

# Inkwell

A Grantwriting Horror Story

by Dan Netherton

## Chapter I

I was late for the strategic planning retreat, my first day on a new job.

How does that old saying go, that he'd be late to his own funeral? But in my case this is so unfair. One of the reasons Massachusetts drives me crazy is that I am hardly ever late. I hate being late. I have been known to get to a place as much as an hour early and hang around, on the other side of the block, or a nearby coffee shop, just to appear right on time or a minute or two early.

Massachusetts will frustrate these efforts time and again for me.

When I flew out from the west to hunt for an apartment I found the local housing market superheated. Vacancy rates at one-half a percent. I find myself with no job and no prospects trying to find something cheap enough to afford on my wife's salary alone at some dingy place near the railroad tracks where this guy says he has a place for me for (just) \$600 per month. My two mortgages in Idaho totaled less than that. But he says he doesn't have time to show it to me. It's easy to find, though.

It's easy to find, but he doesn't give me many street names, because, you know, there aren't all that many signs. If you don't know the way, street names are no help. But this guy, who talks like this friend of the family who I had always thought had a speech impediment (turns out that it is the local accent), serves out-of-towners sometimes and he explains the lefts, the rights, the bridges, etc. And he says I can't miss the left turn because there's a blinking yellow caution light at it. But that light's out. Only he doesn't know that, wouldn't notice it if he saw it, because in his mind, and the minds of his forefathers, it eternally blinks. It was probably a town event when it was put in. They gathered for miles to see the miraculous blinking light. Savvy New Englanders they didn't ask themselves how the light blinked, although there might have been some disagreement about the best way to do it. Questions were more along the lines of "why does this town need a blinking light?" Anyone who doesn't know how to be careful turning left at an un-signalized intersection should die a fiery death. Somebody might ask "but what about the other guy, the one he runs into?" They would have shaken their heads and wandered off.

It's the age of the internet, but I'm late for my first day of work because the internet will still take decades to cope with the roads of Massachusetts, if it ever does. Some mapping site puts the Hotel on the wrong side of the highway, so I'm driving around a bunch of farms. When I finally get frustrated enough to pull into a service station and ask directions the kids there tell me that it's on the other side of the highway and I find it pretty difficult to believe. When I show them the map they stick to their story.

I walk in and everybody is dressed casually and sitting around a bunch of tables circled like wagons in what appears to be an immense dance hall. Only they are on the outside, where they can be riddled easily with arrows. They are far enough apart that they practically have to shout at one another. That doesn't appear to be a problem for this group. Mostly extroverts, optimists, they don't seem to mind enunciating and speaking slowly. They are fundraisers.

Except for the big boss. He never raises his voice. He seems to be able to make his displeasure, his bitterness and inflexibility, known without the same sort of tools that everyone else would use. If they had

any displeasure, or bitterness. The big boss has plenty to go around, and he glares at me as I try to find my seat. Helpfully, oppressively, there are placards telling everyone where to sit.

I have been placed between the two weird lobes of the fundraising head. On one side of the room, looking cheerful and alert, relaxed and dapper, are the "gift officers," the people who meet with university alumni, who call them on the phone and set up parties and events for them in hopes that it will all lead to gifts. On the other side are the "support staff," who generally process the financial transactions, perform various types of research into donor behavior, keep track of alumni, or keep the machines running and the files straight. As a grant writer, the Associate Director of Foundation Relations, I am neither fish nor fowl. I talk mainly with faculty, not alumni (this school doesn't seem to have any alumni on the boards of foundations, most don't) and I write (which is something nobody else seems to want to do either.)

As I come in late the Executive Director, who I already loathe, is finishing his opening statements, mostly about how the day's events will unfold. In a microcosm this little oration represents how most of the day will unfold. There is much talking, unattended by listeners, about what will be said and what has just been said. For someone as disconnected as myself, a grant writer in a room full of people mostly unconnected to what I do, and new on the staff as well, there is a lot of time to think and act like I'm listening. Far too much time to think.

He drones on for another fifteen seconds that seem like five minutes and concludes by saying that the Chancellor himself will be coming by to make a special announcement at the conclusion of the first afternoon workshop session. Well, there's something to look forward to, I tell myself. Not only more than one workshop session in the afternoon, we also get a speech by a bureaucrat. The Exec. then urges to get some coffee and snacks to charge ourselves up for the morning "discussion."

Back at the table I am riding a sugar and caffeine high and also feeling good about having found at least one person I can talk to. I'm listening to one of the "Gift Officers" droning about his plans for the coming fiscal year. Couched in strategic plannese it seems to add up to the following: I will do pretty much what I did last year. But it is laced with talk of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, emerging markets, value nets, the three "C"s, growth share, 7-S and other analytical frameworks that simply don't apply. And even the parts of his plan that do make sense have a miniscule effect on how anyone else will do their jobs. It is impossible to listen to the whole thing.

Through this guy's extensive mind-frappe, his rapid-fire, staccato witstrafe, I'm looking around the table and trying to figure out why there aren't even any raised eyebrows or covert smiles.

Some people, particularly on the rah-rah lobe of the table, are nodding, perhaps a little too rhythmically, to everything he says. Some people appear to be taking notes. Suddenly I fear that I'll begin to giggle and I quickly uncap my pen and start doodling. So that's what they are all doing.

Part of the reason I'm more than a little bored and unfocused is that I've heard all of this before from other fundraisers at conferences and my two other grant writing gigs. And I know that despite all of the day's strategy they will end up with last-year's ad hoc reality: talk to the people in the science, business, and engineering departments and see what deals they are making with industry and find ways to count some of it as gifts, hope like crazy that some big gifts fly over the transom so that our office can claim credit for them.

Suddenly, during this monologue, it becomes clear to me that I'm headed for a serious sugar crash in about twenty minutes. I'm thinking that it may just be best to go with it, to abandon the thought that some protein might save me. Trying to avert it would be like those pilots in the Great War, realizing that

they were in too steep a dive and that to pull up on the stick would simply tear the wings to shreds. Can I bail out? What color is my parachute? Do I have one?

There is a question and answer session following this stuff and Sid's hand pops up. He asks how he can help with pulling down data for one of the six new goals that this guy outlined.

Unbelievable. The guy must have the best-developed sense of irony I have ever seen, or some keen interest in playing the whole thing straight for some other unfathomable reason. Job security? I dunno.

But it hits me as I look around the table again. They are all visibly thankful that somebody was paying enough attention to ask a question that makes sense to this guy, to show that he was listening. And he keeps it up for a follow-up question.

Weirder still, others find a way to keep the ball in the air until suddenly his time is up, as Paul notes by clearing his throat and looking at the clock.

This goes on two more times before lunch. There are some variations, of course. One of the rah-rahs is simply too perky not to engage with. She looks at everyone at the table while she patiently reads from her strategic plan and if you catch her eye she turns her smile into a beaming question, something like "come on, won't you join us all in the spirit of collegial professionalism?" and it is just too sincere and cheerful to resist.

I go into lunch a little disgusted. I'm recovering a little from the sugar crash, and things are definitely looking up. This is a bunch of loonies, to be sure. Few of them seem dangerous. And they seem to be able to work together. They seem to have found a way to manage even in the face of this psychotic, rat-faced cross between a mobster and a clown (not the good kind but the Stephen King—Poltergeist kind). It's not going to be as bad as I thought at the beginning of the day.

Lunch is a huge panoply of hearty fare. There are at least five meat entrees to choose from. The Exec does not, apparently, feel the need to choose at all. And he stands at the table for far longer than anyone else to wait for compliments on how much money he has spent on this thing and how great everything tastes. He receives these with body language that says he appreciates the compliments, but he never once cracks a smile. I think that if someone did a painful pratfall he might chuckle. Maybe I will to spice things up this afternoon. Give the boss what he wants.

At least the lunch offers an opportunity to talk to Sid a little more and get a sense for the dynamic of the place. He is just as earnest with me as he was with the others when work issues come up, but we manage to keep the conversation mostly away from that. So I'm able to talk to a real human being for a while. We talk about bands, movies, funny websites and a range of other topics. Like most of the people I've met here he has lived in Massachusetts his whole life, and his family goes way back. Though he has relatives spread over the small state they can still see each other every major holiday. And with families this is a mixed blessing.

Then he brings up the owls.

"So, you know how it is dark still in the mornings," he says. It was before daylight savings time, or after, or whatever before you get the extra hour of sleep on that blissful Sunday in the fall.

"I'm coming in on the 167 and I look up into the trees and I see all these eyes."

"Eyes."

“Yeah, in the lights coming from the cars behind me, like when you take a picture of your dog. And so I stopped on the side of the road to check it out.”

“They’re nocturnal, right, so that’s not that odd that they’d still be out. That’s when they hunt.

“No, it’s not that they were out, it’s what they were doing.”

“Which was . . . “

“Watching me. There had to be about thirty of them, and they were watching me. But they stopped for a second whenever a car came down the road. And then when it came closer they went back to watching me.”

“Kinda odd. You’re not jerking my chain here?”

“No, man. That’s the same thing they said when I called the Biology Department. Talked to their only zoologist, Scott somebody. Oh, he wants you to give him a call. Seems like he’s a nice guy, but he said ‘Owls don’t do that.’”

“Does seem kinda strange. Did you get a picture?”

“Gonna bring the camera tomorrow, ‘cause it’s just too cool not to get one.”

“I hear you can photoshop the ‘red-eye’ out pretty easily.”

“The red-eye would make the picture much more cool, though, ‘cause you’d know they were looking at the camera.”

I was thinking about how in Whitley Strieber’s book, *Communion*, owls are some sort of symbol that you have been or will be visited by aliens. I was so hoping that this guy wasn’t one of those kooks who believed in that stuff, because I desperately needed some sort of anchor in the office, somebody I could talk to without fear that they would turn out to be a looney. Later I asked some probing questions, though, and it turned out that he had never heard of that stuff.

We both went back to chewing at that point and I listened in, briefly to some of the conversations around the table. It was some of the same stuff you’d hear whenever you get a bunch of fundraisers together, which was talk about friends who had briefly worked with them, what they were up to now, that sort of thing. So easy to tune out. I don’t know any of the names, of course.

I look over at the Exec, and he’s as relaxed as I’ve seen him all day—not very, when the Chancellor steps in. It’s the first time I’ve seen him and he looks uncomfortable here, off campus, yet he seems to be straining not to show it. He smiles when he sees one of the secretaries (who prefer to be called Office Assistants) and strides over to take her hand and ask about her children. Then the Gift Officers line up politely to attempt to joke with him and tell him how good it is to see him. I know I should do the same, but I’m nervous and don’t know what to say. So I mill about and look like I’m letting others go first.

I look over at the Exec and can see the indecision on his face. Clearly he knows that he should make introductions and allow this guy to make his announcement so that he can go. But he also seems to feel that to do so would mean losing face. He finally decides that getting him out of the room as soon as possible is the least threatening scenario for him, will dilute his status the most. So he hops over (a surprisingly light-footed gait for such a heavy man) and ingratiates himself.

“I’m sure everyone here is waiting for your announcement,” he says.

“Oh, yes,” says the Chancellor, “by all means then,” and he strides to the podium set up on one end of the ring of tables.

“For some time, as you all know, we have been carefully following our five-year strategic bolster/back/bankroll plan for the Page One Budget.” He is smiling and clasping his hands together, looking at all of us in turn, confident that we are all waiting on every word, which is true in a sense, I suppose.

“Two years ago, using mostly federal funding and State matching funds, we were able to begin the project that will put this University on the map internationally for the study of mesons, those sub-atomic particles of medium weight. I refer, of course, to the ohkler-heber medium particle accelerator.

“Construction of the accelerator has proceeded according to our most optimistic projections and we were in a position last year to begin the modifications of our power plant to run the thing ourselves separately from the grid.

“Last year I entered into discussions with the engineering firm in charge of the project and they convinced me that the most economical and environmentally friendly way to run the necessary conduits would be to tunnel directly under Macatonicak Hill and run the conduit through there. We were encouraged in this work by the Federal Government, which thought this a particularly good idea for our campus in light of Homeland Security concerns. So they increased their support of the project accordingly.

“Unfortunately, we have run into some safety and security concerns that have made the project a little more expensive.

“You have all heard about the death of Matt Tomlinson—a very capable engineer, and a good friend of mine—while working on the elevator dig portion of the project. And two others have been hospitalized in this very complicated project for what appears to be stress. Sabotage of two of the cranes and drills has also increased costs.

“Accordingly, I would like the Development Office to focus its efforts this year upon finding donors for this worthy project. During the last two years you have focused upon helping the engineers and scientists attract funding from industry and your good work has not gone unnoticed. And you have captured, through your consistent effort, some very large gifts to add to the University’s endowment. I ask that you apply the same diligence and skill to the tunnel project.

“Thank you, and enjoy the dessert.”

## Chapter II

The Chancellor's announcement was met at first with stunned silence. The fundraisers then sprang into action. Actually they sprang into what I was beginning to recognize as their dominant mode of thought—reaction.

"Thanks for coming by, Chancellor," chirped one of them as he stepped down from the podium and began to evacuate the room. "Nice to see you," barked another. The Exec walked over to him, gobsmacked and pale, and shook his hand. Since the Chancellor kept on moving, he struggled to remain facing the exit, finally deciding he might have to crush the Exec's hand to make an escape. The Exec released him and settled for a hand on his back and then he was out the doors.

I pick at my bacon-stuffed chicken breast and tried not to look at anyone else. Mostly the others were quiet, too. They were thinking about how it was going to look asking alumni for money for digging a hole.

"You're going to throw my money down a hole?"

But of course we're in Massachusetts and holes have connotations here that are less pleasant and far less marketable. This was one of the summers of the unfolding fiasco that Massachusetts residents knew as the Big Dig. Boston's Big Dig started as a remedy for the incredibly congested central artery, which warehoused bumper-to-bumper traffic for ten hours a day and became the most dangerous urban interstate in the United States. It was an ambitious project, a ten-lane underground highway through one of America's oldest major cities. But it was much more ambitious than anyone realized when it was conceived.

Leaks plagued the tunnels for a time, closing some to traffic and terrifying the engineers in charge. At one point there were about 700 leaks in a 1000 foot section of tunnel. A thousand or more had to be investigated. And it cost considerably more than its planners ever dreamed it could. In 1985 the cost was estimated at \$2.5 billion. It has now cost almost \$15 billion. When the tunnel opened it became a national news story, an engineering feat to rival all others. Then the story went national again when the tunnel was closed this summer after a ceiling tile fell on a car and killed a woman inside. It may have contributed to another death, that of a heart attack victim delayed in an ambulance ride to the hospital. It has begun to topple bureaucrats and become an issue in political races. And here were a group of fundraisers who had just been told that they would have to sell the idea of cost overruns on a tunnel in post-Big Dig Massachusetts.

I looked to my left where one of the peppiest, bounciest fundraisers sat. Cami runs the phone program, calling alumni and asking them for small amounts of money. She doesn't actually do much of the calling herself. She hired students to staff the phones and trained and motivated them—half cheerleader and half hockey coach. She was like Paul, the Exec, in that her face never looked cheerful, but her body ardently communicated optimism at all times. You can force your body to do stuff like that if you were athletic and well-trained from a young age. Young, in her early twenties still, she dressed a few years younger than that. Skirts as short as she could find them, heels as high as she could get them and still walk around, only the perkier shades of lip gloss and the bounciest hairstyles. Clothes in color

schemes that would have been difficult to achieve, just from a technological standpoint, before the mid-1970s all perfectly matched. Despite the heels she was pretty short and you always found her looking up, whether at people, her computer screen, or the huge jeep she climbed into after the day was done. When I look over she's chewing her pencil after having written down "excavation celebration?" in her notebook.

Across from me are some others that are trying to smile and consider how the announcement changed their plans for the year. They didn't want to say anything before Paul reentered the room, because he was dangerously weird and they obviously couldn't handle any more cognitive dissonance. If they reoriented their plans even a little before he got back he could try to put them on yet a different course. That—they seemed to say with their stasis—would kill them dead.

He's back soon, I imagine he's not been seeing the Chancellor to his car so much as he's been standing in the atrium composing himself. The look on his face as he enters the room says "that idiot knows nothing about fundraising." But he doesn't admit that thought to the room. No, he goes to the podium and says "you all heard what the Chancellor said. It will be a difficult year, but I think it's obvious that we will have to work towards building resources for the dig while also conducting the fundraising activities that we have outlined in our strategic plans. Who's the next to present?"

Always I am taken completely unaware by his tactics and, as always, they should have been completely predictable. There was no way he could let this "retreat" turn into an interactive discussion of some sort. He wouldn't have had control over that. Plus, it might have devolved into a strange sort of circus, all of us sitting in a big circle attempting to find positive ways of saying "hole," or "tunnel" or a million other unmarketable words. And maybe we would have eventually begun to combine them with the fact that there was a shortfall in funding for that project. "There is a hole gap," someone might say, "a fissure in financing out hovel." We would come up with slogans like "Name the new excavation so that you can say 'It's Mine.'" "Can you dig it?" might headline our phone campaign. It's the one with the nooks and crannies. Donors might shoot back at us "Why don't you borrow for the burrow?"

All that stuff would be out of Paul's control, and he can't have that. He is not quick-witted enough to laugh along or join in the joking, no matter that it would ease some of the tension flowing through the place and making us all miserable.

Another couple of presentations go by. I don't have to give one because I have a couple of weeks to learn more about the place before giving my plan at a special staff meeting organized just for that purpose. So, knowing that Sid will keep things going in the question and answer portion, and knowing that others are too stunned to do much of anything except log little reminders in their PDAs that they need to update their resumes, I tune the whole thing out and am alone with my thoughts.

