

The LieDeck Revolution (Book #2)

The Endgame

Jim Stark

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

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Note to readers

This book was written in the late 1990s (and re-written in 2006) but it is set in 2033. As such, certain terms will not be familiar to the reader. For this reason, I have added a short glossary at the back of the book. (Confession: I had to use it from time to time myself, so I can vouch for its convenience.)

Chapter 1

EMOTION WRESTLING

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—11:45 a.m.

Lilly Petrosian took off her headphones, leaned to the left, and looked up the aisle to see what all the commotion was about. Two flight attendants in the forward alcove were trying to fend off an attack of the giggles. Well ... pretending to try, thought Lilly. They were doubling over, turning their giggling backs to the passengers, wiping their eyes, putting hands over their mouths to kill the sound, each begging the other to stop. Every time there seemed to be a glimmer of hope for self-control, the giggling would start all over again, with each one blaming the other. “Emotion wrestling,” it was called by the pop shrinks. “Very unprofessional,” Lilly scowled under her breath. They’re probably Evolutionaries, she figured.

The performance in the alcove was infectious. Many of the first class passengers were smiling and suppressing laughter, even though they had no idea what was so funny. Instinctively, Lilly wanted to be in on the joke too. On the other hand, she thought wearily. She straightened up in her seat, put the headphones back on, and closed her eyes. It made her feel old, somehow, seeing these civilians just enjoying life, without the tensions of the world welling up, closing in, and getting in the way. She was only a few years older than the two flight attendants, but she felt like she could have been their aunt, or their sergeant.

Captain Lillian Petrosian had joined the WDA in 2026, the very year that Sheena Kalhoun took over the leadership of the world body. Lilly had been an agent for seven years now, and the first six had been grand. Her work had been confined to the United States, and most Americans were still in a state of wonder that war and crime had finally been dumped from the human condition. Indeed, civilians had

responded to her as if she were the fountainhead of the magic, as if she had personally waved the extra-terrestrial wand that some people believed had to be behind that hairpin turn nineteen years ago. After a seamless tale of bloody turmoil, stretching back to the first hunter-gatherer tribes, people were profoundly relieved that “history” had finally reached the end of the track, that human life could finally just happen, without the fear of sudden chaos, without the traditional certainty of eventual calamity. All human “history” before 2014 now seemed like a comic book, an unfunny caricature, an embarrassing corner of the family tree that one didn't talk about, except maybe in a whisper.

Of course it wasn't any kind of magic that had changed everything back in 2014. It was a little device called the LieDeck, a lie detector that worked by instantaneously and infallibly analyzing our voice patterns—plus the inevitable political and social fallout from such a potent invention. The advent of the LieDeck had shaken Homo sapiens to the nucleus, unmasked the unreality and duplicity of almost every person, every institution, every belief. As everyone on the planet knew, the device had brought civilization to the brink of omnicide, and the LieDeck Revolution had plainly and indisputably required the establishment of the World Democratic Authority. Civilians simply could not handle the LieDeck ... or rather the corrected version of reality that was so brutally exposed by the thing. That was proven quickly, and beyond a smidgen of a doubt. Now, only the WDA had the LieDeck, and as a result, there was peace on Earth—without which there would likely be exactly nothing, or at least nothing alive, or at least no humans alive.

Until the spring of twenty thirty-two, if I called someone on the Net, faces lit up, Lilly remembered with sadness, and the responses were almost sung. If I arrived at the door ... well, that called for tea and cookies, or the offer of a beer, or a joint.

Everyone knew that WDA agents couldn't accept more than a glass of water, but that regulation didn't stop the invitations. Whether the approach was in cyberspace or “on the warm,” Americans had always shown their gratitude, their appreciation. It made Lilly's job a joy. Now, since the Henderson Scandals of last May and June, most citizens asked straight off the top: “Are you really with the WDA?” It was as if nobody with a pinch of common sense would choose to work for the world government. And there was always that implied supplementary: “When you're done asking your stupid questions, would you please leave me alone?” If we didn't ask the four questions that deter criminal activity, thought Lilly, the answers would be different from what they are now. Some things were nothing less than self-evident, and yet nowadays, billions of people seemed to miss the point.

The civilian governments of nations still backed the World Democratic Authority one hundred percent—not that they had much choice—but the universal public consensus was that the world body had gotten too big for its britches, and had invaded the sacred spiritual territory that lay out beyond its policing mandate. It was broadly believed that the chance to rein the thing in had passed, forever. Most civilians felt locked in, doomed to wonder in the silence of their minds whether this or that event in their lives might have turned out differently, or better, had not “those bastards from the WDA” interfered, using their damnable little LieDecks. The WDA hadn't just lost the trust of the people; it had lost their respect. Where once it was loved, it was now doubted, feared ... even despised by some.

It's just not fair, Lilly grumbled silently. We tax the nations at a lousy two percent of their government revenues, guarantee the peace, and provide the SuperNet free of charge to all. It's a fantastic deal. Her mind flew back to the day, in her first year of high school, when she had learned that Fëdor Mikhailovich Dostoevski, the giant of Russian literature, had ultimately defined the human species as “ungrateful bipeds.” He was too generous by half, she huffed internally. People aren't happy unless they're pissed off.

Lilly felt there was no sense in proving her own point by being ticked off, so ... she made a concerted and conscious effort to dismiss her anger and look on the bright side. It wasn't easy.

She'd left Miami, Florida on short notice. She had a few friends from work ... and the good ones will still be in touch with me when I hit forty. Her father had mercifully passed away after suffering from cancer for thirty months. Her dad's death had happened fifteen years ago, half a lifetime for Lilly, but her mom was still grieving today. Spiritually and psychologically, Lilly's mother was perhaps half the woman she used to be, but the part that had survived was still a good and caring person. And her mom had finally found a new "man friend," as she called him. She'll be fine.

Lilly fiddled with her seatbelt. She'd left a man behind, a live one, but that was more a blessing than a heartache. We were just using each other anyway, she rationalized. That was true enough, but there was more to it than that. Isn't that always the case, and every time it's the same basic tune, and almost the same lyrics. There was no point in doing yet another mental review. Edward T.—or "good old Ed"—was a memory now, a reasonably good memory, but nothing more. He wouldn't be on her electronic Christmas greeting list in eleven months, and she wouldn't be on his. "Goodbyes" were losing their sting.

The music wasn't helping, so she took the headphones off again. For a while, she just listened to the hiss of the engines and tried not to hear the voices inside—to no avail. Her thoughts went back to a routine afternoon a week ago, last Tuesday, when she'd received an unexpected Netcall from Control Upper America—not from some minion, but Control himself!

Control's real name was Mark Drummond, but nobody in his sweep of influence ever called him that. Control was big, responsible for policing everything from the Panama Canal to the North Pole! The Supreme Commander of the WDA was a scant six rungs up from Control Upper America. "Take the job, Ms. Petrosian," he had strongly advised when he saw her do a body-language balk on his Netscreen. "Never mind that it looks like a tedious chore. It's only for a year, and once you're up in Québec, you'll receive further instructions."

Her plush seat was tilted back, but physical comfort couldn't seem to kick her mind out of high gear. This was supposed to be an ordinary flight, originally—a ticket for the coach section, a little small talk, listen to some music, ignore the film, look out at the sky, eat steak for lunch, sip a glass of undistinguished wine, think about the new life she was heading towards, doze, more small talk, then disembark. But at 5:00 a.m. this morning, she had received a second Netcall from Control. "On the plane today," he'd said, "you'll be sitting in the first class section beside one Randy Whiteside, Michael Whiteside's son. He's not one of our biggest fans, and apparently he has become involved with the U.S. LieDeck Unbanning Committee—he's even gotten chummy with USLUC's head honcho, Lester Connolly. His dad is absolutely furious—he wouldn't even send the corporate jet to pick the boy up in Miami. Try to strike up a conversation with Randy. I'll tell you why later."

Lilly wasn't keen on intrigue. She had joined the WDA to construct the new world, to do her small bit in building the post-conflict era, to position herself at the forefront of this most exciting of human adventures. Now, it seemed that she was caught in the ranks of an international regime whose image had been given a public swirl by the media over a couple of ... she searched her mind for the right word ... peccadilloes. Civilians, as a class, internationally, seemed to have condemned the entire WDA over minor misdeeds, committed by a few bad apples. It just wasn't fair, but there it was. Oh well, she said to herself, the further instructions I'm told to expect seem to have something to do with the Whiteside family. That should be interesting.

Randy Whiteside was only eighteen, but he had a movie star quality about him—long blond hair lighter than his bronzed skin, exceedingly blue eyes, and shoulders twice as broad as Lilly's. They sat near the front of the upper deck of an ancient 747 gas-guzzler, and he had the window seat. Ever since taking off in Miami, he had used his headphones and the oval window to ignore the lanky woman to his left.

Lilly had been told that those who traveled first class usually assumed that they had something in common

with each other, but Randy was a boulder. “Lilly ... that's short for Lillian,” she had said as soon as she took her seat. He had said “Randy,” flatly, and not a syllable more. It was short for Randall, the name of his illustrious grandfather, the founder of Whiteside Technologies. She knew that, of course, but Randy had declined the opening to say so, or to even mention his surname. After takeoff, she had asked about his life. “Student,” was all he said. He didn't ask why she was on the plane, or where she was going, or what she did for a living. Instead, he had turned back towards the window and stared out at the endless sea of brilliant cloud tops. During the last four hours, whenever the social circumstances had permitted, she had tried various tricks to break through—some questions about his schooling, a bit of humor, even some mild flirtation. Nothing. Rien. Nada. Bupkas.

He's got to know I'm WDA, she thought as she studied the perfect tan on the back of his smooth neck. She had reviewed his Netfile briefly, at 5:03 a.m., right after the second call from Control. The boy was friendly, by all accounts, and as horny as any guy his age. But I get the cold shoulder, the brush-off.

It bothered her that he hadn't twigged to her efforts at triggering his machismo. The fact that she was six feet tall and thirty years old shouldn't have been a reason for him to pass on what kids these days usually called “a tingle.” On some level, his silent rebuffs made her feel insecure about her sexuality. It's just a God damned job, she reprimanded herself.

A Customs officer was making his way down the aisle, pre-clearing the first class passengers. He chatted briefly with each traveler, and made a busy display of confirming bits of information on his hand-held Sniffer—his SuperNet Interfacer, to use the proper term. He was WDA, of course—all Customs officers were WDA—so when he arrived beside Lilly, she just flashed her badge. The officer smiled, and moved his attention across to Randy.

"Purpose of your visit, Mr.—uh—Whiteside?" he asked, checking a list on the small black-and-white screen of his Sniffer.

Randy slowly turned his head—too slowly, as if to emphasize that his compliance was grudging, at best. “I can't putt,” he said, directly into the man's eyes.

"Would you mind explaining that,” said the officer, in a distinctly less friendly tone.

Randy sighed. “I'm on a golf scholarship at the University of Miami, as I'm sure you already know, and I'm the best they ever had, except I can't putt worth shit. I'm taking a couple of weeks off with my family to decide if I've got what it takes ... to be a pro.”

"Any other reason?"

"No."

There was a shiny, electronic “beep,” and the Customs officer's whole body flicked with surprise. His LieDeck was dialed onto the pin-signaling mode, not the beeper mode, so that his LieDeck-verification results would be discreet. He threw a quick, condemning glance at Lilly—the only other person nearby with a LieDeck-equipped Sniffer—and he went on with his duties.

"Repeat! Any other reason?" he asked the boy.

"My little sister wants to join Evolution,” explained Randy, with audible resentment, “and my parents can't seem to talk her out of it, so I'm going to give it a shot. I suppose it's really important for the WDA to know that, eh?"

"Any other reason?"

"No."

"Anything to declare?"

"No."

"Thank you, Mr. Whiteside," said the Customs officer with a practiced smile. "We'll be arriving in Ottawa at one twenty p.m., Eastern Standard Time, right on schedule. Have a nice visit, and welcome home."

It annoyed Lilly a lot to see a privileged youngster show such deliberate contempt towards a stranger, just for doing his job. In recent months, she'd had disturbing dreams about things like that, about people saying or doing things that were technically correct but clearly designed to annoy, or lying on purpose, just to tick off a WDA official. It isn't very constructive, she thought.

She was too prudent to protest and too self-confident to worry about the architecture of her eventual relationship with the snotty young golf nut ... never mind that he's a Whiteside. The WDA was always in a position to prevail. Battles lost were temporary itches, passing twinges. She knew that, and she knew as well that the new world order was exactly as it had to be, that her cause was both righteous and necessary. So why do I resent these snubs? she asked herself. "If you've got a problem dealing with rejection, then don't work for the World Democratic Authority," she remembered from her earliest days at the Officer Training Academy. And that advice was given to us when the WDA's global popularity rating was in the high nineties, she reminded herself, back when only a few civil libertarians and the last of the Godists were complaining about us, about our exclusive use of the LieDeck and ... and all that other stuff...

"He's not even a freakin' Canadian," Randy complained when the Customs officer had moved out of earshot. "How come you WDA types gotta play brain games like that all the time?"

"He was just being courteous," said Lilly, coolly. "And besides, who's Canadian or American or Floridian or Québécois any more? We're all citizens of Earth first, so in a way he was just trying to show that—"

"Give it a rest," interrupted Randy. She had included "Québécois" in her list, and he had never mentioned to her that he was from Québec. "I don't have to apologize to you or anybody if my country means more to me than..." He let it drop, turned his eyes back to the window, and focused on the comforting fact that he would soon be descending in to Ottawa International, bumping down through a wet layer of floating porridge, leaving the glorious sun behind, joining a bleak, frigid countryside below, beloved land of his birth—bride white for half of every year. Since when is patriotism subversive? he asked himself. Maudit Yankee.

"Listen, Randy," said Lilly as she hand-dusted some lint off her black pants, lint that maybe wasn't even there, "I don't deserve this hostility. Working for the WDA is how I make a living, and I'm at peace with what I do. I tell you what: Let's you and me face on the Net some time, just to talk, you know? I'm an honest person, and I'm a good person, and that's the truth. In fact, I've had my LieDeck set on the beeper mode ever since I got on the plane, so you know I haven't lied." She took her LieDeck-equipped Sniffer out of the inside pocket of her vest so he could see the signaling button ... if he were to turn his head, that is. "See?"

The grandson of Randall Whiteside and son of Michael Whiteside had listened to all this with his face fairly pasted to the window. He turned and looked at her narrow head ... with the narrow mind inside, he groused inwardly. He very pointedly did not look at the settings on her Sniffer. He looked right into her brown eyes, eyes that were trying to look innocent, ordinary, unmalicious.

"You know perfectly well that my family owns the majority interest in Whiteside Tech," he said bitterly. There was a "beep"—he was exaggerating just a little, but clearly didn't realize that, consciously—his family owned the controlling interest, which was not quite the same thing. "Our company patented the LieDeck way back in two thousand and fourteen," he bulldozed on, "almost two decades ago, but here we are, you and me, sitting side by side on a plane, and you have a LieDeck and I don't! And if I did have one, you'd have to arrest me, and the freakin' WDA could even impose the freakin' death penalty to teach me my place! So don't talk to me about what a freakin' gem you are, okay?"

Lilly let it go. It was always smart to let hostile civilians get their licks in early, she knew from her training and experience. That way they felt better for a while, and it made things easier for her when the time came to draw the line.

Chapter 2

EYEBALL

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—1:30 p.m.

A man with the self-ascribed codename "Eyeball" was sitting in a darkened room, with the curtains drawn tightly. He was doing what he did every day, staring intently at the lit-up screen of a wall mounted MIU, his Master Interface Unit, the SuperNet device that brought the world into his head. Eyeball wasn't just surfing; he was hunting. The MIU was his periscope, the World Democratic Authority his foe, and the LieDeck his torpedo.

"The following is a special bulletin from the Netnews service of CBS," said the voice of an announcer. Then a male reporter came on screen, speaking from a very white room filled with milling, mumbling people. His name, Elwood Harding, was printed across the bottom of the screen.

"It was learned a short time ago that Lester Connolly, the fiery leader of USLUC, was rushed here by ambulance this morning," Harding said. "I'm here inside the Washington D.C. General Hospital, awaiting the official statement from Dr. MacInnis, the Chief of Surgery. Of course in recent months, the U.S. LieDeck Unbanning Committee has been increasingly strident in its..."

Eyeball leaned forward and began to perspire. This was the first he had heard of this breaking story, and he'd been at his MIU for the past hour. Why didn't they mention this earlier? he snarled internally. They probably did, he chastised himself, while I was in the bathroom or surfing elsewhere. He reached under the arm of his plush chair and flipped the concealed button that activated his forbidden LieDeck. He left his hand resting there because he always used the pin mode of signaling, never the beeper. All precautions were wise in his world. No perception was paranoid.

He watched every minute movement as a doctor, with his surgical mask still draped around his neck, approached the cluster of microphones and cleared his throat. This guy is exhausted, thought Eyeball ... and he's not accustomed to the limelight ... or he's under pressure ... or he's scared.

My name is Dr. MacInnis. At eleven fifteen this morning, Lester Connolly was admitted with flu-like symptoms and severe pain in his lower left arm. By eleven thirty-five a.m., we had diagnosed his illness as necrotizing fasciitis, the so-called flesh-eating disease, which can sometimes result from a severe streptococcus A infection. In the moments just before we put Mr. Connolly under anesthetic, he authorized us to do whatever was necessary to save his life. At approximately eleven fifty a.m., we amputated his left arm at the shoulder. His heart stopped once, and we had a lot of difficulty stabilizing his condition, which is why we waited for a while before making this announcement. He is now in Intensive

Care, in critical but stable condition. The next forty-eight hours will probably determine whether or not we were able to catch it in time. We promise to keep you informed of any important developments. Sorry, but I've been advised not to take questions at this time.

Jesus! Eyeball said to himself. That's pretty fucking convenient ... for the WDA.

When the doctor and his media minders refused to back down on the “no questions” issue, the reporter—Elwood Harding—took over again. “Earlier today,” he said into the camera lens, “WDA chief Sheena Kalhoun pre-recorded a statement from her New York office to express the response of the world body. Her instructions were that it was not to be Netcast until after an official statement had been made by the hospital. Here is what Ms. Kalhoun had to say.”

I have just been informed that Mr. Lester Connolly, the head of the U.S. LieDeck Unbanning Committee, has been diagnosed with—uh—necrotizing fasciitis. Even though Mr. Connolly regarded the WDA as his enemy, we regard Mr. Connolly as a man of integrity, a man who fights for what he believes in, which is perhaps the highest political virtue in the global democracy. At a difficult moment like this, our political differences should be put aside. We ask his family and friends to accept our sympathy and our wishes for a speedy recovery.

Bullshit, Eyeball said to himself as he froze Sheena Kalhoun's Maggie-Thatcher-esque face on the screen and studied its lines for micro-signals of deception or guilt. His hidden LieDeck had indicated a lie immediately after Kalhoun uttered the word “integrity.” Only one lie, and a fairly innocent one at that, but that whole thing was a big old load of crap. Sympathy my ass!

In fact, when he thought about it, the word “sympathy” was usually used when the person had died. And there was something else about Kalhoun's statement that made Eyeball feel queasy, even if he couldn't put his finger on it. He always archived what he was watching, so he scrolled back to the start and watched the whole thing again. There it was, right in the second sentence! She said “regarded,” he noticed. She used ... the past tense. Why not use the present tense, and say that Lester Connolly “regards” the WDA as his enemy? He went through the statement once more. The other key verbs are all in the present tense—“fights” and “believes”—the way one would talk about someone who is alive. So ... was it just a slip of the tongue when she said “regarded”? A slip of a writer's pen, perhaps? Or does it indicate something more serious, more telling?

Eyeball couldn't decide if he was on to something important or not. It might have been an honest mistake, a minor grammatical anomaly, but he resolved to keep a close watch on the Connolly situation as it developed. Lester Connolly was a modern-day hero to millions of people, including Eyeball.

Chapter 3

BUMMER

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—1:40 p.m.

Randy climbed into the back of the waiting limo and sighed. It irritated him a lot that his father hadn't sent the corporate jet to pick him up in Miami, even though that would have been a shameless and unnecessary wad of air pollution, just the kind of extravagance the Netmedia loved to point fingers at. “Sure, his family is fabulously wealthy,” they would wail, “but that's no reason to flaunt it, or to callously disregard the interests of the planet and the species as a whole.” Randy knew these facts of 21st-century life, of course, but ... well, there were times when “knowing” something just didn't cut it. At least I don't have to take a freakin' taxi all the way over to l'état de Québec, he thought as he slammed the door on a

fierce Canadian winter.

It was a fifteen-minute trip from the airport to the outer edge of the Canadian capital, half an hour to get through Ottawa, and another fifteen minutes to go through Customs and crawl across the Champlain Bridge to the Québec-side city of Gatineau. Then it was thirty-five minutes or so along Highway 148, through hibernating farmland, to the little town of Quyon. The last leg was a two-minute jaunt north off Highway 148 to the great stone mansion where he had been raised—he and his sister, and his father and his sisters before him, and his grandfather and his siblings before that. I should get there by three thirty, he calculated.

"Going home" wasn't like in the movies for Randy. The warmth of the hearth and the rambunctious hugs of the 20th century seemed to have been displaced by a cool cordiality, a diplomatic politesse, an unsigned social contract to let sleeping dogs lie and to stay well clear of any and all issues that were likely never to get resolved. His father, Michael, was all business—bored with it the last few years, and yet cow-eyed disbelieving that his only son wanted to be a professional golfer. His mother Becky was the consummate coper, but her life didn't seem to involve Randy's father that much any more, except on the surface. They're more like cohabitants of convenience than lovers or parents, he thought. And his sister Venice ... well, she's got the hots for Evolution, he mused, raising his eyebrows in a tiny private act of dismay. The glass divider between the driver's compartment and the back was down, so he leaned over and glanced in the rearview mirror to make certain the chauffeur's eyes were on the road, that the chauffeur wasn't catching any physical signals of his thoughts as he sat sullenly and silently in the back.

The skyline of Ottawa could be seen in the distance now, and Randy wondered if he missed that, or indeed if anyone ever felt nostalgic about places any more. The SuperNet made every place "across-the-street" now. At the University of Miami, whenever he was asked, he always said he was "from Ottawa—actually a bit northwest, in the state of Québec," pronouncing it "Kwuhbeck, like a Yankee, rather than the correct "Kaybeck."

It was complicated, telling Americans about the "where" of things up home. They always assumed you had to be from a city, or nearby, even though cities were shrinking as people the world over fled with their Netbased work to a quieter rural life. Americans understood "state" to mean "as in Tennessee or California." It was way too much bother to explain about the odd status of "associate statehood" that the French-speaking former province of Québec had finally wrested from the ROC—meaning the "Rest-Of-Canada," as the Anglophone parts had been nicknamed.

It wasn't that Americans couldn't understand ... just that they couldn't care less. The smaller the world got, the bigger the United States seemed to become, in the minds of its nationals, anyway. Maybe it was because the WDA was based there, the way the UN had been before the Revolution. Next time I'm asked, Randy said to himself, I'm going to say "a couple of miles north of Quyon," just to see what kind of goofy looks I get. The USA is the only country in the world that hasn't adopted metric, and Americans can't even find Québec without pulling out their Sniffers and hopping on the Net.

In any event, Ottawa had never been his home—never felt like it, and never would. He was a Québécois, and proud of it. Now, he realized, even the estate didn't feel much like home. It was where his folks lived, where his sister Venice still lived—at least for now—and where a bunch of his "stuff" collected dust. It was a place he could go where the hassles were bearable. And the temptations there were non-existent, at least in winter (there was a private nine-hole golf course and a practice range on the estate to gobble up his days when and as he was "home").

Randy watched the snow-covered road ahead and wondered what kinds of people were in the cabs and private cars that whizzed by in the passing lane of the autoroute. A Whiteside limo never exceeded the speed limit—everyone else did. They got places to go, people to see, deals to sign, lovers to maul,

reasons upon reasons. Me ... I just can't fucking putt. Bummer.

He re-activated his Sniffer—it had been turned off on the plane, as required by world law. The device instantly emitted a low hum, his selected ringtone for a call that had been awaiting his return to connectivity. He asked the driver's forbearance as he buzzed up the darkened glass partition—he wanted to take the Netcall in private, even if it was only his dad or mom saying: “Welcome home.”

He withdrew the small Whiteside-produced device from his jacket pocket, and the small screen simply read “Lucky.” It was his very dear friend and sometimes tingle-mate, Yolanda Dees—and that made him smile. She'd chosen the nickname Lucky for herself because she worked for USLUC, and she hated her real name. Randy pressed the “face” button.

"Yo ... landa," he teased, even before her image appeared on the screen. "To what do I owe—."

"Lester almost died," she blurted out.

"What!"

"He's okay though. He's in the Washington General—critical but stable, and they said—"

"What happened?"

Lucky wasn't crying, but Randy could tell that she recently had been. She passed on what information she had about their leader, which was little more than had been given out on the Netnews. “We can't get anything more,” she said breathlessly. “The National Council called an emergency meeting for tomorrow to deal with the crisis ... and it's on the warm! All the regional reps are flying in. They're scared to meet over the Net. I don't know what to think, Randy. Everybody here is in shock.”

Randy stared out the limo window at the whitened world that glided by. He couldn't shake the image of Lester's severed arm tied to the mast of a log-boom tug, giving the WDA the stiff middle finger, like in that 20th-century film, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. “Crisis” was the right word. A leader is only a leader, he thought, but if we were to lose Lester—Christ, he's the founder, the last great crusader, the heart and soul of the thing!

"You want me to come down to D.C., Lucky?"

"No way!" she said. “I mean—uh—yes, on a personal level, but ... well, if he dies, what if people suspect he was assassinated? God knows what could happen! Best if you stay up in Québec until the situation clarifies.” She pronounced it “Kaybeck.”

Randy knew she was right, but for a few precious seconds, his feelings had soared at the prospect of missing out on the perennial awkwardness of home, of turning the limo around and heading back to the airport. He also liked the thought that he could be part of the USLUC “in-crowd” during this crisis, not to mention the pleasure of spending a few delicious days with Lucky.

And he knew why she was right, too. Long gone were the days of book depositories and magic bullets. In the last ten years, charismatic leaders of effective dissident groups had a strange habit of coming down with dread diseases. And every time it happened, someone would resurrect the tired ghost of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. A KGB agent in the former USSR had attempted to assassinate him (unsuccessfully) by stabbing him with a poisoned needle in a cathedral, in 1971. Popular wisdom had it that the WDA vigorously protected the right of all world citizens to protest to their hearts' content ... as long as they didn't succeed! USLUC had recently reached the point where there was real hope of an eventual victory ... and now this!

"I really hate it when you're right," he said, dully. "Keep me informed about what's happening down there, eh?"

"Will do," said Lucky as she signed off.

Randy froze her image on the tiny black-and-white screen of his Sniffer. Her face was more strained than he had ever seen it before. It lacked the congenial effervescence that had attracted his attention when he first visited USLUC headquarters and donated his first hundred thousand dollars, a year ago, in 2032. It had taken him three months to get over wanting to own her, or marry her—to have her all to himself, anyway. It embarrassed him to realize that he was caught up replaying their lustful nights in his mind, instead of being profoundly overwhelmed by the terrible state of Lester Connolly's health, but ... well, he couldn't influence Lester's situation, and he would have to wait along with everyone else to see where events led. For now, he had to sit like a lump in the back of a limousine and imagine how this thing would play at the estate, at home.

Chapter 4

WRONG HANDS

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—3:30 p.m.

Lilly was slight, with a pencil nose that grew visibly pinker whenever it had to feed on an Arctic air mass. "Thin as a yard of pumpwater," her Grandma Petrosian often used to say, about her body, before and after she was all grown up. Lilly felt skinnier than usual in the polar wilds of west Québec. She didn't own proper clothes for weather this insane, just some ankle-high rain boots she'd used occasionally in Florida, a black knee-length trench coat and a pair of kid leather driving gloves she'd received for Christmas years ago and never before used. It was all woefully inadequate.

Her exhalations billowed in front of her as she waited for the cab driver to unload her bags. Mouth breathing seemed the only realistic option in this inhospitable country. She wished she could wipe her nose, but digging out a tissue meant taking her hands out of her coat pockets, taking off her gloves and rummaging around in her purse (actually a large handbag) for ten or fifteen seconds—not smart at minus thirty degrees Celsius—minus twenty Fahrenheit. The idle thought crossed her mind that she could draw her coat sleeve across, like a kid would do without a second thought, but Evolutionary eyes were surely watching from darkened windows, she imagined. I better wait until I get inside.

Lilly found herself calculating how often this shivering and sniffing routine would likely recur in the course of her new job. It's worth it, I guess, she thought as her locked aluminum equipment case was plunked too roughly onto the packed snow of the parking lot. If I do well here, I'll get posted somewhere normal, somewhere south, way south.

She looked at the faded front of the old motel. Set back to the left was a double-decker block of twenty rooms, attached at a cockeyed angle to the motel office and the restaurant by an enclosed passage perhaps forty feet long. Those rooms were for paying guests, she knew from perusing the Netfiles on Victor-E. The makeshift passageway was an obvious add-on.

The restaurant section directly in front of her had a hand-painted sign jutting up from the flat roof: "The E-tery." The "E" was for "Evolution," and for "eat," of course. Way too cute, Lilly thought. Below those words was painted "Le E-tery," the French version of the name, in letters twice as large as the English. She knew from the Netfiles that the place had been called Ed and Ellen's Motel before it had been bought by that first-ever band of bewildered Evolutionaries back in 2016 ... seventeen years ago, she

thought. There were only twelve pioneers in the beginning, and now, with clans in every country of the world, the burgeoning movement had some 230 million adherents, more than two percent of the planet's population of ten-plus billion, an economic success story without precedent or parallel. "Weirdos," she sniffed under her breath as she continued to review what she knew about the people and the place.

This first Evolutionary clan was called Victor-E, after Victor Helliwell, the famous recluse who had invented the LieDeck. No one seemed to know exactly why that was; in fact some said it was just a play on the word "victory," and had nothing at all to do with Helliwell. It was a controversy that no one cared enough about to actually resolve. In any event, Victor-E was known the world over as the "motherhouse of the movement," at least by those not in the movement. Its members had built a vaguely wheel-shaped town that covered—or at least meandered over—seventy of their two hundred acres. The main work-and-play facilities were well in behind the E-tery, housed inside an air-supported Pliesterine bubble that covered an area of seven acres and rose a hundred and fifty yards above the ground. There were dozens of enclosed wooden pathways—spokes, they were called—wandering ungeometrically from the bulbous hub out to forty "sleeperies," their bedroom units, forking as needed. The way the cow went, it seemed to Lilly when she'd looked over a map of the place on her MIU screen a few days earlier. The Evolutionaries called all of that stuff their life-base, or their "living terminal." Lilly thought that second term sounded ugly, like "bus terminal."

It was impossible to see all this from where Lilly stood in front of the motel. She had been dozing in the back of the cab for the last few miles, so she hadn't actually seen the Victor-E complex yet. She would have to explore the whole facility in the next few days, but for now, all she wanted was a hot cup of coffee and some quiet time to get organized before having her first supper with these alien beings.

A smallish brown dog was circling the new arrivals, sniffing them, assuming that they were here to stay. And no threat, said the voice of his instinct. He had never known the beatings that could crank fear up to bad-dog status, so he had always been puppy-like in his trust levels. Chances are these new people don't know I'm not supposed to go in by the front door, he felt. They might even open it! He lifted a hind leg and peed on a tire to make sure they knew he'd done his outdoors chore and was ready for refuge.

"Careful," said Lilly as the driver slipped slightly on the icy pavement and almost lost his footing. He slammed the trunk lid and didn't respond. The last ten months had taught her to expect this kind of psychological abuse, but it still stung. In addition to the recent Henderson Scandals that had tarnished the good name of the organization and sullied its reputation, there were people who never had got past old grudges about how the WDA's military founders, led by U.S. General George Brampton, had summarily dismissed the UN's cabal of useless diplomats and taken over the world body right after the LieDeck Revolution—as the final act of the Revolution, really. This taciturn taxi driver seemed about the right age for that unhelpful sentiment. Never mind there hasn't been a war for nineteen years and there's no crime to speak of, Lilly brooded silently. He would have been a teenager during the Revolution. He's in his mid-thirties now, and a classic loser. He probably has a wrinkled old B.A. stuffed in a drawer at home. Maybe he thinks his stinky life is our fault. I bet he's an Evolutionary.

A young woman with long blond hair was standing inside the tall glass door of the restaurant, dressed for mid-July. She was repeatedly breathing on a small area of the glass, rubbing it clear of frost with the butt of her hand, and wishing it would stay clear for more than a few seconds. Big Wus really is a big wus, she thought as she pulled the door and watched the spaniel bully his way past the clan's new spy and her temporary porter. "His name is Big Wus," she said as a wave of cold air washed in, and went right through her light blouse. "I'm Julia," she announced. Lilly stepped aside so the driver could wiggle through with the two fairly heavy cases. "I'm Julia," the girl repeated with equal fanfare to the driver as he stepped in and smacked the cases on the linoleum floor.

"I'm Alex," he said cheerily as Julia shut the door firmly. He removed his gloves and took off his hopelessly misted-up glasses, putting the gloves in one coat pocket and the glasses in another. "I'm out at Base Walden. Things are ... good for you here?"

Julia shook his hand, and then she put her other hand on top of his, to warm him up. "Maybe you can face me on the Net after you have your supper at home," she said with a coquettish smile. "I'll tell you all about us if you like."

"Sure, why not?"

"Oh, that will be so fun!"

"How do you know?" asked Alex teasingly. "Maybe I'm no fun at all."

"Well I'm fun," asserted Julia as she let go of his hand, "so if you're not fun, then I'll just click you right off of my MIU screen."

"Fair enough," he chuckled as he put his bulky gloves back on—he left his glasses in his coat pocket. "And good luck with your new boss," he added sarcastically.

"Oh, she's not the boss," laughed Julia. "She's just here to—"

"Tell her, not me," said Alex as he opened the door and threw a glare at his erstwhile passenger. "Face ya later," he said to Julia in a voice that said he really did want to, that he really would try to remember to call when he got off shift and settled down for some nice Nettime.

Lilly had taken all this in while using the opportunity to dig a couple of tissues out of her gigantic purse and tidy up her nose. Now, with the used tissues stuffed into her pants pocket, she finally felt ready to be civil. "I'm Lillian Petrosian," she said with a trained smile and the presentation of a patchy, red hand. "My friends call me Lilly," she offered, hoping to score a few easy points from her greeter, who seemed to be in her late twenties. And then it hit her—from the Netfiles: This is Julia Whiteside, Randy's aunt!

Julia took the hand, and was surprised at how bony it was, and how cold. She wanted to stick the poor woman's hands under her arms and hold them there a while, but Lilly wasn't an Evolutionary, and Julia had been reminded over breakfast that the ways of the WDA were ... well, different. She remembered being told about that over and over when she had first joined Victor-E four years ago. "Different doesn't mean worse or better; it just means not the same as us." Well, too bad for this Lilly person, she thought sadly. I really like it when my hands are real cold and somebody lets me warm them up in their pits, especially when we both get to giggling and all that.

"Let's have some coffee," she said, releasing the icy hand and heading off towards the counter. "And ... welcome to Québec, and to Victor-E," she added, almost forgetting her primary mission. "You'll get used to winter after a while if you dress up right ... and don't go out too much. I'm skinny too—just like you are, but not as much—so I don't go outside when it's this cold outside unless I have to. At least we don't have to go outside to pee," she said, with a grin. "Like Big Wus," she added, in case the new WDA monitor might have misunderstood her meaning.

Lilly couldn't help but notice that the restaurant was totally empty. A hint, I suppose. She took off her boots and put on the old loafers she'd carried from Florida in her large handbag while Julia carefully set two mugs in a very straight row. "Just black," Lilly said across the room as she put on the second shoe. She tossed her trench coat across the back of a chair and put her purse/handbag on the seat, then walked to the counter, where Julia had successfully poured two cups of steaming black coffee.

Julia led the way to a table that was furthest from the frosted windows, close to a baseboard heater. "This is my favorite table when it's winter outside," she said with a wide smile. "My 'special table' is what I call it."

"Thanks for the coffee," said Lilly. "God, is it ever cold out there."

The two women were as distant in their philosophies as they were in their IQs, but they were close in age. Just as Julia knew that all WDA agents were pretty much stunted in the area of making friends and having fun, Lilly knew that Evolutionaries were a lost cause when it came to realism. Both were glad to sense that the face-offs they'd have in the course of the next year would likely be minor skirmishes or even non-events.

"You got such nice, long, straight hair!" gushed Julia. "Just like mine, except yours is black and mine is yellow."

"I always used to wear it short, ever since I was a kid," said Lilly, "but Ed, my ex-boyfriend, he said—"

"I really like the WDA flag," interrupted Julia, pointing at the metal case by the door with the large WDA emblem emblazoned on the side. "Is your gun in there?"

"Well ... yes it is," said Lilly with all the patience that her job required. "Why?"

"I'd like to shoot a gun," Julia said. She noticed that Lilly had both her hands tightly clamped onto the cup—well, on and off and on and off, actually. She was trying to warm them up without burning them, and somehow that behavior helped Julia to define the tall, wispy WDA agent as a human being. "Of course not at anything living," she continued, "like a cow or something or a dog. Did you ever kill somebody?"

"No," said Lilly, honestly.

"Would you say 'no' even if it was a lie?"

"No," said Lilly, wrongly. But who's to know?

"I wish I had a LieDeck," said Julia bluntly. "You got one, eh?"

"I have two," said Lilly after a sip. "There's one built right in my MIU hard drive and the other one is built into my portable Sniffer. I need them both to do my job."

"I'm retarded," announced Julia. "My mom always told me I was born with my brain like that, but I think it's okay."

Lilly had reviewed dozens of Victor-E Netfiles, and studied the important ones very carefully. She knew to expect some out-of-the-blue commentaries from Julia Whiteside, daughter of the late and legendary Randall Whiteside, but she had no idea what to make of this gratuitous exclamation. She wondered how many other disjointed conversations she'd have to endure in the next twelve months. Keep ... focused, she reminded herself. "What would you do with it if you had one?" she asked.

"I got a brain!" protested Julia. "You hurt my feelings, Lilly. Why did you do that on purpose? I didn't say anything to—"

"No, no," insisted Lilly, trying hard not to laugh. "I meant ... like what would you do if you had a LieDeck?"

Julia wasn't sure who had misunderstood whom, and wished even more that she did have a LieDeck, so she could find out. Big Wus wandered over, licking his chops, and sat at her feet, earning himself a pat on the head. "I'd play with it," she said, still struggling to sweep the hurt from her feelings, still looking down at Big Wus. "It must be so fun to have one, eh?" she asked, finally looking up at the agent. "A ... LieDeck," she specified, meaning not a dog.

"Well, it's ... interesting," allowed Lilly. "But LieDecks are sort of like medicine or nuclear bombs or guns. They're very dangerous in the wrong hands. History teaches us that—"

"Are my hands wrong hands?" asked a startled Julia, fanning her palms out before her face and trying to grasp this strange, new notion.

It took Lilly a couple of seconds to realize this wasn't a put-down, but a reflection of Julia's disability. "I'm sure you know that only WDA workers can have LieDecks, Julia."

"Yeah, o' course I know about that," said Julia, turning her hands over to see if this "wrongness" maybe might show up on the backs.

"Did you ever wish that you could work for the WDA?" asked Lilly. "You could have a LieDeck if—"

Julia's laughter was instantaneous and hearty. "You get that from your father's gene pool," her mother always used to tell her when she burst out laughing like that. Oh dear, Julia worried, I'm afraid maybe that I hurt her feelings by laughing, but ... jeeze!

"That's ... funny?" asked Lilly, carefully. "What I said?"

Julia made herself calm down, and took a sobering sip of hot coffee before answering. This Lilly person is a lot like Mr. Lloyd, the WDA guy that we had before, she thought ... nice enough, but not too clued in. "Yes," she admitted, with only the briefest glance at the woman that she was asked to welcome to Victor-E. "It's just that I'm not ... you know ... I'm not smart enough to be a WDA police person," she tried. "So ... can I, like, ask you a question?"

"Uh ... sure," said Lilly apprehensively. The Netfile on Julia Whiteside had warned of her disarming frankness, and also of her habit of switching horses whenever she felt like it.

"Would you ever ... you know ... shoot a person?" she asked. "Like on purpose?"

Lilly twitched. "If I had to," she said. "But I—uh—don't expect I'll ever have to do that, because—"

"Like what would I have to do for you to kill me with your gun?" asked Julia. "What if I—"

"I'm really quite tired," said Lilly, standing to establish her intentions. "Thanks again for the coffee. Could you get someone to carry my bags to my quarters?"

Julia stood up and tried to hide the nasty feelings that filled her stomach. They're all the same, she thought, remembering how the clan's last WDA agent used to change the topic whenever he bloody felt like it. And I'll just have to teach her some other time not to waste coffee or any other stuff, when she's not so tired.

She marched over to the door and lifted the two bags, just as she'd done last year when Lilly's predecessor had arrived and assumed that Julia was a weakling. "Please follow me," she said with as much politeness as she could manage. "The WDA place is upstairs, right over the kitchen, with a nice view of the pool out in the back yard." She thought of mentioning that the pool was all emptied out now, except for the snow, but ... even a WDA agent can figure that out for herself.

Lilly gathered up her boots, coat and handbag as Julia lugged the two cases from the front door to the base of the stairs. No point in offering to help, she figured. As long as Julia scores her Brownie points and feels superior, we'll get along just fine.

Big Wus ran by the two women, scampered up the first half of the stairs and turned around on the landing to watch. "Woof," he said as Julia let the heavier aluminum case bang on every stair. I never know why humans do things, he felt, but they got nice warm houses and good stuff to eat, and sometimes they even like to play with me. "Woof," he repeated, hopefully.

Chapter 5

SETTLING IN

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—4:00 p.m.

Lilly felt relieved as the door closed and Julia went running down the stairs after ... "Big Wus," she said lightly, making a mental note to mention him by name in her reports to Control. Great name, she thought. At least these Evolutionaries like to joke around and have fun with life.

The suite that she had been promised was actually a small, one bedroom apartment ... circa nineteen fifty. "Big whoop!" she said out loud as she tossed her trench coat on the second-hand couch. Tenth-hand, actually, she estimated. These were her digs for the next year, and she was determined to make the best of what promised to be a boring situation. Her next promotion would be the big one, the one she had worked so hard for, the one that got her parked someplace that she could maybe call "home." I'll be damned if I'll let anybody or anything screw that up.

The large bay window at the back of her living room had an electric baseboard heater beneath it. Good thinking, she said to herself. Keeps this window from frosting over, like the others. Lilly hated feeling closed in.

About two hundred yards behind the restaurant-motel—the original building that dated back to the mid-20th century—was the great bubble that covered the clan's work-and-play area. Lilly found it remarkable that a seven-acre sheet of space-age Pliesterine material could be light enough to be supported by air compressors, yet tough enough and stretchy enough to handle any weather Québec or Canada could throw at it. There were high mounds of snow where the Pliesterine met the concrete base, snow that had slid off the whale's back over the past few months. In the waning daylight, the thing looked solid gray from the outside, but Lilly knew it was translucent. And there was a smallish round patch of snow on the top of the bubble, where the fabric was virtually horizontal, so that on a clear winter's night, if you passed over one of these structures in a plane, it looked like a dim Cyclops' eye.

Extending outwards from the sides of the enormous bubble, she could see several of the so-called "spokes," the unheated wooden passageways that connected the central hub to the dormitories, and some of the dormitories to each other. The spokes meandered like drunken covered bridges to wherever the next eight- or ten-bedroom "sleepery" (their word for a dorm) got built—up over hillocks, down through valleys, around big "keeper" trees, with no apparent attention paid to the overall design. To the left and below she saw the covered spoke that led from the E-tery out to the giant hub. She knew from her study of the Netfiles that the occasional windows and lateral doors of the spokes were simply removed in the summer, so that the breezes, and the Evolutionaries, could travel through, or not, as they pleased.

In the far distance, perhaps three hundred yards to the west of the hub and at a slightly lower elevation,

Lilly could see the long row of twenty-two smaller Pliesterine bubbles, each an acre or two in size. The Evolutionaries grew their off-season vegetables in there, and their herbs—and their pot. Some of these smaller bubbles were used for purposes like machine shops, winter pens for livestock, a slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant, an auto repair garage and body shop ... even a golf practice range—the kinds of things one wouldn't want, or couldn't fit, in the hub itself.

A road ran in front of this row of bubbles. “Every clan has a Bubble Street,” it said in the Netfiles. Victor-E's formidable Bubble Street was where the clan stationed most of its collectively-owned fleet of eighty or so well utilized and expertly maintained vehicles—trucks, vans, cars—even a few busses. A parking lot extended down the road, with short posts every few yards along. Each post had an electric outlet and a cord to plug in block-heaters in winter ... the way people used to tether horses in the Wild West, she thought, bemused.

Lilly gave a last glance at the clan's set-up and walked away from the window. It was time to get down to business.

After tipping the metal equipment case flat on the floor, she unlocked it and withdrew her hard drive. She inserted it into the MIU at her new workstation and turned both units on. As the WDA protocol now demanded, she put her right index finger onto the bioID slot. It still astonished her how, along with the verification of her fingerprint, this novel technology could suck off a few cells of dead skin and confirm her DNA, her biological identity. She then entered her PIN code using the keyboard (the WDA's third, redundant, failsafe ID system), and finally the big, wall-mounted screen of the Master Interface Unit lit up. One by one, all her obscurely-named programs and files were verified “present and secure,” in living color.

She took her small, brown SuperNet Interfacer from her vest pocket and plugged it into the MIU for a function check. Lilly always preferred sitting at a Netstation, using a proper MIU, but these relatively new and fully portable Sniffers certainly had their uses and their virtues. Introduced in 2023, a decade ago, they didn't have full keyboards, not because of any design or manufacturing showstoppers, but because by 2023, keyboards were rarely used any more. Digitized full-interface technology had been largely perfected by then, and choosing between tick-tacking on a keyboard and speaking words was a no-brainer. Nobody picked Door #1. Her only beef with the Sniffer was the inferior quality of the black-and-white images it transmitted and displayed. The person at the other end got only ten images per second, a slightly jerky reflection of the smooth flow of reality.

“Satellite unit confirmed,” came the male voice of her MIU, meaning Lilly's Sniffer was operating properly. “Enough of that nonsense,” she muttered as she accessed the control panel and flipped the “voice” key. Henceforth, she would be addressed by an MIU with a female voice. She needed this tool to be an ally, not a pain-in-the-buttocks. Finally, she was set to begin. “Review major news events in brief,” she commanded.

The voice of the MIU told her about how Lester Connolly had lost his left arm to the flesh-eating disease a few hours ago, and she was shocked—and annoyed with herself for staying out of touch between deplaning and now. She watched the official statement from Dr. MacInnis at the Washington D.C. General Hospital, and then watched as her ultimate superior, Supreme Commander Sheena Kalhoun, responded with words of comfort.

Lilly had no great love for the indefatigable shit-disturber who had dedicated his life to achieving civilian access to the LieDeck, but still ... it's such a terrible disease; I hope he doesn't die, she thought. She was glad to see that Sheena Kalhoun had the good grace to express the sympathy of the WDA to Connolly's family and friends. I bet that stuck in her throat, Lilly thought as she noted the rather careful words the Supreme Commander had used.

She verbally asked her MIU to access InfoBank and retrieve any “faces” between USLUC headquarters and civilians her new “territory” of Pontiac County, and she was surprised to see that young Randy Whiteside had faced with some woman called “Lucky” an hour ago, from his father's limo. Oh yeah—his girlfriend, she recalled from her review of his Netfile. She ran the whole transaction, and was surprised by the apparent depth of the boy's involvement with USLUC. Could that be a pragmatic thing? she asked herself. If the LieDeck was unbanned, sales would go through the roof, and Randy and all other shareholders in Whiteside Tech would make a bundle.

The time had come for Lilly to get on with her own news. “Archive and transmit, coded, to Control Upper America,” she said after she tapped the “instruct” key. “Report number one. Tuesday, February eight, two thousand and thirty-three, four ten p.m.,” she said as she leaned back in the swivel chair.

“I tried to make friendly with Randy Whiteside on the plane, but his distrust of the WDA runs pretty deep. He's resentful of the fact that his family controls the company that makes all the LieDecks in the world, yet he can't own one or use one ... and I guess that's understandable. Anyway, I decided not to tell him that my new assignment was to monitor Victor-E, so I imagine he'll be surprised if he comes over to visit his Aunt Julia and sees me here ... or hears about me from his Aunt Julia, I suppose.

“As his Netfile suggests, he's gotten quite involved with USLUC. He was on the Sniffer to their D.C. headquarters—a girl named Lucky—Yolanda Dees, really—shortly after the Netnews announcement of Lester Connolly's illness. She said something about how people might think that Connolly was assassinated if he dies ... but I'm sure you're on top of all that bullshit. It's astonishing how civilians get paranoid about the WDA. It makes me want to puke, frankly.

“Anyway, I got here at three-thirty. I had to take a damned cab in from the airport. My car wasn't ready, apparently. I can't believe how unpleasantly cold it is up here ... I mean scary cold! I talked to a couple of Canadians while I was waiting for the cab, and they told me eastern Canada and Québec were experiencing an unusual cold snap. Just my luck ... global warming everywhere but here.

“I was met at Victor-E by Randy Whiteside's aunt, Julia. Nobody else in sight—I'm pretty sure they were avoiding me.

“Her Netfile doesn't do her justice. She's mentally challenged all right, but she's got more than a nodding acquaintance with reality, and she certainly gets to the point! She asked me what she'd have to do for me to shoot her, for Christ's sake! I didn't tell her about my chance meeting with her nephew, Randy, but she never said her last name, so I can explain the oversight that way. I'm sure they must realize I was given the goods on everybody here before my departure from Florida, but I might as well keep up the illusion that the WDA does only minimal homework on Evolutionary clans.

“Let's see ... Randy confirmed on the plane that his little sister Venice wants to live with her Aunt Julia in Victor-E. His father Michael—well ... their father—must be just about apoplectic—to lose his mentally challenged sister to this sort-of cult-like lifestyle, and now maybe his daughter could be coming here as well. I guess I'll meet up with her ... Venice ... sooner or later. Randy says he's going to try to talk her out of it, so maybe I can help him there.”

Lilly stopped momentarily, running the family connections through her wetware—her internal computer—the one between her ears. She just hated having to memorize a passel of new names every time she moved, but ... such is the life of a warrior princess, she told herself, sardonically. Back to work, you lazy lout, she scolded herself.

“I committed the horrible sin of not finishing my coffee when I was in the motel's restaurant with Julia Whiteside,” she continued in her report.” It's not that I forgot their passion for waste-not living, just that it

fit with the impression I'm trying to give of being ill-prepared ... ill-mannered too, I suppose ... although I admit that at the time, I really needed to get away from her. She can be a royal pain in the you-know-what.

"The only other warm body I met so far is the dog. 'Big Wus,' they call him. He's a rather fat male spaniel.

"Oh yeah, plus the cab driver—Alex something. He played the silent type all the way in from the airport. When we arrived here, he flings my case around with no regard for what's in it, and it turns out that he's an Evolutionary too, from Base Walden, a few miles east of Ottawa, if I recall correctly, over on the Canadian side of the river, in any event. He made a strong tingle connection with Julia, and she invited him to face her tonight on the Net. I'll scan for the encounter and archive transactions between those two. I expect they'll have fun talking about what a jerk I am. End of report."

Lilly rubbed her eyes, and felt the full weight of the very long day she'd already put in. WDA agents were always on duty, really, and sometimes Lilly longed for the mental freedom, the psychological easiness of her years as a child and student. She felt owned, not like Kunta Kinte or Chicken George in the book *Roots*, but ... sort of like that. She ran tired hands through her long black hair and let fly with a gaping, unabashed yawn. I am woman; hear me whine, she thought, remembering the lyrics of a satirical song that the Iconoclasts had released a few years ago. But I chose my brand of slavery, she almost mouthed as she shook her head free of the anxieties that were crowding her inner space.

The time had finally come to begin the real work she'd been sent here to do. "Face with Annette Blais now," she instructed her MIU, tapping the "local transmit" key on the console. It took a few seconds for the woman Lilly had studied to pop onto her screen in the telltale black and white of a Sniffer transmission, looking all of her fifty-four years—grayer up top than Lilly remembered her from the Netfiles—and looking severely put-upon by the unwelcome interruption. "Well hello, Ms. Blais," she said, "I'm Lilly Pe—"

"I know who you are," snapped Annette into her Sniffer as she walked briskly down the Mainspoke. "Zilla," she said under her breath. "Let's do coffee. I'm just one minute away from the E-tery. The staff told me you left your cup of coffee sitting on the table—it's probably still there, so we might as well—"

"Give me ten minutes," said Lilly, trying not to sound quite as brittle as she felt. "Net, down, now," she ordered before Annette could respond. Lilly pushed the "override" key just before she said "Net, down, now," so her reception was not discontinued, as Annette would assume—at least not until the leader of Victor-E actually turned off her Sniffer.

The screen on Annette's Sniffer went to black. "Zilla," she said, audibly this time, putting her face up close the device, almost as if she knew Lilly was eavesdropping. Then Annette slapped the lid down, terminating the transmission.

Lilly imagined Annette ramming the device into her pocket and cursing the WDA in both English and French. She knew about the Evolutionary use of the name "Zilla" from her study of the Netfiles. She had learned about it during her review of Victor Helliwell's Human One, Two, Three theory. It was short for "Godzilla," an Evolutionary insult, their way of referring to the instinct, or to a person who is acting on instinct alone, especially when he or she shouldn't be, in their supposedly enlightened view. It was their way of suggesting that the "person" is hardly involved, except in defining the "how" of an event, not the "what." In fact, Evolutionaries only used the term Zilla if they concluded that a person's words or actions were what a Normal court of law would label "temporarily insane," meaning an involuntary regression all the way back to Human One—an animal reaction, basically, devoid of any intellectual input, judgment or control.

Careful Annette, thought Lilly as she shut off her MIU and walked to the bathroom. I can push too.

Chapter 6

DOES NOT COMPUTE

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—4:15 p.m.

The man codenamed “Eyeball” was still sitting alone in front of his MIU, watching the Supreme Commander of the WDA smile thinly and push her considerable bosom towards all the applause and cheers in the decorated aircraft hangar. There had been speculation for some months about a huge new spending program that was planned by the WDA for California. There was talk of thirteen thousand construction jobs, and of forty thousand permanent jobs to follow. Where these numbers came from, no one seemed to know, but if they were anywhere close to the truth, the state economy was in for a mammoth shot in the arm. What the project was all about ... well, no one seemed to know that either. Local rumor had it that the installation was to be housed in hundreds of the biggest Pliesterine bubbles, the ten-acre ones, out in the desert. The WDA sure has a thing about secrecy, he thought, even when it serves no useful purpose.

Eyeball watched long enough to hear Sheena Kalhoun announce that the project was to be called the “World Identity Bank,” but he had no particular interest in hearing the details. He pressed “show source” on his keyboard, and as the information was displayed, his heart thumped irregularly. The words across the bottom of his Netscreen read: “L.A. International, Hangar #1, Tuesday, February 8, 2033, 4:15 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.” No fucking way! he said to himself. That ... just doesn't compute ... I don't think.

He killed the sound and double-checked that he'd made instructions to archive the ceremonies as they continued in the hangar—he'd review that later. He took out a piece of paper and began making calculations, working backwards, and using bare minimums in his estimates of the amounts of time that would be required for things to compute:

- 1—walk from plane to hangar in LA—5 minutes
- 2—plane taxis on runway in LA—5 minutes
- 3—time in the air—?
- 4—plane taxis on runway in NY—5 minutes
- 5—airport arrival to boarding in NY—5 minutes
- 6—trip from WDA HQ to JFK Airport in NY—30 minutes

Eyeball knew that “Peace One,” the Supreme Commander's plane, was a Boeing 787 Dreamliner. He accessed the schedules of two commercial airlines on his MIU, noting the departure and arrival times of several flights from JFK to LAX, LA International Airport, flights using that same type of plane. All were about four and a half hours. He multiplied sixty by four-point-five, and got two hundred and seventy. Then he wrote “270 minutes” where the question mark had been, beside “time in the air.” And then he added all of the numbers. “Total: 320 minutes, or 5 hours and 20 minutes, as a minimum,” he wrote.

He subtracted five hours and twenty minutes from Sheena Kalhoun's jaunty climb to the podium in L.A.'s Hangar #1, which occurred at 4:15 p.m., and arrived at an answer of 10:55 a.m. Earlier in the day, when

Kalhoun had recorded her Netcast in response to the breaking story about Lester Connolly, she had been sitting behind her desk in her office at WDA headquarters, in the building that had once been the home of the United Nations. Everyone knew what that highest office looked like, and that's where she had been. The absolute latest that she could have made that recording in her office was five minutes to eleven this morning, he figured, EST.

Eyeball retrieved the archived record of the stunning announcement that had been made from the Washington General Hospital at 3:30 p.m. He let the Netcast roll, and poised his pen to make notes as the Chief of Surgery read his prepared script:

My name is Dr. MacInnis. At eleven fifteen this morning, Lester Connolly was admitted with flu-like symptoms and severe pain in his lower left arm. By eleven thirty-five a.m., we had diagnosed his illness as necrotizing fasciitis, the so-called flesh-eating disease, which can sometimes—

Holy Christ, Eyeball said to himself as he froze the image. Kalhoun recorded her public response to Connolly's illness twenty minutes before he was even admitted, and forty minutes before the fucking diagnosis was made! He carefully reviewed his tentative finding, looking for a snag. The only way I could be wrong is if there's an east-to-west wind today, or no wind, and the plane saved a substantial amount of flight time.

He checked the day's weather on his MIU. The prevailing winds had prevailed. There was a fifteen- to twenty-mile-an-hour wind, out of the west. He checked the actual arrival times of the commercial flights he had noted earlier, and they had all been either on time or a few minutes late.

This is more than big, Eyeball said to himself. This is huge!

He went into the bathroom and dashed off a short hand-written letter—not including the calculations; just the bottom line—to Gilbert Henderson, the American investigative journalist who had so humiliated the WDA last year. He popped it into the bag with the rest of his outgoing mail, hoping to God it wouldn't get noticed and intercepted by some over-zealous WDA flunky. Then he lay on his couch to think about what he had just seen, just figured out, just done ... and fell into a disturbed sleep.

Chapter 7

FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—4:55 p.m.

Lilly was back in her small apartment. Her meeting with Annette Blais, the administrator of the Victor-E clan, had been formal, perfunctory and without much substance. The only thing Annette had said that resonated was: “Jeeze you're skinny; we'll have to fatten you up.” For slaughter? Lilly wondered. She and I are going to conflict.

There was still unpacking, never high on Lilly's list of favorite activities. She opened the smaller suitcase and hung up her clothes, so they'd get unwrinkled. The rest of her stuff could wait. Her practically antique steamer trunk would arrive in a few days, with the balance of her clothing. “And all those other things that matter less and mean more,” she said quietly.

She sat in her comfy new Net chair—her predecessor, Harry Lloyd, had got at least that item right—and locked her thin hands into a kind of hammock behind her thin neck, under her long black hair. With her eyes closed, she breathed in the finality and freshness of this pivotal moment in her life. God never closes

a door without opening a window, she remembered her mother saying with that “I-really-mean-this” look of hers. I suppose, she thought, although she had little time for fiction.

Lilly figured the day would come when she would feel comfortable here in this place, even though this could never be a real home. Bohemians, she remembered hearing from her darling Grandpa Petrosian ... rest his soul. Then came the ... she had to think about it ... beatniks—that was it—then the hippies, then that punk thing, and now these so-called Evolutionaries. There's always some people who can't fit in and just be normal.

She let her thoughts wander, and found herself considering what would become of her ex-lover, Ed, back in Miami. He was a descent sort, destined for an unspectacular float up to the middle rungs of some random regional WDA office, contentedly keeping tabs on a medium-sized cadre of underlings ... and undoubtedly diddling his secretaries.

If it weren't for his great sense of humor ... she thought. She shook her head at the “I'll-never-find-a-man” panic she'd felt when she first decided to hook up with good old Ed. She remembered the moment two years ago when she had flipped an old American twenty-five-cent piece to help herself make the decision. The foolishness of flipping the keepsake coin had made her laugh, and that laugh reminded her of Ed's unfettered ability to crack up, even at his own expense. The deal she'd made with herself was: “Heads, I commit; tails, I split.” But when the 1931 quarter landed on tails, she'd laughed heartily, and ... well, the rest was history ... and now so was Ed.

Lilly opened the small jewelry box that was always with her, and jiggled her index finger among the trinkets until the old quarter peeked up from among the baubles. Coins and paper money were gradually being phased out in favor of those infallible ones and zeros of InterBank, the WDA's digitized record of all bioID-verified financial records and transfers. She knew it made sense, but somehow she knew she would miss the jingle of coins in her pocket. At the moment, she missed good old Ed ... or at least she missed having a man in her life.

I wonder if I'll meet someone up here in the great white waste of time? What was that guy's name? Uh ... Gordon Weatherby. She remembered his name from Netfiles she had reviewed on her MIU last weekend in her tiny office in downtown Miami. This Gordon Weatherby chap was her WDA counterpart at Callaway #6, the WDA baby-sitter of a smaller Evolutionary clan about twenty miles down the highway from Victor-E, towards Gatineau. He's got Ed's laugh, and a full head of hair! she said to herself, recalling the mild revulsion she'd always felt towards old Ed's baseball-sized bald spot. Maybe I'll face him on the Net tomorrow, about the time he's starting to wonder if I'm stuck up.

Lilly knew she should go once more through the Netfiles of the key players at Victor-E, but ... to hell with it, she said to herself. This job was destined to be a walk in the park. She'd probably report “all quiet on the northern front” twice a week for a year, then move on, up the organization, south. I wonder when I'll get the further instructions that Control mentioned?

But Lilly Petrosian had a longstanding problem with guilt, especially if it was caused by her own procrastination. She opened her eyes, leaned forward and booted up her MIU, asking for random ten-second scans of intra-clan SuperNet transactions, snippets of who was talking to whom in this cluster of losers, and about what. She wasn't tired—that's if you didn't count physical fatigue—and this aspect of her duties would likely be good for a few insights, perhaps even a chuckle or a snort.

One thing Lilly didn't usually feel much guilt about was her access to other people's private lives. She had studied a thousand horror stories of what life was like before the LieDeck Revolution, and for a few years thereafter, in the period before the WDA had truly established its presence and control throughout the world. Humans were civilized now, in 2033, and for one reason only. They had no choice! The

WDA had fifty million agents monitoring almost ten billion civilians, a ratio of one agent per two hundred or so civilians. Agents were empowered to prevent crime—individual crime, corporate crime, state crime, all crime—using whatever means were necessary. That's all a WDA agent is authorized to do, and that's all we do, Lilly grumbled to herself. Granted, civilians were not aware of all the means that were used, but there was no need for them to know all that stuff. It's not their concern, she reminded herself. I don't give a hoot how they conduct their personal lives, she assured herself, as long as they stay legal. The system works.

There were eighteen internal conversations under way on the SuperNet, between and among the various members of Victor-E, and twenty-one non-commercial interfaces in progress with the outside world. She decided she would check out the external traffic later, tonight, more likely tomorrow morning, when there'd be less Netsex going on. For now, however, she sat back to eavesdrop on the inside poop.

They're not as different from Normals as they imagine, Lilly said to herself as short Netbites passed before her eyes and through her practiced mind. These Evolutionaries were talking to each other about money, work, and Netshows they liked or didn't like ... pretty mundane stuff, all in all. They also talked about their sex lives, a lot, and she was mildly disquieted by their openness on that score. She noticed a few Netgropes going on, but not many. In fact, it seemed to her that Evolutionaries didn't get into actual Netsex as much as most Normals did, though she knew she might have to revise that opinion when she started monitoring their external Netlinks. Everybody likes to tingle, she remembered “learning” in her first month at the WDA's Officer Training Academy.

She spent a full minute watching a live chatroom that hooked up six of the thirteen patients who were in the small medical clinic that was maintained in the Victor-E base, at the south end of the hub, near the E-tery. From what she heard and saw, it seemed that a couple of those patients might be better off in a regular hospital—there was a hospital in the nearby village of Shawville, as she recalled.

Then, after a few more ten-second clips, she hit on a two-person Netlink that really caught her attention, although she wasn't sure why. Let's see where this one goes, she thought as she disengaged the “scan” key. The woman doing the talking was a Dorothy Copps, according to a written notation on the bottom of the screen. The same information box, with a keystroke of prompting, said that Dorothy Copps had a daughter, Olivia, and that the father was a Terry Day, who lived down in the Callaway #6 clan.

"...so I go over to her bed, and she says, 'I did subtig bad, bubby.' So I said, 'you were just having a bad dream because of your cold, sweetheart,' and I put my hand on the bed to lean over and give her a kiss, and jeeze, it was all over the place! So I turned on the light, and she'd thrown up all her spaghetti, eh? Yuck! My hand was right in it! I switched on the main light, and then she looks at the puddle of barf and starts to scream: 'Worbs, bubby, I got worbs id by tubby.' God, I could hardly stop myself from laughing. I mean Olivia's only three, eh? And she'd never thrown up before. It scares them, eh? I mean they got—"

Lilly killed the sound and watched as the two Evolutionary mothers yammered away about the joys and trials of turning blubbering bundles of joy into walking, talking, potty-trained adults. I guess motherhood is the same everywhere, she thought. It's great, but it's just not for me. I'm not up to that much ingratitude.

Her Netscreen was split, so she could watch both ends of the transaction. She looked at the bottom of the screen, and saw that the other mom was an Alice Lochlear. She had a son Barry; father unknown. Now it seemed to be Alice's turn to story-tell, so Lilly turned the sound back on.

"...at that age, eh? So I said, 'Look, Barry, every eight-year-old in the world thinks there's a monster under his bed.' And you know what he says? He says, 'Why?' So I start talking, then I realize that I don't have a fuckin' clue, eh? How the Christ would I know? When I was his age, I had a gigantic purple

monster that lived under my bed, with long, scaly, green legs—six of them—and there was this slimy, icky pink and yellow drool seeping out between its rows of long, pointy teeth. Shit, I used to hold my bladder until I figured I was going to pee the bed for sure, then I'd leap out and run like hell for the can, and on the way back I'd leap into the bed from as far away as possible, so my monster wouldn't catch my ankles and eat me alive. I used to wake up my sister every time that happened, and my mom would have to come in and turn on the light and look under the bed. She'd make me look too, eh? And of course there was no monster, but that didn't help worth a shit. As soon as she left and turned out the light, I knew it was down there again. I just knew it was there, you know—knew it in my gut. And now here I am, thirty years later, and I got my little Barry asking me why eight-year-olds have monsters under their beds, like I'm supposed to know, eh? I mean moms know everything, right?"

"Well," said the first mother, "I'm sure you can sort that out with him on the Net. At least you don't have to worry about getting bit any more. My little one's only six month's old, but she's got teeth like your fucking bed-monster. She almost took my damn nipple off last week. What kind of plan is that, setting things up so kids can bite the bejesus out of their mothers and not know what the hell they did wrong? I remember on the Net once I saw about these capitalists back in the nineteenth century, and they had these women called 'wet-nurses,' and these girls sort of rented out their boobies to the highest bidder, eh? I mean talk about—"

Learn some freaking history, for Christ's sake, thought Lilly as she killed the sound. Wet-nurses date to antiquity, and the practice had nothing to do with capitalism.

She closed down her MIU and indulged another very uninhibited yawn. Mom #1—Dorothy Cops—seemed sort of interesting, and Lilly decided that she would sidle up to her some time soon, maybe get to know her a bit ... if she lets me, she reminded herself. Even though having babies wasn't on her own "to-do" list, Lilly could never get enough hand-me-down chatter on the subject. Probably to keep myself committed to not having one, she thought, with a suppressed chuckle that good old Ed used to say was designed to hide her sadness.

Maybe I'll sack out for a while before supper. I hope the bed's soft. She went to the bedroom, kicked off her shoes and lay down. She tried to rest and relax for a while, with no success at all. Her life was her work, and vice versa ... and that sucks, she mused as she rolled over.

Lilly's last assignment had involved a factory, an actual old-fashioned workplace that people traveled to in cars and busses. The company also had a large body of workers who were Netbased, of course, but Lilly's monitoring duties had been limited to the physical plant, where one hundred and forty men and women manufactured shoes. Another agent covered all the management types and a legion of Netters—sales staff and so on. It was a good go. There had been no trouble worth remembering—not because she and her team caught a lot of bad guys, but because there were no bad guys to get caught, thanks to the WDA and their LieDecks.

Those workers never stole so much as a single grommet, she said to herself. People nowadays tend to forget the critical preventative role played by the WDA. They lose sight of the fact that before agents started LieDeck-verifying everybody, there was rampant cheating, lying, stealing, harassment—all kinds of disagreeable stuff, even violent crime.

Those who would break the law whenever they wanted to always resented policing ... or whenever emotion managed to banish reason from the equation, Lilly adjusted the thought. Recent studies by the WDA, LieDeck-verified surveys, showed that eighty-six percent of the civilian population would have few compunctions about breaking most laws if they thought they had a reasonable chance of getting away with it. Animals, she said to herself. Clever animals, but animals all the same.

She turned over the pillow, punching it a few times first—an old habit. Even with a subdued pillow, it was hard to concentrate on nothing. One persistent image kept drifting across her internal Netscreen; the memory of the time she'd spent last week, in Miami, reviewing the Netfiles that were left behind by Harry Lloyd, the man she was replacing at Victor-E. He had kept a personal Netdiary the entire time he had lived in the state of Québec. The archived entries started with his arrival about a year ago, in January of 2032. He had used his Sniffer to record his entire first hour at Victor-E, and that touching entry had left a lasting impression on Lilly's mind.

About a hundred of Victor-E's three hundred and twenty members had gathered in the mess hall for a spoofy welcoming gala. They had sung a rousing rendition of "For he's a jolly good fellow," knowing full well that the LieDeck in his Sniffer would register a lie at the end of every line. Then they presented him with a huge cake, and made him blow out all the candles. In the icing, in large letters, was written: "Welcome to Victor-E." And underneath, in small letters and bracketed, was the word "beep." They wanted him to know they didn't need him or want him in their midst, but since world law made his presence necessary, they'd made their point with good old-fashioned humor. "And an absolutely scrumptilyicious chocolate cake," Harry Lloyd had reported. The mood was buoyant, the pleasure genuine and the central difference of opinion mattered no more than partisan shadings at a Christmas party in the White House. Harry Lloyd and these sweet-tempered but eccentric Evolutionaries were having honest-to-God fun together.

For Lilly, this was heart-warming and heart wrenching at the same time. Things had changed dramatically since then, with the WDA scandals that New York Times reporter Gilbert Henderson had unearthed and the full flowering of the protest movement that was demanding civilian access to the LieDeck. Where the last agent had been thrown a party, Lilly had been met by ... by a retard and a fucking dog, she thought.

She pounded the pillow again, hard, and her contemplations coasted unintentionally back to Ed, her ex, whom she felt the need of ... for about three seconds. She changed channels quickly, and reminded herself that she'd promised to face her mother in Miami as soon as she got to Québec ... but that can wait till tomorrow ... screw the guilt.

Whenever her mother landed in her thoughts, Lilly ended up thinking about her own childhood. Now, for some reason, she couldn't ditch the memory of her late father, of the way he'd had of comforting her whenever tears came. "Remember that happy place in your heart that you were in a few minutes ago?" he'd always ask, forcing her to at least nod. "Aaaaaand what do we do when we get lost in a sad place?" he'd ask next. "Go to my happy place," she would say, frowning, hanging her head, and pushing out her lower lip. Whenever they'd had that conversation, Lilly had suspected there was some kind of trickery involved, some ruse by which she was being denied her absolute right to behead a brother or disembowel some other rottenest kid in the world. I don't have a happy place any more, she realized. I just cope, get by, work, and wait.

A "bing" sounded on her MIU. She looked through the open doorway, and a rapidly flashing light on the screen told her she had a coded, top priority "face" archived. Maybe from Control, she thought, or one of his assistants. She rose from the bed and rubbed her hands—they never seemed to get really warm up here in Québec—and walked shoe-less across the carpeted floor to her Netstation. This must be it! she assumed as she turned on the MIU and entered her bioID.

"A decode will be allowed," said the electronic voice in pleasant female tones. "This transmission will automatically de-archive upon completion," it added.

"Start, now," said Lilly, pressing the "Q" button for "decode."

"Well, you made it," said the smiling image of Control.

Jeeze, this must be big, thought Lilly. It looks as if Control is planning to act as my personal handler on this assignment.

"Once you're settled, and once your car gets there—I was told there was a screw-up on that—your orders are to drive over to the Whitesides' estate and then on out to their lodge on Wilson Lake. It's a couple of miles from the manor. Patriot Security patrols the whole estate, so you'll have to tell them in advance that you're coming. Your orders are to LieDeck-verify Victor Helliwell, but tell Patriot you must see him unannounced. Just go into his quarters on the second floor of the lodge and walk in on him and LV the man like any other citizen. Tell him that his free ride is over. We found out last week he's got an inoperable brain tumor, and only a few months to live. We've got to mine his attitudes and thoughts before he dies. Tell him history will demand it if he whines about having a reason for compliance."

Control paused, looked down, shuffled some papers. Lilly continued to gaze serenely at the screen, but inside ... well, that was a different story. She had just been asked ... no told ... to interview the world's most famous recluse! And Victor Helliwell was dying! God, she thought, all I did for years was LV people about stupid stuff like stealing, and now I'm LieDeck-verifying the inventor of the LieDeck! This is amazing!

"Now, there is ... one other—uh—other thing," said Control, who seemed to hesitate, to struggle.

Christ, there's more! Lilly realized.

"We—uh—want you to get to ... know Michael Whiteside. As you know, he's the president of Whiteside Technologies. He has a wall around himself, those Patriot Security folks, but you can get to him through your contact with Victor Helliwell, who's out at the lodge. Of course all those personal connections you've got might also come in handy—Michael's sister Julia lives at Victor-E, and his daughter Venice wants to join Evolution, and of course you met his son Randy on the plane. So ... you're well set up.

"I should mention that Michael Whiteside has a bit of—uh—of marital discord in his life right now, and ... well, I'm sure you'll find your own way of getting close to him. By way of explanation, there's some serious thought being given to ending Whiteside Tech's monopoly on LieDeck production. We need to either cut him loose or reel him in. We're extremely concerned about him, actually, Captain Petrosian. We need a window into his mind and his feelings, and you're it. I wish you well. I want bi-weekly reports on this, to me personally.

"Well, that's it," said Control. "Good luck on both fronts. I'm sure you know what an honor it is to be given these two taskings. Control out."

"Automatic de-archive complete," said the mellow voice of the MIU.

Holy God in heaven! Lilly thought. There must be thousands of more senior agents who would have killed for these assignments. I wonder why they picked me? It ... doesn't figure. But I appreciate their confidence in me, don't I? Reality check ... hello to me! She closed her eyes, pinched her nose, and looked inside herself with enough integrity to get it right the first time. Yeah, she assured herself with some relief. I'm okay on that. Real okay! No detectable lie there! I can say that out loud and not get beeped.

"Transmit, coded, to Control Upper America, now," she said. When the on-screen traffic light jumped from red to green, she smiled at the MIU, at her unseen superior. "Message of February eight, two thousand and thirty-three, received and de-archived. I'll do my best, and ... thanks," she added. "I appreciate your confidence in me. Net, down, now."

Lilly felt overwhelmed. She wanted to punch the air and shout “Yesssssss!” but she figured she was still being observed by Control—even with the Net down and the screen black. This was her shot, her chance to play in the “big,” and the only way to walk onto a major-league ball diamond for the first time was cool, composed, cocky. In her private thoughts, however, one aspect of all this still troubled her. It ... just doesn't figure that they'd pick me.

She retrieved her shoes and checked her appearance in the mirror by the front door. It was time for supper, time to get looked over and gawked at by the Evolutionary masses—a daunting prospect. Just before she closed the door, she threw a confident thumbs-up at the still-dark screen. “Thanks again,” she mouthed silently.

Chapter 8

PENALTY POINT

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—5:15 p.m.

Eyeball found it odd that he would be dressed in what appeared to be full football gear—helmet, shoulder pads, rib pads, kidney pads, jockstrap, and thigh pads. And he had two hockey-type shin pads on each calf, the front one with the rounded knee-cap protector on, and the one on the back of his legs with the knee-part hacked off. The two shin pads on each leg were bound together with silver duct tape.

He also had on what appeared to be short ski boots, though they were made of rusted steel. It was a mystery how one got those things on, until he looked down to check it out. Each boot was in two parts, hinged at the back and clamped together at the front with an old-fashioned padlock ... with the key still in it! He wore tubular pads on his biceps and forearms, something he never saw on other football players. And he wore hockey gloves made of leather, although they seemed to be covered with some sort of chain mail. In his right hand he held a wooden baseball bat, and in his left, the reins.

Reins? he wondered. Well yes! He was, after all, sitting on his very favorite horse ... whose name somehow escaped him, right at the moment. It was understandable that he might forget, what with all the hubbub and the dust. There were hundreds of other men, in similar regalia, all riding slowly up to an uneven starting line, drawn with lime on the sparse grass of the playing field. These other players were grunting and slobbering inside their helmets, like enraged pigs.

Eyeball couldn't help but notice that all these snorting men were wearing different team sweaters. By the looks of things, this competition was every man for himself. “Sure, I would certainly kill Adolf Hitler in 1938 if I knew in advance where he was going with his fuckin' Nazi movement,” he insisted loudly.

“Who the fuck asked?” growled a new arrival on a gigantic, scarred-up, gray nag.

No one had asked, Eyeball realized, although someone probably should have. Oh ... yeah, he remembered. Someone had asked, but that was in first year philosophy ... how many decades ago was that? He had not answered the professor then. Better late than never. After further thought, he worried about the slippery slope problem, and whether he might kill Osama bin Laden, or George W. Bush, or both ... or any number of other bad guys, or arguably bad guys ... or half the human population ... the bad half.

He looked out across the bumpy field, and it seemed to go on forever. It was covered in August-high hay. Here and there, he saw barriers that were to be jumped—if you could fend off the other baseball bats and get a good run at the things. And there were scantily clad women beside each obstacle, on stilts,

for better viewing. He looked closer, and saw that they weren't clad at all! They were totally naked and completely shaved ... head, pits and crotch. And they had these tiny striped bikinis painted on, black-and-white stripes, so all the players would understand that they were referees. And they all had little hand-held computers to record points, infractions ... and casualties, of course.

Eyeball knew the rules, somehow. All infractions stopped counting against you if the victim of your foul ended up dead, disabled or un-horsed. There were a series of rough-hewn wooden penalty boxes with tiny barred windows placed at strategic locations, but it seemed he couldn't remember the last time anyone had been incarcerated in one of those things ... or much else! he said to himself—his memory was failing in recent centuries. A point was scored by killing a competitor or otherwise knocking him out of the contest—or her, Eyeball supposed—everybody knew that—and of course you needed three points to qualify to take a run at the next jump.

It was considered bad form to peek at the finish line before the whistle blew. That, of course, was common knowledge too, but Eyeball just couldn't resist. He yanked his head around to the right, and gasped.

The last jump consisted of a row of eight nude women, painted a pale blue from head to foot, and all holding flaming torches in the air. If he got that far, he'd have to spur his trusty steed (what's his name anyway?) to a PB, a “personal best,” just to get over them. Above the torches, about fifteen feet off the ground, there was a “skyhook,” screwed into nothing but air, and from this skyhook was suspended a short length of string, and tied to the end of the string was a hard green candy, the kind with a yummy soft center of crème de menthe, wrapped in clear cellophane. That's ... it? he mused. That's ... what all this killing and maiming is for?

The ten blue women had their backs to the field, and when Eyeball moved his focus beyond the row of blue butts, he saw ... well, nothing at all! These women were standing on the edge of a cliff, it seemed ... no, that's the edge of the world! he realized. Even if I get the candy, I'd have to unwrap the thing and stuff it in my mouth as I fell, and I would probably hit bottom—if there is one—by the time I bit through and got to taste the crème de menthe! Bad planning, he felt.

"What about General Brampton?" asked the heavily bearded rider to his left.

Eyeball whipped his head back to see who had dared ask him such a curious question. The guy wasn't just old, he was downright ancient. “What about him?” Eyeball snorted.

"Would you have killed him twenty years ago if you knew he'd take all of humanity into an apparently permanent state of martial law?"

All the riders within earshot laughed, and Eyeball felt his face redden. The man who had taunted him unkindly had a white sweatshirt tugged over his bulky battle equipment. The number on the shoulders was 2033, and the slogan on the front read: “It's never too late for a happy childhood.”

A naked referee scampered up beside the rude man, punching penalty points into her computer. Her face was all pinched in horror at the offense, but nobody noticed that. “No taunting,” she scolded, but the rude man kept on laughing, as if he knew he would soon dispatch those penalty points into oblivion, along with the object of his cruel derision.

"Yeah, I'd kill him!" blurted Eyeball, which caused another eruption of laughter, and earned him a penalty point of his own—in addition to the one he'd likely got for peeking at the finish line. Now he would have to murder this geriatric Neanderthal before he'd qualify to even try the first jump.

"What about Michael Whiteside, for making the LieDeck?" someone else shouted at him. “Would you

kill him?"

"What about that fucking snitch Gil Henderson?" came another voice.

"What about Lester Connolly, for trying to unban the LieDeck?"

"What about Victor Helliwell, for inventing the thing?"

Eyeball awoke in a feverish sweat, rolled over and moaned audibly.

Chapter 9

PREGGERS

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—5:25 p.m.

For the millionth time in her twenty-eight years on Earth, Julia Whiteside found herself wondering why things were complicated and frustrating for her when they were so easy for everybody else. So what? she said for the millionth time as she checked her profile in the floor-length mirror. Their eyes always point at me, and they smile and say my body is beautiful. She threw her head back and watched her long blond hair flutter in the wash of her prized dresser-top fan.

She had her red bikini panties on because she had decided to wear the “whispery white sleeveless dress” again, the one that the guys could pretty well see right through ... and the girls too, she thought. As she slipped it on over her head, she remembered those oh so generous summer days when the sun was in its blue glory, and there were brilliant windows in the restaurant to walk by, twirl by, perform in front of. “It’s too bad it’s so dark outside,” Julia said out loud. The sun went to bed early in Québec ... in February, anyway.

I love serving tables, she thought as she faced the mirror straight on, bent over and looked up, holding her hair to one side. The front of her whispery white dress fell just enough for any interested party to get a good look. “They really love it when I do that,” she said, snickering, and jiggling her shoulders, watching her nipples swing back and forth. “Maybe a nice boy will want to sleep with me tonight, and make me laugh and hoot.”

There was a “bing” from her MIU. “Net, up, now,” she instructed.

“Sweet Julia,” came a male voice from the large Netscreen set into the south wall of her room. “It’s your big brother here. Can we talk?”

“Mikey!” she squealed. “I miss you.” She was happy to see that he was at “home,” at the manor house north of Quyon, using the MIU in their father’s old den. That was one of my favorite spots when I was a kid, she thought, but of course there was no MIU in those days.

Michael couldn’t see his little sister because she wasn’t on his screen, and she wasn’t on his screen because she’d had her MIU programmed that way ... based on experience. “Can we go visual ... like ... both ways?” he asked gently. “Please.”

“I really do want to,” Julia said sadly, “but my friends said I didn’t have to, Mikey. Please don’t make me, okay? If I let you see me, I get ... you know ... I get all mixed up and shy ... and scared.”

A long period of silence followed. Michael could only wonder what was happening at the other end at

times like these.

Julia raised her straight, bare arms at the mirror, and made her fingers stretch and reach as far up as possible. The hair in her underarms was as blonde as the hair on her head, but very fine and thin, almost invisible. As she postured, she was thinking all the things she would rather be saying out loud to Mikey, if only she could. I got this one boy, Donny, he's sixteen, and he always wants to lick me there, under my arms, and suck there. I like that a lot, better than almost everything else I let the boys do. And if it's the summertime I sometimes let a boy do it outside, even on the deck of the pool, or if we dance. Sometimes I even ask a boy to do it. "Oh, that feels so nice," she said absently.

Michael rubbed his eyes when he heard this. He hated waiting for Julia's mind to refocus, waiting for her to speak sensibly. "I ... won't judge you," he said, pleadingly, at his blank screen.

He means it, thought Julia, glancing at the handsome, earnest face of her wonderful brother on the screen. He always says that, and my friends told me he probably always means it too, at the time, but he can't not do it. It's too bad. I'd like my big brother to be able to see me.

"Is Venice at the house?" she asked as she sat on her bed and put on her favorite powder-blue slippers. "Can I talk to her? Is it okay for her like to come and visit again over here, like she did last summer? We had so fun, eh? We used to..."

Michael had heard all this before, so he tuned himself out. He wished he could have just one linear conversation with his sister.

Julia had inherited twelve percent of the family fortune when their father was killed, an enormous sum. Her shares in Whiteside Technologies were not for sale, and likely never would be, but that still left a boatload of cash. Her trustee, Mr. Wu, had protected her money from everyone ... including Michael. It was very conservatively invested, as her father would have wanted. As well, Randall Whiteside's will had been specific about Julia's life: she could live wherever and however she chose, as long as she was happy and healthy. She was decidedly both of these, and her tiny monthly allowance was all that she ever asked for—that and the quarterly reports on what the rest of her money was doing.

Not that she can read them, Michael thought. He didn't want to control her money, and he didn't even need to ask for her proxy votes to control Whiteside Technologies. He just didn't approve of Evolution. His problem was not with its economics, but with its blatant permissiveness, its ... promiscuity, was the word he always he settled on. She's retarded, he thought, as he did every time he dwelt on his sister's situation. She should be living with her family.

"She wants to, you know," said Julia as she gave herself a final full once-over in the mirror. "Pretty soon Venice will be old enough to be like free, and then you can't judge her. Then she can come over here and visit me, and take off her clothes if she wants, and do some nice tingly things with the boys and girls and—"

Michael leaned back and rolled his eyes as his sister prattled on about her body, and then about bodies in general, and the joys of sex. Venice just turned twelve, for Christ's sake, he scolded his sister in his mind. It ... isn't right for you to push your Evolutionary attitudes on one so young because ... because...

A god would have come in handy at this point, or a law, but Michael knew he had no basis for complaint, no irrefutable authority to cite, no statistics proving that a creative or diverse sex life led to anything more unpleasant than a large collection of memories and tomorrows full of surprises. If things were like that when I was a kid, I would never have married Becky or had Venice or ... It wasn't a very long list, and it didn't seem to have the same clout since his wife had "graduated from the guilt-jealousy thing" and adopted what she liked to call "a more rounded way" of conducting her personal life. Michael

was only thirty-seven years old, and already he felt that the generation of kids coming up had leapt out in front of him, left him behind in their cultural dust. I'm turning into a young fogey, he said to himself.

Sometimes, when he was in the back of his limo, he would take out his Sniffer and, using headphones for privacy, he would surf the SuperNet. Without really wanting or intending to, he'd end up checking out an Evolutionary chatroom, a group of up to nine people who would talk freely, and with brutal honesty, about literally anything. Being non-judgmental is one thing, he said to himself, but being empty-headed is quite another. He knew he was being unfair, and that this thought, spoken aloud, would alienate most people and earn him a verbal punch-up ... which I would lose, by consensus.

Julia was still there, even if not on his screen. She hadn't said anything for more than a minute. If the past was any teacher, he knew that she was taking the occasion to admire her reflection in the mirror and touch herself with more delight than was ... "normal," he snorted under his breath. He knew that Evolutionaries called normal people "Normals," with an upper case "N," out of respect, but over the years it had begun to sound vaguely derisive, derogatory, like "square" had been for the hippies of the last century, to describe the un-groovy.

"Did you say something, Mikey?" asked Julia. "I wasn't looking."

Michael declined to inform his sister that she didn't even have to have her eyes open in order to hear. "Julia," he said, straightening up in his chair, "I—uh—I have to ask you something."

"Like ... a question?" she twittered.

"Yes Julia, like a question. Can I ask you a question please?"

"I like it when people ask me questions," she squealed as she twirled on one slippery toe, making almost a whole revolution before losing her balance. "If I don't know what the answer is, I just ask my Sniffer to tell me, and then I—"

"Mr. Wu told me that you were having a baby," he said solemnly. "Is that—"

"Oh yes!" she yelped. "Isn't it just wonderful! And it's from one of the smartest boys, Mr. Wu told me, so my baby will be not like me, you know? Like ... not retarded?"

Mr. Wu was an old friend of the Whiteside family. He had faithfully handled all of Victor Helliwell's money for nineteen years, and he did a superb job as Julia's trustee as well, but Michael wanted to be sure that Julia was aware of the reality of her situation. He wasn't altogether sure if she knew what a pregnancy was. The possibility that she fully understood what she was doing wasn't even on the table, but ... as long as she knows the basics, he supposed. "Was it your decision?" he asked.

"Of course it was me," said Julia defensively. "It's my body, Mikey. I wanted a baby ever since I was fifteen. And I saw lots of babies get born. They come out all gooey, with their little eyes all closed up, and with this snakey thing sticking out of their tummy ... I forget what the name is for that ... and they cut it off for the belly button, and then they get to suck on the milk nipple and grow big and get little teeth and they learn to walk and laugh and everything. I'm going to be a mom, just like my mom! I mean our mom! My friends here always want me to look after their babies, 'cause I'm really good at that. And my friends say it doesn't matter if my baby gets to be a boy or if it's a girl instead, but I hope it's a girl, 'cause being a girl is so fun, eh? Do you sometimes wish you were a girl instead of a boy, Mikey? But it's okay if it's a boy, 'cause it's so fun being a boy too, I think. Do you like being a boy?"

"So you're ... happy ... about the baby?" he asked, ignoring all the non-sequiturs.

"I'm happy aaaall the time, Mikey," she sang. "I'm like ... happy about everything! There's nothing not happy in my place where I live. I'm going to have a happy baby too. You'll see."

Again, there was a pregnant pause as Julia went back to striking poses in the mirror. Michael squirmed. He couldn't see her, but these odd pauses were jarring to him. They were abnormalities in the fabric of a Normal conversation. To Julia and her Evolutionary friends at Victor-E, random pauses seemed as natural as sleep.

Michael had called for two reasons—the other one being to say that Randy, his son and her nephew, had come home for a while. He decided to forego the second reason. She would find out from Randy soon enough. Those two get along famously, he thought distractedly, although God knows why.

"Just a minute, okay Mikey?" Julia said when her MIU signaled another incoming face. "Put the first face on hold," she said carefully, to be sure she got the commands right. "Switch over to the new face," she said, using hand gestures to be extra sure the MIU did what she wanted, "and add on the visual part of me, now." She smiled as the new face popped up on her screen. She didn't always get it right, and she tended to get flustered when her MIU got muddled up.

"Hi Alex!" she squealed, delighting herself that she had remembered the name of the taxi driver she'd met earlier in the day. "I got my brother on hold so I can't face too long, eh? How's life at Walden? I forgot to ask—are you a daddy yet? I'm going to be a mom before it's next Christmas. I got one brother Mikey and I had one sister that ... that died. Her name was Sarah, and she got killed in this awful car accident and—"

"It's okay," interjected Alex. "I just called to say I don't really have time to face you tonight, but I said I'd call, so I did. Let's do it tomorrow, okay. Or another day?"

"Sure," said Julia. "Anyway I was in the middle of talking to my ... oh, I already told you that, didn't I? Bye Alex."

Julia realized that she'd forgotten to re-kill the visual export when she instructed the MIU to return to her brother, but she decided to leave it that way. I sure hope I don't get all mixed up and start crying, she said to herself.

"So can Venice come and visit me?" she asked as she turned her back to the MIU and threw a white cardigan sweater over the flimsy dress. "I love Venice so much," she said as she turned towards her brother's image and pulled the sweater tightly across her chest. "The last time she was here, she learned how to ride a horse, and she saw lots of people that didn't have clothes on. She never saw that before, you know! I think she's probably going to start to have her own breasts pretty soon, eh? Boy, she was really excited about that! And she really liked talking to the grown-ups over here, sometimes about stuff that I didn't even know what it was. I'm glad she's smart, Mikey. I don't mind it any more ... I mean ... like me being not as smart as other people. I used to hate that, you know ... but now I'm happy just like I am."

It's like she's ... on drugs, thought Michael as he pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. It's like when a Normal tries to have a sensible conversation with those Netfreaks, in those "Happy Hookah" chatrooms. We say there is no point, and they say we don't get the point. Maybe pot is a way to lower a person's IQ? Maybe intelligence is produced or facilitated by some enzyme that's the inverse of THC? Or maybe she's just stoned out of her gourd! She says she doesn't do grass, and she never lies, but...

"I have to go now," Julia announced. "Did I tell you? They let me serve the tables almost all the time now, in the E-tery. I still work in the day care too, but in the E-tery I take out the water with ice cubes in it on this tray, and not spill it, and I bend over and put a glass in front of all the people who come in to eat our

really really good food. And the customers are always so nice to me. They ask me what my name is, and I tell them I'll have my own baby even before it's next Christmas, and it might even be a girl, I hope. And sometimes there's this nice boy from the Hydro comes here to eat, and he's thinking of moving in, being like an Evolution person, like me. His name is Eric, and the last time he was here, I showed him all over the place, eh?—the swimming pool—and where we dance on the roof of the mess hall—and the gyms—and where all the offices are with all the Netstations like for V-Insight and Soft-E and all that—and the garage bubble and the garbage pickup and the big hot tubs and—and everything. He told me he's got this wife that doesn't even like Evolution, but he says she's not a happy girl, so she'll probably go away somewhere else with this other boy, and then he can—"

"I've got to go now Julia," interrupted Michael. "I'll ... talk to Venice about maybe visiting you in the summer. Bye, sis."

"Uh—bye Mikey ... Net, down, now," said Julia. People were forever changing the topic on her. It was ... disconcerting, but she'd learned to just let it be, to move on. Still, she'd meant for Venice to be able to come visit her now, not next summer. I guess Mikey didn't understand, she concluded.

* * * *

Michael Whiteside sat glumly in the den, that special room he still thought of as "Dad's den." The family had decided just after Randall's death back in 2014 that the den would stay forever as it was when the patriarch had been alive, and except for the new SuperNet installation, not a stick of furniture or a single appointment had been altered ... or even moved. Sometimes when Michael walked into that rich wood-paneled room, he almost expected his father to still be there, to swivel around in his chair and give his little five-year-old "Mikeyface" a big hug, or throw a mock left jab at his teenaged son, and ask about his girlfriend, Becky.

But as usual, the voices and images on the Net had brought Michael back to reality, such as it was. He had too many wrinkles in his personal life, and life in general was too complicated, too different. Dad would gag if he were alive today, he thought.

Michael slapped his thighs as if to discipline himself, and pushed off the old maple desk, spinning the chair round to face the door. "Should I tell Mom the whole truth and nothing but?" he asked the giant of a man who wasn't there. I ... suppose I should, he thought as he rose from the leather wingback chair.

As he walked into the hall, he paused. He rubbed his neck and wondered again what his father, the man that the financial heavy-hitters used to call "the man," would make of the today's world, apparently satisfied with the new international military machine, and with much of the planet laced with a network of Evolutionary communities ... "clans," as they called them.

Dad was murdered because of the LieDeck, he reminded himself, the last victim of the LieDeck Revolution ... the last violent victim, anyway ... not counting the suicides. And now there was this new power architecture, with generals enforcing the peace, using the threat of nuclear attack as the ultimate attitude-adjuster, using Whiteside-produced LieDecks as the tool that made every civilian into an informer—willingly or otherwise; it didn't matter.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we set out to deceive no more," he said softly, with a bent smile. With the company's exclusive contract to supply the WDA with all its LieDecks, millions of units every year, the wealth of the Whiteside estate had leapt from merely legendary to stratospheric. "If we didn't make the fucking things, somebody else would," he muttered as he eased the door closed. "And ... if Victor hadn't invented the damn thing, someone else would have."

As he dawdled pensively down the wide hallway, he shook his head at the archaic nuclear policy of the

WDA. Yes, Brampton vaporized Leningrad in 2014, the very day that Moscow had destroyed Bucharest, but he'd been replaced by Sheena Kalhoun seven years ago, and no one really believed that the world government would toss a backpack nuke into any old town that defied its authority. Still, the age-old debate had finally been decided; human beings simply wouldn't behave themselves unless somebody issued a credible threat to punish them if they stepped out of line. It was easy to imagine that this equation wasn't needed by oneself, but the history Netfiles didn't lie. We're all capable of anything, Michael sighed in his mind, but surely the day will come when we'll be able to rely on something less than a nuclear bludgeoning to keep the peace.

He walked into the spacious kitchen, and found his mother sitting at the varnished pine table, looking sadly at a dark screen. He'd told her earlier that she was welcome to audit his call to Julia if she wanted—listen and watch, but not participate. “Not that you have to even listen,” he had emphasized. “Just if you want.”

She looked so old now. She'd lost weight steadily since Randall's death, and her thin head of hair had gone from slightly gray to seagull white. We never could buy happiness, he thought, but we used to be able to rent some. He sat down across from his mother, the woman who had once run the household staff so gaily. Now, she was almost like a guest, staying in her ground-floor suite most of the time, reading, leafing through photo albums, praying to a dead Jew, or just sitting, rocking back and forth, lost in the past and waiting to be called to Glory.

"Hi Mom," he said cautiously. "You ... watched?"

"Hello sweetheart," she said, looking up as if she hadn't heard him approaching down the hundred-year-old hardwood floor of the hallway.

I'll talk to her about Julia later, he decided. Over the Net, and when she's in a more receptive frame of mind. "Let's us two make some toast and jam," he said, "like we used to when I was just a little whippersnapper."

Chapter 10

BUBBLE TROUBLE

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—5:35 p.m.

Lilly walked down the stairs from her “suite” and into the motel restaurant, which was starting to fill up with local customers. She had never actually been inside a clan-base before, but she knew there were no menus in any Evolutionary eateries. If you came for supper, you got what they were serving themselves for supper, period. You could call ahead and find out what was on the stove, but that was the extent of the choice offered to outsiders. The attraction was wholesome food at low prices, often less than it would cost to fix the same meal in your own home. It was a formula that assured a steady stream of non-Evolutionary customers, and the undying enmity of capitalists who were also in the restaurant trade.

There were three people serving tables already, all of them males, as it happened. They had white aprons on, and they were walking quickly between chores, trying to keep up. In the open kitchen behind the counter, two women in hairnets and less-than-white aprons were dishing out—Lilly glanced at the blackboard by the front door: “Yummy home made cream of mushroom soup, spicy biscuits, lasagna with lots of cheese (slightly singed on top!), salad, milk or juice, hot pumpkin pie with real McCoy whipped cream sprinkled with cinnamon, coffee or tea, \$40.” Jeeze, thought Lilly, that meal in a regular restaurant these days would cost sixty dollars!

She sat at the counter, turned on the vinyl-capped stool, and looked all around. There were several tables of Normals—the usual Canadian “hewers of wood and drawers of water”—with assorted spouses and progeny, but most of the customers, twenty-five or so, were kids, all boys, and all fifteen or sixteen years old. That's ... odd, she thought.

"Annual hockey tournament down the road in Shawville," said one of the cooks as she set two bowls of soup on the counter and slapped a palm on the little bell that alerted the waiters. "Every February, same thing."

"Oh," said Lilly. "Do they..." She was about to ask if these kids came from all over Canada or just Québec, but the cook had no time for chatter if it didn't fit in between her stacked-up duties.

Lilly rose, walked to the back of the restaurant and went on through the wide door that opened into the "Mainspoke," according to a sign. There was no wind in the dimly lit spoke, but the sudden coldness of the air was stunning. Her Netfile map said it was two hundred yards from the E-tery out to the air-lock doors of the hub. Well, it said "metres," actually, and spelled it "metre" instead of "meter" because it was a Canadian map. As she hurried along the unpainted floor, Lilly Petrosian found herself, for the first time in her life, wishing she were fat. She pulled her cardigan tight around her body and hugged her ribcage as she listened to her quick steps on the wood. She kept her chin tucked in and watched her breaths exit her mouth as short-lived puffs of fog.

There were several ups and downs and turns in the Mainspoke, so she couldn't see the other end, or even that far in front. Although she kept expecting to meet up with other people, there was no one else walking in the thing, either way. When she figured she was about half way there, with only a few turns to go, her slacks began to chafe at the goose bumps that had sprung into existence on her thighs. "Tin pants," she remembered seeing in a strange Netfile entitled: "Canadian expressions." She resolved to wear a coat, gloves and boots the next time she had to walk the spokes, and she resolved to go shopping for warmer duds.

Finally she reached the hub, where there was a large air-lock door. "Be very sure the door clicks firmly behind you," read a sign taped to the glass. She tugged the end of the sweater sleeve over her hand before pulling on the handle, not just because it was sure to be very cold, but because she had been forewarned by an expatriate Canadian agent that skin could fuse to metal in these temperatures. Once inside this door, she found a second entrance, a large revolving door—the main system that prevented the bubble's air from rushing out and the Pliesterine roof from parachuting down. That happened here before, Lilly had read in the Netfiles, and while no one had been injured, the clan had invested in the latest safety precautions to make sure it wouldn't happen again.

As she passed through the revolving door, the low swooshing sound of the air pumps hit her—that and the warmth. At last, she said to herself as her body began the recovery process.

She found herself standing on an elevated, railed rim that ran around the entire inside perimeter of the oval Pliesterine bubble, at ground level. The rim was concrete, and about fifteen feet wide, with a sturdy wooden railing. The rest of the inside space was sunken, perhaps twenty feet below ground level. As she stood there, shivering and listening to the low hum of a human hive, she felt as if she had stumbled into the den of alien beings.

The enclosure below was vast, the size of half a dozen ice hockey rinks—larger than it seemed from the outside. Set in about fifty yards from the raised perimeter was a wide oval hallway, perhaps twenty feet across, with smaller, narrower hallways leading out towards the skin and in towards the center. At equidistant points along the oval hall there were ten immense uprights, stainless steel poles, reaching about two-thirds the way up to the air-suspended roof, with banks of lights on top of each pole. It was

similar to the kind of set-up one would expect to find on the perimeter of a sports stadium. And every pole was anchored by three thick guy wires, and each bank of lights had a rounded steel mesh encircling it. Good idea, Lilly said to herself. If the roof collapsed, the poles would catch it, preventing injury or death, and the steel mesh envelopes would prevent the Pliesterine from getting cut, or from being singed by the hot lights. Inside each mesh globe, hanging below the rows of lights, were four slow-turning fans, pushing warm air down, or at least moving air around.

She took out her Sniffer and linked up to her MIU, verbally instructing a quick search for the weight of the roof at Victor-E. "Eight tons," came the answer three seconds later. "The tough, light-weight fabric is made only in Dallas, USA, on the largest machine ever built, measuring six hundred yards in length. Pliesterine has a unique molecular structure that discourages BTU exchange, so that temperature variations on both sides of the fabric tend to stay basically as they are, keeping heat in, or out, as desired. This revolutionary material was first developed for commercial use in the year two thousa—" She cut it off. Wow, she thought. That's just a bit more than a ton per acre! Amazing stuff, Pliesterine!

The elevated lights were probably too bright to look at, but the directional bulbs were pointed up rather than down. The curving roof reflected light back down, like those white umbrellas used by professional photographers in the pre-digital 20th century. Smart, she said to herself.

"Heads up," came a voice from the left.

She looked over and saw two young men on bicycles bearing down on her position, apparently racing around the rim. She beat back an irrational and devilish urge to scare them as they zipped by. "Hi guys," she said instead.

"Hi, hi," came two quick replies.

Below the rim, there were walls everywhere, many hundreds of them, walls without ceilings, mostly, delineating various areas: production and repair shops, offices, two gyms, a swimming pool, lounges. However, except for the rooms close to her, directly beneath or not very far away, she couldn't see the floors or the furnishings, and could only guess what all the rooms were for. It reminded her of a day a few years ago when she had sat in the stands of the Boston Gardens and looked down at a summertime trade show, with all its little booths ... and big crowds, she thought. So ... where are all the people? With the exception of a couple of bobbing heads in a nearby pool and a cleaning crew in one of the gyms, there seemed to be nobody about. Directly below her was some sort of meeting room, with two dozen chairs set in a semi-circle, and sheaves of papers left on the chairs. They must be having supper.

Just to the right of the abandoned meeting room was an area that did have a ceiling. That was the clinic, she knew from the Netfiles, plus Sleepery #1, the only full apartment in the hub, and the place where Annette Blais lived—or at least slept—in the winter. Lilly was momentarily tempted to pull out her Sniffer, connect with her MIU, and peek inside that room via Annette's MIU, but of course she didn't—not due to any particular moral compunctions, but because it was just faintly possible that she'd get caught in the act by a civilian. That would mean her job, and a boatload of legal problems—possibly even jail time. Even after seven years on the job, it was still easy to forget that her WDA masters could watch her at will whenever her Sniffer was activated.

Lilly lifted her eyes again to take in the full sweep of the place. In the middle of all the ceilingless walls, there was a large enclosed area, one tall story high. It was oval in shape, like the bubble itself, and it had its own ceiling, painted black, at least on the top side. It occupied perhaps a quarter of the entire floor space ... maybe two acres or so, she guessed. The flat roof of this structure seemed to be some kind of entertainment facility, with a link fence around the whole thing, and a large stage at the far end. On the sides of the stage were giant speakers, stacked to the height of a bungalow. Evolutionaries do love their

pleasures, she thought. The acoustics in here must be awesome ... or atrocious.

She knew from the Netfiles that the mess hall and the kitchen were in that building-within-a-bubble, along with several other facilities that either required some privacy or needed to be protected from the ambient dust or noise of the “open” spaces. At the four “corners” of the inner oval structure were four more of those giant posts, with the lights and the mesh globes and the fans and the guy wires. Can't be too safe, she thought.

Lilly made her way down the metal stairs to the main level, and when she reached the floor, the place started to look and feel like a maze. There was no foyer, no receptionist, just walls—here, there and everywhere. No capitalist designed this, she said to herself.

She made her way inward to the wide oval hallway, where she found color-coded signs with arrows on them pointing the way to the various rooms, including the mess hall—its arrow was red. I wonder how seniors or the disabled get down here from the rim? she said to herself. There must be an elevator somewhere, but I didn't see it. “Check whether it has handicapped access,” she recorded on her Sniffer for later reference.

As she followed the red arrows, she glanced through various open doors at some of the facilities she'd seen from the rim. She realized she had never felt so miserably out of place in her life. It staggered her to realize that more than two hundred and thirty million civilians lived like this, that there were more than a million of these huge bubbles around the globe, and many millions of the smaller ones. She wondered if Evolutionaries felt as awkward in the Normal world as she felt in theirs. They must, she thought, especially with all their offbeat “clan-cultures.”

Back in 2016, when the movement began in earnest, Evolution was just a way to minimize the cost of living and save money ... for people who didn't have the smarts to get a real job or the entrepreneurial guts to start a business. But as the years went by, each clan seemed to spin off in its own direction. People would go bubble-surfing on the Net or “on the warm” when they first decided to join Evolution, to see if they could find the clan that would suit them best. Now, there were whole clan networks of like-minded people, and the cultures of these clan networks were almost as divergent from each other as they were from Normal society.

On the sex front, some clans were all gay or all bisexual, some were puritanically hetero and monogamous (or puritanically hetero but only serially monogamous), and a few were totally celibate—although these had an admittedly hard time recruiting new members. Some Upper American and European clans were so sexually liberated that a backlash had developed among non-Evolutionaries, among Normals who feared for the emotional health of all the children that were being born or raised in these unconventional environments. Most clans settled for just being non-judgmental about sexuality. Thank goodness this clan is one of the tamer outfits, Lilly said to herself as she walked along the oval corridor, gazing up occasionally at the brightly lit roof, more than a hundred yards overhead.

Her thoughts stayed trained on what Evolutionism was ... if indeed anyone can say what the movement really amounts to these days. Some clans placed high value on such things as literature, art and film, while others were more like bloated pool halls. Lilly had heard of clans that required applicants to have at least a Masters degree, and that was just to be considered for entry. Most clans had no requirements at all, other than a willingness to work hard, save money diligently and get along with the other members.

The clan network that Victor-E was part of claimed to be seeking the elusive dream of “Human Three Consciousness,” a concept that had been advanced nineteen years ago by Victor Helliwell, the reclusive and silent inventor of the LieDeck. A decade ago, only a minority of clans had declared themselves committed to the pursuit of “H3C,” as they short-formed their goal. But after pretty much eliminating lying

from their behavior and their experience within the clans, they “ran out of excuses not to go all the way,” as their Netfiles explained. Now, virtually all Evolutionaries were budding or aspiring “Human Threes”—even those that spurned the lexicon of Helliwell's odd dialectic.

Lilly remembered glancing at the Netfiles about this matter while she was still in Florida. The details all seemed to fudge together into an incomprehensible mass, or mess. The only part that had lodged in her memory was a quotation from Adlai Stevenson, a mid-20th-century American politician and failed Democratic presidential candidate, as she recalled: “The Human Race has improved everything except the Human Race.” Why Helliwell or Stevenson would capitalize the words “Human” or other words like “Race” or “Consciousness” was beyond her, and that curious detail seemed to stick awkwardly in her memory, and her craw, as much as the quote itself. “Re: my visit to lodge,” she said into her Sniffer as she continued following the red arrows, “Do not forget to ply Helliwell about that Human One, Two, Three crap he went on about back in twenty fourteen ... with all those capital letters he said were important.”

Lilly deliberately sent her mind back to its previous train of thought. The only thing all the clans seem to have in common any more is their way of sharing work and saving money for early retirement ... plus their contempt for the WDA ... plus their increasing participation in those damnable LieDeck Unbanning Committees that are cropping up all over the world.

The mess hall had a double-door arrangement, where the doors are both hinged on the outside edges, and swing open both in and out, with no upright spar in the middle. Each door had a small, square window. Lilly was tempted to just watch for a bit before making her grand entrance, but someone would surely notice her peeking, and the gossip would begin ... or someone will come barging through without looking and bowl me over. She pushed the right-hand door gently and walked in.

The mess hall was cavernous and bright, with photographs all over the walls, many thousands of them, plus posters and notices. The buzz in the place was palpable. There were perhaps two hundred people sitting down, eight to a table, eating or waiting to be served by a gang of scurrying Evolutionaries in hairnets and red aprons. Kids were seated at their own tables, with two adults strategically situated in their midst to keep the peace. There was unrestrained laughter and rollicking banter everywhere, almost like a family at Thanksgiving ... more like fifty families, she recalculated.

Within a few seconds, the first elbow in the ribs had infected everyone, and the joyful delirium plummeted into hundreds of silent stares, aimed in her direction. Annette Blais, the administrator of Victor-E, was sitting about four tables away from the double doors, and she was on her feet as soon as she saw what had killed the mood. She walked quickly over to where Lilly was standing.

"Can I talk to you outside for a minute?" she asked, clutching Lilly's elbow and not giving her any kind of graceful choice in the matter. Once they were outside, Annette cupped a hand onto her forehead, crumpling the skin laterally and seeming to struggle for words.

Lilly could hear the happiness levels being reborn inside the hall. “What about?” she asked.

"You ... were supposed to be told earlier," Annette said as she released her brow and faced the music. "I'm ... really sorry. We—uh—I screwed up on that."

"Told what?" asked Lilly.

"The governing council took a decision at its last meeting ... two nights ago," said Annette, “a decision that the mess hall was for Evolutionaries only—and pre-approved guests. But you can eat in the motel restaurant. It's the same food and the same price, but we just felt that...” Oh Christ, she thought, this isn't coming out right.

Lilly waited. She knew the clan was entirely within its rights to take such a decision, but it seemed so insulting, as if it were intended to exclude only her.

"It took us a long time to reach the point where this kind of atmosphere became the norm here, for meals," said Annette, pointing loosely towards the renewed gaiety inside. "It requires a rather unique kind of trust, and that's a—uh—fragile thing. Like ... like it's a difficult job to build a house, but any jerk with a ... any person with a match can burn it down, you know what I mean? It's not personal, Lilly. That's why we took the decision before you arrived, before we'd even met you, so you'd see that it's just something we were doing for ourselves, not ... like it's not against you, or against the WDA. You see, we've had problems before, and usually it had nothing to do with the WDA. Usually it was somebody's guest from the community, a person who maybe said something or did something that didn't ... you know ... fit with our way of life. I hope you understand."

Lilly understood all too well. She turned without speaking, and headed back down the hallway towards the long, unheated spoke that led to the motel. Not a very good start, she thought. What kind of mindscape has to ban people so they can feel secure? It's like ... a cult.

As she reached the large revolving door, a silent alarm was set off inside her mind. She looked out again over the massive infrastructure of the hub, and decided to walk the entire rim, to drink the place in from all angles. It was something that she needed to do at some point, and it seemed a good idea to cool down and gather her thoughts before going back in the restaurant. Evolutionaries pick up on a person's mood, she reminded herself.

Chapter 11

TECHNICALLY A VIRGIN

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—5:40 p.m.

"You see what I mean, Mom?" Michael said hopelessly at the screen. "She won't even let me see her when we Netlink. That was the first time she's let me see her in months, and I think she just forgot to kill the visual when she came back from that other call."

He waited for this to sink into his mom's tired mind, and for the hurt in his gut to fade away. He'd barely finished his toast and jam with his mother when he'd been called back to his own MIU in the den for a short business consult. When that was over, he'd finally worked up the nerve to Netlink with his mother and review the "conversation" he'd had with Julia a half hour earlier—the one his mother had watched from the kitchen. It had to be done, and for this unwelcome duty, he much preferred the safety of cyberspace. It was selfish, he knew, but...

"She doesn't even ask about you, or Becky, or even me," he continued, "and I'm the one who called her! I'm scared to let Venice go over there. She's only twelve, and she'll end up ... you know ... liking it, and staying, and then frittering her life away, like Julia. And now this ... this pregnancy thing! Christ, Mom, you know I don't like to say this, but I mean ... Julia may be pushing thirty, but she has the intelligence of a ten-year-old."

Doreen Whiteside sighed. "Mikey," she said, "I'm as upset about Julia as you are, and if your father were alive today..."

That prefix always unlocked the ducts. Doreen missed her late husband so terribly. He used to be called "the man" on Bay Street, and on Wall Street as well, at least when electronics were discussed. He had

built the company he founded into a healthy corporate juggernaut, and while the LieDeck patent had made Whiteside Technologies into one of the biggest firms of its type in the world, the damnable little device had also cost Randall Whiteside his life. The nineteen years since his assassination seemed to have had no real effect in softening Doreen's pain. Every day was another violation for her, another theft of the lovely time they should have had together. Michael always seemed to end up using the word "healing" when his mother broke down, and Doreen always looked at her son sideways when the word came up. The general idea of healing was fine in principle, she had agreed on many occasions, but deep in her heart, talk of healing felt like a betrayal, a surrender. "Why did they have to shoot him?" she sobbed.

Michael glanced out the den window at the floodlit back yard of the manor, at the leafless trees, and the snow drifts. He had been through this "healing" conversation so many times, and his mother's tears were often infectious. She forgets that I was his son, and a son needs his father as much as a woman needs her husband, he thought ... before he caught himself.

Even though the LieDeck had been banned for everybody except the WDA since shortly after its invention back in 2014, virtually every adult in the world bore LieDeck-inflicted scars from the Revolution. It was as if there was an uninvited spy living inside your head, beeping you when you told a lie, even if you just thought a lie! Her suffering is so much greater than mine, and hers is forever, Michael realized. His mother would die weeping for her beloved Randall ... in spite of his flaws, he thought, his penchant for cheating on her every now and then, and ... and cheating on her without any guilt. Back in Dad's generation, you were supposed to at least feel bad if you got caught cheating, he considered, but Dad didn't see the point of all that guilt, sort of like how things are now ... in Evolution, anyway.

"Actually," he said slowly, "Mr. Wu told me that Julia's still technically a virgin. She was artificially inseminated, so the baby would be smart, or at least not ... intellectually challenged, like Julia. She's never had ... you know ... the full sex act. Mr. Wu told me that she just likes to have fun with her body, but he said she never goes as far as ... actual intercourse, you know."

Doreen did not want to hear these details. This technical nicety didn't change the fact that her sweet little Julia was living with ... with common people, she said to herself, with people who put sex on the same level as joke-telling, a toy of a behavior, un-connected with the deep, spiritual love that bonded Randall and me through thick and ... well, most of the...

"I have to admit that she really is happy," tried Michael.

"But she's ... rich," sputtered Doreen through her tears, "and she ... works as ... it's almost like a topless waitress. I don't know why you're defending her. Just you wait till you get a call from your Venice, saying she's not happy as a Normal and she's decided to spend her life on some stinky farm with a bunch of dirty hippy Communists."

Michael wanted to stand behind his poor mother and place his strong, man's hands on her shoulders, the way his father used to do, but that was one of the major problems with Netlinking. "Mom," he said gently to the screen, "they're ... not hippies. The hippy thing was a silliness-episode seventy years ago. It ended about the time you were born. They're Evolutionaries, Mom. I know ... some of them smoke marijuana, but that's been legal for six years now, and lots of Normals smoke that stuff too.

"Evolutionaries live cheaply, but they work hard and save up money so that they can retire young, that's all, and that's ... that's fair ball for anybody. They're not hippies and they're not Communists either. They're sort of ... collective capitalists, I guess I'd say. They live collectively because it's efficient, economical. And they're no more interested in Marxism than they are in..."

He was about to say "Christianity," but his mother still believed, or thought she did, or at least tried to,

still fell to her knees and prayed, in any event, still asked her precious God for favors and forgiveness ... favors mostly. Few people had taken religion seriously since the Revolution, since virtually all believers, of every stripe, had found out that faith in a deity was the practical equivalent of a psychiatric disorder, a frivolous and dangerous self-deception that served to diminish fear when it was convenient, and served no purpose at all when it got in the way of want, of instinct. True, there was a movement in America and in many of the world's backward societies to raise General Brampton, the founder of the WDA, to the vaunted status of other-worldly saviorhood, but that was just a sick joke, an egomaniacal myth that was probably started by Brampton himself. And then there were those ridiculous Jesus-Eers, who had pegged Victor Helliwell, of all people, as the Second Coming of Christ. Michael didn't have any understanding of why some people needed to have a "savior" to make sense of life. It reminded him of a late 20th-century aberration he had read about in university, where a few thousand delusional people tried to make a new Jesus out of Elvis Presley—they got married in his name, they prayed to him, and they waited for him to return from the dead to put on the rock concert to end all rock concerts.

Still, who's to diminish the sole comfort of an old lady? he thought. Who's to stick a needle into her imaginary balloon? Who's to pull the Messiah out from under a hurting Human Two? He always winced when he caught himself using the term "Human Two," even when he only thought it. It seemed to imply a kind of unconscious concurrence with the Evolutionary paradigm.

Another extended silence was now in progress, and he decided to just let it happen, to let his mother get through whatever pain she was feeling now. He let his eyes close, and his mind went back to the Revolution. Damn, he said to himself as he remembered the chaotic weeks following the Last Holocaust.

After the obliteration of Bucharest by the Russians and the nuking of Leningrad by the Americans ... well, by General Brampton ... word of Victor's theory had gotten out to the public, and LieDecks were still floating around loose at that time. Even though the phenomenon he called "Human Three Consciousness" could not be directly LieDeck-verified at the time, the underlying conceptual framework was LieDeck-verifiable, and was LieDeck-verified, by anyone with an interest in such things. There was no getting around it. A million years ago, all humans were what Victor called Human One, a wholly instinctive animal, not terribly different from a dog or a chimp, Michael said to himself. And what we are now is Human Two, like Victor said—an animal that is both instinctive and rational. The LieDeck Revolution has transformed our minds forever ... redesigned how we see ourselves. There was no God any more, but there might well be a thing called Human Three Consciousness. Progress! Michael grunted in his mind. We were better off with God, even if He only ever existed in our heads.

"Are you going to let Venice go visit her?" asked his mother as she wiped her eyes with a wrinkled clot of facial tissue that seemed to live permanently under her left wrist-cuff.

Michael wondered what his father might have done, or said, if he were alive. "Well, eventually I won't be able to stop her," he said wistfully. "I'm hoping it'll just be a phase, but ever since her visit last summer, there's only two things she really wants and can't get; to talk to Victor Helliwell and to spend time with Julia, in her clan. She's got Dad's single-mindedness, I'm afraid, and unless—"

Doreen closed down her MIU. She had never gotten the hang of the thing. Michael knew that no disrespect was intended, but it bothered him mightily when she did that, just turned the machine off. "Bye Mom," he said at the blank screen of his MIU.

Chapter 12

NO PUSHING

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—5:55 p.m.

Julia hung up her coat and pirouetted into the restaurant's kitchen in the old motel, arms high, blue slippers flitting as she spun. "Hi all," she sang.

"Hi Julia," said the two women who staffed the stoves of the E-tery. Claire Lapine was on duty, and she looked every bit of her sixty-two years in the faded white apron that snugly embraced her bulbous body. Even her round face was strangely pinched. She had something on her mind, something she'd already discussed with Annette. "There's lots of people for you to please today," she said dryly, without even looking up, "what with the hockey tournament and all."

"Oh yes, lots of cute boys," chirped Julia, glancing over the counter at the tables and clapping her hands gleefully. "It's sort of too bad it gets dark so early and there's no sun coming in through the windows. They really like that. Remember last summer when they had the softball tournament? That was so fun, eh?"

"You probably shouldn't—uh—touch the boys on the back of their necks so much," suggested Claire as she stirred the cream of mushroom soup. "You know ... as you pass behind them?"

"Why not?" whined Julia. "I like it, and so do they."

"It's just ... they're not used to it, like we are," tried Claire.

"But there's nothing wrong with it," wailed Julia. "Please, Claire, don't make me not do stuff that's okay."

Claire stopped stirring soup and rethought her position. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're right, of course. It's ... their problem, if it's a prob—"

"Oh goodie," said Julia, with a bountiful smile. "I know they get all tingly, but they wouldn't go all the way down to being, like, Human One, eh? I mean not in here. We're all real safe here. I just wish they could all be like us. Why don't they just change over, Claire?"

Claire didn't have a good answer for that question. She was still surprised at her own "conversion" to Evolution, six years ago, in 2027. Her daughter Ginette had talked her into a weekend visit and ... well, as so often happened with relatives and friends, that was that. There was no point in not joining, not after that weekend, not ever. "They probably will, Julia, some time. I guess they've got, you know, issues, parents or family members or bosses who might object, or who don't understand ... the kind of people who need to control or judge. You aren't supposed to push, you know."

"I never ever ever ever push," said Julia as she started pouring the ice water, trying to get exactly two cubes into each glass. "I just act like me, and I'm a wonderful girl, eh?"

Claire gave Julia a big hug for an answer, from behind, the way Julia liked best. "Of course you are, sweet Julia," she said.

"My brother calls me that all the time," she said merrily as she put down the water jug and lifted Claire's hands up onto her breasts. "He's a really good brother ... mostly," she added. "For a Normal."

"There's lots and lots of wonderful Normals," said Claire pointedly as she extricated her hands and went back to her soup. "But just like me, they have to find their own way over, I guess, one at a time, when they're good and ready."

"Well, here goes," said Julia as she gingerly picked up a tray of four teetering glasses. "I hope I don't spill any water today," she sang, hunching over the tray and peeking up to make sure there were no chairs or

tables about to trip her. “Or get those cute boys too all revved up,” she conceded as she waddled ever so carefully out of the kitchen.

Chapter 13

THAT'S ... NICE

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—6:05 p.m.

Lilly walked from the Mainspoke into the back of the restaurant with great relief, and stood for a moment by the entrance to the kitchen, borrowing some heat from the stoves and breathing the aromas of lasagna. Her body shivered, but her emotions were still on fire from the treatment she'd been accorded by the governing council, by the clan, by Annette. How can a WDA agent ever gain acceptance? she wondered. Maybe we can't. Maybe I'm in for a year of full-bore ostracism—sent off to Coventry, as the Brits say. But maybe my outside work with Victor Helliwell and Michael Whiteside will help me forget this situation at Victor-E. One thing is for damned sure: I'll never feel comfortable living here.

"Lilly!" cried Julia, with all the effervescence of a long-lost friend.

Lilly looked up to see who could be calling her name out in this place, especially in that tone of voice. It was Julia ... and she's wearing a see-through dress, with a white cardigan—open in the front—wide open ... and clearly visible red bikini undies.

"How are you?" said Julia as she planted her hands on the agent's shoulders and went on tiptoe to pop a quickie kiss on her cold cheek. "Jeeze, you're freezing! C'mon and sit at my special table. That'll be so fun!"

She put an arm around Lilly's waist and ushered her along. "Annette told me on my Sniffer that you'd be eating here," she said, giving Lilly's ribs a friendly little rub, "so I kept my special winter table open for us. They said I could stop serving tables and have my dinner with you when you got here. I like to serve tables in the E-tery, especially if it's the hockey tournament. I get to bring the water with the ice in it. Did you ever see so many good-looking boys? Yummy! I never wear a bra when it's the hockey tournament. They like that a lot. They get all tingly. They come back every year. Of course I never hardly ever wear a bra anyway, except when..."

Lilly sat at the same table she had used earlier, and wondered when the conversation could move on to something a little more interesting than Julia's unabashed titillations. Lilly found it surprising that she'd actually been forgiven by Julia, to the point where this particular Whiteside seemed to have become her ... friend? she thought. My only friend around here so far, she shuddered to realize. She's probably forgotten that I pissed her off a few hours ago.

"So, how are you?" asked Lilly.

"I just told you," said Julia, clapping her hands and laughing. "We got such a happy place here. I wonder how come everybody doesn't live in Evolution. So, how come you don't, Lilly?"

"Well I ... do, in a way," she said. "I mean I—"

"No, no. I mean be one," said Julia. "I'll get the soup for you," she decided abruptly, fearing that she had just pushed. "They're kind of busy in there with all..." The end of her sentence got lost in the other conversations that filled the room.

There were several Evolutionaries eating their dinners in the restaurant ... probably with outside friends who don't want to eat in the mess hall, thought Lilly, not people who are unwelcome in there ... like me. She watched Julia almost dance into the kitchen, and heard her laughter as she joked with the cooks.

Two hockey-playing teenagers materialized at the counter, perched themselves on stools, and suddenly one of them was insisting that he needed a clean glass. He seemed to know in advance that the clean glasses were stored under the counter ... right beneath where he and his buddy were sitting. Julia made no effort to button up her cardigan and happily obliged, and the boys' eyes almost leapt out of their heads when she bent over. She knows they're ogling her breasts, observed Lilly, but she revels in it. Disgusting!

Lilly couldn't watch the scripted pantomime at the counter any more, so she checked out her environs in more detail, as she was trained to do whenever her attentions weren't otherwise occupied. These Evolutionaries were distinguishable mostly by their hair. They never cut it, or most of them didn't. They tied it back in ponytails, braided it, piled it up top or just let it fall like a tent. There was no rhyme or reason to it, and of course there was no rule or religious purpose behind the custom. They just seemed to prefer letting it grow, immune as they were from the judgments of others. They seemed to have literally disqualified themselves from the very expensive "dos and don'ts" of the fashion industry. They don't exactly dress to impress, Lilly thought. Anything seems to be acceptable on the clothes front. At least they're clean.

She noticed that there were several other Evolutionaries who were not eating ... just sitting around, playing chess, reading books, chatting with each other. As the WDA agent looked more closely, she noticed that this brand of layabout was ... they're at least thirty-five, she figured. Jeeze, she realized, those are some of the retired ones! It just felt wrong that an ordinary thirty-five-year-old should be retired, but that's what Evolution was all about. Work your ass off, scrimp, save up, invest, retire young ... works for them, I guess.

"I eat deer year round," said an unshaven thirty-year-old local at the next table. "Why the fuck should I kill my beef when I can eat deer all year round?"

Lilly glanced to the left and behind. There were three men, eating supper, and they were obviously not Evolutionaries, by their deportment and their appearance. They were the real country "workin' stiff" that she'd come across in the Netfiles, hailing from the second-lowest socio-economic rung on the non-Evolutionary ladder, just above welfare folk in the pecking order. I think this guy is bragging about being a poacher!

"But it's not often you get a trophy rack," continued the hunter. "I got mine four years ago, back in twenty-nine," he said through a mouthful of lasagna. "North of the Gatineau Park, near where that guy shot his best buddy with a shotgun in the chest. Same year that happened, too. He's still babbling, I heard ... the guy that shot him, I mean. Total fuckin' nervous breakdown. But that musta been something to see, eh? Bang! Right in the fuckin' chest."

"He died, that guy?" asked one of his buddies, meaning the victim.

"Well I fuckin' guess, eh?" came the indignant retort.

"You drawin' wood?" asked the third man, a squat fellow with his toque still on and a surprisingly high voice. Black tumbleweeds of curly hair pushed out from underneath the collar of his T-shirt, even at the back.

"Ninety-five dollars a cord," said the hunter with the trophy rack.

"Fuck, I can get it for like eighty-five," scoffed the high voice.

"Delivered and stacked?" asked the first chap.

"Oh, delivered and stacked!" repeated the unjust scoffer. "Okay, gimme four cord on Saturday. I can pay youse on Monday, eh? My check from the Dumont job should get to me by then. Made good money on that one, by the Jesus. Broke the fuckin' hydraulics on my backhoe doin' it, but old man Dumont paid to fix it, the crazy old bugger."

"How come?"

"Fucked if I know. I just said he had to, so he did."

The three proletarians guffawed over that one.

"Here you go," said Julia as she carefully placed a plastic tray in front of Lilly. There was a bowl of steaming homemade cream of mushroom soup, spicy biscuits and a glass of milk. Julia was very proud that she hadn't spilled a thing. "I'll go get—"

"I'm not having the lasagna," interrupted Lilly. "Just ... the soup and the biscuits are fine, thanks, and then I'm going to bed early."

