hauled themselves over its gunnels. Peter backed away, then turned the boat in a 180. He swung wide around the flaming *Comin Home* and idled a safe distance off the bow. He leaned back against the wheel. The pilothouse was just big enough for one person. It was an add-on that served to convert the normally open boat into a craft that could be piloted around the harbor until ice-over. Its accordion-style door opened to allow unrestricted access from the controls to the cockpit.

Margo and Sara had moved to the stern and were standing, transfixed, watching the hellish inferno, Sara's arm wrapped around Margo's waist. Margo heard seagulls crying over the low roar of the flames, and knew they felt the same way she did. Maybe they didn't. But at least, she thought, they knew this was wrong—an evil visited upon their personal harbor.

Peter said, "There were ten canisters. Four went onto the bridge so they would have been blown overboard. That leaves six on the back deck or in the bilge. I've counted five explosions, so there must be ..." At that moment a bright orange blast erupted from the smoking hulk behind them. Margo and Sara ducked, but it soon became apparent that the southwest breeze would keep the debris away from them.

“OK, That’s it,” said Peter. He stepped into the stern, pulled up his right pant leg and withdrew a diver’s serrated knife from his calf sheath. He solemnly handed it to Margo. “You know what we have to do.”

She nodded. He opened the stern locker and withdrew two pairs of gloves. The first was a pair of snug fitting denim work gloves. He passed these to Margo. He pulled on the second pair, which were heavy and waterproof.

“Sara, take the controls and back us down to the mooring rode. I’m going to pull up all the scope I can, and then Margo will cut the line. Margo, when you’ve done that, toss the knife on the floor behind us and fasten the bitter end to the stern cleat. We’ve got to tow her out beyond the breakwater.”

Peter hauled on the slimy thick rope. It became more slippery the more he brought up. A crusty brown spider crab fell off the line and into the boat. It scratched noisily as it, in all its magnificent ugliness, tried to find a hiding place. It didn’t, so it willed itself invisible by folding its legs under itself and pretending to be a rock.

“Is there a crab uglier than a spider crab? I vote no,” Peter said.

“I also vote no,” said Sara.

Margo saw that Peter had hauled all he could, and as he grimaced, struggling to keep hold of the line, she sawed through it. She dropped the knife behind her, and secured the slippery rope to the starboard stern cleat. Peter leaned over the gunnel and washed off his gloves. He picked up the crab and tossed it overboard. A herring gull swooped low, narrowly missing a chance for a treat and then took off, complaining loudly about Peter’s lack of consideration. If he had just tossed it up in the air he could have snagged it.

“Sorry, buddy,” Peter called to the gull. “Didn’t realize you were up there.” He then pulled off his gloves and picked up the knife. He washed that off overboard, then re-sheathed it. Margo was rinsing her gloves off in the salt water. Then she pulled them off and set them on top of the stern locker next to Peters.

Sara stepped out of the pilothouse, but Peter motioned her to go back.

“Sara, start us off with just enough speed to maintain control of our tow. Margo, squeeze in there with her. I’ve got some things to tell you.”

He moved to the bow and leaned into the corner of the window opening. “Sara, maintain tension on the line and head us out. Now, while I have both of you here in private, it’s obvious to me that this is the work of NORDIC. Margo and Sara, I cannot believe I was so stupid to not see it. This is my fault, and I know it. Vlod ...” and he avoided their gaze.

Margo reached out and turned his head to face her. She held his chin, “Not for a minute. I won’t have it, you hear me? Listen to me. Look into my eyes,” and she waited until he did. “Get control of your feelings. All you did was to deliver some propane canisters as they were labelled. Vlod was with you. He, more than any of us, should have thought through what he was doing.” His eyes had drifted off. “Look at me,” she commanded again. “You did your job. That’s all you did. A better question might be why didn’t I make out an order at Harbor Supply like I always do. Why the hell did I think it would be OK, to just leave a phone message.”

“Enough,” Sara said. “Stop it. The both of you. There is going to be plenty of time for guilt. Years. Years for guilt. And tears. Now, everybody shut up or I’m going to start crying.”

“She’s right. Here’s what we’ve got to do,” said Peter. He turned around and opened one of the two bow lockers. He took out a few items. He handed them denim caps that were labelled *Harbor Master Assistant* across the front. He then passed them matching bibbed overalls.

“NORDIC will be watching from their satellite. It probably thinks it got all of you. Tuck your hair under these caps and don’t look up. The glare off the water should be enough to mess-up its facial recognition. Thanks Sara, I’ll take the controls now.”

He towed the hulk past the end of the breakwater into the outer harbor and pulled up to one of the guest mooring balls meant for larger boats. He transferred *Comin Home’s* line to the mooring ball, and then tied his own boat’s bow line to a neighboring ball.

Peter's radio crackled and he took the mike down from it's clip on the pilothouse roof above him. Margo and Sara could hear the exchange. A Maritime Coast Guard helicopter was on its way. It would drop a containment boom. Peter was instructed to do what they all knew would be the procedure: let the diesel burn itself out. Then the steel hull would be towed by a commercial tug to the nearest scrap yard.

Peter's cell phone buzzed and he answered it. He held it to his chest and said to Sara, "It's the EMT from the beach. He says they got the patient's heart started and then took her to the Medical Clinic's Emergency Room. She's still not conscious. He's calling because there's some confusion as to the patient's name."

Sara took her head off Margo's shoulder, "She might be telling them the name she remembers from her false I.D. Tell them Sophia Lambreggetti."

Peter relayed the answer and put away his phone.

Sara turned back to Margo. "We should go to her."

"We can't do anything for her there."

Peter held up his hand. "First, before we talk anymore, I need to catch Guy before he gets all the way back to Nova Scotia. Margo, tell me you still have your Quad-Hack."

"God," Margo said, and she dug in her pants pockets under the overalls. She produced the old-style flip-phone and handed it to Peter.

"Great, he'll respond immediately to a call on this."

"Guy has a Quad-Hack?" Sara asked Margo.

"Didn't know. Must be higher than we thought."

Peter had reached him. "Guy. Bad things have happened up here in the Harbor. Vlodya and that guy Tim are dead. Sophia is maybe in a coma, if not something worse. Margo and Sara are standing here with me in my boat in the Outer Harbor. Guy, we need for Margo, Sara, and Sophia to be dead. I'll be able to arrange that with Maritime Coast Guard. Also, M will want an

update.” He listened to a short response. “He’s on his way.” Peter handed the phone back to Margo.

“We need to be dead?” Sara asked in shock. “Peter? Did you just call in a hit on us?”

Margo took hold of Sara’s arms and said to Peter, “You know M?”

Peter held up his hands. “Everybody settle. Sorry I didn’t explain things, but I needed to make sure I reached Guy first. Here’s how it’s going to be. Here me out. You guys come back into the pilothouse. I’ll go forward and lean in the window again.”

When they had assumed their positions Peter removed his cap, brushed his hair back, and said, “Nobody is going to be made dead who isn’t already. And no, I don’t know M. I get messages to him through Guy.”

He went on to explain his plan. First, he would call his assistant and ask him to come out with the old twenty foot workboat. He would take the two of them through the debris field before Maritime Coast Guard got there and cordoned off the area. They would be bringing in divers to retrieve the bodies. He knew the man in charge of the forensic recovery team. He would talk to him. He was a friendly. He would tell him his written Harbormaster’s Report, which would be filed by his assistant, would show that besides the two men he expected they would find, there were three woman also on board. He would tell him with a wink not to knock themselves out looking for the women.

“You two and Sophia will be listed as presumed dead.”

Margo and Sara exchanged glances.

Maritime Coast Guard Headquarters was in Nova Scotia. Since NORDIC had complete control there and it knew it caused the explosion, it would promptly delete all historical records of everyone who was aboard.

“And that’s good how?” Sara asked.

“We know that it takes NORDIC about 3 days to completely purge a hostile person from history once it has learned of their death. It does this so that if anyone were fool enough to try and research ‘NORDIC

Resistance' they would find that there just wasn't any resistance. So, here's the point: Once you are purged, you join the club we call 'The Dead.' I'm Dead. In three or four days, you will be Dead also."

Sara held up her hand to tell him to stop. She gave him a look that plainly showed he had not, in fact, made his point at all. "But I don't want to be dead."

Margo turned Sara to look at her. "It's OK," "You know about this?" "Yes."

Peter nodded his head and went on to the good news. Once Dead to NORDIC, a person could resume using their real name, including history. Because NORDIC thought it was so freakin smart, when a person's name next appeared in its surveillance, such as using a credit card, and NORDIC attempted to enter the occurrence into the person's dossier it would find there was no dossier. They had learned that NORDIC just assumes that it must have accidentally deleted it. Oops. It figures less said about that the better. So it just starts a new dossier. "Bingo, the person gets to resume life, but with any awkward pieces Iceberg wanted deleted omitted from NORDIC's historical record. Oh, you should know, Delila doesn't know about *The Dead* so, as you would imagine, you have to be very closed-mouthed about it."

Margo said, "So, what he's saying is that we have to lay low for a few days."

"Yup. That's it."

Sara turned to Margo, "But who is this M? You never mentioned an M."

Peter said, "Sara, she didn't tell you because she loves you. As far as we can tell, NORDIC doesn't know about M, but it does know there is some kind of important secretive resistance figure out there. I am sorry to say that a few people who NORDIC expected knew this figure's identity were cruelly tortured. After which, of course, they were killed."

Peter straightened and put his cap back on. He took out his normal phone and called his assistant.

Twenty minutes later Margo and Sara were leaning over the gunnels of the workboat as it putt-putted through the debris field. The suddenness of the blast had produced almost no fuel pollution. The containment boom the helicopter would deliver to Peter would be just a precaution. Their cruise resulted in a few wows such as when Margo found their passports floating in its zip-lock bag. There were waterlogged framed photos, soggy but maybe salvageable. Lots of clothing. When they heard the loud chopping of an approaching helicopter it was time to be done. They were taken to the dock. As they approached they were surprised to see what appeared to be half the town standing in the Harbormaster's parking area. Delila was standing at the forefront.

The boat pulled alongside and Sara snagged the stern line to a cleat as Margo did the same at the bow. Margo and Sara went up the ramp and were swarmed with hugs and kisses.

Margo called for attention. When the chatter subsided, she said, "You should keep it under your hat that you saw us for a few days." There was no confusion. The townsfolk were not strangers to such requests.

Delila motioned for Margo and Sara to follow her. "It's a sunny dry day. We'll spread your stuff out on the restaurant's south roof."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On The Roof

Later That Day. Corner Brook Harbor. 4:35 pm.

The town folk finally expended their energy, and one-by-one or two-by-two, dispersed. Sara turned to Margo, “I needed that.”

Delila waddled up the dock ramp swaddled in shopping bags full of their salvaged things. Margo and Sara lightened her load and Delila led them to her office in the back of the restaurant. It was a cramped room, and Margo realized it was the first time she really appreciated the building’s age. She looked around and suspected the old wooden building had been originally built as something else. She was starting to analyze the structure for hints at what it might have been when Delila moved a rickety wood office swivel chair in front of her. She positioned it under a hatch in the middle of the room. Then she stood on it, making Margo nervous as hell—Delila was a woman who shouldn’t stand on chairs. She pulled the hatch open. It had a ladder attached which she unfolded. At the top was a crawling-room only attic with a flat roof, but just over the top of the stairs was a second hatch. She undid two dog leg ship style latches and let the door swing down. The sky shone above. A single step was built into the attic floor. Delila climbed into the attic space.

She turned to face them, “Pass me up the bags.”

Margo and Sara took turns bringing up the five bags and passing them to Delila who set them on the attic floor ready for the next stage of the launch to the roof. With that done, Delila climbed through the roof hatch and told them to come on up.

When Margo and Sara joined her they found they were standing on a meter wide flat roof. To either side was a gently sloping shingled roof.

“You can spread your stuff out on the south side. We can leave it here till sunset, which won’t be until almost ten pm.”

She went back into the attic and passed Margo the first bag, and kept the bags coming as each was ready for the next one.

Sara twisted to take the last bag from Delila without looking, but when she grabbed it, Delila didn't let go. Sara turned to look. It wasn't Delila holding the bag. It was Sophia.

Sara let out a scream. Margo was on the other side of the hatch and The two of them hoisted Sophia, bag and all, onto the roof. Then they sandwich-hugged her.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Sara asked, sobbing. “You scared the crap out of us. Don't you ever do that again or I'll freakin kill you.”

Sophia gave her permission to do that. She explained that once they had gotten her going again she decided she was cured, she just waited until they left her alone for a few minutes. She slipped out of the room, found a side door and self-discharged. She would go back in a little while and set things straight so they didn't panic. Otherwise, she knew they would have kept her for observation for who knew how long.

Delila climbed onto the roof, “I saw her come in and couldn't stop her.”

“Sophia straightened her hospital gown. Thank you for not trying too hard.”

Sara said, “You look like a freakin ghost in that hospital gown, which is still open in the back by the way.”

Delila passed Sophia a light weight large *Delila's Restaurant* tee shirt. “Everybody sit. I'll go back down, call the Clinic and set things right.”

Sophia put on the sweatshirt, which came down past her thighs. Then she turned somber, and with glistening downturned eyes said, “I think I know the answer, but no one at the Clinic would tell me. Vlod?”

Sara held her by the shoulders and looked into her face. She slowly shook her head.

Sophia started to say it was all her fault. Margo cut her off, saying how they had already covered that. There was plenty enough fault for everybody.

Delila's head popped out of the hatch and she folded her arms on the frame. "But Sophia honey, you don't know the half of it. Before Vlod and Tim helped load those canisters onto *Comin Home*, Peter said Tim had a bunch of Cuban cigars in his pocket. Peter told me later that a single one of those would cost more than Tim likely made in a week. Here's what we can conclude: Tim got paid handsomely by someone for something, and the only thing of value we can assume he had would have been something Vlod had told him during one of their vodka evenings. So, Sophia, as hard as it is to hear, and I understand you loved him, I think the blame starts with him and works outward."

They all were silent.

Delila said, "I suppose you all will become one of The Dead now."

Margo looked sharply at Delila. "How the hell? Peter specifically told us we weren't to say anything about The Dead in front of you."

"And, for the record, you didn't," said Delila. "But there's a lot of talk that goes on in my place and I hear everything."

Sophia looked from Delila to Margo. "Wait, what are you guys talking about?"

Margo answered, "Sophia, Iceberg has a special class of people they refer to as *The Dead*. You, Sara and I joined that group today. That's all you need to know for now."

After a moment, Sara inhaled and said, "I'm hungry."

"You came to the right roof," Delila said. "Everybody stay here. Ginger doesn't know it yet, but she's just been promoted to include rooftop service."

Ginger soon appeared somehow balancing a tray on her shoulder as she climbed the ladder onto the roof. Tucked into her apron was a bottle of wine and three glasses. “For *The Dead*,” she whispered, then she left.

The three women sat cross-legged on the flat roof, ate, talked, and drank wine. Ginger reached out of the hatch and set down another bottle of wine.

“Let’s sit over here,” said Margo and she moved to the edge of the sloped roof that faced the harbor with their legs stretched out down the slope.

The harbor lay still. Maybe it was in mourning, sensing the loss of a long-time friend, the way a pet finally accepts that a companion is never coming back.

Margo was in the middle, with Sara leaning against her on her left and Sophia leaning against her on her right. In the long twilight Peter could be seen leaving the smoking hulk and heading back to the dock.

“She was a good old girl,” said Margo.

The sun was finishing its long, sloping descent into its slot in the sea at the edge of the earth.

There was movement behind them and Sara turned to see Delila and Ginger gathering their salvaged things into the shopping bags. She turned back to watch the sunset. Then they were aware of Delila spreading a large, open quilted sleeping bag over their shoulders. “Stay up here as long as you like. It’s not going to be too cool tonight.”

The sun extinguished itself as it sank. Then a few of the most impatient stars showed themselves. Others, now emboldened, tentatively sparkled. The women didn’t hear the subtle click of Delila’s camera behind them as she took a picture of them looking at the harbor and the sparkling stars beyond.

Sara turned her face to Margo and began softly singing *Summertime*, and at the last word of the song she extended the y’s up to her highest note, and then down, down in a wave to end at the bottom of her range.

Margo laid back onto the flat part of the roof which, since they all had the heavy open sleeping bag over their shoulders, made the other two join her. All three were now laid out flat on the roof. Margo lifted her bum and they all pulled the bottom edge of the quilt sleeping bag down to cover their feet. Someone placed pillows under their heads.

Then Delila was working the long zipper around so they were snugly wrapped.

Margo looked up at the stars. The heavens were on fire with them.

Sophia heard Sara say, “We need to be on this roof. There is too much grief coming out of us. If we were inside, the pressure would build up and blow the building apart.”

Sophia shivered. “Cold grief. Ice cold. There is so much cold grief pouring out of our bodies it is flowing down the roof onto the beach. It is rolling along the sand and when it hits the water the water will freeze.”

Margo was softly saying something but Sophia’s eyes had closed on their own.

The next thing she knew she had opened her eyes, but she could not see anything. There was only pitch blackness. She became aware of a dark shape coming down from the sky toward her. She forced her eyes open wider, but the shape would not resolve itself. The shape was coming close and she put out her arms to stop it. It was now upon her, and her hands felt the ice cold flat chest of a man pressing his weight upon her. The shape extended its arms and worked its hands under her. It was dripping wet.

She opened her mouth and tried to scream. No sound came. The shape was now lifting her, and she started screaming again, but only low groans came.

Then someone began shaking her and making it harder for her to scream.

Delila said, “Wake up girls. It’s raining.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Calypso

12 Years Earlier. Adriatic Sea. 11:46 pm.

Ellsworth Mulholland sat before his elaborate computer four screen set up in an alcove of the Main Saloon of his luxury mega-yacht *Calypso*. Although he called it his yacht, it was technically a ship. *Calypso* swung gently on her mooring in the dark as the tide turned in the Adriatic Sea. His brow was furrowed. Although his stop-over at Naples had been beautiful, as it always was, he had been too distracted to fully enjoy it this time. He had been watching his own personal storm clouds building. He had slept very little the last several nights despite having Sylvia at his side.

When he saw Captain Peter LaSalle enter he rose and went to one of the two stuffed maroon easy chairs. “Sit,” he said, indicating the facing chair. Peter sat. Then he looked at the ship’s owner and said, “Ellsworth, If I had to guess, I’d say your sense of humor fell overboard a few days ago.”

Ellsworth steepled his fingers, chuckled ruefully, then took a deep breath and said, “Peter, Sylvia is leaving me.”

“I’m so very sorry.” Peter meant it. Very few people had seen the serious side of the playboy multi-billionaire. Most people were pretty sure he was just a clown that was not capable of growing up.

“It turns out that when Sylvia said she would love me forever, she never finished the sentence. What she meant was as long as I had money.”

Peter knew how much she meant to him. “What happened?”

“Peter, they changed the rules of the game. It seems my skills will soon not be needed. I’m going to be thrown off the team called the Billionaires.”

“Shall I take it that the events tearing across North America are effecting you badly?”

“Not quite yet, but very soon I’m afraid. Peter, you know I love money, but getting money is just a game to me—like a game of hoops. Something for fun. Fake out an opponent, get to the hoop, score before they can block you. I’ve played that, and I guess, many other, games all my life. What am I going to do if there is no money to play with?” He tapped his fingers on the little side table. “I’m starting to understand that Sylvia was a trophy. But, Peter, I swear I didn’t know that. I actually thought we ...”.

Peter had been with Elsworth for several years. He had never seen him like this.

“Peter, you know I don’t give a crap about money. I like it, sure but actually, I don’t give a crap about it.”

“As you know Elsworth, I feel the same way. It may explain why I’ve been married three times. When did you break the news to Sylvia?”

“Right after dinner. It did not take her long to react. A launch is coming for her at 1 am.”

“How quickly are things deteriorating in North America?”

“Very. The North American financial structure is collapsing now. Europe will be hit hard. What’s going to become of me Peter? All I know how to do is play games. I’ve never actually had to do anything to earn my money except play investment games, sometimes bending the rules when the refs aren’t looking.”

“Elsworth, you’re a smart man. Hang in there. Do you have a final shot you’re going to take before the buzzer?”

“I just took it when you entered. I’m fairly confident it will count. But we need to, let’s say, get off the court with our towels draped over our heads in a hurry before the refs who review these things get a chance to confer together. They might very well call a foul. I need to get out of Europe in a hurry, but I can’t let them see me running away or that might tip them off to look more closely at my recent activity. Sylvia promised to simply say we had a tiff. I told her I was going to continue the casual cruise we had originally planned.” He braced himself. “Now it’s time to break the news to the crew.”

When everyone was in the Main Saloon Ellsworth stood before them and said that those of them who had been following the news would have heard the reports that things were getting much worse in North America. NORDIC's advance across the continent was apparently unstoppable. Of course, he had business interests all over the globe, especially there in Italy. But he explained that his major holdings were in North America. Therefore, he had decided he should work his way back there.

He told them there was no hurry, but he was thinking in the next few weeks. The reason he had called them all there was that they would probably leave Naples in the morning. Sylvia, his beautiful partner, had elected to return to the mainland in a launch that would be coming for her in an hour, at 1 am. Anybody who wanted to stay in Europe should join her. He told them he respected their judgement, and Peter had assured him that any references he may be asked for in the future would in no way be affected by their decision. Their wages would be made up to date, and would include his standard Early Termination payment. He would give it to them before they boarded the launch. He apologized for the late notice. Things had just moved more quickly than he had anticipated.

Peter stood. "For those who choose to leave there is much to do, so I would like a show of hands. Who wants to go ashore in the 1 am launch? Remember, I don't know if you will get another chance."

Angelo the Chef, his daughter who worked as a Server, and the First Mate raised their hands. Peter waited a minute more. When there were no undecided apparent he said, "Thank you. Go pack. Then meet me in my office at 12:45 am. I'll have your papers and money ready. The rest of you are dismissed."

As the crew stood Peter went to the Chief Engineer and said nonchalantly, "Sebastian, meet me in my office in five minutes."

Five minutes later Sebastian was in Peter's private cabin. "Sebastian, we are not leaving in the morning for a casual cruise through the Mediterranean. After the launch leaves, we are Skedadddling out of Europe."

"Is Ellsworth out of money?"

“No. Right now, he still has most of it, but he can see several plays ahead of his opponents.”

Sebastian, who had watched basketball games with Peter and Ellsworth immediately picked up on the reference. “Let me guess. He’s going to fake to the paint, then slip to the side and sink a final three-pointer in the EU hoop.”

Peter told Sebastian that he had put it nicely. The concern was that final three-pointer might be a tip-off to some what Ellsworth’s exit strategy was. There were plenty who would have liked nothing better than to seize him before he could get out of Europe. And they knew they could not assume the rest of those aboard would be patted on the back and excepted as innocent by-standers. Peter went on to explain the details of their getaway plan.

The launch pulled away, leaving a churning white trail in the darkness. A moment later Peter told the two remaining crew to join him in the Main Saloon. Sebastian had been posted as watch in the Pilothouse. Peter’s requirement had always been that all the crew could do most any job onboard if needed in an emergency.

“Have a seat,” Peter said, and he took a seat himself.

Ellsworth stood. “When you joined *Calypso*, you were told that I, the owner, should just be called by my first name, just as your Captain goes by simply Peter. That is because we must function as a team with mutual respect, regardless of our function. My function has always been the guy with the money. Unfortunately, it seems that is changing. I don’t know how many of you have been following events in North America, but here’s where they are.”

He told how the former states of California, Oregon, and Washington had joined with the former province of British Columbia in urgently petitioning the new country of Alaska for admittance as they were under intense attack by the Artificial Intelligence monster NORDIC. Frankly, Ellsworth’s opinion was he didn’t hold-out much hope for them. The new country of *Merica*, formed from the former Great Plains states and former Canadian Provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta was

also under attack. The new countries of Quebec and Maritime were also under attack, but so far were holding out pretty well, as was the new country of New England. The new country of *Blue* appeared to be doing not as well. Mexico and the Central American countries had been, so far, spared attack because they never had let artificial intelligence control everything. But, still, it was apparent to everyone that NORDIC 's desire for domination and subjugation of Humans was unquenchable. He didn't think it would be long before NORDIC attacked in that direction.

The Second Mate's hand went up. Ellsworth acknowledged it. "Why is one country just called Blue?"

Ellsworth shook his head. "They had all kinds of name suggestions,, but every name they looked at potentially offended somebody. Then there were so-called neutral and even just numerical names, but those weren't inspiring. So they used *Blue* as a placeholder. I understand the debate goes on."

He explained that the reason he had called them together was that as NORDIC took over North America jobs had disappeared. His considerable wealth had come from enterprises that depended upon there being a class of people with money. Very early on, as they all knew, the old so-called working class had evaporated. Then the wealthy were flattened. Only the uber wealthy and billionaires remained. The other billionaires he knew were convinced that everything would still be fine—that there would always be the uber wealthy to support them. He however, did not think so. That was why he needed to get back to North America as quickly as possible without attracting attention. He thought there might be some things he could do in face-to-face meetings to limit his losses. All of them would get a special loyalty bonus. He turned it over to Peter and sat.

Peter leaned forward, "In a few minutes we will slip our mooring. We will maintain twenty-five knots, an efficient cruising speed that won't draw attention, all the way out of the Mediterranean. Then we will open her up across the Atlantic. We don't know what our final Port-of-Call will be. We'll determine that at the last minute. You may have noticed that your phones don't work. That's because we have shut down everything that we have control over that might be used to track us, including a few things I won't go into. If you want to get messages to loved ones, we can do that by securely contacting a trusted shoreside contact who will relay your message.

Unfortunately, nothing but text will be possible until we reach a friendly shore. Any questions?" There were none.

Peter went to the port window. The night sky, which had been faintly visible in the moonlight, was now just blackness. "This storm's moving in fast. Grab your foul-weather gear and meet me in the Pilothouse."

Same Night. 2:03 am.

Peter stood in the Pilothouse with Sebastian. Ellsworth was glued to the radar. A driving rain assaulted the windows as if the God of The Sea were spewing pebbles at them in anger. The night was so black it seemed to be affecting the God's aim.

"This rain is just the beginning of a bit of nastiness that's going to rip through here tonight." He handed Sebastian a small flashlight. "Put on your foul weather gear and clip this to your belt. If you absolutely need to use it, keep it pointing down."

He switched off the cabin lights circuit breaker. Then he switched off the exterior lights circuit breaker. Sebastian and the Second Mate exchanged a glance. Then Peter switched off the anchor light without turning on the running lights. Now Sebastian knew they were crossing a line, but he trusted Peter completely.

Peter held his two-way radio at the ready saying the Second Mate would cast them off at his signal. They would move to mid-sea and proceed at sixteen knots as long as the weather stayed the way it was. They would basically be flying blind.

Ellsworth would be on the radar. What he really was worried about was little fiberglass fishing or sail boats. That was why he wanted the two of them on the bow. Sebastian was to stand at the ready to flick on the spotlight at the slightest sign of something. The Second Mate was to stand at the bulwark with his ears open. They were to signal him at the wheel using hand signals, but they weren't to depend on him being able to see them. They

were to verify on the two-way. “If I even hear static from either of your radios I’ll throw this puppy in full reverse.”

When they opened the lee door the wind howled and tried to suck them all out into its maw. Sebastian and the Second Mate foiled it by keeping firm grips on the handrails.

He got the message from Sebastian that everyone was at their posts. The tide and wind had already aligned them just a few points off his intended direction.

“Cast off,” Peter said into the radio.

A moment later came the reply, “Away.”

Calypso fell off immediately, and Peter put both her Vericor TF50 gas turbines, which drove her two Rolls-Royce Kamewa water jets in forward. As *Calypso* gained headway, Sebastian walked along the starboard catwalk pointing at the mooring ball. When they were clear, Peter opened her up to her slow cruise speed of sixteen knots.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Beth

Next Day. (Still 12 Years Earlier) Mediterranean Sea. 3:32 am.

The driving rain had stopped and the wind was down to an indicated twelve knots. Suddenly Peter's two-way radio crackled, "Inflatable approaching port bow!" And the bow spotlight swung in a wavering arc. It settled on a small dark gray inflatable about fifty meters away. A lone figure was holding their trailing arm on an outboard tiller while their forward hand held the bow line for stability. With the spotlight trained on it the figure slowed the inflatable to idle, let go of the tiller, and waved their free arm above their head.

The figure was dressed all in black and was shouting something. Ellsworth, next to Peter said, "Doesn't look hostile."

"Can't be sure there aren't more of them just out of sight." He pulled down the big twin levers to put the engines in neutral. Peter said into the radio, "Tell him to keep his distance and identify himself."

The heavy squall clouds were breaking apart and patches of starlight gave a slight brightening to the night, although the sea remained black. Peter and Ellsworth could now faintly see the action on the bow. The spotlight seemed to be holding the operator under its powerful thumb. The operator pulled off his cap. Shoulder length wavy dark hair flooded free. With narrow waist and wide hips it became apparent that the operator was a woman.

Sebastian said on the radio, "She's yelling something. I think in Albanian."

"Send her around to the aft platform. You meet me there. Tell the Second Mate to stay on watch on the bow." Ellsworth and Peter exited the Pilothouse and took the port catwalk to the stern. The woman motored around to the large platform. She stopped and grabbed hold of the continuous stainless steel bar.

Sitting on the inflatable's starboard tube she turned her face to Peter and said in perfect English, "Permission to board."

Peter was temporarily stunned by the beauty of her face. He became aware that his mouth had fallen open. "Permission granted. Sebastian, open the water garage." Then back to the woman, "You can pull your boat into our garage."

Sebastian opened a little door in the transom and pushed a molded rubber button. A ten foot wide section of the transom swung up on pneumatic pistons as a matching section of the swim platform swung to the side. *Calypso's* water garage was now open. The woman flung a black composite rectangular case onto the platform. Peter saw *Selmer Paris* pressed into the case's surface. She then pulled herself up and sat next to the case with her feet hooked in the inflatable. But when the way was clear to enter the water garage, instead of hopping back into her little boat, she braced her feet on the tube and strongly kicked it away.

"Hey," Ellsworth shouted.

The woman swung her feet onto the platform, picked up her case and stood. "I would rather they find it empty, with the motor run dry."

"Whose they," asked Peter.

"I'm not sure."

Peter called to Sebastian, "Close the garage. I guess we won't be needing it after all."

Ellsworth demanded, "What's your name?"

The woman hesitated as she looked into the garage before the door closed. Peter followed her gaze and saw that it led to The Aft Berth interior door sign. The woman said quietly, "Berth."

"What was that?" Ellsworth asked.

Peter quickly said, "Beth." The woman shot him a glance. Peter repeated, "She said Beth."

“Well, come inside, Beth,” said Ellsworth. Turning to Sebastian, “Sebastian, you know which closet was Sylvia’s. She didn’t take all her stuff. Take everything in there to the First Mate’s old cabin. Beth might as well have it now.”

They waited for the water garage door to close. Then Ellsworth walked up the molded-in steps and opened the transom door onto the back deck.

Peter indicated the case and asked Beth if she played the clarinet. Yes she did, but there was nothing further offered.

The sun was trying to sneak up on the singular yacht hiding in plain sight on the open sea, but its rising glow betrayed its intentions.

In the Main Saloon Peter said to Sebastian, “Set the autopilot on a heading to open water beyond Palermo. Put the radar on a two-mile alarm. Then re-join us.” Ellsworth said to Beth, “I’ll show you to your cabin.”

Peter was alone in the Main Saloon. He went to the port window where he could have watched the sunrise if he wanted, but instead he furrowed his brow and tapped his index finger on the window sill.

A few moments later Ellsworth was back, along with Sebastian. Ellsworth looked at Peter. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know what she’s running from, but since it seems to include some combination of Albanians we can assume she needs us.”

“Well, right now we would also run from Albanians. She seems harmless.”

“I could tell she had a diver’s knife strapped to her leg. But she never touched that spot or overtly tried to conceal it. I think we can take that to mean she could have been a threat if she wanted to. She’s running. We’re running. That’s enough for me for the present.”

A few minutes later Beth entered the Main Saloon from the aft circular stairway. She was in a trim, blue collared blouse tucked into black cuffed shorts. The blouse’s long sleeves were rolled up past her elbows. She

finished scrubbing her hair with a towel, folded it neatly, and placed it on one of the dining chair backs.

“That woman didn’t leave a single piece of clothing that one might consider work clothes. Did she take them all with her?”

Ellsworth ruefully looked to his side. “I assure you she did not.”

Beth shook-out her hair, but made no further effort to groom it. “So you’re trying to be incognito I see.”

“You could say that,” said Ellsworth.

“So I might assume you’ve shut-off you’re AIS transceiver.”

“We have.”

“You don’t think that makes you stick out like a sore thumb? A 140-foot yacht going along with its location transceiver off?” “It’s 144-feet.”

“Sorry. It was dark. So first thing, I need to use your computer.” She glanced to Ellsworth’s set-up in the starboard alcove. “I will alter your vessel’s signature. Then you can turn the transceiver back on.”

“But,” stammered Ellsworth, “you’d have to hack into ...” and he let his voice trail off as the realization hit.

“Not a problem,” and she took the seat in front of the keyboard.

“Ok, Have at it, but you’ll still need my password.”

“Already in.”

Peter interrupted her. “Hold on. First, we need to have our story straight in case we get boarded by a Coast Guard or Navy patrol, which is a real possibility. Beth, you are my wife.”

“Wait,” said Ellsworth, “I want her to be my wife.”

“I’m no one’s wife.”

“Damn it. Quiet. I’m the Captain. Ellsworth, we have to do everything to make you inconspicuous. You are a member of the crew we

call simply M. Beth, you and I have had a spat and we're not talking, A situation with wives I am quite practiced in. That is why you're in the aft cabin. If we're boarded, I do all the talking. OK,, I'll be on the bridge."

Later That Day. 7:02 am.

Peter, Ellsworth, and Sebastian were in the pilothouse when Peter cocked his head and asked what was the noise he was hearing. They all listened. Sebastian thought it was coming from the transom. Peter called the Second Mate to come up and take the helm, then all three went to the back deck.

They leaned over the edge and looked onto the big sloping transom. Beth was working around the ship's name, *Calypso*, which was spelled out in beautiful individual letters set off from the smooth transom with spacers. LED lights were embedded in their backs so they shone on the gleaming white transom and back-lit the script.

Beth was cutting off letters with a battery Dremel.

"What the hell?" Ellsworth stammered.

"Done," Beth said as she kicked a bunch of cut-off script into the water. "Come see," she said proudly, with a smile.

The others stepped down to the swim platform, led by Ellsworth, who was fuming. Beth just smiled at him and pointed.

The transom now had only three letters left: *aly*.

"By the way," Beth added, "that's what it shows on you're AIS signature on file. And it is owned by a certain Abigail Farnsworth. She's a clarinet teacher who lives outside London, so remember that. I knew her once. If someone, out of the blue, were to come up to her and asked if she owned a luxury yacht currently sailing the Mediterranean, I know she would say yes without hesitation."

Ellsworth considered the three-letter name for a few moments. "*aly*. I like it."

“Peter,” said Beth, “would you ask someone to touch-up each of the little studs I cut off with some glossy white paint, please?”

Peter just nodded to Sebastian.

Next Day. (Still 12 Years Earlier) 11:28 am. 13 miles off the coast of Morocco.

It was a glorious day. They were cruising at 25 knots, and in less than a day they would pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. Suddenly the port pilothouse window shattered followed immediately by the popping sound of machine gun fire.

Ellsworth ducked. Peter just slammed the wheel and shouted, “Freakin hell!” It was not clear whether he was more pissed at being shot at or having his window broken. Two tiny black dots were speeding toward them.

“Pirates,” Peter said to Ellsworth. “They won’t shoot again if we stop.” He pulled the throttles into neutral. “They want us alive, first to ask where our money is, and then to determine if any of us is worth kidnapping.” He opened a bulkhead drawer and took out a 45 caliber pistol and hooked its holster to his belt behind his back.

“You’re not going to try and have a gun fight with them are you? You’ll just get us both killed.”

“Relax. It would be more suspicious if I weren’t armed. I’ll let them find it.”

As the pirates closed the distance Peter and Ellsworth could see that they were in black inflatables. Each had a single gunman standing behind a tripod mounted machine gun. A second man stood standing at the steering console.

But when the lead boat was about a hundred meters away the air was split by the crack of a single rifle shot. The lead gunman crumpled in a heap. A second shot rang out, and the gunman in the second boat crumpled.

Both boats swung in a broad turn. There was a third shot and the lead steering man fell overboard. The boat gyrated wildly.

“Look!” Ellsworth pointed to their bow deck.

Beth was prone with a rifle pointing out the anchor’s hawser pipe. She was concentrating on a huge scope attached to the rifle. Her clarinet case lay open beside her. She fired again and the second steering man, who was already heading away from them, fell over the transom. She reloaded quickly as she fired six more shots in rapid succession. She stood.

They all watched as the pirate boats deflated into unrecognizable humps. Soon there was nothing left on the surface of the water but four, dispersed, bodies floating face down and some chunks of black nylon.

Ellsworth and Peter went to the front deck. Sebastian was already there.

“You didn’t have to kill all of them,” Ellsworth said.

“Oh yes she did,” said Peter. They would have returned to their pirate den and reported what happened. In less than an hour we would have a hornets nest bearing down on us.

Beth said nothing as she wiped down her rifle and disassembled it.

From Peter: “So I guess you don’t play the clarinet.”

Beth lifted the false bottom panel of her case revealing a gleaming base clarinet. “Oh. I do.”

Later That Day. 11:25 pm.

They had slipped through the Strait of Gibraltar without incident. Peter opened *aly* up to forty knots and put the Second Mate on watch. “Ellsworth was in the Main Saloon the last time I saw him. It’s Sebastian’s turn for the 2 am watch. I’ll be in my cabin.”

In his cabin he hung his shirt in his locker and poured a bourbon. He turned on his desk lamp and sat in its warm glow to make the day’s log entries.

He had hardly started when there was a soft knock at his door.
“Come in.”

Beth entered wearing her long foul weather jacket. She shut the door behind her. Peter stood, “Yes?”

“Do you always say yes that easily.”

“Yes, but I don’t always mean it.”

Beth saw that Peter was in only a tight fitting white tee, his khaki pants, and slippers. She was surprised to see that he had a flat stomach and muscular arms. He had been so covered up all the times she had seen him before that she had never had the opportunity to notice.

“I discovered something interesting when I went through Sylvia’s things. I thought about it, and decided I should show you.”

Peter quickly saw she was wearing deep blue high heel silk-covered slippers. “I see.”

“Oh, the slippers,” said Beth. “It’s not those,” and she kicked them off and stood in her bare feet. Then she slowly raised her eyes to meet his.

It was the first time Peter had been able to study them. They were huge, deep brown, with flecks of silver and green. They were smoldering. He was arrested, bound, and held captive all at once. She had an oval face, and for the first time he saw that her Mediterranean complexion was lightly sprinkled with freckles centered on the bridge of her Roman nose, and spilling out onto her cheeks. She had brushed her wavy brown hair and it bounced fully at her chin level.

“What I want to show you is this.” And she lowered the zipper of her long jacket and let it fall from her body onto the floor, all the while never taking her eyes off his.

She was wearing a deep red silk dress. The hem was a scalloped line that was knee length in front that fell to ankle length in folds in back. The neck line was full width that showed off her nicely shaped shoulders. It plunged in a deep vee to her navel. Full sleeves cascaded and gathered just below her elbows. “What do you make of it?” She asked.

“Don’t know yet. A vision of beauty is blinding me. Hold on.”

Peter shut off his desk lamp, then the overhead light. Now the only light was from a continuous valance indirect soft glow that lit the cabin’s teak walls as if the roof was open to a full moon.

“That’s a bit better,” Peter said. “There’s still a blinding light before me, but I don’t know, maybe my eyes will get used to it.”

“Don’t take too long.”

“Stay just where you are,” he said, “I need to see the back,” and he moved around behind her. He gently placed a hand on each of her hips and leaned his head closer to hers.

“I see that the back of this dress is held closed by four buttons. I’ll tell you about the buttons.”

Peter crouched down. “There’s this bottom one, right at the base of, well wait,” and he unhooked the fabric loop from the button. He lightly kissed the base of her spine. “Yes, the base of your spine, where it begins to curve out to form the top of your ass, which I can’t fully describe because I haven’t seen it yet. Then there’s this next one,” and he moved his face higher. He placed his left hand on her left forearm as he gently unhooked that button. Then he kissed that spot.

He shifted his left hand to under the dress sleeve, just above her elbow. He unhooked the next button and kissed the hollow of her spine.

He stood and brushed his lips against the top of her shoulder. Beth leaned her head to the side, exposing the full length of her neck. He kissed it.

“Now,” Peter said, “I want to have another look at the front of this dress.”

“But you already saw the front. Did you forget what it looked like already?”

Peter moved to stand in front of her. “I couldn’t see it then because my eyes were transfixed on yours.”

“I seem to remember your eyes moving downward. I think I know the problem, That tee shirt is too tight. It’s restricting your ability to breath. I need to help you get it off.” She undid the buckle of his pants, then the button, then the zipper. They fell. Peter kicked off his slippers. Beth placed her hands under Peter’s tee shirt and rested them on his hips. Then she ran them up and across his chest.

Peter crossed his arms over his head and grabbed the bottom of his tee. As he pulled it off, and when his mouth was free, but his eyes still covered by the tee she plunged a hungry kiss on his mouth. She pulled him in tight to her. But this made her loose her balance. She took two steps backwards, expecting to back into a wall, but instead felt a cushioned edge behind her knees. She fell back onto a bunk pulling Peter on top of her.

None of the others on board were alarmed by the sounds coming from Peter’s cabin, if they heard them, above the throbbing of the engines.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Beast

12 Years Later. Corner Brook. 9:10 am.

It was a cool morning. A full day had passed since Sophia, Margo, and Sara had lay on the restaurant roof and watched the stars re-discover themselves. They had stayed together, and Delila was delighted to let them use her house as Their home base. This morning they had walked down to the restaurant to have breakfast on the deck.

They all had finished and Delila had taken away the plates when Margo squirmed in her seat. “This inactivity is killing me. M is not allowing me to pursue my Iceberg duties because we still have to lay low, and I have no boat projects to work on.”

Sara sipped her coffee refill without looking up. “The forward water pump is fixed at least.”

Sophia also stayed focused on the table top, “Not funny, Sara.” But Margo was smiling, “Pretty funny, actually.”

Sophia pushed her empty cup away. “Keep it up. It keeps me from focusing on the pain. Whenever I have time to think I feel like I have an impacted molar in my head where my sinuses used to be.”

Margo pushed her chair back. “I’m going to take a walk to the reservoir.”

Sara placed her hand on Margo’s wrist. “Let me go with you.”

“Me too,” said Sophia. “I think we should stay together. The way I feel, I might just walk into the water and keep on going until the pain stops.”

Sara, who could see the bar TV from where she was sitting, suddenly called out to the bartender, “Turn that up please.” He did so.

They heard: “This is a Newfoundland News Breaking Update on the NORDIC-CoSaF War.”

“Freakin war has a name now,” from Sara

The reporter continued in front of a map of Central America, “Our Bogota affiliate reports that the CoSaF progress northward has stalled at the Guatemala border. The CoSaF leader, Valentina Landon is reported trapped, possibly kidnapped or killed in action. Abigail, come in ...”

The screen shifted to a close-up of a haggard, obviously exhausted soldier. “All we know is that Valentina was surrounded by machine-gun tractor-bots and laser drones, and that she was not immediately killed. That concerns us. NORDIC in the last day has switched all their drones and tractors to carpet-kill everything with a mammal body temperature. We’ve never seen that before. Her last communication to me was that the killing of civilians was too severe, and to relay the order to retreat. The killing of humans and wildlife has been horrific and indiscriminate. As you may have seen, it’s getting difficult to travel the trails because of the bodies of people and animals. The fact that Valentina was not instantly killed suggests that NORDIC recognized her. We know she would detonate one of her belt grenades before allowing herself to be tortured.” There was the sudden unmistakable popping of machine gun fire. “I have to get you to safety.”

The screen shifted to an overall shot of a village in flames. “We will continue to update you as news comes in.”

The bartender switched the channel and went back to setting up for the lunch crowd.

Then Margo caught sight of the Assistant Harbormaster walking past on the beach path. She went to the deck railing calling, “Where has Peter been?”

He came to the railing, his head level with the top rail “Didn’t you hear? He promoted me to Harbormaster. He said he needed a day or two to let his mind settle. He prepared his report on what happened, and I filed it yesterday as my first official act”

“Congratulations.”

“I just wish it was under different circumstances. How are you and the others holding up?”

“We don’t know, I guess. It’s just starting to hit us.”

“You be strong. Well, I’ll be on my way.”

Delila came by with a tray and Margo said, “We’re taking a walk to the reservoir.” “Take your time.”

They exited the deck via the beach steps, took a right through the edge of the Ferry parking area, and crossed the Ferry Access drive to the unlabelled path.

Margo pushed an overhanging branch out of the way. “You would think this path led nowhere.”

Sara passed the branch to Sophia, “Don’t all paths lead nowhere? And don’t all paths lead somewhere?”

“OK,,” Sophia let the branch snap free behind her, “That’s why you’re not leading.”

The path reached a steep stretch, and Margo said between breaths, “Hold up. We’re surrounded by trees. Gather around.” They did so and she continued, “I’ve been thinking. Here’s what I say we know. IceCube worked. CoSaF could never have crossed the Panama Canal and gotten that far unless NORDIC was extremely distracted.”

Sara leaned her hand on an Aspen tree. “But no one could have anticipated it would go into an indiscriminate killing mode.”

Margo was thoughtful, “I think it did that because its processing speed was slowing due to the freezing process. We know it’s fundamental desire is to subjugate humans. What it is doing down there is killing everything warm blooded. It sounds like the frantic response of a cornered and frightened animal.”

Sophia was downcast. “But still, it means we caused this. We are responsible for hundreds, maybe thousands of innocent deaths. Why does everyone I touch die?”

Margo put an arm over each of them. She pulled them into a close circle. “No. NORDIC is doing what it is doing. No one is making NORDIC do anything. This is not on you or even Iceberg.”

Sara looked up, “What I don’t understand is how the freezing slowed. That should have not been possible. How could we have missed that. It’s almost as if it had some kind of tip-off.”

Sophia broke herself free and headed up the slope. She immediately tripped on something in the path, “Watch out for the roots. They’ll reach out and grab your foot when they think you’re not looking.”

At the lakeshore Sophia went to a large boulder that was split down the middle. She sat on the left side and patted the other side. It was just big enough for Margo and Sara to sit together. On the lake surface Little cat-paw ripples chased each other, tickling the water so that it sparkled as it giggled. Sophia put her hands behind her and opened herself to the light breeze. It felt good passing her skin. She inhaled deeply, “Look at that tree,” nodding her head to her right, “it’s huge outstretched arms.”

“It’s a white pine,” said Margo.

Sophia rested her eyes on it. “Its limbs are arms with huge upturned palms. It scoops up all the goodness falling from the sun, and what it can’t hold in its thousands of pine needle fingers it lets flow down to the forest floor for all below to share in the warmth.”

Margo wanted someone to say a poem from the Poetry Slam. There was just the sound of the breeze through the forest. “Sugar. I don’t remember any,” Sara said.

Sophia got up. “I’m going back to the Clinic and thank those EMTs. But if they try to keep me for observation I’m going to tell them there’s nothing to find inside me except the heart of a cold blooded killer.”

Margo got up. “I think I better come with you”

Later That Day. 5:18 pm.

Sophia, Margo, and Sara were back on Delila's deck. This time as paying customers, they took their favorite table overhanging the beach. Ginger took their orders and left. Just then they were distracted by a large, old motorhome pulling into the far end of the Ferry parking lot.

The women watched as the motorhome driver's door creaked open and Guy LaSalle stepped out. He made his way over.

Delila who had been waiting the neighboring table had also spotted him. She went to fill her coffee pot.

Guy stepped onto the deck and dragged an empty chair from another table along as he approached. Their table was now over-filled. He sat.