First thing I think is that I am doomed. Not because anyone is honestly going to expect me to attempt to find foundation money for cost overruns on a tunnel project. No, the problem is that I'm going to be expected to act like I am trying to. It is the act that really terrifies me. I hate faking it because I know that if anyone comes to me and says "hey, you're just faking it," I'll start nodding my head. And if anyone on campus asks me what I'm doing I'll tell them the truth, too. And eventually it will get back to the big boss, who will have no choice but to . . .

I don't know what he'll do. I can't predict this guy except after the fact. It's the uncertainty that eats at me maybe.

I think about my family, and how they are genuinely wishing me the best in this job. I want to make them proud. I want them to stop worrying about me for a little while, too. Things have been so difficult

this year, a year when I find out that I am wholly unsuited to the role of house-husband despite the fact that I am a pretty good spouse and father both. I am simply too insecure and dependent on what other people think of me to handle all of the things I need to do all day alone.

And this is a state, Massachusetts, where it is extremely difficult to find a job. Out west there are always entry-level openings for positions that in the east are filled by a friend of a friend. In the west too many people move into cities every year to depend upon only people you know to fill positions. This job has benefits and pays pretty well and I thought that it had relative security until a few minutes ago.

How are we going to pay off this mountain of debt, one larger than my annual salary?

But gradually my thoughts turn in a really weird direction. The funny thing about all of this, I begin to realize, is that my strategy for these things, for these weird requests for assistance with funding something, is to make sure I understand all of the circumstances as well as possible. Then I attempt to understand the position that the prospective funder brings to the table as well as I can. And then I beat my head against the un-fundability of the thing for a while, getting really cynical, and suddenly, in a weird sort of epiphany, I see a way to make the case logically.

Now not all of my proposals get funded, don't get me wrong. Sometimes there are circumstances I didn't foresee, or the foundation has run out of money for the year, or they are making their decisions based on things like personal relationships that I didn't know about, or something else. The point is that I can make almost anything look like it makes sense logically. It is quite a skill, if it is a skill, that is. It could be that I am just persistent enough to luck out repeatedly. So even though the thing looks really dark at the moment, and even though I am a very pessimistic person, there is something that will drive me on in my pursuit to find them some money for this. And so it won't be faking it. So I can live with myself.

Some of the staff are going out for drinks after the day is over, and they ask me to join them. It would mean riding into Boston, because it is still 4:00 in the afternoon, and presumably there's nowhere to get drinks outside of I-495. I excuse myself, explaining that I have to get home and take care of the baby for a while so my wife can work. I make my way to the parking lot thinking that I wish I could listen in on their conversations at the bar. But that I'm glad I have an excuse not to actually go there with them.

The day is warm and bright. Summers can be so unpleasant here because of the humidity, but today it is just warm enough. I am traveling against the commute and I find my way back home much more easily than I found the hotel. Entering town I see something really odd, though. There is a bunch of some sort of four-legged road kill along the center line of the highway. The more recognizable ones have big, dark eyes, pink noses and rat-like tails. But they are much larger than rats and their hair is fluffy, not slicked down like a rat's would be. And its ears are bigger. There are six of these bloody lumps that I don't recognize at all. And they are all bunched together like some sort of toy-dog sized pack animal, creamed by the same eighteen-wheeler.

I keep thinking about the rest of the way home, and about the owls Sid saw. The whole time I lived in Idaho I only saw two owls. I don't even know if it was the same year but it was winter time both times. Both, though, stared at me as I drove by. They were, if I remember correctly, sitting on fence posts disemboweling some creature, probably a mouse. They looked like solitary creatures, though, not the kind of thing that would want to hang out near a lot of competition. Maybe the prey was spread out a little more in the west, though. Not bunched together on the center line of the highway like it is here.

The next day I spent settling into my office, although I was warned by Sid not to move anything around unnecessarily. Apparently the Exec chewed somebody out (he won't say whom) for moving her

plant so that it more effectively blocked a telephone cord. Said person apparently knew enough not to bother to fight. But Sid says I wouldn't enjoy such an altercation. I believe him, of course, but I also find myself thinking that somebody should stand up this guy. Not me, of course, somebody who has passed their probationary period. We are protected by the union, after all. And this is Massachusetts, where unions actually have a little power. Maybe if I survive the year I'll take on his weirdness myself, as sort of a pet project.

Already there is a blinking red light on my phone that says I have messages. It takes me a while to figure out how to use it, and then I find that I don't have a password yet so I can't listen to the messages. Just as well, I suppose. I ask Sid how to get one and he says that it will be set up the next day. He has already set up my computer and has the morning free to show me how to log on and use the network and all of that stuff. So we do that for a while until he has something else to do. Then I go back to looking at the files left behind by my predecessors.

But I don't move anything. I'm pretty content with my space anyway. Offices on campus are small and drafty. But the Advancement Office is practically at the edge of town. The offices are huge. And because they are in a refurbished mill building they all have large windows, the kind they had before electric lights. Supposedly this was a better location, because it has parking, for hosting parties and out-of-town guests. I'm thinking that it also has to do with the laziness of the Exec and his general and mutual disdain for the Chancellor.

While I'm doing this my phone rings. I pick it up and have that moment where I am about to say whatever I said on my last job and then am silent until I finally squeak "hello?"

"Hi, is this the development office," an even female voice returns.

"Yes, I mean it's the Advancement Office, but we do development work. Can I help you?" I'm asking this question of both of us at this point. There are so few questions that I could possibly venture an answer to.

"Um, this is Lisa Wurzer, in Electrical Engineering. I'm looking for some advice about foundation grants," she states.

"Oh, yeah. I'm new. It's my second day, but I will do what I can. Foundations normally don't fund research into EE," I tell her. "Electrical engineering projects are usually the sort of thing that is much more fundable through corporations or the federal government."

"Does that mean you can't help?"

"Oh, no. I mean, I'll do what I can. I'm just saying. What sort of project or . . . what are you looking to fund?"

"Maybe we could meet to talk about it."

I'm quick to agree, now that I've put my foot in my mouth a little, so I agree to go to her office in an hour. With parking as difficult as it is I barely have time to make that. So I leave immediately.

Parking on campus has apparently been better, although you talk to most of the faculty and they'll tell you that it has always been bad. But this year, with the security net thrown around the main engineering building it has to be much worse than ever before. One parking lot close to the building has been replaced in its entirety with mobile homes and construction equipment. Apparently the people who are putting the finishing touches on the accelerator building are housed there to cut down on the amount of traffic in and out. Security thought that it could get a pretty good handle on the comings and goings of

faculty, but felt that to keep track of the additional bodies, some of them unsavory characters from beyond the pale of the campus community entirely, would be too much trouble. There are rumors that some faculty have moved into the lot with rented mobile homes as well, but I haven't actually heard any names.

As a staff member I get to have, if I wish to pay \$500 per semester, a blue parking sticker, which would put me somewhere inside the campus, space willing. But my wife taught here for almost a year before I got the grant writing job, and so I know that these blue passes are for suckers. I bought a red pass, which is good for parking almost at the city limits, and I catch the shuttle in from there. Almost the entire town has parking issues, not just the places near the campus, so there is probably sufficient reason to "ask" some of the construction contractors to bring in mobile homes (they learned a few weeks ago that those who didn't want to were less likely to be kept on for the final phase of construction.)

I get to the parking lot a few minutes later and wait for a shuttle bus. Standing there are some students and this guy with a cowboy hat and a mustache. He is obviously a little tipsy and carrying a large duffle bag. He looks at me and says "Hullo perfesser."

"I'm not a professor," I counter, somewhat defensively, I suppose.

"Know you're not a perfesser," he says. "You're wearin' a suit."

So now I'm completely self conscious and I blush immediately. The guy doesn't look dangerous, at least at the moment. He actually seems pretty friendly, the way he's looking at me. So I decide to joke back. "Well, did you just get off the wide-open prairies of Western Mass?"

"Almost," he says. "M from Oregon."

"That explains your outrageous accent," I continue.

The shuttle bus pulls up just then, so I'm spared from using all of my witty repartee. The students pile onto the bus, causing the passengers trying to get off to have to wait. Then they get off, then this cowboy gets on, then me.

"Where to?" the driver asks, and I'm towards the back of the bus and frantically thinking about how to communicate to him that I want to go to the engineering building without yelling when I look across and there's this cowboy looking at me.

"It's a joke," he says. "This bus only goes in a circle, like at Disney World."

It's patently obvious, of course. I'm apparently wound up a little tight.

Cowboy sees my embarrassment and offers me a drink from a pint flask of run he is carrying.

"No, thanks," I say, "working."

"So am I," he says. "Got the swing shift today. But I thought I'd do some laundry first."

I look at him and his duffel, the bottle.

"S okay," he says. "I'm not a surgeon or anything. Just a painter. And not doing any scaffold work today. Elevator doors, mostly."

"Do you live in that lot near the engineering building?" I ask.

"Gear Town," he says, "yes-indeedy-do."

"I'm kinda new around campus. Do you mind showing me how to get over there?"

“No problem,” he says. “Nolan Reese,” and he holds out his hand.

He’s got a strong grip for somebody his size, which is maybe five-seven. But I know it is a painter thing, holding a brush or a roller for hours on end.

“Neal Slater.” I’ve got a meeting in engineering.

“You don’t look like a gear head. Not corporate,” he says.

“I’m a grant writer.”

“Whatever the hell that is” he finishes my sentence for me and takes another swig.

“Yeah,” I say, and look out the windows. I’m not all that self conscious about it, really. I’ve spent much of my adult life financing my education through manual labor. So I’m comfortable in the role of token “brain,” especially when I have just about the same amount of common sense as the smarter ones do. In those kinds of jobs people have ways of making sure that you know your place. This painter probably makes more than I do writing grants. And he doesn’t have to wear a suit.

But I’ve painted before and I know I’d never make it to his age, which looks to be mid-forties, without some sort of problem. Many of the painters I’d worked with ended up with neck surgery or cancer from all of the chemicals. Almost all of the ones I worked with became alcoholics or smokers or both. They swim in a chemical soup all day long and then after work find themselves going through withdrawals. The only way to keep the shakes at bay is to keep loading up on some sort of chemicals. They say the paints are more innocuous now, but the solvents and cleaners aren’t. And some places still use epoxy paints and oils, primers that are ammonia-based.

I see a dead cat out the window and it snaps me back to reality.

“Hey Nolan,” I say across the noise of the bus motor. “I was coming back to my house yesterday and I saw this pile-up on the 167, only it was a bunch of animals, like six of them.”

He nods.

“They had big black eyes and pink noses, fluffy white fur and ratlike tails. But they were too big to be rats.”

“Possums,” he says, nodding. Funny looking. I couldn’t believe it when I first saw one either.”

“But why would they bunch up like that? They weren’t a mother with babies or anything; they were all the same size, pretty much.”

“Possums,” he says, can’t see good.

“So, what, they stick really close to each other so they don’t get lost?”

“Cannibals,” he says. “Possums’ll eat each other. So they see the road kill, and then they go to eatin’ and wham. And then another happens by, and then he starts in, wham!”

“Oh.”

“So they don’t get lost,” he chortles. “That’s good.”

I act like it was an attempt at a joke, rather than what it actually was, which was me using my powerful intellect to figure things out on the fly. He humors me until he suddenly starts getting out of his seat.

“Our stop,” he says.

The bus can go no closer to engineering than the Administration building, so we have to hike up the biggest hill on campus, in town actually, and then back down to Engineering.

I am carrying a silly-looking briefcase, one of those leather ones with the open top, and Nolan’s carrying his huge duffle bag, so we’re walking slowly. It’s warm already, and the buildings are unfamiliar to me on this side of the campus.

Nolan points out some of the sights, because he can tell that I’m trying to get oriented.

“That over there’s the elevator dig,” he says as we near the top of the hill. “And that,” pointing to a crane off to our right, “is the power plant. They’re finishing the extra turbine.”

“So where’s Engineering?” I ask.

“I’ll show you when we get over the rise. You can’t see it right now, but it’s off to the left and quite a bit forward, too.”

I see what he means as we get over the hill. But I’m puzzled, because if that’s the Engineering building, then the tunnel doesn’t go straight at all, it comes up the hill and takes what must be a twenty-degree turn.

“Wouldn’t it have been a shorter tunnel to dig if they went in a straight line,” I ask, “or does it go to part of the Engineering building that I just can’t see?”

“Idiots,” he offers as an explanation.

I find it hard to believe that they would do this accidentally. But I keep my opinion to myself. Partially, of course, I know that they have made some idiotic moves already with the construction project, so Nolan’s right. But to make a turn like that seems out of the realm of the type of mistake that is usually made in large construction projects. Then I remember the Big Dig and its ceiling panels and I wonder once again if Nolan might be closer to the truth after all. They decided to hang these concrete panels from the ceiling, after all. The Romans knew the value of concrete. They used it to hold things up, because it is really good for that. If they were thinking about suspending something in the air, of course, the Romans were smart enough to think of materials like silk or cotton. And many people have carried this lesson into present day construction methods, which is why you rarely see chandeliers made of concrete.

## Chapter III

We walk up to the gate of the engineering complex together, an odd couple, to be sure. The guard has apparently seen it all, though. Nolan shows him his card and he waves him through. I have to get a temporary, because the permanent one won't be ready for a week or so. So I have to fill out a little form and Nolan and I say our goodbyes there at the gate.

When I finally make it through to the building it is getting close to the time we agreed on to meet. Room 242 should be on the second floor, but this building has steps leading up to the first floor, so it turns out to have the numbers that start with 2. I have the choice of left or right at the entrance and no signs, once again. I choose left, which means a walk down a hundred meter-long hallway that goes up from room 200 to room 280, but without any rooms numbered in the 240s, 350s, or 260s. Then at the end of the hallway there is a sign noting that you can't use the other wing of the building to get to its opposite wing. So I have to backtrack.

When I finally find the room she is standing up writing at a desk that is kind of high, like the desks that cartoonists or architects use. There's no chair in sight, but there's a cot in the room and a refrigerator. No computers in sight either, which I think is a little strange for an electrical engineer.

"Hello, Professor Wurzer?" I venture.

"Yeah, um. Lisa, Hi.

"Neal," I say and walk towards her, but she doesn't stick her hand out to me, so I stop and stand there. She is dressed in jeans and high-top sneakers, a red t-shirt with the name of some computer company on it. She puts down her pencil after a second and says "you wanna get some coffee?"

"That'd be great," I say. She waves me out of the room and then locks it.

"There's like a coffee thing over that way," she gestures, so I follow her down the other long hall to the end. I'm expecting it to be closed to traffic like its counterpart on the other wing, but it is not. And looking down the hall towards that wing there doesn't seem to have been any reason to close the door that I wanted to go through earlier.

She sees me looking down the hall gives me a puzzled look.

"I tried to go around when I found I was on the wrong wing and that door has a sign on the other side saying that you can't pass through," I explain.

"Did you try the door?"

"No, I guess with all the security I didn't want to go anyplace that I shouldn't," I explain.

She makes a sound like steam escaping. "Security," she says. "Makes everyone's work harder. It's like the whole notion of other countries getting the secret to building an atomic bomb."

"Isn't that a danger?"

“Not really. To be a real threat a country would have to reorient a major portion of its economy toward either buying or building a whole raft of technological devices that only the most industrialized countries can afford. And then there’s the question of how to deliver a nuke. There are so many things that terrorists could do so much easier, and with so much more devastating results.”

“Well, what about this accelerator?” I ask.

“Same deal, only more so. I don’t think many people even know what it is for. Most of the people who do are already working on the project. The others will help analyze the results. And we’ve certainly made it no secret that we’re building it here.”

“Why the tight security, then?” I ask.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” she says as we reach this coffee vendor in the corner of another adjoining building.

I buy coffee for both of us, because faculty seem to know that we get all of the resources we ask for in the Advancement Office. But I pay cash, because the Exec won’t sign off on buying coffee for a prof.

“So,” I say.

She waves over to a couple of chairs and a table that is set up for students and we walk over to sit down.

“So, your project,” I sort-of ask. She busies herself with her coffee, taking the stupid lid off it and blowing on it, as I watch her for some sort of indication of why I am her talking to her. She is in her mid thirties, probably, thin and of medium height, curly brown ringlets for hair and granny glasses hiding bags under her eyes. My first impression is that she works too much but might enjoy working too much.

She looks over her glasses and looks like she’s about to say something but doesn’t. Then she sets her coffee down and takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes.

“Not getting enough sleep these last couple of weeks,” she says.

I try to just look at her, without looking like I can tell, without looking like I can’t tell. I nod.

“I’m not sure I should even talk to you about it because it is a little weird,” she says. “It’s just that I keep having these dreams.”

“Dreams about your project?”

“Dreams about a project. I haven’t actually started it yet,” she says.

“But you want to. And you need money to buy . . .” I say.

“Look,” she says, “you can’t tell anyone about this, even if you can’t help me or if you decide you don’t want to help or whatever.”

“O.K., you mean it’s top secret or something like that?”

“No, I mean that’s not the reason,” she says, “it’s because of the dreams.”

“Oh, well lots of people have inspiring dreams that lead to project ideas. What about that guy who finally figured out the molecular structure of benzene while he was dreaming, he saw it coming out of a fire or something,” I say, trying to reassure her.

“These dreams aren’t like that at all,” she says. “They’re really weird, and I need you to promise you won’t spread them around.

“I promise.”

“Alright, these dreams are about listening to the dead.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This certainly wasn’t what I expected as the first project here. But again, it makes a certain amount of sense, given the way my week’s been going. Again, I’m trying to just look.

“Listening to the dead,” I repeat, a “momentumizer” that I have practiced at other, less creepy, grant writing jobs.

