

## Chapter 2

Roger Ennis was in the same salary tier as two thirds of the people in his division and it was common knowledge that he wanted more.

Officially, he could never qualify for Tier 9, but he wasn't qualified for Tier 8 either and he'd managed to finagle that. So why not Tier 9?

Unfortunately, there was a promotion blocking his way, something his manager had been promising him for years without execution. On a good day, Roger told himself that his manager owed him the promotion and he was going to get it. Other days, Tier 9 was like a phantom limb. There was nothing there, except the pain that came from not having it.

In his youth, Roger was afforded the same opportunities as all the people he knew. He had parents who provided for him, brothers who roomed with him, and teammates with whom he played ball... but in the place where Roger really needed someone, he had no one. Roger wasn't uncared for, he was just unsupervised inside his head and he himself was uninformed about what went on in there.

School had been a two-way street to disappointment with his teachers going one way and Roger going the other. He was smart, but he was never able to apply himself in the way the teachers wanted, and his teachers never discovered how to encourage him. Roger had plenty of innate abilities to develop but the school

system didn't know how to help him find them, and since Roger's parents didn't know how, and Roger didn't know how, it just never happened. There was one skill, however, that Mother Nature had bountifully bestowed upon him and required no instruction. Roger could talk people to death.

When he was a toddler, Roger learned that the sound of his voice created such a clamor that he could interrupt practically anyone and anything. All he had to do was persist, and eventually people gave in just to get him to shut up. Success after success led him right into adulthood, usually getting his way. He didn't have to make sense; he just had to talk loud enough and long enough to wear people out.

Although incessant, meaningless chatter at uncomfortably loud volumes was the primary tool of his trade, Roger picked up other useful tricks along the way. One thing that helped him a great deal was that he had the ability to slipknot reality, a kind of plasticity of the brain that allowed him to believe one thing one day and something more useful the next. When he slipped the truth just right, he began to believe the lie himself to the extent that he could boldly deny accusations. Then, all he had to do was tell the new lie to as many naive people as possible, preferably to persons with far-reaching authority. When he was in grade school, Roger discovered the power of abruptly interrupting a classmate mid-sentence and, once he had everyone's attention,

calling him a name to embarrass him. In middle school, he added sarcasm to his repertoire, which allowed him to disguise his degrading gibes as jokes in good fun. In high school, he blended belligerence into the mix, because the shock of it helped him get the upper hand. Developing his arsenal of tricks took very little conscious effort but there was one thought that was always foremost in his mind: Roger never picked on anyone who could beat him up.

Roger viewed life from the perspective of dearth, a belief in scarcity that started at an early age. If someone else was getting attention, he felt he lacked it. If anyone had something he didn't, they had more and that wasn't fair. As a child he'd often heard the story of the 'loaves and the fishes' in

Sunday school but the concept of synergy had never resonated with him; it just didn't add up. What did make sense to him was that life was a balance sheet and his side of the sheet was always supposed to have more. When Roger was eighteen years old, he was hired into the Corporation at a processing plant. For two decades, he diddled there until one day it happened. Like a man shipwrecked with a maniac, Roger landed a supervisor who shared his philosophy of dearth. The supervisor, so desiring to-no-longer-be-called-supervisor and to be called MANAGER instead, needed a person like Roger to help him grind down the unimportant people while he conned the influential. Roger was confident he possessed the requisite skills and was willing to assist in

exchange for the prize of his own advancement.

But Tier 9 had been dangled in front of Roger for so long now, that his mind had begun to play tricks on him. At night in his dreams, it loomed ahead of him in dark corridors and floated through his daydreams as a big party in his honor. As time wore on, worry that the promotion might never come began to occupy his thoughts to the extent that, not getting it, began to look like a kind of death. This was partly his own fault, because he'd told his wife it was *certain*, and she'd told everyone they knew. Roger feared loss of status of any kind, but losing the good opinion of the boys at the club would be too much. It would crush him, and if that didn't, his wife would.

Roger had another fear but it scared him so much he couldn't even look at it sideways. He was afraid that, if he didn't do what the RM wanted, he would lose his job and he didn't think he could survive outside the C. His worry had progressed to the point that he'd lay awake at night, his mind overrun by helpless terror. But Roger couldn't share his dread with anyone, because he believed his fear was weak, and he was a failure for having it.

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“I'm sorry Cara! I should never have dragged you into this.”

Seeing Gwen sitting opposite her, Cara wondered where the cleared-headed, confident woman had gone with whom she'd spent hours conversing



just weeks before. A nervous chatterbox had hijacked that woman. Even her physical appearance was altered. The circles under Gwen's eyes looked like swaths of lavender paint and the eyes themselves were dark balls of anguish.

But Cara had changed too. Gwen had opened up her world like a pop-up card, revealing another dimension. Her words sat in Cara's mind like boulders in a shallow creek, disrupting the stream of tranquility that used to permeate her life. This altered perception had produced an unfamiliar mindset, wariness, completely supplanting the peaceful feeling that comes with unquestioning loyalty.

“I told Roger not to worry about it,” Gwen recounted. “That he’d just made a mistake and no one would care.”

Cara noticed the door to her office was slightly ajar. Though her mind quizzed her on the necessity of it, instinct propelled her across the room to shut and lock the door.

“There wasn’t *any reason* to cover it up!” Gwen wailed. “But when he asked me not to tell anyone, stupid me agreed! That’s when I should have known it was a trick because this is the kind of mistake that you just note in your lab book, then rerun the experiment. Done! No big deal. Instead... I kept his failed experiment a secret at his request and the secrecy that was for *his* sake, was used against me.”

“I’m not really understanding... Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

Cara suggested.

Gwen sat slumped in the chair across from Cara’s desk gripping her lunch bag tightly with both hands. “A few weeks ago, Roger ran an experiment before heading off for vacation, but he screwed it up. He hadn’t set the instrument correctly, and he said he only realized it a day later when he was too far away to do anything about it.” Gwen paused. “Roger thinking about work on vacation... *That* should have tipped me off that this was a ruse.”

Recalling a similar situation with Angelique, Cara asked, “Did he want you to re-run the experiment for him?” Gwen looked up in surprise. “Yes, and I set up a whole new experiment for

him but I didn't look at the one that failed first. If I had, I would have seen that something wasn't right because there was no name on the run; *the employee ID field was blank.*

Only someone with administrative privileges can bypass the quality control fields. He had help from someone in IT." Her shoulders drooped further. "Now Roger's claiming that *I was the one who bypassed the quality controls*, that *I ran the failed experiment and then re-ran it the next day.* And it doesn't matter that it makes *no sense. It doesn't matter* that there's *no reason* for me to ever do anything like this. The whole thing's absurd but he'll make it stick." Cara felt her breath catch in her throat. There was no denying it now. What Gwen was describing was almost an

exact replica of Angelique's last predicament with Roger. A strange sensation came over her. *This can't be true*, she thought, but what came out of her mouth was, "Can you request to see the security footage?"