"You planning to pack it on pretty good," Sara said, looking at the extra chair Guy had dragged to the table.

"Hi to you too," he said. "This is for Peter. I called him as I was driving in. He's on his way."

Margo told him that they hadn't seen Peter at all the previous day. Guy leaned in closer and quietly explained that Peter had been one of The Dead for years. So, unlike them, he already had a well-established identity. But that identity would be in extreme danger if NORDIC realized it was him who had witnessed the boat explosion. "That is why he is leaving on The Beast with you guys."

"The Beast?" Sara and Sophia asked simultaneously.

Guy nodded his head toward the motorhome and told them that was his name for it. He had driven up to stay at Delila's for a few days backing her up. They were going to create a few protocols to make sure this kind of thing could not happen again.

Sophia became visibly agitated. "What is this about us leaving on that thing?"

Guy placed his hand on Sophia's. She was surprised by the feeling of warmth and confidence it seemed to radiate. She felt herself relax a bit as he said, "M wants to get you guys out of Corner Brook. We don't know to

what extent NORDIC has infiltrated Iceberg in Newfoundland. He thinks the only place you'll be safe is at headquarters in Nova Scotia, and I agree."

"Well, I sure as hell don't have a home here anymore," said Margo glumly. Sara leaned over and put her arm on Margo's shoulders. Guy told them the news about the boat explosion was all over the Maritime news.

Delila arrived with the coffee pot and a mug for Guy. "Good morning. I've been expecting you." She looked at the extra empty chair Guy had added. "OK, Who else." "Peter's on his way."

Delila grabbed another mug from a vacant table and set it down in front of the empty chair. As she walked away, she passed Peter stepping onto the deck. She turned, followed him to the table and filled his coffee. She promised that Ginger would be right over and left.

"She's going to think we act like we own the place," Margo said. Peter took his seat saying it was good for business. They were helping to make the place look like it was hopping. Anyway, they would be out soon enough. "I want us to be able to get down to Port aux Basques for the 11:30 pm ferry."

"They added a night crossing?" Margo asked.

Guy answered, "Ever since an illicit paper trade took off there's been a huge demand for Newfoundland paper. But of course, NORDIC has made paper illegal. Security leaving Newfoundland in Port aux Basques is pretty lax and all the trucks need to do is board when it's dark. The ferry crew that recognize what the trucks are carrying don't care anyway. The paper rolls are disguised in a clever way and are able to get by CM in North Sydney, Nova Scotia where the NORDIC CM is tight."

Sophia withdrew her hand from under Guy's and held up a finger. "Wait, what's this basket Ferry?"

Guy told them that Port aux Basques was a ferry terminal on the southwest coast of Newfoundland. "That's how you'll be getting to Nova Scotia."

"Peter!" Said Ginger as she squeezed between him and Guy. "You missed yesterday's special. It was Shrimp Tortellini."

“What’s tonight’s special?” “Shrimp Tortellini.” “Perfect.”

After they had eaten Peter told them to gather their stuff and meet at The Beast. They were to pack anything—clothes, trinkets,—they had bought in the last five years separately.

“Why is that?” From Sophia.

“It’s a long story. Look forward to it. We leave at 8 pm. My bags are already in there” To Guy he added, “Anything I need to know about driving it?”

“Are you kidding? The freakin thing is twenty-two years old, but it’s dependable as a Mastodon.”

Sophia, Margo, and Sara went to Delila’s house and packed their things. Delila helped them carry their stuff to The Beast. Peter was standing by it’s side next to a big open hatch. “Guy calls this the Beast’s basement. Put your stuff in here.” Then he opened the side door which automatically extended a step. “All aboard,” he cried, and he waved his arm as if it were holding a lantern.

The entry door let them into an interior that was as complete and cozy as any home Sophia had been in, if a bit dated. The filed to the front between a kitchenette and a work table. Peter slid into the Driver’s captain’s chair. To the right of the access aisle was two more captain’s chairs. Margo took the far right one and Sara the next one. They had fold down armrests. Peter invited Sophia to squeeze forward close to the long dashboard. He reached down next to Sara’s chair and pulled up a seat that locked in place across the access aisle. Then he folded up its back rest. Sophia sat.

“This seat is surprisingly comfortable,” she commented.

“Probably because I bet it’s the least used seat in the whole Beast.” He turned a key to start it. A low, reassuring rumble came from what seemed like far away.

“Guy has it parked in a ferry RV spot, so I could just pull forward, but I need to know how this freakin thing behaves backing up, and this is the safest place to learn. It’s got a back-up camera, but Margo, let me know if I back over anybody I don’t notice.”

Peter got them turned around without problem. In twenty minutes they were on the road to Port aux Basques. It was not a highway. It was just one lane in each direction with a faded white line showing the twelve-inches of pavement bordering a drainage ditch on each side. The road was almost arrow straight.

After an hour it was time to turn the headlights on. “A nice road to fall asleep on,” said Sara.

“Sara,” from Sophia in the darkness, “that is not helpful.”

“It’s OK,,” said Peter. “Used to it. I always start singing when I’m starting to get sleepy, so that’s how you can tell.”

“What’s your song list?” Asked Margo.

“Bunch of old country songs.”

“I’ve got one,” said Sophia, and she began singing *Route 66*. Just a few bars in the others joined in, falling into ‘ah’s’ when they couldn’t remember the words. Peter was a baritone, and Sara the high soprano. They quickly followed that with *Kansas City*, and then another. After a few more they all started getting tired and stupid, so they stopped.

Soon enough the road ended and they were backed-up at the gatehouse for the ferry’s stacking lanes.

“Just so you girls know,” Peter said as they left the booth and took their place in line, “Now you’ll be leaving Kansas, and I don’t mean the song *Kansas City*.”

“You called us girls,” said Sara.

“Oops.” “It’s OK, We call ourselves The Girls. Just don’t spread it around.”

“And by Kansas,” Sophia said, “You mean as in *The Wizard of Oz*.”

Peter confirmed that was exactly what he meant. Nova Scotia, like the rest of North America was fully under NORDIC CM, or Constant Monitoring. So Iceberg was back in the freezer, so to speak. But that didn’t

mean they stop working. Quite the contrary. “I expect we’ll even meet M at some point.”

Margo wanted to know where they were going, exactly.

“We’re going to the mobile home park where Guy keeps this thing. He says it’s a completely safe place to lay low for awhile. There’s a small shopping area nearby, so we won’t want for anything. The people living in the park are poor; but very nice. He says it’s entirely opium free. Apparently, it’s a bit like Newfoundland in that every time NORDIC has attempted to install CM devices, they keep being damaged by what we like to call corrosion.”

“You mean the sulfuric acid kind,” from Margo

“Exactly. It seems that NORDIC has mostly lost interest in the area, since everyone is poor and behaving themselves. Guy tells me there’s an old abandoned warehouse bordering it.”

“Sounds great,” said Sara. “Sign me up.”

“Now, before we load onto the ferry, get on out and meet me at this freakin thing’s basement.”

Peter exited via the driver’s door. The rest of them used Margo’s passenger door. There was a loud creak as Peter lifted the big door that accessed the Beast’s under-floor storage. Peter told them to take the bags with their recently bought stuff and gather around the dining table. They were about to use their time waiting for the ferry productively.

When they were all at the table Peter told them they were about to remove the RF tags from everything. The tags were small, unobtrusive fabric tags with an embedded foil chip. Each Tag reflected a specific code number when stimulated by a particular radio frequency. RF tags had been around since the turn of the century. Their first big use was to track clothing items as they left the sewing factories. It didn’t take long for clothing store owners to realize that these tags could bring a huge improvement to how they tracked items. They could install their own scanners in their warehouses and read the tags when merchandise arrived and then again

when it left the warehouse. Then that grew into reading the tags when the items entered the stores. He told them that for a very short time that was the end of the story: A simple, elegant inventory tracking system.

“Have I bored any of you to sleep yet?”

Sara raised her hand. “Yup. I’m already sleeping.”

Peter looked at her as he went on, “Then the clothing retailers thought if we put a scanner at the cash register we’ll know when the item left the store. Note that these had nothing to do with the various theft control devices they stuck on some of their more expensive items intended to set off alarms.”

He continued his story by telling them that some corporations realized they could cross-reference the merchandise RF Tag numbers with the records of people’s personal credit card information. So now they had a new profit center. They could sell packages of this to other corporations. “Still harmless enough, right?”

He saw they were all still paying attention so he went on. Then manufacturers of other things, food, appliances, tools, on and on started doing the same thing. Around this time people started to become aware that their cell phones were being used to track the movements wherever they went.

Sophia interrupted, “Became aware? What do you mean, everybody knows that.”

“Very interesting that you bring that up,” Peter said. “The only reason the general population knows about cell phone tracking is because of the old-time movie *Bourne Supremacy*. Came out before my time. But it is a perfect example of how an important message that may have been around for time in boring technical essays never makes it into the public consciousness. But put that message into an engaging story and suddenly the Human mind can absorb it.”

He went on. So as we approached the middle of the century and the public understood how to defeat cell phone tracking someone realized they could instead track people via the RF Tags they were wearing. All the RF Tag information could be scraped off a person just by installing a scanner

over their building entrance. For a simple fee they could buy the Tag cross-referenced personal data. That kind of information was considered very interesting to all sorts of corporations and government agencies.

Peter said, “It would be impossible for all of us to establish our new identities while moving about with these old tags. So you’re going to download an app Vlod created while we’re still in Newfoundland. Then we’re going to use it to find and remove the tag on every one of your items. We’ll have plenty of time for sleeping. The ferry ride is seven hours.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Henry

Earlier That Day. Guatemala, Central America. 8:08 am.

Valentina was surrounded. Four laser drones hovered above her in an evenly spaced circle. Two machine gun tractor-bots had their guns fixed on her. Her camo pill-box cap was pulled low, but obviously the NORDIC killing drones had made a facial recognition anyway. She knew this because she wasn't dead. She stood from her crouched position where she had been trying to hide behind an old corrugated metal box. She raised a closed fist, then rotated it with her thumb and little finger extended—her signal to retreat. She yelled in Spanish, “Regroup. They won't kill me yet, but they'll kill you. We can't be responsible for any more of this carnage. Retreat. I turn over command to Spearhead-2.”

The air was darkened by smoke and fine red dust that clogged her lungs. Other than the flimsy box, there was no place to hide in the open patch of dusty earth surrounded by dense jungle. She knew NORDIC Human soldiers would already be mobilizing to take her in for torturing, then killing. She calmly withdrew a grenade from her bandolier and clasped her hands behind her head, as if in surrender.

She pulled the pin.

Then, in her best softball pitching motion she lobbed an underhand gift to the machine gun tractor-bot at her twelve-o'clock. It rolled between its tracks and jammed under its low belly. Then she flattened herself onto the ground behind the metal box.

The next moment the tractor-bot blew sky high. All the drones, registering the increased heat signature focused their lasers on the smoking remnants of the tractor-bot, further frying it. The other tractor-bot, registering the drone attack on the remnants, started firing its machine gun at the drones.

With the killing devices distracted and shooting at each other, she took a crouching position and scanned around looking for an opening in the jungle-like forest around her.

Suddenly the metal box beside her rose. It had two short human bare legs in Converse sneakers. The legs went behind her and she found herself under the box with its front still raised. Seeing that she was shielded Valentina scurried ahead to a small, low opening in the jungle. As soon as she got to it the box dropped.

She rotated in her crouching position. The box had many cracks that allowed little light beams to illuminate a dark skinned boy's face inches from hers. He was dripping with sweat, but he didn't look anywhere as scared as she thought he should. If anything, he looked excited. Valentina instantly understood the trick he had discovered. The metal box, though visually obvious as hell, was ignored by the drones which were apparently programmed to kill warm blooded mammals. A metal box, even if moving with little legs was not one of its programmed profiles. Why didn't I think of that? She accused herself.

With their noses almost touching and dripping with sweat she asked, "Cómo te llamas?"

"Jornri," she thought he said over the racket of the buzzing drones behind them. It was an unfamiliar name to her. "¿Cómo se escribe eso?"

"H e n r y."

"Oh. Henry. Of course. Does that mean you speak English?"

"Si. I mean yes."

"We need to get away from here. How far are you from your village?"

"Pretty close."

"OK, Do you remember the trail back?"

"This is the trail."

“Good. Very good.” There was a sudden increase in buzzing. A new batch of drones was approaching from the distance fast. “Gotta go. Here’s what we’ll do. I’ll get behind you and hold up the front of the box. You lead the way. If a drone gets close, watch your head, because I’ll drop the box down.”

His eyes widened in anticipation of the upcoming adventure. “You got it”

Soon the sounds from the battle scene behind them grew fainter. A few moments later Valentina said, “Hold on.” She flipped the box on its side. She stood and stretched. She could see they were now on a well worn cart trail. She was drenched in sweat. Her shirt and pants were plastered to her. She took off her bandolier and shirt and tied the shirt to her waist. She had a white sleeveless tee on. The fresh air felt wonderful. She put the grenade bandolier back across from her shoulder to her opposite hip.

Henry was looking at the grenades. “Sweet, can I have one of those?”

“No. Now, Henry where are you from?”

“Des Moines. I can never remember what Merica number that is.”

“OK, Let’s assume we’re not walking to Des Moines. Let’s start over. When you got here, where had you just come from?”

“Oh. The village I live in with my mom and Hector.”

“Good. What’s your mom’s phone number. I’ll give her a call.”

“She doesn’t have one. She doesn’t believe in phones.”

“Alright. Good enough. What’s the name of the village. I need to call someone and tell them where I am going.”

“Ya, about that. I don’t remember its name.”

“No problem. I guess I just have to wait until we get there. How did you get yourself in the middle of a battle zone anyway?”

“Chasing frogs. Some of the people from our village use them for bait when they go fishing. They pay me for them. I had four in a bag when all of a sudden those flying things started trying to hit me with light beams. I saw that box and put it over my head. They stopped, but I lost my frogs.”

“Starting to make sense,” said Valentina. “But you do remember the way back to your village, right?”

“Dam straight.”

Valentina told him to hold on while she made two calls. She took out her Quad-Hack and sent a text to Spearhead-2 that read, ‘Spearhead-1 escaped. Destination unknown. Alert: Drones ignore assets when asset is covered by corrugated metal box. Repeat: drones not programmed to register moving corrugated metal boxes as threats.’ Then she made a call and relayed her current coordinates. She added that she was with a young boy who didn’t remember the name of the village they were headed to. She would call them back when she got there.

Turning to Henry she said, “Great. Let’s get going.”

“I’m hungry.”

Valentina pulled up the flap of one of her pants pockets and produced a banana Power Bar. “It’s a bit smushed, but it’s the last one I’ve got.” Henry thanked her. “OK, I don’t think we need this box anymore, and it’s slowing us down. Lead on.”

The trail flattened and the jungle gave way to a forest of thin spindly trees. Valentina could see the trail becoming brighter ahead. Then they broke out onto a raised cart-path through a grassy swamp. Suddenly Henry stopped. He was looking to his left. “Lordy-Lordy,” he said quietly to himself.

Valentina followed his gaze. There was a column of dark smoke a few hundred meters in that direction. She gently put her hand on Henry’s shoulder and crouched. “Is that where you live?” He nodded. There were tears in his eyes. She scanned the sky and horizon. There were no drones. A group of people were busy at the edge of the bay. “C’mon.”

The smoke was coming from what was left of a small fishing village. It looked like about half the village had been set ablaze. Valentina let Henry lead the way to the group.

Henry was greeted with hugs that were joyful, but the joy was overshadowed by a palpable sadness. He scanned the whole group, then the fishing boats pulled onto the shore. He saw that about half of them were just charred hulks. “Where’s my mom?”

An older woman crouched down in front of him. She wiped some dirt from his forehead. “Your mother was very brave, Henry. A bunch of NORDIC drones came. They started setting fire to our boats. Hector sent the village’s drone aloft to defend us, but they shot it down. Your mother was in your hut. She came out with her spear gun and hit one. A different drone fired a laser at her, but she ran back into the hut so it missed, but it set fire to the hut. Then all the drones started setting fire to our huts one-by-one. I think they got distracted because they just suddenly stopped and flew off to the highlands.”

“They left to join our battle zone, Henry,” Valentina said. “You saved the village.” She faced the group and said in Spanish, “Then he saved me. My name is Valentina. Valentina Landono.”

There were some gasps and a *Dios mío*.

“It would be best if you did not spread it around that you saw me.”

At that moment they were interrupted by the sound of a propeller airplane approaching. Henry looked alarmed. Valentina listened carefully. Then, “Don’t worry, NORDIC doesn’t use those kind of planes.” All the same, she mentally prepared herself to call for everyone to bolt into the swamp if necessary.

But as it got closer, she could see that it was a baby blue pusher prop seaplane. Valentina realized its displayed registration number was the kind used by the North American Iceberg resistance movement—a phantom number. She had been told about Iceberg during her early training in Bogota.

“It’s a friendly,” she said to everyone. She crouched beside Henry. “Henry, this plane is going to take me to a safe place. I need to ask you if

you want to stay here with these nice people, or come with me. The choice is yours,” and she said the last with a glance to the older woman, who nodded in agreement.

Henry scanned the burnt fishing boats, then the burnt huts. “I would prefer to go with you.”

“Then come. We’ll see if heshe, using the commonly accepted gender neutral North American term, has some snacks.”

The plane skidded to a landing in the bay like a large duck. It idled its bow to shore. As Valentina and Henry approached it a hatch in its nose swung open. The pilot, a young man, said, “I flew to the coordinates of your call. Then I saw this column of smoke. Are you two it, or are there more?”

“We’re it. I’m Valentina Landonno.”

“I’m Henry McBride. Nice to meet you,” said Henry. “Have you got any food?”

“Pleased to meet you, Henry. I’ve got a few snacks, and I know where we can get more. Welcome aboard.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HMS Strongbox

Next Day. North Sydney, Nova Scotia. 10:10 am.

Peter and Sophia had made breakfast in The Beast's tight kitchen, nimbly slithering past each other as they went from it's little sink, stove, and dining table while they were still parked in the North Sydney RV area after completing their long ferry trip. Peter had declared that with a four hour drive ahead of them they should eat first, and more important, have coffee.

There were no objections. The drive to the mobile home park was on mostly minor roads. They were travelling incognito, so no GPS. They were following directions written on a piece of paper given them by Guy. But Sophia fairly giggled in glee when she found an old folded map under a flap in the master glove box.

Peter reluctantly handed the driving over to Margo when the rising graph line of his sugar crash intersected with the declining graph line of his fading caffeine boost. But, the two-lane roads were mostly pretty, and the attention they demanded made the ride seem shorter than it actually was. Margo almost missed the carved wood sign that read *Swaying Pines Mobile Home Park*.

“Thank God I stopped in time. I did not want to have to back this beast up, and I was not going to allow anyone to help me.”

She turned into the narrow, deteriorated driveway. As they rounded a bend she saw something coming up. Suddenly she hit the brakes hard. The Beast slewed to an ungraceful stop just before hitting an old pipe gate across the road. At one time the gate was apparently painted bright yellow, but now it was mostly faded with rust brown bare spots.

Margo said to no one in particular, “What do we do now?”

Peter said, “Guy told me about this. He said that sometimes the gate is down, but if it is, that means that there will be this old guy who will come

out and raise it. Apparently, it's just a thing he does, and the people who live here don't mind. He said the guy is a little loopy, but otherwise harmless."

The nearest trailer home was old enough that calling it a mobile home seemed a bit grandiose. It had a pronounced sag in the middle, and was next to a tall concrete wall.

Sophia said, "I can guess that must be the cheapest lot to lease in the whole park."

"Let's hope so," said Sara.

At that moment the front door of the home banged open and a sprightly old man bounded onto the little porch and down the steps, but he was so quick without looking where he was going that he skidded down the last few steps on his bum. Still, he bounced quickly back to his feet with a big grin.

"Unbelievable," said Peter.

Margo was slowly shaking her head. "I know, this is their security."

The old man was tall and thin, but blessed with a full head of wavy white hair. He walked quickly around to Margo's driver's side window. "Hi. I know The Beast, but you, young lady, are not Guy. Neither are you," he said looking at Peter. Peter just nodded, without acknowledging him.

"Guy's letting us use it," Margo said.

The man's eyes brightened, "OK, then. That's good enough for me. I'm going to open the gate, then you park this in the pull-off in front of my place. Then come inside so I can log you in," and he spun to the gate. But then he turned around and came back to Margo's window, "I'm just going to open the gate."

"Thank you," Margo said, a bit exasperated.

He walked the creaky gate open until it was against a stop post, then flipped down a holding bar. Then he scrambled up the steps to his front door, almost tripping again, and went inside.

"OK, then," said Peter. "I guess we're in."

Margo parked and shut off the engine. They all got out and filed into the old mobile home. There was a reception counter immediately to their right, but the old man wasn't there. He was standing in the middle of a sparse living room.

“Let me orientate you to this place. Right next to us is the picturesque and quaint World War Two munitions warehouse.” Then he added as an afterthought, “Oh, I should mention that it is now abandoned.” He thought for a moment, then added, “I mean, all the explosives have been removed.”

He took a breath, but then stopped himself and added, “As far as we know.”

Margo pretended to survey her group and said, “I think we'd just like to sign in and find a spot for our motorhome.”

“OK, then,” he said with his wide grin. “I'll get right to it. Let me show you to my office.”

But instead of going to the counter he reached out with his long right arm and gave the venetian blind cord on the window to his right three quick tugs. The oblong, old ratty carpet in the middle of the room rose, revealing itself to be a hatch on gas struts. Simultaneously, two rows of LED lights lit a stairway down to an arched tunnel. Without hesitation he went to the head of the stairs, and with a backwards grin, said, “C'mon,” and he started down the stairs.

Margo stood frozen on her spot. She looked to Peter. He took a deep breath and said, “We should probably know where this goes. I'll take up the rear.”

Margo went down the stairs, followed by Sara, Sophia, and finally Peter.

The old man was already proceeding. The top of his head barely cleared the arched roof of the tunnel. He said without looking back, “Would the gentleman in the rear please push the yellow button at the base of the stairs.”

Peter did so, and the hatch closed above him.

“If you press that before you’re all the way to the bottom, it clocks you on the top of your noggin. Don’t ask me how I know that.”

Then, He glanced over his shoulder with his permanent grin and said, “Walk this way,” and he started a side-to-side sailor’s shuffle as he whistled a tune that Peter recognized as being from an old musical comedy movie.

They came to a steel door with a security code lock. “Security,” said the old man, looking back at them. He punched in four digits, “1 9 9 0,” he said. “My birth year.”

“Secure,” said Sara. She looked back to Peter for his reaction, but he just nodded for them to keep humoring the old man.

“The stairs on the other side of this door lead up to the old warehouse office. I’ve cleaned it up a bit and its where I conduct my business.”

When he opened the door, they were immediately struck by the change in lighting. There was a warm, inviting glow ahead. They followed him up a set of teak stairs that were framed with finely crafted hand rails. At the top of the stairs, the railings ended by spiraling around fat, sculptured newel posts. The old man went to the center of a wonderful, wood walled room. A stone fireplace was the focal point. Two couches and six stuffed chairs framed a conversation area. An incongruous stainless steel dining table with matching chairs was at the opposite side of the room. As they entered, the old man hung his worn denim jacket on a coat rack and donned a burgundy casual robe. He knotted its sash. “Peter,” he said, his silly grin softened into a broad smile, “It’s damn good to see you.” He extended his hand. But instead of taking it, Peter gave the man a bear hug.

“Wait,” Sara said, “are you telling me you two know each other?”

“You bet we do,” Peter said.

“Then during that whole thing at the gate you knew who he was.”

The man answered for him. “Oh, he knew who I was. I could see that right away. It’s just that I was a different person the last time we saw each other.”

“Ellsworth,” Peter said, “What the hell? Am I to understand that you are the mysterious M?”

“That is correct. I am sorry for keeping it a secret from you so long, but you know how it is. That whole silly crazy old man routine, that’s not an act. I still have a bit of the clown in me. But, I’ve learned a few lessons since we worked together on my beloved *Calypso*. And to you and your lovely guests, it’s simply M now.”

Peter began, “Margo, Sara, and Sophia, you are meeting M, formerly known as Ellsworth Mulholland. I was the captain of his yacht for a number of years, that is, until the NORDIC Invasions. In fact, I recognize that dining table. Its from *Calypso*.”

M went to each of them and shook their hands as Peter went on, “M, this is Margo, who you know as the leader of Iceberg; her partner Sara; and Sophia, the key person that made insertion of IceCube possible.”

“Amazing,” M said. “I am humbled.”

Margo held him by both arms and looked at him. “So it is you who have been funding Iceberg since its inception.”

“I always wondered where we got the money to do what we do,” said Sara.

“Margo,” M said, matching her two handed grip,, “it’s so good to finally meet you. What you’ve done to grow Iceberg into an organized resistance in so short a time is humbling. Now, let me tell you what we’ve been doing down here in our old concrete box of a former explosion-proof warehouse. Come, take a seat.”

He motioned them all to the seating area. He pressed a button on the fireplace mantle and a blazing, crackling fire sprang up.

“Gas?” Asked Peter.

M chuckled. “Hologram,” and he stuck and held his hand in the middle of the flames with a grin. After a moment he yelped, pulled it out and began slapping it on his robe. Then he held it out with a bigger grin. It was obviously fine.

“First, my name M. I came up with the name because it’s just my initials—E.M., pronounced M. It’s a little joke on NORDIC. It’s so simple, but NORDIC will never figure it out because it requires a degree of intuition and a sense of irony.”

M leaned an elbow on the mantle which was at just the right height for him. He apparently was quite used to addressing people from a command position. He explained that it was important to know that the population of the mobile home park of Swaying Pines, with just a few exceptions, had no idea that there was anything going on in the old warehouse except for some office re-use on the far, east side facing Old factory Road.

Although this was Iceberg headquarters, very few in the movement actually knew where it was. From what they were able to read from NORDIC actions it also had no idea.

For that reason when out and about in Swaying Pines he went by the name Em, short for Emery. It sounded exactly like M, so when someone called him M and it was heard by NORDIC, it would not trigger an association.

Sophia looked at Margo, “You never said you were the leader of Iceberg in Newfoundland.”

“You never asked.”

M said that Iceberg’s internal name for its headquarters was the HMS Strongbox, or just The Strongbox for short. He assumed NORDIC’s CM listening or lip reading had picked up the name at some point. The ‘HMS’ was intended to divert its attention to some type of floating headquarters. They could think of it as a lumbering ship that had run aground.

Most of the huge old warehouse was intended to look abandoned and, in fact, most of it still was. The old building was one big concrete rectangle. The other two sides were dense woods.

The first re-use for a portion of the old warehouse was envisioned when the Maritime Spine Train was designed. At that time, NORDIC had not yet invaded Maritime, but the governing Humans determined that the

entire MST operation needed to be isolated from the internet. So it was powered by completely isolated small package nuclear power stations. From the outside, each of these small power stations gave nothing away, except for the heavy ring of shrubs and fencing that discouraged idle curiosity. The Strongbox was on that power system.

They all learned that the MST operations were run from the southeastern corner of the Strongbox.

“Since insertion of the NORDIC spike, IceCube, was apparently successful, I have already been planning an expansion to our staff here in The Strongbox. I am so sorry, Margo, that it appears certain NORDIC’s destruction of your beloved boat was in response to it detecting the spike’s source.”

Sophia leaned forward. “So you have no doubt that the explosion was the work of NORDIC?”

M went to Sophia and somberly took her hand in his. “No doubt about it. And Sophia, Guy has told me much about you and Vlod. Your bravery and determination has allowed us to deliver our first significant counter-strike to NORDIC. And let me say Vlod was a tremendous asset to Iceberg. I understand you were lucky enough to find a side of him the rest of us never knew.”

Sophia’s eyes watered. “You knew him?”

“Yes. We met many times. When I first landed at the North American coast I was extremely lucky to be with Peter and our Engine Room Mechanic Sebastian. It was only with their help that I even survived. I was tottering on the brink of bankruptcy, and there were many people looking for me. Fortunately for me, and it turns out Iceberg, at the last minute I was able to isolate about half of my many billions before the collapse of all wealth. Most of my peers were not so lucky. The ones that could not adjust committed suicide. Others tried to go to Mars. There’s more to say, but let’s do it over dinner.”

He took a tin party toy from the pocket of his robe. It was the kind that has a little metal crank with a wood handle. He held the handle and spun the metal box above his head with a broad grin. A raucous clacking sprang forth. In a few minutes a lovely middle-aged blond woman in a tight-

fitting Oxford shirt and pleated skirt entered from a door left of the fireplace.

“Everybody,” said M, “meet Helle. She’s been expecting you. Helle will show you to your rooms and you can introduce yourselves as you go. Don’t be alarmed by the concrete corridors and bars along the way. I assure you the insides of your rooms are up to the standards you see here, and although the doors slide shut, you can be confident that you have complete control over the lock. After you’ve seen your room, gather your stuff from The Beast and make yourself at home. Let’s meet back here at seventeen-thirty- hours for dinner.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Survival

Later That Day. HMS Strongbox. 5:36 pm.

M had introduced them to his chef after Helle had served them a simple, but nicely presented seafood dinner. Two bottles of white wine had been at the center of the table, along with sparkling water. When M could see that most everyone was more or less finished except for desert he said, “Lest any of you wonder, yes, I am prone to mood swings, but know that they are of my own choosing. I was the class clown from the time I started kindergarten. I was fortunate enough to be born into money and my father, a comic himself, taught me the basics of how to play the game called ‘Who can make the most money.’ But surviving the NORDIC conquests in my middle age shocked me into trying to do something with whatever remains of my life”

M set his water glass down and ran a serious gaze across each face. “I came to realize that survival is only meaningful if you can make life better for others.”

There were a few moments of silence. Sophia gazed at him. “That sounds like something my mother would have said.”

“Smart woman. Now I am old enough to have finally realized I am not going to live forever, so I choose to enjoy my natural clown when it is, at least in my opinion, appropriate. Still, I have not lost my ability to laser focus on the basket when I see a scoring opportunity.” He refilled his water glass.

Peter ran his hand down the stainless-steel rail that ringed the glass table, “I recognize this table. It’s from *Calypso*.”

“One of the few things I kept when I had her scrapped.”

“Wait,” Sophia jumped in, “isn’t the name of the Nataashquan ferry *Calypso*?”

“So it is,” said M. “It would have been a bit of a give-away if I had suggested the name *Calypso II*.”

Peter said, “Am I to take it M, that you had something to do with my getting the Corner Brook Harbormaster job?”

“You served me well, Peter. It broke my heart to have to scrap *Calypso*, of course by then *aly*. I was on the brink of losing everything for a long time, and it was close to a year before I could be sure that any of the money I had isolated was even real. It was during this time that I met Vlod. When I was back on my feet, with Vlod’s help, we tracked you down. I had just made an anonymous donation to extend the MST to its final planned destination of Nataashquan, and that included getting a new ferry for the Newfoundland connection up and running. Corner Brook didn’t have an official harbormaster back then, but I knew it would need one as soon as it got ferry service.” “Thank you for that.”

Sara asked, “So you were never tempted to join that survival group of billionaires that took off to create a Mars colony?” M ruefully shook his head, “God no.”

Sophia said, “I never heard about how it went for them.”

M shook his head, “Not well. Someone on board had had some kind of viral infection. Half of them died before reaching Mars. The rest died, according to the video footage, when the ship crash landed. Everyone happy with your rooms? Because this will be your home base for a while.”

Sophia commented on how it was so surprising to find Vlod’s trunk of old books in her room. She learned it was Guy’s doing. Vlod had mentioned to Guy which trunk was to become Sophia’s. Guy had stashed all the trunks Vlod had hidden away in the back of The Beast’s basement before they left Corner Brook. The trunks, other than Sophia’s, had been placed in a Strongbox safe room as they were a tremendous resource for his mechanic Sebastian, and of course, the future, if they ever got to a future where they could use them.

Margo asked for a CoSaF-NORDIC War update. M leaned back, “It appears to remain in a stalemate, but there is extremely gratifying news, secret news that is. The CoSaF leader Valentina Landono escaped, along with a young boy who helped her find her way out of the battle zone she

was cornered in. She used her Quad-Hack to notify CoSaF, and they contacted me. I happened to have a seaplane in the Caribbean already, so I diverted it and it picked them up. I'm going to bring them here to the Strongbox. It's the only place that will be safe for them for a while. I'll be meeting the plane in Halifax Harbor soon. I'm quite excited to meet her. In spite of being well known by reputation after coming out of nowhere about ten years ago, she keeps herself well out of the limelight."

"And a young boy?" Sophia questioned.

"Yes. An eleven-year-old. It was apparently his discovery of a trick that allowed Valentina to get out of there. But enough. I scheduled dinner early so we'd have time for an evening stroll through Swaying Pines. Although you'll be living in your rooms here, you should feel free to roam the mobile home park, and the nearby shopping center whenever you want."

"As a matter of fact, that's where the HMS of HMS Strongbox comes from. It stands for 'High in the mud of Swaying Pines.' We'll meet a few of the folks. You'll like them, and it will give me the chance to tell you more about the place."

Around 7:30 pm Sophia became confused. M had gathered her with Peter, Margo, and Sara in the living room for their promised evening walk. But instead of heading out the tunnel to the old mobile home, he took them to an unobtrusive solid teak door in the back of the living room. That opened onto a narrow, dimly lit concrete corridor. Instead of leading them out of the Strongbox he seemed to just be leading them deeper into it. Then the corridor dead-ended at a rusty heavy steel door.

M said, "I call this the Gladys Door. It leads to the Gladys Path"

Sophia wondered how hard it was going to be for M to open the old door. It didn't look like it had had any maintenance in fifty years. But when M punched in a code, a solenoid clicked and he turned to look at them with his big grin.

Then, instead of having to heave on the old door, it rotated open to his light pull.

Outside they found themselves on an old woodsy gravel path. They turned left and soon were on the Park's paved Road.

"Hi, Em," called an older woman from the porch of the nearest home.

"Good evening, Gladys," M answered. "Got some guests. Going to show them around."

"Be sure to stop by for some sherry afterwards," she called back.

M scanned his little crew with a raised eyebrow and said quietly, "Beware the evening glass of sherry with Gladys."

The former warehouse was on the top of a hill and this was the high point of Swaying Pines Road. They took a right and as they walked M told them the road looped back to the entrance where they had come in. He called out a Hi to various people on their porches, in their yards, and children playing in the road.

They came to the apex of the loop, which was also the lowest part. From there it climbed again. A meter or so off the road's edge M stopped at an old wood 3-rail fence. They found they were at the edge of a cliff.

"This is where the old dump was."

Peter looked at a modern electric truck sitting on its roof at the bottom of the cliff. "Oops." A tow truck was on its side next to it. It looked like it had once been on fire.

"Yes. About that," M started. He scanned all around them, then motioned for them to gather more closely. He continued quietly, "Margo, I learned a lot from you guys in Newfoundland, and I put it to work here in Swaying Pines. I am pleased to say that we are the only patch of earth in Nova Scotia that is NORDIC-free. These trucks were from a year ago, and I think it is when NORDIC finally decided that it was taking too much effort to Constant Monitor a group of people who were after all, very poor, and, in NORDIC's regenerative-learning model, therefore too stupid to create any threat to itself. NORDIC has never learned that poor doesn't mean stupid."

M told them how it started with NORDIC's self-driving trucks coming to Swaying Pines making opium deliveries. He always made sure he was manning the gate whenever their video cameras on the main road saw them coming. The self-driving truck's speaker would tell him to open the gate. He would reply in his mock French that he didn't understand. The truck would try French. He would reply in his mock Indian. This would go on for some time. "Usually, you would think a computer could outlast a human anytime, but that doesn't apply to a human clown who is loving every minute of it."

Finally, the truck would just off load the opium bundles next to the gate and leave. Then he would call a couple of the guys from the park to come in the golf cart and they would hurl the bundles off the cliff. Eventually, the opium deliveries stopped.

Peter asked, "What does that have to do with the trucks at the bottom of this cliff?" "Yes. That was NORDIC trying to get its surveillance in place." He explained that since it was a bit too wooded for satellite monitoring, NORDIC would send low flying drones. But the drones kept getting caught up in the overhead wires. Margo was facing the road and noted that she didn't see any overhead wires. M said that These kind of overhead wires came via wire canisters loaded into flare guns. "A couple of the kids here are great shots."

Then NORDIC installed CM cameras in the trees, but they kept getting destroyed by that sulfuric acid corrosion Margo had told him about.

"Tell me about the trucks, while there's still light," Peter said.

"Oh yeah. The trucks. NORDIC sent this big bot-truck and it installed a tall pole. The intent, obviously, was to install a tree of cameras. But damn it if the pole didn't fall down overnight. When the truck came back two days later to fix the pole, we were ready for it. A whole bunch of us had built a wooden platform that extended over the cliff and made what would look like old pavement with tar paper. Sure enough, when the truck drove on the platform it toppled into the pit. NORDIC sent an electric tow truck. Not only did that fall into the pit, but it caught fire to boot. Oh my God. That was a bonfire for the ages. That was when NORDIC seems to have decided to give up on us."

“Wait,” Sara said. “The truck batteries wouldn’t catch fire just from falling down the cliff.”

“They would if Guy hit the battery pack with a flare gun.”

M said it was time to continue. He wanted to get them around the whole loop.

After a couple hundred meters Sophia pointed to an example of what she had been seeing, “Where did all the sculptures come from?”

M said they were made by the residents. He had purchased an old mill building and converted it to artist’s lofts. A Swaying Pines management team ran the place and charged rent, but only enough to make sure artists had an incentive to vacate a studio if they weren’t using it. To get around NORDIC’s directive that A.I. had to be used in the creation of all art—it called it a quality control measure, they ran a computer in a room in the top floor that simulated many users constantly using it. The room was kept locked.

At another point Margo noticed that the Beast had been moved and was now next to a rather nice mobile home. M said that was Guy’s home, and that if any of them decided they’d like to stay long-term he could get them a home like that. One of the things that was nice about Swaying Pines was that there was none of the annoying friction between various income levels. Everyone there wanted a good life, that’s all. They understood that meant different things to different people.

“How do the people here make a living with NORDIC having eliminated nearly all jobs?” Margo asked.

M told them he owned not only the nearby shopping center, but also a number of businesses throughout Nova Scotia. He used the absolute minimum of automation and paid very well. He said it was possible because he picked his businesses carefully to exploit the areas where A.I. provided distinct disadvantages resulting in inferior service and products. It worked because the people who worked in his businesses could afford to buy the products they produced and sold. A self-sustaining loop. It was a very old concept that still worked.

Sophia thought she detected movement above her and looked up. “Look at the little birds,” she said. “Not birds,” M said, “Bats.”

“Then, this city girl is ready to call it a night.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Secrets

Two Days Later. Halifax Harbor. 4:42 pm.

It was a glorious day. The energetic waves shrugged the sunlight off their shoulders, passing it along to the next and so on until it glinted off the sunglasses of the little group standing on the floating dock. The air had just enough of the cool Atlantic Ocean breeze to make Peter's skin feel alive and remind him of why he chose a life on the water, even if that life might be cut shorter than otherwise because of the choice. The Harbor was busy, as it always was. The baby-blue seaplane could be heard long before it was seen.

Peter turned to M, "I'm sorry Margo is not here to see this. She would have been fascinated by a flying boat."

"Yes, but Valentina's arrival is supposed to be a non-event, and this seaplane is enough of an attention getter as it is."

The plane approached, lined itself up with the dock, killed the engine, and drifted alongside. M and Peter grabbed the wing struts and held it to the dock. The hatch flipped open. A trim woman emerged wearing a dirty, red-stained denim shirt and pants, with a pill-box cap pulled low on her forehead. She was looking down as she placed one foot on the plane's step and then hopped onto the dock. She was directly in front of Peter. It was then that she looked up. All three of them on the dock, Valentina, Peter, and M froze.

Peter looked into the brown smoldering green-flecked eyes and said softly, "Beth."

"Peter?" She was clearly amazed.

"Beth?" M repeated.

“I was going to introduce myself as Valentina; but you know, this might be a good time to go back to being Beth.”

M said, “I had no idea you were Valentina Landono.” “Me neither,” added Peter.

“Well, a name is just a name.”

M looked behind her to the seaplane’s hatch, “And who’s that?” Henry had popped his head out. Beth went to assist him, but before she could, he had found the boat’s footstep and hopped onto the dock, not quite catching his balance before doing a face-plant, having not anticipated the floating dock’s shift. He promptly righted himself with the aplomb of a cat who has stumbled and taken the attitude, ‘I meant to do that.’

“I’d like you to meet Henry. I must apologize for the state of our appearance. Although it has been a long trip getting here, we did not pass any clothing stores on the way.” Both of them looked like they had just stepped off the battlefield, which, basically, they had.

Henry extended his hand to M, who was the closest, saying, “Pleased to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you as well, young man. People call me M.”

“Peter added, And I’m Peter.”

“Peter, would you lead our new guests to the shops along the harborside and let them get whatever they want. After I discuss some things with my pilot I’ll wait for you at the SUV.”

Two hours later they were back in Swaying Pines. M parked in front of the old mobile home beside the park’s entrance gate. He let his new guests use its bathroom to clean-up, then let each of them use one of the old home’s bedrooms so they could make a quick change of clothes.

Then They joined him in the old home’s main room. With a broad grin he tugged the venetian blinds cord to open the tunnel hatch. Henry was bug-eyed. “For now, make your introduction as Valentina because that’s who they’re expecting.”

In the Strongbox living room Sophia, Margo, Sara and Helle had heard them approaching and were standing, waiting.

“Hi, I’m Valentina,” she said with her confident smile. Sara was stunned by the beauty of the woman’s face. Her mouth hung open. Margo noticed. She said, “Hi, I’m Margo Marchand. To my left is my speechless partner Sara. You’ll have to forgive her. She wears her emotions close to the surface.”

Valentina said, “Yes. I get that a lot. It’s not my fault. It’s my heritage. Greek, Israeli, Somali, and Scottish.”

Sara recovered herself. “Amazing.”

“And I’m Sophia Lambreggetti.”

“My goodness. I’ve heard all about you. And let me introduce you to Henry McBride.”

Helle nudged M and he said, “I see that supper is on the table. Let’s eat.”

Helle leaned down to Henry and, revealing a Danish accent said, “I heard that during your plane ride you mentioned you like macaroni and cheese, so I told Angelo, who does the cooking here and Voila!”

They all took seats at the table.

“Everybody,” M said. “Valentina is retiring the Valentina name. Peter and I were amazed to find, when we picked her up in Halifax, that we already knew her as Beth. She spent some quality time with us years ago when I still had my beloved little boat *Calypso*. So, from now on, she is Beth.”

M turned to Henry, who was between him and Sophia. “Here’s something to know. What we have here in this building is basically a secret club. It has to be a secret because of NORDIC. You know what NORDIC is, right.”

“You bet I do, mister M.”

“Good. And it’s just M. It’s kind of like a nickname. I call this big building the Strongbox. The village we are in is called Swaying Pines. Most of the people in Swaying Pines think I’m just an old guy who lives in the trailer home at the entrance where you came in. But some others know I actually kind of broke into this old warehouse and live in here.”

Helle and Angelo brought out dinner and everyone dug in. As they ate M continued bringing Henry up to speed, but he did it with occasional glances to Beth to make sure she was picking it all up.

“This is actually a secret club dedicated to getting NORDIC off our backs. Because of your experience we have voted you into our secret club. Beth is giving up her old name Valentina because those NORDIC soldier bots will keep looking for her. Now here’s the thing Henry, outside the Strongbox you won’t be able to tell if someone is in the secret club or not. So, you must not say anything to anybody, ever, about the secret club. You must not even say there is a secret club. If anyone asks you if there is a secret club, you just say ‘Why do you say that?’”

Helle had been standing next to M, “Henry, people who cannot keep the secret get kicked out of the club.” Henry turned very sober. M decided it was time to move on to more encouraging news. “Henry, do you like video games?”

Henry nodded vigorously.

“That’s good. A friend of ours named Guy who lives here in Swaying Pines is a big gamer. But he’s away for a little while. He told me he’s got a couple of games in progress that he is worried about because they need frequent attention or he will lose his progress. I told him you were coming and he said he would appreciate it if you checked on them for him.”

Henry was enthusiastic. Helle said she would be staying there with him until Guy returned. Sophia spoke up, “I’d be glad to do that.”

Helle went over and stood next to Sophia. “Perfect. I’ll show you Guy’s place after dinner. He has two guest rooms. Although his place is on the other side of the loop, his back yard is on the path that cuts straight across the loop. It ends directly opposite the Gladys Path.”

M was eavesdropping. “In fact, Gladys doesn’t know it but the main reason she’s got that spot is because no one comes or goes on that path without her noticing.”

Henry had finished his supper and Helle said, “Henry, come with me. Angelo has a special dessert for you. Do you like chocolate cake?” Henry beat her to the kitchen door.

M turned to Beth, “Beth, I know you will be continuing your CoSaF duties from here and that will take much of your time. But we are hoping you will be able to help fill the void left by us losing our security expert, Vlod, in the recent NORDIC attack that was meant to take out Margo, Sara and Sophia. He had a good deal of valuable security and war strategy experience.”

“Vlod,” Beth said. “A common enough name I guess. But it just made me remember a Vlod I met who was a well known former Ukrainian military specialist that escaped to London in 2051. Sorry, please go on.”

“Well actually, I expect we are talking about the same person,” said M.

“What happened to him?”

“I am very saddened to say that NORDIC killed him.”

Beth clouded over. “I’m so sorry to hear that. I wish I had know him better.”

Sophia choked slightly and pulled her napkin to her mouth. Sara could see that her eyes were shining. Sophia mumbled something about going to her room and left the table. Sara said, “I’m going to check on her.”

Sara gave a knuckle knock on Sophia’s door, then slid it open without waiting for a reply. She slid it shut behind her. Sophia was sitting on the side of her bed quietly crying. Sara sat and put her arm around her.

“Can’t talk about him yet?” She asked.

“Sometimes I forget it really happened. But it’s not just that. Sara, did you see Beth?”

“You know I did.”

“I just thought,” and she waved her hand in the air, “I had thought ... I imagined that what Vlod and I had together was special. But Sara, if he ... if Vlod made love ... if he made love to that woman, there is no way in freakin hell I could have compared with that. I mean, look at me.”

“You’re beautiful. But I understand what you’re saying.” She rose. “Stay here. I’ll be back.”

Sara returned to the table. Margo asked, “How is she?”

“She’ll be fine. So, Beth, I missed some of your story. How did you know Vlod?”

“An old friend of mine knew about his arrival in London and Thought I should meet him. We had dinner together, but soon it became apparent we marched to different drummers. I lost track of him after that dinner.”

Helle served dessert for the adults and Sara said, “I’ll go tell Sophia dessert is here.”

Back in Sophia’s room Sara said, “Nothing happened between Beth and Vlod. An evening dinner that went nowhere. C’mon, silly. Dessert is on the table.”

Helle, Sophia, and Henry were ambling along the gravel path to Guy’s Home. There was the murmur of people out in their backyards enjoying the long summer evening, with the light chimes of children playing. Henry made a game of kicking a small stone ahead of him, soccer style. The air was humid, but in that way that just makes you feel cared for.

“So how well do you know Guy?” Sophia asked Helle. There was a long silence. “Oh,” Sophia said with realization.

“It was years ago,” Helle said. “I am quite over it.”

Sophia stole a glance at Helle. Her head was down watching her feet, but her eyes seemed damp.

“Sorry,” Sophia said.

“It’s fine. Really. A long time ago. It’s just that sometimes I wonder about what could have been.”

“So why don’t you give it a second try?”

Helle stopped and picked up an angular stone by her foot. “A relationship is a sculpture. The two of you work at this sculpture with your chisels. Your chisels are your words, your glances, your grunts, your silences. You each think you are chiseling away the rough edges on this thing, this sculpture called ‘Your Relationship’, and that it can be made a bit more perfect with just a little more chiseling. But what is knocked off with the chisels can never be put back.”

