

## Chapter 3

Cara had never been to the east side of town. From images on NetNews she knew what it looked like and as a child she'd seen it. She'd seen it...

Dim memories flashed through Cara's mind like uprooted weeds seeking new soil. In one, she was in the backseat of her parent's car. Had she been six? She remembered being *just* tall enough to see out the window and watch the blur of the road rush by as they sped across a series of bridges. Those bridges that led into the city had side rails of solid cement, and Cara couldn't see what lay beyond them except in the places where one bridge ended and another began. In those in-between stretches of road, metal

guardrails replaced the cement walls and, for a few breathtaking moments, a vista of another world appeared. One, two, three seconds she'd see it and then it was gone. There were three chances with each crossing to capture new sightings of the place below the bridge, but the time was too short to *really* see it.

So, she began playing a game: the instant she saw the haze of the cement wall, she started counting, and readied her eyes to make the quick switch from near focus to far when the wall disappeared. On the count of six, she widened her eyes and fixed them unblinking on the streets below.

Anything that made-no-sense or was out-of-the-ordinary caught Cara's attention as a small child, and the world under the bridges had *both*. The

streets and buildings were unlike any she'd ever seen, with people that looked different from everyone she knew. But it made no sense that anyone would live there because the buildings were crumbling and the streets were filled with trash.

“Mommy did you see those streets?”  
Cara remembered asking.

“What streets dear?”

“Under the bridge.”

“Oh, you silly. How can you see under the bridge?”

“I can.”

“Well... I guess I don't know. How about you tell me?”

When Cara described what she saw, her mother looked sad. She said, “Sweetie, it isn't right what's happening down there. But that's for us big people to worry about, not you.

Here, look up ahead. There's the blue building where Daddy and I work."

"Can you and Daddy help those people?"

"We're trying."

Now, twenty years later, as she drove across the same stretch of bridges, Cara was aware there was no channel of water beneath her. The bridges lifted cars up and over the economically depressed part of town and the cement walls prevented people from seeing it. The publicized purpose of the expanse of road was to provide a speedy way to enter the city, but the convenience for some hid the suffering of others. If she hadn't seen it for herself, the NetNews depiction of the lower east side as a treacherous place with terrible people would have been all she knew. And now, tonight,

Cara was going to ride straight through it.

The loaner car Cara was driving looked ordinary on the outside, but inside it was unlike any vehicle she'd ever seen. Rachel *did* warn her in advance that the car had been altered to make it 'safe'. *More manual* was the way she'd described it.

The first alteration Cara noticed was that the driver-side door was retrofitted with an antique roll-down window and a push-pull lock. This, she was told, was to ensure that she couldn't be trapped inside the car by an electrical malfunction, either accidental or *intentional*.

"The DM doesn't advertise it," Rachel explained, "but the Traffic Patrol has an electronic device that can cause your car to stall and force the

automatic doors and windows to lock shut. In theory, it's to cut their car chases short and catch 'bad' guys, but they can do it to anyone."

Rachel also warned there'd be no electronics in the car except for what was needed to run the motor, lights and wipers, so Cara wasn't surprised that the communication and entertainment panels were missing from the dashboard. It just looked weird. Weirder still, there were no programmable features upon startup. No autopilot, no GPS, no security system... the touchscreen that enabled these functions was dark.

"Traffic drones fly over the roads looking for unusual activity," Rachel reminded. "At night, they 'see' cars in the dark by locking onto electronic signals that a *strip-down* vehicle

doesn't emit. Plus! The route I've chosen for you has *long* stretches without streetlights. Once you leave the freeway, nothing will be able to keep track of you from the sky."

Though she didn't voice it, Cara couldn't help but wonder about all the resources Rachel had at her disposal. How was it possible that she had a modified car to loan out, the knowledge of how to move about the city unnoticed and an unnamed friend who required a carefully orchestrated, clandestine introduction? Most surprising, Rachel said her contact didn't work for the Corporation, but was capable of resolving Corporation quagmires like the one Cara was facing. *Who* could do *that*? The Corporation had the majority market

share of every industry in the country; they controlled the nation's economy. *The instructions for the meeting itself were simple:* allow the contact to speak first, remain at least fifteen feet away, leave all electronics at home, and don't wear jewelry that could be mistaken for a communication device. *The route to the place, however, was deliberately indirect and complicated.* To make sure Cara understood it, Rachel drew out a map on paper, gave Cara a few minutes to memorize it, then burnt the map to ash and washed it down the drain. Another time they met, Rachel explained the layout of the site and what Cara should do once she arrived. She directed Cara to wear her hair down and unstyled, dress entirely in black and, after stepping from the car at the appointed place, to put on a



black cap that Rachel would supply. When Rachel gave her the cap, she also gave her a chemical mask colloquially known as a *breather*, explaining that the rendezvous site was a chemical waste yard. The extensive preparation for the meeting was unnerving, but it was nothing compared to what Cara was experiencing at work.

Only one month had passed since Gwen's disappearance, and in that that short time, Cara's work life had completely changed. The technician who reported to her was transferred to another lab without any warning or explanation. Cara's reporting manager assured that a new technician would be assigned to her soon, but Rachel said,  
"Don't expect a replacement."

Other strange things accompanied this inexplicable loss. Complete strangers regularly entered Cara's lab and wandered aimlessly around. When asked if they needed help, they said they were there to sign up for time on a shared instrument. Anyone who used laboratory equipment knew this was done electronically on the Corporation network. Instead of pointing that out, Cara showed them how to log into CorpNet with their phone and add their name to a timeslot on the instrument's calendar. In each case, the people left without ever signing up.

These visitors to the lab weren't alone in behaving strangely. Everyone Cara knew at work was treating her differently. Some people glared and didn't respond when she said hello to

them in the hall. Other people stared at her in what looked like wide-eyed horror. The scowling people clearly intended to distance themselves from her, but everyone else acted as if they'd heard something about Cara that scared them.