Gwen rolled her eyes. "You mean ask his buddy, the head of building security? He'll say something like, *there's no record of Roger having been in the building on the day of the failed experiment.*" She began twisting and untwisting the strap of her lunch bag. "I knew he had a reputation for making things up to compromise people, but..." her voice began to quiver so she took a sip of water before continuing. "Roger has caused many people to lose their jobs and it always begins exactly like this." She drew in a breath and when she

released it, her whole body trembled. “So that’s it then. I’m next.” Gwen’s chin lifted a little. “They’ll put me under surveillance now. They may have already started.” Gwen look up and examined the ceiling. “No cameras here.”

“What? They can’t just do that on a whim, Gwen!” Cara told her firmly. “The Corporation has written policies. No reprimand’s been issued to you... right?”

“No but they can say they did,” Gwen replied irritably, “They can say anything they want.”

Cara felt a sudden chill and shook it off. “Look. The facts are: an experiment was run, someone bypassed the ID profile, and that someone isn’t you. They have to have proof of fault. There’d have to be a

time-stamped video of you at the instrument at the time of-” Cara stopped abruptly.

“You see it now, don’t you?” Gwen looked at her squarely. “I was the hospitality tour guide who gave you and a few other new hires your first tour of the facility.”

“I’d forgotten,” Cara murmured.

“You asked the security guard what happens if there’s a power outage,” Gwen reminded. “He said, once the back-up generators are on line, all they have to do is power on the security system and *reset the date and time*. That all the settings have a manual override.”

Cara nodded.

Gwen spoke matter-of-factly. “A faked time stamp on a video clip of me at the instrument could easily be arranged.

Since such a video would contradict *my* story, they'll accuse me of lying. Roger will offer the video to HR in secret, of course; I'll never have a chance to defend myself. This is why people call surveillance 'tag and creep' and in this division, Roger does the creeping."

"They..." Cara stammered. "You can't jump to conclusions. There's some deception happening here, that's certain... and it might be a reason to place cameras on *equipment*, but not reason enough to *tag a person*."

"It's not right," Gwen said quietly. "But that won't stop them."

"What could it *possibly* get them?" Cara asked in exasperation. "You aren't doing anything wrong. If they tagged you, they'd just film you doing your job."



Gwen rubbed her eyes tiredly. “They put people under surveillance for two reasons. One is to freak them out and catch them freaking out on camera. They could use a video like that as blackmail or they could show it to HR and say, *this person needs psych meds*. The second reason is to watch every move you make to find *real* things that they can twist into false evidence against you. But if tag and creep takes too long, Roger will sic someone like Eunice on you to trip you up, to speed up your disintegration.”

Cara squinted. “Who?”

“Eunice is one of Roger’s trolls. She, well... The most recent example was a man named Eric, who worked here about six months and Roger didn’t like him. Roger *visibly* didn’t like him, you could see it in his face, but the guy was

flawless in his work and everyone else liked him, so Roger couldn't touch him... at first. The day came when Eric and Eunice were assigned to the same project and *a week later*, Eunice accused Eric of reporting inaccurate data, as if he'd done it *on purpose*. Like, corporate espionage. *Many* people believe Roger used Eunice to set him up, not just me."

"What happened to Eric? Where's he now?"

"Gone," Gwen answered.

Cara looked away and repositioned herself in her chair. "Did you ask anyone where he went?"

"No. When someone disappears, there's an unspoken, no-talk rule. If you haven't experienced that yet, don't worry; you will."

The two women stared at each other in silence until Gwen spoke again. “Roger always stays clear of the situations where accusations are made so that he can’t be connected to an incident, but Eunice couldn’t have set Eric up by herself. She had help from at least one IT person and probably a few others. That’s how they do it; they gang up on you and it becomes one person’s word against many lies.” Gwen eyes glistened. “Eric’s not in the employee catalog anymore, which means he left the C. I keep hoping he found something better and chose to leave. But, given the war and how difficult it is to get a job... it doesn’t seem likely that he left voluntarily, does it?”

“No.”

“There was another a situation with a woman who was here for about two years,” Gwen recalled. “They really got to her.”

“How do you mean?”

“The surveillance... it drove her zany. She discovered that she was being watched and, when Roger became aware that she knew, they started playing cruel tricks on her, little games by which they communicated to her that, not only were they aware she was upset, they didn’t care. No, more than that, to them it was *funny*. They let her know it was *fun* to upset her and *that part*, somehow, really freaked her out.”

“That can’t be legal,” Cara contended.

“It’s... That’s torture.”

“Psychological abuse isn’t against the law. As long as they never lay a hand on you, they can do whatever they

want.” Gwen sunk further into her chair. “Maybe awareness of what’s going on doesn’t help. Maybe it’s worse when you know.”

“*Enough* conjecture,” Cara asserted. “Go to HR and demand to see your personnel file.”

Gwen gave a little laugh. “I wish you were kidding but I see that you’re not. There’s your official HR file, Cara, and then there’s the *other* file that you’ll never see. The *other* has information that gets passed on from one secret handshake to another, then down to the gossips to repress or ruin you, depending on what some unknown person decides. You’ll never know what’s in that file, but you do get a glimpse of it when the people around you start treating you differently, like you’re someone you’re not.

Surveillance, you see, is just the beginning. It's a message. It's their way of telling you, 'We're watching you. If you don't cooperate, we're going to scare you until you don't know who you are, until you feel small and deranged. And then, at just the right moment, we'll point at you and say to others, *isn't she acting oddly?*' That's what they do; they purposely scare people to death, so they start losing their marbles." Gwen's eyebrows lifted inquisitively. "Do you have *any* idea how many people in our division are on psych meds?"

"On... anti-depressants?"

"Anti-depressants, anti-anxiety meds, sedatives, you name it," Gwen listed.

"No, I don't."

Gwen's gaze was piercing. "Based on the evidence I've gathered, I estimate

that eighty percent of people who've been employed here for fifteen years or more are on one of these kinds of medications."

"What?" Cara scoffed.