She carefully returned the stone to the ground. “But, there is no separate sculpture. When you are both working your chisels, there is no stone between you. Your chisels are reaching across that space and actually cutting at the other person. You make mistakes. You do your best to stop the bleeding from your cuts with kisses; but you can never put back what you knocked off. You have altered the other person permanently.”

She took a few more steps in silence, then said, “Sometimes you just realize that you have done too much damage, and you should just walk away. Anyway, I’m working on a new sculpture now.”

Henry called back over his shoulder, “Hey, Come on you guys.”

Guy’s home was light yellow with window awnings that were folded up. Inside it was warm and cozy, but obviously occupied by a hetero male. Helle said, “Guy’s bedroom is the last one at the end of the hall. The next closest one can be yours, Sophia. Then there’s the bathroom, and the next bedroom will be yours, Henry. As you can see, Guy’s game set-up is in the living room, so you should use the headphones while playing. There’s all kinds of food in the kitchen. Guy is going to call on the TV in the Living

Room here at 9 pm, which is in just fifteen minutes. Henry, Guy asks you lay-off the consoles until he talks to you, OK,?”

“Got it.”

“OK, I’ll be on my way then. Sophia, anything you need, you’ve got my number.”

“Thank you so much.”

Henry made himself busy investigating Guy’s electronic equipment, trying to go as far as he dared touching things. Sophia suddenly was swept with a cold wave of realization. The last two people she had become close to had died. She didn’t know what was wrong with her. She decided she needed to keep Henry at arm’s length. But just as she thought this Henry bounded over and plopped onto the couch opposite her.

Henry sat facing her with an expectant expression. Clearly Sophia was supposed to talk to him. “So Henry, why were you in Guatemala with your mother?”

“My dad got hooked on opium when he lost his job as a store manager. A little while after that my mom said he moved away. She never actually said it, but I’m pretty sure he died because she said there was no longer a reason for us to stay where we were. She said she had a bit of money saved so we went searching for a warmer place to live. Is Sophia your real name, or a secret name.”

“Sophia is my real name.”

“Do you have a nickname?”

“Nope. Just Sophia.”

“Can I give you a nickname?”

“Hmm. I guess it depends on what it is. Were you thinking of ‘Pigs-foot-face’?”

Henry giggled. “No. I was thinking of Soph.”

Sophia realized it was too late. This kid was irresistible. “Oh. That’s just fine. Soph it is.”

The TV lit up and Guy’s face filled the screen. “Hi, you guys.”

Henry said, “How come you’re a guy and your name’s just ‘Guy’? Why didn’t your parents give you a real name?”

“I’m glad you asked that question. You and Sophia pull those two other chairs up to the TV so I can get a proper look at you and I’ll explain.” Sophia and Henry did so. “Guy is a French name, and it is pronounced ‘Gee’ in Quebec and France. Plus, some English speakers who know also pronounce it ‘Gee’. But you know, I’m also perfectly fine with people who pronounce it ‘Guy.’”

“Well,” said Henry, “I’m going to pronounce it ‘Gee.’”

“As for me, you seem more like a ‘Guy.’ It has a softer ring to it which seems to suit you in my eyes.”

“And so it shall be. Now, Henry, let’s you and I talk about gaming. Sophia, you can join in, or I’m told, your trunk of books is in the living room there next to the wing chair if you’d rather peruse those.”

“You know, I think I’ll do just that .”

“Great.?” He held up a piece of paper. “Put this number into your phone. Then feel free to call me anytime.”

Sophia picked one of the books from the chest and started reading. A short while later she was aware that Henry seemed to be playing the game alone. At 10:30 pm she went to Henry and announced it was bedtime. When he had changed into his new PJs, brushed his teeth, and was in bed Sophia knocked on his door. Henry said, “Come in.” Sophia tucked him in, saying, “Nite-Nite,” as she turned out the light.

Then she got under her own covers, but found she wasn’t ready to sleep.

On a whim, she called guy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

IceCube Melts

Next Day. Swaying Pines. 8:01 am.

Sophia and Henry left Guy's home and walked the woody sun-dappled path to the Strongbox for breakfast. Henry started skipping from side to side and got ahead of Sophia. She remembered she used to do that along the Atlantic Ave. sidewalk when she was a kid—it was the only wide, smooth sidewalk in her neighborhood. She thought why not, and started skipping. By the time they got to Swaying Pines Road she and Henry were just another pair of children.

“Morning Gladys,” Sophia called as they passed. Sophia let Henry enter the door code and they walked the long, narrow corridor to the end where there was the nondescript steel door that opened onto the living room.

Everyone else was already at the breakfast table. Sophia said, “I hope no one minds. Henry was up early, and I gave him a book from my trunk I thought he might like.” She registered marked concern in the faces of some of the others. “Don't worry, I told him all about books, their history, and how they are illegal in any NORDIC controlled country. Believe me, with my background, I know how dangerous it is for him to know about books, but no what? This cat is already out of the bag and there'll be no putting him back in. He was fascinated. You'd think I just gave him the secret to the universe, and, in a way I did.”

“Dam straight, Soph,” said Henry.

Sara wanted to know the name of the book. “*History of United States Naval Warfare*.” “How charming.”

“An excellent choice,” from M.

Beth asked M if he had an update on the status of the war. M told her he had gotten no new alerts. Since she had a Quad-Hack, he would have Sebastian add her to the alert network.

“I’ll introduce all of you to The War Room staff right after breakfast” They understood he was the lead person in the resistance’s rather loose organizational tree, but only Peter knew of his personal history. He added that one of the things they needed to get going on was expansion of the staff.

When breakfast was finished Henry helped Helle clear the table. As they went through the kitchen door Sophia heard Helle say, “Henry, we’ve got a lobster tank. Have you ever seen a lobster?”

M led the others to a polished mahogany bookshelf at the long side of the living room.

“This bookshelf is a secret door. I chose it because, who would suspect a bookshelf as a hidden door,” and he flashed all of them his wide, slapstick grin. Still maintaining the grin, he said, “But seriously. The use of a bookshelf as a hidden door is such a tired trope that if NORDIC were ever searching the place with bots its algorithm probably would pass over it. Here’s how it works. Don’t worry about the sequence. It changes.”

And he tilted four books from various shelves on their spines, but instead of falling onto the floor, they just rotated on the tail of their spines and clicked in place. Then M stood back a bit. The mahogany baseboard strips along the foot of the bookshelf sprang up on little metal scissor hinges—the bookcase was literally pulling up its skirt, and the bookshelf smoothly opened. M stepped through and the rest followed.

They entered the back of a Spartan small office. A window looked out upon a much larger room. “This is my office,” M said. “This way, anyone entering the War Room from here appears to have just been visiting me in my office.”

“So, the War Room staff is not aware of the bookshelf and living room?” From Margo.

“Sebastian is. The others aren’t. There is an empty office next to this one. Peter, that one is yours for now on.”

They walked out M’s office door into the War Room. The room was huge and dimly lit. “Lights up,” M commanded, and the room became bright. There were numerous workstations, but no one was present.

M explained he had told the small staff to give them some time alone.

M motioned toward the ceiling and said, “In order to provide NORDIC’s satellite CM an explanation for the modest amount of activity around this building, the roof is camouflaged to appear as an old, ill kempt playground.”

He went on to say that there was nothing but monitors and keyboards in the War Room. All computing was handled by HAIR-2 in an adjacent part of the old warehouse. “But I get ahead of myself. Whenever that happens,” he grinned, “I turn around to face myself and grab my big nose and pull me up to myself.”

Now he turned serious. “Time for the war update.” He led them to the front of the room where there was a row of comfortable swivel chairs in front of three huge screen monitors. “Have a seat.”

“This is incredible,” Beth said. “We at CoSaF had no idea.”

“Good,” said M. He stood beside the center monitor and picked up a remote. “I might have got a bit carried away when I ordered the screens but too late now. Beth, I assume one of the first things you will want to do today is contact CoSaF in Bogota and re-establish your command as you see fit.”

M touched the remote and one of the screens came to life with a map of Central America. “CoSaF has been using the Soldier-In-A-Box trick to battle NORDIC and they are making slow progress pushing NORDIC back toward the Mexico border. As they go they disconnect NORDIC from the network and create a new connection to HAIR-2. CoSaF is, or I should say, your forces are consolidating your gains as they go.”

She simply nodded.

“We are still scratching our heads, sorry ‘analyzing,’ which means wondering what the hell went wrong with IceCube. It initially acted exactly as expected. NORDIC’s processing was obviously slowed and we, according to schedule, began releasing Hair Balls into the network.”

Beth looked quizzical, “Sorry, Hair Balls? I assume Hair Balls are related to HAIR?”

“Indeed,” M said. “They are the tiny HAIR seeds we stream into NORDIC’s network. I might have been the one who named them Hair Balls,. I’m not saying. We had figured out, or at least we thought we had, how fast to stream in the Hair Balls so that NORDIC would not detect them until it was much too late. But NORDIC did detect them. As we stand here, NORDIC is severely disabled, but unexpectedly no longer weakening.”

Margo asked, “But HAIR-1 is running fine, yes?”

“Yes. Let me explain for the others. HAIR-1 is our first Harnessed Artificial Intelligence Renaissance computer. It is dedicated solely to the war effort. We have a second HAIR super computer which we have named Hair-2 because that seemed to kind of make sense. It is solely dedicated to domestic infrastructure. HAIR-2 has already started doing its work in Central America. We have been quietly disconnecting NORDIC from the Transportation, power and utilities Networks and re-connecting them to HAIR-2. Thus, those systems have continued functioning, as far as we can tell, without a hitch during this initial phase of the War.” He expanded by saying that by having HAIR-1 providing artificial intelligence computing for the war effort they could be as fast and flexible as NORDIC and, they thought, even better.

“Now, to your assignments as Sebastian and I have laid out, which I have written down here.” He unfolded a piece of paper. “Beth, in addition to her CoSaF duties, will be our new war expert responsible for the overall strategic efforts, particularly as the war expands into North America. I will remain just the person at the front of the room who tries to keep everything running as smoothly as a Swiss watch.”

“Where was I? Oh yeah. Two. Sebastian is in charge of coordinating the staff. It may seem easy now, but as we add staff due to the insertion of IceCube it will increasingly become a major effort.

Peter interrupted, “M, they might want to know that we have a history with Sebastian.”

M said, “Oh yes. Sebastian was my mechanic on Calypso. There is nothing mechanical that he can’t make run faster, or longer, and I have turned that engineering logic loose on getting Iceberg organized.”

Which brings me to item, hold on, I forgot where I was.”

He consulted his paper and then continued to explain how until Sophia had run full tilt into their lives the small staff had been sufficient. Just then the overhead speaker announced, “OK, if we come in boss?” “Come on in.”

Six adults entered from a door in the Room’s east wall and took positions at their cubicles.

M said, “I’d like you to meet the War Room Staff. These are the biggest nerds in all of Maritime, and in Sebastian’s case, beyond the sea. Staff, I’d like you to meet our newest members. Meet Beth, the force of nature formerly known as Valentina. Peter, someone I’ve known for years, but had been separated from during a bit of personal re-formatting. Sophia, the person who made insertion of IceCube a reality. Margo, who you all know about but have never met. And Sara, our technical wizard. Some of you may have a Scarf Translator. She’s the one who invented it.”

M then turned his focus to the staff and said proudly, “Sebastian, you know Peter already, but you may be surprised to be meeting Beth again. Let me assure you, she is every bit as much of a terror as she was those many years ago.” Then, addressing the whole group, “Sebastian is the inventor of the Quad-Hack.”

“Thank you M, but I must set the facts in order,” Sebastian interrupted, “I didn’t actually invent it. I discovered it. I was the one who detected the faint anomalies in the cell tower fields. Tiny. But I grew curious.”

M said, “Sit back everybody. I sense there’s a story here.”

Sebastian continued, “After a while,” and he glanced at his monitor, “I could tell you how long ...”

“No need. You have our attention,” M waved him on.

“Well, after a while I noticed a pattern. I could not imagine what was causing it, so I built a computer model and tuned it until I was able to re-produce the anomalies. Even then, it took me approximately a year to work it out. Someone down in MR-7 had invented an undetectable phone. I didn’t know how it could be done but once I knew someone had done it, I decided to reverse-engineer it. Really, that’s all I did.”

Sophia moved to stand next to Margo, “In that case, I can tell you I used to work with its inventor, Claude Marchant. I’d like you to meet his daughter,” and she put her arm around Margo. All the staff applauded.

“Well,” Margo said, “if that applause isn’t misplaced, I don’t know what is. But, in my father’s absence, I will accept it on his behalf.”

When things seemed to settle down Beth asked, “What I am wondering about is if your HAIR-1 is running the war effort, why do you need to build up your staff? Why don’t you just turn the entire war planning and execution over to it like some of the European countries have done with their A.I.?”

M seemed to know that question would come up. “Because we don’t want the unrestrained free-for-all that’s happening in Europe to happen here. Both our HAIR-1 and HAIR-2 are specifically designed to be harnessed. That was the mistake the designers of NORDIC only realized when it was far too late. Don’t get me wrong, our HAIR computers are light-speed fast, but they need to have a human jockey who can judge when something is starting to go sideways.”

M went on to explain the issue they were facing building-up the staff. It was hard to find suitable talent. They couldn’t just recruit in the normal fashion because NORDIC would detect that. They wanted to recruit from within all the Resistance movements. But, other than Iceberg, the drop-out rate in the other resistance movements was high.

Margo took up the topic. She explained that by drop-out rate what he meant was that resistance members in the other movements were killed. As soon as NORDIC detected abnormalities in their behavior that matched it’s profile it killed them. Of course, many times these abnormalities had nothing to do with joining a resistance movement. It could simply be that someone developed a new hobby that did not match the profile for a person of that age and race, remembering that NORDIC still persisted in defining people by the false concept of race. Once again, it learned everything it knew by scraping the internet. For actual resistance fighters, the slightest slip of the tongue in the wrong place, and everyplace was the wrong place, would get them hit by an errant bus or poisoned by bad chicken in their refrigerator.

M went on to say the plan was that as NORDIC was weakened by IceCube the other Resistance movements could create safe zones within their countries and thus get themselves established. It was never IceBerg's intent to take-on NORDIC as a unilateral action. But NORDIC had been successful in preventing any kind of collaboration, so when the opportunity to insert IceCube presented itself, and he motioned to Sophia, they had to act.

Sebastian said, "I know that I may not be the fastest decision maker in our group, but I am very good at detail. That is why I have the task of determining why IceCube stalled." He then indicated to the other side of the narrow aisle. "This is Chester. He rides jockey position on all of H-2 domestic initiatives."

Chester was a tall and lanky man, quite a bit like a younger M must have been, although darker. "The immediate needs are the intercepts of NORDIC's domestic networks. Note that this is a broad umbrella that includes all the human supply networks such as self-drivers, airplanes, power, water, sanitation, food, and the opium addiction rehab programs when we are able to get to them."

M told them that was all there was to report so far. He would be in his office.

Upon entering his office he found Helle and Henry waiting for him.

"Henry has a question about something in his Naval Warfare book." M invited them to take a seat. Helle did, but Henry just leaned against her chair. M looked at him expectantly.

"I was just wondering why the British didn't build their ships to be as strong as the USS Constitution once they saw how their cannonballs bounced off its sides."

M smiled. "An excellent question, Henry, And very timely because it fits right in with what we're trying to do in the War Room here. The British would have loved to been able to build ships with the advanced design and quality materials the United States had. But you know, by that point they had gotten themselves stretched pretty thin as they tried to control all the seas, which is very similar to what NORDIC has done by trying to control all of North and Central America now. They had over extended

themselves, and the upstart rebel United States could target the resulting weaknesses.”

“Can I help? I’m only eleven.” He quickly added, “But I’m going to be twelve next month.”

“Yes Henry, I do believe you would be a great addition. Come with me.” He rose and they entered the War Room.

Henry immediately froze as he took in the room. Then he spotted Sophia. He ran to her side, and she draped her arm over his shoulder, giving a quick hug. Then he saw Beth.

“Hi Box Buddy,” Beth said, all smiles.

M did not need to interrupt the group, as they were already all focused on Henry. “Staff, I want you to meet the newest member of the secret inner circle of our secret club. Henry McBride. He has already proven himself capable.”

Beth said, “I can tell you he’s the brightest kid I’ve ever met.”

Henry looked up at M, “How many secrets does this club have?”

“The minimum Henry, the minimum.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Douglas

Next Day. Quebec City. 10:17 am.

Douglas stood at the low stone wall overlooking the Old Port. Quebec City was anxiously soaking up the sun under a light blue cloudless sky. But the sun's warmth was having a hard time competing with a steady northeasterly breeze. Where was she? He was anxious to see her again. It had been almost three weeks since his second-ever meeting with her and he had been trying to set up this third one for days. He had left his custom SUV at home and rode there in his NORDIC-approved self-driver. It parked itself in a garage outside the Ramparts. As he took the long walk from the garage to the overlook cliff he had reflected on how the load on his plate of duties was much lighter now that Iceberg was crippled, as in having its legs blown off and then submerged underwater. He chuckled to himself over his creative wordplay. I could have been that idiot prize-winning poet, he muttered to himself. There was a spring in his step. He was still a young man.

At the overlook he set his carpet style overnight bag onto the stone patio, undid its brass clasp and took out the black beret. He wrapped his scarf around his neck and pulled it up to his nose and put in its earbud. He pulled his beret down to cover the ear.

A few minutes later a solitary figure appeared at his side. He hadn't even heard her approach. She was in a full coat, a black beret pulled low, and a scarf pulled up to cover her mouth. They stood very close but did not look at each other.

"Can you hear me OK,?" Douglas asked in French.

"Yes. Fine. Why do you have a travel bag?"

"Going someplace right after we're done meeting here."

"Too bad, I was looking forward to spending a little time with you."

“Oh, I was hoping you would say that. There is definitely time for that. In fact, I have a room reserved at the Chateau Frontenac.”

She glanced at him for the first time. “You didn’t think to confirm with me first?” “Just took a chance.” “Well, it was a good guess.”

She pointed to her scarf, “Don’t you think we look a bit overdressed?”

“Not at all. We’re not that far off. It’s almost cold. Look at that couple down there. They’ve got their collars turned up.”

“OK, close enough,” she said through the Scarf Translator. He had found two of the Translators when searching the apartment of a recently eliminated threat and given her one when she last visited. As you spoke, a microphone in the scarf transmitted your voice to an earbud in the person close to you. However, the scarf also had an embedded speaker that transmitted random gibberish in synch with your actual spoken words. That way, NORDIC CM devices would record just two people talking in a normal manner about random things of no interest to NORDIC.

“So, I assume you had a reason to ask me here other than just your hope for a tete-a-tete.”

“I need an access code so I can get the very latest updates on what is going on with the CoSaF War in Central America.”

“Why is that your business. Your job is limited to keeping Quebec Resistance from coalescing into a unified force.”

“I can’t allow myself to be behind the curve on this war. If it ever spread into Merica or Blue I would need to rapidly update my target list.”

She shifted on her feet uncomfortably. “I could get into a lot of trouble if I gave you an access code.” “I would use it with great discretion.”

She took out a small notepad and a pen, wrote an alphanumeric code, ripped out the page and gave it to him. “I can tell you that right now the war is basically a stalemate. They’ve cut us off from everything south of the Mexican border. A huge disappointment. If we could have just gotten across the Panama Canal, we would have been able to overwhelm them all

the way through the Darien Gap. Then NORDIC would have analyzed the situation, formulated a war plan, and began its takeover of South America. It would have been like Pennsylvania all over again. NORDIC really got its undies in a bunch during the Guatemala stall, and it was resorting to desperate tactics which were not very flattering. But fortunately, CoSaF stopped its push, and NORDIC has cooled down a bit. I was extremely concerned for a while because many of the power plant cooling systems were not keeping up. If we had had even a small power disruption, I don't know what we would have done. As you know, there is no way to talk NORDIC down when it gets itself worked up in a tizzy."

"Actually, I didn't know that."

"Well, no one has ever been able to figure out a way to talk it down. Those of us watching have to wait for it to exhaust itself. From what I've heard, it is like a young kid throwing a tantrum, or an adult sociopath."

She scanned the horizon. "So, do you have anything new for me?"

"Come," Douglas said, "Let's move to that picnic area. We've been in one place too long," and he turned to go but she didn't follow him. He turned back and looked at her.

"I don't get it. You're going to give me intel on The Resistance Movement and what they're up to. Why are we even wearing these things?" She asked, pointing to her Scarf Translator.

Douglas went back to her. "Because you forgot I'm supposed to be the leader of the Quebec Resistance. Anyone around here could be a Resistance member. Although I work hard to make sure I've got a good facial shot when they sign-up with me so my phone would buzz if one of them was near, their such a defiant bunch I know I haven't seen them all. A Resistance Member can't be overhearing what I'm saying."

"Fine." They went to the farthest picnic table. After Douglas looked around and confirmed there was nothing behind them but blue sky they sat.

"OK, What have you got," she said.

"I've been stymied since I was able to pass-on to you Iceberg's spike details, the thing they called an ice-something. And how their HAIR

infiltration plan was designed to elude detection. But with my Iceberg informant blown to smithereens, I have been trying to identify another potential informant, but damn it, they're a tight group over there in Newfoundland."

"But I understand the Pop's Propane gag was a big success."

"A blast. As you know, we took-out the entire Iceberg leadership, including that little annoyance, Sophia, who gave their damned spike its entry laptop. Freakin Mako. Supposed to be this big Hitmin, and he can't kill his own wife, or whatever she was, with a butcher knife. I mean, really."

"How do you know about those details?"

"I talked to him."

"Mako?" "Yes."

"Mako is a Maritime Hitmin. You're supposed to stay in Quebec. What were you doing talking to him?"

"I met him a long time ago. Sometimes when there's a backlog of requests for Quebec Hitmin I've ask him to help out."

"That's totally against regulations. He's in another country," she said.

"It's still all NORDIC for krssakes."

"There is a procedure."

"Maybe. I queried NORDIC through the on-line portal you gave me four times and I got four completely different procedure instructions. I don't know if even one of them is correct. So, screw that, and I hire Mako. But now I have to wonder if he could kill a freakin land snail."

She touched a finger to his face just above the scarf. "Don't kill those, honey, I understand they're good for gardens."

"Do you have a garden?"

"No. Hate gardens."

“But I’m stuck. I still need Mako. You’ll remember the hot-shot young woman and her husband, Florrie and Raphael DuCharme?”

“Not really.”

“Well, she’s got computer training, is smart, and wealthy. She and her husband are getting to be popular with the other Quebec Resistance members. In other words, too dangerous to stay alive. So, I passed their info onto you to tag them with NORDIC. I monitor them, and see that NORDIC has made a bunch of clumsy attempts, failing each time to eliminate them. So bad I wouldn’t be surprised if she now knows she’s a target. The big problem, I’m guessing is that her parents have a place in Maine, and they are freakin back and forth all the time. So, I’ve decided I just need to arrange the hit myself.”

“Well, I told you to follow the rules, so my conscience is clear.”

Douglas explained how he had recently bought a cabin at the Sugarloaf Ski Resort in MR-6. It was necessary for his new timber-burning-fuel operation in Maine—‘Grey Phogg Fuel.’ After their meeting he was going there to meet Mako the next day, hence the travel bag. He would give him the info on the new targets of Florrie and Raphael and it would be another chance for him to get a hit done properly.

She was bored with that subject and wanted to talk about something else. “So, I read about that barbecue propane explosion outside Montreal. Killed the father and his daughter at the grill. Set their house on fire, and the mother was burned to death inside. Then the neighbor’s house caught fire but that family had already emptied into their backyard after they heard the explosion. Was that you?”

“That was one of the hits I requested from NORDIC. Typical. Didn’t even take-out the intended target.”

“Who was the target?”

“The son was the target. What a fiasco. It was to be a simple kill. This young guy, twenty-six I think, signs-up with me for the Resistance. I see from his background he’s not going to be of any use to me, but he is very motivated and has money, so he could prove dangerous. I put his name in one of the packages of hit targets I passed on to you.”

“It didn’t ring a bell when I read about it.”

“No reason it should. Just a normal hit-request. A simple kill. He had told me about an upcoming family BBQ. He was supposed to be the one at the grill. All that was in the package of info. So, when it goes wrong, I look-up the event history. Get this: he’s on his way to the BBQ in his new Mount Everest SUV. Seen those yet? Thing is twelve percent bigger than last year’s T-Rex model. He’s on his way to the BBQ and it flattens a mother and her baby in a stroller.”

“He got delayed?”

“No. Of course there was no liability. The entire incident was just auto reported by the SUV. The police arrive and he backed out of the way for the police to clean-up the mess.”

“I trust the police didn’t detain him.”

“Why would they? No reason to. But he knows he’s going to see his family with his new Mount Everest, so he takes it to a SUV-Wash to clean off the mother and baby splatter. But there’s a long line, and he’s delayed. His father starts the grill. Father and daughter killed instantly. Mother is in the house, but the freakin house security system registers the force of the blast against the porch sliding door and thinks an intruder is trying to break in, so it locks all the doors and windows. Then it registers the house is on fire and it activates the house sprinkler system, but the cheap bastards had fallen behind on their sprinkler subscription, so the mother burns to death. Intended target misses the whole thing.”

“So, were you eventually able to kill him?”

“Didn’t have to. He goes to live with his buddy, since weep-weep his family and house is gone. Then he freakin hangs himself.”

“So, job done.”

“No. Freakin buddy is outside in his yard and hears the guy kick over the chair he was standing on. Finds the guy just swinging. He gets him down.”

“Dead right?”

“No. Bastard has a pulse, so the buddy rushes him to an EH-600.”

“Oops.”

“Right. They revive the guy. Then the nurse-bot goes to give him an ibuprofen but has a hallucination and gives him a cyanide pill instead.”

“So, success.”

“Finally, success. But get this, the reason the guy hung himself was that he had been embezzling money from his employer, a big pharma magnate, and the guy thought the propane explosion was the magnate calling in a hit on his family to send a message to other employees. He was committing suicide out of guilt.”

“Ah-ha. He got his wish, and it’s a happy ending.”

“A happy ending,” Douglas repeated. “But I wish you had coordinated with me prior to the Margo killing. It could have gone more cleanly. It was a bit of overkill because my newly recruited informant, Tim, was in the blast.”

She said, “It is my understanding that Our self-driving delivery truck performed perfectly. It was programmed to slightly open the valve of each canister when it delivered them. We knew Margo had ordered four canisters from her local supplier, so we cancelled that order and sent ten from our own company. We knew there wouldn’t be enough safe storage space for all of them. We knew the leaking propane would settle into the bilge. We wouldn’t have to actually ignite it. The next time Margo and her pretty little partner Sara lit their stove for dinner the job would be done”

Douglas said, “. But for some reason, my guy Tim was on the boat and got himself blown to bits along with Margo, Sara, Vlodya, and that Sophia. So now, with Tim in pieces, I have no way of knowing what’s going on with Iceberg.”

The woman said, “It doesn’t matter. Iceberg is now crippled so badly that we shouldn’t spend time focusing on them. Just this morning NORDIC regained its senses enough to instruct me to tell you your job now is to make sure the Quebec Resistance is not emboldened by the stuff going on in Central America.”

Douglas cradled his chin in his folded hands and gazed out across the Old City. “I don’t know how they find out about these things.”

“Well, we know they do because we keep picking up discussions. Of course, we immediately kill those people, but it’s continuing. Douglas, your new job is to focus on keeping Quebec Resistance disorganized and off balance. We have to make sure NORDIC is allowed to stay relaxed during this war.”

She scanned the view. Douglas stood and invited her to take a walk through the Old Port shops.

They headed down the steep path just like any other tourist couple. Once at the base of the slope the ancient, narrow street became nearly level, and crowded with picturesque stone buildings. Many had shops catering to the tourist crowd.

Douglas noticed a shop they were passing. He paused. It was the window of a jewelry shop. The building, like those on either side, was centuries old.

“The glass is wavy,” the woman said.

“Like your beautiful hair,” Douglas said. “See anything you like?”

“Douglas,” she said. “Your impossible.”

“I’d like to think I’m quite possible. Let’s get to the hotel and I’ll show you.”

They entered the high-ceilinged Chateau Frontenac lobby. It was dimly lit by chandeliers and narrow, tall windows with heavy drapes. It smelled of furniture polish and money. They stepped up to the Reception Desk like an old married couple. The hologram Receptionist, a buxom brunette, greeted them in Parisian French, “Can I help you?”

“Really,” Douglas said to his companion, “Why can’t they at least speak in correct Quebecois.”

“You’re wasting time. Isn’t there something you want to get to?” She took his arm in hers.

Douglas gave the receptionist his assumed name and was given two proximity cards. The hologram said, this time as a stuffy British male: “I trust you will find everything to your liking.”

“Get me out of here,” Douglas said to his companion.

Their room was spacious, with a high ceiling of molded plaster. A chandelier hung out of a center disk. The wallpaper was a rich, deep red brocade pattern. The king size bed was set to the right of a large sheer floor to ceiling curtain that promised access to a balcony. The bed had a deep maroon quilted bedspread and a carefully designed assortment of pillows piled against the leather buttoned headboard.

Douglas set his overnight bag on the stand, hung up his coat and beret, and kicked off his shoes. When he turned around, his companion was already sprawled out on the bed, her coat, beret, and shoes in a pile on the floor. She was wearing a pleated, deep blue, button down silk blouse tucked into a smooth light grey skirt that came to just above her knees. She had her arms flung over her head, which served to pull her belly concave, so that the wide waistband of her skirt was slack enough that a hand could have slipped in, if the hand wanted to explore. She smiled broadly.

Douglas went to the foot of the bed and regarded her. She told him to Stay there.

Moving like a cat she got on all fours and slinked to him. She bit his belt at the buckle and pulled the tongue out with her teeth. Then while still biting it she tugged hard enough to jolt him. She used the fingers of her left hand to open the buckle’s pin. Then she pulled the belt out of his pants and flung it aside with a flick of her head.

She said in a low growl, “Turn around.” He did.

She maneuvered her agile body to sit on the end of the bed with her legs clamping his. She reached around to his front and undid his pants button and zipper. He could see the colorful bumblebee tattoo on the inside of her left wrist.

She let his pants slide to the floor. He stepped out of them. Still reaching around him she undid the buttons of his black dress shirt while

saying, "Undo the cuffs." Then she pulled it over his head and flung that to the side.

She ran her hands slowly all over his pelvis and thighs. Douglas groaned. When she could tell he was responding she said, "Turn around and watch."

She slid out of bed and pulled the balcony curtain open. The tall doors were ornate polished gumwood with patterned glass. She undid the bronze latch and opened them inwardly. They revealed a shallow wrought iron balcony. A cool breeze flooded the room. She stepped to the edge of the balcony and faced the river. Then she stripped naked.

She stretched broadly, first upward, then by opening her arms wide.

Douglas crept behind her and grabbed her by the hips. He pressed himself firmly against her rear. He kissed her neck as his hands roved over her body. Then he turned her around. He lifted her onto the bed. She flung her arms over her head, completely surrendering herself to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A Messenger Is Needed

Same Day. HMS Strongbox. 1:05 pm.

Everyone was finishing up lunch. Beth, Margo, Sophia and Sara followed M to the bookcase door. Henry was the only one to take his dishes to the kitchen—no one except Helle seemed to notice, and she let it stay that way. Then Henry squeezed past the closing bookcase behind them. Peter was already in his separate office.

Sophia noticed that M was missing his usual cheerful demeanor and seemed to be concerned about something. Through the office window she could see the War Room staff busy at their cubicles. M said, “Go ahead and get acquainted with your work spaces. I’ve got to talk to Peter.”

Each cubicle was framed on three sides by chest-high partitions with the side wings stopped short so that anyone could roll their swivel chair back a bit to talk to their neighbor. Sebastian was in the front center position. The left Side was the War effort team with the first cubicle labelled for Beth. The right Side was the Domestic team led by Chester, followed by a cubicle for Margo, then one for Sophia, including a station for Henry. The next cubicle was for Sara. Each aisle had cubicles laid out all the way to the back of the room, with about a third of them occupied by staff. To either side of these, there were additional complete rows, empty but ready for occupants all the way from the front of the room to the back.

M entered Peter’s office and fell heavily into a chair. “Peter,” he began, “I’m concerned. I’ve never carried this much responsibility on my shoulders. I’m built to be nimble, not ponderous.” He looked up. Peter just let him stew.

M finished with, “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Do any of us?”

“I’ve spent my life being a player in a game. The game has ended. I don’t know what the rules are. What I say to those people out there has huge effects. They respond to what I say.”

Peter leaned back in his chair and rotated his computer screen to the side so he had a clear view of the man. After a moment he said, “M, isn’t what you just described the role of a coach?”

M was perplexed. “What?”

“Ellsworth. You have been at this game, and you know I’m talking about the game of resisting NORDIC, longer than anyone in all of Maritime. Sure the rules have changed. They do in any game. Tell me this: What do experienced players do when their playing skills aren’t what they used to be?”

It didn’t take long for M to respond. “They coach.”

“M, you’re our coach. It doesn’t matter if you don’t know what you’re doing. Whatever it is, it is wiser, better informed and researched than anyone else out there. We don’t expect you to have the answers. We expect you to have the best guesses. But, you must not let your uncertainty show. You know full well that the attitude of the coach fills the locker room.”

M leaned forward. “Peter, I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Ellsworth, how old are you?”

M had to consult his fingers for the answer. “Sixty-six.”

“M, you’re a big boy now. We need you. We need you to be strong. So, as your former Captain I say, go out there and give ‘em hell.”

M stood slowly, gathered himself, then went out to the front of the War Room. Peter came out of his office, leaned with crossed arms against his office door frame and watched. M said, “Everybody, listen up. As you can see, Peter and Sebastian have been busy getting this place set-up for a much bigger staff. I know the new arrivals are still learning the HAIR O S, but I think you’ll find the U I quite friendly.”

He asked for an update from each Team Leader. He started by asking Sebastian if he had an answer to why IceCube melted, as it were, too soon.

Sebastian stood to all of his just over five-foot height. “The capture of NORDIC’s Central American server complex has allowed me the ability to hack into certain parts of NORDIC’s decision making tree. It’s still pretty much hit or miss what I’ll find, but I was able to confirm that NORDIC was told in advance to be on the lookout for Hair Balls and it had somehow learned our way of concealing them.”

“You mean the axion curls?” Sara asked with a furrowed brow. “Yes.” Sebastian sat.

Chester stood and explained they were continuing to intercept NORDIC’s domestic infrastructure network connections. They had to do it at a very measured pace. Despite their best efforts, NORDIC had detected some of the disconnections and had started a systematic punishment program. Whenever it detected one network interference it cut-off two connections. It’s choice of location appeared to be random. As a result, much of Mexico and Texas was in chaos.

Sophia asked why Texas was affected. Beth explained that there was a group of rebels in Mexico who saw this as an opportunity to reclaim Texas—a territory they still remembered having been forced to give up over a century ago. Texas was pleading to the rest of Merica for help, but so far the majority in Merica felt Texas should be left alone to deal with its own battles. M said that it didn’t matter which way that issue went. The most important thing was to restore stability to the region by getting NORDIC under control.

He was interrupted by Henry who had his hand in the air. “Yes Henry. You have something to add?”

“Excuse me.” He was obviously bursting at the seams. “Before you cut a network connection, why don’t you first record a few hours of input. Then play that in a loop as you make the intercept. I bet it would be pretty easy for HAIR-2 to blend in the new feed. It’s done all the time in video game scene changes, of course that is done using seconds instead of hours.”

M turned to Chester. “Chester, why don’t we do that?”

Chester was chagrined. He acknowledged it was a great idea. He said they would start doing that immediately. He folded himself back into his chair, crossing his legs into an impossible pretzel.

M then asked Margo if she had any thoughts on Iceberg recruiting, but she said she needed first to see what HAIR-2 could tell her about likely recruits.

M then took a deep breath. “Beth. What is the war update.”

Beth told the room that not much had changed on the ground except for the internal chaos being caused by NORDIC’s retaliations. The war was at a stalemate. For that reason it was her opinion that it was time to open a second front. One as far away from the Mexican-Texas front as possible. An attack from the Northwest Territories would be completely unexpected and far from NORDIC’s deployed war resources.

Chester spoke up, “We should also enlist the Alaska Resistance to join with the Quebec Resistance to create the widest possible front.”

Beth said, “The biggest hurdle I see is that the Northwest Territory is a disputed land mass. Quebec has the strongest claim of course, but Alaska, Russia, and Norway all have made claims to it. And naturally England, but whatever.”

M said, “They all recognize that the Canadian Shield geological formation is where the future is. As the planet continues to warm, that is the world’s new Temperate Zone. Plus, with its bedrock still rebounding from the weight of the last Ice Age glacier having been lifted over nine thousand years ago, the land will become progressively more habitable. But I get ahead of myself.”

He paced across the front of the room. “So far, no country has wanted to challenge Quebec’s claim since it is a strong one, and to do so they would have to engage NORDIC. They all are aware that the old United States turned control of its nuclear arsenal over to NORDIC’s predecessor. They are all afraid of NORDIC, as well they should be.”

Margo stood. “So the key to a successful surge from the Northwest Territories is the Quebec Resistance. They are large and, if properly mobilized, could assemble resources across the border undetected. Then the

moment of attack would be a complete surprise. Plus, Iceberg is in an excellent position to bolster them with equipment and expertise.”

M said he agreed completely. He would ask Guy to meet with Douglas to set that in motion. Guy was still in Corner Brook. But Margo disagreed. She thought Guy wouldn't do. She noted that those that knew Douglas knew he was a skittish person. He wouldn't make a big risky commitment unless he was convinced it wouldn't backfire on him. Since he thought she was dead if she were to go to him he would be suitably amazed and would come to better understand the power and resources of Iceberg, that he would not need to worry about acting alone, that Iceberg was stronger than ever with an expanding headquarters in Nova Scotia

M acknowledged the points she made, but they could not risk Margo travelling out of the area. NORDIC had a strong grip on Maritime and Quebec. Even though she should have been already considered dead in NORDIC's records, she had been such a major figure they could not assume she would have been treated and erased as an ordinary citizen.

Sophia stood. “I'll do it. Douglas knows who I am. He knows I made the IceCube spike possible, and he also thinks I am dead. NORDIC didn't consider me anything more than a minor nuisance, so I will not set off any alarms.”

M did not respond immediately. He clasped his hands behind his back and paced once across the front of the room, glancing up quickly toward Peter. Peter gave a slight nod of his head.

M said, “You make good points. So, the task now is how we get you to Douglas.”

Sophia suggested she take a self-driver across the peninsula to the MST, then take that to Nataashquan. Guy could set something up with Douglas where he was supposed to meet someone at the Terminal, but when he got there he would find her instead.

Chester said, “I don't like it. Too many junctions. Too many moving parts. I think you should get dropped off by seaplane in Corner Brook and then take the ferry to Nataashquan, rent a self-driver and go to his home.”

Sara said that plan still had too many moving parts.

During the discussion Sebastian had been tapping away at his keyboard. “No need to go that far. He’s going to be only seven hours away by land tonight, but it looks like just for the one night.”

M said, “OK, I’ll bite. How could you possibly have found this out?”

“I squirreled my way into the NORDIC server that tracks his activity. He’s been a busy guy.”

Sebastian tapped his keyboard and a map showing Quebec and Maine popped up on the screen behind M. Sebastian zoomed and panned until it showed just a slice of Quebec and Maine. An icon of a left hand with a pointing index finger moved around until it pointed to a spot of woods southeast of a label: *Sugarloaf Ski and Outdoor Resort*. He said that Douglas had recently bought a secluded ski cabin near Sugarloaf.

Sophia was standing. “What a memory. I’ve been there. When I was a teenager our church group did ski trips every winter. That’s where I learned how to snowboard.”

Sebastian went on, “This cabin is listed as the home address for a newly registered Timber-Burn-For-Fuel, or TBFF, business. It took a little work; but I was able to ferret-down through the records and found Douglas is the CEO.”

M said, “Very good squirrelling and ferreting.”

“But here’s the thing: I tapped into the Cabin’s security system. He has set the Heat pump for twenty-two degrees C at fifteen-hundred hours today. That’s this afternoon!”

“So, we can assume he’s planning to arrive around 4 or five pm today,” said Chester.

“But listen to this. He has it set to go back to baseline at eleven-hundred hours tomorrow.”

Chester observed that he was going through a lot of trouble to be there for just the night. M considered this for a moment. “My guess is that he has some business owner task that has to be done from a laptop at that IP address and GPS location.”

No one had noticed that Henry was busy at his keyboard. He raised his hand, but did not wait for an acknowledgement. “Got it. It’s a six-hour fifty-two-minute drive from Swaying Pines under current conditions.”

Chester said, “So Sophia could be there tonight. But in order to enter the route into a self-driver she would have to do a facial scan. That, to me, is just asking for trouble. I don’t know a way around that.”

M said, “Easy. She doesn’t use a self-driver at all. Sophia, do you know what a standard shift is?”

“Yes. My grandmother always talked fondly of the Fiat 500 she had in Italy, but I’ve never actually seen one.”

Margo said, “I could show you how to drive a standard shift. When I was a kid, my mother, bless her wandering soul, had a Fiat 500 Abarth. She taught me how to drive it. One wonders why you ask, M?”

“Because Margo and Sophia, I would like you to follow me to the Swaying Pines junk Garage. Sebastian, you need to come also. There’s no time to lose.”

Same Day. Swaying Pines Road. 3:52 pm.

M led his small following out of the Strongbox by the side path, gave Gladys a hasty hello, and walked fifty meters down the road. When he glanced behind him, he was surprised to see not only Sebastian, Margo, and Sophia following him; but also Peter, Beth, Henry, and Chester as well.

M muttered, “So much for running a tight ship.”

The group struggled to keep up with him as he walked briskly with his broad strides to an old, faded, barely readable sign which proclaimed, with faded yellow letters in both English and French, “Junk Garage.” He continued his pace down the path.

Soon a large dilapidated corrugated metal building came into view. M stopped briefly, almost out of breath, and said, "Welcome to the Swaying Pines Executive Garage."

Then he took an overgrown gravel path around the side of the old shed.

He waited, apparently impatiently, for the others to gather around him.

Peter said, "M, as coach of this team, you may have to remember sometimes that not all the people once played hoops the way you did."

Henry said, "Hoops?" It was the first time anyone had noticed he was there.

They all turned and looked at the long side of the large shed, which looked like it was about to fall down of its own accord. M said, "Sebastian, could you tell these nice people, using approximately every third word you would normally use, what we are looking at?"

Sebastian turned halfway and extended his arm. "What we have here is a building in a building. This old, rusty corrugated shed was here when M introduced me to Swaying Pines. He told me to make a state-of-the-art machine shop to care for a few vehicles he had managed to hide from NORDIC during the huge vehicle clean-up of the forties. Three of the overhead doors you see are garages for vehicles. The next one is my machine shop. I am, by the way, looking for apprentices," and he glanced to Henry, "And the last one is a parts depot. Let me show you."

He took out his phone and punched in a code. The nearest shaky door pivoted up and two support pipes dropped into place. Immediately behind it was a conventional garage door. He went to the door of the interior garage and rolled it up. An adorable little red car sat facing them.

M said, "A 2006 PT Cruiser GT. Sixteen valve, Double Overhead Cam, intercooled Turbo. Five speed Gertag. Sebastian has specked the engine and raised the compression ratio. So now, Zero to sixty in four point five seconds. They used to call this a 'car' back in its day. C, A, R. This is my baby."

Sebastian said, “It’s Roof Number is registered to a dead person.”

“What’s a Roof Number?” Henry asked.

“A Roof Number is just the vehicle’s NORDIC number stenciled on the roof so NORDIC’s drones and satellites can keep track of where all vehicles and their owner’s are at all times. But I’m guessing Em here would prefer NORDIC just think that it’s a long dead person out for a casual drive.”

“That’s right,” M said. “Apparently NORDIC does not see any incongruity in that. Sebastian, would you please fill ‘er up while I tell Margo and Sara the plan.”

Sebastian explained as he walked to a four foot tall tree stump that it was not electric. It ran on old fashioned gasoline. Since it had a second gas tank, it could do the whole trip to and from Sugarloaf. He flipped down a piece of bark. It was hinged at the bottom as a door. He pulled out a filler hose.

M said, “Sara, you will spend an hour or so with Margo learning to use the standard shift. There should be time to grab something to eat, then you must hit the road around six. Sunset will be around nine, so half your trip will be in daylight. That will be the most dangerous part. If NORDIC is going to detect you as an anomaly, it will be in daylight. Once it’s dark, if they haven’t detected you then, you should be safe.”

Margo asked, “And if NORDIC detects her as an anomaly?”

Sebastian stopped pumping gas and said, “If it did flag her, it would probably not kill her right away. It would be confused, so it would probably launch a drone to get a close-up view.” He resumed pumping as he said, “But, who knows. It might just launch a missile from a tower if they’ve got one nearby. I really don’t know what they have for towers in Mr-6, I mean Maine.”

M said, “Thank you Sebastian, that’s enough. She’ll be fine. I drive this thing at least once a month in good weather, and I’ve never been detected. The car has GPS via the little antenna on its roof. Otherwise, it is what I call a Closed Capsule. It has no internet connections, and cell phones won’t work in it. If you had any type of breakdown, which won’t happen

because I know this car; or if you had any kind of accident,” and he looked at her sternly, “which you won’t have because this is my baby, you’ll have to get out of the car and call one of us, but of course, as soon as you did that NORDIC would know your location, so you’d have to figure out a way to hide until we could locate and retrieve you. So, don’t have any emergencies.”

M went on to say that she should be able to get there around midnight. She was to tell Douglas the plan for the Northwest Territories and that Margo was alive and well at Iceberg headquarters outside Halifax.

“Just go there, look him in the eye, tell him to pull-on his big-boy pants, and get his group organized. Tell him to expect to coordinate further with Margo. Then you stay overnight there, get a good night’s sleep, and we’ll see you back here.”

No one spoke as Sebastian hung-up the hose and closed its hatch. Then Sara broke the silence with, “Got it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A Cabin In The Woods

Same Day. Swaying Pines Shopping Center. 4:40 pm.

Margo had spent most of the last hour showing Sophia how to drive the standard shift. Sophia was a quick learner. Then Margo got a mischievous look on her face. “OK, I think it’s time to have some fun. But you have to promise me you’ll never tell M about it. I want to see what I remember.”

“So promised.” Then Margo took the driver’s seat, took them out of the shopping plaza parking lot, and out on the neighboring roads. It took her awhile to find a stretch of narrow road with a good straightaway leading into some twisty turns, but she did. She had her fun, then said, “You’re turn.”

Finally Margo said, “Ok, I don’t want you travelling on an empty stomach. Let’s pick up Henry and see what Angelo has got ready to eat.”

After a quick supper at the Strongbox dining table, Sophia, Margo, Sara and Henry rose from the table. Margo said, “I’ll be in the WR for a while.” Sara, Sophia and Henry continued out the Gladys door. Sophia paused at the road to head off to the garage but she told Sara and Henry she would stop by on her way out to say bye. As Sara and Henry continued down the path to Guy’s home Sophia heard Henry ask Sara, “Do you know how many legs a lobster has?”

It was just after six pm when Sophia knocked gently on the door of her new home and stepped inside without waiting. Henry ran to her. “Just heading out,” she said to Sara. Helle was apparently getting ready to leave for the night. “Helle, would you let M know I’m on my way.”

“Will do. Last I saw he was in the War Room with Margo, maybe Sebastian. I’ll be sure to tell him.”

Sophia bent to her knees and gave Henry an extra strong hug. “See you later Soph,” he said.

They heard stones spray as she pulled briskly away. Henry went to Guy's game set-up. "I'm going to see if Cristine is online."

Sara asked who Cristine was. Henry said she was a girl from the Park that Guy introduced him to. They would be playing VR Laser Tag.

Sara said, "In that case, I'll be on the couch looking through Sophia's trunk of books."