Roger Ennis became a chronic intruder in Cara's world, showing up at odd times and places, with no apparent purpose beyond dropping offensive comments. Whenever he engaged her in conversations, Cara wasn't sure if he was probing for information or just needling her to get a reaction. Usually he'd start by being chatty then switch suddenly to a derisive criticism of someone Cara respected. Always, he talked on and on.

During one, especially tedious episode Cara lost patience and stopped him short with, “So... let me see if I’ve *got this right*: all the women you don’t like are crazy or ugly and all the men you don’t like are whiners.”

The fake friendliness froze on his face and his eyes went dark. “I’m just trying to help you out, Cara,” he said. “There’re a lot of sharks out there.”

In a way, Cara was grateful for all these anomalies, because without them the false arms of denial would have rocked her to sleep. Denial was her natural tendency, it had helped her get along, but a new and unfamiliar instinct had kicked in that superseded it and told her denial was unsafe. For now, jarring disruptions and incongruity were her friends in that they prompted her to be watchful. Her

vigilance was like a battery recharged by *unusual* events, including all of her remarkable exchanges with Rachel. In the first days of their acquaintance, Rachel relayed what she knew about what had happened to Gwen and Angelique. She said they were two of the many casualties of what she called *mark and remove*, a process the Corporation used to eliminate anyone who was a problem to management. But Rachel said she didn't know who in the top tiers of management was responsible for this or where people went when they disappeared. She said unlike with Angelique, however, she did know that Gwen was safe but in hiding. When Cara asked how she knew this, Rachel said her source of information was the anonymous

person she'd arranged for Cara to meet.

Soon after that conversation, Cara witnessed another elimination. Marta, the scientist assigned to Cara as her mentor when she was just an intern, had recently transferred into Cara's division. Hoping to find her at the next meeting, Cara looked around the auditorium as people stood up to leave. Cara thought she spotted her but once she got closer, she wasn't sure. If it *was* Marta, her appearance was significantly altered. Cara said hello anyway, just in case, but the woman returned the greeting with the kind of polite smile one gave to a friendly stranger.

Not knowing what to think, Cara looked Marta up in the personnel catalog. The biographical summary

certainly described the woman she knew, but the picture of her was shockingly different; it looked like the woman she'd just seen. But why didn't Marta recognize her? Was she ill? That afternoon she stopped by Marta's new office to say hello and when she tapped on the door, the voice of the person who answered was irritated. Marta opened the door and again appeared not to recognize Cara. As Cara introduced herself, she watched Marta struggle to remember events from only four years before. She did finally invite Cara in but within minutes, Cara sensed she wasn't welcome and left.

The change in Marta's appearance was mysterious, but the way her disposition had changed was alarming. An energetic, humorous person had

turned ill tempered, and distracted to the point of cognitive strain. Was she on a medication that had altered her personality? But Cara never had a chance to unravel the mystery because a week later, Marta left the Corporation with no forwarding address. The only information Cara could unearth about her sudden departure was a rumor that Marta had been dismissed due to insubordination.

The same day that Cara heard the gossip about Marta, she was depositing chemicals at the outdoor recycling center when a woman named Shirley approached her. Shirley was renowned for saying outlandish things and most people completely avoided her. Some treated her gently, others dismissed her



rudely, but *everyone* wondered how she kept her job. Cara typically invented a polite excuse and went on her way, but on this day, Shirley mentioned Gwen.

“I knew it would happen to Gwen!” Shirley announced. “Oh yes. I’ve seen it all.”

Hoping she might reveal something useful, Cara stopped to listen, but then Shirley launched into a rant that had nothing to do with Gwen. The sun was setting on a difficult day and Cara was too tired to pay attention to nonsense. Her mind wandered as she frowned and smiled in response to Shirley’s tone of voice.

The recycling center bordered a wooded area with hiking trails, and down one of the many paths, there was a pond. Cara recalled one hot,

summer evening when she had jogged to the pond before sunset. The cicadas were serenading in thunderous waves of sound, their crescendos rising and falling, yielding briefly to the gentle song of the crickets, before summoning their thunder again. As the sun melted into the horizon, the roar of the cicadas receded, bowing to the chorus of tree toads and crickets accompanying the firefly ballet.

“Cara! Are you listening? Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Uh, I...” Cara stammered.

“You think I’m crazy,” Shirley accused.

“No.”

“People say I am.”

“Perhaps you say too many of your private thoughts out loud,” Cara suggested. “We all have thoughts that, if discovered, others could laugh at or

use against us. Those are thoughts we should only share with a close friend.”

“You mean, I should keep to myself, that this place is run by dirty old men and young men who are becoming dirty old men? I should keep quiet that they con and scam us? That they steal from us, their *workers*, and from anyone they can? Do you know where the ‘*Self Help*’ movement went?”

demanded Shirley.

“What?”

“It was swallowed up by a *help yourself* society where people help themselves to whatever-the-hell they want.

They’d cheat Life Itself with the cards dealt to them if they could! Yeah, that’s who *they* are, those people running the Corporation. They think breaking the rules and getting away with it means you’re *smart*, and the

people who get in their way and end up getting crushed, *are dumb*. Those are our leaders in the Corporation; that's how they *think*. Then there's the rest of us, the people who get stuck with the consequences of their immaturity, their *inhumanity*. Why do we put up with it? *Because they could take away our jobs!* Oh, I know you don't believe it can happen to you, but they can do to anyone! They can take away our health care insurance, our medications, *even the vaccine!* Just like that!" Shirley exclaimed and snapped her fingers. "And you want me to keep quiet about it... about this *betrayal?*" "Shirley-" Cara began but Shirley interrupted.

"*Shirley,*" she mimicked Cara's voice and then laughed. "Oh, Cara, Cara, Cara. You won't be using that attitude

when they start on you. You aren't in *charge* here, not of this conversation, not of *anything*. You're powerless. You're in *my* shoes now."

Cara stared wordlessly. Was she hearing senility or insight? Was it the weight of the truth... and carrying it *all alone* for too long, which made Shirley act this way?

"Just wait," Shirley taunted. "When it starts, everyday you'll come into work and something you need will be broken or missing. First, it will just be a handy mounting for a pipette, but eventually it'll be an expensive instrument, so that you can't finish your work in time! How will *that* look in your yearly review? 'Cara didn't finish her project on time'."