"That's ... nice," said Julia, with a confused look on her face. "But ... I'll go get my soup now, okay?"

Lilly dropped her head as Julia walked away. She'd just made a point of treating her only friend like a waitress. She decided not to assume that the guy who ate deer all year round was a poacher. She just wasn't up to an arrest.

Chapter 14

NET-MINDING

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—6:40 p.m.

When Lilly got up to her apartment, it was filled with the heady smell of "slightly-singed-on-top" lasagna and the muffled sounds of dozens of diners, eating and talking, directly below. I've lived in worse, she said to herself ... just not for a long time.

She went over to the only frost-free window in the apartment, the bay window facing the back. She felt herself being drawn there by an eerie new perspective on the bubble. It was aglow. The dull gray sheet of Pliesterine was now almost yellow against the velvet backdrop of a black Québec sky, as the powerful banks of lights shone through. The wee patch of snow on the top would appear black now from above—the pupil in a Cyclops' eye, a sight she'd seen dotting the nightscape when she'd flown over the north-eastern U.S. a few years back. It made her feel a bit queasy, as if such a structure could only contain a mystery, an unknown force that no Earthly power could comprehend, let alone counter.

"It's enough that we control things," she remembered learning at the Academy. It may well be enough, she thought now, but do we have control? Should we have control? Are there dynamics at work here that are beyond our control? Beyond anyone's control? Where is this movement going? And ... why the hell am I worrying about stupid stuff?

She stood at the window for several minutes, her arms folded across her ribs and her face betraying

nothing. There were probably Evolutionary eyes out there, possibly video cameras, watching her as she looked at her domain—their domain. What do they imagine I'm thinking or feeling? she wondered. Show no fear, she reminded herself. She resolved to remain right where she was, at the window, while she reviewed her day.

The dinner conversation with Julia had been fractured, but with the exception of her own opening gaffe, there had been no more dumb misunderstandings or bent feelings, either way. Actually, Lilly remembered saying very little. Julia, on the other hand, had talked non-stop ... about how she had tried that “grass stuff” a few years ago, after it was declared legal, and how she got seriously scared of everything and everyone, and never did it again. She didn't really need it, she explained, because she was “like on a natural high.” She seemed to feel that a natural high was one advantage of her mental retardation; that plus the fact that she could never understand how the “big world” was run, and how she was therefore liberated from worrying about it. She had bragged about how she could excuse herself from worry about all things that were beyond the borders of Victor-E or the reach of her MIU. Lilly had pointed out to Julia that the people she faced on the Net were “real live people,” and that they lived all over the world, but Julia said she always preferred to believe they were right behind her Netscreen. She said she only faced with Evolutionaries anyway, and they all said it was okay for her to pretend that they were “only a pane of glass apart.”

It was disturbing to Lilly, the way so many modern people seemed to prefer cyberlife to warmlife. It was as if the Net provided an unlimited supply of “imaginary friends,” as if the forgivable lunacy of childhood had become a legitimate playground for otherwise sensible adults. She felt that if she and Julia had actually been “a pane of glass apart,” Netlinking rather than sharing dinner on the warm, Julia would have blanked her off the screen, with no guilt or regret. It was embarrassing that a woman with an IQ of eighty-two (according to her Netfile) would find her, Captain Lillian Petrosian, to be socially inept—and none too swift. Julia had also bragged—albeit innocently—about having a “CQ” of one hundred and ninety-five. Intelligence isn't everything, thought Lilly, but this “CQ” thing that these Evolutionaries go on about is ridiculous. There's no such thing as a “consciousness quotient.”

She took a final squinty look at the dark, snow-covered world she had been sent to, and at the glowing bubble with the spidery legs that gave her the willies. Then she closed the drapes. I'll get used to it. I wish I could be with Ed tonight.

Lilly went into the bedroom, took off her clothes, and walked naked to the bathroom. She knew that her WDA-supplied MIU could catch her in the act, even when it was off, but she had never minded that. She couldn't relate to the sexual free-for-all that so many Evolutionaries and half the Normals in the world seemed to prefer these days, but she did not consider herself a prude. As a matter of fact, she rather enjoyed the possibility that her WDA handlers got an occasional peek at her unusually tall body. Her body was her very best friend—something she had learned to articulate and accept, ironically, from an Evolutionary Netshow originating in Nigeria, where most every body was black. Ed, her ex, was black, and it was because of him that she'd started watching African Netshows. In fact, while she'd never considered herself a bigot, Ed was the first African-American she'd ever taken seriously, as a human being. Good old Ed, she thought as she turned on the shower. He got me past a few bad attitudes about race ... and sex ... and interracial sex. Still, there was something disturbingly nice and safe about the relative scarcity of non-Caucasian races in the Great White North, and Lilly felt vaguely guilty about her feelings on that score.

It took a bit of fiddling to get the water temperature exactly right, but once she'd done the deed, it was glorious to step in and just let it pour ... well, let it pour as much as the “reduced flow” showerhead would allow. She closed her eyes, and made a slow rotation in the small tub ... too small for me to submerge in, she noted with disappointment. Still, this was the first time since she got off the plane that

she'd felt truly warm. Her feet were the last part of her to lose the chill, and the physical pleasure of it all salved her psyche as much as her long, thin body. "Many are cold, but few are frozen," she remembered her ex-boyfriend telling her just before she left for the airport in Miami. The Bible according to Ed.

After the shower, she put on her fuzzy blue housecoat. There was no wind outside, but the extreme cold seemed to seep insidiously through the windows. She did a quickie inspection of the thermostats in the bedroom and the living area, and cranked them from seventeen degrees up to twenty. As best she could recall, that was the metric equivalent of seventy-five. "Canadians and their damned Celsius," she muttered. I mean Québécois, she chastened herself silently. This separate and sovereign nation-within-a-nation thing was too much for Americans to internalize ... like metric ... Celsius ... whatever.

She sat down at her MIU, slipped her index finger into the bioID slot while ordering the boot-up, and then went back to the bedroom to get the comforter. On her return, she wrapped it around her waist and her legs and tucked it under her feet before sinking into the soft swivel chair. She had no make-up on, and she still had a towel wrapped around her head, cocooning her wet hair. No matter. She wouldn't be working long anyway, and she had no intention of facing anyone ... at least not visually.

There were three recent archived faces. The first one was from Julia, thanking her for the company over supper. Lilly made an insincere mental note to teach her new "friend" the advantages of holding a grudge. Only dogs offer unqualified love, she said to herself, forgetting that Big Wus had made an exception to that rule just for her.

The second archived face was from Gordon Weatherby, the agent from Callaway #6, down the highway near Luskville. How's the weather up here indeed! she smiled. I'll be sure to face him tomorrow.

The third face was from one Davie Brown, a weaselly-looking chap who did cleaning and maintenance for Victor-E. "On salary," he'd emphasized. He said he had helped the previous WDA monitor to "understand things better about life in the Victor-E clan, for a reasonable consideration." Fucking snitch, thought Lilly. But, he may be useful. I guess I should touch base with him.

She checked her "recent local scan archive" to search for exchanges between Julia and Alex, and was pleased to find that Julia had indeed connected with that unfriendly cab driver ... well, unfriendly to me, she rearranged her thought. She readied her pen and her yellow note pad. "Let's have it," she said as she used the mouse to instruct her MIU to run the piece.

"Hi Alex," Julia exclaimed on the screen. "I got my brother on hold so I can't face too long, eh? How's life at Walden? I forgot to ask—are you a daddy? I got—"

Lilly stopped there, and ordered her MIU to access InfoBank, the sprawling archiving facility maintained in Connecticut by the WDA for the sole use of agents. She then asked for the digitized record of Julia's entire day, as secretly recorded by way of the MIU in her bedroom. Not many people were placed on "total archive," but because Julia was a Whiteside, she was one of those whose MIU was set up to capture and transmit images and sounds twenty-four hours a day, even when she slept, and even when she wasn't in her bedroom. A full log of her life in the bedroom was retained for a month, just in case, and all of her Net transactions were permanently archived at the InfoBank.

This aspect of Lilly's work sometimes did bother her, even though she tried to deny it. It wasn't that she questioned its value, just that it was ... so invasive, she thought. She wondered how most civilians would react if they were to learn the full dimensions of the surveillance the WDA routinely carried out in the course of its policing activities. She remembered many examples from her training at the Academy, examples of seemingly innocent interceptions that had turned out to be of critical importance at a later

point in a criminal investigation, but ... well, when it came to surveillance, George Orwell's "Big Brother" was a pussycat compared to the WDA. It's ... necessary, she reminded herself as the MIU signaled the completion of downloading. "If your conscience objects," she recalled being told repeatedly at the Academy, "think of the millions of lives that are now saved every year and the billions of crimes that are now prevented every year." It's hard to argue with that.

She found the beginning of the Julia-Alex interface, then backed up to a spot about four minutes previous, before the beginning of Julia's interface with her brother. The screen showed Julia getting up from her settee. The time on Lilly's screen read 5:50 p.m.... right about the time I was sent packing from the mess hall by Annette, in the bubble, she thought. Julia must have arrived at the restaurant not too long before I did.

Lilly froze the image and spilt the screen into three, so she could catch Julia and both of her Netlinks—her brother Michael, and the taxi-driver, Alex. She gave Julia half the screen, the left half, and assigned a quarter each for the two men. Of course Alex wasn't on total archive, so she copied his image off Julia's incoming feed, pasted it onto her screen, and leaned back. "Roll, now," she said.

She watched as Julia admired herself in the mirror and played with her buttery hair and the fan. God, you can see right through that dress. She could only guess what Julia's mind was doing, or what she might have meant when she said, "It's too bad it's so dark outside now." She's ... narcissistic, Lilly thought as she watched her former dinner-mate pose and primp. And Lilly shook her head in disbelief when Julia bent over, wiggled her breasts, and said, "They love it when I do that. Maybe a nice boy will want to sleep with me tonight, and make me laugh and hoot."

"Aw jeeze," Lilly said at her screen. "Grow up!"

Then Michael's image came on the lower right quadrant of her screen, saying: "Sweet Julia. It's your big brother here. Can we talk?" He really ... loves her, Lilly could see. It wasn't until Michael said "Can we go visual?" that Lilly realized he wasn't being allowed to see his sister, just hear her ... like as if he was using an antique 20th-century telephone. She picked up her yellow pad and started making notes as to her sense of the relationship between the siblings, and particularly about the character of the man she'd been asked by Control to cozy up to. At the moment, she just felt sorry for him.

There was a long silence, during which Julia did her finger stretching and posturing. Lilly tried to imagine what nonsense was going through the girl's mind when she finally said, "Oh, that feels so nice." She could see Michael rubbing his eyes and his temples, waiting for Julia to get back to reality ... or anywhere close to reality.

When the conversation turned to whether Venice would be allowed to visit her at Victor-E, Julia said her piece and then just stopped talking. Michael appeared to go into a kind of trance while he waited for his sister to speak again. Lilly could tell that the man had been through all this before, and she wondered what he was thinking. The silent gap seemed to never end, and when it finally did, Julia started in on the taking off of clothing, talking about it like it was the weather, or a recipe for pecan pie ... and how Venice was going to get into all that "tingly" stuff with the boys. "And the girls!" noted Lilly on her pad. Again, she felt very sorry for Michael as he slumped and rolled his eyes while Julia rambled on. When she stopped talking, Lilly was surprised that the pause just continued ... and continued, and continued. "Somebody talk, for Christ's sake!" she was tempted to shout at her screen. All this silence was driving her crazy.

Lilly knew the name of Julia's trustee from the Netfiles, but she did not know about the pregnancy. She was shocked—not only by the fact of it, but by Julia's giddy attitude. I'm surprised Julia didn't tell me she was preggers during dinner, Lilly thought. And why wasn't the fact of her pregnancy in her Netfile?

There followed another annoying pause, more posing in the mirror by Julia, and then the brief Netcall from Alex came in. Nothing much in that, Lilly said to herself when Mr. rude-cab-driver signed off.

As before, Julia went back to haranguing Michael for a visit from Venice. Lilly noted with some satisfaction that Julia had finally let her brother see her on screen, but she was disappointed when Julia went right back into her sexual fixations and practically shoved Michael's face in it about how Venice had enjoyed seeing all those naked people during her last visit. "Give your brother a fucking break," Lilly snapped at the image of Julia.

That was followed by the soliloquy about Julia's friend Eric, the Hydro boy that she was apparently encouraging to leave his wife and move into Victor-E. She may be a true innocent, thought Lilly, but she's capable of all sorts of trouble-making and mischief.

Lilly noted the time of the end of the Netlink between Julia and Michael, clicked off both images, and commanded her MIU to access the InfoBank to see if there was a record of Michael's reaction. I hope he stayed where he was and talked to somebody else on the Net, she thought as the search proceeded.

The WDA had Michael under total archive ... naturally ... but there were never any guarantees that subjects would be in front of their own MIUs when they said or did the things that the WDA wanted to know about. When Lilly's MIU indicated readiness, she called up the exact time of the end of Michael's conversation with Julia and let it roll for two seconds. She saw Michael stand up and head out of the den. Lilly asked her MIU for "next transaction," and after a brief business call that was of no interest to her, there was Michael, half an hour later, talking towards his screen. "You see what I mean, Mom?" he said. "She won't even—"

"Great," Lilly said quietly as she froze Michael's image with a mouse-command. He had used his own MIU to face his mother, who was apparently at an MIU somewhere else in the Whiteside mansion ... probably just down the hall, Lilly thought ... curious. She split the screen laterally for the two players and returned to InfoBank, but she was not able to access an image from Mrs. Whiteside's MIU. "Check why not," she noted for later—she guessed that Doreen Whiteside wasn't on total archive, or that whatever MIU she had used wasn't being archived. So she just copied Doreen's image from Michael's incoming feed, pasted in up on her screen, and let the thing roll. By the looks of it, Mrs. Whiteside was in the kitchen, talking via the Net to her son, in his den. "Why Netlink in same house?" she wrote on her pad.

So, she observed after the first exchange, Julia manages to piss them both off ... about equally. She also realized that Michael had allowed his mother to listen in on and watch his chat with Julia, but not to participate. Lilly wondered if that was his choice or hers.

It was painful to watch Michael's mother struggle with reality, and then break down in tears, almost as difficult as it was to watch Michael wait it out, enduring his own pain over the Julia situation and the long-ago death of his father ... his beloved father. During the subsequent hiatus, Lilly stared at her screen, at Michael's body language, trying to imagine what might be going through his head, or going on in his feelings. There's too much guesswork in this process, she had long felt, giving no heed to the fact that ordinary mortals got through life without eavesdropping ... without wanting to, or needing to.

Michael then told his mother that Julia had been artificially inseminated—something he had apparently learned from Mr. Wu—and then enlightened her about how Julia was "technically still a virgin." Lilly was repelled by the tortured look on Doreen Whiteside's face ... Dawe-Whiteside is her legal last name, she remembered from her study of those Netfiles down in lovely, warm Florida. When Michael went on to explain to his mother that the Evolutionaries weren't "a bunch of dirty hippy Communists," it seemed clear to Lilly—for the thousandth time—that the WDA was right, that the lessons of the WDA's famed Academy were valid. "Oh dear ... big ol' problem here," she said as she prepared to re-run the previous

several sentences.

No doubt about it! This was indisputably “reportable!” Michael was clearly “soft” on Evolutionism, one of those naïve souls who didn't seem to fully appreciate the danger that the Evolutionary movement represented to the peace, order and good government of the world. This didn't bode well for the option of continuing the exclusive contract under which Whiteside Technologies made all the LieDecks in the world, LieDecks that were paid for by the WDA.

In the extended wait that ensued between Michael and his mother, Lilly pondered the situation, and decided not to make an issue of it—not to report it to Control—at least not until she'd had the opportunity to meet with Michael. There was no legal duty to report it right away, since no law had been broken. What the WDA needed was a thorough report, a compelling report, not a quick one.

The silence on screen ended when Mrs. Whiteside asked her son if he was going to let his young daughter Venice visit Julia at Victor-E. And right in the middle of his response, Mrs. Whiteside suddenly just turned off her MIU! No “talk to you later,” no “take care,” no warning, no nothing, observed Lilly.

She noted in her yellow pad that Venice apparently had a strong wish to talk to Victor Helliwell, as strong as her determination to visit her Aunt Julia at Victor-E, his namesake Evolutionary clan. Maybe I can arrange for Venice and Victor to chat, she thought as she shut down her MIU. If I can get the old fart to talk at all, that is.

Lilly had only been at the clan-site for half a day, and she had already reached the point where things got confusing. People say they don't know what the hell WDA agents do all day, she mused. If they only knew!

It wasn't late, but Lilly was exhausted. On her way to the bedroom, she stopped short. She thought she heard a sound coming from just outside her door, so she took a few quiet steps and listened carefully. Someone was definitely out there, and not knocking—spying on her, or worse.

She tiptoed quickly and quietly to her metal case, opened it, took out her service revolver, undid the safety catch and crept stealthily back to the door. Holding her gun, pointing up, behind the jamb, she opened the door with a jerk, ready for anything.

Big Wus jumped back, startled.

"Bugger off," she said, with a half-hearted kick in his general direction.

The confused spaniel tore down the stairs. I just wanted to get to know you, he felt. And maybe play!

Chapter 15

DEAR DIARY

Tuesday, February 8, 2033—8:45 p.m.

Annette made her daily diary entry with her hands clasped behind her short gray hair. She was leaning back in the chair at her very public Netstation in the far corner of the E-tery.

"Spent an hour and a half in Sleepery number one, my private little home in the hub, recalibrating time-to-retirement records," she drawled towards the MIU screen. "I hate being caught without the current figures when people ask about their status, even though few of the current qualifiers seem

particularly inclined to stop working. Of course I have to admit that with my savings, my inheritance and my generous disability pension from Patriot Security, I could lollygag my life away in style, so ... who am I to talk? Victor-E has fifty-three members who can retire but haven't, and forty-one members who are fully retired—many of whom work as hard as the rest of us, but sometimes at jobs that don't pay any money ... or don't pay as much as a regular job, or jobs that are part-time.

"We're about on par with the Upper American Evolutionary ratio of adults to kids, but we have fewer pregnancies than most clans—which is fine, considering that the world is grossly overpopulated. Of course we're way behind the Normal stats on pregnancies, which is also fine, since there's always lots of kids to bond with and have fun with in any clan without having to produce your own batch. It seems that internationally, more and more Evolutionaries are choosing to wait until after their retirement party to have a kid anyway—not a problem.

"Stats for growth are always interesting, if you like to focus on stuff like that. Our growth rate globally has slowed since the boom days of a decade ago, of course, but it's still more than seven percent a year, not accounting for babies, since our morbidity and fecundity rates—deaths and births—basically offset each other. Evolutionaries represent a bit more than two percent of the world's population, and—oh—that seven percent annual increase is net, eh? I mean—let me check this—yeah, that's right—we're getting about a ten percent increase in membership every year worldwide, but three percent of our members leave every year, for a variety of reasons. And—oops—I almost forgot—there's a going-away party for Len and Betty tonight in the E-tery, at ten p.m.—they're moving down the road to Callaway #6, as I'm sure you've heard.

"Now, as for work and income, Victor-E has ... well, work is never a problem, since we work for different reasons than Normals, but it seems that no matter what we do, our average income is stuck at slightly less than seventy-five percent of the average fully-employed Normal. There's a lot of reasons for that, but we don't consider it a problem, and of course not all Normal adults work, but..."

A lot of people threw Annette's daily diary on their MIUs or the tiny black-and-white screens of their Sniffers in the evenings, just to see how the clan was doing in general; it was sort of an intra-clan newscast. She always had something of interest to report, and she made a point of including some humor, so people wouldn't get the impression that their 320 lives couldn't generate a few reportable light moments in the course of an entire day. Often, as a day would draw to a close, a few people would come to Annette and tell her of the highlights or lowlights of their days, and sometimes she would include those in her daily diary entries.

Her E-tery MIU—the one she usually used during the day—was framed with mirrors on both sides and across the top, so that people could see her face even though she sat facing the wall, with her back to the E-tery action. She had felt that the mirrors were too intrusive when this set-up was first proposed, but the clan had made a good case that the management should be visible to all—the same case they'd made when her MIU was originally plunked down in back of the restaurant. After her first day with the mirrors back in 2030, she not only got used to it, she liked the way it allowed her to see the bustle of activity when the E-tery was busy, and not miss the nutty antics when they flared up, which was often ... especially when Julia was serving tables.

"Julia was her usual provocative self today," she chuckled at her MIU. "She's the main reason why the Junior B players all come here for supper. Their coaches won't let them stay in our motel rooms because they'd have swarms of parents mad at them for letting their horny little sons get tingled for the sheer fun of it. Too bad, really, but Julia was pretty nervy today. Half those boys couldn't stand up straight after their meals, at least not without embarrassing themselves.

"It was a real hoot watching all this in my wall of mirrors. Julia found out who the back-up goalie was for

the Pembroke Flyers and now she's in the broom closet with him while his team's over at the Shawville arena..." Annette checked the Net for the score ... "while his team's at the arena getting badly beaten," she snickered. "She's probably just kissing his face off ... I hope so, anyway ... I always get stuck with the job of explaining things to parents when she makes them splurt, even if she never lets them actually boink her, because they always tell on themselves by bragging, the silly twerps.

"She's a caution, that one, a real pistol. I asked her to keep it sort of mild this year ... not because she's doing anything wrong, of course, but just to spare me the aftershocks. God, I wish Normals would get over their guilt trip on that whole area and stop..." I talk a good Human Three line, Annette thought, but I'm not exactly guilt-free myself. Still, I wouldn't get beeped for what I said even if we had LieDecks.

"Anyway, most of the working members are churning along blissfully, careening towards early-retirement dates that won't mean much anyway. I would say the freedom to retire is still a much-coveted status here, but nobody seems too keen on actually doing it when the big day arrives. Productive work has acquired a meaning almost as important as participating in the rest of the clan's activities. It's like ... it's like a day without at least some productive work is boring, and puts you out of the chatter, out of the loop.

"It's nine p.m., and the restaurant's almost empty. There's a bunch more stuff that I should enter, but I'd better shake my tail or ... yes, poor choice of words," she said with a lopsided smile. "Our new WDA monitor, one Captain Lilly Petrosian, is now available for regular LieDeck-verification—I'm sure you're thrilled to hear that—but the law is the law, so book your appointments, people. Everybody six years old or over has to do this once a month and there's no point getting fined for forgetting. Net, down, now," Annette instructed, and the screen went dead.

Chapter 16

POKE AND SNIFF

Saturday, February 12, 2033—9:40 a.m.

Lilly woke up the next morning, Wednesday morning, with a towering headache. Her throat felt as if someone had run amok in there with a miniature electric sander. It hurt to cough, to swallow, to move—even to think, it seemed. By mid-morning, she'd blown her nose so much she'd run out of Kleenex and had started using folded-over toilet paper. The outsides of her nostrils were beginning to chafe, something her temperament had already done.

The only Netcall she made that day was to her mother in Miami, to say that all was well, except for a little cold she'd picked up. The truth was that she could barely focus her eyes during that interface, and she had almost fainted as her mother signed off. She wished her mom could get on a plane and come sit by her bed, rub her head, sing soft lullabies and speak lovely lies like "there, there, it'll be alright, sweetheart." Lilly was annoyed at her illness, and she was also a little scared, and horribly lonely.

She left a message for Annette on her MIU—just a short, polite face saying that she wasn't yet available to LieDeck-verify Victor-Eens. Then she spent the next three days in her apartment, feeling wretched and weak, leaving the bed only to get to the bathroom. "Perfect," she'd said of her health when she did the required interview over the Net prior to her recent re-assignment. "Never had a day off sick since I was hired," she'd bragged. Welcome to Canada, she kept hearing in her mind. Or rather, Québec.

Various Evolutionaries had brought her food, medicine and the offer of small talk. She turned aside all of the small talk, most of the food and none of the medicine. By Saturday, she was able to focus her eyes again, without pain. Her head still felt thick, but she was able to function. For some completely illogical

reason, it bothered her that the life of Victor-E had muddled along problem-free without her. Burn that thought, she said to herself. That feeling, she corrected herself.

Lilly booted up her MIU, and the female voice gave her a normal two-day heads-up: "Valentine's Day is on February fourteenth, in two days." Lilly realized miserably that most MIUs in the western world would be programmed to spit out exactly this reminder. She was tempted to call "good old Ed" and tell him to get his ass up here to Canada and pat her head until she felt better. Yeah right, she thought.

By 10:00 a.m., she found herself trying to concentrate on one of the Netfiles she still had to review, but it wasn't proving a very useful exercise. In spite of her relative sense of physical well-being, her intellect just didn't seem to be all there. The sharpness is all but gone.

She had read all of the charts for Victor-E—birth rate, death rate, growth rate through recruitment minus departures, types of work done in person-years, range of incomes plus averages (means, medians), range of annual savings rates by percentages of net incomes and dollar-values, nest-egg totals per adult member, plus the overall savings of the clan, RRSP and non-RRSP investment portfolios per adult and overall stats for the clan ... the records went on and on, but most of the numbers didn't stick in her mind anyway. Later, she thought.

There were a few duties on her plate that required no particular concentration, and she decided to hoist those to the top of her list. The biggest one was the grand tour of Victor-E, the "poke and sniff" routine that agents and Evolutionaries used to enjoy and now both resented. She bundled up with double sweaters and socks, loaded a pocket with Kleenex, took a preparatory breath through her mouth and opened her apartment door. The clan mascot was sitting on the landing halfway down the stairs, looking up, his tail thumping hopefully.

"Hi Big Wus," she said in as friendly a manner as she could muster with her crackly voice and shrunken mood. Big Wus jumped up and hustled downstairs, disappearing into the restaurant. He wasn't ready to trust somebody who would try to kick a stranger, and without provocation. Jeeze, thought Lilly, I've managed to get rejected by the resident canary.

Evolutionaries took their animals seriously. They called their canine pals "canaries," after the ancient tradition of coal miners, who took these birds down into the mines with them. If a canary died, there was odorless methane gas in the air and a real danger of an explosion, and it was therefore time to skedaddle. If Lilly couldn't befriend Big Wus, the members of Victor-E would know that something was dreadfully wrong. Big Wus loved everybody! Well, almost everybody, she said to herself.

Lilly passed through the restaurant, and received a couple of cautious and correct salutations from the staff. At the back door, she wound her scarf (on loan from Julia) twice around her neck, donned her earmuffs (another Julia loaner), buttoned up her black trench coat and put on her Miami-appropriate driving gloves. Once she was inside the Mainspoke, she took out her Sniffer and faced Annette Blais. "I thought I'd let you know that the dog Big Wus seems to have the run of the place, including the restaurant. I'm not here to help out the health inspectors, but it's a risk, you know. There's no point getting your restaurant closed down over a damn dog."

"Thanks," said Annette formally—Lilly could see that Annette was in Sleepy #1, her private quarters/office in the hub. "Nobody ever complained before. In future, please try to contact the person responsible, and that would be Claire Lapine for the restaurant. Net, down, now."

Christ, I knew that, thought Lilly. It wasn't like her to make mistakes, especially real stupid mistakes. She assumed it must be the fault of her lingering illness.

As she made her way quickly down the Mainspoke, her Sniffer beeped. It was Claire Lapine, the

manager of the restaurant, and she had her claws out. She had just heard from Annette on her Sniffer, and now Claire was threatening to have Lilly banned from the E-tery. I guess she can do that, Lilly supposed, and if she does, that would leave me eating in my room ... and publicly humiliated. "I'll stop by after my tour of the hub and have a chat with you," she said, hoping the plump cook would be willing to discuss things more rationally. Claire signed off without agreeing.

My popularity rating is in the toilet, and I just got started, thought Lilly. Oh well, I wasn't sent here to win friends.

As she was passing through the revolving door, her Sniffer beeped yet again. It was Annette, offering her the use of a guide for her exploration of the hub. "I appreciate the offer," Lilly said, hoping she sounded properly chastened, "but I'll be fine." It was nice to have the offer, but Lilly felt there might be more to it than just courtesy. She wanted to go about exploring Victor-E in her own way, at her own speed, with no agenda, no timetable and no expectations ... and no minder.

Just beyond the revolving door, a wooden box had been hung on the wall with printed maps inside. And there was a bilingual sign beneath it, asking that the maps be returned. Lilly could have used her Sniffer to find her way around, and gotten fuller information, but civilians were always wary of agents with their Sniffers at the ready. Greeks bearing gifts, she thought. It was not so much that people feared getting caught violating the law; just that WDA Sniffers symbolized the power gap. They had LieDecks built in; civilian Sniffers didn't, and if they did, the users would have to be arrested. Lilly understood that fearful reaction; she even sympathized a little, but ... I don't make the rules, she thought as she descended the stairs from the elevated rim, map in hand.

She went from room to room along the main oval hallway that ran around the hub. There were doors, and narrow, offshoot hallways on both sides, with arrows and bilingual signs saying where things were. Most of the doors were open, and most of the rooms and other facilities had people in them, doing things. Most of the people who looked up and caught her eye gave her a chilly nod and went right back to whatever had occupied them seconds earlier. I'm a real hit around here, Lilly thought. Nobody asks me if I'm feeling better, or even says hello!

The first place she had checked, right beside the stairs, was the deserted meeting room she'd noticed from the elevated rim last Tuesday, the day she arrived ... five days ago, she pondered ... the same day I got thumped out of the mess hall. "V.I. Exec., 9:00 a.m. to noon," said a taped-up notice on the door. A dozen or more people were deep in discussion of what seemed to be a business decision—whether to expand V-Insight, the commercial polling service that was one of Victor-E's largest enterprises. Lilly didn't stay at the door long enough to gather more than a general impression—the tenor of the debate had fallen off almost as soon as she'd been noticed.

She had decided to traverse the oval walkway counter-clockwise, so the next section was the enclosed area that housed Sleepery #1, Annette's digs, and the small clinic. She passed by without looking in either, partly so as not to have to deal with Annette, partly to not have to deal with any sick people—she was sick enough as it was.

Several small offices followed, most of which had two or three people working away diligently at MIUs. Then a door sign read "C.Q.E.S." The small print beneath explained: "Consciousness Quotient Evaluation Service." A row of twenty-five or thirty advisers, all wearing headphones, sat at MIUs. They were advising clients from all over the world, if the skin color and apparel of the people on the screens was any indication, and in several languages, although mostly in English and French. Lilly knew that Victor-E promoted the so-called "Human Three" perspective on CQ measurement, and she shook her head as she moved on. It's curious ... the way so many non-Evolutionary civilians pay perfectly good money for such frivolous advice ... like the tealeaf readers or palm readers of the twentieth century, she

thought. She knew that Victor-E made a shitload of income from their C.Q.E. service. "It's like ... snake oil back in the nineteenth century," she muttered aloud.

Lilly was surprised by how many people were at work on a Saturday morning. She knew that Evolutionaries got a lot of their "outside" business, their non-Evolutionary customers, because of their passion for quality service and their "never-say-no" attitude to any demand that generated cash. "Every day at work translates into an eventual three or four days of retirement for these people," she'd learned as a teenager as she watched the movement explode in popularity. That was the basic appeal of the thing, and it was a formula that worked. Clearly the workers she was observing didn't need to have a "boss" to motivate them. But then neither do I, Lilly huffed to herself. At least I ... don't think I do.

She came across one large room where she rather expected the door to be locked, or at least closed. It was Victor-E's Netsex service, quaintly called "Soft-E." There was big money to be made pseudo-tingling long-distance with horny clients the world over, and this clan was not about to pass on such a sure source of revenue. The name of the outfit, "Soft-E," basically defined the angle. As a clan, Victor-E wasn't really judgmental on the subject of sex, but neither was it tolerant of excess, or weirdness. Inter- or intra-gender orgasms were just fine, and fun, but the approach here was "soft," a head-tingle as much as a body rush. Fantasy was great, but "cluster-fucking," bestiality and sadomasochism were out of bounds. How fucking tame, Lilly said in her mind, chuckling at her choice of unspoken words.

The WDA agent walked into the Soft-E operation. A secretary seemed to be guarding the gateway and monitoring all the Netsex activity on a bank of small screens perched on her desk. There was narrow a hallway inside the facility, with a neat row of closed doors on both sides. Each door had a viewing window, about the size of a hand.

"Would you like to take a look, Ms. Petrosian?" asked the fortyish woman, glancing up from her work. She was seated, and had both hands out and upturned, one offering a peek at the bank of screens, the other seeming to indicate that Lilly was welcome to go down the hall and look through the small windows into the rooms. "The windows in the doors are two-way mirrors ... you can see in, but the person inside can't see you."

"No ... thanks anyway," said Lilly, backing out nervously. Even if most people saw nothing wrong with Netsex, she had never indulged in it herself.

She returned to the oval hallway and passed a few doors that seemed uninteresting, and then came to one that read: "V-Insight—Operations Centre." She recalled that the polling outfit that Victor-E operated was very profitable, and that it asked questions that some other polling organizations dared not pose. While its commercial clients paid the bills, the WDA knew that this organization also surveyed public attitudes on behalf of Evolution International, the coordinating committee of the Evolutionary movement, and for many of the LUCs, the LieDeck Unbanning Committees that had sprung up around the world. She opened the door and found a man standing there, who had apparently been alerted to her approach ... by those people in the meeting room by the entrance, no doubt. He introduced himself curtly as Jimmy Ball, and told her before she could speak that she was not welcome in the nerve center of V-Insight, although he would happily answer any questions that she might have. She knew he was within his rights to bar her entry unless a reasonable suspicion existed that something illegal might be going on in there. She shook her head and moved along.

She sauntered down the wide oval hallway, quieting her resentment at Jimmy Ball's bluntness, and found herself in front of a door that she'd been expecting, looking forward to. "Kid-Kare," the sign read. This was where Julia Whiteside worked most of the time, and Lilly was curious to see how her slow-witted "friend" fared in the raising of young Evolutionaries. She opened the door, and walked into a smaller

hallway with several doors on each side. At the end, some twenty yards away, the hallway opened on the right into a well-lit change area in which mayhem reigned. Kids who had just returned from an outdoors romp were laughing and running about, throwing toques and scraps of snow at each other and trying not to heed the adults' admonitions for order and calm. Lilly's head had stopped aching, but she wasn't up to coping with out-of-control children, armed with snow. She walked down the next hallway, at right angles to the first, and tried the door of the first office on the right hand side—no one home. Then she tried several other doors down that hallway, and still, no one. The last door on the right was ajar, and there ... she found life.

She saw Julia in there, talking intensely and earnestly to a young boy. Both had their backs to the door, and there was another woman, dressed in skimpy gym clothes with a towel over her shoulders, standing a bit inside the door, watching the conversation. Julia glanced up. "I'm just looking around," said Lilly quietly, putting on a forced smile.

The onlooker turned around sharply. "I don't freaking think so!" she barked fiercely when she saw Lilly.

"Mom!" said the boy, who evidently didn't realize his mother had been standing there behind him.

The mother ignored her child and stood her ground, glaring daggers. Lilly shot her own optical daggers back. What the fuck is your problem? she thought.

"Alice," said Julia, "I think Lilly was just—"

"I'm in charge when it comes to my son," snapped the mom, "and I do not need you to—"

"What is your problem?" demanded Lilly. "I was just—"

"OUT!" screamed the mom ... and then she started closing the door on Lilly, giving her the choice of being pushed back or getting out of the way voluntarily.

Lilly stepped back, watched the door bang shut and tried hard to fight the temptation to go back in there and jab an index finger into the mom's eyeball. Jesus H. Christ, she said to herself. These people think they're so cool, so fucking evolved, but they can be as brutish as the worst Normal. That ignorant woman had no reason in the world to treat me like that. Lilly had recognized the mother from her Netsnooping a few days earlier ... Alice Lochlear, she thought ... or Copps ... one of those women that were talking about their kids. "Bitch," Lilly mumbled aloud to herself as she left the day-care area entirely and continued her "poke-and-sniff" tour of the hub.

The two gyms were next along the main oval hallway, and they were occupied with laughing, hollering basketball players, male and female. She listened in on the first game while staying pretty well out of sight. Evolutionaries made the most of their playtime, and these people were having their fill of rowdy fun. Lilly heard a rhythmic thumping sound she couldn't identify, and stuck her head around the doorjamb. At the far end of the gym, an aerobics class was under way.

The second gym's door was clearly labeled "dress-optional," and when Lilly saw that several of the men and two of the women were naked—except for shoes and socks—she moved along quickly. She still had her coat on, even though the floor temperature in the bubble was kept at sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit. It seemed somehow ridiculous that any person would want to throw hoops in the raw, especially in winter.

She passed several dozen rooms that were work areas, and then came to the pool and the big hot tubs. Nudity seemed slightly more rational here, but Lilly was put off by the uncluttered ease with which people of all ages seemed to share the facility, without any clothing. There were several old Evolutionaries

splashing around and lying about—men and women in their sixties and seventies—and that was particularly hard for Victor-E's new WDA monitor to accept. A little dignity pulleeease! she thought.

It also bothered her that children were as welcome in the pool as anyone else. As she stood at the door, a couple of boys—fourteen or fifteen, she guessed—walked by, with erections. Nobody else seemed to take particular note of that fact, but Lilly averted her eyes, turned, and left. It was one thing for her to walk in front of her own MIU and know that she might be observed by other mature people ... but this is something else again.

Lilly remembered that not so very long ago, some Islamic countries still forced the women to cover up entirely. Even their faces were wrapped in hoods that had little mesh grills across the eyes, to see out of—sort of a low-tech two-way mirror. Well, the male leaders of some Islamic countries did that, she reminded herself. They felt they knew, as men, that if you saw a woman's face, you might like it, and then want to see more of her, and if that happened, you'd probably like to see the whole works, and then you'd want to fuck it, or have to, even if she was unwilling. And if a woman let a man see her eyes, and then got raped, well, she pretty much brought it on herself, didn't she?

The fact that some men went through life one peek away from rape was astonishing—not to the animals of the wild, but to the willingly self-tamed human animals who said they preferred “civilization” to the law of the jungle. Evolutionaries flat-out refuse to be strangers to the human body, their own or anyone else's, she said to herself, which means everything is different for them ... or almost everything!

Lilly passed on the chance to go into the empty mess hall. For whatever reason, the headache she had finally shaken seemed to be creeping back. There was a full year to get used to these people ... if one ever does ... so she walked back towards the Mainspoke, completing the loop of the wide oval hallway. She saw six people along the way, and she got six polite nods. She remembered to return the map into the wooden box when she got to the revolving door, then she left the bubble and headed back down the Mainspoke to the E-tery, and to her apartment. All's well that ends well? she asked herself silently. Not today.

It was almost noon, so as she passed through the restaurant, she stopped briefly to tell a waiter that she was still not feeling well and would prefer to have her lunch upstairs, if that would be okay. “No problem,” said a smiling young man who had the word “LARS” printed on the wide, lower part of his apron in green capital letters. His name, I presume, thought Lilly. It pays to advertise, I suppose. When she looked back up from the apron to his face, he was still smiling at her, as if he had enjoyed being looked over. She found his manner discomfiting and turned away quickly, before her mind could go further down the road of imagining “LARS” in the buff, bouncing on the end of a diving board.

"Oh, Ms. Petrosian," he called after her.

"Yes," she said, looking back over her shoulder.

"Catch," said the smiling waiter as he threw her a set of two keys.

Lilly caught the keys.

"Your new car is just outside—the green Aura. This guy delivered it like ten minutes ago. I plugged it in for you, and if—"

"Thanks," said Lilly, meaning for the keys.

Chapter 17

TWO TRICKS

Saturday, February 12, 2033—10:45 a.m.

Julia collapsed in laughter onto the jacket-strewn couch in the Kid-Kare common room. No way could she make head nor tail out of these kids when they all yelled at once. It seemed that sometimes they did it on purpose, just to see her crack up and roll around like she did.

"One at a time," she pleaded as she took off her snow-caked knitted woolen mittens and wiped tears from her eyes. "Davey, get one of the older kids to take off your boots and then you put them on the rack where your name is ... by yourself, okay? Olivia, go and pee if you have to pee ... and hurry up so—Fran, you go with her, okay? And Barry..." She made a serious effort to erase any shadows of joy from her face—Barry was only eight, and he often misunderstood others' glee for heartless ridicule. Julia took off her outerwear and threw the garments in a heap, for now. "Okay ... tell me what happened," she asked the sulker.

"I wanna face my mom," he said towards his wet snow boots. "I'll ... tell my mom."

Julia sat him down on the floor and pulled off his boots and snowsuit. Then she stood him up, took his small hand and resisted the temptation to drag him along at her own pace, which was always twice that of little Barry Lochlear. There were two other women working day care with her, and they could handle twenty kids who were simultaneously disrobing from a half-hour frolic on the sliding hill. The din of shrill voices was music to Julia, sometimes confusing, but always delightful. "Come along, Barry," she chided as they approached the office closest to the common room. "So, did you get in a fight with somebody?" She knew that wasn't it, but the boy would be flattered that she thought he might have had his first physical dust-up.

Barry wasn't going to answer questions any more than he was going to hurry up. Julia sighed. The day would come when Barry Lochlear would be a fine young man, and they could laugh about his roller-coaster childhood, but that day was surely a few years away. "Sorry to interrupt," Julia said to the male worker sitting at the MIU. "Barry has to talk to his mom." She didn't say "again," but their eyes met, and he knew.

"Hey, that's okay," said the man. "It's kind of important for a boy to talk to his mom sometimes," he said authoritatively, seemingly speaking from a vast personal experience in such manly matters. "I have to go to the bathroom anyway."

"Thanks," said Julia ... for the MIU and for the message for Barry. She called Alice Lochlear on the Net, Barry's mother.

"Hi Julia," Alice said as her image popped on the screen a few seconds later. She was wiping perspiration from her brow with a large white towel and breathing hard. She wore a pink Spandex gym suit that left little to the imagination, and several of her classmates in the background wore less, or nothing at all.

"Hi," said Julia as she looked behind Alice to see the other women in her exercise group, puffing their way to better fitness and ravenous appetites.

"Everything okay?" panted Alice. "Hi honey," she said upon seeing her downcast son slouching despondently beside Julia, leaning against her leg, holding her hand. "Do you ... wanna talk?"

"I'll wait outside," said Julia diplomatically as she physically disengaged Barry's tiny hand from her own. "Don't be too long, okay?" she said to the boy.

Barry peeked up at the screen without raising his head. He wasn't sure why he felt so rotten, but he knew he wouldn't feel that way if he could hang out with his mom instead of going to this dumb Saturday kid's play-outside deal. His mother was doing the waiting game, just jogging in place to keep her heart rate up. She likes jumping around in the gym better than playing with me, he felt. He knew she'd say that wasn't true if he said it out loud, and then she'd go on and on about how it should be fun to spend time with the other kids, and how everybody needs some time to do things by themselves, and how he spent entirely too much time on the MIU anyway ... and on and on and on.

"Well?" she finally asked. "Did somebody hit you or something?"

"No," pouted the boy.

"Did somebody take something that was yours?" she tried, drawing the towel down her face and glancing back at her classmates. "Don't make me guess, okay? I don't think it's fair for you to—"

"Allan called me a chicken," Barry blurted out. "He always calls me names, and—"

"Always?" asked Alice.

"He hates me, Mom," pleaded Barry. "He never wants to play with me, and he always calls me bad names."

Alice Lochlear stopped her bouncing, and flashed an apologetic look at the youngish woman who was leading the class. This would probably take a while. "So ... why did he call you a chicken," asked the mom.

"I didn't want to go down the big part of the hill," explained Barry as he stared hard in behind his mother's face at the dozen or so bobbing bodies. Mom used to always let me hang out there while they did all their exercise stuff. It's not fair she makes me come here now.

"So ... why didn't you want to go down the big part?" she asked.

"I just ... didn't want to," said Barry, dropping his eyes and rotating his toe back and forth on the floor, as if to squish a bug.

"Because you were scared?" she asked. "It's okay to be scared, Barry. I'd be scared to slide down the big part myself, and I'm not going to do it either. So ... he wasn't exactly wrong about why you wouldn't do it, eh? But he was wrong to call you a name, that's for sure. So ... you go tell him that he was wrong to call you a chicken ... and make him say that he's sorry. If he doesn't say he's sorry, then you tell me, and we'll mediate the issue ... later ... okay?"

"Okay ... I guess," said Barry.

He was too young to work a technically complicated gambit like this, and Alice knew she'd have to get to the real problem pretty soon. Many of his "upsets" seemed to happen between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m., when she was at her aerobics class. He could see all the nude bodies he wanted on the Net or in the pool, but ... he wants to see the bodies of the people he knows best, especially me, stark naked, bouncing, and ... well, having sex. It's tough to be eight years old and horny, she thought, but I've got to break this daily pattern of concocted or provoked fusses ... just so he can ogle. "See you later," she said lovingly as she started jogging on the spot again and tossed her big white towel off screen. "Net, down, now," she said as she turned away.

Julia had been listening by the door, and the MIU worker was returning from the washroom. Barry was standing in there, staring at the blank screen, sniffing and trying to sob. The whole situation stank, so Julia quietly asked the man whose office it was to give her ten or fifteen minutes, and went in to cope with reality ... well, with Barry's reality.

She pulled two swivel chairs in front of the MIU screen, facing each other, and they sat down. It took her several minutes of handholding and assurances to get the boy to come out of his funk and start talking, even about trivial stuff. A few minutes later, she started asking him about his fears. He was much too young to express himself on sexual matters, but Julia did manage to extract an important admission out of him. He just hated going to bed at night. Julia figured it had to be fear. She was something of an expert on kids, and their problems almost always came down to fear. Now she had something solid to work with.

"Something about going to bed scares you," she said matter-of-fact. "I helped lots of kids with their scary stuff and all that. That's why I work in the Kid-Kare, 'cause I like to help children, and I'm really good at it. So, how about I be the friend that helps you find the answer to this problem, okay?"

Well, it took a lot of guessing, but Julia finally guessed right. "I had that problem too, when I was your age," she said to the boy. "And I had a mom who loved me a lot, just like your mom loves you, and we even had a maid too, but I didn't ever have anybody to explain it to me so I could understand, and if my mom could have explained that when I was eight, I would have understood, but they didn't know how to explain it in the olden days. I was twelve years old before it went away on its own, so I had ... what's twelve minus eight?"

Barry rolled his eyes. "Four," he said.

"So I had this problem for like four years when I coulda maybe not had it. Boy, it used to scare me so bad I was scared to even go to bed, just like you are. It's lucky we had this chance to talk, eh? So ... do you want me to just tell you, or should we use the MIU to help us get it exactly right?"

Barry Lochlear thought about it for a moment. "Let's use the Net," he decided. There was always a chance that the explanation, whatever it turned out to be, might involve a few naked grown-ups.

Julia turned both chairs towards the screen, then she accessed the "children's aid" file and ordered up: "Monsters—under beds." Slowly, step-by-step, with Julia occasionally inserting pauses so she could confirm that the boy was following things, an interactive cybermom walked young Barry through a basic Human Three analysis of the problem.

In juvenile language, he was "reminded" that babies were much the same as kittens and puppies, reliant upon automatic instincts to get what they needed and make it all the way to grown-up cats or dogs. But people, of course, were luckier, insofar as they could think better and better as they grew up, and use words, and understand things that cats and dogs had no chance of ever understanding. But a person's instinct was still there, just like a kitten's or a puppy's instinct. And the instinct made kittens and puppies get real scared ... for their own good, because unless they had a nice human family to take them in as pets, they had to grow up and survive in a forest or a jungle, where there were lots of bigger animals who had to eat little animals for their own survival. The problem was that the parent cats and dogs couldn't use words to explain to their babies about all of the terrible dangers of the wild world, so the instinct made up some imaginary monsters in their brains so that kittens and puppies got the idea of being scared and either fighting or running away before they even had to face these dangers on their own, so they would be good and ready when the real thing came along. The same rationale held for nightmares, and animals had nightmares to help them get ready to deal with the reality of the jungle, to teach them that in addition to needing food, they were food.

"It's pretty much the same for us when we're kids," said cybermom in a voice that signaled the arrival of the epiphany. "Our instinct is the same as in kittens and puppies and little ducklings and baby wolves and mice and all of the other animals, because we're just animals too. Our instinct makes up imaginary things to scare us on purpose ... like monsters under the bed! But we don't have to be afraid of being eaten by other animals, do we? No! We know that in our brains, but our instinct doesn't know that. The instinct is trying to do its job, and it feels that it has to get us ready for life in a forest or a jungle, but that's not true any more, is it? We live in nice safe houses or in apartments or clans, don't we? But the problem of monsters under the bed doesn't go away just because we know this stuff in our brains. Kids all over the world still have this problem, even though human beings haven't lived in the forest or the jungle like the other animals for hundreds or even thousands of years. But ... we have figured out how to fix the problem! Isn't that great? There's two easy tricks. One is really easy—I'll teach you that one first—but then the other one takes a little practice.

"The easy trick..." the cybermom laughed, signaling to Barry how clever the trick was. "The easy trick is to put your mattress right on the floor—no way is there any room for a monster under your bed now! Poof! No more problem!

"But you've got to use the second trick too," continued the image on the screen. "You have to use that special advantage that you have that grown-up sheep and horses and even elephants don't have—your great big beautiful brain!

"An animal feels whatever it feels, and its little brain always thinks about whatever it's feeling. But we humans can think about anything we want! We can think about what we're feeling—and that's okay most of the time—but we can also not think about what we're feeling! When we're really hungry, for instance, we can get all upset about being hungry, and we can cry about it—that's what babies do, right?—or we can drop whatever we're doing and go off and search for food, or we can think about it and realize that lunch is coming in about an hour, and then concentrate on something else until lunchtime rolls around, right? And when we decide to concentrate on something else, well, the feelings of hunger disappear, or at least we don't notice them so much, and they don't bother us so much. We humans can control what we feel—not completely, but a lot—by using our brains to not think about what our instinct is trying to make us feel.

"Now, here's some examples and some games you can do so you can see how this works and get some experience at actually doing it. First, imagine that you just got into your pajamas, and your mom or dad or a friend is trying to get you to go to bed, and you don't want to because you think or feel that as soon as—"

Julia ordered a pause. Alice—Barry's mom—had stolen in the open door while they were focused on the MIU, and although Julia noticed, little Barry didn't. A quick nod told Julia that it was okay, to just carry on. She began going over the material with Barry. He seemed to understand pretty well, but as the cybermom had anticipated, children needed the advantage of experience too ... conditioning. After a few minutes of discussion, Julia judged that Barry was ready to go back to the MIU and try out those examples. But then there was a slight sound from the door, and that broke the mood. Julia turned her head ... and saw Lilly.

"I'm just looking around," Lilly said from the doorway.

Barry's mother turned around to see who it was. "I don't freaking think so!" Alice said angrily.

"Mom!" said Barry, who was happy to see her but scared by her hostility towards the tall new lady that he'd never seen before.

Julia was surprised and alarmed to see Alice and Lilly glaring at each other. She had no idea what had brought that about. "Alice," she intervened, "I think Lilly was just—"

"I'm in charge when it comes to my son," said Alice, "and I do not need you to—"

"What is your problem?" asked Lilly indignantly. "I was just—"

"OUT!" screamed Alice. She closed the door hard, literally forcing the WDA monitor outside.

"Why did you do that?" asked Julia.

"Mom," said Barry as he ran over to his mother. He burrowed his small head into her stomach as he wrapped his arms around her and held on tight.

"Oh ... right!" said Julia, as she finally understood the situation. "I ... forgot."

"That woman has got to learn our rules and live by them," said Alice as she stroked her son's head. "Anybody with the flu or a cold has to be better for three full days before they enter the Kid-Kare center. It's like she doesn't even—"

"Yeah, I forgot she was sick," said Julia. "I guess Lilly didn't know that we had a rule about—"

"It's her business to know, for Christ's sake," grumped Alice. "And even if she didn't know, it doesn't take a genius to figure it out. I mean—"

"Barry," interrupted Julia, "let's tell your mom about all those exciting things we learned on the Net. We learned two brand new tricks today," she said directly to Alice.

"Yeah," said Barry proudly as his mother pried his hands off her butt. "We learned two good tricks," he said.

Chapter 18

MURDER, HE WROTE

Monday, February 14, 2033—10:00 a.m.

Gilbert Henderson was America's marquee muckraker, the man who had almost single-handedly cranked the WDA's approval rating from an A-plus all the way down to a D-minus, or worse. His place of work was inside his plush Manhattan home, in the second floor front bedroom, to be precise, the room where his famous father had once run his investigative empire—and did so without all the advantages of 21st-century technology. Like many contemporaries of his social class, he placed a high value on antiques, and he felt a special pride in those that represented family. Three walls of his large office were covered with photos—some dating back to the late 19th century—and with awards—those won by his late father, and those he had won himself.

As Gil approached his fifty-sixth birthday, he had three unfulfilled wishes.

He wished his wife would come back to him, but that wasn't going to happen. Truth be told, he'd been a lousy husband. Like Einstein, he frequently said to himself by way of consolation, or explanation.

He wished his friend and long-time secretary, Fiona Bledsoe, was straight, or would at least accept a Valentine's Day card from him in the right spirit. He felt this sadness every February 14 ... tradition.

And finally, he wished his father had lived to witness the investigative coups he had made, the so-called “Henderson Scandals.” True, the crimes that he had unearthed were misdemeanors, really, but catching the WDA in a lie, no matter how trivial, had shaken public confidence, badly. The WDA was, after all, the organization that had restricted the LieDeck to its own use, and held global power on the basis of a self-assigned mandate to police the planet, using the device ... and whatever else it took.

All in all, Gil's life was unhappy, in spite of his successes and celebrity. Part of the problem was that he couldn't seem to stop himself from wishing the impossible. That was a double-edged character flaw, as helpful in his professional pursuits as it was unhelpful in his private life. Still, he had one more unfulfilled wish that did stand some chance of being realized. He hoped that the LieDeck device would be unbanned ... even if it meant the obsolescence of his particular career choice. And even with the great Lester Connolly out of commission for a while, he judged there was a reasonable chance that the LieDeck would soon be unbanned—and he said so just yesterday, again, in his regular column in the New York Times.

Gil lit the fireplace, a daily winter ritual. Then he sat behind his father's old desk and looked at his state-of-the-art MIU. He was ready for another day.

While his reputation was the stuff of legend at every journalism school in the world, it was always in need of furtherance, never far from danger. Peaks and valleys, he thought, just like Dad. Indeed, his father's career had survived several assassination attempts by governments and competitors. That was the trouble with investigative work in the media. It wasn't like politics, where you had a defined term of office, some corporate backers and a party structure to depend upon and lean on. Gil's constituency was the people at large, and they loved him to pieces as long as he was on a winning streak. Lose one, and they were as fickle as sports fans. “T'row da bum out,” he kept hearing in his dreams.

The screen of Gil's MIU was dark. He leafed through a stack of letters, about twenty, an average Monday haul. For the past fifteen years, ever since the SuperNet was launched by the WDA, most people simply faced their tips to him. Now, however, with widespread doubts and fears associated with the world body, many people were putting pen to paper again, using the “snail mail,” the hard mail. It wasn't actually known that the WDA could eavesdrop on civilians through the lenses and microphones of MIUs, but it was believed by many, suspected by most, and feared by all. And scariest of all was the suspicion, also held by many, that the WDA could do this illegal spying through MIUs even when one's MIU was turned off! And all this global doubt was born of Gil Henderson's labors—now referred to inclusively as the Henderson Scandals—upper case “H” and upper case “S.” Gilbert Henderson was to the WDA what Woodward, Bernstein and Deep Throat were to Richard Nixon, except his Nixon wouldn't even blush, let alone quit in disgrace. And so it was with a certain natural tension that he approached this daily snail-mail routine.

The first vetting resulted in three letters being tossed aside on the desk, still sealed. Gil never opened any letter that had no return address. That was policy at the New York Times. And besides, Gil knew that Fiona would read them, and she'd let him know if she found anything juicy. It was a ridiculous way to proceed, but he could not risk getting caught in a lie, especially on a matter of company policy. His editor at the Times was a classy man, an intellectual with solid brass balls, but ... well, one never knew who could be “turned” these days, or what all was being recorded by the WDA, for later LieDeck-verification.

The letters that he did open were briefly scanned, and deemed quite unworthy of his personal or immediate attention. He handed the whole lot to Fiona, including the three he hadn't opened. She took them with her as she stepped briskly from the office. A minute later, just as Gil was getting geared up to polish off his column for tomorrow's Netnews, Fiona returned, tossing an opened envelope on his desk.

“You forgot one,” she said as she walked back out of his office.

Gil stared at the envelope. It now had a return address, written in Fiona's distinctive, ultra-neat hand. The letter had to be from “Eyeball,” the unknown source who had been behind most of Gil's biggest, career-making exposés. “Thanks Fiona,” he said casually. “Sorry,” he added as she departed, just in case he was being observed by the WDA.

Once he was alone again, Gil withdrew a single hand-written page from the envelope, wondering what new revelation he'd find inside, what could be so important as to warrant this risk. He was sure this mysterious source had to be inside the WDA, possibly even high up in the WDA. He had deduced long ago that the occasional “Eyeball” missives he had been receiving over the years could only have come from someone who had the use of a LieDeck, and no one doubted that every LieDeck in the world was possessed by the WDA. And if his source was in the WDA ... well, misuse of a LieDeck was a career-smasher and a long jail term, minimum. Under world law, the WDA could even apply the death penalty for this offense in cases where the consequences of the crime were serious. That was the law, the WDA's law, even if it had never come to that because no agent was foolish enough to do it. Except for my guy, thought Gil, wondering yet again if his “guy” was indeed an agent.

Gil read the handwritten note slowly, digesting every word:

Dear Gil:

Today, Tuesday, February 8, 2033, Lester Connolly lost his left arm to necrotizing fasciitis, and he may yet die. Sheena Kalhoun knew the exact nature of his illness at least 20 minutes before he was admitted to hospital and at least 40 minutes before it was diagnosed! For this to be, one is led to the inescapable conclusion that Lester Connolly's disease was no accident of nature, and that Sheena Kalhoun, or someone else inside the WDA, is guilty of attempted murder. If this is so, there must have been a conspiracy. It's probably not possible to pin this on Kalhoun or the WDA, but I hope you give it a try. Good luck.

Eyeball

As always, you must destroy this letter and envelope immediately.

Holy Christ, thought Gil. There's no way I can confirm that!

Lester Connolly was one of the gutsiest human beings Gil had ever known. He was the tireless campaigner who had founded the U.S. LieDeck Unbanning Committee, or “USLUC,” as it was more usually called. He was the first prominent American voice to vigorously challenge the WDA to lift the global ban on civilian use of the LieDeck. He had been a thorn in the side of the WDA for several years, pecking away at their feeble excuses, artfully suggesting that they had something to hide without ever making a direct accusation. His was a voice in the wilderness at first, but now, the WDA's own opinion polls were saying that seventy-three percent of civilians agreed with Lester Connolly. In fact the momentum behind his bold crusade was growing internationally, not just because of the merits of his plan, but because of the passion he was able to generate in those who caught him in full rhetorical flight. He was mesmerizing ... and now, he was recovering from a brush with death, and missing an arm.

The WDA must be going absolutely crazy that he survived, thought Gil. And ... this thought was painful in the extreme ... and now they probably want and need to finish him off! They always finish what they start.

Gil walked over to the fireplace. After reading the letter again, word for word, with his back squarely to his MIU, he made permanent mental notes of the date it was sent and the figures therein. Then he squatted down and surreptitiously placed the note and the envelope in between two spitting logs. He

watched them flare up and turn to ash. “What a load of crap,” he said, for the benefit of the WDA. Thanks, old friend, he said in his mind. You're probably right about my chances, but it's best that I know about this anyway.

Eyeball had been a source of blockbuster information for sixteen years. His scrawled letters were few, but they had all been proven right—at least those that had led to closure. Some things I can't fix, thought Gil. But I've got to try to save Lester.

He went into his bedroom, where there was no MIU to spy on him, and where he kept his father's old Macintosh SE. There, he began constructing a short note on the antique computer, redoing it time after time. When he finally got it exactly right, he wrote it out on a piece of paper and erased all memory of the work he'd done from the hard drive. Then he sealed the hand-written note in an envelope, wrote “Jimmy Ball” on the outside, and put it in his jacket pocket. He walked out of the bedroom, through his office, on to the outer office, and handed the sealed note to Fiona, with only a nod. She knew what to do. After she left, he sat back down at his MIU and wrote an extremely carefully worded column about the arguably suspicious nature of Lester Connolly's untimely illness.

Minutes later, Fiona Bledsoe got on a subway train with the printed message in her pocket, a message that absolutely could not be sent electronically from Gil's MIU. Half an hour later, it was handed to Gil's close friend, Herb Pringle, the chairman of Pringle Polling, in his office. Minutes after that, Herb Pringle's image appeared on the Netscreen of an MIU at V-Insight, the aggressively assertive polling outfit owned and operated by the Victor-E clan up in Québec. Pringle spoke Gil's words as if they were his own, and made no effort to start diplomatically or exit gracefully. He just said his piece, forcefully, then blanked himself off the Net.

Jimmy Ball ran the operations of V-Insight. The corporation that he headed was in conflict with Pringle Polling over a subcontracting job that went sour back in 2032, a conflict that was certain to end up in bitter litigation. The message from Herb Pringle seemed to relate to that conflict ... but it makes no sense at all, Jimmy thought. He put this issue aside and returned to his other work.

Hours later, when he was reviewing his day and couldn't avoid getting back to that strange message, he noticed that Annette's name was included in the words that Pringle had spoken. Oh jeeze! he thought. He commanded his MIU to create a written version of Pringle's words on an old-fashioned diskette, in an ancient program called “Microsoft Word 4.” He then de-archived Pringle's message from his MIU and sent the diskette to Annette Blais by way of a live messenger, just as he had been instructed to do whenever he got any strange message that had her name in it. I wonder if I'll ever know what that was all about? he asked himself. I hope Annette doesn't notice that I missed the signal at first, when I reviewed the thing. She hates stupid delays.

Chapter 19

FROSTY RECEPTION

Monday, February 14, 2033—4:30 p.m.

Lilly was feeling quite a bit better now, although she figured it would still be a few days before her cold was gone for good. She felt well enough to get on with her LieDeck-verification of the “hermit of the lodge,” so she got dressed up in the warmest things she had that didn't make her look like a man ... no sense eliminating the possibility that a glimpse of my endless legs might be just the incentive needed to loosen the man up.

Just before she left the apartment, her MIU signaled an incoming face. She let the machine archive it, and then ran the thing. It was a Bobby Fox, the head of the Kid-Kare center, reminding her that she was not to be in there until she was over her cold for three full days. Fuck you, she said in her mind. She called him back immediately—he wasn't answering, and her clandestine view of his office showed that he actually wasn't there ... unless he's hiding from the lens. She left him a short archived face—"Sorry; it was my mistake; it won't happen again"—and closed down her MIU. It was indeed her fault, and it wouldn't happen again, but as for being sorry ... well, it's a damned good thing they don't have LieDecks, she thought as she left the room and locked the door.

When she got out to the front of the E-tery, she found a small problem with her new car. The block heater was plugged in, but not all the way in. Maybe Lars meant to do it, she thought. But ... he wants to get me in bed—me and every other woman on Earth—so maybe he did it right and somebody else came along and loosened it? Lilly figured that was the most likely explanation, but as she unplugged the cord the rest of the way, she decided not to make an issue of this. It wasn't a crime, after all. It was a nasty prank at worst, and if she made a fuss ... it's just not worth it.

Lilly got in her brand new Aura and turned the key. The engine started, although not without complaining. When she asked for heat, the fan motor whined as if to scold her for the ice crystals that had formed inside. She left everything running while she got out and gave the windows a scrub with the plastic scraper that had been left for her on the front passenger seat. After giving the front windscreen and the side windows a cursory going over, she ducked back inside quickly—she was still grossly under-dressed for this hostile weather—and then she backed the vehicle out. Her intention was to turn east on Highway 148, but when she checked right and left for traffic, she wished she had been a lot more diligent in scraping the frost off the side windows. She'd never used an ice scraper before this day—she'd never had to—and it had seemed the frost was sort of “welded” onto the glass. It was hard to scrape it off successfully, so she did a lousy job of it, and now had to stop the car, get out, and do it again, proper this time. With the job done at least better than before, she got back in her new car, looked east and west, and said “good enough.” She eased the transmission back into gear and pressed the accelerator.

By this time, the rear defog had completely cleared the window at the back. I wonder why they don't put that feature on all the windows? Truth is, they probably did, and some WDA flunky probably forgot to ask what that option was, or whether it would be needed in Québec.

“Shawville 1, Quyon 17,” the sign read. Kilometers, she reminded herself, not miles. She checked the speedometer, and it had both systems of measurement. She eased onto the road, checked all mirrors for traffic, and adjusted the seat back ... as far as it could go, actually. She let her mind backtrack to a brief encounter she'd had over the Net with Davie Brown, the clan's snitch. After yacking away about the local gossip, he'd put on a rather conspiratorial visage, and told her what was surely an often-repeated regional joke: “Shawville is so small that if you tell a lie, it comes back as the truth.” This Davie fellow wasn't as helpful as Lilly had hoped. She felt she had better concentrate on her driving.

The highway had been plowed, but it was still perhaps ninety percent covered with packed snow—in some places, one hundred percent. The dirty white crust was less than a quarter-inch deep, but that was enough to conceal the centerline most of the time. Her bedroom window faced the highway, and while she'd been recuperating from the cold, she'd heard and seen the huge government trucks rumble by, and she had talked to one of her Florence Nightingales about that whole deal.

The sand was apparently mixed three-to-one with salt—otherwise the sand would freeze into a useless block. The trucks had a big, two-sectioned plow on the front; the first angled and curved blade covered an entire lane, the second covered the shoulder of the road, and the truck went so fast the snow flew off the end of the second blade onto great white banks far out beyond the shoulder. Behind the cab was a

hopper for the sand mixture, and a whirling circular device at the back left which threw the grit across the entire road. From the pattern of the sand, Lilly could get a general notion of where the pavement ended and the shoulder began. She had never driven in such tricky conditions, so she resolved to take it easy, and to hell with anybody held up behind her.

A few miles later, the engine had heated up sufficiently to produce a gale of hot air, enough to melt the remaining frost from the windshield, and from the side windows too. Lilly found the nervous tension flowing out of her. She took off her right glove, inserted her Sniffer into the angled slot situated on the dash, where its camera lens would catch a driver's image, and watched out of the corner of her eye as the small screen lit up.

"Netlink with Patriot Security office at the Whiteside estate, north of Quyon, Netsite is on file," she ordered.

"Inspector Bird," said a surprisingly old face on her tiny screen. "You're ... Captain Petrosian?" he asked.

Who the hell do you think? she didn't say—her I.D. was written on the man's screen, after all. "Yes," she said politely. "I'm on my way to LieDeck-verify Victor Helliwell at the lodge. I'll be at the manor gate in about fifteen minutes. Mr. Helliwell is not to be told that I'm coming."

"One moment please," said the Patriot Inspector as he killed the audio-visual export feed from his MIU.

I hate it when they do that, thought Lilly. There should be an "anti-hold" function on these things. She would have overridden the "hold" if she'd been at an MIU, but Sniffers were limited in this way.

The sun was close to setting in the southwest, behind a heavily overcast sky, and the thinning light didn't help Lilly's effort to adapt to driving in these demanding conditions. A transport truck overtook her, and passed at a speed that seemed clearly unsafe. Grains of sand—what seemed like bits of gravel—were picked up by his tires, and Lilly suffered a severe jolt of adrenalin as the unintended projectiles noisily pelted her new car. "God damn asshole," she muttered as she lifted her foot off the gas pedal and fought with the steering wheel to counter the slight wavering caused by the truck's white, swirling wake.

There wasn't much more than a light breeze outside, but diaphanous waves of loose crystals blew across the highway, shifting slowly in front of her. The wispy snow also billowed up behind the car, making it impossible to see anything in the rearview mirror. The overall effect was strangely hypnotic, and she wondered whimsically if this was the same planet she'd been living on for the last thirty years. Where's global warming when I need it?

In the dull gray distance she could see a single high-beam headlight approaching ... and bouncing around rather a lot, she worried. Moreover, the light seemed to be to the right of the road, to her right. She backed off the gas pedal again, unsure of what she was really seeing. Seconds later, when the light got closer, she realized it was a snowmobiler who was barreling up the road shoulder on her side, against oncoming traffic. The driver seemed oblivious to any danger as they passed within a few feet of each other—he didn't seem to slow down at all. "Asshole number two," she snapped.

"I beg your pardon?!" said a new voice from the dashboard-mounted Sniffer.

Lilly glanced over and recognized Michael Whiteside, Julia's brother, the president of Whiteside Tech. "Not you, Mr. Whiteside," said Lilly, with an awkward laugh. "Sorry, I was just complaining to the cosmos about a snowmobiler that roared by me on my side, on the shoulder."

"I'd appreciate it if you could stop off at the house for a few minutes before you drive on to the lodge," said Michael, a bit formally. "There's a few—"

"Sorry again," said Lilly. "I shouldn't be out there for more than an hour. With your permission, I'd like to suggest—"

"On your way back from the lodge, then," interrupted Michael.

"Of course," she said. "I should—"

"Thank you," Michael cut in. "Net, down, now."

He's used to getting his own way, Lilly said to herself. I wonder how his son Randy is doing with his putting? She wished she were out on the links in Florida, with "good old Ed."

Chapter 20

REALITY COORDINATES

Monday, February 14, 2033—5:00 p.m.

Victor Helliwell had lost his midday virtual chess game with Noel, his cook, a game he had munched on as he lunched, alone. The score to date—they had played a game almost every day since the Revolution—was 3,301 games to 2,978, in Victor's favor. He'll never catch up to me now, Victor thought.

He couldn't remember what he'd done after that game, other than sleep. Now, he stood at the large picture window on the upper level of the lodge, staring at the far shore of Wilson Lake, at the dormant strip of brown that was sandwiched between a bumpy white lake and a suspended gray sky. It was only 5:00 p.m., but darkness would fall on Wilson Lake soon, and quickly. Overlaid onto the windless world outside, he saw a reflection hovering in the glass, its arms folded, staring back ... like a bored Merlin, he mused, but without the pointy hat.

When Victor had moved into the Whitesides' lodge "temporarily" ... jeeze, that was nineteen years ago, he thought ... he was just beginning to go bald. Now his forehead traveled up, over and down. A three-inch horseshoe of white hair ran from ear to ear, dipping as it went round the rear, and he had let this stingy crop grow to his waist. With a black wig on, my head would look sort of like a miniature Karl Marx, he thought as he deliberately de-focused his eyes from a dreary Québec winter and caught the odd shape of his broom-like beard in the window. Fool, he added to that thought as he remembered the millions of shriveled-up souls who had dined on raw fear for entire lifetimes under the pitiless religion of communism. Marx should have shut his fucking pie-hole, like me.

Victor felt like talking. Truth be told, he always felt like talking, sometimes rather desperately. As usual, however, he ended up re-committing to the vow of silence he had taken in 2014, the day that Bucharest was popped by a miniature sun ... with a fucking hammer and sickle painted on it, he said to himself. Of course that "pop" was no more insane than the all-American mini-sun that had vaporized Leningrad a bit less than half an hour later that same grotesque day. It was a Tuesday when all that stuff happened, he remembered with a gastric shudder. That city was St. Petersburg before, he reviewed in his mind, from 1991 to 2012, between the two Cold Wars, and Leningrad from 1917 to 1991, and Petrograd somewhere in there before it was Leningrad, and St. Petersburg before that, since ... He didn't know since when, exactly, nor did he care much—he had reviewed that situation many times on the Net, and had tired of trying to keep it straight in his aging mind. It didn't need a name any more. It was radioactive rubble now ... and for the next thousand years, he guessed. Or forever.

As the world slowly became blacker, his image was becoming increasingly sharp ... like a twentieth-century negative curing in a bath of silver nitrate, before photography and everything else went digital. He was almost surprised to see that he was wearing the paisley silk caftan again, the green and yellow one that Winnie Jopps had left behind ... that was almost two decades ago ... and had never dared to ask for since. The lodge had computer-controlled electric heat—the fireplaces were only for show—and Victor loved wearing that caftan, with only his skin beneath. Sometimes it seemed like lovely Winnie Jopps was still in it with him, and smelling of those fruit-flavored soaps that she fancied. I wonder if Patriot ever told her I wear the thing? No matter.

It ravaged his gut whenever a bird mistook reflection for reality, crashed into his bay window and fell to the ground, convulsing, but he was almost immune to the feelings of other people, including Winnie ... well, perhaps especially Winnie. It's ... comfortable, he reminded himself internally as he reached inside the caftan to wipe out an itch on his chest. In fact, it's ... sexy, not that I'll ever get laid again—that's if you don't count my trusty old hand ... or wet dreams.

He still dreamt about women, about Winnie, mostly, but about other women as well, women he had known, women he would like to have known, fictional women—and the occasional teenaged pixie. It bothered him whenever that happened—the dreams and fantasies he had about barely-breasted gymnasts. There were thousands of Evolutionary clans that celebrated all things sexual, of course, and millions of women and men doing every imaginable depravity on the Net, but Victor's moral code was still rooted in the last century, burned into him by well-meaning Jesus-worshippers. I guess I sort of killed God with my invention, he mused. For better or worse, he added flippantly. No, for better, he reassured himself ... if you don't count all those Godists who jumped off of buildings and ate bullets when they found out their faith was bogus.

The idea of God sloshed around in his mind. He found it passing strange that the job of shedding a myth had proven to be so difficult and painful, and yet the task of creating a myth had always been so easy and natural for the human race. Well, for Human Twos, anyway, he said to himself. It ought to be the other way around. They ought to thank me. They begged for a mirage, and I gave them water.

His thoughts turned to those flaky monks across the Ottawa River, in Carp, Ontario ... Canada, really ... those Jesus-Eers that Mr. Wu told me about years ago. He shook his head and winced inwardly at the whole Mr. Wu connection. That quiet man handled all of Victor's money, and did it very well, and he was okay, Victor figured, as far as Human Twos went, but ... he keeps interfering with my seclusion for stupid reasons. Oddly, he remembered the one-way call on the Net years ago in which Mr. Wu had first told him that the Jesus-Eers thought that he—Victor—was the Second Coming of Christ, and that they were sort of ... well, they were worshipping him! And he remembered another one-sided Netcall from Mr. Wu, a year or two ago, asking that he give his doctor a semen sample! What the hell was that all about? he wondered then, and again now. And why did I do it? But Victor also knew that it was entirely possible he had been given perfectly sound reasons why he should know or do these things, and had now forgotten. That was part of the price he had to pay for being a total recluse. His mind was as astute as ever, he figured ... but warped, somehow.

Victor also had dreams about the dead, about all those who had died—by their own hand or otherwise—because of his invention, because of him. They gawked awkwardly at him with melting eyes from the smoldering waste of two great former cities. They cursed his name in a hundred languages as they sailed out from high-rise apartments. They wept for him in parked automobiles as carbon monoxide swam the red rivulets to their waiting brains. They tried diligently not to chip their teeth as they shoved rifle barrels into their own uvulas and pushed the triggers with trembling thumbs. They screamed pitifully for his damnation as they unfastened safety belts and floored gas pedals and steered their cars into the grills of oncoming lumber-trucks. They tensed their faces and clenched their fists as dissonant whistles

tried to frighten them into lifting their wet necks from cold railway tracks.

These nightmares always ended in heart-stopping awakenings, shrieks, and very hard breathing—shivering sweats and withering remorse. Sleep had become Victor's nightly punishment for having tried to rid his planet of illusion, for having invented the LieDeck, the price he had to pay for not taking the easy way out himself. No morning went by that he didn't question whether he could afford this never-ending and self-inflicted emotional blackmail. They're only feelings, he always told himself, and I could change how I feel in a minute, but then I wouldn't be real any more. I'd be ... I'd be...

He could never quite finish that sentence. What do you become when you adopt fake reality coordinates in order to feel good? A riddle, never to be solved, or solved only on pain of depression? A delusional nutcase, beyond the reach of the best psychiatrist or the latest miracle drug? A Christian?

Death had become so small for Human Twos, so ordinary. Pizza or Mexican? Golf or tennis? Wine or pot? Live or die? Raise, call, check or fold? Heads or tails? A year or so after the 2014 LieDeck Revolution, the average life span of an Upper American citizen had dropped significantly, this for the first time since records had been kept, and for both genders—and all because of the soaring Human Two suicide rate, which was ... my fault, thought Victor.

He threw his mind back to a day in the lovely spring of 2014, just before the “Last Holocaust,” as they called it now, when a much younger Michael Whiteside had mouthed off at him. “I'm not so sure the world can handle any more of your fucking discoveries, Mister Helliwell,” he had shouted, or approximately those words. As Victor recalled the day, he had been trying to explain his radical analysis of human consciousness evolution to Michael and his then-girlfriend, Becky, just as the LieDeck Revolution was turning the world into an out-of-control asylum ... and Michael's temper had exploded.

In the nineteen years since, Victor had thought about that brief outburst often. That incident had played a major role in his spontaneous decision to block out the world, a decision he'd made only days later, hours after the Last Holocaust. He'd found other and better reasons for his decision since that insane time, but even though Michael was only a teenager back then, in the heat of an emotional meltdown, he got it approximately right.

Human Twos can't cope with any more reality, Victor said to himself. They couldn't cope with the LieDeck in 2014, and they can't even cope with the sliver of reality that remains now that the LieDeck is banned. Any more reality, and the man-made suns will catapult civilization into another nuclear hissy-fit.

It seemed to Victor that mental health depended on having a steady and sufficient diet of myth and self-deception ... for Human Two, he specified in his mind. He took some solace in the fact that most Evolutionary clan networks were doing what they could to get beyond that pathetic equation by trying to achieve what he had termed “Human Three Consciousness.” To their credit, they had gotten bits and pieces right, sort of. But without the benefit of a LieDeck to verify things—well, it was almost impossible to sort through the interference, the static. It was like sailing on the high seas without a sextant ... and with your eyelids superglued shut, your eardrums perforated, your lips sewn together, your hands tied behind the back and a hole in the keel, he considered. But they can't go back to the old world any more than they can cope with a safe landing in the new world. I've got to let them sink, he told himself ... or swim, he supposed. He wasn't so sure that the former option wasn't the better one for the world.

He hated people who predicted the future and dismissed scenarios that were unlikely but still mathematically possible. He hated them as much as he hated those smug bastards who insisted on second-guessing the past. No one had the right to say what would ensue if this or that event transpired, and as Victor had helped to prove, no one had that ability, either. The LieDeck Revolution hadn't turned out the way anyone had expected or hoped. Of course I could have been right, he thought. And I still

could be, theoretically.

It was virtually nighttime now, even before the dinner hour, and the hermit noticed in the window that the tables had turned. His reflection was almost as clear as it would be in a smoked mirror. He had to strain to see anything outside, had to force himself to ignore the backwards reality of his ghostly twin, who was afflicted with those strange left-right reversals that so bedevil self-perception ... and introspection, he thought ... unless that's the same thing.

His mind floated back to last October, when the far shore of Wilson Lake had showed a whole other face. For a short while, back then, he used to rise at daybreak and watch the place swing into action. The air was so still at that hour, and mist would just sort of hang over the water, motionless. The great log lodge faced to the west, a clever decision made generations ago by the late Randall Whiteside's grandfather. The sun therefore rose from behind the hills behind the lodge, and whittled away at the white suspension until the land opposite wiggled into view, a mile away. Victor used to stand on the deck, just ten feet in front of where he was standing right now, and what emerged from the fog was well worth getting up for, well worth setting the alarm for.

He remembered how the conifers stood out in their permanent green, simply refusing to participate, trying so hard to be the same color as everybody else ... as everybody else used to be, anyway. The deciduous guys, well, they performed a spectacular death dance, a hibernation tango. They stop producing chlorophyll in ... early September, he guessed, and gradually turned into painted ladies before dropping their coats to the forest floor to face the gales of winter naked.

I wonder why they don't all turn the same color? Some were almost fire engine red, but not too many. There were two or three distinguishable shades of red, and as many of orange, and of yellow ... and of green, as they turn. He didn't want to know the scientific reason why the colors varied so much from tree to tree, or why some trees wore crowns of a hue different from their bodies, or why some had cores of lime green that graduated to full red or yellow or orange at the finger ends. It was enough, far more than enough, to enjoy, to drink in the pointless beauty of it, and to wonder at how that shameless spray of autumn leaves somehow managed to make the sky seem bluer than normal.

I wonder if they think? he mused. It's ... possible. They probably feel. The leaves of some houseplants and some outdoors flowers—sunflowers, for instance—will turn to face the sun as it passes overhead, or as we rotate beneath. Venus flytraps chomp down when a bug lands on them. I wonder how Darwin would explain how they learned to shut down chlorophyll production. Even single-celled animals move and respond to their immediate environment, fleeing danger, taking in nutrients, even if they were other living beings ... especially if they were other living beings. Surely trees have some primitive brand of consciousness, a kind of awareness of the world. Maybe they enjoy growing, producing seeds, watching the next generation struggle to survive and mature? I wonder if they feel wind and rain, or wince when the wolf pees on their feet? I wonder how they know the elements are planning to send them into deep-freeze? I wonder if our bodies anticipate reversals of fortune? I wonder if I should have one last, glorious fling before I...

Winter eventually yielded to a spring runoff, renewal, a fresh crop of leaves, another time of high suns and warm baths from the sky. Death held no such promise. All the more reason to turn color and dazzle the human race one last time, Victor figured ... if that's what I'm doing, thinking of doing. Life's too short. I'd need ... he contemplated the road ahead, its complexity, its difficulty, the powerhouse U-turn he was thinking of proposing. I'd need a hundred more years anyway, unless there is a God after all, and He's inclined to lend a hand, or a paw, or whatever He's got. Or She, he supposed. Maybe I'm a mere pawn in some secret cosmological chess match, or a knight, or a bishop, or a messiah ... the Messiah! Wouldn't that be a lark, to die only to find out that I was Jesus number two, the Second Coming, and

didn't even know it!

Christ! he thought absently, smilingly—meaning the curse, nothing more. It's almost impossible to shed the myths of youth, especially when the trees go wonky in the fall.

Victor looked back at his life, a life that was now drawing to a close. Childhood was a time of joy for most kids, no matter what their circumstances, but it was a period of time that the eventual adult was pre-programmed to forget. He could remember lots of verbal battles and slap-fests with other little boys, but he had no recollection of what they were about. They weren't about the issue of the moment anyway, he realized. They were about bodily juices. They were merely programmed training sessions for the anticipated mortal combat of an adulthood that would be passed in a jungle, fending off dangerous predators and capturing live prey with only his stubby teeth and his soft little hands.

He remembered a red tricycle with a black rubber seat, and red, white and blue tassels hanging from the ends of chrome handlebars. There were countless squeals of glee and bouts of debilitating laughter in his youth, but their causes were equally lost in the fogs of time. They weren't about what they were ostensibly about either; just his internal “reward juices” reminding him of the stunning prizes that may be won by executing adaptive adult behaviors with excellence.

His teenage years were eminently forgettable. He got through high school by being smart, not by working hard. His world revolved around the little head more than the big one. Life was not about graduating—it was about girls. He remembered striding into a Saturday night party in somebody's parents' rec-room and instantly losing all interest in philosophical notions. Such frivolities bowed to the superior and prior demands of his chemical programming. His eyes would scan the female population, always from left to right, as it was with reading, and his internal calculator would instantly rack up verdict after verdict: “Would fuck, wouldn't fuck, would fuck, wouldn't fuck...” He could even remember the names of some of the girls he had lusted after, but not the names of those few he had managed to feel up. That's strange, and destined never to be sorted out. He had even lost the name of the pimply grade-tenner he'd actually nailed, when he was in grade twelve. Laura ... Lisa ... he tried again, but it was gone.

University was about beer and science ... and girls who didn't put up such a fuss, if only because the earning potential of a science degree was almost as attractive as a square jaw. And when his Master's certificate was safely entombed in a cardboard tube, he felt that life was finally ready to start, in earnest. Then he'd met George Cluff and joined his small American electronics company as junior partner, where he helped develop the Cluff Voice Analyzer, the unreliable forerunner of the LieDeck, and...

That's when my life got weird, he thought, as he watched nothing change outside the window, except the lighting. George Cluff was killed in a plane crash. Murdered, Victor said to himself. That was the turning point. If I'd have just gone out and gotten another damn job and left all that lie detector stuff behind, everything would be different today ... everything.

Now, with a healthy tumor growing like a weed in his brain, it seemed as if his life had unfolded according to a plan over which he had no control, a design not of his own making. But maybe all those seemingly random yanks on the steering wheel were actually choices I made, he reconsidered. Maybe I just made bad choices. Or maybe I made smart choices, brilliant choices, courageous choices! Certainly that's what I felt at the time ... thought at the time ... most of the time. At least back then I could assume that what I felt and thought were the true product of my instinct and my rational mind. Now ... well, who knows? Maybe my sense of myself is nothing more than the product of a lump of cancer. I'm in no shape to be making any decisions, but when death looms, perspective changes. Jeeze, I could commit a murder and not have to pay for it, he realized. So ... who should I shoot?

He smiled inwardly at this very foolish line of thought ... this malignant feeling. Far too many had died

already. The last inning in a losing game was a time for manic home-run slashes with the bat, not a time for whining or tears. What he'd done in the past, he'd done in the name of life, never mind that his legacy was one of ... well, that's for history to judge.

Chapter 21

MINUTES OF SILENCE

Monday, February 14, 2033—5:15 p.m.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door leading to the hallway and stairs, a timid knock, but a knock all the same. Three knocks, actually ... like I'm not likely to hear the first two, Victor grumbled to himself. It isn't Noel. He knows to knock only once, and to not knock at all unless it's mealtime. It must be someone who doesn't know me, somebody who shouldn't be knocking at my door at all, someone uninvited, unwelcome, someone who doesn't give a sweet shit about my rules, my comfort levels, my lifestyle, my vow.

"Fuck off," he shouted, without moving a limb, or even an eyebrow. "Whoever you are," he added loudly for good measure. Jesus, he thought, those are the first words I've spoken out loud on purpose in about nineteen years. "What the fuck do you want?" he bellowed, still without turning from the arms-folded pose at his gaze-onto-the-Earth spot.

In the window's reflection, he saw the door open. A very tall woman in a dark skirt and jacket walked in and closed the door ... rather roughly for such a simple task ... and then just stood there, legs apart, arms folded, seeming to mimic his posture.

He felt his instinct soar. He wanted to hit something, to hurt something, someone ... her. He wanted to hurt his fist doing it. He wanted to watch her drop heavily to the floor; he wanted to inflict emotion; he wanted to balance the ledger ... payback time! He smiled then ... broadly. It was comical, feeling this hostility, being a Human Two, almost being a Human One. There was nothing to avenge, no insult, no blow to the ego or the body—only a petty infraction of the rules, a breach, albeit flagrant, of a ridiculous regulation he had made up himself ... and which wouldn't matter a row of pins if I wasn't so fucking rich.

Snow wouldn't waltz right in like that, he thought. It stops at the glass, alights quietly on shingles. Wind wouldn't do that either. Nor would a tree, a goat or even a mosquito.

That's the best thing about winter, he remembered someone saying maybe forty years ago. No fucking mosquitoes. But they'll be back in a few months ... the little bastards. He resolved again to have the upper deck screened in, but then he recalled his reasons for not having done so in years past. It made life interesting ... not knowing when the next sting would occur, or where on his body it would occur. Sometimes in the summer he would sit out on the deck and just take it for five or ten minutes, after which he would explode in a grunting rage, slapping himself wildly in a berserk, Whirling Dervish routine, knowing far too intensely that he was still alive ... for better or worse. "I feel, therefore I am," he said quietly, followed by a minor chuckle at the sound of his long-lost voice. It was ... how to describe it? "Airy, when I don't shout," he said aloud. Like a violin, he thought.

"I ... beg your pardon?" said a voice behind him.

Oh yeah, he said to himself as he glanced at the dark window at the lengthy slip of a woman who was still standing there ... after all that time. He had no firm notion of how much time had elapsed since the intrusion, since he'd drifted off ... and cared not at all. "You are in my space," he said in a monotone.

“State your business and then leave.” He waited a few seconds, marveling at what a son-of-a-bitch he had become in his old age. “Please,” he added, with more authority than courtesy.

"One," came the surprisingly low voice, "I'm with the WDA, as I'm sure you have guessed. Two, I'm a human being, and I'd appreciate it greatly if you would treat me as such. Three, I'm going to LieDeck-verify you. And four, I've decided that I'm going to let myself care about you. That's not to say respect you or like you, and I'm certainly not going to get tingly with you, but I am going to get inside your head, and find out what's in your heart, and ... well ... care ... like I said ... not that it matters."

Lilly waited a few seconds, to let things settle in, but the short balding man with the long white hair and yellow-green caftan didn't budge. She found herself wondering why the room was so hot, but she quickly aimed her mind back at the immediate task, as she'd been trained to do.

"I don't have to give a damn, you know," she continued. "However, I am entitled to LieDeck-verify you, and I guess I'll use whatever means it takes to get you to cooperate. We've given you a free ride for nineteen years because of your stature, and because you never talked to anybody or did anything anyway. But ... that's over now, so unless you make it easy on both of us, I'll have to make it hard on you. Can we start now ... please?"

No one had talked to him like that for ... well, like she said, nineteen years. Of course no one had talked to him in any other way either, except for Mr. Wu and Doctor ... what was his ... Valcourt, he remembered, surprising himself. He of the awful prognosis ... he of the lamenting eyes ... he with the baddest news there is for the instinct, the exact thing that feelings fear most, the end of the song, the "point final," as they say in French.

"It seems to me most strange that men should fear that death, an inevitable end, will come when it will come," he said, still facing the window, motionless. "Ol' Willy didn't know the first fucking thing about death, or life, to say something so unbelievably stupid. There's nothing even remotely strange about that."

"I ... heard," said Lilly, smiling internally at his silly nickname for the Bard, William Shakespeare. "So you're ... scared?"

Those nosey WDA fuckers know everything, he thought. It wasn't that she had no right to know; just that he felt no obligation to like the status quo, or anything else. "Of course I'm scared," he huffed. "So what?"

"Like I told you," said Lilly. "I made a decision to let myself ... care."

"Come back in ten minutes," said Victor. For reasons unknown, his mast was up, and that was embarrassing in a paisley caftan. It shouldn't be up, he thought. It never goes up like that for the Netsex women I watch from time to time.

The door closed, this time with an unobtrusive "click." The "hermit of the lodge" was no more, partly because the WDA had found out that he was dying and decided to press its advantage while there was still time, partly because Victor had to deal with death, and felt ... thought, he corrected himself ... that he should spit out what he had to say while he still could. Let the leaves turn, he advised himself. Let the games begin.

He wasn't terribly surprised when he spoke those first few words, but he did wish, for history's sake, that his ice-breaking efforts hadn't been "Fuck off" and "What the fuck do you want?" Not quite the same cachet as "One small step for a man," he considered as he walked to his bedroom, or whatever Buzz Aldrin said ... or was it Neil Armstrong? He had been thinking of ending his silence ever since he got the bad news from Dr. Valcourt. Now he'd done it. Big deal!

He shed the silk robe, the only thing he had on, and was not pleased at what he saw in the full-length mirror. I gotta lose some weight, he thought—and then he chuckled at the wasting-away process that was coming ... that had already begun. At least I'm no longer aroused by Lady Beanstalk. Did she say her name? He couldn't recall. If she did, I forget, he knew. And if she didn't, she was rude, and if she was rude, that was because ... I was rude. Humph!

He put on white cotton underwear, green socks, brown pants—his jeans hadn't fit over his “one-pack” gut since the Revolution, and he'd neglected to order another bigger pair. Then he put on a red and yellow checkered flannel shirt, and gray suede shoes—new ... never before worn. Just to round out the ensemble, he threw on his old black bowling jacket from his taxi-driving days. As he pulled his long hair out from under the collar of his jacket, he rolled his eyes at the unfine figure of a dying old fool he cut in the mirror. “Live hard, die young, make a good-looking corpse,” he remembered a college buddy advising during a beer-binge. “The train's sort of out of the station on that one,” he said as he walked out of the bedroom. He was used to feeling the thick carpet under bare feet, and this Mr. Dressup routine seemed as senseless as it was uncomfortable. He turned down the temperature. During winters, he'd kept his microworld at twenty-three degrees Celsius—almost hot—since ... well, since the Revolution. “Come in,” he hollered at the door to the hall.

“My name is Lilly,” the woman said, guessing that Victor knew about and shared the modern disregard for surnames. “Lillian Petrosian,” she added as she closed the door, just in case she'd guessed wrong.

“Drink?” he asked.

“No thanks.”

“Joint?”

“No thanks.”

“Lamb?”

“Pardon?”

“On a shish kebob,” Victor explained. “A lamb kebob. Noel, the cook here, he does this Afghan dish that's absolutely—”

“Thanks, but I'm expected back for supper, and—”

“Net, up, now,” he interrupted the WDA agent. “Link with Noel in the kitchen.” The LieDeck-response in Victor's mind had beeped, but he wasn't going to get into a dumb argument in the opening seconds of this unwanted encounter. “Noel, could we have two of those lamb thingies you make, and a bottle of good red ... and another dining chair if you don't mind, for my guest. Net, down, now.”

“But—” tried Lilly.

“So don't eat it,” he cut in. “Have a seat, uh...”

“Lilly,” she repeated as she walked over to a padded chair. “Petrosian.”

“Victor,” said Victor, pointing to his head, pretending to mock her, mocking himself, really, but at least avoiding a lie about how he hadn't forgotten her name. “Helliwell,” he added, with a stiff finger-poke at his temple.

“I really am sorry to hear about the—uh—you know,” said Lilly as she sat down on an easy chair.

"Put your Sniffer on the side-table and turn the LieDeck switch to the beeper mode," he said. "I know that you're not supposed to use the beeper if you can avoid it, but you and I will get into a dandy conflict if you don't. Agreed?"

Lilly wasn't interested in getting into a wrangle with this obviously difficult man, and her superiors would not make an issue of this procedure, given the importance of the end product. At least she hadn't had to pull any of his teeth to get him to talk. "No problem," she said, as she obliged his request.

"Beep."

"Small problem," she rephrased, with an equally small smile.

"Now, you were saying?" asked Victor.

"About...?"

"How soon they forget!" he wailed. He pulled over the single upright chair from the dining table and straddled it backwards, directly in front of her. He lifted his foot-long beard so that it would fall over the back of the chair, placed his forearms onto the top of the back, rested his chin on the top arm and simply stared at his guest, waiting for her to get back to reality.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I ... was just saying that I really am sorry to hear about the—uh—about the brain tumor." There was no beep, and Victor was seriously surprised. She actually was sorry. "I also meant what I said about letting myself care about you," she offered, aware that she was now being LieDeck-verified. "I can do that. I ... know about your theory of human consciousness evolution, that Human One, Two, Three stuff you wrote about twenty years ago, although I'd like to know more and—"

"I didn't write about it," corrected Victor. "I made some tapes of my ideas, and it was nineteen years ago, not twenty. You look surprised that you could be completely wrong twice in one sentence and yet not get beeped. It's not that you didn't know those things—uh—Lilly, it's ... just that you didn't bother remem—"

"Whatever," said Lilly, trying to not hide her irritation. It wasn't that she couldn't stop herself from being assertive and rude at times, it was just that this old fart was a bit of a bully, with words, and there was no reason why she should put up with that. "I never understood why you didn't let people study those tapes, frankly. Anyway, the general idea did get out to the public, as I'm sure you know, and of course most of Evolution picked it up and ran with it, but ... well, it interests me ... to hear it from you. As for myself, I've got good control of my feelings, and I've got a fairly good handle on what I feel, and why. And with my LieDeck here ... well, as you can imagine, I had to check out where I was coming from, emotionally, before I could even think about moving forward on this assignment, eh?"

Lilly was of Russian descent, by her name, but Victor knew she was American by her slight accent. He figured that the Canadian "eh?" that she'd tacked on the end of her last sentence was probably trained into her for this northern tour of duty. Maybe that's part of her caring routine, he thought. Maybe she's a potential Human Three!

"Can you sit on the couch, on the end, so I can put my head on your lap and look up at you?" he asked. "While you ask me your four stupid WDA questions?"

"No problem," said Lilly as she started to stand and reached for her Sniffer.

"Beep," it went.

"Okay ... I ... don't mind ... too much," she said, levering herself back down into the padded easy chair.

“Emphasis on ‘much.’”

Victor wasn't buying, even though there was no “beep” this time. He just ... stared at her, waiting.

"I'm ... just getting over a nasty cold," she tried. "And ... you ... might catch it." She had to pause periodically to assure herself that the content of her words was true; whether or not they amounted to an adequate excuse was another matter.

"I'm immune," asserted Victor. As the Sniffer beeped his deliberate lie, he studied the agent's face for the trace of a smile, but came up empty. "We are not amused?" he asked, trying to mimic the accent and arrogance of Queen Victoria, but managing to sound more homosexual than British.

Lilly gave up, stood, and sat on the end of the couch, placing her Sniffer on the arm and putting a cushion on her lap. Victor pushed the ottoman to where her feet could reach it and sat down on the couch. Then he grabbed the cushion from her lap, threw it spinning across the room, rotated, and weebled his legs up and his head down, flipping his white hair off to the side. This was much nicer, being able to feel one thin thigh under his neck and the other touching the bald top of his head.

"Shoot," he said, looking up at her soft brown eyes and noticing her fine, dark lashes. "You got great eyes," he said before she could begin. "I'd feel better if I could hold your hand for this."

Lilly felt distinctly uncomfortable. She had her right arm on the back of the sofa, the other on the arm of the sofa, holding the Sniffer. She put her right forearm on his chest, and tried not to show her feelings as he clapped his hands on top and began to stroke her fingers. "So, have you broken any laws?" she began. "Or are you intending to break any laws?"

"Marijuana's legal now, eh?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Then ... no," said Victor.

"Beep," went the LieDeck in her Sniffer.

"What laws?" she asked bluntly, but gently.

Victor had to think about that. It was obvious that his subconscious knew what the reality was, that he had broken at least one law, but his conscious mind was unable to lock on. There were a lot of new laws now, WDA laws, world laws, and ignorance was no defense before the law. He occasionally used his MIU like an old-fashioned TV, to watch shows that didn't require interacting, and he watched newscasts regularly, ever since the Revolution ... so I must have heard about some new law that I broke without realizing it, he figured. He wanted to kiss the hand he was fondling, but didn't want to push things, or offend. "I've never taken the WDA oath," he said. "Is that a law now? Does everybody have to do that now?"

"No," said Lilly. She looked down at the troubled face on her lap, and felt sure that the man who had so much to say about truth wouldn't likely lie on purpose, especially with her LieDeck active. "You really ... don't know, eh?" she asked.

"No," said Victor, "I—"

"Beep."

"Not consciously," he said, and this time there was no beep.

"Are you...?" began Lilly. She felt ridiculous to find herself asking this one, but that was the proper procedure whenever there was any doubt, and no way did she want to end up having to explain such an important omission to Control. "Are you—uh—planning the overthrow of the WDA?" she asked sheepishly.

"Yes, that's it!" yelped Victor. "I—"

"Beep," went the LieDeck.

Lilly couldn't stop herself from smiling. He may be gross and weird, she thought, but he still plays a mean brain game. "Do you want..." She ran into the same embarrassing wall as before, and reminded herself that this wasn't about her, or about her feelings ... or even about his feelings, about what he "wanted." It's intentions that matter, Lilly scolded herself, internally. Do your damned job, she said to herself. "Do you intend to overthrow the WDA by force?" she asked.

"By force?" Victor repeated.

"Yes or no," she insisted.

"Yes," he said.

"Beep," went the Sniffer.

Victor thought it was far more fun to lie and get beeped than to tell the truth straight-away, but the time had come to get things moving along. "Okay, replaced," he clarified, without getting contradicted by his own invention.

"So you want to see the WDA overthrown by political means?" she asked carefully.

"Yes," said Victor. "And the sooner the better. And before I croak, I plan to release my tapes and help the world's Evolutionaries achieve full Human Three Consciousness, which I hope and expect will be the basis upon which the WDA will become obsolete, redundant, unnecessary, and eventually wither away and disappear à la Karl Marx, what he said about the state ... quite incorrectly, of course. Is that ... a crime?"

Lilly was very surprised to hear that he planned to finally release the three reel-to-reel tapes he'd made two decades ago on the effects of the LieDeck on human consciousness, but for the moment, she had to concentrate on what he had said about the WDA. Could intentions, combined with expectations, constitute planetary treason? she wondered. The WDA had always championed the twin causes of free speech and academic freedom, even if the words at issue were absurd or dangerous. Could it be that some things can't even be thought without incurring the death penalty? Surely not! "Do you believe what you intend to do is a crime?" she asked.

"Belief" was Victor's least favorite word. Belief was the human failing that he most detested. Belief meant accepting something as true when you hadn't the foggiest notion whether it was or not, or accepting as true what one imagines to be true. He wasn't sure if he "believed" anything at all, let alone this. He wanted to clue her in to the great writings of Dr. Michael Shermer and other skeptics ... but what would be the point?

Victor had to consciously rewind his mind to get back to the question that his "guest" had asked before he'd flown off on his philosophical tangent. "Uh ... I'd say ... yes?" he said, questioningly, hoping there wouldn't be a beep.

The LieDeck had stayed silent. "Well, there we are!" said Lilly, while smiling. "You thought that you

were planning to commit a crime, but really you weren't. Your thoughts, plus your intentions and expectations, can't constitute a crime," she explained. "It's like if a man thinks about committing a rape. Even if he says that he's going to do it, and even if he really intends to do it, as long as he doesn't do it, there's no—"

"Or she," interjected Victor.

"—there's no crime," finished Lilly.

"So I was wrong, subconsciously, about having broken a law, or rather I was wrong about my intending to break a law?"

"It would seem you were ... mistaken," she said.

"Yes or no?" he said.

"Yes," said Lilly. "On that score anyway. Are there any other laws you've broken, or that you believe you broke? Or do you know of any other people who have committed a crime, or intend to commit a crime?"

"No?" said Victor, with an inflected question mark in his voice. There was no beep, so they were finally free to get past the formalities and down to business, or at least free to get on to something else. "So, how's your love life?" he asked.

"That's ... none of your concern," she said stiffly.

"Whoa, Human Two alert!" wailed Victor. "Listen up, Lilly. You made a unilateral decision to let yourself care about me. God knows why, but that's what you did, and it's been LieDeck-verified. So if I'm to reciprocate and let myself care about you, then it is my concern. So, again, how is your love life?" He wondered why his words "God knows why" weren't beeped, but then he remembered. It's just an expression—not meant to be taken literally.

Lilly knew that giving a damn about this old fart wasn't going to be easy, but it really irritated her that he showed no respect for conventional social mores ... or Normal social mores, anyway, she thought. "My love life sort of ... stinks," she said. "I'm going to stay celibate for the next while. I don't really need a man in my life ... or a woman ... at least not in that way." Lilly and Victor were both somewhat taken aback that the LieDeck had let all of that get through unchallenged. "So, how's yours?" she countered.

Victor laughed heartily. "Try again," he said.

Lilly realized that her question was a low blow, a cheap shot. I'm just pissed that he forced me to talk about private stuff. He had a point, and he had the decency to laugh at my jab rather than scolding me for being a bitch. "Well," she said, "you never explained to anyone why you stopped talking back in two thousand and fourteen. Would you like to tell me about that?"

"Yes," said Victor, unbeeped.

Lilly waited, and watched. Victor's eyes stared up at her face as he caressed her wrist. "So ... talk," she invited.

"No," said Victor.

"But you said you wanted to, and there was no beep."

"I do," said Victor. "Want to," he added.

"But ... you ... won't?" she asked. "With me?" she narrowed it down. "At this time?"

Victor raised his legs, let go of her hand and kicked, rising to a sitting position. He stood up, and walked over to the spot where he always stood to wonder at the seasons and resent the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. "The last time I opened my fucking mouth, more than ten million people died," he said flatly, staring through his reflection at the black void that awaited the turn into the sun. "And millions more were injured in the two cities that were hit, and are still suffering and dying, all these years later." His voice was steady, but it was now resonating more like a cello than a violin. Facts were facts ... and death was the end. Spit it out, he told himself.

"My brain knows that all that unnecessary suffering and dying wasn't my fault, but my instinct won't agree. It's like if a man is driving a school bus, and a bee gets in and stings him, and because of a half-second lapse in his attention, he drives into a ditch. A bunch of kids die. It's just an accident. He knows that, but for the rest of his life he has ... you know ... nightmares, or daymares, a horrible sense of guilt. He can fix the problem internally, in his emotions, but all those kids are still dead. As a bare minimum behavioral reaction, he stops driving busses. Or, in my case, he shuts up."

It was a good start. Lilly stayed silent, trying to fathom the unique "cross" that Victor Helliwell bore.

"So I thought the least I could do was to give the traditional one minute of silence to each victim," he continued. "And ... that would be ten million, six hundred and seventy thousand minutes—give or take a few tens of thousand of lives—which is a hundred and seventy-seven thousand eight hundred and twenty-eight hours, or about seven thousand four hundred days, which is about twenty and a third years of not talking. I've run those numbers in my mind every day since the LieDeck Revolution, and watched on the Net as the number of deaths grew almost daily for all that time. I've still got a year or so to go, but by then I'll be—"

He cut himself off, and felt again the powerful crush of his impending departure from this ... this vale of tears. "So I thought if I'm not going to be able to make it to the end of my penance," he continued after sniffing for courage, "and ... if I'm not going to even be here to see the consequences of my actions, I might as well take one last risk and spill the beans about Human Three Consciousness ... the rest of the beans. Quite frankly, I don't think that Human Twos can turn that corner without the help of the LieDeck, but ... well, maybe they can. And maybe I owe it to them to try to help. Maybe I should give them the freedom to choose, to decide that I'm full of doggie-doo, or to decide that I'm not full of shit and become it, become Human Three, fully Human Three. Are you ... following me here?"

"Yes," said Lilly. She was familiar with his ideas, his wild theories, the often-told tale of Victor's real reason for inventing the LieDeck back in '14, or in the decade preceding 2014. All WDA agents learned about that in History 101, and most either dismissed him as a lunatic and/or felt sorry for him. In any event, she was following his soliloquy, but it wasn't easy, emotionally. He takes himself so seriously!

Victor turned and read her face. I don't say a fucking word for nineteen years, he said to himself, and now I can't shut the hell up. "Never mind," he said. "You'll ... see soon enough." He picked up the cushion he'd flung across the room and walked back to the couch. Conversation isn't so much a lost art with Human Twos, he thought, as it is an undeveloped art. His failing memory tried, without success, to find the name of a German philosopher he had once heard of, a man who apparently wrote a very long dissertation purporting to prove beyond all doubt that meaningful inter-human communication was simply not possible under any circumstances. And according to the laws of physics, bees can't fly, he remembered reading in his youth.

He put the cushion on Lilly's lap and eased himself back to where he was before she got into challenging his vow of silence ... or questioning it, he re-positioned his attitude. Inviting me to open up. No offense intended, none taken—no harm, no foul.

Lilly didn't want to put her right arm and hand back across his chest, but she'd done far less palatable things “for the cause” in the past ... and if I'm really going to let myself care, then ... She just did it, and Victor rested his hands on her wrist, nothing more. No caressing this time, she noticed. Maybe he's trying to meet me half way.

A minute of silence ensued ... the amount of time he's been giving to every victim of the LieDeck Revolution, thought Lilly. She knew he was looking up at her, but she didn't feel she could look down at him—at least not without betraying her discomfort. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed on their reflections in the black bay window. The peacefulness was a welcome relief, but the situation was also awkward, and seemed to call for a new direction. “I am curious about one thing,” she said finally, looking down at his smallish, wrinkled face. “According to your file, it seems—”

“I have a file?” asked Victor, seemingly surprised.

“Everybody has a WDA Netfile,” she said—she almost barked those words, had she not been so vigilant in keeping her darker feelings out of the process. “And I'm sure you know that's why there's no more war or—”

“So what did it say ... in my file?” interrupted Victor. He began to explore the thinly wrapped wrist bone that lay on his chest.

“Well, it said that you never use the Net to communicate with other people, not even anonymously, using the keyboard and a fake cybername,” said Lilly. “Why is that?”

“I write letters,” he said. “By hand. Short ones, mind you, but people who write actual letters deserve to get answered, I figure. It seems that even after all this time, some folks still want to know what became of me. They ask if I'm really okay. Some people write to insult me or to condemn me for inventing the LieDeck. Some women want to lop off my penis or marry me or screw me or have my child. A lot of people want to know if it's true that I never talk any more. I send them all the same answer. I write, ‘Dear Human Two: Thank you for writing.’ Then I write the word ‘beep’ in square brackets. Then I conclude: ‘Leave me alone. Yours sincerely, Victor.’ They only want my autograph anyway. I try to answer ten or so a day, then I throw the rest away. I get hundreds every day. I read the first few words of every letter, and then I lose interest. If people try to face me on the Net, I ignore them—I don't respond. They're just lazy, those people. I ignore all my Netmail.”

Lilly found this somewhat enlightening. Of course she knew from his Netfile that he wrote letters telling people to screw off, but she didn't know about the square-bracketed “beep” or the reference to Human Two. All she knew for certain was that he'd never been known to write anything reportable. “Don't you watch any Netshows?” she asked. “How come you don't observe or audit chatrooms, or at least watch the Netnews to see what's happening in the world?” She knew he did watch the Netnews, and even peeked in at the Netsex teasers once in a while, but those things were both known by way of the WDA's eavesdropping capabilities, and she couldn't say anything that revealed that he was being observed through his MIU.

Victor stopped massaging her wrist, and a look of confusion seemed to wrap his face in a worried web. “I really try to keep up with the news,” he said earnestly. “I really do. I always have, but...”

Lilly waited, without reward. “But what?” she finally asked.

Victor seemed to be grouting around his mind for the right word, or an explanation that washed. “I watch the Netnews—of course I used the keyboard to make commands because of my vow of silence—and when it comes on, I see the images, and I hear the words, but it's like ... like it's in another language, or from another plane or something. It doesn't seem to register, somehow. I sit there for hours, but when I shut down, I've got only the vaguest notion of what I've been watching. It's ... weird. It makes me wonder if I'm still ... you know ... sane. But it's not the tumor. I've had this problem for since long before the SuperNet got started back in ... when was that; two thousand and eighteen? ... way back in the days of the Internet, ever since the Revolution, really. But in spite of this problem, I still watch the Netnews every day. I have no idea why I do that. It seems so ... so pointless.”

Lilly was beginning to understand Victor, and she was also beginning to wonder just how sane he was—even how sane he used to be. “You know,” she said cautiously, “I ... have the occasional problem with guilt too—I mean, assuming that's your problem—and I often find ways of dealing with it so that it goes away, or at least doesn't bother me so much.” Victor didn't respond, so she decided to soldier on. “If you think about it, the—uh—the invention of the LieDeck led to the Revolution, and that cost ten point six seven million lives, like you said. But the LieDeck Revolution also gave rise to the WDA, and the WDA has managed to eliminate war and crime from the Earth for nineteen years now, and that ... that has probably saved more than ten million lives, maybe twice that number. So if you—”

“Ms. Petrosian,” Victor said sternly, “do you know the difference between a rational thought and a rationalization?”

“Of course I do,” snapped Lilly. “What kind of a question is—”

“Well I prefer to be rational,” he said as he threw off the bony hand and rose from the couch. “I would also prefer to be alone right now. So, if you don't mind...”

Chapter 22

JESUS-E

Monday, February 14, 2033—6:00 p.m.

Annette Blais was in Sleepery #1, her bedroom-office hideaway right in the hub, near the entrance to Mainspoke. She was trying to enjoy a rare moment of peace, relaxing with a book—Cold War Blues, by some obscure 20th-century peacenik—when a knock came at her door. “It's from Herb Pringle, of Pringle Polling in D.C.,” said a V-Insight messenger as he handed her an old-fashioned disk, making an uncomprehending shrug as he did so. “Jimmy Ball said it had to go to you in this format.”

Annette knew immediately who the sender really was from her long-ago days as a Patriot agent. It was from her old friend Gil Henderson, the American journalist who had tweaked the overly tender nose of the WDA so often and so successfully. She also knew it must be important to have come in such a secretive way, and if she had known that the message had arrived that morning and had taken half a day to reach her, she would have stripped her clutch trying to get Jimmy Ball's head onto a stake.

She dug out her antique Mac Plus from the back of her closet, brought it into the bathroom where the camera-eye of her MIU couldn't peek, and sat the thing on the toilet seat. She then attached the mouse, plugged the old computer in, sat on the edge of the tub and waited half a minute for the dingdang “smileyface” to get off the nine-inch gray-scale monitor. “Finally,” she said quietly as she pushed in the disk, clicked on the icon, clicked on the folder, and clicked on the only file it contained. How did humanity ever endure all this infernal waiting? she wondered while the ancient “marvel of the 20th

century” coped with the apparently-Herculean task of getting the words up onto the screen.

Dear Mr. Ball:

If there is any reason to talk to you, I don't know what it is. You can not expect to be able to just kidnap a market by means of guile and trickery. We will naturally protect all our vital interests, and lest you imagine Annette can help, her currency is worthless here, so use your head and a little bit of Christian charity. I'm not going to ease this burden for you guys, not now, not ever! Herbert Pringle.
18he4b—23510193148

The words made no sense, but Annette knew what to do. The second part of the code at the bottom, the long number, was a mystery to her, but the first part—18he4b—was deliciously simple. She highlighted the entire message, scrolled down the “font” menu and switched things to eighteen-point “Helvetica” ... the meaning of “18he.” Then she adjusted the margins to a width of four inches and added “bold,” the meaning of the “4b.” Now the message read:

If there is any reason to talk to you I don't know what it is. You can not expect to be able to just kidnap a market by means of guile and trickery. We will naturally protect all our vital interests, and lest you imagine Annette can help, her currency is worthless here, so

use your head and a little bit of

Christian charity. I'm not going to ease this burden for you guys, not now, not ever! Herbert Pringle.

The conversion complete, she disengaged the highlighting and read the first word on the left side of each line, in descending order. That decoded the message, which read: “If you can kidnap and protect lest her use Christian ease now.”

Ease, she considered with her chin on her fist. He must mean ... Es ... Evolutionaries ... the Christian Evolutionaries across the river, at Jesus-E! So I'm supposed to use these half-wits to kidnap and protect—she stared hard at the screen—lest ... her? It took her a few seconds to get it. Lester! she realized. Lester Connolly! But he's in a D.C. hospital, a week or so after having his left arm amputated. His life was saved, but ... it must be that his life is in danger again ... which means...

Annette could hardly believe where her mind was now going. Only the WDA can be behind this, she realized with horror. Lester wasn't supposed to lose his arm from that disease, he was supposed to ... to die!

She left the bathroom briefly to get a slip of paper and a pen. When she returned, she wrote a longhand copy of the message, the un-rearranged version with the two codes at the bottom, and hid it in her left sock. No ... on second thought, she reconsidered as she retrieved the note and tucked it into her brassiere, under her left breast. Then she erased the text from the disk, closed down her old Mac, and put it back in the closet.

After putting on her coat and boots, she walked briskly out of Sleepery #1, out of the hub, down Mainspoke, and through the E-tery, all without saying a word to anyone. She took a car and drove up to Portage du Fort, passed through Canada Customs, went across the hydro dam to the Canadian province of Ontario, drove east to the bedroom town of Carp, turned left, and went a mile to the north.

Jesus-E was a rather weird outfit, the butt of ridicule from the few remaining Normal Christian churches and a target for judgmentally raised eyebrows and deep sighs within the Evolutionary movement. There were about a hundred monks there. They never spoke, they wore funny clothes, they didn't allow women to join the order and they considered sex a sin ... at least for themselves. But that was just the quirky

stuff. For reasons that no one knew, and in spite of the carnage of the LieDeck Revolution, or the Last Holocaust, these “Jesus-Eers” believed that Victor Helliwell was the Second Coming of Jesus Christ! It was often said in the region that the Jesus-Eers “were not exactly the sharpest knives in the drawer.” Indeed, some doubted that they belonged in the knife drawer at all!

No one knew why this band of monks had chosen to live in an underground 1950s-era bomb shelter that had been built by former Canadian prime minister John Diefenbaker (hence the nickname: “the Diefenbunker”) to save Canadian government officials from World War III. But they did. They made wine in the bowels of the Earth—award-winning wine. They never came out except to deliver product or tend their hydroponically grown grapes in a hundred mid-sized Pliesterine bubbles spread around their vast compound. And they never spoke aloud—ever—except for their leader, when a “blind” Netcall was unavoidable. They had renounced the taking of names, and their hobby, apparently, was tunneling, digging through the Earth, year after year, looking for the devil, to kill him—or so they said ... wrote, actually. There used to be a very large swamp on their property, and now it was all filled with the rock and muck they dug out of the Earth (which they then covered with topsoil, making it arable). It was all too strange for most people to even contemplate, and like most people, Annette wrote these monks off as full-blown flakes. They don't seem the type to undertake a dangerous caper, she thought. Gil must know something that I don't.

Annette was met at the front gate by a corpulent Jesus-Eer wearing a long brown robe with a wide hemp rope around the middle, and a hood. Friar Tuck, she thought. “Hello,” she said hesitantly, holding out a temporarily de-gloved hand. “I'm Annette Blais, from Victor-E, across the river. I have a—uh—an important message for your—uh—for your leader.”

Friar Tuck took the hand with a firm, calloused grip and gave Annette an abbreviated glance and then a slight bow, which caused his hood to fall forward over his eyes. “You are going to die,” he said quietly towards the snowy ground.

“I beg your pardon!” she almost yelped as she hastily broke off the handshake.

“No need to be alarmed, Ms. Blais,” explained the monk as he re-raised his head and pulled his hood back up to eyebrow level. “We hardly ever talk, as you surely know,” he intoned as he reached for her purse, “but when we do, we say those exact words instead of hello, or in response to someone saying hello to us.”

“Uh ... why?” asked Annette as she handed it over.

The monk stuck a bare hand in and rummaged around. He didn't seem very anxious to reply. What had started out as a simple courtesy was turning into a long dialogue—from his point of view. “Well,” he managed as he finished up his search, “it's the truth. You are going to die, and we Jesus-Eers prefer to start off conversations that we cannot avoid with those five words, sort of as a reminder, so nobody does or says anything they might be embarrassed to admit when their big day rolls around. Do you believe in God, Ms. Blais?” he asked as he returned the purse to her.

“Uh ... no, actually.” Can we get the hell inside out of this cold? she thought, dancing from one foot to the other.

“Too bad,” sighed the monk with a shrug as he turned to lead the way. “I'm sure He believes in you.”

Annette closed the purse, and hoped that she could soon drop this pointless chitchat. For a sect that never talks, she thought, this guy's a regular Jehovah's Witness.

The monk escorted her through external security at the gate, then on to the protruding aboveground

door. "Seven tons," said the monk as they passed that door—he pointed at it so she would know what he was talking about. Perhaps he was a tour guide in a previous incarnation, thought Annette.

They went down a ramp to an elevator, where she was given a black cloth hood ... and a gesture. She bent forward and tried to get the hood over her head without mussing her hair, though she had no idea why her appearance was important to her here. Then she straightened up, pulled the cord lightly around her neck ... and waited. A hand took her forearm.

For the next fifteen minutes it was into an elevator, up, down, out, down a hall, turn around a number of times, more walking, into another elevator, or the same one, and so on. Finally, she was asked to stop by a tug on the arm, and left standing. A few seconds later, a door closed and a different voice spoke. "Sorry for all the precautions," it said. "They're for your protection too. Please, take off the hood and have a seat. Coffee? Or perhaps a glass of white wine?"

Annette had the hood off in one swift movement, and fluffed her hair with a hand. The small room was concrete and gray, with an old green linoleum floor, polished to the shine of a showroom automobile. There were no windows, of course, and there were no paintings or decorations to soften the sense of a prison cell. In fact, there was nothing but a round metal patio table—undoubtedly from somebody's garage sale—two painted fold-up metal chairs of similar lineage and the promised refreshments. The leader of Jesus-E—at least Annette assumed he had to be some kind of leader—had seated himself on the opposite side of the table, his long, salted-brown beard sticking out from the close neck of his robe, his hood dipping almost to his eyes. She sat down ... carefully ... although it was not immediately clear to her why caution seemed to be called for.

"Wine would be nice," she said, remembering that these people had no names, and asked for no "sir" or anything like that. The monk poured with pride. After a sip and an approving tilt of her head, Annette explained that she was just the messenger. "I believe you're supposed to kidnap and protect Lester Connolly," she said, sounding much more apologetic than she had intended.

The monk seemed to be middle-aged, from what Annette could see of his face. He stroked his beard with a calloused hand, and then raised his eyes to meet hers. "And how did you arrive at this ... belief ... or understanding?" he asked.

Annette was glad she'd thought to bring a written version of the message. She turned sideways on her chair, away from her host, and dug out the small, folded note from inside her bra. She apologized for any embarrassment, took a pen from her purse and, using the pen as a pointer, she explained the first part of the code at the end, and how reformatting had led to the message by reading the first word of each line, top to bottom. She used the pen to underline the key words: "If you can kidnap and protect lest her use Christian ease now." The note was upside down, to her, so the monk could confirm all this. And finally, she explained about Lester Connolly losing his arm and her interpretation of "Christian ease" as "Christian Es" meaning "Christian Evolutionaries" meaning the monks of Jesus-E. She clicked the ballpoint, and waited.

"Hmmm," said the monk. "And ... all those other numbers at the end? What do they mean?"

"I ... honestly don't know," said Annette. "Sorry."

The monk finished his glass of wine, mouthed an indecipherable prayer, then reached over and took the pen from Annette. He pulled the note closer to himself, clicked open the ballpoint pen, and hunched down. His hood concealed everything, and Annette had to wonder if enough light could squeeze in there so that he could see what he was doing. "The numbers go up," she heard him say ... or thought she heard him say ... she couldn't be sure those were his words. Annette didn't respond, and she thought belatedly

about how embarrassed she would feel if a virtually illiterate monk broke a code that she, a former security expert, had missed. “Two, three, five, ten ... like that,” he mumbled from somewhere beneath the lump of coarse brown cloth. Surely not, thought Annette, with a shadow of a smile—that was so simple, but she had missed it. Suddenly, the monk's head popped up and the note and pen were pushed to her side of the table. And there it was! He had circled the words whose positions in the message corresponded with the ascending numbers: “There is ... reason ... I ... expect ... guile ... vital ... help.” She raised her eyes from the scrap of paper, almost expecting to be chastised, but the monk only smiled at her ... if she read the slight movement in his mustache correctly. Then he stood up and walked out of the room—no “thank you,” no nothing.

Annette threw back the rest of her glass of wine, stuffed the note back into her bra, and waited. Soon, her guide returned and asked her with a hand gesture to put the black hood back on her head.

Less than two hours after leaving home, she was back at Victor-E, flopped down on her bed in Sleepery #1, taking deep breaths as she reflected on her day. She found herself wondering how long it might be before the Netnews would report the disappearance—or the kidnapping—of Lester Connolly ... or, more likely, the capture of a batch of confused and unarmed monks making the attempt. More importantly, she wondered what would happen the next time she was given a routine LieDeck-verification by the WDA ... well, by Captain Lilly Petrosian, she realized.

Chapter 23

A GOOD KID

Monday, February 14, 2033—6:45 p.m.

Lilly was thinking about Victor as she navigated the two miles of rugged private road from the lodge on Wilson Lake back to the manor. Mostly, she found herself thinking about the lamb kebob she'd missed out on. At the mansion, she killed the engine and braced herself. “Nobody should have to live in this weather,” she muttered as she dug some Kleenex out of her purse and gave her nose a mighty blow. Then she got out of her new Aura, slammed the door and trotted up the sanded walk to the huge stone building. The door was opened by a butler as she reached for the buzzer, and she hurried inside. “I do not believe this cold,” she said.

“May I take your coat?” he asked solemnly. “I understand it's supposed to warm up by the weekend.”

Meaning you don't expire in eleven minutes or less, thought Lilly as she handed over her trench coat and took off her light rain boots. She withdrew her shoes from the bag and put them on. Then she was shown into the library, asked to wait, and offered coffee.

As the door closed, a wall-mounted Netscreen made a “bing” sound and lit up—and there was Randy, her sullen seatmate on last Tuesday's flight from the mellow climes of Florida. He was hunched forward over a carpeted floor elsewhere in the manor, lining up a putt and not looking up at his MIU. “Are you following me around?” he asked, drawing back his putter and striking the ball.

Lilly watched the ball roll slowly towards a flanged putting plate twenty feet away. The putt was off line, to the left, from the start—a pull. “Try to not look up at all until you count to three after impact,” she said. “It works for me.”

Randy straightened up and looked directly into the camera-eye of his MIU, which is to say just above the screen, in the middle. “So now you're an expert at golf?” he asked sarcastically.

"Like I said," shrugged Lilly, "it usually works for me. Try it for a few hundred putts and let me know if it helps. I also pretend that the spirit of Ben Crenshaw is controlling my body from heaven when I putt."

"Yeah right," muttered Randy. "Net, down, now."

Lilly wondered why he hadn't given her grief for not mentioning on the plane that her new job was at Victor-E, where his Aunt Julia lived, where his little sister Venice wanted to live. He must know by now, she figured. I guess he's saving that potshot for later.

Michael carried in the tray of coffee and sugar cookies himself, and found Lilly still standing. "Hi," he said, placing the tray on a low table and then offering his hand. "How did it go with Victor?" My God she's tall.

Lilly shook his hand, correctly, and noted the absence of pleasantries—she expected he would mention the fact that she and his son Randy had met on the plane during their flight up to Canada. Michael had the same light blue eyes as Randy, except his were calm and full of warmth, where Randy's were angry and accusatory. "Actually, up until I got booted out, it went rather well," she said, without elaboration ... and without explaining her scratchy, low-pitched voice. "So," she began as she seated herself, correctly, "there was something you wanted to tell me?" She could pass on pleasantries too.

Michael took a cookie and sat down opposite his guest. "I felt it was important to talk to you about Victor before you went out to the lodge, but you saw it differently," he said politely, looking down. "He actually ... talked to you?" he asked, looking up. "I mean he hasn't said a solitary—"

"Non-stop, for a while," said Lilly, as she sat down. "He's got a lot of issues from the past, and now with the illness, well ... he—"

"Look," said Michael, "I do want to talk about Victor, but ... have you met my sister Julia over there at the Victor-E clan?"

Lilly was suddenly aware of being "at work," having been presented with a question and an opening that required a personal reaction, for business reasons. "I ... sure did!" she said in a voice laden with unspoken meaning. "Last Tuesday. She ... apparently got elected to be my greeter, like at the Wal-Mart. We had supper together that night too. It didn't ... go very well. I kept making mistakes and ... well, hurting her feelings, but she ... she seems to keep forgiving me. I was awfully tired when I arrived, and I was getting this cold, so—uh—my diplomatic abilities weren't ... quite up to snuff, I'm afraid."

Lilly felt proud of her masterful response. She had spoken more about who she was than she had about Julia, between the lines and in the well-acted pauses she had inserted at strategic points. She'd also established her general level in the ladder of life by using the archaic expression "up to snuff," and by expecting Michael to understand it and take it in stride.

"She ... does require patience," said Michael. "I was hoping you might—uh—have some insights, you know? I don't get to see her much any more, I'm afraid. She's ... hard to love, sometimes."

Lilly was very pleased at the way this was going, and it seemed that the best way to consolidate the direction was to jump right in. "Do you ... want me to speak freely? In ... confidence?"

"Please do," invited Michael.

"Well," said Lilly, briefly casting her eyes sideways, as if to emphasize her awareness of potential complications, "her mental ... limitations don't seem to be a problem for her in that environment, which ... may say more about the others than it does about Julia."

Michael couldn't hide the microscopic signs of a smile. Lilly's trained eye caught the signal. "She's sort of a—uh—I suppose where I come from, we'd call her a tease ... like ... sexually," she said. "But it's not my place to—"

"I know," said Michael reassuringly. "It's ... okay."

Lilly instantly threw him her own version of a virtually suppressed smile, to express her appreciation, among other things. "I'm not sure there's much more I can add. I think she likes Big Wus more than me, so—"

"Big Wus?" repeated Michael.

"The dog," said Lilly, this time allowing herself a less-controlled smile and an eye twinkle. "Their ... well, he seems to be sort of a clan mascot. I'll probably get to know Julia better as time goes by. Perhaps you and I can talk again ... some time," she offered, carefully not mentioning where or when.

"I'd appreciate that," said Michael. "In the meantime, I mentioned to my daughter Venice that you'd be dropping by on your way back from the lodge, and she asked if she could meet you. I know you're—uh—aware of the situation from when you met my son Randy on the plane, and I know you're not supposed to ... you know ... get too involved, but I'd take it as a personal kindness if you'd help me out on this."

"So she—uh—didn't respond favorably when Randy tried to talk her out of it?"

"She told Randy where he could stick his favorite putter," said Michael, more with sadness than humor, "and she won't heed her mother ... or me ... at least on this item."

Lilly pretended to struggle with her decision. She sat pensively in the padded chair, chewing too deliberately on a cookie and looking off into the distance. She'd worn a navy blue blazer and a matching knee-length skirt for her meeting with Victor, and with her line of sight locked onto the top of the far wall—to assure Michael that she would miss noticing his glance—she crossed her legs a fraction too slowly, a fraction too expansively ... all due to my distraction, she said to herself. Being six feet tall intimidated men, as she knew all too well, but with that overall disadvantage came a rare asset—wraparound legs. "Sure ... I'll talk to her," she said, leaving just enough time between the first two words to drop her gaze without catching him peeking.

"She's ... right outside," said Michael. "Should I—?"

"I'll go myself," said Lilly. She brushed a few granules of sugar from her blazer as she uncrossed her legs—elegantly and properly—and rose to go to the door. I wonder if he peeked again.

Jesus Christ she's tall, he felt.

I wish I'd spent more time figuring out how to play this game with Michael, she said to herself.

Don't even think it! Michael scolded himself as he forcibly peeled his eyes off her astonishingly thin ankles.

