

The LieDeck Revolution

Jim Stark

v1.0 by the N.E.R.D's.

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People tell (on average) 200 lies every day, new research suggests.... “Society would fall apart if we were honest all the time,” says American psychologist Gerald Jellison, of the University of Southern California. “Society would be terrible if people started telling the truth. Anyone who did would be a subversive.”

Ottawa Citizen, April 7, 1997

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Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

The Ninth Commandment, from the Bible

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Whoever is careless of the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important affairs.

Albert Einstein

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Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16, 2014

Chapter 1

BANG ON EVERY TIME

Victor Helliwell had a powerful distaste for *Homo sapiens*—an acquired distaste. He drove a cab, which explained the chronic pain in his lower back, the little village of hemorrhoids that made even sitting a misery, and his dark attitude towards “human beans,” as he liked to call them when he felt charitable.

Back in 2002, when Victor first pinned his laminated photo to the faded sun visor of a taxi, he was still a young man, only twenty-nine, with a full head of hair and fire in the belly. He had every confidence that his *real* work, the work that devoured his off-hours, would take only a year or two to complete. The day he signed up at Blue Line, he had rented a freshly painted farmhouse south of Ottawa and purchased a little white ball of fluff called Lucky, a purebred Samoyed puppy. Now, the farmhouse was in serious need of another coat, and Lucky had died—of old age. “Setbacks,” he'd tried to call them over the years. There had been too many to count, almost too many to bear, and driving cab had become more a way of life than a way of coping.

Yet here he was, sitting in the cavernous backseat of Senator Cadbury's limo, gliding over the Champlain Bridge from Ottawa to Gatineau, in *la belle province*. Victor had crossed this bridge a thousand times, a

loser in the business of delivering winners from wherever they were last to wherever they wanted to go next.

He knew there were man-eating bumps from coast to coast, but on this day, the potholes might as well have been warm butter patties. Unlike car #17, his regular cab, there were no rattles or thunks here, and hardly a purr from the engine. Best of all, there was no meter whining for another dollar every twenty-seven seconds, as allowed by law. Some authority had apparently decided that passengers of this luxury liner were above paying for their transport at all, deserving of deep-pile upholstery, allowed to roll to their destinations without having to press pedals or chew out the world's idiots and slowpokes. A symphony orchestra hid behind a state-of-the-art speaker system, ready to perform at the touch of a button, and the power windows were tinted just enough to filter out the odors of the masses.

He massaged the fingers on his left hand, stubby fingers that jutted out of an unsigned plaster cast. "God," he said absently, "life will never be the same."

"I'm ... sorry, sir?" inquired the chinless chauffeur, with a slight toss of the head that let his ears hear better but kept his eyes glued to the tarmac.

"Nothing," said Victor. *I really must stop speaking my thoughts out loud*, he scolded himself privately.

There were chunks of broken river sliding silently under the bridge, jostling for position, squishing the littler white clumps into slush, helplessly drifting towards the Atlantic, oblivious to the self-absorbed sliver of humanity that passed overhead. Some of the slabs were as big as a bus. *A flat bus, at any rate*, he thought as he stared at the frigid procession below. "Or a flat van," he said aloud, unconsciously.

"I'm sorry, sir?" said the chauffeur, with the same toss of the head and the same modest level of interest.

"The ice," Victor explained. "I was just thinking that some of those floes are the size of a van."

"Well, perhaps a flat van," said the chauffeur dryly.

A fine set of ears, thought Victor, with a crooked smile. Humor was something he'd missed during those twelve lost years. Oh, there was no end to the dirty jokes down at the cabbie shop, but that wasn't the same as actual humor. He had long ago stopped laughing at sitcoms, and to him, people were ... well, they just weren't very funny.

"What's Whiteside like?" he asked.

"He's a prince," said the chauffeur. "Mind you, it doesn't pay to get into a tussle with him."

"He freaks out?" asked Victor, forgetting for a moment that he no longer had to limit himself to the lexicon of the brotherhood. "I mean ... he has a bad temper?"

"Not to worry," assured the driver. "You have to act like a real jerk before he—uh—freaks out, as you put it."

Not to worry, Victor repeated in his mind, looking at the endless parade of flat vans through smoked windows. *My life is in danger, and this guy with no chin says not to worry.*

The Champlain Bridge had two spans, rumbling rapids beneath, and a smallish island marking the mid-point. On the island was an overpriced restaurant, Chez Gaston. Victor had often picked up or dropped off fares at Chez Gaston, and it wasn't his favorite call. Every driver knew the economic facts of life: Rich folk—even those barely able to afford Gaston's haute cuisine—were lousy tippers. *That's what I need*, he said to himself, *my own island.*

"Aren't you curious about why Senator Cadbury asked you to take an ordinary guy like me to the Royal Oaks to meet a big shot like Randall Whiteside?" he asked.

"Not at all."

"Liar, liar," sang Victor, in the manner of a child.

"Maybe a little."

"Pants on fire."

"Have it your way," sighed the chauffeur. "If you don't tell me what's going on, I'll stop the car and bust your other arm with a tire iron. Satisfied?"

"Yep," replied the improbable passenger, and nothing more.

To the west, the sun was hovering about twenty degrees over the Ottawa River, waiting to dive into oblivion for another ten-hour snooze. *Not a bad idea*, considered Victor as he leaned back and allowed his eyes to close. He had worked the graveyard shift the night before, enduring the usual assortment of drunks, druggies and deadbeats. Normally he would be dreaming at this hour, or just crawling out of bed, preparing for another nine-to-nine shift behind the wheel. Of course, had he been dreaming, he might well have been dreaming about this, about making his move, at long last.

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As the limousine eased into the parking lot of the Royal Oaks Golf and Country Club, Randall Byron Whiteside had just finished a feast of rare roast beef. He passed on the dessert tray, as usual, then slapped his beach-ball stomach and peered over half-moon reading-and-eating glasses as his wife kibitzed with the kids about whether fourteen-year-old Sarah usually ate faster than her nine-year-old sister Julia, "Gobbleguts." He had spent his adult life struggling to nurture and expand the corporate empire known as Whiteside Technologies, the robust network of interlocking corporations that dominated the Canadian electronics industry and played fairly effectively below the 49th parallel, as well as across the two big ponds that cradled his home nation. While he gave himself full credit and top marks on that front, he counted himself plain lucky to have a fun-loving, normal family in spite of the myriad stresses and burdens of the moneyed class.

"Okay, hon," he said loudly. "The pro opened the driving range this morning now that the snow's almost all gone. Me and Mikeyface are going to hit a bucket of balls before the sun sets—a half hour or so. We'll keep the limo here. My sticks are in the trunk. The agency will take you and the girls back home. We'll have a game of ping-pong in an hour or so, okay kids?"

"Dad," complained Michael, "I'm eighteen and I'm off to university in a few months. Could we lose the 'Mikeyface' bit for—oooooh—like the rest of my life?"

"My son, my son," said Whiteside. "You beat the crap out of me out on the course and I'll never call you Mikeyface again. Until then, tough bananas. Us gazillionaires aren't supposed to be that nice, you know. We're supposed to eat our young and—"

"Excuse me for interrupting your dinner, Mr. Whiteside," said the maître d' as discreetly as he could.

"It's all right, Charles," Whiteside allowed. "We're finished. What is it?"

"There's a—uh—gentleman from Ottawa who is determined to see you. He says he'll only talk to you. He insists that Senator Cadbury sent him over. Your security chief, Ms.—uh—"

"Kozinski, Helen Kozinski."

"Yes, well this ... gentleman wouldn't tell her what it was all about, so when I was called in—that was maybe forty minutes ago—I listened to his story—or what little he would tell me—and I wasn't about to interrupt your meal, so I asked him to wait in the library, but if you'd rather I can just—"

"Thanks, Charles," said Whiteside. "You did the right thing. I owe the senator a couple of doozies. Come on, Mikeyface. This won't take long. See you at home, hon?"

It sounded a lot like a question, but it wasn't, and "hon" put on her lopsided mug, the one with the circumpolar eye-roll. This scurrying-off routine was typical of the man she loved to pieces but wanted to strangle six days a week. She could remember a hundred other outings that had been unilaterally waylaid by an unexpected business deal or by some emergency at the charitable foundation that her husband virtually owned.

"Sure 'nuff, okay boss," she said in a tone he knew well. "Macho golfers go to jungle, bring home birdies and bogies for cook in black pot. Ooga booga."

Sarah always laughed at her mother's "ooga booga" routine, and little Julia giggled uncontrollably whenever Sarah cracked up. They loved it when Mom stood up to Dad in public, especially if she could make him blush. It was almost as much fun as hanging out at the tennis courts, ogling the hunks—or pretending to ogle hunks, in Julia's case.

Randall Whiteside peeked at the adjacent tables and was relieved to see that the other diners were minding their own business, or pretending to. "Honey," he scolded gently.

Doreen Elizabeth Dawe-Whiteside relented, as always. She'd seen her man cry real tears. She'd seen him grow from a gangly, blond boy with runaway hormones to an aspiring grandfather. She'd seen him vilified as a bleeding-heart liberal and/or a union-busting Hun, she'd seen him fêted, roasted and toasted as an industrial wunderkind and a pillar of everything except salt, and through it all, he'd been a sensitive, decent human being—and a pain in the ass. He was the way he was.

"We'll go home and do girl stuff," she muttered. "I hope we *do* see you later, sweetheart, but I'm not going to sit on my hands waiting."

"Oink oink!" said Sarah in the general direction of her dad.

"Oink oink oink oink!" mimicked Julia, with her tiny chin jutted out and her eyes scrunched into playfully accusing slits.

"Hush, Julia," said Doreen as her eyes darted around the dining room. "We're not at home."

Randall kissed his wife on the cheek and whispered "I love you" in her ear. Forgiveness, although not instantaneous, would be assured. There were kisses for the girls too, and not for show, either.

"The man," as he was often called by the financial media, was in a bulletproof mood as he strode down the red-carpeted, wood-paneled hallway with an arm around his son's shoulders. He always looked forward to smacking balls in April. It signaled the defeat of snow for yet another year, the beginning of the only Canadian season he had any real use for, golf season.

As they passed through the foyer, they were joined in lock step by Cameron O'Connor, Whiteside's longtime right-hand man and the titular head of Patriot Security, a key piece of the corporate empire. "The fellow's name is Thomas Victor Helliwell—goes by Victor," said O'Connor with his typical air of urgency. "He wouldn't tell Helen anything—that's why I took over. He's forty-one, single, a cab driver, of

all things. He's got a mustache and he's wearing a black bowling jacket, and he's got a cast on his left arm, from his knuckles almost to the elbow. The thing that gets me is he seems scared, afraid of something. I'm not comfortable with this whole deal. I recommend an appointment at the office, tomorrow, so we can figure out what his game is."

"He said he'd only talk to me?" asked Whiteside, without missing a step and with the full snap of authority in his voice.

"Well, that's true, but it's my feeling that—"

"And he's scared?"

"Well, from the way he—"

"And Senator Joe sent him over?"

"That's what he says, but—"

"Then I'll see him, Cam."

One thing about Whiteside; once he'd made up his mind, that was pretty well it. Cam O'Connor came from a distinguished family and had a PhD in chemistry. He could never quite adjust to having his advice dismissed like so much New Age drivel. On the other hand, he had built a university friendship with Whiteside into a very rewarding thirty-year career, from Patriot administrator to principal advisor to "the man." He bit his tongue and reminded himself that it was Randall Whiteside who signed the paychecks.

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Since the interrogations by Helen Kozinski and Mr. O'Connor, Victor had been standing alone in a room filled with antiques—antique lamps, antique furniture—the things, he imagined, that made antique people feel good. He had visually taken in every section of the ceiling-high bookshelves, and wondered when those unreachable tomes at the top had last seen light on their ancient pages. He had leafed through the carefully arranged *Wall Street Journals*, impeccably written, he supposed, in the holy language of the well heeled—Greek to him. He had leaned on the windowsill and absorbed the sun's reflection from the Ottawa River. He had gazed at the steep brown bluffs on the Ontario side, at the gray Parliament Buildings above the bluffs, at the famous and phallic Peace Tower, with its oxidized copper cap and the ever-present red and white maple leaf flag on top, wiggling patriotically.

He looked down at the black marble sill he'd been leaning on with his good hand and noticed that he'd left a smudge. He glanced at the door, pulled the sleeve of his bowling jacket over the butt of his right hand, breathed on the print, and rubbed furiously until the area was as shiny and perfect as the rest of the sill. He felt awkward to find himself in this bastion of Anglophone power and privilege. He knew he didn't belong in this elitist club any more than it belonged in the aggressively francophone city of Gatineau. He wasn't dressed properly, for one thing, but he had decided earlier that he should blend out of the field of vision of those who mattered for this one, final time.

Whiteside walked into the library, smiled broadly, and held out his hand as he would for any old friend. "I'm Randall Whiteside," he said cheerily. "This is my son, Michael, and you've met my friend and colleague, Cameron O'Connor."

Throughout his illustrious career, Whiteside had placed a great deal of trust in his own first impressions. This chap should have had hoagie crumbs on his shirt or brown teeth or scuffed shoes—some sort of professional badge. His attire was dumpy enough to make him resemble a thousand other hapless hacks, but something in his bearing hinted at a touch of class. His fingernails were immaculate, no different from

those of the aesthetically obsessed Cam O'Connor, even on the fingers that stuck out of the frayed plaster cast.

After everyone had done the obligatory handshake, Whiteside asked his visitor about the cast.

"I got mugged," said Victor. "Six weeks ago. This will be on for another day or two," he added, clunking the knuckles of his right hand on the cast. "It—uh—hurt pretty bad for a while there."

"Sorry to hear it," said Whiteside, with as much sincerity as he felt was appropriate. "So, Mr. Helliwell, what's on your mind?"

"Thanks for seeing me," he replied. "I'm sorry to just drop in on you this way, sir, but I'm afraid I'll have to ask if we could speak in private, just for one minute. Would it be all right if ... would you two, uh, mind if...?"

At least the broken bowler has manners, thought Whiteside. "One minute it is," he said as he glanced at his son and O'Connor, who indicated "no problem" with their eyes, and with their feet.

The clock on the cabbie started ticking as the door clicked closed. Victor sat on the arm of an easy chair and looked up into the heavily guarded eyes of Canada's most celebrated high tech entrepreneur and big league philanthropist. Here was a man who would understand, with no need for prancing preliminaries. Victor had been anticipating this meeting with Whiteside for the last three years, but now that the moment had finally arrived, all his mirrored rehearsals seemed pointless and trivial. *Just ... say it*, he told himself silently.

"I can tell if people are lying," he said flatly.

Whiteside scratched the underside of his chin and wondered if his golf pal Senator Cadbury had taken up an interest in practical jokes. "This isn't 'Candid Camera' or something like that?" he asked.

"No sir," said Victor, without blinking. "This is for dead real."

"You ... claim to know when people are lying," repeated Whiteside.

"Bang on every time ... one hundred percent accurate," confirmed Victor.

Whiteside sat down in a leather chair opposite, sucked in his lips, hooked his fingers together, and drummed his thumbs, one against the other. His forehead seemed to fold and unfold like living Venetian blinds, and his Brezhnev eyebrows performed a dance of doubt.

"And how, may I ask, do you manage that?" he inquired.

Victor rose from the arm of the chair and sat down properly, if only to put himself on the same level as his perplexed host. In his preparation for this encounter, he had mentally scripted a dozen different scenarios. In the end, he decided that he had to avoid answering the question of "how" until a contract was signed. He leaned forward and said, "Try me."

"Try you?" repeated Whiteside, with a disbelieving head-waggle.

"Tell me anything," invited Victor calmly. "Anything at all. I'll tell you whether it's true or false."

Whiteside studied the strangely confident man. He sensed pride, but not the false pride that he knew as the trademark of the small time rip-off artist. The thing that surprised him most was that he didn't smell the fear that Cam O'Connor had sensed. Whiteside had wasted a lot of his youth playing poker, and he

hadn't let the habit lapse because he lost money—only because he lost the joy of winning small amounts from people who hated to lose, or couldn't afford to lose. If this was a poker face he was looking at, it was one of the best he'd ever seen. If he wanted to know more, it seemed clear he'd have to take up the challenge, call the man's bluff.

"My wife's maiden name is Bracken," he said.

"No sir, it's not," said Victor, "but I happen to know it's Dawe—from an article I read about you a couple of years back. Bracken was your mother's maiden name."

"Okay," said Whiteside as he shifted his considerable weight to the other cheek. "My maternal grandmother's middle name was Faith."

"So it was."

"My wife broke her—uh—big toe on our honeymoon."

"Yes, she did." Victor smiled inwardly at the way Whiteside had tried to throw him off by hesitating just before he said "big toe."

"I had salmon for dinner tonight."

"No, you didn't."

"The stock market will be going up tomorrow."

"Nice try," chuckled Victor. "I wish it worked like that, but if it did, I wouldn't need you, would I?"

Rhetorical questions weren't Whiteside's favorite thing, but the banged-up taxi driver had a point. "My tennis partner cancelled our game for Saturday," he tried.

"Yes, he did."

"I have to have an operation on my leg."

Victor paused for this one. He knew he had it, but he also realized that this would be the turning point, the response that Mr. Whiteside would remember best and talk about for years to come. "You have to have an operation," he said deliberately, "but ... it's not your leg that's bothering you."

Whiteside was both amazed and concerned. His medical condition wasn't serious—he needed a polyp removed from his colon—but still, it *was* a closely guarded secret, so that rumors wouldn't affect stock prices. He leaned forward, locked his hands in an isometric stalemate, and gave Victor a taste of his famous "eyes-of-fire" treatment. *Time for a curve.*

"The Earth's temperature is rising because of pollutants in the atmosphere," he said.

The game was on, and the president of Whiteside Tech was a player's player, but Victor didn't need an oversized racquet to lob that one back. "I *can* confirm that you *believe* that," he said, "but as you know, not all scientists agree with the global warming theory. My—uh—ability doesn't help at all when it comes to opinions."

Whiteside was a scarred veteran of the marketplace, and he had no experience with "The Twilight Zone" except as a quaint novelty from last century, from the very early days of television. *Even if this guy's ability is limited to matters of fact, he thought, it's still uncanny.* He looked deep into Victor's eyes, and although he didn't detect the dark undercurrents of a con job, he felt unsettled by the way this

modern-day peasant was perceiving what no man should be able to know. He didn't want to believe what he was hearing, but it seemed that he had little choice. Still, the one-minute time limit he had established wasn't carved in anything more solid than his son's frustration, so he decided that the test should continue.

"I'm fifty-three years old," he said.

"The article about you in the *Ottawa Citizen* was a couple of years ago," said Victor. "It said you were fifty-three back then, so..."

"And if it was printed in the *Citizen*, it must be true?" suggested Whiteside.

Victor caught the mild dig at the local rag. "Yes sir," he answered sarcastically.

Whiteside was pleased to see that the cabbie could give as good as he got. "If you can't laugh, you can't work here," he had always told his employees at the annual picnic. But this wasn't a time for playful barbs. He had expected this test to last ten seconds, tops, and he had yet to trip the man up.

"So ... how do you manage to do this ... thing?" he asked again, trying to put the game aside.

"True," said Victor, with a straight face.

Whiteside chuckled. "You can't blame me for trying," he said.

"False," judged Victor, with only the narrowest hint that he was teasing.

"Okay," laughed Whiteside, "let's get back on track. My personal limo is a Lincoln—white outside, gray inside."

"It's white outside, but it's not gray inside," corrected Victor.

"Is it blue inside?"

"You tell me."

"It ... is blue inside," said Whiteside.

"True."

"My golf handicap is thirteen."

"False."

"Ten."

"False."

"Twelve."

"True—not bad."

"Capitalism is morally correct."

"Opinion."

"I believe in capitalism."

"That's true."

"My father died on my eleventh birthday."

"True."

"My Aunt Elsa died of cancer."

"False."

"My Aunt Elsa is still alive."

"False."

"I failed chemistry in my first year of university."

"True."

"I think you're a phony."

"False, I'm pleased to say," Victor shot back without the slightest hesitation and with evident pleasure.

Whiteside folded, and stood. "Well," he admitted, "I believe you, and you seem to know it. So, where do we go from here? What do you want from me?"

This was a part of the script that Victor could never quite nail down. The truth was, what he wanted out of all this, personally, was beyond discussion at this point. He had thought about that for more than a dozen years, and often confused the hell out of himself trying to figure it out. He'd spoken aloud to himself in his cab, made tapes, dreamt about it and mulled it over in the concealed lab he'd built in the basement of his farmhouse. He could cough up a six-hour response to Whiteside's question, but at the end of the day, when philosophy, psychology, and sociology were set aside, he had to face a fact that he didn't quite like. "Hermits never learn to bargain in life," he had often said out loud to himself. "Or with it," he would usually add.

"As you may imagine," he began cautiously, "what I want is money. Millions, eventually. But what I need right now is protection—the services of your security outfit, Patriot."

"Protection?" said Whiteside as he reclaimed his seat.

"Yeah, starting now," said Victor seriously. "My skill at detecting lies is a valuable commodity, as I'm sure you realize. I'm not concerned that someone could steal it. It's just that a lot of people will be afraid of me, and it's my judgment that some of these people might do almost anything to make sure this ... shall we say this 'ability' of mine ... never surfaces. My life may be in danger even now, and I need to feel safe—be safe."

He stopped to reflect on his assessment, resentfully. The line between paranoia and prudence was difficult to define, and tricky to talk about without feeling sissified. *No*, he said to himself, *it isn't all in my mind*. The painful lessons of life were the most difficult ones to forget, and he knew too much about the sickness that was out there, the pandemic of greed and the mania for power that infected humanity, or much of it. There had been times when he'd wondered whether he should have stuck to a decision he had made six years ago, during a bout with depression, to keep his cakehole zipped up and let his secret die with him. This was one of those times, presumably the last.

"I'm here primarily to propose a business deal," he said deliberately, "but I'd also like to put my talent to

some good use, for the world. I know enough about your business and your character, and I've read about the work of your charity, the Destiny Foundation. Basically, I need someone like you to back me up—to make sure I don't get whacked, for starters—but more importantly, I need you to help me find a way, the best way, to share my special ability with others."

Whiteside felt his heart hiccup. "Are you saying that ... that anybody can learn to do what you do?" he asked.

"Piece o' cake," said Victor, with a shrug. "That's one reason why it's worth a lot of money."

Whiteside wondered again whether he might be jousting with the most gifted con artist that ever plied the trade. *If he's telling the truth, if anyone can acquire his talent, then he can't be a psychic*, he said to himself. *But if others did acquire this skill ... good Lord! Spies would be out of work, the powerful could fall like flies, religion might be kaput, corporations would crumble, governments could be toppled, and a whole lot of marriages could end up in the toilet. On the other hand, innocent people would never go to jail and the guilty would always ... almost always ... be caught and convicted.* His mind was swimming. This was too much to swallow in one gulp.

"Mr. Helliwell," he said intently, "how long would it take ... me, for instance ... to learn this skill?"

"About a minute," said Victor.

"One minute?"

"Less, actually."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding, and I happen to know that you don't even *believe* that I'm kidding," said Victor.

Randall Whiteside found this exchange as aggravating as it was fascinating. He wasn't at all sure he liked dealing with a person who could literally read his mind, or at least access his beliefs. But it also occurred to him that he wasted a lot of precious time in his life sweating to decipher the true intentions and veracity of other people, not only in his business dealings, but generally, just as he was doing at this very moment.

"And ... we would charge people to acquire this skill from us?" he asked.

"Essentially, yes."

"And ... say we teach some guy how to do it, what's to stop him from just teaching others and cutting us out?"

"You'll have to trust me on that one," said Victor. "It won't be a problem."

Whiteside had been leaning forward, but now he settled back in his chair, and in his mind. "You want me to trust you and go into business with you, but you won't even tell me how this skill works?" he asked accusingly.

"I'm afraid that's the way it has to be for now," said Victor. "But it's not a problem. Have your lawyers draw up a contract. You sign it, then I'll sign it, and then I'll tell you everything. We could wrap it all up by tomorrow evening, I'm sure."

"You think things can move that fast?" cracked Whiteside. "With *lawyers* involved!?"

"You have more than one lawyer," said Victor. "Put two of them on it tonight. Instruct one of them to

represent your interests, the other to represent mine, and tell them to negotiate a fair arrangement. I'd like a signing bonus, royalties, and a share of profits. You put the contract in front of me tomorrow, and I'll simply ask you if it's fair. You'll obviously say 'yes,' and I'll know if you told the truth. And assuming you tell the truth, I'll even promise to sign the thing without reading it."

Whiteside was dumbfounded. This guy had it all figured out. With his ability to discern the truth, trust was almost obsolete, unnecessary. "And ... if I do as you ask, Mr. Helliwell, I could have this skill mastered ... for myself ... by..."

"Like I said, less than a minute after we sign the contract."

Whiteside felt dizzy, and took a deep breath before he continued. "And—uh—how many people do you think would want to acquire this skill?"

"About five percent of the world's population, maybe a little more," said Victor. "At five percent, that would be about 300 million people, and that's just in the first three years of operation. Eventually, no one would even dream of going through life without this ability, and of course no one will ever dare to lie—about anything!"

Whiteside closed his eyes and went back to drumming his thumbs together on his lap. It was difficult to know for sure that he shouldn't be laughing ... or seeking psychiatric help. *Work it out as if it were real*, he recalled his father advising. His instincts rebelled, but his internal calculator told him that five percent in the short-term was probably realistic—depending on the price, of course. "And ... how much would we charge for this ... service?" he asked, opening his eyes again.

"About \$500 a person," said Victor. "We should set up for a \$100 profit per customer. If I realize this objective—I should say if *we* realize this objective—that translates into a pre-tax profit of \$30 billion over a three-year period, although I think my estimates are conservative." He paused briefly to consider whether he should go any further, and decided he should. "But you know, Mr. Whiteside, although you and I stand to make a great deal of money out of this, in the end, that may be the least of our accomplishments."

Whiteside studied Victor's face for clues and, finding none, he rose very slowly and walked over to the window, his hands now linked behind his back. Life was full of surprises, but he had just spent the last minute of his life talking about \$10-billion-a-year profits ... with a cab driver. *What's wrong with this picture?* he asked himself. He turned, sat on the ledge, and tried again to size up this eccentric man.

"If you're so all-fired concerned about the welfare of the planet," he asked sternly, "then what's all this stuff about wanting bags of money?"

"You know, sir," Victor said, "I've discovered a lot about myself since I perfected this ... thing. Some of my insights are wonderful, but others are disquieting. For instance, I've learned that I'm really quite a selfish person. I've never had any real money, and now I have to admit that I want some ... lots, actually. Maybe some day I'll be as generous with my wealth as you are with yours."

Whiteside pushed himself off the ledge, wandered over to an oil painting of one of the founders of the Royal Oaks and stared at the prickly face of his rum-running scoundrel of a great-grandfather. With his back still turned, he asked: "How did my friend Senator Cadbury run into you?"

"I'd heard him on the radio, seen him on TV," explained Victor. "He always speaks the truth. He's one of the most—"

Whiteside wheeled around. "You can do this trick off the TV?"

"No problem," said Victor plainly.

"You're putting me ... you've just *got* to be putting me on! You're ... you're..."

Randall Whiteside almost never lost control. His family life was disaster-free, comfortable, normal. His financial affairs were the envy of everyone. His high status in the business world was secure, respected, global. He'd made his peace with God while still in his teens, by dismissing Him, and he regarded angst as an affectation reserved for mental patients and existentialists. Now he had to cope with an overweight taxi driver who could take the measure a man's character off the damned TV. He felt his face flush, and his voice took on a shrill, panicky edge.

"You—uh—you really can tell, can't you?"

"I know it's hard to imagine, but yes, I can," said Victor. "So, as I was saying, I knew that you were good friends with Senator Cadbury, and he's perhaps the most honorable man I've ever analyzed. I paid a lobbyist \$1,800 to get me a ten-minute appointment with him on short notice ... all the cash I had, actually. I went to his office this afternoon at five o'clock, told him my story, showed off a bit—you know, like I did for you—and he kept me there for over an hour. I told him I had to meet you right away, but my problem was that you were inaccessible to the likes of me, so he told his—"

"I'm inaccessible?" sniffed Whiteside.

"What I mean," explained Victor, "is that I'd have to tell a dozen underlings what it was all about before I'd get to talk to you, and that wouldn't have been a smart thing to do ... for security reasons. In any event, Mr. Cadbury made a call and found out where you were and told his chauffeur to bring me over here to talk to you. Here's his card. He didn't want to talk about me over the phone, so he asked me to tell you that he'd like to hear back from you this evening, if that's possible. He's really anxious to know what you think of me."

Whiteside had heard enough. "Okay," he said, "here's the deal. When you or I share information about this with others, we do so strictly on a need-to-know basis, and we keep each other fully informed. I'll get the senator to do likewise. The only people that I'll involve on any other basis will be Cam O'Connor, and my wife, Doreen—I never hide anything from her—and..."

He saw Victor's eyebrows jump up a notch, and stopped himself.

"Jesus Christ that's disconcerting," he complained. "Let me rephrase that: I *rarely* hide anything from her."

"You're only human," said Victor reassuringly. "It's a big adjustment, I know, but I think—"

"And I'll tell my son, Michael," continued Whiteside. "I want him in on this. It's time he cut his teeth on a business venture, and he'll be out of school soon, for a few months. You don't have any objections to that, I trust?"

"Not at all," said Victor, as he stood up. "Not as long as he can keep a secret and—"

"We'll put you up at the manor—that's north of Quyon, in Québec—until we can firm up security at Wilson Lake. We have a lodge out there, at the east end of the estate. You can stay there for as long as you want, if that's okay with you. So, Mr. *potential* partner, will a handshake do until we check you out?"

"A handshake will do just fine," said Victor, "as long as I also have the protection I asked for from Patriot Security, and a good-faith down payment of fifty thousand dollars into this bank account—here,

I've written it down on a piece of paper—by tomorrow—shall we say—uh—noon?"

He stood, gave Whiteside the slip of paper, and held out his hand. He knew his offer was solid. Randall Whiteside cracked a coast-to-coast grin and shook the good hand of Thomas Victor Helliwell, his new partner in ... whatever.

"You sure as hell don't talk like no cabbie," he said, doing his very best imitation of common-speak.

"I'm not a cabbie," corrected Victor. "I'm now basically ... well, retired."

Whiteside let fly with one of his patented belly laughs and gave Victor a mock left-hook to the jaw. "Why right now, Victor, and why the hurry?" he asked as they walked towards the door of the library.

"Because I'm finally ready, because I think I understand what has to be done with this ... ability of mine, because I'm tired of keeping it a secret, because I'm tired of being so poor, because I'm sick of getting mugged, because there seems to be no end to terrorism, because the Cold War has started up again and the nuclear arms race is on again, because the world needs what I have ... you tell me when to stop, eh?"

Whiteside looked over the stout figure in the bowling jacket as if one more reality check might bring an Allen Funt III or Dom De Luise III leaping out from behind a two-way mirror. He glanced at the back of Cadbury's card and read the words "Remember the clones." The senator was still a tad bitter about not getting an early piece of the PC action twenty-five years earlier. He desperately wanted in on the ground floor this time around, probably for whatever his couple of million would buy.

"Cam, Michael, could you come in here a minute?" said Whiteside as he opened the door. "Boys," he bellowed, "you may congratulate me and Mr. Helliwell here. We have agreed in principle to a very important business deal. I'll tell you all about it in the limo.

"Michael, it doesn't look like we're going to make it to the driving range. Would you call Mom and tell her that Mr. Helliwell—Victor—will be our guest tonight? Cam, I'm sure you'd rather be at home watching the hockey play-offs, but could you double up security at the manor, effective immediately? And tighten up security at the lodge as well. Victor will be staying there for a while. Deposit fifty thousand dollars in this account, by noon tomorrow, and arrange for Victor to have an office down the hall from mine at HQ. Oh, and I'll have to meet with the legal team at the manor—ten o'clock tonight—the top two available guys. Don't take no for an answer. And Cam, I want you *and Helen* in on that meeting. Michael, Victor, let's go."

"Where to?" asked Victor into the teeth of Whiteside's torrent of instructions.

"The pro shop, to take your measurements," explained Whiteside. "And just call me Randall, okay?"

Chapter 2 THERE'S THE RUB

"Randall, I—uh—smoke," said Victor sheepishly as the limo rolled past a dilapidated wooden sign pointing towards the ferry landing at Quyon. "Is there any place I could buy a pack?"

"Pull in to Ray's, Helen," said Randall to the driver. "It's right at the turnoff for the estate," he explained to Victor.

Ray's Restaurant was a single story white box, thirty miles northwest of Ottawa, on the Québec side of the river. It was on the highway, one mile north of the town of Quyon, where most of its local customers came from, and two miles south of the Whiteside estate, where none of its customers ever came from,

not even for takeout. Ray's was one of those establishments that people in the area couldn't imagine being without, but in spite of the reliable patronage, a long succession of owners had found that making a profit from the restaurant was a tough assignment. The last two owners hadn't even bothered to put their names on a sign out front, almost as if they knew in advance that their run would last only a short while. The current owner was Ray Barr, a personable twenty-six-year-old would-be entrepreneur with teeth laid out by a drunken god.

Ray checked the pizza oven and came out of the kitchen to grab a sip of coffee and goof around with his regulars. "Lookee here," he said towards the window as he passed a comb through his prematurely thinning hair. "That's Whiteside's limo, isn't it?"

"The old man's slumming it tonight," said Merrick McFee, the redheaded owner of the un-busy garage that abutted onto the restaurant at the west side.

"Friggin' estate up at Wilson Lake is like a friggin' foreign country," said a hairy heavyweight called Buck Ash, loudly, from the corner table that he shared with Merrick McFee. "He gets louder by the beer," people in the region said about Buck.

"Friggin' estate is like a foreign country," mimicked young Bobby Thompson from a table on the other side of the cash, loud enough for his fellow ne'er-do-well Geoff Farley to hear, but not loud enough for Buck Ash to overhear. Bravado was one thing; getting into a tangle with "the Buck" was quite another.

The back door of the white Lincoln opened, and Victor got out. As he entered the restaurant, all the regulars studied their food, or their beer, or each other, except for stolen glances at the un-rich outsider in the black bowling jacket.

Victor slumped onto a red vinyl stool at the Arborite counter, clacking his cast down on the counter, whereupon the proprietor, or at least the young man that Victor assumed was the proprietor, promptly walked off into the kitchen. It seemed odd, even rude, but Victor decided to just wait.

* * *

"Grant, are you there?" asked Helen into the mike on the dash.

"Eamer here," said a voice over the radio. "I just flew back from the Oaks with Mr. O'Connor. What's up?"

"Victor Helliwell, the guy we met at the Oaks, he's in Ray's Restaurant on the 148, buying cigarettes. He's paranoid about security—he even talked to Mr. Whiteside about possibly getting whacked. We want to impress him. Take the chopper up and lead us in from here to the manor, okay?"

"Be there in about one-point-six minutes," said the pilot.

* * *

"Pack of Rothmans," said Victor politely as Ray returned to his post.

"On the wall, help yourself," said the young boss from behind the counter. "You didn't see it?"

"I was..." Victor was going to say that he *had* seen the cigarettes, but decided against it. A wooden frame with twenty cubbyholes was mounted on the wall, and each slot had a different brand of smokes in it, all right out in the open, as if people could be trusted. He had never seen anything like that, not even during his pre-nicotine childhood. He picked a pack, tossed it casually onto the counter, and dug out his wallet with his good hand.

"How much?"

Twelve forty,” said Ray, with a straight face.

Now why on Earth would this fellow lie about the price of a pack of cigarettes? he wondered. Twelve forty?” he inquired. “They’re only eleven eighty in Ottawa.”

“Well,” said Ray, planting an elbow on the cash register, “if you head on down the highway east there for about half an hour, you can save yourself sixty cents. O’ course we got a ten percent discount if you’re on welfare. You on the dole?”

Victor didn’t look up from his wallet or hear anything out of the ordinary, but he knew that if he turned around quickly, he’d see a lot of concealed smirks. There was no welfare discount policy at Ray’s, and the going price for a pack of cigarettes wasn’t \$12.40 either. This pretentious junior achiever was having him on.

“You work for Whiteside?” asked Ray as he scooped up the twenty Victor had slapped down, punched in \$12.40, and dinged open the old-fashioned till.

“We’re ... doing some business together,” said Victor, resenting the intrusive question.

“Bust your wrist?” asked Ray as he placed \$7.50 on the counter.

“Yeah,” said Victor as he retrieved his change and stood to leave. “I was parachuting, and I—uh—shouldn’t that be seven *sixty*?”

“Dreadful sorry, my mistake,” deadpanned Ray as he fished out a dime from the till and flipped it at his customer.

Victor tried to catch the dime, missed, and trapped it under his shoe as it bounced on the linoleum floor. He bent over and picked it up, and now the snickers of the locals were no longer suppressed. “Mistake my ass,” he mumbled as he headed for the door.

“You’re too fat to parachute,” volunteered old Jesse McCain from his table near the potato chip rack, under a framed photograph of last year’s tractor-pull. “Too old, too.”

“Well, maybe I fuckin’ lied,” spit Victor as he made good his escape.

“Nice move, Jesse,” scolded Claire Lapine, waitress extraordinaire.

“What?” protested Jesse toothlessly. “You—uh—trying to attract a better class of clientele?”

“He was on to you,” said Merrick McFee to Ray, ignoring the old coot by the chip rack. “He knew you overcharged him on purpose.”

“No way,” laughed Ray.

* * *

As Victor jogged back to the waiting limo, he ripped the cellophane from the Rothmans package and stuffed the wrapping into the pocket of his bowling jacket. A day earlier and he would have littered, but now he was in with a non-littering crowd—a non-smoking crowd, too—and he had to make adjustments. He put the full pack of smokes into his shirt pocket, resolving not to light up until it was unequivocally kosher to do so.

He glanced up in the direction of an approaching helicopter, and got back into the passenger compartment with Whiteside and his son. “All set,” he said, meaning about the cigarettes. “There’s a

heli—” He stopped himself in mid-noun as he pulled the door closed—no sense acting paranoid.

"Whitebird Three to limo," came Eamer's voice over the radio. "I've got you now."

"Lead us in, Grant," said Helen into the mike.

"What's a Whitebird?" asked Victor.

"You said you wanted security," said Randall, pointing out the window at the shiny white helicopter that was now hovering about five hundred yards in front of the limo.

Victor ducked his head down to see. The helicopter was turning and heading up the road in front of them, perhaps fifty yards above the asphalt. "Jeeze, you don't fool around!" he said.

The locals knew the Whiteside estate mostly as a lofty stone arch, a "fancy shmancy" security hut, and a very long and tall fence. In the winter, you could see a bit of the manor house through the bare trees, up on the hill, but in the summer, the black tip of a roof and the three chimneys were all that protruded above the green canopy. The property had been carefully assembled over nine decades by four generations of Whitesides, and by 2014, it encompassed more than twenty square miles. Most of it was bush, but two bankrupt family farms had recently been acquired, and rumor had it that these lands were destined to become a riding stable—an extremely private riding facility.

The fencing had only gone up in 2012, when there was some kind of burglary attempt that never quite made it into the papers, at least not in any detail. Since "the incident," as it was usually called, the estate had been perceived in the region as a fortress. The unwritten rule for the uninvited seemed to be: "Please don't bother us—we don't bother you." The Whitesides could be counted on to contribute to any local charity campaign, but apart from that, they didn't mix.

No one in the area knew how many people actually lived on the estate. The best guesses ran between twenty-five and thirty, if you included the security people. Aerial snapshots on the wall of the only barber in Quyon showed eight buildings close to the manor, plus an Olympic-sized pool. Then there was the sprawling log lodge, with a boathouse and a seaplane hangar, out at Wilson Lake. The grandeur of it all and the intentional social distance between the Whitesides and ordinary folks led to a profusion of apocryphal stories that surfaced every Saturday night at the British Hotel in Quyon; on other days at Ray's highwayside eatery.

The chauffeur executed a smooth turn onto the circular driveway in front of the manor. Two female Patriot agents stood by the stone arch over the entrance, waving the limo through with winning smiles.

"Female agents?" asked Victor.

"Smaller targets, bigger brains," said Helen teasingly, with a glance into the rearview mirror for reactions.

Victor lowered his head to take in the full dimensions of the stone mansion. It had turrets, a triple garage, and a porch almost the size of his entire current—or rather his former—dwelling. *So this is how the other .001 percent lives,* he thought, *how I'll live soon.*

Victor wasn't much of a drinker, but he'd been coerced into a toast or three during the thirty-minute trip from Gatineau. He'd always wanted to have a drink in the back of a limo, with ice cubes, like they did in the movies, and he had enjoyed the company of Randall Whiteside and his son. He was surprised that they spoke so frankly, talked from the heart. The only people who had behaved that way towards him in the past dozen years had been hookers and drunks, in his taxi, and those types were a crushing bore ... in spite of their compulsive candor.

The glass partition between the front of the limo and the back compartment had been left down during the trip, and Helen Kozinski had seemed like one of the gang, raising her spill-proof coffee mug and joining in the celebrative toasts. Randall and Michael Whiteside had shown a genuine interest in Victor. They'd asked him questions—nothing too personal—the sort of questions that might come up during a round of golf, or at a cocktail party. It was a well-intentioned gesture, but Victor hadn't anticipated the problem.

"My life got sort of ... sidetracked," he had been forced to admit. "Later," he had finally promised, "I'll tell you all about myself later—what there is to tell."

"God, spring smells fantastic," said Randall as he opened the back door of the limo and walked onto the wet, brown lawn. "You really know you're a part of nature when you can get your nose around it, I always say."

"It's true," whispered Michael to Victor as they exited the other back door. "Dad *always* says that."

"Early spring this year," said Helen as she got out and stretched her legs. "Must be that global warming thing."

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," squealed Julia as she skipped down the brick path from the house, her blond hair flying. "You said we could play ping-pong."

"Hah! I can beat you at ping-pong *any* old day," Randall boasted as he swung his nine-year-old up to straddle his hip and planted a big, juicy kiss on her cheek. "But just one game and then you have to go to bed." He burrowed a knuckle in her tummy until she pleaded for mercy, which didn't take long.

"Hi Daddy," said Sarah as she held her face up to receive her kiss. "Hello," she said to Victor, with a grown-up handshake. "My name is Sarah."

"Sarah, Julia, this is Victor Helliwell," said Randall. "He'll be staying with us tonight, then he's going to live out at the lodge for a ... a while."

"Sarah is fourteen and I'm nine-and-a-half, almost ten," Julia told the new person gleefully.

"Is Mr. O'Connor in the library, waiting?" Michael asked Sarah as they walked towards the mansion.

"Yeah," said his sister. "He came up in the chopper, with a bunch of parcels from the Oaks for our mystery man ... Mr. Helliwell. Why? You don't even like Mr. O'Connor."

"Dad asked me to tell him about our new business venture," he said proudly.

"What kind of business venture?" asked Sarah.

"Can't tell," he boasted.

* * *

Cam O'Connor had been waiting in the study to talk to his boss. He was the chief executive officer of Patriot Security, 3,800 employees in North America alone, third largest of the companies that made up the Whiteside machine. His instructions had been to enhance security precautions at the manor and at the lodge. He'd done that by phone; or rather he'd had it done, but it scraped his professional pride when he wasn't given the reason. It "bugged the shit out of him," as he would express it to his wife, when Helen Kozinski knew what was going on and he didn't. "How the hell can I assess the risk unless I know what the situation is?" he grumbled at the study walls. It also bothered him that Randall had asked Helen to drive the limo back from the Oaks to the manor, and left him, Helen's superior, to return in the helicopter

with Grant ... and with Victor's new clothes. "If the pay weren't so damned good," he would complain most days when he got home from work, "I swear I'd..."

* * *

"My wife, Doreen," said Randall as the group reached the front door of the mansion.

"Pleased to meet you ... Doreen," said Victor. He'd been accustomed to using last names in the taxi trade, and his fares had been the full extent of his social interaction for twelve years. He felt like a teenager going to a friend's house to watch TV and meeting the mom. *This first-name business will take some getting used to*, he thought.

"Welcome to our home, Victor," said Doreen Dawe-Whiteside. "I'd like you to meet Lucinda Tachita, our maid. She's one of the family, as we like to say. You'll want to freshen up while Julia gives her dad a good thrashing at ping-pong. Lucinda, would you show Victor up to his room?"

"I got white skin and yellow hair, and Lucinda has brown skin and white hair," Julia informed the visitor.

Victor was deeply impressed by the Whiteside family, and by the subdued ostentation of the manor. This house had love ... and a carpeted, spiral staircase. *Soon*, he thought, *I'll have a spiral staircase*.

A pretty face suddenly appeared at an angle from a doorway down the hall. It hovered over the blue carpet, but the person it belonged to stayed out of sight behind the jamb. "Hi, I'm Becky," the face said cheerfully. "I'm on the phone ... be out in a minute." And then it disappeared.

"My girlfriend," explained Michael. "Also one of the family ... sort of."

"I'm going to beat you today, Daddy," laughed little Julia.

"We'll have coffee and pecan pie in half an hour," decreed Randall. "You got time for a shower if you like, Victor. Julia, I want to have a talk with Mr. O'Connor for a minute, and then I'll be down to the rec room to play ping-pong, okay? Thanks for understanding, hon. Michael, one hour, tops, if you want to join Cam and Helen and me for the talk with the lawyers."

Things always seemed to swing into action around Randall. Sarah went to the recreation room to help Julia get "warmed up" for the big game. Michael went to talk to his girlfriend, to explain that he had to participate in "some kind of meeting" later. Doreen went to check with the cook to make sure the pastries were in order, and Randall went into the study to mollify his security chief—the titular one.

Lucinda Tachita, the wrinkled Venezuelan maid that Mrs. Whiteside had been so careful to introduce by name, led Victor past paintings of look-alike ancestors, up the spiral staircase, and down a long, thickly-carpeted hall to a large guest room in the back corner of the house, overlooking a still-empty swimming pool. She fluffed up the pillows and generally made sure Victor knew where everything was.

"Call me if there's anything you need," she said. "Just ring five on the intercom. I drew a nice hot bath for you. I figured you couldn't shower with that plaster cast on your arm. You don't have a problem with waterbeds?"

"No," he said.

"Good then," she blinked. "See you later. Coffee and pecan pie in half an hour ... and ice cream, if you want."

Victor could only nod his appreciation as Lucinda disappeared. He had no idea what to make of her, but at least she was real. *I should have said thank you*, he worried. *God, I'm rusty at this*.

It wasn't rust; it was inexperience. He used to have a life, sort of, a very long time ago, but he'd never had occasion to tickle a daughter or thank a loving wife for her understanding. He'd never split a gut with a son or scurried from an important meeting to attend a school recital. Even ping-pong was a game that other people played. Victor had never known "family" as these people did. It wasn't the opulence that threw him, the signs of wealth, but the wealth of emotion, the trust, the interdependence.

He found himself alone for the first time since his wait in the library of the Royal Oaks. He'd spent all of his time alone in recent years, by choice and of necessity—alone in his rented farmhouse or alone in the random company of cash fares. "I wonder who I'd be today if I'd been raised in an environment like this?" he said aloud. Now, at last, he would find out if the years of isolation and secrecy had been worth it.

The "room" he'd been assigned was more like a suite. It had a leather-covered bar, a four-poster waterbed, a sound system with quadraphonic speakers, a TV, a telephone, a Discman for private music or radio listening, a loaded iPod for private music listening, a writing desk with a computer, two easy chairs, two dresser drawers, one with an oval mirror on top, and on the wall were two Tom Thomsons—originals, he was sure. In the dressers he found socks, underwear, and sweaters, all brand new, and all his size. In the walk-in closet he found suits, sports jackets, shirts, and pants, also his size. He found belts and ties, even a trench coat. All the clothing was from the Royal Oaks pro shop, and had arrived aboard the Whiteside corporate helicopter ten minutes before the limo pulled up outside. In the private bathroom he found a variety of toilet articles, a pair of slippers, and a terrycloth bathrobe.

For a long moment, he stood in front of the sink, in front of the mirror, wondering how his image might change in the coming months, years. He couldn't stop thinking about the PC in the bedroom. In all those years out at his rented farmhouse, he had never dared send an email, never even dared to connect to the Internet, all to be sure that he was never traced, all so he could get to this point "unmurdered." *Ah well*, he thought. *That was then and this is now.*

He closed the door to the bathroom, although he wasn't sure why, and had a leak. As he stood there, a smile crossed his mind as he thought about a plasticized card he used to hand out to his fares, to mask the fact that he knew when people told their lies (and to get bigger tips from nice people). "Your driver has Tourette's Syndrome," the card read, "a rare medical condition that involves physical tics and causes sufferers to involuntarily blurt out swear words, racial slurs, sexual insults, or random exclamations like 'yikes' or 'whoop.' Those who have this disease do not mean to offend anybody. Most victims of Tourette's are unable to work because they feel too embarrassed and ashamed. Help Mr. Helliwell keep his job. Please try to understand and please be patient." It seemed to have been signed by a doctor, but it was actually a forgery.

He remembered a snippy woman passenger, a lawyer, who had tried to pretend she was in the personal employ of the federal Minister of Justice. "Liar, whoop, bitch, slut," Victor had blurted with a spastic jerking of his head. He recalled a large Italian man who had bragged, falsely, about his sexual exploits, all the way from the Ottawa International Airport to the Lord Elgin Hotel. "Jew-boy, faggot," Victor had yelled. "Nigger, asshole, yikes," he'd added for good measure.

All that is behind me now, he thought as he gave it a shake, zipped up and flushed. He didn't have to drive a taxi any more, and soon he wouldn't have to conceal his ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. The universe was unfolding as it had to. The "Helliwell effect," as he had sometimes called it in the privacy of his old farmhouse, was about to slam into planet Earth.

He washed his hands and went back into the main room, closing the bathroom door behind himself to keep the heat in. He took off all his clothes and kicked them under a chair—force of habit. The steaming bath had looked inviting, but first, a wee nap, a few delicious asleep-at-the-wheel minutes while the

ping-pong game raged below.

There was a puffy navy blue comforter on the bed, with pastel blue sheets showing, and matching pillowcases. He unfolded the top, crawled in, and pulled things up. The cool cotton sheets began to warm as he sucked in a jagged breath and let out a long, soul-satisfying yawn. It was 9:10 p.m.; about twelve hours since he had parked his cab for the absolute last time. He hadn't slept since 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday—yesterday evening. His eyes closed involuntarily, and the tensions flowed from his mind like an invisible column of electrons screaming skyward from the business end of a lightning rod.

THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 2014

Chapter 3

THE WILSON LAKE BUBBLE

At ten o'clock the night before, Lucinda had listened at the door to Victor's room and heard him snoring, loudly. She had reported her findings to the boss, and he had decided about midnight that there was no reason to wake the man up.

Randall had been working with his two top legal advisers plus Cam and Helen, trying to rough out a contract for which the exact *quid pro quo* was unknown. It was difficult enough to get lawyers to agree without that sort of wrinkle. By 3:00 a.m., he had worn the lawyers down to where there was some prospect of success. Then it became a matter of translating principles and ideas into a binding text, and that meant Randall could get some shut-eye.

Now, morning had broken. Normally, he preferred to go to his office in the limo, a pleasant, fifty-minute drive, much of it through some of the prettiest farmland to be found anywhere in the world. It gave him a chance to read the paper and talk on the secure car phone without interruption. But today, such luxuries were unaffordable. He'd had only a few hours of sleep, and it was poor quality sleep, disturbed sleep, enough to recharge the batteries but not enough to let him feel truly energized. So this morning, he had the corporate pilot fly him to work in the Whitebird III. That way, he could get from his own back yard to the roof of the office in fifteen minutes flat.

He began his morning ritual—a series of short, sharp phone calls—from the sky, and as he spoke, he gazed out the window at Pontiac County, the largely English enclave at the western end of francophone Québec, “home” to the Whiteside clan since the time of his great-grandfather. He was on his third call by the time they crossed the Ottawa. The river looked like a conveyor belt for ice floes and slush. Soon it would be sparkling blue, dotted with tilted white triangles and the widening V-wakes of motorboats. Finally, they flew over the awakening farms of Anglophone Ontario, the town of Carp, and descended towards the middle-class orderliness of Kanata, an offspring municipality, forever suckling the western end of the Canadian capital.

As they eased down onto the rooftop helipad, Randall enjoyed a sense of pride at the sight of the twelve-story office tower and the eighteen-acre plant, a complex that churned out high quality electronic products for the world and handsome profits for his family and the other shareholders. It had always surprised him that success had seemed easy, and yet it was a daily battle to ride the bleeding edge of an industry that tended to evolve faster than the trade literature could follow.

Once he was inside his corner office on the top floor, he tried to concentrate on the several dozen items that awaited his attention, but his mind was still reeling from the implications and possibilities that arose from his “discovery” of Victor Helliwell. He did get back to Senator Joe Cadbury, to thank him, and to apologize for not having done so last night. “He said you were the most honorable man he had ever analyzed,” Randall recounted to his old golf buddy. “He analyzed you right off the freaking TV.”

Senator Joe already knew that Helliwell could detect lies over the media from his chat with the fellow, but he didn't realize that his fundamental character was laid bare as well. "Well, it's true that I don't ever lie," he replied. "In public," he added judiciously. "I always figured nobody's got a good enough memory to be a successful liar. And besides, Randall, I'm a Liberal. We take an oath never to lie unless it's absolutely convenient."

"Well," chuckled Randall—he'd heard that quip before, "be that as it may, it was your integrity that prompted Mr. Helliwell to go through you to get to me. I owe you big time, as my son would say. How about I sell you ten thousand of my own WT shares at eighty-five dollars a pop—that's only a few points below market, but our stock should shoot up twenty or thirty percent in a month if this guy Helliwell is for real—maybe a lot more. Deal?"

"Deal," said Senator Joe. "And thanks, Randall."

"No no no," insisted Randall. "No thanks needed. I owed you that, old friend. Let's just hope for both our sakes it all works out."

Apart from that transaction, Randall's morning was a bust. When he hung up, he pushed his secretary's button on the intercom. "Sandra, hold my calls, okay?"

"Except for the call about the contract," she said.

"Oh yeah," he remembered. "Right."

He felt embarrassed whenever Sandra did that. *She didn't ask it; she said it*, he thought. His memory wasn't what it used to be, and it bothered him that other people seemed to know this.

He settled back into his chair, swiveled towards the window, and clasped his hands across his round belly, hooking his thumbs under his belt buckle. *I didn't forget that I was waiting for the call from the lawyers, but I did forget to mention it. I wonder why that didn't click in? I could rationalize it by saying that I assumed she knew I meant "with the exception of the call from the lawyers," but if I'd said that to Helliwell, he'd have known it wasn't true. I just forgot ... and I wouldn't have forgotten a few years ago.*

How does that happen—that things we know get filed in our brains in such a way that they don't get recalled when they're needed? For that matter, I wonder how things get filed away such that they can't be accessed at all, even when we try hard to remember. They're not gone, surely. They're ... what ... buried in the subconscious mind? I never found out what exactly that was, the subconscious mind. Last I heard the shrinks didn't have much of a clue themselves as to what it was. They only knew that it was there, that they could get in there and haul stuff out, using hypnosis. Young science, psychology! I wonder if this new skill that Helliwell has will change that discipline?

I wonder how history would have turned out if this ability to detect lies had been discovered a long time ago? Maybe there wouldn't have been a World War II if Hitler had been caught lying back in the 1930s. I wonder if people would be different today if Helliwell had come onto the scene ten or fifteen years ago? We're going to have to do some research on these questions.

Randall sat there for more than an hour, wandering through the past in his mind and wondering about everything from his career to Cold War II, trying to imagine the impact that Helliwell's skill might have had if it had existed long ago. Part of him still couldn't believe that the taxi driver was genuine, but he hadn't missed a single item that had been thrown at him in the library of the Royal Oaks. *It just can't be*, he thought as he rubbed his tired eyes, *and yet...*

Finally, at 11:04 a.m., the intercom brought him the news that he'd been waiting for. The legal text was done, he was told, and it would take maybe two more hours for word processing and a final legal verification.

That was enough to kick-start his second wind. The fatigue began to melt away as the thrill of the kill stirred in his veins. Soon he would know the secret of Victor's amazing ability, and one minute after that, barring unforeseen circumstances, he'd master that skill for himself, to the everlasting chagrin, he swore, of cheats, liars and assorted terrorists the world over.

He dialed home, chewing aggressively on a toothpick as he waited. He was surprised when his chief of security answered—not the titular one, the real one. “Helen?” he said. “You're still at the manor?”

“Doreen's in the kitchen talking to Victor. He slept in. Julia calls him Rip Van Winkle, and he's being a good sport about it. She really likes him. I'm driving him out to the lodge in a few minutes—that's if I can get Julia to let go of his leg.”

“Good stuff,” Randall laughed. “I'll be coming to the lodge in the chopper about one or two o'clock, with the contract, but don't tell Victor, okay? He doesn't expect it until this evening.”

“Well, okay, but if he asks I can't lie to him, eh?” said Helen.

Randall shook his head and realized again how much was about to change because of this taxi driver. “I ... suppose you're right about that.”

* * *

While Helen was in the study taking the call from Randall, Doreen had explained the Patriot facts of life to Victor. Yes, Mr. O'Connor *was* the chief executive officer of the security firm, and yes, he and Randall were—or had been—close friends. But Helen Kozinski was the *operational* chief of security, the person Randall *really* depended upon and trusted. Yes, it was complicated, but Randall's sense of loyalty was such that a convoluted chain of command was preferable to the alternative—letting him go. Cam O'Connor had effectively been “kicked upstairs” a few years back, but he still managed to show up on site whenever a real problem emerged—like he did last night at the Royal Oaks. No, Helen wasn't upset, but no, she didn't exactly like it either.

“Just play along,” was Doreen's advice to Victor. “Treat Mr. O'Connor with the respect he demands, but if the chips are down, call Helen.”

* * *

“The Patriot compound is just over that hill,” said Helen from behind the wheel of the jeep as she drove Victor out the back gate of the manor and onto a winding dirt road that led into the bush. “You can't see it from the manor, but it's quite a big installation. There's a very sophisticated communications center, a garage, training facilities, and sleeping quarters for twenty or so people. There's even a small house in there, just for Mr. O'Connor.”

Victor nodded and looked admiringly at her long blond hair as it fluttered in the cool spring air. He also copped a quickie peek at her breasts, which bobbed and jiggled beneath her khaki shirt with every bump in the trail. It bothered him that his body wanted to turn Helen into a sex object. *But then I'm not responsible for my every feeling*, he thought, *and I have been alone for an awfully long time, and I don't live to be politically correct, and ... straighten up*, he scolded himself. And he did, or tried to.

The top was off the jeep, and again he had that feeling of being a little boy, this time being taken to summer camp. He then found himself wondering about Randall's apparent preference for female security agents, and the thought crossed his mind that perhaps it might be something more than a professional

decision. *It doesn't bother me that Randall might be boinking some of his staff*, he thought, *but once everyone has access to the truth ... well, that could come out, and there would be a lot of trouble.*

"Nice country, eh?" said Helen as the bare branches closed in momentarily overhead.

"Beautiful," replied Victor.

"Julia really likes you. She sure had a lot of fun giving you a hard time about sleeping in ... calling you Rip Van Winkle and all that."

"She's a sweetie," said Victor. "Is she—uh—I mean...?"

"Yeah," said Helen, "she's mentally challenged. She goes to a special school a few hours a day."

Victor let a few seconds pass by as he struggled with the question that was really on his mind. He didn't like to pry, and he didn't like using his special advantage to find things out, but he was concerned about security, and he felt it was important to ask.

"Cam O'Connor," he said bluntly. "Can he—uh—be trusted?"

"I ... think so," said Helen, with a hesitancy that revealed more than it concealed. She couldn't lie to Victor, and yet she couldn't exactly tell the whole truth either, lest she endanger her job. "We do all we can to assure ourselves on that score, but there's a limit to what we can know about anyone—or at least there was until you came along. We figured maybe you would help us pick up on any problems, if there are any, regarding our people. We—uh—don't get along all that well, Mr. O'Connor and I," she added.

Pretty long way of not saying "yes," he thought. I wonder what it is about Mr. O'Connor they're concerned about?

Victor didn't care too much for the human race, and the side of the beast that deceived and conspired ... well, he preferred to not even read about that, let alone discuss it. He realized he'd brought the subject up himself, but to be asked to participate in this world of suspicion and intrigue—that was the last thing he wanted. He thought of the words to an ancient song that used to be a favorite of his, from way back in the 1960s, before he was born—or was it the 1970s? "*Paranoia strikes deep,*" he remembered " ... *into your heart it will creep ... it starts when you're always afraid ... da da da da, the man come and take you ay-way.*" *What was that anyway? Oh, yeah—"step out of line, the man come..."*

He sighed, and looked quietly out at the wilderness that was the Whiteside estate. Canada was beautiful, once you got out of the cities. Mottled mounds of pewter rock broke out of the bush here and there, unmoving hippo backs sprinkled with shiny, lime-green mosses, gray and yellow lichens and ground-hugging blueberry patches. Trees and scrub held sway almost everywhere, but it would be many more millennia before the Canadian Shield would surrender those islands of granite to the roots of a mere birch or pine.

It occurred to Victor that at one time all this was molten, red hot, and gurgling. The Gatineaus were the oldest mountain range in the world, he recalled learning in school. *We've come a long way*, he thought.

"So, Helen, tell me about this lodge that I'll be living in."

"You'll see it in a few minutes," she said. "There are four security perimeters around it. Patriot has the ability to protect the Whiteside family from every conceivable danger—even from out on the lake, if need be—so you don't have to worry about being safe out there. That's why the Patriot crowd refers to it as the 'Wilson Lake Bubble.' You won't see those security installations, but they're there. Trust me. We call this 'Whiteside Highway,'" she added with a smile, meaning the primitive dirt tracks with the strip of last

year's yellow grasses in between. "It's about three miles from the manor to the lodge."

Victor looked at her doubtfully. "Three?" he repeated.

Helen laughed heartily, from the gut. "Make that two miles. I was just testing, Victor. When Mr. Whiteside told me last night about your ability to detect lies, well ... frankly, I didn't believe him."

"Yes you did," asserted Victor.

"Jeeze, I didn't *mean* to lie," she said. "I guess I ... did believe him. What does that say—uh—about me, when I—"

"Hey, everybody does it," said Victor. "No need to be embarrassed," he added, with too little conviction.

"I ... guess," conceded Helen.

They rode in silence for a bit; Victor staring at the bush and the rocks, Helen with a brain full of dirt road, struggling to cope with the words her passenger had just spoken.

Victor knew the stats: research showed that, including the smallest misdemeanors, the average person told about two hundred lies per day. *Absolutely astonishing*, he thought, even if most of those were known to be harmless little white lies, or social lubricants. He considered sharing this bit of trivia, but decided against it. "Do you think the world can handle the truth?" he asked out of the blue, looking directly at Helen.

"I honestly don't know," she said as they bumped along, jiggled along. "I guess we're going to find out pretty soon, and ... I imagine you'll go down in history as the man who posed that question."

"I suppose," said Victor wistfully, "although I'd rather be the guy that answered it." He reflected on his wish and decided not to tell Helen about some of the conclusions he'd reached in the last twelve years ... at least not yet. *But why not right now?* He reproached himself silently, and that was enough to change his mind.

"If I had to guess, I'd have to say that the world will not have an easy time of it, and will suffer terribly from the loss of illusion. For a long time, I had serious doubts as to whether I ought to tell anyone about my ... ability. It was only when I realized my life was in danger that I made up my mind to come out of the closet. I concluded that I had no choice, and I was right, wasn't I?"

Helen's stony silence seemed a reluctant endorsement of that grim assessment. With the aid of his special insights, Victor had come to know more than he ever wanted to know about the impoverished state of the human spirit. He gathered that Helen held a similarly bleak opinion, based no doubt on many years of watching grown men—well, *mostly* men—gnaw at each other's hindquarters in the pursuit of fortune and power, the modern equivalent of what used to be called happiness. He turned his attention back to the twin dirt tracks ahead. The trees overhung for a stretch, and the midday sun hardly took notice of the naked branches.

"This must be spectacular with the leaves filled in," he said, "or in fall, with reds and yellows overhead, and on the forest floor."

He had particularly enjoyed the ride from the city of Gatineau out to the estate the previous evening. He had enjoyed meeting Randall and Doreen and their children—and Lucinda, the old brown maid, with her blinking eyes—and Helen, of course—and Cam O'Connor, sort of. These social contacts were a daring departure for a committed social hermit, and he had coped. But he needed time in his own place, to

unwrap himself from a frightened, dismal past, to recreate himself for a different future, hopefully a much better future. Whiteside Lodge was his for as long as he wanted it, for as long as necessary, and he wondered at the changes that he might go through out there.

"People scare me," he said, without turning to look at Helen. He didn't particularly care what she thought of this unsolicited statement. "I think I like dogs best," he added.

"Yeah, me too!" said Helen.

He looked at her, and waited. She caught his eyes, and then she burst out laughing and slapped the steering wheel with an open palm. "I did it again, didn't I?"

Victor allowed himself to laugh. "This ability of mine *does* solve a whole lot of problems," he chuckled, "but ... like in that old Jim Carrey movie, *Liar, Liar* ... it also creates a few new ones. When I was driving for Blue Line, my fares would lie to me all the time, and about the weirdest things. Of course I had to develop some pretty good tricks so they wouldn't realize that I could *tell* when they were lying."

He was still looking at Helen, wondering what the next eye contact would reveal about her reactions, but she seemed content to concentrate on her driving and let him natter away. It occurred to him that he didn't know a single soul on the planet who gave a fiddler's fuck what he thought or said or believed ... not a blessed soul. He'd been too busy and too terrified to cultivate a circle of friends, to construct a life, like other people. But that was then and this was now. His work was done, successfully—the solo part of it anyway—and now he could ... well, he could do and say and think whatever he damn well pleased!

"I haven't had sex in years," he blurted out, "ever since I acquired this skill. Does that surprise you?" He waited, but Helen was not inclined to take the bait, especially since silence now appeared to be a valued safe haven, a hiding place from Victor's uncanny talent.

"Every time I meet a woman that interests me," he continued, "I see right through her pretences, you know? I end up feeling sorry for her after the first few serious lies, like she's some kind of mental defective, especially when they have no idea that their lives are dishonest and empty. That's the part that hurts most, when they don't even know they're full of shit. Talk about a turn-off!"

Helen guided the jeep along Whiteside Highway, easing over bumps and boulder-tops as best she could, studiously declining to respond to Victor's apparent need to bare his soul. She was just beginning to understand the man. It was obvious that his life had been profoundly affected by his ability to detect lies, and not always for the better. Many lives—maybe most lives—would be changed by this taxi driver, and she wondered if her own life would be thrown into chaos, personally and professionally. *Will I weather this storm?*

After a few moments of silence, she decided to open up a bit, if only because her passenger could find out anything he wanted anyway.

"I've got a boyfriend," she said. "Roy Taggart. He's in the RCMP ... heads up the Commercial Crime Division. As soon as I learn this trick of yours, I'm going to find out if he's been faithful to me."

"You ... really want to know?" asked Victor.

"Oh yeah!" said Helen emphatically. "If I find out that he's been fooling around, it would be a major bummer, but I think it would be worse if he was fooling around and I *didn't* know."

"Well ... okay," said Victor.

Again, there was no conversation for a bit. Helen found that she was enjoying herself, and her curiosity

was burning out of control. "Am I ... an honest person?" she asked nervously.

"Say it as a statement," instructed Victor.

"I am a ... basically honest person," pronounced Helen, apprehensively.

"True, I'm relieved to say," smiled Victor ... by which he meant, but didn't specify, that it was true that she *believed* that to be true of herself—not quite the same thing. "Me too," he said. "In fact I never lie any more, ever, about anything. I used to lie all the time, exactly like everybody else—mostly harmless stuff, you know, but now I can't even lie to myself."

It was hard for Victor to decide how fast to go at this new reality with this very new person ... well, new to him ... but he thought he'd move a bit further and see how things unfolded. "It's funny. Everybody hates it with a passion when somebody lies to them or about them, but these same people will fib their arses off if it serves some selfish purpose and if they think they probably won't get caught. There's not too many of us 'basically honest' types around, I'm afraid." He used fingers in the air to put the quotation marks around the words "basically honest."

It occurred to Victor that his search for an honest human being was over. He had Helen, who seemed willing to strike up a friendship of some sort. And there was Randall Whiteside, Senator Cadbury, maybe Cam O'Connor, and surely there would be others, perhaps even a female of the species ... an eligible female. Buds were already appearing on some trees, and it seemed to Victor that this day was like a new beginning, a case of life imitating nature, and a personal springtime for him. He was safe, and he was free, free to be himself, free to say what was on his mind, free to converse with people who were worth conversing with. The isolation was finally over, and yet he found himself feeling oddly reluctant to give it up, to place his trust in anyone.

"People like us," he said, "those of us who have no real interest in being dishonest ... we make up maybe ten or fifteen percent of humanity. There's another ten or fifteen percent, the bona fide scoundrels of this world, men and women who know they're scum and just don't have a problem with that. They'll be out of business, I suppose, but they'll find a way to cope. I think the problem will be with the seventy or eighty percent in the middle, the people who have no idea where the lies end and reality begins. The shrinks are going to have a grand old time sorting those people out..." He paused for a couple of seconds while a delicious thought passed through his mind. "Of course, it'll be a hell of a lot easier for the shrinks once their patients can't bullshit them any more."

Helen let herself enjoy that thought, and then she smiled inwardly at the prospect of her boyfriend's mother, her would-be mother-in-law, going to her grossly overpriced psychiatrist only to be told that she was perfectly normal, except for an insatiable desire to feel sorry for herself.

"So, you like dogs better than people?" she said.

"Samoyeds especially," said Victor. "Sammies, as the owners like to call them. I've got two now, Snowball and Kodiak. I keep them at a kennel, out in the country, north of Carp, on the Ontario side of the river. It belongs to friends of mine, Nancy and Tom Ferguson ... well, sort-of friends. I've been too much of a goddam hermit to have real friends. I don't see them much. It would be terrific if..." He stopped to consider his position. "Helen, would it be okay for me to have them out to the lodge?"

"Who?" asked Helen impishly. "The dogs or the Fergusons?"

"Both," laughed Victor. "The Fergusons for a visit, the dogs to stay."

"Victor, you're rich now, or you soon will be," she said. "You don't have to ask for stuff. You just say

what you want and bingo, it gets done. Can you live with that?"

"No," said Victor.

"Liar," laughed Helen.

The jeep came over the last hill, and the lake threw a skiff of second-hand sunspots through the leafless trees. Victor saw the shake-shingled roof of the grand log building that would be his digs for the foreseeable future, and as they traversed the last hundred yards, he sighed. This was exactly the kind of spot a rich guy should own. It was perfect.

Helen buzzed open the garage door and parked. "Not too shabby?" she asked.

The ground was tan with last year's pine needles. Victor walked out of the garage and breathed in the smells of melting snow, rotting leaves, and new shoots bullying their way through the earth, towards the sun. *This is better than a Thomson painting*, he mused. *This is the real McCoy*.

On the front of the lodge, there was a lower verandah with an elevated second-floor deck on top, facing west. "That'll be so nice in the evenings," he said, looking up.

South of the lodge, a rocky point jutted into the water. Directly in front of the lodge was a dock, and two boats, the larger of which was called *Ms. Adventure*—practically a yacht, considering the modest size of the lake. Victor hadn't been fishing since he was a child, and he resolved to catch the next sunrise from the mists of Wilson Lake. "There's fish in there?" he asked.

"The whole lake is within the estate," explained Helen, "and yeah, there's all kinds of fish. Mr. Whiteside doesn't come here that much any more, but Doreen and the girls love it. Michael comes out now and then, but he's got his own little hideaway cabin on the far shore. No cell phones allowed, no TV, no radio, and no Patriot agents within five hundred yards. His rules. You can barely see Michael's dock ... just to the left of that tallest stand of trees across there," she said, pointing.

"He likes his privacy, eh?" said Victor as he stretched his vision to catch the distant dock.

"He spends a lot of time there when he's not in school—with his girlfriend," she said. "Becky's a great kid. The boats are yours to use, by the way. The keys are left in them. The jeep too. There's three staff at the lodge. They're brought in from the manor every morning at seven, leave at six. Of course you can adjust that stuff to suit yourself. You're basically on your own, Victor ... as much as you want to be, that is. Anything you want, just ask. You want the tour?"

In the next hour, Victor was introduced to the cook, a pear-shaped Frenchman by the name of Noel Lambert, the green-overalled groundskeeper, Bill Townsend, and the housekeeper, Winnifred Jopps. He had to make a mental note of their names. He was terrible at names; used to have to write every one down when he was driving cab. *Noel Lambert, Bill Townsend, Winnifred Jopps*, he repeated silently. *I'll get to know them better later, maybe more than I'd like ... although the housekeeper, Winnifred, seems kind of sweet, and she's about my age, and she has no wedding ring on...*

He was shown all sixteen rooms of the lodge, including the huge living room with the bearskin rugs and the huge stone fireplaces at either end. Then he was shown the hidden seventeenth room, with its entrance tucked below the basement stairs: the Whitesides' private fallout shelter, vintage Cold War I. It accommodated thirteen people, he learned, and had a three-month supply of every essential the residents might need. There was an operations room with two communications systems, two gas-powered generators, and an array of tools ... and guns. In the living area there were two televisions, a CD system, a collection of games, toys, books, and two computers. There were six tiny bedrooms and one large one,

a kitchen, a bathroom, a walk-in freezer, a storage room, even a mini-hospital. Victor was given a small card with the five-digit combination to the heavy, windowless door of the shelter. "Just in case," said Helen. "Keep it in your wallet, and keep your wallet on you—that's a rule here—since 1954—since before Randall was born."

Outside, there were four canoes on a log rack. Beside the dock, near the water's edge, was a very large boathouse, also constructed of log, varnished to perfection, with a roof of black shingles. The two boats were already in the water—the building now contained three ATVs, six snowmobiles and a hovercraft, and every conceivable bit of camping and fishing gear. Victor then walked south with Helen, to the rocky point, and looked at the man-made sandy beach where generations of Whitesides had spent happy hours since before the Great Depression. In a cove to the north of the lodge was a half-hidden hangar with a floatplane inside, he was told. A pilot was on call, he was also told.

"Wealth is all it's cracked up to be," he said at the end of the tour.

Helen told Victor she had some important calls to make, forgetting for a moment that her new friend would see through any ruse. She suggested that he do some fishing, or go for a walk or ... something. *She probably wants to call her boyfriend,* thought Victor, *the big-shot RCMP guy who may or may not be fooling around on her.*

The dock was forty yards long and six yards wide ... more of a pier, really. It felt solid enough to withstand a tidal wave, or World War III. Out at the end was a bulbous rectangle, twenty yards square, with a red-and-white target painted on it. "That's for the helicopter," Helen had explained earlier.

Victor checked out the larger motorboat, a splendid, masculine craft with a ninety-horsepower outboard and every gadget and bauble available. He walked to the end of the dock and sat down, dangling his feet just over the flapping surface of the water. He'd never doubted that his life would come to something like this, even though he never thought it would take so long for him to "arrive." In a way, he regretted not having taken the initiative a few months earlier, but he had to be absolutely certain that his discovery was ready, and that he himself was ready.

He felt a need to celebrate, and decided to spend his first post-hermit hours right where he was. He walked back to the "shed"—apparently that was what the humongous boathouse was called—and got a fishing rod, the tackle box, and a net. "I am gonna snag supper," he said aloud.

As he clomped back out the length of the graying dock, he glanced back towards the lodge to make sure that he had this small section of the world to himself. For the past several years, he'd been testing himself by saying his thoughts out loud when he was alone. He usually laughed when he found that he was lying to himself, fooling himself. It was a bizarre technique, but it worked, and that practice had gradually liberated him from the debilitating human tradition of self-deception. The only problem was that speaking his thoughts aloud might land him in a psychiatric unit if he did it openly.

"I feel the thrill of the kill," he said quietly. "My instinct wants to kill ... no, wait, that's not right," he corrected himself. "My instinct wants me to survive, and killing is the key to survival. There, that's got it. I knew that. How did I forget a simple equation like that?"

"I'm quivering from scalp to toe to find myself heading out onto a dock with these instruments of death. How odd! This is your basic no-lose combat situation here. I don't get hurt, no matter what. My enemy is big enough to eat, but too small to bite back.

"And even if I fail to catch a fish, I'm so rich I could feed India for a month ... okay, so I exaggerated on that one. That's not the same thing as lying ... well, okay, so it *is* the same."

He sat on the end of the dock and looked over the rod and reel. He hadn't fished for a quarter of a century, but the technology of murdering fish hadn't changed. Importantly, he *had* changed. Still, life was too short to get bogged down in conundrums. He opened the tackle box.

"Now, what would a dumb-ass fish like to chomp on?" he asked aloud. "This little yellow spinner looks delicious. Onto the little clip, aaaand..."

Victor stood, keeping the end of the rod out over the water so the lure wouldn't catch on the dock. He let out about a foot of line, eased the rod back behind himself, cocked his arm, flung the rod forward, and released the thumb button. "Whoosh," he said, "we fly through the air with the greatest of ease, aaand ... sploosh, we make a noise."

The casting part was easy, a one-handed operation, but reeling in was a two-handed task, and the plaster cast on his left hand and forearm made it a tad awkward. After a bit of experimentation, he got the hang of it, and his mind turned back to the nature of this activity, the meaning of it.

He wasn't sure that killing fish was such a great way to have fun. "If I didn't kill fish, somebody else would," he muttered as he cast again. "It's merely a matter of which particular fish I end up eating, the big fucker that gets hauled in by a mile-long drift net off the Grand Banks or the little fucker I yank out of the lake by the mouth. I'd rather eat the little fucker. That way I get to enjoy the contest, unfair though it may be."

He watched the lure break the surface and whiplash up to the end of the rod as he reeled in. Then he glanced towards the lodge and wondered again whether his long-standing habit of speaking his thoughts out loud could be dangerous in this circumstance.

"Should I feel guilty about having the advantage of a rational mind?" he asked quietly. "No, I shouldn't! I've got the superior brain, so I use it, and the fish wouldn't do any different if he was me and I was him. If he had tools and I was the micro-brain, he'd swim to shore with a Twinkie on a hook and go human-ing. Too bad. Maybe a zillion years into the future the tables will be turned, and people will get hauled into lakes by schools of pike and munched to the bone because they can't tell the difference between junk food and a steel hook. But for now, I get to win and you get to lose. The natural order of things. You don't like it? Talk to the engineers, whoever they are. I didn't make the rules."

And once again it occurred to him that he should be more circumspect about talking aloud. "I'm afraid that Noel the cook may be checking me out with a pair of binoculars," he said without moving his lips. "I'm afraid that Bill the groundskeeper is actually a CIA operative trying to steal my secret. No, that's silly. I don't believe it, so why did I say it? But I am afraid that—what's her name?—Winnifred Jopps, is after my body and ... okay, so I flat-out lied. I ... wish!"

He decided he simply had to stop talking out loud, no matter how he might minimize the movement of his jaw. The business risks were too great, and there was always the possibility that he had been put under surveillance by Patriot Security. Besides, he might be scaring off the fish.

What am I really afraid of? he wondered silently as he sailed the lure towards the opposite shore once more. *Come to think of it, Patriot Security wouldn't spy on me, he realized, because they know I could just ask Helen and find out, even if she lied about it. But I do feel fear. I guess it's healthy to feel some fear. Okay, not necessarily healthy, but it's real, according to my design. I fear death. I fear death so I kill, to eat, to avoid death.*

"Seems fair to me," he said out loud, now without any fear. "Okay, so 'fair' isn't the point. It's the way things are. In any event, it's time to retreat back under my skin, like a normal person." He remembered a tune he'd once written, and began singing quietly:

Inside of my body is the place I must hide

I peek out through my eyes and let the pictures inside

"Speak no more, oh great but somewhat short and chubby hunter," he commanded himself. "Speaking outside the established norms is punishable by social death. It's a sin, of sorts. But fishing ... fishing is a sport, like war, punishable only by applause. Sis boom bah. I was designed to kill. Rah rah rah. Shut up the face ... and kill."

Chapter 4

THE GAL-DANGED CHURCH IS A DAD-GUMMED JOKE

"Through those doors, second room on your left down the main hall, courtroom three," said a uniformed guard to the well-dressed man doing the asking. "There's a sign on the door: Caughy Commission."

The federal inquiry had been established to deal once and for all with the question of sexual abuse in Canadian boarding schools, and the media was in its feeding-frenzy mode. Bishop Sutherland followed the directions he'd been given, and was immediately pounced upon by microphones, cameras, and cawing open mouths. It wasn't expected that observers from the Catholic Church would attend this session. Today's witness was the "widow of the old coot from Quyon who decked Bishop Malini last November," as one TV commentator had described her. And this entire inquiry concerned a matter that the Catholic Church had already reviewed internally, away from the glare of publicity, a matter it considered "closed" after the scandal of the first years of the new millennium.

"No comment," said the Bishop repeatedly in response to their entreaties. *That will be on the TV news tonight, he thought, the fact that I was here, and had nothing to say.*

Steve Sutherland was a tall, robust man, known for his charm and sense of humor on most occasions ... not including this one. He was the current chairman of the Canadian Association of Catholic Bishops, and he had come to Ottawa from his Alberta diocese for an emergency meeting of the CACB, tomorrow, a meeting that he himself had called. He entered the courtroom and found a seat at the back, on the side, just as the witness was beginning her testimony.

"There was just no containing that cranky old man on that particular morning," sputtered Barbara Farley, widow of the late Joseph W. "The Bishop's secretary—he's a priest, you know—can you imagine that, a priest being a secretary? Anyways, this here secretary, he's beside himself when Joe come barreling in there cocky as an Injun on hooch. The secretary-priest wasn't too sure whether to laugh or cry at the sight of my Joe raging about everything under the sun, the way I heard it, the way Joe told it to me anyways."

Sutherland—the bishop who reportedly always asked to be called just plain "Steve"—bowed his head and pinched the top of his nose. *I bet this woman has never heard the word "aboriginal,"* he thought.

As royal commissions went, this one was bound to yield plenty of fireworks, and some fearsome nightmares. The newspaper reporters were scribbling frantically, trying to pen the perfect metaphor for the female throwback that had allegedly counseled her dear husband to punch out Bishop Malini. The five distinguished members of the judicial panel—three women and two men—wincing and squirmed. Several men from the town of Quyon, retired farmers, had driven all the way to Ottawa to support the widow of their departed friend Joseph W. Farley—not that she needed it. They didn't wince or squirm, but in fact, they were cracking up inside, the way Steve read their faces.

"The Bishop hisself," continued Mrs. Farley, "he hears this ruckus outside his office, so he comes out to

see what the devil's going on, eh? Well, my Joe gives him one of his mean look-sees with them bushy eyebrows of his, like he's about to whup his grandson with his belt in about two shakes, and the Bishop, he starts getting scared that he's about to get whupped. Lord love us, I'd 'a give a side of beef to see that sight with my own eyes." She descended involuntarily into an imperfectly subdued cackle.

"Counsel, if could you instruct your client to get to the point and spare us the colorful language?" implored Justice William Caughy. "This is not a sitcom. This is a judicial inquiry, and I've just about—"

"Of course, Your Honor," interrupted the lawyer, with a sustained glare at his irascible client.

"Your Honor, my foot," snapped Mrs. Farley. "I *am* getting to the damned point. What I been telling you is what Joe woulda said if he was here now, God rest his soul. This whole mess woulda got itself sorted out years ago if the big shot bishop had of listened to what folks were telling him. So you settle yourself down and perk up your ears and do some serious listening, young fella, or I'm gonna refuse to testify any more at your blinking hearing and go out in the hall and say all what I gots to say to them fellas from the TeeVee. I believe they're *plenty* interested in what I gots to say."

The cheering section from Quyon was in stitches, and the reporters were loving this backwoods mayhem. "Sock it to him," whispered the cameraman just behind Steve as he zoomed in for a close-up of the distinguished punchee.

"Mrs. Farley," begged Judge Caughy, "I'm trying very hard to make allowances, but if you could just—"

"Now as I was saying," she went on, "the gal-danged Church is a dad-gummed joke. I figure me and Joe and our young ones probably put a hunnert thousand dollars into the collection plate over the last fifty years. You get my point, Your Honor? We were ... like you might say we were major shareholders in the Catholic Church, so to speak.

"And yet here's our grandson Geoff coming to us with this story about his chum Bobby Thompson that got put into that boys' school, St. Dominique's, and got hisself bred up the ass by some filthy old priest. This was all a few years back, eh? Bobby never went back to that school up in Peterville after he was fourteen, and he's nineteen now. Anyways, Bobby Thompson, he told Geoff there was a lot of them doing it ... lots of them priests and them—whatcha call 'em—them Catholic Brothers. And they was doing it to lots of the boys there, which is why Bobby was running away all the time and why some o' them other boys was running away too."

"We're sadly aware of these facts, Mrs. Farley," said the chairman. "Our society has been trying to deal with this situation for many, many years. Please get to the point, the part about when your husband—"

"So my Joe, he has a real long talk with young Bobby Thompson, and he believes him. And then he finds out that Bobby's parents and relatives had been complaining direct to Bishop Malini, some of them for years, back when Bobby was in there at the school. But nothing ever changed! Nobody ever *did* nothing! Nobody wanted to believe them boys, even after all that big publicity ten years ago in the papers and on the TeeVee and all that. Nobody wanted to believe that priests could do such terrible things, specially after the past times this stuff was caught happening. And Bobby says it's still going on, at least that's what he heard, and we believed him.

"So my Joe, he drives hisself down to the Bishop's place in Ottawa and tears a strip off the guy—you know, like a good old-fashioned tongue-lashing, with nothing held back. Well, I'm afraid when my Joe got hisself fired up, he pretty well covered all the cuss words we generally use down on the farm, plus a few more he musta picked up somewheres else. If you ask me, he shoulda done it a long time ago, and so shoulda you and the damned pope and anybody else that knew about what was going on in there at the school."

"This all happened in the outside lobby?" asked Justice Caughy, trying to get her back on track. "In front of Bishop Malini's secretary?"

"Hell no," fired Barbara Farley. "First, Joe backs the Bishop up into his office and closes the door behind, then he gets to telling him off. The Bishop, he gets all flustered and he tries to get around Joe and get hisself out the door, and that's when he slips and cracks his face on the corner of his desk, just like it was ordained from above."

"So ... your husband didn't actually *strike* the Bishop, then?" asked the chairman.

"Is that what I just said, Your Honor?" scowled a furious Barbara Farley.

"Yes, but I was—"

"Then that's the way it was, Your Honor. Maybe if you woulda listened up the first time, we coulda—"

"That's it for this session," announced Judge Caughy with a loud slap of his gavel. "We'll convene again next Wednesday. Counselor, if you could have a heart-to-heart with your client, I'd be most—"

"Of course, Your Honor," managed the lawyer.

Chapter 5 CAST OFF

At 2:00 p.m., the corporate helicopter thumped skyward from the roof of Whiteside Technologies, on its way to Wilson Lake. Randall Whiteside felt it had been worth it to stay up half the night with the lawyers. Now he had Victor's contract in hand, and was feeling very pleased with himself.

Annette Blais, a Patriot agent who had agreed to stay with Victor at the lodge, sat up front beside the pilot. She was a solid thirty-five-year-old with round shoulders, dark hair, a ruddy complexion, and a dozen pounds she'd been trying to shed for a decade. As with all the female agents working for Patriot, she wore no make-up, but she was one of the few who liked the policy. She wasn't the type to wear it—never had been, never would be. "I don't need it," she used to tell her mother back when she lived at home, back when her parents were alive. "Why would I want to hide my natural beauty?" she'd asked every man she'd ever loved and dumped.

She was joking with the pilot about Canada's new Prime Minister, Louis St. Aubin, allegedly an intellectual lightweight with an ego the size of Lake Superior. She did so quietly, under the drone of the engine, since St. Aubin and Whiteside were friends.

Randall, never far from his briefcase, was making a string of thirty-second calls on the helicopter's phone. Among other things, he made arrangements to land briefly at the Ferguson's farm near Carp, on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River, where Victor's two Samoyed dogs were being boarded.

Whiteside-produced global positioning technology made finding the place easy. They landed, expecting to be met by Nancy Ferguson, the kennel owner. As the chopper idled in a hay field a hundred yards south of the barn (as per instructions), Nancy's husband Tom approached, and he shouted Nancy's whereabouts to Annette over the engine's whine—she was apparently in Vancouver on some kind of government business. Contrary to everyone's expectations, Tom showed no trace of rural friendliness. He just explained his wife's absence, delivered the frightened dogs, on leashes, and retreated.

Annette had to hoist the wiggling, yipping dogs up to the pilot—no easy trick. She looped one leash around her left ankle while she lifted the larger dog, the male, and as she did this, the female almost pulled

her leg out from under her. The pilot was laughing—Annette was not.

When the loading operation was complete and the door closed, Annette tied one of the dogs at the very back of the cabin and settled the other at her feet. Whitebird III took off again, and as it crossed the river, Randall hung up the phone with a sense of finality. “Annette,” he said loudly, “what did you and Helen find out about our taxi driver?”

“Not much,” she said, turning sideways in her seat and stroking a panting Samoyed. “He’s a committed loner. From nineteen ninety-seven until today, he sort of ... well, vanished. He never married. He’s been driving for Blue Line for twelve years and living on a rented farm about twenty miles south of Ottawa. He’d go to work and go right home again. No close friends, no girlfriend, no problems at work, no military record, and no criminal record. We called the hospitals to see what we could learn about his arm, and they had no record of any treatment. The cops knew about him getting robbed six weeks ago, but they didn’t know anything about him getting a broken wrist. That’s about it. Maybe Cam has more.”

Grant Eamer, the pilot, had been instructed to land briefly at the Patriot compound at the estate before going out to the lodge. Randall wanted to zip over to the manor, kiss his wife and kids, and then take care of a daily duty that was starting to make him crazy—the pacification of Cam O’Connor, who was increasingly resentful of Helen Kozinski’s authority and seemingly unaware that he’d been booted upstairs in the Patriot pecking order. He was right there, waiting, at the helipad, and none too happily, as the engine was cut and the blades fluttered down.

“I’ll be ten minutes or so,” Randall said as he unbuckled, “then we’ll head out to the lodge.” Once he was standing on the ground and away from the chopper, he explained to Cam that he’d be at the manor for only ten minutes, then he walked directly to a Patriot van to be driven the few hundred yards to the manor house.

Annette wanted to take the antsy dogs out for a walk, or at least a pee, but under the circumstances, she decided to wait in the now-silent helicopter. Cam’s moods had a way of affecting other people’s plans.

* * *

Cam waited, checking his watch every thirty seconds, with not a word for the pilot, who stood nearby. The boss was compulsively punctual, and for that, at least, the nattily dressed securocrat was grateful. Ten minutes later, noted Cam, the Patriot van returned Randall from the manor. The door opened ... and real life restarted.

Randall didn’t know how his good-natured former pal from University of Toronto days had turned into a stale old crust of bread, but there he was, sulking by the chopper, fifty-seven going on ninety. “Let’s walk while we talk,” he said, and he started down the dirt road before Cam could object. “What’s the poop on Helliwell?”

“I’m getting rather concerned about—uh—shall we say his—uh—equilibrium,” said O’Connor. “He seems somewhat paranoid. I don’t suppose there’s much we can do about that, other than make sure he’s aware of all the security precautions we’ve taken. But there’s another thing, Randall. The poor bugger simply hasn’t ... had any ... for years. He said as much to Helen in the jeep on the way out to the lake. I think he may be on the verge of depression on that score, and now that he’s rich, he’s going to want to have—you know—relations. So either we set him up, or he’ll go—uh—hunting, you know what I mean?”

Randall sauntered along the dirt path with his big hands clasped behind his back. He’d have to think about this, and there was no better place to think than in the woods of his estate.

The best way to silence Cam was to not respond. Randall seemed to fall into a deep and private

consideration of this most recent inane suggestion, but his mind was actually elsewhere. He adored nature. There was a pervasive violence here, things dying willy-nilly, seeds withering in infancy, animals and birds and insects attacking each other, devouring each other alive, life destroying life in order to live. But nature represented the ultimate non-zero-sum system, always producing a healthy surplus of life over death. This was an organized, purposeful violence, and the sideshow of pain and suffering was forever eclipsed by a continuing deluge of colors, sounds, and a quadrillion hidden acts of love and fun.

It was well known that Randall Whiteside didn't appreciate it when unpleasantries were forced into his jealously guarded psychic space, but even his great wealth couldn't buy him immunity from the sordid side of human existence. Cam O'Connor had made a proposal, of sorts, and he had to shoot it down. *People do things that animals would snort at*, he thought, *things that they would mock and ridicule if they could speak. Thank God the creatures of the wild don't understand human folly. They'd rebel if they did.*

"So we should be pimps now?" he asked, "setting Victor up with a woman?"

"No, sir," objected Cam. "In fact that would be quite impossible. If you think about it, I'm sure you'd realize that for a guy with Victor's extraordinary insights, a hooker would last about thirty seconds. I'm just saying that since we've got to have security at the lodge full time, it might as well be Annette. Helliwell could be there for months, you know. If they hit it off, fine. If they don't hit it off, that's okay too. We'll just ... replace her ... if things don't ... gel. Annette ... sort of needs somebody anyway. Her parents passed away some years ago. She ... doesn't like doing stuff like that, but her loyalty to Patriot and to you is such that—uh..."

Again, Randall responded by not responding. He couldn't remember when his long-time friend had taken to calling him "sir," even if they weren't that close any more. And now he had to deal with the policy option that had been proposed.

He was a realist, and he knew that in the opening stanza of the 21st century, good security sometimes required that people do certain ... *things*, things that he didn't want to know about, things that he really shouldn't know about, in order to protect his "plausible deniability." He didn't like to think of Annette or any other female agent spreading her legs for some dumb bastard in order to achieve some undefined advantage for Whiteside Tech. *Life can be a wicked taskmaster*, he thought. *Once we've acquired Victor's ability, we can get rid of that sort of outrage.*

A fox loped towards the two men from the direction of the lodge, its gait slightly unstable. "Shhhhh," whispered Cam as he raised an arm to stop Randall from moving, but the fox had already seen them. It slowed visibly, stopped in its tracks and looked blankly at the two humans. Cam drew his revolver and shot the pitiful animal in the forehead from twenty paces.

"Rabid," he said. "Sorry about that, but they get quite insane from the disease. They can be totally docile one moment and super-aggressive the next."

Much like humans, thought Randall. "You did what you had to do," he said. "I know you don't like that sort of thing any more than I do. And ... good shot!" He knew Cam practiced almost daily at the firing range he had built in the sub-basement of the company headquarters, and he had always wondered if all that "practice" would ever serve a useful purpose.

As Cam radioed in to explain the gunshot, and to get his agents to come and dispose of the carcass, Randall walked over to the dead fox, looked down, and felt a wave of sorrow. Its eyes stared stupidly and blood trickled from its mouth onto the yellow grass between the dirt tracks. "Life's a bitch, little fellow," he said sadly. "Now off you go to fox heaven."

Randall's hands were still linked at the small of his back, exactly as they had been before and throughout the whole incident with the fox. It was as if this aristocratic posture symbolized his power to have things done by others.

Good thing we react differently to people who lose it, he thought as he watched Cam tearing a strip off an agent over the walkie-talkie ... for not having spotted and dealt with the rabid animal already. *I'm going to have to talk him into early retirement*. "Did you find out anything else about Victor?" he asked when Cam had finished his petulant tirade.

"The guy's turning into something of a mystery," replied Cam as he broke out his notebook and flipped pages. "He was born and raised in Sault Ste. Marie, up in northern Ontario—uh—birthday, May three, seventy-two. The early part of his life was quite ordinary. He was a loner, a bookworm with poor social skills. One of his former teachers, a friend of his family, said he went to the United States after dropping out of Queen's University—engineering. Nobody seems to know where he went or why he left the Sault. He didn't even go to his parents' funeral. They were killed in an auto accident in 2007, seven years ago.

"His father was a steelworker," he continued, checking the notations he'd made in the pad he carried at all times in the pocket of his suit, "his mother a home-maker. No other children. Both parents deceased, as I mentioned. In high school he won some kind of math award, and he was a sports nut, though not a player himself. His boss at Blue Line says in twelve years, he never complained—which he said is unusual for a cabbie. Just took his money and left. He never went for a beer with anybody, he didn't even bowl, in spite of the jacket, and he didn't join any clubs or anything. We couldn't even find out who the hell his dentist was. He has some gold teeth, so he must have a dentist. He lived in a farmhouse out past Manotick, south of Ottawa. He drove a rusty old 1996 Cutlass, which turned up abandoned on Parliament Hill, from when he met Senator Cadbury. And ... that's all we know, so far. We'll figure him out eventually, but for now we're dead-ended."

Randall executed a military 180-degree turn and started back towards the manor, his hands still clasped behind his back, listening to what Cam was saying and trying to make sense of it. He took a few heel-and-toe steps, head down, along the left-hand tire track, contemplating the character of the man who now lived at the lodge and promised such changes for the world.

"Good work, Cam," he said, carefully using his employee's first name. "We'll talk again later, but for now I have to get out to the lodge and sign a contract with Victor. As for him and Annette, or any other woman, agent or not, I'm sure you'd agree that the prudent course would be to let nature take its course, and respond as required." Randall also thanked Cam for his help in dealing with the lawyers the night before, and he asked about his wife and kids ... all the dopey formalities that seemed necessary to keep Cam happy, or at least out of his hair.

As they emerged from the bush near the Patriot compound, Randall shook Cam's hand and climbed back into the helicopter for the short jaunt out to the lodge. He was thankful to leave the man behind.

* * *

Helen Kozinski smacked the phone down forcefully. She had just had a long-distance argument with Roy Taggart, her boyfriend—over money, of all things. They both made good livings, but he was a bean counter at heart. She loved him, and had great sex with him, but at times she thought he was a five-star jerk. There was a confrontation coming, and she was almost at the point of writing him off, of regarding him as yet another name on her disturbingly long list of "transitional men." She tried to put her foul mood aside as she walked down the wooden steps of the lodge and back out onto the dock, to the spot where Victor was still casting for bass.

She sat down beside him, took off her shoes, and dangled her bare feet over the water, without a word.

She'd changed into a skirt and a blouse at the lodge, after making those "important phone calls" she had fibbed about earlier—several Patriot staff kept changes of clothes there, for when circumstances like this arose.

Victor found himself sneaking peeks at her legs, and enjoying the way her long blond hair seemed to be tickling the wind. He had never thought of security agents as being beautiful. On TV, sure, but that was to sell soap. This was real life, and Helen Kozinski was the "head honchess" of Patriot Security, or at least the "operational" boss. He tried to imagine what she must look like in full make-up, dressed to kill, and shook his head. *She's a nine, and I'm a three*, he said to himself. *Looksist law—there can't be more than a two-point spread unless you're rich. Of course I ... I am filthy rich, or soon will be, but then she already has a steady boyfriend, in the RCMP, and besides, besides, besides...*

"Here they come," she said as the helicopter appeared on the far side of Wilson Lake. "Better reel in."

"They?" said Victor.

"Well, there's Mr. Whiteside, and Annette Blais, one of our agents and my very best buddy. She'll be staying with you for a bit if you don't mind. We just thought that—"

"Don't mind at all," said Victor, winding in his lure.

"And a couple of your friends," added Helen.

Victor glanced at her sideways and wondered who she could possibly be talking about. *I don't have ... friends.*

She put on her shoes while she was still sitting, innocently flashing thigh. "They're white," she said, looking up with a broad smile.

"Snowball and Kodiak!" shouted Victor as he collected his fishing gear and the five bass he'd caught. "Fantastic!"

"We'd better get off the end of the dock," she said, "away from the landing pad. By the way, the groundskeeper said he'd build a couple of kennels by the dock here if you want ... a bit up from the boathouse, he figures."

"Terrific," said Victor.

* * *

"What kind of person has no past ... no adult past?" asked Randall as the helicopter slowed over Wilson Lake.

"Jeeze, I don't know," said Annette as she held Kodiak by the collar and scratched the underside of his chin. "Spies, psychos, and mystics, I guess, but Helliwell doesn't seem to be any of those."

The helicopter descended towards the dock at a slight angle, nose up. Its powerful engine was thundering and its three wheels were flared like the talons of a mechanical eagle, but Grant Eamer touched down with the grace of a mother placing a newborn in a crib. Randall and Annette ducked and scrambled down the steps, and Grant handed down the two frantic dogs.

Snowball and Kodiak rushed to slurp Victor's face and then sprinted off the land end of the dock, practically bowling over Helen on their way by. "Hi to you, too," laughed Victor as he watched his two galumphs go about their urgent business. As soon as the gang was safely off the dock, the helicopter wound up and churned its way back into the afternoon sunshine.

Randall, his oversized grin pasted on, made all of the necessary introductions as they walked towards the lodge. "I'm glad to see you're getting into the swing of the place," he said to his new partner. "Ain't it grand having your very own lake?"

"Dinner!" bragged Victor, holding up the catch of the day for all to see and admire. "The cook says he can make these little guys into a gourmet meal."

"How's your arm?" asked Annette.

"Feels fine," said Victor. "Can't wait to get the cast off, though."

Noel Lambert came out of the front door of the lodge and welcomed the group by bellowing. "Come up to da porch. No mozzies up here, and good snacks. I fixing dem up jus' da way you like dem, Mr. Whiteside."

"Mozzies?" asked Victor as Randall waved his thanks to the cook.

"That's a standard line for Noel," explained Randall. "Mozzies' is a local expression for 'mosquitoes.' You'll soon find out about this minor shortcoming of our security. They'll be here in a month or so, I'm sorry to say, and all the king's horses can't do a damned thing about it."

They made their way onto the screened veranda of the massive log structure and sat at a table directly under a huge but motionless ceiling fan. Noel had prepared a dish of liver pâté and "smashed lobster," as he called it, with a tray of assorted biscuits and a huge pitcher of iced lemonade. After some munching and small talk about the relative purity of ceiling fans as compared to air-conditioning, there was a collective sense that they ought to get down to business.

"I must say I'm intrigued by this talent you have, Mr. Helliwell," said Annette.

"Call me Victor," he said, "and yeah, it must seem odd to meet someone with my ability. As a matter of fact, it's a little strange to *be* someone with this—uh—skill. I'm not used to all this attention and all this ... well, money ... my money, his money. It's just that I've always been poor. Now I'm ... what do you call it, a *nouveau riche*? I'm sure I'll get used to it. How's the kids, Mr. Whiteside—uh—Randall?"

"Oh, they're just fine," smiled Randall. "Julia was just asking me when Rip Van Winkle can come back and visit her. They'll all be out here on Saturday with Doreen, to spend a little time on the boat ... except for Michael, I'm afraid. He's planning to spend the weekend at his own cabin over there, with his girlfriend, no less. Kids today! What are you gonna do, eh?"

Victor nodded as if he understood all too well, although he wasn't at all sure what he was agreeing with. "Kodiak—come—sit—good dog," he said firmly.

Noel indicated that he would cope with the canine corps. He gripped both collars and led the dogs into the lodge for a snack.

"But as for you," continued Randall, "it's going to take us a couple of months before we have a preliminary impact study on this—uh—phenomenon that you represent. And I guess you'll have to tell us how this ability can be taught to others. We'll have to come up with a plan as to how to proceed on that score. In the meantime, I suppose you're kind of ... stuck here. I hope you don't mind. Is there anything you need?"

"Not that I can think of," said Victor. He sucked in a lungful of air and was about to speak further, but as often seemed to happen, Whiteside had the gavel, and knew how to use it.

"Good," beamed Randall. "Well, I have a surprise for you. Here it is ... earlier than we expected." He pulled two official-looking copies of a folded document from inside his jacket pocket.

"Two exhausted lawyers completed this just a couple of hours ago," he explained. "It gives you a lump payment of two-hundred thousand, over and above the fifty thousand 'good faith down payment' you asked for—which was deposited in your account this morning, by the way—plus royalties of four percent of all sales—that's based on the *wholesale* price of whatever the hell it is that we're selling—plus twenty-one percent of after-tax profits from all activities related to your ability. And there's a stock option thrown in for good measure. Senator Cadbury has a small piece of the action—a bit of my piece, I should say—but that's my affair, and no concern to you. The whole thing is set up so that we can't win unless you win, and vice versa. Disputes are submitted to a neutral panel, jointly nominated, for binding mediation, and we sever relations by the same process, should we ever fall out with each other.

"In return, we get any rights or patents to all programs, courses, written materials, recordings, devices, or anything else related in any way to your ability. Of course all this is dependent on us being satisfied that what we get from you is, in fact, marketable. Our lawyers were upset to find themselves writing a contract when they weren't even sure what it was that we would be receiving from you. I told them it was a special talent that could be taught to others and that I wanted it badly. In other words, Whiteside Technologies gets the intellectual property, the idea, the techniques, and anything else associated with your ability or deriving from it."

Randall plopped the two seven-page documents on the table. "You're supposed to sign each page, where the Xs are, below my signature, both copies. Now, for history's sake," he said as he offered his pen, "keep your promise."

Victor was pleased that Randall had remembered. "Is the contract fair?" he asked as he accepted the gold pen.

"Both lawyers think it's fair, and I think it's fair," said Randall.

"Okay. You told the truth. It's fair," said Victor. Then, true to his word, he took the pen, and without reading a word of the contract, he signed his name, with a flourish, fourteen times ... and pocketed the pen. "There you go," he said happily as he handed the documents back to his new partner. "You and I are in business, Randall ... and I've got myself a nice gold pen," he added, patting the pen in his shirt pocket.

Everyone laughed heartily at Victor's act of unrepentant petty larceny. They all shook hands vigorously. Then Randall proposed a lemonade toast to seal the deal. "To Victor Helliwell," he said as he stood and raised his glass almost into the ceiling fan. "And to the truth. May it make us all free ... and stinking rich."

"Hear hear," added Helen and Annette.

"I'll drink to that," said Victor as the glasses clinked, "even if it means I'm toasting myself."

As they sipped, they were all aware that there was still the matter of the other shoe, the one that hadn't dropped yet. "Well?" said Randall, with great expectancy as they all sat down.

"Annette," said Victor, "could you please get a pair of pliers from that tackle box over there?"

"Pliers!?" asked Randall as Annette complied.

Victor pushed juice glasses and munchies to one side of the table and rolled up the shirtsleeve on his left arm, exposing the plaster cast. "I have something important to tell you, Randall," he said ominously.

"What we have been referring to as my ability, my skill? Well, I'm afraid it doesn't exist. I'm as ordinary as you or Helen or Annette or anybody else."

Randall Whiteside never panicked, but at this moment he felt as close as he'd ever been. "You ... *can't* tell if people are lying?" he asked nervously.

"Nope," said Victor as he accepted the pliers. "No can do, but..." He gripped the end of a wire with the pliers and yanked, splitting the surface of the cast from the inside of his middle finger up to the top, near the elbow. "Would you—uh—hold that open while I slide my fingers out of those damned holes?"

Victor laid his left forearm on the table, palm up. Randall dug his thumbs into the crack and pressed the two halves of the cast apart, and Victor extricated himself from the cage. He flexed his wrist for the first time in seven weeks, and rubbed it. "God, that feels good," he said. Then he picked up the cast, held it up with the split facing down, inserted his hand part way, and gently tapped the finger-hole end on the table. As he pulled his hand slowly out, he watched the universe mutate in the eyes of his new friend and mentor.

"You son-of-a-bitch," said Randall. "It's a piece of technology!"

"Why do you think I picked you as my partner?"

"You son-of-a-bitch," repeated Randall.

"It's called a LieDeck, l-i-e-d-e-c-k," explained Victor as he handed him a wallet-sized black box, with silver duct tape stuck here and there on the thing. "That's short for lie detector. I spell it with a capital 'L,' and a capital 'D' in the middle ... not sure why. This is what you bought."

"You son-of-a-bitch," said Randall again, with the voice of a man who'd just been caught on *Candid Camera*, and loved it.

"Unbelievable!" said Helen.

"It's quite simple in its operation and construction," said Victor. "A tiny microphone picks up a person's voice—you see the little holes in the cast for the sound to reach the mike? A filter removes all the audible frequencies, from a hundred and twenty-five hertz to twelve thousand hertz—or twelve kilohertz—the normal hearing range. What's left are the inaudible frequencies, or maybe I should say the harmonics, produced by the voice box, frequencies that are above or below the human hearing range. These frequencies are dramatically altered when the speaker is aware that he or she is saying something untrue, because of a high level of stress caused by the fear of getting caught. The harder you try to lie convincingly, the easier it is to detect the deception. Even if you don't care whether you're caught or not, it still works. Unless you're a psychopath, with no conscience to be bothered, it's just not possible to control this autonomic aspect of your voice, even with extensive biofeedback training. Believe me, I tried every which way there is. It can't be done. If what's called the 'guilt knowledge' is there, you get caught, end of discussion.

"My hypothesis was that the same biological realities that underpin the regular old polygraph—the galvanic skin response and the blood flow variations—were reflected in voice patterns. The fundamental science was difficult to understand, and the computer algorithm took a very long time to perfect, but once those things were done, it became a simple technical matter to recognize when a person is lying by identifying two types of voice patterns, normal and stressed, and signaling the wearer when the stressed pattern is present. It's a nice little binary system—yes or no. I used a primitive pin structure, as you can see. When I was with you at the Royal Oaks and you were testing me, a tenth of a second after every untrue statement, that pin tapped the surface of my forearm."

Victor paused briefly to see if Randall wanted to respond, but he just stared intently at the small plastic box with the plaster dust on it, lost in thought and calculation.

"There's a patent application, wrapped in plastic, between layers of plaster, inside the cast," continued the inventor. "Also, you'll find all the technical specifications in there ... and my will. That was in case I got killed."

Again, Victor waited, but Randall was still lost in his own world.

"The LieDeck is as safe from copycats as the Polaroid-Land camera," he went on, "and the Polaroid patent was tested in the courts, as you know. The first prototypes of the LieDeck can be assembled in a day. A basic model can be on the market in a week, but that's only the beginning.

"A micro-miniaturized model is where the big money is. I'm hoping we can get that on the market in a few months, maybe by September or October. I think we should build the LieDeck into a digital wristwatch."

"Yes," said Randall vacantly. "Yes, of course—like Dick Tracy and his two-way wrist radio."

"The signaling system can be tactile, as in this model," continued Victor, "but it could be visual—a flashing light—or auditory—a beeper, a buzzer, a bell, whatever. Actually, this one has a beeper too—I just disconnected it while it was inside the cast. It shouldn't be a problem to build a device with all three signaling systems, even in the wristwatch model. So, Randall ... are you a happy man?"

"Happy" didn't quite catch the essence of Randall's emotions. He was gaga. "This is ingenious ... fantastic ... and m-m-marketable as hell," he stammered. "I absolutely *love* it. I honestly didn't know for sure if you were a crazy or a psychic or a con man until this very minute. This is ... it's..."

"Sort of a high-tech Pinocchio," volunteered Annette.

"How the hell did you come up with this idea?" asked Randall.

"Actually, it was originally dreamed up by a good friend of mine, George Cluff," said Victor, with sadness in his voice. "But his model—he called it the Cluff Voice Analyzer, the C.V.A.—his model was too unreliable ... it didn't do the job nearly well enough to be put on the market. I perfected it. George died in a plane crash in 2002, twelve years ago. I believe the CIA killed him because of his device. That's why I played hermit for all those years. I was scared the CIA would get me too."

Victor wanted to change the subject, to not talk about George Cluff, but he couldn't prevent himself from showing grief. His face seemed frozen, or at least locked into an aimless stare at the tabletop.

"Well, you're safe now, Victor," said Helen reassuringly. She put a gentle hand onto the forearm that had just been liberated from the cast, and made a mental note to get back to that George Cluff business ... at the appropriate time, of course.

Victor shook himself out of the mood he had fallen into. "Why don't you—uh—try it," he suggested to Randall. "Just hold it in your hand and talk."

Randall was relieved to get past the minor funk, and he was suddenly like a kid with his first Nintendo. His eyes lit up as he placed the box firmly in his hand, with the pin over the butt of his palm. "Uh—what's your name?" he asked.

"I am Napoleon," cracked Victor. "Did you feel it tap you?"

"Yeah," said Randall. "This is freaking great."

"I'm forty-two years old," said Victor.

"Nope," laughed Randall.

"I'm forty-one years old."

"Uh ... yep."

"I had to make seven casts before I got one that looked right."

"Really ... seven?" asked Randall. "Hey, that's odd. I automatically asked you for confirmation, even though I knew that you spoke the truth, because I didn't feel the pin tap me. This thing is really going to modify our speech habits."

"It took me twelve years to build that sucker, and I only perfected it this January," said Victor.

"It took you twelve years to build," said Randall excitedly, "but you ... didn't perfect it in January. Did I—uh—get that right?"

"Right you are," laughed Victor. "It was last November."

"No it wasn't," Randall chirped delightedly.

"Okay, it was February, about seven weeks ago."

"Yep."

"I'm an honest man," volunteered Victor.

"Yes ... you are," said Randall. "Jesus H. Christ! Just that easy, I get an absolutely vital insight into your character! I can sure use an advantage like that in my business."

"So can your competitors," said Victor.

"I ... suppose so," realized Randall.

"I have no insecurities."

"False."

"I have quite a few insecurities."

"True."

"Ever since I've had a working prototype of the LieDeck, about six years ago, I've been talking out loud when I'm alone to do sort of a running check on myself. Using the LieDeck that way helps you to understand yourself, stops you from lying to yourself—which we all do, by the way."

"That's ... apparently true," said an astonished Randall Whiteside.

"And once you get to know all your fears," continued Victor, "and understand which ones you're responsible for and which ones you're not responsible for, which ones are real and which aren't, they're a lot easier to overcome, and you'll find yourself motivated to change your personality."

"That's ... also true," said Randall, wide-eyed. "At least that's your—uh—honest opinion."

"You're right—good point," said Victor. "It *is* my opinion, but in this case, it's also true, as you'll find out in time. A lot of things are provable when you use the LieDeck on yourself. In fact, using a LieDeck will not only motivate you to *consciously* try to change your personality, it will change your personality whether you work at it or not ... whether you want it to or not!"

"Again ... true ... and scary as hell," decided Randall.

"Holy cow!" said Annette.

"In other words," said Victor, looking deep into the gaping eyes of his new partner, "eventually, the LieDeck will change the very nature of the beast, change human nature! Did the pin tap your hand when I said that?"

"No, it didn't," said Randall incredulously. "Jesus Christ! This is far more than I bargained for. God damn it, Victor. This isn't just an electronic device. This is a ... a *revolution!*"

"I'd have to agree with that," said Victor. "Did the pin tap you when you said that?"

"No."

"Does that mean it must be true?" asked Victor.

"I ... I guess," said Randall.

"No, it doesn't. It means you *believe* it's true. But I believe that too, and that's why I told you at the Royal Oaks that while we stand to make a hell of a pile of dough together, the money we make will probably be the least of our accomplishments. Do you remember I said that?"

"Yes, of course I do," said Randall.

"Well, it's ... true," said Victor with a shrug of his shoulders.

Through all this, Cam O'Connor sat stiff as an icicle in front of the video screen in the Patriot compound, where he was monitoring the conversation from the lodge—he'd had a microphone planted there by one of his agents in the morning, without telling the boss. And as he listened, he became terrified at the thought of having this monstrous gadget turned on himself. *My God*, he thought. *There are things in my life that I'm not prepared to discuss with anyone.*

"So you ... lied to me when you told me you got your arm broke," said Randall.

"I never said I got my arm broke," corrected Victor. "I said that I got mugged, which was true. I said the cast would be on my arm for a few more days, which was exactly what I expected. And I said it hurt pretty bad for a while, by which I meant the cast. And it did hurt. I made it a little too tight on the thumb hole, and I had to ream it out a bit from the outside after the first day I wore it."

"And all this elaborate deception," said Randall, "had to do with that fellow Cluff, your friend who invented the—uh—precursor of the LieDeck?"

"Well, if the bad guys found out, they'd just kill me," said Victor, "thinking that that act would solve their problem. The way I had it figured, a murderer would hardly stop at the scene of the crime to remove and examine a cast. Inside the plaster, with the patent application and technical specifications, you'll find a mini-cassette. It directs that the LieDeck device be delivered to you ... and it also tells you where there are three reel-to-reel tapes that I prepared. These tapes talk about what I think ought to be done with the LieDeck, how it should be handled, what it has to teach us human beings about ourselves, plus a few

other things. Thank goodness that stuff wasn't needed, but it was a sensible precaution, as far as I was concerned."

The two Samoyeds reappeared with Noel, panting ... and looking like they'd done something they should feel guilty about.

"I am feeding dem dat pork chops," Noel announced as he replenished the lemonade in the pitcher, "an I t'ink dey in love wit' me now."

Chapter 6 PHANTOM OF THE PENTHOUSE

Darlene Trahan's mind did a sweeping tour of her jumbled past as the silent driver transported her from the halfway house she called home to an upscale apartment on Riverside Drive. She sat in the backseat, as always, and as instructed. She wore her beaded moccasins, as always, not because it was the way of her people, but because it was her way of not getting confused about who she was—a thorny problem when you're getting straight.

She looked at the back of the driver's head, with its perfect, close-cropped hair. *He never talks*, she thought. *Every week or two he calls me, he picks me up, I go, he waits, I do my dance for Blade, and then he takes me back home. He's made of wood. He feels like a tree feels ... wind, rain, sun, birds' feet, snow, fox urine ... just what happens to him, nothing more. Gotta be a cop. Gotta be. Maybe an RCMP.*

It was only ten minutes from the rooming houses and skin bars of Ottawa's Lowertown to the plush pads of the rich and powerful, but it might as well have been ten hours on a wide-body. Where Darlene was going was a land lost by her grandfather's ancestors, a young and sharp-edged mountain where the gold still lived near the surface.