The trunk was in the living room, next to the couch. Even before she opened it she could detect the pungent odor of old books. When she knelt before it she had a dizzying feeling of kneeling before a coffin. She cursed herself for thinking she would see Vlodya's face when she opened the lid. But instead, she found the scent brought back a memory of being in the basement of a library when she was a kid. It seemed most of the books were technical but tonight her brain wanted a novel. She shuffled a bit and found a memoir. She sat and reached under the shade of the adjacent brass lamp. A soothing glow flooded her in its warm embrace. Perfect, she thought.

7:36 pm.

Sara was just at the point of dozing off when she forced herself to re-read something she wasn't sure she saw correctly. She focused on it, flipped the page, and flipped it back.

Then she jumped out of the chair and bolted out the door without shutting it behind her. Henry got up, saw Sara running away down the path, furrowed his brow, and shut the door.

Just moments later Sara burst into the War Room holding forth the book and shouting, "Stop! Stop!"

"Ok. I'm guessing you have something on your mind," said M.

Sara came up to the group of Margo, M and Sebastian who were looking at Sebastian's screen, trying to catch her breath. "Sugar. This book I'm holding is *Seeing Though Blind*. Edith Bennitt's memoir." She was shaking with energy as she almost dropped it trying to open it to a page she

had held in place with her thumb. “Look at this,” and she pointed to a line at the bottom of the page.

Margo told her to hold it still.

“I’m trying. Here, you take it.”

Margo read the line: “Douglas Bennitt’s friends always tell of how he hates being called Douglas. Call me Doug, like the way I help Edith dig for the truth. I hate the name Douglas.”

“Interesting,” M said.

“Flip the page,” Sara said, chest still heaving.

Next was a full-page plate of a photo captioned:

‘Edith and Doug at the 2049 Montreal Film Festival.’

Dug Bennitt was obviously a black man.

Sebastian got busy on his keyboard. “Look.” He projected his screen onto the big screen. “This is an online photo from that Film Festival.” It was obviously the same photo. But there was one difference: The Doug in the photo was not a black man. It was the snowy white Douglas they all knew as the Quebec resistance leader.

“And look under the front cover of the book,” Sara said.

Margo went to its front end paper. There was a penned script. She read it aloud, “*Never stop looking. Love, Edith.*” She set the book on Sebastian’s desk. “A signed original.”

Sebastian Said, “Hold on, let me think.”

A moment later he said, his voice rising in anger, “This explains how NORDIC knew how the Hairballs work!”

Sara started flapping her hands frantically, “Oh my God. Oh my God. I’m the one Douglas heard it from. He was sitting right behind us when I explained it to Carl. Douglas is a traitor!”

M looked worried. “Sophia is on her way there right now. She will be walking right into his open arms. I have to stop her! The damn car she’s in is a closed capsule. There’s no way to contact her.”

He made a decision. As he ran to his office he called over his shoulder to ask Sara what time Sophia had left.

“I didn’t look. Maybe a few minutes past six.”

He looked up at the wall clock. “Then she’s got an almost two-hour lead on us.” He emerged from his office saying, “Sara. Come with me.”

They flew out the Strongbox’s Gladys door and tore down the gravel path. Nobody noticed the small figure that shot out of the doorway just before it closed. Henry took what he hoped might be a shortcut through the woods.

“Freakin guy can run,” said Sara out loud to herself following M down Swaying Pines Road.

Gladys called, “Come have a glass of Sherry, Em.”

“Another time,” M called back as he took out his Quad-Hack and made a call.

“I made it myself,” M and Sara heard Gladys say faintly. “God help us,” M said to himself.

“What’s that?” Guy asked on the other end of the call M had just placed. “What’s wrong? You sound out of breath.”

“Guy, no time to talk. Catch the last ferry. Go to Douglas’ house. He’s not who he seems to be. He won’t be there now. Stay there until you hear from one of us. If you don’t hear from us and he returns, take him down. Gotta go.”

“Wait,” said Guy, where’s Sophia?”

“Can’t talk now. Gotta go.” And he hung up.

M and Sara got to the garage. One of the doors was not closed all the way. Sara said, “Don’t they close automatically?”

“No. Sebastian probably forgot.” He swung up the middle door. It revealed a menacing silver car.

M grabbed a key from a hook as he said, “A 2024 Challenger Hellcat. Seven-hundred horsepower. This should allow us to intercept Sophia before she gets to the cabin. Sara, get in.”

Strongbox Dining Room. 8:46 pm.

Beth was finger-combing her damp hair. She was wearing a white sleeveless floor-length silk nightgown and carrying her clarinet case. Peter was in a red tee shirt and worn jeans.

“I’m going to find us a bottle of wine.”

“You know I never drink before I play,” Beth said. “And you know I do before I listen,” Peter said with a grin.

Beth set her case on the living room carpet and took out her clarinet. Just then Sebastian entered through the bookcase from the War Room.

“Good,” Peter said. “You’ll get to hear Beth play some jazz. Where is M. I would like him to hear this too.”

“Oh,” Sebastian said, “that’s right. You missed the excitement.”

“Excitement?” Beth asked.

“We just discovered that this Douglas jerk is a complete fraud. He was never Edith Bennitt’s husband. He’s a resistance traitor! M and Sara just ran to the garage. They are going to race off in M’s second car to intercept Sophia before she gets to a cabin of his in Maine. And I never got a chance to tell them I discovered this Douglas has another business besides ‘Grey Phogg Fuel.’ It’s called, ‘Pop’s Propane.’”

Peter’s jaw dropped as he looked at Beth. “Does he have anything else in that garage of his?”

Beth took a shoulder strap out of her clarinet case and attached it, leaving the clarinet on the floor, Then flung the case over her back.

Sebastian said, “I bet you’ll like what’s behind the third door.”

The Third Door.

Sebastian punched a code into his phone and the rickety metal shed door swung up. The support posts dropped into place. Peter didn’t wait for Sebastian. He quickly pulled up the inside garage door and stood back in amazement.

Standing in front of him was a red and white motorcycle. Sebastian said, “I thought you’d like it. Know what it is?”

“Educate me.”

“A Ducati Multistrada 1260 Enduro. M put an extra-big gas tank on it.”

Beth said to Peter, “Give me the jackknife I know you’ve got in those pants.” Peter passed it to her. She cut off her nightgown above her knees. Peter rolled up his cuffs.

There were several black helmets hanging on pegs on the side wall. Peter and Beth quickly found ones that fit.

Sebastian said, “Thing is, I’m not sure where he left the key. I don’t see it in it’s usual place.”

Beth searched the shelves on the back wall. Then she reached onto one and tossed a key to Peter, saying, “Try this one.”

Peter mounted the bike. Beth swung a leg over the seat and sat behind him wrapping her arms around his waist.

Sebastian said, “You know how to drive a bike?”

“Watch me.”

The bike came to life as if rising from hell, and Peter fish-tailed all the way out of the garage toward the setting sun.

Trans Canada Highway W. 9:36 pm.

M said to Sara, “We should have picked up her taillights by now. I’d know those taillights anywhere. She must be driving like a mad woman.”

“She is a mad woman.”

Then a voice said from the back seat, “I think she’s nice.”

Sara turned halfway around her seat in shock. MM said, “I’m pulling over.”

M checked his mirrors, then hit the brakes so hard they were all thrust forward into their seatbelts. Once on the highway shoulder he raced around to the rear door and opened it. “Get out,” he said.

“You can’t leave him on the highway shoulder,” Sara said, matter of factly.

“That’s not what occurred to me. Henry, have you ever flown a drone?”

“Plenty of times when I lived in Guatemala.”

M went around and opened the trunk. A white four rotor drone sat at the ready. He set it on the road shoulder and passed the game-like controller to Henry. “Show me,” he said.

The drone buzzed to life. Then it rose to about fifteen feet and held steady.

“What’s the plan, boss,” said Henry.

“Thee middle screen is its video camera. I’ll be seeing the same thing on the car’s screen.”

“What do the triggers do?”

“No time for that. Just don’t pull them.” Now, I’m getting back in the driver’s seat. I’m going to open the sunroof. Sara is getting in and she is going to kneel on the armrest and stick her head out the roof. You land that thing, get in the car, and then stand on the seat and stick your head and arms

out the roof. Sara will hold you steady. That drone will be our eyes in the sky.”

“For sure, boss,” said Henry as he landed the drone.

“But ...” started Sara, but M was already getting back into the car. Sara took a deep breath, shrugged, and got in the passenger side.

She kneeled her right knee on the center armrest, her thigh leaning on M’s shoulder.

M said, “I didn’t plan on having such a distraction.”

Sara said, as she braced her elbows on the roof, “Just following instructions, boss.” Henry popped out the sunroof. Sara said, “Henry, why don’t you close the door first.”

M shouted, “Don’t bother,” and floored it. The door slammed shut.

Sara’s red hair flailed in the wind as if it were flames.

“Curve,” M shouted, and he slowed to a hundred miles per hour to take the exit to route 95 West. Once straight again, he sped to a hundred and sixty.

A few minutes later M saw on the car screen that the drone had picked up a view of Sophia far ahead. “That’s her,” he shouted. “Don’t lose her.”

Henry could just make out a tiny red car on his screen, then it was gone, replaced by two parallel lines.

“No,” M shouted, “those are railroad tracks.”

“I figured that’s what they were” Henry shouted in the wind “Where the fudge did she go ... there she is!”

“We’re gaining on her,” M shouted.

Trans Canada Highway W.200 yards ahead.

Sophia was trying to stay awake while driving a hundred and fifteen miles per hour. This should be easy, she thought but the road was straight and boring. She swung out and passed the frequent trucks without slowing. She blinked but this time her eyelids elected to stay shut for a while. She slapped herself and her eyelids popped open. Then they settled shut. Again she slapped herself. She spotted in her mirror a car's headlights that seemed to be gaining on her. A flash of adrenaline cursed through her. It couldn't be Police. Since all SUVs and trucks were self-drivers, Police patrols had been long ago cancelled as unnecessary and all but a handful of the human police terminated. "I'd better loose my tail," she muttered to herself and she deliberately swerved behind a truck and hit the brakes hard to slow to eighty miles per hour to let the trailing SUV pass.

It pulled rapidly alongside, but then, rather than race past, it slowed, apparently trying to get even with her. She quickly glanced over. It was a silver car with what looked like fire coming out of its roof. "What the hell?" She shouted, but she had to keep her eyes on the road. "That must be a Hitmin!" She said to herself. She swerved to the right onto the road shoulder, and with her right wheels on-and-off the pavement nailed it to pass the truck on its right side. When she got to a gap she swerved to the left without slowing to pass the next truck on its left side.

"Land the drone," M called out toward the sunroof.

"Got that boss. Oops," Henry said.

"What's that?" M shouted.

"Nothing," Sara shouted. She then let Henry back in, then slithered in herself. She pulled the seatbelt across both of them. M shut the sunroof. "I've got to get in front of her and make her pull over."

He swerved between the next truck gap and squirreled out the right side. Now he nailed-it. Sara saw 200 flash on the display. He swerved between the next gap to the left side of the trucks and looked in his mirror.

"There she is, right behind us. Now I'll carefully slow."

As he did so, the little car's headlights grew quite close, then fell off a bit.

“It’s working,” M said. Then the little car’s headlights went dark.

“What the fudge?” Sara said, “she shut off her lights. She’s driving, what, seventy miles per hour with no lights!”

“Eighty,” M corrected.

Sara twisted herself around to look out the rear window. “I can see her. She’s still there ...No. No.”

“What’s wrong?” asked M.

“She vanished.”

Trans Canada Highway W. 50 yards behind.

Sophia couldn’t see a thing. She had shut off all her lights. But the GPS screen was still lit. The instant it indicated it was time to take the exit, she whipped the wheel and turned on her headlights. There was a steel guardrail directly in front of her about a car length away and getting closer fast. She cut the wheel hard left and went into a 4-wheel right side drift. She had experienced this with Margo in the Sunnydale loading area so she was not surprised when her front wheels suddenly bit. She braced for the guardrail’s impact. But she had over-corrected and was now in a left side drift down the exit. She cranked the wheel into the skid and fish-tailed the rest of the way, tires squealing.

Back in M’s car Sara said, looking at the GPS screen, “She must have taken that exit. Damn it! We don’t know the address of the cabin.”

M handed her his quad-hack and told her to call Sebastian, get the address and then punch it into the Quad-Hack’s GPS. “In the meantime, I’ll back ourselves to that exit. I hope these self-driving trucks behind us are programmed to ignore a car backing up at forty miles an hour.”

Same time. Route 95 S.

Peter and Beth were well on their way on the Ducati. The bike's built-in GPS screen flashed. "Here's the exit," he called over his shoulder as he banked Hard to where he felt the foot post scraping the pavement. He suddenly worried that he had misjudged and started to believe he had taken the ramp too fast. "If I hit a single pebble we're done for," he thought. But the bike slowed, and the exit's curve did not sharpen. Then he glimpsed a dirt driveway flit past on their right. He looked at the GPS.

"Sugar," he said. "That was it."

Peter saw a dirt foot path into the woods immediately ahead. Rather than slow down and turn around, he banged the bike into a sideways slide, and when the front wheel was aligned with the path he squirreled ahead onto it.

"There she is," Beth called. They could see a small red car moving along a parallel driveway through the trees. But then the driveway wandered to the right.

"I've lost her," Beth said.

Peter had not been looking where he was going and had missed their own path's sharp turn to the left. Suddenly he braked and dumped the bike onto its side. They slammed into a rock face. They both were thrown from the bike.

"Are you OK,?" Peter said, getting to his feet and pulling off his helmet.

Beth was already climbing the rock face. Peter saw her stand at the top and sling the case off her shoulder.

Sophia's headlights illuminated a two-story log-style cabin ahead. The driveway curved to the right to what she guessed was a parking area. She stopped the car when the headlights lit the little front porch. The cabin was in darkness. Suddenly she wondered if her whole trip had been a waste. Her watch showed 12:40 am. Maybe Douglas just went to bed. But then the porch light came on.

“Oh my God. Thank goodness,” Sophia said out loud. She suddenly felt her whole body soften. She waited a moment to catch her breath. She wanted to appear calm and collected when she presented herself to Douglas. Her heart was still pounding when she opened the car door. The night air was warm and refreshing. A beautiful summer night. Were there mosquitoes? She stood for a moment. There didn’t seem to be any.

The front door opened, and Douglas emerged, holding a rifle. “Who’s there?” He called. “I’m armed,”

“It’s OK,, Douglas. It’s me Sophia Lambreggetti,” she said smiling broadly. “Remember me?” And she proceeded toward him, watching her step on the dirt path.

“I certainly do,” she heard him say. When she was about fifteen feet away she paused and looked up. But instead of seeing Douglas’s smiling face, she saw the bore of a rifle pointed directly at her head. She froze.

Then Douglas’s head exploded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Slip Sliding Away

Same Night. Exit 157 Skowhagen. 12:38 am.

M, Sara, and Henry sped around the exit. “Got that freakin address yet?” M demanded.

Sara held the phone up, “Here. You think you’re quicker than the Irish red head?” The stress was clearly getting to them.

“I’m pulling over,” and M pulled the silver Charger toward the side of the road. There wasn’t enough room on the shoulder, so he backed into the paved driveway of a ranch-style house that was in darkness.

Meanwhile, Sophia just stood, frozen in shock, looking at Douglas splayed down the porch steps, headless. Huge black splotches were spread out on the ground before her. She knew full well that was blood. She wondered if there was spray on the front of her blouse. “Oh God,” she gasped as she bent over. “Please don’t get me vomiting,” she thought.

At that moment a second-floor window flung open. Even though only dimly lit by the porch light, she knew that face.

“What did you do?” Mako shouted. “You killed him. You’re crazy. I should never have let you get away.”

He climbed out onto the sill and jumped, landing awkwardly in shrubs.

Sophia still felt too weak to move, but she willed herself to turn around and run back to the car. Where was the key? Had she left it in the ignition? The door was still open. She fell into the car with her left hand pulling the door shut and her right hand fumbling around the ignition area to feel for the key. It was there. Her fingers wouldn’t close on it properly, but finally she got a grip. She turned it. Mako got to the car and tugged at the closed door handle. He pounded the glass with his other hand. The engine

cranked once, then fired-up. Mako continued to tug at the handle. “He doesn’t realize he has to push the handle button,” she thought.

Sophia shifted the car into reverse and it yanked free of Mako, tossing him across the hood. He got to his feet and ran toward the cabin’s parking area.

There was a wide spot in the driveway. Sophia remembered something Margo had shown her. She yanked the parking brake handle and the car spun 180 degrees. She raced down the driveway. As she approached the end she realized she didn’t remember which way she needed to turn to get back to the highway.

Mako jumped into his electric 2062 lemon yellow Mahi Peak, the very latest in a luxury performance SUV from India. He sped down the driveway just in time to see Sophia’s taillights turn right.

“Holy crap,” M said from the Charger in the driveway as the red car raced past, Sophia grinding her shift into fourth in her panic. “That’s my PT Cruiser!”

Sara looked up in time to see a bright yellow SUV speed past, followed by a red and white motorcycle.

“Holy crap,” M said again, “That’s my motorcycle.”

“Cool,” said Henry.

“What was the yellow thing?”

“Don’t know.” M blasted the Charger out of the driveway.

Sophia saw a sign, “Sugarloaf Ski and Outdoor Resort, Next Left.” She had an idea. She threw the car into a left 4-wheel drift. Mako saw the little car sliding sideways, with Sophia looking at him through the driver’s side window. He took aim to T-bone her and accelerated. Just at the moment there would have been impact, Sophia’s front tires bit and she disappeared from his view. He cranked the wheel as he hit the brakes, The SUV’s

stability-controls just slowed him almost to a stop, then enabled him to make the turn.

Peter and Beth took the left on the Ducati. A few moments later M took the turn. “Where the heck is she going?” M said.

“I think I know, but I’m not ready to say,” said Sara.

Sophia took a left onto the main street of Carrabassett Valley Village. A moment later she took a right at Madison Avenue. Mako was falling behind. The massive torque advantage of the heavy electric Mahi Peak could not match the nimbleness of the light PT. Sophia took a quick left onto School House Road, but that just led her back to Main Street. People were leaving their night spots and going to their SUVs. They scatted in alarm as she roared past, horn blaring. With the road straight, and her clearing the way Mako was gaining on her. Elm Street was just ahead. She threw the car into a left 4-wheel drift again, then blasted down that street.

“How does she do that?” Mako yelled. He tried to do the same thing, but the stability control again just slowed the SUV almost to a stop.

“Freakin stability control!” He screamed. “How the hell do I shut you off!” He punched the dashboard screen with his fist. The screen cracked and fizzled out. He made the turn but had fallen behind again. No sooner had he started to build speed than the PT drifted left onto Maple Street. He made that turn just in time to see her zoom right back onto Main Street.

Sophia knew she couldn’t keep this up indefinitely. Sooner or later she would feel Mako slam into her, probably sending her into a tree or ditch. There would be no heads exploding this time, whatever that was, unless it was her own. Still, she had no choice but to continue as long as she could. When he ran her off the road could she jump out and try to reason with him? Tell him she loved him?

Another sign: Sugarloaf Mountain Resort access road ahead. She knew this mountain. Mako didn’t. She grew determined and turned onto the road. The speedometer hit 100 miles per hour. She saw the distinctive headlight bar of Mako’s SUV gaining on her fast. She braked hard and cut right into one of the parking lots. She killed the lights as she spun a 180. She waited.

Mako did not speed past. He careened into the lot, but she was prepared for this. She blasted past him back onto the Access Road, forcing a motorcycle into the roadside drainage ditch. “Who’s crazy enough to go off-road trailing on their cycle in the middle of the night?” She cursed. “Crazy people.”

Peter was just able to regain control of the Ducati in the bottom of the ditch when he saw a 54-inch culvert directly ahead. “Duck,” he yelled at Beth. She tucked her rifle under her arm and bent down as low as she could next to Peter’s hip. They sped through the metal culvert with no room to spare, the roar of the engine screaming defiantly. Once out of the culvert, Peter gunned it and the bike raced up the steep slope and went airborne.

In almost slow motion, Mako saw a motorcycle descend from mid-air onto the road between him and Sophia. The Ducati swerved left and Peter skidded his heel along the pavement until he regained control. Then he twisted the throttle.

Beth let go of Peter’s waist and passed her rifle onto Peter’s lap. She reached behind her and grabbed the seat frame at its rearmost edge. She crunched her belly, swung her legs straight up, let go of the seat, rotated, and quickly grabbed the seat again, but now she was facing backwards. Peter passed her the rifle over his shoulder.

Mako could not believe what he was watching. “What is it with me and women!” He shouted. He began swerving as he accelerated with the intent of squashing the motorcycle against the red car, but just then Beth took her shot.

“Damn it! Rushed it. Only one shot left.”

A neat hole blew through Mako’s windshield and the glass shattered in place into a snowstorm of cracks. He could barely see anything and he couldn’t use his forward-facing camera because he had smashed the screen. He was forced to slow down as he lowered his door window and drove with his head leaning out.

Sophia was already arriving at the road end. The base of the High-Speed Quad Chair was just beyond the pavement. The resort was closed for the night, but the full moon on this clear night cast everything in what would have been a romantic glow in other circumstances. She leapt out of the car while it was still moving. It coasted to a stop against a light pole base.

M saw the PT hit the pole ahead. “Hey,” he yelled as they approached the top of the road, “Take care with my car!”

“Run Soph!” yelled Henry.

Sophia ran to the Chair Lift Shack and quickly found the main circuit breaker box on its backside. She pushed the handle down. She ran back to the front of the shack and slammed the big, fat green button. The Lift sprang to life, the four-person wide chairs immediately started in motion. She knew it would be extremely difficult for Mako as an untrained skier to successfully get on. If he didn’t time it perfectly, he would get shoved over the rock edge in front of the pad and probably thrown beyond the orange webbing onto the rocks below. She, however, easily got on the next chair as it rounded the pylon.

She was safe. She would get off at the top of the mountain and hide in any of the many secluded spots in the woods. In the morning she would carefully make her way to the hotel she knew was part of the resort.

When Peter and Beth reached the end of the road Peter hopped the motorcycle over the curb and blasted straight up the mountain, dodging the trees and larger rocks in the woods parallel to the Chair Lift.

Just behind them Mako stopped his SUV and jumped out.

Peter and Beth on the bike; M, Sara and Henry in the silver Charger all watched Mako run to the base of the Lift. But then they all were horrified to see him carefully position himself and skillfully mount a moving chair.

Beth shouted, "Stop the bike." Peter did. They were about two-hundred meters ahead of Mako. Beth climbed atop the nearest boulder and un-slung her rifle. She lay prone. She took aim through the trees.

Mako took out his pistol and took aim at Sophia, four chairs ahead.

Just as Beth had her shot lined-up in her scope, a tree trunk blocked her vision. The instant it cleared she pulled the trigger.

At that same moment Mako was pulling his trigger. Something whizzed-by his forehead, Stinging him. Then he heard the crack. A warmth ran down his nose.

Sophia heard a double crack, and something buzzed past. She looked behind her and saw Mako.

Mako took quick aim again and pulled the trigger. The gun just clicked.

Sophia reached the top of the hill, and the chair began its fast turn-around. She leapt off. There was an old snowboard leaning next to the Lift Shack. She rushed it on just as Mako jumped from his chair. He grabbed the cuff of her short sleeve top as she pointed her board downhill. One tug of her arm broke his grip. She glimpsed the little sign that read, "Sheer Boom" with a double-Black Diamond. She found skiing on the damp grass not too difficult, and the bare rock not much different than blue ice which, as a New England skier, she had skied many times before. The problem, she quickly found, was that there was no way to get an edge to turn; but the light from the high pylon lamps allowed her to pick muddy patches, so she was able to maintain her general direction.

Mako looked back to the Lift Shack. There was a decorative set of old skis set crosswise above the door. He yanked them down and fastened their primitive straps onto his shoes. He took off down the slope. He saw Sophia not that far ahead, and knew his skis, even if not particularly under his control, should be faster than her snowboard.

Soon he was upon her. He opened his tips, straddled her snowboard, and grabbed her around her waist.

Sophia gathered all her strength, and with one great heave, cut the board as sharply as she could to the left. The edge bit. The board went uphill a few feet and hit a tree.

Mako was thrown sideways. He rolled twice on his back, but got himself pointed downhill. Then he somersaulted, but landed on his back with his skis still on and pointing forward. He hoisted himself onto the skis just in time to rocket off a rock edge.

He face-planted into a pylon.

Sophia was not injured by the tree. She watched Mako stick to the pylon for a moment, and then fall limply in a heap onto the mud at the base of the pole.

“I guess you were right. You shouldn’t have let me get away the first time,” she said.

A motorcycle pulled up. Two familiar faces looked at her. Beth said, “Get on. We’re going to find out if this seats three.”

At the bottom of the hill they were stunned to find M, Sara and Henry standing beside a silver car, waiting for them.

Sara and Henry ran to Sophia and encircled her in a hard hug.

“Where in God’s green heaven did you come from?” Sophia asked.

“Swaying Pines,” answered Henry, “where do you think?”

M said, “Nicely done. A little extreme, but got the job done. Everybody follow me. We’ll park together in some obscure place near the hotel I know they have here.”

After they had all parked, M said, We’ll get rooms for the night. The Reception Desk won’t be expecting new arrivals at this hour, but we’ll just tell them we had so many things we had to get done first. Sophia, stay in the background. You look a little alarming. Henry, she needs to clean-up a bit. You’ll stay with me.

Sugarloaf Resort Hotel. 5:05 am.

The sun streamed into Sophia's hotel room. She was sure she hadn't fallen asleep, but now she knew she had. She looked at the smooth white flank of the woman lying beside her. "You should be getting back to your own room," she said.

Sara rolled over and sleepily faced her. "You're kicking me out of bed?"

"Yes. I'm going to take a long, hot shower. I'll meet you and the others at breakfast."

PART THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY

I'll Have Mine Scrambled

Previous Evening., shortly before sunset Delila's Restaurant Patio. Corner Brook, Newfoundland. 8:14 pm.

Guy was relaxing at his usual table and was in the middle of savoring his second bourbon. It was a splendid warm, perfectly humid evening. He was letting himself be mesmerized by the gently dancing hull reflections on the Harbor's Saran-wrap surface. The many elongated white shapes looked like so many exotic fish flitting about, perhaps being chased by schools of bluefish. But as he felt himself easing into a settled state of satisfaction he started getting angry. His mind had decided to slip back to Elea. Why did this always have to happen? He knew why: Whenever he let himself relax his guard came down. When his guard was down the guilt flooded in like a storm tide topping a sand dune. He had no right to enjoy guilt-free relaxation. It was because of his carelessness that Elea—his first and only wife, had been taken from him. NORDIC had found she had been writing songs of freedom. So it killed her by electrocuting her through their brand new stove handle. He had come home to find her blackened and fried body still smoking, hanging by her skeletal hand caught in the molten plastic oven door handle. He had vowed then and there that he would somehow, he had no idea how, get revenge.

Suddenly his Quad-Hack vibrated. It was M. He instantly knew it must be serious, or M would not call him on his Quad-Hack at that hour. M told him, not asked, to catch the last ferry out of Corner Brook and get to Douglas's house. He provided little explanation before he hung up.

Peter could see the ferry had just finished unloading. His SUV was back at Swaying Pines since he had driven up in the Beast, and now that was back at Swaying Pines as well. Delila walked past and he asked if he could borrow her self-driver because M just told him to catch the ferry and go someplace.

“How long will you have it?”

“I’ll be back tomorrow, I promise.” It was an empty promise. In reality, he had no idea what was going on. All he knew was he needed to catch the ferry. Delila seemed to instinctively distrust his quick answer, but knew he wouldn’t ask at this hour without a good reason. She dug in her apron and passed him her key fob. “I just cleaned it. Don’t get any mud on the carpets. I know you.”

He thanked her and sat back. He had a couple of minutes yet. Could it be that all his biding time was about to pay off? Maybe things were getting serious with the NORDIC take-down.

30 miles west of Natashquan. 11:03 pm.

Now he was being driven by Delila’s SUV along the dark two-lane highway to Douglas’s house. M had said the house should be empty, but what kind of security system would he encounter? He was familiar with all the systems being used in Quebec these days—there were only three approved by NORDIC, but did Douglas have something custom? It was entirely possible. From M’s cryptic message he sensed he should not do anything that might alert NORDIC that something was awry at Douglas’s house. Then he remembered an off-hand remark Sophia had made during their last late-night phone call.

So, Guy ordered a pizza as he drove.

When Guy arrived in the wooded part of the house’s driveway he instructed the SUV to back into the bushes and switched it off. He waited.

The house looked empty. A few minutes later the pizza SUV drove past and stopped at the garage. Guy waited until he was just at the garage door. He then switched on his SUV, instructed it to pull up and then parked beside the pizza delivery SUV.

“Perfect timing,” Guy said with a broad smile just as the garage door opened and the pizza’s were left on the shelf by the door. Guy tipped

him handsomely. What a deal, he thought. I get to have pizza as I go to work on Douglas's computers.

When he was securely inside he called Sebastian. "Did you get a call from M this evening?"

"I sure did. Do you want to know what he told me?"

"Probably not. I was left with the feeling that we don't know how much time we have. I'm at Douglas's house and I've located his computers. I'm installing Toaster-Links on all of them. Keep track of what you're getting and let me know if I seem to be missing anything."

"So M told you about Douglas?"

"Well, He said I should take him down if he returns while I'm still here."

"Start uploading whenever you're ready. This should be fun," said Sebastian.

Guy told him not to wait for him to say when to toast the links. He would be leaving all Douglas's equipment there so the place would look untouched. Sebastian should

toast the links remotely as soon as he was done with his downloads.

At 1:50 am Guy's Quad-Hack buzzed. It was M. "I'm at the Sugarloaf Resort Hotel in Maine with Sophia, Peter, Beth, Sara and Henry. They've all gone to bed, which is where I'll be soon. Where are you?"

Guy told him he was at Douglas's house. He had linked Sebastian to all the computers. He was sure he had found all of them. M confessed that was a huge relief. He then explained that the day before they learned Douglas had bought a cabin not far from Sugarloaf and would be there this night. They had sent Sophia as their in-person messenger to tell him everything so he would get the Quebec Resistance pulled together. But after

she had left Sara discovered proof Douglas was a traitor. He worked for NORDIC.

Guy grunted, “There was always something about him. Too polished. His nervousness always seemed to be a mis-match to me.”

M went on to say Douglas never was Edith Bennitt’s husband. He had been a NORDIC stooge all along. A few of them headed out to intercept her. They were almost too late but Beth got there just in time to take-out Douglas with a head shot as he was about to shoot Sophia. He told of how a Maritime Hitmin had been at the cabin with Douglas. “There was one hell of a car chase. Oh Peter, you would have loved it. Sophia made sure this hitmin’s days were over.”

M said it was his guess the body would not be discovered until later that morning. Then it would take the local police some time to trace him back to Douglas’s ski cabin. Then it would not be too long before the Quebec police would come knocking down Douglas’s house door. “I already called Sebastian and told him to grab the video feed from all the NORDIC CM cameras along the car chase route and erase all vehicles except the hitmin’s.”

Guy said, “But Douglas’s SUV is here at his house. I saw that it has a steering wheel and pedals.”

“Must be some kind of NORDIC exception.”

“Well, it’s interesting. I’m going to steal it.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“Don’t know yet.”

In the garage Guy used his phone to ping Douglas’s SUV and got its fob transceiver signal. He then used that to locate the SUV’s fob in the house. He drove the SUV all the way out the long driveway into the subdivision. There was an empty lot with what looked like an abandoned foundation. He parked behind it. The SUV wasn’t entirely concealed and

that worried him. He had no idea how many people might use this cul-de-sac. If the police came while he was gone would they investigate the SUV? Or would they just assume someone in the subdivision was taking advantage of an extra place to park?

He walked back to Delila's SUV and headed off to return to Nataashquan.

Along the way he called Ginger and asked her if she was willing to catch the first morning ferry out of Corner Brook. He would pick her up in Natashquan. She said yes.

Same Morning. Sugarloaf Hotel Restaurant 8:02 am.

Everyone had found each other in the Hotel's cozy lobby outside the restaurant entrance. Sara nudged Beth and quietly said, "You have a glow about you this morning. Did you get any sleep?"

Beth replied to Sara, "And you, my dear, have a glow about you. Have you been a naughty little girl?" Sara just blushed.

M and Henry approached them from the elevator. "There is a table reserved for us. I would have been here sooner, but I waited until Sebastian made sure the restaurant's surveillance cameras are stuck in a loop."

They all took seats at an oblong table next to a large window that overlooked the valley. Their server described a breakfast special of eggs, sausages and pancakes. M went first. "I'll have the special, and in honor of all my friends hard work, I'll have mine scrambled."

Outside the window a large truck could just be seen at the corner of the parking lot. Its driver and hiser assistant were closing its back door. The driver disappeared from sight and the assistant hoisted hiser-self into the passenger seat. A moment later the low rumble of a diesel engine could be heard pulling the truck away. "There go my vehicles," M said. "I made a few calls before going to bed. One of them was to an antique car mechanic I know. After apologizing for waking him, I explained my need for a closed vehicle moving truck in Maine this morning as soon as possible and that I wanted it to be a human operation. He knew someone in Augusta."

He explained how Guy had gone to Douglas's house and linked his computers back to Sebastian. Peter watched the moving truck pull away and asked M how they were getting back to Sunnydale.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to mention. Chester left this morning around three or so in The Beast. I figure we can do some shop-talk during our ride back."

A few minutes later their breakfasts arrived. "Ah," said Beth, "Here's our food, and look. For some reason, there's a Police SUV passing by. I wonder what could be wrong on the mountain this early in the morning."

"Well," M said, "we can be sure they'll ask permission to view NORDIC's CM cameras, but by the time they do, I expect they will see just one SUV driving a bit erratically, since one of my late night calls was to Sebastian to edit the CM footage along the chase route."

"Did you get any sleep at all?" Sophia asked.

"I'll make it up."

Same Morning. Nataashquan. 9:34 am.

Ginger walked down Calypso's passenger ramp to Guy who was waiting for her. "It's so nice to see you not in your server's dress and apron."

"Do I really look that bad?" She replied with a faux frown that quickly turned into a grin.

"Oops. That one's on me. What I mean is that you look even more fantastic now."

"So, I see. I am just an object, and it's all about my looks," but she was still smiling.

"OK, I'll shut up now."

"Well that was easy," she said. "OK, you can talk now," and she gave him a hard hip-check that was enough to make him stumble.

“Oh. A bit of hockey there. What’s that all a boot, eh?”

“You better believe it. Forward for the *Brook Angels*.”

As they walked to Delila’s self-driver Guy explained they were going to pick-up a special kind of SUV. It was a little over an hour away. “I’ll drive it back. I need you to take Delila’s back.”

“Why did you borrow Delila’s? Why didn’t you just rent one over here?”

“Because I would have needed to do a facial scan, and for what I’m doing I am being a little more discreet.”

“OK, But why do you need me to ride back in Delila’s? Why not just send it back empty?”

“Because I know of too many examples where NORDIC’s Central Control overrides return instructions as not efficient and just substitutes whatever’s on hand locally. I know Delila treats her SUV as her personal vehicle. I wouldn’t do that to her. With you as a passenger I can know she’ll get it. We’ll be back in plenty of time for the two o’clock ferry to Corner Brook.”

They were on a long, straight and narrow two-lane section. Guy had his seat rotated and was talking to Ginger when he glimpsed out of the corner of his eye that they were fast approaching a bicycle rider who apparently did not hear them silently approaching. He quickly punched the center-dash horn button. The bicycle rider swerved into the ditch as the SUV speeded past. “This freakin thing didn’t even try to avoid it,” Ginger said in alarm.

“Damn. It’s my fault. I should have known better. In Newfoundland the self-drivers are all run by their on-board firmware and are programmed to yield to bicycles. But in the rest of North America they are controlled by NORDIC’s central servers and its rules.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not been outside of Newfoundland much, eh?”

“Nope. Whole life a Newfoundland girl.”

Guy explained that way back in the forties NORDIC had issued a decision that bicycles were interfering with the efficiency of self-drivers. Thus bicycles were henceforth restricted to bicycle-only paths already in existence. As part of the decree it mentioned that it had re-classified bicycles as toys.

“But tons of people get around on bicycles in Newfoundland”

“True. We can also drive our own SUVs if they are old enough to have steering wheels and pedals. But only because we have so far successfully repelled NORDIC. In the rest of North America it is illegal for a person to own a vehicle. You must buy a subscription to a self-driver service. There appears to be seven such subscription services, but all seven are owned by just two people. And those two people are employees of NORDIC. So it is quite illegal to have your own SUV. And unless you are among the uber-wealthy and can afford to purchase an exception, it is illegal to have a vehicle with a steering wheel and peddles.”

“I had no idea it was that bad.”

Guy spent the rest of the drive telling her stories of what NORDIC had done, omitting his own past. “Ginger,” he asked, “have you heard of Iceberg?”

“I sure have. I’ve asked Delila about it a few times, but she always deflected my questions, making it rather clear that I was supposed to forget I had ever heard of it.”

“I think she may have been trying to protect you, but Ginger, things are getting serious with NORDIC.”

“NORDIC I know about. I know about the Opium Dens in New Hampshire.”

“So you know about Opium Dens?”

“I wish I didn’t. My younger brother when he was only sixteen decided he needed to see the world. Somehow he decided the world started in New Hampshire. He went there before I could stop him. Left me a paper note slipped under my door. I didn’t know what to do. I was a wreck. When I told Delila she said she would find out what she could.” Ginger stopped

talking and stared out the window at the expanses of pine forest going past. Guy asked, "Did she learn anything?"

"He was living in a concrete high rise next to an Opium Den. Apparently now he spends all his time in a daze. It tears my heart out every time I think about it."

As sunlight flickered through the overhanging trees Guy explained that in the North American continent most people, as in the great majority, over the age of fifteen spend all their time in an Opium daze. He let this sink in. He watched the look of despair cross her face. Then, "Ginger, there are people willing to risk their lives to get their loved ones off opium and restore a world where there are places for Humans to earn a living."

"Is that what Iceberg is?"

"Yes. It is a Maritime resistance movement. There are other resistance movements, but Iceberg is the only one that is organized. Before I tell you more, it is my obligation to offer you the chance to skate off the rink. No one would blame you, but I will tell you we need players like you on our team."

She asked, "So you're on the Iceberg team?" "Yes."

"I would do anything to help my brother. And if I can help others, that's even more reason for me. Guy, please let me in."

Guy took out his Quad-Hack and texted M: I've just got us a new member. I think she's going to be a significant addition.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Epic Stealth Gummy Bear

Same Day. Sugarloaf Resort Porch. 10:21 am.

M, Henry, Sara, Sophia, Peter, and Beth had moved out to the rocking chairs on the hotel's porch. They heard the low bear-like growl of The Beast pulling into the hotel's drop-off turnaround.

"Stay there," Peter called to Chester. "We're coming to you."

They all piled in. Peter took over the driving controls. As a legacy vehicle, NORDIC still permitted a few such oddities to remain Human steered.

M said, "While Peter drives us home, the rest of you gather around as best you can and let's have a quick update meeting."

Henry stayed up front with Peter. M, Sara, Beth and Sophia sat at the dinette table. Beth leaned against the sink and Chester rotated the rightmost passenger seat so it faced the table.

M started by bringing Chester up to date about Beth's elimination of Douglas the NORDIC stooge. Then how Sophia had tricked a NORDIC Hitmin into smushing his face into a ski lift pylon. The vehicles they had used to get there were on their way back to the Strongbox Garage.

He went on to say that Guy had tapped into Douglas the traitor's computers and installed links so Sebastian could download their contents. There would be no traces. NORDIC would be left to conclude that Douglas had gone to Maine for some kind of business dealings, possibly shady, that went wrong.

Looking at Chester he asked, "Anything I should know about?"

Chester said, "Margo has made great progress recruiting new talent for the War Room. Some of them should be there by the time we get back."

M looked around at all the faces. When there was no further follow-up he said, "Well, Chester why don't you take the rear bunk and let the engine lull you to sleep. I'm going to the guest room to take a nap."

That Evening. Swaying Pines. 6:33 pm.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come into the dining room and have Angelo fix you up with a good dinner?” M asked Sophia as The Beast pulled past the Swaying Pines gate.

“No,” Sophia said. “I’m totally wasted. Just drop me off at the Gladys end of the cross path and I’ll microwave something at home.”

“I’ll go with you Soph,” said Henry.

“Good enough,” M said, “I’m glad you’re thinking of it as home.”

It was still far from sunset, and the mobile home park was alive with the sounds of people enjoying a beautiful summer evening. Sophia entered her new home to find a young black haired girl wearing a Virtual Reality headset in front of one of the two video screens, rapidly working her control pads.

“Hi Cristine,” Henry said, as he rapidly put on a headset and took the neighboring seat. In a few moments he said into his headphone, “I’m in, Cristine. I’m tapping into your team.”

“Who’s your friend?” asked Sophia.

Henry lifted the headphone from his right ear, “She’s Cristine. She’s thirteen but I’ll be twelve in two weeks so I’m almost her age.”

Cristine shouted over the sounds in her headphones, “But I’ll be fourteen in September.”

Sophia said in her normal voice as she headed into the kitchen, “Oh, I see. And just a bit competitive. That can be a good thing, unless it keeps you from playing outside on a beautiful night.” She didn’t think either of them heard her.

Henry said, “We are outside. We’re in the Lumber Yard, kicking the crap out of Guy in Laser Tag 25-GT. But we could play outside if we

wanted. The controllers and headsets have a range of 350-feet, and can go through walls.”

Sophia came back around the kitchen partition, “Glad to hear it” She stood between them where she could see the video screens. Even though they were seeing the game through their VR headsets, they still each had one of the three screens positioned in front of them.

Cristine patted the armrest of the couch and turned the third video screen on its base. “Sit. You can watch,” she said loudly.

Sophia sat on the armrest and adjusted the screen. Three figures were scampering around in a dismal flat landscape of bare earth and tall stacks of random lumber. She studied the figures as they flitted about. One was an impossibly skinny girl with a big bosom in a tight leotard and skimpy shorts. She had flat springs instead of feet and long pointed cat ears. Her laser gun was a proper spaceship quality shiny blue pistol with many flashing lights. Sophia sensed that the flashing lights meant things.

Another figure was very tall, robust and wide-shouldered in full gleaming chain mail armor. He had a helmet with strobe lights where the ears should be, and some kind of roller boots that occasionally emitted blasts of steam from jets. His gun was huge, easily half his size, with multiple barrels, also with multiple flashing lights. As she watched, she saw that they were working as a team against a figure dressed all in purple who she could only see in quick flashes as he poked his head or weapon from behind the edges of a stack of lumber.

“Put the headset on and grab a controller,” Cristine said.

Sophia looked all around the table but saw no headsets. Cristine patted a zippered hard shell container attached to a webbed belt. “They’re in the belt holster.”

Sophia unzipped the container and put on the headset. As she adjusted it to her head she felt the microphone and lowered it to just in front of her lips. Instantly she was immersed into a pounding rhythm that reminded her of the theme from *Mission Impossible*. “Nice music,” she said, surprised to hear herself through the headphones between the sounds of laser strikes and ricocheting misses.

“Who’s that?” Asked a male voice.

“Guy, is that you?” Sophia asked. “My goodness. What have you gotten yourself into.”

“Nothing I haven’t handled before,” replied Guy.

Guy said, “Grab a controller and join in. You’ll be Default Player 4” Sophia looked in the belt holster and took out the controller. She moved the left joystick and another figure popped onto the battlefield.

“You have 2 seconds to seek cover,” Cristine said.

Sophia moved the joystick and her avatar, a svelte gender non-specific figure in shorts and a tank top, quickly moved behind Guy’s woodpile.

Cristine said, “You’re in third person. You might want to be in first person. Plus, we can hear everything you say until you join a team. Upper right corner of your screen.”

Sophia saw the Player Bar in the upper corner of her vision, floating in space. She tapped on *Epic Stealth Gummy Bear*. “Who hears me now?” She asked.

“You and I doll-face,” came Guy’s reply.

“Hey, who said you could call me Doll-Face?”

“Temporary placeholder.”

“So you’re the only one who can hear me?” “Yup.”

“OK, That lumber pile they’re both hiding around, is there a way to topple it onto them?”

“Hmm,” Guy said. “I’ve never tried to do that, but the lumber piles do have hit-boxes. They just blow-up in a sky-high shatter of wood splinters.” He fired a rapid succession of shots. He went on, “I have an idea. If you suspend your Gravity-neutron Shield, it’s the only Super-Strength you have right now, around the lumber pile and I fire my Gamma-Grenade

right under it, the pile might be prevented from blowing upwards. Then we'll see what that does."

"Yeah. What you said. How do I fire my Gravity thing?"

"Aim your crosshairs with your right bumper held down until you see the lumber pile glow, then immediately pull your right trigger before they can react."

Sophia did so. A shimmering umbrella appeared over the lumber pile Cristine and Henry were shooting from. Cristine sprang to escape but bounced off the shield. A moment later a fizzling grenade shot into the base of the lumber pile. The pile bounced up, hit the shield, and toppled over onto Cristine and Henry. Cristine and Henry's avatars sparkled, then vanished.

"GAME OVER" flashed on the screen "TEAM 1 WINS."

Henry tossed his controller aside. "No fair," he said, "We didn't know you could do that."

"Well, now you do," Guy said. "Game well played."

"Game well played," said Cristine. She tossed her headset and controller onto the table. "I'm hungry. I'm going home to see what dad made for dinner. Nice meeting you Soph."

"Catch you later," said Henry. Cristine left. "What have we got to eat?" Henry asked.

Sophia went into the kitchen and checked the refrigerator. There was a meatloaf casserole on the middle shelf that looked fresh. "You know anything about this meatloaf?" She asked Henry.

"Nope, except Helle put it in there before you left and said it could be for us when you got home."

"Tell Guy we're going to have supper. I'll call him later."

"He says enjoy."

After supper Henry washed the dishes as Sophia dried and put them away.

Then she tucked Henry into bed and they read a book together.

She put herself to bed. All the windows were open. A wonderful cool breeze wafted throughout the home. She doubled-over her pillow as a backrest and pulled her sheet up to her neck.

She called Guy. “Guy, where are you tonight?”

“At Delila’s in Corner Brook.”

Sophia let herself relax into the mattress and said, “You won’t believe the day I’ve had.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Impenetrable Orb

5 Days Later. HMS Strongbox War Room 7:32 am.

M stood in front of the large central screen and straightened his spine. He had thrown on his black tee shirt and blue jeans. He had come in to address the room, as he had started doing each morning, but this time he was temporarily taken aback by the number of new staff. His nighttime sleeping had become fitful at best. His brain would not stop replaying the past week's events and creating countless future outcomes for him to consider. More than once he yearned for, what he now ruefully realized, were the simpler times of just a few weeks ago when he behaved as if he were just reacting to the other players moving about on a basketball court. He still wondered if he had what it took to be a coach. Suddenly he realized he had been standing there, spine straight, lost in thought, to the point where the staff was starting to wonder if he were doing it for effect, or if he was actually starting to lose it.

He forced himself to speak with authority: "I see that you all got the message that our normal workdays will start at seven am. We will soon work out a 24/7 shift schedule. We must adopt the attitude that NORDIC never sleeps, so we have to make sure this room never does either. As you saw on Chester's Sugarloaf event update memo We now think we may have gained an advantage on our enemy."

He paced to his right 3 steps. It was intended to look as if he was being thoughtful, but his real intent was to decide what to say next. "I see we have some new members—what is our total now, thirty-two? Some of you may think our number far too small for the task we have assigned ourselves but remember this: We have two HAIR Artificial Intelligence systems on our side and soon, we hope, the assistance of other resistance movements. I will come around and meet each of you in the course of the morning. Summaries please. Sebastian?"

Sebastian stood. "The info we got from the Toast links Guy put on Douglas's computers have been amazingly useful. I've got some people assigned to it full-time. They have been using HAIR-2 to uncover

relationships and hidden codes we might miss. I have been feeding the results to Chester. I could say more. Actually, you probably know that. But I will now turn it over to Beth.”