Think it, she wished as she pulled the door. "Hello, Venice," she said at the open face that stared up at her. "I'm ... Lilly," she said with as much of a friendly inflection as she figured a teenager would buy.

"Jeeze, how's the weather up there?" said Venice.

Lilly laughed. "Hey, being tall isn't all bad, you know. Come on in. We'll talk."

Venice came in, sat cross-legged on the floor between her dad and the tallest woman in the world, and snapped up a cookie. Lilly returned to her seat, crossing her legs exactly according to protocol and waiting for Venice to open things up.

"So ... talk," said Michael to the twelve-year-old that was both the joy and the bane of his life. "I won't ... interfere."

"I met your brother Randy on the plane," said Lilly. "He told me about ... that you wanted to live in Victor-E with your Aunt Julia. He told me he was going to talk to you about that."

Venice wiped her lips with the back of a hand and swallowed. "Jeeze, so my life gets discussed with strangers in the sky. You'd think I was still a baby, for Christ's—"

"He loves you," said Lilly before Venice could finish. "He's just concerned that you might be making a big mistake, that's all. Maybe he's wrong about that, but—"

"He thinks life is about hitting little white balls into little cups," snorted Venice as she went for another cookie. "I mean, jeeze!"

"Do you know why Evolution got started?" asked Lilly.

"Yeah," said Venice, in a tone that implied that she was worried about perhaps having answered a trick question.

"You studied about the world recession ... of twenty fifteen to twenty nineteen ... a few years before you were born?"

"Yeah...?"

"And about how a lot of people just couldn't get by, financially?"

"Yeah...?"

"And how people started co-gardening and co-housing cooperatives to cope, and the Autocom plan to share cars and all that?"

"Yeah...?"

"And how a group of people—Steve Sutherland and Annette Blais and a few others—said in twenty fifteen that if they got together in a sort of a clan and shared everything, or I should say almost everything, they could live on about a third as much money as most of us Normals spend, and make ends meet, and actually save a lot of their money so they could retire earlier than other people and all that?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well, do you think they'd have done that if they didn't have to?"

"I dunno," said Venice. "Maybe."

Lilly was getting eyes-down responses, cautious communication, words saturated with wary undertones. She uncrossed her legs—too carelessly again this time—and bent far forward, lowering her head to a level closer to the girl. "You know," she said, earning full eye contact at last, "maybe you'll end up living in Evolution, and maybe you'll love it. Maybe it's just right for you. But these people live that way because they have to, not because they want to. If one of them wins a lottery or inherits a large amount of money, they move out, usually. You come from a wealthy family, Venice. You don't have to—"

"My Aunt Julia has tons of money, and she lives there."

"She's ... special," said Lilly carefully. "She's—"

"I heard there's other kids from rich families that go into Evolution and stay there," said Venice, in a shrill, rising voice. "I read there's some university professors and some doctors and even this one guy that won a Nobel Prize that lives there. What about them?"

"Well, that's quite true," said Lilly, returning her torso to the full, upright position, "but there's also some poor people that wouldn't be caught dead living in a clan ... lots of them, actually. So—"

"But I just want to try it for a while," whined Venice. "I'm twelve, and according to the law I can—"

"I'm going to tell you something really personal," said Lilly intently, almost forcing Venice to wait this one out, bending forward again, for intimacy. "I decided not to have children a long time ago, when I was just a bit older than you are now. And do you know why?"

"No," said Venice. "How would I—"

"I came from a really close family," said Lilly, getting back on track. "I loved my dad a lot, and when he died, I realized that I wished I'd done a lot of things differently when he was alive. When I was just a baby, whenever I wanted something, I just cried, like all babies do. And when I was a kid ... you know, four or five ... I would just take stuff, and demand stuff, and usually get what I wanted, and I expected my parents to do everything for me, and I didn't see why I had to do anything for them. It's ... it's just ... normal. It's part of growing up. But before I got old enough to think about really giving back instead of always focusing on what I wanted, my father ... died."

"And I looked around at my friends ... and they were all the same as me. They were changing from little people who only thought about themselves into adults, who ... well, most of them, not all ... would think about what other people needed and wanted too. I know that living at Victor-E is what you really want now, but if you do that, the Netnews will all be talking about it because your family is so important, and it'll make life difficult for your mom and dad and ... and also for the company and—"

"How could it hurt the company?" Venice cut in.

"I'm sure you know that the WDA isn't exactly crazy about Evolution, and Whiteside Tech manufactures all the LieDecks in the world, or at least it has for the last nineteen years, and of course the WDA is the only customer for LieDecks, so ... I mean there's a connection there, eh? I'm not saying the WDA would—"

"Okay," said Venice, "so go ahead about all that stuff you were saying about when you were a kid and your dad died and all that."

Lilly began to wonder if this pattern of changing the subject might be genetic, or was perhaps learned from her Aunt Julia ... or is just a real good example of the selfishness of youth.

"I don't know why schools don't teach kids this stuff, and get us to grow up a little faster, but eventually everybody has to learn to think about other people too, before they make the big decisions. It doesn't feel like it's fair, because we're all used to feeling ... well, whatever we feel, and that's that. But ... well, sometimes life isn't easy, or fair, and sometimes we have to at least agree to wait a while for the stuff we want. Nobody wants it to be that way, in their feelings, but ... well, that's the way it is. And I know you could legally go there without asking your parents for permission, at least to visit, but I don't think what the law says is the important thing here. What's important for you to realize is that what you want ...

simply isn't the whole picture. There's ... lots of things that I want and can't have, even though I could have some of them if I ignored how that would affect other people. But I have to—"

"Like what?" demanded Venice.

"Like ... maybe I meet a man that I'm really attracted to, and I want to maybe go out to dinner with him and go dancing, but he's happily married and I'd probably mess up his life and hurt his wife and kids if I got what I wanted. That's happened to me before, but I—"

"And you never did it?" asked Venice in a way that presaged disbelief of any denial.

Lilly sat up again, almost too quickly, as if stunned, or perhaps hurt, and stared back at her young accuser. "I'm ... not perfect," she said, "but I do try to think things through rather carefully, and I've found that when I'm not sure, it's always smart to wait a while ... let things evolve, let a little time pass, and then, when I am sure, I take a decision. I've avoided a lot of bad mistakes that way."

Venice grabbed another cookie and ate it, looking at the floor. Michael sat quietly, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips for Lilly to see ... and understand. Lilly took a sip of her coffee and shrugged, hoping she'd hit a homer, or at least a single.

"Okay," said Venice, as she stood up. "I'll wait a bit. Can we talk some more when I come out to visit Aunt Julia?"

"We certainly can," said Lilly. "And you can face me on the Net any time at all. And ... Venice?"

"Yeah?" said the child, wondering what apocalyptic pronouncement required her actual name for an intro.

"I hardly know you yet," said Lilly, "but I feel really proud of you for what you just did, what you just decided. I look forward to talking to you again."

"Yeah ... see ya," said Venice as she twirled and headed for the door. Then she did a full-tilt about-face at the door, marched back and kissed her father on the cheek. Nary a word, just the kiss, and she was gone, the door closed.

"Well!" said Michael, his eyes filled with amazement. "Thanks!"

"You're entirely welcome," said Lilly. "I'm real glad I could help," she added, sliding an adjective in where an adverb belonged. "She's a good kid, Michael. You and Rebecca done good." This time, the grammatical error was obviously intentional.

"Yeah," he said, his eyes drifting off into the territory of private words and thoughts. "She's a good kid."

Chapter 24

SORRY

Monday, February 14, 2033—8:30 p.m.

"Enough, enough," gasped Annette as she pushed on his wet shoulders.

Lars pulled out slowly, and gently, a startling counterpoint to the last twenty minutes or so. He was exhausted, in every sense of the word. As he tumbled onto his back, on the vacant side of the bed, he

tried to will his young heart to decelerate. There was a box of Kleenex on the bedside table, and he used it to good effect, three or four wads, tossing the spent bundles in the general direction of the wastebasket.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "I've been wanting to have sex with you for ... jeeze, I can't remember like when I didn't want to." He drew both his hands down his wet face, spreading perspiration around more than drying anything off, and tried to remember how many times she had begged for mercy ... or for more.

Annette was "enduring" her denouement, and she had no inclination to get into a "was-it-good-for-you" chat with this very temporary bed-buddy. "Want the fan on?" she asked, getting up to do it before he could answer ... not that he'd have the nerve to say "no" even if he felt that way.

As she stood up, Lars stared at her full body in the dim candlelight. She had changed a lot since the first time he saw her naked fifteen years ago, but that was okay. Big is beautiful too, and gray hair is pretty. He flexed his shoulder and arm muscles, and felt much like a man—a grown man. "So how come your—uh—breasts hurt like that?" he asked, carefully avoiding the "H" word, and all other unkosher acronyms for "hooters."

"Cysts," she said, without explanation. "No big deal," she added, in case he found himself wanting to explore that wrinkle like he'd just explored everything else. Annette moved the candle to the far end of the dresser and pushed the "hi" button. The fan wound up to cruising speed and began its slow, sensual sweep back and forth, fairly showering her chest with artificial wind. She leaned her hands on the dresser top and bent forward, letting the rush of relief penetrate the damp hairs on the top of her head. The candle was flickering from the margins of the disturbance, and Annette watched the light dance on her aching, shining breasts.

"If only the memories would bugger off," she said quietly, not realizing right away that Lars wouldn't have any notion what she was referring to. "Of my—uh—upbringing," she said. "I'm way past all that 'sex-is-wrong' bullshit in my mind, but I went through childhood and puberty with this unspoken warning hanging there, somewhere near my brain stem: 'make whoopee, and you will roast in hell.' It's like imprinting, with baby ducks. Do you know about imprinting and ducks, Lars?"

"Like—uh—they glom onto the first thing to come along, like a dog or a person, like it's their mom or something," he said, seemingly as proud of his broad knowledge as he was oblivious to his juvenile syntax. He had got the answer right—something that didn't happen all that often in plumbing class—but as for the relevance of the question ... well, it was her fuss, not his. "So ... why?" he asked.

Why indeed? considered Annette as she moved sideways and blew out the flame that shone far too brightly on her inner self. "I just always feel so ... you know ... awkward," she admitted as she felt around on the bed for the covers.

"Jeeze, not—uh—during!" said Lars, meaning it as a compliment.

Annette smiled into the darkness and sat back on the bed. She suddenly realized it was only a long-ago self, a much slimmer model with no stretch marks or love handles, that wanted to hide under a blanket even when there was no light on. She scratched the bottom of her left foot—her hand was in the neighborhood anyway—and flicked the sheet and the comforter to the bottom of the bed. "You're welcome," she said as the fan passed across her again. "And ... thank you, too."

"So it bothers you that you and me are like from different generations?" asked the apprentice plumber and sometimes waiter. "I mean ... to me, you're my friend, eh? I always laugh when you yank my chain and joke around and all that. And I always looked up to you, you know, for like running the show around here so good, eh? When I was, like, fourteen or so, I used to watch you in the pool, eh? I mean

everybody was naked, but I couldn't take my eyes off of you. My buddies told me I was some kind of a pervert, eh, because you were ... you know ... like an adult, and I was like maybe ninety pounds or something, a small fry. But I couldn't help myself. I just stared you all up and down and then I'd run to the can all bent over, with a towel around me so's like nobody could see me with a hard-on and know where I was going and what I was gonna do, eh? I mean I was all hopped up, but like ... after, when I was ... you know ... done ... I'd think about how some day I was gonna be your real friend, even if you never let me ... you know ... make love with you. And I figured that if we did get to be real friends, then ... well, lots of real friends get to know each other, eh, I mean like we just did ... physically. Unless like there's a reason not to, I should say. I'm ... like I really am your friend, you know, and I'm gonna keep being your—"

"I know!" said Annette, much more emphatically than was necessary. "I know you don't carry the baggage that I've got about sex. I'm your friend too, Lars, I mean ... as much as two people can be real friends when one's twenty-two and the other one is ... a lot older. I guess I just ... kind of hope you won't..."

Lars wished she had left the candle burning, but it was her bedroom, and he liked the dark too, just not as much. "Won't what?" he asked.

Annette fell back from her sitting position and sighed, partly out of anger at herself. She wasn't judgmental ... not really ... not in her mind, anyway, and she knew the good people of Victor-E wouldn't even think of faulting her for having a fun romp with the best-built apprentice plumber in west Québec. But ... banished demons never lost their voices. They echoed across the mountain gorges of her psyche, like the lunatic Swiss with those ridiculously long alpenhorns, reminding her of their existence, even if she was forever out of range of their puny arsenal of weapons. Only yesterday, she had caught little Barry Lochlear out in the garage, masturbating Big Wus. "Stop that this instant!" she had screamed in horror. "Why should I?" he'd answered, without missing a stroke. "He likes it ... a lot." She could not respond, and settled for a red-faced U-turn and an insincere "sorry." Life without God is the only sensible way, but...

"I know it's kind of stupid," she admitted as the fan continued its blessed stroking, "but I just find myself hoping you won't ... you know ... blab it all over the place, that we were like ... together." There! She'd said it, and whether or not it was silly, it was her, Annette Blais, a first generation Human Three, awkwardly marginalized between the past and the present.

Lars turned on the table lamp beside the bed, stood, and started pulling on his boxer shorts. "Listen," he said, "I can't agree to that. My friends will be happy for me, really happy for me, because they all know how much I care about you, you know? And they'll be happy for you too, eh? They'll know that I did, like, everything I could to give you pleasure, eh? So, like, I'm sorry if it bothers you, but everybody knows that sex is like my main thing. And it's not like I'm bragging or putting anybody down or causing you like to be embarrassed or anything. It's just..." He was going to get into a discourse on the genesis of the Evolutionary term "Zilla," but if he did that he would have gone from just suggesting to outright criticizing. He shut himself up.

Annette watched him zip up and pull his T-shirt effortlessly over his head and down over his hairless chest. "Sorry," she said. "Maybe this will help me get past all these dead attitudes."

"Yeah," said Lars. "I really hope so, Annette. You'll always be the most special lady I know, eh? And even if you don't want to ... like, be with me again, you know I'm still your really really good friend, eh? Like we can just talk sometimes, or go for a walk, you know? I like that stuff too, eh?"

Annette sat up, reached to the foot of the bed and pulled the covers up to her neck, looking half sheepish

and half cute ... too cute for a mature woman, she thought before she could beat off the silliness. "Sure," she said to the young man who had almost worn her out. "Sorry?" she said again, scrunching up her round face to emphasize the comic side of the one-word epithet that seemed to escape her lips far too often.

"No need to be sorry," said Lars as he put a hand on her cheek, bent over and kissed her forehead. "Now we got a really great memory, you and me. See you at breakfast," he winked as he opened the door and backed out. "And I won't tell," he added just before he closed the door. But they'll all guess it, he thought of adding, but didn't.

"Bye Lars," she said to the empty room. "You're a good ... person," she whispered, and her skin flushed at the way she'd narrowly avoided saying "boy."

Chapter 25

BAD DOGGIE

Monday, February 14, 2033—9:10 p.m.

It was past nine o'clock when Lilly got back to Victor-E. She parked in front of the E-tery and plugged the block heater cord into the closest available outlet to the front door. From behind the old motel, she could hear the hypnotic beat of drummic, a fairly new musical genre that featured soaring and clever a capella harmonies, every percussion instrument known to humankind, and nothing else. The roof of the mess hall in the hub was getting a good old Monday-night workout. Those woofers are gigantic, she thought. She found herself wondering what kind of damage they must be causing to the ears of those dancing directly in front. I'll check out the decibel levels tomorrow, she thought as she made her way into the warmth and light.

"Hi Claire," she said to the cook after glancing at the blackboard. "I'll have a bowl of your barley 'n' beef stew. I've been told it's wonderful. I'll toss my stuff upstairs and be right back, okay?"

Claire Lapine nodded, but said nothing. It was a decent start, and Lilly didn't mind the absence of actual language. Her apology that afternoon had been accepted by Claire. Lilly had admitted that since seeing-eye dogs were allowed in restaurants, and since Big Wus never bothered anyone, and since it really wasn't her job to second-guess the health inspectors, she would leave the situation as it was. Getting along with these self-exiled people wasn't as easy as she had imagined or anticipated, but she was gaining confidence that she would accomplish that goal, eventually.

She dumped her boots and coat in the apartment, used the washroom, changed into a more comfortable pair of pants, and checked her N-mail. Nothing important.

Back in the restaurant, Lilly chose to sit on a stool at the counter to eat her barley 'n' beef stew. It wasn't quite the lamb kebob Victor had ordered for her ... and probably ate all by himself ... but it was hearty. I wonder if anyone here has ever eaten a five-star lamb kebob? I wonder if they care? I even wonder if I care, she thought reflectively. Yup, she concluded after her second mouthful of rather indifferent stew. I care ... deeply. She added salt and pepper.

There was only one table in use in the whole restaurant. A group of eight teenaged boys were smoking tailor-made joints and wishing they could get themselves invited into the hub on short notice. Lilly listened to their whispering and their boisterous laughter. If she had been feeling better, she would have gone over and sat down with them, if only to see if the overly-testosteroned Canadian rabble was that much different from its Yankee counterpart. Fat chance, she thought as she finished up her stew.

"Thanks," she said to Claire as she stood up to leave. She turned around ... and there was Big Wus, ten feet away, on his haunches, slapping the floor with his tail and panting. No sense mucking about, she considered. This is the one friendship I can't afford not to make. Let's see ... what would an Evolutionary do ... or a kid? Lilly pulled out a chair from one of the tables and sat on it. She made a kissing sound with her mouth and tapped her thigh audibly. "C'mon boy," she said, bending forward a bit.

Little by little, Big Wus yielded to temptation, to the apparent offer of a friendship, or at least a truce. When he was within reach, Lilly held out the back of her hand for him to sniff. Before long, Big Wus had his front paws up on her right knee, and was getting well patted and well scratched on the head and neck.

"So ... we're buddies now?" asked Lilly.

Big Wus suddenly wrapped his front legs around her thigh, and before she realized what was happening, his butt was bouncing up and down on her shin.

"Aw jeeze," she said as she slapped the dog on the side of the head and kicked her leg out, sending him tumbling, and then tearing for the safety of the kitchen.

"We don't hit dogs here," said Claire as she picked up the shuddering spaniel.

"Yeah, but—" started Lilly as she got to her feet.

"What dooo they dooo with their doggies?" came a laughing question from the table of young male outcasts.

"Get a fucking life," spit Lilly in their direction as she checked her pants for semen.

"Get a fuckin' life," she heard one of the boys mimic sarcastically as she headed up the stairs to her apartment.

Chapter 26

BRAIN GO BOOM

Monday, February 14, 2033—9:25 p.m.

I didn't commit a crime by giving Gil's message to Jesus-E, thought Annette as she threw on a terrycloth robe. But what about the question of whether I know of anyone else who has committed a crime, or plans to? Lilly will know that I'm lying. And refusing to reveal knowledge of someone else's criminal intent is itself a crime. Christ! I'm going to end up in jail! Or ... or maybe I'll have to go underground! But where? When?

Annette's winter digs were in the hub, fifty feet from the entrance to Mainspoke. Its official name was Sleepery #1, but it was teasingly called the "boss-spot" by most Victor-Eens. She had a private office and bathroom in addition to her bedroom, the only physical perks allowed for the top dog at Victor-E. She was in her bathroom, splashing water on her face, trying to wash the sweaty memory of Lars from her mind, off her skin. There has to be some way around this Jesus-E/Lester Connolly thing; there just has to be, she thought as she straightened up and let the drops of water trickle down her face and onto her chest.

She looked herself over in the mirror as she dried off, and longed for the image that lived in there twenty

years ago, before her face had been disfigured. She leaned forward and took a close look at her face, the orbit of her left eye in particular. The several scars were hardly visible now, and the memory of that awful pain had faded ... along with her natural beauty. I'll never be pretty again, she thought as she put on a dressing gown and tied the cloth belt. Not that it matters, here.

She thought about her husband, dead now for more than a year. He had never quite adjusted to the ways of Evolution, even though he'd been a founder of Victor-E, and had had a wonderful and productive time while he'd lived here. Steve used to refer to her and him as "the odd couple." He was a former Catholic bishop, of all things, and she a former Patriot agent, and yet there they were, living comfortably as Evolutionaries, neither one inclined to look into the past, into their former incarnations as Human Twos. The stroke he had suffered two Christmases ago, in 2031, took his life only one week later. The last words he'd been able to whisper had been: "Try to have a good time with the rest of your life." Annette reopened her housecoat and smiled at an aging body. "I try," she said to the mirror, wishing he could hear, almost wondering if he could.

The LieDeck never makes an error, she thought as she used a wet hand towel to wipe the sink. She straightened the bath towel on the rack. But people do! People ... we make mistakes all the time! Magicians even tell us that they're in the business of making us see something that isn't real, and still ... we see it. I've got the advantage ... she doesn't even know I'm trying to trick her. And unlike the magician, I only have to do it with words. But how? How do I do that? C'mon, Annette. You used to be a pretty talented security agent. Think, for Christ's sake. Then, almost magically, something she had learned from Steve came to mind. Jesuitical equivocation worked centuries ago on some pretty smart people. There just has to be a way of getting through this ... with words ... just words.

She walked from the bathroom back to her office. It was 10:20 p.m. when she closed the door, and it was 10:30 p.m. by the time she had a plan. She wasn't sure she could pull it off, but she was sure she couldn't deal with jail or living on the run from the WDA. She booted up her MIU and called.

"Lilly," she said brusquely when the clan's new resident agent came on the screen. "I don't expect you to understand, but I'm not too crazy about this LieDeck-verifying thing you have to do every month, so could we just get it over with? I know you're supposed to do it in person if possible, but the last guy, Harry Lloyd, he did it over the Net. You don't mind, eh?"

"Not at all," said Lilly, even though she did mind being put on the spot. "If you'll just wait a second while I blow my nose..."

Annette suddenly wished she believed in God, so she could pray before answering the four questions. God never answered prayers—how could He, if He didn't exist—and yet somehow people used that ruse to feel better, more confident. That's nothing more than a simple form of self-deception, she remembered learning her first week as a novice Human Three.

"Go ahead," she ordered as soon as Lilly came back on screen.

"Have you committed any crime?" asked Lilly politely.

"No," pronounced Annette, letting her irritation show.

"Do you have any intentions of committing a crime?"

"No, I do not!" said Annette, with even more anger showing through.

"Do you know of anyone who has committed any crime?"

"No, I do not!" said Annette, even more forcefully.

"Do you know anyone who has any intentions of committing a crime?"

"Listen, Lilly, in the nineteen years since the WDA was established, I can't name a single person who has committed a crime or who has had or now has any intention of committing a crime. Evolutionaries don't break the law. You should know that, and if you really did know that, then you'd understand why we resent this business of proving ourselves innocent every fucking month. Are we through?"

"Yes," said Lilly calmly. "Good night, Annette. Net, down, now."

Annette shut off her MIU and breathed as normally as possible. She'd done it! Thank God those monks don't have names, she thought as she walked back to her bedroom. I can't very well name somebody who doesn't have a name! A tentative smile crossed her face.

She lay down on the messy bed, still dressed in her robe, thinking about the day's intrigue, and about Lars. She found herself hoping to hell he'd keep his word about not blabbing all over the place, even though she knew he wouldn't lie to her. She wished that Gil Henderson had someone else to send his dangerous coded messages to. And finally, she wished she hadn't been so belligerent with Lilly, even though it was necessary.

Damn the guilt, she said to herself. She got up, walked the few steps to her office, and called Lilly back. She was surprised that the WDA agent even responded. "I'm ... sorry I was so rude to you," she said. "I hope you understand that it's not personal."

"Net, down, now," said Lilly brusquely, without accepting or even acknowledging the apology.

I guess I lied about it not being personal, thought Annette as she turned out the light in the office. Maybe I even lied about being sorry. Brain go boom!

Chapter 27

IS SO, IS SO!

Monday, February 14, 2033—11:30 p.m.

At 11:30 p.m., Lilly was still awake. She had used a strong decongestant nasal spray and swallowed a non-prescription sleeping pill, but she found herself staring at the ceiling in the faint light, somehow unwilling even to close her eyes. Her feelings were all jumbled up, tumbling about, and her mind couldn't sort out why that was.

Annette Blais was a pain in the ass, and she was a clever one, but she certainly hadn't fooled this WDA agent with the old "I-can't-name-a-single-person" routine. Lilly would deal with that little semantic somersault later, but right now, Annette wasn't the problem. Lilly was disturbed that Lester Connolly, although a major league pain in the ass, had lost an arm to a disgusting disease, but that wasn't what was keeping her awake either. The famous recluse Victor Helliwell had spoken aloud to her, and had done his damndest to scramble her brain, but ... that wasn't it either. Something else had wormed its way under her skin and was churning things up, and it seemed that the harder she tried to identify the invader, the further she moved from an answer ... and from blessed sleep.

She slept naked—always had since she left home—and sometimes the feel of her own body, leg on leg, hand on breast, helped her feel loved, or at least relaxed. She wished she could be with "good old Ed"

tonight. No, that isn't it either, she knew. I wish I could be with ... with ... "Michael!" she said softly.

That realization jolted her! It was like a body blow, but from the inside! She got out of bed and slipped into her fuzzy blue housecoat. After a brief pit stop, she strode out to the swivel chair in front of her MIU.

"N-mail to Michael Whiteside, Netsite on file," she instructed after the usual security preliminaries—the finger in the bioID slot and the PIN number. "Hi Michael," she said, realizing too late that he might expect her to use "Mr. Whiteside" in spite of their friendly encounter earlier that evening. "I wanted to say that it was a pleasure to meet you today. I was glad to be able to help with Venice. Please don't hesitate to take me up on my offer to talk with you further about Julia. Net, down, now."

As the MIU sealed the electronic envelope, Lilly sat there rather shaken by the pace of her heartbeat. She had never felt quite like that about "good old Ed." In fact she'd only felt this turbulent twice before in her life, and both of those gentlemen had turned out to be ... what was that Canadian expression? she wondered. Hosers, she remembered. Not gentlemen, to say the least, she recalled painfully.

This is a problem, she told herself. I flirted with Michael because it was my job, the shortest route to a man's brain being what it is ... through his nuts. She smiled inwardly at the memory of being taught that lesson by an instructor at the Academy, a hefty old dame who made even Sheena Kalhoun look skinny and attractive. "The gonad gambit," they called it out of class. And now I find I have real feelings for the man, she thought. That's an infringement of the rules, but the truth of it is, I ... I don't care.

She sat at her MIU, pondering her dilemma, smiling at its pulp fiction aura, groaning silently at the power of the feelings she'd just discovered. It occurred to her that in a more perfect world, she would never have left that particular message. She would have left an altogether different one, a message that was congruent with the actual thoughts she had only now been able to express to herself. This was about his being a gentleman. This was about his being ... freaking gorgeous, she admitted to herself ... like his son, Randy, but with class, experience, maturity. This was not about his money. This was about chemistry ... explosive chemistry. This was about ... jeeze ... love? she asked herself. How the hell can I tell him now that my opening foray was planned, manipulative, job-related ... even phony?

Lilly was enjoying the sexual feelings, fearing those feelings, wondering if she could kill them before they grew, wondering what they might grow into, knowing that it was ridiculous to even think the "L" word, and wondering what kind of person she must be, to flirt and tease and play with his mind and feelings on behalf of Control, or on behalf of Sheena Kalhoun, or even on behalf of the cause itself. Lillian Svetlana Petrosian got lost along the way, she felt. Who would I be today if I'd gone into teaching, or social work, or if I'd been a preacher, like I decided in grade six? What ability do I still have to create my identity as I choose?

Several more minutes of introspection brought her to a firm conclusion. She had to do a much better job at being the person she had always hoped to be, the kind of person she knew she already was, somewhere beneath the layers of ... conditioning, she supposed it was.

"N-mail to Victor Helliwell at the Whiteside lodge, Netsite on file," she said. "Hey ... Victor, it's Lilly here. I just wanted to—"

"I'm up," said Victor, as his image came on Lilly's screen. "I'm glad you called. I'm a coward, or I would have called you. I had no right to get pissed off at you and boot you out this afternoon ... evening ... whatever. I need your forgiveness, so I insist on making it up to you ... especially after I ate all your lamb kebob ... which I really enjoyed, by the way. Do you want some money or something? I got a damn mountain of money. Name a charity, and I'll send them a hundred thousand dollars tomorrow morning ... a million, if you insist."

"I ... don't want your money," said Lilly, "not even for my favorite charity. You're used to assigning your own penances, so if you want to do something good, you decide. I just called because I—"

She cut herself off. There were no hormones at play here, so she could speak freely, and start in on being ... a nicer person, she supposed was the best way of putting it. "I figured this was a pretty traumatic day for you, with the talking out loud and all, and if I was truthful about letting myself care, then I wanted to go to bed knowing that you were ... you know ... okay."

"Do brain tumors count?" asked Victor.

"Fraid not," said Lilly. "I mean—"

"Then I'm fine," he said. "I'm at peace with myself, Lilly. I'm okay about dying, too. I really am. I've got things set up to make sure that I don't suffer any excessive pain, and I don't feel cheated that life doesn't go on forever. I just wish there really was a God, and ... well, I'm not dead yet, and I do plan to have one hell of a last fling before I croak. Are you going to—uh—oppose me on that?"

"My job is to prevent and deal with crime, Victor. What you plan to do is ... well ... legal, as far as I understand it. But I'm not going to help you, if that's what you're getting at."

"It is," said Victor. "And even though I'm pretty sure you meant what you just said, I think you'll change your mind. I think you will end up helping me."

"That's ... not gonna happen," said Lilly assertively.

"Is so, is so," said Victor, in the manner of a child.

"Is not, is not!"

"Is so, is so!"

Chapter 28

WAFFLES

Wednesday, February 16, 2033—7:30 a.m.

Lilly sat on the side of her bed, struggling into her fuzzy blue housecoat and waiting for her brain to kick in. She'd never been much of a morning-type person, but waking up in Victor-E seemed to paint even muggier front edges onto her days. On top of all that, she wasn't completely over her cold, and the medication made her groggy.

The meetings with Victor Helliwell and Michael Whiteside had been very interesting, but "job #1" was still sitting sullenly on her plate, staring at her with accusing eyes. She had to start LieDeck-verifying Victor-Eens. "Borrrrrriiiiing," she mumbled in the general direction of the long naked feet that stared back at her from the carpeted floor. There just has to be something else I need to do before I open up that can of worms.

Then it dawned on her; she had come to this frostbitten wasteland ill prepared. She needed ... what do they call that for safaris? she wondered. Outfitting, she remembered from some 20th-century black-and-white flick. The African Queen? she wondered. With Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn? She couldn't be sure.

Lilly stood up, tied the belt of her housecoat around her waist and stepped into her slippers. She squinted at the digital clock. It was 7:30 a.m.... an uncivilized hour. There was a full-length mirror inside her bedroom, and she made a point of not peeking. In the first blush of waking consciousness, she still expected to see a wiry eleven-year-old with boyish short hair, a flimsy triangle of pubies where her weenie should have been and the first signs of puffiness around her nipples. She was frequently eleven in her dreams, and it usually took half a shower before she felt good about reveling in her womanhood again. Get on with it, she scolded herself.

A red light blinked on and off lackadaisically at the base of her MIU. There were faces in there—talking heads with questions, demands—but nothing from Control (the light on her screen blinked more quickly when there was a face from the boss). Later, she thought as she walked up to the remarkable machine that so far had practically defined the 21st century ... if you didn't count the LieDeck. Yadda, yadda, yadda, she thought as she scraped granules of sleep from her eyelids.

"Net, up, now," she commanded after going through the security procedures. "Kill outgoing visual, override privacy, face with Julia Whiteside, Netsite on file." The screen sprang to life, and Lilly smiled to see that Julia's brain, such as it was, hadn't kicked in either. "Hi kiddo," she tried, hoping her acting ability was enough to slip this familiarity by her slow-witted charge. "It's me, Lilly," she said, remembering that Julia couldn't see her. "So how would you like to go shopping with me today?"

"Oh ... uh ... goodie," managed Julia. She seemed to take Lilly's words more as an order than a suggestion. "I'll be right—"

"I'll meet you for breakie in half an hour," Lilly cut in. "I gotta take a shower and lose the ugly." The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she saw the error of her way ... two errors, she realized. You say "breakie" to children, and Evolutionaries don't play the pretty game ... in fact they get pissed off big-time over ... what do they call it? ... "appearance snobbery." I shouldn't open my freakin' mouth until—

"Me too," said Julia.

So much for philosophical purity, thought Lilly. "Okay, bye. Net, down, now."

Lilly washed up and put her face on, and just as she was ready to leave, she decided she'd better check the "news in brief" on the Net. The top story was about Gil Henderson. He had written another provocative column, this one suggesting that Lester Connolly's illness was "more than a little convenient" for the WDA. "That bastard!" she said to her screen. The WDA was not dignifying Henderson's slimy attack with any response at all. Maybe Henderson will be next in line to ... become ill, she thought before she could stop it from happening.

The E-tery was almost filled with locals noshing on waffles, maple syrup and back bacon ... and chugging coffee. Lilly had tried to dress anonymously, in jeans and a loose white blouse and her size-eleven tennis sneakers. But her height always served as an eye-magnet, and she had to stand there, looking all about the restaurant, avoiding lecherous gazes and seeking out Julia's blond hair. There were more than thirty tables in the E-tery, and Julia wasn't at her "special table."

"Over here," bellowed Julia, standing and waving like a kid who just survived a tilt-a-whirl ride and couldn't wait to reprise the adventure for Mom and Dad. "Hi, hi, hi," she squealed, bouncing up and down. Suddenly all eyes shifted away from Lilly's spectacular height to Julia's dancing breasts. No contest! Lilly waved back sheepishly, and gingerly picked her way through the sea of breakfasters ... many with gruff male voices that said things that couldn't quite be heard.

"I thought you forgot about me," said Julia with a full-faced smile. "I'm so glad you remembered."

Shopping is so fun, eh?"

"Sorry I'm late," said Lilly. Good thing my LieDeck is turned off. "I got an important Netcall just as I was about to leave the apartment." Really good thing my LieDeck is off.

"From who?" asked Julia.

"A friend," said Lilly, making a point of not particularizing the lie. It occurred to her that not even a normal Normal would have asked "from who?" Such a question would violate the unwritten pact that white lies were okay. In fact, Julia's inquiry rested on two false assumptions: that Lilly was telling the truth, and that Lilly would have no reason not to share with her. From anyone else, the question would be tantamount to an accusation, but coming from Julia, it was not only totally innocent and without guile, it was meant to be friendly! This Human Three stuff is so naive, the WDA agent thought. So unrealistic!

Julia caught a waiter's eye, and a minute later, breakfast had materialized in front of Lilly. Julia was already half way through hers, and shoveling it into her mouth became her only focus. Total concentration, noted Lilly. No eye contact, no chatter, no space left on her internal hard drive. "Thanks," Lilly said to the waiter as he poured coffee and put a couple of creamers on the table.

"Syrup?" he asked.

"Itsh our own maple shtuff," volunteered Julia through a mouthful of waffles.

"Oh goodie," chirped Lilly, in her best Julia-speak. "I love Canadian maple syrup."

"Québec," corrected Julia.

For Julia, eating returned to its former status as a non-verbal event, and Lilly was just as glad. Of course Julia finished first, having nabbed a serious head start on the basis of her bizarre assumption that a shower had washed all memory of their "date" from Lilly's mind. When circumstances allowed, Julia treated her new friend to a lengthy monologue on the subjects of Alex, her new taxi-driver "tingle-mate," who had a wife and three kids and found it exciting that Julia's belly was starting to show. Then she went on at length about her other main squeeze—"Eric, from the Hydro"—and how he was jealous about her and Alex, and should know better. "He's kind of ... Human Two about sex," she said sadly, "even though me and Alex never actually—"

"So ... I guess we'll start out at the Evolution Store," suggested Lilly, hoping dearly to dump images she really didn't need.

"Oh, we call it the E-Store," explained Julia.

Of course Lilly already knew that from her study of the Netfiles. It was a nimble bit of crassly capitalistic trickery. Whenever anyone tried to say "I'm going to the E-Store," the natural cadence of the spoken word had them saying "I'm going to thee-ee store." The unintended glissando had them inadvertently advertising the place, as if it was thee place to shop; thee only place, or thee best.

The Evolution Store was the all-purpose retail outlet that bragged that nobody sold cheaper and that whatever they didn't have, they could get for you "faster'n if you went anywhere else." The E-Store was also intensely personal, and service-oriented. Netcalls were handled by a gang of MIU operators who knew most of the customers by name and worked hard to deal with each in a manner that fostered comfort and confidence. That resulted in a "call-Evolution-first" attitude among many consumers. More particularly, the E-Store had all but cornered the market for the bottom third of the economic pyramid. Those with the best incomes shopped elsewhere and happily paid more, mostly for the privilege of

boasting about where they'd bought their things, meaning essentially A.B.E.... “anywhere but Evolution.” The real truth of the matter was that lots of well-to-do and even rich folks shopped at the E-Store too, but never in person—only over the Net, with home delivery done by unmarked vans. The bottom line was that many capitalist stores were having a hard time competing with the E-Stores, and society blundered on with an uneasy sense that Evolution represented some kind of long-term threat to the financial well-being of the dominant system. It was impossible to fault the movement for playing the game—the problem was that they played it too well!

Lilly had never shopped at an E-Store. Her parents had, regularly, on the sly, but Lilly had always avoided that, even during her years of tight money, first as a student and then as a cadet at the WDA's Officer Training Academy. Evolution was for “them,” not “us,” she believed. It was an “us-and-them” kind of world for her, even back when the WDA was universally loved and respected, and more so since the Henderson Scandals and the emergence of those very annoying “LieDeck Unbanning Committees” all over the world. Speaking of which...

"I hear Lester Connolly's hanging in there," she said as Julia stood and began packing up her dishes.

"Who?" asked Julia.

"Oh ... nothing," said Lilly. It surprised her that Julia Whiteside was that much out of touch. She was normal in so many other ways that it was easy to forget that she struggled along on an IQ of only eighty-two. “Just a guy that got sick and lost an arm,” Lilly added.

Chapter 29

OUTFITTING

Wednesday, February 16, 2033—9:30 a.m.

Lilly drove—Julia couldn't, wasn't allowed, and apparently never aspired. It was only a mile east from Victor-E to Shawville, and the E-Store was right on the highway, at the “outskirts” of town. It had a huge, hand-painted sign outside, with the French version (“Le Magasin-E”) twice as large as the English name, as still prescribed by Québec law. Lilly had difficulty getting her mind around that legislation, but apparently it was the result of decades of conflict between the “two founding nations” of Canada, the English and the French, before Québec became a “quasi-independent” Francophone state. No one seemed to count the Indians or Eskimos ... correction: aboriginals, Natives, Inuit, First Nations, whatever ... who were here first. In any event, Québec was now a nation—a nation within a nation, sort of—with all the pride of unbridled sovereignty and most of the advantages of interdependence. The point had been to forever protect the so-called “French fact” of the former Canadian province of Québec—nine million strong—from the influence of a sea of North American English. It wasn't working well, thanks to the all-English SuperNet, but it was considered “worth a shot” at the time. Nobody but sign-painters seemed to care much any more.

The WDA agent pulled into the Magasin-E/E-Store parking lot, a vast plowed field of splotchy asphalt with high snow-banks all around the edges, sparsely populated in this grim weather. People shopped in this mid-sized bubble to save money, and poor people shopped in person rather than over the Net to save the cost of delivery. Lilly found a spot about thirty yards from the entrance, and resolved as she exited the car that this would be the last time she dashed through this deep-frozen moonscape without proper attire.

"Well, this will be a new experience for me," she said as Julia plugged the car into the electrical cord that

hung from the closest hitching post. Julia either ignored her or didn't really hear the comment. It seemed to be taking all her strength, and several tries, to get the three prongs into the three holes.

Lilly stood there hugging herself and wishing mightily that she was in Florida, where the weather didn't threaten to kill you for four months of every year. It seemed to her that people shouldn't have to live this far north, at least not sensible people, or anyone with an active survival instinct. The cold poked through her light driving gloves and penetrated her trench coat as if they weren't even there. Her exhalations into the so-still air were like laughing clouds, transient witnesses to the heat that was being drained from her slender body. Her toes were curled inside her sneakers, and the overshoes she had borrowed from Lars-the-lascivious-waiter only promised to defer the onset of frostbite by a few minutes. She'd had the sense to wear pants, but the cold seemed to pass through them as readily as smoke through a colander. "Can I—uh—g-g-give you a hand?" she finally asked.

"Fuck," spit Julia. "You'll have to move the car one spot over. This plug is all iced up inside the holes."

Lilly got back in the car, trying to remember if she'd ever heard Julia swear before. Lilly did a little swearing herself as she turned the key. Once the car was in the adjacent slot, she stayed inside with the motor running until she was sure Julia could get the block-heater plugged in this time.

Julia had big padded leather mitts on, and although it made things a little clumsy, she rammed the prongs home and threw Lilly a broad smile, a two-handed thumbs-up and a celebratory "ta-da." Lilly turned off the motor, got out and started quick-stepping towards the front door of the E-Store, with Julia hustling to keep up.

They went through the conventional outer door and waited until it had closed before continuing. As they stepped from the revolving door into the lobby of the bubble, they were hit by a wave of tropical air. First impressions mattered, and the E-Store knew that as well as any capitalist.

"Hi Julia," said a young brushcutted greeter in a striped red and white body stocking and green runners. "I'm Lorraine," she said to Lilly. "Gimme your coat and we'll get you all warmed up. There's fireplaces over there. Help yourself to a thimble if you like ... we got Drambuie, Annisette, Tia Maria and—"

"Thanks," said Julia as she tossed her parka to ... Lorraine, she reminded herself. "So she's Lilly ... my friend. Jeeze, Lorraine, you look like a candy cane!"

"Neat, eh?" giggled the candy cane as she took Lilly's coat with her free hand. "Just put your boots on the tray at number seventy-two ... here's your ticket for the coats ... Pierre's up next, so he'll be over to help you with the shopping in a minute, okay? He's really nice. Have fun, eh?"

Lilly couldn't get over the damned sincerity of it all. Lorraine was like a Julia clone. They're so ... she struggled for the exact right barb ... nice, she settled on. Just once I'd like to see an Evolutionary act like a first class asshole ... just to know they're human.

"Lorraine says she's a Human Two-point-nine," said Julia as they made their way into the large, comfortably-furnished waiting room. "I met her a couple of times before. She wants to be a mommy too, she told me, but she's waiting to find the right man to be the daddy and stay around for like fifteen years or something like that, like everybody did back in the olden days. She thought of getting—uh—seminated, like me, but her mom and dad stayed together till she was like fifteen or maybe seventeen or something, and she really liked growing up that way, even although now she likes living in a clan."

Lilly didn't respond. She wanted to ask Julia what "two-point-nine" meant, exactly, knowing full well that Julia would have no clue. But that dig held no promise of reward or advantage, so the WDA agent just

flopped onto a couch and drank in the fingers of heat from a huge, crackling fireplace—one of three. Her back was to the lines of MIU booths containing chairs ... most of which are unoccupied, she noted with a glance over a shoulder. Most people didn't like to go Netshopping on site, but the E-Store wasn't going to drive off those few who preferred it that way. She looked up at the sloped Pliesterine ceiling. It was a feature of bubbles that made her feel ill at ease, unnatural, even the little ones, like this one ... well, little compared to the massive hub at Victor-E, she thought. There was nothing magical about flat ceilings, of course; it was just what she was used to.

Julia slumped down beside her, and stopped talking ... something she figured Lilly would appreciate, even if that was a tad weird, by clan standards. "Hi," she hollered at a young lad with Downe's Syndrome. He was pushing a little table on wheels that clinked with bottles, and he was staring wide-eyed at Julia. "What's your name?" she asked.

"I'm Bruno Kelly!" he announced loudly through a congenital smile. He jiggied the serving cart right up to Julia's knees, and pointed to the stuff on top, the bottles, the rows of tiny empty paper butter-cups and the clay toothpick holder full of skinny, hand-rolled joints. "You want some stuff to drink or smoke?" asked his big rubbery lips. "It's for free if you just take only one! We call it the honor system."

The boy hadn't even looked at Lilly—he seemed entranced with Julia—so Lilly poured herself a thimble of Drambuie. Julia passed. "Preggers," she tried to explain to Bruno Kelly, to no effect. Lilly automatically went for her purse to tip the boy before she remembered that you just don't do that with Evolutionaries. It was too late for a rewind, so she took out a toonie—a Canadian two-dollar coin. "Can you put this in the—uh—Foundation-E jar for me, please?" she asked.

"Shoor I can," said the boy as he trundled off, wobbling precariously, pushing the booze and pot cart with one hand and holding the prized toonie aloft in the other. This was a real treasure for Bruno, a day-maker.

"Bye ... and thanks, Bruno Kelly," hollered Julia with an aborted wave, but Bruno was way too excited to turn back. "I'll face him tonight to thank him," she said quietly.

"Why?" asked Lilly before she'd thought through the situation.

"I just said that to you, Lilly," explained Julia patiently. "To say thanks." Julia was beginning to wonder about Lilly's memory, or comprehension. It's her CQ, she realized. "Bruno Kelly doesn't know that what he does is a job. He just ... likes doing that stuff he does. Everybody's nice to him, eh? And he feels important."

It occurred to Lilly that young Bruno Kelly had used both his names in the blatant hope that someone, anybody at all, might be inclined to Netlink with him. "Will he ... do you think he'll like ... remember you?" asked Lilly.

"Maybe he will," said Julia. "But there's lots of people in the world, and they're all just behind the glass, you know, so we all forget most people, eh?"

The glass...? thought Lilly. Ahhh ... the screen of an MIU! "I ... suppose," she said. "Anyway, I'm sure he'll be pleased to—" She cut herself off at the arrival of a tall, fifty-something man with absolutely no hair on his head. He had the body of a pro wrestler and a grin as big as Bruno's. "Hi," Lilly said ... "Pierre," she added, remembering his name in the nick of time.

She's learning, thought Julia as Pierre returned the salutation. Or maybe her CQ is higher than we figured.

Pierre welcomed them both to the E-Store, by name, and thanked Lilly for making young Bruno happy.

It turned out that Pierre was the adoptive father of the boy's mother, and that he had moved into Evolution only a few years ago, when he saw the dramatic change in his grandson's life after his daughter joined. Julia had heard a thousand such stories, and they never failed to touch her heart.

Lilly gave the subtlest of body-language hints, and Pierre picked up on them. "So," he said, "I can talk you around the store on an MIU over there, or I can take your order here and bring stuff out, or we can go for a stroll. What'll it be, ladies?" (He said "ladies," but he was addressing Lilly.)

"Actually, I'd love to just poke around the store," said Lilly. "We'll just pick up a shopping cart and—"

"Can he come too?" asked Julia innocently. She'd stood up and clasped her hands around Pierre's bulky biceps. "You're not too busy to come too, eh?"

"Whatever you two decide on," he said diplomatically, looking at Lilly for the final word. He didn't know she was WDA, but it was obvious to him that either her mood or her CQ was suffering severe frostbite. She's certainly not an Evolutionary.

"Shoor," said Lilly, with what she thought was a minimum of ice.

Pierre didn't know this was Lilly's first time in an E-Store, but he'd guessed as much from her attitude—and the way her eyes flitted about, drinking in all that was there. He grabbed a shopping cart on the way from the waiting room to the store proper—he was prepared to do the pushing. Lilly politely reached over and assumed that duty for herself.

The aisles were wide, and they were covered in lawn-green indoor-outdoor carpeting, and very clean. They must be forever vacuuming, thought Lilly. There were counters with every kind of merchandise, from cabbages to pearls to snow tires. The displays were only chest-high, so that a standard-issue adult could take in the well-lit expanse of the E-Store over the top. There were perhaps a hundred other shoppers' heads visible ... not many for a retail outfit of this size, she thought, although it is miserable weather for going out.

There were only a few of each item on the shelves, so that every bit of counter space seemed to present a dizzying array of products. As Lilly tossed two tubes of toothpaste in the shopping cart, Pierre quietly spoke the specific purchase into his Sniffer. The shelves will be replenished in minutes, Lilly recalled from her study of all those Netfiles on these E-Stores.

"These are nice," said Pierre when he saw Lilly fondling some low-quality earmuffs. "They're only five dollars more, and they have four different colors of interchangeable puffy things for when you fancy a change."

Lilly took them without comment, then dropped them into the cart. She wasn't in a mood to talk with Julia or her new old bald pal ... whose arm she's still holding, Lilly noticed. Julia and Pierre lagged behind, sensing Lilly's mood, trying to respect it without sharing it. Lilly occasionally heard them having a snuffled laugh, and realized she had no desire at all to be included in whatever merriment they were enjoying.

She bought two long scarves that seemed to be hand-made and three pairs of so-called "thermal" long underwear. She wanted to buy a lifetime's supply of facial tissues for her lingering cold, and Pierre asked on his Sniffer that three "valu-paks" be brought out from the back. Then she picked out a pair of warm-looking, attractive calf-high boots for any normal outing, plus a pair of "tramping" boots with steel toes for use in the bush, should she ever venture there. "I'm size eleven," she told Pierre, who had to have things brought out from a storage area.

Lilly had never seen the much-touted Canadian bush up close and personal, and she'd been forewarned

to do it—if at all—before the mosquitoes and blackflies arrived or after they'd gone to bug heaven—which eliminated June through September, she'd been told. There was a display of electrically heated boots, gloves, and headgear—Lilly passed. I'll get through winter without these kinds of things, she thought. With any luck, I won't even be here next winter.

She also bought two pairs of gloves, one utilitarian and the other rather stylish, and some thick woolen socks—three pair. She looked long and hard at some warm flannel pajamas, but ultimately decided against. She'd never bothered before, and there were a number of other, better ways to keep warm through a winter's night. Her living expenses were paid by the WDA, the hydro for her apartment was separately metered, and she was not really expected or obliged to share the Evolutionary obsession with conservation and energy saving. "I'll catch up with you later," she said to Julia. "I've got some—uh—"

"We'll be in the cafeteria," said Julia. "It's over there in the corner."

Lilly had seen the sign, and waved them off as she pushed her shopping cart past a small cluster of customers and towards the plumbing section. She had a particular hatred for reduced-flow showerheads, like the one she had in her so-called suite. It did the job adequately, but sometimes she didn't want mere adequacy. Showers were a necessity, but they were also therapeutic, and sometimes she wanted a damn torrent. She also wanted a detachable, flexible-hosed showerhead to ... well, to enjoy. She smiled inwardly, looked around, and found a large sink with several working models hooked up.

"This one has, like, twelve different settings," said a male voice behind her as a long bare arm reached out to point.

Lilly was startled. "Oh ... hello—uh—Lars," she said. It was the young man who'd tossed her the keys to her new Aura a few days ago and loaned her the overshoes she'd been wearing today ... and both times he took the occasion to look me over pretty good, the smarmy little freak. She remembered him from her Netsnooping too, and felt herself almost gag at the mental image of twenty-something Lars Johannsen and fifty-something Annette Blais doing their version of Shakespeare's "two-backed beast."

"Ms. Petrosian!" he said, expressing—or at least feigning—surprise. "How nice to see you. I'm an apprentice plumber, you know, and I work here sometimes. How's your new job working out?"

"Can you install it for me?" she asked coolly, ignoring his question.

"Be my pleasure," he answered enthusiastically. "No charge," he added, in a voice that suggested conspiratorial secrecy.

Lilly didn't want any favors from Lars, and she didn't appreciate what she felt was the hidden agenda behind his furtive generosity. Evolution was well known in the Normal community as a place of never-ending "love" triangles, quadrilaterals, and more. She did not need such hopeless complications in her life, and even if she had been in the market for gratuitous thrills, it wouldn't be with the likes of him. Dumb name, Lars, she thought as she re-examined the showerhead. God, I'm plain mean sometimes, she realized. "Just put the installation on the WDA's bill, please," she said neutrally, without looking at him. "We can afford it."

"Whatever," said Lars. "I'll try to get by your place tonight, if that's convenient."

"That would be just fine," said Lilly. She almost said his name again, but she had her guard up—she didn't want to do the slightest thing that could be interpreted as responsive to his transparent overtures. She put the twelve-stop showerhead in her shopping cart, and turned the wrong way. Oh God, she thought. "The cafeteria is ... uh...?"

"All the way down to your right," said Lars, pointing.

Even the brief eye contact of that innocent exchange wasn't free of subterfuge, and Lilly felt queasy. He wanted to join her for a coffee; she could tell. She most assuredly did not want that, and he was disappointed; she could see it in his eyes. She saw that he knew what she was feeling, and that he actually felt sorry for her ... the presumptuous little sperm-pistol. She turned to leave, and hoped to hell he hadn't sensed her thoughts. He was extraordinarily good-looking, in a twenty-two-year-old sort of way. In fact Lars oozed sensuality, and knew it. And he knew that others couldn't help but notice. And he loves every decibel of discomfort he causes, she knew.

Lars stood in the aisle thinking about that lucky damned showerhead with the twelve settings, and watched the gangly WDA agent walk stiffly away. She won't turn around to see if I'm standing here watching her ... he knew that in spades. He knew she wanted to, but she still absolutely would not do it. He figured she'd expect to catch him in mid-ogle, and he wondered what she'd feel if she dared to glance back and didn't see him standing there. Until this evening then, he said in his mind as her long black hair lay too still on the back of her white blouse.

Lilly turned up an aisle, and made a phony effort to examine a display of soaps. She was vaguely facing the plumbing department. The counters weren't high enough—he could still see her head and shoulders ... and the outline of my breasts ... if he was still there. She chanced a lightning-quick peek, looking maybe forty-five degrees to the right of the spot where Lars had been. In her peripheral vision, she could see him walking away briskly, going back to whatever apprentice plumbers did when they ran out of tall willowy customers. Ewwww, she thought as the possibilities of Lars' next move crossed her mind. Wanker, she said to herself, remembering the oh-so-British put-down for that sort of thing.

She turned her back to the scene of the crime and took out her Sniffer. "Access the financials of the E-Store associated with the Victor-E clan for two thousand and thirty-three," she instructed in a light voice. "No ... sorry ... make that two thousand and thirty two, last year, and bottom lines only ... and no audio."

Whew! she thought as the answers popped up on the small black-and-white screen. The E-Store sales floor alone covered more than twenty-five thousand square feet. It employed forty-three full-time and part-time staff, had sales of sixteen million dollars in fiscal 2032, and made three million in after-tax profits. Even though the E-Store was based in a very small town, population 3,800, its customer base, she noticed, extended almost to Ottawa. She scrolled down, and was newly astonished at the range of products and services that were offered. This E-Store had two dentists, it built houses, it even had a trust company that amounted to a bank. God, she realized, a person could go cradle to grave and never shop anywhere else! No wonder capitalists are pissed off at Evolution!

The policies of the E-Stores were everywhere the same. No price could be higher than the regular prices of their capitalist competitors, the service side had to be ultra-personal, and to top it all off, every November 3, just in time for Christmas or "holiday" buying, every customer got a check in the mail amounting to three percent of all their purchases in the previous twelve months. It's not fair, Lilly thought. Evolutionaries represent just over two percent of the world's population, but they do seven percent of all sales in the world.

She pushed her cart to the cafeteria entrance. I could bring it in with me, she thought, but that would be foolish. After a few seconds of reflection, she left her purse in the cart, just to show she was trusting. She even thought of taking her LieDeck-equipped Sniffer out of her purse and putting it on top, out in the open, but she declined. No sense being stupid about this. I don't really care what they think of me.

The cafeteria was large, perhaps fifty or sixty tables, and Lilly was surprised to find it half full—the store

was quite unbusy. Then she noticed that many of the customers were staff—sales people, stockroom workers, drivers, greeters, shopping assistants—all wore some badge or article of clothing that identified them as staff. Some were taking a break, but most were talking to their Sniffers—either to people or to an MIU at the other end—doing work that could be done as easily here as anywhere else. That was one of the things she'd noticed about Evolutionaries. They seemed rather carefree and lax, but they were serious diggers. Their Netfiles were highly organized, as were their days, or at least the work portion. Every Victor-E member carried a Sniffer, and every Sniffer had a gang of waiting-to-be-done tasks and reminders ... for just such slack times as this.

It was easy to spot Julia's blond head of hair about thirty feet down the right-hand aisle. And she had her back to the entrance ... which means that she won't be doing her jump-up-and-down giddy-teenager act, Lilly thought, with a dollop of gratitude. As she closed in on her quarry, she noticed that Pierre's eyes were locked onto Julia's, and the two of them were hand-dancing! Lord love a duck, felt Lilly. Bald, ancient, Pierre and young, luscious, dim, preggers Julia were glomming each other's eyeballs while their hands formed a damp, wiggling ball on the tablecloth. What ever happened to good old-fashioned conversation? she wondered. And modesty? It's almost like they're ... doing it ... in public!

"Oh ... hi Lilly," said Pierre as he quickly uncoupled their hands and remembered the rest of reality. "You want a coffee, or—"

"I should get back," said Lilly, wishing she had a basis to add the word "home." She could have used a coffee, but she wasn't up to a surface-level chat with these two aliens, especially as she had apparently caused a kind of "interruptus" in their pursuit of ... jeeze ... happiness? she wondered. She never had understood the universal post-Revolutionary obsession with sex—real, Netbased or quasi—make believe—including hand-dancing. I realize there's no God to tut-tut us humans any more, but...

Julia and Pierre actually kissed goodbye when they parted in the parking lot. Lilly had felt obliged to slam the trunk lid on what seemed a rather prolonged liplock between the two ... strangers, she decided they were. They've just met, for heaven's sake. What's the damned point of all this—

"Bye Lilly," called Pierre as he turned to leave. She nodded and got in her new green Aura as Julia unbuckled the extension cord from the block-heater. The engine started up smoothly.

Julia was still outside, bundled up in her Hudson's Bay parka, waving both her fleece-lined mittens at Pierre. "Okay," she hollered. "Tomorrow night." She finally got into the passenger seat, clutched her shoulders and gave herself a robust hug.

Lilly backed out carefully on the crunchy snow. "What was that about?" she asked, a flick of the head indicating she meant the thing with Pierre, not the self-hug.

"He wants to face me on the Net," said Julia as she buckled up. That was what Pierre had yelled at her, but Julia knew that he was probably thinking Netsex. There was no end of willing partners out there, and Evolutionaries never worried about money when they tingled each other in cyberspace. It was a compliment that he wanted her, at least once, and he obviously knew that the key to pleasure was the giving of it. Julia knew she would enjoy the anticipation of their encounter, as he would, and she knew she would also enjoy giving him pleasure. In the cafeteria, they had touched hands, minds, hearts ... and feet, she remembered ... so why not?

Of course Lilly just didn't get it ... and probably never will, Julia realized. Many Normals didn't, and WDA agents were even more frigid than the average Normal. Not that they didn't like sex or patronize Netsex services, including the Soft-E operation based at Victor-E. They did lots of that, but they pretended otherwise, made as if they were above it all, or regarded it as a private bodily function, like

defecation or flossing.

They prefer illusion, Julia remembered being taught when she first came to live in Victor-E. It took her a long time to get her mind around what “illusion” was, until her friend Annette summed it up for her: “Illusion is the way it isn't,” she had said. “It's ... make-believe.” For a long time, Julia found it hard to believe that people who weren't retarded could lean that way, but after a million perfectly clear real-life examples, she had accepted it—even if it didn't make any sense. “He's really nice,” she blurted out as Lilly turned onto the highway and headed west.

Chapter 30

PLUMBING

Wednesday, February 16, 2033—7:00 p.m.

Lilly had her dinner brought up from the E-tery that evening. She'd gone back to bed at 11:00 a.m., after putting away her purchases—just for a nap—and promptly fell asleep for two hours. Her body was still trying to shake off the cold, and perhaps the daytime snooze had helped, but it didn't get her LieDeck-verifying done. When she finally woke just after 1:00 p.m., she feared she'd never nod off when she packed it in for the night.

She had spent the remaining afternoon hours reviewing Netfiles—the bane of every agent's existence—and had actually done a few LieDeck-verifications over the Net. It was not fun being alone in a weird social environment in a quasi-country like Québec, and being sick here had been almost unbearable. Now it was early evening. She sat at the kitchen table and stacked her dishes on the tray as she listened to the soothing strains of Strauss—she was reorganizing the kitchen—the agent she was replacing had neither taste nor talent along those lines.

There was a triple knock on her door. It had to be Lars. Lilly was expecting him, and had unlocked the door for that reason, but he was early, or at least earlier than she had expected. She glanced in the mirror beside the buffet. She was in her blue housecoat, with nothing on underneath, and she had on a pair of the thick woolen socks she'd purchased at the E-Store that morning. “Christ,” she mumbled, “he'll think that I—” She amputated her sentence and used the remote to shut off the stereo. She didn't give a fiddler's fuck what Lars thought of her, and his one-track mind wouldn't think anything different if she were dressed in mediaeval armor. “Come in,” she hollered.

Lars opened the door and stuck his head around the edge, playfully. “Plumber,” he advertised. “You decent?”

“Yes,” said Lilly icily. “You?”

“Zing,” chirped Lars. He threw his head back as if he had been soundly slapped, and then stepped in, carrying a large red tool box, still chuckling at his little joke, or her curt rejoinder—it was hard to tell. “You ... said tonight was convenient,” he reminded Lilly, putting down his equipment and closing the door behind.

“Yes, of course,” she said, rising from the table and using one hand to assure herself that the housecoat stayed together in front. “The bathroom is right through there,” she said, pointing, and then realizing he probably knew that. “The new showerhead is on the side of the tub.”

“Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go,” sang Lars as he gathered up his kit and walked into the bathroom.

He wanted to explain all about the twelve different settings, but he couldn't really do that without referring to various body parts and likely offending Lilly. He wanted even more to do a show and tell, but that was way out of the question. Images of Lilly and himself experimenting together waltzed through his mind as he turned the long-handled vice-grip wrench. Too bad, he mused. I suppose she figures I want that just for my own tingles.

"I'll take the old one with me, okay?" he hollered. "For when you leave," he added, not as loudly.

Lilly heard both parts of what Lars had said, but chose not to respond. She decidedly did not want to defend her decision to go un-green with the new fixture, nor did she care at all for the fate of her successor, or the old fixture.

In minutes, the new showerhead was installed, the tools were back in their nests and the tub was wiped. Lars removed the head from its perch, turned on the cold water and tested all the settings. "Works perfect," he said towards the open door. Lilly was standing just outside the small bathroom, her arms crossed, her face expressionless. "Enjoy," he said as he grabbed his tools and the rejected showerhead and walked rather briskly past his client. He quite hoped she wouldn't notice that his bulge had grown thicker since his arrival, and then he realized that was the first time in ages that he'd wished for something that perfectly ridiculous. "Bye," he added without looking back.

Lilly exhaled loudly as the door closed, in wonderment at the sexual spell that Lars seemed to carry around with him. It was like the 20th-century ideology of communism; it permeated his every word, subtly condemning the non-believer for his or her deliberate unenlightenment. Same as religion used to be, she figured. She locked the door quietly.

It was just after seven o'clock, and work beckoned—loudly. A shower will wake me up, she thought as she went into the bathroom and closed the door ... to keep the heat in, she told herself. She took off the heavy socks, let her housecoat drop to the floor, glanced at the showerhead, and looked at her reflection in the mirror above the sink ... and killed a laugh. It's like he left his friggin' eyes behind, she thought with a crooked smile. And he knows exactly where I am and what I'm about to do, the little bastard.

Chapter 31

THE "L" WORD

Saturday, February 19, 2033—7:30 p.m.

The best part is the head tingle, considered Lilly ... the anticipation phase, the aspect of danger, the whole discovery stage. Then, at the risk of sounding like a dinosaur from the 20th century, she added to her thought: and there's always the "L" word.

The luxurious backseat of Michael Whiteside's limo seemed a strangely isolated bit of real estate. Lilly valued privacy, but for the last while, she'd had perhaps more than was healthy. She even found herself wishing that she'd had the courage to sit up front, if only to see what the chauffeur was made of, but that would have been ... what? she asked herself. Human Three? She searched for the right word. Sophomoric, she finally decided. Maybe even patronizing.

In the five days since she had met Victor Helliwell, her life had been routine at best, plain lonely at times ... most of the time. Victor had sent her an N-mail message saying that he would be too busy to see her for a while. And he had apologized yet again for his obnoxious behavior, but then he'd reminded her that even though he'd been given a free ride for nineteen years, the WDA was still only entitled to demand a

meeting once every calendar month, and then only for a brief LieDeck-verification session—four questions and skedaddle. Clearly, Victor was planning to go out in a flash of glory ... or something ... and wasn't in a mood to cramp his preparations for her benefit.

So, Lilly had done other things. She had checked the decibel levels of the big woofers on the roof of the mess hall—no reportable problem there. She had looked into the clinic in the central hub of Victor-E, and discarded her suspicion that some of the patients might be better off in a proper hospital. She had made two reports to Control Upper America, and she had reviewed Victor's theories of human consciousness evolution. She had found the elevator that got the elderly and the disabled down from the rim of the life-base hub to the sunken floor-level. She had accessed InfoBank for Julia Whiteside's archived files and scanned for Netfaces between her and Alex, the taxi driver—they were getting close, and they had even shared some innocent Netsex. She had also tracked Randy Whiteside's movements, studied numerous Netfiles—all of them tedious—and gone about her other monotonous duties as the monitor of an Evolutionary clan. Of no small consequence, she had reached an understanding with Big Wus; he'd give her a wide berth if she'd do the same for him. And of course she'd gone shopping with Julia. Tonight, she was wearing the new winter boots and the gloves she'd bought—the fancy ones.

She hadn't spent any significant time with Annette yet, even though she'd tried. Last Monday, she had asked her to drop by her apartment when she had a moment. Annette had shown up only minutes later. When Lilly's efforts at small talk fell flat, she got to the point. During their LieDeck-verification session one week ago, Annette had not given a straight “no” to the last question, the one about whether she knew anyone who had any intention of committing a crime. “So ask it again,” Annette had barked. Lilly had done so and was surprised to find that Annette's “I-can't-name-a-single-person” ruse hadn't been a ruse at all. Annette gave a straight “no” this time, and her answer had passed muster on the LieDeck. I suppose she was playing with my mind last Saturday; testing me, Lilly had decided.

She had also eavesdropped on Victor as he Netfaced with Annette on a daily basis. It was astonishing the way his mood was returning to normal. He seemed very determined to follow through on his plan to help Evolution master Human Three Consciousness—“the whole ball of wax,” he always called it. Lilly couldn't understand why Victor would face Annette on audio, but not on video. He was a strange fellow all around. At least Lilly could see him, and he was getting back into the swing of life almost as if he'd never left. The only time he seemed to regress was when he watched the Netnews, which he did for an hour or two every day. As soon as he started watching it, he would go into some kind of a trance, and he would grip the arms of his chair as if he were sitting on the bridge of the starship Enterprise during a galactic storm. When he stopped his Netnews session, he would shake his head to free himself from its grip, or just lie down and pass out. Lilly had reported all that to Control, and he'd told her to keep a close eye on the situation. “There has to be a reason for that,” he'd said.

The only real difficulty she'd had in the past week was with the young Victor-Een who had apparently been assigned the task of vacuuming and cleaning her apartment every Thursday. Lilly had thrown the skinny remnants of a bar of soap into a trashcan in her bathroom. The “maid” had fished it out, politely chastised her for wanton waste, and given her a free demonstration. “You take the old bar and the new bar, and you wet them both, then you slap them together like this and use tiny circular movements until the two bars start to bind. You can feel it happen. Then you put it aside, and the next time you go to use the soap, they're like glued together like it's one bar. It works perfect.”

“Perfectly,” Lilly had corrected her grammar.

“You need a good swiving,” the girl had spit as she stamped out of the apartment. Lilly had to go to her MIU and look up “swiving.” It was a word used in Britain by the underclass of the 19th century. It meant “fucking.”

"You want some music on?" asked Michael's chauffeur.

"No thanks," said Lilly. "I'm really enjoying the quiet."

On Thursday afternoon, she had gone to a general meeting of Regional Command, the several dozen WDA agents who served Pontiac County west. The only part she could remember was that she definitely had not enjoyed meeting Gordon Weatherby, the agent from Callaway #6. Lilly had faced him on the Net a few times, on business matters, and she had actually looked forward to meeting him in person, but his efforts to befriend her on the warm were done in a way that seemed ... too forward, she thought. Sort of the way an Evolutionary might do it—no finesse at all. It was as if he had figured out a formula; if you were nice to a woman, she would happily hop into bed with you. Sheesh!

The rest of the gathering had been a monumental bore. The other agents could not be told about Lilly's assignments to LieDeck-verify Victor Helliwell and to insinuate herself into the private life of Michael Whiteside, which meant that the only interesting aspects of her work were off limits as topics of conversation.

After almost daily interfaces over the Net, she had finally met her local superior on the warm. His name was Major Brian English. He was a tall, sixtyish gentleman, and he somehow reminded Lilly of her ex-boyfriend. He's sort of an older, wiser, whiter Ed, she thought, congenial, but shallow. She didn't know why the Regional Command couldn't just meet on the Net, or why Major English convened these meetings at all. It wasn't like there were any serious problems to solve, procedures to change or mission statements to be hammered out. In fact, when she thought about it, the usual activities of a WDA agent were about as much of a challenge as feeding goldfish.

"Those lights over there across the river, that's Arnprior, Ontario," said the chauffeur. "Canada," he added, in case his charge had never seen a map or operated a Sniffer. "And there's a ferry runs to over near Arnprior from Quyon."

This time Lilly didn't respond at all. She wasn't interested in chitchat, and his badly fractured sentence structure had pretty well answered her question as to the kind of stuff the man was made of. Truth be told, she had butterflies in anticipation of the evening that was about to unfold, and she was content to distract herself with a slow review of her past week.

She had taken a decision to do all the LieDeck-verification of her Victor-Eens over the Net. Most agents had a stable of about two hundred civilians to monitor; she had three hundred and twenty. It made no sense to force them to set up appointments and line up at her door, and considering her secret duties regarding Michael and Victor, there was really no way that Control would object to her unorthodox approach. The only part of L Ving that bothered her was doing the kids. It was an important part of their conditioning, their participation in grown-up life, but asking six-year-olds if they'd committed any crimes always felt ludicrous.

In any event, one hundred and fifty-eight times so far, she had asked the same four annoying questions to an image on her MIU: "Did you commit a crime? Do you intend to commit a crime? Do you know anyone else who has committed a crime? Do you know anyone else who intends to commit a crime?" That's ... she did some quick math ... six hundred and thirty-two "nos" so far. She knew the critical importance of each "no," but still, her job was starting to feel robotic. "Boring is good," she remembered from her days at the Academy. "For you," the instructors had emphasized, "the opposite of 'boring' is not 'exciting.' It is 'chaos,' or 'death.'"

Lilly had never gone in for the "sixty-second special," the ol' "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" type of LieDeck-verification that was preferred by agents who had "better things to do" with their lives. She tried

to turn each and every LV session into a conversation, not so much to pry as to get a “feel” for the person. The capitalist work ethic had suffered a very startling drop in popularity the world over in recent years—except in Evolutionary circles—but she had never forgotten her father's advice when she was a child: “You keep swinging the bat, and sooner or later, you'll get a hit.” She didn't find Evolutionaries very interesting, and she hadn't made any new friends, but she was gradually getting a sense of clan life that would stand her in good stead ... for when the shit hits the fan ... which it usually does, sooner or later.

The only enlightenment she'd had in the past week came as a result of her LV session with Lars, the apprentice plumber who worked part time as a waiter in the clan's E-tery. After answering the mandatory four questions with four “no's,” he had said that he didn't share the clan's resentment of her role. And then he'd talked enthusiastically about being a member of the “Sex-E” virtual community, a Netbased, international group of three million men and women, all of them Evolutionaries. These were people for whom sex had become the point of life—not the only point, but the main point.

Lars had tried to explain how he and his fellow Sex-Eens thought, what they did, how they compared notes on everything from tingle techniques to attitudes. But it wasn't the stuff about sex that Lilly had found enlightening. It was his unexpected comment about how everybody he knew—whether on the Net or on the warm—simply assumed that all WDA agents eavesdropped on them through the mikes and lenses of their MIUs ... even when the machines were off!

“Everyone!?” she'd asked.

“Did you hear a beep when I said that?” he had countered.

“And if this were true ... if we did that ... it would ... bother people?” she had asked, with more than her usual caution.

“It bothers most of them,” Lars had answered—by which he meant the practice, not the theoretical possibility. “But personally, I sort of get a kick out of it, especially when I'm, like, sharing sex. Most Evolutionaries don't give a damn about the WDA any more. It's just the way things are. In fact I would say that most Evolutionaries feel, like, sorry for WDA agents.”

Jerk, Lilly thought as the limo smoothly manhandled the snow-covered highway.

The bright spot of her week was the surprise invitation she'd received from Michael, Wednesday evening, over the Net, to go out for dinner on Saturday. After the things she had said to Venice about consideration for others, she had wondered if she should ask Michael if their going out might cause difficulties for his family ... but she didn't do it. Michael had half-solved the problem by arranging for his chauffeur to pick her up at Victor-E and bring her over to the estate—“to meet Becky before we head out.” And then there was the problem of her being a WDA agent and his being ... well, he was Michael Whiteside, the head of Whiteside Technologies! She had found herself thinking about the date often on Thursday, and last night she'd even had trouble sleeping. She had finally nodded off after deciding that dealing with Becky's feelings was his responsibility and after making a commitment to be straight with Michael about the WDA's concerns and plans—or to be as straight as she could be without jeopardizing her career.

A fragile smile crossed her face at the recollection of her brief running of the gauntlet in the E-tery ten minutes ago. There was a steel fire escape out of her apartment, from the small back balcony down to the link fence around the outdoor pool. The deck and those stairs were kept clear of snow, and they were regularly sprinkled with salt and sand, but sneaking out that way would have led to idle gossip, she'd realized. So, when Michael's chauffeur appeared on her MIU screen to say he'd arrived, she had accepted the need to walk from the bottom of the inside stairs, through the E-tery and out the front door.

She looked as if she were dressed for a Broadway opening, with a black satin cocktail dress, pearls, heels (now tucked into her purse), and a thigh-length fake-ermine coat that had finally arrived in her steamer trunk. Her make-up was light, perfect for a narrow face with high cheekbones, and her straight black hair shone against the white faux-fur.

In the E-tery, she was a guaranteed showstopper. The cooks and waiters just stared. The Evolutionaries at the tables stopped eating—even stopped chewing. When she briefly took a seat to switch from heels to her new boots, some of the male locals made catcalls, much to the displeasure of wives, girlfriends and daughters.

Lilly had felt herself blush, and she almost made it out of the E-tery without further incident, but Julia espied her just as she got to the door. She skipped over and squealed, “Oh Lilly, you look so beautiful! Who's the lucky guy ... or girl?”

She was trapped, so she told all ... well, almost all. “Actually, I'm having dinner with your brother, Mikey,” she'd said, realizing too late that her use of his nickname would have betrayed her eavesdropping activities if Julia had been sharper on the uptake. “I'm supposed to meet Becky out at the estate and then we're going to the Royal Oaks.”

“Oh, you'll like Becky,” Julia had said, and now, as Lilly tried to relax in the back of the limousine, she wished she had used that occasion to tell Julia that the agenda wasn't exactly dinner for three. I'd much rather have told the whole truth, but that would have led to a five-minute explanation, she thought as the chauffeur turned left off Highway 148 and headed north towards the Whiteside estate. Julia likely would have wished me luck in the scoring department, in front of all those people.

“It's about two kilometers from Highway 148 to the estate,” volunteered the driver. “Maybe one and a half miles,” he added, remembering that she was American.

Lilly looked out at the moonlit farmland, and wished that this beautiful country would hurry up and get warm. She'd been told that the snow would be gone by mid-April, only seven weeks from now, but that seemed hard to believe. The cold snap that had started two weeks earlier was still very much on, and it was sometimes hard for her to remember that there were other, friendlier seasons to come.

“Spying is waiting,” she recalled from an old Le Carré novel that she'd read a decade ago, about Cold War One. But the antonym of boring is chaos, she reminded herself. Life often seems to come down to truisms, even if they aren't true, she thought. “A bird in the hand makes blowing the nose difficult,” she remembered good old Ed saying once upon a dull date. Today is the first day of the rest of your life, her Grandpa Petrosian used to say when he got to reminiscing about the 1960s. Finally! she considered. A maxim that might apply to the me and now.

As she walked the few steps between the held-open door of the limo and the held-open door of the great stone manor house, her trained mind focused on the imminent meeting with Michael's wife Rebecca, or Becky. During their Wednesday night Netcall, Lilly and Michael had connected emotionally, with the fire of teenagers, though neither had the courage ... or the foolishness ... to come right out and say it. She wondered how Michael would play his hand. Would he hide all those feelings? If Lester Connolly had gotten his way and the LieDeck was unbanned, Becky would know about me and Michael in an instant, Lilly said to herself. I'm ... glad he didn't die, though.

“Thanks,” she said as the butler closed the door. She removed her new boots, and was relieved that the carpets were thick and warm. “I'll keep my coat,” she said, unbuttoning it quickly so that Michael would catch the pearls, and the neckline. She took her heels out of her bag and slipped them on, leaning on the butler's proffered forearm.

Michael was a perfect gentleman when he shook her hand and welcomed her for the second time to his grand home. His and Becky's home, Lilly re-thought as she let go of his hand, and his eyes. And Venice, and Michael's mother, Doreen, and the live-in staff, of course ... really quite a gang here ... sort of a miniature clan, of sorts.

"Please, come and meet Becky," Michael said, indicating the way to the living room. My God, she's even taller than I remembered.

Becky was about the same age as Michael, but she looked much younger than thirty-seven. She was also dressed for high dining, or more. In fact, she was a knockout, and obviously knew it. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Lilly," said Becky after Michael made the introduction. "You're just going to love the Royal Oaks. It's wonderful; the food, the ambience, everything."

"It's too bad you can't join us," said Lilly, before she realized just how utterly stupid that was, and how insincere.

"Not at all," said Becky, who seemed to be containing a smile. "It's quite clear that Michael cares for you. I'm well along in the Human Three tradition, you know, and I'm not likely to go back to being a ... I see Michael didn't mention that I was in transition," she said when Lilly's eyes darted towards Michael's.

Indeed, Lilly had no idea at all, and she couldn't help wondering why Control hadn't mentioned that, or why it wasn't in Becky's Netfile, or Michael's. Control doesn't know, she realized. Which means Becky doesn't ... participate ... she just observes the Human Three chatrooms ... and we don't have her MIU under total archive, but we should. God, I'm always "at work," even on a date!

Lilly was also taken aback that Michael seemed to have confessed to his wife about the powerful feelings that had transpired between them on Wednesday, over the Net. And she doesn't seem to mind! At all!

"Just ... have a great time," said Becky to her husband's date. "And if you do think of me, do so kindly, without any guilt or fear. I love this man, Lilly, and I always will. But I have other ... friends. You can be sure my evening will be enjoyable. It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope we'll get to know each other better at some point."

"I ... hope so too," said Lilly, and it occurred to her that she had no idea whether her LieDeck would have beeped those words or not. It also occurred to her that Becky's manner with people somehow resembled ... Lilly couldn't make the connection right away, and then it hit her ... her reactions are exactly like Julia's! Well ... similar.

"And thanks so much for your help with Venice the other day," Becky said as Lilly walked out of the elegant living room on Michael's arm.

"My goodness," said Lilly as she settled into the spacious back of the limousine. "I didn't know what to expect from Becky, but I certainly didn't expect that!"

Michael smiled wanly, and struggled for words. "She doesn't like the Evolutionary lifestyle," he said carefully, "but she's been sort of watching Human Three chatrooms for several years, doing the Human Three thing on her own. I hated it at first. For a long time I felt ... you know ... betrayed ... and angry ... and frustrated, but 'the times, they are a-changing,' I suppose. We sort of lead separate lives, but ... together, if you know what I mean. It ... certainly wasn't my decision."

Lilly felt she'd thought through this date, but now it seemed to her that she had been too excited to fully consider all the issues involved ... the same mistake I made when I hooked up with good old Ed, she realized. She felt confused, and fell back on that most reliable of WDA ploys, silence. It wasn't an easy

commitment to keep, because Michael seemed to feel as awkward as she did.

"I'm ... not completely unhappy about how things are between Becky and me," he finally said. "Tonight," he tacked on.

Lilly looked at him in the subdued light as the limo turned east onto the 148, headed for Gatineau. She wanted to say something, or do something, but her reality coordinates were still out of kilter, off balance, and she stayed with her decision to remain quiet until his convoluted explanation was done.

"She ... actually has a date too," offered Michael, "and I guess I hope she has a good time. It's ... kind of ... disconcerting, this Human Three business. If ... one member of a couple gets involved, the other one sort of gets dragged along, against his will ... or her will ... I guess it's usually the other way around, I mean the man getting into that Human Three stuff first, but in my case..."

Michael's mind seemed to get bogged down, and Lilly realized that she felt sorry for him. That's the second or third time I've felt that way, she realized. Pity sucks, especially when the guy is filthy rich. "So ... let's see what this Human Three stuff is all about," she suggested. She extracted her Sniffer from her black handbag. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," said Michael, relieved to be off the hook. "Why not?"

"Access any Human Three Evolutionary chatroom," she commanded. "Observe only ... and no hard drugs," she added. Chatrooms full of people on narcotics were just stupid.

The small, square, black-and-white screen lit up in a "nine-split"—nine tiny boxes with faces in them. There was raucous laughter all around—heads rocking, eyes tearing up, cheeks in full spasm. Lilly killed the sound. "Can we use the built-in screen?" she asked as she activated the LieDeck in her Sniffer, putting it on the beeper mode.

Michael took the unit and inserted it into the appropriate cavity in the back of the front seat—it saved the time of asking the ID code of the room they had accessed on the Sniffer and starting over from scratch. The built-in screen was revealed by the parting of two flexible panels, rather like the curtains of an early-20th-century movie theater. "Can I—uh—turn on the LieDeck in your Sniffer?" he asked.

"It's already on," said Lilly, certain that she could justify her decision to Control, if he asked, or if she confessed. "And it's on the beeper mode. I figured ... it might be good for a laugh."

Michael reactivated the sound as the built-in MIU took over the job and presented the same chatroom. The nine people were still hooting, but now they were in full color and ultra-fi.

"Show source," said Lilly.

"Happy Hookah Evolutionary chatroom number 31,491, Human Three orientation, THC only," read the words across the bottom of the screen.

"God, there sure are a lot of these Happy Hookah rooms," Lilly said.

"Becky never seems to care which chatroom she watches," said Michael. "It just ... it doesn't seem to matter to her. It's as if the actual identities of the individuals are ... well, irrelevant. It's sort of ... I don't know ... ultra-friendly and totally alienating at the same time."

The chatters were still laughing out of control, and Lilly was reminded of the flight attendants on the plane two weeks ago ... week and a half, she corrected her memory ... it just seemed like a lot longer. The nine Human Threes were "emotion wrestling," trying to stop the laughter, but clearly not trying hard enough to

succeed. She wanted to access InfoBank and roll the thing back to see what the big joke was that they'd missed out on, but using "the bank" was strictly forbidden in the presence of any person who didn't have a WDA security clearance. "I wonder what was so funny," she said.

"Sometimes they laugh like that just because they're stoned, or because it's fun," said Michael.

He's done this before, thought Lilly.

"I've looked in on these Happy Hookah chatrooms a few times before," he admitted, wanting to dispel any impression that he did it often, or that he enjoyed himself when he did. "Of course many Human Three chatrooms don't allow any drugs at all ... not even grass."

Lilly offered no sequitur. She just watched as the nine pot-heads enjoyed their globe-spanning guffaw. Spoken words were attempted from time to time—all in English—but to no effect. Some emotion wrestling sessions had been known to go on for ten minutes, or more.

At the bottom of each box were printed words indicating the geographic location of each participant. The SuperNet has shrunk the planet to the dimensions of a communal kitchen and made us all neighbors, she remembered learning at the Academy. They had been studying the 20th-century media guru, Marshall MacLuhan, and what he had failed to anticipate was that "global village" neighbors would want to talk across and over their imaginary picket fences. As of 2018, a world of many languages simply wouldn't do any more. English had been the dominant language in the days of the keyboarded Internet; now it was virtually the only language of the newer SuperNet. Something like eighty-six percent of the world's people spoke English, either as a first or second language. "Two or three more generations, and English will be the only spoken language in the world," she said as the laughter on the screen began to fade.

"Too bad, in a way," said Michael. "Language and culture sort of go hand in hand."

"So ... you actually believe her?" asked the teenaged woman in the upper, right-hand box, "Box #3." She was dabbing her eyes with a sweater sleeve, and small print below her image identified her as living in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

"Well yes!" exclaimed a bearded youth in another box—from Minsk.

"Beep," went Lilly's LieDeck.

"I absolutely believed her," the Russian lad went on.

Another "beep" happened in the chauffeured limo.

"I am sure that she is feeling—how do you say that?—she is feeling fucking awful about it."

"Beep," went the LieDeck in the car.

"Beeeeeep," squawked an old woman in Tokyo, vocally.

"She probably had his arm delivered to her in New York," joked a male Evolutionary from Brandon, Manitoba. He looked to be perhaps twenty years old—the only Canadian among the nine players. "Five kilos down, seventy-five to go," he added, cackling at his own cleverness.

"The long arm of the lawless," quipped the Sri Lankan woman. And that started the collective laugh all over again, except for three chatters who apparently weren't familiar with the expression, "the long arm of the law."

"Christ Almighty!" said Lilly. She leaned forward and manually killed the sound. "I think ... they're talking about Sheena Kalhoun ... and Lester Connolly's freaking arm!"

"It's pretty clear they're not—uh—too crazy about the WDA," said Michael. "That's another part of the Human Three mindscape that Becky isn't too impressed with."

There was no beep, and Lilly thought about that. So Becky is in transition from being Human Two to being Human Three, but ... she doesn't like the Evolutionary lifestyle and she doesn't approve of the Human Three contempt for the WDA. Which leaves ... what? she wondered. "Does Becky do grass?" she asked.

"The kid's don't know," said Michael, avoiding a direct "yes."

"You?" she asked.

"I tried it at college," said Michael with a playful glint in his blue eyes, "but I never inhaled."

"Beep," went the LieDeck.

Lilly chuckled, recalling the historical reference to the late Bill Clinton, the 20th-century U.S. president whose laughable little fib had been exploited so successfully by NORML to get THC products—marijuana and hashish—decriminalized. Because it was a civilian outfit, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws hadn't had the advantage of using a LieDeck back in 2027, when they finally won their sixty-year battle, but of course they didn't exactly need it for the Clinton quote. "Me too," she said. "I ... still do, once in a while, when I'm not on duty."

Michael reached in the upper pocket of his beige cashmere coat and withdrew a pack of Camel Mini-Jays Mild. "And ... are you off duty now?" he asked.

Lilly was shocked that Michael Whiteside, of all people, would suggest toking up. "I am ... definitely off duty," she said clearly, so the LieDeck in her Sniffer would confirm her sincerity with its silence.

"Beep," it went.

"As of now!" she stated, looking crossly at the tattletale device that stuck out of the back of the front seat. This time she didn't get beeped. She threw Michael a purse-lipped nod to punctuate her decision.

He opened the pack, and she accepted one of the skinny marijuana filter-tips. Michael gave her a light, then lit his own. Lilly took a puff ... and then ordered the sound back on the screen.

"It's supposed to revalue life upwards," said an older man in the section of the screen marked "Box #7"—bottom left—an Israeli, it said, but with a lilting hillbilly accent (the word "life" came out more along the lines of "laaff"). "So now, everybody on Earth kin keep a digitized life profile or a bah-ography o' themselves at this here World Ah-dentity Bank they's building in California so's their descendants some day kin see 'em an' hear 'em talk about their laavves in a hunnert or a thousand years, so's they kin know their roots. Y'all have to admit it's a fantastic idea, an' it shoulda got started up best part of a century ago when we first had tape recorders an' camcorders an' all that stuff. Ah shore wish Ah could see mah great-grandparents and mah great-great-grandparents when they was jes' a couple o' young folks, talking and carrying on about their laavves, and about what laaff was like back in the early twentieth century. What a treasure that would be! Ah don't even have that much stuff from mah own folks, and they only passed on a few years back. Mah kids and mah grandkids—they faultin' me for not getting mah parents' laaff profiles done when it was still possible."

"Hey look," said the Sri Lankan Evolutionary in box #3, "nobody's saying this World Identity Bank isn't a

great idea, but no way is the WDA going to open a hundred-billion-dollar new facility just so our lives can be enriched! They always have another angle. It's a cover-up for a—for something else. You can bet your pension on that."

There were no beeps for any of this, and Lilly sat very still to absorb that electronic silence. What the Sri Lankan woman had said might not be true, but there was no denying that she believed what she had said.

"Maybe," said the Israeli man, "but Ah mean who the fuck cares what the WDA is up to any more? You just ignore them bastards and make the most outa laaff."

"That's all jolly good, as long as you don't rock the boat!" said a portly woman in the center box—from Loughborough, England.

Robin Hood's old stomping grounds, thought Lilly. Nice accent.

"Or what?" retorted a young black man in overalls in the middle of the bottom row—box #8. He was in Johannesburg. "I mean what exactly are they going to do if you make a fuss? I mean—"

"How many arms do you have, Joe?" countered the British woman. That threw the group out of control all over again.

Lilly killed the sound and butted out her Mini-Jay. Michael also finished his. They looked at each other with slightly pink eyes, smiled ... and burst out laughing. Then Lilly calmed herself. "Jesus H. Christ," she said, "the WDA sure is taking a shit-kicking these days. Remember how things used to be? Even a year ago?"

"Well, I'd have to say it's not ... completely undeserved," said Michael, trying to be diplomatic ... and to not laugh ... and to not get beeped.

"Let's be honest here," said Lilly. "The WDA pisses people off all the time. Those so-called scandals that Gil Henderson broke, that was the turning point. And for all their triviality, we were in the wrong. But even when we're not wrong, the WDA isn't always wise. We should have legalized grass long before we did, and frankly, I see more pluses than minuses in unbanning the LieDeck."

Michael was stunned that a WDA agent would say such a thing, especially to him, and most especially with a LieDeck operating. And the LieDeck didn't beep! he noted. "Well, that would certainly make a whole lot of money for my company," he conceded, "but I..." He wanted to explain his thinking on this controversial matter, but he rarely said a word to anyone about this, and now he was talking to an agent of the WDA, albeit an agent who was officially off duty. "My—uh—personal position is ... I'm ... really not prepared to risk a return to chaos," he finally said, unchallenged by the LieDeck.

Lilly was impressed. He really believes what he said. She respected his view, even if she didn't share it. She was only eleven years old during the LieDeck Revolution, but she remembered school friends joking blackly about the "puddle count," the most recent tally of the jumpers' splattered bodies. She also remembered the terrible drum roll of stories about which kid's father or grandpa or brother or sister or teacher or mother had become the latest person to "hit the bricks." Who is to make the choice between repression and anarchy? she wondered. I'm sure there's a way to unban the LieDeck without everybody doing a synapse-collapse. Well ... fairly sure.

"Let's put that issue aside for later," she suggested as the limo slowed at the outskirts of Gatineau. She withdrew her Sniffer from the slot and held it in her lap. "And so that we can keep on being open with each other, I'll leave my LieDeck on, and I'll leave it on the beeper mode, okay? I mean ... except in public?"

Michael looked over the woman who matched or exceeded his height ... among other things, he thought. "I reserved a—uh—private dining room," he said.

"I'm glad," said Lilly. "I'll leave my LieDeck on over dinner."

"And I ... shall lie to my heart's content," said Michael.

"Beep," went Lilly's LieDeck.

"Even when the waiter's in the room," he added.

"Beep."

Chapter 32

PHASE 2

Saturday, February 19, 2033—8:30 p.m.

The Patriot Security van eased up to the third glowing Pliesterine structure on Bubble Street—"The Pot-house," it was called. Victor had difficulty with his blood circulation, among other things, so this building had been chosen for today's meeting. Its temperature was kept at twenty-three degrees Celsius—a lovely summer's day—just like his hideout on the second floor of the Whitesides' lodge.

The Pot-house had large airtight garage-type lifting doors, two of them, in series, so that in addition to keeping the bubble "blown," it allowed vehicles to drive right inside without letting out too much heat. The Patriot van stopped in the holding zone between the doors. A few seconds after the first one closed behind them, the second door opened, and the driver eased the van into the bubble, as per the protocol (no loading or unloading of things or people was permitted between the doors). From the oppressive darkness of the outside world, they had gone into the normal light of the waiting area, and finally into the intense brightness of the hothouse.

Victor stepped out and thanked the Patriot driver. He stood awkwardly, feeling the warm embrace of the humid air, and feeling ridiculous to be dressed in a suit. He watched as the van backed out into purgatory and the inner door descended, and he listened as the outside door rose and the van backed out into the hell of a Québec winter. He realized he was on his own in the big wide world for the first time since the Revolution, and perhaps for the last time ever.

He began walking down the wide central pathway. On both sides, water gurgled, and immature, lime-green plants soaked up sustenance from high-pressure sodium and metal halide bulbs. Row upon row of light fixtures were suspended from moveable trestles. He was glad to make the walk alone. For this first-ever sortie from his private sanctuary in nineteen years, he'd insisted that there be no welcoming committee, no fanfare over the meaningless milestone. "Hi there," he said to a particularly tall plant as he lifted a leaf with his hand and sniffed its pungent odor. The plant did not answer. "I understand perfectly," he said, looking up between the hanging lights to a gray Pliesterine canopy, fifty feet above.

At the back, inside of the bubble, was a small aluminum room with its own roof. It looked like a square house trailer, and it was used variously as a lunchroom, a de-leafing and packaging room—even, on occasion, as an overnight sleepery for homeless Normals. There were wooden stairs built on the outside of the room, leading ten feet up to its roof, and he could see "stuff" up there—a pile of mattresses under a plastic sheet, a column of stacked plastic chairs, dozens of labeled boxes. Victor guessed that a lot of that stuff had gone flying up there rather recently, and that the enclosed space had been hastily tidied up

for this meeting. The more things change, he thought. Plus ça change...

* * * *

"The gang"—the small group that had founded Victor-E in 2016—was inside the room, waiting, sitting nervously around a long wooden table, trying not to become too excited. Most of them had been there for an hour. This was a day they would remember for the rest of their lives. This was a day they would tell their children and their grandchildren about, and talk about on the Net with friends, and describe in exquisite detail when they got around to recording their life profiles.

"Hi," said Annette as she opened the door for Victor. "There's a rack in the corner over there," she motioned, without offering to shake hands, as per the protocol.

For reasons Annette didn't understand or question, Victor had insisted on facing her blind for the past week—she could hear him but not see him on her MIU. And now, she understood. She was shaken by his appearance—the long white beard especially. He even seems shorter, she thought. I can't believe he's wearing a suit and tie!

Victor shed the nylon coat and hung it up. "It's about eight sizes too big for me," he said, laughing. "I borrowed it from old Noel, the cook out at the lodge. I used to have one of my own, but..." Did I really? he wondered.

Inside the room, the sweet smell of grass smoke hung in the air. Little clumps of roll-your-owns peeked out of owl-shaped toothpick holders on the table, and "the gang" had laid out hot coffee, cold soft drinks, baked snacks and ashtrays. "Does anyone have a real cigarette?" asked Victor. No one did—tobacco was frowned upon by Evolutionaries, and so few people smoked it any more anyway. "It's just as well," he said, unsure of whether these words were beepable. "I haven't had a real cigarette since I stopped talking back in twenty-fourteen, but now..."

"Coffee? Munchies? Brain candy?" offered a weathered man at the far end of the table. "I'm Bob, by the way."

"No thanks—uh—Bob," Victor said.

Besides Annette, the only other members of the original "gang" who had met Victor before were Tirone Lucas and his wife, Tammy. They'd seen him way back in 2014, just before the Revolution, when he came in to buy a pack of cigarettes at Ray's Restaurant on Highway 148, at the Quyon turnoff. That was the only time they'd seen him, but ever since, they had told the story of that fleeting encounter as if they remembered him well.

"He seems so old," whispered Tammy.

"We're not getting any younger ourselves," whispered Tirone.

"Well," exclaimed Victor as he sat down on a plastic deck chair at the end of the table, "phase one seems to have gone rather well."

"Phase ... one?" asked Annette as she re-took her seat beside him.

"Of Evolution," said Victor, with a puzzled look in his eyes. His whitened eyebrows seemed to curl protectively. "I ... invented Evolution, remember?"

"I—uh—thought it was Annette's husband's idea," said a woman seated just beside Bob. "Every Netfile and Netshow on the subject says it was Steve Sutherland's idea."

"Oh yeah," said Victor, with a vague smile. His body relaxed. "I remember now. I emailed my document to him on the old Internet, and made him promise to say it was his idea. I'd forgotten about that. Well, you remember, eh?" he said to Annette.

"Of course I remember," she said, making a pretend-attempt to grab his beard and give it a tug. "It's true," she said to the astonished gathering. "But—uh—what do you mean by 'phase one'?" she asked, turning back to their distinguished guest ... and away from a subject he'd probably prefer to avoid.

"Duh!" mocked Victor, holding his hands facing upward like an Egyptian dancer and looking around the room for a three-digit IQ.

"There's ... a phase two?" guessed Tammy Lucas, her voice brimming with pride.

"Duh!" repeated Victor, this time with a smile, and this time the founders of Victor-E broke up.

As the laughter receded, a timid voice came from half way down the left side of the table. "Do you remember me, Mr. Helliwell?" it said.

Victor peered at the attractive, blond-haired woman—the only person in the room who wasn't middle-aged or better. "I'm—uh—really sorry," he stammered, "but I don't seem to be able to—"

"I used to call you Rip Van Winkle," she exclaimed gleefully. "That was when I was just a little—"

"Julia!" exclaimed Victor. He stood up and started towards her, and she stood up and danced, arms aloft, towards this white-bearded, mostly-bald incarnation of the inventor she had met so many years ago, when her father just sort of brought him home one day. They embraced warmly. Julia was very surprised that she was now taller than Victor. She pulled his face against her breasts and kissed the top of his head. "I really missed you," she said as she pulled back and laid her hands on his shoulders. Then she rotated him left and right, like the agitator of an old-fashioned washing machine. The "gang" clapped and whistled at the touching reunion.

"After Steve passed away, we figured we would invite Julia to join the gang," said Annette. "She's in the ninetieth percentile on the CQ scale, and—"

"Aw jeeze," said Victor as he let go of Julia's waist and turned towards Annette. "I ... I didn't know!"

"It's okay," said Annette. "It's been more than a year now. He ... had a stroke."

Victor took his seat again, saddened by this news. "He was a very good man," he said to Annette as he reached over and touched her hand. Then he drifted into what appeared to be a fugue state. His vision became clouded, and his feelings were minced. Everyone waited.

How could I have not noticed that Steve wasn't here? he wondered. How could I have not even thought about seeing Steve again? How could I have failed to ask Annette about him all those times we spoke over the Net in the last week? If Steve ... was considered the father of a movement that now has two hundred and thirty million Evolutionaries in it, his death ... must have been a big deal all around the world! A huge deal! How did I manage to not hear about that? Or ... did I hear about it and forget? Have I ... lost my mind? Am I ... senile? Or is it just the brain tumor?

The awkward moment was broken by Julia. "So, can I ask you about that ... what did you call it?" she asked. "It started with a 'fff' sound I think, like 'fridge.'"

"Oh, Phase two," said Victor, snapping back to the shared reality. "Sure. I'll explain it, but before I tell you, your clan will have to get a whole lot more serious about Human Three Consciousness. I'm proud of

the progress that's been made, of course, but ... well, as you know, there's an awful lot more to Human Three Consciousness than simply never telling any lies, and from what I hear from Annette, Evolution hasn't even nailed that part down yet ... I don't think, anyway. Is that—uh..." He turned to Annette for support. It was so difficult, not knowing anything for sure. Scary.

"We ... do try to support CANLUC as much as we can," said Annette. "The—uh—Canadian LieDeck Unbanning Committee," she clarified, when Victor's face seemed to register yet another area of absent knowledge. "We've ... come a long way in removing lying from our experience with our fuss groups—our system of mediation—but without a LieDeck to verify things, it's ... sometimes it's extremely difficult."

"I know," said Victor. "Well, buckle up, folks. I got some ideas on that!"

The gang fell into a profound silence as Victor gathered his thoughts. He proposed a sort of court system to "simulate" LieDeck-verification. The new "simLV" plan called for every Victor-Een to report every remotely possible fib that occurred within the clan, no matter how white or tiny, and then for a "jury of peers" to analyze each situation for however long it took to determine the truth, after which the "offender" would apologize and make amends—including financial compensation—never less than \$100—if it turned out that all this trouble and bother was caused by a stupid lie. And to really deal with the commonplace habit of jiggling with what was said—"rewriting history," Victor called it, or "revisionism"—he proposed two things: first, reports of suspected lies should be made "within the hour, while everyone's memory is still fresh," and second, each Victor-Een should carry a 100-hour "digicorder"—a disk-based digital recorder—with the "record" button superglued in the "on" position and a voice-activated lapel mike—whenever they were at home in the life-base. He further suggested that a system of yellow- and red-light verbal warnings be instituted, like the military had for sexual harassment, so that people could extricate themselves from temptation or transgression before a gob of time had to get wasted figuring things out after the fact.

LieDecks are so much more efficient, Victor mused internally. He reminded all of the founders of Victor-E that according to all the research, the average person—"the average Human Two" was how Victor particularized it—told about 200 lies per day! The research also proved that these quite-normal compulsive liars didn't usually even realize it, when they were doing it ... and that they believed the result of unbridled truthfulness would be societal collapse! And finally, Victor told them—a bit more forcefully than he intended—that "not-lying is a matter of will, not skill," and he chided them mildly for not having yet made the decision to eliminate lying completely from their lives. "Sheesh!" he said, not in a flattering or amused way. He was clearly disappointed in them on this score.

"So, when you can assure me that not a single lie has been told by any Victor-Een for forty consecutive days," he said, "then, and only then, will I fill you in on phase two." He clasped his skinny hands on his still-bulbous stomach, hoping he had forty days left. And he waited for a response.

"I think you're sort of assuming we're willing to go along with all this," said Annette.

"Well, you—uh—don't have to," said Victor. "For me, it's just a matter of which clan takes on the project. And yes, I ... I did assume that you'd want to."

"Of course we will," chimed in Julia as she clapped her hands.

"Yeah," said Tirone. "Why the fuck not!?"

The consensus emerged quickly without a formal vote. Tammy joined in with Julia's and Tirone's responses, and soon the whole room was ringing with applause, whoops, whistles and play-punches. They knew the governing council of Victor-E would jump at the offer of this new challenge ... if only to avoid the embarrassment of some other clan succeeding where they had feared to tread. Victor made a

gesture to dampen the cheering, and they dutifully stopped before he had to say the words that were right on the tip of his tongue: “Knock it off, eh?”

"Can we maybe have like one hint about the phase two thingie?" whined Julia as she chewed on a muffin. "Please."

Victor stood and walked over to the small square window of the stuffy room. There was no glass in it. He stuck his head half way out and looked over the raised hydroponic fields of marijuana, diligently manufacturing tetrahydrocannabinol. I've gotten most of my best ideas after toking up, he said to himself, but I think I'll stay straight for this one. He returned to the table, flicked the lightweight deck chair off to one side with his foot, and laid his fists knuckle-down on the table, leaning forward melodramatically. "I don't think so," he said soberly, but with a barely-perceptible twinkle in his eye.

"Beep," yelped Julia, throwing her right hand into the air repeatedly, like a grade one student desperately wanting to answer the teacher's question. "That's a beep, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Victor, "although you could have said 'yellow light,' to see if I wanted to admit to my sinful ways ... but..." He stopped himself—it was obvious that Julia, who didn't and couldn't drive a car, also didn't understand the "yellow- or red-light" system of warnings, except perhaps as they might affect pedestrians. Still, for a moment, Victor's feelings wanted to scold her for not paying attention. Jerk, he called himself in his mind. He decided to let someone else explain that to Julia, a bit later. His head hurt, and he felt it was best to stay focused and get on with stuff. So he took a deep breath, and again, all twelve members of the gang seemed to silently bewitch themselves, as if an oracle were about to belch out a rare revelation from the mystic beyond.

"First," he said carefully, "you have got to accept that I am an atheist. That was the first thing that I verified for myself when I had a foolproof LieDeck to play with back in twenty fourteen. So ... no problem with that?"

All heads agreed—no problem there.

"Okay," said Victor, standing straight, stroking his long white beard and fighting off an inclination to change his mind. "So, having established my bona fides on the Godless front, here's your first and only clue." He took another heavy breath, and a second ... and then he let fly. "Christianity is such a wonderful idea, it's a shame nobody ever tried it."

It was something he'd said to himself hundreds of times, silently, in his head, during his nineteen years as a mute. He felt sure that someone else had said those words ages ago, but he couldn't remember who it was. And it always brought to mind another quote, this one by Wendell Berry, who wrote in *Blessed are the Peacemakers*: "I know of no Christian nation and no Christian leader from whose conduct the teachings of Christ can be inferred." Victor had a pro forma chuckle over that one—and couldn't remember if he'd said that second quote out loud or not. That Berry fellow should have added "and no economic model" to his list, thought Victor ... and this time he was sure that he had only thought those words, not spoken them.

Everyone was puzzled. Julia asked what "boner feedays" were, and Victor explained it was a pretentious way of saying that he could be trusted to speak the truth. "Snooty," he said when Julia asked what "prenchuss" was.

"Ahhh," she said, understanding all too well now. "Prenchuss ... I like that word."

Tirone and Tammy were whispering guesses as to the meaning of the hint, and Victor was gratified that no one pressed for more. He lifted his coat—or Noel's coat—from the rack, and put it on.

"The—uh—governing council may have a problem with the cost of buying several hundred digicorders and lapel mikes," said Annette.

"Oh jeeze, I almost forgot," said Victor, with a sheepish grin. "Your—uh—your little charity outfit ... what's it called?"

"Foundation-E," volunteered a woman who was on the board of the charity.

"Yeah, that's it," said Victor. "Well, I was sort of rude to that nice WDA woman—uh—Lilly Petrosian, when she came to LieDeck-verify me last Monday. There was no reason for it, other than the fact that I can be as Human Two as anybody else. Anyway, I apologized profusely, and then I promised that I'd do something concrete to express my regret—give a pile of money to a charity or something like that. So ... well ... I decided that Foundation-E will cover all the costs of phase two, so I—uh..." He reached inside the big coat and dug out a crumpled check from his shirt pocket. "Here's my donation to cover all that ... and I can tell you I had to raise my voice to Mr. Wu to get him to write this out for me ... he said he hadn't written an actual old-fashioned check since..." Victor was almost at the point of chuckling, and then he realized that he'd forgotten how many years Mr. Wu had said, and he'd started to lose his train of thought in any event. "Damn drugs," he muttered to himself, even though he couldn't live without them.

Annette knew of Mr. Wu through her friendship with Julia, but she didn't know that he also handled Victor's finances. She took the check, looked at it, and gulped, audibly. "A million dollars?" she asked.

"Well, the digicorders won't cost much," he replied. "Maybe a hundred thousand or so—Michael can give you a deal on that through his company, I'm sure. But phase two of Evolution will be really expensive. And besides, I got another ... I don't rightly know ... I think more than two hundred million, and half of that will be going into this phase two project sooner or later, so ... by the way, can I take a few of those joints with me?" They helped with the pain ... a lot.

"No," joked Julia. "Beep me silly," she added.

Chapter 33

A TOAST

Saturday, February 19, 2033—8:45 p.m.

The limousine pulled into the parking lot of the Royal Oaks Golf and Country Club in Gatineau, Québec, and Lilly mentioned that she'd better leave her LieDeck turned off. "We can always verify each other later," she said, "if there's any need."

The maître d' met Michael and Lilly at the door, and silently led them down a wide, wood-paneled, red-carpeted hall to the Heritage Room. The private dining room had a painting of Michael's smiling father at one end and a portrait of his grumpy grandfather at the other. If I didn't know better, I'd think we were in the Whiteside mansion, thought Lilly.

The room was wrapped in gentle old wood. The many trappings of class announced that this was a very "inner" sanctum. A window faced the frozen Ottawa River. On the far shore, above the black bluffs, were the stately Parliament Buildings—their silhouettes, really, cast darkly against ambient light, the pink-tinted night sky that hovered awkwardly over the Canadian capital.

The chandelier above the dining table was dimmed to the point where it helped them see, but didn't diminish the contributions of the four candles. The waiter was discreet and mostly absent, the wine was

eighty years old, and both Michael and Lilly were beguiled by the atmosphere, and by each other. The problem was, neither was ready to jump into an overt tangle. They were rather shy and out of step with the normative world culture on matters of the heart—he in spite of his great wealth, she in spite of the impressive power she possessed as a front-line worker in the WDA.

"You heard about the kidnapping of Lester Connolly?" asked Michael sarcastically.

Lilly sighed. "I guess it's a sort of ... like street theater."

"More like theater of the absurd," said Michael.

Six Canadian Jesus-Eers had shown up at the Washington D.C. General Hospital a few days ago, and they were now camped around Lester Connolly's room, videotaping everyone who came within hollering distance of the recovering USLUC leader. They worked in three-monk contingents, doing twelve-hour shifts, and they spoke no words, according to the vow of Jesus-E. They claimed in a written note to be his "loyal body-guards," but Lester Connolly and his family members laughingly called the monks his "kidnappers," and of course that got onto the Net as a hot topic. In fact the Netnews and the TV networks made quite an issue of the event for a couple of days, then moved on to other, more exciting stories.

"I didn't think it was fair of Henderson to suggest that Lester Connolly's illness might not have been a fluke," Lilly said coldly, "or when he came out in favor of that so-called kidnapping caper by Jesus-E. The implication seemed to be that the WDA somehow, you know, made him sick, or that we tried to kill him! I mean for God's sake..."

"Gil Henderson didn't actually say ... exactly that," said Michael.

"He's very skilful at saying things without actually saying them," countered Lilly. "The whole charade with those Jesus-Eers is a slap in the face for the WDA. Next thing he'll say is we—" She cut herself off.

"We...?" asked Michael.

"Nothing, nothing," said Lilly, with a fluttering hand.

It was far from nothing. She was going to suggest that Gil Henderson might imply that the WDA was also somehow responsible for Victor Helliwell's brain tumor, and it hit her gut like a backpack nuke that it might actually be true. Surely not! she thought. Surely to God they wouldn't! And why would they? Later! I'll ... I'll think this through later.

She shook her head free of that disturbing thought, and looked up at Michael just as the waiter came in quietly with vichyssoise and freshly baked cheese croissants. They were both glad to have this distraction. The departure of the waiter seemed to call for continued conversation, but both Lilly and Michael settled for some words of praise for the food, and looks that needed no verbal explanation, glances that would have suffered in translation.

Michael had many questions on his mind, most of them guaranteed mood-killers. He was particularly interested in this new World Identity Bank that the WDA was setting up in California. He knew that the WDA could easily eavesdrop on people at any time by way of their MIUs, even when they were "down"—after all, Whiteside Tech made many of the world's MIUs. He also knew that a facility of these fantastic dimensions, coupled with modern data-compression techniques and the gargantuan storage capacity of the new Japanese Z-chip arrays, could archive the digitized output of every MIU in the world, twenty-four hours a day, for hundreds of years. He wanted to know if that was indeed the plan, but ... he couldn't ask. She'd lose her job ... and besides, what else could it be for? Whatever its

purpose, Michael wanted his company to get a good piece of the action, and found it very strange that the WDA hadn't even responded to his several inquiries about participating in the project. Later, he thought.

"How's Randy doing?" asked Lilly, after tasting a spoonful of vichyssoise.

"He's got some big matches coming up," said Michael. "His putting has improved. He told me about the advice you gave him. He won't tell you that it helped, but it did."

"How much?" asked Lilly, holding a glass of red wine beside her cheek, hoping it would play with the candlelight.

"Thirteen percent, he told me—enough that he went back to Miami a couple of days ago, to resume his studies ... well, his ... career."

There was something off about the pauses, and about Michael's miniscule inflection on the word "career," something that troubled Lilly. He wants Randy to become another portrait on the wall in here, she thought. He's disappointed that Randy isn't more a chip off the old block. "Do you play golf?" she asked. She knew he did, of course, but feigning ignorance was one of the unpleasant conversational necessities of working for the WDA.

"Love it," he said, taking a sip of his wine. "As a hobby."

"Hey, me too!" Lilly said brightly, hoping that when winter finally melted away, they could play at the Oaks, together.

She had a lot of questions on her mind, too. Did Michael know that his son had flown from Miami to D.C. yesterday, on a one-day visit with his girlfriend, and that he'd had a private meeting with Lester Connolly, right in his hospital room? And did he know that Randy was increasing his financial support for USLUC, and sending large checks to the Québec and Canadian LieDeck Unbanning Committees as well? Did he know his family members were making the WDA nervous? With his son's involvement in the unbanning movement, with his sister Julia living in Victor-E and his daughter Venice wanting to join her, and now with his wife getting caught up in the Human Three movement, Michael has to know that his exclusive contract to build LieDecks for the WDA is at great risk. God, I almost told him as much when we met last week.

The big question on her mind, of course, had less to do with the WDA than with her conscience. Lilly felt sure that her job security would not be affected by her friendship with Michael—Control had practically suggested that she seduce the man—but she didn't want the role of "the other woman" ... even if Becky approved! Any significant role in Michael's life would probably mean fissures and quakes for the Whiteside family. And now, having promised Michael that she would be open with him, it was impossible for her to ask Control for advice on that score. She would have to tell Michael if she ever did talk to Control about such things. Worse yet, if she talked to Control and then didn't tell Michael, she would have to admit all of it if he asked, and that could prove fatal to their new relationship.

"How's Victor doing?" she queried as if she didn't know.

"He's on the Net all the time now," said Michael, "mostly with Annette over at the Victor-E clan, getting the eleven disciples ready for—"

"The eleven disciples?" repeated Lilly, quizzically. She knew, of course, but no way could she let him know that she knew. In some ways, I'm never off duty.

"Oh ... just a little family joke," said Michael. His face seemed torn between sweet nostalgia and regret. "It was rather strange for our kids to grow up with this mute holed up at the lodge, and we'd always leave some fruitcakes and candy canes and homemade cards outside his door on Christmas morning. And for reasons we never could figure out, Randy—back when he was five or six years old—used to call Victor 'the baby Jesus.' I guess he heard something from one of his little friends about the beliefs of those Jesus-Eers across the river. Anyway, then Venice picked it up, and as they got older, it kind of stuck, you know, as a joke. So the twelve people who started Victor-E, well of course the kids started calling them the twelve disciples ... I guess because the clan was named for Victor. Then Steve Sutherland, Annette Blais' husband, died a year or so ago, so now it's the eleven disciples. Kids, eh?"

"Yeah," said Lilly. It was tedious to appear interested in stuff that she already knew. "So ... Victor's been Netlinking with the eleven—uh—founders, and ... and...?" Lilly also knew most of what there was to know about Victor's Netlife and his plans, but, as always, she had to be certain she never did or said anything that confirmed the WDA's eavesdropping capabilities. Moreover, Michael knew she knew, and she knew he knew she knew, and so on and so forth in an infuriating web of ridiculous gambits that no one seemed sure how to avoid on those occasions when bedrock post-Revolutionary reality wiggled its way into an otherwise comfortable discussion. At least the WDA can't listen in over a Sniffer unless it's in use, Lilly thought. She touched her handbag instinctively, even though she knew her Sniffer was turned off.

"He's getting the 'disciples' set up for a crash course in that—uh—you know, that ... that theory of his," said Michael. "Becky's been out to the lodge a lot, talking to Victor for hours at a time about his concept of Human Three Consciousness. I have to admit it ... it bothers me that she's been talking about letting Venice go out there with her. I'm ... sort of concerned about that."

As well you might be, thought Lilly. "You still ... love Becky?" she asked. No sense whatsoever in avoiding that one.

Michael took a sip of wine, and wondered if he should have smoked that Mini-Jay in the limousine. "Yes," he said, with as little enthusiasm as such a true confession had ever generated. "We were still just teenagers ... when we got married, Lilly. It was just a few weeks after the Last Holocaust. Maybe we ... did it because of the Revolution ... I don't know. Anyway, that was the very day my dad was assassinated, right on the church steps, and by a damned preacher, of all things—I'm sure you know the story. So ... Becky and I started off on a rough footing, and..." Michael took another sip of his wine, mostly for the time it bought him. "We were very happy for several years, as happy as one could be, given the circumstances, but ... well, I think Becky and I make much better friends than we do lovers, or spouses. We've ... grown apart. I know this sounds all too familiar, like it's a line or something, but..."

Lilly looked into his lovely blue eyes. She knew from classified WDA Netfiles that Becky was pregnant at the time of their marriage—pregnant with Randy. She knew that Michael's mother, Doreen, had blown a gasket on that issue, and had used her money and power to get Randy's birthday officially registered as May 17, 2015 instead of November 28, 2014. And now, Lilly sensed that Michael wanted to say more about that period of his life; about how he and Becky were really too young to get married; about their four years at the University of Toronto together, with the baby; about the killer question of whether Becky had perhaps gotten knocked up "accidentally-on-purpose" ... and about the agony that their wedding night must have been. But there were other important matters that had to be pushed out of the way first.

I suppose it might as well be me that starts off, Lilly thought. "I have a confession to make," she said calmly after wiping her mouth with a stiff linen serviette. "My—uh—handler suggested that I get close to you, Michael. When we first met, I was ... well, I was sort of flirting with you, on purpose ... because of

his suggestion. I think you have to know that, and I hope you realize that I'm way past that now, that my feelings are—"

The waiter came in, and served the entrée—the tenderest prime rib east of Calgary. He topped up the wine glasses and left.

"I assumed as much," said Michael, "but I'm glad you fessed up. So I should tell you that I ... well, I had some practical reasons for asking you out—the World Identity Bank contract, mostly. I want a piece of that, of course, but I'm ... past that too ... I think ... as far as my motivation goes ... I mean for asking you out."

Lilly was struck by his honesty, by his vulnerability and self-doubt, and by that drop-dead gorgeous face of his. Her body was telling her to get sexy, now ... or her "loins," as D.H. Lawrence always called it. But she was still ill at ease in some indefinable way, and there was no hurry.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, they quickly moved on to other things, safer things, ordinary things, normal things. When Lilly raised the subject of politics—Québec politics, Canadian politics—Michael seemed to shift gears internally, seemed to feel a bit uncomfortable.

"Something I said?" she asked.

"Can you keep a secret?" asked Michael.

Lilly smiled. She was highly trained as a keeper of secrets, as Michael knew well. "You mean will I keep a secret?" she said. "Of course I will, as long as you're not going to tell me you're a part-time bank robber."

Michael smiled. "I've been asked to take over the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada," he said.

Pope-on-a-rope! thought Lilly. He's a shoo-in. And the Liberals are in power ... and there's an election coming soon, possibly as early as this fall. I'm having dinner with the next prime minister of Canada!

"That's wonderful!" she said. "But ... my understanding was that you've never been particularly political, in the partisan sense."

"Well, I'm an outsider in two ways," said Michael. "I'm a Québécois—I've got dual citizenship, of course—Québec and Canada. And I'm an outsider in that I've stayed out of partisan politics in the past. But being an outsider seems to be an asset with the voters these days. I haven't decided what I'll do yet, but..."

"Let me guess," said Lilly into the empty space Michael had left hanging. "Making money isn't much of a challenge any more; they've guaranteed you a convention victory for the leadership; the pressure to run is quite unbearable; you know that you can win the election, barring any disasters; the fact that you're a Québécois isn't a problem; there's a lot you can do for the country; and the only potential problem is that Becky's a budding Human Three, but Canadian voters won't mind that very much, and—"

"You some kind of mind reader?" asked Michael, with his eyebrows at full mast. "Or ... you knew about this? Or ... the WDA knew? Or ... they suspected?"

None of Michael's discussions about this political opportunity had been done over the Net; everything was done on the warm, in utmost secrecy, and at the highest levels. If the WDA knew, then his two "native lands"—Canada and Québec—had to be deeply, and illegally, infiltrated by the world body. If we only had LieDecks, he began to think—it dawned on him how ironic it was that the head of Whiteside Tech could begin a thought with those words. If we only had LieDecks, he rebooted the

thought, we'd know all there was to know about the extent of the WDA's undue influence. Small wonder that the WDA doesn't want to unban the device.

Lilly wondered where Michael's mind had been for the last ten seconds. "None of the above," she said. "I'll even verify that if..." In a lightening move, she took her LieDeck-equipped Sniffer from her purse, checked to make sure the waiter wasn't on his way into the room, turned the unit on and repeated her assurance. She used the same words, "None of the above," so that Control would have no idea what she was confirming if he listened in. "In fact I hope you do it," she added—after she shut off her Sniffer and put the device back in her purse.

"You didn't have to do that," said Michael. "With the LieDeck..."

"Sure I did," she said, returning to the roast beef. "Trust ... takes time, Michael. We want to trust each other, and we both want to be trusted by the other, but ... well, like I said before, I'm not altogether unsympathetic with the idea of unbanning the LieDeck. It seems to me that sometimes using the LieDeck helps get the show on the road, or clears the air."

Michael lifted his glass, held it out, and they clinked. "To my new ... friend," he said.

"To..." She reflected briefly. "To Prime Minister Whiteside," she said, quietly.

Michael raised an eyebrow, but then he smiled. He knew that if he LieDeck-verified her motivation for such a toast, it would be shown to be without malice, without avarice, without anything but good feelings towards him.

So to these, they drank.

The rest of dinner was plain fun. They agreed to put business and angst aside. They talked about pleasant memories of childhood and adolescence. They laughed more as the alcohol started playing with the THC, and they edged closer and closer to an uninhibited tingle, often using double entendres to speak their feelings without letting words actually say it. And then they had crèmes caramel for dessert, with coffee.

After the waiter cleared the table and added a tiny crystal bowl of chocolate-covered mints, Michael slid his hands across the table, palms up, his blue eyes fixed upon Lilly's brown ones. She placed her thin hands onto his, palms down, without dropping her gaze.

"Welcome to my life, Lilly," he said.

"Welcome to mine, Michael," she answered.

Chapter 34

LYING LEXICON

Saturday, February 19, 2033—9:40 p.m.

When Victor got back home after his excursion to the Pot-house, he sat at his MIU with a queer sense of mission stirring in his gut. Nothing wrong with feeling excited if you know what you're doing, he said to himself. He ran a damp hand down his beard, and reminded himself that he did know what he was doing, that he'd thought this through for more than twenty years, and that if he didn't do it, it wouldn't get done, period. No telling when this window of opportunity will close, he worried.

With the screen dark, he could see his reflection in the glass front of his MIU. He had dressed way up, in a white shirt and tie, just like businessmen used to do all the time back in the days when they went to work in offices. I don't feel old, he thought, except for my body. He remembered how things were when he was a boy—old farts were not supposed to feel young, vigorous or sexy, and they were not supposed to have goals. They weren't supposed to think about much at all, except for Christmas presents for the grandkids and the odd bit of offered wisdom, usually ignored.

"Jeeze, I really am old!" he said towards the screen. "I got no kids, no grandkids. I'm supposed to have lived a long and fruitful life by now, but I spent my whole adult life ... or most of it ... hiding. I'm ... what ... sixty? Almost sixty-one? And here I am, starting a new..." He wondered how to best characterize the "final arrangement" he'd made with himself, the offering he would make to the world. My new career, I suppose, he said to himself. Whatever, he shrugged.

"Net, up, now," he said. "Search ... magazines ... start in 1990 ... find word 'Inuit,' upper case I, n, u, i, t ... plus any two of the following words in close proximity: 'snow, vocabulary, words, kinds.' Begin search now."

Used to be you'd have a few minutes to go for a pee or just relax, he thought, but the SuperNet is so God damned fast that—

"Saturday Night magazine," said the female voice of his MIU. "February of nineteen ninety-four; an article entitled: It's snowing ... what to say? by Margaret Visser."

A photo was on the screen, as well as some text. All the words he'd asked his MIU to search for were there, highlighted, as he suspected they would be. His eyes ran down the text. At the bottom of the second column were a series of italicized words: *qannik* for a single snowflake, *quannitaq* for recently fallen snow, *kavisilaq* for snow roughened by rain or frost, *mannguq* for melting snow, *minguliq* for a fine coat of powdered snow, *katakartanaq* for snow with a hard crust that gives under one's steps, *pukak*, *apinngaut*, and more. "Great," he said. "Copy it all into a file, the whole thing ... and put the photo on full screen, now."

The photo scrolled its way down the whole screen, and Victor sat back to absorb it. On the left was the head and shoulders of a capped man, with his collar rolled up—a silhouette view, seen from the back. The sun was barely a few degrees over a distant horizon. Three children were about twenty yards from the man, standing apart on the flat, rippled ocean of snow that stretched to a thin black line just below the sun. The middle kid—a girl, if long hair meant anything—was jumping on the snow ... maybe to see if she can break through the crust, Victor thought. Her hair was flying out, and it was thrown starkly against the brilliant patch of ice-topped snow that reflected the perpetual sunset. The shadow of the kids ran all the way to where the man was standing, the sun was that low in the sky, but the middle kid's shadow didn't even touch her feet—she was caught in mid-jump. "Double the contrast," said Victor ... and there it was: an almost invisible line between the two outside kids. "She's skipping rope!" he said in a startled voice. So if they were ten years old in 1994, he calculated, they'd be fifty now ... or dead. I wonder if the Inuit still die young?

Time's a'wasting. Victor hoped he'd have his presentation ready for tomorrow, so he ordered the photo to disappear, and read the text, word for word. He found out there was a separate list of words for ice, for kinds of snow in the air, and yet other lists for types of snowshapes, for snow that's suitable for various purposes (such as making snowballs and igloos), for snow in various places—on walls, in water, stuck to books, and on and on. He read the article again, and highlighted, emboldened, two key passages. He copied them, and pasted them at the top of a new file entitled "lying lexicon," putting a short dividing line between them:

Vocabularies differ in richness, in their insistence on making distinctions, or their refusal to note them

There used to be a theory that if a language had no term for something, a speaker of that language lacked the concept. That idea has been largely discredited. Languages use circumlocution, translations, and, if necessary, explanations. But it remains true that richness of vocabulary is a pointer to the importance that a culture places on certain “regions of the real” rather than upon others

Then he added one more quotation, one he'd meant to give to the Victor-Eens out at the Pot-house, but forgot. It was from Einstein. He hoped they'd get this one firmly into their heads—it was the best summary of the “why” of the new simLV program that he'd just proposed for the Victor-E clan ... well, for the whole movement, really, eventually.

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

Yes, he said in his mind. It's true. If you would steal a dollar from me, you are a thief, and you'll steal a thousand or a million, given the chance. Behavior defines identity, so little white lies count just as much as any other.

Now he was ready. “Record the following in the file entitled ‘lying lexicon,’” he instructed his MIU.

“Well ... hi,” he began, with a timid wave and a helpless look on his face. “Read this article, with special attention to the two excerpts and the Einstein quote at the top, then I will come back on and explain what the hell I'm getting at.”

He touched the command button and said, “Paste the full-screen photo here for ten seconds, so they...” He almost told his MIU why ... so they'd have to drink it in fully ... forgetting that the Net wasn't a person; just a bunch of nuts and bolts ... and chips ... like a toaster, or a LieDeck. “Then paste in the article, with voice reading at a slow listening pace, and get the correct Inuit pronunciations for all of those snow words. Then insert the following presentation.”

Victor pressed “pause” and cleared his throat. He hadn't made any notes to guide himself through this, but ... hey, it's not like this is complicated! He disengaged “pause” with another tap. “Good stuff, eh?” he started, meaning the article they'd just read and/or listened to. “If you want, or if you think you're pretty clever, you can pause here and try to figure out why I wanted you to read that article and why I clipped those two quotations for your special consideration. Nice photograph, eh? Did you notice the skipping rope? I have to squint to see it, or turn up the contrast. Anyway, say ‘pause’ here if you like my riddle, or just continue on if you can't be bothered. I bet none of you can figure it out.”

He pressed “pause” again himself, and stood up. All this lead-in stuff was necessary, or at least it was fun, but now that he was up against it, the concepts seemed jumbled in his mind. He knew what he wanted to say, but after nineteen years of not speaking, well ... it was understandable.

Victor changed into his caftan, and spent the next hour making hand-written notes and transferring them vocally to his MIU hard drive, trying to give at least a few good examples of what he was getting at. He had no intentions of doing their homework for them, but he wanted to give them enough so they'd get the idea, and carry on from there to develop the thing further ... lots further.

Then he started in on the dictation recording again—this time he was determined to get through it. “Okay,” he said, “now when it comes to lying, you have to know that in the ocean of lies which preceded the LieDeck Revolution, it was difficult to get at any reality, so people, in most respects, lived in a storm of illusion. In Evolution, you have fuss groups, where your people struggle for as many hours as it takes to see who is lying whenever there's a serious conflict that won't get resolved without this effort. You do that because the dumb-assed WDA won't let you have access to a goddam LieDeck. Still, it works, and

you also have some people that are particularly good at telling who's lying and who's telling the truth, and I gave you some new ideas at the Pot-house about using digicorders and voice-activated mikes to document all your days, for simulated LieDeck-verification, or 'simLV,' as it'll probably end up getting called. But you haven't really analyzed the phenomenon of lying to the extent that you understand the process ... or the reasons people lie. And to do that, you have to look at the kinds of lies that exist.

"That's why I gave you all that stuff about the Inuit and all the words they have for snow. We—or you, really—fledgling Human Threes, I might say—need to build up a vocabulary to represent the different kinds of lies, just like the Inuit did for snow and ice. I think there's probably a need for fifty or a hundred words for lying—maybe even more than that.