“It is clear to me when I have these dreams, though I don’t know why it is clear or how I know, it is clear to me that during the process of living we are making the brain more and more orderly in a conscious and incremental fashion. We experience things in our lives and we make sense out of these experiences by constructing an orderly, sequential, narrative out of them as we go along.”

She takes a big swig out of her coffee, although mine is still too hot to even sip. I nod slightly.

“And it doesn’t really make sense if our lives make any intrinsic sense, because we go on making sense out of them, even if it means forgetting things selectively, leaving them out, to accomplish that.”

Already as she is talking I’m not so sure that she is talking about being sure in the dream she has or if she’s saying that this stuff is true and she only realized it after having the dream. But I don’t want to interrupt her, because it’s actually pretty interesting, much more interesting than I thought this visit would be.

“So we create this order in our heads, which is mainly digitally stored in our heads. But the life out of which we create this stuff is not digital at all.”

Suddenly I’m not following her at all, so I get this quizzical look on my face, which she senses and she stops talking for a second.

“That’s important,” she says. “Our lives are not lived digitally, but our memories, which are the ordering of our lives in our heads over time, are. Digital,” she states, slowly and evenly. “Are you following along so far?”

“Yup,” I say, trying to sound casual, because there are some other people in the hallway now and I want to look as much as possible like I don’t think she’s insane. I mean this is my first meeting on campus. I can hardly twirl my finger around my ear and motion for somebody to dial 911.

“But after we die, these memories are destroyed, once again becoming disordered, a jumble, as the brain decays into its constituent atoms and dissipates, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” She looks down at her coffee and then up again at me as she says the next part. “And they unspool in reverse, not digitally, but like life itself, in analog.” She pauses again. For effect? I don’t know. “And I have built a device that can record this un-spooling of memory.”

“In the dream, you mean?” I ask, suddenly quite confused about the actual content of our conversation.

“No, I’ve already built it. It records peoples’ memories of their lives, as they decay, in the ground, or wherever. Then you can play it back and listen to it, even watch some of it through their eyes.”

My mouth is completely dry, so I sip the scalding hot coffee a little. I find myself liking the burning sensation. This woman is no longer looking at me like I'm going to go spreading this thing around campus, and I have no idea why she thinks that. I won't, of course, but I don't have any idea why not. She looks much more calm than when we sat down. Perhaps having said these things she feels like she has hit bottom. She has told somebody finally.

For me, I find that it is best to stick to the task at hand. That is a firm anchor in the real world. That's what I'm looking for. "I don't understand," I finally am able to say. "If you've already built this thing to record this stuff. What do you need external funding for?"

"If you've followed me this far, this should be the easy part," she says with a slight smile fluttering on her face briefly, a slight smile that makes me briefly, but only for an instant, consider that she is engaged in some sort of practical joke or hazing ritual.

"This technology that I've developed, which seemed, by the way, to come in a flash of extremely complicated insight directly from my dreams, is a technology for interpreting analog signals and separating them from other analog signals. These signals are already being recorded, any time you record something on a cassette tape within a few hundred feet of a decomposing corpse."

I'm hoping that this doesn't get too much grisly, because I am starting to visualize these things a little too well. "You mean if I go to a cemetery and talk into a tape recorder it records the life experiences of a corpse nearby?" I ask.

"No, you don't have to talk into the recorder. But yes, essentially that's right." She looks at me and seems to realize that this is a lot for somebody to handle. I'm no engineer. And I'm not crazy either, so it is a little much to digest all at once. I start to think about how many tape recorders are within earshot of cemeteries or mortuaries or whatever and she can seem my face doing little dances as my brain tries to catch up, tries to put all this into some sort of coherent narrative.

"Look, there's quite a bit more, I'm afraid, but I'm going to let that sink in for a minute and I could use another coffee," she says. "You want a Danish or something?"

I nod my head and manage to squeak out "apple."

As she nods and walks back to the counter I suddenly think of my music teacher back in seventh grade. This guy was a joker and tried to get our attention, particularly around the first few weeks of school by telling us jokes. They were usually music-related in some way. He must have had a book or something.

Anyway he told one once about these grave robbers who dug up Beethoven's grave and found him in his casket, frantically going at a manuscript with an eraser.

"My God, what are you doing?" they asked.

"Decomposing," he said to them. And I'm scared that if I actually giggle I will just lose it entirely. So I take another hit of coffee, which has now cooled off to the point where I can tell that it is exceptionally bad.

I am sipping this coffee slowly, swishing it around in my mouth so that I get as much of the bitter taste as possible. I am guessing that when they brewed this pot, some time back in the Nixon days, a small mammal of some kind crept into the filter. I imagine that I am tasting scorched rat hair, probably the whiskers lasted this long, and possibly some leg bones, along with whatever bitter rat oils the scalding water (or whatever liquid this has been based upon, I remind myself, perhaps a water substitute of some sort) rendered from the animal during the first couple of brews and which has been mixing, these long

years, with whatever they keep adding to approximate the color of coffee. It is keeping my face straight. Whatever happens next, I am certainly a very cool and collected person.

I am amazed that nobody even seems to mind this sort of thing around here, the coffee, I mean. I gasped and made all sorts of noises the first couple of times I had coffee here in the Northeast, but the people I was with seemed to think that I was exaggerating. There are places here to get good coffee, but I won't mention them by name. Suffice it to say that they are large chains that came in from the west. And they seem to sell far more sugary goop here. People here don't seem to like the coffee unless it is iced or gooped up somehow. I think that this means that they don't like coffee, and if this is the sort of thing they call coffee, that dislike is not only mutual, it is very easy to understand.

The Danishes are pretty good, though.

I am stunned a little, unable to think about much of anything at this point. I'm not really thinking about how I'm going to tell Lisa that she is crazy. And I'm not thinking about whether any of what she says has any basis in fact. I'm just thinking about the coffee, contemplating the brew. And my head is making this humming noise, I think. But I don't think anyone else can hear it, and it's not so loud as to be distracting. It is just humming. Not too weird, seeing as I had a pot of coffee before I left the house and another one (one I made myself) while I was in my office. This stuff might have had some caffeine in it, might have pushed me over my recommended daily allowance a little. Kinda nice, in a way, though, and it is helping me think about things other than the dead for a few minutes.

She gets back and hands me a Danish and I realize that I really should have paid, so I reach into my pocket and she waves me off. "I've got it. You've been through a lot already." She smiles again.

"Thanks," I manage.

"So the thing is, there are all these recordings around the world that capture the events, feelings, sights, etc., of peoples' lives, because cassette and other types of magnetic recording devices have been around for about forty years or so in common use," she says. But these things don't last forever. So there is a certain urgency about making sure that all this stuff gets stored somewhere. And then there is the fact that people are switching to digital recording, too."

"Digital doesn't record this . . . stuff?" I ask.

"Not so far as I'm able to tell. I've only tested a few different kinds of devices. It seems like almost any sort of magnetic tape does it and either I haven't figured out how to interpret the digital storage or there isn't anything to figure out. Maybe they capture too much information, maybe too little, maybe none at all. I don't really know yet. But as you can imagine, a project to figure all of this stuff out, to publish the information widely without jeopardizing my academic reputation, my job, seems to require some sort of external funding arrangements where profit is not the primary consideration."

"Oh, I don't know. I mean, the companies that still make magnetic tape and recorders . . ."

Would not necessarily want to be associated so strongly with the inflexible voices of the dead."

"Well, that's a point. What do you mean inflexible?"

"Well you can't really talk to them. I mean they just send out these signals. They don't seem to respond to any from elsewhere. And the signals simply document their lives in reverse. They don't seem to talk about any sort of afterlife. They don't come up with anything new, because it is their experiences, the ones they had during their lives. So anything really interesting is only so from the perspective of an antiquarian, a historian."

I bristled a little at that, even though I no longer think of myself as a historian and never defended the profession itself. In fact I spent much of my time in graduate school actively attacking it. It must have flashed across my face anyway, because she asked me what was wrong.

“Well, you have to admit this whole thing is pretty weird and creepy,” I said as a diversion.

“Sure. But you have to admit that it is pretty compelling, too. I mean if you had a loved one recently die.”

I looked the obvious question at her.

“No, I haven’t. I’m really interested for a couple of completely unrelated reasons. First, I’ve cracked a complicated code. Interpreting analog signals is my area of specialization, and I’m really good at it. I’ve made a few novel discoveries. It would be pretty easy to publish some of the results. But I think there will be some questions, because the methods differ substantially from both common practice and the ways I usually work. People, and publishers, will want to know what sort of signals this method can help decode. I’m looking into that, to see if there are other applications, but haven’t found any yet. If I’m able to tell people how I figured this stuff out, it would be easier to understand, but creepy and weird.”

“What’s the other?”

“The dreams are really compelling. Really compelling, and I wake up from them thinking that I just have to do this, have to pursue this project. And yet I can’t really explain why. There doesn’t seem to be any rational basis for going on with it. None that I can remember, anyway.”

“So now we confront the fact that none of the major foundations would touch anything like this,” I say, brilliantly sticking to my job, with the coffee a co-anchor keeping me sane and level-headed.

“Sure. But is there a way to find out what those thousands of weird little family foundations are doing?”

“You mean find out somehow if any of them are interested in the occult?”

“This isn’t the occult. This is just math, science, and engineering.”

“In funding terms, though, in marketing terms, math and science look very different. You’re not teaching kids, you’re recording the lives of the dead. So this is the occult to them, or a weird form of oral history, or something worse.”

She gives me this look that’s tinged with a sort of satisfied smile. “So you’ll help,” she states.

“Well, I can look into it. My schedule’s not exactly packed yet. There’s this company that has an online database that lets you search for grants that have been made. If I do a text search with some very odd keywords we’ll see what we are dealing with, at least. Could you make a list for me?”

“I guess. You mean like ‘talking corpse,’ and stuff like that?”

“Yeah, the word ‘corpse,’ but probably a little softer in tone. Like ‘communicate,’ and ‘ancestor,’ stuff like that.”

“You’re pretty good at this.”

“I’ll take that as a really twisted compliment, but a compliment, nonetheless.”

She sits back in her chair, really relaxing for the first time, and stretches. “There’s one more thing,” she adds. “There are some new internet sites that allow people to upload tapes so that they can be heard anywhere just by clicking.”

“Like Odeo?”

“Yeah, and Youtube, although most of that seems to be digitally captured already. Anyway, this stuff is already online, so I’ve been doing some research and just so you know, it isn’t local.”

“Local?”

“It’s not just the dead of this city.”

“Oh, I was thinking that it was just all inside your head, not that it is just happening here in town.”

She smiles much more brightly than I’ve seen her smile yet. “So, you want some proof, then.”

Hard to know what to say to that. What I actually want at this point is proof that she’s crazy, so I won’t have to worry about this stuff anymore. But I nod anyway, reluctantly. And I’m thinking that if worse comes to worst I outweigh her by a pretty good margin and I’ve learned that I can take a hit. So I can probably escape and call for help. And she hasn’t had any of those clingy behaviors that are the mark of people who are crazy and also know, deep down inside, that the rest of the world knows they are crazy. I always watch out for the type of people who overcompensate by telling everyone how sane they are, and so far I’m the only one to bring the subject up.

“My lab is on the fourth floor,” she says, facing the cemetery.”

I’m not sure what would constitute ‘proof,’ but I get up anyway and grab my untouched Danish. And a couple of minutes of silence later we are in her lab, which is mostly banks of computers.

“Do you want to hear some from the internet, or do you want one I recorded here, or what?” she asks.

“One of the locals is fine. Are they talking right now?”

“There’s always one talking, I find. But to hear what’s going on right now I’d have to tape something and then send it through the processor, and then we could hear it. That takes about fifteen minutes now, even with everyone gone from the lab and all the nodes open, plus whatever time we allow for the actual recording. And then there’s the possibility, one-in-three, that they were sleeping. Do you want to wait, or hear one I already have?”

“The dead sleep?”

“No, well, yes, well, I mean that they might be recollecting, or ‘un-collecting,’ a time when they were, in life, sleeping.”

“Whatever you have on tap is fine,” I say, trying to be as accommodating as possible. I look around the lab and see the usual stuff. Students using the lab have left garbage in places and notebooks, so I guess they have stations they typically use that other people do not. It is apparently not one of those labs that just anyone can use. But the machines themselves look the same as anywhere else. Flat screen monitors and a box on the floor, swivel chairs.

She starts up one of the machines and goes through some logging-in motions and such. I go to the window and look over at the cemetery. I’ve got all of these questions coursing through my mind, but they’re not the types of questions that I actually want to know the answer to. With everything she tells me about this stuff I get more and more creeped out.

To some extent the whole northeast creeps me out to begin with. In Northern California, where I grew up there were a few rare buildings that were more than fifty years old. Almost everything up here, barring the University itself, is far older than that. I lived in a historic district in town where some of the buildings dated back to the Gold Rush, but those places didn't feel old. Maybe it was because the whole historical thing was so campy there. So many ways to think of it all as the set for a John Wayne movie.

But maybe it's more than that. I've been to Europe, where everything is old buildings built on the rubble of older buildings, and it doesn't feel as weird as this. Is it the stories that I've read that take place here or were written here, the Stephen King, the H.P. Lovecraft, the Edgar Allen Poe, and all of those? I don't know.

Just then I hear a woman's voice talking from a computer behind me.

"Becca never seems to want to come home anymore. I made her that pie that she likes and still she hangs out with that Donna girl. Donna's just a little tramp," it says and then there's this long pause. The voice is pretty easy to make out, pretty clear, but there is some background noise that makes it more difficult the longer you listen, as if the background noise is somehow more interesting, although you can't really make any sense of it. And it wouldn't take much to make it more interesting, because this woman just drones on and on, presumably about her daughter, although it is hard to be sure.

I look over at Lisa and she nods. "Boring, huh? Not what you expected?"

"Well, I guess. It's like a blog, almost. Are they all like that?"

"MySpace meets six feet under. Pretty much."

"For when your space is six feet under."

"Yeah, so you see why funding this is not so easy. A lot of junk to wade through, mostly about things that everybody knows, mostly ill-informed opinions about stuff nobody cares about."

"But you've listened to a lot of it."

"Yeah, there's something that just pulls you in."

I nod. There is, but it's not the person talking. I just notice that it is time for me to make my way back to my car so I can get home. "Look, I gotta go. What do I tell anyone who asks what we are looking for? I mean, what kind of project can I tell my boss I'm actually looking to fund for you?"

"Tell them it's for a feasibility study of networked foundation databases. Tell him it has something to do with data mining."

"That'll work."

"Thanks, Neal."

"Have a good one," I say, my usual closing line. And I make my way back across campus just as it's getting dark, thinking about nothing at all, or at least trying to.

## Chapter IV

One of the reasons my family moved to the northeast was the belief, relatively common in the west among intellectuals, that things were very established and civilized out here. And there are many associations that go along with that. Massachusetts is a very Democratic state, for example. Civilized thus equals Liberal. There are lots of famous, old, established colleges and universities out here, so we think of Massachusetts as largely agnostic. People are highly educated out here, a larger proportion of people with college diplomas and advanced degrees than any other state. So we think of people as logical.

But places and people have their own organic relationships that are difficult to understand while you are on the outside, or on a job interview, or looking for an apartment or a job. Once you are there for a while, you can see how things actually work, and it is never what you would think. There are many different factions of Democrats in the state, and they are so different from one another that they might as well be called something else entirely. And many of them are very conservative, socially speaking, of course. Indeed, they are driven by a much more religious population, predominantly Catholic and Orthodox than outsiders would recognize. And of course I of all people should have realized that one's level of education bears little relationship to whether one thinks logically or not.

But you never really realize these things just looking at a society from the outside. You never really get it until it is way too late.

I didn't tell my family anything about my first assignment searching for foundations. I didn't because I thought it was a fluke, in a weird sort of way. I knew, of course, that the people who were interested in getting help finding external funding from foundations were, by and large, people who didn't think terribly rationally about their own work, or even the ways in which society is constructed. I had some experience with this at previous institutions. Faculty that I met with often saw foundation funding as a last resort, and they were right about that. It was, for them. So that meeting was not a fluke and, indeed from a more detached perspective was much like most of the meetings I had had at other universities in which I had worked.

I had thought, though, that the weirdness of the project itself was unrepeatable. In this, I was wrong. And it didn't take long to begin to sense some sort of connection between these meetings, something intangible that if I could just sit back and think about the whole thing would pop right out, become obvious.

The next morning I returned to my office and found another message already waiting for me. A faculty member from the History Department apparently had called looking for me because he had requested travel funding for research and his department chair required him to check with our office first. I wasn't in any hurry to return that one. First of all, it was bound to be a very tiny grant, which the Exec would frown upon. Second, there would be very few options he didn't already know about. Third, and maybe the most important reason of all, I didn't really like historians. There have been some exceptions to the rule, of course. I had some very good friends in graduate school who were, like me, studying history. But generally speaking they are tedious people.

Instead, I spent some time looking into weird little family foundations for Lisa. I was pretty curious about what I could churn up, and I also needed to know what the local foundation environment was like. I examined the giving histories of some of the local foundations, and then I began the tedious process of searching for strange key-words in our database. I expected it to be a long, drawn-out process, and I was certainly right about that. I had eliminated some combinations as being too close to the meanings of more common, mundane words, and I was beginning to look through a thesaurus to brainstorm some more exotic words when the phone rang, startling me.

The call was from a professor in the Biology Department. And I thought briefly about telling him what I told Lisa, that scientific research is always a difficult thing to find foundation money for, but I decided that I didn't really care, so long as I got out of the office for a little while. After all, I still needed to learn my way around campus. And I definitely needed to get away from the database work for a little while. I looked at my watch while I talked to him and was a little surprised to find that it was already almost lunchtime.

This biologist researched aquaculture techniques, which interested me considerably. I have always had a soft spot in my heart for water, being from the west, where there is so little of it. So I agreed to meet with him early in the afternoon.