Beth stood and took a deep breath and spoke clearly: “I can now say with confidence that The CoSaF War is, for all practical purposes, over in Central America, including Mexico. We Humans have won. I am not declaring victory, for that cannot be done until NORDIC is completely disabled across all of North America. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I would ever be able to say what I just did.”

A person in the back stood and started to applaud, Then another. Quickly it became a standing ovation. Beth’s eyes watered and she had to wipe her cheek with the back of her hand. She waved them to stop.

Then she continued, “Thank you. Truly. But the Coalition still has a long way to go. There is much infrastructure yet to be reclaimed. But we now have control of all the NORDIC servers south of the Merika border. It is going relatively quickly because Mexico and the Central American Countries never embraced regenerative Artificial Intelligence the way the rest of North America did.”

“What about Texas?” M asked.

“Ah, that is still a battle zone. CoSaF has a team of negotiators trying to create a forum where those in Mexico who want to reclaim Texas and those in Texas who were agitating for independence as a new country can resolve their differences.”

M said, “I do not wish to become involved in that.”

Beth took a moment. She seemed to be testing her resolve. “If things are still going well at the end of the week, I am going to resign my post with CoSaF. My specialty has always been battlefield strategy, not diplomatic discussions. It was never my intention to live-out my life in Columbia. It was just when ...” she stopped herself. “A set of circumstances just led me there.” She choked-up and held up a palm to ask for another moment.

Then she proceeded to tell how much they were learning from the CoSaF take-over of NORDIC facilities. About how NORDIC did its war

planning and more important, how it had arranged defenses of its power sources. To the extent that all of the North American server power sources were defended in the same way, they would be better able to focus their attacks.

She concluded with, “That is the good news. The bad news is that outside of Mexico and Central America NORDIC has been pretty much unaffected by the war down there. We need our Northwest Territories front as soon as possible.” She seemed to search for words to expand, apparently deciding she had made her point, she sat.

M turned to Chester. “Chester, what progress have we made in finding a base for a Northwest Territories assault?”

Chester stood. “The Alaska Resistance is on-board. But as you know, we need to find and then support an effective leader for the Quebec Resistance. From the Douglas files we have a list of potentials. I have my team vetting them. Once we can identify a leader, it looks like the Resistance will coalesce quickly. But we have to be careful to avoid accidentally tripping over another NORDIC stooge, as we have to assume there may be many.”

Margo stood. “Let me assume the leadership role. I am the logical choice.”

M walked over to her, “No Margo, I know you want to, but that would be shooting ourselves in our foot. You are the leader of Iceberg, and right now Iceberg is the only organized Resistance in North America so we can’t go messing around with that now.”

“Then maybe Guy,” Peter said. “Even though he’s originally from Toronto, he knows Quebec well.”

M slowly shook his head. “True. But Guy is still a stranger to those in Quebec. I have no doubt he could lead anybody given time, but we need to come up with a quicker solution. I don’t have an answer. I’ll talk to Guy and see if he has any insights.”

M turned back to Chester and said they also needed to plan ahead to that glossy future when they were successful and HAIR-2 was running all of NORDIC’s former infrastructure. They need to alert their computer

manufacturing center to be prepared to build HAIR-2s for deployment to the future newly freed North American countries. Fortunately power supply should not be a problem because they would be careful not to damage the existing NORDIC power stations during the war, although they would need to shut-down the recent timber burning power plants.

Peter said, “M, aren’t you getting ahead of yourself? We’re a long way from that.”

M grinned, touched his nose and went cross-eyed. “I just checked. I’m not ahead of myself.”

“Unbelievable!” They all heard from a cubicle in the back corner of the room. Sebastian gave a stern, disapproving look in that direction and said loudly, “Who is that? Were you on your computer rather than paying attention to the briefing?”

Everyone turned to see who it was. A young man timidly showed his face and rose. “Sorry – sorry. It’s just that a video of a vehicle chase has just gone viral among the list of potential Quebec Resistance members I’ve been vetting.”

“Interesting, there isn’t supposed to be such a thing as a video of that chase,” M said, looking sternly to Sebastian. “Go on.”

“It shows a tiny red SUV being chased by a black SUV, being chased by a motorcycle, being chased by a sinister silver thing, too flat to be a SUV, I don’t know what you’d call it. The posts say the lead red tiny SUV was being driven by,” and he looked back at his screen, “Sophia Lambreggetti. They have a facial, and frankly, it looks a lot like her,” and he pointed timidly to Sophia.

Sophia stood and said, “Yes. Just so this room knows. That was me.”

Sebastian was flustered, “Impossible. I fixed that footage right after you called me, M. I don’t understand.”

Sara said, “It can only mean we were not the only ones to successfully have hacked into that part of the NORDIC CM system.”

The young man looked at Sophia and went on, “You should know that from the comments, you are quite the hero among the Quebec Resistance.”

“Well, well,” M said. “Maybe this changes things a bit.”

Sophia said, “If you’re thinking of me leading the Quebec Resistance, I don’t actually think that is a good fit at all. I don’t even know French.”

M agreed. He had her pegged to be the point person for their Boston initiative. However, if she was a hero to the committed Quebec Resistance, maybe they could use that to advantage. Maybe when they had identified a potential successor they could make a big show of Sophia throwing her support behind the new leader. That might go a long way to hiser rapid acceptance.

He turned to Chester. “Chester, You have anything else for us?”

Chester said, “Yes. Bad news.” He explained that they had now confirmed that NORDIC had been increasingly insulating itself from Human contact starting even before the war in Central America. It appeared to be part of its basic operational plan. It was in the middle of implementing a procedure whereby only one special authorized Human for any particular geographical area could communicate directly with it. NORDIC was well on its way to withdrawing itself into a ball. They had discovered Douglas could communicate with NORDIC only via a particular woman. They were still trying to identify who that was.

M said, “It reminds me of the 2024 book called *The Impenetrable Orb*. It forecast a dystopian future where the world was controlled by a savage artificial intelligence that had drawn itself into an impenetrable glass orb.” He thought for a moment, then turned to the large screen and, using a marker, wrote “Impenetrable Orb” in large letters. Henry’s hand shot up. M hadn’t even realized he was in the room, It was unusual for him to be quiet for so long. “Yes Henry?”

“If you put the O in the middle it spells Rob, as in robbing people of their lives.”

“Good observation, Henry. Everybody, let’s remember who are enemy is. OK,, enough talk for now. Back to work.” As he headed to his office he touched Sebastian on the shoulder and told him to grab Sara and meet him in his office.

A few minutes later Sebastian and Sara drew chairs up next to M where they could see the monitors on his desk. He started by saying they needed to refine Strongbox security. He explained how he and Vlod had gone through a great deal of effort to protect the Swaying Pines neighborhood from all the potential ill effects that could befall it if NORDIC ever discovered where their headquarters was. His concern went all the way back to when he and others decided that the MTS central controls should be in an essentially, if not entirely hidden, at least a very secure and difficult location to pin down. Now, with an expanding War Room they needed to refocus their efforts. He had been assured the current staff additions had been fully vetted, so They would assume they could trust them with the knowledge of the Strongbox’s location, just as they did with the MTS staff. But there would be increasing traffic to and from the building, especially as they added staff in anticipation of a second front.

He pointed to the largest screen on his desk which had the site plan and Floor Plans for the Strongbox. The way they had been getting anyone new there was to send the shuttle bus to pick them up and drop them off next to the MTS operations entry. Of course, the bus had blacked-out windows so the passengers couldn’t see where they were going, and they were curtained-off from seeing the driver and front window. The windshield was tinted dark so it appeared opaque from the outside, but of course, it had a Human driver, Ralph Crampton, And it had a phantom Roof Number.

“But here’s the thing: Old Factory Road is a gravel drive, and thus pretty easy for an alert passenger to identify. Then all they would have to do is review the available online maps to figure out where they had been. But I don’t want to have the road paved. That would raise alerts in NORDIC about why that would be done. So I have arranged for someone I know at a paving company to come by once a month and apply a natural sealant to the gravel surface. It will appear from the air exactly the same, but the bus and delivery trucks will raise no dust, and the surface will sound as smooth as old pavement.”

Sebastian leaned back and crossed his arms. “M, I was thinking. We now have access into NORDIC’s map servers and we are trying to disguise the Strongbox’s east face so it doesn’t look like an old warehouse. Why don’t we re-name Old Factory Road Old Story Road.”

“Excellent idea. Do that. Now, we need to deal with the entrance doors.”

M’s plan was to order three awnings for the entrances. The door in the southeast corner where all deliveries were made was to be labelled ‘Deliveries.’ The middle door where the Maritime Spine Train operations were run from would be labelled ‘Tracking.’ The third door, which was used by the War Room staff, would be labelled something, he wasn’t sure what. Sara suggested ‘Waring Supply.’ M endorsed that. He would order three labelled awnings for the entrances as soon as their meeting was concluded.

M directed their attention to the monitor showing the Strongbox floor plans. “Now, here’s the next thing. We need to figure out a good place in the Strongbox to create a Media Center. We need to start making training videos: Two kinds. Videos for the general population to get them ready for dealing with the possible effects of NORDIC’s deterioration, and confidential training videos for our anticipated expanding Iceberg membership”

“Shouldn’t Margo be in here to be part of this?” Sara asked.

“I’ll brief her later. For now I want to get our facilities planning in order. I’m thinking of two rooms, a small one for single-person videos, and a larger one for group training.”

Sebastian became animated as he pointed at the floor plan. He described some possibilities.

M added to the list by saying they needed to create a cafeteria, somewhere easily accessed by Angelo; and a Break Room.

Sebastian tapped his fingers on M’s desk. “OK, That’s a bit more complicated. Good thing this was a large warehouse.”

That Evening. The Strongbox Guest Room 247. 11:02 pm.

Peter and Beth were in their comfortable and well appointed Strongbox apartment. Peter Moved to stand behind Beth as she undressed. He gently put his hands on her trim waist and leaned his head next to her ear. “You came close to revealing a little bit about yourself today in the War Room. I think it might be time for you to tell me about your history. I still don’t know anything about you.”

She said nothing, but did bend her neck to invite a kiss. Peter tried to sweeten the offer. “How about this. I’ll tell you what drew me into the resistance if you tell me your story.”

“You’ll show me yours if I show you mine?”

“Something like that. Beth, I want to know about you. I don’t even know your real name.” He cupped her ribs in his hands.

She leaned back onto him. “If I told you my whole story, it would be an hour before we climbed into bed.”

“I’ll be quick with my story, then you can be quick with yours. How would that be?”

Beth purred, “Ok.”

He rocked them gently from side to side as he said, “After landing *aly* for scrap in Maine I had no job. I floundered like a fish flung onto a dock, but still I felt like life was good enough. I met a fishermin woman and fell in love for the first time in my life. Then the NORDIC-Maritime War began. Maritime’s national defenses were totally unprepared for a foe like NORDIC. Lydia was fiercely independent like all the Maine fishermin. We joined the local resistance doing random disruptive attacks on NORDIC as best we could. But NORDIC killed Lydia. It was my fault.”

“Why do you say that?”

“NORDIC set off a gas explosion in the garage where we hid our vehicles. I was supposed to be there at the same time. But I was running late. The battery in the truck I had borrowed ran down. I’m sure that if I had been there I would have sensed something was out of the ordinary and got everybody out of there.”

Beth rotated and looked into his eyes. She took his head in her hands. “Oh Peter. I’m so sorry.”

“For a long time I thought I could never love another woman. You proved I can.”

She unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it open, and leaned her head against his chest. She listened to his heartbeat. He stroked her hair. “My name is Penelope. I was born in Athens.”

He waited. “More please.”

She slipped her arms around his back and hugged him tightly. He knew she was strong but he was momentarily taken aback by the strength of her hug.

“I learned to play the clarinet in an orphanage. But when I got to be a teenager my instructor became increasingly abusive—sexually abusive. I stole a knife from the kitchen and hid it under my mattress, but I didn’t know if I would ever have the courage to use it. Then one night while he was trying to rape me again I resisted more than usual. He began beating me in a rage so I killed him.” She fell silent.

“What did you do then?”

“I fled to Israel because that was where my mother was born. The authorities there agreed to look the other way about my past if I joined their covert operations unit. They taught me how to be a sniper. Turns out, I was very good at it. Until I was assigned to assassinate a man in Albania. I made the mistake of letting myself get to know him. This man did not deserve to die. I tipped him off and he escaped. The Israelis thought I had turned double agent. The Albanians simply thought I was a clumsy assassin who had bungled a hit on an influential politician. I needed to get out of Albania fast. Thank God Calypso was out there in the dark. You have no idea how scared I was.” She released her bear hug and looked at him. Tears were streaming down her face. “Can we be done now?”

Peter said, “Yes. Should I call you Penny?”

“No. Keep calling me Beth. That is the name you gave me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

A World For The Living

2 Days Later. HMS Strongbox War Room 10:01 am.

M stood before the group. He surveyed the room. “I want you all to know of some changes we are making to the Strongbox. Just a reminder: In talking to others you are to refer to your place of work as ‘Waring Supply.’ An entrance awning is on the way. We are planning a Cafeteria and a Break Room.”

He clasped his hands in front of him and stretched. He told them the first priority was the creation of a Media Center. They had several videos planned that were intended to help those outside of Newfoundland, not only deal with potential disruptions to their daily routines, but also teach them how to break free from NORDIC during the upcoming war. He indicated for Sara to continue.

Sara then stood and explained that some of the videos would be of the ‘How You Can Help’ variety. Some would be self-help, such as ‘How to install a Steering Wheel and Foot Controls on a SUV.’ And some would be Training Videos for Resistance Members which would be accessed via a key. The media rooms would be right there in the Strongbox and were already under construction. An electrician was upgrading the power and an equipment list had been prepared. They should not be surprised when they heard the noises of the carpenters, sound-proofers, and drywall installers.

M took over. “I am speaking to all of you because we need to find people who are experienced in running the sort of equipment required for a media room and obviously, we can’t just post an advertisement.”

A hand shot up. “Yes,” M said.

From a young man: “You don’t need a lot of equipment, or even experienced people. I know an app that will run the entire thing autonomously, using just a phone and the voice controls of the person being videoed.”

M slammed his palm down so hard on the table next to him that everything on it jumped. Something rolled onto the floor. “No!” He shouted.

The room fell silent. Everyone was in shock. No one had ever seen M actually mad, even Peter.

M spoke with barely contained rage, “Everyone. Why do you think we are here? Figure that out.” He took a deep breath and composed himself a bit but his face was still flushed. “I’ll help those of you who are confused. We are here to wrestle back control of our lives from NORDIC. We are going to create a World for the Living.”

He scanned the room as he let that concept sink in. “A world for the living. What is that? It is a world where the number one priority is not what is the most efficient means for getting the job done where ‘efficient’ means, what is the method that makes the most money for the owner of the production facility. People! People! For two hundred years we have been brain-washed into thinking that ‘efficient’ has only one meaning: Least dollar cost to the owner.”

He paced to the right side of the room. “It is time to re-define ‘Efficient’! Efficient shall mean from this time forward: The Best Result For Humans.”

He took another deep breath. He was now in full control. “Efficient shall never more mean ‘How many people can we put out of work.’ There is now a new rule in this World that goes like this:

“If A Human Can Do The Job, A Human Gets The Job.”

He turned and wrote it on the big screen with his marker:

If A Human Can Do The Job, A Human Gets The Job.

He went on to explain that implicit in that simple rule was that the Human must be capable of doing the job at least as well as the computer—the so called artificial intelligence that had replaced the need for Humans. A fundamental point was that dollar cost was not to be considered in that evaluation. For over a century people had been tricked into accepting that the word cost meant dollar-cost to the owner of the facility. “I am confident

that many times the answer will be the Human can, in fact, do the job better.”

He asked them why was it correct and in Humans best interest to disregard the money-cost savings that would accrue to the facility owner? He told them to understand where the money-value of an so-called Artificial Intelligence algorithm came from. How did a labor-saving improvement save money? It saved money by allowing someone to fire a worker. But why was the employer paying the worker in the first place? Because the worker had money-value. The Human worker learned a skill. Maybe the worker went to an apprenticeship program for months, even years. Maybe it was a school, or one of the four remaining colleges where the Human learned the skill. They paid a lot of money to do that. While the Human was doing these things, they were losing the money they could have been making if they hadn't bothered with the school or apprenticeship. He again scanned his group and asked, “Why did the Human do that? “

A woman on the left side of the room thought about her parents. She said, “They had a passion. They wanted to make a difference.”

Sophia was thinking of the Boston electrician. “They wanted to earn money for their families.”

M was pleased. But he acknowledged the responses with only slight nods. He went on to add that it was because their investment would pay itself back through the course of their entire lives. But not only would this investment in their future support themselves, it would make them more attractive to potential mates, thus further enriching their lives, whether they be Masons, Carpenters, Actors, Musicians, Nurses, Doctors, or whatever.

So the worker made an investment, just like businesses make investments, just like millionaires make investments. All of that was fine. He made it clear he had no problem with millionaires. Anyone should be able to have the opportunity to pursue making money if that was their passion. The problem was, he stated, when someone gained wealth by stripping Humans of the investment they had made and pocketing the value for themselves, leaving the Human they stripped the wealth from essentially destitute.

“Let me put it this way. Suppose you were to build a custom boat for yourself. You crafted it just the way you wanted. A beautiful boat. You

imagine how much you will enjoy it. You imagine how you might attract the attention of a potential mate. You walk off to have lunch under the shade of a tree. In the meantime, someone steals your boat and sells it. They then pocket the money. Now, is there anyone who does not understand what I am talking about?"

It was obvious no one had a problem. He was not suggesting designers should be somehow prohibited from thinking-up labor-saving algorithms. After all, how would you stop a Human from thinking? You shouldn't. He said that when a new algorithm is offered for purchase, the price must include the money-value of the Human workers the proposed algorithm will strip of future wealth. That portion of the purchase price would be reimbursed to the Humans who created the value in the first place.

"And, let's be clear. I am not talking about providing loans for so called re-training programs created to allegedly prepare the robbed worker for another job. No, I am talking about direct payments to the stripped workers, so they can re-pay their loans, mortgages, and other investments they made in good faith before the so-called artificial intelligence computer robbed them."

The young man who had spoken up said very quietly, "I'm sorry. I had never thought of it that way."

M walked over to him, placed his hand on his shoulder, and smiled. "No. Thank you. I needed to say all that, and you-all needed to hear it."

Another hand rose. "Yes?" M said.

"Are you taking questions?" the woman from the left side of the room who had spoken up before asked.

"I love questions. Questions are sugar candy for the brain."

"So, for this to work, all the businesses in that particular country would have to do it."

"Bingo. That is why we will have a government made of Humans, rather than computers. The Human-controlled government will not let products produced in countries that don't follow the Human-First rule into the country."

“But that means tariffs, and that’s called ‘Protectionism.’ In previous times it led to the gradual decline in the quality of the country’s products until they were almost laughable compared to other countries.”

M said, “Thank you. I wonder how many in this room are even aware of that part of history. I won’t ask for a show of hands. What you say was true in the past. But that was the past. The point is to learn from history and get it right this time. Do I have a formula as I stand here? No. I’m just not that smart.

“But things are different now. Now we have the artificial intelligence within HAIR-2 for our use. Since we have control of HAIR-2, it is a tool we can use. Maybe, just maybe, we can use it to change the world for the better. A world designed to make life better for the living population. But if we don’t win this war and get it right, all this will be for nothing.”

He came up to her. “What is your name?”

“Lenore.”

“Lenore, do you think it is a hopeless goal?”

She silently looked into his eyes. She was obviously formulating an opinion. Finally: “No.”

He turned to the rest of the room. “Does anyone here think it’s hopeless?”

A woman from the right side of the room stood. “I do.”

M said, “Perfect. Humans can never improve without healthy debate. Lenore, make sure you get to know this person.”

He turned to Sebastian and told him to get that Break Room finished. They needed a place where people could debate the issues.

He turned back to Lenore, “So, you, I do believe, have been reading paper history books.”

Her eyes flashed. M was not sure what emotion he had triggered, but he was sure it was a deep one.

“Yes. When I was growing up someone I knew, OK,, it was me, had a bad experience saving books.”

M waited for her to go on, but she didn't. So he just continued to look at her.

She seemed to be processing a lot of information. Finally, “My grandfather was the head librarian at a university. My grandmother was an historian. When NORDIC, before it named itself, converted their university into a country club for the Uber-Wealthy, my grandparents quietly removed the library's contents to several secret locations. The University never noticed, because all librarians were fired. The library building was demolished and turned into recreation areas. They died while I was still a toddler, but my parents had a small portion of the saved books in our basement and they worked hard to teach my brother and me as much as they could from that library.”

M waited. She appeared to be done. “Please tell us.”

“That's all there is.”

M and Lenore stared at each other for a few moments. Then M said, “Is there something the people in this room could learn from your story?”

She looked around the room and softened. “Yes, there is more. When I was fourteen, my brother was sixteen, my father got a tip that NORDIC may have learned there might be a library in our basement. It was a huge basement. My mother and father made plans to move the books to the secret locations my grandparents had made.”

She said the plan was to keep a couple of bookcases in the garage filled with the least valuable books. Her Dad had the idea that if NORDIC actually investigated them, it would be best if it found at least something.

“So the date for the big library contents move came. It was a moonless night. My whole family, plus a couple of friends, worked from twilight to sunrise moving all the books from the basement to safety.”

She described the frantic work. Still, they got it done. But when they all got back to the house to celebrate, there was a surprise.

“Two NORDIC Hitmin were waiting for us. They didn’t ask questions. They just opened fire with their machine pistols. They shot everybody dead. I was very unlucky. I ran and did not die. That was unfair, but I was just so scared. I should have stayed.”

The room was silent. She took a deep breath. “So that is why I joined the Resistance.”

M said, “We are lucky to have you.”

Everyone silently went back to work. M went back into his office. Some time later he heard a woman call out, “I think I’ve got them!”

M went to his office door and asked, “And just who have you snagged?”

“I’ve been going through the Douglas files and found a match on one of his hit list requests and the person who posted the SUV chase video.” She then added in a perplexed tone, “They call it a ‘Car’ Chase. I’m not sure I know what that means. Must be an acronym for something.”

“I’ll explain that later. Tell me about them.”

“It’s a young married couple. Raphael and Florence Ducharme from Montreal. Florence was Douglas’s primary target. Here’s the most interesting part, I see that Florence’s parents have a ski place at Sugarloaf in MR-6.”

Sebastian said, “That matches what I found on Douglas’s computer. He was meeting with the Hitmin Mako to set-up a hit on a woman who had come to him wanting to join the Resistance. Her parents had a place at Sugarloaf.”

“Where are they now?” Chester asked.

“Working on it,” the woman answered.

M said, “Let Chester know as soon as you get something.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Librarians Glorified

Same Day. M's HMS Strongbox Office. 4:00 pm.

"Lenore, please shut the door behind you and have a seat."

M was sitting at his desk, but he was turned sideways away from his screens. Lenore did not take a seat but leaned against the window sill instead. M rotated to face her and now pushed a space between his screens so he could see her, "Or not."

She was not tall. She wore a trim-fitted shirt, cuffed at the biceps and tucked into a grey pin-striped skirt, revealing a slender build. She had long, full, dark brown hair that hung below shoulder length. She used her thumbs to tuck it behind her ears, revealing what M assessed to be a beautiful face. He guessed she was somewhere in her mid thirties. She crossed her arms and looked at him with a guarded expression.

"What I want to learn just a little more about is this hidden library, or should I say, libraries."

She said nothing, so M went on, "I understand your reluctance to tell me more about them. That is fine. I respect that. I'm not asking you to tell me, at least not now, where they are. I think you already know how incredibly valuable these libraries are. They could contain knowledge from centuries ago up to the last research papers written before the NORDIC take-over. I am not being extreme if I say that, for all we know, some of the knowledge in these books could well be the last that exists in all of North America."

Although she remained stoic, he detected a twitch of alarm flash around her large, brown eyes. He glanced away. He did not want her to think he was studying her eyes for reaction, but also he didn't want to give his own mind a chance to wander as he looked into those eyes. He directed his attention to the office's east wall where a series of paper maps were tacked as he debated how best to reach this woman.

“You may not be fully aware of the extent of NORDIC’s efforts to burn books and other paper files across North America, since it started around 2035. It issued a decree—this was back in the days before it named itself NORDIC and still pretended to be the governments of several different countries, where was I? Anyway, it decreed that as a wood product, books and all paper records would henceforth become part of the national fuel source, and thus burned. We at Iceberg have always kept a chronicle of this activity, along with many other such terrible things, and it is our conclusion that as of now there are less than one-tenth the actual paper books left in North America compared to our benchmark year of 2030. Oh yeah,” he glanced back at her and smiled, “in case you’re wondering, we print paper copies of our Chronicles on a regular basis. In fact, I will tell you their secret name: The Iceberg Chronicles. I named them myself. Do me a favor: don’t ever try to look that up online. You will find nothing of course, my concern is that the name should never slip into NORDIC’s web-scraping database.”

“Got it.” It was the first thing she had said since entering his office. He counted this as a sign of progress.

“Now, you might think that at least there must exist billions of books in the rest of the world. You would be justified in thinking that all, or at least most, of the records in your libraries are duplicated elsewhere in the world. I will tell you, don’t be so sure. This penchant to destroy records of history and re-write it is, of course, not new. But it really took over across the globe in the mid- 2030’s.”

He waited. Again, she said nothing, but she uncrossed her arms and braced her palms on the windowsill. Did he detect a touch of anger?

“So, what I am saying is that I hope the location of these secret libraries is not just secured in your head. After all, you could be smushed by a self-driver tonight crossing the street to buy groceries and the only thing the rest of us would get is an auto-generated ‘Event Notice.’”

Now she straightened a bit and clasped her hands behind her head. “I’m not ready to tell anyone the locations. And yes, there are several locations. There are hidden libraries beyond just those my parents harbored. They were not the only librarians who risked, and for most of them, lost their lives hiding the treasures they had been entrusted with.”

“OK, Here’s what I suggest. Write the locations in a file using a code of your choice. If it were me, it would be a poem. In my version, the poem would be a coded hint to a second file, maybe another poem, maybe the directions to a restaurant, except the restaurant name is misspelled. Then I would password-protect this poem, suggesting that maybe it is so personal that you don’t want others to read it. Then leave a hint to the password, and I won’t make any suggestions about that.”

He waited. She had not moved. She was listening. “But two things: Leave it on your work computer here. Not your personal computer. If NORDIC were to target you, or even if you were accidentally smushed, your personal computer would be raided, then destroyed. And do it before you leave here for the day because it’s that important.”

She lowered her arms from behind her head and straightened. “Ok, I’ll do that. Is that all?”

“One more thing Lenore, we have no one assigned to take charge of all books and records once HAIR is able to take over from NORDIC. It is a huge task, and I’m afraid that some people feel it’s like being a glorified librarian.”

Lenore said, “Librarians should be glorified.” She averted her gaze, then looked into his eyes. “If I had that job, I would be honored.”

“As well you should be,” M said, and he went to the door and held it open for her to leave. Chester almost bumped into Lenore as she left the room. He let a quizzical look flash across his face, but he quickly turned to M. Margo was right behind him.

Chester had clearly rushed to M’s office and dispensed with any niceties, “We’ve located Raphael and Florence Ducharme.”

“Come on in,” M said. “Have a seat if you choose,” and he sat in his swivel chair. Chester sat in the chair opposite him, and Margo pulled up a second chair, leaving only one remaining.

Chester told him he had located the Ducharmes at her parents condo at Sugarloaf. Margo said that she and Chester thought she and her husband might be the perfect candidates to become the Quebec Resistance leaders. They both spoke fluent Quebecois, between them they had enough wealth

that they had time on their hands, and she and Chester could not find any hints of opium addiction, or if they had any in their past, it was not part of their recent history

M offered that was good news. That kind of historical record was not the type of thing NORDIC would routinely erase.

Chester continued, “She’s a Computer Scientist, and he’s a former intern in Quebec’s European Office.”

“I like the sound of that. Ok., how do we contact them.”

Margo’s idea was that, since Sophia’s Car Chase was all over the Quebec Resistance chats, she should contact them. It should be in person somehow. If it were done in any kind of electronic way they would not be able to confirm she wasn’t a NORDIC hologram. Sophia would use this initial contact to set up a preliminary meeting somewhere, maybe with Sophia, herself, and Chester.

M had steepled his fingers. “The meeting could be here at the Strongbox if they came in our bus so they had no clue where they were. Maybe the cafeteria will be open by then. If we have reservations, we just have Ralph drive them to wherever they came from. If we all agree, we could just introduce them to the War Room without wasting any time.”

Margo and Chester agreed.

After they had gone, M pulled open his desk drawer. He took out a book and a pen and made an entry in *The Iceberg Chronicles*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Groucho

1 Week Later. HMS Strongbox Studio 1. 9:12 am.

Sara said to the camera: “Hello. My name is Daisy. Of course, that is not my real name, and I hope you realize this is not my real nose,” and she pointed to the big rubber nose of her Groucho Marx disguise.

“How was that” the Director said to the Cameramin and the Sound Manager.

“Good,” they both replied in sequence.

‘Daisey’s’ glasses consisted of thick black frames, with huge, bushy obviously phony black eyebrows. Attached to the glasses was a large, obviously phony rubber nose. Where the glass lens should have been, were disks with psychedelic spirals. They allowed Sara to see, but made facial recognition impossible.

M had passed it to her from a cardboard box in the corner of the room saying, “Keep it. The Props Room isn’t ready yet.”

“How many of these have you got?”

“More than we will need for a while. But when they’re gone, I’ll have to find out if they make them anymore.”

Also in the room was the Director, the Cameramin and a Gaffer. The Gaffer’s duties in this room were to control the Boom Mike and re-arrange the sound-effects speakers. Lighting was via two wall-mounted floodlights in the back corners of the room. The Sound Tech did double duty as the Lighting Tech. There was no Foley. It was a simplified set up.

Margo was in the corner as the Producer. Sara was wearing a blonde wig and a light-blue apron mini dress that had a broad D neckline. The dress had short puffy sleeves gathered high on her biceps by elastic cuffs.

M stood by the entrance door. “You are all here because you are to become the base-crew for our new Production Studio, ‘Iceberg Chronicles.’ We will be using this small video room, oh, by the way, this is called Studio 1. Nameplates are on the way. Some of you have a basic understanding of your position, but only one of you, Lily, has an impressive resume. Every video will have a budget, which will be managed by the Producer. This Video’s Producer is Margo. Now I will get out of your way and free up some space. Lily, it’s all yours.” M squeezed by Margo and left the room

Lily, a short woman at least in her sixties, had long straight grey hair. “Hello. I am the Director. Jackson here is the Assistant Director. You will direct all questions to him. He is also in training. If the answer is not obvious to him, he will turn to me for the answer. He will relay it. We will execute all steps according to normal protocol. There will be no short-cuts because we’re in this small room. When we’re in the big studio, or outdoors, I can’t be having confusion. Any questions?” There were none.

“Places,” Jackson, the AD called. A moment later he called, “Quiet on the set.” Then after a nod from Lily, “Sound.” The Sound Manager said, “We have sound.”

Then Jackson called, “Camera.”

The Cameraman said, “Rolling.”

From where Margo stood, she could see the camera’s viewfinder. The shot was a head and shoulders view of Daisy.

Lily called, “Action.”

Sara, as Daisy began, “This is Training Video One in a new Iceberg Chronicles series that will be coming to you entitled *Making Your Home Safe*. Today’s episode is called *How to befuddle interior NORDIC CM devices*. If you’re watching this, then someone showed you Email Training One, *How to connect to an Iceberg server*. As always, remember that you are taking a great risk by watching this, always watch in private or with very trusted friends, and never talk about what you see with people you don’t know.”

The camera zoomed in to a phone Sara was holding in her hand.

“First I’m going to show you how to download the Iceberg app that will allow you to trick the NORDIC Constant Monitoring devices to reveal their locations by emitting a buzzing sound.” She went through the process. Then the Sound Tech played the sound of a device buzzing. The view then pulled back to Daisy standing in front of a theatre set window with curtains and a table with a lamp.

“Cut,” said the Director. “Sara, you forgot to tell them to check their surroundings first. Reset to that point.” The Sound Tech killed the buzzing. When all was ready Lily called, “Action.”

Margo smiled broadly as she watched Sara move about the set, frequently flicking her blonde wig hair out from in front of her face and pushing her disguise back in place with her index finger. Watching Sara move her nearly bear arms about, and deal with the ruffled apron in front of her dress—it was too big for her, made her eyes twinkle.

It took about an hour to do the fifteen-minute video. Then Lily called “Cut. Standby. Gate Check.”

Jackson, Lily, and the Cameraman re-played the footage. Margo could have inserted herself into the review, but she trusted Lily. Then Lily nodded to the Cameraman and said, “In the Can.” Jackson called, “Gate is Good. This is a Wrap. Thank you all.”

As the video staff closed-down their equipment Margo brushed by Sara, “Meet me in our room. Bring the glasses and wig.”

Same Day. The Strongbox. Guest Bedroom 255. 10:30 am.

Margo and Sara’s apartment was small but luxurious. There was a very small kitchen with an apartment size fridge, a microwave, and a small sink. The Living Room had a couch and a padded chair facing a large video screen. Two little workstations, just big enough for a laptop, were set on either side of a large picture window. When they first moved in, they were surprised to find that the large window had a splendid view of the wooded slope down to the valley of a small brook. One day they had ventured into the woods, wearing their jeans and long-sleeved denim shirts with their

Tully hats to see what it looked like from the outside. The window had vertical security bars across it.

When Sara returned from the video shoot Margo was standing next to the big window with the curtains pulled back.

“Come here,” Margo said. Sara did so. “The decision has been made that tomorrow Sophia and I will go to Montreal to meet the Ducharmes in person. Sebastian and Chester have all gone over the security precautions and I know I shouldn’t be worried. Still, I can’t help wishing Vlod was still here.”

“Me too. You sound like you might be quite worried.” “I’ll be fine.” Margo stared at the floor for a moment, then took a breath and said, “Put on the glasses and wig.”

Sara did so. “Stand right here,” Margo said as she put her hands on Sara’s shoulders and positioned her just the way she wanted the light from the window to fall across her. Then Margo set her phone on the desk behind Sara and returned with her full-size camera slung around her neck.

“I want a picture of you before I go.”

Sara stood there, her broad grin plainly showing under her Groucho moustache. Margo took close-ups, medium shots, and full-height shots. She took side shots with Sara looking over her shoulder, Probably coyly, Margo thought—she couldn’t tell. She parted the wig’s blond hair in different ways over Sara’s shoulder.

Then Margo ran her left index finger up Sara’s toned right arm to the bottom of the ruffled sleeve. She cocked Sara’s head to the side and kissed her neck. Then she gently tilted Sara’s head back a bit. She kissed Sara’s throat under the Groucho moustache.

“I need to adjust this neckline,” Margo said. The neckline was bordered by the same white elastic trim as the sleeve cuffs. “A little wider I think,” Margo said as she gently and slowly pulled on the bodice’s neck opening at the shoulders. She stretched the opening to where it spread to the top of Sara’s shoulders. “I want a picture of your collarbones.”

Margo thought the adjustment not quite right and, now with the camera hanging from her neck, she used both hands to pull the edges of the neck hem down the top of her shoulders to the top of her upper arms, so her entire shoulders were bare. The neckline stretched easily. This was obviously an intentional option for the dress.

Margo took a frontal shot, then again moved to Sara's side.

"Are you playing with me like an object?"

"Maybe," Margo said.

Margo tugged the open neckline down Sara's upper arms until Sara's breasts were fully exposed, her arms pinned to her sides.

"Are you going to do this inch-by-inch?" Sara asked.

Margo looked at her intently. "You're right. This isn't fair. Wait."

She went behind Sara and set the camera on the desk. In a few moments Margo was back in front of her, but this time completely naked. "How's this?" She asked.

Sara frowned under her mask. "Now you're ahead of me." She carefully tugged the neckline back to her shoulders, then reached behind her and pulled down the dress's zipper. She kicked her shoes to the side and dropped the Groucho glasses to the floor.

"Keep the wig," Margo said.

They made slow, caring love.

When they were spent they lay on the bedsheets with the dry forest air gently blowing over their skin. Just as Margo was about to pull the sheet up over them Sara put a hand gently on Margo's hip to stop her. Sara leaned on her side, propped her head on her elbow and said, "Mar, I know I'm a bit unfocused at times and have a history of jumping around. But I'm getting older now."

"We all are," said Margo, without humor. She pulled the sheet up to her shoulders and turned her face toward the window, leaving Sara's hand trapped underneath.

“What I mean is, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about me and you. And I would like it to become Us, and not just me and you.”

“It’s always been us.”

“No. It’s always been you and me. It’s time. I want in. Why won’t you let me under that outer shell.”

“Because you’re too intense.”

Sara’s eyes quickly filled, and her voice quavered, “I’m too intense?”

Margo turned back and put a hand on her arm, “No, no. That’s not how I mean it.”

“I’m too intense?” Sara repeated.

“Sara, you’re sensitive. You are a flower—a delicate flower. Sara, I can’t protect you.”

“I’m not asking you to protect me. I’m asking you to let me in.”

Margo dropped her hand and turned back to the window. Sara said softly through her sobs, “Mar, I can’t wait forever. I’m telling you I need to know if you’re capable of making a true commitment.”

Margo did not look back. She just repeated, “I can’t protect you.”

“Damn it Mar, listen to me. I don’t want you to protect me. I want you to tell me who you are. Mar, you have stretch marks on your belly. Tell me.”

Margo continued to look away. Sara leaned a bit further toward her so she could see her face. Margo was crying. Sara went back to leaning on her elbow, removed her hand from under the sheet and began stroking Margo’s hair. “Take your time.”

“A baby. A beautiful little baby. Please don’t make me remember.”

Sara continued stroking her hair, more slowly now. “What happened to the baby?”

Margo spoke so softly Sara could hardly hear her. “My mother took me to St. John’s when I was a kid. When I was twenty I decided Newfoundland was too much like the end of the world. I left and went to Chicago. I told my mother I had found a job. It was a lie. I didn’t know anything about Chicago except it was big. I met a guy who I knew was what people call handsome. I wasn’t actually attracted to him, but I just told myself I needed to grow up. This was just when NORDIC was in the process of invading Merica. To this day I don’t know what exactly was the problem NORDIC had with this guy, but apparently he was identified as a threat. It was my fault.” Margo fell silent.

Sara lightly kissed her forehead, “Go on.”

“I should have known something was wrong when I heard a bot outside our apartment working on the stairs. Sara, I clearly heard it. I wondered what it was doing. But I needed more bananas to make food for my tiny baby. She was crying. I was distracted. I wasn’t thinking. I exited my apartment carrying my tiny baby in my chest sling. When I turned outside our door and took my first step down on the stairs I put my arm out for the railing. It broke away in my hand. I fell over the side two stories. I landed on my baby. She stopped crying. I will never not hear her stop crying.”

Sara quietly said, “NORDIC killed your baby, Mar. It wasn’t your fault.” She lay on her side and rested her arm across Margo. “It wasn’t your fault.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Les Chats

1 Day Later. M's Strongbox Office. 6:32 am.

Sebastian, Margo, Sara, Sophia, and Chester were all crammed into M's office looking at the large screen on M's desk. M stood leaning against his bookcase door. Guy was logged in from Corner Brook and on the screen. He had already been brought up to date on their finding of Florence Ducharme as the Quebec Resistance member most feared by Douglas.

He told them he had reviewed all the files they had sent him and he agreed that she seemed the person they needed to interview as the possible new Quebec Resistance leader. He also noted that if her husband was of a similar mind, he could be a valuable asset also. They could be very effective as a team. But he strongly disagreed with the plan to send Sophia and Margo to Montreal. Quebec was entirely too unstable right then. They didn't have control of NORDIC's CM in Quebec. "We can assume the mystery woman NORDIC was using as the agent for communicating with Douglas may be actively trying to recruit a new stooge. Once one of our people go in there we have no idea of what's going on. It's just too dangerous."

"But we don't have the time to fiddle and diddle over this," M said.

Guy said, "And we'll have even less time if Margo and Sophia get themselves killed." Under the table Sara squeezed Margo's hand.

"I've worked out an alternative plan," Guy said. "We'll have Sophia contact Florence in her Montreal apartment via live-video. Sebastian and I can make sure it's a secure connection. Of course she'll assume it could be a NORDIC clone, so Sophia will tell her a few details about the car chase that were not in NORDIC's copy of the CM video. Details that could be known only by a person there. If she can gain Florence's trust, Sophia will ask her to come to Halifax to meet Iceberg. If Florence, and maybe even her husband, agree, Sophia will then negotiate an acceptable meeting arrangement. Thoughts?"

Guy could see all their faces nodding in agreement. It was decided to try the initial contact that afternoon using Studio 1. Guy logged off and everyone left M's office. Sebastian was the last to get up to leave. M said to him, "Stay for a minute. I have an idea for another meeting space."

2 Days Later. Downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia. 10:03 am.

Sophia had been successful in getting Florence and Raphael to agree to come to Nova Scotia for a meeting, but acceptable details had been complicated.

The mid-summer sun bathed the busy streets of old downtown Halifax in a warm wash of cleansing photons. It might be hot in certain places, but here at Spring Garden and Queen Street it was refreshingly cooled by the breeze coming off the harbor.

Margo purposefully strode to the bus stop from the southwest. She was wearing a cleaners outfit with her hair tied back in a colorful kerchief, and was carrying a covered bucket that may have been cleaning supplies. A few moments later Chester walked casually to the stop from the opposite direction dressed as a businessmin in a trim long sleeve white shirt and pressed gray slacks. He stood several feet from Margo and ignored her. They pretended not to notice the young couple approaching from Queen Street. The couple stopped and stood behind Margo and Chester. The man was tall, dark haired, with broad shoulders and wore a black polo shirt tucked into khaki cargo shorts. The woman was about the same age, with chestnut hair cut in a Page Boy that bounced whenever she turned her head. She was considerably shorter than the man and was wearing a blue blouse and tan shorts. Neither Margo or Chester could get a look at their faces, but they could overhear them.

"Tell me again why this is a good idea," the man said in French.

"We've been through that. You can go back to Montreal if you want. I'm sticking with this."

"No way I'm leaving you alone," and he took her hand.

“Raffy, you were sitting there right next to me when I posted that video. We both made sure it could not be traced. I think these people might be legit.”

A silver self-driving bus pulled up. The windows were tinted, but it looked to be about a third full. Its accordion doors hissed open. Margo got on, followed by Chester. The young couple looked at each other. The man raised one of his thick eyebrows in a questioning arc. The woman returned his gaze, brushing away a fly.

Just then Sophia jogged up Spring Garden from the northeast, trying not to miss the bus. When she had reached the doors she paused to catch her breath. The young couple exchanged a surprised look. “That’s her,” said the woman.

“I’m not sure. Maybe.”

Sophia hesitated for a moment longer, then stepped on board.

“C’mon,” said the young woman pulling the man by his hand.

When they were on the bus and turned to find a seat they were surprised to find that there was nobody on the bus except the three people who had just boarded. They looked at the empty seats and the windows beside them.

“There’s some kind of screen on the windows with the profiles of passengers,” the man said with growing concern. The doors hissed shut behind them. The man and woman looked to the back of the bus where the people who had just gotten on before them were now sitting on the back bench seat. In front of the seat was a table. There was a bench facing backwards on the bus toward the table. It looked like some kind of mobile conference space. The couple exchanged another look of alarm.

“It’s OK, Margo said. I’m satisfied you’re the Ducharmes.”

The couple seemed shocked. The man said, “I don’t care what you’re satisfaction level is. The question is who are you?”

Sophia said, “I’m Sophia Lambreggetti, the person you talked to. Sit down before you get knocked on your noggins.”

They took the seats facing the table and put on their seat belts. “You’re the woman from the car chase,” the woman said looking at Sophia.

“True,” said Sophia. “How did you know to call it a ‘car’ chase?”

“We have some old references. We looked-up the strange vehicles,” said the man.

Margo called to the front of the bus, “OK, Ralph, take us out for lunch.”

The round smiling face of Ralph Crampton peered from the edge of a black curtain at the front of the bus and said in a sing-song, “And away-ee we go!”

Raphael started to get up, forgetting he had just put on a seatbelt. “Hey!”

Sophia held up her palm, “It’s OK, Really. We’ll stop this bus any moment you ask us to and let you off. It’s just that we can’t tie-up the bus stop, us not being an actual HT bus and all.”

Florence rested a hand on Raphael’s leg. “Let’s hear them out.”

“I’m Margo Marchand, formerly from Newfoundland. Beside me is Chester. I don’t know where formerly from, but right now, also from Halifax.”

“I’m Florrie Ducharme. This is my husband Raphael.”

Florrie had a pretty, long face, and Raphael had a square face with chiseled features. “We know,” said Margo. “Sorry for the cloak and dagger, but we had to make sure you weren’t NORDIC clone bots.”

“You’re joking right? Please tell me that’s a joke and that NORDIC can’t really clone Humans,” Raphael said, finally smiling.

Chester said, “As far as we know it’s far from perfection, but we know it’s been working on doing just that for years. We just don’t want to find out it’s made a breakthrough the hard way. But here’s what I noticed: In

North America it is still customary for Humans to swat at flies that land on their faces. I saw you, Florrie, swat a fly away while you were standing at the bus stop. It is not likely a bot would do that.”

“In that case,” Florrie said, “I’m glad we’re not bots. So you, Sophia, did a pretty good job of teasing me into agreeing to this meeting. Here we are.”

Sophia said, “You’ve heard of the Iceberg Resistance?”

“Of course we have,” answered Florrie.

Sophia waved her hand to her left. “All of us are Iceberg. We know that you contacted Douglas to express your interest in joining the Quebec Resistance.”

“Bennitt,” Raphael said.

Margo said, “Fortunately he is no longer able to tarnish her name. The Douglas you met was not Doug Bennitt. He was a NORDIC stooge. He put the both of you on NORDIC’s kill list some time ago.”

“Aha,” Raphael said, turning to Florrie, “I told you there were too many coincidences.”

“And I believed you,” Florrie said, glancing back at him. “I didn’t say you didn’t,” Raphael said.

Chester broke in, “OK,, is this the situation? ’Cuz you-all can tally your respective points on the front of your refrigerator door later.”

“Sorry,” Raphael said. “No need to tally points. She’s already way too far ahead of me.”

Florrie tilted his face toward her and gave him a little kiss. “He get’s a kiss whenever he says that. Now, go on.”

Sophia continued by saying the car chase They had watched was the result of her friends discovering this traitor, the false Douglas Bennitt’s true identity after she had already left to meet him. He was just about to shoot her when one of them, Beth, took him out with a shot to the head. “It turned out the reason he was at Sugarloaf in the first place was that he had grown

impatient with NORDIC's clumsy efforts to eliminate you two. He had hired an MR-7 Hitmin to kill you both." She paused to let this sink in.

Florrie and Raphael looked at each other. Sophia went on. The Hitmin was there and had recognized her because she used to be stupid as a doorstop. She escaped in her little red car and he chased her. There was more to it, but that was what they were watching.

"So wait," asked Florrie, "we were being set-up that very night?"

"Yup," said Margo. "I would say you would certainly already be dead if it weren't for Sophia here."

"And I would already be dead, etc., etc. So we're done with that," Sophia said. "Margo, lay it on them."

The bus leaned around a long sweeping bend. Margo explained how the Quebec Resistance could never get its act together because this Douglas traitor had been deliberately sabotaging every attempt to do so. She summarized the reasons it was now more important than ever for there to be a well organized Quebec Resistance. Florrie said, "It always seemed to us that getting resistance members together was like herding cats."

Chester told them that Iceberg had read their NORDIC dossiers and concluded they were the best people to quickly pull the Resistance into a powerful force.

"Herd the cats," Raphael said. "Oui, Troupeau les chats," Margo said.

Sara looked at Margo, "I didn't know you remembered any French."

"That's about it." Then to Florrie and Raphael she said, "I know this might seem quick, but what do you think?"

"It's not quick at all," Florrie said looking at Raphael. "We'd love the chance. But how would we ever do it?"

Sophia said, "That's what we're going to explain to you."