"Who *oo...*" Cara flinched when she heard her voice quiver, thinking it

revealed she was unnerved. She cleared her throat. “Who would sabotage a lab like that?”

“People you’ll never see, because they have other people covering their tracks. They’re ghosts. Ghosts that whisper, ‘We can do anything we want and you’ll never catch us, because *we are the system.*’” Suddenly Shirley’s voice changed to a whimper. “I just want to get out of here, and forget it all,” she whined. “Forget I ever came to this God-forsaken-place or met *any* of these people. I wish I could take some drug, and forget it all.”

An hour later, Cara was headed for her car when she overheard two people talking in the car park. She couldn’t see them because they were behind a van, but she recognized Shirley’s voice.

“There’s a drug like that,” a woman’s voice said.

“I’m not going to listen to you. You’re a ghost.”

“Shirley, you’re fine. You just need a rest,” said the woman.

Shirley spoke again. “I have to stay...I need my job. How would I get the vaccine? I’ll try hypnotism. It can make you forget-“

“Or you could stay,” the woman interjected, “and when you encounter more of this treatment you described, we can turn them in. We’ll report it to the police, you and I. We’ll do it together.”

“No!” Shirley barked. “They’ll say I’m crazy. They set people up to look crazy so they can get rid of them.”

“OK, then I can help you leave and go to a safe place. You can start over,

become a new person somewhere else.”

“Will I still work for the Corporation?” Shirley asked.

“Yes.”

“Really? Just somewhere else?”

“Yes, with a different name, like I told you before.”

“OK,” Shirley sighed. “I’ll go.”

“Be ready to leave on Friday.”

In an attempt to spot the other woman, Cara crouched behind a car and inched around it, but once she had a clearer view, Shirley was getting into her car and the other person had gone. The next day, Cara sought Shirley out hoping to understand what she’d overheard.

“Do you mind if I ask...” Cara hesitated but then went on. “Who were you



talking to in the parking garage last night?”

“A ghost.”

An impatient groan slipped out of Cara.

“It’s ok,” Shirley reassured. “I can go now. I’ve taken care of them.”

The creeping concern Cara was feeling turned into alarm. “What do you mean? Who?”

“All the men who had a laugh at my expense,” Shirley answered smugly.

“As a group, they’ll have a *mysteriously high* incidence of cancer.”

“What!”

“As you know, Cara, viruses can be designed to target specific cell receptors... and transform normal cells into cancer cells.”

Cara gasped. A viral cancer group in her facility did study that phenomenon

but their work had achieved the opposite of what Shirley described. They'd found a way to *inactivate* cancer-causing viruses, by altering innate-immune-system proteins through gene therapy. Moreover, that work was done in a *highly* restricted area and Cara knew Shirley didn't have the security clearance to even get *near* it... *This wasn't real.* It was some kind of revenge fantasy.

Shirley smiled sweetly. "A *very* high incidence." Then her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "Cara! Watch out for enemies that masquerade as friends! People who show up suddenly in your life and seem too friendly... too kind or generous to believe, don't! Don't believe them."

Early Friday morning, Cara went to Shirley's cubicle and found it completely cleared of her things. Her impulse was to get hold of Rachel immediately and tell her about Shirley, but she didn't have time. She had to leave to make a meeting at the Sequencing Center, a two-hour drive away. She hesitated; she wanted to stay and signal Rachel but Cara was signed up to use an RNA sequencer in a lab at the Center following the meeting. Cancelling that would be out of character and Rachel told her not to do anything unusual.

"You have to pretend nothing's changed," Rachel warned. "Business as usual, *that's* your cover. Staying under cover when you're in danger isn't cowardly; it's *smart*. Any overt action to defend yourself *or someone*

*else* would be unsafe. For now... you need to accept that you're *uninformed* and trust that I know what's going on." Recalling the intensity with which Rachel had given this advice, Cara went directly to her car.

Once she arrived at the Center and began to focus on interesting work, by the end of the day she almost felt like herself again. No one had behaved strangely toward her all day! She was in high spirits when she stopped to thank the lead scientist for the use of his lab, and since Cara knew the man to be succinct, she expected the interaction would be cordial but brief. His door was open so she rapped her knuckles lightly on the doorframe. When he looked up, he surprised her with uncharacteristic exuberance.

“Hello! Come on in, have a seat!” he hailed, as if she were an old friend instead of a junior colleague he barely knew.

After Cara communicated her thanks, she sensed he wanted to say something, so she sat quietly waiting for him to speak. An awkward silence ensued and Cara tried to ease it by assuring him that he’d be reimbursed for the lab supplies she’d used that day as soon as the regional manager approved the invoice.

But when she spoke the RM’s name, the man before her grew enraged. His eyes began to boil; bitter lines creased his face and he exploded with expletives like a box of firecrackers thrown into a fire. When he finally regained some composure, he ended his outburst with,

“Don’t *ever* speak that name in my presence *again*.”

Cara wasn’t confused by his wrath; he was a wounded person, yet another life the RM had ruined. To alleviate his distress, Cara directed the conversation to a safe topic and when a polite amount of time had passed, she mentioned the late hour and stood up to leave.

“Are you happy where you’re working?” he asked.

Startled, Cara smiled to hide her surprise. “Like you, I enjoy my work,” she answered. She wanted to say: *Why do you ask? What do you know?* But Cara had promised Rachel she wouldn’t discuss her situation...

“Do you feel safe there?” he persisted.

“Have you thought about leaving?”

The only thing that kept Cara from blurting out all that was weighing on her was something striking that had changed in his appearance. He'd moved forward until he sat perched on the edge of his seat and in his eyes, there were flashes of something wild, crazed... like the eyes of a horse running from fire.

"You don't have to answer, of course," he said, relaxing his perch, "but I urge you to put these questions to yourself... and heed your answers."

He reached into his desk and pulled out two professional cards, one was his own, and the other had a name Cara didn't know.

"If for any reason you find yourself in trouble," he said, "call one of us."