"As soon as you get into a scuffle with a leader who doesn't tolerate dissention, you're forced into a meeting behind closed doors where they pressure you to start taking psych meds and begin therapy with a Corporation psychiatrist. I don't think they say it, but it's implied that you must do these things if you want to keep your job. The point is, once they have you on file as being on psych meds, whatever you say about them is easily discredited because you're cuckoo."

Cara felt herself losing patience.

*"You're telling me that eighty percent*

of employees who've been here fifteen or more years have had a serious confrontation with someone in management?"

"No. Only a tiny percent of the people on psych meds get into a tangle with management. The rest of them are on meds to forget they know all this is happening."

"Oh, come on!" Cara rejoined, but Gwen ignored the outburst of skepticism.

"I wonder what other tricks they'll use on me..." Gwen ruminated. "Typically they set women up to make accusations of sexual harassment. But they can't suck *me* into that one. I know about the arsenal they have at their disposal to undermine those kinds of accusations. Fated to fail."

"How do you know this?"



“I’ve seen it a few times and heard about it *many* times,” Gwen answered.

“Seen what?”

“People *deliberately* sexually harassing someone,” said Gwen, “with witnesses in place who are prepped to deny it happened. It’s a con they use *a lot* because they can trust the outcome. I don’t think they’ll try that on me, though; I’m sure they know I’d never take the bait.

Maybe they’ll try to set me up to lash out at Roger and look crazy...

They can get *anyone* to *that point*, you know; they just have to work you long enough. Once they get you nervous, you start to lose sleep and eventually you just wear out. That’s where my boss is. The lack of sleep and worry weakens you and then, when you’ve

got nothing left inside or out, they close in on you.”

“What’s that mean?”

“They get people to harass you everywhere you go; they can do that because, once you’re tagged, they always know where you are. But that’s outside of work. At work, it’s worse. The cameras make you feel like a hunted animal, the animal in the herd that needs to be culled. And, if you feel that way, you’ll begin to act like it too and as soon as you *do*, the gossip takes a terrible turn. They start whispering that you’re a danger to the C, which means you’re a danger to *them*. Once they’ve got that going, when people see you as a threat to their jobs, they’ll just turn and look the other way when you’re escorted to HR. My name would be just one in a long

list of people who've been treated this way." Gwen pulled a bedraggled sandwich from her lunch bag and stared at it without taking a bite. "All my life I've been a well-intended person. All the work I've done, all my efforts here, were directed toward helping the Corporation succeed. I thought helping the C meant I was making a positive contribution to the war effort."

"It does."

"Not if Corporation resources are being used to treat good employees like they're derelicts, and then either repress or get rid of them."

"If that's true, then the resources are being misused," Cara returned, "and there *has to be* someone above the regional manager who would want to know about it. Think about it. They'd

want to know out of simple self-defense because environments like this will destroy the Corporation.”

“Wish that were true. But the reality is, the good people have to keep quiet or they’ll be targeted too.”

“The ‘good people’?” Cara asked.

Gwen stuffed the sandwich back in the bag uneaten. “The honest ones,” she said, and stood up suddenly. “I should go,” she muttered anxiously and headed for the door. But before unlocking it, Gwen turned and faced Cara again. “I’ve been avoiding telling you something because I don’t think you’ll believe me.”

“Okay...”

“All the scientists that the RM turns into his ‘golden people’ have something in common. They have what I call a courageous conscience, a

kind of nonconformist honesty.  
*They're like you* and they spot people like you a mile away.”

“What’re you trying to say?” Cara demanded.

“You’re precisely the type of scientist they rope into being a ‘golden’. To control you, I guess.” Gwen gripped the doorknob. “The best thing for you to do is leave the division. I can advise you on a safe place to land, if you like. Well... *safer*, anyway. The RM has enemies who’d take you in just to spite him.”

Cara’s eyes narrowed in annoyance.

“You’ve *got* to be joking.”

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When she arrived home that night, Cara had a headache. Gwen’s words had roamed freely through her

thoughts all day and now held her mind hostage on a Ferris wheel that wouldn't stop. Problems embedded themselves in her stream of consciousness like this only when she was fearful, but Gwen's situation posed no threat to her. What was more, she had no right to get involved. If these two things were true, *why was she so tense?* She hated when this happened, when her body sensed something her mind was missing. On the surface, Gwen's assertions about 'tag and creep' seemed preposterous. Every NetNews article Cara had ever read about surveillance tagging depicted criminals convicted of espionage or grand larceny. This type of surveillance couldn't be justified in the Corporation except under high-risk circumstances like

these if only due to the expense. The cost of paying experts to capture and analyze the security footage would require two levels of management approval.

Then, from an employee rights perspective, boundaries would have to be set to protect the legal rights of the suspects and those around them. That last consideration alone would necessitate a written policy on the appropriate use of all forms of in-house surveillance.

She logged onto the CorpCloud and began reading the Employee Manual, expecting to find something about surveillance tagging. After combing the manual twice and finding nothing, she searched the Corporation's Security Policy and then the entire CorpCloud, but nowhere did she find a

discussion of legal or business limitations on employee surveillance. On the federal and state NetSites, she discovered that the previous laws pertaining to surveillance had been replaced with something called the Wartime Security Guidelines but it was unclear if the private sector was required to follow them. The only reference to non-government entities was a joint Corporate-Military Committee that addressed 'certain types of corporate security,' but never described what that meant or where to find more information. That was it. There was nothing else on the topic. Cara recognized she wasn't just witnessing a lack of specificity in the rules of conducting in-house surveillance; there weren't any rules.



*But surely, this contradicted what she'd read on the Net. Or did it?*

She began searching for articles lauding the Corporation for its overt approach to security and dozens of articles immediately popped up. The C was touted as having the highest level of security outside of the military as well as for its non-invasive approach. 'Optimal security with minimal supervision' was the catchphrase in almost every article but the authors didn't discuss what that meant. She searched the phrase and finally found an interview in which a Corporation executive said it meant there were no security guards *inside* the facility where the employees worked. Guards were posted outside the buildings and in the areas where visitors were allowed but beyond the archway in the

lobby, the security system in the C was purely electronic.

Cara stopped reading to think that through: *he's saying posting people...guards... inside the facility is invasive and electronic surveillance, with cameras everywhere, is non-invasive.* When pondering this brought the headache back, Cara shut down the computer and went to bed. Unfortunately, sleep wouldn't come and instead she lay there thinking about surveillance.

Inside its gates, every Corporation Research Center had a group of interconnected buildings called the Business, Science & Finance Complex, a park with a pond, two grocery stores and housing for all the personnel.