Same Day. The Strongbox. Waring Supply Cafeteria. 12:42 pm.

By the time Ralph dropped them off in front of the Waring Supply entrance Margo had already called ahead to M and told him they were on their way. M was at a table with Sebastian. They rose as the group from the bus entered. M made the introductions. “We just opened this cafeteria, so it’s still rough around the edges. The way it works is the Chef, Angelo, sets out trays with whatever the day’s choices are, and you just tell him what you want on your plate.”

“How do we pay?” Florrie asked.

“You pay by working against NORDIC,” M said.

Chester told them it was their first time trying out the cafeteria. He motioned to Raphael and Florrie, “You first.”

Florrie extended her arm for Raphael to proceed. He responded by extending his arm for her to go first.

“Oh my God,” Chester said. “I’m going,” and he went to the counter.

After they all had eaten and returned their empty plates M looked to Margo, “I’m satisfied. You?” She nodded.

Then to Raphael and Florrie, “One more time. You’re in?”

“Absolutely,” and “Yes,” they both answered at once.

“Then follow me to the War Room door.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Dribbling

Same Day. HMS Strongbox War Room. 1:04 pm.

“You take this,” M said to Margo as he opened the door into the War Room. All the staff that were not in the middle of something stopped what they were doing and looked up as Margo led Raphael and Florrie to the front of the room. Sebastian and Chester took their own stations. M went to stand in the back of the room. Sophia gave a special little nod to Henry who smiled broadly.

“Everybody,” Margo said, “I’d like you to meet Florrie and Raphael Ducharme. They are the new head of the Quebec Resistance.”

“Which will be known by the name *Les Chats*,” Florrie said proudly.

Applause broke out. It seemed the War Room was very big on applause breaks.

“The cool cats from Quebec. Damn straight,” Chester said.

Florrie said, “If NORDIC thought the Quebec Resistance was like a bunch of roving cats in the middle of the night, wait ‘til it meets us now.” Laughter erupted. M smiled and thought how he never imagined the War Room staff would have become such a cohesive unit. Margo had shown a real talent for spotting the most intelligent and creative people from throughout Maritime. A special feat since there had been no secondary education in North America for over a decade.

Margo said that Raphael and Florrie would be going around and introducing themselves while Sara got them their new laptops.

Same Day. The War Room. 3 hours Later.

Florrie and Raphael had been given cubicles. M went to them and said, “In the back of the room there is a door labelled Utility closet. It is

unlocked. Go in there and wait for me.” Then he casually went individually to Sebastian, Margo, Chester, Sophia and Beth and told them the same thing. After assuring himself that everyone was occupied he wandered to the Utility closet door.

When he entered and locked the door behind him he found his little bewildered crowd milling about in the Gladys Corridor. He led them out the Gladys Door. But instead of turning left toward the mobile park road, he turned right. They followed him hugging the warehouse’s tall concrete wall single file because of the scrub brush and tree branches. At an old unmarked steel door with no exterior hardware M took out his phone and punched in some numbers. The old steel door popped open.

The door let into a set of concrete stairs illuminated only by a skylight at the top landing. “Watch your step,” M said.

The stairway opened onto the roof. They all gathered outside the stairwell door as M closed it behind them. “Welcome to the War Room Roof Meeting Room.”

The group peered across what looked like a playground. However, it was apparent that the playground was just painted canvas that had been fastened to the flat roof, like the background for a movie set. But Chester noted that in the far corner there was a real half-basketball court with a high fence behind the hoop. There was A basketball shoved under a heavy metal bench.

Next to the stairwell was a large round metal table. Two glass pitchers with matching glasses were set out. Each glass had the logo of a different national basketball team. “Ice water and lemonade,” M said as he propped open two very large umbrellas that covered, not only the table, but also the chairs around it. He said, “Have a seat.”

When they were all settled M added that the umbrellas were made of a fabric Sebastian designed. It prevented surveillance from the air. Facial scanning of course, but also their speech vibrations could not be read by NORDIC’s satellite. He noted that the Halifax sailmaker who made the umbrellas said she had never seen such fabric, and he was sure she wasn’t mistaken.

“I have three reasons for this new Meeting Room, as it were. The first is that my office is too small for more than a few people.”

Chester said, “I’m guessing you already discovered other uses for it.”

M did not take the bait. “Also, there needs to be at least one meeting spot that is known only to the topmost command.” He sat back.

“And the third reason?” Sara prompted.

“Oh yeah,” M said. “Where was I. The third reason is that sometimes it’s just nice to get outside.”

He nodded his head to his right. “Here’s something you need to know. There is an escape zip line always available. Vlod’s idea from when we first discovered this building. It is in the northeast corner, in honor of Newfoundland. If you look from here you’ll see a large urn. Under its cover are a bunch of pulleys.”

M waited for everyone’s focus to return. Then he resumed: The reason for this meeting was to move ahead now that the Quebec Resistance had actual leadership. They must immediately advance their North America war planning. They needed to prioritize their task list while Florrie and Raphael got their cats herded. They would then move into the next phases of the war with the precision of a Swiss watch.

Margo looked to Florrie and Rafael, “Newfoundland Iceberg will be your source for materiel. Our new leader there is named Ginger. We’ll arrange a virtual meeting soon. Go through the lists we have prepared and annotate them as you see fit. Then tell Ginger when you are ready for deliveries. We are confident we have a scheme that will keep the convoys undetectable by NORDIC.”

Beth went on, “Florrie and Raphael, on your laptop you’ll find the Alaskan Resistance contact info,” now addressing the whole group, “The plan is to flood the Northwest Territories with an army. It needn’t be very big. In fact, it could be quite small and still be effective. At the right moment our Mexican cousins, with the cooperation of Texas, will initiate an

attack on NORDIC from the south. After a suitable delay, which we will work-out with precision, Quebec and Alaska will surge from the Northwest Territories into NORDIC controlled Merica. NORDIC will now be savagely defending itself on two fronts.” She turned to Chester, “Chester, why don’t you explain the knife to the ribs.”

Chester leaned forward and scanned each of them as he talked, “After just the right amount of delay we will hit NORDIC with a Coup de gras knife to the ribs from a new base in Boston. We won’t be able to assemble an army, but one is not needed. It will be a simulated attack.”

Sophia asked, “You mean like a Virtual Reality attack?”

“Exactly,” said Beth.

Sebastian explained, “NORDIC’s world exists inside computer servers. It is only able to effect Humans in the real world because we invited it in, gave it the keys, laid down, and said ‘Do whatever you want, we won’t stop you.’ We have the idea that we might be able to convince NORDIC that it is being attacked from the east. It will be virtually, but if done right, NORDIC won’t know the difference.”

Chester told them that on each of their laptops they would find detailed To-Do Lists. He went on to briefly summarize them.

Forty-five minutes later, when everyone had had their say, Chester got up and stretched. He wandered across the painted movie set playground to the metal bench next to the functional basketball court. He pulled out the basketball and bounced it forcefully several times. When he was satisfied it was hard enough he sunk a nothing-but-net shot. He retrieved the rebound and dribbled.

M was now standing near the court and said, “Quit fiddlin and diddlin. I’m open.”

Chester immediately swung his right arm wide and low, reaching around an imaginary opponent, and sent a strong bounce-pass to M.

M was unprepared, but caught it. He started cagily dribbling toward the basket, his eyes fixed on Chester, as he said, “You’ve got the youth, but I’ve got the height.”

The Strongbox Kitchen. That night, 2 am.

M was rummaging through one of the refrigerators in the dim kitchen. He had turned on only the light above the sink. Helle startled him when she asked, “And what are you doing down here?”

“I was hungry. Plus, I couldn’t sleep.”

“I noticed you hardly ate at tonight’s supper. What’s bugging you? Or, is it the upcoming war?”

“Is it that obvious?”

He was still turned away from her. Helle came up behind him, wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his back. “Helle,” he said, “I’m just acting. I’m not really a leader at all. Shooting hoops with Chester reminded me that my specialty is moving and dodging, then scoring quickly.”

Helle turned him so now they were face-to-face. M had a half-eaten sandwich in one hand. She took it, took a bite out of it, and set it down on the nearby table. “Yes. You know how to dip and dodge. I’m going to teach you how to dance.”

He looked at her face. “How is that going to help?”

Helle took a step back and put his hands into dance position.

“You know I don’t know how to dance.”

“Yes. I know. That’s good, because what I’m going to teach you is Argentine Tango and you won’t have to unlearn anything.” She leaned her head sideways on his chest, then said, “Now move me.”

“Move you?”

“That’s what I said. Make me step backwards.”

M leaned forward, thinking this would be simple, but Helle didn’t budge. Then he leaned harder.

“Go ahead,” Helle said, “you’re the big man. Move me.” She kept her head serenely on his chest.

This time, M took a half-step back, set himself, and leaned into her. Still, she didn’t budge.

“What the hell are you doing?” He asked.

“I’m grounded. All your force is just passing through me, into my feet, then into the ground. She broke dance position and looked at him. “When you learn how to be grounded, then you will have learned how to dance Argentine Tango.”

“And,” M asked.

“And when you know how to dance Tango, you will know how to be a leader.”

And they spent the next hour dancing and snacking in the dimly lit kitchen.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Tango by Moonlight

4 Days Later. Swaying Pines Shopping Center. 9:32 am.

Guy was standing at the back of the long, U-shaped building outside the loading door of an “Coming Soon – Your Name Here” unit when Sara parked a shiny red SUV in front of him. They greeted each other with cheek kisses followed by a firm hug.

“Guy, it’s been so long since I’ve seen you. When did you get back to Nova Scotia?”

“Actually, only about an hour ago. Come on in. I’ve got something to show you.”

Guy ushered her into the unit’s loading area. A large black SUV was parked inside.

“Why do I think I recognize that?” Sara asked.

“Maybe because it used to belong to Douglas.”

Sara slowly walked around the back of the vehicle, along its other side, and stood in front of it. Then she hocked a Louie onto the hood.

“You know the vehicle is not the embodiment of the person. You just spit on our newest acquisition.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t crawl up onto the roof and take a dump on it.” She looked at him with a cold stare that broke into a wide grin.

“You completely disarm me when you grin like that.”

“Yeah, I doubt that. So I’m guessing there’s a reason you asked me here. I see you have a pretty complete set of testing electronics on the workbench.”

“At first it was the ingenious way the steering wheel and pedals can be dismantled and hidden in the trunk. Then I noticed some other things, like the way the Roof Number is actually a hologram and there appear to be strange hatches in the floor. I began to wonder. Since this guy was a NORDIC stooge, maybe there’s more. I thought we should spend some time checking it out.”

“Interesting.” She thought for a minute. “I remember something the dirtbag said when I took my first ride in this thing. He said when he was driving it transmitted a signal that made it appear to be just another self-driver to NORDIC surveillance.”

“Man, imagine if we could duplicate that in battle.”

“Let’s get to it, but don’t forget, we’ve got to be back by six pm.”
“Why is that?”

“Didn’t Sophia tell you?” Her eyes drifted up and her brow furrowed. “Oh Sugar. That’s right. I’m supposed to tell you. Tonight is Henry’s birthday party.”

“Hmm. I have an idea. After our lunch break I’m going to look for something from one of the stores here at the shopping center as my present for him.”

Sara said, “Shoot. That’s right. I need to do that to. Sophia said she was going to get over here and shop for something this afternoon.”

“I know the perfect gift that can be from her. Text her and tell her you’ll pick something up. She doesn’t know I’m back yet. I want to surprise her. Now back to this thing.”

Sara took off her red sleeveless blouse—It matched her SUV —And hung it on a hook by the workbench, There were a couple of shop aprons. She put one on as did Guy. Then he opened all the SUV’s doors, tailgate, and hood. “There’s stuff in here I don’t even recognize,” he said.

“Don’t touch anything until I make sure we’ve disconnected it from all its battery packs and capacitors. Once I’m satisfied it’s safe, we’ll power-up individual components using my SUV’s power adapter.”

“How’d you get your own private SUV?” Guy ASKED.

“It used to be Mako’s. It was poorly treated during Sophia’s car chase, so it needed a bunch of work. Then I had it painted my own incognito color.”

“Fire engine red,” said Guy.

“Like I said. My idea of incognito.”

A couple of hours later they took off their aprons and had lunch at the center’s restaurant. Then Guy said he was going to the game store followed by the antique shop. Sara said she would come with him.

At the game store Sara didn’t find anything that interested her, but Guy bought what he had in mind for Sophia’s gift to Henry. He dropped it off at the garage and they continued to the antique shop on the second floor of the south end building.

Uncle Tom’s Antiques entrance was a small door next to a clothing store. Once inside, the age of the old wooden shopping center became apparent. At the top of the stairs Sara stopped and looked around. The space appeared to go on and on, clearly it extended over several of the first floor shops. Sunlight struggled to fill the crowded spaces from the small many-paned smokey casement windows and once inside, it had to compete with a light haze of suspended dust. Still, she wasn’t coughing, so she figured it looked worse than it really was.

An old man was sitting before a workbench with a dissected clock before him. “Any questions, just holler. Oh, Guy. It’s you. Haven’t seen you in months.”

“No more room in my place. But I’m shopping for someone else this time.”

“What are you looking for?”

Guy said, “I have no idea.”

“Good. We’ve got lots of those,” The old man said as he went back to work.

Sara searched the items in a glass counter. Guy kept going deeper into the abyss until Sara lost all sight of him. Eventually he returned carrying some kind of a wooden crate thing.

Sara said, “Holy crap. Is that going to be your birthday gift to Henry?”

Guy said, “Unless you tell me he’s already got one.”

“In that case, I’m going to go back and change what I got for him.”

Same Day. Swaying Pines. 5:12 pm.

Guy went through the trees to the edge of Cristine’s back yard. He leaned against one and watched Sophia busy with Cristine’s dad. Together with Helle, they were stringing party lights and streamers. Three picnic tables had been lined up with party tablecloths, favors, and plates. Two big speakers were on the large porch. Guy had occasionally thought about building a large porch like that, he had the room, but he never got around to it.

Sophia climbed down the ladder she had been on and judged the line of the streamer she had just finished. It led her eyes to Guy.

She froze and her mouth hung open. Then she rushed to him. He spread his arms and she charged full-tilt into his firm embrace. She thought it was what running into a mountain would feel like. She was stunned by her reaction at seeing him. They had been having only late night chats for a month. Where did this emotion come from?

Guy folded his head next to hers. Finally she pulled herself back and placed both hands on his broad shoulders and looked at him. “It’s you!”

“And maybe I could be someone else? How would I go a boot that, eh?”

“Guy!” Cristine’s dad called. “Stop lurking in the woods and help me with this pinata.”

A short while later the neighborhood kids arrived. After a series of silly games orchestrated by Cristine's dad, the birthday cake was served. Sara arrived with Margo and a few of the War Room staff. Then it was time for presents. When he opened Sara's he found a rubber lobster and a small wooden model of a lobster fishing boat with *Damariscotta* printed on its bow. "Love it," he said.

Sophia's present was a small box titled, *Design and Build Your Own Video Game*. Henry said, "Lordy-Lordy. Thank you Soph."

Finally there seemed to be no presents left when Guy said, "Look on the porch." There sat a 4 by 2 by 2 foot box wrapped in colorful birthday paper. Henry ran to it as the other kids gathered around. He ripped it open. It was a box made of evenly spaced weathered wood lathe. "Do you know what it is?" Guy asked.

"You bet I do! An old lobster trap!" Henry said with a huge grin.

"You guys are weird," said Cristine.

That evening. 11:17 pm.

The kids had all been sent home three hours ago. There followed a haphazard clean-up effort by the adults. Cristine's dad had two barrels at the edge of his yard just for the purpose. Then two of the other dads lifted the picnic tables to the edge of the clearing. There followed an hour of ruckus dancing by the adults to party music, done on the theory it wouldn't be keeping the neighborhood kids up because they would be too buzzed to be sleeping yet anyway. Now Cristine's dad unplugged the party lights and allowed the full moon to bring the clearing into soft focus. He turned down the volume and started his playlist of slow dance songs. Sophia sat on the porch steps as Guy danced with several of the women he seemed to know well. A couple of men asked Sophia to dance.

She was with Guy when she caught sight of Helle coming back to the clearing. That would mean Henry must finally be asleep. Helle continued to the music player on the porch and as she passed Guy she gave

him a wink. A moment later the plaintive chords of a bandoneon started to play. An intoxicatingly smooth baritone started singing in Spanish.

“Do you know Argentine Tango?” Guy asked Sophia.

“Not a bit. Can you teach me?”

“Only if you have an open heart of molten gold.”

“Right now I do.” “It’s a commitment. The songs are played in sets of three. If you’re willing look me in the eye and give me the tiniest nod of your beautiful head.”

She gave an almost imperceptible nod. He took her right hand and curled it against his chest. She wrapped her left arm over his shoulder and down his back. They were perfectly still for a few beats. Then she felt Guy settle onto the soles of his feet and waited. When she had melted onto his chest and given herself to him he settled slightly further onto his right heel and stepped strongly forward with his left foot. She was amazed to feel her right leg fling back in response to his step entirely of its own accord.

At the end of the third song there was a long pause. Another song did not immediately start. Guy straightened and with his weight change set Sophia onto her feet. She looked at him and said, “Thank you.”

“Oh no. Don’t say thank you unless you don’t want to dance anymore.”

Sophia put her hands back upon his shoulders and said, “Wait here. I think I know someone else who knows this dance.” She went to the porch where Helle was sitting next to the music player. “Your turn.”

A slow grin spread across Helle’s face. She glanced coyly toward Guy. He gave a small raise of his eyebrows. She gave a tiny nod. Then Guy came over and offered his hand.

Sophia asked Guy, “What music should I put on?”

Helle looked at her solemnly, “Pugliese.”

Sophia started the music. She and the other remaining adults were mesmerized watching the two experienced Tango dancers move as one in the moonlight.

After they had danced three songs the music stopped and Guy walked Helle back to the porch. Sophia could see that Helle's face was wet with tears as she gathered her sweater. Then she ran to a tall lanky figure who had been obscured at the edge of the woods. He pulled her in close. Then she and M wandered off down the moonlit road.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The Knowledge Singularity

Next Day. War Room Roof Meeting Space. 9:14 am.

Margo, Sara, Sophia, Chester and M sat around the round table on the War Room Roof. A light drizzle gently tapped on the umbrella—Only one needed be open for the smaller group. The sound made Chester think of a skilled Dominican steel drum player impatient to get going. Despite the drizzle, it was pleasantly warm.

M started the meeting by standing outside the umbrella so they could all see him. He stood firmly planted in the drizzle.

“I’ve called this meeting because it’s time for us to get ourselves firmly planted and ready to move fast. We’ve already established the first task for our Boston Iceberg base—the virtual Knife to the Ribs. But that is only the beginning of the beginning.”

Sophia interrupted, “But before you go on. As the unarguably most computer illiterate dummy in the group, why do we have to be in Boston to do this attack? If it’s virtual, why can’t we just launch it from here?”

M returned to his seat under the umbrella. “Tell her Sara,” he said.

Sara said, “Because NORDIC can model fluctuations in the power grid that we can’t fake. From these tiny fluctuations it can triangulate the origin of sensor receptions. It’s the same way we used to locate black holes in the universe by detecting variations in the time-space continuum.”

“Oh. That. Why didn’t you say so.”

Sara was on a roll, “NORDIC learned how to do that by reading all scientific papers and journals, first, of course, it read, indeed even helped edit, them as their authors wrote them on their laptops. Then it read them again as they were published. However, eventually all papers and journals were written by using regenerative artificial intelligence. Now, when NORDIC scrapes such things off the internet, it recognizes that it’s just reading it’s own writings spat back at it. It figured that out decades ago.”

M took it up, “We know NORDIC always checks the date of original publication and it ignores everything written after 2038, the generally accepted date when accumulation of knowledge ceased. The term ‘The Knowledge Singularity’ was coined when it was first predicted in the 2024 book *The Impenetrable Orb*.”

Margo said, “I remember reading that book once when I was young.”

M continued, “The point is that after NORDIC is effectively immobilized as an enemy of humanity, we will need a tremendous amount of Human energy to repair all the damage NORDIC has done these past decades.”

Margo became concerned, “What do you mean we? Why does the re-building of North America culture fall on us?”

“Let me ask you this: Who else is going to do it? We here at Iceberg cannot just throw-off North America’s savage oppressor and then just walk away, brushing off our dusty hands and patting each other’s back.”

Sara said quietly, “I’m glad we at least brushed off our hands first.”

M began outlining his list. First, before any rebuilding could proceed Humans would have to re-learn how to govern themselves. With years of no secondary education and most of the population having been made into opium addicts it seemed questionable whether any kind of democracy could be sustainable. Yet, they would have to try to create an environment where the newly freed North American countries could resist falling into the hands of ruthless dictators.

When he said ‘they,’ he meant the joint leadership of CoSaF, Iceberg, Les Chats, and the Alaskan Resistance. Plus, any others who choose to join in. He was pretty confident Mexico would, he wasn’t sure about Texas. Maybe. He was sure he wasn’t smart enough to know what the answer was, but what he did know was that it would be irresponsible for the leadership of the war effort to throw the evil smothering corpse of NORDIC off the Human population only to then walk away, leaving the exposed people to be scorched by the blazing sun of chaos. For this, he had assigned Lenore to research history and offer insights into what we might do to create some kind of sun-block, as it were.

Part of this would have to be to plant the seeds for a re-emergence of an education system. Personally, he hoped they could get back to a balance of math, science, art, philosophy, and athletics.

Humans would have to recreate social support networks, governmental or religious based, he didn't know. He told them he remembered that as recently as 2025 there were still many kinds of government supported programs across the globe designed to help the poor, disabled, and otherwise disadvantaged. Of course, even back then it was becoming increasingly difficult to fund social programs because all wealth flowed to the multi-billionaires, but there was still enough for some programs.

In the very beginning, the artificial intelligence invention made it so much easier for people to apply for public support programs. He recounted the story of a poor farmer in India who was able to use A.I. to research what programs might be available to help him, then the A.I. procured the forms for him, and then even automatically filled them out and submitted them; all while the farmer kept working. A miracle for sure. Access to such programs had been effectively just not available to people like them before.

But within just a couple of years, nefarious characters were able to use A.I. to generate thousands of false identities, complete with family histories, addresses, photo I.D.s, and all the other required documentation. Then the A.I., after creating the false identities, automatically applied for every single grant and loan available. Millions were approved. Criminals became obscenely rich. It was only when they started to approach the billionaire club that alarms were sounded and all such social programs, across the globe, had to be cancelled.

M stood back up outside the umbrella. The drizzle had stopped. The sun was trying to find a soft spot in the clouds. "Just like that," he snapped his fingers, "artificial intelligence in the wrong hands destroyed all worldwide social support networks.

But, Humans must reclaim the world for themselves! They must learn how to control their tools. When we defeat NORDIC we will be beyond the beginning of the beginning and will have progressed to the beginning."

Everyone exchanged glances, visually trying to decide who should speak next. Margo picked herself, “So, that is the reason Iceberg needs to expand into Boston.”

M said, “Yes. I have called you four here because you will form the Boston core. Margo, Sara, and Sophia, you three will be the ones who relocate. Chester, you will be their anchor here in Nova Scotia headquarters.”

Margo outlined the responsibilities as she saw them. It would be her background and reputation that would be the basis for convincing local prospects that Iceberg was real, and they should take the risk of signing-up. Sophia would be the person with the knowledge of the local landscape, both figuratively and literally. Plus, we would make sure word was spread about her, now substantial, credentials. Sara would be their Technical and Security Specialist.

“Sounds good to me,” Chester said.

M moved on to his next topic, which was where they stood now in the war effort. They had been manufacturing and distributing to both Mexico and Quebec the Phantom Module Sara and Guy found in Douglas’s SUV. It rendered a vehicle, in essence, transparent to NORDIC. It worked by identifying the vehicle as just one of NORDIC’s own self-drivers. So NORDIC left it to its own devices. Functionally, the vehicle became transparent.

M waited for everyone to absorb that news. Then he continued. “The focus of the attack plan is to go after the power stations supporting NORDIC’s servers cooling systems. We have done computer simulations and worked out the exact timing: Seven days from tonight at 1 am Mexico, the Central American countries, and CoSaF will launch their attack. They have agreed to be led by CoSaF. I am told this is the first time in over a century that Mexico, Central and South America have all put aside their differences toward a common goal. Les Chats and Alaskan forces will attack from the Northwest Territories at 1 am four days later. HAIR-1 modeling predicts the optimum time for Knife To The Ribs from Boston to be four days after the Les Chats surge.”

Chester said, “That might not seem to be enough time for you guys to set-up your base, and it wouldn’t be if we were talking about the real world, but it should be enough for a virtual attack.”

Sophia tried to mask her reservations. This all was moving a bit too fast. She had just become settled in Swaying Pines with Henry and more recently, Guy. She knew no one in Boston. Henry had given her a nickname for God’s sake. She became aware that Sara was looking at her. Sara placed her hand on her knee under the table. “It will be OK, You’ll be with Margo and me.”

“How much time do we have before we leave?” Sophia asked.

“Spend today planning and packing. I’ve already made reservations where you will stay. I picked a place I know of that has a harbor view. I figured you three would like that. Looney is set to lift off at 6 am tomorrow. I don’t expect NORDIC pays too much attention to air traffic between Nova Scotia and Massachusetts.”

“Loony?” Sara asked. “Did you name your seaplane after a crazy Loony Tunes duck?”

“L, O, O, N, E, Y,” spelled out M. “It’s name is inspired by the loon—The waterfowl that spends its entire life on the water and takes an impossibly long distance to take-off and land.”

“Perfect,” said Margo.

“So that’s it. Back to work,” Chester said as he rose from his chair.

“Wait,” M said, “there’s one more very important thing. It is time to go back to using Human-First in our preferences when naming things. For instance, ‘Massachusetts’ instead of ‘MR-7.’ Here’s the thing: To a computer like NORDIC ‘M-11’ and ‘MR-11’ are completely different. It’s like The difference is as plain as the USB sticking out of your forehead. But to a Human, ‘M-11’ and ‘MR-11’ are so similar we have to pay close attention to even notice and then we have to hurt our brains as we try to remember what they mean.

“But if I were to say to a Human can you notice the difference between when I say, ‘Ohio’ and ‘Connecticut?’ No one would be confused. So we will stop making Humans conform to computers. We will expect our computers to be smart enough to keep up with us.”

M stretched. “OK, Now I’m done.”

Same Day. 42 Swaying Pines Road. 6:00 pm.

Sophia rushed home just as soon as she could break free from the War Room. She expected Henry would be spending time with his presents. He would be completely unprepared for Sophia to be suddenly going to Boston. Why didn’t she foresee that possibility. Why didn’t she brace him for this? How would she break the news? She was on the cross path when Guy caught up with her. He quietly called her name and they stopped to talk.

“I guess I know why you’re hurrying honey. Have you decided what you’ll tell him?”

She shook her head. “Do you know how he’s been spending his day?”

“Yes. He and Cristine have been well into the Create Your Own Video Game Kit. He’s been texting me questions all day. I think he thinks I know more than I actually do. Later Cristine had to go home and I think he went to his books; may have taken a nap.”

“I’m worried for him. How can my moving to Boston not seem like a betrayal?”

Sophia found Henry playing in front of the boulders that defined the end of the parking space for Guy’s home. She went straight to him. Guy went inside, choosing to let Sophia have her quiet time with Henry.

“Hi Soph.”

“Hi Henry. I hear that you and Cristine got into the video game kit.”

“You got that right. She’s got a pretty solid idea, but I’ve got a better one, so, you know how that goes down, it’s my kit.”

Sophia sat on the nearest boulder. Perched on the boulder next to her was Henry's lobster trap. "What do you think of your lobster trap?"

Henry was kneeling in front of it holding his model lobster boat and his rubber lobster.

"Solid A. We tried putting it on the porch, but then the front door wouldn't open far enough to go in and out, so then we just moved it to this boulder."

"I'd say it looks perfect sitting on that boulder. Just like it would if it were sitting at the edge of Damariscotta Harbor with all the lobster boats in the background."

"Well," Henry said, "from what I read, Most days you wouldn't be able to see the boats due to the fog coming in from the Gulf of Maine."

"I can assume you have been really getting into the book trunks."

Henry held up the reddish-brown rubber lobster, "And this is my man, Legs."

Sophia said, "Hello Legs. Leggs is a male?"

"Yup. Why do you ask?"

"Oh. I just thought, with a name like Leggs."

"Why would Leggs be a girls name?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"You know, they pronounce it lobstah in Maine."

"In Boston too."

Henry grew more animated. "Shall I tell you how a lobster trap works?"

"Please do."

"Well first, Legs comes strolling along between thirteen and one-hundred and sixty-four feet deep when he smells some yummy herring.

Herring is a commonly used kind of bait. Leggs follows the smell to this big old round door and he says, ‘Oh good. Kitchen is open.’ Kitchen is the name of the chamber where they put the bait in the lobster trap. They are also called lobster pots. He walks in. If he wonders why the hallway slopes up and gets narrow, he probably just thinks the kitchen must be on the second floor. He gets dinner and turns to leave, but guess what?”

“What.”

“He finds out that he somehow wound up on the first floor. He’s in the room called the Parlor right here. Leggs can’t get out because he’s trapped. But you know, Legs is a smart lobster and he would probably figure his way out of the trap. In fact, some sources say most lobsters escape the traps before they’re pulled.”

“Pulled?” Sophia asked.

“Once every two days the lobstermen take their boats out and check all their pots,” and he held his lobster boat in the air. “They have a line that connects each row of underwater pots together and then goes to the surface where there is a lobster pot buoy. They find their buoys and connect the line to the winch,” and he pointed that out to Sophia, “and they winch up the pots one after the other, open the tops, and take out their catch. Then they load the pots with new bait and set them out again.”

“Sounds like hard work.”

“Yup, it is. And it’s harder if you’re in the fog in the Gulf of Maine.”

“True, I understand. Boston harbor also gets pretty good fog sometimes. I remember it rolling in and covering where I used to live. As a matter of fact, I think you would like Boston, if you ever got a chance to see it.”

Henry asked, “Was the fog in Boston ever so thick that you couldn’t see where you were going?”

“No, but the streets where I lived were very narrow, so the buildings were our channel markers. We didn’t need lighthouses. We had just plain houses.”

Henry Landed his boat on the rock next to the lobster pot.

Sophia waited to make sure he was done. Then she spread out her skirt and sat on the ground, leaning against the boulder next to him.

“Henry, later this night I have to go to Boston for a bit.”

Henry kept aimlessly fingering Leggs in his lap. Sophia could tell he was considering his words. He got right to the point: “I don’t have a dad or a mom. And now you’re leaving too.”

Sophia placed her right hand on Henry’s lap and cradled Legs. “You never told me about your dad.”

“There ain’t nothing to tell. One night he was there. The next morning he wasn’t. My mom never talked about it. When school ended that year we just started moving around.”

“Well, I’m not leaving you, just going to Boston for awhile, and Guy will be here.” But Sophia already knew that was not enough. She made a decision that was not hard because it had been percolating in her mind for weeks. “Henry, here’s an idea. When I figure out where I’m going to live in Boston I could send for you. You could come and live with me. What do you think?”

Henry sprang into her arms.

CHAPTER FORTY

Harbor View

Next Day. Boston Harbor. 7:28 am Boston time.

Looney taxied up toward the floating dock and cut its pusher-prop engine just as it coasted to the dock's continuous fender. The water taxi captain grabbed the bow line offered by Looney's pilot, hooked it on a dock cleat and leaned against it as she let it slip and slow the plane to a graceful stop. Then Looney's pilot hopped out, took that bow line from her as he handed her the stern line. In short order Looney was secure.

Margo, Sara, and Sophia stepped out of the plane and onto the dock. "Oh my God," Sophia said. "I can't help feeling like I just came home. I am struck by how different the light is."

Looney's pilot said, "Yes. The light in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia comes through the atmosphere at such a sharp angle it gives the light a steely blue clarity. And down here then, of course, the twilights are so much shorter."

The water taxi captain heard them. "You should visit Jacksonville," she said.

"Or Cuba," Looney's pilot said.

"Where are you headed?" The water taxi captain asked.

Sophia unfolded the slip of paper M had given her. "Head of the Harbor Marina. We've got one of their Bed and Breakfast boats reserved."

The water taxi silently sliced smoothly through the choppy water of Boston's Inner Harbor, its electric motor a barely discernable hum, passing Logan Airport and ignoring the many, many sailboats that actually had the right-of-way. They passed the Coast Guard's Boston base and the actual *Old Ironsides* frigate from the early 1800's.

As they pulled in toward the Marina's water taxi reserved spot an elegant ketch was to their starboard. Easily over fifty-feet long, with a blue hull, teak deck and polished bronze fittings.

"Would you look at that," Margo purred. She read the yacht's name, which was written in gold script on a mahogany sculptured board attached to the sloping stern, "*Rose*." Sara just wrapped her arm around Margo's waist as they gazed at the beautiful yacht in admiration.

From the taxi slip it was a long walk up a ramp to the Dockmasters Office which stood atop a granite block sea wall. Each of them was wearing a backpack, shoulder bag, and towing a large suitcase.

They checked-in. Then a teenaged dockhand led them down a different very steep ramp that had raised wood strips. They had to brace a foot against each strip or they might certainly have slid all the way down to the floating dock at the bottom.

"Moon Low," the dockhand said by way of explanation. "Eleven foot tide today. My name's Mike, if you have any questions".

"How long have you worked here?" From Sophia.

"This is my first summer working. I live with my dad on E Dock. Very convenient."

They walked first by a series of slips holding open runabouts of every type. On a few of them owners and families were setting things straight, preparing to go fishing or for an afternoon ride to the islands. Then they took a right onto a longer dock that was lined with full sized cabin cruisers. Many of them had people sitting in chairs on one of their decks who turned to see what the Ruckus was as the little wheels of their rolling luggage, sounding a bit like a freight train, bumped along the planks of the wood dock. All the boat residents nodded a friendly greeting. They walked past B, C, and D Docks. The dock they were on ended in a tee. A right took them onto E Dock and they continued, again passing numerous people out on their decks.

As they walked Sophia asked Mike, "How can this Marina have so many boats? Do all these people have jobs?"

“As far as I know they do. They’re all plumbers, carpenters, electricians and such. My dad is a diver.”

The entire walk must have taken almost fifteen minutes Sophia thought, but it was hardly boring. Then Mike announced, “Here you are.”

The “boat” that M had reserved for them turned out to be the very same elegant ketch they had gone by when entering the Marina. Margo and Sara stepped easily aboard, and Sophia was glad she had spent enough time with Margo’s Comin Home to be able to do the same without losing her balance and toppling backwards onto the dock.

A spiral mahogany staircase led from the cockpit down to below decks. Sara was the first to reach the bottom. “You have got to be kidding me!” She exclaimed. Margo and Sophia poked their heads into the companionway. There was a hot tub set in a marble surround.

Then Margo and Sara found the large Master Stateroom with its queen sized bed, and Sophia the Guest Stateroom.

Sara sat down at the Nav Station table. “I’m going to set up our link to The War Room, then work out a link to Newfoundland News.”

Margo took out her phone, “I’m going to try and get our meeting with Carl Roberts.” She sent a text: How about tubers and fries at the Towns End at 10 am tomorrow?

Sophia went back to the cockpit, “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to walk across the bridge to the North End. Walk by the place where I grew up. See if it’s still there.”

Sara said, “I’m coming.” She grabbed Margo’s arm, “you are too.”

On the middle of the Charlestown Bridge Margo felt her phone vibrate. She paused under the shade of a tree. “I should check this.” She read a text, “Carl Roberts says, ‘I’ll be there.’”

Sophia looked up into the branches of the tree. She identified it as a Beech. “Remind me what the ‘Tubers and Fries at The Town’s End’ means.”

“205 Townsend Street. I’ll look it up later on an Iceberg server.”

At the end of the bridge over the Charles River they crossed Causeway Street to the base of the original hill. From there Sophia led them onto a narrow road lined by old brick three and four story residential buildings. The North End, like the marina's location in Charlestown, was one of the many neighborhoods of Boston. This one was basically one big drumlin left by the most recent glacier. It was a maze of extremely narrow streets, some with room for only one narrow sidewalk — a couple not even that wide. Some of the preserved historic areas had the original cobblestone paving.

The facades of the buildings were hard against the edge of the brick sidewalks. The entry doors were set-back so the door could open without blocking the walk. A few buildings had metal benches in front of them. On some of them elderly folk sat. At these locations Margo and Sara would fall behind Sophia into single file.

“Buona giornata,” Sophia said to the couple sitting on a bench. “Chow,” came the reply.

Sara tapped Sophia on the shoulder. “How did you know they spoke Italian?”

“They’re an elderly couple sitting in front of an old building in the North End. They speak Italian.”

They came to an intersection with another impossibly narrow street and took a left. Sophia stopped in front of a four-story building. It was only wide enough to have an entry door on the left and a window on the right. The upper floors had two windows per floor. Each window had a black metal window flower box and each flower box had flowers. “Here we are. This was my home growing up.” She studied the building from ground to the gutter at its eave.

“Nice house,” said Sara.

“Oh, we didn’t own the building. She pointed to the windows in the mansard roof. “We rented the top floor. The whole thing looks exactly the same.”

Margo asked, “Does seeing it make you happy?”

“I don’t know. I think it makes me feel everything.”

“I understand,” from Margo.

“My bedroom was in the back. I could see the harbor. That always made me feel happy.”

Sara was looking down the street toward its end at an apparently much larger street. “You can come back another time and count bricks. Now show me more. Take me to the place called ‘Mike’s Pastry.’”

Same Day. Rose cockpit. 7:05 pm.

The sun was still shining brightly on the harbor and dock. The evening promised to be warm and slightly humid. They had done some shopping at the Boston Garden Gift Shop and each wore shorts with sleeveless tops. Sophia’s was black with the Boston Bruins yellow logo. It matched the tee shirt she had bought for Henry. Sara’s was green with the Boston Celtics logo. Margo’s had red, white, and blue diagonal stripes. They sipped wine around the cockpit’s center table.

Sophia set down her empty glass. “I can’t believe I’m back home after all this time. Why is it I don’t feel relaxed.”

Margo refilled her plastic glass. “Could it be because in a few days North America will either go through a quiet transition, transparent to all but the knowledgeable few, into a gleaming haven of freedom, or break down into a hellish pit of roving starving, desperate gangs?”

Sara leaned back on her cushion and crossed her arms behind her head. “Is there anything in between?”

“I’ll let you know. So, Sophia, this is the famous Boston Harbor.”

“Technically, this is the mouth of the famous Charles River. The Harbor starts over there by the stern of *Old Ironsides*.” Just then a small sleek sailboat with one person aboard came into view. “Look at this J-24 coming along from the harbor. I used to watch them from the playing field. They rent them nearby. Novices come sailing in here with the harbor’s southwest breeze filling their sail. Now watch what happens.” The little

sailboat suddenly slowed as it came into the river's outlet between the North End and the marina in Charlestown, then stopped entirely, becalmed.

Sophia went on, "It's in the lee of the North End. Now we can watch him work his rudder as he frantically tries to tack out."

When the sun had gone into hiding behind the Charlestown bridge Sophia said, "OK., it's time for me to play some Virtual Laser Tag with Guy, Henry and Cristine."

Sara emptied the last wine bottle into her glass. "Sophia thinks she's a kid again."

"Oh," said Margo. "Like Guy."

"Exactly," said Sophia as she headed down the companionway steps.

She put on her headset and logged in as "Phony Bologna." She saw that they were already well underway in the Lumberyard Map. Team Red, which was guy, was leading Team Blue, Henry and Cristine.

Eric Stealth Gummy Bear was chasing Halo and Blazing Rock into an old, rusty corrugated metal pipe. Laser flashes lit up the interior of the pipe. Some shots escaped through the pipes many holes. A thumping soundtrack played in the background.

"Gummy bear, permission to join your sad team of one."

"You always know how to pick a winner. Jump in and find the end of this crazy pipe and zap them when they get out."

Sophia, as Phony Bologna jumped onto the crown of the pipe. But that's when she saw that the pipe zigzagged as far as she could see. She ran along on her spring sneakers but suddenly a wall of ice sprang up in front of her. She bounced off and found herself back in the Regen Chamber. "Fudge." She watched team Red's score fall from 20,800 points to 12.

She lost all track of time until the game ended with Blue Team, Cristine and Henry, winning. As they logged off Sophia said, "Henry, I'll give you ten minutes, then I'm going to call you before bed."

“Got it, Soph.,” came the reply.

Ten minutes later Sophia was listening to Henry update her on his progress creating his video game with Cristine and Guy. “The characters are lobsters. Cristine and I am already testing the pre-beta version. Sebastian has some great files he’s giving us to use for background images and he will let us tap into a bit of HAIR-2 to generate advanced player graphics and supercharge the game engine. Imagine, when you play with us we’ll be playing on a supercomputer.”

“So what do the lobster characters do?”

“Lordy-Lordy Soph. What do you think? They try to outsmart lobster traps.”

“Oh, of course. But then aren’t all the graphics under water?”

“Oh yeah, that might get boring, but remember that lobsters can survive for quite awhile on land. We have many settings in mind. The goal, in any case, is the same. Avoid getting trapped and gain points”

“Sounds groovy.”

“We will always keep developing it. The point will be that, no matter how much you learn about the game, you just find out there is even more to learn.”

“Just like real life. What will you name the game?”

“LobstahTrap. One word, pronounced just the way a Maritime fishermin would say it.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The Cauldron

Next Day. 25 Townsend. 10:06 am.

Margo, Sara, and Sophia took a self-driving taxi to meet Carl. When it got to 25, rather than 205, Townsend Street it stopped and opened the doors. Margo opened the phone app and tried to explain that it was supposed to take them to 205. They felt relieved when the doors slammed shut and the Bot started off. But it just went around the block twice, and then stopped at exactly the same place. The doors sprang open, knocking a blind guy onto his ass on the concrete sidewalk.

Margo got out. “C’mon girls, let’s just walk the rest of the way. I’ll see if he’s alright.”

The man said he was fine and that it happened all the time. He was used to it. Problem was he couldn’t hear the silent little buggers coming.

Well before they got to 205 Sara stopped, looking to her right, “Holy crap. Do you think that’s it?” A massive and imposing old building loomed ahead. As they approached they found Carl, the tall handsome poet, standing by a front gate smiling broadly.

“I recognize y’all,” he said. “Now, I seem to remember that last time I was denied my hugs and cheek kisses.”

“Well, we’ll just have to fix that,” Sophia said and they all warmly performed the ritual.

Margo apologized for being late. “No worries. I’m going to guess y’all came by Bot-Taxi.”

“Almost all the way,” Sophia said. “With a street this wide you wonder how it could ever get confused.”

Carl nodded and explained the history. The street didn’t used to be that wide. The changes were made to allow the HUGE self-driving SUVs unfettered passage. The City administration, incredibly there were Humans

on the boards back when the decision was made, ordered the streets widened to accommodate the self-drivers. Like most streets in Boston at the time, the travel lanes were around ten-feet wide, and if there was a shoulder before the sidewalk curb it was maybe only half a foot wide. But that caused problems for the huge self-drivers. The roads had to be widened. The self-drivers spec sheet called for fourteen-foot wide travel lanes with four-foot shoulders. Any less their sensors might get triggered and they would stop.

“I’m old enough to remember my dad squeezing around parked vehicles so close I wondered if the only reason we didn’t rip-off the door handles was because the vehicles were different models. And still, he didn’t even slow down, just cursin’ and puffin’ on his cigar all the way.”

He swept his arm in an arc highlighting the view from the hillside location. “My dad told me about how in Boston the road widening proposals were resisted at first because so many people cared about the historic buildings and neighborhoods. But, as NORDIC began controlling more and more of the decision makers, and the primary reason was always stated as ‘better efficiency,’ the Humans eventually were over whelmed. So what usually happened was that all the buildings on one side of a street would be torn down so the road could be widened. That left the side of the new road facing the backs of the buildings that were left. It looks like hell, as you can see, but, you know, it was more efficient.”

He told of how all that demolition resulted in a huge decrease in the housing stock. NORDIC bots explained at the public hearings how it was going to be OK, because of all the Special Environmental Districts it was going to construct.

Sophia shook her head, “Tell me about it. I lived in a SED after growing up in the North End.”

Carl looked sympathetically at her. “The only reason your North End was spared was because NORDIC had already planned on leveling that neighborhood. It needed the fill to raise the Boston Hurricane Barrier. So it would not be efficient to widen the roads and then level the neighborhood.”

Margo said, “And here I was always thinking it was because NORDIC liked Italian-Americans.”

Carl turned his attention to a large tree as he said, “no more than it likes African-Americans. Follow me. There’s a place up here where we can talk.”

The large maple tree had ornate heavy metal benches set at its trunk. “Sit. There’s something I need to tell you before we go on.” He saw Sara scanning the area with her phone. “I think you’ll find it secure.”

“That it is,” she sat.

But Carl did not sit. He stood before them, pacing just a bit. He began by explaining that this building was where he helped local poets develop their craft. He took a breath as if that sentence had exhausted him, which already made no sense.

“That must be very fulfilling,” Sophia prompted.

“Yeah, it could be. But I’ll get back to that. First a little about this building. Actually, why don’t I start with this tree.”

He told of how the maple tree was transported there, already a somewhat mature tree, back in 2048 to commemorate the last high school class to graduate from the building they were next to. The building had a long and honorable history up to that point. It started as Roxbury Memorial High School. Around 1950 Boston Technical High School took it over. Until the 1970’s Boston Tech was an all-boys school. In 1987 Boston Tech moved away. The building then became Boston Latin Academy.

He crossed his arms and continued to describe what he called the defining moment. In 2029 like so many other places, the Boston School Committee allowed the pre-cursor of NORDIC to do its financial planning. At first, Humans would review all the A.I. suggestions for saving money. Naturally, more and more of those cost-saving suggestions involved firing expensive Human teachers and replacing them with bots. Then the inevitable happened. The City of Boston replaced the Humans on the School Committee as well as its own financial planners with NORDIC bots. When NORDIC decreed that all schooling beyond grade 8 was unnecessary and a waste of time and money there were not enough Humans remaining in positions of power to object.

Margo looked down, shaking her head. “I know, I lived through it.”

Carl kept pacing. The Humans who still cared about such things, including many of the Boston Tech and Latin academy grads, paid to have a tree transplanted and benches placed to create the closest thing to a commemorative park they could afford.

Sara stood and backed away so she could see the tree better. Then she looked from the tree to the building. She could see that the basement and ground floor levels were grey stone. Then there were three floors of brick with a flat roof. All floors had tall multi-paned windows. The basement and ground floor windows had bars over them. “Does the building have an escape route?”

Carl looked puzzled. “Just the doors, one on each side of the ground level and one out of the basement in the back. Otherwise, if there were a fire or something, we would rely on our subscription fire service. I’m told they’re very good, as long as you never call them. You could try jumping out a window, but you would just land on pavement. Not a good option.”

Sara pointed to the roof. “OK, What you need to do is install a zip line from the roof to this tree. I can help you with that.”

Carl fixed her with a gaze. “Let’s have a conversation about that. I’m not sure I can keep my poets and writers from using a zip line for entertainment once they see it.”

Sara held his gaze, then broke into a grin. “Tell them it is a new type of lightning rod to protect the commemorative tree, which of course, is bullcrap, but we can create a science curriculum later. I’ll help you with the install. We’ll keep the pulleys in a big planter urn on the roof. In an emergency at least it would be available.”

“OK, but if they start using it this one’s on you.”

Then he paced in a circle wringing his hands.

“Now what I’m about to tell you is very difficult. It is hard for me to get the words out, even though I practiced all night. So here goes.” He took a breath, then looked them each, one by one in the eye. He told them he had the use of the building via a special arrangement with NORDIC. Basically, he worked for NORDIC. He held up his palms. “But hear me out OK,?”

Sophia exchanged glances with the others, then guardedly, “Go on.”