The Exec was holding forth at a table where the staff usually had lunch, and I just couldn't see anyway to have a pleasant time, or even a pleasant conversation, while having to fake a smile, or act like I was listening. So I acted like I had an errand to run and got my lunch out of the refrigerator and walked about a quarter of a mile to a long, narrow park bounded by a boulevard on one side and the canal on the other. Across the canal, on the other side, there is a larger green space, where people often practice their golf swing or sometimes kick a soccer ball around or even fly model airplanes. Today, though, there were no people there. Instead, the entire field seemed to be carpeted with starlings. For a minute or two I tried to think of how I might estimate their number, but I was a little too far away to even guess. Had to be thousands, though.

When I first sat down they were picking aimlessly at the grass, which had just been watered. But I was about half-way done with my sandwich when suddenly they took flight. All of them at once.

I don't recall seeing starlings in the west, and I'm not sure any live there, but I never really paid much attention to the birds where I grew up anyway. Their behavior seemed strange, though. I've seen geese fly in formation, and I've seen lots of birds travel in flocks, but these were by far the most organized birds I have ever witnessed. They took off toward the south, then suddenly, and as a single unit, they turned southeast. Then after traveling fifty or so yards they climbed rapidly in elevation and then turned again due east. Then suddenly they dropped and turned the opposite direction. And the whole time they were completely silent and were undulating slowly. What I mean is that the birds looked as if they composed a huge black flag that was billowing in a breeze.

While I was watching this strange dance a young woman and her toddler ambled up to where I was sitting, clearly just going for a stroll on the walkway between the bench and the canal. I looked at the child, a boy, about the same age as mine, and motioned my head so that he could see that I was looking at the birds doing a strange dance.

"Paff," he exclaimed. And as I usually do, I acted like I understood what he was saying and replied "you're probably right." And I smiled at the two of them.

When I looked back across the canal the strange flock had disappeared.

I tried to enjoy the sunshine a little, snoozing just a bit after I had finished my lunch. I didn't want to get back to the office too early or people would ask where I had been. It was nice just having some quiet time, some time to not think about anything at all.

It seemed like it would be quicker to walk to the biology building than to drive to the nearest parking lot and walk from there, so I set out as soon as I got back from lunch. And in retrospect it probably was quicker, but it didn't seem so. Clouds had come in just as I finished lunch and the wind had picked up considerably, too. It seemed twenty or thirty degrees colder than when I was eating, although I often get cold after eating. I walked quickly to warm up and was a little early, Ned Kolbe was not in his office when I arrived.

It was a strange sort of biology department, I noticed while I waited and looked at the faculty directory. There were maybe twenty microbiologists and a then a whole wing of the building where faculty specialized in genomics and bioinformatics. And then there was Ned, the only one studying anything larger than the head of a pin, who apparently studied crustaceans or possibly fish (these were the only types of aquaculture I knew about at the time) in industrial quantities. And his office was at the opposite end of the building from any of the others, too.

"Hey!" someone shouted excitedly from the entrance to the building. I looked over and saw a short young man with wildly curly sun-bleached reddish blonde hair wearing soccer shorts and a gray kangaroo sweatshirt. He was the only person I could even remember seeing here who sported a tan that looked healthy. His white teeth shone at me as he smiled like a lunatic. "You came!"

I nodded and smiled a little. I couldn't help it, there was something infectious about the smile he had on his face.

"Man, what a day," he said as he came up to me. He peeled off the sweatshirt to reveal a green and yellow Hawaiian shirt and what looked to be a necklace made of puka shells with a crucifix dangling from it. He was sweating a little, I think.

"That's some perfect soccer weather out there, man," he said, "sept for the wind's picking up a little now." He sniffed and motioned me to follow him into a door at the end of the hall. "You're gonna want to lose the jacket."

I was still a little chilly, but saw what he meant as I went through the door and was hit with moist, warm air. "Has to be warm, cause if it gets too cool, the water condenses everywhere."

I saw that the door was reinforced with Styrofoam like a refrigerator, as were the walls. There was a huge tank in the center of the room, but I couldn't tell what was in it because it was covered and not made of glass. It was more like an above-ground pool. I looked back at Ned and saw that he was taking off his shoes and trading them for flip-flops. "You can take off your shirt if you want, man."

Already I was feeling a little warmer. And maybe a little more comfortable, too. I knew a lot of people kind-of like Ned when I lived in California. None of them were biologists, though. Most were surfers and stoners. Ned made me recall the comparatively carefree days of my youth. Not a lot of my days were carefree, but the ones that included people like Ned typically were.

"You gotta check this out," he called as he scuttled across to the other side of the room. The floor was a little damp, so I had to watch my step as I followed him. I saw that the room we had entered had more than one pool, and Ned was walking towards the largest of four pools, making squeaking, squishing sounds. He stopped before a tank that was so tall that it had what looked to be a twelve-foot ladder leaning on one side. There were several tubes running out of the top of the tank and into humming

machines or into the wall. And several cables also exited the tank and connected to computers sitting nearby on rolling carts.

“You like calamari?” he asked and gestured that I should climb the ladder. It was impossible not to like this guy and do whatever he wanted. He almost wiggled like a puppy. He must enjoy his work immensely. I smiled and checked the ladder’s stability. I also made sure that the rungs weren’t slippery and, seeing that they were covered with some very abrasive material, ascended. When I looked down into the tank I couldn’t see anything that looked like a living creature. A plastic cover prevented me from seeing most of the tank and there wasn’t anything visible in the small section uncovered. The water level, I noticed, was at least three or four feet below the top of the tank. I looked back at Ned and he grabbed a stick with a handle on one end and a pointy end, like something you’d use to pick up garbage in a park. He held it in the middle and reached into a bucket, pulled out a dead fish with one hand and slapped it against the pointy end of the stick. Then he handed it up to me.

I took it by the handle, getting the idea, and put it down into the water. I waited for at least thirty seconds, just long enough to think that nothing was going to happen, and then suddenly something under the water grabbed the stick and tried to wrench it out of my hand. I almost lost it too. But even though I wasn’t paying attention I let my hand go with it sort of instinctively until I was able to tighten my grip.

Whatever was on the other end of the stick had by then also tightened its grip, and we wrestled over the stick for a few seconds until it suddenly let go, and I almost fell back off the ladder.

“Isn’t that cool?” Ned asked as I climbed back down the ladder to safety.

“I don’t know, I didn’t really get a chance to see it,” I said.

“Oh, you can see it all you want on these monitors, Man. I got the whole tank wired with wicked-sharp video. I sent you up so you could feel it.” He gestured to a bank of monitors and flipped a switch and I could see on one of them squid of some sort.

“How big is it?”

“Big enough to do this, dude.” He showed me that the end of the stick that I had stuck into the tank was missing not only the bait but a considerable amount of wood, which had been scraped off by something.

“It did that with its mouth?”

“No, Man. It’s got these teeth things on its suckers, and they just rake stuff. It’s awesome.”

“I see what you mean,” I said. Ned then launched into an energetic explanation of the Humboldt squid. The one in the tank he had brought from San Diego and raised from a baby. They lived only a couple of years, four at most, and he was looking now for a breeding pair, since he had stabilized the tank enough to be pretty sure he could raise them in captivity. He raved about their heartiness, compared to other types of squid, and about squids in general for several minutes.

“If you took all of the animals in the world and weighed ‘em, most of the weight would be squid. There are so many species we never get a chance to study in the wild, and they have mostly been kinda hard to keep in tanks, up until pretty recently. This other researcher and I have been collaborating because we want to grow us a colossal squid in captivity, before anyone else is able to film them in the wild, but we haven’t found any yet. This one we though might have been a colossal, but he turned out to be a pretty common Humboldt. But that’s O.K., because I’m learning a lot about squid behavior anyway.”

“Their behavior?”

“Yeah. These guys are wicked-smart. They’ve got a nervous system much more complicated than ours. They control ten arms, for one. And they don’t have any bones. Bones would make the processing much faster and easier. And on top of that they constantly navigate three dimensions instead of mostly two like we do. They’ve got huge eyes that see really well in the dark, and they also can communicate by making patterns on their skin and through their ink.”

“What do you mean ‘they communicate through their ink?’” I asked.

“They actually make patterns. This one dude who studies them noticed that the ink made patterns that looked suspiciously like squids.” He grabbed a rubber-band like thing and his hair and was putting it into a pony tail while he talked. “He was thinking that they made it look like squids making, you know, like gestures?”

“Unh.”

“And so he sent some pics to me, ‘cause I’d started to look at their body language a little. And sure enough,” he said as he rifled through a stack of papers on his desk, “they do look like squids.”

He got up and went to a filing cabinet and looked through it. Then a bookshelf, until he found what he was looking for.

“But give a Rorschach test to any squid researcher and he’s gonna come out like eighty percent of the time with the answer ‘squid.’”

“Well, they’re pretty loveable, I guess.”

“Yeah, that’s so.”

He pulled a picture out of an envelope and showed it to me. It looked like a brownish-black squid, sort of, or a dragon, or maybe a castle, possibly a depiction I saw in a book once of Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.

“But there’s some other stuff going on there, something almost fractal, something that doesn’t at all look like the ink is following natural currents set up by the tentacles. It’s weird, dude.” His face split into a huge grin. He then shook his head and his ponytail flopped around behind him. “Weird. So I got myself some of these high-resolution cameras so I could take a closer look.”

He motioned me closer to a couple of large computer monitors and started fiddling with a keyboard. “And there’s this dynamic element to the whole thing that nobody seems to have noticed before.”

“Dynamic.”

“Yeah, the designs form and then turn into other designs and then turn into other designs. It’s trippy. Check it out.”

On one of the monitors was a still picture of squid tentacles and a dark shape. Then Ned clicked the computer mouse and the tentacles moved slightly to the left and the dark shape changed a little. This went on until the tentacles were completely out of the frame.

“That was Steve,” he said and pointed to the left of the monitor. “But now that he’s gone, you see, the shapes start forming.”

The dark blob in the center of the picture grew appendages as he continued to click the mouse. And there was something weird about the movement, but I couldn’t place it.

“Steve?”

“Oh, when he was little he just looked like a Steve. I don’t know,” he laughed.

The appendages then started to get complicated. And he was right about one thing, they didn’t seem to act the way they should in the water. If the squid, Steve, had just used his jet propulsion to move away the cloud of ink should have looked a little like it does in cartoons, or like it would if you squirted some ink into a bathtub, or perhaps like somebody blowing cigarette smoke in a windless room. The center of the cloud should move away from the jet and the outsides should whirl around it. If you looked really closely at the pictures you could see some of this motion. But other motions seemed to predominate.

Ned stopped clicking for a second and then said “lemme show you a close-up of this one,” and fiddled with the keyboard for a minute.

A red box appeared on the screen, outlining part of the dark patch, and he moved it with the cursor to an outlying portion of the cloud. Then he hit the keyboard again and the contents of the red box filled the screen.

“See?” he asked.

The cloud was slightly more translucent in the blown-up portion, but the shapes could still be seen clearly enough. And they were really strange shapes.

“They look like symbols of some sort. Not exactly pictographic characters,” I said, “but maybe a little more stylized and complicated. You don’t really think they mean anything, do you?”

“I don’t know, man. They remind me of those symbols used by the members of Led Zeppelin on their albums. Zoso, you know? But they look like they mean something. And watch what happens when we go forward a little.”

He hit the mouse button a few more times and the symbol, or the squiggle, or whatever, morphed into another one that also looked painted, intentional. And with the magnification up as high as it was the illusion was even more complete. There was no way to tell what had caused the movement in the first place—the movement of a cephalopodic mollusk.

“They communicate a bunch of things with their ink,” he said, ticking them off on his fingers. “They say stay away.”

“How does this say that?”

“Oh, sorry, they also secrete a chemical that irritates the eyes of potential predators. In fact that might be the primary reason they started doing the inking thing. Then some of them eventually evolved the ability to color it with melanin. Eventually the melanin became associated in the minds of predators with the stinging, irritated eyes, so it served as a pretty good warning. When these suckers are nearby you don’t want to blink a lot, ‘cause they’ll tear you to shreds if you’re not paying attention. Anyway, they also communicate, we’re pretty sure, with chemicals like L-dopa. That stuff is in their ink and they have L-dopa receptors, too. But we don’t really know what they are communicating with that stuff.”

“And then there are these little symbols.”

“Yeah, only again, we’re sort of lost, there. I’m building up a database of symbols right now. These computers over here,” he pointed his thumb to the other side of the room, behind him, “try to perform a routine like optical character recognition. Only they do it with these things when I identify them as

‘characters.’ Then I’ve got this neural network set up to crunch on that. Gradually it should learn to identify symbols/characters that repeat. If we can get enough data we should be able to crack the code.”

He walked over to the other set of computers. “I’ve got about five thousand of them in there right now. And they all look different, to me, at least. I’ve got an assistant working on this project, too, and he gets a couple of hundred a day, maybe more.”

“That’s a lot of gazing at ink-blots.”

“I know,” he said, making it sound almost like a laugh. “I know, and then we still don’t know whether this looks different in the actual ocean, although we think it does. And we don’t know if this stuff is coordinated with the designs that appear on their skin. And then there’s the fact that this whole thing appears to be massively parallel.”

“Which means?”

“It’s all going on at the same time. At the same time that we are looking at this symbol here there are maybe fifty others appearing on the surface of the same cloud. And some of them are visible from this direction while others are visible from another direction maybe ninety degrees removed, and others from below. So it’s a lot to try to puzzle out.”

“What’s the point, though?” I asked, “I mean what do you think they have to say to us?”

He smiled again, only a little less broadly this time, and his hands finally made an unfamiliar journey to his sides. He shrugged his shoulders.

“These things are social. They hunt in packs, big packs of hundreds. And their talkin’ to each other. It’s cool. I’m a biologist? I don’t know. It’s what I do.”

“But where do I come in?”

“Oh, Man. I totally forgot. I heard you were from northern California. I just wanted to meet you.”

It was my turn to laugh, then. “I thought you were looking for funding.”

“Naw, I’ve got plenty of that. Buckets of it from people who want to make this aquaculture stuff work here, and from federal sources and that. Got money, there’s hardly anybody here from the west, though. Lots of cool people, but, you know, sometimes I miss my old stomping grounds.”

I knew what he meant. “So show me the other tanks.” I was thinking that I could take my time and the boss would think I was somehow helping this guy get even more funding. And it did feel a little like home, somehow.

I had always had aquariums when I was young. There was something peaceful and comforting about the constant gurgling of the water and the humming of the bubble machines and the filters. I liked the way the light was distorted by the water, too, although none of the tanks Ned had were like that. Most were opaque circular tubs with lids. He had shrimp in some and tilapia in others. Some had catfish and some had shellfish of different types. It smelled like San Francisco Bay a little.

Ned showed me the filtration systems. He tested a number of different types, doing elaborate cost-benefit analyses that attempted to account for environmental and social effects of producing and using them along with the monetary costs. And we just wandered around talking, too. He showed me how to

feed some of the fish and other creatures and went around changing some filters and performing other tasks with the systems that weren't as easy to understand.

"I'd never eat Steve. But most of these give me a constant supply of protein and Omega-3s. You ever want some fish you just let me know. Some of it goes to the shelter in town, but they don't like anything too complicated."

I thanked him for his hospitality and was about to leave when he stopped me. "Hey, I just remembered. I've got a friend in History here that came from Washington State. You'd like him, I think. You guys should get together," he said.

I asked his name and he told me.

"I'll definitely look him up. Do you know where his office is?"

He picked a campus map off the wall and showed it to me. He had drawn on it and there were corrections written on some of it, and exclamation points.

"It's this building," he pointed to a building in red on the map, "Go through the door facing the street, here, and then up the elevators. He's right next to the Quillan rare books room, southwest corner. Don't pay attention to any of the signs. And do look him up."

I had every intention of meeting him. In fact, I decided to go there on my way back to the office. Ned's friend was the historian who had left me a message that morning.

## Chapter V

I leave Ned's office and with all of the thinking about squids I have completely forgotten about the frigid day that I had left behind. The wind has picked up considerably while I was inside, and threatening rain clouds are whipping by, strafing the tops of still-green trees.

Although I'm not really dressed for rain or cold there is still part of me that rejoices in rain. I grew up in the Sacramento Valley of northern California. Rain there always seemed like a miracle. By the middle of the summer the trees would begin to shed their leaves, but mostly they didn't change into pleasant colors first. Instead of the reds, yellows, oranges and other colors you see even in a disappointing New England fall Sacramento's trees all looked like they had died of heat exhaustion. By August they appeared to be ready to spontaneously combust.

Sacramento falls, consequently, looked so much more permanent. In New England you can always look forward to a crisp winter that would, at some future point, end. In Sacramento the weather would get cooler, but there never seemed to be any guarantee of moisture and rebirth in the eventual spring. Sometimes the winters would be so warm that by the time spring rolled around (much earlier than in New England, of course) you might completely forget about it. Winters there seemed sometimes totally without hope.

I wrap my thin jacket around me and button it, despite the fact that suit coats and blazers look kinda stupid that way. And I follow the path that Ned had outlined to the squishy side of campus.

It isn't squishy in the actual physical sense, of course. The sciences were clustered together on one side of an immense hill, one that had no name, so far as I am aware. On the opposite side, towards the north, was University housing, the dorms, cafeterias and bookstore. On the eastern side were the stadium complex and other athletic facilities like tennis courts and the track. And the western side housed most of the social sciences, the humanities, and for some odd reason, the business school. The social sciences and humanities are usually considered the squishy subjects, so their predominance on the western side of campus makes it seem like the squishy side.

The main campus library, the one that had the kind of books you might actually read, as opposed to the ones that you simply referred to in academic papers or looked something up in, was in the middle of the western campus.