Arches designed to resemble the Arc de Triomphe marked the passage from

one area to another within the Complex, scanning employees as they passed through. The scan recognized an identity chip embedded in a wristwatch alongside a voice-activated communication chip called the Comm, which linked employees to their approved audio channels within the Corporation.

The ID chip permitted employees to freely go everywhere in the Complex except for the special-access areas which required additional authentication. The Comm allowed employees to send audio messages or talk live with colleagues and friends within the Center's gates; but outside the gates, the Comm links automatically shut down to prevent illicit BlackTooth devices from intercepting proprietary information.

Reactivation of the Comms occurred at secure walk-in entrances and at the drive-thru where a chip in the windshield of the car was also scanned to identify the vehicle's owner before opening the gate.

The Business, Science & Finance Complex, however, maintained a higher level of security than the gated grounds surrounding it. To enter the Complex employees ran a gauntlet of scanners. Everyone, employees and visitors alike, first walked through a breezeway of weapon scans and dogs sniffing for hazardous substances.

Then came a series of cameras that scanned the profile, the face and the left and right iris of every person as they passed. At a branch point in the hall, the employees went left and held up their watch arm for the overhead

sensors to scan their ID chip as they entered the lobby. Employees could then go to the shops and restaurants or proceed to the archway where the identity chip, face, and iris scans were repeated as they passed under the arch into the facility.

In addition to ID scans at all the archways demarcating special areas, the security system in the facility consisted of continuous-scan cameras everywhere. There were cameras on the walls along the corridors, the loading docks, supply rooms, labs, lounges, eateries... and though security scans were a routine part of everyday life in the Corporation, surveillance tagging was not.

The security guards in the Complex could determine the general location of any employee based on the

archways they'd walked through and when. However, 'tagging' meant that, in addition to tracking someone's ID chip, the person's image and voice were also tracked using a separate audiovisual surveillance program that followed them from the moment they entered a Corporation facility until they exited. The suspect was listened to and watched through cameras and voice recognition devices all day, everywhere they went. Surveillance tagging was so invasive that Cara had believed that only the Domestic Military could perform it and only for serious matters relating to national security. But Cara hadn't been able to find any ruling preventing the Corporation from doing it whenever and however they chose.

To Cara, the scary part was that the person was never informed. They never got a warning, were never able to stick up for themselves and clarify a possible misunderstanding. Instead, someone, somewhere decided they would be tagged and that was that. A rustling sound came from her Comm notifying her that a voice message had just arrived. Cara told it to play the message back and immediately recognized Gwen's voice speaking, "Could I come in? I'm right outside your building."

Cara called the number back. "Gwen? You still here?"

"Yes."

"Wait a sec. I'll buzz you in."

Cara pulled the front door camera up on her computer and saw Gwen standing there. Her face was near

enough to the lens for Cara to see that she was upset. Inside Cara's apartment, Gwen apologized profusely for the late hour intrusion.

"That's okay," Cara told her. "I couldn't sleep anyway. Is something wrong?"

"Nothing new, it's just... I need to know what people are saying about me."

Cara questioned the wisdom of the request thinking it might make Gwen even more upset. Instead of revealing this concern, Cara asked, "What could you possibly gain from *gossip*? How will that help you?"

"Rumors are important information," Gwen answered anxiously. "They reflect what the RM wants people to believe. With that information, I think



I can devise a way to escape the crosshairs.”

“How?”

“It’s kind of like... knowing the questions that will be on a test,” said Gwen. “If I know the lies they’re using, I’ll be able to refute them when the time comes.”

“Or hearing the lies will make you chase your tail round and round in an angry panic,” Cara warned.

Gwen’s face fell like a flag with no breeze. “Please tell me,” she implored. Cara acquiesced and told her all she’d heard, but when Gwen left, she looked just as distressed as when she’d come. The next day, Gwen messaged Cara at work and requested she meet her at the end of the hall. Once there, Gwen motioned to Cara to follow her into a

restroom and to be quiet while she checked the stalls.

“We’re fine, nobody’s here. So...”

Gwen hesitated as if summoning the courage to speak. “Things have suddenly gotten really strange. People are going out of their way to avoid me... like I’m an animal marked for the kill. As if they know something’s about to happen *any minute* and they don’t want to be around when it does.”

Cara didn’t know how to respond, so she said the first thing that came to mind. “Is it possible you’re imagining things because you’re so worried?”

“Yes.” Gwen pressed her temples as if it hurt to think. “I might be imagining it... Anyone could go crazy in a situation like this. Especially if it went on and on, and the person knew they were being watched. Like my boss.”

“It might help both of you if you told him what you’re experiencing,” Cara proposed.

“He won’t...” Gwen replied, tapping her foot in agitation. “He’s afraid to talk to me. It’s as if someone convinced him he can’t trust me anymore, even though I’ve been nothing but an ally. I don’t know what someone could have invented to turn him against me.” Her eyes grew wide at the thought of something. “Did you know they tag your Comm?” She waved her watch arm in front of Cara. “That’s how they tag and creep. Then they set up cameras in the ceiling in your lab, your office and sometimes,” Gwen looked up, “at the sink in the restrooms.” Gwen began carefully examining the ceiling tiles above the sinks.

“Where did you hear that?” Cara demanded. “I couldn’t find any details about surveillance tagging in the private sector. I searched the whole Corporation cloud and the Net.”

Gwen looked from the ceiling tiles, to Cara, and then at the ceiling again. “I heard it from people who’ve seen it.” She squinted. “Is that a hole in that tile?” Gwen overturned a trashcan and endeavored to climb onto it. “If an *honest* person filmed me all day, I’d be vindicated. But what chance do I have if the people setting up the cameras are dishonest? Sometimes you have to take matters into your own hands.”

Crouching precariously on the bottom of the can, Gwen slowly straightened to a standing position and reached for the ceiling. “Damn! *Still* can’t reach it!” She issued a stream of expletives

as she jumped from the trashcan to the floor. “Gotta see what’s up there,” she grumbled to herself as she righted the can and picked up the trash that spilled out. “I watched what happened to one woman,” Gwen said. “She became terrified to the point of despondency. I understand *now* how that can happen. When abuse and betrayal exhaust your mind, body and heart, if you believe there’s no way through it or out, you escape by shutting down. I think, though, for some people it’s a kind of dormancy. A way to save energy to get them through the present... to wait out the abuse until they can get to a time and place where they can be themselves again. Or be themselves for the first time.”