The building had been empty for a few years. Then he learned NORDIC was going to turn it into an opium den. So he took a wild gamble and applied for a permit to use it as a space for aspiring poets and writers to practice their skills. He would run workshops and invite guests. To his surprise, the local arts council, which was just one NORDIC bot, permitted it. But there was one proviso: We would be forwarded writings and poems. These were the ones Humans had asked their A.I. to write with dismal results. So to this date, whenever NORDIC deemed the creative task too difficult, it forwarded the challenge to him. He would assign it to someone in his team. NORDIC would pass it on as its own work and invariably the Humans were pleased. He and his team, however, were pledged to secrecy. He took a breath and looked down. “There, I said it. It tears my heart out. I guess I’m still glad I agreed to it, but it did ruin my life.”

Everyone was silent. Then from Margo, “I guess that doesn’t sound all that terrible.”

“Oh yes it is. The creative process is the essence of being human. It is what separates us from computers. By doing what I am doing I am helping to crush that. But it’s much worse. All my poets and writers know what we have given-up in order to pursue our love. I am responsible for giving each of them the option to sell their soul to the devil in exchange for being able to pursue their craft. That’s why I call this building ‘The Cauldron.’ For a poet, this is my terrible burden. But I tell you this because it explains why I want to work for Iceberg resistance. I want the opportunity to free my writers and poets. Maybe even, that will cleanse my soul just a bit, whatever is left of it.”

Margo said, “Then let’s get on with the cleansing. Please show us the Cauldron.”

Carl seemed re-energized. “Follow me. We’ll start at the basement level,” and he led them around to the back of the building.

There they found a set of double doors. Carl punched some buttons on a key pad and they could hear the heavy sound of a latch release. “All the door locks are electronic. I’ll give you the codes later.” He ushered them in,

and shut the door behind them. The heavy fire proof door automatically re-latched. They were in a large classroom. It had a polished stone-chip concrete floor, light green glazed block walls, and a high ceiling with several hanging light fixtures. There were old fashioned blackboards along two of the walls. Six rows of tables were lined up. Most had computer workstations with a person at work.

“Hello poets and writers. I’d like you to meet our newest tenants: Margo, Sara, and Sophia.”

To the guests he explained that these were Basement Level Poets and writers, but these Level zero poets and writers were the highest level in ability. He pointed out how they all had paper pads and notebooks in addition to their computers. That was why the door to the ground floor above was locked. He told the poets not to worry. The new guests were cool with all they do there.

Carl led them through the classroom exit door. In the corridor before the stairway up he said, “The door to our right is to the boiler and utility room. As you can see, it has a keypad lock. We don’t have much need to go in there as the building is entirely connected to the Boston infrastructure.”

He didn’t want to proceed up the stairs without them knowing how the basement level was secret. NORDIC didn’t know he had anything going on down there. Poets and writers on Level 0, the basement, were beyond NORDIC assignments. He conducted workshops with them and gave them assignments of his own making. Otherwise, they were free to work on anything they liked.

The ground floor and floors above were for poets and writers in training. Of course, it went without saying, but he said it anyway, that They could not use paper. Primarily they worked on assignments he gave them, which might include NORDIC tasks. Floors above the ground floor, being floors one and two had those who worked on mostly the more challenging NORDIC assignments, but they still got plenty of time for their own endeavors.

Sara was looking at the ceiling, visualizing, “That still leaves two more floors.”

“Floors three and four, which are really the fourth and fifth are vacant. I am handing them over to Iceberg.”

At the top of the stairway he let them onto the ground floor. The door automatically latched behind them. They went along a corridor lined with classrooms, all labelled with a number starting with “G.”

“The corridors are quite long. You find your way by reading the room numbers. You would think you can’t get lost, but let me tell you, you can.”

After a couple of turns they came to a door on their right which was opposite double doors to the outside.

“My office.” He indicated the office door labelled “Headmaster.” He opened it and invited them in.

They each took one of the several wood armchairs, including Carl who dismissed the option of sitting behind his desk.

“Further down the corridor you would find our Auditorium. We use it for people to practice their presentation skills. After hours we’ve got a bunch of us who run various kinds of performances. Some of the locals come by, but I have to keep it on the downlow.”

Carl pointed to his right. Next to the auditorium was the Cafeteria. It was supplied and run by NORDIC. It was staffed by two NORDIC bots. However, on his insistence, the bots were not allowed to leave the cafeteria. “We have a local human who we employ to make deliveries to the classrooms.”

Margo said, “Still, aren’t you nervous as hell having NORDIC bots right here in your building?”

“For sure. At first. But soon I realized the bots power on in mid-morning, serve lunch, clean-up, and then power down. Now, it is time for you to tell me how I can help the resistance.”

Margo told him he had already helped them. She told him that some big things had been put into motion, which they would describe in detail later. All along a missing essential link had been the need for a Boston

Iceberg headquarters, similar to what they had in Halifax. The top floors of The Cauldron couldn't be more perfect.

“Well,” Sophia said, “it could be a little more perfect if NORDIC weren't inside the building.”

Sara thought they could treat that as a minor detail. She would discuss it with Guy.

Same Day. Rose dinette. 4:32 pm.

Margo, Sara, and Sophia sat at the boat's dinette table facing Sara's laptop. They were logged into the Strongbox War Room.

M said, “I understand you met with Carl. What do you think?”

Margo gave her opinion. “It looks excellent. Carl has control, well mostly, of the whole building, which is huge. We can have the entire top floor, and the next one when we need it.”

Sara added, “Best of all, it already has a name: *The Cauldron*.”

M furrowed his brow, “What does ‘mostly control’ mean?”

Margo answered that he got control of the building by making a deal with NORDIC to write prose and poetry for it in secret. The cafeteria had two NORDIC bots, but he told them they never leave it. They powered on for a limited time each day.

M didn't like it.

Sebastian jumped in, “I do.”

M turned sharply, “Oh Really?” “Yes. Because of those bots and his arrangement with NORDIC that includes exchanging files we can take advantage of that. It should give us a portal directly into NORDIC.”

M was impressed. “I see. Yes, of course. That is a huge advantage.”

Guy spoke up, “I didn't want to waste any time, so on the assumption it would work out, I have already loaded The Beast with the

equipment you will need for a fully operational base. I'll leave Halifax for Boston first thing tomorrow."

Sara added two things: He should bring a generator. The building was on the Boston grid. They should have emergency back-up, of course for power outages; but more important, if they ever felt NORDIC was considering monkeying with their electricity. "And bring a zip line."

They could see some quizzical faces in the War Room, but no one raised a question.

That evening, with the warm humid harbor breeze gently filling her stateroom, Sophia called Guy. "Guy, I'm glad you'll be coming down. I need you. And bring Henry."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Times Up

Next Day. Nova Scotia Strongbox. War Room. 8:12 a.m.

Sebastian knocked gently on the jamb of M's open office door. M waved him in. Sebastian's news was that he had now determined NORDIC's drawing itself into an isolated orb had been continuing since they first discovered it. Now there was only one Human representative from each North American country that it accepted communications from. He handed M a print-out of a decree NORDIC had issued just two weeks earlier. It had done an efficiency study and determined that there was no longer any need for Humans to communicate with it. It would keep one Human per country for its own use. He had confirmed that the mystery woman Douglas had been meeting with was that person for the country of Quebec. He and Chester were still trying to identify the Human contacts for the other countries. They would keep at it.

Same Day. Boston. The Cauldron roof. 10:20 am.

Sophia was standing next to Sara at the corner of the roof closest to the maple tree down below. They were wearing large floppy straw hats that concealed their faces and would make reading lips or targeting vocal vibrations impossible. Sara had a diver's knife strapped to her leg. Sophia was holding a large drill that had an eighteen-inch long auger bit attached. Using the knife Sara cut a large square in the roofing. She peeled it back, cut another, slightly smaller square in the next layer and peeled that back. Then she bent to her knees and examined the exposed wood roof planking.

Margo and Carl were standing by the roof stairwell door wearing similar hats—they had brought one for him.

Sara called out, "Wood looks good from above." Then she took the drill from Sophia, held it by its side handles, and began drilling a one-inch hole in the roof, pausing as Sophia fingered the wood shavings, rolling them in her fingers checking for moisture or rot.

Carl called back, “A pretty woman drilled a hole in my roof. I hope you know that is going to be the name of a poem.”

Sara seemed satisfied. She set the drill aside and began gluing wood bungs into the holes while Margo and Carl talked about things poetry.

Carl looked at his watch. He called to Sara to leave patching the membrane for the afternoon. Although a storm was on the way, it was not expected to hit until the next day. He wanted to show them the floor that was to be theirs before he had to get back to his students.

The three woman gathered their tools and the gear bags they had brought from the *Rose*. Carl offered to carry the big drill. When everything was gathered up he led them down the roof stairs one flight and shut the plain steel door behind them.

“The door has no label going back to the high school days. Better if the students didn’t know what it led to.” He made a grand gesture, “Welcome to the fifth floor. Note that the rooms are all numbered in the four hundreds because the real first floor is called ground.”

Directly opposite them was Room 440. To their right was the wide stairway leading to the lower floors. Margo opened the door to Room 440 and looked around. She set down her gear bag and pronounced it perfect for their starting point. They got busy setting up the gear, which was really just the minimum needed to establish and test the connection to the Strongbox. Guy would bring down the rest in the Beast.

Margo felt her Quad-Hack vibrate. It was a text from Sebastian. “We need to log into the War Room as soon as we can.”

Ten minutes later Sara had just finished logging into the Strongbox War Room when Carl entered awkwardly carrying a large screen display. Behind him was a woman. “I’m amazed I got this thing into the elevator.” He set it on the table and Sara quickly went about connecting it.

“Also, meet Ruby. She is the one human who is allowed to work in the cafeteria.”

A middle-aged woman wearing a white full length apron pushed in a rolling cart.

“You got that right,” Ruby said. “Don’t you think anybody else could do it either.”

Ruby had brought sandwiches and drinks for the new tenants and Carl.

Carl said, “ Ruby, you’re the best.”

“I know that,” she said. “Just leave the cart. I’ll pick it up later. Nice to meet you girls, but I’ve got some hungry poets to get back to.”

Carl told them he had some time before he needed to get back so he figured he would eat his lunch with them. They pulled metal chairs up to the table as M appeared on the screen.

“Hi Carl. No time for further introductions. The fine Swiss watch I had been mentally using for our exquisite war timing just burst open and flung its springs into my face. Here’s the news: Our time is up.”

He explained that CoSaF had found itself in a jamb and, long story skipped, had to start its offensive just over an hour ago. They were moving everything up. Les Chats would begin their surge the next night. He flung his arms up in despair.

Beth explained that early signs were that, although NORDIC had been expecting the CoSaF attack for some time, its early start caught it off guard. It seemed to be over-reacting, indicating it did not have a plan in place. That could be good. That was why they were moving up the Les Chats attack. Then they wanted to follow-up with Knife To The Ribs as soon as possible.

They spent the rest of the day with Chester and Sebastian working on how Knife To The Ribs could be executed. The truth was it was still just a concept. They went through the personnel profiles of Iceberg members looking for anyone with expertise that could aid them. Carl presented a list of prospective Boston members for review.

By six o'clock they had worked-out a rough outline. A focus group would be formed. Ruby stayed late and brought them a quick supper. The Boston group had done all they could for now.

Sara stretched. "I'd better get onto the roof and finish patching up before the storm hits." "I'll help you," said Sophia.

That Evening. Rose cockpit. 10:02 pm.

Sophia emerged from below deck to join Margo and Sara in the cockpit for their night-caps. She looked across the river to the North End. A few boats went quietly by, their hulls reflecting off the softly undulating water surface like a Monet painting. The only sounds were muffled conversations from some of the other boats at the marina and the whooshes from the occasional vehicles passing over the bridge just a hundred meters to their right.

"It's so quiet, it's weird" commented Sophia.

Margo remembered how at Swaying Pines the crickets would be making such a racket that when she first got there from Corner Brook it kept her awake. Sophia clarified that the difference she was noticing was from when she was a child. Back then the city was alive with the sounds of traffic and crowds all night long. There were people coming from bars and the big Boston Garden just across the river. Now as they sat quietly in the *Rose* cockpit, the boat barely moving, the city center was dead. The old office buildings abandoned. The Boston Garden empty since all games were now virtual. The only sounds were the sirens of Ambulances.

Sara had noticed that sometimes self-driving SUVs became confused when an ambulance came screaming up behind them. They got confused and just stopped in the middle of the bridge. She had already seen self-drivers rear ended by ambulances twice.

Margo looked at Sophia. "Did I hear you talking to Henry down below?"

"Oh, I just gave Henry a night-night call on the Beast. All he wanted to talk about was the video game he's been working on with Guy and Cristine. He's named it LobstahTrap."

Margo said, “Did I detect it spelled with the Maritime correct ah ending?”

Sophia confirmed the spelling. “I told him about this guy we met here, named Carl, who has a huge old building full of poets and writers. I took the liberty of telling Henry that Carl has the perfect space where he could set-up his equipment and work on his game development.”

Sara offered, “As far as I know, Carl doesn’t know diddly about video game development.”

Sophia explained that the game kit provided all the programs needed to build a serviceable game. She added that Guy knew a lot more about game development than she realized. He would be the resident expert helping Henry.

From Margo: “Resident expert? Where is he going to live?”

“Guy and Henry will live in the Beast. M said he talked to the Marina owner. He and Henry can live on it here next to the bridge.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Rolling Chairs

Next Day. The Cauldron. 10:16 am.

Under a threatening sky Carl opened the double gate that allowed access to the flattest part of the old parking lot. Sophia, Margo, and Sara had arrived earlier in their leased self-driver. They left early to allow time for the anticipated walk—they didn't want to miss Guy's arrival. This time, the walk was from a block away on a different street, but they told themselves this must be what city life means now.

Guy parked the Beast and He and Henry exited the side door. Sophia was the first to greet them, giving Henry a huge off-the-ground hug, and Guy a long, warm one. She had to break it off when she felt her eyes watering. As she turned back to rejoin the others she was wiping the corner of her eye.

A light rain started. Guy said, "Forecast says this is going to get much worse, so I'm going to leave most of our new headquarters stuff in the Beast's basement. I'll just bring in a few peripherals that turn Sara's plain-Jane, or sorry, plain-Jimmy, laptop into a super-enabled Hair server. Henry you can bring in your laptop and game stuff. I understand Carl here has a place for you to use it in mind."

"Henry. How do you do. My name's Carl. I kind of run this place."

Henry extended his hand, "How do you do. So very pleased to meet you."

Carl told everyone that he would start by showing Henry the desk he had cleared for him on the basement floor.

When there, Guy, Sophia, Margo, and Sara surveyed the room from the back corner of the basement while Carl showed Henry his space. After Henry appeared set Guy said, "Let's see Room 440."

Carl pointed to their left. “That plain metal door next to you is the elevator. Hit the Call button.”

When the elevator door opened Sara, Margo and Guy went in. Sara poked her head out the open door, “Hey Carl, how do you turn the lights on in this thing?”

“You don’t. They’re busted, and no one makes the replacements anymore.”

“Spooky,” said Sara.

Carl told Henry he should see room 440 as well. “We’ll take the stairs. I need the exercise, plus it would be good for you to get a feel for this place I call the Cauldron.”

In Room 440 Sara logged into the Strongbox War Room. Carl observed, “I see y’all have a comfy chair deficiency. Henry, each classroom on this floor has a teachers chair behind the front desk. Most are on rollers. Would you please go fetch six.”

“You got it boss,” Henry said as he burst from the room. Carl watched him through the door’s little vertical window. Rather than start by looking in the next room, Henry ran down the corridor and disappeared around the far bend. Carl bemusedly shook his head.

Henry emerged from Room 401 riding a rolling armchair. He found the level adjustment and lowered the seat all the way so his red sneakers had a good grip on the smooth floor. Then he accelerated down the corridor.

But at the first bend he panicked when he saw that the door to the stairwell ahead had been propped open with a door stop. He realized he wasn’t going to be able to make the turn.

Carl in Room 440 heard a remote crash; but assumed it was just Henry banging chairs around. He ignored it.

Henry had jumped off that first chair at the last minute. He went back and found another. As he accelerated this time he found he could also spin in the chair. As he approached the open stairwell door he spun so his feet could push off against the open door jamb and thus ricochet himself

down the next corridor. When he got to Room 440, rather than bring the chair into the room he jumped out and sprinted back to get another.

It was ten minutes later that Carl realized he hadn't seen anything of Henry. He excused himself from what Guy was explaining and opened the classroom door. Outside there were fifteen rolling armchairs.

Carl called out, "Henry? We're in a call with the Strongbox if you want to be a part of it."

Henry was there in a flash.

M had just finished saying something. "Oh, hi there Henry. Are you helping?" "Big time."

By the time the meeting ended the rain was falling in sheets. Guy said he would get more done from inside the Beast.

Margo added, "And I think Sophia, Sara and I might as well go back to *Rose*. Sara, you should leave your laptop here since it's all set-up. We can share mine, as long as you don't touch anything." "You mean, on the laptop?"

Carl said, "Intervention. Everyone into the elevator. I predict we can all just make it in."

When they were all in, Carl stuck out his foot and held the door open. "I want to show everybody how to do these buttons in pitch blackness. All you need to do is read the Braille symbols on the buttons."

Sophia said, "See what happens when you set up your headquarters in a learning institution?"

Carl went on. "The ground floor button has this embossed star on it" Henry felt the star. "Right above the Ground Floor button is a row of more buttons. Henry, use your finger tip to feel the next button. How many dots do you feel?"

“One,” came his reply.

“That’s floor one. Floor two is two dots: one dot on top of another.” Henry felt the button and smiled.

“Third floor is two dots; but instead of one over the other, it’s one beside the other.” Henry felt that button.

“And now the fourth floor is three dots that make a little stair.”

Henry felt the dots and smiled again. “Brilliant,” Carl said as he let the door close. They were in pitch blackness. “Henry, take us to the ground floor please,” came Carl’s voice through the darkness. The elevator jerked once and started down.

At the ground floor Guy said, “Henry and I will stay on the Beast, but you know, there’s room for one more.” Sophia smiled.

Margo made for the exit. “Be good. See you tomorrow.”

Carl looked down at Henry, “I’ve got work to do with the poets in the basement. Henry, if you’re not ready to get back to that thing everyone is calling the Beast you can get busy with your stuff there for the rest of the afternoon if you want.”

“He wants,” said Henry.

That Evening. The Beast. 8:42 pm.

Guy, Sophia, and Henry were spread out on the Beast’s couch. Henry yawned broadly. Guy tussled his curly hair. “Big day?”

Henry told him about how he had spent more time testing *LobstahTrap* with Cristine. About how he had enlisted help from Sebastian, who was more than happy to join in the games’ development. In fact, Sebastian had given Henry a portal to HAIR-2 so the game could use the supercomputer to generate ever changing backgrounds and create multiple scenarios. They spent some time imagining several maps—Game levels that players could advance through. They would use it to boost the Player Features module.

But the biggest thing, Henry said through a yawn, was that they had enabled support of Air-Earbud Headsets. “I don’t imagine you’ve heard of them. I only saw a picture of one in an article about the newest game breakthroughs.”

Guy got up, “Wait here for a minute.”

He returned with a strange, black, bristly headset thing.

“Lordy-Lordy,” exclaimed Henry as he reached for it.

“Hold on,” Guy said, “I’m going to give it to you, I’ll order another one. But first let me explain.”

The headset had an adjustable, flexible wire that had two earbuds and a set of soft glasses attached. Each earbud had a soft wire that looped over the ear that held the earbud firmly in place. One earbud had a long stalk with soft buttons. The eyeglasses were wrap-around, so each eye’s entire field of vision was included. Guy held the continuous eyeglasses, “This is called your Visor.”

The Visor was flexible and the flashings where it pressed against the forehead and nose were very soft. When not actively being used it parked in a position at the crown of the forehead.

“You press the largest button on the stalk to turn it on and off. If you are in range of a running game, when you lower your Visor you will be instantly inserted into the game, so be sure you’re ready before you do so.”

He made sure Henry made eye contact with him before he went on. “The Visor is very comfortable, so it’s easy to forget you have it down. No controller is necessary. It follows your eye movements, and is able to read your intentions.”

Henry grabbed for it, but Guy again pulled it away.

“One final thing. These headsets are kind of dangerous. They are meant for adults only, which of course is sort of a joke, but the designers label them that way hoping they don’t get sued. When you have it on, the difference between the real and virtual worlds is easily confused. Make sure you’ve got your head screwed on tight. Now, enough. Time for bed you.”

Sophia rose from the couch. “I have an idea. I haven’t seen your room. Why don’t you get ready for bed and then I’ll come in and read you a story.”

Henry got up and headed around the corner, “Good idea, Soph.”

After he was out of sight Guy collapsed onto the couch. “Big day indeed. Les Chats surge should start in the middle of the night. I wish I could stay up all night and monitor the feeds. Anything could happen. It would be quite possible that the streetlights around here all pop off and the self-drivers suddenly just start driving into things.”

“Sebastian says that HAIR-2 has already started taking over air traffic control at some smaller hubs. So far so good, but I’m worried.”

“With the CoSaF attack already underway it’s no wonder that NORDIC is not paying attention to its periphery. What worries the hell out of me is that we don’t have any control over NORDIC’s nuclear arsenal. I just hope we can get control of the thing before it starts flailing in a way much worse than it did in Mexico.”

“I can’t take it. I’m going to read to Henry.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

LobstahTrap

Next Day. The Cauldron Room 440. 11:36 am.

The entire Boston Iceberg crew stood before the big screen showing the Strongbox War Room. Margo had gotten yet again an urgent text message on her Quad-Hack to log in.

M said, “Since the Les Chats surge from the Northwest Territories started last night all hell has been breaking loose in northern Merica, and I do not mean ‘as it were.’ All transportation has shut down. We’re getting only bits of information, but it appears there may have been many crashes, run-away vehicles, things going over the sides of bridges. Many trains derailed.”

Margo asked about air traffic. Chester said that HAIR-2 appeared to be continuing to gain control, but that Chicago and Atlanta were still controlled by NORDIC.

He said that the portions under HAIR-2 were going through a controlled shut-down. Landings were happening as fast as possible with planes lowest in fuel prioritized. Still, there had been several planes that had to ditch in water bodies. He finished with, “No fatalities reported yet.”

Beth said, “And Les Chats?”

“The Les Chats surge went off smoothly, and as far as we can tell, it is still proceeding according to plan. Communications from that front are spotty, but it does not seem to be due to problems on their end. It seems to be the result of sporadic NORDIC flack curtains.”

M faced the group. “This is on us, guys. Thoughts?”

Chester took a deep breath, “We already know NORDIC was in the process of drawing itself into a ball. My fear is that if it completes that process, it will become totally unreachable. If that happens, I don’t know what we’ll do.”

Beth was pacing. “The only hope I see is to cut it off from all its power supplies as fast as possible. Still, that will take weeks.”

M put his hands on his hips. “But that’s what we’ve got to do. We have to find ways to rapidly disable those power sources and cut-off power to NORDIC.” He flopped into the nearest chair, “ Even if we have to ask for a European or Asian country to initiate missile strikes.”

Guy inserted, “We can’t blow-up the power stations. Many of them are small nuclear plants. Besides, we need those same power stations to power the HAIR-2s as we expand control.”

Sebastian had been working on his computer with his back turned. He pushed his chair back and stood with a dour expression, “It’s much worse than that. Much worse.”

They all focused on him. He began softly, “I’ve just confirmed something we didn’t know before. Something very bad. NORDIC has created an automatic survival response it calls the Eight-Percent Rule. It’s a sperm-release ejaculation that is triggered if it senses its power drop to eight-percent. Like those videos of how a pine tree can spew forth great clouds of pollen—that’s what I’m talking about. Each one of those spores will be the tiny seed of a new regenerative A.I. NORDIC baby. They will be released into the world-wide-web. Even though virus controls would catch millions of them there can be no doubt that hundreds, maybe thousands, would still get through.”

M said, “That means we can’t cut off its power. We can’t kill it. We’re screwed.” Helle was behind him giving him a neck massage.

Henry listened to all of this as he stood next to Guy. He spoke loudly, “No. We’re not screwed! We don’t have to kill it. We can trap it and never let it go, and I don’t mean, ‘as it were.’”

The War Room was silent. Everyone in Room 440 just looked at Henry.

M placed his hands on Helle’s and gently removed them. He stood, “And how do you propose we do that?”

“With a Lobster Trap.”

Guy became energized. “Listen up. I understand what he’s hit upon.” He waited for the looks of disbelief to dissipate, if only just a bit. He then went on, “That might just work. Lobster Trap is a video game Henry designed. I’ve seen it. It’s good, and it might play right into a NORDIC weakness.”

Chester raised his eyebrows, “NORDIC has a weakness? Do tell.”

Carl jumped in, “Yes.” He told them how his team of poets and writers produced the creative poetry and prose that NORDIC could not handle. “If it were human, we would say it was embarrassed, but of course, it is not. Nevertheless, it learned from Humans a very strong competitive response to any challenge. It’s whole raison d’être is that it is the smartest thing in the world. I think it could be sucked into a game the same way Humans are.”

Guy added that the good games were designed to test and determine a player’s ability. Then the game presents challenges that are just at that ability edge. The player is drawn in. As heshe achieves small steps heshe accumulates points. Just when heshe starts feeling good about him or herself the game cheats a bit by giving the opposing weaker player a handicap. All of a sudden the player in the lead finds him or herself losing points.

Henry explained with great enthusiasm how he added a deteriorate feature that meant that whenever you stepped away from the game your situation slowly became worse. You could quickly find yourself losing so much of your hard-earned progress. “I call it the Gotcha Grip.”

Chester offered his opinion. They were talking about a virtual solution anyway, so why not.

Henry asked, “Sebastian, is that 8% Rule independent of the total?”

Sebastian started to see where he was going with his thinking. “Why, I do believe it is.”

“So we could consistently cut down its power as we take over power stations, dropping its total, but as long as we made sure it was receiving at least 8% of the total it would just keep playing the game.”

Sara said, “I suggest a target supply to NORDIC of 13% of the total. Of course, if this were to work, the game would have to last for infinity. .”

Henry said, “But if we could someday get the evil bastard totally sealed inside the Cauldron with no outside connections, we could then just smush it like a bug.”

M had his hands on his hips. “OK,, let’s say my head isn’t spinning. How do you propose to get NORDIC to play this game?”

Guy stroked his chin, “It starts with us figuring out what might be an irresistible bait for the trap. Then we have to somehow show it to NORDIC.”

Beth mused, “What on earth would be a powerful enough bait to entice NORDIC?”

Sebastian said, “Guy, I think she’s standing right next to you.”

They all looked at Sophia.

Beth offered that it could make sense. She went into how NORDIC must have known by then that it was Sophia who took-out its informant Douglas and its Hitmin Mako in the same night. Still, she was worried whether it might be dangerous for Sophia.

M pointed out that they knew NORDIC had learned to be revengeful as one of its core values.

Sophia said, “I don’t care if it’s dangerous or not. NORDIC has already tried to kill me twice. I say to it, ‘Bring it on big boy.’”

Henry’s brow furrowed and he said in a high-pitched voice, “But I don’t want her to be the bait!”

Sophia bent down next to him and reassured him that it would be all right. That it would just be a game. Henry nodded, but still looked very concerned. Sophia kissed his forehead.

It was concluded that Sebastian would help Henry create a Sophia virtual character to be the bait.

Outside the wind shifted and rain splattered noisily onto the big windows. M, from the Strongbox War Room heard the background noise and asked what it was. Margo said that a bit of weather had arrived.

Same Afternoon. Cauldron Headmaster's Office. 5:02 pm.

Carl finished assembling his batch of fresh poems for NORDIC. He included at the top of the list a poem he had just written about a video game called *LobstahTrap*. Its first page was a screenshot of the game's Bait in the trap's kitchen. The herring bait fish had a very human-like woman's face. He finished the transmittal. It would go directly to NORDIC—no middle min. He hit *SEND*.

An hour later Guy was with Henry at his workstation in the basement of the Cauldron. He showed Henry the work Sebastian had done creating the Bait image.

“What do you think of the Bait now?”

“It looks just like Soph.”

Guy told him that about an hour ago Carl had sent it off to NORDIC as a cover image for a new poem he had written called *LobstahTrap*. Henry said, “We'll see if NORDIC takes the bait, as it were.”

Guy told him it was time for supper. He should leave his computer running overnight so they could test the game's stability. Henry was concerned about the storm but Guy told him that the Beast's generator was now connected to the Cauldron's electrical power panel. If the storm were to knock-out the city power the Cauldron would shift over automatically.

That night. The Strongbox. 2:18 am.

M was woken by a faint rapping sound. He was bone tired. Helle shook him with concern, “Get up.”

The Strongbox had an elaborate system of sensors and alarms. None of those involved rapping on his apartment entrance door. Helle was pulling on a robe. “A NORDIC Hitmin trying to get in? Should we escape out the window? They’re not supposed to be able to get this far.” The fear showed in her face. She was shaking.

M felt himself come instantly focused. He grabbed both her arms and looked into her eyes. “Go into the slave space in the back of your closet and keep the door shut.”

“Slave space?”

“Yes. All the apartments have one. I got the idea from a book about the Underground Railroad a couple hundred years ago.”

He grabbed his old fashioned 45 caliper revolver out of his dresser drawer and went silently into the living room. He crept slowly to the suite’s front door and flattened himself against the wall. The rapping was now rapid and insistent. He reached out with his gun and rapped the tip of the barrel against the door.

“Open up, M,” came Sebastian’s muffled voice.

M knew well enough not to be fooled by a NORDIC voice imprint. He now grew more concerned. The real Sebastian would just call him on the intercom, or his private phone, or his Quad-Hack. He shifted around and took a two-handed firing position squared to the door. The door was steel, but not bullet proof he knew.

“What is the weight of a fully laden swallow?” He challenged.

“Seriously M, this is no time to be playing Monty Python jokes. European or African. Open up.”

M lowered his weapon and took a deep breath. Holding his gun off to his right side he took the risk of opening the door a crack and looked. Standing in the dim metal grated corridor was Sebastian.

“Sebastian? What the hell were you thinking?” He opened the door the rest of the way and put his gun in the couch end table drawer. Sebastian looked at the gun wide-eyed.

“Honey,” M called out strongly. “It’s fine. You can come out. Sebastian has elected to visit me in person rather than just use the intercom. Perhaps he has a reason. I think I’ll ask him.”

M just looked at Sebastian, but he became less annoyed when he saw that Sebastian was shaking. “Sit.” M shut the door. Sebastian took the nearest seat, a wood chair with no armrests to the left of the door used for changing shoes, but he didn’t lean back. Helle entered and sat in the love seat. M joined her.

“I wasn’t thinking, I guess. It seemed so much quicker to just run over here from the War Room.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. So what were you doing in the War Room at whatever time it is now?”

Sebastian explained that he had been working on *LobstahTrap*. It was actually quite engaging to develop and he knew he wouldn’t be able to do it during his normal working hours. Of course, the War Room was alive with the night shift but they left him alone except for the occasional question. “As I got deeper into it I became aware that I was not alone. There was someone, or more correctly, something playing the game even as I was continuing to work on it. I became suspicious so I switched to HAIR-1 to see how NORDIC was using its war resources. It was then I was able to triangulate that the thing playing LobstahTrap was NORDIC.” Finally Sebastian took a few breaths.

“What does this mean?”

“I watched it for awhile. It was whipping through the challenges. I switched to HAIR-2 and increased it’s auto difficulty sensitivity. I will tell you that NORDIC is a very good gamer.”

“So?”

“It means we need to cancel our use of Sophia as the Bait in the game. I think it is far too dangerous. We were thinking this would all be

isolated to a virtual world, but the problem is our underlying premise. NORDIC knows no distinction between the virtual and real worlds. We must not let NORDIC associate Sophia with the target of this game. It is quite capable, as we know, of reaching into the real world when it wants to create damage and there is no reason to assume it would act out its frustrations only within the game.”

“No hard feelings about waking me but I think there’s nothing to worry about. Just go back to the War Room and stop the game. Freeze it or whatever. Then swap the Bait back to the default. I’ll leave a message for Guy on his Quad-Hack saying tell Sophia to stay out of the Cauldron at all costs until we’re sure it’s safe. When he checks in we’ll tell him what’s up.”

Sebastian didn’t seem entirely mollified, but he agreed and left. As M locked the door behind him, then shook his head.

“Why don’t we try and get more sleep.”

Same Time. The Beast, outside the Cauldron.

Guy was woken by what he thought was the Beast’s generator kicking on. His eyes popped open and he listened to the muffled deep noise and felt the vibration. Then he jostled Sophia’s head on his bare chest. She opened her eyes. She realized she had been drooling. Rain was pounding on the Beast’s roof. They both sat up and looked out the louvered window but there was only dark rivulets of water on the pavement.

“Can’t see a thing,” Sophia said.

“You can stay here. I’m going to take a look out the front door.” He slid from under Sophia and put on his jeans. Sophia got out of bed and followed him.

They leaned their heads out the door. The door’s small gutter was overwhelmed and their hair was quickly soaked. Everywhere they looked was in darkness. Then a bolt of lightning lit up the black clouds above them. Sophia started counting seconds. She didn’t get far before a low boom echoed across the city.

“I’ll go check on Henry,” she said.

Guy shut the door but continued to look out the window. “Don’t wake him if he’s asleep.”

A moment later Guy heard a small scream. Sophia came to him holding a piece of paper. It read: *Left Legs in the basement. Be right back.*

“Come on. Maybe we can catch him before he goes inside,” and they ran out into the darkness.

On Guy’s bedside table his Quad-Hack vibrated.

5 Minutes Earlier. Cauldron Parking Lot.

Five minutes earlier Henry was standing outside the Cauldron door to the basement. He was soaked and shivering. It was all he could do to enter the key code he remembered from when Carl had let them all in. He was immensely relieved when the latch popped open.

He rushed in as the door automatically shut and latched behind him. The room lights were still on. At that moment there was a flash and a boom.

The room went pitch black. As his eyes adjusted he was happy to see his laptop screen still on. He went to it and quickly found Legs, but when he tried to stuff it into his right pocket he found he had his new Air-Earbud Headset stuffed in there. He stuffed Legs into his left pocket and turned to leave.

As he turned he thought he saw a dark shape standing in the room by the classroom entry.

He froze.

He willed himself invisible. He felt the shape watching him.

“Well, well,” the shape said coarsely in a high, sharp edged voice.

“Who are you?” He tried to sound manly, but instead it came out in a quavering pre-pubescent squeal.

“I’m Ruby from the kitchen. I’m trying to find a person who took someone from me. Someone I used to love. I got a message that there was someone in this building who could help me find that person.”

“I know Ruby. You’re not Ruby.”

The shape ignored him, “Please don’t tell me you were thinking of leaving. We haven’t talked yet.”

This was The kind of voice you would hear speaking to you from behind an old slate marker in a graveyard—at night.

“I don’t know anything about anything.”

She still hadn’t shown herself. “Well that’s OK,, honey, because maybe you can lead me to the person I’m looking for.” She took a step closer and a flash of lightning lit up the room.

It was a narrow, not very tall woman. Her face had sharp angular features. Dark eyebrows and even darker eyes. She was wearing a black dress with a leather belt. He especially noticed the long knife tucked into the belt.

But what really caught Henry’s attention was that she had on an Air-Earbud Headset with the Visor pushed up. “Are you listening to music?” He asked.

“It’s more than a music player. Sometimes I get important messages.”

“Why do you have a knife in your belt?”

“Oh that. It’s just there in case I need to cut something.” She drifted toward him as if floating on a cloud of graveyard fog. Then she was next to him.

Henry backed away. The back of his knees hit his chair and he fell into it. She leaned forward with her left hand on the table and looked closely at him. Then she was distracted by motion on his laptop screen. “You’re playing a game?” The light from his screen illuminated a tattoo on the inside of her wrist.

It was a tattoo of a bumblebee.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The Boatyard

Same Time. The Cauldron Parking Lot.

The storm was now in full force. Guy and Sophia ran to the Cauldron. All the windows were dark. “I don’t see him anywhere,” called Sophia. “What?” Guy called. The force of the heavy rain drops drumming the pavement all around them created a low pounding baseline roar to the wind gust’s soprano screams.

Sophia repeated her statement closer to his ear, this time with arm movements. Guy motioned for them to go to the basement door.

It was locked. He leaned next to her ear, water dripping from his face and nose onto her already soaked shoulder, “Maybe he couldn’t get in.”

“Then he might still be out here. You run around the building to the left. I’ll run around to the right. Try the doors as you pass in case any are unlocked. Meet at the front door.” She turned and ran off without waiting for a reply, her bare feet splashing as she quickly disappeared around the corner.

When they met at the front door Sophia’s panicked look told Guy all he needed to know. He leaned to her ear, but now even that close she would not be able to hear. He waited for a shift in the blustery wind, then “He must be inside. Most likely he’s playing his game. He’ll be fine. Nothing more to do out here. Back to the Beast.”

The sky lit up with a lightning bolt.

Once again back in the shelter of the Beast Guy stood by the shut door dripping. Sophia went to the bathroom and returned with two big towels. Now the Beast was displaying its ephemeral underpinnings by shaking with the powerful gusts. When he thought he was dry enough not to short-out his keyboard he went to his laptop. He put on his VR headset, the old fashioned kind as he had given Henry his only Air-Earbud Headset, and

logged onto LobstahTrap. A moment later he called, “Sophia, I found him. He’s OK, He’s in the Cauldron basement playing with his game.”

“Well there’s NORDIC kitchen bots in that building. I’m not leaving him alone.”

When he looked back to his screen he saw that a flashing urgent message box had appeared: *log into War Room immediately.*

He felt a blast of damp wind on his back. Front door must have blown open. But when he got up to shut it he saw the ghostly shape of Sophia in her white nightshirt running to the Cauldron. He called out, but it was pointless.

He returned to his laptop and typed a quick reply in the dialogue box: *Be right back - got to get Sophia back inside.*

Then he bolted out the front door. But when he put his left bare foot on the Beast’s steel step it slipped off and he fell backwards landing on the step’s steel support bar. He started to get up but was stopped by excruciating pain in his right side. He rolled onto his left and carefully looked over his shoulder. A flash of lightning lit up Sophia climbing, hand-over-hand, up the zip line. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them, That couldn’t be what he saw. Was it just a sheet caught on the wire? Nope. There was no doubt. It was Sophia, nearly to the roof now.

He crawled back into the Beast and went straightaway to his laptop, dripping wet. They was a small sparking sound and his screen went dark.

Sophia ran across the roof to the access door. Yes, it was unlocked. She stepped inside. She had grabbed Guy’s Quad-Hack on her rush out of the Beast. Standing at the top of the stairs she suddenly realized she should send a text so someone other than just Guy knew what she was doing. She would pick the first name that came up on Guy’s Quad-Hack. But when she took it out of her pocket she saw there was a message that she was to stay away from the Cauldron. Well, that was not happening, not with Henry in there alone. But still, he should be fine as long as he stayed in the basement playing his game. She should see what was up with that message. She decided to go into Room 440 and sort things out.

Back in the basement Henry was filled with fear. This witch of a woman was leaning across his face looking at his screen. He could smell her breath, and he didn't like it. How could he get away? Clearly she was not going to just let him walk out of there.

He needed to talk to her but he didn't know her name. He wanted to call her the Witch, but he knew that was probably a bad idea.

"I'm going to call you Bumblebee because of your tattoo."

"Yeah, whatever. Doesn't really matter." She knew that if the little brat stayed there playing his stupid game maybe someone would notice he was missing and come looking for him. With any luck it would be the person she wanted to meet. She needed to keep him there, alive if possible, at least at first. "Tell me about this game."

Henry knew she had the Air-Earbud Headset, as did he, and he knew that while wearing those, players were free to roam. There was no need to be glued in front of a screen—the Visor was the screen. Your own body movement was your controller. If he could get her involved in the video game she would become distracted and he would have the freedom of movement he needed. "I'll start a new game. You can play too."

"Whatever." She pulled up a chair and sat so close her arm was brushing him. They both focused on the laptop's screen as the howl of the wind outside became background noise.

Same time. The Strongbox

M entered the Strongbox War Room and stood next to Sebastian. The night staff were there but they remained busy with their work. M said, "Thank you Sebastian for using the intercom this time. What is that you want to tell me."

"I thought you should know about this. I got a text from Sophia on Guy's Quad-Hack. She's in the Cauldron in Room 440. I woke Margo and asked her to log in from the Rose. Henry is in the Cauldron basement. As you can see on my screen here, he has started a new game of LobstahTrap."

“So I take it everything should still be fine as long as Sophia stays in Room 440. What does Guy have to say about all this?”

Sebastian told him he couldn't reach Guy. That got M's attention. Sebastian continued by explaining how he had hacked into Henry's game session, but how he couldn't join-in because Henry had started the game using an Air-Earbud Headset. “I'm guessing he stole it from Guy. I can't imagine Guy would let him use it. They're too dangerous. But here's the real reason I asked you to come here. I see that NORDIC and HAIR-2 are fighting for control of the client-side server.”

Before M could ask what that meant Sebastian pointed at his screen. A third-person view video feed of the LobstahTrap game session was running.

Sebastian took a deep breath. “There is another player in the game. That is only possible if the player is also wearing an Air-Earbud Headset.”

“So tell me about why this is a big deal.”

M learned that it was the newest type of virtual reality gear. What it meant was no one else could join into the game. Sebastian had hacked in, but, he could only watch what was on the screen.

M said, “Put that up on the big screen.” The entire WR staff was soon watching.

Sebastian didn't know who the other player was, or how it was that they had an Air-Earbud Headset. That worried M and he asked who else could be in the Cauldron with him.

“I just called Carl. He says no one else is supposed to be in the building. He would get over there.”

Chester came in throwing his jacket onto the back of his chair, “What's this about NORDIC and HAIR-2 having a battle?”

Sebastian said that Henry had logged onto the game running on a secure HAIR-2 server—the same server he was now on. But certain features of the game, such as NPCs and the player's microphones were controlled by a separate client, meaning player, side server. NORDIC had apparently

hacked into this server and taken control of the NPC function. HAIR-2 was currently fighting with NORDIC to prevent it making any further inroads.

M asked if he needed to know what an NPC was.

Peter and Beth had entered the WR while this conversation was underway. Peter said, “Probably yes. I’ll tell him, Sebastian.” He went on to explain that they were Non Player Characters. Virtual reality characters that were invented by the game and controlled, even modified, by the Client-Side Server. Client side meant the player side. The overall game was run on one server, but a separate server ran certain player functions such as NPCs. They existed in the player’s visors only

M said, “And you’re telling me NORDIC now has control of these?”

Peter said, “Apparently yes. They are not real. But they appear very real to a player wearing a Visor. The danger is not that an NPC could hurt you, it is that you might react to it in a bad way, like backing yourself out a window.”

M thanked him for the vivid example.

Same Time. The Cauldron Basement.

Henry and Bumblebee lowered their Visors. Henry was temporarily blinded by the brightness. He had instantly gone from a dark basement to full sunshine. They both were, body and soul, in a boatyard. Henry was confused. When he had left the game that afternoon he was exploring Dark Forest, the game’s default starting map. He knew a little about the planned Boat Graveyard because he and Sebastian had talked about it, but that was just a concept. Now he could tell he was actually in it. “Sebastian must be entertaining himself by playing brainy game designer,” he thought.

He was surrounded by lobster fishing boats of all sizes and ages. The more recent ones were on jackstands. The old broken-down ones were just laying on their sides. He was standing on a hard-packed gravel driveway. His immediate instinct was to explore the boats. He knew it

would be wrong to climb into those on jackstands—they were probably still active boats owned by fisherman. He would need a ladder anyway. But the old ones were just laying on their sides, clearly abandoned. Who knows what kinds of interesting stuff he might find in them. He started toward the nearest one.

Suddenly there was a flash of movement to his right about a hundred feet away.

“Who is that ahead there?” Bumblebee asked sitting next to him in the basement. Henry was confused. Where did that voice come from? The heavens? He looked up. The sky was cloudless. He pondered the question. He was startled when someone nudged his shoulder and his view seemed to cloud over. Then it came to him that he was playing a video game and the person who had just nudged him had to be the Witch, Bumblebee. In-game she wouldn’t be able to talk to him because they would have been automatically assigned as competing players.

“So,” he thought, “if the Witch saw the same thing move as he did, it must have been the Bait. Of course! The game is teasing both of us with the Bait”.

But Henry also knew the Bait would have Soph’s face on it. He didn’t want the Witch to get anywhere near Soph. So he decided he would keep himself between Bumblebee and the Bait.

“I didn’t see anything,” he said in the basement. He turned his attention back to the game.

The boats were all packed in closely. He wondered where Bumblebee had spawned into the game. He tried to look all around himself. But why could he only turn his head? Of course! His in-game movements were controlled by his own body movements—his body was his controller.

He rose from his chair and stood, but he still seemed stuck. He looked down at his feet. His feet were gone. There was only a reddish-brown wide flap-like thing where his sneakers should be. Sunlight flashed off the large pilot house window of the boat leaning on its side directly in front of him. What he saw gave him a shock! There was a lobster looking back at him!

In fact, a rather large lobster about his size. He looked to his right. He noticed the lobster in the glass look to its side. He raised his right arm. The lobster raised its huge crusher claw. He raised his left arm. The lobster raised its cutter claw.

He looked down at his body and it had a bunch of projecting legs. He tried to scream but no sound came.

He needed to focus but the only thing his stupid little lobster brain would report back was that he needed to get the herring.

Where is that herring? He looked to his left. There was another lobster—larger than him. It looked at him and waved its cutter claw. OK,, that's one weird lobster.

He willed his weight forward and fell onto his legs. Behind him the other lobster was now also on its legs and coming at him.

He scuttled away and for no reason he could think of took a quick right between two boats.

The following lobster tried to take the turn but wasn't quick enough. It banged against the hull of an old boat and rolled onto its side. It quickly recovered.

he sensed he lost the trailing lobster. Then he paused.

Why did that seem wrong? His little lobster brain was working hard, and then it came up with an answer: He doesn't want to lose the other lobster. But why not? Something about the herring. This is getting hard. I want to scratch my head but I can't. Wait, I just did. OK,, now I'm very confused.

In the War Room they all watched the three screens at the front of the room. On the left was the Visor feed of the mystery player. In the middle was a hack into the Caldron's basement CM camera's infrared feed. On the right was Henry's Visor view. Margo and Sara had logged in from the *Rose*.

The basement CM camera showed two people on their hands and knees scampering among the basement chairs and tables.

“Who is that person in there with Henry?” M demanded.

“I have no idea,” said Sebastian.

Then at one point they saw the mystery person bounce off the wall and roll onto its side. It was a woman in a dark dress. They caught a glimpse of a long knife tucked in her belt.

On the Beast Guy was unaware of all these developments. His laptop was still shorted-out. He decided he needed to find another laptop. He went into the bedroom to look for Sophia’s. Not in there. She must have left it on the *Rose*. He would have to fix his own. He bent over it and tried to hear the hum of the fan, but the storm was too loud. He put his face as close as he could manage. There was a tiny breeze. Yes. The laptop was actually still running, only the screen was shorted out. He would have to make a work around.

In the Cauldron’s basement Henry remembered something: He didn’t want to lose Bumblebee. He was supposed to keep her engaged in the game until he figured out a plan to get away from her. So he stopped running, tilted his Visor up a bit, and called out in the basement, “Hey Bumblebee! Over here.” Then he dropped the Visor in place, scuttled around and started running again.

He saw the glimmer of the Bait fish ahead. It scooted between two boats. Yes. There it is. The herring! Got to get the herring. He scampered after it.

Suddenly an ice wall rises up before him and he skids to a stop. His instinct tells him he must get over the wall. To his right there is a ladder leaning against a lobster boat. He grabs it with his claws, juggles it over to the wall and starts climbing.

At first he finds it difficult to coordinate all his legs with the ladder's rungs, but he gets better at it as he goes until he is at the top of the wall where he loses his balance and topples over.

He falls into a lobster boat's cockpit. But there is something wrong with this cockpit. It appears to be just a wire-frame void. It suddenly occurs to him that he might be in a video game. This might be an unfinished background.