I take a shortcut through a practice field that isn't being used, one usually devoted to pick-up games of tag football, Frisbee and lacrosse for those not actually on the team. But I am still chilled when I reach the library. By that point I am trying to think about who I could call to pick me up and take me back to my car. But then, you never know, it could warm up by the time I have to leave. Best to wait.

Scott Peterson, the newest hire in the History Department, is supposed to be up on the fifth floor. So I take the elevator like Ned had suggested and then try to figure out where the southwest corner of the building would be. After a minute I decide it is to the right, which leads me into the stacks. As a space-saving measure, apparently the books were on moveable stacks, which had to be cranked to the left or

right to open up a sort of temporary hallway. It seems strange to encounter this on the fifth floor of an older building, though. This method of book storage can be pretty heavy. I stand there for a moment trying to figure out the easiest way to open one up when somebody on the other side opens one for me.

A student then enters the hallway from the other side looking for a book. She seems pretty absorbed in what she's doing, and I don't want to startle her—the aisle she had created is a narrow one. So I go around a bit, looking for another path.

To my right I find the end of one section of stacks, and it already has a path open to the other side. It leads directly to a glass enclosure that has little green banker's lamps set up on dark oak library tables. As I walk up to it I can see that the electrical cords leading to the lamps were entwined with other wires, which looked to be network cables for laptop computers.

I look through the windows at the little reading room briefly. It is such a nice, peaceful-looking room. A little dark, perhaps, but with really old, leather-bound books on two of the walls, and really comfortable leather chairs at the four desks. There are other, still more comfortable chairs at the far end of the room, one of which, I notice, is occupied. A man with straight blonde hair, wearing a leather jacket and jeans and reading one of the old books looks up at me as I come into view. He has his feet propped up on one of the chairs from a desk and seems surprised, but not startled.

I smile my best I-didn't-mean-to-stare-or-bother-you smile and turn to the left, retracing my way to the southwest corner where the History Professor's office is supposed to be.

When I get there I see that it is closed. Knocking, I discover that it is also unoccupied. "Oh, well," I'm thinking, "at least I got warm. I turn and walk back to the reading room only to be confronted by the guy who had been reading in the little glass room.

"Are you looking for me?" he asked.

"I don't think so, unless you're Scott Peterson?" I venture.

"I am. And you are, . . . wait a minute, no accent. Are you by any chance Neal?"

"Very good," I say, and he laughs. "You're pretty quick." I don't finish that statement, but it continues in my head with the words "for a historian."

"I didn't expect any visitors, so I was in the Quillan Rare Book Room," he says while making little air quotes with his fingers.

"Oh, I was on my way back to my office after meeting with a friend of yours, so I thought I'd drop by and see if you were in."

"A friend," he said. Must be Ned?"

"He couldn't be your only one?"

"No, but nobody else seems to know where my office is. Nobody ever really just drops by here. They're a little more . . . formal or something."

"Yeah. I'm beginning to think that what it is is more like they're too polite. They would see that as an imposition. I told somebody recently that nobody had ever invited me to their house here in New England. This native told me that it would be presumptuous to think that I'd want to be invited to their house."

He appears to consider this for a moment. Then "Do you have time to chat?"

“Yup.”

So we go to the comfortable leather chairs.

“I don’t see any sign on the door. Why did you call this, somewhat mockingly, the Quilling Rare Book Room?”

“Quillan,” he said. “Guy was a professor here. Still is. Emeritus, I guess. He packed up a few years ago and moved to Idaho, after recommending my hire on the personnel committee. I’ve got his old office. And they locked off his books in this room. Since I’m right next door I get to open it up when people want to look at the books. But nobody ever does.”

“Seems a pity that nobody ever does. They look like some cool old books.”

“Yeah. They’re not in the electronic catalogue, though. I suspect they weren’t in the old index cards either. But those have been gone for a while. Anyway, most of these aren’t even rare, which was why I was joking about the name of the room. They’re just his old books from the 1970s when he started teaching. He got the Library to buy them as hardbound books and then took their covers off. They just look older because they’re dusty.”

I stand around for a few seconds and look at some of the titles. “But some of these are leather-bound.”

“And some of those are rare, although mostly not. Just old Modern Library editions of different literary works.”

“Still a nice look. A pleasant spot,” I said, and he nods, flopping into the chair he had occupied when I first saw him.

“Yeah, it’s one of the many benefits of this job,” he said in a mock-bragging sort of way, putting his hands behind his head and stretching back in the chair. “New on the faculty but I’ve got the biggest office in the building.”

I point to a sign on one of the tables. “You can’t eat or drink in here, though,” I said. “So it isn’t perfect.”

“Truth be told,” he says, “you’re the first person I’ve seen on this floor since the semester began. And even if there was a good amount of traffic, you’ve probably noticed that nobody reads signs here.”

“Well, I guess you win.”

“So, you met Ned?”

“Yeah. He called and I thought that he wanted to talk about funding a project. Seems like a pretty nice guy, very enthusiastic. But it turns out he was just looking to meet another displaced westerner. Is that why you called?”

“Actually, no. The Department Chair said I had to check with Development for travel funding before he would consider giving it to me out of the Department budget.”

“That’s right, you said as much on the phone.”

“Not that I don’t want to meet displaced westerners, too.” He holds up his right hand. “I know the odds of finding travel money through you are slim to none. I just had to check. “In a week or two I’ll call him and tell him you couldn’t find anything. Then he’ll give me the money. It’s not as if it’s his anyway. We are each supposed to get a travel budget for research. It’s just that I’m the only one who ever uses any.”

The rest of them are doing local research, Boston, Cambridge. Oh, every once and a while somebody goes to DC, but most of them have forgotten there's a travel budget, the Chair's so stingy about it."

"What's he want the money for, historical re-enactments or something?" I ask.

"Don't think so. Although that would be pretty cool. He specializes in the French Revolution. I know lots of parts I'd not want to play, lots of parts I could recommend for others, though. I think he just likes to have the money around, on the books, even though he usually ends up forfeiting it when the budget gets tight at the end of the school year. He funds some scholarships out of it though."

"Okay, so you've talked with me. Do you want me to call you in a couple of weeks to let you know I couldn't find anything?"

"No need. He'll take my word for it."

"Where are you doing your research?"

"Back in Idaho, actually. Ever been there?"

"I've seen most of the State, actually. Which part?"

"I'm flying into Moscow."

"Doing something with the University archives?"

"No," he said softly and then was quiet for a few seconds. "I can only tell you about my research if you won't tell anyone else here."

I pause for a second. Not because I am actually thinking whether I should hear his secret, but because I want him to think that I am taking him seriously. I can't think of anybody I'd tell about anything. Finally, I smile and hold up both of my hands in sort of a gesture of surrender. "What were you reading, anyway?" I ask, reaching for the book he had put down earlier. He shoots up out of his chair and with a scared look flashing briefly across his face says "I'm serious."

Hard to know what to do with that. The Advancement Office is a weird, repressive little place where nobody can talk about anything real and now it turns out that even the History Department has secrets. My heart sinks a little and I instinctively remember my early training in the ways of the Californian. "Whoa, dude." I say with my hands up. "Secret's safe with me." I can't immediately think of anything that could be so important. "What, is it a job interview?" I ask.

"No, it's kinda strange. And I wouldn't even bother with the secrecy or anything, but I've been told by the Chair specifically not to do what I'm about to do. So it wouldn't be like I don't know any better if they ever find out."

"I guess that's why I decided not to get an academic job in History." I said. "I just can't muster up this kind of passion about anything that happened in the past."

"Have you met with any other faculty besides me and Ned?" he asks.

"Just this electrical engineer, Lisa Wurzer, you know her?"

"No. She live in town?"

"I don't know. She seems to live in her office."

"What, like literally?"

“She’s got a cot there, and she seems pretty engaged in her work. Why?”

“What did she want?”

“She wanted to work on a grant proposal. Something wrong?”

“You tell me. There’s some strange stuff going on here, and it’s not the usual strange stuff you get on a University campus. She didn’t have any strange requests?”

I’m a little stumped by that one, so I just stare at him for a bit. “Look, no offense, Scott, but how is this any of your business?” I finally ask.

“Fair enough. I’m going to assume that she asked you not to talk about it. Do you live in town?”

It’s beginning to seem like prying. So I wonder briefly if I’m picking up some of the local attitudes about privacy. “No, we couldn’t get a place close in a good neighborhood. But we’re looking.”

“You might want to hold off on moving here for a little while. I’m going to tell you a few things because I think I can trust you, because you wouldn’t tell me what Lisa is up to. This trip I have to make is not job-related, or at least not in the traditional sense of the phrase. And it’s not about history, or at least not just about history. I think that something’s happening right now, right here in town. Something I need to look into.”

I just sit there looking at him for a few heartbeats. I’m thinking how things could not possibly get any weirder here. And I can’t help but ask questions, I guess. It’s in my nature. “What’s happening?”

“Have you noticed that lots of people look a little pale, lately, on campus?”

“No offense, but they mostly look pale out here, except when they look sunburned or ruddy.”

“On average, though, this semester, people look paler. And they are more tired. Like they aren’t sleeping well. Isn’t everybody, though. It only seems to be the people who live in town.”

“So, they aren’t sleeping well. Think there’s something in the water?”

“I don’t think there’s something in the water. I actually checked that out. The water’s good.”

“Then . . .”

“I don’t know. But old Quillan, the guy whose office I have, whose books these are, Quillan said to keep a look out for this kind of thing. Odd thing, that. He told me in a letter, couple of months after I showed up, that I should keep my eyes open and not to move to town. Not to sleep in town either.”

“Weird.”

“Practically made it a condition of my employment, though. Although I don’t know how he would find out if I didn’t listen. And weirder still, he took a bunch of books with him when he left. All of the actual rare books he took with him.”

“But you said there were some rare books here. Are they yours?”

“Now they are. But he sent them to me. At home. Several months after he had gone. And he told me not to let anybody in the department get ahold of them.”

“Strange old guy.”

“Yeah, but not as strange as the books.”

I look out the window and, sure enough, the sun has come out of the clouds, and the trees aren't shaking in the wind anymore. I am thinking about finding a quick way out of this, because I'm just not sure I want to know any more. I take my pen out of my pocket and begin to twirl it around my fingers. It helps keep some distance, some perspective.

"So what kind of books?"

"The books are old local histories, most of them. Some of them are considerably older and are, um, religious in nature."

I look over at the book I had reached for a little earlier. It definitely looks old, and is in longhand, like a journal of some sort. The pages look dirty and mottled, and it is in that old blackish/reddish/brownish ink. "Did he leave you some handwritten journals, too?"

"No, that's one of the religious ones."

At that I'm sort of stopped in my tracks. I look away from it at back at Scott. "So what kind of religion are we talking about here?"

"None you've heard of, probably. There was an old cult that apparently stretched from a few miles west of us here all the way to the sea. They apparently claimed descent from an old Sumerian faith. It's not really my area. I certainly never had heard of it before."

"Does it have a name?"

"Makatonic or Katonic, I don't know the language, but they seem to be used interchangeably in this thing," he waves toward what I had taken as a journal.

"That sounds Indian, though. Isn't it?"

"Again, I don't really know. There's too much I don't know about this stuff."

"But you said things were happening."

"Did you know that thirty people forty-five years old or younger have died this year in town?"

I'm thinking that that doesn't sound right. Surely I'd notice something like that in the paper. "In a town of, what, forty thousand-odd?"

He nods and I find myself asking, "anything mysterious in the ways they died?"

"That I don't know. Most of them had no write-up in the paper, except the obit section, where they didn't say anything about cause of death, which is a little odd, given the sheer numbers, I think. And then there's the animals."

"What animals?"

He looks at me like he can't believe I haven't noticed. And I'm thinking about owls again.

"Yesterday when I was walking in from the parking lot I saw a huge flock of sparrows heading straight for a chain link fence. I remember thinking that it was going to be really cool to see them suddenly veer upward when they got close, because they can turn on a dime. They didn't, though. They went through that fence as if it was made of air."

He pauses and I can see him struggling with it, he's searching my face, lightly, but still obviously searching for some evidence that I don't think he's a lunatic.

“There wasn’t anything magical about it, “he finally says. “They had just learned to go through chain link. No big deal, but I’ve watched birds around here for quite a while. Quillan asked me to watch the birds. And I don’t remember ever seeing any of them do that before.”

“And people are acting weird. You probably don’t even notice. They probably all act a little strange to you, since you’re just off the boat. Lots of them are in a fog, of course. First week or so that I became aware of this I overheard a bunch of people at the cafeteria talking about strange dreams that kept waking them up. And then, about a week after that, nobody was talking about much of anything at lunch, at least nothing interesting.”

I reserve judgment on this. There doesn’t seem to be anything dazed about the people in my office. They seem as alert as guard dogs. But I don’t tell him that. And nobody ever talks about something as interesting and deep as dreams. Except Sid. Then I think about the owls again and make a mental note to ask him whether he was able to get pictures of them when I get back to work.

“Doesn’t sound like much to go on, although it is all pretty creepy. Why are you going to Moscow, then?”

“I’m not. I said I was flying in to Moscow. The Chair thinks I’m doing some research on Lewis and Clark. They went nearby. I’m landing in Moscow, but I’m going to drive up to Kellogg.”

“Cool old mining town. What’s up there?”

“Quillan, for one.”

“Surely you could just call him up?”

“You’d think, but he doesn’t actually have a phone. And I’ve written him, but I need to know more about all this strange crap he saddled me with here, and why. I mean, my dissertation was on transportation systems in the U.S. I don’t know anything really about the history of this place or the Sumerians, or any of this stuff.”

I’m thinking that he wants something from me, but I can’t imagine what it could be. Just confiding in me to have somebody to hear him out seems so bizarre. Maybe he just wants some confirmation, however flimsy, that he is not going crazy.

“What are you going to do with the rare book room when you go?”

“I’ll just lock it up. Like I say, nobody ever comes here.”

We seem to run out of things to say. He doesn’t have any answers and I don’t have any questions. I get up out of my seat and straighten my jacket. He shrugs his shoulders. He seems a little embarrassed by the weird conversation. I scour my memory for some sort of joke or something, something to break the tension and let him know that don’t think of him as a lunatic.

“Kellogg is pretty this time of year, although they don’t get the color we do,” I say, “too many evergreen trees.”

“Yeah, there’s tamarack, of course, but those just look dead in the fall.”

“You must be looking forward to going out there.”

“Actually, I am. I’m hoping to get in some skiing at Lookout Pass. And I’ve got some family in Coeur d’Alene. So it should be a nice break.”

“So you’re planning on going during Christmas?”

“Yeah, or Thanksgiving. We don’t get a week off, but most students take a week, so there’s no reason not to, really.”

“Did Quillan grow up out there?” I ask as we walk out of his Rare Book Room.

“No.” He stops for a moment, shaking his head slightly. “No, he’s actually a local. He just retired there, for some reason.”

“I’ve noticed that a lot of people retire to someplace with winters that are less harsh.”

“Some people have telephones. Some people don’t exact weird promises from junior faculty before retiring. Some people don’t carry their books across the country and then turn around and ship them back.”

“Well, I’ll search around for that travel money for you. I should know in,” I look at my watch, “about two weeks.”

He laughs. “Hey, we should have lunch sometime or something, you me and Ned. Form a little western clique and make fun of people, that sort of thing.”

“Sure, I’ll give you a call when you’re not so weird,” I say, smiling. “Maybe after your vacation,” I hint.

“I do sincerely hope that that helps, somehow,” he says.

I find my way back without any trouble and notice that it is warmer than when I arrived, but it is also getting dark. I hurry to make it back to the office. Automatic lights on the big hill begin to light themselves as I arrive. Backed by the dark clouds that had passed the town looks quaint and weird at the same time.

I turn off my computer and notice that most everyone has gone home already. I look for Sid and find that he’s already gone. There are a couple of lights on down the hall, but I don’t bother to tell anyone I’m leaving.

Driving home I’m thinking that maybe Scott is right. Moving into town seems just a little rash at this point. I should definitely wait until I see if all of the faculty are completely bonkers. My wife never mentioned it before, and the few social gatherings to which we have been invited seemed to offer the usual mix of narcissists, shy myopic nerds, opinionated bullies, and people you’d like to befriend, if you had the time. I resolve to ask her whether she’s heard anything weird. And then I find myself deciding that I wouldn’t be able to give a satisfactory reason for the question without talking about my weird experiences in Lisa Wurzer’s office, which I had already decided not to trouble anyone else with.

## Chapter VI

Driving to work the next day I'm thinking about a conversation I had with my son, who is barely old enough for day care now. His being old enough is the reason I was able to take this job and to some extent I'm wishing he was still only two.

It had started with a dinner conversation with my wife, who had apparently been talking with a student who was visibly impressed when she heard she had grown up in California. She immediately stepped in and explained that she was talking about northern California, which is so mysterious to people in the U.S. "Oh, but that's even worse," the student had said, "there are all those earthquakes." We were laughing about it because although there have been terrible tragedies resulting from earthquakes most of them are really nothing to worry about. Natural disasters occur all over the states, you just get different kinds.

This led us into talking about the tornado that had ripped through a town just north of ours in Washington the year before we left to come out east. It didn't kill anybody, but it had caused tens of millions of dollars of damage to the wheat crops and had destroyed some grain silos and torn roofs off some houses. We were less than eight miles south of where it had touched ground, and although it was exhilarating, what with golf-ball sized hailstones and ferocious winds, it was also much scarier than an earthquake.