"Blade will see you now" was all she ever heard over the phone from the driver, and she was told to be ready in exactly five minutes. "I don't need to get myself ready just to spin," she would respond, and then she would sigh.

Like everything in the white man's world, there was a price to be paid, both ways. Darlene paid with a slender body. For this gig—her only gig these long days—the rewards she got were never negotiated and never contested, unlike her years as a stripper, or a hooker (depending on whose story you believed). Social workers and probation officers never understood that side of Darlene, nor did the tight-assed staffers at the halfway house. Drugs were her problem, cocaine mostly, but the authorities were always keen to cure her of her personality, her character, every time they got a free shot.

Bodies were for lots of things ... she knew that ... but bodies were mostly for fun, for pleasure. If you said it was so, then it was so ... for you anyway, what with Canada being a free country and all. Her body just happened to fit the *Playboy* mold, the fashion tramp template, and she had one of those haunting faces that launch ships ... or at least cause an occasional fender-bender.

Her purpose in life was a total mystery to her, much like the purpose of life generally ... with one great exception: sex. Even when she was a teenager back on Manitoulin Island, all the "braves" knew her ground rules. "Nobody gets to just fuck me," she had always warned the boys and men who panted at her feet. "You make my body howl like a wolf over the fresh kill ... then you get to let your arrow fly." Life in that half-way house was agreeable enough in spite of the white taboos, she supposed, and whoever it was that secretly employed her from time to time obviously had the political juice to get around the ridiculous rules and regulations of Canada's penal system.

Blade, she thought vacantly as the car eased towards the back entrance of the apartment block. His name is Louis in my dreams. I don't know how I know that, but I do. Maybe I heard it in my sleep. My dreams are more real than ... than this, anyway. Still, he needs me ... here ... this way. He needs me to help him steer some great ship through turbulent air. He needs me to take away the sting of a mostly stupid life. Some day, I'll take away the fear too. People should not fear pleasure. Imagine, telling people that not having any sex is therapeutic. What a so-white crock. Even my doctors know better than that ... well, two of them, anyway.

As always before, Darlene stepped out from behind darkened auto glass into the darkened parking lot. It was never more than a few steps to the back door, and her silent escort always seemed frantic to open the lock and get her inside—*away from any prying eyes*, she guessed. The private elevator required a key too, and once they were inside she was always told by a hand gesture to turn around, to face the rear wall, so he could push the button—and to stay that way exactly until she was ushered into a hall and down to an unmarked suite. That door was locked too, locked before she was let in and locked again from the outside after she was inside.

As the door clicked behind her, the puritanical rules of a white society were left whispering and whimpering in the hall. This was a place of mental health, of normalcy, of natural animals.

Darlene put her purse on an antique chair and went into the washroom. Her black hair hung like the curtains of an Egyptian royal bed, framing her face. “My eyes are too scary,” she said softly. “Men seem to like that, but...”

Her Timex watch was closing in on 10:00 p.m., but she was ready. The timing of her encounters with Blade had to be precise, just like at the Meat Shop, where she had most recently plied her trade, except that these impromptu sessions were so much ... *classier*.

She took off all her clothes and put on the printed pink kimono that hung on the inside of the bathroom door ... chosen by Blade, she was sure ... *and a keeper*, she said to herself. She walked into the living room of this place where no one lived, where no magazines ever lay about or got read. She took a deep breath and gazed at her reflection in the large, gray, two-way mirror that surely hid the man who paid the bills. Darlene liked being beautiful ... *and silk has a special way of highlighting erect nipples*, she said in her head as she swiveled for effect.

"Where is my phantom prince?" she asked aloud as she glanced to make sure the sliding doors and the drapes of the balcony were closed. "Is the moon your home? Do you pay visits to other ladies like me throughout the universe? Do you let them speak, while I can only know you in silence? Do you let them see you, and touch you, while I can't? Do you provide them with the good things of life, like you do for me? Do you make them into prisoners of terrible secrets? Must I live forever as a madwoman on this two-faced planet? Will I join you for eternity when I die? Come to me, my bear with no hair."

She dropped her new kimono onto the thick, sea-blue carpet and raised her long, thin arms to the sky. Slowly, her feet created little circles as she hummed a Mohawk lullaby. She watched her small breasts dance in the low light. The stereo went on of its own accord, as it always did whenever she twirled, and the tasty scent of oriental pipe tobacco wafted into the room like the fingers of an aroused poltergeist. Blade was there, behind the looking glass, and the steps quickened until her long hair flew from the small of her back and spun wildly through the air. She closed her too-scary eyes, as she had been told she must do when Blade came, and the rhythm of aboriginal drums penetrated her and tickled her, tapped and hammered at her from inside her bones, tripped switches in her mind.

"My heart beats like the thunder of a great forest fire," said the echo of a man's voice on a speaker system. "I am pressed for time, but I just had to see you for a few moments." He was nearby, as ready

as she was, exactly at the appointed hour and minute and second.

Darlene's silence, or at least her abstinence from words, was supposed to begin with the sound of his voice—the cardinal rule. She thought of the pleasure he would have watching her while he “touched himself”—that's what they called it at the Meat Shop—and she thought of her own pleasure at moving the spirit of the phantom prince. She used her hand to dance herself into a mighty orgasm, then crumbled to the floor. She threw her heels up on the chesterfield and let her hips continue lunging, grabbing for more.

"You are the Earthling of my dreams," said the trembling voice of her client as she declined wetly into a slow rocking from side to side. "I'll see you in a few days, when I get back from ... from my trip ... and at that time I will enter your body. There's a present for you in the bedroom. I hope you like it."

With that, he was gone, as if he'd never been there at all—or so Darlene believed. She rose slowly, picked up the silk kimono and held it to a slippery chest. Then she walked into the bedroom and closed the door, as per plan.

Blade actually waited a few minutes before leaving the viewing room with the two-way mirror, waited for things to settle down, waited so he could tidy up. He stuffed the last wet tissue into his suit jacket pocket, pulled up his pants, zipped, tucked in his white shirt, did up his belt and tightened his tie. Then, with a final glance through the mirror to make sure his favorite Canadian was still in the bedroom with the door closed, he left the closet, walked quickly out the penthouse door, rode the private elevator to the main floor, ducked out the rear door and slipped into his waiting limousine.

The world was changing far too fast for this phantom prince. He felt that if he relaxed his focus, everything he cared about would dissolve into droplets of molten lava, explode, like the mother of all hydrogen bombs. *Maybe ... when I come back from Winnipeg, he thought, I'll finally get up the nerve to have actual sex with that beautiful creature.* He poured himself a shot of scotch from the limo's well-stocked pantry and aimed his mind at the affairs of state.

In the top drawer of a dresser, Darlene found a Swiss watch, and two crisp thousand-dollar bills—freshly minted, or so it seemed. *This is so nice,* she thought. She looked at the face of a long-gone white man on the brown bills, and recounted the zeros after the ones. *I must please him well. All phantoms should be this tuned in to the material needs of mortals. Maybe they are, of course. How could I ever know, or guess?*

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 18, 2014

Chapter 7

COLD WAR II

The colossal U.S. embassy stood on a prime piece of real estate just a skip down Sussex Drive from Parliament Hill—line of site neighbor; “real close” if you figured from the standpoint of modern technology. It was a luxury liner of a building, five stories high if you go by the rows of visible windows, topped with two peculiar topknots, one of glass with mysterious structures inside, the other without windows ... or so it seemed. The old digs, from before WWII to the turn of the century, was an old gray box on Wellington, physically closer to the Peace Tower on the Hill, right across the street, actually, but indistinguishable from all the other gray boxes on “the strip” ... well, indistinguishable except for the menacing eagle over the front door and the star-spangled bar-graph above the bird of prey. Now that emblem stood guard above the doors of this new fortress, a state-of-the-art post-911 bunker, with outside cement barriers that robbed tax-paying Ottawans of one lane of Sussex Drive for several hundreds yards.

In the middle of the sub-basement, three floors beneath pavement level, there was a special room known as “the safe-room.” It was an austere place, vault gray, with a phone, a couch, a TV/VCR, a table and four not-very-comfortable chairs. The walls, ceiling and floor of this room were electronically alive with the simultaneous sounds of music and human voices plus an encyclopedia of other noises, but inside the room, there was only the faintest hum. There existed no technology anywhere that could eavesdrop on this place. The CIA had tried, at the request of the former ambassador, and they had failed.

It was only here that General George Brampton felt free to discuss the Helliwell situation. He lowered himself carefully into a chair and double-checked the crease in his civilian trousers. “I don’t see why I can’t wear my fucking uniform in this snow-bitten country,” he said aloud to the empty space.

He was weary—not the kind of tired you feel from too little sleep, but the far deeper fatigue that invades the body by minuscule increments, caused by years of struggle, with too little to show for it. “War is hell,” he said as he folded his hands on the table, “but this Cold War business is the worst. God damned thing should have ended when everybody thought it did, back in the glory days of Gorbachev and Yeltsin.”

The general’s thoughts retreated to their usual hiding place, inside his skin, a knee-jerk concession to the rules that applied everywhere in the world except this room. He retired back in 2010, at age 68, but he had been politically exhumed and militarily kick-started when the Cold War resumed in 2012. *With the God damned never-ending War on Terror plus the Second Cold War, the American way of life is going down the crapper*, he thought.

“I’m too old to be chasing a fucking Russian Bear,” he said out loud as he took off his glasses, sat them on his knee, and massaged his loose temples. With his hands slapped over his face, he could still catch the receding scent of his daily splash of Old Spice. He remembered when that was meant to twig the hot buttons of the ladies. Now it seemed to serve only to mask the odd odors that seem to glom onto aging, pleated skin.

For all four decades of his illustrious career, the scuttlebutt had been: “If you’re meeting with Brampton, do *not* be late.” Colonel Findlay was about to be late, but this day, the general was grateful for the few extra moments of peace. “Too damn old,” he repeated aloud into his hands.

* * *

It was 0900 hours. Colonel Roger Findlay stood hangdog against the back wall of the elevator, his briefcase in one hand and his umbrella in the other. His armed escort was professionally silent. The two men avoided eye contact as rigorously as they avoided idle chitchat. *Loose lips and all that*, they both remembered.

Findlay always felt ill at ease in the embassy. He worked in, and out of, the American consulate in Toronto, Canada’s pretty-big apple, a couple of hundred miles southwest. The poop on the Colonel for the past forty years was that he could research anything, and he was proud of that reputation.

Every time he was summoned to Ottawa and entered the front door of the embassy, he could smell the residual vapors of power. Those in power simply adored that aroma, but those who served the powerful feared it. *Politics is a blood sport*, he said to himself. *It’s entertaining for the masses, but it stinks when it’s your own blood.*

When the elevator came to a stop, he was led quickly and quietly to the unmarked room where the general was waiting. He went in, stood at attention until the foot-thick door shuddered shut behind him, and saluted smartly. “Sorry I’m late, sir,” he said too briskly. “Couldn’t be helped.”

Brampton stood to greet his colleague. “At ease, Findlay, at ease,” he said, with a small, unmilitary wave and a cursory handshake. “How are you?”

"Very well, sir," he lied. He'd had little sleep the past two nights, but he would never allow his discomfort to show.

"You have the tape?" asked the general as he picked up the remote, clicked on the television, and killed the sound.

"Yes sir," answered Findlay as he opened his briefcase—he knew that when General Brampton said "tape," he could mean a CD, a DVD ... all sorts of things. "Like you said ... cutting-edge stuff, off-the-wall stuff. Actually, I recorded two clips—one's just funny. I think they're both more off-the-wall than cutting-edge, but that's your call."

Brampton's eyes lit up a bit, a very tiny bit. "What's the funny one?" he asked.

"Just an old Johnny Carson sketch from nineteen eighty-two, about a politician forced to hold a press conference while he was wired to a polygraph. My assistant thought you might enjoy it."

"Is it good?"

"Carson cracks me up," said Findlay. "Do you want to see it?"

"Maybe just a bit." He felt silly opting to look at nonsense in such extremely serious circumstances, but for most of his military career, whenever he wasn't overseas, he had watched Johnny Carson, from his first *Tonight* show in 1962 until his final show in 1992. "Just a few seconds," he added. *Come to think of it, I used to watch Johnny almost every night when I wasn't overseas as well*, he thought. *Or is that what I just said?*

Findlay was surprised. Brampton rarely laughed. It was hard to tell, but maybe the old man was actually in a good mood. *That could happen*, he assured himself. *Theoretically*. He called up a section that he had found particularly amusing.

Male reporter: Isn't it true that you won't subsidize heating bills for our senior citizens this winter?

Carson: Absolutely not! No one is more concerned about our senior citizens than I am.

BUZZ

Carson: There may be some small cutbacks.

BUZZ

Carson: Some big cutbacks.

BUZZ

Carson: We're going to freeze their asses off.

[Laughter]

Male reporter: It's been alleged that your major contributors are corporate fat cats.

Carson: That is not true. All of my contributions come from the small workingman.

BUZZ

Carson: From the middle class.

BUZZ

Carson: It's all from the Mafia.

[Laughter]

Female reporter: Congressman, what's your position on equal rights for women?

Carson: I'm glad you asked that. I look forward toward a day when all Americans are equal, regardless of sex.

BUZZ

Carson: I'm looking toward a day when they're kind of equal.

BUZZ

Carson: I'm looking at your boobs.

[Laughter]

"I miss Carson," said the general. "Wind it forward to the important part, Findlay," he said—his mind was still back in the days of videotape, when these functions actually took time. "And while you're doing that, I'll fill you in, tell you what I couldn't tell you over the phone."

Brampton had been standing, leaning with one hand on the table. He hobbled over to a chair and sat down as normally as he could without throwing his back out. It used to embarrass him when younger officers or women saw the evidence of his physical frailty, but no more. He hadn't been recycled for hand-to-hand combat. He had been recalled to service in Cold War II because of his superior military mind. *The brain is mightier than the H-bomb*, he remembered. He used to say that to raw recruits back in the 1970s, when he was a mere sergeant.

"For years, we've had suspicions about Senator Joe Cadbury," he said to Findlay. "He's not a Commie. We know that. But he is one of those pesky liberal squishheads ... always promoting peace ... you know the type ... absolutely no understanding of what's really going on in the world. We tap his phones. We got parabolic mikes aimed at his office, his home. The poor bugger can't beat his wiener that we don't count the strokes. I always felt it was a mistake to be on his case so heavy. He's basically a decent man, and we never got any usable dirt on him anyway ... until this Wednesday, when we had this hot intercept ... and that's when I called you." *Today's Friday, right?* he thought. *Yeah, yeah ... Good Friday ... whatever...*

"One of the local lobbyists made an appointment with him to meet a taxi driver, and it turns out this guy—his name's Victor Helliwell—is like some kind of a human fuckin' lie detector! Whatever you say, he knows if it's true or not. But does the good senator call President Barker or his own PM or his military guys or even his own fuckin' RCMP? No, he doesn't. He sends the lie detector guy over to see Randall Whiteside, for Christ's sake, so they can make money off him. Can you believe that?

"That's why I asked you and your team to find whatever you could about the science and art of lie detection ... not the standard stuff, but the weird stuff. I don't believe in any o' that psychic shit. This Helliwell character referred to his lie detection thing as a skill, an ability, but I don't buy it. There has to be some rational explanation. I don't know how he does this thing, but whatever it is, it works, and we've got to get it. At the very least, the enemy must be prevented from getting it." He wasn't sure if he meant the Russians or the Arabs or ... "Whatever," he added, flapping a mitt in an arc that covered pretty much everywhere.

That called for a minor breather. He was about to get into an area where he considered Findlay to be weak. He hated weakness. He'd hated it all of his adult life, until he had developed a few weaknesses of his own. But his failings were physical, and no reason for shame. Findlay's weaknesses were psychological, mental, avoidable. What he had was an attitude. It never showed, but Brampton could sense it, as surely as when he was on his belly in the bush and "knew" that a deer was heading his way ... *or a gook, or a raghead, or ...* In any event, Findlay was a fairly good officer, on balance, and there was no sense playing to his shortcomings.

"Obviously, this guy has to be stopped," he stated. "Here we are on alert, right up at DEFCON-TWO, on both sides of the Iron Curtain *and* the Oil Curtain, for twenty months in a row, since August of twenty twelve, missiles at the ready, and the only damned thing that bastard Joe Cadbury can think about is making fucking money, for the love o' Christ. People like him didn't learn piss-all from the first Cold War, or the War on Terror, or any other war.

"Now, this ... this taxi driver ... he claims that anybody can learn to do what he does, and that's how they plan to make their millions, by teaching this skill to all comers. And we've found out that he can even detect a lie over the TV, for Christ's sake—he told that to Cadbury. Can you imagine what we'll be up against if those buggers start teaching all kinds of people to do that? Teaching Commies to do that? Teaching terrorists to do that? We'd have to..."

Brampton wasn't aware that he was tuning out, but suddenly he was 20,000 feet in the air, looking down at little green concentric circles as they rippled outward from around the targets. *March, '69*, he remembered. His job, as described to him verbally and loudly by the Pentagon, was to bomb the living shit out of Cambodia. It was a neutral country, but that wasn't his concern. *More than three thousand B52 raids*, he recalled as he shook his head. "A hundred thousand tons of ordnance we dropped on them bastards," he said out loud, as if Findlay had been privy to his thoughts for the last half-minute.

The look on Findlay's face revealed massive confusion, or worse.

Either he's thick, or he hasn't been listening, concluded the general. "Cambodia!" he shouted. "The fucking Cambodian campaign. Nixon went on national television and told the American people and the world we weren't doing it. Just ... imagine what would have happened if this Helliwell character had been around then, and if he had exposed all *that* stuff! It would have been a total fucking disaster for the government, for the military, and for the entire Cold War I effort ... for *democracy*, Jesus Christ!

"Anyway," he continued, hauling in oxygen, "this is a *very* serious situation we've got here. I'll tell you the rest of it later. Let's take a look at the rest of that video and see if it sheds any light on things. When's it from?"

"Two thousand and one," said Findlay as he reoriented himself internally and pressed the play button. "Thirteen years ago."

Anchor: ... and that's the news for Thursday, March fifteen. Stay tuned for *Cross Country Pulse*. Today, Paula Choquette interviews George Cluff, a man originally from Richmond Virginia who claims his machine can tell if you're lying by the way you talk ... coming up next.

As the advertisements began, Findlay pressed fast-forward—or he *said* that was what he was doing—he'd learned that to get along with Brampton, you were best to set up the technology *as if* it was from twenty or thirty years ago. "This guy Cluff had no credibility whatsoever with the police or the courts," he said. "Apparently, his technique wasn't even close to the standards of accuracy of the traditional polygraph, the galvanic skin-response machines, where they use electrodes. And ... Cluff died in a plane crash, just after he did this interview in aught one, and he ... okay, here's the interview."

Choquette: Meet George Cluff, an American inventor with what he calls his twenty-pound machine—that's about nine kilos for us Canadians—a machine he claims can tell if you're lying by the way that you speak. Mr. Cluff, how does this gadget of yours work?

Cluff: Well, Paula, it's called the C.V.A., for “Cluff Voice Analyzer.” When you talk, your voice emits vibrations, and these can easily be measured and represented on a graph, here—you see on the paper there—that's you doing the intro and me starting my answer. Some of the vibrations from your voice are beyond the range that the human ear can detect ... too high or too low. This machine picks up and measures only those inaudible frequencies. When you lie, these little lines go crazy, with large zigzags instead of the small ones you see here. Whenever I see any of those exaggerated squiggles, I know they indicate the psychological stress that comes from a person's anxiety about getting caught telling a lie. No one can control these inaudible frequencies in their voice, so what we have here is a lie detector that can operate without any electrodes being applied to your body.

Choquette: And maybe without the consent of the person being tested!

Cluff: That's true. The C.V.A. can work over the phone or from a tape recording or off the TV or the radio.

Choquette: Mr. Cluff, I'm sure you know many experts have panned your invention, said it wasn't even as accurate as the polygraph, and some critics even questioned your honesty, and the scientific reliability of your results. But you put it to a practical test, I understand, during the Great Foreign Currency Scandal, where the U.S. Mint was caught red-handed printing the currencies of some other countries. And you apparently had some success in—

Cluff: Yes. We wanted to publicize our new discovery, of course, but we ran into tremendous market and media resistance, so we taped and analyzed the testimony from the U.S. Senate Inquiry and the public pronouncements of the president and most of the other major participants in the scandal. We believed we could tell who was lying and who wasn't. When the whole truth eventually came out, it turned out we were right in our assessments ... not a hundred percent, but almost every time. We've improved the C.V.A. since then, and now it's virtually one hundred percent accurate.

Choquette: And after this public demonstration—well, some have called it a publicity stunt—did your device prove to be a commercial success?

Cluff: At first, the response was good, even enthusiastic. We got a few small contracts with corporations that were losing millions of dollars a year as a result of internal theft ... stuff being stolen by their employees, everything from computers to kitchen utensils to vehicles. We would go into a company's operation once every month and select a small number of employees at random. We'd ask if they'd stolen anything from their employer, and of course they'd all say no. Then we'd run the tape of their responses through the C.V.A., and we could tell who was lying and who was telling the truth. We saved those corporations millions of dollars, not so much by catching culprits as by setting up a situation where this kind of internal theft was deterred—by the increased probability that employees would get caught if they did steal something.

Choquette: But your company's success was short-lived, I understand.

Cluff: That's right. We were just getting our feet on the ground, financially speaking, when some civil rights organizations and unions got involved. There were a number of lawsuits related to our commercial applications. We lost the first case, and basically, that was that. We didn't have the capital to fight all the other cases, so we declared bankruptcy. C.V.A. Inc. went under, and we couldn't find any new lenders or partners who would take a chance on the machine.

Choquette: Can I try it?

Cluff: Be my guest.

Choquette: Ladies and gentlemen, the statements I will now read from these cards were worked out by our producer, just before we went on air. I'm seeing them for the first time myself, so you can be sure this is a fair test.

Okay, here goes. Mr. Cluff, I was hired by Alpha Television on September six in the year two thousand.

Cluff: That's—uh—true.

Choquette: Well, you're off to a flying start. That's the exact date that I was hired, and I don't know how you could have known that except from your machine here. Let's try another. My son goes to day care at three sixty-seven Tate Avenue.

Cluff: That would be—uh—false, Paula.

Choquette: Amazing! My son goes to day care at three sixty-*eight* Tate, not three sixty-seven, but your machine picked up on that small difference.

Cluff: Not really. The machine only registered the fact that you knew the statement to be false, Paula. If you hadn't been aware of the error, consciously or subconsciously, the C.V.A. would have indicated that you were telling the truth. But when you realized you were in fact saying something untruthful, your nervous system automatically affected your voice pattern—those inaudible frequencies we talked about—and that's all that this machine is designed to pick up and analyze.

Choquette: One more try. My locker here at the station is number sixteen.

Cluff: Uh—nope, it's not.

Choquette: That was pretty impressive, Mr. Cluff. So, what's next for you?

Cluff: Well, I'm hoping for a good response to my publicity tour. I used to be very secretive about this machine, but now I figure if people get to know me and know about the C.V.A., it could attract investors, and I can get back into production. I think we'll see the day when all lying and deception will become technologically impossible, and the world will simply have to adjust to this new reality.

Choquette: Now you've written a small book about your invention and the problems you've had because of it, which you published yourself, right? So how's it selling?

Cluff: Not very well. Of course the chain stores don't want to stock it, and the independent book stores just take a few here and there, on consignment, but I hope through programs like this, people will learn about the book and realize how important it is to get this technology developed.

Choquette: Mr. Cluff, thank you so much for coming on *Cross Country Pulse*. You've certainly given us food for thought.

The book, *Truth and Consequences*, by George Cluff. Up next, thoughts of food. Pierre Beaudoin talks to an Inuit woman from up in Nunavut ... which means “our land” in the Inuktitut language ... an Inuit woman who has turned her basement into a year-round vegetable garden.

Colonel Findlay turned off the television and “rebound the tape,” so to speak. He felt it would be prudent to wait for General Brampton to respond before offering any insights or guesses as to where this

Cluff fellow might fit in with the Helliwell situation.

The general was on his feet and pacing. "Findlay, I think we got a direct hit here," he said. "The way that woman made those statements and tested Cluff's machine was almost identical to the conversation we picked up between this guy Helliwell and the senator. You know what I think? I think Helliwell used to work with Cluff, or he stole his idea. Maybe Helliwell learned about the C.V.A. and reinvented it on his own. Maybe he got a copy of Cluff's book and figured it out. We got photos of Helliwell leaving the senator's office, getting into his car, and he certainly wasn't carrying any twenty-pound machine with him. Maybe he invented a smaller version of it. That's ... possible, isn't it ... with today's technology?"

"I ... really couldn't tell you, sir," said the Colonel. "I suppose it is."

General Brampton lapsed into reflection, and fear. "If I'm right," he said after half a minute, "Cold War II could get hot. Both sides do things that are fucking light years beyond the limits of public tolerance. The only factor that keeps the Cold War cold, or cool, is the tacit agreement by them and us to do our fighting in the dark, to keep this business away from the God damned TV cameras. If C.V.A. machines became available to CBS, *60 Minutes* would find out everything and blab it all over the fucking place. On the other hand, we might be able to use the C.V.A. to convince suicide bombers in the Middle East that their belief about getting into heaven free is a crock, sold to them by unscrupulous criminals with political agendas, never mind they wore holy robes."

The general had a glazed look on his face as he sat on the arm of the couch. Findlay knew the drill: shut up and wait. Everyone at the U.S. consulate and at the embassy knew about his habit, and no one ever said a word when he drifted off. *That is not the face of madness*, they reassured themselves, *but the mask of a brilliant military mind, lost in strategic calculation.*

"If Helliwell has perfected and miniaturized the C.V.A.," said Brampton, "he could have put it in his pocket. But then it could be stolen." His eyes moved off again to some distant point far beyond the walls of the safe-room.

Colonel Findlay ceased to exist for all practical purposes, and he did his very best to remain motionless. He was close to retirement himself. He had served under Brampton in Vietnam way back in 1970, long before Brampton made general, and he'd seen him float off like this for minutes at a time. It was easy to be skeptical about the manner of the man ... but when his odd silences ended, it was equally easy to be impressed by the product of these ... departures.

"But ... he ... had ... a ... cast ... on ... his ... arm!" shouted Brampton as he slapped the palm of his left hand with the back of his right hand to punctuate each word of his deduction. "The son-of-a-bitch had a cast on his arm, Findlay! Are you with me here?"

"You think ... he hid the miniaturized C.V.A. in a false cast?" he asked.

"Exactly!" said the general.

He walked over to the table, leaned on the corner, and used the secure phone to call his personal aide, six floors above. *By the Jesus*, he said to himself, *I'm as good as I ever was, and that's pretty fucking good.* "Carl, it's me. Call every hospital within, say, four hundred miles of Ottawa. Start off here, Ottawa, and work your way out to Toronto and Montreal. Ask if there's any record of a broken lower arm or wrist or any other injury requiring an arm cast in the last month or two involving a Victor Helliwell, or Halliwell. Put everybody on this. I want the answer by this time yesterday."

He hung up the phone brutally and wagered himself that the hospitals would come up empty. "I have something I want to ask you, Findlay," he said bluntly. "Do you think it's possible that our guys killed

Cluff, that we brought that plane down?"

"Jeeze," said Findlay, "you know I take a dim view of that sort of thing. I guess it's ... possible, but I hope that's not what happened."

"Well, we probably didn't, or we'd have his machine and I'd fucking know about it, right?"

"That ... would seem reasonable," managed Findlay, "unless the C.V.A. really was no good, like people said back in—"

"But we may still have to 'disappear' this Helliwell character," said the general in a whisper, as if even the ultra-high technology of the safe-room could never contain such a terrible secret.

"I ... know there's ... no other way in some circumstances," said Findlay nervously, "but it's not my nature to take a life ... except in a shooting war. Wipe out a career, a marriage, an organization, yes, but murders of innocent friendlies, in the name of freedom and democracy? It's ... just not right."

"Don't paint me as a bad guy," barked the general. "Nobody likes war ... not me, not anybody. Not even a Cold War. Do you know why they call it a Cold War, Findlay? Do you realize why they don't call it a cold fucking difference of opinion or a cold fucking disagreement? Because it's a fucking war, Findlay, a real war, with real fears and real hatreds and real high stakes and real guns and real dead people. We do what we have to do, is all, and I really resent you suggesting that I'm a villain in all this."

Brampton stood above Findlay, stared down at the man in the chair, waited for an apology. The Colonel was impressed with the argument, but not so much that he was willing to grovel and recant. There were standards and rules for wars—hot, cold, anti-terror or otherwise—international standards, laws, norms, the Geneva Convention—and it was irrelevant that these rules were rarely observed or respected these days.

"We could let the Canadian Department of National Defence handle it," suggested Findlay.

Brampton slowly raised one condemning eyebrow. There were times when Colonel Findlay, clever as he was, didn't seem to grasp the big picture ... the biggest picture, at any rate.

"But those guys at DND went right to DEFCON-ONE during the Cuban Missile Crisis," protested the Colonel, "without any legal or political authority, while Prime Minister Diefenbaker was waffling on whether to let our nuclear weapons into Canada. Those soldiers served the cause of freedom and democracy, served it in a way that could have had their entire upper echelon court-martialed. I mean they're going to go through the roof when ... when..."

Findlay stopped himself in mid-complaint, to the general's evident satisfaction. He realized that Canadians would never know. This would have to be covered up, forever. Helliwell was as good as dead.

"Get with the program, soldier," scolded Brampton. "We got us a major-league team at the embassy here. We don't stand around picking our damned noses while you and your pretend-spies are out there carrying the ball. Cold War II could be the run-up to the big one, and even if we manage to avoid a nuclear war, this C.V.A. thing could be ten or a hundred times more dangerous than the Cuban Crisis. You do understand the gravity of the situation, don't you, my old friend?"

Findlay detested the general's patronizing attitude, and he was having a difficult time getting his brain to agree that this taxi driver represented a threat to the planet. But for now, he had another priority: He had to make sure that he didn't become one of those "in the know" who couldn't be trusted any more. "Of course I understand," he said firmly.

Brampton watched Findlay as he rose to leave. He thanked him for the videotape—that's what he called the DVD—he congratulated him on a first-rate piece of research, and assured him that he would welcome any ideas that would allow them to handle the Helliwell matter politically. As the heavy door closed, the general was again alone in the safe-room. "It's very difficult to work with that man," he said out loud. "He isn't really cut out for this business."

Chapter 8 ROOM FULL OF STRAW

The Patriot field house on the Whiteside estate was staffed around the clock by rotating shifts of agents, with a minimum of three per shift. The control room had a sophisticated communications set-up that was operated twenty-four hours a day. There were never fewer than twelve agents in the bush or in unmarked cars circling the estate, staying in touch by radio. All calls were electronically scrambled, to foil ham operators or anyone else who might want to pry. In addition to keeping the radio traffic in order, the agents in the control room also monitored an elaborate array of automated high-tech surveillance equipment that assured the safety of the Whitesides.

The patrol agents and the inside staff had living quarters in what amounted to a private motel in the Patriot compound, so they would be comfortable for the four-day weeks they put in, away from homes and families. It cost more than a million dollars a year to conduct this security operation, but Whiteside Tech could well afford it, and the circumstances of the early 21st century demanded it.

Within the compound, Cam O'Connor had a small house to himself. He rarely stayed there, but since Victor Helliwell had arrived, he'd taken up regular residence. The security business, much like the military business, had to organize its activities in accordance with worst-case scenarios, and while he felt that Victor was overestimating the danger he was in, Patriot could take no chances.

It was 11:00 a.m. on Good Friday, and Cam was in his quarters, catching up on sleep. There had been a nasty scare at 4:00 a.m. A couple of not-so-young lovers—both married, as it turned out, although not to each other—were looking for a place to park ... or whatever. They had tripped a silent alarm as they drove onto a path that led to one of the several dozen security huts located around the circumference of the estate.

Helen Kozinski was at the field-office helm. She was thirty-six years old, a "semi-natural" blond by her own admission, and as tough as a brick of deep-frozen butter when the need arose. She was also Annette's best pal and confidante, so her interest in the incoming intelligence-feed from the lodge was keen. She had donned the earphones herself as Annette talked to Victor about the glories of Ray's greasy spoon, the place where he had purchased cigarettes two days earlier. She imitated the amusing Ottawa Valley twang that was to be found there, and remarked on the endless joshing that went on among the locals when they weren't spooked by an outsider. Then the problem emerged.

"Damn," said Helen. "Annette knows what that will do to us here. I can't believe this." There was no choice. She'd have to wake up the boss.

"Cam," she said into the phone, "Victor has decided he wants to go to Ray's Restaurant for lunch with Annette. They're just getting into the jeep out at the lodge. They'll pass the manor in about five minutes. You—uh—better get up."

"Okay," said Cam. "Set up for front and aft coverage, and get Buck over to Ray's, armed—and sober."

"Gotcha."

As Victor and Annette rounded the last curve and emerged from the bush, the security operation was ready to go. There was a Patriot car that would lead by half a mile and another that would follow at the same distance. Grant Eamer, the corporate pilot, had been required to stay at the field office since the mysterious guest had arrived at the lodge. His job was to take the helicopter up fifteen seconds after the jeep turned onto the road. He was told not to start the engine until they were out of sight, and that rankled. Cam didn't appreciate what a cold engine could do to a pilot's life span.

"There's Cam ... with a golf bag?" said Victor as they passed through the back gate and drove onto the grounds of the manor proper.

"Yeah, goofing off, as usual," said Annette playfully, and quite wrongly. "I guess we should stop and tell him where we're going."

"Oh ... hi guys," said Cam, with a surprised look on his face as the jeep pulled up. He was glad to see that Annette had insisted on driving, and had left the roof up. "You look like a new man without the mustache," he said as he leaned his forearms on the sill of the open window.

"Thanks," said Victor. "Annette gave me a haircut last night, then she talked me into shaving. I do feel like a new man."

Cam had a smile on his face—not a leer, but an oversized grin, to be sure. *An unlikely couple ... if they are a couple*, he thought. *Maybe they will hit it off*. "So, where are you off to?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"We're just going down the road a bit for some lunch," said Victor. "That's okay, isn't it?"

"No problem," said Cam casually. "We got you covered. I'm just off to the range to work on my long irons ... can't seem to hit the ball straight with them any more. If you want to join me some time, just let me know, eh? You're going to have to take up golf if you want to work effectively with the old man, you know."

"I used to play a bit of golf ... a long time ago," said Victor. "You have your own driving range here?"

"Oh yeah," said Cam. "We're even building a nine-hole course this spring. Call me when you have the time, when you're bored. I'll show you the whole layout. We'll whack a few balls around."

"Okay," said Victor. "I'll definitely do that. My back's feeling better than it has in years ... since I stopped driving cab."

"See ya," said Annette.

Victor didn't have the one and only LieDeck on his arm any more, but he had vast experience in reading deception. He felt Cam was telling the truth when he said "We got you covered," but it never occurred to Victor that he wasn't going off to practice his irons.

Cam O'Connor was a tall, thin man with a bulbous crop of white hair perched atop a pinkish face. He wore his authority like a pair of too-new jeans, and played the security game well, but with little finesse. As soon as Victor and Annette were out of sight, he dropped the smile and the golf bag and drove over to the communications center in the Patriot compound. The jeep showed up on the TV screens seconds after the helicopter went up, and Cam took over the direction of the operation, bumping Helen aside.

Grant Eamer followed far enough behind so the engine couldn't be heard. The radios crackled from the chopper to the coverage cars and back to the field house as the invisible caravan moved towards Ray's at exactly fifty miles an hour, the precise speed limit on this secondary road.

"This is great," said Victor. "I got the impression that security was going to be really tight, that I'd be like a prisoner out there. I know Cam said he had us covered, but ... I don't see any security at all?"

"Hey, what am I?" Annette asked. "Chopped liver?"

"I mean ... besides you."

"It's tight," she said. "You're not supposed to see it. That's the whole idea of good security. If you could see it, you'd realize we were in the middle of a convoy. The chopper is up and ... no, it's no use craning your neck. Actually, this whim of yours is costing old man Whiteside plenty."

"I just wanted a greasy hamburger," said Victor, "and to be with ordinary people for a while. Like Helen said, and you agreed: now that I'm rich, I get to tell instead of ask."

"God," said Annette, "we've created a monster."

It was only two miles to Ray's, but the sense of freedom was exhilarating to Victor. Annette used the drive down to Highway 148 as an opportunity to discuss a few things that she didn't want to get into at the restaurant. She told him about the early-morning false alarm with the over-aged lovers—they had a good laugh over that—and she filled him in on the plans that Whiteside's chief engineer had come up with for production of the LieDeck. The workers who were chosen to make the LieDeck would be sworn to secrecy, and their compliance with the oath would be LieDeck-verified, daily. "Cam hasn't told the workers anything about the LieDeck yet," she said, "but apparently he and Laurent Gauthier—that's the chief engineer—have been having all kinds of fun with your prototype, that one you had in the cast. Mr. Whiteside told me they were trying to fool it, and were speculating on its impact on the government, on Cold War II, on terrorism, on terrorists, on the lives of ordinary people."

Victor was pleased to hear that events were moving ahead quickly and calmly. He was deathly allergic to conflict, and he had expected trouble right from the first moment that other people got their hands on his invention. He wondered if he might perhaps have miscalculated the effects of the LieDeck on humanity. *Maybe I was wrong*, he thought.

"So you—uh—like working for Patriot?" he asked.

"Well, I'm good at it, and they pay me well." Annette dropped it there, wondering if she had already said more than she should have. "Look," she said, "when we go in, watch for a big guy named Buck Ash and tell me what you think of him."

"Buck Ash ... the hockey player?" asked Victor.

"Yeah," said Annette. "Well ... the *former* hockey player."

"He's ... a Patriot agent now, I bet," he said.

"Good guess," she said. "He's been with us twenty years, ever since he retired from the Detroit Redwings ... wrecked his knee up. The locals don't know he's one of ours. He reports gossip about the Whitesides, gets a fix on any poaching that might threaten the estate or the bubble at Wilson Lake—stuff like that. He lives just a shout from Ray's."

When the restaurant came into view, Grant Eamer dropped his craft below the horizon and veered off to the west. "They're taking over on the ground," he reported to Cam at the compound headquarters as Victor and Annette drove into the lot and parked.

Claire Lapine, the alpha waitress, was one of the few constants at Ray's Restaurant, having watched its

procession of owners for nearly twenty years now. She looked out the window and saw the two non-locals as they walked towards the front door. "Isn't that the guy was in Whiteside's limo the other day?" she asked as she brought another beer to Buck.

"What guy?" asked Merrick McFee through a mouthful of fries.

"Couldn't be," said Buck. "He had a mustache, and a cast on his arm. And he looked normal. This guy..." The end of the sentence had to wait until after Buck's "time-out" for a cigarette cough. "This guy looks..." He tried clearing his throat with a loud hork. "This guy looks like a damned fairy," he managed with a pinched-up voice.

"Bigot," snarled Claire.

"Whaaat?" protested Buck when he got his voice operational. "I don't say nigger or frog or squaw or *nothin'* no more ... now I gotta call fairies *gay*?"

Victor was dressed in some of the clothes that had been bought for him at the Royal Oaks, and although he looked like any other cottager, his gait and his eye movements were still those of a taxi driver ... or a recently retired hermit. Annette had decided to go with a "lumpen camouflage" look, the one that discouraged wannabe mashers and hid most of her natural beauty. The twosome couldn't pass for locals, of course, but they did squeak by as ordinary people, undeserving of any special attention.

Victor walked over to the cigarette wall, helped himself to a pack of Rothmans, and waved it at Claire so that she'd tack it onto the bill. Annette found a table, took off her jean jacket and scanned the room for anomalies. She counted the people, made mental notes of their appearances, and double-checked that her gun was in her purse. She knew there were four Patriot agents inside a van in the parking lot, and of course Buck Ash was over at the corner table with his cronies, smoking his guts out and pretending not to notice her. Ever since her first day on the job with Patriot, when she'd been flattened by a sucker-punch from a drunk, her policy was: you can never be too careful.

"Coffee?" said Claire as she put two steaming cups down.

"Thanks," said Annette. "We'll order in a few minutes."

Old Jesse McCain had showed up, so naturally he had the floor, and there wasn't a whole great deal anybody could do about that. It was generally accepted in the area that Jesse had been waiting since the late 1990s for old Joe Farley to relinquish the role of local elder and chief storyteller. *Seein' as Joe's up and died*, Jesse figured, *I might's well jump right in and take over*.

"I really miss Joe," he announced, unbidden, from the wall side of the most central table at Ray's—Joe Farley's old seat. "Jesse's voice never was no Stradivarius," people in the Quyon area said ... even some folks who had no clue what a Stradivarius might be. And his voice had gotten squeakier over the years, to the point now where it was nearly impossible to ignore.

"I'll never forget the last time he showed up here," Jesse laughed. "He stashed his beat-up Chevy pickup out beside the concrete slab there where the gas pumps used to be twenty-odd years back. Always parked that contraption in the exact same spot. Figured something about it was better'n all the other spots, I guess. He lifts out his good leg and plants his cane in the snow, good and firm, before hauling the rest of hisself out. It was getting to be quite an operation for him to get into or outta that truck, ever since he got his hip done. That was back in twenty ten, close as I can recall."

Jesse didn't recognize Victor when he came in, perhaps because he didn't have the cast or the mustache. Claire hoped it would stay that way, especially after the crack he'd made the other day about Victor

being too fat and old to go parachuting. "Jesse's a bit tangent-prone," she said to Annette as she handed over a couple of menus with scrawled-in revised prices.

Jesse overheard the remark, but Claire's opinion had never been a reason for him to slow down or change course. "He'd picked up a cold, Joe had," he continued, "same one been going around over at the school in February. Well, that's a big deal in these parts, old Joe Farley with a full-fledged nose cold! So he leans himself against the side of the truck for balance and commences to unclog his nose. He was expert at that particular maneuver, but you know, I don't think he realized his reputation on that score preceded him wherever he went."

A quick reality-check told Jesse that he had the room now, if not spellbound, at least attentive. He displayed his power by shoveling half a chicken finger into his toothless mouth, making everybody wait for the punch line.

Victor had his back to the old man, and was reluctant to peek, lest he be recognized and singled out. "He doesn't exactly get the saliva churning, does he?" he whispered. "Is it possible he's trying to gross us out on purpose?"

"Can't tell," said Annette as she watched Jesse gum the hell out of the chicken finger. "I think he's just holding court."

"Anyways, Joe turns his back to the restaurant, I guess figuring if he couldn't see us we couldn't see him, eh? He hangs his cane on the rearview, bends over twenty-thirty degrees, puts his left index up to his left nostril and heaves a lungful of soaking wet air at the ground. *Snap, whap*, an' he clears her out in one shot, then he reverses himself to clean out the other side. Then he touches things up with the backs of his hands, wipes his hands up and down the sides of his overalls, then turns around for to face the world, and 'course retrieves his cane off the external rearview. Even if there wasn't nobody around to hear him, he'd say, 'Snot's the only thing a rich man puts in his pocket and a poor man throws away.' He'd always say that, every time he done that thing with his nose."

That drew smiles from the patrons who'd heard the long one-liner before, outright laughter from the few who hadn't, including Victor and Annette. It also triggered a flurry of independent storytelling on the subject of Joe Farley.

Claire remembered many a day when she'd personally witnessed this acclaimed nasal performance by the late Joseph W. Farley—"W." for Wilfred. As a youngster, she figured Joe was about the best thing there was to be found in the world ... after cotton candy. She was taking Victor and Annette's food orders now, and she decided to fill them in on Joe.

"That guy Joe Farley that he's talking about, whenever he could get out of the house and down to the restaurant, I always used to hold the door open so he wouldn't fall over or get all tangled up. 'How's doing, young fella?' I'd always ask him. 'Would it help if I complained?' he'd ask back. 'Not around here,' I'd tell him. Jesse McCain's okay," she added secretively, "but he's no Joe Farley."

"This place is really something," Victor whispered as the waitress departed. "It's like a community center for hicks."

He told Annette the story of his brief encounter with Jesse McCain and Ray a couple of nights earlier, about getting the wrong change and the flipped dime and Ray's crack about the discount on cigarettes for those on welfare, and he told her about what it was like to have the LieDeck on his arm for such occasions. He told her about the last month and a half of his life, about driving cab with the LieDeck in place, about playing mind games with his fares with the plasticized card claiming he had Tourette's syndrome.

Annette told Victor about the current man in her life, a divorced dentist by the name of Lou Glassen. It was easy for Victor to see that this Lou chap wasn't her favorite topic of conversation. The way he read it, she seemed happy to have the assignment out at the lodge as a means of avoiding Lou for a while. She also talked about her best friend Helen Kozinski, who was probably worried sick because the two of them had ventured outside the security perimeters surrounding the estate. And she talked about Helen's boyfriend in the RCMP—she didn't like him much, but couldn't put her finger on why that was.

The chatter among the locals bounced from table to table, but for Victor and Annette, it was now inaudible.

"Are we having fun yet?" he asked boyishly.

Annette laughed. "You're okay," she said. "And yeah, we're having fun."

"It was them no-good kids Bobby Thompson and Geoff Farley that robbed your place here," hollered Jesse to Ray, who had shown up behind the cash. "Old Joe deserved better'n to have a bad grandson like that. You know how I can tell it was them that did it—them two boys? They always sit in the back there and snicker when they come in here. You watch when they get to court. It *was* them, I tell ya."

"I know Bobby got charged," said Ray as he smoothed back his thinning hair, "but I don't think it was them that did it. Them two's usually so wasted they can't chew gum without gettin' all freakin' confused."

"You know, Victor," said Annette quietly, "what you told Helen about your friend George Cluff, the guy that invented the—uh..."

"C.V.A.," said Victor. "The Cluff Voice Analyzer."

"Yeah—well, what you said about Cluff maybe getting killed by the CIA, I was ... I was thinking that maybe we could use a LieDeck to get to the bottom of all that ... if..." She left the thought unfinished.

"No hurry," said Victor. "After the LieDeck has been out there for a year, there won't be an unsolved crime in Canada. In fact, if you think about it, there won't be any crime at all, anywhere in the world. Crime's no fun if you're sure to get caught."

"I ... I guess that's true," considered Annette, reeling once again at the coming wallop of the device, and of this odd man. "So, you think they'll let the police and the courts use LieDecks?"

"How could anyone prevent it?"

"So ... I could be out of a job because of your little doohickey," she mused.

"You can be my personal bodyguard," quipped Victor. "I'll even give you a raise."

"Uh ... thanks, Victor," she said tentatively. "But I don't think so."

"Well, it's not going to threaten anybody's job for quite a while in any event," said Victor. "Randall and I agreed to take our time, to not release the LieDeck until there's been a thorough study of its anticipated impact on society."

"Very prudent," said Annette. "I'm actually rather relieved to hear that—I don't mean because of my own job, but ... in general."

"Can I ask you something personal?" Victor said. "Nothing terribly deep and dark, just a question I have?"

"Sure," she said.

"Here you go," announced Claire as she plunked down two hot pork open sandwiches smothered in gravy with French fries and peas on the side ... the special. "You wanted milk, sir, and you wanted just—uh—water, right?"

"Thanks," said Victor.

"Well?" asked Annette after Claire left to get the drinks.

Victor dunked a golden fry in the gravy and savored his first bite of ordinary food in two days. "The thing is," he said as he chewed, "I was literally a hermit for the last twelve years, while I was working on the LieDeck. Now, I'm faced with a problem. I'm about to be rich, and that's fine—in fact it's terrific. But I'm about to be famous, too, and that's the problem. I don't know how to act with people, and if I get famous because of the LieDeck, I'm scared everyone will treat me ... you know ... like a famous person, and not accept me or deal with me as an ordinary guy. So I was thinking maybe they could leave my name out of it when the LieDeck is unveiled to the public, just say it was developed by Whiteside Technologies and leave it at that. Then I could live however I wanted, and get in touch with people again at my own speed, and on my own terms. Do you think it's possible ... that I could remain anonymous through all the hoopla? Do you think Mr. Whiteside would go for that?"

"Here you go," said Claire as she brought their drinks. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's just fine," said Victor.

Annette was enjoying her meal, and cutting the fat off the pork. "Victor," she said, "we already told you ... when you're rich, you stop asking and start telling. You keep forgetting that. If that's really what you want, to remain in the background, just tell Mr. Whiteside, and that's the way it will be."

Victor worked away at his sandwich for a spell, wondering if he'd made himself clear, or if he'd even finished the thought. "The thing is," he finally said, carefully, "that you're being paid to be with me. It might well be that you're enjoying yourself, but if I was still a poor slob of a taxi driver, the chances of you and I having lunch and laughing and getting to be friends would be zero, nil, zilch. That's why—"

"Victor," interrupted Annette, with an edge to her voice, "you ... don't know that ... for a fact."

Victor half-smiled, more out of sadness than pride. "You hesitated when you said that," he said. "Twice, actually. And the reason you hesitated was because a LieDeck would have tripped you up, or ... it *could* have tripped you up. You must understand, Annette—I've had an infallible prototype on my wrist for six weeks or so, and I've been fooling around with near-perfect models of the LieDeck for ... well, it seems like forever, because the damned thing has literally made me into a different person. It's not even hard for me any more ... to know when actual reality is happening and when games are being played. You'll see for yourself, soon, in a couple of days, when you get to play around with a LieDeck of your own. The fact is—"

"Okay, okay," said Annette. "I'm just not used to somebody being able to tell, you know?" She squirmed uncomfortably in her chair and focused on her food. This new venture that Whiteside had undertaken had brought her face to face with more than a taxi driver. It had thrown her headlong into a whole new perspective on life, and while that was unavoidable and arguably fascinating, it also had the effect of changing the rules and threatening to shake up ... well ... everything! She hadn't bargained for that. *Nor has anybody else*, she thought.

Victor felt it might be a good idea to just pick up his train of thought from where it had gotten waylaid.

"What I said about you and me having to deal with each other because the dollars said we had to, well, the same holds true for Mr. Whiteside, and his family, and Senator Cadbury, and Cam ... especially for Cam. They're all in touch with me on some level, but not because I'm me. They have something to do with me because I'm a commodity, a commodity that has to be protected, exploited, pampered, whatever. It's not that I don't like these people, or you. I do, but the only person I've met so far that I *might* have made friends with a week ago is the cook, Noel Lambert. I'd like to get to know Winnifred Jopps, the housekeeper at the lodge, but the fact that I'm the important guest and she's just the help makes it difficult. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

Annette understood all too well. She could only imagine what Victor would think or do if he realized that some rooms in the lodge had been bugged by Patriot. Of course she didn't actually *know* that to be true ... in case Victor asked her ... but she had assumed as much. She knew the capability existed, and it was pretty obvious that Helen must have "overheard" their plan to come to Ray's restaurant. Cam O'Connor with golf clubs was a real hoot.

"I tell you what," she said, "this afternoon, when we get back, we can work on a plan to keep your name out of it when the LieDeck is released, okay? You'll present it to Mr. Whiteside tomorrow. And we'll try to deal with the psychology of the LieDeck as best we can ... as we go along. How's that sound?"

It sounded great to Victor, and he found that the fries tasted even better, having sorted that out.

"Here's something else," said Annette after a full minute of silence. "I'm going to say something, and I'm going to guarantee you that not one word of it will get caught if I say it again later, at a time when you've got a LieDeck ... or I've got a LieDeck."

Victor smiled as broadly as he could with his mouth full. "Shoot," he said.

"I ... would like..." began Annette. "I would like ... to spend the afternoon with you ... even though I pretty well have to anyway ... unless you get Whiteside to replace me ... which you're perfectly free to do, by the way..."

Victor signaled "no" and "carry on" with a couple of hand gestures.

"I would like ... to take you on a tour of the Whiteside offices and the production plant over in Kanata, and then, when we get back in a few hours, I would like ... to go with you to check out the new golf course they're building on the estate. Deal?"

"I'd like that too," said Victor. "And I won't make you repeat what you said."

"Hey Ray," yelled Merrick McFee, "Tirone's truck just pulled in." He stepped off his stool at the counter to check the kitchen and make sure Ray was in there to hear him, then he sat back down, took a swig of his beer and waited a few seconds to get his timing down pat. "Guess he got hisself lost coming all the way up from Tenth Line, eh?" he said loudly. "O'course it gets pretty complicated, what with that new stop sign they put in down there at Seventh Line."

"I heard that," said Tirone Lucas as he wiped his feet on the mat.

"You were supposed to hear it," said Merrick without turning his head. "No point saying it if you ain't here to get ticked off."

Victor smiled at Annette as they eavesdropped on the banter. To her it was quaint, and rather weird. To him it was real, almost beautiful. *These people have roots*, he said to himself, *families, constellations of friends, trust, memories. When they die, it'll be okay. At least they lived.*

"You said you were going to be here early," shouted Ray from the kitchen.

"I was," Tirone shouted back as he accepted the coffee that Claire placed on the counter, "but I solved that problem easy enough."

Most everyone in the restaurant managed a chuckle out of that one, except Ray, since he was the one who usually got stuck waiting for whatever Tirone was supposed to be delivering.

"The key to the Beach Barn is out under the cash there," hollered Ray from the kitchen. "Beth said her boys will help you unload that straw. She said to just dump it on the floor and it'll get spread out later, just before the dance."

"Can't figure why they always got to have frigging straw for that dumb dance," said Buck as he lit a Player's Plain cigarette, the kind with no filter, "a man's cigarette," he'd always contended. He was on his third beer, and beer had a funny way of bringing out the grouch in him. "Every year, same dumb-ass thing, a room full of straw."

"It's so Merrick won't hurt hisself when he falls down," explained Claire as she cleared table #3. "Of course there's always the chance he stays vertical this year, but we can't really count on that, eh?"

"How come they put the dance on Good Friday this year?" asked Merrick, if only to change the topic.

"Somebody screwed up," said Ray as he came out of the kitchen, toweling his hands. "They didn't check the calendar, and by then they had the band booked and everything. Nobody cares anyways."

Tirone and Merrick took their coffees and joined some other buddies at the corner table. "So they had Joe Farley's funeral last week," Tirone said as he sat down. "I was kinda sorry I couldn't make it. Joe was a good old fart."

"Week ago yesterday," said Merrick. "There was a hunnert people at the church, I figure. Laid him out pretty good, too. Looked so natural I half expected him to sit up and spit."

"Joe Farley must have been quite the character," whispered Victor.

"Oh yeah," said Annette knowingly. "Maybe you heard about him on the news. He was charged with assault last year ... on a bishop, if you can believe it!"

"It was them break-ins that his grandson Geoff did that killed him, you know," said Claire as she dried her hands. "They're good boys, Geoff and Bobby, except Bobby got turned bad by the priests and young Geoff got carried along. Joe would be sitting at that table right now, giving us a piece of his mind, if it weren't for all that stuff that was going on out there at the boarding school. Joe's heart was a big one, made of steel and vanilla ice cream, but they damn well broke it. He just couldn't forgive them priests for what they done to those boys."

"It weren't priests, Claire," said Jesse angrily. "It was Brothers, not full priests, and we oughtn't get to passing judgment on anybody until those government hearings get to the bottom of all that."

"How come you're defending them friggin' preeverts, Jesse?" asked Merrick testily. "I haven't seen you at mass for twenty years."

"I ain't defending nobody," insisted Jesse. "And I go to mass every Sunday. Go to the French mass, at eight o'clock, while you're still snoring."

"You do not," argued Merrick. "You don't even understand French."

"Don't understand Latin neither," said Jesse, with a shoulder shrug, "but that never stopped nobody for hunnerts o' years."

That ended the discussion, and Victor got the distinct impression that Jesse usually had the last word ... as well as the first.

"Soooo..." said Victor as if he were revving himself up for something of importance, "are we—uh—friends now? Don't get me wrong—I'm not coming on to you. It's just that ... well, after all those years..."

Annette put her left hand on his right forearm and looked him in the eye. "Friends ... yeah ... sure," she said, squeezing. "You're okay, Victor."

Victor smiled. "Know what?" he said. "This is the first time in months that I don't have my LieDeck on to ... to verify everything that people say. I feel sort of ... naked, but it's ... it's kind of nice. I believe you. You ... *do* think I'm okay!"

"Yeah, I do," smiled Annette. "You are okay. So am I. We're two ... okay people."

Victor laughed, and the Patriot agent reclaimed her hand. "There's a poster over there on the wall," he said, "about that barn dance they were talking about in Quyon ... tonight. You—uh—want to go?"

"Jesus, Victor," Annette exclaimed, "do you have any idea what it would cost to set up a security operation for that?"

"So?" said Victor, feeling quite rich and powerful.

"So ... yeah, why not? Let's go to the barn dance. We can pretend we're cottagers."

"I'll pretend I'm a cab driver," added Victor.

He left five loonies on the table for Claire, then he wandered over to the counter and popped a candy mint from the glass jar. "I'll get it," he said, motioning. "What's the damage?"

"Be my guest," said Annette as she handed him the bill. "It's twenty-nine ninety, with the cigarettes added in ... and the damned tax."

Perfect, he thought with a smile as the proprietor came out of the kitchen.

"Now for the good part," grinned Ray as he dinged open the cash.

"Keep the change," Victor said loudly as he slapped down a twenty and a ten.

Chapter 9 THE POPE WILL HAVE YOUR COLLAR

The afternoon sun cascaded through the glass of many colors, and eight-minute-old photons put a certain zing into the halos, robes, and a bevy of cherubim and seraphim. Sheep shone, doves glowed, sinners repented, and saints saved souls between strips of soft gray lead. The headquarters of the Canadian Association of Catholic Bishops needed a guiding light of some kind, but perhaps it would have been better if it had been blessed with the plain white variety.

Bishop Steve Sutherland looked around the ornate meeting room and wondered how he'd gotten to where he was. It wasn't so long ago that he was an apple-faced boy playing buck naked in the backyard

of his family's Calgary home, in a grass-free depression they called "the sand pile," fighting with his younger brother Anthony over possession of a red plastic fire truck. Steve invariably won, and Tony always cried, with predictable results. "Steeeee-vennnn," his mother would half sing and half scream. "Let your brother have a turn!" And he would, until his mother went back to whatever it was that mothers did all day.

How did that brat grow into this tree? he asked himself as he dropped his face into his hands. *When did I make the decisions that brought me all the way from being the most annoying kid on Sunnyside Avenue to a robed fifty-five-year-old in charge of sorting out the sexuality of the Church ... again? How long has it been since I believed the bumf or accepted the official party line? How many years has it been since I first realized there might not even be a God? Why am I still doing the same old shtick I've done all my adult life? Could I go and be a civil servant if I wanted, or maybe a chef? If there's no life after death, is there still time for me to live life before my death, to know the love of a woman, perhaps to father a child? Am I the only sane person in this room, or just the only person who's lost his faith? Lord God, I believe. Help me in my unbelief.*

"Are you all right?" asked Bishop William P. Doyle as he placed his hand on the chairman's shoulder.

Sutherland snapped out of the daze and assured Bishop Doyle that he had just been praying, seeking divine guidance for the difficult task at hand. "I guess we'd ... better get going," he said as he fiddled with the papers in front of him on the desk, "or we'll never get through the agenda. Thanks for asking. Honest, I'm fine."

Thou shalt not bullshit thine fellow clerics, he thought. *But then, who knows what the rest of these splendidly dressed men are really thinking, feeling? They're all actors, and nicely in tune with the manner, the way, the ancient etiquette of demonstrable piety. It goes with the territory of being a player in an outfit that claims to have a lock on truth and a direct pipeline to God.*

I'm not even close to being fine, he admitted silently. *I'm a sinner, a liar, a scaredy-cat. That used to be the worst thing to call Tony in the sand pile. And yet here I am, a middle-aged guy, faking my way through life with a bunch of other fakers.*

Bishop Sutherland knew that this was not the time or the place for a tearful cathartic experience. He had been thinking about leaving the Church for several years, but there was much work to be done, for the good of the wounded flock *and* the country. He had the rest of his life, perhaps thirty years, to ponder the boatload of unCatholic questions that haunted him, the thousands of doubts that he was very careful never to confess ... never mind that he was supposed to confess all. Now the moment of truth had come. The decision to leave the Church was probably going to be made for him today, and he had no more time for second thoughts, no time for doubts about his doubts. "Shall we convene?" he asked, rising from his chair.

Small clusters of clergy cut short whispered conversations and turned to face their elected chairman. The emergency meeting of the CACB was finally in progress, or at least called to order.

"Instead of the usual opening prayers," said Sutherland, "I'm going to ask that we all pray silently for guidance."

He folded his hands reverently, lowered his head, and fought back a grin. It suddenly occurred to him that he couldn't peek. It simply could not be done. He thought it over, and realized that he'd really like to peek, but even if he did, he was dead certain that he wouldn't catch a single one of his colleagues committing the same impropriety. Still, he would have bet his dead mother's favorite rosary that there

were other bishops and even archbishops in the room who were wondering if anyone would dare to peek, instead of praying. He knew it was silly, and yet there it was—something to consider. These men could be trusted absolutely when it came to not peeking. *If only that level of trust applied elsewhere, he thought sadly ... say, for instance, to the welfare of the children.*

Bishop Sutherland couldn't pray. He knew too much. He knew too much about the sins and failings of the holy ones. He knew too much about the specific problem they had gathered to resolve. He didn't feel any need for guidance from above or from anywhere else to make up his mind about what had to be done, and he had decided weeks ago that he was the one to do it, or at least the one to try.

They would counter his efforts with quotations from scripture, obscure passages and doubtful interpretations. They would be sure to bring up the dire consequences for the sacramental dish, the collection plate. Some would drop shadowy hints about his chances of remaining chairman, not to mention his odds of ever advancing further within the Church.

But Sutherland felt immune to these tactics. He had a secret. He was disinterested in personal advancement, and he didn't give a tinker's damn about whether the collection plates of the land were empty or full. In fact, he didn't care much what it said, or didn't say, in the Bible. Right was right and wrong was wrong. The scandals of the early 21st century had died down, but the Church had not changed. It still attracted deviates to the station of priest, it still ordained sexual predators, and they still couldn't keep their hands to themselves and their peckers in their pants. *I, Steven Sutherland, he said to himself, being an ordinary man with a functioning conscience and nothing to gain or lose, will put an end to this abomination, once and for all.*

"Gentlemen," he said aloud, raising his head, "please be seated."

Eighteen bishops and six archbishops slipped their forearms under their respective bums, pulled their black frocks forward and seated themselves. The term "gentlemen" felt like a bombshell, not because they were worried they might not qualify as gentlemen, but because "gentlemen" was not the prescribed appellation for men as revered and reverent as themselves. Sutherland was obviously looking for a scrap.

"My first week in the seminary," began the chairman, slowly, "I was approached by a young man, a second-year student, and—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Bishop Doyle, standing for the occasion, "but before we get down to business, I must go on record as opposing the manner in which this meeting was called." He paused for a moment, and slowly removed his wire-framed glasses. "This is Good Friday," he intoned. "We should be in our parishes with the faithful, not—"

"As CACB chairman, I have the power to call an emergency meeting at a time of my choosing," said Sutherland forcefully. "But for the record, I take note of your objection. I wouldn't be surprised if it is shared by all present."

"You're too kind," said Bishop Doyle, with uncharacteristic acid. He sat back down, and replaced his glasses on his nose.

"My first week in the seminary," Sutherland repeated pointedly, "I was approached by a young man, a second-year student, a homosexual. He asked if I'd like to go to his room ... for a bowl of soup. What he really wanted was to have sex with me, right there in the seminary."

Eyes were darting, eyes that were practiced and even expert at control, at concealing emotion.

"I learned later that this sort of thing was not uncommon, that many new seminarians were propositioned

by older gay seminarians, and even by some of the priests. I declined that invitation ... politely, would you believe? That incident was my introduction to the seamy side of Catholicism."

He looked out at the room of black and white vestments and multi-colored sunlight and wondered how many of his fellow men of the cloth had had similar experiences, or whether they had said no to their invitations, or if they had been the ones to cook the soup and lure young seminarians into their rooms, and beds.

"The man who approached me became a parish priest, and later a monsignor," he continued. "His name was Bernard Hawthorne, a name you surely recognize. At this moment, he's sitting in a cell in the Kingston Penitentiary, convicted on fourteen counts of sexual assault.

"As you know, being gay doesn't mean you're a pedophile, and most pedophiles aren't gay. However, Bernard Hawthorne was a gay pedophile, and by my fearful silence, some thirty-five years ago, I became a part of the problem. I became part of the reason this evil man could go on to become a priest. I became part of the reason that Catholic boys had their bodies violated, their minds twisted, and their small hearts broken, for life. Many of the youngsters who were entrusted to our boarding school system and who were molested by our priests and Brothers became sex-offenders themselves, as adults. By the latest count, more than one hundred and fifteen of them are now in jail, or were in jail, or stand accused ... and that's just in Canada."

Sutherland searched the room, the eyes, for remorse, for horror, for guilt, for shame, but mostly he saw fear, and bitter resentment. *These men already know the dimensions of this thing*, he said to himself. *They know the facts, but they're reacting like politicians, wondering how to defend, how to bob and weave and duck out from under responsibility. What ever happened to the imitation of Christ?*

"Offenders typically have fifteen or twenty victims before they are caught," he went on, "and the fact of having been abused greatly increases the chance that the victim will himself become a sex offender later in life. The numbers grow exponentially, as does the human cost of our silence, our indifference. And the victims of these second-generation offenders are also on our collective conscience, as will be the victims of their victims, as they in turn spread the virulent disease that has festered for decades in the bosom of the Church."

It suddenly struck Bishop Sutherland how difficult it must be for these men to fully internalize the message he was sending. They had spent lifetimes being professionally holier-than-thou. Some of them were more wicked than the worst of those they forgave so clinically in the darkness of the confessional. *Cognitive dissonance*, he remembered from his university days. *Denial*.

"No one would argue against compassion and understanding for the clergy who have gone astray," he emphasized, "but frankly, I'm a lot more concerned with the people they hurt ... the kids, and their families. I am here to inform you that I will make one mighty ruckus in the press if we don't find a way to bring this ... this filthy business ... to an end. That is what we are here to do, and I assure you, that is what we are going to do."

Sutherland had reached the part that the CACB would probably not be able to accept. In a way, he knew how this meeting had to end, but that was no reason to back away from duty. He braced himself and carried on.

"I called this emergency meeting because I have a plan. It's not a nice, comfortable plan, but this is a hellishly uncomfortable problem. I'm prepared to admit that my plan will be extremely controversial and very painful. However, I am certain it will work, so unless one of you can come up with an alternative

plan that is more palatable but no less effective, then my plan it shall be!"

He shocked himself as much as anyone else with the loudness of his voice, but this confrontation was long overdue. There was nothing to be gained by sugarcoating the pill or hiding his determination.

"Job one is to find out who among us is involved in this sort of thing. The problem is, the priests and Brothers who are assaulting children lie to the rest of us about it. They go to confession, as every Catholic must do, and in their confessions they neglect to mention that they are abusing those they are supposed to protect and nurture. By so doing, they have abandoned their vows and chosen to live in sin. In a real sense, they are no longer priests or Brothers. The roles they play within the Church have become little more than theatrical performances. Either that, or they have deluded themselves so successfully that they can no longer be considered sane."

Eyes were beginning to shunt and roll, some rather wildly. Spirits were stinging. The word "sane" rocked souls. *Time to inject some perspective.*

"There is no massive cover-up here," said Sutherland, "no Church-wide conspiracy of priests and bishops who knew what was going on and did nothing. Most of us didn't know much, and felt distanced from the problem. That's reality. But this mess has been dragging on for almost five decades. Some of us knew, and did nothing. All of us knew to some extent, and none of us did enough, obviously. That is the problem we face, and we are now obliged to ask all Catholic clergy, ourselves included, the classic questions that are the signature of every scandal inquiry: What did you know, and when did you know it?"

He was surprised they'd let him get this far. He was invoking memories of Watergate, Iran-Contra, and the Great Foreign Currency Scandal, and he hadn't even told them his plan yet. *Well*, he thought, *I haven't been lynched so far, so I go for broke.*

"Our *mea culpas* are important," he said, "but the question of who the sex-offenders were, and are—that is critical. We must begin with a grip on basic reality, and we can't even *connect* with reality unless we break through the curtain of lies that protects the despicable men who are attacking our children. These men are not only sinners, they are criminals. The Church is just not a criminal organization. If we are to avoid the public perception that we are corrupt, we must expunge from the Church the cancer within.

"There is one reliable way to find out whether someone is lying or not," he said softly, "and that is with a lie detector. I have researched these devices, and while they aren't perfect, they're pretty darned good. I propose that once every six months, every priest and Brother in the country must go to confession with a superior from his own order or his own diocese, while hooked up to a lie detector. We will have to train priests and bishops to operate these machines, and we have to start cooperating fully with the police when we learn—"

"Pardon me," said Bishop Doyle as gently as he could, "but I find I must rise on a point of order." And rise he did.

Well, here it comes, thought Sutherland. A barely audible hum slid around the room as legs shifted and cassocks shuffled. The chairman decided to sit for his sentence.

Bishop Doyle cleared his throat, pressed praying fingertips to his mouth, and resumed his intervention. "While the CACB has no formal process providing for the recall of a chairman, I find that I must move non-confidence in your leadership, Bishop Sutherland. It is my very strong feeling, and a feeling I'm sure is shared by others here, that what we are hearing is not only poorly thought out, but the product of a psychiatric or personal problem in the mind of the person who is supposed to facilitate our collective

discussions. Unless you have forgotten, it is not the role of the chairman to dictate policy. This is especially true when the policy being advocated could bring shame and even ridicule down upon Mother Church itself."

Doyle paused to give his words a chance to register in the hearts and souls of his colleagues, most particularly in the heart and soul of Steve Sutherland. "You would be procedurally within your rights to refuse to call a vote on my motion of non-confidence," he continued, "but if I inform His Holiness that we probably had near-unanimity for this resolution, I think you know that the Pope will have your collar. Therefore, I respectfully and humbly request that you call a vote, immediately."

Humble my butt, thought Sutherland.

Bishop Doyle sat, slowly, painfully, as if to underline the overwhelming regret he was suffering at feeling spiritually obligated to stab Caesar.

"I find myself obliged to second this unhappy motion," said Bishop Pietro Malini, the man who had become the center of the storm at the Caughy Commission. It was clear that a broken jaw and a black eye at the hands of Joe Farley had taught this prelate nothing.

Sutherland rose to face his accusers. "I would have preferred some discussion first," he said. "However, since you insist, I will call a vote." He watched as eyes widened in disbelief. "All those in favor of my proposal, please stand," said Sutherland.

He knew full well that the vote Bishop Doyle had demanded had nothing to do with consideration of his lie detection plan, but he wanted the CACB on record on that issue first. Once the question had been called, they could do nothing about it except to stand ... or not. No one wanted to get into a debate over the chairman's deliberate misapplication of *Robert's Rules of Order*. There were weary thoughts and tortured feelings for a once-great leader who seemed bent on torpedoing his own credibility—and his career. No one stood.

"Very well," continued Bishop Sutherland, "I ask all those in favor of my resignation to please stand."

One by one, with heads hung in a pounding silence, twenty-four men rose. Their eyes were aimed anywhere but at Sutherland's eyes, and once they had all visually confirmed the unanimity of the vote, they sat down again.

"Gentlemen," said the chairman in his last official act in that capacity, "I accept your decision, and I bid you farewell. However, before I go, I want to tell you something.

"Yesterday, as you undoubtedly saw on the television news, I sat in on a session of the Caughy Commission. In her testimony, an elderly lady by the name of Barbara Farley said, 'The gal-danged Church is a dad-gummed joke.' Think about that. Think about where the Church will be if that opinion comes to be widely shared.

"I gave you a good policy option today. You rejected it for all the wrong reasons, and then you rejected me. I'll give you two weeks to come to your senses, then, if you fail to change your views, I go to the press. And now, if you will excuse me, it seems that I must leave."

Bishop Steve Sutherland walked proudly and solemnly out of the meeting room and down the hall to the suite where he'd been staying. Then he closed the door, called a cab, and sat on the bed, staring at his packed suitcases.

He had dreamed his fate the night before, stood helplessly in the stationary external glass elevator of a

business tower in Vancouver, looked out at the Pacific ocean, and seen the water rise higher and higher above the horizon, twenty yards, fifty yards, one hundred yards, twice as high as the office tower, three times as high, seven times as high. The tidal wave hit with such force that the city was swept off its base, lifted, crushed, mangled, and then spit back out as the wave receded into its basin. Then, abruptly, there he was, alone, dry as bagged flour, picking his way through twisted metal, broken brick, human bodies, and gasping, thrashing fish. Everything was shiny, and the world smelled of plankton. Oddly, he found himself fending off questions from a group of wet reporters, all shoving their microphones at his mouth.

"How come you're not soaked, or dead?" they asked.

"How the hell would I know?" he asked back.

"Did you make this happen?" they demanded.

"Yeah, right! Me and Moses! We got a way with water!"

Weird, he said to himself nervously. *The crazier your dreams, the saner you are*, he remembered hearing somewhere.

He removed the trappings of the Church and put on his favorite jeans, his weathered plaid shirt, the "stompin' boots" he'd worn for so many summers at Catholic Youth Camp, and his baseball cap. As he stood there, pondering the finality of this move, he couldn't prevent tears from creeping into the corners of his eyes. He brushed them away and shook his head free of sentimentality. Under the grief, he felt good, much healthier than those who were right now trashing both his game plan and his reputation. They would know that they were in for a major fight, and they were undoubtedly preparing to tell the media of their profound concern for both his spiritual condition and his mental state.

Sutherland sat back down on the bed and retied the laces on his boots, looser, and he wondered what kind of displaced hostility had led him to tie them so tightly the first time around. He also wondered what kind of scandal it would have caused if he had ever shown up at his Calgary cathedral on a Sunday and said mass dressed like this. "Can't be done," he said lightly. "God's got taste."

It felt worrisome to find himself joking, albeit mildly, about God, about Catholicism, about faith. *This is going to take some time*, he said to himself. *I have to learn to think for myself. I have to learn to think, period. I have to rediscover the world, life, me.*

He guessed that in spite of having packed his bags ahead of time, he hadn't really believed it would come to this. After all, he hadn't thought things through to the next step, to what he might exactly do if the meeting did go as badly as it had. "Well, the big questions will have to wait," he said to himself aloud—a habit he'd had all through childhood, and dropped the day he was ordained. "Let's start with the little ones."

He had a key to the Sutherland's family cottage out in Norway Bay, and he had a friend he could talk to, really talk to. At least he used to be able to, in the 1980s. *It seems like only yesterday, or last week*, he thought.

The friend was his old high school buddy, Randall Whiteside. He thought back to the many lunch hours they had passed together, alternately discussing girls and God. He remembered the football games they had won together, the mud and the blood, the sock-hops after, and the never-ending stream of boyhood tales about sexual conquests, real and imagined—almost all imagined, truth be told. He remembered clumps of boys smoking cigarettes, standing on street corners one block from the school, as the rule demanded, turning their right hands into beautiful girls through some universal trick of the male mind.

Well, the problems are a little different now, he said to himself as he stood and checked out his image in the mirror. *I hope you're really there for me today, Randy. You just landed the unenviable task of getting an ex-bishop back on his feet.*

He looked at his watch. It was 3:00 p.m. He made the decision to get settled out in Norway Bay before seeing Randall Whiteside. *At least that way I won't seem homeless.*

He dialed the private line of his old chum. "Hi there Sandy," he said to the plump private secretary who never failed to offer him a chocolate whenever he visited Whiteside Tech. "It's Steve here. Is Randy in?"

"Yes, but he's awfully—"

"Has he ever been too busy to see me?"

"No, but—"

"Tell him I'll be over in about two hours, okay?"

"You're pretty nervy for a bishop."

"And you're pretty nervy for an executive secretary."

"There goes *your* chocolate," she laughed. "I'll tell him."

Bishop Sutherland, *former* bishop Sutherland, pulled the curtains aside, looked out the window, and saw that his taxi was already at the curb, waiting. He made it to the front lobby without incident, ignored the nun-receptionist, pulled the cap down to his eyes, and lowered his head. Then he marched out the front door of the CACB and past the reporters so quickly that none of them recognized him. He was free, free at last.

He got in the cab as the driver put the bags in the trunk, and he turned his head away from the occasional glances of reporters. "Norway Bay," he said as the engine kicked in and the car eased into traffic. "I might be ten minutes out there, then I'll be coming back to the city, to the Whiteside plant in Kanata. You take plastic, eh?"

Chapter 10 THE INNER CABINET

The Right Honorable Louis St. Aubin had his slippers on, as was his custom whenever he was in his office at 24 Sussex Drive, the official residence of Canadian prime ministers. The inner cabinet would be arriving soon, with all their pet projects and way-too-high ambitions. He put his pipe into its black clay holder, hoisted his heels up onto the teak desk, and let his head sink into the back of his tilting chair. Then he moved his glasses up onto his forehead, above the bridge of his nose but not too far from home, ready for instant recall.

The sweet smell of oriental tobacco hung in the air and seemed to massage his memory. He had been in office eight months, and the Liberal Party of Canada was still basking in the afterglow of the landslide victory they'd scored last September. However, the honeymoon with the electorate was almost at an end. The Party's rating in the polls was slipping as the Conservatives and New Democrats scored points on a whole range of niggling issues in the daily House of Commons free-for-all known as Question Period.

St. Aubin was content with the quality of the men and women he had in cabinet, but he wasn't at all sure

they would measure up in a crisis, such as the next time the dreaded separation-jitters shook the province of Québec, and the nation. In the absence of major problems, Canada seemed to have made an art form of dithering, with Judeo-Christian morality tut-tutting the government from one side and surly Uncle Sam kicking its shins from the other.

"It isn't that Canada is ungovernable," said the former teacher of law who ruled the maple roost, or tried to. "But God damn, it's a pain in the ass at times. It must be fun to be a dictator."

"Give it a rest," grumbled his humor-impaired chief of staff. Ralph Dellaire was stretched the length of the sofa and wasn't in the mood to play brain games with his friend. "We'll get through the agenda in an hour and slip over to the Oaks for a quick nine before supper. I called Joe Latimer. He opened up the back nine. There's a bit of snow left behind the green on the seventh hole and in a couple of bunkers. I've already arranged for an RCMP perimeter, and I had Betty call your wife and tell her that you'd be tied up for a few hours."

The two men closed their eyes as if on some unspoken cue. In a matter of minutes, urgent and not-so-urgent affairs of state would scream for their attention. Catnaps had become an essential survival strategy at number 24.

Dellaire had been attending an indoor golf school all winter, and he was mentally organizing his thoughts ... *straight left arm, nice smooth acceleration, full release, stay connected. What was that other key that Latimer always emphasized? Oh yeah ... seven o'clock-one o'clock, swing inside out, trust the club head to return to square, swing out to the ball—gets rid of a slice in no time.* "Work was invented for people who don't know how to golf," he mumbled. He remembered reading that bit of wisdom on one of those tacky wall plaques they sold in the pro shops.

His mind went back to the day he had first seen Darlene Trahan perform at the Meat Shop, down in Lowertown. He wondered what it would be like to see her on the Oaks, swinging a golf club, naked as a jay. *Louis would have a freaking seizure*, he chuckled inwardly.

The Prime Minister was thinking of nothing at all. In fact, he was counting backwards from one hundred, silently numbering his exhalations, a homespun technique he'd been using for decades to help himself fall asleep. Even when it didn't work, it cleared his mind of the competing demands for his judgment and allowed him to rest ... to droop, if not to dream. He'd only counted down to forty-seven when his secretary quietly opened the door and whispered that the inner cabinet was ready and waiting in the conference room.

"Thanks Betty," he said as he pulled his glasses down and his body up. "Monique knows I'll be late, eh?"

"Yes sir," said Betty, "and she said not to worry about your son's performance in the school play. It'll be on again next Saturday, so you can catch it then."

"Make sure I don't screw up on that," said St. Aubin. "They'll skin me alive if I blow it the second time around."

"Of course, sir," said the secretary.

Dellaire picked up the dossiers of priority agenda items and gave a copy to the Prime Minister as they walked over to the meeting room. "Watch out for the Honorable Mr. Goofy," he said quietly. "He's been whining out loud to the media about his desperate need for shiny new toys for the boys now that the goddam Cold War has started up again."

"Gotcha," said the Prime Minister as he opened the door. "Ladies, gentlemen, don't get up," he bellowed

as he entered the room. "Let's make this one a quickie. No disasters, I trust? The ship of state is on course and on time as far as I know, and I'm sure you've all got plans for the evening."

The ten men and six women of the inner cabinet opened their files, and St. Aubin ploughed through the agenda like a man on a mission.

"Bertha, you can announce the Russian wheat sale whenever you're ready. Tuesday is probably best, a few days before the farmers hold their convention in Winnipeg. I'll be going out there to—"

"I don't see why we should sell our wheat to that bugger Latzoff," muttered Jeremy Ford, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. "He's another Stalin."

"We might as well sell him our wheat," said the prime minister in a soothing voice. "We would have *given* the stuff to him if Russia had stayed on the road to freedom and democracy. At least this way we get paid."

"Wednesday, six p.m.?" said Agriculture Minister Bertha McNeil with a quick glance around the room. "Unless anyone has a conflict or a good reason why not..."

"Gaston, are those PSAC negotiations back on track?" asked St. Aubin.

"Prime Minister, I still think we're giving away the damned store," said Gaston St. Cyr. "Those guys in the Public Service Alliance have it goddam good, but they're *never* happy. The press guys are going to say we caved in to their demands, that we're wasting taxpayers' money to buy labor peace."

"And they'll be right, Gaston," said an exasperated prime minister, as calmly as he could. "We'll deny it vehemently, of course, but they'll be right. The problem is, there isn't any alternative, is there? This year we giveth to PSAC, next year we taketh away. Didn't we cover that at the last meeting?"

"Yes, sir," admitted St. Cyr, "but I'm still very uncomfortable with the numbers, and my staff feels that—"

"Your staff is your concern," said the PM sharply. "I'm interested in your views, not those of your staff. We've got a country to run here."

"Now, Jeremy, I've been told that the rebels in the Philippines are in retreat, but some dumb-ass official over at Foreign Affairs opened his fat yapper and told the press that we were talking about recognizing the breakaway islands. What's the poop?"

One by one, each item in the current litany of irritants was taken the next step, or papered over, or postponed until the next meeting. The public would be told the truth where possible, part of the truth where prudent, and lied to, with some regret, when necessary.

After an hour and a half, the Prime Minister finally found himself at the bottom of the list. He was about to adjourn when Nick Godfrey raised his hand. St. Aubin grimaced at the way his defense chief resembled a tenth-grader asking a teacher for permission to go for a pee. "What is it, Mr. Godfrey?" he asked, hoping his frustration wouldn't show.

"Request five minutes, one on one, sir," said the Minister. "We have a classified situation that requires your urgent attention—can't wait."

Nicholas Godfrey always looked ill at ease. His long chin and saggy cheeks were permanently gray where the whiskers grew, and the rest of his face was only slightly less gray. His forehead was slashed with horizontal gullies and he had heavy, lined sacks under his eyes. Oddly enough, no one in Parliament was better dressed, even though the Defense Minister would be everyone's last choice as a clotheshorse.

The Prime Minister looked briefly at his trusted chief of staff, and they both knew that their golf game had just been cancelled by the Honorable Nick Goofy. Still, he was the Minister of National Defence *and* the Deputy Prime Minister, so if he said the issue was urgent, he had to be given the benefit of the doubt.

"Very well," he said. "Thank you all. Nick ... in my office."

St. Aubin tromped across the hall and into his office in a manner that suggested displeasure, if not hostility. Nick Godfrey followed closely, quickly, not wanting to appear less virile than his boss. He wasn't oblivious to the 180-degree mood swing he'd produced in the Head of Government, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Ralph Dellaire limped along behind this procession of unlikely bedfellows. He hoped that Godfrey's kafuffle would turn out to be overblown nonsense so they could tell him to go fly a kite and get on with their golf game.

"You now have my undivided attention," said St. Aubin as he flopped into his chair. "What is it, Nick?"

The Minister was dumbfounded, and searched frantically for the right words to vent his outrage without losing his cool, or his job. He had specifically asked for a one-on-one with the Prime Minister, yet there was the ever-present Ralph Dellaire, standing casually by the doorjamb, showing every intention of staying right where he was. St. Aubin preempted Goofy's outburst by saying, "You don't mind if Ralph stays, do you Nick? I'll just have to tell him about it after."

"I most certainly do mind, Prime Minister," said Godfrey. "And if I don't have your full support, then you should come right out and—"

"Nick!" shouted the Prime Minister as he stood up abruptly and planted both fists knuckles-down on the desk, "put a fucking sock in it. I know the speech, and this is not the time or the place for posturing. Ralph, give us exactly five, then come back in here and I'll bring you up to speed. Now, Nick, sit your ass down and tell me what this is all about."

Dellaire closed the door after winking at his old pal Louis.

Godfrey sat. "Prime Minister," he began solemnly, "all hell is going to break loose in the next month or two, worldwide, and the trouble is going to start here in Canada, right here in Ottawa. Now you hear me out for however long this takes, or I'll have to—"

"First," hissed the Prime Minister, "don't ever threaten me with any of your 'or else' crap, or I'll have you fucking *arrested*." His voice almost broke on the last word. He was astonished at his own ferocity and realized, too late, that his threat of arrest was as empty as Godfrey's puffed-up bravado.

"And second," he said, after taking a deep breath, "I never know what to do when you speak in freaking tongues, Nick. What the Christ are you going on about? Are you telling me we're going to have a nuclear war or something?"

"No, Prime Minister," said Godfrey, "or I should say I hope not. The problem that I foresee is ... is not primarily military, but it could turn ugly at any—"

St. Aubin stopped his defense chief in mid-sentence with a flared hand, a gesture that warned of serious consequences unless it was obeyed immediately and in full. He could slug Godfrey, he could fire him, but he couldn't make the man get to the point. He couldn't even get him to abandon his beloved clichés. *What does that mean, "turn ugly?"* he wondered.

"I want the bottom line NOW!" said St. Aubin, with a maximum of emphasis, an uncharacteristic absence

of profanity, and only one cliché.

"Prime Minister," Godfrey began again, "I have reason to believe that within one year, the secrets of all governments will be laid bare to the public. I've learned of a new device with which anyone can tell when anyone else is lying, from the way they speak. When the media get their hands on this, and the Opposition parties, and the pollsters, there won't be a secret left anywhere that can't be found out and printed. Think about what this could mean, in the middle of Cold War II and the ongoing War on Terror. We could be looking at chaos on an unprecedented international scale, a sudden confluence of national and subnational crises that may reach the point where all law, both international law and domestic law, could collapse, and—"

"You're joking," the Prime Minister said as he reached back and scratched his neck. "Who the fuck told you this?"

Godfrey felt a need to stand for this occasion. He wasn't sure why, but the situation just seemed to call for it, so he rose, and stood virtually at attention.

"Prime Minister," he said bluntly, "at this very moment, there is a sixty-five-year-old man named Roger Findlay in my office, a colonel in the U.S. Air Force. He fought in Vietnam, and he is in fear for his life—with cause, I might add. He told me about this new kind of lie detector. He wouldn't tell me his source, but he kept referring to him and repeating: 'You have to act quickly; the man is fuckin' rabid.' He must have used the word 'rabid' five or six times. And that's all I know, but apparently there's a lot more to it. Colonel Findlay won't say any more until he can say it directly to you, in person. In my opinion, you and I should go talk to this man, and we should bring the Minister of Justice and the Commissioner of the RCMP, to cover all the necessary bases."

"You're telling me the truth, aren't you Nick?" said St. Aubin.

"Yes, sir, of course, and if you don't mind my saying, I think—"

"Ralph, get in here—Nick, sit down," shouted the distraught and deadly serious prime minister. As Dellaire came through the door, St. Aubin ordered him to sit down as well. "Right beside Nick, like you two were bosom buddies."

He walked to the bay window and looked at the newly rototilled garden-to-be behind his palatial residence. The unwritten rules of nature were so immutable, the seasons so predictable, the results of zero administration so perfect and pleasurable. *It's easy for the God damned lilies of the field*, he thought. He knew that if Godfrey was right about this new device, the tone and tenor of human activity was about to convulse. Some day people would ask each other where they were at the exact moment they first heard of the thing, like people used to do about the Kennedy assassination, or that terrible day when the twin towers of the World Trade Organization were felled in New York by al-Qaeda—9/11, as it had come to be known. And now this!

"Nicholas," he said respectfully as he turned and walked back to his desk, "Ralph was listening in on the intercom, not because he's a snoop, but because I signaled him to. I trust him more than anyone on Earth, and that includes the Justice Minister and my own wife. Ralph deserves that level of trust, Nick, and I am asking you to give him no less than I give him, from now on. Can you do that for me? *Will* you do that for me?"

Godfrey was comfortable with his own leadership abilities, but he was also a good follower when a situation called for it. "Of course, sir," he replied. "Sorry, Mr. Dellaire ... Ralph."

"Ralph," continued the Prime Minister, "the truth is that you and I don't like this minister a hell of a great

deal, personally, and I'm sure he's aware of that. But he was my choice for Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, and I have no regrets about those decisions. In fact, I'm really impressed by the job he's doing—on both fronts. I want you to treat him with more respect, give him your full and unfettered confidence. Will you do that for me?"

Dellaire had never seen his old friend in quite this mood, never in forty years, not even when they were students together at the University of Toronto. Louis looked older than his age, in spite of the off-season facelifts and tummy tucks he'd had in recent years. Truly difficult situations usually led the Prime Minister to let fly with a virtual torrent of improvisational cursing, and the absence of that display seemed to represent a rare lack of self-confidence. Ralph nodded sincerely. "Yes, of course, Louis ... I'll do that."

"Now, both of you," continued St. Aubin, "do not discuss this Colonel Findlay or the dilemma he represents with anyone unless you clear it with me first. Is that understood?"

It was.

"Good," he concluded. "Now, let's the three of us go see this son-of-a-bitch."

Chapter 11 SHAKE A PAW

The headquarters of Whiteside Technologies was a twelve-story office tower that seemed to be made of solid, steel-tinted glass. It reflected clouds and sky, looking almost as powerful as the elements themselves. The front lawn seemed greener than grass had a right to be this early in spring. A sense of corporate muscularity oozed from a parking lot flush with new cars, and from the very visible security presence. There was a giant low-rise production plant behind the tower, spread over an area the size of a city block. This complex was the crown jewel of Kanata, a suburb of Ottawa. It provided employment, tax dollars, and prestige to a city that served mainly as a bedroom community for the federal civil service.

Steve Sutherland was delivered to the front of the office tower at 5:05 p.m. He was dressed for hiking, camping, or a barbecue—certainly not for preaching. He gave the taxi driver his VISA card and reminded himself that he had to get some cash from his bank account in Alberta. At this moment, however, what he needed most was a friend, a real friend.

The driver seemed skeptical that his wordless fare of apparently modest means would have a valid card, so he insisted on running the transaction past his dispatcher. After all, the trip from Ottawa out to Norway Bay and back to Kanata came in at almost \$450, not including the tip, and he'd been stiffed before.

"It's valid," came a voice over the car radio as Steve sat patiently in the backseat, with the door open.

"Problem—uh—Father?" said a Patriot hostess who had been on the lookout for Sutherland.

The driver's dark eyes stayed focused on the paperwork, but his brain was flashing "disk error." *Is that her dad, or did I just figure a priest for a deadbeat?* he asked himself. *Probably best to just write in the price, get the signature, and haul ass.*

"He was just checking my card," Steve said to the hostess as the driver passed the plastic tray from the front seat. He added a modest tip, signed on the line, and passed the tray back. "Thanks," he said, taking his card and the receipt back from the driver. "I made this in my basement this morning," he bragged loudly as he showed his VISA card to the hostess and stepped out of the cab. "Pretty professional job, eh?"

"You must have been a holy terror as a kid," said the hostess in a voice that the driver was sure to hear.

"Whadya mean 'as a kid?'" Steve joked just as he closed the car door. He didn't know quite why he was in such an outrageously wonderful mood, or why he and his temporary escort would conspire to confuse and worry a perfectly innocent cab driver. *I'll think it through later*, he said to himself.

As he walked towards the large glass doors, he found himself taking stock. He had made the right first step—to set up shop in Norway Bay, in the small cottage his family had owned since before World War II. That gave him a base of operation. Now he could look forward to a future that was ... *well, tabula rasa*, he supposed. *A blank slate* ... he made a mental note to lay off the Latin while he was a civvie.

In spite of the problems that would attend such a profound change in his life, Steve felt a bit like ... *like what?* he wondered. *Like the day I went to summer camp, when I was eleven; like the day I started high school, age thirteen-and-a-half; like that wondrous day when I first donned a cassock and plunked my father's suitcase on the bed of that small, austere room in the seminary, back in 1980. Or was it 1979? Somewhere around there.*

He wasn't very good with dates. He also wasn't very good at hiding his real feelings, and he therefore suspected that his good mood was a defense mechanism of some sort, and destined to be short-lived. Still, he wasn't very inclined to kill it off, to sour himself deliberately. *Time enough for tears*, he thought. *Maybe I've already exceeded my lifetime quota?*

The hostess was unaware of his reasons for not having a collar on, and Steve didn't explain as she ushered him into the waiting elevator. Instead, he engaged her in a lively conversation about the state of the nation. They went down two floors, where she sat him in an electric golf cart and drove him through a well-lit tunnel, an underground link between the office tower and the production plant. It seemed that her opinion of the new St. Aubin Liberal government wasn't much different from her opinion of the previous Tory bunch, and Steve got a kick out of the way she searched for polite ways to trash politicians, the lot of them. At the other end of the tunnel, they went up an elevator, down a hall and around a corner to a door that was flanked by two burly agents.

"He's expecting you," said the hostess as she showed him in.

Randall was at the other end of a large, windowless room—a lab of some sort. There were dozens of white-clad workers standing around in clusters, murmuring—*the way people do at a wake*, Steve thought. As soon as Randall saw him, he crossed the room and welcomed him with a hearty handshake.

"It's great to see you, Steve," he beamed. "It's been a while since you just came by out of the blue. What brings you all the way out here? Looking for another donation for the missions?"

Steve was truly pleased to see his oldest friend. He felt as if he were returning home from a foreign war. And yet this was a man who could usually read him like a book, the person he'd have to lean on for a while. As night falls in the mountains, his upbeat mood dissipated with astonishing suddenness.

"Hi Randy," he said, with as much of a smile as he could manage. "Actually, I'm looking for some advice. I came to Ottawa for an emergency meeting of the CACB. You can guess what was on the agenda, what with Caughy Commission and all that."

"Yeah," said Randall. "I saw your ugly mug on TV last night, at the hearing, giving the scribes a 'no comment.' Must have been a slow news day. I wonder how come they don't report it on national TV when *I've* got nothing to say," he quipped, with a play-punch to the Bishop's gut.

Steve found the jocularly a bit too much. He tugged Randall by the sleeve towards a wall, for privacy.

Then he cleared his throat, and his mind, and told him briefly about his ill-fated proposal to use lie detectors on all the clergy, twice a year, to ferret out the child molesters. "Well, you can bloody imagine how popular that made me," he said. "There's a bishop by the name of Doyle who stood up and—" He was stopped in mid-sentence by the reaction of his old friend, who looked like he'd been slapped across the face.

"You are not going to believe this," said Randall, shaking his head and throwing his bushy gray eyebrows skyward, "but I can help you with that problem. There's a man that you simply *have* to meet. He's staying at the lodge. Let me take care of a bit of business here, and then we'll head out in the helicopter. I'm meeting him for dinner tonight. Trust me, Steve. This guy has what you need. Are we on?"

"Uh—who is this person?" asked Steve. Randall smiled at him with the mischievous gleam of the young Randy, the gawky boy who sat behind him in math class in grade ten. "You're not going to tell me, are you?" he predicted.

"You're always in such a damned hurry," said Randall, with no real appreciation that he was also describing himself. He threw an arm around the shoulders of his boyhood pal and led him forcibly to the front of the room. "Steve," he boomed, "this is our chief engineer and main wizard, Laurent Gauthier. Steve and I go way back, Laurent. To grade nine, would you believe?"

"How are ya?" said Laurent with a firm handshake, the kind that bishops rarely got.

"Nice to meet you," said Steve.

"Just give us a sec, okay?" Randall asked quietly.

Steve moved aside, to let them converse.

"How many units have your people made so far, Laurent?" Randall asked his chief engineer in a whisper.

"Just three—the one we sent out to Helliwell and these two," he said, giving one of the slim, black cases to the boss. "I made them myself. No one else knows a thing yet."

"Good," said Randall, slipping the LieDeck into his shirt pocket. "And I can expect the first production models to be completed by...?"

"Maybe eight o'clock tonight," guessed Laurent. "They're not that complicated."

"Okay, I should be back here by then," said Randall. He turned his attention to the workers, and held up a hand to get them to settle down.

"Ladies, gentlemen," he said, "you have all agreed to live inside this building for the next few weeks to work on a new top-secret product, and I appreciate that. I expect your best efforts, and I intend to reward you all in your pay packets for the sacrifices you're making. You have all called your families. There must be no phone calls or emails or other communications in or out now until the first thousand units are built. We have the parts on hand, I'm told, thanks to a little cannibalizing of our stock. So, does anyone want out before we tell you what we're going to be making?"

No one responded, and by the looks on their faces, the workers who were about to be sequestered only wanted to know what the fuss was all about.

"Well, this is it!" he said proudly, holding up the LieDeck he'd just received from Gauthier. "This is not a Dictaphone, but as you can see, for the moment anyway, we're going to use casings from our new Dictaphone line to house the—uh—new device. Later, when we get to full production, we're going to

microminiaturize the guts of the thing and maybe put it in a wristwatch. I have to go to an important meeting, and I'm already late, so to tell you what this new gadget is, I'll turn this meeting over to our top-notch magic-making chief engineer, Laurent Gauthier."

Laurent fished the other LieDeck from his pocket and signaled the workers to knock it off with the applause. "Hold on to your dentures, friends," he said. "I have here a device that will impact dramatically on the life of every—"

Randall hustled Steve out the door before Laurent got into matters any further. Within minutes they were aboard Whitebird III, on their way to the lodge. "The man" went up front, hunkered down behind the pilot, put a hand on his shoulder, and talked in a low voice that was clearly meant to not be overheard.

"*Sotto voce*," Steve whispered to himself—for reasons unknown, he just loved Latin. He looked out of the window as Kanata became the Ottawa River, then Québec farmland. His life seemed to be changing faster than the ground below, and it was both exhilarating and frightening. *And now, an element of mystery*, he said to himself.

When Randall returned to his seat and buckled up, he leaned to his left and looked directly at his guest. "I don't think you came to see me to get my sage advice on Church politics," he said. "What's really going on, Steve?"

There was no point in putting it off. "I ... left the Church," he said. "I—uh—I think I—uh—may..." His head dropped a bit. He couldn't quite find the words to match his feelings.

"Really? You left the Church?" asked Randall.

"Really," admitted Steve, with his eyes pointed at the chopper floor. "I'm not making it public for a couple of weeks, but it's..."

"Well ... look," said Randall as he slowly internalized the stunning reality of Steve's decision. "I want you to stay with us at the manor for a while, just until you get yourself sorted out."

"I'm okay," said Steve. "You know our cottage in Norway Bay? I'll be staying there. My brother bought it from the family estate, and he said to use it for as long as I need. It's furnished and everything. I've moved in already, this afternoon. It's a ten- fifteen-minute drive from your place. We'll be almost neighbors. Really ... I'm all set."

"Well, okay," said Randall. "But I want you to know that I'm here for you, Steve. We'll clear some time to talk, to really talk." After a pause, he added, "I suppose you're looking for a new job?"

"I'm glad you brought that up," said Steve. "It seems I could use one."

* * *

Victor and Annette had enjoyed their day, especially the lunch at Ray's Restaurant and the tour of Whiteside Technologies in Kanata. Victor had decided not to tell Randall he was in the building, even though Patriot surely kept him informed. In late afternoon, he and Annette had a stroll at the half-built nine-hole golf course on the northern part of the estate. Now they were kicked back, side by side on the elevated deck at the lodge, above the front porch. They were listening to music, sprawled out on two pine chaise lounges with deep mattresses, nursing glasses of chilled white wine. The former cabbie wagged his feet in sync with the glorious high harmonies of an early Vince Gill as he lamented, "Nobody answers when I call your name." Annette thrilled to "Liebestraum," by Franz Liszt. Neither one spoke. God bless the iPod.

Victor was wishing that he could rearrange his privates without Annette noticing, but decided he could put up with the discomfort. And he found he wasn't really listening to the words of the song in his ears any more. His mind kept drifting back to the golf course.

He and Annette had sauntered along the edge of what was destined to become the sixth fairway. They had watched a bulldozer shove tons of wet, brown earth from point A to point B. They had been enthralled by a giant, yellow machine that noisily encircled a tree, drove down four hydraulically operated blades, crunched roots like celery sticks, yanked the tree out of the ground, root clump and all, tipped the whole works back, rolled off slowly, and replanted it in a prepared hole a hundred yards away.

Victor had wanted to take Annette's hand as they watched this brute demonstration of technological prowess and human ascendancy, but ... well, he hadn't dared. She was six years younger than him, and he hadn't been in a relationship—hadn't even been *close* to being in a relationship—for so very long. Besides, as far as looks went, on a scale of one to ten, Annette was a seven, easily, arguably an eight, and he was still a three. It wasn't as bad as the six-point spread that existed between himself and Helen Kozinski, and he and Annette had sort of become friends that day in Ray's, but then there was that Lou Glassen fellow, the dentist ... and besides, besides ... ?

Victor knew he was just plain horny, that his "id" had gone impulse shopping, just as it had yesterday, with Helen. He opened his eyes a bit, peeked down at his rounded belly, and he wondered if he had passed some sort of unmarked threshold, without even noticing. *Maybe I've reached an age and a shape where I'm sexually attractive to no one*, he thought as he closed his eyes again and leaned back, *destined never to be laid or loved again, except by women who want my money ... or have no taste in men*. He closed his eyes again and tried to change the inner topic ... to no avail.

It bothered him that he was having such feelings towards a woman who was basically ... he almost thought "not my type," but then realized that he didn't have a type. In any case, she was nice, she was pretty, but truth be told, he just wanted to scoop her up like that big tree-moving machine, carry her off into the bush and ... "Stop it," he scolded himself under his breath, without opening his eyes. He crossed his legs on the chaise lounge. *Nobody answers when I call your name*.

* * *

In the kitchen, Noel Lambert was frantically trying to prepare for the visitation. "The old man" hadn't eaten a full-fledged meal at the lodge since December, and Cam O'Connor had forgotten to call ahead. The housekeeper, Winnifred Jopps, had been recruited to assist him, although she was supposed to have been let off early to meet her girlfriends for what they called their annual "giggle-dinner," their warm-up for the rite of spring at the Beach Barn.

"Bad enough dat Mr. O'Connor don' call me ahead," complained Noel as he cut every visible sign of fat from the edges of the steaks, "but after he is finally calling me, he is calling me back and saying dat Bishop Sutherland he's coming too, coming wit' Mr. Whiteside."

"Grump," muttered Winnifred. "I'm the one who should be bitching here."

"I t'ink, me, I am putting li'l bit dis Memories of Bangkok sauce on dat steak," said Noel. "What you t'ink, Winnie? I'm getting dis stuff at Loblaws. Is really good stuff."

"That's supposed to be for fish," said Winnifred.

"*Oui, je sais, tabernacle*," he sputtered playfully, "but he don' know dat, an' you not telling, *n'est-ce pas?*"

* * *

When Victor had returned from his wonderful afternoon out with Annette, he had found a Whiteside-produced LieDeck on his bed, one of the three that chief engineer Gauthier had made himself. The Dictaphone casing had a slapped-together look about it, with one button sealed up completely and other buttons adapted to new purposes, sporting hand-labeled bits of tape to educate the user. Unlike his original prototype, this one had all three of the signaling modes—the pin, the light, and the beeper. He had felt vulnerable during the entire day that he was without a LieDeck, and he had breathed relief when he tucked this new one into his shirt pocket.

It was surprisingly warm for April. Victor had put his headphones back on, and was ignoring Vince Gill again. He had his eyes closed, and he stared in wonder at the inside of his eyelids, at a brilliant ocean of ... well, not orange ... it was yellow-red, overlaid but unblended. The late-afternoon sun was trying to get in.

Annette was watching Michael and his girlfriend in the distance. It was Good Friday, so the two youngsters had no school. They were paddling a canoe from Michael's dock on the far shore over to where Dora's Creek fed Wilson Lake. According to Noel, at night, when the air was still, you could hear them laughing all the way from the other side. Sometimes, if Noel was to be believed, you could make out actual words as they chased each other and did those nutty things that young lovers seem compelled to do.

"Victor," called Annette. He couldn't hear or see her, so she dipped her fingers into the ice bucket between them and flicked a few drops at his face.

"Hey," he yelled as he tore off his iPod headphones. "This is an unprovoked assault, Your Honor. I was peacefully minding my own..."

"Knock it off, Bozo," she laughed. "They're here."

* * *

During the sixteen-minute flight from the top of the office tower to the rugged dock on Wilson Lake, Randall had kept to his decision not to explain anything about the LieDeck to Steve, so that he could react freshly to the thing, and so that Victor could introduce his invention in his own way. Steve had told Randall the details of his visit to the Caughy Commission, how Barbara Farley had humiliated poor old Judge Caughy with her earthy analysis of social responsibility and morality. And he told him the longer version of how, and why, he had walked out of the Canadian Association of Catholic Bishops, and out of the Church. "For good," he'd said with finality, although he hadn't intended the *double-entendre*.

Randall had stayed friends with Steve for forty years, even though the Whitesides weren't Catholics, or even churchgoers. He had always thought that Steve was a rock, in his character and in his beliefs. Now he was concerned for his old high school buddy. *I wonder if the LieDeck can be used to find out if a guy really believes in God?* he thought. *If it can, it's going to knock the Argyle socks off a lot of priests and rabbis and ministers and imams ... and whatever else those types call themselves.*

* * *

Snowball and Kodiak barked loudly and leapt wildly in the chain-link kennels that the groundskeeper had constructed down by the dock. In vain. Apparently helicopters aren't scared of bushy white dogs.

Annette and Victor walked down the outside wooden staircase that led from the upper balcony to the pine-needle floor. They waited until the engine was cut and the blades were wilting before they let "the kids" out of their kennels. "If they jump at you too hard, put a knee up and they'll get the message," said Victor as he fended off Kodiak, causing both dogs to race out to the end of the dock. "Funny how Samoyeds can cheer things up," he added as he watched Randall fight off the canine love-bombing.

"Quite the welcoming committee, eh?" he yelled towards his two visitors as he walked with Annette out on the dock.

"Victor, Annette, this is Steve Sutherland," said Randall as he inched his way around the circling, bounding dogs.

"Hi Steve," said Victor as they shook hands. "This galumph is Kodiak, or Slurp, and the lady here is Snowball. Shake a paw."

The dogs weren't interested in that human tradition. They ran back off the dock, across the front yard, and up the stairs to the veranda.

"So much for your theory that they're happier outside," said Annette, with a laugh. "I bet Noel lets them in and slips them scraps when we're not here." She made it sound like a tradition ... and thought perhaps it was, or would be.

As the foursome walked towards the lodge, Randall explained that he couldn't stay long, that he had to leave by eight o'clock, at the latest. "I have to go to a secret meeting," he whispered jokingly.

Victor wished he had spoken out loud. Even with a subdued voice, the LieDeck worked, but when people whispered, talked without using their vocal cords, he was as blind as he had been before, during the dark ages, before he'd perfected his invention.

"Mr. Whiteside, is very good to see you so soon again," boomed Noel as he held the screen porch door open. "Dinner is almost ready. I am making dat steak, da way you like it, wit' da mushroom and dat baked potato wit' da sour cream, and I make da new sauce for dat steak ... is da best sauce I'm ever do, me, an' if you don' like, is breaking my li'l heart."

Noel's histrionics always amused Randall. "Well, then, I guess we better like it," he chuckled with a wink as they reached the top step. "Steve, this is Noel Lambert, our cook, and Winnifred—uh—"

"Jopps," she said politely, holding out her hand. "Winnifred Jopps ... or Winnie, really ... the housekeeper. Welcome, Your ... Grace ... is that the proper...?"

"Just call me Steve, okay?" he said.

"Certainly ... Steve," she said, with an uncertain smile. "If you'll all come this way."

Winnifred's hair momentarily flew sideways as she turned quickly, almost pirouetted, to lead the procession in. Victor had noticed that about her before, that way she had of turning so that her hair flew out, like in the Vidal Sassoon ads on TV. There was nothing Hollywood-special about her hair—limply thin, chocolate brown with a couple of dozen gray misfits—but it was unusually long, past her shoulder blades, and would reach to within an inch from her butt, he imagined, if she were to throw her head all the way back for any reason.

It wasn't just the way her hair flew that interested Victor, but the way she so clearly enjoyed doing it—without the move seeming to be on purpose—almost as if it would surprise her to realize that anyone had actually noticed. She wore the front in bangs, like a shiny helmet, down to the eyebrows ... early Cher. A couple of times last night, when the firelight caught her profile just so, Victor thought he saw a petroglyph of a green-eyed Egyptian princess rather than a housekeeper.

As she strode through the large, rustic living room with the grand fireplaces at each end, Victor watched her from behind. She was about his height, he guessed, five-foot-seven or so, yet her legs seemed longer than his. He watched her designer jeans move ... until they stopped, until *she* stopped, right at the

dining-room door, turned, and smilingly waved everyone in.

Victor caught her green eyes briefly as he passed by, but there was nothing more than courtesy there. They had wrinkles, those eyes, not the puffy bags that speak of weariness or impending funerals, but the laugh-lines of a seasoned liver of life. As far as he could gather—and he was now in the business of gathering such things—Winnifred met the six criteria he had established for a potential mate. She wasn't married, involved, gay, bulimic, out on bail or under forty.

"Thanks ... you," he garbled on his way by. He tripped in between a "thanks" and a "thank you" when his libido made his brain fold over on itself and short-circuit, sort of a cerebral intussusception. "Oh my God," he mumbled to himself.

The dining room had large picture windows that looked out on the lake and let the afternoon sun glisten off the varnished, knotty pine furniture. The outside glass door to the lower deck had been left open, but the inner screen door remained closed, to let in the breezes and the smells of a Canadian spring, minus the mozzies, if there were any yet.

Victor thought about how far he'd come in the past two days. He'd been allowed, largely, to make his own decisions, and people hadn't overloaded him with unsolicited advice. On the other hand, he was still a hermit at heart, and Annette and Helen had both mentioned that he should be more assertive, so ... ?

"Winnie," he said as everyone sat down, "I'd like you to join us for supper. You don't mind, do you Randall?"

"Uh—no—of course not," managed Randall. "The lodge is your home, Victor, and I'm sure we'd be honored to have Ms. Jopps join us."

"But really I ... there won't be enough to go around," said Winnie.

"Nonsense," said Victor. "We've got four steaks prepared and five people to serve. You cut a bit off each steak and everybody's happy. That's the way we did it at my house when I was a kid. I'll even take the cut-off bits. The rule at home was that if you took the little chunks, you got out of doing dishes."

Randall laughed heartily and Steve added his support, so the deal was set, in spite of Winnie's mild protestations. Victor even went to the kitchen and helped her bring out the ice water. *If this really is my home*, he thought, *then we'll do things normal around here*. Annette laid out the extra place setting, right beside Victor's. Steve got another chair, and Randall just sat, drumming his thumbs together and smiling.

"I think he's got an eye for that lady," Annette whispered to Randall as Victor and Winnie headed back to the kitchen to get the food.

After everyone was seated, Noel poured the wine and lingered. He watched as the diners took their first bites.

"Rave reviews," said Randall enthusiastically.

"I *love* that sauce," beamed the former bishop.

"Really?" asked the cook.

"It's terrific," assured the host. *And they are telling the truth*, he almost added, forgetting momentarily that Winnie, Noel and Steve knew nothing about the LieDeck.

Winnifred, it turned out, had a wit and wisdom all her own, born of the suffering and growth that comes from the loss of a husband to a younger woman and a great will to get on with life. She noted that she was getting a better deal at the lodge than she would have at the dinner party she had planned with her girlfriends, and she talked about the barn dance she was going to attend that evening, and about the madcap band that did the gig every year—"Raccoons on Ice," they were called, although no one knew why. Later, in hushed tones, she squealed on Noel, and told the secret of "his" new steak sauce—the "store-boughten" fish sauce from Loblaws.

Steve told stories about his childhood, about his brother Tony and the sand pile and a red truck. And he spoke about the humorous side of being a priest. "If only I could write a book about the vastly different species that I meet through the curtain of a confessional," he said. "Met," he corrected the tense.

He also derived a peculiar sort of delight from some mild swearing that went on, an indulgence he hadn't permitted himself since he was eighteen, when he'd first felt the call to the priesthood. And he mentioned, not with any great emotion, that he had just left the Church. "It ... happens," he said. "I'm hardly the first, and I won't be the last." He didn't share details.

Annette mostly stayed in the background. It had struck her how much the ex-bishop reminded her of her boyfriend, Lou Glassen, minus the pretences, the selfishness, the perfect, polished, dentist's teeth, and plus a few wrinkles, of course, mostly around the eyes.

Victor announced that he and Annette were also planning to go to the barn dance in Quyon, "just as friends, of course," and Winnie said it would be great fun if they joined up with her girlfriends in a big gang. Then Victor got impish, and badgered Steve into agreeing to come along.

"I'd have to go to my cottage first, to—uh—shower and change," Steve said, all the while wondering privately whether he'd chicken out when the time came. "I'll meet you there," he swore. "Promise," he'd been forced to add.

Randall was pleased to see everyone having a good time, but he was too aware of the passage of time to get into the full spirit of things. He had said he would meet Laurent Gauthier, his chief engineer, at eight o'clock, to see the first production LieDecks come off the assembly line. His other meeting was at nine o'clock, in his office. It had nothing to do with Victor Helliwell or the LieDeck, and that was a pleasant switch. People seemed to have forgotten that he was a busy man *before* all the recent commotion, and this was the first time in two days that he had dedicated significant time to the other business matters that were on his plate.

"Winnifred, Annette," he said, "let's take our coffee and go out on the porch. Victor and Steve have something they need to discuss ... which means I get both the pretty girls."

Once they were alone, Steve drew a heavy, preparatory breath and set about giving Victor a full understanding of the situation he was in. He spoke about his realization that he probably didn't believe in God any more, and maybe never did. He explained the proposal he'd made to the CACB to use polygraphs to identify criminals in the clergy. And he mentioned his threat to go to the media in two weeks if the Church didn't adopt his radical proposal. "Randy said you were in a position to help me," he said finally. "Are you?"

Victor reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his new Whiteside-produced LieDeck. "It's all yours," he said, placing it in Steve's hand. "I can get another one tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Steve with a curious grin as he examined the small device. "What ... is it?"

Chapter 12
BARN DANCE '14

Tirone Lucas was late, as usual. He had a delivery in Fort Coulonge, an hour west of Quyon, that he couldn't locate anybody to sign for. "Trucking's a good life, occasionally made miserable by dumbwads," he'd tell anyone who would listen. But never mind. He'd gotten home before his Tammy started calling around after him, and they'd finally arrived at the Beach Barn, just an hour late, give or take.

The parking lot was stuffed. "This barn dance thing is getting more popular every year," he said.

The previous year, they'd raised over \$6,000 for Brenda Crosbie, the widow whose boy was supporting her when he got shot. Of course that was before they found out that Fatty Crosbie, her son, was dealing dope. They never did give the money to her. They ended up giving it to a group up in Shawville that helped youngsters who got steered the wrong way on drugs. This year, however, they planned to give the proceeds to the Red Cross, figuring there was no chance of a screw-up with that outfit.

"Don't that beat all?" said Tammy disapprovingly, sadly. "There's Ginette Lapine, doing traffic again this year. Claire's never gonna get her married off if she lets her spend all her time getting people's cars parked instead of dancing."

Tirone waved at Ginette and obeyed her signal to head down to the area behind the Beach Barn. "She sure does that with authority, don't she?" Tirone said as he stashed his Chrysler clunker a hundred yards from the back door, further than he'd ever seen cars parked before.

The ferry was bringing folks in from the Ontario side, by the dozens each trip, which was good for the money-raising but not so good for the cops. "At least this year the police are making them 'forners' leave their cars on the other side of the river," everybody down at Ray's Restaurant had been saying all week. The Beach Barn was only a skip and a hop from the ferry dock, so the "forners" could skip or hop their way up to the dance.

Tirone locked the car, and he and Tammy wove their way through the lot and around the ancient Lion's Club building to the front door. The entrance was decorated with paper streamers, and things were already to the point where a gang of break-takers was hanging around outside, puffing cigarettes and swigging right from their bottles. There was an outside table with things to buy, and they had tickets on a gas barbecue, donated by the hardware store. The thumping country music was already stirring up feelings, and by the looks of things, the party was off to a rollicking good start without any help from the Lucases.

"Git your big ass over here and buy yourself one of my genuine pressed-cardboard cowboy hats, Tammy," hollered Claire Lapine. "Nobody allowed in there if they ain't attired proper."

"Hi Claire," said Tammy. "I see they got you out here doing sales again this year."

"Hell," said Claire, "after spending all day on my feet at Ray's, the last thing I want is to be in there sweating and pretending I'm having fun. Besides, tell you the truth, I think country music stinks."

