

What Air Supports Us

A Novel by

William A. Stubblefield

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For my wife, Merry

*The giant in whose apertures we
cohabit, unaware of what air supports
us . . .*

William Carlos Williams

Paterson

PROLOGUE

The building listened across uncounted iterations. It listened to the faint radio signatures of its occupants' identification badges, tracking their movements through its chambers, anticipating their needs, tracing the patterns of their intent. At 1:05:36 AM, it noted that Edward Walters occupied room 213, his own office. It detected no other occupants.

It listened for voice commands requesting services or information. It listened without boredom or curiosity. At 7:32:44 PM, Edward Walters had requested privacy, and a nearby computer had disabled the camera above his display screen. The building had experienced no loss of sight, for the camera was not one of its senses: it was only another source of the data humming in its wires and optical fibers, in its memory and processors. Instead, it continued to listen. Should he choose to initiate a videoconference, or to let others see into his office, he need only ask.

Security systems had locked all entrances to anyone unfamiliar, to anyone not possessing the small plastic badge with its ordinary identification photo and constant electromagnetic song. Motion sensors monitored the building's perimeter. One of them detected movement, and pattern recognition algorithms classified it as a small animal, possibly a cat or a rabbit. Response procedures neither illuminated the area, nor notified the police.

The building regulated its temperature, humidity and power consumption, balancing human comfort against the goal of conserving energy. It understood neither need: its homeostatic mechanisms required neither reason nor sensation. Based on Edward Walters' patterns of activity and the time of night, it computed only a slight probability he would enter any area except his office, the men's room, or the hallway leading to the exit. As a consequence, it had reduced the heat in all other parts of the building, and darkened unneeded lights and computer displays. To retain warmth and enhance security, it had shuttered all windows, except those looking out from Edward Walters' office.

All of this activity, all of the building's decisions, all of its automatic, rolling awareness emerged from millions of interactions among thousands of agents: small, autonomous programs executing silently on computers scattered throughout laboratories and offices, hallways and meeting rooms. Agents fed the displays on desktops, wall panels and wireless notepads. They answered requests through the voice interface. Agents flowed like blood through the building's electronic viscera, carrying data and capability,

crowding through wires and fiber like platelets swept along in the body's turbulent plasma.

Some of these agents served Edward Walters. Unseen, a research agent performed its nightly task of constructing his morning "newspaper," scanning selected Internet sources for topics of interest to him. It read each article with inhuman comprehension, applying semantic rules to strings of text, constructing models of each article's content, networks of propositions it matched against models of Ed Walters' interests. It assembled the best matches into a momentary reflection of a unique human being's curiosity and concerns.

Sensing he was in his office, Edward Walters' agents continued to maintain his workspace on the large flat-panel display at his desk. Among the notes, diagrams and windows scattered across the screen, only the image of a second hand on a virtual clock face appeared to move, a wave of darkness orbiting in a sky of white pixels.

His music agent continued to play pieces from his preferred collection. The current selection was the Adagio from the *First Brandenburg Concerto*, by J. S. Bach. As programmed, it played the music softly. Should another person enter the room, it would reduce the volume still further.

Silently, with automatic, plural intelligence, the building listened through the night, unconcerned at Ed Walters' late hours, or the unusual quiet in his office. Sightless, it could not know that his trash can had been overturned, scattering crumpled paper like white carnations across the floor. Listening only, it was unaware his chair had fallen on its side near the bookcase, and lain there through the night. Lacking vision or compassion, it

could not respond to the sight of Edward Walters' body lying on the floor beside his desk, nor could it comprehend the Rorschach of dark blood drying on the pale gray carpet beneath him.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Elizabeth Florczyk moved the small pile of papers to the corner of her desk, next to a half-dozen yet unread technical journals. It was all that remained after she had thrown away a mountain of notes, reminders, sketches and outlines – anything whose associated deadlines had either passed, or vanished among the changing priorities that abet creative people. Earlier, she had triaged days of accumulated e-mail, answering the few messages that required a simple response, saving for later those that needed more attention, and discarding the rest. She'd cleared a backlog of minor administrative tasks, and pruned back the sticky note reminders that grew around her monitor like ivy around a window. She'd attended to all the tiny, cumulative acts of order that circumscribed her bright community, the ordinary rituals through which we compose islands of reason against dissonant circumstance.

Today, none of them seemed to help. She was frustrated with the rumors multiplying through the systems, impatient with the lack of information, and, more than anything else, she was tired of waiting. If Robert had not asked everyone to stay at their desks and be available to the police, she would have gone home hours ago.

She heard her door open, and turned in her chair to face it.

“Excuse me, Elizabeth?”

Robert Hill, the project’s director and chief scientist, leaned into her office past the partly opened door. Elizabeth recognized the hard timbre of self control in his even baritone. She rolled her chair back from the desk, and saw a stranger behind him.

As Robert pushed the door open wide and entered, Elizabeth heard the system lower the music that played constantly in her office. She’d been too preoccupied to notice it, and paradoxically, the lowered volume brought it to her attention. She brushed her finger down the graceful concavity of a small abstract sculpture sitting at the corner of her desk. The curved plastic changed color from warm green to navy blue, and the music stopped. She stood up to meet Robert’s guest.

“Dr. Elizabeth Florczyk,” Robert said, “I’d like you to meet Lieutenant Victor Rodriguez of the Albuquerque Police Department.”

Robert stressed her last name, as if to make sure the officer heard its correct pronunciation: “Flor-check.”

“Dr. Florczyk,” the detective said, stepping toward her and shaking her hand.

With his gray tweed jacket, black slacks, light blue shirt and maroon regimental striped tie, Victor Rodriguez could have passed for a job candidate, or one of the visiting scientists who regularly toured the building.

“Elizabeth,” Robert asked, “I was wondering if you could spend a few minutes with us?”

“Of course. Please, sit down.”

She removed her dark green, cloth shoulder bag from the chair she kept for visitors, and placed it on the floor beside her desk. The detective relaxed into the ergonomic steel and mesh frame with more grace than she’d expected. Robert walked across the hall to fetch a chair for himself.

Victor Rodriguez was a large man, and his wide back strained against the chair’s bio-mechanical contours. He appeared fit, with only the beginning traces of the thickness so often found on forty-five year old ex-athletes. The crook in his otherwise straight nose recalled his days as a walk-on linebacker at the University of New Mexico; his prominent jaw and short black hair, peppered with gray, further suggested an ex-athlete’s easy good nature. Only his patient eyes evidenced a subtle intelligence, an intelligence honed to darker wisdom by twenty years with the Albuquerque Police Department.

“Could I get you anything?” Elizabeth asked. “The kitchen is just around the corner . . .”

“No, no thank you,” the detective said, shaking his head and smiling slightly.

He did not take advantage of the opening to begin the routine interview she assumed brought him to her office, nor did he initiate the small talk people use to fill the time spent waiting for a meeting to begin. Not

wishing to enlarge the context of his visit, Elizabeth waited quietly for Robert to return. She watched the detective glance around the carefully proportioned office, inventorying the tools and souvenirs she'd brought into it, quietly measuring the tracks her occupancy left on its smooth, corporate surface.

As in most modern offices, a flat-panel computer monitor, keyboard and mouse dominated the desk, but the beige computer case and trailing wires that usually accompanied them were missing. Instead, a small, black hemisphere at the top of the monitor drew information and capability directly from the room's constant electromagnetic touch. No cables tied the mouse and keyboard to the display: software agents listened to both devices and synchronized the images on the screen with their movements. Smaller, more specialized devices clustered around the large monitor, like birds around a feeder.

The "sculpture" Elizabeth had used to turn off the music was one of these experimental controls. Its shape, like the leaf of an imagined tropical plant, or the palm of a gently cupped hand, invited touch. A finger moving up or down across its surface sent the message "more" or "less" to a listening agent, and its color followed along the spectrum. Although she used it to control the volume of her music, she could have connected it to any agent that could respond to its simple message. Elizabeth had led the team that designed it.

What looked like a row of ordinary photographs in brushed metal frames sat on a shelf above the large monitor. Several of these showed people working at their desks. Had it not been for all he had seen since beginning

this investigation, Victor would have been startled to notice that some of the images moved. The other frames contained still photographs of faces with the words "privacy requested" beneath them. Buttons appeared at the bottom of each screen. He guessed they were some sort of messaging system, with each display connected to a different individual.

An apparently ordinary calendar sat on the desk beside an aggressively modern, steel desk lamp, with a print of Georgia O'Keefe's *Oriental Poppies* showing above the month of December. It was not until the poppies softened into white lilies, and December cycled into a daily appointment calendar, that Victor realized it was yet another computer display.

Oddly, the ubiquitous technology did not dominate Elizabeth Florczyk's office, but seemed to colonize the spaces shaped by its occupant's personality. The messaging system's displays shared the top of her monitor with a model of the starship *Voyager* and a wind-up plastic model of a robot Victor remembered from a grade-B science fiction movie whose name he'd long ago forgotten. At least a dozen plants lined the large window, or competed with scientific books for space on the shelves next to her desk, and he noticed the faint smell of potting soil. A large, framed drawing of a cat hung above her desk. Outlined in simple, almost abstract shapes and colored bright red, it had the name "Sam" written beside it in script. The poster conveyed a subversive wit absent from most "cat art," and Victor noticed Andy Warhol's signature in the drawing's corner.

In spite of all the technical invention and human souvenirs around him, Victor's eyes fixed on an old photograph in an inexpensive black plastic

frame at the rear of the desk. The snapshot caught a teenage girl posing self-consciously beside an older African-American woman. The older woman wore a long, blue formal satin dress, and a piano and drum kit stood in the background. A crowd filled the back and edges of the picture. Some people stared uninvited into the camera, their faces washed out by the flash; most ignored it, talking in groups of two or three. He could not place the older woman, but beneath the layered, rock and roll haircut, he recognized Elizabeth Florczyk's wide, quick mouth and gray-green eyes.

She saw him suppress a smile as he looked at the picture. Elizabeth did not tell him the story of its origins, a story her father still repeated at family gatherings. When she was thirteen and dreamed of growing up to be a professional musician, Elizabeth had begged and bargained until her parents interrupted a family vacation in Washington, DC, and took her to a Georgetown nightclub to hear one of Mary Lou Williams' last performances. As soon as the legendary pianist had finished her set, as soon as the final applause had ended, she'd dragged her father on-stage, cleared an opening in the crowd, and made him take the photograph that caught the quiet detective's attention.

Robert returned with the extra chair, and closed the door. Victor Rodriguez began to speak as soon as he sat down.

"Dr. Florczyk, as you probably know, I'm looking into the death of Edward Walters."

"People have been talking about it all day," Elizabeth acknowledged. The detective nodded, but said nothing.

"They say it wasn't an accident," she probed.

Victor Rodriguez responded with the standard phrases about needing to investigate all unexplained deaths. Elizabeth had expected the evasion, but had hoped she would be able to read something in his voice or manner. She could not.

Robert unbuttoned his suit jacket, and leaned forward in the chair with his hands clasped together and his forearms on his knees. Elizabeth recognized the posture: he used it when he wanted to take control of a conversation, or impress an underling with his sincerity or the gravity of his request. In spite of the circumstances, the calculated body language annoyed her. Robert Hill was charismatic enough to control a discussion without tricks.

“Elizabeth,” he said deliberately, “I’ve brought Lieutenant Rodriguez to you for more than a few routine questions.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“The lieutenant and I have discussed ways the data recorded in our systems might help in his investigation,” Robert explained. “I’ve given him some things already, and told him a little about our project and the information it might provide. He’ll need one of our staff, someone who understands our technology, to work with him – to be his liaison with our systems.”

He paused, as if waiting for Elizabeth to make the obvious inference. She said nothing.

“I’d like for you to be that person,” he finally concluded.

Elizabeth leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. The idea of rummaging through her colleagues' e-mail with a policeman looking over her shoulder did not excite her.

"I'm not exactly the best person for this," she said after a moment. "You really should talk to Wayne."

Robert said nothing, but stared at her as if waiting for her to recognize some obvious necessity. She held the stare briefly, then turned to the detective.

"Wayne Ballard is our head systems programmer," she explained. "He knows these systems inside-out."

Robert leaned back, frowned and rubbed his chin with his left hand. He stared at her and rocked slightly in his chair. After several moments, he leaned forward.

"Elizabeth, I'd like for you to handle this," he said, his voice hardening slightly, like a horn pushed to the edge of its range.

She shook her head, and leaned forward to face him. "My field is human-computer interaction; you need someone with systems . . ."

He interrupted her. "I believe your training as a researcher gives you the ability to see the larger picture."

The larger picture, she thought. *At least he's not talking about paradigm shifts or thinking out of the box.* She glanced at the detective briefly, then nodded.

"I'll probably need Wayne's help," she said, falling into the engineer's habit of negotiating the scope of a new project.

“Elizabeth,” Robert said, trying with visible effort to maintain a conciliatory tone, “I’ve promised Lieutenant Rodriguez our full cooperation. Recruit whomever you need.”

She noticed the irritation beneath Robert’s carefully tailored persona, and, in spite of the circumstances, felt an involuntary, passing sense of satisfaction. A little over a month ago, they had ended their year long romantic relationship. More to the point, Elizabeth had moved out angrily after discovering the last of what she eventually learned was a series of betrayals: short-lived affairs he pursued on business trips and afternoons away from work. After the breakup, they had agreed to minimize their interactions while the wounds healed, to keep their distance in a building designed to eliminate the distances between its occupants.

Elizabeth glanced at Victor Rodriguez, and saw his dark, patient eyes move from Robert to her and back. She reminded herself that this was not the time to indulge her resentment toward the project’s chief scientist.

They talked for several minutes more, with Robert outlining what he expected. He wanted her to acquaint the police with the building’s capabilities, to help them select information that might be relevant to the investigation, and to provide it in a form they could use. Elizabeth said little, but listened past his specific requests to hear the reasons behind them. It was a habit she’d developed over the years she’d spent designing software: the less she pushed a boss or customer to clarify his expectations, the more freedom she would have to meet his needs. From time to time, she glanced at the detective. On the surface, at least, he also seemed content to let Robert lead the conversation. As the discussion came to a close, Robert looked at

each of them in turn, making sure there were no further disagreements, questions, or loose ends. It was his customary way of ending a meeting.

He stood up and buttoned the jacket of his navy blue suit with a practiced, economical sweep of his right hand.

“Lieutenant, if you'll excuse me, I need to return to my office. Dr. Florczyk will help you in any way you need,” he glanced at Elizabeth and smiled, “. . . or find someone who can.”

She ignored the remark.

Victor stood up and thanked him. Robert shook his hand, reaching out with his left hand to grasp the detective's upper arm.

“I just hope we can help,” he said, holding the handshake, as if trying to establish some bond between them. “I cannot begin to tell you how upset my staff and I are over this . . . this outrage.”

Elizabeth saw Robert's eyes shine with moisture, and felt a brief, surprisingly intense sympathy for him. He released Victor Rodriguez' hand, and stepped back into the doorway.

“Dr. Florczyk will show you up to my office when you're finished,” he told the detective.

He looked at Elizabeth.

“Thank you,” he said simply, then turned and walked out of the doorway's narrow opening.

Victor Rodriguez sat down, giving no indication he had noticed either her reticence or Robert's irritated reaction to it. Finding herself alone with the officer left Elizabeth feeling oddly self-conscious.

“I apologize if I seemed reluctant to help,” she explained. “I just wanted to make sure we found the right people to assist you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I know this is difficult.”

“Do you really believe Ed might have been murdered?” she asked.

The detective looked at her thoughtfully, as if measuring her question against her importance to his investigation. Finally, he answered.

“We won’t know for sure until later, but I believe he was.”

The simple, open response caught Elizabeth off guard. Earlier in the day, the more curious of her colleagues had abused their access to the usage database, the building’s record of all human activity within it, to see if Ed might have had any unexplained visitors. The fact that he had been completely alone since last entering his office yesterday afternoon had already filled the building’s electronic and traditional gossip networks.

“But the usage data . . .” Elizabeth began automatically.

She saw him frown and nod, acknowledging that he had seen the data. She sat quietly as the significance of his admission spread through her mind. He not only believed that someone had murdered Ed Walters, but also that his killer had deliberately evaded the building’s bland, constant attention. Involuntarily, she shook her head and looked down at the floor. She did not move or speak for several seconds, and the detective did not intrude. Abruptly, she sat up in her chair, breathed deeply, and pushed a few strands of fallen brown hair away from her face.

“How should we start?” she asked.

Victor smiled. “Dr. Hill has already given us a great deal of useful information from your computers. Frankly, I’m not sure what else to ask for.”

“There is quite a lot, actually,” Elizabeth said. “This is not an ordinary office building.”

“I’ve gotten that impression . . .”

“It was designed as a research prototype for studying the integration of architectural and computational spaces . . .”

Elizabeth stopped. She realized she’d slipped into the comfortable, automatic narrative of her technical presentations.

“I apologize for the jargon,” she said. “Robert usually just calls it an ‘intelligent building.’”

“What does that mean exactly?”

“Well, it’s not quite as sci-fi as it sounds,” she began, trying to avoid the narrow dialect of the software engineer. “The basic idea is pretty simple. Instead of putting a computer on everyone’s desk, the building itself manages all our data and communications.”

She gestured toward the monitor, keyboard and the many specialized extensions of the building’s undifferentiated presence that covered her desk.

“These devices,” she explained, “are simply interfaces to the building’s wireless systems. We’ve tried to replace personal computers with a universal, shared information space. Robert is right in thinking it may help your investigation.”

Victor nodded for her to continue. His expression gave no indication that Robert had told him anything about the building’s network of computers, sensors and radio transceivers, or about the way it tracked everything from people’s work activities to the temperature in their offices. She doubted Robert had kept silent about its abilities – he was too proud of them.

Instead, she assumed the detective's apparent ignorance was an investigator's technique for drawing her out. She used similar methods in her own research into the human factors surrounding the building's abilities, in her interviews and studies with its occupants.

“We wanted to do more than just put all our data on some central system and make it available through a wireless network. We wanted to create an environment that could sense and interact with the people inside it, that could help them with their work and communications.”

She held up the ordinary-looking plastic photo ID she wore on a gold chain around her neck.

“The systems recognize us through small transmitters in our badges,” she explained. “It uses them to locate us in the building – it keeps that information in the usage database . . .”

She paused involuntarily at the mention of the data that should have proven Ed's death an accident. Victor waited attentively.

“It also uses our badges to route messages and data to us,” she continued, “to conserve energy without making people uncomfortable, and so on. But, what's most important,” she paused for emphasis, “is we're trying to give the building the ability to understand our work, to infer our needs – to support us like a human assistant.”

Victor exhaled loudly and shook his head. She saw him suppress a smile, and for a moment, he seemed almost like an ordinary visitor, giving in to the amazement the building – her building – so often inspired. She wondered if it was a deliberate effort to make her feel at ease.

Those are our goals, but we're not there yet," she continued. "Technology isn't the obstacle – we have the hardware and much of the software we need. Human factors are the problem. We don't really understand how people will respond to this kind of information rich, adaptive environment, so we've been using the building itself to gather data on how people interact with it. It records where everyone goes in the course of the workday, who they talk to, and what tools or data they use. Essentially, we're all Guinea pigs in our own experiment."

Elizabeth realized she was once again slipping into a comfortable discussion of the building's abilities.

"I think there are many ways it could help in your investigation," she concluded self consciously.

"That's the clearest explanation I've heard yet," the detective said in a relaxed, friendly voice. "I can see why Dr. Hill asked you to help me."

Elizabeth felt herself flush.

"Let's see if we can find a conference room," she suggested. "It will be more comfortable, and we can use the large display."

What was more important, Elizabeth realized she did not want to continue the conversation in her own office. It was her sanctuary in a very public place, and she recognized her instinctive desire to protect it from the cold circumstances surrounding Ed Walters' death. She spoke toward the ceiling, in a voice slightly louder than normal.

"Pops, find me the closest available conference room."

Victor heard an old man's voice, coming from a location vaguely above and behind him.

“Conference room 115 is available.”

The voice seemed familiar, but Victor couldn't place it.

“Pops, reserve it for the rest of the afternoon,” she instructed.

“Room 115 is reserved until five o'clock,” the familiar voice answered.

Unlike most synthesized speech, the phrasing bridged the syllables into a remarkably natural rendering of an old man's graveled yet musical voice.

“You can talk to your computers?” Victor asked as he stood up.

“We have the option of voice interaction,” she explained, “but I usually prefer the mouse and keyboard. They're faster, and voice recognition still has some bugs. I really only use it if I'm away from a keyboard – or if I have a guest.”

“Why is that?” Victor asked.

“It seems more polite than ignoring people while I stare at a computer screen.”

“Why do you call it 'Pops'?”

“We use a keyword or phrase to let it know a command is coming, and I liked 'Pops.’”

“After your grandfather?”

“Actually, it's the nickname musicians gave Louis Armstrong.”

Victor smiled. “I thought I recognized the voice.”

“I had a summer intern who worked on voice modeling. When he found out I'd named my system after Louis Armstrong, he set it to sound like him.”

She paused.

“I used to be a musician,” she added, as if that simple fact explained everything.

Elizabeth saw Victor’s eyes return to the snapshot of her younger self cornering Mary Lou Williams on the stage of a Washington nightclub. Once again, felt a self-conscious reluctance to continue the conversation in her office. She gestured toward the door.

Before leaving, Victor called his partner on the radio he carried, and asked him to meet them at the conference room. Then, he followed Elizabeth down the gray carpeted hallway, between a row of offices and a cluster of blue-walled cubicles. He did not try to engage her in conversation, but seemed fascinated by the clash between the corporate geometry of the cubicle farm, and the lush chaos that grew over its desktops, shelves and blue carpeted walls. It was early December, and Christmas decorations added to the clutter around them. As they walked, Elizabeth saw him glance into a particularly disorderly work area and smile.

She felt grateful for the silence, for the opportunity to think back through the day’s events, and re-interpret them in light of this new, darker pattern of the world. As she led the detective down the familiar hall, Elizabeth recalled the hours preceding her meeting with him and Robert. She remembered the abruptness with which Ed Walters’ death had displaced the day’s ordinary beginnings.

She had almost finished her first cup of coffee when Ed Walters’ secretary had discovered his body. Elizabeth had heard neither her cry, nor the initial disturbance around his office. Instead, she’d noticed a growing commotion in the halls, a busy hum that seemed to run through the building

itself, an audible echo of the ambient, electromagnetic conversations inside its walls. At first, she'd thought it was a technical problem. System failures interrupted the flow of work as decisively as an earthquake or fire, and brought people into the halls for a combined coffee break, office party and technical conference that inevitably outlived the problem that inspired it.

She'd noticed no problems with her own system, and had tried to ignore the noise. She'd closed her door, and turned up the music that played constantly in her office. Almost immediately, one of the "photographs" sitting above her monitor had caught her attention. She'd heard a soft, synthesized chord, and the frame around a view of Jennifer Sorenson's office had turned red and pulsed faintly. As Elizabeth touched the button on the frame of her friend's picture, Jen's face had filled the larger screen below it.

As she led Victor down the hall, Elizabeth let the conversation play in her memory . . .

Jen's face filled Elizabeth's monitor, and the slight fish-eye effect of the video camera and Jen's theatrical use of eye liner had combined to accentuate her eyes. They were blue, inquisitive and clearly upset.

"Libby, haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Heard what?" Jen parroted back at her in mock disbelief. "They found Ed Walters dead in his office."

"What are you talking about?"

"They found him dead," Jen repeated. "The place is swarming with cops. Don't you ever stick your head outside?"

“No. I mean, I heard some commotion in the hall, but I didn’t know . . .”

“They found him on the floor, in a pool of blood,” Jen interrupted. “It looks like he fell and hit his head.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Are you going to be in your office?”

Jen glanced toward her office door and back at the camera. “Maybe I’ll be out in the hall with some people,” she said after a moment.

“I’ll be right there.”

Jen nodded and the video window closed.

Elizabeth started down the hall, trying to avoid the clusters of people who had gathered at intervals to talk about Ed’s death. On the way, she heard Robert’s voice and saw his face appear on the screens placed every few yards along the hallway. When inactive, they appeared to be decorative black panels set into the wall. Available throughout the building, people used them to access data or locate colleagues while away from their offices. When management activated all of them at once for some official announcement, the recurrence of self-important faces, and studied, casual dress reminded her of an updated version of *1984* in which “Big Brother” shopped at The Gap.

She joined a group clustered around the nearest monitor. A few days ago, Christmas decorations had appeared around it, and they stood in ironic contrast to the message on the screen. Robert looked visibly upset as he made the official announcement of Ed’s death. He called it a tragic accident, but gave no details. He asked people to remain at their desks, and avoid the area near Ed’s office. As he ended the announcement, the screen went blank.

Immediately, the people near the monitor resumed talking loudly, alternately speculating on the cause of Ed's death, and complaining about Robert's failure to say anything substantive. Elizabeth extricated herself from the conversation and hurried to Jen's office. Her friend wasn't there.

Two men were standing in front of the nearest wall panel, arguing over the meaning of Robert's announcement. A third tried futilely to interrupt from the display. Elizabeth stepped into Jen's office to access the system.

"Pops," she asked, "where is Jennifer Sorenson?"

"She's not in her office, now is she darlin'?"

When her student intern had programmed her assistant to sound like Louis Armstrong, he'd also left the normally helpful agent booby-trapped with a collection of wise-cracks, set to begin triggering randomly a few weeks after he'd returned to Stanford. Once again, she reminded herself to disable the "feature" when she had time.

"Pops," she repeated, "where is Jennifer Sorenson?"

"She is in the lobby."

Elizabeth hurried to the front of the building, and found a crowd gathered along the edge of the large, glass-walled lobby. She guessed the uniformed officer at the bottom of the stairs had asked them to stand clear. She noticed a half dozen police cars and vans parked at odd angles outside the entrance.

She found Jen at the center of a particularly vocal group, and worked her way toward them. As Elizabeth expected, most of the noise was coming from her friend. She looked around for Thomas Lee, and found him standing nearby.

“Thomas,” she said, leaning toward him to be heard above the conversations echoing from the lobby’s hard surfaces, “what’s going on?”

“Hi Libby,” he said, turning toward her.

Elizabeth regarded Thomas as either a friend or a mascot – her attitude depended on whether he was acting seriously or behaving like the twenty-three year old kid he was.

“I’m not sure exactly what happened,” he said. “All I know is Ed Walters’ secretary found him dead in his office. I think he fell and hit his head.”

“Are you OK?” she asked.

“Sure.”

Instinctively, Elizabeth put her arm around his shoulder, and felt his composure soften. He put his arm around her waist and leaned against her, as if seeking comfort from an older sister. Jen was not so quiet. She was arguing vigorously with a pair of programmers Elizabeth recognized from the voice interface project.

“No,” Jen insisted, “just because there are a bunch of cops here, it doesn’t mean he was murdered.”

“Come on, Jen,” the youngest of the two programmers complained. He had a sparse goatee and wore a gray plaid flannel shirt open over baggy jeans and a black t-shirt.

“The cops just keep coming,” he argued, “they must have found something.”

“No, it means they haven’t determined it was an accident, and they have to investigate. It’s just procedure,” she explained with an exaggerated show of patience, “they won’t know anything until later.”

Jen’s short, almost spiked blonde hair, multiple earrings, and art school wardrobe belied the rigorous logic she brought to this, and most, situations.

Flannel shirt shook his head and retreated, joining a friendlier, more speculative group nearby. His friend, a smaller kid in a blue polo shirt and khakis, followed. Jen saw Elizabeth, and walked over.

“Are you OK?” Elizabeth asked her.

“Yeah, I’m fine, but this place is going nuts.”

“She isn’t fine,” Thomas told Elizabeth.

“Shut up, Thomas,” Jen said.

“See what I mean?” He spoke directly to Elizabeth, like a doctor ignoring a patient to discuss her symptoms with a colleague

“I checked the usage database,” Jen said, ignoring him, “Ed was alone in his office all night. He probably had a heart attack or something.”

The usage database kept a record of everyone’s movements through the building. Although they were only authorized to use it for officially sanctioned research into the way people used the building systems, Elizabeth was not surprised Jen’s curiosity had overridden the rules.

“These idiots keep starting rumors,” Jen continued, tilting her head to indicate the crowd around her. “They say someone took off their badge and killed him, or that someone sneaked into the building without a badge, or that someone murdered him, then went back and changed the database.”

She exhaled impatiently. “I’m still waiting for someone to claim they heard gunshots from the ‘grassy knoll.’”

“It’s just human nature,” Thomas assured her. “As soon as the cops tell us something, they’ll calm down.”

Jen glared at him. He shrugged. A smile crossed his fine boned face and dark, slanted eyes. Jen’s mock anger faded and she returned the smile.

A voice in the crowd asked if the police had removed the body, and the programmer with the goatee and flannel shirt walked to an information kiosk set in the lobby’s wall. Like the displays in the hallway, it included a large, touch sensitive monitor, camera and a voice interface, but this was tailored to visitors. Two even larger displays flanked the monitor. One presented a map of the building, with dots representing people moving through its halls and offices. It showed a large cluster of dots in the lobby. The other panel showed a similar map, with a superimposed schematic of the building’s computer network. Pulses of light moved through its filaments, indicating the rate of network communications. Together, the panels mapped all the building’s activity, both human and computational. Two perfect, almost identical potted palms flanked the installation. Using the voice interface, flannel shirt asked the building to locate Ed Walters.

“Edward Walters is in his office,” it answered.

“Haven’t they removed the body?” someone asked.

“It could just be his badge, I heard they took the body out an hour ago,” flannel shirt speculated.

“Then why is the medical examiner’s van still parked outside?” Jen yelled across the crowd.

Flannel shirt ignored her, and she shook her head in irritation.

Elizabeth did not join the debate, but stood quietly within the rippling crowd. She watched it continuously reorganize itself into small, shifting discussion groups as rumors mutated through it. She watched people break away to return to their offices, to be replaced by others who entered the lobby from the back of the building, or who descended from the second floor, watched by the officers at the top and bottom of the staircase. She watched them drift off to call home with the news, or to enter one of the building's virtual environments seeking comfort, facts or fresh speculation.

The virtual environments, or VEs, were graphical chat rooms. They took videos of their participants from the cameras sitting above their display panels, and arranged them around an image of a table to give the illusion of a live conference. Image processing systems scaled faces to an appropriate size, oriented them so they appeared to look across a table at each other, and replaced the clutter of people's offices with a consistent background. The result was, at first glance, surprisingly realistic. Panels that looked like ordinary office "white boards" stood behind and above the participants, where anyone could display data for the rest to see. Although intended to support technical collaborations, the VEs found use in ways their designers had not imagined.

Only minutes after Ed's death became known, someone had set up a virtual environment for discussing it. As the crowds around the tables grew, and different topics of conversation emerged, the environments split into smaller discussions, organized around specific subjects. By noon, a virtual conference on Ed Walters' death had spread across the network. People could

select anything from a rumor management center, to an ongoing criticism of management's handling of the situation, to a wake where people shared their remembrances of the dead man. The information hungry joined multiple VEs, arranging them in panels on their screens. They complemented the small groups in the halls and the lobby, and people moved freely between them and the irreducible comfort of face-to-face, human contact.

After an hour, tired of the crowd and their speculation, Elizabeth had returned to her office and closed the door. Jen and Thomas had followed a few minutes later, camping in her office for much of the morning. They'd talked and drank coffee, entered one virtual environment after another, and made it all but impossible for her to ignore the spiraling discussions about Ed's death.

By late morning, Jen had become fed up with the waiting and the endless recycling of rumors. As abruptly as a cut in a hip-hop video, she'd announced she'd had enough and was going home. Elizabeth had urged her to tell the police she was leaving. Jen had shrugged and walked calmly down the hall. Thomas had left soon after, returning to his own cubicle.

Alone in her office, Elizabeth had tried to distract herself with the trivial administrative tasks she saved for times she felt too tired for her scientific work. As she'd sifted through the e-mail and notes, she'd waited for Robert to announce that Ed had fallen after tripping over his chair, or as a side-effect of a heart attack or some other tragic but commonplace cause. She'd waited for him to make a show of pulling the community together with appropriate, measured sentiments before sending them home to deal with their private grief and shock. She had worked at her desk until late in the

afternoon, until Robert brought Victor Rodriguez into her office, until their request for her help and the reflexes of her own intellect had entangled her in the spreading consequences of Ed Walters' violent, puzzling death.

CHAPTER 2

As Victor followed Elizabeth from her office to the conference room, he saw her grow quiet and turn inward, as if she was trying to arrange the events of the day within some private field of understanding, to situate them around some internal fixed point. He chose not to intrude. Instead, he took the time to compose his own impressions of this almost magical building and the apparently ordinary crime that brought him to it.

He looked into the cubicles and offices they passed, comparing their creative disorder with the larger, carefully groomed corporate offices that took up most of the second floor. The people here were young, and seemed to be either working in a state of exhausted intensity or not doing much at all. Most desks were a mess. In spite of the building's remarkable capabilities, paper was everywhere, as if no amount of computer hardware could replace

the ancient, tangible, infinitely flexible medium. Most computer monitors had at least one or two wind-up toys, slinkies or other chotchkies arranged across their tops. Passing an open door, Victor recognized the chorus of a song he'd often heard in his daughter's room, but whose name he could not recall. Posters commemorated all facets of programmer culture: everything from the Grateful Dead to Phish, from Dilbert to M. C. Escher, from the Macintosh computer to the Java programming language.

Victor glanced at his reluctant associate. Still deep in thought, Elizabeth did not notice his stare. Victor found her attractive, and allowed himself to enjoy the feeling. She was younger than he – Victor guessed she was still under thirty-five – and wore little makeup, as if her quick, expressive features rejected the encumbrance. Her jeans fit tightly enough to suggest a good figure beneath her loose sweater. She wore her light brown hair just off her shoulders, and frequently pushed the odd strand from her face. It was a mannerism she shared with his wife – his Michelle – and the comparison made him smile.

Like all murder investigations, Ed Walters' death had kept him busy most of the day. Now, he enjoyed this opportunity to examine the strange, bright building with a broader focus, a more relaxed eye. The offices and people, the technology, the clutter, the diagrams and odd bits of computer code written across the white boards – all of them were so different from either City Hall or the typical crime scene. He felt like an anthropologist dropped into some lost culture, looking for the deeper causes behind its odd permutations of the familiar. He looked again at his silent guide, and tried to envision the role she would play in his investigation. He doubted that role

would have time to take shape. Most probably, he told himself, Edward Walters' death would prove to be the sort of clumsy criminal act that revealed its story to the most routine police work.

"You told me your specialty was human-computer interaction," he said to her, breaking the silence. "I've never heard of that."

The question brought Elizabeth abruptly back to the present, and she inhaled sharply, involuntarily. She composed herself and answered him.

"Actually, it's been around for a while. It's sort of a mix of computer science, cognitive psychology, industrial design, anthropology and human factors."

Victor whistled softly. "You know all that?"

"Well, I'm not sure I know any of it very well," she smiled.

"What do you do here?"

"A bit of everything," she answered, slowing down and looking up at him. At just over six feet tall, he was almost six inches taller than she.

"Mostly, I'm studying how people interact with the building's technology, how we can make the systems easier to use . . . that sort of thing."

He nodded and looked around. "This place really is different, isn't it?"

"I guess I don't often think about it, but, yes, you're right. It is." She paused. "It's odd that I should take it for granted."

"Not really. You spend a lot of time here."

She smiled.

"Who funds all this?" he asked.

Elizabeth listed several large technology companies, and a few smaller firms that had survived the NASDAQ's collapse. She also named Sandia and

Los Alamos National Laboratories, the National Science Foundation, and the most well known of the dozen or so universities, including the University of New Mexico, who had joined the effort.

“They formed a consortium to explore advanced office information technologies a few years ago,” she explained. “They named it the ‘Sky City Consortium’ after the Acoma Pueblo’s Sky City.”

She glanced at Victor to see if he remembered the controversy surrounding the consortium’s choice of names. When it had announced its intention to locate in Albuquerque, and named itself after the ancient city on a mesa to the west of town, the consortium had drawn scattered protests from the Native American, Hispanic and Liberal communities. Time, money and a skilled public relations effort had calmed the controversy, but the corporate exploitation of an ancient culture still embarrassed her. The ironic smile on the detective’s face suggested he not only remembered the incident, but also shared her feelings.

“They wanted to call this building Sky City II,” she volunteered. “Fortunately, the name didn’t stick.”

His smile broadened. “What do they hope to get from all this?” he asked.

“The next big thing,” she shrugged.

Victor nodded and walked on a for a few more yards.

“Did you know Ed Walters very well?” he asked.

“No. As Chief Operations Officer, he stayed on the second floor.”

Elizabeth paused, as if trying to find some link to a man she knew only from

a distance. “My contacts with him were fairly formal: staff meetings, project reviews and the like.”

“How did the staff feel about him?”

“I don’t know anyone who disliked him,” she said thoughtfully. “The technical staff didn’t interact with him a lot; he mostly worked with the project’s backers and upper management. He wasn’t involved in the scientific work. That’s Robert’s kingdom.”

The detective did not react to her unconscious sarcasm, and Elizabeth realized she had probably revealed more than she should have about her feelings toward Robert Hill. She felt relieved to be nearing the conference room.

As they entered, the lights came on automatically. Like most corporate meeting rooms, it was dominated by a long, expensive-looking table and matching chairs, but this room, like the rest of the building, offered its own windows into information space. In front of each chair, beneath the smoked glass tabletop, a flat panel computer screen faced upward. Slots in the glass, and an elaborate system of tracks and arms gave people the option of raising the screens to a better working level. Beneath each screen, a keyboard and mouse waited discretely on a movable shelf. Several shining black panels, more of the large displays Victor had seen in the hallway, lined the walls.

Shortly after they sat down, a slender, blonde man rushed into the conference room, slightly out of breath.

“What took you so long?” Victor asked, smiling.

“I got lost,” the blonde answered. He took a final deep breath. “I had to get directions from the building,” he explained, grinning.

“When did you learn how to do that?” Victor asked. He sounded surprised.

The blonde shook his head, and the grin broadened.

“It’s no big deal,” he explained. “These badges let it know we’re guests, so we can talk to it. Just call it ‘System,’ and you can ask it anything.”

In spite of the circumstances, Elizabeth felt proud that a stranger had found the building so easy to use. Victor turned to her and introduced his partner.

“Dr. Elizabeth Florczyk, I’d like you to meet Sergeant Bruce Kaminsky.”

Like Victor, Bruce Kaminsky wore a tweed sport jacket, but he wore it over a white cowboy shirt, jeans and boots. Elizabeth guessed he was about ten years younger than Victor. With his wiry build, blonde hair and ruddy complexion, some people would have described him as looking at home on a horse. Elizabeth sensed he preferred the two step at a country and western bar.

“Dr. Florczyk.”

Bruce Kaminsky took her hand firmly, looked her in the eye, and smiled. He held the handshake a moment longer than a business introduction required. *Definitely at home in a country and western bar*, she confirmed.

“How are things going upstairs?” Victor asked him.

“All right. I think we’re about done,” Bruce answered.

“Anything on the body?”

Bruce Kaminsky glanced at Elizabeth, then back to his partner. He shrugged slightly, almost imperceptibly. She saw Victor frown, then walk to the far side of the table and sit down.

“I’ve told Lieutenant Rodriguez a bit about the building’s abilities,” she told Bruce as he joined Victor across the table from her. “Did anyone explain them to you?”

“I was working the scene all day,” he answered, shaking his head, “but I’ve picked up a few things. Don’t worry about me – just go ahead.”

“The obvious place to start is the usage database,” Elizabeth began. “Through our badges, the building keeps a record of where we go, the services we use, and so on.”

“Doctor Hill gave us a list of people in the building after hours last night,” Bruce said. “Is that where it came from?”

Elizabeth nodded. She wondered who was on the list.

“Dr. Florczyk,” Victor asked, “if someone removed their badge before entering Mr. Walters’ office, is there any way the systems might detect him?”

“No. They rely on our badges.”

“What about all the cameras and microphones I’ve seen around here?” Victor pressed. “Might they have recorded something?”

“Possibly, although the building doesn’t make audio or video records without people’s consent. There would only be a record if someone had requested it, but I’ll certainly check. Let me start a list.”

“Pops,” she said in a slightly louder voice, “give me the wall display.”

She turned toward the wall, and the panel closest to her brightened. The room lights automatically dimmed to compensate. At the top of the screen, a graphic appeared in bas-relief on a light blue background. The logo of the “Sky City Consortium” was a stylized cliff dwelling. Below the logo, a stock publicity photo appeared. It showed one of the building’s executive offices. In the background, a virtual environment ran on the wall display, with several young professionals sitting around the virtual table. What seemed to be sales data was posted behind them. A young African-American man who looked and dressed like a model for the Brooks Brothers catalog stood to the side of the screen, as if meeting with his remote colleagues. In the foreground, a man and woman were working at a graceful cherry wood desk, concentrating on the large, built-in flat panel display angling up from its shining surface. No keyboard or mouse cluttered the desktop, suggesting that all interactions with the computer used voice or a touch-sensitive screen. The woman sitting at the desk was attractive, well dressed and nearing the edge of middle age. She looked like a TV news anchor. The man standing beside her leaned forward with one hand on the desk, and pointed at the screen with the other. He matched a soap opera’s image of a corporate CEO: silver haired, handsome, white and clearly in charge.

Elizabeth had expected to see the same cluttered workspace she had left on the screen in her office, and the stock photo caught her off guard. She recalled that the systems had been programmed to present a more corporate image when visitors were present in the conference room. Like most of the consortium’s image making, the carefully staged photo annoyed her, and she reacted without thinking. She drew an “X” in the air front of the screen and

swept her hand quickly to the right. The picture disappeared, to be replaced by a plain, blue background.

“What did you just do?” Bruce asked. He sounded astonished.

“It was the gesture,” she explained. “The camera over the display lets it track hand motions. It recognizes a simple gesture language: I just deleted the publicity photo.”

She saw the detectives smile.

“Pops,” she said, “open a new document.”

A window appeared on the display. She gestured again to adjust its location on the panel.

“Pops, start a numbered list, and add the item ‘check for audio or video records.’”

The words appeared on the wall display almost as soon as she spoke.

“Pops,” Elizabeth continued, “add the item ‘usage records.’”

She watched the phrase form on the wall, then turned to the detectives.

“The usage database can tell us more than just who was here last night,” she explained. “It also keeps a record of their movements and activities.”

“Could someone other than an employee, someone without a badge, have entered the building?” Bruce asked.

“It's unlikely,” Elizabeth answered. “Security is very tight. Visitors are always given temporary badges and escorted. Besides, there's only one main entrance, and we have a guard on duty from the start of business until about nine.” She paused. “People tend to work late,” she explained. “When the

guard goes home, automatic systems lock the building to anyone not having a badge.”

“What about e-mail?” Victor asked. “Would it be possible to get copies of Mr. Walters’ correspondence?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said tentatively.

Victor detected the hesitation in her voice.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, it’s fine,” she said quickly. “It’s just that e-mail . . .” she added, as if trying to explain away an embarrassing reflex.

Although the usage database recorded people’s movements through the building, it did not reveal the content of their conversations. Like any community, the Sky City Project drew its stability from a dense web of customs and implied laws. Violating them troubled Elizabeth as deeply and as inevitably as violating any basic taboo would trouble any member of any tribe. Although she accepted the necessity behind his request, reading another person’s mail remained among the strongest of these prohibitions.

“Dr. Florczyk,” Victor said, “I do not want to put you in a difficult position . . .”

“No,” she interrupted, “I understand the situation.” She paused for a moment. “This just takes some getting used to.” She added e-mail to the list.

“Actually,” Bruce suggested, “we should probably just take his computer with us.”

“It isn’t that simple,” she said. “These systems aren’t like ordinary computers. We don’t have hard drives on our desks.”

“Where do you keep them?” Bruce asked.

She smiled. “The building keeps all our work in its document management systems, storing them in different locations to improve efficiency, security, and so on. Occasionally parts of the same document even wind up on different machines. I can get you all the documents Ed wrote, or even those he just looked at, but it will take a while.”

She added ‘documents and memos’ to the list.

“What about backup tapes?” Bruce asked.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Elizabeth acknowledged.

She wasn’t certain, but she thought she saw a moment’s confusion cross Victor’s face.

“Like most businesses that depend on their data, we copy everything onto tape regularly,” she explained.

“Can’t we just take the tapes to our people?” Bruce pressed. “Have them go through them?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Because our systems are so different, you’d have to install most of our software on your computers before you could read the data. Also, you’d have to copy the tapes back onto disk before you could get at anything, and that would be difficult – remember, we back up nearly a hundred machines every day or two.”

“We should take them anyway,” Bruce said. “Anything we find will have more credibility in court if we can verify it from the backups.”

Victor nodded, and she added ‘backup tapes’ to the list.

“Dr. Florczyk,” Bruce asked, “I was wondering if there might be something about these ‘agents’ I keep hearing about that could help us?”

“Yes,” she said thoughtfully. “There might be a number of things we could do with them.”

“Could one of Edward Walters’ ‘agents’ have a record of his actions that wasn’t on his appointment calendar?” Bruce speculated. “Or maybe some record of his interactions with other people?”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Elizabeth confirmed. “All agents do keep histories of their activities.”

Victor smiled and shook his head. “Do you mind explaining these agents to an old, computer illiterate cop?”

Elizabeth smiled. “An agent is a small, specialized, intelligent computer program. The basic idea is that we can give it a request and it will go off on its own and take care of it. It’s sort of a software assistant that knows how to do a particular task, and how to collaborate with other agents to do more complicated things. Agents give the building its intelligence. Every request we make, every document we create, every message we send: they’re all handled by agents.”

“Is ‘Pops’ an agent?” Victor asked.

“Yes, but he – rather, it,” she corrected herself, “is special. ‘Pops’ is what we call an executive agent. Everybody has one, and all our requests go through it. It listens for our commands and dispatches other agents to satisfy them. It’s sort of a personal assistant.”

Victor nodded.

“Could you get us all the agents Ed Walters used over . . .” Bruce began, then paused and thought for a moment. “Say the past six months?”

Elizabeth frowned. When a person made a request of her executive agent, it delegated tasks to anywhere from one to several dozen assistants.

“There will be an awful lot of them,” she said, “easily tens, or even hundreds of thousands.”

“We’ll go over them,” Bruce interjected. “It’s part of the glamour of police work.”

“Perhaps I could write a search algorithm to help?” she volunteered.

She had started to recognize the incredible volume and complexity of the information the detectives were requesting, and felt some obligation to do more than simply hand them a CD filled with megabytes of unorganized data.

Victor shook his head. “Maybe later,” he said. “Let’s see how it goes.”

Elizabeth nodded reluctantly. “Pops,” she said, “add 'last six month’s agents.’”

She tried to think of some other building system that might have relevant information. Nothing came to mind.

“Lieutenant, Sergeant, I can't really think of anything else that might be useful.”

“I think we have a good understanding of what this building can do,” Victor said. “If you think of something else, let us know. In the meantime, why don’t you get these things together for us.”

“Are you sure I can’t help you analyze the data?” Elizabeth repeated her offer.

“Actually, I'd prefer it if you just gave us the raw material,” Victor said. “We’ll look through it ourselves.”

Well, she thought, *so much for Elizabeth Florczyk, girl detective*. She took a deep breath, nodded and reminded herself that the less she became involved in a police murder investigation, the better off she would be.

“What if we come by tomorrow afternoon?” Victor asked.

“Sure,” she agreed.

Elizabeth led the detectives out of the conference room, back through the labyrinth of cubicles toward the stairs leading to Robert’s office. She suddenly realized how tired she felt. Ed’s death and her involvement with the police must have affected her more than she knew. As they walked, they tried briefly to continue their conversation, but their earlier rapport quickly faded. Bruce talked on for a minute or so, but he, too, grew silent as they crossed the lobby toward the stairs. The crowd had gone home, along with the young officer who’d controlled access to the second floor.

The stairway led up to a large open space, with a comfortably furnished seating area in its center. Manager’s offices lined the perimeter, with secretary’s desks in front of them. Ed Walters’ office stood at one end of the open area, with yellow tape crossing the entrance. The crime scene warning clashed brutally with the Christmas decorations framing the doorway. When they reached the reception area, they saw Robert’s secretary still at her desk.

“Is Robert free?” Elizabeth asked. “Lieutenant Rodriguez, Sergeant Kaminsky and I are finished.”

Robert’s secretary walked to his office, knocked softly and entered. Elizabeth recalled that Robert preferred this acknowledgment of corporate

status over the building's more efficient communication technologies. After a moment, she returned, said he would be out shortly, and motioned toward the comfortable cluster of sofa and chairs.

Elizabeth made up an excuse about needing to return to her office to start gathering the data they needed, and said good-bye to the detectives. She accepted their thanks, and left as quickly as she could. She was suddenly eager to leave the second floor, to get away from the site of Ed's death. She also wanted to avoid any unnecessary contact with to Robert Hill.

Victor watched her disappear down the stairs, and then leaned toward his partner.

"So, what do you think of our Dr. Florczyk?" he asked softly.

Bruce glanced at the secretary to make sure she was out of earshot.

"Well," he said, "I don't know about the sweater – that thing could sleep a family of four. . ."

Victor smiled and rolled his eyes.

". . . but I bet she'd clean up pretty nice."

"No doubt. What about the case?"

"I'm not sure I feel comfortable having one of them that closely involved in our investigation," Bruce said, turning serious.

"One of them?" Victor repeated, stressing the word 'them.'

"You know what I mean."

"She's not a suspect."

"Not yet."

Victor shrugged. "I think we need her help."

“We don’t need to recruit some gang-banger to help us figure out every drive-by shooting,” Bruce said.

“Gangs don’t have this technology.”

“Are you sure?”

Victor chuckled.

“We have some pretty good computer guys,” Bruce said. “They probably know forensics better than she does.”

“These systems are different. Besides, our people don’t know the culture.”

“They need to know the culture?”

“This is going to take more than figuring out who wrote which file, or getting back some deleted records off a disk,” Victor said. “I want someone who can help us look this data and tell us what it means to these people.” He paused. “And I’d like someone who can do it quickly.”

“It won’t be that complicated. It’s probably just about money, status or sex.”

“Well that narrows our list of suspects,” Victor said ironically.

Bruce shrugged. “If you ask me, this place is just another barrio.”

Victor nodded. “Most places are,” he said thoughtfully. “Most places are.”

CHAPTER 3

Elizabeth closed her office door and sat down. She had programmed her music agent to start when she entered her office alone, and she heard Sidney Bechet begin “Muskrat Ramble.” She’d been listening to a lot of early jazz lately, and the agent had adapted to the trend. It didn’t suit her mood.

“Pops,” she said over the music, “play the Mozart piano sonatas.”

Pops passed her command on to his unseen assistant, and the music changed.

“Pops, softer.”

She had exaggerated when she’d told Victor Rodriguez she only used voice interaction when other people were present. For reasons she didn’t

quite understand herself, she usually asked for music using the voice interface. Was it more intimate? Did music's audible nature suggest vocal interaction, or was it something as simple as being able to change a song without letting go of the mouse or keyboard? She had often wondered if there wasn't a paper topic in her little quirk, but now, such things were far from her mind.

She knew that the sooner she started gathering the information the police had requested, the sooner her life would return to normal, and she knew she needed help. Elizabeth specialized in user interfaces; she'd designed much of the bright surface the building presented to its human occupants. Getting at the data the police needed required someone who understood its data systems at a much lower level, down among their nerves and bones.

Elizabeth scanned the locators lined up across the top of her monitor. Wayne Ballard and David Chavez were systems programmers, two of the small staff who kept the building's network of computers and sensors running, and Elizabeth kept active locators for both of them. She usually called on David, younger and eager to please, when she needed a routine job done well and quickly. She called Wayne, his boss, when she needed a rule broken. Both of the small screens showed a cartoon of a departing automobile, puffs of cartoon smoke coming from the exhaust. Both had left for the day.

She sat back in her chair and relaxed into its smooth, familiar curves. She let her head rest against the back, closed her eyes and listened to the Mozart sonatas. In spite of the stresses of the day, she found herself listening

with a musician's trained ear, listening past the calm sounds to the music's deeper harmonic structure, the silent, abstract ratios of Mozart's thoughts. As the sonata ended, she opened her eyes and stared at her monitor.

"Pops," she said, leaning forward in her chair and reaching for the mouse. "Privacy, please."

As a rule, access to the building usage database was restricted. Since Elizabeth used that data in her research, she already had access permissions. She opened a data agent, and instructed it to find all people who were in the building between the close of business last night and the discovery of Ed's body this morning. The agent returned immediately, and displayed a list of seven of her coworkers, a list of seven people she knew as colleagues, acquaintances or even friends. It was the same list Robert had given the police. The names appeared in alphabetical order:

Gilbert Baca.

Wayne Ballard.

Guru Deep Singh Khalsa.

Thomas Lee.

Peter Martinelli.

Regina Martinelli.

Jennifer Sorenson.

She stared at the names. She knew all these people.

Jen and Thomas were the only people on the list she would have called friends. Jennifer Sorenson had joined the project soon after Elizabeth, coming to New Mexico straight from her graduate program at MIT. In spite of her aggressive, East-coast hipness, Jen looked younger than her twenty-

eight years. She was an anomaly among the project's staff in that her early education was in the arts, rather than science or engineering. After finishing a fine arts degree at Carnegie-Mellon, an interest in computers had led her to the MIT Media lab. Like many people her age, Jen found information technology as intuitive as driving a car. Although not as well trained as Elizabeth in the theoretical aspects of computer science, she was a more than capable programmer, and a promising researcher in human-computer interaction. Her background in the arts gave her a perspective few engineers could match.

Thomas Lee had recently finished his bachelor's degree at UC Berkeley, and joined the project as a programmer. With the exception of his intelligence, Thomas contradicted nearly every stereotype of the Chinese-American science student. A former diver on the Berkeley swim team, he was built like a welterweight and moved like a dancer. The string of pretty girls he brought on tours of the building gave the lie to any idea that he spent his nights with an engineering text. Only twenty-three, he was the kid on the technical staff and the unofficial office mascot. Like Jen, beneath the too-cool facade he was an innocent.

Mentally, Elizabeth crossed both her friends off the list.

Guru Deep Singh Khalsa was the building's chief of security, and worked under a contract with a Santa Fe security service. In his khaki guard's uniform, turban and chest length beard, he looked like a character out of Kipling, and affected an air of aloof efficiency. Had it not been for a barely suppressed tendency to flirt, a tendency that frequently attached itself to her, Elizabeth would have known little about him. Over the course of

several months and a handful of conversations, she'd learned he had grown up in West Los Angeles and moved to New Mexico when he adopted the American Sikh religion. Taking their warrior traditions as seriously as only a convert can, he had gone to work for a Sikh owned security company. Tall and fit, he was physically capable of Ed's murder, but she could not imagine their lives intersecting in any way. He socialized little, did his job and went home. Any motive, any connection to Ed Walters would have to lie outside of work, in some older history, in some residue of the time before he changed his name, grew the beard and adopted the strange, encompassing religion. Such a connection between him and the middle-aged, ex-military, corporate officer seemed unlikely.

She skipped back up the list to Wayne Ballard. In spite of Robert's high opinion of himself, Wayne was the only truly indispensable person on the project. He had as much practical knowledge about operating systems and computer networks as anyone on the planet and, without him, the entire building would have fallen silent. He ruled his domain from the rear of the first floor, from a laboratory filled with servers, disk drives, routers, cables and other viscera of the building's electronic body.

With his gray pony tail, beard and generous paunch, Wayne looked every inch the modern software wizard. He'd served in the military before starting his career in computers, first as a technician, but quickly working his way up in skill and responsibility. It was not that Elizabeth thought him incapable of violence, so much as she failed to see how Ed could have done anything that would have penetrated his arrogance. If Robert had been the victim, she could have accepted Wayne as a suspect. They often clashed,

usually over Robert's habit of making ambitious technical promises without first verifying their practicality with him. But Ed Walters? Elizabeth doubted Wayne even thought about Ed enough to form a motive for murder. The idea that the project's system wizard had killed its business manager seemed as incongruous as the thought of Merlin the Magician killing a pig farmer.

She leaned back in her chair. Her attention had gone to the four people she knew best. The project's caste system, the gap between the business unit upstairs and the technical staff was so complete that she could find no connection between any of them and Ed Walters. All were separated from him by bounds of age, rank, money or lifestyle. She wondered if she was missing something a trained detective would have seen. Perhaps Victor Rodriguez was right in declining her offer to analyze the data.

She turned to the remaining people on the list. They belonged to Ed's world, and might have reasons the others lacked.

Gilbert Baca worked closely with Ed Walters. Trained as an accountant, he assisted upper management on a variety of projects. He was 55 years old, had a wife, a son in high school and a daughter at the University of Colorado. He drove an ancient Chevrolet pickup truck to work, usually ate lunch at his desk, and did his job quietly and efficiently. For some reason, Elizabeth remembered the oak desk set she had seen in her occasional visits to his office. His son had made for him in high school woodworking class, carving Gil's name on the front, framing it with the geometric designs found on traditional New Mexican furniture. On the side facing him, there was a small brass clock, and places for two pens. He

reminded her of a small town banker.

She knew he and Ed worked together closely, and had heard that they'd become friends, with Gil generally taking Ed's side in his efforts to bend the project's staff of dreamers and academics to the corporate will. Could that friendship have soured? She rejected the idea. Although Elizabeth knew closeness often led to resentment, she could not imagine Gil Baca committing murder.

Peter and Regina Martinelli seemed more promising suspects, although Elizabeth knew this was just her own prejudice, a willingness to believe the ambitious couple was capable of the darkest acts. Peter managed the Software Agents project, and Elizabeth's work fell under his authority. He was also Robert's right hand, and the likely heir to the chief scientist's position in the unlikely event of Robert leaving the project. As an engineer, Peter took complex, hard to use machines for granted, and did not understand Elizabeth's devotion to the human factors of the building's design. Fortunately, he knew others considered her work to be important. Peter and Elizabeth regarded each other as necessary evils and, as is often the case, that understanding allowed them to collaborate both courteously and effectively. She knew that Peter, like Robert, often clashed with Ed over the mass of arbitrary details the project depended on for its survival. Do people kill each other over budget or staffing decisions? She thought about this for a moment. Peter had a temper, but he would clearly see murder as a risky career strategy. She knew from experience: Peter hated risk.

She turned her thoughts to Peter's wife. Regina Martinelli ran the project's legal department. More to the point, she was the project's legal

department, the only lawyer the relatively small project kept on staff, and she talked with Ed on a daily basis. Elizabeth had worked with her briefly on the privacy issues surrounding the consortium's research, and, although her feelings toward her were less than positive, she could not see Regina performing an act of physical violence. Elizabeth had always envisioned her as more of a poisoner.

Could Regina have given Peter a motive? The attorney was both attractive and aware of the power her looks gave her. Could a flirtation or an affair with Ed have driven Peter to murder? Elizabeth doubted Regina would hesitate to use sex to advance her career – she even remembered a few painful rumors alleging her involvement with Robert – but, the more she thought about it, the less likely an affair with Ed Walters seemed. He was too old to engage her in a genuine passion, and, to Elizabeth's knowledge, there was no immediate opportunity for her to exploit his position.

She stared at the screen. Seven suspects handed to her by an all-seeing computer, and not a single, credible motive. Seven suspects, and the only thing that made sense was that Ed Walters had died of an accident or sudden illness. Elizabeth wondered what the police were thinking. Certainly, they were looking beyond this convenient list of suspects. Could someone have sneaked into the building without their badge? Could someone have sent their badge out with an accomplice, or temporarily disabled its transmitter?

She heard a soft chord, and an icon bearing Robert's face appeared on her monitor, indicating a request for a conference. It drew her abruptly out of her reverie. The day Elizabeth had moved out of his house, she'd also

removed his locator from the collection that lined the top of her display. She clicked on the icon, and his face filled her screen. Robert Hill was the kind of young, handsome corporate officer business magazines sought for their covers, regardless of the fortunes of their companies. In spite of the late hour and the day's tragedy, he looked as fresh as he had that morning. His black hair remained in place, the quick intelligence still showed in his dark eyes, and no wrinkles creased his expensive clothes. Only the late afternoon shadow of his beard undermined his good looks.

"Yes, Robert?" she said in a tired voice.

"Lieutenant Rodriguez and Sergeant Kaminsky have just left," he said, forcing a smile. "They were very pleased with the help you provided."

"I didn't do much, really" she said, shaking her head. "I made a list of the obvious things, and I'll give it to David in the morning. I'm still not sure why you didn't just go to him in the first place."

"I put you on this for your judgment, not your systems skills," he said patiently.

"Robert, you don't know what you're talking about. They don't want my judgment, they just want Ed's documents, e-mail, and"

"You know it isn't going to be that simple," he interrupted, shaking his head.

Elizabeth nodded reluctantly. In spite of the detective's insistence that she give them "raw" data, she knew it would be useless without some help in organizing and searching it.

"It will be fine, Elizabeth," he reassured her.

It was a tone of voice she found infuriating when they were living

together. Under the circumstances, she said nothing.

“I’ll send you and David the permissions you need to get at Ed’s data,” he promised. “Look, I know this is hard, and I’ll help you any way I can.”

She nodded. “Thanks, but I can’t think of anything else.”

“Do you have any deadlines coming up?” he asked. “I can get you an extension, or if you need some help with your regular work . . .”

“No, I can take a few days away from it,” she said.

“Look, it’s been a tough day,” he said sympathetically. “Why don’t you go home and get some rest.”

She nodded.

“Robert,” she began.

“Yes?”

“What was the real reason you brought them to me?”

“I told you,” he said, concern showing in his face. “I believe your judgment and experience will be important.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “I’m not the only person who could do this . . .”

“Elizabeth,” he interrupted, “I know we agreed to keep some distance from each other, but this is a bit of a crisis.”

“Don’t be sarcastic . . .” she snapped.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” he apologized.

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry, Robert. I guess we’re both tired.”

He leaned toward the camera. It was the same body language he used to gain the focus of a face-to-face conversation.

“Elizabeth, I need you on this,” he said, stressing the word ‘on’ in the unique cadence of corporate management. “I need someone with complete integrity. Someone who will put the truth above . . . above corporate image, above my wishes – even above their own welfare. You’re the only one.”

She suppressed an urge to laugh, and stared at him for several seconds.

“You’re serious,” she said finally.

He nodded.

“What is it you’re not telling me, Robert? This is just routine data . . .”

“Elizabeth, there’s nothing to tell. I just need your judgment and integrity.”

She smiled and shook her head.

“Now I understand,” she said slowly, shaking her head. “You want a front man. You want someone from outside of management to put on a good show and deflect attention from you and the consortium. You want . . .”

“Damnit,” he interrupted angrily, “if that was all I wanted, I’d have asked Peter Martinelli.”

She said nothing, but looked away in frustration.

“Look, Elizabeth, you’re right. There is going to be a feeding frenzy in the press, and there is going to be hell to pay with our backers. You’re right, I am worried about it, but I will deal with the politics, not you.”

He paused and waited for some confirmation from her. She stared at him and said nothing.

“I want someone on this whose integrity cannot be challenged. That is partly a matter of appearance, but that doesn’t make it a lie. Damnit, Libby,

I want the son of a bitch that killed Ed caught, and I want that effort to be clean, untouched. No politics, no conflicts of interest – nothing but the truth.” He smiled. “Hell, you wouldn’t do what I wanted when we were together. You should jump at this . . .”

Elizabeth fought back a profanity.

“I need you because you hate me,” he said, turning serious. “You’re the only person here I can trust to do the right thing, not what I want, not what the consortium wants – no matter what the pressure.”

“I don’t hate you.”

“I hope not,” he said, and stared at her for a moment.

“I probably should, though.”

He smiled. “Elizabeth, I do appreciate this,” he said, emphasizing the word “do.”

“I’ll take care of it,” she said as she closed the connection and he disappeared from the screen.

“Pops,” she said in a weary voice, “if Robert Hill gets near me again, shoot him.”

“I’m sorry, but I do not understand the request,” the building answered in Louis Armstrong’s patient tones.

“Never mind,” she said.

She looked at the small analog clock face in the corner of her computer screen. It was almost eight o’clock, and she was exhausted. As usual, she neither turned off her computer, nor instructed Pops to stop the music. The building would do that automatically when she left the room. She put on her coat, picked up her bag, and started home.

CHAPTER 4

Elizabeth Florczyk lived alone in a small rented house in the foothills of Albuquerque's Sandia mountains. Alone, except for a six-foot long, white Yamaha grand piano, and a mostly white calico cat named Grace. Still only a couple years out of graduate school, she was trying to pay off her student loans early and save for a down payment on a house. Consequently, most of her furniture was so nondescript it required some effort for her to remember what she owned. There was an old couch Grace had partly shredded, and a dining room set Elizabeth had bought second hand when she was still young enough to think any piece of old oak was an antique. She owned a cheap television and a good stereo. She had framed a few old photographs of her parents and grandparents, and arranged them on the wall of her bedroom.

The rest of her “art” consisted of posters. She owned a few nice pieces, like the cherry china cabinet with the curved glass front her mother had left her when she died, along with her china and crystal. She cherished the matching cherry wood desk her father had given her before he’d moved back to San Francisco. But, her most important possession was the piano.