Cara thanked him for his interest and bee lined to the door. Although her

body was numb and her eyes unseeing, she was acutely aware of the business cards in the side pocket of her bag as she passed through the building to the parking lot. Inside her car, she pulled the cards out and stared at them. The impulse to call and talk to someone was overpowering but her mind was frozen with indecision. Instead of pulling out her phone, she sat slumped over in the driver's seat feeling weak, limp... like her spine had failed her. She lifted her head and looked out at the ocean of cars surrounding her. The never-ending sea of vehicles stretched out in every direction without a soul in sight. Something about it made her feel anonymous, like no one knew who or where she was, and that imaginary reality felt safe.



She began flipping the business cards over and over in her hands. If she called one of them, he'd tell her his terrible tale. Like Gwen. Then he'd tell her the terrible stories of ten more people who dared to say no to the RM. The details might be different but the tragedy was the same.

Then, one day, she'd call the person again, only *this* time he wouldn't answer. She would search and discover that his name had disappeared from the employee catalog. Cara also knew, that if she kept doing everything as she always had, the memory of his disappearance would gradually fade like the fingerprints on her car window. All she had to do was look the other way and eventually, the wind and rain would render them invisible. She'd

forget, like she'd forgotten about the world of people under the bridge.

\*\*\*\*\*

The location of the rendezvous with Rachel's friend was the city's old waterfront, but now that Cara was almost there, she felt unsure about her decision to come. The last people she'd seen were back at the edge of town leaving a bar and there'd been no cars on the road for miles, just gutted buildings with faded signs, marsh grass and an unpleasant odor that was getting stronger the closer she got to her destination.

When Cara arrived, she parked the car next to the heap of rocks Rachel had described and carefully surveyed her surroundings. The last ships to dock

at this wharf had probably been cannibalized for parts before she was born and she guessed what was left of them rested half buried in the riverbed. Rachel said the site was being used illegally as a hazardous waste dump, a *fun fact* that spoiled legitimate business interests in the property and discouraged visitors. Some of the solar street lamps still worked and brightened the deserted place like faithful sentinels. One street entrance was particularly well lit and the face of the illumined building rose up in ghostly contrast with the night. Out past the lights along the wharf there was nothing for the eyes to see. The sky and water were equally black, creating a seamless, silent expanse. Rachel had been quite specific about the building Cara was supposed to

enter and which door to use. There it was, right in front of her, the only warehouse connected to the wharf at the first pier, and *still* she felt unsure *as if she couldn't trust what her eyes were seeing*. Being there felt so unreal, all normal sense of certainty was lost. "It's the right building," Cara announced aloud, hoping the sound of her own voice would strengthen her resolve. She opened the car door, and right away slammed it shut when a terrible smell threatened to overwhelm her. Immediately she restarted the car, understanding *now* how much the pollution filters in the air-circulation system had protected her. She leaned toward the vents breathing in the filtered air and waited for her heart to stop pounding. *Hence the chemical mask*, she reminded

herself and reached into her pocket for the breather Rachel had given her.

Once it was carefully sealed over her nose, she stepped outside again.

Cara had to enter the warehouse through a door on the wharf but the stairs from the ground up to the deck had collapsed. She was told to use the rock pile as a kind of ramp up to a chain-rope ladder that would enable the final ten feet of her ascent. Once she spotted the ladder hanging from the deck, Cara pulled on the black cap and began to climb.

Up on the deck, she headed in the direction of the warehouse, slowly picking her way across the rotted planks. Although the lights closest to her weren't functioning, a few of the lamps lining the street-side of the wharf were lit and her present path

would bring her directly under them. Rachel had told her to stay in the shadows but to skirt the rims of light she'd have to walk along the portion of the wharf that hung out over the water. Cara stared at the far side of the platform where there was no barrier of any kind to prevent her from walking straight off the deck into the river.

On the side close to her, a railing ran between the lampposts and clearly outlined the edge of the wharf along an old parking lot. Cara put her hand on a lamppost for balance and peered down at what lay below. The light of a street lamp below reflected off the surface of a greasy, green pool twenty feet beneath her, prompting her thoughts to shift to a familiar place,

guessing at the chemistry causing the color.

*That green is the exact color of Closterium monoliferum, she thought, but it doesn't look like algal scum.*

*There aren't any naturally occurring, metallic-green minerals locally so that's out, but it could be electroplating waste that contains a reduced form of hexavalent chromium-*

“Ahh!” she howled, as the soft wood beneath her foot gave way.

She grabbed the light post with both hands, but the wood under the lamppost cracked. As the post started to fall, Cara shoved against it with all her might, falling backward onto the deck as the lamp dropped and crashed into the waste pool below. For a moment, the world was still. Then Cara picked herself up and fixed her

attention on staying in the shadow without falling in the river.

When she reached what was left of the first pier, she saw the entrance to the warehouse. It was a doorway without a door, a gaping hole with what looked like pitch-black darkness on the other side. Relieved that at least she couldn't be locked in, Cara tested the floor with one foot and, when satisfied the landing was stable, she stepped inside.

“Hello?” she called.

*Oh sheht!* Rachel had *insisted* she be silent until the contact gave her permission to speak. The blood drained from her face and her heart started pounding. To calm herself, she ran through the rest of the instructions in her head.



*I enter the warehouse on the second floor landing of a staircase. I go up one flight, stand at the top of the stairs and wait. The person I'm meeting will say, 'This is a great book.' He might not show his face and the whole exchange may take place without lighting of any kind.*

Not wanting to repeat the near-disaster on the dock, Cara stood still waiting for her eyes to adjust. For the moment, all she knew was that she was standing on a fire escape-style staircase over a black pit. Outside, at least there were a few streetlamps. The space before her was *devoid* of light.

Gradually the shape of a multi-story staircase emerged and, as she began to climb the flight that led upward, the clanging of her footsteps echoed in the

unknown space below. Feelings of mistrust and trepidation slowed her stride. Her good opinion of Rachel had convinced her to come but she was wary of the intentions of the person she was meeting.