It was one of those adult conversations that you think are so innocuous until the questions start. So while I'm giving the kid a bath later he asks me if Massachusetts gets tornadoes. "No, of course not," I tell him. "There are too many hills and things for a really big tornado to get going." I didn't mean to lie. Apparently Massachusetts has had Fujita 5 twisters in the past. The week earlier I had told him that the state was too populous for bears to be a significant threat, and I was wrong about that, too. Add those things to the lethal winter snowstorms, the possibility of hurricanes, Lyme disease, and the drivers and it is probably a much more dangerous place than most people think. And don't bother telling the people here that New England is well overdue for a massive quake. They simply won't believe you. Those things only happen in California and in other countries.

I arrive at the office and hunt Sid down. He's back in the server room, where there is the tremendous and comforting white-noise hum of the email and database servers. He looks to be performing some mysterious server rites involving command lines and a website devoted to some sports team I'd never heard of. He looks up as I come in and raises his eyebrows.

"What's up?" he asks, because there's really no reason for anyone to go into the server room but him unless they need his help with something.

"Hey. No much. So this is your sanctuary?"

"Yeah. This is the one place that Paul won't go. It's way too warm for him, there's technology that he doesn't understand, and it would be beneath him to seek me out this far away from his office."

I'm thinking that it is nice to hear that Sid doesn't like Paul either. It is so hard to tell around here who is allied with whom.

"You mind if I move my desk back here?" I ask, but I'm joking. To move office furniture is, of course, completely and psychotically taboo. "I'm actually wondering whether you got pictures of the owls," I say.

"Oh, yeah. I got pictures, but their not like you'd think. They may be a little weirder, though. Hang on."

He fumbles around with the computer mouse, clicking on some folders until he finds what he's looking for. And it is pictures of the ground. It takes me a few seconds, and his finger pointing at the screen, before I see that the ground is littered with dead owls.

"Got a much better look at them the next morning, because they weren't moving, weren't staring back." He clicks the mouse on something else and the picture magnifies a little. Then he moves the scroll-bars so that the frame moves to the left and down a little.

"They're all sorts of different owls. I called the animal control guy and he said that there were like nine different species."

I can see that there are small ones and large ones, and the colors are different.

"What did they die of?" I ask.

"Guy doesn't know. He took a couple back to the clinic with him and he's waiting for test results of some sort. Weird thing is . . . I don't know if you can see it, but they are all like emaciated. It's like they starved to death."

"Some sort of raptor hunger strike."

"Yeah. No list of demands, though."

I laugh, probably one of those laughs that are mostly to relieve tension, because it was funny, but much more creepy than funny. Then I remember about that bird flu thing.

"Any chance it was bird flu?" I ask.

"No, he thought of that, too. The symptoms are all wrong, I guess. He knew that right away."

"That's a relief," I say, and it is, a little.

He nods. "You getting ready for your strategic plan presentation?"

"Yeah. I've still got almost two weeks, though."

"Paul will want you to have a rough draft by Tuesday, though, because TWR is coming."

"TWR?"

"They're fundraising consultants that he brings in five, six times a year to back him up with the administration."

"And we all meet with them?"

"Yeah, divide and conquer. Even I have to go in and do a little song and dance, which they won't listen to a word of. They'll have suggestions, though, suggestions like 'maybe we should migrate our servers,' or 'we need to use a relational database for this.' I just nod a lot and promise them I'll do

whatever crazy stuff they say, or research it or whatever. You probably know your job pretty well, but allow me to suggest a strategy.”

“You think I’ll meet with them, too?”

“You’re already on the schedule, check your email.”

“Sure, I’d love to hear your suggestions.”

“Tell them whatever they want to hear.”

I hate telling people what they want to hear. But I nod at Sid and thank him for the advice. At least I know how people get along with him now. Later on I can decide whether to do it.

I go back to my office and find out, sure enough, they have slated me in at 2:00 in the afternoon and even put “strategic plan” on the agenda. I figure I have to move pretty quickly now to think this thing through. And because I don’t know what I’m going to do quite yet I decide that I’ll put together two different plans. One will lay out what I think we should be doing. The other will be what they want to hear.

Fundraising is a strange business, particularly the part focused on foundations. It is difficult enough for most people to get a handle on how other people think. It is a big step from that to get most people to understand how corporate organizations work. But most people make that transition pretty well once they understand the role of the profit motive. For some reason, though, most people never seem to be able to make the next leap, understanding how grant-making non-profits work. They tend to simplify. So usually the reasoning goes something like this: I am doing valuable work for the public good, therefore this organization should give me money to do it. It is even worse, usually, in the hands of fundraising administrators, because they take this ignorance and tack on things that they have heard in fundraising conferences and seminars, things like “this business is all about building relationships.” And they believe that since a college or university does good things, things like educating kids and doing valuable research, foundations should be happy to simply hand over their money. The phrase about relationships suits them perfectly, too, because most university administrators, to whom they report, came from the faculty ranks. And most faculty want nothing to do with “building relationships.” And even if they did, the phrase “building relationships” carries a non-specific timeline with it. How long does it take to build a relationship with a foundation?

But all of this is hogwash. The fact is that there are two main types of foundations. One can be called “local,” and the other can be termed “foundations with a specific agenda.” The local foundation is primarily concerned with the things going on in the town where the foundation is located. And most of these already feel like they know what is good for that town. You can build a relationship with these foundations, but it takes a good bit of time, because you need to do a lot of listening, and you need to be intimately familiar with the social structure of the town and its history.

The foundations with a more specific agenda are simply not interested local issues in other towns and may or not be interested in local issues in the towns in which they are located. They have national or international vision about certain social, economic, environmental, or political problems. They often have a set of tactics towards solving those problems that is also important to consider when applying for funding. Although knowing people at these foundations can be helpful, it won’t get you anywhere if you aren’t applying for money to solve what they see as the most important problems of the day. And it won’t get you anywhere unless they think you have the right approach to solving those problems. And the last thing they want to hear from anybody calling them on the phone is that you are in a fundraising office at a

university. They want to hear from researchers or people who are out there solving problems. Not people who want to take credit for these people.

I start by looking carefully at the foundations in town, and this doesn't take long. None of them could possibly come up with large sums of money in the short term. Certainly none of them could help this university with its miniature version of the Big Dig even if its trustees wanted to. Then I look at the grant-getting histories of institutions that are supposed to be similar to our university, not because I think they'll be any surprises, but because I am thinking about using it to persuade the Exec and his consultant to think rationally about foundation fundraising.

Most Universities get their large foundation grants from the local foundations. When they get large grants from foundations with specific agendas it is usually for research. It is almost never for projects that are already underway. I spend the afternoon doing research just to reassure myself that none have ever, in the history of grant-making to universities, gotten a grant for cost overruns incurred digging a hole in the ground.

Next day is Thursday and I spend some more time researching weird grants for Lisa. The phone has been mercifully quiet. Probably this is a busy time of the year in terms of getting classes going. This will buy me some time to think about the situation before I have to meet with many more faculty.

I try a flurry of keywords related to death and manage to make a couple more lists. Then it occurs to me to try the names of people who have attempted to communicate with the dead. I try Harry Houdini, Madame Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, Theodore Reuss, a few others, and some strange little foundations come up, but most of them don't have any presence on the web, so they are difficult to look into. Then I tried all of the associations that seemed to come out regular web searches on these names. The O.T.O., the Golden Dawn, the Abbey of Thelema. Most don't seem to have any assets either. By lunchtime I'm pretty much ready to give it up, since the list of names and associations seems to blossom without actually leading to any pockets. I have decided to limit myself to researching this stuff only in the mornings, partially because that's my most alert time of day, partially because I won't have to think about it when it starts to get dark outside.

Thursday afternoon I devote to developing the strategic plan some more. Part of the research process involves identifying large foundations with specific interests that match those of researchers on campus. In fact this research into our institution is almost half the battle.

There are six colleges that seem about equal in size. The Business School will, no doubt, come to me thinking they should be getting some money to study entrepreneurship or something, but mostly they won't be banging at our door because the whole idea of non-profit is off their radar.

The College of Sciences is pretty well-connected to industry, and so their main focus is partnerships or alumni with their own companies. Sometimes they will get the idea that there is such a thing as corporate philanthropy, which will send them over to our office. Most, though, won't know about that weird entity called the corporate foundation at all, or will focus on other types of connections, like funneling scholarship money to students who will be potential hires for these companies later on down the road.

The College of Agriculture is a little smaller than the others and will have business connections. They'll also look mainly to government grants. So they're out.

This leaves the College of Pharmacology and Toxicology, which is mainly funded through industry and government grants, too. There are a few foundations that seem pretty interested in medical issues,

but most of them prefer to fund institutions that have a medical school where they can perform clinical trials.

The College of Engineering is probably something I can also safely ignore for the time being. Engineering, like business, always seems to be interested in connections with industry. There are a few foundations with specific interests who have periodically funded engineering research or education, but most either specialized in areas where this university has no infrastructure or made large grants to local universities.

This leaves my main focus—the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Essential to any university these are the most neglected departments, partially because they do not bring in federal research dollars in anything like the volume of engineering and science departments. They lack the corporate inroads that engineering, science and business departments get. And they tend to get the short end of the stick when it comes to support, although they tend to have the steepest teaching requirements (because they tend to teach most of the general education requirements) and some of the most difficult research mandates (because they have to compete with engineers and scientists, who can publish experimental results whether or not their experiments fail, and where results are often simply spit out by specialized computer programs.) These are gross generalizations and simplifications, but in the main these are the feelings of faculty members in the humanities and social sciences, so it doesn't matter all that much whether or not they are true. Humanities and Social Sciences are therefore most likely both to need the support and to feel like they have something to gain by seeking it from foundations. So, in essence, they are the most likely to feel like they are getting something from somebody in foundation relations, even though mostly you tell them not to waste their time.

I take a look at the departments and notice that there are some researchers who might benefit from my help, and I start making a list of professors to call during the upcoming weeks. I'll make some appointments, I'll start learning what they do and at the same time be thinking about how to put all the pieces together.

I go home that day still unsure about what I'm going to tell the Exec and his consultant. Mostly, I'm thinking, it depends on how much stress he puts on the numbers. If he has some vision of how many dollars I should be bringing in each year, and it is far in excess of what the school brought in last year, I should start looking for a new job sometime around the first of the new year. If he quantifies things like how many proposals I have written to foundations for faculty members, then I should start looking right away.

I do have a pretty good start on a roadmap for what I'm going to be doing, though.

I clean my desk before leaving and even though I have spent the entire afternoon researching traditional routes to foundation funding my mind immediately turns to the researches of the morning. It is truly amazing what one can find on the internet, I reflect. Many of the works of Aleister Crowley were published so long ago that they are public domain now. I remember when I was a kid finding it difficult to locate the books I wanted either at the pathetic city library or at the local bookstores. There simply was no variety. Now, though, you can read books that have been out of print for decades or order books through the library from other libraries in distant towns or purchase them used.

I shut down the computer and head out the door, almost bumping into one of the major gift officers.

"Hey there, big guy, I was just coming to see you. Have you got a minute?"

"Sure, Ted," I say as he brushes past me into my office, "have a seat."

He doesn't sit but waits until I do and grabs the back of the chair next to my desk, putting one of his feet on the seat of it. Ted Stanley is a bear of a man and a pretty good guy as well. He seems to be able to smile though just about anything, although during the retreat I thought that I saw him actually falling asleep during some of the presentations. He dresses well, but not as well as the Exec, almost like he is intentionally being careful not to appear threatening to the boss. Probably a good strategy for him, because he seems to be able to take credit for a lot of the money that flows from industry to the University. He has dark features, Mediterranean-looking, but he apparently grew up in New England, as did his family, all of which live nearby, and their ancestors going back generations. He predominantly deals with the engineering school alumni, and it seems to show in the precise and unnatural way he uses his hands while talking. He gestures like he is drawing a schematic in the air with his hands as he talks. He has a tendency to make prefatory remarks that indicate how many points he will make, and then to list them and delineate them one by one. Mercifully, he doesn't do this now. At the end of the day I imagine I'd find it pretty difficult not to stare at his hands quizzically.

"How are you settling in here? You got everything you need?" he asks.

"Thanks for asking, Ted. Yeah, I'm just now digging into the funding environment a little and trying to understand the institution a little better. It's pretty overwhelming, but I've scratched the surface, I think. I've got my meeting with Paul and the consultant next week early and I'm a little worried about that."

"Don't worry about those guys. You're new, so you'll get kind of a honeymoon period before they start to ask any hard questions. Best way to handle them this early on is to treat them like father figures. They are suckers for that kind of thing."

"You think?"

"Absolutely."

"Hmm. You've been around here a while, right? You have any hints about how I should actually proceed?"

"Well you probably already know that we don't really have any alums on big philanthropic boards, except their own, of course."

I nod.

"And the engineering school is pretty slim pickings for foundation money, he says, "but actually, that's what I came to talk to you about. Hey, this must be your lucky day. Tomorrow I've got a meeting with one of our finest new engineering professors to talk about a new nanotechnology initiative that she's involved in. They might be in a position to put together a campaign and maybe a proposal for some equipment or a new building sometime late in the year."

I just nod and smile. "So, what maybe a Kresge grant for the building. Do you really think anybody is going to be able to leverage some capital spending on campus any time that soon? I mean, . . ."

"They're pretty sharp, these people. And they seem to have a shot at some federal and state money for this stuff. So it's possible. Do you want to come along and meet them, find out what it's about?"

"Sure. I can spend a little time with them tomorrow. Maybe an hour or so."

"Great," he says, "that's just great."

"Where? Who? Should I meet you there?"

“I’m leaving about 9:45 or so if you want a ride to the engineering compound. If you want to get there yourself . . .”

“No, a ride sounds good,” I say, thinking that the meeting must be at 10:30 or so if we are going to be anything close to punctual. “So what is the nanotech stuff connected to? I thought we didn’t really have anybody doing that kind of silicon chip engineering stuff?”

“This is all materials science stuff. They are mostly connected to the polymers people. And I don’t really know the details, hoping to get that from them tomorrow. But it is exciting.”

“I guess it is. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He leaves and I’m thinking that it’s probably good to have some allies higher up the food chain in the office as well. And Ted is in line to get the Exec’s spot when the administration catches up with him.

## Chapter VII

Ted gets to the office around 9:30 and has a couple of things to do, apparently, before he is ready to go. Mostly these things seemed to involve touching base with every single (or married, for that matter, or straight or gay, left- or right-handed) person in building. He says “hey” to the guy who’s fixing the copy machine for the fifth time that week. He asks the janitor if he saw the Patriots play on Sunday. He asks the woman who does the books how her dog is doing and if she has a check for him. He asks Sid if he has the report he requested earlier that week, but reminds him that there’s no hurry.

Watching him I wonder briefly if he is running for some sort of office, but he doesn’t do it like he’s selling himself or anything in particular. He really seems to want to just check in with people and let them know he knew they existed, that he cared, even if it was just a little. I find myself watching and wishing that I could do what he is doing. And then I find myself wishing that I didn’t have to think about stuff like this all the time. And I find myself telling myself that what Ted is doing is something that everybody really should do. And then I find myself telling myself that I really should be doing it every day. And then I start criticizing myself for not doing it. And, thankfully, Ted shows up to stop me from further reprimanding myself.

He listens to some voice mail and writes a couple of notes, grabs a stack of mail and his jacket, stops to tell the receptionist that we are going to be out the rest of the morning, and we make it another few steps before we see some more people to chat with.

By 9:55 we are out in the parking lot, where I see that Ted has parked right next to the guard shack, on a cross-hatched no-parking zone. There is not ticket on his car, though. We climb in and he makes short work of the journey to campus. He seems to cover more distance more quickly than I usually do, despite the fact that he negotiates almost ever intersection and turn with other drivers. He waves them in front of his car, he waves to others to be let into traffic, he holds his hand out and they stop for him. There don’t seem to be any rules to the road at all with Ted behind the wheel. Everything is ad hoc negotiation with others. I am exhausted just watching.

Luckily there isn’t much opportunity for conversation with him. He has already touched base with me. Now he has to meet the rest of the world and let them know he would like to take them out to lunch sometime.

I am about to say something about the parking lot nearest the building having been taken over by mobile homes but I realize that he must have some plan, because he comes to the engineering compound three or four times a week. He drives straight up to the guard shack in front of the lot and I’m expecting some sort of glib lie or mumbo-jumbo, maybe something like Obi-Wan Kenobi did in Star Wars, waving his hand and saying “you don’t need to see our parking pass,” but he just pulls to the side and parks on a plot of grass between the guard shack and a tree.

Ted waves his hand at the guard, who is taking down somebody’s license plate on the road leading to the compound and the guard looks up, clearly uncertain about who is waving at him, and holds his finger up. It is clear that the guard wants us to wait, but

Ted grabs his stuff out of the car and simply walks through the gate. We check in with the guard inside and continue on our way.

“Do you have a deal with the parking guy?” I ask.

“No,” Ted says, “I think he’s new here.”

I wonder if the strategy would have been different had he been here a while, but it seems as if the whole thing has been just like the drive across town—negotiated as it happened. He seems to simply know what he wants and have no compunction about asking for it in such a way that it is assumed that he will be given whatever he has requested. He seems to lead a charmed life, in certain ways. But I couldn’t possibly do what it would take to collect the goods.

Ted steers us directly to the main engineering conference room, where there is a huge table with only two people around it, waiting for us.

I am about to apologize for being late, for it is obvious that they are waiting for us, that the meeting was scheduled for 10:00, which we passed about fifteen minutes earlier, but Ted says something to both of them individually that seems to make them forget about that.

“So, I am here with our newest staff member, Mr. Neal Slater, no wait, Doctor Neal Slater,” you can almost hear the air-quotes around the word ‘doctor’ as he says this, “who is going to help us think about foundation funding for some of the exciting new nano-stuff you guys are doing. Dr. Slater, meet Professor Marisa Pinella and Polymer Engineering Chair Jack Takeda.”