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A day later, a flurry of rumors began. Cara stumbled across people talking about Gwen three times on the first day, and it only got worse as the week wore on. Some talked about Gwen in hushed tones as if they were at her funeral. In other groups, the people were excited like someone was running a hustle and they were all about to place bets on what would happen next. Cara overheard one man in the hallway scoff, 'Gwen's nothing special. Anyone could do her work.' It was an outrageous slur, and Cara wanted to stop and defend her, but she kept walking. Cara hoped she'd have a chance to speak on Gwen's behalf at some point so she needed to demonstrate impartiality.

With this strategy in mind, Cara watched from the sidelines as Gwen tried every conceivable approach to save herself. Frustrated that she could get no one in management to meet with her, Gwen finally went outside the Corporation to a government agency and pleaded her case to an official there. The situation took a turn when the agency agreed to investigate. Gwen was elated. “I’m going to break through the lie!” she whooped. But the next day Gwen learned that the government agency was allowing the Corporation to both coordinate the investigation and choose the members of the team that would conduct the investigation. Moreover, there was only going to be one government official on the task team and he was not the person

originally assigned. Infuriated, Gwen marched into the government building only to find that the person who had interviewed her and agreed to take on the case was on leave until further notice.

Then Gwen's laboratory was closed for maintenance for two consecutive days. This was *highly* unusual given that ongoing experiments often had to be monitored seven days a week. Cara had never heard of a lab being shut down without warning. When Gwen submitted a request to access the lab for fifteen minutes to check on her work, she was denied.

Three days later, on the day of the investigation, Cara came to work an hour early so she could visit with Gwen before starting her day. But



Cara found Gwen's office door partway open with no one inside.

Since it was against protocol to leave your office unlocked unless you were in it, Cara knew something was wrong. She pushed down on the door handle and her stomach fell. The handle was rigid, moving neither up nor down, and that meant the master switch in the guardroom had unlocked the door, not Gwen.

An eerie feeling passed over her as she stepped into Gwen's office and looked up. Two of the ceiling tiles looked brand new and the tile dust on the floor beneath them meant their placement was very recent. The rest of the office appeared unchanged, at least as far as Cara could tell.

Out in the hall again Cara messaged Gwen and waited. Receiving no reply

she beelined to Gwen's lab, only to find it locked and dark. How could it be that Gwen was not at work at this hour on the day of the investigation?

All morning Cara tried to make contact with Gwen but never received a response. Out in the hallways people blabbed about the investigation.

Employees questioned by the task team were told not to share anything about the interview, but that didn't stop them. Around noon, on her way to the cafeteria, she noticed that the task team was assembling in the lobby and with them was a Corporation attorney she recognized from NetNews. But what she saw next made her stop in her tracks: Roger and the Regional Manager joined the team as they exited the building. She

continued to watch as the whole group piled into a limousine and drove away. Roger? Having lunch with the team investigating him? How could that be legal? Yet, how could it *not* be, given that a Corporation lawyer was with them? Was he there to attest that no one discussed the investigation over lunch? Why would a Corporation attorney's word be trusted in a government investigation of the Corporation?

Suddenly fury seized her as she realized what was going on. The lunch was part of a bribe that included a private room at a fine dining locale, with linen napkins and Perrier water. During dessert, someone would slide an envelope with cash to the government official... Cara wondered if the lack of discretion in gathering so

openly was purposeful, to send the message, 'Yes, that's right folks. We're all friends here, and there's no complaint you can make that can touch us.'

Cara glanced around to see if anyone else had seen the party leave and noticed Rachel Zeff staring straight at her. Their eyes locked, but the boldness of Rachel's gaze startled Cara and she looked away. A moment later curiosity won out and Cara looked back, but Rachel was gone.

Cara decided to follow the task team from a distance the rest of the day. She noted where they went, whom they interviewed and listened carefully to the chatter that was everywhere. One piece of gossip, in particular, stood out like a devil's shadow dancing in the moonlight: two

administrative people called in sick that day and had been replaced with people from a temp agency. One was the lobby receptionist and the other, the RM's administrative assistant.

What did they know that the RM was afraid they'd share? Was he afraid they'd slip-up and say something by mistake, or was he afraid they were sympathetic to Gwen? Cara fumed all afternoon as she waited for the team to approach her for questioning, but they never came.

There was no denying it now. The investigation was an elaborate farce dedicated to making a fool out of Gwen and *no evidence* to support her allegations *would ever be found*. How could she break this news to Gwen? But her real concern was that Gwen still hadn't responded to any of her

messages and Cara didn't know where she lived. Gwen had learned *her* address only because she'd walked Cara home the night they'd had dinner in the restaurant, but she didn't know where Gwen lived. In the Corporation, your place of residence was confidential until you chose to share it and for some reason, that detail had never come up.

Cara knew the evening-shift receptionist a little bit, and had noticed that she and Gwen were friendly. Fervently hoping she knew Gwen's address and would be willing to share it, Cara locked up to leave for the day. But as she passed under the arch into the lobby, Cara saw that a stranger sat at the reception desk.

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Cara didn't hear from Gwen until the following week when Gwen messaged her to meet in a locker room near Cara's lab. When she went in, Cara was aghast at Gwen's disheveled appearance. Gwen immediately put her finger to her lips to warn Cara to be quiet and then ran water from one of the faucets. "Some background noise just in case," she whispered, pointing up at the ceiling. "Where have you been?" Cara asked. "At home. They made me hand in my computer the day before the investigation. Then they escorted me out of the complex to my apartment where I was told I couldn't communicate with anyone 'until further instructed.' That's why I didn't answer your messages!" She slammed her hand down on the vanity and sank

into a chair. “I *should* have answered! But I was afraid...” her voice trailed off, and her eyes went vacant as she stared at the running water. Then she looked at Cara again. “Did you hear what they did?” she asked, and continued before Cara could reply. “The only complaint I filed with the government was against

*Roger* for lying about the failed experiment. But they told people it was an investigation into *multiple charges of sexual harassment!* Pah!” Gwen spat scornfully. “As if anyone’d ever get anywhere with *that accusation*. I would never have wasted my time.”

Cara’s knees went weak. “No. That’s not true. I’ve listened to the gossip for a week. No one has said you accused anyone of sexual harassment.”



“That’s because the only people interviewed *on that one point*, were Roger’s best-bribed buddies. And they were given a script from a lawyer to memorize so they’d all say the right thing.”

“How do you know this?” Cara demanded.