Rachel's 'friend' wasn't going to help her for-free; *something* would be expected in return. Cara guessed they wanted her to complete a task that was important to them, important enough for them to risk exposing themselves through this interaction. Well... actually, she didn't *know* how risky this exchange was for *them* but Cara was acutely aware of how much *she* was risking. Her job, her standing in the scientific community, a clean political and criminal record... if it was discovered that she'd driven an illegally altered vehicle, that alone

could ruin her professionally and might even land her in jail.

She wasn't fooling herself. She knew she was *way out of her element* and not *at all* at her best. Since her first evening with Gwen, Cara had been riding one shock wave after another, and tonight might be a tidal wave. But she was here because needed advise on how to manage her work situation and, so far, Rachel's guidance had been sound.

At the top of the stairway, Cara lifted the breather off her nose to test the air. There was an odor of damp dust and dirt, but the chemical smell was manageable. Although the space right around her was empty, ten feet away to either side there were rows of shelves that traveled down the length of the room as far as she could see.

The shelves nearest her looked empty except for an occasional, untidy stack of boxes. Dim light from the lamps outdoors illuminated a line of windows set up high along the walls. Cara took in a deep breath, gripped the stair railing and prepared to wait. She heard a click and shut her eyes as a bright light momentarily blinded her. The person holding the light turned it facedown on a table and in the red glow that remained, she saw the silhouette of a man sitting behind the table. Reflexively, Cara tried to swallow but her throat was so dry, the motion got stuck halfway. “You spoke downstairs,” he noted. “You weren’t supposed to do that.” Cara cleared her throat. “That’s not what you’re supposed to say.”

The man chuckled then pulled a book out of the shadow and held it close to the red light. “This is a great book,” he said.

Cara noticed the sleeve of a finely tailored suit on the arm holding the book and that he was sporting an unusual wristwatch. “What is it?” she asked.

“Robin Hood.”

“I’ve read two versions of Robin Hood,” she said. “One by Pyle and the other by... I think, ‘Egan’.”

“Yes. Pierce Egan the Younger.” He tapped the book. “That’s the one.”

“Why do you consider it a great book?” she asked, continuing the polite parley. He leaned back comfortably in his chair. “A story is great when it has an enormous capacity to give people what they’re looking for.”

The conversation felt like a warm tide coaxing her out to sea. Her natural curiosity, so beneficial in her personal and scientific life, could easily be used as a lure to draw her in. *He's fishing,* she concluded, *but to what end?*

The man prattled on, acting as if he was unaware of her suspicions. "For over 700 years, every generation of the English-speaking world has retold this story and, I'd only be guessing, but *I bet* that every language has its own version of Robin Hood. Do you know what people are usually looking for in a story?"

She waited.

"The same things they look for in life," he answered himself. "A book is *great* when it helps us make sense of ourselves, the world, and our place in it."

Cara shifted impatiently from one foot to the other. “Who *are* you?”

“You can call me St. Anthony.” He put the book on the table. “Does that name mean anything to you? From the news, perhaps?”

Dread paralyzed her limbs as her mind went white with panic. St. Anthony was the name of a group of anarchists descried on NetNews as the instigators of all the major crime in the city. The tidal wave wasn’t coming; it already struck land.

*Information*, Cara reminded herself. *Get information*. “I don’t always catch the news,” she hedged. “Maybe you could tell me about yourself. St. Anthony was Egyptian, I believe...” He chortled. “Yes, there was a St. Anthony of Egypt, but the one I’m referring to was from *Portugal*. He’s

the patron saint of lost items, and lost *people*.”

“Am I lost?” Cara deflected.

“Without my help, you are,” he answered.

*Breathe*, she told herself. “I’m sure that, as a saint, you can understand that I can’t afford to sell my soul.

Before I agree to cooperate with you in any way, or even accept your help, I need to understand your *purpose*.”

The man sighed with the patience of a grandfather. “I shared my public name with you hoping you might already know something about me.”

“I can’t know someone by what’s said about them on the news.”

“We agree on *that*,” he said. “One person can have an *appalling* public persona and be a *saint*,” he paused for effect, “while another, despite all his



public displays of charity and the pretty pictures on the news, is a monster in disguise. It takes money to maintain an appealing, public facade when you're actually a miscreant. Poor people can't hide who they are; they're at the mercy of however the media wants to portray them."

"I imagine that's true," she allowed.

"Nice suit, by the way."

"Oh!" he sat upright and straightened his jacket. "Thank you. This is the costume I wear when I come to the city." He leaned forward. "NetNews portrays us as criminals, yet I'm here to help you. Could it be, that I'm both dissembler and saint?"

"I can't possibly know that."

"Ah yes, the scientist." He tapped the book absentmindedly. "I believe that you know that some people can be

called despots by one part of society and *heroes* by another. Take the CEO of the Corporation, for example. Some people call him a hero and others say he's deranged. Is it possible he's both, or that he was one way once... and then become the other?"

Unsure of where the conversation was headed, Cara remained silent.

"Oh, I forgot. Badmouthing the CEO of the Corporation isn't allowed... one of those unspoken rules that's *written* on every face. Then *let's look* at some *other* miscreants," he suggested. "I would guess that you consider drug traffickers and pimps to be 'bad people' because they 'rip apart the fabric of society'. Am I right? Indulge me. Isn't that what you think?"

Cara sighed impatiently. "Your point is?"

“If I admitted that what they say about us in the news is true, that I’m a drug dealer and a pimp, I think you would not approve.”

Cara was listening now. She suddenly sensed truth being laid down like mortar before the bricks.

“But what if I told you that the drug I ‘deal’ is an antiviral, and that I sell it to poor people at a price they can afford. What if I told you my sister sells sex to survive, and that I protect her business, what would you think?”

Cara scowled. “I won’t comment on someone who’s not here to speak for themselves, but *you...* You seem to think of yourself as a hero who ‘robs from the rich and gives to the poor’ but the Robin Hood *in your book* would confiscate *vaccine*, a medicine that *prevents* sickness, and then would

*give it to the poor. You're stealing antiviral and selling it on the black market."*

To her surprise, he took a long time to respond and when he did, his tone was subdued. "Yes. If we could get vaccine, that would be tremendous."