I make the appropriate noises and they settle down into their chairs. There is coffee in the room, apparently from an earlier meeting, and I grab a cup while Ted tries to get them to explain nanotech without being technical.

When I sit down Takeda has taken the lead and is already explaining to Ted. “It is really about controlling every atom, putting them exactly where you want them to go. You know, when you make, like, a wrench or something, you pour the molten metal into a mold or something and then end up cutting off bits that shouldn’t be there and polishing it so that it shines?”

I nod at this, because I’d read a little about it in a science magazine a few years earlier.

“But the thing is you have to figure out ways of controlling bazillions of them all at the same time, otherwise you can’t make anything very big or cheap out of them.”

I look over at Professor Pinella and she is clearly, but patiently, frustrated with the Chair, willing to let it ride a little, not wanting to correct him. So I step in.

“I heard that things were really different when you work with really small molecules, or small groups of them or something,” I start, a little vaguely and lamely. “This guy told me once that if you slice up a piece of gold into nano-size chunks, it will change color. It won’t look like gold. It’ll look red. Like the Golden Gate Bridge does. Or was he having me on?” By this time everybody is staring at me like I’m a bug and I get so self-conscious that I stop dead in my tracks.

“No, that’s right. Things do work very differently when they are that size,” Pinella says, to save me a little. “There are lots of different reasons for that. The important thing is that there are some real difficulties working with materials that size, because they don’t seem to respond to the same physical laws that everything you normally experience does.”

“What, like gravity and thermodynamics and stuff?” I ask, thinking to myself that nano-sized particles sound a little like Massachusetts drivers, or like Ted.

“Actually, yes, gravity, a little. I mean they respond to gravity, but other forces can make gravity irrelevant at that scale.”

“Hmm. But that’s good, right. So there are opportunities, too?”

Takeda jumps in, “Tons of opportunities, every major industry is going to feel this shift. It will be a revolution in materials science.”

Clearly the guy is waiting for us all to nod at his wisdom, and Pinnella obliges him by nodding shyly as Takeda looks over at Ted. “Can I show you that email from Dickinson that we talked about yesterday? He seems to want something completely different than what you two had talked about.” They don’t even bother to check with us, simply stand up together, wave their hands and exit.

I look at Pinella, who is a thirty-something Italian-looking woman. Black hair, a little on the short side, with narrow glasses, attractive. Apparently unmarried, at least not wearing a ring. She klunks her forehead down on the conference table a few times as if she is knocking on a door. Her glasses click on the surface of the table each time. Then she looks back up, shakes her head.

“I’ve trained him to talk to the people from NSF and from the local delegation, but it all seems to fly right out of his mind as quickly as I get it in there. Luckily they are used to that sort of thing from administrators.” She gets up to grab a coffee, turns back to me.

“And Ted is nice, but doesn’t want to understand this stuff either. Anyway,” she shrugs, “we don’t have many people working on this stuff yet, but we are planning to bring in a few more this year. We have a good nucleus of people working on projects that could really benefit from structured research at the nano level.”

“Do nano people have specialties or something?”

“At this point it is more like people in the traditional disciplines having an interest in nano stuff, a specialty in nano.

“So what sort of experiments are you running, or what did you work on before your nano specialty?”

“I’ve done a lot of work in dispersion, which has been gradually moving into the nano dimensions for about ten years.”

“Dispersion.”

“Yes. So, there are regular sorts of dispersion problems, problems that you are probably familiar with.”

“Like . . .”

“Like when you put ice cube trays in your freezer at home, does the ice form more rapidly if the water is from the cold water tap, or does it form faster if it is hot? That’s a dispersion problem, in a way.”

“Obviously the cold one, because the hot water has to be made cold on its way, so you’re just starting closer to ice with the cold water.”

“But that’s not what happens.”

“Oh, I thought . . . So what does happen?” I ask, suddenly curious.

“Well, in most cases, and we did this test in my high school when I was a sophomore, the water froze faster when it started out hot.”

“What’s the deal with that, then?”

“The rate of freezing is highly dependent upon air flow. Unless there are currents in the freezer moving the cold air around and into contact with the water, it takes a long time. So the hot water helps to set up some currents, and it can even trigger the fan to come on, which really speeds up the process.”

“So that’s normal dispersion.”

“Right. In fact there are some refrigerators at supermarkets now that use that circulation to their advantage, they rotate bottles of cola and they can remain open. You don’t have to open a glass door to get the product, and they still save energy. It’s more efficient because heat transfer without the air-flow is a function of the square of the temperature difference. The air flow overwhelms that function, just as gravitational forces are overpowered by other types of forces at the nano-scale, forces we don’t understand so well. So we have to look at the Van Der Waal forces and the molecular structures involved and do experiments to understand dispersion. Otherwise we don’t have any hope of being able to control what these materials do in a solution, say,” she says all of this as she’s putting cream in her coffee and watching the way it diffuses and changes the color.

“I just saw some pictures. Um, I mean I met this biologist earlier this week, Ned Kolbe. Do you know him?”

“Is this revenge for the trick question about the ice cubes? I’ll say no.”

“He was showing me close-up pictures of a squid squirting ink into the water. And they made really strange patterns.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. Strange, how?”

“They made little designs that you could only see when he blew the picture way up. They looked like symbols or something.”

She nodded and bit her lip. “I’ve seen something like that. Ned Kolbe? And he’s in bio?”

“Yeah. I’ve got his number here somewhere. You should look him up.”

“I’d like to see the pictures. But surely dispersion isn’t really his area of research. I would have run into him.”

“No, he does this aquaculture stuff. But he’s interested in pretty much everything. He’s got a squid there in his office. A big one. Dangerous one.”

She chuckled a little. “Dangerous?” she said, as if she didn’t fear squids of any kind.

“It’s like fifty or sixty pounds,” I say, arms wide. And her eyes get big at that, but she smiles.

“So how were you thinking that I could help the nano program here?” I ask.

“I wasn’t, not really. The Chair and the Dean were hoping, but they don’t know that much about foundations. We might want to go for a building campaign or something in ten years, maybe, if we get the nod from the state for economic development or something. Right now we could use some equipment money.”

“Well, there’s Keck, of course. But they really are just looking for blue-sky types of scientific research. Their problem with doing this from the engineering perspective is that it is always with an eye to industrial use, or almost always.”

“Thought so, but I had to ask.”

“And I’ll keep my eyes open. But my sense of nano is that the major players pretty much all know each other at this point. If you guys are doing this stuff publicly, then chances are they’ll come looking for you when they need something. And the “they” will probably be corporate.”

“Well, then our work here is done. I’ve got to meet a student. So give my best to Ted and what’s-his-name,” she says, getting up and flinging her hand towards the Chair’s office.

“I will. Have a good one.”

And I find myself alone in the engineering complex. I wander over to the windows and look out at the hill. Campus is inordinately quiet for this time of the morning. Usually you begin to see the heavier traffic of lunchtime, struggling up the hill for some much-needed calories at the cafeteria complex. The people who are out and about seem a little listless.

And then I look over to the construction site on the hill. It’s a little puzzling. Where there should be excavation activity there is no activity at all. In fact, since I last checked some of the fences have been taken down and heavy equipment moved from the site. I wonder if this is a pause in the construction or whether they have completed the elevator shaft. I look around for a campus newspaper and see only brochures for graduate schools and the detritus of faculty meetings. I don’t want to barge in on the Chair and Ted, so I get some more coffee and think a little bit about strategic planning again, trying to sketch without any notes an outline of what I will present on Tuesday.

Eventually I hear Ted’s booming voice coming out of the Chair’s office. He is checking in with the Chair’s secretary as he leaves, asking the score of her son’s soccer game and asking her to give his best to her Mom, recovering from something in the hospital.

“Hey,” he says, acting as if he didn’t expect to see me, “How did it go with Marissa?”

“Mareeza,” I correct him. “It went well. She’s a pretty sharp one.”

“All of our faculty are sharp,” he says. No hint of criticism in his big, booming voice, but maybe a trace of irony. But I know that if pressed he would not be able to name one faculty member whose work he doesn’t have the deepest respect for. Although he will agree that there are a few who should probably be committed.

“You had lunch?” he asks.

I guess that must be truly living in the moment, because not only does he know that we both arrived together and at the same time, it is still only eleven thirty or so. I take the hint.”

“No, you want to stop by the cafeteria?”

“Sure,” and he leads the way. I realize then that this will be the longest trip I have ever taken to the cafeteria, as he stops ever few steps to chat with whoever we meet. I’m glad that there aren’t a lot of people on campus, because we would not have made it in time for lunch.

“Did you hear anything about them finishing work on the elevator shaft?” I ask him as we get a little closer to the hole.”

“No, they didn’t finish. They ran into something. . . . Hey Tom, how’s the golf swing?” he shouts at some guy.

I can’t hear the response, but it doesn’t matter. It is all in tone of voice and body language.

“They ran into some sort of strange geological formations or something on the way down. The geologists were there for a while sorting things out. And then the people with OSHA got involved, because there was something toxic in the rocks, so they wanted to make sure everyone was wearing the right gear and enclosing the site well enough. Hey Chief!” Another call and response.

“Then they brought in the Anthropology Department. They were thinking that they must have run into some sort of burial site or something. I still don’t know how that one turned out. But then somebody called the State Historical Preservation Board and the Chancellor is meeting with them today.”

“It looks like they are taking all of the digging equipment away, though.”

“Yeah, that is a little strange. Maybe it’s leased and they decided to cut costs by returning it until this all blows over.”

“Hmm.”

We walk in silence for a few seconds and finally reach the cafeteria.

I order the pasta, mostly because it’s cheap and you can shovel your own parmesan cheese onto it. Those habits from graduate school die hard. Ted orders a Cesar salad with chicken, something he says he can’t do when he meets with prospects, because they are messy and noisy to eat. There’s hardly anyone in the cafeteria, and since Ted

Is behind me in line I find a seat that is away from the few people eating at the tables.

I ask Ted a few leading questions about the administration, which he answers at length, and at first I’m paying attention to him. But after a while I’m looking at this guy who came in after us.

He looks to be in his early to mid fifties and he has a full head of straight, white hair that is parted on one side. He is dressed a little shabbily, but not remarkably so. Male faculty have a wide range of acceptable clothing that includes everything from the thrift store to Burberry. This guy is close to the bottom of it but in a way that looks like he is making an effort. Wool pants and a sports jacket that look to be of nice material and sewn together in the forties. His hair in the front hangs a little in front of his face and is discolored, as if he was a chain smoker.

But it is not his looks are distracting me from Ted’s meandering discourse on the University but what they guy is doing. When he comes in he brings this stack of folders, the manila kind, that are held together with an immense rubber band. He slips the rubber band off and then sets the stack to one side, pulling one of the pieces of paper out of the pile. He folds it a couple of different ways and then tears part of it off in a straight line. Then he folds intently for about a minute, very carefully, lining things up just right. And even this would normally distract me a little. It is when the piece of paper disappears that I find I can no longer hear Ted at all.

The guy doesn’t look around at all when this happens. I expect him to turn toward me and show that he has nothing up his sleeve, maybe do a little bow, but he does nothing of the sort. He simply stares at where the paper was for a second with these sunken, haunted eyes, and then pulls another from the stack.

While he does the preliminary folding and tearing on this one I make a few cursory nods in Ted’s direction. I shake my head incredulously at an appropriate phrase. Then I am riveted once again, looking

at this lunatic folding paper behind Ted. He stops before this one disappears and gets up, walks to the counter where the condiments are kept. He looks at it as if he can't quite make out the purpose for some of the ketchup dispensers or the little containers of cream. Then he selects a small salt container, the kind made of paper that has two little corrugations housing the salt, and he takes this over to his little origami project.

Carefully tearing the end off the salt package he empties it into the piece of paper that he had previously been folding. And then he continues to fold it. As this piece follows its predecessor into oblivion I notice that Ted is staring at me.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I got distracted for a moment."

"S'okay," he says, mouth full of food. "Whattareya watching?"

"That guy over there," I say, nodding my head in his direction. I don't want him to notice I'm watching him, or Ted to blow my cover, but the guy is completely oblivious to us. He looks around the table, for the salt, I presume, and then selects another from the stack and shakes his head in disbelief.

"Kyle?" Ted asks.

"Uh?"

"That's Kyle Riddell, from the Mathematics Department."

"How do you know him, then?" I ask, because Ted knows almost everybody from the University except the faculty of departments that don't bring in corporate money.

"He and some of his students have been working for a company that makes emergency parachutes in Japan. They showed them how the material could be compacted in such a way that the entire parachute fits in a space about the size of a beer can. Most amazing thing. And it never, ever, fails to deploy the right way. He made a mint off a couple of other projects like that a couple years back."

"Check out what he's into now," I say, and Ted turns around in his chair, resting his arms on the back.

This time Kyle has taken out a larger sheet of paper. This one looks to be eleven by seventeen inches, and it takes him a while to make the first few folds. He is being much more careful this time.

Ted turns around to look at me and then twirls one finger around his ear and makes a face.

"No, keep watching," I say.

Kyle pauses after one fold and seems unsure of himself, holding the paper in the air. Then he carefully licks a corner and tears one side from the rest. He places this one aside as he had the others. Then he completes the process up until the point where he put the salt in the last one and takes instead a piece of the paper scraps he had produced earlier. He folds this carelessly and sticks it in the paper he is currently folding.

Ted's patience looks to be taxed and he fidgets a little, but he is watching, at least.

Then the piece of paper disappears.

He turns to me. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah, you see why I was distracted. You think we should ask him about it?"

But Ted is already up and walking over to the guy.

“Hey, Kyle, howrya doing anyway?” he says, and Kyle jumps about an inch off his chair. He had been staring in sort of a reverie at a spot on the table.

“Oh, Ted. Good. How. How are you?”

“Fine, Kyle, I’m just fine. That was some trick with the paper. The new guy and I were just watching you. And I couldn’t see where the hell it went.”

“Yeah,” Kyle says breathlessly. “I couldn’t tell either. Although I’m coming up with some theories. If I could just get some sleep I’m sure I could figure it out.”

By this time I’m over with them and Ted introduces me.

We are all looking at the table, though, and the stack of paper. Formalities seem so pointless.

“So you don’t really know what you’re doing?” I ask.

“Well, I know parts of it. This is sort of my specialty, this mathematics of folded spaces and such. It’s just that I never had any of it actually disappear before. Not that I ever tried, but I didn’t really think it was even an option, really. I mean theoretically it should be possible, but. . . .”

I look up at Ted and he’s as slack-jawed as I am at that point. We both sit down.

“Can you show us again?” I ask, in sort of a pleading tone of voice.

“Oh, sure.” And he goes through the routine again without the salt or the extra paper or anything else, like he did the first time I saw him. We are trying to figure the whole thing out, but it seems so simple until the last step, when he makes this fold and is suddenly empty-handed and staring at a point, with Ted and I, on the table.

“I had this dream the other night, you see. And it didn’t really seem to be very interesting at all, but I was doing this, this paper folding thing. And it was really tiresome in a way, you know. Like when you are trying to work out a problem from your job or something and you do it over and over all night and you are not getting good sleep at all because of it?”

We both nod.

“Except when I finally woke up I was missing half a notebook, and there were scraps of paper all over the floor of my kitchen.”

Ted says, “Hey Kyle, have you thought any about the commercial implications of this?”

“No, I’ve just been toying with it, really, just working it out, playing with it.”

“Well we should meet sometime soon. When you have a chance to think about it. I don’t know what they would be either, of course. I’m going to be thinking about it, though. I’ll give you a call.”

“Okay, great. Thanks,” Kyle nods. He seems happy enough, but totally exhausted and mystified, rummy.

Ted looks around and sees that nobody else has been watching. Then he stops again.

“Hey, Kyle,” he calls, and walks back to the mathematicians table. “You might want to keep a lid on this thing until you figure it out all the way. You wouldn’t want somebody to come along and steal the idea away from you, would you?”

“Oh, no. Oh, thanks, Ted. I wouldn’t want that. Your right, of course.” He looks around but is clearly more weary than wary. “I’m going to go home and try to get some sleep, I think.”

“Sure you can find it all right,” Ted says jokingly, as Kyle takes the papers and scurries away. Kyle just nods, though and keeps walking.

“He lives right at the bottom of the hill. The University keeps talking about eminent domain but they never do anything about it. He is a pretty valuable faculty member. They don’t really want to piss him off too much.”

Ted and I finish our lunch at a pretty leisurely pace. We don’t talk much because we are both a little weirded out by the show. So we mostly stare into space and eat in silence. Then we both walk back to his car, which seems impervious to tickets, somehow. And even though we finished with our engineering meetings by 11:30 we don’t get back to the office until 2:00.

I spend the rest of the day digging into weird foundations for Lisa and then looking into the faculty of the squishy departments. After asking around a little, Sid tips me off to a cache of old campus faculty/staff newsletters in the storeroom. I spend a couple of hours scouring them for names of faculty who have done noteworthy research. I am just grazing, though, and not really trying to remember much—just trying to get the feel of the place. Then it is suddenly five o’clock, and time to go. I’m really going to have to work quickly on this stupid strategic plan if I’m going to have something presentable by Tuesday, I tell myself as I walk out the door.

## Chapter VIII

The next morning I go into the office a little early, wanting to catch up on the strategic plan stuff before I get sidelined by anything else. I chug away at that until noon, getting the thing in pretty good shape, but still wondering a little what version I'll bring to bear come Tuesday. I'm just about to find somewhere to eat lunch when the phone rings.

"Advancement, Neal," I say.

"Hi Neal," Marisa says in a sort of tentative voice, "this is Marisa, remember. We talked about ice cubes yesterday."

"Of course I remember. Something wrong?"

"Well, I called Ned this morning and something terrible has happened."