"The problem with Human Twos is they all pretend the problem doesn't exist or they grossly underestimate its gravity and pretend that they always tell the truth. They aren't aware of any but their most dangerous lies, and even these aren't a big moral problem for them, but a practical one, mostly, in that getting caught is embarrassing. Lies cause you to be unable to see the person that you really are; a liar, a shameless “bender of reality,” a manipulative self-lover, not because you chose to be like that or because you were raised like that, but because that's the way your instinct works, automatically.

"The message in all this? A young or immature Human Three, meaning a person who has only been Human Three for a few weeks or months, is infinitely more and better than the finest Human Two, as there are no circumstances under which lying, stealing, murder, etcetera, are acceptable to any Human Three.

"In nature, animals—including Human One—have to go out into their environment and just take what they need or want, and if that means injuring or killing another animal, well, that's the breaks. It's entirely natural to do these things because it's necessary for the animal's survival. In the march towards civilization, Human Twos proscribed those kinds of things, forbid them, made laws, turned them into crimes—theft, assault, murder, cruelty to animals and so on. But these were the visible crimes. Lying is invisible. Lying is as natural as theft and assault and murder, more so, maybe, but it is also as uncivilized as those things. Human Threes have to outlaw the act of injuring or murdering ‘the truth.’ And as far as I'm concerned, this natural but uncivilized behavior should not be forgiven without some compensation. I ... mentioned that at the Pot-house, didn't I?

"Ah shit,” he said as he passed a hand over his head and felt acute embarrassment. “I ... I've got this brain problem, like a medical problem—maybe you heard—anyway, I get mixed up and carried away, so please do forgive me if I ... if I ramble sometimes, okay? Anyway, here's the deal: name a lie! Get a fixed, agreed-upon lexicon going in the clan, and among clans, so people can make distinctions about what kind of lie they're talking about and not have to explain its complexities every time, you know?

"Here's a few ideas I came up with in one hour of trying, but you'll have to be more serious about it than that, and come to a consensus, okay? Instead of saying them all, I'll just throw the written version on your screen, okay? I'm ... kind of ... tired anyway. Of course if you had a LieDeck, you would know that was a ‘ducker,’ a lie told so that I can ‘duck’ out of something. I'm actually just too lazy to go through all of this stuff with you verbally. See how this lexicon can help you get to the reality of a situation?”

Victor figured he'd made his point—not fully, and none too well, but he didn't feel he had to do that anyway. “Guides” were supposed to know the main features of a territory, not every stick and stone. He saw his job as getting things going, pricking consciences, twiggling frontal lobes. He was a guide, not a daddy or a babysitter. He slipped his mouse up to the waiting notes and clicked.

1) a biggie—an important lie

- 2) a whopper—a lighthearted synonym for biggie; perhaps a harmless biggie
- 3) a funny—a lie meant to produce laughter or amusement
- 4) a wrinkle—the minor re-slanting of reality, perhaps for self-defense or self-enhancement
- 5) a shield—a lie meant for self-defense or to hide the truth about yourself
- 6) a puffer—a lie told for self-enhancement
- 7) a teacher—a didactic lie, intended to instruct more than deceive (such as the myths of religion)
- 8) a needle—a lie told to deliberately annoy someone
- 9) a detour—a lie meant to divert events, thoughts or feelings away from the directions or places where they would probably otherwise go
- 10) a ducker—a lie told so you can avoid something
- 11) a saint—a lie told for another person's own good
- 12) an oinker—a lie told to acquire something for personal gain
- 13) a dropsy—an indirect lie; dropping a detail to encourage a wrong conclusion or wrong perception by another person (a sin of omission)
- 14) a tickler—a lie told just to tease someone
- 15) a crooked arrow—a lie meant to misdirect the other person
- 16) a writ—a lie told from a perceived necessity to not get into the truth or reality (the perceived need can be wrong)
- 17) a mirror—a lie in response to a perceived or suspected lie, with the other person's lie used as justification (as in “he started it”)
- 18) a trickie—a lie that is intended to confuse the other person
- 19) a killer—a lie which, if believed, could lead to a death
- 20) an auto-lie—a lie told to oneself, usually in the silence of your thoughts (Question: if you tell yourself a lie and then believe it, who told the lie, and who believed it? And are there two of you? And if so, do they know each other?)
- 21) a Stalin—a lie intended to rewrite history, redefine the past (revisionism)

Victor wanted to go on. He hadn't really communicated with his fellow human beings for a very long time, but ... he'd had his reasons, and he knew that if he tried to improve on what he'd already done, he'd end up editing himself to bloody death, and rewriting the thing forever. “Good luck,” was all he added. That, and: “Hope this helps.”

Sunday, February 20, 2033—12:30 a.m.

Lilly arrived back at Victor-E at half past midnight, with the shadow of a kiss still on her lips. The E-tery was open, but quite empty ... thank God. Big Wus was snoozing on the landing halfway up to her apartment, and Lilly, hiking her shimmery black dress up a bit to climb the stairs, stooped to give him a pat on her way by. He didn't lift his head up, but his wary brown eyes watched her every move, and his tail twitched.

When she got to the top of the stairs, she imagined herself going in and closing the door, leaning her back against it, with her fake-ermine coat still on, her eyes shut, and a smile on her face to match the circus in her heart. Can't do that, she thought. Not in front of my MIU.

She unlocked the door, closed it, and exhaled in the way one does when a big job is finally done. She hung up her coat and purse and walked into the bedroom. As she closed the bedroom door, she leaned against it, sighed and enjoyed the moment of reflection she had imagined herself indulging just a few seconds earlier. She had no real idea how her relationship with Michael would impact on her career, and for the time being, she didn't care. The WDA doesn't own me, she thought. They rent me, on a month-to-month basis.

But, whatever feelings had grown between herself and Michael, she was still a WDA agent, and therefore her day was not over. She was forgetful of the fact that she'd smoked a "reefer" and drunk half a bottle of wine, and that these minor pleasures might affect her professional performance. Duty was duty, and the flashing light told her there were some messages on her MIU. She knew she should review them, if only to make sure there was nothing in there that wouldn't wait until morning. She changed into her housecoat, went into the bathroom, washed the make-up from her face, walked to her Netstation, slapped in her bioID and PIN and booted the thing up.

Julia had called, asking her for a full report on the dinner party. Not very likely.

Davie Brown, the clan's volunteer snitch, had left her a message about how the "gang of twelve" had met with Helliwell in the lunchroom at the Pot-house. Interesting, thought Lilly. There's no MIU out there. I wonder how they planned that without my finding out? And ... I thought it was a gang of eleven.

There was a short archived face from Ed, her ex ... just to say hi and see how things were going for her up in Québec. Just freakin' peachy, she replied in her mind, without a molecule of insincerity.

As she sifted through the rest of her N-mail, a new incoming face was being archived. She decided to observe, without engaging. It was Michael. He was using his Sniffer from the back of the limousine, saying goodnight one last time ... and giving her his personal Netsite address! "Call me any time at all," he said. "And soon," he added. You can count on that, Mr. Whiteside, she thought.

Lilly accessed InfoBank, downloaded the last twenty-four hours of her digitized spying on Annette Blais, then scanned for "events." There were several recent Netcalls to and from Annette's MIU, having to do with the allegedly "historic" meeting with Victor. From the snippets Lilly reviewed, it was clear the meeting had gone extremely well. The big surprise for her was not that Victor had come up with a plan to simulate LieDeck-verification, but the news that it was Victor, and not Steve Sutherland, who had originally conceived of the novel lifestyle design that had come to be known throughout the world as Evolution! No wonder Sutherland insisted on calling the first clan Victor-E, Lilly said to herself. I always wondered about that.

And then there were several references to an undefined "phase 2" for Evolution. Lilly watched closely as this was bandied about by Annette and several of her Netlink partners. I'll look into that tomorrow, Lilly said to herself, although they don't seem to know what it's all about themselves, which is ... strange.

She skipped forward to Annette's last interface. It was a short Netcall from her to "the Lars," as he was apparently called by the legions of women who admired him and wanted him, carnally, at least once. Annette was asking him to drop by for "a while."

"Ewwww," said Lilly as she dumped Annette. That conjures up images I just do not need in my head, she thought. She returned to InfoBank, and this time she downloaded the last twenty-four hours of Victor's MIU activity. I wonder if our new World Identity Bank is actually intended for eavesdropping? she asked herself as billions of ones and zeros poured into her hard drive from InfoBank. She was still unconsciously reviewing the details of her evening with Michael. The Happy Hookah group seemed to assume as much, and they're probably right ... but they also assumed the WDA tried to kill Lester Connolly! She reminded herself. No way that's true, she thought, none too confidently.

When she scanned Victor's day, she found him staring at the Netnews for practically two hours during the afternoon, with that weird glazed-over look in his eyes, almost as if he were hypnotized. He's probably stoned, she thought. Or nuts! Or both!

She zapped forward to the point where Victor arrived back at the lodge from his short outing to the Pot-house. She watched as he marched straight to his MIU, without even losing the shirt and tie. She then fast-forwarded bit by bit as he spent more than an hour, dressed now in his caftan, constructing the types-of-snow/types-of-lies missive for the Victor-Eens. I'll watch all of that tomorrow, she said to herself as she skipped forward again, and ... what's this? Lilly wondered. Victor was smiling, and he was talking, going on about his years of silence. Who the hell's he talking to? A few seconds later, Victor turned around and started to laugh, realizing he had been talking to someone who wasn't even there yet. "Well, come on in!" he shouted. "I don't bite!"

Lilly saw Julia's giggly face peer around the doorjamb, holding her shoes in her hand. I don't believe it! Lilly thought. Jeeeeeze!

"Maybe I like biting," said Julia as she skipped into the room and kicked the door closed with the bottom of her bare foot.

Lilly was more fatigued than upset. Ever since she had started off as a WDA agent, the one thing that had grated on her was the peek-a-boo view she got of other people's sex lives. It really was important for WDA agents to have these insights—she knew that from the Academy—but ... well, she wasn't raised like that. And while she supposed that all this free-range sex would go on whether or not she was aware of it, when it came to people she actually knew, she did not want to know who was doing what to whom. Julia and Victor!? she said to herself. Good God, Michael will go ballistic!

She decided to postpone her review of their "communion"—it would surely wait until tomorrow morning. As she was about to close down her MIU, a new face registered—the face of Control. He's ... been watching me do my homework, she realized, waiting until I was finished.

"Hello, Ms. Petrosian," he said. "How was your date?"

"None of your business," said Lilly—not because it wasn't, but because she knew she'd need to report her reaction to the question to Michael. She winked, and Control took her meaning.

"What's this 'phase two' concept Victor was spouting at the Pot-house?" he asked.

S.O.P., thought Lilly. Standard operating procedure. Start with the easy items. "No idea," she said. "It seems that everybody here assumes that the WDA is eavesdropping on them through their MIUs, so the gang had their meeting in a room where there was none. And Victor won't elaborate on what this 'phase two' business is all about anyway, or at least not until the clan goes forty days without a single lie being

told. I'll keep an eye out and my ear to the ground on that."

"You—uh—sort of skipped forward past some pretty important stuff when you were checking Annette's archived data," he said. "No big deal—I mean you'd find it tomorrow anyway."

"Like ... what?" asked Lilly, apprehensively.

"Victor apparently gave the clan's charity, Foundation-E, some money to finance a stack of digicorders for their new LieDeck-simulation program—that simLV thing, they call it—and to finance that phase two thing that he alluded to," said Control.

"Really," said Lilly. She was intrigued to see that Control was ahead of her on this, and was watching her progress with such a personal interest. It also bothered her to be chastised, no matter how politely. "How much?" she asked.

"A million bucks," said Control, with no emotion on his face.

"A mil—" started Lilly.

"And he's giving them half of his fortune eventually ... presumably when he dies ... another hundred million plus," he continued.

"Jesus H. Christ!" said Lilly. "I'd ... have caught it tomorrow, Chief ... I was ... it's just that I've been out all evening, and—"

"Don't fret it," he interrupted. "You worry too much, Ms. Petrosian. Let's get back to business here. Can they simulate LieDeck-verification, like Victor said?"

"Uh—probably," said Lilly, who was still shaken from having missed an important piece of information, even if only temporarily. "It will be time-consuming, but the whole Victor-E clan is already in transition to Human Three Consciousness—some of them are already Human Three, apparently—so I expect they won't have many situations to cope with. They—uh—don't lie much any more anyway, I understand. I'll—"

"I have to ask you one question about Michael," said Control.

"Yes sir," she said. Her fear levels leapt again.

"Did he mention anything about unbanning the LieDeck?"

Whew, thought Lilly, he doesn't know about the political thing. "He's against it," she said calmly. "He doesn't want to risk a return to chaos, even though an unbanning of the LieDeck would make a mountain of money for Whiteside Tech. And if production of the LieDeck is spread around to a large number of companies, Whiteside Tech still owns the patent on the device, so they'd still get royalties on every LieDeck any company makes, and—"

"That's ... verified?" he asked. "That he's against unbanning?"

"I—uh—left my LieDeck on, set on beeper mode, while we talked in the limousine. It was necessary for the—uh—trust levels, so ... yeah, it's verified."

"Interesting," said Control. Actually, he was furious. If her Sniffer was on at the time, then we already knew about Michael's position on unbanning the LieDeck several hours ago, and I wasn't told! Communications snafus at my level are unacceptable. Someone's head will roll. "I know it's very late, but

have you got a few minutes for a couple more questions? I imagine you're pretty—"

"No problem, sir," she said.

"Annette?"

"She's clean. She doesn't like me, but we—"

"Julia?"

"Uh ... she's over at the lodge with Victor as of a few minutes ago. I've got a feeling she's—"

"Mrs. Whiteside?" said Control. "Senior—Michael's mother, Doreen."

"I didn't meet her. She's not really ... in the loop, I don't think. We—uh—don't have her on total archive, but we probably should."

"Rebecca, Michael's wife?"

Lilly hesitated. This one was a problem. "We need to place her under total archive, sir. She's deep in transition to Human Three. She even gave her blessing for Michael to date me! I—uh—I believe she's got other men in her life—I have no idea who they are, but you probably do. Did you know she was into this Human Three stuff?"

"And ... Randy?" said Control, ignoring her question.

"I reported on his situation yesterday. Nothing new."

"And ... Michael," said Control ... less as a question than a statement, or an order. "How did it go?"

"I'll ... answer in full if you insist," said Lilly, "but doing so could limit my future effectiveness. It's your call."

Control stared into his screen at the image of Lilly Petrosian as she looked back at him, expressionless. She's clever, this one, he thought. "I'll wait," he said. "Good luck. Net, down, now."

Lilly kept her face in neutral, closed down her MIU, and went into the bathroom to have a shower. It was normally part of her getting-up ritual, but somehow the chat with Control made her feel itchy ... and cold ... and scared. Why did he ask the question about Michael's view on unbanning? she wondered as she took off her housecoat and slippers. They must have thought Michael was supporting the unbanning committees for personal profit, or that he approved of Randy's support for USLUC ... or maybe that Michael was even financing Randy's involvement!

She washed and rinsed her hair, then she took the soap to her body—a new bar with the remnants of the previous bar pressed on, exactly as the maid had "advised." After lathering and rinsing her face, she started on her arms. Then she reached up, pointed the showerhead in a more vertical direction, and stepped to the other end of the tub, out of the hot spray. The soap felt so very sensual tonight, and she imagined her slippery hands were Michael's hands as they caressed her underarms and her breasts. Her eyes closed when she moved on to her stomach, her crotch, her ... No, she said just as her finger was about to slip through to her clitoris. I don't know why not, but ... no.

She wondered whether Michael would share her restraint, or if he was in the shower right now, joyfully pumping his penis and thinking of what might have been, thinking of what might happen next time. Or making love to Becky! came the sudden, awful thought. I hope not. Why do I hope not? Would Becky

be hoping her husband wouldn't spend the night with me? Is she spending the night with one of her other ... what did she call them ... her "friends"? How the hell do people like Lars and Annette avoid all these muddled-up feelings? Is sex the great common denominator between and among the classes? Is Julia going to have sex with Victor? What would her taxi-driver friend Alex think of that? What if I...

Her trained mind had a way of running long lists of questions, and it usually left the one that mattered most for last. What if I ... quit my job? she wondered.

Lilly reversed her earlier resolve, and her finger slid wetly between her labia. Her orgasm was instantaneous and intense, and the word "Michael" kept shaping on her lips as her knees turned to gum.

Chapter 36

CAN WE TALK?

Sunday, March 6, 2033—2:05 p.m.

Venice Whiteside sat in her playroom—she called it her office now, at least in the quiet of her thoughts—staring at her MIU with the sound turned off. For the last half hour, she had been auditing—watching and listening, but not participating in—an adult Happy Hookah chatroom. The chatters were discussing the WDA; more specifically, its rarely-used power to inflict the death penalty and its reserved right to use nuclear weapons if chaos was threatening to overwhelm society, and nothing else seemed to be working to stop it. Assholes, Venice thought ... about the WDA, not the talkers in the chatroom. So she'd turned off the sound.

Not all Happy Hookah chatrooms were populated by Evolutionaries, but this one was—otherwise Venice wouldn't have selected it. When she wanted to participate, she'd log onto a "junior" Evolutionary chatroom, where no THC was allowed. Today, however, she wasn't up to being a player. She needed the freedom to quit whenever she wanted.

While she didn't understand all the words and didn't appreciate the coarse language that people sometimes used in adult chatrooms, she felt closer to these people than she did to most of those she knew on the warm—except her family, of course. It wasn't that virtual relationships had the depth or the rich texture of her schoolmates or her family or her adult acquaintances; they didn't, but they had presence, significance, and relevance. Venice was twelve, and she enjoyed her warm encounters as much as she needed them, even with the burdens of accommodation and the pressures of her personal history with "real" people—the "baggage." But the untouchable temporaries on her screen connected with each other, and tangentially with her, in a way that was equally human, even if all the rules of that connection were different. Whatever the rap on cyberlife, Venice knew that she was one of "them," a budding and future Human Three, just as it had dawned on her at the age of four that her certain destiny was to be a fully grown woman, with her own house, her own kids, even with her own husband, as handsome and perfect as her dad was ... or used to be.

The only thing she didn't particularly like about these adult Happy Hookah chatters was the fact that they smoked marijuana. At times they would do their emotion wrestling thing to an extent that just wasn't warranted by the words that had triggered the outbreak in the first place. Of course sometimes Venice suspected that she just didn't get it because she was a kid, but most of the time she knew exactly what they were cracking up about. And she'd laugh herself, but then as good things always do, it would end for her ... while the people on her screen were still at it, cackling full tilt! It wasn't that she lacked a sense of humor; just that "dopies" took emotion wrestling to ridiculous lengths. She had often switched chatrooms immediately after saying the words: "It wasn't that funny!"

Venice had tried grass once—just a couple of puffs—and all it did was make her choke and cough. She'd told her folks about it over supper, which got her grounded for a month and banned from accessing the Net for two months. For some reason, grass was legal only on your sixteenth birthday and thereafter. She didn't get the reason, but she had conceded even to herself that there was one, and that it was probably a good one, and that when she had her own kids, she would apply that rule even if the law had changed in the meantime.

At the moment, however, she was suffering from Netburn. Cyberlife was real life, but then again ... it wasn't, really ... and it often got in the way of “on-the-warm” stuff. Life is what happens elsewhere while you're busy on the Net, she remembered hearing from one of her teachers, repeatedly (a few of her classmates were problematic cyberjunkies). It was a guilt trip then, but like the law on marijuana use, not without a certain wisdom. Venice had a sense of that wisdom right now, as she stared at the silent screen full of passionate exhortations, wisecracks, and grinning faces. She wasn't in the kind of sparkly physical condition that typified children of her age in generations past, and she led a life somewhat separate from her parents, even living in the same house. She just didn't know what it was like to have nothing to do, and with the Net, there were an infinite number of things to do at any time of the day. Mom has her “friends,” Dad has his business ... and Lilly, now ... and I have my MIU, she thought, and felt. She knew that she was just being bleak, with little justification, but since she felt guilty and bummed, she decided to survey her personal landscape and see what she found.

She crossed her arms and closed her young eyes. Where could I be right now instead of here? she wondered. She had eavesdropped on a chatroom last week where a twelve-year-old boy was telling story after story about the fun times he had as a TA—that meant “teaching assistant,” apparently—at a school, helping to “grow” the children in pre-K to grade four. It was one of those “3-schools”—Venice forgot the name—but it was based on the premise that everyone ought to be a Human Three, and school was as good a place as any to learn how and why and all that stuff. That very day, Venice had put her name in for a try-out as a “TA” at the 3-school up in Shawville, the Victor-E “3” Primary School, and she was waiting to hear back from a Monsieur Bellehumeur, the principal. That was a good step, but not one she could hurry any faster than other people were willing or able to move. There has to be other inner stuff I can get my head into, she thought. Slowly, she interlocked her fingers behind her neck, and let her brain ... wander.

I promised to talk to Lilly Petrosian, and I never did, she remembered. The problem was, Lilly and her father were getting to be “friends” now, and Venice wasn't at all sure she was in favor of that. It was enough that her mother had men “friends” without her father getting into that kind of thing too. She had been meaning to visit her Aunt Julia on the warm, but her dad was really negative on that ... at least if it meant Venice's going out to Victor-E. Actually, Aunt Julia had been spending a lot of time at the Wilson Lake lodge the last couple of weeks, ministering to the hermit, or at least being with him when she wasn't working at the clansite.

Everyone now knew that Victor was talking again, even if he wasn't saying anything publicly. He was being besieged with requests for interviews from all over the world, but he had granted not one. He'd told Julia “never,” and Julia told Patriot Security, and that was the end of it. Everyone also knew that he was dying. His snail-mail was up to twenty bags a day, and his Netmail was in the order of a hundred thousand arrivals per week—not that he ever opened his N-mail.

Venice didn't think that was right, actually. “He should talk to people while he still can,” she had mentioned to her mother, a couple of times. “There's no rule anybody has to talk to people,” her mother had countered. Venice had almost cut back with a snarly comment about how Victor had gone to something of an extreme proving that seldom-debated point, but she had stopped herself—and was proud of herself for having done so.

Maybe he'll talk to me! the thought suddenly struck her. That opened her eyes right up again. She'd done occasional columns for her school's internal Netnews program, and she had many times wondered if she might end up being a journalist. She liked thinking up really good questions and asking them to people ... and she certainly was not going to waste her whole life being a rich lazy person ... like Mom, she couldn't help thinking.

"But how?" she asked herself aloud. Venice knew she could simply take advantage of her family connections to try and talk with Victor, and she figured she could likely guilt him into an interview, but a "real journalist" wouldn't approach it like that ... unless she really had to, she thought.

"Face with Captain Lillian Petrosian at Victor-E," she said to her MIU, "Netsite on file." She felt very grown up and professional to use the word "Captain," like it happened every day, and the sound of the word "Victor-E" had always stirred the reporter magic in her. That's what's the most fun about journalism, she thought ... the feelings. It wasn't exactly what she imagined a Human Three perspective would be, but she was still a kid, barely Human Two ... and besides, she reviewed, Human Threes actually enjoy their feelings more than adults that are Human Two. Nothing wrong with that.

"Well hello, Venice," said Lilly's image on the MIU. "How are things?"

"Fine," said Venice. She wanted to launch right into the meat, but she had been on what she called an "un-me" campaign lately, an effort to let other people play with the agenda too. "How's your life tooting along?" she asked, trying to sound interested and hoping for a short answer ... and one that doesn't include her and Dad getting to be ... like friends.

"Keeping busy," said Lilly. "Anything particular on your mind, or did you just call to—"

"When's your next LieDeck-verification session with Mr. Helliwell?" asked Venice before Lilly could get to the predictable end of her sentence.

Lilly commanded her LV schedule onto her screen. "On the—uh—on March ... the fourteenth," she said. "A week from tomorrow. Why?"

"Can I come with you for that?" asked Venice. "I wouldn't listen to the LV part, of course, but I thought ... well, I thought maybe I could talk to him for a few minutes after you're done ... for my life profile, you know? For my kids and grandchildren when they get here. Would that be—"

"It's not up to me," said Lilly. "Why don't you ask your Aunt Julia ... she seems to be his gatekeeper these days."

"Gatekeeper?"

"It's just a term," explained Lilly. "You know how the Patriot Security people at your front gate control who gets onto the estate?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well, Julia sort of plays that role with Victor—not like who gets in the lodge, but who gets to talk to him, you know? He's pretty busy these days, Julia told me, and he's ... well, he's not getting any better."

Venice looked sad, and felt sad. It wasn't that Lilly couldn't or wouldn't help; it was death. Venice hated the word and resented the very idea of it. Life was a gyp, sort of. You get to live for a while, and then ... you're dead. She remembered the awful day in 2027 when she'd learned about people dying for real, including herself. She was six years old at the time, and she'd cried for days, wondered every night whether she'd even wake up the next morning. But that was part of the idea of doing your life profile—to

get around death, not in the material sense or in any divine sense, but at least your descendants got to know their ancestors even after they'd fallen into that ghastly pit called death. She wished her Grandpa Whiteside had done his life profile before that crazy Christian preacher shot him. "Okay," she said finally. "Thanks, Lilly," she added, as sincerely as she could. "Net, down, now."

It turned out that Julia was over at the lodge, and Victor had only just awakened from an afternoon nap. He was almost finished the work he'd been doing to prepare for some meeting or other, Julia told Venice. And after a hollered reality-check between Victor's living-room MIU, where Julia was, and his bedroom, where Victor was, Julia told her niece that Victor was quite agreeable to a short visit. "He says like as long as it's just for your life profile," Julia had stressed, "and you use like a video camera and not an MIU or a Sniffer," she explained. "And it has to be done in his bedroom where there's no MIU, he says, and it can't get shown to anybody at all till after he's dead, he said."

Venice winced at that last part, but agreed. She didn't understand the why of all that, but on reflection, she didn't really care. In fact, she was elated. She ran quickly out of the house, and told a Patriot agent to drive her out to the lodge with such urgency that she—the agent—thought there must be an emergency in progress out there. Eight minutes later, Venice jumped out of the Patriot van, ran up to the lodge and went right into her father's bedroom on the first floor. That room was huge, and it was like a museum—in fact that's what Randy used to call it when he lived at home: "Dad's museum." There were perhaps one hundred different electronic products in there, samples of maybe half the products that Whiteside Tech had turned out over the last half-century, and all of it was in perfect working order ... or so her father had always bragged.

She picked out two old-fashioned videotape cameras that had plugs for the wall—she didn't want to rely solely on batteries that could croak and just ruin everything—and she made sure they were loaded with tape. She also took two of those fold-up tripods her dad had taught her how to use when she was just eight. One of the cameras would be trained on Victor, the other on herself, for what she had learned was called a "2-shot." She would transfer the images and sound to digital format later, and edit it herself. That'll be fun, she thought as she gathered her low-tech haul into a big bath towel for transport up the stairs. I bet this'll get shown all over the world ... after he dies.

Chapter 37

TWO BOSSES

Wednesday, March 9, 2033—6:15 p.m.

Through the day, Becky and Venice had both watched the silent progress of one of those late-winter/early-spring snows, with big, fat, sticky flakes that float down rather than fall from the sky—the kind that almost beg to be rolled into a snowman. Becky had watched the slow-motion drama from the windows of the manor house, wishing the hours would move along a little bit faster than the clock allowed. Venice, who normally loved school, had been distracted all day, to the point where her teachers had noticed, and commented.

Mother and daughter were both looking forward to their 7:00 p.m. rendezvous with Victor Helliwell, so when Michael called at 5:00 p.m. to say he had to be away for a few days on business, they ate supper early, and decided to drive out to the lodge a bit ahead of schedule. With forty-five minutes to kill, they tramped on down to the dock in shin-deep snow and tossed affectionate snowballs at each other whenever the spirit moved.

It wasn't that many weeks ago that the sun would be down at this hour. They had no visible sun above,

but they had a diffused ceiling, a waning light. Spring was coming, but it certainly wasn't here yet. They had eschewed the kind of regular nylon garments that retailers insisted on these days, and donned old-fashioned "woolies," the kind their early-20th-century ancestors used to wear—"just for the hell of it," Becky had said. On the way up from the dock, they had lain down on their backs, side by side, and made snow-angels by waving their arms and legs. The snow had caked onto their backs and toques, and when they reached the porch, they fell to laughing and flailing at each other with floppy wet mittens ... perhaps more roughly than was necessary, but all in good old-fashioned fun.

Becky wondered if Victor could hear them from his second-floor hideaway. She wondered if he ever laughed any more, or if he ever had done much of that. She had visited with him briefly several times over the past couple of weeks, and supposed she knew him better than anyone except Julia, and yet she realized she hardly knew the man at all. For almost two decades, he had excused himself from the acquisition of friends, even from most interaction, by refusing to talk. Yet he was sure to go down in history as having had a profound influence on human life, more perhaps than anyone else save the usual short list—Jesus, Einstein, et al.

She also wondered about the wisdom of bringing Venice along with her for this visit. Normally, she would have discussed the matter with the men in her life, starting with Michael, of course, but also including one or two of the other lovely men that shared her nights from time to time. True, Venice had met with Victor once already, three days ago, last Sunday, and interviewed him for her life profile. That had gone very well, according to the vague report she'd been given by her daughter. But that was for history; that was about externals, mostly—or so Becky had assumed. This encounter was supposed to be "in the pudding," a no-holds-barred conversation about and confrontation with reality—internal, external—the whole gamut.

There was a real need on Becky's part to better understand the process of transition. She knew that Human Threes were always in transition, sort of. At times she felt she was through it, done with it, finished, graduated, even if lesson #1 in the evolving "book" was that anyone could regress at any time, even all the way back to Human One! Part of her reason for shunning the C.Q.E. services and participatory encounters with Human Three chatrooms was the unfortunate knowledge that a Whiteside couldn't do anything without risking unwanted attention from the Netnews. If she wanted her consciousness quotient evaluated, or bumped up a notch, she was pretty well on her own. It was a challenge she accepted and largely enjoyed, whatever the unfairness of her circumstance.

However, there was another element to her situation, a positive aspect that no one else in the world would even imagine. Becky could go to right the proverbial horse's mouth, now that he was talking again—or at least while he was still alive. The problem now was that she was secretly uncertain of her footing as a Human Three, and she just didn't want Venice to know that, even though there was no good Human Three reason to fear such knowledge by her own daughter ... or anyone else, she supposed. She didn't know if she could be open in front of Venice, and deep down Becky was terrified she might discover that her daughter's CQ was higher than her own! That's a typical Human Two worry, she scolded herself as she removed her toque and flicked snow off ... into Venice's face.

"Mom!" squealed the girl. "You said truce!"

"I lied," said Becky playfully. "So sue me."

Venice scooped up a handful of snow from the porch railing and chased her mother inside. They both laughed when Venice got her final shot in—snow down her mother's neck—and then a real truce was declared as they stomped their boots and took off their outerwear. They put on the slippers they'd brought with them, and the mood slid from giddy to apprehensive as they mounted the wooden stairs. They both flashed inwardly on what it might be like to make this climb after Victor had died.

"Come on in," shouted Victor. There are few silences as complete as that created by a soft, floating snow, so he had heard every word spoken on the walk to the dock, and he'd heard the fake feud on the porch, and left the door to his suite open. He wore his yellow and green silk paisley caftan—no way was he going to "dress up" for a CQ session unless a yellow and green paisley caftan is "dressed to the nines" for a Human Three. "Who the hell knows," he mumbled to himself, realizing afterwards that if he didn't have a clue, no one else did either.

He wasn't too sure why he had agreed to meet with them both, and together ... not just as a matter of doubtful memory, but as an issue that could have gone either way at the time of the decision, and could still be reversed on appeal. He had talked with Becky several times recently, both on the Net and at the lodge, and found her to be a bubbling cauldron of anxious hunger and a multiplicity of self-inflicted blind spots. Venice was a just a child, and his experience with children was ... well, basically nil. He didn't know how much Venice could understand, no matter how hard she tried. Oh well, he thought, maybe if I simplify for Venice's benefit, Becky will get it ... better.

"Door's open," he bellowed as he draped a blanket over his dark MIU. Long before such speculation was rampant, he suspected that the WDA was able to see into the private lives of civilians using the technology that was built into every MIU. I don't give a shit if they listen, he said to himself, but I'll be God damned if I'll let them see me. "So ... who won?" he asked as the rosy-cheeked guests entered his domain.

"Me," Becky and Venice said, both at once.

"You know what it means when people fight like that, eh?" he asked as he showed them to the sofa.

Becky squirmed emotionally—she figured they were in for some kind of Helliwellian crypto-analysis on how their play-fighting represented some obscure—

"You love each other, that's all," said the host, killing the anxiety he had already seen on Becky's face. He knew it wasn't just that, of course. He knew all about cannabinide receptors in the brain, and the brain's production of it's own THC product, anandimide, and he knew that Ananda was the Sanskrit word for bliss, and he knew that science knew precious little about the mechanics or genesis of human feelings or emotions, but a word had to say something, even if it wasn't perfectly scientific, and "love" wasn't altogether unscientific, so ... "Jeeze Louise," he added, by which he meant "Duh!"

Venice laughed. She knew that. Becky smiled. She knew it too, but her feelings got her off track, and now she was nakedly Human Two. "I knew that," she play-huffed as she reached down and snicked a stubborn clump of snow off her left sock.

Victor pulled a straight-backed chair to a position in front of the couch, twirled it backwards, and straddled the seat, tucking the loose caftan under his crotch as he did so. "Of course you did," he said as he watched both of them glance at his bare knees, shins and feet. "Pretty ugly, eh?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," said Venice, rolling her eyes in jest ... well, partly in jest.

Becky was embarrassed, but Victor hooted. "Given enough time, we all get ugly," he said, "but let's not get all lost on appearance stuff. That's too basic, and I—"

"Actually," interrupted Venice, "I was sort of hoping..." Her voice quit on her as she worried about the reactions of the other two players.

"Finish your sentence," said Victor. This is no time to wimp out over some irrational fear or other, he thought, but didn't say. Christ, we haven't even started!

"I know lots of Human Three stuff," said Venice, "but I'm not real sure that I've got all the basics sometimes, and like—"

"Me too," Becky blurted out.

Victor had his forearms on the back of the dining chair, and his chin on his forearms; his beard was mostly hidden behind the back of the chair. He lifted his head and flicked the long white beard over the top, letting it flop over his forearms and the chair. He did it dramatically, as if this action had some hidden meaning.

Venice laughed. "I'll never be able to do that," she ventured.

"Well, I'll never be able to have a baby," said Victor.

"Do you—uh—want to do basics?" asked Becky, trying to steer things back to ... to what? she wondered. To where they should be, she added to her thought.

"What I want is not the issue," offered Victor. "You start," he said to Venice.

The girl's mind went into overdrive. She swallowed visibly as her eyes shifted way up, way left, towards ... nothing, she realized.

Victor wondered how far he could or should go into the biology of our most primitive emotion, the little bits buried in the almond-shaped amygdala, on both sides of the brain. Should I explain the difference between the Pavlovian conditioned response that relies on past memory to trigger a gush of hormones, a quickened heart rate, sweating, the freeze response, and the involuntary emergency reflex response that needs no serial processing or messages to the higher brain centers for environmental assessments? Jeeze—what am I thinking? She's a kid, for Christ's sake! "Fear?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Venice, who was simultaneously caught in the emotion and amused by it.

"Of...?" he asked.

"That ... you won't like me?" she said, questioningly.

"I already do like you," said Victor, "or you wouldn't be here. You're my favorite kid in the world."

"I'm the only kid you ever met since before I was born," she noted.

"So ... then you're also my least favorite kid," chuckled Victor.

Venice smiled, and then she got serious and scratched her head. "Nothing ... here," she tried.

Becky looked at her twelve-year-old daughter curiously. What the hell did she mean by that? she wondered. Oh, she realized. She means she's not afraid of anything here, so the fear is—

"Zilla?" said Victor. He'd been through that with Becky before, and he knew all kids liked that expression—he knew some things about kids from the Net, of course. Zilla was short for Godzilla, meaning instinct, or the person when he or she was acting primarily on instinct; most especially when the person shouldn't be acting on instinct. "When it's Zilla that responds," he explained to Venice, "for me, it's not a whole lot different from talking to a machine, because the instinct is on auto-pilot. The person that you defined yourself to be by way of conscious decision," he emphasized, "is not even involved, or isn't hardly even involved."

"Yeah," admitted Venice. "I still get all surprised when I feel stuff that's like ... you know ... totally

stupid."

"So do I," said Becky. "It's weird being Human Three, or in transition, anyway. Does it ever stop feeling weird, Victor?"

"Fucked if I know," he said. "Oops—sorry," he added when he realized he had sworn in front of a child.

"No harm done," said Becky. She waved it off, although she wondered privately if Victor's judgment had suffered irreparable damage from nearly two decades of silence. She wanted to credit his words to the pain medication he was taking, but that wasn't it. Sometimes ... like now ... his judgment just plain sucks.

"Beep," said Victor, and it stung him that he had to pretend that he had a LieDeck. I invented the fucking thing, and I can't even use one!

"What? Me?" asked Becky.

"Yeah," said Victor. "No harm done to Venice—that's true—but I did harm both of your perceptions of me. I showed poor judgment, and it wasn't the pills I'm on, either. I think we all have to acknowledge that my social skills are ... sort of the pits."

"So ... does it?" asked Venice.

"Does ... what?" asked Victor.

"Does it ever stop feeling weird to be Human Three, or in transition?"

"I think—" started Victor. Hmm, he thought, maybe the pills are getting in the way. "I think," he started again, "that for certain individuals—Julia, for instance—it never does feel weird. But for most people, including me, I think Human Three Consciousness will always feel weird—not every minute of every day, of course, but ... lots of times every day.

"Shrinks and gurus used to tell people to 'go with their feelings,' because whatever you do feel always feels right, right? Well of course that's perfectly ridiculous advice ... I mean, if you feel like kicking or insulting somebody, or killing them, then what do you do? Even becoming an adult Human Two involves acquiring certain inner controls ... an ability to refuse to yield to your own feelings. No, I think it will always feel weird when Zilla doesn't win every battle. He's designed to win every battle, of course, so it's only natural that he profoundly hates losing, and it's perfectly predictable that he beats you up, emotionally, whenever he loses, especially when you make him lose, with your mind.

"It took thousands of generations before Human Ones started not feeling weird about becoming or being Human Two, for Pete's sake, so perhaps it'll be hundreds of years or dozens of generations before we get the hang of really being Human Three. What do you think, Venice?"

Venice felt scared again, but this time she squashed the feeling before it showed, and before she got dragged into a long discourse about it. "Well," she drawled, "I always fall back on the 'two bosses' thing. That's the best way of looking at it, at least for me."

Victor's legs hurt ... and come to think of it, so does the rest of me, he realized. He stood, walked carefully over to the stuffed chair that matched the sofa, and eased himself into it. Only teenage boys flaunt their agility by sitting backwards like I was doing there, he thought. Zilla made me do it. "So ... tell me about that 'two-bosses' dialectic," he said to Venice as his body relaxed.

Venice had no clue what a "dialectic" was, but she figured that didn't matter anyway. It's probably one of those fancy words adults use because they don't want to say "thing" or "stuff," lest they look vocabularyly

retarded. "Okay," she said, flipping her eyelids up and shifting forward in preparation. "It's like we're animals, right? And we got these two bosses inside of us, Zilla and Albert, and when—"

"Albert?" asked Becky.

"As in Einstein," said Venice. "That's ... how a lot of kids in transition call it these days—the wetware, the brain, right?"

"Gotcha," said her mother. "Or I guess I could use 'Alberta,' if I didn't want to refer to my rationality as a male thing."

"Good idea," said Victor.

"So," continued Venice, "like Zilla says what to do—like eat—and then Albert's job is to figure out how to do it, right? Like if I think of myself as a corporation, when I was a baby or when I'm like being a total Human One, Zilla is like the president, and Albert is like the vice-president, eh?" Or Zilla is the dictator, she thought but didn't verbalize, and Albert is the sycophant. She had just recently learned that word, sycophant, and she loved it. In her dictionary it meant a "servile flatterer or toady," but "an ass-kisser" was her own private definition. It disturbed her that reason could be brought so low, that it could be so grossly undervalued by Zilla and his ilk.

"Uh-huh," said Victor, ignoring the all-too-frequent occurrences of the word "like," while still admiring the message, or rather her grasp of the reality.

"Then—I'm not too sure I got this next part right," said Venice. Against her wishes, her face betrayed an inner struggle that wasn't helping.

"Oh, well then, you should—uh—get scared and don't say nothing," said Victor, enjoying the indulgence of a double negative.

Becky frowned at his sarcasm, but Venice laughed. "Thanks," said the twelve-year-old. "I needed that." She couldn't stop giggling in spite of herself.

"We all do sometimes," said Victor, smiling.

"I ... don't," said Becky, pausing only long enough to confirm that she felt that way.

"Do so," said Victor.

"Do not," insisted Becky, brushing her words with a dusting of doubt.

"Do so."

"Do not."

"Do so."

"Do not."

Victor wanted to holler "piss off," just to prove his point, but he declined. If people didn't want to "get it," no amount of reasoning or provocation or even torture could make them get it. Ironically, Albert couldn't win unless Zilla desired it, or at least allowed it to happen. He stared at Becky, waiting for her to make a decision ... her latest decision in a very long string of decisions to be Human Three. It's a lot like quitting smoking for her, he considered. Keep deciding the same damn thing, over and over, and sooner or later it will stick ... maybe. He decided to wait it out.

"Do so," she admitted sheepishly.

Time was a'wasting, and Victor had little left of that particular commodity. "Okay, go ahead, Venice," he asked.

"So, like," she started, "so for a Human Two, Zilla and Albert are like co-presidents, eh? Like they can both decide what I can say or do." She was going to go on to include a little example, about how her mom's Zilla was saying "do not" until her Alberta said "do so," but she decided against. It was too easy to lose track when you got bogged down in examples. "So, most of the time they get along, and when they don't, they can fight, and Zilla can win sometimes when he shouldn't, and that's like a Human Two, right? And the danger is that Zilla can win and we can go like all the way back to being Human One, eh? So it's..."

"So if that happens," interrupted Victor, "that regression to Human One, it's...?"

"Well it's ... it's sort of relative," said Becky. "Isn't it?"

"How so?" asked Victor.

"Well," continued Becky, "if a regression results in you being insulting to somebody, then I'd say you were 'acting like a jerk' or some such thing. But if the regression results in an assault, for instance, or a murder, then I would say—using moral terminology—that you were bad ... or evil ... or, in terms of Human Two psychology, I would say you were experiencing ... what do they call that?"

"Temporary insanity," said Victor.

"Yeah," said Becky, "and if—"

"Or heroism," inserted Victor.

"Heroism!?" asked Venice.

"Well," said Victor, "if you're a normal person and you kill somebody just because it pleased you to do so or because they pissed you off, then you're either bad or temporarily insane, but if you kill someone to stop them from killing me, then you're a hero, at least you are to me. There's times and situations when people should regress, when it's helpful or efficient or okay to be a paranoid, aggressive, remorseless Human One."

"Like?" asked Venice.

"Like a professional boxer," tried Becky, "as long as you stay within the rules ... I mean you can't go around biting somebody's ear off or—"

"True enough," said Victor. "Same thing for a soldier or policeman, I guess, at least when a dangerous situation calls for that. So ... what about Human Three, Venice?"

"Pretty simple," said the girl. "Albert already got one promotion, from vice-president to co-president—like when I became Human Two, meaning when I graduated from being a baby and became a proto-adult, eh?—and now Albert's got to become the president for life—like for me to be a Human Three, I mean—and Zilla has got to accept that he got a demotion, that he's just my vice-president from now on ... unless I get into one of those situations where ... like you said about the police or soldiers and all that, I mean. They both know how to be the boss, but if I'm a full-blooded Human Three, then Zilla never gets to run the show unless Albert says it's okay, right? And even in the middle of one of those rare situations, Albert can step in at any time and take control of a situation ... any

time at all ... even if Zilla is having a ball, right?"

"Especially when Zilla's enjoying himself," said Victor. "Not that you should never let Zilla run amok, mind you ... like you and your mom did with the snowballs outside ... it's just that Albert always has to keep an eye on things, like in that book *Catcher in the Rye*. Whenever there's the slightest doubt, Albert has to step in and take control, right?"

"Right," said Venice. "I read that book, by the way, and I—"

"And ... lying?" Victor cut in.

"Albert's in charge of language, and he ... can't lie ... all ... on his own," said Becky. "Albert can only lie if Zilla makes him, and Zilla can't make him if Albert refuses to let him." She wished she had used "Alberta" rather than "Albert" in her response, but ... the pronoun situation got dicey ... him or her ... and besides, it actually doesn't matter much, or shouldn't, to a Human Three.

"There you go!" said Victor with a clap of his hands. "It's really very simple. We're designed to be a Human One. Then as individuals we evolved into a Human Two—as a normal part of the growing up process—with the ever-present danger of regression back to Human One. Now we have the option of choosing to be a Human Three. And if we make that choice as a species, humanity and planet Earth will survive. If we don't, well, I don't think we will survive. Time will tell, but..."

The base of his neck had accelerated from the relative comfort of the past half hour to a boiling ache, and he tried hard not to let it show. He wanted to get into a discussion of his now-famous $I+T=C$ equation—instinct plus technology equals chaos—but he wasn't very sure Venice would get it, and he wasn't so sure that he could get through it without passing out or screaming from the pain. Becky knows all that stuff, he said to himself as he took a deep breath. I already discussed it with her—she'll have to take it from here.

Venice had a hundred other things on her mind, but it seemed clear that Victor was tiring. "My Zilla really wants to stay and talk some more," she said, "but my Albert tells me that maybe you're tired and need to rest."

"You should always use 'Alberta' rather than 'Albert,'" said Becky to her daughter with her kindest mom-boss voice. "I like that idea, Venice, and it just seems—"

"My Albert—or my Alberta—says I should rest," said Victor, "but my Zilla is having lots of fun, and since I'm going to die pretty soon anyway, I think I'll let my Zilla win ... this one ... for a while longer, anyway. So, what do you think of this new Lilly Petrosian woman?" he asked them both. "She's a pretty interesting person, eh? I'd really like to see her enter transition. In fact, I'll bet she'd make a dandy Human Three."

Chapter 38

THE GOOSE

Wednesday, March 9, 2033—7:30 p.m.

Lilly and Michael had two nervous conversations over the Net the day after their first date, eighteen delightful days ago. They both found themselves fumbling the simplest emotional transactions because neither could believe that the hand they had apparently been dealt was real, or could last. When they faltered, they laughed, and that fixed things up nicely—closed the door behind and opened the next

portal—and the band played on. They faced each other three times the day following, and thereafter it seemed to happen whenever one spirit or the other moved.

Sometimes they faced each other just to smile or to put their hands onto the glass—"like a prisoner with a visitor," Michael once observed, without venturing as to who was which. They went on real dates the following two Saturday nights, dining in public now, at posh Ottawa hotspots that catered to Normal men with big money and the women they wanted to impress ... or vice versa. They danced with no precautions against the glances of gossips. And they talked about many things—Russian literature, the Pope's newfound poverty, the alienating effects of Netlife and the concomitant dilution of traditional social skills. They spoke of their families, and enjoyed each other's favorite childhood stories. Sometimes, they chatted about things as inconsequential as their favorite foods or the pro golf tour, but never about anything as irrelevant as the latest Netshows—what used to be called "television" or "TV." The issue was never the issue when they talked anyway. The process was all that mattered, the simple act of being together, virtually or on the warm—the mutual rescue from their respective solitudes.

Still, no matter how much they tried to avoid the subject, in cyberspace or on a date, politics kept arriving at the doors of their minds, sneaking in, bullying its way in, elbows flying. Lilly knew little of Canada's internal dynamics, or of Québec's, but she knew a lot about power, including the perils of power. Nowhere in her reading of human history had she come across a "great divide" such as existed now between the WDA and the masses, not in the days of omnipotent monarchs and emperors, not even in the squalor-opulence mismatches of what used to be called Third World countries ... not even within the slave societies of antiquity. And never the twain shall meet, she often mused.

Michael was thinking of joining that hazardous in-between league, the quixotic and illusory cricket pitch occupied by the governments of nations. Below were the people, begging for more and better everything, and above was the WDA, the androgynous single parent who occasionally gambled away the milk money and drank the rent. Which is not to say that there's any other way to keep humans from depravity, Lilly always repeated in her mind. Somebody has to do it. She really wanted Michael to throw his hat in, but she wasn't altogether sure why she felt that way.

"I'm not a very public person," he said every time she asked about his deliberations.

"Yet," Lilly had usually responded.

Michael was leaning strongly against accepting the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada, but time was running out. Prime Minister Templeton had already announced his impending retirement—for "health reasons"—and nomination papers had to be submitted by would-be successors before the end of March, about three weeks hence.

The only minor snafu was that Michael was un Québécois—a Québécois. Of course he had dual citizenship, and two out of the last five Canadian PMs had been from la belle province, (or "le bel état," as it was now called by the few who still spoke only French). The problem was that some Canadians were still bitter about the souverainiste victory that happened just after the Revolution, eighteen years ago—a pyrrhic victory, as English had become the universal language in spite of the successful efforts of the "separatists" to form their own country to preserve the French language. Political reality in the former nation of Canada (and the now-segmented version of the country) was a matter of great disinterest to most people, a matter of passion to only a few. Michael just happened to be one of the latter. He cared about Québec, and he cared about the world's loss of so many languages and cultures, and he cared about Canada, even if he was a proud Québécois (he had been born back in the days when Québec was a Canadian province, of course). So to him, the political decision he faced was about service, not ego.

Lilly had warmed up to the idea of leaving her job, and was secretly delighted at the prospect of

becoming the consort—and perhaps even the wife—of Canada's next prime minister. She was no longer able to avoid the “L” word, and although she and Michael were still deferring a physical consummation of their affair, their reasons were practical, not moral, and certainly not social. For them to take that step, however, everything had to be “thoroughly right,” they had agreed.

Lilly's WDA duties had become almost routine, and Control seemed to be content to let her “plug away” at her own speed. The weather had finally broken. The new snow was superbly wet and sticky, and that had led to a massive snowball fight in the clan's forest, out beyond Spoke North—a silliness episode that Lilly had been asked to join ... by Lars. She had declined, but it was a sight she couldn't help herself from watching out the back window of her apartment, with binoculars, and couldn't help snickering at. These people, whatever their shortcomings, sure know how to have big fun.

Victor had stopped using his MIU to interface with Annette, and was now using live runners instead—Julia mostly. He was profoundly suspicious of the WDA, and he wanted to keep his activities private. He was entitled to his privacy, of course. His activities were quite legal, and he had passed his second LV session, this time over the Net, and this time he had only a skeletal chat with Lilly.

The only thing available from InfoBank on Victor were the images of him staring, with what seemed at times a mad intensity, at the Netnews, on a daily basis. Lilly had found herself taking an increasing interest in this strange behavior. She didn't know if her own boredom was at the bottom of it, but she spent hours watching Victor watching the Netnews, searching his eyes and his body language for clues to what he was feeling or thinking. She had assembled a montage of archived Netbites of Victor doing this, and she was observing his manner, especially at the beginning and the end of these sessions. He seemed to physically transform at both ends. He was bored, hunched and mute before he began and after he logged off, but he seemed intense and very focused as he watched the world turn. Lilly had gone deep into InfoBank and dredged up records from three, five, even ten years earlier, for comparison, but the only difference between Victor's current Netnews sessions and the old ones was that he looked younger and healthier back then. She had tried to figure out what triggered his ending of these Netnews-watching sessions by listing and comparing the last stories he watched on different days. But they varied normally, and this line of inquiry brought no useful insights. That guy's an enigma inside a mystery wrapped in a conundrum, thought Lilly ... or something like that. She wasn't sure who had coined that phrase originally, but she thought it was Winston Churchill, and he was speaking about Russia, if memory served.

Annette had become rather busy trying to reorganize the “fuss groups,” the regular mediation system maintained by every Evolutionary clan, to handle the additional role of simulated LieDeck-verification, or “simLV,” as Victor dubbed it. The governing council eventually gave up and let the established fuss groups off the hook by assigning the new simLV responsibilities to the founding members, “the gang.” It was better for the clan that way, but it didn't make Annette any easier to pin down, because she chaired both the official council and the unofficial gang. It seemed to Lilly that her basic relationship with Annette now resembled the uneasy truce she'd reached with Big Wus.

Julia had been spending most of her time with Victor, out at the lodge, returning to the clan from time to time for a rest or for a “date” with Alex, her taxi-driver pal. She was still a “technical virgin,” and while that didn't bother Victor, it was starting to irritate her pal Alex. Julia was tingling with both of them—enjoying Netsex and the occasional romp on the warm—but she was inexplicably unwilling to “go all the way,” as she put it, with either of them (or with any of the “strays” she occasionally lassoed, for that matter).

Sex had lost its traditional mystique in the first decades of the new century, and while it hadn't been reduced to a mere bodily function, the loss of most medical and theological terrors had taken an expected toll ... created “a paradigm shift in sexual attitudes,” as the academicians phrased it. Lilly

couldn't relate to this guilt-free spreading around of sexual favors, but it seemed to work fine for Julia and most of her fellow Evolutionaries, most of the time. At least Michael stopped having sex with Becky, Lilly thought. I couldn't handle that.

Today was Wednesday, and Michael's only predictable Netcall came at exactly 7:30 p.m., as always. Lilly smiled at the list she'd drawn up of all the reasons she had to love this man, and chuckled out loud to recall that "punctuality" had made it onto the list, near the top! "Hi guy," she said at her MIU screen. She was surprised to see that he was in the limo, and using his Sniffer—the image on her screen was in black and white, and jerky. He had always handled the after-work Netcall from the estate before, in between kissing Becky and Venice and jumping in the shower. "So, how was your day?" Lilly asked.

"I just passed the Quyon turn-off," he said, holding his Sniffer close to his face and giving Lilly a close-up of the mischief in his eyes—they would have been blue, if he'd been using an MIU, but they were still vital in shades of gray. "How long does it take you to pack?"

"Say what?"

"Pack."

"For ... what?"

"A few days ... away ... alone ... with each other."

"Where?"

"Trust me. I want to surprise you."

"I do trust you, but I need to know where we're going so I can—"

"There won't be any snow."

"Let's say fifteen minutes."

"You can take a week off without a problem?"

"Uh—yeah."

"See you in ten minutes then. Net, down, now."

"I said fifteen!" she snapped playfully at the blank screen.

Lilly flew into action, stuffing clothes into a suitcase without her usual meticulous care. No snow! she thought. Alone ... together ... yum yum! It occurred to her that these emotional reactions were a lot like Julia's had been during the hockey tournament ... but so what? Hardly the Stockholm Syndrome, where the kidnaped starts identifying with the abductors. Like they said at the Academy, "everybody likes to tingle."

Ten minutes later, Lilly got into the back of the limousine in front of the E-tery. There were stares as she walked through the restaurant with a suitcase in her hand, and much gawking out the windows as the chauffeur put her case in the trunk. Maybe I'll never come back! she said to herself as she ducked into the spacious backseat. Wouldn't that be wonderful!

She kissed Michael—not passionately, but sweetly—and to her he looked younger than he'd ever done before, certainly more excited, even a bit impish. "So, come on," she prodded. "Where are we going?"

"Where's the trust?" joked Michael.

She yielded. "I am in your hands," she said, batting her eyelashes just in case he missed her double meaning.

The limo went east for one mile, turned left off the highway, into the small town of Shawville, and eventually pulled into the parking lot of the Pontiac Regional Hospital.

"We're going to a hospital?" said Lilly.

"Where's the trust?" repeated Michael.

They walked into the lobby, followed by the chauffeur, who carried the luggage. The elevator took them up to the roof, where the Whiteside Technologies corporate chopper was idling on the helipad.

"We're going to where there's no snow in a helicopter?" asked Lilly.

"Where's the trust?"

Forty minutes later, they touched down on the tarmac at the Ottawa International Airport, close to where Whiteside Tech's corporate jet idled in waiting. They scurried across, and minutes later, they were airborne, headed south.

"Well, being rich sure is liberating!" said Lilly as they punched through the clouds and entered a world of perfect sunsets and forever-starry night skies. "Come on, tell me."

"I keep a villa just outside Freeport, in the Bahamas," said Michael as he took off his tie and threw it over his shoulder with deliciously reckless abandon. "We'll be there by eleven p.m., and I've booked a tee-off time for us at eleven a.m. tomorrow."

The inside of the plane was like nothing Lilly had ever seen. It seemed very small compared to the wide-bodies of commercial airlines. And there were no close-packed rows of seats here. It was like a narrow living room or a den, like the insides of a really nice trailer, perhaps. There were four upholstered chairs in the middle section. They all faced the front during takeoff, but when she heard a clunk, Michael explained that the pilot had disconnected the locking system, and he showed her the controls in the armrest that made the chairs swivel and tilt ... even vibrate. Then there were the state-of-the-art, Whiteside-produced speakers in the wraparound headrests, and headphones hidden in compartments inside the arms in the event of differing musical tastes. And there were motorized tabletops that unfolded from concealed slots in the sides of the chairs and then moved up, over and into place. The decor was all Michael, with walls of rare woods and some expensive-looking paintings. Surely not originals, Lilly said to herself. The carpet was deep blue, and the lighting was ... well, it was whatever you wanted it to be if you sat in Michael's chair, with all the extra bells and whistles. Lilly unbuckled her seat-belt, pressed a button with an arrow pointing left so that her chair swiveled to face his, and blew him a kiss.

The front section, between the den and the pilot's cabin, was a kitchen—"a real-live honest-to-God kitchen," Michael said. The rear section of the plane was separated by a dark wooden partition and an antique door from ... from the nineteenth century, Lilly guessed. Behind that door must be a bedroom, she thought. Maybe we'll put it to good use on the way back.

"I managed to miss supper," said Michael. "Have you eaten?"

"Sort of," said Lilly. "But the E-tery is a no-star joint, so I—"

"Lobster Newberg?" asked Michael.

"Yum!" she said excitedly.

"I brought Noel along for the trip," he said, smugly. "The cook from the lodge," he explained, unnecessarily. "Julia said she'd cook for Victor while we're gone. They've become fast friends, I'm given to understand, but I sent one of the estate cooks out to the lodge to—uh—"help" her." He used his fingers to put knowing quotation marks around the word "help." Then Michael took out his Sniffer and called the pilot. "Hi Grant, how's it going for you up there?" he said with a genuine familiarity that quite surprised Lilly—Grant Eamer had been the Whiteside's pilot for thirty years, she remembered reading in the Netfiles. "Would you tell Noel we're ready?"

Noel served up a meal that would have garnered rave reviews in the New York Times, and Michael and Lilly feasted, and drank, at an altitude of thirty thousand feet. Michael then took out a pack of Camel Mini-Jays Mild, and they toked up over brandy.

The night air in Freeport was warm and moist as they stepped down from the Learjet and walked over the floodlit tarmac to the two waiting limousines. "The other one is for Noel and his supplies," said Michael.

A small black man in a uniform stood off to the side, seemingly too shy to do his job. His mouth moved, but Lilly heard nothing. "Pardon," she said.

"Anything to declare?" asked the little guy real meekly. He had a LieDeck-equipped Sniffer in his hand.

Well, I love Michael madly and I'm going to fuck him purple tonight, Lilly thought of saying. "No," she said.

"Just ... the usual," said Michael.

The man smiled thinly and put away his Sniffer.

"What was that about?" asked Lilly as the family's Caribbean chauffeur (la dee da!) held the door for her. "What's ... 'the usual'?" She knew the Customs official could lose his job over this, so she was almost obliged to ask. He was paid by the WDA, after all.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," Michael said. "It's sort of a—uh—an arrangement I have in this country. No big deal."

She let it pass, for now, and buzzed down her window to devour the absence of snow. The lights of the city were gaudy, and the wet streets were full of mostly white tourists, mostly black locals and much merriment. The downtown area had the metallic pong of a recent thunderstorm, one that their plane seemed to have missed or ducked or skirted on their way down to Mother Earth. Once they were through the city and in the countryside, the envelope was particularly dark, sprinkled with only a few windows, glinting through palms in the distance. There were no stars, there was no moon, but there was cloud cover, even if it had to be inferred from the absence of light above ... of any kind. Lilly buzzed up her window, and they passed the rest of the drive in silence, enjoying a prolonged and unathletic cuddle.

Lilly found it strange that she was grateful to have air conditioning—the last thing a sane person would think of in Québec, except perhaps in July or August. Lilly also felt overwhelmed with gratitude to have met and befriended ... I mean met and fallen in love with ... Michael. Life didn't always ache after all.

"Well, this is it," said Michael as the limo passed through iron gates held open by a uniformed Patriot agent. Lilly remembered that in addition to the electronics company, Michael also controlled a security firm—even if security had stopped being an issue—or a profitable industry—back in 2014. The villa was

like a downsized mansion, with white pillars and a lot of glass in the front. The outside was lit up brightly by floodlights hidden at the bases of bushes. "We'll turn those spotlights off when we get inside," said Michael. "I just wanted you to see the place. First impressions matter."

"What was your first impression of me?" asked Lilly as the limo slowed on the paved, circular driveway.

"When we first spoke on the Net—that was when you were on your way to the lodge to LieDeck-verify Victor—I thought..."

"Yes?" said Lilly as she privately admired the stately villa.

"I ... I thought you'd be big trouble," admitted Michael as he opened the limo door.

"The night is young," noted Lilly, with a flirtatious batting of her eyes.

Within a few minutes, they had changed—separately—into shorts and light shirts, and were standing barefoot on a deck, just off the living room, at the back of the villa. They leaned side-by-side on the varnished railing and looked silently over the private beach to a becalmed ocean and a luminescent crescent moon that was alternately visible and gone behind the thinning clouds. Michael couldn't help dwelling briefly on a scene almost twenty years ago, at the estate on Wilson Lake, when he and Becky stood like this on the deck of his little cabin across from the lodge, naked. But that was then, he knew, and this was even better. "God's thumbnail," he said as the moon crept back into view. He was glad he'd remembered to turn off all the floodlights. Darkness was so ... sexy.

"I can't believe we're here," said Lilly. "It's almost like you were ... trying to seduce me."

"You can have your own bedroom if you prefer," said Michael. "If we make love, it has to be because we both want to and everything is exactly right."

"I know," said Lilly, remembering their pact. "So ... what do you think?"

Michael put his arm around her shoulders, and she put her arm around his waist. He didn't answer her question, nor did he need to. The past few years of Michael's life had been bereft of uncomplicated natural pleasures. The past few weeks had been a rebirth. He felt like Lazarus, except that his Jesus was flesh and blood, and female, and gorgeous ... and so tall. "One way or another, we'll go back to Québec different people from who we are now," he said.

Lilly thought about that. He's a big shot, she reminded herself. Every major move has consequences, and nothing goes unnoticed. "Could this—uh—tryst cost you the Liberal Party leadership nomination?" she asked.

"Possibly," he said, "but I doubt that it will have any bearing on that."

"So if it doesn't, you'll ... accept?"

"I haven't decided a hundred percent yet," he said, looking at the mostly hidden face of the moon. "I'll call them with my decision tomorrow."

Lilly turned and squeezed in between Michael and the railing, so that she was facing him, and Michael thrilled again at the fact that they were of exactly equal height. She put her bare toes on his and kissed him. "I'll try to be a grand first lady ... if that's what's in store for us," she said. "And if not..." She shrugged nonchalantly, only to realize, again, that she wasn't remotely as indifferent as she pretended to be.

"I think you're already my first lady," said Michael. "My only lady."

"What ... about Becky?" Lilly asked.

"I'm a one-woman man," said Michael. "Becky ... will be fine. And ... so will we."

"I hope so," said Lilly as they started a slow walk through the double sliding doors leading into the villa.

There was a circular stairway up to the second floor, a far smaller version of the one that put its stylish signature onto the entrance of the manor house in Québec, except this one had a small landing at the halfway point. Michael stopped briefly at the base of the stairs to activate the electronic security system, turn off the lower-level lights and flip on the muted lights of the stairwell and the upstairs hall. Lilly started up before him ... and every step seemed an eternity ... a fateful footfall towards her first full-blown tingle in months ... or at least the first she would have with an actual partner.

Michael ascended silently, about four stairs behind ... and seemingly in no hurry to catch up. We're not even talking, Lilly thought as one leaden foot followed another. Kids today have rollicking fun with sex, she considered, and we're acting like a conspiracy is afoot, like ten-year-olds sneaking out behind the barn for a first-ever toke, like Christians deciding to sin now and get forgiven later. And since when do I use the expression "kids today"? That's a new—

"Yikes!" she hollered as she flung herself up to the landing ... and turned around in absolute astonishment. "You fucking goosed me, you bastard!"

"Yeah," he said. "And I'm going to do it again!" He lunged upwards.

Lilly started running up the second half of the staircase, laughing crazily and yelping as Michael's thumbs kept landing left, right and below target. "That's ... an unprovoked taliation, Your Honor," she said as she stopped dead at the top of the stairs ... and turned. (That was a running joke with them; who had "taliated" and who had "retaliated.") "You absolutely know I'll get you back!" She grabbed for his bundle, causing him to leap back down a couple of stairs.

"Whoa! No fair," Michael complained indignantly.

"Fair!" said Lilly, with a facial expression that screamed: "Not a good time to mess with me." She took up a lineman's pass-defense stance, but with both hands out in front, cupped for action. "Chickennnnnnnn," she taunted.

Michael folded his arms and stared at her, smiling melodiously now. "God, you're beautiful," he said serenely.

"And dangerous," she snarled, squinting her eyes for fuller emphasis. "Nice try, white boy!"

"White boy?" asked Michael as he walked up the stairs and bewitched her out of her retaliatory intentions. He slid his arms around her narrow rib cage as she stood straighter, and he kissed her lightly on the mouth, a kiss she returned. "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow," he squeaked when she grabbed his earlobe and brought him to his knees. "I'm sorry," he professed ... unconvincingly, if he judged by the twist she added. "I'll never goose you again," he promised through the pain.

"Beep!" Lilly snorted as she let go the ear disdainfully and knelt in front of him. She kissed him on the tip of the nose and drove her fingers deep into his hair. "My last lover was black," she said. "Does that bother you?"

"No," said Michael seriously, "not ... the fact that he was black..."

Ellipsis, she thought. His face betrayed concern, or perhaps fear ... maybe dread. No way is this acting, she assessed, worriedly. "Then ... what?" she asked.

"Well," said Michael, "I ... sort of ... assumed you were a virgin," he said gravely.

"Yeah right," said Lilly as she tackled him down to the floor and tickled him until he begged for mercy.

They never made it to the bedroom for their first time. They clumsily tugged at each other's clothes while their mouths frantically tasted every newly exposed area, until they were naked under the soft electric light. Michael fumbled his way hurriedly into her and lost it in ten seconds flat. As he came, he made the strangest whimpering noises Lilly had ever heard. Then he lay on top of her, still in her very wet embrace, and breathed heavily as the last few involuntary gasps escaped his lips. "Was it ... was it good ... for you?" he finally asked.

Lilly snickered. "The best I ever had?" she said, with the clear upturn of a question in her inflection.

"The night is young," said Michael as he pulled out slowly. "Come," he said, standing and drawing her up.

Lilly gawked at his sopping, semi-erect penis as she stood. "Good old Ed" was hung like a bull; Michael wasn't, and she was glad. He won't hurt me that way, she knew. Not any way, she truly knew. This lovely man will do whatever it takes to make me and my body sing. She didn't know exactly how she knew those things, but she did. She enfolded his neck with her long arms and pressed her naked body against his. "I ... have ... a tiny confession to make," she said to the bluest eyes she'd ever looked into at close range.

"What?" he asked.

"Sometimes I get sort of ... you know ... selfish ... during sex," she said. "I ... don't consciously decide to, it just ... sort of—"

Michael's mouth put an end to that silliness, and it turned out she was right. He was a creative lover, and her body sang almost every variety of tune save the dirge. It was four in the morning before they finally got to sleep, too worn out to try for another go-around, too exhausted to even talk any more.

Chapter 39

FORTY DAYS

Thursday, March 10, 2033—5:00 a.m.

It was five o'clock in the morning, the only time that "the gang" could agree on for their collective Netlink. The governing council had assigned the gang—the eleven remaining founders of Victor-E plus Julia—the job of getting the clan through the forty consecutive days of "zero lying tolerance" that Victor had demanded, and it was time to take stock. But when?

Julia was busy—in spite of her wealth, she held two jobs. The other eleven "gangers" were either officially or unofficially retired, of course, having worked hard, saved hard and invested prudently for seventeen years (the cost of living in Evolution was about a third of what it would cost to live on the outside, so the whole process was accorded up). The problem was, most "retired" Evolutionaries just kept on working—not so much for the money as for the fun of it. They all had duties, if not jobs, to go to, so it was only after much chatter on the Net that they had agreed on this awful hour.

Victor had agreed only reluctantly. The gang evidently had no accurate notion of how much juggling of medication it took to alter his shrinking daily allotment of lucid, pain-free hours.

"So," said a bleary-eyed Victor Helliwell at his MIU screen, "we seem to have—uh—reached the point of no return." He noticed that the square screen was split into sixteen boxes to accommodate "the gang" plus himself—four rows of four boxes each. It rankled him that one of the boxes was dedicated for the user himself or herself—he didn't want to see himself and he didn't need to see himself, although he knew that most everybody else liked and used that feature. And it rankled his innate sense of symmetry that the last three boxes had to be left empty. Why not the first three? he wondered petulantly. Or why not three corner boxes, or—

"No we haven't," said Tammy Lucas, holding a forefinger and thumb up to form an "L" to make sure the other members of the gang knew that she was lying ... on purpose ... a "tickler," apparently.

"Well, I guess somebody had to do that," said Annette resignedly. "I hope ... you all realize that kind of joke can backfire if you forget to signal your intent."

"What's the point of no ... what did you call it, Victor?" asked Julia. "The point of no ... something?"

Victor ran a hand over his bald pate and wished he could bequeath his IQ to Julia in his will. He had demanded forty straight lie-free days before he would elaborate on his phase 2 for Evolution, and the clan had decided to try to achieve this goal within just fifty days. They had a streak of eight days going now, but they'd started the campaign eleven days ago, when the digicorders and lapel mikes had been issued to all 267 adult members of Victor-E. There were sixty-one alleged lies the first day, all not too serious, all of them convictions, and all resolved. There were only nine admitted lies the second day, two the third day, and none since ... none proven, that is. So if they had to start over now, they'd lose eleven days, and the best they could do would be fifty-one days before they achieved the forty consecutive lie-free days.

"Point of ... no return," said Victor. "I'll explain it to you tonight after supper, okay?"

"Okay," chirped Julia. "I like having supper with you. I'll help Noel and we can make some nice soup and—" She suddenly remembered that Noel was in Freeport with Mikey, her brother, and Lilly, and that one of the manor's cooks was filling in at the lodge. There were times, like this one, when life was just too complicated for her to keep it all straight in her mind.

"So, how many outstanding challenges do we have right now?" asked Tirone Lucas, without waiting for Julia to finish her tangent.

Annette checked her notes. Each digicorder could carry 100 hours of recorded sound, and the machines only kicked in if the wearer spoke ... or if a truck horn blasted nearby. Most people, it seemed, only actually talked for two hours a day or less, although those with jobs such as Netsex players or CQ advisers tended to get up into the seven- to eight-hour-a-day range. "In the last eight days we've had twenty-one challenges, and nineteen acquittals, so we've got two outstanding cases, two that we still have to resolve—both of which came in yesterday."

"Do you expect acquittals on those two?" asked Victor.

"I certainly hope so," sighed Annette, "or we'll have to start over. One had to do with Albert Fowler, who said that he'd never cheated on his taxes. The prosecutor dug up his past tax returns, and it seems he claimed a charitable donation back in twenty eleven, like before the Revolution, that he had no receipt for. We're checking with the charity now, to see if they can—"

"So the challenge was based on a hunch, and not actual information," said an elderly gentleman, Bob. Often, it seemed that Bob didn't "get" things until the third time around, but his problem wasn't his intelligence. He just never paid very much attention, and that annoyed the rest of the gang, with the obvious exception of Julia.

"Hunches count," said Annette.

"Yeah," said Bob, "but maybe this Fowler guy just forgot, so even if he did cheat a little back in ... when was that?"

"Twenty eleven," said Annette, rolling her eyes. "And it's 'Albert' Fowler. Don't you know him from—"

"I'm just saying that maybe this Fowler fellow simply forgot about it," said Bob, "so, like, he didn't actually lie, right? I mean maybe he didn't know that what he said wasn't true ... didn't know consciously."

"Victor, do you want to take that one?" asked Annette as she rubbed her eyes.

"Sure," said Victor. "Bob, if you're not positive, then you don't say it," he explained. "Fowler could have said 'I don't remember ever cheating on my taxes.' That's a part of being Human Three, Bob. When in doubt—even when there might be a doubt—you gotta qualify what you say. You risk your credibility if you're not, like, ultra-careful. You risk getting challenged, and you show that you're not really tuned in to how others might see you. If others doubt you and they're too polite to say so, it puts up a wall. It will alienate the speaker from the listener. I know it sounds like I'm nitpicking, but absolute honesty is the foundation of Human Three Consciousness. You can't go on to the rest of it, to phase two, until you're solidly grounded in phase one. I mean, I could die never telling anyone about phase two, eh? And it's no skin off my nose, you know what I mean? But it would be a real shame for..."

Victor stopped the flow of words. The reality of his disease slammed his emotions down to Human One levels of anger. He'd passed the denial stage, but he saw no reason why he had to go all the way to "acceptance." Dying was for other people, not for him. Why hasn't science perfected cryonics? How am I supposed to do what I have to do if I die before I get the chance? I'm not remotely ready to die. Nobody's ever ready. There is no getting ready for death. Oh well, at least all my Human Three stuff is on those three reel-to-reel audio recordings I made before the Revolution. He tried to remember where he'd hidden them, and then it came to him. He hadn't checked that they were still there since just after the Revolution, the day before his beloved Winnie Jopps had walked out on him. I wonder if I should look her up before I—

"Speaking of which," said Annette softly, "how are you feeling today?"

"It's sort of like a permanent headache," muttered Victor, "in spite of the painkillers. When it gets to be like a permanent migraine, they say I'll have to go on morphine, but I'm gonna try to..."

The gang was getting used to Victor's habit of petering out, and they all admired his determination, if not the arbitrary pre-condition he'd placed on them, the sine qua non of forty straight lie-free days. There was still the scary possibility that Victor could pass away before he got to tell them about his "phase 2" concept, but most of the gang figured he'd back down and tell them if he had only days to live and they hadn't yet succeeded in meeting his condition. "No fuckin' way," Annette had shouted whenever this hoped-for loophole had come up for discussion in the gang. "This is a man who didn't say a word for almost twenty years." Annette felt certain that Victor would take phase 2 to the grave with him if they screwed up, so she had insisted that they get it right the first time, and not tempt fate. She knew about the old reel-to-reel audiotapes that Victor had made many years ago, but she didn't know if they still existed, or if they included that phase 2 stuff, or even the phase 1 economic model that Evolution had been

founded on, and Victor had yet to speak about those tapes, so...

"What's the other challenge that's still ... standing?" asked Julia.

Annette was glad for the change of course. "Well, the other outstanding"—she over-pronounced the word without insult—"challenge involves a more serious matter. It seems Brenda McAndrew claimed credit for some time that she allegedly didn't work. If that's true, then her lie—and the reality behind it—nicked us all. That's ... rock bottom Human Two! She's adamant that she did work the hours in the pool, supervising the kids, but the other lifeguard says he was on duty alone for the first part of the shift, from six o'clock to about eight-thirty, and he's adamant too."

"What's the disk from her digicorder show?" asked Victor.

"Well, that's the thing," said Annette. "It's silent from four o'clock that day until ten twenty-one the next day. Either the digicorder stopped working, and then spontaneously restarted, or she turned it off by accident, or ... or something."

"Didn't you guys superglue the 'record' button in the 'on' position like I suggested?" asked Victor.

"Uh—no," said Annette. "You couldn't extract a used disk and put in a blank one if we did that ... plus—uh—that would wipe out the re-sale value of the equipment."

The financial angle irritated Victor no end—money meant nothing to him—but he had to respect their Human Three emphasis on not wasting money ... or anything else. The other reason—the problem of not being able to put in a new disk when the old disk was done—was reason enough for the decision not to glue the buttons. He hadn't thought of that. "Jeeze," he said, "how could I have made such an asinine suggestion? Me ... the guy who invented the LieDeck? I mean..."

"It's probably the brain tumor," said Julia. "I get all mixed up on stuff too sometimes, and I don't even have one."

Victor had asked Annette to keep his health situation private, or at least out of the conversation, but she had told him that word had already been leaked from somewhere—possibly from a doctor, an X-ray technician, or the WDA—and the Netnews had reported it. Victor grinned tenderly at Julia's image on the bottom left corner of his MIU screen. "Sweet Julia," he said. "I think you may be right."

"Digicorders don't quit and restart like that on their own," said Bob. "Normally," he conceded, belatedly. "I mean if you have cancer, you can have a—what do they call that? Spontaneous..."

"Remission," said Victor, "and it doesn't happen very often, I'm sorry to say."

"Yeah," said Bob, "but it doesn't happen at all with machines, and..." He hadn't gotten the connection before this, and now he felt like a jerk, and was seen as such by his fellow founders.

"I wish to hell we could use a LieDeck to sort this out," said Victor. "It is so stupid that we can't even—" He cut himself off, and used his mouse to delete himself from the collective Netlink, without explanation or apology. He called Brenda McAndrew, who was at the Soft-E operation, overriding her link with a client. Who fools around at this ungodly hour!? he wondered.

"Jeeze," she complained as she shut off the music and ducked down so that her MIU captured only her agitated face and tousled hair. "Get off my fuckin' screen, you creep," she demanded. "What kind of asshole pervert just cuts in like in the middle of somebody else's cybertingle? I'm going to report you to—"

Victor complied. He realized the woman hadn't recognized him, but that shouldn't have mattered anyway. Vitriolic outbursts were so Human Two, arguably Human One. He hadn't found out if she'd been lying about those disputed hours in the pool, but he'd seen enough to make a decision, so he re-pasted himself onto the collective Netlink with the gang. "Sorry about disappearing on you like that," he said, "but I just Netlinked with Brenda McAndrew, and—" A sharp pang literally threw his head backwards, and it took almost ten seconds for him to recover and compose himself.

"Are you ... okay?" asked Annette.

"Yeah," said Victor weakly. "Listen, I don't know if she lied about her hours working at the pool, but she hurt my feelings ... on purpose. Can you—uh—get her to transfer to another clan?"

"Is that fair?" asked Julia.

"No," said Victor, "but somebody lied, either her or that guy who was on duty at the pool. At this moment, and with me being in this condition, I ... I frankly don't really care who it was. I just..."

Annette and the other members of the gang watched as Victor squeezed his temples against the pain. "Consider it done," she said. "We'll make it a commercial transaction, pay her to move on, with no questions asked either way. She doesn't have to accept, but I know her. She'll accept."

"Thanks," said Victor. "Look, I gotta go back to bed, okay?"

They said their goodbyes, and Victor decided to force himself to record a tract that he hoped would help the Evolutionaries. He meant what he'd said about going to bed, but it seemed obvious to him that even the founders of Evolution didn't really understand the seriousness of lying. He opened up a new file on his MIU, left instructions that it was to be sent out over the Net after he died, and began:

Imagine a person who claims to have not only the power but the right to reach out his or her hands, grasp all of the past, alter any parts that he or she finds inconvenient or embarrassing, and then present this modified and distorted version of the past to the rest of the world as something which is valid, even if it is contradicted by the memories of others or by facts available on the Net, or whatever. That, in my view, would be the height of arrogance, the epitome of arrogance, the apotheosis of arrogance. It is also the opposite of integrity, and sanity, and honor ... and a lot of other good things.

What I have defined above, of course, is the basic act of lying. Arrogance is a characteristic that is imputed to someone, or used to describe a person, if he or she offensively exaggerates his or her own importance, or is excessively and unpleasantly sure of himself or herself. I have spent my life working on this whole thing of lying, lie detection, and truth, and I am more marginalized by my adoption of what I have aptly called "Human Three Consciousness" than I would be if I were a gay black cannibal living in Tennessee in the nineteen thirties! I live in a world that wrongly thinks that lying is normal, just part of life, without which civilization would implode. That, my friends, is not only nuts, it is what is wrong with a species that could have written a joyous and sterling history of and for itself, and has instead written a story of stupidity and destruction. And that is one reason why I refused to be part of our world. I refuse to be a card-carrying member of the species I have called Human Two. I am better than that, and so is anyone who decides to be.

Only a God would have the power to change the past, but if there were a God, He, She or It wouldn't do that! You don't have that power and you don't have that right. Lying is more than arrogance. It is quite literally an act of madness. For your own sake; for everyone else's sake; stop lying now, and stop forever. Goodbye.

Victor took his pain medication and went back to bed. With any luck, he said to himself, I won't wake

up.

Chapter 40

SELLING OUT

Thursday, March 10, 2033—9:30 a.m.

Lilly woke up in the morning to feel the sun streaming in the window at a steep incline. She figured she must have slept in, and then she remembered where she was—nearer the equator, where the sun got up a lot earlier and rose to heights unknown to Québec, and Canada. She turned over to snuggle with the man who had become her lover a few short hours ago, and found only rumpled sheets and a pillow. Maybe he's making breakfast for me, she thought drowsily.

The master bedroom was wonderfully unMichaellesque. It was decorated ... playfully, she decided ... with local crafts, bright colors. Becky's hand. She sat up and lifted stray hairs from her face with a curled pinky finger. I hope he leaves it like this, she said to herself before she remembered that she might have a voice in the decor—not now, but maybe some day.

She walked naked to the window, and backed off alarmedly. An old black gardener was sitting on a verdant knoll about twenty yards from the house, with his pruning tools, taking a toke break. He was looking up to the deck, and he had waved at her, and smiled! “Christ,” she muttered. She put on her blue housecoat, marched back to the window and closed the curtains roughly. She then walked out of the bedroom into the hall, did a quick U-turn, and walked right back in. That was close, she thought. My hair's a mess, and I'm pissed off—two pretty good reasons for sober second thoughts.

She went into the bathroom. It had two distinct parts, one for the sunken green hot tub ... maybe later ... and a carpeted section with double sinks, a toilet, and ... a bidet! Who uses those things?

She closed the door, thought about things for a moment, and decided to lock it. The bathroom was almost as big as the living room of her apartment back at Victor-E, and the lights were so bright she knew she'd feel vulnerable to be naked in here, even with the door locked. She lowered the intensity of the lights and hung her housecoat on a hook on the inside of the door. Remnants of anger bubbled in her gut as she washed her face and brushed out her long black hair. I'm angry that the gardener saw me. And ... I'm angry at Michael for not warning me. And I'm angry at the world for not respecting modesty like it used to. And I'm angry ... she hoped the list stopped there, but it didn't. I'm angry at me, she realized. I'm angry at me for being angry for no good reason. That man enjoyed seeing my body, and ... I didn't really mind, in my head.

With effort, she regrouped emotionally while having a pee—overdue. If there was ever a morning when she should feel totally contented, this had to be it. She went back into the colorful bedroom and slipped out of her housecoat. For a fleeting moment, she considered reopening the curtains ... to let the sun in. She put on some flowery shorts she'd brought along and stood at the mirror, half dressed, wondering whimsically if she had the brass to go to breakfast like that. With my luck, I'll probably run smack into Noel, she figured, before remembering that her “luck” had recently taken a major turn for the better. After some thought, and a good bit of unconscious self-admiration in the mirror, she decided not to wear a bra. She threw on a white halter-top that left a bare midriff below and little to the imagination elsewhere. It would please him, she was sure, and it was one way she had to not be Becky. She couldn't imagine Becky, for all her Human Three liberation, walking around the villa with her bellybutton exposed. She's more a lady than a woman.

Half way down the stairs, she paused to look through the expansive glass of the cathedral ceiling that arched over the living room at the front of the villa. Michael was outside, waving goodbye at two black limousines as they pulled away. Two other limos were still parked, and a small group of men in dark, unCaribbean suits were shaking hands with Michael, and with each other. Lilly didn't recognize them, but there was one Oriental man who looked like a photo she'd seen of Mr. Wu, Julia's trustee, the man who also handled Victor's money. It had to be him. She was sure she'd seen that face before, in her Netfiles.

Something was going on. Something good, by all appearances, she said to herself, but why didn't he...

The anger she had just recently buried seemed to rekindle itself against her will, and she realized she felt deceived. He should have told me this trip was also about business, she thought. She felt like a weekend fling, or like some kind of add-on. Mostly, she felt really stupid to be feeling what she felt. I'm disqualifying everything he's said to me, she realized, everything he's done, including last night.

She beat her feelings back into submission, hurried down the carpeted stairs, and hid behind the front door, on the hinge side. After several long minutes, when Michael finally opened the door and sort of backed into the house while waving goodbye to the last of the limos, Lilly jabbed her clawed hands into his sides, from behind, on the ribs, and shouted "Boo!"

Michael jumped, and yelped, but by the time he had turned around, he was laughing. "You scared the shit out of me," he said as they embraced.

Lilly kissed him. "And your point would be...?" she asked.

Life with her will be fun, thought Michael. "You ready for breakfast?" he asked.

"You bet," she said. "For some reason I've got a biiiiig appetite this morning."

Michael smiled inwardly as they walked hand-in-hand to the back of the villa and out to the deck, now an open-air dining area, where Noel had prepared a setting for their first breakfast together. It's her little way of thanking me again for the lovemaking, he thought as he watched the turquoise ocean lick at the white beach. She likes talking in ... parables and allegories. "Me too," he said as he pulled a chair out for her.

"Me too ... what?" she asked.

"Me want food," he uttered in a lowered voice, with a Tarzan of the Jungle tone.

Noel brought out a carafe of fresh-squeezed pineapple juice, a pot of coffee, and two plates of day-starters: eggs, sunny side up, slices of Canadian bacon, toast, and mounds of overdone home fries. "I know it seems ordinary, but I love it," Michael volunteered as he twisted the pepper mill. "I even had to make a somewhat secret 'arrangement' to smuggle in the Canadian bacon, in Noel's suitcase," he laughed. "That's what it was all about with the Customs agent at the airport. I always get fined a thousand dollars, and I always pay the fine, but they never take the bacon away from me."

"It's worth a thousand bucks to have illicit bacon?" she asked in amazement. "You capitalist oinker, you!"

"I make three or four times that much every hour I'm at work," Michael explained. "I never apologize for my success, and besides," he added, popping a rasher and giving it a few chews, "it's so damned good, eh?"

Lilly laughed. "I don't know how come we Americans don't cure our bacon like you do in Canada," she said, forgetting momentarily that he was Québécois, at least officially. "It is the best in the world," she conceded, popping a crisp slice into her mouth with her fingers. "So, was that ... about business?" she

asked, slanting her head towards the front of the villa.

"Oh, just a little three-minute signing ceremony," said Michael. "It was scheduled for New York, this morning, but all those guys were more than happy to meet over here on my dime and get in a round of golf after it was all wrapped up."

Lilly ate, and waited, and ate some more, and waited some more, but Michael seemed more intent on ogling her nipular areas than in explaining himself. This bears directly on our relationship, she thought fearfully. "So ... I'm supposed to ... not ask?"

The old black gardener walked by behind a hedge, carrying a shovel and a rake over his shoulder, and apparently struggling with a decision whether or not to say hello.

"Leon!" said Michael. "How are you, my old friend? Come here for a minute."

Leon padded slowly over, showing a mouthful of very white teeth and eyes that were wetly pink where the whites were supposed to be. His wide black forehead glistened with new sweat, and sinewy muscles hardened youthfully on his forearm as he shook hands with "the boss."

"I'd like you to meet Lilly Petrosian," said Michael.

Lilly stood up. Her thin hand seemed to disappear into the calloused catcher's-mitt paw that Leon wore on the end of his wrist.

"A pleasure, ma'am," said Leon in a slow drawl. "I hope your stay in our beautiful island will bring you great pleasure."

"Thank you," said Lilly at the black and pink eyes that had enjoyed her whole body only minutes before.

"Regards to the family," said Michael as Leon turned and wandered away.

"He's been with you forever, right?" said Lilly.

"About ten years," said Michael as he sat down. "I let him and his grandkids use the MIU and the pool table when I'm not here. He's a wise old fellow. He's been into that Human Three bit for the last few years, believe it or not, but frankly I don't notice any difference since he got into that stuff."

Lilly decided to wait, to see if Michael would use the interruption as a convenient way to avoid the question she'd asked before Leon's arrival.

"No," he said, and his blue eyes betrayed a mischievous intent.

His habit of trying to confuse her was "cute," Lilly had decided ... but it could get tiresome. "No ... what?" she asked.

"No ... you're not supposed to not ask about my business dealings," he said. "I ... I wanted to tell you about the meeting last night, but it would have raised all the questions we're facing now, and I just wanted last night to be ... special ... unencumbered."

"It was both," said Lilly as she wiped her mouth with a serviette and then sat back in the chair, her glass of pineapple juice parked in her hand. Her heart was starting to thump beneath the thin halter-top as the memories flooded back.

"It was a—uh—pre-emptive strike," said Michael. "WebNet International has been trying to buy controlling interest in Whiteside Tech for several years, but the price was never right, never even close to

what I wanted. Two days ago, they upped their offer by twenty percent. I couldn't believe it. So ... I sold."

"Jesus carumba!" said Lilly. "So .. you're not ... the president of the company any more?"

"Well, I still am for a little while," said Michael. "The money for the sale has to stay in trust with the lawyers for a couple of weeks for technical reasons ... so WebNet can do their 'due diligence,' it's called. They have to look at the books, check all of the Minutes, review all of our contractual stuff—you know, that sort of thing."

"But ... I thought you didn't own the controlling interest."

"The family does," said Michael. "Almost. We included Venice's small bit, plus Randy's one-point-seven percent, and some friends of the family are in on the deal too. Mother and Julia and I owned just over forty-three percent, so..."

"How come Randy went in?" she asked. "I thought you were grooming him to take your place as president."

Michael finished chewing his mouthful of home fries, swallowed, and wondered if he could or should explain this to Lilly. She was still with the WDA, but that wasn't going to be true for much longer, he figured. And besides, if this new relationship was to last, it had to be built on openness and trust.

"If the LieDeck were unbanned," he started, lifting a stray crumb from his mouth with a finger, "we'd have to bump production up by a factor of ten, and we'd make a boatful of dough—there's no doubt about that. Randy is involved with USLUC, as you know, but he doesn't really believe the LieDeck will be unbanned any time soon—although I guess WebNet believes it will. If Randy did think that USLUC could get what it wants, he'd hold onto all his shares and do whatever he could to buy more ... that's how I know that he doesn't really believe it. I ... just don't see it happening either, so I had no reason not to sell."

"You never asked my opinion on that ... whether I had any insight into the unbanning situation," said Lilly.

Michael remembered a short discussion they'd had of that issue, but she was probably right—he hadn't actually asked her opinion—nor should he have done. "So, do you?" he asked as he stirred sugar into his coffee.

"No," she said, "and I'll get my LieDeck if you—"

"Don't do that any more, okay?" asked Michael irritably. "It's a done deal anyway, and I trust you."

Lilly was astonished. Michael had just taken a monumental decision, and he wasn't scared of finding out it was a mistake or elated with the prospect of selling his shares at a high price. "Can I ask how much you got?"

"You can ask," said Michael, "but I can't tell you until I tell the Board of Directors at five o'clock. It just wouldn't be proper, and that has absolutely nothing to do with your—uh—employment situation."

Lilly said no to coffee, and then asked the key question that kept rumbling around in her mind. "Did anything I said to you before ... influence your decision?" she asked.

"Yes," said Michael, "but only to confirm what I'd already suspected. Our exclusive contract to produce LieDecks for the WDA comes up for review annually, and if I were the head of the WDA, I'd see a growing list of reasons not to renew it this year, reasons to let other companies in on the action. It's no

secret that a lot of other companies have been squawking about our monopoly for a decade. Plus I've been getting nowhere fast in negotiations to get in on the new World Identity Bank deal. Plus ... well, I'm sure Julia's lifestyle is of no concern, but Becky's flirtation with—uh—this so-called Human Three Consciousness is a piss-off for the WDA. Randy's involvement with USLUC is another irritant for the WDA, and he's a lot more interested in golf than business anyway. And I felt it was wise to clear my agenda of corporate responsibilities if I'm going to..." He looked into her deep brown eyes with as little expression as he could manage, to see if she'd get it.

"You're ... you're going to accept the Liberal leadership!" squealed Lilly.

Chapter 41

THOROUGHLY ENGAGED

Sunday, March 13, 2033—3:30 p.m.

Randy stood quietly, fiddling occasionally with his pork-pie hat. He was on the fringe of the very large seventeenth green—what he and his buddies called the frog-hair—staring at an impossible thirty-foot putt. It was, in reality, a nine-meter putt, but the game of golf was one of two Luddites (the other being the USA) that still resisted metrification. Randy didn't care how the hell it was measured: it was long and tricky, and the stakes were too high. He was one-up in his match with Howie Pilaster, his friend normally, his opponent today. The Florida sun blasted down relentlessly, at a slant that seemed far too vertical to a Québécois. This putt was for birdie, the result of a ho-hum third shot he had just made from the greenside bunker of the par-five, ocean-bordered hole.

Howie had marked his ball a mere foot from the cup before Randy had conceded the par putt. Basically, Randy had made him bend down twice, once to spot the ball with a dime, and once to pick up the dime after the shot was conceded. They really were good friends, and they'd joked often about the mean-spirited head-games that could be played on a golf course, but that was in a classroom, in a bar, or in a locker room. This was real life here, one of the last term-paper showdowns that could make and break not only an academic scorecard, but a guy's career! With only a half-hour off for lunch, this day had been a grueling ten-hour, thirty-six-hole, no-holds-barred, one-on-one joust, and while Randy's position would be favorable if he went to the last hole one-up, this putt could win it for him "two-and-one"—two holes up with only one more hole to play.

Randy had never felt quite this alone. There were no caddies allowed in this test. This was the semi-finals of the 2033 Interscholastic Knockout Tournament. This contest was match play, where you won, lost or tied every hole; not medal play, where each stroke on each hole was counted up. Win this hole, and he had the match. Win this match, then one more, and Randy would have established a firm foundation upon which to launch his pro career. Unlike all the other competitors, Randy's problem was not sponsorships, it was confidence. His knees shook. His stomach felt as if he'd gotten falling-down polluted in some beer-joint last night. Adrenalin could only stand in for insufficient sleep for so long, and Randy was terrified that he would wallop a skanky duck-hook into the Atlantic if he had to haul his driver out of the bag one more time.

A small and quivering hitch caught the right side of his mouth as he studied the putt and remembered the gratuitous advice he'd received from the wiseacre WDA agent who had elbowed her way into the manor on some bogus pretext. Don't look up until you've counted to three after impact, and pretend that the soul of Ben Crenshaw is controlling the swing, he reviewed. He continued to visualize the putt, as he'd been taught, while his putter swung like a pendulum, hung from the spine, back and forth on wrists of

steel, just shy of the ball. Allow for a seven-inch drift right to left, and give it just enough speed, he thought, and that sucker will crawl into the gut of the hole like a drugged-up rat. Never mind that the green is slick as wet linoleum.

From behind, and out of sight, Howie Pilaster cleared his throat, and Randy's anger flared invisibly. He had already addressed the ball, so he backed off and walked away to look over the putt from a different angle. I heard nothing, he told himself firmly as he walked back to his ball, took a down-the-line look and settled his feet. The act of lying to yourself in your own mind was beyond the reach of the WDA and their LieDecks ... and it worked, sometimes. My name is Ben Crenshaw, he told himself as he re-set his stance and executed two butter-smooth practice swings. He stepped a few inches closer to the ball, made one last visual check, imagined the curvature of the roll, validated the amount of borrow, and looked straight down. He tapped the ground minutely with the putter-head, to make sure the blade wouldn't hit the big green ball instead of the little white one, then he took a relaxed final breath and stroked the ball with the tenderness of an uxorious lover.

The putt was sidehill and downhill, and with the speed of these greens, that would require a journey of perhaps ten seconds, maybe more. Randy's resolve not to look up for three seconds lasted only one second—he just had to watch this crucial voyage.

Too much borrow, he thought immediately when he viewed the results of his efforts slowly unfolding. The ball was going to miss on the high side, on the right. No way can it bend enough, he said to himself as the gravity of the big green ball worked its evil magic on the little white one. And ... it might not even get there! he realized with horror. Lesson #1 from Lee Trevino, as every aspiring pro knew, was that if the ball doesn't go as far as the hole, the odds are that it won't fall in the hole! Coach is going to nag me forever for coming up short, he thought through a starburst of facial perspiration.

About three feet from the hole, the ball's motion had shrunk to a crawl. Randy could practically read the black imprint—"Maxfli 8"—as the white ball turned slowly over and over. Then it hit a spike mark in the turf and made a minuscule hop, and the direction of its movement flicked ever so slightly to the left. There was now the faintest chance that it could catch the side door. It rolled up to the right edge of the hole ... and with probably two-fifths of the ball suspended over the opening ... it ... stopped.

Randy could almost feel Howie's heart restart. He cursed Lilly Petrosian under his breath, stood erect, and walked up to bunt the "gimme" in before Howie could have the sweet satisfaction of conceding the next putt. But just as he reached his ball and prepared to tap it in, it fell in of its own accord!

"YYYESSS!" Randy shouted, with a piston-like jerking of his clenched fist, the way Tiger Woods used to do it thirty years ago.

"Putt-of-a-lifetime," he heard his coach holler.

Randy had won! He picked the Maxfli out of the hole, kissed it amid the applause, threw it into the Atlantic, and shook Howie's hand. Then he hugged him. They were pals again, and Howie was hurting bad.

"We'll be doing this again in the bigs," said Randy, "and ... maybe next time..."

"Great putt," said Howie through his pain.

"Great match all 'round," said Randy.

His coach—their coach, the man they called "Coach"—strode onto the big green and congratulated both warriors. "So," he said to Randy as they all headed for the uncontested eighteenth fairway, "you got the

old flat stick working while you were up in Canada. Did someone—"

"Québec," said Randy, in his never-ending effort to educate America about the new political geography up north.

The coach nodded acknowledgement and yanked the conversation back to stuff that mattered. "Did someone give you some secret advice up there or something?"

"No," Randy lied. "I just did a little growing up ... and made a couple of decisions."

"Like...?" asked Howie, who was walking on the other side of Coach.

Randy shifted the heavy golf bag on his shoulder. "Well, my dad ... he reminded me that golf is just a game," he said, keeping his eyes down and his pace steady.

"Meaning...?" asked Howie. The question was as bitter as it was sincere. They were friends, yes, but Howie had never lost to Randy before. In the past, he could always count on Randy to choke on the green.

Randy took a few steps to slough off the several zingers that he could have shot back at Howie. "Life isn't," he finally said. "A game," he added, for the memory-impaired.

The three men—two boys and one man, really—walked in pleasant silence down the eighteenth fairway, followed by a small murmuring crowd composed of the eliminated competitors, other students, and a few rabid fans. Coach feared that his protégé was about to quit school, or, worse yet, quit golf. He had never learned exactly how to relate to a kid who wasn't money-motivated. Everybody knew that Randy Whiteside could purchase the whole university if he had a mind to, or half of downtown Miami, if the rumors were true. The boy had talent coming out the wazoo, but he was ... strange, too cerebral, and a bit distracted, even a tad weird, thought Coach. He wanted to respond, but he couldn't use his usual barking style on a youngster like Randy. Lord knows what other involvements are complicating his life.

Some of Howie's friends pulled him aside to offer him encouragement, and probably a long list of rationalizations he could choose from to explain why he lost. Coach walked on with Randy, and wondered why this Canadian couldn't even allow himself the luxury of a gloating post-mortem—maybe a smile—something to indicate that he understood the significance of his achievement.

"I'm going to be away for a couple of days," Randy finally said.

"Washington?" asked Coach.

"Yeah," said Randy. "I'll be back for the final match on Tuesday," he added.

Few people knew that Yolanda Dees—"Lucky" to her friends—was the one thing that Randy coveted and couldn't buy ... well, that and a truly reliable putting stroke. Once, in the throes of a particularly acute golf depression, Randy had talked to Coach about his girlfriend Lucky, and Coach had forever destroyed his credibility on that front by saying that there were "lots of fish in the sea."

Randy asked Coach to give his apologies to those who would have expected him to stay around for a few drinks and laughs. He just didn't feel very celebrative, he explained ... or even victorious, he thought. He waved goodbye to the few who bothered to notice, and headed around the side of the clubhouse to the waiting limo.

He'd heard on the news the day before that Lester Connolly's condition had taken a turn for the worse, after a month of impressive recovery and real optimism. Randy had turned off his Sniffer long before he

went out on the course, as always; in fact he'd been out of touch since 10:00 p.m. last night. The thing he wanted most to know was that the body and soul of USLUC were still glued together. He worried that Lester's illness was not exactly an "act of God," as insurance companies still called such things in this post-theological age. Everybody knew that Gil Henderson had hinted on the Net that the WDA might have been responsible. Kill the head and the body will surely die, Randy recalled, from Klauswitz or de Sade or some other such psychopath.

He handed his golf bag to Lou, his own chauffeur, and fell into the backseat. He was tempted to turn on his Sniffer right away and get up to speed on the state of the world, especially the state of Lester Connolly's health. He was tempted to Netface with Lucky, but she worked for USLUC, so that would lead back to the Lester Connolly situation. He felt bad that he couldn't brag to her, or bask in the afterglow of his surprise victory over good old Howie Pilaster—she'd be completely engrossed in the news from the hospital, and he worried that golf-talk would seem insensitive. Besides, he thought, I really stink! For reasons he never understood nor felt the need to explore, he always thought he should be fresh and clean to Netlink with Lucky.

Bang! It was only the trunk lid closing, but Randy wasn't expecting it, and he was startled. I must be on edge, he thought as Lou got into the driver's seat and started the engine. The air conditioning washed over him as the limo rolled towards the beach house that he had purchased a few miles north of Miami. He felt as unlovely and sticky inside his mind as he did on the surface of his body, so he went about deciding whether to opt for a dip in the Atlantic or a long, self-indulgent loll in the jacuzzi. He'd had a mid-sized MIU installed over the foot-end of the dark blue tub. That settled it. He would get clean, and then Netface with Lucky from the jacuzzi, soaked and starkers.

He touched a button and lowered the glass partition that shielded VIPs (usually just Randy) from the rest of humanity. "So what's new and exciting?" he asked Lou Messel, his personal chauffeur and sometimes confidant and psychotherapist.

"Same old same old," said Lou from the front. He never volunteered a thing until he had a solid fix on the boy's mood. Randy was unpredictable, mercurial, and occasionally showed the dismissiveness of the moneyed class.

"No ... really," said Randy. "I've been unplugged since last night."

Lou glanced in the rearview mirror, even though he knew what he had to do. "You're not going to like it," he offered, hoping faintly that "the boss" would let him off the hook. Randy had leaned forward reflexively. "Your friend, Lester Connolly?" said Lou with an upturned cadence. "He—uh—he didn't make it, and there's been..." He stopped talking when he saw the boy's reaction in the rearview mirror.

Randy fell back and closed his eyes. "Fuck," he mumbled.

"The—uh—fever came back around midnight last night," said Lou, "and they—uh—couldn't seem to get him ... stabilized, they said. I guess ... the virus got into his neck or shoulder or chest ... or something. They announced it around nine o'clock this morning. You got a big bunch of faces waiting for you ... Yolanda ... Lucky, rather ... and your mom in Québec ... your dad from Freeport, and a bunch more. I told them that you were unplugged, and out on the course ... you know, important match and all that. How'd you do, anyway?"

Randy buzzed up the black partition without responding. He ordered up the on-board MIU and instructed a Netlink with Lucky. It occurred to him—not for the first time—that she meant more to him than anyone, even his folks. "Aw jeeze—I just heard," he said as her face appeared on the screen—she was sitting at her MIU, in her office. "You ... okay, sweetie?"

Lucky had been crying. She knew he'd been unplugged since last night, for the golf match, and she knew she would be his first call. Her red eyes were shunted upwards; her chin quivered. "Can you come up here for a few days?" she asked, still unable to look at her MIU screen, at Randy. "I just need ... to be with you."

"I was already planning to come up," said Randy. "I'll be there in a few hours. I just have to—"

"Look, I gotta go," said Lucky. "The whole USLUC Board is here on the warm, at the office, and things are pretty freakin' tense. You better catch up on the news. I have to tell you ... people are going ... kind of nuts ... like all over. Net, down, now."

It was about twenty minutes from the Liberty Cove Golf Course to the beach house, and Randy decided to use that time to think. He shut down the on-board MIU and leaned his head back on the soft upholstery. The chilled air penetrated his clothes now, and his damp armpits felt cold. His "putt-of-a-lifetime" was suddenly an utterly irrelevant pixel of ancient history, as the world seemed poised for a painful spasm. Rumors about the real cause of Lester's death will be rampant on the Net, he figured. Even if Sheena Kalhoun denied everything on a stack of Bibles, and had her veracity confirmed by a LieDeck, the members of USLUC—and a lot of other people—would never believe it was the whole truth.

What did Lucky mean ... "kind of nuts"? he asked himself. He called her back, this time using his Sniffer, and found her sitting in the Boardroom at USLUC headquarters. "I ... are you okay to talk?" he asked hesitantly. He noticed that she was also using a Sniffer now, and that her hands were trembling, judging by the shaking black-and-white image on his screen. "What did you mean by people going—uh—kind of nuts?"

"Randy, the Board is all here and things are escalating fast, spinning out of control," she said. "At first, people were marching around in the streets, shouting, spitting at WDA agents and all that, but now some people are smashing windows at WDA offices, turning over WDA cars, even setting them on fire. We haven't heard of anybody getting killed or seriously injured yet, but it's real bad. We don't know how to stop it. You got any ideas?"

Randy was on the USLUC Board in an ex-officio, honorary capacity, and as he had feared, with Lester gone, the USLUC leadership was in total disarray. Maybe we should do like Victor did when reality got to be too much for him, he mused. Just shut the fuck up for a couple of decades. The more he pondered it, the more this random, idle thought seemed to make some sense, or seemed at least to offer a basis for the development of a practical plan.

"What if..." he started. "What if we decided that—uh—at least, say, until the WDA is proven innocent, that we—uh—we asked everybody in America to—uh—oh, what the fuck—let's ask everybody in the world to refuse to talk to any WDA agent ... except for their LieDeck-verification, of course. Ah hell, let's go all the way and include LieDeck-verification too. The WDA has been forcing us to prove ourselves innocent for nineteen years. We'll pull a Lysistrata—withhold what they need most. We'll assume the WDA is guilty until or unless it's clear that they're totally innocent, and until proof is established, we just pretend the WDA doesn't exist. Christ, they can't put us all in jail!"

Lucky's pale face sat on Randy's Sniffer screen, but he could also see several of his Board-mates peering over her shoulder, and he could hear numerous conversations in the background, behind her. "...it could work ... retaliation ... no way that ... no time for a ... arrest ... what else ... as president ... just no clear policy on ... perhaps as an interim measure..." Randy could catch only occasional words from the jumbled mix.

"I'll call you back in a couple of minutes, okay?" asked Lucky. "They seem to need some time to—"

"No problem," said Randy. "Net, down. now." Jesus Christ, he thought, it sounds like they're taking it seriously. If they go with that, the WDA will know it was my idea. I don't know how, but they always know everything. They might even be waiting to arrest me, at the beach house.

"Lou," he said as he lowered the divider, "head out to Musky Airfield, and call ahead to charter a small plane. Tell them to have it warmed up and ready to take off and—uh—tell them to make sure there's parachutes on board."

"Parachutes!?" asked Lou as he slowed down to make the required U-turn.

"Just do it!" Randy ordered—he knew he could be a real prick at times, and he knew some other people saw him that way, but such was life, he figured. Lou Messel was quite the good fellow, but ... he has a cushy job, for which he's absurdly overpaid, so...

The parachutes were a red herring. Randy loved reading his 20th-century spy thrillers, and he particularly liked red herrings. He knew nothing about parachuting, however, and the very idea terrified him. He buzzed the glass divider back up and re-established a link with Lucky. "Hi honey," he said. "Did they—"

"Listen, Randy," she interrupted, "they approved it, but they—uh..." She swallowed and looked around the room. "They want you to take Lester's job and do the Netnews release yourself ... partly because it was your idea, but I think—uh—mostly because the WDA would be more than a little reluctant to arrest you, you know. You'd be the interim president, they said—just to get through the next few months. What do you think?"

Randy was stunned. There might be no next golf match, no career as a pro, no more beach house, no university degree, at least not for a while, and a huge fight in the family, and ... God, nothing would be the same! he realized. Sweat formed on his face in spite of the air conditioning. It was simply too much, and a lot too fast, even if there was no time to waste. "I'm ... only eighteen," he said. "And ... I really don't know if I could handle it ... at least not alone," he tried weakly.

"You won't be alone," said Lucky. "The Board will be there to help you and I ... it's just for a while, and there are..." She seemed to have run aground on some mental shoal. She brought her Sniffer close, so her face filled Randy's entire screen. "YES!" she said assertively.

Randy was confused. From her face, the assertive "yes" was clearly aimed at him, not at someone in the background who'd asked her something. "Yes ... to what?" he asked. "I didn't—"

"Yes to the question you're always asking me," she said.

Randy's beads of sweat began to connect up with each other and dribble down his forehead. Suddenly, he was engaged to be married! Real life, it appeared, could be as iffy and arbitrary as golf. Still, you play the lie you get. Rub of the green. This wasn't a time for careful consideration. It was a time to sooth the mind, calm the instinct, make a best bloody guess and clobber the little white ball. At least she was prudent enough not to say the whole thing over the Net, he thought. And I already told her I wouldn't want to tell my folks for a while if we took this step. She knows I don't want her to be more of a "target" than she already is.

"Okay, honey," he said evenly. "Just one thing ... you know those six monks, those Jesus-Eers that said they sort of—uh—kidnapped Lester while he was in hospital? I want them—at least some of them—for me ... for us, really. Can ... that be arranged?"

Lucky knew what he was referring to. Ancient kings needed food tasters as well as a loyal palace guard. She and Randy would need those monks if they were to at least try to avoid contracting an ugly disease as definitive as necrotizing fasciitis. She got the sense of things from the chorus of bobbing heads around the table. "It's ... approved," she said, "Mr. President."

"See you soon," said Randy. "Mrs. Whiteside-Dees," he mouthed.

Lucky blew him a kiss. "Dees-Whiteside," she mouthed as she signed off.

Chapter 42

AMAZING GEORGE

Monday, March 14, 2033—10:20 a.m.

General George Brampton eased himself out of the backseat of the WDA limo and stood on the chilly, bare sidewalk. He carried himself erect in spite of the howling pain in his lower back—a high school football injury, from seventy-odd years ago. He loathed being ninety-one. The rest of his body hurt too, mostly just from too many years of living. No matter, he reminded himself as he accepted his slim briefcase from the silent soldier who did the ferrying about. My mind's in top form, he assured himself as he checked his Rolex watch. It was 10:20 a.m. He was late again ... not that anyone gives a shit. He didn't have to be here at all, and as a matter of fact, as the years crawled by, it seemed that more and more WDA officials actually preferred that he stay home. Fuck 'em all, he thought. They wouldn't even be alive except for me, he reminded himself, harking back in his feelings to the glory days of 2014.

Brampton dismissed his driver with a cursory salute, and stood alone on the concrete until the car pulled away. He liked watching those two little flags flutter from the front corners of the brand new Cadillac. He had won the competition for the flag design back in 2015, and not just because he had control of the whole world's unified nuclear arsenal. It made sense, his design. It conveyed the essential message of the new WDA: "Peace on Earth." It consisted of a stylized version of a satellite photo of the Earth, a blue-green ball half dressed in white floss, a stainless steel peace symbol superimposed over the whole works, all on a randomly star-spangled, pitch-black background. "A thing of beauty," he mumbled.

As the limo eased onto 43rd Street, the ancient general tugged at the lapel of his gold uniform jacket and turned to face the building that was the hub of WDA activity. It didn't look much different than it had in those "bad old days," when these eighteen American acres, running from 42nd to 48th streets, had cradled the United Nations. The main visual difference was to be found in the row of flags extending far down the street in front of the stately, 20th-century structure. All national flags were square now, with a horizontal white dividing line. Above the narrow equator, as prescribed by world law, was the WDA flag, indicating precisely who was on top of whom. Below the line was the flag of a nation, a formerly independent state, now joined forever with all other countries through the WDA in a world where order was tightly assured and freedom was ... well, where freedom was officially promoted and protected, but was actually just "allowed," and even that only to the extent that it didn't threaten the seamless continuation of order. "That is as it should be," whispered Brampton as he did his best to march toward the glass front doors of the administration tower, unaware that his pace was half that of a dawdling child. "As it must be," he said under his breath.

It never failed to thrill Brampton that he could walk in to work (well, from the curb, anyway) unarmed and unafraid. The lovely truth was, barring any physical impediments, he could walk on any old patch of the planet unarmed and unthreatened. Anybody can, he thought, as long as they want to just live life and not make any trouble. It was only a few months until the celebration of the WDA's nineteenth

anniversary, a year and a bit until they celebrated its second decade in place, in power. “Not a single bullet has been fired in anger since May, 2014,” he remembered bellowing towards the sea of cheering faces at the eighteenth World Peace Day celebration in New York's Central Park, almost a year ago. That wasn't exactly true, of course, as there were still some crimes of passion for the Netnews to titter over in graphic detail and living color, but this slight exaggeration had hardly seemed to matter at the time. “The terrifying black days of chaos are ended,” he'd announced to the half-million people who had gathered to hear the father of the WDA in what the media anchors had called—for the sixth year running—“perhaps his last public appearance.” “Forever!” he had shouted into the mike, spraying spittle.

That standing ovation had endured for more than four minutes, CBS reported on the Netnews last June. His daring decision to H-bomb Leningrad and then declare universal martial law had taken everyone by complete surprise back in 2014, during the LieDeck Revolution. His threat to nuke the capital of any resistant state had been taken seriously, and within two days, the head of every military establishment in the world was sitting in a dull New York office, wondering how the fuck that happened. And each general found himself (or herself, in a few instances) running the control apparatus of his or her home country over the old Internet, and clearing every major national decision with “George,” as the then-Supreme Commander insisted on being called.

George Brampton and the United States of America had projected their power over all nations in a global coup, a coup that George still considered “essentially bloodless.” And the people of all nations had approved, almost unanimously. George felt a profound pride in the legacy of peace he would leave. “War never again,” he had written right into the Charter of the WDA. “Peace before all, and at any cost,” he had penned onto a cloth serviette on the very day that Bucharest and Leningrad had disappeared. That serviette was now displayed in a glass case in the WDA's Museum of the Unified Earth, down in the belowground concourse of the General Assembly. “At any cost,” he mumbled as he glanced over at the unrenamed, domed annex where now, generals actually assembled.

Yes, there were a few malcontents who still griped occasionally about the standing order to use nuclear weapons immediately if ever there was a serious threat of chaos, but most people had just moved on in their minds, and in their lives. No one called it overkill when we eradicated smallpox, he reminded himself—sliding over the fact that that was a UN achievement. Nobody gets up in the morning and says, “Zowie, no more smallpox in the world,” he said to himself. Same fucking thing! No more war!

The braying in the newspapers and other media still got to George, even though there was no indication of popular support for the complainers. Just last week, Gil Henderson was at it again, bitching and whining on the SuperNet about how the nuclear policy of the WDA amounted to “the banalization of death,” and a “concomitant trivialization of life.” A year ago, before the fucking Henderson Scandals, no one would have even dared say such a thing, he thought. Perhaps our Mr. Henderson should come down with something bad ... smallpox, maybe.

And then there was that little Whiteside ... well, “piece of snot” was the way he had referred to Randy since his call for rebellion yesterday. The old general was astonished that he'd been called only three times on the Net about the boy's idiotic effrontery, and he'd been especially galled when Sheena Kalhoun—through her secretary, no less—had told him to please keep his counsel. “Shut the fuck up” was what she was really saying, he grumbled to himself. Oh well, as long as she thinks she's in charge.

As he trudged awkwardly towards the doors, he became aware that he'd blocked out the music again, so he stopped, turned around in a series of short shunts, and gave a nod and a wave to the gaggle of singers across the six-lane road. The serenading had started seven years ago, just after Sheena Kalhoun took over as head of the WDA. Some people didn't like the change. A lone black woman of obvious financial means began to show up every day and break lustily into the first verse of Amazing Grace every

time George got out of his limo for his two-minute shuffle to the WDA tower. She was talented, if a little long in the tooth, and she belted out those first four lines with much more verve than the lyrics, if not George, deserved:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost but now I'm found

Was blind, but now I see

Within a week, she was joined by other Brampton fanatics, black and white, male and female, young and old, American and foreign, in ever-changing permutations. On certain days, like his birthday, there would be hundreds of impromptu singers—whoever could make it out that day—fortifying the melody or throwing on harmonies, a capella.

About a year ago, they had added a new second verse. The daily chanters had been asked to “do their thing” across the street because of that new verse. “He'll hear you,” they were assured, “and he's very pleased by your intentions, even though he still denies...” etcetera, etcetera. George didn't appreciate all those lunatics claiming that he was the Second Coming of Jesus, or a deity of any ilk. On the other hand, he was flattered to be thought of in such august company ... and unlike Jesus, he actually had saved the world. But still, the words of that new verse were a bit ... well, there they were, in his ears:

Amazing George, how great the man

Who saved this world and me

He's come again, evil to ban

He's set my people free

Third line still seems a bit wonky, he thought as he reached the front of the building. Eeevilll to baaan. He shook his head. Oh well, he thought, life will be a lot easier without that son-of-a-bitch Lester Connolly on our case all the time.

"Morning George," said a smiling hostess as she held open the big door. "And bless you."

"Bless us all," replied the former Supreme Commander and living legend as he kissed her proffered cheek. He liked kissing cheeks, among other things, and he often wondered if the adoration he received from young women wasn't the best perquisite of his honorary position.

"No trouble?" he asked.

"Not since twenty fourteen," the woman said, adoringly.

"Gun?" he snapped.

"Check."

"Sniffer?"

"Check."

"LieDeck?"

"Check."

"Good girl," he grinned, sliding a wrinkled hand from her ear to her chin and walking away, or waddling away. The gun got her listened to, the LieDeck meant she didn't have to use the gun, and the Sniffer meant that anyone she had to deal with would know they were dealing with the whole WDA, not just with one little hostess. It wasn't complicated, but it worked.

"Boy, does it work!" chuckled George as he rode the elevator to his top-floor office. This was the price of peace ... a bargain by any standard ... and he was the ... well, lots of people tended to call him the "prince of peace," a moniker he'd always rejected loudly enough to keep it out of his face during interviews, although not quite so vigorously as to discourage any off-camera usage. Some people had now switched over from the "prince of peace" to calling him the "king of peace," and that sat well with him ... it didn't carry the sense that he was competing with Jesus. He prayed to the Lord God daily, on the Net, and he hoped deep inside that death was indeed a mere stepping stone to eternal bliss. "Make certain they use the lower case on that if they insist on using it in print," he told the Minister of Civilian Relations several months ago. "Small 'k' on 'king' or small 'p' on 'prince'," he'd grumped. "The concept of the divine right of kings ended up buried in the dustbin of history, where it belongs," he'd said. "And besides," he'd explained, "my right to govern wasn't given to me by God. I just took it, and now everyone's glad I did."

The elevator door opened onto the thirty-ninth floor, and he was met with a kiss on the mouth from his favorite hostess, Laura Becker, a black, a very light black, actually, a sort of beige person, almost indistinguishable from the so-called whites. She was also his secretary, although that assignment hadn't produced any actual secretarial work in years. "You're ... Algerian, aren't you?" he asked as he ran the backs of a few old fingers under her breasts. He was fairly sure she'd said that to him a long time ago ... probably often.

"I'll be whatever you say," winked Laura.

She has one of those eternally perky mouths, thought George as he tried to remember Goldie Hawn's name, with gums as pink and wet as her cunt. He absolutely hated it when darker blacks smiled and showed brown or purple gums. "Naughty little tart," he said. "Is General Heatherington here?"

"He's in the waiting room," said Laura—whenever the British MGA came here, he'd be sure to arrive early, way early, for whatever reason. "I tried to rub his temples, but he brushed me off. Maybe I'm the wrong color," she said.

"We'll get him sorted out soon enough," said George as he handed over his briefcase and led the way, very slowly.

Laura held the door as George hobbled into his private office, then helped him down into his special chair—"the throne," some journalists had dubbed it, with no disrespect intended. The general let out a deep sigh, and then played the buttons built into the right armrest until his body felt as comfortable as it ever got. Then he closed the cover on the mini-console. The business of the day could begin, and hopefully, the agenda wouldn't take him past noon, and included a small bit of "entertainment" at the end. "What else we got?" he asked.

"Just General Heatherington," said Laura. "Oh ... and plus there's a little Sri Lankan girl who wants to please you with a private performance ... a contortionist."

"Well!" said George, with as much of a twinkle as his dry eyes could manage these days, "then I'd better get General Heatherington sorted out. The usual ... procedure with him, eh? And then I'll—uh—clear my desk. You can send him in now."

* * * *

General Clinton W. Heatherington was a wasp-thin gentleman of just seventy-four years, and trim-looking in his uniform, if not quite so tightly held-together underneath it. He had never been in a war, although he almost saw action in the Falklands when he was a young sergeant. Now, in what he hoped was the sunset of his working life, he found himself with great prestige and little power. With the elimination of war and the full flowering of cyberlife, national borders had stopped mattering in the minds of the people ... most of them, anyway. Real power seemed to have skidded away from national governments—and their military MGAs in New York—skidded both down and up; down to provincial and local governments and up to the inner sanctum of the WDA, to Sheena Kalhoun and her tiny circle of advisers, her “cabinet.” Sure, the civilian government in London did his bidding, but in these unsteady days, there were precious few issues in need of any serious “bidding.” He was a senior MGA—Member of the General Assembly—and although that was a free ticket to any Broadway opening, cocktail party or corporate boardroom, he had little influence with Kalhoun, the real head of the WDA. What he did have, however, was the occasional ear of the ex-head, the now-Honorary Chairman, and he made every effort to use that connection sparingly, wisely, and never at the behest of others. Today was an exception to that last criteria, and he was nervous.

"General Brampton, SIR," he almost shouted as he snapped to attention and executed a sharp salute. It wasn't what Brampton said he wanted, but no one except Kalhoun had ever dared not do it.

"Just 'George' will do," said the Honorary Chairman of the WDA as he threw back a loose salute-type gesture and held out a shaky, liver-spotted hand. "How are things in the United Kingdom, Clint?"

Well, things weren't so bad, it seemed. They were crime-free, of course, and there was no more terrorism anywhere, thanks to the WDA and the LieDeck, and of course the UK was doing well economically, now that they didn't need to finance much of a military establishment—also thanks to the WDA. "But we've gone over the three percent mark with Evolution," complained the British general, "and these ... people, this three percent of our population, now own almost twenty percent of all shares in domestic corporations. They could crash the market if they wanted to ... not that they would, of course ... that would be stupid, but ... well, it's a concern—uh—George. Hundreds of new people are joining up every day ... mostly poor younger people, but now some that are middle-aged or elderly and some that aren't even poor, people who are just looking for a comfortable and pleasant way to get through life. And this new ... well, they call it a 'consciousness' that they've achieved, or they're working on ... it seems to have even more appeal than the financial security offered by Evolution. If they continue to grow at the current rate, it won't be long before they have the private sector in their control ... not completely, but they'll have it by the—uh—by the scrotum, sir, and our government and business leaders are very concerned that if nothing is done to stop these people, well..."

"Well ... what?" said George, with his small gray eyes clamped onto this too-proper Brit.

"Well, they could ... you know ... upset the balance of ... of—"

"Come here, Clint," smiled George as he rose painfully and wobbled over towards the window. "Look out there," he ordered, pointing to the wide streets far below. "What do you see?"

Clint stared out, down, and bit his lip from worry. Wrong answers weren't popular in this office, and this question was so ... so vague. "Manhattan," he said, "and ... cars, and people, and ... and peace," he added hopefully.

"Yes," nodded George. "Peace," he repeated proudly. "There has not been a war now for nineteen years; no revolutions, no uprisings, no terrorist bombings. And why is that?" he asked rhetorically, not even bothering to glance at his guest. "It's because I forbade it, because we have things under control.

The right technology came along, and maybe more to the point, the right man made the right political and military moves in the right order at the right time. You—uh—with me so far?"

"Yes sir," said General Heatherington. "George," he semi-whispered as the Honorary Chairman slid carefully back onto his hi-tech throne.

"You come back to me with one good, solid reason why Evolution should be seen as something other than a harmless fad, and I'll listen. You explain to me why I should stop the movement, why they're dangerous, and I'll put the dumb fuckers out of commission overnight. But all this whining about them—and I'm getting it from all over the world, you know—it doesn't cut it with me. I hate whiners. The WDA is uber alles, Clint, and it's going to stay that way, forever, as it must, for purposes of peace. We've got our eye on the balance that counts. Too much freedom and you lose on the side of peace. History had taught us that. But too little freedom and you also lose on the side of peace. If those weirdos pay their damned taxes and work productively and stay the fuck out of politics, I don't care if they live like pigs or royalty, and I don't give a sweet shit how many there are. Christ, if they didn't live like that, most of them would be on fuckin' welfare! Do we understand each other, Clint?"

General Heatherington hated taking the point position for all those other puffed-up, would-be soldiers, but they had elected him to take their case upstairs, and now he saw his opening. "So ... they should stay out of politics?" he asked. "Domestic politics, all levels?" he added, putting a finer point on his inquiry.

"They'd better," said George, before thinking it through. "Mind you I—uh—I know about some of them getting on school boards and local councils and the odd one getting into provincial or state legislatures, but—uh—are they planning on getting into national politics in Britain? Or anywhere? Is that ... what you're saying?"

"Well, we've got some intelligence to the effect that they may start their own political party," said Clint, "the Evolution Party ... and not just in Britain, but in many countries ... most countries ... simultaneously. We know that they haven't taken a final decision, but they can do it, and we're just suggesting that—uh—you should keep an eye out for—uh—"

"We!" said George, as both bushy eyebrows shot up. "Just who, exactly, is 'we'?"

Clint knew better than to lie, about anything—that was a quick ticket home, and out of action. "There are ... a lot of other MGAs who share my concern, George, and they thought you should hear it, so I was chosen to—uh—"

"Priority override to George," came a serene voice on the MIU screen. "Your visual is requested. Are you alone?"

"One moment," said George in the direction of the large screen. "Sorry, Clint, but the demands on my time are..." He stopped himself before he told the lie—Clint was WDA, so he had a LieDeck too. "I'll—uh—get a report done on this matter," he said, realizing that he would now have to do it ... or rather get it done. "Thanks ... for coming in."

General Heatherington saluted the frail man in the pale gold uniform—the only one of that exact shade on Earth, it was said—and left the office quickly.

"Visual on now," said George brusquely as the door closed. "What is it?"

"Just me ... coming to your rescue, sir," sang Laura Becker as her image came on the screen. "You said to call you when he ran out of steam or got too—"

"Thanks kiddo," said George. "You said there was some—uh—little Sri Lankan girl that—uh—"

"A contortionist—I'll send her in," came the reply. "You might want to take all that stuff off your desk for this."

"Gotcha," said George.

Chapter 43

BECKETT

Monday, March 14, 2033—11:30 a.m.

Sheena Kalhoun sat irritably in her office, just two doors down from George Brampton's office, listening to the Netfeed, alone. It had taken years to push "the old coot" (as he was called in private by the most powerful woman on Earth) out of the loop. In fact it wasn't until 2026, seven years ago, that she and her allies had finally succeeded in "promoting" George to the largely fictional post of Honorary Chairman, a role of inconsequentiality in reality, but unprecedented honor in its elaborate trappings. Figureheads rarely appreciate or enjoy the impotence that their jobs require, she said to herself.

She and her closest advisers had discussed "the Brampton situation" in that curious language of hints and allegories that had been spawned by the LieDeck. They had a plan. It might not work, of course, but the fallback position was as solid as the Earth's mantle. If push came to shove, George would have to go ... by which they meant "die."

The timing of Sheena's entrance into Brampton's office had to be exact, and give her the advantage. Getting by the loyal Laura Becker wasn't difficult, since Sheena could fire her or snap her neck in seconds. As it happened, and as planned, she walked in just as the naked Sri Lankan woman—a slip of a girl—was slinking out, pressing her clothes against her skinny chest with one hand, and trying unsuccessfully to hide her face with the other.

"George!" Sheena she ebulliently before he could object to her unannounced arrival, and without so much as a glance at the girl. "I noticed earlier—twenty-two minutes ago, I think—that people are still singing your song out on the street. You're like a fucking god to your fans. Should I kiss your ring or something?"

Brampton was a real sucker for flattery—never could get enough of the stuff. At this moment, however, he couldn't reconcile his satisfaction over Sheena's deference with his fury over her intrusion. His heavily layered facial folds seemed to read "tilt," like a 1950s pinball machine.

Sheena took pride in her opening thrust. She wondered if old George wasn't standing to greet her because he was frail, or because he was sitting there with a painful, unused erection. "You're looking trim," she lied. George Brampton's left eyebrow flipped up a bit, and Sheena was dismayed to see that he still hadn't mastered the art of concealing his emotions, of hiding the fact that he had an active LieDeck operating, using the pin mode. She had let him catch her in a dumb lie, and he didn't even have the acumen to know that on a higher level, she'd caught him!

"Please ... do sit down, Ms. Kalhoun," he parried, gesturing carelessly at a chair and seeming to suppress a belch. "What's ... on your mind?"

Sheena knew she could easily club the aging icon into a blubbing submission, and although that was tempting, she stuck to her game plan. Out of respect for his reputation and legacy, she'd decided to give him one chance to take his licking like a man. "One chance, and one chance only!" she'd bellowed at her

inner circle of advisers when they had pressed her to be merciful. It was not her first instinct, and it still stuck in her teeth like a popcorn hull, but it did have the additional advantage of covering her own precious butt ... and likely a truckload of other highly placed recta.