Cara didn't know what to make of his answer. *Is this a trick?* she wondered. *Is he trying to throw me off track?* Cara steered the conversation back to her point.

"You sell people antiviral because the moment it clears the body they have to buy *more*. A lucrative business model, for sure. If you sold people the *vaccine*, they could avoid getting sick altogether and by being well, perhaps begin to acquire their own immunity. That's what a real Robin Hood would do."

He was quiet again for quite some time and when he finally spoke, he changed the subject. “I’m sure you’ve seen on NetNews... that certain ‘terrorists’ are selling impure antiviral and it’s killing people. That’s not us; we don’t do that but I feel compelled to inform you that that for a large and extremely unfortunate segment of the population, *impure* antiviral is *better than none*. My organization *appropriates* a portion of the Corporation’s antiviral stock and sells it at an affordable price. We also make an antiviral that we use ourselves that’s safer and more effective than any of the concoctions that the Corporation gives to the public, but it’s very expensive for us to make so we can’t sell it at a price people can afford. The Corporation has the

manufacturing facilities to produce a cleaner antiviral and sell it at an affordable price. But they don't." Cara didn't know if she felt unnerved because of the things he was telling her or because her entire knowledge base on this subject came solely from one source, NetNews. She didn't have any personal experiences to draw from either, but she kept these details to herself.

"So, yes," he continued, "We steal the antiviral that the Corporation makes and we sell it; but the Corporation isn't troubled by that at all. That's because, no one in this hemisphere can compete with the Corporation and they rest comfortably in their supremacy. They *allow* us to operate, mostly because we don't adversely impact their profit."

“So, the DM and the local police just *look the other way* when you steal antiviral from the Corporation,” Cara stated drolly, “because the Corporation thinks it’s fine.”

“It’s *because* the authorities allow it that I know it’s fine with the Corporation. Keep in mind that the ‘Corporation’, the ‘Government’ and the ‘DM’ are the same organization since the Corporation funds them all.”

Cara wore a pained expression. “I guess you’re just doing everyone a favor by selling the Corporation’s products for them.”

“Seems like it.”

Cara could no longer contain her irritation. “Oh, come on! Once you sell to the middlemen on the black market, they add cheap filler so they’ll have twice as much to sell, and some of

those mixtures *kill* people. Do the police ignore that too?”

“You’re right, the local police wouldn’t allow the sale of our antiviral if it killed people, because their friends and family buy our antiviral on the black market. Fun fact: they call us St. Anthony because our antiviral *saves* people, people who would otherwise be *lost*, meaning dead, because *it’s the only antiviral they can get.*”

Cara shook her head. “*Everyone* has access to free *vaccine*. Why would they need antiviral?”

“Ha! What a world you live in, *in your head!* So privileged. So spoiled!”

Cara felt her face burning.

“Little princess in the tower, do you know how many people don’t get any medicine *at all* from the government? Let me guess... *You* think that the only



people who don't get medicine are derelicts and drug addicts, because they're so busy doing their derelict, drug addict things they forget to stand in line at the clinic."

"The government provides free vaccine to anyone who can't afford it," she argued. "People like you *sell* an *inferior substitute* to them."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, feigning sudden insight. "That's right! They buy our antiviral because they'd rather pay for it than get it for free!

Did you know that some people live thirty miles from the nearest clinic and they can't afford transportation for their whole family to get the antiviral every week? Or did you think the clinics made house calls?"

Cara felt so overwhelmed. The tidal wave had crashed into the walls of her

psyche, and destroyed them, as easily as a receding glacier crushes rock. The fortress she'd built with the bricks of her education was gone and the foundation fully exposed. To herself she acknowledged that she didn't know anything about the poor except for what was depicted on NetNews. For a scientist, having only one source of information was like having none at all.

Suddenly Cara realized she'd been staring at the floor and he was waiting for her to answer his question.

"Why do you keep talking about antiviral?" she deflected. "People get free antiviral after they've contracted the virus and are very sick. The free vaccine is—"

"Did you know," he interrupted, "that some people are denied free antiviral

because they haven't been able to prove they can't afford it? And did you know, that for most of those people, if they paid Corporation prices at a pharmacy they wouldn't have money to feed their families?"

"People can petition the government's decision to deny them," she countered, "and when they do, social workers are sent to their houses to reassess their status."

"Sure! Sure!" he exclaimed. "There's a government protocol for that! Do you know how long it takes for the government to ascertain that someone can't afford antiviral?"

Cara didn't answer because she didn't know.

He leaned forward. "Long enough for people to die." Then he added, "It's *advantageous* to the Corporation to

have the poor taken care of by someone else; they don't want the headache. So they allow people like us to operate as long as we don't interfere with their fiscal year." He fell silent for a short while and when he spoke again, he sounded like he was thinking aloud.

"If the Corporation *could* take care of the poor themselves, they would... so they could take credit and get the PR. But, contrary to what people like you believe, the Corporation doesn't hold everything *neatly* in its iron grip. For now, they're still managing to hide it, but things are falling apart. This war they got us into has caused complications they can't seem to address, the obvious one being that the population is so ill, soon there'll be no one left to fight. But, who knows...

Maybe they'll discover helpless beings in outer space and conscript them."

"Uh...." Cara muttered in exasperation.

"You think the *Corporation* got us into the war?"

"Yes."

"That's ridiculous."

"Oh, but they did. We're warring over who controls the global sale of antiviral. Well," he added as an afterthought, "that's how it began. Now it's about survival.

It's amazing how often people in history have embarked on a war thinking that it's how they're going to 'have it all.' This war was a quick-get-rich scheme, and like all money grabbing strategies, someone is robbed."

“Yet *your* get-rich scheme of selling illegal antiviral makes you a *saint*,” she commented.

He folded his hands on the table. “I don’t do things that rip apart society. I sell antiviral at affordable rates to poor people. How do I know what’s affordable? Because I grew up not far from here. When I was a boy, I worked in this building...” His arms swept outward. “On these docks. So, not only do I know first-hand about being poor, I know that being poor means living with the virus. I bring antiviral to people who wouldn’t have it otherwise, to people who would have no choice but to be sick, all day, every day. *My* family would probably all be dead.”