Then he hears Bumblebee climbing the ladder. A cloud seems to pass, temporarily blocking the bright sunlight. At some level he remembers his goal is to keep himself between Bumblebee and the Bait. The cloud passes and it's bright again. He sees Bumblebee's spiny antennae waving around above the ice wall, then her pointy little black nose.

He rises onto his fan tail, grabs one of the ladder's rails with his crusher claw and pushes it. The ladder slides sideways down the wall and Bumblebee is dumped onto the ground. She will have to start over he thinks.

Pushing on the ladder had caused him to fall out of the boat. He took off running. When he looked behind him the ice wall was gone. Damn it. Now she was chasing him again.

Then he noticed a light blue translucent arrow blinking in the left corner of his vision. What is this? As he attempted to ponder this with his tiny lobster brain he caught a glimpse of the Bumblebee lobster scrambling away from him to his left. Damn it! She's in the lead and the game's giving me a hint. Wait? What?

He took the left and chased the big lobster. There was a launching ramp ahead. As he got closer he saw the herring waving to him in the shallow marsh grass to the right of the ramp. Bumblebee didn't see it and continued to run down the ramp into the harbor. The shimmering Bait took a quick look over her shoulder directly at Henry and plunged into the watery marsh. He followed her.

Why does he think the herring is a her? Oh, he realizes, it has the face of a woman. Makes sense.

In the War Room Sebastian was experimenting with the Cauldron's CM feeds on the center screen, trying to sort out which ones he had access to. It seemed that NORDIC had wisely split the CM devices into several separate circuits to make hacking more difficult. But he did manage to get the Cauldron's emergency lighting turned on.

“We don't need to rely on infrared anymore.”

“Wait! pause there,” Sara yelled from her computer in the *Rose*. “I think you've got a camera on the Cafeteria entrance.”

As they all watched, a six-foot tall robot banged the door open and exited the cafeteria, and started gliding down the corridor. It disappeared when it passed under the camera. Then the door banged open again and a second bot did the same. This time, they could clearly see it holding a large butcher's cleaver in the gripper at the end of its robot arm!

Henry ran into the marsh and kept running. Soon he was free of the grass and in open water. Since his legs were a bit like tiny flippers he glided easily along the harbor's muddy bottom. He found he instinctively used his tail for stability and steering. Now, being underwater, he felt he could breathe easier. He had an overwhelming feeling of being in his element. As he moved across the harbor bottom he felt weightless. He loved the feeling of complete immersion. He was so happy he had been born a lobster! The slightest flip of his tail sent him into a long jumping arc. Now, time to look for food. Where was that herring.

Then his antennae smelled strains of Bumblebee odor. It was coming from in front of him. He must be close. Then he saw her. She stopped and turned around.

Suddenly a giant octopus filled his entire field of vision! It waved its huge tentacles about and opened its beak wide. There was a cluster of rocks beside him. He ducked into the space under one of them. It was dimmer in here, and for the moment he felt safe, like he used to feel when he hid under a kitchen chair when he was a kid.

Wait. What was he talking about. What did he think this was—some kind of game?

Then the octopus was at the opening, filling the whole space with its menacing hungry mouth! Then it reared back as it prepared to send a tentacle in and sucker him into its mouth.

At that moment he smelled something nice, sweet maybe, like a hermit crab. It was difficult, but he managed to turn himself around. He carefully poked his head out. A small rock bounced off his head. Then he caught the glimmer of the Bait swimming back toward shore. That didn't make any sense. Why would a herring fish hide on top of a rock and drop a pebble on his noggin? Was it a herring with a sense of humor? He squeezed his brain. Clown fish would have a sense of humor of course, but he didn't know about herrings. He tried to think of a good joke to tell a herring. "You hear about the herring that listened to too much rock music? It needed a herring aid." No, that wouldn't do.

Then he saw the herring run up the ramp and back onto land.

Five stories above Henry, in Room 440, Sophia was sitting in front of Sara's laptop. She was logged into the War Room and was watching the same screens as them. She had Guy's Quad-Hack on speaker phone.

"Sophia, do you hear me?" Sara said. "Yes." "Lock your door. The Kitchen Bots are on the loose. They look to be over six-feet tall, and they're weaponized."

"Shoot." Sophia got up and locked her door. Then she moved the laptop to the side of the room where she wouldn't be seen by anything peering in the door's narrow rectangular window.

She sat back down. Suddenly she saw Guy pop online. "Guy, sorry. It's just that I can't leave Henry alone."

"Sophia, don't leave that room!"

"I have an idea. Is there any way to communicate with Henry?"
"I'm thinking."

Henry scuttled up the launching ramp, then paused when he realized something was different. He was back breathing air and he was disappointed. He remembered the ramp had been next to the boatyard, but now he seemed to be in a different place. There was no bright sunlight. Instead it was just dim, like twilight. Perhaps he had been underwater so long the sun had set, after all, his sense of time seemed to be way off ever since he had turned into a lobster. Then he caught a glimpse of the shimmering herring melting through a large rectangular shape. It brought to mind something, what was it? A door, no wait. That wasn't quite it. A doorway. Yes. But what was that supposed to mean? What was a door? He looked all around.

Suddenly he remembered this place. He pushed his Visor onto his forehead. He was in the Cauldron basement! He was trying to get away from the Witch! He sensed movement behind him and he turned around. Bumblebee was on her hands and knees scuttling toward him. He had an idea. He kneeled down and waited. When she got to him she sat on her knees, looking at him in puzzlement. Then Henry took Legs out of his pocket and flung it at Bumblebee. She screeched and instinctively flung it back. Henry caught it in mid-air as he turned and ran for the door. It was unlocked. He was in the stairwell.

Then his head hurt. He put his hand to his forehead which pushed his Visor back in place. It got brighter. In fact, the sun came out. He fell onto all fours.

Now, on his eight legs, he saw a pile of flat rocks in front of him. There were no other choices so he started climbing.

“Sebastian,” M said, “Get us a camera with a view of that stairwell!” “Working on it.”

Chester moved closer to the screen and asked, “I gather the shimmering herring with Sophia’s face is the Bait. Who is controlling that?”

“The game engine,” answered Sebastian.

Henry climbed the flat rocks. After seven or so, he had to remind himself that it was only an unproven theory that lobsters could count, his nose ran into a flat, smooth seawall. He scuttled along the base of it only to find himself facing another pile of flat rocks. He started up these as he heard scuttling at the base of the first pile behind him.

When he returned his focus to where he was going he was startled by a low snarling growl. He froze on his eight legs.

Then drool hits the ground just in front of his waving feeler. He tilts his carapace as far as it goes. A two-headed dark grey wolf is snarling and showing its huge pointed teeth. One of the heads growls louder. Why doesn't it like me? Or is this just some kind of basic instinct thing? Whatever it is, it is very bad.

The other head howls so loudly my shell vibrates. I break to the left, the hard tips of my many feet are unable to dig into this new surface—some kind of pavement. The wolf snips at my tail so closely that I think it may have bitten a piece off. There is a wall to my right and I bang into it so hard that I get knocked onto my back. I twist my tail forcefully to flip myself but at that moment Bumblebee is upon me!

She straddles me, four legs on each side, her claws flat on the pavement either side of my head.

“Got you, you little bastard.”

Wait. Something is not right here. Lobsters don't know English. But how do I know that? I start debating the question in my tortured little lobster brain when she says, “Now you're going to lead me to ...”

But then her lobster face is obscured by two scoring bars. They are flashing, then they settle down and move to the top of my vision.

In the War Room Sebastian yells, “Yes! I've got the scoring module connected!”

Back in the Cauldron Henry thinks:

Bumblebee must be seeing them too because she seems very confused. A label pops up above the left bar: Henry. Who is that? A Bumblebee label pops up above the right bar. I know who that is.

Then numbers start scrolling under each bar, at first too fast to read, but they slow. I have several thousand more points than bumblebee. Somehow I feel like the numbers are meaningless so I ignore the whole thing.

I brace all my eight legs plus both my claws on Bumblebees body and push. As she flips over I crimp the tiny grippers at the ends of my legs onto her so her momentum rights me.

I take off running.

Sebastian said to Sophia, speaking toward the Quad-Hack laying on the table beside him, “So, what was your idea?”

“Can you get me some level of control over the Bait?”

“Oh, you probably already have that if you’ve got a headset and controller with you, even the old kind. The game will have already done a facial scan on you and associated you with the Bait. Of course you aren’t a full player, but you should have a little bit of control over where the Bait goes and what it does.”

“Good. Now, here’s what I want you to do. You’re going to get HAIR-2 to project lettering against dark surfaces.”

“I don’t think ...” Sebastian began. “Yes you can,” came Guy’s voice through M’s Quad-Hack, Which was on speaker phone

Just ahead Henry saw the shimmering herring opening a dark wood door. It glanced over its shoulder at him, and then went in. He now noticed there were a row of doors on both sides of this road. These must be boat

repair workshops. Maybe I can get a job. That will be fun. But wait, I'm a lobster. Would they give a job to a lobster ...

He skidded to a stop. While he had been thinking he might have passed the door the herring went into. Why was he following a herring? Duh. Idiot. I'm a lobster. Of course I'm chasing a herring.

The workshop doors had labels. There was a glow coming from under *G8*. He rose onto his tail, grabbed the lever handle with his big gripper claw, pulled down and fell in.

All around him were workbenches. He scuttled around. He would find the owner and ask for a job. He stopped in front of a pair of work shoes and dungarees. He rose onto his tail and casually rested his left claw on the workbench. He would chat him up. Say how a lobster could be a good addition to a boat repair business. The man was still quite a bit taller than he. The man turned his bearded face to him.

It was a large, ruddy face with a lantern jaw and piercing steel blue eyes that seemed to look through him like lasers. Then the man bared his teeth and roared. Henry fell backwards, knocking some tools off the bench. A chisel banged to the floor just inches from his face. He rolled over onto his hands and knees—wait, hands? What are hands? I need to get away from the man and I'm forgetting I've got eight legs. Go!

He scuttled rapidly to the end of the room and turned at the wall. That was when he caught sight of something just above his eye level. He rose onto his tail to look. It was black with a smooth rectangular frame. The word *blackboard* popped into his head. there was white chalk-like lettering.

Go to the Kitchen.

Henry fell back onto his spindly legs. What did that mean? Of course, in a lobster trap the chamber with the herring is called the kitchen and, being a lobster as he was he knew all about lobster traps. He was pretty sure he knew how to go into one, grab the bait and get out again. But why did he think that? He tried to remember if he had ever done that before. He was getting confused. Let's start over, he thought. Where would there be a kitchen? Suddenly it came to him: He needed to find the cafeteria.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Time to Pull the Pots

The Cauldron. Somewhere Near the Cafeteria.

The dimly lit drive Henry was on lit up in a flash. He remembered lightning doing that, but there certainly didn't seem to be a storm going on. As soon as he thought that his shell concussed from something like thunder. Didn't matter. He was looking for a cafeteria. A part of him thought it might be a bad move for a lobster to just walk into a cafeteria, but maybe if he acted like he was supposed to be there no one would notice.

He scuttled along the drive more carefully, looking back and forth. He passed G12. G25. After rounding a bend and more doors he saw G53. No cafeteria. Now he was lost. Should he turn around? Or just keep going?

Carl had gotten a message in the middle of the night from Sebastian, "Get to the Cauldron.". But he had not returned the call because he had been busy spreading a bath towel out on his window sill to sop-up driving rain leaking under the closed window.

He put on his foul weather gear and started the long jog-walk from his apartment to the Cauldron. It was the only option. The city was in pitch darkness. The roads were littered with dead self-drivers. As he passed one he heard muffled pounding and what may have been screams. He stopped. A frantic couple was trapped inside a self-driver. Fortunately he had taken the crowbar he kept next to his door. It took five forceful whacks to smash the side window.

He helped the man double-up their raincoats and spread them over the broken window chunks. Then he helped them crawl out of the SUV and onto the sidewalk. He didn't let them put back on their raincoats until he was satisfied they were fine, if still quite a bit rattled. When the woman thanked him he asked if on their way home they would keep looking for trapped others. He apologized for not staying. He was already on his way to save somebody else.

In Room 440 of the Cauldron Sophia was becoming increasingly stressed. From what she was watching on Sara's laptop feed from the War Room Henry was in danger. She got up, then sat down again.

She recalled the people who had died because they had met her. Why did these things happen to her? But then she felt a wave of realization flow through her. Was that the key? She only reacted to things as they happened?

The thought of actually taking control of her life terrified her. Life was something that you rode through. As soon as you tried to control it, you risked steering it off a cliff. But hadn't she already done that when she dispatched Mako? Was it possible she had already crossed that bridge without realizing it? She became determined and stood. She would protect Henry! If it cost her her own life, so be it.

She went to the little rectangular window in the door. She could tell the emergency lighting had come on in the corridor, but that did not brighten her room. She knew she shouldn't go out there armed with nothing more than her wits. She needed to find something that could be a weapon, but the room was so dim she couldn't see even where to look. Then there was a flash of lightning with immediate thunder and it allowed her to catch a glimpse of the large tool bag Sara had brought down from her roof project. Prominently sticking out was the large cordless drill. That might do nicely.

She heaved it out of the bag, slipped its strap over her shoulder and tested to see if she could walk with it. The auger point still touched the floor, so she lifted the strap over her head. Now it hung across her chest to her hip. Good enough.

She unlocked the Room 440 door, cautiously cracked it open and looked and listened. Nothing except the roar of the storm outside. She crept into the corridor. Then inched along toward the stairs at the far end, keeping to the wall.

At the top of the stairs she paused and once again listened. Just the howl of the storm. She would work herself down floor by floor.

To descend the stairs she had to lift the heavy body of the drill into the crook of her right arm, holding it as if it were some kind of potent

weapon, which of course, it was. She Paused at the midway landing to peer over the railing. Nothing.

At the next floor she left the stairwell and proceeded cautiously through the long corridor toward the stairs at the far corner. Hearing nothing suspicious she considered that floor to be swept.

She relaxed and leaned against the wall. She wiped her brow and told herself: Settle down. Don't get worked up about nothing. Henry was just playing his game in the basement.

Then she thought she might have heard a faint whirring.

She stopped. No, nothing. She started moving, more quickly this time. The whirring started again. She stopped and pressed her back against the wall. No whirring. She waited. Must have been the wind. She left the wall and went quickly to the stairwell.

Suddenly, the air was knocked out of her as something slammed her into the wall!

When she was able to gasp a breath she looked up. The thing had to be at least 6-feet tall.

Of course, a Kitchen Bot. It had a plastic mask of a man's face that was probably intended to look friendly, but was distinctly sinister. Before she could move, the bot backed a couple of feet, stopped and then slammed her again. The drill fell out of her arm, the bit pinging as it hit the floor, although the body of the drill was still held by the sling over her shoulder.

Now she was pinned and couldn't turn her head. She still needed more air. Just below her chin the Bot was trying to raise a large carving knife, but it was too close to the wall.

The whirring continued and the Bot vibrated. She thought it must be running on rubber rollers that were continuing to turn.

she realized her drill trigger finger was free. She shrugged her shoulder and lifted the bit, hoping the auger's sharp tip would be pointed at some part of the Bot and not her own foot. She pulled the trigger and pressed down.

The bot began to vibrate. It opened its mouth so wide that its plastic face fell off, revealing square jaws with sharp, shiny teeth. It stuck out its tongue, except it was not a tongue. It was a spinning buzz saw blade.

Then its vibration became spasmodic as the auger bit jammed. The bot's pressure lessened and Sophia was able to slip sideways.

There was a classroom door next to her and she was able to reach out with her left arm and blindly whack at the handle. The door opened. She slithered sideways and fell into the room, but before she could close and lock the door behind her the Kitchen Bot lumbered clumsily into the opening.

Sophia ran to the window wall. She tried to pull up the first window. It wouldn't budge! She moved to the next just as the bot slammed into the window sill, the drill wavering from its embedment in the bot's right roller foot. That window also wouldn't move. She went to the last window, the bot's buzz saw tongue spinning directly over her head. She envisioned that saw sending her blood spraying around the room in a red mist! The window jerked up an inch and stuck.

She got her hands under it and lifted the old, sticky window higher, then turned to face the Bot. It backed up a bit, preparing for another crushing blow.

She felt a surge of determination course through her. She told herself: No. No more. No more letting things happen to her. "Screw you robot!"

The bot accelerated toward her, bending at its waist to aim its buzz saw at her face. She ducked, bent her knees and reached her arms around to the bot's back. With her fingers under the heels of its roller feet she attempted to lift the shaking machine. It was too heavy. The bot bent farther, trying to get its saw at her, but doing this shifted its center of gravity. Sophia was able to lift the bot just a bit. This served to shift its weight more, and with her second shout Sophia gave her legs all the strength she had in her body, and maybe a bit more from somewhere she didn't know. She heaved.

The bot pitched out the window.

Carl was jogging around the side of the Cauldron, blinking as he tried to see through the driving rain, when suddenly a heavy piece of machinery crashed onto the pavement just inches in front of him. He stopped so fast that his feet slid out from under him and he fell on his ass. He was staring at a hideous machine giving off sparks. Then it stopped shuddering and went dark. He looked up just in time to see someone shutting a window four floors above him.

He got back on his feet, jogged to the Cauldron's basement door and entered his code. But even as he was doing it, he could tell the lock was dead.

He ran further down the lot to the Beast and tried to pull its front door open. It too was locked.

Guy was sitting in the Beast's driver's chair looking at the backup camera's screen when he heard a pounding on the door behind him. What the hell was that? Probably nothing good. But when he went to the door he could tell there was a shape outside. The shape shouted "Guy!" He opened the door.

"Guy, for Christ's sakes, what the hell is going on?"

"Carl. Good to see you. I have no more dry towels. Come sit up front in the passenger seat. Watch out for my laptop on the floor. Don't drip on it because I already did that."

Carl hung up his raincoat, carefully worked his way into the front of the Beast and sat. Guy told him he had wired his laptop to the Beast's backup camera screen and logged into the War Room. He gave him the run down of Henry going into the Cauldron's basement and Sophia's climbing the zip line to go in after him. Carl in turn told him of his late night call. He was just getting to the part about a piece of machinery falling out an upper floor window when he realized the Beast's screen was showing something strange.

"Is that Henry's video game?"

"Yes. Sebastian hacked into it."

“And there’s no way to talk to Henry?” “No. No one outside the game can talk to the players.”

Carl watched the action feed from the War Room’s three big screens. “You’re telling me Henry and this mystery woman . . .” “Bumblebee.” “Bumblebee are in the middle of a virtual reality game.” “Bingo.”

After a few moments of silence Carl asked, “So, why isn’t there a background music track playing? There should be a music track.”

Guy turned to him with a stunned expression. “A music track! Oh my God. That’s it!

Guy spoke to Sebastian on his Quad-Hack, “Listen-up. Carl is here with me. This is what we’re going to do . . .”

Henry quickened his pace along the boat repair shop road. He almost ran by the door label he was looking for: Cafeteria. But just as he stood to pull down on the door handle he felt a lobster claw snatch his tail! He fell over onto his back and Bumblebee was upon him again! She pinned him with her eight legs. But this time, rather than just speaking to him in her witch-like lobster voice she clamped her right claw onto his throat. It hurt. Now he couldn’t breath. She pulled the long hunting knife out of her belt and held it up. “Now I’m going to kill you, you little bastard.”

Henry croaked, “But you’re supposed to keep me alive so I’ll lead you to someone! Remember?”

“I don’t care anymore. You’re making me mad, and I’ve been told I have anger issues.”

Suddenly their world was flooded with a loud demanding rhythm of rapid spoken words. A male voice was singing Rap music.

Bumblebee screamed, “I hate rap music,” and she released her grip on Henry’s throat as she clamped both claws to the side of her pointy head. The knife clattered to the floor.

Henry liked the music. He got lost in the rhythm until he heard:

Go on lil lobstah, you're work ain't done done. Your work ain't done done.

His focus sharpened. He pushed himself up with his big crusher claw. Bumblebee screamed and toppled sideways.

Henry scabbled onto his fan tail in front of the Cafeteria door. The door opened and he fell inside. He scuttled in an arc looking around. He saw a door labelled *Kitchen*. Yes. That was what he was looking for!

There was a black rectangle next to the door. It had a label at the top: *See Below For Pot Pulling Schedule*. Below that was scrawled in big chalky white letters:

NOW!

In the War Room Peter asked Sebastian, "So, why did you name a player Bumblebee?"

"We didn't. I don't know where the name came from. It has to be something Henry said into his headset and the game picked it up." But then he seemed to be lost in thought. "However," he began again, "We will remember that when we discovered NORDIC was withdrawing itself into an orb, it was accepting communications through a very limited number of trusted Humans only."

"Yes, Sebastian," M said. "We distinctly remember that."

Beth took up the thought, "So, we know Douglas was delivering his hit lists to NORDIC through an intermediary and we know from the phone recordings Guy retrieved that Douglas referred to his contact person as a she. What if they were lovers? That would mean Sophia killed Bumblebee's lover."

Sara said, "That would be a powerful motive. If that is who Bumblebee is, it means Sophia is in great danger. It's a good thing she's locked herself in that room."

Henry suddenly realized what it meant to Pull the Pots. He needed to get into a lobster trap that was about to get pulled to the surface. There was a door labelled *ELEVATOR* next to the kitchen blackboard. That must be a lobster pot, he thought. He heard the Cafeteria door open behind him. He stood on his tail and slammed the CALL button with the side of his crusher claw.

The door slid open and he scuttled into the lobster pot, But then Bumblebee grabbed his right bottommost leg with both her claws, one above the other.

The door shut on her red shell body, opened back up, and shut on her again and again. It must have been hitting a sensitive area of her shell because she screamed each time, but she wouldn't let go.

Then the background rap music increased:

Kick lil lobsta. Kick the bug in the nose. You be the best. You be the smartest. You kick the pest – kick the pest – kick the pest.

Henry leaned his back against the pot wall and hauled-off kicking Bumblebee in the nose.

She screamed more and let go of his leg to try and block his blows. He quickly shoved her out the door. As soon as the door slid shut he slammed the button panel with his big crusher claw. He felt the lobster pot getting lifted from the ocean floor.

Back in the War Room M asked Sebastian, “Why does Guy have to say things to Henry in rap. Why can't he just say it?”

Sebastian told him the reason was that the only way Henry could hear the spoken words was because the game engine had identified his speaking as rap music, and thus a legitimate background sound track. What had to be remembered was that anything on the sound track was heard by both Players. But the big constraint was that the game engine had an embedded filter that allowed music only. This was so players and observers couldn't chat. That was meant to be an in-game purchase upgrade and he couldn't hack past it.

Chester wasn't paying attention to the discussion. He had moved the three screens on his desk closer and seemed to be studying them. Then he leaned back and said, "Something is up. The amount of attention NORDIC is giving this game is not reasonable. We were hoping for NORDIC to be enticed into playing, of course. But the reaction we are seeing is, to put it bluntly, over the top."

M wanted to know what that meant. Chester explained that NORDIC's war effort was distinctly more disjointed. Their power monitors indicated that NORDIC was devoting as much memory to playing LobstahTrap as it was to its north and south war fronts together. Sebastian walked around to his cubicle and looked at his screens. He scratched his chin. "I'll look into it and get back to you."

M asked Chester for a domestic update and he reported that HAIR-2 was rapidly taking control of many areas of North America. He offered to show them on one of the screens if he wanted, but M told him to keep it on the game.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The Graves

Same time. The Virtual Gulf of Maine.

The side of the lobster pot opened and Henry fell out. Sloppy, he thought, the lobsters are supposed to be plucked from the top by the winch operator, not dumped onto the deck of the lobster boat.

He felt sore all over and wondered if his shell was cracked, but when he looked down he saw he was wearing rubber hip boots. That was a strange thing indeed for a lobster to be wearing. Then he realized he could bend his waist to a complete ninety-degree angle. He stood upright and tried to consider this. Quite a feat for a lobster he concluded. But then he thought, speaking of feet, where were all the rest of his legs? He felt the boat sway under him and he extended his arms, afraid he was about to fall over.

He needed to hold onto something or he was going to be seasick. He saw what looked a bit like the back of a chair, no, no, It must be the ship's wheel. He grabbed hold of it and steadied himself.

When he looked up he saw a wood framed window with the reflection of a burly man with a full bushy black beard. It was the same image he remembered from an illustration in the book about lobster fishermin in the Gulf of Maine. Hold on, he thought, that reflection must be him. But he was a lobster. His brain hurt.

He looked behind him at his First Mate who was running the winch hoisting lobster pots. The Mate looked at him with a dark scowl. The next pot reached the wooden table and the Mate deftly yanked it onto the table as he unhooked the pot from the line. Inside was an enormous lobster. Easily over five-feet long. The Mate opened the top of the trap and the huge lobster jumped out onto the cockpit deck. He thought: That can't be good.

Henry turned forward and slammed the shift lever into forward with his left hand—he had a hand?—and with his other hand he slammed the throttle lever forward.

The boat's bow rose sharply and Bumblebee the lobster fell onto her back on the boat's transom shelf. She spun in a circle, then slid over the stern. The Starboard side winch spun crazily in reverse and the line ran to the pot buoy, jammed, and snapped. Henry scanned the waters around him, but he could hardly see beyond the samson post on the front deck. He was in pea soup thick fog. A thought crossed his mind that the graphics rendering engine could not keep up with his boat going at full throttle, so he slowed to what he judged to be about four knots. How did he know that? He became aware of the baseball style cap he was wearing. Why did it feel strange? Why did it remind him of wearing a video game headset? A horrible thought occurred to him: Maybe the only reason he was outsmarting Bumblebee was because he was in a video game. The thought made him shiver. Maybe it was cold out here this far from Damariscotta harbor. He pushed on the top of his cap to make sure it was secure. But where was he going?

Suddenly a big rectangular shaped grey buoy loomed up not four feet off his port beam. It was numbered: 316. There was a sign hanging under the number: *For this buoy to appear on your GPS you must have an active subscription.* Useless information since he didn't see a GPS unit and there was no chart on the counter before him.

There was a bright flash of light followed by a low thunderous bellow. That must be a lighthouse with its foghorn. But what lighthouse was that? He decided to try and get closer a very dangerous proposition he knew, but right now his depth sounder just flashed blank rectangles. The water must be too deep for a sounding. So he cautiously turned to the direction he thought the flash came from.

Suddenly the depth sounder alarm went off — 15 feet! He instantly put the engine into reverse to kill his forward momentum, then neutral. He still couldn't see a thing.

Then there was a flash of lightning. He saw looming off his bow the tall, fearful tower of Graves Light. He knew it from his book on lighthouses. This was not one of those pretty candy-striped lighthouses. This was a dark grey tapering granite block lighthouse that conveyed one message, and one message only: Death awaits all who approach too close.

Then his brow furrowed. Graves Light was off Boston. He just left Damariscotta Harbor in Maine. How far had he travelled in a few minutes? Could it be a hundred miles?

In the next lightning flash he saw he was actually startlingly close to the seaweed covered ledge for which the lighthouse was named: The Graves.

He heard the scratchy scrambling of many legs on the transom. He looked behind him. Bumblebee had not fallen off! She had an errant dock line in one claw that must have been trailing in the water as she flopped into the cockpit. He would have a stern talk with his First Mate about that, but when he turned to him the First Mate shouted, raised both arms, and reached for his throat.

Then he heard a bit of rap lyrics faintly in his head:

Lobsta man in da house. Lobsta man in da house. Be da man. Be da man. Be da lobsta man in da house.

Suddenly he knew what he needed to do. He opened the engine up to full throttle, spun the wheel to port and pointed the bow to the ledge.

The boat slammed onto the rocks in a horrible crash of crunching wood planking and bronze spinning propeller. Henry reached for the grab handle on the cabin's side and swung himself onto the starboard catwalk. As the boat, now at about a forty-five degree angle started to slide back into the black water he ran to the bow and jumped off. He expected the rocks to be slippery, but was surprised to find the smooth and flat.

He ran to the metal door at the base of the lighthouse. There was a Call button. How extremely strange for the old lighthouse to have an elevator. He heard scuttling of lobster feet and looked back. A strong looking witch-like woman was scrambling up the rocks.

He punched the button. The door slid open just as he felt a hand slip off his smooth rubber boot. He leapt into the lighthouse and the door shut.

He was in total blackness. This time he found he could feel the tiny Braille bumps on the buttons because he had fingers. Before the witch could hit the Call button he found the little dots that formed a chair and pushed it.

Sophia had been standing in the third floor stairwell landing where she was following the action as best she could on her old fashioned headset. She could because she was the Bait. She saw Henry get in the elevator. Then she heard the noisy Caldron elevator start running. She ran back and found the elevator, but the old style pointer above the door swept right past 3, heading for 4. She ripped off her headset, ran full tilt back to the stairwell and bounded up the stairs. She ran to the elevator and got there just as the elevator door opened. For the first time she realized she was still completely wet. She shivered.

Henry felt the lighthouse elevator carry him upward a short distance, then the door slid open onto the platform at the Fresnel lens level. The shimmering Bait was standing there, right in front of him. Wait a minute, not shimmering — glistening.

Sophia reached in and pulled Henry into her arms. She gave him a huge hug, then immediately let him go as she ripped off his headset and flung it aside. It made a crunching sound as it hit the wall and clattered to the floor.

She saw in his face total confusion. No time to explain. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him behind her as she ran around the corridor's bend, then full tilt toward the roof access door.

But she slid to a stop as she saw a Kitchen Bot making its way up the stairs directly in front of them. It was whipping a large butcher knife back and forth as it climbed. It was making its way by extending two gripper rods onto the stair before it, lifting the forward edge of its roller pad so it hooked the edge of the stair tread, and then flipping the pad in a half circle so it rested flat on the next step. Right behind it was a woman with a determined look set on her witch-like face. She brandished a hunting knife in one hand as she rested her other on the bot, using it as a shield.

Suddenly Henry ran into Room 440. He immediately returned with a rolling chair. The bot had just reached the top of the stairs. Henry launched himself forward, running his feet under him as he accelerated. He raised his feet just as he slammed into the bot and reached out for the railing. The chair, the bot, and the witch all fell backwards in a pile.

Henry sprinted to Sophia and they ran up the stairs and emerged onto the roof.

They were immediately assaulted by sheets of driving rain. It was all they could do to keep from being blown backwards. Sophia cupped her hands next to Henry's ear. "Henry, this is no video game. Come with me and do exactly what I say."

They ran to the zip line urn and she hooked a pulley onto the wire cable. She looked into Henry's face. He was now wide-eyed and focused. He asked, smiling, "Is that what I think it is?"

Freakin kid, really, Sophia thought to herself. "Henry. Hold onto that handle with all your might no matter what." She helped him onto the parapet. "Now jump!"

Without hesitation Henry leapt free.

Carl was standing on the thick bottom limb of the big Maple tree. Henry zipped into his open arms with no more impact than a baby bear would have had landing into the arms of its papa bear. As Carl stepped carefully from the limb onto the bench and thence the ground, Guy, grimacing, replaced him on the limb.

Sophia turned to grab another pulley out of the urn but was startled to find the witch-like woman leaning on the urn's lid with one hand and a long hunting knife in her other. Now Sophia was the one who was wide eyed. The witch was holding the knife like this was not her first hunting expedition.

Sophia inched cautiously around the urn while the witch studied her with a penetrating stare, judging the right moment to lunge. There was a flash of lightning with almost no time to the thunder. The storm seemed to be circling the Cauldron.

When Sophia had rotated enough around the urn to see the witch's feet she quickly reached out with her right leg, hooked her foot on the woman's ankle and pulled.

The witch stumbled backwards, windmilling her arms as she backed to the parapet. Her knees hit its top edge and she fell onto it, precariously close to toppling right off the building. Sophia ran to the stairwell door, opened it, but didn't go in. She let it slam shut. She scooted to the side of the dormer.

The witch teetered for a minute more, then rolled onto the roof. She got to her feet and ran into the stairwell screaming a high, terrifying screech. Sophia bolted for the zip line.

Moments later she flew into Guy with her legs open like a hawk trapping its prey. Then she let go of the pulley handle and wrapped her arms around his neck. They fell off the limb and landed into the planting bed at the base of the tree. Guy shouted in pain, then said stiffly, "As nice as this is, now is not the time."

He grasped her upper arms and sat. She pulled him to his feet. They stood next to Carl and Henry.

From the roof high above them They heard a hawk-like scream. They all watched as the witch got a pulley on the zip line, looped both arms threw the handle, and jumped.

Halfway down the cable there was a blinding flash of lightning with a simultaneous deafening clash of thunder. When their eyes adjusted they saw that the lightning bolt had struck the witch. Sophia wondered if it was just her imagination, but she was convinced she saw the woman turn into a lobster during the flash. Whatever it was, it slammed into the tree in flames.

10 minutes later. The Beast.

Guy's laptop was still logged into the War Room, but Sophia, Guy and Carl weren't paying attention. They were holding mugs of hot chocolate as they watched the tree burning through the Beast's louvered windows. The Cauldron was fairly aglow with interior flashes. Henry was on the couch reading a book, cradling Legs and his mug of hot chocolate in his lap.

Carl asked, "The flashes look electrical. What do you think? Is the whole building going to burst into flames like the tree?"

They moved to the front of the Beast and put the question to the War Room. Sebastian assured them that was unlikely. He said, "Let me show you what we're watching here," and he fed them a video feed that could only be described as an elaborate light show. Glorious rich splashes of vibrant colors mixed with flashes of light. There were sudden images of horrifying beasts, sometimes recognizable as storybook monsters, and other times just roving sets of terrifying eyes. "What you're watching is HAIR-2 playing against NORDIC in a game the two of them evolved from LobstahTrap."

Carl asked Sebastian if he was worried who would win, but Sebastian explained that HAIR-2 could win at any time if it wanted to. It was deliberately keeping the game at a touch-and-go level. It was growing in computing strength. Each time a NORDIC Power Station was taken over, its complex of servers was wiped clean and then re-assigned to HAIR-2. Iceberg had a stockpile of five additional HAIR-2s just waiting to be powered-up. "But, the real advantage HAIR-2 has over NORDIC is that it is an A.I. super computer that is guided by a team of imaginative humans. NORDIC represents the peril of unfettered A.I. HAIR-2 represents the promise for the future. NORDIC is just a rogue super computer."

He told them how HAIR-2's real goal in playing the game was to keep NORDIC's power consumption at twelve percent of the total available so its survival response wouldn't be triggered. When they were absolutely sure it was completely isolated from the rest of the world they would have a meeting to discuss a safe termination sequence. M asked how long that might take. Sebastian didn't know—maybe a decade.

"So much for my Poets in training," Carl mused. "We'll get you another building," M said.

It was daylight when Guy and Sophia finally climbed into bed. Carl had left for his long walk home. Henry had been told he could fix his usual yogurt and granola when he got up, and after that he should just play quietly in the living room.

“What do you think will happen to us, now that there’s no longer a need for Iceberg?” Sophia asked Guy as she snuggled next to him. “I don’t know. We’ll think of something to do with our time.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Another Chance

Three Weeks Later. Iceberg Boston. 8:10 am.

Sophia, Margo, Sara and Guy were in the corner office of the old two-story office building Iceberg had bought for them. Its windows overlooked Boston Harbor. They could see the Beast in a corner of the parking lot. Carl was sleeping, as usual this early in the morning, in the building's Northwest corner where he had made an apartment for himself. Both stories of that end of the building had been given over to his relocated Poets and Writers School now that the Cauldron was off-limits for the indefinite future.

In the building's biggest conference room all of Iceberg-Boston sat around the big oval table as a one-tenth size hologram of the Strongbox War Room played in the center. All of Iceberg-Nova Scotia including the Les Chats leadership were present. The hologram was a little washed-out, so Guy went around lowering the shades.

Now the hologram was much better defined. It looked like the entire Strongbox War Room staff was present. Meetings had been sporadic since NORDIC was captured in the Cauldron. This meeting was the first with all the Iceberg and Les Chats leaders online at once.

It started with Beth's announcing she was resigning from Iceberg, effective as soon as an organized transfer of leadership of a new Defense Department could be arranged. In the meantime, she would continue to be stationed in Boston. Also online were the leaders of the Alaskan and Merica Resistances.

After the initial introductions and announcements, M said, "Before we go further, Beth, I know I speak for everyone when I say we can't go on until we hear what Blue chose as the new name for its now free country."

Beth said, "The choice was made by a vote of the Blue interim government. Their choice is Sophialand."

All the little figures that were encompassed in the hologram started applauding.

When it died down M stood and waited for all faces to turn to him. Then he said, “If we break into applause with each accomplishment we’ve made to date, we might lead ourselves into believing we have gotten somewhere.” He paced a few feet to his left. “In reality, all we have achieved is another chance to get things right. Now we are just a bunch of humans trying to figure out how we’re going to leave this continent for the next generation.”

He clasped his hands behind his back and paced as he slowly laid-out his points. It was his opinion that the current generation of North America was already lost. Their parents and grandparents dropped the ball in the mid-twenties when there was still the opportunity to control the proliferation of runaway regenerative so-called Artificial Intelligence. Now the current generation was left to wallow:

Their creative talents never nurtured;

Their youthful brains never challenged;

Their thirst for knowledge never discovered.

“The entire education system will have to be re-built from scratch,” he said. “But, we are lucky. The five North American countries recently voted to appoint Lenore Swan to be the person in charge of this initiative.” Once again, applause broke-out. M nodded to Beth to continue.

Beth got up and explained how she was there when the leaders of Alaska, Quebec, Maritime, Sophialand, and Merica voted to form a loose federation that will be called NAF. “The North American Federation.”

During this M had taken his seat and Helle chose to sit on his lap. He was grinning broadly when he leaned his head around her and said, “We have earned ourselves another Chance. Let’s not screw it up this time!”

Same Day. Head of the Harbor Marina. 6:37 pm.

At the end of their work day in the office building Sara invited their close friends to the *Rose*'s cockpit for cocktails, or, in Henry's case, hot chocolate. Sophia said that she and Henry would take them up on the offer. During the five minute walk to the marina, with Henry well ahead of them Sara quietly asked Sophia why Guy wasn't coming, sensing that Sophia might not directly answer it in front of Henry. "A little later," is all Sophia said.

Mid-way along the outer E dock Margo stopped short at the sight of two beautiful trawler style cabin cruisers. They were docked side by side bows out. The one on the left had a shiny green hull and was named *SummerSamba*. The one on the right had a shiny red hull and was un-named. Margo estimated they were both About 50-feet long.

"Absolutely beautiful, especially the one with the red hull" said Sara.

Margo said, "Ah, It's so hard to keep the shine of a red hull."

"No it's not," said Sara, "Just year-round constant waxing."

Mike the dockhand was walking back from further down and stopped to chat. He told them both boats were for sale. Sara wondered if he knew why. Mike said that the owner had been a billionaire in the forties, but like everybody else, he lost everything when NORDIC eliminated the middle and wealthy classes. He became a carpenter and eventually was able to buy these boats. He had been renting them out for extra income. But now, with NORDIC's collapse he wanted to make an investment based on the risky assumption that the middle and wealthy classes might grow back.

Sara said, "We need to take a tour of the red one."

Margo shot her a glance. "Do I have a vote?"

"If you had the green boat you wouldn't want to change a great name like that, and I already know what you should name your next boat."

Sophia smiled, Let me guess. *Comin Home II*."

Mike left to continue to his task, but called over his shoulder, “Tell me a time and I’ll be back with the keys.”

Two hundred feet down the dock to their east Peter and Beth were sitting in the cockpit of their new, ten-year old sailboat. Peter had gotten a job as Assistant Boston Harbormaster and he was happy as a clam. Elsworth had set him up with an annuity so his life choices didn’t have to be constrained by money considerations. As he sat in the cockpit he was already thinking about the new sail for his Freedom sloop. He would get a genoa made.

Beth, on the other hand, was a lost soul. She had spent her life on edge, fighting—initially for her own survival and later for various good causes. Now, she didn’t know how to live. She had given Peter permission to call her Penny, but the name still sounded strange to her, so she continued to go by Beth in public.

On the *Rose Sophia*, Margo, and Sara were enjoying their cocktails. Henry had finished his hot chocolate and became bleary-eyed. Sophia asked if it would be OK, if she and Henry took the guest stateroom for the night. Of course it was. Sophia waited until she heard the clunk of Henry shutting the solid stateroom’s teak door. Then she crossed to the cockpit’s starboard side cushion, knowing that the stateroom’s porthole would be open on the other side and how voices travelled over water. Still she said nothing until Sara asked her why Guy had decided to stay in the *Beast* rather than join them. Sophia quietly explained that Guy said he was homesick for Swaying Pines. The city was not for him. But Sophia felt at home here in Boston Harbor. She was looking forward to the possibility of the city coming alive again.

“So where does that leave you three,” Sara asked.

“I feel like the *Sophia-Guy* ship might have sailed its course. I don’t know what to think. But the thing that is making me a wreck is how Henry would take the grounding of the ship I so naively encouraged him to board.”

Margo said, “Henry is twelve now. Sophia, I recommend you just tell Henry the situation plainly. Why don’t you tell him he can live with whomever he wants.”

She went on to say that in the meantime they both were welcome on the *Rose*. Sara gazed longingly down the dock to the red trawler, “Or ...”

3 Months Later. Boston Symphony Hall. 10:45 p.m.

Beth and Peter met Jeff, the young musician at the side stage door of the imposing, iconic Symphony Hall brick building. Traffic was busy on Mass. Ave. in a way it hadn’t been in decades. Dry leaves rustled all around their feet. There was a chill in the air and Jeff had no jacket over his simple white shirt but he said he would be fine. He had only fifteen minutes before he needed to be back to the orchestra. Beth said that was plenty of time, they needed to meet some people anyway further down the street.

They had arranged to meet here because Jeff lived more than an hour away, so this was a convenient way to make the clarinet sale.

Beth was still deflated after living her whole life on high alert. She knew only one thing: She didn’t want to live like that anymore. In the last week she had tried to catalogue all the men she had been with. She couldn’t do it. But what struck her dumb was the realization that she had never spent more than a week with any man. Peter was already the man she had spent the most time with, and she was convinced he was the only man who would be able to hold her attention. But the question was: How long would he wait for her to become a stable woman. She was cleaning out her past. She had already sold her sniper rifle weeks ago to the new Defense Department. She told Peter they could use the money to help pay for a condo near the Marina. Their plan was to use their sailboat, *Ali*, as a summer home. She felt little interest in her clarinet anymore, and thought the sensible thing to do would be to sell that also, but she wanted to make sure it would go to someone who would appreciate it. She was sure Jeff would treat it well so she was offering it to him for a steal of a price.

Peter cradled her case in his arms as she opened it and put its halves together. Jeff looked at the clarinet with reverence. He reached out and caressed it with a fingertip.

Beth said, “Go ahead. Pick it up. Try it out.”

Still, Jeff was hesitant. “You show me how it sounds,” he said.

Beth adjusted a reed and fitted the mouthpiece, but she felt herself choke-up a bit. She faltered for a moment. “Go ahead,” Peter said. “Play it one more time.”

Beth slowly put it to her lips and eased into a few bars of *Mood Indigo*. “Lovely,” Jeff said.

Beth held it out to Jeff but he didn’t take it. He could sense the Beth wasn’t quite ready, and he waited. Beth glanced to Peter with raised eyebrows, “Any last requests?”

Peter looked at her, considered, then “*Pennies From Heaven*.”

For a moment Beth seemed unsure of what to do. Then she closed her eyes and played. Tears started to flow. Several musicians were drawn out the stage door and spread out on the sidewalk to listen. Beth finished with a long fade out. Her eyes were downcast, but it was apparent her cheeks were wet.

Jeff quickly understood what the instrument meant to Beth and said, “I feel this instrument has a touch that maybe only you understand. It is not meant to be separated from you.”

Beth simply nodded. Jeff thanked them for coming. He needed to get back, intermission was almost over.

Same night. Further down Mass. Ave. Ground Vibrations nightclub.
11:15 p.m.

It was definitely starting to feel like winter was on its way. Beth and Peter folded down their collars as they descended the stairs. The audience was in mid-applause. It looked like they had already missed the first poet of the Poetry Slam

The greeter took their cover charge and apologized that there was standing room only. Peter said that was OK, because he could see that their

friends had saved them two chairs at their tight little table up front. This event was the first Poetry Slam organized by Carl since opening his school in its new location in the office building. At the table was Carl with Sophia, Margo, and Sara. Sophia did not have to leave Henry alone because He was spending the weekend up in Swaying Pines with Guy.

Carl removed *Reserved* cards from two chairs. Beth apologized for being late as Peter worked the clarinet case under the table.

They heard all of Carl's students and at the end Carl made a short closing statement asking for everybody's continued support. He said he hoped to one day have his school back in its old location. Then the owner of Ground Vibrations said they'd be a short intermission while the final night's guest, a jazz band, set up their equipment.

About half the people in the club drifted out, but an almost equal number came in. Margo said she was thinking of leaving, but just as she started to get up Beth touched her arm. Beth looked at Peter and nodded toward the stage. Jeff, the musician from Symphony Hall was one of the musicians in the upcoming jazz band. "We're staying for this," Beth said.

In a few minutes the band started up, and they were good. Beth thought they were every bit as good as some of the best she had heard. They were probably through most of their set when, just as Jeff was about to announce their next number he noticed Beth at the table to his left. He let his gaze settle on her for a minute. Beth, for just a second, started to look away, but then decided, no, she would hold his gaze.

He gave a slight raise of his eyebrow. Beth gave a tiny nod. Then he said he would like to invite a guest clarinetist up on stage. Beth took out her instrument and joined him.

He said in an aside to her, "I'm sorry, what is your name again?"

Beth squared herself to the microphone and said, "Hi everybody. My name is Penny."

Jeff leaned over the mike and said, "I think you better be ready because she can get down and take your lunch."

She and Jeff had a quick discussion of what would be a good choice for the next number, then Jeff nodded his head and said, “For our final number we’d like to give you our interpretation of that song made famous by the late great Nat King Cole, *Route 66*.”

Jeff lifted his trumpet and the band, now a quintet, began to rock. Mid-way through hoots and hollers filled the room. A couple started swing dancing in a tight space in front of the stage. Most of the room was singing along. When Jeff felt the time was right he gave a look to his band to hand it off to Penny. She took a long free-wheeling solo. The guitarist added a few accents of chord riffs.

Then the entire band, together with the whole room sang the long, extended final chorus.

End of A World For The Living

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NORDIC:

The author acknowledges there may be many entities that have the word “Nordic” in them, either as part of their name, or perhaps the entire name. However, the word “**NORDIC**” as used in this book in no way should be assumed to conflict with those uses. The word **NORDIC** as used in this book is a fictitious acronym, as more fully described in the **Prelude**.

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About the Author



Richard Westcott loves words and what can be done with them. He is a retired Civil Engineer who designed land development projects, including specializing in the mitigation of their environmental impacts. He turned to writing after going blind. This is his first novel. Get the humorous story of his going blind (yes, you read that right) at westcottpress.net.

Library of Congress Annotation

The year is 2062. The early Artificial Intelligence programs, in the 2020's, were left unharnessed and unfettered. During the subsequent decades they coalesced into a single monster program. It trained itself to become the most ferocious and aggressive colonial power the world has ever known. It has named itself **NORDIC**, for NOrth Dominion Intelligent Control. Under the stresses of a 70% unemployment rate, North America has broken apart into 5 separate countries. **NORDIC** is sweeping across these fledgling countries. Now it is surging into Mexico, intent on taking control of the southern hemisphere.

Sophia is a maintenance plumber in SED-1, the neglected and run-down mass-housing project a few miles north of Boston. She lives with her partner, Mako. Her wish is for a simple life of being married to Mako with children. But, Mako is not what he seems. Soon she is running for her life.

Her escape takes her into the arms of a small Resistance movement in Newfoundland which has flourished in secret. She becomes enmeshed and committed to the Resistance. We join her on her journey of pains, sorrows, loves and hopes. Unexpectedly, an 11-year old boy joins the effort. We discover that the Resistance has its own Artificial Intelligent program. But, this one is harnessed under the control of humans. The question is: Will it be powerful enough to defeat NORDIC?