“Because one of them told me. He’s in Roger’s little circle of trusted creepers because they went to school together, but he hates all of this... what Roger and the RM perpetrate.” She looked at Cara with concern. “I can’t tell you his name, but I asked him to talk to you. If he can find a safe way to contact you, he will.”

Feeling overwhelmed, Cara leaned on the wall of lockers, the cold metal against her back giving welcome relief. “Did they send you the final report?”

Gwen gave Cara a wry smile. “Oh yes, they did.”

“What did it *say*?”

“Roger claimed that my accusation was fabricated, and motivated solely to undermine him... to steal his promotion. But that’s *nothing*. The reeeeeally big news is that *there was no evidence of Roger’s failed experiment on the instrument*. I checked myself when I came in today. It’s gone, deleted, no trace of it ever existing, no run numbers out of sequence to show something’s missing... Nothing.”

Cara’s eyes flew wide open. “I *saw* it. We looked at that recorded experiment together.”

Gwen’s tone was acerbic. “Let me guess: they didn’t interview you.”

Cara pulled in a long breath. “But... you took screen shots of it, didn’t you?”

“Yes! Look!” she showed Cara the images on her phone, then rifled through her bag for a folder that contained prints of the same images.

“I gave them copies of all of this evidence. *And for what?* NOTHING!” Cara ducked as Gwen flung the pile of papers into the air. They fluttered wildly about, striking walls and surfaces, until finally coming to rest on the floor.

“*This is the stuff of nightmares!*” Gwen proclaimed sardonically. “Oh! There’s more good news! Many of the people interviewed apparently said that I’d been acting strangely for *quite some time* and... then there’s the lunch. Did

you hear about the lunch for the so-called investigators?”

Cara looked at her wordlessly.

“Apparently there was a *very special* lunch for the task team on the day of the investigation at an expensive restaurant. Among the invitees, were two lawyers bought and paid for by the C. The lawyers, I was told, were there to advise everyone present about how to write their individual reports so that their stories would be consistent, cogent and legal.”

“Gwen,” Cara spoke firmly, “I’m going to pick up these papers and you’re going to pull yourself together. OK?”

Gwen stared at her without moving.

Finally, she nodded and sat down in front of a mirror to comb her hair.

When they were ready to leave, Gwen looked at her watch. “We’ve been in

here a long time. A number of people usually shower after they work out in the mornings. I wonder why none of them have come in yet.”

But as soon as Gwen stepped into the hallway she said, “Oh, *that’s* why. It's the lazy watchman.”

Cara followed Gwen’s gaze and saw Roger leaning casually against a wall. He walked slowly towards them. As he passed by Gwen, he stopped to give her a big smile and then walked on.

“What was that?” growled Gwen. “His victory march?” She glanced at Cara.

“I’m so sorry I dragged you into this.”

“If you hadn’t told me everything that you did,” said Cara. “I would have been oblivious to your side of the story during this investigation. Knowing the awful truth is better than living in a lie.”

Later that day, Cara was surprised to see Rachel Zeff walk into the reagent supply room across from Cara's lab. When Rachel shut the door behind her, the place was empty except for the two of them.

"People like Roger take revenge on those they fail to dominate," Rachel said. "It's an affront, when others don't bend to their will." Then she began looking at the items on the shelves.

"Did the task team interview you?" Cara asked.

"Of course not," Rachel snorted. "They know better!"

"The way they ran the investigation... Do you think what they did was wrong?"

“*I think* that our leaders and their trusted servants are not who they say they are,” Rachel answered.

Cara’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t have patience for riddles.”

Rachel smiled. “Good for you. The Corporation espouses ‘respect’ and ‘responsibility’. Is that what you see here?” Rachel tilted her head slightly.

“I was about your age when I learned that the world I wanted didn’t exist.”

“This... it doesn’t make any sense,”

Cara sputtered in frustration. “A business that allows its leaders to fabricate reality *will fail*.”

“It makes sense if you change the premise.”

The door opened in that moment, and when someone walked in, Rachel left without another word.

Cara crossed paths with Rachel again that same day, out on the loading dock. She appeared while Cara was sorting through the newly arrived shipments and when Rachel joined her as if hunting for a package as well, Cara looked around nervously.

“We’re alone,” Rachel assured her, “and no one’s watching because I jammed the security cameras. We can talk openly until someone else comes.”

“Oh.” Cara had a sinking feeling, the kind one has after a narrow escape. “I forgot about the cameras,” she admitted.

“I wouldn’t have expected you to have thought of that,” Rachel remarked, and continued picking through the packages as she talked. “On the day of the investigation. I noticed you observing the task team in the lobby



before they went out to lunch. I was curious to know what you were thinking.”

“That they looked very comfortable,” Cara said, “like they’ve done this before.”

“They have.”

Cara responded with a disgusted grunt. “What’s going to happen to Gwen now?” she asked.

“Possibly the same thing that happened to Angelique.”

Cara leaned against a shelf for support.

“What happened to Angelique?”

“I don’t know where she is,” Rachel replied, “but I know she didn’t choose to leave.”

Cara’s face fell. “I believed that nothing of consequence could happen to Angelique just like I thought the

gossip about Gwen would burn itself out.”

“The kind of gossip you’re referring to is called *idle* gossip. That’s not what’s going on here. The rumor about Gwen was a planned attack meant to ruin her because she’d threatened to expose the ogre’s secrets.”

“But Gwen had *damning* screenshots and other documents *proving* her claims,” Cara said. “How did she lose this fight?”

“Because the investigation wasn’t about finding the truth,” Rachel answered. “The purpose of the investigation was to make Gwen look crazy. Cara, everything makes sense when you understand the *premise*.”

“And they’ve done this before?”

“Many times. Honesty and lies, right and wrong, good and bad,” listed

Rachel, “are just *labels* that rich people use to mesmerize the public. There’s no getting at the facts anymore if the powerful want to hide them. Gwen’s caught in a web of lies about her boss, and the perpetrators appear to have a lot at stake in preserving the fabrication. Inside the web, ‘facts’ are irrelevant and ‘truth’ is nothing but fool’s gold.”

“I don’t understand how they can keep getting away with this,” Cara murmured.

“You just witnessed *how*. They isolate people with slander to create a situation where there’s one lone lamb against a pack of jackals. Character defamation used to be against the law for a reason! You can completely destroy someone’s career with it, if the person is just one against many.”

Cara glanced furtively at the security camera closest to them.

“Don’t worry,” Rachel said. “The cameras are still jammed.”

“How do you know? And how come the security guards haven’t figured out the images are frozen?”