“Your sister still lives a life of high risk,” Cara said, “so much so, that you

have to provide protection. Isn't there a safer way for her to earn a living?"

"Like you," he began mildly, "my sister is a brilliant woman. But presently, sex work is the only sure way for women *who don't have the good fortune of being handed a higher education,*" he paused poignantly, "to be financially independent.

Prostitutes are the only women in this country who will never be put in jail for possession of birth control pills. Someone like yourself would expect jail time if found with *any* form of birth control and a lifetime in prison for an abortion. Not so, for prostitutes; they're exempt. Have you ever thought about why that is?"

Cara hadn't. She didn't know a thing about sex work. There'd never been anything on NetNews about them

either, not that she'd seen. Never. In her world, the subject wasn't discussed. It was as if it didn't exist, but of course, it did...

"This is what we've come to," he was saying. "This is the world we live in. First, the viral pandemics hit us, followed by the war, and then the war was the excuse to impose martial law and create the DM..."

People have to work so they have money for food. Medicines cost money too, but if you only have enough money for food *or* medicine, guess what you buy? Twenty five percent of the population is ill every waking moment of their lives, till death takes them."

The crest of the tidal wave had passed over, the water in its wake rushing freely across the foundation. "If *you*



are a 'good' criminal," she said, "what do the 'bad' ones do?"

"They work for the Corporation."

"You mean... like *me*," said Cara wryly.

"No. People like you sustain what's left of the Corporation. I'm referring to the people who are eating it alive."

\*\*\*\*\*

"I'm Lenore," the woman said.

"Lenore, the 9<sup>th</sup> floor whore. Catchy huh? It should be a *song*." She thought a moment. "I could put it on a plaque over my desk. *That* would be *skiff!*"

Cara couldn't stop the astonishment from appearing on her face and Lenore giggled.

"I guess Rachel didn't tell you about my job," Lenore said sympathetically, and giggled again.

“No.”

Rachel arranged for Cara to have two additional ‘safe’ people within the Corporation to talk to if ever she couldn’t get hold of Rachel.

“Both are *meticulous* about checking for listening devices and choosing safe places to talk,” Rachel assured her. “If you follow their instructions about how to make contact, there will never be any security concerns.”

The location of Cara’s first meeting with Lenore was in an elevator.

“I wait around all day on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor—in very nice accommodations,” Lenore explained, “and pretend to work as a receptionist until I’m called. All the board members have one of us. And there’re extra ones as loaners too... you know, for when clients come. You should talk to Jasmine about that,

though. She's a loaner, and *tough*. Not like me. I act nice and pretend to *like* my jerk; I tell him how great he is because that's the *easy* way. I hide how much I hate him and so he thinks I'm sweet and stupid." She laughed. "I *would* be stupid if I liked him. Jasmine, she gets away with an attitude because she's exotic. She's from Africa or something. She's so beautiful, people have heart attacks just looking at her." "All the board members have a mistress on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor?"

"Yeah. Well, some have two. Most days are boring for us. Work picks up when the stockies come for meetings... that's what we call the suits from the stock exchange. They have their meetings, then have their fun. There's more go'in on in that saying about 'strange bedfellows' than people know.

Ha! The best part is... and you'll *love* this... *My* jerk has his business meetings right in front of me! They think it's safe because, like I said, they think I'm stupid. But I have a *crazy* good memory and I pass on *everything they say* to Rachel."

Cara was incredulous. "They discuss their business with you *there*?"

Lenore responded with a big smile. The second time Cara met with Lenore was in a baseball field in a greenway that wasn't registered on NetMap. Lenore's directions were so precise, Cara had no trouble finding the park and was twenty minutes early. She followed a winding path down to the ball field and when she arrived, Lenore was waiting on a bench in the batter's box.

“You look so *worried*,” Lenore observed as Cara sat down next to her. “I’m fine.”

“No,” Lenore disallowed. “You’re a *wreck*. Take a deep breath. Good. Another. That’s it. Okay, now look around you. *Nobody’s here*. Not even under those bleachers.”

Cara looked over at the stands in alarm. It never occurred to her that someone might be hiding nearby.

“See? We’re *totally* alone and it’s completely safe ta’ talk.”

“If it’s so safe,” Cara said, “then why do you keep scanning the whole area around us?”

“It’s my job and I’m good at it,” was her reply. “That’s why you don’t need to worry.” Then Lenore grinned.

“Wanna know somethin’ funny? People think I’m a little-league mom

because when I come here I clean up the trash. I'm actually sweeping for bugs but, this way, I do two good things at the same time."

Cara frowned. "Listening devices? Out here?"

"Sounds far fetched, huh? Yeah, well, you gotta start thinkin' different. Don't think probabilities; think in terms of *degree of risk*. If somethin's a big deal, you watch out for it even if there's one chance in a million. A *bug* is a *very* big deal. I find one... I'm *rekt* and so's the contact."

"What?" Cara asked anxiously.

"A bug means your cover's blown."

Cara swallowed.

"And that's why you *check* and when nothin's there, you feel good! Ahhh..." she stretched her arms up toward the sky. "I love this time of year. I hope

we have a *long* spring. Summer's too hot."

Cara let out a disgruntled sigh. "I still have a *lot* of questions..."

"Shoot!"

"What kinds of things do you learn from the stock exchange people?" Cara asked.

"They talk up their next stock market 'win' to the board and warn about 'sliders'. I get the most information out of them at their drug orgies, which they call 'conferences' to their spouses. At those things, the stockies flit around their Corporation buddies like flies buzzing around sheht, because the Corporation's where the big money is. The Corporation twats like to call the stock market the '*mysterious woman*' because, they say, '*you never know what she's going to do next*'; and the

stockies talk themselves up like their the jockeys who know how to ride the market. But they're all *full of derp*. Fact is... Corporation money completely runs the stock market on this side of the world. *Completely*. There are *no* stock market surprises the Corporation can't fix. The *fickle mistress* is the *war*. At first, the twats thought they controlled the war too, but she's a runaway horse. No one can bridle her now."