She’d bought it during a period of prosperity before she went back to graduate school. Her band was playing regularly, the man she lived with paid the rent, and she had enough money to buy the instrument she’d always wanted. After she quit the band and returned to school, she sold the electric piano she used for gigs, along with the PA system she sang through occasionally, and the guitar she played badly, but she held on to the grand. Even when money was tight and she had to take out additional loans, even when she had to drop out of graduate school temporarily and take a job at the university computing center, she held on to the grand piano. It would probably cost her \$10,000 to replace it, and it would be a while before she had that kind of extra cash.

Elizabeth entered and locked the door behind her. Grace had started circling in the entryway when she heard the car in the drive, and meowed up at the woman who shared her home. Elizabeth picked her up and scratched between a white and an orange pointed ear.

“How was your day, lady?”

The cat purred, her eyes narrowed to contented slits, and she raised her nose toward Elizabeth’s face.

“That’s good, cause mine was rotten.”

Elizabeth nuzzled the cat, and carried her into the kitchen. As she

passed through the dining room, she shrugged off the green cloth shoulder bag she preferred to a conventional purse, and dropped it on a chair. She placed Grace gently on the floor, opened a can of beef and liver cat food, spooned a bit onto a dish, and set it in front of her. Then, Elizabeth took off her coat, draped it over the back of the chair where she'd left her bag, and went back into the kitchen.

She took her big, stainless-steel pot out of the cabinet, and put some water on to boil. While the water heated, she opened the ten-dollar Sangiovese she'd been saving for company, and poured herself a glass. She went into the living room, put the Modern Jazz Quartet on the stereo, and walked down the hall to her bedroom.

Elizabeth pulled off the baggy gray sweater she'd worn to work that day, folded it neatly, and left it in the dresser. She thought of the time she'd spent with the detectives, and wished she'd worn something more business-like. She decided to wear a skirt to work tomorrow, and tossed her jeans into the dirty-clothes basket in her closet.

Pulling the sweater over her head had left her reddish-brown hair in a tangle. She looked in the mirrored closet door and smoothed it back, running the fingers of both hands back from her temples along the sides of her head like coarse combs. She paused briefly, holding the hair back, stepping close to the glass and scanning her face. The small act of vanity bridged the gulf between the insanity of Ed's death and the comfort of her home, and she lingered uncharacteristically before her reflection.

Elizabeth had what her hairdresser called "good bones," although she suspected he said that to all his clients. She held her hair back, and

examined the planes of her face, tapering downward from her gray-green eyes, curving over her cheekbones, past her wide mouth into a softly rounded triangle. Although her features favored her Polish father, her skin's soft olive shade was a gift of her Italian mother. She searched her face for blemishes and found none. She turned her face from side to side, giving it one last inspection, and stepped back from the glass.

She stood in front of the full-length mirror in her panties and the cotton athletic bra she'd worn beneath the sweater. In the month since her break-up with Robert, the demands of setting up a new apartment and her own emotional withdrawal had interfered with her schedule at the gym, and she looked for some evidence of that absence. She was relieved to find none. She turned slowly before the full-length mirror in another uncharacteristic indulgence.

Elizabeth took a sip of wine, sat down on the carpet and worked through her daily mixture of yoga and runner's stretches. Then, she threw the last of the day's clothes in the basket with the jeans, surveyed her naked body a final time, and slipped into a burgundy silk robe. It was a present from Robert. Although she had almost completely exorcised stain of his betrayal from it, the robe briefly reminded her of their breakup and the month she had given over to recovering the arc of her own life. She straightened the wine-dark silk in the mirror, took her glass and walked back to the kitchen in her robe and bare feet.

She saw a plume of steam coming from the pot, and started to work on dinner. After adding salt and olive oil to the boiling water, and dropping in a

handful of linguini, she peeled three cloves of garlic, and grated a pile of cheese from a large block of Locatelli Romano. She cooked and drained the linguini, poured a little olive oil over it, sprinkled on some dried basil, added crushed garlic and tossed it all with the grated cheese. Her mother had taught her the beauty of simple recipes and quality ingredients. Elizabeth especially enjoyed the taste of good olive oil, and the imported, sheep's milk cheese she bought at a deli across town. She took a plateful to the table, and ate slowly, letting the wine and the music smooth out the wrinkles of the day.

Almost immediately, Grace hopped up on the table. Since she had no guests, Elizabeth let her stay. Grace sniffed at the plate, and Elizabeth gently pushed her away.

“Not now, lady. Let's have some manners.”

After a few more tries, Grace gave up and moved to the end of the table, curling into a neat spiral, a furry, piebald oval with only two ears and a twitching tail to indicate it was a cat.

After dinner, Elizabeth put her plate on the floor for Grace to scavenge bits of sharp cheese, or lick its coating of sweet, peppery oil. She poured another glass of wine, turned off the stereo and sat down at her piano. She did not feel like her usual warm-up of scales and studies. Instead, she just played slowly, letting her feelings lead, trying to regain her focus and let the day's events settle in her mind.

When she was still a teenager, Elizabeth had discovered Thelonius Monk's masterpiece, “Round Midnight.” It was one of the first jazz songs she'd learned, and its discovery defined one of the meridians of her life. The first time she saw the sheet music she could not unravel the logic in Monk's

composition. She saw no obvious link between the song's extraordinary beauty and its strange, complex harmonic structure. At the time, her musical intuitions, her mental stores of harmonic and melodic patterns were simply inadequate to an understanding of Monk's conception. Unlike the rock and roll she had played for years, there was no easily predictable chord progression, no neat sense of a return to a tonic, no repeated hook or stereotypic pop themes. But, as she'd explored the song, playing it again and again, the act of playing had transformed her. She did not so much learn the song, as she let the music alter her understanding, her perception, her nerves and muscles. She came slowly to feel the song's logic, to understand its deeper unity, the way Monk crafted beauty and mischief at the edge of dissonance.

Over the years that followed, she had studied jazz theory, even learned to improvise plausibly within its framework, but Monk's masterpiece still reminded her how little she really understood. Her relationship to that song and its composer was something she felt in her skin, muscles and nerves, but could never explain to a non-musician.

As she played, she thought about the mass of data Victor and Bruce had requested. Somewhere within it they might find the traces of a killer's intention; more likely, it would simply be a maze of innuendoes and petty office rivalries. She wondered if anyone could plumb those traces through reading and analysis, or whether it would require an almost musical act of interpretation, a personal expression of a sound only suggested by the written evidence.

Elizabeth tried to put the investigation out of her mind and relax into

the song, letting her fingers hang on to the notes longer than usual, as if she could wrap her hands around the sound itself and run them over its smooth, interpenetrating surfaces. Her left hand played the chords automatically, and she let her right hand toy with the melody, sometimes pushing, sometimes lagging the time, and sometimes adding a small variation to a familiar phrase. She focused less on the act of playing than on the sound she produced.

She'd always thought it ironic that it was so hard to listen past the demands of playing and actually hear the music she made, to give herself over to the pure experience of sound. Elizabeth knew the song well enough to listen deeply, without attending to her technique, or planning an improvisation's course. She listened to the dancing harmonics inside each chord, to the way Monk's play of suggestion and dissonance propelled the song ahead, flirting with resolution, but always branching toward one more misleadingly simple phrase, toward one more unexpected turn. She played for a long time, trying to curl up in the song's structure, as calm and safe as Grace sleeping up at the end of the old, torn couch.

Elizabeth recognized that the distractions of the day, the time she'd spent with Jen and Thomas, and her work with the police, had kept her from realizing how deeply Ed's death had affected her. In the time she had worked there, the people at the project had become her friends, her community – almost her family. Now, one of them was dead, and the police believed another had killed him. She could not make herself believe that one of the seven people on the list had done this, but even if the killer was someone else, someone who had sneaked through the building without a badge, invisible,

she knew that he had to have worked there. No outsider could have understood the security systems well enough to defeat them. Again, she found herself hoping Victor Rodriguez would walk into her office tomorrow and tell her Ed Walters had died of a heart attack, hitting his head against his desk as he fell. Again, something told her there would be no such resolution.

She thought back to the last time she felt this way. When her band had started to come apart, Elizabeth had felt the same sense of disintegration, of losing her frame of reference in the world. She'd help start the band the year after she'd finished undergraduate school. As they grew more popular and began playing better clubs, her band mates embraced the temptations that pursued local heroes. For a while, she tried to keep them together while keeping her distance from the parties and the hangers on eager to trade a line of coke for a share of reflected glory. Eventually, she found herself den mother to a troop of cokeheads. She rounded them up for gigs, went home alone when the bars closed, and complained when they missed practice the next afternoon. When the partying went too far, and the music suffered; when she found herself covering for their neglect more and more; when she became increasingly confrontational and still failed to change anyone's mind; when they nicknamed her "narc" and simply stopped listening, she quit and went back to school. She stayed in touch with them for a while. Eventually, two found Jesus, one went to prison for receiving stolen goods, and one married a woman who made him work days and stay home at night. Over time, she accepted that she had lost them.

It was not until she finished her degree and went to work for the Sky

City Project that she found a creative community to equal her early days with the band. Now, she found herself trying to accept that someone in that community had removed their badge, walked into Ed Walters' office, and smashed his skull. How could something so toxic have taken root among her bright, carefully reasoned community, among these people who seemed so enthusiastic for their work, so gifted with invention?

Elizabeth thought of the seven people the building marked as present the night of Ed's death, and considered the possibility his killer was not among them. The thought brought H. G. Wells' novel, *The Invisible Man*, to her mind. Without an ID badge and its transmitter, a killer could move through the building as unnoticed as the invisible man moving through a Victorian slum. Could this invisible man have left traces in routine corporate data, just as Wells' dark hero had left footprints in the untracked snow?

Victor Rodriguez had asked her for the obvious things: e-mail, memos, and appointment books. Elizabeth wondered how useful they would prove. People did reveal surprising things in electronic mail. She thought of the Microsoft executives who used it to brag about their ruthlessness in crushing competition – until their boasts showed up in the government's anti-monopoly case against them. If a killer was among the seven people on the building's list, or even if he was an invisible man, he might have written a note that reflected his state of mind, scheduled an appointment that led to a murderous confrontation, drafted a memo in a moment of careless anger. She also knew the chances were slight. She knew that something this serious would not appear in any obvious form.

There was more she could give the police than a CD full of files. The

building systems offered sophisticated tools for searching and analyzing texts, tools that went far beyond the simple word matching of most Internet search engines. She also knew the building's tools were, by themselves, insufficient. Even with their power, it was unlikely she could provide anything useful without anticipating the nature of the trace the invisible man had left behind, without making some decisions about what to select, what to ignore.

Years ago, she'd read a comment of Einstein's about the way theory shaped observation. There was no such thing as raw data, no such thing as data unfiltered by the observer's history, hopes and assumptions. This was the necessary impurity in the scientific method, the source of both error and inspiration. Theoretical bias was the lens that both clouded our perception and made purposeful observation possible. It was the essential flaw the whole scientific infrastructure of experiment, journals, credentials and conferences sought to exploit and control.

Without some theory, some first guess about the tracks the invisible man would leave, the police would have no framework for understanding the building's data. If they embraced the wrong theory, binding their attention to it too soon, too tightly, then it would bend all observation to its own false contours, letting the killer go free, possibly incriminating an innocent.

Elizabeth sat alone at her white piano, but had long ago stopped playing. Instead, she rested her hands silently on the keyboard's constant, intimate ratios, and tried to delineate her obligation to Victor Rodriguez and his investigation. Again, she thought of the invisible man. What could she do, what should she do, to help bring him into sight?

How could she illuminate his tracks in the snow?

CHAPTER 5

Regina Martinelli pushed the identification wallets across her desktop toward the detectives, leaving their spines neatly parallel to the edge of the polished wood. She sat quietly back in her chair, crossed her legs, and smoothed the wrinkles from her wool skirt. Her navy blue suit was simply, almost severely cut, and, like the white silk blouse she wore beneath it, as inevitable as a Bach prelude. She confined her black hair in a perfect chignon, and wore little makeup except for a deep red lipstick. Regina Martinelli was uncommonly attractive. Her high cheekbones and delicately slanted eyes evidenced the fading Native-American bloodlines entwined in many Hispanic families. Pale skin and green eyes spoke of the continent's European invaders. Except for the large diamond wedding set on her left

hand, her only jewelry was a pair of diamond stud earrings, and a small gold cross on a chain at her throat. Victor wondered if the stark professionalism of her dress and grooming were an attempt to downplay her looks while she was at work, or if she understood how the simple frame intensified her peremptory beauty. He picked up his wallet and placed it in his jacket pocket.

“Mrs. Martinelli,” Victor began, “we understand you worked closely with Ed Walters. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “You won’t mind if I record our conversation?”

“Not at all,” Victor agreed in a relaxed, professional voice.

“System,” she said, using the slightly louder tone with which most of the building’s occupants addressed it, “start a video recording.”

Bruce smiled.

“What is it, detective?” she asked.

“Most of the people around here name their computer. I wondered why you didn’t,” he asked.

She smiled. It was a smile that charmed absolutely.

“It’s just a machine,” she said.

Victor saw the expensive-looking camera mounted on the wall above her desk pivot slightly, and adjust the zoom lens to include the three of them. It moved silently. If he had not glanced at it when she requested the recording, he would not have known it was there. He could not see the many software agents marshaled to the task of aiming the camera, managing the recording, creating a text transcript of the spoken words, and storing the

result so Regina Martinelli could find it by date, subject or the names of its participants.

“I haven’t seen a camera like that in the building,” Bruce observed.

“That’s because it’s the only one. It’s much higher quality than the little cameras scattered around here,” she explained, with no suggestion of pride. “As an attorney, I thought it would be useful to record conversations, and I wanted the best camera possible. One of the techies rigged this up for me.”

“How does it know where to point?” Bruce asked.

“They told me it looks for faces,” she answered. “It recognizes them by looking at several factors, including skin tone, shape, movement, even eye blinks – it uses something called ‘fuzzy logic’ – then, it adjusts its field of view to contain everyone.”

She smiled, and Victor saw a hint of self-consciousness briefly shadow her features.

“This place will make even a lawyer into a bit of a computer nerd,” she confessed, as if her own use of technical jargon left her with a mixture of pride and embarrassment.

“I understand you are the consortium’s legal advisor,” Victor began.

“I’m the first person people come to,” she said. “I handle routine matters myself, and coordinate with outside counsel on complex issues.”

Victor took a sip of coffee. Instead of the Styrofoam cups he had used elsewhere in the building, she had served it in the matching china she kept on the side table near her desk, pouring from a silver pitcher her secretary had filled from the pot down the hall. The rest of Regina Martinelli’s office

showed the same attention to detail. A dark red Persian rug covered most of the gray corporate carpet, and the dark walnut desk gave the room a greater visual density than the graceful cherry wood that furnished most offices in the building. The two paintings on the wall were southwestern landscapes: one portrayed the cottonwood trees of a river bosque, and the other a thunderstorm over distant mountains. Neither painting revealed the sentimental absorption with local color that cheapened so much New Mexican art, just as neither intruded on the calm order of her office. Unlike the rest of the building, the room did not expose the technology that filled it. Except for the camera sitting quietly high on the wall, and the wireless computer monitor on a work area to the side of the desk, Victor could have been in any upscale legal office.

“What sort of things do you deal with?” Victor asked.

“Practically everything,” she explained. “Contracts, intellectual property, employment, privacy issues – you name it. A one woman legal department can hardly afford to specialize.”

Victor glanced at the diplomas on the wall behind her desk. The Bachelor of Arts was awarded to Regina Valdez by the University of New Mexico. Her law diploma came from Stanford.

“You grew up here,” he observed.

“Yes. Highland High School class of 1985.” She took her first sip of coffee from the china cup, leaving a perfect red lipstick print on its rim.

“And you decided to come home after you finished at Stanford?” Victor asked.

“Not immediately,” she began. She explained how she had previously worked on the legal staff of one of the consortium’s members, a large, old-line technology company.

“When this job opened up,” she concluded, “I moved back, both for the opportunity, and to be close to my family.”

She set the cup silently back in its saucer.

Victor’s relaxed approach to the interview was not a ploy or an attempt to probe for some inconsistency or weakness. His mother had taught him to approach people with grace, patience and respect. She’d told him that manners were not only a gift to others, but a source of strength in the giver. Over the years, he’d come to recognize her wisdom: understanding people meant more than discovering the facts and circumstances that enclosed them. It required patience, respect and a willingness to engage with the subject of an inquiry.

Unlike most attorneys, Regina Martinelli neither showed signs of irritation at his slow pace, nor pressed him to get to the point. Her manner revealed little beyond a cool self-possession. Victor decided she was a better lawyer than most he encountered, probably better than her current position required.

“That must have been quite a change, going from a major corporation to a small research lab,” he noted.

“I wanted the opportunity to make something happen on my own.”

“Has it met your expectations?” he asked.

“I am ambitious, if that’s what you are wondering,” she acknowledged without self-consciousness. “This project gives me independence, broad

experience and much more visibility than a large company. It also acquaints me with some new and very important technology.”

Victor noted the frankness of her answer and her insight into his reasons for asking the question. He wondered how long she would stay at this small research project, four hundred miles from the nearest major city.

“Mrs. Martinelli,” Bruce interrupted, “records show that you worked late on the night of Ed Walters’ death.”

As was often the case, Bruce was the first to turn the interview to more pointed questions. He called it their “boring cop, bad cop” routine: after Victor bored a subject into submission, he moved in for real information. Victor seldom minded when his younger partner took over. It allowed him to observe the subject without driving the interview, to focus on the nuances of their replies, to trace the emotional shadings of the facts and beliefs Bruce systematically elicited.

“That is correct,” Regina answered, turning her attention to him.

“When did you leave?” he asked.

“Peter and I both worked late that night,” she paused and searched her memory. “We left together a little after seven o’ clock.”

“Did you see anyone here after hours?” Bruce asked.

“No.” She closed her eyes briefly as if trying to visualize the scene. “I noticed the lights were on in Ed’s office, but didn’t speak to him.”

“Was the door closed?”

“Yes,” she said, “but I saw the lights through the curtains.”

“Did you look in? Did you notice anything unusual? Anything that might help us?” Bruce pressed.

“No,” she said shaking her head. “It was late, and we usually don’t interrupt people who are working after hours. Besides, Peter and I were eager to go to dinner.”

“Could you tell us about your working relationship with Ed Walters,” Bruce continued.

“Of course. In his role as chief operations officer, Ed consulted with me nearly every day. I found him professional, competent and easy to work with.” She paused and frowned. “I also thought he was a very nice man.”

“Who else worked closely with him?” Bruce asked.

“Robert, of course, and the rest of senior management. Ed reported directly to the consortium backers, which took him out of town frequently. He also worked with most of the support staff at one time or another.”

She continued listing Ed’s colleagues. She mentioned none of the technical staff, and Victor remembered Elizabeth Florczyk’s description of the project’s two cultures, with the technical staff working under Robert Hill, and Ed Walters representing the project’s almost invisible backers.

“You mentioned Gilbert Baca,” Bruce said, “could you tell me more about his relationship with Mr. Walters?”

Victor wondered why Bruce singled out Gilbert Baca, and made a mental note to ask him after the interview. If Regina Martinelli also noticed, she gave no indication.

“It’s interesting that you should ask,” she began, “Gil and Ed were very close. Gil is our chief accountant, and he was always preparing some report or analysis for Ed.” She thought for a moment. “But, it went deeper than

that. They were both older than most of the people here, and both were ex-military. I think they had a special bond.”

“Did they socialize outside work?” Bruce asked.

“No, I don’t think so. They weren’t really friends in the usual sense – both men were pretty private. Gil was more like Ed’s confidante here at the office.”

“What do you mean?”

“They often ended the day together just talking, going over the events of the day,” she said, smiling slightly and looking out the large window. “I think both of them used the ritual to get rid of the stress of work before going home.”

“Was Ed Walters close to anyone else?” Victor interrupted.

“No. Except for Gil, he was very professional, almost formal.”

“Did you know of any friction between Mr. Walters and any of the staff?” Bruce asked.

“No, no more than you’d expect.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, really. There is always friction in these high-tech enterprises. I think it’s a combination of high expectations, unusual degrees of risk, and large amounts of money. There are also,” she added with a slight smile, “a disproportionate number of prima donnas in this business.”

“Do you know of anyone who might have had reason to harm Mr. Walters?” Bruce asked.

The question triggered a dramatic change in her manner. Victor saw her become visibly less relaxed, more on guard. She uncrossed her legs and

moved her chair close to the desk. She placed her elbows on the desktop, laced her fingers together and leaned toward the detectives.

“Lieutenant Rodriguez, Sergeant Kaminsky,” she began slowly, “there is a matter that I believe may be important to you. It is a corporate matter, it is very delicate, and I would appreciate discretion.”

“Mrs. Martinelli,” Victor answered, “you understand we have to share any relevant findings with the District Attorney . . .”

She nodded.

“. . . but,” he continued, “I can tell you that we will be sensitive to proprietary information, so long as it does not hinder our investigation.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. That is all I expected.”

She glanced briefly downward, as if composing her thoughts, then looked at each detective in turn and began to speak slowly, deliberately.

“About a week ago, Ed Walters came into my office with proof that someone had transmitted confidential information to a major competitor of several consortium members.” She paused. “Someone in this building has sold information about proprietary technologies, along with our plans for commercializing them.”

“Are you certain?” Victor asked.

She walked to the file cabinet near her desk, unlocked it, and retrieved a manila folder. She spread its contents on the desk in front of the detectives, and sat back down.

“One of our people obtained these documents from a contact inside the competing company. They are exact copies of proprietary documents produced in this building: word for word, diagram for diagram.”

Victor glanced at the documents, then looked back at the attorney. Bruce leaned forward in his chair and leafed through the papers.

“How did you find out about this?” he asked.

She smiled. “Intelligence is very important in the information economy. Companies pay for it, and they pay very well.”

“So, one of your spies found out about the other guy’s spies, and sent you copies of the stolen papers?” Bruce remarked.

“Don’t act so ingenuous, detective,” she challenged him without raising her voice. “Governments are not the only organizations who require information to survive. It’s the world we live in. Look at the companies who form the core of the information economy – and don’t think this stock market fall is anything but a temporary setback. They did not get rich cutting down trees or digging minerals out of the ground. Their wealth is information. Computer programs. Business models. Consumer profiles. Financial analysis . . .” her voice trailed off, indicating she had made her point.

“Could we talk to your informants?” Bruce asked, showing no reaction to the scolding.

“No. For reasons I’m sure you understand, their identities are confidential.”

“We can get a court order,” Bruce pressed.

“Perhaps, but I can assure you it won’t be easy,” she answered in a professional, almost friendly tone.

“Mrs. Martinelli,” Victor interrupted, “what happened after Ed Walters brought these documents to you?”

She turned and spoke directly to Victor, all but ignoring his partner, as if sending him a message about the futility of threats.

“Ed came to me for legal advice. He was not sure whether we should contact the authorities immediately, or handle things ourselves,” she explained. “I suggested we carry out a preliminary investigation, and take the results to the consortium’s board.”

“Who performed this investigation?”

“Ed wanted to begin himself. We agreed to keep a low profile, although I felt that we would need to bring in help eventually.” She paused. “Ed was not the most computer literate person in the project.”

“Who knew about the theft besides you and Mr. Walters?” Victor continued.

“To my knowledge, we are the only people on the project who knew.”

“What about Robert Hill? He is the chief scientist,” Victor asked.

“Not even Robert,” she said, shaking her head.

“Were you suspicious of him?”

“No. No more than anyone,” she said in a matter of fact voice. “Ed was ex-military, and his instinct was to hold this as closely as possible. I agreed with him.”

“Did either you or Mr. Walters suspect anyone in particular?” Bruce asked.

She shook her head. “We had nothing that pointed toward any individual.”

“Who could have accessed this data?” Victor asked, picking up one of the stolen documents.

He rested it on his lap and thumbed through it as he spoke.

“Any of the management staff. These documents all passed across my own desk as part of my work on patents and copyright.” She thought for a moment. “Robert, Peter and the other project leads were also involved in assessing their value,” she said, as if mentally working through a list of her colleagues. “Gil Baca assisted both Ed and me with figures, financial estimates, and so on. Of course, nearly anyone on the management staff could see these documents if they desired.”

“And their secretaries?” Victor prompted.

“In most cases.”

“What about the technical staff?”

“It’s unlikely, but not impossible. We have controls in place to restrict access to proprietary data, and we do ask staff to follow procedures. But,” she shook her head, “the people on the first floor are pretty casual about sharing information, and most of them are good at getting around system restrictions.”

Victor remembered the kids in the cubicle farm on the first floor and smiled. She returned the smile and nodded.

“Most of the consortium’s management would share your surprise. Getting scientists to follow rules is a bit like herding cats. Still, I find it hard to imagine a member of the tech staff could have gotten hold of all these documents,” she stressed the word *all*, “without someone noticing.”

“What about Wayne Ballard, or the other systems people,” Bruce asked.

She shrugged. "Legend has it that they can do anything. I'm not sure I believe it, but I'm certain Ed considered them, too."

"And you're sure no one knew about this but you and Mr. Walters?" Victor pressed.

"We told no one," she said, "but I can't help but wonder if someone found out."

Victor sat quietly, leafing through the stolen documents without paying close attention to them. He seemed to be contemplating a puzzle.

Bruce resumed the interview. "What other information can you give us about the theft?"

"I can let you have copies of these documents, although I must remind you to keep their contents confidential."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Bruce said.

"I think you should also look at Ed's work environment," she suggested. "I'm sure he programmed some agents to help with his investigation. You should be able to retrace his steps."

"What do you mean?" Bruce asked.

"All agents keep a record of their actions," Regina explained. "Essentially, you can replay an agent's entire history."

"We'll need some help on that," Victor said. "Dr. Hill has asked Elizabeth Florczyk to work with us on the computer side of things. Do you have any objection to our sharing this information with her?"

"No, not under the circumstances. I respect Dr. Florczyk's integrity, but please stress to her the importance of keeping this confidential. It may be a good idea to have her talk to me before she starts."

“Of course,” said Victor. “One more thing . . .”

“Yes?”

“Have you noticed anything unusual? Personally?”

“I’m not sure I understand,” she said deliberately.

Victor inferred that she understood the question perfectly, but was pressing him to reveal his own reasons for asking.

“Any strange phone calls or letters? People watching, or cars following you?” he clarified.

She said nothing for a moment, then nodded almost imperceptibly.

“I have received a few crank phone calls. You know the kind. The phone rings, I answer, they say nothing. All women get them from time to time, so I didn’t think too much of it.”

“Do they come here or at home?” Victor asked.

“Here, only. I have a caller ID,” she volunteered, “and I called them back the first few times. They were pay phones at various bars and convenience stores.”

“When did you receive the last one?” Victor asked.

She thought for a moment. “The night before Ed’s death.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Victor reassured her, “but until this is over, I would like for you to take some extra precautions.”

“Ed and I were the only people who knew about the theft,” she observed. Her voice showed no evidence of fear.

“Please don’t worry,” Victor assured her. “Now that we’re involved, I’m sure whoever attacked Ed Walters is going to lay low. Still, I would like for you to avoid late hours at work.”

“That seems reasonable,” she said.

“And I would like for you to travel to and from work with your husband.”

Regina Martinelli bristled. “I don’t think I need Peter to protect me.”

“It’s only temporary. I promise,” Victor said as he rose to leave.

He placed a card on her desk.

“Mrs. Martinelli, we will want to talk to you again. In the meantime, if you think of anything else that might help us, or if anything odd happens, please call.”

She nodded.

“I’ll walk out with you,” she said, standing up.

Her self-possessed manner had returned, and she sounded like any successful attorney escorting new clients out of her office. She picked up the folder of stolen documents, and led Victor and Bruce out into the large open area. She handed the folder to her secretary.

“Could you make copies of these for the officers, please?” she asked.

The secretary walked briskly to a nearby copier, and Regina turned back to the detectives.

“Can I help you find your way to your next appointment?” she asked.

“No, thank you. We’re learning our way around,” Victor said.

He shook her hand, and thanked her. Bruce did the same.

Regina Martinelli returned to her office, closing the door behind her. She walked around her desk, collecting the china coffee cups.

“System,” she said, “stop recording and save the video under today’s date, and the names ‘Victor Rodriguez,’ ‘Bruce Kaminsky,’ and ‘Ed Walters.’”

As she picked up each cup and saucer, she wiped the place they had rested with the napkin she’d placed beneath them. She stacked the china on the tray on the side table for her secretary to remove, then sat down and turned to face the computer monitor.

"System," she commanded, "replay all sections of the video that mention 'Robert Hill.'"

The recording system used the building's voice recognition algorithms to index the sound track by key words. It was intelligent enough to assume that since she specified no date or subject, she meant the most recent recording. After a moment, a video of her conversation with the detectives began to play on the large monitor at her desktop.

“Who else worked closely with him?” Bruce Kaminsky asked in the video.

“Robert, of course,” she saw herself answer. “Ed also reported directly to the consortium backers . . .”

"System, next," she interrupted.

After a few seconds, another scene appeared on the screen. It began with a question Victor Rodriguez had asked.

“Who knew about this industrial espionage besides you and Mr. Walters?”

“To my knowledge, we are the only people on the project who knew,” she saw herself answer.

Regina Martinelli watched the replay closely.

"What about Robert Hill? He is the chief scientist," she saw Victor ask.

"Not even Robert," she saw herself answer, shaking her head.

"Were you suspicious of him?" Victor asked.

"No. No more than anyone," she answered.

She watched the rest of the segment play. When it finished, she swiveled the ergonomic chair around to face her large window, and stared out at the Manzano Mountains to the east of Albuquerque. She sat quietly for several minutes. As she sat, she absentmindedly drummed her fingernails on the desktop. Her perfect nails made a sound like crickets on the brightly polished wood.

CHAPTER 6

Elizabeth Florczyk sat locked in traffic on southbound Eubank Boulevard. One of the main entrances to Kirtland Air Force Base straddled a curve in the road only a few hundred yards beyond the Sky City Building, so she shared her morning commute with twenty thousand employees of the base and Sandia National Laboratories. This morning, it seemed every one of them was stopped in front of her.

Thoughts about Ed's death and the police investigation had kept her awake into the night, and she'd overslept. In spite of her late start, traffic moved slowly, advancing only twenty or thirty feet at a time. Since the terrorist attacks on New York City, the military had required that guards

check the identification of everyone entering the base. Still, traffic usually moved faster than this, and she wondered if there was an accident up ahead.

The minivan in front of her moved forward a car length, but she did not follow. The clutch on her 1995 Toyota pickup was on the verge of failing, and she avoided shifting. The driver behind her raised both hands from the steering wheel and shook his head in frustration. Elizabeth ignored him.

She'd purchased the short-bed pickup new when her band was working regularly, using it to haul equipment to and from performances. She'd jokingly called it "job security": insurance against the possibility that the band might decide they didn't need a keyboard player – particularly one who frowned on partying. It worked better than she had hoped. Even after she'd quit the band, they kept calling her for help getting to gigs. The sun had faded the truck's blue paint, along with the collection of bumper stickers advertising Fender amps, Gibson guitars, Zildjian cymbals and other, more esoteric musical instruments. Other than the paint, the body was in good condition. Thanks to New Mexico's dry climate, it was free of rust. Thanks to her refusal to let her band mates drive, it was free of dents and scrapes. Because she wanted to pay off her student loans and save for a house before getting a new car, Elizabeth relied heavily on her mechanic's ingenuity and good will to keep the truck running without undue cost. Too heavily, she told herself, and vowed to start shopping for something more reliable as soon as things got back to normal.

The traffic ahead of her moved forwards another car length. She checked her rear view mirror and decided the man behind her was nearing the limits of his patience. She eased the truck into gear and pulled forward.

To her right, a sign proclaiming the “Future Home of Sandia National Laboratories Science and Technology Park” stood at the edge of a large empty field. The Sky City Building, still a mile to the south, was one of the first tenants of what the city hoped would become a source of civic pride, a model of cooperation between local and federal governments, and, more importantly, a fountain of high paying, high-tech jobs. Although the crash of technology stocks and the bursting of the Internet bubble had slowed development, several companies, including the Sky City Consortium, held on to their embattled optimism for science and the future.

As she waited for traffic to resume, Elizabeth looked out across the prairie dog town that occupied the still undeveloped north end of the Technology Park. Every morning during the summer, she drove past the fat, sand-colored sentries standing upright by their burrows, front paws held neatly together in front of their bellies, alert for the coyotes that prowled the shrinking open space for their own hard livelihood. She had not seen them for over a month. They were gone for the winter, sleeping underground, unaware of the plans humans were making in the cold air above them.

To the west across the empty field stood a neighborhood of nearly identical brick and stucco houses. It occupied the north end of Kirtland Air Force Base, and had long provided housing for military families. Unlike forty year-old civilian neighborhoods, the houses and yards were nearly identical. Regulations and the transience of military life kept anyone from adding a new room, painting the trim of their house some bright, ridiculous color, or investing years of love and money in lawns and roses. Military cutbacks had left many of the houses vacant, but beneath the film of age, the neighborhood

looked as neat and uniform as the day it was built. Elizabeth thought about the families that had passed through it, never given the chance to leave a mark. She thought of her own father, who, after leaving the Navy, bought an old house and either painted, tiled, plastered, paneled, carpeted or remodeled every square inch of it.

To the north of this neat neighborhood, tracking west along the edge of the base like weeds along a stream, sprawled a jumble of apartment buildings, trailer parks, garages, machine shops, contractor's yards and other businesses the better neighborhoods to the north shunned. For years, these outcaste enterprises had scavenged among the scraps of defense spending for their survival. With the end of the arms race, a leaner defense budget left fewer scraps. Many of the businesses had folded, and crime had filled the void, responding to the same amoral, automatic economic forces that governed legitimate enterprises. The neighborhoods had become a cause of concern, and politicians had promised voters a technology park to re-establish a community in this civic vacuum.

A car horn interrupted her thoughts, and she noticed that traffic had started to move, slowly but steadily. She eased her truck into gear and started toward work. After a few hundred yards she passed the cause of the traffic jam – the victims of a minor collision sat by the side of the road, surrounded by police cars and tow trucks. A young woman with black hair and a bright pink sweater leaned against her damaged blue Mustang, crying and talking on a cell phone. A fifty-ish man in jeans and a denim jacket inspected his truck's dangling fender. Elizabeth passed them carefully, and then accelerated toward work.

The Sky City Building sat in a field of tumbleweeds, mesquite and clumps of native grass. The stone and cactus garden that bordered the entrance confirmed the project's awareness that New Mexico was a desert, and its commitment to save water. The building itself was a two-story mélange of technical and architectural ideas the press-release labeled without shame as "pueblo-post-modern." Tan stucco butted against the small, metal-framed windows of the building's northern face. The roof sloped upward toward the south wall, jutting past the larger windows that helped warm it in the winter. Solar panels and dish antennae interrupted the roofline – the architect had made no effort to conceal them, but seemed fascinated by the clash of technology and traditional southwestern architecture. A green tinted glass wedge jutted from the front of the building, marking its lobby and main entrance. The glass wedge looked like a crystal embedded in sandstone. At least, that is what Elizabeth assumed to be the architect's intent. She parked at the far end of the lot and walked toward the entrance.

Elizabeth had missed the morning rush, and the lobby was empty. Light coming through the walls of the glass wedge reflected on the floor tiles, and her footsteps echoed on the hard ceramic. Together, they made the lobby seem vast, deliberate and abstract.

She saw Guru Deep Singh Khalsa, in turban and khaki, sitting behind his security desk at the far end of the entrance. Unlike most corporate security setups, there were no banks of monitors or computer terminals sloping up in front of him. It looked like any corporate reception area, except

for the single display screen that glowed beneath its glass top. Software agents monitored the security cameras and automatically alerted him if they detected anything suspicious. The building's designers had so much faith in the automated systems that they only staffed a security guard during working hours and early evening, mostly to welcome visitors and to provide a contact should something unusual occur.

Elizabeth had always looked past the odd religious affectations that separated the guard from so many of the people in the building, and had discovered an ironic wit he often aimed at his own peripheral position in that community. She also had discovered a tendency to flirt that frequently attached itself to her. This morning, he neither joked nor winked.

"Good morning, Doctor," he said with clear concern. "Are you doing all right?"

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, I think I am, thanks. How about you?"

He nodded. The beard and turban looked incongruous on his typically American face. His usual composure seemed distorted by some emotional weight, and she sensed he needed to talk. She set her green cloth bag down on the floor.

"I heard that you were one of the first people in Ed's office after his secretary found his body," she probed gently.

"Yes. I heard her cry out. I found her just standing there. Mr. Walters was on the floor."

"I understand there had been a struggle?" she volunteered.

In truth, she knew nothing about the condition of Ed's office.

“It seemed so,” he said. “The chair and trash can had been overturned, and there were papers on the floor.”

“Is it possible he simply fell?”

The guard frowned.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I remember seeing blood around his mouth and nose. It looked like someone had hit him.”

“It must have been difficult,” she said.

“Yes,” he acknowledged.

He looked at her for a moment, as if measuring the trust he could place in her. He continued.

“It’s odd, but so much of my spiritual practice is intended to help me face death with clarity and acceptance. Still, when I see it . . .” He paused.

“Well, it was difficult.”

“Have you ever seen a person who died violently?”

He briefly looked downward and to the side, as if searching his memory, or perhaps out of embarrassment at his lack of experience.

“No. Only illness or old age – grandparents, aunts and uncles.”

Elizabeth listened quietly.

“I worked the night he died,” he continued. “We’d been shorthanded and I had to pull a double shift. I closed up, and left at nine. I wonder if he died while I was here.”

Elizabeth heard a tone of regret, or perhaps a sense of failure, in his voice.

“It wouldn’t have been your fault,” she assured him.

“Doctor, I am head of security,” he said, with a surprising intensity.

Elizabeth nodded. She heard in his voice the pride he invested in his work, and his personal sense of failure over Ed's death. She realized that years of taking safety for granted, and her own absorption in the building's vision and technology had led her to regard his position as little more than a formality, a presence at a desk to introduce visitors to the building's perfect, ubiquitous systems.

"Mr. Khalsa," she said softly, "even if Ed was murdered, it was someone who knew him, possibly someone who planned it. You can't be everywhere."

"I heard you were working with the police on the investigation," he said, changing the subject.

Elizabeth felt herself flush. "Not really – I mean, I'm getting some computer data together for them."

She found herself starting to stutter. She stopped, and inhaled deeply.

"Where did you hear that?" she asked finally.

He smiled at her.

"It's been all over. You're famous," he needled.

Elizabeth mumbled a faint, ambiguous denial. After a moment, she returned his smile, took her badge from her bag, placed it around her neck, and walked past the desk into the building.

As she entered her office, the lights came on, along with the computer monitor at her desk. The windows and icons reappeared where she had left them the night before. She leaned over and closed the list of suspects that

remained on the screen, then set her bag on the desk and hanged her coat on the hook behind the door.

As programmed, her communications agent responded to her arrival by listing new e-mail, grouped and sorted according to her specifications. She glanced briefly at the message headers to see if any needed immediate attention. There was a note from Robert to all employees, apparently offering encouragement in time of difficulty; another message from Robert about her work for the police; a note from Jen; a few letters from out of state friends sending jokes or technical articles; and the usual collection of official announcements and administrative reminders from secretaries and department heads. The building immunized her from the marketing blurbs, pornography, confidence scams and other parasitic communications that had infected the Internet.

Another window displayed her phone messages. She was grateful to see it was empty.

She decided to let her e-mail wait until after her first cup of coffee. She'd been trying to cut down, and only allowed herself to drink it at work. Consequently an intact, fully realized, raging caffeine addiction had stalked her into the office. She took her cup and started down the hall.

Elizabeth returned with the coffee in one hand and her paper mail in the other. The paperless office had not stopped the flow of product brochures, conference announcements and other junk that filled her box. She dropped the handful of paper in the trash as she passed it, and sat down.

She picked through her e-mail. As she had guessed, Robert's first note was a formal response to the tragedy, reassuring employees and discouraging

them from spreading rumors. It listed the time and location of Ed's funeral, and urged everyone to attend. Elizabeth made a note to keep Saturday afternoon free.

Robert's second message told her he had added root permissions to Pops' access controls. This would give Elizabeth unrestricted access to the building's systems, including e-mail and most of the proprietary databases. The message also reminded her of the procedures needed to obtain Ed's personal encryption key from the company's key escrow. Elizabeth thought of the power this gave her, and whistled softly.

In addition to the normal access controls the root permissions bypassed, each employee had the option of encrypting specific documents using a personal key. This formed a second line of protection for particularly sensitive data. Even the root permissions could not penetrate it – the key escrow was the only way around it.

The central concept behind the escrow service was that of a "key," a large number with specific mathematical properties that allowed its holders to encrypt and decrypt documents. Each employee had their own key for information that demanded more than the usual levels of security, and the encryption algorithm the systems used was, in practice, unbreakable. In order to protect the company's interests, the building systems automatically stored a list of all employees' keys in a secure escrow. The escrow list was itself protected using the same system, and this master key was split in two, with the halves distributed among different members of the project's management. Regina Martinelli and a lawyer at one of the consortium's larger members received copies of one half of the key. Robert Hill and Ed

Walters held the other half. Getting anyone's personal key from the escrow required the cooperation of at least two responsible people, one from legal and one from upper management.

She opened Jen's letter next. It asked Elizabeth to stop by her office when she got to work. She decided to leave the rest of her e-mail for later, and glanced at the locators lined up across the top of her monitor. Both David Chavez and Jen were in their offices.

She tapped on the small display that showed David at his desk. As her request for a conference appeared on his screen, she saw him look up at his monitor. Simultaneously, his face filled her large display.

"Hi Libby," he said in his usual cheerful voice.

"Morning, David. Can I come by? I need a favor."

"I know," he said, "I was expecting you."

She smiled. David was the most helpful of the project's systems staff, and Elizabeth relied on him inordinately.

"I'm on my way," she said, feeling the burden of the police investigation start to lighten.

Before she started down the hall, she drank enough coffee to make sure she wouldn't spill any as she walked. Management frowned upon coffee stains on the building's new carpet. There was even a rule discouraging employees from walking in the halls with any sort of open beverage. It was a rule Elizabeth derided as tyranny and cheerfully ignored.

CHAPTER 7

As he and Bruce neared the room reserved for their use during the investigation, Victor heard the door unlock. Robert had offered them the small conference room as a base of operations, and instructed the agent that managed it to lock the door to anyone other than the detectives. As the lock released, Victor automatically glanced above the door at the small bulge that covered one of the building's many radio receivers.

They entered the conference room and closed the door. Although Bruce was eager to try the building's tools, Victor had asked for a plain white board and markers. Somehow, Robert had found one in a closet, and a pair of young programmers had wheeled it into the room. It stood awkwardly in

front of the shining black display panels, its white surface clean except for the few marks the eraser had missed. The white board was only the most prominent reminder of the detective's occupancy. Their coats covered the chairs near the door, and Styrofoam coffee cups, notepads and pencils littered the large conference table.

Bruce walked around the table and sat down. "We could have our motive," he said.

"Less than a week after Ed Walters starts looking into the stolen intellectual property, he winds up dead," Victor agreed.

"I wonder what he learned in his 'investigation.'"

"We should ask Dr. Florczyk to look into it right away."

"I wish our people could do it," Bruce complained.

Victor shrugged. "We'll keep an eye on her," he said.

Bruce absentmindedly picked up a Styrofoam cup, glanced at the cold coffee and pushed it away.

"We need to talk to Martinelli's informants," he said. "They might lead us to the person who stole the data."

"We should get some help from the DA on that one," Victor suggested. "Corporations and their lawyers . . ."

"We could ask Carmen," Bruce said, smiling.

Carmen Goodman was an ambitious assistant DA who loved high profile cases.

"Besides," Bruce added, his smile broadening into a grin, "it would be nice to see her tangle with Regina Martinelli."

Victor chuckled. If anyone in the DA's office could approach Regina Martinelli in brains, looks and style, it was Carmen.

"Don't get your hopes up," he warned. "I doubt Martinelli will put up much of a fight. She's just protecting her own turf, and her relationship with her higher ups. My guess is they just need for the DA to make a bit of a show so they can save face."

Bruce frowned in exaggerated disappointment. "Well," he said, "it was a nice thought."

"Have you heard from forensics?" Victor asked.

"I'm still waiting for the report, but I'm not optimistic," his partner answered.

Bruce had conducted the crime scene investigation. Following standard procedures, they had left Ed Walters' body undisturbed until technicians had scoured the area around it: turning a dead body to examine it could disturb evidence in its vicinity. Investigators had worked toward the body in concentric circles, vacuuming fibers from the floor, looking for small objects or fingerprints, photographing everything before they touched it. By the time they reached the body, the investigation of the crime scene was almost over. The investigators had found a spray of blood on the wall, suggesting that someone had struck the victim before he fell. The blood around the dead man's nose, and his broken eyeglasses confirmed that Ed Walters had not died accidentally. Beyond that, they'd found nothing: no weapon, no hair or fabric in the dead man's hand, no skin under his fingernails, no residue of the assailant's presence.

Bruce picked up the Styrofoam cup, looked at the morning's cold coffee once again, and pushed it aside.

"You want some coffee?" he asked his partner.

"Why not."

Bruce left the room to go to the kitchen. Victor gathered up the morning's cups, and threw them in the trash. He sat back down, and looked up at a perforated metal disk set in the blue-carpeted wall, covering one of the building's microphones.

"System," he said toward the disk, "where is Elizabeth Florczyk?"

"She is in the systems lab," the building responded in a bland, unaccented voice.

Other than sounding like a news anchor on a Midwestern television station, the voice gave little indication it had been synthesized.

"System, is she alone?" Victor asked.

"She is with David Chavez, Jason Evans and Wayne Ballard," the wall said in its anonymous voice.

Bruce walked in holding two cups of coffee.

"Kind of cool, ain't it?" he said, tilting his head toward the microphone and grinning.

Victor smiled. "I thought I'd give it a try. I was going to ask Dr. Florczyk to see if she could find anything about Ed Walters' investigation of the information theft."

"And?" Bruce asked, handing his partner a cup of black coffee.

"She's with some people. We'll catch her later."

Victor took a sip from the Styrofoam cup.

“I noticed you singled out Gilbert Baca back in Martinelli’s office,” he said. “Did you have a reason, or was it just a hunch?”

“He phoned in sick again today,” Bruce answered.

“Again? When did you learn that?”

“I talked to his secretary before you got here.” He paused a moment, then grinned. “See what you miss when you’re late.”

“I had to drop Maria at school,” Victor explained. “She was taking in an art project and didn’t want to ride the bus. Did she say what was wrong with him?”

“No, he just phoned in sick. Maybe we should go see him.”

Victor nodded. “Maybe so. I’d like to talk to Peter Martinelli first.”

“See what hubby has to say while our talk with the misses is still fresh?”

“Something like that. Since you got in early enough this morning to chat up the secretarial staff, did you learn anything about him?”

“Nah, not much,” Bruce shook his head. “People think he’s a pretty nice guy. Most folks don’t think he’s as smart as his wife.”

“I hope that’s not a crime,” Victor said flatly.

“The secretaries think he deserves better than Regina,” Bruce volunteered.

“Why?”

“Nothing definite,” Bruce shrugged. “Could be jealousy. Most of them think Peter’s good looking. Some hinted Regina was less than perfectly faithful.”

“Really? Anyone we know?” Victor asked.

“Give me day or so,” Bruce grinned.

“That long?” Victor started toward the door. “Since you’ve done the homework,” he said, “why don’t you lead off on this one.”

“How come you got to lead with the good looking woman,” Bruce complained, “and I have to talk to her husband?”

Victor shrugged. “I thought it would do you good to talk to a husband for a change.”

“To new experiences,” Bruce said, draining his coffee.

He dropped the cup in the trash and started toward the door. He took hold of the handle, then stopped and turned to Victor.

“What kind of art project?” Bruce asked.

“What?”

“Your daughter. Remember? You had to help Maria take an art project to school.”

Victor smiled. “It’s a still life: an Indian pot and some autumn vegetables: squash, chile, corn, an apple from her grandfather’s tree. It’s pretty good,” he said proudly.

“I’d like to see it.”

“Are you hinting for a dinner invitation?”

“Well, yeah.”

Victor smiled. “Maria would like that.”

“She said so?”

“Yeah. I imagine she’d even help me talk Michelle into feeding you.”

CHAPTER 8

“Pops,” Elizabeth asked as she started down the hall, “who is in the systems lab?”

“David Chavez, Jason Evans and Wayne Ballard.”

Given the sensitivity of the information she was after, she had hoped David would be alone. She was not surprised to learn he wasn't. The systems staff didn't have an office in the usual sense of the word. Wayne, along with his disciples, worked out of a large, cluttered laboratory at the back of the first floor. The cables, routers, network hubs, circuit boards and other parts that littered the lab, along with the empty soda cans and pizza boxes scattered among piles of papers, manuals and books were a continuous cause of conflict between Wayne and Robert. In spite of Robert's persistent

efforts to bring their lab into conformity with the project's bright corporate image, Wayne didn't budge. He didn't budge, because he knew, in the calculus of Robert's ambitions, that usefulness canceled inconvenience. They both knew that if Wayne left, David and Jason would quite likely follow, leaving Robert to find replacements who might be just as difficult and quite probably less competent.

The systems staff made an odd team, as varied in their dress and manners as the characters in one of the comic books that accented the clutter in the lab. Wayne was not only the head of the systems department: he was its undisputed leader and chief wizard. Tall, with a gray pony tail and beard, he selected his daily wardrobe from a disturbingly small collection of jeans and t-shirts, most of which commemorated defunct rock bands. Today was Pink Floyd day.

Jason Evans was the youngest of the three, a nineteen year old, skinhead counterpoint to Wayne's deadhead lead. His approach to dress and grooming appeared even more minimalist than Wayne's: run a razor over the head, make sure no earrings had fallen out, and put on a black t-shirt and jeans. The tattoos largely took care of themselves.

And David Chavez, in his neat khaki slacks, pressed sport shirts and polished loafers, was as comfortable with these self-styled outsiders as a fraternity president at a rush party. Outgoing, helpful and cheerful, he often seemed the strangest of the three. Such is the effect of context on perception.

Elizabeth entered the lab without knocking.

"Doctor Florczyk," Wayne said expansively, "come in, come in."

As usual, he amused himself by emphasizing her title. As usual, she ignored his teasing.

“Hi, Wayne. David. Jason.”

David smiled. “Hi, Libby.”

Jason did not look up from his work, but added his own, “Hi, Libby.”

Wayne held out the pot he kept permanently brewing on his desk.

“Have some coffee, Doc,” he offered.

She held her cup out gratefully, and let him fill it. The bitter, burned aroma of Wayne’s coffee hit her nostrils and etched its way into her forebrain. As usual, it was too concentrated for any but the most pathetically addicted. She moved a stack of papers from the spare chair to a nearby desktop, sat down and took a welcome sip.

Behind the rumpled programmer, faint patterns of light and shadow swirled on the wall, as subtle and chaotic as the reflection of sunlight off quickly flowing water. The ambient representation of network activity was another of the building's experimental displays. Shining from a small projector hanging from the ceiling, the image encoded the amount and location of network activity in a dense, abstract pattern. The experimental display was not intended to show the details of the building's operations, but rather to give the systems staff a subliminal, constant sense of network activity. It remained at the edge of perception like the pattern on familiar wallpaper until some sudden change in network traffic disturbed it, alerting those nearby. If she listened carefully, Elizabeth could hear its audible component, a consonant, multi-layered, musical pattern repeating almost beneath the threshold of hearing. She remembered Wayne's initial reaction

to this abstract representation of network activity. In spite of his usual contempt for anything that made computers easy to use, he had insisted on installing the prototype in his laboratory. Although the display encoded little beyond the gross rate of network traffic, Wayne boasted that he knew "his" system so well that he could recognize a new joke propagating through the soft abstractions on his wall. He claimed he could distinguish the activity that accompanied an approaching deadline, or a new rumor of a sexual affair, or one of Robert's periodic floods of managerial directives in the shifting patterns of light and song.

"How's the cop business?" Wayne asked, putting the coffee pot back in place and crossing his feet up on his desk.

"What are you talking about?" Elizabeth asked with an exaggerated show of ignorance.

"Come on, Doc," Wayne grinned. "You can't keep a secret around here."

"I'm just here to talk to David," she deadpanned, sitting back in the chair and relaxing into the linguistic sparring that defined her relationship with the head of the systems department.

"I know," Wayne winked at his minions. "You're just doing a favor for poor Robert."

She glared at him.

"Did he use his famous charm?" Wayne leered.

"I thought he was saving his famous charm for the lawyer," Jason said without looking up from his monitor.

Elizabeth took another sip of her coffee.

“Is there something I should know?” she asked, being careful to show no emotion.

Wayne looked at Jason and snorted conspiratorially. He turned back.

“Where have you been? Robert’s been boning Mrs. M. since before you split the conjugal sheets.”

“Shut up, Wayne,” Elizabeth snapped.

“Hell Liz, you’re better off without him.” Wayne sounded almost sincere.

“Thanks,” she said, recovering her composure. “So, Jason,” she asked, “is there anything to this, or is it just the usual office bullshit?”

Elizabeth ordinarily avoided profanity, but accepted it as part of the social ritual that defined her favored status with the systems department.

“Probably just bullshit,” Wayne answered for him again. “It’s just Jason wishing he spent his days in a nice suit, up in the executive suites chasing pussy.”

“That’s right, ass-wipe,” Jason said, without looking up from his work, “except I’m stuck in this shit-hole with you.”

Elizabeth found herself smiling, even as she again confronted the painful rumor. She’d heard it before, but had dismissed it as part of the speculation that attached itself to a relationship’s unraveling. She’d noticed Robert and Regina’s flirtation at the end of their affair, and it had been the cause of at least a couple of fights before she finally moved out. Still, she believed Robert when he said he had not slept with her. After she’d moved out, Robert confessed to several affairs, but denied any involvement with

Regina. She saw no reason for him to lie about one affair and admit to the rest.

“Never mind,” she said finally. “Why don’t you go back to downloading smut off the Internet, Wayne. I need to talk to David.”

Wayne laughed out loud, and Elizabeth turned her chair toward David Chavez.

“Robert called me yesterday and told me what you were doing,” he began. “He said you’d need some help, and he gave me a list of stuff to get started on.”

“He gave you a list to get started on?” Elizabeth made no effort to conceal her irritation.

“Yeah.”

David opened a mail window and nodded toward the screen. Robert’s note asked him to get Ed Walters’ mail, appointment book and all his documents from the last six months, and put them on a CD so they could be read on an ordinary computer.

“Well, it wasn’t everything that was on my list,” she said. “At least I have one or two ideas of my own.”

“Don’t worry, Doc,” Wayne interrupted. “Everybody knows where Robert steals his ideas.”

She smiled at him, and continued reading Robert’s mail. He had included the supposedly confidential list of people who were in the building when Ed was killed, and asked David to pay special attention to mail either to or from anyone on it.

“Jesus, Robert,” Elizabeth shook her head, “why don’t you take out a billboard on the freeway.”

Wayne laughed. “Don’t worry, Doc. There aren’t too many secrets down here. Besides,” he grinned, “I’m on his list and I don’t give a fuck.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and shook her head.

“That’s because you have neither shame nor common decency.” She turned toward David. “Show me what you have.”

Unlike the nearly invisible computers that were integrated into the building infrastructure, the machines in the lab sat prominently near their owner’s desks, usually with auxiliary disk drives or network hardware hanging off them like infant marsupials. David loaded a CD into his machine, and it displayed a set of folders on the screen.

“This CD has all the e-mail everyone in the building has received over the last six months. I made two folders for each person: one containing all the mail they sent, and the other all the mail they received.”

She looked at the screen. It was well organized: David had placed folders for the people who were in the building at the time of Ed’s death up at the top, with everyone else’s alphabetized in a list below them. He removed the CD from the drive, placed it in a jewel-box container and gave it to her. He loaded another CD in the drive.

“This has copies of all of Ed Walter’s documents, everything he either wrote or read, and some of his personal agents, like his appointment manager and stuff.”

“You said you included some of his personal agents?” she asked, emphasizing the word ‘some.’

“Yeah, the appointment agent, his newspaper agent, and so on – the stuff that related to the list.”

“David,” Elizabeth said, “I was wondering if I could get copies of all the agents Ed invoked over the last few months.”

She stressed the word ‘all,’ and winced as she said it.

“How many months?”

“Say six.”

David whistled. She heard Wayne snort a laugh.

“There will be lots of them,” David said.

“I know,” Elizabeth acknowledged.

He opened a query window and entered the request. After a few seconds, a list appeared. As Elizabeth feared, thousands of items filled the screen.

“David,” she asked, “could you load these onto another disk, just like they are?”

“Sure,” he said cheerfully, “it will take a few minutes.”

“No problem,” Elizabeth said, “if Wayne will keep plying me with coffee and his lame attempts at conversation.”

David put the last disk into a jewel box and handed it to her.

“Will the police be able to read this stuff?” she asked.

“Some of the files are probably encrypted . . .”

“I’ll take care of that,” Elizabeth said. “What about the formats?”

“Well, the e-mail is just text. I pulled the documents out of their agents, so the police can open them using any word processor. There are a

few spreadsheets, and some presentation slides. I also gave them an agent viewer, so they can look at histories and stuff, like you asked. I think it's all they need."

"What if I want to do some searches, or use some of our tools on this?" she asked.

"Well, I didn't put any of our system tools on the CDs. If you want to do that, you'll need to work on the building's computers. You can also get at the original copies of all this stuff that way, along with the document histories and so on."

"They also wanted backup tapes . . ."

Elizabeth heard Wayne laugh.

"Help yourself," he said, pointing toward a set of shelves covering the wall at the end of the laboratory from floor to ceiling.

They were filled with tape cartridges.

"How many months worth?" David asked, ignoring his boss.

"Six?" Elizabeth suggested.

"I'll box them up and drop them by your office."

"Thanks, David. This is great. I'll call you if I need anything else."

She got up to leave. Wayne leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped against his belly.

"Don't be a stranger, Doc."

"Don't worry," she said smiling. "Thanks for the coffee."

She poured the dregs from her cup into the dead geranium they kept on the workbench, and left the laboratory.

CHAPTER 9

Victor and Bruce followed Peter Martinelli into his office. Like the other manager's offices, it was large enough to hold both a desk and a small conference table. Unlike his wife, who remained behind her desk throughout the interview, Peter guided them to the table, and waited for them to sit down.

"Can I get you any coffee?" he asked.

"No, no thank you. We've been drinking it all morning," Bruce answered.

Peter Martinelli was an athletic forty year old with light brown hair, a handsome, open face, and a wardrobe straight out of the Banana Republic. In the semiotics of office fashion, his position as a project leader required a compromise between the suits and ties of upper management, and the jeans

and T-shirts favored by the younger members of the technical staff. He negotiated these tricky fashion waters with both good taste and conspicuous expense. Victor wondered if his wife helped him pick his clothes. He tried to imagine Regina Martinelli bringing shirts home to her husband.

The detectives showed him their identification. He waved them off.

“I know who you are,” he smiled. “What can I do for you?”

While Bruce began the fairly predictable line of questions with which most detectives started their interviews, Victor looked around Peter Martinelli’s office. Although it was typical of the spacious, comfortably furnished manager’s offices, it was as cluttered as any of the cubicles downstairs. Technical journals competed with software manuals for space on the bookshelves and desk. The Georgia O’Keefe print on the wall hanged slightly at an angle. The mix of decorator chic and scientific clutter underscored the impression that Peter Martinelli lived between the project’s management and the techies on the floor below. Victor wondered how being the man in the middle might translate into tensions between him and the other people on the project. He wondered how it affected his relationship with his wife.

Victor sat, quietly watching him answer Bruce’s questions. Peter confirmed that he had worked late the night of Ed’s death, and left with his wife. His story matched Regina’s, as well as the records in the usage database. He gave the expected answers to questions about the people he worked with, his relationship with Ed Walters, and his lack of knowledge of any conflict between Walters and other employees. None of his answers were

surprising, all were consistent with the other interviews, and his manner revealed nothing unusual.

“Mr. Martinelli,” Bruce asked, “is there anything here that might be worth stealing?”

As his partner raised the issue of proprietary data, Victor paid close attention to both the content and manner of Peter’s answers.

“Well, there is a lot of valuable computer equipment.”

He showed no unusual reaction to the question.

“What about confidential information?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Peter said.

“Well, I’m not sure myself,” Bruce smiled. “Did Ed Walters have any information someone might have wanted to steal?”

“You mean badly enough to kill him?”

Peter leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling in thought.

“No,” he said finally, “I can’t imagine.”

“What about proprietary information? I understand Mr. Walters handled a great deal of it.”

“Yes, I do, too,” Peter volunteered. “There really isn’t much there of immediate value.”

“I should think that this place would have some valuable technology,” Bruce prodded.

“Most of our work is pretty ‘blue sky,’” Peter said casually. “We hope it will lead to products someday, but I haven’t seen anything worth stealing.”

“Do you know of anything that is close to being a product?” Bruce persisted.

“Sure, there are a few things,” Martinelli said after thinking for a moment, “but I can’t imagine anyone killing over them.”

Bruce did not stay with the topic, but asked what he knew about Ed Walters’ personal life. Victor had seen nothing in Peter Martinelli’s answers or his manner to indicate he knew anything about the information theft. To all appearances Regina Martinelli had meant it when she said she’d told no one about the stolen intellectual property – not even her husband.

Victor thought about Peter’s assertion that little of the project’s information was of immediate value. He thought of the effort that went into protecting this abstract, highly technical information, and the effort that clearly went into stealing it, all for something of “no immediate value.” Was this the cause of a man’s death? Victor wondered if the only source of the information’s value might be the consortium’s wish to keep it secret.

Bruce continued asking about Ed Walter’s relationships at work. Peter’s answers were consistent with everything else they’d been told, and added nothing new. He described a man who was well liked, who handled the inevitable conflicts of his high-level position without grudges, and who kept a strong separation between his work and personal life. After a few more minutes, Bruce brought the interview to a close.

“There is something else I wanted to ask you about,” Victor said as he stood up.

“Yes?” Peter replied as he pushed his chair back under the table.

“We’ve been given a record of people who were in the building the night Mr. Walters died.”

“Yes,” Peter nodded.

“Is it possible to tamper with that information?”

“Excuse me?”

“The records of who was in the building, who was in Ed’s office – could someone have changed them?”

Peter Martinelli thought for a moment.

“I suppose it’s theoretically possible, but practically? I can’t see any way it could have been done.” He thought for another moment. “No. I’m sure it’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“The data is all time and date stamped at a systems level. You can’t change it using our standard tools,” Peter said, shaking his head. “The only way someone could change that data would be to get down to the guts of the operating system. They’d need a lot of skill and some specialized tools.”

“I see,” Victor said.

“And then, they would have to change all the data, and do it in a consistent way,” Peter went on, as if thinking aloud. “Inconsistencies would be bound to show up. No, I’m sure the data is accurate.”

Victor nodded. “So, it would be hard to make the changes . . .”

“Yes.”

“And even harder to get it right.”

“I think it would be practically impossible,” Peter said confidently.

“But, maybe we should check it. I mean, if someone tried, there might be inconsistencies we could find?”

“It’s almost certain,” Peter answered.

“What about the backup tapes?” Victor asked. He remembered the tapes Elizabeth Florczyk had promised.

“That would be even harder,” Peter explained. “The data on them is written sequentially, so you can’t just remove a record or two. You’d have to redo the entire tape.”

“Thanks again.” Victor shook his hand, and then started down the hall.

“So, what made you ask him about changing the computer records?” Bruce asked, walking down the stairs to the first floor.

Victor shrugged. “I’m just not sure we should rely on them so much.”

“He said they couldn’t be changed,” Bruce said ironically.

Victor smiled at his partner and nodded. “This job must be making us both cynical,” he said.

“Building a theory on unreliable evidence requires risk and imagination,” Bruce said, lowering his voice into a resonant baritone with traces of a south valley inflection.

“Who said that?” Victor asked.

“You did.”

“No.”

“Yeah, to my class at the academy.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

CHAPTER 10

“Jen?” Elizabeth tapped on the wall just inside Jennifer Sorenson’s door.

Her friend looked up from her work and smiled. “Come on in.”

Jen was fortunate enough to have a private office with a window facing the mountains. Like her work, personality and dress, Jennifer Sorenson’s office was neat, minimal and precise. Two well-manicured plants, a framed Santa Fe Opera poster, and the hand-thrown vase on her desk were all the personal items she brought into work. They defined her presence definitively.

“It looks like they didn’t bust you for sneaking out early,” Elizabeth said as she sat down.

She heard the agent automatically lower the volume on the music. It was an alternative band she didn't recognize. Jen usually listened to rock at work: she said classical music was more distracting, because she actually paid attention to it.

"No big deal. I just told the cop in the lobby I was upset and needed to go home. He wrote my name down." Jen smiled ironically. "I couldn't see sitting around here all day because of Robert's demands."

"I wish I'd known it was that easy."

"Yeah, but I hear you'd have missed a great opportunity."

Elizabeth smiled. "Aren't there any secrets around here?"