"As you know, Gil Henderson implied in the Times last month that we were behind Lester Connolly's illness ... or might be." She spoke wearily, like a mom trying to come to grips with a son's truancy. "We figured the best way to deal with Henderson when he made that scurrilous accusation was to ignore the son-of-a-bitch, so we said nothing, and people started to lose interest. Then, as you know, when Connolly died yesterday, all hell broke loose ... for eleven hours. The people have finally stopped demonstrating, thanks in part to the Whiteside kid, even if we may not want to admit it. Still, he and his USLUC gang also asked all citizens of Earth to refuse to talk to WDA agents, even to refuse to do their LieDeck-verifications. People seem ready to believe just about anything about us—anything bad, that is. We're—uh—taking a real shellacking. A lot of people now seem to believe that we ... well, that we murdered Connolly!"

"So, tell 'em it's a big old load of crap, and leave your LieDeck on while you do it," sputtered Brampton.

"But ... what if it's true?" asked Sheena coolly.

The general froze ... not the reaction of an innocent man, noted Sheena. Their eyes were locked, and every second of silence trebled the trouble he was in. The ball was in his court. Sheena showed no emotion—not fear, not hostility, not anything.

She has to know, thought Brampton. "And ... and ... are we?" he asked nervously. A cold perspiration shower crept onto his forehead, and his hard-on began to wilt. She's got to know, or at least suspect.

"Are we ... what?" asked Sheena, feigning ignorance.

"Are we responsible for Lester Connolly's ... misfortune?"

Sheena Kalhoun detested the post-Revolutionary habit of answering questions with questions. It was the coward's way out, a means of deferring a direct answer, a method of surveying the enemy's emplacements before committing your troops. If this were anyone other than "the old coot," she would have taken action then and there. She was Supreme Commander of the World Democratic Authority; not a person to suffer fools gladly. I did promise to give him one chance, so ... here goes, she thought. "Have you read Beckett?" she asked. "By Jean Anouilh?" she added, underlining her awareness of the man's lack of culture.

Brampton's lowered eyes exhibited the full terror of a defeated dog lying on its back, exposing his neck, praying for mercy. He'd never read the play, but he'd seen the movie a lifetime ago, and knew the reference. "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" Henry II had lamented. Had that matter gone to court, King Henry would have faced some unbearable questions, he thought. "Didn't you realize your sycophantic underlings would construe your complaint as a direct order, that they would see in your question an opportunity to ingratiate themselves to the monarch?"

"What's ... your point?" he finally asked, weakly, his eyes still pointed down, filled now with two gnarled hands that seemed to be his own, desperately hoping that some idle motive lay behind this curious question.

"Well, the press conference this afternoon was originally planned to just say when the World Identity Bank would be going online, to announce the awarding of contracts—that sort of thing. But now that Connolly's dead, there's a lot of Netnews speculation that we might unban the LieDeck soon, and—"

"Over my dead body!" shouted Brampton. His eyes were back up now, issuing forth a virtual flame, a direct threat that used to cause presidents and potentates to tremble.

"Possibly," said Sheena, returning his stare with all the confidence of a player holding a royal flush. "What I need from you is a blank check."

"Explain," ordered the general as he drew a wrinkled hand down his damp face, then wiped it on a leg of his pants.

"I want you beside me at my press conference this afternoon, and ... no matter what, you will confirm whatever I say, but without any verbal comment. A pleasant nod will do just fine, George. Agreed?"

Brampton closed his eyes, trying to prevent any telltale tears from leaking out. She's ... actually trying to save my ass, he realized. If our roles were reversed, I'd have her shot. She doesn't know whether I did anything, and she doesn't really want to know, but if I confess, she'll have to throw me to the wolves. As long as she only suspects, she can pass LieDeck-verification. "Okay," he said softly with his eyes still closed, "but I'm only agreeing to this because..." He was going to say "because I'm too fucking tired to fight with you," but he couldn't say that. He often forgot about the LieDeck when he needed most to remember. Getting old sucked.

"And ... please take one of your—uh—nerve pills an hour before you get to the press conference," Sheena asked as she stood to leave. At least he'll look too feeble to talk, she thought. "And be there on time," she added forcefully as she marched out of his office.

Chapter 44

100% INNOCENT

Monday, March 14, 2033—1:00 p.m.

God bless the SuperNet, Sheena Kalhoun said to herself as she watched the green dots pepper her MIU screen. She'd ordered that every single MGA—Member of the General Assembly—be immediately LieDeck-verified on the subject of Lester Connolly's illness and death. The same LV test was also ordered for every paid employee at the WDA's headquarters in New York. Green dots indicated that the respondents knew nothing, and were innocent. The whole process was expected to take one hour, max. MGAs and other employees who were off-site carried Sniffers at all times, so LVing everyone on the two lists posed no problems.

General Carlos Juarez, the Brazilian MGA, entered Sheena's office unannounced, and as quietly as possible. His head pounded with every push of new blood. "The executive picked me," he said. He and Sheena were fairly close, and that's why he was picked. No one had ever done this before, and Sheena's temper could flare without warning.

"Picked you for what?" she asked irritably.

"To—uh—LV you ... personally," said General Juarez.

Sheena stared at the man, wondering how much fear he was feeling. "Go ahead," she said calmly ... finally.

General Juarez felt as much fear as he'd ever known. If Sheena flunked, he'd have to arrest her! And deep inside, he expected her to fail! Like many other MGAs, he suspected she had a super-secret cadre

of agents ... like Richard Nixon's "Plumbers," he imagined ... who didn't exist on any MIU list, or in any mother's memory or heart ... people who could do the dirty work and never be found because technically—digitally at least—they didn't exist at all. He inhaled fully, made sure his Sniffer was set on the beeper mode, and proceeded with his task. "Do you, Sheena Kalhoun, have any knowledge of how former USLUC president Lester Connolly contracted the flesh-eating disease?"

Sheena reminded herself internally that the question was about knowledge, not about suspicions. "No," she said flatly. I'm one hundred percent innocent, she wanted to add, but didn't dare. It wasn't that her suspicions made her culpable or made her feel culpable, only that a profession of total innocence could conjure up Shakespeare's "the lady doth protest too much," or come across the way O.J. Simpson had in 2023, when he repeated his famous 1996 lie in a barely audible whisper, two days before his deathbed confession.

"Thank you," said General Juarez as his adrenal gland decelerated. He put his Sniffer away, trying not to betray the unwarranted doubts that had almost choked him one minute earlier. Then he watched as Sheena glanced at her MIU screen so she'd observe when the green dot pop up beside her name. "You'll—uh—do George?" he asked as he reached for the doorknob.

"I will assure that my directive is carried out in full and to the letter," she said stiffly to General Juarez as she raised her eyes resentfully from her MIU. He took her words and her unamused glare to mean that one way or another, George Brampton would indeed be officially LieDeck-verified—for the first time in anyone's memory. Sheena meant for him to take it that way. What she didn't manage to mention was that the vaunted founder of the WDA, while he had a generous pension, was not technically a "paid employee" of the WDA, which meant ... which means we're home free, she thought, unless Henderson busts his brain dissecting this thing. Indeed, Jesuitical equivocation still worked ... if you thought the thing through carefully, she admitted internally.

Sheena was watching as the last green dot popped onto her screen, and a voice from inside the MIU said: "Program now complete; no lies detected." Sheena's smile was sub-molecular. She prepared to proceed with the rest of the plan. "Face Michael Whiteside, and override, now," she commanded.

* * * *

Michael and Lilly were on the sixteenth tee of the Diamond Princess Golf Course, a short par three. Lilly had hit her ball first—that "honor" always went to whoever had won the previous hole. Michael had a seven iron in his hand, and was staring at Lilly's ball, lying on the green, ten feet from the pin ... in birdie territory. Tall people are supposed to be rotten golfers, he recalled from when he was a kid. Even though she was no taller than he was, she was very tall ... for a woman.

Lilly had been the beneficiary of some good luck earlier in the round, some amazing luck, and Michael was having a bad day—as far as the game of golf was concerned. They were both tired after yet another rather aerobic night, and while this game was irrelevant in the larger scheme of things, Michael badly wanted to win. He'd assumed Lilly would not even be competitive. He'd been wrong. They had played golf for five days straight, and each had two victories so far. And today they were tied with only three holes to go ... and she had a birdie putt ... and then his Sniffer buzzed.

"This had better be important as hell," he muttered as his caddy ran to the golf cart to fetch the Sniffer. Michael took it from him roughly, letting his frustration show, scaring the old caddy but delighting Lilly. Any distraction at this critical point should be good for a bogie, she figured.

"What!" he demanded before he realized whose image he was addressing.

"It's Sheena Kalhoun," said the most recognized face on the planet. "Sorry to disrupt your game, but I

have a very important favor to ask of you."

Even though the WDA was the only customer for LieDecks made by Whiteside Tech, and even though LieDeck sales were the main profit center in the company, Michael was not predisposed to do any favors for that organization at this pivotal time of his life. He had just sold his interest in the company, for one thing, but ... if I'm going to be the next prime minister of Canada, I'd better ... "And that would be?" he asked flatly.

* * * *

Two minutes later, Sheena got a Netcall from the main verification studio of Whiteside Technologies. They'd received instruction from Michael Whiteside, and they were ready to go. Sheena commanded her MIU to interface with George Brampton. "It's time," she said to the old man. "We'll do this here, right from my office, okay?"

George Brampton's ceremonial office was only two doors away, but it took him a full three minutes to preen himself and hobble over. Sheena was sitting at her teak table, with the large WDA emblem behind it, on the wall, daring anyone to miss the connection. She usually preferred to have her face right in the middle of the emblem, as if to say, "I am the world," but she needed to give the impression that George, the founder of the WDA and an icon to billions, was at least a part of the package, and a full participant in these proceedings. Sheena sat on the right, facing the remote-operated camera lens, and she tried not to show her impatience and contempt as Brampton made a production of sitting down and looking erect.

"Universal override," said the Supreme Commander of the WDA, the only person in the world who could bust in on every MIU conversation in the world, simultaneously, or wake people from their sleep, as the case might be. "People of all nations, fellow citizens of Earth," she began. "I'm sure you're not happy to have me interrupt your lives like this, but this Netcast is important. It will be automatically archived on all MIUs, of course, but I hope those of you who are awake will stay where you are and listen as I speak. I'll keep it short."

Sheena Kalhoun gave people the world over a few seconds to stumble out of bed or apologize to their Netlink partners; then she began in earnest.

Recently, as you may know, suggestions were made that the WDA was somehow involved in the illness and death of Lester Connolly, the late president of the United States LieDeck Unbanning Committee, or USLUC. This Netcast is being real-time LieDeck-verified by senior staff from Whiteside Technologies in Ottawa, Canada—as you can see on your screens now—and they are using five brand new LieDecks straight off the production line. The read-outs will be broadcast live in the corner of your screen, as you can see now. We're doing this so that everyone can be totally confident in what the truth is.

Earlier today, March fourteen, two thousand and thirty-three, I personally ordered the LieDeck-verification of every Member General of the WDA General Assembly and every paid staffer here at WDA headquarters in New York ... which of course includes myself. All these transactions were recorded, and all the electronic records are available for outside scrutiny. The question that all these people were asked was as follows: "Do you"—and then the name of the person was said—"do you have any knowledge of how former USLUC president Lester Connolly contracted the flesh-eating disease?"

Sheena gave an invisible knee-nudge to Brampton. He nodded dutifully, even wisely. She continued:

I am pleased to report that of these two hundred and forty-six MGA tests—Member General tests—and thirteen thousand five hundred and ninety-one staff tests, all the respondents answered "no," and no lies at all were detected by our LieDecks. All these responses were recorded and are on archive, available for anyone to check and re-verify using the LieDeck of any WDA agent, if they wish. I hope this will lay

to rest any doubts that remain on this matter, and will deter journalists and anyone else from suggesting that the WDA was in any way involved with the illness and death of Lester Connolly.

Brampton nodded again, this time without prompting. He was glad that Sheena had said “I hope” and not “I trust,” because “hope” was guaranteed LieDeck-proof. They both hoped this Netcast would make all this fuss go away. Brampton really hoped it. He had never actually said: “Kill that son-of-a-bitch Lester Connolly,” but he had done a fair bit of high-volume, out-loud, Beckett-like wishing along those lines—which, considering his lofty position, could amount to ... well, trusting that his “will be done.” Still, he had done his present duty, willingly or otherwise, and Sheena Kalhoun thought it was time to wrap things up with a final dig:

In the next few days, every WDA agent in the world will be similarly verified, and you will of course be apprised of the full results. I don't know exactly why this horrible suggestion was made in the first place, and I hope that I will get either an explanation or an apology from the New York Times and its reporter, Mr. Gilbert Henderson. Net, down, now.

Chapter 45

BATTLE PLAN

Monday, March 14, 2033—2:00 p.m.

Victor was taking painkillers more regularly now, but they didn't do much for the thick feeling inside his head. He'd been working hard in preparation for Victor-E's “phase 2” effort, the attempt the clan intended to make to acquire full Human Three Consciousness. He found he had to lie down frequently, and it seemed he rarely found time to watch the Netnews any more. But so far, this up and down activity hadn't been allowed to interfere with his daily lunch-time chess game with Noel, a tradition that dated back almost to the Revolution, and represented Victor's only social contact through his nineteen silent years. The only difference was that he and Noel now played on the warm ... and of course now he could, and did, kibitz.

Michael had sent Noel home from the Bahamas on day two of the vacation, when he (Michael) had learned that Victor really missed him (Noel), badly. It seemed somewhat extravagant to send him back aboard the corporate jet, and the whole situation seemed a tad strange, but Victor was dying, after all, and his invention had fueled the meteoric rise of Whiteside Technologies, and Julia frequently had other things to do besides tending to the needs of the hermit of the lodge, which left Victor alone, with only a substitute cook to depend upon. And besides, Noel wanted to go home—it seemed clear to Michael that he missed Victor as much as Victor missed him.

On this day, Noel was giving as good as he got, both on and off the chessboard. The two aging men had been sitting in Victor's living room on the second floor of the lodge for the last hour and a half, listening to a powerful March rain pound at the roof and lash loudly at the windows as it demolished the last vestiges of a winter's accumulation of snow and ice. They were at move twenty, in what seemed to be shaping up as a boring draw. Victor was playing black, and nothing ingenious sprang to mind as he stared down at the wooden men. Funny that the queen is called the most powerful man on the field of battle, he said to himself. I wonder what Julia's up to?

"You heard ‘bout Randy is being made da president an' all dat?" asked Noel, mostly to irritate his opponent, and partly on the off chance that Victor really hadn't heard.

"President?" asked Victor without lifting his head, or even his eyes, and certainly not his voice. He wasn't

being distracted from any brilliant analysis of the chess game, but he did not want to give Noel the satisfaction of getting a rise out of him. "Of what?" he said, just in case this wasn't all a brain-gambit.

"Dat 'Merrcan outfit," said Noel—for him, it seemed that thirty years wasn't enough time to learn to speak proper English.

"What American outfit?" Victor asked, sitting erect and looking perturbed. "What the fuck are you talking about, Noel?"

Noel gave Victor the bare facts, as he remembered them from Randy's Netcast. "He says he's da president of USLUC and dat nobody is s'posed to talk to dem WDA guys no more until somet'ing is getting done 'bout dis guy dat used to be da president before he is dying yesterday, an' den some people, dey t'inking de WDA did it ... kilt dat odder guy," he managed. "So dey make trouble, yes? T'row rocks, burn cars, all dat shit—all h'over da world, tabernac."

Victor hoisted his shrinking body up from the chair and violently swept the men from the board with the back of his hand. "Why didn't you tell me, fuffucksakes?" he yelled.

Noel was old, but he was a big man, with a temper to match. He walked around the table to do something he'd been meaning to do for the best part of the last twenty years. He used both hands to grab Victor by the front of his silly paisley caftan, and hauled his face in to where it was practically touching his own.

The Frenchman's breathing smelled like garlic, and murder. Victor's head pounded. "I ... I'm sorry," he said. "You put up with me for all those years when I wouldn't talk, and ... you didn't do anything wrong, and ... and I was completely out of line to take my frustrations out on you, Noel. I'm ... really sorry."

Noel held the dying man in place for a couple of seconds more, still wanting to punch the crap out of him, and wondering how the little bugger had come up with the only damn words that could spare him a good whupping. "If you ever talking to me like dat again, I am bust up your face," he growled.

"Gotcha," said Victor. "Yeah," he added rather hastily—to avoid any cross-cultural misunderstandings.

"So you are conceding dat chess game," stated Noel—as a fact. He pulled Victor an inch or two closer.

"Yeah—sure," Victor sputtered into Noel's stubbly chin. "Really, I'm not just saying it. I really am sorry, okay? I was totally wrong. I was..." He was going to say that he'd been acting like a Human Two, but that would have meant nothing to the cook, and might have triggered an assault.

Noel let go of the caftan contemptuously, marched out of the room without another word, and slammed the door to punctuate things. Victor breathed heavily to make up for the oxygen-shortage of the last half-minute—it seemed much longer. The pain at the base of his skull leapt with each beat of his heart. His first impulse was to face with Michael on the SuperNet and have that fat Frenchman fired. He had to marvel at how his feelings were still trying to take decisions for him—never mind what his brain said. Fuck, it's not that easy to be Human Three, he thought as he staggered to the bathroom and swallowed another pain pill.

He sat on the edge of the tub for a couple of minutes, deliberately thinking about ... nothing. Then he went out to his MIU. Too bad I don't have a LieDeck, he said to himself as he picked up the mouse to order a synopsis of recent news reports. He said "Net, up, now," but nothing happened! Then he remembered that he'd unplugged the thing—he wanted nothing to wake him during those times when he slept well. He plugged it back in and ordered up what he wanted verbally.

Ever since the SuperNet began, back in 2018, he had absolutely never used his MIU without first spending a few minutes of intense concentration to “focus his mind,” as he had always called it. He found it was impossible to remember why he had initiated that custom, and stuck to it so rigorously. He'd had his reasons for doing it ... of that he had no doubt ... but he just couldn't remember what those reasons were. Must be the brain tumor, he thought as the announcer began running through the day's developments, but that didn't show up until ... He forgot.

Yesterday, at eight forty-eight a.m., Lester Connolly died. The virus seemed to have been eliminated by the amputation of his left arm one month ago, but somehow it regained a foothold in his chest. He was euthanized at his own request before the pain became unbearable.

Millions of people around the world went on a destructive rampage at the news of his death, breaking windows, setting fires, and in some isolated instances assaulting WDA agents. These hooligans apparently believed that the WDA had somehow caused Mr. Connolly's illness, as New York Times reporter Gilbert Henderson vaguely suggested in his Netcolumn a month ago. Some medical commentators have suggested that it would be very unusual and perhaps even impossible for the original disease to re-establish itself on its own, and that has led to speculation by some conspiracy types that Mr. Connolly may have been re-infected by the WDA.

At seven p.m. yesterday, Randy Whiteside, the eighteen-year-old son of Whiteside Technologies president Michael Whiteside, went on the Net to announce that he was suspending his studies at the University of Miami to take over as the interim president of USLUC. He used the occasion to ask every civilian in the world to stop demonstrating destructively, but he also urged everyone in the world to refuse to talk to any WDA agent or representative, and to refuse to do their legally-required monthly LieDeck-verification sessions. He also advised civilians not to talk to the media about whether they planned to heed USLUC's call for civil disobedience. It is not yet possible to determine whether civilians will follow the new USLUC president's advice to refuse LieDeck-verification and not talk to the media, but the destructive demonstrations stopped after eleven hours and peace returned to streets and neighborhoods the world over.

Sheena Kalhoun went on the Net at one thirty-eight p.m. Eastern Standard Time today, using the universal override for only the third time in her career as Supreme Commander. She denied any link between the WDA and the illness and death of Lester Connolly. She allowed an unprecedented application of LieDeck-verification to her live Netcast, conducted by a civilian panel using a battery of five brand new LieDecks from the assembly line at Whiteside Technologies in Ottawa, Canada. All MGAs and all paid staff at WDA headquarters were tested, apparently, and no lies were detected. Many people still seem to believe that a trick was used and that the WDA is responsible. Over the next few days, every WDA agent in the world will also be LieDeck-verified.

Ms. Kalhoun demanded an explanation or an apology from Gil Henderson, the New York Times reporter who originally made the veiled accusation. Mr. Henderson has remained silent, and was unavailable for comment. He is apparently standing by his story, and the Times has confirmed that for the present, it is standing by its reporter.

On the economic front, the latest InterBank projections indicate that—

Victor silenced his MIU and pondered these astonishing developments. He'd been out of touch for two days, and he hadn't even heard about Lester Connolly's death, let alone the unprecedented worldwide outrage. He knew there were messages waiting for him in his MIU—there always were—but he'd rarely bothered with such mundane things in the past, and he did so even less since his recent decision to be engaged with humanity for his personal sprint to the finish line. I've got to stay abreast of things, he scolded himself. I must have been zonked on painkillers during Kalhoun's universal override, he

thought—forgetting that he'd had his MIU unplugged since early morning ... or was it yesterday ... he couldn't be sure, and he cared little ... not one whit, truth be told.

It was unbelievable! Randy Whiteside, at eighteen years of age and with no political background, had ended the demonstrations and thrown the WDA on the defensive in one inspired stroke! What remained, Victor knew, was the implementation—always a sticky wicket. How many people will actually do what he said, he wondered, actually refuse to be LieDeck-verified and march willingly off to jail? The WDA won't have to “divide and conquer.” They probably have an enormous list of people that piss them off, and they'll challenge those people to take their LV sessions first. This ... could backfire.

The Netnews went on to interview professional pundits and a few common people on how Randy's gambit might play, but Victor tuned all that out. “Face with Annette Blais, Netsite on file, request override,” he commanded.

Annette was in an aerobics class, fighting a losing battle against time and flab. It took her a moment to towel down and respond. “Yeah?” she said breathlessly as she turned on her Sniffer. “What's up, Victor?” she asked when she saw the ragged beard and bald head on the tiny black-and-white screen. This had better be important, she snarled in her mind. At least he's letting me see him this time. She was glad that he was talking again, before he died. For a while, until a couple of days ago, he'd call her several times a day on this, that, and everything else. It seemed to her like a mid-life crisis, but of course it was much more serious than that—it was sort of a prolonged death rattle. She smiled weakly at him.

“You ... heard about Randy?” Victor asked as he turned off the outgoing visual signal of his MIU.

“Yes,” she said simply to her blank screen. Although Annette couldn't see it, Victor's face began to contort. She could, however, sense his pent-up emotion in the short pause that followed. Don't you watch the freaking Netnews? she wanted to ask.

“And...?” he asked.

“And ... what?” she asked patiently.

Victor found this extremely frustrating. “What's your response?” he demanded. “The reaction of the clan?” he specified.

“It's up to each individual,” said Annette as she ran the towel over the top of her chest with her free hand. “Evolution is a way of life, Victor. We don't play mommy and daddy or priest or cop to our people on moral issues. And besides, Lilly's still away on vacation, so ... no problems here so far.”

Victor's feelings wanted to swat the fat bitch on the ear, and again he found himself amused at how easy it was to regress right back to Human Two. It occurred to him that while he was the author of the concept, his experience of Human Three Consciousness was largely intellectual. For the past couple of decades ... well, the last dozen years or so ... millions of people in Evolution had been living it, trying it on for size. But there is no substitute for experience, he thought, limply. In fact, knowing intellectually about Human Three Consciousness can't hold a candle to the impact of practical situations, he could remember concluding even before the LieDeck Revolution, back when he made the three reel-to-reel audiotapes. Conditioning, he recalled emphasizing to himself back then. That is the key to everything.

He'd cooled down by now, and made a decision. “Can I groupface with the governing council over there?” he asked Annette. “Now?”

“Jeeze ... most of them are at work, Victor. Can't it wait until—”

"No!"

"No?"

"No!" Victor almost shouted. "I wouldn't have asked if I—"

"Okay!" said Annette as she mopped her forehead with the towel. "It'll take me about twenty minutes to set up ... is that alright?"

Victor figured she was lying when she said twenty minutes ... she probably wants to shower and change. A "detour," he figured, remembering the list of names he'd created for the various kinds of lies. "Sure," he said. "Net, down, now."

He couldn't abide the thought of sitting on his fitful impatience for twenty minutes, so he decided to pre-record his message to the Board of Victor-E. He wasn't in any way inclined to try to persuade anyone of anything. That wasn't the Human Three way. You say what you've got to say, and leave it at that. He set up his MIU to record, turned the visual output back on, and began.

"Well, hi folks," he said as lightly as he could manage. "As you know, circumstances have changed." He hated that phrase ... it was usually the prelude to injustice, the pretext some folks used when they wanted to break their word or default on a deal. He continued: "History is about to restart, for better or worse. The questions we should address are: who will join this battle, and on what side, and what weapons will they use, and who will win?"

"Now, most of you people are committed to being Human Three ... or to becoming Human Three ... and things are going pretty good so far, with the not-lying and all that. Phase two? That's still to come, but right now there's a decision facing every civilian on Earth. Do we go along with Randy Whiteside and USLUC, or do we cover our asses and run for the hills? There's no definitive judgment on what a Human Three should do here, so I'll tell you what I've decided.

"I'll never talk to the WDA again ... or at least not until I'm certain they didn't do a JFK on Lester Connolly. If you want my opinion, Victor-E should take a referendum over the Net to make its decision collectively, and if it's a strong 'yes,' then a Net-alert should be sent to every clan in the world, recommending they follow suit. If all Evolutionaries in the world are on board for Randy's strategy, then the battle is over and we will have won in a couple of days. We'll get the truth from the WDA and take it from there. My guess is you'll get at least three-quarters of Evolution involved, and that's more than enough. If the WDA really had nothing to do with Lester's death, then ... well, I guess they'll come out of this stronger than ever, though perhaps a little bit chastened as to the limits of their power. If they did do it, as many people suspect ... well, I don't have a clue where things would go in that circumstance, but I can't avoid concluding that it's best all around if we find out the truth, the whole truth. Let me know what you decide, eh? Net, down, now."

Victor was done, and he sat back to await Annette's return call. He tried to remember all the times the forces of darkness had used bullets or bombs to change the silhouette of the political landscape. There were two or three Ghandis, John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his brother Bobby, Martin Luther King, Salvador Allende, Sweden's Prime Minister Olaf Palme—South Africans goons did that one—Sadat, Rabin, and then—

"Hi Victor," came Annette's voice from his MIU. "We're all set up."

Victor didn't respond verbally. He was accustomed to using a mouse from his years of silence, so he just set the arrow and clicked to start the transmission of his recorded message. Then he clicked the sound and picture off his own MIU. They'd get back to him in due course. He couldn't believe he'd gone from

total recluse to the status of global shit-disturber in a matter of a few weeks. Oh well, he figured, I'll be dead pretty soon anyway.

* * * *

Twenty-four hours later, the deed was done. Virtually every Evolutionary clan in the world, representing more than two hundred million people of every color, creed and background, had endorsed the USLUC campaign to snub and defy the WDA. In some countries, citizens were being arrested en masse. Arenas, warehouses and community centers were being converted into ad hoc jails. Those arrested were being denied their Sniffers, but they were mostly singing, sleeping, sexing around and having a jolly good time, expressing neither anger nor objection of any sort. They knew that just as pyramid schemes mathematically had to implode at level thirty-two, when there weren't any more people in the world to sell to or con, the WDA's strategy had to collapse in two or three days if every single act of civil disobedience led to a new arrest. The determination of Evolutionaries was very strong, and the Netnews had reported that only seven percent of them were folding under pressure. Then add in the fact that a significant number of non-Evolutionaries were also inclined to join in, for the fun of it, if for no more philosophical or political reason, and the WDA could see the writing on the wall.

Chapter 46

NUMBERS

Wednesday, March 16, 2033—9:20 a.m.

Gilbert Henderson, muckraker extraordinaire, had refused for the past two days to reply to any of the “faces” that were flooding in to his MIU, or even to answer the door of his Manhattan office and home. His now-famous February 14 “hint” that the WDA might be involved in some criminal activity had converted his life into a misery of conflicting and unrelenting pressures. He even took the battery pack out of his Sniffer so he couldn't hear the constant “bings” that called for his attention. Plus, he'd given his long-time secretary and friend, Fiona Bledsoe, an unrequested week off.

His enmity towards the WDA wasn't a personal thing, but a “position” he'd taken as a result of its arrogance and past misdeeds. He suspected the WDA was responsible for Lester's death; he just didn't quite know why he felt so sure of it. In journalism, as in life, it wasn't enough to just “feel” a certain way. Sheena Kalhoun had demanded an apology or an explanation from him. “I'll be damned if I'll apologize to that bitch,” he'd said to his boss at the New York Times. “And I have a constitutional right to protect my sources. Give me twenty-four hours,” he had demanded when they clashed on the Net two days ago, just after Kalhoun's global Netcast.

When he made that demand, he had no idea what was going to be any different in twenty-four hours. He wouldn't apologize—that would damage his credibility, fatally—but he didn't have an explanation. Network camera crews were encamped in vans for a block either way of his home, and it was now forty-eight hours since he'd insisted that his boss give him twenty-four. His anonymous source had never let him down before, never; but the carefully-couched accusation Gil had made against the WDA back in February had been based on no evidence at all—just that cryptic snail-mail letter he had received from the mysterious “Eyeball.” If something didn't break soon, Gil faced disgrace, ruin.

He had slept fitfully for the second night in a row, and his body ached in a way it had not done since his last “all-nighter” at college, thirty-some years ago. When he finally got out of bed at 9:20 a.m., he walked out to the front door, opened it a wee crack, pushed the outer glass door, and reached around to collect his mail, letting the camera crews see only his arm and a bit of his back. He was wearing only a gray

housecoat, and hadn't combed his hair, but that was not his reason for hiding his face. He knew that the cameras outside were rolling and the mikes were hot. He ignored the shouted questions. He'd speak his mind when he was good and ready, which might be soon ... or never.

There was quite a stack of letters—mostly of encouragement, he figured, and surely a few brickbats from diehard WDA supporters as well. There was one letter—sent special delivery—that had no return address. This simply has to be from Eyeball, he figured. He ran to his bathroom, sat on the toilet lid and ripped open the envelope, using the ballpoint pen that had lived in his shirt pocket for about thirty years. “About time,” he muttered. I started the rumor about the WDA being behind Lester's illness on his say-so, and now my butt is on the line.

Inside was a letter from his unknown informant, as expected. Instead of an exposé of an outright lie, caught with a rogue LieDeck, it had a rather elaborate set of calculations that purported to prove that Sheena Kalhoun had to have known about the illness and the diagnosis even before Lester Connolly was admitted to hospital. Her Netcast in response to Lester's illness was made from her New York office, and had been pre-recorded—but she was in the air at the time of Connolly's admission to hospital, on her personal plane, Peace One, headed for LA, and the diagnosis had taken another twenty minutes or so after that! The first law of physics was in play here: nothing (and no one) can be in two places at the same time. If Sheena Calhoun was at 30,000 feet, headed west from New York, she simply couldn't simultaneously be in her New York office. The numbers did seem to prove the case, but they didn't carry the same level of comfort as a solid “beep” from a LieDeck, or some direct evidence. Gil was led to wonder if other insights he'd received from Eyeball in the past hadn't been LieDeck-verified. Some of them had to be ... he knew that. But this one ... apparently not.

He copied the figures carefully onto a sheet of toilet paper, slipped it into the pocket of his housecoat, then tore the letter and envelope to bits, and flushed them. Now that his source was protected, he left the washroom to get dressed and prepare his defense.

Since Sheena Kalhoun's denial of any WDA involvement had passed the tight test of an independent LieDeck-verification, Gil was under searing pressure not only from the WDA, but also from other news organizations and even from his boss to come up with a credible basis for his cleverly guarded speculation one month ago. These numbers, and this approach, did seem watertight, but Gil found his feelings flying off in two opposite directions. On the one hand, he was going to have the last laugh on his critics—again! On the other hand, if he did successfully prove that the WDA was behind the illness and the death of Lester Connolly ... well, the fallout would be just horrendous! And potentially violent! On the up-side, however, discrediting and destroying Sheena Kalhoun could lead to the first steps in reforming the WDA, at democratizing the thing, a goal that had been whispered by journalists and intellectuals the world over ever since General George and his World Democratic Alliance had set up shop as the new World Democratic Authority back in '14. True, Homo sapiens could not be trusted to behave in any civilized fashion without the kind of global LieDeck-based policing that was offered by the WDA. Well ... imposed by the WDA, Gil revised his thinking. But surely that fact should not serve as the premise for a permanent state of planetary martial law.

He picked up his Scotch tape from a drawer in the kitchen, walked out to his MIU, and stood with his shoulder to the screen, blocking its view—he always assumed that he was being monitored. He then extracted from his shirt pocket the square of toilet tissue and taped it right beside the wall-mounted screen, where the machine's camera lens could not see it. He was now ready to go to work, and he was determined that this blockbuster column would be out on the Net within the hour.

UNHAPPY ENDING

Thursday, March 17, 2033—9:35 a.m.

Two identical limousines had rolled up to the Whiteside Learjet at Ottawa International Airport, casting sharp shadows in the brilliant morning sun. Lilly and Michael shared a perfunctory kiss on the wet tarmac before they headed their separate ways. The trip had started out as an adventure of a lifetime for both of them, sort of a trial honeymoon, but it had ended on such a doubtful and awkward note that neither knew if they had any future together.

It was closer to April than it was to February now, and for the last two days there had been torrential rains in eastern Canada and Québec. Lilly had been astonished to look out the Learjet window and see that after only a week away, much of the snow was gone; in fact most of it was gone from the flatter pastures. She sat in the back of “her” limo, alone, and prepared herself to “endure” the trip through Ottawa.

Her mind went back to her first trip in from this very airport, when she'd gone across the border at the still-frozen Ottawa River to l'état de Québec and her new “home” on the outskirts of Shawville. That had been a time of no expectations, a time of no emotional baggage, a time of looking forward. This, however, was a time of deep reflection for the depleted WDA agent, a time to wonder how events could have conspired to sour such a glorious relationship, or at least slam it onto the back burner. It's 2033, she thought, but in matters of the heart, at least for me, it might as well be 1933.

Lilly knew that a lot of women, especially Evolutionaries, would simply feel grateful to have had a week in the Caribbean sun along with fine food, great entertainment and superb sex, but for Lilly, the pleasure had to come from context more than content. She had hoped—even assumed—that Michael would talk to her about divorcing his unfaithful wife, and then propose ... well, maybe not marriage, but ... some kind of living-together arrangement. What she got—conveniently on the last night, and after sex—was a feeble explanation of how a great many Normals still put a lot of stock in marriage and fidelity ... when it came to their elected officials, anyway. It wouldn't help get Michael elected, he had explained, to go through a divorce during the campaign or to be seen in public with “the new woman” while he was still technically married to Becky, the mother of his children. What he didn't have the guts to say was that in addition to that stuff, the “other woman” worked for the WDA! The reputation of the world body had taken quite a major-league beating since the death of Lester Connolly, and Michael's real worry, she knew, was that “consorting with the enemy” would cost him a lot of votes ... could cost him the election.

She had been stunned to realize that Michael was essentially breaking up with her, at least temporarily, and she'd been furious at him—almost unforgivably so. The truth was, now that he had committed to running, he desperately wanted to be prime minister, and he wasn't about to disrupt his family life—even such as it was—while he was out on the hustings. He'd told Lilly that she could Netlink with him whenever she wanted, or they could meet on the sly, but that had only made her temper boil hotter. “You know how I feel about you,” he had insisted. “Crap,” said Lilly under her breath as the limo swam through the bright Canadian spring. If he really loved me, he'd have let nothing stand in the way.

When the limo rolled into the E-tery parking lot, Lilly was surprised to have arrived so soon. Time's supposed to fly when you're having fun, she thought, not when you're drowning in self-pity. She thanked the driver and carried her suitcase into the restaurant.

There were perhaps a dozen Evolutionaries—retirees, for the most part—having mid-morning coffee and chatting. Most of them gave her a slight glance, and nothing more. Nice to see you too, she thought bitterly. Claire Lapine was behind the counter, and she'd been cutting the day's freshly baked pies. Lilly could see there was a lapel mike pinned to her apron, and she wondered how long they were going to

wear those things before they either gave up or got it right. Claire stared at Lilly, her round face as blank as an unsullied canvas.

"Hi Claire," said Lilly cheerfully. "How's business?"

The kitchen honcho stood as she was, the sharp knife poised for its next purposeful cut. She didn't turn her back or sneer or even move—she just stared.

"Real mature, Claire," said Lilly as she walked with her bag towards the stairs that led up to her apartment. So this is the kind of treatment I'm in for, she said to herself as she mounted the stairs, the kind of treatment that every agent in the world is getting from Evolutionaries ... and others. She made a mental note to send an archived face to Randy, Michael's son, telling him a thing or two about how mature he was for suggesting this global act of defiance.

Big Wus was sitting on the landing, his tail thumping the carpet, his jaw flat on the floor, his eyes cautious. "You just never really know about me, do you?" said Lilly as she stopped to return his gaze. I'm talking to a fucking dog, she realized, blushing visibly, a dog that tried to have its way with my freakin' leg! Big Wus's head tilted, and his tail became syncopated. Lilly reached down to pat him, and the spaniel pulled his head in slightly, hoping for the best but obviously fearing the worst. Lilly tickled him behind the ear and continued up the stairs. Somehow, Lilly expected the dog to follow her, but he didn't. She looked back from the top of the stairs, and he was still lying there, staring ... like Claire, she thought. "Well fuck you too," she whispered as she let herself in. "And anybody that even looks like you!" And the horse you rode in on, she almost added aloud, although clearly she was getting carried away with her hillbilly put-downs.

The maid had been in. The place was spotless. The window in the aluminum door at the back had been hoisted to allow in cool spring air through the screen, and thermostats had been set lower. Lilly lifted her suitcase onto the dining table and made a beeline for the bathroom. As she sat there, taking care of business, she put her elbows on her thighs and rested her head in her hands. It would be really easy to cry right now, she thought, for several different reasons. She'd apparently been completely ostracized in her own home. Things with Michael, so perfect for the past month, were now in limbo ... or worse. And her secret hope of leaving the employ of the WDA was in tatters. Even Big Wus hates me, she felt as she tore off some toilet paper and doubled it over in her hands. I'm not going to cry, she resolved. I'm just not!

She walked back out to the living room, and worried that she was being too obvious in not looking at her MIU, which she knew would have that damned little red light at the bottom, blinking away feverishly. She sidled over to the picture window at the rear of the apartment, just as she'd done when she'd first arrived here, five weeks ago. She felt good then, reasonably good, even if a bitter snow covered everything. She felt lousy now, even as the land was beginning to show off its greens and browns. Progress, she thought as she folded her long arms. Time to cope, she decided as she turned to the job of unpacking.

Lilly had asked Annette's secretary, Robert Chamblis, to keep a written list of those who wanted to connect with the WDA during her absence. It was mostly a formality, required by WDA regulation, since leaving an archived face on the agent's computer could get technically glitched up. Her request certainly had nothing to do with any great demand. In fact, before her departure, the only Evolutionaries who wanted a piece of her time were Julia, because she didn't know any better, Lars, because he fancied a tingle, and Annette, because she seemed to feel the WDA agent needed the occasional scolding for various infractions against the clan's customs or sensitivities. Other than that, Lilly's involvement with Victor-E had been strictly business. She had tried to loosen people up during LV sessions, but the best she ever got was "polite," never genuine warmth ... and this from people who say they value friendship and love above all else, she thought as she threw clothes directly from her suitcase into the laundry

hamper.

She put her bag away in a closet, and briefly entertained the notion of having another shower ... if only to wash the scent of Michael Whiteside off my skin, she felt. She went back into the bathroom with an armful of clean denim jeanswear, and closed the door.

Michael had smoked marijuana quite a lot down in Freeport, and Lilly had taken to carrying a pack of his Camel Mini-Jays with her wherever they went. If she remembered rightly, there was still a half a pack and some matches in her jeans jacket. She looked in there and found them. Then she turned on the shower, drew the curtain, and let it run. She sat down on the toilet lid, lit up, and toked deeply, flicking the ashes into the sink.

She didn't so much rethink the fiasco of her last night with Michael as feel it all over again ... and again ... and again. It was like a disk error on her internal hard-drive, some kind of emotional loop that played the same cacophonous song over and over, frontward and backwards, until she wanted to scream. She sucked on the joint and lectured herself inwardly until her emotional dissonance ... well, it didn't go away, exactly, but she got a lid on it and shut out the smell.

Her thoughts moved over to Control. He wouldn't object to her snap decision to go on vacation—in fact he would see it as a useful and important part of her express mandate to get close to Michael ... and he'll be expecting a full report, she realized as she flushed the roach. Fuck!

Lilly turned off the shower ... that's long enough if I'd been using a shower cap, she estimated. Then she washed her face in the sink, dried off, and changed into her casual clothes. Before leaving the bathroom with her armful of soiled clothes, she stared at her face in the mirror, trying to see if she looked stoned. She knew there was no legal or other problem in her enjoyment of this small pleasure when she was with Michael—Control would see that as part of her job too—but she didn't want her handler to know that she was smoking up just because she liked it. My life sucks less when I'm ripped, she thought as she threw a forced smile at her reflection.

By the time she sat down at her MIU, Lilly was trying so hard to act normal that she couldn't be sure she wasn't making a damned fool of herself. It seemed to her that she'd been too efficient at making coffee or checking her hard mail—mostly stuff that had been forwarded from her old Miami address—and settling into the grand swivel chair that her WDA predecessor had left behind. She entered her bioID and her PIN casually.

"Net, up, now," she commanded as the cup approached her lips. "Display requests for meetings from Victor-Eens," she ordered.

She drank ... and realized too late that she'd swallowed a gulp of coffee before giving it a fair chance to cool down a few degrees in her mouth. She reached instinctively for her throat, realizing too late that that wouldn't help—then feeling another wave of paranoia come over her, a fear that Control was watching her and that her altered state of mind was showing, big-time. She closed her eyes, and forced herself to get on with her duties.

There were no requests for meetings. Not one! There was an archived "Hi-how-are-ya?" face from good old Ed ... I'll face him back later. There were several archived faces from her mother, too, and although Lilly loved her mom and felt guilty about having been incommunicado for the past week, she resolved to respond to her later as well. And sweet bugger-all from Michael! Nice, she thought as she stared at the absence of his name and likeness from her MIU screen. Control hadn't called either ... which I could have known from my Sniffer anyway, she reminded herself.

The problem was, she had nothing handy to do, nothing she could use to legitimately postpone her report

to Control, her report on Michael. She had no idea what she should say anyway. She thought she would have quit her job by now, and wouldn't have to make that call at all ... or at least not until her final debriefing, which wouldn't be for a week or two, under normal circumstances. For lack of a better plan, she ordered up the "News in brief," and saw that Sheena Kalhoun was scheduled to make another major live Netcast in just over an hour. Lilly knew she would be expected to check in and touch base with Control before that, or immediately after, but the sorry truth was that she cared not at all what the WDA chief had to say ... about anything.

She looked down at the finger on her left hand where a new engagement ring should have been shining back at her, and tears almost began forming at the inside corners of her eyes ... again. She looked back at the screen, and then jerked her head sideways—she'd heard a sound from the direction of her door. It sounded like a knock, but it was so faint, it could have been almost anything. Probably just Big Wus, thumping his tail. Or maybe he came up to apologize, she thought crookedly. "Just a minute," she yelled.

"Hi," said Lars when she opened the door.

Lilly looked heavily into his young face. "You're ... talking to me," she noted, matter of fact, crossing her arms.

Lars made a point of looking over both of her shoulders, as if to check that there was nobody else in the apartment. "I must be," he said playfully. "There's nobody here except us two," he added needlessly. "Hi," he tried again. "How's—uh—your new showerhead working?"

Lilly was a tad taller than the Lars, and she looked calmly down into his dark brown eyes, trying to decipher his current agenda ... other than the ever-present invite for a sweaty bone-bashing. He had bushy brown hair, and large shoulders that ... knock it off, she thought when she found herself taking inventory of his physical features. "What can I do for you, Lars?" she asked evenly.

"I got an old shack out in the woods, and I'm going hunting there for a few hours," he said, with an air of innocence. "Wanna come along?"

Lilly blinked her disbelief, but Lars just stood there, crossed his arms, and smiled his dare that she disbelieve him. "Hunting!?" she repeated. "You're asking me if—"

"You need a distraction, Lilly," said Lars as he used his foot to gently prevent Big Wus from sneaking through the doorway into Lilly's apartment. "I'm heading out in a few minutes. Join me in the restaurant if you decide to tag along. It's gorgeous out in the bush this time of year—no mosquitoes, no blackflies—and it's such a nice day. C'mon, Big Wus. You can help me get organized, but ... sorry, you can't come with us." And with that, Lars turned and left, with the dog panting excitedly after him.

Us! thought Lilly, pondering the unbounded nerve of the apprentice plumber. She watched his tight T-shirt and jeans bound down the stairs two at a time to the landing, then she closed her door. She had no idea how to respond, and she was painfully aware that her handlers were watching her from the camera eye of her MIU. She also recalled that Sheena Kalhoun's Netcast was due to start in less than an hour, but she could always catch it later. I'll report to Control and then ... she began in her mind. Nah, I think I'll go hunting, she revised the thought, with a hopelessly confused shrug.

Thursday, March 17, 2033—11:00 a.m.

The Great Hall of Order was the formal name of the meeting room where the General Assembly met and deliberated. Today, it was packed to the rafters with two hundred and thirty-nine men and seven women, in full military attire—and their top aides, of course, another four hundred souls. It was a veritable medal-fest, although through the last two decades, the WDA and all national governments awarded medals for battles avoided, not fought. The word that did the trick in luring out the jingling regalia was “history.”

A typical military leader of a nation was a fifty-year-old male, steeped in the stuff of history, and more often than not nostalgic for the “good old days” of gallantry and gore. These men and women had lived the tradition of the warrior in a time of perpetual peace, and had known the inner ache of the middle-aged, when the hopes of a whole career are reduced to rote and irrelevance. The job of the Member Generals was to make sure they themselves stayed idle, unneeded, never to practice the only trade they'd ever lusted after. They were part of a totally effective global program designed to bring an end to history, or at least history as it had always been, before the LieDeck Revolution. They lived in the heart of New York, these people. They ran their countries by MIU, ignored their civilian “masters” back home, and felt utterly powerless.

But now, that magical word had come over the secured Netlinks of the WDA's elite. “There will be a closed assembly of Member States today at eleven a.m.,” the Minister of Information had said soberly. “The Minister of Correct Opinions” was what most people called him behind his back, for reasons that seemed obvious to those who laughed at the nickname. “You will be asked to consider the most important proposal that has come up before the world body since the adoption of the WDA Charter,” the Minister went on to say. “And whatever the outcome, my fellow soldiers, we will be making history.”

Every single delegation had immediately demanded clarification. It just wasn't right for the Supreme Commander to spring “historic” legislation on them like that ... so they complained, especially since Sheena hadn't had the courtesy to give them any clue as to the content or architecture of the bill. The more important the issue, they had always held and argued, the greater the need to contemplate, to consult with all their advisers in New York plus their civilian governments back home. But ... the Minister of Correct Opinions never came back on the screen, and demands that were sent elsewhere were re-directed to that Minister. Three national delegations had even tried going over his head with appeals directly to Kalhoun, to no avail. There was just no way around this problem. A proposal would be put forward, kicked around for perhaps ten minutes, and then adopted, they all suspected.

Or rejected! considered Sheena Kalhoun as she stood at the podium. She was feeling nervous for the first time in years, and found herself glancing at the second hand on the wall clock. It had never happened before, of course, but it was still theoretically possible, according to the WDA Charter. Her eyes traveled around the massive chamber, and as she listened to the muffled buzz of whispered words, she wondered how many of these peacocks would have the guts to vote “no.” A dozen, tops, she figured. I won't even want to know who they are.

“Member Generals of the WDA,” she began on the stroke of eleven to a very silent assemblage, “a word from our founder, the Honorary Chairman of the WDA, General George Brampton.” It always helped to trot out “the old coot” on occasions where the “feel-good” quotient was below normal. Just being in the same room as the once-great man was enough to make youngsters swoon, a privilege that guaranteed the beneficiaries center stage with their peers for the re-telling of events. I think he'll make a wonderful dead hero, thought Sheena. Then we'll be able to doctor up his image without the daily fear that he'll do something idiotic and make liars of us all.

Brampton was sitting close by—to minimize the time required for him to stand and baby-step to the

podium. The clapping was raucous, led by Sheena herself ... and she felt confident that his words would be reliably self-serving, if not inspirational. And when he finally arrived at the microphone, the hoots of approval rose another level. The Honorary Chairman smiled his appreciation, but he also flapped a flipper-like hand for them to shut the fuck up and sit down so he could get on with it—which they did.

"All over this wide world," he intoned, "doors are unlocked, for there is no fear of intrusion. Fathers and mothers no longer have to worry whether their daughters will be raped. Businesspersons do not have to worry that their stores will be robbed, or that their accountant will abscond with their hard-earned treasuries. WDA taxes are always paid, all contracts are always honored, and for the..."

Yadda, yadda, yadda, thought Sheena. It was a rerun of his anniversary speech. He never tired of that speech, and he never realized that others did. After eight minutes of typical Bramptonian verbiage, it was finally Sheena's turn to do the real stuff. She joined in the standing ovation for the old coot and went to the podium, patiently waiting for the homage to peter out, and for the old coot to sit back down.

"History has recorded the righteousness of General Brampton's inspired vision and decisiveness back in twenty fourteen," she began. "We were absolutely right to expel all those lazy, useless diplomats," she barked, with a convulsive jerking of her fist and head on the word "right." "We were absolutely right to restructure the UN and to make it into the effective guarantor of peace that it has been since the Revolution. And we—" She did try to barrel right on, and leave no time for another round of wild applause after that last sentence, but only because she knew it would be impossible, and she would appear to be altogether taken with her message, and utterly disinterested in ovations. "And we were a hundred percent right to ban civilian use of the LieDeck," she barreled on.

The MGAs stood as one, clapped, roared their approbation, and hoped like hell that she meant it, that these salving words were not to be followed by a "however."

"However," continued Sheena when everyone was once again seated, "in spite of our great successes, people have come to take peace for granted, and it is said that times have changed so much that some of our policies are holding back the tide of human progress. I don't happen to agree with that analysis, but some of the criticisms are arguable, and the problem is real. We must do something to restore the esteem of our grand institution. The grumbling and defiance of the masses must end, and our best efforts have so far failed to restore the high honor that has been ascribed to our mission from the time of the LieDeck Revolution until last year, when a certain journalist made our lives very difficult with his prying and innuendo." She conveniently omitted the fact that Gil Henderson had caught the WDA with its pants around its ankles on several small but significant lies in recent years. Her craggy face revealed the faint shadow of a grimace as she realized, at least on the subconscious level, that there was that wee glitch in her indignation. Best to press on, she said to herself.

"In consultation with the Executive Committee, I am pleased to report to you today that we have a plan of action that will not only do the job, but make history." Applause rippled through the room—approval in principle, she thought. No way more than ten of those guys vote "no," she said to herself, ignoring the fact that seven of her MGAs were not "guys"—eight if she were to count herself, although she only voted to break ties, and there'd never been a tie, so...

"Resolved," Kalhoun read from the small screen built into the podium, "that Member Generals of the WDA adopt the omnibus bill that is now..." she bowed almost invisibly to a technician, who immediately pressed a button "...is now on your Sniffer screens."

"I second the motion," bellowed General George from his big chair near the podium. He had no voting rights in the world body, or any other legislative rights, actually, but no MGA would try to stop him from getting his name into the official record one more time ... and everyone knew there was no need for a

seconded to a Sheena Kalhoun motion in any event. Anything she proposed got voted on, period.

There was dead silence as 246 MGAs took out their LieDeck-equipped Sniffers and began reading. Kalhoun swelled up her chest, much like a man might do—a young man, at any rate. She adored these moments. It was as close as the lady would ever get to being Caesar, to looking down on the bloody detritus of a defeated foe.

This was a closed meeting, and the security precautions were excessive, as everyone knew. Still, the rules were “eyes only,” and no out-loud talk about the details ... unless a significant number of MGAs voted for that. The Member Generals leaned forward to read every word on their Sniffers, scrolling up and down and up again to get all of it into their military minds. The details were stunning, but...

"This is an experiment," Sheena said when she figured everyone had had enough time to read the thing twice. "We have the power to prevent war, or to prevail in any conflict that we fail to prevent. We have the power to prevent crime, and the power to find and punish all criminals foolish enough to defy our authority. Our powers will remain as they are, and not be diminished, ever. For now, this new plan—which will be fleshed out in due course—is proposed for a five-year trial period. If it succeeds, we extend it, amplify it. If it fails, we simply rescind it. And if it fails, then we were right to do what we did with reservations. I have a number of reservations myself, and I'm sure most of you do too. However, in the absence of discussion, I will call the question. Since I am confident most of you will agree with me, let all those who oppose the resolution stand ... now."

No one stood. The representatives were in shock. Only the Syrian MGA raised his hand, and that only to request a recorded vote. A half hour of wasted time, Kalhoun felt. "I think not," she said. "Meeting adjourned, with my thanks."

Chapter 49

A'HUNTING WE WILL GO

Thursday, March 17, 2033—11:40 a.m.

"The trick is not to make any sound," said Lars as Lilly sat beside him at the counter in the E-tery, "but the really hard part is, like, to not laugh, eh?"

Lilly wished Lars would drop the teen-talk, the “like” that seemed to fall into the middle of any old phrase, and the ever-present Canadian “eh?” at the ends of sentences. She was grateful for the delaying tactic that his unusual invitation had provided for her, but she was unsure whether there were other reasons why she had accepted to go on a “hunting” trip with the boy. She also had to wonder if she would have made the decision to go if she hadn't just toked up, but she had always assumed that her judgment was as good under the influence as not. And that “not laughing” bit ... well, she didn't even ask.

"Nice boots," said Lars, looking down, noticing the boots in passing—after checking out her ass and her long legs. "New?"

Lilly just nodded. She knew his interest in her was sexual, but that was just Lars. His interest in every woman was sexual, but he was a committed Human Three, and would never even consider “coming on” to her ... or to anyone. She also knew that Victor-E was unofficially opposed to the sport of hunting, but she had a pretty good sense that Lars was holding something back, planning some kind of a surprise. He smiled at her the way he'd done the first time they'd met, the way he did every time they met nowadays. He looked plain goofy in his plaid shirt with a florescent orange “don't-shoot-me” vest over top. She

touched her own vest pocket—she was wearing a normal vest—to double-check that her Sniffer was there. It was.

Not ... laugh? Lilly repeated in her mind as Lars finished his coffee. What's that all about? She hadn't done anything this spontaneous for a long time—well, not since flying off to the Caribbean—and this young man was so persistent ... and charming, I suppose, in a limited-IQ sort of way.

"Where ya going in that get-up," asked one of Lars' Normal friends—acquaintances, really—from the town of Shawville, a regular local who wore plaid shirts for real, not so's he'd look like a local. He seemed to be about thirty, and he was slumped at a table drinking beer alone, looking for all the world like life had bored him to distraction.

"Hunting," said Lars emphatically, almost proudly. He stood up and signaled Lilly to follow him through the E-tery. "It's kangaroo season, ya know," he added playfully.

"You fuckin' Evolutionaries couldn't follow a menstruating elephant through three feet o' snow," said the local as he scraped mindlessly at the label on his beer bottle.

Lars ignored the comment; just walked on.

He made Lilly turn her back and wait in the hall beside the kitchen while he nipped into the restaurant's larder. He emerged a minute later with a length of string, a two-foot square cardboard box and a brown paper bag with something in it. As they walked down the Mainspoke, around the rim of the hub and out Spoke North, Lars would periodically rattle the bag and ask Lilly to guess what was in it. She had no idea, and firmly declined his offer to play the "Twenty Questions" game to find out. When they reached the end of Spoke North, he finally admitted that it was bait.

Better bait than poison, thought Lilly. And unless I'm mistaken, I seem to be the only one here with a weapon. "What ... kind of bait?" she asked as they emerged from Spoke North at its last sleepery—Sleepery #8—and set off down a spongy path in the bush.

"Oh no!" said Lars. "Then you'd guess what we're hunting." He danced ahead of her, shaking the bag and saying "hi" to every bird that chirped and several trees with whom he seemed to have personal relationships—trees with names—Swedish-sounding names.

Lilly was beginning to feel silly to find herself enjoying the aspect of mystery ... and the company of this barely-twenty-something boy. She tried to take in the pungent smells of spring and limit her delight in Lars' antics. After fifteen minutes of stepping over logs, climbing up and down rock outcroppings, almost slipping on some wet moss and dodging deep pockets of mushy snow, she began to wonder just how far it was to the "abandoned shack" where Lars did his hunting. Being cooped up in her tiny apartment with unwanted responsibilities staring at her was a problem, but it was perhaps easier to handle than this apparent game that Lars was playing.

He knows I'm a Human Two, she said to herself. He knows I won't be able to avoid suspecting his motives for luring me out into the bush, but if I take out my Sniffer and start fishing around for the truth, he'll just feel sorry for me and walk me back home. It bothered her to find herself referring to Victor-E as "home," even in the privacy of her thoughts ... especially in the privacy of my thoughts, she felt. She'd done that a couple of times since she got back from the Caribbean, and that was ... what? Stupid, she decided, especially now that most Evolutionaries don't even talk to us WDA types any more.

They turned a corner on the bank of a stream they'd been following for the last few minutes. It was called Dora's Creek, Lars had mentioned earlier, and apparently it ran all the way to Wilson Lake, on the Whiteside's estate (and beyond, to the Quyon River and the Ottawa River and eventually, the Atlantic).

The way Lilly felt right now, if she'd had a bottle, she would stick a hateful note in it, cork it, and drop in into the creek in the faint hope that it would get fished out by Michael. The creek emptied out right beside his little cabin, she knew, and—

"There it is," cried Lars, excitedly.

Lilly saw the old gray shack, and she couldn't help wondering who had built it, and why. It was perhaps seven yards square, and by the look of the faded, decaying boards, it had to be ... a hundred years old, she guessed. There was a single stair in front, and no door—just a doorway. The worn plank floor looked as if it had been swept recently. She wondered whether Lars had done that, and if so, why.

There were square holes in the east and west walls, where glass likely used to be. An ancient cast iron stove sat by the middle of the back wall, and its chimney pipe lay on the floor, tucked against the south wall. It was rusted completely through in places. One short chunk of chimney pipe hung precariously from a slumping roof above the stove, refusing to abandon its assigned duties.

Lars put a finger to his mouth and beckoned to Lilly to park herself in a back corner, on the floor. She complied, sitting cross-legged, and wiped a touch of perspiration from her forehead. Lars lit two Mini-Jays and simply handed her one. She hadn't expected this wrinkle, but she accepted, and she toked as she watched the lad go about his business.

He had picked up a twig during the walk, and now he took out a large hunting knife and began whittling in the doorway. Lilly had noticed similar wood chips around the stair outside, undoubtedly from past safaris, and concluded that this was part of the ritual ... or served some purpose that she would learn about in due course.

When he put away the knife, the twig was about a foot long, with a small "Y" at one end. He sat on the floor near Lilly, tied one end of the string around the bottom of the twig, untangled the rest of it—it was about eight feet long—and gave the other end to Lilly, reminding her with an upright finger to his lips that speaking was now forbidden. He got onto his knees, turned the cardboard box upside down and propped one end on the crotch of the twig. Then he butted his joint and, with a dramatic flourish, he opened the paper bag and pulled out...

"A peanut?" said Lilly as she snuffed out her Mini-Jay on the floor.

Lars shook the shell, rattling the peanuts inside, and placed it under the middle of the box. He put another peanut right beside the bottom of the twig, and crawling across the floor, he put six more in a straight line leading to the open doorway, with the ninth and last one ... Lilly was counting ... on the small step, just outside. Then he folded the paper bag, stuffed it in his vest pocket and crawled back to sit down beside his guest, throwing her a big grin and leaning against the back wall.

Lilly put a questioning look on her face, and partially pulled the string, as if to ask if that's what she was supposed to do.

Lars just tilted his head and flipped his eyebrows. It wasn't a "no," but it wasn't a "yes" either. It was more or less: "You decide." He then folded his arms and stared at the doorway, motionless.

After about ten minutes had passed, a brown squirrel peeked over the stair, and then jumped onto the stair. The little animal stood on its hind legs, and with its front paws barely touching each other, it looked like a jittery grandmother who'd been interrupted while knitting. The underside was a dull gray. It had large round eyes that seemed as confused as they were black, and its face wore a gray mask and a tiny white muzzle. It took only two seconds to survey the situation through a series of head-flicks, and then it scampered off. "It's called a red squirrel," Lars whispered, "even though it's brown ... and gray ... don't

ask."

A minute later, it reappeared, and in a lightening move, it scooped up the outermost peanut in its tiny black paws, tucked it into a cheek, and ran. Lars looked at Lilly, smiled, and held up one finger.

After another few minutes had passed, the squirrel returned. The next peanut was right on the threshold of the old shack. The creature was up on his haunches, its tail flicking nervously, staring inside at the two hunters. Lilly was amused by its dilemma, its indecision. It ran away and disappeared for several seconds, but then it reappeared and took the calculated risk, escaping unscathed. Lars held up two fingers.

The next peanut was a foot or so inside the door, and when the squirrel came back, it seemed to change its mind half a dozen times. Lilly stared into its eyes as it looked at her, looked at the peanut, retreated, returned, looked at Lars, and finally made its decision. It sprinted in, scooped up the peanut, shoved it into its cheek and raced for freedom. Lars held up three fingers.

The next several peanuts brought similar results, and Lilly had to admit to herself that this was fun, that she was truly enjoying the bizarre trap that her ... friend, she supposed he was ... had laid for the hapless little beast. She was accustomed to power, but this was different. There was no law saying that what they were doing was right or wrong. It was just the way it was. Soon she would use her power of intellect to win an irrelevant victory over a tiny dumb animal. Maybe, she reminded herself. I haven't won yet, and it's not for sure that I can keep from laughing.

By the time the squirrel got to the second-last peanut, the one beside the base of the twig, it seemed to have decided that these two humans were no threat. The box, however ... well, that was another matter. It was darker in there, and the squirrel's approach this time was frantically fitful, full of reversals and uncertain glances at Lilly, Lars, the box, the doorway and the peanut. It finally lunged for the prize and fled, faster than ever.

There was one peanut left, the one that was right under the box. Lars held up one flared hand and three fingers of the other. The ninth peanut—and the hunters—waited. What will the squirrel do? Lars wondered. What will Lilly do?

The squirrel didn't return for several minutes, and when it did show up, it made its way to a position a few inches from the box after only a little hesitation. But then it went back half way to the door-opening three times, each time using its eyes to check out all the relevant factors—the box, the escape route, the eyes of the dormant humans. Lilly felt her heart racing, and she had to struggle to keep her breathing even and quiet ... and to not laugh.

All of a sudden, the squirrel made a mad dash for the peanut, and Lilly pulled the string so hard the twig flew backwards and almost hit her in the face. "Gotcha!" she shouted. Lars collapsed in laughter as the box started moving jerkily around the floor. Lilly was laughing too, and the more they laughed, the more the box scooted this way and that, emitting squeaks and panicky scratching sounds.

Lilly crawled across the rough floor to the twitching box, laughing all the way. "So ... should I let it go?" she asked Lars, but her fellow hunter was not inclined to give her advice. He just shrugged. "Freedom!" hollered the WDA agent as she lifted the box and watched the terrified squirrel bolt for the doorway ... without the peanut.

"And next time be more careful, eh?" shouted Lars after the long-gone quarry. "We humans are not to be trusted."

Chapter 50

WORLD IDENTITY BANK

Thursday, March 17, 2033—12:30 p.m.

Michael showered and shaved at the manor, and then he dressed for the trip to the office. Nothing much ever changed on the estate, with the single exception of Victor's recent revivification out at the lodge, and the ex-hermit was being absurdly secretive about his activities, so even this major change hardly counted.

But that was not to say that nothing had changed for the Whiteside family! Michael had made mental notes of the several things he had to discuss with Becky. At the top of the list was the fact that their son had shaken up the world pretty heavily a few days ago. Michael couldn't understand why Randy hadn't called or returned his messages since Sunday, and he had no idea how the boy had suddenly become the president of USLUC, or why he'd agreed to do that without talking it over with his parents. And Michael didn't know how his son had arrived at that idea for stopping the demonstrations, or why he had assumed the WDA was guilty when he'd called for civil disobedience on a global scale.

Also, Michael had to go over the sale of the company with Becky, and his reasons for accepting the nomination for the Liberal leadership, and the dicey question of what role she would play, if any, in the campaign. He needed to tell Becky why he had allowed the company to participate in Sheena Kalhoun's Netcast three days ago, and then there were all the details he had to go over with the Board—details Becky really should know about if she was to meet her own “due diligence” obligations. And ... he had to talk to Becky and the Board about the implications of Gil Henderson's new column, the one in which he explained the basis for his February 14 “accusation” against Sheena Kalhoun. Take a week off, and the world does a goddam somersault, Michael thought as he reviewed his appearance in the mirror. And ... and I have to talk to Becky about Lilly at some point.

When Michael had first arrived home, his young daughter Venice was there, waiting for him—it was a “P.D.” day, a professional development day, at her private school. She had patiently endured her grandmother's inevitable whining session with him, and then she told him about school stuff, about her friends, about her visits with Victor out at the lodge, and about how “my own dad could have at least told me he'd be gone away for a whole week.”

Now, after his apologies and ablutions, Michael was freshly attired and felt like a new man, except for the knot of guilt in his stomach. “Do you want to come to the office with me in the helicopter?” he asked hopefully when he found Venice still waiting outside his bedroom door. “We can be back home by suppertime.”

“No thanks,” she said. She'd never said no to that invitation before. It hurt her to see the disappointment in her father's eyes—and yet it pleased her, somehow. “I got a bunch of Netstuff to do this afternoon.”

“Really,” said Michael as he headed down the spiral staircase, holding his daughter's hand. “School stuff?” he asked.

“Nope,” said Venice. “I've started to record my life profile on the Net. They said with the wib opening up soon, it's a—”

“What the Dickens is a ‘wib’?” Michael cut in. (He knew, of course, but he wanted her to explain her perception of the thing.)

“W—I—B ... the World Identity Bank,” explained Venice in that special children's tone that means: “Everybody knows that—sheesh.”

"Ah, a new acronym?" asked Michael. Just what the world needs, he thought.

"Anyway, they said it's a good idea to start young, eh?" Venice carried on, ignoring her father's test word "acronym," which she knew from the Netshow Jeopardy anyway. "And then after I'm dead my kids and grandkids can see me talking all about my life and times when I was at all different ages! Starting now, when I'm twelve! Neat eh?"

Christ, thought Michael, that WIB thing sure gets kids thinking about the big picture, the long term. And ... and ... the thought caused a peristaltic wave of ice to slither up his backbone and shrink his scalp ... and it sure puts me on my best behavior, to know that there'll be a video record of how I was perceived by my children at different ages. Yet another chill passed through him ... and by everyone else who knew me, or thought they did. "Well," he said, "I'm going to watch this new WDA Netcast with Mom, and then I'll be leaving, so if you change your mind..."

Venice went dancing off to ... well, it used to be her playroom, but now she called it her "office," apparently. Michael went into the den that had been his dad's favorite room, and found Becky waiting. Delicious images of Lilly's writhing body flashed through his mind. God, she's so ... so wild! He smiled, bent over from behind her chair and kissed his wife's cheek. "How've you been, my dear?" he asked out of habit and courtesy ... he did not want to know about her body writhing around with one of her "friends," as she called them. Good for the gander, good for the goose, he thought ... I suppose.

"Just fine, dear," she said, smiling. "How was your trip with Lilly?"

She's probably guessing about Lilly, Michael figured, but no point in lying. "Very ... nice," he lied. "I'm glad to be out of the company," he said, moving the focus away from his Caribbean tryst, "but I've got all sorts of details and loose ends to sort out ... with the Board ... this afternoon."

"Me too," said Becky. "I mean ... not with the Board, but for my own life, you know. Now that all our money will be liquid ... well, that will be—uh—interesting, for us."

Michael didn't know exactly what she'd meant by that, but it was almost time for Sheena Kalhoun's appearance on the Net, so he ordered the sound on and left all else for later. "Wonder what she's got up her sleeve," he said absently as Kalhoun's hefty image filled the huge screen.

People of all nations, citizens of Earth. I have five announcements to make today, so I'll try to be brief.

Number one. I expect you've all heard about the World Identity Bank that we've set up in the desert in California, USA. Well, it's now in operation on a limited basis. There may be some delays getting your entries archived or retrieved at first, but we will be smoothed out in a week or so, I expect.

Now the World Identity Bank ... or "the WIB," as we've come to refer to it around here ... this is another free service of the WDA, and it represents your opportunity to leave your life story for future generations of your family ... well, for whomever you please, actually. Of course the contributions that you make will be held by the WIB in confidence, and access is limited to the people you select ... maybe only your direct descendants, or maybe anyone who wants to browse, or maybe nobody at all for a hundred years after your death ... whatever and whomever you say. It's entirely up to you, and makes no difference to the WIB.

With our new Z-chip arrays, storage space just isn't a problem. If everyone on Earth recorded all their waking hours every day of their lives, the current installation that we have built would still last for three hundred years. So enter as much as you want, or as little. You can always take stuff out later, if you want, and of course you don't have to use this service at all. We just wanted to offer you another concrete program that reflects the WDA Charter, the sentence—it's in Article Seventeen, for those who

want to look it up—that says that every human life has great value and should be protected and preserved in all possible ways. We took that word “preserved” to be a serious obligation, as you can see by what we have now done.

Sheena Kalhoun paused, checked her watch, and raised her eyebrows to realize she'd already used up almost two minutes of time ... two minutes times ten billion people, she calculated. How many lifetimes is that?

I want to move along, but I feel compelled to mention a few more things about the WIB.

The human race existed for hundreds of thousands of years before you and I arrived on the scene, and it's too bad that all those billions of life stories from the past are lost forever. We can't change the past, but we can certainly lay the groundwork for a better future.

Family has always been the cornerstone and the basic building block of society, but most of us only get to know seven generations or so. With the average life span now approaching ninety-one for women and eighty-seven for men, most of us get to know our parents, our grandparents, and our great-grandparents—at least when we're young. And we get to know our own generation—a brother or a sister and whatever cousins we have. As we get older, we get to know our child or children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren. And of course all those we get to know get to know us. But it's worth considering just how many men and women of the distant future will be interested in your life profile. Some of them just won't be interested, of course, but let's look at the numbers.

With our ZPG policy—zero population growth—most couples have two children. That means most people will have four grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren, sixteen great-great-grandchildren ... you see how the number of descendants gets to double every generation? The chart that's now on your screen shows you what the next seven hundred years will look like.

If we assume two kids per couple and three generations per century, then a hundred years after your birth, your four grandchildren will have had eight new kids—your great-grandchildren—who are your direct descendants. In three generations more, two hundred years after your birth, that number will have doubled three more times, so there will be sixty-four kids born who are your direct descendants. Then three hundred years after your birth, there will be, say, five hundred kids born who are your direct descendants. Four hundred years after your birth, there will be perhaps four thousand kids born who are your direct descendants. Five hundred years after your birth, there will be thirty-two thousand kids who are your direct descendants. Six hundred years after your birth, there will be approximately two hundred and fifty thousand kids born who are all your direct descendants. And seven hundred years after your birth, there will be about two million kids born who are your direct descendants. And ... well, you get the idea.

The point I'm trying to make is that your life profile is going to be of interest to a very large number of people in the distant future. They won't all want to meet you from your WIB recordings, but some of them will, and they'll be glad that you took the time to think of them, and went to the trouble of leaving a record of who you were and what life meant to you way back in the twenty-first century. If we're not going to destroy the Earth—and we're not; the WDA will see to it that we don't—then we have to start planning for a future in which human civilization lasts ... well, forever.

Sheena Kalhoun checked her watch again, and this time she did move on ... and Michael Whiteside squirmed.

TIT FOR TAT

Thursday, March 17, 2033—12:40 p.m.

Lilly had walked about a hundred yards through the leafless bush, stepping gingerly over the remains of fallen trees and avoiding the little pockets of nature's soup—snow, water, last year's leaves, mud. It bothered her that Lars might see her take a pee, and it annoyed her that it bothered her, because she knew he wouldn't peek. He was a Human Three, and besides, she could always LieDeck-verify him afterwards. However, the antsy feeling she had just wouldn't go away as she trudged on.

At last, she came across a depression with a dry-looking log at the bottom ... as good as it'll get, she supposed. She eased her way down, and figured this place would hide her from prying eyes ... if you didn't count the newly arrived birds. She dug some tissues out of her pocket and took a last look around as she positioned herself with her calves backed up against the suspended log. She lowered her pants and underwear, hunched down and released a grateful bladder.

She knew Sheena Kalhoun would be right into her Netcast by now, but she was loath to take out her Sniffer and watch. Of course the WDA could not eavesdrop via Sniffers when they were turned off, but they could when the Sniffer was in use, and no way did she want Control or his minions to catch her in this act. She reached into her inside vest pocket and flipped her Sniffer on as yellow liquid melted into a patch of sugary snow beneath her. At least I can listen, she thought.

...planning for a future in which human civilization lasts ... well, forever.

Number two, we are well aware of the call by USLUC, through its new president, Randy Whiteside, for civilians to refuse their LieDeck-verification. I had nothing to do with the illness and death of Lester Connolly, and I have proven this publicly. And if I had been involved, I would have been interrogated, tried, convicted, fired and possibly even executed by now. But—and I find this odd—there are still those who don't believe me, and are refusing their monthly LV sessions.

Well, that won't do. I am now ordering our agents worldwide to release all those who have been arrested for this offense, and also to stop arresting these so-called refuseniks. This has gotten totally out of hand, and therefore I am putting a stop to it ... immediately.

Lilly wiped herself, threw the tissues to the ground, and pulled up her panties and jeans. She was stunned, and extremely pleased, by this totally unexpected announcement. But ... there must be some consequences, she thought as she kicked loose snow over the evidence and got herself zipped up.

Sheena Kalhoun continued:

However, from this moment on, anyone refusing LieDeck-verification will lose his or her free SuperNet privileges for the rest of their lives ... and they won't be able to buy their way back in, either. Maybe you never thought of this before, but living without the SuperNet could be very tough, and it's not something you want to do to yourself without thinking it through carefully. The General Assembly has recently voted unanimously to rewrite the legislation dealing with LieDeck-verification. The World Court advises us that such a change in the sanction by my order is allowed under world law and the WDA Charter. So it's up to you, people. The WDA keeps the peace for you by virtue of our policing activities, and that work depends upon LieDeck-verification. This new penalty may seem pretty severe, but we are sworn to preserve the peace by whatever means are demonstrably necessary.

Now, announcement number three. This won't affect...

Lilly reached into her vest pocket and clicked off her Sniffer, resolving to review the rest of the Kalhoun

Netcast as soon as she got back “home.” That really should solve the LV rebellion, she decided as she planted her left foot carefully on a wet rock and began the trek back to Lars’ hunting cabin. She felt deliciously proud to be a WDA agent ... for the first time in a while, she realized.

Chapter 52

LAWYER HEAVEN

Thursday, March 17, 2033—12:47 p.m.

"Brilliant!" exclaimed the vice president of sales. "By God, she's done it!"

The entire executive committee of Whiteside Technologies—that being six men and four women—had gathered in the boardroom early to catch Sheena Kalhoun's Netcast ... before Michael Whiteside arrived for the Board meeting. People around the world were concerned about the “LV rebellion” that had been going on lately, threatening who knew what level of chaos, but this particular grouping of humans was also in a state of shock that their boss had been able to cobble together enough shares from family and friends to sell control of the company to a competitor ... without even trying to get Board approval. Most of them would likely lose their high-paying jobs, so Michael wasn't very popular around this boardroom table on this day. However, there was nothing they could do stop a shareholder from selling, so all eyes went back to the huge, state-of-the-art MIU screen as Kalhoun continued down her list of announcements.

Now, announcement number three. This won't affect many people, but since I'm on the Net anyway, I thought I might as well use this occasion to inform all citizens of a small administrative change we're making.

For nineteen years, the WDA has bought all its LieDecks, hundreds of millions of units all told, from Whiteside Technologies in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. This was done under a contract that has been renewed annually at the pleasure of the WDA General Assembly. Whiteside Technologies owns the patent for the LieDeck, and will therefore of course continue to receive royalties from all LieDeck production, but the WDA will not be renewing this company's exclusive contract to produce the device. In July, that's in four months, this contract will go to SofTech Industries in Athens, Greece, and the work will be spread around its fourteen plants, in as many countries. This means that—

"Holy Christ!" screamed the comptroller of Whiteside Tech. "Michael had to have known about this! That's why he sold out!"

The vice president of sales carried the line of thought from there. "His son Randy's shares were all in that deal, so Michael must have known about the boy's intention to head up USLUC, and he must have realized that some kind of retaliation from the WDA was likely. Call your lawyers, ladies and gentlemen. This deal has the stink of litigation all over it."

It didn't take many seconds before all ten members of the executive committee had scattered to their private offices to call their stockbrokers and their lawyers—although not in that order. They learned immediately that the CSE—the Central Stock Exchange in New York, the only exchange there was—had suspended trading in WT shares until a full investigation could be completed. Those who held shares, including all the top executives of the company, were stuck in neutral on that one. However, all over Ottawa, one could find high-octane lawyers salivating at the prospect of billable hours in the thousands. This was bound to be a bonanza for them, no matter what the truth, or who won.

One fact emerged quickly, and if it didn't prevent ten heart attacks, it did provide a little bit of relief to the members of the executive committee. The money for the sale of controlling interest in the company was still in trust with the firm of Owen, Owen and Podborski, and that was where it would stay until all the lawyers were happy and the CSE investigation was completed. Financial gridlock was no fun for anyone, but it was better than bankruptcy or heavy losses. If the sale is tainted, they all thought, then it might well be stopped and nullified.

Chapter 53

OFF THE HOOK

Thursday, March 17, 2033—12:51 p.m.

Gil Henderson sat in his plush office with his long-time secretary, Fiona Bledsoe, waiting for the next shoe to drop. Of course Fiona was supposed to be on a week off, but with the recent developments, there was no way she would be anywhere but at the side of her hero and friend. She had simply showed up for work today at her usual 8 a.m.—a little bit later than Gil would have preferred, truth be told.

The WDA knew when to bob and weave and execute a strategic retreat, but it had never actually feared anyone, or anything. To put a finer point on this, WDA strategists had never feared anything with the exception of worldwide defiance, and that had always been considered unimaginable ... until last Sunday. Corporations, even the biggest, were mere pipsqueaks compared to the WDA, as Whiteside Tech had recently been reminded, and individual persons were less than gnats. Gil Henderson had dared to suggest that the head of the WDA, Sheena Kalhoun, might be a murderer, so he found himself expecting her to use this occasion to bring the flyswatter down upon his puny head.

Now, my fourth announcement. There is an apparent contradiction between my LieDeck-verified profession of innocence last Monday, regarding the illness and subsequent death of Lester Connolly, and the facts and figures that were Netcast yesterday by New York Times reporter Gil Henderson. He purports to prove that I must have pre-recorded my message of sympathy the day Lester Connolly was diagnosed, because the message was made from my office at WDA headquarters in New York, and at the time that the doctors made their diagnosis, I was in fact thirty thousand feet in the air on Peace One, on my way to California. That's how Mr. Henderson said he could prove that I knew about Mr. Connolly's precise illness before it was even diagnosed ... or perhaps I should say that he suggested as much, just to be totally accurate.

Well, Mr. Henderson's calculations were correct, but his deducted conclusion was incorrect. I didn't make that Netcast from this office. I made it from aboard Peace One. It was done against a pitch black background, and my image was transmitted live to our WDA studios here in New York, where the background sounds of the plane's engines were digitally removed and the visual image of myself was digitally superimposed against an image of my office. Our PR personnel were merely trying to give citizens a satisfactory comfort zone—nothing more. Hundreds of bioIDed MIU files of these high-tech mixing and editing transactions exist, and eighty-one technicians were involved in this harmless deception. All of those MIU records are being made available for independent analysis, and all these technicians are being made available for independent LieDeck-verification. We're doing this so that you can all be absolutely certain that this is in fact what happened.

Still, my officials should have made that information available on the Net for those who might have been interested. They simply failed to anticipate that keeping it a secret might lead to a misunderstanding. Mr. Henderson is to be commended for figuring out the discrepancy, but as you can now see, it didn't prove

what it seemed to prove. We owe all of you an apology for this merry mix-up, and here it is. I'm sorry. I mean that for everyone, of course, but especially for Gil Henderson, whose reputation and professional ethics have been doubted by various news organizations and of course by certain officials here at the WDA. Mr. Henderson, the fault was ours, and I apologize to you personally for any discomfort or any embarrassment you may have suffered as a result of our failure to be far more forthcoming with information about how that Netcast was accomplished back on February the—uh—February eight.

Now, returning to...

"You're still the king, Gil," said Fiona to her boss and good friend. "Sheena Kalhoun just saved your butt ... our butts."

"Whew!" said Gil as his eyebrows slid up his forehead.

Chapter 54

PARTIAL VICTORY

Thursday, March 17, 2033—12:56 p.m.

Randy sat at the tacitly acknowledged head spot of USLUC's round boardroom table. At his left sat Yolanda "Lucky" Dees. There were elevated screens set into all four walls, so that everybody could see an MIU without effort. A hooded monk from the Canadian base of Jesus-E stood at each of the two doorways, and four more stood out in the hall, silently following the orders they'd been given to protect Randy and his new fiancée ... with their lives, if need be.

Last night had been glorious. Randy was beginning to think he knew what it meant to be "happily married," and he liked not thinking and dreaming about golf all the damned time. He also knew, for the first time in his life, what it felt like to exercise power, and he absolutely loved that feeling. But now the Whiteside heir found himself outfoxed by the WDA.

During Sheena Kalhoun's first two announcements, the two lovers had done a little innocent hand-dancing under the table, with unconscious pauses at critical points, but the cancellation of Whiteside Tech's exclusive contract had been such a big bombshell that Randy hardly even heard the WDA chief's apology to Gil Henderson and the world. The hand-dancing came to an abrupt end. Randy knew that the sale of his WT shares wasn't a done deal yet, and now a salivating clutch of lawyers would be all over the transaction, maybe for years. He remembered a quote from ... who was that? Charles Lamb—yeah, Charles Lamb who said: "Lawyers, I suppose, were children once." It was one of those "you cain't-live-without-'em" and "you cain't-shoot-'em-neither" conundrums.

Lucky put a hand on his thigh under the table—the hand with the "small-but-just-fine" diamond ring on it—and gave a squeeze. She had never cared about his wealth—that had been part of her initial appeal for Randy—and she didn't care if he was now suddenly reduced to financial ordinariness, like most of the rest of humankind. "Hey, we'll manage," she whispered to him as he placed a sweaty palm on top of her hand.

No one had ever doubted Sheena Kalhoun's intelligence or her political savvy, and she was at her powerful best this day. Strangely, Randy found himself remembering his political science lessons, the two dozen historical versions he'd been given for the maxim "The best defense is a good offense," and because he had over-studied for a test last fall, he had no trouble recalling their names. There was Aristotle, of course, and then Flavius Vegetius Renatus, George Washington, François de Salignac de la

Mothe Fénelon (he'd nearly broken his brain learning that one) and ... a few others ... and ... Jack Dunn Jr., the current president of the United States. Of course Ms. Kalhoun has the best strategic minds in the world assisting her, Randy reminded himself as she continued on with her Netcast.

Now, returning to the question of USLUC, we are definitely not too impressed by the organization's call for worldwide civil disobedience, but what I will announce next has nothing to do with that, and it has nothing to do with the pressure tactics that have been used for the last few years by LieDeck Unbanning Committees all over the world.

The WDA makes its decisions democratically, and rationally, and our deliberations take into account all the relevant factors, which includes but is not limited to what people want. In the privacy of the WDA Research Center, we have been studying the question of unbanning the LieDeck for several years. Earlier today, the General Assembly of the WDA met in full plenary session and unanimously adopted a new omnibus bill that I presented to them, and it includes a clause on that issue.

While Sheena Kalhoun paused and cleared her throat, Randy and Lucky squeezed each other's hands under the table, as glances of anticipation flew around the boardroom at USLUC headquarters. Whatever the WDA chief was about to say, it was bound to be historic, and bound to have a profound impact on USLUC, and on its hundreds of sister organizations in other nations.

Kalhoun stared at the camera lens.

As of now, at one p.m. today, in honor of the up-coming nineteenth anniversary of the founding of the WDA, the LieDeck is partially ... and I emphasize partially ... unbanned.

Kalhoun allowed the slightest of smiles to cross her rugged visage as she waited out the roar of approval that was surely now echoing all around the world. The members of the Board of USLUC weren't cheering, but only because they were too stunned to react. A few graphic expressions of surprise were uttered around the circular table, but most of those present were shushing because they wanted to hear the small print, the meaning of the word "partially."

Will civilians be able to go out and buy their own LieDecks? No! Not yet, anyway. But with only a few restrictions, a civilian can make an appointment with a WDA agent, or catch an agent when she or he isn't too busy, and have anything LieDeck-verified. That's how it will work for now, and this is, of course, another free WDA service.

Agents will only use the pin mode of signaling for civilian LieDeck-verification—never the light or beeper modes—and you will have to accept the agent's word on things. Agents are ordered to give civilians the true result, of course—surely that goes without saying. The only area that cannot be subjected to LieDeck-verification is religious faith. The WDA has decreed that all faith must be considered a matter of free choice, and all professions of faith, no matter how alien or unlikely they may seem to others, must be honored and respected as being genuine ... as long as they don't denigrate other people, denigrate other faiths or condone violence, of course.

We feel that enough time has gone by since the Revolution to take this risk without any expectation that people will riot or commit suicide or generally go berserk like they did back in twenty fourteen. Nobody has to submit to any LieDeck-verification challenge, and it should not be seen as proof of your guilt if you simply refuse to be LieDeck-verified on any matter. Furthermore, if any agent smells trouble, she or he can refuse to do it, or they can postpone the LV session until it's sure that there's no mischievous or dangerous intent. And whenever an agent refuses to do a LieDeck-verification, any involved party can, of course, appeal to the courts and try and have that refusal overturned.

We'll try this system out for five years, and if everything goes well, I expect the WDA will then unban the

LieDeck completely ... at least I will certainly support a complete unbanning of the device in such a circumstance.

Now, there's one more little...

Randy and Lucky hugged and kissed—and cried—as the room broke into applause.

"Hey, I can go back to university!" Randy realized suddenly. And I'm not needed any more to head up USLUC, he also realized, silently.

"Yeah," Lucky said as she wiped her eyes. "I ... I guess so."

Chapter 55

DECLARATION OF WAR

Thursday, March 17, 2033—1:03 p.m.

On the roof of the mess hall in the central Pliesterine bubble, a crowd of two hundred or so Victor-Eens had gathered to listen to Sheena Kalhoun's Netcast. They were dancing, shouting, crying, kissing, and a few were already heading down the stairs to celebrate privately, carnally. Everywhere, Victor-Eens were divesting themselves of those pesky voice-activated digicorders they'd been wearing for the simLV program. The LieDeck was unbanned! It was as if life could finally start in earnest.

In the midst of this joyful mayhem, Annette Blais kept watching the hideously huge MIU screen that had been wheeled onto the stage and parked between the two columns of speakers. One hand was vaguely gesturing for everyone to shut the hell up, and her other hand held her Sniffer to her right ear, with the sound cranked up.

Sheena Kalhoun had only a few more words to say, but they were killers. When the WDA emblem filled the screen, indicating the end of the Netcast, Annette turned to the whooping Victor-Eens and held up both her arms, demanding silence. The decibel level fell gradually as a few people noticed their leader and alerted those who hadn't. When the last few had simmered down, Annette moved to center stage and spoke.

"You missed the final bit," she said solemnly. "Derek," she called to the technician at stage left, "rewind and roll that last section please. And—uh—people...?" she continued as Derek set things up. "Listen carefully, okay?"

Now, there is one more minor matter I should mention. It's ... one thing to suspect malice and call for answers, as Gilbert Henderson did, but it's quite another thing to jump to conclusions and incite lawlessness on a global scale, as Randy Whiteside did on behalf of USLUC. That's not legal, and while we understand and appreciate USLUC's contribution in bringing an end to the demonstrations and vandalism of last Sunday, we don't look kindly on any person or group that defies the law. But the worst thing of all was the utterly indefensible rush to judgment and the defiance of world law that we saw from the Evolution movement. Had it not been for those people, the Evolution clans, and their collective response to Randy Whiteside's call for civil disobedience, research polls show that this idea would have fizzled out and flopped miserably. We have heard that several important voices had encouraged the Evolution movement to support the USLUC call for defiance. Who suggested this is not important to us; what is important is that the Evolution movement responded as it did. We hope and expect that history will take a dim view of this action.

However, after due deliberation, we have reluctantly decided as an administrative matter not to prosecute anyone from USLUC or Evolution. But we do feel, if I may make a modest suggestion, that such irresponsibility should be noted, recognized, condemned ... and factored into all of the personal decisions that civilian families and individuals make in the course of their daily activities.

Thank you. Net, down, now.

The Victor-Eens were suddenly as low as they had been high a moment earlier. No one ever underestimated the power of the world body since the stunning coup of '14, the final revolutionary act—including the vaporization of Leningrad—by which the political United Nations mutated into the military WDA. A mere hint from Kalhoun carried the same clout as a papal decree or a royal edict in 16th-century Europe. Some whispered voices on the Net had even compared the relationship between today's civilians and the WDA to that of the citizens of the Soviet Union and its Communist regime, back in the 20th century; with only one employer of any consequence in Russia, you got into a full-time sucking-up mode early in life, and jumped through any and all hoops to not piss off “the boss.” What Sheena Kalhoun had called a “modest suggestion” was neither modest nor a suggestion. For Evolution, it was a disaster!

"What she just said," Annette intoned into the potent silence, “amounts to ‘don't join or support the LieDeck unbanning committees and don't buy anything from Evolution.’ What happens to CANLUC and USLUC and all the unbanning committees is not going to matter much in the end, now that the LieDeck is available to us all. However, as I see it, the WDA has just declared war, economic war, on Evolution, on us.

"Board meeting in ten minutes, with internal Netcast. I expect the Board of Evolution International will Netlink in a couple of hours, and ... well, I have no idea how that will go, or whether it will be Netcast. We may have to meet on the warm if we don't want the WDA to know about our discussions. So ... that's about it, I guess."

Annette stood on the stage, her head hung. Derek, the technician, went up and hugged her, bringing tears to both their eyes. Then a solo voice began to sing, and by the second line, two hundred voices bellowed out the old union song of the last century, “Solidarity forever” ... except the last line was: “Evolution marches on."

Chapter 56

NO LONG FACE

Thursday, March 17, 2003—1:05 p.m.

"Well," said Becky as she slapped her thighs and rose from her chair, “I guess, thanks to Sheena Kalhoun, we're financially kind of—uh—all fucked up!” She was half-trying to be humorous—she almost never swore. “What's the long face for?”

Michael had turned off the MIU as soon as the WDA emblem came on at the end of the Netcast, and he'd been staring at the blank screen for half a minute, trying to make sure that his face revealed nothing ... at all. They're watching me, he kept realizing over and over. In fact they're probably smoking wacky-backy in Sheena's office and laughing their tits off.

"No long face," he answered as he got up. “We got a lot to think about, that's all.” They're L'Ving me, he thought, and I slid that by them. I don't have a long face, literally, and Becky and I assuredly do have a

lot to think about. It slipped his attention that his last two words, “that’s all,” would get surely beeped. “Let’s go for a walk on the Indian trail before I chopper off to the office.”

Becky appreciated her husband’s dilemma, and she knew the main reason behind his suggestion. She took his arm gently and leaned her head on his shoulder momentarily as they walked out of the den.

There were five vaguely circular “theme walks” throughout the estate, four of which had artifacts in keeping with the themes. The Indian walk was Becky’s favorite, and was artifact-free. It was short—forty minutes at a stroll—and except for the lightly trodden pathway, it was exactly the way God would have made it—had there been One. She was already dressed in jeans, runners and a sweatshirt from her alma mater—the University of Toronto. Michael was wearing one of his wide collection of virtually identical and utterly boring business suits. “Throw on some rags, honey,” she said. “It’ll only take a minute, and—” She was about to say he’d enjoy himself more and not get his good shoes scuffed or mud on his pants, but switched horses on impulse. “All those big-shot executives at the office ... they’ll wait,” she finished.

Michael needed that. His wife did love him, in spite of Lilly, and in spite of her own adventures with other men. “I’ll just be a sec,” he said as he took off up the spiral stairs two at a time. “Would you get my walking stick, hon?”

"Already on it," she hollered back.

* * * *

Spring is a moist business, thought Michael as he slogged along behind Becky, using his walking stick more for fun than for assistance. She liked to lead so that she would see any birds or animals first. Michael didn’t care who saw wildlife first, but pretended he did—it was a fun game they had played for almost twenty years, since before they were married.

When he reached the top of the third hill, he found himself somewhat out of breath, leaning on his walking stick for support, and that concerned him. Becky was already on their “sitting rock,” taking in the un-budded forest as it sucked at the scalp of a melting planet. To his surprise, the multi-billion-dollar monkey wrench that had just jammed his corporate gears was far from his mind, and every time it had tried to sneak back onto the front burner of his internal MIU, he just ... changed channels. Becky, however, was ill-equipped to assess what the new corporate situation really meant for her, for them, and Michael could sense worry on her forehead. “We’ll manage just fine,” he said as he sat beside his teenaged bride of 2014.

For a few moments, they just drank in the sun-warmed air and the sights and sounds of the valley below. There were occasional pockets of snow nestled guiltily in low-lying, shaded areas, standing out against the general brownness. Some of the birds had already returned from their vacations, or were stopping here temporarily on their treks to points north. Squirrels were busy rushing around doing whatever squirrels did so frantically in the spring. The natural seasons had no impact on the business world, or on matters of the human heart.

"So ... you love her?" asked Becky.

Michael flushed, but he knew too much about Becky’s internal LieDeck to fib to her. “She’s mad at me right now, but yes, I do love her.”

"Well, then I think we should get divorced," said Becky, ignoring his reference to the undefined squabble that her husband and his new “friend” were having.

Michael’s heart rate had just crept back to near-normal; now it doubled again. Jeeze, she does get to the

point. "Why?" he asked.

"Oh, we don't have to," she said. "And I certainly don't want to, but..."

"But what?" asked Michael, picking a long blond stalk of last year's wild grass that had somehow stayed erect under the great snows of the previous winter.

"I'm ... pretty much Human Three," said Becky plainly. She knew she hadn't come to grips with the fact that real Human Threes did productive work, but ... all things in good time, she said to herself. She paused briefly, and decided to use the unbanned LV service of the WDA to check herself out on that score ... later. Perhaps she wasn't as far along as she imagined herself to be. In the meantime, she tried to organize her thoughts for her husband.

"Our present situation doesn't bother me," she said softly. "In fact I like it as much as I ever did ... well, almost ... but I can manage my feelings, Mikey. You're ... well, you surely know that you're Human Two. I don't mean that negatively, just as a fact. You're Human Two, and so is Lilly, so it just seems to me that us getting a divorce is necessary ... for you." Well, for Lilly too, she thought, although she didn't want to overcomplicate this analysis.

Michael chewed on the ragged end of the grass stalk. He had been staring at the rock between his feet, and now he rotated his head to face her, and some words came out of his mouth that he never expected to hear, words that he seemed not to have planned. "I listen and watch a lot," he said into her eyes. "I'm about ... Human Two-point-eight," he quipped, "so it's not that big a leap to ... for me to, you know ... to turn that corner."

Becky was rocked. "Mikey!" she said, clasping her hands. She felt like doing a wee Scottish jig—here—now—naked. "You'd enter transition!?"

"I'm ... pretty sure I want to," he said, assuming he'd answered his wife honestly and well.

"But Michael," said Becky, with a concerned look suddenly draped all over her face, "wanting to isn't enough. It's good, mind you, but everyone's first unemotional Human Three decision is to become a Human Three. It has to be the only reasonable choice, my darling. The intellect has to be so sure of itself that you'd do it even if you didn't want to, even if it felt all wrong. Is it eminently sensible and rational for you to make this move? Does your mind know that it's right and smart and necessary?"

God damn, she asks hard questions, he said to himself. "Well ... no," he admitted. "But I'm going to give it the old college try anyway. I feel quite confident that—" He stopped himself short, realizing that how he felt was not the issue, not the question; not even allowed. "I ... I think that as I learn more, I'll find this new knowledge sufficient, and satisfying, in support of such a decision, and then I may be able to say 'yes' to your question."

Becky had always gritted her teeth when Michael did his "lawyer-talk" thing, but she picked up his right hand and kissed the back of it. "I'm so ... proud of you, and happy for you," she said. "It's not that easy, though."

"I know."

"It took me about half a year just to get to the point where I was ready to make my decision."

"So you're ... you said you were pretty much ... there now?"

"Oh yeah, since about a year ago February, really. That's not to say I don't have lots to learn and a thousand changes to go through, or that I don't face the constant danger of regression, but my CQ is up

around a hundred and fifty already, and I'm aiming to break two hundred by Christmas. It's like shaking a drug habit. It takes constant vigilance, and I have to take it one day at a time ... like in AA. I have to ... rededicate myself every hour, sometimes, but most of the time now it just comes natural, and sometimes I even forget that I ever was a Human Two. It's going to take you a while to catch up, but I'll help you. Some people go right from two-digit CQs to over two hundred in a few weeks. I mean, it can be done, but..."

"But what?" asked Michael. "Maybe you think I'm not clever enough to—"

Becky slapped his shoulder with the back of her hand, enough to smart but not nearly enough to offend. "You're not the problem," she scolded jokingly. "It's..."

"Whaaaaaat?" whined Michael playfully. He really didn't know.

"Lilly," said Becky, in a tone that hinted at: "Wasn't that just a bit obvious?" "She's Human Two, Mikey, and she's WDA! She literally can't come with us ... or with you."

Michael's high humor collapsed immediately. He really was interested in becoming a Human Three, in fact he'd been subconsciously moving in that direction for months, but he wasn't even close to understanding how anybody could play their own emotions like some kind of obedient musical instrument. "Listen, Becky," he said quietly, "this is all a bit fast for me. I haven't had much chance to concentrate on me for a lot of years. I think that maybe I'll..." Michael fell silent, and stayed there.

"What?" asked Becky after Michael failed to carry on for more than a minute, and a minute in the forest is considerably longer than a minute anywhere else. Becky was fine with long pauses, but she knew Michael wasn't there ... yet. "Whatever it is, I'll support you," she promised.

"You know what I'd really like to do? I'd like to go over to my cabin on the lake, on Wilson Lake, by myself, for maybe a month or two, and just ... be."

"So ... do it!" said Becky. "I'll get food sent over from the lodge, and whenever you think you're ready to get back in the saddle, I'll be there too, we'll all be here, still loving you, as always, no matter where this ends up for you."

Chapter 57

BOO!

Thursday, March 17, 2033—1:07 p.m.

Lilly took her time returning from her pee-break, and she even said hello to a particularly handsome pine tree. When she finally reached Lars' old shack, she smiled inwardly at the "hunting" trip that her new pal had taken such joy in sharing with her. She stepped up on the single stair—it looked fairly rotten and unstable, so she placed her foot near the edge, the side. When she reached the hole where the door used to be, she raised her eyes ... and saw nothing. Where did our young apprentice plumber go? she wondered. He must have slipped out for a pee too, she concluded as she walked through the entrance.

"Boo!" shouted Lars as he stamped a boot on the wooden floor.

Lilly's adrenal gland went instantly ballistic. "You son-of-a-bitch, you scared the crap outa me!" she screamed. She was as angry as she was frightened, but it was hard to hold on to the anger. Lars had been hiding behind the doorjamb, much like she had done down in Freeport, except that Michael's villa

came equipped with an actual door. Now Lars had collapsed onto the floor and was laughing out of control, wiping tears from his eyes.

"That was a fucking ... ten!" he gurgled.

"A ... ten?" asked Lilly, as annoyed as she was becoming amused.

"Ten out of ten," said Lars as he struggled to his knees. "I'm ... sorry," he cackled insincerely as he got to his feet.

"Fine," conceded Lilly. "It was a ten, but what was the friggin' point, you bastard? Why the fuck did you—"

"You're scared of me, Lilly," explained Lars as he tried to collect himself. "You set yourself up to take a ten-point fall, by your fear."

"I am not," she protested—she instinctively touched her vest pocket as she reminded herself that her LieDeck was turned off.

"Oh, sure you are," said Lars as he relished the last few stanzas of his laughing fit. "And that feeling of fear is completely inappropriate." And insulting, he thought, but did not say. "I wouldn't hurt you in any way ... or anyone, for that matter. I really like you, Lilly ... but then I really liked that squirrel too, and we both enjoyed scaring the shit outa him ... or her."

Lilly finally let a smile creep out, and her mouth uttered words that she couldn't recall thinking. "You absolutely know I'll get you back," she said.

"Yeah, I know," squeaked Lars in a high voice.

That started them both laughing, and their mood caught the mother of all waves. It grew and grew until both of them could do little but point at each other and laugh. They were emotion wrestling, and it was ... what? ... fun? ... sexy? Lilly stopped herself from trying to find the right word and just went with it. As the experience peaked, Lars flung open his arms and Lilly fell into them, hugging him back, hard, as they teetered together.

"I'm trained to break various bones from this position, you know," she snarled into his ear.

"I know ... and I'm so skeeeered!" said Lars as he burst out into a brand new round of debilitating laughter. "But you wouldn't," he managed to smother into her neck.

Lilly grabbed the back of his hair and pulled it slowly and relentlessly to the floor.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow," yelped Lars as he got to his knees, then sat, then leaned back until he was lying on the floor, still laughing—and not the least bit scared, in spite of the hurt. "You're too ... skinny ... to be that ... strong," he said in installments, interspersed with jagged laughter and little cries of pain.

Lilly shook her head, and resolutely refused to accept the part of her being that was demanding to understand what the hell was going on here. She leaned forward, her hand still gripping Lars' hair, and touched her mouth to his. Her anger—what she still had of it—vanished as quickly as did his laughter. Their lips brushed lightly as air at first. She loosened her grip as his fingers slid through her long black hair ... and cupped her skull. Then their tongues met, hesitantly at first, then with abandon. Lars wondered if Lilly was really okay with this, and the WDA agent wondered the same thing, only harder.

Too late.

Chapter 58

DETOUR

Thursday, March 17, 2033—1:25 p.m.

Lilly walked slowly through the woods, so to think, so to enjoy the absence of snow and the impending natural normality, but mostly to let her psyche find an airstrip and return to terra firma. She felt a whole cornucopia of terrible emotions ... regret, confusion, anger, frustration, fear, shame ... plus a recurrent rush at the unfading taste of Lars' amazingly versatile tongue.

She had put an abrupt end to their exploding sexual encounter back at the hunting shack. She didn't know why she'd done it then, and she was no closer to an answer now. Something inside just froze up, like pistons fusing to cylinder walls in a seized engine. Lars had tried to talk her through it, but the WDA agent would have none of that either. She had literally glared him into a beaten silence. He still had his hands on her narrow waist when the deep-freeze struck her, and the young apprentice plumber had removed them with a sense of drama, slowly, with "surrender" written all over his face ... more like submission, Lilly angled her thought.

Now they were walking back from the squirrel hunt without a word, Lars leading the way and Lilly hanging back a good fifty yards. What had happened, or almost happened ... started to happen ... was way beyond discussion, and that non-event ... near-event ... partial event ... dominated every nook and cranny of both their guts. There was simply no emotional room for chitchat ... at least not without games piled on top of games, and neither of them was up for that.

Lilly decided to distract herself by reprising Sheena Kalhoun's Netcast, with her Sniffer held to her ear, for privacy. She was very pleased to learn that the new WDA-sponsored World Identity Bank had opened its doors—the first announcement Kalhoun had made. That was the kind of organization that Lilly had joined, and had expected to serve; a loving, global mom, effectively. "Way to go Sheena," she whispered towards a nameless birch when that section of the archived recording ended.

She took the Sniffer away from her ear and decided to hold it in front of her, with the sound up higher, while she picked her way along the rough trail. She watched in brief glances as Kalhoun went over the second item, the one Lilly had heard but not seen while she was out in the bush behind the shack. And she allowed herself to lag even further behind Great White Horny Hunter—she wanted to watch Kalhoun's face as the WDA chief sorted out how to deal with the recent tidal wave of civil disobedience.

There was no hostility in the deeply lined, black-and-white visage, no real power trip, only a reasoned, compassionate response to an obviously intolerable situation. The deal was complete amnesty, no further arrests, and a new penalty: those who refused LieDeck-verification lost all their Net privileges for the rest of their lives.

"Another ten out of ten," whispered Lilly, as her mind flashed back to the instant terror Lars had caused her with his childish prank. "Prick," she muttered ... like that squirrel might have said—in its language—or felt—as it raced away from us hooting, sadistic humans, she considered.

Lars looked back through the bare trees and saw Lilly, now at least seventy-five yards behind, engrossed in her Sniffer. You could have done that after we made love, he thought sadly as he turned to resume his retreat from Eden.

Lilly simply stopped walking altogether when Sheena Kalhoun announced the new arrangement for

LieDeck production. That's the end of Whiteside Tech's monopoly, she realized, and it's undoubtedly because of Randy. She pushed the "pause" button on her Sniffer and thought: But ... that's not fair ... to blame the father for the sins of the son. Michael's sale of the company is in jeopardy. And he's screwed ... politically! She was about to link with Michael on her Sniffer, then thought better of it. They were watching her, Control and his lackeys, and she wasn't in complete control of herself at the moment. And besides, she thought, first I need to have a long talk with ... uh...

Nothing came! Painful thought, she realized. There used to be good old Ed, but that was then. Control? she wondered. Hardly! Then a horrible thought came to her: Jesus, my reports, back to Control, were probably factored into the WDA's decision to switch suppliers for the LieDeck.

Who was there to talk to? About these kinds of things? Her mother would be of no help at all. Julia would love to advise, but ... please, Lilly thought, with a grimace. Lars was ... *persona non flagrante delicto*, she figured. And not Annette! And I'm pissed off with Michael. My God ... I'm ... clean out of friends!

Lilly looked up and saw that Lars was plodding on ahead. I should have done it with him, she felt before she could pour cold water onto the idea. "Not this lifetime," she said in his direction as she disengaged the "pause" button. She continued to pick her way over fallen branches and wet spots as Kalhoun let Gil Henderson off the hook for his absurd suggestion that the WDA might have murdered Lester Connolly. Again, and in spite of Michael's new problems, the WDA agent felt proud of the organization she had served so loyally.

Then came Sheena Kalhoun's announcement that the WDA was partially unbanning the LieDeck ... for civilian use! That sat Lilly down on a hog's-back boulder! "Lars," she hollered as she rewound back to the beginning of that section. "Come and hear this," she yelled. "This is unbelievable!"

Lars looked back, waved minutely, and carried on his way.

"Fuck you," Lilly said, not entirely unaware of the irony of her words.

Lilly made herself more comfortable on the rock, and looked up through the leafless trees at a cloudless blue sky. A perfect day for such a momentous and totally unexpected decision, she thought as she listened again to those truly amazing words. Too bad Lester Connolly didn't live to see this day. She wished Lars had come back to share this moment with her ... well, she did and she didn't. "Yes, I ... wish," she scolded herself out loud—realizing too late that she had just confused her boss, who was surely watching her.

She stopped her review again at the end of Kalhoun's fifth and last announcement, turning off her Sniffer and tucking it back into her inside vest pocket. There was more, apparently, but Lilly could watch that later. She lifted her shoulders and stretched out her condor wings as she drew in an invisible cloud of very tasty Québec air. The WDA had handled the threatening global upheaval like farmers handle inclement weather. They had coped ... perfectly, she concluded.

Only two things still troubled Lilly as she leaned forward to watch a black bug skitter between her brand new hiking boots. The first, of course, was the impossible position that Michael was in. He would lose control of Whiteside Tech, and he'd lose the pending sale of the company too. And if that weren't enough to crush the man, he would also lose the Liberal leadership nomination! Only yesterday, Lilly had imagined herself as the future bride of Canada's very rich next prime minister. Now, their relationship was on the rocks ... or at least in limbo ... and Michael was ... what? ... disgraced? She resolved to call Michael later in the day, after she'd had time to rethink her feelings for him ... and Lars, she added silently.

The other thing that perplexed her was that the unbanning of the LieDeck was bound to help Evolutionaries attain Human Three Consciousness ... and a lot of other civilians, she amended her assessment. She wasn't ready to judge that as a good thing or a bad thing, but it certainly wasn't something that the WDA wanted to encourage. Had Sheena Kalhoun and her brigade of top strategists dropped the ball? Impossible, Lilly thought as she stood up and began walking slowly towards the hub of Victor-E. There has to be ... more ... substantive stuff. She took her Sniffer back out, restarted the archived recording, and listened to Sheena's parting shot, her "modest suggestion," as she had called it.

"Holy shit!" Lilly said aloud, unintentionally, when Kalhoun signed off—and before she turned the device off. Evolution is toast! Nobody will buy from them now!

When she saw Sleepery #8 peek through the crowd of bare trees, she cut left, east, deciding to circumvent the Victor-E life-base. She'd walk for ten minutes with the sun on her right ear, then turn right ninety degrees, south, towards the sun, walk up as far as the highway, and then turn right a second time, and get into her car at the front of the E-tery ... without speaking to anyone. She'd been trained to avoid danger, and with the assault that Evolution had just suffered from Sheena Kalhoun ... Christ, those freaks wouldn't hurt a fly, she reminded herself. Well ... maybe a fly, but not a squirrel, she revised the thought. But "prudence" was the WDA's watchword. If anyone did blow a neuron pile at Victor-E, and something did happen to her, she'd have only herself to blame.

It was 2:20 p.m. before she was safely cocooned in her green Aura, and it felt good to be back where the rules of civilization applied. Almost unconsciously, the car backed out and headed east, towards Shawville, past Shawville, and sixteen miles on to the town of Quyon—and the turnoff for the Whiteside estate. She belatedly placed her Sniffer in the slot on the dash—she was supposed to do that whenever she drove, but it seemed that she wasn't thinking very clearly, or clearly enough. She eased the Aura up to the main gate, where a Patriot security guard said something at her through her closed window.

Lilly slapped her WDA badge briefly against the glass and shifted back into "drive" before the guard could acknowledge her right to go wherever the hell she pleased on this particular planet. "I'll tell Mr. Whiteside you're on your way in," she heard him holler as she drove off. You just do that, she thought acridly as she accelerated past the mansion and hit the dirt road that led to the lodge. "You do that," she said aloud, hardly caring that her Sniffer was on and the WDA was listening.

Chapter 59

STICK A FORK IN IT

Thursday, March 17, 2033—3:05 p.m.

Lilly found the door to Victor's room open a crack, and she could hear the sounds of the top-of-the-hour newscast. She couldn't resist peeking in before knocking. He was seated naked at his MIU, totally engrossed in the Netnews, as was his daily custom. Lilly had spent many hours watching Victor do this on archived InfoBank files, and his left hand was always compulsively gripping the arm of his big chair ... as if the thing was going to take off, she'd thought, or like he was on a scary circus ride. Today was different. Both of his hands were sitting peacefully on his lap. Curious, she thought.

She didn't feel right, spying on the only person she could think of to vent with, so she stole backwards down the carpeted hallway and tiptoed down the wooden stairs. At the bottom, she silently re-opened the front door, and started whistling a little tune from her childhood, the name of which escaped her. She closed the door audibly, and clomped up the stairs. By the time she reached Victor's suite, she found the door still open, but now the bald inventor was quietly reading a book, clothed in his paisley caftan, and

his MIU was dark.

She stuck her head around the jamb. "Come on in," he said when he looked up and saw her questioning face. "I could use some company." As she entered, Victor couldn't help noticing that she was dressed for hiking. "Nice boots," he said.

Lilly sat in the other soft chair, carefully avoiding the sofa. "So ... big day!" she said emphatically. "You caught Sheena Kalhoun's Netcast?"

Victor nodded, dog-eared a page, closed the book, and cocked his head. The certainty is gone, he observed in the agent's face. She's in the middle of an emotional twister. "I'm listening," he said.

Lilly hated it when Human Threes made assumptions like that, especially when they were right. Still, he was listening, and she had come to talk ... I guess. "I was out at this guy Lars' hunting shack," she said. "Can we ... sit out on the deck?" she added. "Maybe you want to get a jacket or—"

Victor opened the door to the world and ushered her out without a word. The sun was shining, and he didn't want to be warm, particularly. Cool is nice.

There was a padded lawn chair and two pine chaise lounges at the far end of the big wooden deck, and Lilly chose one of the latter. I feel like a psychiatric patient, she said to herself. At least Victor's MIU can't pick up on the conversation out here, she thought as she settled in. She surveyed the melting ice cap of Wilson Lake. It looked like there was open water here and there, especially near the shore. There's probably ice underneath, but it's ... the thin edge of the wedge, she thought. Metaphor for ... well, for something.

Victor sat beside her in the chair, and threw his eyes out over a doomed skating rink. The white patches of snow on top of the ice slumped in wilted drifts. This is my very last spring, he felt.

The largely deciduous bushland was still leafless, brown, but there were also a lot of evergreens showing their namesake colors. "How come there's a bare strip of brown all around the edge of the lake?" asked Lilly. "It seems so even ... like someone trimmed the evergreens up to a certain level."

"Well," said Victor, "the shores are crowded with cedar trees because they need more sunlight and water, and that strip of brown is exactly eight feet high. The deer wander around on the ice in winter, and eat the cedar ... well, they're not exactly needles, even though they are evergreens ... let's say the foliage. It's more digestible than the needles of other evergreens. The deer are about four feet high at the shoulder. Add another foot or so for the neck and head, and add another three feet for when they stand briefly on their hind legs to grab a mouthful, and voilà ... a neat eight-foot strip of bare cedar branches all around the lake."

Lilly found that rather interesting, but it was not what she had come to discuss. She proceeded to tell Victor all about the squirrel hunt, and he laughed heartily. She told him about going off in the bush behind the shack to pee, and about how Human Three Lars scared the bejesus out of her on her return, and about the kissing and the groping and the fear and the seized engine ... and about being in love with Michael Whiteside and going to Freeport and having a big idiotic fight and ... and the long walk back from the shack to Victor-E, including the prudent detour, and the confusion, and the horrible sense that she was essentially friendless. Then she stopped, without so much as one word about Sheena Kalhoun, the WDA, or her current "employment" problem.

"It's like ... I don't know what to feel," she said after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence. "Or maybe I just forgot how to feel," she ventured.

Lately, Victor had watched Evolutionaries and other would-be Human Threes work through “transition sessions” on his MIU, and it irritated him when people made stupid guesses like that, or fell back on 20th-century psychoanalysis, or clutched at the pointless spiritual hucksterism of the last remaining men and women of the cloth. Lilly Petrosian, a captain in the WDA, seemed to be inviting his assistance to resolve a tiny consciousness crunch, and Victor could only assume that she knew where he would be coming from. He stood up, walked slowly over to the railing, and looked down about fifteen feet to the wet ground and haphazard clumps of snow below. He remembered the whitened frigid world that had lived there until a week ago. He found himself wondering for the millionth time why perfectly rational Human Twos couldn't do these things for themselves. Actually, he knew why. It wasn't so much a burning question as it was a piss-off for him. They could do it solo if they chose to, he said to himself. “You believe in God?” he asked—he didn't want to play games.

“No,” Lilly answered towards his back.

“Well, that's a good starting point,” he said. “Turn on your LieDeck,” he instructed as he returned to his chair. “That's legal now, isn't it?”

Lilly decided to comply, even if it meant that her WDA masters could now hear them. She knew better than to even try to hide anything from the WDA, but she had hoped for a little privacy. She turned the Sniffer on, setting the LieDeck on beeper mode, and placed the thing lens down on her stomach. At least they won't be able to see us.

Victor suppressed a powerful urge to scold. “Well, it's certainly not that you forgot how to feel,” he said loudly, “but I presume you already knew that. It implies that people learn how to feel, or decide what they will feel in this or that situation, which of course they do not ... well, Human Twos don't, anyway. It was Charles Darwin who first saw the evolutionarily-derived nature of emotion and its expression, and a lot of research has since elaborated upon and sharpened his observations. Your feelings are on autopilot ... much like a newborn baby's. The central fact about feelings is that they are not learned—they are modified and/or refined over time, yes, but not learned.” Victor hated having to start with these basics, but ... Human Twos are pitifully and willfully ignorant, even of such self-evident fundamentals.

“Human Three Consciousness is much like the awakening that science represented for Human Two,” he tried. “A few millennia ago, humans found out that the brain could do much more than create language and tools and get horses to pull plows. Your feelings are controlled by your instinct, as per the design of any animal's body's chemical and electrical systems, although your way of feeling is modified ... I would say somewhat ... by your parenting, education and your personal experiences. And...” Victor stopped pontificating briefly to look over at his audience of one.

“Go ahead,” said Lilly. She wasn't speaking as an agent of the WDA, but as a person. Victor sensed that, and needed to sense it. He stood, painfully, and swung his chair a bit so he would more directly face his guest. Then he sat down again, wincing from the pain.

“So my feelings are controlled by my instinct,” he continued after a few deep breaths, “except for the big decisions. It's like ... the SuperNet, I suppose. Technology that few people understand delivers its ready-made pictures and sounds to your eyes and ears, but you decide what to watch, or whether to watch. As a Human Three, I personally decide what emotional ... program I'm on. I decide that consciously, then I just relax and let my instinct do its thing ... but in the ballpark of my choosing.

“You feel fear towards me, as you did towards Lars. It's completely unwarranted, not based on any external reality, and it is therefore insulting and stupid ... insulting to me ... and insulting to Lars ... and accidentally-step-off-a-tall-building dumb. All that searching you're experiencing, whether you think it's psychological or theological or philosophical or whatever, is simply the acting out of a biological function.

All animals have internal systems that are designed to make them, or us, feel bad ... like pain, hunger, thirst, sexual frustration or need, loneliness, jealousy, anger, territoriality, aggressiveness, confusion, possessiveness, terror ... and there are similar systems—or maybe you want to see it as the flip side of the same system—designed to get rid of those bad feelings; which is nice in and of itself, but they also go beyond that and actually reward adaptive behaviors, as defined by the instinct, with good feelings ... like a sense of vigor, the taste of food, the slaking of thirst, the feeling of being loved, or the feeling of being possessed, orgasm, a sense of empowerment or security ... not to mention various ‘highs’ we can experience, the kind of feelings that are also achievable through recreational drug use, albeit with the risk of side-effects ... I could go on."

"All ... built in?" asked Lilly.

"You tell me," said Victor.

"Yes."

"Right." He didn't rub her face in it by pointing out that she already knew the answer, as proven by the fact that her LieDeck hadn't beeped. He felt like doing so, but he didn't do it. He was, after all, a Human Three ... however reluctantly, at times.

"Okay ... go on." Lilly noticed that Victor was irritated by her question, and also that he was getting tired. He's on a roll, she thought, so I'll just let him go on with it. She also had an internal problem. She didn't want to dwell on it, but she had to wonder if she was listening to Victor for her own reasons, or so that Control could listen in, and realize that she was doing her job, and doing it well. He's so ... pompous, she felt ... meaning Victor, not Control.

"Every religion is nothing more than a biological solution to an internal bad feeling," Victor continued. "Religions purport to make life into more than it is, and towards that end, they try to convert death from a bad thing into a good thing ... and then they pass the collection plate, of course ... can't forget that part. As you know—at least I assume you know—the instinct is called the ‘instinct to survive.’ By tricks of the mind, non-rational tricks, religions find all kinds of ways to convince us that we will indeed survive death. They deliberately lead us to a state of denial, and then charge us more than lawyers for the favor. Psychology purports to do a similar thing, on a lesser level, using tricks of the mind to move us from feeling bad to feeling good—although I must admit that at some times and in some circumstances, it really is preferable to feel good than to be rational.

"In point of fact, fear is designed into our bodies—by whom just doesn't matter, and by what process doesn't matter either. The ‘by whom’ question leads us to a ‘god’ answer and the ‘by what process’ question leads us to the concept of ‘evolution,’ with a small ‘e’. The purpose of feeling fear is, of course, to increase our chances of survival in nature. No fear; not a big chance we'll survive."

"How so?" asked Lilly. She was enjoying the old man's performance as much as she was intrigued by the words that tumbled out of his mouth. He's so damned confident of his views, she thought. Too sure of himself, she felt. Felt, she reviewed. Well, he did have a couple of decades to get his ideas organized in his mind, and he—

"Nature is hostile," snapped Victor, "and in nature, as non-rational animals like your squirrel learn to their peril, too little fear is a dangerous thing. Two deer gambol in the bush; a twig snaps; one deer feels ‘Christ, that could be a predator,’ and it bolts; the other deer feels, ‘oh, it's just a twig snapping,’ and so it continues to graze. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, I'd venture to guess, the braver deer is right, but the hundredth time, the wus is right. The cocky deer gets to be the predator's supper, and the paranoid deer lives to pass on its genes to his or her offspring. It's not just the survival of the fittest; it's like survival

of the scariest! The dynamics of natural selection reinforce maximal irrational fear, so after hundreds of thousands of generations of that process, it's small wonder that we feel fear even when the circumstances are non-threatening. Our bodies 'think'—and I use the term rather loosely, even wrongly—our bodies 'think' that we need to be insanely paranoid in order to survive. You see the problem, I'm sure!

"We feel fear simply because we're designed to feel it. No matter what their overall circumstances, people will find something external to blame their fears on, and if there's nothing convenient in your environment, you just ... make something up—Jews, blacks, devils, aliens, whatever. That's why every kid in the world knows that there's a monster under his bed, or her bed. And we also feel a generalized fear of feeling bad, much of the time, and we naturally try to avoid it. And nothing feels as bad as death, or so we assume. Even though we know virtually nothing about death, on the emotional level, it represents our ultimate failure to survive. That's the problem with life ... you'll never get out of it alive! Human Twos can't cope with their own mortality. They think there has to be some way around such a terrible plan. Human Threes simply acknowledge the reality of death, and work with it. But ... we do filter the gas before burning it."

"You—uh—lost me there," said Lilly.

"It's a matter of who gets the first kick at the cat," said Victor, with a smirk. "You can't filter gasoline after it's been combusted, and the whole purpose would be lost by then anyway. But you can filter it before putting it in the tank, and if you don't, it could well have impurities in it that will eventually foul up your engine. Human Threes have the same active instinct as Human Twos, Lilly, but before we turn it loose, we engage the brain to put things in context, then we let ourselves feel whatever comes up. And if what comes up feels unpleasant or is counter-productive, then we try to start over ... or we go to another Human Three and get some guidance or help."

"In your case, you opted for sex with that young fellow before you got your intellect in gear, and then you had second thoughts—well, they were first thoughts, actually, since the 'opting' part was just feelings, just instinct, but you know what I mean—so then you had these quote-unquote 'second thoughts,' and did a sort of pre-coital interruptus ... and now you're worried about consequences." He was going to say "right?" at the end of that sentence, but decided not to—he was right, whether Lilly knew that or acknowledged that fact or not ... so why bother asking? "So—where was I? Oh yeah. So ... if you feel weird about having sexual feelings towards—uh—"

"Lars," said Lilly.

"—towards Lars," continued Victor, "then don't. There's no reason why you should. If he acts weird towards you, or has unwarranted expectations about your future behavior, then he's just being Human Two. He's a Human Three, you told me, eh?" Lilly nodded. "He'll straighten himself out as soon as you point that out to him—if indeed you have to. As for Michael ... well, you could always take one of those Ski-doo's down at the dock and go sort yourself out. Becky told me he's over at his cabin right over there, across the lake here, in total seclusion—no MIU, no Sniffer even." As for you, he thought but didn't say out loud, it seems I'm your best friend now ... which is something that you really must work on, my dear ... there are so many fish in the sea, surely, and some of my best friends are fish ... and ... and ... Victor sometimes just let his mind run, with no direction, just to see where it went. Still, she does strike me as a bit of a cold fish, so—

Lilly didn't know that ... about Michael. She wasn't completely sure if she wanted to know that, but now that she did, she wanted more than anything to thank Victor and run madly for the snowmobile. But that would be ... what? she asked herself. Human Three? And ... it would also be somewhat stupid, she said to herself as she checked out the lake-sized ice floe between herself and Michael. There were puddles of water all over it, and she felt sure it would be much wiser to use a hovercraft ... or not go.

"Look," said Victor, emphatically, "if you tell Michael and he gets all jealous, well ... that's a Human Two response, but it's his problem, not yours. Even if you'd had sex with that Lars fellow, you wouldn't have taken anything away from Michael, or betrayed him. And besides, he and Becky could well be having sex right now if he wasn't sulking over at his cabin. She's been Human Three for quite a while, and she has several other lovers, but she and Michael still enjoy their sex life a lot. Becky and I got to chatting a bit on the Net, about Venice mostly—and about her own transition. But she also told me that stuff about her and Michael, and a Human Three would never lie."

Lilly was hit hard. Did Michael lie? He wouldn't ... surely not to me! What Becky had said to Victor, she must have meant before Michael and I got together—although Michael never complained about the sex with his wife, the way most gloomy husbands do. That ... creepy bastard! How could he ... At that instant, she realized she was about to "believe" something, something that might not even be true. Damn, she thought. His ideas seem to glue themselves to my frontal lobe ... meaning Victor's ideas, not Michael's.

She noticed that Victor had stopped talking. He was staring at her, and she just didn't know what to say next. With effort, she turned off the "jealousy" valve that Victor had opened. In a way, she wanted to dial up Victor-E's CQ service, or maybe the CQ service of another clan, to get a notion of where her consciousness was now, what her starting point would be. But that was a curious desire, and one she felt herself resisting ... fearing, she realized. Normals never did that, never feared having their consciousness quotients evaluated ... unless of course they discovered that they had unintentionally entered what Victor (and all Evolutionaries) called "transition." That could be scary!

Victor leaned forward and looked at the lanky body of the WDA agent. He wanted to do what Lars had recently tried to do—draw her into a big emotion-wrestling frenzy and diddle her dizzy. But his reasons had nothing to do with the person of Lilly Petrosian, so he put those feelings aside ... and the images that went with them, which was admittedly more difficult.

"It is reversible," he said in a near-whisper.

"What?"

"Human Three Consciousness!" he said, as if it should have been rather obvious what he was referring to.

"It ... is?" asked Lilly. "Then how come...?"

The answer to that was well known to her. Anyone could unlearn things—arithmetic, even one's command of the spoken word, with great effort and a lot of time. I ... I could unlearn my Human Two Consciousness, I suppose, but ... that would mean becoming a ... a Human One again ... a mere animal, so ... what would be the point?

Victor's theories were not open to "belief," like some goofy religion or the latest not-in-the-least-scientific psychobabble. They were fundamental science, much like the laws of physics governing the boiling point of water or that reliable mathematical equation for the calculation of the circumference of a circle. The few wrinkles in his theory of human consciousness evolution were matters for consideration and interpretation, or individual choice, but the basics were simply not up for grabs. "Better a person should deny the law of gravity," as the transition-assist guides were taught to emphasize to their clients.

"So ... what happens now?" asked Lilly, not altogether sure that she understood the question herself, or whether she really wanted an answer.

Victor leaned back in his chair and thought about how to respond as he studied the blue-white ceiling high above the lodge. "For you, personally ... well ... who's to say? You'll make your own decision, and I

won't be here to see the results, and ... I was going to say I didn't care, but that was a feeling talking—self-pity, actually. The truth is ... I do care, but I won't let myself care too much, at least not quite enough to let myself follow through on this stuff with you. There's ... lots of other Human Threes who can guide you better than me, or as well. For me, I'm in a hurry to use the last small portion of my life to good effect, and as you know, the WDA just declared economic war on Evolution. My least favorite thing in all of life ... is fighting! But I've decided to bump up my schedule in order to engage in that war, personally, on behalf of Evolution. The WDA...?" Victor paused briefly, and reminded himself forcefully that his new plan would proceed even if he were to die right this minute. "The WDA?" he restarted. "Well, you can stick a fork in it."

"A ... fork!?" asked Lilly, with a curl of amusement creeping onto her lips and into the muscles around her eyes.

"It's done like dinner," said Victor blandly. "So ... ergo ... stick a fork in it."

Lilly's mind couldn't take Victor seriously, but in her feelings ... well, she had a lot of work to do on her feelings no matter which way she turned. Still, Victor Helliwell had just announced the imminent demise of the world body, whose power was ... total, she had always believed. "You're going to put the WDA ... out of business?" she asked.

"Well, the last time we had this conversation, I was thinking seriously about a nice, civil competition. Now it's different. The WDA started a war, set up a win-lose situation, and ... well, Evolution will fight back," he admitted with seeming indifference. "And if Evolutionaries use all the weapons at their disposal, they'll win, which means the WDA will lose, and as a result, the WDA must at least be restructured, reformed, demilitarized, democratized, all that good stuff. You won't recognize it in a year or two ... plus, if my guess is right, you won't be working for it anyway, at least not until it's been completely revamped, and probably not even then!"

Lilly almost laughed ... almost, but not quite. "Would you care to tell me how you—uh—seem to know all this?"

"No," he said. "You're Human Two, Lilly, and you're still technically WDA, and your boss is listening to us through your Sniffer. If you were Human Three, I'd take you for a short walk in the woods and tell you all about it, no problem, but you're not ... so I won't. However, I will be telling Evolution how to win this war tomorrow, and they will likely announce it publicly ... they should anyway. Come to think of it, I will insist that they do, so everybody will know pretty soon anyway, including you and ... plus YOU, you sniveling cowards!" he shouted in the very specific direction of Lilly's stomach, at the navel area, where her Sniffer lay.