Rachel laughed. “Trade secret.”

“What trade is that?” Cara quizzed.

“An honest one.” Rachel tucked a package under her arm. “You are less confused than you feel. Next time something happens like it did to Angelique or Gwen, you’ll recognize it for what it is.”

“How comforting,” grumbled Cara.

“This is how they preserve their privilege... Since they have no right to it, they take it by force so they can run things as they see fit.”

“Something must be done.”

Rachel chuckled. “You’d have to expose the whole lot of them.”

“How many?”

“A dozen people at least.”

Cara gripped the box in her hands.

“Could a person do that? Can it be done?”

“Not Gwen’s way,” said Rachel. “Gwen is typical of the people they target. She didn’t have a prayer. The investigation team you saw in the lobby is used to handling naive people.”

“Gwen isn’t naïve,” Cara contended.

“She knew what they were doing.”

“She knew too late,” Rachel returned.

“Naïve people face facts *after* they’re hit by the truck.”

“How come you know all this?” Cara asked suspiciously, “and why did you decide to tell me?”

“I hope to answer all your questions, but not today.” Rachel looked at her watch. “I need to warn you about something. You’re going to start feeling very anxious and that’s a *good* thing because it will help you be careful. These are dangerous topics to discuss with the wrong people.”

Cara felt her heart beating faster.

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“What’s wrong with asking questions and discussing things?”

“Nothing,” agreed Rachel. “That’s what scientists do: they observe, question what they see, then develop a hypothesis to test it. It’s not wrong; it’s just not *safe* to discuss Gwen and Angelique openly at work. At some point, very soon, *that’s going to sink in* and when it does, you’ll feel like your world has changed forever. Don’t let

that feeling overwhelm you; you're not alone. But you *are* in danger of turning to the wrong people for advice. Be careful who you choose."

Rachel looked at Cara for a moment as if she were sizing her up. Then, as if coming to some internal conclusion, she gave Cara a nod and left.

Cara needed to go as well but her legs wouldn't move. The conversation had stymied her, in body and mind. Frozen in place, she stood and listened to Rachel's footsteps until the sound of them disappeared behind the closing of a door.

The next day, Cara went to work and found that Gwen had vacated her lab and office. All her personal belongings were gone and the official word was that Gwen was out on medical leave. The most unnatural part of it was,

suddenly, no one was talking about her. The sniper shots and rapid-fire of words aimed at Gwen stopped abruptly, and in their place came a soundless chasm, a vocal void that was the antithesis of peaceful silence.

Cara closed her office door and sat at her desk in a stupor, until a thought struck that broke through the veil of confusion. She slowly raised her eyes to the ceiling and saw a small hole in one of the tiles above her desk, so small that she would never have seen it had she not been looking. *If she'd not been warned.*

Her breath quickened and her face flushed red as heat radiated from her body. Had the hole always been there? *Maybe* it was for a camera that was pointed at someone in the *past*, such as, the person who had this office



before her. *Maybe* the hole was a defect in the tile... *Maybes* be damned! She had to see what was behind that tile.

She resisted an impulse to jump up on the desk right away to try and reach it. No, she'd be reprimanded and cited if anyone caught her standing on her desk... Lock the door! *It was irregular to lock an office while you were in it...* Lock it anyway!

Her breath turned shallow as if there wasn't enough of it. She felt like she was trapped in a slow-motion reel pushing through oil instead of air as she moved across the room. The doorknob felt cold when she pressed the lock. Suddenly the reel switched to triple time, and in a split second, she was standing atop her chair with one foot on the desk, when a knock

sounded on the door. She gasped, choked on saliva and began coughing uncontrollably. Backing down from the chair, she took a gulp of water and opened the door.

“Hi Cara,” Roger said. He put one foot in the doorway, making it impossible for her to close it. “I thought you should know that the HPLC in your lab is beeping with a blinking red light.”

Cara’s perception of the scene turned surreal. Her limbs wouldn’t move and only one thought came to mind. She couldn’t leave her office until she looked behind the ceiling tile.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Not at all.” Sweat trickled down the back of her neck. “Who’s running the experiment?”

“I don’t know. No one’s in the lab.”

Then Cara *knew* it was a ruse. The HPLC in her lab was old and notoriously touchy. If any function was accidentally pressed on the keypad mid-run, the instrument could malfunction and even shut down. None of the people authorized to use it would ever leave a run unattended for fear of ruining their experiment. *And Roger was fully aware of these facts.* “OK. Thanks for telling me Roger, I’ll take care of it.” He didn’t budge. She understood the dilemma clearly. Her lab was her responsibility. If she didn’t go immediately and an expensive run failed, Roger could accuse her of negligence and she’d have no way of proving it was a setup. She hesitated and Roger smiled.

Cara stepped into the hall and locked her office door knowing that if there *were* a camera in the ceiling, it would be gone by the time she got back. The sense of surreal returned as Roger led Cara through the halls to her lab, only to find an instrument that was not in use.

“Oh! The run must have ended!” Roger exclaimed as he merrily waved goodbye.

Cara checked the log and saw that the instrument hadn't been used in over twenty-four hours. She shook off a shiver before it could run down her spine and then, from out of nowhere, words once spoken by her mother popped into her mind: *When tragedy strikes, sometimes there's nothing you can do to change it. So you do the next*

*thing you would have done, if the tragedy hadn't happened.*

Not knowing what else to do, Cara followed this advice and checked on the experiment she'd set up earlier that morning. But after watching the robot operate for a moment, she knew something wasn't right. Then she saw it. A nutrient reservoir had almost run dry! She paused the robot to examine the floor and feed lines, but found no evidence of a leak. No leak... Her heart fell to her stomach. *Someone deliberately emptied the reservoir.* If she'd not caught it in time, it would have resulted in an expensive mishap and, with no way to prove sabotage, the fault would have been hers. The rest of the morning was a blur. Cara kept telling herself she had nothing to fear, that she was a reliable,

innovative contributor as documented in all her yearly reviews. Back in her office, she scoured the employee handbook and reread the Corporation mission statement to make it clear to herself that no one could accuse her of ever going against policy, because she never had.

So, since she hadn't done anything wrong, how did they justify putting a camera in her office? *If there ever was a camera...* Cara locked her office door and balanced atop a small stepstool she placed on her desk. But when she pushed the ceiling tile up to see what lay above it, all she found was a maze of pipes and a carefully drilled, empty hole in the tile.