"Nope. Information wants to be free. So what do the cops have you doing?"

She told Jen about Victor Rodriguez and Bruce Kaminsky, and her assignment to gather e-mail, appointment books, agent histories or anything else that might help with their investigation. She held up the CD's David had given her and smiled.

"And when I give these to the cops, I'm done."

"Libby," Jen asked, concern softening her voice, "do the cops really think that someone took off their badge, sneaked into Ed's office, and murdered him?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth said. "I keep hoping they'll decide he died of a heart attack and tell me to forget about it."

"Like Robert does with most of our projects," Jen complained.

Elizabeth knew her friend had been fighting to keep the funding alive for her pet project. Jen spent every moment she could spare, and every dollar

she could beg or bully out of management on trying to program computers to recognize human emotions. She'd looked at everything from facial expressions, to the electrical conductivity of the skin, to pulse rates, to skin temperature in an effort to make machines understand what people were feeling. Jen wanted to make computers that could tell when a user was frustrated or confused, and offer help. She wanted to make educational programs sense when a student was on the verge of some new discovery or insight, and help them bring it into focus. She'd started the work in her dissertation, and had joined the project on Robert's promise that he would help her continue it.

In spite of their best efforts, her work had always been a target: many of the consortium members felt that enabling computers to recognize human emotional states was impractical and had little to offer office automation. They wanted her to focus on the wearable computer project. Jen countered by insisting that practical sensing of emotions would render the current generation of user interfaces obsolete. In a meeting still discussed among the project's management, Jen had explained to the consortium board that office workers were thinking, feeling human beings, and deserved to be treated as such – at least by their computers, if not their management. In a damage control effort, Robert listed the new markets her work could create. With his help, and a strong campaign aimed at Ed Walters and the consortium's board, she had kept minimal funding alive for another year.

“What do you really think happened to Ed?” Jen pressed. “Be straight.”

Elizabeth looked at her friend and said nothing.

Jen took a deep breath and let it out. “Well,” she said finally, “they have a list of people who were in the building. That makes me a suspect.”

“Yeah. The cops are calling you ‘Mad Dog Sorenson,’” she said with gentle irony.

“Thomas was here, too. That makes Mad Dog and Baby Face,” Jen said without smiling.

“Did you see anything strange?” Elizabeth asked. “Did you talk to anyone? Anyone acting weird?”

Jen picked up the CD’s Elizabeth had set on her desk, and waved them at her friend.

“I thought you said you were going to give these to the cops and be done?”

Elizabeth smiled and shrugged. “I’m just trying to make some sense of all this.”

“That might not be possible.”

“We’ll see,” Elizabeth evaded. “So, did you see anything?”

Jen shook her head in surrender. “I ran into Wayne coming down the stairs as I was leaving.”

“When was that?”

“About ten thirty,” Jen said in a quick staccato.

“Did he seem strange?”

“Wayne always seems strange. Now, it’s your turn,” Jen pressed.

“What the hell’s going on?”

Elizabeth sat back in the chair and stared at her friend for several seconds.

“You’re right,” she said finally. “Something about this has been on my mind.”

Jen nodded.

“David helped me get the police the things they’d asked for, the e-mail, documents . . .”

“So you’re done.” Jen paused and looked at her friend sympathetically. “They will sort this out. I’m sure of it.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I’m not sure that data’s going to help them,” she said, “at least not in its current state. I mean, there’s so much of it. Besides, do you really think there’s some e-mail that names Ed’s killer? There could be something in all that data, but how do we recognize it?”

“These people know what they’re doing . . .”

Elizabeth shook her head. “This is something new. How many intelligent buildings do they investigate?”

Jen shrugged.

“There’s going to be so much data,” Elizabeth said, “e-mail, memos, voice recordings . . . They can’t process all that. I mean, they’ll read through it, but how can they interpret it? How can they see past the surface?”

Jen raised an eyebrow. Elizabeth sensed her friend was being drawn into the same questions that had infected her own thoughts.

“How do I help them get at the deeper meaning?” she asked.

“There isn’t any deeper meaning,” Jen said, shaking her head. “It’s just a bunch of text and it isn’t going to tell them anything except who has to go to Robert’s stupid meetings. Whatever meaning those letters have is in all the contextual human stuff surrounding them. Without knowing the context,

the goals and emotions behind those letters, they're as useless as road signs yanked out of the ground and dumped in a pile – they don't point to anything anymore.”

Elizabeth smiled. The metaphor was classic Jen: unconventional, complex and undeniably compelling.

“I'm not so sure,” she said, shaking her head. “There must be some way we can analyze that data, something better than having a couple cops read it one page at a time.”

“Like what?”

“I don't know, but we have a lot of data that needs to be searched for something complex, incomplete and ambiguous. Isn't that what we do here? We spend half our time writing intelligent search algorithms.”

“What are you thinking?” Jen asked in a scientist's voice, a voice that combined skepticism with a willingness to consider ideas that challenged it.

“There's a lot of isolated information in there: people's communications, projects they worked on together, Ed's appointment schedules, his phone calls, his agent histories,” Elizabeth paused, composing her thoughts. “If we look at the pieces individually, you're right. There may not be anything. But I'm wondering if there isn't a way we can find some pattern, something more than you can get at by just reading through it, something only our tools can find.”

Jen shook her head. “You're starting with incomplete, unreliable data: just the stuff people say at work, that they put in e-mails. You know how cryptic most e-mails are . . .”

“I'll have to take that into consideration.”

“That’s right,” Jen warned, “and when you do, you’ll be telling it how to interpret messages, appointments, all the data you expect to see. How do you know the conclusions it draws are anything except a rehash of your own assumptions? Maybe all it does is feed your own speculations back to you, but this time they look like they mean something ‘cause they came out of a computer.”

“Isn’t that how every scientific theory starts out: intuitions, clues, hunches?”

Jen shook her head again. “Science is more careful about validation than the law. We don’t accept hypotheses without repeated confirmations, replicated experiments. The kind of stuff you’re talking about could wind up in court with some jury thinking it’s scientific evidence.”

Elizabeth paused. “OK. But what if I don’t help? How do we know the police won’t misinterpret the information? Maybe they’ll blame some innocent person. Don’t I have an obligation to use what I know to try and help them do the right thing?”

“How’d they ever manage without you?”

Elizabeth ignored her friend’s sarcasm. “I didn’t want to be involved in this.”

Jen laughed. “Bullshit.”

Elizabeth laughed in spite of herself.

“They’ll find Ed’s killer . . .” Jen reassured her.

“It’s not just Ed,” Elizabeth answered.

She spoke slowly, as if she was discovering the ideas as she spoke. She thought about Ed Walters lying dead, about the yellow tape crossing his door, and about violence's intrusion into her world.

"Something is wrong here . . . someone we know has done this. I can't just give Victor Rodriguez some CDs and forget about it – not if I'm able to give him something more."

Jen shook her head and smiled.

"Nancy Drew Florczyk," she joked. "It doesn't even sound right."

Elizabeth shrugged. "How's work going on the sensor?" she asked, changing the subject.

"The infrared sensor?"

Jen did not resist her friend's effort to leave behind talk of Ed's death.

"Yeah, how's it going?" Elizabeth asked.

Jen's pet project used an infrared sensor to detect changes in skin temperature and infer emotional states.

"Have you seen this?" she said, taking a large Victorian silver brooch out of her drawer and handing it to Elizabeth.

"Lovely."

Elizabeth turned it over and saw the electronics epoxied into the hollow space in the back. She held it up to the light, and saw the lens that replaced the original stone in the antique filigree.

"Who put this together?"

"I know a jeweler in Old Town who likes me," Jen smiled. "He did it for free."

"How'd you get the electronics so small?"

“I know a really good electronics guy at Sandia Labs . . .”

“He likes you, too?” Elizabeth said.

“No, he’s gay, but he likes electronics.”

“How’d you find him?”

“He lives with an artist I know. He likes me.”

“I’m sorry I asked.”

Jen shrugged, “How else you gonna learn about the world?”

Elizabeth turned the brooch over in her hand.

“Does it work?”

“It’s not bad,” Jen said. “It’s not as sensitive as the larger version, but I’ve got some ideas to improve it. But, wouldn’t it be great to use this with a wearable computer? To be able to tell what people are feeling, if they’re excited or afraid – or even if they’re lying?”

“You haven’t mentioned lies before,” Elizabeth noted.

“It’s new,” Jen said, “look at this.”

She turned to her screen and moved her mouse. A window opened showing two rows of faces. The top row showed a man in various stages of what looked like ordinary conversation. The bottom row showed the same pictures, but the face was tinted with bright colors that ranged across the spectrum. Some pictures were dominated by green and blue, others showed more red and yellow.

“I’ve had better luck at detecting strong emotions like anger,” Jen said, “but this shows some results on lie detection. The increased heart rate and blood pressure that accompany a lie register as a slight increase in skin

temperature. Look at the color maps at the bottom of the slide. You can tell when he's lying."

"With a man, that's easy. His lips move," Elizabeth joked.

"And his skin is a little warmer," Jen said, ignoring her. "Look closer . . ."

"The reds and yellows?" Elizabeth asked.

"Maybe you ought to use this in your investigation," Jen said ironically.

"I'm not investigating," Elizabeth frowned, "but this is terrific. What are you doing with it?"

"Not much," Jen said in a frustrated voice.

"Why not?"

"It's not ready to publish without some more work. It's nowhere near as accurate as a conventional lie detector. I need to do some adjustments, more tests . . ."

"Get to work," Elizabeth said, laughing softly. "You can sell this. Think barrels of money."

Jen shook her head. "Not right now. I need to get some other stuff done. This is a long way from being practical, and I need to make management happy this year or . . ."

She drew her finger across her throat.

"So, what do they have you doing?"

"I'm testing a prototype wearable computer system with some management interns over at the University," she frowned.

"That sounds interesting." Elizabeth tried to sound positive.

“Right, if your idea of interesting is trying to convince a twenty year old biz-school undergrad that a wearable computer doesn’t make her look fat.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Yeah. But it’s either that or do web pages for Peter.”

Elizabeth heard the soft, synthesized chord that announced a request for a video call. Unlike Elizabeth, Jen did not keep small locator displays for her colleagues – she didn’t like the clutter. Instead, a small image of Thomas Lee appeared on her monitor.

Jen smiled and opened the icon. Thomas’ open, cheerful face filled the screen. In the background, Elizabeth recognized her own office. She saw Victor Rodriguez in the background.

“What’s up?” Jen asked him.

“Let me talk to Libby.”

“Hey Thomas,” Elizabeth said, moving into the camera’s field of view.

“Could you come back to your office? Lieutenant Rodriguez and Sergeant Kaminsky want to see you.”

“I’m on my way.”

Thomas nodded. The window closed and Jen’s display returned to its working state.

“Duty calls,” Elizabeth smiled.

Jen smiled and shook her head.

“Do you still want to play this weekend?” Elizabeth asked.

Jen was a classically trained violinist, and they had worked out a few pieces together. Elizabeth’s technique had lost some of its discipline during

the years she'd spent in a rock and roll band, and Jen pushed her, reintroducing her to the classical repertoire. In turn, Elizabeth was teaching her friend to improvise through the complex harmonic structures of modern jazz.

"Why not?" Jen asked.

"Ed's funeral is Saturday," Elizabeth reminded her.

"Damn. I'd put it out of my mind. Libby, I hate funerals."

"Everybody hates funerals," Elizabeth said. "Look, let's plan on playing Saturday night when it's done. I think we'll need it."

"Along with a bottle of wine."

"OK, then. We'll order up a pizza, work on the Bach sonata and polish off a bottle of wine."

She got up to leave.

"Libby," Jen stopped her. "Don't get all knotted up in this thing. Just give them the data and move on."

"It'll be OK. I just want to try a few searches."

Elizabeth noticed the skepticism on her friend's face.

"I promise," she asserted. "I won't get involved."

As she turned to leave, she heard Jen's cynical laugh.

CHAPTER 11

Elizabeth walked into her office and saw Thomas sitting with Victor and Bruce. He was wearing jeans and a UC Berkeley sweatshirt, and was talking casually with the detectives. All three of them seemed relaxed. He looked up as Elizabeth walked through the door.

“Hi Libby, I saw Lieutenant Rodriguez and Sergeant Kaminsky waiting outside your office. They were too polite to interrupt you and Jen, so I thought I’d help out,” he grinned.

He stood up and started toward the door. He turned toward the detectives.

“We’re kind of casual here. If this happens again, just tell the System you want to talk to her, and it will track her down.”

Victor and Bruce smiled and thanked him.

“Thomas,” Elizabeth said, “thanks.”

“No problem,” he said, and disappeared down the hall.

Elizabeth closed the door and sat down.

“Pops, privacy,” she said.

She put the CDs David had made on her desk.

“These are the things you asked for. I should have the system backup tapes for you later. David’s going to box them up and bring them by.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Victor said, “I know we’re kind of early.”

“Call me Libby.”

He smiled. “OK, Libby. And, it would probably be easier if you called me Victor.”

“And Bruce.”

She returned their smiles.

“The reason we stopped by is that we thought of something else we’d like for you to do for us.”

“Of course, what is it?”

With Bruce’s help, Victor told her about the stolen corporate data. He shared what Regina had told them about the theft, about Ed Walter’s efforts to investigate it on his own.

“Mrs. Martinelli thought Mr. Walters might have programmed some of these ‘agents’ to investigate the theft. She said it was possible to replay what he had done.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged “every agent keeps a history of its actions. It happens automatically.”

“How hard would it be for us to find that on the disks?” he asked, gesturing toward the pile of CDs and stressing the word ‘us’.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Hard. The disks don’t include any of our search tools, and the tools on your computers wouldn’t be able to use some of our contextual information . . .” she realized she was descending into technical details and paused. “You’d have to do it manually – it would take days, maybe weeks.”

Victor nodded. “I expected as much.”

He paused for a moment, as if revisiting a decision he’d made earlier.

“I would like for you to retrace Mr. Walters’ investigation into the theft,” he said finally.

Elizabeth smiled. “Of course. It shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Also, I would like to do this quickly.”

Elizabeth nodded. “You think Ed might have learned the thief’s identity? Do you think the thief found out about it and confronted him?”

“I’d rather not speculate,” Victor said.

“I understand. Could I see the stolen documents?”

“Of course,” Victor agreed, “but first, Mrs. Martinelli wants to talk with you. There are some legal issues she wants to discuss. Perhaps we could walk up to her office?”

“That shouldn’t be necessary,” said Elizabeth. “Pops, is Regina Martinelli available?”

“Yes, she is alone in her office.”

“Pops, please request a video conference.”

After a moment, she saw Regina’s face appear on her computer screen.

“Dr. Florczyk, is this line secure?” Victor asked.

Elizabeth nodded.

“Mrs. Martinelli,” he began, “we have told Dr. Florczyk about the information theft, and explained its sensitivity. As you requested, I have asked her to speak with you about your concerns.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Regina Martinelli’s image moved with none of the jerkiness usually found in networked video. “Elizabeth, it is important that you understand the sensitivity of this to the corporation.”

Elizabeth nodded. She was tired of people emphasizing the obvious.

“I’m not so much concerned about the stolen data itself,” Regina continued. “That cow has already left the barn. At this time, I am more concerned about anything that might embarrass the company . . .”

Elizabeth suppressed a smile. Embarrassing the company was usually a primary concern among management.

“. . . or jeopardize any continued investigation into the theft.”

“I understand,” Elizabeth assured her. “What would you like for me to do?”

“Just cooperate with the police, but try to keep this as quiet as possible. If you find yourself in a situation where you aren’t sure what to do, come talk to me.”

“Or the police?” Elizabeth added.

Regina ignored her. “Also, I would like for you to keep me informed of what you learn.”

Elizabeth wasn’t sure how to respond to the request. She recognized the importance of sharing her findings only with the police.

“I will be working with Dr. Florczyk, and I will keep you informed,”
Victor interrupted.

“That will be fine,” said Regina. “Oh, and one more thing,” she added.
“Elizabeth, I want you to know I have full confidence in your discretion.”

Elizabeth nodded. She had already gotten the hint about protecting
the company from embarrassment.

“Well,” Regina concluded, “that’s all I wanted to say. Is there anything
else I can do for you?”

“Yes,” said Victor, “I would like to give Doctor Florczyk copies of the
stolen data.”

“That seems fine,” Regina agreed. “I’ll send her electronic copies.”

“I’ll need Ed Walters’ encryption key from the escrow,” Elizabeth
interrupted.

The attorney frowned. “That’s a serious request.”

“I know, but it seems likely that Ed would have encrypted the agents
he used to perform that search. Also,” Elizabeth added, “Robert has already
offered to support the request. You have the other half of the master key.”

The attorney seemed irritated. “I’ll discuss it with him.”

“I’d be grateful if you could hurry. I’d like to get started right away,”
Elizabeth said. “Today if possible.”

“Shouldn’t you first verify that you need it?”

“Regina . . .”

“Both the request and the urgency are mine. I would be grateful for
your help,” Victor interrupted.

“Of course, detective,” Regina seemed to regain her composure. “I’ll call Robert immediately.

Elizabeth felt both glad for the detective’s help, and annoyed that it was necessary. Regina ended the conference, and her image faded from the screen.

“So what happens now?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well,” Victor said, “I would like for you to reconstruct Ed Walters investigation of the theft – exactly as he originally performed it.”

“I should be able to do that pretty easily, but it will take some time.”

“How long will you need?” Victor asked.

“Well,” she said, “I have root permissions, so I can access Ed’s agents with no problem. The only delay might come from waiting on Ed’s private key. I’m sure he would have encrypted all the agents he used in the investigation. Once I get the key, I could be ready in a few hours.”

“Would tomorrow, late morning give you enough time?” Victor asked.

Elizabeth nodded.

“Well,” Victor said, “that’s really all we needed.”

He gestured toward the CDs David had made.

“Can we take these?”

“Of course.”

Victor nodded and put them in his jacket pocket. “By the way,” he began.

“Yes?”

“I’d rather you didn’t stay here alone tonight working on this.”

She nodded slowly as she the implications of his request formed in her mind.

“Lieutenant . . . I mean Victor,” she corrected herself. “I gather you’re certain Ed was murdered?”

Victor glanced at his partner. Bruce frowned but shrugged in agreement.

“Yes,” Victor said. “We have the coroner’s preliminary report.”

“Could you tell me what happened?”

Victor thought for a moment. He decided there was no harm in letting her know the basic facts of the death. It would be in the papers in a few days.

“I suppose we can give you the basics, but please keep them confidential. Bruce, you’ve spoken to the medical examiner . . .”

“Well,” Bruce began reluctantly, “there are several injuries. There are bruises on the face consistent with blows from a fist, and a cut on the lip. The fatal injury apparently occurred when he fell and hit the back of his head on the desk. The corner of the desk broke the skin and caused the bleeding. The impact and angle of the fall broke his neck.”

Elizabeth felt frozen to her chair. She said nothing.

“As near as we can tell,” Bruce continued, “he fought with someone and fell. It was something of a freak injury.”

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth asked.

“It’s harder to kill a person than most people think. Even falling down and hitting his head wouldn’t normally kill a man. At least not right away. It seems that a number of unlucky things came together: we think he tripped over his chair and it accelerated his fall – sort of like cracking a whip. The

impact, and the angle with which he hit the desk were just right to break his neck.”

“Did he die right away?” she asked.

“No, probably not,” Bruce said.

“You mean, he might have survived if someone had gotten help immediately?”

“I can’t really say,” Bruce said.

He looked at her with concern.

“Can I get you some water or something?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“No,” she answered firmly. “I’m fine.”

CHAPTER 12

Elizabeth walked with the detectives out into the hall, and confirmed that they would meet again tomorrow. Again they thanked her. Elizabeth watched them start down the hall, then returned to her office and closed the door. Noting that she'd entered her office alone, the system began playing Ella Fitzgerald singing *I Ain't Got Nothing but the Blues*, with the Ellington Orchestra. Ella was one of her favorite musicians: like Louis Armstrong, her voice inevitably changed Elizabeth's mood for the better. She smiled. Sometimes, her music agent actually made an inspired choice.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and tried to let Ella's gentle swing wash the disturbing facts of Ed Walters' death out of her mind. As she sat there, giving herself over to Ella's ageless voice, and Duke's uptown blues, Jen's

comment about running into Wayne as she was leaving intruded on her thoughts.

Why was Wayne upstairs?

She grasped the mouse and opened up a query agent. She asked the usage database for Wayne Ballard's movements from 5:00 until he left the building. The query finished almost immediately, and a table filled her screen. Each row of the table indicated a change of location, marking the time he entered a new room or hallway.

Wayne had gone upstairs around nine, going straight to Robert's office, and remaining there for about an hour and a half. Jen would have encountered him as he came down and she was leaving, just after ten thirty.

Elizabeth needed to confirm that Wayne was indeed working on Robert's system. She found the trouble ticket database, where Wayne and his staff kept track of bugs, breakdowns and requested work. Unlike most of the software that formed the building's carefully crafted surface, Wayne and his minions had built the trouble ticket database for their own use. Elizabeth opened the database agent. Its interface was complex, powerful, poorly organized, and the colors clashed offensively. She guessed Jason had programmed it. She requested the record of any work done for Robert Hill on the night of Ed's death.

As she waited for it to return, Elizabeth wondered what she would do if the query came back empty. What would have been Wayne's reason for going upstairs? Would she be justified in telling Victor and Bruce about a possible link to Ed's death?

The agent returned. At nine o'clock, Wayne had answered a service request that Robert had filed the previous afternoon. He had replaced a network card to repair an intermittent failure. She felt relieved. It was common for him to make such disruptive repairs after hours.

Elizabeth sat staring at the table of Wayne's movements that remained on her screen.

"Pops," she began without really thinking. Her voice trailed off.

"Please repeat the request," Pops said after several seconds.

"Never mind," she said.

Instead, Elizabeth used the mouse and keyboard to request the movements of all people who were in the building after the close of business on the night of Ed's death. After a few seconds, it returned a table, in which each row indicated a different person's entry into a room or hallway.

She pulled down the agent's "View" menu, and selected the "Movie" option. She had programmed the movie view to help her visualize people's patterns of building usage. The rows and columns of the table gave way to a floor plan of the building. Dots appeared on the screen, a different color for each person. A legend at the bottom of the screen told her which color represented whom. The controls included a play and pause button, along with a slider to indicate the position of the "movie," and another to control the playback speed. She clicked "Play," and the dots began to move.

She watched the "movie" run. There was little movement, as was usual when people worked late. The red dot representing Thomas Lee moved back and forth between his cubicle and the yellow dot in Jen's office. That was typical of their working patterns. She saw Regina's pink dot (*oddly*

appropriate, Elizabeth thought) move back to the green dot in Peter's office and stay there until they left together around seven fifteen. Elizabeth wondered briefly if Robert had been honest when he denied an affair with her. She forced the thought out of her mind.

The animation continued, and she watched Gilbert Baca's orange dot move from his office to the bathroom at about seven-thirty and return to his office, to stay there until he left at eight. She watched him move out of the building. She watched Guru Deep Singh stay at his desk in the lobby until he did his rounds of the emergency exits on the first floor and went home at nine o'clock. She watched Wayne's purple dot move from his lab to the second floor and down again.

Elizabeth played the visualization over and over, looking for some pattern that might reveal the invisible man. She looked for long periods of time when a person seemed to stay in the same room, indicating that they might have left their badge in their office and sneaked upstairs. Everyone had the opportunity she looked for, long times when at least their badges remained in their offices, periods when they could have removed them, and moved invisibly through the building.

She watched the motions of the colored dots on the building floor plan, and imagined an invisible dot, a round, faint, shimmering outline that cleaved from each stationary colored circle, as if someone had removed their badge and walked like a ghost through the building. Each time, she tried to imagine the invisible man was a different person. She traced the different paths that took the invisible dot up to Ed Walter's office and back, without encountering anyone. Each time, she found a path the shimmering,

transparent circle could have taken without being seen. Each time, she found a possibility another of her colleagues could have been the invisible man.

She watched the visualization repeat, letting her mind wander, letting invisible men multiply and swarm over the screen in shimmering, transparent, imaginary dots, watching them converge around the blue dot fixed in Ed Walter's office. She played it again and again. She played it until the motions of the dots and the imagined motions of the invisible men all faded from her attention, and she found herself staring at the unmoving, perfect, blue circle that represented Ed Walters lying dead in his perfect, inhuman, intelligent office.

CHAPTER 13

Bruce turned onto Gilbert Baca's road and slowed down, looking for an address on the old houses that lined the narrow South Valley street. He drove through the old agricultural neighborhood, past small adobe houses on large lots, past horse corrals, past pastures gone brown in the cold, and the stubbled remnants of the summer's gardens. "Don't any of you people down here believe in house numbers?" he complained.

"Don't need em; we're all cousins. Go another block," Victor said, gesturing down the road.

"You really know where he lives?"

"My street's only a mile or so over," Victor smiled. "The numbers should run the same."

"Now that's a detective," Bruce said, speeding up slightly.

He drove across a hump in the road where it crossed an irrigation ditch, and slowed down again to look for house numbers. Gil Baca's carefully maintained house displayed its number near the door, just below the porch light.

"Do you think he was really sick?" Bruce asked as he parked in front of the house.

Victor shrugged. "We'll find out. Why don't you take the lead on this one."

"I thought it was your turn," Bruce complained as he parked in front of Gilbert Baca's house.

"I'm still recovering from Regina Martinelli," Victor said, opening the door and stepping into the cold sunlit afternoon.

The small, adobe-colored frame and stucco house sat on an acre of land. A chain link fence enclosed it, but the gate was open. Bruce and Victor walked up the narrow sidewalk, beside the neatly trimmed lawn, past the shrubs and flower beds. They pushed the doorbell on the frame, next to the aluminum storm door with the letter "B" wrought in its center. A woman answered the door.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Baca?" Bruce spoke to her through the screen.

"Yes?"

Gilbert Baca's wife was a small woman in her early fifties, with the heavy but strong body of a farm wife. It was the kind of body Victor's older relatives called "hard fat." Streaks of gray lined her black hair, and a tight permanent lifted it off the shoulders of her bright, floral print house dress. Neither her age, her weight, nor the house dress could hide her alert energy.

“Mrs. Baca, I’m Sergeant Bruce Kaminsky with the Albuquerque Police Department.” He held his badge up to the screen. “This is my partner, Lieutenant Rodriguez. We were hoping we could talk to Mr. Baca for a few minutes.”

“Couldn’t this wait? My husband is ill.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. There are just a few routine questions we’d like to ask him relating to Edward Walters’ death. It shouldn’t take too long.”

She stood behind the screen door and said nothing, as if trying to make up her mind how best to protect the man life had entrusted to her. Victor saw a man in a brown plaid flannel robe come to the door behind her. He was shorter than Victor and thinner, thin enough that Victor could not tell if he was fit or sickly. He was dark skinned, either from time in the sun, a Mestizo heritage or both. His black hair showed no trace of gray, and, in spite of a few wrinkles, his face would be considered handsome.

“What is it, honey?” the man in the robe asked softly.

“It’s the police. They want to talk to you about Ed.”

“Well, show them in.”

He reached over his wife’s shoulder and unlocked the screen door. She gave Bruce and Victor one last look of warning, and went inside. Gil Baca held the door open, and welcomed the police into his home.

The door opened directly into the living room. Gilbert Baca sat back down in the large recliner across from the television. A pitcher of water, several bottles of pills, and a thermometer sat on the table beside it. There was a cup on the table, with a crumpled tea bag on the saucer. Victor smelled something pungent, and saw a blue jar of ‘Vicks Vap-O-Rub’ behind

the pitcher. Gil Baca picked up the remote control and turned off the television. Bruce and Victor sat down on the couch.

“Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea?” Mrs. Baca asked them.

“No, ma’am. No thank you. We really don’t want to take up any more of your time than we have to,” Bruce answered.

Victor also declined. Relieved of hospitality duties, Mrs. Baca sat in a smaller stuffed chair at the other end of the table from her husband, still alert and protective.

“I’m sorry you had to come all the way down to the valley,” Gilbert Baca told them. “This cold has really knocked me out, and then the news about Ed . . .” His voice trailed off sadly.

“That’s all right,” Victor answered. “I live close by.”

“Where?” Gilbert asked.

Victor told him. Gil Baca knew the street, and said he had a nephew who lived a few houses away from Victor. Bruce interrupted them, before his partner and the suspect went off talking about cousins, ditches, high school football and all the other trivia Victor managed to bring to an interview.

“Mr. Baca, as you probably know, we are here in regard to Ed Walters’ death,” Bruce began.

“Yes, I heard about it. It was terrible.”

Victor looked closely at his expression. His grief seemed genuine.

“Yes sir,” Bruce said. “We need to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

“I understand you worked closely with Ed Walters.”

“Yes, I’m an accountant, and Ed was the project’s business manager. Naturally, we worked together.”

“What sort of things did you work on?” Bruce asked.

“Mainly special projects. We contracted out the routine bookkeeping: payroll, benefits, that sort of thing.”

Victor let Bruce lead the interview, and watched Gilbert Baca’s manners, his expressions. He listened closely to his tone of voice, trying to link the details of his affect to the substance of his answers, looking for some trace of evasion, for the slowed, too deliberate cadence or the changes in diction or vocabulary that even experienced liars used to distance themselves from deception’s emotional demands. Although Victor thought he detected an unusual care in Baca’s answers, it was slight. He did not know whether to blame the effects of his illness, an effort to hide something, or the heightened sense of formality the police brought out in most people.

Victor looked around the small living room. The furniture was comfortable, but not expensive. As in many homes, the television was the focus of the room, even though a fire burned in a brick fireplace to the left of it. Photographs of family members lined the mantle, the shelves on the wall, the side tables. He noticed pictures of two children, a boy and a girl, taken at all ages. Victor picked out a young woman’s graduation picture on the mantel, next to a picture of a teenage boy in a Rio Grande High School baseball uniform.

“Did you work with any of the project’s technology?” Bruce asked.

“Not directly,” Baca said, smiling and shaking his head. “Most of it was over my head. Although, I did work with Ed on commercialization plans for some of our inventions.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, whenever an engineer came up with something of commercial value, we would work with him to put a package together,” he explained. “Regina worked with the patent attorneys. I helped the engineers come up with projections on the cost to turn it into a product. I also helped Ed come up with estimates of its potential value.”

He paused at the mention of his dead associate.

“My job was making sure the figures made sense,” he said finally.

“How so?” Victor asked.

“Ed’s numbers were always pretty realistic, but it was usually a problem with the engineers,” he said with a half-smile. “They always underestimated the cost of turning their ideas into products.”

“Where did you learn to do that?” Victor asked.

“Oh, just experience, really. I started out as a quartermaster in the service. I worked in logistics. When I got out, I did similar work at Sandia Labs for ten years, then the job at the consortium opened up.”

“What made you decide to leave the labs?” Bruce asked.

Sandia Laboratories was one of Albuquerque’s more stable employers: once hired, people tended to stay there.

Gil Baca smiled, a slight sort of half smile. “It’s funny. I heard about the job from a friend, and interviewed on a lark. It was my interview with Ed that made me decide to leave the labs.”

“Oh?”

“I needed a change, and he made it sound so exciting. Also, I liked him; I felt comfortable.”

Bruce nodded, and let Gilbert Baca talk.

“We were both old Army men,” Baca continued, “we talked about the service, about the job, about his management style, and I just felt comfortable with him.”

He paused, and his eyes shined with moisture.

“I’m so sorry he’s gone.”

“Mr. Baca,” Bruce asked, “the information you worked on for copyright and licensing: I understand it was valuable?”

“Not in the ordinary sense, but to the right people, possibly.”

“How so?” Bruce asked.

Victor watched Gilbert Baca closely. He grew visibly more attentive when Bruce brought up the proprietary data.

“Well, to a company that had the resources to turn those ideas into products,” Baca answered deliberately.

“Do you know of any irregularities in the handling of this data?” Bruce continued.

“No.” Baca paused a moment. “What do you mean?”

“I assume that information was closely controlled.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever notice any irregularities, anyone mishandling the information, or making unneeded copies of it?”

“No.” Gilbert Baca’s voice slowed, and lowered slightly in tone.

“Did anyone talk about proprietary information in inappropriate ways?” Bruce continued.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, did anyone say things in public they shouldn’t have, or talk about things they weren’t supposed to know?” Bruce pressed.

“I’m not sure what all this has to do with Ed’s death.”

Bruce smiled calmly. “Well, frankly, we aren’t either. We’re just trying to get a sense of what Mr. Walters did, the people he worked with. Also, we look at things like this for possible motives.”

“I see. Well, I can’t think of anything relating to corporate secrets.”

“I understand,” Bruce answered.

He continued the interview, alternately asking Gil Baca about Ed Walters’ relationships at work or other background questions, and returning to the issue of proprietary data from some other perspective. Each time Bruce returned to those questions, Victor thought he detected an increased level of control in Gil Baca’s voice, an unusual formality of diction. He felt a curious disappointment.

Bruce turned the interview to the night of Ed Walters’ death.

“I understand you worked late the night Mr. Walters was killed?” he asked.

“Yes, I needed to finish some figures for him by the next morning, and worked until about eight.”

“Did you give him the figures yourself when you were done?”

“No, I sent them to him by e-mail.”

“Did you talk to him at all before you left?”

“No.” Gilbert Baca paused, as though trying to bring a faint memory into focus. “You know, that reminds me: usually, if Ed and I both work late, I stick my head in and say goodnight. We often used to end the day like that.”

“But, you didn’t that night?”

“No – wait, I remember, now. I have a small window on my computer screen that lets me see into Ed’s office. It lets me see if he’s there or in a meeting.”

“Yes,” Bruce acknowledged, “we saw them at the building.”

“Well, he had blocked the camera to his office. We can do that if we want privacy,” Baca explained.

“Is that unusual?” Victor asked.

“Yes. Ed rarely uses the privacy option unless he’s having a meeting.”

“Do you know of any meetings he might have scheduled for that evening?” Victor pressed.

“No. That’s just it. Ed never scheduled meetings at night. He always said that he had enough of them in the daytime. When he worked late, it was because he wanted to be alone, to wrap up some report or memo.”

“Think back. Can you remember anyone mentioning a meeting with him?”

“No, no one. I remember because I thought it was so unusual that he had the privacy on.”

Gil Baca seemed excited, eager to help. The stress, the deliberate, careful phrasing had vanished from his voice.

“Did you see anyone in the halls, or around any of the exits?” Bruce asked. “Take your time.”

“No. I worked alone until I went home. I saw no one.” He thought for a few seconds. “I left my office once to go to the bathroom.”

“Do you remember when?”

“A little after seven,” he answered immediately.

“Could you be more accurate?”

“It was close to seven thirty,” he said after a moment. “I’m sorry I can’t be more precise.”

“Did you see anyone?” Bruce tried to trigger his memory.

“No,” Baca said slowly as if trying to see the scene in his mind. “Wait,” he said, “I remember: his door was open. There was no one with him.”

“But it was closed at eight o’clock when you left?” Victor asked.

“Yes.”

“Think carefully,” Bruce pressed gently. “Did you see anyone in his office? Did you notice anyone through the window, or hear anything?”

Bruce gave him a moment to search his memory. Finally, Baca shook his head apologetically.

“I’m sorry. I can’t think of anything.”

Victor sat back in the comfortable chair and let Bruce ask the interview’s final questions. He knew the conversation had run its emotional course, and let his more analytical partner fill in the details of Gil Baca’s story. Instead, he thought back through the interview’s odd emotional trajectory with increasing discomfort. They had engaged Baca twice: first, in his self-conscious control when asked about the project’s intellectual property, and later in his open, spontaneous account of the night of Edward Walters’

death. It was a curious pairing, bringing their attention to the information theft, but giving no sense of a connection between it and Ed Walters' murder.

Victor knew this case, like all cases, would find its solution in the geography of fact: in the physical evidence from the crime scene he still hoped forensics would uncover, in the interconnected stories of witnesses and suspects, and, possibly, in the e-mail, documents and the automatic testimony of the silent building. He also knew that, without some sense of the emotional forces leading to Edward Walters' murder, he would have to cross that terrain with neither map nor compass. The ambiguities of Gilbert Baca's responses did little to reveal the reasons connecting the facts they were starting to uncover. He surveyed the Baca's comfortable living room as if it were a narrow opening in that wilderness, and wondered at the contours that terrain would assume.

As he and Bruce rose to leave, Victor gave Gilbert Baca his card and the usual reminder to call if he remembered anything relevant to Ed Walters' death. Baca held the card by the corner and stared at it for a moment.

"You mentioned you lived nearby," he said to Victor.

"Yes."

"You wouldn't be John Rodriguez's son, would you?"

Victor smiled involuntarily. "Yes, I am."

"I knew him a long time ago. How is he?"

"My father died a few years back."

"I'm sorry," Baca said.

He seemed genuinely saddened. Neither man spoke for several seconds.

“I knew your father only briefly,” Gil Baca said thoughtfully, “but he was a good man. His father – your grandfather – and my dad were pretty close. That’s how I met him.”

Victor said nothing, but let him reminisce.

Baca continued. “About thirty years ago. I was home on leave from the service – I was just a kid, and all I wanted to do was go out drinking and sleep late,” he smiled. “I remember my dad rolled me out early one morning. He told me his friend’s son was building a house and we were going to help.”

“You helped build my father’s house?” Victor asked in surprise.

“Oh, I only worked on it for a couple of days before I went back on duty, but I remember you. You were about ten. You wanted to help so bad, but kept getting in the way.”

Victor did not respond.

“Your dad didn’t care how much you slowed him down,” Baca smiled, “as long as you wanted to help, he let you.”

“He was a good man,” Victor said formally.

“I liked your dad – I even saw him a few times after that. After my father died, I lost track of him,” Baca said. “I’m sorry to hear he’s passed away.”

“Thank you,” Victor said simply.

He and Bruce left the small house and walked back to their car, following the sidewalk across the neat yard.

CHAPTER 14

Elizabeth returned to her office with a fresh cup of coffee, and closed the door behind her. Victor and Bruce's confirmation that Ed Walters was indeed murdered, their description of his death, and her own passing suspicions of Wayne Ballard had left her mind churning. As was her habit at such times, she'd left the building and walked around the parking lot, letting the cold fresh air and the rhythms of her muscles clear her thoughts. She sipped the coffee and glanced at the clock. It was after three, and she was eager to get started on her search for the agents Ed Walters had used in his own investigation of the information theft.

Since starting work on the project, Elizabeth had come to see the building's agents as more than computer programs. They were her assistants: idiot savants who offered up their narrow abilities in her service. As she grew more fluent in using and designing them, she came to think of

software agents as extensions of her own intent. The idea of using them to uncover a dead man's last days and find his killer fascinated her in ways she could not resist.

“Pops, privacy.”

That would guarantee no interruptions in the form of phone calls or requests for video conferences. She closed the door to discourage visitors.

“Pops, classical music only, and play it softly.”

She listened as the music's volume lowered and a selection from the Brandenburg Concertos began to play. Out of long habit, she paused and listened to the piece until she recalled its title. It was the Adagio from the first concerto.

Using the root permissions Robert had provided, Pops could now access anyone's agents and data. Elizabeth opened a list of all the people who worked at the consortium. She quickly scrolled down to Ed Walters' name, and opened his executive agent, his counterpart to Pops, his assistant, his confidante, his shadow.

William Gibson, a science fiction writer Elizabeth read enthusiastically, had coined the term “consensual hallucination” to describe people's willingness to accept the conventions of a computer interface as real. He used it to describe still uninvented technologies that tapped directly into the human sensory cortex, giving people the illusion of flying through spaces filled with data objects, cryptographic fences, electronic highways and multi-dimensional information architectures, but, in a sense, all computer interfaces were consensual hallucinations. The seductions of the virtual went beyond Coleridge's ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ to redefine belief itself.

The Macintosh and Windows interfaces were consensual hallucinations in which users accepted patterns on a computer screen as desktops, file folders, trash cans and printers. People embraced the fiction because it allowed them to create documents, balance spread sheets, or view a web site on the other side of the planet. Voice interfaces were a consensual hallucination where people accepted audio pattern recognition systems and semantic analysis programs as genuine conversational partners. The world wide web was a consensual hallucination that fostered desk bound fantasies of travel to locations across the globe: people did not just download a file to their computer and read it in a web browser – they visited a location in cyberspace.

Software agents were another purposed fiction layered onto the computer's chimeric architecture, another device for projecting human intention onto its transient, dimensionless extent. The building's agents did not simply obey human commands: they inferred human goals and attempted to carry out those wishes in their own community of insubstantial actors. They moved through a world their human counterparts could only know through fictions and metaphors.

Elizabeth opened Ed Walters' executive agent. She wondered what he had called it, and opened its profile. A window appeared on her screen, listing the executive's properties, including its access name: *Ariel*.

It was not what she expected. She would not have thought that a man who always came to work in a jacket and tie, whose gray hair never fell out of place or seemed in need of a barber, who inhabited a world of order and corporate regulations, would approach his daily work through the metaphor of Shakespeare's willful sprite. She would not have been surprised if he had

named it after his child, or a dog he remembered fondly, or perhaps after an old girl friend, a narrow link to a lost passion. Elizabeth realized this was just her prejudice, and felt a moment's sadness. She had never thought about Ed Walters enough to wonder what he named things, what personas he overlaid on the dull reality of work, meetings and reports.

Elizabeth searched Ariel's profile. She found a box labeled *delegates*, and entered her own name, enabling her to substitute for Ed Walters in all interactions with his agent. It was a capability the root permissions gave her. Essentially, the building's systems created a layer of deception between Pops and Ariel: when Elizabeth used the name "Ariel," Pops recognized her badge, validated her voice, and passed her commands on to Ed Walters' agent. If Ariel had been capable of perceiving anything, it would have perceived her to be Ed: her commands, the transmissions of her badge, the history of her own actions all appeared to Ariel as if they came from him. Her access was another hallucination on layers of hallucinations, another fiction in a system of fictions, another imagining in a world of purposed imagination.

OK, Ariel, she thought, lets see what you can tell me about your boss.

She opened Ariel's main window and asked for a list of all the agents, past and present, that it managed. These were the witnesses to Ed Walters activities over his last weeks. A table appeared, filled with tens of thousands of entries. She saw old agents that had finished their work weeks before his death. She saw agents he had created just before he died, still waiting to report to their master, fleshless ronin, robbed of purpose by his sudden death. She saw them exiled among system and maintenance agents, menial

programs operating beneath awareness, performing the routine services that supported all other activities.

She restricted the selection to agents created since the day Ed and Regina had learned of the data theft. Thousands remained.

The creation of agents continued past Ed's death, up through the present. Even though Elizabeth knew that these were simply the automatic productions of the operating system, routine agents for maintaining data or monitoring network communications, they left her uneasy. In spite of herself, she felt as though she was watching the residue of a life sustained by will or inertia, as if Ed Walters' servants had struggled to retain an impression of their dead master. She remembered reading how people's hair and fingernails continued to grow for several days after their death, and felt as though she was witnessing that growth.

She configured a filter to hide all but the agents Ed had created directly. A few hundred entries remained per day, the immediate traces of Ed Walters' intention, the witnesses she hoped would tell her about his last days. Their creation stopped on the day of his death.

Next she configured a filter to indicate which agents Ed had encrypted. She was certain he would have given added protections to anything he used to investigate the information theft, and she took this to be the quickest way to find the traces of his investigation. She set the filter to color these blue and leave the others gray.

Most of the icons remained gray. Elizabeth scanned their names: all of them dealt with obvious corporate tasks like budgets and reports. She

configured another filter to remove them from the screen, leaving only their encrypted sisters, the keepers of Ed Walters' secrets.

Elizabeth instructed Ariel to return the encrypted agents to the folders Ed had created for them. She saw four anonymous, encrypted folders. She remembered a trick Thomas had shown her. He had found an obscure utility that allowed people to see the date folders were created and other basic statistics such as size, dates of modification, etc. Through some oversight of the security system's designers, this utility also worked on encrypted folders. Although it could not reveal their names or contents, it showed Elizabeth their creation dates: three of the four folders were old, created months before Ed learned of the information theft. They probably contained routine but confidential business data. Ed had created the fourth on the day he learned of the theft.

Elizabeth smiled. She had found Ed's investigation, but she had gone as far as she could without his escrowed key.

Although both Robert and Regina had agreed to give her the key as soon as possible, she worried about their reliability. Like everyone else in the building, unconscious social taboos sometimes diverted their intent. Elizabeth remembered Regina's discomfort with her request for Ed's personal key, and glanced at the clock. It was almost five. She opened the person locator, and searched for Robert and Regina. It displayed the building floor plan in the same view she had used to trace Wayne's movements: a green dot representing Regina was in her office, and Robert's red dot was starting down the stairs. She watched him reach the first floor, ready to run out of the building after him if necessary to get the key to Ariel's secrets.

Robert passed the exit and walked down the hall toward her. She waited for him to appear in her open door.

“Hi Libby,” he said and entered. “I can’t stay long . . .”

“Did you get me Ed’s key from the escrow?” she interrupted.

He smiled. “Regina and I have dispatched an agent to place it in your key set. It’s probably already there.”

Once it made Ed’s private key available to Pops, Elizabeth would have access to all of his agents and their secrets. She turned to her keyboard and monitor.

“But first,” Robert interrupted, reaching in his jacket pocket and pulling out an envelope, “Regina insisted that you read and sign this.”

He handed it to her.

“It’s a standard form. It acknowledges that you’ve received Ed’s key and understand the responsibilities that go with it; that you won’t pass it on to anyone else; that you won’t allow anyone but yourself and the police to see the encrypted data; and that you’ll inform management if you find any inappropriate information or actions that run contrary to the consortium’s interests . . .”

“Or anything that might otherwise embarrass the corporation,” she interrupted. “Sure, no problem.”

She took the envelope from his hand, laid it on the desk and checked her computer screen. As Robert had told her, Pops now held Ed’s escrowed key, and had decoded Ariel’s encrypted agents. The folder Elizabeth believed to contain Ed’s investigation of the information theft revealed its identity. A label appeared below it: “Investigation.”

Elizabeth smiled.

Robert leaned forward and looked at the screen. “What have you found?”

She closed the window.

“Robert, you know I can’t share this stuff. Not even with you.”

She held up the envelope. “Read your form.”

He smiled back. “I know, but it’s hard not to be curious. Besides, you haven’t signed it yet.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said firmly.

“Yeah, but it’s hard to resist: seeing the last days of a man’s life like this, replaying his actions, reconstructing his thoughts.” He paused thoughtfully. “It’s almost like going back in time.”

“Mainly, its going to be a lot of work, and I need to get started.”

“I know, but do you ever wonder where this is all headed?”

She’d heard this tone of voice before. She knew Robert was slipping into the vague, techno-romantic musings he regarded as philosophy.

“All this technology,” he began, “it’s almost like you have Ed’s essence in that machine. It’s like a form of immortality, like he’s not really dead.”

Elizabeth stared at him.

“These agents are no more his ‘essence’ than a notebook, or some old letter.”

“Now, maybe, but don’t you ever wonder? I mean, maybe someday we’ll be able to place our minds in computers – not just our knowledge, but our consciousness, our awareness. Maybe someday our minds will live on after death.”

They had talked about this before, or, more to the point, argued about it before. Robert believed in the possibility of capturing human consciousness in computer programs, of giving people practical immortality. He fantasized about the technologies that could make it possible: neural networks to capture the patterns of our awareness; broad spectrum sensors to give us perceptions beyond what human senses could reveal; ageless, nearly invulnerable robot bodies for mobility, or, what would be even better, an existence in the Internet, traveling and mingling with all humanity, soul intersecting soul, unbounded by any sort of physical extent.

When Robert rhapsodized about virtual existence, Elizabeth argued that our bodies were essential to our awareness. She argued that our consciousness was a product of our physical existence, not of sentences in a computer language. The patterns of human uniqueness were not just programs in our brains, but expressed themselves in our flesh, senses and emotions. She gave examples like music, like the experiences of breath, of hunger, of exhaustion and love, and she argued that sensation, not logic, was the seat of intelligence. Even if we could capture the defining patterns of a human being in a computer program, she argued, without a physical body, they would be as devoid of consciousness as an IRS database.

It was a deep and ongoing philosophical debate, one she and Robert had often fought over dinner or evenings by the fireplace, one that scholars continued to argue from Stanford to Edinburgh. Today, she did not rise to the occasion.

“Robert, that’s just wishful thinking,” she said.

She regretted it almost immediately. Robert's tone of voice, his posture, the look in his eye all told her that, this time, he was not firing an opening salvo in an intellectual battle. In his own way, he seemed to be grieving Ed's death, trying to place some structure on his feelings. Elizabeth noticed his eyes were moist.

"Robert, I'm sorry. I'm sorry Ed's gone."

He inhaled deeply and held the breath a moment before releasing it.

"God, did we fight. Libby, there were days I wanted to kill that man myself. He seemed so narrow, so unimaginative, always in the way of everything I wanted to accomplish . . ."

She listened quietly.

"I don't know how this could have happened – here, of all places . . ."

Robert's voice trailed off and he sat looking into space, breathing slowly.

After a few moments, he gained his composure. "Libby, we have to – you have help them find out who did this."

She nodded. "I will," she said.

Robert stood up and took another deep breath.

"Well, then I'd better let you get to work." He picked up the form and handed it to her. "Sign it, or I will stay here and look over your shoulder."

She signed and dated Regina's form, and gave it back to him. Robert leaned forward and kissed her cheek. Elizabeth stiffened.

"Good luck, Libby."

He closed her door as he left.

As Robert made his way down the hall, Elizabeth re-opened Ariel's window. She saw the four small icons as she had left them, their secrets exposed. It was clear the folder labeled "Investigation" contained Ed's efforts to find the information thief. The oldest of the other three folders was labeled "Legal." Most likely, it contained a variety of confidential corporate legal documents. The two remaining folders were labeled "Personal" and "Regina" respectively. Most employees kept an encrypted folder of personal information. Elizabeth's contained e-mail from friends and family, along with the occasional angry memo she had written in response to some particularly outrageous example of corporate stupidity, memos she had written but, for the most part, reconsidered sending. The folder labeled "Regina" probably contained confidential documents relating to her role as the consortium's attorney. Elizabeth wondered if it contained any communications regarding the information theft. She decided to check it later, but first, she wanted to look at the contents of the "Investigation."

She opened it and scanned the names and types of the agents it contained. They implemented the obvious searches. There was an e-mail search; she reminded herself that, as a senior manager, Ed had permissions to access all employee e-mail. There was an agent for accessing employee records, apparently to look for connections to the company that had received the stolen data. Another looked at access privileges for different data items, probably to see who had legitimate access to the stolen documents. Still another searched projects and their staffs, allowing different queries concerning who worked where. She saw a couple of agents programmed to

search the system usage records, to search the histories of employee's work activities.

Ed had been thorough. Elizabeth could not think of a line of inquiry he had missed. She selected a time ordered view, and watched the agents arrange themselves in a list, lining up to tell their stories.

Elizabeth closed her eyes for a moment, leaning back in her chair, clearing her mind, preparing to start work, and realized how tired she was. She glanced at the clock. It was almost five thirty, and the sky had darkened outside her window. She noticed her music agent was still playing the Brandenburg Concertos. As she sat, listening to Bach's music, planning her search of Ed's agents, going over the things she hoped to find, her mind began to wander. A few lines from *The Tempest* flashed across her consciousness, probably triggered by her interactions with Ed's agent, the program he called Ariel. They were lines from one of the little songs Shakespeare's Ariel made up as he did his work: pretty, deceptively simple songs that revealed his inhuman nature. The lines came automatically, briefly, almost beneath awareness:

Full fathom five thy father lies . . .

As an undergraduate, Elizabeth had started a literature major, only switching to psychology late in her junior year. She had even auditioned for a role in a student production of *The Tempest*, memorizing long passages in a failed attempt to become Miranda, or even Ariel. Even though she had not thought about the play for years, even though she would have sworn she'd forgotten Ariel's enigmatic verses, the lines came back involuntarily. Elizabeth recalled the scene where Ariel said these words, but could not

remember the character's name, the youth Ariel duped into believing his father was dead. It did not matter. She repeated the line, hoping the momentum of its rhythms would carry her forward into the rest of the verse.

Full fathom five thy father lies . . .

She tried to remember the next line. *It was something about bones*, she recalled. She tried to sound it out, filling in the missing words with rhythmic patterns, hoping Shakespeare's words would complete them:

Full fathom five thy father lies,

Tah-dah . . . something-about-bones. . .

Something about bones. She could not form the words. *The third line rhymes with "lies."* She thought. *Lies, lies – what rhymes with lies? Eyes – that was it: eyes.* She recalled another fragment: *pearls that were his eyes.* The image startled her.

Don't try so hard, she told herself. She remembered a trick she'd often used to recall a song she had not played in a long time. Instead of searching her memory, she cleared her mind and simply started to play.

Full fathom five thy father lies,

Tah-dah . . . something-about-bones. . .

Tah-dah . . . pearls that were his eyes . . .

She could not remember all the words, but the image came to her, an image of a Renaissance nobleman lying dead in the ocean, clothes intact and flesh stripped away, pearls glowing in the darkened sockets. She tried to let the image suggest the rest of the verse:

Full fathom five - pearls for eyes - full fathom five - pearls for eyes.

Something about bones, she thought, *about coral – bones of coral*. She went back over the verse, trying to fill the blanks, switching from images to sounds and back again.

Full fathom five thy father lies,

Tah-dah . . . something coral bones. . .

Tah-dah . . . pearls that were his eyes . . .

She recalled another fragment: *suffer a sea-change*. She heard that phrase often, another of Shakespeare's images that had found its way into our daily language, another idiom people mouthed automatically, forgetting its origins in the poetic swirls of our unconscious. She thought briefly of the managers who called for a "sea-change" in the way people worked. They used it like they used the phrase "paradigm shift," and it annoyed her as much.

Elizabeth went over the fragments of the poem she recalled:

Full fathom five thy father lies,

. . . something coral bones. . .

. . . pearls that were his eyes . . .

. . . suffer a sea-change . . .

She sat and repeated these fragments over and over, calling on their rhythm, their rhymes, their imagery, trying to tease out the phrases that seemed just out of reach, just beyond the edge of articulation. Eventually, she gave up, opened an Internet search agent and entered 'Shakespeare' in the query. It presented a list of matching sites, and she chose one that offered searchable texts of all Shakespeare's plays. The web page appeared. She selected *The Tempest* and searched on the line she had first recalled: *Full fathom five thy father lies*.

A page of text appeared, with her original query highlighted. She read Ariel's verse aloud:

*Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made.
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange . . .*

She read it again. Shakespeare's improbable music penetrated the weariness of her mind and body. She looked at Ed Walters' agents lined up to tell their stories, and realized how tired she felt. She took her coffee mug and started down the hall to the kitchen.

CHAPTER 15

As Bruce drove away from Gilbert Baca's small, tidy home, Victor glanced at the dashboard clock. It was after five, and the winter sun was setting.

"Would you mind just dropping me at home?" Victor asked. "I hate to go all the way back to that computer building just to get my car."

"Sure," Bruce agreed. "I can pick you up in the morning."

He made a U-turn in the narrow street and started back the way they'd come.

"So?" Bruce asked his partner.

"So?" Victor repeated.

"What do you think about Gil Baca?"

“I don’t know, Bruce,” Victor answered thoughtfully. “You did a good job back there. I think we need to pay close attention to him.”

“I think he’s hiding something – something about that information theft.”

Victor nodded thoughtfully.

“Could be. Or he could just be old and nervous and not used to dealing with guys like us.”

Bruce turned onto Isleta Boulevard, and started toward Victor’s home. Traffic was still heavy with cars heading home from work, their lights coming on in the twilight.

“Did you hear something I didn’t, or are you just being careful?” Bruce asked.

“Probably just careful. He did seem uneasy when you talked about the information theft, but I didn’t sense a connection to Walters’ murder.”

“He’s hiding something,” Bruce said, stressing the word ‘something.’

“He could be.”

They talked for a few more blocks through the heavy traffic, analyzing the interview with Gil Baca in the rapid, cryptic give and take of long time collaborators. Gradually, they moved on to the broader developments in the case. The list was not long. With little physical evidence to build on, all they’d found of interest were the theft of the consortium’s intellectual property, the dead man’s rumored investigation into it, and Gilbert Baca's ambiguous but unsettling responses in their interview. Finally, there was the data from the building’s computers. Victor’s instincts told him that he would find little of interest in the mass of corporate e-mail and memos

Elizabeth had handed him that afternoon, but he was very interested in learning what Ed Walters had discovered about the information theft before he died.

As they moved through the traffic, and the darkness intensified, the spaces in their conversation lengthened into silence. Bruce turned the radio to a country and western station, and Victor stared out the window, watching the traffic pass, turning the case over in his mind.

He imagined possible scenarios: Walters discovers the thief's identity and calls him into his office; he confronts him; the thief panics and hits him, driving his head into the edge of his desk. Victor thought about the theory. It was simple. That meant it had a good chance of being true.

On the other hand, it didn't explain why there was no record of anyone entering Ed Walters' office around the time he was killed. Victor turned the problem over in his mind. Either the killer had removed his badge before going in, or had removed the evidence after the fact. Peter Martinelli had told him it would be almost impossible to doctor the computer records, so he focused on the first possibility. Perhaps Ed Walters had confided in the wrong person, or the information thief had hacked into his agents and saw what he was doing. In any case, the thief decides to stop him, removes his badge, goes into the office, and kills him. A darker scenario, Victor thought, but it would explain the killer's absence from the building records.

Or, maybe the thief did alter the database. In spite of Martinelli's insistence on the difficulty of changing those records, this still made the most sense to him. It was the only thing that could reconcile the seemingly

unplanned nature of Ed Walters' death with the killer's absence from the database.

Only a madman used beatings as a method of pre-meditated murder. They were an intimate form of violence, more evident in crimes of passion, in spontaneous violence between friends or lovers. Planned assassinations almost always relied on the distance that guns provided. Ed Walters' death looked accidental, like someone lost his temper and started swinging. If someone did change the computer records, their first thought would have been to delete the records in the usage data. There was a chance that he'd forget to go after Ed Walters' personal work histories, especially if the killer was in a state of panic. If so, Elizabeth Florczyk might indeed find something useful in Ed Walters' investigation of the information theft.

Victor thought about Gilbert Baca. Like Bruce, Victor felt certain he was hiding something. He found himself hoping he was wrong, and briefly wondered if Baca's distant connection to his family might affect his judgment. He decided it was unlikely. Every case carried its emotional distractions. The investigative methods Victor had developed over decades with the force had insulated him from those phantoms many times. Where his methods failed, he knew he could rely on Bruce's very different perspective to fill in the blanks, to uncover any flaws in his own thought.

Victor looked out at the passing farms and houses, the feed stores and other small businesses that lined the street. He tried to relax, tried to put the case out of his mind and turn his thoughts toward home.

He had grown up in this enduring agricultural community to the south of Albuquerque. In spite of the influx of chain stores and housing

developments, in spite of the people with more money than roots who moved there looking for a touch of authenticity, the valley remained a funky mix of feed stores, auto salvage yards, truck farms, lumber yards, mom and pop burrito stands, and auto body shops. People still raised alfalfa in their front yards, flooding them twice a week from irrigation ditches that crossed the valley's brown dirt like the veins on the back of a farmer's hand. In spite of the city's repeated campaigns to keep kids from drowning in the ditches, boys still swam in them all summer. Kids and old men still rode horses on the ditch banks in the mornings and summer evenings, before and after the heat of the day drove them indoors for beer or lemonade.

He thought of Gil Baca's remarks about meeting his father, and the brief time he'd spent helping build his house, and his own memories of that summer surfaced in his thoughts. He smiled.

Victor's father had wanted to purchase the adobes from a yard down on Second Street, but his grandfather had overruled him, insisting that it would be better to make their own bricks. So, they'd dug a pit in the back yard and started mixing mud and straw. Victor was ten years old, too young to be of any real help, but old enough that the men had given him the honor of helping mix the adobe with a hoe, or let him try pushing the wheelbarrow full of heavy, wet mud to the forms they'd lined up in the yard. The first few times, he'd made it about five feet and the wheelbarrow had fallen over – they'd let him try again with smaller loads until he'd finally experienced success. Then, they had found another job for him. When the bricks had dried, he'd helped carry them to the men who had built the walls. He'd watched with fascination as they'd set the adobes in mud mortar, tapping the

ends of each brick to align it with the string stretched level as a guide.

During the hottest part of the day, he'd sat in the shade with the other men, drinking his soda, hinting for a sip of his uncle's beer, surveying the morning's work.

Victor's grandfather had boasted the old ways were the best, but after a few days, his back had grown sore. He did not complain when Victor's father lost patience and ordered several truck loads of commercial adobes from the yard on Second Street.

His father had died five years ago, and Victor knew he would soon face a difficult decision. His mother lived alone in the adobe house he'd helped build. Victor made needed repairs to it, but he'd started to see the film of neglect grew slowly across the property. Although he maintained the house adequately, he could not give the same attention to the workshop, garage and barn that surrounded it. Their roofs began to leak, their paint began to peel, and cracks appeared in the windows. The fence posts began to rot, and the wire staples pulled away from them, letting the wire sag. Weeds grew again in the yard the chickens had once picked bare.

His mother often suggested that he move his family into the old house, but Victor avoided the decision. He had bought a home with Michelle, and they had made it their own. He dreaded the day when his mother died or could no longer live alone.

They turned onto Victor's street, and he tried to shake off the strange mood. He forced himself to think about Michelle and the kids, about the family he so often ignored in the first few days of a new investigation and the intense focus it required. As Bruce drove down the narrow roads near his

home, past the adobe houses, irrigation ditches and cottonwood trees that filled the valley, the image of his father and uncles sharing beers and laughing under a cottonwood tree returned to his mind.

Only now, he saw Gilbert Baca laughing among them.

Victor closed the car door, waved goodnight to his partner, and walked through the gate into his back yard. He tried, with little luck, to quiet the dogs. Michelle turned on the porch light and Victor tried to slip through the door into the kitchen. The dogs, a border collie and a German shorthair cross, managed to follow him into the warm house and circled excitedly around him.

“Hard day?” Michelle asked, working her way through the dogs and kissing him on the cheek.

“Well, long anyway,” he said, putting an arm around her waist and returning the kiss. “How are the kids?”

“Maria’s doing her homework and Anthony’s playing video games,” she said, putting her arms around him.

Victor kissed her again, and walked into the kitchen, trying to quiet the dogs as he went. He saw his ten year-old son come into the kitchen.

“How was work, dad?” the boy asked.

“Big case,” Victor said, hanging his coat on a hook by the door, and sitting down at the kitchen table.

He inhaled deeply, as though doing so would draw the smells of the kitchen upward into the tissues of his brain. He smelled the warm caramel, cinnamon and grain aroma of a freshly baked apple pie.

“A murder?” his son asked.

“Yeah.”

Anthony sat down at the kitchen table. “Do you know who did it?”

“Not yet.”

“Any leads?”

Victor rubbed his son’s head. “You sound like a cop.”

“Tell me about it,” Anthony insisted.

“Later. How was school?”

Anthony shrugged. Victor saw the apple pie on the counter and smiled.

“Is that for me?” he asked Michelle.

Michelle smiled and sat down at the table with him and her son.

“If you’re good.”

“I’ll let you have your way with me,” he said, raising her hand to his lips and biting softly at her knuckle.

“Good enough,” she smiled.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked.

“We’re having the last of that trout your uncle caught last summer, beans and cornbread.”

“And apple pie,” Victor reminded her.

“And apple pie.”

“Where’s your sister?” he asked his son.

“Studying.”

“Then I’d better let her study,” Victor said in a tone of ironic surrender.

“She’s probably on the phone,” Michelle interjected. “Anthony, go tell your sister to get ready for dinner.”

Victor smiled, and washed his hands in the kitchen sink. He began helping Michelle with dinner’s small chores. Maria came into the kitchen and put her arms around him.

“I told Bruce about your painting,” he told her. “He wants to see it.”

“Dad,” Maria flushed, “It’s just some school work.”

“No, it’s better than that,” he said, kissing the top of her head.

She rolled her eyes and started helping her mother set the table.

Victor stood back and watched the activity around him as the smell of beans and frying trout filled the kitchen’s damp, warm air.

At eight thirty, Victor wandered into the den and told Anthony it was time for bed. He walked down the hall with his son.

“Be sure to brush your teeth,” he said, as they reached the bathroom.

“Dad, I already did.”

“And then you had another piece of pie. Brush.”

Anthony shrugged. He went into the bathroom and turned on the water.

Victor walked into his son’s room and sat on the edge of his bed. He looked around at the clutter of toys and sports equipment, idly letting the day’s events unwind in his mind. He believed Bruce was probably right; something was going on with Gilbert Baca, and the intellectual property theft seemed the most likely explanation. Although logic and experience told him that such a close coincidence of two crimes implied some connection between

them, his instincts told him Gil Baca had not killed Ed Walters. He picked up Anthony's football and turned it in his hands. His fingers unconsciously found the stitching and he held it there, enjoying its solidity, its texture, and the accustomed fit to his hand.