"They used to burn heretics, you know," said Tirone as he tried on several hats in a doomed attempt to find one big enough for his whole head. "They'd have a lynching out here if I was to tell them inside what you just said about country music."

A clown dressed as a sheriff sidled up to Tirone and stuck a bright red, oversized, plastic six-shooter into his ribs from behind. "That'll be a one-loonie fine fur gittin' mean before yur time," he said.

"Jesus," said Tirone, "I just got here, Buck, and you're sticking me up for a dollar before I even get a

single dance in."

"Make that a toonie," declared Buck Ash, with a lit cigarette clenched between his teeth the way he figured Clint Eastwood would do, "for giving lip to the law. Pay up, mister wise guy, or I'll hafta haul yur pitiful ass downtown."

Tirone paid the revised fine with a two-dollar coin and threw in a five-dollar bill for good measure, and just as he was stuffing his wallet back into his hip pocket, he noticed a man who seemed out of place, not dressed funny or anything like that, but ... weird, in a way. The man walked oddly, it seemed, like he was in some kind of a trance. And he was looking up, like he'd just seen a flying saucer or some damned thing. And then the fellow let a little skip into his step, the way a kid might do just because the mood struck. He was approaching from up town way, and he was all by himself. *Nobody comes to the annual spring blowout alone*, he thought. "Who is that guy, Buck?" he asked. "I swear I seen him before, but I can't place him."

Buck followed the line of Tirone's finger. "Fucked if I know," he said.

"Tell you what," suggested Tirone. "You go give him a fine, see what you can figure out. Get his name. I seen his face before ... last summer ... or maybe other summers, but I can't remember who he is, and it's starting to bug me."

Well, Buck Ash had started his drinking in the mid-afternoon to get in the spirit of things, and because he couldn't do his stint as the Sheriff of Quyon if he went around toting a quart of bubbly. He was in "one of your finer fettles," as Claire had expressed it, and he didn't need any extra encouragement to give this pretend-hick a hard time.

"Thaaaat's far enough, pardner," he said, feet apart, hands on hips, cigarette hanging from his mouth. "The name's Buck Ash, an' I happen ta be the Acting Sheriff of Quyon. I'm a'feared I gotta give you a ticket, fifty cents, 'cause yur late. This here shindig started itself off more'n an hour ago, and where were you? Well now, you weren't here, were ya? So pay the sheriff, or I'll be forced ta squirt ya all over yur nice plaid shirt with my shiny red gun."

The man laughed at the whimsy of the situation and dropped two quarters into the slot of the tin can with the big red cross on it. "How many times does this happen to a guy in the course of the evening?" he asked.

"That'll be another twenty-five cents fur askin' too many questions, mister, an' I'm gonna have ta jack it even more if ya give me any trouble. What's yur name, anyways? We git kinda skittish about strangers in these parts, 'specially strangers that's ugly."

"And ... am I ugly?" asked the amused man in the plaid shirt as he deposited another quarter.

"You are the consarndest ugliest critter ta come up the road all night, an if yur not careful, I'm gonna have ta hit ya fur a loonie jes' fur being so gal-danged tough ta look at, which is prob'ly why ya ain't got no wife on yur arm. Now if I'm not mistaken, you was about ta tell the nice poleeeeceman what yur name is."

"My name," said the stranger, "is Steve Sutherland."

Buck still looked like a clown on the outside, but he nearly went into shock on the inside. He got himself in position to get a better look at the face of the man, and sure enough, it was Tony Sutherland's brother.

"You're ... Bishop Sutherland," said the Acting Sheriff of Quyon as he threw his cigarette to the ground.

"Not any more," said Steve. "I quit."

"You ... quit what?" asked Buck.

"Well, bishoping," he laughed. "I guess you'd say I'm sort of—uh—unemployed."

"Well I'll be f—uh—darned," said Buck. "You mean you really aren't a bishop no more?"

"That's right," said Steve.

"So—uh—what do I call you now, if you're not the...?"

"You can call me Mr. Sutherland if you're mad at me or you can call me Steve if we're having a normal conversation, or—uh—you can call me the ugly old fart in the plaid shirt if you need another quarter for the Red Cross," said the former bishop with a smile.

"Oh jeeze," said Buck, "I'm sorry, Father, I didn't mean no—"

"It's okay, Buck," he laughed. "And I'm not even a priest any more, just ... a guy, okay?"

"Well, okay ... Steve ... but it doesn't seem right somehow. I can't think of you like one of the local rowdies, going in there to get all drunked up and hitting on the ladies. I mean ... is that what you're here to do, like the rest of the guys?"

"I intend to drink a few beers all right," said Steve, "maybe even a few more than I should, and I intend to do some dancing, but as for the—uh—other part, I can't say I'm ready for that quite yet. What do you do for a living, Buck?"

Well, Buck Ash chatted up a storm for a few minutes, mostly about the NHL bosses and their lousy pension plan. Tirone was beginning to wonder what the devil was going on over there, and Tammy was on his case for standing outside waiting for "the Buck" when they could have been inside drinking beer and dancing.

When the Acting Sheriff of Quyon finally came back to Claire's hat-and-ticket table, he gave Tirone the inside scoop, with eyes the size of beefsteak tomatoes.

Tirone caught a glimpse of the man as he made his way up the steps, and sure enough, it was Bishop Sutherland. "You know who that is?" he asked his wife, pointing to the back of a disappearing plaid shirt. "That's Tony Sutherland's brother, the Bishop, except he isn't the Bishop any more, and he told Buck here he isn't even a priest any more."

"Git outta here," squealed Tammy as she slapped Tirone's arm with the back of a hand. "Come on, let's get in there and kick some butt."

Steve paid his way in, got stamped with red ink on the back of his hand, and walked onto the straw-covered floor. There were tables along both sides of the Lion's "Beach Barn," two rows on each side, and a bar in the corner, surrounded by eager customers. The strobe lights and the shifting, colored spotlights were not what he expected of a barn dance, but in the 21st century, anything went, or so it seemed.

The dance floor in the middle of the room was well populated with bobbing heads and flailing arms. The band was playing a song that Steve hadn't heard before, and the decibel-level was brain damaging—so high that it was almost impossible to make out the lyrics. With effort, Steve was barely able to get the words of the repeating chorus. *"Drop-kick me Jesus through the goal-posts of life,"* he said to himself

as he shook his head in disbelief. "Amen to that," he added out loud, though he couldn't even hear his own voice. It was only a few hours since he'd walked out of the Church, and already he was being exposed to heretical new prayers—and on Good Friday, to boot!

* * *

"Down to the end, turn left. Down to the..."

As she drove into the parking lot, Annette obeyed the square-shouldered woman who was barking orders and pointing to where to stash the car. She then picked the mike from its holster on the dashboard. "We're just getting parked," she reported to Patriot HQ. "Is everything in place?"

"All set. Boogie your little hearts out," came a voice over the radio.

* * *

Claire snuck up behind Ginette and plunked a cardboard cowboy hat on her head, startling her. "Here you go, sweetheart," she said to her daughter. "Now you come on in when you're done out here."

"Thanks Mom," said Ginette, more resentfully than gratefully, as her mother kissed her and turned to leave.

Buck was standing nearby. He hadn't had much new business over at the door for a while, so he'd come over to talk to Ginette. Now he found himself trying not to laugh at her, at the sight of her in a cowboy hat. He shaped his right hand into a claw, turned it dramatically towards his own face, and clamped it onto his extruded lips in mock terror, pretending that he dared not laugh or even speak.

"Oh just screw right off," said Ginette.

Buck was about to tell her his story about Bishop Sutherland when he saw the three latecomers heading towards him from the back of the parking lot. "Do you know those people?" he asked Ginette, pretending that he didn't.

"Nope," she said. "Go give 'em a hard time, tiger."

"Sure wish you was straight, sweetie," he said as he patted her bum and made a very hasty departure.

"Do that again and you die," Ginette hollered after him.

"And who in tarnation are you folks?" Buck asked as the new threesome reached his position.

"My name's Norman Snider," said Victor Helliwell.

Buck was slightly thrown. As a Patriot agent, he knew who Victor was, generally, and he couldn't figure why the man might lie about his name. "Well—uh—Norman," he drawled, "I gotta fine youse a whole loonie fur being shorter than yur galfriend here."

"She's my mom," lied Victor.

"I'm not his mom *or* his girlfriend," winked Annette to her undercover colleague. "My name is Annette Blais, and I work for Patriot Security," she said as she popped a loonie into his tin can.

"My name's Winnie," said Winnie as she made a voluntary contribution to the Red Cross. "I'm his daughter," she added, which earned her a playful elbow to the ribs from the alleged Norman Snider.

As they started walking again towards the Beach Barn, Winnie saw one of her girlfriends coming up the road and excused herself for a minute.

Buck fired a couple of warning squirts in the general direction of Victor and Annette. "Now y'all behave yurselves in there, or I'll have ta give youse all another fine," he hollered.

"For a guy who invented a lie detector, you're quite the liar," Annette said as they sauntered on, waiting for Winnie.

"I'm going to lie to everybody tonight, about everything," said Victor as he wiggled his fingers at the traffic lady. Ginette soberly pushed the front deck of her cowboy hat up a tad with the tip of an index finger, and gave a slight nod as they passed by.

"But ... why?" asked Annette.

"Because this is one of the last times in history when a person can do that and get away with it," said Victor.

"I ... guess that's true," she said, laughing ... well, half-laughing.

"Listen," said Victor seriously, "there's something I wanted to ask you about. It's just that ... well, I wish I could tell Winnie about the LieDeck ... about who I am."

Annette wondered whether she should get into this situation, but figured she probably should have handled it earlier and might as well do it now. "Actually, everybody who works at the lodge has to have security clearance," she said. "Winnie already knows the score."

Victor was surprised. "Well spoil my fun, why don't you? How come you didn't—"

"Look," said Annette, "security work is quite difficult. With Winnie there was a need to know. You don't have to agree with us on that, but we know our jobs, and that's the way we called it. Don't make an issue of it, okay? Besides, I—uh—probably shouldn't tell you this, but I think Winnie sort of—uh—likes you."

"Let's go," said Winnie as she returned from her chat with her friend. "That girl I was talking to, she was one of the people I was supposed to have supper with tonight, before I got dragooned into helping Noel out at the lodge. Her name's Sal. She'll meet us inside a bit later."

Steve had wandered back outside and was standing under his brand new cardboard hat by the sales table, feeling a bit foolish and very much alone. He was glad to see the three familiar faces walking in from the parking lot and coming up the steps. "Howdy," he said, a lot less convincingly than he had hoped.

"How are you doing, cowboy?" said Victor. "This is so exciting for me. I haven't gone out in twelve years."

"I've got you there," smiled Steve. "I haven't been drinking and dancing since before I was ordained, and that's thirty-some years ago."

"I'd better warn all the local ladies to watch out for you two," said Annette.

"Oh, I think the ladies are pretty safe with me," said Steve.

Winnie went over to the sales table to try on hats. Annette went over too, leaving "the boys" alone.

"You told me you're not a priest any more, Steve," said Victor. "Don't rule anything out."

"Please, I'm over fifty, and I'm still a Catholic ... sort of."

"So, you do the wild thing and then go to confession," offered Victor teasingly. "Isn't that how Catholics handle it?"

"The wild thing!?" said Steve.

"Let's go, campers," hollered Annette.

Inside the Beach Barn, the Raccoons on Ice were cranked up full tilt. Winnie found her girlfriends, who had saved four seats at the end of their table. It was impossible to talk, so they used hand gestures to sort out which seats were vacant. It didn't work very well, but the newcomers finally realized the unclaimed seats were the ones without any half-eaten drinks or burning cigarettes in front of them.

After putting his bowling jacket on the back of a chair, Victor shouted into Annette's ear, "I'll go get us a couple of beers each. Don't let Steve be a party-pooper, eh?"

As he left to elbow his way to the bar, one of Winnie's friends shouted at her over the music, "Where'd you pick up Danny DeVito?"

"What?" Winnie shouted back, turning her head to hear better.

"Your friend ... he looks like Danny DeVito, but with hair."

"Yeah," Winnie laughed, swapping positions to shout into her friend's ear. "He said I looked like a white Whoopi Goldberg with a Cher wig."

"Eh?"

Winnie declined to try again. She made a hand movement that meant "later," although it looked a bit like she was trying to swat a fly out of the air.

Annette signaled Steve to get up and boogie, and he nervously stood and followed her into the fray. They just got wiggling to a fast song when it ended. A slow song began, and Annette put both arms around his neck, smiled at him, rested her face on his chest, and moved with the music. With some reluctance, Steve put his hands lightly on her ribcage. A few seconds later, he started to feel embarrassed and moved his hips away from hers by bending slightly at the waist. Annette pressed her cheek against his, caressed the back of his neck, and shouted directly into his ear, "It's okay for you to enjoy this, you know, and it's okay for me to like it too. Look around you. It's sort of like kicking the tires when you're buying a car, except..." She wasn't sure how much of this was getting through, so she let it go at that.

Steve must have got the message, verbally or otherwise, because he allowed the full contact to re-occur. Unseen by Annette, he made a face that seemed to indicate at once a glorious pleasure and a horror; a pleasure that he hadn't known since ... he had to think about it ... *since grade twelve* ... and a horror that he might not be able to control his feelings ... or his dangly bits!

Chapter 13

A REASONABLE PRICE

The north wing of the Whiteside plant had been sealed off for the production of the LieDeck, and the entire operation was being videotaped by hidden cameras—partly for posterity, but most immediately for reasons of security. A section of the Patriot quarters in the office tower had also been declared off-limits to all but those directly involved in monitoring the LieDeck project.

While ordinary mortals from the Quyon area were enjoying Barn Dance '14, Randall Whiteside was at

the office in Kanata. After his meeting in the administrative tower, he had driven an electric golf cart through the tunnel over to the plant, intending to spend a few minutes with Helen Kozinski, whom he'd asked to personally supervise the Patriot aspect of the LieDeck production program. He pulled up a chair beside her as she scanned the eight screens that were receiving feeds from the north wing. She flipped the sound from her headset to the speaker system, for Randall's benefit, and brought his attention to the screen that covered the lunchroom. "That's where most of the talking takes place," she explained, "the non-scientific talking."

It was 10:00 p.m. A balding man in a smock got a cup from a shelf, poured himself a coffee, sat down, and rubbed his eyes. The workers who had been sequestered were encountering a few more difficulties than anticipated. It wasn't a matter of not having the parts on hand, but of coordinating a group of cranky professionals and keeping a firm handle on the big picture, the overall assignment. Laurent Gauthier, Whiteside Tech's chief engineer, was brilliant in his area of expertise, but a leader of staff he was not. Still, things were only two hours behind schedule, and the first real production LieDecks were expected to come off the line any minute now.

"This should be interesting," said Randall, "how they react."

"Yeah," said Helen as she turned a dial adjusting the focus of the concealed camera.

"Who's he?" Randall asked, pointing to the bald man.

"Fred somebody, a sound technician ... and that big guy coming in now is Luigi ... sorry, I'm not too good at last names. I can get it from the computer if..."

The second worker, Luigi, poured himself a coffee. "How long do you figure we'll be held captive here?" he asked his workmate.

"A few weeks maybe," said Fred.

"Quite the little gizmo, eh? I mean, there's nothing much to it."

"Sure wish I'd have invented it."

"No shit. That sucker's gonna make Whiteside a bundle."

"I talked to Gauthier about doubling the work force in here," said Fred. "I told him he should bring in a whole other shift, you know. I think he's going to ask the old man about it."

"Good idea," said Randall in the security office as he turned down the volume and gave it some thought. "Helen," he asked, "would it be an insurmountable problem for security if we let the workers go home after their shift?"

Helen cranked the sound halfway back to where it was—this was, after all, her turf. "Well," she said, "we can verify intentions now."

"Come again?"

"Well, of course we can use the LieDeck to verify whether they told anybody else what they're making ... after the fact ... but we can also ask if they have any *intentions* of telling anybody about the LieDeck ... verify that on their way *out* of the plant. The only problem I see is if one of them says 'no' and their answer registers as a lie. What do we do then? We can't exactly kidnap the person."

"We'll ... deal with that when and as we have to," said Randall. "I think we could even look at three shifts

a day, round-the-clock production.” *Jesus!* He thought. *That's a wrinkle I hadn't anticipated ... verifying a person's intentions! Immigration control! All kinds of other applications!*

"I hear they're going to do some kind of impact study before they release the thing," said Fred as he took off his white smock and threw it over a lunchroom chair.

"Probably best," said Luigi. "Can you imagine some poor bastard telling his wife, 'Honest, I was just out with the boys last night,' and she's got one of those things on her?"

"Yeah," said Fred.

"I just had a couple of cold ones and shot some pool, honey," continued Luigi.

"Beep," said Fred.

A female worker came into the lunchroom just as Fred beeped his pal Luigi, and she joined in the merriment as Randall and Helen took it all in on the TV screen. "Her name is Linda something ... Dicks, I think ... a real pistol," Helen said to her boss.

"Have you done your homework yet?" Linda asked, pretending to have a conversation with her son. "Yes Mom," she answered in a child's voice.

"Beep!" bellowed Fred and Luigi, sounding more like a couple of trucks than a pair of LieDecks.

"I won't be able to come in today; I got the flu," said Fred in a hoarse voice, feigning a phone call.

"Beep!" said Luigi and Linda.

A third male worker entered the lunchroom, his dark face beaming excitement. "Here it is," he said, "the very first production unit, with the beeper, the flashing light and the pin!"

"Isn't that supposed to go right to Whiteside?" asked Linda.

"Five minutes won't kill the old windbag," said Fred.

"Windbag?" said Randall as he watched the monitor.

Helen chuckled. "You should hear some of the things my agents say about me behind my back. It's an honorable tradition to badmouth the boss, Mr. Whiteside. The new guy is Raj somebody, by the way. I can never remember Indian names."

"Fantastic!" said Fred, taking the device from Raj. "Is it on?"

"Is the ON/OFF button in the ON position, Einstein?" asked Luigi.

Fred looked stupidly at the Dictaphone casing. "No," he said.

"Beep," went the LieDeck.

"So I lied!" bellowed Fred. "So sue me already!"

After the laughter had subsided, Linda said, "Okay wise guy, answer this. If a hostile foreign agent offered you ... say a million bucks for that LieDeck, would you steal it and sell it to him?"

"No way," said Fred, defensively.

"Beep."

"Would you?" he asked Linda angrily.

"I certainly would not," she said.

"Beep."

"You see," said Luigi, "we all have our price, and—"

"Beep."

"Gotcha!" said Linda.

"Okay, so not all people can be bought," countered Luigi, "but I'd say—uh—most people can. And see? No beep when I said that!"

"That just confirms that you *believe* that," said Linda. "Not that it's true."

"I don't like this conversation," said Raj.

"Would you go to bed with me for a million dollars?" Fred asked Linda, smarmily.

"I'll bloody your face for a freakin' nickel!" she offered.

"Whoa, no beep!" said Luigi, digging in his pocket for change. "Hey, I'll pay a whole dime to see that."

"The question wasn't fair," said Raj, the man who had brought the LieDeck into the lunchroom.

"Why not?" asked Luigi. "It would have been fair yesterday or ten minutes ago. If she says 'no' and there's no beep, that's the end of it. But if she says 'no' and there is a beep, then we can start negotiating a—uh—a more reasonable price."

"You sexist bastard," Linda screamed.

"Beep," went the LieDeck ... just for the word "bastard," one would presume.

"My union steward is going to hear about this, and you won't be able to lie your way out of it, neither."

"Oh come on, Linda," begged Fred as she stomped out of the lunchroom. "I was only pulling your chain, for Christ's sake," he hollered at the closing door.

"We're—uh—face to face with reality, aren't we?" said Randall as he turned down the sound.

"It would seem so," said Helen, "whether we like it or not. Are you ... are you at all worried?"

"Well, yeah ... a little," admitted Randall. "Still, it's better that we have the LieDeck rather than the government, or the military. At least this way everybody's in the same boat."

"Let's hope she stays afloat," said Helen as she turned the sound from the monitor back up again.

SATURDAY, APRIL 19, 2014

Chapter 14

LOVE AT FIRST LIGHT

"How come your Dad lets him stay?" asked Rebecca Donovan of the string-bean teenager she had pleased so well. "And that woman ... that Annette person! I mean, where does she—"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it," said Michael, defensively. "If Dad found out I said anything, he'd ground me into the twenty-second century."

"Yeah, I know," said Becky, "but jeeze, like this guy just ends up living at the lodge and taking over. I bet your mom's in a major snit."

Michael didn't respond. He regretted telling his girlfriend about these happenings on the home front, but he had no one else to talk to, to really talk to, and God, she was so good to him.

The small cottage on the west bank of Wilson Lake was Michael's, and it was very private. The two naked teenagers leaned quietly against the wood railing of the elevated patio, staring east across the lake towards Whiteside Lodge, taking special pleasure from the absence of mosquitoes, and taking pleasure even more in the fact that they could stand there, nude, and just enjoy life. The sun was almost ready to make its grand entrance, and the pink-freckled, deep blue sky was doubled back in the unbreathing surface of the black water. The air was chilly, but so very still. Soon the wind would ruffle things up, and the early spring of 2014 could continue.

"I heard Dad talking to Mr. O'Connor about it," said Michael. "It's got something to do with some big business deal. He says he can't tell me about it yet. It sounded from the way they were talking like Victor Helliwell invented something that Dad really wanted. I couldn't tell what it was. Humongous secret for now. When Dad gets that look in his eye, you can bet he's got his reasons, but it bugs me that he doesn't trust me enough to tell me what's going on, you know? Like last year when—"

"Mikey," interrupted Rebecca, "can we go inside? I'm getting goose bumps and ... well, I just want to snuggle, okay?"

They closed the sliding doors behind them and slithered joyfully into the king-sized bed. As they pulled the big comforter up to their necks, Rebecca turned her back to her best friend and first true love, pressing her bum into his groin. He enjoyed spooning that way, and she enjoyed hearing him purr. Michael reached around and cupped a cool, small breast in his hand.

"Purrrrr," he whispered as his organ began to grow—again.

"Purrrrr," she answered.

After a few oddly motionless seconds, Michael found the courage to say what was on his mind. "I ... lied to you, Rebecca," he admitted. "I ... never did that before, and I hate that I'm good at it. I *do* know what's going on with Victor, but I can't tell you. I *hate* it when I can't tell you. I don't want to play the games that other people play, you know what I mean? But Dad is always telling me there are circumstances that force one to—"

While Michael was talking, Rebecca had turned over, and now she put her fingertips gently on Michael's lips. "I knew you lied," she whispered. "And I know you'd tell me if you could. The day will come when you'll trust me more than you trust yourself, my very sweet man. We're just kids, you and I, but what we have together is—"

Michael smothered her words with his mouth and slowly slipped a hand between her silky young thighs. They could talk any time. This was a moment for making memories.

Chapter 15
MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

A single-engine pontoon plane passed low overhead, its engine fluttering, just south of the cabin. *Can't be the company plane*, thought Michael. *Mr. Eamer would never fly in so low. Cam O'Connor would have him fired, and Dad would have a fit.*

He jumped out of bed and bolted to the window to see what was going on. The sun wasn't quite up yet, but it was light enough to make out the letters "RCMP" on the side of the plane. *What the hell are they doing out here?* he wondered, repeatedly. *There has to be something wrong over at the lodge.*

His rule for the cabin was "no-tech," but when he made an exception for a battery-operated fridge a year ago, his father had a basis to compel him to allow the installation of a low-tech battery-operated radio system from back in the 1970s, hidden from view. "It's practically World War II," his father had emphasized ... as if that made a stronger case. It had seemed like a defeat to Michael at the time, but now—well, circumstances had changed ... just like his father had said they might. He rushed into the bathroom, lifted out the medicine cabinet, put it on the toilet seat, and reviewed the instruments in the wall cavity. He booted up the scrambler and entered 007, their cleverly devised code for the Patriot field office—so "the kids" would remember it.

"Come on," he said as he drummed his fingernails on the sink. "Come *onnnnn!*"

"What's happening out there?" demanded Helen as she picked up the receiver. "They woke me to tell me that they picked up a plane on screen a minute ago. Is there a plane out there? Did it land?"

"Yeah, I saw it," said Michael. "It's an RCMP plane, and it's on the water, headed for the lodge. Is there something wrong?"

"An RCMP plane? Are you absolutely sure?"

"I saw it written on the side of the plane, 'R-C-M-P,' in big letters. What's happening? Why are they—"

"I don't know, Michael. It must have something to do with Victor. I'll wake up Cam, and I'll call Annette and tell her it's just an RCMP plane. I'm going over to the lodge ... I'll be there in three minutes. You stay put."

"I'm going over."

"There's no need, Michael. You just—"

"I'm going!" he shouted.

"Look, I don't have time to argue with you, for Christ's sake. Just don't bring Becky, okay? I'm sure it's safe, but go alone, okay?"

"Okay," said Michael as he hung up. He'd have to move fast. He was young enough to be scared, but old enough to be expected to handle things—even to take charge if need be. He was, after all, a Whiteside, and he had to acquit himself well in a crisis or lose face. He replaced the bathroom cabinet as quietly as he could and ran into the hallway ... and almost bowled over his teenaged lover, who had come to investigate.

"What's going on, Michael?" asked Rebecca. "You're scaring me."

"Look, honey, it was just an RCMP plane, so I'm sure everything's all right, but I have to go to the lodge and find out what's happening. Sorry, Becky, but you have to stay here. Helen said so. I talked to her ...

there's a radio outfit in the bathroom that I didn't tell you about before. There's no reason for you to be scared. Now I gotta get dressed and go, honey ... please!"

Michael disengaged himself from Rebecca's worried grasp, ran into the bedroom and dressed faster than he had ever dressed before. Becky stood at the bedroom door, naked and frightened, her arms hanging limply at her sides, saying nothing, unconvinced. She was from a wealthy family herself, but all this security stuff—that was new for her, and right now, it was scary. "Where there's heavy security, there's real danger," her mother had once said during an uncomfortable supper-table discussion of Rebecca's "emerging romance with the Whiteside lad."

"You're ... sure it was an RCMP plane?" she asked.

"Yeah, dead sure," he said as he tied his shoes. "I saw it right on the side of the plane when it came in for a landing. It must have something to do with Victor Helliwell. I've got to go over in the boat. I'll call you on the—uh—come with me, hurry."

He literally pulled her back into the bathroom, removed the medicine cabinet, dialed 007 again, and arranged to have an agent stay on the line with her for as long as it took to sort things out. Becky suddenly felt exposed, and chilled. She wrapped herself tightly in a pink bath towel as Michael made the arrangements and explained them to her.

"As soon as possible, I'll patch in from the lodge and let you know that everything's all right. Okay? Okay?"

It wasn't okay ... not by a long shot. "No," said Becky. "Hold me."

Michael let it happen. What were a few seconds anyway? *And who will ever know, even if the worst-case scenario ends up being what actually happens.* He held her softly, and calmly, with the strength of the man she needed him to be at this exact moment in time. He tried to prevent his body from signaling his difficulty, his anxiety, but to some extent, it was impossible. He kissed her on the neck, and cleared his throat, meaningfully.

Becky thanked him for at least making an effort to keep his priorities straight. But she also understood. "Be real careful, Mikey," she said as she reluctantly took the radio mike. "Don't—"

Michael planted the world's speediest kiss on her cool cheek and ran out of the cottage, down the stairs, and out the dock to his boat. He unhooked the lines and hopped in. With a turn of the key, the engine jumped to life and he was off, at top speed, across the glassy lake. He reached blindly into the compartment beside the steering wheel and pulled out the binoculars, then pressed his knees against the wheel to steer, freeing up his two hands to hold and adjust the glasses. The results were blurry, so he half-stood, still pressing his knees against the steering wheel, so that the binoculars were looking above the windscreen.

Although the image was jumpy, even on the still waters, he could see Annette now, standing on the steps of the porch at the lodge, in her pajamas and her bathrobe, talking to three uniformed RCMP officers. He put the binoculars on the passenger seat, sat back down, and wondered again what the problem could be, what would bring the RCMP, the national police, to take a decision to fly in to Wilson Lake without even checking in with Patriot. Something was definitely not right about this.

It usually took *Pride and Joy* a little longer than two minutes to ferry Michael from his cottage to the lodge. When he was about halfway there, he again stood part way up to look over the windscreen, squinting into the rush of morning air. Something was going on over there, something troubling. The three RCMP officers were running down to the dock, towards their idling plane. *Where's Annette?* he

wondered. The officers got into the plane ... and the plane was leaving, arching back the way planes do at full thrust, and ... and it was heading towards the boat, *directly* towards the boat. "They have to see me," Michael shouted, as if to convince himself.

Suddenly, there was a massive explosion, and the lodge burst apart. What Michael saw wasn't the slow-motion symphony of flying wreckage and bodies; it was abrupt and loud enough to be heard above the roar of his outboard engine. *We're under attack!* He knew instantly. *It's like nine-eleven!* Adrenaline just flooded throughout Michael's body as he sat down and clutched the wheel. "This can not be happening," he screamed at the top of his voice. But it was happening, and he guessed he had maybe six or seven seconds to decide what to do.

He steered directly towards the oncoming plane. About one second from impact, he veered sharply left. The steering wheel was on the left-hand side of the boat, putting Michael on the downside of the tilt. A bullet from the plane would have to pass through the hull of the boat before it got to him: instant armor. He didn't hear any shots being fired over the fierce whine of the plane, but he did see a string of tiny eruptions on the invisible surface of the water, just in front of the boat. It was surreal, like the Disney folks might draw it in an animated film.

He jerked the craft back to the right, leveled off, slowed down, and glanced back. The impact moment that every kid had seen in school flashed through his mind again. Back on September eleven, two thousand and one, the passenger plane flew right into Tower, as if it was hardly there at all, and only the billows of smoke came out. But in this reality, the little plane was airborne, rising, soon to be gone, with the terrorists inside, alive.

He looked towards the smoking rubble, still several hundred yards away. Patriot Security had just rolled in. A dozen agents were running every which way, and that had to be Cam O'Connor's white head bobbing across the yard. A huddle of agents stood just in front of where the lodge used to be. *Someone has to be hurt there*, Michael thought as he rammed the throttle full forward and aimed for the dock. *Or dead.*

By the time he arrived, Helen was jumping out of a Patriot van. Cam had already run out to the end of the dock. He was breathing hard and screaming instructions into a walkie-talkie while his agents searched for Victor and snapped photos of the departing plane and the smoldering lodge-site.

"What's the hell's happening?" screamed Michael to Cam as he threw the rope to an agent. "Those crazy fuckers were *shooting* at me!"

"They shot Annette, and we can't find Helliwell anywhere," yelled Cam through the frenzied yipping of the terrified kennel-bound Samoyeds. "Are the ambulances on their way yet?" he barked into the walkie-talkie.

"It was RCMP," yelled Michael as he struggled out of the boat and up to the dock. "I saw them, and they were in fucking uniform, for Christ's—"

"One of our guys saw the markings," said Cam, "but it couldn't have been the RCMP. The best thing for you is to—"

"The ambulances just turned off the 148," came Randall's voice on the walkie-talkie. "They should be there in eight minutes."

"Ten-four," said Cam.

"Is she dead?" asked Michael insistently.

"Shot in the face," said Cam. "Look, you get back across the lake and stay out of this. We'll deal with Annette. What's done is done. Let the police do their job. There's no need for you to—"

Michael ran the length of the dock, jumped off at an angle onto the beach, and ran over to a Patriot van to call Becky and let her know that the danger had passed and that he, at least, was okay. She would have seen the explosion, and she would have seen the plane speeding right towards his boat, and she would have seen him swerve ... and she would be pretty much insane with fear by now.

Cam was too busy to let a teenager eat up his time. He had the Québec provincial police and two ambulances on the way ... and the RCMP! He had already ordered Grant Eamer, the company pilot, to get out to the lodge in the helicopter, and all available Patriot agents who were assigned to the estate but who weren't at the compound were now on their way from wherever they lived. Cam jogged back to the land end of the dock and up to the spot where three of his agents were kneeling around Annette's body. "It had to be a professional job, Randall," he shouted into his walkie-talkie. "We can't go inside. There *is* no inside. The whole thing is caved in and strewn about ... smoldering logs all over the fuckin' place."

"Cam," came Randall's excited voice. "Is Annette still alive?"

"She's hurt bad," said Cam, peering over shoulders at the bloody face with the hole where the bridge of a nose used to be, "but she's still alive. There's no sign of Victor. I figure there's no way he could have—"

"He's okay," shouted Randall. "We got him on the radio. Here, I'll patch him through to you. Go ahead Victor."

"Cam," said Victor frantically, "are my dogs hurt? Is Annette okay?"

"Where the hell are you?" said an ashen-faced Cam O'Connor.

"Annette ordered me down to the bomb shelter," he said. "How long until you guys can dig me out?"

Chapter 16 IT'S NOT YOUR TIME

Annette didn't hear the gunshot, didn't feel the bullet strike the bridge of her nose, but she saw it happen, from above, from outside her body, like in a slow-motion film. She saw herself tumble down a half dozen steps to the ground in front of the lodge. She saw blood dribbling out of her face, her nose, and the back of her neck, onto the pine needles. She saw an elongated blob of rose-colored saliva run slowly from her open mouth onto the shriveled surface of a brown maple leaf, a juicy curiosity for insects to discover and taste. Then ... it seemed a full century later ... she saw brilliant flames spit out from the windows of the lodge. She saw the roof lift gently up as logs sailed sedately by overhead, breaking into its parts even as it rose, and she saw cinders and splinters landing on what used to be her body.

The scene that Annette witnessed wasn't so much ugly as it was ... unfortunate. She had become quite fond of life on planet Earth, and she felt sad to be leaving it behind.

Reality, or what had passed for reality for thirty-five years, was now much like a flat canvas, a pitiful attempt at art, created with no particular skill or inspiration. All the same, it had been her painting, and she had enjoyed it. "This" was her reality now, whatever "this" was, and it was stunning to behold, to be part of, to have as part of one's own self, wondrous beyond belief: the dark tunnel, the shimmering, cool white light dangling at the end, her weightless, windless emergence into that light, into a universe without fear, the intense, sexual sense of penetrating peace, the absolute knowledge that a body is literally made of love, as surely as fire is made of wood.

Annette gradually became aware that a man was standing in front of her, or at least “was” in front of her; whether one stood in this place was unclear. This was no ordinary man she was gazing at, into, through. This was a vision of a spirit-man, a male being who was clothed only in light, who consisted only of light.

"Victor," she said. "You died too, so you and I will always be like ... this ... now?"

"My dear Annette," said Victor, with great affection. "I met your mother and father. They're fine. They look forward to seeing you, and I'm sure you want to see them too, but it's not your time. I'm sorry, Annette. It's only for a while, but you must go back."

"Wait, no," she protested. "At least let me see my parents for a moment."

It wasn't so much that they appeared as that they'd been there all along, unnoticed. They didn't speak, but they did smile, and their faces said they would all meet again, at the proper time. Her parents were so young, in their early twenties, a good deal younger than their own daughter, and yet somehow ageless. They were filled with the same transcendent peace that consumed Annette, and then they were gone. Victor stood alone, asking again with his eyes that she try to understand, to accept what had to be, for now.

"Goodbye, Victor," she said. "It's so perfect here. I'd rather stay. Please, my dear man, I'd really rather stay."

Victor smiled at her gently and receded slowly back into the light. By imperceptible stages, total darkness returned. Fear also returned—only a twinge at first, then with a vengeance. And the pain, the towering, rolling waves of flame within. Annette wondered if she could manage a bit of bodily control, in spite of a million shattered nerve endings.

"RCMP," she tried to say, but nothing came out. For her body, it was like sleep, the sleep that shuns the dream. But her soul seemed to be making a bumpy landing; first a touchdown, a sharp smack on the tarmac, then a sudden jolt skyward. For a moment, she seemed to be floating beneath the soap-white ceiling of the operating room. She felt that it was within her power to leave the hospital, to turn again towards that beautiful light, and Victor, and her mom and dad. But she also knew that Victor had spoken the truth. It wasn't her time.

"Well, we got a heartbeat and we got breathing and we got brain function," said Dr. Otto Kreuzer. "I can hardly believe it. Have you ever seen anything so improbable as this woman, lying here, alive? This one definitely gets the luckiest-patient-of-the-year award."

There were headshakes all around, and when the masks were pulled down, smiles emerged—heady, proud smiles.

"Great work," said the hospital administrator from the back of the pack. "Now please remember, the cops and the politicians are all over this case. If you're asked, the drill is 'no comment' beyond these facts. Annette Blais is alive. The bullet went through the bridge of her nose and the left eye socket, glanced downwards, and exited from the back left of her neck. It went through her nasal cavities and missed everything important. She may lose the sight in her left eye, but there's no reason to believe there will be brain damage. She's on the critical list, but we expect her to pull through. Again, all other questions go to the chief of surgery, okay? *All* other questions!"

Annette looked down from the ceiling. She didn't know the details that were emerging from her “case,” but she knew she would, soon, for whatever that turned out to be worth. With great regret, she let herself slide back into that jumble of torment and terror that was her wounded body.

These people are good at what they do, she thought, and essentially decent. She resolved to tell them everything she had just seen, heard, experienced. And why not? They should know about the other side if they're going to make intelligent decisions about keeping people on this side. They may not be able to understand it all. Maybe they just can't, no matter how I might explain. Still, she decided that she would try to explain, for her own reasons, if not for theirs.

I'll probably have a difficult convalescence, she said to herself as darkness made a bid for her mind, but at least I'll know for the rest of my life that heaven is waiting for me when I do finally die.

Chapter 17 RENDEZVOUS AT RAY'S

"No free candy mints, no tip," said Buck Ash, with a shadow of a grin, and through the Player's cigarette that hung permanently from his lips. "That's the damn rule."

Ray checked the big glass jar with the chrome lid and, sure enough, the mint supply had run out. He filled it up, not only because free mints was the official policy of Ray's Restaurant, but because Buck and the other regulars really meant it when they said, "No candy mints, no tip." The last thing Ray needed was unhappy waitresses.

"I filled that sucker up just a few days ago," he complained. "You guys been double-dipping again?"

"Triple-dipping when you're not here to catch us," said Buck as he waited for Ray to find his bill.

"It was an RCMP plane, I tell you," said Bill Watson. "Benoit saw it right from his upstairs bathroom window this morning. I seen him at the hardware. He said it came in from the west, flying right into the sunrise, around 5:30, and it was outta there barely ten minutes later. He said when he heard the news about the shooting and the explosion on the seven o'clock news, he called up Jake at the Shawville police and told him all what he saw."

"Sounds like old Benoit had a good long crap," commented Jesse McCain.

"You shouldn't say it was an RCMP plane," said Willy impatiently. "They said on the eleven o'clock that it was *marked* RCMP, but it probably wasn't *really* RCMP."

"Coffee, ladies?" hollered Ray over to the two elderly women that had just seated themselves. Barbara Farley and her sister Dorothy nodded gratefully. "Anybody else?" he added, searching the room for takers.

The conversational karate simmered down a notch when everybody realized that Barbara Farley had put in an appearance at Ray's. She'd been keeping something of a low profile since the Caughy Commission hearing two days earlier, since the papers and the TV had portrayed her as some kind of a prehistoric dingbat. Everyone had heard that she had soured on the whole process when she saw what the news media had done, making fun of her like that, and making out like her late husband was loony-tunes. That was the part that really bothered her, people said, the part about her Joe. "And for them that saw it on the TeeVee, you could understand," the local wisdom had it.

The TV was always on in Ray's, but the sound was never turned up, except on really dead afternoons when the girls found time to watch their soaps. For sound, they used CKBY FM, the country music station, same as everybody else in the area. It was five minutes shy of twelve noon, and everyone at Ray's understood, patrons and help alike, that when the noon news came on today, the radio had to go off, the TV had to get turned up, and everything else would have to grind to a halt. These were big doings

in their neck of the nation, and that hadn't happened but once or twice in the memory of anybody still alive. Sure, there was the time Fatty Crosby got himself shot, and there were the regular fights down at the British Hotel in Quyon, but this was *really* big. Last anybody heard, they had a nearly dead girl at Whiteside Lodge, and some other guy staying out there was missing. Ray's was the only place to go at times like these, and today's events had filled the restaurant almost to overflow.

"Must be the Mafia or something," muttered Bill Watson. "You get to be too rich, and you end up playing with fire every time, I always say."

"I heard some folks even pulled their kids from school," said Claire to Bill as she served his BLT and fries at the corner table, closest to the TV. "If I was you," she added with a knowing nod, "I'd call up your Mary and tell her to do likewise. One day out of school isn't going to spoil anybody, and you just don't take chances with the little ones, what with killers on the loose, flying around in RCMP-type planes."

"I seen at least ten cop cars heading up there just after I opened up," said Ray, as he struggled at the counter to keep the bills updated to match the food orders. "For an hour, cops coming and going every few minutes, with bubbles on, and some with sirens on too, and two ambulances. Ziggy said they got the road blocked off about a mile up from his place."

"Oooooee, lookee here," sang Tirone as he looked out the window and rubbed his chin stubble. "We got us a live one, Martha."

A spotless blue BMW pulled into the parking lot and Helen Kozinski got out. "One leg at a time, thaaaaaaat's it," coached the corner table. She locked her car with a remote and strode purposefully to the door, flipping back her long blond hair a couple of times along the way. "For effect, no doubt," said Buck as he scooped up half a dozen mints and resumed his position at the corner table.

"Works for me," said Bill.

"Now you fellas hush up," scolded Claire. "We got a business here that we gotta—" She had to end her sentence there, about half ways to the end, and trust that these overgrown delinquents would "get it" and behave like normal people for a change.

As Helen entered, everything seemed normal, city normal, men and women eating and minding their own business. She scanned the full layout, out of habit more than any need, and made her way to a stool at the counter. She made fleeting eye contact with Buck, but they made no sign that they knew each other.

What could this be about? Buck asked himself. *She's not supposed to come in here just for food or even a coffee. This is my territory. Maybe I should call Mr. O'Connor.*

Claire was busy busing tables, so Lucille came out of the kitchen, drying her hands. "Coffee?" she asked.

"Thanks," said Helen. "I could sure use a cup."

Her eyes told a story of anguish, and many unanswered questions. Her best friend was in the Ottawa General, under police protection, in critical condition. Events were out of control, and that was a place Helen detested and wasn't remotely used to. She had called her boyfriend and, offering no explanation, she'd asked him to rendezvous at Ray's, and not in uniform. Indeed, she'd insisted.

"Here ya go, darlin'," said Lucille. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Just coffee is fine," replied Helen wearily, and gratefully. "And a table when there's one free. I have a friend meeting me here in a few minutes."

"The Gordons are pretty near done. That's them over there in the back, with the little girl. You set yourself down when they get up to leave and I'll be over to clean her up, either me or Claire."

Helen waved and grimaced her appreciation. Too many words had passed her lips in recent hours. She was out of words, out of tears, and possibly out of a job.

"Turn her up, Bill," hollered Willy from a couple of tables over. "The twelve o'clock is on right after that ad there, and kill that radio."

Bill was already operational. "That got her?" he asked back.

"Down in front," hollered Grant Doherty. "And turn it down a bit. We're not deaf over here, eh?"

Bill wanted to make a lashing comeback swipe about how many of Grant's faculties were already getting dimmer than what they used to be, but the newscast graphics and theme music were beginning, so he saved it for later.

"Is it on yet?" asked Merrick McFee as he emerged from the men's washroom.

"Shut up, Merrick," said Grant. "It's just starting."

That's funny, thought Helen. I didn't see that guy go in there, and there was another fellow who just came out of the washroom. It has to be a single-seater. I ... must be losing my concentration, like Cam said.

Marshall: Good afternoon. I'm Trent Marshall with the midday news.

At dawn today, there was a daring, military-style assault at the estate of industrialist Randall Whiteside, north of Quyon, Québec. Three or four men flew in to Wilson Lake in a pontoon plane, and in less than five minutes, they shot ... ?

Helen tuned out for a sip of coffee. She knew the details too well. The crime had been committed on her watch, and she'd been suspended from duty for not ordering Annette into the bomb shelter with Victor. *How the hell was I supposed to guess that the RCMP would attack us?* she said to herself. *I thought Annette was being paranoid when she sent Victor down there. I could lose my job and my best friend on the same damned day. Life's a bitch.*

Marshall: We go now to Katie Lochart, who is at the scene. Katie, can you bring us up to speed on developments?

Lochart: Trent, I'm not at the actual scene of the shooting. I'm about three hundred yards south of the front gate of the Whiteside estate, which is a couple of miles west of the lodge where the attack took place. The Sûreté, the Québec provincial police, have cordoned off all of Wilson Lake and a wide area around it.

Nobody is getting in or out of the estate now, and no one is saying a thing about who the victim was or why she was gunned down on the steps of the Whiteside's lodge before it was blown up. I tried to get a comment from Patriot Security, the Whiteside-owned company that was supposed to be protecting the estate, but they're being as tight-lipped as the police. Two ambulances were seen leaving the area at high speed just before six o'clock this morning, and the police presence here is now more than sixty.

It's unclear why the authorities are being so secretive about this case. One obvious factor is that this is one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Canada. As well, the RCMP are absolutely furious because reporters have speculated that the plane used in this crime may have been an RCMP plane.

Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't, we simply don't know at this time. Whatever the case, Solicitor General Rhéal Bélanger stated an hour ago that the Sûreté has been assigned primary responsibility for the criminal investigation, and it seems clear that this is because of the mystery surrounding the RCMP plane ... I should say the plane with the RCMP markings.

Marshall: Did they identify the man who was staying at the lodge? I understand he wasn't hurt.

Lochart: No, he wasn't hurt, but they refuse to say who he is or why he was at the lodge. All we know is that he was not a family member, and that he escaped injury by hiding in a nineteen sixties-era bomb shelter—or rather a fallout shelter—that the Whitesides had built underneath the lodge.

Marshall: So there's no word on what the motive might have been?

Lochart: No, I'm afraid not, Trent.

Marshall: Thanks, Katie. We'll be back to you for bulletins as the day goes on.

In Ottawa, all Members of Parliament are expecting this astonishing crime to dominate Question Period this afternoon. Solicitor General Bélanger will be making a statement in about ... ?

"Who needs coffee?" called Claire to everyone in general. The real keeners gathered around the TV for every last bit of trivia, but life in Ray's Restaurant gradually returned to normal, or as normal as it got with a smartly dressed city-woman sitting uncomfortably on a stool at the counter. The Gordons had finished eating and were standing at the cash, listening to the news and shushing their daughter. Helen took her coffee and retreated to the back of the restaurant, to a table splattered with ice cream and littered with cold fries. She put her coffee on a clean spot, took off her jacket, flipped it over the back of the chair, and sat down.

Lucille came over with a cloth and a tray and began clearing up the detritus. "Your friend, the one meeting you here, does he drive a black sports car?" she asked.

"Yes," said Helen. "Is he here?"

"Just drove in the lot," she said.

Roy Taggart was the head of the Commercial Crime Division at the RCMP. He had dressed in his civvies, as Helen had asked, but from the muscular, ready-to-elbow way he walked, by the cat-like way he surveyed the room, he might as well have worn his scarlet tunic and busby. "You holding up okay?" he asked as he hand-dusted the red vinyl seat.

"I suppose," said Helen. "I haven't cried in years, but I couldn't keep my emotions together for a while there. The doctors, the police, they won't let me go see Annette and they won't tell me a damned thing. It's driving me crazy. And I'm so scared that she's not going to make it..." Her lips began to quiver and she turned her head abruptly to one side, hoping that might make it easier to apply the brakes.

"I know," said Roy as he placed his hand on hers. "Look, the Sûreté is in charge at the hospital, so I can't do anything about getting you in there to see her, but you must have heard the doctors' press conference. Annette's still alive, Helen, and they're finished the operation."

"She liked you, Roy," said Helen, struggling for control. "She and I used to drink a few beers now and then, just the two of us. We'd get dressed in our grubbies and go to one of the sleazy bars on the Gatineau strip, just to stay in touch with ordinary people, you know? We'd gossip and talk about guys and all that, you know ... girl stuff ... just for the hell of it. She and I trusted each other totally, and now..."

"Look," said Roy, "I have to get back. Why was it so important for me to come all the way out here?"

"Coffee?" asked Claire, who had suddenly appeared at their table. Taggart waved her off brusquely, and Claire made a face as she wheeled about and stormed off.

"I've ... just got to know," said Helen quietly, but emphatically. "You know there's been talk that someone from the RCMP might have been involved. I ... have to know, Roy."

Roy shot back in his chair, a shocked look on his face. "Absolutely impossible!" he spat. "God, how could you even *think* it, Helen?"

"So ... there's no doubt in your mind that the RCMP was *not* involved?" she asked.

"None," sputtered Taggart, seemingly uncaring whether anyone overheard him in the crowded restaurant. "I mean Jesus H. Christ, Helen, have you lost your mind? We're the national police!"

She tried not to let her face change, or reveal anything. Her gun was in her purse, which was on the table, beside the ketchup. She wanted to take it out, shove it into his mouth and pull the trigger, but that wasn't the way to handle this. She looked into his eyes, and he seemed desperately hurt and angry. He was good, very good, at what he did.

Helen had one of the first production LieDecks turned out by Whiteside Technologies taped under her left breast. The pin had tapped her ribcage when he said "absolutely impossible," and again when he said "none." Not only was the RCMP involved in the attack at the lodge, but her lover knew it ... and he lied. This was too much—to lose her best friend, her job, *and* her man all on the same day! The tears gushed, but she refused to sob. She wiped her eyes with a paper napkin and pulled herself together.

"Thanks, Roy," she said with a forced smile. "I'm sorry ... I just ... I had to ask, you know? You'll tell me if you hear anything, eh?"

"Of course," he said soothingly, causing her LieDeck to signal another lie. "Now look, Helen, I really have to go. Will you be okay?"

"Yeah," she said with a sniffle. "I'll call you tonight." She was also very good at what she did.

Roy Taggart stood up, kissed Helen very lightly on the cheek, and hurried from the restaurant. The kiss burned. Helen took her purse and went into the women's washroom to remove the LieDeck. She lifted her blouse from inside her skirt, reached up and yanked the device out, tape and all. It hurt, but more hurt at this point made little difference. She rammed the LieDeck into her purse, lowered the toilet seat lid, sat down, put her elbows on her knees, and buried her face in her hands. This was no time to indulge the pain.

What do I know for sure? she asked herself. Annette may live. Roy's going to jail. The information I've got gets me my job back. The RCMP knows about the LieDeck, so Roy knows, and he probably guessed that I had one on me. Oh my God! He must know that I knew he was lying to me! I've ... got to get out of here!

Helen was terrified, but she was also a professional, and there had to be a way out. *That other guy*, she remembered. *The other guy that came out of the men's washroom ... Marty ... no, Merrick ... he went back into the washroom after the newscast and never came back out. There has to be another door on the far side of the men's can, leading to the garage, so they can get from there to the restaurant without having to go outside. If the RCMP are waiting for me, they'll wait outside, not in the restaurant. The men's can ... that's my escape route.*

She dug a black silk kerchief out of her purse and wrapped it around her head, hiding her blond hair. She put her sunglasses on. It occurred to her that she'd left her favorite jacket on the back of the chair in the restaurant, but there was nothing she could do about that now, and its presence there would speak to her obvious intention of returning from the washroom to her table. She tucked in her blouse, checked her face in the mirror, and made a quick dash from the women's washroom to the men's. *Thank God*, she said to herself when she found it empty. And she had figured it right. There was another door, on the far side, that led to the waiting area of the garage.

Merrick McFee was a large, balding man with bunker-oil hands and several teeth. He glanced up at Helen with an astonished grin, but said nothing. He was discussing an invoice with a farmer, and Helen decided that would have to wait. She flashed her Patriot badge briefly at the farmer and said, "Police business—sorry, sir, this will only take a couple of minutes." She grabbed Merrick by the elbow and led him quickly out of the office area and into the garage itself, beside the muddy wheel of a hoisted-up Toyota.

"Look," she whispered, "we've got a real situation here. Lives are at stake. That's why I had to go through the men's toilet. Sorry, but you have to help me. You got a tow truck with a radio?"

"Yeah," said Merrick, "but—"

"Get it, immediately. Drive the nose into the garage. I can't be seen. I'll get in when you drive in, then you get me up to Whiteside's, fast. Don't worry. You'll be back here in ten minutes. Now go," she ordered. "Don't run, just hurry."

Merrick watched a lot of television, and he loved cop shows best. Here was his fifteen minutes of fame—Andy Warhol's promise made good. He did exactly as asked, and as soon as he pulled to a stop with the truck's cab right inside the garage, Helen hopped in the passenger side. She pulled the door closed behind her, dropped down and curled up on the floor, and drew her gun, mostly for effect, for Merrick's benefit. "Okay, go!" she said, "and don't squeal the tires."

Merrick backed up, shifted gears and pointed his rig north. As soon as he reached third gear, Helen asked if they were being followed.

"Nope," he said. "Somebody chasing you?"

"Give me the mike," she commanded as she hoisted herself out of the footwell and onto the bench seat. "Patriot, it's Helen Kozinski here. Whoever's monitoring C.B., tell Cam this is a Code Beaver—I repeat, a Code Beaver! I'm in a tow truck headed for the estate from Ray's on the 148. I need to be met. Hurry!"

Code Beaver was the Patriot equivalent of red alert. Fifty seconds later, three cars, roof lights spinning and sirens on, came screaming up to the tow truck from the north, blocking the road. Merrick braked to a rough stop, and Patriot agents jumped out and approached, guns in hand.

"Thanks," said Helen sincerely as she pressed a twenty-dollar bill into his shirt pocket. "You may have saved my life."

"Jeeze, my pleasure, Miss," said Merrick.

"Best you don't say anything about this for a while."

"Okay," said Merrick. "Whatever you say, officer."

Fat chance, thought Helen as she stepped down from the door and ran quickly over to O'Connor's car.

"Go," she yelled as she jumped in. After Cam squealed a perfect U-turn, Helen grabbed her LieDeck from her purse, flipped a switch, and held it between herself and her boss. "It's on the beeper mode," she said. "The RCMP was definitely involved in the attack, and they probably know that I'm on to them."

There was no beep.

"Holy fuck," said Cam.

Chapter 18

BASTARD!

When the Patriot vehicles arrived back at the manor, the Sûreté officers demanded to know what the hell was going on. They—the Sûreté de Québec—were charged with protecting the estate now, and conducting the investigation into the attack. Cam and Helen were in no mood to trust the police, any police, and refused to talk. The head of the Sûreté was furious, and threatened them with obstruction of justice charges. Cam and Helen ignored him and walked into the stone mansion without a word.

In the kitchen, they found Randall Whiteside pacing back and forth, shouting into the phone ... at the Prime Minister!

"Maybe it was an RCMP plane, or maybe it wasn't," he ranted, "but it was *marked* 'RCMP,' Louis. I want the freaking Army here to protect my family. You see to it, or you can forget about my support in the next election and..." He paused for a few seconds, and then said, "Yeah, I can do that; in an hour or so."

Randall hung up the phone with an emphasis that might have damaged the prime-ministerial eardrum. "St. Aubin won't make any promises," he said irritably. "He wants me to meet him and the RCMP commissioner at 24 Sussex in ninety minutes. So, what was that Code Beaver all about, Helen?"

After Helen told Randall her story, the three of them tried to sort out how they should view their situation. "I'm not quite sure which is worse," said Randall, "worrying that you can't trust the goddam police, like I did all morning, or *knowing* that you can't trust the goddam police, which I'd say is ... where we are now."

"Uh—sir," said Cam hesitantly, "are you sure we can trust the ... I mean, we don't know whether the RCMP acted on its own or whether—uh—or whether..."

"Enough," ordered Randall. "I absolutely refuse to believe that St. Aubin could have been a party to..." Doubts took hold. He hated it when Cam was right ... even when he *might* be right.

"Any word on Annette?" asked Helen.

"Actually yes," said Randall, who seemed grateful for the change of focus. "Amazingly, she wasn't hurt as badly as they thought. They figure she had already fallen off the porch before the bomb exploded. At least no logs landed on top of her, so there's basically just the one bullet wound, and it's pretty sure she'll recover from that."

"Thank God!" said Helen.

The psychic temperature in the room finally began to diminish as they talked about Victor living at the manor for the time being. Randall also told his two security chiefs that he intended to rebuild the lodge as quickly as possible—which for "the man" probably meant a few weeks. "Partly for Julia's sake, mostly for my own," he explained.

* * *

After an hour of rehashing, coping, speculating, planning and serious coffee drinking, the telephone rang yet again. Randall answered, and he looked confused. "It's ... for you," he said to Helen, holding his hand over the mouthpiece. "It's ... Roy Taggart!?"

She took the receiver, set it down very quietly on the counter, and fished in her purse, withdrawing her LieDeck. She made sure it was on the light mode and gently pressed the condenser mike area against the ear end of the receiver. It was quite awkward, a two-handed operation. With the LieDeck tight against the receiver, she was concerned that she wouldn't be able to get her ear close enough to make out the words. Not only that, but in order to get the LieDeck mike in position to pick up the sound, she had to turn the device upside down ... no big problem, except now she couldn't see the damned light. She stepped to her left, leaned over on her elbow, and glanced up. A chrome toaster was on the counter in front of her, and she'd be able to see the reflection of the light in there.

"Roy?" she said, incredulity reeking from her voice.

"Helen, you have to meet me at my house as soon as—"

"Don't tell me what I have to do, you son of a—"

"Code Beaver, Helen, as you Patriot people say. I know the score about the attack on the lodge, but I'll only tell you. And come alone. You know I wouldn't harm you." And with that, Roy Taggart hung up. There was no blink from the LieDeck in response to anything he had said.

Helen recapped her call for Randall's benefit. "We'll get to the bottom of all this now," she said, "but Roy said he'll only tell me, and he said I should come alone. Don't worry, it's safe—verified safe—on the LieDeck. How about I'll go in the chopper with you to the office and I can take a Patriot car from there."

It was arranged, and in forty minutes Helen screeched into the driveway of Roy's house. She ran up the sidewalk, tried the knob, and found the door unlocked. That wasn't like Roy. She tapped her handbag to make sure her pistol was still there and peeked inside the door.

Roy was almost horizontal in his favorite LA-Z-BOY chair, staring up. There was a trail of blood from his right ear, and his revolver lay on the floor beside a dangling arm. A camcorder sat silently on a tripod, aimed at the chair, and there was a videocassette on his lap.

Helen staggered in, sat on the arm of the sofa, and slapped her hands over her mouth as the emotional fire within threatened to fell her too. "Oh my God, oh my God!" she said repeatedly. She stared numbly, with tears rolling free. Then she shook her head sharply, walked the several steps over to the chair, grabbed the tape, clicked on the TV, shoved the tape into the VCR, and pressed "play." She hesitated, then took her LieDeck from her purse, turned it on the beeper mode, and placed it atop the TV. "Jeeze, Roy," she sobbed as she peeked again at the corpse of her lover. After a few seconds of tape hiss and snow, Roy appeared on the screen.

"Honey, it's over for me," he said plainly. "I'm so sorry to hurt you, but at least this way my death may have a positive meaning. You see I organized the assault on the lodge this morning, but before you shoot a damned hole in the TV, let me explain.

"There's an international conspiracy called the WDA, meaning the World Democratic Alliance, involving politicians, the military, and security people, like myself. It's based in Washington, and its aim is to destroy communism once and for all. But it's out of control, Helen. It's got to be stopped.

"The entire upper echelon of the Commercial Crime Division is in the WDA, and at least one cabinet

minister too—sorry, but I don't know who it is. The Canadian handler is a General George Brampton. He works at the U.S. embassy.

"The American Ambassador is clean, Helen. So is Bertrand Joly, my boss, the RCMP Commissioner ... and the Prime Minister, too. Please get this tape to the Commissioner immediately.

"By the way, I should tell you ... we were spying on Senator Cadbury when he met Mr. Helliwell, and we—uh—I mean the WDA, not the RCMP, except for those of us who were both—we had a guy inside Patriot ... Ian Tomlinson. He'll be gone by now.

"Please, Helen, you've got to believe me. The WDA will stop at nothing to prevent that new C.V.A. lie detector device from getting out. It would threaten the conspiracy.

"Anyway ... again, I'm ... truly sorry. I love you honey..."

"Beep."

"...and I've always been faithful to you."

"Beep."

"Now go ... hurry ... bye..."

Helen watched the screen as Roy got up from the LA-Z-BOY chair, walked straight towards the camcorder, blew a kiss into the lens, reached out, and turned it off. She clicked off the TV and rewound the tape. "Bastard!" she spat as she removed the tape, putting it and the LieDeck into her purse. Then she stood there looking at Roy's body, trying to decide what she was supposed to feel, or could feel. "Jeeeeeze Roy," she said as the tears began again. She remembered the many sweet things he'd done, the warmth and joy that used to live in those glazed eyes, the miserable things he'd done, the beautiful day they met, their first kiss, their first time in bed, their last time in bed, her love for him ... and she remembered her doubts about him, now confirmed ... LieDeck-verified.

"Bastard!" she shouted again as she booted the padded underside of the back of the reclining chair. Roy's head jumped, but his eyes didn't blink. "Bastard!" she screamed again as she kicked the chair even harder. Roy's head jumped up and flopped to one side, and a little red bubble in the left nostril slowly grew, then burst ... noiselessly.

Chapter 19 RING THE BELL

Helen ran crying from Roy's house, jumped into her car and backed out, banging roughly over a curb. She braked, slammed the stick into drive, and peeled out. Then she grabbed the radio mike and called, "Mr. Whiteside, where are you?"

"I'm in the chopper, over Aylmer. I'm on my way to see the Prime Minister. Why?"

"You have to pick me up. *Code Beaver!*"

"Jesus ... where are you?"

"There's a primary school near the corner of Alta Vista and Heron Road. Land in the playground."

The pilot took the mike from Randall. "That's dangerous, Helen! And illegal!"

"*Code Beaver, God dammit!*" shouted Helen. "Alta Vista and Heron. *Hurry!*"

One minute later, Helen parked beside the door in the chain-link fence surrounding the playground. The yard was packed with children, playing, squealing with delight, as kids everywhere seem compelled to do when no one tells them not to. That was a shock. Saturday "playdays" had been standard fare in Ontario primary schools for two years, but Helen had assumed that no one would be there on *Easter* Saturday.

"Hey, you can't park there lady," said a little ten-year-old boy with freckle-framed eyes and an attitude.

Helen got out of the car, took her Patriot Security badge from her purse, and strode onto the playground, waving the badge. "Everybody inside—inside the school—right now," she screamed. "I'm a policewoman." The LieDeck in her purse beeped. "This is an emergency. Everybody inside, NOW!"

Some children obeyed; some just stood there; others didn't hear her or simply ignored her. A supervising parent appeared at an open window and hollered, "What's going on out there? Who are you?"

Helen waved her Patriot badge and screamed up at the window. "Police. Ring the bell. Get these kids inside the school *NOW!*"

More of the children obeyed her frantic appeals, and when the bell rang, they all went in, turning their small heads to gawk one last time at the blond woman with the terminal apoplexy. Helen was now alone in the playground, looking repeatedly at her watch, and searching a blue sky, almost prancing from frustration and fear. "Come onnnnnnnnn," she whispered to the heavens, with clenched fists. "Come onnnnnnnnn!"

Finally the chopper arrived. Grant Eamer touched down for no more than ten seconds, just long enough for Helen to jump in, and then he took off. The faces of several dozen children—plus parents—were pasted to the glass in the classrooms, innocent bystanders, befuddled onlookers, seemingly cast as extras in a movie with no name and no known plot.

"What's the Code Beaver this time?" asked Randall.

"Roy's dead," she said bluntly, handing Randall the videotape and fighting back tears. "He left this. It has to go to the Prime Minister immediately. The RCMP handles security at 24 Sussex, right?"

"I'm sure they do," said Randall. "Why?"

"Call ahead," ordered Helen. "Tell the Prime Minister he has to get rid of them before we land. I'll tell you why after."

* * *

St. Aubin argued with his RCMP security chief as the Whiteside helicopter hovered over the Ottawa River. "For the last time, get your men *out* of here while that chopper lands, or I'll bloody well have you *fired!*"

As soon as they were visibly gone, Grant Eamer landed right on the lawn and shut down the craft. The Prime Minister waved them in, and Randall and Helen hurried into the official residence, closing the door behind them.

"What the Christ is this all about, Randall?" demanded St. Aubin.

"You have to see this right now, Prime Minister," said Helen as she gave him the videotape. "Commissioner Joly should see it too."

St. Aubin was still upset, but now he was becoming concerned. "Joly is in my study right now, but why did you have me boot out his agents? They probably think you're kidnapping me."

"You'll see, Louis," said Randall. "A man died to get this tape to you. Put this on your TV while you run the tape," he added, handing over his LieDeck. "It's called a LieDeck—a new kind of lie detector. It's a hundred percent accurate."

"You do it, Randall," said Louis as he refused the LieDeck and handed back the tape. "I'm no good at electronic stuff."

As the three of them entered the study, Commissioner Joly got up and walked towards them. He was a tall, barrel-chested man with the gait of a wounded grizzly. Helen hadn't ever met him before. She had seen him on TV, seen his picture in the newspapers, but in person, he was ... well, not quite a sumo wrestler, but still ... huge. When she shook his hand it was a total mismatch, like the palm of a child in a catcher's mitt. However, his kindly face could have been under a pope's three-decker hat, and his manner was that of a concerned parent.

"I'm so sorry about your friend Annette," he said, right into her eyes and through to her heart. "When she's fully recovered, I'd like to meet her. And you can believe me on this; when we catch the people who did this terrible thing, they'll pay."

"Thank you, sir," Helen managed. It was the oddest thing—she felt a bit like she ought to curtsy to this regal being. And he certainly was well informed!

"If my force was involved, I want to know about it," Joly told her softly, firmly. "I run a clean ship."

Helen had her LieDeck turned on, and it was silent, so she knew the Commissioner was telling the truth. She reviewed the talk she'd had with Roy in Ray's Restaurant, and mentioned that she'd had a LieDeck taped to her chest at the time. "It works off your voice," she explained. She told the Prime Minister and the Commissioner about escaping from Ray's with the help of one Merrick McFee, and she told them about the mysterious telephone call she'd received from Roy an hour ago. "I went to his house, and the rest is ... it's on the tape," she finished, resisting the urge to weep or choke up.

"Well," said St. Aubin, "I guess we should take a look."

As Randall put the videotape in the VCR and put his LieDeck on top of the TV, Helen asked to be excused to go to the bathroom. She couldn't bear to watch again, and feel the humiliation of Roy's false declarations of love and fidelity.

"Out that door and left down the hall, second door on the left," said the PM, pointing.

When she returned, she stood outside the door to the room momentarily. The three men were deep into a discussion of what they would do next. St. Aubin was incensed to learn of the depth of the treachery that existed in the national police, and Bertrand Joly was taking the brunt of his controlled fury. The Prime Minister stopped dressing down the Commissioner when he saw Helen re-enter the study.

"Can we keep this LieDeck device for the investigation of the WDA conspiracy?" he asked Randall, holding the thing gingerly, as if it were some kind of magic wand.

"As long as there are no leaks about it for a few months," said Randall.

"Don't worry, there won't be," assured the Prime Minister as he handed the LieDeck to Joly. "Here you go, Bertrand. I want progress reports every hour on the hour, and I want those sons-o'-bitches busted."

"Yes sir," said Joly, as he turned his massive frame to leave. "Nice to meet you," he threw back to Helen as he closed the door.

"You two can't say a word about that WDA outfit to anybody," said St. Aubin. "Is that absolutely clear?"

"Of course," said Randall.

"I understand," said Helen.

"Ms. Kozinski, I'd like a private word with your boss, if you don't mind," said the St. Aubin.

Helen left the room, and the Prime Minister turned an ashen face to the president of Whiteside Technologies. "Randall," he said, "we actually already heard about your lie detector, except we thought it was called the Cluff Voice Analyzer, after some guy called George Cluff. We've got an American defector locked up over at National Defence Headquarters, but he won't say much. He told us that Victor Helliwell was in danger, and Joly tells me that a warning was supposed to be sent to your chap Cam O'Connor, but somebody screwed up—well, the message probably got deliberately waylaid by some RCMP officers who were involved in this damn WDA thing. Anyway, the inner cabinet is aware that some kind of new lie detector is on the horizon, and I can tell you, they're having a major shit fit about it.

"Now I owe you a big one ... for that tape," he continued, "and here it is. Listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you. Your LieDeck device? The military *will* force me to classify it—classify it *top secret*." He didn't quite say whether he was referring to his own generals or to the industrial-strength brass south of the border, but in this situation, it hardly mattered. The net effect was the same.

Randall could literally feel his blood pressure soar. It seemed that the LieDeck would never see the light of day, or the marketplace. "You have *got* to be kidding!" he said. "You can't..."

"Tuesday," said the Prime Minister deliberately.

"You're ... going to classify the LieDeck top secret ... on Tuesday ... in three days?" asked Randall carefully.

"Precisely," said St. Aubin. "And you didn't hear it from me ... or at all, actually."

Randall now had no LieDeck on him to corroborate this statement, but he had no doubt it was the truth. He stared into the eyes of his benefactor. Louis didn't owe him a favor *this* big. The warning might have been offered as a matter of principle, but that seemed unlikely, somehow. Whatever his reasons, Randall was reeling at the implications of what the Canadian leader had just done.

"Why did you tell me that?" he asked.

"If governments have the LieDeck and ordinary people don't," said the PM, "we'll end up with Big Brother. I wish you could put this genie back in the bottle, to be honest, but after the attack at your lodge this morning, and after seeing that tape, it's just ... not possible. Besides, we need the LieDeck to shut down the WDA. You do ... whatever you have to do."

"Now I owe you one, Louis," said Randall.

"Big time!" said St. Aubin. "Now ... if you'll excuse me, I've got to figure out how I can arrest an American general who's got diplomatic immunity."

"Before I go, could you use another LieDeck?" asked Randall.

"Jesus, yes ... several more ... delivered to me, personally, within the hour. No one must know."

As soon as Randall and Helen had departed in the helicopter, St. Aubin called in his chief of staff, Ralph Dellaire. Twenty minutes later, U.S. Ambassador Foley was sitting on a picnic bench in the back yard of 24 Sussex, getting briefed, and recruited, with the assistance of Defence Minister Nick Godfrey. An hour later, they had a plan. Tomorrow was the day. The LieDeck was the way. One American general was going down, along with the latest incarnation of fascism, the loftily named World Democratic Alliance.

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 2014

Chapter 20

THE CAT'S IN THE FRIDGE, BEEP BEEP

Victor awoke in the same waterbed he'd slept in at the manor four days earlier, the day he had first met Randall Whiteside and sworn off taxi driving for this lifetime. His watch read 8:12 a.m. He'd had a bad night, in spite of a strong sleeping pill that Helen Kozinski had given him. It wasn't that he hadn't slept, only that his time away from reality had been as the blink of an eye, and had changed nothing. He had to pick up where he left off yesterday. "Wherever the hell that may be," he said aloud as he took a brand new pair of socks from the dresser drawer.

It bothered him that little bits and pieces of his private stream of consciousness still escaped from his lips—not because he was ashamed of his thought processes, but because they might be misunderstood by a species that spent much of its energy making outward appearances conform to the expectations of other folks. That was a game Victor played poorly, and preferred not to play at all. "I suppose I have to live in the real world, even if people throw bombs at me," he said as he zipped up and tucked in.

He'd actually awakened half an hour earlier, but he had stayed in bed to listen to the squeals of little Julia discovering Easter eggs hidden all over the mansion at the ends of trails of colored, construction-paper bunny tracks. He had been dragooned into the bunny footprint squad the night before, in order to get his mind off the awful events of yesterday morning. It hadn't worked. He felt the need of a shower.

* * *

In the wee hours, in the quiet grandeur of the master bedroom, the Whiteside matriarch had explained to the Whiteside patriarch, pillow to pillow, that he had to talk about the attack on the lodge with the children—all of them, including Julia—in full. "Randy," she had said firmly—he always knew she was deadly serious when she called him Randy—"the kids are upset. They'll remember this incident all their lives, and they're going to remember how we handled it, so *handle* it. Handle it like the sensitive man you are. Give them the straight goods, together. I'll be there for back-up."

She's something else! thought Randall. He had often started his business speeches with a reference to how he couldn't have made it without her, and that was the truth.

Now it was 8:30 a.m., and the Whiteside clan was assembling for the only meal of the day that the help was not supposed to help with. This was the one time of day when the family was sure to be all together, and Doreen Elizabeth Dawe-Whiteside had long ago established a tradition that breakfast was for the family—*only* for the family.

As soon as Randall entered the kitchen, Sarah confronted him. She had eavesdropped on a heated discussion yesterday afternoon between her father and O'Connor, and learned that Cam had temporarily suspended Helen for not sending Annette to the bomb shelter with Victor. "Mr. O'Connor's had it in for her for years," Sarah whined. "You should fire him, Dad. She's nice and he's a big jerk."

"We don't call people names in this house," Randall reminded his elder daughter. "And Mr. O'Connor

did what he thought was right. We all have our good points and our bad points,” he added, “even you and me.” That turned Sarah's snit into a mere sulk, but everybody in the family knew that “Daddy” disliked Cam as much as the kids.

Breakfast presented serious problems for Randall. He could talk to Michael later, alone, but he wasn't sure how to present the story so that it satisfied and helped fourteen-year-old Sarah and sweet little Julia, nine in body, perhaps four in most other ways. It didn't help that Victor was back at the manor, but there was no choice on that score, for the moment. He had been told of the plan to talk to the kids the night before so that he'd be there at the breakfast table, and participate, and not have to cope with the thing second hand. Victor had agreed, and so now he waited, and nibbled, like the others.

Randall had already made a decision to tell the media about the LieDeck tomorrow morning because of the super-secret information he had received from the prime minister, and that meant that he could reveal all to his children today without putting them in any danger. He took a sip of his coffee and indicated to Victor with his eyes that the time had come.

"Children," he began, "we have to stick together as a family right now. Yesterday, something terrible happened at the lodge. A lady was hurt ... badly." He glanced briefly at Doreen, and was reminded by her eyes to tell the unvarnished and whole truth. "She was shot ... with a gun ... in the head.

"Three men flew to the lodge in a plane. They were trying to hurt our good friend Mr. Helliwell ... Rip Van Winkle." Julia put four fingers in her mouth, hunched down, and giggled at the reference to the nickname she had given to the new person only a few days earlier. Victor aimed his eyes at her face and pushed out his lower lip, pretending to pout, which started the giggling all over again ... and told her that he wasn't hurt, that he was okay, that he could still joke around.

"They blew up the lodge," Randall continued. "You know, where we keep the boats, Julia?"

"Like in the cartoons ... they blew it up?" she asked innocently.

"Yes," said Randall. "I'm afraid so, honey, but we're going to get a whole bunch of grown-ups together, and they're going to work all day and all night until it's all back *just* the way it was ... you'll see. We're not going to let some bad people spoil our lives ... no sirree Bob."

"But who are those bad people, Daddy?" Julia asked.

"Well," said Randall, "we don't know who these bad men were. They ran away, but the police are going to find them and make sure they can't do any more bad things like that."

Doreen glared. He had inadvertently raised the possibility that these men could return. That was sure to frighten Julia. Randall had blown it, to some extent, but he knew it, so he could fix it ... he hoped.

"These bad men aren't coming back here, that's for *sure!*" he said in a chest-beating voice. "They'd be too scared, with the police all around the house. So we've got nothing to worry about. But we have to help the police in case these bad men hurt some *other* nice people that live in some *other* place." *Whew, that was close*, he thought.

"Why did they want to hurt Mr. Helliwell, Daddy?" asked Sarah.

"Yeah, why, Daddy?" repeated Julia.

"Do you remember that cast that Mr. Helliwell had on his arm, like you get when you break your arm? Well, he had a secret. He was just *pretending* that his arm was broken."

"You were just pretending?" asked Julia as her head swung around to catch his reaction. "I like to pretend," she giggled.

"You see, the cast on his arm was a hiding place, Julia," explained her father. "And I bet you can't guess what he had inside the cast."

"What did he have, Daddy? What did he have inside the cast?" asked Sarah with lots of enthusiasm, knowing that Julia would follow her lead.

"Yeah, what did he have in the cast, Daddy?" asked Julia.

"Welllll," said Daddy, "I ... don't know if I can tell you. It's supposed to be a secret. What do you think, Mr. Van Winkle? Do you think we should tell them?"

"Hmmm," said Victor, "I don't know ... it's a pretty big secret."

"Oh please, Daddy," said Michael, playing the game Sarah had begun, the game that helped his little sister understand. "I can keep a secret."

"Me too," said Sarah.

"Me too," said Julia.

"Well, do you *promise* to keep it a secret and not tell anybody until tomorrow?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," said all three kids—mostly Julia.

"Well, inside the cast, Mr. Helliwell hid a teeny-weeny machine that Daddy bought, Daddy and some other people, like Senator Cadbury. You remember him, eh Julia?"

"I like him, Daddy," Julia grinned as she explored her ear with an unoccupied finger. Then she threw her arms out sideways and teeter-tottered back and forth in her chair, singing, "He's the cho-co-lit man, the cho-co-lit man."

"Well," said Randall as he calmed her down, "the men who wanted to hurt Mr. Helliwell at the lodge, they were trying to steal that little machine that he had hidden inside the cast on his arm. The machine is called a LieDeck. They didn't steal it, though. We still have it here, yes sir, because ... we fooled them!" he bragged ebulliently.

"We fooled them," exclaimed Julia proudly with her little fists in the air.

"What kind of machine?" asked Sarah.

"Well, it's hard to explain," he said. "It's a new machine. When a person tells the truth, it doesn't do anything, but if you tell a lie, or if a person who's talking to you tells *you* a lie, there's a little pin and it taps you on the wrist and tells you. It can help the police to tell if a person is bad or good and..."

This wasn't working for Julia. Randall tried to explain that it was like Pinocchio's nose, except much better, but she was still looking perplexed. He had to do better than words, so he pretended to be the machine, using his finger. He had Sarah say something true, and he did nothing. Then he had her tell an outrageous fib, an obvious lie, and he tapped her wrist, to the great amusement of all. Julia had a turn too, two turns, actually, and the family all encouraged the game until it was clear that she understood what the machine did.

"You're going to manufacture these things, Daddy?" asked Sarah. "Like ... anybody could have one?"

"Mr. Helliwell wants us to make these machines and sell them, and I think we should do that," said Randall. "He wants us to put these machines inside of watches, so when you wear the watch and someone tells you a lie, you'll know right away that it's a lie, and you can ask if maybe the person wants to change their mind and say it right—say what is true instead. And if—"

"How do you know it's a lie?" asked Julia.

"Well, the little pin goes like my finger did—you remember when I tapped you on the wrist when you told me that the cat was in the fridge?"

Julia laughed at the recollection of her clever lie. "I like it when your watch goes beep beep," she beamed. "It should go beep beep."

"You mean ... when somebody tells a lie?" asked her father, sounding utterly amazed.

"Yeah," squealed Julia as she pulled her golden hair towards the sky with both hands. "The cat's in the fridge, beep beep."

Chapter 21 WE HAVE TO MOVE NOW

Victor Helliwell had spent a quiet morning at the manor, watching cartoons with Julia, vaguely aware that he had about as much control over his life as Bugs Bunny had over his. The police had asked him to stay indoors for a few days, just in case. Mrs. Whiteside had things to do, people to see, places to go, and although Lucinda had put aside some of her maid duties to make him feel at home, they both felt awkward about the situation. *At least when I drove cab, I had some sort of semi-real contact with humanity*, he said to himself.

He thought of using that powerful computer in his bedroom suite, of going online and actually conversing with people the world over. He'd tried that for a while once, back around the turn of the century, using a computer in a public library, and he'd found the people he'd met on ICQ to be almost impossibly shallow, or at least universally inclined to behave that way, given the power to dump each other with the click of a mouse. *And besides*, he thought, *what would I tell them about myself now? The truth? I don't think so!*

A few minutes before lunch was to be served, something snapped, and Victor was gone. He felt reborn, in control, behind a steering wheel again. He had "borrowed" the jeep and was cruising down Highway 148 towards Ottawa at an unsizzling 55 miles an hour, silently daring every oncoming car to commit to a header. "Life is all that I have," he said aloud. "It's all anybody has, but life hiding behind a security outfit is not much better than life behind bars."

Patriot Security was in hot pursuit ... or warm pursuit. There was no point overtaking or stopping the man, they had concluded. That would only aggravate an already tense situation. The inventor was proving to be as stubborn as Whiteside himself.

The brutal shooting of Annette Blais had capsized Victor's thinking and stomped all over his heart. It was only three short days since he had shared his incredible secret, and already somebody was tossing bombs in his direction. He'd spent more than a decade in hiding, as an urban hermit and as a rural hermit, wondering all along whether he was being paranoid. Now he had become the object of violent attention, and he didn't know how to deal with it. He was also suffering acute withdrawal from his habit of many years, the custom he had developed of speaking out loud, testing his every thought against the judgments of the LieDeck. In effect, he missed his best and only friend, Victor Helliwell. He lit a smoke, his first of

the day—he was trying to cut back—and decided on a course of action.

"Hiroshima Survivor calling Patriot," he said into the air. "I know you can hear me, you guys, so listen up. I'm going home. You got that? You tell Mr. Whiteside that I truly appreciated his hospitality, but I don't want it any more.

"I expect Patriot to follow me everywhere, and try your best to keep the bad guys off my case, okay? I'm disgusted with your performance out at the lodge. If you can't do the job, just tell me, and I'll hire someone who can."

Victor stopped talking for a moment as he eased across the center line to pass a tractor that was creeping along the shoulder, lumbering its way from one sopping wet field to another. He didn't have a LieDeck on him, but he was sure that if he had, it would have called him a fibber when he blamed the security failure at the lodge on Patriot. It wasn't their fault. *Surely only criminals and crazies run for cover when the RCMP shows up at the door*, he thought.

"Now here are the new rules, people," he continued. "No one, and I mean *no one*, is to say a single word to the press or to anyone about my connection with the LieDeck for the next few weeks at least, maybe for months. That's my decision, and while I realize that sooner or later my cover will be blown, it had better not be your fault. I intend to lead a normal life for as long as I can, and by normal, I mean private. You put any bugs in my house and I'll sue your nuts off, or your tits, or whatever body parts you've got that you'd rather not lose."

Helliwell chuckled to himself. Sometimes he just plain enjoyed lying. Of course Patriot staff would be busy taping this soliloquy, and they'd realize he was lying, but what the hell. Rich people were entitled to have fun however they pleased. He also found it amusing to consider that perhaps the jeep *wasn't* bugged, and that he might be driving down the 148 talking to nobody at all. *If they think life is strange when they're carrying a LieDeck*, he said to himself, *wait until they find out how primitive they were before they got the thing!*

"If I'm needed to sign something or whatever, you can call me," he directed his pursuers. "I don't want my tranquility disturbed for any reason, unless it's a duty that is urgent or unavoidable. I hope you got that loud and clear."

He went on to tell the Patriot agents exactly how things were to be, and what he wanted, now and in the future. "Pay my rent at the farm—get my old Cutlass back—stock up my fridge while I'm asleep tonight, and don't wake me—tell Winnie I'll call her as soon as I can—Annette too—tell Julia I'm just taking a little holiday..." When all of the practicalities of his move were covered, he began singing, too loudly: "Paranoia strikes deep..."

* * *

There were four Patriot cars behind the jeep. The chopper was a mile north of the convoy, over the escarpment that ran alongside Highway 148, out of sight. Even Grant Eamer had been enlisted in the "chase," and he was listening to the transmissions, relaying the gist of things to Helen, who was in Kanata, at Whiteside Technologies. Randall Whiteside had just entered the room.

"There's basically nothing we can do to stop him," said Helen. "He's a free man, and he's going to be very wealthy, and he's made up his mind. He says that if it comes down to making a choice between being free or being safe, he chooses freedom."

"Translation?" demanded Randall.

"He's going back to his rented farmhouse," explained Helen, with a disbelieving and resigned shrug. "He

wants us to retrieve his 1996 Cutlass. It was impounded when the police found it abandoned up on Parliament Hill, from when he went to see Senator Cadbury. He says he wants Patriot to do what it can to ensure his security twenty-four hours a day without being visible, and he says he'll sue the bejeebers out of us if we eavesdrop on his private life. He says we're to put a lawyer in charge of all his business affairs and an accountant in charge of his money and to basically ... well, leave him alone."

Randall smiled. This was a man he could respect. "So ... we do it," he said, "just the way he asked. No screw-ups. I like this guy, Helen. The day will come when he'll have to come in from the cold again, and I want him to be happy that he had this little bit of time to indulge his whims. Keep me apprised of his activities. Where's Cam?"

* * *

Cam O'Connor was huddled in his office, still deeply shaken from the assault on the lodge. His conservative temperament winced even at verbal flamboyance. Although he had proven himself in his younger days as a Patriot administrator and occasional field agent, he was known to avoid movies that involved even a modicum of derring-do. His ideal world involved the highest levels of law and order, steady profits, a minimum of politics and no fireworks at all—life in the smooth lane. Helliwell had disrupted all that, and Cam felt like he was trying to land a Boeing 747 during an earthquake.

"Good riddance, as far as I'm concerned," he whined as Randall poked his head around the door.

"Now Cam," cautioned the boss, "he's entitled. In any event, I can make Helen his main contact and leave you out of the picture, okay?"

"I'll hold you to that, Randall," said Cam, pointedly.

"Fine," agreed Randall, "but keeping Victor out of your hair doesn't distance you from the LieDeck, and we have to discuss where we go from here on that score."

"Knock knock," said Laurent Gauthier. He'd spoken to the boss on the phone earlier, and his sense of the situation was that no more talk was due or welcome on the subject of the bombing and the RCMP.

"Hi Laurent," said Randall. "Sorry you and your people will have to work weekends for a while, but I'll make it up to everyone."

"It's okay," said Gauthier, laughing. "The shop floor is quite literally humming with calculations about the profit-sharing agreement. If sales go as well as we expect, then the production workers are looking at major bonuses. They're not complaining."

"Everything under control out at the lodge?" asked Randall—he'd put his chief engineer in charge of the rebuilding project.

"Yes, actually," said Gauthier. "We found the original architect's plans. It'll get done. It's just a matter of putting enough people on it. Rebuilding the place will cost about a hundred thousand dollars more than what the insurance will pay, but—"

"Helen, we're ready," said Randall into the intercom.

Helen joined the group already in Cam's prized corner office. She had agreed earlier with Whiteside that it was a good idea to conduct the meeting there. Cam would feel a bit like the teacher, behind his desk, while the others would seem like mere supplicants. The morning sun was being dissected through slim, burgundy verticals, and the fortunes of Whiteside Technologies seemed destined to fare no better.

"We've got trouble," said Randall. "First, we get some idiot bombing the lodge and trying to assassinate

Victor, and almost killing Annette. Next, our inventor friend takes off. And now I've received word that the LieDeck may never see the light of day."

"Say what!?" said Cam, followed by similar exclamations from the others, including Helen, even though she was way ahead of the curve.

"Don't ask me how I know this," said Randall, "but the military has demanded that the Prime Minister classify the LieDeck as top secret, along with all information about the device—for national security reasons, of course—the damned Cold War II, mostly, and of course the war on terror. They could tie us up for years, decades. So ... if we're going to save the thing, we have to move now, right away, whether or not Victor approves. And as far as Victor is concerned ... well, he put himself out of the loop. Laurent, how many units have you made up so far?"

"Over three hundred," said Gauthier. "We only planned to make four hundred of the first type and then—"

"When are the microminiaturized LieDecks scheduled for completion and release, the wristwatch ones?"

"We should have the first lot of a hundred thousand by September five, twenty weeks from now," reported Gauthier.

"How soon could you produce twenty thousand of the ones we're making now, in the Dictaphone casings?" asked Randall.

"Jeeze Louise!" said Laurent. "We never worked that out ... didn't expect we'd ... I'd have to check with—"

"Ballpark," demanded Randall.

"Well, they're not hard to make. I suppose if ... if we had no problem keeping up with parts, and if we went to three shifts a day and set up a second production line, we could turn out ... mmmm ... maybe twenty-five hundred a day, starting—uh—tomorrow. We could be up and running by midnight tonight, if that's what you—"

"Do it," said Randall. "There's no freakin' law says the God damned things have to be microminiaturized right from square one. So the product is as it is now, a wallet-sized device in a Dictaphone case. In a few months, we'll see where we stand, and maybe get back to the wristwatch model."

Cam was becoming concerned. "But—"

"Laurent," continued Randall, "if we're marketing the prototype, it should be a lot cheaper than the wristwatch model. How much should we be charging for that?"

Laurent hadn't been asked to prepare for this contingency. He hated being caught off guard, but he also enjoyed being able to come up with a plausible answer no matter what the circumstances. He knew the costing in every minute detail, and he knew the general formula that the company had used to price a host of other products. "The cheapest we could go is ... not less than six hundred dollars, retail," he said. "But considering we're the only producers, and the demand will be virtually unlimited, I suggest we go for the bucks, sell it at nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars and ninety-five friggin' cents, and then let the market forces bring it down ... later ... hopefully much later."

"I like the way you think, Laurent!" said Randall, with a smile. "I want to make an outrageous profit on these LieDecks. You got any more ideas on that?"

"Sure," said Laurent. "Cut out the middleman. The demand will be phenomenal. We don't need retailers. We can advertise nationally, internationally, put people on a waiting list, have them call our one-eight-hundred phone line and use their credit cards. If we do that and ship their LieDecks out to them by courier, we increase our profit margin by a ... by maybe thirty percent."

"Laurent, you snake!" said Randall. "I love it! Get the ads on the radio tomorrow, right after my press conference, coast to coast."

"Okay," he said, "but what if the government classifies the LieDeck?"

"I intend to fight that," said Randall. "There's no way I'm going to let them cut our legs out from under us with that tired old 'national security' bullshit."

"And ... how do you propose we accomplish that?" asked Laurent, looking skeptical and nervous.

"Cam," said Randall, "get Grant Eamer to fly you to New York in the Learjet with two hundred of the LieDecks we've got now. Do it right away, and bring two hundred of those pamphlets we had written about the operation of the thing. Just get photocopies—they don't have to look pretty. Tomorrow, you give five LieDecks to the UN Secretary General. Get a courier to rush-deliver a LieDeck to the ambassador of every UN member state, all hundred and ninety-five of them. Make sure they sign for it. We'll call ahead to the ambassadors from here so they're in to accept delivery personally. Use Fleet Courier. Call their head honcho, Ian Fox. He's an old buddy of mine. I want these transactions to start at one p.m., and I want them completed by close of business tomorrow."

"I'm ... not really the best person to—"

"Either you go or I send Helen," snapped Randall. "If you're not up to the job, then I think—"

"I'll go," said Cam as he stormed out of his office.

"Jesus H. Christ," said Laurent. "You can't just end-run the fucking government."

"Just let them try to classify the thing top secret when every nation in the world already has one," laughed Randall.

Chapter 22 THE DEFECTOR

Ralph Dellaire and Nicholas Godfrey were doing their best to heed the Prime Minister's admonition to treat each other with respect, but it wasn't easy. Ralph had become St. Aubin's chief of staff in large part because he was a skilled "big picture" man, a macro-politician. He perceived the Defence Minister's obsession with detail as a flaw, a fault, a weakness, an Achilles' heel for one so highly placed. Nick Godfrey, for his part, saw Ralph Dellaire as a dilettante, a gadfly, a dandy political playboy with no philosophical underpinning for his actions. "Anybody can push pawns around a board," he frequently told his wife, "but it takes a strong sense of purpose and considerable wit to achieve checkmate."

On the subject of the renewed Cold War, their differences were particularly sharp. In the 1980s, Ralph had been a longhaired student at the University of Toronto. Louis St. Aubin was then the president of the students' union, and Ralph was his VP. They were both serious, and both had joined in protest demonstrations—even organized them—to stop the nuclear arms race and end Cold War I. They saw the first Cold War as a mere contrivance, a diabolical ruse by the military-industrial complex, as Dwight Eisenhower had called it, a horrid ploy to bankrupt the old Soviet Union and simultaneously enrich

American arms manufacturers ... all this without reference to the *actual* defense needs of the Western democracies.

Nick Godfrey had been in military college in the 1980s, and his view of Cold War I was quite different. It was a contest between freedom and oppression, and the good guys had to win, no matter what the cost in terms of dollars or danger. And they had won, briefly, from 1989 until 2012, when Russian Prime Minister Andrie Zenko found himself on the receiving end of a Communist putsch. Godfrey took pleasure in reminding anyone who would listen that the western strategy used for the first Cold War had worked, if only for twenty-three years. Now that the Communists had recaptured the Republic of Russia, he saw no reason to approach Cold War II any differently.

Prime Minister St. Aubin was Catholic, and he had dug up an old trick he'd learned from his studies of Pope John XXIII. The wily pope used to take two men, from opposite sides of an issue, and tell them to construct a joint proposal to solve a problem. It worked, for the pope. St. Aubin was less certain whether this technique would work for him, but he had to try something, and that was the best he could come up with. He'd sent Nicholas Godfrey and Ralph Dellaire to interrogate Roger Findlay, the defector. He instructed his men to recommend what the Government of Canada could do about the story that Findlay had promised to tell concerning Cold War II intrigue by Americans ... on Canadian soil ... and elsewhere ... this whole WDA conspiracy thing.

St. Aubin had gone to talk to Colonel Findlay two days earlier. The American colonel had spilled the beans about the LieDeck—he knew it as the C.V.A.—but he wouldn't name names or go any further, and he hadn't said a thing about the WDA. That was his trump card. The price of his continued cooperation was immunity from prosecution, and that was up to cabinet. Cabinet had agreed. Now it was up to Ralph Dellaire and Nick Godfrey, a dove and a hawk, to take this matter the next step.

* * *

Colonel Findlay had been held incommunicado at National Defence Headquarters. It wasn't a cell, although it might as well have been. There were two armed guards at each door of the small suite, and there were no windows. There was a bed, a table, chairs and a TV. He was well fed, and he was allowed to exercise and shower. Apart from that, he felt as if he could have been on the moon.

An hour earlier he'd been told to expect two visitors soon, and since video recording equipment had been set up in the room, he felt very confident that he would be granted his demand for immunity. Still, he was depressed. His life as a political player was over.

"Okay," said Defence Minister Godfrey as he entered the room, "you got immunity, *Mr.* Findlay. It's written down. Your ambassador has a copy. Here's your copy. The video camera is rolling, so get it right the first time. Here's a cell phone. Make your call."

Findlay sat at the table, glanced up at the lens of the camera, then he read the two-sentence note. By decree of the Government of Canada, he would be allowed to stay in the country for as long as he wanted. He would be given a new identity and a good job, and he would be absolved of all responsibility for acts that he was involved with. For the deal to stand, the government demanded his full and immediate cooperation. He made his call to the U.S. ambassador to be sure the deal was on the level, and he was satisfied.

"So let's have it, all of it, now," said Godfrey as he sat down opposite the defector. Ralph Dellaire sat beside Godfrey.

"I want to begin by telling you that I never intended to hurt anyone," said Findlay.

"Beep."

"False," said Godfrey. "If you tell one more lie, we'll terminate the agreement. The deal was *full* cooperation, and starting off with a lie is not helping your credibility. This is called a LieDeck," he said, taking the device out of his suit jacket pocket. "You knew it as the C.V.A. I'll put it on the table, right in front of you, *Mr. Findlay*. From here on, you are the author of your own fate."

The defector felt his adrenal gland erupt. Not only was General Brampton right about the microminiaturized C.V.A., but the Canadians already had the thing. He shuddered imperceptibly and let the words flow.

"The first Cold War didn't begin in the early 1950s, as many people believe," he said. "It began immediately after World War II ended in 1946, and was planned even before that, during the latter stages of the war. It lasted until 1989. It took forty-three years to win the thing, and for most of that time, the risk of total destruction was real; on several occasions, it was considered imminent. When Cold War II broke out in 2012, those who had fought the first Cold War, people in high places, decided that this time it had to be ended decisively ... and forever ... even if it took the use of WMD ... weapons of mass destruction." Findlay knew that Godfrey already knew the acronym, and wondered why he had bothered to explain it. *Just get on with it*, he scolded himself silently.

"These veterans of Cold War I set up an organization called the World Democratic Alliance, a secret organization. It was supposed to destroy communism once and for all, and lead eventually to the creation of a democratic world government—dominated by the United States, of course—based in what is now the UN. The WDA has many thousands of members in over a hundred countries, and I know for a fact that some WDA members have been killed by our own people ... killed because they started to have doubts ... and because they considered talking ... like I'm doing right now.

"We destroyed reputations, planted false stories, framed innocent people, and wiped out organizations that stood in our way—lots of peace groups, a few unions, some left-wing journals, even church groups. The oath of secrecy is tighter than that of the Mafia. The people involved are highly placed in military establishments and governments, but mostly in security forces. In Canada, there's an RCMP unit—I don't know its name—that is totally controlled by the WDA. They pulled off the attack on Victor Helliwell at the Whiteside estate. Anything less than a bomb shelter and they would have got him, and it would have been concluded in a public inquiry that it was an economic crime, committed by a ruthless American corporation which sought to patent the C.V.A. itself and produce it ... I mean the LieDeck. There would have been a credible fall guy, and he would have happily served the rest of his life in prison for an act that he had nothing to do with. The WDA is that sophisticated, and the people who run the WDA and act for it really are that committed.

"The WDA operates on a cell structure. No one knows more than he or she absolutely needs to know. General George Brampton runs the show in Canada. He was my handler, and he works out of the U.S. embassy. As you already seem to know, Ambassador Foley had no knowledge that all this was happening under his nose.

"As for the situation in Canada, I know of no involvement inside your military. The action was handled by that unit in the RCMP. We all assumed that direction came to them from a headquarters in the U.S., probably in Washington. However, it was my impression that we established our presence in various countries only after we had the cooperation of some members of the government. I would suspect there is at least one cabinet minister who reports to the WDA. And ... that's all I know."

"Beep," went the LieDeck.

"Sorry," said Findlay. "I don't mean that's *all* I know, only that the rest is detail. I'll answer all of your questions."

Nick Godfrey and Ralph Dellaire went over to a corner of the room and had a brief discussion on how to proceed. They didn't particularly like each other, but circumstances, and Prime Minister St. Aubin, had thrown them together on this one, and they realized that their differences were simply irrelevant compared to the import of this man's words. "You go first," said Ralph.

They returned to their seats at the table. "One thing I don't get," said Godfrey. "The RCMP is involved in this WDA business, and yet you attacked the Whitesides' lodge using an RCMP plane, with the insignia right on the side. Wasn't that rather stupid, to draw suspicion to yourselves like that?"

"It wasn't an RCMP plane," said Findlay. "They were RCMP officers in regulation RCMP uniforms, but it was a private plane, made to look like an RCMP plane. The plan was for you to find the plane in a couple of days or a week, which would allay suspicions and get the RCMP off the hook. The assumption would be that the uniforms were also bogus. The RCMP could then become involved in the investigation and steer it away from themselves, away from the WDA, and towards the fall guy."

"Pretty slick," said Ralph Dellaire.

"We thought so," said Findlay.

The interview went on for three hours. The Colonel became increasingly resigned to his status as a defector, and as the burden of guilt diminished, he grew animated. The videotape equipment took it all down for the next critical phase in the plan that had been hatched the previous afternoon, in the garden-to-be behind 24 Sussex.

* * *

At 8:00 p.m., one hour after the interview with Colonel Findlay ended, an American embassy limousine pulled up to the front door of the Department of National Defence. Ambassador Cyrus Foley and General Brampton were welcomed by an assistant to Defence Minister Nick Godfrey.

"The Prime Minister and the Minister are waiting for you upstairs, Mr. Ambassador, General," said the aide.

"What's this all about?" asked Foley, with an edge of irritation in his voice.

"Major security problem, sir," said the aide. "The Prime Minister will explain."

The two Americans were escorted up an elevator, down a hall, and into a room with no windows. There was a boardroom table with a TV set and a VCR at the end. Louis St. Aubin and Nick Godfrey met their guests at the door, smiling.

"Ambassador, General, Happy Easter and all that," said St. Aubin. "I very much appreciate your coming over on short notice."

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Ambassador Foley as he shook hands with his high-powered hosts. "You've both met General George Brampton, haven't you?"

"Good to see you Prime Minister, Mr. Godfrey," said the general as he shook hands, and as the door was quietly closed, and locked, behind them. "What's the problem?"

"Well," said St. Aubin, "we've got a couple of video recordings to show you, General Brampton. One came into our possession yesterday, made by a fellow named Roy Taggart, an RCMP officer who committed suicide. The other we made ourselves about an hour ago. It involves a Colonel Roger Findlay ... a colleague of yours, I believe."

"And you can forget about diplomatic immunity, George," said the ambassador sarcastically, "because if anybody asks, I don't even know where you *are*, you ... you fucking fascist *maniac*!"

EASTER MONDAY, APRIL 21, 2014

Chapter 23

BACK TO NORMAL

Victor drew back the Big Bertha driver, coiled his body, drove his legs and hips to the left, turned his torso, let his arms drag behind like a couple of ropes, kept his eyes on the ball, and allowed physics to do the rest—the “conservation of angular momentum,” he recalled from his university days. His fists were almost over the ball, and yet the club head was still close to his right ear. The release at the bottom was as perfect as he had ever achieved, confirming once again his reputation as a superb “striker of the ball.”

The sound of impact never failed to thrill him, especially when he launched one into upper orbit at the Masters. Unfortunately, he sliced. The little white Top Flite ball did the “big banana,” careened off to the right and smashed right through the glass of a small basement window belonging to some rich guy whose three-story mansion was just off the twelfth fairway at Augusta. The crowd was hushed and horrified. Still, Victor had a three-stroke lead in this, the final round, so the green jacket was not necessarily lost.

Moments later, he found himself on his knees, staring into the unfinished basement at bags of petrified cement, dusty gray slabs of plywood, a broken ride-on lawn mower and boxes of unread books—junk of every description. This wasn't your typical upper-class basement, but no matter. The tournament was on, and the game was all.

He vaguely remembered that there was a well-established rule about what one does after hitting a ball out of bounds, but he also seemed to remember that some arrogant PGA executive had unilaterally suspended that rule, for reasons that baffled even the experts. “Play it where it lies,” he had decreed. Victor grabbed a towel from his caddy, wrapped it around his right fist, punched in a few remaining triangles of glass, and eased himself through the small window frame, head first.

The caddy was shouting at him—something about him being all mixed up—but sometimes a man just knows what he has to do on a profound psychic level that defies rational explanation. Victor's hands reached a cluttered workbench. He found an old paint cloth, which he used to whisk the shards of glass onto the floor—all while he was half in and half out of the window. Then he tumbled in, awkwardly, onto the workbench, bruising his hip slightly in the process.

His caddy was being no help at all, but she finally followed him in, pulling his bag of clubs behind her. They started heaving things around, looking for the ball. An NBC video camera lens appeared at the window—and the cameraman was laughing. Victor picked up a rusty adjustable wrench and threw it full force at the opening. No more lens now, just legs, in the distance, knees, shins, and fancy shoes, shuffling off towards the twelfth green as life on the links went on without him.

"Here it is!" shouted the caddy.

And there it was, nestled beside a short length of two-by-four. Victor carefully moved the board, but the ball jiggled, noticeably, on the concrete floor.

"That's a stroke," said his caddy.

"Are you gonna tell?" he asked testily.

"No," she said. "You are."

She was right. He was an honest man, and this was, after all, the great game of honor. He dropped his chin in his gloved left hand and calculated the angle. *Hitting a ball off a concrete floor is hard enough, but with only that little window to aim at ...* “Christ,” he said, “I’ll bet this takes me twenty freaking tries. Gimme the sand wedge.”

“You left it on the last green,” his caddy said, accusingly.

“And you didn’t pick it up?” wailed Victor in disbelief.

“You said to hurry,” she whined.

“Come on up,” said a mellifluous voice from the window frame. Victor spun around and looked up. A slinky, middle-aged woman in a black dress was hunkered down, and her finger was beckoning to him. “Come,” she intoned wistfully, “we’ll nip over to the mall in my brand new Corvette and get you another sand wedge, sugar.”

“Why didn’t you just go back to the last green and get my old one?” asked Victor as he crawled out of the window.

“Oh, it’ll be long gone by now,” said the woman. “People will steal anything these days, sweetheart. Now hurry, before it’s too late.”

Suddenly, he found himself standing in a parking lot outside the shopping center, his new sand wedge in hand, wondering what had become of the willowy woman who had promised to wait while he ran into the sports shop to make the purchase. He hailed a cab and was dropped off in front of the house where his ball was, and there was the Corvette, parked in the driveway. The mystery woman was inside the house, standing at the bay window, dressed in a flimsy kimono with a blue towel wrapped around her head ... posing, it seemed. “I simply had to wash my hair, darling,” she shouted through the glass, pointing at her turban.

Victor caught the meaning of her words, but his exasperation would have to wait. His mind flew back to the problems he still faced. The sun was lower in the sky, and time seemed to have whipped up its pace of passage without the courtesy of a consultation or a warning. He ran around to the back of the house, the side facing the twelfth fairway, and scrambled down through the small window frame. His caddy was sitting on the floor cross-legged, weeping bitterly.

“I don’t think that will help matters,” he scolded.

“Go fuck yourself,” she said, still sobbing. It was a crude rejoinder, but it was, after all, the exact rebuttal that Canada’s former prime minister Brian Mulroney had used to one-up a critic ... a critic who had the audacity to call him crude.

There’s no arguing with women once they get to the “go fuck yourself” stage, thought Victor, so he went about his business. He took a wide stance, addressed the ball, and executed a fine, controlled swing. The ball lifted, banged loudly against the ceiling strut and bounced several times on the hard floor. Eventually, it rolled to the back wall and settled ... in a position where no swing was possible.

“Three,” said the caddy through her tears.

“That’s only two strokes,” said Victor.

“Your drive—plus the penalty stroke—plus that shot,” said the caddy curtly. “Count, for Christ’s sake.”

“Damned game of honor,” mumbled Victor. “I have to move it out from the wall to get a swing.”

"That'll be four," said the caddy. "Plus, you can't move the ball forward—only backward."

"I can't move it backward because of the fucking wall," shouted Victor. That shut her up, but she was correct, and he knew it. This was an impossible situation. The window had become even darker, and he was sure the tournament must be almost over.

A voice from directly above—a male voice—was heard arguing furiously with the woman who had once been his would-be savior, and his caddy had gone back to sobbing and swearing. Victor moved the ball to the center of the floor and flailed at it. The ball hit the concrete wall opposite, only a few inches below the window, and bounced back, almost hitting him. When it began to settle, he trapped it under his foot before it could roll further.

"That's six," said his caddy. "And you can't stop a moving ball with your feet. You know that."

He backed away and swung again. This time the ball ricocheted off the wall and continued to bounce around the room as if it had a permanent source of energy. Victor and his caddy were ducking and dodging the hard little projectile, fearing for their lives. The caddy dove under the wooden stairs, wailing about the certainty of death if this kept on. The man upstairs shouted through the floorboards that he was calling the police.

Victor's fear gave way to fury, and as the ball flew wildly about the room, he started lashing at it in the air with his new wedge—to no avail. The ball hit him once on the arm, and after several other impacts on the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, it caromed off the side of his head, leaving it throbbing. And all this time the ball mysteriously kept its speed—even seemed to increase its velocity ... and the danger.

"I give up," he screamed as he sat bolt upright. "Shit," he said, rubbing his eyes. It was dark outside, and his head hurt—and his arm—and he was perspiring profusely. He threw off the bedspread, turned his pillow over and flopped back down onto it. "Dreams are a pain in the ass sometimes."

* * *

At 8:00 a.m., Victor felt good to wake up in his own bed in his old rented farmhouse. He had no clear memory of the sleep disturbance he'd experienced during the night, only a fuzzy notion of having awakened, covered with sweat ... something about golf.

After he had done his ablutions, he went downstairs to have a bit of breakfast. The fridge was full of fresh bread, cheese curds, milk—all sorts of goodies, as he had hoped. He put the coffee on, slapped together a peanut butter and jam sandwich, and munched on it as he walked down the driveway to the yellow plastic box-on-a-stick to retrieve the morning paper. "I'll read it later," he said aloud. He was very pleased to see that in addition to filling his fridge, Patriot had returned his old Cutlass, as he had asked. He noticed they had also "repossessed" the jeep he had borrowed. "Pricks," he muttered through the peanut butter.

On the front seat of the Cutlass was a large package with his name on it. He brought it in with him, and after he poured himself a coffee, he opened it up. Inside, he found his old plaster cast, and the original LieDeck—the one it had taken him so many years to perfect. Mr. Whiteside had been thoughtful enough to include one of the newer LieDecks and a couple of thousand dollars in cash. There was also an electronic transmitting and receiving device—a plastic earpiece with a built-in mini-microphone, the whole unit resembling a hearing aid. There was a short note from Patriot explaining that he had to wear it in order to communicate with their agents. And there was another note, this one from Randall.

Dear Victor:

I trust all is well. We miss you. Julia wants Rip Van Winkle to visit, and so do the rest of us. Patriot is

covering your ass. Call any time.

I am initiating some 1-800-line radio ads for the LieDeck today—direct sales. Circumstances forced this move. At least there's no point in anyone attacking you again if the device is already out on the market. Call if you want further explanation.

The lodge will be rebuilt in a few days—I've put several dozen workers on the project. It's yours whenever you say. So far we've managed to keep your name out of the news—not sure how long that will last, of course. The PM wants to have lunch with you—when you're in the mood. Take care. Your new office is waiting, when you're ready.

Your friend,

Randa

P.S. I put new batteries into your old LieDeck.

"When I'm ready?" asked Victor. "Or when I must?"

The cast was a bit the worse for wear, especially where the papers and the mini-cassette had been removed, but he managed to replace the original LieDeck as it had been before. With a little struggle, he got his fingers back through the holes and taped the cast onto his arm. The cut was on the underside of the cast, so people wouldn't likely notice it, and he was able to cover most of it with the sleeve of his bowling jacket in any event.

"Two plus two equals five," he said. The pin tapped his forearm. "Good," he said aloud. "I'm back in business. I'm glad this sucker was at head office during the fire. I don't mind losing all those new clothes, but I would have been sorry to lose the cast and the first LieDeck that ever existed. I wonder how Annette's doing? The TV said she's making a remarkable recovery. I'll call Steve later and find out. Well, time to go. Have I got everything ... license, keys, attitude?"

He walked out the front door of his farmhouse and waved lightly at the Patriot agents who were protecting him. He couldn't see them, but of course that was part of the plan. He was sure they could see him, and that was what mattered. He got into his Cutlass and began driving towards Ottawa, thinking of what it would be like to go back to work.

It had been an interesting experience to watch the TV late news last night—part of his planned diet during his first evening "back home." Apparently the Sûreté wasn't making much progress in getting to the bottom of the crime at the lodge. The cameras had been allowed to film the devastation on Sunday. Victor had been referred to on TV only as "an unidentified male guest at the lodge." After seeing the news report, he was very surprised that the explosion itself hadn't killed Annette. The fact that the lodge was made of logs was credited with preventing the blast from shredding everything within fifty yards.

Whoever did that, he said to himself, I'm going to make them pay ... unless they kill me before I get the chance.

* * *

The road from Manotick to Ottawa was one he'd traveled ... "let's see," he said aloud ... "twelve years, three hundred workdays a year, so ... three thousand, six hundred times ... seventy-two hundred times if you count the return trips." The stores were the same as always, the traffic was no better or worse than he remembered, and people were going about their lives as if nothing had changed. Victor knew otherwise. "Everything has changed," he said. "You just don't know it yet, but you will ... soon."

It didn't bother him to have Patriot eavesdropping on these snippets of his private thought. As he parked in the Blue Line lot on the southern tip of the capital, he found himself talking out loud about his inevitable return to the lodge at Wilson Lake, and wondering how Winnie Jopps might be doing. *Those beautiful green eyes*, he thought. He went inside the cabbie shop, prepared for the usual wait.

He finished reading the front section of the *Ottawa Citizen* and the funnies before the dispatcher rapped his knuckles on the bulletproof plastic window and waved him in. It was 10:00 a.m., and business always slipped a notch around that time. He entered the cluttered cubbyhole and leaned his elbow on the protruding stainless steel tray beneath the half-moon slot used by drivers to settle accounts at the end of shift. There was only room for one chair, and it was occupied, completely occupied, by a bulging Asian named Ramura Kamazi, Victor's old boss.

"Ram," as he insisted on being called, flashed the dispatcher in the other booth to take over all incoming calls and contemptuously signaled Victor to close the door. He was just finishing a private phone call, and Victor knew better than to interrupt.

"I said we'll talk later," Ram spit as he whumped the receiver into its gummy basket. "Still got that cast on your arm, I see," he said, with only a cursory glance in Victor's direction. "I suppose you want your job back."

"Yeah," said Victor defensively. "You got a problem with that?"

"You dress lousy," said Ram as he reviewed the day's take so far.

"It's a God damned bowling jacket," protested Victor. "Where the fuck does it say I can't drive a fuckin' taxi in a fuckin' bowling jacket?" He was glad that he'd thought to grab the treasured garment on his way down to the bomb shelter, although he didn't have the idea of saving it ... just staying warm.

"You don't even bowl," said Ram as he pretended to study the figures.

"So?" said Victor. "This fine garment was a gift from a really good friend of mine, George Cluff."

Ram was going to snap back that Victor didn't have any friends, but he let that zinger go. "You got a lot of nerve," he said as he plopped his charts on the desk. "You cash out last Wednesday, I don't see you for five days, then you just show up here. No 'I'm sorry Ram,' no explanation, just 'Please, Ram, can I have my job back?' And I'm supposed to drop everything on my plate and do a fuckin' jig because there's nobody else in Ottawa with a driver's license that needs a job, is that it?"

Victor found this extremely annoying. He was briefly tempted to buy the company and fire the bastard, but the point of this entire exercise was to get back to normal, or on to normal, and stay there, at least for a while.

"C'mon Ram," he said. "I know you. You haven't touched the books in a month. I'll bet you never even took me off payroll, so I never even lost my job, technically, so you wouldn't even have any extra paperwork to do. You just have to say yes and we'll go on like before. C'mon ... say yes."

"I took you off the books last Thursday, at noon," said Ram as he went back to his number crunching.

"No you didn't," laughed the wayward cabbie. "I bet you five hundred bucks you didn't."

"You never had five hundred bucks of your own God damn money in your pocket in your whole God damn life," snarled Ram, without looking up.

Victor pulled out his money clip, counted off five hundreds from a wad that looked to be a dozen bills or

more, and splatted them on the desk beside the dispatch radio. Quite suddenly, he had Ramura Kamazi's full and undivided attention.

"Okay, yes," said Ram as he picked up the bills, counted them, and stuffed them into his shirt pocket before the other dispatcher got too nosy. "But one condition."

"What condition?" demanded Victor.

"You tell me why you just fucked off without a word, and I'll give you your job back."

"I came into some money," said Victor. "You saw me, I got lots of money. For a while there, I didn't handle it very well, that's all. Now I got things under control."

"What? You won it in the 649 lottery?" asked Ram.

"No," said Victor indignantly. "I was working on an invention. For twelve years I've been working on it, and I sold it to this big company. Now how's about assigning me a cab?"

"What invention? What company?" scoffed Ram through pinched eyes.

"None of your goddam business," huffed Victor.

"Right," smirked the dispatcher. "If you had four numbers, you won..." he checked the inside front page of the *Citizen*. "You won seventy-four dollars. Nope, not enough. If you had five numbers plus the bonus number then you won ... eighty-one grand and change. Nope, I'd never see your ugly face again, poor me. So you must have had just five numbers, so you won ... two thousand, eight hundred and forty-four bucks! Not too shabby! Okay, so get the fuck out of here. Take number sixteen. It's at the back of the lot."

"Thanks," said Victor. "By the way, I'm just doing six-hour shifts, and just days, okay?"

"Fine," said Ram without eye contact. "Now get the fuck out of here before I change my mind."

Victor picked the keys from the hook marked "#16" and beat his retreat from the elevated perch of the Blue Line dispatch and bribe office. Number sixteen was a good car. He'd often requested it when seventeen and twenty were already out.

As he left the outer door of the Blue Line office, he threw a "thumbs up" across the street and walked over to the familiar Ford. He got in, donned the earpiece he'd been asked to wear, and fired up the engine. He wasn't even out of the lot when a call came through from Ram. "Number sixteen—twelve twenty-nine Bronson—apartment five-one-four—a Mrs. Van Grinven—to the airport. Say thank you to the nice man."

"This is sixteen—copy, twelve twenty-nine Bronson—apartment five one four—thank you to the nice man," said Victor into the doorknob mike that clipped to the dash. "That's the thanks I get for the five bills," he said into the air after replacing the taxi mike on its hook. "The airport is good money. You got to be in tight with the dispatcher to get airport runs, or generous with the payola."

"Gotcha," said Helen as she pulled her blue BMW out behind him, a respectable distance behind. "It's Helen here. I read you clear, and I'm picking up the radio traffic fine too. Number twelve twenty-nine Bronson, apartment five-one-four, right?"

"Jeeze, high-priced help!" said Victor. "How are you, Helen? How come you're doing this yourself?"

"Because you're such a swell guy?" she said, with a clear, teasing question mark in her voice.

"Yeah, right," laughed Victor.

On the way over, Victor and Helen chatted back and forth. He even lied to her once, to see if she had a LieDeck, and was surprised to find that she didn't. They settled on a plan as to how Victor could tell her the verdicts of his own LieDeck without giving the game away to his fares; a short whistle for a lie, no signal for the truth; a whistle if she guessed something wrong, no signal if she guessed right; and a cleared throat to request a response from Helen. Victor wasn't sure he'd remember all that, but he'd give it a try.