"For now," said Victor as he stood up awkwardly, "I have work I must do. I wish you a good day, and a jolly good life too. Please come and see me again if you enter transition formally, Lilly. But if you don't, well ... I'm just too busy for Human Two bullshit."

Lilly remembered how she had promised Victor that she'd let herself care about him, but at this moment, she wanted to kick his shins more than part amicably. She followed him back into the living room, and wondered if she should just leave. "I ... still have to—uh—LieDeck-verify you," she said.

"No, actually, you don't!" announced Victor as he closed the door to the deck and turned to face this tall woman. "First, you did me over the Net a week ago, I think it was. But that's not the reason why you don't have to LV me now or ever again. You quit your job when you went into transition, Lilly, which you effectively did when you asked me many of the right questions with your Sniffer active. You knew they were listening. And besides, I'm Human Three! I don't lie, and I don't break the law, and—"

"Beep," went the LieDeck that was now in Lilly's vest pocket.

"Well, I don't break the law except insofar as I refuse to be LVED by the WDA any more," said Victor, and this time there was no beep. "And being a Human Three, there's just no need to LV me," he added. He watched her struggle for his meaning. "There's no need to LieDeck-verify any confirmed Human Three," he explained. "Good luck to you," he said as he marched into his bedroom and slammed the door.

Lilly knew that Victor, by virtue of his refusal to be LieDeck-verified, had just lost all his Net privileges for the rest of his life. Not that he cares; he's dying anyway. "Victor!" she hollered at the door. "I didn't quit the WDA and I do have the right to LV anyone at any time if I think there could be a problem. I have that discretionary power, and ... you knew that." She wasn't sure that he knew that, but what the hell ... she let her accusation stand.

Victor let his caftan fall to the floor, stepped out of it, and stood with his back against the door. He'd become chilled from the excursion to the deck, and his arms were covered in goose bumps. His head was starting to throb as well, and he worried that the amount of time he could last between pain pills was shrinking dramatically.

He lifted one foot out of the garment, and used the other foot to fling it to the side of the room. "Lilly," he said loudly, "come in here a minute." He went over to his dresser and took a piece of paper and a pen. He didn't bother to turn around when he heard the door unlatch, and he didn't care whether it would bother his "guest" that he was buck-naked. He penned a short note in tiny script, and wrote "Eat this" at the bottom. Then he tore off the corner of the paper that he had written on and turned towards Lilly Petrosian. She kept her eyes on his eyes—and off his elf-like body—as he walked over to her and handed her the note. Victor then turned around and lifted up the long white sheet of hair.

Lilly was sickened to see the open sore on the back of his neck. It was practically a carbon copy of the horrid mass of poisonous matter that her father had had on his chest, a globule of flesh that didn't just look disgusting, but was a lethal weapon, spawned by his own body, aimed madly at himself. Vomit leapt in her stomach, begged to be thrown out of her mouth. With an effort, she held it back—that and her tears.

She read the note. "I don't know how they did it," the note said, "but I do think the WDA murdered me. Goodbye." She felt her stomach clench when she glanced again at the sore. Then she put the tiny note in her mouth and began chewing it into a wet ball. Paranoia? she wondered. "See you ... soon," she said as she turned and left the room.

"I doubt it," she heard him say as she closed the bedroom door.

Chapter 60

SUDBURY HARDROCKS

Friday, March 18, 2033—7:40 a.m.

Victor jammed his thumbs into the ear-holes, tore off his helmet and threw it into the mud in front of the bench. Sweat poured down his face, and his breathing was labored. He wished he had an oxygen mask, but those lovely things were reserved for game-day. "Fucking ... cheapo ... Sudbury ... Hardrocks," he snarled breathlessly in the direction of the coach. "You want us ... to work ... as hard as ... game-day ... with no fuckin' ... oxygen." No one paid him any mind, not even the players he'd squeezed in between on

the bench.

It was past midnight, and the cheapo fucking Sudbury Hardrocks Football Club had authorized the use of only half of the floodlights for practices—another dumb cost-saver that irritated the hell out of Victor. He was sixty-something ... old, in a word ... and his eyesight was marginal even in mid-afternoon. “Don't know how they expect to keep stars on the team under these absurd conditions,” he brayed to himself. “I can't fuckin' throw the fuckin' ball if I can't fuckin' see what the fuck's going on. Next year I'm trying out for the Dallas fuckin' Cowboys!”

“Is that your goddam ex-wife again?” hollered the coach.

Victor realized he was now lying on the gummy ground ... how did I get here? ... and that he'd been asleep. He jumped up and squinted at the mid-field stripe. “Oh Christ!” he spit.

There was Winnie Jopps, with her two children, a boy nine and a girl twelve whose names he could never quite recall, walking blindly onto the very middle of the field, as oblivious to the rain and mud as they were to the grunting clutch of three-hundred-pound black football players. Why can't Winnie and the kids play pretend-badminton someplace else? And why now? Don't they know they're spoiling our fun?

Winnie and her children started batting imaginary birds over and into an imaginary net with imaginary racquets. Victor slumped onto the bench and dropped his pounding head into his wet, muddy hands. When he opened his eyes again, he was quite surprised to notice that his uniform was clean, unlike everyone else's. How could that be?

He looked to the left, and saw no one. Same thing to the right. Even the coach had disappeared, as had the fifty or so die-hard fans who never ever missed the team's full-dress scrimmages. Even Winnie and the children had gone. The field was now ... empty! One by one, with strangely metallic clunks, the floodlights were being turned off. Musta fallen asleep again, he figured. I hate it when that happens.

He rose and jogged towards the locker room, windmilling his left arm as he bobbed along. Every time it went up and over, his left shoulder-pad scraped across his ear. Never mind about the ear, he said to himself—his arm ached like fire. Musta slept on it and cut off the damn circulation, he guessed. Serves me right for playing football at my age.

As he opened the heavy green door and entered the hallway, he felt the same visceral thrill he'd known the first time he walked on concrete with his cleats ... forty-five years ago, he realized. “Click, click,” they went as he walked. His chest was puffed out. “Click, click.” His arms seemed to be suspended weightlessly out from his body ... sideways, at thirty degrees or so ... as if his lats were so enormous that it was a physical impossibility for his arms to hang straight down. “Click, click.” He reached the locker-room door, tried the handle, but he couldn't get in.

“It's locked,” he yelled at a diminutive gray janitor who was sweeping in the hall, in slow motion. The man had the tiniest ears, nose and mouth, but he had enormous black eyes ... almond-shaped, like the drawings by those crackpots who claim alien abduction.

“You'll have to crawl in through the air conduit, or a drainage pipe,” the janitor said languidly. “Everybody's gone home.”

Victor marched over to the little gray man—click, click, click, click—grabbed him by the throat with both hands and let snot drip from his nostrils by virtue of heavy breathing. “The keys!” he demanded.

The terrified janitor held out a big ring with a couple of dozen keys on it, and Victor loosened his grip.

"They don't even let me go in direct," the wee gray guy explained, "but if you go through the Great Hall and out the far end, there's a blue door there that goes to the kitchen, and at the very back of the kitchen there's an orange door to the other end of the locker-room. Just try all of those keys till you get the right one—that's what I have to do."

It all sounded a bit contrived to Victor, a bit reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland, truth be told, but he let the poor man go, took the keys, and jingled them gaily. The little gray man with the almond eyes immediately jumped into a broom closet, and closed the door on himself.

After a good deal of profanity and nine wrong keys, Victor managed to open the door to the Great Hall. "Finally," he bellowed. He walked through—and almost bowled over a waiter carrying a huge silver tray high aloft with one hand.

"Crab?" asked the waiter as the orchestra stopped dead in the middle of a minuet.

"You got any lobster?" asked Victor.

The waiter lowered the tray to eye-level. Victor grabbed an over-sized pink claw and began gnawing on the fat end, shell and all, as he elbowed his way through the crowd.

All the men in the Great Hall were exactly thirty-six years old, he observed, and all the women exactly twenty-three—how Victor knew these "facts" was uncertain. All the men wore identical black tuxedos, and all the women wore identical red cocktail dresses ... with carnation-and-baby's-breath corsages on their wrists. "Oh ... my ... God!" they all said, the men and their womenfolk, in perfect unison.

"Snobs," shouted Victor, as bits of meat and claw showered all over nearby clones. "You think you're so fuckin' together, but I got the fuckin' keys, ya bunch of losers!"

"Oh ... my ... God!" they all repeated as he click-clicked his way through the human passageway that opened up before him.

"You don't even know what the fuckin' keys are for, jerks," he shouted as he kicked open the blue door on the far side of the Great Hall. Safe at last!

"Oh ... my ... God!" they all said again as the string orchestra restarted discreetly.

The kitchen was pulsating with multi-colored strobes, and somebody had a Sniffer on, pumping out tinny drummic on its pathetic little speaker. All the stoves and countertops had been removed, and the entire black football team was in there, clustered around each other, freshly showered and dressed in expensive civvies, looking uniformly forlorn. The coach—he was extremely white—was hollering at them, trying to bully them out of their stupor. "So what if no girls came?" he shouted, turning up the volume on the tiny Sniffer. "Dance with each other, furfucksakes."

This didn't seem right to Victor. He threw the remains of the lobster away and jingled his ring of keys expectantly, sensing that these big black guys would understand the fuller significance of his newfound power. No one even looked his way.

Suddenly the orange back door of the kitchen burst open ... and out poured a hundred or more well-endowed and scantily-clad extremely white cheerleaders, doing cartwheels, and shaking their oversized paper pom-poms—among other things—to the drummic, and chanting something about the painful injuries and real death that would surely befall their enemy, the other team, meaning any team that dared to do battle with the cheapo fucking Sudbury Hardrocks Football Club. Every player attracted four or five cheerleaders, and in seconds these rather excitable women were touching muscles, showing

off their cleavage and offering sneak peeks...

...except not to Victor, who stood alone. "Hey, what about me?" he yelled, but no one seemed to hear. "I'm the fucking quarterback ... and I got the fucking keys, too!"

Who am I shouting at? he asked himself. The last he knew, he'd been in the kitchen-cum-dancehall of Laurentian University with a bunch of big, burly, black footballers, an endless gaggle of nubile, extremely white cheerleaders, and one jubilant coach. But now he found himself back in the hallway where he'd started, just outside of the locker-room, looking into the confused face of that little gray man, the janitor with the almond eyes ... and he evidently wanted his keys back.

"Mid-life crisis?" the man asked as he picked the keys surreptitiously from Victor's confused hand.

"I'm the backbone of the fuckin' team," cried Victor, "and all the girls ... they just ... ignored me!"

"Look," said the janitor as he clipped the huge key ring to his belt, "it's probably time somebody told you the truth. You're not even on the team, sir. They just sort of let you ... you know ... hang out, and pretend, because you're rich. Go home, Mr. Helliwell. Go home and make love to your wife or something."

"I—uh—don't have a wife," he admitted sheepishly.

"You never know," said the little gray man. "Maybe by the time you get home, you'll have one."

"Were those my kids out there playing pretend-badminton?" Victor asked.

"You don't have any babies," said Julia as she mopped his burning forehead with her hand.

"What!?" screamed Victor as he sat bolt upright in his bed.

"Yet," whispered Julia as she gently eased him back down onto a lightly bloodstained pillow. "You were ... dreaming a bad dream, that's all. You could still be a daddy if you wanted to." She covered him up with the comforter and lay again beside him, rubbing the top of his chest. "Mr. Wu said that guy I got seminated with could even be dead, he told me."

Victor smiled vacantly, and decided not to relate his bizarre dream to Julia. He also faintly remembered making a sperm deposit several years ago, at Mr. Wu's suggestion. "Why did he ask me to do that?" he said aloud, but the memory wouldn't come to the surface. Julia said nothing—she had no idea what he was talking about. "What time is it?" he asked.

"There's lots of time before your meeting," Julia assured him as she lifted his arm and burrowed her blond head under his good arm and onto his shoulder. "I wish I could go," she said, meaning to the meeting. "You want some nice cranberry juice with ice in it, just the way you like it best?"

"Were you here all night?" Victor asked.

"I'll get you some nice cranberry juice," said Julia, getting up, "and your pill."

Chapter 61

RETREAT

Friday, March 18, 2033—8:00 a.m.

Michael had slept reasonably well the first night in his little no-tech cabin on Wilson Lake, in spite of a biting overnight frost. He had bundled up on the sofa in his clothes, wrapped in two fat comforters, and he'd lit fires. He had awakened twice to feed the fireplace and the wood stove—he'd have to chop more wood when he got up—and he had thoroughly enjoyed the manly inconvenience of it all. Life is what happens elsewhere when you're at work, he'd tried on for size during the second feeding. It sounded as if his daughter were preaching inside his head, and like most truisms, it felt suspicious.

Now it was morning, and he was kneeling down, blowing gently onto the remaining embers in the fireplace, sticking in crumpled paper, cross-piling kindling, and shivering. In days long past, he would have run naked down to the dock and dived off the end ... consequences be damned. If a lake wasn't totally covered in ice, then you could swim in it—that was his teenaged rule of thumb. “His” lake, at this time, was a solid mass of ice, on top anyway. He longed for his oversized jacuzzi back at the manor, where he'd spent so many hours lolling deliciously with Becky in better days ... or the Bahamian beach, where he had lolled so sensually with Lilly only two days ago ... and three days ago, and four days ago, and...

“Later,” he whispered to himself as the bulging grab bag of griefs and grievances threatened to fence in his entire mind. That was part of the plan: to confront himself with unavoidable chores and a demanding environment. Michael wanted to just percolate his problems, not nuke them.

The two things that had kept his shoulder to the boulder for the past fifteen years were gone now. Well, the company was gone to him until all the lawyers and the C.S.E. got their pounds of flesh, and that could take a year, even in a judicial system now aided by the LieDeck. But Becky wasn't gone, exactly. In fact she had encouraged him to make this solitary retreat, for however long it took to sort himself out, and she did that out of love. Maybe I should pull a Victor and hide out here incommunicado for a few years, he thought with a chuckle as the kindling caught fire and started giving up its meat to make heat.

Michael went out on the deck and pissed over the railing. He actually preferred the “big bathroom” to the little chemical outfit he had indoors ... except in mosquito season, and especially late at night in mosquito season. Getting stung on the weenie was his least favorite thing about the little cabin. He resolved to get the wood stove boiling water for coffee before he took a shower ... at least that was the plan before he remembered there was no shower out here. He'd have to tap into the “big bathtub”—either that or break his long-standing habit of bathing daily. A sponge bath would have to do.

He glanced up over the frozen, puddle-spotted lake to the lodge on the far side, and he shivered. Partly it was the cold; partly it was the stinging memory of the day many years ago when, as a teenager, he had sped across that lake in his boat to see what the RCMP plane was doing, only to see the lodge explode. He went back inside, lit the fire in the wood stove, and faced the ignoble facts of 18th-century life. Then he went trudging out to the mudroom and got the ice-auger, a tiny pail and a bucket. He put on his nylon hunting jacket and his “bubbaroots”—funny how childhood nicknames stuck—and walked down to the dock and then out to the end.

The ice was still two feet thick, he estimated, but watery on top, and thinner near the shore. It looked dangerous, but wasn't. He eased his way on the slippery surface with one hand on the dock and the other holding the bucket and the auger out from his body, like the balance pole in a high wire act. He set down the big bucket with the small pail inside, braced one rubber boot against a supporting log of the dock, and slammed the spike end of the auger into the ice. He put his left hand on the loose wooden top-knob, leaned his chest and his weight against that hand, and started cranking with his right hand. He was anxious to get the job done, but he was also mindful of keeping his balance on the wet surface.

It pleased him greatly to see ice crumbling under his will. He loved that splintering sound, and he enjoyed the relative ease with which a simple tool could shatter the hard face of nature. Who invented this thing?

he wondered as he turned the handle and leaned and listened. The spiral blade sank further and further into a sloshing mound of ice-chips. Technology was fantastic, and he'd made a fortune out of it, but it was a double-edged auger. As he cranked the handle, it occurred to him that of all the gizmos and gadgets that Whiteside Technologies had ever produced, the LieDeck had become the main basis of the family's wealth. And just as that pesky device had inflicted cavernous wounds and disfiguring twists onto history, it was now the principal cause of his emotional debt. His future decisions—all of them—had to be taken only after factoring the LieDeck into the equation, and they would be determined as much by that hyper-modern brain-auger as by his personal circumstances or his free will. It felt unfair. If only we could dis-invent the LieDeck, he pondered as he leaned and cranked.

The auger punched through—the ice was thinner than he'd guessed—and he lost his balance when the thing gave. His feet fled like rogue skis on an Alpine hill, and he landed on his buttocks in about an inch of water. And he laughed heartily—laughed at the liquid nitrogen that burned him from beneath, laughed at the absence of engineers, accountants, secretaries, Patriot agents and chauffeurs.

Then he struggled to his knees, pulled out the auger, and stuck his bare hands into the maw to remove the larger chunks of ice. It was apparently easy to forget how the passage of time could make a person stupid. He knew better than this once upon his younger days, and now his hands burned more than his knees and his ass. He was making a mess out of a relatively simple job. He glanced across the frozen lake once again, towards the lodge, and wondered if anyone was watching him make a fool of himself ... through binoculars. Of course they were. If Patriot didn't watch, and he injured himself seriously, real heads would be lopped off willy-nilly. Maybe Victor's watching, he even considered—until he recalled how sick the man was ... and how disinterested he is in anybody but himself, he added, meanly ... and wrongly, he knew.

Michael grabbed the little pail out of the bucket and began loading the latter with the former, ice shards and all. It didn't take long—twenty or so quick dips and pours—and his hands and knees were rebelling against the full court press of acid pain. He stood up gingerly, using the auger as a cane to keep his balance, and headed for shore, for warmth, for safety, for healing ... and away from nature's early-warning system. Water had gotten in his rubber boots when he took the tumble, so his feet stung as much as his knees and his butt. But the worst by far were the hands. They were so cold he wanted to drop the bucket and auger and just run. Any more idiotic bumbling along these lines, and next would come hypothermia ... then death. He laughed again. He was in no danger, but Ma Nature had punished his ineptitude and lack of forethought, rather severely. Not only that, but a bucket of water seemed a lot heavier today than it had been half a lifetime ago.

He struggled into the cabin, used both hands to hoist the metal bucket onto the wood stove, and breathed relief. He'd have a sponge bath in half an hour or so—whenever the water was above body temperature—but for now he had to get into some dry clothes. He smiled as he peeled off his soaked pants and socks and underwear. His penis had shrunk, and turned a cloudy white, and his scrotum had shriveled defensively.

Forgetting is like inexperience, he knew. This is going to take time, he also realized—the personal-sorting-out process, not the getting-dry-and-warm-and-clean.

Chapter 62

INHERIT THE EARTH

Friday, March 18, 2033—10:00 a.m.

Annette had slept too little, and poorly. Her body complained as she drove towards the entrance of the underground Diefenbunker, the home base of Jesus-E. There were no MIUs or Sniffers here, she had been told (although rumor had it that they had one early-model Sniffer in a locked safe, in case of emergencies). That must be why the Board of Directors of Evolution International chose this unique locale for its warm meeting, she said to herself.

In the past twenty-four hours, the directors had flown in from all over the world for this gathering, even though the secrecy of their deliberations would likely be short-lived. Surely their decision to meet here had nothing to do with the fact that the WDA retained the right to use nuclear weapons against the perpetrators of chaos, and the fact this place can withstand a near-direct hit. She dismissed that thought with a rather nervous laugh. Hi there Zilla, she said to her instinct. Feeling a tad paranoid today? she asked him.

Civilians had jumped at the chance to have things LieDeck-verified under the new LV policy of the WDA, and not unexpectedly, agents in the field had been cooperative. It seemed the LieDeck-verification of Human Three status could be done directly after all, since those who had achieved it knew it, and those who hadn't knew they hadn't. And so it was that Evolution International had confirmed the Human Three status of their top people, putting to rest years of pointless speculation about who among them, if anyone, might be a WDA informant or mole. No one was, and no one could fake Human Three Consciousness.

Now, having learned for the first time that Human Three Consciousness was a real and provable phenomenon, it was certain that the Board would take a decision to ask the WDA to change its approach. There had been talk for years about some day asking the WDA to simply confirm the Human Three status of Evolutionaries instead of asking their four demeaning questions, since being a Human Three implied the right answers.

Annette hadn't been able to find Lilly Petrosian yesterday, and hadn't made much of an effort, truth be told. She assumed Lilly simply wasn't answering her Netmessages. So, late last evening, Annette had Netlinked with the WDA monitor of Callaway #6, Gordon Weatherby, and confirmed that she had indeed mastered Human Three Consciousness, become Human Three—the first time she had really known that fact for absolute sure. It felt good. In fact it felt more than good—it felt wonderful. It took the commitment to the idea of Human Three Consciousness right out of the realm of belief, where it had sat in the past beside such embarrassments as religious faith, and placed it right squarely in the scientific world. I now know who I am, she realized as she parked near the entrance to the old bunker. She had to wonder if the Jesus-Eers would ever muster the guts to check out their silly religious dogmas on a LieDeck. Not gonna happen, she figured. Maybe just as well.

The ninety-eight monks of Jesus-E were thrilled to have been designated the official host clan. “Just let our people in, escort them out and serve us your fabulous wine,” they had been told. It was quite impossible to make arrangements with a bunch of male grape farmers and rock-tunnellers who eschewed the spoken word, so Evolution International had named Victor-E the “unofficial” host clan—meaning that they had to do everything else, all the hard stuff, everything except the three small duties that had been assigned to these eccentric monks.

The past twenty-four hours had been hectic on the Québec side of the Ottawa River, and Annette had to be almost forced into bed at three o'clock in the morning. Now, she regretted her inability ... my unwillingness, she edited herself ... to delegate authority to others during the frantic ramp-up to this rare warm huddle of Evolution International in the Diefenbunker. She was plain exhausted, and by the look of the crowded parking lot, she was among the last to arrive.

Annette was again struck by the theological lunacy of these monks. They thought they could find Satan

beneath the surface of the Earth if they dug a long enough tunnel. Like that's going to happen! came the sarcastic thought. And for seventeen years, they had professed their belief that Victor Helliwell was the Second Coming of Jesus Christ! Oh well, she figured, with the new LV policy of the WDA, that myth will be dispelled very soon, no matter what the Jesus-Eers think or do.

She wasn't a member of the international Board of Directors, but as the head of the "unofficial" host clan and a member of the original "gang" over at Victor-E, the first clan ever to exist, she had been given a late invitation for this historic meeting. When her hood was carefully removed from her head by a taciturn monk, she found herself standing in a large underground room, and in the company of the thirty Board members of Evolution International, plus a few strays, like herself. Everyone was standing, and the windowless room was alive with animated conversation. Silent monks were serving their fine wines, and Annette was personally welcomed by Mbingu K'tonga, head of the African network of clans, with whom she had Netfaced on many occasions ... and with whom she had shared Netsex once, back in ... twenty thirty, she remembered as she caught a flash of his perfect white teeth.

"Mbingu," she beamed. "Good to see you, my friend. Are you chairing today's—"

"No, I am," said a cramped voice from behind as an arm embraced her waist.

"Victor!" she exulted. "I wondered if you were coming today. How are you?" She found it odd—even comical—that he had dressed in a suit and tie for this gathering. He was the only person in the room wearing such clothes.

"Dying, unfortunately," he said after they'd kissed. "But apart from that I'm dandy. We'd better..." He finished the sentence with a hand gesture.

The delegates sat down on an odd assortment of mismatched chairs, and the hubbub became a hush as Victor pulled a lightweight plastic lawn chair to the front of the room. "I think I'll have some of that white wine," he said to a passing monk. The draped man handed Victor a full glass. "Thanks," said Victor, and the monk smiled. "Thank ... you," he repeated assertively, but the monk just smiled wider, and added a dutiful nod. "You're wel—come," said Victor irritably. "It's just courtesy."

The monk looked around the room, hoping to find a superior who could help him out of the dilemma.

"Say it, for Christ's sake," said Victor testily. "I'm a human being, and I deserve to be answered when I say thanks."

"You're welcome," said the terrified monk. "Lord," he whispered as he slunk away.

"There you go," said Victor—meaning it wasn't such a big deal to open your mouth and spit it out. He had heard that these monks believed he was the Christ, and thought it was perfectly ridiculous. He remembered the heyday of religion, and he'd even tried to believe in God once upon a very long time ago. It amused him, the crackpot things people did in the name of a non-existent deity. Sometimes it irritated him. Why do people think they need the fear of a god to even try to love each other? he wondered for the millionth time. He stifled the impulse to lecture these foolish monks, and after tasting the wine, he turned his full attention back to the business at hand.

"As you all know," he began, "we were going to do this phase two thing at Victor-E and hope that it would catch on world-wide. However, we're at war now, so we have to either surrender, or beat the WDA at its own game. We could have surrendered over the Net, so I assume you've come here to get sweaty and muddy and Human One and kick some serious WDA butt." He felt like a coach ... or a quarterback.

Glances flew all over the room. That wasn't exactly how any of these directors would have put it, but ... well, this was war.

"Just kidding," said Victor impishly, remembering his crazy dream of very early that morning. "This contest is unavoidable, but this conflict is not between Evolution and the WDA! It is between Human Two and Human Three. The world is no longer big enough for both species. We cannot co-exist any longer, so ... we Human Threes must convert all the Human Twos, or at least the vast majority—say ninety-five percent—in the next few years. Otherwise, we're finished.

"Now, we have no tradition of proselytizing," he went on, "for the good reason that Human Twos cannot be reliably made to see any light on a basis of rational argument or persuasion. Which leaves us with—?" He looked out at his captive audience and saw that again, he'd managed to confuse the lot of them.

"Prayer?" suggested a young monk, out loud! Victor dismissed him with a scornful look, caught himself, and said "no," as politely as he could manage.

"Force?" came a timid female voice from the back.

"Please," said Victor. "You don't fight fire with fire if you're a Human Three. You fight fire with..." He paused again, hoping for an intelligent offering, or any offering at all. When nothing emerged, he finished the sentence himself. "Water!"

Jeeze, felt Annette, I wish he wasn't so fucking obtuse about everything. "I'd prefer it if you just told us what you have in mind," she said.

"Connnnnnnnditioning!" said Victor excitedly. "The only effective competitor to the biological imperatives of an unwilling or disinterested Human Two is conditioning! A Human Two seeks his or her self-interest compulsively ... not effectively, but certainly compulsively, instinctively. So ... we have to modify the material equation such that the efforts of Human Twos at self-gratification lead them inexorably over to Human Three Consciousness! We have to condition them into it!"

Everyone was as miffed as ever, but two things were clear. First, Victor seemed sure of himself; and second, you don't dismiss the man who had invented the LieDeck and the Evolutionary socio-economic model until you'd heard him out.

"And the poor shall inherit the Earth," Victor offered with a crooked smile, just to be sure their bewilderment was complete. "Now, I guess the monks had better skedaddle so we can get down to the business of this phase two thing."

"Why not let them stay?" suggested Annette. "They won't talk!"

Victor always felt sick when he dwelt upon the absurd beliefs of Jesus-E—especially as they pertained to himself—but when he looked up and saw the eager, child-like looks on their bearded faces, he couldn't bring himself to do it. "I ... guess," he said, and about a dozen monks scrambled to find good spots on the floor right in front of Him.

Chapter 63

JACKASSES

Friday, March 18, 2033—1:40 p.m.

The WDA had a monitor amongst the monks of the Jesus-E clan, just as Lilly Petrosian lived among the Victor-Eens ... except he was clandestine. He hadn't been able to get a video of the proceedings in the Diefenbunker, but he had managed to stash his digicorder close to where Victor had been seated, taped beneath the seat of a chair. And half an hour after the meeting ended, he'd gone into the room, retrieved his tiny digicorder, driven to his office in Carp (on what he said, in a hand-scribbled note, was a "personal privilege" mission), compressed the audio data down to a "squashy," encrypted the thing and fast-loaded it by satellite onto Sheena Kalhoun's MIU.

Sheena Kalhoun and her inner circle of six generals (plus old General Brampton, who had elbowed his way in) spent the next forty minutes listening to Victor Helliwell outline the "phase 2" plan that he had devised for Evolution. And now that their eavesdropping session had ended, everyone, even the "king of peace," was waiting for Sheena to set the tone, to say something—anything.

"Anybody figure Helliwell ... could be joking?" she asked. Nobody even shrugged. They weren't sure where she was going with this, and there were dangers in both a "yes" and a "no" response. Sheena kept staring at the dead MIU screen. "Well, does anybody think he was play-acting, trying to fake us out?"

"No way he knew we were recording the meeting," said her favorite Member of the General Assembly. His name was General Carlos Juarez, and he ran—or "represented," officially—Brazil. He was in Sheena's good books, permanently, it seemed, and had been ever since he had accepted the point position and stick-handled the WDA through those "Henderson Scandals" last year. He wasn't always helpful, but he seemed able to speak up at will in Sheena's presence and yet be spared the legendary Kalhoun temper, even when his ideas were less than helpful ... like now. "No question Helliwell meant what he said," offered Juarez. "There were no beeps, anyway." They were, of course, LieDeck-verifying the squashy.

Sheena nodded patiently. Juarez sometimes displays a stunning grasp of the obvious, she thought, like now. "Is Victor Helliwell insane, then?" she asked. "Like a sociopath, or a psychopath?" Everyone knew that there were certain psychiatric disorders that allowed their sufferers to escape LieDeck detection—mostly because they didn't rightly know that they were lying, or had no conscience to be bothered, and hence no angst to be detected in their vocal patterns.

"Doesn't help to have a malignant golf ball inside your skull," said Brampton, with a chuckle.

"Even if he is insane," tried Juarez, ignoring the Brampton intervention, "the issue is whether or not the directors of Evolution bought that load of crap."

And then sometimes he actually is helpful, thought Sheena, like now. "Any traffic on that?" she said into the rarefied air of her top floor office at WDA headquarters in New York.

Her MIU lit up, and her Information Officer came on the screen. "Not yet," he said. "They'll either use the snail mail or compressed-encrypted data in a fast-load squashy to all the clans or..."

"Or?" demanded Kalhoun.

"Well, they could let the directors fly home and tell their clan networks personally," said her Information Officer, "but that would take time, and I think these people are in a hurry, and Mr. Helliwell did encourage them to go public as soon as possible. I'll alert you the moment we get some electronic data on that."

It was only two hours since Victor Helliwell had spilled his guts to the full Board of Evolution International. "They met on the warm," said Sheena, "so obviously they didn't want us to know about phase two before they're ready. Maybe they're anticipating that we'll fumble the thing in our first reaction,

or ... or they think we could and would screw them up.” It had always bothered the Supreme Commander when civilians assumed that the WDA would interfere in ways that weren't strictly within the mandate of the Charter. It mattered nothing to her that such concerns had proven prudent in the past, especially during the Henderson Scandals. She still found this paranoia insulting. But, the bigwigs of the Evolution movement almost never meet on the warm except on a regional basis, she pondered. So ... what was the point? Surely ... surely they didn't think that ... that we'd nuke them!

"I think he meant every God damned word of it,” said General Juarez. “Plus, I think they bought it. And furthermore, I personally think Helliwell's completely fuckin’ gonzo. The fact that nothing he said got beeped only proves that he believes his own bullshit, not that what he said is true.”

All eyes moved from General Juarez to Sheena Kalhoun. “So...” She paused briefly to make absolutely sure she had this right. “So, we declared economic war on Evolution, and their brilliant retaliatory move ... is to start giving their money away helter-skelter?”

Nobody said anything. That was essentially what Victor Helliwell had proposed ... well, not all their money, but half of their ongoing savings. No one in the WDA's inner circle dared to contradict or even confirm Kalhoun's cynical synopsis. They'd all heard the recording, but it made not a lick of sense to any of them ... never mind what Victor had said was the point of his cockamamie plot.

"Statistics?” called Sheena, and another top international civil servant popped onto her MIU screen. “Have you run the numbers yet?” asked the boss.

"Still working on it, chief,” said the female mathematical wizard that Sheena always consulted. “But as a rough guess ... we—uh—figured last week that it would take eight months to a year for Evolution to collapse financially—just on the basis of your so-called modest suggestion. Now, with Helliwell's SST giveaway deal factored in, that time-line should be cut to...” The people in Sheena's office watched as the oracle double-checked the bottom lines. “As far as I can tell, the new SST thing should accelerate the process—a lot. I'd say Evolution should be totally bankrupt in perhaps ... I don't see how they can hold out more than another ... five months ... maybe as little as four!”

Sheena ordered her MIU down, and a small curl appeared in the corner of her mouth. “We declared economic war on Evolution,” she reviewed in a manner that exhibited great care, “and they're responding ... by weakening their defenses and giving away their war chest! Did I ... get that right?”

Slowly, the snicker in Sheena's voice infected the whole room. Even General George felt a rare smile creeping over him. Incrementally, the snickering became chortling, then laughter, and finally disintegrated into a collection of guffaws that set up a full-fledged emotion wrestling session, replete with foot stomping, tears and all. Evolution had been shown the business end of a sword, and their leaders had decided to defend themselves by impaling themselves on the thing.

"Fuckin'—” Sheena could hardly get the other word out, so convulsed was she with the colossal idiocy of it all. “Jackasses,” she finally managed.

Chapter 64

SPOILS OF WAR

Wednesday, April 6, 2033—7:25 p.m.

It was a sunburned evening, the kind of sweaty affair one might expect in Memphis or Athens in July, not

in Pontiac County, Québec in April. March had not been so unusual, even after four decades of global warming, although towards the end there had been less snow than would have been typical a century ago. Still, there'd been no "weird spells" in 2033—until now. The high on this windless day, at 3:00 p.m., had been 93 degrees on the Fahrenheit scale, and the humidity rivaled that of a sauna. It would probably last only a day or two before things went seasonal again, but for the moment, it was ... well, weird.

"We should have come starkers, to freak them out," joked Lars as he plodded down the cement stairs with Annette Blais and Tirone Lucas. Had this meeting been virtual, the guys at least might have done it—Annette was too hung up or dignified (take your pick) to present herself to the whole world *au naturel*. But this meeting was "on the warm," or "in person," as Evolution International had insisted, and Evolutionaries weren't supposed to flaunt their broader comfort zones in the Normal community, especially when it came to all things sexual. So here they were, dressed in clinging clothing, representing Victor-E's new role as community Santa Clauses, entering the basement of the town hall.

They were on time, and they were surprised not to see a clump of locals standing out on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes and joints—the usual fare for Normal meetings. They didn't even see anyone parking a car or walking towards the early-20th-century building on Main Street. "Maybe they didn't hear about our meeting," said Tirone, "or maybe they just didn't believe us!"

"Maybe Normals just don't like free money," said Lars sarcastically.

"Yeah right," said Tirone. "And pigs fly."

The threesome went down the stairs to the basement, and voices could be heard from the meeting room. Lars opened the door, peeked in and saw about a dozen people, mostly women, and all clearly proletarian.

Annette gave Lars a light knee to the buttocks to move things along. "I guess the local movers and shakers didn't come," she whispered.

They had expected that. The middle class and anyone even higher up the ladder were ridiculing this new "phase 2 thing" that Evolution was now launching—not that they had much of a handle on the details. They certainly didn't want anything resembling charity from what they considered a collection of "misfits and deviates," a phrase that better-off Normals used in private to characterize Evolution. A few businesspersons had mumbled their concern that this new Evolutionary gimmick might catch on, like Canadian Tire's funny-money or the Fineberg Food chain's frequent diner points, and cut into their sales figures. For the most part, however, the Normal response to Evolution's weird invitation had been raised eyebrows and dismissive laughter.

The notice on the Net had been rather vague. All over the world, from almost one million clans, the same message "template" had been filled in and sent out on the Net to bulletin boards maintained by all nearby cities, towns and service groups:

All phase 2 Evolutionary clans will henceforth invest a significant portion of all their members' ongoing savings into social services for the surrounding Normal communities through our new Social Service Terminals (SSTs). [name of clan] invites all Normal citizens to come and tell us what you need. A meeting will be held on the warm at [time] in the [place] on April [date—no later than April 8], 2033.

"Hey, here comes Santy Claus!" slurred a short Normal male wearing a feed cap—obviously a country hick, and just as obviously a drunk. Annette seemed to remember that squeaky voice. She caught the eye of the unfunny guy who had repeated the "Santa" put-down that had sprung up in Normal chatrooms immediately after the first skeletal facts about the "phase 2" plan had been released. She recognized him as a regular at the E-tery, a mostly unthreatening pain-in-the-ass whose patronage was prompted by the

rather high probability of excellent boob-ogling prospects. In the E-tery kitchen, all the staff referred to him as “the troll.”

The sweating locals were standing around in groups of two or three, wiping their faces and complaining about the sweltering weather. When Annette and her two escorts went to the fold-up table at the front of the room, those who had come to hear the news shuffled to find seats. There were tiny open windows down one wall of the basement room, high up, just above ground level, a perfect set-up to let in lots of natural light, no breeze at all, and way too much heat. Annette fished an unused E-tery serviette from her purse and mopped her brow. “You got the numbers?” she asked Tirone.

“Right here,” said Tirone. She knew I had them, he realized, so why did she ask that? He pulled a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and flattened it as best he could on the plywood table, having already forgotten that his feelings might have been injured one moment ago.

The years haven’t been kind to Tirone, thought Annette. He was fifty-eight, but he looked a lot older. Annette was pleased to see the pride in his sunken eyes as he shook his head at the impressive bottom line on the page between his big beefy mitts. He finds it nearly impossible to believe we’re actually doing this, she thought, but he’s so trusting of others—especially Victor—that he’s going along with it. That was also true of a hundred million other Evolutionaries around the world—almost half of the movement had already signed up for “phase 2.” It’s amazing that so many came on board, Annette considered, again. I think it’s possible that Evolutionaries are closer to Human Three Consciousness than Victor realizes.

She wanted to “believe” that, even though belief, as such, was not exactly a popular activity for Human Threes. Belief meant you accepted something as true even though you had no evidence, and no reason to even suspect it was true other than your own hope that it was ... or maybe somebody else’s hope or say-so. The reality of Evolution’s shift to the phase 2 model was foggier than Evolutionaries suddenly seeing some kind of bright light. The perception of most people was more in keeping with the instinctive skepticism one would expect of a jungle-dweller, or a capitalist. In fact, millions of Evolutionaries were shifting over to the new model on faith, plain and simple, never mind that they had been specifically asked not to do things that way. But it was understandable. After all, they had just recently learned that Victor Helliwell was the architect of the Evolution movement, and it was Helliwell who was recommending this fundamental amendment to the rules.

Annette put her elbows on the table, interlocked her fingers, parked her chin on her hands, and stared out at the motley collection of locals that had deigned to attend. She could have called the meeting to order and jumped right into the business part, but she wanted to collect herself, review the situation, take a minute or two to just think.

The campaign slogan that the Board of Evolution International had decided upon at the Diefenbunker was: “Phase 2—because it’s right for now—even if it feels wrong.” Human Threes knew all about that “feeling wrong” business. They’d had hundreds of personal experiences, and heard about thousands more from friends and family, where those words “even if it feels wrong” had been the fulcrum upon which big decisions had turned, good decisions, mostly, decisions that had reinforced their new and unnatural reliance on reason, and their distrust of impulse, their distrust of their own gut feelings. The reality was that many of those decisions were tentative, taken on trust, and confirmed only when it became obvious that they were right, later ... sometimes months later. The apparent momentum of the international move to “phase 2” was indeed very tentative.

Evolutionaries knew they were at war; that was simply impossible to miss. A lot of their business was drying up as more and more Normal customers heeded the “modest suggestion” that Sheena Kalhoun had made a few weeks back. Most Evolutionaries had a friend or a family member who wouldn’t go along with phase 2, or who was moving out of a clan in protest, even disgust. But almost all of the older

members of the movement, along with at least some of the newer ones, had decided to buy into the recommendation of the Directors of Evolution International. If they stuck it out for a couple of months and it didn't show concrete signs of working as planned, they'd be out a few thousand dollars each—not a big deal. And of course as free people, they could change their minds at any time and go back to the old phase 1 model ... and just hope that somehow the movement would still survive the economic war that had been declared by the WDA.

But then along with the alarming exodus, there was a parallel trend that stymied the expert analysts—a growing demand for those places vacated by the Doubting Thomases, a flood of new applicants to Evolution, a need for entirely new clans to be constructed, thousands of them, all over the place. It seemed that the world's remaining Christians—although they certainly didn't buy Victor Helliwell as a new Jesus—were profoundly impressed by his “economics of love” idea, and the fact that he had based phase 2 on the admonition in the second “Great Commandment” for Christians to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Some Christians said that the phase 2 model was based on the Golden Rule—“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—but the second so-called Great Commandment was the principal source of Helliwell's inspiration ... even though he also meant what he had said about phase 2 having nothing to do with believing the Bible or believing in God. (“A good idea is a good idea, no matter what the source may be,” he had emphasized repeatedly in the Diefenbunker.)

One thing was certain: Victor Helliwell unquestionably believed his own words when he articulated the phase 2 economic model in the Diefenbunker. All his words had been surreptitiously recorded by Annette Blais—partly for the sake of history, and partly so they could be LieDeck-verified later. A sympathetic (read “not-too-hostile”) agent of the WDA had later allowed the L Ving of that entire presentation, and it flew out over the Net that Helliwell's logic, if not intrinsically verifiable, had at least passed that test. Helliwell believed (and it could be cogently argued) that if Evolution were to operate on the basis of the phase 2 model, their customer loyalty would become so intense that many Normals would start volunteering at the Social Service Terminals, or SSTs—and many of these volunteers would eventually end up joining the movement, becoming givers rather than takers, and getting a lot more fun out of life in the process! This was a wild dream, that real love could eventually conquer instinct, greed and selfishness—even evil. Of course Victor Helliwell was not the first person to propose such a preposterous notion—Jesus was—but Victor was the first to translate it into material terms, into an economic model that could, and would, test this theory out, once and for all. And now Annette and her two friends were in a position to start that ball rolling, to see if it went anywhere or not.

“You'd think more'n a dozen locals would'a come,” Tirone said sadly. He had picked up on Annette's mood, and done a little Human Three thinking of his own. He felt it was time for her to snap out of it and get her butt in gear.

“You watch, the next SST committee meeting will be so crowded they'll be renting the fucking arena,” Annette whispered as she accepted the damp, wrinkled page from Tirone. Then she introduced herself and her fellow phase 2 Evolutionaries. “We are not here to run your meeting,” she told the small gathering. “We will simply tell you how the phase two SST thing is going to work, and how much money is available, then you folks will have to form a committee, elect a chairperson, discuss your priorities, vote, and tell us what you need, okay?”

“You mean, like, we just tell you how to spend all that money and that's what you'll do?” asked the tipsy troll from his hiding place under the feed cap.

“That's about it,” said Lars, who was sitting to the left of Victor-E's administrator.

“So, like, if we voted for free beer, you'd buy beer and give it to us?” asked the troll's buddy.

"Is that what you want?" asked Tirone, putting a hard Human One edge on his voice.

"Sure, why not?" said the troll.

"Well," said Annette, "if you make up a committee and the committee votes for that, I guess ... that's what we'll do, but you'd have to—"

"All riiiiiiight!" said the troll-buddy with a triumphant thrust of his fist. "All in favor o' free beer, hands up, dammit!" He tried throwing both his arms into the air, presumably to signal the touchdown.

"First of all," shouted Tirone—the Tirone Lucas of old, really—"you couldn't drink that much beer, and sec—"

"Try me," squeaked the troll belligerently.

"—and secondly," bellowed Tirone, "if you'd shut your fuckin' mouth for a while, I think maybe some other people could talk and we could get on with the meeting."

Annette stood up and looked down at Tirone, amazed that after so many years living in Evolution, he could regress with such speed to the rowdy goon he had been before the Revolution.

"Sorry," said Tirone when he looked up. "Sorry," he repeated ... directly at the troll, who was ready to roll up his miniature sleeves and pummel Tirone—not that he stood a chance of landing a single blow. "I guess I shouldn't'a shouted at youse ... or swore," he said reluctantly.

Annette got the two inebriated locals to sit down, and went back to the business that had brought her here. "First, why don't I tell you how much money you'll have to play with?" she asked, immediately regretting her choice of the word "play." "There's..." she checked the wrinkled sheet of paper. "There's three hundred and twenty people at Victor-E, of which ninety-six people are retired or at school full time or too young to work, so that means there's two hundred and twenty-four Evolutionaries who work full time. The average income for an employed Normal is a hundred and ten thousand dollars a year, but the average income of an Evolutionary is only about sixty-five percent of that amount, or about seventy thousand a year. The total income at the Victor-E clan is seventy thousand dollars times our two hundred and twenty-four working people, or about sixteen million dollars a year. As you may know, we save and invest approximately forty percent of our incomes, so our collective savings are about six million a year. Now, in this phase two program, instead of investing all of that money for our own retirement, we'll be putting half of it, or three million dollars a year, in the SST committee that you people will be setting up. So if you—"

"Holy Christ!" said the suddenly sobered-up troll. "So you're going to give us three million fuckin' dollars a year, and we can do whatever the fuck we want with it?"

"That's right," said Annette, with silent questions rumbling in her head about whether these people deserved so much as a half-price hamburger. There were nods of agreement from her Evolutionary cohorts—that was the plan.

"Why?" asked the troll's similarly sobered-up sidekick.

"That's our business!" said Tirone ferociously. "Well, you said it was," he whined up towards Annette's disapproving face.

"We aren't here to explain our reasons," Annette said diplomatically to both Tirone and the small audience. "That information is already out on the Net for any of you to look up. For the moment, I will tell you that there is one string attached. Whatever you decide to do with this money is fine with us, as

long as you can explain how the ideas you agree upon will help make life better in your community ... which means if you want free beer, you'd have to justify the expense in those terms, which I don't think you—"

"Yeah right!" said the troll. "So it's—like—we can have anything except free beer, right?"

"Come on with me, you two," rumbled Tirone as he stood up quickly, pointed two adjacent fingers at the sinners, and headed for the door. "I'm gonna personally buy you guys as much beer as you can drink between now and fuckin' midnight, okay?"

The two drinkers reached the door before Tirone, hooting and hollering all the way.

"Thanks, Tirone," said Lars, echoed by Annette.

"No problem." said Tirone. "Just don't be surprised if I come home a bit wobbly—and don't be surprised if I convert them two assholes into Human Threes," he added with a goofy grin. "We're allowed to push people now, right?"

"Okay," said Annette to the nine women and one man who remained, "so, this money should go a long way towards making life better for you and your families and friends, so ... do I hear any nominations for chairperson?"

Chapter 65

MOON ON THE RISE

Wednesday, April 13, 2033—2:45 p.m.

It was mid-afternoon on a pleasant mid-April day—Canada and Québec had returned to seasonal temperatures. The sun was rising ever higher in the sky, and sticking around longer. Victor stood at his traditional spot at the picture window, staring west. Spring was just around the corner, and there was now open water all around all the edges of Wilson Lake. He wondered if he'd make it to summer, conscious. Doctor Valcourt had changed his medication again, and while the pain was under better control, Victor's body now had an unpleasant buzz, even at the best of times.

But my soul is ... he said to himself, meaning it poetically rather than theologically. On the inside, he restarted the thought, I'm...

In three days, it would be the nineteenth anniversary of the day in 2014 when he first met Randall Whiteside to show him the prototype LieDeck. Victor didn't know how he should feel about that. What ever happened to that first LieDeck? he asked himself, and then he remembered that it had been in the lodge when the place was blown up on April 19, 2014. Or so I was told, he reminded himself. No one seemed absolutely sure about that, but that's the way the history books and the Netshows told the story ... so ... that's what probably happened, he told himself. It didn't feel right, that "fact," but then nothing felt right any more. Not since...? Victor tried to pin it down. January, he figured, when I had to start taking all those pain pills.

April 16—the day in 2014 that he showed old man Whiteside his LieDeck—wasn't an anniversary anyone celebrated. They should, he felt. Vision is better than blindness, no matter what's in front of your eyes. Soon there would be a flurry of anniversaries ... the day the lodge got bombed, April 19, 2014; the day the late prime minister Louis St. Aubin swan dived to his death in Australia, April 26, 2014; the day Bucharest and Leningrad died, April 29, 2014; and the day when I stopped talking ... that was ... He

couldn't get that date clear in his mind. There were too many anniversaries to remember, all clustered together—the Revolution—and none of them brought pleasure.

And all those things are my fault, Victor felt—and that made him laugh inside, and smile on the outside—that ... feeling. Not a single Helliwellian neuron bought into “the blame” thing, but ... feelings have their own rules, he reminded himself for perhaps the last time. Let that stuff go, he thought. It will just get in the way of phase two ... not that I'm needed on that front any more ... personally.

"Mr. Helliwell?" came a solemn male voice from behind him.

Victor jumped. There was a uniformed man parked on his lit-up MIU screen ... I left that fucking machine turned off ... looking straight at him, someone who could apparently arrive uninvited into his private domain. “Big Brother just shows up whenever he wants to now?” Victor asked acidly. “Why don't you just fuck right—”

"I think you might like to hear me out, sir,” said the man as he removed his military cap and ran wrinkled fingers through thinning and artificially darkened hair. “My name is General Juarez, and I—”

"The short version,” demanded Victor harshly, “or I'll unplug the unit.”

"I am sorry for the intrusion,” said the general, “but you don't answer your Netmail, and this is important. The WDA is committed to revamping Peace Day this year. General Brampton won't be speaking at all, and every year from now on, we're planning to honor one person whose contribution to world peace has made a real difference. I would like to ask you to accept the distinction of being this year's honoree, Mr. Helliwell, because we are—” The general stopped talking. It was quite impossible to converse with a man who had collapsed onto the floor and was ripped up by laughter. “Excuse me?” he tried.

Victor used his hand to rub the warm seawater from under his eyes, and tried to gain control of himself. “You got ... some fuckin’ ... nerve,” he managed in broken bits. “I'll ... grant you that.” The laughing made his head hurt more than usual.

"Mr. Helliwell, there has been no public announcement about all this,” said General Juarez, “and of course my approach to you today is strictly unofficial, but we feel that by honoring you ... you know, while you are still well enough to attend ... the WDA could show a completely new direction on June the eleventh, to make up for past neglect, and also to demonstrate a new appreciation for—”

"Oh, for the love of Christ,” Victor blurted out as he stood up and walked over to his MIU. He bent forward and placed his face right in front of the screen, so that this General Jaurez character wouldn't miss a nuance. He also pressed the “archive” button ... so that future generations can enjoy this. “You just don't get it, do you?” he asked rhetorically. “You work for, and you are a key part of, an illegitimate and criminal organization. No person and no national government ever voted the WDA any powers of any kind. You, sir, do not have any ‘honor’ to give.”

With that, Victor turned around, still bent over at the waist, yanked up his caftan, and mooned the world body. If he could have farted, he'd have done it, but he just didn't have it in him at that exact moment. He dropped the caftan back down, reached underneath his desk, and unplugged his MIU ... maybe forever ... after which he returned to his gaze-at-the-Earth spot. Now, where was I? he asked himself.

Tuesday, April 19, 2033—3:25 p.m.

Julia had put on the flimsy white dress that showed off her body so well, and decided after long deliberation to forego the red bikini panties she'd always worn underneath when she was on duty in the E-tery. There was no reason she knew of why customers or anyone else should be deprived of a long look at her entire body, if they wanted, and her body was so much more interesting now that she was visibly preggers.

She danced into the packed restaurant on tippytoes, twirling, with her arms aloft, her dark green canvas bag swinging high, hoping that the boys and girls and men and women wouldn't fail to notice and enjoy the fluffy tumbleweeds of blond hair in her pits. "Hello everybody," she called out as applause rose. "I'm going to be a mommy before it's next Christmas, and that's going to be so fun, eh? There'll be one more beautiful little person for you to laugh with and have fun with."

"Boy or girl?" asked a young mother of two, much to the surprise of her husband and their kids.

"Who cares?" sang Julia, with no shading of an implied judgment. "I like boys and girls."

Customers went back to their meals and conversations as Julia danced in behind the counter, with the Normal men and children taking a longer last peek than their wives or mothers.

Julia hung her canvas bag on a hook, carefully. "Hi Claire," she said as she planted a kiss on the cheek of the head cook. A friend for so many years, they both thought. "So ... how's it going up at the till? Does everyb—"

"Almost all of them pay now," said Claire. The E-tery wasn't supposed to be a Social Service Terminal, but there were some Normal poor people whose greatest need was for a good meal. So, with the tentative support of the Victor-E governing council, the E-tery had made paying optional—optional-but-highly-recommended—in effect, an SST for all those who really needed it to be so. "It's almost the same as before," said Claire, "except now they don't have to pay."

"And we got that wonderful SST on Bubble Street!" chirped Julia as she carefully filled glasses of ice water and loaded them onto a tray. "People really like the SST!" she beamed. "Can I go over there instead of taking out the water in here?"

It had shocked Claire when the E-tery staff voted to try out the "honor system," but customers were plopping the correct amounts—or more—into the wooden "pay-box" on the counter. I guess they realize that if we don't make money at the E-tery, the real SST wouldn't get funded, she thought. "Sure," she said, belatedly. "We got lots of staff on ... and some customers help out now too. They put on hairnets and everyth—"

Julia kissed her again without even waiting for the end of the sentence, grabbed her canvas bag, and went skipping into the Mainspoke. It was truly and splendidly spring now. The windows in all the spokes were left open, and the doors had been removed. She loved to run, and in a few months she'd be too big to do much more than waddle, so she ran ... ran as fast as she could do without falling or accidentally losing her canvas bag. The wooden floor of the spokes made a nice thumping sound at every footfall—she had always enjoyed that. "Hi guys," she said as she overtook two teenaged boys, whose eyes were too busy for their mouths to respond. "Want to come and help me at the SST?" she yelled as she ran on ahead of them.

Now there was the sound of six feet thumping through the Mainspoke. Julia turned on the afterburners. "Last one there is the rotten egg," she yelped. The boys caught up easily, but were little inclined to pass her until they had reached the heavy turnstile into the hub. "Good thing you guys are Human Three," said

Julia as they held the outside air-lock door and gawked at her sweaty breasts. “Sexy stuff is great, eh?” she asked, rhetorically. She passed through the normal doors and swept dramatically into the revolving door ... and then banged into a pane of shatterproof plexiglas. The boys had started rotating the large three-paneled door for her, but now they were holding her in there, between two panes, preventing the door from turning ... and they were laughing!

"Not funny," she said. "You could have hurt me, or the baby." It could have smashed her Sniffer or the other breakables she had in her canvas bag, too, but those things could always be replaced. "You were mean," she said, holding back tears.

They released the door, followed her through, and stood still, watching her stomp off down the elevated rim towards the exit into Spoke West, which led to several sleeperies and then on out to Bubble Street. "Sorry," one of the boys shouted.

"Forgiven," hollered Julia, turning around to face her former captors. "C'mon, let's go love people."

* * * *

Sébastien Roy—pronounced “Rwah,” with a trilled “r”—parked on Bubble Street and slammed the driver's door. This was definitely not his idea, coming here to Victor-E. He was terrified of running into someone he knew, or someone who knew him—maybe one of his former students, all grown up and sporting Evolutionary colors ... or the parents of one of his former students.

"Mr. Roy," as everyone had always called him, was a tall, slim redhead, thirty-six years of age, and still nattily dressed in spite of his newly acquired state of poverty. He had the standard two kids, Chantal, seven, and Rejean, eight, but no woman. He used to be the dad in a very unexceptional family, but his wife “wasn't the working kind,” as she put it, and she just couldn't or wouldn't handle the last two years she'd spent with him, years that were marked by his unemployment and their mounting unpaid bills. She had eventually “copped a man,” as Sébastien put it when he hung out at the local pub, a habit he'd acquired mostly to save what was left of his sanity—never mind what it did to his once-stellar pride. He would call his sixteen-year-old niece to come over and sit the kids, then he'd dress way down, go to Kilarney's on Shawville's Main Street and tie one on.

"The fucker had tons o' dough," he'd slur to any drunk or barkeep who had nothing better to do than listen to him. "She fucked right off, left her own kids, lives in England now, and she's hardly ever home when the kids try to raise her on the Net ... the bitch! Now I'm fuckin' broke, living off the fuckin' dole, if you can call that living—and it's because of them fuckin' Evolutionaries that I lost my job in the first place. And now my kids want to drag me out to that fuckin' 'free store' they got set up out there on their ... whatchacallit ... clansite." He'd learned the language of the streets in order to fit in, just as he'd mastered the lexicon of academia some fifteen years earlier.

Every now and then he'd use his “bar-time” to make a minor effort to get laid ... only to go away pissed off when he failed, or chicken out whenever things started to look sort of promising. The end of every binge was filled with determination and hope that he'd restrain himself from “bumping uglies” with his more-than-willing niece when he finally staggered home. It was a pointless concern. He was impotent, and had been ever since his wife left him for a greener man. Impotent and in denial.

Truth be told, he wasn't much interested in getting laid ... or in finding work of some other kind, either. He was a gentleman and a teacher, point final, and the only thing that kept him in the hunt for work at all was the kids ... well, the kids plus the authorities at the welfare office. But mainly it was the kids. He loved them, and they loved him ... not that any of them had much of a choice on that score.

"C'mon guys, move your sorry butts," he snarled at little Chantal and Rejean, both of whom had inherited

his untamable red hair. "And lock the damn doors."

"Nobody steals here," whispered Rejean to his sister as he looked up at the row of big Pliesterine bubbles.

"Why would they?" Chantal whispered back. "The stuff's free anyway, if you got no money."

Nobody steals anywhere, remembered Rejean, except for real young kids, who don't know any better.

Sébastien took their tiny hands in his and walked through the sunshine to the door of Bubble #6, Victor-E's SST, faster than the children's legs could manage without doing a skippity-hop, which was okay with them. They'd both grown like beans in the past year, and Daddy couldn't afford all new clothes for them, and they'd heard from their friends that anybody could get really good stuff for free at the SST. "You can pay full price or whatever you got or not pay at all—they don't care which it is," the word was. If people got greedy, there wouldn't be any stuff left, of course, but there was always lots of stuff there—at least that's what the kids heard from their little friends at school. And there were toys in there too, they'd heard. They'd asked their father a whole bunch of times if they could go, just to look around, and he had finally caved ... though not with any grace, and with a few muttered epithets that he'd always told his children were "bad" words.

He opened the outside air-lock door, then shepherded everyone through the revolving door. The kids rushed in to see what this new air-supported miracle place had in store for them. "Wait for me ... and don't get lost," he warned them. The place didn't seem very busy, but there were a half-dozen Evolutionaries huddled inside the entrance, waiting for customers—or "friends," as they called them.

"Oh, they won't get lost," announced Julia to the new customer as she broke out of the group and approached. "I got two helpers today, two nice boys, so each of your kids can have one. My name is Julia," she beamed, holding out her hand to the man. "I love kids."

Sébastien was mortified ... and aroused! That hadn't happened for quite some time—the "aroused" part—but this woman was practically naked ... and pregnant! She had straight blond hair—not that he was concentrating on that particular feature—and she had a dark green canvas bag, like an oversized purse, hanging over one shoulder of her see-through white dress. She seemed to be in her late twenties, and she had an attractive, un-made-up face—not that he was concentrating on that particular feature either.

"Sébastien," he said from behind a red face, carefully not volunteering his surname. He shook Julia's hand minimally, as if he feared an electric shock, or an STD. He knew that Evolutionaries were at ease with visible human bodies, but ... Normals weren't—at least not unless they paid for it, and not always then. His kids were dumbstruck, but there was no way Sébastien could hide this part of 21st-century life from them forever. "This is Chantal," he said, prying his eyes off Julia's crotch and putting a hand on his daughter's head to assure her that it wasn't really a bad thing for a grown woman to wear practically transparent clothes and not seem to give a hoot.

"Chantal," said Julia, bending over and shaking hands with the girl, "this guy here is Alexander." She pointed to the shorter of her teenaged fans ... now helpers ... who had sauntered up to flank their new mentor. "He's a real nice boy, and he has a little sister just about your age, so you take his hand, and he'll show you around all the stuff we got, and try to help you pick out some nice stuff that you really need, okay? Or ... that you really want."

Chantal took the lad's hand with trepidation, and looked up to Daddy to make sure this was okay. Daddy nodded and smiled, and he gave Rejean the same assurance as he was paired up with Maurice, the other teenaged lad. As the two children headed off to explore what seemed an endless supply of

maybe-free things, Sébastien waved a tentative goodbye. "Just ... take what you really need, you guys," he warned them.

"They're so pretty!" said Julia as the two children looked back one more time for a final security check from Dad ... and another good peek at the first practically-naked fully-grown woman they could remember seeing. "So ... let's you and me have some coffee and talk about stuff," suggested Julia, slipping her hands around the man's left biceps. "Jeeze you're skinny!" she said inoffensively. "I'm getting fat, eh? I'm going to be a mommy before it's next Christmas ... October, I think."

She led Sébastien over to the enclosed "nosh" corner at the front of the bubble, and made sure that a platter of donuts was brought to their table along with his coffee and her apple juice. "You're very lucky to have two nice kids," she said as she sat down opposite her charge. "Do they live with you?" she asked as she laid her canvas bag carefully on the floor. "Or with the mommy?"

"With me," said Sébastien irritably. "Their mother ran off to England with a rich guy ... and it's partly your fault, actually."

"No it's not," said Julia seriously. "You made a bad mistake, Sébastien—I don't even know the mommy! You must think I'm somebody else."

"Yeah right," mumbled the man as he launched into a frosted chocolate donut. It's hard to get really testy with bare breasts staring at me like that.

"Do you like to work?" asked Julia. "I sure do! It's so fun!"

Sébastien Roy figured Julia for a former "special ed" student. He washed down a wad of donut with a sip of too-hot coffee before answering. "Yes—uh ... Julia, you said your name was?"

"Yeah."

"Yes," repeated Sébastien as he made a second assault on the donut. "I love to work," he said with his mouth full, something his kids had to write punishment lines for doing. He glanced up ... well, just above the far edge of the table-top, where Julia's breasts were ... and wondered why he, an award-winning math teacher, was accepting charity from a dim-witted exhibitionist ... and making small talk, very small talk.

"So ... what do you do?" asked Julia. She pulled her long hair from her back over her shoulders, so that it fell down her front, almost to her waist, on both sides.

"Nothing," mumbled Sébastien.

"How come?"

"I lost my job."

"How come?"

"They closed the damned school."

"Why did they do that?"

"Because more and more parents were sending their kids over to your school, if you really must know," he hissed.

Julia didn't get it—what he said about "if you really must know"—but she also didn't get it why this man

was angry at her, or seemed to be, by the tone of his words ... and by the words too, she thought.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked. "I just came here to—"

"To what?" asked Sébastien Roy. "To gloat? Do you even know what 'gloat' means, Julia?"

The man seemed to have abandoned interest in his chocolate donut and coffee, and Julia didn't understand why he was looking at her so sternly, so hard, as if she had done something wrong. She also didn't know what "gloat" meant. "I ... love you," she said lightly.

Sébastien rolled his eyes despairingly and went back at his snack. It's like that "love-bombing" routine that cults used to do, he thought. "No," he said dirtily, "'gloat' doesn't mean 'love.'"

"No," said Julia far more firmly, "I ... love ... you."

She had been taught to see the world situation as an extension of her own behavior. It was exactly like her decision to have a baby. She had asked herself the question every Human Three was taught to ask at square one: "What would happen if everybody in the world did what I'm doing?" If everybody decides to have only one baby, like I decided, then the population of the whole world goes down by half every generation 'cause it takes two to have a baby but there's only one baby. If everybody has two babies, the population stays the same—like in ZPG, she remembered—'cause it takes two to have a baby and there's two babies for every two grown-ups. And if everybody has three babies or more, then there's too many people in the world and we can't all have enough to eat and people will fight and die. And if everybody acted like me and worked so that their money could help themselves and help other people too, nobody would need anything they didn't have. And if nobody ever worked, like Becky, then nothing would ever get done. I better explain some new things to Sébastien.

"I showed you my beautiful body 'cause I knew you'd like that. I put my hands on your arm 'cause I knew you'd like that. I gave you some real nice donuts and coffee 'cause I knew you'd like that. I worked lots of time as a waitress in the E-tery and in the day care center to make money so Chantal and Rejean could get stuff for free if they didn't have enough money to pay 'cause I knew you'd like that. I got two nice boys to help me today and hold their hands and help them find stuff they really need or want 'cause I knew you'd like that. Rip van Winkle said..." Julia put her hands to her mouth and giggled at the way the nickname she'd given to Victor almost twenty years ago had just popped out. "I mean Victor said that..." She paused to collect herself and remember her point. "Victor Helliwell said we are what we do ... or most of all we are what we do, I think it was ... so you can just look at what I did, and you can figure out who I am, and what I feel, see? I told you what I did, so ... you see? I ... love ... you! Simple as that!"

Sébastien kept his eyes and his attention on the shrinking donut, and wondered how he could communicate with this gorgeous creature with the bent brain. "If you want to do lovey-dovey stuff for me, then you can give me my job back. Victor-E bought the school that I used to teach in back when it was a public school, so why don't you Netlink with the principal over there and tell him to hire me back on?"

"Oh, this is so fun!" squealed Julia. "I'm good at this SST stuff, eh?" she said as she picked her big canvas bag off the floor and rummaged around in it for her Sniffer. "I call this my 'manly canvas bag,'" she mentioned distractedly. "It was Eric's, this boy I like from the Hydro? I called it his 'purse' once, and he said purses are for girls and this was his manly canvas bag." She used her deepest and manliest voice to say "manly canvas bag," the way Eric used to do to make her laugh. "And then I said I liked it, so he gave it to me and—oh, here it is!" she said as she located her Sniffer from amongst the rubble.

"What do you mean you're good at this SST stuff?" asked Sébastien as he watched Julia unfold the

device. "You're ... actually going to call them up and try to get me re-hired?"

"Well," explained Julia patiently, "the first part of my job was to find out what you wanted and needed, and I did that ... even though you were cross with me for no reason. And the second part of my job is to get it for you ... what you want or need ... which I'm going to do now ... that's if I can."

Sébastien leaned back in his chair and stared, occasionally at the long, straight blond hair that fell down her front, but mostly at her breasts—or at what he could see of them through the sheets of hair ... especially at the nipples, when they peeked out. This should be interesting, he thought while Julia asked for the principal's office at the Victor-E "3" Primary School—"3" for "Human-Three-oriented."

"You pronounce his name 'see-fwah,'" explained Julia as she waited for the principal to answer. "It's a funny name, eh?"

"Humph," said Sébastien.

"Hi, Six-fois," she said giddily, holding the Sniffer in front of her with both hands. "By the way, how come they call you that anyway? Is that your nickname or a for-real name?"

"Hi Julia," said Six-fois Bellehumeur patiently. "Didn't I tell you about that before?"

"Maybe," thought Julia out loud, "but if you did I guess I musta forgot."

"Well," began Six-fois, "my bioDad traveled a lot ... for his work ... and every few months when he went through Thetford Mines, where my mom lived, they—uh—got together, and after the sixth time, she got pregnant ... with me ... so she called me Six-fois. She thought it was cute. I didn't think so when I was a little boy, but I do now. My mother and I laugh about it all the time. So—uh—what can I do for you, Julia?"

"Oh yeah!" said Julia, blushing slightly from embarrassment. "You did tell me about that before, and I forgot. I think it's cute. My mom used to always call me—"

"Julia," interrupted Six-fois Bellehumeur, "I'm ... really kind of busy here. Was there something I—"

"There's this nice Normal man," said Julia, "his name is Sébastien—uh—what's your last name?"

"Roy," said Sébastien.

"His name is Sébastien Roy, and he's got these two really pretty children Chantal and Rejean, and the mommy went over to England with a rich guy 'cause Sébastien lost his job teaching at the nice school where you are—before we bought it and changed it into a nice Human Three school—and he needs his job back 'cause he likes to teach kids and he likes to work but he hasn't got a job now. Can he come over to our school and teach ... please?"

"I remember Mr. Roy," said Six-fois. "He taught my sister's kids. He was very highly regarded as a teacher. He's—uh—there with you now, I take it?"

"Yeah, he's right here," said Julia expectantly. "See?" She turned the Sniffer around so it would capture the man's image.

Sébastien Roy nodded and said: "Hello, Monsieur Bellehumeur. Listen, I—uh—just came here to the SST because my children nagged me to death, and this wasn't my idea. She just took out her Sniffer and—"

"Julia!" Six-fois interrupted with unexpected force and authority. "She has a name, and it's Julia Whiteside, and she's a friend of mine, and I love her dearly, and she's got a higher CQ than mine, so when she talks, I listen. Now ... you were saying...?"

Jeeze, thought Sébastien as he reeled mentally, almost physically. He had heard that the late Randall Whiteside had a rich daughter who was mentally challenged and lived somewhere inside Evolution, and ... this is her! "Ms. Whiteside," he restarted, "just took out her Sniffer and—"

"Just 'Julia' is fine," said Julia. She smiled as she kept the Sniffer pointed at her new friend and signaled him with her other hand to take the thing and carry the ball from here. When Sébastien seemed to balk, she stood up, leaned across the table, and just placed it in his hand. "Six-fois is a really nice man," she whispered, as if that were appropriate or relevant ... which it was.

Sébastien took the Sniffer and wondered why his attitude sucked. She did love him, sort of, and Six-fois probably was a nice man, and...

"Sébastien," said Six-fois on the small black-and-white screen, "you are welcome to come over here and help the children learn their mathematics ... you were in maths and sciences, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Sébastien.

"Well, you're a fine teacher, by all accounts, and we've sure got a lot of kids here who need to learn what you have to teach, and we can never have too many teachers, so there's nothing stopping you from joining our staff whenever you're—"

"The paid staff?" asked Sébastien pointedly.

Six-fois was frustrated. Surely the man watches the Netnews and knows the score, he thought. "Parents send their children here because the paid staff are Human Three," he explained, "or at least well into transition. Most of our unpaid staff are in transition, and a few of them even have CQs in the two-hundred-plus area—high enough to claim Human Three status if they went to the bother of doing it. So ... as paid positions open up, we'll undoubtedly choose the new paid staff from among the volunteers. If you want to work here on our paid staff, that's how you get in ... by showing us that's what you want to do, by being here. Just come on in and do what you love to do—teach kids—and although any decision to enter transition would be entirely up to you, it wouldn't kill you to at least find out what the hell you're missing. Human Three Consciousness is as real a thing as the chair you're sitting on, Sébastien, not some phony religious belief. In fact it can be LieDeck-verified, for those who really have it, now that the LieDeck has been partially unbanned, and we can LV a person's CQ too. The ball's in your court, my friend. And now, if you'll excuse me, I really do have to get back to my work. I hope you'll join our vibrant little outfit, Sébastien. Bye Julia. Net, down, now."

"See!" said Julia triumphantly as she took the Sniffer back and tucked it back into her manly canvas bag. "He says you're a good teacher and you can go teach there tomorrow if you want. And if love all the children and the other teachers and the mommies and the daddies and they love you back, you can get paid after a while and be a Human Three person! Isn't that just wonderful?"

"Oh yeah," muttered Sébastien as his chin flopped onto his sternum. Just fan-fuckin'-tastic, he said to himself as he slurped coffee.

UNDER YOUR CLOTHES

Friday, April 22, 2033—7:25 p.m.

Annette didn't feel well. It wasn't anything she could put her finger on, like a cold or the flu. Her temperature was normal, but she felt weak, worn out, unmotivated—even utterly “unhorny,” which was unusual for her. She lay on her bed, and wished she could doze off during the day. She could rarely manage that, and on the few occasions when she did, she usually woke up with a splitting headache and had to take a painkiller. And besides, she told herself, I got no time for sleep. I got my stupid “helper” job to do. There were times when she just didn't feel very Human Three. But ... we are ... what we do, she reminded herself. We are, at the very least, what we do.

Since she had taken over the leadership of Victor-E thirteen years ago, she had been allowed to assign her own volunteer hours. Evolutionaries were supposed to do no less than five hours a week, and hers usually consisted of cleaning or cooking or serving food in the mess hall—inward-looking stuff; self-help, really; the Evolutionary equivalent of housework or yard work or taking out the garbage. When Annette was too busy with her clan duties, she did no volunteer work at all, and even when she wasn't terribly busy, she still often did none.

She didn't keep a detailed record, but she figured her productive work in the office gobbled up fifty hours a week, on average. And in a way it's all volunteer work, she had often rationalized. She'd saved the standard forty percent of her income since she had helped to establish Victor-E early in 2016, with her late husband, Steve Sutherland. She had inherited his nest-egg last year when he passed away, and she had her pension from her days at Patriot Security, and she had her own savings which alone were sufficient for her to retire since ... mid-twenty-twenty-nine, she estimated as she turned onto her other side and fluffed the pillow. Her work wasn't so much what she did any more, but who she was ... and she was okay with that. She was still being paid, of course, and she loved her work, plus she had no idea what the hell she'd do with her time if she were to retire.

This new phase 2 regime, though ... that had changed a lot of things. She didn't have to touch her two sizeable retirement funds or draw on her Patriot pension—she was, after all, “well off”—but now, in addition to giving half of their ongoing savings to the SSTs, all participating Evolutionaries now had to do an additional three hours of volunteer work every week in an SST! Financially, it was nothing, but emotionally, Annette minded ... a lot! Her feelings kept coming up with phrases like: “It isn't fair,” or rhetorical questions like: “Don't I give enough already?” In her rather good mind, however, her Human Three Consciousness was as solid as Arctic pack ice—vulnerable to fissuring, but on the whole, quite thoroughly immovable.

In fact, she was awed by the stark simplicity of Victor's phase 2 plan for Evolution—the authenticity, the inescapable, pure logic of the thing! In a few years, she figured, most people on Earth would be Human Three, and the remaining few percent would live in a Human Three world, being served by Evolutionaries. “And the need for Social Service Terminals will kind of disappear,” she recalled Victor explaining in the Diefenbunker.

For centuries, it had been a case of “tough luck” for Human Ones who had to live in the Human Two world. They spent all their days ducking Human Two laws or enduring Human Two law enforcement. Now, with the WDA in global power and the application of LieDeck-verification, everyone was forced to actually conform to minimum Human Two standards and accept an array of Human Two expectations. And soon, Human Twos will be constrained by Human Three laws and mores and expectations, Annette said to herself.

But that was for later. She'd be in her mid-sixties by then, and if she made it to the average life

expectancy of ninety-one for women, she'd still spend the last third of her life without the threat or fear of Human Two chaos, and without the oppressive oversight of the WDA! Nice thought, she said to herself as she rubbed her face and pushed herself to a sitting position. But for now, it doesn't get my volunteer SST work done.

She stood in front of her dresser mirror and scrunched up her face at the marginally less chunky body she'd won from hundreds of hours in the gym. Her breasts seemed to sag with fatigue in recent years, and they had little stretch lines in the wrong light. Her stomach was almost as big as her hips, and her hips were too big ... or bigger than she wanted them to be, for reasons she didn't care to explore. She leaned forward, and felt glad that the old bullet scar over her left eye was almost invisible now. Lots of great years left in this old dog, she reminded herself. And that made her smile ... finally.

Annette hadn't actually volunteered for CQ duty, but with the burgeoning, out-of-control international demand for entry into the Evolutionary movement, she knew she'd end up doing at least some of that ... and for free, as part of her SST volunteer work. For several scary weeks after Sheena Kalhoun's now-famous "five-and-a-half-point" Netcast (the "half-point" being her veiled declaration of economic war), there had been a sharp migration out of Evolution—not by those who had already retired, of course, but by those who assumed that Kalhoun's "modest suggestion" would turn out to be a death knell for the movement. There had been a net decrease of more than a million members in a three-week period, a dip of almost half of one percent worldwide—an average loss of one or two people per clan. But in the last few weeks, mostly as a result of Victor's phase 2 plan and its emotional adoption by the world's remaining Christians, the tide had turned, with a vengeance! Kalhoun's attack was backfiring! Many of the Evolutionaries who had fled what they believed to be a "sinking ship" were now sheepishly moving back into their former clans. The latest statistics from Evolution International showed that in addition to these "returnees," there was also a spectacular—and problematic—influx of three million new applicants. And of course all of these new applicants wanted and needed transition guidance, as well as clans to live in.

A lot of Evolutionaries, including Annette, had even wondered out loud whether they could cope with the pressure of so much success ... even if the goal Victor had suggested was the conversion of ninety-five percent of all humans, she thought. (Actually, Victor had only used the word "conversion" once, and when someone said that it had a religious sound and feel to it, he switched to saying that people just "grew up" or "matured" into Human 3 Consciousness.) Transition wasn't something anybody could rush or shortcut, and most of these new applicants were on rather long lists, waiting for the kind of highly-qualified assistance that Annette was now preparing to give to some anonymous couple. Frankly, she preferred physical volunteer work, the kind that gave her brain a rest. But ... she had been asked by the CQ Center to handle a transition assignment for this married couple, and she'd accepted. She had even agreed to do the first session "blind!"

The clients she'd been assigned weren't Christians, she'd been told, or adherents of any other faith, and she was truly glad for that. She hated having to explain that the very idea of religious belief was irrational, and an obstacle or hindrance to anyone's attempt to get a grip on reality. Persuading people to transcend their emotional impulses was hard enough without having to do battle with a mythological creature that was defined by the believer as all-powerful. And when those folks get onto a roll of scriptural citations, she considered, well, sensible discourse becomes all but impossible.

She figured she was a pretty good transition guide, but this business of not being able to see the people you were working with, and not being seen by them, and having to put up with pseudonyms and voice-alteration all around ... that was so ... Human Two, she thought. It's hard enough to work with two people at once without having to do it blind. Sure, couples had the right to go at this thing together, but one partner was always light years ahead of the other, and the volunteer often felt more like a

20th-century marriage counselor than a Human Three transition guide. In the case that faced her now, it was even trickier. The wife already was a Human Three—or so she said—and the husband's motivation, Annette had been alerted, might have more to do with clinical depression than intellectual insight. “Oh joy,” she said sarcastically. “Yes, joy,” she repeated as she straightened herself out. At least they're both university-educated, she remembered from her briefing. That may help, although IQ is way over-valued as a predictor of anything important.

The sun stayed up later these days, and the one thing about living in a bubble that really irritated Annette was that Sleepery #1—her “Boss spot”—had no windows to the outside. In the summer, when things usually slowed down, she often traded spots with someone in a normal, detached sleepery, a traditional structure made of anything except Pliesterine. It wasn't summer yet, but she'd already made the move, and now she was ensconced in Sleepery #31, an eight-unit building just east of the hub. Her room had a small south-facing window, and an April sun was lancing through, brightly illuminating one skewed rectangle of hardwood flooring. Her new digs were pleasantly warm on this spring evening, even with the window open.

She'd had her Netstation transferred out there too—a wonderful convenience—even though these accommodations were much smaller than “Boss spot.” And this transition-assist session was to be bumped electronically from the CQ Center to the MIU in her new sleepery. (The CQ Center was the former C.Q.E.S.—Consciousness Quotient Evaluation Service—before the aspect of “transition-assistance” was added.) And since it would be a “blind” link, she thought she'd do it naked. No real reason why not, she told herself, and if they ask, I'll tell them. With the voice alteration, they won't even know if I'm a man or a woman anyway unless I tell them, which I just may do straight off the top. She made her way to her MIU and sat on her soft chair, ready to begin, if not exactly eager.

"Net, up, now; CQ Center; blind link ... I'm ready if they are. Call me 'Rudolph' on screen, okay?"

"Good evening, Annette," came the voice of the young CQ coordinator. "The couple you've been assigned is standing by, blind. You ready to fly?"

"Can't fly alone," quipped Annette, letting more of her irritation show than she had intended. "Go ahead with the link."

Her vertically divided screen lit up with two cartooned smiley-faces, one subtitled “Louise” and one “Igor”—fake names, chosen at random, Annette knew. “Are you—uh—okay with the name Igor?” she asked the icon on the right.

"Sure, why not?" said a distorted voice as the Igor smiley-face lit up, indicating who was talking. "I've been called worse than that."

At least he's got a sense of humor, thought Annette. “And how are you, Louise?” she asked.

"Human Three," said a raspy voice as the other icon lit up. “For quite a while,” she added. “My husband and I have lots of reasons to save our marriage, but that's not my goal here, just my preferred outcome. I mostly want to help Igor ... do I have to call him that? ... I guess I do ... anyway, I love this man, and I'll do anything I can to help him through transition, and I'll gladly withdraw if I'm not being helpful. He says he's okay with this three-way format, in fact he says he wants it this way, but he's pretty much new to this thing, and—”

"Can I get a word in edgewise?" interrupted Igor.

"We've got the rest of our lives," said Rudolph/Annette. She looked down at her nude body and wondered again how long that would be for her. “Go ahead, Igor."

"I'd like to confirm that—uh—I can go one-on-one with you or with—uh—Louise, whenever I want, eh?" asked the male smiley-face.

"Of course," said Rudolph/Annette.

"Good," said Igor. "So ... can I start by asking you to sort of describe ... you know ... what it was like for you—uh—Rudolph?"

Annette realized she didn't like being called by a man's name, or the name of a red-nosed reindeer, for that matter, but it was she who'd made that decision, so she couldn't very well complain about it. Igor had gotten off to a fairly good start, but it was a passive approach that put the first burden on her. Oh well, she thought, there are no rules for this.

"This is not a fool's paradise," she began. "The biggest moment for me was when I realized that Human Three Consciousness wasn't like the fictional state of grace or bliss that the Godists talk about, but a real thing, as real as Human One or Two Consciousness, which, as you know, are extremely real. You can't fake Human Three Consciousness any more than a child can fake being an adult. And ... you can't trick yourself into it ... and you can't do it for somebody else. You have to do it first and foremost for yourself, and for your own good reasons.

"It's..." She found it hard to reduce Human Three Consciousness to a few words that would be readily understood by any Human Two. "It's like ... in the past, I guess for all of history before the twenty-first century—" She checked herself, and started again from another angle. "I'm—uh—told you're not a Godist, Igor..."

"No," said Igor.

"Is anyone any more?" said Louise.

"Yes," said Igor, with a caustic edge to his voice.

"Sorry, honey," said Louise. "Go on—uh—Rudolph."

"Well, as I was saying, in the past," Rudolph/Annette continued, "sexual awakening used to be the defining moment in a person's life. Of course even before puberty comes the slow road from Human One to Human Two, the natural process by which a new baby stops reacting solely by instinct and gradually learns to use his or her emerging brain in determining its actions, words and reactions. But one's sexual awakening was like a huge epiphany, the biological right of passage that eclipses all else and caps one's growth from child to adult. I would say that that experience, as powerful as it is, looks timid and small compared to the transition from Human Two to Human Three.

"Personally, I found the process of transition rather difficult ... much more difficult than puberty, but as much fun, or more, than anything else I've ever experienced. Maybe it's even more fun to become Human Three than it is to be it. In the end, it's about ... it's about identity. Who are you? Who could you be? What is life anyway?"

Annette stopped there, wondering if she had perhaps plowed through the conceptual cosmos too far, or too quickly. "You ... still with me, Igor?"

"Why'd you ask me?" he said, a bit defensively.

"Tilt!" admitted Rudolph/Annette, with a laugh. "Are you both with me so far?"

"Yes."

"Yeah."

Annette believed them. The problem wasn't them keeping up with her, it was her not knowing exactly how to proceed from here. There were a lot of doors into that room; that was what faced the administrator of Victor-E. A rather awkward silence followed ... well, awkward for Igor, she imagined. Annette enjoyed the drifting-off thing, taking time for her thoughts and feelings to dance her towards a creative renewal of the contact ... but ... Human Twos aren't as—

"So you're going to pass on the secret of life to me?" interjected Igor in the middle of her silence. "Isn't that a bit—"

"Well, talking about the meaning of life is ... tricky," Rudolph/Annette conceded. "I think sometimes life is best put into context by talking about its absence," she tried.

"Death?" asked Louise's icon. "Gee, I never did that one. Have a go at it, Rudolph."

"Sure," chimed in Igor's icon. "I'd like you to ... or rather I think it might help me to understand."

TTH, thought Annette. It was her private shorthand for "trying too hard" ... the bane of writers, actors, and wannabe Human Threes. "Well," she began carefully, "it's a given that we know nothing about death other than it's a word we assign to the end of life. But I actually had an N.D.E. once, many years ago, and I—"

"N.D.E.?" asked Louise.

"Near-death experience," explained Rudolph/Annette. "Back then, the physiology of the phenomenon was still being debated, and wasn't fully understood, and a lot of people thought that those who had this experience were actually getting a sneak preview of a heaven, or of God. That's what I thought at the time, and it was a powerful metaphor for an experience that really defies description. 'Pure joy, total love' ... that's how people have often tried to describe it, but it was much bigger, and far more glorious than those words indicate—sort of orgasm times a billion. We now understand scientifically that it's really a mix of endorphins and neurons firing randomly and frantically in the dying brain, an instinctive defense mechanism, presumably designed into us to ease the pain of death or actually fend off the dying process ... but whatever the explanation, we now know two things. An N.D.E. is not a glimpse of any kind of afterlife; however, it is an indicator of how good a human being can feel without the aid of a drug or a belief system, by which I mean a religious belief system.

"I guess I'd have to say that acquiring Human Three Consciousness is ultimately very selfish, self-serving ... maybe even a Human Two thing to do, ironically! As a person in transition, your waking hours are spent avoiding Human Two angst, and directing your internal experience of every moment in the direction of the feelings one gets in an N.D.E. Now personally, I've never come close to recreating the actual N.D.E. experience, and I think I have an advantage over people insofar as I've 'been-there-and-done-that.' I have been privileged to know the upper limit of what it can feel like to be alive, so of course I use my rational mind to keep myself pointed that-a-way all the time ... except when I forget, of course, and that happens ... a lot. There are behaviors, like chores, especially chores, that I used to avoid in the past because they were not intrinsically fun, or because I was forced to do them to survive financially, but I now do them with pleasure because I know rationally what they mean, how they serve to keep me from feeling low, and how they serve to make me feel ... 'high,' I guess you'd have to say, but not in the sense of a drug high or a so-called religious experience ... 'high' in the sense of 'I'm-not-so-sure-I-could-possibly-like-life-or-like-myself-any-better-than-I-already-do,' if you know what I mean."

Annette was frustrated that she couldn't see her clients, and erased that feeling by realizing anew that

doing this CQ-assistance thing blind was both instructive and quite interesting. She found herself guessing at the body language and the facial expressions of the couple she was serving ... or loving, she redefined her assignment. Subtle non-verbal reactions often play a big role in shaping the direction and tone of a presentation, she considered, and without that kind of feedback, the conversation is ... what? ... more of a rational thing, perhaps?

"So that's where this new SST thing comes into play?" asked Louise of the CQ guide.

"What?" asked Igor.

"SST" stands for 'Social Service Terminal,'" said Louise, "that phase two Evolution thing I told you about."

"Oh yeah," said Rudolph/Annette, in response to the original question. "Are you up to speed on that, Igor?" she asked.

"To be honest," said the male icon on Annette's screen, "I haven't paid a whole lot of attention to that sort of stuff lately, or anything else, for that matter. I sort of—uh—cut myself off from everything and everybody for the last month. I went through a kind of a—uh—personal disaster—I'll get to that later, I suppose—but I haven't used an MIU or even talked to anyone for quite a while. I ... we got this little—uh—place that I went to, holed up in, and I guess I kind of wasted a month of my life—you'll get a kick out of this I guess, Rudolph—I wasted a month of my life feeling rotten! I wallowed in it ... until Louise came out and sort of slapped me around ... well, figuratively, or psychologically. I realized she was right and ... now here I am, talking to you about transition, woefully ignorant of the doings of the planet since late March. So, I'm afraid I didn't even know what 'SST' stood for until yesterday, when—uh—Louise tried to explain it. I thought it stood for 'supersonic transport.'"

Annette generally detested having to re-chew yesterday's dinner, but with her Human Three mind reluctantly called to duty, she pushed herself to re-situate the requirement in a positive light. Here was an opportunity to summarize the incredible "phase 2" plan that Victor Helliwell had initiated at the Diefenbunker, and which now had been adopted by more than half of the Evolutionary clans in the world—well, virtually all of the clans, but only a bit more than half of the individual Evolutionaries in the clans. And now she had some hard realities to point to, not just the idea-set that they'd started with a month ago.

"Well, as you now know, 'SST' also stands for 'Social Service Terminal,'" she said to Igor. "Evolution used to be sort of bi-polar—well, some of the movement still is, but most of us have moved on. We had our work, which we called the 'Productive Terminal,' and we had our leisure time—you know, sleeping, eating, body functions, entertainment, fun, sports, sex, all that stuff—which we called the 'Living Terminal,' stuff that usually happened in the life-base, as we call it ... those big Pliesterine bubbles and the sleeperies, you know? And I'm sure you're familiar with the phase one economic model, the way it used to be for all of Evolution, where everybody had to work hard and save at least forty percent of their income and invest it in guaranteed financial instruments like Treasury Bills, Canada or Québec savings bonds, GICs, that sort of thing. That idea can be traced back to a twentieth-century book called *The Wealthy Barber*. We just kind of pushed it to the extreme. We economized on everything and shared material things and spaces in all sorts of ways in order to meet this goal, and the reward was that after thirteen or fourteen years of productive work, most Evolutionaries had enough of a nest-egg to retire on ... if they wanted to ... and if they kept living in Evolution, of course, where the cost of living is about a third of what it is in the outside world, living as a Normal.

"So ... with this phase two thing we got going now, we have to give at least half of our ongoing savings to these new SSTs. As a result, we save less for our own retirements. It's estimated that on average, an

Evolutionary would now have to work for twenty or twenty-one years before he or she could retire. In reality, it'll likely turn out to be more like eighteen or nineteen years, because all SSTs are registered charities, so the money I give to them, for instance, produces a nice tax deduction, so my savings actually amount to considerably more than half of what they used to be.

"In any event, we also have to work an additional three hours a week in an SST, so that we get a hands-on feel for what our donations are actually doing—you'll see why in a minute. In fact, my time with you today is part of my own voluntary SST work.

"So ... getting back to the new money arrangement and the point of it all..." Annette stopped for breath, and to review how she was doing, and where she was going, and why she was doing all the talking.

"So," interjected Louise, with no prompting, and no objection from Rudolph/Annette, "Evolution accepts that everyone's first duty is to cope with their own survival, which is expected to use up the first sixty percent of their net incomes. After that, the rest of their money, well, that's split right down the middle—half to yourself, to save up for your own retirement, and half to the SSTs, which are set up to provide whatever services are most needed by the surrounding community. Normals need day care for their kids? There it is, supplied free of charge by phase-two Evolutionaries. In fact the decisions about how this SST money is used are taken by the users of the services, and not by the Evolutionaries whose money it is ... or was. Normals have to set up SST committees to decide what is most needed, and that way we're quite sure that the SSTs are meeting the actual needs of the Normal community. How am I doing—uh—Rudolph?"

"Jeeze, carry on, Louise!"

"But," continued the female icon, "the biggest bonus of all this is not for the Normals who receive the benefits of the SSTs, the people who need the SSTs. The biggest reward is for the Human Threes who are supplying these services. After taking care of their own needs, they know that all of their surplus money has two equal meanings in material fact. Half of the meaning is the bringing of pleasure and security and free time to the self, at a later point in time, and the other half of the meaning is a significant material betterment of the human condition. In religious terms, we're 'loving our neighbor as ourselves,' or 'doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.'

"That's why those Jesus-Eers are more convinced than ever that Victor is the Second Coming of Christ. They're calling this phase two Evolutionism 'Christian economics,' because it takes the ethos of Christianity and materializes it, converts the Golden Rule or the second Great Commandment from once-a-week platitudes into a viable and workable economic model. 'We are what we do,' is what Victor said. The Jesus-Eers even say that if you live as a phase two Evolutionaries, then you are a Christian, and if you do not live that way, then you're not ... like it's sort of an acid test.

"Of course that's a load of doggie-doo..." Louise laughed at her own little jibe. "I ... don't suppose I care if people become Human Three for wrong reasons, but I'd say it's a lot more fun to do it for right reasons, and it has none of the dumb-assed limitations of religious beliefs. What counts is that by living this way, Evolutionaries know in material reality, and therefore in their consciousnesses, that every minute of work they do is an act of love—love for others—as much as it is an act of love for oneself ... see? It's ... well, I would say it's conditioned into us. So ... how did I do—uh—Rudolph?"

"Couldn't have said it any better," said Rudolph/Annette. "In fact my being here right now, as I told you, is part of my volunteer SST work, part of my loving you ... whoever the hell you are. Even if this whole exercise goes swirling down the crapper with us all screaming at each other, I still benefit from it. It still acts as an effective and important event in terms of keeping my fragile consciousness on a Human Three level, and making me feel good as well. My money helped pay the costs of this service, and even if I fail

as a CQ guide for you people, I will have tried my best, and as ... I think it was St. Thomas Aquinas who once said, 'Do your best; the angels can do no more.'"

Annette had no idea why she'd used that religious reference to explain herself to her incognito clients. It just popped out, from somewhere in her past. Oh well, she thought, as long as he gets the point.

"Thanks," said Igor.

"For ... what?" asked Rudolph/Annette.

"For loving me," said Igor. "Unconditionally, like a dog does—no offense intended."

"None taken," snickered Rudolph/Annette.

"Actually," continued Igor, "I'm still a long way from grasping all this stuff and from making a personal decision about becoming a Human Three, but there is one little thing that I'd like—uh ... let me rephrase that. There's a small risk I'd like to take, or at least to suggest, that might—uh—facilitate our ... the process that—uh..."

"What's that?" asked Louise, who'd seen her husband fall into verbal gridlock a few times before.

"Well," said Igor, "as long as this whole thing is kept confidential, and won't end up on the Netnews or something like that, I was thinking that—uh—maybe we could remove the voice-alteration aspect ... and go visual?"

"Jeeze ... sure," said Rudolph/Annette. "I always prefer things that way. How about you, Louise?"

"Hey, I'm Human Three," said Louise. "No problem here."

"Okay," said Rudolph/Annette, "just give me a minute." She killed the sound output, and called the CQ coordinator, instructing her to reconfigure the connection, to add the visual. "And don't forget to remove that ridiculous voice-alteration stuff too," she made sure to add.

"Okay," said the CQ coordinator as she made the required changes. "Just about ... all set ... and here weeee ... go!" She pushed the button.

"Annette!" said the former Igor and Louise in perfect unison from their respective MIUs at the Whitesides' lodge.

"Michael! Becky!" said Annette, in astonishment.

"Jeeze, you're stark naked, Annette!" said Becky, putting a hand to her mouth and trying not to laugh.

Annette looked down, as if surprised to hear such a disturbing rumor. "Jeeze, you're right," she observed, poking a breast with her finger. "But then ... so are you," she said, looking up at her screen, "under your clothes."

Becky laughed. It occurred to her that all people were basically Human Three, if only they could shed the ugly, cumbersome turtle shell of Human Two Consciousness and let themselves be.

Michael stood up and walked out of the lodge. To him, this was a most reprehensible betrayal. His serious contemplations out at the cabin had led him to join the vast majority of world citizens in not caring what the WDA might think of his private life any more—if indeed they were eavesdropping—but he had been assured that the person doing the CQ assistance would be a person that he didn't know and would not be likely to ever meet; a person who didn't know him. Someone at Evolution had screwed up, and he

was not in a forgiving mood, let alone a laughing mood. Becky's reaction was alien to the woman he had married, or the woman he thought he had married, in 2014. He wasn't ready for this ... or for anything else, he supposed. So he walked down to the dock at the lodge, got in his hovercraft, and sped back across the half-frozen lake he had traversed a month ago by Ski-doo, when whitened ice clung to the shores and scoffed at the sun.

"Sorry Becky," said Annette.

"Not your fault," said Becky. "Michael will get over it. He had to come over here anyway for his LV session, though I suppose we could have sent a Sniffer over there to his cabin. But I definitely think someone at your CQ Center needs their ass kicked."

Ass kicking was a very Human Two remedy, but Annette found herself giving it serious consideration.

Chapter 68

THE QUIET REVOLUTION

Monday, April 25, 2033—7:25 p.m.

Sébastien Roy was sitting on a too-low stool, watching a group of three kids command functions on an MIU, mathematical computations that twenty years ago didn't even crop up until high school. These were grade four students, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves silly—and having little need of any teacher. Sébastien remembered a time just a few years ago when getting nine- or ten-year-olds to even do mathematics was like yanking tree roots out of the ground with your bare hands, and getting kids to find the fun in it, the creativity, wasn't even on the agenda. When he taught here last, back when this was Shawville Public School, his students were there because they had to be there. Now, in one of the same classrooms he'd used a few years before, most of his students were already "at work" when he waltzed in at precisely 8:59 a.m., and many stayed on after he waltzed out at 3:31 p.m. The roll call was already done when he arrived in the mornings, done on the main MIU by the kids themselves, and nobody seemed much concerned about attendance anyway—neither the kids nor the administration. Evolutionary schools were open seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, and truancy wasn't even an issue here, let alone a problem. No one ever "failed," not that tests or exams were even given—or needed. Motivation wasn't a problem either, which Sébastien still found bizarre. Kids were supposed to have problems that way. Overcoming this difficulty in children was a complicated skill he had been taught in Teachers College, an art he had worked on and developed over his fifteen-year career. Now it was unneeded, whether you called it a skill or an art. He'd been back in the saddle for five days now, and he still found it shocking how much things had changed during his two years of unemployment ... his "supersulk," as one of his supposedly Human Three colleagues had called it. The insensitive bitch, he thought as his instinct fired a minor thruster-burn in his gut. He felt ... what? Out of it? Obsolete, perhaps?

In his mind he knew it wasn't a two-year revolution that education had undergone. It was that so-called quiet revolution that had been brewing, creeping along largely out of sight, ever since 2015, since the terrible recession that had swept through the world right after the LieDeck Revolution and had eased up only in 2019. The shakeout had been hard on everyone, but it had been completely devastating for hundreds of millions around the world, and of course it was hardest for the poor areas that used to be known as the "Third World"—basically the southern hemisphere. The new global "superclass" of economic losers had hit rock bottom ... and then banded together, becoming each other's insurance against starvation.

And they had ended up not only achieving more job security than the Normal middle class, but figured

out how to work for only thirteen or fourteen years and then retire! That was miracle enough for most, but what galled people like Sébastien Roy was the fact that this new “po-folks union,” as it was often called by non-participants, was not content to merely exceed its economic mandate. It became a movement, and had embraced the idea behind the LieDeck in spite of le déluge of 2014. Most Evolutionaries had learned to live without any lying at all, or largely without it, in spite of the WDA's international ban of the device. They behaved “as if” the LieDeck device were available to all. They had their stupidly named “fuss groups,” sort of a hyper-mediation process, and recently they had begun experimenting with “simLV,” or “simulated LieDeck-verification,” in order to root out even the slightest of fibs. And now, of course, they could go to any WDA agent and get to the truth about anything, using an actual LieDeck. Not that they did it very often. It seemed that among Evolutionaries, there was little need for this new WDA service!

But it wasn't even the airs of superiority surrounding this Evolutionary reality that bugged Sébastien the most—it was their recently-renewed dedication to what they called “Human Three Consciousness.” There were always some Evolutionaries on that kick, but now they were almost all into it, full bore, full tilt. The three stages of life had always been childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Now, these “phase 2” Evolutionaries, as they piously called themselves, had a different view of life. Babyhood and early childhood were included in their “Human one” designation, but then later childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood were all bunched together into their “Human Two” classification. Sébastien Roy was a teacher of math. To him it was simple. For anything desirable, from dollars to orgasms, more was better. Three was better than two, and two was better than one. The Evolutionary notion of Human Three Consciousness struck many in the Normal community as some kind of massive ego trip. There was even a small international group of several thousand former Human Threes, men and women who claimed to have been “deprogrammed” from what they said was a “cult.” These people even called themselves Human Fours, and specialized in trash-talking Evolution—not that anyone paid them any mind. Since the partial unbanning of the LieDeck, almost all of them had been exposed as current or former WDA moles.

Bottom line, he thought; it's just insulting for these people to view a mature human being as someone who suffers from arrested development in the adolescent stage of life.

"Did I do it right?" came a small voice from one of the two girls in his group.

Sébastien snapped out of his toxic reverie. He had no idea what the kid was referring to, and that pissed him off. They were trying to include him, a teacher, in the classroom dynamic! They were also quick as hummingbirds ... the twerps. They knew his head was somewhere far away, and they surely knew he was ... what did they call it? Fussing! In fact, if he didn't grab hold of the situation and assert himself soon, one of his little proto-humans would get up and start massaging his knotted-up shoulders! He really hated it when they did that—absolutely despised the physical liberties these kids took ... with him and with each other ... and took for granted. This kind of condescension was hard enough to deal with from his colleagues or contemporaries, but from a ten-year-old, it was infuriating.

"I was ... fussing," he admitted sheepishly. There was no future in pretending with these little mind-readers. "I'm ... sorry," he added, and surprised himself to realize that he really was sorry—for himself more than them, granted, but sorry nonetheless, and not entirely for himself! "If you will excuse me, I'm going to the teachers' room for a break," he said. "To get rid of my fuss," he finally confessed to the six clear young eyes that were watching his slow mutation with fascination and pleasure. They may be kids, he said to himself as he stood up and turned his back to their knowing stares, but they're way ahead of me in this transition thing. I hate them all. No I don't; yes I do; no I don't; yes I do.

Sébastien left the classroom, closed the door, and sighed quietly in the knowledge that more real learning would go on in his absence than in his presence. Fusses got in the way of education (among other things),

but it used to be kids that fussed, not teachers, and certainly not him. He walked down the unlit hall, past the low-set water fountains and the endless rows of curiously unlocked lockers. He arrived at the open door of the teachers' room, and stopped short before those inside could see him. Two other teachers, paid teachers, were kicking around issues of law and politics. I'm eavesdropping! he realized, with a major overdose of chagrin. Neither of them would say a word different if I'd walked right in, he knew. I never felt so fucking old in my life.

He went in—strode in, really, to avoid confessing his venial sin. They both said hi, and he sensed immediately that they knew. They don't know, he thought. It's just guilt telling me that, he said to himself. "You'll never guess ... what I just did," he said as he poured himself a cup of hot coffee. "I—uh—well ... I stood outside the door listening," he said through a forced laugh.

Their laughter wasn't forced. It was loud and uninhibited. "We all did that at first," they both said, along with variations on the theme and a few short anecdotes. Sébastien was coming to actually like these people, these Human Threes, in spite of himself, and there were times—like now—when being in transition didn't piss him off.

"You serious about this 'new world order' thing you're always going on about?" he asked them as he stirred his coffee. He knew immediately that his spontaneous choice of the words—"always going on about"—was rather derisive, critical, unwarranted, nasty ... and revealing. "Sorry," he said, chuckling at his own expense.

The two teachers were in the "consciousness development" program, the curriculum that Evolutionaries had set up to mould their little clumps of obsessive angst into proud, polished, give-a-damn Human Threes ... some of them as early as age twelve! They were both long-time Human Threes themselves, and they were so freaking "nice" that at times Sébastien wanted to just puke.

One was Leo Papadopoulos, a heavily bearded, fiftyish, Greek guy ... man of Greek heritage, Sébastien corrected his vocabulary internally ... with blue tattoos that never let him forget his youthful involvement with organized crime (for which Leo had apparently served eight years of very hard labor). The other was a way-too-pert late-forty-something woman named Beth—maybe early fifties—who had apparently slept with every straight male pal she'd ever made (and any willing females), and just plain loved to talk about it ... courteously, of course. Sébastien found Beth entirely attractive and intriguing, but she scared him to death. He often felt she was trying to befriend him, and while he welcomed her subtle advances, he was just not up for a fling with a Human Three. His bugaboo used to be "performance anxiety." He knew that was a non-issue for Beth and her ilk, but he was mortified by the impotence that had bedeviled him since his wife had flown the coop with "that rich British fucker," as Sébastien had often called him from the second beer on. He'd actually stopped drinking when he went back to teaching, but as far as he knew, old Mr. Wiggly still wouldn't stand at attention. Try as I may, he thought ruefully as he took a seat at the round table and remembered his three unfruitful forays into the weird world of Netsex. "Don't let me interrupt," he said politely, referring to their political debate, now long lost because of the arrival of a ... what am I to them? he asked himself. An adolescent?

"We were just plotting the course of the Quiet Revolution," said Beth. "Everybody's doing it on the Net now—and it's gotten so big that they're even using capital letters to spell it out now, like we do now for the French Revolution or the American Revolution or the LieDeck Revolution. In fact most people—us Evolutionaries anyway—see this Quiet Revolution as a natural second stage of the continuing or on-going LieDeck Revolution, something that would have happened nineteen years ago had it not been for the WDA and their idiotic decision to ban the LieDeck for civilian use."

"We might not even be here if the WDA hadn't emerged to outlaw war and end all crime and terrorism," said Sébastien after he swallowed his first sip of coffee. He was right, of course, as any Evolutionary

would readily concede, but he'd said his piece in the manner of a point-scorer, an advocate of the Normal side, an opponent of the very thing he was now grudgingly embracing—or at least trying out, experimenting with.

"Bullshit," said Beth.

Sébastien felt his face go rosy, and his mind raced to phrase his next parry, his deft counterpunch. It went all the way to fire engine flord before he caught the glint in Beth's eye. Cajoling a person was apparently kosher as a means of encouraging Human Three Consciousness, but Sébastien Roy hated being roughed up emotionally ... well, he hated it when it worked this well. He smiled at her zinger, and she burst out laughing.

"Absolutely true," she corrected her opinion. "The WDA, as we know it now, was ... was historically necessary, but now, so is its reform."

Sébastien leaned back, and wondered at how his intense reaction to her fake jab had faded from his face and found a new home in between his legs. Like when I met Julia Whiteside, he mused, remembering his embarrassing act of gratuitous petulance at the Victor-E SST, the free store, or whatever they called it. "I just don't see why it has to be enshrined in law," he said to Beth ... and Leo, he added mentally as he looked at "the Greek" momentarily, to indicate his belated inclusion. He didn't think he'd ever adjust to the hypersensitive accommodations that were the way of the Human Three, although he never failed to recognize the need for them when he was the recipient. And I appreciate them as well, he acknowledged in his mind.

"Ever see that old twentieth-century movie Camelot?" asked Leo.

"Yeah," said Sébastien, bracing himself for yet another Human Three "lecture."

"Human Two got us past the 'law of the jungle' a few centuries ago by proscribing—outlawing—Human One behaviors that—"

I know what "proscribing" means, Sébastien muttered inside, realizing too late that his body language had signaled his defensive reaction. Leo had simply stopped talking, and Sébastien ran a hand down his shaven face to indicate that he'd caught the emotional culprit, handcuffed the bugger, incarcerated, tried, convicted and executed the fucker, and didn't need or want to review his internal battle. "You were saying?" he invited.

"Some people really didn't like that, didn't approve of the introduction of laws and courts," continued Leo, "but that was really their tough luck. The era of Human One was over. In time, the great majority of Human Twos simply didn't rape or pillage any more, not precisely because the law proscribed it, but more or less because their consciousness had gotten past the 'might is right' assumption, and they saw the wisdom of resolving all conflicts through law. There was still some crime, of course, and ... and—"

"And as little as twenty-five years ago," interjected Beth, "there were still some South American countries that allowed 'crimes of passion.' Your wife cheats on you; you kill her and the guy; you explain to the judge that you pretty well had to do it, considering the shame they had brought upon you and your family, and the judge says he understands, and he lets you go with a couple of weeks in jail and a substantial fine, basically writing off the double homicide as a matter of honor. Nice, eh?"

Sébastien didn't know that, and he saw her point. He was reminded of a fact he did know, and that had been ground into him by his mother—that in Canada, up until 1929, women had been considered non-persons in law, chattels, mere "things" that were meant to be owned ... by men, natch.

"Anyway," Leo restarted his case, "there's still some crime committed today by the last remaining Human Ones ... or should I say those who think they have the right to act Human One whenever they feel like it, but the WDA pretty much put a stop to all that. Would-be Human Ones are now forced to conform to minimum Human Two standards and live within minimum Human Two expectations. For these people, fear of arrest and punishment is still a deciding factor, but eventually, deterrence will be rendered obsolete and unnecessary by a higher consciousness, by Human Two Consciousness, this in spite of the resistance by these would-be Human Ones to what they see as runaway servitude to a ridiculous and confining 'political correctness' fetish."

"All we're saying," Beth took over, "is that for a couple of generations, until Human Three Consciousness gets entrenched worldwide, an elected, civilian WDA will probably have to proscribe in law the most damaging or dangerous Human Two behaviors."

"What ... like you'll get arrested for lying?" asked Sébastien.

"At the very least," said Leo, jokingly.

"Well, not arrested," said Beth, in a more serious tone. "But fined, like for a parking offense, for instance. I mean it's already an offense to lie in court—perjury—or to lie in advertising, or to misrepresent the financials of a company, for example. A Human Three law would simply make it general—no lying ... anywhere ... period ... except for fun, I suppose."

"And what other perfectly natural behaviors would your so-called Quiet Revolution proscribe?" asked Sébastien.

Leo shifted in his chair. He wasn't sure if this new guy just didn't get it, or just liked playing devil's advocate ... or just wasn't a very nice person. Jeeze, raping and pillaging used be perfectly natural for Human One, he thought, but didn't say. "Actually," he said, "a lot of us figure that would about do it. If nobody ever lies, the rest sort of ... follows," he explained patiently. "I told my last whopper in..." His eyes flicked up at the ceiling as he tried to remember. "That was ... back in twenty-nine," he said with the satisfaction of certainty. "I had a stupid fuss with my third wife ... it's not important what it was about ... but I'd already been Human Three for about six years then, and I just ... collapsed..." His face trumpeted the shame he still felt about that cave-man incident. "I made a fist and drew it back and just about smacked her ... in the face," he said timidly. "Astonishing! I jumped right from Human Three to Human One—didn't even stop at Human Two on the way by! Total fuckin' regression! The whole thing took about half a second! Bang! and I was there."

He slapped his flat hand very hard on the table when he said "bang," and Sébastien winced.

"Scared the shit out of me!" continued Leo. "Her too! In fact she walked right out the door with no clothes on, and never came back. She won't even face me on the Net now, and I don't blame her either. Life is too short and lovely to have to put up with violence."

"She could forgive you," said Beth, "if she realized you—"

"Oh, she did," said Leo. "Forgiveness is the easy part. It's the trust that I killed. But ... better I killed that than her," he finished, with "whew" written all over his face.

"Under a Human Three WDA, you'd likely get a thousand-dollar fine just for feeling that, I suppose," offered Sébastien.

"And a hundred extra hours of SST work, I would think," contributed Beth. "Just for reinforcement and example."

Sébastien decidedly did not want to start debating the appropriateness of particular sentences—that would have conceded the righteousness of the overall game. “What did she do that pissed you off?” he asked Leo.

“Oh, nothing so terrible, really,” said Leo. “I came home and found her on the couch in the living room, having a for-old-times-sake romp with her first husband Joe. She still loved him a lot, and she still loved me, too. It wasn't anything that I hadn't done with my ex-wives. And it wasn't her first ‘last tingle’ with Joe either, but I didn't ... you know ... I didn't actually see the other two incidents, so it didn't bother me much when she told me about them, even though I didn't like the guy. I didn't realize that my dislike for him had anything to do with jealousy, which I guess I would've found out if we'd had access to a LieDeck. I just found him to be a goof—actually, he's a pretty good guy. Anyway, I totally flipped out for about a second when I caught them in the act. I even smashed the guy's head in with a baseball bat ... in my mind,” he hastened to explain for Sébastien's benefit.

“I knew that,” said Sébastien.

“Way to go, guy!” exuded Beth—to Sébastien. “Listen, can I make dinner for you some evening? I make the best honey-garlic meatballs you ever tasted.”

“I—uh—think that would be—uh—lovely,” said Sébastien. “But for now I'd better get back to my munchkins,” he said as he went to the sink to wash his cup.

“I'll do the washing up, Sébastien,” said Leo, rising to get at the task—he snatched Sébastien's cup from him and started running hot water into a stoppered sink. “Really ... no sweat.”

“Penance?” asked Beth, a former nun. She pushed back her chair and grabbed her bag from the tabletop.

“Maybe,” said Leo. “Or ... maybe not. Maybe I get some sort of perverted kick out of doing dishes! Tell you what. What if I accept your invitation to a dinner of honey-garlic meatballs? Would that be just as...?” He turned around as he swooshed liquid soap into the dishwater, and laughed heartily. It seemed that Beth had left the room, presumably in pursuit of prey.

* * * *

Sébastien walked out of the teachers' room determined to put all this Quiet Revolution stuff out of his mind and have a good rest-of-the-day with his students. He felt like a real live teacher again, for the first time since his return. He told himself he'd stay until five o'clock, if necessary, or until the last damned kid was worn out and ready to go home for supper. But as he arrived at his classroom door, he came across the principal, Six-fois Bellehumeur, who had just come up the stairs from his first-floor office.

“I looked in on your class earlier,” said Six-fois. “Have you—uh—got a minute to talk?”

Oh shit, thought Sébastien. I've never walked out on a class in my entire career, and now I get—

“No, no,” said Six-fois, sensing his fuss. “Your class was humming along just fine.”

Christ I hate that when they read your fucking mind, Sébastien thought. “What can I do for you, sir?” he asked.

“Six-fois,” said the principal. “Whenever I get called ‘sir,’ it makes me feel like I'm turning into my absentee dad, which is something I'd like to avoid.”

“Six-fois,” obliged Sébastien, trying to do it in a good spirit. “What can I do for you, Six-fois?”

"You can take this," said Six-fois as he reached into his coat pocket, pulled out an unsealed envelope and handed it to his newest volunteer teacher.

Sébastien opened it, and was astonished to find a paycheck for his first week of service. "I thought you said—"

"I did," said Six-fois. "Julia Whiteside—she's rich, you know—she sent her trustee, Mr. Wu, over to see me, and he told me that she'd cover your salary for as long as it took for you to—"

"Give it back," said Sébastien, handing back the envelope and check.

Six-fois studied his new volunteer teacher carefully. The redheaded man didn't seem angry or flummoxed or indignant. He seemed ... Human Three! "Why?" he asked.

"First," said Sébastien, "I don't want any favors from a stranger just because she's loaded. If Julia wants to do good with her money, she can give it to the SST. But mostly..." Sébastien found it very unusual, somewhat frightening, and curiously sexual to find himself thinking and saying these things, especially when he didn't even want to be doing so. "But mostly," he repeated, "I'd prefer to earn my way onto the team, sir—uh—I mean Six-fois."

"Well hot damn!" exclaimed Six-fois, with the sort of grin that most men reserved for news of their first-born. "I'd hug the shit right outa you if I didn't think that would make you feel uncomfortable!"

"It's the thought that counts," said Sébastien as he edged towards his classroom. "It was awful nice of her, though," he added.

"She's a peach," said Six-fois. And so are you, he thought as he stuffed the check back into his pocket and watched a proud man walk away ... jauntily, he thought. "She'll be so friggin' proud of you she'll likely bust out crying," he said to the back of the novice Human Three.

Sébastien just waved his acknowledgement, without turning around. He was in a hurry, after all. He had kids to teach.

Chapter 69

STRONG MEDICINE

Friday, May 6, 2033—9:46 p.m.

Victor loved working maintenance at the Royal Oaks Golf and Country Club. It wasn't the money—he had tons of that already—it was the fresh air and the flexible hours and the sunshine baths and the pleasant way the regular members called him by name and stopped to ask how he was feeling as they played through. Today was different though. For some reason, in spite of glorious weather, the course was utterly deserted. Still, he had flowerbeds to tend and a Sarlo to push around tree-trunks where the gang-mowers couldn't reach. He had sand traps that needed raking, and divots to repair, and there was never any shortage of spike marks to be smoothed over on the greens, even though the new rule required spikeless shoes. He worked on one hole per day, and every nineteenth day he rested, or played a whole round of golf by himself. Of course he played at night, which presented certain difficulties, but he knew his place, and plus he didn't want any acrimonious gossip in the Royal Oaks dining room about uppity help.

"Done!" he said as he looked over his handiwork with pride. He picked up his rake, shovel, trowel,

lunchbox and hardhat and headed out to check out the eighteenth fairway and green—tomorrow's canvas. Eighteen was one of his favorites, the hole that forever stood between now and his next day off. He felt very good, although he was becoming concerned about a persistent rumbling sound he had been hearing for the last couple of hours ... there must be a thunderstorm coming.

He turned around, and saw, to his astonishment, a hundred-foot-high glacier working its way down the sixteenth fairway! Big dirty chunks of ice were falling off its front edge, and it was gouging up grass and earth like a monster plow, even uprooting trees—in fact it was demolishing everything in its path! He signaled a teenaged girl driving the gang-mower tractor on the eighteenth hole. She was just doing the loop at the tee-off end of hole, and she shifted into neutral and waited for Victor to come puffing up to her. “Where ... the hell ... did that come from?” he asked, pointing at the icy juggernaut.

“Fifteen fairway,” she said. “It's moving about twenty feet a minute, they figure. I should have time to finish this fairway before it gets here ... if I hurry.” She shifted back into drive and continued to mow.

Victor saw that she was right. It was moving up the sixteenth fairway from the vague direction of number fifteen ... but what is it doing here, and what's the point of mowing number eighteen? The glacier was making a God-awful mess of things, of fairways that Victor had tidied yesterday and the day before, and soon it would ruin today's effort. It'll take the regular crew years to repair all that damage.

He walked glumly back to the clubhouse to put away his tools, entering by a concrete ramp at the back that led down to the maintenance area. When he got to the bottom, he saw that the basement had recently been converted into a sort of a warehouse. There were electrical devices piled all over the place—hand-operated toasters, old-fashioned cassette tape recorders, used MIUs—all trade-ins, according to their tags ... antiques, I suspect. That was one thing about his job that really and truly burned his ass—nobody ever told him anything. “I'm just going to go home,” he said out loud, to no one.

He threw his gardening tools onto a stack of obsolete MIUs and looked around. A red neon sign flashed: “Elevators.” That's new, he thought. And a damn good idea! Walking up stairs always made his head hurt.

Victor hadn't noticed this before, which was odd, but there were ten men in dark suits waiting in two straight rows of five for elevators, holding electrical appliances, new ones, judging by the shiny, un-taped-up boxes. They sniffed him, then turned away in unison—throwing each other knowing glances. Victor was profoundly offended, but said nothing. He worked outdoors, with his hands, in the heat! What did they expect?

There were two elevators, freight elevators, it seemed, and one of them arrived with a pleasant-sounding “bing.” Victor got in, then looked outside, and the dark suits were all laughing. At me! he realized. He peeked outside at the label near the “up-down” button, and horror of horrors—he'd gone in the women's elevator! His face faded to deep purple as he hurried out and rejoined the vigil.

Finally, after what seemed an interminable wait, the men's elevator arrived. They all got in, with the ten suited-up men huddled on one side and Victor alone on other, in his soiled green overalls. The doors closed, but just after the elevator started up, there was a disturbing “clunk,” and the thing listed to the heavy side. All four walls and the ceiling continued their upward journey, but the elevator floor had somehow become wedged between the walls of the shaft, between the basement and the first floor. Suddenly, the elevator floor sank sharply, to a forty-five-degree angle, towards the gaping front. All the suit guys grabbed the upper edge of the elevator floor, letting go of their boxes, which tumbled onto the basement floor. Victor grabbed too, but only managed to latch onto a man's ankle ... which snapped off!

He slid down the sloped elevator floor, slipping beneath the underside of the first floor of the building,

and landed in a heap in the basement, among the crunched boxes. He wasn't hurt, but he was stunned to realize he was still holding a foot in a black leather shoe and a black and green Argyle sock! There was no blood on it, but it scared him all the same. He threw the foot back, and the man who owned it caught it, said thanks—a nice touch, considering he was clinging for dear life with the other hand—and put it back on, one-handed, as if it were a comfy old loafer. The man with the refitted foot said: “Sir, there's a lot of good stuff down there—you can have it for your new SSTs if you want.”

He called me “sir,” thought Victor. He must want something.

The basement was starting to flood badly, no doubt because the glacier was melting ... and all that traded-in electrical shit will be no good if it gets wet. Victor figured that was why the man in the suit was suddenly so generous—that and getting his foot back, which surely must have come as a great relief.

He scratched his bald head and tried to ignore the terrified whimpers emanating from the elevator shaft. Might as well save what I can. He tried to load himself up with the appliances, but never got more than two or three items onto his free arm. The stuff kept falling off. He didn't want to get caught using the women's elevator, so he tried to think where he could get a truck ... to drive up the ramp. The only vehicles he could see were little things, like the cars used by clowns at the Shriners' Circus. Golf carts, he realized. Useless little farts, although quite handy on, for example, golf courses. He'd forgotten, momentarily, that he worked on a golf course, and that he was theoretically still at work.

The desperate cries from the much-tilted elevator floor weren't helping matters at all. The muddy water was cold, and it was getting deeper. Victor was afraid of drowning, so he walked up the stairs, empty-handed. And he didn't bother to punch out; he just headed through the empty liquor lounge and went straight for the parking lot and his 2002 Buick.

He turned the key over and over, and pumped the gas pedal as mightily as he could, but the stupid old machine wouldn't start. The water reached the rocker panels, and began seeping in under the doors. Even with the windows closed, he could still hear the rumble of the glacier as it plowed its way mindlessly across what used to be a prime piece of real estate. He could also still hear the screams of those men in the elevator. If they would just let go of the floor, they could save themselves, he thought. Stupid Human Twos.

He abandoned his car and walked through the empty streets, heading generally uphill, for obvious reasons. He was on dry land again, but his shoes and socks were still sopping, and he was lost. He wasn't even sure he could remember where he lived, but his memory kept saying “Elm Street.” Once he got to Elm Street, he'd be fine, he figured.

He asked a young man with a nose-ring where Elm Street was. “Follow me,” said the teenager. “It's tricky to get there from here, but I'm going sort of that way, and once I get to my rooming house, it's easy from there.”

Victor followed for almost an hour, about ten yards behind, struggling to keep up. He figured he had to be succeeding in terms of pace, because he wasn't falling any further behind, but for some reason, he wasn't able to actually catch up. Finally, the boy turned in a walkway to what had to be his rooming house.

“It's getting late,” said the kid. “You'll never make it to Elm Street before dark, and all the street lights are out because of that glacier or iceberg or whatever it is. So you can stay at my rooming house, but I only got a single room with a single bed, so you'll have to sleep with my sister. She won't mind, but you have to go barefoot in her place or she gets violent. I don't know why she's like that, but she's been like that ever since she was a kid. Never grew up, I guess.”

Victor reluctantly agreed. Jeeze, she didn't even make it from Human One to Human Two! he thought. Bummer!

He walked inside and was shown to the door of the sister's place on the second floor of the old house. It was sort of a two-room apartment, really, and the room just inside the door was so cluttered with garbage, toys, clothes and magazines that one would be hard-pressed to put a foot onto the actual floor. The table and chairs and counter of the kitchen area were completely covered with dishes, new and used, and food, new and used, and the cupboard doors were open, with loaves of French bread, cellophane-wrapped candles and all kinds of stuff sticking out or rammed in any old way. Victor was careful to take off his shoes and place them on the floor out in the hall. He took off his wet socks, put them inside his shoes, and then he introduced himself, explaining his predicament and the offer he'd been given by her brother. He was still outside the door, unable to step inside without drawing attention to the obvious problems that that move would pose.

"My name is Spot," the sister said. It sounded like a name you'd give to a dog, not a girl. She was in her twenties, naked, and balder than himself, and she was standing across the kitchen, in the doorway leading to the bedroom, shining in the bright overhead lights. She had blue and red tattoos from head to toe, an unlit cigarette hanging from her mouth, and even from across the room, Victor could see that her fingernails were unkempt. And her eyes! They seemed wonky, as if they were taking quite separate decisions about just where to look, like a lizard.

"Just pick a spot and it's yours," she said, no double meaning intended, or taken. "So, like, my bedroom's in here, if you want to sleep with me."

Victor could see a bedroom through the open door. Unlike the kitchen-dining area, it was clean and richly appointed, but the bed and the floor had big four-inch nails sticking up. Spot was standing barefoot on nails, in fact. She could apparently walk and sleep on them without injury, but Victor didn't think he could manage that—indeed, he was quite sure he could not. He pushed some of the junk aside for a place to sleep on the floor, and he mentioned to the girl that he needed to pee real bad.

"It's behind you, outside the apartment, at the end of the hall," she said, pointing.

He looked back. The door was open, and there was a girl in there, facing out, wearing Winnie-the-Pooh pajamas, brushing her teeth vigorously. She was staring at him as she brushed—staring past him, he realized, at the tattooed naked bald lady.

"She's been there for more than a week," Spot said. "It's very annoying. She won't share. Her teeth are real clean now, and her gums are all bloody, but she just won't stop."

Victor didn't ask for an explanation—he had other pressing priorities. "Then I guess I'll have to—uh—go in your sink," he said.

"I d-d-d-don't think so!" sputtered Spot. "N-n-n-not on my dirty dishes you don't!"

"Then ... in a jar?" he suggested.

"Ewwww, gross," she said.

"Do you have like a pee can?"

"Pie?" she queried, puzzled.

Victor had had enough of this. He went outside, where he saw his old 2002 Buick! It was sitting right where he couldn't remember having parked it. That's weird, he thought. He distinctly remembered leaving

it at the golf course, but there it was, sitting there, sort of waiting for him. My memory's not what it used to be. He urinated on the left back tire, glancing this way and that so as not to be seen. Does that work? he wondered.

As he did up his seatbelt, he became quite irritated with himself, mostly because he couldn't seem to get his thoughts or actions organized, or even figured out. He was also ticked off that he couldn't seem to get done what he was supposed to be getting done, whatever that was. He peeled out from the curb and drove much too fast, looking down into the bib pocket of his green overalls to make sure he had his checkbook. At least I remembered that.

He finally got to where he was pretty sure he was supposed to go, but it wasn't Elm Street—it wasn't even Thunder Bay! (Don't I live in Thunder Bay?) It was a farm, half way in between the one-horse town of Bristol and old Highway 148, ten or seven miles south-west of the Whiteside estate. He parked on the side of the narrow laneway, running two wheels up into the long shoulder grass, on the right. When he got out, it still seemed to him that it might be difficult for other cars to get by. But I don't care, he realized with pleasure. I really and truly don't give a shit!

He walked up to the farmhouse and entered the basement—it was only a crawl space, really—by a storm door, one of those near-horizontal entrances that people built more than a century ago. He wanted to go in by the front, but he felt ashamed, because he was wearing a pair of overalls. A pair? he said to himself, not understanding why they were referred to in the plural. He stooped over and wiggled through the low space, ducking his head to avoid rafters and old wires, to where he found a butter-box to stand on. Strange, that I'd need a box in this cramped space.

He stood on it anyway, accepting this latest contradiction as he did so many others, and looked out the elevated window. It was a small window, made to let light in, not to look out of. He saw a verdant, twenty-acre field, with one hundred cows in it, standing in ten rows of ten, like pews in church, with an aisle smack down the middle. And they're all munching in unison, he thought pensively. Cows never do that! Not even businessmen do that!

The hay was growing so fast you could practically see it fill in immediately behind the disappearing mouthfuls. This was his kind of land, and he was determined to buy the place. The cows suddenly looked up, almost as one, saw him, and lo, they began to stir. Then they broke rank completely and started wandering aimlessly, bumping into each other, as if they were blind. Victor couldn't help feeling that this was somehow his fault, but he didn't remember doing anything bad. Then they started kicking and biting, and a bunch of little stampedes broke out, with collisions galore. "Stop," he whispered ... and everything froze, just as if he'd said "pause" to an MIU. Such powers I have, he thought.

He ran upstairs, and looked out a big front window in the dining room, where, as he gradually realized, a tea party was in progress—well, they were using teacups, but who could really say what the amber liquid was. The cows were now tranquil, but several had badly fractured legs, which flopped around uselessly as they hobbled along on the other three. The disabled cows seemed unaware of the awful sight they made. The farmer stood among them, shooting the wounded, who didn't seem to mind at all. And the other cows take no notice, Victor noted. "It could have been worse," he said to those gathered inside. "Of course I'll pay for the damage," he added, pointing to his checkbook, but no one was listening. They had tea to drink and things to say to each other ... things of importance, no doubt.

The farmer came in from the cull, put away his .303 rifle, and ordered the meeting convened. Victor sat on a padded bench as they discussed the selling price for the farm—apparently it was a collective concern. The two women flanking him on the bench were extremely big, and they seemed to be growing as fast as the grass outside. Their bodies pressed against him tighter and tighter, until he had to lean back. All the owner could see of him now were his legs. Then there was a sound, like the popping of a huge

cork, and he found his torso flung backwards, like he was a bar of wet soap that got squeezed, and launched. His head smacked against a window ledge, and that hurt his neck. He tried to talk from that position, but it was difficult. All he could see were the backs of those two bulbous women—that and a bit of the ceiling.

The owner's wife suggested that there was a place seventy miles to the east where a much nicer type of house was prevalent. "Why don't you go buy a place over there?" she asked, craning her neck in a vain attempt to see her guest. "The people over there are a lot nicer than we are too," she added.

Victor twisted, pulled his legs from between the two ever-expanding book-end ladies, and snuck out of the room, crawling on his hands and knees out the front door and around to the side of the house, where he stood up and ran to his car ... only to find that someone had punctured the left back tire. Or maybe it rotted off, he considered as he took a closer look at the disintegrating rubber. Some damned dog did that, he figured. Toxic stuff, dog pee!

"I have to get that tire fixed," he said aloud. He didn't know how to change a tire, so he drove one mile south to Charmichael's Garage with the left back wheel clattering on its rim, and with strips of rubber flapping madly. He walked up the stairs to the door of the rural store-slash-service-station. Christ, I'm barefoot, he realized. I forgot my socks and shoes at that rooming house. Funny I didn't notice until now. Isn't that illegal ... to drive without proper footwear?