After he tucked Anthony into bed, Victor went out to the den and turned on Headline News. He caught the half-hour news cycle in the middle. Michelle came and sat on the couch beside him. Maria kissed them goodnight, and Victor sat there alone with his wife, his arm around her, watching the football highlights. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he rubbed his cheek against her, enjoying the smell of her hair, its texture, its feel against his cheek and lips. After going through the half-hour news cycle, Michelle kissed him and started back to get ready for bed.

"I'll come to bed soon," he told her.

She frowned at him from the hallway.

"I just want to catch the sports again," he smiled. "It's a little hard to pay attention with my arm around you."

She returned the smile.

"Don't be too late," she invited.

Victor watched her start down the hall, and then turned back to the television. As he watched football's familiar, paradoxically relaxing patterns of conflict, he thought about the case, about Gil Baca and Ed Walters, and the building filled with its imagined "agents." He thought of Elizabeth Florczyk, and wondered if she was honoring his request that she not work in the building alone after hours. He considered calling to check on her, but

thought better of it. He could not stop her from working in her own office, and he believed the possibility of physical danger was remote.

He was more worried about the effect her involvement in the investigation would have on her emotions, on her relationships at work. Many of the people she was looking at were her friends. In opening up their private data, she was crossing lines that defined the very structure of her community.

He thought about the whole strange idea of software agents, about their promise of replaying a dead man's last days like a video tape. He found himself dwelling on an image of Elizabeth Florczyk awakening Ed Walters' abstract servants, asking them to tell her of his last acts. It reminded Victor of the ghost stories his grandmother had told him as a child. Occasionally, when she was baby-sitting, or managed to sneak Victor and the other children away from his mother's protective but tired eyes, his grandmother would frighten them with stories of violent death and its consequences for the soul. She told them how the ghosts of murder victims were unable to leave this earth, and remained here, trapped by their soul's longing for justice. She told how every night, at the hour of its death, the ghost relived its murder. She told how ghosts remained trapped in this violent cycle until someone finally understood their cries, and set things right. She frightened them with stories about this cycle of suffering and its terrible effects on the living people who were drawn into it.

He noticed the sports had passed for a second time without his paying much attention to it, and remembered Michelle's gentle invitation. He

turned off the news and the lights in the living room, and started down the hall to the big bedroom at the back of their house.

Victor stopped in the small bathroom off the hallway to brush his teeth and wash his face and hands, leaving Michelle the run of the master bath. He walked down the hall, closed the bedroom door behind himself, and undressed, hanging his pants neatly in the closet, throwing his shirt and underwear in the basket that overflowed onto the closet floor. He opened the window by his side of the bed and stood there naked, hands on the windowsill, enjoying the feel of cold air across his skin, trying not to think about the case. When the cold finally became uncomfortable, he slid into bed and let the returning warmth relax his muscles, still enjoying the feel of cold air against his face. As he lay there, Michelle came out of the bathroom in her flannel nightgown, walked around the bed and closed the window. She walked back around to her own side, turned out the light and gracefully folded herself into bed. Silently, she slid across the sheets toward Victor, pressed her body against his, and kissed him softly.

CHAPTER 16

Elizabeth leaned against the kitchen counter, waiting for the coffee to brew, enjoying the quiet of the nearly deserted building. Usually, she avoided caffeine in the evening, but after the long day, after once again confronting her mixed feelings about prying into Ed Walters' confidential documents, she needed the stimulant and she needed the comfort. She glanced at the clock. It was almost six thirty. She reminded herself the guard was on duty until nine. Although she recognized the likelihood she was rationalizing, Elizabeth decided that staying until he left did not betray her promise to Victor.

She remembered the copies of the stolen documents Regina had promised to send her. They had not arrived, and she assumed Regina had forgotten to send them.

“Pops, is Regina Martinelli still in the building?”

“No.”

“Pops, when did she leave?”

“Five-twenty two, PM.”

Regina had left at almost the same time Robert left Elizabeth’s office. She re-filled her cup, took another sip and tried to ignore the suspicions their nearly simultaneous departures aroused. She turned off the coffee maker and returned to her office.

Her screen came on instantly as she entered, and the agents Ed Walters had employed in his investigation remained as she had left them. Elizabeth opened the first of them. It was a document manager he had set to retrieve the stolen documents. She instructed it to replay its query, and saw nine icons appear on her screen. She felt relieved that Regina’s failure to send her the documents would not slow her efforts.

She opened a couple of the documents at random. They were technical memos, describing potentially valuable findings. Elizabeth recognized most of the projects. One of them was Jennifer’s work on computer sensing of human emotion. The memo mentioned her work on lie detection as a particularly promising technology. She thought for a moment of management’s hypocrisy, of their rush to capitalize on a project they had tried so hard to kill. Another document described Robert’s original work on agent architectures, the work that got him appointed chief scientist of the Sky City Project. This was the work Peter Martinelli now managed. She scanned the documents and moved on.

Ed had searched each of the stolen documents for failed attempts to read their contents. He'd found no unauthorized attempts.

The next step in his investigation listed people who had legitimate access to the stolen material. He had instructed Ariel to go out to each document, and obtain a list of people who had access permissions. He'd then instructed him to merge the lists, and find people who could read seven or more of the stolen documents.

The results held no surprises. Most of the upper managers had access to all nine documents; the list included Ed, Robert Hill, Gil Baca, Regina Martinelli, and their secretaries. People who had access to seven or eight of the documents included a few area managers: people who oversaw families of related projects. Peter Martinelli was among them.

Ed had next instructed Ariel to look for groups of three or fewer employees who, together, could access all the stolen documents. Evidently, he wanted to include the possibility of a team of thieves. There were several such groups. One of them included Peter Martinelli and Jason Evans. The pairing struck her as particularly unlikely. Ed added these possible teams to the list of suspects.

Elizabeth smiled. He'd had organized his investigation with all the thoroughness of a military campaign. Not only was he remarkably systematic in his approach, but also, the queries he had written to accomplish it were more sophisticated than anyone would have given him credit for. Like most of the technical staff, she held management's computer skills in slight regard – usually for good reason. She was happy he'd surprised her.

Ed had constructed a list of fourteen suspects: eleven individuals and three possible teams. He'd next instructed Ariel to search each of these for attempts to print copies of the stolen documents, to send them out in an e-mail, to copy them to a removable disk or to do anything else that might suggest a theft. Only Gil Baca, Robert Hill and Regina Martinelli had accessed all the documents. All three of them had printed paper copies. In addition, Gil Baca had copied all the documents to removable disks.

Elizabeth paused. Because of the unique nature of the building's systems, virtually none of the workstations had any type of removable media. The intention was that all work would be done on the building's network. She opened the equipment database, and queried for all computer hardware registered to Gilbert Baca. Along with his monitor, printer and network hardware, it listed a CD drive.

She opened the systems work database and queried for the installation of the drive on Gilbert Baca's system. About six months ago, Wayne Ballard had installed it at his request. She read through the job ticket and saw the reason listed as "to take work home." This made no sense. Each employee owned an electronic notepad that could download any work they might want to take away from the building. Gil had no need for any sort of removable media.

She returned to Ed's investigation. He'd also followed the evidence of the CD drive, listing all files written to it. With the exception of a few test files Wayne had initially written to the disk to check its performance, the only use of the drive was for downloading the nine stolen documents. Gil

Baca had downloaded each of them to a removable disk, and he had used the drive for nothing else.

Elizabeth felt a knot between her chest and stomach. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She continued the re-enactment of Ed's investigation.

Ed had next retrieved Gil Baca's resume. It documented a solid but undistinguished career. After leaving the military, he'd spent two years in a community college in California, graduating with an associate's degree in accounting. He returned to Albuquerque, and began working at a bank in a middle management position. He held that position for five years, until taking a job at Sandia Labs. He'd worked at the labs until he joined the consortium.

Elizabeth wondered why Ed had examined Gil's resume. Could he have been looking for some past connection to the company that had purchased the stolen documents? If so, he must have been disappointed. It contained nothing relevant to the theft. It occurred to her that Ed, like herself, might simply have wanted to understand how Gil could have committed the betrayal the system agents suggested.

After looking at the resume, he'd continued browsing Gilbert Baca's employee records. At one point, Ed had retrieved his own employment recommendation. He'd praised Gilbert Baca for his experience, enthusiasm and for having a personality that "would only enhance the teamwork we hope to build at the Sky City Building." It recommended hiring him as an accountant to work on the consortium's special projects.

Elizabeth thought of Ed Walters re-reading his own words, and imagined the sense of betrayal and regret he must have felt. She instructed Ariel to continue.

The last agent Ed had created was a mail reader. Using root permissions, he'd listed all of Gil Baca's e-mail for the last year. He'd first looked at mail to or from people outside the company. He'd used no searches: Ed had opened and read each letter. She did not try to read them all herself, but skimmed the headers. She noted Ed had not instructed Ariel to copy any of them to a separate list, and assumed he'd found nothing relevant.

He had next instructed the mail agent to retrieve all of Gil Baca's mail to or from the other suspects. Again, he'd performed no searches, but opened and read each letter. Again, he'd found nothing worth saving.

Finally, Ed had looked at the headers of all the e-mail Gil had sent to consortium employees not on the list of suspects. He opened the occasional letter, but saved nothing.

Ed had read nearly all of Gil Baca's mail from the months the documents were stolen. Apparently, he'd found no evidence of an accomplice or a contact outside the project. Elizabeth let go of the mouse and sat back in her chair. Ed Walters had been careful, complete, and he had found damning evidence of Gil Baca's guilt.

Her mouth was dry. She walked down the hall to the water cooler, and drank two cups full before stopping to breathe deeply. The data seemed to confirm Gil's theft of the consortium's intellectual property, but she had seen nothing connecting him to the killing. In order to establish that link, the police would first have to show how Gil Baca had learned of Ed's

investigation and discoveries. Had Ed confronted him? Had Ed confided in someone about his findings, someone who let it slip to Gil Baca? Had Gil somehow uncovered this evidence of Ed's investigation on his own?

Elizabeth doubted Gil Baca could have called up Ariel's agents as she had done. To do so, he would have to have obtained a copy of Ed's escrowed key. That would have been nearly impossible without Robert and Regina's help. Also, Ariel would have recorded his access, just as it had recorded hers. She scanned Ed's calendar and e-mail for the few days between his discovery of the evidence against Gil, and his death. There was no indication that he had confronted his friend over his betrayal.

Could Gil have found some physical evidence of Ed's discoveries, a document or a scribble in the margins of a memo? Could he have found mention of the investigation written on a pad on Ed's desk? Could he have intercepted a written memo to Regina, perhaps something Ed chose not to entrust to the building's systems? Might there be something left in Gil's office that could indicate if he had learned of Ed's investigation, some physical evidence that could support the unthinkable possibility that he had killed Ed Walters?

"Pops," she said aloud, "who is in the building?"

"Elizabeth Florczyk and Guru Deep Singh Khalsa."

"Pops, where is Khalsa?"

"At the security desk."

Elizabeth took another drink of water and walked quickly down the hall to the front of the building. She needed to look in Gilbert Baca's office. She needed to find some evidence Gil had known of Ed's investigation, and

she wanted to do so privately. With care, it was possible to climb the stairs without being seen from the guard station.

As she approached the lobby, she walked into an open office and closed the door behind her. Confident she could not be heard, she asked again:

“Pops, where is Khalsa?”

She was in luck. The guard had started his final rounds before closing the building and going home. He was at the rear of the first floor.

She left the office, closing the door quietly behind herself, and walked quickly up the stairs. Elizabeth reached the second floor and tried Gil Baca’s door. It was not locked. As she let herself in, the building detected her badge and automatically turned on the lights.

The office looked as neat as if Gil Baca had just cleaned it up before going on vacation. The only things on his desktop were a lamp, a small stack of papers and the hand-carved desk set his son had made for him. A computer monitor, keyboard and mouse stood on a table next to the desk. A bookshelf stood against one wall, partly filled with books on accounting, intellectual property and engineering project management. Across from the desk was a circular table and chairs. Pictures of Gilbert Baca with friends and family covered the wall behind the table. One picture, taken at the building’s official opening ceremony, showed him standing in front of the consortium building with Ed Walters, Robert Hill, the Mayor, the Governor and the entire New Mexico congressional delegation. Another showed him standing next to a young woman in a graduation gown; Elizabeth assumed she was his daughter. The other pictures showed him with his son and

family members. They showed him at home, on fishing or hunting trips, or with his coworkers at office parties and ceremonies.

When Elizabeth entered Gil's office, the computer screen came alive and automatically displayed her own workspace. She saw Ed Walters' agents on the screen as she'd left them.

"Pops," she said, "remove my workspace from the monitor in this office, and turn it off."

The screen went blank.

"Pops, tell me if Khalsa comes upstairs."

Elizabeth looked for the CD drive. She walked around behind Gil's desk and started opening drawers. She found the drive in a bottom drawer, along with a small pile of unlabeled, apparently blank discs. Installing the drive in the desk's bottom drawer required running cables through the side of the desk to a transceiver bolted to the side of its frame. He had gone to a lot of trouble to hide a drive that anyone else would have left on their desktop – if they had bothered to install it in the first place.

She opened each of his other drawers, looking for anything, she was not sure what, that might relate to the information theft. She found nothing. She looked through the small pile of papers and found nothing. She looked on the bookshelves. Other than the hidden drive, she found nothing in the office to suggest Gil Baca's involvement in anything improper.

Elizabeth leaned back in his chair and looked around the neat office. She knew that her failure to find physical evidence linking Gilbert Baca to Ed's death meant nothing, but sitting in his office, looking at the souvenirs of his life only made it harder to believe that he could have murdered Ed

Walters. Once again, she searched the office for evidence of his guilt or innocence. Finding none, she left, closing the door behind her.

The manager's offices surrounded a large, shared open space. Across the open area, Elizabeth saw Ed Walters' door, still crossed with yellow tape warning of a crime scene. She looked at her watch. It was after nine o'clock. The guard should have left.

"Pops, who is in the building?"

"Elizabeth Florczyk."

"Pops, notify me by voice if anyone enters the building."

Elizabeth crossed the open area and tried Ed Walters' door. It was unlocked. She pushed it open and ducked beneath the yellow tape that crossed the entrance. As she entered, the lights came on.

She had only been in Ed Walters' office once. When she first joined the project, he had invited her in to talk about the job, about her background, about the things she hoped to accomplish. The office was as she remembered. It was large, an important emblem of corporate status – only Robert's matched it in size. The desk contained a built-in, flat-panel display that could either be viewed beneath its glass top, or raised, through an elaborate mechanism of tracks and doors, to eye level for serious work. The screen was currently retracted. Elizabeth saw it come to life beneath the glass desktop. As in Gil's office, it displayed her own workspace, and she instructed Pops to turn it off. A bookcase stood next to the desk, and a couch and chairs clustered around a coffee table at the opposite end of the room.

Ed Walters had filled his office with the trophies and souvenirs of a long career. Many of them reflected his military background, showing him as a younger man in uniform, standing with high-ranking officers she did not recognize. She saw a picture of Ed standing in front of the building with the Governor, the Mayor and the New Mexico Congressional delegation, obviously taken on the same day as the nearly identical picture in Gil Baca's office. An image of the consortium's officers lining up for their photo op with these politicians formed in her mind. They seemed like kids, waiting to meet an athlete or rock star. The thought made her smile.

Photographs of Ed with his family mingled with the history of his military career. Many showed him outdoors, in jeans and flannel shirt, holding a gun or fishing rod, kneeling next to a mess of trout spread out on the grass, or standing by some trophy animal he had killed. His wife stood next to him in many pictures, fit and attractive, a country club blonde with the deep, weathered tan often found on older women who spent a lot of time outdoors. A younger version of Ed, clearly his son, appeared on some of the outdoor photos, also wearing jeans and a woolen shirt. Some of the photographs showed Ed and his wife at dinners and parties. His son and daughter in law appeared in these, and, as Ed and his wife grew older in the photos, grandchildren appeared beside them.

Elizabeth stood inside the doorway and surveyed the walls and shelves. She was not sure whether she hoped for some physical evidence to show Gil knew of Ed's investigation, or was simply trying to understand the man at the heart of so many difficult events. She looked at the pictures and souvenirs on the walls, at the furniture and supplies scattered about. Her

eyes fell on a dark brown spot on the carpet near the desk, the bloodstain remaining from Ed's death.

Elizabeth walked to Ed's desk, carefully avoiding the bloodstain, and sat down in his chair. Trying to disturb things as little as possible, she looked through the papers scattered on the desktop. She found nothing relating to the stolen data, no bit of evidence that could have revealed his suspicions to Gil Baca or anyone else.

She looked in Ed's drawers for some piece of physical evidence, some document that referred to the investigation, something that Gil might have found, something that might have told him of Ed's suspicions. She looked for anything that might clear Gil's name, some evidence of the invisible man. She opened each drawer carefully, trying not to disturb anything. Even though the police had already taken fingerprints from the office, she avoided touching anything with her hands, opening each drawer with a pencil hooked under the handle. She found nothing. She tested the lockable center drawer and it slid open. She wondered if Ed had left it unlocked, or if the police had unlocked it in their own investigation.

Inside the drawer Elizabeth saw a collection of newspaper and magazine clippings. On top was a copy of a Spanish language magazine that circulated with the Sunday edition of the Albuquerque Journal. It was opened to an article about Regina Martinelli, née Valdez. Although it was written in Spanish, Elizabeth understood enough to infer that the article praised her as an example of a successful Hispanic businesswoman. As usual for the magazine, there were many pictures, most of them in color. She looked beneath the magazine, and there were more clippings: from the

Albuquerque papers, from various regional business and technology magazines. All of the clippings dealt with Regina Martinelli. Most of them included photographs of her: smiling behind her desk, standing in front of the consortium building, showing off some piece of technology to visiting dignitaries, visiting the University of New Mexico law school, or city hall, or the governor's office.

Elizabeth closed the drawer. Using Ariel's voice interface to avoid touching anything, she asked Pops to open her workspace on the computer screen beneath the desk top. She watched it come to life. She instructed Pops to open Ed's once encrypted, once secret blue folder labeled "Regina." The window opened, and Elizabeth saw three new folders aligned vertically on its left side: one labeled "Robert," another labeled "Peter," and another labeled "Friends." To the right of them was a collection of icons representing video agents. Elizabeth opened an icon at random.

A new window opened on the screen and began playing a video of Regina Martinelli alone at her desk. The camera seemed to be looking down on her from a point about eight feet above the floor. There seemed to be no one else in the office. Elizabeth watched as Regina sat back in her chair and looked out the window. It was morning, and the sun shined on her desktop. She removed her shoes and rubbed her right foot, then leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on the desk, crossing them at the ankles, letting the sun play on her lower legs. Regina smiled, as if entertained by her own thoughts, and idly stroked the skin at the base of her throat, fingers tracing the neckline of her blouse. The video continued, simply watching her rest, her feet in the sun, staring out at the mountains. Elizabeth closed her eyes,

sat back in the chair and raised her left hand over her mouth. When she opened her eyes, the video had ended.

Elizabeth breathed deeply and instructed Ariel to play another video. Her voice sounded hoarse and amplified in the deserted building.

The video showed Regina standing near the window, pruning one of her plants, pinching off dead leaves and placing them in her cupped palm, pausing to look out at the mountains. Elizabeth played another. It showed her taking a mirror out of her purse and freshening her makeup. In another, Regina found a run in her panty-hose, walked over to lock her office door and returned to change into a fresh pair.

In spite of a rising desire to run out the door, Elizabeth continued playing the videos. Most showed Regina alone, in some quiet, almost intimate moment. A few showed her laughing or enjoying a conversation with a colleague, often a woman. How did Ed Walters get them? The building systems enforced people's privacy, not allowing others to start a video camera without a subject's direct permission.

She noticed the videos showed none of the slight graininess or distortion that went with the small cameras scattered throughout the building, but were high quality, high resolution images that filled the screen without loss of clarity. Elizabeth remembered the special camera Regina had installed in her office.

She continued to open the videos, but now paid little attention to them, to their dull, repetitive voyeurism. She tried to imagine how Ed could have obtained them. It seemed certain they came from the special camera Regina had installed, but how did he gain control of it?

She sat, almost paralyzed, trying to understand the evidence before her eyes. She opened another video. It recorded a meeting with Robert Hill. She watched, now a voyeur herself, as Robert and Regina laughed and flirted. She watched as he stood up and circled the desk, and Regina rose to meet him. They kissed. They kissed for a long time and Robert held her, stroking the side of her arm and saying something Elizabeth could not hear. She watched as he led her toward the couch and tried to unbutton her blouse. She saw the attorney push his hand away in a vague, uncommitted gesture and smile. Elizabeth stopped the video and closed her eyes, calming her breathing with deliberate effort. She looked at the date Ed had made the video. It was at least a month before her breakup with Robert, a month before his painful revelations and his denials of any involvement with Regina Martinelli.

She opened the folder labeled “Robert.” It consisted entirely of e-mail between Robert and Regina. She looked at the headers. None of them carried business topics. Apparently, Ed was only interested in her personal correspondence.

Elizabeth opened one of the letters from Robert. Its header simply said “this afternoon.” The text read:

My meeting is running over. The Admiral won't stop gushing about the military applications of our technology.

I wish I could leave now, but I'll have to meet you a bit later than we had planned. Say, 3:00?

R.

Elizabeth stared at the letter for a long time, feeling as if she had lost all ability to move, all volition, all feeling. Gradually, she felt the sensation return to her limbs. She closed all the letters, all the folders, all the video windows. She forced herself to breathe deeply, regularly. Gradually, she felt her eyes turn from the glowing rectangle beneath the glass desktop and regain their focus. Slowly, she became aware of the room around her.

Elizabeth stood up, and turned quickly to leave. She almost stepped in the brown bloodstain on Ed Walters' carpet, and nearly fell trying to avoid it. She hurried out of the office, ducking through the yellow tape that crossed the door. She knocked one end of the tape loose and swore softly. The wide ribbon fluttered free of the door jamb, undulating in bright curves, a silent, slow motion dance through the air. The tape fixed her attention, and for an instant, she stopped, arrested by its motion, by its abstract, inhuman beauty. She watched it fall free but made no effort to re-attach it. She reached past the remaining yellow tape and the Christmas decorations that framed the opening, and pulled the heavy wooden door closed. She turned and ran down the stairs, returning to her office for her coat and bag, then left the Sky City Building.

What Air Supports Us
William A. Stubblefield
PART II

CHAPTER 17

Elizabeth sat with Victor and Bruce, her door closed and the many electronic windows into her office shuttered by privacy requests. She said nothing, but waited for them to absorb the testimony of Ed Walters' perfect, indifferent agents. At their request, she had replayed his investigation in the same order as he had conducted it originally. Aside from a few technical questions, and the occasional request to review some section of data, they said little, but simply watched the story unfold. The evidence against Gilbert Baca was consistent, compelling and almost irrefutable.

When she finished, neither man spoke, but sat quietly for several moments. To Elizabeth, it seemed like much longer. Finally, Victor broke the silence.

"The CD drive sort of clinches it," he said.

Bruce nodded. "I'd have guessed he'd be smarter than the average crook."

"I know it seems strange," Elizabeth offered, "but information technologies have become so common, so easy to use, that people often do things without thinking. How many people give a web site their credit card number without checking the security first?"

“This is one credit card he’s going to be paying for a long time,” Bruce said dryly.

“But it doesn’t mean he killed Ed Walters,” Elizabeth insisted.

“Elizabeth,” Victor said patiently. “I know how hard it is to learn these things about people you know.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean to imply . . .”

“Our investigation is far from over,” he interrupted. “You need to trust us.”

“Is there anything you can add to all this?” Bruce asked.

“Well,” she said, “I did look up the records on the CD drive. Wayne Ballard installed it six months ago at Gil’s request.”

“Isn’t that unusual?” Bruce asked.

“I would think so. Our systems are designed to eliminate the need for any kind of removable media. If you want to work at home, you just use a wireless note pad.”

“Isn’t Ballard required to report this sort of thing?” Bruce pressed.

“No. Because this is a research lab, people have more leeway than in an average company.”

“But wouldn’t he have thought it odd?”

“He might have,” Elizabeth repeated, “but he handled it like an ordinary request.”

She noticed the detective’s frustration.

“People around here are always asking for weird things,” she tried to explain.

Bruce glanced at his partner.

“I guess that makes sense,” he said.

Victor shrugged and raised his hands, palms up. In spite of everything, Elizabeth smiled.

“Was there any evidence of Ed Walters sharing this information with anyone else?” Victor asked. “Any indication that someone might have learned about his investigation? This is very important.”

“I understand,” she said. “I checked his e-mail and didn’t see anything – of course, I didn’t read it in detail.”

“We should go over it,” Bruce said to his partner.

Victor nodded. He turned to Elizabeth.

“Can you think of anything else?”

She shook her head. She was not ready to tell them about Ed Walters’ obsession with Regina Martinelli. She knew it opened a new line of inquiry into Ed’s death, and could possibly clear Gil Baca of murder. It was precisely because it was so important that she decided to wait until they had finished reviewing Ed’s investigation into the information theft, until they could consider it without distraction.

Her feelings were less systematic. Her aversion to probing the dead man’s pathetic fantasies was preconscious in its origins and physical in its intensity.

“Libby,” Bruce asked, “can you copy all this to a CD?”

“I’ll need to get some help. I don’t have a drive in my office.”

“Is there any way you could make copies without letting anyone else learn about this?”

“David Chavez would let me use his machine,” she suggested. “I could ask him to leave the room.”

“What about getting a CD drive in here?” Bruce pressed.

“Sure, I can do that.” She laughed involuntarily.

“Is everything all right?” Victor asked.

“It just seems ironic that I’d avoid suspicion by doing the same thing that’s gotten Gil into so much trouble.”

“How long would it take to install the drive?” Bruce asked.

“Well,” she said, “I’ll need a drive with wireless communications added. If they have one rigged up, I can just go get it. If not, they’ll have to wire one up. I can tell them it’s for you. They’ll know anyway, and mentioning your names will speed things up.”

“Do it as soon as you can,” Bruce said. “In the meantime, I’d like you to encrypt these things again, so no one can get at them.”

“Pops does that automatically. Do you plan to share it with Regina or the other consortium officers?”

“Not right away,” Victor explained. “Our job is the murder investigation, not the information theft. When we’re finished, we’ll pass it on to the proper people. That will include your management.”

Elizabeth nodded, and took a deep breath.

“Lieutenant . . .” she began.

Victor noticed the look on her face.

“Try not to worry about Mr. Baca,” he said, misinterpreting her expression. “We won’t jump to conclusions.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “it’s not that . . .”

“Oh?”

“I know you asked me not to look into Ed’s records without you, but . . .”

“But you did anyway,” Victor interrupted, “I know. It’s all right, but now I need for you to leave things to us.”

“No, you don’t understand.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. She saw the detective's attention sharpen.

"There's no easy way to say this," she began. "Ed Walters was stalking Regina Martinelli."

"What?" Bruce said.

Elizabeth could not tell if he was shocked or confused. Victor leaned back in his chair, stared at her, and said nothing.

"When I decrypted his documents and agents," she explained, "I found a folder labeled 'Regina.'"

She did not mention her visit to Gil and Ed's offices, nor her discovery of the drawer full of photos and clippings.

"I opened it to see if there was anything relevant to the information theft, and I found a bunch of videos. When I played one, I saw this . . ."

She played the video clip of Regina with her feet up on the desk, looking out the window. The detectives watched in silence.

"Here's another," she said, starting the video of Regina changing her panty hose.

"They're all like that," she said, "just watching her – alone, in meetings, on the phone."

"What else did you find?" Victor asked softly.

"He had collected some of her e-mail – not business mail, just personal communications."

She opened the folder labeled "Friends," and showed them one of the letters Regina had sent to the woman named Sharon. In it, she complained of being sexually bored with Peter.

After they read the letter, Victor pointed to the folder labeled "Robert."

“What’s in here?” he asked.

Elizabeth felt herself flush. “It seems Robert and Regina were having an affair.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s OK. I didn’t mention it, but I recently ended a relationship with Robert.”

Victor said nothing, but his expression left Elizabeth certain he knew about her affair. She wondered if he had heard it from someone else, or if he had inferred it from something she’d said.

“Is there any record of anyone else accessing these files?” Bruce interrupted. “Could someone else have known about this?”

“I don’t think so. They were encrypted. Also, I checked last night, and the histories show no access other than Ed’s and mine.”

“And you’re sure no one could have gotten at these files without leaving traces in the system?”

“I’m not sure of anything anymore,” Elizabeth said, stress breaking through her composure, “but no, it’s pretty unlikely. Our encryption scheme is the best available, and as far as I know, only Ed had the key.”

“Could anyone else have gotten the key?” Victor asked.

“It would have required either Robert or Ed working with Regina to combine the halves of the master key,” she reminded them.

She saw the officers glance at each other.

“Are you thinking Robert and Regina might have . . .”

Victor shrugged. “We have to keep all possibilities open, but right now, I don’t see a motive.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“We would need to establish that one of them had reason to suspect Ed of stalking her,” she volunteered.

Victor smiled. “We’ll be looking for evidence that anyone might have learned what Ed Walters was doing,” he said, stressing the word ‘anyone.’

“Of course,” she explained, feeling foolish, “I didn’t mean to single out Robert and Regina . . .”

“Elizabeth,” Bruce interrupted, “how could Ed Walters have gotten hold of this information? I thought your systems protected people’s privacy.”

“The e-mail is easy to explain,” she answered. “Like most corporations, our management feels it has a right to read employee e-mail. Although we have internal procedures to make sure no one does so without cause, it wouldn’t be hard for a corporate officer like Ed to do an end run around them.”

“How so?” Bruce pressed.

“Well, as an officer,” she explained, “Ed had access permissions already. That gives him the ability to access people’s mail. Really, he could have just done it.”

“What about the procedures you mentioned?” Victor asked.

“They’re not really enforced – rather, Ed was one of the people responsible for enforcing them,” she said ironically.

“What about the videos?”

“That’s a problem,” she said. “I cannot imagine how Ed got those clips.”

“Wouldn’t his access permissions allow him to do turn on her camera?”

“No, not even upper management could turn on a camera without people’s permission.”

“They do it in factories,” Bruce said.

“I know, but this is different. People here are professionals . . .”

She stopped and smiled. The phrase came almost automatically. In light of the events of the last few days, it seemed laughable.

“We’ve always believed that, if we were going to succeed, our systems had to respect people’s privacy,” she tried to explain.

“Are you sure these protections couldn’t be bypassed?” Bruce asked.

“I was, but . . .” she gestured toward the screen and Ed’s videos.

“Could Ed Walters have rigged the camera himself?” Victor pressed.

“No, he didn’t have the skills.”

“Do you know who installed it?” Bruce suggested.

“I can find out.”

Using root permissions, Elizabeth opened the database of service requests, the record of work Wayne and his staff had performed. She requested records of any work done for Regina Martinelli that contained the word “camera.” The query returned instantly.

“It looks like Regina had her camera installed about a year ago . . .” Elizabeth scanned down the record, “. . . by Jason Evans.”

“Isn’t he one of Wayne’s assistants?” Bruce asked her.

“Yes.”

“Could he have rigged the camera to give Ed Walters control?” Victor asked.

“He could have,” she answered, “although it’s just as possible someone else changed it later.”

“But it probably would have been one of your systems people?” Bruce said.

“Not necessarily,” she cautioned. “There are a lot of good programmers here. I can look at the software for the controller. The system keeps a record of the programmers who worked on it, along with a history of the changes they

made. Once I find how Ed accessed the camera, I should be able to find who made the changes.”

“Elizabeth,” Victor said, “we have a pretty good computer forensics man downtown. Perhaps it’s time we brought him into this.”

She felt an almost instantaneous tensing of the muscles in her neck. The intensity of her reaction surprised her. She forced herself to be objective, to separate herself from the troubling story of Ed Walters’ last days, the story that now seemed to include her.

“Of course another person could help,” she admitted, “but it would take me a while to explain our systems to him.”

“How long?” Victor asked.

She thought for a moment. When her summer intern had joined her from Stanford, it had taken a week before he was any help to her at all. Even then, she recalled several more weeks during which he consulted with her constantly.

“It depends,” she explained. “It would take him at least a week to learn our systems well enough to be really effective. On the other hand, if I organized the work carefully, I could give him specific tasks, but that would take time – at least a day or two.”

Victor leaned back in the chair and exhaled heavily. He looked down and to the side as if scanning an imaginary calendar.

“She’s right,” Bruce volunteered. “From what I’ve seen of these systems . . .”

Victor nodded to his partner. He turned back to her.

“You’ve already gotten more involved in this than I’d planned . . .”

“Its OK,” she interrupted, “I’d like to see this through.”

“I know,” he said with an ironic smile. “That’s not the point.”

She felt herself flush, and heard Bruce chuckle.

“The sooner we find the person that rigged Mrs. Martinelli’s camera,” Victor said, “the more useful that information will be to us.”

He seemed to almost be thinking aloud as he spoke.

“I could get someone else from our staff to help,” she suggested. “They already know the systems.”

“No, you’re enough to worry about.”

She looked for his ironic smile. She was relieved to see it.

“Because we need this quickly,” Victor said, turning serious, “I’m going to go along with you. I can give you until Monday morning. That’s three days.”

Elizabeth had negotiated enough project deadlines to know when to push for more time and when to commit to the time she was given, no matter how short it seemed.

“And Elizabeth,” Victor began.

“Yes?”

“Don’t get too wrapped up in this. I don’t want you staying here alone at night, and, when you’re done, I want you to put this out of your mind.” He turned to his partner. “Bruce, can you think of anything else?”

“No,” he answered.

They stood up to leave.

“There is one other thing,” Victor began.

“Yes?”

“I want you to keep us informed of what you’re doing, of what you find. And, I want you to call us immediately if anything unusual happens: any strange phone calls or e-mails, or anyone paying more attention to you or your work than usual. Do you understand?”

She took a deep breath, let it out and nodded.

“What does this mean for your investigation?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Maybe nothing,” he said, “maybe a lot.”

He turned to go. As he walked out the door, Elizabeth heard him say softly, almost as if he was thinking aloud: “Maybe quite a lot.”

CHAPTER 18

Victor and Bruce returned to the conference room they were using as a temporary office. Victor sat down at the large table. His partner closed the door and sat across from him.

“Lots of skeletons in these virtual closets,” Bruce cracked.

“Yeah,” Victor said, “but only one corpse.”

“What do you want to do?”

Victor leaned back in the chair, and glanced around the room. He’d learned to spot the small antennae that tracked employee’s badges, as well as the distinctive pattern of holes covering the microphones. Since he came to the consortium building, he’d fallen into the habit of looking for them whenever he entered a room. He reached down and felt the badge Robert Hill had given him, the badge that gave him free access to the building. He balanced it in his hand, measuring the extra thickness and weight of the transmitter.

“I’d like to take a walk,” he said.

“What?”

Victor looked up at the microphone in the corner of the office in an exaggerated tilt of his head. “A walk,” he said, “it might clear our heads.”

Bruce stared up at the corner for a moment. “You know,” he agreed, “that’s not a bad idea.”

They left the building through the green glass lobby. The sun was shining, and the temperature was in the high forties. Victor stopped on the sidewalk, turned his face toward the sun and filled his lungs with the cool air.

“You think someone might be listening?” Bruce asked.

“Probably not. I’m just getting paranoid.”

“Maybe we’re getting smart,” Bruce said. “It wouldn’t hurt to move out of there, work out of a Burger King parking lot like respectable cops.”

Victor smiled and shook his head. “I don’t think so. We need to be careful what we say in there, but I’d rather not let them see us change our behavior. I also want to make it clear to them that we’re not going anywhere until this is solved.”

They walked the perimeter of the parking lot, staying on the blacktop next to the open space surrounding the Sky City Building. Victor began to feel himself relax.

“So what do you think?” he asked his partner.

“Give me a minute – it’s my first cyber-stalker,” Bruce said.

“And they say cops are behind the times.”

“I can think of at least three people who would be pretty upset if they’d known what old Ed was up to,” Bruce said.

“I’m sure Regina Martinelli would have wanted to kill him,” Victor observed, holding up his index finger. “Do you think she’s capable?”

“We’ve already decided it was probably a lucky punch. If she’d hit him just right . . .”

“I agree,” said Victor. He raised a second finger. “Then there’s Peter. He might not have appreciated Ed stalking his wife.”

“And, learning she was screwing his boss might have made him especially grumpy.”

“And then there’s the beneficiary of said screwing,” Victor said, holding up a third finger.

“Yep.”

“To cover up his affair,” Victor confirmed.

“He wasn’t in the building,” said Bruce. After a moment, he added, “If you trust their data.”

“Yeah, that’s it, isn’t it? If we trust it.”

“Damned computers are getting more like people all the time,” Bruce cracked.

“Anyone else you can think of?” Victor asked.

“Well,” Bruce continued, holding up four fingers, “the guy who fixed the camera had to know what Ed was going to do with it.”

“Agreed. Maybe he was afraid Walters was going to go public with his feelings . . .”

Bruce finished the thought. “And he didn’t want people to learn how Ed got his window into Regina’s private moments.”

“So, he confronts Ed Walters . . .”

“and tempers flair. How about we talk to Jason Evans?”

“Just because he installed the camera, doesn’t mean he rigged it for Ed Walters.”

“I can’t think of a better place to start,” Bruce said.

“I’d like to give Elizabeth a day or so to find who actually rigged the camera,” Victor said. “The more we know before we talk to these people again, the better.”

“What about Gil Baca?”

Victor nodded. “I do think it’s time to have another talk with Mr. Baca.”

Bruce nodded. “So Elizabeth Florczyk gets to look at Ed’s smutty videos, and we have to talk to the accountant?” he complained.

“Doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

They continued around the parking lot, saying nothing, enjoying the cold air and the feel of the sun on their faces. Bruce picked up a handful of stones and began throwing them across the empty field.

“How do you think we should handle him?” Bruce asked, aiming at a struggling mesquite bush about twenty yards away.

He missed by nearly a yard and scowled.

“Well, I think we should come out with the evidence against him in the theft and see how he reacts,” Victor said.

“Simple, direct, I like it. Are you thinking of taking him downtown?”

“No, not yet.”

“Why not?” Bruce asked. “We’ve got enough to be more aggressive. He had a potential motive, he was in the building . . .”

“There’s nothing connecting him to Ed Walters’ murder . . .”

“At the very least, he’s guilty of stealing company secrets,” Bruce interrupted. “We need to press him – put a little fear into him.”

“I agree, but if we scare him too much, he’ll just clam up.”

Bruce threw his last stone at the mesquite bush, hit it squarely, smiled and wiped the dust off his hands.

“So you want to take him out to lunch?” he cracked.

“It might not be a bad idea,” Victor said dryly.

“Seriously . . .”

“Whether he killed Ed Walters or not, he’s into some pretty scary stuff, and he’s got to be feeling it. He probably wants this over with as much as we do. Let’s give him a chance to end it.”

“Yeah, let’s take him downtown and scare the shit out of him.”

“I guess we know which one of us is going to play the bad cop,” Victor said.

“We don’t really do that, do we?” Bruce complained.

“Do what?”

“The ‘good cop, bad cop’ thing?”

“Not on purpose.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Bruce, I think I know this guy,” Victor began.

Bruce rolled his eyes. “You’re not going to give me that ‘I’m from the valley and I know this guy’ crap, are you?” he said.

“Well, yeah, I guess I am,” Victor confessed.

“I can see where this is going,” Bruce groaned.

“I think he’s scared,” Victor continued. “I think he’s tired of dealing with this alone, and he wants it over with.”

“Unh-huh,” Bruce grunted.

Victor smiled. They'd had this conversation before, over other cases, other suspects.

"He just needs the right person and the right situation," Victor persuaded.

"He just needs a way out."

"Unh-huh."

"Bruce, I think it'll be easier if I talk to him alone."

"I knew it," Bruce said in tone of exaggerated frustration.

"Sometimes a man wants to confess, but it's hard to do it in front of a bunch of cops. One man can make it easier. The fact that we have a common background . . ."

"The valley thing," Bruce interrupted.

"The valley thing. It should make it easier for him."

"And nobody else hears it," Bruce protested weakly.

"If Gil Baca confesses, he won't retract it. He won't want to be alone with it again."

Bruce nodded reluctantly. "I guess I'll go look around Ed's office to see if I can find anything new," he said.

Bruce remembered the newspaper clippings in Ed's drawer, the clippings that only now made such terrible sense.

"Maybe I can find some more dirty pictures of Regina Martinelli," he added.

"Good luck," Victor smiled.

"But, I think you ought to prepare yourself for something you might not like."

"What do you mean?"

Bruce did not answer.

Victor shook his head. “He met my father once when I was ten. That doesn’t make him family.”

“Not even in the valley?” Bruce smiled.

“Not even in the valley. Don’t worry, I’m a tough cop. I can take it.”

“You still might not like it.”

Victor shrugged. “It won’t be the first time,” he said.

Bruce nodded. Together, they turned and crossed the parking lot toward the Sky City Building.

CHAPTER 19

Elizabeth sat quietly and closed her eyes, forcing herself to clear her thoughts and concentrate on the rhythms of her breath. Her talk with the detectives had re-awakened her revulsion toward Ed's obsession, and she needed to calm her mind. She knew that finding the person who'd given Ed his access to Regina's camera might give Victor and Bruce their best link to Ed's killer. She also hoped it would clear Gil Baca of murder. She invoked Ariel, once again assuming Ed Walters' increasingly disturbing persona.

She began by opening the folder labeled 'Regina,' and creating a list of recording times for all of Ed Walters' illicit videos. She then instructed Ariel to display any of his agents that ran at those times. As she waited for the results, she thought about the jargon surrounding illicit systems hacking, the 'back doors' and 'Trojan horses' that gave outsiders access to supposedly trusted software. She felt she had discovered a new piece of jargon: she felt like she was looking for a keyhole.

After a moment, Ariel completed the query. It showed nothing but routine system agents: utility programs that ran constantly as part of the building's electronic infrastructure. There was nothing unusual, nothing to explain Ed Walters' access to the camera.

She returned to Pops' still open window, and listed all of the agents that served Regina Martinelli. She scanned the list, and found an agent named 'RM-CameraController.' She guessed this stood for 'Regina Martinelli's Camera Controller.' Elizabeth remembered Jason Evans had installed it, and smiled. According to company rules, Jason should have named it with the camera's manufacturer, its model number, and the word 'Controller.' Many programmers ignored the standards, either in haste, carelessness, or rebellion against corporate regulations – especially Jason.

She opened the property list for the 'RM-CameraController.' The agent's description confirmed it managed the expensive camera. Whenever Regina made a video, her executive passed the proper commands on to the 'RM-CameraController.' It, in turn, coordinated a temporary bureaucracy of smaller, specialized agents to aim and focus the camera, to manage the stream of images, and to store the video under the names Regina gave it.

Elizabeth scanned the description for an item labeled 'Permissions.' As she expected, only Regina Martinelli was authorized to access her camera.

She leaned back in her chair and gathered her thoughts. If she was to believe the systems, everything was as it should be: there was only one way to reach the camera, and Regina Martinelli had sole control of it. Elizabeth was not surprised. She had assumed the person who'd rigged it would leave no obvious traces.

Elizabeth wished she could make Ariel start the video in the same way Ed had. Then, she could use the building's tools to trace the resulting sequence of agent activity, watching it unfold like a movie, following it step by step until she found the code that corrupted the system. Unfortunately, she had no idea how Ed had started the camera. That left her no alternative but to search all the computer code that could possibly hide Ed Walters' keyhole – agent by agent, line by line.

Like bridges, buildings and machinery, software is an engineered artifact, but unlike physical constructions, it obeys few inherent restrictions on its form. Concrete, steel and plastic impose their own rules on the engineers

that work with them. The limited ways that cutting, hammering and melting can shape physical materials force designers to think in ways their colleagues expect, to work within a shared understanding of tensile strength, electrical conductivity, hardness, melting temperature and hundreds of other unchangeable properties of physical materials.

No natural laws force software designers to build programs along lines other engineers recognize; no innate physical properties stand between software and the human imagination. That is the foundation of software's appeal, its ability to manifest our dreams and abduct our desires. It is also the source of bad design, error and unmanageable complexity.

If software engineers are to work together, they must devise their own conventions, and share them through standards, style manuals and the programming lore that permeates their community. Deprived of empirical constraints, they draw on all the tools human minds have devised for organizing abstract knowledge. They draw on everything from logic to analogy, from the proofs and theorems of mathematics, to the narratives and metaphors of poetry.

The building's agent system grew out of such a metaphor. The idea of agents, of self-contained individuals acting within a community to pursue another's interests mirrored the familiar, social world of actors and objects, actions and relationships. It gave software designers an intuitive framework for their collaboration, a framework rooted in the universal foundations of ordinary language. When Regina Martinelli started her camera, her executive agent interpreted her request, and delegated it to the 'RM-CameraController.' The controller, in turn, coordinated dozens of more specialized agents to manage the camera's operation, to process the images it produced, and to store them in the building's databases. The pattern of agents and their delegation mirrored human bureaucracy. The boss told a foreman what to do; the foreman told workers how to do it; and, the workers carried out those commands with little understanding of the reasons behind them.

Beneath the bright fiction of agents and messages was an intractable network of data and algorithms. Ignore the abstractions and metaphors that define our understanding of so complex a system, and human minds could no

more envision its larger patterns than they could understand New York City by tracing every action of every citizen at every moment of every day. The fiction of agents, collaboration and delegation was the link between the algorithmic behavior of the software and the intentions of its designers. If she were to find the lines of computer code that enabled Regina Martinelli's disembodied rape, Elizabeth would have to penetrate the building's bright conceit of agents and community. She would have to take apart its central metaphors like a literary critic analyzing a very long, very abstract, very difficult poem.

She selected the agent named 'RM-CameraController,' pulled down a menu labeled 'View,' and chose the item called 'Network.' The network viewer was a map of all the project's software: it showed every agent's potential interactions with its assistants, all possible delegations of responsibility in the vast community of the building's systems. Every agent was connected to every other through this single intractable network. The chain of events that led from Ed Walters to Regina Martinelli's camera would be one of the millions of possible paths through it.

At the bottom of the window a slider enabled Elizabeth to control the breadth of the view. Move the slider all the way to the left, and all that appeared was a single box labeled 'RM-CameraController.' Move it to the right, and the network expanded outward, one layer at a time, growing in complexity and declining in resolution, like an image of a city as the observer moved from a street corner, to a rooftop, to a mountain, to an airplane, to a satellite in orbit above the Earth.

Elizabeth moved the slider slowly to the right, and the agents that assisted the camera controller in its work appeared around it. Many of these were simple programs for managing its mechanical operation. One simply started and stopped it on command. Another monitored its output, sending the video stream to one of the system's document managers for storage. Another timed the recording, doing nothing more than starting a clock when it began, and stopping it when the recording ended. Other agents used this timer for their own purposes: one listened for additional commands from Regina's executive, allowing her to add bookmarks to the video that allowed her to return to some particular moment on the recording.

Other agents assisting the camera controller were more intelligent. One transcribed the conversations into a searchable text. One searched for the pattern of colors, shapes and movements that defined a human face, and adjusted the field of view to include everyone in the room. Another monitored the executive agent's activities during the recording, constructing a map of the events surrounding it. Still others would use this map to support contextual searches, such as "find the video I made while I was working on the quarterly report."

All of these agents had access to the camera, and Ed's accomplice could have modified almost any one of them to take control of it. Elizabeth decided to start in the obvious place, and hoped she might get lucky. She opened the software for the 'RM-CameraController.' It provided the simplest, most direct way to reach the camera, and the obvious place to breach its security.

In spite of Jason's undisciplined coding style, Elizabeth was able to examine all the controller software in a little less than two hours. She found nothing – no lines of code listening for messages from unauthorized sources, no patches in the authentication software that allowed Ed to bypass security controls, no unusual commands of any kind. Everything was as it should have been.

She took another hour, and went through the code again.

Elizabeth frowned. If Ed and his partner had not compromised the RM-CameraController, than their illicit access must have come from one of the agents that assisted it, and there were dozens of them.

What was worse, many of these agents served multiple purposes. Some of them could access all the video cameras in the building, including the one in Elizabeth's office. Others played a role in managing all sensor data, whether from cameras, microphones or the radio receivers that tracked their badges. If Ed's keyhole was in one of these general tools, then the entire network of cameras, microphones and computers might be affected.

Elizabeth forced herself to face a disturbing possibility. The security breach might not be limited to a single sexual predator, a single camera and a single

victim. The corruption could have spread throughout the building, throughout her community, throughout all of the ubiquitous, invisible, immaculate software she and everyone else trusted.

CHAPTER 20

Bruce and Victor crossed the Sky City Building's broad, glass walled lobby, and walked upstairs to the executive office suite. Hoping to find evidence of some link between Gil Baca and Ed Walters' investigation of the information theft, Bruce crossed the open area to the dead man's office. He ducked past the yellow tape that crossed the door frame. As he entered, he absent-mindedly replaced the tape Elizabeth had knocked away the night before.

Victor paused, alone at the head of the stairs, composing his thoughts before speaking to Gilbert Baca. The open space with offices lined up around its perimeter reminded him of a plaza joining the houses and businesses of a small town. Having seen the effect both small towns and technology had on privacy, the comparison seemed particularly appropriate. The Sky City Building's glossy, technological aesthetic hid its own networks of secrets and rumors, its own system of implicit laws and explicit sanctions.

"Excuse me," he said to the secretary outside Gil Baca's office, "is Mr. Baca available?"

She reminded him of the old people who watched from the benches lining a small town plaza, the community's self appointed historians, guardians and reporters.

“Yes,” she said, “I’ll tell him you’re here.”

She did not ask Victor who he was or what he wanted. She didn’t need to. She spoke briefly toward her computer screen. Victor recognized Gil Baca’s voice in the response.

“Go right in,” she said.

As Victor left the plaza, he briefly wondered if Baca’s office was any less public.

Gilbert Baca stood up and welcomed the detective into his office. He did not walk out from behind his desk, but gestured to the arm chair across from him. Victor closed the door and sat down.

“Lieutenant Rodriguez, how can I help you?”

“Mr. Baca,” he began, “there are a few more questions I’d like to ask you. Do you have some time now?”

“Of course. None of us have really been able to work since this happened.”

“I hope you’re feeling better?” Victor asked.

Gil Baca seemed confused for a moment, then remembered his illness. “Oh, yes, thank you.”

“I understand you handle a lot of proprietary information,” Victor began.

“I’m not sure how this relates to Ed’s death,” Gil Baca asked.

He seemed uncomfortable.

“Well,” Victor said in a calm voice, “I’m not sure either. I was just hoping you could clarify a few things.”

“Of course. As you know, I worked with Ed on . . .” he stopped, and a look of genuine sadness passed across his face. “That is, before this happened. Anyway, we worked on commercial applications of the project’s technology.

Most things of value produced here came across my desk at one time or another.”

“I see.”

“Look, could you please tell me what this is about?”

“Of course,” Victor answered. “In the course of our investigation, we’ve learned that someone in this building has stolen proprietary data and sold it to the consortium’s competition.”

Gilbert Baca said nothing. His expression froze.

“That’s impossible,” he insisted. “We take every precaution”

“I’m afraid there’s little doubt. We’ve obtained exact copies of consortium documents from sources at one of your competitors.”

“I can’t believe that,” Baca insisted, continuing to shake his head.

Victor paused a moment. He needed to engage both Gil Baca’s trust and his fear. He shifted from the plural “we” to the pronoun, “I,” and began to speak in an almost personal tone of voice.

“I’ve learned that Ed Walters was conducting his own investigation into the theft just before he was killed,” Victor began.

Gil Baca inhaled sharply.

“I’ve reviewed Mr. Walters’ findings,” Victor said.

He searched the face across the desk. Gil Baca knew what he’d discovered.

“Mr. Baca, I know you were one of a handful of people who had access to all the stolen information.”

“That’s not surprising,” Baca protested, “anything that looked like it might be valuable to the consortium came across my desk.”

“I understand you had a CD drive installed on your computer about six months ago.”

Victor saw him glance down toward a desk drawer. He saw the effort of forced composure in the muscles of his face.

“Yes, I needed it to take work home.”

“I thought you used wireless notepads to get at data from outside the building?”

Gilbert Baca laughed. The laughter seemed to be more a deliberate show than a spontaneous expression.

“Detective, don’t believe everything people tell you about this place. The notepads are a nice idea, but they don’t work as well as people would like you to believe.”

“Oh?”

“They take a long time to download large files; sometimes it’s hard to get a connection from down in the valley . . .”

“I can believe that,” Victor smiled. “I grew up there. We always seem to be the last to get that sort of thing.”

Baca did not respond to him, but continued listing the notepad’s shortcomings.

“. . . the screen is too small, and using a stylus for data entry is error-prone. I have a good PC at home, and I prefer to work on it.”

“I can understand that,” Victor said in a calm voice, “but there is one thing I can’t quite figure out.”

“Yes?”

“You only used the CD drive nine times.”

Gilbert Baca froze. He did not remove his eyes from the detective’s.

“Mr. Baca, the only times you used the drive were to download the stolen documents. You downloaded all the stolen documents, and no others.”

Victor waited. Gil Baca looked out the window of his office, and said nothing. Finally, he turned back. His eyes shined with moisture.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

“Your use of the CD drive to copy the stolen documents and only those documents is extremely suspicious.”

“It means nothing,” he insisted, “the documents I took home were special. They were very complex, and potentially quite valuable. That’s why I needed to spend extra time on them. I took them home to work on them for exactly the same reasons they would interest a thief.”

Victor shook his head. “It’s only a matter of time before we locate the purchasers of the documents. Those people will not protect you. If you were involved with the document theft, I will find out.”

Gilbert Baca looked out his large office window toward the Manzano Mountains, and said nothing. After a few seconds he spoke slowly.

“Detective Rodriguez,” he said, “I don’t think I should continue this conversation.”

Victor continued speaking to the man sitting motionlessly in front of him.

“Mr. Baca, we are looking at the possibility of a connection between the theft and Ed Walters’ death,” Victor said, choosing his words carefully. “I’m not accusing you of anything at this time, but if you are involved in either of these matters, or if you know about anyone else who is, I will find out.”

“I’ve done nothing.”

“I sincerely hope that’s true.” Victor continued in a personal, almost intimate tone. “I know you are a decent man, but I also know good people make mistakes, and I know things can get out of hand. There are often circumstances, and I can take those into account. If anything has happened, it will be easier if you cooperate with me.”

He waited a moment, but the man across the desk from him sat rigidly, silently.

“I can help you,” Victor said softly but emphatically.

Gil Baca spoke with what seemed like great effort. “Detective, I’d like for you to leave.”

“Mr. Baca, please take some time to think about what I’m saying,” Victor urged.

He realized the man was not ready to confess. He tried to plant the seeds for a later opportunity.

“I can help you,” he repeated.

He placed one of his business cards on the desk.

“I’d like to talk to you again, downtown, and take an official statement. Please come to my office tomorrow morning at ten o’clock. I urge you to bring legal counsel.”

Baca sat motionless for several moments. “It’s Saturday,” he said finally.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Baca picked up the card, looked at it and set it slowly back on the desk. He seemed to gather his strength.

“Detective, I’ll have my lawyer contact you and arrange this.”

Victor rose to leave. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

He walked toward the office door. As he neared it, he heard Gilbert Baca speak.

“Detective Rodriguez,” he said slowly, his voice hoarse with emotion, “I did not kill Ed Walters.”

CHAPTER 21

Elizabeth rested her elbows on her desk, closed her eyes and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyelids. She had found nothing to explain Ed Walters' illicit access to Regina's camera. She had searched every piece of software she could imagine his accomplice might have subverted, and everything looked perfectly correct. The excitement she had felt a few hours ago had faded into a dead end, an intense frustration and a splitting headache.

She took two aspirins from the bottle in her desk drawer, and tried to swallow them with sip of coffee. The liquid was cold, and she almost gagged. She walked down the hall to the kitchen.

A quarter of a pot of coffee sat on the burner, and, from the smell etching into her sinuses, Elizabeth guessed it had cooked down from half a pot. Even under ordinary circumstances, she would not have settled for the acidic concentrate; now, she especially needed something more comforting. She poured it down the drain and took the large can of supermarket coffee from the shelf.

"Pops," she asked, as she spooned coffee into the filter basket, "where is Thomas Lee?"

Pops answered, his voice brightened by reflection off the kitchen tile.
“Thomas Lee is in his office.”

She added an extra spoonful, and placed the filter in the coffee maker. She watched to make sure it started brewing, then walked out into the hall.

When Pops had said Thomas was in his office, he'd exaggerated: the young programmer occupied a corner cubicle toward the rear of the first floor. The only benefit his workspace offered was its corner location and the extra few square feet of space that configuration afforded. Elizabeth found him working at his computer. Like most cubical dwellers, he wore earplugs to listen to music, and, like most cubicle dwellers, he was young enough to require nearly constant musical input. She tapped him on the shoulder. Thomas smiled and removed his earplugs.

“Stretch out and make yourself at home,” he said.

“I'm stuck. I need some help.” she said, leaning against his desk.

“I thought you'd never ask,” he said, his smile melting into a conspiratorial grin.

A man and woman walked by, talking loudly. She waited until they had passed.

“Lets see if we can find someplace private,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. “This must be good.”

“No, it's just a hypothetical.”

“A private hypothetical?”

“Bear with me.”

“I'm your bear,” he punned.

Elizabeth groaned.

“Come on,” she said.

Thomas followed her down the hall to a conference room. She closed the door and asked for privacy.

“I need some help,” she said, “but I also need for this to go no further.”

“Sure,” he said, turning serious, “what is it?”

“You know this is for the police. I can’t really tell you what it’s about.”

“No problem.”

“No, the problem is you’re smart enough to figure out what it’s about, and I want you to promise you won’t try – at least not very hard.”

He crossed his heart and grinned.

“Also,” she said, “if you do figure out what I’m up to, I want you to promise to keep it to yourself.”

“Sure,” he nodded, “I understand.”

Elizabeth thought for a moment, framing her words carefully.

“If I wanted to access system resources without leaving a trace, how would I do it?”

“Hypothetically speaking?”

“Hypothetically.”

Thomas clasped his hands behind his head, leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

“Depends on the resource,” he said after a moment.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it would be hard to get at a data file without using its agent or something just like it – the systems spread stuff all over the place . . .”

“I know. I’m not thinking about data,” she interrupted, choosing her words carefully.

“OK?” He stared at her and waited.

Elizabeth thought for a moment. “Lets say a device.”

“Like a hard drive? You could access it, but, like I said, the building systems store data in a funny way. It would be hard to put it together.”

“No, not a hard drive.”

She tried to think of an example that would not reveal anything.

“Suppose I wanted to tap into one of the microphones in this room,” she said, “but didn’t want anyone to know I was doing it?”

“That’s a scary thought.”

“Hypothetically,” she reminded him.

Thomas thought for a moment. “Is he a good programmer?” he asked.

“As good as he needs to be.”

“Better be, ‘cause he’d have to know where the microphone driver was running, he’d have to know its interface, he’d . . .”

“What if he wanted to get at things he had no permission for,” she interrupted, “and didn’t want to leave a trace?”

“If it was me, I’d just go straight to UNIX and bypass the agent system entirely. UNIX is more secure than PC operating systems, but there are always ways. I’d have to write more code, but in the long run it would be easier – and harder to trace.”

UNIX was the operating system that ran on all the building’s computers. The building’s agents inhabited a layer ‘on top of’ it, and used its basic file system, process management and network software. Although UNIX had been created at Bell Laboratories in the nineteen-seventies, it remained the

most robust, flexible operating system in existence. Elizabeth, like nearly all computer science students, had used it in her university work.

“See, they could bypass the building systems entirely,” he continued. “If they knew what they were doing, they could get at just about anything, and the agent systems wouldn’t even know they were there.”

Elizabeth felt like kicking herself. His idea was obvious. Getting at Regina’s camera through the underlying UNIX system would be a little bit like sneaking through a city using the sewers or utility tunnels: you could go anywhere the roads above could lead, and do so with complete invisibility.

“What about system security?” she asked.

“Well,” Thomas explained, “everyone relies on the agent system’s security – which is pretty good – but they don’t always pay close enough attention to what’s underneath it. Sometimes they forget to protect lower level programs like microphone drivers. Even when they do, UNIX security is not as tough as the building’s. With a little luck, and a little skill, there are ways around it. If I knew more about what you were doing, I could look at it.”

“That’s OK, maybe later.”

Elizabeth did not ask him how much he knew about UNIX security holes, or where he learned it.

“Who can access the UNIX system?” she asked.

“Anyone.”

“Anyone?”

“Sure, We all have UNIX accounts. Even you. You’ve just gotten lazy using all those nice tools we wrote for you.”

“How?” she asked, ignoring his teasing.

“Just ask Pops for a shell, or select it off the menu.”

The shell was a program that enabled a user to send commands to the UNIX system. Using it, a skilled programmer could do nearly whatever she wanted.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Elizabeth admitted.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You didn’t have any need.”

“Thanks. So how would I track them down?” she asked.

“Well, you’d have to figure out which machine they used, then you’d have to find the program they used to get at the microphone.”

“I’d have to know what machine they were using?”

“Yep,” Thomas said. “I’d start with the computer that controls their desktop display.”

Elizabeth thought for a moment. “One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“If someone wanted to run one of these programs,” she asked, “wouldn’t they have to open the UNIX shell every time?”

“Sure.”

“Would there be a record of them doing it?”

He looked up at the ceiling, thinking about the question. “Well,” he said, as if thinking aloud, “the easiest way to bring up a shell program is to go through the executive agent, so, the exec would have a record.”

“You said ‘the easiest way,’ are there others?”

“Sure, but they wouldn’t be as convenient. You could go directly to any of the computers that run this place, and use its console,” Thomas explained.

The console was a monitor and keyboard that connected directly to the operating system of a specific computer. As a rule, only systems programmers used them, and then only for maintenance or repairs. To

access a UNIX console directly, Ed would have to leave his office and find one of the computers running in the labs or server rooms scattered throughout the building.

“There might be other ways,” he added. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Elizabeth smiled.

“Did I help?” Thomas asked. “Hypothetically speaking?”

“Yeah. You helped.” She got up from the conference table. “Thomas, remember: keep this quiet, OK?”

He nodded.

“Are you going to Ed’s funeral?” he asked as they walked into the hall.

“Damn,” Elizabeth said, “I’d forgotten. Tomorrow’s Saturday, isn’t it.”

“Yeah. Jen and I thought we could all go together.”

“I’d like the company,” she said. “Besides, my truck has seen better days.”

“You know, you can afford a new car.”

“Maybe when this is over.”

Thomas grinned. “Jen’s driving. We’ll pick you up at your house.”

Elizabeth walked back to the kitchen. The coffee had finished brewing, and she filled her cup. She wrapped both hands around it and let the warmth and aroma calm her mind. She took a couple sips and topped the cup off, then returned to her office and closed the door.

The building’s metaphor of agents and society had failed her; now, she had to explore another. Again masquerading as Ed Walters, she opened Ariel’s main window, and scanned the menus of his abilities. She opened a menu labeled ‘System’ – it was a menu she seldom used – and found a command

named 'Shell.' A window she not seen since graduate school appeared on her screen.

The UNIX operating system had been written before windows, mice and menus became widely available. Like Microsoft's early DOS, all interactions with it were text-based: users typed in a command and the system either printed its results to the screen, or stored them in a file. Although any commands entered into the shell would be unknown to Pops and the other agents, the executive agent should record the initial shell access. Elizabeth asked Ariel to display a history list. At the top of the list, she saw her own just completed command to open the UNIX shell.

She wrote a brief query, instructing Ariel to find all shell accesses in the last year. The command executed quickly, and listed only her own request from a few minutes ago.

"Damn it," she said aloud. According to Ariel's records, Ed Walters had never reached into the underlying operating system. Frustrated, she decided to try another tactic.

Elizabeth opened a map of the building's network. The wireless systems were supported by dozens of computers, stored in system labs or small server rooms scarcely larger than a walk-in closet. The only way Ed could have reached the UNIX system without going through his agent would have been to go directly to one of these machines. She noticed a server room around the corner from his office. It was at the end of the hallway leading to the rest rooms. He could have reached it without being seen. Elizabeth read the server's network address and, using the still open UNIX shell, connected to it.

She searched the machine for anything that might look like an illicit duplicate of Regina's camera controller. She found nothing.

Frustrated, she looked at the clock. It was almost eight. Eventually, she might be able to locate Ed's camera software by searching one machine after another for suspicious programs, but she also knew it would take considerable time, and offered no guarantee of success. There were many computers in the building, and the software could be on any of them.

It was time to move beneath the bright fiction of collaborating agents, and search its foundation of files, servers and processes. She needed a different set of maps, and would find them in the system manuals, in the physical layout of the building's networks, and in her own long neglected understanding of the UNIX and the abstract, entangled architecture beneath the building's familiar agents.

She thought of Grace waiting home alone, of Ed's funeral tomorrow, and of her promise to Victor not to work after hours. She took her wireless notepad from the desk, and downloaded the building's network specification onto it. On her way out of the building, she stopped in the building's research library, and placed several UNIX textbooks in her bag.

She needed to refresh some long neglected skills.