"Do you see the same people all the time at these parties?" Cara probed. "No. Stockies and twats come and go. Know why?"

Cara shook her head.

"When you're a con you have to keep moving or get lynched. Same's true for the investors and bankers who talk the twats into 'special' deals."



“Like what?” Cara asked.

“My jerk meets with investors and bankers who look legit because of the company they work for, but they’re not there to do business for *their* company. They’re a *front*, usually for an unnamed, third party client who wants to cannibalize a business within the Corporation and is willing to pay cash. Let me tell you... in those deals, *everybody gets screwed* except for the Corporation and a few already rich shehtheads. The business fails, the rich get richer, the Corporation blames the stock market and the employees lose everything.”

“How do they make money by destroying a business?”

Lenore waved to a couple of teenagers who’d emerged from the woods. They looked embarrassed, turned and went

back the way they came. “Sorry kids. Can’t snog here today. The answer is, ‘it depends’. Usually a competing company wants the ruined company’s market share. Sometimes a business that owes money to the ruined company doesn’t want to pay up... And always, *always*... there’re hundreds, sometimes *thousands*, of transactions involved in breaking a company up into little pieces and for every transaction there’s a *broker’s fee*. Imagine how much money can be made if most of the transactions are under-the-table?”

“What kind of transactions?” Cara pressed. “Give an example.”

“Most of what I hear about is selling technology secrets that they call ‘IP’. They’ll sell the same IP over and over to different people and say to each one

they've only sold it to *them*. Other transactions are about stealing everything out from underneath a business till there's nothing left to hold it up. *Six months before it's publicly announced* that the company is in financial collapse (and everyone is going to be laid off), the shehtheads who *caused it* sail off on their yachts so no one can find them."

Lenore paused her scan of the surroundings to glance at Cara.

"Heard enough for one day?"

"No... but I've got to get back to work."

Cara turned to face Lenore. "Do you mind if I ask a personal question?"

"Nope! Go for it."

"Why did you join..." Cara trailed off. She didn't know what to call the people for whom Lenore was spying.

They each used their own word for it and the meaning was made clear in context.

“I joined *Fred*,” Lenore answered, “to find my sister. She went missing two years ago and she didn’t go on her own. These Corporation bastards took her.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The second Corporation employee Rachel wanted her to meet turned out to be someone Cara already knew. Al Ohanian was a technician who worked with Cara on her first project, right after she’d been hired. The acquaintance was convenient because it was an excuse to chat when they ‘accidentally’ bumped into each other. Rachel arranged for the first

encounter to occur outside a supermarket.

“Before Gwen disappeared,” Cara said to Al, “she told me about a person she trusted even though he was a friend of Roger’s. Is that you? Did she ask you to contact me?”

Al nodded. “Roger and I went to the same school, played on the same teams... The one thing I know about Roger that you need to know too is that you can *never* drop your guard around him. He’s demented, thinks of people as joysticks, and his chucklehead friends do too. *Cruelty is funny to them* and anything that’s funny is *fine*. *That’s how they think*. Do you understand how dangerous that is?”

“I think so.”

“Roger...” Al muttered with a grimace. “I hate when people use the word ‘bully’ for shehtheads like him. It’s too nice a word. You say bully and some people think of a comic book character like Brutus in the old Popeye cartoons. What about the carnage that all the Rogers cause? The lives they destroy? Do you dress that up in a cliché too? Laugh at it in a cartoon?” He cursed under his breath.

“Roger’s got at least three prospective casualties even as we speak. I’m sure there’re more... These are just the ones I know about. Since I know you’ve met Harry, I’ll tell you about him first.

The short story is, Roger told Harry’s supervisor last week that Harry was ‘on drugs’ at work. It was true that Harry was high at work one day and

he did act goofy... *three years ago!*  
Harry was on *pain meds* for an injury and didn't realize how the meds were affecting him so he came into work a bit high, *three years ago*. Roger forgot to mention that last part to Harry's supervisor.

Next thing he knows, Harry's called down to the clinic for a drug test and couldn't defend himself because had no idea what was going on. The test was negative, but once you put an idea like that in some people's heads, it's hard to dislodge even when it's false. *Damage done."*

"How did Roger convince the supervisor without proof?" Cara asked. "Who knows. Roger's body produces lies in his saliva. The second person is the new woman in Roger's group named Davina. Single mom, no time

for a personal life, *excellent* technician... Roger's been pressuring her to join a bunch of *married* men after work on Fridays for a drink, no wives invited, you understand. She told him she doesn't socialize after work because she has to get home to her kids. Understandable, *right?* But I promise you, she's on Roger's sheht list now for saying no to him. *Damage is coming.*

Then there's Aarone: talented scientist, funny, everybody loves him, but he does *not* like Roger. He *can't stand* how Roger blurs the lines of reality when it suits him so the two of them butt heads. When they disagree about technical details, Aarone's always right and that drives Roger crazy... he just can't deal with that and goes on a revenge binge. Most people



know that, so they let Roger think he's right, but not *Aarone*.

The other day, when I went into the lab, I saw Roger leaving in a huff and Aarone had a 'I just made a field goal' look on his face. I could tell Aarone thought he'd just won the game, but *I thought*, 'uh oh, here it comes'. And it did. A day or two later, Roger's best goon Judd comes into the lab with two other yobos and Aarone was surly towards them in front of his coworkers. Four complaints have now been filed about Aarone's behavior. *Damage well underway.*

The hardest part about working for *Marge* is not being allowed to warn people like Aarone and Davina and Harry when they're in trouble. They don't let me tip people off for fear I'd blow my cover. *Gwen was a huge*

exception to that. I was surprised when they told me I could help her. She's ok, you know. But I can't tell you any more than that."

"That's what Rachel said..." Cara murmured. "But why were you allowed to help her and not others? Why was Gwen an exception?"

"It had something to do with you, that she was your friend," he revealed. Bewildered, Cara asked, "How does Gwen's situation have anything to do with me?"

"I don't know. No, *really!* I've no idea, and I can't ask. They only tell me what they think I need to know; it's safer that way."