The maître d' met him at the entrance, and he was adamant that there were no tables available, even though there were clearly more empty tables than there were occupied ones. It's probably because I'm barefoot, thought Victor. He was told he had to sit in the back, on a bench beside the washrooms, until a table came free. Other customers, dressed in Sunday-go-to-meeting finery, came through the door and were assigned tables. That's just not fair. He went over to the men's loo, but it had a minuscule "out of order" sticker slapped right over the keyhole in the doorknob. He wanted to duck into the women's, but after the elevator incident at the Royal Oaks, he didn't dare. He went back to the bench, and sat silently, trying to think of something to think about—anything but his bladder. He had forgotten about the flat tire. When he remembered, he quickly put it out of his mind. The current situation was that vexing.

He decided to complain, and demanded to see the manager over the table problem. The maître d' finally said he'd found a chair. "But I'm afraid you'll have to share a table with six other people," he said. "There's nothing more I can do—sorry."

Victor reluctantly accepted the offer, and once seated, asked for a menu.

"The only thing left is a pineapple upside-down cake," said the waitress stiffly as she chewed gum open-mouthed and looked off in the direction of Uranus, her yellow order pad and orange pencil poised for action. Victor saw that others had roast beef, fried eggs, corn on the cob, even pickled beets, but the waitress was getting increasingly agitated. She shoved the pencil into her hair, above her right ear. "That's all we got, but the boss says 'cause you made such a freakin' fuss before, he'll make it à la mode for youse." She speeded up her chew-rate, blew a small pink bubble, and cut it with her teeth—"pop."

With considerable doubt, Victor nodded. When the cake came, almost immediately, it was cut into seven uneven slices and served all around the table. A woman on the other side of the table wolfed her helping down in three poorly minced bites, and then stared, longingly, at Victor's smaller portion. "Oh ... take it," he said, handing it across the table, shocking the other diners with his bad manners. "I can't see anyway," he explained.

The left lens of his glasses was gone. Victor couldn't recall losing it, but then again he wasn't even sure if he wore glasses. Last he remembered, his eyesight was fine. He took off his glasses and dropped them

into a sweating pitcher of ice water, hoping they would disappear, like diamonds. No one noticed. Whew!

The conversation among the other diners continued as if he wasn't even there. Then a man on his right started rubbing his bare foot up and down Victor's leg. "You smell real funny," the man said.

"Pardon?" yelled Victor. "I can't hear without my glasses."

The gay man turned away, insulted.

Victor got up to leave, wanting nothing more than the safety of his old Buick, flat tire or no. He took a candy mint from a bowl beside the till, and reached for the door handle ... only to run into a burly man, blocking his escape. "Not ... so fast, Mr. Helliwell," said the big fellow, with a meaningful pause after the word "not."

"What's your problem?" asked Victor.

"I think maybe you'd like to pay your ... bill," the muscle-bound doorman said with dripping sarcasm. He handed Victor an itemized bill for \$1,798,467.93! It was the bill for the farm he'd recently escaped from, the asking price—plus the costs of the stampedes and the lost head of cattle, plus one serving of pineapple upside-down cake. At least they didn't charge me for the ice cream, he thought. Everyone in the restaurant was peeking at him slyly, with mocking, held-back smiles. Then came a few yellow snickers, and finally they laughed right out loud, in all colors, with no regard whatsoever for his feelings.

The doorman is the farmer! Victor realized.

The farmer turned Victor around forcibly and lifted his wispy crop of white hair with a spatula. Underneath, a carrot-shaped ganglionic mass protruded, sort of a soft, upside-down Hippo horn, with black blood and pus oozing out of the end. The farmer wiggled the spatula and toyed with it—it was wobbly, like a baby tooth just before it falls out. The laughter in the restaurant soared. "Get my three-o-three, Martha," he said, matter-of-fact. "We can't send this mess to market."

"Noooooooo!" Victor screamed, snapping up in bed. "Noooooooo!"

"It's okay," said Julia. "I'm here. I'll get your pill."

"What!?"

"You lie back down; I'll get your pill and some water."

"I'll ... get it myself," said Victor. "I have to pee anyway." The new painkillers gave him bad dreams, but what could he do? "Sorry to wake you up."

Chapter 70

ARRANGEMENTS

Friday, May 6, 2033—10:00 a.m.

Julia watched as Victor slipped painfully into his paisley silk caftan—she really liked it when he wore that thing—and watched some more as he walked unsteadily towards the can. He can't sleep any good any more, she thought sadly. He'll be all dead pretty soon, I think. I'm so glad we got to be friends first. Or again, she tacked on to her thought when she remembered calling a much younger Victor "Rip van

Winkle” at the manor when she was only ... ten, I think ... or maybe nine. He was nice to me, and I was such a talk-talk-talker back then.

There was a soft knocking at the outer door of Victor's suite, and Julia reprimanded her wayward brain for not setting the alarm. She knew Mr. Wu was due here at 10:00 a.m., and since he was always exactly on time, that meant it was 10:00 a.m. right now. She jumped out of bed and yelled “I'll get it” through the bathroom door. She arrived at the door to the outside hall just as the caller knocked again—harder this time.

Julia flung the door open. “Mr. Wu!” she sang as she gave the man a full-bodied hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I'm so glad you came to see me! Come on in and sit down. You could call Noel on the MIU. He'll bring us some nice coffee and juice and donuts. I'll be right back after I brush my hair and put some clothes on, okay?”

“Boy, you're—uh—tummy's starting to get big, eh?” Mr. Wu said as he admired her receding backside.

“Yeah,” said Julia, pleased that he'd noticed—she was very proud of that bulge. She turned around and poked her taut belly. “I used to be able to pull my boobs sideways and see my toes if I just looked down,” she said, demonstrating how it used to be, “but now I have to bend over too to see them,” she explained, laughing at her beautiful dilemma and demonstrating again. She danced out of the living room and into the bedroom, leaving the door open.

She did that just for me, I'm sure, thought Mr. Wu. “I'm ... here to see Victor too,” he said towards the bedroom doorway. Julia didn't respond. Not even to mention whether Victor is here or not, he realized. But with her it's never rudeness. She's ... incapable of malice. He paused. No, he reworked the thought, we're all capable of malice; she's just ... unwilling, I suppose. Hell, she was a Human Three child before Victor ever coined the term.

He called the cook on the MIU, and minutes later, Noel brought drinks and treats up to the second-floor suite, placing everything on the low coffee table. The two men had met each other on a number of occasions, but had never actually spoken, other than to say “hello.” Mr. Wu was a wealthy, prominent accountant and lawyer; Noel was a cook. That wouldn't matter to Human Threes, thought Mr. Wu as he thanked Noel, but for us it's a mediaeval moat.

“You ... still play chess every day?” Mr. Wu asked as he helped himself to a black coffee. “With Victor?”

“I am stopping dat chess las' week,” said Noel in his never-to-improve franglais. “He is all dat time losing, an' I feeling sorry for 'im. Dey trying to give 'im dat morphine, but he saying ‘not yet’ to all dem doctors dat's all da time come in here.”

He wasn't leaving, and Mr. Wu didn't know what to say for an encore. As far as he knew, Noel had no family, no friends ... just Victor. He'd be all alone when Victor died, and Mr. Wu was not surprised when he looked up into the eyes of the fat Frenchman and saw tears streaming down his face. His arms just hung at his sides, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his red and white checkerboard apron. Mr. Wu wanted to get up and hold this lonely creature, to console him, and he had almost decided to actually do that when Victor came out of the bedroom, looking frail and blotto, and leaning heavily on Julia's arm. Saved, thought Mr. Wu.

“I gots ta go,” blurted Noel as he bolted the room, slamming the door.

“He's taking this worse than me,” said Victor in a weak, tremulous voice. He shook hands lightly with his guest, and allowed Julia to steer him to a chair and ease him into it. With a few head-clearing breaths, Victor watched as Julia sat on the floor in front of him and start dealing with business on the low table.

She put exactly the right amount of milk and sugar in his coffee mug, then added the coffee. She handed it up to him with a smile, and Victor did his best to smile back.

Mr. Wu loved Julia's blond hair, and just about everything else about her. Ever since she had become a woman, he'd wished he could share Netsex with her. He even figured she'd be delighted if he asked, but he'd never had the nerve. He'd imagined her naked a thousand times over the last fifteen or so years, especially when he made love to his wife. Now, he'd actually seen her body, and it was almost as beautiful as her mind ... well, let's say her "consciousness," he decided. She was now wrapped in jeans and an oversized green sweater ... which used to be Randall's, Mr. Wu knew from his long friendship and collaboration with "the man."

"So ... what's up?" Victor asked as soon as he felt up to dealing with an answer.

"Well," began Mr. Wu, "I have to speak with Julia about her estate—the shares we sold that were hers, and the money, and the little problem we've got with the C.S.E., the Central Stock Exchange—but ... that can wait until later. I've been—"

"Till never!" said Julia, not entirely aware that he wasn't actually speaking to her. "You know I don't understand that stuff, Mr. Wu. You're doing all you can what's best for me, eh?"

"Well ... yes, but—"

"Daddy said you would, and he was exactly right!" tittered Randall Whiteside's only surviving daughter. "I always trusted you, Mr. Wu, and I still do, so we don't have to talk about my boring stuff." She almost spilled her orange juice when those words popped out of her mouth. "Oops!" she said, putting her glass up on the coffee table. "Well, boring to me, I mean. If I could understand that money stuff, maybe I'd—"

"I—uh—have to talk to Victor too," interrupted Mr. Wu.

"Sure," said Julia, still smiling, as almost always. "What about?"

She was sitting on the carpet beside Victor's feet, her left arm draped over his knees as he stroked her hair. "You're the nicest girl I ever knew," Victor said.

Julia blushed shyly. She gave his bare feet a little friendly rub with her right hand and then returned her gaze to that nice Mr. Wu, who had something to say.

"The—uh—arrangements," Mr. Wu said, trying to be gentle by being oblique. "We—uh—we've got to have your instructions," he tried.

"Rangements for what?" asked Julia.

"The—uh—funeral," said Mr. Wu quietly, with worry lines deepening throughout his round, sixty-year-old face. He had been hoping not to have to say that "f" word, but now he'd done it, of necessity.

"How about a barbecue?" suggested Victor. "Haul me over to Victor-E, gut me, ram an apple in my mouth and turn me on a slow spit for the best part of a day. I bet I'd be ... scrumptious," he declared.

Julia was in stitches, slapping his knees and rocking back and forth. "We eat meat, but not people meat," she said ... and then she jerked back to full sobriety as she got his point.

"Perfectly good protein," said the inventor. "You could probably invite the Callaway number six clan and still have leftovers. But if you're still too hung up to roast me, then ... let's see ... I'd hate to see my body

go to waste. I know! Dump me in the Amazon and let the piranhas go on a feeding frenzy. They aren't so picky about who they eat."

Julia was giggling and slapping his knees again, although this time she wasn't so sure of her foundation. "Jeeze, Victor," she said. "I don't think pianos eat people either."

"Pi ... ra ... nhas," explained Victor. "They're a tiny little fish with great big teeth, in South America. If a monkey or something falls in the river, these piranhas get so excited the water just churns, like it's boiling, like at the bottom of a little waterfall or a fountain, and just minutes later there's only bones left. Look it up on the Net, Julia. It's an amazing sight."

"I—uh—really have to know what you want, Victor," said Mr. Wu. "Your will's all set up, but this part was never—"

"There used to be these Indian guys that would hoist you to a platform up in a tree," offered Victor. "The scavengers got the best bits, and the worms got the rest."

"Victorrrrr!" wailed Julia. She was still laughing at his silly suggestions, but seemed a bit upset. "Stop it!" She wiggled closer between his knees, and briefly rubbed his shins.

"Okay, I'll settle for being made into pet food," he said. "I never liked scavengers anyway—they remind me of pawn shops—but I always liked dogs, especially samoyeds. I used to have two dogs, Snowball and Kodiak, but they died, and I never had the heart to..." A pithy silence ensued, and Victor's eyes seemed to gaze right through the far wall.

"I think ... you should let us do like a regular-type funeral, Victor," Julia said into the void, staring at her bare feet. "Like they did for Daddy when he got killed, and like they did for my sister Sarah when she got in the car accident."

Victor knew that these were the only unsalvable wounds on Julia's psyche. He put his coffee on a side table, leaned forward, and wrapped his arms around her neck, resting his crossed hands soft on her breasts. "Why?" he asked. He was fully prepared to give in, but not without a good answer to that question.

"So we can feel sad and cry," she answered timidly, putting her hands on top of his. "I think it's okay to do that when you love somebody," she offered, her head hung.

"Of course it is," said Victor as he kissed the crown of her golden head, extracted his arms and sat back. "So be it," he said, touching the back of his neck, beneath the veil of long white hair, only vaguely aware that he would be surprised yet again to find the lump still there, killing him softly.

"Good," said Mr. Wu as he stood up, hoping to escape before either of them had time to start up another round of tomfoolery.

"And half of my money goes to Foundation-E for the implementation of phase two?" Victor said ... asked, really, just by way of confirmation.

"Yes," said Mr. Wu. "That's all set up in—"

"And the other half to my son," he said.

"Victor," said Julia, "you don't have a son, and Mr. Wu was just—"

"Or daughter," Victor said.

"Victor!" scolded Julia. "You don't—"

"Or his mother, actually."

"Victorrrrr!"

"Or her mother."

Mr. Wu turned and left the two in the middle of another play-fight that was bound to spill coffee—and surely couldn't be good for a dying man. What the fuck am I thinking? he asked himself silently after the door had clicked and the sounds became muffled. Who ever died so happily?

Chapter 71

THE MOLE

Wednesday, May 11, 2033—11:00 a.m.

"Freedom!" was all the note said. Lilly held the scrap of paper up to the opaque light of the window at the back of her apartment, but no clues were yielded from that experiment. She'd found the note taped to the screen of her MIU, and the maid hadn't been in. Lilly was the only person in Victor-E who ever locked her doors, and the maid was the only other person with a key and permission to enter. Who could have done this? And why?

Lilly hadn't Netlinked with Michael in almost seven weeks, although she'd thought about doing it a hundred times a day. He hadn't called her either, which is why she hadn't called him. It was a classic Mexican standoff, but Lilly wasn't about to fire first ... or to surrender. He's the one who spoiled everything on the alter of his political ambition, she reminded herself as she fondled the mysterious note. So if he wants to make up, he can damned well grovel.

She read the note aloud ... "Freedom!" ... and then it registered. It was she who had shouted that word, out at Lars' old hunting shack, when she released the trapped squirrel. How did he get in here?

Lilly tried not to signal her insight with any facial cues—her MIU was sitting there, staring at her, waiting for her long-overdue reports on both Michael Whiteside and Victor Helliwell. Every day she found it impossible to sit down and get them done, and every day she expected Control to appear unannounced on her screen and demand that she do her duty, and every day he didn't. Control must be either dead or way ahead of me, she thought. And he ain't dead.

She checked her appearance in the mirror by the front door—she was still drop-dead ... intriguing, she settled for. She put on her only-used-once tramping boots. "I'm going for a walk in the bush to clear my head," she said in the direction of her MIU. As far as she knew, that was the truth—not the whole truth, but the truth nonetheless. It was also true that she had almost quit caring whether Control caught her lying. Sometimes she felt it might be a relief to get fired ... better than her present purgatory, anyway. She closed the apartment door, leaving it unlocked, for the first time ever.

No one will say "hi" to me if I go through the E-tery, she thought as she stood in the hall, feeling more than alone. She went back inside, refused to even look at her MIU, and walked through the apartment to the back door. She unlocked it, went out onto the tiny balcony, and left that door unlocked too. The written side of the note was taped facing the screen, she recalled as she walked down the metal-slatted stairs of the fire escape. There were a dozen or so Evolutionaries down inside the empty swimming pool, cleaning it out, preparing for the glory days of summer. Lars wasn't concerned about the possibility that

my handlers might see the note, she realized as she sent a chilly nod to the maid, who was now working with the pool crew. The maid acknowledged Lilly's existence with a barely visible nod of her own. In fact maybe he even wanted my handlers to see it, Lilly clued in, knowing the WDA wouldn't understand the thing. They would have seen him anyway, when he came in the apartment. "The thick plottens," she said out loud as she stuffed the note into her pocket.

Lilly walked around the side of the old motel, got into her green Aura, drove east for a half mile and turned north onto the first dirt side-road. A light drizzle hung in the air, caught in limbo between actual rain and none at all. She set her wipers on "intermittent," and neglected—deliberately—to insert her Sniffer in the angled slot on the dashboard.

About a mile later, she pulled over at the crest of a hill and stopped. There was little that could be called a shoulder, so half of the car was really still on the driving surface ... but she parked anyway. There were ditches on both sides of this secondary road, and just bush beyond. Victor-E was now to the southwest, Shawville wasn't far to the east, and if she figured it right, she'd find the hunting shack if she walked due west for about twenty-five minutes. And if I miss it, I miss it, she said to herself as she put her Sniffer under the driver's seat and closed the car door. She knew she couldn't miss Dora's Creek, and that his cabin was right beside that creek, so if she did miss it on her first effort, she'd merely have to decide whether to follow the water upstream or down.

I'm taking the day off, she thought, so Control can stay the hell out of my private business. She had depressed the button before closing the car door, so it was locked. It occurred to her to leave it unlocked, just to be consistent, but she didn't. I'm sort of like this drizzle, she thought as she checked the slate-gray sky. An ape with a human heart, not really one thing or the other.

The first few steps into the wilds of Québec brought many memories flooding back, memories of the bizarre "hunting" trip she'd had with Lars in March ... that was almost two months ago! If Lars was in the shack, waiting for her, she would have sex with him this time—she knew that for sure. It wasn't that she had any great feelings for the person of Lars ... what is his last name anyway? She just needed something happy in her life—anything at all would do ... apparently; obviously, she thought.

Minutes later, Lilly's jeans were soaked up to the calves by a thousand brushes from baby-leafed ferns and the budding branches of low-lying shrubs. The drizzle had largely disappeared from the air, and Lilly was finding the moment-to-moment decision-making required by the difficult terrain to be an effective diversion from the never-ending stream of unwelcome and unanswerable questions that seemed to preoccupy her life lately. In fact, she was rather enjoying herself—something she hadn't done much of since ... that last day in Freeport, she realized. She even got a kick out of the thin layer of perspiration that now covered her body and dampened her clothes from the inside ... my own drizzle, she contemplated.

A few types of trees had sprouted little green knobs, embryonic leaves, but most of them seemed to be holding off. Maybe they fear a late frost, she imagined. Maybe trees have instincts, and know the value of prudence. I wonder if Victor ever looked at plants that way?

Lilly cut around a shallow depression in the rock. An old dead tree was suspended horizontally across the bottom. The blacks and browns of nature were broken at the foot of the gully by a spot of white, she noticed. Christ, that's where I went to pee last time I was out here, she thought. I didn't even bury the tissues I used. How ... how Human Two of me!

She carefully eased her way down to the scene of the crime, put the tree-trunk to good use, as she'd done before, and then dug a hole with the steel toe of her hiking boot. She kicked the new tissues along with the old ones into the hole and covered the lot with dirt and rotting leaves. Not that anyone will ever

know ... or care, she thought as she stamped things down. But I'll know ... and I ... seem to care.

On a whim, Lilly decided to play commando. She hadn't done that since her days at the Academy. She had been quite confident back then that she'd never have any use for such pre-Revolutionary skills. But why not? she snickered. I owe him one.

She crawled up to the top of the depression, enjoying the sensation of wetness on her knees. Dirt clung to her hands, worked its way under her fingernails. It took her almost ten minutes to crawl across the ground to the back of the shack, because every shift in weight required certainty that no twig would snap, giving away the game.

At the back of the shack, she lay still, flat against the ground, relishing the God-awful mess she'd made of her clothes. Even the ends of her hair had picked up mud and debris. She lifted her head, and saw a minute crack between two boards. Her heart was pounding pointlessly. Her breathing was deliberately light, in spite of her body's demand for a great gasp. She slowly raised her head to the crack, about three feet above the floor level, and peeked in. The width of a board away, she saw brown hair. Lars' hair!

Lilly lowered herself silently back down and crawled a couple of yards to where she saw a broken branch that was vaguely the weight and shape of a baseball bat. She cleared away a few twigs, and lifted it noiselessly from its bed. Then she stood up ever so gently, raised the branch—wrist thick at the heavy end—and took two careful steps backwards to the corner of the shack. She set the “bat” at shoulder height, reviewed the physics of the golf swing, and let fly against the wall. WHACK!

"Holy fuck!" she heard from inside the shack. Lilly put down the club, barely choking back her laughter, and ducked behind the back of the shack, avoiding the crack between the boards. With any luck, she thought, he'll come tearing out to investigate and I'll scare the shit out of him again.

She heard Lars run out of the front opening, where a door had once been, and then she heard nothing. She waited ... and waited ... still nothing ... after half a minute. Her curiosity started to melt into fear, or at least concern, so she decided to peek around the corner of the shack. She'd do it as she'd been trained, in one third of a second ... out, in. She would see all she needed to know, and if she was seen, the opposition couldn't get a shot off before she withdrew her head. It was a silly precaution, she knew ... but what the hell! He's got to be playing some sort of game.

Zip!

"BANG!" she heard, as she pulled her head back to safety. A bullet ripped through her hair, ricocheted off a branch and thudded into the trunk of a tree. "It's me ... Lilly," she shouted. Her heart was racing madly now, this time for serious. She used to always carry her weapon, but for the last several weeks she hadn't, since it became clear to her that she could never shoot anyone. She hadn't even brought her Sniffer with her, so she had no way to summon help. "Lars, it's me," she repeated.

"Step out very slowly, showing your hands first," screamed Lars. "Do it NOW!"

Lilly eased the fingertips of her left hand beyond the corner of the shack, and when they didn't get shot to bits, she did the same with her right hand, then her forearms, and finally she rose up and stepped out. Lars was flat on the ground, with only the top half of his head and eyes showing around the front corner of the shack—plus his right arm and hand, holding a pistol, a standard-issue Smith and Wesson.

"On your knees, NOW!" he screamed. "Put your head down, look only at the ground, and crawl forward, slowly."

Lilly recognized the drill, and did exactly as Lars had commanded. She didn't look up, and her hair swept

the earth. "Lars," she said pleadingly, "it's me. What the fuck are you doing with a gun. I thought—"

"Shut up," shouted Lars. He was standing now—Lilly could tell by the angle of his voice. "Crawl into the shack and lie on your stomach on the floor. Do it NOW!"

Lilly obeyed. Lars has to be WDA, she realized. How could I not know, not be told? How could it even be? It ... can't be!

"I wish you hadn't done that," said Lars angrily. "I have her in custody now—please advise," Lilly heard him say.

"Accelerate the plan," came a voice from the speaker of Lars' Sniffer.

Lilly thought she recognized the voice. It sounded like ... Control—my Control—Mark Drummond! But ... that can't be!

"Right," said Lars. "Captain Petrosian, crawl slowly to the corner, turn around and sit. Face me with your arms fully outstretched and fingers flared."

Again, she obeyed. When she turned around, she saw Lars in a wide stance, his pistol pointed at her heart, pure fury in his eyes. "Can I lower my arms?" she asked the young man she'd come here to ... to have fun with, she remembered as she stared at the barrel of his weapon.

"Are you armed?" asked Lars without the slightest change of position.

"Yes," said Lilly.

"Beep," went Lars' LieDeck-equipped Sniffer, confirming for Lilly that he really was WDA.

"No games," said Lars as he lowered his gun and relaxed a little. "You should not have done that," he said in a voice so harsh that Lilly barely recognized it as his. "Now we'll conduct your debriefing," he said as he sat cross-legged on the floor, his gun still in his hand. "You will address me as Colonel Johannsen, Captain Petrosian. You came here alone?"

"Yes."

"Anyone know you're here?"

"No."

"Got your Sniffer?"

"No."

"That's an offense."

"I couldn't care less."

"Beep."

"No more lies. Last warning. Where's your car?"

"On a dirt road about a mile east of here."

"Pick up the car," said Lars towards his vest, without taking his glaring eyes off Lilly.

"Roger," came a different voice from his Sniffer.

Lars seemed to relax even more. He continued to stare at his prisoner, though, and Lilly wondered why he didn't take his Sniffer out, so that Control could see what was happening. Then she remembered the Academy again. Losing your Sniffer was as serious an offense as losing your weapon, and both hands were needed in any weapons-drawn situation.

"I suppose you think you got this incredibly important assignment up here in Québec on merit?" said Lars, with an almost animal sneer.

"Apparently ... not," said Lilly.

"You got it because you were so weak!" said Lars as his free left hand fished in his pocket for something. "We knew you'd cave if the going got rough, and we knew you'd cop a man if the money was right ... and we knew you'd even convert to Evolution and become Human Three if your world fell apart," he snarled as he pulled a pen from his shirt pocket. "Plus, you're reputed to be a great lay," he said with a wicked smirk. "We got quite a kick out of the MIU feed from Freeport."

"You fucking voyeuristic bastards!" spit Lilly.

Lars raised his right hand and fired a bullet into the wall above Lilly's head, causing her to duck instinctively. "The next one goes through your left tit!" he shouted viciously.

Lilly was terrified ... but also curious. Lars had used the pistol report to cover the clicking of his ballpoint pen. Something strange was afoot!

"Do you know where Michael is?" he asked brutally.

"No sir."

"Beep."

BANG! This bullet missed her by a smaller margin than the last one.

"Is Victor Helliwell aware that we made him sick?"

Christ, Victor was right, she thought. "Sir, yes, sir!" she barked. "At least he assumes that the WDA—"

"Is Michael Whiteside aware that we killed Victor?" he demanded as he quietly put down the gun on the floor.

"No sir," said Lilly, putting a "what's happening?" look on her face. "At least I didn't tell him, and I doubt if Victor did. He seems—"

"I'm not interested in your amateur female speculations, bitch!" shouted Lars as he rolled up his left sleeve and began writing on his forearm. "Are you Human Three?"

"No."

"Beep."

Lilly was stunned. "Not yet," she tried.

"Beep."

"I guess I really don't know."

"Beep."

"Is Michael?" shouted Lars.

"I doubt it," she said. "No, not to my knowledge. I haven't—"

"Shut up!" screamed Lars as he put his pen back in his pocket and held up his bare arm. "Just answer the fucking questions yes or no."

Lilly leaned forward. "Attack me when I wink, then kill my Sniffer," he had written.

"One more act of insubordination," he shouted at her as he got to his feet and slowly approached her, "and I'll do a summary execution." With his free hand, he was signaling to her to stand up. She complied—and then he winked. "And don't think I won't do it if I hear one more—"

Lilly lashed out with her right foot. The gun was just above hip-level and pointed off to the side, but she wasn't about to take any chances. The steel toe of her boot snapped his right wrist just as the gun went off, and her right forearm crashed into his chest a split second later, driving the breath out of him and knocking him to the floor. She leapt onto him, pulled his Sniffer out of his inside jacket pocket, and threw it against the wall, where it fell face up—meaning Lars' WDA handler could still see, even if what was visible was mostly ceiling. She grabbed for the fallen gun, stood up, and fired a bullet in the wall just above Lars, for effect. Then she wheeled around, stepped to where she virtually straddled the Sniffer, contorted her face into a contemptuous snarl, and fired again. "The Sniffer's dead," she said as she put the gun in her jacket pocket and bent over to help Lars.

"Jesus H. Christ!" squeaked Lars, with insufficient air. "You didn't have to ... break my ... fuckin' arm."

"Jeeze, I'm really sorry, Lars," said Lilly. "What do we do now? You better fill me in on—"

"We got maybe two minutes before the choppers get here," he said as he cradled his throbbing wrist. "They'll expect to find one of us dead ... and when they don't, and they figure out that we're on the same side, they'll expect us to run ... so we stay. Lift up the three floorboards immediately to the left of the stove. It's a trap door. Use my knife—it's in my jacket here, left pocket."

Lilly took his knife, went over to the side of the old stove, and looked—nothing. She had to get right onto her knees and stare before she saw the faint outline of the cleverly disguised trap door. She inserted the knife at the edge, lifted the floorboards—the thing creaked. There was sort of a shallow dungeon below. She could see two car batteries in there, and a plastic-covered box, presumably containing food, water and other supplies—and a smaller white box with a bold red cross on it. Good thinking, she said to herself as she heard "Colonel Johannsen" moaning lightly behind her.

"That ... was supposed to be your coffin ... after I killed you," said Lars as he stood up. Then he reached up to an old shelf with his left hand, beside the stump of dangling stovepipe, and withdrew a tiny delicate glass bottle, circa 1900, or so it seemed. "Break this just before you crawl in," he said, handing it to Lilly. He wormed his way into the hole, protecting the injured wrist as best he could. "Just heave it as hard as you can before you close the trap door," he said. "And make sure the fucking thing breaks."

After Lars had managed to wiggle into place, Lilly got her lower body into the hole and did as she'd been told, easing the floorboards down only after the vial had shattered against the far wall.

The trap door was a masterpiece of makeshift carpentry. It was almost pitch dark in the dungeon even though it was daylight half an inch above. Lars turned on a flashlight to help Lilly find her way onto one of

the two inflated mattresses. "You're not going to like the next part," he said, wincing in pain.

"What next—" she began ... and then it hit her. "What the—"

"Eau de skunk," said Lars, trying to maintain his sense of humor. "Put this on," he said, giving her a gas mask and struggling to get his on with his one good hand. "It's so the dogs won't know we're here. Let's get my arm set. There's morphine in—"

"Shhh!" said Lilly, as the sound of helicopter blades emerged faintly out of the gray sky above. She put on her mask, laid the flashlight down on the mattress, and helped Lars on with his mask. Then she got a morphine pill from the first aid box and shoved it up under Lars' gas mask and onto his waiting tongue. "We'll have to set the arm later," she whispered.

Chapter 72

CONFESSION

Wednesday, May 11, 2033—11:50 a.m.

Victor awoke in his bedroom to find himself staring at the carpeted floor, about three feet below. He wondered briefly if he was having an out-of-body experience, but ... no such luck. I wish, he thought as his brain kicked in.

It was the strap around his forehead that caused him to remember. He hadn't been able to lie flat on his back for weeks. The only relatively comfortable position he could manage was to lie on one side or the other, and he needed help to switch over from left to right. In recent days, he'd reached a point where he couldn't lie on his sides for very long either. The pain in his neck was often just too much, even with the pills. They'd told him the time had come for morphine, but he had demanded a few more days of lucidity, or what passed for same—the pain medication he was willing to take was no slouch. "Think of something, for Christ's sake!" he had demanded of his doctors. So they had put him in a bed called a modified Stryker frame. Whenever it was necessary, which was about half the time now, they would have him lie briefly on his back, and then lower a suspended mattress onto his front—a mattress with a hole in it for his face—then strap him into this temporary mattress "sandwich" and rotate him until he was on his stomach, with his face sticking partly out through the hole, looking down. When the deed was done, they'd lift off the regular mattress for a while—for how long, Victor was never sure, but this queer "roisserie contraption," as he had come to call it, did help.

"Where's my apple?" he whispered at the carpet. He knew he was never alone any more, and he rather hoped it was Julia that was keeping the deathwatch today. Probably not, he thought. Certainly not. She'd be lying on the floor already, so I'd see her when I surfaced.

"Did you ... say something?" came a whispered response.

Victor snickered ... which hurt his head. He couldn't tell who it was because there were no vocal cords involved. He snickered because his mind went back to that one little loophole in his invention. The LieDeck didn't work for psychopaths—everybody knew that—but it also didn't work if a person whispered. He remembered a time just before the Revolution when former prime minister Louis St. Aubin and his caucus and cabinet were reduced to whispering to the media, lest they be caught in a lie. Those were strange days, he thought.

"Victor?" came another inquiry, this time in full voice.

"Hi Mr. Wu," he said. Not my first choice, he felt, recognizing the telltale Oriental nasality in the male voice. He considered explaining his little "apple-in-the-mouth" joke, but decided against. Mr. Wu hadn't laughed the first time anyway. "Get Julia," he said hoarsely. It was hard for him to clear his throat in this sling thing, and phlegm tended to build up while he slept. If you can call being KO-ed by drugs "sleep," he said to himself.

"Pardon?" said the voice, beside the bed now. Mr. Wu had hunkered down, but was not about to prostrate himself under the man. Last time I did that, Victor asked me to get a cup so he could spit in it. Yuck!

"Get ... Julia," said Victor again, as strongly as he could. "And clean ... your ears ... furfucksakes," he added as Mr. Wu's feet scampered out of the room.

Victor didn't know what time it was. They don't put clocks on floors, he mused. He made a mental note to ask Julia to do exactly that, then changed his mind. What would it matter? he thought. My time is measured in doses, not minutes or hours.

He heard the bedroom door close. Good, he thought; he didn't want his MIU, out in the living room, to pick up their conversation.

"Hi Victor," said Julia as she maneuvered carefully under the bed—she wasn't used to having a football in her tummy. "How are you feeling?" she asked as she reached up and ran her hands over the exposed areas of his face and scratched the underside of his chin through the long white beard. She knew he always woke up itchy. "Do you need a cup to spit in?"

"I'm ... fine," said Victor, answering both questions at once. "But I think I may fall asleep again pretty soon, and I have to tell you something, okay?"

"Sure," said Julia. "What?"

"I did a crime," he said. "I'll tell you about it, but it's okay ... the next time you're LieDeck-verified I'll be dead anyway, so you can tell them the truth and you won't get in trouble, okay?"

"You did a crime!" asked Julia. She was just nine during the Revolution ... Dad used to call me "Gobbleguts," she remembered ... so she had never known anyone who did a crime! "How did you not get caught, Victor?" she asked incredulously. There hadn't been any crime ... oh, a little, maybe ... since the Revolution.

"Well," said Victor with as much of a smile as the contraption allowed, "for a long time I didn't talk, eh? And the WDA left me alone, and then by the time they decided to LieDeck-verify me like they do everybody else, I ... well, I was somebody else."

Julia couldn't make any sense of that, and she was pretty sure it wasn't because of her mental disability, either. Maybe the drugs are making him imagine things, she wondered, or get mixed up.

"You know how some people have diseases of the mind?" he asked.

"Like me?" asked Julia.

"There's nothing wrong with your pretty mind," said Victor. "You just got a low IQ, that's all, same as I got a high forehead."

Julia laughed. He had explained what he meant by "high forehead" once before, and she'd thought it was perfectly silly, and funny, that some men were embarrassed because they didn't have any hair on their

heads, or at least none on the top, like Victor.

"All my not-talking and brooding and hiding from the world all those years," Victor continued, "gave me one of those diseases of the mind. But I did it on purpose, Julia. I got what's called a split personality, which means that sometimes I get to be this whole other person ... you can look that up on the Net if you want ... it's quite interesting." His breathing was becoming labored now, and there was a gurgle in his voice. He decided not to try to explain how he had only come to realize this lately, probably as a result of all the medication he was taking. "Split ... personality," he repeated. He cleared his throat ... or tried to.

"I'll get a cup," said Julia, as she wiggled awkwardly out from under the bed.

First things first, thought Victor. He was enduringly grateful that it had turned out—as he'd anticipated and predicted—that one's CQ and IQ were largely unrelated. While a few people came by high CQs naturally, a high CQ was mostly a matter of will, practice and support, not biology—and the cup was the first priority, lest he choke to death before he had the occasion to say what he wanted to say. He did his best to hork out the mucus plug that seemed to grow in his throat every time he slept, and Julia arrived with the cup just in time.

"Feel better?" she asked as she slid the cup away and wormed her way back under the bed, to where her face was directly below his.

"Yeah ... thanks," he said, somewhat winded from the effort.

She watched as he calmed down, and then, just when he was getting back to normal, she noticed that he was holding his breath, and sort of grimacing. She was going to ask if he was all right, but then she realized it wasn't because of the pain. She knew what it was. He'd told her two days ago about how they had arranged for him to pee or poo while he was in his "rotisserie." They put a condom on his thingie all the time with a hole in it and a tube in the hole that goes over to a bag so he can pee whenever he wants to without moving, she remembered. And they ... she forgot how they handled poo, so she waited ... patiently ... although not for long.

"So ... it was this other guy that you got to be that actually did the crime?" she asked when his "business" was done.

"I didn't say it was a guy," said Victor teasingly.

"You got to be a girl?" Julia asked excitedly.

"No ... it was another man that I became ... and yes, it was him that did the crime."

"What did he do?" she asked.

"Well," said Victor, "I ... me ... Victor ... I actually forgot that I still had my original prototype LieDeck, the first one that I ever made, the one I showed your daddy back in twenty fourteen. Everybody thought it got destroyed in that explosion that happened here ... remember when the lodge got blown up and your dad built it all up again in just a few days using hundreds of workers ... just before the Revolution?"

"Oh yeah," said Julia pensively. "Daddy said he would build it right back the way it was before, and he did it. That was when Annette got shot right near her eye and almost died, eh?"

"Yes," said Victor. He was getting concerned that this current bout of consciousness wasn't going to last long enough for him to get through what he had to say, but he was in the middle of it now, and he fought against the magnetic pull of stupor.

"This other guy called himself Eyeball," he said.

"That's weird," said Julia.

"You gotta tell Mr. Wu to call a guy named Gil Henderson on the Net, and tell him that I was Eyeball, and Eyeball said 'thank you, friend, and goodbye,'" he said. "Can you remember all that?"

"Duh," said Julia—she thought it meant "no" when you said that made-up word. She retrieved a pen from her "manly canvas bag" and began writing the essentials on her left forearm. "Gil..."

"Henderson," said Victor, and then he spelled both names for her, Gil and Henderson, at her pace. This is all taking too long. "Mr. Wu knows who he is."

"Victor ... is ... Eyeball ... and ... Eyeball ... says ... thanks," she said slowly as she printed the upper case letters on her arm.

"Friend," said Victor.

"Yes ... I'm glad you had a friend, Victor." She wrote that word down, although she wasn't sure she had the spelling right ... not that that matters, but...

"And goodbye," he said.

"And ... good ... bye," she repeated as she wrote it down.

"My first LieDeck?" said Victor, in the form of a question ... to get Julia back to that. "It's hidden inside the ... left arm of that old chair that's ... always in front of my MIU," he said.

"You had a LieDeck all that time!?" squealed Julia with delight.

"Well, Eyeball did," said Victor. "I never even knew I was turning into this Eyeball guy, but he remembered the old LieDeck, and sewed it into the arm of that chair, and unsewed the arm to replace the batteries every eight or ten months, and sewed it back up ... I don't know how many times ... dozens ... and he did all that in the dark, and—"

"Why in the dark?" asked Julia.

"I'm falling asleep, Julia," said Victor, "and there's one more thing I ... I got to tell you ... before ... I..." He was silent for a few seconds. "Mr.... Wu ... arranged..."

Julia waited a few seconds, unsure of whether Victor was still among the conscious, or the living. "What?" she asked.

"I'm the ... father of your ... baby," he said ... or thought he said ... he couldn't be completely sure which.

"What?" said Julia, but it was too late. "Sweet dreams," she said as she got up on one elbow, kissed his cheek, and lay back down, staring at her inked forearm and crying hot, silent tears.

Chapter 73

THE HOLE

Wednesday, May 11, 2033—8:30 p.m.

Lilly lay motionless in the cramped underground hole, sweating profusely, breathing in the putrid air—the gas mask worked, but only to a point.

Oddly, she found herself wishing for all the world that she could brush the mud out of her hair. Stray thought, she said to herself as she pushed that silliness out of her mind. She knew that stray thoughts were dangerous. Anything could happen in the pitch dark—knock something over, even poke yourself in the eye. She was a trained WDA agent, and knew that she needed all of her faculties aimed solely at the problem at hand. Review all you know ... over and over, she'd been taught. Make as many plans as you can dream up, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each, then choose the best one and act. What do you know about your enemy? Can you anticipate his moves? You must win. The question, the only question, is “how?”

She had done all that many times over. She'd started her reviews even as the WDA helicopters had hovered near the old shack in the early afternoon, lowering their human robots on ropes (she remembered doing that during her training). Neither fighting nor fleeing were options, even with Lars' weapon in her possession. She had worked on her plans as the incoming WDA agents had screamed at each other, at her and at Lars from the surrounding bush, and fired four shots into the cabin's walls, judging by the sound. And she had kept concentrating on her business while they tried unsuccessfully to send dogs into the shack, undoubtedly with Sniffer-arrays strapped to their heads, Netcasting to agents in the bush. She had swallowed her fear and focused her mind on the longer-term even as she heard the banging of boots and coughing only inches above her face. She didn't find it funny that the capture force swore up a storm at the skunk that had squirted its foul defenses—presumably at Lars and herself as they left. “Or after they left,” one agent had speculated between coughs and curses—curses because they had no gas masks as much as because their quarry had escaped. Lilly had continued her planning as the swarm of WDA agents went outside for air and to settle down their yelping dogs, whose olfactory genius had been thwarted by a dumb-assed forest critter. She'd kept her mind centered on planning and analysis while she listened to the WDA helicopters depart ... hopefully with all the agents and dogs on board. If they left someone behind to set up a perimeter, we're dead, she'd realized.

At one point, her mind departed from the forced repetitions of plans and analyses. It occurred to her that the WDA didn't know about the hideout! They must have just told Lars to debrief me and kill me and bury my body anywhere that it wouldn't be found, she realized. He took quite a risk preparing this place, and Control wasn't as thorough as he imagined in questioning Lars. She scolded herself silently, inside. There was so much to think upon and understand, but this really was not the time.

An hour or so after the blessed silence had begun, Lilly had carefully removed one boot and a sock, and placed the sock over the bulb end of a flashlight, to muffle the light, and just as cautiously turned it on, trying to prevent the switch from clicking. The fit on the trap door was perfect, but she wanted to take no chances, and even this muted light had shocked her. She wasn't surprised to find Lars in la-la land. She knew the strength of the morphine pills from the crushing experience of her father's death, back in 2018.

Lars had turned slightly and groaned through his mask when she shone the shrouded light on his face. She'd thought of giving him another pill, but hadn't dared. She knew early on that the plan that would likely win the day was to run for it, at about 9:00 p.m., as night fell, and for that, she would need a wide-awake Lars, whatever the pain he would have to contend with. The WDA was nothing if not thorough, and when they realized that they were not going to find their quarry, the bad guys—her and Lars—in the bush, they'd start over from the beginning, here at the shack. They'd pull it apart, board-by-board, and fast.

She had checked her watch—it was 1:38 p.m. when she doused the flashlight, leaving Lars to his drug-induced reveries, and reviewed her priorities yet again.

First, don't cough, no matter how intolerable the stench. Second, be ready to pounce on Lars' mouth in half a second should he choke, snore or talk in his sleep. Third, keep running the plans through the wetware over and over and over, looking for weaknesses, calculating odds, anticipating problems, constructing fallback positions. The rest was ... well, the rest was waiting—that and the occasional visceral nod at the possibility that she and Lars might not make it out of this alive. The WDA absolutely abhorred losing; in fact Lilly couldn't remember when they ever had.

* * * *

It's surely time now, Lilly estimated. She turned on the hooded flashlight and checked her watch. It was 8:47 p.m. It would be almost dark outside, and it was time to act.

Lars was still asleep—well, unconscious—and waking him up posed problems. The first thing he would experience would be the terrible pain in his wrist—she'd deemed it far too chancy to put on a splint—even on morphine, he might wake up and scream. The second thing he'd experience was the stench of skunk in his nose ... and total blackness in his eyes. There was no alternative. Even if she could provide a bit of light for him to see, she would still have to silence him in order to wake him up.

The hole that Lars had dug under the shack was quite large—maybe twice the size of a refrigerator, eight feet long by five feet wide by four feet deep—but it still felt cramped, like a tomb. Lilly's head was just under the trap door and Lars' feet were beside her right shoulder. She made a quick pass with the dimmed flashlight, making careful mental notes of anything that could clang or bang. Then she silently turned herself, not without some difficulty, until she was lying beside him, listening to his breathing. She put the flashlight onto a shelf, leaving it on, with the sock still killing most of the light, and positioned her hands directly over his face. Then, as quickly as she could move, she tilted his gas mask upwards with her left hand, and with her right hand, she covered his mouth as forcefully as she could, using most of her upper body weight.

"It's me, Lilly; don't make a sound," she said lightly into his ear as she used all her strength to hold his mouth.

"Mffff," said Lars through his nose.

"Shhhhh," said Lilly as she released the pressure and replaced his mask. She could see him in the dim light of the flashlight, and he didn't look good. "You gotta whisper," she said.

"Morphine," whispered Lars. He started to choke from the horrific smell, and then caught himself, forced himself to resist the natural impulse. His right arm was swollen to the elbow, like a bag of molten lava. His fingers felt as if they were melting off. "Please."

"No," said Lilly into his ear. "It's almost nine p.m. We have to run, now. Sorry about the pain. I've got the morphine—we'll bring it with us."

Lars took off his gas mask and took a deep breath ... and immediately regretted this instinctive move. The odor of skunk had diminished, but it was still otherworldly, and it took all his will power and all his training to not cough. When his body resigned itself to losing the battle of wills, he asked quietly: "We ... have to run?"

"Yeah," said Lilly, as she removed her mask too ... and paid the same price. "We've got to cover almost fifteen miles through the bush by four a.m."

"Where are we going?" Lars whispered.

"Whiteside's estate," said Lilly. "Michael's at his cabin, alone, across Wilson Lake from the lodge. We'll

follow Dora's Creek—it empties into Wilson Lake right near his cabin. There's a nineteen-sixties-era fallout shelter under the lodge, the one that Randall Whiteside and his family hid in during the Revolution. There's doctors at the lodge ... for Victor ... and I'm sure there's lots of medical supplies in the shelter. Michael will let us hide there for a bit, until your wrist gets better ... or until his next LV session, anyway.” She dearly hoped Michael had been LieDeck-verified recently.

"You think he'll ... do that?" asked Lars as he pushed himself up on his good elbow. "Let us hide out at—"

"He'll do it," said Lilly. One way or another, she repeated to herself. She had already reviewed the possibility that she might have to kill the man she loved, but the stakes were indeed that high.

Lars sat up ... and winced aloud from the searing pain in his right wrist. "Sorry," he whispered. Lilly put a hand on his back, slid it up, and squeezed off a mini-massage on his neck to distract the young man from his pain.

"Couple of things before we go," said Lars.

"Make it quick," whispered Lilly as she doused the flashlight, took the sock off, and put it back onto her bare foot.

"My parents—they're at Norman-E out in Alberta, west of Moose Jaw—they think I flunked out of college in St. Petersburg, Florida," he said. "Actually, I was in training with the WDA down there, to be a mole. The flunking bit was a cover for me becoming an apprentice plumber up here in Québec. If I die, tell my folks I didn't flunk, okay?"

"Okay," said Lilly—it was easier to agree to his strange request than to argue with him about his chances of survival.

"I can't tell you right now how I know that we killed Victor Helliwell," he continued in a whisper, "but I will tell you soon—before I die anyway, okay?"

"Lars, you're not going to die," said Lilly, louder than she should have, louder than she meant to.

Lars ignored her prediction, knowing it had no foundation in reality. "And one more thing," he whispered. "I did such a good job of pretending to be Human Three that I ... well, I am one! That's why I saved your life, Lilly. I've been Human Three for a year now, but I couldn't tell anyone I was a mole or I'd just get arrested and replaced by the WDA. It was best for Victor-E and for Evolution generally for me to keep my secret a secret. Tell all that to Annette, okay? And tell her I always loved her ... even back when Steve was alive."

"Steve?" asked Lilly, just before she remembered.

"Sutherland—her husband who died of a stroke last year," said Lars. "I ... I think we killed him too, although I certainly had no hand in that one. Okay, let's go. We can't even get to the bush if they left a guard outside here, so don't worry too much about noise. The doorway may be booby-trapped, so we'll go out by the west window-hole. You'll have to go first, and help me through. Are you ready?"

Lilly couldn't really believe what she was hearing, and yet she had to. He said he didn't have a hand in the possible killing of Steve Sutherland ... which means ... what? She reached out until she found his shoulder. Does it mean he did have a hand in the killing of Victor Helliwell? She went higher and rubbed the back of her hand on Lars' stubbly cheek. Is it even possible that I worked for a criminal organization? She wanted to say a lot of things—how sorry she was that they hadn't made love the first

time they'd come here to the shack, for one. She wanted to tell him how she ended up on the road to Human Three Consciousness herself. She wanted to splint his arm, to give him morphine, to kiss him, to rewrite her life, to knock the stuffing out of the WDA, and to—

"Argh," moaned Lars. He had just begun to turn himself in the confined space, and the pain in his wrist shot off the scale.

"You ... gonna be able to do this?" asked Lilly.

"I think I better have a morphine pill," he said.

Lilly felt terrible, keeping it from him, but she knew that he wouldn't make it if she did as he asked, and she didn't want to be responsible for his death. It was a certainty that the WDA would kill them both if they were caught. She didn't want to say those things, and she didn't have to—Lars knew. He was breathing evenly, collecting himself, steeling himself for the trek ahead, for the seven or eight hours they faced tramping through dense and mosquito-infested Québec bush, in the dark, in search of sanctuary in the only place where it might be found. He had little doubt that he could not make it, but it was "die for not trying" or "die trying," and he chose the latter.

"One more thing," Lars said as he reached with his good left hand to caress Lilly's thin arm. "I don't think you want to know this, but ... the guy who recommended you for this job..."

"Yeah?" asked Lilly.

"Ed—" said Lars, who evidently didn't want to finish what he'd begun.

"My Ed!" said Lilly, in full voice, accidentally. "You mean my ex-boyfriend, Ed ... Edward Tumson?" she whispered. "That Ed? In Miami?"

"He was never your boyfriend, Lilly," said Lars sadly. "He's—uh—he's still your handler at this time. Even though you only Netfaced with Mark—Mark Drummond—Control—Ed's the guy in charge of your file. He's ... a colonel, like myself," he added, although he declined to explain how either of them had earned such a high rank.

Lilly felt tears forming—that, and a decision to kill "good old Ed" if she ever got out of this alive. She squelched both feelings. "Let's go," she said. "We're going to have to move fast if we want to make it to the lodge before sun-up. Let's hope there's no cloud cover and we get a moon."

Chapter 74

DORA BY NIGHT

Wednesday, May 11, 2033—9:05 p.m.

The stink of skunk was still overpowering as Lilly closed the trap door and used her hand to make sure the edges were smooth. Then she took a deep breath ... big mistake ... and prayed that her next move wouldn't be her last. The west window-hole wasn't too high—perhaps three feet off the floor. She put her left leg through first, and her foot touched dirt before she expected. She hunkered her head down to get her torso through, holding onto the side of the frame, and then hauled her right leg out.

Lars followed, with little difficulty but considerable pain. "Listen," he whispered when it became clear they were not being shot at, "I used to walk that creek in the winter, on the ice. Some kids from

Shawville built a clubhouse about a mile downstream. They left their canoe there. We'll never make it before daybreak if we walk through the bush, so we'll have to wade our way down to the canoe ... we'll have to steal it ... borrow it. I just hope it's still there, and they left the paddles with it. We'll sink it at the other end—with rocks. I'm afraid you'll have to do all the paddling, Lilly. I'm just..."

"Shh," whispered Lilly. "Let's go."

She led the way into the bush, with Lars bent over, keeping his good hand on her back from behind and his injured arm curled near his stomach. There were only a few clouds, and there was a partial moon ... thank God, they both felt, the instinctive words that speak themselves at times of enormous relief. Still, it was hard to see, and as Lilly walked slowly west, she kept her hands out in front of her face to stave off any lurking branches. She set each foot down with care, trying to be quiet, before she realized that the time they had didn't allow for that level of caution, especially if they didn't come across that canoe. She picked up her pace a little—as much as she could without losing Lars—hoping that she'd bump into the creek soon.

It was less than 100 yards from the shack to the creek, but it took them seven minutes to get there—Lilly had checked her digital watch before and after. She did the math in her head, and it became clear that Lars was right—the canoe was their only hope. At the edge of the creek, she put a foot into the water, and it was freezing. She almost slipped on a slime-coated boulder as she put her other foot in. "Be careful," she whispered.

Dora's Creek was about fifteen yards wide at that point, Lilly remembered from her first visit to Lars' shack. And it ran slowly. It probably widens to thirty or forty yards at the mouth, at Wilson Lake, so if we manage to get the canoe, it'll get easier and easier as we progress. It dawned on her that she was actually assuming they'd make it ... again ... as she was trained to do ... but also because it seemed they really did have a chance.

Lars stepped into the water, holding Lilly's forearm with his left hand. "Try to stay about knee deep," he suggested. "Less, and we'll run into branches sticking out from the shore ... more, and we'll be slowed down. The creek goes north and then cuts east and goes across the highway that runs up to Ladysmith—the one they call the Picanoc. Just a bit north of Shawville, there's a truck-sized culvert under the road. It's wide enough to paddle through, but it might not be very high—you know—because the water's high—the spring runoff. That's where we face the biggest danger of being caught, I think. If we get past there, we should be okay unless—"

"Shh," said Lilly as she turned and guided Lars' good left hand to her belt, at the back. She began walking downstream. The mosquitoes and blackflies were out in their millions, or so it seemed, and Lilly knew it was pointless to slap at them as they attacked. And besides, Lars can't, she thought. Even if he could, he wouldn't—it would make a sound. And even though she could, she wouldn't. They were horrible little things, and she was being bitten many times at once, but people had survived days in this bush without going mad, she'd heard ... before they went mad, she honed her memory. You just had to stay focused and pretend the insect-assault wasn't happening. In any event, her hands were both needed to fend off branch attacks, and for balance—especially for balance, since Lars' reaction to any loss of his own balance would result in his pulling on her belt. And if either of them sprained an ankle ... game, set and match to the WDA, she knew.

The going was difficult, and slow. The bugs ate at her face, her neck and her hands—the exposed areas—and even the top of her head, right through her hair. She wanted to step to her left as she followed the right-hand shore, to dunk herself, but the relief would be short-lived, and time was everything now.

"Damn this water is cold," whispered Lars.

"Shh," said Lilly.

At least Dora's Creek had a fairly even bed—there was the occasional surprise rock and a few jutting logs, but for the most part they could walk at perhaps one quarter the speed of a normal stroll on a sidewalk—much better than they would manage on land, in the bush, and quieter as well. Some species of trees were filling in with leaves lately, but the moonlight got through, and their eyes had adjusted. Step by step, the former WDA agents walked on, sometimes pulling their lower legs through the water, and other times, when it was shallower, lifting their feet out of the water and trying not to splash as each foot re-entered the frigid creek.

Lilly tried to imagine what it must be like for Lars; he was enduring screaming pain in his broken wrist as well as the bombardment of stings and bites. And as they slogged on, Lilly's feet—and Lars' too, she knew—became stingingly numb with cold.

All they could hear, aside from their own movements and the buzzing of mozzies that were near their ears, were the frogs, loudly courting each other as if no danger existed for anyone. Every now and then, they would hear a slight hiss as a zephyr would materialize from nowhere and stir things up. It was as if ghosts were warning them to turn back.

Finally, Lilly caught the outline of an overturned canoe on the far bank. It appeared to be made of unpainted aluminum ... reflective ... damn. She checked her digital watch. It was almost 11:00 p.m.—they'd been out in the bush for two hours, in the freezing water. She unhitched Lars' hand from her belt, gave him the pistol to hold, and told him softly to just wait—she'd go get the canoe. There was no sense in both of them getting soaked. She waded in to her waist, swam a few strokes on her side (taking the occasion to have a long-overdue pee), and felt the floor of the stream rise to touch her fingertips.

She struggled onto the shore on her hands and knees, trying not to make any noise, and pulled her wet hair behind her head as she stood up. Then she carefully turned the canoe up on its side, and the clunk of the paddles inside both frightened and relieved her. If we can just get across the damned Picanoc, we might make it, she thought. She spread her arms and gripped the gunwales near the middle of the canoe, bent back and lifted it gently onto her thighs, then baby-stepped her way back towards the stream. With hardly a sound, she got the canoe settled into the water. Holding on to a short length of rope that was attached to the bow, she swam the thing back across the creek.

After getting the pistol back and tucking it into the front of her belt, Lilly held the canoe steady. Lars put a foot in the exact middle of the bottom and eased his weight onto that leg, hanging on to the port gunwale with his good hand. Once he was seated, Lilly told him he'd be better to lie right down in the bottom, under the front seat. "No sense sitting up, since you can't paddle, and it'll lower the center of gravity and help me go faster," she whispered. What she really meant is that there was no sense in both of them getting shot if they were seen, and if she was shot, the canoe would probably overturn, and he could hide under it, breathe the trapped air ... and maybe escape ... if he wasn't seen before I got shot, she calculated.

Lars suspected her real intent—he would have made the same suggestion if their roles had been reversed. He obeyed, although getting himself onto the bottom of the canoe and squeezing his feet under the front seat wasn't easy, and sent shock waves up his right arm that would have made a normal person wail. Once Lars was settled in, Lilly stowed the extra paddle beside him. Then she bent over, grabbed both of the gunwales, lifted a leg in, and eased her sopping butt onto the seat in the stern. She used the other paddle—the one with the more rectangular blade—to push off from the shore.

The current was light, but that was a good thing—it meant there weren't likely to be any rapids or small waterfalls. Lilly paddled evenly and quietly, listening intently through the burps of the courting frogs for the slightest sound of rushing water—that could spell disaster. The light of the moon was sufficient for her to see the broad outlines of reality, and although it may have been illusion, it seemed to her that the number of bites she was getting was reduced now that they were slipping along the creek at the speed of a brisk walk. The one thing they couldn't outrun was the stench of skunk ... well, hopefully that would be the only thing they couldn't escape.

Lilly placed Lars' pistol on the seat beside her, with the barrel tucked under her thigh. She wanted to be able to get at it easily and quickly, and she also didn't want it pressing against her stomach. As she paddled steadily along the creek, she wondered at the finality of the device. She didn't know if she had the guts to stick it into her mouth and pull the trigger, but she knew that at any time, events could spring up to make that question more than a vague hypothetical. She resolved to give the gun back to Lars when—and if—they got through the culvert. She remembered training to shoot with her non-dominant hand at the Academy, and wondered how Lars had scored on that test.

The trees arched over the creek, and at times the branches overlapped, but there was no time at which they could not see the stars through the canopy, and times when they could see the partial moon directly. Lars tried to distract himself from the aching arm by watching the tree limbs pass overhead, and just marveling at the mad profusion of nuclear events in the black universe beyond the skinny film of Terran air. He recalled that, at the Officer Training Academy, both he and Lilly had mastered hundreds of skills that they didn't expect to ever use. Handling a canoe properly was on every agent's top-ten list of most-likely-never-to-be-needed talents. "You remember all that stuff we had to—"

"Shh," said Lilly. "We'll be at the road pretty soon."

Lilly pried the paddle out like a lever, using her left hand as the fulcrum, pressing the stern to the right and the craft to the left. Then she resumed her meticulous stroking, her eyes glancing left, right and up. Often, the strip of uncluttered sky was the best indicator of upcoming bends in the tranquil creek. Her goal was to stay as close as possible to the middle and maintain a reasonable speed. The worst that could happen—other than being shot—would be that they got temporarily hung up on a log or on a rock outcropping near a shore, but it was the sounds of such a misadventure more than the inconvenience that worried her. Somewhere out there were dozens—perhaps hundreds—of WDA agents, all armed, and all hoping they'd be the one to bag the two rebels. Of course they would have already checked Dora's Creek, from the shack south to Victor-E and north-east up to the Picanoc, but...

Suddenly, Lilly pushed the paddle forward, resisting the pull of the current. Ahead—perhaps a hundred yards—the dark sky grew wide. It was the Picanoc, and in the dim moonlight, she could see a van parked on the roadway ... undoubtedly right above the culvert. She saw no lights, heard no voices, sensed no human presence, but it had to be a WDA vehicle, and there had to be agents inside, and perhaps outside. They're probably in the van, escaping the bugs, except for ... there has to be at least one guy outside, who would go maybe fifty feet upstream and...

Without consciously deciding to do it, Lilly found herself imagining an action-movie scenario, where she would park the canoe, blacken her face and hands with dirt, crawl stealthily up the creek near the shore, find the scout, sneak right up behind him, click the hammer of Lars' pistol, grab his hair, touch the gun to his temple and whisper the choices he had. "Take a bullet in the head or swallow two morphine pills," she'd say. He'd take the pills, and she'd wait a minute until he was passed out, and then she'd drown him—no, she'd let him live so he could try to explain his way out of it when he was grilled by his LieDeck-equipped colonel! Then she'd slink back to...

But she knew better. Their one and only chance was that there was no outdoors scout, or that he or she

was asleep under mosquito-netting, or in the bush having a crap ... and that the designated watcher inside the van had dozed off, or didn't have his or her night-vision goggles on. A lot of ifs, she realized. She released the brakes, and determined that she would not paddle until they were safely on the other side of the culvert. Every nerve ending screamed at her to pull as if Olympic gold depended on it, but she resisted. The current was sufficient to keep them moving—it was quite slow, but it was virtually silent. She set the paddle in the water like a rudder, and just steered.

Gradually, the sky opened, and they glided past the point where she figured the sentry might be, or should be. Nothing yet. The shores were difficult to see as the trees receded.

Lilly looked up, and the three-quarters moon had drifted behind some cirrus clouds, cutting its light by more than half. At first she was glad—less chance of being seen—but then she realized that it couldn't have happened at a worse time because she couldn't see the outline of the culvert up ahead. However, the dark silhouette of the van was visible, barely, and she guessed that logically, it had to be parked exactly over the culvert. That's where I'd park it. And if the canoe did bang into anything solid ... we'll be dead within seconds.

Before Lilly felt ready, the van seemed to rise above her, and at the exact moment that the front of the canoe would either enter the culvert or crash into something hard, Lilly bent forward—she had no idea how much clearance she had, and no way did she want to get her aim right only to be smacked in the face by a bridge. She let the paddle have its mind, and hoped desperately that the eight or ten seconds of not steering at all wouldn't result in their scraping against the corrugated steel side of a dumb culvert.

Lars was on his back, looking up. He saw the stars blink out in quick sequence, and realized they'd just entered the culvert under the roadway. His heart rate soared, and the terror of this moment eclipsed the pulsating flame in his right arm. I should have told Lilly how I killed Victor before we set out, he scolded himself. He hardly dared to breathe until he saw the stars blink on again at the far end. He desperately hoped that the stink of skunk on their clothes and bodies wouldn't give them away.

Lilly had her face turned sharply to the left, in between her wet knees, and when she sensed the end of the culvert slip silently away, she lifted her head enough to check the position of the canoe. They had drifted to the right, and would touch the shore in seconds. There was no choice. She sat upright and levered the blade away from the stern. Then she lifted the paddle out of the water, and silently cursed the droplets of water that splashed like bullets as they fell. She dipped in again, pried again, and judged that they were back in the middle of the stream—and still alive.

She wanted to look back to confirm that they'd actually made it, to see the van shrink darkly away, but her white face was more reflective of moonlight than her black hair. She just steered, and let the lazy, unconcerned current carry them to safety.

There was still one road to go under, the Bristol Line, but that one had a real bridge, not just a culvert, and it made no sense for the WDA to set up a second perimeter there. Two turns later, after the trees had closed in over Dora's Creek and Lilly's heart rate had eased back towards normal, she began paddling again. "We made it," she whispered.

"Shh," said Lars.

Chapter 75

REUNION

Thursday, May 12, 2033—4:11 a.m.

Just after four in the morning, Michael snored on the couch in the living room of his very small cabin. Even in mid-May, Québec nights could be uncomfortably chilly. The last he remembered, he'd fed the fireplace and the stove—but that was maybe two hours ago. He had stopped a minute to gaze out of the front window at the partial moon, wishing that his life could somehow mimic the beauty and predictability of the cosmos. Then he'd fallen back to sleep, waiting for the shivers to wake him yet again.

Suddenly, his eyes stared into a terrifying darkness. He breathed heavily through his nose, and tried not to throw up. A powerful hand was clamped on his mouth from behind, and another assailant was straddling his chest, holding his wrists down, preventing him from moving. All he could smell was skunk.

"Do not speak," a coarse voice hissed into his face.

"Mm-mm," Michael tried through his nasal passages, hoping it would be interpreted as acquiescence. He relaxed his struggling arms and legs to show that he had stopped resisting. He also hoped the attackers would let him breathe through his mouth. The stink was overwhelming.

"It's me, Lilly," came the voice from atop his chest. "Do not speak, or we'll have to silence you. It's a matter of life and death."

Michael felt Lilly slowly decreasing the pressure on his wrists, and the hand from behind began slipping off his mouth. He coughed, and turned his head instinctively away from the foul odor that hung on their bodies and clothes. Questions fought each other in his mind, but he asked none of them as Lilly got off and he sat up. She took him by the arm and led him out of the cabin and fifty yards into the dark bush. Finally, he was eased to the ground.

"Sorry we smell so bad," said Lilly quietly.

"Jesus Christ," whispered Michael, "I almost died of fucking fright. Do you mind telling me what the fuck's going on?"

"We had no choice," whispered Lars. "Is there an MIU or a Sniffer in the cottage?"

"No," said Michael. "Lilly, who the hell is this guy?"

"Colonel Johannsen," said Lars.

"He's a WDA defector," said Lilly, "just like me. There's a war on, and it isn't just a little economic bullying game between the WDA and Evolution. His name is Lars, and he says he can prove that the WDA killed Victor—or rather it's in the process of killing him. We think they may have killed Lester Connolly too ... and maybe Steve Sutherland and ... no, listen, we can talk about that stuff later, but we have to hide out in your cabin for a while, or in the shelter at the lodge. Is that okay?"

"As long as you take a couple of dozen baths," said Michael. "Jesus H. Christ, how did you find out all that—"

"We'll talk inside," said Lars as he started the walk back. "Dibs on the shower," he added, "and then I want that morphine pill."

"His right wrist is fractured," explained Lilly into the darkness.

"You'll have to wash in the lake," said Michael. "I don't even have electricity out here."

"Shh," said Lilly. "Whispering only, and say nothing that isn't absolutely essential."

Inside the dark cabin, Michael got soap and towels without turning on any lights—and a pillowcase and a short length of wire that Lilly had asked for—and then he walked with them down to the dock in the dim moonlight. Michael just sat on the dock, swatting mosquitoes and holding the pistol Lilly had given him, silently searching the forest for any sign of light or movement. Lars and Lilly took off their clothes and ventured up to their knees in the freezing water—water that had been ice until a couple of weeks ago—and scrubbed themselves and each other. They were shivering badly, but they were much too preoccupied with fear—and pain, in Lars' case—to worry about Michael's reaction to their nakedness.

When they were done, Lilly put their clothes into the pillowcase and tied it with the wire to a strut under the dock, so they'd slosh around in the lake but not drift away or sink. The first fragmentary signs of dawn were creeping into the sky as the three of them walked quickly back up the path to the cabin.

Lilly and Lars had wrapped themselves in beach towels, and once they were inside, Michael gave each of them a blanket. He also gave Lars a glass of water to take with the morphine pill that Lilly had handed him. And finally, Michael got them some food from his small, battery-operated fridge.

"I'll take the pill after I eat," whispered Lars. "And Lilly ... after I konk out, you just gotta get some kind of splint on my wrist, okay? Fuck it hurts!"

At Lilly's insistence, they sat on the carpeted floor of the living room, near the dying fire. Fifteen minutes later, the fire was roaring and Michael had the short version of what had transpired out at Lars' hunting shack. Lilly told him how they'd hidden out for nine hours, since about noon, with Lars unconscious and her planning their escape. She told him how she'd been scared to even clear her throat, and about enduring that awful smell, breath after breath, hour after hour, even with a gas mask on, wishing to God she could do a hit of morphine, and even considering that option in a couple of tearful moments. And she told him the harrowing story of how they had crept through the bush to Dora's Creek, and sloshed along until they got to the canoe, and paddled for almost fifteen miles, and sunk the canoe with rocks when they finally reached Wilson Lake. Lars still wouldn't give any details about how he could prove that the WDA was killing Victor Helliwell—he'd already explained to Lilly that he couldn't do that ... not yet, anyway.

Michael was shocked at the profusion of red marks and welts on their faces, necks and hands—normally, one didn't pick a fight with Québec bugs. "I did hear helicopters when I got up to put wood on the fire a few hours ago," he said, in as small a voice as he could manage. "That was the WDA searching for you two, I guess."

"I'm a dead man walking," said Lars as he popped the morphine pill. "But Lilly here, she should live."

"We'll talk about that later," said Lilly irritably. "For now, Lars and I have got to get some sleep. You—uh—realize you can't go back over to the lodge, to your life, until we figure a way out of all this, Michael?"

"Yeah," he said. "I know." He slapped a mosquito that had snuck inside the cabin on their wake and played vampire on the back of his neck. It left a red splotch on his hand from the explosion of her body. "Bitch," he spat as he wiped his hand on his pants.

Lars went off to a small bedroom, and promptly passed out. Lilly and Michael were left sitting on the living room floor, looking at the fire in the first light of dawn. They were quiet for a while. Both wanted to speak, and both had a thousand things to say, but they just sat, not touching, not doing a thing. Finally Lilly couldn't stand it any more.

"Why didn't you call me?" she whispered, wishing she didn't still smell of skunk. "Don't you even keep a

cell phone out here?"

"Yeah, I got one," Michael said. "But I didn't call because ... I ... well, for the same reason you didn't call me ... because I'm an emotional midget." His mind drifted back unwillingly to the aborted CQ-assist session he'd had at the lodge three weeks earlier, and he wondered if there was any remote chance that Becky would understand all this when the time came to tell her about it. He was shamed by the sudden realization that she likely would.

Lilly thought in silence about what Michael had said. He was right, of course, but it was needlessly hurtful to say it so bluntly—hurtful to her; hurtful to himself. They were caught in a kind of second adolescence, much too wise to carry on as before, but far too inexperienced and scared to get the growing up over with and get on with Human Three life. For the moment, however, surviving long enough to get on with any kind of life was the priority issue.

"I'm—uh—due for LieDeck-verification in a week or so," Michael said.

Lilly knew the significance of that, but there was no use talking about it now. "Don't use the cell phone—it can be monitored," she said, scratching at mosquito and blackfly bites on her neck. "I'll ... take the other bedroom. You'll have to stay awake and keep the gun for now." She placed it on the floor beside him, and stood up.

"I ... can't use that," he said.

"Me neither," said Lilly, "but I simply have to get some sleep. Give it to Lars when he wakes up. It's ... good to see you again Michael," she said as she turned and left the room.

"Sleep well," he said.

* * * *

At eight thirty in the morning, Michael peeked into the two bedrooms. Lars was still under the influence of the morphine, and Lilly was sleeping. The floorboards creaked in his little cabin, and he stepped away from the doors very slowly, staying near a wall. He had no idea what this day would bring—whether it would be his last, or hers, or theirs. Several times in the last few hours he'd heard the distant drumming of helicopter blades, and it brought as much terror as rage to the heart of the only person awake on the west shore of Wilson Lake.

The stories Lilly and Lars had told were unthinkable, and yet Michael knew he didn't need a LieDeck to verify their words. He'd learned a truth that was ... preposterous. He'd never even imagined that such things could be, and yet it was so obvious that it had to be known already, to virtually everyone with eyes to see and a brain to process information. In a world where crime was virtually unknown, there was one criminal organization still in business, big-time. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. He tried to remember who said that, but he couldn't. And when power corrupts, poetry cleanses. That was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, he knew, and he wondered if the WDA existed back when JFK was assassinated. And then a terrible stray thought jolted him. I wonder if the WDA killed Dad too?

He sat at the small pine kitchen table, pen in hand, trying to think of a poem to write, looking east as the sun irradiated the light mist that hid the lodge across the lake. I'll ... never be a poet, he thought, but I can feel all that a poet feels. He looked over at the floor of the living room, to see if Lilly's Smith and Wesson was still lying there. It was right where he'd left it, of course, and Michael didn't know whether to feel disgusted at the primeval consciousness it represented or terrified that he might have to use the thing. He wondered what Victor or Annette or Becky would say about managing your feelings at a time like this. Impossible, he thought. He looked at the blank sheet of paper, picked up the pen and put it in his shirt pocket.

The stillness was broken by the distant sound of an engine from the direction of the lake. Michael looked out the window, but he saw only the whiteness of ground-level cloud. Then it registered. Trouble.

He crouched down, retrieved the gun, and slipped into his big bedroom. “Lilly,” he whispered. She opened her eyes, and it was like Freeport all over again—but there was no time for that. “Here’s the gun,” he said. “You better watch outside, from the window. It’s Noel, the cook from the lodge, bringing my supplies over in the hovercraft.”

Lilly had to think fast. “Is there enough food and stuff to keep the three of us for ... say ... three or four days?”

“I—uh—was intending to go back to the office in a couple of days, but—no,” he said.

“Okay, we need supplies,” said Lilly—she had no idea how long they would be at the cabin, or when—or even whether—they could slip over to the lodge to get Lars’ wrist attended to. “Ask for extra food,” she said. “Tell him you’ll be staying longer than you thought—and ... and you don’t want to be disturbed for a week. Tell him to bring the extra stuff out tomorrow ... mid-afternoon.”

Michael ran back to the kitchen table and used his poetry supplies to write out a list of things he alone might need for a week away from civilization ... no, for two weeks, he decided. He wondered as he did it how many days or hours it might be before the WDA closed in and played the endgame. Noel will ask why I’m extending things, Michael felt sure, because Becky will want to know, and she’ll ask him. He quickly wrote the names of several financial reports he had been dealing with at the office before the company went into gridlock, and a few others that were a year or more old. They’ll think I’m still trying to figure out how to win the company back.

Lilly watched through a slit in the curtains as Michael went down to the dock and pretended to be nonchalant with the Frenchman. When Michael hoisted the box onto his shoulder and the hovercraft backed off and roared away, she relaxed. She put the pistol under the sheets, and decided to pretend that she’d gone back to sleep. She surely knew she couldn’t sleep, but she needed some time to think—some time alone.

Chapter 76

OUT OF THE LODGE!

Friday, May 13, 2033—2:50 p.m.

Annette Blais walked out the front door of the lodge disappointed. She had gone there basically to say goodbye to Victor, but he was unconscious, and of course the doctors wouldn’t allow her to wake him up ... not that I wanted to. The curtain that someone had jerry-rigged across his bedroom door was open a crack at the side, where it wouldn’t lie flush against the jamb. Annette had taken advantage, of course, but all she’d seen was his back, as he lay face down on the modified Stryker frame bed. The bedroom was darkened, and in the air there hung those antiseptic smells that always seemed to surround a death. Various medical devices sat on dressers and chairs, and several plastic bags hung from a multi-pronged chromium pole, dripping sustenance and painkillers through tributaries to a tube that was attached to the back of Victor’s right hand. Annette had felt tears welling up, and she left Victor’s suite without having to be ushered out by the medical staff.

Now she stood on the screened front porch, beneath the elevated second-floor deck, leaning against a load-bearing pillar and looking into a brilliant May afternoon that sang of vitality and health. She hadn’t

been at the Whitesides' lodge for nineteen years. It was a place of painful memories for her—in fact this was the exact spot where she had been shot ... during the LieDeck Revolution.

Her thoughts drifted to her late husband, Steve Sutherland, to the day when the two of them had been allowed into the lodge's fallout shelter ... after Bucharest was H-bombed. She wondered what ever could have happened to her old Patriot Security partner, Helen Kozinski. She never wanted to keep in touch with me, even after all we'd been through together. I guess she's happy working for the WDA ... not that I care. Annette was very surprised to catch herself auto-lying—lying to herself—after so many years as a Human Three. I do care, she said in her mind. But Helen doesn't ... obviously. Such a shame.

Across the lake, Annette could see the little cabin that Michael used to retreat to as a teenager, with his then-girlfriend Becky Donovan. The last time she saw Michael was in cyberspace, three weeks earlier, during their ill-fated CQ-assist session, when Michael had basically stomped out. She wondered if she'd been forgiven, or if Victor-E had been forgiven for the mix-up of using her as Michael's and Becky's transition guide. He's over there right now, she thought, staring across the water. And he's either basking in angst or ... or becoming a Human Three. No, he's in transition now, she knew, but he's not going to have an easy time of it ... the rich never do, except for Julia. "Eye of a needle" and all that.

Annette had talked to Becky about that bungled CQ session. The actual fault lay with a young woman who was new at CQ scheduling, but that fact didn't get Annette off the hook. Annette couldn't apologize enough, and although Becky seemed to have taken the incident in stride, Annette still felt weird when talking to her. It was as if the relationship between Becky and her husband might be a lot better if only, if only...

The long dock directly in front of the lodge had a helipad at the end, and Annette watched the backs of two women as they dangled bare feet over the lightly ruffled waters of Wilson Lake. It was Julia and Becky, she knew, Michael's sister and wife. She had seen them walking out the dock, arm in arm, when she'd first arrived at the lodge twenty minutes earlier. Julia had mentioned to her last week that she was helping Becky become more fully Human Three, and both of them were helping Victor die. Annette wasn't sure how you helped someone die—she still felt that she hadn't done very well when her late husband had a stroke and passed away ... a year and a half ago. But she'd been amused to learn how Julia was actually helping Becky. Annette had asked her—Julia—about that, and in her innocent manner, Julia told her she had explained to Becky that Human Threes work! "I told her that I'm lots richer than almost everybody," Julia had explained, "and of course I work lots and lots every day, same as everybody else at Victor-E, but you never do anything, Becky. If you want to become Human Three, you have to get more busy and do some good productive stuff." Christ, thought Annette, I would love to have been a fly on that wall!

Should I go out on the dock and commiserate with them? she wondered. Maybe they just need each other right now? But ... what I need counts too, she thought as she headed across a rocky yard to the man-made beach where the dock began. The hell of winter was gone for another half-year, but she estimated the water was still far too cold for her feet ... never mind those two days of unnatural heat a few weeks ago. The sun shone full force through a cloudless sky, and she wished her mood would allow her to just wallow in the comforts of this long-awaited spring.

When she reached the helipad, she took off her shoes and socks and sat cross-legged beside Julia without saying a word. She put an arm briefly over Julia's shoulders, and then she sat in silence, her hands fiddling with each other as the minutes of Victor's life ticked off.

"I don't think Michael's ready to see me," said Becky finally, "and Julia can't leave the lodge—partly for Victor's sake and partly because the baby might start to come." Becky knew full well that Julia couldn't drive a boat or a hovercraft and that the baby wasn't due for another four months, but she didn't want to

mention these things.

Annette didn't look over at Becky. There was more to come—that was clear—but deep waves of emotion tended to stretch things out at times like this.

"Noel was supposed to bring some additional supplies over to Michael this afternoon, but he's sick ... well, he says he is," Becky said. "I think he's just sort of depressed about Victor, but anyway, would you ... run the food across to Michael?"

"Sure," said Annette. "No problem." We could talk, she figured.

"He gave Noel a list of everything he wanted yesterday, and some of it is in my car up by the lodge," Becky continued. "The Patriot guys are getting the last stuff on the list, and they'll put it all in the hovercraft."

"Yikes!" said Julia. "The baby just moved his leg right across my tummy! Or his arm, maybe it was!"

"So ... how long is Michael going to stay over there?" asked Annette, ignoring Julia's reproductive epiphany.

"I don't rightly know," said Becky. "A while more, he said. He's still hurting. That CQ session we had with you pretty much threw him off his feed—metaphorically—but judging by the long food list he sent back with Noel, he may be there for another week or two. He's got a lot to think about besides whether or not to become a Human Three. He lost the company—although there's a bunch of company reports that he asked for in my car, so maybe he's trying to figure out how to get it back. He lost the Liberal leadership nomination. He is trying to become Human Three, but it's difficult when you've had so much and lost it all ... or most of it. He even lost Lilly—he really blames himself for that, and—"

"Well, he's too proud to call her on the Net," said Julia. "Lilly told me that, and she wouldn't lie, so I think maybe it is his fault, and—"

"He's got an MIU over there?" asked Annette. "Or a Sniffer?"

"Good God no!" said Becky. "He's never wanted any technology over there except for his battery-operated fridge," she said, remembering their delicious teenaged weekends at the cabin. "That's always been a strict rule of his." She knew he had a cell phone, but that was strictly so he'd be informed immediately if Victor passed away, or was about to. He does want to say goodbye.

Annette stood up and signaled for Becky to come with her, to step off to the side for a minute, hoping that Julia wouldn't notice, or at least wouldn't follow. She put her arm around Becky's shoulders and walked slowly to the far side of the helipad, as if she had some private comforting to do. "If I go over there," Annette said softly, "I don't know if I should tell Michael that Lilly's been missing since yesterday morning."

"Well I was talking to Claire at the Victor-E clan, on the Net," said Julia helpfully—she had materialized right behind them, like a cat—"and she told me that Lilly probably went to Washington or New York on her WDA business or something."

Annette gave in, figuring she couldn't keep things from Julia forever, and that Julia would resent it if she even tried. "We—uh—went to check her suite yesterday, and the doors were unlocked—which isn't like Lilly—and all her stuff was still there. It's kind of ... strange, actually. And Lars is missing too—he apparently disappeared about the same time. We ... don't know if there's a connection, but the WDA called me twice on the Net, asking if we knew where they were—both of them. I'm ... a bit concerned."

"Hmm," said Julia. "Maybe they—you know—went somewhere together, like to just be with each other for a while?"

"Maybe," said Annette, airily. Aw jeeze! she thought.

"Yeah, maybe that's it," Becky agreed—or seemed to. No point in worrying Julia.

The Patriot agents arrived on the dock, and began loading all the things that were on Michael's list into the hovercraft. After an agent started the motor for her and briefed her on the vehicle's quirks, Annette set off, and Julia went back into the lodge to lie down for a bit.

Becky sat down again on the end of the dock, alone, thinking about the past, of the future, the turning of the leaves that would be coming in a few months, and the imminent death of the peculiar genius who had occupied the lodge for the last ... jeeze, nineteen years now. It occurred to her that since religion fizzled off the world stage and slithered out of mind, people tended to date things in terms of "since the Revolution" ... BR and AR, she considered. Everything "BR"—before the Revolution—seemed Dark Ages now ... and everything "AR" is darker still, she felt. It had only taken a few weeks for the UN to get dumped in favor of the WDA back in 2014, and Becky suddenly remembered that the nineteenth anniversary of what was laughingly called "Peace Day" was coming up in less than a month. Half of the world—well, half of the Normal world—would lay down tools and pause to listen to the alleged "king of peace" make the same old boring, self-serving speech he'd been making in Central Park every year "AR." Why on Earth am I thinking about such stupid things? she wondered. She pushed General Brampton and the world out of her mind.

Thoughts of her husband crowded into the void—how he was trying so hard to cope with several crises at once. It was a lot for any man to handle, but if anyone could get through it and come out on the winning side, it was Michael. She had fallen in love with him mostly by hormone, but she ended up loving him for a very long list of reasons, one of which was his formidable ability to cope, his tendency to think things through and take the rational decision. She still loved him; she always would.

The minutes went by, and Becky began to wonder what could possibly be happening over there. It was just a mile across the lake, and she had seen a miniature Michael come down from the cabin, walk out the dock, and help Annette tie up the hovercraft. Becky expected that Annette would just give him the supplies and the company reports and head back. But then she had gone up to the cabin, and she'd been there for ... what? ... fifteen minutes?

Becky continued to stare across the lake, worrying about everything ... and nothing. Then she saw Annette run from the cabin down to the dock, jump into the hovercraft, go mildly berserk at her clumsiness in untying the thing, start up the engine and head back. It was as if something ... had happened ... oh God, please let Michael be okay. It brought memories rushing back of the day that Michael had forced her to stay at the cabin while he tore across the lake—the day the lodge had been bombed—the day Annette had been shot—the first major WDA shot of the Revolution proper.

Annette came in hot, and smacked the dock with the side of the hovercraft. Becky could tell by the look on her face that something was wrong. "Is he okay?" she asked.

"He's fine," said Annette. "Call those Patriot agents to come here at once," she said even before the hovercraft could be tied up.

Becky turned around, hollered and waved frantically at the agents, who were standing amid the parked vehicles outside the lodge, talking quietly. They came running down the dock with their weapons drawn.

"Put those guns away," shouted Annette as she met them part way down the dock. "This is a note from

Michael, telling you to do exactly as I say. Get Victor transferred down to the bomb shelter beneath the lodge with the medical staff and all that equipment. Close the shelter door, but don't lock it. And until further notice, no one is to go into the lodge except to go to the shelter, and if someone has to go to any other place inside the lodge, there's a two-minute maximum time limit. And nobody gets in the shelter without my okay. Is that understood?"

The agent in charge read Michael Whiteside's note, then instructed his men to carry out Annette's orders immediately. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"Just do it!" snapped Annette. "And have someone tie up that hover-craft properly. I made a bit of a mish doing it."

"Annette," screamed Becky as soon as the Patriot agents had run off the dock. "I demand to know what's going on."

Annette was accustomed to brute authority from her days as a Patriot agent, but she wasn't used to people screaming at her. She calmed herself. "Becky," she said quietly, "I am instructed to tell no one. Michael said not to worry ... and that he loves you."

Chapter 77

A PICNIC FOR GIL

Saturday, May 14, 2033—7:00 a.m.

Gil Henderson rose to find a hand-delivered letter in his mailbox, mixed in with all the brickbats and bouquets. But the hand-delivered letter no return address. Maybe it's from Eyeball, he thought. When he got inside and opened it up in the bathroom, it turned out to be from a Mr. Wu, a high-priced lawyer/accountant in Canada, judging by the long list of names (with credentials) on the regally-embossed letterhead. There was no signature, and the letter said simply:

Eyeball is Victor Helliwell. He has only days to live. He asked me to relay these words to you: "Thanks, friend, and goodbye." Do not contact me ever, under any circumstances. Destroy this letter now.

"Well I'll be damned!" exclaimed the New York Times reporter under his breath. He must have made a LieDeck from scratch after the thing was banned. He sat cross-legged on his bathroom floor and tore the letter into very small pieces, dropping the bits into the bowl. With a minimum of flourish, he finally stood up, threw a thumbs-up at the volatile flotilla, and flushed.

After all that his formerly anonymous source had done for his career, it simply didn't seem fitting that it should end like this. Gil thought of Netlinking with Victor, but by the sounds of things that wasn't possible, physically, nor would it have been wise, politically. There was no use appealing to this mysterious Mr. Wu, but Gil felt strongly that he had to do something to say his own "thank you" to the inventor of the LieDeck ... or to his alter ego, anyway.

Everyone knew exactly where Victor Helliwell was, or at least where he had been for the nineteen years since the Revolution. Gil made a decision and left a hand-written note for his secretary, Fiona Bledsoe, telling her where he was going. Then he took a taxi out to JFK, got on the first available flight, and landed in Ottawa a little before noon. When a Customs official had asked him the purpose of his visit, he'd said: "Personal—a friend of mine is dying." The agent's LieDeck didn't go "beep."

By 1:45 p.m., he was in the back of a Canadian cab, at the front gate of the Whiteside estate, arguing

with a Patriot guard. "Who's closest to Mr. Helliwell?" Gil demanded to know. "I want to talk to whoever says 'no' for him—directly for him."

"Well," said the guard, "I don't think it'll do you any good, but I guess that would be Julia Whiteside. She's been with him pretty much all the time for the last month or so but she's—uh—mentally challenged, and—"

"Just let me talk to her for fifteen seconds," demanded Gil. "If she says no, I promise I'll go right back to New York."

Julia was delighted to learn that Victor's friend—Eyeball's old friend, really—had come all that way just to say goodbye. Without even talking to the American visitor, she told the Patriot guard to let the taxi come out to the lodge. "We'll see if Victor can talk when Mr. Gil gets here," she said. "Net, down, now."

She met the taxi in front of the lodge, and made a show of reaching over her slightly bulging stomach to give this stranger a welcoming hug. "Victor won't take the morphine, so he can still talk pretty normal when he's awake, but he's ... almost never awake any more," she explained. "But I know that he likes you and he'll want to say goodbye to you ... but you'll have to wait, I guess. Why don't you get some comfortable clothes—there's lots in the lodge there—I'll show you where—but just put on the clothes and come right out, eh? Nobody's allowed in there any more for more than two minutes at a time ... they didn't tell me why, but that's why they set up that big tent down by the dock ... there's stuff in there like chairs and tables and cots and some cold drinks too ... and a barbecue ... and then come and sit on the end of dock with me and with Annette and Becky ... and Noel, okay?"

Gil couldn't begin to guess what this two-minute time limit was about, but two Patriot agents, three doctors and a nurse were sitting out on the porch, apparently abiding by the new rules, by these inexplicable sanctions. Gil also had no clue who all these people were that Julia had named, but he obliged her suggestions without asking any questions. Julia showed him Michael's room, and left immediately.

Gil was utterly astonished to see a cluttered display of Whiteside-produced electronic equipment in the first-floor bedroom. It's like a museum, he thought. He scanned all the walls and the cases, and the one instrument that was missing, of course, was the LieDeck. Damn shame, he said to himself.

He chose some jogging duds from the closet, changed, and handed his dress clothes to a woman—a Patriot agent, she said—on the porch, on his way out. He asked her who was who—besides Julia—at the end of the dock, and she explained. Then he joined the three women and the cook at the end of the dock, which was a helipad, judging by the painted target. He took off the borrowed moccasins and his socks and let his feet join the others hovering over the chilly waters of Wilson Lake. Thirty or forty yards out there was still some floating ice, he noted, and that brought his feet back up. He sat cross-legged in the rising sun.

The prevailing mood, after the introductions were over, was one of sadness, and Gil wasn't inclined to start asking questions—his usual routine. He was a guest here, not an investigative journalist, and his mission was personal, not professional. Nobody seemed particularly impressed that he was that Gil Henderson, and his ego winced quite in spite of himself. They hadn't even asked why he was here, why it was so important to him, and he didn't offer any explanation. He just sat, and looked over the lake. He remembered a story he'd covered ... almost twenty years ago ... of how a fake RCMP plane—actually manned by WDA agents, when those letters stood for World Democratic Alliance—flew in low over this very lake. Its occupants blew up the lodge ... where he had just changed his clothes ... and it was rebuilt by Randall Whiteside, he recalled.

Annette Blais, he reviewed in his mind. Wasn't she the Patriot agent who got shot in that incident, and almost died? He turned his head to the right and looked at Annette's face. She was staring across the lake, at the cabin he'd noticed on the far shore. Gil could see the faint traces of plastic surgery just above her left eye. My God! he said to himself. It's her!

"The—uh—Whitesides own the entire lake?" he asked Annette, hoping to get a full frontal peek at her eye.

"It's contained within the estate," said Becky, who was on his other side. "That cabin over there is Michael's. It was our secret hideaway when we were teenagers. We were over there the day the lodge got blown up, back in..." Her voice withered, as memories of that terrible moment swelled within her.

Annette's head jerked suddenly, as if she were about to say something apocalyptic. Gil looked back in her direction just in time to see her restrain herself. "Noel," she asked urgently, "could you throw together a real quick picnic lunch—I mean really quick? I'm thinking we may take the hovercraft for a spin. Just go in, do it in less than two minutes, and come back here, okay?"

"Bien sur," said Noel as he struggled to his feet and began lumbering down the dock barefoot, carrying his shoes and socks. He had no idea what this "don't-go-in-the-lodge-for-more-than-two-minutes" business was all in aid of, and he wasn't inclined to ask. He had other things on his mind, and he was actually glad of the diversion from his sorrow. I loving dat crazy son-da-bitch Victor, he thought as he trudged.

Annette signaled everyone to just be quiet until he was out of earshot, and then she said: "By the livin' Lord Jesus, there is a God!"

"No there isn't," laughed Julia. "You know that's not—"

"I didn't mean actually," explained Annette. "I just mean that sometimes your luck is so good it just seems like there must be a God."

"Oh," said Julia, still not understanding, but accustomed to letting things like this slide by so people could get on with what they were saying. "So ... we're lucky?" she asked.

"We sure as hell are, kid!" said Annette. "Becky, what do you think of us bringing Mr. Henderson over to the cabin?"

Becky's face went white. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" she asked shakily.

"Too bad we don't have a LieDeck," said Annette. "Julia, could you please run up to the lodge and get an old video disk recorder from Michael's room? He's got all sorts of electronic stuff in there. Make sure there's batteries in it, and grab some extra disks too, okay? And don't stay in the lodge too long, eh?"

Julia headed off down the dock, listing from side to side and cupping her hands under her protruding stomach ... mostly because she thought it was fun, not because she was that far gone. She knew she couldn't go with them over to Michael's cabin ... what if the baby starts to come? ... but she also trusted Annette completely, and was glad she could help, whatever the plan was.

Out on the end of the dock, Annette was beside herself with excitement. She took Becky to one side, explained her plan, and offered her the option of not being involved.

"But now that I know, I am involved," she whispered to Annette. "And besides, he's my husband. And besides, I think it's a great idea—and we don't have another plan, so count me in."

"Mr. Henderson," Annette called over to their illustrious visitor.

"Gil," he said as he stood and approached the two apparent conspirators.

"Gil," Annette restarted, "you didn't come here as a reporter, but you are about to get the story of a lifetime."

Five minutes later, Julia and Noel came back out to the end of the dock, each of them waddling for their separate reasons. Noel put the picnic basket into the hovercraft, said his goodbyes and hobbled off to the tent for a nap.

Julia explained to Gil why she couldn't go, and handed a plastic bag to Annette. "So there's a video tape recorder in there, and extra batteries, and extra tapes ... plus a biiiiig surprise!" she said gleefully.

Annette was disappointed that Julia had gotten it wrong, and brought an old analog camcorder instead of a digital disk recorder, but she supposed it was all the same, as long as the thing worked. Plus a surprise! she thought curiously. She looked in ... and slowly pulled out a small black plastic box, with silver duct tape over some of the buttons. "Holy shit!" she yelped. She recognized it immediately—it was the original prototype LieDeck that she had seen way back in twenty fourteen, when Victor Helliwell had first shown it to Randall Whiteside. "Where the hell did you find this!?" she asked.

"Victor had it all the time," said a delighted Julia. "He said he sewed it inside the arm of his chair, the one in front of his MIU, and when his mind went kerflooy and he turned into this other guy—uh..."

"Eyeball," said Gil.

"Eyeball!?" asked Annette.

"Yeah," said Julia. "Like Victor didn't actually know that he was like turning into this other guy, but when he did..."

Julia went on to tell what she knew of the story, as only Julia could. Annette waited out the convoluted explanations. Julia was a friend, after all, and the only person Annette had ever met who was devoid of guile as a function of her basic biology, not as a result of Victor's theories or a technological censor. And besides, this was the first Annette had heard of all this. When Gil spoke of Eyeball's remarkable contribution to his career, and of his conviction that the man who named himself Eyeball had to have a rogue LieDeck, the information shattered and reassembled Annette's perception of Victor Helliwell, and of the world ... and of post-Revolutionary history.

"Julia," said Annette as her girlfriend was winding down and struggling over fuzzy details, "you must not say a single word about this for a day or two—until I say it's okay, okay?"

Julia thought about it, and looked as if she were on the verge of tears. "I don't think I ever ... told a lie before," she said nervously. "What if—"

"If someone asks, I know you'll tell the truth," said Annette. "But if you stay out at the lodge in that tent that the agents put up on the beach here and you don't ever talk on an MIU or even a Sniffer, nobody will ask, see? And in a couple of days, everybody will know about all this stuff anyway. So ... can you do that ... for me?"

"I ... guess so," said Julia. "But if the baby comes I'll want to talk to my mom and to Michael and—"

"If the baby starts to come," said Annette reassuringly, "you can do and say whatever you want, okay?" The baby wasn't due for several months, but Julia had heard about how sometimes they come out early,

and her grip on time was ... well, it was ... unique ... not quite the same as everybody else's, at any rate.

"Okay," said Julia. "Tell Mikeyface I love him when you go over there, eh?"

"Okay," said Annette as she kissed Julia on the cheek. "By the way," she whispered in Julia's ear, "we found Lilly and Lars, and they're okay, but it's best if you don't tell anybody about that either, okay?"

"Where did—" started Julia.

"Shhhhh!" said Annette. "It's our little secret for now, okay?"

"Okay," whispered Julia, although she still wasn't entirely sure whether not saying anything was the same thing as telling a lie.

Chapter 78

SURPRISE VISIT

Saturday, May 14, 2033—2:10 p.m.

Randy Whiteside and Yolanda "Lucky" Dees pulled up to the Victor-E "3" Primary School in Shawville. This was to be a surprise visit home, so he had rented a car at the airport rather than calling for the family's chauffeur to pick them up. Actually, Lucky had done the renting, and there had been three cars rented, not one. The monks were still attached to the couple, ever since Randy became the interim president of USLUC, and in spite of his subsequent resignation and return to college. For the last two months, three of the Jesus-Eers had stayed down in Miami, with Randy—the other three had stayed up in Washington D.C., protecting Lucky. Now the monks were reunited, as were their two "subjects." They never spoke, these monks, and because of that they were easy to forget, to ignore. There were six monks in the combined squad, so they also needed two monk-cars, one to lead and one to follow. Randy and Lucky had discussed dismissing them, but they had ultimately decided against, for now. Randy wasn't too sure if the monks would shoo even if he told them to bugger off. So ... it was a mini-caravan that had pulled up in front of the school, and three of the hooded monks had followed the young couple inside.

It was a Saturday—a school day like any other for Evolution, although a day when attendance was down and the fun level was up above normal. The din that greeted them was like nothing Randy or Lucky had ever known when they were in grade school. A veritable tribe of kids ran through the hall as the guests entered. They were all screaming, playing a kind of chase game, making a shrieking noise that pretty much confirmed their having been raised by hyenas. The monks stood shoulder-to-shoulder, frozen, praying silently to God, or Victor, God's boy, to take this cup from their lips.

Kids are still kids, thought Randy, no matter what kind of school they go to. He tried to remember if he had ever gone quite this nuts with a gang of children when he was a child himself. It occurred to him that he really was grown up now, inclined to hang back and smile at this lunatic behavior. It wasn't so many years ago that he was a ten-year-old. And now I'm getting married, he said to himself in amazement. Well ... I'm engaged.

He had called Patriot on his Sniffer from the car—to make sure Venice was home and that his parents wouldn't see him before he was inside the manor. Patriot had told him little, other than the fact that Venice spent her weekends at this "3" school now—not the private school that she attended, but Victor-E's outfit, in Shawville. Randy took Lucky's hand as they watched the gleeful children rush by,

and they both wondered if some day they might be the parents of one or two manic proto-humans themselves.

"Wanna play?" asked a ten-year-old kid with bushy, rusty-red hair and a generous crop of freckles. She had slammed on the brakes when she came upon the huddle of strangers in the doorway, as the rest of her gang ran off up the stairs. "I'm Chantal," she said, holding out her little hand as if it were the real thing. She shook with Lucky first, and Randy was glad the little girl had said her name—he thought she was a boy. She shook with him next, then with all three monks, who confused her first by not speaking, and then, when she persisted, by admitting in a whisper that they didn't actually have names.

"So how does the WDA keep track of you for all that LV stuff?" Chantal asked. "The LieDeck machine doesn't even work when you whisper, right?"

The Netnews had reported that Jesus-Eers were now apparently allowed to talk, but in the last couple of months, Randy and Lucky had not heard so much as a word from their ever-present escorts, or "kidnappers," Randy recalled one of them writing on a notepad, as a joke.

"They make us say 'no' out loud, and they give us made-up names, using numbers," a youngish monk said out loud to Chantal. "They ... call me Diefenbunker ninety-one." He shrugged. "Dumb, eh?"

"You ... talked!" said Lucky.

"It's only polite," said the monk, "and ... you know ... she's just a kid."

"Actually, I'd love to play," said Randy, in answer to Chantal's original question, and hoping to get back to the situation at hand. "But I haven't got time. Me and this lady are on our way to—"

"Lucky," said Chantal. "Her name is—"

"Me and Lucky," restarted a chastened Randy Whiteside, "are on a surprise visit to my mom and dad ... to tell them we're engaged."

"Like ... to get married?" asked Chantal, who wasn't altogether sure these two were old enough for that.

"It's also my birthday," said Randy.

"Happy birthday," said the smiling, speckled face. "How old are—"

"I'm her brother, Rejean," said a different voice. A boy had sidled up behind Chantal. His hair was the same shade of red, and he had even more freckles than his sister.

"Can I help you?" asked an approaching male voice from down the hall.

"Hi Daddy," squealed the two kids as they ran for hugs.

Sébastien Roy introduced himself, and was impressed to find himself in the company of yet another Whiteside—the famous one who, as the interim president of USLUC, had sucker-punched the WDA back in mid-March. In fact, Sébastien was about to effuse, to comment at length on Randy's short-lived celebrity, when he remembered just in time that he, Sébastien, was in transition. Any strong emotion, bad or good, was an automatic "slam-on-the-brakes," a time to stop, to review ... at least until his new "consciousness" became habit. He swallowed his giddy feelings and greeted Lucky and the monks, with no less interest in one than in the others. Sometimes, being Human Three feels downright ludicrous, but...

"We're looking for Venice," said Randy when the formalities ended.

"Ah, my TA," said Sébastien effusively. "Will you guys run upstairs and get Venice to come down here?" he asked his children. "Don't tell her why, okay?"

"She's your ... teaching assistant?" asked Lucky as the two kids fully engaged their afterburners.

"Oh yes," said Sébastien, "and a good one she is, too. She comes every weekend now ... wants to be a journalist ... says she's onto some pretty hot stories ... she loves kids ... loves people ... I'm lucky to have her."

Randy had mixed feelings about this. He'd never put much stock in this Human Three business, but he was certainly used to his sister having a mind of her own, even at the age of twelve. During his last visit, Venice had promised her dad that she wouldn't go over to Victor-E for six months, but she'd evidently found another, roundabout way to enhance her involvement with Evolution and enter transition, and by a route that her father—their father—couldn't object to.

The three adults—the talkers, not the monks—chatted briefly about the purpose of the couple's visit. When a lull occurred, Sébastien felt it was one of those moments that he could shape freely. "I heard about your—" He was going to say "caper," but that sounded loaded, or could be taken as such. "I heard about your rather—uh ... rather daring moves with USLUC," he settled for. "I guess I'd like to say thanks."

"Thanks?" said Randy.

"Well ... for stopping the demonstrations and the vandalism," explained Sébastien, leaving out any reference to the controversial aspects of the caper. "That ... could have gotten right out of control, had you not—"

"Randy! Lucky!" shouted Venice as she ran down the hall, followed by the two Roy children.

Randy scooped her up by the armpits, twirled her around, and planted a juicy kiss on her cheek. "So, you're a TA now!" he exclaimed as he put her down. "My little sister—a teaching assistant! Wow!"

Venice shook hands with Lucky, and then said, "Oh, this is stupid," and gave her a big hug. She and Lucky had faced on the Net once, when Randy was home last time, and Venice knew they could be friends for the rest of their lives if they wanted to, if they just made an effort to begin. Then she went on to hug the three monks, who appeared never to have been hugged before. Venice had been told that it was kosher for a Human Three girl up until she had breasts, and she explained matter-of-fact to the astonished monks that it was also okay even after she had her own breasts. "As long as I think it through first and accept the tingle-angle as part of the overall transaction," she said.

"So ... what's up?" she finally asked of her brother. "How come you guys came up to Québec?"

Randy and Lucky said that it was a surprise birthday visit. They wanted to save the engagement announcement for later, when everybody in the family was together, and they found themselves hoping that Sébastien's kids would not realize that Venice didn't know, and that they would stay mum about that part. "Can you get away from your TA responsibilities and come with us to the estate?" Randy asked.

Well, then Chantal and Rejean wanted to go too, and of course Venice wanted them to come along for all the fun, and then naturally Chantal and Rejean wanted their dad to come too, and Venice said: "Can they all come, Randy? Please?"

"I'm sure they don't have enough room in their car for all of us," said Sébastien.

Well, Venice just up and asked about that, and it turned out her brother had three cars sitting in front of

the school, not just one, and apparently Venice was particularly close to these two kids, and Sébastien was her new hero, and Human Threes went with the flow sometimes, even for family events, and Sébastien was always asking about her Aunt Julia anyway, and hoping that he'd get to meet her again, like he had at Victor-E's "free store" when she got him back into the teaching profession, the telling of which caused Sébastien to blush crimson, and caused Randy to capitulate completely.

"Hell, the more the merrier," he said. It wasn't about presents anyway. It was about being with the people he cared about, and while the Roys were total strangers, it seemed they had become emotional in-laws, via Venice.

Chantal was sent by her father to tell some other teacher that she and her dad and her brother and Venice were leaving for the day. "I don't even have to be here on Saturdays," Sébastien explained to the visitors and their monkly entourage.

"Tally ho," said Randy when Chantal came breathlessly back and they all headed out the door.

Chapter 79

SO WHAT'S THE PLAN?

Saturday, May 14, 2033—2:45 p.m.

Sébastien Roy sat sullenly in the rear seat of the last car, the following car, with three silent monks. Two were in the front, and one sat beside him ... all pretending to be so holy, he thought. The seating arrangement had been decided upon at the school. Venice had insisted on riding with her big brother Randy and his girlfriend Lucky in the middle car, and of course the two Roy kids wanted to be with Venice. Sébastien had done the dad thing, the adult thing, and let them have their way, their fun, even if it meant that he had to ride for maybe twenty minutes with three mutes from the Middle Ages.

As the trio of rented cars made its way down Highway 148 towards Quyon, Sébastien watched little hands playing sky-conductor through the back window of Randy's car. His kids loved singing and conducting their "dancy songs," and he had watched Venice at the school when she'd taught them these gyrations of joy. He'd been thrilled when Venice began coming in every weekend. She was terrific with all the kids. They loved her, she loved them, and he harbored a secret hope that one day, perhaps one day soon, Venice would be his ticket to seeing Julia again. Today?

Sébastien rolled down his window and craned his neck as the three cars approached the guarded entrance to the Whiteside estate. He was awestruck by the grandeur of the elevated stone mansion, the top of which was visible through the trees. It's ... as big as our school, he thought. Venice had told him about this wonderful place, and he looked forward to seeing the inside, and meeting Venice's parents ... and maybe seeing Julia.

He couldn't seem to muster the cojones to just go over to Victor-E and visit Julia, but he also couldn't get her out of his mind since he met her that day at the "SST free store." His life went from "sucks big time" to "couldn't be a whole lot better" after his fortuitous encounter, but it was not the need to thank her in general that spurred his hopes. Yes, he wanted to thank her, for sure, but he'd been impotent for two years, and he'd recently felt a strong stirring every time he thought about her. And it wasn't just her body ... well, it wasn't not her body, but it was more ... or could be.

He now knew what a "CQ" was, not just as a bit of Evolutionary trivia, but as an experience. His had gone from two digits to more than a hundred and sixty just in the last few weeks. Six-fois Bellehumeur, a

kind man and the principal at his school, was always telling him he was a “natural Human Three,” and the other teachers had agreed. (So had his students, and when they said so, it always tangled up his tongue and made him blush.) He had allowed himself to revel in the hormonal attraction for Julia, but he knew better than to befriend her (or anyone else) for that reason alone. He had no idea if he could form something resembling a relationship with a girl ... woman ... who was “retarded,” but other couples survived and thrived in spite of worse disabilities, and the truth was, at least for now, that Julia was very much his “superior” in terms of CQ. He had no idea if she was in the market for a man, or a primary relationship, or a dad for her baby when it came, but he wanted her to know that his body was ready to end its sexual rebellion, and that it was because of her. That alone deserved a huge thank-you, whatever the long-term prospects between them.

The first rented monk-car eased up to the stone security hut, and two Patriot agents approached quickly. One guard stayed with the lead car while the other, a sturdy looking fellow with a dark mustache, followed the silent monk-thumb back to the second car in the parade. He was surprised to see Randy at the wheel and Venice in the back, with her two pals. “Christ, we just sent a car over to the school to get your sister,” he told Randy excitedly. “We couldn’t raise you on the Net.”

“I had my Sniffer turned off,” said Randy. “We all do. Is something wrong?”

“You and your sister have to get out to the lodge right away,” the guard whispered conspiratorially into Randy’s ear, “but I just can’t let these other people in. My orders—”

Randy put a flat hand up to create a hiatus, and got out of the car. Nothing annoyed Venice more than whispering, and Randy got the powerful sense that something was in fact wrong. There was an air of contained urgency, and the agent standing beside the lead car looked disturbingly nervous. Randy led the mustachioed guard a few paces away, by the elbow, for a tête-à-tête. “Okay, what’s going on?” he demanded to know.

“It’s ... not up to me to say,” tried the guard, “but I’m afraid I can’t let all these other people in. My orders are—”

“These ‘other people’ are with me and Venice,” said Randy bluntly. He was only a pup at eighteen, and the Patriot guard seemed to be about thirty, so Randy felt strange to be laying a power trip on the man. “Now you let us through—all of us!”

“I’m ... really sorry,” said the guard, “but my orders are—”

“Your orders,” interrupted Randy, “are to call my dad or my mother on your Sniffer, NOW!”

“I’m—uh—afraid they’re—uh—not available to take any calls,” said the guard, who looked far more frightened than belligerent. “My orders were ... very specific. Patriot was trying to locate you and—”

“Your orders,” snapped Randy, “are to let us through, and if you don’t, you’ll lose your job. Now open the fucking gate,” he said as he turned and got back into his car.

He hoped his bluff would work, and it did. He put the car in gear, re-activated his Sniffer, and called the monk driver of the lead car—the lead monk who had been given Lucky’s Sniffer so Randy could navigate him from the airport south of Ottawa to the “3” school in Shawville. “Drive past the house, and stay to the right at the fork,” he directed cheerfully, to not upset the kids. “It seems that everybody is out at the lodge—it’s just a couple of miles through the bush.”

“I know the way,” said the monk. Randy didn’t know how that could be, or why, but he let it drop. Maybe these weirdos are better at security than I imagined.

* * * *

Lilly Petrosian was in the fallout shelter at the great log lodge. She had been elected—not very democratically—to go outside and help cope with what sounded like an invasion, if the warning from Patriot had been accurate. She met Randy as he got out of his car, and she was struck again by the remarkable likeness between the boy and his father ... at least physically, she thought. “Hi Randy,” she said with a careful smile and a handshake—she wondered if she still smelled of skunk, but no one commented, and Venice surely would have said something if she'd noticed. “Can we—uh—talk for a minute ... alone?”

There were several Patriot people on the porch, and more near a big beige tent that had been erected on the beach, down by the dock, near the boathouse. There were half a dozen more scattered in between the private road and the parking area, and several more hovering near the hems of the bush. Randy had never seen that before. Patriot was hardly even necessary any more, since the Revolution, but they were kept on “just in case,” his dad always said. They knew to keep out of sight, and it seemed now as if they weren't even trying to keep a low profile. Something's wrong, he thought, even though Lilly had betrayed nothing in her voice.

“Venice,” he said to his little sister, “why don't you show everybody the dock and the boats and the hovercraft and all that? You can explore that new tent down there ... and tell them the story of how Grandpa rebuilt the whole lodge before you and me were even born, and all that stuff. We'll see Dad and Mum in a few minutes, okay?”

Venice looked at her brother sideways. Her eyes seemed to ask: Why am I excluded? I'm a Whiteside, and I am twelve years old! Randy stared back at her, and tilted his head very slightly in the direction of the Roy children. Venice “got it,” and now it was okay. It was for the little kids that Randy had asked, so she, Chantal and Rejean went skipping on down to the big dock, followed at an adult pace by Sébastien, Lucky and the six silent monks. It was a gorgeous May afternoon, and there were few mosquitoes ... and I do love telling that story, thought Venice.

“So, let's have it,” said Randy as soon as the last explorer was out of earshot. “What the hell's going on? Where's my parents?”

“They're ... fine,” said Lilly. “They sent me out to talk to you.” She led Randy to an open gazebo and sat him down. She really didn't know where to start. “Look,” she said, “I'll give this to you in point form ... there's so much to tell, and we've got some serious decisions to make, okay?”

“So do it, dammit,” ordered Randy, with a hand gesture that told her his patience was at an end.

“Me and Lars, Colonel Johannsen—you don't know him—are on the run from the WDA,” she began. “And Gil Henderson ... the famous New York Times reporter ... he's upstairs in Victor's bedroom doing an interview—no, not with Victor—Victor is in the fallout shelter in the basement, and he's ... dying. Gil Henderson is doing an interview with Lars, using an old analog camcorder, on how the WDA ... caused Victor's cancer, and—no, don't interrupt me—there was some refit work done on the plumbing at the lodge a year ago, and Lars's cover was—he was an apprentice plumber, but he was also a WDA mole who lived over at Victor-E. He was on the gang that did that plumbing work here. He put this lead box with a trap door—he pushed it up through the wall, I mean inside the wall, to a position only a few inches from the head of Victor's bed, so your dad got a Geiger counter from the shelter and he—I mean Lars—went up there and proved that the lead box was still there. When he was here before, doing the plumbing job, he pulled a cord and the trap door opened that released radiation near to Victor's head, and he was supposed to come back and remove the box later, but then the work order got screwed up or Patriot employed a different plumbing company or something, and that's how come the box is still there—either that, or the WDA never intended for him to go back and get it—we can't be sure. Lars

didn't know what he was doing when he came here a year ago. They—the WDA—told him it was a listening device, but he knew from the weight of the thing that it had to be lead or gold or something like that, and when he found out recently that Victor had cancer, well, he pretty well knew he'd been a party to murder—that there was plutonium or uranium in that box—he didn't know, like to the extent that he would be caught when he was LVED, but ... he knew, the way people know things in their guts. He's Human Three now, so he's telling everything he knows to Mr. Henderson. I think they—well, Lars—might even smash the wall and take the box out, but it's dangerous stuff, so I ... I don't know—actually, he's probably done it by now. Your father is acting as the cameraman for the interview ... which started across the lake, actually, at the cabin.

"In other words," she concluded, "the WDA killed Victor, and we think they killed Lester Connolly ... and Annette Blais' husband Steve Sutherland ... and..."

"And!?" asked Randy, open-mouthed—he could hardly believe that there might be more.

"And maybe your Grandpa Whiteside too," Lilly said. "Our problem is that—"

"They killed my Grandpa Whiteside!" said Randy. "The fucking WDA killed Victor and Grandpa and—"

"We ... really don't know about your grandfather, Randy," said Lilly, touching his shoulder, and keeping her voice well below his, hoping he would take the hint. "We only know about Victor for sure, but that's enough ... Jesus, it's hard for me to accept too, you know. I mean I worked for these people, and—"

"This isn't about you," said Randy testily. "Sorry," he was quick to add. "I'm ... not mad at you ... it's just..."

Lilly waited, but Randy was still swallowing the awful possibility that the WDA had killed his Grandpa Whiteside. She decided to carry on.

"The problem we're facing now is how to get that videotape and two other tapes out of here and on the Net before the WDA stops us. The electricity to the lodge mysteriously failed while you were on your way out here from the mansion—that just happened a few minutes ago—of course they've got the generators in the shelter, but..."

Randy felt his stomach curl. "How could they...?" He had a sinking feeling of déjà vu. He recalled being told a long time ago that he'd been through something like this on a previous occasion, right here, and in similar circumstances, though he had only been a fetus when the old World Democratic Alliance blew up the lodge—before the LieDeck Revolution—as the first major shot of the Revolution, really. "You don't ... think..."

"Randy, we don't know what to think," Lilly admitted. "We're trying to figure out what we should do. What we do know is that Victor bragged to me about bringing down the WDA—politically and economically, although not through violence. He said that to me, and while I told him that his plan wasn't illegal, I had to report it all to my handler in the WDA..." Lilly cringed to realize that her handler, her actual handler, was none other than the man she'd thought was her boyfriend in Miami, the affable guy she had thought of even after the breakup as "good old Ed." "And ... now that we know that the WDA is a ... a criminal institution, or at least it has a criminal element in it, well..."

"What the fuck was Victor doing, bragging like that? And to you?"

"Well, he was actually talking about his phase two economic model—maybe you heard about that—and he was telling me how it could save Evolution from the economic pressure that the WDA was applying, and how it might ultimately replace the capitalist system as the primary means of production world-wide."

Lilly felt weak to realize that Victor hadn't said that last part to her—not in so many words—and yet that was what she had reported to Control ... Victor's intent, his hope. She had no idea why she'd told that lie, to herself or to her handlers, and she wished she had Victor's prototype LieDeck with her to keep her in touch with her own misdeeds. It was with Gil Henderson and Lars, of course, being used to LieDeck-verify the interview upstairs in the lodge. She hoped she wasn't forgetting anything major in her summary to the boy.

"Anyway," she continued, "Evolution has not only survived the WDA's assault, but now it's straining under the weight of a growth spurt that might double the movement's membership in the next few years. As things have turned out, the best defense was a good offense—for Evolution—but from the WDA's point of view, these developments could be seen as ... as sedition, and the WDA Charter—which is a humanitarian document in the main—is clear about the consequences of any kind of rebellion against its authority. The combined arsenals of the pre-Revolutionary nuclear powers were unified by General Brampton in twenty fourteen, and he proved during the Revolution that he was prepared to use it ... that is ... if he felt it was necessary, but of course he's not the official head of the WDA any more, so..."

"Jesus Christ," said Randy. He stood up and tried to shake off the numb feeling that was leaking through his entire nervous system. "Are you saying ... that the WDA could ... like, nuke us!?" He stared at her. "I'm sorry, but that just isn't believable," he snorted. "I want to talk to my dad, now!"

Lilly stood up and hugged him—she couldn't think of what else to do. It wasn't easy, but she got him to sit down again in the gazebo. "Just ... for a few more seconds," she assured him as she broke off the embrace. "I—uh—I don't have my LieDeck-equipped Sniffer any more, but we've got Victor's original prototype, the LieDeck that he showed to your Grandpa Whiteside before you were born. It sort of—uh—reappeared ... it's a long story. Your dad has it upstairs in the lodge. All that stuff I told you, or at least the stuff about Lars, it's ... verifiable," she said. "Gil—Gil Henderson—he had it to verify Lars and me across the lake at your dad's cabin, before we came over here to the lodge ... except we had to whisper over there and..." Her voice withered away, and her eyes started to tear up.

Randy had never had his entire universe turned upside down before—that wasn't supposed to happen any more; not since the Revolution. Was it possible that the often-ridiculed nuclear policy of the WDA was actually a serious policy, meant to be used, or that it could actually come into play here ... now ... or soon? "So what's the plan?" he asked in a barely audible voice. "What the hell do we do now?"

Lilly hung her head and put her slim hand back on Randy's shoulder. All her life, it seemed, people had leaned on her, depended on her, asked her if things ought to go this way or that. Now it was her turn to be vulnerable, and she had only a scared, angry and confused eighteen-year-old to give her support. She closed her eyes, trying not to regress. "I'm afraid," she began, "we haven't yet figured that out."

Chapter 80

ISN'T THAT A CORKER?

Saturday, May 14, 2033—3:05 p.m.

Sheena Kalhoun stormed into General George Brampton's office at WDA headquarters in New York. She was absolutely determined that this would be their last showdown, that the farcical "king of peace" would make like a good old soldier and fade away ... finally. She slammed the door hard and shouted: "Call it off, George—NOW!"

Brampton was almost expecting her, and he was ready—not so much emotionally as by circumstance.

He had passed the point of no return several minutes ago, and couldn't call off the attack even if he wanted to—which he didn't. “Who told?” he asked calmly. “Not that it matters one way or the other, but ... just out of curiosity.”

Sheena melted inside. George was a bully and a coward at heart, so she knew that this level of confidence didn't come from the strength of character it took to bluff. Her quick mind locked onto the reality—she was too late. “Are you telling me that you can't?” she demanded to know.

“Please sit down, Sheena,” intoned the old man, motioning with a loose, wrinkled hand.

My God, this is the end, felt Sheena as she sank weakly into the chair on the visitor side of Brampton's desk. “Where did you get ... the information?” she asked—it was a question that would be critical at his trial, if not right at this moment. Sheena was still a lawyer, even if she hadn't practiced in years, and one way or another, she was going to bring this bastard down.

“We put the cook on twenty-four hour archive,” the general said—he could never remember Noel's name unless he went through an internal checklist of Christmas-related words. “He's gay. He's got a cyberboyfriend. He talks. But the important thing is that there's two escaped felons in that lodge, as well as the man who's plotting the overthrow of the WDA. And you, Ms. Kalhoun, do not have the jam to do what's needed.”

Sheena felt the blood leaving her head and rushing for lower extremities. Brampton was speaking from a position of pleasure as much as of power, and with the deformed righteousness known only to those whose minds had settled for second fiddle years ago. He was what Victor Helliwell would call a typical Human Two, a man who, faced with even the smallest perception of a threat, reacted with overkill ... the way a wild animal has to react.

“You came charging in here thinking that you're going to get me,” the old coot went on, “but I wouldn't bet on it. Christ, you figured it out two months ago, when you gave me your cute little Beckett lecture. You're as much a part of this as I am, Sheena, even if you didn't know about all of it until now. So get this right the first time, lady!” he said brutally. “I deny nothing!”

He looked hard at the woman who had taken his position as the head of the WDA, the woman who thought she could just bump him aside with her little democratic vote and a few weeks of clandestine lobbying, the woman who thought she could take the place of a great man who had literally saved the world ... as if I was garbage, he thought bitterly.

“You seem surprised,” he noted with a wicked smile. “Why?” he asked in a tone that allowed for a response. He just let the word sit in the air for several seconds, and gloried in the silence that emanated from the haggard, drawn face of Sheena Kalhoun. “You think you caught me in the middle of doing something wrong, just like those ... bleeding hearts thought in twenty fourteen, when I nuked the fuck out of Leningrad. And you know what happened then. The whole fucking world thanked me for what I did! I personally sucked the poison out of the civilian United Nations, and I re-made the institution in my image—into a tough, fair body of qualified military rulers who have brought security, peace and prosperity to an entire planet for nearly twenty years now.

“Yes,” he said, leaning forward to make sure her Sniffer caught every word, “I have a little group of technically non-existent warriors, men and women whose bioIDs are not recorded in any MIU ... anywhere. They are loyal to me, to me alone, and while you and your MGAs have been deliberating—” he over-pronounced the word in what he felt was a wonderful display of contempt “—these few fine soldiers have been safeguarding the sacred principals of the WDA Charter, a document that I wrote with this old hand.

"Yes, we did a little ... something to our friend Lester Connolly ... as you've known since the middle of March, and you did nothing! You covered your ass, like I knew you would, as long as I acted contrite and scared and beaten. And yes, we've done a number of other equally necessary covert operations, without which world order would have been jeopardized. And yes, we've got a few valiant men slogging their way through the bush right now, on their way up to Whiteside's lodge on Wilson Lake. And no, they can't be stopped, not by those puny Patriot agents, not by you, not even by me. My guys don't even have Sniffers on them. And it wouldn't help to warn Michael Whiteside. My guys are close enough now, and if they see any significant movement away from the lodge, they'll detonate early and sacrifice themselves to the cause. So, what exactly ... was your point?"

Sheena made her decision. She knew she was going down. She couldn't change the past, nor could she stop this current crime. The WDA would fall to civilian control as a result of this, and she determined that she would do all in her power to help that happen quickly and thoroughly. "Collateral damage?" she asked. It was the next logical question for a military mind.

"A little bit," shrugged the old general. "But we get one really fantastic bonus point!" he added with evident delight.

The man is well and truly mad, Sheena knew ... again ... for sure this time. "Bonus point?" she asked incredulously.

George began to laugh, and try as he might, he just couldn't stop. "Gil Henderson," he said through the guttural cackling.

"He's ... at the Whitesides' lodge?" Sheena asked. "Up in Québec?"

"Yeah," said George as he swept away happy tears with the backs of his fingers and got his jiggling body under some control. "Well, he left a note for his secretary saying he was going there," he said as he pulled a tissue from the box on his desk and dabbed the wet bags of flesh that hung under his gray eyes. "Isn't that a corker?"

Chapter 81

LOCKDOWN

Saturday, May 14, 2033—3:22 p.m.

Randy went into the lodge alone and found his father in the claustrophobic, windowless fallout shelter, sitting at the kitchen table, writing out the score by hand. He must have finished helping with that interview upstairs, he realized. They embraced ... for the first time in years, thought Randy. "Lilly just told me that—" he started.

"Better let me get through this first," Michael interrupted as he sat back down and returned to his figuring. A Patriot agent had brought him up to speed on the new arrivals, and now the numbers didn't work. "Mom's in the medical room with Victor," he said, hoping his son would take a few minutes to go in and hug her, and let him get back to his calculations. "Grandma's in there too," he said absently. "Actually ... no ... she's in one of the bedrooms." He completely forgot to say "happy birthday" to his son. And Randy forgot to expect it—he just walked around the table and sat opposite his dad.

There were footsteps on the stairs, and Lilly came through the heavy vault-like door. It seemed to Randy that his dad hardly noticed her, even when she placed a hand on his father's shoulder. She was standing

behind Michael now, and she put a finger up to her mouth. Randy caught it, and sat back in silence. Then he leaned forward to see what his father was writing, working on. The only sound was the hum from the power generator.

There was a big “13” at the top of the page, circled and underlined, and Randy knew that was the intended capacity of the fallout shelter. “Lucky thirteen,” he remembered being told by his dad when he was little. Then there was a list of names, with numbers beside them. Randy had to concentrate to read the names upside-down, but his father's script was neat enough, so he managed.

The family had been assigned the numbers one through six, Randy observed ... Dad, Mom, me, Venice, Grandma and Auntie Julia. Then there was Lilly ... listed as number seven, Randy noted—he wasn't too sure of his father's sense of priorities on that one, but this wasn't the time for that discussion. Noel, the cook at the lodge, was beside number eight, and the name Annette Blais was beside number nine. Everybody and his brother's in here, Randy thought. Number ten was Victor, but Randy noticed that his dad had put a question mark beside Victor's name. He silently pointed to the odd punctuation.

"The doctor said he's got only days or hours to live," said Michael to his son. "It may seem heartless, but ... I have to consider that."

A Doctor Valcourt was listed as number eleven, Randy noted. Gil Henderson's name was beside the number “12,” and although “Lars Johanssen” was written beside number thirteen, it had been crossed out and replaced with “Lucky Dees,” Randy's girlfriend. He was relieved. She was still outside with the Roy family, Venice, and the monks, and no way would he have tolerated her exclusion, even if it meant bumping the cook. “We're uh—” he started, but the timing and circumstances could not have been more wrong for a big happy announcement about his engagement. “So what happened to this Lars fellow,” he asked.

"He's ... not staying,” said Lilly. A Patriot guard had told her privately on her way into the lodge that Lars had finished his interview with Gil Henderson, and that he was now in the shelter, in the storage room, getting a pain injection from Dr. Valcourt, and a temporary cast for his fractured wrist. Then he was going to leave, to run for it. Lilly had figured the rest out. He would be taking the lead box with him, undoubtedly with the trap door back in place. He was going to hide the evidence, in case he was killed. He knows the WDA will kill him if they find him, she thought. So he'll use the night, she was sure, especially with the WDA closing in on us. And he'll hide it...? She thought about it. He'll hide it in his old hunting shack, she figured, so it won't hurt anyone and so that I'll know where to look ... no, not in it; he'll hide it near the shack ... he'll figure ... we can find it with a Geiger counter ... or someone else can, if we don't make it. “He's ... on our side,” Lilly quietly reminded Randy, “but ... there's something he has to do.”

Just then, Annette tapped Lilly on the shoulder and asked her with a silent gesture to come with her. Lilly got up and followed Annette to the only bathroom in the shelter—Randy assumed it was some sort of “girl problem.” He watched his father struggle with the numbers and with his feelings, neither of which seemed to be working. And Randy decided to stay where he was—he was a Whiteside, after all, and he didn't want to be in some bedroom dealing with somebody's bloody feelings when important decisions were being made.

He looked over his father's shoulder as Dr. Valcourt walked out of the supply room, where he had been treating Lars. Then the young apprentice-plumber-cum-WDA-mole exited the same room, a bulbous cast on his right forearm. He walked unsteadily towards the shelter door.

"You're in no shape to—” began the doctor.

"Goodbye everybody," said Lars. His eyes seemed glazed, his face pasty. "I wish you all the best."

Everyone in the kitchen-dining area wished him well as he walked out. The door to the shelter was open, and Randy saw him reach down and pick up a green silk pillowcase with something heavy in it. The lead box, Randy realized as Lars plodded up the stairs.

"He'll never make it," said Dr. Valcourt when Lars was out of earshot. "I admire his determination and his courage, but not his common sense."

Randy squeezed his hands together under the kitchen table as the doctor returned to his primary patient in the mini-hospital. Then he resumed watching his dad, who returned his attentions to the papers, the numbers.

But again, almost immediately, Michael was interrupted. A whack and a vague thump emanated from the bathroom. "You all right in there?" he hollered towards the bathroom door. "Lilly?" he called, his voice showing concern.

"Yeah," came Annette's voice. And then she emerged, looking brutal, slamming the bathroom door behind her, with Lilly still in there. "Give me the tapes, Michael," she said bluntly as she marched into the kitchen-dining area. "I'm going with Lars."

Michael got up, retrieved the three analog videotapes out of a cupboard where he had stashed them earlier, and handed them over. He wasn't sure if it was a good idea to let her take the tapes, but it probably was ... and her departure gives me one more place to play with in my calculations.

Annette stuffed the tapes into the pockets of her jacket, and then she shook Michael's hand. "Good luck," she said. "To all of you," she added. Then she just walked out of the heavy door and disappeared up the stairs ... two at a time by the sound of it. "Lars, wait up," they heard her call.

Randy watched the barely perceptible muscle-movements of his father's body. He's going to make the decision now, the son knew.

"These new people," said Michael abruptly, meaning Sébastien Roy and his children and the six monks. "Get them in here right now ... and then we go to lockdown."

"But Dad—" began Randy.

"We'll just have to manage," said Michael.

Chapter 82

ON THE RUN

Saturday, May 14, 2033—3:44 p.m.

Annette Blais eased the small motorboat up to the side of the dock in front of Michael's little cabin on the west side of the lake, and killed the engine. The plan was for them to wait until nightfall, and then to fish out the sunken canoe and paddle up Dora's Creek, back to the "hunting" shack, under cover of darkness. Lars was supposed to stay there with part of the evidence—the lead box with the radioactive pellet in it. Annette would leave him there, hidden in the hole beneath the floorboards—assuming the WDA hadn't torn the shack apart—and head out to deal with the rest of the evidence. She had to find some way of getting the analog tapes flipped over to digital and get them out on the Net before the WDA

could intercept the transmission and terminate the effort. That was the plan, but Annette had had serious second thoughts during the brief ride across Wilson Lake.