At 1229 Bronson Avenue, an attractive thirty-five-year-old woman was in the foyer, waiting. She opened the door and beckoned for him to come help her with her luggage. "That's usually good for a big tip," said Victor as he turned off the engine and pocketed the keys—company regulations.

"Bet she stiffes you," he heard in the plastic earpiece.

"Nah, these apartments go for three grand and up. She's got to be pretty flush to live here. It's a ninety-five dollar flat rate from downtown to the OIA these days." He got out of the cab and slammed the door. "I'll get a twenty-dollar tip, minimum."

"Jeeze, Victor," warned Helen from the shadow car fifty yards further down Bronson, "don't talk out loud when people can see you. They'll think you're crazy."

"Me? Crazy? Are you crazy?" said Victor, without a lot of mouth movement as he walked up to the apartment door.

"I can handle the suitcase," said the woman curtly. "You take the cello. Put it in the backseat, carefully. It'll fit."

"You're Mrs. Van Grinven?" asked Victor, as required by strict Blue Line policy.

"Yes," she answered frostily. "Now please, handle my instrument with extreme care. That's my livelihood in that case."

Interesting, he thought as he let out a little whistle, as per plan, assuming the woman would think he was doubting whether it would actually fit or not.

Helen was intrigued. "You whistled?" she asked into Victor's earpiece.

"Yes," said Victor as he smiled at his fare. "I'll be very careful."

"So ... her name *is* Mrs. Van Grinven?" asked Helen. She'd guessed right, so Victor did nothing in response to this question. "She was lying about the cello then," Helen said, and again there was no response. "Okay, so either it's not a cello, or it is a cello but it's not hers, or it's her cello but she doesn't play professionally. How am I doing, Victor? Don't answer that."

"This is really light," Victor said to his fare. He opened the back door on the street side and placed the cello case as directed, sliding it across, fat end first. Mrs. Van Grinven got into the passenger seat in front as Victor put her small valise in the trunk and closed the lid.

"OIA?" he asked as he turned the key.

"OIA?" she repeated.

"Ottawa International Airport," he explained. "You never heard it called that?"

"No," she said distractedly. "I don't fly much. It scares me."

Victor let out three whistled tones as if he were absently starting some musical ditty, then he picked up the radio mike on the dash. "Number sixteen to OIA," he reported to the dispatcher.

"I'm not sure I followed that," said Helen over the air. "She *has* heard it called the OIA?" She paused, and Victor's silence told her she had that one right. "She *does* fly a lot?" Again there was no reply. "And ... what was that third thing?"

"How come flying scares you?" asked Victor.

"Oh, it just makes me a bit nervous," said Mrs. Van Grinven. "Ever since nine-eleven and all those terrorist things. How did you bust your arm?"

"Parachuting," lied Victor nonchalantly. "I'm a writer, actually. I'm doing a novel set in a parachute club, and I was out at this club in Kemptville doing research. They talked me into trying it ... 'to understand the attraction,' they said. Well, I found out, all right!"

"So if you're actually a writer, why are you driving a taxi?" asked the fare.

"Oh Christ, you can't make a living writing in Canada unless you're Mowat or Atwood or ... what's-her-name ... Devine," he said. "I drive part-time, to eat. I write to feed the soul."

"I read *A Change of Season* last year," said his fare. "That was her first one, right? Earleen Devine? God, she's terrific!"

Victor pulled up to a red light, and felt a need to check that his security was still in place. He cleared his throat, the agreed signal for a confirmation.

"I'm three cars behind you," said Helen into his earpiece. "Jeeze, you really are a bastard, Victor."

"Also, I get lots of story ideas from my fares," he said cheerily.

"Really?" said Mrs. Van Grinven as she reviewed her make-up and hair in a compact mirror.

"Oh yeah," said Victor. "I practice on every fare. I pretend that I have this psychic ability, that I can tell when people are lying. I make up stories about who they *really* are, what they're *really* doing. It's a good way to exercise my writing skills, or at least my imagination. I always end up with a pile of notes at the end of my shift."

"You don't say," said Mrs. Van Grinven coolly. "And what wild and woolly story ideas spring to mind from a woman with a cello?"

Victor picked up the microphone from the dash and, without pressing the "on" button, pretended that he was dictating a novel. "She *said* that her name was ... what's your first name?"

"Make one up," suggested Mrs. Van Grinven.

"She *said* her name was Elizabeth Van Grinven, but the baggage tag on her patent leather suitcase read Lucia Fagrone," pronounced Victor in his best mystery-story voice. "The cab driver felt an electric current run the full length of his flabby frame. This had to be the daughter of the infamous Pablo Fagrone, the undisputed crime boss of New Jersey. As the taciturn woman held up her compact mirror, ostensibly to repair her face, the hack glanced over. The angle was wrong. She was trying to see behind, to see if she was being followed! Followed by whom? And why? What was *really* in that cello case? A cello,

probably, but not just *any* cello. No. It had to be a hiding place ... for drugs perhaps, or diamonds, ingeniously implanted into the polished neck of the instrument, below the cold brass tuning knobs, above the seasoned sound box. It would be awkward for the airport security to X-ray a cello, and efforts to pry would be discouraged by the danger of ruining a prized Guarnerius, the equivalent of a Strad in the esoteric world of celloing.

"It was too dark to see, but the trembling cabbie wagered himself that the tips of the fingers on this woman's left hand were smooth as liver, not the callused jackhammers one would find on a professional musician. And this obviously wealthy non-cellist was far too sophisticated to not know the term 'OIA.' She had lied about that. And she probably lied about not flying much, as well. The odds were she had a briefcase full of frequent-flyer points. Although the terror she had confessed was palpably real, the cabbie could sense that this paranoia had nothing to do with the perils of aviation, as she had spuriously claimed.

"As the swarthy driver coaxed his aging chariot out to the airport, a black rain was pounding mercilessly onto the—"

"Okay, okay," surrendered Mrs. Van Grinven. "You've convinced me. You write ... sort of. And I play the cello, sort of. I'm working as an editor for the CBC right now, but this Saturday I'm auditioning for the Vancouver Symphony. I think I could make it. It doesn't pay much, but I'll quit the CBC in a New York minute if I get accepted."

Well, the truth was out. Her little white lies were just that, nothing more. There were no drugs, no diamonds, no underworld conspiracies. Victor could hear Helen cackling away in his ear, an improvement on the petrified silence he'd heard a few seconds earlier. He knew what her trained mind had probably been thinking: What if this woman really *was* a Mafia mule?

Nonsense, he thought. There were millions of LieDeck-certifiable jerks in the world, but only a few real bad guys, and besides, the bad guys used limousines to get out to the airport ... if they were any good at their profession.

Chapter 24 BOMBS AWAY

Randall Whiteside brought Doreen to Ottawa with him for the press conference ... plus the three kids, and Michael's girlfriend, Becky. Cam was already at the United Nations, ready to carry out the plan, but his wife was also with the Whiteside clan in the National Press Building. Dr. Laurent Gauthier had brought his entire family to see his handiwork unveiled. Steve Sutherland wasn't there because he had decided to watch the proceedings with Annette, in her hospital room. Senator Joe Cadbury came, and he was in a state of wonder at the events that had been set in motion following his April 16 meeting with the inventor of the LieDeck, only five days earlier. The one person who wasn't there and who *should* have been was Victor Helliwell.

Randall placed a call on his secure cell phone. "How's it going down there?"

"All set," said Cam from his hotel room in New York. "I had a good meeting with the Costa Rican ambassador last night, and I'll be seeing the UN Secretary General at exactly one p.m. Deliveries to the missions are set to start at one fifteen p.m. How are things up there?"

"Okay, I guess," said Randall. "Well ... I'm a little ticked off at Victor. I mean, we're announcing his invention and he's out driving a freaking taxi?"

"Go figure," said Cam.

With Victor out of the picture, the task of launching the LieDeck era had landed by default on Randall. He stood behind the curtains in the anteroom of the main theater in the Press Building, across the street from the Peace Tower. The two blocks of seats were filled by 12:30 p.m., and reporters huddled against the back walls and sat on the steps of the center aisle. This venue was supposed to be solely for Members of Parliament and high government officials, not private citizens, no matter how rich or famous they might be. But the Press Gallery had made an exception this day, at Senator Cadbury's insistence, and on his solemn promise that they would be well rewarded with a blockbuster story.

"Ladies and gentlemen," bellowed the senator into the buzz of the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll get started if you'll just..."

Randall made his entrance from stage left, and kept his eyes on the senator as he walked towards the chair behind the pyramid of microphones. He heard the shouted questions and wanted to scold the pack. It wasn't that he didn't sympathize with their frustration of recent days, but he was determined to deal with questions only after he had said his piece.

"Before we begin," he said, "I've asked my chief engineer and my son Michael to pass out these things that look exactly like Dictaphones. Just hold onto them. Don't fiddle with them until I explain what they are.

"And while they're doing that, I can tell you that Annette Blais, the Patriot agent that was shot in the attack, is speaking now, and it looks like she'll be okay. Also, we're rebuilding the lodge at Wilson Lake, using almost a hundred workers. We hope to have it completely rebuilt in a matter of days."

As Dr. Gauthier and Michael handed out LieDecks, the atmosphere in the room changed. The media hadn't been told what this was about, only that it was "hellish fucking important," and that they would remember it the rest of their lives. Now they had something tangible to hold on to, and they immediately started whispering to each other about what might happen if they pushed this or that button. *Asking a journalist not to pry is like asking a cow to hold the methane*, thought Randall.

"Give 'em hell," whispered Cadbury to his old golf buddy as he took the chair beside him.

"You bet," replied Randall quietly. "We've got all the LieDecks set on the flashing light mode. Even if they turn them on, they won't know what the light signifies."

The cameras were rolling, and the buzzing in the room intensified as Dr. Gauthier and Michael filled the last few outstretched hands.

"Ladies, gentlemen," said Randall, "the attack on the lodge is under ongoing police investigation, so I will have nothing to say about that. I will tell you, however, that the motive behind the attack is the small machine that is now in your hands. I will also tell you that by five o'clock this afternoon, one of these instruments will be in the possession of the ambassador of every nation at the UN. You'll understand why in a moment.

"Hold the device like this, with the WT emblem facing you." They did as they had been told, and looked up for further instructions.

"To turn it on, flip the on/off button there," he continued. "A red light should flash. If it doesn't ... did everybody see the light? Okay. Now, watch your device, where the light is. I'm going to make some statements. Don't watch me—keep your eyes on the device.

"First, my name is Randall Byron Whiteside," he said in a clear and carrying voice. "Did anyone's light blink?"

There was a consensus that nothing had happened anywhere in the room, and Randall prepared himself to drop the bomb. "Okay, now let's try a few more," he said. "My name is Joseph Cadbury."

Blink.

"I am fifty-six years old."

Nothing.

"I'm a pro football player."

Blink.

"The moon is made of rock."

Nothing.

"The moon is made of blue cheese."

Blink.

"Inflation in Canada is—"

"This is a God damn lie detector," shouted one of the journalists. "I don't frigging believe it."

"Flip the blue button to the 'bell' position," instructed Randall. "Now put the device in your pocket, or your purse ... well, best to leave your purse open for it to work." When everyone was ready, he began another series of statements.

"I'm flat broke," he said, and seventy LieDecks beeped, in perfect unison. "There are four quarters to a loonie," he said to a silent room. "There are four dimes to a quarter," he said to a chorus of beeps.

"This remarkable device is called a LieDeck, which is short for lie detector," said Randall. "And it's spelled capital 'L,' small 'i,' small 'e,' *capital* 'D,' small 'e,' small 'c,' small 'k.' It's one hundred percent accurate, and it will be on the market very soon. And as you can imagine, it will change the world ... profoundly."

"How does it work?" came a shouted question.

"Oh, by magic," said Randall to a room full of beeps, and a few tentative laughs.

"Why did you pass them out at the UN?" several reporters asked.

"For the same reason I passed them out here," said Randall, "to get the ball rolling." He had forgotten that even white lies were now *verboten*, and seventy "beeps" surprised him. "I respectfully refuse to answer that question on the grounds the damnable LieDeck might incriminate me," he said playfully.

"How much will it cost?"

"We're advertising them for direct sale only, at nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars and ninety-five cents," he said, "...plus tax, of course. There will be absolutely no sales at the Whiteside plant or through any stores. We will only take prepaid orders, on our 800 line, but I'm afraid supplies will be limited for a while."

"Is it really a hundred percent accurate ... all the time?"

"When exactly will it be made available to the public?"

"How does it work, really?"

"Who invented it?"

"What impact will this have on Cold War II?"

"Can this be used to identify terrorists?"

"Will the LieDeck be used in the courts?"

"Will the police have them?"

"How will anyone ever keep a secret in future?"

"How is the government going to respond to this?"

"Will they be allowed in the House of Commons?"

"Does the LieDeck work over the phone or off a TV or radio?"

"Can we keep these things?"

"Ladies, gentlemen, please," implored Randall. "One at a time."

One at a time, their questions were answered, briefly, at least those questions that were appropriate for Whiteside to field. For the first time in decades, the men and women of the media were on the hinge of history. This little device seemed to be right up there with the invention of the printing press, the Bomb, the Pill. This was a day that literally everyone would remember, like 9/11.

"One more thing," said Randall as he gathered up his notes and made signs that he was leaving. "In a few months, we'll be releasing a microminiaturized LieDeck, built into a digital wristwatch. These are Dictaphone casings, as you can see. What you have here is just an early model ... and yes, they're yours to keep. Please, try to use them wisely."

"That's all for now," shouted Cadbury as he and Randall rose to leave. "I'm sure the Prime Minister will have something to say this afternoon, in the House."

Chapter 25

I SAW VICTOR

The doctors were surprised by Annette's rapid recovery, both physically and emotionally. Incredibly, she'd been speaking since Sunday, yesterday, the day after the attack, at least during those short periods of time when the drugs weren't knocking her out cold. The only parts of her face that could be seen were her right eye, her right cheek, her nostrils, and her mouth, but there was little of her indomitable spirit that couldn't be seen or heard ... or admired ... by those who tended to her.

Randall Whiteside had pulled a few political strings, and had managed to loosen up the police protection around Annette's room at the Ottawa General. Helen had been over to visit her several times, and now permission had been given for Steve Sutherland to be in her room to watch Randall's noon-hour press conference on the TV.

Steve would have visited earlier, but he hardly knew the girl. He'd only met her last Friday, and danced

with her once that evening. He assumed that her boyfriend, that Lou Glassen chap, the dentist, would be by her side whenever Helen couldn't be there. When Helen told him that Glassen was refusing to visit because he didn't want to get involved in the legal process that was sure to follow the assault on the lodge, Steve decided two things. First, he would practice what he had been preaching for thirty-something years, and second, this Glassen fellow had to be a certified goof.

* * *

Annette had never been a man before, and she couldn't get over how different everything looked. Suddenly, other men were unthreatening, and that was wonderful! And women! My gracious! They were ... how exactly to put this ... "scrumptious!" She ... or he ... wanted to talk to total strangers, female strangers, about sex, and send out coded signals of arousal. *No wonder men are such a pain*, she thought, *with such feelings to control all the time, or try to control, or not control.*

It was the day of Peru's national election, and an entire village was trudging through the heat—several villages, in fact—in a herd. Annette lagged back and turned away from the peasants, who were walking in a clump towards the Sisco Consolidated Gold Mine office. She desperately needed to hand-shuffle her new body parts. It wasn't unbearable, being a man, but the way those various appendages flopped around, it didn't take much of a shift of shorts to make her ... him ... feel uncomfortable.

On the plus side, she was tanned and shirtless under the Peruvian sun, and no one seemed to take any note of that fact, or care. What a glorious sense of freedom, walking bare-chested in public without having half the population staring at her nipples ... his nipples ... *that's if you don't count the eighteen-year-old filly walking with her mom up ahead, the one that keeps glancing back, the one with the great jugs and the tight little...*

God, thought Annette, *I don't believe I'm having these feelings. I can't get through a damned millisecond without my libido distracting me. How do men manage that?*

"Why are you voting for Manuel Valdez?" she asked an elderly farmer she'd caught up to.

The man's head was bent permanently forwards, as if someone had cruelly snipped the sinews in the back of his neck. He rotated the whole leathery works clockwise, just enough to glimpse the youngster with the dumb-assed question. His red-rimmed eyes didn't scold or scoff, but they seemed to know things, ancient truths and secrets that only old farmers are allowed to understand.

"'Cuz he don' wannit," he scowled, or the Spanish equivalent. "They checked it out with that beeper thingamabob, and it's for sure he don' wannit. If they do wannit, they's full o' shit. If they don' wannit, well, maybe they's full o' shit and maybe they ain't."

"Who's the babe with the D-cup hooters?" she asked her ancient traveling companion. *Did I actually say that?* she wondered. "That testosterone stuff is ... bad dope," she said aloud.

"Are you ... okay?" asked Steve.

"Steve—uh—hi ... oh, jeeze. I guess I nodded off."

"Boy, you were really squirming around and moaning. I didn't want to wake you, but I was afraid you were having a relapse or something."

"A relapse of what?" she asked fuzzily.

"Annette, you ... almost died a couple of days ago," said Steve.

She smiled at the memory of seeing Victor, and her dear-departed mom and dad ... *so young they*

were!

"You were ... dreaming," Steve said gently.

"God, was I ever," she said. "What a dream! I dreamt I was a man, and I had my shirt off and..." Her voice dropped off, and her good eye closed. It wasn't easy to maintain consciousness at times. But no sooner had she drifted away than she floated back up to the present moment ... and all of that was okay, she decided.

"Earlier this morning, I laughed out loud for the first time," she said proudly ... she meant for the first time since she was shot. "There were these two kids down the hall. They were fighting. It was splendid."

The former bishop had been holding Annette's hand while they watched Whiteside's press conference on CBC's Newsworld channel. She had asked him to do that, and he was thrilled ... and scared ... but mostly thrilled. And this lovely wounded warrior had stayed awake and alert almost to the end, and then ... well, it was understandable.

There were a few times when he felt that her squeezes said more than just: "Hey, I'm sick, and I appreciate your being here for me." He had reprimanded himself silently for thinking it could be anything else, or anything more. This woman had almost died, after all, and he was a priest ... or used to be ... still was, technically.

"Shouldn't you be resting now?" he asked, giving his hand a slight tug, hoping she might realize that it was time to let go.

"Steve," she whispered, holding on tighter and opening her eye, "watching television for the last few minutes is one of the few things I've been able to do besides rest since the ... accident. I want to talk, okay? And not about my health and not about the God damned LieDeck."

The chair at the side of the bed was becoming uncomfortable, and Steve realized that he was being asked to act like a human being, a male human being, and not like a priest. He hadn't done that, strictly speaking, since he was eighteen or so, and he was afraid of behaving like a teenager if he tried, or let himself.

"Doesn't it hurt you to talk?" he asked.

"Probably," she admitted, "but I can hardly feel it. The medication I got just before Mr. Whiteside came on TV, it's kicking in now. I was thinking about that nice dinner we had out at the lodge? I was pretty quiet that day, wasn't I? Do you remember?"

"I ... didn't really notice," said Steve.

"Liar," she said.

Steve smiled and flipped his eyebrows as if to say, "Well, you can't win them all."

"Okay, I remember," he said. "What of it?"

Annette winced a little, and sighed. The painkillers were good, but not perfect. Steve wished she would take his advice and get some rest.

"I saw Victor," she said, as her good eye closed. "And for just a moment, I saw my parents too—and they were young—younger than me."

She must be hallucinating, thought Steve. "I'm ... sorry, Annette," he said. "You lost me there."

"I died," she said simply. "I died and went to heaven ... and now I'm back. It wasn't my time."

"You rest now, Annette," he said affectionately as he stood up. He kissed her on the cheek and extricated his hand. He didn't want to confuse her or upset her by mentioning that Victor couldn't be in heaven since he was very much alive, and it seemed that she was passing out again anyway. "I'll come back again ... tomorrow," he whispered. "We can talk about it then."

Steve looked down at the woman who had just faded away, to become a man, to drop in on God, or heaven, or whatever. He remembered that glorious dance they'd had at the Beach Barn, and wondered why he had pleaded fatigue that night and fled to the safety of his cottage in Norway Bay. *Maybe testosterone really is bad dope*, he said to himself as he turned to leave, *but it sure feels fine*.

Chapter 26 YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND

Cam O'Connor had never been to the United Nations before, and he found it intimidating to throw his eyes down a row of 195 national flags. It was 12:45 p.m., and he stood under the warm New York sun, admiring the gray tower on the banks of the East River. Dozens of nameless diplomats and international civil servants came and went about the business of the world in the minute that he stood there with his briefcase between his ankles. *I'm not sure this is a good idea*, he said to himself, *but then I'm not the boss*.

His meeting wasn't until 1:00 p.m., but he decided he'd better go ahead in. He'd been warned that security at the UN office tower was tight—at times ridiculously tight—so he grabbed his briefcase and set about the business of discombobulating a planet, or saving it from itself, or whatever.

Getting an appointment with the Secretary General on short notice had been no easy task. Fortunately, Randall did a lot of business in Costa Rica. Cam had made use of the personal relationship between Whiteside and the president of that Central American democracy to get the appointment. The evening before, he had visited the Costa Rican ambassador, and basically traded a LieDeck for the favor. That was the price—a fifteen-hour head start on the pack for the Costa Ricans. Why this obscure country might need or want a head start, or what they might do with it, was a mystery to Cam ... *and none of my business*, he reminded himself.

"Ambassador Rodrigo," he said cheerily as he entered the main doors of the UN tower. "Thank you for meeting me." They shook hands briefly, formally.

"You are welcome," said the ambassador. "I must tell you, I called my president after you left last night, at 10:00 p.m., and he had me charter an airplane to deliver your device directly to his *casa presidencial*, with all possible haste. It was in his hands, in San José, by 4:00 a.m. I don't know whether you realize it, but this LieDeck is going to make big problems. By eleven o'clock this morning, having possessed your device for only seven hours, six ministers of my Government were fired, and two more were arrested. I have been told that later today, several foreign diplomats are to be expelled from Costa Rica because of the thing. One general in our civilian guard has apparently committed suicide. I cannot imagine what tomorrow's news will be."

"Really?" asked Cam, instinctively, although his own LieDeck, set on the pin mode, made it unnecessary to seek confirmation.

As they arrived at the security desk, Cam put his briefcase on the counter, expecting that it would be

searched.

"It's okay," said the ambassador. "He's with me."

The guard nodded, and the chief of Patriot Security was appalled. *If I were a terrorist, he thought, the Secretary General would be toast. I guess it pays to be Caucasian.*

The entrance to the United Nations tower was a large rotunda, two large stories tall. It was almost empty, what with the Christians having a good excuse not to go to work on Easter Monday. The two men rode up the glass-sided escalator to the mezzanine floor in silence.

The ambassador was not the same man he'd been the night before. When Cam was at the Costa Rican mission, Rodrigo had been courteous at first, but as he realized what the LieDeck was, how it worked, and what its potential was, he had become effusive in his admiration for the device and lavish in his praise for Whiteside's plan to share this new technology through the United Nations Organization. Now, however, after a sleepless night and a loud, long-distance argument with his foreign minister—who had since been fired—he wasn't so sure he wanted to have anything to do with the LieDeck.

They walked from the top of the escalator to a bank of elevators, and again they rode in silence. Cam made several attempts at small talk, but it was clear the ambassador wanted to keep his word, and nothing more. "I will introduce you to Dr. Denthor Gütsch, according to my instructions," he said, "and then I must leave." When they arrived at the large office on the 39th floor, the top floor, Ambassador Rodrigo did just that, leaving Cam alone with a total stranger.

The Secretary General was old, with gray hair and enough worry lines in his face to cover a difficult planet. He was a Dane by birth, but a man of all nations by temperament and profession, a man who took strutting presidents and imperial potentates in stride. This particular rendezvous, however, had been arranged through the proverbial back door and was shrouded in mystery. He felt uncomfortable, manipulated, even a bit frightened. The notation in his calendar read: "Ambassador Rodrigo, 1 p.m., four minutes—urgent." But now there was no Ambassador Rodrigo in his office, and that was hardly diplomatic, to say the least.

"What is the nature of your business with me?" he asked frostily, without offering Cam a seat or a coffee.

"Dr. Gütsch, a new device has been invented," said Cam politely, "and it is going to change the world dramatically. By five o'clock this afternoon, one of these devices will be in the hands of every UN ambassador, a gift from Whiteside Technologies, a Canadian firm. I have been instructed to deliver five to you, to do with as you please."

As Cam explained and demonstrated the LieDeck, Secretary General Gütsch felt his heart flop around madly in his chest. "The governments of nations cannot deal with this," he said abruptly, and the LieDeck in Cam's hand told him that it was true ... or at least that it was the man's honest belief. "Turn that off."

Cam turned off the LieDeck. "But surely you—"

"The United Nations is in the business of building trust," said Gütsch. "I refuse to participate in any process that will bring down the edifice that I have spent a lifetime constructing. I do not accept your gift. Please tell Mr. Whiteside that I fear that he has acted most irresponsibly, imprudently, and tell him I said ... I am not sure if I can say this correctly in English ... 'Forgive them, Father, for they don't know what they're doing.' Good day to you, sir. I think you should go now."

Cam placed the LieDeck he was holding back in the briefcase and closed the lid. He was stunned. He had entered this office in awe of its occupant. A scant six minutes later, he was looking at a man who had

shrunk to the size of a plastic doll, the tiniest ones you might get as a prize in a box of Cracker Jacks.

Not without a fight, he said to himself. He discreetly lifted a hand to his shirt pocket, inside his suit coat, and flipped a switch.

"One question, and I will go, Dr. Gütsch," he said forcefully. "Are you certain it's in the interests of world peace to reject this act of faith by Mr. Whiteside?"

"I am," said the Secretary General with equal force.

"Beep."

"You're lying," said Cam. He pulled out his own LieDeck and held it at arm's length towards the UN chief, like the condemning finger of the Grand Inquisitor. "And in my inside jacket pocket, on the other side, is a tape-recorder. I will broadcast your lie to the world unless you reconsider your response at once."

Dr. Gütsch had been standing behind his desk, in front of his plush chair, but now he fell back into the seat as if his knees had simply stopped working. "I ... can't do that," he said quietly.

"Beep."

"I cannot tell you why."

"Beep."

"You wouldn't understand," he continued doggedly.

"Beep."

"You *can* tell me, and I *would* understand," declared Cam.

The Secretary General dropped his chin onto his sternum and ran both his hands up his forehead, over his thin hair. As they came slowly down the sides of his neck, he raised his head and looked with pity on the fool with the briefcase full of political napalm. "You ... you should have taken my good advice," he said. "Now I must ask you to go."

"Beep."

O'Connor could do no more, so he left as he had come, with the five LieDecks in his briefcase. As he stood in the elevator on the way down, he felt confused, and suspicious. Then it hit him. His LieDeck had beeped after Dr. Gütsch said, "I must ask you to go," but not when he said, "You should have taken my good advice."

He spoke the truth on that one, Cam said to himself. *I should have taken his advice. It was a warning, intended or otherwise.* He glanced up and saw that he was just passing the ninth floor. He pushed "7" on the panel, and when the doors opened, he walked out, turned right, and strode down the hall, looking for any safe haven.

"Suite 718—Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees," read the sign on the door, in English, French, Russian, Chinese and Arabic. It would have to do. He opened the door and entered a reception area, where he was greeted by a young Indian woman in a sari. "May I help you?" she asked hesitantly. "*Puis-je vous aider?*"

Cam knew deductively that something was seriously wrong in the UN. The worst-case scenario? The

entire building could be bugged. He touched his lips and made hand and facial gestures that were intended to indicate that he couldn't talk. Then he took his pen from his shirt pocket and mimed a request for writing paper. The puzzled secretary sensed no danger from her unexpected visitor. *She can't be part of what's wrong here*, thought Cam as she tore off a page from a pad.

"PLEASE," he wrote, "my life is in danger. I must see your boss. Give this note to him, I beg you."

He gave the note to the woman and placed his hands together in a praying position, shaking them vigorously, with a desperate look on his face. He placed an index finger briefly on his lips, entreating her not to speak, and then got down on his knees to repeat the praying gesture, shaking and all.

The secretary hadn't just worked with refugees in the field; she'd been one. She knew the face of stark fear, and this man had it, in spades. With a nod of her head, she asked Cam to be seated and disappeared into the inner office. A minute later, an old Pakistani gentleman emerged and signaled Cam to enter. His name was Dr. G'lohreah Pavay, by his card, offered and accepted silently.

It took several minutes of furious writing, but Cam managed to tell Dr. Pavay about the LieDeck device, and show him the five he had in his briefcase, and tell him what had happened up in the Secretary General's office. The High Commissioner was prudent enough not to speak. He picked up his phone and asked his secretary to have a car meet him in the sub-basement garage, immediately. "So that I won't be late for my scheduled meeting at the Sri Lankan mission," he said blandly.

"Of ... course sir," she replied. A quick check of the calendar told her that her boss had no such meeting. She ordered the car, then went to the closet and took out a wide-brimmed ceremonial hat and a shin-length, embroidered gray coat. When the two men emerged from the inner office, she nodded to Cam and helped him into the coat. Then she put the hat on him, and with her hands on his neck, she pulled his head downwards, so that the hat hid his facial features. She took the briefcase out of his hand and gave it to her boss to carry. Then she ducked down so that Cam could see her face, and with a childlike wiggling of her fingers and a warm smile, she said goodbye.

The two men went down the elevator to the parking level without incident. The driver held the door as Dr. Pavay and O'Connor got in the backseat. After the car had pulled out from under the UN building, Cam opened his briefcase, took out his address book, and turned to the page marked "B." With his pen, he underlined the address of the Brondel Building, where he and Randall had often landed by helicopter. He held the book in front of his diminutive host.

"Go to ... three-eight-five-four Lexington," said Dr. Pavay to the driver.

"May I keep the coat and hat for a bit?" wrote Cam on a blank page at the back of his address book, giving the book to Dr. Pavay.

"Yes," wrote Pavay, "but no talk and no more notes. Good luck."

Cam took back his address book and gave one of his business cards to his savior. He then took out the few personal items he had in his briefcase, put them in various pockets, and gave the briefcase to Dr. Pavay with the LieDecks and the photocopied instruction pamphlets still in it. The sober international public servant gave a knee-level thumbs up, to hide it from the chauffeur. And that was the last communication the two men had until Cam stepped onto the sidewalk at 3854 Lexington.

"Have a good day," he said as he closed the door.

Dr. Pavay only nodded.

Cam walked into the office tower, showed his corporate credentials, and was escorted by security to the office of the president. Howard Brondel was out, and that was fine. Cam's face was well known here. He was able to rid himself of the ceremonial hat and the embroidered coat and have these items couriered back to the High Commissioner for Refugees, and he was able to get a private phone to call Grant Eamer, who was waiting back at the Airport Hotel.

"Eamer here," came the voice.

"Don't say anything," demanded Cam. "Code Beaver. Charter a helicopter to land on Brondel within a half hour. Call Kennedy Airport and make sure the Learjet is ready and cleared for takeoff by 3:00 p.m., at the latest. Then get over here in the chopper. I'll be in the waiting room on the roof."

He hung up, and everything went according to plan. In just over an hour, the Learjet was airborne, streaking towards Canada.

"Okay," said Cam. "We can talk now."

"What the Christ is going on?" asked Eamer as he leveled off at 30,000 feet.

"I wish to fuck I knew, Grant," said Cam. "I wish I knew."

Chapter 27 OUT ON BAIL

"I bet you was fuckin' scared, Bobbeeeee," taunted Jean Proulx as he leaned forward between the bucket seats from the back. "I bet you shit da pants when Jake is catching you."

"I'm nineteen, furchrissakes, so I don't get Juvenile Court any more, eh?" said Bobby Thompson as he gingerly picked the roach from Jean's hand. "But this here's my first offence, eh, so I'll probably get—"

"First time you got *caught*," snorted Geoff Farley from behind the wheel of his sort-of rebuilt, canary-yellow 1968 Dodge Charger. "You been rippin' off stores and restaurants for longer'n I can remember, since you was thirteen."

"Yeah, well, I coulda told them you were in on the one at Ray's if I'd 'a wanted to," said Bobby. "You like to forget about that, eh?"

An awkward silence fell. Everybody in Quyon knew that Geoff was involved in the break-in at Ray's, and the cops knew it too, but they didn't have any evidence. The chances were that Geoff would get charged any day now, evidence or no, but it hadn't happened yet, and it was up to Bobby to keep his mouth shut, according to the honor code among punks.

"Let's go to the Miniputt in Norway Bay and check out all them city chicks from the cottages," suggested Bobby. "I like 'em young and juicy."

"No chicks there today, asshole," said Geoff. "It's Monday."

"Easter Monday, dog-shit-breath," snapped Bobby.

"Oh yeah," realized Geoff. "Them preevert priests used to do a big deal over that one, eh?" he said as he turned towards the 148. "Something about like they thought Jesus was lying about being dead so they stuck fingers in the hole in his gut, eh ... I mean where the spear went in? Friggin' preevert Jews."

"Jeezechrise, Geoff, don't go more dan da speed limit," pleaded Jean from the back as the Charger charged onto the highway. "I got da stuff on me, an' I don' need no hassle wit' no cop."

Bobby inserted the shrinking joint into the hollow end of a rolled-up matchbook and held it up to the driver's mouth. Geoff sucked, took a deep breath, held it, then exhaled loudly, and coughed, roughly ... the price. "Gooooood stuff," he exuded through choked vocal cords. "Did ya get it from Ziggy?"

"Nah," said Bobby, "I don't like dealing with Zig. This is the last of that kilo I got from Fatty in twenty-twelve. I wish I'd 'a bought more of his stuff before he went and got himself shot. He had great stuff, the best. Cheap, too."

The Norway Bay Miniputt had just opened for the season. It was early evening, and as the boys wheeled into the gravel parking lot, children, teens, and parents looked up to see whose car badly needed the muffler job. Diane Logan was handling the shack, and she knew these three all too well. Their arrival always meant trouble, so she made a quick telephone call to her husband over at the glass shop, just to let him know.

"Just treat them polite and don't give them no reason to start up," advised Sam. "If you don't call me back in five minutes, I'll come on over and settle things down. How's the turnout?"

"Pretty good," she said Diane. "How's it going over there?"

Diane had two little freckle-faced girls waiting impatiently for putters and balls, so she cut the conversation short. But she made sure the boys in the aging Charger saw her talking on the phone. That was the main point of the call.

"Lookit dat old fart on da bench checkin' out da meat," said Jean from the backseat. "Man, does he look horny or what? Let's swarm da bastard."

Geoff looked at Bobby cross-eyed and flicked the back of his hand in the general direction of Jean's face. "Jerk," he said. "Wait till you're out on bail. We'll make sure to get your ass in trouble."

"Okay okay," said Jean, "you stay here in da car den. I gotta hassle dat guy. I jus' gotta. Here, you hold da grass, Geoff."

He tossed his baggie of marijuana onto Geoff's lap, jumped out the back door, and started doing his patented palsy-limp towards the man on the bench. Geoff and Bobby rolled up the windows so the man wouldn't hear them laughing. It never failed to crack them up when Jean did his "reeeetard" routine.

He eased himself onto the bench, inches from the man, and began picking his nose. He got a piece of gelatinous snot tucked under his fingernail and examined it closely, obviously, so the man couldn't help but take note of his Academy performance. Then, with a toothy smile and a bizarre waggle of his tongue, he reached over and wiped his finger on the man's shirt, on the upper arm. "Duhhhh, how's doin' derr, Pops?" he asked.

The man stared right into Jean's eyes. He had been challenged, and he wanted to let the tears roll. *How could a good-looking youngster in a wealthy, decent country become so warped?* he wondered.

"I *am* afraid of you," admitted the gentleman. "That *is* what you wanted to know, isn't it? But I'm more afraid of other things, such as losing my self-respect. I tell you what. You take that off my shirt and I won't tell your mother. If you don't take that stuff off my shirt, I'll make sure you get arrested for assault, and then I'll go tell your mom what a creep you turned out to be."

The man's eyes indicated that he meant business, and Jean wasn't ready to sail these uncharted and

apparently treacherous waters. He leapt up from the bench, right into the titanium arms of Buckminster Ash, who had sidled up quietly from behind when he saw the situation brewing. Buck planted an oversized mitt into the boy's hair to hold him steady, squeezing just hard enough to cause real pain without actually separating scalp from skull. From the parking lot, the spinning of tires and the clatter of flying pebbles told Jean that he was alone on this one. Nobody messed with "the Buck," never mind if he was almost fifty.

"You got something to say to the nice man?" Buck asked in a voice that seemed to come from the bottom of a mineshaft.

"I'm sorry," squealed Jean. "Leggo o' my fuckin' hair, man."

"Louder," shouted the Buck, "so's all them good people over on the Miniputt can hear you good and clear."

"Sorry," cried Jean, again, and much louder.

"And maybe there's somethin' else that needs doin'?" asked Buck as he moved the boy by the hair back to the bench where the man was still sitting, shocked.

Jean picked the disgusting blob of mucus from the man's sleeve and wiped his finger and thumb on the bench.

"You're lucky I didn't make you eat it, you little asshole," said Buck as he released the boy's hair. "Now bugger off before I..."

Jean didn't need any further prompting. He ran away as fast as he could, amid a spontaneous round of applause from the people who had gathered to test their minigolf skills.

"You okay, Father?" asked Buck as he lit a Player's cigarette. "Uh ... Steve," he corrected himself.

"I'm fine, Buck," said Steve. "And thanks. It's a good thing you happened along."

"Actually, I didn't exactly happen along, Steve," said Buck after he blew out a cloud of smoke, coughed, and spit. "I ... sort of followed you here. I need to talk to somebody, and if you don't mind, you're it."

"Of course I don't mind," said Steve. "Let's go down to the British Hotel in Quyon and chat over a bottle of beer."

"Tomorrow," said Buck.

"Fine," said Steve. "Tomorrow at say ... seven?"

TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 2014

Chapter 28

A DIRTY JOB

The Centre Block, as the name implies, is located in the center of a cluster of gray, stone buildings that house the political component of the Canadian government. It is 470 feet long, but only five stories high. In addition to the vast lawn, the wide cement walk that leads to its arched doors, and the Centennial Flame in the middle of the walk, the Centre Block is set apart from all the others by the Peace Tower jutting up in the middle, a great square stone tube, fourteen yards along the sides and 300 feet high. It has a pyramidal, copper-green cap on top, and a maple-leaf flag fluttering above that. Just under the cap is a

clock, sort of a “Little Ben,” with carillons that announce the passing of every quarter-hour. The other political buildings—the East Block, the West Block, the South Block, and the Confederation Building—could only look on with envy; tower envy, power envy.

The PMO—the Prime Minister's Office on Parliament Hill—is in the Centre Block, on the second floor, near the center of the Centre Block. In the PMO rests the authority to command, compel, control. By tradition, by default and by elimination, its occupant is usually a person who badly needs to command, compel and control. As the PM's chief of staff, Ralph Dellaire, liked to say: “It's a dirty job, but everybody wants to do it.”

For many years, Louis St. Aubin had laughed at Ralph's offbeat humor throughout his days. Ralph used humor partly to maintain his sanity, mostly because it was his nature to enjoy life. No more. Ralph wasn't joking around these days, and no one in the PMO felt much like laughing—not since the attempted assassination of Victor Helliwell stopped being a mere crime and showed signs of becoming a political crisis of global proportions, with the RCMP right in the middle of the mess.

St. Aubin's feelings were in free-fall. *Canada is a middle power*, he said to himself, *economically and politically married to America—or at least living in sin with her. Is the U.S. government behind this WDA madness, or itself a victim? Thank God we have the LieDeck to help us figure all this out.*

The Prime Minister reconsidered his reasons for warning Randall Whiteside of the government's intention to classify the LieDeck. He really did believe that burying this technology would be a terrible mistake. If nothing else, such an approach would surely mobilize the riffraff. “What are you trying to hide?” the radicals and cynics would hiss. “Coward,” they'd call him. “Dictator!”

Technologies can't be buried anyway, he reasoned. *Suppression of the LieDeck would only mean that governments would have it and ordinary citizens wouldn't. People would be horrified by that kind of situation, and they'd have every right to scream. And besides, the pressure to classify the LieDeck top secret is all coming from the damn military, and I don't like it when soldiers flex political muscle.*

St. Aubin had one other reason for doing what he did, but he didn't want to think about that ... not now, not ever. He had issued the warning in the sincere hope that his old friend Randall would find a way around the problem, but he hardly expected him to pass out free LieDecks to all 195 ambassadors at the UN!

He stood sullenly at the window, looking out over the lawn at the old U.S. embassy across Wellington St., the one Uncle Sam occupied before the new colossus was built on Sussex Drive. For all the political purity and practicality behind his thinking, the LieDeck was bound to cause serious trouble, not just with Canada's elephantine “neighbor” to the south, but everywhere. Now St. Aubin was in it, up to his nostrils, and so was the country ... and the world. *“It's a dirty job,”* he remembered.

“Is it possible that even the PMO is bugged?” he wrote on a piece of paper when he heard the voices outside his office door. As Nick Godfrey and the RCMP Commissioner Bertrand Joly came in, Prime Minister St. Aubin put a finger to his lips and handed the note surreptitiously to his defense minister.

Godfrey looked at the note and shrugged helplessly. It was possible, he supposed. But anything was possible. He passed the note to Joly, who tried to hide the fact that he was insulted. If the PMO was bugged, then he had failed at his job, inexcusably. “Let's go to the parking lot out back and talk,” he wrote under St. Aubin's question.

They walked nonchalantly down the corridor, rode the elevator to the basement level, and exited through

the back door, telling their security escort that they would be right back, and not to follow. Bertrand Joly was a bit of a whale, and he had trouble keeping up as the other two wove their way between cars to a stone ledge at the back of the parking lot, led by the leader of the nation. Beyond the ledge, the ground dropped off steeply to the Ottawa River, more than a hundred yards below.

"Any news?" whispered St. Aubin when the Commissioner arrived at his side.

"Well," said Joly softly, gulping for oxygen as he spoke, "we ... still ... can't find Jeremy ... Ford."

"What do you mean you can't find him?"

"Jesus, Louis," said Godfrey, "I thought you would have heard. We heard almost an hour ago."

"Heard? Heard what?"

"He's ... missing," explained Godfrey. "His wife called me on my personal line this morning, looking for him. She hasn't seen him since yesterday. He told her he had a late cabinet meeting, which he obviously didn't. Security dropped him off at the East Block at 9:20 p.m. last night, and he hasn't been seen or heard from since. He left the East Block by the back door. The security guys that were on duty at the time figured maybe he had something ... shall we say 'private' going on."

"And you can't ... *find* him?" asked St. Aubin, incredulously.

"Thin air," said Joly—he'd caught his breath by now. "My guys are in his office right now, looking for clues. It's still possible there's some innocent explanation for all this, but we figure he was with the WDA. Had to be. Why else would a minister of the Crown just bugger off like that? The WDA must know we're on to them by now."

"Why wasn't I told about Jeremy?" demanded the Prime Minister angrily. "He's my minister of foreign affairs, for Christ's sake!"

"You probably *were* told," said Godfrey, on his right. "There's probably a memo or a fax on your secretary's desk. The entire government is having serious communications problems, ever since Whiteside announced the LieDeck yesterday. Nobody will use the damned telephone. Everybody is sending memos and faxes. The secretaries are drowning in faxes. Everybody's running scared. I think we just got thrust into a new world, Louis. Nobody knows how to cope with this fucking device, even though there's only a few of the things around. Nobody's talking to reporters, because some of them have LieDecks, or they can make tapes and run the tapes past a LieDeck later. And look at us! I mean just *look* at us, for the love of Christ! We're passing notes in the PMO and skulking off to a God damned parking lot!"

"And General Brampton, he's still not talking?" asked St. Aubin to the big man on his left.

"Not a word," said the Commissioner. "We're scared he's going to commit suicide. We got him under visual, around the clock. The Yanks think we've got him and they want him back, and they're entitled, but I'm not letting him go until he talks. I want to know if the American government is in on this WDA thing first."

"*You're* not letting him go until he talks?" said the prime minister.

"*We're* not letting him go until he talks," said Joly assertively. "I also think you ought to instruct me to formally arrest him, or we—uh—we could get charged ... with kidnapping."

"So do it," snapped the boss. "You're the commissioner, make an executive decision, for God's sake."

Bertrand Joly let it go. There was no point to a contest of wills with a prime minister, even if the man *was* acting like a jackass and copping out of his responsibilities. Joly resolved to make a formal arrest, and to let the media know. *No sense in having them find out on their own, with their LieDecks, and us getting egg on our faces*, he said to himself.

St. Aubin turned away from his colleagues, leaned on his elbows on the stone ledge, and stared down. The morning sun was sucking up molecules of water from the river and flooding Canada with a promise of green leaves and warm rains ahead. Little white carts were edging their way around the Royal Oaks on the Québec side of the river. A man in a kayak braved the icy waters and dodged the last of the ice floes as he struggled upstream. Life was continuing on, blundering on, as if nothing had changed.

"What was it you wanted to tell us about the UN, Prime Minister?" asked Godfrey, carefully. "I believe that's why you asked us to—"

"First things first," said St. Aubin as he rejoined the discussion. He reached into his pocket and retrieved his LieDeck. He turned it onto the beeper mode and said, "I'm not with the WDA ... are you?" He pointed the black case directly at his minister of defense.

"I most certainly am not," sputtered Godfrey, "and if—"

"Are you?" asked the Prime Minister, turning his attention to the Commissioner of the RCMP.

"You know fucking well I'm not," said Joly, "and I resent the fact that—"

"Look," interrupted the Prime Minister quietly, "I spoke earlier with Cam O'Connor, Randall Whiteside's security chief, and I have reason to believe that Denthor Gütsch, the Secretary General of the UN, is probably in on this WDA thing. Now what the fuck do we do about that?"

Chapter 29

WE CAN ALWAYS PUT A BAG OVER YOUR HEAD

"The two kids were back," said Annette, "down the hall, a little boy and his sister, I think. Their parents must have been visiting a patient, I guess. Anyway, they were fighting again—the kids. I was rooting for the girl, of course, but the funny thing was, even though I could hear every word, I couldn't make out what the problem was. In fact, I'm not even sure who won, or if anyone won, or if winning was even the point of it all. Metaphor for life, eh?"

"I've been such a dunce, ever since ... you know. I got this rhino of a nurse—her name's Beatrice—and for about ten times in a row, when she'd come in the room, I'd ask her what her name was. I just kept forgetting. I think she likes giving me grief, that one. And the last time Helen was here, I sort of passed in and out of consciousness. I'd start to say something and forget where I was going, or why I was saying it, and then she'd say something, and I'd lose track of her train of thought. I know I need the drugs, but wow, are they ever strong."

Annette paused for a few seconds, to make sure she had a firm grip on where her own train of thought was going.

"But today, I feel fantastic, like I just smoked a great joint, you know what I mean? Well, I guess you don't know, Steve. Sorry. I don't smoke that stuff any more anyway, or cigarettes either.

"They might let me eat some actual food in a few days, but the thing is, I'm not really hungry with this intravenous gizmo sticking in the back of my hand. I want to eat mostly just for the feel of the stuff in my

mouth, and the taste. They only let me drink warm tea. Major thrill.

"I guess ... I'm going to be here for a while, eh? On Earth, that is. I gave the doctor a hard time this morning. He told me I had a ninety percent chance of a full recovery, so I asked which ten percent wouldn't be working, and he just laughed. I couldn't quite laugh along with him then, at least not very convincingly. Not enough drugs swimming around inside me I guess. Too much pain. But I really enjoyed making him laugh.

"But listen to me now, talking like there's no tomorrow. See, there I go again, making death jokes. It's so nice to be able to really talk freely. I'm not sure why I'm enjoying all this yacking when I don't even know who you are. I mean, I remember meeting you and you were a priest and all that, and I remember we had a dance at the Beach Barn, you and me, but are you my ... friend now? You visited me once before, didn't you? Funny ... I can't be sure. I mean I know you did, but in my feelings ... I can't be sure. Anyway, I could use another friend now. Come to think of it, Helen is about the only friend I have ... really close friend. I always make friends with the men in my life, of course, but they always seem to be sort of passing through, no matter if they love me or if I love them.

"When I get better, maybe you and I will become actual friends ... I mean, more than a sick person jabbering away and an ex-priest or bishop or whatever putting up with her. I hope so. I like you, and I think I need somebody to talk to ... I mean besides Helen ... a man, I guess I'm trying to say.

"I seem to ... to sort of flit from man to man. Maybe I'm fickle ... or impossible to please. Lou Glassen and me—that was never going to work anyway. I only knew Victor for a short time, but there was far more to that man than I imagined at first. I'll miss not getting to know him. It shouldn't have been his time..."

She stopped to reflect on the near-death experience she'd had right after the shooting, on her introduction to heaven ... God ... or whoever. She remembered her decision to tell the doctors all about it, and others, if they'd listen, but not ... yet, not while her body was still crammed with chemicals.

"Men ... seem to pass through my life, you know?" she continued. "It wasn't there for me and Lou on any long-term basis, I don't think, but then it's usually me that stays away from long-term stuff. I always put the blame on the man, though, when things come crashing down. The natural order of things, eh? The truth is, I never wanted marriage and babies and the traditional route. Maybe I'll want them some day ... I don't know. Do you think you'll pass through my life, Steve?"

Steve's head was whirling. He had never heard anyone talk of life's prospects and possibilities at this speed, or with quite this degree of *glasnost*. This attractive, thirty-five-year-old woman with the gauze-encased head and the drug-addled brain was doing it again, dealing with him like he was a man, an ordinary man. He was sitting on a chair beside the bed, thankful that she was alive, but also grateful that this conversation was not taking place in front of the focus group he was involved with at Randall's HQ, studying and using the LieDeck. Fact was, or seemed to be, that too much truth, or truth too widely shared, could hurt.

"I'd be happy if ... we became friends," he said cautiously, "for as long as you like, or is that just me being too altruistic again? Let's say for as long as we both shall want to be friends. Am I getting the hang of—uh—not being a priest?"

"You're doing great, Steve," Annette smiled, "but you're still much too nice. Cut it out. Answer the damned question." Annette tried her best to crack a grin—gave it a respectable effort, all things considered. She saw crinkles around Steve's blue eyes, and liked what she saw.

"I ... don't want to just pass through your life," said Steve with clerical sincerity. "If you mean that we

might ... get ... involved, well, I'm afraid I'm rather inexperienced at such things. I'm—uh—you see..."

"You're a fifty-five-year-old fricken *virgin*?" squealed Annette.

"You got a problem with that, sweetheart?" said Steve, in his best Humphrey Bogart impersonation.

"Nooooo," said Annette, truthfully. "I think it's ... delightful."

"I'm way too old for you anyway," said Steve. "Besides, it's going to take me a while to sort myself out on that score, and I think I have to do that before I—"

"Oh, give it a rest," she said as she tried to adjust the pillow under her neck, looking for a cool spot. "I may be in an awful state now, but I still know bullshit when I hear it. If you're not a priest any more, in your heart, then you're a man, and you have to face the fact that you have an emotional life and needs and—" She cut herself off and paused to consider whether she dared to speak the rest of what was on the tip of her tongue. "And a weenie," she blurted out.

Annette laughed at her chutzpah, and so did Steve, from the gut, to her great relief. It still hurt Annette to laugh out loud, but it could be done, in moderation. She de-escalated deliberately, and tried not to let the pain show. Then she dropped a hand casually onto his, and held on.

"I'll bet you broke a few ladies' hearts when you started wearing long black dresses," she went on. "What on Earth made you decide to be a priest anyway? Whoa! Forget I even said that. Don't even start to answer, okay? We'll save that one for another time. Can I ask you something about myself?"

"No," said Steve bluntly.

Annette couldn't prevent herself from laughing this time. He was getting the hang of it all right; too well, perhaps. It ached to laugh, but she had asked for it, so she paid the price, and brought herself down to normal, never letting go of Steve's hand. There was a question still dangling in her mind, a stupid question, Steve would likely conclude, but an important question for her. "Am I going to be ugly when they take the bandages off?" she asked.

"You mean uglier than before?" asked the former bishop.

"I've created a monster," she complained. "Please. Be serious for a minute. I used to be pretty ... well, sort of pretty. I keep thinking I could end up in a circus where people pay ten bucks to gawk at my face. 'See the miracle-lady who got shot right between the eyes and lived to tell the tale,'" she pretend-barked.

Steve smiled. "Well," he began, "Bishop Sutherland would say that true beauty comes from God and rests in the soul. And Father Sutherland would say that beauty is only skin deep and—"

"And ugly goes right to the bone?" suggested Annette.

"—and that appearances shouldn't control your state of mind, your feelings, or the quality of your life."

"Enlightening," said Annette, "but not very helpful. What would a fifty-five-year-old male virgin say?"

He had to smile again. "I would guess that Steve, the mixed-up middle-aged teenager ... I think he'd say that if—uh—we ever get to feeling that way about each other, we can always put a bag over your head."

Annette hooted, too hard, and cringed from the pain. Steve was afraid he might have overstepped the bounds, but as she eased off wincing, the joy came back to the part of her face that could be seen.

"You bastard," she smiled. "I'll get you for that."

Steve released Annette's hand and suggested she should get some rest. He stood and pulled up the covers a bit, tucked them under her chin. She knew he was right, but she wasn't ready to agree just yet.

"I saw Victor," she said with her eye closed. "I ... I already told you that, didn't I? The last time you came?"

Steve couldn't decide what to say. He didn't know why he hadn't said something before about the fact that Victor was still alive, and now he was stuck.

"Didn't I?" Annette asked again, this time with her eye open, and with much less conviction regarding the accuracy of her memory.

Steve sat back down on the side of the bed, and found he was too scared to just take her hand again. "You ... don't watch television much, do you?" he asked.

"Never," she said ... by which she meant "rarely," she realized. "I hate it."

"And Helen didn't say anything to you ... about Victor?"

"No ... at least if she did, I don't remember."

"Victor's ... fine, Annette," said Steve gently. "He ... he wasn't hurt ... at all."

"But the explosion!" said Annette. "He couldn't have survived. And I saw him up in heaven and—"

"You sent him down to the bomb shelter, Annette. Actually, you saved his life. He's ... fine."

"Oh my God," said Annette in a tinny voice that seemed to have been left over from her childhood. "I totally ... forgot about that..."

Steve just sat there for a moment, not sure what he could say, not sure if there had been brain damage after all.

Annette's parents had died when she was young, but Victor, it seemed, was alive, and living on Planet Earth. "Then ... there is no heaven?" she asked sadly.

"I ... really don't know," said Steve, wondering privately if a LieDeck would beep his statement. "I used to believe there was one, or at least I *thought* I believed there was, and there ... there might be a heaven, Annette, but if there is, Victor isn't in it. He's here, and he's doing fine. Your N.D.E., your near-death experience, was apparently just a ... well, a hallucination, I guess we'd have to say."

Annette closed her eye again and tried to settle her feelings. She had seen paradise, and now it was gone. And so was Victor, the Victor she thought she knew, the guy who gave her the big speech in Ray's Restaurant about how maybe she was only being his friend because she was paid to play that role.

"How could I forget about sending him to the bomb shelter?" she asked pitifully. "And ... why hasn't he come to see me?"

"I guess he's ... been kind of busy," tried Steve, hoping to slide by the first question.

"Liar," she said. "Busy doing what?"

"Well, taxi-driving, actually," he said.

Annette looked at him with her good eye, and from the look on his face, her internal LieDeck told her

that he had spoken the truth. She didn't even want to know why Victor was back driving a stupid goddam cab. It was enough that he depended on the kindness of strangers, or the company of strangers.

"Give me your hand," she said as she reached out and took it. She held it between her own, kissed it and tucked it under her good cheek. "Tomorrow I'm gonna ask Nurse Bea for a big brown paper bag," she said through a yawn.

Chapter 30 YOU OKAY, HONEY?

Nancy Ferguson hadn't seen her husband, or her dogs, since last Tuesday, and she was anxious to get home mostly for those two reasons, although not necessarily in that order. She'd been at a conference in Vancouver, a not-terribly-useful discussion of substance abuse put on by the federal Department of Health and Welfare. She had stayed over for the Monday following the conference, to visit relatives.

"It was one of those last-minute things," she explained to her seatmate. "My boss, the deputy director, he was supposed to go, but he couldn't, so I was asked to fill in. Then when I got to the coast, I get this call from my husband Tom, and he says that two of our dogs got picked up in a damned helicopter by this big shot Randall Whiteside—that was last Thursday. The dogs actually belong to this guy Victor Helliwell, a taxi driver, but—he's boarded his two dogs with us for years, eh? He comes out to our farm every couple of weeks and takes them for a walk, but he never even stays for a coffee or anything like that. Strange fellow. I tried to call him on Saturday morning, from Vancouver, but there's no answer at his place. So then I call Whiteside Technologies, and this guy Mr. O'Connor gets on the line with me and tells me Victor is staying out at the Whiteside estate, and he says that Victor is okay, but then he tells me about that freaking attack on the Whiteside's lodge out at Wilson Lake, which was where Victor and his dogs were staying. And since then, I can't reach this O'Connor guy *or* Victor by phone. I just don't know what the hell is going on, and I—"

"Oh yeahhhh," sang the mother of four who had been chatting with Nancy since they flew over Winnipeg. "I heard about that on the news. So you know the mystery guy that was involved in that explosion thing?"

"I'm really anxious to contact him," said Nancy, remembering but utterly ignoring her promise to Mr. O'Connor not to tell anyone that Victor was the guy at the lodge when the attack took place. "I want to find out what the heck happened. I mean, he's a nice guy, you know? But he's just a taxi driver, after all. I can't imagine what he was doing at the Whitesides' lodge in the first place."

"Maybe it had something to do with that new lie detector Whiteside Tech announced just yesterday," said Nancy's temporary friend, "that LieDeck device everybody's talking about."

"Well ... I *seriously* doubt that," she said with a smile.

A flight attendant was asking people to fasten their seatbelts and prepare for landing at Ottawa International. Nancy looked out the window at the brown, wet farmland. There had been a few stubborn pockets of snow when she had taken off from Ottawa five days earlier, but they had melted now.

"My dogs are Samoyeds," she said. "I bet they're just soaking. When I'm away, my husband Tom takes care of the kennel, sort of. He's not the best poop shoveler I ever had, but he's free. The taxi driver, Victor, his two sammies are called Snowball and Kodiak, and like I said, they were taken out to Mr. Whiteside's lodge. I really hope they're okay. That O'Connor guy made like he was in a huge hellova hurry. He never even told me if the dogs got hurt when the lodge got blown up ... although I'm sure he would have said if..."

The 747 said a quiet hello to Mother Earth. The passengers baby-stepped their way to the exits, and twenty minutes later, Nancy was in her car, paying the parking fee, and on her way.

Her route home took her up the Québec side of the river. She had to make a stop at Le Général, a highwayside store on the 148 near Luskville, to pick up a few forty-pound bags of dog food, wholesale. She had decided that from there, she would cross back to Ontario on the ferry, at Quyon. It was almost five o'clock in the afternoon, and doubling back through Ottawa meant fighting thousands of federal "silly servants" driving home from work. Nancy wanted to get home in time to watch the fireworks on TV—the press conference that the Prime Minister was holding, presumably about the LieDeck, at six o'clock, according to the car radio. The ferry would be the quickest way as well as the most convenient.

When she arrived at the Quyon turnoff, she decided that before heading down to the ferry landing, she would silence the insistent messages she was getting from her stomach.

"RESTAURANT—RESTAURANT—RESTAURANT," she read on the oval sign as she drove into the lot. *What a strange sign*, she thought.

* * *

"Oh, man, we're in shit," said Bobby Thompson to his chum at the backmost table. "This LieDeck thing is the end of the fucking world, man. We're gonna get nailed for the break-in at the restaurant here, and they're gonna find out that Jake shot Fatty over a dumb-ass pot deal, and we're gonna get dragged into that fucking mess, and they're gonna find out fucking *everything*. Everybody in the whole damned country that's out on bail, they're all gonna skip, man—you watch. We gotta head outta here before the cops start in on us with that LieDeck thing."

"Keep your fuckin' voice down, furchrissakes," said Geoff Farley. "I gotta think."

"Oh jeeze," whispered Bobby. "Check out the broad that just walked in."

Four teenaged eyeballs undressed Nancy Ferguson as she entered Ray's, and her two adult eyeballs stared them down, told them without words that they didn't have the first notion of how to please a real woman.

"Excuse me, Miss? Could I have a chicken sandwich to go, and a milk?" she asked.

"Sure thing," said Claire.

"And if you don't mind my asking, how come the sign outside says 'RESTAURANT—RESTAURANT—RESTAURANT'? I've seen it before, but I never really noticed that—"

"Oh," laughed the waitress, "that was Merrick's idea, Merrick McFee over there. He owns the garage out back. You tell her, Merrick."

"Well," said Merrick after a rather dramatic puff of tobacco, "it's 'cause this here is Québec, and under Bill 178, outdoor signs gotta be in both official languages, as long as one of them isn't English."

"I'm ... not sure I understand," said Nancy, turning to the waitress for help.

"That's sort of the whole idea," said Claire, crossing her eyes.

"Oh," Nancy managed with a confused half-grin. "Do you ... have a pay phone?"

"Sorry honey," said Claire, "but there's a phone just inside the kitchen door. It's okay to use it when Ray's not here, if it's not long distance. It's just to your left as you—"

"You just watch," warned Merrick, pointing at Claire with his lit cigarette. "Ray's gonna come back with one of them LieDeck thingies and ask if anybody used the phone when he was out."

Nancy stopped in her tracks, uncertain of what to do.

"Don't pay any mind to that old reprobate," said Claire. "Ray pulls a LieDeck on me and all's I gotta do is threaten to tell his mother about them young ladies he brings in here after hours. Go ahead, use the damned phone."

Nancy smiled her appreciation for the waitress's courtesy and wit, and found the black wall-phone just inside the kitchen door, shiny and wet with molecules of grease. She called her own number. After three rings, she concluded that her husband wasn't home and decided to retrieve her messages. She entered her security code, and as she waited for technology to catch up with reality, she eavesdropped on the ruckus in the restaurant. Everybody was arguing and joking about "that LieDeck thing that just got invented."

There were two calls from people wanting information and prices on puppies; her perpetually worried mother had called to see whether she had arrived from Vancouver in one piece; and ... *what's this? Tom's voice? Leaving a message on our own answering machine? How could that be? Why would ... ?*

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way, Nancy," said Tom's voice, "but with this new LieDeck device, you were bound to find out sooner or later. I have to tell you ... I *do* love you, but there's another lady in my life, for the past year or so, and I'm *in* love with her.

"She's married, but her husband works in the north and only comes home every eight weeks. I'm at her place now. I'm calling from over there. We talked about it, and she and I ... well, we want to be together, you know. There's no sense making a scene with you or with her husband. I know you never suspected a thing, and I'm glad you didn't because it meant that our time together was good, or at least as good as—"

Nancy hung up the phone and stood there like a pillar of quivering Jell-O as the tears dribbled down her face. Claire couldn't help but notice, so she came over and put a big arm around her waist.

"You okay, honey?" she asked.

Chapter 31

ILL BE MEETIN' GOD THIS YEAR ... IF'N THERE IS ONE

In the early evening, Steve Sutherland headed out to meet Buck Ash at the British Hotel in Quyon for a beer, as planned. He didn't have a car because he didn't know how to drive, but he knew he'd have no difficulty getting there. In Norway Bay, the trick was to go down to Henderson's, the only store in town, shoot the breeze for a while, and wait. Sooner or later, somebody headed for Quyon would stop in, and sure enough, someone did, and now here he was, at the British.

"How come you're in the area anyways?" asked Buck as the two men found a fairly ungrungy table near the empty stage.

"My brother Tony has a cottage out in Norway Bay," explained Steve. "He bought it from the family estate when my dad passed on. When I told Tony about my predicament, he said I should take a few months at the cottage to get myself together and decide what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. I like it up there. Nice people. Have you always lived in Quyon?"

"Four draft," hollered Buck to the waiter. "Oh yeah ... 'cept for my hockey years. Born and bred, I guess you could say. So, have you made a decision yet, Father ... or I mean Steve? Jeeze, I still can't get my brain around just calling you Steve. Anyways, did you figure out what's next for you, or are you gonna just sort of take your time on that score?"

Steve paid for the four drafts and tipped the waiter as he pondered how to answer Buck's question. It had been a long time since anyone had inquired about his current state of being from the point of view of plain, ordinary curiosity and caring. *Every priest and bishop should be compelled to take a rural sabbatical once in a while*, he thought.

"I haven't really figured that out," he said. "I feel like praying a lot. That's what I always used to do when I felt a need for guidance. But praying doesn't seem to work for me any more. When I get the urge to pray, I write, pages and pages. I'm not exactly sure why, but it sure beats sitting around doing nothing and getting nowhere."

"I pray," admitted Buck as he pried his glass from the fiber coaster. "Been praying up a storm lately, but like you say, it don't seem to work so good for me neither. O' course it never did work for me, Steve, which is maybe why I didn't do much by way of church stuff all my life ... one reason anyways. I guess you must have figured praying was like helping you sort things out, I mean back when you were the bishop and all."

Steve smiled at the frankness of their discussion and tried hard to remember the last time his ecclesiastic colleagues had jumped into the pudding like this. He couldn't—not because his memory was failing, but because they never did, not even in the shadowy privacy of the confessional. "Maybe my writing is a kind of praying, Buck," he said. "I don't know. Maybe I'm writing a long letter to God. Do you believe in God, Buck?"

He was a mountain of a man, Buck was, an enforcer during his stint in the NHL. He had more hair on his forearms than some men had on their heads. His face never quite looked like it had been shaved—at least not recently. He could have made a career in pro wrestling if he had wanted to, or so the locals always said. At the moment, however, there were salty droplets hanging shamelessly from the stubble.

"Tell me what's the matter," said Steve.

Buck's eyes were glued to his beer. His lips moved slightly, but nothing came out, and Steve decided he'd best just wait this one out.

Finally, Buck spoke up. "I'll be meetin' God this year ... if'n there is one," he said softly.

"I beg your pardon?" said Steve.

"I'm ... d-dying, is what's the d-damned matter, Father," he stuttered as he lit another cigarette. "I got fuckin' lung cancer. It doesn't even hurt, except when I cough up at night. I been coughing up blood for a year. Never did nothing about it. Tried to quit these things. Never could. They told me to go in the hospital for chemo and all that stuff back in January, but I never went. I'm dead meat in a month or two, and I'm..." He turned his head away as if to prevent himself from seeing Steve, or to prevent his new friend from seeing him break down, or to not break down. "I'm..."

"You're afraid," said Steve soothingly. "It's okay to be afraid, Buck. Everybody feels afraid of dying, even the pope."

Buck signaled for two more beers and collected himself. "Yeah, but the pope there, he's gotta be pretty sure of making it, eh? But me, I led a pretty bad life. I did stuff, you know, bad stuff, and like I know a

lot of stuff, bad stuff, that I never told nobody."

So that's it, thought Steve. He wants to confess, probably for the first time since third grade. What terrible secrets are troubling this simple soul? Why does it take the prospect of imminent death to bring a man to deal with the requirements of life? And ... and what business is it of mine, now that I'm no longer a priest? And what can I tell him, anyway?

"Look, Buck," he said, "I'm not a priest any more, and I'm not sure I could help you much even if I was still a priest, but if you want to talk about it I'll listen, and if you want me to keep it confidential, to not tell anybody, I'll do that, just like I was still a priest."

Buck paid for another round and threw back his shoulders to perk up his courage. "I've got to talk to somebody," he said quietly towards his glass, "and I guess I wouldn't mind talking your ear off for a while. If you'd rather not, it's okay, eh? I just figured..."

"Go ahead, Buck," invited the former bishop. "Tell me what's bothering you ... I mean, besides the cancer."

"Well, first off, there's this guy, Fatty Crosbie, and he used to grow grass, you know, dope, marijuana, up near Shawville. There's a cop lives over in Bristol; his name's Jake; he caught him, and when Fatty tried to run away, Jake shot him, killed him. Nothing ever came of it, but the thing of it is, Fatty was paying Jake off for years. Gave him thousands of dollars to keep quiet, eh?"

Buck felt the burden lift as he finally made himself tell, and Steve felt the burden land on his shoulders.

"What *really* happened is Fatty got born again," explained Buck. "Is that how you say it? This old preacher up in Shawville got a hold of him and convinced him to change his ways, eh? So Fatty, he comes to me and he tells me he's gonna tell the Sûreté like about everything, you know, about the dope, *and* about giving all that money to Jake."

Buck stopped long enough to take a fortifying gulp of beer, and told himself to keep going, to get right through it.

"Well, I know Jake, eh?" he said. "I figure before he killed Fatty, he got him to say who he talked to, and even if he didn't, now with that LieDeck thing that Mr. Whiteside's making, he's gonna find out, eh? All's he's gotta do is ask me, and if I say I don't know nothing, he'll know I'm lying, eh? I figure Jake already knows that I know, and if other people find out, he'll shoot me too, sure as shit, just like he shot Fatty, even if it wasn't me that told on him."

There! He'd done it. He swallowed the rest of his glass and took a preliminary guzzle out of its waiting twin.

"Kinda funny, eh?" he said as he tried to smile and make a tiny bit of eye contact, "me worrying about getting shot when I already know I'm gonna kick the bucket pretty soon anyhow? So I figure maybe you could tell me what to do, you know, like whether I should tell anybody before I ... before I..."

Steve watched "the Buck" throw back the last of another draft and light yet another in his never-ending string of cigarettes. "I can go with you to the Sûreté if you want," he volunteered. "I can't tell you much about God and heaven and forgiveness and all that, but I think the law is important, and you could help justice to be done before you—uh—before the lung cancer catches up with you. You'd feel better, and that would be one big problem off your conscience, and in the hands of the right people. We can go right now if you..."

"Two more," bellowed Buck at the bartender. He'd have said four more, except he was in need and Steve wasn't. "Okay," he said. "But there's more, a lot more I gotta say."

Buck became less eloquent and more verbose as the minutes went by and the glasses of beer disappeared behind his lips. Between trips to the can, he talked about his secret employment with Patriot Security, about his duty to report all the local gossip—to "rat on my friends," was the way he put it. He told Steve about the stolen cars he and his buddies would drive up from the States and sell to the locals. He told all about the smuggled-in cigarettes that most everybody near the poverty line smoked. He told about the women in his life, the two failed marriages, the under-aged girls, and the many housewives he had "borrowed" over the years.

"Christ, this one time, 'bout twenny years ago, I even did it with..." Steve watched as the end of that sentence got buried in amber dope. It seemed there were some things you just don't confess, no matter what.

"Plus," added Buck in a loud afterthought, "plus ... you gotta come with me to talk to this old lady, Barbara Farley. She's the widow of that guy Joe Farley they charged with assault on Bishop Malini. You gotta remember that ... I mean from when you was the bishop? Well, this old gal Barbara, she's been tellin' lies to them government people that are looking into that case of them kids at St. Dominique's Boys School, and she's gonna die from her heart just like her Joe did unless somebody talks some sense into her head ... 'specially if they trip her up with one of them LieDecks."

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 23, 2014

Chapter 32

JUST CHECKING

Prime Minister St. Aubin adjusted his tie in the mirror and hoped he could get through the press conference without a blunder ... or a stroke. It had originally been scheduled for 6:00 p.m. yesterday, but he'd cancelled it, ostensibly for political reasons, but mostly for psychological ones. Now, twenty hours later, after a divisive cabinet meeting that almost led to a revolt, announcements had to be made. The signing of the Russian wheat deal out in Winnipeg could have been handled by the Minister of Agriculture, of course, but this depressing UN situation ... well, he had to deal with that one personally, so he'd decided to take the plaudits for the wheat deal too.

"Am I a thing of beauty?" he asked his chief of staff.

"You look fine," said Ralph Dellaire. "Just remember, there's no rule says you have to take questions. If it gets rough, tell them you're late for a meeting or something."

"You know I can't lie," scolded the PM. "They've got LieDecks." He gave his image one last check in the mirror. "Do you think I'd escape with my life if I just told them to stuff their fucking questions?"

"You should do exactly that," said Dellaire. "What could they do?"

"Well, I'll give it a try," said St. Aubin as he headed into the lights.

The press had always been respectful of this prime minister's habit of starting with an opening statement. It was usually boring and unhelpful, but that was a small sacrifice for them. They would have their chance to be rude and confrontational soon enough.

"Ladies and gentlemen," St. Aubin said, "I know you have questions about all sorts of different things, but I have two important announcements to make, and I'm afraid I won't have time for any questions."

"Beep," went dozens of LieDecks.

The Prime Minister's cheeks went pink with fury. He couldn't get used to strangers having access to his conscience, nor did he particularly want to get used to it. "Just checking," he quipped. "Now if you don't mind, I'll ask you to turn those things off. You can always do the truth test with your tapes, later."

The reporters took out their LieDecks and reluctantly flipped switches. The request was reasonable, and there was always that new safeguard, the ability to LieDeck-verify tapes after the fact. When the commotion settled down, the Prime Minister continued.

"First, in about..." He checked his watch pointedly. "In about two hours, I'll be on my way to Winnipeg to formally sign the new wheat sale to the Republic of Russia. We're all concerned about the terrible repression that has again gripped that beleaguered state, but there's a lesson in this for Vladimir Latzoff. If Russia had stayed the course towards democracy and freedom, we'd probably be *giving* them wheat, or at least advancing loan credits. As things stand, we will gladly accept one-point-eight billion American dollars of their dwindling supply of hard currency. Bertha McNeil, the Minister of Agriculture, has sent a stiffly worded note to the Russian leader to this effect ... with my blessing."

He waited for the scribes to finish scribbling, and he wondered why they still did that, now that they all used tape-recorders. He cleared his throat, and unconsciously threw a worried glance at the row of staring cameras.

"My second announcement is very serious, and will come as a shock to all of you, I'm sure. For reasons that I do not wish to discuss at this time, Canada is temporarily—and I emphasize *temporarily*—suspending its membership in the United Nations. I've already recalled Ambassador Lynden Jacks. Canada was a founding member of the UN, so I take this action with profound regret. I hope we will find a way to resolve the difficulties that led to this decision as soon as possible. And now, I really must go."

"Beep," went several LieDecks.

"What's going on at the United Nations?" a reporter shouted as St. Aubin turned to leave. "Why did Canada withdraw?"

"Is it true that an RCMP officer has committed suicide?"

"It's been three days since the bombing at Whiteside's lodge. Why won't the RCMP answer our calls?"

"Was the RCMP involved in the raid?"

"Where's Jeremy Ford?"

"Yes, where is the Minister of Foreign Affairs?"

"Why did you arrest General Brampton? Doesn't he have diplomatic immunity?"

"Why don't you allow LieDecks in the Commons for Question Period?"

"When are we going to get some God damned answers?"

Chapter 33

THOU SHALT NOT BORROW

Stuart Harper had been the Whitesides' chauffeur for more than twenty years, and yet few people in the

family, or at Patriot, knew his real name. Six years ago, Sarah—then only eight—had nicknamed him Jeeves. He thought it was perfectly silly, even demeaning, but Sarah was such a sweet child, and Harper—Jeeves—let it be. That was back in 2008. This was 2014, and not a good day.

Sarah got out of the limousine the same way she'd passed the last forty-five minutes in the backseat—without a word. Jeeves had seen her moods before, the normal ups and downs of a fourteen-year-old, but he had never seen her depressed ... adult depressed. He had asked about her day at school, and he had tried to find out what was bothering her, but he got no response whatsoever. Sarah had indulged in minor bouts of self-pity in the past, but she'd never been rude.

"Hi Sarah," called Lucinda from the front door. "How was your day at school?" Sarah didn't even look up. She walked right by her and straight up the stairs. "Has she told you anything?" asked the maid.

"I'm a chauffeur, not a damned psychologist," said Jeeves. "And if she keeps taking her troubles out on me, I'm not going to pick her up at school any more. I don't have to do that, you know. And from now on she can God damn well call me by my proper name, and..."

Lucinda realized she wasn't going to get anywhere with Jeeves, so she went upstairs to Sarah's bedroom and knocked. "Sarah," she called, "do you want to talk?"

"Go away," said Sarah through the door.

"Now Sarah, I know something's bothering you. Please, we've had some good talks before. Why don't we try to figure it out together?"

There was a long silence from inside the bedroom, one of those charged silences that teenagers master instinctively. Sarah was awash in despair. Thinking seemed impossible. "I want to be alone," she managed.

"Well I want to talk," said Lucinda gently. "Your mother will be home in an hour, and it would be best if this got sorted out before she gets home. Sometimes I'm pretty good at coming up with ideas, you know. Remember when you broke your sister's music box and—"

"Okay, you can come in," she said as she flipped over onto her stomach and stuffed her face into the pillow.

Lucinda came in and closed the door. She sat on the side of the bed and ran her brown fingers through Sarah's brown hair. A year ago, she would have started off by singing a Venezuelan lullaby. But Sarah was fourteen now, fourteen going on twenty. She had a little woman look to her, and even though she was still very much a child inside, a more grown-up approach would be needed now.

"You know I won't tell if you ask me not to," Lucinda reminded her young friend.

"Yes you will. You'll tell," she said into the pillow.

"I didn't deserve that, Sarah. You know when we had talks in the past, I never told. We always found a way out, a way that you were able to do yourself."

"They'll get it out of you," said Sarah, "with that LieDeck thing. You won't mean to tell, but they'll find out."

At least one thing was clear. Something important had happened. Sarah was scared, very scared.

"You don't know that for a fact," said Lucinda carefully. "I think you know you're going to have to deal

with this sooner or later. I just want to help you find the best way to do that, okay?"

Bit by bit, Sarah's fears were overcome, at least to the extent that she could try to express herself. She turned over, sat up, and began to cry, loudly. "It's ... it's ... it's Mr. Peters," she blurted out between sobs, "the music ... teacher ... he got ... fired today, and it ... it was my fault."

Lucinda wondered for a moment if this was one of those rare occasions when her duty would be to withdraw and let the parents cope. If the problem was that serious, she would have to tell if she was asked, perhaps even if she wasn't asked. But for now, Sarah needed help. "Let's start from the very beginning," she said as she took her hand. "Why was Mr. Peters fired?"

Sarah knew she had to go on, now that she had started. She stopped sniffing and just charged forward. "You remember last fall, I told you Cathy Sanders went to the principal and said Mr. Peters ... you know ... touched her?"

"Yes, I remember," said Lucinda. "She said that he had touched her breasts, and they didn't believe her, and then later she changed her story and said he didn't do it."

"That's right," said Sarah, "but he *did* do it!"

"How do you know that?"

"Cathy told me, and I believed her."

"Could she have been lying?"

"No. I know when she's lying. She was real scared."

"Well, we know one thing for sure," said Lucinda. "She had to be lying at least one time before. I mean, she said he did it and then she said that he didn't do it. Why did she change her story back then, Sarah? Did she talk to you about that?"

"Yaaaaa," said Sarah nervously, and nothing more.

"Well?" Clearly, Lucinda had asked the right question, and just as clearly, Sarah did not want to answer. "Please, Sarah ... tell me why Cathy changed her mind and said Mr. Peters didn't do it."

"Well," said Sarah hesitantly, "Mr. Peters told Cathy that if she didn't change her story and say he didn't do it, he would tell her mom that she had some ... you know ... condoms ... in her school bag."

Lucinda was fairly sure they were getting to the point, but with Sarah, it seemed, that sometimes took a while. "And ... did she?" she asked.

"Yeah, but they weren't hers," insisted Sarah. "She was keeping them for her sister, in grade twelve. Her sister made her change her story so she wouldn't get in trouble about the condoms. She even gave her her bike."

Lucinda sorted through the pronouns to make sure she had the story organized in her head. "I take it the principal knows the truth now, about Mr. Peters?"

"Yeah," said Sarah, "and it's my fault."

"But ... how is it your fault?" asked the maid.

"Well, I borrowed Dad's LieDeck and took it to school, to show to my friends and—"

"You took your father's LieDeck!" exclaimed Lucinda. "Sarah, how could you? You know he said to leave it alone."

"I just *borrowed* it," said Sarah tearfully.

"Okay, I didn't mean you stole it ... I'm sorry, Sarah," said the maid. "Now tell me, what happened with the LieDeck at school?"

"Well, we were playing with it at lunch. All the kids heard about it already on TV, but they never saw one. They all thought it was really neat. And when we got in class they were still talking about it, and Mrs. Draper heard them and took it away from me and said I could pick it up in the principal's office after school, so then when I went to get it, that's when I heard him, Mr. Bennet, the principal, using my LieDeck, or rather Dad's LieDeck, to ask questions to Mr. Peters, with the beeper on, and then he fired him."

Chapter 34

'CUZ IT'S RIGHT ... AND 'CUZ OF THE BEEPER

Barbara Farley was tugging at her dark-blue jacket, the same one she had worn to Joe's funeral, until she got herself good and comfortable on the chair behind the rail. "You can start now if you want," she said to Justice Caughy. "I'm all settled in."

The chairman of the Caughy Commission thanked his witness as sincerely as he could without cracking up the audience. Then he asked Joe Farley's widow to just get on with it. "And please stick to the facts this time, if you don't mind," he said emphatically. "Last week, you told us that the only thing that took place between your husband and Bishop Malini was ... how exactly did that read?"

After a brief search, the clerk found the right spot. "A good old-fashioned tongue-lashing, with nothing held back," she read from her records. "He pretty well covered all the cuss words we generally use down on the farm, plus a few more he must have picked up somewhere else."

"Mrs. Farley," resumed the chairman, "I understand from your counsel that you've had a change of heart, that you are now ready to give us the full story. So ... did your husband assault Bishop Malini, yes or no?"

"Well, Your Honor, when you say assault, if you mean did he paste the son-of-a-bitch in the kisser, then I'd hafta say yes, he did."

Everyone hooted, and Justice Caughy gave a few good bangs of his hammer to quiet things down.

"Came home with a hell of a sore hand," she added gleefully, "and a grin that stayed glued on his mug for a couple of weeks."

"Order," yelled Justice Caughy, with a bang of his gavel, "or I'll clear the room." No one wanted that, with the exception of the chairman, and order quickly returned.

"So ... when you told us that the Bishop slipped and hit his face on the corner of his desk, that wasn't true?" he asked.

"Oh, he hit his face on the desk all right," insisted an unrepentant Barbara Farley, "just like I told you last week, just like it was ordained from above, is how I always say it. But the part about him slipping, well, that wasn't true. Like I said, Joe smacked him a good one right in the eye, just like I said he oughta. I was proud of my Joe for doing that! It shoulda got done a long time ago. Can't say he ever regretted it

neither. Used to brag about it day and night, right up to when he died from his heart. He used to say—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Farley," interrupted the chairman stiffly. "That will be all for now, although I would like to ask you something. Why did you decide to change your mind and tell us about this now?"

Joe's widow fidgeted around in her seat. She glanced over at her lawyer for guidance, but there was none forthcoming. "Well," she said, "I told ... ummm ... 'cuz it's right ... and 'cuz of the beeper."

"Because of the ... beeper, did you say?" asked the judge.

"Yeah, that newfangled gadget that Bishop Sutherland and Buck Ash told me about when they come over to my place to talk about Bobby Thompson and my grandson Geoff. They said that if I didn't tell, you'd find out using the beeper thing and I'd go to jail and—"

"Reconvene at 10:00 a.m. tomorrow," said Justice Caughy as he stood to leave and gave his gavel one final, disgusted slap.

Chapter 35 NOBODY HERE BUT US LIARS

Steve Sutherland had had a dyspeptic discussion with Annette's physicians the evening before, and had persuaded them to yield to the patient's wish to cut back dramatically on her medication. To everyone's surprise, Annette was able to deal with the pain ... rather well, actually. She had considerable discomfort, but she was adamant that physical pain was preferable to the mental disorientation that had been her lot for the past five days.

She had called Randall Whiteside at noon, just as her brain began to defuzzify, and they'd had a long, personal and humorous conversation. Randall was delighted to find her so lucid and cheerful.

"They're going to let me eat pretty soon," she gloated. "The only problems I have now, apart from monocular vision and an ego-alert about my appearance, is that I'm so bored. I feel so ... useless."

Randall had a solution for that one, or at least a partial solution. Apparently, one of the journalists who got a free LieDeck at the Whiteside press conference had submitted a program proposal to Alpha TV that very day, Monday. In the hyper-competitive media market of 2014, it was often a case of "first up, best dressed," so Alpha Television had thrown together a show based on the LieDeck, literally overnight. It was called *LieDeck Live*, and it was due to air for the first time at five o'clock. This show was troubling to Randall, so he asked Annette to monitor the program, to watch it and tape it, to see what Alpha was up to and report by phone to the focus group, which was meeting regularly at head office. Even though Annette almost never watched television, she accepted this invitation with some exuberance.

Steve had arranged to watch the show with her. He had arrived a good half hour early, and had found her sitting up in bed, yapping away to Helen on the phone. The dressings had been reduced to a triangular patch on the left side of her face, from just above her nostrils to the center of her hairline and back to the ear, and another, smaller patch on the back left of her neck, where the bullet had exited her body.

She'd had her hair washed, cut, and styled so that it partially concealed the evidence of the entrance wound ... a nice boost for her self-esteem. That, and the reduction of her pain medication, made for a rather spectacular metamorphosis. If Steve were blind, he would have sworn Annette was in perfect health, physically and otherwise.

Randall had sent over a TV and a VCR, with a remote. *LieDeck Live* had been promoted every half hour, and she'd made a point of taping one of the teasers. The new show was being billed as the hottest property in the history of Canadian TV, and Alpha had already sold the American rights. It certainly wasn't what Randall had in mind when he distributed LieDecks to the Canadian media, but if someone decided to use the device to laugh at liars for an hour a day, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Since the distribution of those initial LieDecks, legitimate newspapers had begun to resemble scandal sheets, not so much by choice as from necessity. Unearthing a scandal was now about as easy as toasting a bagel. Small wonder that "trash TV" had jumped on the bandwagon.

The idea behind the show was to confront a situation and see who would dare to lie, or lie unwittingly. If a guest lied, there would be merriment all around. If it turned out they were telling the truth, the show might land a news scoop. As long as the story was truly implausible, juicy and potentially good for a few laughs, you could get on *LieDeck Live*, or so the promo said. Guests were to be paid \$5,000 to appear, and if they didn't get beeped by the LieDeck, they stood to earn another five grand.

Annette sat in her bed, talking excitedly with Steve, waiting for the show to start and cringing at the way the media intended to cheapen the profound transformation that might soon sweep the planet. "Horrid hucksters of hype" she'd called them during her telephone chat with Randall. But whatever their faults, these horrid hucksters certainly had the eyes and ears of the masses.

"Ladieees and gentlemen," beamed a slick, handsome man at exactly five o'clock, "welcome to *LieDeck Live*, the best place on Earth to get in touch with reality, whether you want to or not."

The studio audience erupted with applause, as instructed by flashing red signs on either side of the set.

"I am your host, Wally Trout, and in our studio today there are a few ordinary people with wild stories about how the LieDeck Revolution, as the newspapers are calling it, has changed their lives in the past two days. I think I can safely say that there's..." He put a cupped hand behind his ear and leaned forward. The audience didn't need any coaching on this item, at least no more than had been dished out during the warm-up session.

"Nobody here but us liars!" they screamed in unison.

"You're beautiful," exclaimed Trout. "We've got a great new show for you. You'll meet Elsa Worthington, a Hamilton woman who claims that she absolutely despises one of her own children."

"Applause applause ... God these people are sick," said Helena Wong, the producer, up in the booth. "I love it."

"And you'll meet Lou Moffat," continued Trout, "a man who's been employed by the International Nickel Company for his entire adult life. He claims—now get this—that he hasn't done an honest day's work for twenty years, since 1994."

"And ... applause. I'll bet this guy's sex life is a story in itself," snorted Helena as she watched the zoom on Moffat's pockmarked face. "Where did we scrape him up? It's a good thing ugly is in this year."

"And we have a very special guest today, a young man by the name of Jean Proulx. This eighteen-year-old lives three miles from the Whiteside estate. He claims to know the name of the man who invented the LieDeck, and he claims that this man was living at the Whitesides' lodge at the time of the attack. He also claims it was the inventor who was the target of the attack. Most important of all, Mr. Proulx claims to know *for certain* that the RCMP was in fact involved in this terrible crime. Do we believe him?"

"Hell no," chanted the audience.

"Liiaaar, liiaaar," they sang.

"I believe him," shouted a dissenting voice from the back.

"Annette," said Steve, "that's the punk who put snot on my shirt a couple of days ago, when Buck Ash came along and rescued me. I told you about that, remember?"

"Who?" said Annette. "Later," she snapped—she was at work, after all.

"Today's guests have only told us their stories in whispered tones," stage-whispered Wally Trout, "because we instructed everybody who called the show to whisper to us. As you probably already know, the magical LieDeck doesn't work when you whisper, so we don't even know if our guests told *us* the truth or not. Buuuut," he bellowed in full voice, "we're gonna find out, aren't we?"

"Go get 'em, Wally," shouted the audience.

"Applause, applause ... set for commercials?" asked Helena.

"We'll *all* go get 'em," bellowed Wally manically. "And I'll be back with our first guest in a moment, right after these important messages."

"Theme music. Pan audience. Applause applause. Back to Trout doing his dumb-assed dance. Commercial in two, aaaaaand cut to commercial," instructed Helena in the control room.

Annette was on the phone immediately. There had been nothing in the teasers about Jean Proulx, likely because of the RCMP connection in his story, in case he was actually telling the truth and the RCMP tried to stop his appearance on the show. Also, Victor's identity, as the inventor of the LieDeck, had apparently been discovered. "Has to stop driving cab," she scribbled in her notebook as she waited on hold. "How the hell did that kid find out?" she added in her notes.

"Turn on channel nine right away," she yelled into Cam's ear when he came on the line. "Get Whiteside to stop whatever he's doing and watch. They've got this kid on who says he knows the details about the alleged RCMP connection regarding the attack. He's from Quyon, just a teenager. His name is Jean Proulx. I don't know how he could know anything, but he'll be on after two other people. And..." she checked her notes "...oh yeah, tell Victor they probably know about him, and if they do, he'll have to quit driving cab ... immediately."

She then put Steve on the line to relate what little he knew about this teenager from Quyon. "He's a punk, Cam. I just can't believe he knows anything. It's got to be a scam or a set-up."

After six commercials, Wally Trout was back, with his mouthful of expensive teeth and a strange array of meaningless bodily movements. The mother of Terry Worthington stood behind a railing, looking like a prisoner at the dock. In front of her, but just out of reach, was the Alpha LieDeck, taped to a mike stand.

"A mother of four discovers that her son Terry is the most unpopular kid at school," explained Trout. "He lies compulsively, and doesn't seem to care who knows it. He's allegedly stupid, irresponsible, lazy, nasty, and unlovable. But he is her offspring, her firstborn! What's a mother to do?"

"Well, Elsa Worthington *is* that mother, and she has recently realized that she doesn't like her boy any more than anybody else does. She wants him to get out of the house and never come back, but her husband won't hear of it. Ladies and gentlemen, from Hinton Falls, Alberta, please welcome Ellllllsa

Worthington."

"Theme music, applause, kissyface," said the producer. "Now wave to everybody back home, Elsa. Good girl. Where the hell's Hinton Falls? Fade music, aaaaaand..."

"Welcome to the show Elsa ... may I call you Elsa? Now, you really do hate your own fifteen-year-old son! Isn't that the truth?"

"Yes I do. He's a jerk," spat Elsa Worthington at her host, to the loud approval of the audience. "He's an asshole," she added, "and I'm fed up with people saying it's my fault. I'm a decent person, a loving, caring person, but my oldest son happens to be a creep. It's not my fault. I agree with everybody else who knows him. He's a piece of shit."

The audience was delirious. The LieDeck had yet to beep. This lady was telling the truth, at least the truth about how she felt. Her son wasn't *literally* a piece of shit, of course, but when a person spoke figuratively, when there was no intent to deceive, the LieDeck remained silent. It seemed that Terry had simply turned out bad, and it wasn't her fault, and like the man said: "What's a mother to do?"

"Okay, so we know that Elsa Worthington from Hinton Falls speaks the truth *as she knows it*, but there's always another side to every story, isn't there?"

"Yes, yes," chanted the audience.

"Give us the kid," shouted an old man at the back.

"Bring on the jerk," shouted a woman in the front row.

"You got it!" Trout winked as he pointed to the camera. "Ladies and gentlemen, liars all, meet Terrrrrence Worthington."

"Applause applause. Theme music. The jerk shakes hands like he never did it before," said Helena Wong. "Oh, God! Looks like he's *on* something. Security, keep an eye on the jerk. The jerk scowls at his mother—niiiiice touch. More applause. Jerk sits down. And he slouches! Don't you love it? This loser has the aplomb to slouch on national freakin' TV! Okay ... fade music, aaaaaand..."

"Welcome to *LieDeck Live*, Terry," said Trout. "We just had a little talk with your mother, and it seems that she's a nice person, but she hates your guts, my young friend. How does it—"

Bells rang, horns blasted, and lights flashed. It was the *LieDeck Live* equivalent of "beep." The audience went into hysterics. They couldn't tell if Wally Trout had made the LieDeck go off on purpose, nor did they care if he did.

"Okay," laughed the host, "so I'm the first victim. When I called this young man my friend, I was just trying to be polite and—"

"Whonk-clang-bong," went the cacophonous collection of effects. The audience loved it.

"Okay, okay, I give up already," confessed the ever-smiling host. "I *wasn't* trying to be polite. I was *lying* about Terrence Worthington being my friend, right?"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," sang the audience.

"The truth is that I met this young man just minutes before the show," said Trout, "and he is definitely *not* my friend. I find him to be boring, obnoxious and rude." He glanced furtively at the LieDeck on the mike

stand and waited for the whonk-clang-bong that he knew wouldn't come, and added, "...but then, doesn't everybody?"

"Jerk," cried members of the audience.

"Let the kid talk," screamed one woman indignantly.

"She's probably a Unitarian," said Helena in the production booth. "Or a socialist."

"Maybe she just wants him treated fairly," said her assistant.

"Ask him outright," shouted a man in the audience. "I want to hear him say it."

"Terrence Worthington," asked Trout earnestly as he held up a hand to silence the audience, "some people seem to think you're a no-good, bottom-feeding smartass. I have to ask you. Are you a jerk?"

"Fuck no," said the boy, only to be whonk-clang-bonged into utter submission. The audience was beside itself. Not only *was* he a jerk, he even *knew* he was a jerk! And he was such a jerk that he lied about it ... and got caught ... on TV! This was what they had come for, the public humiliation, the open wounds, the chance to watch a fellow human being die with his pants at his ankles.

"A classic moment in reality TV, ladies and gentlemen," boasted the silver-haired truth-addict. "Question: Are you a jerk? Answer: Fuddle-duddle no! And the LieDeck *saaaaays*?"

"Liiiaaar, liiaaar, liiaaar," sang the audience.

"One for the books, wouldn't you say? Now ... here's a no-brainer, Terry. Was it worth five grand to be exposed as a human whoopee cushion on national television?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Terry, to a round of laughter. "At least now I can afford to move out of that dump," he added.

"So you'll be moving out of your parents' home now?" asked Trout.

"Fucking right," sneered Terry, only to be whonk-clang-bonged again, to the delight of the audience and the utter dismay of the mother.

This went on for a while, with Terry's mother telling horror stories about her son, and Terry was caught again and again by his own lies. After several minutes of abuse, the boy stormed off the set—a popular move, judging by the audience reaction, perhaps the first popular move of his sad life. Where would he go? What would he do? "Not our concern" was the unspoken message of *LieDeck Live*.

"Say goodbye to the jerk," laughed Trout. "And say goodbye to Mrs. Worthington. Stay tuned, folks. We'll be back in a minute with the story of how Lou Moffat got tripped up in a lie he'd been living for an incredible twenty years."

"...aaaaand cut to commercial," said Helena. "Security, see the Worthington kid out of the building. Give him his check. Tell him to get lost. We don't need any bad moves while we're on air. This is our maiden show here, for chrissakes. Get me a coffee."

Jean Proulx turned off the sound on the TV monitor in the dressing room and let his eyes close. Commercials were a bore, and besides, he was scared, big time. This was an act of desperation on his part, being on the show, and there was no backing out now. He stood up and walked around the room after the ads were done, but his fear only grew. In an attempt to distract himself, he turned the sound

back on to watch the next guest, Lou Moffat, do his thing.

Jean had met the so-called King of Shirk already, during the make-up session, and they had spoken a bit during the endless wait for the show to begin. In the smelter where Lou Moffat was paid to work, there was a house-sized steel box that held twenty tons of a special kind of sand. The sand would be wetted down, shaped into a cone, put on the end of a long steel pole, then shoved into the hole from which a blast furnace poured molten metal. The cone of sand would instantly solidify into clay, which would seal things up until the time came for it to be punched out—to allow the next pouring of slag or nickel. Lou had been working steady graveyard shift in the Coniston smelter for twenty years, and for all that time, he'd paid his boss a quarter of his wages (like several other slackers on his shift) to let him sleep in the sand box all night ... at full pay. INCO was suing him, and he was counter-suing INCO for firing him, and his shift boss was suing the union, and ... ?

"Who gives a shit?" muttered Jean aloud as he turned the sound off again. About nine minutes later, the self-proclaimed King of Shirk had completed his stint in the electronic sun, and he'd won the extra \$5,000 for not getting beeped once.

After the next block of ads, it was Jean's turn. He wished he were stoned, but he knew it was best that he wasn't. He wished he'd never committed to doing the show, but this was the way he had chosen to get the story out ... and to get off the hook! He believed his life was in danger because of what he'd heard. By saying his piece on *LieDeck Live*, he was trying to protect himself ... and, not incidentally, pocket a tidy ten grand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, meet Jean Proulx, from Quyon, Québec, which is just a few miles south of the Whiteside estate. I talked to Mr. Proulx on the phone myself ... and by that I mean he *whispered* his story to me, as people have to do if they want on the show. We flew him to Toronto immediately and hid him in a safe house, just in case his story was true. Now all three elements of his remarkable story come from the same source, so let's get the details out of the way, and then get down to the serious stuff.

"Mr. Proulx, you told me that you had heard the name of the man who invented the LieDeck. What is that name?"

"I heard dat his name is Victor Helliwell," said Jean, unbeeped.

"Mr. Proulx, you told our researchers earlier that this man, this Victor Helliwell, was at the Whitesides' lodge at the time of the attack. Is that true?"

"Dat's what I heard," said Jean, again unbeeped.

"And you heard that it was Mr. Helliwell who was the *target* of the attack?"

"Dat's what I heard ... yeah."

"Now, Mr. Proulx, this is the important one. Who exactly was behind the attack at the Whitesides' lodge on Wilson Lake, the shooting of Annette Blais, the attempted murder of Victor Helliwell?"

Annette shuddered in her hospital bed to hear her name spoken on national TV.

"Look," said Jean, "I tol' you before when I am whispering to you on da phone, I tol' you not to ask dat question dat way. I heard what I heard, okay? You want to ask me what I *heard*, I will tell you dat."

"Jesus, the frog scored one on Wally," exclaimed Helena Wong from her perch in the booth. "Go get him, Wally. He's *got* to be lying."

"Okay," conceded Trout. "You're quite right. So, who do you *belieeeeve* was behind the assault on the lodge?" asked Trout.

"I *hearrrrrd*," said Jean emphatically, "dat de RCMP was involve."

"And so you did," cried Wally when the whonk-clang-bonger failed to whonk-clang-bong. "Of course we've all heard the rumors, haven't we?" he said to the audience. "But this young man says he heard it on a short-wave radio, in a conversation that was clearly supposed to be private, and the person who said it was...?"

"Well," said Jean, "me and a couple of friends, Geoff and Bobby, we like to listen to da police radio, eh? And sometimes we pick up odder stuff too, and we are picking up dis frequency dat's being use by Mr. Whiteside in his helicopter ... dat's da guy is making dese LieDecks like you got here ... and he's talking to dis odder—"

"Who's actually doing the talking?" interrupted the host.

"Whiteside ... Randall Whiteside," said Jean. "He is talking to dis odder guy Joly ... Bertrand Joly ... he's da Commissioner of de RCMP, and—"

"For our American viewers, RCMP stands for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian equivalent of your FBI," explained Trout. "Please continue, Mr. Proulx," he said, adding a "hurry-up" hand gesture.

"...and dese two guys, dat's who dey said is doing it. And bote of dem is saying dat," concluded Jean.

There was no whonk-clang-bong.

"The Commissioner of the RCMP *himself* was saying that the RCMP was involved?" asked a suddenly serious Wally Trout.

"Yes sir," said Jean, and again there was no whonk-clang-bong.

The host seemed suddenly frozen. "Jesus," yelled the producer into his earpiece, "do your song and dance, Wally!"

"Ladies and gentlemen," exclaimed Trout, "did you hear a beep?"

There was dead silence.

"A scoop for *LieDeck Live*," proclaimed the host, to hesitant applause from his confused fans.

"Oh my God," said Cam to his boss at Whiteside Tech. "Call Victor ... and the Commissioner ... and the Prime Minister."

Chapter 36 THIS COULD BE DANGEROUS

Rebecca Donovan was seventeen and a half, and although she was a woman and an adult in most respects, her parents still thought of her as their "little girl." Becky often felt that being a good daughter was much harder than being a good student, a good person, a good friend, or even a good lover. An after-dinner discussion with her parents had been due for a month, and now there was no getting around it. She was sitting at her traditional place at the Donovan dinner table in the family home in Shawville,

having coffee at the end of a fine meal.

"Mom, Dad," she said in a measured way, placing her linen serviette beside her plate, "I'm going over to Whiteside Tech with Michael. I may be gone for a few hours or a few weeks ... I just don't know what to expect. Mr. Whiteside asked Michael to be involved in some important work that's going on over there—a focus group on the LieDeck—and he said I could be part of it too ... and I accepted ... and he said this was an immediate need, and that those who agreed to be involved would have to live in some apartments in the office tower until the job is done ... and each person gets their own apartment. I hope you'll be really proud of me when this is over. I'm only a phone call away, and you have the number, and—"

"But what about your school work?" her mother pleaded.

"School can wait," said Becky firmly. "I'm a straight A student, Mom, and I'll pass grade twelve with flying colors. This opportunity, or rather this invitation, is a lot more important than school."

Her father usually did little of the talking during these rare discussions, but when he did participate, he expected to have his every word taken seriously. "This whole thing with the Whiteside lad," he said slowly, "it concerns me a great deal, and I—"

"Dad," interrupted Becky, "I do realize things were altogether different for you and your generation, but Michael and I have a fulfilling and wonderful relationship, a sexual relationship, if you must hear me say it. We're not married, and we may never marry, but for now, we're both ... happy and serious ... and we're headed in a very good direction ... not in spite of our relationship, but in large part because of it. Believe it or not, he's as important in my life as you are. You just won't accept that I love him. Now please, send me on my way with a smile and a hug, because I have to go now."

They came around. They always did ... not before their "little girl" had to spell it out for them, but eventually, which may be all that a daughter can ask of a mother and father. They hugged and kissed, and Becky knew that her mom would have a good cry as soon as the door closed.

Michael had been waiting, somewhat fearfully, in the living room of the Donovans' Shawville home, staring at Becky's suitcase, which was sitting on the floor by the door, defiantly. He had been let inside by a maid—the Donovan family had money—and he'd asked the maid not to tell anyone that he was waiting inside. She didn't like that plan one bit, so Michael said he'd go back outside and wait in the limo, but ... well, he just hadn't got around to doing it yet.

When Becky emerged from the library at 7:32 p.m., Michael could tell—it hadn't been easy. He also knew she wouldn't want to talk about it, at least not yet. Time enough for that with the comforter drawn to their necks.

Stuart Harper—Jeeves, the Whiteside chauffeur—was in a sour mood himself, and when his feelings went south, the trick was to call him Mr. Harper ... or walk. He had already been out on a tiresome errand that morning, to deliver Helliwell's two dogs to his dilapidated farmhouse, twenty miles south of Ottawa. It would have been a lot easier to chopper the animals around, Harper felt, and the same applied to Michael and Becky. As the two teens climbed into the limo, it was clear by his manner that "Jeeves" wanted to be left alone.

"We're going over to the office, Mr. Harper," said Michael, meaning the corporate headquarters of Whiteside Technologies in Ottawa ... well, in the Ottawa suburb of Kanata, fifty-some miles southeast of Shawville. Michael buzzed up the dark power window that divided the driver's cab from the spacious passenger compartment.

Becky flopped over, dropped her head into Michael's lap, and folded her arms. As she stared at the lines in the leather ceiling, Michael put his right hand in her hair and quietly massaged her scalp. Then he drew his other hand gently from her forehead to her chin, closing her eyes gently on the way down. He ran a finger around her ear, under her chin, across her neck, and finally, as her arms unfolded, to places that heal, under her blouse, into the armpit, on to her small, warm breast.

They had never dared make love in the limo, although they'd been sorely tempted on more than one occasion, and joked about it often. A look in Michael's eyes said that this was the moment, that they could keep the noise down, that they had enough time to make a first-rate memory. Becky peeked, caught his silent suggestion, and told him with her own eyes that it wasn't a good idea. Michael jutted out his lower lip and scrunched up his eyes as if to cry, and Becky laughed, at last. Michael smiled too. *No one deserves to be loved as I'm loved*, he said to himself. Life was good, almost too good at times.

Jeeves—Mr. Harper—had called Patriot Security on the car phone as they rolled through the outskirts of Gatineau, on the Québec side. As he had predicted, the limousine arrived at the office at exactly 8:50 p.m. Steve Sutherland had been chairing the focus group, and when they called him to say the limo had arrived, he took a break in order to greet Michael and Becky at the front door of the tower.

Michael had only been to one meeting of the group, and was only now committed to working with them full time. Becky, of course, was brand new. Steve filled her in on their progress to date as they rode the elevator. He escorted them to one of the apartments that were built into the office tower, where they dropped off their suitcases. And when they all arrived at the seminar room, the other members of the group made a point of welcoming the newcomer.

"You'll get to know all their names in time," said Steve.

Nancy Ferguson had been included in the focus group—what was now called the LieDeck Assessment Program, or L.A.P.—at the express invitation of the president. Cam O'Connor had complained to his boss about her constant calls concerning Victor's dogs, so Randall had called her back personally, yesterday, figuring the only way to get Cam off his back was to get her off Cam's back.

In response to her insistent questioning about the explosion at the lodge, Randall had told her, in strictest confidence, the secret of who had invented the LieDeck. She'd been astonished to learn that the man she knew as a mild-mannered taxi driver had invented the device that had brought an end to her marriage ... not that it wasn't doomed anyway. When she told that personal story to Randall, he suggested that perhaps she would like to participate in the evening sessions of the focus group studying the impact of the device. She had accepted—not just for the evening sessions, but for *all* the sessions, explaining that she had six weeks of accumulated vacation leave at her government job, and would be happy to use some of it for this purpose. She was determined to put the collapse of her marriage behind her, and she was happy to see another woman, albeit a rather young one, join the group. As in much of life, the fairer sex was in a distinct minority position in the L.A.P.

After Michael and Becky were introduced to the group, Steve took them to the table at the front of the room and showed off the LieDeck. "Well," he said, "this is it. This is what all the fuss is about."

"Doesn't look very scary, does it?" said Nancy.

Michael had seen it before, of course, but this was new for Becky. It didn't look very impressive—a black plastic Dictaphone case, a few colored buttons with makeshift labels glued beneath them. "That's it?" she asked.

"Go ahead," said Steve. "Tell it a lie."

"I wish I didn't have to be here," said Becky.

"Beep," went the LieDeck as she hit the last word of her sentence.

"We're glad you're with us," said Steve. "And you see? I must have really meant it, because there was no beep."

"I have to be home by midnight," said Becky, expectantly.

"Beep," said the LieDeck.

"I think my mom and dad are overly protective of me," she added. To her enormous astonishment, the LieDeck beeped her. "I ... don't understand. How come I got beeped?"

"Gotcha," laughed Nancy. "This thing is amazing. I've only been using it for a couple of hours, and I just can't get over it. It can tell you things about yourself that you really didn't know, things that your *subconscious* knows, but your *conscious* mind doesn't."

"The subconscious mind knows stuff the conscious mind doesn't?" asked Becky. "Like, I know things about myself that I don't even *know* that I know?"

"Oh yeah!" said Nancy. "That's why shrinks use hypnosis to find that stuff out. Turns out the LieDeck is actually easier, and much more reliable. For instance, try saying that you ... resent your parents' protectiveness, but you don't really think they're overdoing it."

"I ... resent my parents' protectiveness," said Becky. Nothing. No signal. "But I don't think they're overdoing it," she tried. Again there was silence. "Well I'll be darned," she exclaimed. "This is ... ummmm ... more than I bargained for!"

"Whoa," said Michael. "I didn't know about that part. This could be dangerous."

"Well, that's part of what we're here to determine, or at least to explore," said Steve. "Now, if you'll take your seats—there's two at the back there if you like—we have to get on with our work. I believe we left off with you, Nancy. You mentioned something about how the divorce rate is probably going to triple or quadruple."

Nancy returned to her front-row seat and shuffled her notes. She seemed to be looking for something, but in reality her mind was flooded with images of Tom Ferguson, her cheating husband, her very-soon-to-be-ex-husband. She remembered her humiliation at Ray's Restaurant, when she learned from her answering machine that her life was not as she had imagined, and she quivered at the recollection of the big arm of that waitress, a total stranger, who had showed her kindness at a time when the person closest to her had showed nothing but deceit, and contempt. She had always been a church-going woman, and at this exact moment she was glad there was a hell—for Tom.

"I—uh—I don't have much to add to what I said before," she began. "It seems that with the 'Helliwell-effect' in the mix, the institution of marriage is in serious trouble. I mean, it already *was* in trouble, but now it's ... well, maybe it's a goner. Something has to change—either our attitudes about sex and fidelity or our expectations about family life. In the short run, as Chairman Steve put it earlier, there's going to be an epidemic of divorces, starting ... well, right now, I guess, but not necessarily based on husbands and wives fooling around on each other, sexually. With the LieDeck, we get to know pretty much whatever we want to know about our spouses, lovers, kids, parents, bosses, and our employees, including everybody's ... shall we say their 'dark side,' their inner thoughts, fantasies, illicit desires, all that stuff we used to be able to bury or just keep quiet, and of course that's a two-way street, so they get to

know all about us in the same—"

"We don't have to answer when people ask us about stuff that we don't want to talk about," came a male voice from the back. Nancy turned her head slightly and looked at the rumpled middle-aged bus driver who had seemed intent on making a contact sport of interrupting her ever since she'd joined the group a few hours ago. His name was Mickey Gendron—Marc Gendron, actually, though he had used "Mickey" since he was a kid.

"Marc," she said, deliberately using the name he had asked the group members not to use, "we went through that earlier. People communicate as much by what they *don't* say as by what they *do* say, and—"

"Horseshit," scoffed Mickey.

"Really?" said Nancy as she turned around more completely, with her eyebrows at full mast and her gaze dead into his black pupils. "Do you have any idea why you like to challenge me all the time? You want my attention! I have to accept that you don't agree with what I said, because you didn't get beeped. But this isn't about the details of how people communicate. The reason you jump in on me like that all the time is because you want to have sex with me! Right? You don't even care that I find you annoying. In fact, you couldn't care less what I think of you, or what I think about anything at all. Who I am is of no interest to you! You just want to screw me, for your own recreation.

"Well, Mr. Gendron? Lost your tongue, Mr. Gendron? No denial, Mr. Gendron? You don't have the courage to open your mouth, Mr. Gendron? Scared of getting beeped, Mr. Gendron?"

"You haven't got the guts to cope with the reality of who you are, but the fact is, you don't *have* to respond out loud. Everybody in this room knows the answer already. Now maybe you can see what we mean about finding out stuff even when a person doesn't say a word, *Mr. Gendron?*"

"I ... think you've made your point," said Steve gently, trying to get Mickey off the hook.

All eyes in the room were welded onto Mickey's face. His hard eyes had locked onto Nancy's, and narrowed to slits, concealing ... well, concealing nothing, as it turned out.

"So now you want to slap me or hit me with your fist, is that it?" Nancy asked. "Well, thanks ever so much. I find that very sexy, a real turn-on."

Two electronic beeps identified that reverse meaning of her put-downs, the sarcastic intent—not that anyone needed confirmation. She turned her face back to the front of the room and signaled Steve that she was done, that he could continue, hopefully on some other subject, so she could cool down and cope with the presence of a man who wanted to rape her, a man who would settle for a good beating or a black eye, maybe even a broken bone—in the worst case, for ... what? Murder?

Michael and Becky were sitting very near Mickey Gendron, and they were stunned, shaken. The other participants were silent, frozen into their own imaginings of what this incident represented, and what it could lead to, not only for Mickey and Nancy, but for themselves, and for humanity in general. The LieDeck, apparently, did a lot more than detect lies and go "beep."

Steve hadn't asked for the role of facilitator. When he had been nominated, a couple of days earlier, he had tried to duck out of it, had even begged not to be chosen, but the group had insisted. Now he was stuck with a duty to sort this thing out, to either change the subject or see the confrontation through to some kind of resolution, perhaps to expel the hormone-driven Mickey Gendron, or to rescue his sanity, or stave off an emotional collapse ... or an assault.

I know, he thought. *I'll bare my own ...* He was about to think the word “soul,” but that word had gone the way of “goblin” and “angel.” His vocabulary had yet to adjust to what the focus group was calling the “truth imperative,” and he couldn't immediately locate an unbeepable surrogate.

Mickey felt like a bleeding ulcer. His mind was ping-ponging back and forth from a consideration of his own embarrassing nature to the options available for the laying on of hurt, physical hurt. He was still staring at the back of Nancy's head, three rows in front, wanting to love her ... or injure her. All the other eyes in the room were executing quick triangular road races among Nancy, Mickey and Steve.

"Look, Mickey," tried Steve, "there isn't a person in this room or anywhere who doesn't have parts of his or her character that are not in keeping with the—uh—that are out of whack with that person's finer qualities, that are, well, sometimes offensive, to others, even to ourselves. The LieDeck Revolution is putting us all through an extremely difficult process of identifying who we really are, even including the bad stuff, and it's ... well, like I said ... it's not easy. If you'd like to take a short—"

"What about you?" shouted Mickey at the chairman. "You're pretty damned clever, the way you keep the light from shining on your bad stuff."

It was a fair call—rude, bumptious, but fair. Its appeal to Mickey was in the diversion of attention away from himself, in the possibility it held for him to save a little face, if only in relative terms. *And besides, I was going to do that anyway, without any prompting from Mr. Hormones-for-brains*, thought Steve. He smiled inwardly at that pejorative; he would never have used it, even in the privacy of his brain, back when he was a priest. *Or am I still a ...* He came out of the reverie as abruptly and inexplicably as he had entered it. "Yeah ... me too," he said, failing to specify, and feeling somewhat faint.

"So ... spill it," said Mickey, sensing that he had touched a nerve.

The former bishop was snookered, and he knew it. His mind flashed back to a day more than thirty years ago, when he was in grade ten. A friend of his had taken him aside and given him proper shit for being such a social klutz. "Your problem is you don't know how to act," his buddy had said to him earnestly. Steve remembered thinking, but not saying, a snappy comeback: "Your problem is that you *do* know how to act," he'd wanted so much to say. *How odd*, he thought now. *When I finally learned to act, it backfired. I acted like a believer, and they made me a priest. I acted like a priest, and they made me a bishop. Then I acted like Jesus, and they dumped me.*

"I ... was ... sort of a blackmailer ... in a way," he shrugged. "I was—uh—you could say I was something of ... of an emotional terrorist."

"Oh for Christ's sake," said Nancy, unaware of the full irony of her choice of words. "What the hell are you talking about, Steve?"

Steve had been standing at the front of the room. Now, he sat on the desk, folded his hands on his lap, and slowly raised his eyes to meet Mickey's. He didn't have to do this, and he certainly didn't want to, but he would.

"All my life," he said plainly, "I went to confession, and told, honestly, of the sins I had committed. But there was always a part of me, a part I denied and ... that I couldn't cope with—"

"Beep."

"—wouldn't cope with," he continued without skipping a beat, "a part of me that I blamed on the Devil, or on some outside force, a part of me that I kept private. It had to do with my doubts about my faith. I always settled for having doubts about my doubts, but ... well, as I told you before, I've never believed in

God ... ever ... although I only fully realized that a week ago, less than a week, last Friday, the day I met Mr. Helliwell, the day I finally had my agnosticism LieDeck-verified and—"

"Beep."

"Sorry," said Steve as he wiped his damp face with a damp hand. "I should have said the day I had my *atheism* LieDeck-verified. Not that there's a great deal of difference. But the question remains: what was I *doing* all those years that I was a priest? Was I in deep psychological denial? Was I insane? Was I playing a game? Or was I responding to some primitive urge to boost myself up by laying a power trip on others? And if that's what I was doing, how on Earth did I avoid realizing it? What need was being served by such a tawdry self-deception? As you can imagine, I spent a lot of time in the last few days trying to figure—"

"So you're human," blurted Nancy. "So what's all this crap about blackmail and terrorism?"