CHAPTER 22

It was sunny and the temperature was in the high forties when Elizabeth, Jen and Thomas arrived at the mortuary. A military veteran, Ed Walters had earned the privilege of burial at the National Cemetery in Santa Fe. To accommodate mourners who could not make the sixty mile drive to the cemetery, the mortuary had arranged a service in Albuquerque prior to the grave-side ceremony.

The night before, Elizabeth had spent several hours at home trying to devise a plan for finding how Ed Walters had compromised the building's security protections. She'd placed the wireless notepad on her dining room table, displaying a map of the building's physical computer network. She'd worked through the maze of computers and cabling, trying to find some obvious starting point in her search. If Ed had bypassed the agent system, the software he'd used could be on any of the dozens of computers on that diagram. She'd considered everything from the structure of the network to the probable psychology of Ed Walters' and his mysterious assistant. She found little to cut through the complexity. That morning, she'd driven into the office before six, working until she had to rush home to change into her gray suit for Ed's funeral. She'd found nothing, and was feeling the effects of frustration, stress and lack of sleep.

Elizabeth crossed the mortuary parking lot with Jen and Thomas. Thomas looked uncomfortable in his navy blazer, gray slacks, white shirt and tie, occasionally hooking a finger in the collar and pulling it away from his throat. Jen's black skirt, white blouse and long black leather coat were less of a departure from her normal wardrobe, but she looked just as uncomfortable.

They joined a small group of people from the project, standing together in the sun. Like Elizabeth, these people knew Ed only slightly, and preferred to remain outside the circle of the family's grief until the formal service began. Elizabeth situated herself where she could watch people enter the building. Robert stood at the mortuary door, dressed in a dark blue suit, white shirt and maroon tie with light blue figures. He stood next to an older man in a gray, western-cut suit and black lizard skin boots – she did not know whether the older man was a relative of Ed's or an employee of the mortuary. They seemed to divide the responsibilities of greeting mourners between them, with Robert offering each of his staff a comforting hand on their shoulder before guiding them into the building. The old man in the western suit seemed to do the same for Ed's friends and family members.

Peter and Regina Martinelli arrived shortly after Elizabeth. As they passed the cluster of project employees waiting outside in the sun, they stopped briefly. Peter spoke to Elizabeth, and Regina stood apart in an expensive looking charcoal suit. The suit's minimalist geometry harmonized surprisingly well with the antique, black lace she wore over her head and shoulders. She wore dark glasses, and looked toward the mortuary. Elizabeth could not tell if she was attending to their conversation or not.

"How are you doing, Elizabeth?" Peter asked.

She wondered if he was referring to her work with the police.

"I'm OK," was all she said.

He stood there for a few more minutes, trying to make small talk. Elizabeth was not sure why he had focused on her, although she was closer to him in age and status than the other people in the group.

Regina grew impatient and leaned toward her husband's ear.

"We should go inside and find Ed's family," she said.

She started toward the doorway without looking back. Peter nodded, muttered something Elizabeth did not hear, and started after his wife. She watched them walk, looking for some evidence of tension between them. She thought she noticed a slight acceleration in Regina's step as they left the group, as if the project attorney was trying either to maintain a distance from her husband, or to make sure he did not stop again. She paid special attention as Robert greeted them at the door. She saw him acknowledge Regina first, taking her hand briefly, then turn to Peter. The two men spoke at some length. Regina stood quietly in her expensive suit and traditional mantilla.

Wayne Ballard arrived shortly before the service. He appeared in a new, dark blue BMW Z-3, driving with the top down in spite of the brisk winter morning, and parked at the far end of the lot, away from other cars with their paint destroying doors. Elizabeth watched him walk toward her, dressed in a charcoal gray suit, wearing a black shirt buttoned to the top with no tie.

"Jesus," Jen said to Thomas, "when did he get that car?"

"About a month ago. Don't you keep up with anything?" he answered.

"I guess I should have gone into networking," Jen complained.

"Well," Thomas answered, "he's a single guy with a good job."

"We're all single guys with good jobs," Jen joked. "How come I'm the only one with a car that can make it to Santa Fe?"

Elizabeth thought of her old truck and smiled.

"Morning, Libby," Wayne said to Elizabeth as he joined her and the others outside the building.

Elizabeth noticed the absence of his usual wise cracks. He seemed subdued, almost sympathetic.

“Have you been inside?” he asked.

“Not yet. I guess we should go in soon,” she answered.

“Don’t worry. Robert won’t let us miss anything,” he said, tilting his head toward the door.

Robert was talking to Ed’s secretary. She was crying softly as he put his arm around her shoulders and offered his handkerchief. Elizabeth saw him take it from inside his jacket, leaving his maroon pocket square undisturbed.

“So, how’s the investigation, Doc?” Wayne asked, reverting to his customary persona.

Elizabeth looked up at him.

“I’m not investigating anything,” she insisted. “They wanted some data, and I got it for them.”

“That’s not what I hear. I hear you’re burning the midnight oil.”

“Hey Wayne,” Thomas interrupted, coming to her rescue. “How do you like the Beemer?”

Wayne grinned through his beard, and started praising his car. Thomas seemed to listen raptly. Elizabeth made a mental note to thank him.

Robert left the mortuary door and walked toward them. He leaned into the group and put his hands on the shoulders of the people on either side of him.

“I think its time to go inside,” he said softly.

“Why,” Wayne challenged, “we’ve still got ten minutes before it starts?”

Robert frowned at him. “Because it looks bad. This isn’t an office picnic.”

The circle started to break apart, and move toward the mortuary door. Wayne held back a moment, then followed. Robert fell in beside Elizabeth.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m tired,” she answered, “but I’m doing all right.”

“I know you’ve been working pretty hard on this.”

“It seems like everybody knows.”

“People care about you.”

She looked at him and frowned. He smiled and took her hand. She stiffened, and he let go. After a few more steps, he broke from the group, and went to talk to another of the project’s managers who had just arrived in a black Volvo. Elizabeth went inside with Jen, Thomas and the rest, and they sat together near the back of the room.

“Jen,” she whispered, “have you seen Gil Baca?”

Her friend looked around. “No,” she whispered back, “but I haven’t been looking for him. Why?”

“No reason,” Elizabeth lied. “I hear he’s been sick.”

She kept her eye on the door. After a few minutes, Gilbert Baca and his wife came in and sat on the other side of the auditorium. He looked tired, but surprisingly relaxed. Elizabeth glanced at him from time to time. Several times, she saw him look at his wife and smile lovingly.

“I knew the asshole would pass me,” Jen said. “He just had to.”

Her voice woke Elizabeth. She looked up to see the back of Wayne’s blue BMW accelerating away from them. At her request, Jen and Thomas agreed to make the trip to Santa Fe for Ed’s graveside service. Because it was sixty miles north of Albuquerque, the mourners made no effort to hold a line behind the hearse, but agreed to meet at the cemetery at two o’clock.

They had left the mortuary several minutes before Wayne. Elizabeth had noticed him talking intensely with Robert in the parking lot as they’d driven away. In spite of Jen’s heavy foot and their head start, he’d caught them just

outside Santa Fe. He stuck his hand out of the window and waved as he passed.

“I’m sorry I dozed off,” Elizabeth said.

“No problem,” Jen said without slowing down or taking her eyes off the road. “Why don’t you wake the baby.”

Elizabeth reached back and shook Thomas’ knee. “Hey, we’re almost there.”

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Santa Fe,” Elizabeth answered. “We both fell asleep, and left poor Jen alone.”

Jen smiled. “You can make it up to me later. Maybe I’ll get drunk at Ed’s wake and let you drive me home.”

“I didn’t know Ed was having a wake,” Thomas said, stretching.

“Well,” Jen said, leaving the Interstate and heading west on St. Francis Drive, “that’s up to us, isn’t it?”

The National Cemetery lies northwest of Santa Fe, on a hillside overlooking Saint Francis Drive approximately where it turns into Highway 84 on its way to Taos. Elizabeth’s father, a Navy veteran, had taken her there years ago. He’d led her among the graves, reminiscing about his war, his youth and his comrades, and telling her of his wish to be buried among them. As they neared the cemetery, with its neat, identical white stones arranged in rows on the hillside, she remembered that day with sadness, thinking of her mother’s death, and her father’s decision to return to San Francisco. It seemed as if the loss of his wife had robbed him of the love he’d found for New Mexico, and she wondered if his wishes had changed.

Jen entered the cemetery through the main entrance, passing among the graves of men who had fought in the First World War, the Spanish American, the Civil, and even the Indian wars. From the highway, the arrangement of tombstones seemed military in its precision, but the older part of the

cemetery only approximated this uniformity, like some ragged militia from the old west. The oldest of the tombstones belonged to men who were killed in the wars of the nineteenth century, and bore the individual touch of forgotten stone carvers.

Moving into the newer parts of the cemetery, the stones standardized into identical three-foot high white marble rectangles with rounded tops, and the dates advanced into humanity's most recent, most prolific century of slaughter. Elizabeth read the names of soldiers who'd survived their wars and lived into old age, mixed with those of men killed in their youth, far from home. Identical crosses and an occasional Star of David were carved into the stone above the names of the dead.

Ed's grave was in the newest part of the cemetery, where flat marble markers, recessed into the ground, replaced the upright headstones. Elizabeth guessed the flat markers simplified grounds keeping. In an age of measure, analysis and efficiency, even the army of the dead adopted a systems approach.

The cemetery had no parking lot, and mourner's cars lined up on the shoulders of the roads that crossed the grounds. Jen fell in behind the cars that were arriving for Ed's funeral. She parked at the side of the road, and they walked together toward the grave. The hearse bearing Ed's body and the limousines carrying his family had not arrived, and people stood around the site in small groups. Elizabeth was in no hurry to join the mourners, and walked slowly among the graves, occasionally stopping to watch the cars passing on the highway, driving northward alongside the Sangre de Cristo mountains, past the Santa Fe Opera, through Española and on to Taos.

When the limousines from the mortuary arrived, she walked back to stand in the sun with a group of people from the Sky City Project. Robert, Peter, Regina and a few other managers sat in the third row of chairs, behind Ed's family and friends. Elizabeth noticed Guru Deep Singh Khalsa with a tall woman she took to be his wife. The woman wore a white turban, leggings and a flowing dress; several pieces of dark blue turquoise jewelry were the only trace of color against her white clothing. Elizabeth knew he lived in Santa Fe, and was not surprised he had skipped the Albuquerque service.

As the chaplain approached the gravesite accompanied by an honor guard of Marines in dress uniforms, Elizabeth continued to search the crowd for people she recognized. She noticed that Gilbert Baca was not among those standing on the sunlit hillside.

After a short graveside service where a military chaplain spoke of honor, family and eternal life, after the young Marines in dress uniforms and white gloves had fired blank rounds into the bright, cold sky, after two young Marines had folded the flag that covered the casket and given it to Ed Walters' wife, after the dead man had been lowered into the ground on a system of chrome mechanisms and canvas belts, Elizabeth joined the line moving slowly past his family.

"Mrs. Walters," she said to his widow, "I'm Elizabeth Florczyk. I worked with your husband."

Ed Walters' wife took her hand and smiled. In the pictures Elizabeth remembered from Ed's office, she had looked robust, almost athletic. In person, she was only about five foot tall and surprisingly fine boned – she seemed almost fragile. Only the open, still beautiful face, and the strength of her handshake suggested the woman in the photographs. Elizabeth wondered how much of the difference was a product of grief and the shock of losing a husband to murder.

"I'm so thankful you could come," she said, "Ed spoke of you often."

"I didn't know that," Elizabeth said with genuine surprise.

"Yes, he said you were one of the few real scientists working there. He took great pleasure in knowing his work was not just about meetings and budgets."

Elizabeth flushed. "I never realized. You see, I didn't know Ed well."

"I know. His job kept him too busy to get close to many people at work, but he took a lot of pleasure from the younger staff." She smiled sadly. "He called you 'his kids'"

Ed Walters' widow paused for a moment. A tear tracked her cheek.

"Ed took a lot of vicarious satisfaction from your battles with management," she said, leaning forward and whispering into Elizabeth's ear. "He was especially delighted whenever you kids set Robert straight."

Elizabeth felt her own tears form, and embraced the small woman with sadness, admiration and affection.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," she said.

CHAPTER 23

Elizabeth leaned back in the old sofa. The morning's second pot of coffee sat on the table, in an insulated steel pitcher from Starbuck's. Robert had given it to her last Christmas, and she still used it, in spite of its origins and the Starbuck's logo. A small white plate held the last few sections of an orange she'd been nibbling. Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier* played on the stereo, and Grace slept in her customary spot at the end of the couch. Elizabeth watched a square of sunlight crawl across the floor toward her east window, and thought about going into the Sky City Building. She decided she needed a little more time to rest, to think, and to plan.

After Ed's funeral, Jen and Thomas had persuaded her to go to Thomasita's for an early dinner and, as Jen described it, 'Ed's wake.' She'd tried to beg off, but with no luck.

"Come on," Jen had insisted, "it's early – we can beat the lines and get a good table."

"Actually, Jen, I was hoping we could go straight back."

"Why?"

"I need to go into work."

“Once again,” Jennifer had asked, with an irony bordering on sarcasm.
“Why?”

She’d tried to answer Jen’s question without revealing the facts of Gil Baca’s theft of the project’s intellectual property, or Ed’s stalking of Regina Martinelli. She’d had little luck in changing their minds: they’d answered every rational argument with a wisecrack, contradicted every notion of duty and responsibility, and ignored her protests when Jen pulled into the parking lot of the old railroad station that housed Thomasita’s Mexican Restaurant.

Elizabeth did not know if it was the effect of the funeral, the accumulated stress of the week’s events, or an unconscious need to step back from the problem, but her resolve had weakened and finally died over margaritas in the bar. She’d decided her efforts to penetrate the puzzle of Regina Martinelli’s camera would benefit more from a fresh perspective than from another night of probing directories, databases and computer code.

Elizabeth took another sip of coffee, bit into an orange slice, and recalled wandering around Santa Fe with Jen and Thomas. After dinner, they’d driven back to the plaza that still defined the center of town, and walked around in the cold, looking for anything worth doing, particularly something involving music. Except for five old men playing Dixieland jazz in a tourist bar off the plaza, they’d found nothing of interest – mostly predictable country flavored light rock, and a nuevo-flamenco duo pushing the music’s technique past the limits their skill – and listenability.

They’d wandered up Canyon Road in the cold, looking in the gallery windows, and laughing at the expensive, sentimental Indian art the tourists carried back to California and New Jersey by the mini-van full. They had even found an occasional piece of genuinely creative work, the odd painting, pot or textile that spoke simply and honestly, instead of pimping southwestern color. As it had grown colder, they’d joined the last, hardest tourists in getting off the street, and wound up in the bar of the Pink Adobe, talking about art, politics, music and, of course, software. They had talked about anything but Ed’s death. Sitting in the cramped, overheated bar, the air heavy with the smell of a piñon fire and tobacco, Elizabeth had finally relaxed. She’d stopped thinking about the investigation, and fallen into the familiar rhythms of

friendship and conversation. For the first time, she'd noticed the changes in Thomas and Jen's interaction – the incidental touch, the shared inside jokes, the glances back and forth. She'd seen Thomas take Jen's hand as it rested on the bench, and realized why her friends had been so eager to stay in Santa Fe.

Sitting alone in her living room, Elizabeth recognized the wisdom in stepping back from the problem. The intellectual itch she had been unable to scratch, the idea that seemed to lie just outside the bounds of form seemed to be taking shape, without any conscious participation on her part. She could not accept that Ed had used the UNIX operating system to access Regina Martinelli's camera. In spite of her failure to find any plausible alternative, in spite of Thomas' compelling arguments, something troubled her about the idea that Ed Walters had bypassed the building's agent system.

Thomas had given her a hacker's solution. As compelling as his logic was, it did not match Ed Walters' dark needs. She'd known a few hackers – they seemed as drawn to her as lost cats and musicians. As a rule, they seemed more interested in the challenge of defeating system security or some other technical obstacle, than they were in any information they acquired. Even if Ed's accomplice had simplified things as much as UNIX allowed, she believed the result would still be too technical, too distracting. Ed Walters wanted a fantasy, an outlet for loneliness, desire, or even anger. He did not want to contend with a technical challenge. She could not see him sneaking out of his office and down the hall to a small closet near the bathrooms, sitting in a hard chair and staring at Regina Martinelli over a systems console. Rather than doing so, Elizabeth believed he would have simply nurtured his fantasies with newspaper clippings, stolen e-mail and love letters he wrote but did not send.

She poured another cup of coffee, listened to Bach's graceful abstractions, and tried to form a new strategy. She sat there, alternately evaluating some new line of attack, and letting the music take control of her thoughts. She was tracking the voices in the E-major prelude when the doorbell rang. It was Victor Rodriguez.

“Victor,” she said, “this is a surprise.”

She noticed the concern in his face.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Elizabeth, can I come in?”

He looked tired. Almost immediately, she sensed he’d come to share some burden with her, some burden she would not want to receive. She invited him in, and he sat in the wooden rocker she kept across from the couch.

“Can I get you some coffee?” she asked.

“No, no thank you. Please, sit down.”

She sat back on the couch. “What is it?”

He took a deep breath, then paused for what seemed a long time. Finally, he spoke.

“I can think of no easy way to say this. Gilbert Baca is dead.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He committed suicide last night after Ed Walters’ funeral. I wanted to tell you myself.”

She felt paralyzed.

“No,” she said, flatly.

“I know this is difficult . . .”

“What happened?” she interrupted. Her voice sounded strange in her ears.

“They found him this morning and called the police. I came as soon as . . .”

“Who found him?” she interrupted.

“The maid at a motel. He had taken a room.”

“What motel?”

“Elizabeth . . .”

“Damnit, Victor, what motel?”

He looked at her carefully, startled by her insistence on knowing so small a detail. After a few moments, he acknowledged the need behind her demand.

“The Rio Grande View,” he said . “It’s on Central just west of the river.”

He did not tell her that the Rio Grande View Motel looked out on little more than the traffic and commerce on Central Avenue.

“How did he do it?”

“I’m not sure you . . .” Victor objected.

“Tell me,” she insisted.

“This may be difficult.”

“Tell me.”

He stared at her. She said nothing, but sat with her eyes closed, breathing slowly. He lifted the Starbuck’s thermos from the table and filled her cup, then hefted it to confirm it held another.

“I guess I will need that coffee,” he said. “Where do you keep your cups?”

Victor took a long drink and set his cup down on the coffee table. He leaned forward in the rocking chair.

“As near as we can tell, he took his wife home after Ed Walters’ memorial service in Albuquerque. Shortly after dinner, he left on the pretext of doing some errands. We don’t know if he went straight to the motel or not, but he checked in around eight o’clock. His wife became worried and called the police around nine, but the officer on duty did not know to contact me. They

found him this morning. One of the officers connected him to my investigation, and called me.”

“How did he do it?”

“Elizabeth, it’s not . . .”

“I need to know.”

Victor looked at her thoughtfully, as if measuring the depth of her need and the strength of her will.

“We don’t have the coroner’s report, but we found an empty bottle of sedatives and a partly empty bottle of whisky in the room. Apparently, he took a large dose of pills and drank about half a bottle of whisky.”

“There’s more – you’re hesitating.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Tell me.”

She did not raise her voice, but its timbre changed, like a nylon guitar string hardening into steel.

Victor shook his head. “I don’t know why you need this . . .”

“Please,” she interrupted.

“. . . but,” he continued, “if I’m going to answer you, I have to insist on confidentiality. It could hurt our investigation. It could also hurt some innocent people.”

She nodded.

“He sat in a hot bath and cut his wrist,” he said.

“Both wrists?”

“No, he cut one, then apparently tried to cut the other. We think he passed out before he succeeded.”

Elizabeth looked down for several seconds, as if trying to envision the deeper pattern of Gil Baca's death.

"He wanted to make sure," she said finally. "Then what?"

"The maid found him this morning. He had written a note to her and taped it to the outside of his room door. It explained what he had done, and asked her to call the police."

"What else?"

"There was a hundred dollar bill in the envelope that he said was for any inconvenience he might have caused her."

"A hundred dollar bill?" she asked. "Not twenties?"

The detective nodded.

"He'd planned this," she said. "He must have taken the hundred dollar bill out of the bank last week."

Victor shrugged.

What else did the note say?" she pressed.

"He apologized and urged her not to come into the room. He left two more notes inside: one addressed to his wife, and one to me."

"That's why the officer called you."

"Yes."

Elizabeth closed her eyes. A tear traced the curve of her cheek and she took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry for the questions," she started to explain, but her voice trailed off. "Please, just tell me as much as you can."

"It's all right. I've told you most of it. I'm sorry."

"No, you have to continue. What did she do?"

“I’m sorry?” he asked.

“The maid. Did she go in?”

Victor looked at her for a long moment, and then nodded as if to himself.

“She tried to. The door was chained on the inside. She got the manager and he cut the chain. He found the body and called us.”

“What time was that?”

“About seven o’clock this morning.”

“What happened next?”

“The police closed off the area and began to examine the room. They found the notes and called me.”

“Did you tell his wife?”

“No, the police chaplain did.”

“What about the notes?”

“Elizabeth, I have to wait until they’ve been processed.”

She leaned back in the couch and shook her head.

“No. You have to tell me. I have to know,” she demanded. “I’m part of this. I helped kill him.”

“That’s not true,” he said firmly.

She shook her head again. “I found the evidence in the information theft. I fed your suspicions. I’m part of this.”

She continued to fight her tears. Victor walked around the coffee table and sat next to her on the couch, taking both her hands and looking in her eyes.

“Elizabeth, I will answer any questions I can, but you need to listen to me. You are not responsible for Gilbert Baca’s death. He chose to act as he did,

and we would have discovered his guilt without you. Do you understand me?"

She did not reply, but tried to breathe deeply between her sobs.

"Elizabeth?" he said, squeezing her hands.

She nodded briefly, moving her head less than an inch.

Victor let go of her hands and leaned forward on the couch, his elbows on his knees. He looked down at the floor as he spoke.

"In the note he wrote to his wife, he apologized, and told her he loved her and his children. He explained what he had done, and said he wanted to spare his family the pain and scandal of a trial. He asked their forgiveness, and he asked God's forgiveness. That's about it. There were some personal details that have no bearing on the case."

She nodded. "I understand. Did he say why he stole the information?"

"Yes. He said he felt frustrated at his own shortcomings and failures in life, and saw it as a way to make extra money to help his family."

"It wasn't just the money," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"He wasn't the kind of man who would steal from his employer for money. He did it out of frustration. Maybe it was anger, resentment – I don't know."

Victor shrugged. "I don't know," he said softly.

"What about the letter to you?"

"I cannot tell you the details, not until the DA has gone over it and issued a statement. I can tell you he confessed to the information theft, and gave us a complete accounting of the details, the people who bought the stolen data, dates, the amounts they paid him – that sort of thing."

"And he denied killing Ed Walters?"

Victor paused and looked into her eyes.

“Yes,” he said, “yes, he did.”

She sat back in the couch and closed her eyes. She sat quietly for a long time, and Victor remained beside her, leaning forward on the edge of the couch, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together. Finally, she picked up her coffee cup in both hands.

“Its cold,” she said without emotion.

“I can make a fresh pot.”

Victor stood up. He looked toward the kitchen.

“I should be able to find what I need. If I can’t, I’ll ask.”

She nodded and stared ahead at the living room wall.

Elizabeth took a swallow of hot coffee and leaned back in the couch. Victor sat quietly in the wood rocker across from her.

“I’m sorry I reacted like that,” she said.

Her composure had largely returned, although the swelling around her eyes evidenced her shock and grief.

“Reacted?” he asked ironically.

She laughed involuntarily. For an instant, it seemed the laughter would trigger her tears once more.

“You know,” she said, “all the questions.”

“Its OK. That happens sometimes. It seems people either try to shut out bad news, or . . .” he paused for a moment, searching for the right phrase, “or some people need to run at it.”

“I guess I ran at it.”

“I guess so. More than most.”

“So what happens now?” Elizabeth asked.

“What do you mean?”

“With the case.”

“Well, we’ll have to regroup, review the evidence, including Gilbert Baca’s suicide, and decide.”

“But we know Gil didn’t kill Ed,” she volunteered.

“That’s not certain.”

“Don’t you accept a dead man’s last statement?”

Victor shook his head.

“It’s not that simple,” he explained. “TV’s created a myth about deathbed confessions. We give them a lot of weight, but we look at all the evidence.”

“What do you think?” she asked.

He said nothing.

“You don’t believe Gil killed Ed Walters, do you?” Elizabeth pressed.

Victor took a long drink of coffee, and sat back in the rocker.

“No,” he said. “No, I don’t.”

What Air Supports Us
William A. Stubblefield
PART III

CHAPTER 24

“Elizabeth, that’s not why I called you here.” Robert Hill shook his head in frustration. He looked across the table at Regina Martinelli, appealing for help. She said nothing.

“Bullshit,” Elizabeth said angrily. “This whole thing is an embarrassment to the consortium and to you. Now, you want to wrap it up, and hide it away.”

“That’s not true, and you know it,” he snapped at her.

“So, you bring me into your office, tell me Gil killed Ed Walters, and ask for a report like it’s some technical project you’re canceling.”

“The status of the criminal investigation is up to the police,” Robert said, retreating into the measured cadences of the professional politician. “I only suggested it seems likely Gilbert Baca killed Ed, and that we should think about moving forward.”

“Then why is she here?” Elizabeth gestured toward Regina.

“Perhaps she should answer that,” Regina said calmly. “I am here as the project’s chief counsel. I not only have the consortium’s interests at heart; I also want to protect you.”

“Bullshit.”

Regina did not respond to Elizabeth’s outburst, but continued in a calm, firm voice.

“The police have told us that Gilbert Baca confessed to stealing and selling our intellectual property, and that is very much our business. I need for you to give us any information about it that you have discovered.”

She stared at Elizabeth, as if looking for agreement. Elizabeth returned the stare, but said nothing. Regina continued.

“As far as Ed’s murder is concerned, I talk to Lieutenant Rodriguez on a daily basis, and he is keeping me informed of all relevant developments. I know Gil Baca has denied involvement in the killing in his suicide note, and I know the investigation is continuing. I will do nothing to interfere with your work for the police, but I need – I expect – your cooperation on the theft of our property.”

“I disagree,” Robert interrupted.

“Oh?” Regina challenged him.

“We can’t just worry about our intellectual property and ignore a murder and a suicide. We have to worry about the effect on employee morale and our public image.”

Robert glanced at Elizabeth, then turned back to Regina.

“This could affect our very survival,” he emphasized.

“Robert,” Elizabeth interrupted, “two men are dead. I don’t feel like helping you spin this.”

He leaned forward, folded his hands on the table, and looked directly at her.

“Maybe you need to think about putting this behind you.”

“Oh?”

“I can see you’re getting too involved. You’re taking this way beyond my original intent.”

“Your original intent?” she repeated sharply, stressing the word ‘your.’

“Yes. Your job was to turn data over to the police. Not to start your own investigation.”

Elizabeth said nothing for several moments, clearly struggling to control her temper.

“Robert, you may sign my paycheck,” she said finally, “but my participation in this investigation is between the police and me. Victor Rodriguez is the only person who can end it.”

“I wonder if you’ll even listen to him,” Robert said, leaning back in his chair and staring at her.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she snapped.

“Elizabeth,” he said patiently, as if repeating a mathematics lesson to a child. “Gilbert Baca had a motive: he wanted to keep his role in the information theft a secret. He was here the night Ed Walters was killed. He acted strangely afterwards, not even coming to work for several days. Now, he kills himself the night after Ed’s funeral. I think it’s obvious he killed Ed Walters, and then took his own life out of guilt.”

“And he admitted to the theft in his suicide note, but denies any involvement in the murder. Why would he admit to one crime and lie about another?”

“Don’t be naive,” Robert shook his head. “He lied to protect his family. Murder would shame them much more than his stealing a few papers. Besides, why shouldn’t he lie? He wouldn’t have to face the consequences.”

“You cynical bastard,” Elizabeth said angrily.

Robert turned color, and started to his feet. He stopped himself and sat down slowly, glaring at her.

“Be quiet, both of you,” Regina stood up, put her hands on the small conference table and leaned toward them.

“I know you have personal history . . .” she said sharply.

Elizabeth laughed.

“That is not relevant . . .” Robert interrupted.

“Both of you,” Regina snapped in an angry staccato, “shut up and let me finish.”

Robert’s skin deepened color. She glared at him. He returned the stare, but said nothing.

Regina spoke directly to him. “I am responsible for this company’s relationship with the police during this situation. I will decide what help it provides and who provides it.”

“Regina . . .” Robert protested.

“Be quiet and listen,” the attorney interrupted.

Robert started to his feet, but stopped suddenly. His face slackened into the startled paralysis of a man who’d been slapped.

She turned to Elizabeth.

“I’ve stayed clear of you throughout this investigation. I’ve done nothing to interfere with your work for the police, and at this time, I have no intention of doing so. Now, I want you to help me.”

Elizabeth returned her stare. Neither woman spoke nor looked away. Regina continued talking, as if Robert was not in the room.

“Victor Rodriguez and Bruce Kaminsky are meeting with me later this morning. I am going to ask them about their plans for the murder investigation, and I am going to ask them to release any information regarding Gilbert Baca’s theft of our property. When we are done, I will ask

them to tell you what we agreed, and I expect your full cooperation. Do you understand?"

Elizabeth continued staring at her. After a moment, she nodded.

Regina turned and spoke to Robert.

"When I am finished with the police, you and I will discuss the steps we must take to protect the project. Do you understand?" she said, stressing the word 'you.'

Robert said nothing.

"Do you understand?" Regina repeated sharply.

"Yes," he said, "but I want this ended."

He looked purposefully at Elizabeth. She ignored him, and spoke directly to the attorney.

"I'll get you a report as soon as I speak to Lieutenant Rodriguez."

"Thank, you," Regina said.

Elizabeth turned to face Robert Hill.

"Robert, spin this one without me. May I go?"

He turned his chair away from her to face the window, and stared out at the mountains.

"Be careful, Elizabeth," he warned. "Don't try me."

Elizabeth left Robert's office and closed the door behind her. As she started across the open space toward the stairs, she saw Peter Martinelli look up from a conversation he was having with one of the secretaries. He stared past her into the window beside Robert's door. She turned and looked inside. Robert and Regina were arguing vigorously, but she could not hear what they were saying. She turned back toward Peter. He returned her glance, and then went back to his conversation.

Elizabeth heard a knock on her doorframe and looked up from her work. She saw Bruce and Victor outside in the hall, and invited them in.

“How are you doing?” Bruce asked as he sat down. Victor crossed the hall to find an extra chair.

“Better, thanks,” she answered. “I guess Victor told you I took Gil’s death pretty hard?”

“He never tells me anything,” Bruce said smiling.

His expression softened into one of concern.

“We’ve been worried about you,” he admitted.

“Thanks, Bruce. I’m all right.”

Victor returned with a chair and closed the door behind him.

“Pops,” Elizabeth said, “privacy.”

“We’ve just spoken with Regina Martinelli,” Victor said. “She asked me to have you prepare a report on the information theft.”

“What about the murder investigation? What about Gil Baca?” Elizabeth asked.

“There are a few things we need to discuss . . .” Victor began.

“What do you mean?”

“What he’s trying to say is all hell’s broken loose downtown,” Bruce answered.

“What are you talking about?”

“As if this building and its technology weren’t causing enough publicity,” Victor explained, “Gilbert Baca’s suicide makes two deaths in one case.”

Elizabeth sat back in her chair and scanned the detective's faces.

"We're coming under pressure to wrap this up," Bruce said. There was no evidence of the humor that usually underscored his remarks.

"Pressure? What kind of pressure?"

"We've got an unsolved murder," Bruce explained, "a suicide and, any day now, a major scandal about high level corporate espionage is going to hit the papers – I expect it may even make CNN. We're not only dealing with our own superiors, the DA and the mayor, but the Governor and the office of economic development are extremely unhappy."

"So that's the end of it," Elizabeth said angrily. "Gil Baca's dead, he can't deny it, he . . ."

She turned slightly in the chair and crossed her legs in an unconscious gesture of self-control.

"Try to calm down," Victor interrupted. "This is still our investigation."

"It seems like everyone's telling me to calm down."

Victor ignored the remark. "Elizabeth," he began, "I want you to listen carefully."

He paused and made eye contact with her.

"The first thing you need to know is that the FBI is getting involved in the theft of your intellectual property. It's no longer a local problem: it involves interstate commerce."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"The information theft belongs with the FBI," Victor explained, "and I'm happy to see them take it. It involves at least half a dozen Fortune 500 companies, and crosses more state lines than I can count. I'm just a city cop."

"From the valley," Bruce added.

His partner gave him a pained look, and he shrugged.

“I need for you to gather up everything you have on the theft,” Victor told her.

“What about the stalking?” she interrupted. “What about Ed’s wife? His family?”

“I know you want to protect them,” Victor said. “If possible, so do we. Now, I would like for you to prepare a report on the stolen intellectual property. You do not need to mention Ed Walters and Regina Martinelli, but I want you to include everything you’ve learned about the theft: the full account of Walters’ investigation, the installation of Gil Baca’s CD drive, and all supporting evidence. I want electronic and paper copies. Give it to Bruce and me, and we will pass it on to Mrs. Martinelli and the FBI.”

“And the stalking?” she pressed.

“For the time being, I want that to remain part of our investigation,” Victor said.

He saw the relief in her face.

“What if they ask me about it?” she asked.

“If the FBI asks you anything, answer them truthfully and completely.” Victor paused a moment. “But I don’t think that’s likely to happen. Bruce and I will give them the report, so you won’t have to talk with them right away. After a few days, they may contact you with follow up questions, but I wouldn’t worry.”

“And then what?” she asked.

“Elizabeth, I won’t lie. Some people do want to blame Ed’s death on Gil Baca and be done with it. As far as I know, they may be right.”

She began to protest. Victor held up his hand and she stopped.

“But I can promise you that Bruce and I will complete our investigation – thoroughly and impartially. Right now, our top priority is Ed Walters’

stalking of Regina Martinelli. Do you have anything on who gave him control of Regina's camera?"

She shook her head. "I haven't worked on it since you told me about Gil."

"Elizabeth," Victor said, "Gil Baca's death does change things. A lot of people are watching us. I've been asked – I've been told to bring our computer people in."

She tried – and failed – to hide her disappointment.

"You said it would take time – days or weeks – to explain your systems to an outsider?" Victor asked.

"I'm sorry, but I believe that is correct."

"I need to act quickly," he said.

She realized what Victor was about to tell her. She said nothing.

"How long will it take you to find who rigged the disk if you work alone?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I've run into problems . . ."

"We can only stall for a little while," he interrupted. "Can you get us something in a day or two?"

Elizabeth took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"Yes," she said simply.

CHAPTER 25

Elizabeth stood in the building's small kitchen, holding the refrigerator door open with one hand, and staring at the leftover rice and vegetables she held in the other.

Since Victor and Bruce had left her office the day before, she'd done little but search for Ed's access to Regina's camera. She'd used every bit of technology, logic and psychology she could think of to untangle the possibilities. She'd started by looking for unauthorized software on the computers near Ed's office, computers he could have accessed both easily and inconspicuously. Finding nothing, she'd searched machines around the systems lab, under the assumption that his accomplice was Wayne Ballard or his assistants, hoping they might have been careless enough to work on their own computer. In spite of the multitude of home-grown tools on their machines, she'd found nothing that could access Regina's camera. She'd even theorized that Ed's accomplice may have placed the software on the computer that served Regina Martinelli's own office, acting out of malice or some twisted irony. She'd found nothing. She'd worked until the guard had left, following him out into the cold, and returning before dawn to start again. So far, she had found nothing. Elizabeth stared at last night's leftovers, and remembered dragging

herself home to an unhappy cat and a late, unsatisfying supper of rice with steamed cabbage and onions – the sole remaining contents of her refrigerator. She opened the microwave, and set the container inside.

“Isn’t it a little late for lunch?”

She turned and saw Robert Hill standing in the doorway.

“What’s up, Robert?” she asked, setting the timer and starting the oven.

“I want to apologize – if you’ll let me.”

“For what?”

“Yesterday morning. I was out of line.”

“Forget it,” she reassured him. “This is affecting all of us.”

He nodded toward the microwave. “I was hoping you’d let me take you to lunch – as a peace offering.” He sniffed the air and smiled. “I think I can offer something better than nuked cabbage.”

“I don’t think I can,” she said in a tired voice.

“Hasn’t it been long enough?” he said softly. “I know I’ve given you plenty of reasons to be angry, but can’t we move on? Especially now, with all that’s happened?”

“Can we have this conversation some other time? I really am busy.”

“Maybe a beer and some enchiladas will clear your mind,” he suggested. “You can’t accomplish much when you’re hungry and tired.”

“Not today.”

“Sure,” he shrugged. “Maybe another time.”

He turned to leave.

Elizabeth looked at the rice and vegetables sitting in the microwave. She thought of the hours of work that probably lay ahead of her, and the futility of her efforts so far. She needed to step back, find a fresh approach.

“Casa Blanca?” she asked.

He turned and smiled. “Where else?” he confirmed.

She returned the rice and vegetables to the refrigerator. “You are easier to face than these damned leftovers.”

He shrugged. “Well, that’s a start.”

Casa Blanca was located near Kirtland Air Force Base in an old, white adobe house on a side street off Central Avenue. It was a particularly desolate stretch of the city’s often desolate main street, and the comfortable cafe seemed out of place among the mobile home yards, the garages, and the rock and roll and country & western bars waiting with vast, empty parking lots for night and crowds to come.

Robert took a short cut across Kirtland Air Force Base. Elizabeth sat in his silver BMW, watching the last few leaves fall from the elm trees growing along the neat, wide streets. She wasn’t sure why she had agreed to join him, except for a desire to get out of the office and clear her head, a preference for green chile over leftovers, and more than a little curiosity about what he really wanted. They talked little during the drive.

The cafe was open Monday through Friday, from 11:00 AM until 7:00 PM. No one who understood the economics of businesses near the Air Force Base thought its early closing time odd. Casa Blanca had a line at the door when it opened, and a steady clientele all afternoon. Business peaked again when Sandia Labs and the base’s civilian employees got off work at five, and filled the tables with people grabbing a quick dinner on their way to a night class at the university, or with engineers meeting on the way home to finish some technical discussion over beer and nachos. The smaller tables filled with the newly divorced, the soon-to-be divorced, and the permanently divorced enjoying a dinner they did not have to cook themselves. By six-thirty, they’d

all cleared out and gone home. The evening crowd, the Saturday night crowd, people going on dates, or having a leisurely dinner before a movie or concert, drove to the nicer parts of town. It would have made little sense to stay open later.

They reached Casa Blanca well after the lunch rush. That, along with Robert's popularity among the restaurant staff, guaranteed that they would have their pick of tables. Robert believed no one visiting Albuquerque should be allowed to leave without a taste of their chile, and, because the consortium drew a lot of visitors, he'd become one of the small cafe's most treasured customers.

The owner, whom Elizabeth knew only as Henry, was a handsome man in his sixties. When they entered, he smiled broadly and hurried toward them with his arms outspread.

"Doctor Hill, it's good to see you. And beautiful Elizabeth, it's been too long," he said warmly, taking her hand and kissing her cheek.

If Henry knew they had broken up, he did not let it show. "How about a table in the sun room?"

"Yes, Henry, thank you." Robert clearly enjoyed the attention.

Casa Blanca's owner escorted them to a table on the back porch. When Henry and his family had converted the old house to a restaurant, they'd glassed in the porch and filled it with plants, Mexican and Native American pottery, and antique glass. The porch looked out on a terrace surrounded by a neat lawn, flowerbeds, and a fountain that drew birds all summer long. Now, the tables and chairs that had filled the terrace in warmer weather were stacked against the wall. The colorful umbrellas stood folded in a corner, and the fountain had been drained, but the porch was still a nice place to be on a sunny winter afternoon. The waitress brought chips and salsa, and took their drink orders. Robert asked for a bottle of Corona, and Elizabeth ordered iced tea.

"Why don't you have a beer, or a margarita?" he suggested, smiling. "I won't tell the boss."

“No thanks,” she said, “I have a lot to do when I get back.”

The waitress nodded and returned to the kitchen. Elizabeth felt the sun on the side of her face, and started to relax.

“I meant it back there when I apologized,” Robert began.

“I know,” she acknowledged, breaking off a corner of a corn chip and dipping it in the bright red salsa. “This has been stressful for all of us.”

“Regina put me in my place after you left,” he said.

She nodded. “I saw you arguing.”

“I’m sorry about Gil. He was my friend, too.”

“It’s OK, Robert.”

She was relieved to see the waitress return with her tea and Robert’s beer, her order pad at ready. She was the same older woman who always waited on them, a career waitress who wore the peasant blouse and flounced skirt with genuine dignity. Elizabeth ordered cheese enchiladas.

“Red or green?” the waitress asked.

The question was so common in New Mexican restaurants that the governor and legislature, in a rare show of bi-partisanship, had proclaimed it the official state question. Elizabeth asked for the green chile. Robert asked for a carne adovada burrito with red. The waitress wrote down their order, motioned like a drill sergeant to the busboy for more chips and salsa, and walked briskly back to the kitchen.

“So why did you bring me here?” Elizabeth asked.

He smiled and shook his head.

“You always get to the point,” he said. “You know, I miss that.”

He poured the Corona carefully down the side of the glass.

“I guess I’m just worried about you,” he said.

She nodded, then broke off another corner of a corn chip, and ate it with a thin coating of salsa.

“Gil’s death hit me pretty hard,” she acknowledged.

“You weren’t responsible.”

She shrugged.

“I am worried about you,” he repeated. “You’re working too hard on this.”

“It shouldn’t be much longer,” she said, thinking of the limited time Victor had given her, and questioning her decision to break for lunch.

“Can you tell me what you’re working on?” he asked.

“I can’t really talk about it. The police have some questions, I’m trying to answer them,” she said carefully.

“I won’t pry,” he reassured her. “But are you optimistic? Do you think they will find Ed’s killer soon?”

“Are you coming under pressure?” she asked.

He nodded. “The consortium wants this off the six o’clock news. ASAP.”

“What are they threatening to do?” she asked.

“It hasn’t reached the threat stage, yet. They’re still relying on vague intimidation,” he said, smiling ironically.

Involuntarily, she returned the smile. “All I can say is that Victor is under as much pressure as you, and he’s doing all he can.”

He nodded and took a long drink of his beer, then looked at her for several moments.

“You know what this project means to me,” he said softly.

She sipped her tea.

“Of course I do. We lived together for a year.”

“It wasn’t a bad year,” he said.

“Are you really worried about what the board might do?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Of course. You know how conservative they are. This publicity is giving them some serious heartburn.”

“You’ve kept them in line before.”

“Yeah, but this is different.”

Robert took another sip of his beer.

“Elizabeth,” he said, “I know there’s been friction between us. I know most of it is my fault. But now, we have to think of the project. It’s not about my personal ambition. You know that. Our work is too important to let some corporate board kill it. No one is doing anything remotely like this. No one is looking at the human effects of technology to the extent we are. They’re all worried about the money, the next big thing – the next killer app,” he said, his eyes growing big and his voice rising in a parody of Silicon Valley hyperbole.

Elizabeth nodded. She was familiar with Robert’s odd idealism, the way his naive faith in their work’s potential for good co-existed with his personal ambition. She remembered him fighting the board of directors to keep funding alive for Jen’s work on computer sensing of emotions, just as she remembered the cold efficiency with which he killed a half dozen other projects – including one of her own – as part of a deal with the same people.

Out of the corner of her eye, Elizabeth saw the waitress bring their food, and leaned back to avoid the sizzling, nearly overflowing stoneware. She cut off a portion of enchiladas and blew on it for a moment, then took it carefully off the fork. She chewed and closed her eyes, feeling the chile’s addictive blend of pain and sweetness, savoring it against the earthy background of corn tortillas and the cheese’s sharp reassurance.

Robert neatly cut a piece of his burrito and chewed it thoughtfully.

“Remember that Internet conference I went to a few months ago?” he asked.
“Remember the keynote speaker?”

Elizabeth nodded. The speaker was an Internet billionaire who was as familiar to the average computer owner as Mickey Mouse.

“All he could talk about was how we’re ‘re-wiring the nervous system of the planet.’” Robert said, parodying the self-styled visionary.

“Sure, we’re re-wiring it,” he went on. “We’re laying enough fiber to circle the planet a thousand times, and putting up enough satellites to block out the sun. But, what’s the planet supposed to think about? Online shopping? Stock quotes? Sending grandma snapshots of the kids? Pornography?”

She smiled.

“We can do better,” Robert said softly.

“I know.”

“He was right about one thing,” Robert said. “He said that by combining all the minds on this planet, we could think brand new thoughts, new kinds of thoughts. Someday, the human race will conceive of ideas that would be as unthinkable to us as the Internet would be to a Neanderthal.”

She took another bite of her enchilada and let him talk. It was a diatribe she’d heard often. She half listened and enjoyed the food.

“A group of people working together, with the right information, the right goals, the right coordination, is smarter than any of the individuals in it. It’s smarter than the sum of the individuals. Think about a jazz band,” he said, smiling.

He paused and waited for her response.

“I haven’t heard that one,” she said ironically.

It was a comparison Elizabeth had first used in one of her own talks, and Robert had quickly made it his own, shamelessly adding it to the standard presentation he gave industry visitors.

“Well, I thought you might enjoy hearing it again,” he said, “but it still makes you think. A good band is a lot more than the sum of the people in it. Where is that added knowledge? It isn’t in the minds of the individuals. It’s in their interactions, in the structure of their relationships. The band knows things that none of its members could match by themselves.”

He looked at her until she nodded her agreement.

“It’s all about patterns of relationships. A human brain is more than a bunch of neurons,” he continued. “A neuron is just a switch; it has no intelligence. Adding them up does nothing. It’s the structure of the brain – the relations between neurons – that matters. Intelligence isn’t in the nerves, it’s in the way the nerves organize themselves, and the organization of the nerves is shaped by our experiences, by our community.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I know,” she said.

He smiled at her, then took a large bite of the burrito and chewed slowly, washing it down with his beer.

“Just throwing fiber across the planet and filling it up with smut and stolen rock-and-roll won’t take us anywhere,” he said. “We won’t achieve that potential if all we do is follow the money. Someone has to think about something better.”

“There are other research labs, universities . . .”

Her voice trailed off without enthusiasm. She knew he was right about the project’s uniqueness, and did not feel like playing the devil’s advocate.

“No one even comes close to us,” he said matter-of-factly. “That building is living proof of everything we believe. Look at the ideas, the papers, the patents coming out of a hundred or so people inside it. What will happen if we can do that for the entire human race?”

She took a forkful of beans, swirled them in the chile, and chewed the sharp mixture thoughtfully.

“It’s not that simple, Robert. Not anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“This last week. Ed’s murder – his . . .”

She stopped. She had almost mentioned Ed Walters’ stalking of Regina Martinelli.

“– his discovery of the information theft, Gil’s suicide . . .”

“I know it’s been hard,” Robert sympathized. “But we can’t forget why we’re doing this.”

“It goes too deep for that, Robert. You know I’ve never fully shared your vision. Now . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“We thought we could build something new, a brand new kind of community – we thought we could re-engineer human nature. This isn’t some technical problem or software bug. People are using our software – our software,” she repeated, “to steal, and kill and God knows what else.”

“None of that invalidates the potential.”

“Are you so certain?” she challenged. “Look what’s going on. I don’t know who killed Ed or why. I don’t know why Gil did what he did. I can’t give you a logical reason why the entire project is paralyzed with gossip about it. The problems are inside us,” she said, searching for the right phrase. “We evolved over millions of years of struggling in the wilderness to survive.” She paused. “To climb to the top of the tribe, to be the alpha ape. People are not going to change because of an intelligent building, or on-line meetings or agent systems or . . .”

“I don’t believe in some deep, controlling human nature,” he interrupted. “We’re not slaves to our genes,” he repeated. “We can be anything we decide to be. Ed was a setback . . .”

“It’s more than a setback,” she argued. “Maybe we’ve gotten so full of ourselves, our damned technical cleverness, that we’ve forgotten the human needs behind it all.”

“Damnit, Elizabeth, I know we can’t program human community into a computer – we’re not trying to. We’re just trying to help people communicate.”

“But, all this technology makes us think we can control everything. Maybe we need to be reminded that there is something in all this we can’t control.”

“That’s my point,” he said. “There’s always risk, but we can’t stop believing in ourselves, in our vision. Every undertaking – every relationship involves a leap of faith.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Vision, faith . . . Lovely words. But we can’t just believe things because we want them to be true.”

“When did you get so cynical?” he said sadly.

“When I grew up.”

He nodded, then took a long drink of beer, and stared out the window at the brown lawn and empty fountain. They ate quietly, gradually returning to what would have seemed like an ordinary conversation among the engineers that frequented Casa Blanca. They talked about the business of the project, about software and staffing problems and conference papers. They made no explicit mention of the investigation again.

The waitress saw them finish their food, and came to the table. Robert smiled up at her.

“It was wonderful, as usual,” he said.

“Dessert?” she asked.

“No thanks,” he answered.

Elizabeth shook her head.

The waitress pulled her pad out of an apron pocket, and placed the check on the table between them. Robert handed her his credit card without looking at the bill, and watched her leave.

He stared at Elizabeth for a long time. “I know we don’t always agree, but I love talking to you, I love watching your mind work . . .”

“Robert, don’t,” she said firmly.

He reached across the table and placed his hand on hers.

“I’ve missed you,” he said gently.

She neither pulled her hand away nor responded to his touch.

“Why did you lie to me?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“About Regina Martinelli.”

Robert did not answer, but pulled his hand away, and stared out the window for several moments.

“Who told you that?” he asked.

“Never mind,” she said. “Why did you lie?”

He picked up the empty beer bottle, and scraped at the label with his thumbnail for a moment.

“Maybe it’s one of those weaknesses you said are so much a part of us,” he said finally. “I wanted to protect the project. If Peter had found out . . .”

“Why didn’t you think of that before you started fucking his wife?” she interrupted in a sharp whisper.

He shook his head. “What do you want me to say?”

He caught his voice raising and stopped. He glanced at the only other people on the porch, a young couple sitting across the room. They continued eating and talking as though they hadn’t noticed.

“God, you’re so self righteous,” he finished in an angry whisper.

“Why did you lie to me?” she repeated.

“You lay this on me in public, in a damned restaurant – what do you expect me to do? Get down on my knees?”

Elizabeth found herself wanting to laugh. She remembered the night he had supposedly made a “clean breast” of his affairs – over dessert in an overpriced bistro near the University. She remembered sitting there for what seemed like hours while he finished his tort and coffee. She remembered following him into the parking lot, slapping him across the face, and walking back to the bistro to call a cab. She spent the night at Jen’s. The next day Elizabeth had rented her small house, while Jen had driven to her gym and returned with a truck and four of her admirers, all part time movers and full time body-builders. They had moved all of her possessions – including the piano – before Robert came home from work.

“It’s over,” she said firmly. “That’s all.”

“Don’t think I haven’t regretted everything everyday. I was a shit, and a fool, and I lost you.”

“Enough,” she asserted, staring into his eyes. “It just won’t work anymore.”

He returned her stare briefly, then turned and looked out the window at the silent fountain.

Robert parked his silver BMW in his reserved spot, and escorted Elizabeth across the green glass walled lobby. They stopped at the base of the stairs.

“I guess its time to get back to work,” he said, looking past her up the staircase.

She nodded. “Thanks for lunch.”

He climbed the stairs that curved around behind the guard desk. Elizabeth watched him disappear at the top. She started back to her office, trying to compose her thoughts, to put the lunch’s emotions out of her mind, and find some new strategy for pruning away the complexity of the building’s invisible infrastructure.

“Pops, messages?” she asked as she entered her office.

“Lieutenant Victor Rodriguez called at 1:30.”

“Pops, play it.”

She heard Victor’s voice from the speakers in her office, asking her to call him at his office. She phoned the detective, and heard him answer.

“Victor, it’s Elizabeth Florczyk. I got your message.”

“I just wanted to check in and see if you’ve found anything.”

“No,” she said.

The frustration and disappointment she’d felt that morning returned.

“I’m sorry,” she added, “but I just don’t know what I’m missing.”

“What do you mean?” Victor asked.

She explained the vast complexity of the building systems and the difficulty of searching the computers one at a time.

“It sounds like the usual detective work,” he said, hiding his disappointment behind an encouraging tone of voice.

“I don’t know. Usually, when I debug software, I start to see a pattern after a while. I get ideas where to look,” she explained. “That hasn’t happened.”

“Maybe this is different than a bug,” he said.

“How?”

She heard him laugh.

“Listen to me,” he said, “telling a Ph.D. about computers, but, aren’t software bugs hard to find because they’re random?”

“This is hard to find because someone hid it,” she finished the thought.

“And people tend to hide things in predictable ways.”

She smiled. “I’ve tried to think like Ed and his accomplice. So far, no luck.”

“Keep trying,” he said. “I can give you another day, not much more.”

“I understand,” she said. “Victor . . .”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

She took a breath. “I feel like I need to do this.”

“Why?” he asked.

The question took her by surprise, and she said nothing.

“I hope it isn’t guilt over Gil Baca’s suicide?” he pressed.

“Oh, partly. But, it’s more like . . .” She struggled for the right words. “I helped build this community. I need to understand what went wrong.”

He did not respond immediately, and she tried to imagine his expression on the other end of the phone line.

“Elizabeth,” he said finally, “you may never understand. Try not to get too involved. Just find out who rigged that camera, and then put it behind you.”

“I’ll try,” she said.

She thanked him, and said good-by. For a long time, she sat quietly in front of the large monitor, trying to plan her next attack on the increasingly intractable maze of the building’s software. She neither touched her mouse and keyboard, nor called on Pops, but simply sat, as if trying to hear some hidden order in complexity of the systems surrounding her. After a few minutes, she turned and stared out her window toward the mountains, then continued sitting motionless, intent. Finally, she looked up and spoke in a slightly louder voice than normal.

“Pops,” she began, “locate Jen . . .” she stopped in the middle of the request.

“I couldn’t hear what you were saying, honey,” the walls answered with Louis Armstrong’s voice and another of her summer student’s jokes.

“Pops, cancel that.”

Elizabeth walked down the hall to Jen’s office. She found her friend working alone.

“Libby, what’s up?” Jen asked.

“Not much,” she answered in a normal voice.

Elizabeth leaned over and whispered in her friend’s ear.

“I need your help. Can you get Thomas and meet me in the parking lot?”

CHAPTER 26

Victor poured the Newcastle Brown Ale down the side of his glass, set the bottle on the wooden table top and took a long sip. He waited until Bruce looked down from the football highlights playing on the nearest of the half-dozen televisions that lined the perimeter of the bar.

“I thought this was going to be easy,” Victor said to his partner.

“You mean like some Ph.D. cold-cocks a pal over an experiment, then breaks down and confesses when we walk into his office?”

“Something like that.”

Bruce shrugged and took a long drink of his Coors. They’d spent the day in their offices, going over their interview notes, the forensics results and the computer data Elizabeth had given them. They’d found little of interest. Bruce had promised to meet his girlfriend at the bar at six, and had persuaded Victor to join him early in the hope a beer and a change of scene might loosen some insight. They’d arrived just as the bar started filling up with young lawyers, bankers and brokers. They were early enough to find a table with a good view of the TV screens and the pretty young women in

expensive clothes entering in twos and threes, talking and laughing about money, sex and power. The change of scene had improved their mood, but done little for the investigation.

The preliminary forensics report had shown no trace of Edward Walters' killer. There was no hair or skin under the dead man's nails, no blood splatters on his clothes, no cloth or fibers. They'd found fingerprints from nearly all of his colleagues on the furniture and doorframe. The autopsy had revealed nothing except to confirm that he had been struck in the face several times and died when the base of his skull struck the corner of his desk. That left them with little more than the building's computer records. In spite of everything that Elizabeth Florczyk had given them, they had failed to find a pattern, some story that would tie all the data together into an explanation of a possibly entwined murder, stalking, theft and suicide.

"How are you doing with the Gil Baca thing?" Bruce asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You know – with him knowing your dad and all?"

Victor shrugged. "He knew my dad, not me."

Bruce said nothing, but took a sip of his beer and waited.

Victor watched a particularly attractive pair of young women enter the bar and pass near his table. Both were brunettes; one of them reminded him of Regina Martinelli.

"It's not the kind of thing that makes me love my job," Victor admitted.

He took another sip of the Newcastle.

"He was just some ordinary guy that – I don't know, got greedy, got frustrated with his life," Victor continued. "He did a stupid thing, and he kills himself over it. Hell, he probably wouldn't even have gone to jail. I don't like it, but I've seen worse. I'm OK."

The two brunettes had taken a table near them and were laughing over martinis. They self-consciously sipped from the art-deco stemware, as if they were enjoying the symbol of sophistication more than the gin. Victor glanced at them and smiled.

“Victor,” Bruce said after a moment, “I’m worried about Elizabeth Florczyk.”

“Why?”

“She’s not a cop. She shouldn’t be in this.”

“We’ve worked with outside experts before. We do it all the time.”

“She’s not an outside expert, she’s one of them.”

Victor shook his head. “The only expert we’re going to get on those systems is one of them.”

“Look, I don’t think she killed Ed Walters, or that she’d deliberately try to cover up any evidence, but these people are her friends – hell, Robert Hill was her lover.”

Victor nodded.

“How can we expect her to be objective?” Bruce insisted. “How do we know she won’t overlook something that might incriminate one of her friends?”

“We don’t,” Victor shrugged and took a long sip of his beer. “What makes any of us objective? We all have our biases.”

“Come on Victor.”

“No, I’m serious. That’s why we work in teams. So we can draw on different points of view. That’s why we follow certain procedures. Elizabeth isn’t the only person looking at this case, and I need her perspective.”

“You’ve been saying that. What has she found?”

“I know it’s going slowly, but suppose we do bring our people in? They couldn’t make it go any faster. And, they might see some piece of evidence

and overlook it because they don't really understand what it means, because they don't know the background of the person who said it, the reasons behind it."

"What if she misses something? She's not trained."

Victor shrugged. "I have a feeling." He paused and waited for the groan that almost always came from his partner when he talked about his intuitions. It did not come. "Look," he continued. "We will have our computer guys go over the CDs, the backup tapes, but if we're going to get something quickly, she's our best shot. Our guys will take weeks to figure out these systems. Even then, you know their workload. Unless we can give them some idea of what to look for, they'd never have time to go through all those tapes."

Bruce nodded slowly. "Fucking city budget."

He took a long drink of his beer.

Victor smiled. "There's more than that. She knows the people, the culture."

Bruce smiled. "I seem to remember some old guy talking to my academy class about that."

He dropped his voice several steps and recited: "Don't just look at the evidence; place it in the context of people's motivations, relationships and culture."

Victor shrugged. "If you want to understand what's in people's heads, you have to think about those things. An insider can help." He took a swallow of beer. "And I'm not some old guy."

"Well," Bruce said, "I'll give you one thing. These people are different."

He looked up toward the bar's entrance. A tall, athletic blonde in navy-blue slacks and a cream colored silk blouse walked through the door, paused and looked around the bar. She smiled when she saw Bruce and Victor, and walked briskly toward them.

"Hi Barbara," Victor said, standing up to greet Bruce's friend.

“Victor,” she said. She hugged him warmly, and kissed him on the cheek. She turned and kissed Bruce on the lips. Victor brought her a chair from a nearby table, and she sat down.

“Why are you still hanging out with this yahoo?” Victor asked.

She smiled. “Cause all the good ones are married.”

The waitress came to their table. Bruce ordered a round for himself and Barbara.

“Can I buy you another one of those yuppie beers?” he asked his partner.

Victor measured the Newcastle that still half-filled his glass, and shook his head. He sat with Bruce and Barbara and worked through the last of his beer, letting the conversation turn from the investigation to sports, jokes and gossip. He tried to put Elizabeth Florczyk, Gil Baca and the increasingly frustrating circumstances of Ed Walters’ death out of his mind. After a few minutes, he drained his glass, kissed Barbara on the cheek and started home.

CHAPTER 27

Elizabeth leaned against the kitchen counter, waiting for the coffee to brew. She looked up at the clock: it was already after 8:00, PM.

That afternoon, on a slow, cold walk around the parking lot, she'd told Thomas and Jen the story of Ed's investigation of the information theft, the evidence she'd found against Gil Baca, the circumstances of his suicide and, finally, Ed Walters' dark, lonely obsession. As she had expected, they'd agreed to help her find the source of Ed's access to Regina's camera. Thomas acted like she'd invited him to a party. In spite of Victor's request that she work alone, and her lingering doubts about involving her friends, Elizabeth knew they were her best hope of unraveling the tangle of Ed Walters' disturbing history.

"Is the coffee ready?"

Elizabeth looked up and saw Jen in the doorway.

"Hi, Jen. A few minutes, still."

Her friend walked in and leaned against the counter across from her. Jen was wearing black bell-bottom jeans and a vintage Janis Joplin T-shirt she'd

found in a used clothing store near the university. Elizabeth remembered when the styles were not emblems of retro-chic, and smiled.

“I saw you were here, so I thought I’d join you,” Jen said. “I figured there’d be caffeine.”

“How’s it going?”

Jen shook her head. “Nothing. You?”

“Nothing.”

Elizabeth checked the coffee pot. It was only a quarter full.

“Jen, I’m starting to wonder if this was a good idea.”

“The night is young. We’ll find something . . .”

“It’s not that.”

“Are you worried about the police?” Jen probed. “I get the impression they may not be too happy about this.”

Elizabeth frowned and nodded. “I am stretching Victor’s trust.”

“Stretching?”

“OK, breaking. I’m still not sure how I’m going to deal with that – I guess I’ll just tell him I needed help.” She paused for a moment. “But, it’s more than that. I’m worried about you and Thomas. You don’t need this.”

“We’re doing fine. Besides, I knew Ed and Gil, too.”

“Will, I appreciate it,” she said reluctantly. “How’s Thomas?”

“He’s happy as a clam. He’s got a problem, a computer and no one’s bothering him. I didn’t even ask him if he wanted to break for coffee. I doubt he’d have heard me.”

“Is it just me,” Elizabeth asked, “or did I notice something different between you two the other night?”

Jen smiled. “Different,” she confirmed.

“Serious different?”

“Maybe. Right now, it’s mostly fun different.”

“So, how is it dating a younger man?”

“Come on, Libby. Five years? I’m not exactly robbing the cradle.”

“I guess I still think of him as a kid,” Elizabeth said.

“There’s more to him than you might think . . .”

“I know.”

“. . . and, he’s really sweet,” Jen added.

The smile on Jen’s face reminded Elizabeth that she was little more than a kid herself.

“You should find a sweet man,” Jen said in a serious voice.

“I’ve had sweet men.”

“Robert wasn’t sweet.”

Elizabeth shook her head, and checked the coffee maker’s progress.

“No, he wasn’t sweet,” she admitted. “Sometimes, I don’t understand what I ever saw in him.”

“You mean besides looks, charm, brains, money and power?”

Elizabeth smiled and shrugged. “There’s something I didn’t tell you.”

“Oh?”

“In the course of going through Ed’s data – the stuff about Regina – I found out they had an affair.”

“No. Robert and Regina?”

Jen held her stomach, groaning and laughing simultaneously.

“It hurts even to think about it,” she said. “How’d they ever get past their power struggles long enough to do anything? I can see them arguing all night over who gets to be on top.”

“Apparently, they worked it out,” Elizabeth said ironically.

“Sorry.”

Elizabeth shrugged.

“Does Peter know?” Jen asked.

“I’m not sure. Yesterday, Robert and Regina were fighting in his office, and I saw Peter looking in. He had a funny expression on his face, but I don’t know if it meant anything.”

“Knowing Peter,” Jen said, “he was probably hoping they’d kill each other so he could get Robert’s job and Regina’s Mercedes. So, how has Robert been behaving?”

“I had lunch with him this afternoon.”

“I know. How’d it go?”

“Oh, he was fine – mostly. He got a little weird at the end – started telling me how much he missed me . . .”

“I assume you told him to fuck off?”

“Basically, although I lack your poetic flair. I confronted him about Regina.”

“And?”

“The expected: rationalizations, accusations, manipulation . . .”

“The stages of grief, Robert Hill style.”

Elizabeth laughed, and then checked the coffee pot. It was over half full, and she pulled it out of the coffee maker, sliding her cup under the still flowing

liquid. She filled Jen's mug, then her own and slipped the pot back under the dark stream. It was a maneuver she'd performed often, and only a few drops hit the burner, sizzling briefly. Elizabeth took a sip of her coffee, and both women stood quietly. After a moment, Jen broke the silence.

"Maybe Robert killed Ed. They didn't exactly get along."

"You know," Elizabeth said, "I think about that from time to time, but I can't see the motive."

"You mean, besides hating each other?"

"Besides that. Also, Robert wasn't here the night Ed died."

"You mean he wasn't in the data base . . ."

Elizabeth looked across the kitchen at her friend.

"And that's just bits, and bits can be changed," Jen continued.

"Yeah, bits can be changed." She paused, as if trying to bring a distant idea into resolution. "I'm not sure why, but I don't see it."

"You can't see him losing his temper and getting violent?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I doubt he could alter the database."

"Are you sure?" Jen pressed.