She held on to the dock, and carefully stepped up to the middle bench, where she sat down and mulled. There was no good plan, really. There was only a choice between two bad plans. Waiting for dark probably meant getting caught, because there was now little doubt that the WDA was on to the fact that their two rogue agents were hiding out at the Whitesides' lodge. Annette looked back across the lake at the lodge, and remembered a horrible day back in 2014 when ... no time for all that, she scolded herself.

In fact, Annette couldn't figure why the WDA hadn't already arrived at the lodge and arrested the lot of them. It had been about forty-five minutes or so since the power went off over there, and the WDA had a well-earned reputation for hyper-efficiency on those occasions when the use of force was needed to control a situation. If they were closing in on the lodge now, they would do it in massive numbers—thousands of agents—and they were probably already setting up an air-tight perimeter around the entire estate, including, of course, Wilson Lake. In all probability, unless she and Lars were to accept the suicide option, the only thing they would accomplish by running was to change the location of their arrest. Unless they nuke the lodge! she thought. In which case...

Annette abandoned that line of thought. It was just too ridiculous. "I ... slapped her face," she said towards the tarpaulin in the front end of the boat.

"What?" came Lars' strained voice from beneath the tarp.

"I slapped her," she said again.

"Who?"

"Lilly."

"Why?"

"Long story," said Annette.

Lars felt weak from the pain shot that Dr. Valcourt had given him before setting his broken wrist in a temporary cast, and he didn't want to move unless Annette said he had to. "So ... tell," he said, hoping it would at least buy more time to not move from the cold floor of the aluminum boat.

"Well," said Annette, "I was pretty depressed and distraught at the time, and I was worried like hell about you. I could imagine you racing through the bush by yourself, scared out of your mind, hurting from the broken wrist that Lilly gave you, so I brought her into the bathroom to talk over the possibility of going with you on the run. And she said how truly sorry she was about hurting you, and how she was confident you'd get away, and how she knew you were special to me and all that.

"Well I just stared at her, eh? I thought, 'You fucking BITCH!' I mean you said ... you said you wouldn't blab, and I know you didn't. But it was real clear to me that Lilly knew you and me were lovers—otherwise she'd have no reason to think that we were so close, eh? She eavesdropped on us, Lars! Maybe it's no big deal to you—I mean being a Sex-Een and all—but to me it was ... well, it was fucking outrageous! So I continued to stare, hard, to let Lilly figure out the message and maybe even do the right thing ... the Human Three thing.

"Lilly glared back at me, like she was confused by all this hostility on my part, then after a few seconds she says: 'Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Annette. Please forgive me.' It was like a light bulb going on, eh? Like she just then realized what she had revealed. And I guess she got suddenly ashamed of the person

she'd been. I told her that if we got out of this alive, I'd take a front tooth out of that long face of hers, with pliers. Then she started lecturing me about threatening her with violence, eh? So ... I smacked her good! I mean flat-handed, eh? But like really hard. To her credit, she took it. She didn't even try to hit me back, but..."

And with that, Annette stopped relating the tale. There was silence from under the tarp. She wondered if Lars had fallen asleep or something.

"Well," he finally said, "I guess she deserved it." What he didn't say was that perhaps he deserved what he had got too—the broken wrist, the likely death sentence—one way or another.

"Are you saying that as a WDA agent or a Human Three?" asked Annette, who was saving that discussion for later, the one about how he owed his whole Victor-Een family, and her especially, a huge apology.

"Neither," said Lars, as he used his good hand to pull the tarp off his face and look at Annette in the bright May sunshine. They smiled at each other in the awkward manner that lovers sometimes fall into when much has already been forgiven, and yet the end of the affair is unavoidable. But this wasn't a time for a sentimental retrospective on their ... on our relationship, Lars supposed it was. "You ... got doubts about the plan, right?" he guessed.

Annette sighed quietly, wiped perspiration off her forehead, and adjusted her internal orientation. He was right. There was business to be done. "I say fuck the canoe and fuck waiting for dark," she said. "What say we run for it now, using this motorboat?"

"I agree," said Lars. "Just one thing ... I really meant it when I said that I just won't allow myself to be arrested. If they—"

"I know!" said Annette. She wasn't "in love" with Lars, but she'd loved him hard and often with her body—in Sleepery #31, her "boss spot," in her summer digs at Sleepery #31, in his so-called hunting cabin and in many other places. And she'd loved him not a little with her heart and mind, too. She knew he felt the same, even if he wasn't exactly the immature apprentice plumber with the awful grammar that she thought she had come to know and care about. Yes, he had deceived her, and all of Victor-E ... but his reasons were compelling ... and his former role as a mole had nothing to do with his relationship with her. But while his resolve to blow his brains out rather than be taken alive was quite understandable, Annette worried that it was perhaps based on wonky thinking, messed-up emotions. Yes, Victor's imminent death would mean that Lars was officially a murderer, but he was innocent of the intent, and surely he knew he could forgive himself ... in time. And he was heavily drugged, and in pain; just not in a position to take a rational decision to die ... if anyone ever is!

Annette thought about the winding route that Dora's Creek took. She knew the layout of the estate well from her years as a Patriot agent, and she tried to calculate how many miles of creek there were from Michael's cabin to this and that point along the way, and to the hunting shack. The creek meandered vaguely northwest for several miles before turning west across the first road. "It's about—uh—three miles upstream to the Bristol Line," she said—that was the road that ran south to Ray's Restaurant on Highway 148. "So ... if there's a perimeter, that's where it'll be. Let's go that far ... or get close to the road ... and we'll rethink things up there."

"Oh ... kay," drawled Lars—it seemed the pain shot was dulling his speech as well as his senses. He pulled the tarp back over his head, and was mostly glad he could avoid standing up, or moving. His body felt as dense as the lead walls of the tiny box at his feet. Every heartbeat was like a miniature explosion in his right wrist, even with the injection that Dr. Valcourt had given him. He felt his jeans with his good left

hand to make sure he still had the plastic bottle of morphine tablets ... and the pistol.

Annette pulled the cord and started up the ten-horsepower fishing motor. She pushed the boat away from the dock and headed for the mouth of Dora's Creek, a stone's throw or two north of Michael's cabin. There had been bigger and faster boats at the lodge, but none was more suited than this one to navigate the narrow creek. There were hovercraft at the lodge too, but they were much louder than the small engine that pushed them along now. In fact, Annette realized that in her choice of this vessel at the lodge, she must have been already contemplating ... subconsciously, I guess ... this possible change of plan.

As the twosome purred their way up the first few hundred yards of the slow-flowing stream, Annette reactivated the skills she'd learned all those years ago as a Patriot agent. Her eyes searched the terrain ahead like radar, looking side to side through the maze of tree-trunks and flowering bushes for the first sign of trouble. Her heart was racing, and she felt certain it was only a matter of time before they were confronted by one or more WDA commandos, or, worse yet, hit by an invisible hail of bullets. Still, her left hand gripped the steering arm tightly as she kept the craft in mid-stream at about one-quarter power—trolling speed. And every now and then, she couldn't help touching her jacket pockets with her free hand to confirm that the three analog videotapes were still there.

She had checked her wristwatch at the mouth of Dora's Creek, and she had estimated their progress at walking speed, strolling speed ... maybe three miles an hour. I'll stop in forty-five minutes, she decided, at 4:35 p.m. Then I'll leave Lars with the boat and scout ahead on foot to the Bristol Line.

Chapter 83

A SON-OF-A-BITCH TO THE END

Saturday, May 14, 2033—3:39 p.m.

Michael's Grandpa Whiteside, Randy's great-grandfather, had built the fallout shelter underneath the Wilson Lake lodge in response to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. It had not only been kept fully operational, it had been upgraded regularly and tested monthly by Patriot Security, ever since. It had six tiny bedrooms, one large bedroom, a kitchen, a walk-in freezer, a storage room, a bathroom and a mini-hospital, where Victor Helliwell now languished. The shelter was stocked with a three-month supply of everything that might be needed—guns, tools, food, water, two big power generators, fuel, medicine, and three MIUs. Now, of course, those MIUs were unplugged as a precaution—so the WDA couldn't find out any more than they already knew.

The last problem Michael had faced before lockdown was explaining to the thirty-two Patriot guards outside the shelter why he and the others still needed to be sheltered now that the deadly lead box had been removed by Lars. How the WDA would react depended on how much they knew, and how frightened or furious they were. There was no way of knowing these things, but the mysterious power outage was a pretty damned good clue, as far as Michael was concerned. Whatever dangers the Patriot agents might face outside the lodge, inviting them in was obviously not possible. Just before locking the heavy steel door, Michael had done the only thing he could do—he told them to go to their homes, immediately, and to stand by there.

Randy and Lucky went into a bedroom to talk about their situation—Gil Henderson had agreed to fill them in on what he had learned during the interviews he'd conducted at the cabin and here at the lodge. Others had gravitated to various bedrooms, or stayed in the dining area to whisper and brood. The six smiling monks sat down on the floor in the kitchen, in a neat row, seemingly disinterested in their fates, or

by the other difficulties faced by this thrown-together group. A decision had been made to drop the intensity for a while, partly for the benefit of Venice, Julia and the Roy children, partly because there aren't a whole lot of possibilities for action when you're locked in a 1960s-vintage fallout shelter, partly because it seemed that a bit of reflection couldn't hurt, but mostly because the word had come out that "the patient" had very little time left.

Victor Helliwell lay on the Stryker frame bed, attended by his physician, Dr. Valcourt, and by Becky. The only sound to float out of the mini-hospital was the dim beeping of a heart monitor. Michael was in the large bedroom just across from the open door of the medical center, with Lilly, and they could just feel the heaviness. They sat on the hide-a-bed sofa, saying nothing. Michael could see the end of the Stryker frame bed, and a lump of white sheet that covered Victor's feet, toes up—he was lying on his back now, in spite of the pain. Michael tried in vain to not glance so often at the gaping threshold he would soon have to cross.

"Doctor Valcourt has been in there an awfully long time," he said as he let his head fall onto the back of the sofa. Valcourt was a great doctor—he knew that—but ... well, doctors still seemed to have a ... a way about them. It was as if their job was simply to minister to the sick or dying, without reference to the feelings and needs of the family ... or what passed for family, in this case.

Michael was so glad Lilly was here. Thank God, he thought—felt. They were parked side by side on the sofa, like patients waiting their turn at a dentist's office. His mind was on the problems they faced, but his feelings were on Lilly and Becky, the two women he loved, and Victor, a man for whom feelings were the enemy, or at least a dangerous ally. He stared up at the concrete ceiling, and then he closed his eyes, wishing his heart could block things out as easily as that.

Lilly was just numb. She hated it when other people saw her differently than she saw herself, and it seemed that almost everyone did—the WDA, all the good people at Victor-E, certainly Annette ... maybe even Michael? She felt she was a failure as a Human Two, and she found herself hoping that out of all this confusion would emerge a better Human Three ... if I live! For now, she was with the man she loved ... and he loved her, and he loved his wife Becky, and Becky loved him, among others, and it was all ... too damned much. Things were so much simpler when men and women swore eternal fealty to each other and then tried their best to keep the cheating to a minimum, and a secret. There was a case to be made that reality was too complicated for the human mind ... and yet it was impossible to escape the new realities of the LieDeck Age. As she thought further about these convolutions, she recalled that the crisis had begun with her decision to walk into the bush and fuck Lars blind ... and that was to pay Michael back for not calling her, and for continuing to love, if not screw, his own wife ... a woman I admire and like!

She gave up trying to figure it all out, and did whatever her feelings said ... and never mind Human Two, Three, this, that, or whatever. She remembered her first meeting with Victor, and made a decision. She shifted down on the sofa, put her head on Michael's lap, and draped her legs over the far armrest. She flipped her long dark hair off to the side, where it fell to the tiled floor. If Michael hadn't dropped his head back, her eyes would have gazed up into his, and caressed his pain. "Maybe he's sleeping ... comfortably," she tried—meaning Victor.

Michael's mind went back to the moment he'd heard Lilly descending the wooden stairs leading down from the main floor of the lodge, just after his son Randy had entered the shelter. Her footfalls seemed so light, so pressed for time and yet hesitant, scared but confident, all this mixed together in one complex person who had become everything to him, everything his wife wasn't ... couldn't be, he shifted the thought sideways. He loved Becky ... in a deep and abiding way, but...

He gave up on figuring out reality too. He put a hand under Lilly's chin, on her neck, and he moved his

thumb up and down to let her know that he'd heard, that he appreciated her intentions. "Yeah," he said softly towards the ceiling. "Maybe. I hope so."

Lilly reached up and touched his prominent jawbone with the back of her hand. She knew as well as anyone the thunderous impact the strange inventor had had on the planet, and she found herself wishing, again, that Helliwell had used the Net more while he was alive. While he was still able, she rephrased her thought, realizing that ... he's still with us. "I ... don't know ... what to say to him," she admitted, "other than ... what the monks asked."

"Me neither," said Michael, lifting his head again, shrugging with his brows as their eyes met. "Victor is probably going to be the last important historical figure whose life profile won't be archived in the World Identity Bank, and can't be mined. It's ... a real shame. People will be arguing about him for centuries, millennia. He wasn't..."

With her facial inflection, Lilly asked him to continue ... almost begged him. He had an annoying habit of starting a sentence and then just quitting on it. "He wasn't...?" she repeated.

"I was just thinking that he wasn't ... you know ... that nice a person," said Michael, mostly out of regret, certainly without malice. "I mean ... he was so..."

Lilly looked away this time. She knew from painful personal experience how difficult Victor could be. There had been times when she'd wanted to pull back an elastic band and flick the hell out of his most sensitive body parts, times when she'd wanted to have nothing more to do with him, ever, in much the same way that he had excommunicated the whole world. "That's the trouble with the man on the mountain," she sighed.

"What?" asked Michael.

"My dad used to say that to me all the time," she said. "He had this booming voice ... God I used to love that voice when I was a kid ... and he'd get this really stern look on his mug, and then he would say: 'That's the trouble with a man sitting on the mountain; everybody looks small to him, and he looks small to everybody.'"

Michael chewed on that for a bit. He wondered if Victor Helliwell ever "saw himself as others saw him." Not that it matters any more, he thought. The poor bastard never got to know what Human Three Consciousness actually feels like. He ... said he didn't give a damn about that, but ... "I don't think that applies to Victor," he said.

"Want me to get the LieDeck?" asked Lilly.

"No," said Michael. Opinions didn't matter much, and even if they passed muster on a LieDeck, you were left with only a Pyrrhic satisfaction of knowing that the opinion, however wild or eccentric, was sincerely held. He wasn't interested in whether he really believed what he'd said about Victor. What mattered now was that the man was dying. This was his moment, his very last moment ... well, the last one he participates in, he said to himself. His legacy will reverberate for...

Michael had been a significant player in only one other death, and that debilitating and defining moment washed over his mind, again. He was only seventeen, and it was the day of his marriage. The guests were milling about the estate in sunny weather, trying to ignore the hubbub at the front gate, when his father had been brutally gunned down by Christian fundamentalists, based on their mad claim that he was somehow to blame for the death of God—this, because he produced and sold the LieDeck. "Assassin of Jesus," Michael remembered them shouting from the road near the front of the manor. He could still hear the bizarre chant that covered the sound of the shots: "Enemy of God, you will fail, Randall Whiteside

belongs in jail.” He remembered peering out from behind a thick shrub, ten yards away, at the backs of a solid blue line of police who were holding the crazed crowd of true believers at bay. And he remembered his father standing very close to the commotion, frowning, and no doubt wishing he could give his accusers the finger ... the “digitus impudicus,” he used to call it ... without the TV cameras catching him in the act. He remembered a Patriot agent walking down the line, holding a LieDeck over each policeman's shoulder, pointing it at one protester at a time. That LieDeck had been hot-wired to a battery-powered blow horn, turned up full blast. And that was a sight to behold, and to hear...

"Enemy of God"

"BEEP"

"You will fail"

"BEEP"

"Randall Whiteside belongs in jail"

"BEEP"

Those fuckers didn't even believe their own bullshit, he had been forced to realize ... and the amplified beeping just made them bellow all the more. Michael remembered the astonishment he'd felt as these zealous “Christian soldiers” ranted on, ignoring the loud, incontrovertible proof of their own duplicity. He remembered how he'd laughed at them until tears came—and he remembered seeing his father double over, slump to the ground.

Christ, he thought, Human Twos are so disconnected from reality! He had to remind himself that they did it, those God-addled screamers with their towering fear ... and their dumb anger ... and their guns. But when Mom went into shock, it was me that had to say “okay” to the morphine for Dad, came the aching memory. That was a decision he had regretted ever since. That was the moment his father had lost consciousness ... forever, as it turned out. And now it seems that maybe all those rabid Christians ... or some of them ... were actually WDA!

"I'm glad that Victor..." He swallowed hard, trying to erase the mental image of his mortally wounded father breathing from his mouth, and twitching periodically, unable to clear the gurgle in his lungs, unable to talk, unable to banish the terror in his eyes. “I'm ... glad Victor rejected the morphine,” he finally said.

"Yeah,” said Lilly, knowing now the dark waters where Michael's mind had been swimming—he'd told her the story of his father's death down in Freeport. “I admire that about him, I suppose. I hope he's ... you know ... able to hear us ... and speak ... when we go in there.”

They drifted off into separate wonderings and worryings for the next several minutes. At long last, Dr. Valcourt emerged from the open door, looking exhausted, beaten. “He's awake,” he said as Michael and Lilly stood up. “But you'd better hurry. I'll—uh—keep the rest out, if you think it's best.” Michael nodded agreement. He took Lilly's hand, and didn't let go as Becky came out of the mini-hospital, red-eyed.

Victor's bed was surrounded by life-support technology; he was joined to machines by tubes and wires. A monitor was beeping out the last frail convulsions of his failing heart, counting down the seconds to the telltale monotone that would match the flat line on the EEG's digital display. He was now lying on his side facing the door, and he was breathing through his mouth, gulping at the air. His eyes were open wide, and they were blinking, repeatedly.

Lilly walked over, reached through the protective chrome bars and took his cold, white hand in hers. Everybody should have a hand to hold at the end, she thought. "Hi," she began. "There's ... a question that the monks ... that we want to ask you," she said, bearing in mind the doctor's warning that time was short. Victor nodded slightly, and Lilly glanced briefly at Michael, hoping that he would forgive her haste to get business out of the way ... and hoping he'd pick up from there, carry the ball the last few inches.

Michael resented the unspoken invitation ... but then ... why shouldn't it be me? he asked himself. Somebody has to speak for the world. "Do you have any ... any awareness of being ... of being the—uh—the actual savior, the Messiah, the reincarnation of ... you know ... Jesus?" he asked. He wanted to launch into an apoplectic apologia for the truly dumb-assed question, but he knew that would keep for later ... if there was a "later."

Victor started breathing quickly, seeming to rev up what little was left of his strength. "Of course ... not," he whispered hoarsely.

The two-second pause between the words "course" and "not" sent a bolt of adrenalin through the two budding Human Threes who stood quietly by the side of the bed. Lilly felt Victor's hand squeeze, and she returned the fragile signal. It seemed that he wasn't finished, that he wanted to say more, but couldn't.

"Use your..." he began, but his mouth just wouldn't oblige his will. He winced as a mild cough sent intense pain careening through his entire body. "Use..." he tried again. Michael and Lilly leaned in to hear what seemed to be his very final words. "Use your ... fuckin' ... head," he gasped with his last three shallow breaths. His eyes closed gently, and a blob of pink saliva oozed from the corner of his mouth, settling on the white sheet.

Lilly looked abruptly at Michael, and pointed at her ear with her free hand. "When people die, they can hear for several seconds after they stop breathing," the doctor had told them earlier, when it was clear the end was near.

"Say ... hello to my dad for me," said Michael spontaneously, wishing he'd made a plan for this most disturbing sliver of time.

"And say hi ... to Jesus," added Lilly, with absolutely no understanding of how those words had escaped her mouth, or why. She let go of the lifeless hand, wrapped her hands around Michael's arm and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Bye, old friend," said Michael.

With that, they just stood there, looking down at the remains of a man whose life had transformed a world he'd hidden from.

"He was a son-of-a-bitch to the end," said Lilly, as a tear slipped down the side of her nose.

Michael found himself hoping that Victor's hearing had gone the way of his spirit when Lilly offered that blunt appraisal, and he almost expected to see the famous hermit break into a big, fat grin. "Yeah," Michael said in his best comforting voice, "but ... he was our son-of-a-bitch."

Chapter 84

KEYS TO HEAVEN

Saturday, May 14, 2033—3:50 p.m.

Victor's body was put into two plastic garbage bags, one over the feet end and one over the head, fastened together at the middle with four turns of white adhesive tape from the medical stocks. Then, after foodstuffs were rearranged to make room, he was propped up in a sitting position at the back of the walk-in freezer. Lilly and Randy did the dirty work, tenderly overseen by the smiling monks. Lilly knew that they considered Victor to be the Son of God, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. She couldn't imagine why they were so happy, and then she remembered the mythology. They probably figure that about three days from now, Victor will pop out of those garbage bags, fit as a fiddle, ready to thrill and amaze the masses with new and better miracles, she said to herself. She made sure Victor's head wouldn't flop over. Randy made a quick exit from the freezer, and almost bowled over Gil Henderson, whose journalistic instincts had compelled him to peek in.

When Lilly was finished, she found most of the others assembled in the largest area, the kitchen-dining room. Doreen, Randy's grandmother, had been kept in the dark about Victor's death and given a mild tranquillizer pill. Now, she was in one of the bedrooms, being "interviewed" by Venice with the old analog camcorder that Michael had brought into the shelter—the interview would be a contribution to Venice's life profile, a project she planned to work at throughout her life, until her own death.

Julia was in another bedroom singing songs with the Roy children. Good ... we can talk, thought Lilly.

Sébastien Roy was at the table with Michael, Becky, Lucky, Gil Henderson and Noel, and sitting on the floor, all in a row, were the six mute monks, still smiling senselessly. The group at the table was discussing sleeping arrangements and shifts, and Lilly felt that whatever they decided was fine with her. She asked Lucky where Doctor Valcourt was.

"In the bathroom," said Lucky.

Lilly turned in that direction, and watched him come out as Randy went in to use it next. He's just a boy, really. He probably feels like he wants to throw up. When Randy re-joined the table, the talk turned away from the sleeping schedule.

"Thanks," said Michael to Lilly and to his son. He really did not want the job of moving Victor's body, and he felt grateful that it was two people that he cared about who had relieved him of the responsibility. "We'll—uh—have a little ceremony for him later, but for now we've really got to take stock." He looked at Lilly for support, even though he felt certain there could be none forthcoming.

Lilly had chatted earlier with Gil Henderson, and she'd learned that he had left a note for his secretary in New York, saying where he was going. From the way he described his friendship with Fiona Bledsoe, it seemed unlikely that Fiona was a mole. Still, the WDA had its ways, and who would have guessed that Lars was a mole?

The bottom line was that that WDA probably knew that Gil Henderson was here, and that was one more magnet, one more reason for the world body to direct the full force of its venom on the lodge. Lilly didn't want the job that Michael was silently inviting her to accept, but she took over anyway. Somebody had to sum things up, and she figured she was likely best suited to the role, now that Annette and Lars were gone.

"With the outside electric power being shut off," she began, "we have to assume that the WDA is closing in on us, so ... escaping out the road is not an option, nor is escaping through the bush or across the lake. I'd say there's a good chance that they catch Lars and Annette with the evidence, and—" She choked on the continuation of that thought. She wasn't sure how much she cared about Annette, but she cared a lot about Lars—he had, after all, saved her life when he had been ordered to take it away. Maybe he intends to get caught, to sacrifice himself to save us! "But even if that happens," she carried on, "I can't

imagine them stopping at that point. Assuming the WDA is corrupt, and that the criminal element within the WDA is aware of where we are, who's here, what we know, then—"

Again, she felt herself slam into the wall full force. They'll get it out of Lars if he's alive, she realized. That's why he took the gun, to kill himself if he gets caught! Oh God! "Then ... then they'll—uh—nuke the lodge," she said with as little emotion as she could manage. "Now this is only a fallout shelter," she heard herself saying. "So ... unless their aim screws up big-time ... well, I'm ... afraid we're not going to make it. Which brings us to the only realistic option I can see..." Lilly didn't want to say the obvious next few words, but ... well, Michael had reached the same conclusion, independently, as things turned out. "We have to surrender," she said despondently. "There's ... no other way!"

There followed a heated debate as to Lilly Petrosian's motive and intent, her loyalties. Doctor Valcourt just wanted to get the hell out of the shelter. Noel started to cry. Becky stayed out of it. Lilly asked for the one LieDeck they had in their midst—the prototype device that Victor had made back in twenty fourteen—and she used it to prove for the benefit of all that she was no longer loyal to the WDA, and was actually in transition to become Human Three.

Then it became a discussion—at times a shouting match—over the wisdom of that option. There were some good arguments for and against surrender. The phrase that kept coming back was: "At least we get out of here alive." The recurrent rebuttal was: "Yeah, but for how long?"

"The Lord will provide," thundered the monk who had driven the lead car. He was smiling, as were all the berobed monks, smiling broadly, as if God the Father had just tossed them the keys to heaven. "If I may say a few words," he said as he stood up. And then, inexplicably, he started stamping his right foot on the kitchen floor, repeatedly, and hard! Thump thump thump ... thump ... thump ... thump ... thump thump thump.

Chapter 85

BOOM!

Saturday, May 14, 2033—4:35 p.m.

Time itself seemed to warp both ways for Annette. On the one hand, with every second threatening to bring them into the cross hairs of an assassin's scope, minutes seemed to be endless. On the other hand, as she carved turn after turn along quiet Dora's Creek and nothing violent happened, it seemed all too soon that 4:35 p.m. arrived. She wondered about her calculations, but in the absence of farmland, there was no way to see very far ahead. After the Bristol Line, it would be a mixture of farmland and bush, and while moving through open fields offered advantages in terms of being able to see ahead and assess the setting, it also meant the WDA could more easily spot the boat! The chances of actually making it to the hunting shack were ... piss poor, Annette figured silently. But going back to Wilson Lake was not an option. Waiting for dark where they were now, however ... well, that was an option.

Annette cut the engine and grabbed a branch of a nearby bush that jutted out over the water. She listened attentively to this forested world, but the only alien sound was coming from under the tarpaulin, from Lars. He was snoring! While she had been dancing on an emotional knife-edge, he had tuned out. It had to be the drugs, she knew, and it was just as well. She hoped he hadn't taken one of the remaining morphine pills that he had in his pocket. Surely not!

She let the lazy current ease the boat backwards a few feet, where she stepped out into the shallows and tied the prow to a tree-trunk. Then she sat down on the shore, on a rounded boulder, to think ... and

listen to Lars. She wondered whether he was dreaming, and if so, she wondered what he might be dreaming about.

She tried to calm herself down, but all of the hallucinatory adventures she had known when she was in hospital in '14 came flooding back to her, and not with any pleasure. As she swatted at mosquitoes on her face and neck, she remembered her N.D.E., her near-death experience—the tunnel, the so-cool white light, the sensation of all-encompassing love. She knew she would almost certainly die today, perhaps in minutes, perhaps in an hour or three. Will I go to that wondrous place again? she asked herself. Or does life just “fade-to-black,” like a twentieth-century movie? Or will there turn out to be a God and a heaven after all? She found it strange, to be at peace with the idea of facing her death, especially now that she knew truths about the WDA which...

At that moment, the whole world went pure white before her eyes—not the mystical, rapturous light of an N.D.E. in a place that existed only in her mind, but the acidic, brittle, blinding white of a sulphur fire! After less than two seconds, the light was gone! “What the hell was that!?” she muttered as she stood up and blinked her eyes.

And then the sound wave hit her. It seemed like a moon-sized mallet was crashing into the Earth. It was so loud, it seemed to break up, like the effect of heavy rock ‘n’ roll music on the tinny speaker of a cheap Sniffer. Her hands flew to her ears instinctively, and she dropped to her knees on the sopping shore of Dora's Creek. Her mouth was open ... an unheard scream issued forth. And then the thunder began to abate.

Lars shot upright in the bow of the boat, throwing off the tarpaulin. “What the fuck was that?” he shouted. “Jesus H. Christ, Annette, I—”

“Quick,” she screamed as the deafening clap shrank to a distant rumble. “Get out on shore!” Lars got one foot into the water and stumbled out of the boat. Annette grabbed his good hand. “Hurry up!” she shouted as she pulled him towards a rock outcropping a few feet inshore. She forced him down onto his stomach, and suddenly, where there had been no wind at all, there was a hurricane! Annette fell beside him and held him down with one arm strapped across his shoulders and one leg splayed over his buttocks. “Shock wave,” she shouted over the screaming gale.

The ground beneath rumbled and shook, like a distant earthquake. The air howled for several seconds, and treetops bent like a well-trained army, in unison, and all in the same direction. Some trunks cracked and some branches snapped right off, but most didn't, and suddenly ... it was over ... as abruptly as it had begun.

“You okay?” asked Annette.

“They ... they nuked the fucking lodge!” said Lars. The side of his face was flat on the wet dirt, and the new white cast was covered with mud.

“How come we ... survived?” asked Annette. “We're only ... what? Maybe four or five kilometers from ground zero!?”

“Backpack nuke,” said Lars as he tried to push up with his good hand. “They got nuclear warheads up to any size—a gazillion megatons or whatever.” Lilly was sitting up now, and she helped him into a sitting position. “But that one was just a peanut ... even smaller than the Hiroshima bomb,” he continued. “The delivery agents must have put it near the lodge on a timer-fuse, and then given themselves twenty minutes or half an hour to escape ... lucky for us.”

They stood up and wiped themselves off as best they could, then they walked back to the shore of

Dora's Creek. Fortunately, the light boat hadn't been overturned or ripped from its rope by the gale. Through the trees, to the southeast, they could see a fat white mushroom cloud rising silently into the womb of an innocent blue sky.

Neither of them said another word. They both knew the new reality. All those in the shelter at the lodge were dead! The WDA had used its ultimate power, and for evil. Now, Annette and Lars were truly alone in their enterprise.

Still, there was one helpful aspect to this horror. The WDA would now assume that she and Lars were dead! There would be no perimeter of armed agents surrounding the estate, or on the Bristol Line, or up further, on the Picanoc. Annette and Lars could leave, and purr their way along the creek without fear of apprehension. Their tactical problems were over ... at least until they showed up someplace, alive!

Annette helped Lars get back into the bow of the boat, and covered him with the tarp. Neither of them spoke ... there were no words. Annette wondered if he would drop off to sleep again; she hoped he would. The engine fired, and Annette resumed the trek towards their first destination, now at a higher speed than before. The analog videotapes were still in her jacket pockets, unbroken ... and hopefully unaffected by the NEMP.

That thought worried her as she steered the boat around many bends. "NEMP," she whispered, as her numb mind flew back to a high school physics class. Nuclear electro-magnetic pulse, she remembered. Besides light, heat, radiation and blast, nuclear bombs also emitted an electro-magnetic pulse, or NEMP, and it could knock planes out of the sky and screw up satellites. But can it mangle the configured fragments of steel dust on the surface of an analog tape? She didn't know, but she didn't think so, at least not when they weren't in a direct line of sight from the source ... which we were not, she assured herself.

All those people ... dead! she thought, over and over. Michael ... Lilly ... Becky ... Julia ... Victor ... that Roy fellow and his two kids ... Venice ... Doreen, Michael's mom ... Randy and Lucky ... Dr. Valcourt ... Noel ... the six monks ... all gone! Every nerve ending begged her to weep, but she refused. That will have to wait ... until we're out of danger, she thought, although she was quite unsure if she herself would survive all this.

Lars did fall asleep again ... well, he passed out. Annette could see cars careening in both directions on the Bristol Line as she approached the bridge. After she had passed underneath and was gliding away on the other side of the road, she saw a police car zip by behind her, its bubble flashing and the siren blaring. The commotion of the aftermath, she thought as the aluminum boat carried its refugees past another farm and back into dense bushland.

When they reached the point nearest the hunting shack, Annette tied up the boat, and sat on the shore for a minute. She remembered the time just a week ago when she'd been here with Lars, laughing, crying, running naked through the trees, getting scratched by stray branches, getting stared at by unbelieving squirrels and birds, taking a crazy, frigid dip in the creek, right where she now sat, and finally spreading out their jackets on the bare wooden floor in the shack and having sex. I doubt if we'll live to do that again, she thought as she absently fondled the rope that was hooked to the boat.

* * * *

Time to move! Annette realized. She tied the rope to the base of a birch and then pulled the tarp away from Lars' head and torso. He groaned, and covered his eyes with his left hand. "We made it," she said. "C'mon, get up."

With difficulty, Annette helped Lars through the bush and up to the old shack. So, she saw, the WDA hasn't returned here since they lost track of Lars and Lilly three days ago. Lars was conscious, but only

just. Once inside the shack, he told her how to open the trap door beside the ancient, rusted stove, and then she helped him crawl inside the hole. She blew a few breaths into the inflatable mattress, and hoped the air wouldn't leak out before she could return. This underground hiding place had been unknown to her during the several romps that she and her young Sex-Een friend had had out here, and it was a place where Lars had hid with another woman, with Lilly, as the WDA tried to eliminate them. Some day, we'll build a shrine here, she thought. The shack, including down in the hole, still smelled vaguely of skunk, and Annette recalled the telling of that tale at Michael's small cabin, with Gil Henderson doing the pointed questioning and the acute listening.

"I'll be safe here," Lars said. "If I wake up and you're not here, I'll just keep popping morphine pills until I wake up and you are here."

Annette wasn't sure what to say to her young lover at this precarious moment. "I'll—uh—leave the lead box under the front step," she finally said ... but he was already gone to some other dimension. "Sweet dreams," she whispered, with very little hope that her wish would come true.

She kissed him. Then she crawled out, closed the trap door, and walked outside the old shack. She walked briskly back to the boat, retrieved the lead box, ran back to the shack and tucked it beneath the single front step, covering it with several handfuls of dirt and dead leaves.

Now was a time to consider matters. Annette walked a hundred yards up the faint path to get away from the lead box ... never mind that it's sealed ... and sat on a bald, warm boulder. She dropped her head in her hands and began to cry. For a full minute, she sobbed—she just couldn't help it.

"No way!" she said aloud as she shook off her grief and rid her cheeks of tear-water with the backs of her hands. "Later!"

She took out her Sniffer and asked for the Netnews. It was all about the explosion, of course. Anchormen were covering their precious asses with extreme caution, making no assumptions about how it could be that a backpack nuke had wiped out the Whitesides' lodge, or why. There were no live shots from helicopters yet, but Annette was sure there soon would be.

Then there was an outdoor interview from the estate, near the manor house. A Patriot agent was telling the story of how he and all his comrades had been sent away from the lodge a mere fifty minutes before the blast ... and he told the reporter how he and several of his Patriot colleagues had helped the police draw up a tentative list of names of those who were at the lodge, in the shelter, at the time of detonation.

Oh, those precious names, thought Annette. But they were only words now ... words with no material reality attached ... names of ghosts. Including me and Lars! she noted as her Sniffer droned on.

There was no way around it. The only people she knew that she could trust absolutely and who stood any chance of getting the three analog videotapes digitized and sent out on the Net were the monks of Jesus-E. They were the people that Gil Henderson turned to when he needed a tricky or dangerous job done, and she had learned not to underestimate them. But while they were only on the other side of the Ottawa River, ten or twelve miles away the way the crow flies, the Diefenbunker was perhaps twenty-five or thirty miles by road. She needed wheels, and since she couldn't exactly walk up to the Victor-E clansite and sign out a vehicle, she needed an ally ... someone guaranteed to be totally loyal and utterly fearless. Tirone Lucas, she thought.

She had to make one Netcall now, and just hope to hell that it wasn't intercepted by the WDA. She mopped her forehead with a dirty hand and did it. "Tirone ... don't say a single word and do not let anyone see your Sniffer screen ... and do not tell anyone I'm alive. Get a vehicle and meet me ... park at the western end of the lot out at the end of Bubble Street, between the last bus and the bush. Wait for

me. Net, down, now."

Half an hour later, Annette crept silently through the bush to the edge of the parking lot. Tirone was there, sitting in the driver's seat of a pickup truck, smoking a skinny joint. Annette slipped in between the busses, and when she reached the truck, she just opened the driver's door. "Move over," she ordered. It was not a good time for him to be toking up, as far as she was concerned.

Tirone obeyed. "Where we going?" he asked.

"Jesus-E, over in Carp," said Annette. "Christ, no 'hi; glad you're still alive; thought you were dead'?" she asked as she spun the tires on the loose gravel. She looked over at her passenger when he failed to respond, and saw that the burly man was choking back an army of tears. "Sorry," she said.

"I had to leave home and not tell anybody," he managed to say. "Everybody's over in the mess hall, watchin' the Netnews and bawlin' their fuckin' eyes out over you and Julia and all them other good folks."

"Jeeze, I'm really sorry, Tirone," said Annette as she squealed the pickup onto the pavement and floored the gas pedal. "I'll fill you in on what's happening as soon as we get through Customs at Portage du Fort. I'm ... going to have to—uh—sort of wing it, if they put it together about who I am."

"Fuck!" said Tirone, "I never thought about that, about Customs bein' there. That all started back in..." He couldn't remember the year all that constitutional stuff happened. He decided to shut the fuck up for a bit. That sometimes worked wonders.

It was only a few miles to the two-horse town known regionally simply as "Portage." A huge hydro dam bisected the Ottawa River there, with a road up on top of the dam, and at each end was a Customs office—at the near end, Canada Customs, and at the far end, Québec Customs, both plunked on each other's territory, by agreement. Everyone locally thought it should have been the other way around, but of course it really didn't matter. All Customs officials were WDA anyway, whatever their nationalities.

Annette told Tirone that the only other escapee from the lodge was Lars, and she told him where Lars was hiding. Apart from that, they spoke little for those few miles. Neither of them had any idea if Portage was as far as they'd get.

As the pickup moved towards the funnel that led to the Canada Customs kiosk, the one on Québec soil, Annette reached over and briefly held Tirone's hand. "Keep your cool, my friend," she said as she eased to a stop, "and let me do most of the talking." She rolled down the window.

"Name?" said the bored official from inside the security hut.

"Annette Blais," she said flatly. "Carp. Business. Nothing to declare." The next three questions were always: "Destination? Business or pleasure?" and "Anything to declare?" People often rattled off all four answers without even waiting for the first question, and most Customs agents had no objections to this shortcut. Annette hoped that by moving on to the other three answers, she could deflect attention away from her name, and the bored flunky with the LieDeck might fail to make the connection.

"And you?" he hollered through the open window, across to Tirone.

"Tirone Lucas," he said. "Same answers as her."

"Her!?" snapped Annette ... anything to distract from my identity. "You call me 'her' now?"

"Excuse me," said the Customs officer, "but aren't you the Annette Blais from over at—uh—Victor-E?"

"Yes," she said, glaring at the man. "So? Is that a crime now, being from Victor-E?"

"But ... but they said on the Net that..." He stared at her.

"Yes!?" Annette said irritably, feigning ignorance of the end of his thought.

"They—uh—said you were—uh—out at ... on Wilson Lake, where that bomb went off!" he stammered.

Annette laughed heartily. "Are you kidding?" she said, phrasing it as a question so it couldn't get beeped by the LieDeck.

"I—uh—heard it myself," said the official. "They said—"

"Look," barked Annette, "you got your little fuckin' LieDeck turned on, so you listen up real good for the sound of a single 'beep,' okay? THEY GOT IT FUCKIN' WRONG, OKAY? I mean even without a LieDeck, the average WDA hack could figure out that if I was out there, at that lodge outfit, then I WOULDN'T BE HERE! RIGHT?"

"Yeah ... okay ... right," said the flustered man in the uniform.

"So ... we're going now, okay?" said Annette, with a threat of litigation in her voice, or at least contempt. "OKAY?" she repeated, almost shouting this time.

"Yeah ... sure," said the Customs officer.

Annette drove off sedately ... no sense tipping her hand about how relieved she felt, or how desperately she wanted to put serious distance between herself and the WDA, the Customs agents, the border ... the danger. As usual, the Québec Customs people at the Canadian side of the river just waved them through.

"Jesus H!" said Tirone after they were off the far end of the dam and around the first turn in the road. "I almost had a fuckin' seizure."

"Me too," said Annette. "Now let's haul ass to Carp."

She tramped the pedal to the firewall and shot up to eighty miles an hour—above the speed limit of seventy, but not so far as to get a ticket if she saw the cop in time. Then she explained to Tirone on the way about how she'd taken the three analog videotapes from Michael in the shelter, and how one of them proved that the WDA had murdered Victor Helliwell. And she told him that those in the shelter believed that the WDA might also have killed her late husband, Steve Sutherland "...and probably that USLUC guy, Lester Connolly, and maybe even Randall Whiteside, way back in twenty fourteen." And maybe even JFK way back in the nineteen sixties, she could have added, but didn't. Democracy, it seemed, had always required a bit of criminal activity ... to protect itself, presumably.

She explained that the videotapes were an old analog type, from forty years ago, and that there was no technology at Victor-E to flip analog over to digital. And even if there had been the right tech, it was clear that these messages couldn't go out over the Net in real-time, lest the WDA catch on and kill the transmission. "And if we got caught doing that from Victor-E, the WDA might even nuke the clan!" she added. "But those monks at Jesus-E aren't the goofy idiots they pretend to be," she continued. "They got smarts, and connections, and they got ... well..." She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "As you know—as everyone knows—they've got a bunker that's supposed to be able to withstand a direct hit!" she finished.

"Holy fuck!" was all Tirone could come up with by way of a response. Now even he wished he hadn't toked up.

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They didn't talk much the rest of the way—Annette's idea—a suggestion, really—a very strong suggestion, as Tirone read it. Twenty minutes after sliding through Customs, they rolled into the parking lot of the Diefenbunker. Annette bumped the pickup over the curb and drove right up to the half-moon entranceway that led to the underground bunker. She skidded to a rough stop, turned off the engine, and then they both jumped out and ran to the middle of the steel tube, where a sloped concrete ramp led at right angles down to the massive bombproof door to the actual shelter.

The seven-ton door opened slowly as they reached it, and there stood the same monk who had met Annette the previous time she'd been here. "You are going to die," he said solemnly, with a slight bow.

Tirone had his fist curled and his arm cocked in a quarter of a second, but Annette stopped him. "That's how they say 'hello'," she explained.

"Fuckin' weird, if ya ask me," he grunted, holstering his fist, and not caring if the monk would be privy to his opinion or offended by his language.

"Please ... come in," said the monk. As they stepped beyond the threshold, the monk flipped an unmarked switch, and seconds later, the seven-ton door was re-sealed with an ominous hydraulic clunk. "Your friends are all eating dinner downstairs," he added as he led the way.

"So ... what's that supposed to mean?" Tirone asked Annette. "Is that another..."

"I don't know," she snapped.

"Only the truth," said the monk. "Please ... just follow me and I'll take you to them. We'll dispense with the search and the blindfolds this time, considering the—uh..." His voice just petered out as he walked ahead of them.

Tirone looked at Annette with a question written on his face, but she just shrugged. It wasn't the time for interrogations. These monks always seemed to be two steps ahead of her, and she figured she and Tirone had better just do as they'd been told. They went into an elevator, down, out, and down a hall to an open door.

"Please," said the monk, with an expansive hand gesture. "I'm sure you're hungry, and our wine is..." He let the end of that sentence hang as well.

Annette proceeded to the door, looked in, and promptly fainted! Tirone grabbed her by the armpits to break her fall, and then he looked up. "Holy fuck!" he said.

When Annette came to, she was on her back on the floor in the doorway. Tirone was smiling, and tapping her face gently with a calloused old hand. "It's okay," he whispered as her eyes opened. "You ain't seein' things! They're all alive!"

Annette sat up, turned her head, and almost passed out a second time.

"It's a long story," said Lilly from her chair at the dining table—they had all decided they didn't want to make more of a big deal of this than was really necessary. "C'mon in and eat, and we'll tell you all about it."

"Now!?" squealed Julia. "Now can I get up and hug them?"

"Oh ... sure," said Michael, suppressing a laugh.

"Go ahead," said Becky to her irrepressible sister-in-law.

Annette was standing now, with a stunned expression on her face, and Julia's huge hug almost toppled her once more. In fact, the heat and feel of Julia's pear-shaped body was what finally convinced Annette that it was true, that she wasn't dreaming or drugged or hallucinating ... or in heaven. It took her a few seconds to hug Julia back, but then she broke down. She sobbed uncontrollably, but she smiled the whole time. The loony monks were serving food and wine to the group from the lodge—all of whom were sitting at the table, hooting and clapping ... well, except for Doreen Whiteside, Michael's mother, who managed only a slight grin and an abashed nod at the newcomers. "But how—?" began Annette.

"Tirone!" squealed Julia as she broke away from Annette and almost bowled over the clan-mate she'd known and loved for so many years. The clapping and hooting went on and on, and Julia planted a loud kiss on Tirone's stubbly cheek.

"And ... Victor?" asked Annette—there was always a chance, if miracles were being handed out holus bolus.

"He—uh—passed away just before we left," said Becky. "He's ... at peace now."

"C'mon and eat!" said Julia to Tirone. "It's the most wonderful food," she said to Annette.

"There's a seat over here beside Lucky," said Randy to Annette.

"I'm all done," announced Julia to Tirone, "so you can have my chair."

"I—uh—already ate," said Tirone, "over at—"

"You wanna see it then?" asked Julia excitedly.

"See ... what?" he asked.

"How we got over here, silly," she said, pummeling his shoulder with a fair flurry of pretend punches. "C'mon, I'll show you. It's not very far."

"Go ahead if you want," said Annette, although she still had no idea what it could be that Julia wanted so badly to show off. "I'm still a bit..."

Julia guided Tirone back out of the dining room and into the hallway, where a smiling monk offered to lead the way. He's one of the monks from the lodge, Julia remembered, the one who stamped his foot on the floor. "He's monk number—uh—number ... what's your number again?"

"Who cares?" joked the monk as he led them down the hall to the elevator. "What's in a number? A sixty-two by any other name would smell just as sweet." He laughed at his attempt at Shakespearean humor, but it was lost on his two guests ... and that didn't even matter, he knew. "Just call me—uh..."

"Smiley?" suggested Julia.

"Sure," he said, smiling. "Why not?"

They went down for six or seven seconds, and when the elevator door opened, Tirone blinked in disbelief. There was a huge cavern cut out of the rock. It was perhaps the size of the Pot-house—several stories high, maybe two acres in size, with a wooden platform for a floor, made from thick, heavy planks. The entire enclosure was floodlit, and on the far side of the rough platform was a miniaturized electric ore-train, four cars long, with a small, dirty engine at the front.

Julia led Tirone across the dusty floor towards the train, followed by Smiley, their jokester monk. To the left, Tirone could see a tunnel entrance, maybe twelve feet square, with narrow tracks leading to ... well, to wherever. Beyond the train was a pit, where for years, rock and muck had been dumped from tipped-over cars. And to the right was an industrial-strength conveyor-belt that carried the diggings up into a slanted shaft to ... to wherever.

"So ... like," tried Tirone, "youse all got out on this—uh—"

"We rode out on the train!" exclaimed Julia, clapping her hands together and grinning to the max. "The monks thought Victor was like a Jesus, eh? But o' course he wasn't, but they thought he was, so they spent years and years digging this really long tunnel all the way from here over to underneath the Ottawa River and then over all the way to exactly underneath our lodge on Wilson Lake, so's if the—uh—who were those other people you said?" she asked the monk.

"Romans," said Smiley. "Well, the WDA," he explained, updating the myth. "And we used GPS to locate the—"

Julia's train had precedence, including her train of thought. "So if they tried to crucify Victor like they did the real Jesus a long time ago," she cut back in, "they could save him and get him over to here, but o' course by the time they drilled up through the floor at the shelter over there to save Victor, he was already dead and there was just all of us in there, in the kitchen, so we all got on the train and—"

"But I thought you guys did all that tunneling stuff to find the devil ... and then kill him," said Tirone to the monk. "At least that's what—"

"We—uh—kind of lied about that," said Smiley, with a sinful smirk. "But we never said it out loud, so of course we never got caught."

"So ... like, you drilled up through the floor over there," asked Tirone, "like right into the fallout shelter at the lodge?"

"Smiley stamped his foot on the kitchen floor in—in what's that called again?" Julia asked.

"Morse Code," said Smiley, smiling. "Three long, three short, and three long—for S.O.S., meaning 'You can save our buttocks any time ... and right now would be good,' you know?" He giggled at his own retelling of the story.

Tirone didn't know, and was going to ask, but Julia carried on with her story before he could get a word in edgeways.

"And the monks down in this stage-type place—"

"Staging area," interjected Smiley.

"—and the monks from the stage area drilled up through the floor right in the kitchen in the shelter," Julia continued, "and then they put this ladder up and one of them climbed up and his face was all dusty and dirty and he was smiling a lot and we all got to go down the ladder and they got us all in this little train and—well, all except for..."

"Diefenbunker forty-one," said Smiley, sadly. "He stayed behind with Victor's body, you know ... in case he came back to life, but..." His voice failed him.

"That monk got killed from the bomb," Julia whispered to Tirone.

"It's okay," said the grieving monk as he collected himself. "He's in heaven now, the lucky guy."

"Anyway," said Julia, "we got going on this little train, and the tunnel has lights on the ceiling all along the way, and Venice still had her video camera thing with her, so she took lots of pictures and interviewed the people that were in her car—she was in the front one here, just behind the engine. Me and Mikey and Randy and Lucky and Becky were all squashed in here together—and ... and Venice too—I said that already, eh?"

Julia put her forearms on the edge of the small ore-car and peered in, wondering again how they had all fit in there, and hoping that her baby didn't get squished from being all wedged in there. Tirone put his forearms on the edge beside hers, and silently wondered the same things. Julia pushed off and walked back one car, continuing her tale.

"And my mom was in this one," she explained as she put her hands on the second dirty ore-car. "She screamed and hollered a lot—oh, she was real scared." Then Julia's emotions took a tangent, and then returned, as if that memory was too difficult for her. "But then Doctor Valcourt made her take a pill and she got all spacey, you know? And then we sang 'Happy Birthday' to Randy—he's nineteen now, and ... and guess what!?" Julia squealed as she grabbed Tirone's big hand and held it to her chest.

"Uh—what?" asked Tirone as he tried to keep his hand dormant, and his feelings concealed—he was from another generation, or at least another background.

"They're getting married!" she squeaked as she let go of his rough hand and danced an impromptu pirouette. "Randy and his girlfriend Lucky! So we sang 'Happy Birthday' again, except the second time we changed it to 'Happy Wedding'! Oh, it was so fun! But then..." her face went from giddy to morose in an instant.

Tirone waited, but Julia seemed unable to go on.

"The power went off in the tunnel," said the monk. "It was cut when that big bomb exploded over there. We were already on the Ontario side of the river, the Canadian side, but..."

"And then the whole world started to shake," said Julia, tentatively. "I thought it was an earthquake—we all did. We heard this scary rumbling sound, and it was like all black, and everybody was screaming—oh, it was just awful. But then one monk had a flashlight with batteries in it and he made it shine and shouted at us to shut ... well, he said ... like a bad word, and..." Julia looked shyly at Smiley, and wondered if she was "telling tales out of class," as they called it at Victor-E.

"He shouted that we all had to 'shut the fuck up,' was the way he put it," admitted the monk. "It ... worked," he added, with a shrug.

"So we all, like, shut ... up," continued Julia. "And they got us all off the train one by one and out in front of the train and we made our own little snakey train by holding hands and we had to all walk real slow in the dark except for that one flashlight up at the front that the monk had and boy, I tell you, we sure were happy when we saw the light coming from this big cave here! Oh, we were just like a bunch of little kids! And this one sort of old monk—uh—number—"

"Four," said Smiley.

"Yeah, four," said Julia. "He asked our monk with the flashlight where Jesus was—I mean Victor—well, that's what he meant—and when he heard that Victor was already dead from the cancer even before the bomb and then got blown up by the bomb, the old monk made this cross-type motion with his hand and said some funny words in—uh—"

"Latin," said Smiley.

"And then he smiled real big-like and said that God was working in ... how did that go?" she asked Smiley.

Smiley smiled. "He said: 'God works in strange and wondrous ways.'"

"Yeah, that was it!" said Julia. "So then they all said this little prayer for Victor and for the monk that stayed behind in case Victor came alive again, and then they said we could all have a nice hot shower and get our clothes all washed and dried, and then we had to wear some picky robes till our clothes got all dry, and then we went for a nice big supper with wine but I couldn't drink any because of the baby ... and ... and then you and Annette came here!" she finished with a Goldie Hawn smile and flourish.

Chapter 86

CHAIN LETTER

Sunday, May 15, 2033—11:05 a.m.

Gil Henderson felt ridiculous dressed in a tent, with a hood hanging down over his eyes. He was sweltering under the thing, and he couldn't fathom why a hundred or so crazed monks ... well, not so crazy, as it turns out ... would toil in their vineyards and hard-rock tunnels for their entire adult lives in such mediaeval attire. Good thing there's still room for true eccentrics in this old world, he thought. The awkward get-up and these bizarre believers were his only hope now, but he had convinced himself that in spite of all that had happened, and could still happen, he would likely make it through this alive.

Unbelievable, he repeated in his mind yet again. It had become a word that wouldn't go away, not because a professional journalist couldn't find a dozen alternatives without a thesaurus, but because no other word really said it. The events of the previous day had literally defied belief. If I had penned these events in the form of a novel, he thought, no self-respecting publisher would read past page ten!

Gil crawled into the back of a Jesus-E wine delivery van, and was followed by three actual monks ... or what he presumed were actual monks; he couldn't actually see their faces. Two monks were already on board, occupying the only two actual seats in this relic of the 20th century, one in the driver's seat and one in the passenger seat. As Gil sat down on the metal floor, right behind the driver's seat, with his back against the side of the van, his thoughts returned to last night. The whole bunch of them—well, minus the Roy kids, Tirone Lucas, Noel, Venice, Julia and himself—had crowded around the only Sniffer that was owned by the monks, an early 2027 model that had been kept safely out of sight ever since the day of its purchase—until yesterday evening. It was intended and even labeled "for emergency use only," and had served its intended purpose admirably—so he'd been told—in the time since the Whitesides' lodge on Wilson Lake had been vaporized by a backpack nuke, yesterday, at 4:41 p.m. And I was excluded from the Sniffer-huddle just because I'm not a Human Three or in transition to become a Human Three! he recalled bitterly as he wiggled his position on the van's floor in a losing effort to get comfortable.

The bomb was a mere firecracker even by 20th-century standards, but the blast was still reportedly one-tenth the size of the Hiroshima bomb, he had been told—quite big enough to require the evacuation of the town of Quyon, three miles southwest of ground zero, and anyone else within a circular area twelve miles in diameter, or in the "plume" area, thirty miles downwind—east of Wilson Lake—including the Calloway #6 clan and the entire village of Luskville. For the second time in two decades, the WDA—once as the woefully misnamed World Democratic Alliance, now as the equally misnamed World Democratic Authority—had blown up the Whitesides' lodge. And this time they got it right, Gil

said to himself. Even the manor house, some two miles west of the epicenter, had its windows blown out by the blast effect, or so he'd been told by those who'd had access to that primitive, first-generation Sniffer.

Well, this time they got it almost right, Gil edited his thought. A smirk crawled over his face yet again, the one that always accompanied that word “unbelievable.”

He adjusted his position on the ribbed floor of the delivery van, and lifted his hood for a quickie glance at the monks in the front—the pilot and co-pilot—and at the monk opposite, Diefenbunker ninety-one. This monk was young, and seemed almost Islamic in his willingness to die for his God, even if Victor wasn't the reincarnated Christian savior. When Diefenbunker ninety-one looked up and caught Gil's eye—and his smirk—he got onto his knees, reached over and yanked the reporter's hood back down. Then he ... well, he flattened his hand and slapped the hood right where he figured Gil's cheek ought to be ... and got it exactly right.

Gil wanted to kick the little bastard right in the crotch, but he knew he deserved the slap. It was hard to grasp the importance of keeping up the act, no matter what, as he'd been warned, repeatedly. Unbelievable, he thought again. The fate of the world was taped tightly to the inner thigh of his left leg, under his cassock, in the form of those three old-fashioned analog videotape cassettes. He heard the engine start, and then the van began to move out of the hangar-like entrance to the Diefenbunker.

Everybody thought that the LieDeck Revolution of 2014 would stand as the defining story of the 21st century, and perhaps of all time. Everybody was wrong. This story, the one I'm in the middle of, gets that honor, he said to himself. He made a mental note to remember that thought for the time, hopefully soon, when he would sit down to write his life profile. He unconsciously reached down to feel his thigh, to make sure the cassettes were still there. In response, Diefenbunker ninety-one kicked him in the shin, hard.

"Quit hitting me," whispered Gil. "That really hurt, you son-of-a—"

The real monk kicked his shin again, harder this time, and on the very spot where the first blow was undoubtedly bluing up into a bruise. Gil shut up. He shouldn't have drawn attention to the cassettes, and he shouldn't have said a word, not even in a whisper. He had been awake most of the night, and he hoped that his judgment wasn't impaired by the lack of sleep. Unbelievable, he thought again as they slowed at the front gate of the Jesus-E property.

And then the van stopped! That wasn't supposed to happen. Gil breathed heavily, and his heart palpitated wildly. He wanted desperately to look up to see what was happening. He wanted to ask. He kept his head down and his mouth closed.

"Out of the vehicle," came an authoritative voice from outside.

Gil didn't move. He figured the WDA agent for an American, likely from the Deep South. He had pronounced it: “vee-hicle.” Canadians, and most Americans, said “vee-icle,” with no telltale “h” sound and not even much respect for the “i” ... “veekull.” He heard the driver's window scroll down as the agent repeated the order.

"You have no right under world law," said the driver—Diefenbunker fourteen, one of the older monks, who had been with Jesus-E since it was founded in 2017.

"These are extraordinary times," yelped a different voice from outside. This agent's anger did not sound professional, like the first voice. It was shrill ... almost panicky. Gil began to question the strategies and tactics that had been adopted for this mission.

"Without law there is no order," said the driver, far more emphatically than seemed necessary. "And without order, there is chaos and death." He was quoting the allegedly immortal words of the putative "king of peace," General George Brampton himself, the Honorary Chairman and founder of the WDA, exactly as his words appeared in the WDA Charter. The driver was challenging these WDA agents to obey their own damned laws or face the wrath of the only true power on the planet.

There was a sudden and disturbing silence as the driver turned off the engine, and Gil wondered why he did that. Because ... because ... they always do that to conserve fuel, he realized. Waste-not Human Threes, he recalled. "No changes of your behavior patterns from what you would do if the circumstances were benign," Lilly had warned the Jesus-Eers. Smart move, thought Gil.

After half a minute, presumably occupied by a consultation among the WDA agents, the second outside voice tried again. "Where are you going?" it demanded.

"You have no right."

"How many in the back?"

"You have no right under world law."

Another few seconds passed, and Gil could feel his body fairly spitting sweat. His bladder, relieved just before departure, seemed about to release an aftershock, and even his intestinal tract felt suddenly slippery and loose, unwilling and unable to wait. He had always thought the phrase "to almost shit yourself" was just an idle expression. Now he knew it was a physiological reaction to real terror. Unbelievable, came the thought again. I've got to remember that for my life profile.

"Have you ... committed a crime since your last LV session?" asked the first WDA voice.

"No one in this van is due for an LV session," said Diefenbunker fourteen. The real monks in the van had all been LieDeck-verified within the last two weeks—Lilly made sure that that was the case—so they could legally refuse even this question until the one-month anniversary of their last LV session. These two agents had active LieDecks handy, and operating, and the monk's statement, amounting to a refusal, had not caused a beep. "You have no right under world law to ask more," he reiterated, "unless you have a solid basis for suspecting that—"

"The world is now under martial law, in case you haven't heard," said the second voice outside, the shrill one.

"The world has been under martial law for nineteen fuckin' years," shouted the driver ... with astonishing ferocity. He hadn't sworn since he was a teenager, but there was no ring-rust in this voice. He was regressing, on purpose, all the way to Human Two ... and hopefully to good effect. "Now you either ARREST us for something," he continued on in the same harsh tone, "or you fuckin' LET ... US ... GO!"

Gil gulped air deeply, twice. He had to. He'd had a mild form of cardiac arrhythmia for twenty years, and every time his heart lurched like that, it felt like death. The monk opposite lifted his right boot up and shot his leg out, scraping his heel up Gil's shin. Gil grimaced at the pain, but he made no sound, and he didn't move. On the plus side, the shock of this blow had stopped the heart palpitations. Unbelievable, he said to himself.

"Go ahead," said the first voice from the outside—the more professional one.

Diefenbunker fourteen buzzed up his window, started the engine of the old delivery van, and slowly pulled away.

It was only a couple of miles to the small town of Carp, and there they got onto the eight-lane Queensway, which cut a swath to and through Ottawa. As the van accelerated, Gil tried to set his mind to reviewing what he had to do when he got to the Canadian Press Building in downtown Ottawa, just like Lilly had instructed him to do, but in truth he was getting worried as to whether he'd get there at all, and focused on what would happen if this adventure didn't end well! No doubt we're being followed now, he said to himself, without daring to look up or ask.

Ten or twelve minutes later—Gil dared not even look at his watch—the van exited the Queensway, went through three traffic lights, turned, and came to a stop. Gil had been told by Annette that there was one stop to be made along the way. She was the non-monk mastermind of this dangerous mission, but Gil had been denied information about what this stop entailed, why it was needed, and whether it could compromise his personal part of the mission, which seemed to him the only bit that mattered. He heard the back doors of the van open, and he heard what he thought was the sound of two monks at the back getting out. Then the doors closed, and the van began moving again. Soon, judging by the change of speed, they were back on the Queensway. Whatever the stop had been about, it hadn't ended in disaster.

A quarter of an hour later, the van left the arterial route again to begin its journey through the traffic of Ottawa. Finally, thought Gil. He wanted to get up on his knees and peek out of the window to see if they were being followed, but his shin still hurt, and he dared not even ask. Surely Lilly made contingency plans for that, he assured himself ... silently. Annette and Lilly had differed more than once, and sometimes loudly, on what the best tactics might be—or so he'd heard.

They were being followed, at an indiscreet distance, by a blue car that had latched onto their tailpipe the moment they pulled out of the Jesus-E gate. The driver of the van had kept his vehicle under the speed limit all the way on the Queensway, and had never moved from the slow lane. After he turned onto the Metcalfe exit and stopped at the first red light, Diefenbunker fourteen pulled Jesus-E's only Sniffer out from under his robe and handed it to the monk in the passenger seat.

The co-pilot monk—whose name/number Gil had forgotten—then ordered up a pre-arranged Netsite and began singing “Jungle Bells,” a satiric tune sung to the melody of “Jingle Bells” by a Human Three comic. Gil was all for prudence and codes and all that, but ... “Jungle Bells”? Once again he felt resentful that he had not been included in the strategy sessions back at the Diefenbunker, even though he knew full well it was for his own protection, and that of the overall mission. “They can't ever get out of you what you don't know,” Lilly had impressed upon him.

As the van worked its way through the downtown traffic, Gil listened hard. Cities were full of strange noises, but he thought he could hear bells ... cowbells ... hundreds of them. They were stopped at a light, and as they began to move again the sound of bells seemed to become louder. The van slowed to a crawl, and stopped. It is cowbells, or old-fashioned school-bells, he said to himself, and they're all around us!

Diefenbunker ninety-one got to his knees and spoke aloud—whispering had no real chance of getting through the infernal clanging. “Keep your head down, hold on tight to the back of my cincture, and do not speak until I lift your hood—it's your game from that point on.” Gil grabbed the heavy rope belt of his monk-guide, lowered his head as far as he could, got onto his knees, and waited.

The back doors of the van opened, and Gil could feel people pouring in. By the brush of rough cloth on his free hand, he knew they were monks too—well, at least they were dressed as monks. They were praying in Latin, and ringing their confounded bells as loud as physics allowed. Then a bell-handle was shoved into his free hand and Diefenbunker ninety-one spoke directly into his right ear. “Ring this as loud as you can ... and mumble prayers if you know any ... and keep your hood right over your face.”

The guide monk began to move forward on his knees, and Gil followed, keeping his head hung, holding the cincture like a lifeline ... which it is, he thought ... and clanging his bell like a town crier on amphetamines. Hands and arms helped him out of the back door of the van, and Gil realized that he should have been mumbling prayers. "Semper ubi sub ubi," he started repeating over and over. It was a Latin phrase he had learned in school, back in the late 20th century ... "always where under where" ... college wit. A nearby monk must have been listening, and must have understood, because an elbow landed solidly against Gil's ribs. He kept baby-stepping through the madding crowd, and he kept on clanging his bell, but he switched to the Lord's Prayer, in English, which he remembered verbatim from his childhood.

He followed his guide up three stairs, through a door, and was grateful when the door closed and the clanging was muted by half ... except for his bell, which seemed to have developed a mind of its own. An anonymous hand stopped that, and took away his bell.

"And forgive us our sins as we forg—" he tried to carry on. Another elbow to the ribs straightened out his attitude on that score.

"We have an important message from the late Gil Henderson of the New York Times," said Diefenbunker ninety-one ... to someone.

Gil could only see a small patch of marble floor, and it rankled him and amused him to be referred to as "the late Gil Henderson." One thing about Henderson; left to his own devices, he was never late. Never.

"We have to deliver it personally to Mr. Yves Lacombe, president of the Canadian Press," Diefenbunker ninety-one continued. "I trust he's in?" he added, even though Lilly had made sure of that ahead of time.

Gil knew Yves Lacombe pretty well—a cyberbuddy for many years—and he tried to imagine how the French Canadian news icon would react to seeing him alive.

A new voice started talking into a Sniffer. "Two of these—uh—monks came inside," it said. "They say..."

The person on the other end of the Netlink listened to the explanation, and ordered that the two monks be brought up to the president's office. Gil kept his head down, and the oversized hood completely hid his face. He just followed the cincture. They shuffled into an elevator, rode up, and shuffled off, presumably into the president's office. And lead us not into temptation, he felt like saying, as a joke, but he had some bad memories of elbows to his ribs, and of boots scraping up his shin, so he remained silent.

"It's very private," said the guide-monk as the door closed. "We have to be in a place where there's no MIU or Sniffer."

Gil wiggled forward when the belt he was holding moved. He assumed that Yves had been told by a hand signal not to speak. He stopped when the belt stopped, and another door closed. Then he heard a water tap get turned on, full force, and then ... a shower?!

"Do not say a word or make any sound whatsoever when you are given the message," ordered Diefenbunker ninety-one.

"Okay," said Yves. "I knew Gil Henderson well," he added, "so I'll know if it's really from him."

"Just do not speak or make any sound whatsoever!" repeated the guide in a forceful whisper.

"Okay, okay," said the president of Canadian Press defensively. "So ... let's have it."

Gil looked up when he felt his hood get yanked up and off his head. For a reason he didn't understand

himself, he winked at his old cyberbuddy.

Yves Lacombe let out an involuntary gasp ... then his face blanched. His eyes teared up instantly as he stepped forward to embrace the man who'd been declared vaporized ... last night ... and again this morning ... if the front page of the New York Times was to be believed ... or any other news report in the world. Yves started sobbing, and Gil fought against his own emotions.

The young monk put a hand into the vice and parted the two men. He was smiling at the impossible reunion, but he was anxious to get on with the plan. He pulled a piece of paper from under his cassock and gave it to Yves Lacombe. It read:

DO NOT SPEAK! CLEAR THE ENTIRE SECOND FLOOR OF THE BUILDING, AND GET US UNSEEN INTO THE TECHROOM NOW!

Yves did as ordered.

* * * *

The three of them—Yves Lacombe, Gil Henderson (again hidden under his hood), and Diefenbunker ninety-one—stood just outside the techroom on the second floor of the Canadian Press Building. The real monk gave a second note to Yves. The president of CP read it, raised his eyebrows, and again, he did as ordered.

He went in the room alone and began manually unplugging every single machine—even the coffeemaker. The room was crammed with the technology of 21st-century communications. In fact, this room and these devices were the hub of an international news network, the whole of which would now appear to have crashed. This action would undoubtedly cost CP millions in legal settlements when furious advertisers and customers found out that the cause of the disruption was sabotage—or at least deliberate. But the second note had also said that Michael Whiteside would personally accept all legal and financial consequences! Yves almost fainted again when he read that, because Michael Whiteside had also been listed on the Netnews as being among the atomized. He must have survived too!

Yves carried on around the room, yanking out plugs by the handful, assuming, or at least hoping, that whatever the not-so-late Gil Henderson had in mind would be worth all this electronic self-immolation. The part he knew about was astonishing enough—that Gil Henderson, known to have been at the Whitesides' Wilson Lake lodge at the time of the nuclear “event,” was walking the face of the Earth, very much alive ... albeit dressed like a monk and unwilling to talk, thought Yves as he disconnected the last plug. And if he and Michael Whiteside survived, there may have been others!

As Yves reviewed his terrible handiwork, he found himself also assuming—not just hoping, but taking for granted—that all those other people at the lodge were similarly undead. He knew logically that there was no way that could be. The bunker at the lodge was a fallout shelter, not a bomb shelter, not intended or able to protect people from the blast effects of a direct hit by even the tiniest backpack nuclear weapon. The spot where the Whitesides' lodge stood had been photographed from the air and shown repeatedly on the Netnews for the past three hours. It wasn't a crater as such, but appeared as a new, semi-circular bay on the eastern end of a now-poisoned Wilson Lake, with flattened trees emanating fan-like for almost half a mile—east, north and south.

That's what this is about! Yves realized as he double-checked all the sockets with a clockwise tour of the techroom. Not just how they escaped, but why they were targeted by the WDA in the first place. The commentary on the Net hadn't presented any rationale, but given the WDA's control since the Revolution, if it was a nuclear weapon, it had to have been done by the WDA ... or the nuke was stolen from them, he considered.

Yves was done. The room was electrically inert ... for the first time since a decade before the Revolution, he calculated. "Okay, let's do it," he said as he opened the door ... whatever "it" is, he thought.

Gil Henderson put a finger to his mouth as he stepped into the room and flipped the heavy hood off his head. He was annoyed that Yves would take any risk, even if there was no chance of being caught. He cupped his hands into a fleshy tunnel on Yves' ear, and placed his mouth on the thumb end. "After I get my robe on top of the screen and lens of the editing suite, plug it in—only it," he explained. "I have to flip some analog videotapes over to digital, then compress the data."

Gil "disrobed," and draped the garment over the screen of the editing unit. He felt relieved to be rid of the coarse vestments that Jesus-Eers felt kept them humble. Jerks, he thought, forgetting momentarily that they had saved his life, along with many others, and that without them, the world would never know the staggering truths that were taped to his thigh. He undid his belt, dropped his pants, and quickly ripped off the medical tape that held the treasure in place. His leg hairs were pulled out by the hundreds, but the pain dissipated almost as fast as it arrived. After getting his pants back on, he separated the videocassettes from the medical tape, and nodded to Yves.

Yves booted up the editing suite, and Gil put the first tape into the slot and checked that a blank disk was in the digital copy-slot. Then, after a deep breath, he punched the "record" button on the right and "fast-play" on the left.

Michael had given him the approximate figures out at the Diefenbunker. The first cassette—the interview Gil had done himself with Lilly, Lars and Michael at the no-tech cabin and finished up at the lodge—was almost three hours long, and would take thirty minutes or so to fast-copy to digital. The second tape, Venice's interview with Victor Helliwell a few weeks ago, was twenty-eight minutes long, and would take five minutes to flip. The last tape—"of Michael Whiteside redefining the world," Gil had been told earlier by Annette—was sixteen minutes long; three minutes to fast-copy to digital.

The next thirty-eight minutes would be critical, and Gil Henderson almost started praying again—that the WDA had no way to clue in to what was happening, and thus wouldn't be able to react in time. The three men had to remain silent until the next step, and while that was *de rigueur* for the smiling monk and easy for Gil, Yves Lacombe looked like he'd burst. He must be going crazy wanting to ask me questions, Gil thought as all the metallic squiggles of the analog tape turned into trillions of ones and zeros inside the console.

Hurry the fuck up, Yves thought, in spite of himself. He didn't say this out loud for a whole bunch of reasons, one of which was that he knew there were two things that never listened to the spoken word; high technology and golf balls.

Thirty-nine minutes later, Gil had the finished digital CD in his hand ... the future of a planet, he realized. He put the disk into another slot, and began waiting the one minute it would take to make a second copy-disk—this one in super-compressed-data form.

He was almost finished his assignment. If I can just get this done, I'm going to retire, Gil found himself thinking as the disks whirled. For one thing, the bottom will fall out of the market for investigative journalists, he re-realized, with a chuckle. But my life profile, culminating in this last superb caper, will be worth a fortune. I'm going to golf until I die.

He signaled to Yves to unplug the whole editing unit once both disks were out of the machine. With the editing unit again disabled, Gil pulled his robe off the top of the thing and went over to an ordinary MIU. He laid the robe over that screen, which is to say over its camera-eye—the point of the cover-up—and had Yves plug the MIU in. Gil was now ready for the final act. He inserted the super-compressed-data

CD and checked his watch. According to the game plan agreed upon out at the Diefenbunker, he couldn't hit "send" for another two minutes, so he used the occasion to give Yves a gift—the source disk. "It's yours to keep when I'm done here," he whispered into the ear of his old friend. "All I ask is that you send it to my boss at the Times first, okay?"

Yves nodded ... by which he meant "second" ... or "first if you don't count our own Canadian Press network."

* * * *

Michael Whiteside sat in the main techroom of the Whiteside Technologies complex. He was one of the "monks" who'd been dropped off from the back of the old delivery van as it made its way from Carp to the Canadian capital.

It had been arranged ahead of time that Michael's father's old colleague and friend, Laurent Gauthier, would come to the office for a "secret meeting." Gauthier was given no explanation, but he'd been told that the late Randall Whiteside would want him to go. He had been met at his own front door an hour earlier by a silent monk with a hand-written letter from Becky Donovan-Whiteside, and that had done the trick. Laurent Gauthier had received a Christmas card from Becky every year since the Revolution, by snail mail, and he knew her cursive handwriting well because he admired it. Of course Becky had been listed among the dead at the Whitesides' lodge, so Laurent had been shocked to hear from her. But that wasn't his greatest surprise of the day. He'd almost fainted when he was met by a different, taller monk at Whiteside Technologies. That monk had turned out to be a living, breathing Michael Whiteside!

Gauthier was in his late seventies, and in excellent health. The last time he'd been in this building was in mid-2014, the very day Randall Whiteside was assassinated. That was the day Gauthier quit, vowing never to return. He had been one of the first people, aside from Randall Whiteside and a few others out at the lodge, to see the black prototype LieDeck that Victor had created in the basement of his farmhouse. That was back in April of 2014, two weeks or so before the incineration of Bucharest and Leningrad—"the last holocaust," as it had been known ... at least until yesterday. He had been the one to test the prototype LieDeck, to convert it into a marketable product, and to oversee the sales blitz that had literally transformed the world. Now ... here he was, nineteen years later, looking at the same black prototype instrument in the hands of the son of his former boss and mentor.

There wasn't much Gauthier didn't know about high technology back in his glory days, and he had kept current for the sheer love of it, even in his retirement. His loyalty to the Whiteside family was undiminished by the years, so when Michael asked him to do something illegal, and told him it was the only way to achieve freedom and justice, he had agreed—without even asking for the application of that ancient LieDeck to Michael's words. Breaking the law was utterly against Laurent Gauthier's nature, but he knew the ring of truth as well as any electronic device. If Michael said this was for freedom and justice, then that was the reality.

Now, he had spent the past hour writing a computer program which, if it were used and traced back to him, could destroy his good reputation and land him in jail for the rest of his life. Gauthier wasn't told the reason behind the risky assignment, partly because passing notes was a terribly inefficient means of communication, and partly to protect him in the event that they were caught and prosecuted. "Speed," one of Michael's notes had specified, "is of the essence."

"Done!" he mouthed silently at exactly 12:52 p.m. He was referring to the program he'd been writing—and he was eight minutes ahead of deadline!

Only one MIU had been left plugged in at the Whiteside Technologies nerve center, and just as it was over at the Canadian Press building, this MIU had a monk's cassock draped over the screen—over the

lens that was used to capture the image of the user. At precisely 1:00 p.m., the call came through, the one they were waiting for.

"We got a squashy here," came the voice of Yves Lacombe, president of Canadian Press. "Squashy" was the colloquial term for a super-compressed-data transmission. At the max, digitized data could be reduced to less than one two-hundredth of its real-time length. This squashy, representing the digitized sound and images from the two hundred and twenty-four minutes of analog videotapes, would be downloaded accurately in just over a minute.

"Send," said Gauthier aloud, as pre-arranged by a note from Michael.

Sixty-three seconds later, the squashy was on board an MIU at the headquarters of Whiteside Technologies. With a well-practiced hand, Gauthier embraced the squashy in the new—and totally illegal—program that he had created. A few seconds after that, he nodded to Michael, who personally pushed the "send" button. Every new MIU that now received the squashy—and this was the illegal part—was tricked by Gauthier's program into relaying the message on to five more MIUs automatically, the previous five MIUs which the receiving unit had been in contact with.

The first squashy Michael sent was transmitted simultaneously to one thousand MIUs in the first minute or so, and relayed to 5,000 more in the next minute, and these 5,000 sent it on to 25,000 more in the third minute. There would be 125,000 receptions in the fourth minute, more than half a million in the fifth minute, several million in the sixth minute, and so on. And during that second minute, after the first missive had been fully launched, Michael sent the first-generation squashy to yet another thousand MIUs at random, which started another hypermodern speed-of-light electronic chain letter going. By their estimation, by 1:19 p.m., the bombshell squashy would have been archived by virtually every MIU in the world!

However, since the distribution was quite random, the squashy would end up on the WDA's MIUs too! Success depended on how long it took for the WDA to get a grip on what was happening.

At 1:12 p.m., the SuperNet crashed internationally, globally. There wasn't much in the way of communications technology that couldn't be found at Whiteside Tech, so Laurent Gauthier had an old-fashioned ham radio ready for exactly this eventuality. He plugged it in and listened to words being spoken all over Upper America and the world. This type of calamity had never happened before, ever, and as far as he knew, it couldn't happen at all unless the WDA purposely pulled the plug.

"How'd we do?" asked Michael.

Gauthier jotted down a few calculations on paper—something he hadn't done much since primary school. He underlined the last number he'd written down: "78 million!"

"We can talk now, with the Net down," said Michael. "Just seventy-eight million?"

Gauthier smiled. "I'd say that's enough, and that's just from the first transmission of one thousand. The second transmission would reach a fifth of that—about another fifteen million—and so on. I'd figure—mmm—at least a hundred million total, after deducting duplications. We got the job done."

The two men shook hands. Gauthier wanted to know what they had just done, but Michael put him off momentarily. He used a ham radio to contact Gil Henderson at the Canadian Press building. "It's me, Michael," he said. "Over," he remembered to say just before pressing the button on the microphone.

Gil had sent the squashy from the CP building to a Netsite that he had memorized when he was still at the Diefenbunker, and he had no idea that the person receiving the squashy would be Michael Whiteside. In

an instant, it all fell into place in his mind. The two monks we dropped off ... one of them was Michael ... it must have been Whiteside Technologies we stopped at ... they needed time to set up a program to maximize the speed and the reach of the distribution ... of course! He had already plugged in the ham radio at the CP Building, as he had been instructed to do by Annette if the Net were to crash. He realized now that the planning for all this was better than he'd thought it was. "So, did we make it?" he asked. "Over."

"We done good," said Michael. "We got it out to maybe a hundred million MIUs—don't ask how. God be praised," he added. "Over."

Those Godist words were the signal to meet back at Jesus-E. The WDA would be no problem now. WDA agents would be unable to communicate with their handlers during the SuperNet blackout, and they were not the type of people to take any serious decisions without covering their precious derrières.

Gil looked at his watch, and took a spontaneous decision. "I'm not going back there," he said into the mike of the Canadian Press ham radio. "I'm going to the airport and then to New York. I'll be needed there ... and then I'm retiring ... to write my life profile, my memoirs, and play golf. Good luck to—uh—all of you. Over."

"I'll use the radio to—yeah, that'll work—I'll have the corporate Learjet warmed up and waiting for you at the Ottawa International Airport," promised Michael. "The pilot's still loyal to me ... I think. Did you get the squashy sent to your boss? Over."

"Yep," said Gil. "And I'm sure it got downloaded to quite a few Times subscribers in the time before the Net crashed, so I guess we got the biggest scoop of all time. Over."

"You're..." Michael wasn't sure he should say this, but he decided he'd better do so. "You're ... sure the WDA won't shoot the plane down?" he asked. My plane, he thought soberly, even though it wasn't any more, technically. "Over."

"The game is done, my friend," said Gil—he never liked explaining fundamentals to amateurs. "We won; they lost; they know it; the rest is just following the script. They're not all evil, you know; there's clearly a few bad apples in there somewhere, but mostly, they're just ... the wrong people in power in the wrong institution for these ... new times. Over."

Michael wasn't sure it would be quite that simple, but Gil was the one with the vast experience in such matters, and he had told him at the Diefenbunker that real pros know when to resign. "Having a checkmate conceded to you is even sweeter than achieving an actual checkmate," Gil had said, authoritatively.

"Good luck," offered Michael. "Over and out."

By the time Gil ended his radio exchange with Michael, Yves Lacombe was sitting at an MIU, entranced, watching the first minutes of the first tape—the one Gil had started at the cabin on Wilson Lake and finished at the lodge. The Net was down, for the first time ever, but the electrical grid was fine ... a good sign, thought Gil.

"I gotta go," Gil said. "No no," he said when Yves hit the "pause" button. "Knock yourself out ... enjoy. We'll talk later, when I'm back home and you've seen the future." He reached over and released the pause button, and he smiled as Yves' journalistic head rotated automatically back to the screen.

Gil put his rough brown robe back on—no sense inviting trouble—and then he kicked the real monk in the shin, hard.

Diefenbunker ninety-one jumped around on one foot, yelling “ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!”

"What the hell did you do?" asked a shocked Yves Lacombe.

"I kicked him," said Gil as he pulled his hood up and over. "Back," he explained.

Chapter 87

EPILOGUE

2053 (Twenty years later)

The three analog videotapes that Gil Henderson had converted into a sixty-three-second digital squashy (along with a fourth tape, mentioned below) are housed behind glass in the Victor Helliwell Memorial Chamber that was added onto the United Nations complex in February of 2035. Perhaps appropriately, the Helliwell Chamber is located inside the underground concourse, and is as windowless as the old fallout shelter on Wilson Lake, where the body of the reclusive inventor and social visionary was essentially cremated by a backpack nuke, as windowless as the Diefenbunker, where silent monks still live, many of them the same monks whose misguided and zany zealotry inadvertently saved the day ... the world, really ... back in 2033.

Digitized copies of the three key tapes run continuously inside the chamber, along with a presentation derived from a fourth tape that was shot by Venice Whiteside as the unlikely collection of “heroes” made good their harrowing escape. There are a couple of pews in this subsurface room, put there at the request of the monks of Jesus-E—for those who might wish to pray. Not many people ever visit the Helliwell room in person, and few of those use the pews, at least not to pray. The entire presentation is available on the new V-Net (the VirtualRealitySuperNet) in 3-D and ultra-fi, and that often-visited Netsite is as good as the real thing—some say better. Since 2033, there is scarcely an adult or a child over the age of ten who hasn't perused that set of records, or written a term paper about those epochal events, or spent weeks in a chatroom, discussing and debating this last great human upheaval.

The first tape, the one that was done by Gil Henderson, was immediately recognized by his peers as a journalistic masterpiece. Even though he had to use very crude analog technology, and had the weight of the world quite literally on his shoulders, he dissected the issues one by one, and laid out the basis for the fall of the WDA, and for its reform.

He got all the facts known to Captain Lillian Petrosian, Colonel Lars Johannsen and electronics magnate Michael Whiteside during the long session they conducted at the small cabin on the western shore of Wilson Lake, and the fact that they all had to whisper has made this recording into a work of art as well as an essential historical document. At times, the sound of WDA helicopters can be heard in the background as they searched the Québec bush for their two missing agents, their two “traitors.”

Colonel Johannsen, who had a badly broken wrist at the time, told the complete story of how, as an ersatz apprentice plumber, he had placed the lead box inside the wall of the Whitesides' lodge, and how it dawned on him years later that he had been made into a murderer by the WDA. He spoke candidly of his reasons for not coming forward before he did, and for not telling Evolution that he was a WDA mole. Many people thought that he was somewhat doubtful of his own rationale, but after-the-fact LieDeck-verification of the tape made at the cabin was impossible, because they were whispering at the time. The continuation of this tape, at the Whitesides' lodge, was done in full voice, but of course most of Lars' previous comments or responses weren't repeated there. Gil Henderson did ask him to affirm in full voice that his whispered words out at the cabin were all true, and Johannsen did that, but memories can

fail, and there is still debate as to the character of this man.

No trace was ever found of Colonel Johannsen. It is generally assumed [Editor's note: To "assume" the veracity of something is not a rational process, and amounts to baseless guesswork. This comment on the assumed fate of Colonel Johannsen is included only because those who make this assumption are numerous, and insist that their point of view be included here.] that WDA agents found him and disposed of him before the WDA was felled. But the lead box with that pesky pellet of plutonium in it was discovered under the front step of his hunting shack, one mile behind Victor-E, exactly where Annette Blais had hidden it. It is also generally assumed [Editor's note: To "assume" the veracity of something is not a rational process, and amounts to baseless guesswork.] that if Lars was tortured before he was killed, he didn't talk.

The last words spoken by Colonel Johannsen into the camcorder were prophetic. He was on the second floor of the Wilson Lake lodge, in the bedroom where Victor Helliwell had lived in silence for all those years. He was holding the lead box in his good hand, and he was in pain from the fractured wrist. "I can die in peace now," he said. "Freedom!"

That word—"freedom"—was the word Lilly Petrosian had spoken when she let the squirrel escape, and it was also the word that Johannsen had written on the note that had lured Lilly out to his hunting shack that second time. Netshows and books tend to paint Lars Johannsen as something of a hero, who meant by that word to declare the world free of the terrors of the WDA, free of the dangers of Human Two Consciousness. He wasn't the first agent to become fully Human Three in the course of doing undercover work for the WDA, but he is thought to be the only one who actually got away with his deception long enough to make a real difference.

It is impossible to recount here all the aspects of the long tape that was made by Gil Henderson, and those who are interested in knowing more can access the source [the V-Netsite is at larsj.NYT.com/GilHenderson/WDAtape]. It is sufficient to say here that the stories of all three of the interviewees—Michael Whiteside, Lars Johannsen and Lilly Petrosian—were LieDeck-verified using Helliwell's original prototype device (except for the whispered sections, of course) and their evidence was demonstrably incontrovertible. Unbeknownst to all but a few WDA agents and officials, the organization was corrupt. It was involved in, and it was ultimately sustained by, criminal activities ... activities that went up to, and included, murder! "The rest," as young people like to say these days, "is the rest of history, the second part, the part that is permitted to happen only by the fact that we humans finally got the first part right."

The second tape, the Helliwell tape, was made as a favor for Venice Whiteside, for her to put in her personal life profile. Venice was only twelve at the time, and as an aspiring journalist, she did rather well in what was her first serious interview. She got Victor to admit that the LieDeck device was really invented by one George Cluff, whose life story is regrettably lost forever. Victor Helliwell had only perfected the device, and he remained convinced to the end that his former friend and boss (Cluff) was murdered by the World Democratic Alliance, long before the LieDeck Revolution. (It was formally established in 2034 that his suspicions were warranted. The World Democratic Alliance, precursor to the World Democratic Authority, had brought down a plane that Cluff was on, and resulted in several other deaths, deaths that were covered up in WDA documents under the bizarre Human Two term, "collateral damage.")

Venice Whiteside also got Victor to confess that it was fear, more than any plan of penance, that actually motivated his years of silence. As subsequent events have revealed, that fear was very well founded, and in fact the sacrifices of his social life and his mental stability were instrumental in facilitating the return of freedom and democracy to planet Earth—albeit through his deprivation-induced alter ego, "Eyeball."

Victor also revealed to the young Whiteside girl that his own CQ was actually quite low, and was dependent not so much on any natural bent as on the courage of his intellectual convictions and a will of titanium. “I’m a super-controlled Zilla,” he told Venice. (He laughed as he said it, but when this taped comment was later LieDeck-verified, it became clear that Victor at least believed it to be true.)

When he kissed Venice at the end of that interview, it seemed to be his goodbye kiss to the world. Although the interview was over, Venice had left her camcorders set in the “on” position, so she captured that image, that delicate kiss on the cheek. As everyone knows, a stylized version of that touching picture is now featured on the official emblem and flag of the LCAE, the LieDeck Celebration Association of Earth.

Of interest is the fact that Victor Helliwell, for all his brilliant insights, was not able to foresee that in a few short years, it would become socially gauche to use a LieDeck in any clandestine manner, a sign of a lack of trust that is naturally found rather insulting by Human Threes. He also failed to appreciate that the policing function that was previously performed by the WDA was destined to carry on as before, even after civilian control was reinstated in the world body (which of course is once again known by its former name, the United Nations, albeit with the addition of the directly-elected World Parliament, or WHOC—see below).

This interview was the only one ever given by Victor Helliwell, and it is often said that he seemed “nice” mostly because Venice Whiteside was then a child, but also due to the fact that he was blitzed out of his gourd on painkillers. In any event, Venice asked most of the key questions that would have come up had the interview been done by the redoubtable Gil Henderson.

The third tape was sixteen minutes long, and was made by Michael Whiteside inside the fallout shelter under the log lodge on Wilson Lake. It was an eloquent call for the total reform of the world body, but it was obsolete even before it was formally Netcast. The WDA fell quickly in the wake of Gil Henderson's powerful exposé, so quickly that Michael's appeals for a return to civilian control were just not needed. Still, his effort serves as a sort of secular prophesy, and when the times are considered, making that tape was quite a courageous move for this wealthy Québécois. Many people still access that impromptu soliloquy on the V-Net, if only to remember and feel the depth of the wounds that drove such passion and gestated such a great hope for a far freer tomorrow. Children today have no knowledge of what the world was like back then—more precisely, they are not able to adequately translate their cognitive knowledge of these events into an affective appreciation of the situation (not that that matters much to Human Three adults, although it is generally assumed that it should matter to everyone to some extent [Editor's note: To “assume” the veracity of something amounts to baseless guesswork.]).

Of course Michael Whiteside did propose one very constructive idea. It is often said that this suggestion at least facilitated the rapid ascension of Homo sapiens from the false security of militarism to the tasty vicissitudes of true freedom. He was a party to the plan to send out the now-famous squashy which doomed the WDA, and it occurred to him that in a wired world, that process could also work in reverse! If one person could reach out and touch every other person in the whole world (or at least every MIU) in less than half an hour, then every person in the world could participate in a singular Netevent in a very short period of time!

He therefore called, in June of 2033, for the holding of a global referendum to affirm and endorse the return of the world body to civilian control and to muster support for the elimination of all nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction. He said the vote could be done over the Net—what was then the SuperNet—using the bioID slots to prevent multiple voting or cheating. His argument, now a pillar of UN philosophy, was that no power on Earth could ever legitimately deny or even protest a clear mandate that emanated from the entire human race! Today, that analysis is considered to be rather

self-evident, but no one who mattered had ever said it before, at least not in so many words.

It took the United Nations an exasperating three weeks to formulate the wording of a proper ballot, but the electronic voting took only nine days. The “global mandate” rolled in at an incredible 86.9 percent, and opinion polls have shown that the same referendum, had it been conducted in 2038 or beyond, would have yielded a plurality in the order of 94 percent (of course it must be remembered that the vast majority of voters in 2033 were only Human Two). Michael Whiteside was given kudos for the very notion of harnessing people-power in this new form. It took six long years after the referendum to dismantle the WDA's (the UN's) arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, but the problems causing this delay were technical, not political. Now, of course, the world is free of this particular Human Two terror, and indeed of all Human Two terror.

(Michael had also suggested in June of 2033 that another element be added to the ballot for that original world referendum, the idea of a directly-elected World House of Commons, or WHOC. He saw this as a third body that should be added to the UN's General Assembly and Security Council, where the representatives of nation states sat—representatives of national governments, to be precise. It took eight more years before a second world referendum was held on that issue, but of course now the WHOC exists and is filled with directly-elected Members. And as the WHOC gets used to functioning as a truly democratic world government, thought is finally being given to the idea of phasing out the other two houses, or at least diminishing their powers.)

The most interesting tape, many people say, was the fourth one, the one that didn't get downloaded onto MIUs all over the world on that fateful day back in 2033. Young Venice Whiteside had borrowed the old analog camcorder from her father in the fallout shelter to interview her Grandma Whiteside for a segment of her (Venice's) life profile, and then she kept shooting footage, as it was then called, throughout much of the escape.

She didn't capture the actual scene where the monks made their startling revelation in the Whitesides' shelter, and that is unfortunate. However, she did interview a monk about that event a couple of hours after they all dragged themselves into the Diefenbunker over in Carp, Ontario. He was a peculiar man, perhaps fifty years old (one never really knows with these people), and he described for Venice the scene at the lodge (Venice and the two Roy children were in a bedroom in the shelter at the time, with Julia). This monk found it very funny that the gang of non-monks would doubt that “God would provide.”

Venice rolled the camcorder after she was helped down a ladder to the staging area that had been prepared by the monks for the evacuation of their “savior.” She got a shot of the monk who stayed in the fallout shelter just in case Victor Helliwell (“Jesus,” in the minds of the monks) returned from the dead. She aimed the camera up the narrow vertical column of rock as the delighted Jesus-Eer waved his goodbye. This vertical part of the tunnel was fairly dark, and the inside of the shelter was brightly lit, so unfortunately, the monk appears as a silhouette (that tape has now been digitally enhanced, but it is still hard to make out his facial features). This monk was the only immediate casualty of the explosion at the lodge.

Venice also took several clips of the group loading themselves into the short electric train that had been used for years to ferry equipment, monks, dirt and rock into or out of the tunnel. The train trip took more than an hour—the top speed was only eighteen miles per hour, twelve miles per hour on the uphill part. Her film shows the train jiggling along as it went from Wilson Lake to the lowest point, under the middle of the Ottawa River. The tunnel had ceiling lights every fifty yards, and viewers can see the three color-coded pipes that were fastened onto the walls of the rock-walled tunnel, on the left as the train was traveling. One pipe was for the electric power supply, one for incoming fresh air, and one for outgoing stale air. (There was a fourth pipe system underneath the tracks that one can't be seen on the tape—it

was for sucking out all water that had leaked down from the river through fissures in the rock.)

Doreen Whiteside, Michael's mother, was quite old, and she spent much of the train ride screaming in terror or praying, loudly. Gil Henderson was located two cars in back of Venice, who was sitting just behind the engine. At one point, he called to her to pass him the camcorder, to let him have a turn, but she refused. Venice captured the sound of the gang singing "Happy Birthday" to Randy Whiteside (he made a wisecrack about this being his most memorable birthday so far), and then singing "Happy Wedding" to Randy and to Yolanda "Lucky" Dees after they hollered out their marriage plans.

The electricity failed when they got past the uphill section and were rolling along the level part on the Ontario side, the last section before they got to the Diefenbunker. Most fortunately, Venice's camcorder was running at that moment, so she caught the sound of Doreen Whiteside going into emotional collapse. The voices of Michael Whiteside and Gil Henderson can be heard in the pitch dark as they appealed for calm. The monk driver then shouted his now-famous curse, and he turned on a flashlight a few seconds before the rumbling sound began. And then the ground shook. You can see the flashlight quiver as Venice continued to record what she was sure would be her own death, the death of them all.

The monk at the front told everybody to sit tight until the "earthquake" was over—that took a full nine seconds. Then, one by one, all the people were helped out of the open cars and guided up to the front of the train. Venice explained in the dark that she had to turn off the camcorder while they formed a kind of human snake, hand-in-hand, to walk up the narrow tracks to safety. The human chain consisted of the three rescue-monks in the lead, then the six Whiteside family members, then Lucky, Lilly, Sébastien Roy and his two children, Noel, Doctor Valcourt, and Gil Henderson, with the five remaining monks of the security force pulling up the rear—twenty-two souls in all. They were less than two miles from the Diefenbunker when the backpack nuclear device destroyed the Whitesides' lodge across the river, but it took the group an hour and twelve minutes to walk that short distance. The mood was somber, and the words were few—or so it was reported later.

Venice turned the camcorder on again briefly when the entrance to the Diefenbunker appeared in the distance as a dim glow. Randy made a remark, caught on tape, about how this bizarre experience could bring new meaning to the old expression: "light at the end of the tunnel." The group—with the exception of Doreen Whiteside—was in a state of uninhibited euphoria for that last leg of their journey (unfortunately not recorded). Even the monks had "let their hair down," it was said, and they had joked giddily about their good timing and fortuitous planning (while giving most of the credit to God, of course).

When they finally arrived at the Diefenbunker, Venice started recording again. There was only one smiling monk waiting there to greet the party of refugees, and he lost his smile abruptly when he learned that Victor—the Son of God to him—was not only dead, but vaporized. (Dozens of monks had seen the rising mushroom cloud across the river as they tended their vineyards in Carp, and had subsequently retreated to the Diefenbunker, locked themselves in and prayed for the deliverance of their "messiah"—to no avail, of course, but the Jesus-Eers wanted it noted in the public record that that's what they did, and that they prayed as hard as they could.)

Venice got a good shot of the one-monk welcoming committee and the train's monk-engineer discussing this revised version of reality, and the waiting monk got his smile back readily as soon as he learned from the engineer (who had learned it from Lilly and Michael) that Victor Helliwell had unequivocally denied being the savior. In fact the monk who had been waiting for them had laughed when he said: "God works in strange and wondrous ways." Still, he thought it might be prudent to wait for three days before declaring Victor Helliwell officially dead, "in case he lied about that." (The other monk, the engineer, tried to hide his face when he explained to his leader that if Helliwell really was the savior, he wouldn't likely lie about it!)

Venice had been excluded from the long planning sessions that took place inside the Diefenbunker, so sadly there exist no sound- or video-recordings of that, other than the anecdotal recollections of the participants. Venice fully intended to use her camcorder to interview all the escapees before the sending of the squashy was carried out, but she ran out of tape (those old analog devices only took three-hour tapes, and there were no spare tapes at the Diefenbunker, natch).

* * * *

No retrospective would be complete without a few words as to the particular fates of the key players.

Julia Whiteside had a miscarriage only weeks after the great escape, but that turned out to be for the best. The male fetus had deformities from all the time Julia had spent with Victor; she was exposed to radiation emanating from the open lead box behind his bed, embedded in the wall. Fortunately, her own health was not affected. She was told in 2035 by Mr. Wu, her trustee, that Victor had been the donor of the sperm with which she had been inseminated, and she was extremely disappointed to learn that his remaining specimens at the sperm bank had been destroyed (as were all other specimens that had been stored within 200 miles of the Wilson Lake detonation). Julia formed a pleasant union with Sébastien Roy for thirteen years, and she joyfully became the de facto mother to his two children, Chantal and Rejean.

Becky Donovan-Whiteside finally got past her problems with wealth and landed a job as an executive assistant to Lilly Petrosian. She stayed married to Michael Whiteside, but insisted that the manor house north of Quyon be turned into a “closed clan,” a brand of Human Three Evolutionary life that is not very far from the norm, except that the entry of any new member requires the unanimous consent of those already there. Also at Becky's suggestion, this new clan at the manor was called “Little Victor-E.”

Since 2033, Lilly Petrosian has also lived at Little Victor-E, known colloquially and locally as “the mansion clan.” And as a reward for her heroism, she was selected by the revived United Nations to head up the Global LV Agency, the civilian agency that uses LieDecks to police the human race, much as the WDA had done before. (Of course now, most people need no coercion or reminding, and Human Threes are allowed to simply confirm their Human Three Consciousness rather than answer the four questions that the WDA had always used.) Advanced technology allows Lilly to do her work from Little Victor-E, over the V-Net.

Lilly Petrosian and Michael Whiteside have a warm relationship, and although they never married, they are as much a couple as it pleases them both to be—this with Becky Donovan-Whiteside's full blessing and support. There was a period of time when Lilly considered having a child, but in the end, she couldn't face bringing a new life into a world that was still dismantling doomsday technologies and trying to counter the deadly global warming trend that her ancestors had left as their toxic legacy. Lilly had settled for spending quality fun time with other people's children, inside the mansion clan and in the town of Quyon, as well. In fact, she volunteered regularly at a day care center that she had personally financed, as a penance for any harm she may have done in the past ... as a WDA agent.

“Good old Ed” Tumson, Lilly's former lover when she lived in Miami, was given a life sentence with no chance for parole. After four months of incarceration, he utilized the prong of a prison fork to puncture both his eardrums and to blind himself. He has since refused to learn any form of communication. Lilly went to visit him once in 2035, and she did get him to stop trying to starve himself to death (he'd been fed intravenously for five months at the time and weighed just 113 pounds), but to this day, he is a silent shell of a man, essentially waiting to die.

Sébastien Roy's children grew up and moved to clans that were more to their liking, after which Sébastien grew tired of Julia's limitations. He met another woman over the V-Net, and in 2046, he moved away from Little Victor-E ... to her clan in Los Angeles. Julia didn't mind, and Sébastien took that—incorrectly—as a sign that she didn't care. He retired back in 2051, although he continues to help

out at a primary school whenever he gets bored.

Noel Lambert, the big French cook from the Whitesides' lodge, became the head cook for Little Victor-E and enjoyed his last few years of life, both socially and sexually. He had never really been accepted by people (with the exception of Victor Helliwell) in the past, just employed by them, so life was all new and exciting for him. He fell down the stairs to the basement in 2038 (he'd been secretly drinking), and died without ever regaining consciousness.

Big Wus lived to the age of fourteen. His health was just starting to deteriorate when he got struck by an eighteen-wheeler on Highway 148. The truck's driver was devastated that he had killed the dog who was credited with teaching Lilly Petrosian to not be such a "tight-ass" (a label that the former WDA agent laughingly applied to herself in her public life profile).

Michael Whiteside consolidated his Human Three Consciousness about a year after the fall of the WDA. In 2035, he was chosen as the leader of the Québec E-party. (These Evolution-parties, or E-parties, emerged worldwide as a political force in 2034, after the WDA folded, and now they form the Human Three governments of many municipalities and dozens of nations around the world.) He became the first Anglophone prime minister of the Francophone nation of Québec after two terms as Leader of the Official Opposition in the Assemblée Nationale. His efforts to convince the new UN to require the teaching of second languages to children all over the world saved French (and all "dying" languages) from slipping out of use and into oblivion.

Michael also regained control of Whiteside Technologies, although he delegated most of those responsibilities to others. The company invested hundreds of millions into the development of highly advanced instantaneous translation MIU programs which were necessary to counter the dynamic of the Net, a dynamic by which English was becoming practically the only "used" language in the world. Michael's French went from passable to fluent, but after one uneventful term as prime minister of Québec, he decided to retire from both politics and business. He now paints landscapes—quite well, according to the critics—and his absolute favorite activity is taking walks (in decontaminated areas of the estate) with Becky, Lilly or other "friends." (He is frequently asked to be a candidate for the new WHOC, but he just isn't interested in going back into politics.)

Gil Henderson retired to write his memoirs (his life profile, for the World Identity Bank) immediately after the great escape of 2033, but he was forced back into the saddle a month later by the new UN. He was asked to chair the "World Commission of Inquiry into Criminal Activities within the WDA." He simply could not refuse the opportunity to suss out the truth one more time, and bring wrongdoers to justice. He eventually got his golf handicap down to a respectable twelve in 2042. In 2046, on his sixty-ninth birthday, he died of a massive heart attack while on the backswing of his third attempt to escape the dusty clutches of a steep-faced Bahamian sand trap (now respectfully referred to by local golfers as "Henderson beach").

General George Brampton clammed up totally during the hearings of what became commonly known as the "Henderson Commission." He was convicted of a very long list of offenses (far too many to mention here), including the murders of Victor Helliwell and Lester Connolly, and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. He spent his the final four years of his life in a mental hospital, where he died, shunned and forgotten, in 2038.

Sheena Kalhoun cooperated fully—it's said "enthusiastically"—with the Henderson Commission. It turned out that General Brampton's cadre of fixers (like Richard Nixon's "plumbers") were a tiny group of loyalists, twenty-one in all. Only two escaped capture, and these two are thought to have committed suicide rather than face reality (they are in many quarters "assumed" to be the agents who "disposed of" Lars Johannsen). With Ms. Kalhoun's help, it was finally learned that the WDA had played no role

whatsoever in the assassination of Randall Whiteside, Michael's father, back in 2014.

Because of Kalhoun's attempt to stop the attack on the lodge and her cooperation with the Commission, she got only a ten-year sentence. She spent those years in a penal institution near Manchester, England, which employed daily CQ-assist sessions for the re-education process. When her time was up, she decided to stay on and help others. She feels she can never become fully Human Three because of her past, but she is happy, and has learned a useful trade—weaving. She suffers from a terrible sleep disorder—basically nightmares—that began the very day the Whitesides' lodge was destroyed (meaning the 2033 attack, of course).

Yves Lacombe, the president of Canadian Press, was given the Order of Earth Award by the UN for his participation in what is now often called the “Great Historical Act.” His career had been ruined by his act of faith, and the UN wanted to make things right again. Recipients of slightly less prestigious UN awards included Annette Blais, Tirone Lucas, Victor Helliwell, posthumously, and all those who escaped from the fallout shelter out on Wilson Lake, although the several monks of Jesus-E couldn't accept even this modest honor for fear of “compromising their humility.” Yves now lives in retirement in Nassau, where he plays a lot of golf (he was playing with Gil Henderson the day that the famous reporter collapsed and died in the sand trap).

Annette Blais, the former administrator of Victor-E, also lives at Little Victor-E, the so-called mansion clan. She learned from the Henderson Commission that the WDA was behind the stroke that killed her husband, former bishop Steve Sutherland, in December of 2031 (George Brampton could have been tried for this murder as well, but in his sorry mental state and considering his other convictions and sentences, it was generally thought there was little point to the holding of yet another trial). She retired in 2036, and wrote an unheralded novel called *Squirrel Fever*, which seemed to be about her husband and about the Lars Johannsen she had known and cared for (Lars apparently liked to “squirrel hunt” with all his lovers).

Randy Whiteside tried hard to turn pro, but a disobedient putter continued to be his downfall. He didn't make it through the PGA's dreaded Qualifying School for two years straight, and settled for teaching golf at the University of Mexico. He married Yolanda “Lucky” Dees, but that union ended after a few months. She was Human Three through and through, and Randy found all that stuff to be as silly and empty as a religion. Lucky eventually married a botanist, who fathered their only child, a girl (Victoria).

Doreen Whiteside finally got over Randall's death when her eternal question was answered by the Henderson Commission. It wasn't the WDA who killed him. It was “those blind, rabid, fundamentalist Christians” (as she always called them in her life profile), who blamed her husband for introducing the device that put the lie to their faith. Doreen spent her last years on an unsuccessful and somewhat pathetic campaign to force the UN to ban all religion. She died of cancer in 2044, apparently quite satisfied that she had fought the good fight, even if she'd lost.

Venice Whiteside was far too young to deal with the celebrity status that was thrust upon her as a result of the videotapes she had made. She reveled in it for a while, then became depressed when people moved on to other things. It took her a year to get back to normal, after which she decided that being a productive and happy Human Three was enough for anybody. She has a nine-year-old son now, and teaches English literature at a college in North Vancouver, in the brand new country of British Columbia.

(Venice also spent a small fortune—she had a large fortune, after all—trying to locate the three reel-to-reel audiotapes that Victor Helliwell had made in the decade preceding the Revolution and then hidden somewhere on the Whiteside's estate, near the lodge on Wilson Lake ... with no concrete results. She finally accepted that understanding the far-reaching impact of Victor's lie detector and his theory of human consciousness evolution were better achieved through ongoing observation and scholarly inquiry, but many people still regret that we will never be able to compare the way things actually turned out with

Victor Helliwell's expectations of the way things would turn out.)

* * * *

And what of the world?

The United Nations discovered that the World Identity Bank, designed and started by the WDA, was to have included the aspect of keeping tabs on all civilians. The advanced technology was readily reconfigured to prevent that abuse, and by 2039, the vast majority of all citizens of Earth—ninety-one percent—were creating their life profiles and leaving them on archive at the WIB for their descendants.

The UN launched an international program called “The Big Repair” in January, 2037. Its purpose was to remedy all of the human-caused problems on our home planet. That involved a compelling array of financial disincentives and rewards to ensure that for the next four generations at least, couples (on average) would produce only one child, which would have the effect of reducing the population of Earth by half four times in a row over a period of about 120 years, bringing it from ten billion down to about one billion (after which ZPG will be reinstated, giving population stability on the basis of an average two children per couple). Not unexpectedly, a legally sanctioned trade in reproductive rights emerged between those who didn't want any children and those who wanted more than one. In conjunction with this population-reduction program, two thirds of the “occupied” landmass of Earth is slated for a return to the wild, set aside for nature to do with as she pleases. (Eventually, human occupation, except for certain limited recreational uses, will have to be restricted to designated enclaves.) And of course the Big Repair also involves a 100-year plan to reverse the effects of pollution on the air and seas and soil, in the hope that global warming can be reversed, and Earth won't end up resembling Mars, thanks to human stupidity.

As a lifestyle and economic model, Evolution peaked at about thirty-four percent of world citizens in 2043. Capitalism took some hard knocks because of its all-too-cozy relationship with the WDA, but it bounced back vigorously. People found ways to merge a high “consciousness,” called by whatever name, with the ethic of a system that excels in producing goods and services efficiently, and for profit. The phase 2 economic model of Evolutionism faded significantly as all the different levels of government accepted a lot more responsibility for the care of those whose lives were shriveled by their lack of ability, lack of character or lack of opportunity. To put it in more precise terms, the SST programs continued, but at an average level of twenty-three percent of an Evolutionary's on-going (net) savings—a far more modest but still very useful and helpful effort.

Unexpectedly, Christianity (and other religions as well) went through something of a revival in the late 2030s, partly as a result of the monks’ “fortuitous” tunneling activities, partly as a result of the phase 2 economic model that Evolutionaries had adopted as a response to the economic war that the WDA had inflicted upon them, and of course partly because of the LieDeck itself. Virtually all “verified” Christians now live as phase 2 Evolutionaries, giving the full fifty percent of their on-going savings to the SSTs so that their material relations conform to the non-negotiable admonition of the second Great Commandment (Matthew 22: 37-40). Most Christians believe that the Holy Spirit guided Victor Helliwell in his construction of the phase 2 economic model and guided all the devout monks of Jesus-E in their construction of the hardrock tunnel. Whatever the case, the LieDeck continues to beep false prophets into oblivion, and LieDeck-verifiable belief in God has grown in the past two decades. In fact, most Christians and other “believers” happily use their LieDecks to confirm the sincerity of their faith, to see if their conduct is such that they at least believe themselves to be following in the footsteps of Jesus ... or Mohammed, or whomever. (Also of some importance, people who don't believe in any god now respect those who do—except insofar as some believers continue to try to press their beliefs on others, and insofar as some beliefs are demonstrably false ... or harmful ... or malicious.)

New technology continues to amaze and liberate humankind, but history (as it was once known) has finally stopped lurching people about. An easy equilibrium has finally settled between and among human beings, their machines, their social structures, and the natural world. National borders, which were in the past a basis of deadly conflict, are now relatively congruent with the world's ethnic and/or cultural realities, a development that inevitably led to a huge proliferation of nations (where there were only 160 in the mid-20th century, and 246 in 2033, there are now 2,794). Power, in terms of ego or military might, is now a matter of disinterest to most Human Twos and all Human Threes, since very few conflicts get as far as fisticuffs, let alone war.

As for the ultimate impact of the LieDeck, all people—Human Twos and Human Threes—have been forced to accept life without duplicity. No one can lie any more, not even to themselves, and this new reality has not only reduced religion to a political rump, it has also almost emptied the waiting rooms of psychiatrists. People now have no choice but to deal with reality.

And with self-deception (if not myth) finally out of the way, the transition of adults to what Helliwell dubbed “Human Three Consciousness” has become almost as automatic and inevitable as the acquisition of Human Two Consciousness by children (who start out life as full-tilt Human Ones). Most parents (and literally all Evolutionary clanspersons) now see this as a necessary and normal element of the natural growing-up process, not as anything special ... or unusual ... or optional. Those few individuals who suffer arrested development in the Human One stage (mostly males) are restricted in their movements, and are monitored 24/7, for their own safety as well as that of society. The twenty percent (approximately) of adults who suffer from arrested development in the sense that they are stuck in the Human Two stage are always welcome to spend time in an Evolutionary clan ... so they can get over it. And those who take advantage of this open invitation (which is about 14% of this subgroup) really do get over it, which makes one wonder about the rest of them ... what they could be thinking.

Historians, to the extent that such a profession is still relevant, perceive the road taken from the first upright steps of Homo erectus to the early 21st century as an embarrassing and tragic legacy, analogous to the rap-sheet of a teenager who couldn't have started his or her life in any worse way or with less effective personal and social skills. In a very real sense, the LieDeck forced our species out of its “juvenile delinquency,” where the gang mentality and the supremacy of force led to dynamics that discouraged the development of anything remotely resembling Human Three Consciousness. In the Human Two world, power gravitated to those who were least qualified to use it wisely; it was the “survival of the meanest,” where charismatic autolatry (the worship of the self—always undeserved) was the fastest and arguably the only route to the very top of anything. Now, the horribly troubled adolescence of Homo sapiens is thankfully over, and for the remaining millions of years of our species' existence on Earth, the doors of possibility are open to anything reasonable that we may wish to accomplish ... or be.

* * * *

Glossary of terms used in 2033

bioDad—biological father (similarly; bioMom)

bioID—one's biological identity, as seen in one's DNA

bioID slot—a finger-slot in an MIU which sucks off a few molecules of dead skin and confirms (or not) the identity of the user with absolute certainty blind Netlink (or blind Netface)—a connection on the SuperNet where one can be heard but not seen, sometimes used with the additional aspect of voice distortion bubble—an air-supported structure, from several acres to ten acres in size, made of a new material called Pliesterine

Bubble Street—a street found in every Evolutionary clan (and some other places) where all the structures on the street are small or mid-sized Pliesterine bubbles (for specific uses)

Callaway #6—a small Evolutionary clan about twenty miles down Highway 148, east of Victor-E, near Luskville, Québec
chatroom—a Netsite (full color video plus sound; like a video conference call) where the screen is divided into up to 25 spaces, one per participant in the interaction (9 spaces is as many as one would normally want to use, since people “chat” on small-screened Sniffers as well as large-screened MIUs, and too many chatters can spoil the fun)

chatters—participants in a SuperNet chatroom clan—a group of people, almost always Evolutionaries, who live together in a group, share many facilities, and share a mini-culture (or “clan culture”)

clansite—the property or site where a clan is located, the buildings and the surrounding land; almost always rural
clansperson—a member of an Evolutionary clan
clan network—a collectivity of related clans (sometimes only a few, sometimes hundreds or even thousands) who share the same clan culture (or have similar clan cultures)

Control (or Control Upper America)—a high military position within the WDA, whose responsibility was the policing (using LieDeck-verification) of everyone living between the Panama Canal and the North Pole.

CQ—stands for “consciousness quotient,” like IQ for “intelligence quotient,” except CQ refers to one's level of consciousness; similar range to IQ; a CQ of 100 is average for Human Twos; 60 is so low as to be problematic; 40 or less is virtually Human One; 150 or more is a healthy transition level (well on the way to becoming Human Three); 200 or more is solid Human Three territory; 250 is the highest score possible

CQ assist—help in raising one's consciousness quotient, or in getting from Human Two to Human Three Consciousness (theoretically, it could also mean assisting someone from H1C to H2C, but there are few Human Ones alive any more, and those who do exist are incarcerated as mental defectives)

CQ assistant—a person who helps you evaluate and raise your consciousness quotient, or the process by which that goal is achieved (see “transition guide”)

CQ Center—what used to be called the C.Q.E.S. (Consciousness Quotient Evaluation Service), before the aspect of help for transition (from Human Two to Human Three Consciousness) was added to the service (those who offered the service in a CQ Center assumed that those calling in did so not just out of some idle curiosity as to their level of consciousness, but because they wanted to evolve and needed guidance or assistance)

C.Q.E.S. or C.Q.E. service—an Evolutionary clans’ “Consciousness Quotient Evaluation Service,” meant to measure and analyze one's level of consciousness (or CQ); C.Q.E.S.s are operated over the SuperNet by Victor-E and many other Evolutionary clans; this type of service is always run as a commercial enterprise

C.S.E.—the Central Stock Exchange in New York, which is the only stock exchange in the world in 2033

cyberbuddy—(or cyberfriend, cyberboyfriend or cybergirlfriend)—someone you know and connect with over the Net
cyberlife—the vast quantities of human interaction and social intercourse that take place on or over the Net (as opposed to “warmlife,” which refers to direct social interaction, “in person” contact)

cyberjunkie—a person who is addicted to Netlife to the exclusion of almost everything else, including and

especially warmlife cybermom—an interactive female digital construct on the Net, used principally to explain things to children in a way they can relate to (similarly, “cyberdad”)

cybername—a fake name (“hook,” “handle,” “moniker”) that some people prefer using in their cyberlife
cybertingle—a sexual feeling or experience, not necessarily including orgasm, which is had over the Net with another person (or persons)

E-Store—a “big box,” multi-purpose store run by Evolutionaries; they try to maintain the same prices as their capitalist competitors, but they place an incomparably high emphasis on personalized customer service, and every November 3, every E-Store customer is sent a check amounting to three percent of their purchases in the previous twelve months

E-tery—the name given to the restaurants run by Evolutionary clans

Evolution—an international movement of 230 million, living in clans of 100 to 500 individuals; members share many facilities and do volunteer work within their clans; all this is designed to get the cost-of-living for the members down to one third of what it would be if they lived as “Normals” (those who do not live in a clan); under the “phase 1” Evolutionary economic model, adult members all work if they are able, and each member must save 40% of his or her income, which is then invested in absolutely safe financial instruments (such as government-backed savings bonds); by this strategy, any Evolutionary can retire securely (if he or she continues to live in a clan, with its reduced cost-of-living) after working for only 13 or 14 years
face—as a verb, to “face” someone (or to face with someone) means “to interface” with that person on the SuperNet; as a noun, a “face” refers to the archived message left on an MIU (like a phone message, except with visuals as well as audio)

fuss-group—an Evolutionary system of mediation, where as much time as needed is spent trying to iron out any intra-clan or inter-clan conflicts

General Assembly—the main body of the WDA, which is now populated with actual military generals, unlike the case of the former United Nations, which had diplomats, all of whom were civilians

Great Hall of Order—the General Assembly (of the WDA, in New York) as it is formally known when it is in session
groupface—a verb, meaning to face with several other people at once, like a telephone conference call (the MIU or Sniffer screen is split into an appropriate number of squares; the people involved in the groupface are each assigned one box; always the format in chatrooms on the Net)

hand-dancing—like dancing, but done only with the hands (usually considered very sexual, and involving many different moves; sometimes hand-dancers use lubricants)

Happy Hookah chatroom—one of the thousands of so-designated chatrooms on the SuperNet, where participants (usually Evolutionaries) smoke marijuana or hashish as a regular part of their participation; because of the drug use, all Happy Hookah chatrooms are designated “adults only” for participants (although anyone can “audit” any chatroom)

hard mail—same as “snail mail,” letters, postcards, packages, etc., communications that aren't on the Net

Human One—same as an animal; a human who is ruled by emotions and impulse, with the brain acting only as the servant of instinct (the term is used as a noun or an adjective)

Human One Consciousness—the consciousness of a Human One (short form “H1C”)

Human Three—a new (and perhaps the final) evolutionary state of humankind; a person who is both rational and instinctive (emotional), but who is always sure of which aspect is dominating, and who is

never in danger of acting impulsively when rationality is called for (the term is used as a noun or an adjective)

Human Three Consciousness—the consciousness of a Human Three (short form “H3C”)

Human Two—so-called “rational man,” a person who is both rational and instinctive (emotional), and who is never quite sure of which aspect is dominating, and who is always in danger of acting impulsively when rationality is called for (the term is used as a noun or an adjective)

Human Two Consciousness—the consciousness of a Human Two (short form “H2C”)

InfoBank—an extremely secure digital archiving facility maintained in Connecticut by the WDA for the sole use of agents over the Net; it has vast storage capabilities

InterBank—the WDA's digitized documenting of bioID-verified financial records and transfers (bills or coins are still in use in 2033, but mostly for small purchases, or by the poor, whose finances are often or permanently in the red)

Jesus-E—an Evolutionary clan of 100+ Christian monks who live in the decommissioned underground “Diefenbunker” just outside Carp, Ontario (across the Ottawa River from the Quyon/Shawville area); they raise grapes in bubbles and make fine wines, and their “hobby” is to dig a long tunnel under the surface of the Earth, ostensibly to find Satan and kill him; these monks take no names, never shave, almost never speak, and wear mediaeval robes with hoods; they believe, for reasons never quite explained to the outside world, that Victor Helliwell is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ

Jesus-Eer—a monk who is a member of the Jesus-E clan

Last Holocaust—term used to describe the events of April 29, 2014, when Bucharest, Romania was H-bombed by the Russians, and Leningrad, Russia was H-bombed by the USA (actually by General George Brampton, the renegade American general who was at that time the leader of the World Democratic Alliance, the precursor of the World Democratic Authority)

LieDeck—the revolutionary device built by Victor Helliwell, which detects lies by analyzing voice patterns (in 2033, and ever since the establishment of the WDA in 2014, the use of LieDecks is restricted to the WDA)

LieDeck-verification—the use of the LieDeck device by WDA agents to verify the truth (or not) of a spoken statement (for crime detection and prevention)

LieDeck-verify—a verb; to apply LieDeck-verification life-base—the main living area (may include some work areas) of a clan, almost always a large Pliesterine bubble with detached sleeperies plus a public restaurant life profile—one's life story, in the form of audio, audio-video, or written words, usually put together for the benefit of one's family, and future family members

Living Terminal—part of a “phase 2” Evolutionary clan's physical set-up, in Pliesterine bubbles or sleeperies; all areas where non-work activities take place, like sleeping, eating, bathing, entertainment, fun, intimacy, sports, etc.

LV—shorthand way of saying “LieDeck-verification” (used as a verb; to “LV” someone, or to be “LVed”)

Mainspoke—the enclosed wooden walkway that runs from the E-tery to the main bubble in the Victor-E clan's life-base

MGA—a Member of the (WDA's) General Assembly, always a general in the military of the nation that he or she represents

MIU—Master Interface Unit; the main device through which people access the SuperNet; it has a keyboard, but is generally voice-commanded; it is used to contact Netsites, as a source of entertainment (as with TV, except Netshows can be called up at any time), and as a videophone for personal telecommunications or chatrooms; the screen is large (from one foot square to wall-sized); the picture is in color (with satellite units, or Sniffers, the picture is in black-and-white); MIUs can also have bioID slots as a security system (a Sniffer does not have a bioID slot)

Netmail—like email, except with images and sound rather than, or in addition to, written words

N-mail—(see Netmail)

Net—short form for the SuperNet

Netalert—an alert sent out over the Net

Netbites—Like 20th-century “news bites” or “sound bites,” small audio-visual clips that can be found on the Net

Netburn—burnout or fatigue (even disorientation and a form of antisocial autism, in extreme cases) caused by spending too much time on the Net; Netburn is considered a psychiatric disorder in serious cases

Netcall—like a telephone call, but on the Net

Netcast—a broadcast over the Net

Netcolumn—like a column or opinion piece in a newspaper, but on the Net

Netdiary—a diary kept on the Net

Netevent—something significant that happens on the Net

Netface—verb; to face someone on the Net (often short-formed “face”); used as a noun too, meaning the message itself

Netfeed—digitized information flowing in to or out of an MIU or a Sniffer over the Net

Netfile—a file on the Net

Netfreak—a person who lives mostly on the Net, particularly referring to the “Happy Hookahs,” who virtually live in chatrooms (and smoke a lot of marijuana)

Netgrope—derisive synonym for Netsex

Netlink—a verb meaning to connect with a site or a person on the SuperNet, literally a synonym for “Netface” or “Netcall” when the other end of the transaction is a person

Netnews—much like television news, but available in whole or synopsis at any time, on command, over the Net, using an MIU or a Sniffer

Netsex—virtual sex; people enjoying auto-eroticism with one or more partners, done over the Net; often done gratis (between or among Evolutionaries), but also offered on a commercial basis by individuals,

companies and Evolutionary clans

Netshopping—to go shopping using the Net, either by searching for products or services by yourself or doing it with the help of a Net-based “clerk”

Netshow—like a television show, but on the Net

Netsite—the code for a person's address (or a company's, etc.) on the SuperNet

Netsnooping—the undisclosed ability of the WDA to spy on anyone using microphones and video lenses of any MIU; can be done by the WDA via an MIU even when the unit is turned off (as long as it's still plugged in), but can't be done via a Sniffer unless the unit is actually turned on

Netstation—a workstation made up of a chair, desk, and MIU with keyboard, camera, mikes, etc.

Netstuff—work done on an MIU or information stored in an MIU

Netters—people who work from their homes and do everything over the SuperNet (very common in 2033)

Nettime—time spent on the Net

Normal—spelled with a capital “N”, this word designates a person who is not an Evolutionary, and who generally lives a capitalist lifestyle, meant to be mildly critical, like “square” or “not hip”

on the warm—see “warm” (in person, as opposed to over the Net)

phase 2—Victor Helliwell's redesign of the economics of Evolutionism so as to better combat capitalist competition and to optimally connect commercial realities with human needs, but also to fully ingrain Human Three Consciousness in the person who lives with his or her economic realities organized this way

Pliesterine—a very light, very strong, stretchy material used (among other things) to make air-supported “bubble” buildings

Productive Terminal—a term referring to the part of a clan where productive work takes place, often (but not always) in the main bubble or on Bubble Street

RCMP—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the equivalent of the FBI in America

SST—short form for “Social Service Terminal”

STD—sexually transmitted disease

Sex-E virtual community—a Netbased, global group of three million Evolutionaries for whom sex had become the main point of life

Sex-Een—a member of the Sex-E virtual community
simLV—simulated LieDeck-verification
simLV group—a group of people, virtually always Evolutionaries and Human Threes, who analyze and pick away at the stories of the parties in a dispute until the simLV group is sure they know who is lying (and why) without the aid of a LieDeck device
sleepery—a dormitory, usually for 6 to 12 people, usually detached from the main bubble but connected to it by enclosed wooden “spokes” or walkways
snail mail—a slang term for “hard mail”

Sniffer—short for “SuperNet Interfacer,” a recently-introduced (2023) hand-held device that receives and sends data just like an MIU, except the screen is only 5 inches square, and visual images are

monochrome (black-and-white) only; it is much more than just a videophone, as it connects, like a portable home phone, to an MIU, and can use the MIU's internal programs, commands, stored information or resources; a Sniffer only has a limited keyboard, and is usually used as an audio or AV communication, research or display device; video images sent by a Sniffer are ten per second max, which produces a slightly jerky picture at the receiving end, even if the receiver is an MIU

Social Service Terminal—the new “phase 2” aspect that Helliwell adds to Evolution's economic structure, where half of a members’ on-going savings from income (formerly all of which became personal retirement savings) are used to better the human condition in the surrounding “Normal” community; these social services or facilities are provided free to the public, and monies are spent by SSTs according to the decisions of a users’ committee, on the sole condition that the use of such monies can be shown to improve the quality of life

SoftE—the commercial Netsex operation associated with the Victor-E clan spoke—noun, enclosed wooden walkways that fan out from the main bubble of a clan to the various sleeperies and other facilities associated with a clan's life-base squashy—an electronic message in super-compressed-data form; a squashy takes very little time to transmit, but must be electronically reconstructed at the receiving end (decompressed), resulting in a slightly artificial quality of the sound and an inferior visual image

SuperNet—the system that replaced the Internet; a worldwide, digital, visual/audio communication and information system, supplied free by the WDA to all world citizens to access by way of their personal MIUs or Sniffers tingle—a sexual feeling or experience, usually but not necessarily including orgasm transition—the process of getting from Human Two Consciousness to Human Three Consciousness transition guide (or CQ assistant)—someone who assists, over the Net, a client who is interested in not just analyzing or evaluating his or her consciousness quotient but also upgrading same (mostly clients who decide to move from Human Two to Human Three Consciousness)

Upper America—the land mass from Panama to the North Pole

Victor-E—the first-ever Evolutionary clan, formed in 2015 outside Shawville, Québec; named after Victor Helliwell; in 2033, Victor-E has 320 members

Victor-Een—a member of the Victor-E clan warm (as in “on the warm”)—face to face, in person, as opposed to “over the Net”

warmlife—direct social intercourse, meeting or interacting with others “in person” (as opposed to “cyberlife,” which is on or over the Net)

WDA—the World Democratic Authority, the military world government that took over the United Nations in 2014 (WDA also stands for the World Democratic Alliance, the outlaw international anti-communist organization which pre-dated the 2014 LieDeck Revolution and subsequently became the World Democratic Authority)

wetware—as in software and hardware, wetware refers to the brain, or the processing ability of the brain (as the human body is made up largely of water)

W.I.B.—the World Identity Bank (see below)

World Democratic Alliance—(see WDA)

World Democratic Authority—(see WDA)

World Identity Bank—an enormous new digital facility built in California in 2033 by the WDA; it is a free

service through which citizens can permanently archive their life stories in digital form for the enjoyment and information of their descendants, forever into the future, with access determined by the person whose life story it is

ZPG—zero population growth; a form of stasis, where fecundity is approximately equal to morbidity on the global stage