Steve then realized he was still hoping to slide by the crux of the matter. He'd gotten Mickey out of the frying pan, but he had landed himself in the fire. *Fine*, he thought. *I will say what I have to say, and I will not get emotional about it.*

"Let me put it this way," he said evenly, staring at his hands and wishing this cup could be taken from his lips. "Santa Claus—the myth of old St. Nick—he's supposed to know all, and he goes around with his list and checks it twice, making notes on who's naughty and nice, and the nice kids get presents and the naughty ones don't. Even that myth has an intrinsic lie. Santa leaves presents for all the kids, the naughty ones and the nice ones and the half-and-half ones, which is most of us, I suppose. But the blackmail works, doesn't it? Hundreds of millions of children try like crazy to be extra-nice in the couple of weeks leading up to Christmas.

"God, on the other hand—let's say the myth of God—well, he's not nearly as nice as old Santa. He's supposed to know everything too, so much so that he doesn't even have to keep a list, let alone check it twice. However, it's essentially the same as the Santa scam. If you're nice, you get to live forever in this perfect place called heaven after you die. But if you're naughty, he doesn't just withhold a few goodies and presents; you get to spend eternity in this house of pain called hell. God's got a much bigger carrot than Santa, and a much bigger stick.

"And who do you think gets to wave the stick at those who don't do what God says? Who gets to say exactly what God wants? The priests! We're God's enforcers, dispensing reality and passing the collection plate. We tell people what's right, what's wrong, how to behave, how not to behave, and if people defy us, or if we don't believe that a confession is sincere, that they're really really sorry, or if they refuse to confess to us, we don't bust a kneecap, but we do withhold ... absolution! We deny them God's forgiveness, and by so doing, we deny them entry into heaven, and we assure their deliverance into hell.

"Worst of all, we don't even take responsibility for this blackmail, this ... terrorism. We say, 'Hey, I was just following orders,' like the Germans did at Nüremberg. We make the rules, then we claim that God made the rules and that we just teach them, apply them, like a good parent ... like a good cop ... like a good Nazi ... and—"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Steve," said Nancy, "get a grip! You've gone too far, way too far. You quit trusting your mind several decades, ago, so figure it out, eh? We're talking major rust effect here. So what if you used to wallow in power, now you're wallowing in guilt. Put it behind you, for heaven's sake! You too, Mickey. You're both acting like ... jerks. Yes, the LieDeck is making us face up to the fact that we're flawed, maybe even deeply flawed, but what's important is whether we *continue* to act like assholes, now that we have to acknowledge the truth about ourselves.

"So, as I was saying, about marriage and divorce..."

Michael reached over and took Becky's hand. Becky squeezed back.

Chapter 37 WHISPER CAMPAIGN

"Victor," said Randall boisterously. "Great to see you again."

"How are you, Randall?" said Victor, without emotion. "And the family?"

It was 9:50 p.m., and "the truth squad" had gathered in the boardroom of Whiteside Technologies to view the evening news and to discuss how they should respond to the day's developments, if at all. They knew the moniker "the truth squad" wouldn't stick and mightn't even be deserved, and they hadn't actually voted on it themselves, but they were gelling into a family of sorts, and yet they were seriously confused about exactly who they were, and why they were together, doing this thing.

One thing, however, was crystal clear. Victor knew that his taxi-driving days, his days of anonymity, were over. Randall explained to Victor that after Jean Proulx had made his appearance earlier in the day on *LieDeck Live*, an enterprising Alpha reporter had been able to confirm his identity as the inventor of the LieDeck from a second reliable source, by tricking a staff member from the lodge.

"I hope it wasn't Winnie," said Victor.

"I'm afraid it was," said Cam. "I told all staff that while the lodge was being rebuilt they would get their full pay, and I told them to watch out for reporters or anybody else who might try to get them to talk about you, or about the attack. But you shouldn't blame her. A reporter found her at her apartment in Quyon, and he had a LieDeck. She denied everything, but she might as well have told the truth. It seems that a 'no' plus a 'beep' are equal to a 'yes' now—although the reporter used the pin signaling mode, of course."

"I don't blame Winnie," said Victor ruefully. "I just got hoisted by my own petard, so to speak."

Cam smiled—something he tried to avoid, normally. This "petard" business was the first sign of sophistication or class he'd ever seen in the taxi driver, and he was impressed ... modestly.

"Annette's really pissed off at you for not visiting," said Helen.

"Oh, she'll forgive me," said Victor.

"You could have called," said Steve, with an edge to his voice.

"I could've not told anybody about the LieDeck," said Victor, in a tone that dared anyone to scold him again. "I just lost my freedom, Steve, forever, and I'm not thrilled about it. I thought I'd have a month or more. Instead I got two and a half frigging days. I couldn't go see her, and even if I'd called, I might have ended up with even *less* than two and a half days if the call had been intercepted. You know perfectly well that ever since about 2005, in response to nine-eleven, more and more national governments spy on private emails and phone calls and ordinary mail and any communications they feel like spying on, and they do it legally, because people don't get it. God knows what the RCMP is up to, or capable of. You seem to have forgotten that the assassination attempt was aimed at me. I needed some time to myself. I'm glad she's okay."

Everyone in the room was taken aback by Victor's ability to assert himself when the occasion called for

it.

"I'm ... sorry if I offended you," said Steve sincerely.

"Forget it," said Victor. "But I would like to know how that little bugger from Quyon managed to find out."

"It ... was partly my fault," said Cam. "I was in the helicopter with Randall while he was talking to the RCMP commissioner—and I forgot to warn him that the radio system wasn't scrambled, wasn't secure. It turns out this young punk—uh..."

"Jean Proulx," said Helen.

"Yeah," continued O'Connor, "this guy Jean Proulx, he and his friends were fooling with a short-wave radio, listening in on the police band and fishing around to see what else they could find, which unfortunately included Randall talking to RCMP Commissioner Bertrand Joly ... about you and the LieDeck and the attack on the lodge. The funny thing is nobody would ever have believed the little bastard before the LieDeck came onto the scene. You heard about that new show—uh..."

"*LieDeck Live*, they call it," said Helen, scornfully.

"Yeah," said Victor, wondering how it could be that Cam seemed to be forgetting things already mentioned, and depending on Helen to fill him in. "I heard. I went to hand in my keys at Blue Line, and I barely got out of there before the TV crews arrived. My old boss, Ramura, he was suddenly the best friend I had in the world. The other drivers were treating me like a God damned hero. Wait until their own lives get screwed up by the thing."

That was a conversation-stopper, and Randall felt the dull edge of awkwardness grip the group. He let a few seconds pass ... and then decided he'd better tell Victor about the reasons behind his decision to go to the UN with the LieDeck, his reasons for releasing it, but without revealing that it was Prime Minister Louis St. Aubin who had warned him ... about the certainty that the government would classify the thing. As it happened, he only got a few words out before Victor told him that Helen had already explained the situation to him, and as it happened, Victor agreed with Randall's judgment—not particularly for the financial sense it made, but for a whole bathtub of other reasons, most of them much more important than money.

Coffee was served, and the talk turned to the focus group that was meeting regularly at Whiteside Tech. Victor was told that the plan to produce a more stylish wallet-sized device had been scrapped, for now. They were going to sell what they had, and their hope was to have the microminiaturized wristwatch model on the market before Christmas, perhaps as early as September. Steve talked about Annette's recovery, and he mentioned the beautiful, warm friendship that was growing between them. Cam talked—after getting everyone's agreement to keep this under their friggin' hats for the time being—about the American connection: the WDA, the surprise defection of Colonel Roger Findlay, and the subsequent arrest of General George Brampton. Randall was a bit upset that information concerning the WDA was floating around in wider and wider circles, as he'd sworn to the Prime Minister that there would be no leaks. But he felt strongly that he could trust the people around him, and he figured the whole WDA story would probably break from other sources, and very soon. Helen was about to tell Victor about Buck Ash, Patriot's undercover man in Quyon, who was also in the Ottawa General, with lung cancer, two floors beneath Annette, and how he and Annette would phone each other every day, but the Alpha National News was beginning. They became very quiet.

The issue of RCMP involvement in the attack on the lodge was the lead story, of course. Commissioner Joly had apparently made himself unavailable for comment, and no one else could be found to speak for

the RCMP. Alpha played the tape of Jean Proulx blowing the case wide open on the maiden edition of their brand new program, *LieDeck Live*. Then they interviewed him, but all he did was stare at the ground and say “Yeah” to each question. They asked him what he thought of the so-called LieDeck Revolution, to which he answered, “I dunno.”

Marshall: We go now to Winnipeg, where the prime minister has just signed a major wheat deal with the Russian Republic. Prime Minister, can you now tell us if the RCMP was involved in the attack on the Whiteside's lodge?

St. Aubin: Trent, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to comment on that right now, and you'll have to forgive me for whispering. I have instructed my caucus and cabinet colleagues that until we've had time to study this new LieDeck device, we're not going to let it determine how we run the Canadian government. And since the device doesn't work when you whisper, I'm afraid that's what we're going to be doing for a while, whispering. It might even be a good idea for all citizens to take up this habit, or at least try it out, because there is reason to believe that the LieDeck can be abused, which could lead to trouble.

Marshall: You realize that people will naturally think that you have something to hide, Prime Minister.

St. Aubin: Well, they can think what they want. We've got problems that are very serious, and our priority is solving them, not making the media happy ... or even the Canadian people. Our minister of foreign affairs has disappeared, as you know, and we have some reports of ministers from other governments disappearing as well, all over the world. Four countries have declared states of emergency since Monday, since Mr. Whiteside distributed all those LieDecks at the United Nations. There is a great deal of instability in the world because of his ill-advised actions, and I'm afraid it may get a lot worse before it gets better. So until we have a much better idea of the impact of this device, we're saying little, and what we do say is going to be done in a whisper.

There were other words between the anchor of Alpha News and the prime minister, one talking, the other whispering, but nothing more of much consequence. St. Aubin did confirm that a high-ranking RCMP officer had committed suicide, although he would not confirm whether this related in any way to the LieDeck. There was a report about other suicides and disappearances in Canada and abroad, and of several armed clashes that had erupted due to information that was uncovered with the aid of the LieDeck. It was also reported that many journalists who received free LieDecks at Randall Whiteside's press conference had sold them—in some cases for up to \$60,000—to corporations, or to the opposition parties in foreign countries, or to simple brokers, who wouldn't say who they represented. One reporter who'd received a free LieDeck hadn't been seen since, and foul play was suspected. Several UN ambassadors who had received LieDecks had either defected or disappeared in the past two days. Sri Lanka, Poland, Turkey, and Bolivia had declared martial law, and other nations had either done that without admitting it, or were very actively considering the switch. The advent of the LieDeck was not turning out the way Randall Whiteside had hoped, the way anyone had hoped.

"Well, as you can see, we've created quite a mess," said Randall.

"My LieDeck confirms that you believe that," said Victor, sadly, "but it's not true."

"Not true?" asked Randall.

"No sir. The only thing we've created is a device that identifies lies and thus provides access to the truth," he explained. "The mess you refer to was there already. If I hadn't invented the LieDeck, that mess would be with us for generations and centuries into the future. The only thing we've created other than the device is a compelling freaking need for humanity to face the mess, and to fix the mess, once and for all."

Yikes, thought Victor. *I could say all this stuff and tone it down a bit.* However, others seemed to

think that this new insight into his character was to be admired. *Who would'a thunk it*, he mused.

There was another awkward silence in the boardroom while everyone considered Victor's view of things. Their LieDecks confirmed that he believed what he had said, but that was hardly proof that he was right. It was difficult to accept that the LieDeck hadn't actually *caused* any problems when erstwhile democracies were falling under military rule and the Prime Minister of Canada was reduced to whispering on national television.

"Mr. Helliwell," said Cam, stiffly, "the mini-cassette that was in your cast mentioned three reel-to-reel tapes that you prepared ... about what you felt ought to be done with the LieDeck, how it should be handled, what it has to teach us about ourselves. I regret that I didn't have the foresight to recognize their importance when you told us about them. But that was then and this is now. I think you should let us have those tapes ... before things fall apart any further."

Victor hadn't planned to delve into these matters until at least a year had passed, so that people could find their own accommodation with his device before moving on to the next phase. During the years he had spent working on the LieDeck, he had realized that a certain amount of disorder was inevitable. He had often feared that things could get out of control, but he didn't really expect it to be this bad this soon. Of course he had no way of knowing how deep the rot ran, how messy the world really was. It seemed he had also no choice but to go along with Cam's suggestion.

"I spent twelve long years in isolation building and perfecting the LieDeck," he said, "but I also spent a lot of that time considering the problem of how people would deal with it, react to it. Tomorrow, I'll get the tapes, and we can begin learning how to live without illusion, how to cope with reality, how to adapt to this technology."

"I think perhaps we should have those tapes today," said Randall, gently, "before we end up with a country that can only whisper."

THURSDAY, APRIL 24, 2014

Chapter 38

THE GOOFY GOVERNMENT

As Commissioner Joly waddled into Ralph Dellaire's office, sorrow and shame ate at his considerable stomach ... that, and the want of food. He was a man with well-honed skills and vast experience, but this situation was beyond anything he had ever imagined a law officer would have to face.

"Good morning, Bertrand," said Ralph. "So ... what could be so serious that you can't even talk to me on a secure phone, that you had to drag me out of bed at five a.m.?"

Bertrand gave Ralph's fingers a minor shake and carefully eased his weary body into an armchair. Heavy rain banged on the office window. "I wish I could tell you it was some speck of bullshit," he began, sounding more melancholy than pissed off, "but I—uh—I'm afraid this is a real fuck-up."

Ralph had been slogging it out in the political trenches for more than thirty years. Nothing surprised him any more, and as far as he knew, there wasn't anything he couldn't handle. However, judging by the serious look on Bertrand's face, he knew this one was going to be a major skirmish, whatever it was. "Let's have it," he said.

"You're fifty-nine years old, Ralph," said the commissioner, "and yet you and your pal Louis act like you're still a couple of college frosh." He let his eyes rest on the right-hand man of the Prime Minister. *One day soon, these sorts of things won't happen any more*, he thought, *not with the LieDeck*

around there to help us. He had hoped that Ralph would capitulate immediately, but ... that didn't happen. He would have to do the deed. "Darlene Trahan," he said flatly.

Ralph didn't ask for any further explanation. Bertrand was not fishing. He knew ... presumably everything. "So, your agents are spying on the Prime Minister now," he said bitterly.

Bertrand pulled a LieDeck from his jacket pocket, turned it on, set it on the beeper mode, and placed it on the coffee table. "No," he said. "I have never spied on the Prime Minister, nor have any of my agents—with the possible exception of the officers who got caught up in that fucking WDA outfit. I arrested those guys at three o'clock this morning, by the way ... the whole senior staff from Commercial Crime. But it wasn't them who got the goods on Louis—and that's LieDeck-verified."

"So this juicy information just ... fell out of the sky?" asked Ralph sarcastically.

"We got an offer on the table from one of those so-called political brokers," said Bertrand. "He won't say who he represents, of course—they never do—but it has to be the WDA. This guy says that if General Brampton goes down, the prime minister goes down—and of course you go down. But the deal is that if Brampton gets his freedom, and immunity from prosecution, Louis can carry on, just like nothing was wrong."

Ralph saw a glimmer, a small but significant glimmer, that the situation might yet be salvaged. "So," he said coldly, "do we make the deal?"

"I'm sorry you asked that," said Bertrand. "No, we don't make the deal, and if you don't know *why* we don't make the deal, then you're even more pathetic than I thought. We wouldn't make that deal before the LieDeck, for reasons that you obviously do not understand. Now, with the LieDeck around, it couldn't work even if I *wanted* it to. You *do* see that, don't you?"

"What have they got?" asked Ralph.

"Tapes, photos ... enough," said the commissioner. "Louis should be able to lead a dignified life as our ambassador to some country with a golf course, but he has to resign. Godfrey and I feel it's imperative that—"

"Godfrey and you!" repeated a shaken Ralph Dellaire—ice could have formed on his exhalation. "You and *the Goof* are behind this ... this treachery. I should have—"

"Shut up, Ralph," shouted Bertrand as he pried himself into a standing position. "This only looks like treachery to you because you stand to lose your job and your influence, and because Louis is going to blame you—correctly, in my judgment—for his downfall. Ninety percent of Canadians wouldn't want a government led by a man whose idea of a fun Saturday night is to fiddle with his dick behind a two-way mirror while some poor drugged-up Indian madwoman masturbates, and that ninety percent happens to include me, Ralph. It doesn't include you, obviously, and that's one of the reasons why you have to resign—that plus the fact that the Prime Minister was doing his little dance of the one-eyed wiggler in your God damned penthouse ... condo ... whatever ... plus the fact that you had my fucking RCMP guys driving this Darlene Trahan woman around ... like the national police is some sort of high class pimping service."

Ralph felt the sting of these words, not just because Bertrand was relishing the put-down, but because he was right. Somewhere along the line, he'd lost his compass. There were night clubs in big cities that offered booths with two-way mirrors and naked women so that men could get their jollies, but while community standards allowed such weird businesses to operate openly, the world of politics was much different. "Gotcha" meant "game over." He knew that.

When this conversation had begun, Ralph's great fear was that the Commissioner had found out that he and Louis had bought a block of Whiteside Technologies stock on Monday morning, a few hours before Randall Whiteside's press conference, and sold it at almost twice the price two days later. Their investments were supposed to be locked away in blind trusts, but ... well, that was all academic now. The Darlene Trahan business did the job.

"I asked Godfrey to give Louis Australia," said Bertrand as he sat down again. He'd been up pretty well all night for several nights now, and he was wilting fast "Maybe we should give him the Philippines, eh? There's a nice civil war going on there, and lots of teenaged hookers for his amusement." He paused for breath. Here's the bottom line, Mr. Dellaire. If you and Louis cooperate, we'll try to keep this Darlene Trahan stuff quiet. I can't guarantee the WDA will stay quiet, but if you and Louis aren't out of your offices by eleven o'clock this morning, I swear I'll release the tapes and photos myself ... and you notice that my LieDeck didn't beep when I said that!"

The commissioner paused for a few seconds to let his words sink in, and to give himself a rest. He took no pleasure from this, and it was his hope that some day, Louis and Ralph would actually thank him for saving what could be salvaged of their lives and reputations. They weren't evil, but occasionally, their lack of judgment was breathtaking. They had run a competent government, but these absurd sexual antics were unforgivable, and Bertrand Joly wasn't a particularly forgiving man at the best of times.

"It's necessary because the Prime Minister is immoral," he said, as if a little more explanation might help. "I'm sure you can guess what all the special interest groups are going to be saying if the shit hits the fan on this one. Native organizations will want his scalp. The feminists will demand other selected parts of his anatomy. The churches will be apoplectic. You can't ride this one out, Ralph. I know it, you know it, now what about it?"

Ralph didn't answer, not that an answer was required.

"So, it's a done deal, understand?" continued Bertrand. "Louis is due to arrive in from Winnipeg at seven a.m., in two hours. We meet him at the airport, give him the straight goods, then we go to Rideau Hall. Louis formally informs the Governor General that he's resigning ... for personal reasons. Nicholas Godfrey gets sworn in as prime minister, and life goes on. And if you want my opinion, I think the man you call 'Goofy' is going to be one of Canada's great prime ministers, and I think he's just the man to lead us through the wrenching times that this LieDeck device is going to put us through, this ... this so-called LieDeck Revolution."

Ralph sat in silence for a moment. Bertrand Joly was right. It was all over, and it was his fault ... well, partly his. But whatever the proper apportionment of blame, the die was cast, and the rest was a matter of following the script.

"Just one small favor," asked Ralph, meekly. "Let him come to us, okay? Let him get past the reporters and brag about signing the wheat deal and all that. Let him get back here. He can resign at the cabinet meeting this morning, at ten o'clock. Can you let it turn out that way, Bertrand?"

* * *

At 7:41 a.m., Louis St. Aubin came barreling into his office, loaded for bear. "Why the hell didn't you meet me at the airport?" he said to Ralph, roughly. "We've got a cabinet meeting at ten, and I need you to help me with ... Commissioner Joly! What are you doing here?"

Trent Marshall sat stone-faced in the elevated anchor chair while a make-up artist fussed over persistent beads of perspiration. "Twenty seconds," said the producer's voice over the studio speakers. "Fifteen seconds." Soon a full hand became four fingers, then three, two, one ... and a quick chopping motion.

Marshall: This is a special bulletin from the Alpha News. At eleven o'clock this morning, Prime Minister Louis St. Aubin told the cabinet that he was resigning, for what he has called "personal reasons."

At seven a.m., as he returned from Winnipeg, his plane was met by reporters. He stopped to comment on the Russian wheat sale he announced yesterday, and his mood seemed buoyant and upbeat. He mentioned nothing about any impending resignation.

Alpha News has learned that the Prime Minister's chief of staff Ralph Dellaire has resigned his position as well, also for so-called personal reasons.

The Minister of Defence, Nicholas Godfrey, who was named deputy prime minister only four months ago, is being sworn in by the Governor General as we speak. He will be giving his first press conference as prime minister in a few minutes, and we will join that live when it begins. Our chief political correspondent, Katie Lochart, is standing by in the pressroom at Rideau Hall.

Katie, we reviewed the footage of the Prime Minister's arrival at Uplands airport less than five hours ago, and either Mr. St. Aubin is a terrific actor or something happened between the time he stepped off Maple Leaf One and the moment he arrived for the cabinet meeting. What are you hearing in Ottawa?

Lochart: Trent, there seems to be a consensus among the political pundits that there's a lot more to this story than meets the eye, but no one as yet seems to know what Louis St. Aubin meant by "personal reasons." No explanation was given to the members of cabinet. The official line here is that any sitting prime minister is entitled to a personal life, and if he says that his reasons for leaving the job are private, then that's just the way it is.

Marshall: But the resignation of a prime minister without any explanation at all would be an unprecedented occurrence in Canada, and his surprise decision will change the shape of government for the whole country. Isn't it reasonable to ask for some kind of statement?

Lochart: Certainly the media all share that view, and there are a number of Government MPs who feel the same way, and have said so. The Opposition Parties are demanding an answer to that question, but the lid is definitely on. Prime Minister Godfrey will be asked about this, of course, but the word from his aides is that there will be no comment on that subject, at least for the moment.

Marshall: We're also given to understand that—

Lochart: Sorry to interrupt, Trent, but Prime Minister Godfrey is about to enter the pressroom and ... Prime Minister, could you please comment on ... ?

Godfrey went straight to the lectern and held up both hands in a gesture that begged the media mob to be seated. As things settled down, the new prime minister of Canada told reporters that he would not conduct the press conference unless they assured him that their LieDecks were off. He gave them a few seconds, and then asked if there was anyone who had a LieDeck operating. When no one said yes, he began to read.

Godfrey: As you know by now, I have just been sworn in as the twenty-third prime minister of Canada. I will serve this great nation to the best of my ability. However, there are some dark clouds on the horizon, and although I cannot elaborate at this time, I will tell you that my colleagues and I will do our best to sail the ship of state safely and responsibly towards our national and international goals, no matter

what storms may tear at the rigging.

Now, I'm sure you have questions, but I have several announcements to make.

First, when my good friend Louis St. Aubin resigned as prime minister this morning, he did so for personal reasons. I hope you will accept his right to do so. I have a great deal of respect for Mr. St. Aubin's contribution to Canada and the world, and I have asked him to serve as our ambassador to Australia. He has accepted this post, and I wish him bon voyage and good luck. His chief of staff, Ralph Dellaire, has also resigned. He will continue to work with Mr. St. Aubin at our Australian embassy.

Also, we learned recently that General George Brampton, who was arrested Monday, was involved in a secret and subversive organization called the World Democratic Alliance, or WDA. We also have reason to believe that the former minister of foreign affairs, Jeremy Ford, was a member of the WDA, and fled Canada when the LieDeck threatened to expose him. U.S. President Barker and I will have more to say about this international conspiracy when there has been some headway in our respective investigations.

I have named Senator Joseph Cadbury to the cabinet, as Minister Without Portfolio, to head a new Human Futures Secretariat. There will be a press conference in a few days, at which time Senator Cadbury will announce the precise mandate of this new body and the reasons for its formation.

As for the rest of the cabinet, I foresee no changes in the immediate future. I will retain the defense portfolio for the moment, and I am naming Ms. Bertha McNeil as minister of foreign affairs and as deputy prime minister. Her former post at Agriculture will be filled later.

Questions?

The questions were inevitable and rude.

CBC: Why did you lie when you said that Louis St. Aubin has resigned for personal reasons?

Global: Why did you call Louis St. Aubin your “good friend” when he's not?

CTV: Why did you say that you respected his contribution to Canada and the world when you don't?

CKBY: Why did you say that you can't elaborate on these so-called dark clouds that you see on the horizon, when in fact you can?

Radio Canada: Why did you say that you didn't plan any changes for cabinet when you do plan changes?

After each question, Prime Minister Godfrey just stood, still as a sentry, while his staff scribbled notes. It only took a second of silence to prompt the next reporter to ask the next question, and all the while, Godfrey simply stared at his accusers, one by one. When they finally ran out of LieDeck-verified fibs to ask him about, he moved slightly closer to the microphones, and spoke.

Godfrey: You said you had turned your LieDecks off, but you didn't. You just switched them to the pin mode. I said I'd answer your questions, but I won't. That makes us about even. Let it be known that in future, any reporter who trains a LieDeck on me will not have a single question answered for as long as I'm prime minister. I have thought carefully about this, and I refuse to conduct the business of this proud and great nation in a whisper. That is all.

With that, Godfrey stormed from the room.

Lochart: Well, you heard it. We have a very tough new prime minister on this rainy April afternoon, and

we have no explanation as to why Louis St. Aubin suddenly resigned. The American diplomat who was arrested has been linked to an organization called the World Democratic Alliance, that Prime Minister Nick Godfrey has described as “secret and subversive” and an “international conspiracy.” Jeremy Ford, who is still missing, has also been linked publicly to the WDA. Senator Cadbury is now in the cabinet to head what seems to be a new department of the government, the Human Futures Secretariat. Louis St. Aubin and Ralph Dellaire are off to Australia, without so much as a word as to why they resigned. Prime Minister Godfrey is keeping the defense portfolio for the moment, and Bertha McNeil, the former minister of agriculture—she is widely considered a junior minister with modest credentials—has been named Minister of Foreign Affairs, and also given the lofty position of Deputy Prime Minister.

The most striking development for me has to be Nick Godfrey's handling of the LieDeck question. We've never had a prime minister who stood up to the press in that way. I have no idea where such a challenge will lead, but for the record, I'll tell you that I *didn't* have my LieDeck turned on while he spoke ... nor will I in future.

Marshall: Thank you so much for that report, Katie. We will turn now to our panel of experts for their reactions.

Well, that was quite a remarkable performance. I don't know exactly what the Prime Minister meant when he referred to “dark clouds on the horizon” or “storms that may tear at the rigging of the ship of state.” Nicholas Godfrey is not known for fanciful flights of rhetoric. Certainly it is alarming to realize what strange things are happening in Canada and the world, but it sounds to me like there's something else happening, something dangerous, something that he isn't prepared to talk about yet. Any ideas?

The experts included university professors, political hacks, and the usual collection of FIPs and SIPs: formerly-important-persons and semi-important-persons. This format had often produced partisan or personal body shots in the past, but today there was unanimity. The new LieDeck device had to be behind the indecipherable allusions to ominous clouds and storms.

After they agreed that they knew nothing of St. Aubin's reasons for resigning, the debate shifted to the LieDeck itself, to the unprecedented explosion of news events that were linked to or caused by the device.

There had been eight murders, contract killings by all appearances, in the last twenty-four hours: six in Montreal and two in Toronto—just in Canada. The speculation from the panel was that some members of the underworld had obtained LieDecks and were finding things out and settling accounts.

Several senior civil servants had followed the former minister of foreign affairs and disappeared, presumably to save their slimy skins before the LieDeck uncovered illegal activities that they were involved with.

Mini-scandals were breaking out hourly, and many politicians were still following the advice of the former prime minister, whispering in public, especially to the media. Some reporters were refusing to talk to elected officials or public servants who didn't have the guts to use their vocal cords. Most journalists felt that people generally, and politicians in particular, should not have to accept the application of a lie detector every time they opened their mouths. That smacked of “guilty until proven innocent.” It was insulting, unfair, and there was a broad concern that it might even be illegal under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, adopted by Parliament in 1981. Still, it was like steroids in Major League Baseball and other sports—if you want to be competitive, you have to use all of the tools at your disposal.

It was assumed by the whole panel that the discovery of the secret and subversive organization that Godfrey had referred to, the WDA, could also be attributed to the LieDeck. It had been learned in the

past hour that the high-ranking RCMP officer who had committed suicide was the head of the Commercial Crime Division, Roy Taggart, and the panel assumed that he must have been involved with the WDA as well. They also made the connection between the WDA and the attack, five days earlier, on the Whiteside estate, and they noted that there was an unconfirmed report that eighteen other RCMP officers had been placed under arrest—the entire senior staff of the Commercial Crime Division.

The media tradition of not reporting suicides for fear of triggering other suicides was openly questioned by the panel. One expert felt moved to tell Canadians they shouldn't panic over the invention of the LieDeck. The unspoken message seemed to be that there had been a dramatic surge of people taking the easy way out. Sales of the 1991 best-seller *Final Exit*, a how-to book on taking one's own life, had reportedly soared as many people prepared for the real possibility that their reputations, jobs, and marriages might soon be shredded by the LieDeck.

Armed clashes, also attributed indirectly to the LieDeck, had broken out in fourteen countries, mostly in Eastern Europe, South America, Africa, and South-East Asia. The grievances behind these skirmishes were not new, but every faction of every old conflict was suddenly discovering infiltrators and traitors, even before they had an actual LieDeck of their own. They were apparently using the beepers on their watches and electronic pagers to pretend they had a LieDeck operating, and tricking people into admitting things. Security agencies were doing the same on behalf of governments, and taping statements and conversations for LieDeck-verification later. Several governments had banned the importation of LieDecks by citizens and corporations, all while ordering large numbers for official use. It was rumored that LieDeck-related purges, rarely based on the actual LieDeck-verification of anything, had begun inside the fundamentalist wings of various religions, and the panel expected similar purges to begin within political parties and corporations, especially in unstable parts of the world.

Several more UN ambassadors had defected to other countries or had “disappeared.” Canada was still the only country to actually withdraw from the world body, but it was obvious that there was a very serious problem there. The panel assumed that the difficulty in the United Nations had to be connected with the World Democratic Alliance, whatever that turned out to be. There was a collective sense among the panel members that Godfrey had a duty—a duty he had failed to honor—to cough up a few details on what the WDA was.

Police organizations all across Canada and in other countries were bracing for a shock wave to hit the moment LieDecks became available to the general public. Since the first radio advertisements promoting the device had aired Monday, three days ago, Whiteside Technologies had received 58,000 pre-paid orders—many more than it could fill. The ads were now running in ten other countries, in six languages other than English. Credible voices were suggesting that Whiteside should be prevented from proceeding with the sale of the device for a cooling-off period.

The panel guessed that the new Human Futures Secretariat, to be headed by Senator Joe Cadbury, had to be aimed at coping with the impact of the LieDeck. They agreed that this was a sound idea, but they wondered if it would do much good in the short term.

As for Cold War II, that seemed to be anybody's guess. The worst-case scenario was too horrible to contemplate, nuclear war. The hotline between Moscow and Washington, established in the 1960s by John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, was still in place, and had been upgraded to the latest ultra-redundant high-tech specs. The media commentators hoped that it would be used to good effect in the days and weeks ahead, if the need arose.

And there was the impact on the War on Terror to consider, although that war had been reduced to a background noise in recent years—half a year of peace, followed by half a dozen coordinated explosions and a heap of dead civilians. There was no possible “hotline” connection with Osama bin Laden, who

was still alive, somewhere. Still, as the panel reminded the audience, there had been a flurry of recent articles about how, maybe, the LieDeck could be used to convince suicide bombers that no self-respecting god would promise automatic entrance into any heaven as the reward for murder.

After all the speculations and calculations, the television screen split into nine boxes, with Trent Marshall's face in the middle box.

Marshall: I think you would all agree that we face difficult times ahead?

Dumb question, they all thought.

"Yes," they all said.

Chapter 40 IT'S THE PRESIDENT!

Jacques Lafontaine, Nick Godfrey's chief of staff, stuck his head through the doorway of the PMO and waited. Godfrey heard him, but didn't look up. He had some unwinding to do after the press conference, and he felt overwhelmed. Not by the job—by the LieDeck.

"Yes," he said impatiently.

"It's the President!" said Lafontaine. "Line one."

"Mr. President," said the prime minister deferentially as he picked up the receiver and waved Lafontaine out the door. "What can I do for you?"

"Prime Minister," said Leroy Barker, "congratulations on your new job."

"Thank you very much, Mr. President," said Godfrey. "I accept the challenge gladly, but I must say I'm awfully concerned about this WDA thing."

"Well, that's what I'm calling about," said Barker. "We can't seem to get it under control. We know how we're going to handle it, but we need at least a dozen more of those LieDecks down here if we're going to catch these characters before they can kill themselves or go into hiding. All I have is the one that was given to our ambassador at the UN and one other one that we bought from a Canadian reporter, who got it free from Mr. Whiteside. We have some on order at the Whiteside plant that we can pick up tomorrow, but I need them today. In fact I need them by yesterday, if you know what I mean? I had my VP call Randall Whiteside personally, and Whiteside told the Vice President of the United States of America to wait his bloody turn ... politely, I should say, but I expected more from the man. Now, I've sent a fighter jet to Uplands Airport in Ottawa. Can you see to it that a dozen or so LieDecks are waiting there for him? He'll be there in half an hour."

Godfrey was puzzled. The President hadn't said a word about the fact that Canada had arrested and was still detaining General George Brampton, even though he obviously had diplomatic immunity. Barker could have used that as leverage to get the LieDecks, but he didn't. He didn't even complain about it. "Consider it done, Mr. President," he said. "Can you tell me more about how you intend to deal with the WDA situation?"

"Just like that Committee on UnAmerican Activities that McCarthy set up to suss out Commies back in the nineteen fifties, Prime Minister. Of course Joe McCarthy was nuts, but what we got here is an unconstitutional and very dangerous conspiracy which could destabilize the entire world. I've got no compunctions about LieDecking any number of people and forcing them to rat on their friends in the

WDA, if that's what it takes. It's show-no-mercy time down here, at least on this item. How are you proceeding up there?"

That was probably the first time anyone had used the word "LieDeck" as a verb, and although Godfrey was relieved to realize that the U.S. president was not part of the WDA conspiracy, he was uncomfortable with the possibility that this new device could lead to the kind of Cold War I witch-hunt that had destroyed many thousands of innocent lives in the bad old days of McCarthyism.

"Well," said Godfrey, casually, "you know us Canadians. We'll do approximately the same thing, but in our own, low-profile way. No fanfare, no name for the program, just competent, persistent police work performed by self-effacing gentlemen ... and women. That's the way our people like it. But don't let that fool you. We'll have our perps under control as quickly as you. I hope other heads of governments have been watching us, and will take a page or two from our book on this issue."

"Trust me, they will," said Barker in a manner that suggested he wasn't about to leave that to chance. "And thanks a ton for the LieDecks."

"Jacques," said Godfrey into the intercom as soon as he heard the click. "Get hold of Whiteside right now and get him to part with a hundred LieDecks. Don't take no for an answer. Pick them up in a military helicopter. Call ahead and have Whiteside's people bring them to the rooftop helipad at his office tower, so you can just grab them and take off. Take them to Uplands Airport. Fifty go to an American fighter pilot. He'll be there in half an hour or so. Bring the rest back here."

"Yes sir," said Lafontaine.

"And Jacques," added the prime minister, "tell Whiteside that I'll need to see him this evening—not to make plans. He'll be called later with the details."

"Okay," said Lafontaine.

Nick Godfrey sat at his desk in the Centre Block and wondered if he was really cut out for leadership. For some unknown reason, he found himself thinking of an ancient Chinese curse: *May you live in interesting times*. He wasn't a particularly contemplative man, but then he had never had the misfortune to live in such ... well, interesting times. And being in charge during such times was not what he'd had in mind during the two decades that he had coveted the position he now held.

He stood up and walked to the window. Everything looked normal ... some tourists wandering about, a few RCMP officers in full regalia getting their pictures taken, couriers delivering and picking up the business of the nation. *But for how long*, he wondered as he pulled at his belt and re-tucked his shirt. *Will Canada be forced to opt for martial law? Is there any alternative? Will there be soldiers out there next week, instead of tourists? Will democracy buckle under the pressure of the damnable truth machine? Will communism simply implode from the impact of the device? Will life ever be the same again?*

What bothered him most about this LieDeck business was the abrupt advent of the thing, the lack of reliable information and research, the total unpredictability of the so-called LieDeck Revolution. He needed advice, and most of his cabinet ministers were either deathly afraid or oddly ill, afflicted with the political equivalent of writer's block. It felt as if a deity or an alien race had taken a fit of other-worldly pique and decided, on a random whim, to screw everything up, just to see if Nick Godfrey could piece Humpty Dumpty back together again ... without any assistance from all the king's horses and all the king's men.

He felt completely alone. "And it's not just that I feel that way," he said towards the glass, towards the

people below. "I *am* alone."

Chapter 41

REALITY: \$20 A SHOT

Victor didn't wake up until almost 2:00 p.m. He was alone in his bed, and wished he weren't. This would be his first full day back at the rebuilt lodge on Wilson Lake, and although he was still glowing from a night to remember, he found himself vaguely wishing he was out driving his taxi—and driving passengers to distraction, if the mood struck.

He walked to the bathroom, turned on the shower, stepped in, and began to sing a madrigal ditty he knew from long ago. *By Henry Purcell*, he recalled—*mid-1600s*. The choir used to sing it at university, although he was never sure why.

I gave her beads and bracelets fine

And I gave her gold down derry

I thought she was a'feared

Till she tickled my beard

Then we were wondrous merry

As he set about soaping down, he found his mind reviewing the evening before. When he had arrived by helicopter, just after 11:00 p.m., he'd been too upset over the loss of his freedom to say much to Winnie or Noel, in spite of the fact that they had both stayed after their regular shifts to attend to his needs, real and imagined. "The fact that I understand my own negative emotions is no guarantee that I can dismiss them by an act of will," he said out loud as he lathered his armpits. That wasn't entirely true, of course, but it had served as a perfectly good rationalization last night ... and again now.

By midnight, Winnie had decided she'd had enough. She had flopped herself down beside him on the chesterfield by the south fireplace in the living room, grabbed his lit cigarette from the ashtray, butted it out, and let fly.

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't smoke in the lodge," she'd fumed, burning Victor with her piercing green eyes. "It really *really* bothers me. But what bothers me a lot more is that you and I were starting to be friends last Friday. You asked me to join you and the others for dinner, and then we had such a good time at the barn dance ... I mean, we were together almost all evening. Then on Saturday, after the attack, you weren't taking any calls at the manor, and on Sunday you just took off. Yes, I was safely tucked away in my apartment in Quyon during the attack, but did it occur to you that I didn't know if I still had a job? And did it occur to you that maybe I might have been worried about you? You didn't call me on Monday or Tuesday, then you show up here again tonight and all you can do is sulk! You want this to be strictly business—you the big shit inventor and me the lowly housekeeper—fine, that's just peachy, but I think you should have the guts to say so. On the other hand, if you want us to be friends, then you have to talk to me and relate to me like I'm a human being."

Victor winced at the memory of his lousy behavior, and he felt a debt of gratitude that Winnie had had the courage to speak her mind last night. He took the shampoo and started on his hair. He was already feeling guilty last night, for not having called Annette, when Winnie lit into him. He knew he had a terrible propensity for alienating people who had treated him decently, but he seemed incapable of preventing himself from doing it over and over. He had apologized to Winnie, repeatedly, and she had finally

accepted. Then they had talked into the wee hours about the wonders of the LieDeck, about the incredible insights that were available into the workings of a human mind and “heart” by using the LieDeck on oneself.

Victor finished rinsing off, put the plug in, and sat down in the tub to let the hot water pour over his body. He put a washcloth over his face and leaned back to enjoy the liquid memory of the night before.

Winnie had seemed fascinated by an analysis of human nature that he had formulated ... had *discovered*, really ... and she had used his LieDeck to check out some of her own attitudes and views.

Victor could tell by the tone and tenor of their conversation that she was feeling a rekindling of the attraction she had experienced towards him the previous Friday evening, when he had insisted she join the gang for dinner. It was like a rebirth of the magic they had flirted with, gingerly, at the Beach Barn.

About 2:00 a.m. this morning, Victor had gone to the bathroom. During his absence, Winnie had used his LieDeck to check out the feelings she had towards him, and then she talked about her findings openly when he had returned. She told him that apparently she was not only turned on by him, but was falling in love with him as well, according to her heart (she meant the emotions, not the muscle that pumped blood) and according to those unerring evaluations of her words by the LieDeck. “Two quite different things,” she had emphasized. Victor had then used the LieDeck to confirm that he felt the same about her, on both counts.

They had readily agreed that it wouldn't be prudent to go leaping into bed until they knew each other better, a decision that stood like the rock of Gibraltar ... for about fifteen minutes.

I gave her cakes and I gave her ale

And I gave her sack and sherry

I kissed her once and I

Kissed her twice

And we were wondrous merry

Now it was the morning after—the afternoon after, actually. When Victor emerged from the bathroom in his terrycloth robe, Winnie was sitting at the table in the bedroom, pouring coffee, uncovering eggs Benedict, admiring Wilson Lake through a wide open window, looking ever so much like a wife. She enjoyed serving him, not because it was her station, but because she loved him. Her eyes said it, and Victor made them close with a soft kiss.

"Good morning, sweet lady," he said.

"Good *afternoon*, sweet man," she joked back, blinking her green eyes.

As Victor sat down and took a sip of his coffee, Winnie pressed the remote for the sound system.

"'Lyin' Eyes,' by The Eagles," he exclaimed. "How did you know? That's one of my all-time favorites."

"It didn't take no Sherlock Holmes," she snarled in her best Brooklyn accent. "You like country and western music. You invented a lie detector. I put two and two together."

Victor smiled. If they could keep humor in their relationship, the rest would take care of itself. "God," he said, "I used to put that CD in my old Discman while I was out at the farm. I'd come home after a

twelve-hour shift behind the wheel and put that tape on. I've spent many a lonely night with that song ... and the LieDeck ... well, earlier versions of the LieDeck."

They ate and drank to the strains of "Lyin' Eyes." On the choruses, Victor hummed a high harmony. "Always wanted to sing with a band," he said when it ended.

"So do you think you could tell if I was lying just by gazing into my eyes?" Winnie asked, batting her lashes again.

"Maybe ... probably not," said Victor. "But there *are* people who can tell if a person is lying without using a LieDeck."

"Really?" asked Winnie, who still didn't have the hang of not needing a LieDeck, of not challenging the veracity of friends as a manner of speaking.

"Aphasia," said Victor—he knew she wasn't questioning his honesty when she'd said "really"—she just meant he should explain. "It's called receptive or global aphasia. It's a psychiatric disorder associated with problems in the left temporal lobe, and aphasiacs are incapable of understanding words, so they develop an extreme sensitivity to the meaning of what people are saying from the tone of their speech, the involuntary expressiveness and feeling that goes along with words, the 'paraverbal,' it's called. And they seem to do it much the way a dog understands some things that people say or mean, but more so."

"Amazing," said Winnie. "Where'd you learn all that?"

"I read about it in a weird medical book called *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, by Oliver Sacks. There's apparently a truism that you can't lie to an aphasiac. One day, this Dr. Sacks walked into the aphasia ward of the hospital where he worked, and all the patients were laughing hysterically. It seems that Richard Nixon—he was president at the time—was making a speech on TV—something about the Vietnam War, I think—and these aphasia patients knew that he was being disingenuous, even though they hadn't the slightest clue what he was talking about. So they were—like—cracking up."

"You're kidding," said Winnie, who realized after the fact that her exclamation was beepable, and represented yet another pre-LieDeck speech pattern that would eventually collect an unheralded cultural death.

"God's own truth," swore Victor. "Now there's an expression that will fall out of use, eh? 'God's own truth'?"

"You know what I heard on the radio this morning?" said Winnie.

"What?" asked Victor.

"There's a new nine-six-seven number you can call ... 1-967-LIEDECK ... and you can get something verified with a LieDeck anywhere in Canada, over the phone! It'll be in the United States in a few days. They must've bought some of those LieDecks that Mr. Whiteside gave to reporters. Anyway, it's twenty dollars a call, plus six dollars a minute for as long as you stay on the line. Apparently they're flooded with requests. It goes right on your phone bill."

"Oh my God," said Victor. "Now it's *really* begun."

The focus group had been working twelve-hour days in a large room at the headquarters of Whiteside Technologies, in an urgent effort to understand the LieDeck, with dwindling hope that events might not fly out of control. However, under the able leadership of Steve Sutherland, a clear picture was beginning to emerge, aided in part by the headlines in the daily newspapers.

In the short term, it seemed that the LieDeck spelled serious trouble on almost every front. Many politicians were in hot water, business scams were being exposed daily, and sex scandals were now a dime a dozen. The advantages offered by the LieDeck were real but long-term, and they seemed doubtful in value compared to the chaos that was likely to be injected into most areas of life in the “here and now.” Humanity, it seemed certain, was going to have a *very* difficult time coping with the thing. The irony, of course, was that hundreds of thousands of people were clamoring to get LieDecks as soon as possible, in spite of the danger, in spite of world events.

Everyone now referred to the focus group as the LieDeck Assessment Program, or L.A.P. New members had been recruited, and specific tasks had been assigned to seven subgroups.

One of these subgroups, headed by “Chairman Steve,” was set up to assess the impact of the LieDeck on belief systems and public morale. Another group, headed by the legal team at Whiteside Tech, was asked to gauge the effects the LieDeck would likely have on the court system and law enforcement. Nancy Ferguson had insisted on joining the group that was asked to study the pressures that the LieDeck would bring to bear on marriage and the family. Another subgroup was looking into the economic forces that would be affected or unleashed by the LieDeck. Eight men and one lone woman had volunteered to examine the influence of the LieDeck on the political process.

Most of the new members of the L.A.P. were outside specialists. There was a team of eminent sociologists and psychologists from the University of Ottawa and cross-town Carleton University. They had been asked to outline the expected effects of the LieDeck on society at large, and on the mental stability of individuals within society. Of course Michael Whiteside and Becky Donovan were also members of the L.A.P., and they had been asked to sum up their thoughts and feelings on how the youth of the country—well, the youth of all countries, really—might react to the LieDeck in terms of their personal relationships, education and careers.

And everyone was waiting to see what might be on those three reel-to-reel tapes that Victor had made over a twelve-year period, a period during which he was the only person alive with a reason to ask himself the questions that had now seized the attention of the L.A.P.... and the whole world. Rumor had it that although he had promised to turn them over, then promised to write a report himself with the help of Chairman Steve, there was a strong reluctance on the part of the inventor to let these tapes go, to personally confront the consequences of what he had started.

The overall group had grown from the original twenty members to fifty. Some of those who had been involved since its formation three days ago were already suffering burnout. Randall Whiteside had told everyone to take this afternoon off, if they could, but there was to be a meeting that evening at seven o'clock at which all seven subgroups were to present their preliminary observations and recommendations, verbally and in writing.

Michael and Becky had been working on their report in one of the company's unused labs, with help from a secretary whose normal duties were in the advertising department of Whiteside Technologies. They felt reasonably satisfied with the conclusions they had reached and the usefulness of their suggestions. Becky had only been at it for a day, but she had worked hard and contributed much to a report that Michael had begun alone. Like everyone in the L.A.P., they needed a rest.

“Look,” pleaded Michael, “all's I'm saying is let's you and me crack this pop-stand for a couple of hours.

There's no reason why we—"

"Crack this pop-stand?" squealed Becky in disbelief. "I thought I actually heard you say 'crack this pop-stand.' You didn't say that, did you?"

"Beckeeyyeeeyeeey," whined Michael as he pretended to bash his forehead on the blacktopped lab desk. "Our report is done. It's not even due until seven o'clock, so let's take a break is all I'm saying."

Becky usually melted when he whimpered like that, but she and Michael had been entrusted with an important aspect of the work, and she wanted badly to do it right, and make a difference. It was already 3:00 p.m., and the mature decision, she felt, was to stay.

"Our report isn't actually *done*, Michael," she said. "It's dictated. It hasn't even been proofread. It has to be checked one last time. I want to submit a document that's ... you know ... like ... polished. You're always—"

"We're talking *homemade* frigging pies here," explained Michael as he jumped up and danced wildly around her, wiggling his fingers, "pies that win *blue ribbons* at county fairs, smooth vanilla ice cream that people get *addicted* to. We're talking golden French fries, sizzled to perfection in one-hundred-proof cholesterol, green overalls, permanently dirty fingernails, wild-assed conversations that fly around from table to table. This is hick heaven we're talkin' here, honey."

Becky said nothing as she struggled to choose between a heavy sulk and a sharp rabbit punch to the kidneys. Michael saw the chink in her armor and leapt in to close the deal.

"It's on the highway, right at the Quyon turnoff, near the estate, and it's unbelievable that you've never even been in there. We chopper out to the dock at the lodge: that's like fifteen minutes. We grab the boat over to my cabin: another two minutes. We get into our grubbies: two more minutes. We boat back to the lodge, grab the jeep, and we're at Ray's by four o'clock. We stay an hour, have a wonderful, fattening meal, then we just reverse ourselves, and we're back here by five thirty, five forty-five tops—to check our report. Come on ... puleeease ... Beckyyyyyy," he begged, on his knees, now.

"She's too serious, that one," her Uncle Fred would always say. "Cut her some slack," he used to tell her dad. "Get her involved in outside activities," he used to say to her mom over coffee. "Race you to the elevator," dared Becky.

When they got to the cabin, an impromptu tickle-fest turned into a full snuggle, and eventually became lovemaking. Then they ran into a hassle when Michael called from the lodge to make sure the public portion of their outing was covered by Patriot—he should have told them before the trip to the cabin, not on the way back in. What with one thing and another, they didn't get to Ray's until almost 5:00 p.m.

Many of the locals knew Michael from before, of course. He had tried to hang out at Ray's on rare occasions in his younger teens, over the strenuous objections of his parents. To the regulars, it appeared that "the Whiteside lad" might be some kind of a rebel, or "a few kernels short of a cob." From their point of view, it was unexplainable why a rich kid would go around like that, looking like he just got off shift at the mill. But he seemed to be "all there" when he talked, not a lot different from anyone else, save for his soft hands and his fancy jeep.

"How's doin'?" Michael said to the twenty-six-year-old proprietor.

"Where the hell you been hiding?" asked Ray. "Haven't seen your ugly face around here in a..." He did a search, internally, but the right clincher just wouldn't come.

"Oh, you know ... school ... working for my dad," said Michael as he pulled out a chair at Joe Farley's old table, Jesse McCain's table now. "So, what's new?"

"Well, this buddy o' mine tol' me the Sûreté arrested Jake, the cop from up in Bristol. Do you remember him?"

"You're kidding!" said Tirone Lucas, who was one table down from the corner table, with his Tammy. "I can't believe that."

"Busted him this morning," said Ray. "I thought everybody knew." He tossed a look at Tirone that amounted to: "Where've you been that you didn't hear?"

"Yeah, I remember Jake," said Michael. "So ... how come they arrested him?"

"Well, it seems Buck told the Sûreté that Fatty Crosbie was paying Jake hush money to not say anything about him growing wacky-backy up near Shawville. You remember. Jake shot him back in twenty twelve, when he tried to run away. But now they're saying maybe Fatty wasn't running away, that maybe he was going to spill the beans about that hush money on account of he got born again, and that's really why Jake shot him. That's the way I heard it, anyways," explained Ray.

"Holy shit!" said Tirone. "I can't believe it, Jake in jail."

Notably, no one at Ray's thought to say, "Holy shit, I can't believe it, Fatty was murdered."

"You missed the big shindig down at the Beach Barn," said Claire as she cleared off Jesse's table. "Social event of the year, and not a Whiteside to be seen. O' course we all heard about that terrible business you had out there at the lodge the next day after the dance. This place was crawling with reporters and cops and army guys for a couple of days. They catch those guys yet?"

"Can't say," said Michael pointedly, which was technically correct if not one hundred percent honest. "You make any pies fresh today?" he asked.

"You don't get pie until you finish your first course, young fella," announced Grant Doherty, father-like, from the corner table, Merrick McFee's table. "Didn't your mom teach you nothin'?"

"Oh, leave the kid alone," said Claire over her shoulder to Grant. "I got apple pie and coconut cream I baked up just this morning. What'll it be?"

"Actually, I'd like to see the menu," said Becky.

"Here you go, sweetheart," said Claire as she plucked a menu from under her arm.

"Chicken fingers," said Michael insistently as Becky perused. "I told you we gotta have chicken fingers. We're talking three different sauces here! You got your sweet-'n'-sour, your honey-garlic, and your barbecue, and the—"

"On reflection, I think I'll have the chicken fingers," announced Becky with a bent smile as she refolded the menu and handed it back to Claire.

"Boy, you can sure tell they haven't been married too long," said Merrick McFee, too loudly. "You see the way she goes along with her man there? You see that, Tirone? Now my Francine, she don't know that particular trick. Maybe she could have a little talk with my—"

"We're not married," said Becky forcefully to the neighboring table.

"Mr. McFee, this is my girlfriend, Rebecca Donovan," said Michael. "Becky, this is the guy that owns the garage out back, Merrick McFee. Remember I mentioned him before? He's the guy that once told me his family motto was 'why give anybody an easy time when you can give them a hard time?' Isn't that right, Mr. McFee?"

"Two chicken fingers," hollered Claire in the general direction of the kitchen. "So, I guess that awful business out at the lodge was pretty rough on your whole family, eh?"

"Actually, I'd rather not discuss that," said Michael, politely but firmly.

"Whoa, good put-down," whispered Tirone to Tammy as all six customers and the staff exchanged meaningful glances.

"It wasn't a for-real put-down," Tammy whispered back, "at least not deliberate-like, anyways."

"But everybody could see Claire got too pushy," said Tirone.

"She didn't mean no harm," said Tammy softly. "Everybody could see that, but still, I guess she could've left well enough alone, I mean, after he showed he didn't want to talk about it the first time she brought it up."

"Claire's like that," whispered Tirone. "I don't mean like all the time, of course, but a lot more often than her husband would like, that's for sure."

It wasn't the way at Ray's to give somebody a harder time than was right. Claire was crowding at the edges of that regulation, and with the Whiteside lad, no less!

Chicken fingers were the daily special, so it didn't take a minute to get the youngsters served. Lucille brought the plates out herself, to say hi to Michael and because Claire was fuming around in the kitchen, trying to figure out why it was supposed to be such a God damned crime to ask a simple question of the Whiteside boy. The general conversation died off a while because of Claire's faux pas, but then it picked up again on how Prime Minister St. Aubin just "up 'n' quit" like he did.

"There's got to be more to it than what they're saying on the TeeVee," said Tirone over to the corner table, where Merrick McFee and Grant Doherty were nursing beers. "What does that mean anyway, 'personal reasons'? First the Minister of Foreign Affairs or whatever you call it disappears clear off the face of the Earth, then the prime minister resigns—'for personal reasons,' he says. I don't get it."

"It's gotta have something to do with that lie detector your father is putting out," said Merrick McFee. "That how you figure it, son?"

Michael pretended not to hear.

"You need me to come over there and ream out your ears?" asked McFee in a voice that indicated he wouldn't mind actually doing it.

"My hearing's just fine, thank you," said Michael deliberately.

"Whoa, the kid's good," whispered Tirone. "Another bull's-eye."

Several regulars noticed Jesse McCain pulling into the parking lot, and of course that led to some minor adjusting of chairs, for better viewing, because old Jesse likely didn't know it was the Whiteside kid sitting at his personal-private-property-type reserved table. He teetered in and hung his puffy nylon jacket on the first hook, just like he always did. Then he sauntered over to the table where the two

youngsters were enjoying their chicken fingers, and each other.

"You go to high school?" he demanded to know.

"Umm—yeah," said Michael as he looked up sideways at the bristly gray face of the challenger.

"You got a particular seat you sit in for every different class, like we did when I was a kid?"

"Yeah," said Michael. "Why?"

"Well I don't go to school no more myself," explained Jesse, "but I do come in to Ray's five or six times a week, and that's my seat. I'm whatcha call a preferred customer, you might say, and they wouldn't want to lose my business. Nosirree, I can sure tell you that. So, what say we—"

"We'll move," said Becky. "No problem. By the way, my name is Rebecca Donovan, and you are...?"

Ray was already over at the disputed table, picking up plates and silently thanking the Catholic God that the young people weren't going to get in a tussle with old Jesse. But Becky had her hand out, waiting. Jesse wasn't sure what to make of that, so he shook it and introduced himself. Then he turned on Ray.

"Leave the damned dishes," he said. "Son, you just push yourself around to the other side and finish your hen-hocks there," he ordered. "You don't mind if an old fogey sets hisself down an' teaches you a thing or two. You don't mind that, eh?"

"Please," said Becky, holding out an upturned hand. "Join us."

* * *

"Jeeze, Jesse was in his glory," explained Merrick to all comers after the two youngsters and Jesse had left the restaurant. "He sorta knew these young folks were partly pulling his leg and looking on him like some sort of a curiosity, but he didn't seem to mind one bit. He worked up a full head of steam and got to storytelling so dead earnest that poor Claire had to stand beside him a full minute, just waiting for him to order. It was a glorious sight to behold, what with her wanting so bad to get on with other things and yet knowing full well that the first step she took away from the table would land her in a peck of trouble. She got around behind Jesse and used her eyes to tell everybody that she'd like to pour some nice hot tea down the back of his shirt. It was that girl, Rebecca, stepped in again. She excuses herself and asks Jesse if he'd like to order, polite-like, and she calls him *Mr. McCain*. Smart girl, that one. The Whiteside lad could have done lots worse, that's for sure."

Chapter 43

SAY THE CREDO FOR ME

Steve Sutherland decided to use his free afternoon to pay a visit to a former colleague, Bishop William P. Doyle. He had discussed it over the phone with Annette, and this visit was something he simply had to do. He had also examined his motives carefully, looked into his heart. He had used Victor's unusual technique of talking out loud with a LieDeck in hand to double-check his reasons, even to triple-check them on the key issues. He was astonished at how much he had learned about himself that way. Not all of it was pleasing, of course, but at least it was 100% real, and that was a huge improvement on the largely fictional self-perception he'd been living with for the last several decades. In fact, Steve had come to the carefully considered and verified view that the LieDeck, properly used, was a godsend. "Perhaps an unfortunate choice of words," he had said to himself out loud during a recent session.

He had originally identified three reasons why he wanted to visit Bill Doyle. As he rested in the back of

the taxi that was taking him from the headquarters of Whiteside Technologies to the offices of the Canadian Association of Catholic Bishops, he cut the list to two.

He had wanted to talk to somebody about the joy, and the confusion, of his new ... friendship, he supposed he might call it ... no, his new “relationship” with Annette Blais. He had gone over that part many times in his mind, and several times out loud. During his contemplations, he had been struck by the fact that his career as a priest had effectively alienated him from humanity. That wasn't the way it was supposed to be, but after more than half a century on the planet, he found it was a struggle to identify more than two candidates for a totally honest heart-to-heart. It had to be either Randall Whiteside or Bill Doyle.

Whiteside was his first choice, but Randall had never been a Christian, had never understood the Church, and couldn't even begin to understand the powerful hold it had over those who devoted their lives to it. The two former school buddies had managed to stay in touch over the years, had even remained close, but their active friendship never included any discussion of the most intimate parts of life, the core of life itself.

That wasn't the case with Bill Doyle. Bill had been his friend, or at least the colleague Steve had felt closest to since he had become a bishop. There had been a few times in the past when the two of them had talked from the heart, or dangerously close to there. For several summers, in the early years of the new century, they had taken walks together, after midnight, under the stars, at Catholic Youth Camp, long after all the kids were in bed, and they had tried to relate on a level other than bishop-to-bishop.

However, their closeness had effectively ended five years ago. Back in July of 2009, they had prayed together on a rocky point at the water's edge, prayed out loud under a trillion stars and a brilliant moon, and the emotion of it ended up embarrassing them both so much that they had walked back to camp in total silence and dared not walk together again for the rest of that summer, or ever again.

During that troubled prayer, Steve had alluded vaguely to his “needs,” he had called them, the urges that sometimes led him to the very brink of madness. He told Bill that once, back in 2006, he had stepped out of the shower, screamed at his naked body in a mirror and slapped his own face, repeatedly, hard, until the image of Sister Beth had been banished from his mind's eye.

Bill Doyle, for his part, had knelt and squirmed on the bare rock until his knees bled. He had wailed aloud to God about a time he'd stood in the bush, out of sight, watching a dozen eleven-year-old boys go for a skinny dip, watching them through binoculars, for twenty agonizing minutes, while perspiring insanely. “I just wanted to make sure they were playing safe,” he had sobbed, “but...”

He had never finished that sentence. Steve knew the rest intuitively, and Bill knew that Steve knew. That moment of truth, as it were, had led to a chill in the air whenever the two men met, a hellish awkwardness that had never really gone away in the years since the incident.

No, Steve said to himself in the back of the cab. That issue will have to wait. I'll tell Bill about Annette and me soon enough, but not right off the top. He would think I was flaunting my sinfulness in his face, for spite. No ... he wouldn't think that, with his brain, Steve corrected himself, but he would feel it, emotionally, deeply. In any event, he would conclude that my feelings for Annette were out of character—wildly out of character—and there's no way he would be able to understand that it was my being a priest that was out of character. He could never understand that I've only recently gotten in touch with who I am, with my real character, thanks to the LieDeck, and I wouldn't be doing him any favors by getting into that difficult arena before he gets a handle on who he really is.

Bishop Doyle had no desire to see Steve Sutherland, but as the newly elected head of the Canadian Association of Catholic Bishops, it was his clear duty to make peace with his predecessor. Six days earlier, Steve Sutherland had threatened to bring shame on the Church with his idea of hooking priests and Catholic Brothers up to lie detectors, for the holy act of confession. *His goal was laudable enough*, thought Doyle. *Everyone wants to bring an end to the sex scandal in the Church, no one more than myself, but the approach he proposed was ... outrageous, to put it mildly.*

Since Sutherland's departure from the Church, the world had changed radically, and Bill Doyle knew it. Now that the LieDeck Revolution had begun, no one would be able to hide any crime or misdemeanor. Like everyone else, the new head of the CACB was very seriously worried about the implications of the device.

He worried about the Church. And for reasons that he wasn't sure of, and decidedly did *not* want to explore, he worried about Steve Sutherland. By a quirk of fate, Steve had ended up in the middle of the LieDeck Revolution, smack-dab on his secular feet, deeply involved with Randall Whiteside and that damnable little gadget.

For Doyle, the most frightening part of this meeting was the not knowing. True to his word, Sutherland had said nothing to the media about his reasons for leaving the CACB and the Church—yet. But his promise was for a two-week grace period. Was he now intending to reveal the reluctance of the CACB to find all the abusers and turn them over to the authorities? Was he going to reveal that he had been forced out of the Association because of his zeal to see that all of the criminals among the clergy were arrested and punished? Was he going to mobilize the grass roots of the Church to achieve his goal? Would he encourage Catholics to use their LieDecks to ask priests and Brothers if they were abusers? Did he plan to tell the media folks that it was the man who replaced him as CACB chairman who had suggested the vote of non-confidence? *And what should I call him*, wondered Doyle, *now that he isn't a bishop any more?*

"God be with you," he said as he opened the door and executed a slow, solemn head-bob. "Please come in—uh..."

"Steve," said Steve. "Just call me Steve, Bill. Everybody calls me that now, and I ... I kind of like it. How are you?"

Still spoiling for a fight, thought the new chairman of the CACB.

Still floundering around the cosmos without a paddle, judged the former bishop.

"Shall we go into the study—uh—Steve?" asked the Bishop.

"Let's see what we can scare up in the kitchen," said Steve. "I'm absolutely starving."

Of course Steve knew the headquarters of the CACB well. For years, when he had lived there off and on, he had always made a point of befriending the nuns and laypersons whose job it was to keep the brass fed and watered.

"Sister Beth," he exclaimed. "How have you been, you rascal?"

"Father Steve!" she beamed as she gave him a big hug. "I'm fine. And look at you! How's it going? Staying out of trouble, I trust?"

"You don't watch enough TV," he said.

"I watch. I heard about you getting involved with that LieDeck Assessment Program at Whiteside's. It

sounds ... interesting."

"It's fascinating," said Steve. "What's new with you?"

"Hey, you forget—I'm a nun!" she protested. "Nothing's ever new with me, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Now look, I'm sure you two want to talk, so I'll make myself scarce. There's some fabulous turkey breast in the fridge, and lettuce, and some of my wonderful homemade bread. Make yourself a nice big sandwich, with mayonnaise and lots of pepper, the way you like it. The pepper-grinder is up over the stove. See you later."

Steve waved goodbye, and as soon as he got to the kitchen, he took her advice. "You want one, Bill?" he asked.

"No thank you," said Bishop Doyle sternly as he sat down on the far side of the table. "And I'd appreciate it if you'd call me by my proper title."

Steve finished making his Dagwood sandwich in silence, and Bishop Doyle wasn't about to be the first to speak. They were like two boys in a contest to see who would blink first, except that here, only one contestant had any interest in winning.

"You sure I can't make you one of these beauties?" asked Steve as he sat down opposite his former colleague and chomped off his first bite. "We used to make these all the time at Youth Camp," he continued with his mouth full. "Remember?"

"Why did you request this meeting?" asked Doyle tensely, as a gaggle of laughing eleven-year-old boys flashed and splashed across his memory. "I think it might be best if you would state your business."

Too bad he doesn't finish his sentences, thought Steve. *I'll take it as implied: state your business and leave.*

"Two reasons, really," said Steve as he removed some stray mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth and licked his finger. "First, I wanted to inform you and the CACB that I will not be following through on my threat to talk to the media about the events of April 18, Good Friday, when we had our ... our parting of the ways. I thought you'd like to know that."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Steve," said the Bishop. "I trust prayer had a role to play in changing your mind?"

Steve threw back half a glass of fresh, cold milk before making his response. "Oh, it's not so much that I changed my mind, Bill," he said. "It's just that it won't be necessary now. That whole thing will take care of itself when the LieDeck goes to market. It would be vengeful of me to waste my time ushering the process along. It's a new world we've got here, isn't it?"

Bishop Doyle flushed. He knew the sex scandal would be shoved out in the open for all to see, in sordid detail, and that would rock Canada and exact a fearsome toll from the Church. "There's ... a second thing?" he said, hoping to slide past the abuse issue.

"I want to ask you a favor, Bill," said Steve as he reached beneath his cardigan and flipped a button in his shirt pocket. "A small favor."

"What is it?" asked Doyle suspiciously.

Steve tried to use his tongue to dislodge a cracked peppercorn from between his teeth, but it didn't work. He took a toothpick from the angel-shaped clay holder on the kitchen table and did the job right,

with a single poke and a twist. He took another small bite of his turkey sandwich, swallowed it with too little chewing, and scolded himself, silently, for procrastinating. "Say the Credo for me," he said, without looking up into Bill's eyes.

"Say ... the Credo for you?" asked the startled bishop.

"Yes Bill," he said, gently, putting down his sandwich and settling in for the duration. "I'm asking you to say the Credo ... for me ... please." He looked directly at Bill's face, planting his elbows on the table and leaning forward, resting his chin on his interlocked knuckles.

The Bishop was stunned. He had no idea if this troublesome ex-priest was somehow searching for his faith, or ridiculing him, or provoking him. Whatever the case, this was a favor that he could not refuse.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, ma—"

"Beep," went Steve's LieDeck.

"...maker of heaven and—"

"Beep."

"...and Earth, and—"

"Beep."

"...and in Jesus Christ, His—"

"Beep."

"...His only Son—"

"Beep."

Steve held out his hands on the kitchen table. His eyes begged the Bishop to take hold, but it wasn't to be.

Bill Doyle couldn't continue. He stared in the general direction of the half-sandwich and felt his soul evaporate. "Why did you do this to me?" he asked through silent tears. "Why did you destroy my faith, my life?"

"I didn't destroy anything, Bill," countered Steve softly. "I ... I like you, actually, and you notice my LieDeck didn't beep when I said that. You were the only guy who had the guts to stand up and say out loud what everybody else was thinking last week."

Doyle took off his wire-rimmed glasses and closed his eyes, and wished that ears had been made with lids as well. He wished he had a magical eraser that could scrub out the last minute of time. He wished he were dead.

"The thing is," said Steve, "I did some work with the LieDeck on this whole area of religious faith, and I was astonished to find out that the great majority of Christians don't believe in God. They want to believe, some of them rather desperately, but the fact is, they can't, and they don't. There may be a God, Bill, for all I know. Sister Beth ... I'm sure she believes. But you and I aren't believers. You can use a LieDeck to find out if you ever believed. And if you did, before, you can use the thing to find out when you lost your faith, and even find out why you stopped believing. The LieDeck doesn't *make* us who we are, but it's very useful in helping us understand who we *actually* are. I had to cope with the discovery

that I never believed in God, Bill. It was devastating ... and it was embarrassing ... but it was real."

Doyle still had his eyes closed, and his head was gradually dropping. His lower lip was quivering, and the muscles all around his face were becoming mildly spastic.

"I'll stop if you say so," offered Steve. When there was no response, he took it as a signal to carry on. "Reality seems to have this nasty habit of just existing out there, and existing inside ourselves, quite in spite of our perceptions of it. And we fool ourselves if we think otherwise, Bill. As far as I know—and as far as you know, it would seem—God is a myth, a man-made idea that serves a primitive emotional need to transcend death, to not die. It solves the problem of the fear we have of dying, and little more. We believe in God mostly because it has the effect of changing death from a very bad thing into a very good thing, but it doesn't even do that very well. As the saying goes, everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. I've looked at this phenomenon every which way, Bill, using my LieDeck, and that's ... well, I'm afraid that's what it—uh—boils down to."

The Bishop opened his eyes and stared unfocused at a newly naked world.

The first time is the hardest, Steve reminded himself. Everybody said that, all those who had tested their belief in God and found only a puff of smoke. There was nothing to do but to continue.

"I know what you're going through, Bill," he said. "I went through it myself, and I went through it alone. I came here mainly so that you wouldn't have to go through it all by yourself. I had the same sense of loss, the same remorse over wasting most of my life pretending to believe something that I didn't believe. And I know you blame me, Bill, but I'm not to blame. Sooner or later, you would have found yourself with a LieDeck in your hands ... in your office, or in your car ... and you would have tested your faith, and you would have ended up exactly where you are now, in a major depression ... except you'd be alone. I did this because I care, Bill, because I was your friend ... *am* your friend."

Doyle heard the words, understood the words. He wanted to scream out, to object, to let fly with some wild accusations, but the infallible LieDeck was sitting passively on the table, like an electronic Satan, silently endorsing a second assassination of Jesus Christ, the son of ... whomever.

Steve's own experience with this process had been less traumatic because he'd had doubts and suspicions about his faith for years. Bill would not have such an easy time of it.

After having gone this far, Steve knew he had to press on, whatever the risks. "The truth is—and this has been verified over and over in our research—the truth is that you can take hours, or days, or, I presume, weeks or months or perhaps *years* to get over the depression. But we also have the ability to deal with this wrenching experience in a few seconds if we want to, if we decide to. I've seen people do it, Bill. I've done it myself, several times. You just say to yourself 'Well, that's reality,' and you bloody well go on from there."

Doyle stared at his former colleague, his putative friend, at his sternum, actually, at the V in his buttoned up blue cardigan, near the spot where his heart was. "I'll ... have to leave here for a while ... so I can consider my position." He replaced his glasses, and his eyes went from the cardigan to the photo of the pope above the fridge, straight up, never catching Steve's face on the way by. "Perhaps a leave of absence," he said vacantly, with a wet pewter glaze over his pupils that caused the pope's peaceful face to shimmer out of focus. "What was that you said about dealing with this experience in seconds, Steve? I mean ... not that I can, but..."

"Well, to show you how it's done, if you took that option right now, you'd say, 'But what will I do now?' And I would respond 'Well, Mr. Whiteside told me about a social project he's starting up next month through the Destiny Foundation. How about I try to get you a position there?' And you'd say—"

"And I would ask you what the job entails," said Bill, courageously, as he wiped tears away with a paper napkin. He managed eye contact for the first time since he'd faced his unbelief, or learned about it, made the leap from pseudo-Christian to ... well, to whatever came next.

Steve smiled as warmly as he'd ever smiled. This was much better than saving souls, especially since there were no souls ... as far as he knew. He stood up, walked behind his friend, and massaged his brittle shoulders. "I've got the use of a cottage in Norway Bay," he said. "It belongs to my brother. I think you should stay with me for a while. We'll help each other."

"Okay," said the Bishop meekly ... ex-bishop.

"Bill, I'm so proud of you," said Steve. He slapped the Bishop on the back, returned to his chair, and prepared to tackle the other half of his snack. "But enough of this silly sentimentality," he said. "I don't go in much for that stuff since I got myself straightened out ... I mean about my religious—uh—status."

Doyle nodded, tried to agree, at least on the surface.

"Whiteside needs a cook at that project I mentioned," said Steve as he took a bite of his turkey breast snack. "You're pretty handy with a skillet, Bill. You ... you want to be a cook?"

"A cook?" said Doyle in utter disbelief.

"Yeah, a cook," said Steve as he opened his half-sandwich and added more pepper. "Somebody has to cook, Bill. I like to cook, and so do you. I've seen you make dinner a hundred times at the Catholic Youth Camp. I never saw anybody have as much fun as you used to have in that big old kitchen, with all those kids running in and out, driving us bloody crazy. Come on, Bill. Be a cook. There's lots of room for advancement when you start out at the bottom."

Chapter 44 THIN VENEER

Bill Doyle didn't commit to the particular career opportunity that Steve had suggested, but he did pack a bag and leave with him, by the back door, to avoid Sister Beth and the other staff. There seemed to emerge a tenuous bond between the two former prelates, as if they had survived a disaster together, the kind of experience that can't be put into words, that can only be understood by those who were there.

For Steve, the transition to civilian life was rooted in reality, permanent, and entirely liberating—this in spite of the problems and challenges it posed. For Bill, however, the jury was still out. His rational mind told him that his decision to leave the Church was both necessary and right, but his mind hadn't been in charge of things for quite a long time, obviously. This was not his idea of what being "born again" was supposed to feel like, or be like.

They took a taxi from downtown Ottawa to Steve's cottage out in Norway Bay. It was expensive, but Steve had an income again, from his work with the L.A.P., and he wasn't concerned about money, and he didn't want to call Patriot for a lift. Bill was in need of a place to live, to just be for a while, alone—alone with a LieDeck, to get to know himself, to make friends with himself, hopefully to make friends with the world as it really was.

The trip out was uneventful, mostly because further discussion of important matters couldn't take place in the presence of a cab driver. They talked a bit about the state of the world, and about recent political developments, but every topic seemed to slide inevitably back to the LieDeck, as surely as all roads once led to Rome.

"Great little spot, eh?" said Steve as the cab pulled up to the door.

"Wonderful tall trees," said Bill. "It must be very peaceful here."

Steve asked the driver to wait for him. After they were inside, he gave his new roomie a quick tour of the cottage. "You got your stand-up kitchen," he said in the manner of a harried salesman. "You got your carpeted living room, no fireplace. You got your three-piece bathroom with a chemical toilet. You got your full basement—God knows why, my parents never found a use for it. You got your wooden deck out back—we can eat there tomorrow if it stays nice. And you got your spare bedroom. It's yours for as long as you want it or need it. Here's a key to the front door.

"I'm sorry I can't stay," he explained. "I've got a big meeting at Whiteside's. But I'm leaving you a LieDeck here. Use it, or don't use it. It's up to you. There's a lovely sandy beach a couple of hundred yards that-a-way. The government wharf is right at the end of the road. It's a nice place to think ... or eavesdrop. Talk to the people you see, Bill. They really like spontaneous conversation around here. Make yourself supper. There's lots of food in the fridge. I should be home by about ten o'clock. Maybe we'll go out for a beer at the British Hotel in Quyon and just talk awhile. You'll ... be okay?" he asked.

"I'll be fine," said Bill. "Go. Go to your important meeting. I'll ... see you later. And Steve ... thanks ... I guess."

"Yeah," said Steve. "It's kind of a mixed blessing, eh? The LieDeck, I mean."

In an hour, Steve was back at the headquarters of Whiteside Technologies. The 7:00 p.m. meeting of the L.A.P. had been preempted by a call from Bertha McNeil, Godfrey's deputy prime minister, asking on behalf of the Prime Minister that Randall fly out by helicopter to the government's retreat house at Meech Lake, to consult with the inner cabinet about the LieDeck. Godfrey also wanted Randall to bring "Bishop Sutherland" with him, and Commissioner Joly too.

An odd request, thought Randall, the part about bringing Joly along. Surely he could make his own way out. But if the Prime Minister wants us to arrive together at Meech Lake exactly at 9:00 p.m., then that's what has to happen.

Commissioner Joly arrived at Whiteside's headquarters about 7:50 p.m. He wanted to see the Prime Minister's speech to the Commons at 8:00 p.m., on TV, before they flew in Whitebird III to Meech Lake. As it turned out, he needn't have bothered making the extra effort. Nicholas Godfrey issued forth with a river of platitudes, then informed the House that the full cabinet was meeting at 10:00 p.m., at Meech Lake, to discuss a detailed plan of action with regard to the LieDeck.

"I guess we're the warm-up act," said Randall when the Prime Minister's speech was over. "I've got all the written reports from the subgroups. Too bad we didn't have time to go over them one last time. I guess they'll just have to do as they are. Five bucks says we get to Meech Lake before Godfrey."

Steve leaned his head back against the trembling seat and listened to the blades as they ploughed an invisible column of innocent spring air towards the Earth. It had been six days since he'd walked out of the Church, and he realized that he hadn't given a lot of thought to his ecclesiastical circumstances. Sister Beth had called Whiteside Tech several times, asking for him, leaving messages to the effect that many of his old friends had been trying to find out what was going on, why he had left the Church, and why he was involved with that new LieDeck device. Steve had decided not to return her calls. *Bishop Sutherland* no longer existed. He had rejected the Church when the Churchmen rejected his proposal to access the truth about sex abuse using lie detectors, only days before his life had been consumed by a new type of lie detector that might well shadow and shape human behavior for the rest of time.

He reflected on the first time that he had tested his faith with a LieDeck. Clearly, he did not believe in God. He'd suspected as much for a long time, but that was the problem with belief. By definition, you could never really know if you believed or not. You could say you believed, you could try to believe, you could want to believe, you could act as if you believed, you could infer from your behavior that you believed, you could accept the feedback of others who accepted your profession of faith and treated you as if you were a believer, you could think you believed or believe you believed, but in the end, you could not actually *know* whether you believed or not. Now he knew, for sure. He didn't believe in God. Never had.

His old life in the Church was extremely hard to understand from his new perspective. He had little insight into how an intelligent, informed and balanced person like himself could spend decades in self-deceit and not be aware of it in the slightest. *But if I could get hooked*, he thought, *then small wonder that poor old Bill got scooped up*.

And there was the flock to consider ... the flocks, really ... plural ... believers of all stripes. *What happens to one-point-seven billion Christians if the bottom falls out of the Jesus market?* he asked himself.

He shook his head and wondered whether he was wasting his time worrying about imponderables. Like most people, he was starting to get caught up in his real-world responsibilities. He was too busy now to fret away valuable minutes on the minutiae of the spiritual condition ... assuming there even was such a thing.

And what a life I ended up with, he thought as he looked at the last hints of light on the western horizon. Six days ago he was the chairman of the Canadian Association of Catholic Bishops. That same day he was an ordinary guy at a dance in a "Beach Barn," of all things. Two days ago he was in a grungy bar, consoling the formerly famous hockey star Buck Ash over his terminal lung cancer, unable to assure his new friend that death was anything more than the end of life, period. For the past few days, he'd been chairing the L.A.P. group at Whiteside headquarters, trying to get a handle on how humanity would cope with the LieDeck. And just yesterday, he had realized that he was buns-over-applecart in love with a pretty young security agent ... who apparently felt the same way about him. Bill Doyle had followed him out of the Church and was his roommate. And now here he was, on Whiteside's corporate helicopter, with the Commissioner of the RCMP, zipping up to Meech Lake to brief the inner cabinet! It felt like a B-movie script had been syringed into his brain by the Devil ... *oops, no devil either*, he thought. He closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind.

"We're coming in, Mr. Whiteside," shouted Grant Eamer from behind the controls. "Better do up your tie."

"Sorry to interrupt your—uh—meditations, Steve, but are you ready for this?" asked Randall.

"Ready as I'll ever be," said Steve, "although I'm still not sure I should be part of the group that—"

"Too late," said Randall. "You'll do fine. You're about to discover that politicians are pretty ordinary people, but you shouldn't let that fool you or turn you off. Government by ordinary people is as good as it gets on this particular planet."

"Well," said Bertrand Joly with a deep sigh, "I'm sorry I'm going to have to disagree with you on your primary recommendation, Randall. I want to assure you now, before the hostilities begin, that this isn't personal. I simply—"

"I'm a big boy," said Randall. "I can take it. And besides, what makes you think that I won't convince the PM that you're off the mark on that one?"

"I'm a pretty big boy myself," said Bertrand, with a rueful smirk and an unconscious glance at his bulging midsection. "If I lose the argument, I will of course enforce the law as it stands. Where do you come down on this, Steve?"

Steve hadn't said a word since Whitebird III lifted off the roof of the office tower, but he'd caught bits and pieces of the discussion that had so sharply divided his two traveling companions.

"I've spent decades listening to devout and not-so-devout Catholics spill their guts in the confessional," he said. "All I can say is that if the rest of humanity is as screwed up as that flock, you'll probably turn out to be right, Commissioner. I say that very reluctantly, and sadly, but that is my view. The thing I'm going to emphasize is that if it does become necessary to suspend civil liberties or declare martial law, then it must be done carefully, compassionately, and only as a last resort, like Trudeau did back in the early 1970s, in the FLQ crisis."

"That's where the political subgroup at the L.A.P. came down, right?" asked Randall.

"Yeah," said Steve, "and if it's of any interest, Annette and I had a major brouhaha over the issue this afternoon. She called me bad names ... a 'God damned Catholic Cold Warrior,' among other things. I hope it was just the drugs. We talked on the phone for a good twenty minutes, then she hung up on me."

"Ah, young love," quipped Randall. "At least we can be thankful we don't have to make the decisions, Steve. I sure don't envy Nick Godfrey."

Several RCMP officers met the helicopter when it touched down on the landing pad. Grant Eamer stayed with his craft, and the three newly appointed advisers were escorted with hissing naphtha lanterns up the rock path to the government retreat. The imposing log building—what could be seen of it—reminded Steve of Randall's lodge at Wilson Lake, though the scale here was far grander. Constitutional accords had been born in this massive, rustic structure. Political visions and visionaries had risen and fallen in these thick woods. And this would be a day for the history books, the day that the Government of Canada had to decide how to face a future that included the LieDeck.

Inside, Bertha McNeil, the new deputy prime minister, rose to welcome the guests. She explained, with apologies, that she and her colleagues would not be able to expose their views on the subject of the LieDeck "for security reasons." She then asked the three guests to keep their remarks brief: "Two or three minutes each, please." She showed the guests to three chairs at the end of a long table, then she walked to the other end and sat. She moved elegantly, to be sure, but it was very obvious that she was tense—extremely tense. "I'd introduce you all around, normally, but they know who you are, and I'm sure you know who they are, and we are rather pressed for time."

The inner cabinet was made up of those holding the plush portfolios, the prestige jobs, the tough jobs. They were all senior parliamentarians, and they were clearly not accustomed to being briefed by outsiders, especially on matters of national security. There were fourteen ministers around a conference table, with Prime Minister Godfrey sitting off to one side, as if he were going to act as an observer, and nothing more. There was a fresh fire crackling in the massive fireplace, and there was fear, bordering on panic, crackling in the air. After the guests had been served coffee, the waiters were asked to leave.

"The full cabinet will be meeting here in one hour, so ... shall we begin?" suggested Bertha McNeil. "There's no need to stand. Mr. Whiteside, if you'll lead off?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Randall stiffly, "I'm pretty sure that some of you wish we could turn back the clock and suppress this new device, but that's not possible. In my opinion, it's also not desirable. I stand to make a great deal of money from the LieDeck, but that's not the totality of my interest in the device. I have never *ever* seen technology move humanity backwards. Anything can be used for good or

evil, of course, but if we can survive the atomic bomb, surely we can survive the LieDeck."

The president of Whiteside Technologies went on to pitch the kind of relationship that he hoped to forge between the Destiny Foundation and the government. The LieDeck Assessment Program was to be formalized and moved to the Foundation, and Randall said that a portion of the profits from the LieDeck would be made available to study the device's impact. He congratulated the PM for creating the Human Futures Secretariat and naming Senator Cadbury to head it up, and he expressed the hope that the new body would work closely with his Foundation. He asked the government to commit itself to a program of matching grants for non-governmental organizations that became involved in the campaign to tame the LieDeck and facilitate the transition to a LieDeck society. And finally, he pleaded the case for a general amnesty for virtually all pre-LieDeck crimes of a nonviolent nature, an idea that the legal subgroup had thought up and the whole L.A.P. group had endorsed, enthusiastically.

He also attempted to wax eloquent on the dignity and potential of the human spirit, as he called it, but his words seemed to fall on impatient, unwelcoming ears. To wrap up his presentation, he expressed his absolute belief that most Canadians would soon adjust to the "Helliwell-effect," the so-called "truth imperative," without any need for draconian measures of control.

Shifting eyes and fidgety buttocks told the story. The ministers were not convinced.

Bertrand Joly wished he had been allowed to stand for his presentation. People didn't like disagreeing with men as big as he was, and his physical size often added up to a few stray points, awarded subconsciously.

He began by reminding the inner cabinet that when the lights had gone out in Miami, back in 2012, riots and looting had started up in minutes. He was a thin-veneerist at heart. He'd seen too many corpses, interrogated too many genuine psychopaths and testified at too many grisly trials to share Randall's confidence and optimism.

"Civilization is tenuous, at best," he thundered. "When the LieDeck hits the streets, you'll have a choice between martial law and chaos. No one wants chaos. No one wants martial law, either. But if that is the choice, we must not choose chaos. If I were you, I would declare a state of emergency, including full martial law, beginning tonight. But I am not certain you can get away with that politically, so I'll leave you with this piece of advice. Do not wait too long! Your government is going to be held accountable, one way or another."

When the huge frame of Bertrand Joly shuddered into silence, the cabinet ministers responded with silence, just as they had for Whiteside. His last words had sounded more like a threat than he had intended, but ... so be it. Some people need to see a stick before they pay attention. They had to be told that, even if they already knew it full well.

While Randall and the Commissioner were speaking, Steve had found himself in that same sour mood he had known so well for so many years; whenever it came time to write yet another sermon that few people would hear and fewer still would appreciate. He automatically went back to the habit of scanning his internal inventory of aphorisms and clichés. He thought of quoting St. Luke, about how "the truth shall make you free," and rejected it. "Truth does not blush?" Nonsense. "In the end, truth will conquer?" Not always. "Truth never hurts the teller?" *Good Lord, no ... that one would get beeped!*

After decades of being accepted as a dispenser of wise counsel, it was humbling and embarrassing to face the poverty of his actual life experience. He felt his face redden as he remembered his attempted confession to the L.A.P. group yesterday, and he realized with horror that he had no words that would fix anything today. But now it was his turn to face this tough audience. He had a duty to perform, even if

there was only faint hope that his input might matter ... or help. He knew he wasn't supposed to stand, but he did so anyway. No one objected.

"No one knows with any degree of certainty where the LieDeck is going to take us," he began tentatively, "and that may be the most difficult problem we face here. Fear of the unknown is not only universal, it's smart. It's what makes us extra cautious when we take our first step, or get on a bike for the first time, or a horse. It's what gets us through childhood without accidentally killing ourselves. And yet we absolutely refuse to be ruled by that fear. We do learn to walk, and we do ride bicycles and horses, and we believe in ourselves enough to fly flimsy metal chariots to the moon and back.

"If I know anything, I know the difference between knowledge and belief. Belief is as fragile as smoke. Belief can blind us. Belief can make us insane. Belief is accepting as true what we imagine to be true ... meaning anything at all. Small wonder that belief can mangle brains in ways that the strongest narcotic can't. But in the absence of knowledge, belief can get us through the night, through the day, through our lives.

"It seems to me that humanity must have faith in itself at this extremely critical point in our evolution. Even if we can't foresee how we're going to get from where we are to wherever the LieDeck will lead us, we can certainly strike an attitude, and that is what I recommend.

"You should assert that humanity can and will deal with the LieDeck, with all of its consequences and effects. I have had an awful time with this device myself, and yet I am convinced, personally, that we will learn to live with it, in time—even profit from it—morally, or spiritually, if I may still use that term. I think that kind of message has to be communicated over and over until it sinks in; the power of positive thinking, if you will.

"Having said that, I am nonetheless of the opinion that Commissioner Joly's unhappy expectations will turn out to be correct. However, I am not frightened by that—not in the least—and I don't think you need to be frightened either. I surely don't envy you the task you face, the decisions you have to make, but I must and I do believe in you, the men and women who hold the reins of power in our democratic system.

"In return for my faith in you, I respectfully request that you, who have the power to act and the responsibility to act, believe in us, in the people. No one here would argue if I reminded you that truth is the only legitimate basis for moral authority. If you do not believe that we, the people, can handle the truth, then you have no right to govern this fine confederation of ours.

"You must give us the freedom to fail, and yet you must also protect us from others who would do us harm. There might well come a time or a circumstance when you must protect us from ourselves. If you come to the conclusion that this is such a time, then I ask you to do what you must do with compassion, and with a view to relaxing and eventually *undoing* any new measures of internal control at the earliest possible moment.

"I most sincerely hope that you find the wisdom and the courage to steer a course that assures the preservation of democracy, even if it requires temporary suspension of all or many of our democratic rights and freedoms. The truth may not exactly make us free, my friends, but it must not—I repeat—it must *not* lead to our enslavement."

Silence was a hard reaction to fathom, and although he understood the inner cabinet's need for secrecy, he felt like he had just given a sermon on the evils of masturbation to a congregation of retired nuns. As he sat back down, he unconsciously put a forearm under his posterior to adjust the cassock that wasn't there, and blushed, again.

Prime Minister Nicholas Godfrey rose to speak like man under a great weight. He had been seated off to the side, and now he approached the table, leaned on it, and took a deep breath.

"On behalf of my colleagues," he said slowly, "I want to thank you for coming, and for your commitment to keeping this visit confidential ... at least until those nosy press people find out about it with their LieDecks. Your views will help us deal with this issue when the full cabinet meets in..." He checked his watch. "In forty minutes.

"We face trying times. This we know. What we don't know yet is how we are going to deal with those trying times.

"We have been asked to believe in the common sense and essential decency of the people. We will do that.

"We have been asked to work with non-governmental organizations who participate in the process of getting the country and the world over the LieDeck hump. We will do that, too.

"We are aware of the need for compassion. In fact I hope we will be on the receiving end of that very rare commodity, because we will need it as much as anyone else, perhaps more.

"With regard to the admonition that the Government of Canada might have to choose between chaos and martial law, you can be sure that we will be searching for another path, a middle ground, a new direction that will redefine the options available to us as a Government, as a nation and as a global civilization. We are all in this together, and while you will want inspired leadership from us, we will need your support and the support of the people generally. I can't choose chaos. I just can't. But I am loath to choose martial law.

"As for tomorrow, I earnestly hope your sale of LieDecks to the public can be orderly and without incident, Mr. Whiteside. I will be watching the event closely, and I will be addressing the issues raised by the LieDeck in the House, at eight p.m., eleven hours after your sale begins.

"Once again, our thanks to all of you for taking the time to speak with us, and may God guide us all."

And if there is no God? Steve didn't say.

Chapter 45 SALVATION

When the helicopter arrived back on the roof of Whiteside Technologies, Randall asked Steve if he'd like to join the RCMP Commissioner and himself for a wee nightcap. Steve declined, explaining that he had to study some notes he'd left in the L.A.P. meeting room. The plan was for him to be driven back to Norway Bay by a Patriot agent, and he wanted to review these notes on the way. He also realized with some regret that he hadn't found a convenient moment to tell Randall about the Bishop Doyle situation. As Steve entered the waiting elevator, he resolved to do so tomorrow.

Randall and Bertrand Joly got off on the top floor, said their goodbyes to Steve, and headed down the hall to the boardroom. Steve was now alone in the elevator—well, alone with one of the ever-present Patriot hostesses, who was clever enough to sense his mood and say nothing. "Six," he said, and she pressed the button.

The hostess wore no make-up, and was dressed in blue slacks, a white blouse, and a vest. *The vest is probably to conceal her weapon*, Steve thought. She stood silently by the elevator doors as they

closed, at just the right angle to say: "I don't have my back turned, but neither am I inviting or expecting any small talk." A glance and a reserved smile sent Steve the message, "I'm not being unfriendly, just doing my job."

She wore a delicate perfume—Patriot allowed that—and in these very close quarters, it seemed to Steve that she smelled ... he searched for the right word ... "edible"? He looked up from his shoes, took in her profile, especially the bust, observed the way her strapped-up breasts suspended the sides of the vest, like the hanging door-flaps of a tent. Before he could stop himself, he involuntarily imagined her naked.

He pinched his temples to reprimand his wayward brain, and wondered why he still felt so guilty. Then he caught her eyes. She smiled politely, again, briefly ... knowingly. Steve tried to smile back, but he couldn't cope with the redness that washed over his face and squealed on him. She looked away, back at the doors, which mercifully opened onto the sixth floor and allowed them both to get on with business.

In addition to his duties as the overall chairman of the L.A.P., Steve had been chairing the subgroup studying the impact of the LieDeck on belief systems and public morale. Although the job was far from finished, their use of the LieDeck had allowed them to make considerable progress in much less time than these sorts of things ordinarily took. Opinions were easily identified as such, and shunted aside. Opinions weren't irrelevant, but they could be dealt with later. The consensus reached by all the subgroups was that their first goal was to get at the facts.

Steve found the notes he was looking for on his desk. He put them in his briefcase and snapped the lid shut. "All set," he said to his ever-present minder, as cheerfully as he could fake.

A few minutes later, after an uneventful elevator ride and a courteous goodbye to the hostess, he was in the backseat of the Patriot car with the interior light on, opening the briefcase and shuffling through his notes. "I don't mean to be impolite," he explained to the driver. "I've just got a few things to do here."

"No problem," said the driver. "It's been a long day."

The actual report of the subgroup—double-spaced, laser printed and only four pages long—was so diplomatic and general as to be of no great use. It skirted many of the issues that would be of concern or help to Bishop Doyle. Steve was bags-under-the-eyes tired, and he didn't look forward to coping with Bill. What he wanted was ten hours of sleep, dreamless sleep, a physical and mental recharge. But duty called, and Bill Doyle was, after all, his friend—arguably his responsibility.

Here we go, he said to himself as he opened the manila folder and found the rough, handwritten notes he'd made for himself as the discussion had raged in his subgroup. There were perhaps thirty pages in all, and he flipped through the lot of them before doing any actual rereading.

It had been his habit to jot the initials of the speaker beside every entry, and he was surprised to see how many times "QS" showed up. These initials stood for Quincy Smith, a twenty-three-year-old bookstore clerk who made a point of telling everyone about how his parents had tried to make up for his boring surname by calling him Quincy, after some crusading coroner in a TV series from "the olden days," which for him meant the 1980s.

Quincy was the most annoying person Steve had met in many years. He wasn't really *that* annoying, but it had been a long time since Steve had had to deal with *any* annoying people. Most people did their best *not* to be annoying when they were talking to *Bishop* Sutherland. But now the starched, white Berlin Wall that used to surround his neck was gone, and coping with Quincy Smith was a lesson for Steve on what life was like for the flock.

Quincy had a penchant for saying things that were worthy of note, and then smiling, as if he'd just landed

a roundhouse right. Steve was a newcomer to the ranks of atheism, and he had felt resentment every time he was compelled to jot down things that Quincy had said. Still, in his notes, the initials QS were written beside almost half the entries, even though there were six people in his subgroup. As an exercise in humility, he decided to review all the QS entries first, then double back and reread the rest.

QS—belief in God doesn't prove there is a God—unbelief in God doesn't prove there isn't a God—if there actually is a God, and He wanted us to know Him, He did a lousy job of it

"Lousy" was Steve's word. Quincy had actually said "piss poor," but Steve couldn't make himself write that down. He buzzed open the gray-tinted window to his right and looked out at the neon signs and the streetlights. Soon he would be across the Champlain Bridge, across the south-west corner of the city of Gatineau and into the countryside, a blackened place at this hour, the way ... he almost thought *the way God intended night to be*. God was a tough habit to break, he was finding.

He didn't want to go back to his notes about Quincy. It bothered him that this guy seemed to take pleasure in trashing religion. At one point in the L.A.P. discussions, there had been a confrontation between Nancy Ferguson, the kennel owner, and Quincy. Steve had ended up acting as the mediator, and his mind drifted back to that numbing conflict as the car passed through Ottawa's west end.

Nancy was apparently a devout Presbyterian, quite involved in her parish in Carp. She presented a spirited *apologia* to the group, telling one and all that faith was a good thing, and that believing in God was a matter of free will, of choice, no matter what the LieDeck might say about anything. "If I say I believe in God, that's the end of the discussion," she had declared with a smack of her open palm on the desk, "just as if I were to say I believe in love, or in human rights. With your damn permission, Quincy, I am, and I always will be, in charge of me!"

Good point, Steve remembered thinking at the time, *even if the presentation was a tad heavy on enthusiasm and innuendo*. Nancy's faith seemed as well-founded as that of most true believers, and she had held her ground against the argumentative bookstore clerk.

But then the gloves had come off, and after several typically snarky Quincy Smith barbs, she had told him that he could fuck right off with his God damn LieDeck fetish, that she was under no obligation to test her faith on the thing and friggin' well wouldn't do it. In the heat of battle, she had alluded to the four billion people or so who agreed with her, and she had called Quincy a "fucking faith-basher." That was the one that popped the cork.

Steve had felt torn then. His entire adult life had prepared him to jump in with both lungs and support Nancy's point of view, to amplify and buttress her faith with elegant turns of theological phrase. But he now found himself, at least technically, on Quincy's side ... not a place he wanted to be. For most of the spat between Nancy and Quincy, he had settled for "non-directive leadership," the politically correct euphemism for ... well, chickening out.

He turned a few pages and found the notes he had taken during that contest of wills. Quincy, he remembered, wasn't willing to be insulted without putting up a feisty defense.

QS—if I said aliens didn't exist, you wouldn't call that faith-bashing—evidence of existence of aliens stronger than evidence for existence of God—you wouldn't get offended if I said "Believing in aliens is a crock"—the sorriest truth is that if I tried to convert people to a belief in an alien entity with 1/4 the powers of your Christian God, you'd put me away in rubber room and hit me with psychoactive drugs and anti-depressants in the sincere hope that you could cure me of my deluded faith

Steve half-smiled as he remembered his reaction to that tirade. It wasn't the substance of what had been said—that was a point well made, he supposed—it was the feeling he'd had of genuinely wanting to see

Quincy Smith locked up in a psychiatric ward. It was a terribly mean thing to think, and Steve's adult life had been ruled by a field full of stop signs, one of which was: "Thou shalt not think mean thoughts, because if you do, you'll just have to confess them later." Now that the old rule book had been chucked out, he had to admit to himself that it was okay—and it was *fun*—to think mean thoughts—especially about the irrepressible QS.

He remembered interjecting at that point, asking Quincy outright why he felt compelled to antagonize people. "I don't antagonize people," he had said; "I *protagonize* them." A middle-aged man in the group had then faulted Quincy for inventing a word, for working on the premise that "bullshit baffles brains," at which point Quincy Smith had astonished everyone by apologizing! He then rephrased his comment, redefining himself as a "social expectorant," and dove right back into the elegant tongue-lashing he'd been delivering to Nancy. Steve looked down again at his notes.

NF—humanity's will to believe goes deeper than just a wish to avoid death or fear of death

QS—what does that mean, "deeper?"—deeper where?—deeper into what?—if all we have to go deeper *into* is our emotions, then fear of death is as deep as it gets—you want to see how deep faith goes compared to the fear of death?—I'm Jewish on my mother's side—Jewish history full of episodes of messianic fervor—we're always looking to see if this or that rabbi is the Messiah—back in 17th C., thousands of Jews got ready to return to Jerusalem, to follow this Turkish rabbi called Sabbatai Sevi—only problem was locals got hold of him—told him unless he converted to Islam, they'd kill him—he converted to Islam, a better-red-than-dead sort of deal—left his followers pretty screwed up—fear of death won, hands down

NF—what about all the Christian martyrs and martyrs of other faiths who died rather than renounce their faith?

"Zing," said Steve under his breath. He loved it when Nancy scored a zinger. And he wondered if he was beginning to enjoy the process, the cut and thrust, the war of words, the act of battle, the idea of risking symbolic death, preferably inflicting it, only to live to fight, verbally, another day. He also thought he caught a nano-glimpse in his mind of him and Nancy doing the deed ... yikes! He'd have to deal with that later. He turned his eyes back to his notes.

QS—if our intellects are the deepest well of existence we can tap into or be, then who's to say what is deep, or deepest?—you say that this thing goes deeper than that thing—you're free to believe stuff like that and you're also free to put it forward for others to consider—and I'm free to say "bullshit"

—the fact is that billions of humans feel compelled to say that they believe in God, and that is proof of *nothing*, theologically speaking—human beings have felt compelled to believe all kinds of dumb things—a pope once declared the Earth was flat—bleeding a patient was done to speed up healing—a few years ago, millions of African men believed that having sex with a white woman was a cure for AIDS—I really don't want to be disrespectful of other people's beliefs, but I'll tell you this free of charge—if the entire human race said that eating rat shit would purge my soul of evil, I still wouldn't eat rat shit—and I'd laugh at the lot of you if you did any different—does that make me a nasty guy?

No, thought Steve. *That, in itself, doesn't make you nasty, but you are nasty. Smart, educated, but nasty.*

And yet Quincy Smith was not alone in expressing such strong feelings. A lot of people who had been loyal to God and generous with their parish or their favorite TV evangelists were feeling ripped off in recent days. It was alarming, frightening, for Steve to witness the intensity of emotion that was wafting around the L.A.P. on this subject and on other issues. His people were being buffeted about by the

introduction of the LieDeck into their private spaces ... and so were the other people on the planet ... all of them ... at the same time!

The Patriot car rolled across the Champlain Bridge. Steve felt a sense of aloneness that he had never known before, even during his darkest moments under the cassock. He buzzed up the window to within an inch of the frame and leaned his throbbing forehead against the cool glass, allowing the sliver of night air to pass through his thinning hair. It helped. He was further soothed by the blackness of the water down below. There weren't any actual ice floes left, he knew, but the river was still frigid ... *like the road ahead for humanity*, he mused. He turned back to the manila folder on his lap.

QS—a religious doctrine is an opinion stated as fact without proof—accepting a doctrine is a leap of faith we make based on the reliability of indoctrinators, clergymen, God's best human buddies—main job of clergy is to indoctrinate, recruit, to shove opinions down throats, to make others agree that God must be exactly as He is interpreted to be by those who say they are His agents—God, if He exists at all, has no opinions—He doesn't need them because He is the ultimate know-it-a

Steve recoiled at the sarcasm that seemed to worm its way into Quincy's every word. He also wondered why the word “God” still got capitalized in his notes—even “He” and “His,” when they referred to God or Jesus. *Another habit I suppose I'll have to break*, he thought.

QS—who rakes in the most dough on this planet?—governments of nations, corporations and religions, in that order—governments give back security and social services—corporations give back goods and services—religions give us a pack of lies and fears—all religions claim to have a lock on divine truth, but they all contradict each other—best case scenario is they're all completely wrong except one, which is completely right—very odd that people actually believe clergy—nobody's got the guts to come right out and say “Hey, check it out; the King is stark fucking naked”

Steve closed his eyes, rested his soul, his psyche ... whatever. *Quincy Smith is so ... offensively self-assertive, so God damned ...* He didn't finish that thought. He was oddly annoyed at himself for swearing, even internally, in a way that perpetuated the illusion of an unseen and all-powerful player in all human lives that people were deathly afraid of if they were smart. He was becoming an atheist, and didn't like it much. No, he already *was* an atheist, so had to figure out how to live all over again. That was the problem, and he'd come to resent the way that thought jumped in to fill the predicate space in so many of his sentences, even in his private thoughts.

One more shot, he said to himself, *although I'm not quite sure why*. He began reading his notes again.

QS—if we assume one religion got it right + all the others are heresies, why should we assume that it must be one of the great religions that got it right?—because they've got the most followers and the most money?—the great religions used to sacrifice virgins, behead infidels, burn witches—more than half a million in Europe, by some estimates—and charge money to get into God's good books—their credibility is at least suspect—maybe some little sect or cult got it right—what about that religious leader in the Philippines who had his followers running around deflating car and truck tires because that's what God wanted?—what if he had the real key to salvation?—what if Jehovah's Witnesses got it right, and God only wants 144,000 people in heaven due to housing shortage?—odds of you or me getting in would be about as good as winning the 649 lottery!—maybe shaving heads and hassling people at airports is theologically correct—what about that cult that teaches that the rational mind is the root of all evil, and our use of that faculty is a surefire ticket to hell?—problem: if you say religion stinks, Christians (other believers) will define your behavior as deviant and say that you oppose goodness and light and endorse evil—maybe in future, belief in God will be considered deviant!—atheists and agnostics should band together and fight the prejudices that the “Godists” lay on us—we should form a union and go on strike and ... ?

Steve chuckled his notes back into the manila folder, put the whole works into the briefcase, and slapped the lid down. *Out of sight, out of ... sight*, he said to himself with a weary sigh. *How do I get God out of my mind after all those decades, after all that praying?* he wondered. *At least I can put that abrasive little prick Quincy out of my mind.*

He had tired of the scalding put-downs and insults, but try as he might, he couldn't seem stop the whirlwind that was Quincy Smith. *What a bitter man*, he thought, although he was unsure why he was being so defensive, why he still felt so protective of God, of the Church, and of religion in general, or why it felt unseemly to listen to someone roast a mere myth. *Conditioning, I suppose*, he decided privately.

If there's no God, then what exactly is the Church? Assuming that the Pope and the cardinals do believe in God, a premise that will surely be tested very soon, then they are in the business of spreading their sincerely-held beliefs, even if those beliefs have no foundation in fact. But what if ... Steve had difficulty even thinking that thought ... *what if the Pope is just like me and Bill? What if he finds out that he's an atheist? What if he stands on the balcony at the Vatican, saying the Credo, and his oration gets punctuated with beeps? Would people see the Church as a scam? Would that in fact be the proper perception? Would there be judicial inquiries, and lawsuits? Would people decide that Karl Marx had actually written one unstupid thing when he said that religion was the opiate of the masses? Would there be a collective psychotic episode if a few billion true believers went through simultaneous withdrawal from this powerful narcotic? Would priests and nuns be whipping out résumés, looking for honest work? What would become of the priceless treasures hoarded by the alleged Vicar of Christ? And what of the good work that is being done by missionaries, of many faiths? Oh, what a tangled web...*

Either God exists or He doesn't, he thought again, deliberately. *If there is a God, then Bill and I have lost our faith. But if there is no God, then Bill and I have shed ... a mental disorder, I suppose, and found ... what? Ourselves, I suppose ... or what's left of us.*

Too many questions, he told himself. It would take time to get through all this, and even if he could conjure up possible or tentative answers on demand, most of them would be of little help to Bishop Doyle. He shook his head and wondered how in the world he would approach the discussion that he had to go through with his former colleague.

He also made a mental note to get in touch with Victor, and set a definite time when they could get down to work on that paper Victor was supposed to write, based on those reel-to-reel tapes that he'd made on the impact of the LieDeck, his ideas about ... *how did he phrase it? Consciousness evolution?*

He and Victor had talked briefly on this subject, or about Victor's conception of it, and what Steve had heard sounded ... well, "flaky" was the word he had thought of at the time. *On the other hand*, he now considered, *some people might find it just as flaky that billions of people would go to church every Sunday and dump perfectly good money into a plate in order to think that they were eating the body and drinking the blood of a two-thousand-year-old Jewish guy who hallucinated that God was his daddy!*

My oh my oh my, he said to himself as he searched for an expletive to replace the usual sexual and religious ones, *I'm ... starting to think like Quincy Smith!* He shook his head once more, harder this time.

This was virgin conceptual territory for Steve, and the absence of landmarks was as frightening as the loss of his old friend, prayer. A light dusting of mist formed on his face, and his stomach felt like a toddler lost in a shopping mall.

Then a stray thought crossed his mind. When he had used his LieDeck to confirm that he didn't believe in God—that was almost a week ago—he had assumed that it meant he was an atheist. He had been so shaken up to finally know for sure that his faith was gone that he hadn't really looked at the exact meaning of the experience. *Sloppy thinking*, he said to himself.

He took his LieDeck from the inside pocket of his suit jacket, switched it to the pin signaling mode, and turned it on, holding it in a damp hand. He bent over so the driver wouldn't hear, and he was thankful that the slightly open window was providing enough background noise to cover his mission as they passed by the garages and *dépanneurs* of Aylmer.

"There is a God," he whispered into the mike. *Oops*. He'd forgotten. It didn't work if you whispered. In a barely audible voice, he repeated the hopeful statement directly into the mike, but the pin tapped his palm, as he knew it would. He'd gotten that far last time he did this.

"There is *no* God," he said, in the same thin voice, and again the pin called him a liar, or, more precisely, told him he didn't believe that either. *So!* he thought as he turned off his LieDeck, *I'm not an atheist after all! I'm an agnostic!*

And he remembered being beeped in the L.A.P. group when he'd referred to his own agnosticism. He'd been forced to correct himself then, but he saw now that that particular beep was because he *believed* he was an atheist ... at the time. *This LieDeck-verification technique is tricky*, he realized.

He straightened up, and found himself wondering what that clarification was really worth, the fact that he was an agnostic rather than an atheist. Strangely, he felt relieved, as if being an agnostic wasn't quite as "sinful" as being an atheist, as if it were more "forgivable," although he didn't know how that worked if there was no God to offend or be forgiven by. He also wondered whether this distinction would help him deal with Bill Doyle, or with his own personal "reformation." Again, he had found questions with no answers, and the circumstances were all wrong for him to speak out loud, or to continue using LieDeck-verification to sort himself out.

He decided to keep the LieDeck in his hand and strike up the band with his driver. He leaned forward, placing an elbow on the back of the front passenger seat. "What do you think of all this LieDeck business that's been going on?" he asked as they exited Aylmer and entered the wonderfully dark countryside.

"The LieDeck?" repeated the driver. "Well, it's obviously turned out to be the all-time leading shit-disturbing bit of technology that ever came on the scene. I feel sorry for the people who can't cope with the sucker, but to be honest with you, I'm for it. I think it's a hoot."

"Really?" said Steve, as he made sure his LieDeck was still on, and on the pin mode.

"Yeah, really," said the driver. "Name's Allen, by the way ... Allen Potter."

"Oh, sorry ... my name's Steve," he managed, with an awkward shake of the hand that Allen Potter had flipped over his shoulder towards the backseat. "Don't know where my manners have gone. I've been sort of ... distracted lately."

"Stressed out, Father," said Allen. "I mean—uh—Steve."

"Yeah ... stress," said Steve as he gave his burning forehead one of his patented pincer treatments, the thumb and middle finger performing the operation, the palm hiding his closed eyes. He terminated the movement quickly—he was tired of his self-pity, and didn't want it to show. "The impact of the LieDeck on religious people is a real bitch," he said, feeling relieved that he could finally speak the vernacular without having to log it in his memory for his next confession. "What's your take on that aspect of the

thing?"

"Hmmm," said Allen, with a glance in the rearview at his contemplative passenger. He knew the Patriot car was bugged, mostly for his own protection, and he didn't know if he'd have trouble explaining this conversation to his supervisor, but the new rule was, if your passenger asks you a question, shut up or be straight.

"Well, I can tell you this," he began. "When I found out there was no Santa Claus—I'd say I was about five at the time—I took it kind of hard for a day or two. But when I found out there was no God—I was about eighteen then—I felt ... well, I was really glad, frankly. Religion was sort of a pain in the ass in my life, and in my family too. My father was Protestant. He came from farming stock. His father's father—my grandfather—he was an Orangeman. Lived for the glorious 12th of July when he and his cronies would get a parade going down the main street to celebrate beating the piss out of the Catholics at the Battle of the Boyne. My mother was a Catholic. She'd always figured she would be a nun until she met my dad. They were decent people, mind you, but ... they fought about religion the whole time I was growing up. When it dawned on me that there was no God, I remember thinking: Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"I see," said Steve. He did see. He envied the ease with which this rather average guy could dump Jesus and get down to ... well, down to reality, he supposed ... or up to it. "And your wife? She's ... on the same wavelength as you?"

"No, actually," said Allen. "She believes in God ... strongly, so she says, although she never goes to church. But it doesn't screw up our relationship that she leans one way and me the other. It's no big deal. She votes Tory and I vote NDP. Same thing. It's just not important in the larger scheme of things. It's mostly a tool, religion—helps people to define their values and hold on to them. That's the way I figure it anyway."

"So—you don't think her belief is as strong as she says it is?"

"Nobody *really* believes that God stuff," laughed Allen. "Maybe the odd one here and there, but not too many, far as I can tell."

The pin tapped Steve's hand just as the driver said the word "stuff," but it remained inactive for the rest of his statement. Allen Potter had been exaggerating when he'd said "nobody," effectively a lie, but then he had corrected himself, and qualified his answer, probably without fully realizing that he had lied, or that the lie had been detected.

Steve wondered whether the LieDeck would have signaled a lie for Allen's second sentence if it hadn't started with the word "maybe." He knew that the driver's offhand estimate jibed with the preliminary research results of the "belief systems and public morale" subgroup at the L.A.P., but for some strange reason it astonished him that this thirty-year-old fellow could have reached such a conclusion so confidently without the aid of LieDeck-verification. Of course, Allen's statement only reflected what he *believed* to be the case, and that wasn't any kind of accurate gauge of objective reality.

"What makes you so sure that hardly anybody *really* believes in God?" Steve asked.

"Only logical," said Allen. "I mean, let's say you got kids and—I don't mean you personally, Steve—but let's say there's these kids, and they're going to Disneyland in July. Hell, they start talking about it nonstop in frigging February, and it never lets up. I went through that myself, as a kid, and I went through it with my own little guys—I got three sons. That's just the way people are, Steve. Adults too ... not just kids. That's half the fun, anticipating good stuff like that. But when's the last time a Catholic slapped his knee and said, 'I just can't *wait* to get to heaven. Man oh man, I'm so excited about that I could burst.' Now

tell me the truth ... when's the last time *anybody* said that to you? In fact, did anybody *ever* say that to you?"

Steve wanted to judo-chop this wannabe Quincy Smith right on the Adam's apple. No he didn't. Yes he did. He did ... and he didn't ... and he resented the emotional turmoil. Allen's good-humored, common sense insight had somehow bullied its way through the theological fog by dint of its utter simplicity. *How could I know hundreds of thousands of splendid things about religion, and yet never notice this revealing incongruity?* he asked himself silently. *Seems I've got an uncanny knack for missing the point.*

"No," he admitted. "No one ... ever ... said that to me. And you're right. If people believed in God, in heaven, they would feel exactly like you said, and they would say it ... well, approximately like that ... maybe with even more enthusiasm than if they were just going to Disneyland, actually. I remember feeling that way a couple of times in my life, mostly back in the seminary ... maybe a few times since..."

His voice trailed off as it occurred to him that perhaps common sense was blocked by religious belief. Take away all the mythical reasons for being decent to each other, and people might get wise to some reality-based reasons for being decent, for having a moral code, for doing good. Just as it was predictable how people would anticipate the ecstasy of getting into heaven if they really believed in God, it became clear in his mind that no one who believed in God could molest a child, could even *contemplate* molesting a child ... or an adult, for that matter. *We are what we do, and we do as we are*, he remembered learning a few days earlier. *And, while I'm waxing away on this subject, we are not only the product of our genes and our upbringing; we are also the person we choose to be!*

"You've ... got this all figured out, eh?" he asked the Patriot driver, who seemed to be tuned in to the possibility that Steve was losing it, or drifting into some private mental swamp.

"Nothing much to figure out," shrugged Allen. "Only mystery I see is how come so many people play along, get swept up in the thing even though deep down they know it's not real."

Ain't that the truth? thought Steve. *And how am I supposed to get Bill Doyle around that corner when I can't seem to stay there myself?*

"I wonder if you could turn off the interior light?" he asked. "I want to rest for a little while."

"No problem," said Allen Potter.

No problem, thought Steve. *You want a light out, you flip a switch. You want to turn God off, you ... what? Have a nervous breakdown?* He smiled to himself, crookedly.

The rest of the trip was passed in silence, meaning not simply that there wasn't any conversation, but that there was a sort of radio silence within Steve's mind. He had spent much of his life with his inner thoughts in high gear, a sort of manic hyperactivity of the psyche, a stream of consciousness that never seemed to let up, awake or asleep. A few years ago, he'd learned the trick of throwing a mental switch, of tuning out, emptying his brain, slowing down the river, silencing the neurological tornado. It didn't always work, and on this occasion he found himself backsliding often, but for the most part he just watched on-coming headlights zoom past, stared at lit-up windows of farmhouses as they slipped by and kept his mind unoccupied, freed of the ripening tensions that had stretched his endurance so gravely in recent days.

"Here you go," said Allen as he pulled to a stop. "I'll likely see you again soon. Nice to meet you."