"As sure as I am of anything in the last few days. I looked at the usage records for the night of Ed's death pretty closely. I couldn't find any evidence of tampering – there were no odd times, no gaps in the record. I checked the usage data against the agent histories, and found no evidence of an absent person requesting a service. Everything looks OK."

Jen nodded. "And, Robert would have been pretty freaked if he'd just killed Ed."

“So he’d have made mistakes,” Elizabeth confirmed. “Also, he hasn’t been that close to these systems for a long time. When we lived together, he was constantly asking me for help with some systems problem . . .”

“He asked you?” Jen joked. “He must have been desperate.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Trying to think of him doing it under stress, in a short time, and not making any mistakes . . .” She paused. “I just can’t see it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Intimately,” Elizabeth said, with more than a trace of irony. “Robert knows a lot of theory, and he’s a smart man, but he needs other people to do the real work.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Jen said. “Still, it would be too good to be true, huh?”

Elizabeth frowned. “I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head. “There’s not much good in any of this.”

She picked up the pot and held it out. “Refill?”

“Yeah, and give me a cup for Thomas.”

CHAPTER 28

Elizabeth sat down at her desk and set the coffee cup by her mouse pad. On her computer display, a section of the source code for the executive agents remained as she had left it. She remembered Victor's comment that there were only a few, predictable ways to hide things, and she hoped she was guessing right.

Earlier in the day, standing in the parking lot, they had argued over the best way to proceed. Jen had agreed with her that Ed had almost certainly used the agent system. Thomas held on to his belief that he could have bypassed it entirely. After some discussion, Elizabeth and Jen decided to take another look at the building's agents, and left Thomas to search the underlying operating system.

It was Jen who suggested they look at the code that defined Pops, Ariel and the rest of their executive agents. She'd reasoned that, if the backdoor was not in the camera controller, the executive was the next logical place to look. Because it communicated directly with the camera controller, giving Ed his keyhole would be easy. It had another advantage: once Ed's accomplice had

compromised the building's executive agents, he could bypass all security controls – not just the camera's. Jen described it as an “elegant solution.”

Elizabeth thought of it as a nightmare. If Ed's accomplice had corrupted the executive agents, then the building's most basic security protections would have been eliminated. Nothing would be private.

She heard a familiar chord chime through the music playing in her office, and saw a request for a video conference appear on her screen. The icon carrying the request bore Regina Martinelli's picture. Elizabeth responded, and a large video window opened. Regina looked upset.

“What are you doing here?” Elizabeth asked. “It's almost nine o'clock.”

“I'm glad you're still here. I need help.”

Elizabeth heard the urgency in her voice.

“What is it?”

“I've been receiving phone calls . . .” The attorney paused, as if searching for the right words.

“You mean obscene calls?”

“No, just silence.”

“You just got one?”

“Yes,” Regina confirmed.

She looked frightened. It was an expression Elizabeth had never seen on the self-possessed attorney.

“Did he say anything at all, anything threatening?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, but I'm afraid it may be more than a crank call. I mean, with all that's been going on . . .”

“Did you call the guard? He should still be here.”

“No, I asked who was in the building, and when I heard your name, I called you.”

“Get your things and meet me at the guard desk,” Elizabeth instructed.

Regina nodded.

“And try not to worry,” Elizabeth said before she closed the window.

She started down the hall.

“Pops, locate the security guard,” she said as she walked.

“Guru Deep Singh Khalsa is in the rear hallway of the second floor.”

“Pops, page him to the front lobby.”

When Elizabeth reached the lobby, she found Regina waiting. Standing alone in the lobby, with her perfect hair and make-up, her expensive suit with its short skirt and high heels, Regina looked like a classic slasher movie victim. Elizabeth pushed the image from her mind.

“Thank you,” Regina said. She seemed calmer than she had on the video.

“Don’t worry about it,” Elizabeth said. “What happened?”

“I got another one of those calls, and I panicked.” The attorney seemed embarrassed. “I guess I shouldn’t have let it bother me – I’m being silly.”

Guru Deep Singh Khalsa ran down the stairs and walked quickly toward them.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Regina’s been getting threatening phone calls,” Elizabeth explained. “She just got another one.”

“Did you get the number on the caller ID?” the guard asked.

“Yes, but it’s just some convenience store.”

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Yes, some of the earlier calls came from the same number. It’s a pay phone.” She named an intersection near the building.

“Did you hear anything in the background?” he asked.

“Just traffic noises. The store’s close by, and it frightened me. I mean, it’s so late, I wonder if he saw my car in the lot and called to confirm I was here?”

“Try not to worry,” the guard reassured her, “no one’s going to hurt you. Now, is your husband at home?”

“No, he’s doing errands, but I called him on his cell phone. He said he could meet me here or at home.”

“Call him again and tell him to meet you at home. Dr. Florczyk and I will walk you to your car. Once you start driving, just keep the doors locked and you’ll be safe.”

They waited while Regina called her husband. She spoke to him briefly.

“Yes, I’ll be there soon. . . Yes, I’m OK . . . Yes, I love you too.”

She returned the cell phone to her purse. Elizabeth noticed the “Coach” logo on the leather bag. Regina pulled her coat around her and picked up her briefcase. The three of them walked out into the cold air and headed toward the eggplant colored Mercedes.

“Elizabeth,” she said as they started down the walk, “thank you. And,” she glanced at the guard’s name tag, “Mr. Khalsa, Thank you.”

“It’s all right,” he said. “Just lock your doors and drive straight home.”

“What kept you here so late?” Elizabeth asked her.

“Oh, the usual. Paperwork. How about you?”

“Lieutenant Rodriguez asked me to wrap up some things on the investigation,” Elizabeth answered, evading the question.

“I hope it isn’t the report I requested,” Regina said. “It’s not that urgent.”

“No,” Elizabeth answered without elaboration.

They reached Regina’s car. The guard checked the back seat. While Regina let herself in and started the engine, he looked around the nearly empty parking lot.

“Is that your truck over there?” he asked Elizabeth.

“Yes, why?”

“Something looks odd.”

Elizabeth followed him to her truck. It seemed to be sitting at an odd angle, and she realized one of its rear tires was flat. Regina drove around so her lights shined on it. Both the front and rear tires on the side away from the building pancaked uselessly against the asphalt. The guard crouched and shined his flashlight on the tire, rubbing his hand along its side. He examined the valve stem.

“Someone has removed your valve core,” he said, looking up at her.

Elizabeth knelt beside him. She saw the small mechanism on the ground beside the wheel. He walked to the front wheel.

“Same here. Someone’s done this deliberately.”

She heard Regina’s door slam, followed by the staccato of high heels on cement.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Someone’s let the air out of my tires.”

“You shouldn’t be here either,” Regina urged. “Let me take you home.” She looked around nervously.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Don’t worry, Jen and Thomas are here. One of them will drive me.”

“Elizabeth, don’t be foolish.”

“It’s OK, Regina.”

The attorney shook her head, and started back to her car. She opened the door, then looked back at Elizabeth and the guard.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Elizabeth nodded. Regina frowned, then wished her luck and slid into the Mercedes. Elizabeth heard the simultaneous “ca-thunks” of its four automatic door locks as Regina drove away.

“She’s right you know,” Guru Deep Singh Khalsa remarked as he watched her leave the lot. “You shouldn’t be here this late.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I have work to do.”

“Would you like for me to stay?” he asked.

“No, I’m really OK. Jen and Thomas are here.”

“I think I’ll stay anyway. I have some paperwork to catch up on. How long will you be?”

“Late.”

“How late?”

“Real late. Maybe all night.”

“Well, I have a lot of paperwork,” he said, as they started back to the building.

Elizabeth reached over and squeezed his hand.

“Thank you,” she said.

CHAPTER 29

“How’s it going?” Elizabeth asked as she entered Jennifer Sorenson’s office. It was almost 1:30 AM.

“Nothing. How about you?” Jen sounded discouraged.

“The same,” Elizabeth said, collapsing into the extra chair.

“It’s hard enough to find something if you know what it looks like, but this . . .”

Elizabeth nodded. If they could control Regina’s camera in the same way Ed Walters had, then finding the lines of code that gave him access would be simple. They could use the building’s trace tools to step through the program until they found Ed’s back door. Lacking that, they faced the entire body of the building source code with few clues about where to begin. She’d been doing it for days.

“Jen,” Elizabeth began, “maybe it’s time to go home.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been thinking about what happened to my truck.”

Jen shrugged. “Someone is trying to scare us off, but don’t worry. You, and Thomas and Guru Deep Singh are here. Besides, it happened hours ago. I’m sure we’re safe.”

“That may be true, but it’s not the point.”

“Oh?”

“I should never have involved you.”

“Bullshit. You needed us.”

Elizabeth let go of a tired laugh. “That’s true,” she said.

“Libby, you’re just tired. You’ve hardly slept since Ed died.”

“Tired or not, I have no right to endanger you.”

“We’re not in any danger . . .”

“I had no right to violate Victor’s wishes and involve you. Let’s go home. I’ll call him in the morning.”

“Libby, don’t. We’re getting close. We have to be.”

“Then we can finish tomorrow.”

“At least let us all decide,” Jen insisted. “Let’s go talk to Thomas.”

Elizabeth tilted her head to the side and tried to stretch the knots out of her neck.

“OK,” she said, “we’ll go and talk to him. But, then, we’re going home.”

“Mind if I warm up by your fire,” Jen said as she walked into the cluttered cubicle.

“Hey,” he said in a flat voice, not looking up from his screen. He was wearing the same fluorescent pink Hawaiian shirt he’d had on that afternoon. The print featured bright green pineapples, rum bottles with yellow labels, and girls in blue bikinis with orange flowers in their hair. It was the newest addition to his collection, sent by an uncle in Hawaii who owned a tourist trap and picked the most outrageous shirts for his favorite nephew.

Jen turned to Elizabeth.

“Can I take back all those nice things I said about him?”

“Consider them never said.”

Thomas pushed back from the computer. “Sorry,” he said.

“Thomas, we need to talk . . .” Elizabeth began.

“OK, but first, look at this.”

“Did you find something?”

“Well, I haven’t found anything about the camera, but I have been poking around Wayne’s directories. He has quite a collection of toys.”

Elizabeth pulled a chair close to his monitor and sat down. Jen leaned against his desk.

“What kind of toys?” Jen asked.

“Well,” Thomas said, “I took a guess that Ed’s helper was one of the systems guys. I started with Wayne, since he is the head guy, and he was here that night.”

“And what did you find?” Elizabeth asked, curiosity displacing weariness from her voice.

“Well, I’m not sure if it means anything, but I found a lot of tools that could be used in weird ways.”

“Like?”

“I found a database editor – not the usual kind – this would let him go in and change any field of any record in any of our databases. It even does simple consistency checks on the data.” He paused. “If I wanted to, I could make it look like we hadn’t been here tonight, or like Ed Walters was here.”

“Please,” Jen said, “no ghosts.”

“What else?” Elizabeth asked.

“I found a tool that lets him set a probe on an agent . . .”

“A probe?” Jen interrupted.

“Yeah, it lets him monitor some aspect of its behavior – like putting a sensor on a machine. Let’s say he wanted to be notified every time someone accessed the person locator – he’d just set a probe on it.”

“Could he put his probe on any agent?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yeah,” Thomas nodded.

“Even Pops?”

“Even Pops.”

Elizabeth frowned and shook her head. “What about security?” she asked.

Thomas shrugged. Elizabeth nodded in acknowledgement.

“Anything else?” she pressed.

Thomas described a variety of powerful, specialized programming tools.

“Those all have legitimate uses,” Elizabeth said.

“That’s true,” Thomas said, “but there is something about them . . .”

“What?”

“When I need to monitor some agent I’m debugging, I usually just hack something together. Wayne’s was pretty neat: general and powerful.” He

snapped his fingers. “That’s it,” he said excitedly, “he has these really powerful tools, but none of us knew about them.”

“If he’d written them for legitimate purposes, he would have shared them with the rest of us,” Elizabeth finished his thought.

“Not necessarily,” Jen said, “lots of programmers like to keep their tricks to themselves.”

“And, Wayne can be selfish,” Thomas added.

Elizabeth said back in the chair. “I looked in Wayne’s directories. How’d I miss this?”

“You were looking for a camera controller,” Jen reminded her.

“That’s right,” Thomas finished. “These tools don’t seem so unusual unless you look really close. You probably glanced at them, saw they didn’t involve the camera, and moved on.”

Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully.

“Thomas, this is great,” Jen grinned. “Let’s copy these onto a notepad and Libby can take them to the cops tomorrow.”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth said. “This is so speculative – we’ve always known Wayne could do just about anything with the building systems.”

“OK, so we take it to the cops, and let them sort it out,” Jen insisted.

Elizabeth said nothing, but sat with her arms crossed, staring at Thomas’ monitor.

“Libby,” Jen said.

Her friend did not respond.

“Earth to Elizabeth,” Jen said in a louder voice.

Elizabeth looked up at her friend. “I don’t want another Gil Baca on my conscience,” she said.

“Wayne’s tougher than Gil,” Jen argued. “Besides, you’re never going to be sure. Fifteen minutes ago you wanted to call the cops and go home. OK. We’ve found some important evidence. Let’s tell the cops.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “If there hadn’t been a murder, and we’d found these tools in Wayne’s directory, do you think we’d have given them a second thought?”

Jen frowned.

“Instead,” Elizabeth continued, “this murder has shaded everything. No matter what we see, we ask ourselves what it means for Ed’s murder . . .”

“And, no matter what it is, we think it means something,” Thomas finished.

“That’s right,” Elizabeth said.

“OK,” Jen said, “so what do you want to do?”

“I need to talk to Wayne.”

“What are you talking about?” Jen said incredulously. Her voice echoed in the nearly silent building.

“I need to talk to Wayne. It’s the only way.”

“Are you crazy?” Jen said.

“Probably,” Elizabeth said, “but I can’t stare it this damn software anymore. This never was about software. It’s about people.”

“So what do you expect to get from Wayne?”

“Some sense of what all this means.”

“How?”

“Everything I look at seems to point at him, but nothing’s definite. You saw him coming downstairs the night Ed was killed, but the records say he was up there on legitimate business. Thomas finds all these tools that could alter databases, tools that are far more powerful than anything we have, but we

have no evidence he did anything wrong with them. OK, if we keep coming back to Wayne Ballard, then we need to look at Wayne Ballard – not this damned software.”

“What are you going to do, ask him if he helped Ed Walters stalk Regina, then killed him to cover it up?”

“No, too subtle,” Elizabeth said ironically. “I’ll have to improvise. Maybe I could start talking to him, ask him about security or changing the database, see how he reacts . . . I’m not sure.”

Elizabeth thought for several moments.

“Jen,” she asked finally, “you know your work in recognizing human emotions?”

“No . . .” Jen replied firmly.

“You know that infra-red sensor – the one in the brooch. You know, the lie detector?”

“It’s not a lie detector,” Jen insisted. “I used an infra-red sensor to measure skin temperature, to try and recognize emotional states. I did some experiments with polygraphy – that’s all.”

“That’s not what I remember. You were pretty excited about it.”

“So, I was excited. I found some correlations between skin temperature and lies – it wasn’t much more than a footnote.”

“But do you think it would work?” Elizabeth pressed her.

“No,” she answered emphatically, “this is a real person, a real situation. I’ve only used it in controlled tests.”

“Think of it as a beta test,” Thomas interjected.

Jen ignored him.

“Suppose I wear the sensor in to talk to Wayne,” Elizabeth continued. “I could start out asking him some general questions – maybe I could ask him how hard it would be to change stuff in the database. I could say Victor wanted to know. Let’s see how he reacts.”

“Libby . . .”

“What do we have to lose? He won’t know what we’re doing.”

Jen shook her head.

“Even if your sensor can’t tell us anything,” Elizabeth pressed, “I’ll still have my own impressions. Maybe I can get some idea of what all this means, what we’re looking for.”

“Come on, Jen,” Thomas urged.

“Shit,” Jen said in a mixture of frustration and surrender.

“Way to go,” he said.

Jen glared at him.

“How long would it take to set up the sensor, the one in the brooch?”

Elizabeth asked her friend.

Jen took a deep breath and let it out in resignation.

“I don’t have to do anything. The sensor broadcasts its signals through the wireless system; I already have an agent that sends them on to me. Really, all you have to do is put it on. I should be able to calibrate the results later – if there are any.”

“Good. Look, I’d like to do this the first thing in the morning. Let’s go home, get some rest and get cleaned up. Jen, can you give me a lift? My truck . . .”

“Sure.”

“You guys go on,” Thomas said. “I think I’ll stay here and see what else I can find.”

“No, Thomas. I can’t leave you and Guru Deep Singh here alone. We’re all leaving.”

“It’ll be OK. Tell him to go home.”

“Forget it,” Elizabeth insisted. “Thomas, pack it up.”

He turned and looked at her. “You’re serious . . .”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

“Look, there’s something I wanted to try. Give me ten minutes to finish writing this little script, and I can leave it running.”

“Ten minutes?”

“Honest.”

“OK,” Elizabeth surrendered. “Meet us at the guard desk in the lobby ten minutes – or I’m going to come up here and drag you out.”

CHAPTER 30

Elizabeth stood in Jen's office, holding the small hand mirror so she could see the brooch on her lapel. Four hours sleep and a shower had left her feeling human again – barely. She'd changed into a pair of black slacks with a pale blue rayon shell and a gray tweed jacket. Jen was wearing the same black bell bottoms she'd worn the other day, but had changed into a gray, ribbed turtleneck.

Elizabeth adjusted the brooch's position, then smoothed the tweed around it.

"So, how do I make this work?" she asked.

"Just try to face him, and hope for the best."

"Sounds scientific."

Jen smiled. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea," she said.

"I'm not either, but I need to talk to him anyway. Your sensor's just added help."

"I don't know how much," Jen said, "but that's not it."

“What do you mean?”

“There is the ethical issue.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I know.”

“How would you feel if someone ran a lie detector on you without your knowledge?”

“Angry. Outraged.”

“Wayne may be completely innocent.”

“I know, and even if he’s guilty, it’s still probably wrong. And, if he finds out, it will put a hell of a strain on our working relationship.”

“We sound like a bad joke: Why does it take two female computer scientists with PMS to violate someone’s civil rights?”

“It just does,” Elizabeth answered with exaggerated irritation. Neither of them laughed.

“Libby, how is this different from Ed spying on Regina?”

“Jen,” Elizabeth began, “I thought through all these arguments. The bottom line is, as suspicious as Wayne seems, all we have is circumstantial evidence.”

“What if he’s innocent?”

“We’ll find that out, and if I bend some rules to get at the truth, I can handle it. It’s my choice.”

“Is this about Gil Baca?”

“Probably. It doesn’t matter.”

Jen shrugged, then adjusted the brooch on her friend’s lapel.

“There are a couple of things to keep in mind,” she instructed. “First of all, remember that I’ll be making comparisons over time, so I’ll need all the data I can get. Try to face him as much as your can.”

“What about sound?”

“The microphone in the brooch isn’t great, but it should be OK,” Jen said.

“Should I do anything special?”

“Like shove your chest in Wayne’s face when he speaks? No.”

“I’ll try and remember that,” Elizabeth said in a parody of concern.

“I’ll need a baseline – his normal skin temperature. Try to keep the first few minutes as normal as you can. Stay away from anything that might get him upset or excited.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to get Wayne excited. What else?”

“When you get into things you want to test, try and spread the questions out. This isn’t as sensitive as a real lie detector, so it’s best if we have some time between questions for him to get back to the baseline.”

“OK, so I’ll ask him if he helped Ed take dirty pictures of Regina, then I’ll talk about the weather for a while.”

“That’s the idea. Also, don’t handle the brooch. It’s heat sensitive and you could mess up the readings.”

“Is that why you put it on the lapel of my jacket? So the extra cloth would insulate it from my body heat?”

“No, it just looks better there. By the way, did you do the tweed thing to match the brooch?”

“Uh-huh,” Elizabeth nodded.

“It’s a new look for you,” Jen said, with a trace of disapproval.

“Well, I know it’s not your style . . .”

“There’s one other thing.”

Elizabeth looked at her friend and waited.

“I’ll be monitoring the signal,” Jen said seriously. “If I see or hear anything scary, Thomas and I are coming down there.”

“You mean like a floor level image of Wayne’s boot toe driving into my face?”

“This isn’t funny.”

“Don’t worry, Wayne’s slow, and I won’t take any chances.”

“Don’t forget that. I’ll still be watching.” Jen looked upward and spoke in a slightly louder than normal voice, “Andy, where is Wayne Ballard.”

An androgynous male voice with a generic East-coast accent answered from the speakers in Jen’s office. “He is in the Systems Lab.”

“Andy?” Elizabeth asked.

“Warhol.”

“I thought you named your agent Ludwig. I remember the German accent . . .”

“Wittgenstein,” Jen shrugged. “I got tired of the accent.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Most people get tired of the philosophy. Pops, who is there with him?”

“Jason Evans.”

“Shit,” Jen said in a frustrated voice, “I wish David was there. That little skinhead gives me the creeps – the thought of Wayne and him together . . .” She gave an exaggerated shudder.

Elizabeth shrugged. “I can use that. I’ll tell him I wanted to talk to David, then start chatting casually.” She picked up her coffee cup and smiled. “I’d better take this. If Wayne sees me without it, he’ll know something’s wrong.”

“When you go by Thomas’ cubicle, send him over,” Jen said. “I’ll need his help. And Libby . . .”

“Yes?”

“Be careful.”

Elizabeth picked her way through the cluttered computer lab. As usual, she did not knock before entering.

“Doctor, Doctor, come in, come in,” Wayne said in an expansive tone.

He had his feet up on a Sun Computer carton, and seemed to be wearing the same jeans he always wore, along with a Moody Blues t-shirt.

“Hey Libby,” Jason said, without looking up from his screen.

“When’s David coming back?” she asked.

“Not for a while,” Wayne answered, “I’ve dispatched him on a mission of mercy. You’re stuck with me and my loquacious friend.”

“You got any coffee?” she asked, sitting down across the cluttered desk from him.

“Sure, enjoy some of the good stuff.”

She held out her cup and Wayne filled it from the pot that brewed perpetually on his desk. She swirled it around and stared into the mug.

“Looks good. Nice uniform lumps, and a vile, yet piercing fragrance.”

“It’s an old family recipe,” he said, filling his own cup. “So, what brings you down here to find a guy the locator could have told you was somewhere else?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” Elizabeth answered, “and sometimes I just want to talk to a human being.”

“I didn’t know you cared,” Wayne grinned through his beard.

“I didn’t say I found one, and no, I don’t care. When will David be back?”

“Don’t know. One of the secretaries has a printer that won’t print. It’s disrupting e-commerce from coast to coast. Why don’t you ask him yourself?” he said, gesturing vaguely upward in the direction of a building sensor.

“It’s not worth interrupting,” Elizabeth said. She took a sip of the strong coffee and grimaced.

“So what do you need from the ever popular Mr. Chavez?” he asked, placing the pot back in the coffee maker.

“I’m wrapping up my report for the police. I have a couple questions.”

“Wrapping up? That sounds good; maybe life will get back to normal.”

“I hope so,” she said.

She saw an open box of donuts sitting on the server next to the desk. She resisted the Boston Creme and took a plain cake donut.

“I thought it was pretty much settled,” Wayne probed.

“Oh?”

“I heard Gil Baca did it.”

“Who told you that,” she asked, “Robert?”

“Whoa, did I hit a nerve?” Wayne asked in a sadistic tone. He retrieved the Boston Creme from the box and took a bite.

“None that haven’t been hit before,” Elizabeth answered. “So, you think Gil did it?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Wouldn’t know. I’m just a glorified plumber.”

“Right,” Elizabeth said, “a glorified plumber with a brand new BMW.”

“Hey, most plumbers drive BMWs. Why do you think they charge so much to come poke a stuck tampon down the drain?” Wayne chuckled and bit into the donut again.

“You’re a pig, Wayne,” Elizabeth said, making a face, “and there’s donut filling on your beard. You sure David didn’t quit in disgust?”

“Nah, he’s worse than any of us. Want me to have him come by your office when he’s done?”

He wiped the cream from his beard, stared at it on the end of his finger, and licked it off.

She groaned and shook her head. “Oh, I don’t need anything in particular; I just have a few questions.”

“Then fire away,” he said, taking the bait. He finished the donut in a single bite and washed it down with coffee.

“The police wanted me to find out if there was any way someone could have altered the data I’d given them.”

“What data?” Wayne sounded uncharacteristically professional.

“Well, there was e-mail.”

“Not hard. Any of us could do that.”

“You mean . . .”

“Me, young David, the silent genius behind me,” he said, gesturing toward Jason with his thumb. “Robert and a few other managers have access to the mail server, but I doubt they have the brains.”

“What about database entries?”

“Depends on the database. The administrator for any of them can pretty much do what they want.”

“What about the automatically maintained data? Like the building usage information?” Elizabeth asked.

She watched for any sign of unease on his face. She saw none.

“I could do it. So could my boys. The usual suspects.”

“Anyone else.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Wayne said, scratching beneath his beard, “there aren’t any routine data entry tools for the usage information, so the ordinary schmoe couldn’t do it. Also, he wouldn’t have the right access permissions. But, Doc, it’s just software. A guy with the skill and the will can change it.”

“How would you do it?”

“I have an editor. I can do just about anything, actually. It wouldn’t even take that long.”

Elizabeth felt a knot in her stomach. Wayne was admitting to all the capabilities that had drawn her suspicion.

“So all this data I’ve been getting for the cops, all the data on our systems – I can’t trust it?”

“I didn’t say that. Your data is as trustworthy as the people who manage it.” He grinned broadly through his beard and winked. “And, that’s me.”

“That’s it?” she said incredulously.

“That’s it,” he answered.

He sounded as nonchalant as a tenured professor handing out the answers to a mid-term.

“Why do you think those boys down at Sandia labs are so worried about insider threats?” he asked without waiting for her to answer. “They can keep Chinese spies from hacking in – hell, they can even keep pimple-faced fifteen year olds out most of the time – but some trusted guy puts a disk full of bomb

plans in his pocket and walks out the door? They can't do a thing. It's all about people."

"You're not making me feel any better," she said.

"I'm not trying to make you feel good. Now, if you want to meet me for drinks. . ."

"In your dreams."

Wayne laughed. "More coffee?" he said, holding out the pot.

"No thanks. What about all these sensors, microphones and stuff?"

He refilled his own cup.

"It could happen," he said, "its all just code."

She shook her head, "Even the camera at my computer? Could someone spy on me?"

"Get over it."

He laughed as he returned the pot to the ancient coffee maker.

"Privacy's dead." He leered at her. "But, don't stop changing clothes in your office."

Elizabeth said nothing.

"Don't act so shocked," he said in an uncharacteristically serious voice.

"What do you expect?" She held out her cup. "I guess I need a refill."

"Doc, I've been in this business a long time," he said, filling her cup. "I've seen how flat-out weird people get behind computers."

"What do you mean?"

"You look at these guys who won't even buy a book from Amazon-fucking-dot-com 'cause their afraid 128-bit encryption isn't good enough for their pathetic

credit card numbers. Then they stop at some strip club for a beer on the way home, and give the same damned card to some cocktail waitress they've never met. How do they know she isn't writing the number down for her dirtbag boy friend?"

"Well sure," Elizabeth said, "a lot of people don't really think . . ."

"That's an understatement," he interrupted. "Look at the corporate brain trust upstairs. They spend half their careers leaving memos and shit laying around on their desks where any janitor can pick them up, and don't give it a second thought. Then, the minute they put them on a computer, they have a shit fit . . ."

"Putting information on a networked computer opens up huge opportunities for access," Elizabeth argued.

"Duh," he said, stretching the word out to two syllables. "Isn't that the point?"

"Sure, but we need to protect people's information. We need to control . . ."

Wayne laughed out loud. "Control. Now there's a fantasy. People think computers can give them control. Hell, they don't know the half of it."

"What are you talking about?"

"We don't even know what these damned things are doing half the time, and we're the ones that build them. When we were programming in Basic on machines with 64K of memory, maybe we had a chance, but look at these things now. They're way too complex. Nobody really knows what the hell's going on in a PC, let alone the Internet. This program requests information from another program, which gets information from half a dozen databases scattered all over the world, and sends it to some other program to help process it all. Who knows what will happen? We're all building different pieces of this monster, and nobody has any kind of plan. Control?" he laughed. "They're not control machines. They're fucking chaos machines."

"Christ, Wayne . . ."

“Don’t ‘Christ Wayne’ me. You know what I’m talking about. You and the rest of the people here think this is all going to make people rational, trustworthy, loyal . . . You have no idea how corrosive it is.”

He leaned toward her and his voice grew in volume and intensity.

“A bunch of geeks from Stanford, MIT and the other ivory towers built this mess, but look who’s taken it over.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t roll those baby blue . . .” he paused and stared at her. “Well green, anyway. Damn it doc, you know what I’m saying. The Ph.D.s built it, but the politicians, the unwashed idiots, the MBAs, the fundamentalists, the perverts are all taking it over. Most of the people on the Internet don’t even know what makes it work . . .”

“They shouldn’t have to,” Elizabeth interrupted. “Most people don’t know how their cars work, but can drive them responsibly.”

She wondered how she could get Wayne back onto the topics she’d hoped to test.

“Bullshit,” he said angrily. “Look what happens when we give this technology to people who don’t understand what’s behind it. Forget the marketers and pornographers. You’ve got a bunch of religious terrorist fanatics who still think the earth is flat downloading nuke plans off the net for their fucking jihads. You’ve got a bunch of cocksuckers in turbans who think it’s still the twelfth century, who can’t even castrate their fucking goats without half of them dying from infection, but they can order up enough anthrax from some Russian web site to kill half the fucking country . . .”

“Wayne,” she interrupted.

“Don’t Wayne me.” He stopped and smirked at her. “You people built this damned thing. Now you have to deal with it.”

“Christ, I just wanted to ask David a few simple questions . . .”

“Oh yeah, I remember. Can the cops trust the data you gave them? Sure, no problem. Anything else?”

“Don’t blow me off,” she snapped.

She felt her own anger rising and forced herself to focus on regaining control of the conversation.

“We have to protect critical data,” Elizabeth insisted, searching for some ruse that might lead him back to the subject of the building systems. “What about your bank account?”

Wayne laughed. “I thought you were one of us. You’re talking like those stiffs upstairs. Sure, you can encrypt your account and shit behind passwords – do you think that matters?”

“Of course it matters.”

“They don’t care if they can’t get at your account; they don’t need to. They know where you go, they know where you work, they know what you earn, they know what you buy, they know what you read.”

Wayne started to sing: “He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows if you’ve been bad or good . . .”

He stopped and looked at her sarcastically.

“Hell, if they wanted to, they could probably guess your account balance within a few dollars.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Wayne . . .”

“And then,” he interrupted, “the next time you go to your favorite web site, they’ll flash a banner ad designed to separate you from those last few bucks.”

“Who is this ‘they’ you keep talking about?”

“The usual suspects. The Government, the banks, the credit agencies, the Republican National Committee, your favorite dot-com . . .”

“This is pretty cynical,” she protested, “even for you.”

“Get over it, Doc,” he interrupted. He seemed to be growing angry. “Privacy’s dead. If you want to hide, you have to hide in plain sight.”

“That’s rhetorical gibberish.”

“Is it? We can’t hide from the system, Doc, but people like us can use it.”

“Don’t give me that ‘information wants to be free’ crap. People have a right to privacy.”

He laughed again. “I thought you were smarter than that, Doctor Florczyk. You’re missing the point. It’s not about technology, and forget the fucking lawyers and politicians. It’s about people. It’s about us. If the data is there, we will find a way to get at it.” He emphasized the word ‘we.’

“You know that’s not true.”

“Bullshit,” he said, his voice rising again.

“People need to be able to trust all this,” she said, trying to calm him.

“That’s my fucking point,” Wayne snorted. “You’re trusting people. You’re trusting us,” he gestured around the lab. “There are hundreds of people behind every thing you do on the Internet. People you’ve never met: everyone from the guy who wrote the software to the geek running the mail server. And, even if it does get through the network untouched, you’ve still got some guy at the store, or the bank, or the brokerage on the other end that can read all your stuff. Just like fifty years ago, except now, he’s got all this technology to work with. He decides to rip you off – hell you’ve already given him everything he needs – if he decides to start ripping people off, he can rip off thousands – millions. People haven’t changed, but look at the tools we’ve given them.”

“So, should we just give up?” she said in frustration.

“Hell, no. Enjoy the ride, but forget about the old bullshit: privacy, control – you name it.”

Elizabeth said nothing. She knew Jen would find little among Wayne's angry tirade.

Wayne seemed to relax. His face, which had turned nearly scarlet at the height of his tirade, cycled back across the spectrum to its normal, sallow hue. He chuckled.

"Hey Jason," he said, "here's something you're never going to see again: Doctor Liz is speechless."

"Fuck you, Wayne," Jason said, not looking up from his work. "You're so full of shit."

Elizabeth stood up. "Jason's right. Thanks for the help – I think."

"Don't mention it," Wayne laughed.

She emptied the dregs of her cup into the dead geranium by the window, and started toward the door.

"Hey Doc," Wayne yelled after her.

She turned, "Yeah? What now?"

"I didn't get a chance to tell you. I like your new pin."

She felt herself flush and reached self-consciously toward her lapel.

He made deliberate eye contact with her.

"Did you borrow it from your pal Jenny?" he asked in a voice empty of jest or sarcasm.

CHAPTER 31

Elizabeth retreated into Jen's office and closed the door behind her. She sank down in the chair until her head rested on the back, and rubbed her temples between the thumb and fingers of her left hand.

"That was a fucking disaster," she groaned.

"You weren't supposed to get him excited," Jen said dryly.

"And he recognized the brooch . . ."

". . . so he knew what we were up to," Jen finished.

She looked at her friend with concern.

"I hate to tell you this, but I doubt we got anything we can use."

"Too much emotion?" Elizabeth asked.

"Off the scale."

"It'll be OK," Thomas tried to reassure her. "Can I get you something? Maybe some coffee?"

“If I have any more coffee,” Elizabeth groaned, “my head’s going to explode.”

“Skip the coffee.”

“So,” Elizabeth asked, “is it a total loss?”

“Well, I’ll have to go over it,” Jen said, “but, the big problem is that he didn’t deny any of the stuff we were testing.”

“Well,” Thomas said, “if he knew what you were doing . . .”

“I want to know what happened at the end there,” Jen said. “You must have really pushed some buttons.”

“I’ve never seen him like that; he’s normally into his cynical-cool thing.”

“Well,” Jen said matter-of-factly, “that’s another good way to mess up a test like this.”

“You mean just get pissed off and stay that way?” Elizabeth acknowledged.

“Yeah.”

“So, I’ve alienated a colleague I depend on, and probably broken the law,” Elizabeth said, shaking her head. “I didn’t learn anything except that Wayne has some radical ideas about privacy, and I still don’t have anything solid to show the police.”

“It could be worse,” Thomas tried to reassure her.

“How?” Elizabeth asked.

He shrugged.

“You’re such a comfort.” She turned to Jen. “So, can you salvage anything?”

“I need to go over this stuff,” Jen said. “I might be able to do something.”

“Can I help?” Elizabeth asked.

“Don’t know,” Jen shrugged. “You’re welcome to stay.”

“Maybe I will. I don’t feel like being alone right now.”

“I think I’ll split,” Thomas said, standing up. “I have to check on some things.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth asked hopefully. “Any chance of good news?”

He smiled and shrugged. “Maybe. Wait and see.”

Jen watched him go. A smile formed subtly behind her lips.

“Libby,” she said, after he’d disappeared down the hall, “there is one thing.”

“Yes?”

“After all we’ve learned, what Wayne said . . . “ She looked around the room. “Can we be sure no one’s watching us?”

Elizabeth scanned the walls, from the antenna that tracked their badges, to the microphone that listened for voice commands, to the camera perched on Jen’s computer monitor.

“No,” she said, “we can’t.”

She paused for a moment and took a deep breath.

“I guess I don’t care,” she said wearily. “I just don’t fucking care. I just want to bring this into the light.”

“Look at this.” Jen’s voice woke Elizabeth, and she sat up quickly. When Jen had started working through the data, she’d sat quietly in the corner of the office, her mind wandering over what little evidence they had, over the probable costs of her botched interrogation of Wayne Ballard, over all the consequences spreading outward from Edward Walters’ increasingly troubling death. After a few minutes, she had fallen asleep.

“What is it?” she asked, rubbing her eyes.

“Look at this . . .” Jen’s monitor displayed a sequence of pictures of Wayne’s face, his features barely showing through the bright color maps. “I saw this earlier, but didn’t make much of it – it’s pretty slight.”

“No,” Elizabeth said, “I see it. The middle one is warmer. What’s he saying?”

“He’s saying he thought Gil Baca killed Ed.”

“No.”

“Yeah,” Jen said. “I didn’t pay much attention at first, because it was so subtle, but the later stuff’s all useless, so I came back to this. I fiddled with the color mapping, intensifying the differences.”

“So, he lied when he said he thought Gil killed Ed. He knows he didn’t do it.”

“Possibly,” Jen confirmed in a guarded voice.

“That means he either killed Ed himself, or he knows who did,” Elizabeth pressed.

“I don’t know for sure. I mean, it’s so slight . . .”

“But there’s something there.”

“We can’t be sure . . .”

“If he’d actually killed Ed himself, wouldn’t his reaction be stronger?” Elizabeth pressed.

“Let’s not make too much of this,” Jen urged. “Without something to corroborate it, it doesn’t mean anything.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Well,” she said, “it was worth a try. I guess we ought to go talk to Victor. Tell him about Wayne’s tools.”

She sounded tired and disappointed. She leaned back in the chair and covered a yawn. She thought of her truck, still sitting in the lot with two flat tires.

“Can I get a lift downtown?”

“Sure,” Jen said. “Let’s see if Thomas has anything to add.”

She turned to her computer and tried to initiate a video conference with him. The window opened, and showed a view of his empty office.

A moment later, Jen’s door opened, and Thomas leaned in.

“I found out how Ed got to Regina’s camera,” he said excitedly. “It looks like Wayne rigged it.”

Thomas brought a chair into Jen’s office and closed the door behind himself. He perched on the chair’s edge and spoke rapidly.

“I figured out how Ed turned on the camera in Regina’s office. Once I could do that, it wasn’t hard to trace through the code and find the section that did it – Wayne wrote it.”

“OK,” Jen asked, “how did he do it?”

“I’ll show you.”

Elizabeth had shared with her friends the system permissions that enabled them to access Ed Walters’ executive, allowing them to act as Ed himself. Thomas spoke in the slightly exaggerated tone people habitually used with the voice interaction system.

“Caliban,” he said, “start Regina Martinelli’s camera.”

A window opened on Jen’s computer screen. It showed Regina Martinelli working at her desk.

“Caliban?” Elizabeth asked incredulously. “That’s how he did it?”

Thomas nodded. “Yep. If Ed’s executive hears him say the keyword ‘Caliban,’ it opens another executive . . .”

“A second agent?” Elizabeth said.

She sounded like an engineer who was both angry with herself for missing an obvious solution to a problem, and delighted finally to see the answer.

“Yeah . . .” Thomas began.

“. . . one that will take commands to run the camera,” Jen finished for him.

“Thomas,” Elizabeth asked, “how did you figure this out?”

“That’s the good part,” he answered. “Remember what you said, about his needing to do it as easily as possible?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“I asked myself how I’d do it. I figured the most usable, hardest to trace way would be to write a completely distinct executive agent . . .”

“Caliban,” Elizabeth said.

“Right, and let it run alongside the normal agents. Someone with Wayne’s skills could fix it up to use all the system’s resources, but avoid all the security controls.”

“Thomas,” Jen interrupted. She gestured toward the image of Regina Martinelli. “Could you turn that thing off?”

“Sure,” he said. “Caliban, turn off video.”

The image disappeared from the screen.

“Should I save the recording,” Caliban asked in the bland, androgynous baritone of an agent that had not had its voice synthesizer tailored to a user’s desires.

“No,” Jen said immediately.

“How’d you figure it out?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, I had a hunch,” Thomas explained. “Since ‘Ariel’ is a character in Shakespeare, I guessed he’d name his stalker after some other Shakespeare

character. So, I went out to one of the Shakespeare sites on the web and got lists of all the characters in all the plays.”

Elizabeth smiled.

“I put them all together and ran through them,” he continued. “With the root permissions Elizabeth gave me, I was able to write a little script that made the system think each name was coming from Ed. I followed them with the phrase ‘Regina Martinelli’s camera’, and set it running.”

“Is that what you did last night before we left?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yeah, but I screwed it up. Someone was rushing me.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s OK. I fixed it this morning, and I left it running while you were talking to Wayne.”

“That’s what you went to check on when you left us,” Jen confirmed.

“So all Ed had to do was use the keyword ‘Caliban,’ and he could start the camera,” Elizabeth said.

“That’s it,” Thomas concluded. “You were right about Ed not doing anything weird with UNIX. ‘Caliban’ behaves just like a normal executive; in fact, he could do all his regular work with it – the only difference is that it bypasses all the system access controls. In fact, it’s literally invisible to the rest of the system.”

“The invisible man . . .” Elizabeth said softly.

“What?” Thomas asked.

“Never mind,” Elizabeth said. “How’d you trace it to Wayne?”

“That was tricky. Once I could start the camera, I tried to use the trace tool to find the lines of code that bypassed security. Problem was, it didn’t work right.”

“What do you mean?” Jen asked.

“Well, I kept getting to this one section of the code, and the trace just stopped.” He named a section of the building system software.

“But, I looked at that code,” Elizabeth complained, “twice. What did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Thomas said, “that’s the tricky part. See, when the trace tool ran into its dead end, I checked out the version of the software. It turns out the code actually running on the system did not match the official version – the one you looked at.”

Elizabeth sat back in the chair and shook her head.

“Like I said, there are two kinds of executives running on the system: normal agents like Pops, and rigged ones like Caliban. You could have looked at the official software all day and found nothing. It wasn’t there.”

Jen looked at him and smiled. “All that and brains besides,” she said.

Thomas blushed. “I remembered seeing a copy of the executive agent code in Wayne’s directories when I looked at them before,” he explained. “I didn’t think anything of it, ‘cause you guys were looking at the executives, but I went back and checked it out. It was different. I looked through it, and found the security hole right away.” He smiled. “And that’s not all,” he added.

“Do I want to know?” Jen asked.

“Yeah,” Thomas said, “he didn’t just do this for Ed: he has a whole list of these tricked-out agents. Looks like a bunch of people can bypass system security.”

“Shit,” Jen swore angrily. “Who?”

“I didn’t really look at it yet. I wanted to come tell you what I found.”

Elizabeth smiled and ran her hand through her hair. “Could you download this onto something portable? Something safe?”

“Let me use your CD recorder,” he said, pointing at the device she’d gotten from David. “It will only take a minute.”

“Well,” Elizabeth said, reaching for the phone, “let’s call Victor.”

What Air Supports Us
William A. Stubblefield
PART IV

CHAPTER 32

“No . . . no, I think it’s better if I come downtown . . . OK, I’ll leave right now . . . about thirty minutes . . . Thanks, Victor.”

Elizabeth placed the phone back in the cradle.

“Jen,” she asked, “can you drive me downtown?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Can I come?” Thomas asked.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” Elizabeth said tentatively. “Jen’s going to be enough of a surprise.”

“Come on,” Jen protested, “he did find Ed’s back door to the camera. Suppose they have questions for him?”

“Please,” Thomas begged, his expression melting into a caricature of disappointment.

“Oh no, anything but Bambi eyes,” Elizabeth groaned. “Oh hell, Victor will find out sooner or later. Meet me in the lobby in five minutes.”

She returned to her office for her coat and bag, and paused to check her e-mail. She found nothing of importance: the usual assortment of corporate announcements, a response to a technical question she’d sent a colleague at the MIT Media Lab, a note from Regina Martinelli, and a recurring joke about lawyers and rats that had once again found her through a chain of mailing lists whose origins were a mystery. It occurred to her that there must be only three or four forwardings between her and every tasteless joke on the Internet. She opened Regina’s note.

Elizabeth,

Thank you for your help last night. I got home without any problems, and Peter was waiting for me. He was very sweet and reassuring. I’m sorry I behaved so foolishly. :-)

Thanks again.

R.

P. S. I hope your truck is OK.

Jesus, Elizabeth thought, *a thank you, an apology, a pretense of domestic harmony, a smiley face and a phony show of concern for my truck. Not bad for a four-line e-mail.* She closed the message, took her coat and bag, and started down the hall.

She saw Jen and Thomas ahead of her, and ran to join them. Jen had put a bright red leather motocross jacket on over her black jeans and t-shirt. Thomas was wearing a long black wool coat that reached almost to his ankles, and wrap-around sunglasses. They walked quickly and said little. Elizabeth could feel their excitement, and it almost made her forget her own weariness – or Bruce and Victor’s likely reaction to their involvement.

As they entered the building lobby and turned toward the door, Elizabeth noticed someone on the second floor balcony. She glanced upward, and saw Wayne Ballard looking down at them. He did not look happy.

“Libby,” Jen asked as they left the shaded lobby and walked into the bright winter sun, “did you see Wayne upstairs?”

“Yes,” she said as she took her sunglasses from her green shoulder bag. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I’m not, not after what we found. It’s just . . .” Jen paused. “I was wondering what he was thinking.”

“I don’t know, but I’m not going to worry about it. Wayne was betraying all of us. If he wants to confront me, let him.”

“I’m just trying to make sense of this,” Jen pressed.

“You know how Wayne is,” Thomas said. “Maybe he just did it for the hell of it.”

“Yeah, but it’s just so weird.”

“Why?” Thomas asked.

“Well . . .” Jen paused as if searching her memory. “OK. Don’t you wonder why Ed called his agent Caliban?”

Elizabeth nodded. “You have a point,” she said.

“OK,” Thomas said, “let me in on this.”

“Well you know,” Elizabeth said, “Caliban. It seems odd that Ed would choose such an unpleasant character to name his agent.”

“Especially if he was using it to fantasize about Regina,” Jen added.

“Actually,” Thomas said sheepishly, “I don’t know who Caliban was.”

Elizabeth looked at him with disapproval.

“Science nerd,” Jen said.

“But cute,” Thomas grinned, poking her in the ribs.

She swatted at his head, and he ducked away. Elizabeth ignored them.

“Thomas,” she said, “I’ll forgive you this once, but you should read at least some Shakespeare. In *The Tempest*, Prospero was a magician. He had two servants. Ariel was a fairy: very powerful, flighty and mischievous, but essentially good . . .”

“Or, at least amoral,” Jen interrupted.

“. . . Caliban was deformed and evil . . .”

“He kept trying to rape Prospero’s daughter,” Jen added.

“I see,” Thomas said, shaking his head. “Why would he want to talk to such a creepy character to turn on Regina’s camera?”

“Unconscious self-loathing,” Jen said firmly, “and he deserved it.”

“Maybe,” Elizabeth said tentatively.

“What do you mean?” Jen asked.

“I’m not sure,” Elizabeth said, starting toward the parking lot. “We can figure it out later. Let’s get this over with.”

Elizabeth sat at the end of the metal table in the barren interrogation room and watched as Thomas led Victor and Bruce through the evidence he had discovered. Things had gone well enough after the detectives recovered from their initial shock at the retinue she brought with her. As Thomas presented his discoveries, they became increasingly attentive, and Elizabeth felt almost superfluous.

The first few minutes after their arrival were considerably less comfortable. She had entered Victor's office looking and feeling like the den mother to a troop of science scouts. Victor immediately realized that she had brought her friends into the investigation, and was clearly unhappy. He said nothing, but threw Elizabeth a glance that promised a reckoning. Bruce's expression seemed to oscillate between amusement and irritation.

In spite of this, the evidence captured their attention. She gave them an overview of their discoveries, then let Jen and Thomas take over. Bruce quickly entered the discussion. Victor watched and listened quietly at first, but became engrossed in Thomas' story of his discovery of 'Caliban' and its ability to circumvent all privacy protections in the system. He told them how he had traced through the building code and discovered that Wayne Ballard had created these altered agents.

"So all Ed Walters had to do was use the name 'Caliban,' and he bypassed the security controls entirely," Bruce confirmed.

Thomas nodded.

"What else could 'Caliban' do?" Victor asked.

"He could read other people's e-mail, get at their files, eavesdrop on cameras and microphones, access phone messages . . ."

"It looks like Ed could do just about anything," Bruce interrupted.

"Not just Ed," Jen added.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, this wasn't something Wayne just did for Ed . . ." she explained.

"It was general . . ." Thomas interrupted.

". . . and he had other clients," Jen finished, without missing a beat.

Victor raised an eyebrow and glanced at his partner. "Do we know whom?" he asked.

“Yeah,” Thomas said, opening the list of people Caliban and his brothers served.

In addition to Ed, the list included most of the building’s managers. Apparently, spying was a routine feature of life in the executive suites. She scanned for Robert Hill and quickly found him. She felt strangely disappointed. Peter Martinelli was on the list, but Regina was not – apparently Peter had his own secrets. With the exception of Wayne Ballard, almost none of the technical staff were on it. She was relieved that David Chavez was not on the list, and surprised to see Jason Evans’ name was also absent. Most of all, she felt saddened to see Gil Baca’s name among Wayne’s clients.

Elizabeth watched the detectives’ reactions as they read through the names. Victor said nothing, but sat back in his chair, evaluating its implications for his investigation. Bruce went over the list repeatedly. Elizabeth watched the slight movements of his facial muscles as the emotions played beneath his skin. After a moment, Victor turned to her.

“Could these people have accessed Ed Walters’ investigation into the information theft?” he asked. “Could they have gotten at the files he kept about Regina Martinelli?”

“I don’t think so,” Elizabeth answered. “They could have found the files, but remember, that data had an extra level of encryption that even Caliban couldn’t crack. In order to read them, they would have had to get the key out of the escrow service.”

“Refresh my memory,” Bruce asked, “how would that work?”

“Well, everyone has a personal encryption key they can use for things that need extra security. Ed used his to encrypt both his investigation into the theft, and his stalking of Regina. Those keys are kept in a separate ‘escrow,’ so the company can get at them in an emergency. The escrow list, in turn, is encrypted using yet another key, and that master key is split in two. Robert and Ed each had a copy of one half; Regina and an attorney at one of the consortium’s parent companies had the other.”

“Is there any way to tell if someone might have gotten Ed’s key?” Victor asked.

“Well,” she said, “a week ago, I’d have said that was impossible. We have both technical and organizational protections on the escrow list. Now, I just don’t know.”

Victor rubbed his forehead and looked visibly frustrated.

“Mr. Lee,” he asked, “could someone use one of these ‘backdoor agents’ to change things in the databases?”

“No, but Wayne had other tools that could,” Thomas answered.

He went on to describe the database editors, and their ability to modify any of the building data, including the usage records.

“So all that information about who was in the building the night of Ed Walters’ death, about who went where – none of it’s reliable?” Victor asked.

Thomas nodded.

“Have you found anything else?” Bruce asked.

“No,” Elizabeth said, “that’s about it.”

She did not mention the botched lie detector test.

“There is one thing,” Jen said. “Libby, tell them about your truck.”

“Your truck?” Victor asked, turning to Elizabeth.

Reluctantly, she told them about Regina’s call; about meeting her in the lobby with Guru Deep Singh Khalsa, and walking her to the car. She told them about their discovery that her truck tires had been deliberately flattened.

“Thanks for keeping us informed,” Victor said flatly.

“I didn’t think it was relevant,” she said.

“You’re staying alone all night in a building that allows everyone to spy on everyone else, conducting your own murder investigation, and someone vandalizes your car. I’d say that’s relevant.” Elizabeth heard the tension return to his voice.

“I’m sorry.”

“This was my fault,” Victor said, shaking his head. “Elizabeth, I asked you to find this information. I should have known things would get out of hand. Ms. Sorenson, Mr. Lee, your involvement is also my responsibility. But now, it needs to end.”

He looked at each of them in turn.

“I’m sending our computer forensics man over tomorrow, and I want you to give him everything that is relevant to this investigation. Then, I want you all to go back your lives and forget about this. Bruce, can you think of anything else we should ask them while they’re here?”

“Mr. Lee,” Bruce said, “Do we need any special tools to look at the data you’ve brought us?”

“No,” he answered, “I copied the necessary viewers onto the disk. Just open everything up like ordinary files.”

“Well,” Victor said, “The rest is up to us.”

They rose. Thomas and Jen shook hands with the detectives and started to leave.

“One last thing,” Victor interrupted.

Elizabeth knew what he was going to say.

“Would you mind if Detective Kaminsky and I had a word alone with Dr. Florczyk?”

Elizabeth sat back down as Jen and Thomas closed the door. Victor sat down across the table from her, and Bruce stood behind him, leaning against the wall.

“Elizabeth,” he said, “I’m disappointed in you – damnit, I’m angry.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but you weren’t there, and I was out of ideas. I needed their help.”

“You said you’d keep me informed of what your were doing.”

“I know, but you weren’t there, I felt pressured, it was getting late . . .”

“I have a phone.”

Elizabeth took a breath and let it out. She nodded, but said nothing.

“I don’t care if I asked for your help,” Victor said. “I was wrong, and I want you off this. It’s for your own good. It’s for the good of my investigation.” He stressed the word ‘my.’ “Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Now, before you leave, is there anything else I should know?”

Elizabeth felt the muscles in her neck tense.

“Well . . .” she began.

“Come on,” Victor pressed.

“You’re not going to like this . . .”

“I can imagine,” Victor said. “Just tell me.”

“I spoke to Wayne this morning.”

Victor stared at her. Bruce held his hand in front of his mouth. She could not tell whether he was hiding a smile or a grimace.

“You what?” Victor finally asked.

“I spoke to Wayne. I wanted to get a feel for what he was thinking – what he’d done.”

Victor took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Do you have any idea what could have happened?” he asked.

Elizabeth detected the effort of emotional control in his voice.

“I had to be sure,” she explained.

Victor nodded but said nothing.

“There’s more,” she said.

“Why was I afraid you were going to say that?”

“I used Jen’s emotion sensor. I wanted to see if he was lying.”

“What are you talking about?”

She told Victor and Bruce about the brooch, and about Jen’s work in computer sensing of emotions – and lies. The detectives listened but said nothing. When she’d finished, Victor stood up, and walked to the door. He stared through the mesh reinforced glass into the hallway. He neither moved nor turned around.

“Elizabeth,” Bruce said, sitting down in the chair his partner had just vacated, “do you realize how dangerous that was?”

“It was OK. Jen and Thomas were close by.”

“And will they be close by if Wayne or someone else comes to your house?” he asked.

She said nothing.

“And,” Bruce continued, “Do you know what that little stunt could do to our investigation?”

She shook her head.

“Suppose we wind up taking this into court,” he explained. “What if Wayne Ballard goes on trial, and it comes out that almost all of our evidence came from a woman – a civilian – who used questionable, probably illegal means to spy on her colleagues? What effect would it have on a jury, let alone a judge, if it came out that you performed a lie detector test on our suspect without his knowledge or consent?”

“But, you had nothing to do with it.”

“That’s not the point,” Victor said, turning to face her. “A good lawyer would discredit you in heartbeat, and when he does, he’ll discredit every bit of evidence you’ve given us.”

“I’m sorry, but I had to be sure.”

“That’s not your job,” Victor asserted.

“But it was my job to incriminate Gil Baca.”

Elizabeth heard her own voice rise, and felt the grief and frustration in her chest. She stood up and faced the detective.

“Now he’s dead. Did you expect me to do it again without doing everything I could to make sure it wouldn’t happen again?”

“Damnit, Gil Baca’s suicide was not your fault,” Victor insisted.

“Wasn’t it?” Elizabeth asked angrily.

“Elizabeth, it was not your fault,” he repeated.

She said nothing, but took a deep breath and slowly sat back down.

“Is there anything else we should know?” Victor asked.

“So, was he lying?” Bruce interrupted.

“Bruce,” Victor snapped.

“The damage is done,” Bruce said, “we might as well find out what she learned.”

“Not much,” Elizabeth said, shaking her head. “The lie detector didn’t really work.”

She explained how Wayne admitted to his ability to change the systems data. She told them about his angry tirade and its effect on the test.

“The only thing that showed any response was when he said he thought Gil Baca killed Ed.”

“Oh?” Bruce was clearly interested.

“It wasn’t much, but there was an elevation in skin temperature. It was slight, but could be consistent with a lie.”

Bruce looked at his partner.

“Maybe he knew Gil Baca was innocent,” he said.

Victor shrugged.

“Is there anything else?” Bruce asked.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, “I think he recognized Jen’s brooch.”

“He knew it was the lie detector?” Victor asked.

“I think so.”

Victor said nothing for a few seconds, but leaned against the window ledge with his arms crossed and stared at her.

“Elizabeth,” he said finally, “that little stunt has not only jeopardized our investigation, but also your safety.”

“Victor . . .” she began.

“Just be quiet and listen,” he interrupted. “If you see anything that might be a threat – someone following you, a hang-up call, a sideways glance from Wayne Ballard or anyone else – I want you to call me immediately. Do you understand.”

“Yes.”

“And, if you do anything else except turn this data over to our forensics man tomorrow, I will personally arrest you for obstructing my investigation, and I will do everything in my power to keep you in jail until it is finished.”

He looked into her eyes.

“Am I clear?” he demanded.

“Victor . . .”

“Am I clear?”

She took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly.

“Yes,” she said.

“Good day, Elizabeth.”

Victor turned around, walked to his office window and stood there, his back turned, staring out at the street below.

She took her coat and bag and left the office.

CHAPTER 33

“Victor, Bruce . . .” Gerry Bruner sounded frustrated and increasingly impatient.

He called the detectives by their first names, a tactic Victor recognized as an effort to annoy him. He ignored it.

The lawyer continued. “Mr. Ballard has cooperated fully. We came here to meet with you as soon as you asked. You’ve asked every one of your questions three or four times, and he has answered every one of your questions three or four times. Now, if you cannot come up with a new question, I suggest we end this interview. I’m not going to let you treat my client like a criminal.”

In a transition as calculated as any actor’s, his look of exasperation gave way to a smile. He placed his clasped hands on the table and looked Victor in the eye.

“Mr. Bruner,” Victor returned the smile, “we have not accused your client of anything, yet. We do need answers to these questions. I’m sorry you misinterpret our efforts at thoroughness, but they are in everyone’s best interest.”

He spoke in a tone of exaggerated reasonableness. Victor had frequently crossed swords with Gerry Bruner, and understood the dance. He knew the defense attorney had learned everything he could about their case against his client, and was looking for some excuse to end the interview, something that would allow him to storm out in a deliberate, tactical show of outrage. Victor began to move into his own endgame.

“Now, Mr. Ballard, you claim that all the files on your computer are just normal systems maintenance tools.”

“Except for the altered executive agent, that’s correct,” Wayne answered.

“And you have no idea how the altered executive got there?”

“Like I said before, I keep a copy of the executive’s source code in my own directory. I refer to it often, and it’s easier than getting it out of the source code repository every time. I have no idea who altered it to bypass system security, or how people started using it.”

“What about the database editors?” Victor asked.

“They’re just routine maintenance tools.”

“Is it true that you could use them to alter any of the data in the building systems, including the records of building use?”

“Don’t answer that, Wayne,” Bruner interrupted. “Detective, this is not relevant. I’ve told you my client only used these tools for legitimate purposes.”

“I did not suggest he used them improperly, Mr. Bruner. I only asked about their capabilities. Could you instruct your client to answer the question?”

Gerry Bruner smiled and leaned back in the ancient metal chair with cracked vinyl cushions. He clasped his hands across his prominent stomach, just above the large silver belt buckle, taking care to slide them beneath the braided leather strands of the turquoise bolo tie that was his trademark. His other trademark, two skinny braids of graying hair, hanged down the front of his chest. Strips of bright red cloth entwined in them advertised his claim to be part Native American. It was a claim the police and prosecuting attorneys universally and laughingly ridiculed.

“Victor, we agree the tools are powerful,” he finally answered.

“Mr. Ballard,” Victor asked in a reasonable tone of voice, “according to our sources, you have not made these tools available to any of your fellow programmers. Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“No,” Wayne answered.

“Let me elaborate,” Gerry Bruner said smiling. “These are tools of my client’s trade. He built them himself, and they are part of his value to the company. Of course, he doesn’t share them.”

“The software we found on your machine allowed certain users to bypass security controls,” Victor pressed, ignoring the attorney and leaning toward Wayne Ballard. “Copies had been inserted into the system. How do you explain that?”

Again, Gerry Bruner answered for his client.

“My client cannot be held responsible if someone else modified that software and misused it.”

Victor noticed the exaggerated irritation in Bruner’s voice, and guessed he was getting ready to storm out of the interview room. He continued to speak directly to Wayne.

“Mr. Ballard, are we to believe some unknown person bypassed the security controls on your computer, and either replaced or modified the software on your disk?”

Wayne smiled. “Well, if they were able to make those programs do what you say, they must be pretty good.”

Bruner raised his voice. “Detectives, we’ve been over the same questions a half-dozen times. If there’s a point to all this, please make it. If not, I think this interview needs to come to an end.”

“Mr. Bruner,” Victor said, standing up and leaning forward across the table, “you know the point.”

He knew the attorney was about to create his scene and storm out. He knew it was his last chance to give Wayne Ballard something to think about. He turned and faced him.

“You helped Ed Walters violate the basic privacy protections of the Sky City Building’s software. You were in the building the night Mr. Walters was killed, and witnesses placed you upstairs near the time of his death.”

Victor shouted the last sentences over Gerry Bruner’s protests.

“Wayne,” Victor said, deliberately ignoring the attorney, “you’re near the end of the line. I suggest you think about cooperating.”

Gerry Bruner stood up and placed the legal pad in his briefcase.

“Detectives, that is enough. This interview is over. If you wish to charge my client, charge him. Mr. Ballard, it’s time to leave.”

Neither officer rose from their chairs. Bruner led Wayne Ballard toward the door. He stopped and turned around.

“One more thing,” he said in an angry hiss. “I find your use of civilians to circumvent my client’s constitutional rights appalling, and promise I will bring it to the attention of your internal affairs division.”

“What are you talking about?” Victor said innocently.

“You know what I’m talking about. Tell your Doctor Florczyk and her pals to stay away from my client.”

Victor shrugged. "I don't understand. We simply asked Doctor Florczyk to find the software that allowed Ed Walters to spy on his colleagues. The path led to Mr. Ballard."

"She followed the wrong path," Bruner snapped. "Find another."

He turned to leave, paused, and turned back.

"If you have anything else to say to my client, contact me first."

"We'll be talking to you, Gerry," Victor said, smiling.

He continued to smile until the door had closed.

"So what do you think?" Victor asked his partner.

"He's guilty of something," Bruce said, "as if hiring Gerry isn't proof enough."

Gerald Bruner was a fixture in Albuquerque's criminal courts, and a favorite of the local press. He had a reputation for taking on high profile cases, crafting defenses that would embarrass all but the most shameless, and winning on little more than showmanship, audacity and an almost pathological lack of shame. Over the years, Victor had come to know him better than he wished.

"Have you dealt much with Gerry?" he asked his partner.

"Not a lot, thankfully," Bruce said. "I understand you've got history with him?"

Victor nodded. "You could say that."

Gerry Bruner had moved to Albuquerque fifteen years ago from Los Angeles. According to rumor, he was on the brink of disbarment for misuse of client funds when he'd left. He'd re-invented his career among Albuquerque's low-rent criminal defenders, spreading stacks of business cards among local bail bondsmen, lining up outside metro court every morning for a shot at a domestic abuse or drunk driving case. Short, heavysset, prone to cheap suits

and loud ties, and possessing questionable legal skills, there was little to distinguish him from the other career bottom feeders clustered around the courthouse. Willard Carson had changed all that.

“You were involved in that demon case, weren’t you?” Bruce pressed.

“Yeah, I was there when Gerry got his big break,” Victor confirmed.

He was still in uniform, working the night shift in a squad car, when he got the call. A small time criminal named Willard Carson was driving his wife and twelve year-old son from Bakersfield to Tulsa when he pulled off the highway west of Albuquerque. Leaving his wife passed out in the passenger seat, he dragged his sleeping son to the side of the road, and cut his throat with a ten-inch, bone-handled hunting knife. Police found drugs in Carson’s blood, drugs in his wife’s blood, and drugs scattered all over the van. Victor was the first officer at the scene.

“Did I ever tell you about it?” he asked.

Bruce shook his head. “I remember he got some guy off for killing his kid. Argued some bullshit about demon possession.”

Victor told his partner the facts of the Carson case. He told him how he’d arrived at the side of the freeway to find the boy dead in a pool of blood, and his father praying loudly in tongues, still holding the knife in his hand. After the drugs had cleared his system, Carson insisted the murder was the result of demonic possession. He’d claimed the devil had deceived him, appearing in the guise of God, and commanding him to sacrifice his son. Unlike the Biblical Isaac, Willard Carson’s unfortunate child never got a reprieve.

“Gerry didn’t come on board until later, though,” Victor said.

“What happened?” Bruce asked.

“Well, Carson had a court-appointed defender, who tried to put together an insanity plea. Carson refused to go along with it, fired him and insisted on defending himself. He claimed he’d been possessed by a demon and had nothing to do with his son’s murder.”