Lunchtime handed Cara a new difficulty. A colleague named Vanessa had recently accepted a business role

and had moved to the finance building, but she and Cara still met for lunch as often as their schedules allowed.

When Cara spotted her in the cafeteria, she felt a wave of relief roll over her. Vanessa was the perfect person to talk to about all this craziness.

Yet, when Cara gave her a big wave, Vanessa looked the other way. Had she not seen her? As Vanessa persisted in looking in the opposite direction, Cara sensed a kind of pretense in her behavior, and something else... Amusement? Then Vanessa looked directly at Cara, pivoted abruptly on one heel and headed for the door.

Cara followed her. She had to find out if she was imagining things. At one point Vanessa turned ever so slightly

as if to spot Cara in her peripheral view. Cara gasped. Had she just seen a smirk? No.... Why would that be? Now Cara knew she was imagining things!

She walked quickly to catch up with her, and as she neared, Cara called her name. Reflexively Vanessa slowed and glanced backwards, but stopped short of making eye contact. When Cara called her name again, Vanessa faced forward and resolutely walked on. Cara got in the cafeteria line, barely noticing what she put on her tray. She asked herself, would she have read the interaction with Vanessa differently before Gwen's disappearance, before someone tried to ruin her experiment? Realizing she was obsessing, she went to an area with empty tables and chose



a window seat so she could look out at the beautiful day.

Staring into the woods usually cleared her head. There was something relaxing about trees, the way they stood rooted in the earth yet reached skyward with even the tiniest of their branches. Some trees were tough and craggy, while others looked glamorously sleek. Plus, the afternoon was windless, the sky pure blue, the squirrels in the brush foraged peacefully... She felt grateful that nature, on this troubled day, was such a gentle refuge.

“Lost your friend?”

Cara shuddered at the interruption.

“Uh, oh. You’re getting jumpy. That’s not a good sign,” Rachel said, as she took a seat opposite Cara. “Oh, look who’s back!”

Cara followed her gaze across the room and, to her dismay, she saw Vanessa in the buffet line.

“What... Are you tailing me now?”

Cara accused.

Rachel ignored the question. “You two used to talk a lot. You’re friends, aren’t you? So what just *happened*?”

Cara let out a trembling breath, not knowing whether to be angry or grateful for Rachel’s disconcertingly well-informed candor. “I really have no idea.”

Rachel chewed a bite of her sandwich thoughtfully, swallowed and then said, “You committed a crime.”

“A *what*?” Cara barked irately.

“By supporting Gwen, you broke an *inviolable* rule, a crime that she,”

Rachel rolled her eyes in Vanessa’s

direction, “tells herself she’d never commit.”

“Against *whom?*”

“The insider club.” Rachel pulled a pickle out of her sandwich. “She thinks she’s one of the boys. *Big* mistake.”

Cara experienced an intense, internal pang and wondered if it was what people called a ‘panic attack’. She swiveled in her seat so that she had her back to the wall of windows. Glancing to all sides, she saw to her great relief that no one was within earshot.

“Let her go, Cara,” Rachel warned.

“This friend of yours is nothing but a danger to you now. She doesn’t know it yet, but *she’s* in just as bad a situation as *you* are. She’s cocky right *now* because she’s under the false

impression that she's an insider getting all the insider info, but she's about to learn the hard way that she's not."

"Vanessa's a-"

"*Don't* look at her," Rachel interrupted.

"You'll let on we're talking about her. Just look at me. That's it."

Cara looked into the intelligent, kindly eyes of this woman she didn't know, and saw sincerity.

"I'm going to help you," Cara heard her say. "I'll put you in contact with someone who can... assist, but it will take some time to arrange. Until then, you need to hang tight and keep your mouth shut. *Do not talk* about Gwen or your own situation. *Do not* discuss the conversations you've had with *me*, ever, *unless I tell you it's safe*. If you

can agree to say nothing, I can help you. Will you agree?”

“Yes.”

A big smile lit up Rachel’s face just as someone walked by. “You’re gonna *love* this yoga class!” she exclaimed, and then Rachel left with her tray.

That was the day Cara’s mind shifted gears. Much like a computer taken over by a keystroke hack, she entered a state of hyper-awareness that caused her to continuously keep watch and notice changes. She didn’t have to think about it; this faculty for vigilance ran itself. It kept her on schedule, coordinated her thoughts, and constructed a wall of courteous detachment.

Something else switched on as well. She now had an internal authenticity device, a heightened intuition that

tuned into tone of voice, demeanor, and quality of eye contact, gauging the level of sincerity in each interaction. Although this new ability assisted her in determining who could not be trusted, she was acutely aware that a trusted person today could be an ear for Roger tomorrow.

Not that Roger needed informants since he was suddenly everywhere. Like a butterfly, he flitted here, there and all around her. He appeared at least three times a day in a variety of places: in the hall, the parking lot, the snack hubs, the supply rooms and even her lab. If Cara conversed with anyone for more than three minutes, he'd show up.

One day he followed her all the way to a building in another division, and when Cara stopped in a lounge to

sneak a peak at him, she found him staring unabashedly straight back. He even gave her a nod and a smile to acknowledge he saw her looking. He was letting her know that he wasn't the butterfly. He was the man with the net.

Fortunately, by then, Cara was clear on a few key points. She knew she didn't dare play teeter-totter with people ten times her political weight. That meant avoiding ambiguity games with individuals like Vanessa and dodging disagreements with members of management. The minions of management, like Roger, had to be handled carefully too since they carried the weight of the person they toadied to. At least these hazards were out in the open and easy to spot. The internal dangers, her

weaknesses... her vulnerabilities, were more treacherous because they hid behind defensiveness and denial. She'd noticed self-doubt and paranoia slinking around in her mind, and it scared her. These deadly consorts were the instigators of ordinary madness, an insanity caused by completely intolerable circumstances that go on too long. Like a creeping fungus, doubt and paranoia could gradually infect all of a person's thoughts. She'd have to try to face such thoughts as they arose and, like vampires to the light, expose them to reality and reason.

The irony of the situation did not amuse her. A big part of her job was to be as fully informed as possible. This meant obtaining information from high caliber professionals and trusted



sources. Yet, presently, she was in an information void caused by people who were unqualified for their positions who were eliminating those that were... and her only means of learning anything more was from Rachel, a person she hardly knew. Far from amused, Cara was *very angry*, but not with the short-fused kind. This anger was a slow burning, boundless source of energy, enough to fuel all the intellect, deftness, and grace needed to resist the unacceptable... defying and confounding it, until the day when it would be transformed into something better.