"Thanks," said Steve as he got out. "I enjoyed meeting you, too," he added, although he was suddenly concerned that the Patriot agent might have had a LieDeck operating, on the pin mode.

"Take care," said Allen.

Steve closed the door and watched the new Buick depart. He transferred his briefcase to the other hand and stood at the end of the stone walk, looking at the tiny, mostly white cottage, the Sutherland family hideaway where he'd spent so many carefree days as a child, fishing, swimming, bicycling; the place where he'd spent so many fine days as a teenager, going out to well-chaperoned dances, masturbating in the shed, playing tennis, masturbating in the bathroom, learning golf, masturbating in his alarmingly squeaky bed. *Christ*, he thought as he pushed himself up the walk, *I was one helluva horny kid before I ...* he almost thought the words "found Jesus," but he realized that those words would not survive the scrutiny of a LieDeck if he said them out loud. "Oh ... later," he said softly as he started up the steps. "So much to learn, so much to unlearn."

"Bill?" he called jovially as he opened the door.

"In the kitchen," hollered Bill. "Be with you in a sec. I'm just tidying up the dishes. You're not a very good housekeeper."

A good sign! thought Steve. *A very good sign!* he said to himself as he stashed the briefcase, kicked off his shoes, and put on his slippers. He noticed that everything looked somehow neater, cleaner, nicer. "Sorry I'm so late, but—"

"No sweat," assured Bill as he emerged from the kitchen drying his hands on a tea towel. "I made good use of the time ... and the LieDeck. I did a lot of talking out loud. I guess I spent about two hours wallowing in guilt and self-loathing," he confessed as he flung the towel carelessly onto the back of a stuffed chair. "Then I slapped myself silly, took a shower, and shouted, 'Bill, get a fucking grip' into the mirror. I ... made myself laugh, actually. Haven't said that word out loud in forty years."

Steve was astonished, but tried not to let it show. William Doyle had "seen the light," so to speak. This was indeed better than saving souls ... *or pretending to save souls*, he corrected himself. "So ... you're okay?" he asked, somewhat doubtfully.

"No, I'm definitely not okay," said Bill candidly, "but I've made one good first step towards getting there. We've got a lot to talk about, you and me. By the way, do you still play cribbage?"

"Good enough to whup your ass," Steve joked, sensing that the burden had suddenly lifted, that maybe this wasn't going to be the wrenching all-nighter he'd feared.

"In your dreams," snapped Bill. Yes—Bill—not Bishop Doyle. Billy Doyle, the man, the ex-boy, now sixty-something, back in the game after one bitch of a detour.

FRIDAY, APRIL 25, 2014

Chapter 46

THUD

At about 3:00 a.m., Cam O'Connor's phone rang. He flipped on the bedside light and fumbled the receiver onto the carpet.

"O'Connor," he grunted after he'd shushed his wife and retrieved the thing.

"Sorry to wake you, Cam," said Helen, "but you'd better come over to the office and handle this yourself. We've got more than two hundred people lined up already, people who aren't even on the waiting list. They just came, expecting to buy LieDecks. Several are from other countries, for God's

sake. One guy flew here in a chartered plane, from Rio! Two of them are from Europe, one from France, and one from Norway, of all places. Several of the guys seem connected, you know what I mean? Like—uh—Mafia types. We could have a riot in a few hours."

"Jesus H.," said Cam. "Okay, get the cops out there, lots of them. Tell Laurent to get over there too. I'll need him to discuss what can possibly be done by way of revising our distribution policy. Maybe we can send these people away happy. I'll be over in half an hour."

There was always an agent in a van outside the O'Connor home, just in case. Cam called the agent on the cell phone and told him to be ready to roll. He also advised him to slap their magnetic signs over the Patriot emblems to make the van look like a laundry vehicle, so they could steal in the back entrance unnoticed and undisturbed.

The first 5,500 LieDecks had already been sent out to customers via courier, late last night, so that many or most of them would arrive today, as promised in the radio ads. There were another 5,500 in the factory, packaged and set aside for the "special" orders. The decision had been made earlier that half of the LieDecks produced would go to bulk orders from governments and corporations and the other half would be used to fill orders from individuals.

We'll have to dump that plan, thought Cam as he closed the bedroom door, *at least until we're sure the animals won't stampede.*

Half an hour later, he was in Laurent Gauthier's office at the front of the Whiteside building, looking down onto the floodlit grounds and the parking lot. There were now more than three hundred people, almost all of them men, standing in a straight line, four abreast, with police patrolling alongside the line. The executive parking lot was full of cars that didn't belong there, and there were parked cars down the street as far as you could see, in both directions. Police vehicles were parked at key positions, their blue-red strobes casting an aura of drama and danger over the still April night.

"Quite a sight, eh?" said Laurent.

"Price of popularity," said Cam. "Can you believe these people ... just showing up here?"

"Did you call Randall?" asked Laurent.

"Yeah," said Cam. "He told me to handle it, like I can just go down there and tell them to go home or something. We're obviously going to have to increase production. What are we at now?"

"We're up to almost three hundred units an hour; about seven thousand a day," said Laurent. "The insides of the LieDeck aren't the problem. It's those damned casings."

"Well, we're going to have to make do with something else," said Cam bluntly. "We have to admit that we badly underestimated the intensity of demand for the thing and boost production up to ... say seven hundred an hour. Get on that, okay?"

"Okay," said Laurent. "As soon as I wake up."

For a few minutes, the two men stood in silence, watching nothing happen below. Neither of them wanted to get philosophical about the process they had started, at least not out loud, but both of them had concerns, deep concerns. If this could happen when they specifically said in the ads that only 800-line orders would be accepted, it wasn't difficult to imagine what would have happened if they had decided to sell the device in stores.

"Lemmings," said Cam, looking towards the growing crowd.

"What does that make us?" asked Laurent.

"Front door to O'Connor," came Helen's voice on the walkie-talkie. "We've got a situation here."

"Go ahead," said Cam.

"We've had female agents going up and down the line, talking to people. There's a foreign fellow, sort of Mediterranean, about twentieth in line, standing there with sixty thousand Canadian in a briefcase, cash. He wants sixty LieDecks. I went outside and talked to him myself. I told him about the federal and provincial taxes, but he whispered to me that if he didn't return with sixty, he'd get whacked."

"Return where?" asked Cam.

"He wouldn't say. He wants me to accept a personal check for the tax so he can have the full sixty. And there's three other guys with bodyguards, also carrying briefcases. Maybe we should have a policy of five per person or something, and then they have to go to the back of the line. What do you think?"

"Did you believe him ... about getting whacked?"

"I don't have to believe him," said Helen. "I had my LieDeck turned on, pin mode. He's telling the truth. If he doesn't get sixty LieDecks, he'll be killed. I told the cops."

"Okay," said Cam as he walked to the window with the walkie-talkie, "the policy is ten per person. Give a twenty percent discount on orders of five or more, like we do for the corporate and government customers on the waiting list. That way this guy with the briefcase can afford his sixty, plus tax. He'll have to go to the back of the line six times, but he'll get what he wants. I don't want some guy getting murdered just because of our God damned distribution policy, even if he is a gangster. Randall will approve that. The fifty-five hundred units are in the hall? At the back of the lobby? Like I said?"

"Yeah," said Helen. "I had them all brought up here, like you—"

"Okay," he said. "Now when you open up later, don't let any more than a couple of people into the lobby at one time."

"Right," said Helen. "Listen, here's an idea, Cam. What do you say we start the sale now, to ease the pressure?"

"Good idea," said Cam, "if the cops will go along with it."

Helen Kozinski had called in twelve of her female security officers at 2:00 a.m., when it seemed that the situation could get difficult. The "chick brigade," as they jokingly called themselves, usually escorted visitors to their destinations within the corporate office tower or the factory. They had been trained to perform reasonable facsimiles of the world's most adorable personalities, but each one of them was an expert in the martial arts, armed ... and dangerous if provoked.

They had charmed most of the would-be customers in the lineup by this time. Four of these agents were now perched in the circular security booth in the front lobby, ready to accept payment and hand over the coveted devices. The police supported the decision to start the sale early, so Helen went outside to give the word.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said into the battery-powered megaphone, "I would like to thank you once again for your patience and understanding. We have decided to begin sales immediately and—"

There was no way she could finish her announcement. The crowd roared its approval, and Helen had

difficulty getting them to quiet down so she could explain the rule about only cash or credit cards.

By 6:00 a.m., everyone who had been in the original lineup had been served—even the frightened man who had to make six trips. For a while, the lineup had shrunk to about forty people, but just after 7:00 a.m. it started to grow again ... and now there were more than 400 new people, including many women, waiting to get in the door and purchase a LieDeck or ten. Helen decided to take a short break, and after a trip to the washroom, she went up to Gauthier's office, where Cam and Laurent were discussing a plan for the new LieDeck casing and keeping vigilant eyes on events below.

"How's it going down there?" asked Cam.

"Okay," said Helen through a yawn. "Everything's under control. I get the impression that lots of those people are scalpers. They heard about media guys selling their LieDecks for thousands of dollars apiece and they want in on the action."

"How many have we sold?" asked Laurent.

"Almost two thousand," said Helen. "Can you imagine? Two million dollars in sales before frigging breakfast! If this keeps up, we'll be out of stock by noon. Advance-order customers are going to scream at us when they hear about the sale at the door. We've got ninety-seven thousand people on the waiting list, last I heard—all pre-paid. It's not fair to them. What do you want me to do?"

"Keep selling until ten o'clock," said Cam. "We'll get every radio station in town to tell people not to come here, starting as soon as we can call them with our message. We can say we don't have any more in stock. Tell the police what we're planning."

"Okay," said Helen, "but make really sure that whoever does the phoning to the radio stations doesn't know it's a lie. The media have LieDecks, or they could tape the call and check it out with a LieDeck later, or with Bell Tel's nine-six-seven-LIEDECK service. They could find out, and we could become the story, you know what I mean? *Whiteside whopper: company lies about lie detector supply.*"

"Christ," said Cam, "you're right. Life's getting too damned honest for my taste."

Helen went back to the lobby and continued to oversee the sale of the LieDecks. Cam found an agent who had just returned from his holidays and didn't know there were still thousands of LieDecks in stock. He asked him to call the radio stations. Life was getting too complicated.

By 8:00 a.m., Laurent and Cam had done what had to be done. The sun was up, and tensions were down. They felt they were no longer needed on-site, and agreed that they deserved a little shut-eye. As they were putting away their notes, a thud was heard from outside. They jumped up to look out the window. A block away, to the north, fire could be seen, or at least the smoke from a fire.

"What the hell was that?" hollered Helen into her walkie-talkie as she ran to the front of the lobby and peered through the glass doors.

"Helen, this is Ted, up on the roof," came a voice. "I got it all on video. It was a brand new Cadillac, black, chauffeur-driven. It was driving real slowly north on Falcon Avenue when *bang*, it just blew up. I'm sure we got the plate on tape. The cops are heading there now. Whoever was in that car has to be dead. I guess somebody didn't want somebody else to have a LieDeck. Should I keep rolling?"

"Bring that tape to Gauthier's office," ordered Cam into his walkie-talkie. "For sure it'll be needed by the cops. Put in a blank tape and leave the camera trained on the scene. Helen, are you listening?"

"Go ahead," she said from the lobby.

"Stop the sale immediately. Take the receipts up to the safe. I'll meet you there after I call Randall. We got a major PR problem, at the very least."

Chapter 47 BEAT IT

It was mid-morning, and the sun was slashing through the venetian blinds, trying to cheer up a still-somber situation. Randall sat beside Annette's bed and looked down quietly at her face, drugged or asleep—restful, in any event. He had intended to visit earlier, but he hadn't managed, and now that he was finally able to make it, he worried he was wasting his valuable time doing ... well, doing nothing, as it happened.

"She seems so peaceful," he whispered to Nancy. "It would be a shame to wake her."

"Then don't, dammit," said Annette with her eye still closed. "You're going to give me another frigging needle, aren't you?" she groaned.

"It's ... Randall Whiteside," he said as he took her hand in his.

"Oh ... sorry." Annette smiled as she peeked at him with her good eye. "I figured you were one of the gazillion doctors I see every day. I've been giving them a hard time, I'm afraid. So, how are things over at the LieDeck factory?"

"Good, good," lied Randall. "The LieDeck Assessment Program is making progress. I shifted it over to the Destiny Foundation so it can get some government money to support its work. This is one of our newer members, Nancy Ferguson. I told her a little about you and ... well, she wanted to meet you."

"Hi Nancy," said Annette. "How'd you get involved with our little conspiracy?"

Nancy pulled her chair up to the bedside and told a heavily censored version of her story. She talked mostly about keeping Victor's dogs for all those years, and she talked about Victor's ability to pass himself off as a cab driver. "I could hardly believe it when Mr. Whiteside told me Victor was the guy who invented the LieDeck."

"I had a near-death experience—an 'N.D.E.,' they called it—when I was shot," said Annette. "I thought I saw Victor, in heaven—my parents too. But then I found out it was just a dumb hallucination. Steve told me Victor was still alive, so he couldn't very well be in heaven, could he? But he never came to visit me, the bastard. I'm ... I'm pretty sure I prefer illusion to reality."

This was a side of Victor that Nancy had never seen, and she'd known him for years. She found the situation unsettling, squirmed in her chair, and looked squarely at Randall Whiteside, wondering if perhaps there was a misunderstanding here, or whether Annette's injuries might have affected her memory, or her mind. She found herself wondering if Annette was expecting a bit much of the man. But then she realized that Victor hadn't returned any of her calls either, nor had he dropped in on the L.A.P. to say hi. Maybe he just wasn't a very good friend to his friends.

"Victor really couldn't visit you, Annette," said Randall. "His life was in danger, and he had a lot of trouble dealing with that. He's back at the lodge now. It's been completely rebuilt, you know? Victor said he was intending to drop by and visit you later today."

"Mr. Whiteside," she said, "could you do me a favor?"

"Of course, Annette. What is it?"

"Well, I don't care what Victor's excuse is. He and I agreed to be friends a week ago, and I got shot protecting him. He should have at least called. I'd like you to tell him I don't want to see him, okay? In a few days, maybe..."

"Of course, my dear," said Randall. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yeah, beat it," said Annette as she withdrew her hand from his comforting grasp.

"You ... want me to leave?" asked a startled Randall Whiteside.

"Yes sir, I do," she said. "I like you, and I appreciate all the things you've done for me, but I just ... I haven't forgiven you for not visiting earlier. It's been almost a week since I got shot. I'll get around to forgiving you, but I'm just not there yet. Sorry ... but that's the way it is."

Randall was devastated. He'd spoken to Annette over the phone several times since the shooting, and she wasn't pissed off at him on those occasions. And he certainly was not in the habit of thinking of himself as a jerk. But deep inside he knew she was right—he should have visited before this, and he felt deeply embarrassed and ashamed.

"May ... I come to see you again, say tomorrow?" he asked.

"No," said Annette. "I'll call you when I'm in a better mood."

"But—"

"So ... Nancy, you want to stay and shoot the breeze for a while?" she asked, pushing Randall to leave without a last word, a hug or a smidgen of absolution.

"Boy, you really knocked the wind out of Mr. Whiteside," said Nancy as the door closed.

"Good," said Annette. "He'll survive, and maybe he'll smarten up a little. He's a hell of a guy. I ... know that. But being rich, I think it can get you disconnected with human values sometimes. I've known lots of men who were rich and powerful, and most of them suck. I'll let him off the hook tomorrow, but I want him to stew a bit, you know what I mean?"

"Well, I don't doubt that you accomplished that," said Nancy. "How's ... your head? When do they take the bandages off?"

"My head's fine, apparently, but my face is a mess. The doc told me I'd need plastic surgery so I don't scare little children when I walk down the street. You're pretty, Nancy. How would you deal with it if all of a sudden you found yourself facing life with a big ol' bulging eye and a big red crater where the bridge of your nose used to be?"

"Tell you the truth," said Nancy, "I wouldn't deal with it very well. Men are a funny lot, aren't they?"

Nancy had been told by Patriot Security that Annette never watched TV, and was therefore out of touch. Nancy had also been instructed by Patriot *and* the Ottawa police *and* a doctor to not say anything about the sorry state of the world, and to not mention other things that might cause stress. So, she said nothing about her husband having an affair and walking out on her after ten years of marriage, not that all this was *caused* by the LieDeck, but certainly *triggered* by it. Annette had her own LieDeck-related cross to bear, after all, and she didn't seem to be listening anyway.

"Can you make sure I don't foul up those hoses and stuff they got sticking into me, Nancy?" she said. "I have to turn over."

She was stiff from always lying on her right side, though the back of her neck didn't feel as tender as it had for the past few days. She managed to turn over without creating any medical emergencies, but she looked tired, and Nancy sensed that it might be time to go, to let the poor woman sleep. "Is there anything I can get you, bring for you?" she asked.

"Please, sit a while," said Annette. "I'm slowly getting to know my limits, and I can hang in for another ten minutes or so. I had them cut back on my pain medication there for a while, for a couple of days, but it was too early. Boy, did I pay for that mistake!"

"Tell me about how things are going in the focus group ... or the L.A.P., I hear you call it now. Tell me about the people in the group. Nah, never mind. Tell me about Steve.

"It's funny, you know, but all I can think about is making a life with Steve. I'm so turned on by that man it scares me. And it's not just sex either. Well, I mean it *is* that, but it's more than *just* that. It's obvious I'm feeling vulnerable, and maybe I'm a dope for grabbing onto him like I am, but after I almost died, I just ... I just don't care how stuff looks ... to other people."

"It does seem kind of fast, you know," said Nancy, "I mean, how you seem to feel about him, but there's no hard and fast rule that says—"

"Does he talk about me at the L.A.P. group?" asked Annette. "I have this paranoid dream that as soon as I'm better, he'll go running back to the priesthood and tell me that he was just being nice because I was hurting and needed a friend."

"Well, he never mentioned you at the L.A.P. when I was there," said Nancy, "but that doesn't mean he doesn't care about you. I mean, some things are kind of private, and—"

"I sort of think we'll end up together, he and I," Annette cut in. "It's like I finally met someone who stands for something more than his own self-interest, you know? Or at least he did before, when he was a priest. Did he tell you he was a bishop? I figure all the good stuff that got him into that line of work is still there, but it needs a new way to express itself, you know? I keep thinking about what he and I might do together if we were, you know, partners.

"I already told my friend Helen Kozinski—I guess you never met her; she was my boss and my buddy—anyway, I told her I wasn't going back to the security business. I haven't a clue what I'm going to do when I get out of here, but I have this overpowering feeling that whatever it is, it'll be with Steve. Weird eh? Where's that—uh—where did I put that..."

Annette was reaching, unsuccessfully, for the button that summoned nurses, and she seemed to be breathing hard. She had clearly overextended herself.

Nancy followed the cord, found the puffy rubber button, and placed it in Annette's hand. "I have to go now," she whispered. "I'll come and visit you again. Take care, eh?"

Chapter 48 POLITICAL JUJITSU

Nicholas Godfrey was alone in the PMO, and he was exhausted. The inner cabinet had been up all last night, and most of them had continued working through the day with senior officials from various government departments. Tempers were getting short from frustration and fatigue. It wasn't easy trying to figure out how to survive a technological revolution in a few days, but they had no choice. It had to be done, and it had to be done now. Delay would make choices for them, and in politics, delay usually

chose poorly.

Godfrey had managed a catnap just before supper, but it didn't help much. "Maybe I'm in the wrong game," he said out loud. "I could have stayed in academe," he added as he twisted a pinkie in his ear to erase an itch, "but then who the Christ would cope with this LieDeck ... mmmm ... craziness?"

At 7:45 p.m., Bertrand Joly entered Godfrey's office without knocking. In his hand was a red rose. "It worked for Pierre Trudeau," he said. "Thought it might be worth a try ... a positive image, subliminal, to take the edge off."

"Sit down, Bertrand," said Godfrey nervously, as he himself stood up ... and started pacing out a small circle on the office floor.

Not a good sign, thought the RCMP Commissioner as he put the rose on the desk, expecting it to die there. He knew that every prime minister had to be tested by fire, and it was somewhat unfair that this good man had run into a multi-megaton wild one in his first week. *But then who ever said life was fair?* he reminded himself as he sat and braced himself for whatever was about to transpire.

"I'm not going to do it," stated Godfrey. "Now, before you try to make me walk the political plank, let me tell you why.

"I realize the dimensions of the WDA scandal. I know how deep the rot goes within the RCMP and elsewhere, even at the UN. I wasn't at all surprised by that bombing at Whiteside's shop this morning, and I know that criminals are expected to start bumping each other off at an alarming rate. I also know the suicide rate and the divorce rate are expected to quadruple in the next couple of weeks. And I know the international trend-line is towards 'preemptive over-control,' as it's being called. And I know that some people—not a lot, but some—call me 'The Right Honorable Mr. Goofy' behind my back."

Godfrey continued his pacing routine. He felt he had to have this conversation with several people, and the Commissioner was first on the list. It was difficult to bare one's soul, and the new prime minister hadn't had a lot of practice at that. But he continued. "I used to have a reputation as a Cold Warrior during the first go-around with the Russians, the former Soviet Union," he said towards the window, "and that reputation was entirely deserved. But I'm a believer in democracy, Bertrand. That's *why* I was a Cold Warrior, *why* I opposed communism so vigorously. Are you ... with me so far?" he asked as he turned back towards his top cop.

It seemed to him that the Commissioner should understand where he was going by now, but by the look on his face, he didn't. Ever since Godfrey had acquired a personal LieDeck, he'd come to realize that his manner of speaking—his manner of thinking, really—was off-putting to others, and tended to obscure his worth as a politician, even as a human being. He frequently asked people what they thought of him, and now, even if they lied, they told the truth. He had a crucially important speech to make in the House, in a matter of minutes. This was destined to be his first major test as prime minister, and he had been practicing the art of "getting to the fucking point," as Louis St. Aubin used to scream at him. He realized that he hadn't mastered that trick yet.

"After I graduated, back in the nineteen seventies, my first job was teaching history," he continued as he fell into the large, padded chair behind his desk. "This was back when Trudeau was dealing with the October Crisis in Québec and had his famous flirtation with the *War Measures Act*. I felt then that his actions were premature and unwarranted, and I refuse to make that same mistake. I don't give a shit if the cabinet was unanimous. I'm the Prime Minister, and I get the final say. Now ... are you going to back me on this or not?"

The Commissioner felt his LieDeck tap his chest when Godfrey said he didn't care if the cabinet was

unanimous. "Of course I'll back you up, Prime Minister," he said calmly. "It's my job," he added. *Unless you ask me to break the law*, he thought, but didn't say.

Godfrey apologized for assuming there might be a problem. He had always faulted his predecessor for doubting the loyalty of his cabinet colleagues and senior civil servants, and he was surprised to find that character flaw creeping into his own behavior. He stood up, walked over to the window, and glanced at the Centennial Flame in the front lawn of Parliament Hill. The crocuses would be up in a week.

"Sometimes I think a prime minister has to go with his heart," he explained as he returned once more to his chair. "That's not easy for me. All the evidence points to the wisdom of clamping down, but I'm going to try something else first. I'm not terribly optimistic about my chances, but I can always go back to Plan A if it doesn't work. Am I right, Bertrand?"

"True enough," said Joly. "And I'm sure you know that I'll be in the camp that's trying to change your mind on the question. In my view, we'll still end up with martial law by early May, not because anyone likes it, but because we can't avoid it. But for as long as you say it's business as usual, that's the way I'll play it. I'm one of your biggest fans, Nick. I hope that in future you'll remember that before you fly off at me like you did."

Godfrey apologized again. "It must be the long hours, the lack of sleep," he said. "I don't feel intimidated by the power of my position, but I know what they mean now by 'lonely at the top.' Maybe we should get Victor Helliwell to invent a gizmo that sees into the future and tells us how things work out if we do this or that."

"Go get 'em, chief," said Bertrand as he winched himself into a standing position. He moved around the desk, yanked Godfrey's lapel, and pinned on the rose. "I'll back you up, and so will the whole damned cabinet."

"You're dreaming," laughed Godfrey. "The whole cabinet?"

"Well, if it isn't true..." said Bertrand as he adjusted the angle of the rose, "...you *make* it true."

"Excuse me?" queried the PM.

"Fire everybody who disagrees, Nick," said Bertrand. "We're in a crisis. It's not the time for a cabinet split. Go out there and do your thing. Take their loyalty for granted, and if you're mistaken, sack the fuckers. This isn't a power trip I'm recommending. This is what it will take to get us through the LieDeck Revolution, and you know it. Martial law! Now *that* would be a power trip if it were entered into lightly! Personally, I don't think it's premature to go with martial law today, but you do, and you're the boss. So go be the boss, Nick! It's almost noon. You'll be late if you don't shake your tail."

"Thanks, Bertrand," said Godfrey, looking down momentarily at his red badge of courage. "And again, I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Get out of here," joked Bertrand. "Do your thing. Your public awaits."

As Nick Godfrey walked towards the people's chamber, Commissioner Joly ran a dry tongue around the outside of his teeth, upper and lower, lips closed, then swallowed hard. "Good luck," he said, inaudibly.

* * *

Bertha McNeil was waiting for the prime minister by the curtains that separated the House of Commons from the leather chesterfields and window ledges where the real deals were made. She wasn't at all comfortable being a heartbeat away from the hot seat. "This could be worse than war," she had told her

husband over a hurried supper just the night before. "For the first time, every man and woman on the planet will be on the front lines, absorbing incoming fire. There's no defense against the LieDeck. Every idea we tossed around in cabinet came up looking about as useful as chain armor in a nuclear holocaust. "Godfrey's a competent man," she had allowed, "with occasional flashes of eloquence. But this is too much for any man. This smells like the end of civilization as we know it. That damnable invention promises to bring about an unmanageable period of human history. If we can't figure a way through, as a nation and as individuals, heads will roll ... our heads. I know it, you know it, cabinet knows it." At which point her husband had retreated to the only safe room in the house ... for a dump.

Godfrey smiled calmly at his deputy prime minister as he passed through the curtains and walked directly into the Commons. He knew she wanted a word with him, but that would have to come later, after he'd "done his thing," as Bertrand had put it. He settled himself into the captain's chair at the center of the Government benches and surveyed the parliamentary disarray. Bertha McNeil followed him into the House. "Turn that frown upside down," he whispered as she took her seat beside him.

Government MPs—the majority—broke into a standing ovation as Godfrey rose to speak, the usual signal that the boss was in big trouble. The new prime minister made no immediate attempt to quell the clatter, but when he finally looked towards the Speaker, silence descended.

"Madame Speaker," he began, "I can tell all Honorable Members of this House that last night, after struggling with the troubling issues that have been raised by the invention of the LieDeck, the cabinet was unanimous in its view that we should impose a temporary state of emergency—martial law, in other words—on the nation."

Again, the Government side stood and clapped and hooted approval, almost as loudly as the opposition benches roared their disapproval.

"Fascist," yelled a New Democratic MP.

"Dictator," yelled a Tory.

"However..." shouted the Prime Minister, holding up his hands in a bid for silence.

"Order," demanded the Speaker. "*Order!*" she bellowed.

"However, I'm *not* going to do that," boomed Godfrey with an "I-dare-you-to-knock-this-chip-off-my-shoulder" look on his face. Now it was the Opposition's turn to raise the crescendo, to bleat out their approval. The Government members were caught completely off guard and had no idea how to react. Nick Godfrey stood impassively, waiting for the chance to continue.

"Order!" demanded the Speaker again. "Order, or I'll have to—"

"Instead..." tried Godfrey.

"Order!" shouted the Speaker.

"Instead, we are going to do to our political system what Mikhail Gorbachev did to his way back in the nineteen eighties. We are going to create an era of *glasnost* like nobody ever dreamed of, a new openness in government that will make the twentieth century look like the Dark Ages.

"In effect, we are going to make virtue of necessity. We are going to play political judo. We are going to use the opponent's weight and momentum to our own advantage. We are going to run with ... *with* this LieDeck machine. The LieDeck is ours, ladies and gentlemen. It was invented by a Canadian, and we should be proud of that. Canada is going to be the first government in the world to *embrace* the

LieDeck. We are going to face up to its implications and get ahead of the curve. My fellow Canadians, we are going to co-opt the LieDeck."

It was a stroke of genius ... or at least it seemed to be, or might be, depending on how the fine print read. There was no thunderous round of applause, but there was no heckling either. Everyone began looking around to see what other MPs were thinking and feeling. Godfrey stood his ground as the whispered conversations grew.

What are the particulars? they'd want to know. How would a grand design like this translate into the kinds of practical policies that would be needed to keep things glued together and rescue Canada, and perhaps planet Earth, from disaster?

"There's lots of room for input," said Godfrey, "and we need your input. All I can give you at this time are the broad strokes, as I see them, and I see them as follows.

"Maximum disclosure of the truth is essential to true freedom and democracy, and we will guarantee access to virtually all government information. We'll even put it into the *Constitution*, if that's what it takes. The only exceptions would be information that the courts specifically allow the government to conceal, for reasons of national security, corporate necessity, or private privilege. In other words, from now on, if we want to keep something secret, the onus will be on us, the Government, to satisfy an independent judicial panel that such secrecy is warranted. I needn't mention that, with the aid of the LieDeck, any idiot can find out whether we believe our own rationale for wanting to keep something secret."

The House of Commons rarely twigged to new ideas the first time around, but this one sounded reasonable, even inspired—unavoidable, in any event. Parliamentary heads nodded tentative approval on both sides of the aisle.

"We've got a ... a unique situation here," continued the prime minister, "where the LieDeck, for the first time in human history, can get to the truth about virtually anything. Therefore, I am recommending a total amnesty for all pre-LieDeck crimes except those involving violence. This general amnesty will apply to citizens who confess anything except murder, kidnapping, assault, rape, child abuse, and so on. We'll give non-violent offenders one month to get up the courage to confess, and after that, if they get caught, well that's just tough, the amnesty no longer applies."

"Sounds okay," was the reaction of the House, judging by the head bobbing and the light applause.

"The general amnesty will be accompanied by a new system of fair restitution and genuine offender rehab," said Godfrey, "and I do *not* mean that squishy nonsense that passes for rehabilitation now. Real McCoy rehab is what I have in mind. Losers, perverts and misfits will be literally forced to make something of themselves, to really iron out the unacceptable elements of their characters, if they want to avoid jail time. In other words, nobody gets off the hook. Law-breakers will either be punished as usual, or allowed to escape incarceration *if* they make amends and straighten up and fly right. And of course we'll use the LieDeck to verify whether these people really have straightened up."

That got a resounding "yes" from the Government benches *and* from the Opposition. Godfrey would get public support for that one, perhaps for the wrong reasons, but no one cared about that. The proposal seemed to be practical, or might be practical. And besides, it was obvious that if every LieDeck-verified crime translated into somebody in custody, they'd have to build dozens of new prisons, at a cost of billions ... and staff them.

"This amnesty will apply to all people," continued Godfrey, "including politicians and bureaucrats who admit to making an error or committing a wrong, and heaven help those who don't come clean. With

regard to our own sins, this amnesty will require that we apologize to the public—which is our employer—explain how the error was made, repair any damage quickly and completely, and compensate the people who were done wrong or suffered any injustice as a result of the mistake."

There would be some red faces and a few scathing editorials over that one, but Nick Godfrey knew there was no choice. Besides, there would be as many embarrassments for Opposition Members as there were for MPs on the Government side of the House, and there would be scandals galore for politicians at other levels of government as well, at the provincial and municipal levels. The only alternative would be to try to cover up all those mistakes, and that simply couldn't be done any more.

"This amnesty, I must emphasize, applies only to *pre*-LieDeck offences," he said. "More precisely, it won't apply to offences committed after the legislation comes into effect. This is a one-time deal, and I see no reason why it should ever be repeated."

That made sense to everybody, and Godfrey was roundly rewarded with a standing ovation. It seemed that getting to the point worked, and was appreciated.

"And since we don't want to trigger a crime spree while we dither over the wording of this new law, this amnesty will go into effect by decree, by Order in Council, as of one p.m. today, in less than an hour."

Again, there was a nonpartisan ovation. This was going far better than Godfrey had expected. For the first time, he felt the full power of his position, emotionally. *What an incredible sensation!* he said to himself. *No wonder this job went to Louis' head.*

"My Government will also decree, as of one p.m. today, that all police forces are to be equipped with LieDecks as a regular tool of their trade," he continued. That got a huge and thunderous response as MPs realized that the LieDeck was destined to be "Enemy #1" for the criminal element.

"And my Government will also bring in legislation allowing LieDecks to be used in all courts, to assist the search for truth and justice. In fact, when you think this through, there's no reason why most cases would have to go to trial at all any more, now that the truth is universally accessible, and witness credibility is no longer an issue."

Again, there was near-unanimous approval, except from a few MPs who were still practicing law on the side and saw perhaps ninety percent of their business going down the tubes.

"And finally, my Government will see to it that every primary and high school in the country has a LieDeck, at our expense, so that Canada's young people can be taught how to use the device properly, and diplomatically."

That got a tepid reaction from the House—positive, but weak. No matter.

"Now, I know this sounds like a campaign speech or a Speech from the Throne, but it is neither. We are in a crisis because of the LieDeck, and it is incumbent upon us to show the world that instead of falling apart, this device can serve as a rallying point, a basis for renewal, an inspiration to redesign our institutions for life in the twenty-first century, the twenty-second century, and beyond.

"I'll be putting these recommendations to all-party committees, and for the first time in our history, Government MPs will not have an automatic majority. I will be asking committee members to conduct themselves *as if* we had a government of national unity, a government where partisan interests are subordinated to the greater national interest."

All sides of the House applauded that announcement, with slightly more enthusiasm coming from the

Opposition than from Godfrey's own MPs.

The Prime Minister had never felt so much like a public servant as he did at this pivotal moment in Canadian history. He wondered what Louis St. Aubin would be saying if he were still the boss, but not for long. Louis would be up on his high horse, trying to sound like Winston Churchill, declaring martial law with all the bluster that his huge ego demanded. *It's a good thing for the country that he's gone off to Australia*, thought the new Head of Government as he scanned the political sea. *They bought the glasnost bit; now let's see how they take to perestroika.*

"My thinking does not end there," Godfrey continued. "I have other ideas that I will ask the committees to consider, to see if they are useful and feasible in the LieDeck age.

"For example, perhaps we could extend the existing 'right to life,' which is already enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, to mean more than it does now, to mean the right to *a* life, a certain *quality* of life: the right to a decent home, for instance, a right to good food, medical coverage, and retirement with dignity. Maybe this could be balanced by a solid right to work, the right to have a job that pays enough to get through life proudly from the cradle to the grave, or 'womb to tomb,' as our British cousins like to say. And with that right to work we could imply a right to make a mess of your life, to die in the gutter if you want to. In other words, while we could give all people of ages sixteen to sixty-five the right to make a decent living by contributing to society, we could replace the social safety net with a system that doesn't require taxpayers to feed, clothe and house all those who could contribute to society but won't do it. In my ideal Canada, citizens can choose to give what they can and get what they need, or they can choose to *not* give what they can and *not* get what they need."

MPs from all sides were too stunned to clap, but the adrenaline levels in the people's chamber were going ballistic. Surely this was too radical! It just couldn't be as logical or reasonable as it sounded. There had to be a "catch 22" in there somewhere.

"If these ideas are found to be practical and popular," Godfrey went on, "there could be no more food banks ... and no more welfare ... and no more employment insurance or worker's compensation ... just a system of jobs for those who are able to work, plus a guaranteed annual income for those people who are legitimately not able to contribute. In other words, a right to work could translate into a *duty* to work, if you're able and of age ... unless you're in college or rich enough to not work, of course. In this social situation, there would be no pity for those who refuse to do their part in society, no need for anyone to feel guilty if lazy people suffer, *and*, I might add, no chance that deadbeats and cheats would turn to crime to get what they want, since they would assuredly get caught by the LieDeck."

Another "standing O," except from the NDP, the little-bit-socialist New Democratic Party, who managed only a "sitting O." This set of ideas would get overwhelming public support, and all MPs realized it. There was a question of costs, of course, but the costs of not getting ahead of the curve were not only unaffordable, they were unimaginable!

"Now I know you're all wondering if such a program will bankrupt the nation. It's an honest concern, and I don't have that answer ... yet. That's what we are going to have to look into. My hunch—and it's not much more than a hunch—is that all this is doable.

"If the LieDeck puts a crimp on terrorism the way it's beginning to stop crime, and if it has the effect of solving international conflicts before they can trigger wars, then maybe all nations can cut their military budgets in half. That would save Canada twelve billion per year, and—"

Hoots of derision from the Conservative caucus.

"Typical Liberal wimp," hollered the Tory Leader.

"Order," called the Speaker as Godfrey tried to raise his voice over the din.

"...and besides saving all the money we now spend on employment insurance, which is approximately eighty-four billion a year, we would save about seventy percent of what we spend on welfare, which comes to—"

Howls of horror from the social democrats.

"Order," said the Speaker. "*Order!*" she demanded.

"...which comes to—"

"Hit the damned *corporate* welfare bums instead," yelled the Leader of the NDP, "not the poor guy who—"

"Order!" called the Speaker.

"Well, at least with the LieDeck at our service, we'll never get conned by citizens who say they're unable to work when actually they're just not *willing* to work," countered the Prime Minister.

More outrage from the NDP.

"Order," shouted the Speaker. "*Order!*"

"Listen," said Godfrey, "I already told you I don't have all the answers yet, and I'm depending on the Honorable Members of the Opposition to work *with* us on these new and vital questions. My guess, at this time, is that this policy restructuring would cost no more than the so-called safety net approach, probably even less—all the while producing citizens who pay their taxes, contribute productively, and do not experience the fear and poverty that are often said to lead to crime and despair. So I say let's study the thing. Can we do that?"

Godfrey's speech had been going well to this point, but he seemed to be losing it, pleading rather than leading. Liberal MPs applauded his call for cooperation, and the MPs opposite settled down, remembering that many of their constituents would be watching this historic speech on TV. The Prime Minister regrouped emotionally, and restarted his address, checking his notes and clearing his throat.

"Also for your consideration, I think that soon, jails could be a thing of the past for all crimes except violent crimes. All the other offences could be punishable by periods of time spent working for the public good, and I mean additional work, after the offender's regular workday, weekends if necessary. I mean long periods of time, and real work, like cleaning up waste dumps—whatever we can think of. Nobody could complain that this program would take work away from others because these would be the jobs that nobody else wants to do. And besides, if we proceed with the right-to-work/duty-to-work policy, there won't be a single unemployed person in the country—among those who are willing and able to work."

There was defensive, contrived applause from the Liberal benches and only subdued applause from the Opposition.

"I think the time may have come to control nonviolent criminals electronically, with radio anklets, so the police always know where they are. Those convicted of nonviolent crimes could be subjected to daily checkups, likely by phone, full reality checks, using a LieDeck. Nobody would *have* to accept these conditions. They could always go to jail, if that's what they prefer. But I would guess that ninety-nine percent of all convicts would choose this new option instead of prison.

"A person who steals a car, for instance, could decide between a year in jail or, as an alternative, full restitution plus ten years of LieDeck-verification. If this idea finds wide acceptance, recidivism could become a thing of the past. Correctionalism could finally come to mean what it's supposed to mean: actually *correcting* what's wrong, getting rid of the bad behavior even if the person hasn't changed his inner wants or needs, correcting the situation as much as the person, perhaps more than the person. And if we are to use this method to control crime, convicts would have the chance to reintegrate into society and not become embittered by the degrading experience of prison. Plus, we would save on capital costs for new prisons and create a new labor-intensive industry—keeping tabs on the ba—I mean LieDeck-verifying offenders."

Godfrey paused to recalibrate the internal emergency measures department, the little judge-voice that lived in his head and was supposed to make sure he didn't say words like "bastards" in public ... especially when referring to voters ... of any stripe. *Oh well*, he thought, *they probably thought I was going to say "bad boys" when I just caught myself back there.*

"Yes, it will cost money to pay those who do this work," he carried on. "As much as five thousand dollars per year per offender. But please, let's remember that it costs us over a *hundred* thousand dollars a year to keep an offender in prison, and let's remember that with the LieDeck in the picture, crime rates will fall dramatically, and the costs of policing ourselves and the costs of running the courts will also fall ... some of our early estimates say by as much as seventy-five percent."

Things were making more sense again, and the applause was again sounding like it came from the heart, and from all sides of the House.

"The people of Canada are going to love these new ideas and participate actively in their development and implementation," said a re-invigorated Nick Godfrey. "This is a brand new world we have here, my friends. Canadians should stop worrying about how the LieDeck might mess up their lives and start thinking of how it could make life better for them, and for everyone in the world."

That's an odd sound, he thought ... *people clapping their hands with ... with awe, or with ... something akin to reverence.* He put his notes away and bucked himself up for the finale.

"Now I know there will be some practical and ethical problems to consider, but if we're going to do an end-run around the LieDeck, it's going to have to be one heck of a wide end-run. If we don't start doing backflips immediately, the LieDeck will overtake us, and eventually it will compel us to do what we should have done willingly and quite happily in the first damn place. If I have my way, the people of Canada are going to be so busy creating a brilliant new way of life that they may even forget about how bad it used to be, with all the lies and crimes and scandals.

Godfrey was aware that he had said the word "damn" in a speech, and swearing was always bound to annoy some elements of the society more than any substantive element of what was being said or discussed. Still, he wanted to appear as one of the people, and he wanted no one to doubt that he was serious, and determined. *A little "damn" here and there never killed anyone*, he said to himself.

"Canada is not going to sit back and become the victim of a bloody microchip," he announced resolutely. "We are going to launch this LieDeck Revolution *our own damn way*. We are going to bring in the political and economic adjustments that the LieDeck is going to force on the entire world sooner or later. Canada is going to lead the world. A new day is coming—in fact it's already here—not because we wanted it, but because an inventor by the name of Victor Helliwell forced it on us. That isn't the best of all possible reasons to dare greatly, but it's the reason we've got, so let's make the best of it."

Godfrey paused briefly, long enough for MPs to realize that their new, unelected prime minister was

indeed a man to be reckoned with, a genuine leader, far more of a statesman than any of them had heretofore imagined. And that statesman was standing, and speaking in tongues, and almost daring anyone to object.

"I will need one hundred percent cooperation from all MPs over the next few weeks," he said soothingly. "We're going to flesh out these proposals together. Cancel everything on your agendas for the next while, no matter what's there. We have an extremely serious problem, my friends, and we're not quitting until we lick it.

"Over the next couple of months, there may be as many as one million LieDecks on the world market. And later this fall, Whiteside Technologies plans to microminiaturize the LieDeck, build it into digital watches. It will be beeping the world's liars and cheats into a state of panic, and into oblivion. These tiny devices may end up priced at less than two hundred dollars eventually, possibly as early as next December, so virtually anyone who wants one will be able to afford one. In a year or so, there might be more LieDecks in the world than there are computers. I have been told they may even be as prevalent as cell phones within a few years. We can forget about turning back the clock—that cannot happen—and here in Canada, at least, we can also forget about merely reacting to events as they sweep over us."

Again, Godfrey paused to let his words register.

"There is a dark cloud of anarchy threatening to engulf Canada and the entire world," he said ominously, leaning forward for effect. "Under the provisions of Standing Order forty-three, I move that we suspend this session of the House immediately, to concentrate on committee work for as long as it takes to come up with an integrated program of action, so that we may dissolve that black cloud with the light of reason, with good old Canadian ingenuity."

MPs from all parties stood and saluted the Prime Minister with a rare outburst of affection and gratitude. If Godfrey had made this speech under any other circumstances, he would have earned silence, laughter, and outright hostility—perhaps even a kindly phone call to his wife, to let her know that her esteemed husband had lost his mind.

These were times to try intellects, among other things, and the new prime minister of Canada, the man that people used to call "Goofy," had apparently risen to the challenge and come up with a plan that would either blast humanity into the future or blow the Liberal Party off the political map. Time would tell which fate awaited the nervous men and women who made up the Liberal caucus, but they could at least feel that they had a chance of surviving, even of thriving, not in spite of the LieDeck Revolution, but in part because of it.

The Speaker of the House was obliged by regulation to call a voice vote immediately on the S.O. 43 motion. "Standing Order 43" was a provision of parliamentary procedure under which any motion had to achieve unanimity in order to pass, and as such, motions of this type were rarely approved ... unless they involved wishing young King William a happy birthday. Like the Liberals, the NDP and the Conservatives had an assigned "Dr. No," an MP whose job it was to always holler "nay," to scotch all S.O. 43 motions unless specifically instructed not to by his or her Party Leader.

The Conservative Leader signaled the NDP Leader to leave his seat and come to the curtain for a brief chat. He also signaled the Prime Minister to hold off for a few minutes.

Godfrey had the Commons floor, and the only way he could give the Opposition time to negotiate their response to his S.O. 43 was to keep the floor, so he rose again quickly, and unleashed a torrent of well-worn words on issues ranging from bilingualism to the condition of the nation's infrastructure. He dearly hoped it wouldn't take those Honorable Members too long to strike a deal.

The Opposition Leaders met each other cordially, and it was clear that if they voted against the motion to suspend the House, the PM would probably declare martial law and get what he wanted anyway, and they would be blamed for the declaration of martial law because they hadn't given the Government the chance to move on its agenda. The Tory and NDP leaders agreed that the Prime Minister had used his powers of decree, meaning the Order-in-Council for the general amnesty, in a way that was light years beyond what was intended by the framers of the *Constitution*, without so much as a "by your leave," so he surely wouldn't hesitate to use martial law to get his way, if that's what it took. And besides, they realized, if this Gorbachevian gambit failed, it would be *his* fault. But if it succeeded, and set a post-LieDeck example of how-to-run-a-country for the international community, all parties would share in the credit and the glory.

The two men re-entered the House, and nodded to the PM. Godfrey stopped talking and sat down.

"All in favor?" called the Speaker, and the House erupted with "yeas."

"Opposed?" she called, and there was silence ... and then song.

"For he's a jolly good fellow," they sang with unrestrained gusto. "For he's a jolly good fellowwww, which nobody can deny. Which nobody can deny..."

God, thought Godfrey, even that old song deals with the possibility that somebody could be lying ... about whether or not I really am a jolly good fellow.

He made no effort to silence the love and admiration that was being directed his way. These elected representatives didn't really know what they were getting into, but they had a clear notion of what they were avoiding, or trying to avoid, and that was what mattered for the moment. There was life after the LieDeck after all, political life, and it seemed that Nicholas Godfrey, heretofore perceived as a stodgy plodder, was turning into a full-blown political wizard, right before their eyes.

SATURDAY, APRIL 26, 2014

Chapter 49

IN HORA MORTUS NOSTRUM

The L.A.P. members had gathered in the Whiteside Tech cafeteria last evening to share a meal and then watch the telecast of the Prime Minister's address to the Commons. Like everyone in Canada, they had been astonished by the dynamics of the proceedings and the substance of the plan. And of course they were thrilled that their reports had been used so extensively by the government in forging a policy for the nation—perhaps for the world. Their primary recommendation had been the general amnesty for pre-LieDeck crimes of a nonviolent nature, and that seemed to have become the centerpiece of "the Godfrey Plan," as the media pundits were dubbing it. Before they left for home—and some of them hadn't been home in days—Randall Whiteside had congratulated them on a job well done, and advised them to take the weekend off to rest, and to get themselves in shape for next week.

Michael Whiteside and Becky Donovan had thought up the idea of giving all primary and secondary schools in Canada a LieDeck, free, courtesy of the federal government, and they were elated that Godfrey had included their suggestion. The two teenagers had spent the night at the small cabin on Wilson Lake, celebrating, repeatedly. They woke up for the last time at about 7:00 a.m., and spent the next three hours snuggling, debating whether they would get out of bed at all, ever.

At 10:00 a.m., Michael used his new phone—new since the attack one week ago—to call Noel Lambert and ask him to make brunch, over at the lodge. Victor was there, and Michael wanted to see him, not just as a formality, but because he liked him, admired him. Dozens of reporters were camped out at the

entrance to the manor, begging to speak with the reclusive inventor, but Victor would have none of it. Michael got a kick out of his disdain for the media.

"We'll be over in about ten minutes ... could you tell Victor and Winnie?" he asked Noel.

"D'accord," said Noel.

"Merci," said Michael.

"Can I drive?" asked Becky.

"You'll have to," said Michael, too nonchalantly by half.

"What do you mean?"

"I won't be in the boat."

"You're not going?"

"I'll be right behind you," he said with a gleam in his eye.

"What the hell are you...? No ... no way, Michael," protested Becky. "I won't do ... your dad will ... it's frigging freezing, you jerk!"

There was no wind, and the April sun was valiantly trying to toast the crisp morning air, with little success so far. The idea was just too tempting, and Michael knew he'd have a grand time bragging about it at school next Monday.

He sat on the end of the dock, shivering, feeding out the line as his girlfriend edged slowly away. She had her head turned around as much as possible, and when she saw the rope break the surface, she turned forward and slammed the throttle down. Michael's takeoff was so smooth he didn't get splashed any higher than his thighs. But Becky had it right; the water was liquid ice. *Big deal*, he said to himself.

The slalom ski had no sooner hit the surface than he was prying it left, speeding out almost parallel to the boat, slowing down, raising the line above his head, then cutting back to the right, jumping up off both edges of the wake and slashing through the still, chilled air with his body. Halfway across the lake, Rebecca slowed the engine down by about fifty percent and turned her head to laugh at Michael.

"I'll kill you," he hollered. "You dunk me and I'll kill you."

The ski sank further into the water because of the slow speed, and the spray stung him from the chest down. Becky couldn't hear his words, of course, but she could guess his meaning. She'd had her fun, and she thrust the craft back up to full speed so quickly that Michael almost leapt forward off the ski. But ... he regained his balance just in time, and zigzagged merrily over to the lodge.

As they were coming in, Becky turned her head to get Michael's instructions. He was making a looping motion with one arm, so she knew what he wanted. She aimed to the right of the dock and then, a hundred yards out, cut to the left. Michael swung wide and released. Too early, and he'd end up a human Popsicle. Too late, and he'd do a header with Mother Earth.

As usual, he had it about right. He had taken his leading left foot out of the rubber stirrup, and after a few staggering steps up the beach, he was flexing spindly muscles in a display of his manhood, for Becky's benefit. She completed the loop and eased in to the dock, shaking her head in the appropriate combination of ridicule and awe.

Michael made his way out onto the dock to greet her, trying to hide his blue shivers. "You're nuts," said Becky as she threw him the tie-up line and handed him his clothes and a towel.

"Ooga booga," he grunted.

Victor reached the dock as Becky was pulling in the towrope. Michael had put his shirt on and was pulling his pants over his bathing suit as quickly as he could. "D-d-don't tell D-d-dad, okay?" he said to Victor, his chin quivering. "We're not supposed to do this without two p-people in the b-boat."

"I'm not sure he would believe me if I did tell," said Victor, momentarily forgetting that the age of believing or not believing was over. "Was that supposed to be ... fun?"

"It was great," said Michael. "B-better than sex."

Becky flashed one of her "you're dead meat" glances at Michael.

"What I meant was—" he started.

"How are you, Becky?" inquired Victor before Michael dug himself an even deeper hole. "You guys are in the history books now that the Prime Minister took your idea of putting LieDecks in the schools. Congratulations. I think it's a splendid idea."

"Thanks," said Becky as she accepted his offer of a hand to climb out of the boat. "Where's Winnie?"

"Still asleep," he said. "We had rather a ... late night."

"Pretty neat the way they rebuilt the lodge, eh?" said Becky, "I mean, exactly the way it was before?"

"Remarkable," said Victor. "Noel told me there were something like a hundred guys working two shifts a day for five days. It's amazing how they—"

"People," corrected Rebecca.

"I beg your pardon?" said Victor.

"People," repeated Becky, "or persons—not guys. There were over a dozen women in the crew we saw a few days ago, and even one of the foremen was a woman."

"Does that make her a forewoman?" asked Michael. "Or a forechick, or a—"

"Boy, you're really asking for it," shouted Becky as she took off after Michael. He tore for the front door of the lodge as fast as he could, with Becky in fiery pursuit. Victor laughed heartily and followed them at a more civilized pace. He stopped along the way to let Snowball and Kodiak out of their kennels. The footrace had put the dogs in a mood to play, and Victor had decided to let them inside the lodge more often than he had before the bombing. "Life's too short not to spoil your mutts a little," he'd said to Noel.

The coffee was hot, the waffles were decadent, and Michael had apparently been forgiven, again. The dogs had settled down in the kitchen, with the help of a couple of soup bones. "Da grinding of da powerful teeth is dat vurry happy soun," said Noel as he brought out a pitcher of fresh-squeezed orange juice.

"So, what are you guys up to today?" asked Victor. "Aren't you in danger of flunking if you skip classes like you've been doing?"

"No danger of that for me," said Becky. "Mr. Pea-brain, though, I worry about him. Yikes!"

Victor smiled. Becky winced and scowled. Michael had obviously retaliated under the table, and it didn't seem proper to ask about his technique.

"We thought we'd drive over to Norway Bay and visit Steve Sutherland and his new roommate," said Michael, "that's if we can get through the media campers at the manor. Dad told me about that other bishop who's staying with him at his cottage, Bill Doyle, the same guy that kicked him out of the Catholic Church. Weird, eh? Anyway, Dad said that this guy Bishop Doyle kept Steve up all night Thursday, or almost all night. Steve was trying to help him cope with the new Bill Doyle he was discovering with the help of the LieDeck. It must be tough, eh? I mean, this guy's in his sixties. We figured he could use a bit of cheering up, you know? We're going to ask Steve and him to come with us to the Miniputt. You want to come?"

"No thanks," said Victor. "I still have some tapes to go through and a report to do for your dad. It's supposed to be done by tomorrow—a draft, anyway. Steve may come over later, to help me."

"What tapes?" asked Becky.

Victor wasn't altogether sure that he should get into this with Becky, or even with Michael, for that matter. But if young people couldn't get excited about consciousness evolution, then the whole point and purpose behind the LieDeck might be lost, and all the suffering and anxiety that people were experiencing might be for naught. He decided to tell them.

"Well," he said very seriously, "when I spent all those years building the C.V.A. with George Cluff, and all those additional years developing the LieDeck on my own, I wasn't particularly interested in catching liars or criminals, or in making money, for that matter. I'm quite surprised no one has asked about my motivation.

"You see, human beings, as we are now, are just one step along the way, like *Homo erectus* was a step en route to *Homo sapiens*. You've studied that in school, I'm sure. Well, I believe—let me rephrase that; I try never to use the word 'believe'—I have come to the conclusion that by removing illusion, which the LieDeck will do in time, we open the door for the next stage of human evolution ... human consciousness evolution, at any rate. A pre-rational human, what I call a Human One—capital "H" on "Human" and One with a capital "O"—or with the numeral "1" I suppose—was a purely instinctive being, same as a dog or a cat or any other animal. Well, they had brains, of course, but like all of the other animals, the instinct said *what* to do through the animal's emotions, so the brain just served to figure out *how* to do whatever the instinct had ordered. In other words, they were instinctive. *Homo sapiens*, humans as we are today, are both instinctive and rational, which a LieDeck can confirm. I call them, or us, Human Twos. And humans as we will be after we've been influenced by the LieDeck for few years ... well, I call them Human Threes. Are you ... following me here?"

"What?" asked Michael. "Like, after we're exposed to the LieDeck for a while we all turn into spiritual supermen or something?"

"Superbeings," scolded Becky.

"Oh, nothing that grand," said Victor. *Or that silly*, he thought but didn't say. "I'm not nearly as sure about what the LieDeck will lead us towards as I am about what it will lead us away from."

"Like what?" asked Becky as she finished off her coffee.

"Like all the dumb 'isms' that are floating around ... anti-Semitism, sexism, racism, ageism, looksism ... that sort of primitive thing. They stop making sense when—"

"Looksism?" said Becky. "What's that?"

"Prejudice against ugly people ... a big problem for some of us," said Victor, with a hearty laugh.

"Anyway, all these 'isms' start looking pretty lame when they're checked out on a LieDeck. There's a lot more to this, but let's just say that if you're interested, you can see my paper on the subject, at least as far as I'm concerned you can. I should have a draft done by tomorrow, and if your dad doesn't have any objections, you can take a copy over to your cabin."

"Good enough," said Michael.

"Thanks," said Becky. "I'd like that. It sounds fascinating."

"Well, let's go," said Michael, rising. "See ya later, Victor. Thanks Noel," he hollered towards the kitchen.

They got in the jeep and went bouncing off down Whiteside Highway ... too fast, in Becky's opinion. They stopped briefly at the manor, to tell Patriot where they were going and to make sure the media crowd had been told to leave them alone. Then it was two minutes of asphalt to Ray's Restaurant, a right-hand turn, two miles up the 148, a left, and three winding miles down to the river, to the cottage community of Norway Bay.

Many of the buds were out now, and the fields were greening up a bit. In another two weeks, there would be little evidence that winter had recently decked the country with a six-month knockout blow.

"The ducks got it right," said Michael. "No one should have to stay in Canada for the winter."

"Grump," said Becky.

There were no actual numbers on the houses and cottages of Norway Bay. You were supposed to instinctively know where things were in this community of retirees, and if you didn't, you were supposed to ask. That was easier said than done in winter, because most Norway Bay residents were still in Florida, with the ducks. But human life was gradually returning now, along with the leaves, and Michael pulled up alongside a white-haired man who was checking the chain on his bicycle. He leaned across Becky to speak through the open passenger window.

"There's a cottage belongs to the Sutherlands," he said. "You know where I'd find it?"

"You know the road that goes to the government wharf?" asked the man. "Well, it's on there, maybe four or five cottages from the river. It's white ... with a black roof, as I recall."

"Thanks," said Becky.

"Thanks a lot," hollered Michael as he drove away.

They found the cottage without difficulty, and they were surprised to see a car parked in the driveway. Everyone knew that Steve had never learned how to drive. "He must have visitors," said Becky.

They went onto the porch and knocked, but no one answered. A muffled voice could be heard coming from inside, and Michael wondered what could be going on. He pulled the screen door, eased open the inside door, and stuck his head in. There was a plainly dressed woman, on her knees, in the middle of the living room, praying ... and shaking.

"Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum," she moaned. *"Benadicta tu in mulieribus et benadictus fructus ventris tui Jesus."*

"Excuse me," said Michael politely. "Is ... is Steve Sutherland here?"

"Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, orare pro nobis," she continued, *"nunc, et in hora mortis nostrum. Amen."*

"Is ... Bishop Doyle here?" he tried.

"No," said Sister Beth through bloodshot eyes. "But his body is in the basement."

"His ... body?" said Becky in a hoarse whisper.

"Ave Maria, gratia plena..."

"Who ... are you?" asked Michael.

"I'm Sister Beth," she answered, without looking up. *"Ave Maria, gratia..."*

"You stay with her," said Michael softly, with a hand on Becky's elbow. "I'll check the basement."

He found the door at the back of the kitchen and pried it open. He turned on the light, walked down the first few steps, and bent over to see what could be seen.

In the corner, slumped on the concrete floor, was the body of Bishop William Doyle. He didn't have his shirt on, and a cross was carved deeply into his chest, from his throat to his navel and from pec to pec. Viscous, black blood covered his stomach, his pants, and a square yard of floor. One wrist had been slashed repeatedly, and his steel-rimmed glasses lay folded on the floor, lenses-down, in the blood, beside an orange carpenter's box-cutter. Also on the floor, a few yards to the Bishop's left, was an envelope.

Michael turned his eyes away and beat back the urge to vomit. *Must have happened last night*, he figured. He gathered himself and went down the stairs to get the envelope. It wasn't sealed, and on it were written the words "Bishop Steve Sutherland." He slipped it in his back pocket and ran hurriedly back up the stairs, two at a time.

Sister Beth was still in shock, still saying the Hail Mary over and over in Latin. Becky was kneeling beside her, an arm snugly over the nun's shoulders. She took no apparent notice of Michael's return.

"I'll call in," he said.

He dialed Patriot, and Patriot put him on hold while they contacted the police and arranged for an ambulance for Sister Beth. When all the right wheels were set in motion, Michael told the Patriot agent that he should locate Steve and give him the terrible news. After he hung up, he noticed that the red light on the answering machine was blinking. He pressed "play."

"Bill," came Steve's cheerful voice, "I'm still up at Whiteside Tech. I'll be working late, so I'll just crash here tonight. They've got a few nice apartments here in the office tower. I've got to go to the lodge tomorrow, Whitesides' place out at Wilson Lake, to help Victor Helliwell with a paper he's preparing, and I'd like to visit Annette first. Hope you don't mind. I should be home for supper tomorrow. If there's anything you need, you know where the store is. Just tell Val to put it on my tab. Sorry you were out when I called. Hope you had a good day. See you tomorrow, partner."

"...et in hora mortis nostrum," prayed Sister Beth.

Chapter 50
LET'S P-P-P-PARTY

Dr. Otto Kreuzer was talking to Annette Blais as a nurse finished the job of replacing the dressings on her head. "We took out the other tubes," he said, "so you can walk around a little bit now ... with your intravenous-on-a-stick, of course. But don't overdo it. You could faint and hurt yourself. If the buzzer on the pole sounds, it just means the batteries are low. Call a nurse. No big deal. We'll take you off the intravenous tomorrow, so you'll be able to eat real food again."

"Thanks Doc," said Annette. "You have no idea how much I look forward to that. I've got some friends coming over any minute, and they're bound to bring food. Can I nibble a bit today?"

"Absolutely not," said Dr. Kreuzer sternly, "unless of course I'm not here to see it."

"Great," whooped Annette. "Now, what about the plastic surgery? I want to get on with that as soon as possible. Whadya say, Ottoooooh?"

"All in good time, Ms. Blais, all in good time," said the doctor. "Before we start in on your face, we've got to make sure your brain's working properly."

"And ... you have doubts about that?" asked Annette.

"Grave doubts, I'm afraid," said the doctor, smiling and shaking his head as he read her chart.

"Hi," said Nancy as she peeked around the door. "You decent?"

"Hey, Nancy," said Annette. "The doc here thinks I'm loony-tunes, headed off to the funny farm for a lobotomy."

"Sad case," said Dr. Kreuzer melodramatically as he signaled the nurse that it was time to leave. "B-b-b-brain damage is such a t-t-t-terrible thing."

"Git outta here," said Nancy. "How ya doing, kiddo?"

Annette accepted a hug from her new friend as Dr. Kreuzer and the nurse left the room. "Not b-b-b-bad," she joked.

"A few of the gang are in the lobby already," said Nancy as she found a brush in her purse and drew it through her tousled red hair. "Are you okay for a major invasion?"

"Invasion my butt," replied Annette. "Let's p-p-p-party!"

Randall Whiteside came with flowers, and wore a face that asked whether he'd been forgiven yet. He had, and Annette gave him an extra big hug. Cam O'Connor managed to stay for a while, but then his pager beeped. He excused himself and rushed out. Laurent Gauthier left moments later, after telling Annette the saga of trying to produce a new piece of technology in mere days. "If we run out of Dictaphone shells, we might have to put the LieDecks in electric-shaver casings," he said with a laugh.

Senator Cadbury was supposed to have come with the others, but he never showed up. Helen Kozinski had been working horrific hours, and simply couldn't make it this time. Steve was there, of course, although he seemed content to stand back.

Buck Ash was in the same hospital, on the sixth floor. He had sent word yesterday that he hoped to be able to come to this little gathering, but as the talk rattled on, a call came in from a nurse, on his behalf. Steve took the call. He was told that Buck's cancer was in the final stage, and his condition was

deteriorating rapidly. Steve tried hard to act nonchalant as he hung up the phone. "It seems Buck can't make it," was all he said.

"Where the hell's Victor?" asked Annette suddenly. "How the hell could you forget to invite Victor?"

"He's right where you put him, Annette," said Randall, "by which I mean anywhere but here."

"Oh yeah," admitted Annette. "I forgot. I'm still mad at him. Well, you can tell him he can visit me tomorrow ... if he's got the time, that is. I'd hate to disrupt his busy social schedule. Gee, this is great, being sick. Everybody comes to visit me, and I can act like a complete shit and get away with it!"

For ten minutes, Annette and her guests had a rollicking good time, laughing and talking about the news ... well, some of the news. They all knew that Annette never watched television and had deliberately put herself out of touch with the world, and the doctors wanted everyone to keep it that way. "So do not mention revolutions, coups, suicides, martial law, the WDA, the UN situation—nothing like that," Dr. Kreuzer had warned everyone in the hallway before they had entered the room. "Even healthy people could collapse emotionally under so much garbage," Cam had added.

"Did they say you could eat yet?" asked Nancy when a lull finally occurred. "We—uh—brought some deli food."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" scolded Annette. "Let me at it." She fed her face ravenously. "Maybe I won't feel so goopy-headed with some food in my stomach," she mumbled through a mouthful of pastrami on rye with mustard.

Annette was also keen to get out of bed and actually stand up for the first time since the attack. "If only to get back to doing my business on a normal pooper," she explained. As soon as she had popped the last of the dill pickles, she insisted on giving it a try, holding onto Steve with one hand and the "bag-of-juice" pole with the other. Her legs hadn't been injured in the bombing, but they didn't want to follow orders. The deli food, after a week of intravenous, had made her light-headed, and between the quivering knees and the fuzzy brain, the whole experiment was a bust.

"I guess I'm pushing it," she said as she fell back onto the bed in a sitting position. "Listen, it's been wonderful, you guys. I wish we could carry on for a while, but you've got responsibilities to attend to and I'm getting wobbly here, so ... do you mind? I'd like to spend a few minutes with Steve before I konk out again."

There were goodbyes and good wishes all around. When everyone had left, Steve eased Annette back onto her pillow and watched as she wiggled towards the far side of the bed. "Lie down beside me, Steve," she said with her eye closed, patting the bed. "Just for a minute or so..."

Steve wanted to, and didn't want to, and wondered what God would say ... if there was one. He lay down gently beside her, put his forearm across her chest, and caressed the underside of her chin. She took his hand in hers, kissed it, and placed it quietly on her left breast. "Steve," she said as a tear crept out of her good eye, "I know I'm not in much of a position to make decisions about my future, but I know, deep down, that I want my future to be with you." She opened her good eye now, as she had planned to do if she found the guts to get through this conversation. "You are the most special person, man or woman, that I have ever met, and I'm..." She drew in a big breath and prepared herself to say the words she'd been wanting to say, the words she'd rehearsed a thousand times. "I'm in love with you."

Steve already knew how she felt about him, but he'd never touched a woman's breast before, let alone contemplated marriage. "Are you—uh—*proposing* to me?" he asked incredulously.

Annette fixed her eye on the face of the man she knew she could live for, and die for. "I guess I am," she said simply. "I'm asking you to be my husband, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, until death do us ... etcetera, etcetera, etcetera."

Steve's emotions flew apart. He couldn't make himself speak. All he could muster on the outside was a stare that reflected a great joy and an equally great terror, madly and badly mixed. He made himself remember that Annette was still on powerful painkillers. He was taken off guard by the blinding speed of what was happening, and he had no real choice but to review the serious questions he had about Annette's judgment ... and his own. *What can I say?* he asked himself as panic and confusion grew.

"Sorry to interrupt," said a nurse as she opened the door, startling both bedmates. "There's a gentleman outside asking to see you, Mr. Sutherland ... a Mr. O'Connor?"

Chapter 51 DYING WITH DIGNITY

Louis St. Aubin stood on the concrete balcony of Ralph Dellaire's seventeenth-floor apartment, staring out over sun-drenched Canberra. Today was the day that the Australian Prime Minister was to have accepted his credentials as ambassador, but that wasn't going to happen.

The previous afternoon, Louis had received a phone call from "up-over," as some of the "down-under" crowd called it, from Commissioner Joly. It seemed the RCMP had used a LieDeck to find out that Louis had warned Randall Whiteside of the government's intention to classify the device top secret. "And *that's* why Randall gave LieDecks to all the ambassadors at the UN," Bertrand Joly had screamed in his ear. "And *that's* why the LieDeck was rushed to market, and *that's* why you bought a three hundred and forty-six thousand-dollar block of stock in Whiteside Tech on margin before Randall announced the LieDeck, which you sold for six hundred and twenty-two thousand, nine hundred and sixty-one dollars two days later. There *will* be a public inquiry, and there *will* be criminal charges!"

So, last night, having realized he would be disgraced, that he was totally finished as a public figure, Louis had done something honorable. *Best to make a clean breast of it*, he had decided. *Better that she learn it from me than from some God damned reporter.*

The former Canadian prime minister and current ambassador-designate to Australia told his wife Monique the whole truth about his resignation. He had already told her all about the stock deal when they were still in Canada, and she had assumed that that was the only reason he had been forced to resign. She had not only forgiven him for this tiny indiscretion, she had even hinted at what a clever chap he was, financially speaking, since the matter had been covered up and they apparently got to keep the money.

Over a late-evening glass of wine, Louis had sat in the rather opulent living room of the ambassador's residence and told her the other part, the part about his mad obsession with Darlene Trahan, the *real* reason Commissioner Joly had forced him out of office. Monique had stood there in front of him, hands planted on her hips, and dredged every last detail out of him. She had demanded to know if there were any other dalliances, any full-blown affairs involving actual copulation. He had assured her that there weren't, and had gotten beeped by his own LieDeck. He had wept contritely, and he had apologized, repeatedly, and profusely. He had begged forgiveness and promised to mend his ways. It hadn't worked. *Hell has no fury like a woman scorned*, he remembered.

In the morning, when he had awakened, she was gone, with their son, and there were two letters sitting on the kitchen table. He had read them, then calmly showered, dressed in his best suit, and asked his chauffeur to drive him over to Ralph's apartment.

Now he was there, on Ralph's balcony, drinking and peering out at the peaceful city of Canberra as it hummed into gear for another uneventful day. His mind's eye squinted, but he knew he would never see the invisible freight train that was headed his way.

He threw back another slug of scotch and a last look at the long handwritten letter. "A Mafia don," his wife had called him; "a scum-sucking pissant; a wanker; a fraction of a man not fit to be recording secretary of a high school camera club; a spiritual Ferengi; a puss-oozing sore on the body politic of Canada; an embarrassment to humanity; a God damned juvenile delinquent." She had signed the letter "Love, Monique."

"That gal really knows how to hurt a guy," he mused aloud through the alcohol and the waves of depression. "But she's right. I guess I'm Canada's Richard Nixon. How did an asshole like me become prime minister of such a great nation? And why the fuck did I throw it all away over a brown-eyed nymphette and a bag of money?"

Along with the "Dear Louis" note was a photocopy of a typed letter Monique had sent to the *Canberra Times*, telling all the juicy, sordid details of the Darlene Trahan business at Ralph's Ottawa condo, as well as the full skinny on the illicit stock deal. *Is death the proper penalty for masturbation?* he wondered. *Bad enough that she destroys me, but did she have to ruin Ralph too?*

Questions—so many questions—so little point to them all. If there were answers, it might be worth his sticking around. But there wasn't an answer anywhere in the known universe, none that he could see—only the prospect of permanent humiliation and public ridicule ... and of course prison.

"Dear Ralph," he penned on the back of his wife's letter to the editor. "Sorry to add to your grief by jumping off your balcony. Don't follow my lead. I tried to be a good friend to you. You were the best friend I ever had. I guess I'll see you in hell."

He finished his drink, threw the two ice cubes over the railing, and watched as they grew smaller and smaller, finally bursting into two clusters of temporary diamonds. Then he wiped the bottom of the glass on his pants and placed it on top of Monique's letters, so they wouldn't blow away.

He wanted to write a note to Nick Godfrey, the new PM, his political replacement, the man he used to call "the goof" and "the Honourable Mr. Goofy," but there was no point in that. He wanted to write letters to the legion of loyal friends who had helped him with his political career, and to his two sisters, and to his young son, but again, there was no real point in his doing that. These were just delaying tactics, reflections of fear, and fear was all that stood between himself and the blond, Australian concrete, seventeen stories below.

"Fuck the fear," he said. "Survival isn't all it's cracked up to be. I have a much more important priority ... avoiding ... major-league avoiding."

As he hauled his legs over the railing, he determined that he would do this last thing well. This would be a perfect swan dive—arms out, toes pointed, body arched backwards, eyes open ... and he would *not* scream. He would fall with dignity and meet his death in silence.

He pushed off mightily, shrieked in terror, grasped idiotically at a thin wind ... and smashed most unwillingly into a cruel planet.

Patriot Command knew that O'Connor was at the Ottawa General, in Annette's room, and had beeped him on his pager. He had left the room to call in, talked to his operatives on his cell phone, and then waited for Randall outside the door, chatting with two police officers who were keeping the reporters at bay. *No point in rushing the boss*, he figured. When Randall and the others finally emerged, Cam took him aside and told him the news, and after a few more minutes had passed, the nurse was sent in to get Steve.

When Steve came out, he wanted to sit for a minute, to contemplate the relief he felt at having been rescued from Annette's stunning proposal of marriage, but the looks on the faces of Cam O'Connor and Randall Whiteside told him that something terrible must have happened. He wasn't in the best of shape to start with, and the news of Bill Doyle's suicide blew the rudder off completely.

He blacked out momentarily. The next thing he knew, he was halfway to his knees, being held up by hands under his arms, and stared in the face by a worried nurse. The two police officers were staring over the nurse's shoulder.

"I'm ... okay," he said as he flexed his way back up, physically and otherwise. "We'd better go out there."

Grant Eamer was waiting in Whitebird III on the roof of the General Hospital. They flew straight to Norway Bay, intending to land on the sandy shore beside the government wharf.

* * *

Michael and Rebecca heard the helicopter thumping its way up the Ottawa River, and they saw it slow down for a landing on the nearby beach, but they got in the jeep and just left. They found they had nothing to say to each other during the drive back to the estate. They were supposed to be going back to school in two days, and they had planned a grand weekend together—minigolf, some horseback riding, maybe a movie on DVD. But after the police officers had finished taking their statements, a one-hour marathon, all they wanted was to get back to Michael's cabin and be alone for a while, alone with each other.

They arrived at the manor in early afternoon. The first thing they did was give Mrs. Whiteside a hug, together, a quiet, three-way consolation. Patriot agents had already told Doreen what had happened in Norway Bay, and she was concerned for her son, and for Becky. Such a terrible thing could stay with them forever.

"Dad and Steve are out there," said Michael as they released their hold on each other and touched away latent tears. "Steve spent most of Thursday night talking with Bishop Doyle, so the cops want to ask him about the Bishop's state of mind, and of course about the LieDeck ... like if he had one or not, and if he used it. Look—uh—I'll be back in a couple of minutes, okay?"

He walked out the back door and over to the Patriot compound, to report what he knew of the incident ... and to make sure he didn't make a fool of himself by crying in front of his girlfriend and his mother. "They know I'm hurting," he said lightly as he strode heavily. "Let the record show that when I hurt, I hurt like a man."

Becky called her own mother from the telephone in the kitchen, to tell her what had happened and to assure her that she was okay. "I'd really rather discuss this with you and Dad together, tomorrow night, when I get home," she tried.

"I just knew something awful like this was going to happen," her mother said.

"Mom, you didn't *know* that something terrible would happen," said Becky with her eyes closed and her

impatience barely concealed. "You *feared* it ... and you were right, as it happens. But you could just as easily have been wrong. Please ... can we talk about it tomorrow?"

There was a long period of time during which Becky was reduced to mere listening, alternately showing concern and frustration on her young face. "Honest, I'm fine," she interjected several times. After a tense goodbye, she hung up, walked to the table, and sat, looking glum and drained. Doreen Whiteside took her hand gently. "Are you sure you're okay, honey?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," said Becky, fairly convincingly. "My mom has been expecting something terrible to happen in my life ever since I was born. She was bound to be right sooner or later, I suppose. Really, I'm fine. Maybe ... a glass of water."

"Now Becky," said Doreen as she went to the fridge to get ice water, "don't be too hard on her. She's your mother, and she can't help but worry. Come the day when you have children of your own, you'll see. It isn't easy."

Michael came back into the manor and embraced his mother again. Becky had to look out the window, into the back yard and beyond, to the woods. She wished things were that comfortable in her family.

"Was it ... awful?" Doreen asked her son as he joined Becky at the table.

"Yeah," he said. "Pretty gruesome. Look, I'm sure you'd like me to stay, but Becky and me just want to be alone for a bit, okay? Patriot said Dad should be here any minute. I'll call him later from the cabin. We'll have supper together tomorrow. The police said they'd keep my name out of the papers if they could, but you'd better talk to Sarah and Julia, in case they hear from somebody else about me and Becky being there in Norway Bay ... finding the body and all. You'll be okay until Dad gets here, eh?"

"Yes, of course, dear," said Doreen. "Go ahead. I'll talk to you in a while—when you call Daddy."

On their way out to the cabin, Michael and Becky stopped briefly at the lodge to talk to Victor. He had a right to know what had happened to Bill Doyle before he heard about it on television, and he had to be told that Steve wouldn't be coming to help him with the written report he was supposed to present tomorrow.

It turned out to be an odd conversation, disquieting to both Michael and Becky. When they told Victor about Bishop Doyle, he didn't seem particularly moved, one way or the other. Perhaps he'd been told already, by Patriot, but if that were the case, he didn't say so. He seemed to drift off momentarily, and then he told the two teens there had been a news bulletin earlier, saying that former prime minister St. Aubin had also taken his life. "Jumped off a high-rise apartment building in Australia," was his complete description of the event, said in a monotone.

Michael and Becky felt compelled to rehash that conversation when they got to the small cabin on the other side of the lake. "He didn't seem to feel any remorse about all this," said Michael as he reached into his battery-operated fridge and pulled out a can of Pepsi. "You want one?"

"He did too," said Becky, nodding "yes" for Pepsi. "I think it's just that he was able to get by the thing more quickly than we did. We need more time to let our feelings run their course than he does, that's all."

"I ... guess," conceded Michael as he looked out the kitchen window across the lake, towards the lodge. "But all these awful things that have been happening, they don't seem to surprise him, you know?" He turned, put a can of Pepsi in front of Becky, and then sat down beside her. "It was like he expected a certain amount of this craziness because of the LieDeck. And he seemed to be sorry about Bishop Doyle mostly because it struck so close to home ... at least that's the way it seemed to me."

Rebecca let her emotions run silent, like a submarine settling on the ocean floor or a powerless space shuttle gliding back to the safety of Earth. She knew that her pain and confusion would pass. She knew that there was nothing more she could have done for Sister Beth, that Steve and the doctors had what the poor woman needed. And she was glad she hadn't yielded to the temptation to go down to the basement and look at Bishop Doyle's body. The memory of this day was going to be horrid enough without a visual image to haunt her sleep. She also knew that her parents were going to give her a tough time when she got home on Sunday night, and she was anxious to clarify her thoughts before that happened.

"My dad is going to say I should have nothing to do with Victor," she said absently. "He's going to point to all the bad things that are happening in the world and say they're all Victor's fault, and your dad's fault. God, I wish I didn't live at home."

"You don't mean that," said Michael reassuringly. He wanted to ask Becky to live with him when he went to university in September, to go to Toronto with him, but this obviously wasn't the right moment. He resolved to talk to her about that soon, and for the first time, he felt that she might agree, in spite of her parents.

"You'll work it out with them," he said softly as he got up and stared out the window. "I don't know why they always give you such a hard time before they come around. The truth is, we're both pretty young to be dealing with this sort of ... with a suicide. So, let's look at this as something we're coping with as a family ... I mean, not a real family, but as ... as partners. I support you and you support me, okay?"

Michael walked behind Becky's chair, wrapped his thin arms around her neck, and pressed his cheek onto hers to relieve the ache. She reached up and put her hand into his hair.

"I really love you, Michael," she said as her vision went cloudy again.

Michael waited until he felt that Becky had recovered a little. "I have to call Dad," he said. "Why don't you change into a nice dress and splash your face before we head back to the lodge. Or take a hot bath. We've got tons of time."

He found his new cell phone under a jacket and rang his father. He told him exactly what had happened in Norway Bay, and how they had handled it. "We're okay now," he said.

Randall had already heard the details from the police. He was proud of his son, and of Becky, and he made a point of saying so. "You sure you're okay, Mikey?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine, Dad," said Michael. "Becky and I can deal with our feelings. You take care of Mom though, eh? And the girls?"

He chucked the cell phone on the couch and went into the bedroom. Becky was lying on the bed with her shoes off and her eyes closed, curled up in a fetal position, wishing things weren't as they were. Michael kicked off his shoes, lay beside her, and pulled the comforter up over them both. Normally, he would reach around her, pull her hair back, kiss her on the neck, and one thing would lead to another. But this was surely not a time for making love. It was a time for ... well, he didn't know for what. He lay on his back, breathing quietly, and began reviewing his role in this dreadful day.

When he was at Steve's cottage in Norway Bay, he had ended up standing at the screen door for several minutes, waiting for the police, while Becky consoled Sister Beth. Two squirrels had chased each other up and down trees and across the lawn in some kind of spring mating ritual. Michael had felt a strange procession of conflicting emotions chase each other up and down his spine as he listened to Sister Beth communing in Latin with the Mother of God against the manic, incomprehensible chattering of the squirrels. He still had the suicide note in his hip pocket at the time, and he'd remembered that it was

unsealed. He would give it to the cops when they arrived, of course ... *but a peek won't change anything*, he had assured himself. So he'd peeked.

"The LieDeck is the work of the DEVIL!" it read, in big, shaky script. "May God have mercy on my soul, and yours, *Bishop Sutherland*."

When Sister Beth went to the bathroom, he'd shown the note to Becky. Neither of them was sure what to make of the words, but they certainly didn't want Sister Beth to see it, so Michael had stuffed it back in his pocket until the police came.

Bishop Doyle had abandoned Christianity, like so many millions had done recently, because of the LieDeck, because it confirmed the fact that he didn't believe in God. Now he was dead, by his own hand, and for no sensible or worthy reason. Reality, it seemed, was no substitute for myth.

* * *

"Not like that!" Michael screamed as he sat bolt upright.

"Michael, what's wrong?" said Becky with a start. "You're scaring me."

"Jeeze ... sorry ... I was dreaming," said Michael as he grabbed his head with both hands. "I was just thinking about Bishop Doyle. I must have dozed off."

Becky looked at her watch. They'd been asleep almost two hours. "We'd better get going or we'll be late," she said quietly. "What were you dreaming about?"

"It was—uh—nothing," said Michael as he collected himself and reached for his shoes. It wasn't nothing, of course, but he saw no purpose in frightening Becky. He'd dreamt he was a floating, ghostly presence in the dank basement of Steve Sutherland's cottage. He remembered screaming, trying to get Bill Doyle to ... to do what? *Funny how a dream can be so vivid and yet slip away so quickly*, he thought.

"No, really," said Becky as she brushed out her hair. "What did you dream?"

"I was ... there," he said nervously, "and Bishop Doyle was, you know, like ... he was doing it, or getting ready to. And he couldn't hear me. I was shouting at him, but no matter how loud I screamed, he ... couldn't hear me. I ... *I* couldn't even hear my own voice."

Becky sat beside him on the bed and hugged him. "It's okay now," she said. "What did you mean when you said 'Not like that'?"

Michael held her tightly and began to tremble as the memory of the dream returned in detail. "I was trying to get him to put his glasses on the cement floor with the lenses facing up ... you know, so they wouldn't get scratched," he managed. "I mean, this guy's getting ready to slash himself, and I'm worrying myself sick about his stupid frigging *glasses*. Jeeze!"

"Come on, honey," whispered Becky, kissing his ear. "It was only a dream. Dreams get weird at times." She held his head in her hands, using her thumbs to wipe away the tears he had hoped she wouldn't see. "I love you so much," she whispered into a light kiss on the lips. "I was so proud of you today."

Earlier, at the lodge, Victor had invited Michael and Becky back for dinner—"with Winnie and me," was the way he'd put it—and they had accepted. As *Pride and Joy* sped across Wilson Lake, they felt guilty to be going on with life as if nothing had happened. It seemed wrong to be heading out for what was supposed to be an enjoyable evening with another "couple," especially because they had both resisted the efforts of their respective parents to be at home, with them.

The pain of that lost nun praying in Latin ... it was infectious, etched in their minds. They found it perplexing to be mourning someone they had never met, but because they had been there, it seemed somehow necessary, unavoidable. In fact, they both felt vaguely responsible for what had happened because of their involvement with the LieDeck.

Neither spoke from shore to shore. The youthful joy of the frenzied and frigid water-ski trip that morning was long gone, replaced by a powerful sense that no one was in control any more. They tied up the boat and were pounced upon by Victor's genetically bubbly Samoyeds. On any other sunny day, they would have found it next to impossible not to share in the furry frolic, but such uninhibited glee in the midst of their sorrow was annoying, and resented.

"Come on guys," said Michael as he walked them by the collars back to their kennels and locked them in. "Don't take it personal, but we want some peace and quiet, okay?"

Noel met them at the front door. He told them that Victor was in the shower and that Winnie was changing her clothes. "Is like dey been marry for ten year," he said, "except dey don' having dat big fight yet."

"We'll wait in the den," said Michael. He felt a strong need to talk, but not to Noel.

"Can you believe Victor," he whispered to Becky as he closed the door, "taking up with the housekeeper like that?" He fell into the large sofa, reached behind, and picked up the TV remote from an end table.

Becky flopped into a large, comfortable chair, kicked off her shoes, and crossed her legs under herself. "Well I think it's bloody terrific," she said as Michael surfed channels with the mute on. "Why shouldn't older people fall in love?"

"I didn't say they shouldn't," said Michael, defensively. "It's just a little convenient for both of them, you know? I mean, like they're both here, they're both lonely. They're sort of ... using each other, you know what I mean? And with Victor going to be so rich and all..."

"Well, I think it's great," insisted Becky. "I bet Victor helps her with the housework and does his share of the dishes. Steve was telling me about the day he met Victor and Winnie, about how Victor invited her to join them for dinner and helped serve dinner and all that."

Michael didn't choose to respond to her thinly disguised advice, and sought to lose himself in a boxing match—a mismatch really. A black kid was pummeling a white kid on *Wide World of Sports*, and the ref didn't seem to have a grip on his responsibilities. "I really hate that," he said. "Once a guy's beaten, they should stop it."

Before there could be a knockout or an official intervention, the screen went blank. A few seconds later, the network emblem and the words "NEWS BULLETIN" came on. Michael cranked up the sound just as the announcer was asking viewers to stand by.

"Oh God," said Becky. "What now?"

"Jesus Christ," said Michael, "I better call Victor." He pressed the button on the intercom. "Victor, you might want to come down to see this," he said. "There's a news bulletin. It might have something to do with the LieDeck. Maybe it's about ... Bishop Doyle."

Marshall: We're having some trouble getting ... Katie, can you hear me? It seems we've lost our feed from ... uh ... okay, we've got you now. Go ahead, Katie.

Lochart: This is Katie Lochart on the steps of city hall in Halifax. As you can see, Trent, the police have

set up a perimeter around the building. Nova Scotia Premier Joey Underhill and his entourage were literally forced to retreat inside this building by a collapse of order that threatens to turn this civilized city into an ocean of anarchy. No one wants to believe this can be happening. There are bodies in the streets—bus drivers, students, police officers, mothers, kids—no one seems to be immune to the madness. After the midday newscast, rioting erupted in several black neighborhoods. It continued sporadically throughout the afternoon. It was mostly bloody noses and shouting and vandalism until a half-hour ago, and then things started to go completely crazy.

Victor entered the den with Winnie on his arm, dressed for dinner. They sat down beside Michael on the couch, without a word.

Marshall: For those just tuning in, perhaps you could bring viewers up to speed on how the noon news broadcasts became something of a trigger for this breakdown of order, Katie?

Lochart: Trent, we ran the same story that most other news organizations felt compelled to cover, about a controversial public opinion poll in which the LieDeck was used to confirm the truth or falsehood of the opinions expressed by the respondents. This survey was commissioned by a Professor Milton Graftie of the University of Calgary, and it was paid for by an allegedly racist outfit called White Right. The same poll has been done in the USA, and those results are even more alarming.

The Graftie poll indicated that sixty-eight percent of whites in Canada fear and dislike blacks. Apparently, we don't want to hire them or rent to them or buy from them or even share beaches or restaurants or hotels with them. We think they smell bad, have no proper sense of morality, and ought to be sent back to Africa. Our attitudes about natives are apparently no less critical, according to this poll, except that we don't know where we'd send them back to, since they were here before we so-called whites were.

Michael and Becky were both stealing looks at Victor, and Winnie seemed to be making an effort to keep her head erect, to not look or feel condemning. The teens were also glancing at each other, remembering the talk they'd had at the cabin, two hours earlier, about what made Victor tick.

Lochart: It isn't that people admitted these things freely, just that their answers were checked out with a LieDeck. If they said "Yes, I'd rent property to a black or a native person," and the LieDeck then identified that response as a lie, it was counted as a "no." Scientists have not been able to deceive the LieDeck, and most researchers are reluctantly saying that the methods used in this poll are scientifically valid—indeed, that the whole science of opinion polling has been revolutionized by the LieDeck, has made it into sort of a psychiatric X-ray.

Many blacks literally went berserk when they heard about this poll. It began with some teenagers tearing around the streets, screaming obscenities at white people—adults and senior citizens and kids—everyone and anyone. Then the looting began, and the first black teen was killed by a police bullet as he ran down Dover Street with a stolen MIU, brandishing a kitchen knife and daring the police to stop him.

The TV dialogue was continuing over visuals of the destruction in Halifax, including a shot of two black youngsters, perhaps fourteen years old, throwing what appeared to be lengths of pipe at the police, baring their young teeth, clenching their young fists, using language usually barred from TV screens, or bleeped over. All this hate and fear made everyone squirm. Becky quietly put her shoes back on, got up, and sat on the arm of the sofa, beside Michael, putting a moist hand on the back of his neck.

Lochart: Within minutes of the death of this young man—the only name we have is George—a white ambulance attendant who was trying to help the boy out was killed by a shotgun blast fired by the father of the black teenager. That was followed by a police response, and the boy's father was killed in front of

his wife, who was standing only a few feet from her dead son. A kind of mini-war ensued, and as word spread throughout the city, there were outbreaks of violence elsewhere. Reports are apparently coming in to police headquarters by the hundreds.

There are at least a dozen fires burning in the city, but Alpha has learned that the Halifax fire chief almost pulled his men back to their stations. It seems that one fireman was fired on by a rifle about ten minutes ago, about five forty-five p.m., as he and his mates tried to put out a fire in the home of a black family—a fire that had allegedly been started by white teenagers in retaliation for some other provocation that had happened minutes before.

The visuals were horrifying: fires, looting, a female police officer with blood fairly streaming from a gash behind her ear, where the scalp had been partly peeled off. Victor was the only person in the den whose eyes never left the TV.

Marshall: Have things begun to settle down yet?

Lochart: It's really hard to tell, Trent, what with nobody talking to anybody. The Prime Minister has ordered everybody to “shut the hell up and wait,” to quote his exact words—that was about half an hour ago.

The police seem to have lost control in most of Halifax, and the Army has sent in troops. They've established some control in the west end of town, where an indefinite curfew has been imposed. Apparently everybody gets one warning. If they don't put their hands in the air and enter the nearest building, they are arrested and confined in city buses, under guard. We're hoping that the Army will arrive here soon, but we don't know what they're going to meet up with in the dock area.

Every radio station and television station in the province is carrying non-stop news of this day of rage, and dozens of important people, from Grand Chief Joe Norweejan to Jesse Jackson, have been telephoning in emotional messages for the black, native and white communities, begging everyone to stop where they are, to abandon their weapons, to go indoors and to speak to no one—friend or foe, the same color or another color—and just wait until this wave of hysteria has passed so that we can figure out what society can do to deal more sensibly and peacefully with the problems that confront us.

The message here seems to be that sometimes the truth, as laid bare by the LieDeck, doesn't make us free at all. In fact, this LieDeck-assisted opinion poll seems to have had quite the opposite effect.

"Well, they see to be regaining *some* control," said Winnie. No one responded.

Marshall: Katie, have you been able to get any reaction from the Premier?

Lochart: Trent, I've got two police officers standing near me with their rifles loaded and their eyes on the surrounding buildings and streets. They've given me exactly eight minutes to make my report from this outside position, after which they're going to arrest me and my crew if we don't go into city hall and shut up, along with the rest of the people in there. Believe me, these police officers understand their orders, and they're not fooling. Once I sign off and go inside, I won't be talking to anyone, and no one will be talking to me either, including the Premier.

Marshall: Katie, there are reports that Native populations have also gone on the rampage in several parts of Canada. Is this a part of what you're seeing down there?

Lochart: Yes, the Natives are attacking whites and looting white businesses with their newfound black “brothers and sisters.” They are challenging all whites—especially white police officers—to fistfights and knife fights. It's as if the natives and the blacks have suddenly been fused together by what they perceive

as racist oppression by whites, and hatred has simply taken over from reason—blind hatred ... fury. We've received some unconfirmed reports that dozens of Natives have been killed or wounded in the fighting. The number of police killed or wounded is said to be over twenty, and ... ?

"I wouldn't call that control," said Victor as the visuals went back to the streets, showing Natives and blacks fighting as allies against a common enemy, and lugging off the booty of this pseudo-war. Winnie threw her man a sharp look, her green eyes ablaze, but he missed it. Becky and Michael, however, noticed.

Marshall: We received reports only a few minutes ago that the American poll is having a similar effect. Several U.S. cities are in worse shape than Halifax, and they are now trying to implement the so-called "Godfrey solution," as they're calling it, in their hot spots. Do you see any signs that this policy is working in Halifax, any sign that the "shut the hell up and wait" strategy is helping cool things down?

Lochart: The short answer is yes, Trent. Politicians from all parties are saying that things would probably be much worse in the absence of Nick Godfrey's unorthodox approach. As of—

Marshall: Sorry to interrupt, Katie, but your eight minutes are up, and we are concerned for your safety. Thanks for your report.

We return now to our chief Ottawa correspondent, Lorne Chambers, who is standing by in the lobby of Parliament, one place where the Army is firmly in control now. Lorne, this horrifying event does seem to be peaking, in Canada, anyway. I realize that the cabinet is in emergency session at this time, but is there any indication the Prime Minister will make another public statement, another appeal for calm?

Chambers: Trent, the word "extraordinary" is much too weak to describe the radical ideas that are flying around here. The consensus among journalists is that we're going to live under martial law for the next while—indeed, for the foreseeable future. I've been told that Prime Minister Godfrey may be coming out soon to ... excuse me, Trent, but he's coming out now. Prime Minister ... Prime Minister, can you tell us whether—

Click.

Victor had picked up the remote and turned off the TV.

"What the hell are you doing?" Michael said angrily as he reached to grab the remote from Victor.

"Dinner's ready," said Victor as he put the remote in his pocket. "Shall we eat?"

"Jesus Christ, Victor, turn on the fucking TV," shouted Michael.

"Michael," said Victor soothingly, "you're in my home, and I say the TV goes off. Dinner's ready, and Winnie and I are hungry, and you probably are too. My friend Noel put a lot of effort into making us a nice meal. Come on. Let's eat."

"Don't you want to know what Godfrey says?" asked Becky.

"I already know," said Victor sadly, "and so do you, I suspect. He ... has no choice. We're going to be living under martial law, I'm afraid. I wish it weren't so, but there's nothing I can do about it, and—"

"Christ Almighty," said Michael with disgust as he jumped up and turned on the TV using the button on the front of the set.

Godfrey: This has been made necessary by the rise in—

Click went the television again as Victor pressed “power” on the remote. He walked towards Michael like a predator moving in on his smallest prey ... no posturing ... just absolute confidence that a leisurely swipe could snap a backbone and turn the opponent into raw lunch. Victor was no taller than Michael, but he seemed to tower over him ... or so it seemed to Michael, and to Becky.

"Chill out," said the inventor, the man of this house, or this lodge. His eyes were clamped onto Michael's like the curved talons of a falcon, and yet their grip was cool, bloodless, assuring only that his words would be taken as more than a suggestion.

Michael almost lost his balance from the force of the words. His sense of a stumble was so sudden and physically palpable that he didn't realize immediately that it was only internal, emotional. “Fuck ... right off, man,” he blurted out before his brain was fully engaged. “You think you fucking own this—” His mouth stopped abruptly as his intellect caught up with his instinct, as he remembered that Victor probably had his LieDeck on. Michael's sentence, completed, would have been a bald lie.

Victor simply stared. He didn't want to fight. Fighting brought no joy for him, no pleasure in winning. There was no prize that he coveted, or even valued. Fighting brought pain, and the enjoyment of pain was a typically Human Two aberration, in his view. And yet he was fascinated to find himself responding emotionally to a mere insult, wanting to accept the tiny gauntlet that had been thrown down by this barely-bearded upstart. In nature, this male-male confrontation would be about sex, or territory. He knew that if his feelings could be translated into the words of prehistoric man, the words would be: “I could take your woman and make her mine and I could drive you away from your family, and into a life of solitary wandering in the jungle.” *Humanity has come a long way since the cave*, he thought, *but my God, the road ahead is long*.

"This morning," he said calmly, “I told you a little about my other discovery, about consciousness evolution. That stuff is far more important than the LieDeck, frankly. Now Winnie is the only person I've explained it to so far ... in full. I wanted you two to be the next—you and Becky. If you'd rather watch politicians do what they have to do, then go to the manor. It's up to you.”

Michael was stunned. “I'm not sure the world can handle any more of your freaking discoveries, *Mister Helliwell*,” he said. “Look at that fucking mess down in Halifax, not to mention—”

Again, Michael stopped himself short, in mid-sentence. Word by word, his intensity had seemed to double, until he was literally screaming. At the very least, he was savagely devaluing his own currency in Becky's eyes.

The texture of Victor's gaze transformed from parental to professorial. “Wild boars, hyenas, snakes, apes, cats ... all animals,” he said, “they seek to intimidate with loud noises and threatening gestures. It works for them because there's an implied threat, a threat that if bluster doesn't do the job, physical violence will then follow. But I can't take your shouting seriously, Michael. I can't feel afraid of you. You can't hurt me much with your bare hands, and I don't think you're the type to pick up a blunt instrument and crack my head open. This is my home, Michael. I don't want to be a sanctimonious prig about this, but Winnie doesn't like it when I swear, so ... we don't swear here ... end of discussion. You can come and eat with us ... or you can take a hike. Those are your two options, sport.”

"Well fucking *excuuuuuse* me,” said Michael as he headed for the door. “Come on, Becky, let's go.”

"I'm not going, Michael,” she said firmly. “I'm very interested to learn about Victor's ideas, and I think you owe him an apology.”

"Oh, no apology necessary,” said Victor. “Come on, Michael, let's eat. We'll turn the TV on right after dinner. They'll be at this situation nonstop until midnight—that's *if* the government lets them continue

broadcasting. Winnie and I have to go help Noel in the kitchen. He'll be joining us for dinner. We'll meet you in the dining room in a minute."

"You and Noel can manage," said Winnie confidently. "I'll stay in the dining room with our guests, and I shall await to be *served*," she added, in snooty, British tone.

Victor chuckled. "Sure, hon," he said as he walked out of the den.

Michael apologized to Becky and Winnie. He didn't want to, but he was very badly outnumbered, and he wasn't inclined to jeopardize his relationship with his girlfriend. "Doesn't Victor feel sort of ... a bit responsible ... for all the insanity that's going on?" he asked.

"Should he?" Winnie asked back. Her guarded green eyes seemed unprepared to accept anything but the word "no."

"Well," said Michael, "yeah, I mean—"

"Beep," went Winnie's LieDeck after the word "yeah." The kids hadn't noticed her turn it on, but clearly she had sensed a need to do so.

"You see!" said Becky. "You don't even believe what you said."

"Well, I ... I *thought* I did," insisted Michael.

"Beep," went Winnie's LieDeck again.

"Give it up, Michael," said Becky. "You're just mad at Victor for turning off the TV."

"I am *not* mad at Victor," he said indignantly.

"Beep."

"Let's take a good look at this," suggested Winnifred as they walked towards the dining room. "If we hold Victor responsible for all the awful things that are happening, we would basically be saying that he shouldn't have invented the LieDeck in the first place, or that he shouldn't have told anybody about it, or he should have just gone to the military and let them have it exclusively. Am I right?"

"I ... suppose," said Michael, and there was no beep.

"If we hold Victor responsible for the deaths in Halifax, would we then have to hold Albert Einstein responsible for Hiroshima? Wouldn't we also have to hold Henry Ford responsible for every life that has ever been lost in a car accident, or the Wright brothers for every plane crash?"

"I guess that figures," said Michael, without contradiction from the LieDeck.

"As I see it," continued Winnie, "the problem in Halifax isn't the LieDeck. It's the racism ... that and the apparent willingness of some blacks and some Natives to vent their frustration through violence. But mostly it's the racism."

"I ... I suppose so," said Michael, recalling what Victor had said earlier about how the LieDeck would debunk all the nasty "isms" that plagued the world. He and Winnie sat down at the dining-room table. Becky stopped to close the vertical blinds a little, and as she passed behind Michael, she threw Winnie a clearly decipherable glance that meant "wow." She really liked Winnie, now that she was getting to know her, and it struck her that although she'd met her often, she had never really tried to get into her mind before, to understand her, to see if they might become friends. A similar thought occurred to Michael ...

similar, but more limited. *How could a housekeeper acquire such insights?* he wondered.

"I've had to face being wrong many times in the last day or so," said Winnie, "ever since Victor told me the details about Human Three Consciousness. I don't want to spoil his fun. He'll tell you what that means in a few minutes. What I *will* say is that it's quite easy to use the LieDeck on a personal level. All you have to do is speak your thoughts out loud, and of course you have to want to know what *is* real and what *isn't*. The more you fight the LieDeck, the harder you fall. The more you let yourself go with it, and let it ... teach you, the easier it gets. I ... I shouldn't say too much.

"Do you need any help, sweetheart?" she called. She was on her way to the kitchen before Victor had time to respond.

"Jeeze," said Michael, "I'm not sure I'm ready for all this ... this therapy baloney they're into. Talk about psychobabble!"

"Oh, come off it," said Becky. "That's not therapy. It's ... reality, and I would have thought you'd find it exciting."

"And you *do*?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," she said frankly. "I mean ... well, the script for the last few minutes could have gone a dozen different ways. You could have had a fistfight with Victor, or you could have stomped out, or we both could have stomped out, or you and I could have had a fight, even broken up. But none of these bad things happened, mostly thanks to the LieDeck ... *and* the fact that Victor and Winnie seem to know how to use it in ways that lead to solutions. I find it remarkable, and I can't wait to learn more."

"But what about my feelings?" sulked Michael. "You don't seem to care about—"

"What about them?" asked Becky, pointedly. "You were wrong to get mad at Victor for turning off the TV in his own home, you were wrong to suggest that this wasn't his home, you were wrong to deny that you were mad at him, you were wrong to say he was responsible for the damn riot in Halifax, and you were wrong to swear! And if we had a LieDeck here now, you'd find out that you're also completely wrong to say that I don't care about your feelings. I really think you need to calm down and get your act together before—"

"Spaghettee an' dem meatballs," announced Noel as a procession emerged from the kitchen, "an' I am making dat special sauce jus' for you, from da scratch."

"Beep," went Winnie's LieDeck, to the amusement of all, including Noel, who claimed that he'd lied on purpose to make it beep ... only to be beeped once again.

"What a riot that thing is, eh?" said Winnie. Her green eyes seemed to smile now ... their normal state.

Everyone sat and got through the ceremonial first bite, and Noel was delighted to see that everyone liked his sauce.

"Chili pepper and dat little bit of brown sugar," beamed Noel. "Is fantastique, non?"

"Victor," said Becky as soon as circumstances allowed, "would you tell us more about this Human Three concept of yours?"

"I've been thinking about that, and it seems I've changed my mind again ... third time, actually. I ... have to go public with that, Becky," he said with a sigh. "And I should tell everybody at once. I hope you don't mind waiting a few more days."

"Oh, honey! I'm really glad to hear that, but ... are you sure?" asked a concerned Winnifred Jopps.

"I ... think so," said Victor.

Chapter 53 ARSE-OVER-TEAKETTLE IN LOVE

"Hey hey," said Helen as she poked her head around the curtain. "Sleeping on the job again?"

"Helen," answered Annette groggily. "Give us a hug, mate."

Helen wasn't in good shape. She had been deeply troubled by the suicides of Bishop Doyle and the former prime minister, especially coming as they did on the heels of the bombed car outside Whiteside headquarters yesterday. She'd slept only five hours, for the third day in a row, and they were the wrong hours, daytime hours. When she woke up at 6:00 p.m., she had called Patriot for an update on the Bill Doyle situation, only to be told that there had been race riots in Halifax, Toronto, Winnipeg, and even in Vancouver, and that the United States had fallen into a virtual state of siege from its black, Native and Hispanic populations. That news banged her comfort zone down to rock bottom. Cam O'Connor also informed her that Prime Minister Godfrey had finally yielded to the crush of events and had declared a "temporary state of emergency" in Canada—martial law, in other words. And all his psychic weight had fallen upon her before she'd ever had time to grieve properly for her dead ex-boyfriend, even if he was an unfaithful cad.

She had to go back on shift at 10:00 p.m., in three hours, and she was on the brink of depression over the latest news ... as well as being physically exhausted. *Thank goodness Annette never watches TV*, Helen thought.

"It's great to see you improving every day," she said. "Your voice is strong, and they finally took that turban off your head. There's no more tubes and wiring. I can't get over how fantastic you look. When is the patch coming off your eye?"

"I feel terrific," said Annette, "almost normal. The patch will be off in a few days. The hole in the back of my neck will be almost completely healed pretty soon. I won't let anybody see my scars when the patch comes off, by the way. Dr. Kreuzer said it'll be a month or two before they can do any plastic surgery. I asked him for a pair of those wrap-around black glasses. Vanity has its place, and I don't want people to remember me like I am now ... except for Steve, of course, but he's..." Words failed her, and a look of bliss crossed her bandaged face.

"Spare me," squeaked Helen. "The woman is smitten. You need an exorcism more than you need plastic surgery."

"Oh, Helen," said Annette. "I am *so* in love with that beautiful man. He's ... well, he's unlike any man I've ever met. To tell you the truth, it likely wouldn't matter to him if my whole body was covered in icky scabs and gaping eyeballs. He's in love with me, the real me, the me that I never felt I could even *express* completely to anyone. I think I'm the luckiest person on Earth, not because I survived a bullet, but because I met Steve Sutherland." She used every available facial muscle to let her love shine through, and Helen almost collapsed with laughter.

"Yeah, I'm bloody smitten, all right," smiled Annette, "but the last thing I need is a rescue mission. You know what I did this morning? Oh, Christ, I still don't believe I did it..."

"Spill it, woman," begged Helen.

"I ... proposed to him," laughed Annette.

"Get out of town," cackled Helen. "You didn't!"

"I did. I really did ... and I meant it."

"You've lost it," cried Helen. "There was brain damage after all."

"I can't believe I did that," said Annette as she tried to settle herself. "But I can't see my life having any meaning without him. There is nothing I have ever wanted more than to marry Mr. Steve Sutherland. I *have* to marry him. He's my husband. I feel like I'm his wife. So I ... just ... asked him ... if he'd marry me," she said, shaking her head and still hardly able to believe what she'd done.

Helen was in stitches. This was splendid. "If ever there was an affirmation of life," she hooted, "it's my pal Annette, in a hospital bed, arse-over-teakettle in love with a frigging bishop." The two buddies cracked up over that description. "I really am happy for you, Annette," said Helen as she grabbed a Kleenex and wiped tears from her cheeks. "This is terrific. What did he say when you asked him?"

"He wants a big ring," squealed Annette, "like a pope gets when he gets crowned pope."

Helen almost fell off her chair. This was even zanier than it was lovely.

"I'm kidding, of course," said Annette after she collected herself. "Actually, he was perfectly ... well, I should keep some parts of our relationship private, Helen. All I can say is I really hope he says 'yes.' Do you think I should buy him a humongous big-assed cubic zirconium, to keep the pressure on?"

"God," said Helen, "you're bad, Annette, as in B-A-D, baaaaad!"

"I wish he'd said 'yes' on the spot," said Annette. "I know he wanted to, but he also wanted me to have an 'out' ... in case the drugs might have affected my judgment, or the trauma that I went through, or the post-traumatic stress that they all say I'll go through at some point. But I really am—how did you delicately phrase it?—'arse-over-teakettle' in love with the man. He knows it, and he feels the same towards me, I just know it. And ... and we're going to live happily ever after, Helen, no matter what. We've got the fairytale in our grasp, and I'm going to hold on so tight it'll never get away."

This is so ... joyful, thought Helen. It's a shame I have to give her bad news. But then ... why should I spoil this moment? Fuck it. She'll find out later anyway, and it isn't like Buck's going to die in the next hour.

Chapter 54

WE'RE ALL HIS FRIENDS

Tirone Lucas crept into Buck's hospital room without knocking and saw that his old pal was resting, or sleeping ... or worse. *I wish he'd'a given his okay to the morphine*, Tirone said to himself. *No point in him suffering so freaking much, but then that wouldn't be the Buck*, he supposed. *Always gotta be a damned hero.*

"You awake?" he said quietly. There was no response, and Tirone was suddenly terrified that perhaps he was too late. *Maybe he's dreaming that dream again, the one he told me about last time I came*. He put his plastic bag of magazines on the bottom of the bed, beside Buck's feet, and lifted a chair quietly to the bedside. He could see that Buck was breathing. *A man shouldn't hafta die alone*, he thought as he slapped his calloused trucker's hands onto his forehead and drew them down to the chin stubble.

Buck opened his eyes a crack and saw the familiar mug of his long-time drinking buddy. "How ... you hanging?" he whispered.

"Jeeze, Buck, you're scaring me," said Tirone. "You're ... not looking so good, man."

"What ... the hell ... did you ... expect?" wheezed the Buck. "I'm dying, for ... for fucksakes."

"Aw Jesus," moaned Tirone as he gave his face another two-handed once-over maul. "Don't say that, Buck."

"Okay," he gasped, "I'm just ... faking it."

Tirone wanted to laugh, but mostly he wanted his friend to not die. It wasn't often that he found himself in the position where he couldn't just smack somebody and make things instantly better.

"There's something I—" Buck coughed painfully before he could finish his thought. He reached over, got a Kleenex, and spit blood and phlegm into it. The effort tired him, and he let his eyes close and his lungs relax before he tried again. "There's something ... I'd like you to do for me," he said in a raspy, halting voice. He threw his eyes sideways and attempted to reach over to the drawer of the bedside table.

"I'll get it," said Tirone as he pulled open the drawer. "What are you looking for?"

"My LieDeck," Buck whispered, "and the pamphlet ... that goes with it."

Tirone took them out of the drawer and held them out towards his old bud.

"They're yours," waved Buck, "on one ... condition."

"Jeeze, thanks," said Tirone. "But ... what do you mean by one condition?"

"Take it ... to Ray's," said Buck, "and give everybody a hard time. Tell them ... tell them it was my dying wish. But ... don't tell them that today, okay? Tell them after ... after I'm gone."

Tirone smiled nervously. "Sure Buck," he said, "I can do that for you."

"Hurry up," said Buck. "I want you to come back here ... and tell me what everybody said ... what they did."

"Well, okay," said Tirone, studying the small black case. "I was gonna stay and visit you for a while, if you want. I even bought some magazines for ya ... ones you like."

"Give them ... to your Tammy," said Buck.

"Yeah right," chuckled Tirone.

"One other thing," said Buck.

"Of course, Buck ... anything."

"When I'm gone, touch my face ... make sure I'm cold ... really dead. All my life ... I been scared of being ... buried alive by some jackass that ... that can't tell it's a coma ... and I'm still alive."

Tirone felt the clutch in his throat shear a gear. "Sure, anything you say, good buddy," he managed. "You sure you want to be alone?"

"Yeah," said Buck. "I'm used to it. Bishop Sutherland came to see me twice ... or Steve, I guess I should

say. I asked him ... about the LieDeck. He gave me ... that one you got there ... Whiteside told him to, he said. Ginette came ... Claire's daughter ... nice girl. I never laid her ... I tried to once. I hardly knew her then ... didn't know she was gay. She came to see me ... and see how I was doing ... brought her roommate ... her name's Judy. Nice chick. And you came ... three times. Helen came ... said she'd come by again ... but she never did. Mr. O'Connor, my boss, he came for about ... two minutes. But now I'm too tired ... to visit ... too far gone."

Tirone Lucas was the only Quyon resident who knew how Buck had been making his living for the last couple of decades, that he had been on the payroll of Patriot Security. It bothered him that the Whiteside people could spend so much time with Annette and still not find a few minutes to visit with Buck. "Jeeze, Buck," he said, "I could say something if you want me to, I mean, I could mention it to Annette and she could—"

"Nah," said Buck. "They're another class ... of people. Just get over to Ray's ... and then come back ... tell me who got caught, okay?"

"Well, okay," said Tirone. "You take care of yourself, eh?"

"Yeah, right," said the Buck with a lopsided smile.

Tirone put Buck's LieDeck in the plastic grocery bag with the three girlie magazines he'd bought and walked quickly to the elevator. He thought of pressing "8," of going up two floors to tell Annette that those inconsiderate bastards from Whiteside's and Patriot Security should have visited Buck, but the sorry truth was that Buck's own friends from Quyon had yet to make it in to the city for a visit, what with life getting in the way all the time. He pressed "L" for lobby. *Buck never took a sympathy fuck his whole life, he said to himself. Never needed to, and he wouldn't want to start now. If those fancy people gave a shit, they'd'a come to see him.*

He ran to the parking lot, fired up his truck, paid the attendant and tore out. He then proceeded to curse every car that blocked his progress from the hospital through the city of Ottawa, across the Champlain Bridge and through a corner of the city of Gatineau. When he finally hit the open road, he took out his grief and frustration on the gas pedal.

His pickup wasn't just functional; it was hot. He drove his big rig with professional care, but there were times when he drove his pickup "better'n Michael Andretti coulda done," was the way he bragged. He told people that he could shift a gear in a fifth of a second and never shifted a second too early or too late ... always right on the money. He enjoyed the sound of an engine performing at the level of an Olympic athlete. He asked for and got absolute obedience from the stampeding herd of horses below the hood, and he reveled in the domination, the risk.

He passed every car between Gatineau and Quyon whose driver didn't share his sense of urgency, which is to say all except one—a foreign job, a Toyota. He lost track of it for a while, but then he saw it again right at Luskville, halfway to Quyon, with a soldier *and* a policeman at the driver's door, dispensing the pain of punishment.

"They can go fuck themselves," he said aloud as he screamed past the scene of the crime. Martial law was just another mushy slug of government crap, as far as Tirone was concerned. "Life goes on, never mind how them politicians try to fuck it up," he would tell anyone who would listen to him when he drank beer.

He skidded to a stop in Ray's gravel parking lot and sat there for a few seconds. Buck had a magic way about him that Tirone knew he could never match, but he had decided that he had to give this solemn assignment his best shot. He shut off the engine, took out his new LieDeck, Buck's LieDeck, and glanced

over the instructions. It wasn't such a tricky thing, not like a DVD or anything like that. He turned the thing on and selected the beeper mode.

"I'm better looking than Buck ... smarter too," he said. Two beeps told him that he had the hang of it. He slammed the pickup door and walked into the restaurant. Most of the gang was there, in the midst of doing whatever it was that made it so impossible for them to go all the way to Ottawa and visit Buck.

"Blue?" asked Ray, referring to Tirone's "usual."

"Make it a couple," said Tirone. "I just saw Buck," he announced. "He's not doing so good, and he won't take the fuckin' morphine they wanted to give him."

"Damned shame about Buck," said Merrick McFee. "I warned him to quit smoking ... warned him a thousand times."

"Beep, beep," went the LieDeck.

"Merrick, you're so full of shit it's coming out your fuckin' ears," snarled Tirone. "So how come you say bullshit like that anyways?"

"Jeezechrise," squeaked Jesse McCain from his perch at old Joe Farley's former table, "you got yourself one of them giddim LieDeck gadgets?"

Tirone turned on Jesse, whose self-proclaimed piety had been a standing joke in Quyon since the '60s. "When's the last time you went to mass?" he asked accusingly.

"Every Sunday, for seventy years," said Jesse, which earned him a pair of beeps. "I always go to the French mass, at eight o'clock, when you guys are still snoring." That statement earned Jesse another two beeps, but the beeping had no affect whatsoever on his routine. "Go to confession every week, too," he said with a straight face, "whether I need to or not."

Everyone in the restaurant laughed at the way Jesse was refusing to yield to the Big Brother demands of the latest miracle microchip. Tirone backed off just to see what else would happen. He took his seat at the corner table, by the TV, and soon people were all coming over to him, asking to see the LieDeck and asking about Buck, in that order.

"Here you go," said Ray as he brought out two bottles of Labatt's Blue. "I thought of going to see Buck, but we been busy as hell."

"Beep, beep."

"Jeeze," said Ray. "There goes my best excuse."

The conversation gradually turned from the LieDeck device to the question of martial law. The consensus was that it didn't make a particle of difference to anybody.

Then Tirone told everybody that Buck had had a couple of short visits from Bishop Sutherland. "Buck just calls him Steve—said he's like a regular guy now, and he might even marry that Annette Blais girl, the one that got herself shot out at the estate." That caused a few raised eyebrows from the Catholics in the crowd.

Jesse McCain left his coveted table by the potato chip rack and pulled a chair to the periphery of the corner table, where all the action was. "So ... did you hear about what happened to Bobby Thompson and Geoff Farley?" he asked in his high, raspy voice.

"Nope," said Tirone. "I heard the cops charged Geoff too, for the break-in here at the restaurant, figuring they'd have themselves one of these LieDecks by the time it got to trial, but that's all I heard."

"Well, Bobby and Geoff skipped bail," continued Jesse, "and didn't realize they were covered under that new amers ... amints ... what's that word?"

"Amnesty," said Ray.