Victor remembered the sight of Willard Carson: gaunt, bearded, filled with erratic, fundamentalist fires and proclaiming the reality of Satanic possession to the court and the media. They called the case the Abraham murder, and let none of it escape the local news.

“Carson made a complete circus of the initial hearings,” Victor explained.

“How’d Bruner get involved?” Bruce asked.

“No one’s completely sure, but somehow he managed to contact Carson, and convince him he could argue a demon possession defense and win.”

Victor got up and walked to the coffee pot on the table in the large office he and Bruce shared with a half dozen other detectives. He poured two cups, handed one to his partner, then sat back down.

“Bruner found a priest from up in the northern part of the state who claimed to be an exorcist, and brought him in to testify about the reality of Satanic possession. The poor prosecutor was some kid a year out of law school. He produced evidence that the priest was a drunk and a pederast from a wealthy Philadelphia parish who’d been sent to New Mexico to dry out.”

Victor chuckled and sipped his coffee.

“Poor kid didn’t understand how deep people’s attitudes toward the church run in this state. Gerry went on the news and protested the ‘desperate, sacrilegious attack on a man of God.’ The next morning, he had a couple dozen protesters lined up outside the courthouse, holding crosses, praying for the soul of Willard Carson and the redemption of a legal system infected by the forces of evil.”

Bruce smiled and shook his head.

“Of course,” Victor continued, “Gerry made sure the local media knew when he was arriving at court. Every morning, he walked past the protesters with his exorcist and a whole flock of witnesses in tow.”

“Witnesses?”

“Yeah, experts on demon possession. He had a couple fundamentalist preachers, a new-age philosopher from Santa Fe, and some psychologist who claimed a Harvard education – he even had a guy who said he was an ex-Los Alamos physicist who’d discovered how to photograph ghosts. Gerry was pretty ecumenical about it all. It was too much for the judge.”

“Who was he?”

Victor mentioned the name of a local judge who was known more for his political ambitions than either his legal skills or personal integrity. He had run unsuccessfully for a number of higher offices, returning to the shelter of his judgeship after each failed attempt. Bruce laughed.

“Anyway,” Victor continued, “the judge immediately called both attorneys into his chambers and strongly hinted he would smile upon an insanity plea.”

“But Carson had already refused to deal.”

“Right. That’s where Gerry showed his true genius. He took his entire contingent of preachers and psychologists into Carson’s cell and made them all kneel in a circle around him. He led them through six hours of sustained prayer until his client accepted the plea bargain as God’s will.”

“I remember he got off,” Bruce acknowledged.

“Yeah, he spent three years in the state hospital, then went on his way. Gerry became a star.” Victor smiled ironically.

Bruce knew the rest. In the years following the Carson case, Gerald Bruner had re-invented himself with a thoroughness unrivaled by all but Hollywood’s most desperate. He grew his hair and wore it in braids. He spent his newfound wealth on Armani suits and the largest, flashiest turquoise jewelry he could find. He wore it into court, and threatened anyone who complained with the claim that he was one-eighth Pima Indian and would vigorously defend his right to express his heritage. He became a fixture at New Mexico Democratic Party functions, and regularly crept into photo opportunities with embarrassed local politicians. Gerald Bruner made it a point of personal

pride that he never advertised. His name never appeared on buses, billboards, magazine ads, or the Yellow Pages. It didn't need to.

"So," Bruce asked, "what do you think Bruner's up to this time?"

"Oh, he's looking for a deal," Victor answered, "like always. He just needs to go through his dance, and get on TV a few times, first."

"You think Wayne Ballard killed Ed Walters?"

"I don't know," Victor answered, scratching his head in thought. "No, I don't think so."

"But, he knows who did," Bruce added.

"But, he knows who did."

CHAPTER 34

Elizabeth heard a tapping on the door frame, and twisted in her chair to face it. Victor Rodriguez stood in the threshold.

“Do you have a moment?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said, “come in.”

“I just wanted to see how you were doing,” he said as he closed the door and sat down.

“I’m OK,” she said. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was going to apologize for losing my temper.”

Elizabeth smiled.

“What do you say we call it even?” he said.

“Even,” she agreed. “I spoke to your computer fellow this morning.”

“Ron Garcia? He’s a good man. He knows his stuff.”

“He seems to. I got him the things you asked for: the evidence on the information theft, the stuff on Wayne.”

“So, how are you doing?” he asked again.

Elizabeth did not answer a second time. She sensed Victor’s reasons for asking passed simple courtesy, and she waited for him to elaborate.

“I heard you went to Gil Baca’s service last night,” he pressed, “and his widow had an usher ask you to leave.”

She exhaled heavily. “Who told you?”

“I’m a detective.”

“You talked to Jen?”

“Yeah. She’s worried about you,” he said. “I am, too.”

“I’m OK,” Elizabeth said. “What’s happening with Wayne?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“I know.”

Victor nodded. “We took him downtown and interviewed him this morning. He admits the software was his, swears he only used it for legitimate purposes and denies everything else. No surprises. He’s hired Gerry Bruner.”

“No.”

The syllable came out in a single astonished reflex.

“You know about Gerry?” Victor asked. “Of course,” he said, answering himself, “everybody with a TV knows about Gerry. The DA’s assigned Carmen Goodman to the case . . .”

“That name sounds familiar . . .” Elizabeth said.

“She’s sort of Batman to Gerry’s Joker,” Victor explained. “She’s the only attorney at the DA’s office who actually enjoys going up against him.”

Carmen Goodman had made Gerry Bruner something of a career niche. She was a young, attractive, publicity hungry counterpoint to the aging, bizarre, publicity hungry Bruner. Their interactions seemed as choreographed as a Hong Kong martial arts movie, and usually ended in some sort of deal.

“What’s going to happen?” Elizabeth asked.

Victor shrugged. “We’ve given Carmen what we have. She’ll take it from here.”

“Wayne’s still at work. Do you plan to arrest him?”

“Not yet.”

“But, he seems to be involved in Ed’s murder,” Elizabeth insisted.

“We have nothing linking him to that.”

“What about his bypassing system security?” she asked, her voice thick with frustration. “Spying on people? Helping Ed stalk Regina?”

“Elizabeth, we don’t have much. Most of what he’s done is a civil matter between him, the company and his colleagues.”

“OK then, the stalking.”

“Just bargaining chips.”

Elizabeth looked at him inquisitively.

“Be patient,” Victor said, “Carmen knows what she’s doing.”

“Do you think Wayne killed Ed?” Elizabeth asked.

“I’m not sure. Gerry is hinting he knows who did, and will cooperate in exchange for immunity.”

“Immunity?”

“If Wayne does know who killed Ed, as Gerry seems to be hinting, he might be an accomplice to the murder. Carmen would probably grant him immunity from felony prosecution if he gave her the killer and testified in court. She’d also bargain on the smaller charges relating to hacking your systems, helping Ed spy on Regina, and his role in the theft of your intellectual property.”

“The information theft?”

“Yeah. He hooked up Gil Baca’s CD drive.” Victor chuckled. “It’s another bargaining chip. Carmen’s pretty creative when she goes to work on Gerry.”

“What do you think will happen next?” Elizabeth pressed.

“Oh, Carmen and Gerry will do their dance. Eventually, she’ll either put together a case against Wayne in Ed’s murder, or decide his story is true. If it is, she’ll do a little horse trading, cut a deal, and go after the real killer.”

“If Wayne decides to testify then my . . .” She groped for the right word, “the fiasco with Jen’s lie detector might not hurt?”

“It might help Wayne get a better deal, but, if he’s telling the truth, it shouldn’t hurt us against Ed’s killer.”

“Thank God. What about the building systems: the security holes, the spying?” she asked.

“Carmen will issue a report when she’s ready. As a courtesy, she’ll give advance copies to the consortium’s board of directors, probably to Regina Martinelli – if she still looks clean. I don’t see any more criminal charges coming out of it, but there could be civil suits.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“What do you think will happen to the project?” Victor asked. “Your guess is probably better than mine.”

“I imagine there will be a shakeup at the top, what with most of management using Wayne’s backdoors to spy on each other. I suspect the board will clean

house, but I don't know if anyone will sue. I hope things will settle down, that we'll get a chance to fix the systems, and continue our work."

"Could they shut you down?"

"The board can do whatever they want," she explained. "It depends on the publicity, on the politics, the consortium's budget . . . the usual. The quality of the science we've done won't matter much," she said ironically.

Victor looked at her sympathetically.

"I'm sorry," she added. "You don't need to hear that old song."

"No, it's OK."

"Frankly, once Robert's out of the picture, I don't know what will happen."

"You think they'll get rid of him?"

"For violating privacy? Spying on his colleagues? Yeah. He's made a lot of enemies, and he won't get much help from his friends on this one."

"You sound sorry."

"After everything that's happened, I just don't feel like judging him – or anybody."

"I understand."

She acknowledged Victor's support with a nod and a half smile, and looked out her window toward the mountains. It was late afternoon, and the light lengthened the shadows, further softening the subtle contrasts of rock, sand and dried grasses.

"Robert can be difficult," she explained, "but he is a brilliant man, and I shared much of his vision."

"What's that?"

She smiled. "It seems silly now, with all that's happened."

“Tell me,” Victor said.

She looked out her window and thought.

“OK,” she said finally, taking a breath and letting it out. “I believed that computers and telecommunications could make our lives better. I believed they could help us build real communities – overcome the isolation of big cities. I believed they could give every kid a shot at the best possible education.”

She paused and smiled.

“I believed workers could be safe and productive, politicians could be accountable, and we could usher in an age of reason,” she concluded in an ironic, self-mocking tone. “It sounds naive, now.”

“I don’t know,” Victor said, “computers have helped with all those things. Besides,” he smiled, “gossip, spying, grudges – they’re just as much a part of community as reason and trust.”

“You should know,” Elizabeth said.

“I should know. What about Ed Walters? Why do you think he got involved with Wayne?”

“Well, he never trusted Robert. I would think a chance to keep an eye on him might be hard to resist. And, then there was Regina.”

Victor nodded.

“The guy I can’t figure out is Wayne,” Elizabeth said.

“What do you mean?”

“I can understand the managers wanting information, control. They’re ambitious people, but Wayne wasn’t like that.”

“How so?”

“He seemed happy where he was. He didn’t want to climb the ladder – hell, he held management in contempt.”

“That’s reason enough,” Victor said, shifting in the chair and crossing his legs.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, selling them this ‘service’ would be a way of getting back at them. It gave him power over them. They needed him, and he had something on them. He felt superior.”

She smiled. “That does make sense. In fact, it explains something that’s been bothering me.”

“What’s that?”

“You remember Ed’s backdoor agent was called ‘Caliban?’”

“Yeah, the monster in *The Tempest*,” Victor confirmed.

“We – Jen, Thomas and me – we were wondering why Ed would name it after such a negative character. It almost mocks his attachment to Regina. He wouldn’t want to act through something so negative for a sexual fantasy.”

“But?”

“Well, suppose Wayne named the agent for him? He would have known Ed called his regular agent ‘Ariel.’ Suppose he didn’t ask Ed what he wanted, but just named it ‘Caliban’ and gave it to him? Suppose he fixed it so Ed couldn’t change the name himself?”

“Ed might have been too embarrassed to ask him to change it.”

“Right,” Elizabeth said, “and it supports your idea about Wayne holding management in contempt. It also fits Wayne’s sense of humor.”

Victor smiled. “You know, you have a knack for this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Detection, psychology . . .” He shook his head. “Just remember one thing: you’re retired.”

Elizabeth raised her coffee mug in a mock toast.

“To retirement,” she said.

“Now that you are retired, do you have any plans for the holidays?” he asked.

“Oh God,” she groaned, “I’d forgotten all about Christmas – what with everything going on.”

“Well then, it should be a nice chance to bring life back to normal. Are you going to be with family?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

Victor frowned. “That’s unfortunate. Are they far away?”

“My mother’s passed away,” Elizabeth answered. “My dad lives in San Francisco. He has a new friend, and he’s taking her to Hawaii for the holidays.”

“I see,” Victor said.

“Oh, he invited me,” Elizabeth added. “He even offered to pay for my ticket.”

“Christmas in Hawaii with your Dad? You turned that down?”

“I think he should be alone with his friend.”

“He wouldn’t have asked you if he didn’t want you to come.”

“Well, it’s too late now. I doubt there are any plane tickets available – let alone hotel rooms,” she explained, “and I don’t think they want to share a room with me.”

Victor laughed. “I imagine that’s true. Look, Michelle and I are having a party Sunday night – more of an open house, really. Why don’t you come?”

“I couldn’t intrude.”

“You wouldn’t be intruding. Michelle would like to meet you.”

She shook her head. “Thanks, but like you said, Christmas is for family.”

“So it is, but this is a couple of weeks before Christmas, and there are going to be about a hundred people there . . .”

“I couldn’t . . .”

“Michelle’s inviting her entire office, and I’m inviting half the force. Bruce will be there . . .”

Elizabeth found herself smiling.

“You’re weakening. I can tell,” Victor grinned.

Her smile turned into a laugh.

“Can I bring anything?” she asked.

“No, there will be plenty of food. Michelle’s used to feeding cops. But, if you feel guilty, grab a six pack on your way.”

“OK,” she said, “I’ll try.”

“I’ll e-mail you directions,” he said. “And don’t just try. I’ll see you Sunday.”

CHAPTER 35

Elizabeth turned south onto Interstate 25, and headed toward the valley. As she tracked the freeway ramp, she reached down on the seat beside her, and steadied the bottle of wine against the force of the turn. It was an eighteen-dollar Montepulciano she had picked up at the Quarters Liquor Store on her way. She did not know the brand, but the woman who managed the wine department recommended it. She had followed her recommendations before, and trusted her. She'd smiled when Elizabeth had told her she was going over her usual ten-dollar limit, but had the sensitivity to keep it below twenty dollars.

Elizabeth thought back over what had been a strange few days at work. To her relief, she had hardly seen Wayne. What little time he was not with his lawyer, he'd spent in the systems laboratory, sending David and Jason out on service calls. The one time she had crossed his path in the building's lobby, Wayne had turned and walked quickly back to his lab.

A similar tension filled the rest the building. The morning after her discovery of Caliban and the other rogue agents, Robert had appeared in her office. Between apologies and efforts to justify his actions in terms of “the good of the project,” he’d told her that Wayne had informed his “clients” of the discovery of the phantom agents.

As she tried to recover her normal routine, it seemed that people were preparing for the inevitable. Stress levels among management were higher than usual. The conference rooms seemed deserted, few managers stopped in her office with requests for reports or proposals, and there was little of the usual discussion and politics in the common area outside the second floor offices. It seemed as though people were hunkered down, waiting for a storm, or a phalanx of lawyers to come at them across the desert surrounding the Sky City Building.

The day after the police had questioned Wayne, Robert had called an “all-hands” meeting in the large auditorium. In the building’s culture, calling a physical meeting instead of some sort of virtual conference indicated a situation of considerable significance. Robert had spoken in vague terms of “the recent forces threatening our community.” Without revealing anything beyond the facts of Ed and Gil’s deaths, he’d promised the project was “waking from a long nightmare,” and urged everyone to be strong in the face of “further trials that awakening might bring.” The performance was vintage Robert: reassuring and uninformative, inspiring and ambiguous, a textbook example of corporate leadership and corporate dissembling.

After the meeting, he’d kept his usual e-mail announcements coming. He appeared on the first floor more often than usual, touching base with nearly every employee, engaging them with his impressive understanding of their work, and creating a highly visible show of normalcy. He repeatedly consulted with Elizabeth about employee morale, asking her advice on shepherding the project through the crisis.

Elizabeth reached the freeway exit near Victor’s house and, steadying the bottle of wine on the seat, turned onto the off-ramp. Once she’d reached the surface street, she took the instructions Victor had e-mailed her, and held

them over the steering wheel, reading them again in the truck's dome light. She quickly found Victor's home and the knot of cars parked outside it.

As the door opened, Elizabeth heard a flood of conversation and what sounded like a live band coming from the back of the house. A pretty woman drew the door wide and welcomed her in. She was small and fine boned, but her dark eyes suggested a remarkable strength of will and perception.

"You must be Elizabeth," she said.

"Yes," Elizabeth said, shifting the wine to her left hand and holding out her right.

"I'm Michelle Rodriguez," Victor's wife took Elizabeth's hand and introduced herself. "I'm glad you could come."

Elizabeth entered, and Michelle closed the door behind her.

"After all Victor's said about you, I wanted to get a chance to meet you."

Michelle Rodriguez was prettier than Elizabeth had anticipated. She wore her dark hair long, and had it styled for the party, put up in graceful curves and a few carefully falling curls. She was petite, and carried herself with a grace Elizabeth envied. She wore flowing black pants made of what looked like silk, black patent leather pumps with a short heel, and a sleeveless, bright red sequined top. Elizabeth was glad she'd worn her black cocktail dress and heels.

"Anthony," Michelle called, suddenly sounding less like an elegant hostess than an authoritarian mother of two.

A handsome, dark-haired boy emerged from the crowd.

"Anthony," she said, "this is Doctor Florczyk. She's a friend of your father's. Why don't you take her coat into the bedroom."

The boy smiled and nodded. Elizabeth removed her coat, knelt down and held out her hand.

"Hello, Anthony, my name's Elizabeth."

The boy shook her hand. She was struck by his dark eyes.

“Hello, Doctor Florczyk,” he said, “I’m happy to meet you.”

He took her coat and left.

“He has lovely manners,” Elizabeth said.

“Thank you. It’s a struggle.”

“I brought something for the party,” Elizabeth said, handing her the Montepulciano.

Michelle opened the bag, looked at the label and smiled broadly.

“This is way too good for this bunch of cops and farmers. Come on, I’ll take you back to the kitchen and find some proper glasses – I’m pretty sure we’ll find Victor there.”

Elizabeth followed her through the crowd. On the way, Michelle explained the party’s layout. The food was in the kitchen, adults who wanted to talk were in the living room, kids were playing in the den, and there was a band for dancing on the back porch. Elizabeth glanced through the open doors to the enclosed porch and saw the crowd of dancers in the small room. She saw Bruce dancing with an attractive blonde in tight jeans and a loose white blouse and waved. He did not see her.

Michelle led her into the kitchen. Victor was drinking beer with three other men. Two white-haired ladies sat talking at the table.

The table was packed with food, and the kitchen air was almost tropical with warmth, moisture and the blending of a thousand smells. As usual for New Mexico households during the holidays, a huge pot of posole, a thick hominy and chile stew, simmered beside smaller pots of beans and red chile. The table was covered with plates of raw vegetables, salads, guacamole, chips, bread, tortillas and cheeses. Cakes, pies and plates stacked with cookies lined up on the counter next to the sink.

“Elizabeth,” Victor smiled and greeted her, “I’m glad you could make it.”

He introduced her to the people in the kitchen. The old ladies were his aunts: they smiled shyly and held their hands out to her. Victor introduced the men he was talking with, and she recognized Ron Garcia, the police computer forensicist.

“Doctor Florczyk,” Garcia said, shaking her hand, “I’m glad to see you.”

“Please,” she said, “call me Libby.”

“OK,” he smiled, “Libby.”

“All right,” Michelle interrupted.

She was holding two pieces of glass stemware, a corkscrew and the Montepulciano. She handed Victor the wine and the corkscrew.

“Elizabeth brought the good stuff,” she told him. “Be a sweetheart, and open it for us.”

“Don’t I get any?” he asked.

“No, you’d just put it in a plastic cup like that cheap stuff you make me drink.”

He opened the wine, filled the glasses, and handed them to Elizabeth and Michelle. Elizabeth heard the glasses clink together, and realized they were real crystal. She reminded herself to be careful. Victor poured a small amount of the Montepulciano into a plastic cup and raised it in a toast. Ron Garcia and the others raised their beers to join them.

“Welcome to our home,” Michelle said, as the glasses met.

After Elizabeth had finished several glasses of wine – with suitable toasts – and a bowl of homemade posole and red chile, Michelle instructed Victor to give her a tour of the party, and rushed off to meet a new set of guests. Before following him out of the kitchen, Elizabeth transferred her wine to a plastic cup, and carefully placed the crystal in a safe space at the rear of the counter.

“How has your week gone?” he asked her.

“Not bad.”

“Any problems with Wayne Ballard?”

“No. He’s been avoiding me.”

“Can’t say as I blame him,” he smiled. “How has everything else been?”

“Well, it is pretty tense around work. Everyone seems to know about the security holes in the system – news travels fast in an intelligent building. Wayne’s customers seem particularly nervous.”

“Have patience, Elizabeth. Things will work out soon.” He smiled. “Now, let’s see if we can find that daughter of mine. I’d like for you to meet her.”

He led her onto the back porch, where a four-piece rock and roll band was playing enthusiastically. In spite of the several open windows, it was warmer on the porch than in the house. Elizabeth recognized a song the Pretenders had done back in the eighties, but could not follow the lyrics: the band was singing it in Spanish. A knot of dancers enthusiastically crowded the tiny floor. Through the windows, she could see small groups clustered outside. Some were smoking, some simply talking, in spite of the cold.

The band stopped, and Victor called out “Maria!”

A young girl, just showing the lovely beginnings of adolescence came out of the crowd, towing a young, blonde boy behind her. Elizabeth recognized Michelle Rodriguez’s dark, sloping eyes and delicate features.

“Elizabeth, this is Maria,” Victor said, with obvious pride. “Maria, this is Doctor Florczyk.”

Maria Rodriguez took her hand and smiled.

“Aren’t you going to introduce your friend?” Victor said.

“Dad, you know Tommy.”

“Yes, but Doctor Florczyk does not,” he said sternly.

Maria indulged her father, then took Tommy back onto the dance floor as the band started their next song. Bruce Kaminsky came over and introduced his date, Barbara. Victor left when his wife called him for help, and Bruce, Barbara and Elizabeth wandered into the living room. They found an open couch and sat down.

Barbara worked as an insurance adjuster, and shared Bruce’s love of country dancing. They had met at a local dance club, and Elizabeth got the impression their relationship might be growing beyond a shared interest in the two-step. At least, that is what she read in Barbara’s manner. Bruce’s revealed less.

Bruce brought beers for his date and himself, and Elizabeth continued to sip her wine from the plastic cup. As they talked, she felt herself relax. She did not know if it was the wine or the companionship. She didn’t care. They sat and talked through several more songs and the band’s break, until Bruce and Barbara caught their breath and the music resumed. Sensing their eagerness to dance, she accompanied them back to the porch and waited until they found an open spot on the small dance floor. Then, she returned to the couch and sat down.

“What’s a pretty girl like you doing all alone?”

She looked up. An older man stood there smiling. She saw an echo of Victor’s features in his face.

“I’m Ben Rodriguez,” he said, “Victor’s uncle. Mind if I join you?”

Elizabeth smiled.

“I’d like that.”

She gestured to the empty seat on the couch, and he sat beside her. Ben Rodriguez had thick silver hair, olive skin, and features that could still turn a woman’s head.

“Elizabeth Florczyk,” she said, holding out her hand.

Victor's uncle held the handshake with clear pleasure.

"Are you a friend of Michelle's?" he asked.

"No, I did some work with Victor."

"You're a cop?" he smiled in an exaggerated show of astonishment. "I should never have retired."

"No," Elizabeth returned the smile, "I work at the Sky City Building."

"I've read about that case," he acknowledged.

"Victor said one of his uncles was a policeman," she said, changing the subject.

"Yes, that's me," Ben said with clear pride. "Thirty years in uniform. None of this fancy detective stuff like my nephew."

"Are you one of the reasons he became a policeman?"

"Oh, maybe a little," he said proudly. "Once he settled down and decided what he wanted to be, I pulled a few strings."

"Settled down?"

"You didn't know? My nephew, Lieutenant Victor Rodriguez was quite a hell raiser in his day. If he hadn't had an uncle on the force looking out for him, he could have wound up in big trouble."

"No," Elizabeth laughed incredulously.

Ben smiled. "Oh it was nothing that serious. Just a big, energetic kid with too much fondness for beer, and too much luck with the girls."

Elizabeth smiled and took his hand. "I guess luck with the ladies runs in the family."

The old man smiled and squeezed her hand, then looked around in a parody of caution.

“I should be careful. You must have a husband or boy friend close by.”

She laughed and shook her head. “No, I am all too available.”

“In thirty years behind the wheel of a squad car, I have never seen a more outrageous crime,” he said gallantly.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Divorced?” he asked.

“No,” she answered.

She felt her normal reticence slip further away. She did not know if it was the wine, her own need to open up after weeks of work and stress, or simply the warm blanket of family and friendship Victor’s party wrapped around her.

“No one special?” he asked.

“Oh, there have been men I’ve cared about. I just haven’t found the right one.”

“Ah,” he said. “You’ve lost someone.”

She took a sip of wine and nodded. “I broke up with a man recently.”

“He must have been stupid to let a pretty girl like you go.”

Elizabeth realized Ben Rodriguez was quite drunk. She shook her head.

“No, he was anything but stupid. In fact, he’s quite brilliant.”

“Educated?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Still a fool. The educated ones are the worst. What happened?”

“Another woman. Several other women.”

“A fool,” Ben said emphatically, shaking his head.

“Oh, it’s more complicated than that.”

He squeezed her hand and spoke softly.

“No, it’s not. It’s just too simple for most people to understand. You see, men these days – some women too,” he added apologetically, “they don’t know what’s important.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“Everything is so fast, so complicated,” he said. “Everyone is greedy. They see the fancy cars and pretty people on TV and they just want more. They never stop to realize it’s not about getting more.” He looked into her eyes. “Do you have children?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

Ben Rodriguez looked at her sympathetically. She noticed the moisture in his eyes.

“Forgive an old man,” he said. “I talk too much.”

Elizabeth squeezed his hand again.

“Nothing to forgive,” she said.

“Is this old cop bothering you?”

She heard a familiar voice, looked up and saw Victor. He sat down on the other side of his uncle.

“No,” Ben said, “but I talk too much. How are you doing Victor?”

Victor put his arm around his uncle and squeezed his shoulders.

“I’m doing well. It’s a good party.”

Ben smiled. His sadness disappeared.

“Yes, you tell that beautiful wife of yours thank you.”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself. She’s in the kitchen, and she has been asking after you.”

Ben smiled and turned to Elizabeth.

“Will you excuse me? Another pretty girl calls.” He winked at her. “But I’ll be back for a dance.”

Victor watched his uncle walked unsteadily toward the kitchen. “I hope he didn’t bother you too much,” he said.

“No. In fact, he was very sweet.”

“He tends to pry,” Victor said. “Old cop habits die hard.”

She laughed softly, and finished her wine. “Well, I didn’t mind.”

“Sometimes he gets that way – when he’s been drinking.”

“It’s OK.”

“Did he go on about family?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“He does that.” Victor took a sip of his beer. “We keep an eye on him.”

“Why?” Elizabeth asked. “He was charming.”

“He’s kind of fragile. He lost his son in the first Gulf War. He never got over it. Sometimes when he drinks, he remembers.”

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said.

“His boy was older than I, and Ben wanted so much for him. When he died, Ben almost fell apart. His wife finally left him. For a long time, all he did was drink.”

Elizabeth listened, but said nothing.

“They even suspended him from the force for a while. He finally got back on his feet, got his drinking under control, and went back to work. He seemed to return to normal, but sometimes when he’s had a little . . .”

“I understand,” Elizabeth said.

“We like to keep an eye on him.”

“Your uncle is a truly gentle man, I enjoyed talking to him.”

“I’m glad. You know he’s helped me out of a few scrapes . . .”

“I know,” she admitted. “He said you were quite a hell-raiser.”

Victor stared at her with a raised eyebrow. The stare quickly melted into a smile that revealed little.

Elizabeth laughed. “What was it like growing up in the valley?”

Victor sipped his beer.

“It was a good way to grow up,” he reminisced. “Rural, quiet, clean, but close to the city. We had horses, and there was space to ride them.”

He looked over the crowd filling his house and smiled.

“We knew most of our neighbors, and most of the family lived close by.”

“Is it still like that?” Elizabeth asked.

Victor thought for a moment. “Not quite, but it’s still pretty nice. Crime’s worse, there are more drugs, and there are the gangs, but it’s just as bad in the heights. It’s still a good place to raise kids.”

“You’re very lucky.”

“What about you?” Victor asked.

“Oh, not much to tell. I got out of college and tried to be a professional musician for a few years. Eventually, I went back to grad school in computer science and got my doctorate. I did a post-doc, trying to get a professorship at

a decent university. Then, the job with the consortium opened up, and here I am.”

“It seems like a good fit for you.”

She smiled and sipped her wine. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, you said you were interested in human-computer interaction. It seems the Sky City Building would be ideal,” he said, leaning toward her to be heard above the noise in the small house. “What about your music?”

“What do you want to know?”

“I get the impression you were pretty serious about it.”

She nodded. “I was for a few years.”

“That’s quite a switch: music to computers.”

“It’s not that unusual. A lot of musicians are programmers.” She smiled. “I don’t know whether music and programming have something deep in common, or if it’s just that music pays so awful.”

“Is that why you stopped performing?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not really. After a few years, I realized I wanted something different.”

She looked around the warm, crowded house. Victor sipped his beer and waited for her to finish.

“There’s a story I read about Louis Armstrong,” she began. “He was older, in his forties, I think, and living near New York City with his wife. Anyway, the story goes that he came home from a tour one day, and his wife took him to a little brick house in a middle class neighborhood. It turns out she’d saved all the money he’d sent her and bought a home. The story has it he just sat down and wept. It was the first real home he’d ever had.”

“Music’s not an easy life,” Victor acknowledged.

“Oh,” she smiled, “it wasn’t so bad, but after a while, I just decided I wanted a home, sane hours, and friends who cared about something more than getting high or making it big in L. A.”

“Do you ever miss it?” he asked.

She smiled. “Yeah. Sometimes I do.”

Victor laughed and set his beer down on the table.

“Come on, Doctor,” he said, taking her hand and standing up, “let’s have a dance.”

Victor set the trash bags down in the hall and slipped into Anthony’s room. As usual, his son had opened the window and kicked off his covers. Victor closed the window quietly, and pulled the blanket over the sleeping boy. He kneeled down and kissed his forehead.

“Good night, little man,” he said softly, without waking him, then he stood up and walked back into the hall.

Even though it was late, Michelle refused to let Victor go to bed until they’d cleaned up the worst of the party mess. He picked up the two trash bags and continued through the house, putting paper plates and cups in one, beer and soda cans in the other. After he’d made his rounds, he tied the bags off and left them in the garage.

He found Michelle in the kitchen, in front of the sink. The dishwasher was running and she was finishing the rest of the dishes by hand. He walked up, smoothed her black hair to the side, and kissed her on the back of the neck.

“Not now,” she said, turning and kissing him on the mouth. “Help me clean up, then we’ll see.”

He held her with his left arm, and slid his right hand under the shoulder of the sleeveless, red beaded shell. He ran his fingers between his wife’s soft skin and the smooth cloth behind the sequins.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you looked tonight?”

“You can tell me later.”

He smiled. “Why don’t we leave the rest of this . . .”

Michelle laughed and pushed against the side of his face in a mock slapping motion. She kissed him.

“Why don’t you wipe the counters.”

Victor took the rag from near the sink and started wiping crumbs from the counter tops into his cupped hand.

“It was a good party,” he said.

“Yes, although I did catch Maria and Tommy kissing,” she said.

“Should I get the shotgun?” he asked ironically.

“Victor,” she said sternly, “we can’t ignore these things.”

“Sorry.”

“She’s only thirteen.”

“Well, I know, but she’s a good girl. I’ll talk with her.”

“That would be a good idea.” Michelle placed another dish in the drying rack.

“I saw Ben latching onto Elizabeth Florczyk.”

“You know Ben – he can’t leave the ladies alone.”

“Was he OK? He seemed teary for a while.”

“Oh, he did get into one of his moods. She seemed OK with it.”

“She was prettier than I thought she’d be,” Michelle said without turning around.

“Oh,” Victor said, “I suppose she is.”

“I suppose she is?” Michelle mocked. “Victor Rodriguez, don’t give me that.”

He smiled at her.

“Not too pretty, though?” Michelle asked. She still faced the sink.

Victor put the rag down and walked up behind her. He put his arms around her waist.

“It doesn’t matter how pretty she is,” he said, pulling her close, resting his cheek on her dark hair, feeling it soft and damp from the steaming dishwasher.

She turned in his embrace, and put her arms around his neck. She pulled his head down and kissed him for a long time.

“Don’t forget that,” she said sternly.

Victor held her gently and looked at his wife. Her hairdo had gone limp in the moist air over the sink. Small wrinkles showed near her eyes, and a few gray strands accented her dark hair. He noticed neither. She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

“I won’t forget” he said, kissing her again. “Don’t you think the house is clean enough?”

“It’ll have to do,” she said, taking his hand and leading him down the hall.

CHAPTER 36

As Elizabeth approached her house, the motion sensor turned on the porch light. With similar automatic efficiency, she found her front door key, and opened the screen. As she tried to insert the key into the deadbolt, the door opened inward, turned on its hinge by the slight pressure of her touch. Adrenaline instantly flooded her body, awakening nerves calmed by wine and weariness, pulling muscles taught with sharp urgency. She pushed the door all the way open, and noticed the splintered wood on the frame. Her breath caught in her chest.

“Is anyone there?” she called out automatically.

She waited. She heard nothing but her own shallow breathing, and the pulse of blood in her temples. Slowly, she stepped inside, listening for any sound that might indicate an intruder’s presence. She turned on the light.

The room was devastated, the familiar composition of her home and possessions unmade with impersonal thoroughness. She walked slowly into

the house, keeping her back to the wall, alert to the possibility the intruder might still be in her home. She looked across the room, numbly, automatically gauging the damage.

Someone had smashed nearly everything. He'd thrown her plants across the floor, shattering nearly every pot, scattering dirt and leaves across the hardwood. Her stereo cabinet lay on its face; she saw shards of plate glass from the cabinet's doors shining among the dirt and broken plants. With instrumental efficiency, the intruder had cleared the shelves containing her music collection, scattering CD's across the room. She saw the bright circles of compact disks and their square plastic containers littering the floor. Some looked as though they had been stomped upon. She saw a fireplace poker protruding from her loudspeaker, like a sword thrust into the body of some large, helpless beast. Someone had gashed the cushions of her couch, and torn the framed posters and photographs from the wall. Everywhere she looked, something had been destroyed, disfigured, taken from her.

She stood with her back against the wall, barely breathing. She felt a tear move down her cheek. She tried to breathe and felt knots of air rasping through her chest.

Grace.

The thought came to her suddenly, sweeping the fear from her muscles, from her joints. "Grace!" she called out sharply, then held her breath, listening for some response. She heard nothing.

"Grace!"

Elizabeth forgot the possibility the intruder might still be in the house, and began searching for her companion. She fought the horrifying images that forced themselves into her mind: images of the cruelties vandals so often inflicted upon domestic animals. She fought the knowledge that, of all domestic animals, cats had borne the most grotesque of these torments.

She went into the kitchen. All the cabinet doors were open – some hinged by a single hinge as if the attacker had tried to tear them from their frames.

He'd swept nearly all her dishes from the shelves onto the floor. She noticed a few pieces were still intact among the rubble. She saw no sign of Grace.

"Grace!" She called out again and stood still, holding her breath.

She heard nothing.

She looked in the laundry room, the place where she kept Grace's litter box. She hoped to find the animal hiding there, huddled in the corner farthest from the door. She looked behind the washer and dryer, but found nothing. Steeling herself, she looked inside each appliance. Apart from a load of clothes still in the dryer, an odd emblem of normalcy, she found nothing.

Elizabeth walked back toward the living room, passing the dining room on the way. She forced herself to look, fearing she might see Grace dead and disfigured, certain she would see her mother's cherry china cabinet with the curved glass front shattered, the precious china and crystal her mother had collected and preserved through a life of struggle and dreams strewn in pieces on the floor.

She stopped in her tracks. The cabinet seemed untouched.

Her oak table lay on its side. Dirt covered the floor. Torn plants, shards of pottery, books and pictures littered the room, but her mother's cabinet seemed untouched. Elizabeth walked into the dining room, not knowing what this meant, hoping it was indeed some disjointed mercy among the devastation.

Could this be a sadist's trick? She feared she would find Grace dead at its foot, the tortured punch line of some twisted prank.

She found nothing. The cabinet was intact, and she found no sign of Grace in the room. Her heart pounding, she opened each drawer, expecting to see her friend's small body among the linens her mother had left her. She found nothing.

Elizabeth stood before this bizarre gift and began to sob. She fought back the tears and continued searching.

She walked toward the room where she kept her piano. She had not been able to face this before; she could not bring herself to face the certain destruction of the instrument that was as much a part of her as her own voice. Now, compelled by her need to find Grace, and given some hope by the sparing of her mother's cabinet, she walked into the music room and turned on the light.

The piano stood undamaged in the center of the room. She looked around and saw her music on shelves as she had left it. The pictures of her family remained on the wall. Her reading chair, the brass floor lamp, the side table with its crystal vase – all were untouched.

Elizabeth felt as though she was going to faint. She envisioned the vandals frightened by a passing car or their own unease, leaving before they had reached the music room. She looked in every corner, and saw no sign of her companion. She turned to continue her search for Grace, and heard a thin cry. She stopped.

“Grace . . .” she said softly, then held her breath and listened.

She heard the meow again. It seemed to come from the piano.

Elizabeth remembered she had left the piano's lid raised. It was now closed. She lifted the lid, and saw a small white, orange and black shape huddled inside the piano, eyes wide with terror. Elizabeth propped the lid open, and, making soft comforting sounds, reached in and picked up the cat. She held her close to her face, and felt her tremble.

“Grace. Thank God.”

Elizabeth stood there, holding the cat close, making soft purring sounds into the warm fur, and gently stroking the terrified animal. After a moment, she started toward the living room to find a functioning telephone and call the police. As she passed the piano bench, a bright object caught her eye.

Resting in the middle of the cushion, was a large, filigreed Victorian brooch.

She picked it up and turned it over. She recognized the electronics Jennifer Sorenson had carefully fit in the hollow of the ornate silver shape.

CHAPTER 37

Elizabeth sat on the remaining intact cushion of her couch, holding Grace on her lap, and answering the questions the young uniformed officer read from the clipboard balanced on his knee. His partner had found an unbroken glass, and brought her the water she sipped between questions.

After she'd told him about her involvement in Ed Walters' murder investigation, and the significance of the brooch she'd found on her piano bench, he'd contacted Victor Rodriguez. Within an hour, investigators had filled the house, searching for fingerprints, footprints, or any other evidence that might identify the intruder, or link the vandalism of her home to Ed Walters' murder. Victor arrived soon afterwards unshaven, wearing jeans and a workshirt.

"Victor, I'm sorry you had to come out here so late – especially the night of your party," Elizabeth said, walking carefully among the debris, and meeting him at the door.

"Don't worry about it. What happened?"

She told him about her discovery of the break in, the vandal's odd pattern of destruction, and finding Jen's brooch on the piano bench.

"Are you sure you hadn't brought the brooch home?"

"Yes, positive. I gave it back to Jen, and she left it on her desk. After that fiasco with Wayne, I never wanted to see it again."

"Did you disturb it in any way?"

"I picked it up to make sure it was Jen's, then I put it back on the bench and called the police."

Victor nodded. He took a few steps into the middle of the living room, and stood there surveying the damage to her home.

"Do you think Wayne did this?" she asked him.

Victor said nothing, but continued scanning the debris on the floor, the pictures hanging at disjoint angles across the walls, the broken furniture.

"Do you think he did this to frighten me? Or to get even?" Elizabeth pressed.

He turned toward her. "All I can say is I'm going to get to the bottom of this, and I am going to start with Wayne Ballard."

He called the nearest uniformed officer, and gave him Wayne's address and description. As the officer signaled his partner and started toward the door, Victor called after him.

"When you find him – and I don't care if he's sleeping, naked or surrounded by lawyers – I want you to bring him here to me."

After about thirty minutes, the officers Victor had sent after Wayne called. Elizabeth gathered from the conversation that he was not home.

"I want you to stay there until he shows up," he told them, "then I want you to call me."

He sat down beside her on the couch. “Ballard isn’t at home,” he began.

“I heard,” she said.

“Is there someplace you could go for the night?”

“No, I want to stay here.”

“Look, we aren’t treating this like an ordinary break-in. It’s part of a murder case.”

“Are you worried for my safety?” she asked.

“No, I’m worried about your getting in the way of my investigators.”

Elizabeth smiled for the first time since she’d arrived home from his party.

“I could stay with Jen,” she began, then paused. “No, I think I’d rather go to a hotel. I don’t want to wake her – and I’d like to be alone.”

“What about your cat?” he asked.

“My vet has an all-night emergency service. I can drop her off to be boarded until this blows over.”

Victor called to the young uniformed officer who had first arrived at Elizabeth’s house. He asked him to find a hotel that could take her. After several minutes, the officer returned and told them he had found a room nearby. Victor asked him to take Elizabeth to the veterinarian’s to board Grace, and then to the hotel.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “I’d rather drive myself.”

“Are you sure?”

She smiled at him. “Yes, I’m sure.”

She retrieved her green cloth bag from the living room floor where she had dropped it, and brushed the potting soil from its surface. She moved quickly through the wreckage, gathering up a few toiletries and a change of clothes. She retrieved a small cat carrier from the closet where it had sat through the

break-in. Grace struggled uncharacteristically when Elizabeth tried to put her in it. She again recognized the extent of the animal's trauma, and felt a surge of anger against Wayne Ballard – or whomever had invaded her home.

Victor stopped her at the door as she prepared to leave. He placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Are you sure you're OK to drive?” he repeated.

She reached up and squeezed his hand.

“I'm OK,” she said, “really.”

She could not sleep. After lying in the big hotel bed for what seemed like hours, Elizabeth threw aside the stiff bedding, showered and wrapped herself in the robe she'd found in the bathroom. Room service had not started serving breakfast, but a bell hop took pity on her. He scavenged coffee, orange juice and a Danish from the kitchen, and brought it up to her room. She tipped him five dollars, ate while dressing, and left before six.

She drove to her house, parked in the driveway and went inside. The police had gone, and she found herself alone in her shattered home. She wandered from room to room, re-assessing the damage, salvaging a few more unbroken possessions from the dirt on the floor. She stood in front of her mother's china cabinet, undamaged amid the rubble, for what seemed like a very long time.

The piano was as she had left it, except for the dusting of black fingerprint powder on the edge of the lid. She looked at the smudged black marks on the bright white lacquer. She took a soft rag and polish, and carefully cleaned the white lacquer where the intruder had lifted the lid to imprison Grace. The smooth feel of the wood calmed her. She paused and wiped a tear from her cheek, then continued polishing the instrument. Elizabeth sat on the bench in front of the piano, and rested her right hand on the keyboard's constant, intimate ratios. She did not play.

She closed the keyboard cover, aligned the bench in front of the piano, and walked back into the living room. She surveyed the damage one last time, mentally laying out the steps she would take to reclaim her home. Seeing that process in her mind restored her strength; she could wait to repair the physical damage.

First she wanted to face the twisted bastard who had done this.

CHAPTER 38

Elizabeth found herself among the earliest commuters funneling into Kirtland Air Force Base, Sandia Laboratories and the few businesses of the technology park. Traffic was heavy, but moved well. She did not know what she hoped to find, but she wanted to go into work, to search Wayne Ballard's desk, his data files, to find anything that might link him to the destruction of her home. She did not know exactly what she hoped to find, but she did know that the only route to restoring her home, her security, the ease of her own life passed through the Sky City Building.

As she arrived at the building, Elizabeth fell in behind the small line of cars turning into the lot. Her thoughts had been on the steps she would take once she got to her office, and at first, she did not notice the familiar, unkempt figure crossing the asphalt toward the glass-walled lobby. When she did, her breath caught in the center of her chest. The sight of Wayne Ballard in his baggy jeans and old bomber jacket, his gray pony tail hanging limply against the worn leather, raised her anger instantly. She swerved out of the line of cars, and drove directly to the front of the building.

“Wayne,” she shouted as she stopped between him and the entrance.

She ran from her truck, and stood in front of him. He stared at her with a mixture of venom and surprise. With effort, she calmed her emotions and spoke slowly, deliberately.

“You bastard!” she shouted, her voice sounding distant and brittle, attenuated by self-conscious restraint.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

He angled away from her and kept walking.

“Don’t give me that,” she shouted.

She overtook him, and placed herself between him and the building.

“Did you trash my house?”

“Go to hell,” he said.

Elizabeth closed the few yards between them and shoved him as hard as she could. He stumbled back, but did not fall.

“What the fuck is going on?” he shouted.

“You did it, didn’t you?” Elizabeth said in a sharp staccato, still holding tightly to her emotions.

“You crazy bitch. Leave me the hell alone,” he shouted.

“Leave you alone! You bastard, you wrecked my house.”

She started toward him.

“Just tell me why, for God’s sake,” she shouted.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” he said coldly. “You don’t know what’s going on.”

“Don’t give me that crap,” she cursed. “I know you trashed my house. I know you terrorized my cat, you sick, twisted piece of shit!”

“Fuck you.”

He spat the words into the cold air and tried to walk around her, to go inside the building. Elizabeth grabbed his shoulder, spun him around and slapped him across the face so hard she felt a bolt of pain run up her forearm. His sunglasses skidded across the blacktop. He stared at her in shock, and she fought back tears.

“Don’t lie to me,” she said coldly.

A crowd started to form around them, drawn from their cars and the building lobby by the commotion. A programmer she knew only casually started toward her, hands out in a calming gesture, repeating her name. She glared at him. He stepped back.

“I can’t believe this, you psychotic bitch,” Wayne shouted at her, holding his hand against the side of his face and kneeling to pick up his sunglasses.

He held them up, and stared at the hopelessly bent frame.

“God damnit,” he said and threw them aside.

“Why, Wayne? Just tell me that.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Elizabeth started toward him. Several people tried to move between them. She glared at them, and they stepped back.

“You lying bastard,” she shouted, “you left that goddamned brooch on my piano bench – I got the message.”

Wayne turned pale. “That wasn’t . . .”

“Shut up, Wayne, tell it to the police.”

“What are you talking about?” He looked nervously at the gathering crowd.

“They’ll be here soon. They’ve been looking for you all night.”

“That wasn’t me,” he stammered.

For the first time, she heard the fear in his voice. The realization hit her.

“Are you telling me you know who did it?”

He looked at the crowd and shook his head.

“Not here, Elizabeth. Not now.”

“You know who trashed my house, and you won’t tell me,” she repeated slowly as the idea formed in her mind.

Wayne scanned the faces in the crowd, then stopped, staring directly at her.

“I can’t tell you anything,” he said finally.

“This is about your goddamned lawyer, isn’t it? About your deal with the cops?”

Her voice sounded oddly calm, almost distant in her ears.

“I have to leave,” he said, turning toward the dark blue BMW sitting with its top up in the winter sun.

In spite of his weight and stiff gait, he moved quickly across the asphalt.

“Goddamnit Wayne, don’t even think of leaving,” she shouted.

He ignored her. The crowd had grown, and several people placed themselves in front of her as Wayne jogged heavily toward the sports car. Elizabeth ran back to her truck, placed it in gear and started forward. The crowd scattered.

As she completed the U-turn and started back across the lot, she saw the blue BMW pull out of its space and speed away from the building. She tried to get between it and the exit, but the faster car pulled away. She pressed the accelerator to the floor, and felt her clutch slip. The BMW increased its distance from her. A white minivan pulled into the lot, and Wayne braked to miss it. Elizabeth did not slow down. She did not pay attention to the

minivan, or the line of cars on the street behind it. She only knew that Wayne Ballard had either destroyed her home or knew who did, and now, was running to his lawyer to hide.

She did not slow down or turn until the truck hit Wayne's immaculate blue BMW on its left front fender. The impact turned it sideways, and she heard the cry of metal on metal as her truck scraped along its sculpted side. The minivan swerved and missed them. Momentum carried both cars over the curb, onto the sand that bordered the asphalt. Elizabeth saw the BMW strike one of the light posts that surrounded the lot, and saw the pole topple across it. She saw Wayne's toy ride up on the base of the broken light, and heard a scraping sound as her truck continued past the impaled sports car.

The truck mired to a stop in the sand before its momentum carried her into the traffic. She sat there for several seconds, holding the steering wheel so hard her forearms hurt. Finally, she released the wheel, opened the door and started back toward the BMW. She looked up and stopped. The sports car had climbed the base of the light post, and sat with its front end raised, wheels turning futilely in the air. Its entire left side was dented and scraped from the collision, and the falling light pole had left a crease in the tan cloth top. Wayne sat stunned behind the wheel, blood running down his face from a gash above his nose.

As she stared at Wayne's shattered plaything, the hard, unconscious tunnel of her attention collapsed. The sounds of the traffic, of people shouting, of her own breathing came upon her rapidly. A police car turned into the parking lot, lights flashing, and stopped in front of her.

Elizabeth watched Victor Rodriguez pace across the conference room. She rubbed her head.

"I don't know what happened," she repeated. "Wayne practically admitted he knew who trashed my house then started to run. I tried to stop him and . . ."

She exhaled heavily.

"I'm sorry," she said, holding her hands out, palms upward.

Victor stopped his pacing.

“If I’d known you were this . . .” He looked at her in frustration. “. . . this loose cannon . . .”

“That’s not fair . . .”

“Not fair?” He interrupted her abruptly, angrily. “We ask you to get us some simple data, and what do you do? You start your own little investigation, recruit your friends, and run some half-baked lie detector on Wayne Ballard. Now, you ram your truck into my suspect, and you tell me I’m not being fair.” He stared at her. “What the hell is going on?”

“He either trashed my house, or he knows who did.”

“You don’t know that,” the detective snapped.

“Come on, Victor . . .”

“No,” he stopped her. “Don’t ‘Come on, Victor’ me.”

“I looked him in the eye. He knows.”

“And what do you think we’re going to get out of him now?” Victor asked, staring directly at her.

She returned his stare. Finally, she nodded and took a swallow of coffee. She wished it was stronger.

“Do you have any idea of the mess you’ve caused?” Victor pressed.

She sat in the conference room chair, her right leg folded beneath her, and wished her head would stop throbbing.

“I can’t undo it, and I’ve already apologized. What do you want from me?”

He threw up his hands and sat down across from her.

“What do I want?” he repeated in a defeated voice.

He shook his head, and sat there without speaking for an uncomfortably long time.

“So what happens now?” Elizabeth asked through the silence.

Victor took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Well, let me see. For starters, I’m trying to keep you out of jail. You just committed vehicular assault.”

Elizabeth started to apologize. She stopped herself and took a sip of coffee.

“Gerry Bruner is standing in front of Wayne Ballard’s car giving an interview to the press even as we speak.”

“Shit,” she said involuntarily.

“Yeah, shit. He’s telling them that his client was framed and then attacked by a psychotic, jealous woman.”

“Jealous?” Elizabeth said in astonishment.

“He hasn’t said whether you were jealous of Wayne’s intellect, success or sex appeal. He’s leaving that to their imaginations.”

“That lying bastard,” Elizabeth protested.

“He gets paid to be a lying bastard,” Victor said, “and he’s very good at it.”

She set her coffee cup on the table, and shifted her position in the chair. The headache had not abated. She felt a sharp pain in her thigh and wondered if it was a result of the collision, or simply the tension that followed it.

“And speaking of lying . . .” Victor picked up a clipboard from the table and thumbed through several pages of reports.

“What?” she asked.

“I’ve got some very creative fiction here. It seems that the people who don’t know and love you are telling one story. They say you nearly ran Wayne Ballard down, chased him across the parking lot and slapped him so hard you

broke his glasses. They say you threatened him, and when he tried to leave, you ran his car into a light pole.”

“I didn’t threaten him. I said you were coming, and he ran.”

“Oh, well that makes a big difference.”

She ignored his sarcasm.

“What are the rest saying?” she asked, half afraid of what he would tell her.

“This is where it really gets good. Let’s see . . .”

He skimmed several pages.

“Here’s one. Guru Deep Singh Khalsa – your highly trained security guard – says he saw you and Wayne arguing. He says he didn’t see you slap him, and he swears the collision was an accident. It seems Wayne had slowed down to let you pass, and you swerved into him to avoid the incoming minivan.”

“He said that?”

“He even drew us a picture,” Victor said holding up an accident diagram.

He found another report and began to read.

“Jennifer Sorenson claims she saw Wayne start yelling at you first, that you both tried to leave at the same time, and that you collided by accident.”

“Oh, Christ.”

“Yes, that one is very creative; it also has the benefit of corroboration. Jason Evans told nearly the same story.”

“Jason? But I . . .”

“I know,” Victor said, “he’s one of Wayne’s assistants. I guess you have a secret admirer – either that, or he hates his boss. But, here’s the best one of all. Our Mr. Lee claims that Wayne Ballard ‘started it’ – to use his school yard turn of phrase – and rammed into you deliberately.”

He looked up at her.

“The next time you see him, try to talk him out of a career in crime.”

“Victor, they’re trying to protect me,” she said, leaning across the table toward him. “I don’t want them to get into any trouble.”

He tossed the clipboard on the table, and rubbed his hand through his short, dark hair in frustration. She picked up the reports and glanced at them.

“I’ll talk to them,” she said.

“Probably a good idea.”

“What’s going to happen now?”

He leaned back in the chair. He seemed to be forcing himself to relax.

“You will almost certainly be charged, and have to go through a hearing,” he explained. “The rest depends . . .”

“On what?”

“At this time,” he said deliberately, “it mainly depends on Wayne Ballard.”

“Wayne?” she said, incredulously.

He nodded grimly. “There isn’t much I can do for you. You committed vehicular assault. The DA will take it seriously.”

“I could plead insanity,” she said, venturing a smile.

“Could be your best bet.”

Elizabeth searched his voice and expression for a trace of humor. The results were inconclusive.

“Right now,” he explained, “Gerry Bruner is screaming for your head, my badge, and a cash settlement from the city. He’s also threatening to sue you for everything you own.”

“He wouldn’t get much,” Elizabeth said.

She thought about her piano and felt a pang of worry. She put it out of her mind.

“How does this affect the DA’s negotiations with Wayne?”

“It won’t help them,” he said, “but Carmen’s a pretty cool customer. My guess is she’ll wait a few days for things to calm down, let Gerry have his fun, and then start over.”

“Victor, why isn’t Wayne in jail?”

“What do I lock him up for? Getting in the way of your right cross?”

She winced.

“What about my house?” she asked. “Did you find out where he was last night?”

“Wayne has an alibi – a good one. He was with his girlfriend all night . . .”

“Wayne has a girlfriend?” Elizabeth interrupted without thinking.

“. . . and came straight to work from her house. She corroborates his story.”

She felt a knot in her stomach. “Could she be lying?”

“I doubt it. She seems straight. Their stories match.”

“Then, who could have left Jen’s brooch on my piano bench?”

Victor stared down at the palms of his hands for a few seconds, then looked up at her and spoke slowly.

“I’d like to know,” he said. “I’d really like to know.”

CHAPTER 39

Elizabeth spent the rest of the morning in Metro Court, waiting and filling out paperwork. In a brief hearing, she was charged in the assault on Wayne Ballard, and released without bail, a result she owed more to Victor's intercession than to the efforts of her own lawyer. Before leaving the consortium building, she had called the law firm that had helped with her mother's estate, and they'd sent a young associate down to the hearing. He told her he specialized in real estate law. After her release he seemed as relieved as she, and urged her to find a criminal firm to handle the rest of the matter.

At almost two o'clock, Jen picked her up and took her to the closest place she could find for lunch. After green chili enchiladas and several margaritas, they rented a car to replace Elizabeth's ruined truck. She did not make it home until nearly five.

She spent the evening cleaning up the mess, re-potting her plants, and inventorying the damage. She decided to leave Grace at the veterinarian's until the house was back to normal and things had calmed down. Aside from a few plates and her cooking pots, there was little to salvage in the kitchen. She'd had better luck with her posters and photographs: although all of the glass and most of the frames were broken, only two posters were torn. She would have to replace one of her speakers – the fireplace tool thrust into its woofer had left it unsalvageable – but the rest of the stereo miraculously worked. There were a few dents in the metal cases, and a cracked instrument panel, but she was able to listen to music through the single speaker as she sorted through the rubble.

The next morning, after clearing most of the mess from her home and spending the night in her own bed, Elizabeth felt almost normal. She left the house at around eight-thirty, and drove the rental car to the Sky City Building. As she pulled into the parking lot, she looked over the scene of the collision. They had taken Wayne's injured BMW away. She hoped it was to the body shop, rather than the junkyard. The light post lay on the sand, parallel to the curb. Someone had pushed her truck back onto the pavement, and into a parking space. She stopped next to it, got out and looked over the damage. Long scrapes marked the side of the truck, bright parallel lines of bare metal stretching from the pleated right fender back to the bumper. The front wheels seemed badly out of alignment. It was time for her to buy a new car – if she could afford one after paying a lawyer to keep her out of jail, and settling the civil suit Wayne was certain to bring.

Wayne and his lawyer were making noises about the severity of his injuries, and had claimed he was unable to get out of bed, so she doubted she would see him in the halls. She wanted to spend some time talking to people and poking around the building systems. Someone had stolen the brooch from Jen's desk and planted it in her damaged home, and that someone worked at the Sky City Building.

Elizabeth left the rental car by her truck, crossed the parking lot and entered the broad lobby. The sun coming through the glass walls left it feeling

uncomfortably bright, and slightly overheated. She saw Guru Deep Singh at the guard station, and stopped at the desk.

“I wanted to thank you,” she said.

“For what?” he asked.

“You know ‘for what.’ For staying the other night . . .”

“You already thanked me.”

He stood up, circled the guard desk and walked toward her.

“I heard about your house,” he said. “Are you OK?”

She smiled at him and nodded. “I also wanted to talk to you about yesterday.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lieutenant Rodriguez showed me your statement – about Wayne. I know what you were trying to do . . .”

“I just told the truth as I saw it,” he interrupted.

“But . . .”

“Please, Doctor,” he insisted.

She knew from his tone of voice that she would not be able to persuade him to change his statement. She hoped she could find a way to resolve this before his effort to help her became a problem. She thanked him and started toward her office.

“I’m sorry, Doctor Florczyk,” he called out.

She turned toward him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Mrs. Martinelli would like to see you before you go in.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said, “I’ll call her from my office.”

She turned and started once again toward the back of the building.

“I’m sorry, Doctor,” the guard said, gently taking her arm.

He seemed embarrassed.

“She asked me to hold you here and contact her,” he explained.

Elizabeth could not be angry with him.

“I understand,” she said, stepping back into the lobby.

“Security,” the guard said, sitting down at the desk and addressing his executive agent, “contact Regina Martinelli.”

After a few moments, she heard Regina’s voice over a speaker set into the guard desk.

“Mrs. Martinelli,” the guard said, “Doctor Florczyk is in the lobby.”

“I’ll be right down,” the attorney replied.

Elizabeth did not have to wait long. Regina came down the stairs less than a minute after the guard had called her.

“I need to talk to you,” she told Elizabeth, gesturing toward one of the benches that lined the lobby’s perimeter.

“Why can’t we talk here?” Elizabeth said sharply.

Regina gave her a patient look.

“Please,” she said, “I think we should sit down.”

The attorney walked to one end of the bench, sat down and crossed her legs. Elizabeth reminded herself of the problems her temper had caused. She walked to the bench, and sat down next to her.

“Elizabeth,” the attorney said, leaning forward and speaking earnestly, “this is difficult . . .”

“Shit, here it comes.”

Regina sat silently and waited for her to calm down.

“You’re firing me,” Elizabeth confronted her.

“No, but I am suspending both you and Wayne Ballard until we straighten this out.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“I don’t know what happened out there, and I am not jumping to any conclusions. I’m suspending both of you with full pay until I figure out what’s going on.”

Regina paused. She waited for Elizabeth to acknowledge what she had said. Elizabeth nodded reluctantly.

“It’s the best I can do. When this is resolved, we will decide whether you will return to the project.”

“We?”

“Robert and I made this decision after considerable discussion . . .”

“It figures,” Elizabeth said softly.

“I beg your pardon?”

Elizabeth raised her voice. “I said ‘you and Robert; it figures.’”

She stood up and placed the strap of her green bag over her shoulder.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Regina challenged.

“You know damn well what it means,” Elizabeth said, glaring at her.

She turned and walked toward the door. She did not stop until she was well past the exit. As she stood in the cold sunlight, breathing deeply, trying to regain control of her emotions, she heard the click of high heels on concrete. She turned to see Regina hurrying toward her.

“Do you have something to say to me?” the attorney demanded.

Elizabeth laughed.

“Damnit,” Regina said, “I want to know what’s going on here.”

“What’s going on? You fuck my b—”

Elizabeth stopped herself. Calling Robert her ‘boy friend’ seemed embarrassingly adolescent.

“You sleep with Robert while I’m living with him. You suspend me from . . .”

“Who told you about Robert?” Regina interrupted.

“Wake up, Regina. Everybody knows.”

“I’m not going to deal in allegations . . .”

“God, you people never give up.”

Regina glared at her. “Right now, all I care about is holding this project together.”

“You have no idea how unraveled this place is,” Elizabeth said angrily.

For a moment, both women stood in the sunlight, saying nothing.

“I know how deep it runs,” Regina said finally. “I know what Ed was doing. I know about the videos he took of me. My e-mail. The letters . . .” Her voice trailed off in disgust.

Regina saw two employees come up the walk. She stopped talking, and greeted them in a practiced, professional voice. She and Elizabeth waited in silence until they’d entered the building.

“You knew he was stalking you?” Elizabeth asked in disbelief as soon as the door had closed.

Regina nodded.

“How long?”

“Not long,” Regina said. “After your altercation with Wayne, I decided to look into all this myself. I found the videos.”

A look of disgust crossed her perfect features.

“Then you know about Wayne, about . . .”

“About his ‘special’ agents? About his ‘clients’?” Regina said in an angry staccato. “Oh yes. And I’ve also talked to Robert. He’s told me everything.”

“Everything?”

Regina nodded.

“And you still trust him?”

“I’m making the best decisions I can.”

“Then let me go inside. You have to let me finish . . .”

“No, I can’t.”

“This is a murder investigation,” Elizabeth insisted. “I’m the police contact. I need to get in.”

“No. It’s being taken care of,” Regina said firmly. “I’m their contact, now.”

Elizabeth exhaled in frustration. “God, Regina. You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“Then tell me.”

“Let me come back to work.”

Regina Martinelli shook her head. “That’s not going to happen. If there’s anything I need to know, you can tell me now.”

Elizabeth stared at her.

“I promise you,” Regina said emphatically, “I will find out what’s wrong here, and I will fix it.”

“I know, Regina,” Elizabeth said softly. “It’s your idea of ‘fixed’ that frightens me.”

She turned and walked down the sidewalk to the rented car.

“Jen, try to think,” Elizabeth pressed. “Can you tell me anything at all?”

Jen took a long drink of Sam Adams Ale from the bottle and shook her head. The rest of the six pack sat on Elizabeth’s coffee table. Thomas sat at the opposite end of the couch, holding Grace on his lap, and scratching her behind the ear. The cat looked up at him and purred. On her way home from her encounter with Regina Martinelli, Elizabeth had picked her up at the vets. She was glad to see Grace returning to normal.

Elizabeth leaned forward in the rocking chair, her elbows on her knees.

“That’s it?” she pressed. “Nothing?”

“Sorry Libby,” Jen repeated. “Regina has the place locked up tighter than hell. She’s put all of Ed’s and Gil’s documents in an encrypted folder, and closed down all the Virtual Environments relating to any of this.”

“She what?” Elizabeth said incredulously.

It was almost unheard of for management to interfere with the VEs or any other form of employee communication.

“You heard me,” Jen said. “I can’t get at anything. She’s even pulled the root permissions you gave us.”

“That bitch,” Elizabeth swore and fell back in the rocker in frustration.
“What’s Robert been doing through all this?”

Jen shrugged.

“Not much that I can see,” Thomas explained.

Elizabeth looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Regina had the police computer guy in her office this morning for almost an hour,” he explained. “He didn’t even talk to Robert.”

“Are you telling me Robert hasn’t done anything?” Elizabeth pressed.

“He was around this morning for a big meeting, then he spent about a half hour with Regina in her office, and left around lunch time,” Jen said.

She reached into her bag, removed a paper copy of a printout from the usage database and handed it to Elizabeth.

“Regina forgot to lock us out of the usage database,” Jen grinned.

Elizabeth looked it over and set it on the table.

“She’s taking over.”

“No shit,” Jen confirmed.

“After the meeting, we tried to look into some stuff for you,” Thomas interjected. “That’s when we found out she’d closed your root permissions. We did keep an eye on her and Robert for most of the morning, but didn’t see much. When he left at lunch, we followed him . . .”

“You what?”

Thomas grinned. “He just went home, so we picked up a six-pack and came over. Thought you could use the company.”

“Thanks,” Elizabeth said, returning his smile. “What was the meeting about?”

“The usual bullshit,” Jen said.

“Robert told us you were no longer involved in the police investigation,” Thomas explained. “He said he was going to bring things under control. Then, he turned it over to Regina, and she read us a bunch of rules.”

“Rules? What rules?”