"Yeah, that new amersty program. They didn't even know about it. Them boys got all the way up to Sudbury, then Geoff called his grandma, and she told him they were idiots because they woulda got off under the amersty. So they drove all the way back, figuring they wouldn't even have to go to court, eh? And then they find out they're gonna get charged again, on account of skipping bail, because it was done after the amersty started, and now they're probably gonna hafta get LieDecked every day for six months and then every week for another couple of years after that, and do all kinds of community work, too. They're a couple of genuine reeeetards, them two."

The crowd at Ray's had a hoot over Jesse's colorful telling of the tale, even though most of them had heard all about it earlier. Tirone's wife, Tammy, had come in the door about in the middle of Jesse's story, and she had shared the laughter that rippled through every table in the place.

"It's about time them little buggers got their ears pinned back," she said, good and loud. And then she gave her husband a big kiss on the lips, right in front of everybody, and everybody clapped like she'd just performed a triple Lutz or something.

"Knock it off," she said.

"Coffee?" asked Ray.

"Sure, and a chair," said Tammy. "Move over, you guys."

Well, when she got herself seated, Tirone showed her his LieDeck, and explained the background to her in whispers, while other people played with the thing and tried to trip each other up. Then things sort of settled down, and they all got back to talking about the LieDeck in general.

Jesse said that he needed a LieDeck about as much as he needed a fur-lined piss-pot ... and didn't get beeped. Claire came out of the kitchen and said she'd heard on the noon news that people were getting divorced by the thousands, all over Canada and the States, since they started that 967-line phone-in arrangement. "One-nine-six-seven-LIEDECK is what you dial up," she said, "or something like that." Then she told Tirone about "that Nancy Ferguson girl who was in the restaurant the other day," about how the LieDeck played a part in her husband taking off with some young bimbo.

"Now there's an interesting idea," said Tirone, to tease his Tammy.

Tammy was steamed. She stood up and was about to walk out, and Tirone practically had to beg her to forgive him. Of course she did, as always, but they'd have words later—Tirone knew he could count on that. For now, though, Tammy wanted to try the LieDeck for herself.

"I never cheated at cribbage," she said, and Tirone got an elbow in the ribs when the thing refused to beep. He was always claiming that she had to be cheating to beat him so often, and now that argument was settled once and for all.

"I don't care what the LieDeck says, I *know* you cheat," he said.

"Beep, beep," went the LieDeck, which got Tirone another elbow.

"I never overcharged a customer at the garage," announced Merrick McFee.

"Beep."

"Well, I never overcharged any *local* customers," he said, and this time there was no beep.

"I never cheated on you, Tammy," said Tirone, and there was silence from those in attendance and, more importantly, from the LieDeck. He was very proud of his fidelity, especially considering his premarital status as a local legend, second only to the Buck.

"I knew that," said Tammy.

"Beep," went the LieDeck, to everyone's amusement ... except Tammy's.

"My apple pie is better than Lucille's," said Claire, and there was no beep.

"Oooee," said Jesse. "That should be good for a few sparks. You hear that, Lucille?" he called towards the kitchen.

"Ray's is the best restaurant in Pontiac County," proclaimed Ray, and that got a beep. "Okay, Ray's is the best restaurant in the Pontiac except for Kojack's up in Shawville," he said, and this time there was no beep. "But Kojack's is a Chinese restaurant so you can't compare one to the other," he said.

"Beep," said the LieDeck, and Ray called it quits because everybody was laughing at him.

"Your daughter Ginette was in to visit Buck," said Tirone to Claire, "with her—uh—roommate. Buck said that Ginette could have his job as acting sheriff of Quyon at next year's barn dance ... that's if she can get someone else to handle the car-parking."

The tall tale about Buck giving Ginette his acting sheriff's job got Tirone beeped, as he knew it would. He was trying to pull Claire's leg, but she wasn't laughing. She came over to the corner table, picked up the LieDeck and said she wanted everybody's damn attention. Nobody knew what she was up to, but she looked dead serious.

"This gadget is going to change lots of things," she said coolly, at about sixty percent of her usual machine-gun pace. "We'll have to adjust to it, the same as city people. And we're going to end up knowing things about each other that were considered like private before, and I'm a bit nervous about all that. My daughter and I, we had a talk about that recently, and she's making an announcement to all her friends tonight in Ottawa. She said I could do the same here—in fact she said I *should* do the same thing here.

"Ginette is gay ... you all got that?" Claire was pointing the LieDeck, like a handgun, towards the corner table, and everyone knew that in spite of her apparent control, she was fully prepared to dump a pitcher of nice, cold beer onto the lap of whoever dared make a wisecrack.

"She's a lesbian," she said bluntly, "and she knows maybe thirty other people, guys and gals, in the Quyon area, who are gay, and lots more up in Shawville. And she's got a partner, her name is Judy, and it happens that they're really in love. She's not ashamed of it either, and neither am I.

"So if anybody here has a problem with that, you can just keep it to yourself, because if I hear one bad word about Ginette or any other gay people, you won't get served here no more. I'm not too keen to be telling you about Ginette, but that's what she wanted me to do, so I did it. And since I got this here LieDeck in my hand, you know I told the truth, not just about Ginette, but about not getting served no more if you don't stay off her case, and my case, too. And that's all I got to say."

She slapped Tirone's LieDeck back onto the table and started walking towards the kitchen, but Ray broke the ice by applauding. "Way to go, Claire," he whooped. "You got some guts, lady," he declared, and the whole restaurant followed his lead and gave her a big ovation.

Claire was shocked by this, and grateful too. She made a deep bow in their direction before escaping into the kitchen.

Of course most everybody already knew that Ginette was gay, but in that instant, it's said locally, something changed, something pretty important. It couldn't have happened a week ago, they figured, and it wouldn't have happened at all except for the LieDeck.

Then Tirone had an idea, such a good idea that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it way before. "What say we close up the restaurant and all head down to Ottawa and visit Buck, give him a big surprise?"

"Maybe in about an hour," said Ray, checking his watch, "like when the dinner rush tapers off and—"

"NOW," boomed Tirone, standing. He wasn't as big as Buck, but he was just as scary when he got out of control. "There's no dinner rush except for us, and Buck's dying, for fucksakes."

"Yeah," said Claire, "let's close her up and give the Buck a fitting send-off."

"Aw, come on, Tirone," Ray whined. "I'm trying to run a frigging business here. I can't just—"

"Look," said Tirone to Ray—to everyone in general, actually—"you people think you know Buck, and you do, most ways, but there's some ways you don't know him at all. Like you think he gets by on his NHL pension, eh? What a laugh. He was a big hockey star, a hero to most everybody here in Quyon and all over Canada and the States too, and he gets a lousy twelve hundred a month from the fucking NHL ... after playing for nine years.

"And he's been on the payroll with Patriot Security since nineteen ninety-five or so, keeping tabs on poaching and stuff. You didn't know that, did you? And you didn't know that he's the guy that kept young Jean Proulx and Bobby Thompson outta freakin' jail back in twenty twelve, when they broke into the estate. And you didn't know that Mr. Whiteside never pressed charges against those boys even though he got shot in the leg with a damn pellet gun, and that was because of Buck too.

"But what you mostly don't know about Buck is he's lonely most of the time. Hard to imagine, eh? Buck, lonely! Sure, he had ladies, but he never had himself a real wife, you know, at least not one that stayed with him for very long—or any kids.

"Everybody knows Buck, and everybody likes Buck—well, almost everybody—but you know who his family is, like all his sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and all that? We are! You and me! We're all he's got—the gang at Ray's. In fact, we're all any of us got if you don't count our real families.

"You know what he said to me an hour ago? He said to never mind telling them people from Whiteside's and from Patriot that he could use a few visitors now and then. And you know why? He said because they're a different class of people—you know, like too good for him or something. But you know what? Never mind about a couple of shortcomings Buck's got, I say there's not anybody anywhere that's too good for him. He's first damn class as far as I'm concerned.

"But I'll tell you what. Bishop Sutherland was in to see him. And Helen Kozinski from Patriot Security was in to see him, and her boss Mr. O'Connor, too. That Annette Blais girl phones him most every day from her room on eight to his room on six, just to say hi and see how he's doin' and to joke around and

all that. But apart from me and Claire's girl Ginette, nobody from Ray's has been in to see him, or even called him up, and it's not even long distance on the phone from here.

"You know what else he said? He gave me his LieDeck and he said for me to come here and give youse all a hard time with it, and then to go back and tell him who got caught lying and what everybody said and all that. He said not to tell you this 'til after he's gone, but he said it was his dying wish—like the last thing he wanted to do was give you folks a hard time.

"Do you know what that means? Do you? It ... it means he *loves* you, God damn it! It means he loves you more than anybody else."

Tirone ran clean out of words, and somehow his throat was getting all knotted up. Everybody was pretty well wrapped up in what Tirone was saying, and in what he was feeling, and nobody seemed to know how to respond, exactly. Ray copped a peek at the wall clock, but the decision to close down the restaurant was taken without any further reference to his opinion. There was only one table of real customers anyway, and they were just dawdling over coffee ... and pretending not to notice all this loud carrying on.

By 7:45 p.m., everybody had arranged who would go with whom, and most of them had bought a couple of beers from Ray for the trip down, and a couple more for the trip back. Several men called up their wives, or whatever they had, and a couple of women drove up from Quyon and joined the excursion. Ray took all of the paper money out of the till and stuffed the wad into his jeans pocket, seeing as Bobby Thompson and Geoff Farley were back in town. By 7:55 p.m., the lights and the ovens were turned off, the "closed" sign was hanging in the window, the door was locked, and the impromptu party was rolling down the 148 in a string of two pickups and three cars.

Tirone had Ray with him in the cab of his pickup. They didn't have much to say to each other for the first fifteen minutes or so, not until they got all the way past Luskville. Ray was still pissed at having to close the restaurant early, even though he'd sold over fifty beer to the gang for the trip ... at full retail. Tirone was pissed too, pissed at Ray for squawking about business, and pissed at life in general. It wasn't fair that a guy like Buck should have to die ... ever ... certainly not now, not yet.

"He told me a couple of days ago he spent a shitload of time talking to himself out loud since he was in the hospital," offered Tirone, "using that LieDeck that he got from Whiteside's people."

Ray didn't say anything, although he was curious. He flung a dead soldier out the open window, over the roof of his truck and into the ditch on the right, lit up a smoke, and opened another bottle. The LieDeck had changed everything, just like Claire said back at the restaurant. Nobody seemed to have much of a fix on how, exactly, except that some people had apparently taken to talking out loud to themselves and not figuring it was nuts. When he thought about it, he figured maybe he'd like to try that some time, if he ever got his hands on a LieDeck when he was alone. Not that he was all that keen to find out he was fucked up, but he supposed he might have realized that he was playing mind games as to why he hadn't gotten around to visiting the Buck before this, or at least given him a dingle.

There was one thing about the LieDeck Ray knew for sure: when a guy had one of them suckers on him, like Tirone did right now, you had to watch your Ps and Qs pretty damn careful. It was like being followed around through life by a bunch of judges, juries and executioners, all loaded for bear. On second thought, Ray wasn't too sure he wanted to get his hands on a LieDeck, but he figured he might as well let Tirone get off his chest whatever the hell it was he was burning to spit out.

"So ... what happened?" he ventured.

"Well," drawled Tirone, "Buck told me he found out how come he always messed up with the ladies, for

one thing."

Ray didn't bite. Buck made his own bed, just like everybody else, and if he didn't care to lie in it ... well, tough shit. Besides, every red-blooded stud from Gatineau all the way to Fort Coulonge envied the guy, envied the fact that he got more tail than any other three dudes lumped together, even after adjusting for the bragging and B.S. *Shoulda took my own car*, Ray thought.

"He said he had a dream, too," explained Tirone as they approached the outskirts of Gatineau.

"Oh yeah?" said Ray, trying to sound interested and figuring this ought to be easier to swallow than the tribulations of Buck's sex life.

"Yeah," said Tirone as he checked the rearview to make sure he hadn't outrun the pack. "He says it came to him every night since they put him on those painkiller drugs ... but he says it's not the drugs, it's for real ... or at least it will be, in a way."

Ray didn't like being stuck up in the air like that, but it seemed real clear that Tirone wasn't going to finish his stupid story unless he got some sort of personalized invitation. "Oh yeah?" he managed, again, in a tone that put a big question mark at the end, beside the aggravation mark.

"Yeah," said Tirone. "It was like that guy—uh—jeeze—that black guy. He gave that famous speech in Washington there, about having a dream ... then he got shot..."

"Martin Luther King," intoned Ray, in a manner that seemed to say, "Read a damned book, for God's sake ... any book at all."

"That's the guy!" exploded Tirone. "But that King fellow, he wasn't talking about an actual sound-asleep-type dream, and he was into all that religious stuff, of course, but he sure got everybody all riled up about things being different from what they were, better, for black people. You must have seen it on the TV, eh? Crops up every now and then."

"I seen it," sighed Ray.

"Well, Buck said that in his dream, he saw himself up on this stage with everybody in the whole friggin' world standing there like an ocean of faces, as far as the eye could see, rocking back and forth and singing some kind of song that repeated over and over and over, and he—"

"A round," Ray cut in.

"What!?" barked Tirone—he didn't like stupid interruptions much.

"It's called a ... never mind ... go on."

"So anyways, Buck sees himself standing at the microphone talking out of this huge loudspeaker system, shouting about how things were soon going to get like unbelievably better after we stop lying to each other and bullshitting each other, eh? And he said it was like all of history got divided into two, and like the big turning point was the invention of the LieDeck machine, and starting next year, everybody's got to get used to being ... you know ... nice.

"And he said we got no choice any more, and after we stop bitching about it, we're all gonna kind of get ... used to it, and even start liking it and wondering how come we were such jerks beforehand, and then he said we're gonna start finding new ways of looking at everything, like sex and power and money and taking care of the planet and all that. And he said in his dream, everybody gets sort of hooked on that vision, eh? And so they start imagining what it could be like, and then they realized that the world

actually *will* be like that if ... you know ... if we don't screw it up first. Like everybody's imagination starts running wild, and then whammo, they get hit again right in the freakin' gut by realizing that this transformation was really and truly going to happen. It was like everybody in the world found Jesus, sort of, all at the same time, except that there was no need for a Jesus person ... like the idea of Jesus got replaced by something real. And you know what he said it all boils down to, in the dream he had? He said that everybody stops being scared ... scared of anything ... even dying!"

Tirone stopped talking and just steered for a bit, letting his mind go on a fine run with Buck's most excellent dream. They were on the Champlain Bridge now, crossing over the river to Ottawa, to Ontario, to a situation that belied all that theorizing about not being afraid of the end of life. He reflected a bit on Buck's odd terror of being buried alive by mistake, and realized that sorting stuff out in your brain and actually *being* that way were two altogether different things. "Still, if people all joined together and helped each other to change over..." he said aloud, forgetting that Ray hadn't had the advantage of hearing what led up to that.

Ray gave him a glance that said, "You're losing it, pal," but Tirone missed it. For his part, Tirone figured that no way was Ray going to catch on all that quick anyway, so he decided not to even finish his story about Buck's dream. And besides, it was now sort of his dream too, Tirone's dream, and a dream that might soon belong to millions ... even billions, maybe.

"Buck said he talked to Father ... to Steve about that too," said Tirone, "about talking out loud to yourself. He said it's like lots of people like to exercise their bodies, but not too many people like to exercise their minds, eh? He said most people were ... aw jeeze, what the hell did he call that?" Tirone twisted his face and banged his left temple with the butt of his left hand. He hated it when he couldn't remember stuff, and it seemed to be happening more and more often as the years rolled by. "Intellectual couch potatoes!" he yelled. "That was it! Fucking intellectual couch potatoes was what he said people were. You got to admit the guy's got a way with words, eh?"

Ray took a final drag on a cigarette and flicked the butt out the window. He'd had enough of Tirone's gobbledygook for one day.

"You shouldn't do that, you know," said Tirone, meaning the butt out the window.

"Oh fuck right off," said Ray, which killed the conversation for the rest of the way in.

By 8:50 p.m., the gang of revelers had assembled on the third floor of the indoor parking garage at the Ottawa General. A couple of cold ones were tucked into Tammy Lucas's handbag, for Buck, and then thirteen people walked down the garage stairs and across to the hospital, led by Tirone, with old Jesse McCain pulling up the rear. They all squeezed onto one elevator, and if you judged by the squeals and complaints, there was a fair amount of bum-pinching going on in the close quarters.

A man in a wheelchair gawked at the invasion as it disembarked on the sixth floor. The lone woman at the nursing station looked concerned.

"Excuse me," she said authoritatively. "You're looking for whom?"

"For whooooommm?" mimicked Jesse McCain, with a face like he'd just discovered an anchovy in his ice cream.

"We're here to visit Buckminster Ash," announced a slightly tipsy Merrick McFee.

"It's okay," said Tirone. "We're all his friends. I know where his room is."

"Could you ... just wait here for one minute?" asked the nurse, very forcefully, "while I..." She was down the hall, out of earshot, before the rest of the words came out.

"Maybe he's on the can," suggested Claire hesitantly, "or he's getting another test or something."

Ten seconds later, Helen Kozinski walked up the hall with the nurse, and everybody could tell. They were too late.

"Buck didn't make it," said Helen. "He just took a deep breath and—uh—expired. He died ... easy."

"I'll be back in a minute," said Tirone as he took off down the hall and struggled to keep his composure. "There's something I gotta do."

Chapter 55 IN GOD'S NAME

Randall Whiteside sat at his desk, feeling overwhelmed by the events of the day—of the past week, actually. Adding to his dark burden, he had just learned from Helen, half an hour ago, that Buck Ash had lost his battle with lung cancer. He didn't know "the Buck" that well, but he had loved to watch him play hockey when they were both a lot younger, and he had personally instructed Cam to hire him when his injuries had made him an NHL has-been. *What next*, he wondered.

"Next" was a pre-arranged phone call that was due to come in shortly, a call he had to handle himself. It had been set up twenty minutes earlier between Helen and the rather surly representative of the Vatican to Canada. The Papal Nuncio had initiated the process, and he had been emphatic about the precise timing of the call, and totally uncooperative about its purpose. Randall thought it might have to do with Bill Doyle's suicide, or with the race riots, but serious as these things were, they hardly called for an intervention from the pope. *Guess I'll just have to wait and see what the man's got on his mind.*

"Everything set?" he asked over the speakerphone.

"Ten-four," came Helen's voice.

"Are those protesters ever going to go home and get some sleep?"

"Doesn't look that way," she replied. "A couple left, but six more just straggled in. There's about forty of them now, and they seem to be stuck on that one main chant they dreamed up. The minister—the sweaty little fart with the loud bullhorn—we were able to LieDeck him using a directional mike, and—"

"Let me guess," interrupted Randall. "He doesn't even believe it himself, right?"

"You got it," said Helen.

"Assholes," he muttered.

The question of religion was really bothering Randall. Even though he'd never bought into the "God trip," he had recently LieDeck-verified himself on the subject to test out his attitudes. He found out that if he discounted the psychiatric dimension, the mental health implications of believing in and praying to and obeying someone who doesn't exist, what remained was fairly positive. He tended to view religion as a legitimate part of the social landscape. In fact, he accepted it as benign, for the most part.

But that was before the believers—"Godists," they were called by a robust and very outspoken atheist community—had decided to focus their boisterous attentions on the head office of Whiteside

Technologies, and on himself in particular. He understood the psychology of the move, why they would decide to take their frustrations out on him. They were, after all, in crisis—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the lot of them—ever since the LieDeck started beeping them into personal humiliation ... and corporate insolvency. *Still, it's not fair for them to blame their problems on me*, he thought.

"Any Catholics out there?"

"We can't really tell," said Helen. "None in uniform. The cops told me the bullhorn guy is a Reverend Robert Barnes. He's a fundamentalist preacher, and he ran an ad on the radio calling on all believers to join in at our front gate, so we—"

"And that's the whole team, only a few dozen?" he scoffed.

"Well ... so far," said Helen.

Randall turned up the volume on the speakerphone and wandered over to the window. Twelve stories below, beyond the floodlit parking lot and front lawn of the office tower, it looked like a police convention.

On the near side of the street, there was a string of twenty or so cruisers and vans, all with their blue-red roof strobe lights ablaze, giving the site the air of a rock concert. The demonstrators had been restricted to the far side of the street, opposite the main gate. Randall could see only their heads and their placards because eighty or so police officers were standing about two feet in front of them, shoulder to shoulder, in a straight line. The cops were dressed in full riot gear—helmets, face guards, bulletproof vests—and they were holding clear plastic shields and black truncheons. This was the second day in a row that they had been called out to the Whiteside plant, and they obviously didn't want any repetition of the car bombing they'd had to cope with yesterday. They were also keenly aware that Canada was now officially under martial law, and they didn't want to lose control to the point where the Army had to come in and save their butts.

The protesters were holding hands and rocking back and forth, ignoring the police and chanting their nasty ditty. From inside his office, Randall couldn't distinguish the words, not even from the little guy with the leather lungs and the battery-powered megaphone, but he knew what they were saying:

Enemy of God, you will fail,

Randall Whiteside belongs in jail.

It baffled Randall that fully grown adults would expend so much time and energy trying to "kill the messenger." *No, not kill me*, he mused. *They just want me thrown in jail, and they probably want that only because it rhymes with "fail."* *I wonder if they would've toddled on home and done something constructive if they hadn't been able to come up with a slogan that rhymed? I wonder if some day the shrinks will redefine belief in God as a psychiatric disorder?*

"Have we got any agents in there with them?" he asked loudly.

"Three," came Helen's voice, "chanting along with gusto, and hoping you don't take it personally. Want me to fire them?" she added with a chuckle.

Randall ignored her small attempt at humor. It felt extremely uncomfortable having an interfaith jihad aimed personally at him, and he wondered how the kids and Doreen would react to news reports of this latest development ... even if the protesters were sure to be portrayed by the media as nothing more than a bunch of deluded airheads.

He also wondered why the L.A.P. group hadn't been more alert, hadn't been clever enough to expect this impact of the LieDeck, or why Patriot hadn't been able to predict it. It bothered him that he hadn't anticipated this kind of entanglement himself, and he felt that he would have been sharper in his analysis a decade ago. *I must be losing my edge*, he thought as he glanced at his watch and returned to his desk. *Hope I can hang on until Michael's old enough to take over ... mature enough.*

It was exactly 10:30 p.m. when Randall's private phone rang. "If that's the Pope, tell him I'll call back," he said.

"What!?" gasped Helen.

"I'm kidding," he said as it rang for the second time. "I just ... always wanted to say that."

"Jesus," said Helen, "answer the goddam—"

Randall silenced the speakerphone and picked up his private line. "Your Holiness," he said deferentially. "I'm truly honored."

"Mr. Whiteside," came the mellow drawl of the first-ever pontiff of American origin, "I appreciate the opportunity of this private conversation. I understand you do not believe in God?"

"Uh—no, I ... don't," stuttered Randall, who was taken aback by the strange opening foray. "I ... understand you do," he said nervously.

"My beliefs are not at issue," came the stiff reply—no one liked being put on the spot about their beliefs any more, not with the possibility their words could be checked out on a LieDeck in real time or later, by verifying a tape. "I would like to invite you to come to Rome to meet privately with a select committee drawn from the College of Cardinals. Do you accept?"

Randall was caught off guard once again. He saw no useful purpose being served by such a visit, but he also knew what the media would do with the story if he said no to the Pope. "There is a gentleman in my employ," he said carefully, "Steve Sutherland, and he is a former Catholic bishop. If he is willing to go, I'd be pleased to send him as my—"

"This invitation is for you only," stated the Pope, unequivocally.

Curiously, Randall found himself amused to be talking to a pope with a Tennessee accent. He quickly refocused. "I accept ... with pleasure," he said, "but my visit will have to wait for a few—"

"The meeting is tomorrow," the Pope shot back.

"Then ... I'm sorry," said Randall. "I can't just—"

"The invitation is withdrawn," said the Pope. "Mr. Whiteside, before we part, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Of ... course," said Randall.

"Did you know that the LieDeck would have the effect of undermining the faith?"

"No ... of course not," said Randall. "If I had, I ... I..." His voice stopped as his mind frantically searched for words.

"Yes?" came the pope's hard-edged voice. "If you had..."

Randall couldn't find an ending for the sentence he'd begun with such certitude, at least not one that would survive LieDeck-verification. He hated hypotheticals, and this one irritated him profoundly. *If I'd had time to study this matter in advance*, he thought, *I might have been inclined to take a bit more...*

Something inside cancelled that flight, and reminded him that he *had* planned to take several months to study the LieDeck ... perhaps even for a year before it was released. It was not his fault that the schedule had to be moved up. *That's why we set up the L.A.P.*, he said to himself, *to give ourselves time to study these questions*. And then, as usually happened on those rare occasions when he found himself cornered, Randall flipped over to offence—the best defense.

"Your Holiness," he said tersely, "some people in the press have suggested that the Catholic Church was a founding member of the World Democratic Alliance. I wonder if you—"

The phone went dead, instantaneously, not with the clunk of a hang-up, but with the silence of a high-tech switch. "Nice talking to you too, your popeliness," he snarled as he hung up his private line. "Did you get it?" he asked after re-activating the speakerphone with Helen.

"Oh yeah," she said, "for what it's worth." She'd been taping the call, and LieDeck-verifying both parties.

"And ... what is it worth?" asked Randall.

"Well," said Helen, reviewing her notes, "your first lie was about your being 'truly honored,' and you lied about being 'pleased' to send Steve to Rome, and about accepting his invitation 'with pleasure,' and about your visit 'having to wait,' and about being 'sorry' that you had to decline his invitation, but ... that's all pretty much diplomatic stuff. The one that counts is ... well, you lied about not anticipating the impact of the LieDeck on religious faith, sir. It—"

"But I ... I can't recall ever—"

"Apparently you ... you must have thought about it in the past and then ... forgot that you thought about it ... consciously ... but in your subconscious ... well, you know how that works."

Randall knew all too well. It was a hard lesson that a great many people were learning these difficult days. *Sloppy thinking and forgetfulness were so ... forgivable*, he thought, *before the LieDeck*.

He had always thought of himself as an honest man, a man who chose his words ever so carefully, and he honestly hadn't realized that he'd told five little white ones. *Lies are lies*, he said to himself, *and if I didn't tell all those innocent ones, maybe when it came to the important issue, I might have been more...*

He suddenly remembered what Victor had told him—*jeeze, it was only a week ago*—about how the LieDeck would change a person's personality, would modify the very nature of the beast, and he wondered why he hadn't pressed the inventor on that at the time. *I really am losing my edge*, he thought again. *I really must get those reel-to-reel tapes from him*.

"You ... still there?" asked Helen hesitantly.

"Yeah, I'm here," said Randall. "I was just thinking about who might have cut the line off. We'll never know, I suppose. Tell me, did ... he lie?"

"Uh—no," said Helen, who was confused by the fact that her boss had just lied about what he'd been thinking about ... and forgotten that she would be able to tell if he lied about anything. "He ... ducked your question about his own faith, so ... either he doesn't believe in God or ... or he thought you were being ... rude, I guess."

"Well, he asked me first," said Randall testily, "so it was a fair—"

"But he's the damned pope!" said Helen. "You don't ask a—"

"If he *does* believe in God, he shouldn't hesitate to say so," snapped Randall, and if he *doesn't* believe in God, then he's just a big fat good-ol'-boy with a con game that went sour. And if he's behind the WDA, then who the hell knows what he's..."

There was a brief silence as Randall considered the possibility that the invitation to Rome might have been a trap. *Maybe the Pope is with the WDA. Maybe he even approved the attack on the lodge! Or maybe the WDA has hijacked the papacy, as it did the UN.*

"Tighten up my personal security," he said, "and for the family too."

"Done," said Helen.

SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 2014

Chapter 56

CRITICAL CONDITION

When Cam O'Connor found the outer office door unlocked, he said a little prayer that there were no new disasters waiting for him. It had been a long time since he'd had a day off, and the torrid pace of events was getting to him. His secretary was obviously in ... her purse was on her desk. She had probably gone to the washroom.

He put his briefcase on the floor and perused the stack of yellow phone messages. Most were unimportant, but one of them caught his complete attention. "Arriving Ottawa International Airport, 11:00 a.m.," it said. "Meet me. Urgent. I've got your briefcase."

Apparently the caller had not left a name. Scrawled underneath the words were two question marks and an exclamation mark. Cam looked at his watch. It was 10:15. He'd have to hurry. Since the helicopter was out at the manor, he called down to the Patriot desk to arrange a ride.

The Sunday traffic was thin. The sight of parked tanks and soldiers in full battle-dress standing on occasional street corners seemed as pointless as it was disturbing. The race riots had stopped as suddenly as they'd begun, all over Canada, and news commentators were speculating about the possibility that martial law might just disappear with equal dispatch.

The decision to opt for martial law was a prime ministerial career-buster if it went wrong, and Cam wondered where the country would turn for leadership if Godfrey lost his grip on 24 Sussex. There were now more than 40 countries where the governments had imposed martial law, or where it had been imposed by their military leaders with no particular regard for what the government said. Eleven full-fledged civil wars had broken out since his ill-fated trip to the UN, the last he'd heard, and the line between these internal conflicts and clashes *between* nations was becoming dangerously blurred. It had occurred to him often that the history of the 21st century would be turning out quite differently if Randall hadn't made that snap decision to pass out LieDecks at the UN.

And now this, he thought as he slumped in the back of the chauffeured Patriot limo, *whatever "this" turns out to be*. He picked up the secure car phone and had the operator connect him with Bertrand Joly, at RCMP headquarters.

"Bertrand," he said. "It's Cam O'Connor here. There's a Dr. Pavay arriving at the OIA at 11:00 a.m.,

from New York. Can you get him through customs without a fuss? He's a top UN official, and I got a cryptic message to meet him there. I think he may be in danger—probably from the WDA. I'd like to bring him to your office for debriefing."

Joly said he could handle Canada Customs, but he insisted they meet at Whiteside's office, so as not to scare the man. The whole world knew how the WDA had infiltrated Canada's national police force, and the cloud of suspicion still hung there, still clung, still stung, still stank and still rankled. "In fact, you better not tell your friend that I'm with the RCMP," he suggested.

"The guy has a LieDeck," said Cam. "We can't play that game any more ... forever. It's ... hard to get used to, eh?"

"Yeah," said Joly helplessly. "Well, I hope he feels okay about opening up with me there."

The car pulled in to the airport just before 11:00 a.m., and the Patriot driver went inside the terminal to wait for the Customs officials to deliver Dr. Pavay. Cam called Bertrand again, from the car, and found out that everything was under control. Just after he hung up, a young soldier, still a boy in spite of the menacing rifle, came over to the open window and asked why the vehicle was idling in a no-stopping zone. Cam quietly asked his forbearance, and got it. *God*, he thought, *Canadians are even polite about martial law. This could be a car bomb, for all that kid knows. Christ!*

The military presence was upsetting to Cam. There were soldiers inside and outside the terminal, huge camouflaged trucks in the parking lot, and choppers hovering nearby. This was the first time the boys had been able to play with their toys openly since the so-called War on Terror had started up in 2001, and he found himself hoping that the current crisis would be as bloodless as that Iraq business had been ... for Canada, anyway.

At 11:20, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees got into the back of the Patriot car and shook the hand of the man he'd met before but never spoken to out loud. "I'm very pleased to see you again, Mr. O'Connor."

"Welcome to Canada, Dr. Pavay," said Cam warmly. "What brings you here?"

"Please," said Pavay, "I think we should not talk about it until we reach your office."

As they had done once before, in New York, these two men sat in the backseat of a chauffeured automobile in complete silence. Cam found himself remembering the day that Dr. Pavay had saved his skin. He never did find out how much danger he'd actually been in. If he had called Dr. Pavay to ask, there could have been trouble, especially if the CIA was tied in with the WDA, as many people were openly suggesting now.

He called ahead to the office and asked that light lunch be brought to the boardroom, for three. He thought of calling Randall, but then decided against it. Sometimes it was his responsibility to make sure the boss *wasn't* apprised of things ... in order to preserve his "plausible deniability," as it was called in the trade.

When Cam led his guest into the boardroom, Joly was already there, waiting, leaning his enormous frame on the oval table as a waiter fussed over the food. "Dr. Pavay," said Cam, "I'd like you to meet Bertrand Joly, Commissioner of the RCMP. If I hadn't told him about you and asked for his help, you would probably still be at the airport, or in the custody of our defense department." The two men shook hands.

After the waiter was shepherded out of the room, Dr. Pavay spoke. "Gentlemen," he said soberly, "the United Nations has ceased to function, for all intents and purposes. No one speaks to anyone else on

matters of substance. Everyone is continuing to play the UN game as if it was real, but nothing gets done."

He stopped for a sip of tea and a bite of a mini-sandwich—salmon. He knew he had to confide in someone, and most of his acquaintances and friends in the UN were suspect, impotent or plain terrified.

"For years," he continued, "most diplomats at the United Nations have been wearing wires. Virtually every face-to-face conversation is routinely recorded. Every embassy tapes its phone calls, incoming and outgoing. No one complains because they all do it. There are legions of bureaucrats who study these tapes around the clock on a daily basis, looking for nuances, openings or contradictions. The Cold War paranoia is so pervasive that every tiny advantage must be exploited. These bureaucrats are now re-examining all older tapes, running them by their LieDecks. They're confirming many of their fears, and finding out all kinds of other awful things that they never even suspected."

Bertrand Joly was starting to get nervous. He knew all about this practice of taping all telephone calls and face-to-face meetings at the UN, and elsewhere. The RCMP had been involved in similar procedures ever since the 1970s, although the Canadian government wasn't entirely aware of it back then. They had not backed away from the practice during the lull between the two Cold Wars, and now that 9/11 had generated enough fear to pass legislation making such practices legal in most democracies, including Canada, it was the duty of the RCMP to review many of *its* old tapes, using their brand new LieDecks.

"Please go on," said the commissioner, and Dr. Pavay obliged.

"Almost every UN mission has banned verbal communications inside their walls, so everything is written down and then shredded and flushed, or whispered into the ear of the other party while loud music plays on a radio. But that's not the worst of it. The worst part is what they are learning. Many delegations have discovered spies in their midst, and some of these spies are now being held prisoner inside their nations' missions. It has been rumored that some of them have been killed, their bodies dismembered ... ground up into mush, actually ... and flushed into the sewer system."

"Is this a rumor?" asked Joly. "Or is there proof?"

"We don't have proof," said Dr. Pavay, "but we have reason to believe that it's true. It's hard to get solid proof when most people won't say *anything* of substance out loud. There's a tiny and clandestine group of international civil servants, including myself, who have been working to find out how much influence this World Democratic Alliance has in the UN. We're risking our lives every time we meet."

"Jesus Christ," said Cam.

"More serious than that," continued Pavay, "are the political directions that are taking shape. The Chinese and the Russians are now together in their absolute conviction that the capitalist world is engaged in an all-out effort to destroy their ideology once and for all. They have come to the conclusion that the United States is not even governed by the Government of the United States, that there's a shadow government behind the scenes, which *really* controls things, by which of course they mean the WDA. They believe this shadow government lets Democrats and Republicans play their partisan games, then steps in whenever a critical decision has to be made. These two Communist powers believe that the WDA isn't a new outfit at all, that it has been around, and in control of the U.S. government, ever since the early 1950s. They believe that JFK was assassinated by the WDA because he was preparing to negotiate a formal treaty with the old Soviet Union based on the old McCloy-Zorin Principles, the GCD concept—general and complete disarmament—back in the early 1960s, after the Cuban Missile Crisis. And they're now saying that what happened to John F. Kennedy could happen to President Barker and—"

"Is there proof of that," asked Bertrand Joly, "of a conspiracy against Barker?" He made a mental note to ask General George Brampton, who was still locked up at DND headquarters, about that—and Roger Findlay, the defector, now in the Witness Protection Program.

"Mr. Joly," said Dr. Pavay, "the notion of 'proof' is a pre-LieDeck phenomenon in the world of diplomacy, as I explained. Everything is illusion and rumor now. I'm telling you these things for one reason. Canada is the only country to withdraw from the UN. It is my hope that this means that your country is not involved in the WDA conspiracy and that your country is actually governed by its elected government, in spite of the martial law decree. Is that the case?"

Commissioner Joly took out his LieDeck and placed it on the table. It was on, and set for the beeper mode. "That is true," he said deliberately. "I am opposed to the WDA, like yourself, and so is the Prime Minister. I will do everything I can to help you."

Dr. Pavay was satisfied. "No one trusts Dr. Denthor Gütsch, the Secretary General," he said. "Almost everyone thinks he's in the WDA, although personally, I'm not so sure. All past decisions of the UN are now inoperative because it seems pretty certain that the whole organization was hijacked by the WDA—maybe as early as the 1960s. Dr. Gütsch won't resign, and he's powerless to influence anything. We are in a state of international paralysis, and nobody wants to face up to it.

"Worse yet, the Russians now believe that the late Comrade Gorbachev was actually with the WDA when he trashed the Soviet 'empire' back in the nineteen eighties, and of course if that's true, it means the American right wing actually had control of the Russian government from nineteen eighty-nine until the putsch in twenty twelve. And a rumor has been spreading that a final showdown between these two economic systems is inevitable, that one side or the other will very shortly find itself under irresistible pressure to launch a preemptive first strike—a *nuclear* attack—unless fear levels are dramatically reduced."

"You've ... got to be kidding," said Joly, which elicited a beep from his LieDeck.

"I've been told that round-the-clock work has been under way for a week to refurbish and restock the nuclear bomb shelters of both corporate and government leaders in the United States," said Dr. Pavay. "I've heard that VIPs are withdrawing money from their Swiss bank accounts, in gold, and quietly leaving the cities in all western countries. Some of them have already left for destinations like Australia and New Zealand. I've heard that in Russia—"

Bertrand Joly's pager beeped. He explained that it might well be something urgent, and asked Dr. Pavay to wait a moment while he left the room to call his office. While he was gone, Pavay poked worriedly at his food, unable to eat. The boardroom faced south, and the Sunday sun was streaming in as if pure contentment had been legislated by the gods.

"What exactly made you decide to come to Canada?" asked Cam. "I ... suppose you remembered the favor you did for me."

"Mr. O'Connor, as I said, Canada is the only country to officially withdraw from the UN. If we are to avoid a calamity, someone—and I do hope it will be your government—has to take back the United Nations organization from these despicable WDA fanatics."

"I thought this WDA business was under control," said O'Connor. "I'm sure you've heard that we arrested a number of RCMP officers that were involved with the WDA, and that Jeremy Ford, our minister of foreign affairs, was involved, and has disappeared. We even have an American general captured. He was the Canadian handler for the WDA, apparently. I'm surprised that the UN is falling apart. Of course the security you have down there is really pretty lax. My goodness, when I was down

there, I couldn't believe what I ... oh ... is everything okay, Bertrand?"

Bertrand Joly walked back into the boardroom, looking pale. He had his jacket off, and he was sweating heavily. "The United States is now formally under martial law," he said quietly, "and apparently President Barker has just had a heart attack. He's in critical condition."

Chapter 57 IT WASN'T BULLSHIT

Nine days earlier, on Good Friday, Victor had done the grand tour of the whole Whiteside Technologies complex, including the production studio where they made their own TV and Internet ads. The facility was also used by an amateur theater troupe that had been organized by the union, and during his visit, Victor had been impressed by a videotaped snippet of their last play, a comedy. He hadn't thought about his tour since then, until it popped into his mind after breakfast.

He had been talking to Winnie about visiting Annette in the hospital, and about the problems that such a visit would pose. On a whim, he called up the make-up artist he had met during his tour, a woman named Martha Worth, and asked her if she could make a disguise for him. It was the only way he figured he could get over to see Annette without being tackled by the media, or shot by fundamentalist zealots, or strung up by others who blamed the recent world turmoil on him.

He called Patriot Command, and they said it would be no problem. Martha, in spite of her rather peripheral role at Whiteside Technologies, had enough security clearance to be told the real story behind his odd request.

She had laughed heartily over the phone at his dilemma, and suggested he dress up as a policeman. Victor agreed. Cam O'Connor was informed of the plan, and he had a staff person arrange for a real policeman to escort Victor from the office to Annette's room at the Ottawa General—so he wouldn't get busted for impersonating an officer.

"Put 'em up—you're under arrest," said Victor as he poked his head sideways around the studio door.

"You don't scare me one bit," said the rotund Martha Worth. "Sit," she commanded imperially. "Here."

"Yes ma'am," he obliged, making a cockeyed face at her back.

Martha walked behind the make-up chair, plopped a large barber-type bib on him, and pulled the two cords tightly around his neck. "Yes *who*?" she demanded.

There was a long mirror that ran the length of the room, with rows of round bulbs across the top and bottom. Victor laughed. Martha was very large, and at the moment, she had something akin to homicide in her playful, fifty-five-year-old eyes. "Yes SIR!" he barked like a Marine-in-the-making.

Martha gave the cords a good tug—enough to hurt a little, but not offend. "That's a damn sight better," she growled. Then she loosened the cords and tied the bow. "You had better watch your mouth or I'll make you up to look like me."

Victor appreciated her humor, and her self-deprecating manner. Here was a "Human two-point-seven," he gauged in his mind, a fine lady who would flower within the new Human Three culture that he pictured emerging after the LieDeck had done its work for a year or two. But while he admired her character and liked her personality, she was dead right about her appearance. On the traditional looksist scale of one to ten, she was a four, tops, even with her professional skills at make-up and costuming. She would

probably be a three first thing in the morning, maybe even a two with her dentures in a drinking glass. Liposuction, plastic surgery and divine intervention would all be needed to convert her physical image into a reasonable facsimile of any Hollywood blueprint. *And even then*, he pondered.

He closed his eyes and felt a flood of sorrow sweep over him, like the downwash of a helicopter. He would have to forego the conversation they'd surely have a year from now, in a Human Three setting. Sexual attraction was grounded irretrievably in instinct, and no amount of attitude-adjustment would make that chemistry happen where it wasn't to be, or go away when it did occur. Martha Worth was simply not sexy. But ... on every other level, she was a "humdinger," as his father used to say ... a real beauty.

Victor wanted to tell her that as he stared at the inside of his closed eyelids, felt her patting and brushing, heard her fiddling with the tools of her trade. He wanted to talk to her about how Human Three Consciousness would banish looksism to the dustbin of history, along with most of the other Human Two "isms." He wanted to talk to her about blindness, like the color blindness that Human Threes would experience towards visible minorities. He wanted to explain the "appearance blindness" that ought to emerge in the next few years, about the possibility that the *person* of Martha Worth could, at least theoretically, be treated exactly the same whether it inhabited the body of a drop-dead gorgeous twenty-one-year-old white supermodel or a withered and weathered Ugandan grandma.

The time isn't right, he said to himself as Martha touched up his eyebrows. Maybe a year from now she'd see him again and throw her arms around him and bear-hug him until he burped or cried for mercy, all to say thanks ... thanks for the LieDeck, for the quality of her life in the new LieDeck society, the new Human Three society.

I really must get to work on those God damned tapes, he scolded himself silently. He had expected to have a year or so to work on that aspect of things, with professional help from a skilled team of writers and social scientists. He wasn't sure why he seemed to be procrastinating on that critical front. Yes, circumstances had gotten in the way, and it was difficult to focus his attention with all the troubling developments that were connected to the LieDeck. But still, he knew he was avoiding this difficult job, and he resolved anew to LieDeck-verify his reasons the next time he was alone.

"Want any special effects?" Martha asked as she snipped away at the tumbleweeds that grew out of his ears.

"Like what?" Victor asked, opening his eyes again.

"Oh, I could give you a pimple or a liver spot or a scar or even a missing tooth," she said as she peered into his left ear.

"How do you do a missing tooth?" he asked.

"Pliers," blinked Martha as she walked over to her countertop and fished around for some mislaid utensil.

"Pass," chuckled Victor.

About an hour later, he was standing in front of a three-sided mirror in full uniform, checking out the armed enforcer he had become. Over the reflection of his shoulder, he caught the eyes of his new ... *acquaintance*, he supposed ... and he wished the situation had allowed them to use the past hour to become friends, or at least to explore each other to the extent that an actual friendship might have been considered.

"Is my gun loaded?" he asked.

"Yeah right," said Martha, rolling her eyes and turning to attend to her messy counter-top. "Just what the world needs! Victor freakin' Helliwell with a loaded gun."

Victor tugged lapels and fiddled with his police cap, looking for just the right angle, mostly to pretend that he hadn't heard what she'd just said, or hadn't really taken offence. She was probably kicking herself internally for having said something that could be taken as a serious jab. Or, then again, maybe she really did have a mean streak.

Life's too short to figure all these things out, he thought. *No*, he corrected himself, *that's not right*. *A couple of Human Threes would have dealt with it in ten seconds flat if the hurt were unintended*. *She would say, "Oops, that sounded awful, eh?" and he'd say, "Up your nose with a rubber hose," or some similar absolution, and it would be rubbed out, repaired, forgotten, forgiven, converted into laughter. And if injury was intended?* he wondered. *A minute*, he estimated, *or maybe two*.

"Thanks a ton," he said cheerily as he turned to leave.

"Break a leg," said Martha, trying not to sound literal.

* * *

As he strode into the Ottawa General, he was amused by the looks he got from patients, visitors, and staff. It wasn't fear or hostility. It was different from anything he had ever experienced. *It's a kind of morbid curiosity and awe that goes along with the right to terminate a human life*, he supposed. "Do people always gawk at the police that way?" he asked his escort, one Sergeant O'Neil.

"Yep," was the only explanation he got.

As they passed through the police checkpoint on the eighth floor, Annette's floor, Victor saw a reporter who looked like she'd been camped there for a long time. "When are we going to be able to talk to Annette Blais?" she asked. "Would you take a note to her?" Her camera equipment was heaped on the floor, as was her cameraman, and by the pitiful looks on their faces, they didn't expect the police or anyone else to cooperate.

There was something about the woman that seemed familiar, but Victor couldn't place her. "What's your name?" he asked, trying hard to sound appropriately gruff.

"Paula Choquette, Alpha News," answered the reporter, "and I've been trying to talk to Ms. Blais since last Monday, two days after she got shot. Tell her I'll respect her wishes—whatever she wants. All I need is a couple of minutes."

Victor felt an explosion of adrenaline as he recognized her as the woman who had interviewed his old friend George Cluff back in 2002, just before his death. "I'll tell her," he said.

He flipped on his LieDeck and entered Annette's room. He closed the door, and then removed his police cap. "How goes the battle?" he asked.

"Victor," said Annette, with mixed emotions. "What ... you're a cop now?"

He gave her a kiss on the cheek and squeezed her hand. "Just my way of not getting harassed by the media," he said.

"Pull up a chair," she said, "and tell me why I shouldn't give you an earful of crap for not visiting me, or at least calling."

"I really couldn't afford the risk," he said.

"Liar," she shot back.

"Beep," went Victor's LieDeck.

"I'm glad you didn't mean that," he said.

"Yeah, well, maybe I didn't, but I still want to kick your butt from here all the way out to Vancouver," she said. "And you see ... no beep when I said that."

"I don't ... blame you," said Victor, also without getting beeped. "I should have sent you a letter or something. When I did get around to planning a visit, Randall told me that you'd had me excommunicated and—"

"Yeah, well you were," she said angrily. "You behaved like a shit. I saved your ass and took a bullet through the head, and—"

"I'm really glad you weren't killed," said Victor sincerely, "and I really am sorry I didn't call earlier ... honest."

"Well, you're forgiven," said Annette, "and you don't have to say 'honest' when you got a LieDeck in your damn pocket. I believed you anyway. You're not such a bad guy, just thoughtless, inconsiderate, self-centered, and—"

"I *know*," he said forcefully, finally allowing his impatience to show, and smarting from the dearth of beeps. He already felt guilty, but Annette was making sure he didn't get away with these sins too lightly. "I'm—uh—in a relationship now," he said, hoping she might be ready to move on to other, more pleasant topics.

"Really," she said. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Winnie Jopps."

"The green-eyed housekeeper at the lodge?" Annette asked with visible pleasure.

"One and the same. We're really happy, and I've heard through the grapevine that you and Steve are becoming ... close."

"He asked me to marry him," said Annette, only to get beeped. "I haven't accepted yet, but if he keeps begging me the way he's been doing the last few days, I may have to accept, just to get him off my case."

Victor was laughing, and his laughter grew every time the LieDeck signaled yet another fabrication. It seemed that Annette enjoyed saying whatever she felt like saying, LieDeck be damned. It didn't do any good by way of deception, but it got the message across just as effectively as telling the truth up front. He turned his LieDeck off.

The two laughed and talked for an hour. Victor thanked Annette for saving his life and asked her why she had sent him to the bomb shelter that fateful day. She explained that she was just being "overly paranoid, the way a security officer is supposed to be when in doubt." He asked why she hadn't gone down into the shelter with him, and she told him how Helen had said the idea was silly, since it was only an RCMP plane.

Victor was careful not to mention anything about the recent troubles of the world, and Annette didn't ask.

He wouldn't have done so in any event, but Patriot and the police had both informed him that silence on these matters was a strict condition for visits with the patient—for everyone. He had almost slipped up a couple of times, and he was glad he'd turned off his LieDeck as he tap-danced his way out of several near-blunders.

"Listen," he said when the conversation slowed down, "there's a reporter in the hall who's been giving the cops a hard time. She says she's been waiting to talk to you ever since—"

"No reporters," said Annette, firmly.

"You know what I was thinking?" said Victor. "Why not let her in and we'll both talk to her. Maybe we could—"

"I said *no reporters*!"

"Wait a second," he said. "Hear me out. What I had in mind might be fun." He told her about the plan that had occurred to him out in the hall, and Annette agreed—it might be fun.

Victor pulled the curtain around her bed and turned off the main light. "I think I'll call myself Inspector Joe Farley," he said, "after that dead hick that we heard about at Ray's Restaurant, remember?"

"I remember," said Annette as she assumed a near-death position and appearance.

Sergeant O'Neil was standing right outside the door to the room, and Victor asked him to tell Paula Choquette that she would be allowed in, but not her cameraman. After a brief, whispered chat, the police officer escorted her to the door.

Victor stopped her and gave her the ground rules. "No camera, no LieDeck, and only if you promise to have a *conversation* with Annette, not an interview," he said. "And if she has a problem with any part of the conversation, then I take the tape and you have to leave empty-handed. Sergeant O'Neil is a witness to this, so think about it carefully. Are we agreed?"

Paula agreed readily—she knew she had no choice—and was led into the room. She was a slight woman, with mousy brown hair, gray-blue eyes and a ski-jump nose. Her appearance at the moment was ragged, the result of a vigil that had lasted too many nights and days. She was a seasoned pro and would rise to the occasion, but right now, she was secretly relieved that the camera had been barred.

Inside the door, where Sergeant O'Neil couldn't hear him, Victor introduced himself, in a whisper, as Inspector Joseph P. Farley, and then opened the curtain, slowly. Annette feigned semi-consciousness as the lapel mike was pinned to her blue hospital gown, and "Inspector Farley" whispered to the reporter that she had to go easy on Annette ... "She's had something of a downturn," he explained.

"Of course," she said.

He took Paula's LieDeck, made sure it was turned off, and put it on the bedside table. He also checked that his own LieDeck was turned off. When everything was set, Paula leaned in towards Annette and asked her if she was ready to start.

Annette opened her one good eye with a start. "Mom?" she said. "Is ... that you?"

"My name is Paula Choquette," said the reporter tenderly. "I'm from Alpha News. I wonder if I could ask you a few questions?"

"There's been some brain damage," whispered Inspector Farley as Annette pretended to struggle with

reality. "Best to just talk, rather than asking questions."

"Okay," whispered the reporter.

"Do you have any babies?" asked Annette pathetically.

"Yes, a boy, sixteen," said Paula. "You?"

"Two," she said wistfully. "Both girls."

"Really!" said Paula. "I didn't even know you were married."

"Oh, I'm not married," sighed Annette. "But if I ever do get married, I'd want to be married by a bishop. That would be ever so wonderful," she said, pretending to smile with great effort, "to be married by a real bishop?"

"Yes ... I ... suppose so," said Paula, with a confused look over at Inspector Farley. "Who's ... taking care of the kids while you're in the hospital?" she asked gently.

"Taking care of who?" asked Annette.

"Your children," said Paula.

"Oh, I don't ... have any children," she moaned as she pulled the covers more tightly under her quivering chin. "I'd like to have a few some day, but only if I was married ... by a bishop."

Victor certainly hadn't expected Annette to dive into the chicanery quite so daringly. He had to stand up and walk behind Paula to prevent his face from giving the game away. Paula looked directly into Annette's eye, suspecting that she was being had, but that feeling vanished as she watched the patient pry herself painfully into a sitting position.

"Did you ... meet ... Victor Helliwell?" Annette asked, gasping from the apparently Herculean effort.

"No," said Paula. "I'd love to meet the man, but he's hiding out at Whiteside's lodge, now that it's rebuilt. He won't talk to any reporters. I bet I've called over there a hun—"

"You wouldn't like him anyway," said Annette, as she put another pillow behind her head and collapsed onto it, looking exhausted. "He's a major ... major-league ... jerk."

"Now, now, Annette," said Inspector Farley, "you don't mean that. I met him, you know, and I thought he was a real gentleman. Bright, too."

"Smoke ... and mirrors," sighed Annette. "Underneath, he's a creep. And a coward. He ran into the bomb shelter and closed the door on me ... wouldn't let me in. And that LieDeck thing, I don't think he invented it. He told me that he stole the idea from some other guy."

"Oh, you mean his old friend George Cluff," said the inspector knowingly, "the guy that got killed by the CIA?"

"Who?" said Annette, genuinely perplexed at how he had turned this gambit around on her.

"George Cluff," said Inspector Farley. "He was a real wacko. A decade or so ago, he had this thing called a Cluff Voice Analyzer, or C.V.A., a kind of early version of the LieDeck. Cluff got killed in a plane crash. Helliwell says that the CIA did it, but he has no proof. I think the two of them were working for Scientology." Victor smiled inside at his own cleverness, but his face suddenly showed alarm. "You ...

won't use that stuff in your broadcast, will you?" he asked Paula urgently. "I ... I shouldn't have said anything about that—about the Scientology connection."

"Hold on now," said Paula assertively. "You didn't say it was off the record."

"You don't care if his career goes down the toilet?" asked Annette, who had become miraculously lucid. "As long as you get your story, is that it?"

"Look, I'm just doing my job, and—"

"Wait a sec," protested Inspector Farley. "I did you a favor, damn it, and you repay me by destroying my twenty-year career as a police officer?"

"I'm a reporter, for Christ's sake," insisted Paula.

"I'll tell you what," said Inspector Farley. "You promise me that you won't use that information, and I'll get you an interview with Helliwell. Is it a deal?"

"Well ... yeah ... all right," said Paula. "I'll leave that part out ... for now, but I still have to follow up—see if I can get it corroborated from other sources."

"I ... suppose," he conceded.

"The inspector won't be able to get you an interview," Annette told Paula. "Victor hates his guts like you wouldn't believe. He told me so himself."

"You spoke to Mr. Helliwell on the phone?" asked Paula.

"He was here!" said Annette. "He said he walked right past you in the hall and you didn't recognize him. He said you were stupid."

"I beg your pardon!" said Paula.

"Actually, he didn't say stupid," said Inspector Farley. "But he did say that he wrote a letter to you about his friend George Cluff getting killed by the CIA—this would be back in twenty aught two—and he said that you never did anything about it. Do you remember getting such a letter from Mr. Helliwell back then?"

"I ... can't discuss that, I'm afraid," said Paula.

"Oh, I see," said Inspector Farley. "So you are entitled to privacy if something might threaten your career, but I'm not. Is that it?"

"Look," said the exasperated reporter, "I'm trying to do a God damned interview here and—"

"But you weren't supposed to," interrupted Inspector Farley. "I said you could have a *conversation* with Ms. Blais, not an interview."

"All right," said Paula. "I did get a letter, but I assumed it was a crank. There was no return address, and I'd never heard of any Victor Helliwell then, so I—"

"So you did nothing," said Inspector Farley, accusingly.

"What could I do?" asked Paula. "Call the CIA and ask them to tell me if they'd killed any inventors lately? Get real!"

"And now that it's been made public that the RCMP was involved in the attempted murder of Mr. Helliwell, did you dig that letter out of your files and show it to your boss and follow it up?" asked Inspector Farley. "Did you tell any police organization or the Solicitor General's office that you had possible evidence related to the attempted murder of Victor Helliwell?" he demanded. "And Annette Blais?" he added, embarrassed that he had almost forgotten about Annette in all this.

"That's it," said Paula as she disconnected the microphone from Annette's lapel and grabbed her LieDeck. "I'm out of here. What's your badge number?"

"You want my badge number?" asked Inspector Farley with a look of shock on his face. "I ... don't think so."

"You know the law," said Paula. "You *have* to give me your badge number if I ask for it, so let's—"

"We're under martial law, lady," said Inspector Farley sternly. "I don't have to give you squat. I could have you arrested and held in prison for a very long time, without a trial, without even a charge. Now, are you really sure you want to pick a fight with me?"

Paula spun about, yanked open the door to leave and ran smack into Sergeant O'Neil, who backed her into the room. "Is there ... a problem here?" he asked.

"You witnessed the deal," said Inspector Farley. "You'll have to ask Annette if she objects to any part of the discussion."

"And ... do you?" asked the real police officer, looking over at the patient in the bed.

"Oh yes, I do," said Annette, with a voice as fragile as a dry flower. "I don't like her at all. I tell you what, Ms. Choquette. You give *me* the tape, and *I'll* get you an interview with Mr. Helliwell. An exclusive."

"Deal," said Paula as she took the tape recorder from her purse, removed the cassette, and handed it over. "When?"

"I'll call him right now," said Annette, weakly. "Please ... can you wait outside?"

As the door closed, Annette and Victor broke up, quietly.

"You're really bad," she giggled.

"No worse than you," he countered. "And besides, I know her from way back. She's a bitch, and she deserves whatever she gets. I don't want to have anything to do with her."

"What the hell were you going on about Scientology for?"

"Oh, I was just giving her a blind alley to get lost in," he said. "I hope she wastes a lot of time on that one."

Annette seemed to be searching her memory chips for something lost or buried ... or never there. "And what was that bullshit about the CIA killing some guy ... George...?"

"Cluff," said Victor as he turned his LieDeck back on. "And it wasn't bullshit. I told you about him before, but you must have forgotten, I mean with the trauma and all. That stuff about Cluff and the CIA—that was why I was such a hermit all those years, and that was why I was so scared to visit you, or even call."

Annette forgave him, again, as the memory returned. Victor kissed her on the cheek again, squeezed her

hand, and took his leave.

As he closed the door and rejoined Sergeant O'Neil, he could see "the bitch" behind the police cordon, several yards away, almost dancing with anticipation.

"So it's a go?" she asked excitedly.

Victor moved towards her to be sure her LieDeck picked up his words. "I'm sorry," he said, putting on his most sincere policeman's face.

"Beep," went her LieDeck.

"You *lie*," she hissed.

"So sue me," said Inspector Farley. "Helliwell said that he wants to have nothing to do with you," he explained serenely, "and you'll notice there was no beep as I said that."

"Well ... at least give me my damn tape back," Paula snarled.

"Sorry," he said, as he turned to leave with Sergeant O'Neil.

"Beep," went her LieDeck.

"I'll get you for this," she screamed at his back.

"Beep," went her LieDeck, again.

Chapter 58 UNDER THE SKIN

Victor sat in the backseat of a Patriot car as it made its way through the streets of Ottawa. He had thoroughly enjoyed his visit with Annette, as well as his unanticipated encounter with Paula Choquette. More precisely, he had enjoyed the pummeling of Ms. Choquette. *I'm still a full-blown Human Two at heart*, he said to himself, and he found that thought mildly depressing. *People are ... social*, he reminded himself. *If we're going to change, if we're going to become Human Three, we have to go at it together, as a group. I'll need ... others ... to travel that road with me.*

He found his ruminations going back to a day not so long ago, April 16, less than two weeks ago, when he'd sat in the back of Senator Cadbury's limousine, full of hope, on his way to make his fortune, on his way to making this world a better place. He stared down at the fingers that had jugged out from a cast of his own construction, the grungy cast that hid the magical device that was supposed to chuck the goddam moneylenders right out of the temple. No such luck. Not yet, anyway.

The tapes, he remembered. *That's what I'm screwed up about. Things aren't turning out the way they were supposed to. The world can't cope with half a LieDeck Revolution. That's not half a loaf. That's more like half a baby—as in Solomon. I've got to give them the other half. I've got to release those tapes.*

Victor's on-again/off-again plan to do a written report based on the reel-to-reel tapes had infuriated Randall Whiteside and Cam O'Connor, not to mention the Government of Canada and a whole gaggle of foreign governments that were convulsing from the impact of the LieDeck. And Steve Sutherland wasn't exactly impressed with all the flip-flopping either, since he had been assigned the job of helping write the report.

Victor wasn't really feeling the pressure that he knew was out there, pressure for him to act more responsibly, or to "grow up," as Godfrey had reportedly expressed it. True to his word, Randall had told Patriot Security to protect him from such pressures, to assure his freedom and peace of mind as vigilantly as they assured his physical safety.

Still, the inventor of the LieDeck had often felt guilty, remorseful, angry, disgusted, amused, terrified, sad, and occasionally despairing, in random sequences—sometimes several of these things concurrently. *Fortunately*, he thought, *I choose not to conduct my life based solely on my emotions.*

He looked outside as Elgin Street rolled by. There was hardly any traffic, vehicular or pedestrian. Of course it was a Sunday, but by all reports the churches were as bare as Old Mother Hubbard's cupboards. Mostly, he decided, all those empty pews were a typically Canadian way of saying: "We're stunned at the sudden imposition of martial law, and at the presence of soldiers on our street corners and tanks in the parks." It looked alarmingly like the false and eerie calm that was found in the belly of a hurricane. People seemed to have developed a curious uncertainty, a kind of quiet confusion, at having been stripped of their traditional social and psychological underpinnings, an indefinable need to huddle in their homes, where they could cling to some tangible sense of who they were, maintain a fingernail grip on what life was about, or for, or made up of.

"It wouldn't be like this if I..." Victor spoke out loud, and then caught himself. The Patriot driver was circumspect enough to let it pass, to pretend he hadn't heard. Victor realized he had a half dozen ways of completing that thought. *If only I hadn't invented the LieDeck; if only George Cluff hadn't invented the C.V.A.; if only Louis St. Aubin hadn't warned Randall that the LieDeck would be classified top secret; if only the military had not felt that such a device should be classified top secret; if only there had been no Cold War II; if only there was no never-ending war on terror; if only Randall had talked to me before passing out LieDecks willy-nilly at the UN; if only, if only, if only...*

He knew the emerging global bummer wasn't his fault, knew that in his mind. But on the emotional level, he blamed himself. *If only I hadn't insisted that Randall leave me out of the decision-making process. If only I had stayed at the manor house last Monday—he flushed with embarrassment at the idiocy of his decision to resume driving cab—maybe I could have stopped the decision to release the LieDeck early, to the UN, to the media and to the public. But would I have tried to stop it? Could I have said "no ... stop ... don't do it?" That scenario could have cost me millions of dollars.*

He marveled at the odd sense of rudderlessness that enveloped him. Where would the world be today if the LieDeck had been kept under wraps, if the military *had* classified it top secret and then used it to conduct Cold War II and the War on Terror? He found it discouraging to realize that he had no insight into such things, no education, training or psychic powers that might have allowed him to predict history more accurately than the flip of a coin. As the car turned onto Catherine Street, he found that he could not prevent all these irritating and answerless questions from dominating his consciousness. He was convinced that his dwelling on these things was utterly pointless and unproductive, but still, there was no escape.

His mind turned back to the three tapes he'd made, to the wonderful dream contained therein, to the radical analysis of human nature that he had ... well, "discovered" was the word he always used when he spoke out loud to himself on the subject, or when he was in the throes of explaining things to Winnie. Those ideas would fly in the face of everything that was conventionally accepted about the remarkable two-legged beast that had risen so convincingly to the top of the food chain and then soiled the nest for everyone. It wasn't scholarly ridicule or rejection that he feared. His analysis of human nature was LieDeck-verifiable, after all.

Whatsisname ... Nobel, Alfred Nobel, the Peace Prize guy ... the guy who invented dynamite, he

thought. He remembered this great man's naïve assumption that his new substance was so horrible that men would never again dare to make war. If the LieDeck was the political and social equivalent of dynamite, as media commentators had so often said, then those reel-to-reel tapes, which he had buried in a waterproof container near the lodge, were nuclear landmines.

Victor made a decision at that point, for the fourth or fifth time—he'd lost count. He would definitely *not* go public with his ideas about this new human consciousness until things had settled down. *Small wonder I vacillated*, he thought, making an extra effort to assure that those words didn't accidentally escape his lips.

People are so ... primitive. They don't even want to stop lying to themselves, for the love of ... He almost thought the word “God,” out of habit. *They can't even expunge the fucking “isms.” How are they going to cope with a new definition of who they are if they can't even deal with what they already know to be true? Illusion is frosted glass. Break it, and 20/20 vision is unavoidable, is it not?* “None so blind as those...” he said, audibly, by mistake.

"I beg your pardon?" said the driver.

"I was just thinking," said Victor. "Do you mind stopping at the Destiny Foundation for a few minutes?"

"Not at all," lied the Patriot agent.

...as those who will not see, Victor finished in his mind. He felt righteous about his most recent position regarding the tapes, but it seemed his mind could not entirely agree. *I have to talk this decision over with Steve*, he realized, again. *He'll be at the Foundation now—pretty sure.*

Victor knew Ottawa well, having roamed its streets for Blue Line for a dozen lonely years. He knew his driver was angry at having to double back half a mile and then wait. *He's barely said a word since we left the hospital. I wonder what he thinks of me. And I wonder what others think of me. I wonder what would happen if I walked into a grocery store and yelled “Hi everybody, I'm the guy who invented the LieDeck!” Would they all cluster around with big grinning mugs and hassle me for my autograph and clutch at my clothing? Or would they rush out and fetch a couple of logs, some nails and a crown of thorns? Or would they ask if it's possible to transcend the bullshit and become more than we are?* “No, they'd probably ask me which aisle the arse-wipe is in,” he scowled under his breath.

The Destiny Foundation, Randall Whiteside's charity, operated from a Victorian brick house on a quiet side street in the Glebe, a trendy and quite expensive section of Ottawa sprinkled with doctors, dentists, top-level bureaucrats and big-league drug dealers. As an institution, the Foundation had a mandate to develop economic policy options for poor countries, and it had a solid reputation for being more effective than most charities in that field. There was a big, varnished wooden sign on the front lawn, and carved under the Foundation's name was its motto: “DARE GREATLY.” *Not too greatly*, thought Victor.

"This must have been a private home for a large family at one time,” he said as the driver parked and scanned the landscape for danger.

"I suppose,” said the agent, out of politeness only.

Victor got out and closed the door with considerably more force than was necessary, as a hint. He walked up the half dozen stairs to the wooden porch. *They've had an armed Patriot agent at the door ever since the LieDeck Revolution began, so that ...* Victor had trouble finishing that thought. “Ever since the LieDeck started screwing up the world,” he muttered before he realized he was speaking out loud again.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Helliwell?" said the guard as he held the door open for the famous visitor.

"Nothing, nothing," he said, which earned him two beeps from the agent's LieDeck. "Fine, it wasn't nothing," he blurted out. "I talk to myself, okay?" he snapped, with more acid than he'd intended. "And what I was saying was none of your business."

"Beep," went the agent's LieDeck.

Victor gave up on the doomed encounter and walked in. There was a wide, carpeted stairway to the right, with a wooden banister that had been polished by hired hands going back to the 19th century. He tossed a light "Hi there" wave at the pretty receptionist and plodded up the stairs, two flights.

At the back of the three-story building, a wall had been knocked out between two adjoining bedrooms to make a large meeting room. The L.A.P. had set up its new base of operation in the privacy of that room, and Victor entered without knocking. To his great surprise, it wasn't full of people debating the merits and dangers of the LieDeck. The only person in the room was Steve Sutherland, who was caught unawares, on his knees, by the window.

"Jeeze ... sorry Steve. Were you ... praying?"

"Nah," Steve smiled as he rose. "I've just spent so much time thinking on my knees that I thought being in that position might help me sort a few things out."

He looks tired, helpless, confused, detached from his moorings ... like the rest of us, thought Victor. "Where's the gang?" he asked.

"Nobody showed up," shrugged the reluctant chairman of the L.A.P. "Some called in with excuses ... including a few lies, oddly enough. The others didn't even bother to..." He ran out of words, chickened out, ran into a emotional brick wall, or something. One way or another, it seemed to Victor that people were giving up, biding their time, treading water, waiting for a current to wash them onto a shore, any shore ... or out to sea.

"How come you're dressed for Halloween?" asked Steve.

Victor had been so caught up with his contemplations that he had forgotten he was costumed as a cop. The peaked police cap was in the backseat of the waiting car, but he was still dressed to kill. "Oh ... that?" he said, swelling his chest. "Career change."

"I know the feeling," said Steve, as he unconsciously reached to loosen up the stiff white collar that wasn't there any more.

"Look," said Victor, "I'm heading back to the lodge. Patriot's got a car outside. No sense in you hanging around here. Why don't we ride back together? We can talk on the way. When we get back, maybe you can help me sort through the—uh—morality, or the wisdom, of releasing those tapes."

"We never did get around to doing that paper, did we?" said Steve, with a sigh, "what with all the..." Another wave curled up, foamed at the crest, crashed onto the rocks, and gurgled back to sea. Bill Doyle was dead. Buck Ash was dead. Louis St. Aubin was dead. And Annette was ... "How's Annette?" he asked as he gathered up his suit jacket.

"Super," said Victor as he opened the door. "I didn't expect to find her so energetic. We had a wonderful visit. *She's got you, under her skin,*" he sang lustily, a teasing glint in his eyes.

"Yeah," smiled the former bishop. "Me too."

Steve felt somehow relieved when the Patriot vehicle passed beyond the city limits of Gatineau. The rest would be highway driving, smooth, billboard-free, fresh, not counting the occasional whiff of manure as the farming season sloshed into gear. *Metaphor for something*, he supposed as he watched greens and browns suck up the afternoon sun.

He thought about the man beside him. Victor was ... what? ... an acquaintance? He was okay, on most fronts ... perceptive, thoughtful, funny. As they sat in the backseat, he realized that Victor had recently been making an effort to bond with him, on some level ... *as colleagues, comrades in arms, pals, maybe all of the above*. But there, in the car, the former bishop found he had no desire whatsoever to engage the man in conversation. Instead, he felt taciturn, weary.

As a result, nothing of consequence was discussed during the first half of their ride to the estate, to the lodge. Steve rummaged through the growing list of things in his life that were pecking at him from the inside, demanding verbalization, review, clarification, and coping. Victor just wasn't the right person to bounce stuff off ... not now, anyway.

In addition to Steve's storehouse of personal troubles, there was another item in his in-basket, staring at him, begging for attention. The L.A.P. had been laboring mightily to get a handle on the impact of Victor's invention, and although they had made respectable progress and contributed significantly to the contours of the new Godfrey Plan announced last Friday, martial law had still come to Canada the very next day. And today, the United States had fallen under martial law as well. President Barker was near death, from a heart attack—or so an announcer had said on the military-controlled radio and TV. Wars raged, and there was a wider international conflict brewing. *Hell ... not brewing*, thought Steve. *We're up to our nostrils in the thing, and Victor has been no damned help at all*.

It seemed to Steve that Victor was coping psychologically, although it didn't inspire confidence to see him sitting there, dressed up as a cop, cap and all. He was a complex man, Victor was, but he was also stubborn beyond belief. The last anyone had heard, he had decided to sit on the three reel-to-reel tapes he'd made. He wouldn't give them to the L.A.P. or the government—wouldn't even let Winnie listen to them—wouldn't even say where they were.

Steve had specifically asked Victor to do that, suggested very strongly that he allow Winnie to listen to the tapes, to see if she thought the ideas that were in there could help the international community deal with the LieDeck. Victor had been intransigent. He just wouldn't, or couldn't, bring himself to face the urgency of the world situation. Steve felt Victor had become paranoid in his expectation that the tapes would make things worse instead of better, but it was difficult to challenge the fears of a man who spent more than a decade hiding from the CIA and had only recently survived an assassination attempt from the RCMP, acting for the WDA! *Alphabet soup*, he thought.

Of course Victor would have LieDeck-verified his attitude, to make very sure that he wasn't just ducking out from under a crushing heartache, avoiding personal responsibility for the death and chaos of the past few days. Steve was sure of that. He respected Victor enough to know that his opinions were sincerely held, even if they were misguided. But that admirable character trait was cold comfort in a world that was rapidly becoming un-Velcroed at the seams.

After talking the matter through a number of times, alone and out loud, making use of LieDeck-verification, Steve felt sure those three tapes should have been handed over long ago—to someone. In fact, he had decided to talk to the Whiteside lawyers, tomorrow. He saw no choice but to get the courts involved, if that's what it took to shake the inventor out of his complacency. He wanted to tell Victor about his decision, but he felt it might be best to do that on the end of the dock, in the quiet of Wilson Lake, with warm breezes and birdcalls to soften the blow and facilitate a compromise. *You never*

know, he thought. Maybe he's finally ready to change his damn position. At least he sounds like he's ready to reopen the issue.

"Would you mind if I—uh—made a phone call?" he asked.

"Not at all," said Victor.

It took him three tries and a helping hand from the Patriot field office on the estate, but he was finally able to learn that Sister Beth was in the Ottawa Civic Hospital, under observation, lucid, calm, and in the company of friends, family, and fellow nuns. "Yes," a doctor told Patriot, "she could take his call."

"Oh, hi Beth. It's—uh—Steve here. I just wondered..."

"Hello Father," said Beth, with a strangely vacant voice. "I'm fine ... now. I just kind of ... lost it there for a while yesterday. Wait a sec, okay?"

Steve waited as Beth said her goodbyes to visitors, with her hand over the receiver. "They were just leaving anyway," she said as she came back on the line a few seconds later. "I'm glad you called."

They spent several minutes talking about the late Bishop Doyle, in respectful tones. Steve felt several twinges of guilt that he hadn't accepted Bill as a full-time challenge from the moment they became roommates, or rather from the moment they both became refugees—from the Church, from faith in God, from the dull illusion that had defined the entire playing field of their lives in the pre-LieDeck era. He knew that he was reading between the lines, but every time Sister Beth spoke of Bill Doyle, her subdued manner and an unfamiliar social distance in her voice seemed to whisper, "It's partly your fault."

"You shouldn't say you lost it," he said after Beth used the term for the second time. "A friend died ... you prayed for him ... that's all."

There was silence from the Ottawa Civic, and Steve's mind filled with guesses as to what his favorite nun was thinking, feeling.

"I heard on the radio about the note he left," she said finally. "I'm not so sure I agree with him ... you know, literally ... but..."

"What ... exactly did it say?" asked Steve, hoping that the knot in his stomach wasn't obvious.

"That the LieDeck was the work of the Devil," said Beth. "You didn't know that?"

Steve was greatly relieved. The police captain had reluctantly agreed to withhold the second sentence—"May God have mercy on my soul, and yours, *Bishop Sutherland*"—on the grounds that it might lead some people to conclude that Steve had somehow been a cause of the death. "I knew," he said quietly.

"Did you pray for him?" asked Sister Beth. "For his soul?"

"Yes, I did," said Steve without hesitation, hoping desperately that she didn't have a LieDeck hooked up to her phone. "I'm ... not so sure that my prayers get listened to any more," he added, without bothering to explain whether he meant "God doesn't listen to unbelievers" or "there's no God to listen."

He really didn't want to have this conversation over the phone, but he didn't have the time to do it in person if he was going to pry those tapes away from Victor. Actually, he didn't want to go through this with Beth at all. He wasn't even sure what "this" was, or what his exact intention had been in calling her. "Do you ... want to know ... about your faith," he finally managed, nervously.

"You must be psychic," said Beth, the first flash of the old Beth so far, the one with the ready smile, the quick wit, the untiring love for humanity, the relentless servant of Jesus, whose ring she wore like a proud wife. "I've thought it through, carefully, a bunch of times, and yes, I do," she said. "Do you have a LieDeck? I mean there? With you?"

Steve didn't have one of the suction-cup mikes to stick on the car phone and jack into his LieDeck. He asked Beth to wait a moment while he checked on procedure.

"Just hold the mike holes in the casing directly onto the ear end of the receiver," said Victor. "You'll have to use two hands and sort of squish your ear in there, but it'll work."

"I don't have to hear what she says," said Steve. "And I think she would prefer this to be private."

"Better yet," said Victor. "Just slap them together. You got it set on beeper?"

Steve stared at the other buttons on the Dictaphone casing. It was set for the beeper mode, but the on/off button was in the "off" position. He was tempted to leave it there, but he realized that Beth could easily test the thing by saying her name was Tanya, or whatever. And it would be foolish to risk their friendship, if indeed they still had one, by trying to deceive her, even with the best of intentions. She'd only repeat the test later, and then Steve might have *her* suicide on his conscience ... *as well*, he almost thought.

No, he had to go through with this, and this was likely the bedrock intention behind his call, the motive he'd been unable to identify earlier. His road to sanity was to lose his faith. Hers would probably be to not lose it.

"I won't be able to hear what you say," he said as he explained how he had to press the LieDeck up against the phone. "It's set on the beeper mode, okay? Are you ready?"

She was, and Steve said just to whistle when she was done; he'd hear that. Sister Beth could hail a cab from a block away with that whistle, the one she did with two fingers between her teeth, the one she'd often used to get a hundred kids to shut up in the mess hall at Catholic Youth Camp.

He made sure the plastic on plastic made a clunk, so Beth would know that the device was there and his ear wasn't. Seconds later, he heard a beep. *It's a good thing I didn't leave it turned off*, he said to himself, *assuming she was testing whether the LieDeck was working*. Then a heart-bending chill swept over him. *Unless she just failed the test of her faith*, he thought. Twenty seconds later, he heard the whistle.

"Uh—hi," he said carefully as he removed the LieDeck and put the phone back to his ear. "So—uh..."

"I believe in God," said Beth quietly. "And I'm sure He believes in you," she added.

Steve dropped his brow into his free hand and struggled with the question of how to respond to that. Before he could make a decision, Beth spoke again.

"God be with you, Steve," she said lovingly. "I hope you find your faith again some day." And with that she excused herself and hung up, pleading fatigue.

Steve clicked off the phone, paused, pinched his temples, and let his heart decelerate. Then he turned off the LieDeck and put it back in the pocket of his suit jacket. *Life's a bitch*, he thought. He had lost a faith that he never really had, and yet he was inexplicably depressed to have done so. He had lost his friend Bill Doyle. And he'd lost much of his self-confidence, even with the LieDeck now there for course corrections.

And now, my oh my, how the course of events had changed! He had transferred his love, his loyalty and his hopes for the future onto Annette Blais, a woman twenty years his junior, a wonderful and precious person with whom he had precious little in common, if the truth be told. "The odd couple, they'll call us," he said weakly.

"I beg your pardon?" said Victor, from under the blue cop's cap.

"Nothing ... nothing," lied Steve.

Chapter 59 STICKS AND STONES

Nick Godfrey stood at his office window and wondered how much more his aging heart could take. He had just been told that nobody had gone to church today ... well, hardly anybody ... and this only a week after Easter. God was wherever and whatever He had always been, Nick supposed, but faith in God was clearly dead, slain, not by the darkly carved gambits of a neurotic existentialist, but by a microchip, by *the* microchip. *Same thing*, he thought as he watched a soldier arguing with a would-be tourist on the concrete below.

There were little clusters of hard-core believers throughout the capital and all over the country, praying fervently for those who had abandoned the Lord. They were calling on the government to "ban the LieDeck for God's sake." However, most former believers had elected to just endure their embarrassment and move ahead with life, relegating their past flirtations with religion to that special internal sub-basement that humans reserve for unmentionable memories.

The TV networks had LieDeck-verified past performances of all active televangelists and chucked the lot of them off the air because they didn't believe what they preached. Personally, the Prime Minister thought the country would be far better off without those oddballs, but he mourned the collapse of all the mainstream churches, worried about the long-term implications of that. *Take away God, and people won't know how to deal with life, or death*, he said to himself, *and those two things are hard enough to get right even with God around to help steer things*.

Yesterday, Godfrey had ordered his minister of culture to issue a statement, what he had called a "LieDeck advisory," assuring Canadians that belief in God was a completely private matter, a valid exercise of free will, never mind what the LieDeck device had to say about such things. The impact of this initiative had been negligible, partly because the Minister of Culture had no actual job under martial law. The media commentators had ridiculed the advisory, claimed that the Prime Minister was treading where angels would fear to tread ... if indeed there were angels. The media had also restated the historical reasons for the separation of church and state. In effect, even though people knew that the verdicts of the LieDeck had nothing to say about the existence or non-existence of God, they also seemed to accept that if your profession of faith got beeped, then you just did not believe—*point final*.

The people out on Wellington Street seemed to be moving along as usual, dodging cars, disciplining naughty children and trying not to notice the soldiers. *I'm not losing control*, Godfrey said to himself, *I'm just getting damned mad*. "There's a huge fucking difference," he said aloud as he marched back to his desk. His LieDeck endorsed that minor distinction by its silence. *Whatever I just thought had to be true*, he thought as he cast another admiring glance at his own, highly treasured LieDeck. He reviewed what he had most recently thought, and concurred with the judgment of the device. There were ... pals now, colleagues, comrades in arms, Nick and "Helen," as he had privately dubbed his mechanical conscience. *She was something else, that woman!* But time enough for pleasurable thoughts later.

"Jacques, did that tape get here yet?" he shouted at the intercom.

"Security called to say that the guy from the CBC just came in the front door," said his chief of staff. "He'll be up here in about a minute."

Bertrand Joly was in the PM's private office bathroom, trying mightily to have a bowel movement. He had gotten used to the ribbing at RCMP headquarters when he had to duck out of meetings, but irritable bowel syndrome was no laughing matter. The stress of the LieDeck Revolution was making his life unbearable. "I know what's on the tape already," he yelled through the door. "Go ahead and watch it. We'll talk after."

"You ... okay in there?" hollered the Prime Minister. He needed for Bertrand Joly to be okay, today of all days.

"Jesus Christ, Nick," he yelled, "if I was okay would I be in here grunting my fucking life away? Gimme a break!"

"Here it is," said Jacques Lafontaine as he entered the office. "You want me to put it on?"

"Put it on, sit down and pay attention," said Godfrey. "I want your reaction and your advice."

He did as he'd been asked ... told. He resented being ordered about that way, but that was "just Nick," or so everybody said. Jacques Lafontaine was a seasoned political pro, a loyal "organization man," not a shrink. The problem was, somebody had to evaluate the thing because it was scheduled to be shown at ten o'clock on the CBC's *The National* ... unless Nick Godfrey issued a gag order.

The black screen turned white, and then the pretty face of a young girl appeared. The light was poor, and the teenager seemed to be having trouble getting her dad's camcorder to sit on the dashboard of the car. The only sounds were muffled curses, and the engine ... running. The teenager was distraught, but obviously determined. When she finally got the camcorder organized, she settled back into the passenger seat, coughed, wiped away the remnants of tears and cleared her throat.

"Okay," she said, "I don't know how much time I have, so here goes. I'm checking out, okay? I got this situation I can't deal with, and I'd like to talk about that if I had time enough, but I don't. It doesn't matter much anyway, to anybody but me.

"What I want most is for my death to mean something, you know? That's why I'm making this tape and telling my mom to give it to the TV, so the government will do something. I mean, I'm the third one just from my school to check out in the last week, and there's gonna be more, eh? A guy from my dad's office did it last night. And this friend of mine's aunt? She did it two days ago. I know the TV doesn't like to talk about suicides because then maybe some other assholes will just do it too, like copycats, but something really gross is happening here.

"I got an email from this friend of mine out in Kamloops and he said the same thing is going on out there, and my boyfriend talks to this guy in Trois Rivières on ICQ, and he says it's the same down there. There was this guy at our school that sprained his ankle in gym, and he went to the hospital and got to talking to this orderly who tells him there was twenty-two attempted suicides came in yesterday, just at the Civic. So you put this on TV okay Mom? Because I'm telling you, there's something bad going on in Canada and the government should be doing something about it and they're not.

"I figure it's just people who can't deal with reality, you know? I know that that's my problem, and I got nobody to talk to. A couple of days ago we got a free LieDeck at our school, from the government, but a lot of good that does if there's nobody you can really talk to without feeling like a lamer. All of my

teachers live like on another planet, and my parents are all fucked up in their own lives, because of the LieDeck, mostly, so I'm taking the easy way out.

"Yeah, that's what it is, you know, the easy way out. You go over to Canadian Tire, you buy a couple of yards of large hose and a clamp, you borrow a car and bingo, all the pain goes away. I guess the thing that pisses ... that pisses me off is I could have gotten talked out of it, eh? But I ... needed ... some ... jeeze ... this carbon monoxide stuff is like dope ... I'm getting ... so tired ... I ... I gotta say this fast ... it's ... my dad..."

There was a pause of five seconds. The Prime Minister and the Chief of Staff found themselves holding their breaths, wanting to reach out and twist that key in the ignition.

"Me..." she resumed weakly, "me and my sister ... ever since I was ten ... he's been ... he's ... he ... he..."

Her eyes closed. There were a few more minor movements on her lips that gave the appearance that she wanted to keep talking, but it wasn't to be. Nick Godfrey and Jacques Lafontaine leaned forward to see better, to hope. She was still breathing, they could see that, but she wouldn't be for long.

Lafontaine turned off the tape and the television. He put his head in his hands and wondered what he ought to feel. "A normal person would be crying now," he said. "I'm just numb."

Godfrey had been standing behind his chief of staff. He put a hand on his shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Maybe a real man would decide to throw out the God damned rule book and do something radical," he said. "Ideas, Jacques, I want ideas."

"I'm dry," said Jacques apologetically. "I'm never dry, but now I'm ... dry. I just..."

Bertrand Joly came out of the washroom, looking pale. "We gotta do something," he said as he eased his body onto the couch. "What the fuck are we going to do, Nick?"

Godfrey walked to the window and stared at the uniformed soldiers who surrounded Parliament. "Well," he said, without turning around, "I've got something akin to absolute power under martial law, and I'm standing here like a fucking brainless fool, powerless to do anything. What's the latest count, Bertrand?"

"Over seven thousand," he said languidly. "Can't bury them fast enough. And there's another nine thousand or so miscues, people who tried and blew it. Apparently citizens of Canada are inept at offing themselves. Christ!"

"That's it," said Godfrey as he wheeled around, his face nothing less than a light bulb. "Jacques, book me a half hour of prime time, say eight p.m., national, all networks, and I want them to use that little line that they make run across the bottom of the screen to give storm warnings and so on to tell people it's coming up at eight o'clock, and I want every God damned radio station in the country to run promos about it. That gives us two and a half hours to come up with a plan. Better yet ... never mind all what I just said ... tell the Press Gallery that I'll be down there shortly. Hell, we could lose another hundred citizens by eight o'clock. This has got to stop ... *now*."

Lafontaine was out of the office and on the phone in mere seconds, to alert the press. Godfrey looked blandly at Commissioner Joly and shrugged his shoulders. "Let's give the media ten minutes to get their shit together," he said. "And don't ask me what I'm going to say."

Bertrand knew better than to ignore that advice. And besides, he needed a few more minutes of privacy.

The Prime Minister watched his beleaguered pal lumber back to the bathroom, then he wandered over to the wall of framed cartoons from the nation's daily papers, mostly caricatures of himself being mocked for

his perfect attire and less-than-perfect character. One of them showed him facing a horde of bearded and/or bra-less peaceniks, who were holding placards calling for “conversion” ... the making of swords into plowshares, the switching of armaments factories to civilian production. The artist had drawn him with tiny, squinty eyes, a massive grin, and a pointy head, and the caption in the bubble read: “Don't you people have jobs?” *God damned Cold War*, he thought. (The War on Terror got short shrift in many minds, including Godfrey's, precisely because that war simply didn't matter if Cold War II turned into World War III!)

When Bertrand Joly re-emerged from the can, the two battle-weary comrades walked down the hall to the elevator. The Centre Block was ominously empty since Parliament had been suspended and the public barred, and the walls had nothing to do but echo the sounds of their footfalls. Three military security officers followed them at a respectable distance.

"You're just going to wing it?" whispered Bertrand.

"I got a few ideas," said Nick. "Sometimes a prime minister just has to go with his head, you know, even if it feels wrong. The frigging generals may have my balls for this, but I'm going out on a limb. That's what I'm paid for ... leadership ... and by God, that is what I'm going to deliver."

Nick Godfrey, Bertrand Joly and the three military officers rode the elevator together, without a word. When it stopped, Nick Godfrey was out the door first and down the hall so quickly that the Commissioner fell behind, unwilling as much as unable to keep up.

"Roll cameras," said the Prime Minister as he entered the pressroom. "Turn on your mikes, and turn on your LieDecks too, if you want. I'll take questions at any point, but only if they're not stupid."

Jesus H., thought Joly as he hobbled into the room. *Here we go again—policy from the hip.*

"Item number one," said Godfrey, very loudly. "I am sending our UN ambassador, Lynden Jacks, back to the UN, with a bunch of LieDecks, and with instructions to ask every diplomat and international civil servant in the damn place whether or not they are involved with that WDA outfit. Canada was a founding nation of the UN, and there is no denying that this proud and mightily-useful organization has been hijacked by a bunch of right-wing bandits, and they are just as corrupt as any left-wing bandits or any other kind of criminal. We are going to take it back, take back the United Nations, for the people of Canada and for the people of all nations. Any questions?"

There were none. Just amazed stares. Godfrey had scored a bull's-eye with the “shut up and wait” policy that ended the race riots the day before, and he was being given high marks for his efforts to impose martial law in a manner that was humane and reasonable. Still, the reporters were afraid of a man who felt so comfortable ordering people about and taking charge the way he did.

"Item two," he said. "I'm recalling our ambassador to the United States. I am deeply concerned that the democratic process in the U.S. has also been hijacked by the WDA. I intend to work with American law-enforcement agencies—those who can tell me in full voice that they are not sympathetic to the so-called World Democratic Alliance—to assist in assuring the continuance of democracy in that country. I'd rather not answer questions about this right now. In fact, I won't."

"Item three. I am sick to death of all the sexual abuse that's going on in this society. Victims are asked to call the RCMP or the local police or the military in their area. Those who are accused will be questioned, using a LieDeck, within one hour, if at all possible, and guilty parties will be jailed immediately, and held without trial until we figure out how to deal with these ... animals."

"There's sort of an unwritten rule in jurisprudence that the pain of punishment should correspond to the

pleasure of committing the offence. For this particular offence, under martial law, I am going to make sure that the pain of punishment is *much greater* than the suffering of the victim—an eye *and* a tooth for an eye, if you will. I am not pretending this is enlightened or progressive. It is, nonetheless, *exactly* what I intend to do. This new deal begins right now, because I say so. Any questions?"

There were a host of questions on the minds of the reporters, but they didn't dare ask them yet. This was a rough justice, but it was justice. A hand began to go up, but Godfrey pretended not to see it and proceeded with his list of decrees.

"Item four," he said, in a more conciliatory tone, but with no less authority. "We've got an epidemic of suicides in this country, and I want it to stop, NOW."

He took off his suit jacket, threw it at a very surprised soldier, and loosened his tie. He took his LieDeck out of his shirt pocket and held it in front of himself. It was on, and set for the beeper mode. He didn't know exactly what he was going to say until the very "moment of truth" arrived, but it was obvious that the people he had to reach out to were those who would be the next victims, and those who could prevent further tragedy.

"If you are thinking of suicide," he said, "please listen to me just for a minute. Here's my LieDeck. I'm giving you the straight goods. If you make up your mind to die, the sad truth is, we can't stop you. So here's the deal.

"You want to die, make it easy on yourself. Go to a hospital. You talk to a person in there—not a doctor or a social worker or a shrink, necessarily—but a ... person, a human being, just like you. Explain why you want to die, and use a LieDeck to make sure you're not fooling yourself. If the person you talk to can't help you deal with your problems and talk you out of killing yourself, then fine, you'll get an injection. Painless. Just give us an hour or two of your time before you check out, okay?

"I do that myself, you know—turn to other people when I need help. I ... use other people, and I use my LieDeck, to see if I'm thinking clearly. I wasn't very sure of myself about the martial law decree, and I obviously had to be sure that it wasn't a power trip or an overreaction. The situation looked hopeless yesterday, and I got depressed. I couldn't see a way out. But with a little help from my friends, and with the help of this LieDeck, eventually I got a grip, and we came up with a plan to stop the riots, and it worked ... or at least it has so far.

"But who are these people that you'd talk to at the hospitals? Well, I will be one of them. I will volunteer a few hours a day for that. And there are maybe a million or two million other people in this country, adults, with their heads on straight and their hearts in the right place. You know who you are, so you just get your buttocks down to the nearest hospital and volunteer, just like me. If you've got organizational skills, you help organize the effort at your hospital. And if you volunteer to be a supporter and you get matched up with someone who wants to die, and if there's no place where you can talk privately, take the person you're trying to help to your own home.

"Everybody who needs somebody to talk to should have somebody to talk to, and if you can't resolve the problem of the person you're trying to help, then you just drive him or her back to the hospital, so somebody else can have a crack, okay? Or for the injection, if nobody can help.

"And if the person you're trying to help ends up dying, you have to understand that it isn't your fault. People who choose to die have to take responsibility for their decisions, just like the rest of us.

"And you doctors and nurses, remember that Canada is under martial law here. What I say goes. You're not breaking any laws by giving lethal injections to people who ask for them. This program is not designed to make our hospitals into suicide centers or to make our health care workers into murderers.

It's supposed to give us the chance to *save* lives.

"When people get upset, I mean really upset, and most of us have been out of control at one point or another in our lives, we feel very strong emotions, we say things we don't really mean, things that aren't true, and sometimes we can't think straight. You might be one of those people who *hate* the LieDeck, but one thing is certain. It gets to the root of the matter when there's a question of truth, even the truth about why you feel so bad or why you want to die. The sorry truth is that we all lie, and ... worst of all, we all lie to ourselves! It's complicated and it's dangerous, but it's fixable, and the LieDeck can help.

"In five minutes, I'll be ordering Whiteside Technologies to make its entire inventory of LieDecks available to hospitals across Canada for people to use in the new anti-suicide campaign. I can do that under martial law, and I am doing it.

"So that's it, for now. If you're feeling suicidal, you get yourself to a hospital, NOW. And if you're a person who can play a support role for one of your fellow human beings who's in need, you get yourself down to the closest hospital, NOW. Go to the cafeteria, and by my order, everybody in this country is *commanded* ... to start coping!

"And if it means missing a day or two of work, or a week, or if it means spending a bit of your money or taking a risk, do it. They say that people come together in a crisis, like we Canadians did during two World Wars. Well, this *is* a crisis, a *serious* crisis, and I expect *all* Canadians to do whatever they can.

"We had one hundred and sixty-one deaths in the riots yesterday, and that's a tragedy. But we're having *more than a thousand* deaths a day from suicides. That's far worse than during the great stock market crash of nineteen twenty-nine. So ... we are now declaring war on suicide, and if the economy collapses, well, we'll just have to fix it up later, after we take care of the business that matters the most, the welfare of the Canadian people. Any questions?"

Any invitation to the media for questions was traditionally followed by twenty or thirty loud shouts, none of which could be understood. Either these reporters weren't sure if he had finished his statement, or they didn't know how to respond. *Or*, thought the Prime Minister, *maybe they're hellish impressed*.

"Should other countries do this?" asked a young man in jeans—youth market TV, by all appearances.

"Yes, of course," said Godfrey, and if his forehead could speak, it suggested that that was not a very bright question. "All countries should. Next?"

"Would a suicidal woman be assured of a female support worker?" a female reporter finally asked.

"Should she?" asked Godfrey.

"If ... she wants," said the reporter.

"Then do it," said Godfrey.

"Do you think that your approach to sexual abuse infringes on the civil rights of all Canadians?" asked another reporter.

"Yes, I'm sure it does. But I'm also convinced that the incidence of sexual abuse will be down by ninety-nine percent by this time tomorrow."

"Do you have any moral problems with what you're doing?"

"Yes, I do," said Godfrey, and nothing more.

"Aren't you concerned that people will say you're acting like a dictator?"

"Sticks and stones," said the Prime Minister. "I've been called a lot of things, some of them worse than that. Names do hurt, but they won't cause me to back off."

"So you still think the LieDeck has a positive value, in spite of the problems it has produced?"

"The LieDeck hasn't produced that many problems," said Godfrey, in a tone that showed his annoyance. "But it has exposed a lot of problems that were already there, and forced us to deal with them. And it has also started solving some problems. The crime rate in Canada is down eighty percent already, because of the LieDeck, and I hope the LieDeck will help stop this wave of senseless deaths."

"Do you think your anti-suicide program will work?"

"I honestly don't know," said the PM, "but if you have a better idea, I'll be glad to change the plan. It's going to depend on whether the people who aren't suicidal get off their rear ends and do their part."

"Do you think the program could backfire?"

"I hope not," said Godfrey. "Tell you what. In a week, I'll let you know how I did as a support volunteer, and you tell me how you did. I trust you'll all be volunteering?"

Chapter 60 GREASE

Randall Whiteside had decided to bring Cam O'Connor out to the manor, even though he wasn't the family's favorite guest. His perpetually sour attitude tended to dampen the atmosphere, so much so that little Julia had taken to making faces at him behind his back. However, the two men had not finished their day's work, and Randall had promised to be home by six, so there was no real option except to bring Cam along.

Grant Eamer turned his head towards the passenger compartment of the helicopter. "Patriot called on the radio," he said loudly. "There's a press conference happening with the PM. Helen said you'd want to know." Randall asked Cam to turn the TV on, and to close the door to the flight deck, so they could hear better.

They were glad to see Nick Godfrey trying to cope with the WDA crisis and the domestic suicide problem, and it was good to see that the LieDeck was proving useful. However, it was also clear to Randall and Cam that if the LieDeck hadn't been invented, these awful events wouldn't even be happening. The black holes in their guts grew larger.

The question of moral responsibility was easy enough to resolve ... intellectually. Victor had figured it out years ago. "The harsher the truth, the truer the friend that shoves it in your face," he'd said just yesterday ... paraphrasing the famous line from *Camelot*. "If you don't know something's broke, you won't likely try to fix it," he'd also said. "All very well," Randall had replied, "but the dogs of war don't listen to reason, even when it's LieDeck-verified."

"How's Michael doing?" asked Cam after the broadcast, sensing that they could both use a diversion.

Michael Whiteside had been virtually living at the WT HQ for the past week, coming and going as he pleased, at times in the helicopter ... sometimes messing up the orderly flow of business. Cam had been fairly cold towards the boy ... until Friday, when the suggestion of placing LieDecks in the schools had suddenly become national policy. He had found it hard to think of Michael as a member of the team, just

as he couldn't think of the taxi-driving inventor as a business partner. Cam's approach to life was to assume the worst of people and then wait for them to prove him right. It usually worked, but in Michael's case, it hadn't. This innocent question about how the boy was doing was as close as Cam ever got to admitting that he *might* have been wrong.

"Mikey's doing ... sort of okay, I guess," said Randall above the whipping of the blades. "He and his girlfriend missed some school, of course, and now they're hiding out over at his cabin ... ever since they found Bishop Doyle's body yesterday."

There it was again, the LieDeck, grabbing center stage in their minds, not by way of celebrating technology, truth, or the profits they were raking in, but as a pall, draped over a beleaguered planet. It was becoming almost impossible to think of a person, a situation or even a country where the LieDeck wasn't threatening to trigger a "critical mass," and reduce order to ash.

In all his twenty years of marriage, Randall had never known a family problem that he and his wife couldn't handle with good humor, will power, caring and compromise. But now, the LieDeck seemed poised to interrupt that winning streak as well.

Steve had been at the manor the night before, recovering from the heartbreak of Bill Doyle's suicide. After all the words that could be said had been said, Doreen and Randall had shared some of their concerns about the children. Doreen was worried about Michael, in spite of the brave front he was putting up, but she was even more upset about Sarah, who was literally being shunned by some of her schoolmates. Randall and his wife had already decided to withdraw Julia from her special education classes and switch her to home tutoring, and after the talk with Steve, they decided to withdraw Sarah from her school as well, starting Monday, tomorrow.

Julia would miss her little friends, to be sure, but she'd adjust, if only because she couldn't really understand, and was very quick to forget. Sarah, on the other hand, was fourteen, very bright, and hypersensitive. She would suffer from a sudden dearth of peer-pleasures. She could be in danger of a serious depression over the LieDeck. It was hard enough being a teenager from a wealthy family, but being the offspring of "the guy who fucked up the whole planet" was a reputation that no child could be expected to bear. That, apparently, was the coded message she was receiving from some of her erstwhile girlfriends at school—that all the terrible things that were happening in the world were her father's fault.

During this late evening discussion, Steve had put on his bishop's hat, or at least his old priest's hat, and found himself mouthing platitudes and clichés that would probably wilt into embarrassed nothingness under the scrutiny of a LieDeck. Randall had used his usual formula on Doreen, trying to cheer her up with bravado and hope, but it had failed, for the first time ever. They had agreed to tag the subject "to be continued."

After a full day of uncomfortable debate with his senior staff at the office—mostly about the LieDeck and this question of responsibility—Randall had decided to respond to Doreen's concerns by donating 50% of his personal share of profits from the LieDeck, the profits that had been made so far, to the Destiny Foundation, to develop programs and techniques that could soften the impact of the device and assist people whose lives had been disrupted by the thing. That came to a substantial amount of money—an estimated \$22 million from 162,000 pre-paid orders—and Randall had also expressed the hope that Victor would do likewise with his share of the profits, or say 25% of his share. Still, as the chopper touched down at the Patriot compound behind the manor, he knew that the chances of an early return to normalcy were no better for his family than they were for the world. *Put on a happy face*, he told himself as he entered the back door of the manor.

"How's my very favorite nine-year-old pumpkin in the whooole wiiide wooorld?" he bellowed as he swung Julia to his hip and tried to give her a kiss and a tickle.

She turned her head away from the kiss and brushed off his tickle finger. "I want to go back to school, Daddy," she pouted, and that was all she could manage by way of a greeting.

"Ooookay," said Daddy. "How about ... in a week? We can mark off the days on the calendar, like we always do for your birthday."

"Okay," said Julia, whose mood inverted all the way to its normal giddy state. "Can we play ping-pong now?"

"Not tonight, dear," he said as he put her down. "We have company, and Daddy's tired. Hi, Sarah. I was wondering where you were. How's about a big hug for the old man?"

Sarah dutifully embraced her father, but got only a C for effort and a D for spirit. Doreen had accepted the unhappy task of telling Sarah she wouldn't be going to school tomorrow, and for a while, "for security reasons," she had explained.

"I'm really sorry for taking you out of school," said Randall, "but I hope we can all get back to normal in a week or so. You're old enough to understand."

"Just because I understand doesn't mean I like it," whined Sarah, as she abruptly broke off the hug. "I think the LieDeck sucks, big time."

"Well, you're not alone there," said Randall, ruefully, "although I think you might have phrased it a little better."

"Hello Mr. O'Connor," said Sarah, as required, with her blue eyes turned down to match her mood.

"Hi sweetheart," said Doreen, with a kiss for Randall. "Good to see you, Cam. I hope you're both hungry."

She usually asked "How's business?" whenever Cam was a guest in her home, that being one topic of conversation that didn't annoy the man. But today, she couldn't, didn't want to, and didn't need to. She knew the answer too well. Whiteside Technologies was getting stinking rich from the collapse of civilization.

"Steve will be over shortly," she said to her husband, "and Michael will be back in a minute. He's out front, saying goodbye to Becky. Her parents are in a major snit over the LieDeck ... and about Becky's involvement with the LieDeck Assessment Program. They asked her to quit the L.A.P., even though the Prime Minister bought her idea of putting a LieDeck in all schools. It's a shame, really."

"Their idea," corrected Randall, "hers and Mikey's ... and yeah, it is a God damned shame."

Randall thought of mentioning the new money he was planning to give to the Destiny Foundation, but decided to wait. He knew this act would help sort things out, but in truth, money was the easy answer for the well heeled. It didn't even sting to part with \$22 million, although Randall held out no hope of ever convincing Cam O'Connor of that.

"You saw Godfrey's press conference?" Doreen asked, certain that they had. "What did you think of his anti-suicide program?"

Cam struggled to find a response to the question, but settled for a glance at the boss, a helpless look that

said, "This one's all yours, boss."

Randall walked over to phone book and began flipping the pages. He wasn't ignoring her ... this *was* his answer. Doreen knew that her husband often preferred to speak with actions instead of words, but she wasn't certain what he was doing. He punched numbers and waited.

"Yes," he said, "this is Randall Whiteside. We're just sitting down to supper, but I'll be over to volunteer in ... yes, *the* Randall Whiteside." There was a pause, during which the patriarch's forehead and face moved in what seemed a series of conflicting emotions. "Very well," he finally said. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

Explanations were given to the children, and arrangements were made for Grant Eamer to fly Cam O'Connor back to the office earlier than expected. For now, however, the pilot had to ferry Randall and Doreen up to the roof of the Pontiac Regional Hospital, to deal with a young man whose life might already have flickered out had it not been for the Prime Minister's plea. He was the first person in Pontiac County to respond directly to Godfrey's anti-suicide program, and Randall Whiteside was among the first people in his area to call up and volunteer.

Whitebird III landed on the rooftop pad that Whiteside Tech had paid for a few years earlier. Randall and Doreen went down the elevator and walked through the lobby to the hospital cafeteria. It was a small operation, with six tables, four vending machines plus a change-maker, a coffee percolator, and a grill that closed in the late afternoon. At one of the tables, a young nurse sat with the troubled and even younger man, holding his hand.

"My name's Randall," he said plainly. "This is my wife, Doreen."

The man was more of a boy. He seemed to be about nineteen years old. He smelled of booze, and by the cut of his clothes, he looked like he'd been cast in the musical *Grease*. His jeans were worn through at the knees, as prescribed by teenage law, and his cowboy boots hadn't been polished in months. He'd obviously been crying, and he wasn't up to any hand-shaking or eye contact.

"This is Bobby Thompson," said the nurse.

Chapter 61 THE ROMANIAN CRISIS

Randall tried to dive right into the pudding with Bobby Thompson, as if getting to the point was the best way of getting to the point ... an amateur's mistake. "What seems to be the problem?" he tried. "What has to change for you to change your mind?" he asked.

Doreen watched her husband fumble the catch and noticed that the young nurse was becoming concerned. Then she remembered a bit of wisdom from her own youth. "The way to a man's stomach is through his mouth," her mother had frequently told her, with a wily wink for the botched aphorism. "We were just about to eat dinner," she said to the boy. "I vote for going to the house and pigging out. What do you say, Bobby?"

"Sure, why not," said the lad disconsolately. "Might as well have a last supper."

"Ever ride in a helicopter?" asked Randall.

He always was a quick study, mused Doreen.

Bobby wasn't in a mood to let anything about life excite him, but he was too young and immature to

prevent his reaction from showing. He sat up front, beside Grant Eamer, and although he was determined not to speak, his eyes kept wandering over towards the controls, wondering which gadget made the craft do this or that. Eamer looked back to the compartment where the Whitesides were, and Randall made a sort of “roll cameras” action with his hand, meaning “by all means, go with whatever works.” The flight back to the manor ended up with more spins and swoops than either Whiteside would have liked, but if the pilot could get through to the boy, it was worth it.

"Jeeze ... thanks, Mr. Eamer," said Bobby, as the helicopter landed at the Patriot compound.

"You're okay, kid," said Eamer. "I gotta take this guy O'Connor back to his office in Kanata, but maybe we'll go for another ride, say tomorrow? I could even show you how to fly this contraption. What do you say?"

"Can I, Mr. Whiteside?" asked Bobby, hopefully, as he opened the door.

"Sure," agreed Randall. "Why not? Maybe in a couple of years you could even get your license and be a pilot, if you want."

Doreen smiled. This wasn't a bad boy, just a lost soul, living with a pain they had yet to understand. "I'm starving," she said lustily. "Let's go eat."

Cam O'Connor had heard the helicopter land and was leaving the house as the Whitesides and their guest came up the back walk. "I've eaten," he said to Randall. "We'll finish up that business back at the office tomorrow."

He was hoping to be spared an introduction to the suicidal punk, but to no avail. He shook the boy's hand reluctantly, and as he turned away for the short walk to the waiting helicopter, he rubbed his right hand on his suit jacket, trying to scrape off whatever creepy-crawly things might have hopped across during their brief physical contact.

Supper, which they decided to have in the kitchen, was saved by Julia. She sat right beside Bobby and badgered him relentlessly with questions he could easily answer ... plus a few suggestions about personal grooming. Privately, Mrs. Whiteside had asked Lucinda, the maid, to call the pro shop at the Royal Oaks and have them send over a few items of clothing that Bobby might wear without feeling that he'd been bought or maybe adopted, including a leather jacket. Sarah and Michael made few allowances for Bobby's emotional crisis, teasing him at times, but also setting the stage for minigolf and perhaps horseback riding, perhaps tomorrow. Randall sat back and watched as his family worked its magic. *No way this lad wants to die*, he said to himself. *He just wants to live, and he doesn't know how.*

Steve Sutherland arrived just as dessert was served: crêpes with frozen yogurt and a dollop of low-cal chocolate sauce. At the front door, Lucinda had filled him in on the Bobby Thompson situation. When he arrived in the kitchen, he found himself recruited to take over as surrogate father figure while Randall excused himself ... "to make a call," he said, checking his jacket pocket to see that his LieDeck was turned off. "And Michael," he added, "if I could see you in the den for a minute or so ... about your schoolwork?"

His intention was to ask his son if he had any ideas that might help him reach this boy on the level that counted, meaning the despair that had to be raging within. Out of what had become habit, he reached for his shirt pocket and flipped his LieDeck on again. But before he had a chance to say anything, Michael spoke.

"Dad listen," he whispered as he closed the door. "While you were at the hospital in Shawville they said on TV that there's a war started, a big one, between Romania and Russia. CNN is on it full-time. The

Communists in Romania launched a coup to take back the country from the democratic government, with backing from Russia and with some Russian troops too, but it all went wrong. The Romanian government then used a LieDeck and found out about the coup just before it started, and the coup leaders were all executed! In the streets! Then the Romanians sent planes to bomb these Russians that were retreating. The Americans say that the Russians are gearing up their missiles for a nuclear attack on Romania, and with President Barker still in a coma and the generals in charge, they say that maybe the States might use nuclear missiles on Russia if it uses nukes on Romania. They said it's something like the Cuban Missile Crisis, but worse."

Randall turned on the TV, with the sound on very low so that Bobby wouldn't hear ... or Doreen, or the girls. It seemed from the commentary that in the last half hour or so, Romania had broken off its bombing raids, faced with the threat of nuclear attack from Russia. But there were still fierce firefights within Romania, and no one was taking bets that this conflict would be resolved any time soon. Various governments were discussing emergency food aid to alleviate the terrible famine that had ravaged Romania for the last two years, hoping that full bellies might silence the guns, if not the outrage of the masses.

The story behind the coup was chilling. Apparently, the Communists in Romania had their own LieDeck, and had used it to unearth evidence that when the first Cold War had ended back in 1989, the WDA had virtually seized control of several Eastern European governments, including theirs. There was also some strong evidence that the WDA had controlled the Russian government between the two Cold Wars, lending credence to the rationale that had been offered by Russian Communists for their successful 2012 coup d'état. American TV analysts—mostly civilians, in spite of the martial law decree—were reviving the domino theory with regard to all the formerly Communist states of Eastern Europe. "And this time," they all agreed, "it's more than just a convenient theory."

Randall muted the sound and turned an ashen face towards his son. "Michael," he said, "my father built that fallout shelter out at the lodge when I was about Sarah's age *because* of the Cuban Crisis. I thought the whole thing was a crock, but ... when he was dying, he made me promise two things: first, that I would keep the place shipshape at all times, and equipped with the most modern technology, just in case, and second, that if we ever got close to the brink again, I wouldn't wait too long before getting ready. So we go with the plan tonight.

"You go over to Becky's. Tell her parents that I need to see them, and Becky, here at the house, right away. Tell them it's a matter of—uh—of considerable urgency, but don't tell them what it's all about. They'll stay here tonight. We're only four or five minutes from the lodge, and they'll come with us if we have to use the shelter. In the meantime, I want you to stay with this Bobby Thompson character out at the lodge tonight. Look—don't give me any guff on this, okay—I know he's a jerk, but I promised to try to save his life, and my word has always been my bond, so—"

"You mean you're going to let him in the shelter if—"

"Yes," said Randall to his son. "You two can sleep in the servants' quarters tonight. Don't go to your cabin, in case everything breaks loose and your boat won't start. And I don't want you to watch television at the lodge, okay? Bobby's already in a bad way, and God knows what he might do if he panics. I'll make sure we've got lots of agents in the bush, a few yards away, in case Bobby stops coping or something, and we'll have audio surveillance—you won't be in any danger from the boy.

"Now you'd better get going. I have to instruct Patriot and tell Victor and Winnifred that you and Bobby will be staying at the lodge. Don't show any fear, son. It's okay to be scared. I'm scared too. If Bobby finds out about our decision to prepare ourselves for the shelter, make like it's simply a wise precaution, okay? I'll make sure he's delivered over to the lodge before you get back with the Donovans."

Michael got up to go, but hesitated long enough to get a thought off his mind. "I think ... because of the LieDeck ... all this is partly our fault," he said.

"Beep," went Randall's LieDeck.

"I'm really glad you don't believe that, Michael," he said as he put his strong hand on his son's shoulder. "Now go. Hurry. This isn't the kind of thing we want to arrange over the phone."

MONDAY, APRIL 28, 2014

Chapter 62

DEFCON-ONE

"What about me and my wife?" demanded Cam. "What the hell are we supposed to do? Tuck you and your kids into bed and then walk quietly over to ground zero and get fried?"

Randall scratched the back of his neck and stared out the window of his top floor office. It was 10:15 a.m. on a rather cool April morning that stank of fear. The head of Whiteside Technologies realized that he'd never figured out what the procedure should be if the bomb shelter was ever needed for real. Patriot Security was a company he had built himself. It was like a miniature army, with training similar to that of the regular military. The loyalty of the Patriot machine had never been seriously questioned before. But if a nuclear attack was imminent, the Patriot personnel at the estate would certainly want to get into the shelter themselves, with their families, just as Cam was demanding now. If push came to shove, Patriot had the power to take over. And if they did, and a nuclear war ensued, there might not be any Whitesides left to protest by the time these traitors emerged into a post-holocaust world.

"How much do I pay you?" Randall asked his chief of security.

"Three hundred and forty thousand a year, plus bonuses," said Cam. "Why?"

"So you could have afforded to build a shelter of your own, on your own property, and you didn't. Am I right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"And because you didn't, you want me to promise that you and your wife can share ours?"

"Jesus Christ, Randall, I've been with you for over thirty years," said Cam. "We're like family, you and I, and if they do attack, you're going to need me afterwards ... to control things, to ... keep the crazies away. I'm as good as I ever was, Randall, and..." There was no point in continuing. The boss wasn't buying any of this, and Cam correctly guessed that his old friend had a LieDeck on his body, set on the pin mode, tapping out the truth. "Never mind," he said bitterly as he stood to leave. "Forget I asked."

"One question, Cam," said Randall. "Have you considered using Patriot to capture the shelter, to keep us out ... and use it yourself?"

"Of course not," said Cam angrily. "What the fuck kind of ques—"

"You're fired," said Randall calmly. "I'll have accounting send your severance pay to your home this afternoon."

* * *

It was a beautiful morning. The Royal Oaks was crowded with early-season players, but they all had portable radios with them on the course, and cars standing by, with full tanks of gas and trunks filled with

rations, clothing, medicine and weapons. No one wanted to believe that politicians were once again playing dice with life on Earth, but everyone over sixty recognized the atmosphere as something they'd known before, back in October of 1962, when humanity had threatened to commit suicide *en masse* ... or had it decided for them by their "leaders" ... and one would have to use that term loosely.

Helen Kozinski had been up all night, monitoring CNN, and she had briefed Randall on the world situation at about 8:00 a.m., before Cam had called demanding a meeting. Apparently the Romanian crisis was only a small part of a grand design by a resurgent Communist Party to win back all of Eastern Europe, all of what used to be the Soviet Union, or the Soviet empire. Coup leaders had been found and summarily executed in Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria, where Communist cells had bombed key communications and transportation centers. Armenia, Georgia and several other republics that were part of the former Soviet Union had recalled their ambassadors from Moscow, and if you added up all the armed clashes, it amounted to a major war.

The North Koreans had used the occasion of the superpowers' intense concentration on Europe to make a bid to win back South Korea by force. Hundreds of American troops were among the dead—never a good omen. American citizens had begun fleeing major U.S. cities, in a trickle at first, but now in a steady stream. Some cottages in resort areas had been taken over by whoever got there first, and the Army had lost control in the New England states, and in California. American grocery stores were being emptied. The guns stores were already empty. No one was predicting nuclear war with any certainty, but the people who had options were not in the mood to take chances. Canada had been spared some of this panic, but the Army was quietly resupplying the government bunker at Carp, and military helicopters were parked on Parliament Hill, ready to evacuate the country's leaders, if need be.

"Helen," said Randall into the intercom, "could you come in now? And leave your LieDeck with Sandra on the way in, please."

Helen had been cooling her heels in the outer office for half an hour, wondering why she had been asked to come in at all, why she wasn't at her post in the Patriot compound at the estate, or better yet, asleep in bed. She handed her LieDeck to the secretary, walked into Randall's office, and sat down, apprehensively.

When Randall told her that Cam was leaving the company, without explanation, she was sorry to hear it. She'd had many disagreements with him over the years and couldn't remember ever liking the man, but still, she felt for him, and for his family.

On the other hand, she was extremely pleased to learn that she was to be the new head of Patriot Security. Unlike her best buddy Annette, she had a great and enduring love for the business. She had always assumed that when Cam retired, a man would be chosen to take over. This was her chance to prove that a woman could handle the job.

"Now that he's gone," she said, "there's something I ought to tell you. He's had ... he's had Alzheimer's disease for more than a year—just a few early symptoms, nothing serious. We've been covering for him as best we could. He said if I ever saw the disease reducing his effectiveness, I should tell him, and he'd retire."

"I already knew," said Randall. "Don't ask how. I was okay with that arrangement, but I couldn't accept that he lied about it." He then asked Helen the critical question, the same one he'd put to Cam O'Connor.

"No, I haven't considered it," she said, with a shocked look on her face. "Nor would I," she emphasized.

"Why not?" asked Randall, in deadly earnest.

"Look," she said, "I've risked my life for you before, and I'd do it again. It's my job. I accepted the risks when I signed on."

"But think about it," suggested Randall. "You're at the lodge, the bombs are on their way over, you've got a dozen agents with guns, and we're just a few ordinary people—a middle-aged man, his wife, some kids, a taxi driver, and so on. I mean—"

"Mr. Whiteside," said Helen deliberately, "the only thing I'd ask is that my staff and I be given a supply of suicide pills. You've got them in the bomb shelter, and of course it's prudent that you do. I don't want to die, sir—no one does—but I might, and if I have to, then I'd rather do so painlessly."

Randall was impressed. This was a person who knew her job, liked it, accepted it, and could be relied upon. Also, unlike Cam, she'd spoken the truth. "Agreed," he said. "And thank you, Helen."

He swallowed hard, rubbed his eyes, and forced himself to explain to Helen the real reason why he'd had to fire his old friend. It was as hard for her to believe as it was for Randall to relay, and she found herself wishing she had a LieDeck with her to verify what she was hearing. But by the look on his face, the color of his skin, it had to be the truth.

Randall sat there without speaking for a few seconds after his careful explanation, and Helen Kozinski didn't dare move. Then he straightened his tie and got back to business. "Now, there's a couple of things we have to discuss. First, I want a tight perimeter around the lodge. I trust you can get it set up by noon today. Never mind it's already tight—I'm aware of that—I want it tighter. Second, I have to tell you who gets in the shelter, so you can enforce it. There's only room for thirteen people. Here's how I have it figured ... if you could take a few notes ... ?

"There's me and Doreen and the kids. That's five."

Helen knew there was always a chance her boss would suggest note taking, almost as if tape recorders didn't exist, but he *was* the boss, so she always had a small pad of paper and a pen with her. She pulled them from her inside vest pocket and began scribbling in her own shorthand: "Whites—5."

"I told Michael that Rebecca and her parents can come in," Randall went on. "That's three more—eight so far."

"Eight," repeated Helen as she wrote.

"I've got to let Victor in, and that means Winnie, too, so that's ten."

"Ten," she said ... Randall Whiteside liked to be reassured that he had been understood.

"Steve is like family. He's staying at the manor. So that's eleven."

"Eleven."

"Bobby Thompson—I suppose you met him—well, I—uh—I made a commitment to keeping the little bastard alive, so I can't very well exclude him, so that's a dozen."

"Twelve."

"If it's war, we'll need the helicopter after, so I simply have to include Grant Eamer, but unfortunately, not his family. I spoke to him already ... and he reluctantly agreed. So that's thirteen, the full complement."

"Thirteen."

"Now Sarah and Julia can bunk together," he continued. "I mention this because there's one other person I'd like to have in there. Do you know who I mean?"

"I ... hope you mean Annette," said Helen.

"I do," said Randall. "If things go berserk, can she travel? Would she be okay outside the hospital?"

"It ... would be a risk," said Helen, "but I'll get the drugs she needs into a package in case it comes to that. And thank you so much for making this decision, Mr. Whiteside. Annette wants to live so badly, and she's so much in love with Steve. The only thing is, if you wait until it's certain there's going to be a ... a real conflict, we'll never get her out. As soon as the chopper puts down on the hospital roof, it'll get swamped, like back in the nineteen-seventies when the Americans tried to get out of their embassy in Saigon."

"Okay," said Randall, "we'll take her out ... this afternoon. You get her medication together and hire a doctor. Bring Annette over to the manor and we'll have the doctor live in. We'll tell him it's just for a month or two. Pay him whatever it takes. If worst comes to worst, Annette gets in the shelter, the doctor doesn't. Make sure it's a man doctor. I can't really justify my attitude, but I don't want to be in the position of turning a woman doctor away if war comes. Can you have this all together by five o'clock this afternoon?"

"I think so," said Helen. "Anything else?" she asked as she stashed her pen and pad.

"Yeah, call me Randall, would you?" he said.

"Gotcha ... Randall," said Helen, with a thumbs-up for the boss.

As soon as she left, Randall got on the phone. First, he called the lodge. Fortunately, Steve answered.

"Everything okay out there?" he asked.

"I guess," said Steve. "That little bugger Bobby Thompson pasted me in the mouth about an hour ago."

"Jesus, I hope you pasted him back," said Randall.

"Nah. He hits like a girl. I wasn't hurt, but he scared me good. I guess I'm still part priest underneath it all. I forgave him."

"Well, I'm not so sure *I* want to forgive him," said Randall.

"Just ... let it go," advised Steve. "It was partly my fault anyway. Victor gave him a LieDeck ... well, loaned it to him ... and I didn't know about it, and I lied about having been a priest when he asked me about it this morning. Michael told him last night that I used to be a priest, and then he also found out that Bobby was a victim of sex abuse by a couple of Catholic Brothers at St. Dominique's Boys School."

"Jesus," said Randall, "no wonder he's so troubled. And no wonder he smacked you. He probably sees you as the enemy."

"He's with Grant Eamer on the helicopter now, buzzing around the lake," said Steve. "I'll talk to him later, but I'm going to Ottawa in—"

"It would be better if you stayed at the lodge today," said Randall.

"No can do," said Steve. "Life goes on, crisis or no crisis. I'm going to Ottawa at noon. I've got a meeting at one o'clock, then Bill's funeral is at three, and after that I want to see Annette. She said she

wanted to be alone today, but—"

"You don't have to," said Randall. "She's being released. We can't tell her yet, but we're bringing her to the manor around five o'clock, maybe sooner."

"Fantastic," said Steve. "I can't—"

"Listen, don't tell anybody about Annette coming back, okay? And you can't tell Annette over the phone, either. It's important that you don't. And ... hold on a sec, would you?"

Randall had forgotten that he'd given permission for Bobby Thompson to play with the chopper. He put Steve on hold and buzzed his secretary on the intercom. "Sandra, call Grant Eamer on his radio. Tell him that he's needed at the office, ASAP. Thanks."

He re-connected with Steve. "Sorry about that. I just realized that we need Grant here, so you can expect Bobby back in a minute. I hope you can deal with him. How are the Donovans doing?"

"Becky and her parents came out to the lodge this morning," said Steve. "They're fixated on CNN while Bobby's out, and they're not too happy that they have to leave the TV off whenever Bobby's here. Poor Mrs. Donovan thinks it's the end of the world."

"I ... sincerely hope she's wrong," said Randall.

"Yeah," agreed Steve. "They were saying on TV that with martial law, nobody knows what's really going on in the States, or in Russia. CNN used a LieDeck and caught two U.S. government officials lying, and now the Americans have put the lid on information. Victor wanted to spend the day at Michael's cabin, to get away from all the commotion here at the lodge, but Michael and I talked him out of it. He's up in his room. I'm going to challenge him to a game of chess before I leave. I think he's—uh—starting to feel like he's responsible for all this."

"Winnie's with him, I suppose?" asked Randall.

"Actually, she's gone to Ottawa to—uh—do some shopping ... and visit Annette," said Steve.

"Shopping!?"

"Yeah, shopping."

"Christ Almighty," said Randall. "Okay, we'll bring her back on the helicopter when we pick up Annette. And listen, would you do me a favor? Tell the cook and the groundskeeper they can have a week off at full pay, okay? Send them home right away."

"Uh—okay," said Steve.

One down, six to go, thought Randall as he hung up. Most of the other calls on his list were important, but only one was critical. He made that one next.

"Bertrand," he boomed. "Randall Whiteside here. How are things at the RCMP?"

"Extremely busy," said Joly. "I only took your call because I owe you. Actually, I owe Mr. O'Connor for including us when Dr. Pavay came up from the UN. Please, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Just one question," he said jovially. "Are the Americans and Russians at DEFCON-ONE?" Randall had never done military service, but Whiteside Tech had been a defense contractor almost since its inception, so he knew soldier-speak. "DEFCON" stood for "defense condition," and there were three DEFCON

levels of war-readiness. DEFCON-ONE was where you definitely did not want to be—a “red alert,” both figuratively and literally.

There was a pregnant silence at the other end of the phone. “You know better than to ask me that,” said the commissioner. “The Russians didn't use their nukes during the first Cold War, and I ... don't believe they'll do so now. They've got nothing to win by doing something that ... crazy, and neither do the Yanks.”

“Thanks,” said Randall, at which Joly hung up the phone without saying goodbye. Randall removed the rubber suction cup from the phone receiver. It was attached to the end of a short wire, and at the other end of the wire was a small jack, plugged into his LieDeck. When Bertrand said “I don't believe they'll do so now,” the red light blinked.

“Sandra,” said Randall into the intercom, “call Grant Eamer again. Tell him it's now a Code Beaver. And call Helen in her car. Tell her I want her to really expedite the plan we discussed.”

“What plan is that?” asked the secretary.

“Just do it!” he said angrily.

Chapter 63 GOTCHA

Bobby Thompson got off the helicopter at the end of the dock and thanked Grant Eamer for the ride, especially for the few seconds that he had been allowed to actually hold the controls. He didn't know why the chopper had to return to the Whiteside plant, but he did know that he was suddenly alone again, and he felt the desperation creeping back as he turned towards the lodge.

Wilson Lake was alien ground. Everybody in Quyon knew that. And yet here he was, *with a wimpy seventeen-year-old friggin' rich kid*, he thought as he walked down the dock. *And a fat frog of a cook, and some fucked-up lying sonovabitch of an ex-priest. And then there's those other Whiteside kids, those two giggly girls, tearing around all over the fuckin' place, and Michael's girlfriend and her dumb parents, and them asshole agents, trying to look like they got something to do. And then there's “old Mr. Zombie” himself, Victor Helliwell, the creep behind all them suicides and divorces ... and riots ... and his cleaning-lady whore.*

Worst of all, Bobby was dry ... dry as dust ... dopeless. “I gotta get outta here, man,” he said aloud as he ran off the dock. There was only one cure for panic, and that cure was control—and dope, of course, if he could just find some.

“I gotta have the jeep for an hour or so,” he barked at Victor as he thumped in from the porch. “Where's the keys?”

“We might need the jeep here,” said Victor, without looking up. He was playing a game of chess with Steve Sutherland, and the immediate demands of a suicidal, drug-addled delinquent wouldn't yield to a Ruy Lopez opening. “Maybe Patriot could drive you. Where are you going?”

“Gimme the fuckin' keys, man,” screamed Bobby as he danced from one foot to the other and tried hard to keep his chin from quivering.

There were only three rungs on this ladder, and Bobby had already covered the first two. Anything in the nature of a “no” would sadly lead to another assault. Two Patriot agents stood up and began edging their

way towards Bobby, from behind. Both had their right hands tucked under their jacket lapels, in case.

"Okay," Victor reluctantly conceded. "You can have the jeep. You promise to be back in an hour?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Bobby. "Just gimme the keys, man? I just want to go to Ray's to get some smokes, eh?"

"They're in the ignition," he said. "Drive carefully."

Bobby wheeled around and ran out the door. A few seconds later, Victor winced as the jeep roared to life and squealed out of the garage.

"Say goodbye," said Steve, as he turned his attention back to the game he was losing, and thoughtlessly pushed a doomed pawn.

"To the jeep or the jerk?" asked Victor as his bishop ate the pawn.

"With any luck, the jerk," Steve opined. "More likely both."

* * *

Bobby couldn't wait to impress his chum Geoff Farley with the new jeep. He skidded to a stop on the fringe of Quyon, in front of the ancient farmhouse where Geoff lived with his grandmother, and honked the horn repeatedly. "Let's go, let's go," he yelled as he half-stood in the open-topped vehicle, holding the steering wheel between his knees. Nothing happened, so he let out a shot of his super-whistle, the one that could startle a gopher halfway across a pasture. Still no Geoff. Finally, Barbara Farley threw open the front door of the wooden farmhouse, flailing her whole, flabby arm at Bobby in a manner that suggested: "Get lost, arsehole."

"Where's Geoff?" he hollered.

"He's at Ray's," shouted Mrs. Farley. "Did you steal that—"

Bobby was seated and gone before the question got fully posed, and two minutes later he blew into the parking lot at Ray's. He parked the jeep under the RESTAURANT—RESTAURANT—RESTAURANT sign, where everyone would be sure see it, and see him getting out of it in his new leather jacket. He walked up to the door ... walked cool, collected, powerful, in control ... everything the jeep was and he wasn't.

"Geoffeeee," he drawled. "How's it hanging, buddy?"

"Where'd ya get the jeep, man?"

"It's mine ... to use, anyway."

"Yeah, but where did—"

"None of your fuckin' business, man," he said as he sat. "I got it. That's all you need to know."

With a little prodding from Geoff, the truth came out, almost as if Bobby was dying to tell it. Not the whole truth about *how* he'd ended up at Whiteside's—that was a deep, dark secret, he said—but he told Geoff that he was staying out at the lodge on Wilson Lake for a while. "Until I get tired of it," he boasted, loudly.

Boys talk big when they feel small, thought Claire. "What'll it be, Robert?" she asked. Bobby hated it when she called him Robert, which was why she did it. The rules at Ray's were straightforward. You got

a full point when you got somebody's goat or when you didn't let them get your goat; half a point if they got your goat a little bit but you zinged them right back "better'n what you took by way of incoming fire."

"Robert?" she repeated into the boy's eyes, doubling her score.

"Just a Coke," said Bobby, effectively conceding the game. "And a pack of smokes. Du Maurier."

Claire wrote it down ever so slowly while standing at the side of the table. Another point. Three-nothing so far. Then she ambled off slowly, erasing and rewriting something on her receipt pad, making it harder for them to restart their urgent conversation, harder by maybe ten seconds. "Big tip coming from that table," she said as she passed Ray at the cash.

"Shutout?" asked Ray.

"Four to zip, I figure," she said as she stuffed her receipt pad into an apron pocket and headed for the kitchen.

"Jeeze, I heard they got a bomb shelter out there," said Geoff as soon as Claire was definitely out of earshot.

"Yeah, they do. I seen it," said Bobby. "So?"

"Jesus, Bobby, you don't know what the fuck's going on, do you? Have you been watching any TV?"

"No. Why?"

Geoff told Bobby Thompson about the Romanian crisis, about how the TV showed the whole left-hand side of Russia on fire with tanks and bombers, and how they said that President Barker of the United States had a heart attack and was dying, probably, and that most people were saying that the Russians were going to use their nukes, and about how the United States wasn't saying anything, but everybody figured they were going to use their nukes too. "This is the last flush, man," said Geoff, "or close to it."

Claire brought Bobby's Coke and cigarettes. "That's thirteen eighty-two—with the tax," she said to Bobby, and Geoff surprised even himself by just paying.

Bobby was shaking, not wanting to believe what he'd been told. He had forgotten his new LieDeck on the chopper, but he knew Geoff better than anyone, and Geoff ... well, he was scared shitless. He just had to be telling the truth, and Bobby suddenly realized why the lodge had become such a popular gathering place that morning for everybody and his damn uncle, and why they wouldn't let him watch the damn TV. "You got any grass?" he asked furtively.

"Yeah man, I got two lids," said Geoff, "one in each boot. You can have one, free, but you gotta take me to the lodge. I gotta get in that shelter before they—"

"Keep your fucking voice down, Geoff, or—"

"What?" whispered Geoff. "You're worried about getting busted for pot on the day the fuckin' world blows up?"

"I'm more worried about you telling people I can get in the shelter, you dumb shit," scowled Bobby.

"You gotta get me in there, Bobby. You owe me."

"I owe you nothing, and besides, I ... I can't."

Geoff sensed that Bobby's armor was cracking, or at least that it was crackable. His mind rammed into overdrive as he searched for leverage. He took a sip of pop and felt terror building as file after file rolled through his onboard computer without delivering up any useful ammunition. Then his eyes refocused intensely and his hands curled into fists. "Gotcha!" he said.

"What ... gotcha?" said Bobby defiantly. "You ain't got shit."

"You get me fucking in there," said Geoff through clenched teeth, "or I swear, the minute you leave here, I'm gonna phone up Whiteside's and tell them that you and Jean were in on that break-in back in twenny-twelve—the fucking 'incident,' man, when Mr. Whiteside got his shot in the leg with a pellet gun. You think they'll let you in the shelter if I tell them that?"

Bobby knew a good threat when he heard one, and this one was a peach. The problem now was how to get Geoff in the shelter. "What about your grandma?" he asked.

"What about her?" snapped Geoff. "She's old anyways, and it's *me* you're talking to here. It's *me* you gotta deal with, man."

"Jeeze, I don't know," said Bobby. "I don't think—"

"You can just say I came back with you for a visit, Bobby. I'll just sort of, you know, hang out, until we see if this war stuff is bullshit or not."

Bobby didn't have a choice, really. And besides, he just couldn't imagine being stuck in a frigging bomb shelter for maybe two months with no dope. "Okay," he said. "We'll give it a try, but if they don't let you in, you don't tell about the incident, okay? Christ, I don't even know for sure if they'll let *me* in the fuckin' shelter."

"That a new jacket?" asked Jesse McCain from his table over by the chip stand.

"What's it to you?" asked Bobby, as he turned his head to throw a glare at the old man.

"Take it off," demanded Tirone Lucas as he stood up from his stool at the counter. "Lemme see it."

Bobby wasn't inclined to scrap with the likes of Tirone, so he took off the jacket and gave it to him.

"Looks to be about the right size for Ray, wouldn't you say?" asked Tirone.

"Just about perfect, I'd say," said Jesse.

"Hey, come on, man," said Bobby. "That's mine."

"Did you ever pay Ray back the nine hundred bucks that you and this other little prick stole from here?" asked Tirone, without looking at the boys.

"Not yet," said Bobby, "but we're gonna. The lawyer said we're gonna get six months to pay it back, man, and we're gonna. Plus interest, too. Come on, eh? Gimme my—"

"This jacket looks a lot like interest to me," said Tirone. "Does it look like interest to you, Jesse?"

"Certainly does," said Jesse. "Why, that's the most interesting-looking jacket I ever seen."

Tirone planted his hand in Bobby's hair, the way Buck used to do back when he was alive, and began walking towards the door with the boy in tow, hunched over in pain and complaining about some injustice or other. "It's my jacket now," explained Tirone. "You see, I'm gonna steal it, like you stole from

Ray. And don't you come in here no more, understand?"

He released Bobby at the door, and the lad didn't even turn back to curse. His friend Geoff followed closely behind, slipping sideways past the big truck driver.

Tirone hollered at Geoff that he was banned from Ray's too—forever. "This sucker's brand new," he said as he examined the jacket on his way back to the stool at the counter. "What say we wrap it up and give it to Ray for his birthday?"

"Is it radiation proof?" asked Jesse.

Chapter 64 WINNIE GOES TO TOWN

Ever since her husband left her, which was ... she had to think about it now ... *six and a half years ago* ... Winnie had kept a small apartment in Quyon. But she basically lived at the Whitesides' lodge, where she worked. In the last few years there had been periods of weeks when she'd just stayed put and let the world roll by. Now that she had renewed the relationship with Victor, she rarely thought about her own place. They were a bona fide couple, and they lived luxuriantly in a gorgeous log building on their very own lake—sort of.

Winnie had realized since meeting Victor that she was almost as much a hermit as he was. Maybe that was one of the reasons they got along, fell in love, hooked up with each other. But today was not a day for hiding out. Today was a day for going to town—not just to Shawville or Quyon to pick up a few things and check the mail, but to Ottawa! *For the first time in ... goodness ... several months*, she calculated.

Her first meeting wasn't until 1:00 p.m., but she left at 10:30, to do some serious shopping. Victor's birthday was coming up in a week, and she had quite a list of things he needed, or might like. The Patriot agent who drove her to the Carlingwood Shopping Centre hadn't ever volunteered his name, and hadn't spoken more than a few words during the one-hour drive. He silently followed her around in nearly empty stores, the ones that weren't closed, carrying her plastic bags and enduring her apologies for the embarrassment. "All in a day's work," he said at one point, not very persuasively.

Winnie was glad to be in town this particular day. Victor had been up and about at breakfast time, but he had gone back to bed, mostly to get away from the infuriating teenager that Randall had dumped on them last night. Then, fifteen minutes later, he'd come down again—to play chess with Steve. He didn't seem to have time for her, even after some rather memorable lovemaking in the wee hours. Becky and her parents had stayed the night at the manor, but at Mrs. Donovan's insistence, they had decided to pass the day at the lodge ... in order to be closer to the shelter. Noel, the cook, was grumping non-stop about having to work hard for a change, what with all these people around. And to top it all off, there were several security agents getting underfoot, in addition to dozens of others who were in the bush, or on the dirt road, guarding the lodge. All in all, it was a good day not to be at home, even considering the state of the world.

Winnie had left a note for Victor in the bathroom off the master bedroom. "See you for supper, honey," it read. "Think about what I said about those tapes, okay?" She knew he'd feel that she was nagging him when he read it, but that was because she was. It had become a sore point, a bone of contention between them, this question of what to do—if anything—about those reel-to-reel tapes. They would finish that argument tomorrow. She wanted him to reconsider that situation so he wouldn't explode when she ... well, when she put her foot down.

After her shopping spree, the taciturn Patriot agent drove her to Kanata. By 12:45 p.m., she was at the first of her three rendezvous.

Earlier that same morning, Steve had asked her to meet him for lunch in the employee cafeteria on the second floor of the office tower. She didn't know what he had in mind, but she was glad to oblige. She liked him, admired him, and she was very happy that he and Annette had fallen in love.

A Patriot hostess met Winnie right at the car, at the end of the wide walkway, shook her hand, introduced herself as Debbie Collier, and did her level best to be ultra-pleasant ... without prying. Winnie knew that this agent would have been thoroughly briefed, and she found herself feeling resentful that the young woman could turn on the charm without getting even remotely personal. *That's bullshit*, Winnie thought as they walked up the front steps to the twelve-story tower. *But ... she's just doing her job.*

So she gabbed at Debbie Collier about the fun she'd had buying jockey shorts for the "Pillsbury Doughboy," her new nickname for the famous inventor. She told her how three different salespersons had mistaken the Patriot chauffeur for her husband, and laughed at how the man could never work up the courage to correct that misperception. Ms. Collier seemed to enjoy the chatting, but didn't cough up one fact about her own life. *A shame*, thought Winnie. *The shift from Human Two to Human Three will fix that soon enough. Next time she'll be more open.*

Debbie pointed as they arrived at the double doors of the cafeteria. "Your friend is over there. I'll walk you up to meet Dr. Secord as soon as you're done here. Two o'clock, right?"

"Yes," said Winnie. "Thanks."

"Hi," said Steve nervously as Winnie joined him at the small table he'd chosen in a far corner. "Thanks for coming," he added as he stood and shook her hand.

"I'm glad to get away, actually," said Winnie as she slung her purse over the back of the chair and sat. "The mood at the lodge really stinks, as I'm sure you noticed. Bobby Thompson has probably managed to alienate everyone by now, even Noel. Oh ... and Noel told me that Bobby hit you in the face? What was *that* about?"

"Oh, he didn't really land the blow," said Steve. "It sort of glanced off my forehead," he tried. "Minor disagreement."

"I ... got some shopping done for Victor," Winnie said, tacitly accepting that the subject of pugilistics had been officially closed. "His birthday is the third of May. The Patriot guy that was driving me around tagged along at the Carlingwood mall. He was a real sweetheart, but I think he was glad to finally get rid of me."

"Oh, I'm sure he enjoyed your company," said Steve, who suddenly found himself hoping she wouldn't read too much into that.

"It surprised me to see so many soldiers standing around all over the place," said Winnie, "on the streets, in the mall. I knew we were under martial law, but..."

"Yeah," said Steve, as a worried mask fell across his middle-aged face.

"So ... what's up?" she asked brightly.

Here it is, thought Steve. *No getting away from it now.* He had asked for this meeting; now he had to follow through. He considered the option of ducking the main issue, but he would just have to face it later, without any advice, if he did that.

"Well," he began cautiously, "Annette's going to be ... let out of the hospital at—uh—well ... soon, I've been told ... and I—uh..."

It turned out that Steve wanted to talk about feelings, about his feelings towards Annette, *and* about her feelings towards him, *and* about their age difference, *and* about his inexperience when it came to matters of the heart, *and* about his big problem with irrational guilt, his unshakable suspicion that the Holy Troika was still looking over his shoulder from the clouds above, tut-tutting his every sexy thought in perfect three part harmony.

He had been at the lodge that morning and could have taken Winnie aside there, but he resolutely did not want Victor involved. Victor was in need of counseling himself, as far as Steve was concerned, and was in no shape to be dispensing advice. And besides, one of the things he wanted to discuss, to understand, was the bothersome fact that he'd been experiencing strong sexual feelings towards women other than Annette, including, as it happened, Winnifred.

It took him ten minutes, with extended pauses, much sighing, and no humor at all, to spit out what he had to say, and that was just to define the problem. Poor Winnie had to remind herself repeatedly of her decision to wait until he ran utterly out of words before she responded, and by the time it was her turn to talk, she was almost as off-put as she was sympathetic.

"Listen, Steve," she said in a controlled tone, "do you love her?"

"Uh—yes," he managed. "I'm sure I do," he added, remembering the several dozen times he'd LieDeck-verified himself about that. "Why?"

"Well, for starters, neither of us believes that God exists, so you can bench the guilt trip, okay? And if you do love her, then sex is not *just* okay, it's *definitely* okay, and it's also ... glorious, as close as you're ever going to get to heaven. So what can I say? Just ... go for it."

Steve caught the mild reprimand in her voice ... and blushed. "What did you mean by definitely okay?" he asked.

Winnie checked the cafeteria to make sure there was no one in a position to overhear their conversation, and decided that she might as well give Steve the same answers she'd give anyone else. "Well, it's probably okay, or arguably okay, to have sex without love," she said with a shrug, "but that's totally up to the individual. 'As long as nobody gets hurt' is the rule that most people follow, or should follow. But when there is real love, then sex is not only arguably okay, it's definitely okay. That's all I meant. And as far as you feeling sexual towards other women, or towards me, well, women can always tell anyway, and it's a—"

"You ... you *knew*!" sputtered Steve. His face flushed visibly.

"Men aren't very good at hiding that stuff," she smiled. "Anyway, when a man feels that way about me, I take it as a compliment, in a way, and sometimes I'm even happy for the man, that he's enjoying a nice feeling because of me ... unless he's gross about it, or pushy. The important thing is that you know where I'm coming from and you respect that. I'm into a monogamous relationship with Victor, and I expect to stay right where I am."

"Well, of course. I ... didn't mean ... what I meant was..."

"Relax," Winnie said as she reached across the calico cloth and lightly touched one of his newly spastic hands. "We feel what we feel, Steve. We can say that our feelings are instinctive or Human One or whatever, but in the final analysis, we're just not responsible for everything we feel. We don't decide to

feel this way or that. It's what we *do* about what we feel that makes us who we are. You are a gentleman, and I am a lady, and a gentleman and a lady can talk about these things without ... being all nervous." *Having a heart attack*, she almost said.

Steve regrouped emotionally and checked his watch. "Do you want to go get some lunch?" he asked, tilting his head towards the stainless-steel-fendered open kitchen.

"In a few minutes," Winnie said. "Let's finish this first."

It bothered Steve to know that she realized he hadn't gotten to the point yet, the real point. He took a deep breath and let fly. "How can I be sure that I can—uh—that I'll be able to make Annette happy?" he asked, trying to avoid the distraction of Winnie's green eyes. "You know ... in ... in that way?"

"You can't," she said simply ... and it suddenly dawned on her that a housekeeper was counseling a bishop, and doing it rather well. "That risk is part of the allure, Steve. All I can say is that if your intention when you make love with Annette is to love her, then you'll probably be a wonderful lover, and please her very well ... and she will want to please you too. If your goal is to satisfy yourself—to 'get your rocks off' is the vulgar way of saying it—you'll have an orgasm all right, but you likely won't really please her *or* yourself. It's taken men thousands of years to figure this out, but there it is, the key to great sex. The most wonderful of all sexual feelings is not your own climax, but the sense of having pleased your partner."

Steve pondered that one for a minute, and wondered if he had the guts to ask the other key question, the one that was really driving him nuts. "Are there ... best ways of—uh—making sure? I mean how do I ... do it so that she—uh..."

"Well, not with your penis," said Winnie.

Now Steve was really coming unglued. He found this difficult to accept and felt the need to turn on his LieDeck. "Not ... with my penis?" he said, smarting at the sound of a word he had rarely pronounced in half a century.

"Well, eventually, yes," said Winnie gently, "but you do maybe—oh—seventy-five percent of it with your hands, your fingers, then ... you know ... *then* you do the old in-out."

Winnie was smiling, and Steve couldn't help but crack a small one at her whimsical description of the secret, forbidden act that both terrified and consumed him. "With ... my hands," he repeated quizzically.

"Yeah. She'll help you, Steve. And like I said, it's mostly in your head. If you're trying to give pleasure, if that's your aim, you'll see what works, sense it. And don't be afraid to experiment, or to ask."

"Experiment?" said Steve, with a voice that betrayed a crazy fear that he was being auditioned for a triple-X-rated movie.

"Well, for instance, Victor ... teases me a lot," smiled Winnie. "He uses his hands to get me right on the edge of an orgasm, right on the brink, and then he backs off, eases off. It makes me crazy, furious and frustrated, but before the sexual feelings go away, he'll ... start up again, still using his hands, his fingers, and after a few times of that part, when I finally do have an orgasm, I nearly ... explode, you know?"

Steve didn't know ... well, he knew now, in his mind, anyway. "And all this comes before the actual ... in-out?" he asked.

Winnie had to laugh at his hesitant use of a term that he had probably never heard in his previous incarnation, and certainly would never have used himself if he had heard it. "Yes," she said joyfully, "and depending on how Annette feels about it, you can ... once in a while you might even want to try using

your—uh—mouth."

"My *mouth!*" said Steve, much louder than he'd intended. His mind was on the verge of a nuclear meltdown as he tried to reconcile the delicate and beautiful idea of love with something he'd always considered to be ... well, pornographic.

"Your tongue, Steve," said Winnie tenderly. "It's not dirty. If it's an act of genuine love, it's about as intimate as it gets. And it—uh—cuts both ways, if you get my drift."

"Aw jeeze," said Steve as he turned sideways in his chair and put both hands on his face. "Look," he said as his palms slowly parted, "I—uh—what do you say we get some food and talk about something else for a while? I'm afraid I still can't—uh..."

* * *

After spending three hours at the headquarters of Whiteside Technologies, Winnie felt relieved to walk out the revolving doors and into the afternoon brilliance. Her two-hour meeting with Dr. Secord had been tiring and stressful, especially following on the heels of her difficult session with Steve.

Steve had left just before 2:00 p.m. to attend Bill Doyle's funeral, in downtown Ottawa. That was the other thing Steve had talked to her about. He blamed himself for Bill's death, in a way. He felt he shouldn't have stayed overnight at the office last Friday. It was only Bill's second night after leaving the Church. He seemed to be coping well ... surprisingly well ... for the first twenty-four hours after he'd been forcibly weaned from the Catholic God, but Steve felt that he should have anticipated the breakdown that led to his suicide.

Winnie had not been able to help much on that front. Neither she nor Steve had a LieDeck operating during their hushed conversation in the cafeteria, but ever since the device had been around, most people felt they had to tell the truth. There were too many ways of getting tripped up later if you lied. The problem here was that she agreed with Steve. In her view, it *was* partly his fault. He *should* have known. He should have been there with Bill last Friday night, and she wanted to advise him that he should talk about that error in his eulogy, admit it, and express his regret.

She had wanted to say all those things to Steve, but she feared it might be too much, or too soon, and she did not want *his* suicide on *her* conscience. She had tried to think of how a Human Three might deal with a situation like this while Steve stared blankly at his food. In the end, she had copped out. "In no way was it your fault that Bill Doyle took his life," she had fibbed, and it had smoothed out his hurting, contorted face.

She thanked Debbie Collier again after being escorted out to the waiting Patriot car. "I'm going to the Ottawa General," she told the same agent who had traipsed dutifully behind her through the Carlingwood Mall. As she climbed into the backseat, she realized that she had never even asked the man's name. *How very Human Two of me*, she thought. *It must be the stress*. She considered apologizing, or rectifying the situation, but decided finally to let it slide. She put her head back and closed her eyes.

Her other purpose in going to Whiteside Technologies today was the cause of her stress. She didn't want to hide this matter from Victor, but neither had she been inclined to tell him about it ahead of time.

She disagreed strenuously with his decision to wait until events had "settled down" before going to the public with the results of his exploration of human nature. For twelve years, out at his rented farm near Manotick, alternately driving cab and working on the LieDeck, he had talked out loud to himself, plumbing what he used to think of as his soul, searching for answers. For most of that time, the devices he'd had to work with were not perfect, slightly less than a hundred percent accurate, but in spite of that problem, Victor had never really doubted his methodology, or his results.

Since those first thrilling revelations with a relatively reliable LieDeck, his premise had been that we humans know a great deal about ourselves subconsciously that we don't know consciously, and since the human voice triggered a beep on the LieDeck even if it was only the *subconscious* mind which objected, the LieDeck proved to be a marvelous microscope for viewing and studying one's own soul ... one's identity, at any rate, one's *real* identity, as an individual *and* as a member of the species.

Victor had validated his approach with his first perfect LieDeck, the one that he had put into the cast and ultimately given to Randall Whiteside (and subsequently got back). As he had done the previous Thursday—it seemed like a lifetime ago—he again showed Winnie how to use the LieDeck on herself, and he watched intently as she confirmed his technique with self-addressed questions and answers. She found out that the reason she rarely went to movies had nothing to do with the sex and violence in film today. It had to do with her fear of fire, a fear of stampeding people in a burning theater. She found out that she liked to fish not so much because she enjoyed eating fish, but rather because she liked catching fish—killing fish, actually—a disturbing insight. She also discovered that it wasn't ideological choice that made her vote NDP every national election. She voted NDP because her father voted NDP, and even at age thirty-eight, she was still scared of what her father would say if she did otherwise.

Winnie was the only person that Victor had explained his ideas to, in full, and she found that she had no choice but to agree with his approach and, far more importantly, with his conclusions, not just because they seemed to make sense, but because she could LieDeck-verify them for herself, make the same kinds of discoveries about her own soul, or psyche, or whatever. The fact was; humankind had evolved from a purely instinctive creature to what we are today, a creature both instinctive and rational—a quantum leap, as it were. Fact was, we didn't understand this duality with our rational minds, meaning “consciously.” Fact was, we did understand it, perfectly, on the subconscious level. Fact was, with the help of the LieDeck, that understanding could be elevated to the conscious mind. And the simple fact was that a second quantum leap, which Victor had described as a planned transition from Human Two Consciousness to Human *Three* Consciousness, was perfectly logical, even if it wasn't readily verifiable with a LieDeck. It was not only within our potential as a species to be Human Three, or to become Human Three, it was virtually inevitable, because of the LieDeck ... or at least it seemed to be. Yes, it would take many years and a lot of hard work to define what Human Three Consciousness was, exactly, but through this procedure of conversing with one's own subconscious, Winnie had come to accept Victor's view that the post-LieDeck consciousness of human beings would be as radically different from our pre-LieDeck consciousness as *Homo sapiens* was from the ape!

Where she parted company with Victor was in tactics—his maddening decision to wait. The international crisis that had been caused by the LieDeck—or *rather* triggered by *the LieDeck*, she corrected herself—was deepening dangerously. *There is a chance that he's right*, she said in her mind, *a small chance that his new conception of human consciousness might exacerbate an already unstable situation. But there's an even better chance that this theory is exactly what humanity needs to survive the LieDeck Revolution!*

She and Victor had used a LieDeck during their heated debates of this question, and what it came down to was that they both felt they were right, and that the other person was wrong. It was annoying that the LieDeck was no help at all when an argument came down to opinions. The only difference was that Victor readily agreed that he *might* be wrong. Winnie, on the other hand, *knew* she was right—or, more accurately, and as the LieDeck had forced her to admit, *felt* that she knew she was right, *believed* that she was right. She had asked Victor to yield, for once, even begged him, but although he had flip-flopped on the issue several times already, there was now no moving the man.

There had even been a call from a Jacques Lafontaine, in the Prime Minister's Office, asking for the reel-to-reel tapes, demanding them. Victor had told him to get stuffed. He had hidden those tapes, and

he would not tell Winnie where, try as she might to pry that information out of him. That was what ticked her off. She had repeatedly assured him that she wouldn't take them or tell anyone where they were, but still, he wouldn't say.

So, she had made an executive decision and spilled the beans, all of them, into a tape recorder, under the careful questioning of Dr. Emile Secord, the distinguished chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Montreal. The meeting had been arranged on the QT by Randall Whiteside himself. Dr. Secord had been astounded, confused and not terribly pleased to have his perceptual foundations rocked by a member of the working class, and a woman at that. But he had been both fair and thorough, and he had promised to keep this new theory a secret for one day, a day that he needed anyway to sort through the transcript of the two-hour tape that he and Winnie had made. He had also promised to talk to her again, tomorrow, to show her his completed report before he gave it over to the government and the media.

Winnie didn't have to believe his promises, what with her LieDeck sitting on the desk right beside the tape recorder, but she also knew that he would have difficulty keeping his commitments. He was up there right now, she knew, in the Whiteside Tech sound studio, in a daze, furiously asking himself questions ... and answering them, LieDeck-verifying himself, and finding out that much of what he *thought* he knew about the human psyche, much of what he *taught*, was wrong, or at least incomplete and amateurish. Winnie hoped he would keep his word, so she would have time to explain her actions to Victor before he heard about them on TV. She had already resolved to talk to Victor tomorrow, at noon ... he was at his best, his most flexible, at that time. *Men are weird that way*, she thought, *in their moods—more Human Two than women. Nah*, she corrected herself silently. *That would get beeped for sure*.

She rubbed her eyes and fluffed her hair as the Patriot car merged onto the eight-lane Queensway, heading east, downtown. There was almost no traffic, an odd thing for rush hour, and what little traffic there was was mostly going the other way, west, out of the city. That spoke volumes. She was afraid of how Victor would react when she told him about her chat with Dr. Secord, but mostly she was afraid for the future of Planet Earth.

The state of the world bothered her, a lot, but she had few people she could really talk to about it. Victor wasn't even in the running any more, because that always led back to the argument over whether to release the reel-to-reel tapes. Her several girlfriends would blab, for sure, and Steve's plate was already full when it came to troubles. *Mr. Whiteside and Cam are another class of people*, she said to herself, *or at least not available to me for lengthy chats, and Helen's never around ... or too busy*. Noel was a great cook, but a dead loss on any subject other than food. Bobby Thompson, the Human One that Randall had moved into the lodge, wasn't even the same species. The Donovans had their own problems to deal with. And Annette ... well, as Winnie had been reminded forcefully by Patriot, Annette was unaware of all that had happened to the world since the shooting—by her own choice, mostly, but also with the collusion of all who had come into contact with her.

"Want to look at the paper?" asked the driver, with a flicked glance in the rearview mirror.

"Sure, thanks," said Winnie.

He handed it back, and she separated off the front section. "War in Romania," said the headline above the fold, in Second Coming typeface. "Russians utter nuclear threat," it said in a smaller sub-headline. Below the fold was an article about Godfrey's plan to take back the UN, to recall Canada's ambassador to the United States, to get tough with sex-abusers, and most importantly, to tackle the epidemic of suicides. "No 'injectees' so far," she noticed in the third paragraph. *Terrific*, she thought. When she had first heard about Godfrey's idea of using the nation's hospitals to end life, she'd thought it was idiotic, but if it worked ... ?

Also below the fold was an article about another funeral that was to take place today, that of former prime minister St. Aubin. His body had been flown back from Australia, and he was to be buried in Québec City, at five o'clock this afternoon. *In half an hour*, Winnie realized when she checked her watch. "Lover jumps too," she noticed in the subtitle. Darlene Trahan, the Native woman who had been identified as "the partner" in Louis St. Aubin's kinky sex trip, had followed her only paying customer by leaping off a similar high-rise balcony, with remarkably similar results.

Winnie put down the paper for a minute and wondered what kind of attitudes a Human Three might have towards sex, and whether this area of life would continue to ruin marriages and careers. Her mind wandered back to a deliciously absurd day back in 1993, when Prince Charles's shot at assuming the British crown was royally torpedoed by the release of a taped phone call that he'd made to Camilla hyphen-something ... *Parker-Bowles*, she remembered ... a tape in which the assumed heir to the throne, still married to Princess Diana at the time, told his erstwhile paramour he wished he could be "turned into a Tampax." *Oh yuck*, Winnie shivered as that bizarre memory faded. *Weird dude!*

Most people would see Louis St. Aubin's escapade as equally "yucky," but in the absence of a God, there was no harm done, and old Louis and young Darlene seemed to have enjoyed the game, by all accounts. Certainly death seemed a bit of a steep price for an unauthorized orgasm. *Later*, she thought, *I'll talk to Victor about this, when things settle down, or I'll talk to Steve, when he gets himself more together.*

She turned to page two of the *Citizen* and found a major think piece on the state of the nation. "Martial law: Day 2," said an ominous headline. She didn't even scan this article. Below it was an article entitled "The world in brief," which outlined the current state of disarray and death in dozens of countries, giving each only five or ten lines of ink. *And in alphabetical order, for crying out loud*, she said to herself. *Flavor-of-the-day insanity.*

She glanced over the headlines on pages three and four. There was an article on the undoing of the WDA, which was apparently happening swiftly and easily with the aid of the LieDeck, although details were being withheld so the process could go forward at all possible speed. "UN toothless, thanks to WDA legacy," one headline said. On page five, she noticed an article about a judicial inquiry that had been called into the 2002 death of George Cluff, Victor's mentor, pal and former employer. *Bingo*, she said to herself. The Alpha reporter who had interviewed Annette and sparred with Victor had done the right thing after all. *He'll be really pleased to learn about that.*

On page six, Winnie found a brief obituary for the famous hockey star of the previous century, Buckminster Thadeus Ash. Twenty years ago, when she was still a teenager, he had seen her at the local bar, at the British Hotel in Quyon, and tried to seduce her. She had indignantly refused, of course, but now she wasn't so sure that she didn't regret that decision. She didn't read Buck's obituary, however, because further down page six, her eye caught a short piece about a priest, a certain Father Dent, who had finally admitted to masturbating young boys at a summer camp run by the Catholic Church. *Jeeze, that's the camp Steve used to help out at.*

Winnie remembered seeing snippets of that story for many months—parishioners stood by their man, their spiritual leader, an "all-round fine fellow who simply couldn't have done such a thing." His bishop had been told years earlier, and had swept the matter under a rug. The victims finally went to the police, who laid eight charges. Father Dent had pleaded innocent, indignantly. But now that the time for his trial was at hand, he had changed his plea to "guilty," shocking almost no one. "We were only twelve at the time," the eight boys, who were now men, had told the press, "and Father Dent said it was a way to get rid of evil spirits." *Well*, Winnie thought, *after five pages of violence, I guess we had to get on to the sex. Human Twos are so pathetic, and all because it's so easy to lie—or rather it was so easy!*

There was a sidebar to this story. “Churches, synagogues, mosques empty as religious beliefs evaporate,” read the headline. *Long time coming*, she said to herself. *But too bad, really ... maybe.*

Next came the editorial page, something she had always refused to read, except for the letters. She was about to turn to page eight when she noticed that most of the letters were about the LieDeck, and about Mr. Whiteside, about putting him in jail or arresting him, preventing him from making any more of these troublesome devices. Some letters called for further public demonstrations at the Whiteside plant. *That won't happen in this paranoid environment*, thought Winnie. *Not now that there's fear of a nuclear war.* She made a mental note to read those letters more carefully later, with Victor, when she got home.

"Mind if I keep this?" she asked.

"Not at all," said the agent.

"This is one edition of the *Citizen* worth sticking in a drawer," she said as she folded the front section in two and crammed it into her large purse.

"Might as well," he said. "Probably won't be any paper tomorrow, they said on the radio."

Winnie was surprised. The driver hadn't strung that many words together since they'd left the lodge. "How so?" she asked, leaning forward and resting a forearm on the back of the passenger seat.

"Well, a lot of the workers at the *Citizen* went AWOL, and half of the stores that sell the paper are closed anyway, and there's almost nobody out shopping, as you saw, and the home delivery kids aren't even showing up. And ... and they said over fifteen percent of the population has left the city already. By tomorrow, it'll be up to twenty-five percent or even thirty percent, I bet. Maybe even more!"

"Jeeze, where'd they all go?" asked Winnie.

"Wherever they could." He shrugged. "Some cottagers are taking in two or three families at a time up in Norway Bay and points west, for upwards of six hundred dollars a day, I heard. You can't get a hotel reservation in any small town in North America for less than a thousand dollars a day ... that's if you can find a room at any price. People want to get away from potential target areas—cities ... military bases ... nuclear power plants ... major mining sites. If they—"

The agent had a message coming in on his earpiece and picked up the mike. "Yes sir. We'll be there in five minutes or so. I'll call in as soon as I discharge the passenger." He replaced the mike ... and didn't pick up his previous train of thought.

"Imagine that!" said Winnie, trying to restart the conversation. "No newspaper! I wonder when's the last time that happened, I mean except for Christmas and stuff like that?"

"I suppose there's one story that doesn't need to get reported on at all," the driver offered.

"What's that?"

"Doomsday," he said, with a quick glance back at Winnie.

"Oh puleeeease!" she said. "Nobody really believes that's what we're in for, for heaven's—"

"Beep," went the agent's LieDeck, and Winnie sat back in her seat ... to think, perchance to pray.

A TINY BIT UNFAITHFUL

Doreen was sitting on the side of her bed, their bed, the bed that had been the warp and weft of her marriage. She held the telephone receiver with jellied hands. After several aborted efforts, she let her call go through. "Hi ... Randy," she said rather awkwardly. "I'm using the phone in your den. Is that line—uh—scrambled?"

"I'll call you right back," said Randall. He hung up, asked his secretary to hold his calls, and wondered what the hell this could possibly be about. Doreen positively detested security—had done ever since they were married, even if she understood the need for it. He arranged with Patriot Command for a secure line, punched in the number and asked his wife what was up.

"I got this ... strange call a few minutes ago," she explained. "The guy—at least I think it was a guy—it was impossible to tell because he just whispered—I actually think it was Cam, from the way he used words—anyway, he said..." There was just silence now; silence and what seemed to be labored breathing.

"Are you okay, honey?" Randall asked, but that netted him nothing. "What did this ... person say?" he tried.

Doreen cleared her throat in a way that Randall had noticed only two or three times before, and not on the easiest of days. "He whispered that ... that you had sex ... with Helen Kozinski ... a few years ago ... in Geneva. Of course I hung up right away, but ... Randy, please tell me it's not true."

Randall closed his eyes. *I ... I could lie*, he supposed. He knew that Patriot would have taped the mysterious call that his wife had received, as they did all telephone calls to the manor, but they wouldn't be able to LieDeck-verify the tape because the person had whispered. That escape hatch wasn't really open. *It had to be Cam, the son-of-a-bitch, and he could always call Doreen again and say the same thing in full voice. And besides, she'll probably want a LieDeck-verified denial from me at some point. And ... and she's entitled*, he thought.

"I'm afraid ... it's true," he said slowly. "It was a long time ago, honey, and it was just one time, and—"

"You ... you freaking liar," screamed Doreen, revealing without words that she had a LieDeck tied in to her end of the phone, a LieDeck that had surely blinked when he said it was only the one time. "How *could* you?" she cried out. "And with Helen! Jesus Christ, Randy, I should..."

Randall's gut wanted to retaliate, but his brain wasn't up for that. Better to take the hit, and hope. She had, after all, stopped short of completing her threat. She had to know that this slippery slope led to no good place, no happy ending. If they were to duke it out, she had to know that he would eventually ask the same question about *her* fidelity. Her dalliance really was a long time ago, and hers really *was* only one time. "But ... with Buck Ash!?" Randall recalled bellowing at Cam so many years ago. "I want that bastard *destroyed!*" he had screamed ... that was before he had learned from a very nervous and much younger Cam O'Connor that Doreen had actually been the aggressor, had pretty much thrown herself at the famous hockey star.

And if they fought, and if the fight got as far as tit for tat, Doreen would fall into emotional gridlock when she found out that her husband had known for the last fifteen years about her sweaty one-timer with "the Buck". And she would leave him—and sue him into penury—if she ever realized that much of her adult life had been surveilled surreptitiously by the likes of Cam O'Connor ... and Helen Kozinski!

Funny ... I never anticipated having to deal with this when I met Victor, he thought. *I guess I got used to having all the aces up my sleeve.*

He thought of telling Doreen that he had just fired Cam, but that would have led to a whole other dilemma, the thorny question of why Cam had been busted. *And she couldn't handle that.* He thought of telling Doreen he was sorry, but ... he couldn't do that either. He wasn't the least bit sorry. It had been a glorious three-day tryst, and it had become a memory that he cherished deeply, and often—even during moments of tenderness with his beloved wife. He wondered briefly if Doreen ever thought about her illicit romp with Buck's athletic body when her hands were creeping down her husband's bulging belly. Maybe it didn't matter if she did. Maybe it even helped their love life.

Maybe we're better off not knowing such things, he considered silently. *Perhaps we all need to lead two lives, a public one and a private one, like JFK, or J. Edgar Hoover. In the end, we want what we want. The freaking rational mind has got piss all to do with it.*

Randall wasn't the contemplative type, and it now occurred to him that he'd strayed several galaxies south of the situation at hand, and that Doreen hadn't said anything for a half-minute or so. *I wonder what she's thinking,* he said to himself.

"I suggest that we set up a little private amnesty, Doreen, like the government did, but just between you and me—at least until this political crisis is over. Please, Doreen ... just for now?"

Again, there was near-silence from his wife's end ... and then a click.

"I'll take that as a yes," said Randall, aloud, and there was no beep.

Chapter 66

I+T=C

By the time Winnie stepped off the elevator onto the eighth floor of the Ottawa General, her decision was firm. Other people's rules had never been her strong suit, and she was feeling empowered now that she'd told Dr. Secord about Human Three Consciousness ... a bit guilty, a tad scared, but empowered ... and righteous. Now she was poised to do it again, to break the code and tell Annette what the hell was going on in the world.

She found it quite incredible that the conspiracy of silence had held, unbroken, even unwrinkled, for nine days. She didn't know Annette all that well, but they'd had a couple of chats out at the lodge and shared a few belly laughs, usually at the expense of the male of the species. Annette had been surprised and pleased to receive Winnie's phone call yesterday, and she had welcomed the idea of a get-together. "I'll give you the scoop on Steve and you give me the skinny on Victor," she'd said. Patriot had told Winnie that the news blackout had originally been Annette's own idea, a self-imposed thing, but Winnie knew in her heart—*believed*, she corrected herself—that Annette would rather know than not know, considering her current condition, which wasn't so bad, and considering the state of the world, which was ... *worse than bad*, she thought ... again.

There were no reporters to be seen, but there were four Ottawa police officers sitting in the hall, and all eyes were on Winnie. "Excuse me," said the one at the desk, about ten feet from Annette's room. "And you are...?"

"Winnifred Jopps," she said. "I called yesterday."

"Oh ... yes," he said, checking his papers.

Winnie began walking past the desk, assuming that that was the full extent of the interrogation.

"Excuse me!" snapped the officer as he jumped up, extended an arm, and flipped the flap on his holster. Suddenly, all four officers were standing. They seemed pumped, primed for some kind of worst-case scenario, and they were staring at Winnie through narrowed eyes.

"Jeeze, no problem," said Winnie as she backed up with her hands fanned out at shoulder height.

"Sorry Ms. Jopps," said the officer with the papers. "There's just a couple of—uh—formalities, for first-time visitors."

His apparent partner, a female officer with a frying pan face and a forced smile, went through Winnie's purse, an operation that took longer to repair than to execute. Winnie was embarrassed to see the eclectic clutter that seemed to accumulate in there, or grow in there, and she made an effort to stay unflummoxed as she stuffed all the junk back in. The only thing the female agent didn't return was the front section of the *Ottawa Citizen*.

"Were you planning to show that to—" started the female cop.

"I know the ground rules," Winnie said, defensively.

"—show that to Ms. Blais?" finished the officer, undeterred by the interruption.

"Fine, I'll leave it with you," tried Winnie, but it was clear from the eyes that they wouldn't be letting her in the room unless they could LieDeck-verify her intentions.

"I do solemnly swear," Winnie intoned, her right hand thrust up in courtroom fashion, "that I will not talk to Annette about recent news events."

Both officers sensed that Winnie *had* intended to tell all to Annette, but her change of heart had passed muster on the LieDeck. And besides, their police colleagues would be listening in on the conversation in the private room from the communications center that had been set up in the adjoining room, unbeknownst to Patriot, Randall Whiteside, even the RCMP.

"Thank you very much, Ms. Jopps," said the female officer with a barely suppressed glare. "Actually, Ms. Blais isn't in her room right now, but she should be back in—"

"Gangway," hollered Annette as she careened around the corner in a battery-powered wheelchair. "Gimp coming through!"

Winnie laughed. Annette was wearing black wraparound glasses and the grimace of an Indy driver, and she was being followed by a harried Ottawa policeman, who had to jog to keep up. "Hey, you're mobile?" said Winnie as Annette jerked to a halt. "That's great."

"You been giving my pal a hard time?" Annette asked the officer in charge.

"No no," said Winnie. "Make that yes yes," she confessed when the police LieDeck beeped. "But it was mostly my fault," she added, unbeeped.

"Humph," said Annette as the chase cop took over, disengaged the power drive and pushed her manually into the room.

"Thanks," said Winnie to the officer, indicating that she could handle things from there.

"I just got this contraption ten minutes ago," said Annette as the officer exited the room. "I can walk now, but they won't let me. Something about insurance. So how are you, my little gold-digger?"

"You're evil," said Winnie, as she jiggled the wheelchair back and forth towards the bed in preparation for the next move. "The fact that Victor is rich has nothing to do with how we feel about each other. It's a good thing I know you didn't mean that."

"You got a LieDeck on?" asked Annette.

"No, and I don't need my LieDeck to know that. You're just being naughty, Annette, like a little kid at recess. I'm going to tell Steve what you said."

"No you're not," said Annette.

"You got a LieDeck telling you that?" asked Winnie.

"I don't need the stupid thing either," said Annette, as she braced herself to move up in the world.

She was not as well as she pretended to be. Mentally, she was in top form and high spirits, but physically, she was obviously still weak. Winnie helped her stand and pushed the wheelchair away with a foot as soon as the patient was stable. Annette had one hand on a corner of the night table and the other clamped onto Winnie's forearm. Her face betrayed self-doubt, and her whole body shook perceptibly as she transferred her weight to the mattress and lifted her legs up, with Winnie's help. As she eased back onto her pillow, they both felt relieved.

"Thanks," sighed Annette. She looked into her friend's green eyes, and hoped she didn't appear too pathetic. "I hate that my body won't behave."

Winnie pulled a chair up to the bed, sat down, took Annette's hand and squeezed it. "It's good to see you."

"So ... let's have it!" Annette grinned. She seemed to have gotten her second wind ... almost.

"Have it?" asked Winnie with her eyes thrown skyward, feigning ignorance ... and innocence.

"Come on, Winnie," said Annette. "I want the lowdown. Is he ... you know ... is he ... good?"

"None of your damn business," protested Winnie in a squeaky voice that defined her objections as pro forma and temporary. "Okay ... yeah," she revealed with twinkling eyes. "In fact, I'd say he's ... terrific."

"Oooooeee, I'm getting goose bumps," squealed Annette. "So ... come on ... tell me everything."

"No way," said Winnie. "Not till you got traders."

"Traders?" said Annette.

"Yeah, something juicy to trade back. Like after you and Steve get together in a few weeks."

"Okay, Ms. Poop," grumped Annette. "But everything ... else is okay with Victor? I mean ... on other levels?"

"Well, yeah, except we're having our first big fight, him and me. And it's going to get a lot worse tomorrow."

Annette propped herself up on one elbow and focused her good eye carefully, to pick up all the nuances. "So ... what's the deal?"

"Well," began Winnie, "it's kind of a long story. You see when Victor was out at his farm, working on the

LieDeck, he started talking to himself, out loud, LieDeck-verifying himself, and after a while he realized that you could find out a lot of things about yourself that way, and eventually he developed this new sort of a theory ... about what happens to people if they've been exposed to the LieDeck for a while. He made a few tapes about it, and ... the thing is, he won't let anybody hear them. I felt it was very important for him to release them. We argued about it a bunch of times, and one minute he'd be ready to do it and the next minute he'd change his mind, and we'd start fighting all over again. Now he says 'No way José'—that's his favorite saying these days."

"But what's his reasoning?" asked Annette. "Why wouldn't he *want* people to know about that stuff?"

Winnie suddenly realized she'd put her foot in it. She couldn't answer the question truthfully without breaking her word to the police, who were right outside the door, possibly listening. "Oh, who the hell knows?" she said, pretending to be exasperated. "He's one of those guys that just won't budge once he gets his heels dug in—you know how men are. Anyway, then he tells me that he hid those tapes, eh? And he won't even tell me where! So I said to myself, 'Screw you, buster.' You see ... he already told me everything that's on the tapes. That's how come I knew it was really important for him to release them. So I—uh—told Mr. Whiteside about it. He agreed with me, and he set up a meeting with this Dr. Emile Secord ... nice guy ... heads up the Psych Department at the University of Montreal. Anyway, I met him at the plant this afternoon ... actually, I just came from there ... and I told him every damned thing that was on the tapes ... at least insofar as I could remember ... and I'm pretty sure I understood all the main stuff."

"Lord Jesus!" said Annette. "Victor's going to go ballistic when he finds out. Why did you do that?"

She was right, of course, and Winnie realized that her foot was back in it, even deeper this time. She couldn't talk about the world situation that had eaten at her conscience and finally led her to feel compelled to take this precipitous action.

"Yeah," she said, with resignation in her voice. "He's going to be awfully upset ... for sure. But he's flat out wrong on this one. He's bright, you know, *exceptionally* bright, but sometimes he can't seem to get a handle on his responsibilities. He's the only person in the world who's had any long-term experience at living with the LieDeck, at coping with this ... technological censor. It's not fair, you know? I mean some people are bound to have trouble with his invention, eh? And it's clear to me that this theory of his can help people adjust to the thing, you now? I'll—uh—tell you about his theory ... if you want."

Annette sensed that there was something vaguely evasive about Winnie's answer. "Maybe later," she said, reaching up under the eye bandage to scratch an itch. "Could ... you get me another pillow from that closet over there?"

* * *

The police inspector in the temporary communications center adjacent to Annette's room quick-dialed his boss at Metro headquarters in Ottawa. "Sir, I think we got something here," he blurted out, glancing once more to make absolutely sure the three tape recorders were still rolling.

"Situation?" demanded Chief Hodgins.

"Winnifred Jopps, Victor Helliwell's—uh—partner, she's in the room with Annette Blais, and she's telling her some stuff that ... well, it's the other shoe, sir."

"Talk English, Inspector!" barked the Chief.

"She's got the information from the Helliwell tapes, sir, and she spilled it all to a Dr. Emile Secord, at Whiteside's plant, about an hour ago. He's a psychology professor from the University of

Montreal—head of the department, she said. And guess what? This Dr. Secord made a tape of their whole conversation! He's probably still out at the Whiteside plant. Think we should bust him?"

"Shoot me the digital of what you've got on line four. And keep this line open. And keep taping. I've got you on the speaker, but don't interrupt me unless—"

"I know the drill, sir."

* * *

"So," said Winnie cheerfully, "I guess you're ... gearing up mentally to restart your life."

Annette thought about the question. The housekeeper from the lodge had nailed it. That was exactly what she faced, and now she realized that she hadn't developed a plan, at least no further than getting her face fixed and definitely not returning to her old job. She qualified for a pension from Patriot as a result of her injuries, and while she wasn't about to turn down the money, it wasn't her style to kick back and let life happen to her ... at least it didn't used to be.

"Welllll," she said slowly, "I hope Steve and I get married ... like I told you on the phone ... but apart from that..."

"What are a few of the things that you'd want to do in the very first week after you get released?" asked Winnie.

"Hmmm, maybe there was some brain damage after all," joked Annette. "Normally ... well, before ... I'd have a five-minute answer for a question like that, right on the tip of my tongue."

Winnie watched as Annette faded into private reflection. Here was the first victim of the LieDeck—if you didn't count Victor's old friend George Cluff, allegedly murdered by the CIA over the early LieDeck model, and if you didn't count Victor himself, for the toll taken by those years of driving taxi ... and hiding out. Annette was arguably the first living victim of the official LieDeck Revolution, and Winnie felt very strongly that she should, and could, help her get back on track.

"You must be freaking angry at the guys that shot you," she ventured.

Annette's face turned pale. "Well, I ... I ... don't want to kill them or anything like that," she said flippantly.

"Beep," said Winnie.

"Beep?" repeated Annette. "You *beeped* me?"

"Yeah ... beep," said Winnie again. "Do you want me to turn on my LieDeck so we can see for sure?"

Annette smiled. "No," she admitted, "I ... *do* want to kill those sons o' bitches. My shrink says it's normal for me to feel that way, but I'm not sure I want to keep feeling that way for the rest of my life. They did tell me that they caught the guys, but when I asked who did it, they wouldn't tell me. I asked if the RCMP was actually involved, like that kid said on TV, but they wouldn't tell me that either. I was damn mad at first, and then I realized they were probably right. I'm not ready yet. I ... don't want to know."

* * *

"RCMP, Joly here."

"Commissioner, it's Hodgins, at Metro. We've got something here. We know how to find out what's on

those Helliwell tapes. We've got to get this to the PM right away."

"Holy shit! How did you manage to ... never mind, I probably don't want to know, right? I'll conference call the three of us. Give me a minute. And don't hang up. And for sure don't tell the PM how you found out if he shouldn't know."

* * *

"Hey, I told you about Victor," said Winnie. "So what's the inside story on Steve?"

"Not too much to tell," said Annette teasingly. "He has exquisite taste in women, I must say."

"Not as good as Victor," smiled Winnie.

"The other day ... Saturday ... yeah ... God, I seem to lose track of time sometimes. Today's Monday, right?"

"Yeah."

"Anyway, the other day I got Steve to lie on the bed with me. It was the first time we ever snuggled. I haven't felt that nice for an awful long time, but then I put his hand on my breast and he ... almost ... lost it," giggled Annette. Winnie was trying not to crack up completely. "I shouldn't laugh," Annette continued. "It was really sweet, actually, but then the damn nurse walked in on us."

"You're kidding," said Winnie, suppressing a smile.

"Some dumb business with Cam," said Annette. "I asked him on Sunday what it was about, but he wouldn't tell me."

* * *

"Dr. Secord, this is Nick Godfrey here. We've got a serious crisis to manage, and my RCMP commissioner tells me you've got a tape that we want, need. So ... talk to me."

"This is quite an honor, Prime Minister. If I may give you some of the background on the—"

"Cut to the chase, Dr. Secord," Godfrey said abruptly.

"Well," said Secord, "it seems that the idea behind the LieDeck has little to do with detecting lies or catching criminals. Mr. Helliwell had a twelve-year jump on the rest of us, and it seems he's figured out a theory as to the nature of man—a new theory. The ... technique that he used is sound, and I've been able to confirm most of the basic tenets he advances, just in the last hour. It's not very complicated, but it *is* dynamite, academically ... and in practical terms too. The problem is, I gave my word to Ms. Jopps that I would not reveal any of this for a full day, so that she could—"

"Dr. Secord, I can have you in custody in thirty seconds, and I'll do that if you force me to," said the PM. "I need the bottom line, and I need it *NOW!*"

" $I+T=C!$ " said Secord tersely, and without hesitation.

"I'm ... sorry, Doctor," said a chastened Nick Godfrey after a few seconds of silence. "I didn't ... mean to shout at you. Yes, I did mean to. Sorry ... again. Now, if you could please be a little *less* succinct. What the fuck does that mean: $I+T=C?$ "

"Instinct plus technology equals chaos," explained Secord. "It's ... it seems to be the psychological and political equivalent of—uh—of Einstein's $E=mc^2$."

"Translation?"

"We wouldn't give nukes to apes, sir, because the first time they got really ticked off, they'd blow up the world. Problem is, we used to *be* apes. *Real* problem is, we still *are*. It's still ... in us ... apeness, if you will."

"Explain."

Dr. Secord bit his upper lip ... and reminded himself that he was dealing with an academic commoner. "We used to have one boss, internally," he began carefully. "That was the instinct, the same internal boss as all the other animals. It basically directed our behaviors ... according to its own preprogrammed perception of our survival needs. And it worked its magic through the emotions—made us eat by way of pain, hunger—and it consolidated adaptive behaviors, reinforced them, with pleasurable feelings—taste, a full stomach, that sort of thing—punishments and rewards, carrots and sticks, all from the inside. It seems that by whatever means, rationality was added *on top* of that gestalt, onto an already complete, surviving organism. So ... now ... each one of us has two bosses inside."

There was a pause on the PMO end of the phone as Nick scratched his nose and felt the need to urinate. "Try again," he said.

"Human One, as Mr. Helliwell calls it, had only one boss, instinct, same as any other mammal. Whatever brainpower we had was *at the service* of the instinct. The instinct to survive told us *what* to do, and the brain served to figure out *how* to do it. Human Two, that's what Helliwell calls us, *Homo sapiens*, we have *two* internal bosses, the survival instinct, which remains unchanged, and a brain that can also tell us *what* to do. These two—uh—entities, I guess I'd say, instinct and rationality, they often work in tandem, but at times they come into conflict with each other, try to steer us in two directions at once. Sometimes the instinct wins, sometimes rationality wins, and other times it's a saw-off. They can compromise ... or they can even take turns winning or exercising control."

"So instinct is bad and rationality is good, a sort of an internal God-Satan war going on?" asked the prime minister.

"Sort of," said Secord, "but without the value judgments. Both—uh—sides, if we can call them that, are vital, and both have a part to play in every decision, every action."

"So these two ... personalities," asked the PM, "these two ... parts of me ... I *have* them ... or I *am* them?"

"An astute question," said Secord. "That's ... going to take a while to figure out, and it may not even matter except to scholars and nitpickers. What *is* important is that all the emotional sticks and carrots are still at the service of, or belong to, the instinct."

Godfrey tried to lock on to the significance of all this, but it wasn't very easy. "People might write this whole idea off as crap, you know," he said, more as a hope than anything else.

"No can do," replied Secord. "We've gone way past believing and disbelieving things since the LieDeck came out. This Human One, Human Two analysis is readily LieDeck-verifiable."

"Shit," said the Prime Minister, "I keep forgetting. You're ... sure it's verifiable?"

"Well, he goes on about some Human Three stuff, and that part is a bit speculative—he even gets into some new-fangled socio-economic system in relation to Human Three, but he didn't tell his girlfriend much about that. However, the Human One, Human Two stuff ... well, let me put it this way: I ran it by

six people over the telephone, using a LieDeck to verify their responses, and every one of them already knew it ... meaning on the *subconscious* level. And I think if I did the same for a thousand people, or a million people, it would still come out unanimous. If people were that certain of the existence of God, I'd say straight out that there *is* a God. Bottom line is that we know who we were, meaning Human One, and we know who we are, and we are Human Two, as Helliwell defines it. This isn't actually a theory he made up, sir. It's something that he's ... well, *discovered*. Whole different ball of wax there, sir."

"Okay, okay," conceded the prime minister. "Go on with ... with that stuff..."

"Mr. Helliwell projects the emergence of a Human Three, a new stage of evolution, as the necessary end product of a LieDeck society, the necessary end product of the LieDeck Revolution, as scholars would likely phrase it now. A—uh—Human Three man is exactly the same as Human Two, except that he is always capable of making his rationality win over his instinct, and always does so if the consequences of doing otherwise would harm himself, other people, or the planet. It's a form of hyper-enlightened self-interest, I guess you'd call it. Helliwell's theory suggests that when Human Twos yield to instinct, they can regress all the way back to being a Human One, a very clever Human One ... which leaves us with a very high probability—a certainty, actually—of harming the planet, each other, and ourselves. In effect, he's saying that with the magnifying effect that happens as a result of our technology, meaning the way technology enlarges all the consequences of our behavior, we are destined to produce chaos, of some day becoming ... well, apes with nukes, sir. $I+T=C$."

"And ... you think he's right?"

"It's sort of like the wheel, sir. Once you see it in motion, you realize there's nothing to it, but it works, and you wonder why you never figured it out before, and how you ever got along without it."

"But ... the Human Three part isn't verifiable?"

"No, at least not by me at this time. I'd have to have a Human Three in front of me to do that, and I don't know if there even are any yet. The terms 'Human One, Two, and Three' aren't important, Prime Minister, but if we do adopt his terminology, then I'd have to say I know we are Human Two, and I believe we will become Human Three, just as Mr. Helliwell predicts—and for the reason he predicts it—because of the LieDeck, sir."

Godfrey felt like he was about to lose bladder control, or more. "Well, that's all very well and good for our grandchildren," he said calmly, "but ... I have to deal with the here and now. So, Dr. Secord, do you see any practical applications for this theory?"

"It's hard to think of a practical matter where it *doesn't* apply!"

"Example?"

"You name it, it applies."

"Air pollution."

Dr. Secord closed his eyes, paused for about five seconds, and there it was. "Polluters pressure government to relax standards for reasons of profit. However, the best interests of humanity and global survival require a stricter standard. A Human Two politician fears the power of polluting industries to influence the political process, and a Human Two politician fears the consequences for re-election, since the tax implications of stricter pollution controls won't be popular. So he acts based on those fears, decides not to raise the standards, but he must pretend that his policies are rational and within his mandate to represent the best interests of the electorate. The LieDeck will detect such ruses in future, of

course. A Human Three leader would make the rational choice, and opt for the stricter pollution standards, in the long term interests of the electorate and the planet."

"Fear be damned?"

"Exactly."

"And he would lose the next election!"

"Well, yes, if the electorate is still Human Two, but if—"

"Overpopulation?" interrupted Godfrey.

"There's too many people for available resources," said Dr. Secord plainly. "Human Three politicians would institute an international policy of one kid per couple, since that would cut the world population by half each generation; we do that for three generations, and we'll have a world population of ... one billion or so ... in a century. After that, two kids per couple produces ZPG—zero population growth."

"You ... just figured that out?"

"Like I said, it's like the wheel," explained Dr. Secord. "Quite suddenly, what used to be hard is child's play. Being rational simply isn't that difficult once you can ignore how you feel."

"What about enforcement for a population-reduction program?"

"The Human Threes in the world won't need any enforcement. They'll do it because they know in their rational minds that it makes sense in terms of their own self interest."

"Violence?"

"Makes far more problems than it solves. Law is better, warts and all. Where there's no enforceable law, like on the international level, we'll have to create law, world law ... enforceable world law. Violence, whether it's a parent spanking a kid, a duel, a barroom brawl, or a WMD war, is for immature people with lazy brains and an almost treasonous refusal to think rationally—the equivalent to reckless endangerment, minimum. At least that's how I *think* a Human Three would view it. I'm new at this myself, sir."

"And this ... I guess you'd call it a *transition* to Human Three," asked the PM, "the majority of people can make it in...?"

"The majority?"

"Yeah."

"In Canada? I'd say a couple of years, tops."

"So ... that could be ... before the next election?"

"Yes sir."

"And how long for a particular individual to—uh—switch over?" The Prime Minister could hardly believe he was having this conversation, but indeed he was.

"Well, some people will refuse to do it at all, I suppose," said Dr. Secord. "But any individual person can understand the whole thing and commit to the transition in maybe ... half an hour, and a person could

become a Human Three, consolidate the change, in ... a month, maybe even a week. Some people might be able to do it in ... a couple of days, and I would guess that those who do it first will be very busy for a few months helping other people get it done.” He dearly hoped the Prime Minister would not think to ask him whether he, personally, was in the midst of this transition right at this very moment, or if he'd already reached the far bank of that river. *What would I say?* He wondered. *Just the truth*, came the answer from somewhere in his head that he didn't feel in charge of. But it was right, that answer. The LieDeck made it necessary to speak the truth, and the truth was that he, Dr. Secord, already *was* a Human Three, just as a newborn foal already is a horse ... albeit still wet behind the ears and not terribly stable on its pins. *And some of us will just say “eureka,” and it's done*, he thought to add, but didn't dare say out loud.

"Jesus Christ!" spit the Prime Minister.

"Yeah. Pretty scary!" admitted Dr. Secord. "But the transition he talks about just isn't particularly difficult for people with reasonably good minds and the right attitude."

"Stay on the line, please," said Godfrey. "Jacques," he barked at his chief of staff after pressing the "hold" button, "I want Secord's tape here in thirty minutes, and I want our top people on it. I want a full report by seven p.m. And get me Ambassador Jacks on the phone." He pressed "hold" again. "You still there, Dr. Secord?"

* * *

"That's about it," said Winnie as she finished telling Annette about Victor's theory of Human One, Two, Three. "I'm not sure I explained it very well. It's my second time through it today."

"That's nothing more than a rehash of Freudian psychology, and not a very good one at that," said Annette. "I mean ... I don't know that much about Freud, except that he said everything came down to sex, didn't he? Wasn't the 'id' supposed to be the instinctive part of human personality?"

"Freud, shmoid," said Winnie. "Who cares about believing theories any more? Before we had the LieDeck, a credible theory was whatever you could get away with ... or sell ... or whatever you could get people to buy into. We don't even have to believe Victor or not believe him. Belief is kaput, not needed, disgraced, stupid. To me, it's ... like coming out of a zillion-mile-long cave, into the light. We can't fool ourselves any more."

Annette seemed content to weigh what she was hearing. There was a lot to digest here, even for a person of her intellect.

Winnie felt it would be best to continue. "There ... is more," she said.

"Like ... what?" asked Annette.

"Like some things are instinctive, but also rational, for instance, while other things are instinctive and irrational, and others are rational but feel all wrong, instinctively. Is this ... making sense to you?"

"But what would be rational but feel wrong instinctively?" asked Annette.

"When I asked Victor about that, he used the example of a bear," said Winnie. "If a bear looks like it's about to attack you and you don't have a gun to kill it, you'd want to run away as fast as you can. Your instinct says that's the right response, but if you do run, you'll almost certainly get killed. But ... if you just lie perfectly still, even if the bear hits you or bites you, it will usually assume you're dead, lose interest and leave you alone. You see what I mean?"

"Yeah, I think so," said Annette. "What about love?"

"What about it?"

"Is it instinctive or rational?"

Winnie rolled her eyes and considered the question for a few seconds, long enough to realize that she didn't know the answer. She picked up her outsize purse, and rummaged through the clutter until she found her LieDeck. "When I *really* want to know, I have to use it," she explained.

"Sort of a high-tech conscience," ventured Annette as her pal turned the device on.

"Love is instinctive," said Winnie directly into the microphone holes. She waited for a beep that never came, that she didn't really expect. "Because," she continued, "it draws men and women together for sex ... so they'll have offspring ... so that the species will survive. There! You see? Love is instinctive ... not that I care a hell of a great deal!" She placed her LieDeck on the bedside table.

"But is it also rational?" asked Annette.

"Why don't you find out yourself," suggested Winnie.

"Okay," said Annette. "Jeeze, this is fun, and exciting. So ... love..." she hesitated, enjoying the hunt and attempting to second-guess the outcome. "Love is instinctive, but it is also ... rational." There was no beep.

Winnie was astonished. She had expected a beep, for sure. "Let me try," she said. "Love is instinctive ... but it is *not* rational," she said.

"Beep," went the LieDeck.

"Well I'll be damned," she said, earning herself a gratuitous beep. "I never would have guessed it!" Another unexpected beep made both women smile. "Either we both believe something that's wrong," she said carefully, "or love *is* rational. I guess we have to accept it as a fact ... but I don't understand how that could be."

"I think I do," said Annette excitedly. "We all want love, right? Everybody enjoys receiving love, so it makes sense in terms of our own instinctive and rational self interest to give love away, because the more we give away the more we get, sort of like the old rule of karma, you know? As in 'what goes around comes around.'"

"So hate," said Winnie, "like you feel towards those men who shot you, that would be ... instinctive..." She waited for a beep that never came. "But irrational."

"Beep," went the LieDeck.

"Jesus, now I'm totally confused," said Winnie.

"My hatred for those guys is instinctive," said Annette, noting that there was no beep so far, "because it—uh—serves to promote aggression or an attempted defense against a genuine threat to my survival—or an escape, I guess—and yet my hate is ... also rational, because ... because ... I don't know why."

"Beep," said the LieDeck.

"Whaaaaat!" complained Annette. "This LieDeck is full of shit."

"Beep."

They both laughed, although not with great pleasure. This was a bit like losing a chess match to a computer. You could grab a hammer and smash the sucker into little bits, but you couldn't deny what it had done.

* * *

"Jacks here."

"Lynden, it's Nick. Listen, we copped a break up here. It could settle things down all over the world. Don't ask, okay? It's not for certain yet, and there isn't time to explain. I want to address the Security Council. Get an emergency session set up for eight p.m. I'll do it over the phone. They've got the tech for that, eh, to patch the phone to their speaker system?"

"Nick," said Jacks helplessly, "there's nobody left down here, nobody worth talking to, at any rate. The UN is practically empty. The WDA people disappeared a few days ago, of course, but ever since Vladimir Latzoff shot his fucking mouth off about maybe using nukes on Romania, people are fleeing the city. I mean you must have heard about the traffic jams, gridlock, and looting—even some of the soldiers are taking off, covering their own asses."

"Fuck!"

* * *

"I guess you do know why your hate is rational," said Winnie. "At least ... you seem to know, subconsciously. I guess just your conscious mind doesn't realize why."

"Could it be that my hatred is rational for the same reason that it's instinctive?" asked Annette.

"Maybe," said Winnie. "Try saying it as a statement rather than a question, and see what happens."

"My hate for those sons o' bitches is rational..." Annette waited a few seconds to make sure she was okay to that point, "because it motivates me to avoid or destroy a real threat to my survival." And again there was silence. "So," she went on, "when my real needs are served by my emotions, instinct itself is rational." The silence of the LieDeck confirmed that she was on the right track, and Winnie was mightily impressed.

"But instinct is irrational," Annette continued, "when the threat is not real ... when the threat is overestimated ... or when my reaction to the threat might be self defeating..." Every time she paused, the LieDeck silently endorsed her assessment of reality, or at least the validity of her *beliefs* about reality, her subconscious notion of reality. "Christ," she said. "This God damned thing is dangerous!"

"Beep."

Winnie smiled. "That doesn't mean the LieDeck *isn't* dangerous, by the way," she explained, "only that you don't *really* believe it is. Neither do I, frankly. What's really dangerous is Human Two, especially with technology in its hands."

"So ... you're actually a Human Three now?" asked Annette.

"Getting there," admitted Winnie with a trace of pride.

Annette was stunned by the discoveries she was making with the aid of the LieDeck, if not about reality, at least about her perceptions of reality, meaning the notions that the subconscious mind assumed or assessed to be the truth.

* * *

"Why won't he talk to me?" shouted Nick at the U.S. secretary of state—actually, the Air Force general who was filling that role now.

"Prime Minister, I've heard you out, I've asked you to send us any information you can, but I simply have to hang up now. The Martial Law Authority in the United States of America is trying to deal with domestic panic and Russian insanity at the same time. You could tell me you found the Holy Grail or the meaning of life or the exact value of pi. It would still have to wait, sir."

"That's from the top?"

"Yes sir. Sorry sir."

"Fuck!"

* * *

"Look," warned Winnie, "I promised everybody, from Mr. O'Connor to Mr. Whiteside to the damned cops outside the door, that I wouldn't tell you anything about the world ... any news. All I'll say is that the attack on the lodge was kind of a Cold War II thing. The people who shot you thought the LieDeck was a threat to democracy and freedom, and you were just ... in the way. That's all I'll say."

Annette's mind returned to the question of what she was going to do, what she could do, to resolve her all-consuming hatred for the men who had somehow decided that her life was expendable ... for the cause of freedom and democracy, she had now learned. Were these people insane? Did they feel remorse? Could they actually be right about the LieDeck and its potential to threaten the very things that the free world holds dear? Were their beliefs rational, or merely rationalizations of some dark, instinctive need to have an enemy and play the killer in order to feel safe? The "eat or be eaten" equation. And what would LieDeck-verification do to their consciences, to their perceptions of the world, of reality?

* * *

"General Secretary Latzoff," Godfrey said crisply, "I know we're not on the same side of anything, but you can always use a LieDeck to monitor this phone call, or to LieDeck-verify your tape of this phone call. I am telling you the truth. It looks like this theory is valid, and we want to set up a top-level conference call with your officials, in case this stuff actually means what we think it means. The LieDeck, together with this new theory, could mean the end of all current wars ... possibly the end of war itself ... forever!"

Nick Godfrey cocked his head, pinching the receiver between his ear and shoulder, and hit the "timer" button on his digital watch. For posterity, if there was to be one, he noted that it took a minute and forty-two seconds for the translation to get done and for the Russian leader to construct his response. This had the potential of being one of the key decisions in all of human history, and as the Canadian Prime Minister waited, he felt a stinging pain in his chest. He took a deep breath and virtually willed it away.

"When will you complete your assessment of this matter?" came the translator's marbled Russian voice.

"No later than nine p.m., our time. That's in about three and a half hours," said Nick, looking into Jacques Lafontaine's face for confirmation of the plan, and the timing of the thing. Jacques nodded. There was a short pause, and a few muffled words could be heard from Moscow.

"Call this number tomorrow morning at seven a.m., Eastern Standard Time," said the nervous translator. "General Secretary Latzoff will take your call personally."

* * *

"Somewhere..." said Winnie as she began rummaging through her purse again, "I've got ... here it is."

She pulled out a thin, black, plastic covered wire, with a jack on one end and a suction cup on the other.

Annette recognized it from her years of work in the security business. It was the poor man's way to tape a telephone conversation, eight dollars and ninety-five cents at Radio Shack. "So, are they including those with every LieDeck sale now?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Winnie. "I understand Whiteside just got a shipment of thirty thousand of these thingamabobs and they got another half million on order, would you believe? People were complaining that they couldn't use a LieDeck over the phone. Now they can. That's one of the reasons they used the casing of a Dictaphone to house the LieDeck. You stick the suction cup on the ear end of the telephone receiver and the jack into the mike hole, and bingo, you can verify the person on the other end of the phone—in secret, if you put your LieDeck on the light mode or the pin signaling mode ... and your end of things too, of course ... verify both—"

"Good thinking," said Annette, meaning the inclusion of this device with all LieDeck orders, "but why did you take it out?"

"So you can call those guys they arrested," said Winnie. "If you want to resolve your hate, you have to talk to those guys."

The thought of confronting her attackers terrified Annette. She'd spent many an hour, awake and asleep, imagining how she would lay hurt on the people who had hurt her, and some of the ideas she'd come up with were so heinously violent or cruel that she hadn't even dared discuss them with the psychiatrist she'd been seeing twice a day. She didn't even know who these men were.

"How would I get hold of them?" she asked.

"Through Patriot," said Winnie. "Get Whiteside to apply pressure on the PM, maybe through his friend Senator Cadbury. Tell Mr. O'Connor he damned well owes you, so you can sort yourself out, you know ... emotionally. Tell him you're ready to learn what the hell is going on. They can't keep you in the dark against your will."

Annette thought it was a grand idea. Scary, but grand. She was about to ask if it could be arranged for tomorrow morning—she was always a bit stronger in the mornings—when Helen arrived at the door. "Ready to go?" she asked mischievously.

"Where?" asked Annette.

"To the Whitesides' manor," said Helen. "You've been released."

Chapter 67 PIETRO FINDS PIETRO

Steve Sutherland had done his part at the cathedral, and it wasn't easy. He had spoken with feeling about Bill Doyle's finer qualities as a man, and meant every word. He had expressed his profound regret at not having anticipated Bill's reverse epiphany, although he skipped the part about how maybe Bill might still be alive today if only ... *if only a lot of things*.

In the eulogy, Steve had also declined to repeat the traditional mention of how the deceased was surely in a "far better place" now. Steve couldn't say that even if he had wanted to, because he was now in the habit of leaving his LieDeck on at all times—this for a lot of reasons. And turning it off wouldn't have

changed a thing. Representatives of the press were in attendance, at the church, and they just never turned their LieDecks off when an innocent white lie could sometimes lead to a perfectly printable exposé.

Maybe I'm getting too cynical, he said to himself as a priest droned on under a dull sky and over the suspended casket. *Come to think of it, I only noticed one reporter inside the church, and she seemed to be doing more praying than note taking. I'd go talk to her, human to human, if I weren't so tied up with ...* He hated that brick wall, the one that said: "If you speak it aloud, then 'beep.'"

Sixty or so relatives, nuns and priests were now gathered at the gravesite, and Steve stayed near back of the pack, on the side of things closest to the road. He had no official role to play here, and that was a relief. The brief outdoor ceremony was coming to an end, and he really didn't want to stay, to exchange strained glances and cautious words with the family and the last of the true believers. Cemeteries were difficult and sad places, God or no God.

He turned and walked away, slowly, towards the Patriot car that was waiting to whisk him back to the Whiteside's manor. The grass was well on its way to full uniform now, and the buds on the trees were well into their annual unfolding. *Too bad people don't get to start over like that,* he thought.

"Steve," came a voice from behind. "Got a minute?"

It was Bishop Pietro Malini, he of the legendary dust-up with old Joe Farley ... and dressed in civvies! Steve had never seen him like that, not even at Catholic Youth Camp. He also hadn't noticed him at the cathedral, or in the crowd around the grave ... perhaps because he was quite short.

"Of course—uh..." he said, offering a tired hand to his former colleague.

"Pietro," said the frail, balding man as he gave Steve's hand a consoling double-clasp. "Just call me Pietro," he said as his hands quickly returned to the relative safety of his pants pockets. "I'm ... out of the Church too," he admitted with a resigned shrug. "It's quite a shock, actually, and..." His voice trailed off into that brand new vacant lot where feelings went when the pillars of a lifetime had buckled and snapped.

Steve knew that crowded ghetto well, and he nodded in the way one does when there is understanding, but no words. "So ... where will you go now?" he asked. "What will you do?"

"Well, I'm certainly not going to pull a Bill Doyle, if that's what you mean," said Pietro bluntly.

Steve winced at the way his friend's suicide seemed to have become sort of a "thing," a textbook behavioral precedent that one could follow ... or not.

"I've run up quite a debt with that new nine-six-seven line recently, that LieDeck-verification phone line service," continued Pietro. "And—uh..." His voice involuntarily withered again.

"And...?" ventured Steve. The last thing he wanted was to trigger a repeat of the Bill Doyle tragedy, but this was a grown man here, and he was asking to be asked.

Pietro took a deep breath and let it all out. "And it was worth every penny," he said confidently. "I now know who I was, I now know who I am, and I now know where I'm going, all thanks to the LieDeck."

Steve's LieDeck told him by its silence that Pietro's confidence was real, but he had heard this brand of bravado before, from Bill, when *he* had first faced reality. Bill had believed himself too, and had even LieDeck-verified his feelings, but then ... ?

"So who ... were you?" he asked.

"I was somewhat hard to get along with, I know, but I was a decent man, one of many who bought into a popular myth ... and I did quite a poor job of internalizing it, of being it," confessed Pietro.

"Well, I'm a member of that club too," admitted Steve, with more hurt than humor. "So who are you ... I mean now? What's ... next for you?"

"Well, I still am a decent man," said Pietro. "But as it turns out, I'm a decent—uh—homosexual man. And I'm okay with that, Steve. I really am okay about that! I guess I knew that I was gay since ... well, since forever, even if I never faced it."

Steve searched for a telltale glint of truth in the tiny brown eyes of the redoubtable Bishop Malini, forgetting that no one had to do that any more. Pietro, as he now wanted to be called, was indeed at ease with his new identity, or with his recent discovery of his true identity ... at least for now.

"And as for the future," continued Pietro, "the first thing I'm going to do is get my own LieDeck, so I don't have to rely on the nine-six-seven line, and I'm going to use it to write a common sense book on how we can dump God and replace Him—replace the myth, I guess I should say—with a reality-based moral code. Not a bad idea, eh?"

"And I'm going to tell everything I know to the Caughy Commission, of course—although now that they've got a LieDeck, they've got things pretty well figured out and under control..."

His words stopped flowing momentarily, and he seemed to find it necessary to look off into the distance. *So many priests in jail*, he thought. A "holy round-up," they were calling it in the papers. *How could we not have known? How could we have known and not understood? How could we have known and understood and done nothing, or too little? How could we have rationalized such a ... a holocaust?*

Pietro consciously recaptured his confidence and picked up where he had left off with Steve. "And on the personal level, I'm going to simply be the person I really am, without shame or regret. I've decided that I'm going to actively seek a partner for myself, Steve, a person to share my life with, a ... a husband, or whatever gay guys call it. That's if..."

Steve knew the ending of that sentence, and it reminded him that a Patriot agent was standing beside a car, nearby, frightened to death by the perilous state of the world, and waiting to perform what might turn out to be his last official duty. "I gotta run," he said ... honestly, as far as he knew.

"Beep," went his LieDeck as he backed away.

"It was ... good to see you, Pietro," he added quickly.

"Beep."

Chapter 68 A NATURAL REACTION

Annette was delighted to learn that she was being released, but a bit confused as to why she hadn't been told in advance. Dr. Kreuzer had always made a point of telling her everything ... or so he said. Helen and Winnie agreed to wait in the chopper while the nurse helped Annette dress. Putting on full regalia was something she hadn't done for a while, something she'd never done with limbs that felt like water balloons.

"I want to say goodbye to Dr. Kreuzer," she said.

"Oh, I'm afraid he's busy," said Nurse Bea. "And you're not sick enough to waste his time any more, young lady. Write him a letter. He'll like that."

Annette looked at the weathered face of the woman whose kind, professional manner had made her days bearable for ... it seemed an eternity. She was perhaps forty-five years old, physically large, and "strong like bool," she had bragged ... often ... trilling the "r" in "strong" and saying "bool" like some Eastern-European fanatic. "I am not a bucket of kitty litter," Nurse Bea also used to tell her. "You piss on this old broad and you're gonna get pissed on right back."

"Thanks for everything," said Annette.

"No problem," said the nurse. "Go have yourself a good life, and if you want some personal advice, next time somebody shoots at you ... duck."

The orderlies had already taken the suitcases and presents up to the helicopter on the hospital roof. Annette eased down into the wheelchair and waved goodbye to the room that had been her home for almost two weeks. "Hope my replacement is less of a pain," she said.

"That's got my vote," said Nurse Bea as she waved goodbye.

Once Annette was on the roof and rolling towards Whitebird III, she began to feel in charge again, able to make decisions again. It had been a long road back to the land of the living, and there were still many miles to go, but at least she was out of that place where ambulances scream in and hearses lumber out, silently. She was back in the jungle, where humanity muddled along, century after century.

She felt giddy about being released, but something was keeping her emotions from showing. As Patriot agents helped her up and into the chopper, she tried to put her finger on the problem, and failed. While they folded and stowed the wheelchair and helped her buckle up, she kept glancing at Helen, who seemed to be fussing about so as to avoid eye contact. She looked at Winnie as if to say, "Is there a problem I don't know about?" but Winnie just smiled and mentioned that this was her first time in a helicopter ... again.

"I know you better than anybody, Helen," Annette finally said after the craft became airborne. "There's something you aren't telling me."

Helen thought about telling the story of how she had been appointed to replace Cam O'Connor, but that presented some problems. Annette would then have to learn the facts about Cam, and that would lead to the truth about everything. On the other hand, Annette had her own LieDeck now, and there was no point in shielding her any further. Helen ran her fingers front to back through her long blond hair, like an oversized comb, and bit the bullet.

"You've been in a cocoon, Annette," she said. "You always listen to music on that bloody iPod of yours. You never use your Discman to listen to the radio, or watch TV on your cell, except the day you watched that *LieDeck Live* program. Nobody wanted to talk to you about what's been going on in the world. In fact ... we weren't allowed."

"So ... talk," said Annette. "I may be weak, but my brain's just fine, thank you very much."

Helen looked at Winnie with a face that cried for help, but Winnie's face replied only: "You started it, you finish it." Helen took a deep breath and picked up Annette's hand. "People have been having a very tough time adjusting to the LieDeck," she said. "There have been ... incidents ... nationally ... and even

internationally."

"What ... incidents?" demanded Annette.

"Well, there were some race riots," said Helen cautiously.

"Race riots?" said Annette. "In Canada?"

Helen explained about the Gallup poll that had been commissioned by White Right, using the LieDeck to verify answers, and how it turned out that the vast majority of white Canadians and white Americans didn't like blacks, or natives, or any other brand of non-Caucasians. And she told her about the government's unorthodox "shut the hell up and wait" policy, and how it had worked to quell the riots, and how the United States had copied Prime Minister Godfrey's plan, and how he was getting high marks for—

"*Prime Minister Godfrey!*?" said Annette.

Helen told the story of how Louis St. Aubin had been turfed out of office, and the full story of his suicide, in Australia.

Annette was a bit disbelieving even as it was explained to her. It was hard to accept that so much could have happened, and that no one had said a word to her. "What else?" she asked fearfully.

Winnie decided it was her turn to be the bearer of bad news. She explained about the new 967 line that people could call up to have a statement LieDeck-verified, and how millions of people were finding out that they didn't love their husbands or wives, or that their spouses were cheating on them, or that they didn't actually believe in God, or that they were gay—all sorts of things that might have been better left buried. "It's not that ignorance is bliss," she said, "it's just that a full awareness of reality seems to be ... well, dangerous." She told Annette there had been many suicides, so many that the government had set up a radical new national program to save lives by letting people go to a hospital and die by lethal injection if persuasion failed to change their minds.

"They can't *do* that!" shouted Annette. "There's laws, and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*."

It was Helen's turn again, so she explained how martial law had been in effect for the last two days, and how the PM was doing all that he could do to limit the application and severity of martial law, and how more than eighty other countries were also experiencing martial law ... and a certain amount of disorder.

"Disorder? What disorder?" asked Annette.

"Well, civil wars, in some places, and now real wars, two, so far, and one of them is—uh..."

"What?" demanded Annette. "Come on, Helen. What the hell is going on here?"

Helen gave up and told her the truth, the whole truth. "Cold War I had the Cuban Missile Crisis. Cold War II has ended up with the Romanian Crisis, now the Romanian War, otherwise known as the European War, which could maybe develop into a world war, a nuclear war, or so a lot of people have convinced themselves. By staying at the manor, you'll be four minutes away from the Whitesides' bomb shelter, at the lodge. Steve will be there too. We've got you a full time doctor, and all your medication. You'll be fine," she said, hoping to be believed.

Annette was struck dumb. How could all those people—her nurses, her doctors, her visitors, her friends—how could they have kept all this from her? Why? How could these things have even happened in the first place? Was it all because of the LieDeck? "What about ... you?" she asked her former partner

and best friend.

"I'll be fine," said Helen. "I just got a promotion. I'm Patriot's new head honcho. I made Chief of Security, Annette. Isn't that great!"

"I'm ... happy for you," said Annette. "But what happened to Cam?"

"Well, you knew he was planning to retire soon," said Helen.

"He retired?"

"Well, you know he had Alzheimer's."

"He couldn't cope because of the Alzheimer's?"

"Well, he lied about it."

"Whiteside *fired* him?"

"Actually—uh—yes, he did."

"For telling a lie?"

"Well, that was ... part of it."

"Don't make me turn my LieDeck on," threatened Annette. "I'm sick of this game."

Helen finally relented and told her about Cam O'Connor's plan to take over the bomb shelter in the event of nuclear war. "We're LieDecking all Patriot staff to see who else knew about this, or was involved."

"Good fucking God!" whispered Annette.

There was an unspoken agreement to pass the next minute without speaking. Grant Eamer was whistling a tune, "Puff, the magic dragon," trying to stay out of things. Annette looked out the window and saw the Queensway, the major east-west artery of Ottawa. It was a quarter of six in the afternoon, the height of rush hour, and traffic seemed ... abnormal. "There's virtually no cars heading east, into the city," she said. "Are we ... that close?"

Winnie almost started to say what she'd heard from Helen earlier, while they were waiting on the roof—that the government had begun moving all prisoners out of cities, as a precaution. "Even that General Brampton," Helen had told her, and rumor had it that this villainous general had escaped, perhaps with the aid of some RCMP officers that were in that WDA outfit. But then there were rumors about so many things since the free press had gone out of business.

"Nobody knows what the real situation is," Winnie said to Annette. "With martial law, reliable information is impossible to come by. People just aren't taking any chances, that's all. It's ... a natural reaction to uncertainty."

"It's a natural reaction to nuclear war!" said Annette.

TUESDAY, APRIL 29, 2014

Chapter 69

BUCHAREST IS GONE

It was 5:52 a.m. when Annette woke up, according to the digital clock by her bedside. She found it difficult to sleep at the manor. It didn't seem right that she and Steve weren't in each other's arms, for one thing, but she knew it was best to wait, from the medical point of view. She also knew with all her heart that they would be married soon. Steve had said "yes," and no amount of political turmoil could wipe that smiling image from her mind.

She donned her Sony Discman and found some soothing classical music on CBC FM. Normally, she'd have chosen her iPod, but she really wanted to hear the news at the top of the hour. It bothered and embarrassed her that she had been so completely out of touch during her convalescence, and she vowed that it wouldn't happen again. She was also ... well ... scared. As the gliding, peaceful violins filled her ears, her mind traveled back to the previous evening.

When she had arrived at the manor from the hospital, she was wheeled into the living room, and took great pleasure in the feeling that she was in a normal environment, with normal people. She'd been introduced to a Dr. Pavay, a UN official ... or a former UN official ... she wasn't sure of the details. He had been staying in a posh Ottawa hotel at the expense of Whiteside Technologies for the last two nights, ever since he had arrived from New York. Helen Kozinski had been asked to find a full-time doctor to administer Annette's medications and monitor her recovery, and she remembered that Dr. Pavay had been an internationally renowned physician before he'd gone to work for the UN. It was serendipitous for all.

The Whitesides had put on a wonderful feast in Annette's honor, and Dr. Pavay had turned out to be quite the comic. Apparently his given name was G'lohreah, which his eccentric mother had gleaned from a Welsh storybook, and so naturally little Julia kept calling him "Gloria," and laughing until tears came. When dessert was served, Dr. Pavay had finally scrunched up his wrinkled, Pakistani face and called her "Burt." The conflict was resolved when Julia agreed to call him "Mr. Doc" if he would call her Julia.

The Strauss was mellow, and Annette had to remind herself not to fall asleep again, or she would miss the news. Her room at the manor was the same one that Victor had used when he first arrived here, except that the waterbed had been replaced with a hospital bed, with a motor and a remote button that made the thing buzz up and down. It struck her that Victor had come out of hiding from his farmhouse and dumped his taxi-driving job less than two weeks ago ... *thirteen days ago, actually*, she calculated. *Such a short time for human civilization to come unraveled*, she felt. *After we get through this crisis, we'll have to take a closer look at those theories he made up.*

She lay on her back, her good eye closed, her hands interlocked on her stomach, just marveling at the quality of the new headphones that Whiteside Technologies had recently developed. *It really is better than sitting in the front row at a live event*, she figured. She thought of the things Winnie had told her about Victor's theory of human consciousness evolution, and wondered why she hadn't thought of that herself—that the LieDeck would inevitably suss out the building blocks of human consciousness and open new doors ... *to a new world, really. But ... later*, she said to herself. *I've got lots of time for that one.*

Suddenly, there was thumping and shouting all over the manor, but Annette couldn't hear anything but a lonely flute, with a vibrato that could melt silver. It soared airily just above the symphony orchestra, but in mid-riff, the radio host broke in.

"This just in. The capital of Romania has been hit by a large Russian nuclear bomb. Bucharest is completely gone. I'm leaving the CBC studio on our traffic helicopter. I'm only going to say this once. You've got a thirty-two-minute warning *if* this is the prelude to an all-out nuclear war. Get out of the city, any direction! Get out of the city, NOW!"

Annette ripped off her headset just as two Patriot agents burst in her door, and they were followed immediately by Dr. Pavay and Lucinda, the Venezuelan maid. The agents picked Annette up and practically threw her into the wheelchair, without a solitary word ... and without injury. She pulled her nightgown above her knees and tucked it under her thighs and between her legs.

Lucinda had a housecoat on over her pajamas, and she stepped aside gingerly as an agent snatched Annette's suitcase and tossed it to another agent by the door. Dr. Pavay rushed back to his own bedroom to get Annette's medicine and his glasses. They could hear shouting, from downstairs, then the sounds of vehicles peeling out as the Whiteside family, Steve Sutherland, Grant Eamer and the Donovan clan were rushed away to the lodge. Other agents appeared at the bedroom door, while the agent in charge screamed up at them from the bottom of the stairs. "Let's go! Get her down here, God damn it!"

It took the agents twenty-three seconds to roll Annette down the hall, carry her down the spiral staircase, roll her out the front door, and hoist her, chair and all, into the back of a waiting van. Dr. Pavay and Lucinda followed from the bedroom to the driveway, unable to help. Then, unable to make themselves stay, they hopped in the side door of the van. They were ordered to buckle up in the bench seat behind the driver. "GO!" shouted an agent as he slammed the back doors closed.

The engine roared and the tires bit into asphalt. As they turned sharply towards the back of the manor, Annette could see out the rear windows. The guards at the front gate were screaming into radios and preparing to disappear in a few seconds—north, almost certainly—it was only twenty minutes to the Whiteside Tech fishing camp on Carmen Lake. *They'll head there*, she thought. *Hope you make it, guys.*

Just as they hit the unpaved road that led to the lodge, the agent in the passenger seat up front called Helen on the radio. He had to make sure the van would get through the *very* tight security perimeter at the lodge, and he had to make sure that Helen knew that Dr. Pavay and Lucinda Tachita were also on board. It was Helen's responsibility to get Annette into the shelter, but it would also be her job to give the two other passengers the terrible news ... that they would have to be excluded.

The short trip from the manor to the lodge was right on the edge. The Patriot agents had rehearsed it many times, and the driver knew every dip, turn, and boulder. At each point along the way, he knew exactly where the line was between maximum efficiency and a spill. There was no choice for the passengers except to trust him, completely. They endured silently, sensing that the slightest distraction might throw the driver off his game.

The sun wasn't really up yet, but in the vacant first light of a tranquil dawn, Annette could see out as the trees whipped by, bounced by, rocked by. Her trembling hands were glued to the armrests, and agents were straining to prevent the wheelchair from skidding, or to keep her from being tossed out of it. The arm of one Patriot operative was strapped tightly across the top of her chest from behind. His tense biceps pressed against her right ear, his hard right wrist passed under her left armpit so that his hand could grip the cold chrome frame of her chair. Another agent was braced in front of her, like a lineman in a stance. His powerful hands were clamped on her bare knees, pressing down ... and back. Annette could feel his breathing, and smell him. He perspired freely, and he kept his eyes focused above her, on the road. She was facing the rear of the van, and although she knew that was the proper procedure from her years as a Patriot agent, she found it unbearable to not be able to see where she was going, the next turn, the next bump.

As they closed in on the lodge, she saw eight agents appear, two by two, on the sides of the dirt track, their rifles pointed up, frantically waving the van through. When the van lurched to a halt, the back doors were flung open from the outside. In under twenty-seven seconds—it was being timed, as it had been during rehearsals—two Patriot heavyweights lifted Annette out the back doors of the van, carried her up

to the porch, rolled her to the top of the basement stairs, carried her to the bottom, set her down and rolled her into the shelter.

"Thanks a million, you guys," she said, holding out both hands to take theirs, even if only for a moment. "Good luck," she added as the agents abruptly turned and left.

"Thank God you made it," said Doreen Dawe-Whiteside.

"Annette, I was so worried about you," said Steve as he bent over and embraced the woman who had captured his heart and his dreams. She threw her arms around his neck and allowed a few silent tears to leak out, tears for the two of them, tears for the world.

Randall was in one of the tiny bedrooms, trying to calm his two daughters. Of course Sarah had studied about nuclear weapons at school, and she was delirious with fear. Julia was an emotional mimic, and her screams followed and matched those of her older sister.

Michael was sitting at the kitchen table, mutely holding Becky's hands as her parents whispered into each other's ears, over by the stove. Grant Eamer, the pilot, was also at the kitchen table, torn between the relief he felt to be among the probable survivors and the devastating image of his wife and two young boys, trying to escape Ottawa in just thirty-two minutes, stuck in traffic, wondering if they would die in the family car.

Victor and Winnie had been rudely awakened at the lodge by Patriot agents as soon as the news report was aired, but they had dressed and gone outside, to the front yard, rather than down to the shelter. They were sitting on the top of a wooden picnic table, their feet planted on the bench, watching dawn paint the loveliest of lakes on one side, and human insanity on the other. Dr. Pavay was sobbing quietly by the side door of the van, hanging on to the outside rearview mirror, dressed only in his pajamas and slippers. Lucinda was being held back as she screeched violently at Helen Kozinski, half in Spanish and half in English, insisting that she was "family," that there had to be some sort of terrible mistake, that the Whitesides would not want her to be kept out of the shelter.

"Ever play golf?" asked Victor.

"No, I haven't" said Winnie, "but I wouldn't mind having a crack at it some day. Are you saying ... you're in the mood for a game ... *now!*"

"Yep," said Victor as he stood up and hand-dusted the back of his pants.

Snowball and Kodiak were yelping wildly at all the excitement, in the hope that they could join in the fun ... or maybe bite whoever was making Lucinda scream. Victor and Winnie walked down to the dock to let them out of their kennels. They put them on their leashes and walked them back to where Lucinda was in hysterics, being held as gently as possible by Patriot agents. Victor took her wrist firmly, and asked her to stop screaming so he could try to fix things for her. She did, and Victor walked over to where Helen was still shouting orders into a walkie-talkie. He had to insist that she listen to him. "I've got a spot in the shelter, right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," snapped Helen, "and if I were you I'd—"

"Lucinda can have my place," he said plainly, pointing at her ... at Lucinda.

"What!?" Helen shrieked.

"Dr. Pavay can have mine," said Winnie. "We have to go."

"Are you completely fucking nuts?" shouted Helen.

"No," said Victor as he, Winnie and the dogs started towards the jeep. "Just Human Three," Winnie hollered over her shoulder—loudly enough that Helen's LieDeck would catch it.

Helen had to believe them—she had her LieDeck on beeper mode—and although she couldn't begin to understand their reasoning, she had no time to waste. She caught up to Victor, pulled him aside for a moment, and gave him two suicide pills from a bottle in her jacket pocket. She also handed him a small pistol that she had hidden in another pocket. "For ... the dogs," she explained. "And good luck," she called after them as they loped off behind the straining white Samoyeds. She ordered two agents to escort Dr. Pavay and Lucinda into the shelter, then called Randall on the radio to explain.

"Do *not* let Victor go!" Randall screamed into his mike.

"I couldn't stop them," said Helen. "Their minds were made up."

"Where the hell is he going?"

"I really don't know, but they're already on their way ... in the jeep. Do you want my men to stop them at the manor and bring them back?"

There was an extended, excruciating pause in the transmission. "I ... guess not," said Randall.

"Look, Randall," said Helen, "time's getting scarce, and I still have to sort out Bobby Thompson and his idiot friend Geoff. They were fighting, so I locked them in the walk-in fridge, off the kitchen. Maybe by now they've cooled off a bit."

She went back to her work, without waiting for Randall to approve or disapprove. The "potential event" lead-time was down to nineteen minutes, and the door to the shelter was scheduled to be locked in six minutes. She left the yard situation in the hands of a trusted lieutenant, ran up the stairs to the front porch, ran through the cavernous living room to the kitchen and told the two agents guarding the food locker to go outside the back door and await further orders. She wanted to handle these local punks personally. As soon as the agents were out of sight, she drew her service revolver, unlocked the heavy wooden door, pushed it open and walked in the room. It stank of marijuana.

Geoff Farley was hiding behind the door. He attacked her with a butcher knife as soon as she stepped in.

Helen defended herself instinctively with her left forearm, but the knife sliced down to the bone. She responded to the pain with a piercing wail—plus a bullet into the boy's chest. Geoff twirled and fell to the cold floor, smashing his face on a drum of rice on the way down.

As Helen bent over to see if Geoff was still alive, Bobby Thompson kicked her right wrist with his boot, sending the gun flying. He leapt for it, and got it just as she was about to tackle him.

"Back off, bitch," he screamed, and Helen froze. He was aiming the revolver right at her, from three feet away. "You fucking get me in that fucking shelter, or I'll fucking—"

"You'll never make it," she said, cradling her slashed arm. "I can get you in, Bobby. You can have Geoff's place, but you have to give me the gun first. They won't let you in with a gun."

The agents who had just left had run back into the building, into the kitchen, when they heard the scream and the gunshot. As the first one dashed across the open doorway, Bobby turned and fired at him, and missed. One second later, the other agent threw his head and his right arm around the jamb. He fired into Bobby's torso, ending his troubled life.

"How ... long?" asked Helen breathlessly as the agent ripped off his shirt and tied the sleeves around her arm to staunch the bleeding.

"Seventeen minutes," he said ... meaning until a nuclear weapon could detonate in a nearby location, such as Ottawa or Gatineau ... assuming one had been on its way. "Four minutes to lockdown."

"Get me down there now," ordered Helen. "I'm no good to anybody like this. Doctor Pavay can patch me up before they lock."

The agents helped Helen down the stairs to the fallout shelter. She stumbled through the open door, her face white with pain, her arm dripping blood. Dr. Pavay rushed to her aid, and Randall stepped around them and put his hands to the heavy shelter door.

"Lock-down," he said authoritatively. "NOW!"

Chapter 70

FORE!

Victor and Winnie didn't speak until they were half way to the manor ... except to the dogs. This was better than they had ever expected, to be taken out at sun-up, in a car, in a jeep! Wherever they were going, it was sure to be different, fun and exciting. They tried over and over to jump into the front seat, where the action was, or at least where the two people were. Flicked knuckles to their snouts solved that problem, but nothing could keep them from panting ... and dribbling saliva onto shoulders and laps.

Winnie tried to let herself enjoy the rising sun and the fresh spring air, but powerful emotions wouldn't allow. "Why do you suppose they're doing this?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," said Victor as he steered along the bare tracks of Whiteside Highway. He knew what Winnie meant, and who "they" were. "They" were the folks who built the doomsday devices "for defense," the people who burned a million European women alive at the stake a few centuries ago, "believing" they were witches. "They" were the people who colonized other countries, who raped and pillaged and preached and generally made human history a cause for such profound shame.

"Give it a shot," Winnie suggested.

"Jeeze, I dunno," Victor said. "Could be they're just trying to scare themselves, like race car drivers or bungee jumpers. Maybe Human Twos need a certain quota of fear to feel safe ... to feel powerful and in control. Maybe they're just not getting enough fear ... like there's too much civilization. I'm just guessing here. This is a new question for me. I think it might be like every kid in the world being scared of monsters under the bed, you know—like people need some sort of fright, real or imagined, to keep the instinct oiled up and ready for the day when it's *really* needed. So they create scary situations, play at the brink of actual danger, and every now and then it gets out of hand."

Winnie thought about it briefly and decided that if they ever did get through this, she would look into that "quota" notion Victor had come up with. "So ... what do you think *will* happen?" she asked.

"Jesus, Winnie, I ... just don't know," he said. "It's possible that the world will die today ... or, then again, maybe not. Your guess is as good as mine."

"But if they don't do it—go all-out—I suppose they'll want to have a big war crimes trial at the UN," she tried. "They'll probably want to look at all the events related to the LieDeck to see how they led to this ... this..." It was impossible to find the right next word.

"Starting with my old friend George Cluff and his C.V.A. device, I'd suppose," said Victor. He knew he'd be called to testify ... about a thousand things. *God, I'll be one of the main witnesses*, he realized. And yes, he would have to testify about George Cluff's death ... murder ... if the world didn't end, that is. The jeep was waved through the front gates of the estate by the last two remaining Patriot agents.

"Listen, honey," said Victor as he turned onto the paved road leading to the highway and slowed to a crawl, "we can still go back to the shelter ... if that's what you want." He threw his eyes sideways so that she would catch them, and know that he was serious. "It's like ... there's nothing says a Human Three shouldn't want to live," he said.

"I ... think we have to bet the bank on them not doing it," said Winnie. "There's no point hanging around if they do." Her green eyes were clear and steady—confident. She was at peace with their unspoken decision not to survive an all-out nuclear war. "Didn't Khrushchev say as much back in the nineteen sixties?"

"As much as ... what?" Victor asked.

"That after a nuclear war, the survivors would envy the dead," she remembered from a long-ago history class.

Victor smiled, returned his focus to the road ahead, and pressed the accelerator. There they were again! Feelings! "Envy," this time! The leader of the former Soviet Union had considered the deliberate destruction of the only known living planet, and his big concern was how people might *feel* about it, afterwards! "I'd feel mostly embarrassed." He sighed heavily. "You know ... after ... embarrassed to be a member of the human race."

It was a short drive down to the 148; only a couple of miles. But when they reached the highway, they found a steady stream of cars, trucks, and motorcycles, all heading away from ground zero, away from the Ottawa-Gatineau area. In fact, in the absence of oncoming traffic, both lanes were moving west on the two-lane highway. And all these machines were moving fast, dangerously fast, especially the motorcycles, which darted recklessly between the other vehicles. There were no opportunities to merge safely.

Victor turned right onto the shoulder, built up speed, and simply bullied his way onto the pavement when he hit fifty miles per hour, an unsafe speed on a gravel shoulder. And while the dogs didn't know any better, Winnie showed by her body language that she was nervous. However, she figured it was doable, and Victor had managed to pull it off. Once they were on the highway, he accelerated quickly to seventy miles an hour, matching the other vehicles in his lane ... and *still* there was a steady stream of cars passing him in the outside lane.

He had to get out to the left hand lane in order to make a left turn two miles later, the turn south, down to Norway Bay, where the golf course was. He frowned inwardly as the trains of vehicles, all following too closely, flew west in both lanes. Then a hole opened up. He ducked into the left lane, forcing the car behind to slow down and almost causing an accident. He put on his left turn signal, put the two left tires on the far shoulder, braked as gently as he could without causing a crash and fairly skidded around the corner of the Norway Bay Road. They were finally back on a surface where there was no competition, no immediate threat or risk to life and limb, no desperate struggle for survival.

"Will we be able to get clubs and balls out there?" asked Winnie in an effort to move her mind away from the accident they almost had, and the World War III that might have now begun.

Victor tilted his head—he hadn't thought of that. "I ... don't know," he said. "If not, we'll just take the dogs for a nice walk, okay?"

He turned on the jeep's radio, and they were both relieved that somebody was still broadcasting information from the CBC building in downtown Ottawa—someone with guts. *Maybe somebody with hope*, Victor thought, although the news was not good.

As they pulled into the small nine-hole course, it was clear that the maintenance crew had already been in, but had skedaddled ... perhaps when they heard that Bucharest had been vaporized by the Russians, or maybe sixteen minutes later when they heard that an American missile—likely fired from a submarine—this one carrying a *hydrogen* bomb—had made Leningrad ... not exist any more. The doors to the equipment shed and the pro shop were wide open, and a rusty old red tractor was sitting cockeyed in the parking lot, idling in the dawn mist.

Victor shut down the jeep. “Think I should bring the keys?” he joked ... although he did pocket the keys.

Winnie liberated Snowball and Kodiak from their leashes, and they jumped out to pee on a part of the world they'd never peed on before. When the humans exited the jeep, the dogs understood that this was the destination, this was where they were going for today's outing, to play ... to enjoy life ... to “do no harm.” Victor walked over and turned off the tractor engine—he wasn't sure why. Then he walked to the pro shop, hand in hand with his lady. They each picked out a set of somebody else's clubs, sat the bags on pull-carts and walked to the first tee, followed, preceded, circled and bumped by bounding dogs, by mere animals, who didn't know diddly about golf ... or nukes.

Victor found a brand new Top Flite ball in his bag, and a tall tee. He selected a spot, perched the ball, and took out a long club, a handsome instrument with a bulging titanium head. “This is a Mother-o'-Big-Bertha driver,” he said approvingly to Winnie as she held the dogs back by their collars. “It's supposed to be the best.”

“It's not what you got,” she quipped, “but what you do with it.”

Victor made his eyes into slits, and his glance seemed to say: “I'll show you.” He planted his feet as firmly as he could in the dewy grass. After a brief waggle of the club, he took a homicidal slash at the innocent, white ball. It popped off the toe end of the clubface, dribbled twenty yards down the right hand edge of the fairway and tumbled limply into a chilly creek, followed by two laughing dogs.

“Fore!” wailed Winnie at the empty acres.

“Best laid plans,” muttered Victor as he scowled at the fat-headed driver.

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