“No more VEs about Ed or anything relating to the murder,” he began to enumerate. “No discussion of the case outside work, and we have to inform Robert or Regina of any contact with the cops or the press.”

“You forgot the best one,” Jen told him.

“What’s that?” Elizabeth interrupted.

“Until further notice,” Jen recited, “we are prohibited from using the systems for anything not directly related to our work.” She stressed the word ‘anything.’

“That’s outrageous,” Elizabeth said, shaking her head.

“Don’t worry,” Jen said, “nobody’s paying much attention to her. She shut down the VEs, but people are still talking.”

“What did Robert do while she was doing all this?”

“He sat there looking serious,” Jen said. “That’s about it.”

“You said he mentioned Wayne and me,” Elizabeth said. “What did he say?”

“Not much,” Thomas began.

“But it’s the way he said it,” Jen finished.

“The way he said it?”

“Yeah, he was real formal,” Jen elaborated. “He called you Dr. Florczyk, and emphasized that you were no longer acting in any sort of official capacity. He said your attack on Wayne had nothing to do with the investigation. That’s when he told us that both of you were suspended.”

“That son of a bitch,” Elizabeth said bitterly, sitting back in the rocker in frustration. “What did he say about Wayne?”

“That was really weird,” Thomas said.

“What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

Jen nodded. “He just said Wayne had been temporarily suspended.”

“That’s it?”

“A couple people even asked him to explain why,” Thomas added, “and all he said was that he wasn’t at liberty to talk about it.”

Elizabeth sat back in the rocker and stared past her plants out the window.

“He wasn’t at liberty . . .” she repeated in an uncomprehending voice. “And he left after lunch?”

Thomas shrugged. Jen picked up a Sam Adams by the neck, and held it out toward her.

“Have a beer,” she said.

What Air Supports Us
William A. Stubblefield
PART V

CHAPTER 40

Victor Rodriguez stood outside the circle of activity, and surveyed the open living room with its high ceilings and elegant, almost austere furnishings. Having met Wayne Ballard amid the clutter of the Sky City Building's systems laboratory, he had not expected the care and expense that marked his home. The sprawling, single-story pueblo style house sat on a half acre at the end of a still sparsely built street in High Desert, one of Albuquerque's newer and more desirable developments. The lot backed onto the open space at the foothills of the Sandia mountains.

The house couldn't have been more than two years old, and retained the deliberate touch of a professional interior designer. The burgundy leather couch and chair contrasted with the soft blue of the Chinese rug and the burnt earth of the Saltillo tile floor. Maple bookshelves were jammed with large, hard-cover art books and over a thousand CD's and old vinyl records. A polished aluminum rack filled with exotic electronics covered the opposite wall. Victor noticed the inch-thick cables that trailed from the amplifier to a pair of speakers. Each speaker stood as tall and wide as the door on his house. Between the book shelves and the stereo, French doors stood open onto a patio and a professionally maintained lawn.

Next to the couch, the coffee table's marble top rested in a polished aluminum frame. A small stack of computer journals were spread out on the table. Only the journals, the record collection and the gold-topped Les Paul guitar leaning against a Fender amplifier suggested the rumpled programmer and his endless collection of rock and roll t-shirts.

Curiously, the thought of Wayne Ballard living in this decorator's showpiece seemed stranger to Victor than the sight of him lying dead on the pale Chinese rug. An automatic pistol lay near his hand and the side of his head was blown away. Blood soaked into the sky-colored wool.

"Here's the note," Bruce said, holding up a neat, laser-printed sheet. He held it by the corner between his latex-gloved thumb and forefinger.

"Let me go out on a limb," Victor said with dense irony. "He confessed to Ed Walters' murder, and killed himself out of regret."

"You got it."

Bruce set the note back on the Plexiglas and steel record turntable where he'd found it.

A middle-aged uniformed officer with thin legs and a generous stomach looked up from his work near the open French doors.

"I thought it was a suicide," he said.

He stood up and pointed to the gun lying near Wayne's right hand.

"It's the dead guy's gun."

"How do you know that?" Victor asked.

"We found the holster, ammo and a spare clip in a drawer in the bedroom. There weren't any signs of a struggle here, or in the bedroom, either," the officer with the skinny legs explained.

"You should listen to the detectives," a good-looking, young Navajo in surgical scrubs interrupted, standing up by the body and stretching his back. "You might learn something."

"What did you find?" Victor asked, walking toward him.

"Take a look at this . . ." the doctor said, kneeling down and pointing at the small hole in the intact side of Wayne Ballard's skull.

“What am I looking at?”

“It’s what you don’t see that’s important,” the doctor said. He smiled.
“Remember Sherlock Holmes and the ‘curious incident of the dog in the night?’”

“Yeah,” Victor said. “What dog’s not barking this time?”

“Look around the entry wound.”

Victor kneeled close to the body. “No powder burns?”

“Elementary, dear Watson.”

“He wasn’t shot close up?”

“Look at the splatter pattern on his clothes.”

Victor looked over the dead man’s clothes. The shirt was pocked with small burn marks that had sprayed outward from the gun’s muzzle. “How far away was the shooter?”

“I won’t be positive until we get him downtown and do a little more work,” the doctor said, standing up again, “but judging from the splatter, I’d say at least two, maybe three feet.”

“Anything else?” Bruce asked the doctor.

“Take a look in his left hand,” the doctor said. He nodded toward the body, but remained standing.

Bruce circled Wayne carefully, and kneeled. He called to a young plain-clothes officer with a camera.

“Get some close ups of this,” he said.

After the photographer had taken several shots, Bruce retrieved a pair of long tweezers from a nearby toolbox, and reached into Wayne Ballard’s cupped hand. He stood up and held the tweezers out toward Victor.

“Check this out.”

“What is it?”

“Hair.”

“What color?”

Bruce walked toward a well-lit section of the wall and held the tweezers against the white plaster.

“Light brown.”

Victor glanced at Wayne’s salt and pepper ponytail spread out on the carpet.

“Light brown?”

“Yeah, and they look thinner than Ballard’s.”

Bruce placed the hairs in a plastic evidence bag and handed it to the uniformed cop with the thin legs.

Victor nodded.

“Anything else?” he asked the doctor.

“I don’t see anything offhand, but I’ll get you a full report tomorrow,” the doctor said.

He gestured to his assistants who rolled a portable gurney toward the dead man.

“Thanks,” Victor said, putting his hand on the young doctor’s shoulder and squeezing it briefly.

He surveyed the team of investigators swarming around the room, and then walked in a wide arc around Wayne Ballard. He stopped at the open French doors and briefly examined the damaged wood where someone had pried the lock, then walked outside. He stood on the patio at the side of the house, looking down at the city lights.

He heard steps behind him.

“Nice view,” Bruce said.

“Nice house,” Victor acknowledged, still looking out at the city.

“He didn’t make enough to afford this,” Bruce observed. “You think helping his bosses spy on each other paid that well?”

“People pay for information,” Victor said, glancing at his partner.

“Sometimes they pay to keep it quiet. Who found the body?”

“A neighbor heard a shot, and wandered over. He saw the open doors,” Bruce said, gesturing toward the French doors, “looked in, and saw him on the floor.”

“He came as soon as he heard the shot?”

“That’s what he said.”

“What time?”

“About six-thirty.”

“The doors were open when he got here?” Victor asked.

“And he didn’t see any cars leaving.” Bruce turned toward the foothills of the Sandia Mountains rising up behind the house. “My guess is the killer parked nearby and walked in through the open space.”

Victor nodded.

“We need to talk to people on the streets around here, check the cul-de-sacs, see if anyone noticed a car,” Bruce said.

Victor stood quietly on the patio, staring at the city lights.

“So who do you think’s screwing with us?” he asked.

“Ed Walters’ killer.”

“Duh.”

“The hairs should give us a lead,” Bruce said.

“I don’t think so,” Victor said.

Bruce thought for several moments. “What are you getting at?”

“Ballard was shot from at least several feet away. How’d they get in his hand?”

Bruce thought. “They struggled and Wayne grabbed a handful of hair. They broke apart and the intruder shot him.”

Victor stared out at the city. “There aren’t any signs of a struggle. Also, he was shot in the side of the head, more toward the back than the front. If he’d seen his attacker and resisted, he’d have probably been facing him. My guess is the killer pried the doors, and was waiting for Wayne to come home. He hid,” Victor spoke slowly, staring off toward the city lights, as if visualizing the attack in his mind, “probably in the hall off the living room. I’d guess that Ballard came in and saw the open French doors. When he turned and started toward them, the killer came up behind him.”

Bruce stood quietly, as if playing Victor’s story in his mind.

“OK, I’ll buy it,” he said finally.

“He also knew Wayne fairly well, well enough to know where he kept his gun.”

“What about the hair?”

Victor looked down at the flagstone patio and thought for what seemed to be a long time.

“What do you want to bet those hairs match Elizabeth Florczyk’s?” he asked.

“What?” Bruce said, almost laughing in surprise. “You think she did this?”

“I didn’t say that,” Victor said deliberately.

“What are you saying?”

Victor shrugged. "Someone's screwing with us," he repeated.

Bruce stood beside him for several seconds, saying nothing.

"He knew we'd see through the suicide," he concluded.

"He wanted us to see through the suicide," Victor said. "Look at the ham-handed break-in . . ."

"So he gave us something to see when we did," Bruce concluded. "Any idea who it was?"

Victor shook his head. He put his hands in his pockets and raised his shoulders slightly against the cold.

"No, but I think our friend just made his first mistake."

"What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about Wayne's customers," Victor said slowly, "the guys with those back door agents."

"What about them?"

"Do you think they're still using them?"

Bruce chuckled. "With everything that's happened, I doubt they want anything to do with that shit."

"I know I wouldn't."

"And when they hear about Wayne, they really won't any part of it."

"Unless . . ." Victor began.

"Unless they have a good reason," Bruce finished the thought.

Victor nodded. He took one last look at the city lights, then turned and started back into the house.

"Unless someone has a good reason," he repeated.

CHAPTER 41

Elizabeth gently pressed the soil around the roots of the small schefflera. It was the last of the plants she needed to re-pot, and she wondered if it would recover from the shock. She looked at each leaf for signs of yellow, and misted it slightly. Then, she put it back in its old spot near the window but out of the direct sun.

She heard the doorbell ring. It was Robert Hill.

“Hi Robert,” she said, opening the door and speaking through the screen.

“Did you hear about Wayne?” he asked from the porch.

She nodded, and pushed the door open.

“Come in,” she said.

Robert stepped inside and she closed the door behind him. Instead of the dark suits he had worn for most of the days following Ed’s death, he was dressed in a tan and blue checked sport coat over khaki slacks and a knit navy blue shirt.

“I didn’t know if anyone had told you,” he said stopping next to her and squeezing her shoulder reassuringly.

“Victor and Bruce came by last night,” she said, turning and walking back into the house.

He followed her, stopping in the middle of the living room, and looking around at the remaining evidence of the break-in: the pictures she'd hung back on the wall with their glass missing, the potting soil and tools on the coffee table, the torn loudspeaker, the missing glass doors of the cabinet.

He looked at her in sympathy. "My God, Elizabeth, I'm so sorry."

"It'll be OK," she said.

She sat down on the rocking chair, and motioned Robert toward the couch across from her.

As he passed Grace, he leaned over and stroked her back. The cat woke and looked up at him.

"Remember me?" he said, sitting down and lifting her onto his lap.

Grace squirmed, then hissed up at him. He released her, and she ran upstairs.

Elizabeth watched the cat disappear into the bedroom.

"I'm sorry, Robert. She's been through a lot."

"So have you."

"What did the police tell you about Wayne?" she asked.

"Not much, but I filled in the blanks."

He settled into the couch and crossed his legs.

"I seem to be a suspect," Elizabeth said.

"I know."

"You know?"

He shook his head. "Like I said, I filled in the blanks. What did they say to you?" he asked.

“Not much. They asked me where I was last night.”

“And?”

“Here. Alone.” She smiled. “Grace can testify.”

“Alone?” he repeated. Lines of concern crossed his forehead.

“Yeah. Jen and Thomas were here for part of the afternoon, but they left about five.”

Robert shook his head. “That’s unfortunate.”

“The police want a sample of my DNA,” she said in a matter of fact voice. “Apparently, they found some traces at Wayne’s . . . hair, or blood or something.”

“That should clear you?” he said tentatively.

She nodded. “It should. I’m expecting a technician to come by this afternoon.”

He stood up and walked toward the window. He stopped in front of the schefflera she’d just re-potted, and idly stroked a leaf.

“Elizabeth,” he said, his back to her, “I want you to know that I’ll be there for you . . .”

“I heard about the meeting you called yesterday,” she interrupted.

“What about it?” he said.

“I heard you did a pretty good job of not being there for me.”

“You’re not being fair,” he said, turning toward her. “I’ve got more to worry about than you or any feelings I might still have for you. My first duty is . . .”

“To the project,” she finished for him.

“What do you expect?” he repeated.

She shrugged. "I also heard that you and Regina were trying to squelch discussion of Ed's murder and everything related to it."

"That's right," he admitted. "It's only temporary."

She laughed. "I suppose you're doing it to protect the project."

"And to protect you."

"To protect me?"

He nodded. "The last thing you need right now is a bunch of gossip and speculation. Do you have any idea of the trouble you've gotten yourself into?"

She did not answer.

"Elizabeth," he said sympathetically, "I know how much this house means to you. I know how seeing it vandalized must have affected you."

She did not answer for a long time, but rocked slowly and stared at him.

"What are you saying?" she asked eventually.

"I just want you to know that I'll be there for you," he repeated. "I want you to know I understand."

She leaned back in the rocker and shook her head.

"You think I killed Wayne Ballard," she said in a matter of fact voice.

"I don't think anything, Elizabeth, but after that episode in the parking lot, people are talking . . ."

"What are they saying?" she demanded.

"Jesus Christ, do you have any idea what you've been like for the last month?" He stood in front of the window, staring down at her in frustration.

"The last month?" She felt her anger at him start to increase.

"Yes, ever since the breakup you've been erratic, striking out . . ."

“Since the breakup?” she interrupted, shock and disbelief thick in her voice.
“You arrogant bastard . . .”

“God knows the stress you’ve been under,” he interrupted. “I never should have asked you to help the police . . .”

“Fuck you, Robert.”

He glared at her briefly, then shook his head and frowned with a friend’s concern. He put his hands on his hips, and looked up at the ceiling. Elizabeth imagined him firing off one last sarcastic insult and walking out angrily. She leaned back in the chair and waited. She felt it tilt back on the rockers. She watched him simply stand there, staring at the ceiling, his hands on his hips, his tan and blue jacket drawn back. She felt time thicken, as in the aftermath of a lover’s quarrel.

Waiting for him to leave, she did not prepare herself for his sudden attack. Leaning back in the rocker, she had no fulcrum to push against when Robert turned and rushed at her. She had no way to resist when he wedged his right leg between hers. She felt a sickening shift of balance, as if she was falling backwards. Robert put his hands on the chair back, to either side of her, and pushed the rocker back, trapping her beneath him. She heard the joints of the wood creak, and thought the chair would collapse under their combined weight. In a sharp reflex, she held tight to the chair’s arms. He leaned toward her, until their faces almost touched, and stared into her eyes.

“Did you do it?” he shouted.

She smelled his cologne, and felt his breath, warm and damp on her face. She could not move.

“Did you kill Wayne Ballard?” he repeated, the shout replaced by an almost intimate rasp.

She neither answered nor took her eyes off his. He held her there for a moment, then released the chair and stepped back. He stared down at her and seemed to relax, his posture softening.

She stood up quickly and walked backwards across the room. She took the fireplace poker from the hearth, the same tool she'd found thrust into her loudspeaker. She turned and faced him, raising the poker behind her.

"Get out, Robert," she said coldly.

He didn't move, but held his hands out, palms forward.

"If you say you didn't kill Wayne, then I believe you," he said, "but I had to ask."

The violence, the threat had vanished from his manner. He spoke like a friend trying to recover a friend's trust.

"Elizabeth," he said softly, "whatever happens, I'll be there. If you need an attorney, I'll pay for it. If you need to talk, I'll listen." He sounded committed, resolved, reassuring.

"Robert," she said, "get the hell out of my home."

He stared at her. Finally, he nodded, turned and walked to the door. He opened it, stopped and turned back toward her.

"Elizabeth, I am your friend." He emphasized the word *am*. He waited, as if for confirmation.

She did not respond.

"I may be one of the few you have left," he said, his voice layered with pity.

He walked out and left the door standing open behind him.

CHAPTER 42

Elizabeth arranged her dinner plates in the dishwasher, and wiped the counter clean. She took another sip of Cabernet. Somehow, the bottle had survived the vandal's onslaught, and it seemed a fitting toast to the house's nearly completed restoration, a fitting touch to her first meal in her home since it was vandalized. She'd eaten linguini and pesto, using the basil-garlic-Romano cheese pesto that had survived the vandalism in the back of the freezer. She'd made it at the end of the summer and frozen it for a special occasion. Restoring her home from the attack and becoming a murder suspect in the same day seemed to be occasion enough.

That afternoon, after Robert's visit and assault on her, a young police technician had stopped by her house to take a sample of her hair and her DNA. When she'd asked him if they'd found hair belonging to Wayne's killer, his clumsy evasions left her certain they had. She remembered his expression, and his inability to take his eyes off her light, reddish brown hair.

She walked into the music room, and sat down at the piano. She sipped her wine and sat quietly, not playing, but enjoying the comfort of the familiar, still intact music room. She thought back across the afternoon. With the vandalism of her house and her attack on Wayne in the parking lot, the police had compelling reasons to suspect her in his death. Now, she wondered if someone was trying to finish the story she'd so carelessly started. She thought again of the expression on the young officer's face as he took her hair sample. For reasons she could not articulate, she knew the tests would confirm that the hair found at the scene of Wayne's murder matched her own.

She took another sip of the Cabernet and breathed deeply. The invisible man had moved outside the Sky City Building. He was manipulating the events surrounding Wayne's death as certainly as he'd manipulated those surrounding Ed Walters'. She thought of the story growing from the case's few facts, the story that had been nourished by her own indiscretions. It was a story her colleagues were almost certainly spreading through the Sky City Building's instantaneous webs of gossip, and the police were confirming through blind procedure: an unbalanced Elizabeth Florczyk finds evidence linking Wayne Ballard to Ed's death. Wayne tries to scare her off by vandalizing her home. She discovers he was the vandal, and attacks him, wrecking his car and injuring him. His lawyer threatens civil and criminal action against her. Still enraged, she breaks into his house and kills him.

The story was simple and inevitable. The result: Wayne dies with the blame for Ed's death, she goes to prison for killing him, and the invisible man returns to his life among her friends and colleagues.

Elizabeth thought through the story again. She forced herself to begin with the painful facts at its start, and search for the precise point where it parted from those facts. That point was obvious: if Wayne had not vandalized her home then his killer – Ed's killer – had.

She sipped the wine and held it in a pool in her mouth, the vapors filling the hollows behind her face. She swallowed, breathed deeply and forced herself to go over the attack again, deliberately, dispassionately searching for the killer's identity in the bizarre patterns of her home's destruction.

The attack was clearly intended as a message to her, a warning to back away. He'd spared her piano, but had thrown her stereo across the floor and driven a fireplace tool through one of her speakers. He'd shattered the dishes in her kitchen, but had spared her mother's china cabinet. He'd locked Grace in the piano, her most prized possession turned into a prison for her companion. The chaos of the attack was as carefully structured as a Bach fugue.

The message was clear: stop or it could be worse.

As she sat at the piano, Elizabeth saw something new in the attacker's bizarre message. Her willingness to believe that Wayne was capable of so

twisted an act had blinded her to a simple fact: Wayne Ballard did not have the knowledge its cruel symbolism required.

Wayne knew she was a devoted musician – he'd teased her about it enough – but how could he have known how much more important the piano was than either her stereo or CD collection?

Wayne knew she had a cat. He'd even let Grace curl up on his lap at her house warming, but he did not know the extent of Elizabeth's bond with the animal.

And, what was most telling, Wayne knew nothing about the importance of her mother's china cabinet with the curved glass front. She'd never spoken to him about it. He did not know its history, nor could he understand the meaning of the crystal and china inside it.

She sat at her piano, forcing herself to breath deeply, regularly as the realization hardened in her mind. Wayne did not know her well enough to compose the attack's deliberate, articulate message.

Robert Hill did.

The realization came on her suddenly, fully formed. She'd lived with Robert. He knew the way she felt about the piano. He knew about her struggles to buy it. He knew it was a part of her that she would not give up – not even for a new Steinway.

She'd told Robert how the china cabinet symbolized her mother's struggles to build a life of grace and beauty on a Navy Chief's pay. He was at her old apartment when she'd supervised the movers in bundling it for the short ride to his house, making sure they'd wrapped it in only the cleanest moving pads. He was there as she had followed the movers through every step of carrying it into his dining room. He was there when she'd insisted on unwrapping it herself, and while she had spent hours polishing the wood and arranging the china on its shelves. Robert knew that, in spite of her anger and haste to leave his house, she'd taken that same care in its removal.

He knew of her attachment to Grace. He knew how she reacted when he'd pushed the cat off the couch or the bed. She remembered the arguments they'd had over Grace clawing the furniture, or jumping up on the table at dinner. She remembered her own determination, her refusal to compromise on any disagreement that involved her cat.

The message written in the destruction, the clear threat that no matter how horrible the damage to her home had been, it could and would be infinitely worse – it was a message only Robert could have composed. It was message he had sent with Wayne Ballard's signature – with Jen's electronically altered Victorian brooch.

She remembered Grace's odd behavior that afternoon. In spite of Robert's lukewarm attitude toward the cat, she had never hissed at him before. What cause had he given her to fear him?

Elizabeth went back to the beginning of the nightmare, to Ed's death, Gil's suicide, Wayne's murder and all the revelations that marked her world's unraveling. She tried to piece together a story that placed Robert in Ed's office at the moment of his death, a story that drew him through the narrow aperture of the events that followed it.

She could not outline a motive, but she knew there was enough in Robert and Ed's relationship to fuel an explosion of anger. She tried to envision him killing Ed in a moment's rage, and using Wayne's system tools to erase all traces of his presence in the building . . .

No, she thought, it did not make sense. Wayne had not shared his tools, and Robert did not have the skills needed to erase his presence so thoroughly from the database without them.

She went over the story again, revising it to fit all she'd learned. Suppose Robert had killed Ed Walters, and somehow gotten Wayne to help him cover it up? That would explain how he was able to change the records so completely, and it would explain Jen's encounter with Wayne the night of Ed's murder.

But why would Wayne help Robert conceal his crime? Why would he break the law and risk everything to help a man he disliked so intensely?

It had grown cold in her small house. Elizabeth walked back into the living room, took the afghan from the back of her couch and wrapped it around herself. She sat down and thought over what she had learned about Wayne in the last few days. She thought about his phantom agents and the strange “service” they provided to the project’s managers. She thought about Ed’s dark servant, Caliban, and her theory that Wayne had named it after Shakespeare’s dull-witted monster as an expression of contempt.

Wayne’s contempt for Ed meant little compared to his dislike of Robert. Wayne had not helped Robert cover up his crime, she began to realize. He’d placed him under his control. In his arrogance, Wayne had believed he would have Robert permanently under his thumb.

She thought through the theory again and found no flaw. The story moved without resistance through the events of the last week, with the pure inevitability of a mathematical proof. If Robert had killed Ed, then he would have needed help to cover it up. Wayne was the most likely person to help him, and it was also nearly certain to use that knowledge against the project’s chief scientist, most likely through some sort of blackmail. Finally, Elizabeth knew that Robert could not remain under Wayne’s control. He would have to find a way out.

She stopped and repeated it to herself: *he would have to find a way out.*

Robert had vandalized her home and left Jen’s brooch on the piano bench. He’d done it to incriminate Wayne, painting him as desperate to frighten her away from further discoveries, or as vindictive enough to terrorize the person who’d linked him to Ed Walters’ death.

Robert had murdered Wayne Ballard, silencing the only man who knew the truth about Ed’s death, and he had used the destruction of her home to implicate her in the killing. Her outburst in the parking log had only drawn her more deeply into Robert’s scheme, entwined her more deeply in the story Robert had woven, the story that ended with Wayne dead and her hair at the scene.

Elizabeth forced herself to breathe slowly, regularly. Still feeling the chill that came from the winter night and the cold realizations hardening in her mind, Elizabeth got up and adjusted the thermostat. She walked into the kitchen to refill her wine glass, sipped it slowly and played through the story again.

The result was perfect, symmetrical and left no loose ends behind: Wayne dies with the blame for Ed Walters' death, she goes to prison for killing him, and Robert returns to his life at the Sky City Building.

Elizabeth leaned against the counter and heard the heater fan begin to blow warm air through the quiet house. She tried to find the flaw in her theory, some other explanation for the internally consistent, emotionally inevitable story that entangled her.

The chill and the hum of the heater fan reminded her of the building late at night, of walking from the warmth in her office into the cold hallways. She thought of Ed Walters dead in his office while the systems maintained the meaningless warmth around him and let the rest of the building settle into the night chill. She thought of the invisible man moving through that building without detection, without . . .

Of course, she thought, the environmental systems.

The idea intruded from outside the narrow stream of conscious thought. If Robert Hill had been in his office the night Ed died, then the building's environmental system might contain an indirect record of it.

She had not looked at the environmental systems in her work for the police, because they kept no direct record of people and their movements. They simply monitored the information being added to the usage database, and adjusted the temperatures accordingly. But, she remembered, the environmental systems did keep a record of the temperatures throughout the building. They used it to build models of heat flow, to optimize the efficiency of the heating and cooling systems. If Robert had stayed in his office after the altered database showed him leaving, then they might show it remaining warm into the night.

Elizabeth thought with disappointment of the wireless notepads that could access the building systems over a cellular connection. If she had not left hers on her desk, she could have tested this hypothesis in a few minutes. As it was, she would have to go in to the building. She looked at the kitchen clock. It was almost nine thirty; the guard would have gone home for the night.

She remembered her suspension, and wondered if Regina and Robert had instructed the systems to deny her entry. It was an obvious thing to do. She also knew they were under considerable stress, and had never suspended an employee before. If she were lucky, they would have forgotten to lock her out.

Elizabeth checked briefly on Grace, sleeping at the end of the couch, and resisted an urge to sit down beside her and stroke the soft fur. She left the animal sleeping, took her coat and bag, and walked quickly into the December chill.

CHAPTER 43

Elizabeth took her badge out of her bag, draped it around her neck, and walked up the sidewalk to the Sky City Building. Except for her wrecked truck still sitting at the far end of the lot, and the rental car parked at a random angle in the fire lane by the entrance, the parking lot was empty. The building stood darkened, its windows shuttered. She walked to the front door, not knowing if she would be able to enter, or if a security agent would lock her out and call the police. As she came within range of the badge sensor at the front door, she was relieved to hear Pops' familiar voice.

"Good evening, Doctor Florczyk. Please enter your pass code."

After hours entry required entry of a numeric code in a keypad by the door to prevent thieves from entering with a stolen badge. She entered the numbers, heard the solenoid trip the latch, opened the door quickly, and started across the lobby.

"Pops," she tested automatically, "are you with me?"

"Right beside you, Darlin'." It was another of the phrases her summer student had planted in him. Under the circumstances, Elizabeth found it comforting.

"Pops," she said, "who is in the building?"

"Just you and me, lover."

It was another of her student's canned jokes, but one she hadn't heard. She wondered if it was simply because she had never been in the building alone before.

"Pops, alert me by audio if anyone enters."

As Elizabeth neared her office, she saw the lights and computer display come to life. It was cold. The environmental systems would take a few minutes to warm her office, more time than it would take her to find what she needed and leave. She heard her music agent start the Mozart Divertimento – it had learned that she generally preferred classical music when working late.

"Pops, turn off the music."

She sat down in front of her keyboard without removing her coat. Working as quickly as she could, she queried the environmental systems for the temperatures in all offices on the second floor the night of Ed Walters' death.

The query returned quickly, and a large table of numbers filled the screen. She scanned its "View" menu for some sort of a graphic display, and found an item labeled "Architectural." She selected it, and the table gave way to a layout of the building's second floor. It was a familiar "movie" display, allowing her to view the data over time like a film. She started the playback. A small clock face in the corner of the simulation set itself to five o'clock, and its hands began to turn rapidly, compressing an hour into a few seconds.

As the visualization began, almost all the offices were a soft orange: the color key at the bottom of the screen indicated this represented a temperature of 68 degrees. A few unoccupied offices and conference rooms were already a cooler pale green, as the environmental systems had inferred that they would not be entered for the rest of the day. As she watched, the colors of most of the offices began to cool to the same pale green, on into the color of a cool forest, and then to dusk's deepening blue. The only offices on the second floor that remained warm were Ed Walters', Gil Baca's, Peter and Regina Martinelli's – and Robert Hill's.

She watched in silence as the visualization played. After seven thirty, she saw Peter and Regina's offices start to cool. After eight, Gil Baca's office followed. Ed and Robert's offices remained a warm orange. The rest of the second floor shifted toward a light blue, indicating a temperature near sixty.

As she watched into the night of Ed Walters' death, the offices of the second floor cooled to a deep indigo, a temperature of fifty-eight degrees, the coolest the environmental systems allowed. The only regions that continued to draw heat were the men's room, the hallway and Ed and Robert's offices.

She remembered that the usage database had shown Wayne working in Robert's office on a supposedly legitimate system problem. She watched as the simulation reached 10:30, the time he had completed the repair and returned downstairs. The office did not cool.

She watched the display move toward dawn, until the room temperatures would rise in anticipation of the workday. Only Ed and Robert's offices had remained warm past midnight. Robert's office did not start to cool until after two.

She leaned back in her chair. She had found the trace of the invisible man, his tracks in the building's icy recollections.

Elizabeth inserted a blank CD into the drive David had installed at her desktop, and began to copy the environmental records to it. She heard the drive start to spin, and heard the tiny mechanisms moving the laser head, burning evidence of Robert's guilt into the disk's rainbow surface. Almost as soon as the copy started, it stopped and she saw the pilot light on the drive's front panel go dead. She pushed the eject button and nothing happened. She turned to her computer display and saw the icon representing the CD drive had disappeared. As she watched, the environmental records vanished from the screen. She grabbed the mouse and tried to recover them. The cursor sat unmoving. Nothing responded. Suddenly, the screen itself went blank.

"Pops," she said, "turn on my display."

She heard nothing but the silence of the empty building.

“Pops, are you with me?”

Silence.

She tried Ed’s agent. “Ariel, can you hear me?”

Still, silence.

“Shit,” she swore. She stepped out into the hall.

“Pops, who is in the building?”

Silence.

She walked to one of the display panels that lined the hall. When she stopped before it, the screen should have come to life. Its smooth, reflective black surface remained dark, impenetrable.

“Pops, turn on the display,” she said.

Nothing happened.

She ran back into her office to grab her bag and car keys. As she entered, the lights went off. She turned instantly toward the door, looked down the hall, and saw the fluorescent panels dim one by one, light and familiarity receding. She found herself in nearly total darkness.

She stood in the dark without moving, holding her breath, listening. She heard nothing. After a moment, her eyes adjusted. She tried the stainless steel desk lamp, fumbling for the switch in its base. A small circle of light projected on her desktop. It was not a power failure – someone had locked her out of the building systems, and turned off the lights they controlled.

Elizabeth left the circle of light in her office, and started slowly down the hall, keeping her hand on the wall to guide her through the darkness. As she went, she took her cell phone from her bag and dialed 911. Nothing happened.

She remembered that the cell phone, like her wireless notepad and palmtop computer, was integrated into the building systems. When she was away

from work, it used one of the city's ordinary cellular systems, but when she was inside, it tied directly into the building software. She looked at the dial. The batteries were strong. Someone had blocked the call at the systems level.

She reached the lobby, and tried the terminal at the guard's desk. "Pops, can you hear me?"

Still, silence.

She tried the guard's phone, hoping it might have an outside line. It, too, was cut off. The lights in the parking lot illuminated the lobby, and Elizabeth crossed it quickly to the exit. She pushed the bar on the glass door, but it did not move.

"Damnit," she swore. "Pops, open the front door."

Silence.

She looked around for something she could throw through the window, a chair, or a plant: anything heavy. As she searched, she saw a pair of headlights turning into the parking lot.

It was Robert Hill's silver BMW.

Elizabeth ran back to the guard's desk and tried the drawers, looking for anything she could use as a weapon: pepper spray, a nightstick, anything. She found nothing.

"Damnit, Pops, where are you," she said without thinking.

Suddenly, she thought of another possible ally. Robert had disabled Pops and Ariel using a remote connection. He might have forgotten Wayne's phantom agent. He might have forgotten Caliban, the spy Ed Walters had sent to stalk Regina Martinelli.

"Caliban, are you on line?"

She heard it answer in the same flat androgynous voice all agents used as their default, the voice they used until someone modified it to support their fantasies of the perfect disembodied assistant.

“Yes, Mr. Walters.”

Deceived by the building’s layers of permissions and indirection into believing she was his dead master, it had addressed her as Ed. Elizabeth saw Robert’s car stop outside the door. She hurried back into the shadows of the hall.

She spoke into the cell phone: “Caliban, get me a phone line. Dial 911.”

It answered almost immediately. “No outside lines are available.”

“Damnit,” she swore.

She saw Robert coming up the walk toward the bright lobby. She retreated down the hall, relying on her memory and the feel of her right hand on the wall to guide her through the darkness. She stepped into an office at the rear of the first floor, and removed her badge. She held it for a moment. It not only enabled Robert to track her, but also it was her only link to Caliban and the building systems. Removing it would not only lure Robert into the deserted office, it would not only leave her invisible – it would leave her alone. Reluctantly, she laid it on the desk and started into the hall.

Suddenly, she paused and turned back to stand briefly beside the badge.

“Caliban . . .” she began.

CHAPTER 44

The first floor of the Sky City Building was divided into three sections by two main hallways that ran its length. About every ten yards, a secondary hall connected them. Elizabeth crouched in the long, dark hallway farthest from the office where she'd left her badge. She watched the front door, fighting to control her breathing. She saw Robert enter. She heard him ask his agent for her location, and heard it respond with the number of the office where her badge rested. She watched him cross the lobby. He wore running shoes, jeans and a black leather bomber jacket over a black sweater. He seemed as relaxed as if he'd stopped in for a few hours to catch up on a report or a batch of proposals.

As she lost sight of him, the lights came on in the far hall. Elizabeth counted to five and ran, as silently as she could, across the lobby. She ran to the wooden benches that lined the wall of smooth glass, and picked up the nearest of them. It was heavy, anxiety had left her hands slick with perspiration, and the varnished hardwood slipped in her grasp. The bench glanced off the window, and fell to the floor. The glass vibrated in front of her, alternately fracturing and reassembling her reflection in a stream of disconnected instants.

“Safety glass.”

She turned and saw Robert crossing the lobby. He did not run, but walked calmly toward her.

“You didn’t think I’d really go chasing your badge, did you? This isn’t some stupid movie.”

As he approached, he held his hands out, palms forward. A few steps away from her he stopped and spoke in a reassuring voice.

“Relax, I’m not going to hurt you.”

She looked around for anything she could use as a weapon.

“Don’t,” he said simply, the reassuring tone of voice resolving into bright menace.

She stood and faced him. “What are you going to do?”

“Give me the bag,” he demanded, holding out his hand.

“Why?”

“You’re a smart woman, Libby,” he smiled, “maybe the smartest I’ve ever met.”

She stared at him. He seemed calm, focused. She felt disbelief take control of her features.

“I hadn’t thought about the environmental systems,” he explained.

“So what are you going to do?”

Robert stared at her for several seconds. Elizabeth knew him well enough to know he was measuring her emotions, planning his course of action. She forced herself to remain calm, to reveal nothing.

“Don’t be afraid,” he reassured, “but we have to sort this out . . .”

He paused for emphasis. He seemed calm, as if he were presiding over a corporate planning meeting.

“So no one gets hurt,” he finished, staring at her coldly. “Now give me the bag. Please.”

She did not move.

“Elizabeth, don’t put me in a corner. Give me the bag.”

She handed it to him.

“You were monitoring the building systems?” she asked.

He nodded, then unzipped the green, cloth bag and dumped its contents on the floor. He moved them around with the toe of his shoe, looking for tapes, CDs or any sort of media. He saw none. He felt inside the bag with his hand, and then tossed it aside.

“By the way,” he said calmly, “I have already modified the environmental records.”

Elizabeth thought briefly of the backup tapes the police had requested. If they had taken tapes made after Ed’s death, they would have copies of the records. She pushed the thought aside so as to reveal nothing.

“OK,” she said, “what now?”

“Let’s walk back to your office. I want to look there.”

She glanced down the dark hall. “No. Let me go, and you can look all you want.”

“Come with me,” Robert demanded.

“Why?”

He shook his head patiently. “Libby, there is still a way out of this – for both of us.”

“Robert, people are dead . . .”

“You don’t know the whole story.”

“Then we go and talk to Victor . . .”

“You think he’s your friend? He’s just using you. He’s used you since this started. Now, trust me.”

Elizabeth began to laugh. She could not control the spasms rising from what seemed like some automatic nerve center in her stomach. The laughter drove adrenaline’s sharp focus from her body, and sensation returned to her joints.

Robert grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her close. She forced herself to stare into his eyes. She saw a hard, blank determination in them. He began to speak in a soft, almost intimate tone.

“Calm down, Libby. I need you.”

She knocked his hands away and stepped back.

“Have you lost your mind?” she said angrily.

“Elizabeth, help me and we’ll get through this. Fight me . . .”

He paused and stared at her.

“Without that data,” he warned, “It will just be the word of a jealous, unbalanced woman against a respected scientist.”

“They won’t believe you.”

“Why not? Because of your friend Victor? Get real Elizabeth. Even he’s having doubts about you.”

“Look at yourself.” Robert spat the words out. “You never got over my affair with Regina. You’re obsessed with revenge. You can’t control your temper. You run your car into people. You’re a pathetic, psychotic who lives alone with a cat and spies on her colleagues. Who’s going to believe you?”

He stared into her eyes, as if waiting for some evidence that she saw the inevitability of his logic. After a moment, he gave up and continued.

“Don’t you see? It all follows. Wayne killed Ed Walters in a dispute over . . . his services. That is what you called them, isn’t it? You and your little pals pulled that stupid stunt with Jen’s ‘lie detector’ to try and trap him. Wayne

saw through it and vandalized your home – either to frighten you off or get even – and it was more than you could stand. You killed him. Then, you saw an opportunity to frame me for it, to get yourself free, and to get even for my affair. You broke into the building. I caught you tampering with the environmental records.”

He stood quietly, as if waiting for her to absorb the story.

“It won’t work,” she said.

“You don’t get it,” he laughed. “It’s already working. The cops need a good story to tie up all the loose ends around Ed and Wayne’s deaths. I’ve – you and I – we’ve given them the story.”

He pointed down the hall.

“Now walk.”

“No.”

Elizabeth fought the urge to run. She fought the urge to search the lobby for a means of escape. Instead, she watched his movements, his eyes.

Robert grabbed her upper arm and pushed her toward the hall. She turned and swung at his face as hard as she could, striking him on the cheekbone. She felt his head yield, the muscles in his neck stiffen. He did not let go of her arm, but shook her violently, then hit her on the side of the face with his fist. She fell. Her hand automatically reached to the side of her face, and she looked up from the hard tile.

Robert reached into the pocket of the leather jacket and withdrew a small, black automatic pistol. He held his arm out straight, pointing the hard, impersonal metal directly at her face.

“Elizabeth,” he said, his voice hard with menace, “you are an intruder in this building,” he said. “You have been suspended from work and told to stay away from here. You are a suspected murderer, and you have shown your violent side.” His hand went to the side of his face. “I have the bruise to prove

you attacked me. Make no mistake about it. I will defend myself and my property.”

He glared at her.

“Where did you get that?” she asked, looking up at the small handgun.

He smiled and looked down at the pistol, turning it in his hand like some new piece of electronics one of his engineers had brought him.

“Family heirloom. My mother kept it in her night stand to fight off rapists,” he smirked. “It’s been registered in my name for a long time. No one will question my owning it, and they certainly won’t question my carrying it with me – not after all that’s happened.”

“So, now what?”

“Elizabeth, believe it or not, I still have feelings for you. If you cooperate with me, I won’t need this, but,” he steadied the pistol, aiming it at her once again. “But, it is my fallback position.”

The blow left the side of her face numb. She felt moisture at the corner of her mouth and rubbed it away. Her fingertips came away bloody. Losing patience, Robert reached down, grabbed her arm, and pulled her to her feet. As he pushed her into the darkened hallway, the indifferent building illuminated the long, familiar passage.

They entered her office, and Robert pushed her into the chair. He closed the door behind him and returned the gun to the pocket of the black leather jacket. He removed the partially written CD from the drive and put it in his other pocket, along with the blank disks David Chavez had given her. He started searching her desk drawers.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” she asked.

“What?” he said without looking up. He sounded detached, as if she’d interrupted him while he was writing some corporate memo.

“With Ed,” she pressed. “At least tell me what happened.”

“You don’t need to know,” he said, opening another of her desk drawers, and looking for any media that might contain the environmental records.

“Robert, I can help you,” she said.

“Damnit Elizabeth, just shut up,” he snapped. “The less you know, the safer you’ll be.”

“It was about Regina Martinelli, wasn’t it?” she pressed.

He shook his head and snorted a laugh.

“All right. What do you think happened?” he asked, without looking up from his search of her desk.

“I don’t know much, but I think I’m starting to figure things out. I know you and she were having an affair. I know Ed Walters had feelings for her . . .”

“Feelings?” Robert interrupted, turning toward her. “The sick son of a bitch was stalking her.”

“I know,” she said. “Did he confront you?”

He looked at her for a long time, but said nothing.

“Tell me about it, Robert,” she said softly, “please.”

“Tell me about it, Robert, please” he repeated in a mocking falsetto. “Jesus, you wonder why I left you.”

“OK, then. I’ll tell you.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I know how Ed felt about Regina. I know he’d learned about your affair, and I can imagine how that made him feel. I think he confronted you about it, and things got out of hand . . .”

Robert interrupted angrily. “He called me into his office, and said I was jeopardizing our work. He said if our relationship became public, it could put

our funding at risk.” He shook his head. “That pathetic, rationalizing pervert.”

“What happened then?” Elizabeth pressed.

“I told him to shut up and tried to leave.”

He looked at her as though she had asked him to explain some absurdly obvious fact.

“He ran after me and grabbed me. He tried to hit me. I pushed him away and he fell. End of story. Now sit down and shut up.”

“What about Wayne? Why did you kill Wayne Ballard?”

“Shut up.”

“Was he blackmailing you?”

He stepped toward her, his hand raised. Elizabeth thought he was going to hit her again. She did not flinch, but forced herself to stare calmly at him. She felt the conflict of will and instinct in the muscles of her face. He lowered his hand, and returned her stare.

“How did Wayne get involved?” she insisted.

Robert took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling.

“You want details? All right.”

He grew agitated again, talking in a venomous staccato, chopping at the air with his hand.

“After Ed died, I was deleting records of my presence from the database. He came up to my office and asked me ‘what the hell I was doing.’”

Robert stopped. He seemed to be trying to calm himself.

“He’d set an agent to tell him if anyone tried to modify ‘his database.’ Son of a bitch acted like he owned the place.”

“Then what?”

“He went into Ed’s office, and saw what had happened. He threatened to call the police.”

Elizabeth heard Robert’s voice harden with resentment.

“I convinced him to help me,” he said bitterly.

“When did the blackmail start?” she pressed.

“When did it start?” Robert snorted. “Oh, he’d been doing it for a long time. It was one of the hidden costs of the services he’d provided.”

He spit out the word ‘services’ angrily.

“Although, he did raise my rates for helping out with Ed,” Robert explained. His face softened. “Libby, it was a mistake I will regret the rest of my life. But, you need to let me fix it.”

He stared at her, as though waiting for her to recognize the inevitability of a mathematical proof.

“You vandalized my home,” she said slowly. “You did it to incriminate Wayne in Ed’s death, to make it look like he was trying to scare me off.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. It was necessary.”

“And, you let the air out of my tires?”

“I needed to establish a pattern leading up to . . .” He paused. Up to your house.”

“When did you decide to . . .” She deliberately left the sentence unfinished.

“To kill Wayne?”

He stared at her for several seconds, then looked down and scratched his head in front of his ear. He looked up her and smiled sheepishly.

“After you rammed his car in the lot,” he said.

“You saw an opportunity to frame me?”

“Well,” he said, looking down and to the side, “I had to improvise.” He raised his eyes to hers. “I was worried that your house wasn’t enough to incriminate him in Ed’s murder. I couldn’t be sure whom the cops would believe if he told them his side of the story. Then, when you rammed his car in the parking lot . . .”

“You had everything you needed,” she interrupted. “You just needed to make sure Wayne couldn’t refute it.”

Robert nodded.

“And the hairs they found at Wayne’s were mine?” she pressed.

“You left a hair brush at my place when you moved out.”

“What about that performance at my house this afternoon?” she asked.

“I needed to see how you’d react.”

“What did you learn?”

He stared at her and shrugged.

“And I go to jail,” she concluded.

Robert shook his head, as if in frustration at her failure to see the necessity of his actions.

“Elizabeth, you’re not seeing the big picture. It’s unlikely you’ll spend so much as a day in jail. My lawyer can convince the jury you were driven to it, stressed by the investigation, by Wayne’s attack on your house. There are plea bargains, insanity pleas . . . dozens of options. And, if it looks like it’s going badly, I will get you out of the country.”

“You expect me to go along with this?” she interrupted. Once again, she started to laugh.

“I don’t give a damn what you do. You don’t have any choice.”

He stopped and stared at her, impatience set in his face.

“Don’t you see? This is about more than you or me,” he began in a bitter iambic, “It’s more than Wayne, or Ed, or Regina . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you remember what we were trying to do here?” he demanded, gesturing at the technology in her office. “Do you really expect me to let that piece of shit destroy it all? Do you think I’d throw it away, even for you?”

She said nothing, but kept her eyes on his. He returned her stare.

“Half the people in the world have never used a phone – let alone a computer. Can you believe that?”

He paused for emphasis, his sense of timing unaffected by the situation.

“Half the people in the world live in ignorance and disease, and here’s the greatest opportunity to bring them out of the darkness since the printing press, and you expect me to let some fucking degenerate like Wayne Ballard destroy it?”

“Robert,” she said deliberately, “it’s over. We have to go to the police.”

“You’re talking like I’m some sort of a criminal?” he said incredulously. “Look around you. Look at the greed and vanity that infects everything people do. Remember the ‘new economy?’ We prey on each other like fucking rats, and you call me a criminal?”

He stopped and stared at her, as if searching for some understanding. She said nothing.

“What about the people on the outside?” he went on. “What about the people who will never own a PC? The people that don’t know how to read, let alone use the Internet? We can give them something better than a six hundred dollar computer. We can give them buildings that hear their needs and respond. We can go into villages that have never seen a doctor, and build clinics that understand their symptoms and tell them how to stay healthy.

We can build town halls that teach people about democracy, libraries that teach children to read, houses that care for the sick and the old. We can build schools that take knowledge where the poor live, not where college professors want to live. We can give them something better than tribalism, religious dogma and thousand year old hatreds.”

“What does this have to do with Ed Walters? With Wayne? With me?”

He stared at her as though she had missed an obvious meaning.

“How do you think the consortium will react to the publicity? The murders, the spying?” He asked bitterly. “They’re already trying to shut us down. I can’t let that happen. I have to stay in the game.”

She forced herself to step toward him. She spoke calmly.

“It’s over, Robert. There’s no more game.”

He shook his head. “I’m all that’s kept them from turning this place into just another product development lab. Who do you think these people are?”

She reached out and touched his arm. “You have to tell the truth . . .”

“What truth? Ed’s death was an accident. That’s the truth. I was involved; Wayne was involved – what’s the difference? Is my shoving Ed the most important truth?” he asked, stressing the word ‘truth.’ “What about Ed stalking Regina? What about Wayne’s blackmail? What about his willingness to corrupt everything we’ve done? Where exactly is the truth in all this?” He paused and stared at her. “What about Gil Baca? What good did your truth do there?”

She felt a knot in her chest. She did not respond to Robert’s goad, but forced it back in her mind.

“We’ll tell them everything,” she said calmly. “I can help you.”

He laughed. “You can’t tell them everything. There’s always a point of view, always a spin.”

“You can’t keep lying,” she insisted. “It’s already coming apart . . .”

“Lying?”

He looked at her with pity and frustration.

“Is it a lie when a photographer frames a photo?” he said as if confronting her in yet another philosophical argument. “Hell, every time he aims his camera, he decides what goes in and what stays out. Is he lying? Does anybody care? People see photographs on the front page of newspapers, and decide to go to war. Does anyone wonder what’s just outside the frame?”

“We know the difference” she said calmly. “We know what happened here.”

“That’s right. I know Ed died of an accident. I know Wayne Ballard was trying to twist everything we believe in. I know he died from his own greed. I know that what we are doing here is more important than him, or you or me.”

“No Robert. It’s over.”

“You haven’t been listening,” he said, sliding his hand into the pocket of the jacket. “Elizabeth, you have to make a choice, and you have to make it now.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Caliban,” she said in the slightly louder voice the project’s employees used to address their executive agents, “stop the recording, and e-mail a copy of it to everyone in my address book.”

She glanced at his hand in the pocket of the black leather jacket.

“Do it now,” she said urgently.

“Yes, Mr. Walters,” the bland, androgynous voice replied from the walls around them.

“What?” Robert blurted, the muscles in his face going slack.

“You disabled Pops and the rest of the system,” Elizabeth said to him, “but you forgot about Ed’s backdoor agent, the one Wayne programmed. I’ve recorded everything, Robert. It’s over.”

“Caliban,” Robert shouted angrily at the walls, “do not mail that recording. Delete it from the system.”

Silence.

“Caliban,” he repeated, his voice growing even louder.

“It can’t hear you, Robert,” Elizabeth said softly. “It hasn’t been set to respond to your voice.”

“Damnit, Elizabeth.”

He pulled the gun from his pocket and leveled it at her stomach. She saw his hand tremble.

“Robert, it’s too late,” she said, forcing herself to speak calmly, fighting an overwhelming instinct to turn and run. “That recording has already gone to over a hundred people. Most of them don’t even work here. Victor Rodriguez and Bruce Kaminsky are on the list. It’s already on dozens of mail servers all over the world. You cannot delete it. No one can delete it.”

Robert Hill stared at her, and a shocked paralysis passed over his face. The gun lowered slightly.

“You stupid woman,” he said. “You don’t know what you’ve done. The damage you’ve caused . . .”

He stopped suddenly. Elizabeth heard a crash of breaking glass coming from the front of the building, and turned toward the sound. She saw Victor and Bruce running down the hall, followed by several uniformed police. She turned back toward Robert. He retreated slowly, taking several steps away from her and the approaching police.

“You bitch,” he snarled.

He stopped, closed his eyes and raised the pistol to his temple.

“Robert, don’t,” she shouted.

He opened his eyes and stared at her, holding the gun to his head. She heard the steps of the police behind her, then heard them stop. Without turning or taking her eyes away from Robert, she heard Victor Rodriguez' voice.

"Dr. Hill, put the gun down," he said.

Elizabeth heard the sound of metal against leather, the unmistakable sounds of the police drawing their own guns. She raised her right hand, turning the palm toward the men standing behind her. She took a single step toward Robert Hill. She saw moisture pool against his lower eyelids, and then saw him smile.

"Well played, Elizabeth," he said.

"Robert," she said softly, "don't do this."

"Like you said, it's over."

She searched his face for some sign, some emotion she could use to stop him. She found nothing.

"Elizabeth," Robert said, "our work . . . this place . . . it's up to you, now. Don't let it fail."

"Then don't destroy it. Don't do this."

He looked at her as though she had failed to understand something urgent, something obvious.

"I have to, Elizabeth. It's the only way."

"This won't end it, Robert. Ed Walters, Gil Baca, now you – it's all the same madness. Pull that trigger, and it just goes on."

She paused, trying to find words that could loosen his hand from the gun's perfect, inevitable contours.

"Pull that trigger, and you make it go on," she said, stressing the word 'you.'

He looked puzzled. She saw a tear break free of the pool above his eyelid and track down his cheek.

“Robert,” she said softly, forcing herself to take another step toward him, “don’t you see what’s happening here? It’s all falling apart and I can’t stop it. I’ve tried and I can’t. Killing yourself is just one more insane act among all the insane acts that are tearing this place apart. Someone has to stop it, someone has to refuse to take one more step down that road. Someone has to be the first. It has to be you.”

She held out her hand.

“Please,” she said.

Robert stared at her for what seemed like a long time. He seemed as detached as if he was analyzing some technical argument. Finally, he nodded, and his jaw began to quiver. He lowered his hand, slowly, automatically. Elizabeth did not take her eyes from his, but heard the thud of the pistol falling to the carpet.

A wave of release passed through Robert’s body, the hinges of his joints losing all tension. He fell to his knees in front of her, raised his hands to his face, and began to sob.

Elizabeth heard voices and footsteps behind her. For an instant, she was unable to parse the sounds, unable to situate them in the field of her awareness. Then, she remembered the police’s arrival, and the hard tunnel of concentration that had connected her to Robert Hill evaporated. She saw two uniformed officers force Robert onto his stomach, his face turned to the side, still sobbing, wet with tears. She saw them draw his hands behind his back and clasp the chrome handcuffs around his wrists. Elizabeth saw Bruce Kaminsky kneel in front of her and pick up the small black pistol. She felt her knees weaken, and staggered toward the nearest wall, her hand out for support. She felt a hand reach from behind her and grab her left shoulder, another steadying her at the waist. The hands lowered her gently to the floor, her back against the blue-carpeted walls.

She looked up and saw Victor Rodriguez.

“Are you all right?” he asked her.

She nodded.

“How?” was the only word she could form.

“We were monitoring the systems,” he explained.

“You were what?” she asked in a puzzled voice.

“We thought Wayne’s killer might use them to spy on the investigation, or try to alter data. It was a long shot. Jason Evans helped us set up a remote link.”

“Jason?”

Victor smiled.

She tried to speak, to thank him, but the words remained trapped deep in her throat. She nodded, and a spasm of undifferentiated emotion, a clear white light of joy, sorrow, fear, exhilaration and regret rose all at once in her chest.

CHAPTER 45

“Prospero Año Nuevo.”

Elizabeth turned in her chair and saw Victor Rodriguez standing in the doorway. He was holding a large yellow Tupperware container.

“Victor,” she said, rising to welcome him, “Happy New Year.”

He handed her the yellow tub. It was heavy, hard and ice cold. She felt her palms slip across the thin layer of frost covering it.

“What is this?” she asked, steadying the yellow hemisphere before it could escape her grip.

He automatically reached out and held his hands to either side of hers, as if he could catch the tub if it slipped away.

“Posole,” he smiled, “Michelle froze some for you.”

The rich hominy and chili stew was a New Year’s tradition in New Mexico homes. Elizabeth guided the tub to her desktop, and eased it down onto the bright surface.

“Tell Michelle thank you, and wish her a Happy New Year,” she said, rubbing her hands together until the moisture evaporated.

“I will. By the way, be sure to get the tub back to me, or she’ll make me arrest you.”

She laughed. “No problem. Come in and sit down.”

“I see you’re back in harness,” he said, settling into her spare chair.

He was wearing the same gray tweed jacket he’d had on the day she’d met him a little more than a month ago, although he now wore it over a dark blue, ribbed sweater. Seeing him negotiate his athletic frame into the angular office chair took her back to the day she’d learned of Ed’s death.

She sat across from him, crossed her legs and rested her hands easily on her lap.

“Yes, I’m back,” she said. “Regina lifted my suspension . . .”

“That’s good news.”

“But, not until I played on her guilt and made her let it run through New Years. So, I had little extra paid vacation. How were your holidays?”

“Terrific,” he said smiling, “a quiet Christmas at home, and no more than the usual New Year’s Eve carnage. Did you do anything special?”

“Well, I decided to take your advice. I joined my Dad in Hawaii.”

She tilted her head toward a rainbow-colored plastic tourist lei draped over the corner of the framed poster of Andy Warhol’s cat.

“You look like you got some sun,” he smiled. “You didn’t have to bunk with him and his lady friend, did you?”

She returned the smile and shook her head.

“No, the travel agent found a cancellation at the same hotel. I had my very own room.”

“How was it?”

“Wonderful. She treated me like a girl friend, and dad was delighted to have two women on his arm.”

“You look relaxed,” Victor said. “It’s good to see.”

“Getting away helped. Where’s Bruce?”

“He took a few days vacation and went to Vegas with Barbara.”

“So you’re working alone?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m just tying up loose ends, getting caught up on paperwork – nothing heavy.”

The music coming from her desk reached a small crescendo and intruded on the conversation.

“Just a second,” she said, leaning across her desk and turning down the music that played on a small portable stereo.

“Thelonius Monk?” Victor asked tentatively.

“Monk,” Elizabeth acknowledged, sounding surprised. “You never told me you liked Jazz?”

“I’m not a huge fan, but I know a little. Monk’s pretty distinctive. What’s with the boom box?” he asked, gesturing at the black mini-component system sitting at the back of her desk. “Where’s Pops?”

“Off-line, along with everything else.”

Victor glanced around the office. For the first time, he noticed that the gallery of locators was absent from the top of her monitor. His eyes rested on a stack of them sitting beside the portable stereo. He recognized several more of the building’s strange, wonderful devices in the pile like a child’s abandoned toys, and frowned.

“When Regina finally realized how corrupted the systems really were,” Elizabeth explained, “she had a fit. She made us shut everything down until we could remove the security holes and re-validate all the software.”

She tilted her head toward the monitor.

“Right now, it’s not much more than an ordinary wireless network.”

“What’s it like without Pops – I mean without the systems?” he corrected himself.

“I miss him, too,” she smiled.

“So, what has been going on around here?” he asked.

“Well, the board has sent in one of their hot shots to decide what to do with this place. Regina’s helping him from a legal standpoint.”

Victor noticed the irony in Elizabeth’s voice and raised an eyebrow.

“You mean she’s running things,” he said.

She laughed. “You get the picture.”

“What about her and Peter?” Victor asked.

“I’m afraid things aren’t going so well for him. They haven’t fired him yet, but I can’t imagine they’ll let any of Wayne’s ‘clients’ stay on. I haven’t seen him at work very much. As far as the marriage is concerned, they’re keeping up a good front, but the word is Regina’s divorcing him as soon as things settle out professionally.”

“I hear he was making the anonymous phone calls?”

“That’s the buzz,” Elizabeth confirmed. “He’d been using Wayne’s services to keep an eye on her.”

Victor shook his head. “Poor bastard.”

“When Peter learned about her affair with Robert . . .” She paused. “Well, I’m not really sure why he made the phone calls.”

Victor shrugged. “Could they shut you down?” he asked.

“Sure,” she acknowledged, “but I don’t think they will. I do think this place is going to be a lot different, though.”

“And?” Victor probed.

“Please keep it quiet,” she said, “but I have my resume out. Do you need a computer forensicist?”

“Don’t push your luck,” he joked, “but that reminds me why I’m here.”

“Oh?”

“I spoke to Carmen Goodman at the DA’s office. The first piece of good news is that it looks like your little incident in the parking lot is going to go away.”

“What do you mean?”

“With Wayne Ballard dead, and everything else that’s happened, she doesn’t think there’s much of a case. She said it was too complicated to sell to a jury. Besides, no one is exactly screaming for your head anymore. She’s decided not to go forward with it.”

Elizabeth exhaled in relief. “Victor, thank her for me, and thank you.”

“I had nothing to do with it.”

“Yeah, right.”

He smiled. “Second, it looks like Robert’s going to go for some sort of deal.”

“You mean . . .”

“We’ll probably avoid a trial.”

“Thank God,” Elizabeth said, the words coming in a visible, physical release.

She remembered Ed’s wife at the funeral, her grace and kindness. She remembered the cost Gil Baca and his family had paid for his shame.

“So Ed’s secret – the stalking. No one else needs to find out?” she said.

“With luck – except for the part you broadcast all over the Internet,” he said with an ironic half-smile.

Elizabeth remembered the night Robert confronted her, and her desperate use of Ed’s illicit agent to record and publicize his admissions.

“Well, I’d hate to see it stirred up again,” she acknowledged awkwardly.
“What made him change his mind?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“The recording you made that night.”

“I thought we couldn’t use it in court.”

“Well, there is always some doubt about secret tape recordings,” he explained,
“and your spreading it all over the Internet didn’t help any.”

Elizabeth felt herself flush again.

“On the other hand, Robert Hill helped design this building, and he gave it that ability. Carmen thought she could get it admitted. I guess she convinced his lawyer she had a shot.” He smiled. “Truth is, she was eager to try; I think Robert’s change of heart has disappointed her.”

“So what is going to happen to him?” Elizabeth asked.

“Carmen has a strong case, so she’s not going to deal too much. On the other hand, she really does want to spare Ed Walters’ family any embarrassment. If Robert pleads guilty to involuntary manslaughter in Ed Walters’ death, and second degree murder of Wayne Ballard, I think she’ll give him something on the sentence.”

“What does that mean?”

“She won’t go for the death penalty on Ballard’s killing.”

“How long will he be in jail?”

“For what he did? It’s going to be a long time.”

In spite of everything, she felt deeply saddened, and sat for a moment, looking downward, trying to understand the feelings rising in her.

“Are you OK?” Victor asked.

“Sometimes, I still find myself trying to make sense of it all,” she added softly.

“You may not be able to. People don’t always do things for reasons we can understand. I’m not even sure Robert could explain it.”

She nodded, but said nothing. Victor sat patiently, as if waiting for her to place her thoughts in order.

“I keep coming back to something Wayne said,” she said finally, “something he told me the last time I really talked to him. He called computers ‘chaos machines.’ He said all our ideas of stability were just illusions.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“I know,” she said. “Deep down, I don’t either, but he made me think. Maybe it’s not the computers that are the chaos machines – maybe it’s us.”

“That’s for sure,” he smiled. “I call it job security.”

Elizabeth laughed.

“It made me think,” she began slowly. “It made me think that maybe we missed something when we designed all this.”

She tilted her head in a gesture that encompassed all the technology, both functional and inert that filled her office. Victor waited quietly for her to finish her thoughts.

“Maybe it was a mistake to think that we could build a community where everything was open, shared. Maybe human nature won’t allow it. Maybe people need secrets. Maybe we need our masks.”

Elizabeth thought about Gil Baca, of her own role in exposing his crime. She felt tears pool in her eyes.

“Sometimes we do,” he acknowledged, looking at her with concern, “but that doesn’t mean you were wrong to appeal to something better in people . . . something nobler.”

“Nobler. I haven’t heard anyone use that word in a long time,” she said, smiling.

Victor shrugged. "That doesn't mean its not there."

She nodded, then glanced downward, as though listening for some faint melody coming through the walls of her office. Victor did not intrude. For what seemed like several minutes, they just sat in her office. The Thelonius Monk Quartet continued playing on the portable stereo, the angular rhythms and unexpected harmonies partitioning the familiar space into a newer, stranger order. Curiously, she felt no awkwardness at the lengthening silence, no urge to fill the time, no discomfort with the detective sitting across from her. When the song ended Elizabeth began to speak.

"You know, when things were so crazy here," she began, "with Ed, and Gil and Wayne . . . When I couldn't make sense of anything, when I needed to give it some shape – any shape, I started calling Ed's killer the invisible man."

Unconsciously, her hand went to the identification badge she still wore around her neck, as undetectable by the now insensate building as the invisible man himself.

"I remember the movie," Victor prompted.

"Claude Rains or Kevin Bacon?" she asked.

"Claude Rains, of course."

She smiled.

"Sometimes, during the investigation," she said, "I'd feel like he was standing just behind me. Sometimes, I feel like he's still here." She paused, as if listening for footsteps, or for some rustle in the air. "Sometimes I think he'll always be with me."

"I know those feelings." Victor said. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can't promise you they'll go away."

"I know," she said, in a matter of fact voice. "Maybe that's the point. Maybe I don't want them to."

Victor leaned forward in his chair and took her hand. “You’re going to be OK.”

“I know,” she said.

Victor leaned back in the chair and smiled at her.

“I should be going,” he said. “A new year brings new crooks, and my regulars will be getting back to work.”

He stood up and gestured toward the yellow Tupperware on her desk.

“Enjoy the posole.”

“Victor,” she said, walking with him toward the door, “thank Michelle, and give Bruce my best when he gets back.”

“Will do. And be sure to tell Jennifer and Thomas I said hello.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “One more thing.”

She held out her arms.

“The pleasure would be mine.”

He put his arms around her and held her close for several seconds. Then, he stepped back, took her hands and held them briefly.

“Take care, Elizabeth,” he said.

She stood in the doorway and watched Victor Rodriguez walk away down the hall. A colleague she knew only casually walked by, and she wished him a happy new year. By the time she looked back down the hall, toward the bright lobby, the detective had walked out of sight.

She went back into her office, closed the door, and turned the music up. The Thelonius Monk Quartet was still playing. Elizabeth Florczyk sat down, but did not return to work. Instead, she closed her eyes, smiled, and let the brilliant, unexpected corners of Monk’s imagination enfold her.