My hands go cold while I find myself thinking about how comfortable I was in Neal's office the other day. "What?"

"Well, somebody killed Steve," she says. And I fumble around for a second trying to think of who she is talking about.

"The squid."

"The squid."

"Why, . . ." I start, thinking to myself how anyone could kill a squid as strong and quick as the one I tangled with that day. "Why would anyone kill a squid?"

"Ned's wondering the same thing. And so is everybody. Although we are having a tough time interesting the campus police in following up on it."

"Hmm."

"And actually Ned has called the town police, too. And they are nowhere to be found. They just haven't responded."

"So, how—and I feel a little insensitive even asking this, but how did they do it and how does Ned know it was murder, if that's the right word here."

"It was quite a scene, I'm afraid. Ned is pretty cool about it, considering he has spent so much time with him and thinking about communicating with him. I suppose he knew that Steve's kind only live two or three years. But whoever it was brought a sort of harpoon and speared him with it. Then they pulled him out of the tank and dissected him right there on the floor."

"Good God."

"Yeah."

"So was it some kids, then? A fraternity prank kind of thing?"

“Apparently they took his ink gland. I don’t know, but Ned says it is not so easy to find the thing. These people apparently knew where to look, at least. Doesn’t mean they were squid experts. Does mean that it took a little planning.”

“That’s so bizarre. Does he have any enemies?”

“Steve?”

“No, Ned.”

“Just a little joke. Ned doesn’t really make waves. I mean, I’d never heard of him before. I’ve seen him around, but I’ve never really heard his name around campus before. A couple of students were here helping us clean up, and they just adore him. And they’re undergraduates, so it’s not like he’s paying them to like him. How could anyone hate Ned?”

“I don’t know. I’m just trying to figure it out. So he’s handling it okay, considering?”

“Pretty much. I asked him about his research and he got interested in explaining it to me. I don’t understand any of the communications stuff, but it is interesting. He was explaining it all to me when it occurred to him that he should check the last few minutes of tape to see if he could see anyone attacking Steve.”

“He see anything?”

“No, couldn’t see the attacker, because the cameras just weren’t set up that way. But he did find something interesting. He’s reviewing Steve’s last few hours right now, and it is some pretty weird stuff. It is almost as if the poor thing used up all of his ink anyway sometime early this morning. It is almost as if he was terrified of an imminent attack since about midnight last night.”

“This place. I’ll tell you. So you were interested in the ink. Still interested?”

“Well it is certainly strange that someone would take it from a ‘dangerous’ animal when you can just go out and buy it.”

“You can buy that stuff?”

“That’s what Ned claims. Art supply places, apparently. And you can get it at certain restaurant supply houses in an adulterated form. And it does have some interesting and complicated chemical properties. And some of the molecules are small enough to do some weird dances while the stuff is dispersing. Ned claims that some of the designs—he calls them symbols—start to repeat on the tape. I don’t know. I’m not seeing it.”

“Hmm. Well, give Ned my best. Thanks for calling to tell me. I’ll try to drop by later and pay my respects.”

“Oh, also, Ned wanted me to ask you to tell Scott.”

“Scott Peterson?”

“Yeah. Ned is really trying to piece something together, mostly because he is angry, but he is probably also throwing himself into this project because he doesn’t want to grieve. You know.”

“Because he’s a guy.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll give Scott a call. Give Ned my best.”

“Will do.”

I hang up and think to myself that college campuses always made me feel safe. It's one of the reasons I wanted to become a professor, one of the reasons I wanted to find a way to continue working on college campuses even after I decided that teaching was something took a lot more out of me than I was willing to give.

And I've always felt this way, comfortable and safe on college campuses, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Most campuses are actually slightly more dangerous than the outside world. They are packed with teenagers with raging hormones who are usually able to get a hold of alcohol and many are not directly under adult supervision for the first time in their lives. Campuses can be very dangerous places. I hate it a lot when that myth, one of the enduring myths by which I lead my life, is shattered. It always takes a while for me to piece it back together again.

I pick up the faculty directory and look for Scott's number, pick up the phone again and dial it. But it goes directly to voice mail. I hate to leave a message that sad and weird so I decide I should try again later.

When I get back from lunch I run into the Exec, who's straddling the hallway to my office. I think briefly about trying to step on his foot and go to one side of him, but even though he is not looking at me directly I can tell that he wants to talk to me. I just have to make the first move. And I have to make some sort of fake smile like I'm happy to see him while I make obeisant gestures of some sort and the whole thing is a little wearying, frankly. Somehow I manage about half of these respectful litter rituals, but it is enough for him to save face or whatever it is that he's trying to do.

“Come on in,” he says, going into his office, dispensing with the courtesies of asking if I have a moment, but in such a way as to brook no argument.

I follow, and he gestures to a seat on the other side of his immense desk with its spotless glass top over ugly and cheap mahogany veneer. It's only the second time I've been in his little pleasure palace and I find it just as stifling as the first time. He's got his own little kitchen and conference table and storage room, and even a little living-room area with two loveseats and a coffee table. The office is bigger by far than the Chancellor's office, or any other office I have ever been in. And it is completely spotless, sterile even. I find myself wondering how he can get any work done without having to wipe fingerprints off something. Then it occurs to me that if you redefine the word “work” to include the wiping of fingerprints, one would never, theoretically have to stop working, not if one was comfortable cleaning fingerprints for \$150,000 per year.

“You can stop looking for funding for Professor Peterson,” he says, and I get chills, because it makes me think about Steve's death, somehow.

“Okay,” I say, hesitantly, hoping that somehow he'll feel compelled to tell me why I should stop looking. But he doesn't, just sits there with this ugly little sneer on his face. “Did he find the money?” I finally ask.

“No, I did,” he says.

“Oh, that's great. He was really looking forward to the trip.”

“Whatever. And when he gets back, don't help him again either.”

“Umm, may I ask why?”

He stares at me with the little grey rat-like eyes. “Somebody in upper administration has taken an active dislike, ‘sall I can say for now.” He seems to think he’s in on some sort of secret. And I find that I don’t want him to think that I care, all of a sudden. So I just nod my head. “So, tell me. What was his little trip all about, anyway?”

“He just wants to do some research on the Lewis and Clark thing. You know, the Corps of Discovery stuff. And he was hoping to visit some relatives out there, too, I think.” I hope that I wasn’t supposed to keep that part secret. It seems so much more realistic when I add the personal component to the lie about the true purpose of his trip.

“Any idea why the administration didn’t like him?” he asks, clearly annoyed that I might have some information that he doesn’t.

“No. I just me the guy. Why don’t you ask him?”

“Can’t. He left this morning. It was part of the deal.”

“Deal?”

“I took some money out of our discretionary account to pay for the trip. Now I have to think about how to justify that one as well.”

I nod again, having no idea what he’s talking about by that point, but he seems to be hinting that he had had to do this twice recently. I’m hoping that somehow I can get out of his office soon, because I don’t want to have to spend time at a deposition later recounting the conversation.

“Anyway, keep this all quiet,” he says, getting up from his chair.

“Oh, I won’t say anything, . . .” I promise. I just leave out the last part of the sentence, which is something like “to sneaky rodents like you.” The guy smiles, because apparently one can’t hear ellipses, even with the finely tuned senses of a Norwegian Brown.

It is really strange that they would force Scott to take his research trip early. I mean somebody presumably will have to cover his classes while he’s gone. And he was hoping for some skiing, but I don’t even know if there’s anything falling on lookout pass yet. And he wanted to visit family, who were presumably expecting him for Thanksgiving. Probably they won’t be that excited to see him early. I don’t think they were close relatives. And he certainly had no time to let them know he was going to be early.

I decide to call Ned and get Scott’s cell phone number, partly because I want to carry out my obligation to Ned, but partly because I want to find out what they hell is going on.

“Hello,” I say to the person answering Ned’s phone, clearly not Ned, “is Professor Kolbe there?”

“Who shall I say is calling?”

“It’s Neal, from the Advancement Office.”

“I thought so. Hi, Neal, this is Marisa.”

“Oh, you’re still there, huh? Working on the ink?”

“Sort of. Is it something I can help with, or do you need Ned. He’s a little engaged in something at the moment.”

“Um, actually I was just calling to see if he had Scott’s cell phone number, because Scott is out of town on a research trip right now.”

“Hang on.”

I wait for a minute or two until somebody picks the phone back up.

“Hey, Neal,” it’s Ned’s voice this time. “Marisa says Scott took off. I thought he had a full teaching load this semester. What’s the deal?”

“I don’t really know. My psycho boss funded him out of some slush fund and they asked him to go immediately instead of waiting for the holiday weekend.”

“So he’s in Kellogg?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Ned makes more fumbling sounds with the phone and gives me a cell number.

“I could probably call him myself, though, now that I think of it. I just didn’t want to talk about what happened. You know.”

“I don’t mind calling him. I sort of want to know what is going on between him and my boss, so . . .”

“Okay. You might try calling him before he gets too deep in the hills, though. Unless he’s right on the highway that cell number’s not going to do you any good. Much better to get him before he leaves the airport. He fly into Bonners’ Ferry?”

“No, Moscow. He wanted them to think he was doing research on the Lewis and Clark stuff.”

“Man, if they even knew him it would be obvious that he would never dig into that stuff.”

“I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Thanks, man. You take it easy.”

I try Scott’s cell phone immediately after I hang up and find that it goes directly into voicemail. So I leave a message, but not about Steve being killed. I don’t know if the guy is sentimental about mollusks, so I just leave my own cell number so I’m more flexible with the three hour difference. I think it’s three hours, or is northern Idaho on Mountain time? I can’t seem to remember anymore.

I go home a little early, because I just can’t seem to think anymore. And it is Friday, which is nice, although I am not really close enough to putting this strategic plan together.

Friday is often the day of the week that people look forward to the most. Most places you work on Friday but you’re really not thinking about what you’re doing so much as thinking about the weekend. With a new job, however, Friday can often be the worst day of the week. Unless you are happy about the way things are going, Friday can seem like the beginning of a long period where you can’t work but it is all you think about. You keep thinking of a way out of it. And you think about how you might approach things differently on Monday. And you think about all of the things you have to do when the working week starts up again. I tried desperately to shut all this stuff out of my mind before I got home, but it kept creeping in to my thoughts. And my wife knew what was happening and tried to help distract me. But when I’m in that kind of a mood the distractions can only heighten the anxiety. Distractions just make me feel worse.

She knows me well enough now to see it coming and offered to take over with the kid the rest of the evening.

Even that only seemed to add to my anxiety. It reminded me that if things didn't work out, I'd be back to being an unemployed stay-at-home dad. And that made me feel bad because I should view that as an opportunity to spend valuable quality time with my kid. But that's not the way it seems to work. Unless things are going well on the job everything else in my life seems to fall apart. Which is more pressure, really.

I try to get into a novel I'm reading but I find myself reading the same paragraph over and over, no idea what it means. I try to lay on my back in the dark and just relax, but I can't seem to shake the question. If it weren't for the cost of living out here maybe I'd feel a little more comfortable simply quitting and trying for something else. I wonder if it is even the weirdness of the University itself. Maybe it's the town or New England, to some extent. And if the people were a little more welcoming it might not seem so bad. And in terms of hostility, the Executive Director of the Advancement Office is a sort of pinnacle achievement. The place seems bizarre and violent and creepy, but I've been in creepy and strange places before. This exec guy just sucks all the remaining light out of it.

I'm beginning to work my way around to simply sucking it up, soldiering on, when I hear a soft knock on the bedroom door. "It's somebody named Scott," she says. "For you," she adds with that little questing lilt at the end.

"Got it," I say and go to the kitchen to get the phone. The stupid apartment came with only one phone jack.

"Hello, Scott."

"Hey, got your message. What's up? You find me some travel money?"

"Seems like you got it some other way."

"Yeah, the strange way. Your dumb boss had his secretary, . . . Charlotte?"

"Yeah."

"Charlotte, call me and find out when the soonest flight out of town was. And then she calls the airline and buys me the ticket. I barely had time to find somebody to watch my cat."

"Any idea what the hell they are trying to get you out of town for?"

"I know exactly why. So is that why you called?"

"No, I promised I'd get in touch with you to give you some bad news, I'm afraid."

"Well."

"Um, you know Ned's prize squid, Steve?"

"I know Steve well. He tried to drown me once, the bastard."

"Well somebody snuck into the lab last night and killed him. Then they dissected him on a lab table."

"That's some twisted stuff, there. Student prank?"

"Seems unlikely, or at least Ned thinks it unlikely."

"He Okay?"

"Yeah, he's taking it pretty well, pouring himself into trying to figure out what's going on. They apparently cut him up to remove his ink gland. And they got it. So they knew their way around a squid, to some extent, anyway."

"You are probably seeing some other strange stuff happening around town, too."

"Yes. I'm new, though, so sometimes I can't tell if these things are normal or not."

"What are you having trouble with, then?"

"Well earlier this week I saw some birds doing strange acrobatics and there were a bunch of owls that were acting strangely and then died the next day all in one spot. Then the campus seems deserted all of a sudden. And many of the people who remain seem tired. Some say they're not sleeping well, dreaming weird dreams all of the time and it's keeping them up."

"Sounds about like I thought. I don't live in town, and the only people I've socialized with at the University are Ned and another couple that also live in another town. I've got a theory about what's going on, but it is not something that you're going to like hearing."

"I'm sure it's not. But I'd much rather know, still."

"Quillan, the guy I came out here to see, was really spooked when I showed up. He was really, I don't know, alarmed looking. He seems to be pretty sane, and he seems to have made a nice little life for himself out here, cozy little house in the woods, and all. But he got this haunted look when I told him what I was here for."

"Which is?"

"Which is that there is all this strange stuff going on and I want to know what he knows."

"So. . . ."

"So he poured us a couple of drinks and sat there for a bit at his kitchen table. Then he got right down to business. He told me that he had suspected that the University was built right on top of the remains of a settlement of what he calls the 'Old Ones.' Did you ever read any H.P. Lovecraft? This guy says that some of that stuff in his horror books is based on fact. I don't have time right now to explain the whole thing to you, and barely understand it myself, but the gist of it is that the excavation for the elevator shaft might have uncovered one of these things."

"So they live down underground, and the dig pulled one up. And this is causing all of this strange stuff to happen?"

"Well they don't exactly live underground. He says that they had built a civilization, this would have been more than three or four million years ago, and that they were under attack from some other bizarre alien race or something. And they went dormant somewhere. Apparently they are incredibly resilient. They can last hundreds of thousands of years, looking like a dried-out husk, or a mummy or something. And then, if they somehow get around other creatures and a source of food, they can regenerate themselves."

"So what does it want, how do we get rid of it, is it a bad thing?"

"Apparently very bad, at least according to Quillan. But I went into town to take care of a few things and call you, so I don't know the whole story yet. Then when I got into town I got your message."

"Why were you calling me?"

"I need you to get me some of the books from the rare book room—as soon as you can. We'll be in a better position to deal with this thing if we can access those things."

"Deal with this thing."

"Yeah, Quillan has been fearing this happening since the 1960s. He always sat on University building committees and discouraged any projects that involved much digging. He's seen strange stuff on campus, too. But I told him about the last couple of weeks and he says it is the same sort of thing but amplified, like this "Old One" is stronger, or nearer."

"How does it make this stuff happen?"

"Dunno. He says it projects its thoughts or something. The books he read were so mysterious and had been translated four times before he got to look at them in Latin. So it's like playing telephone with dead people."

That makes me think of Lisa and her weird little project, but it doesn't seem relevant to the task at hand, so I don't say anything except "Okay, do I need a key for the room?"

"Yeah, it's in the only copy of "The Market Revolution" in the stacks, tucked into an envelope glued to the back cover."

"That's safe, at least. So, what, do I mail them to you?"

"I don't know. Since tomorrow's Saturday why don't you just call me when you've got them and hopefully I'll know more. Maybe we can figure something out over the phone."

"Oh, um, which books?"

"Jesus. Got me spooked, too. They don't have anything written on the spines. There are three books all in leather. If you are walking in they are directly in front of you on the second shelf down in the middle of the bookcases. But they are behind the books on that shelf, lying flat so they can't be seen."

"Sneaky again. Library opens at . . ."

"Ten O'clock on Saturdays. I'll be in town waiting for your call. Thanks, Neal. I'm sorry you got roped into this."

"It's okay. This is the sort of thing that grantwriters do all the time. We just keep it quiet."

"Give my condolences to Ned. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Bye."

And somehow I feel better about things. There's no way for me to explain it. Maybe because I'm trying to understand something and helping people. Who knows.

## Chapter IX

Saturday I get up late, usually, and this one is no exception. I was up until at least 2:00am tossing and turning the night before, mostly in my head. I have the uncanny ability to be really persistent in focusing on things that I need to think about during the times when I have the weakest ability to think effectively. The weird stuff happening to Scott and Ned and a bunch of others on campus doesn't seem to apply to me at all. I barely even know these people, yet I'm all wrapped up into some sort of murder mystery involving a squid and a bizarre religious cult that disappeared from this area long ago. And there are so many pieces to this puzzle, my mind keeps telling me. There's the math professor and the electrical engineering professor with their disorienting and macabre new projects. I toss this stuff around all night long, even while I'm sleeping. And then I suddenly realize, just as I'm taking a shower and getting ready to go in to the library. These aren't pieces to a puzzle. Puzzles make some sort of picture. And this is simply a bunch of disconnected crazy stuff that has nothing to do with anything else. It's not going to make a picture; it's going to make a pile of weird, lumpy pieces that can safely be thrown away. In fact, leaving them around will simply frustrate people. They have to be swept away. I resolve to do just that when I am done getting Scott's crazy books to him.

As I'm stepping out of a steamy bathroom the phone rings. I run to get it, knowing that my wife is out shopping already with the boy. Both have been up for about three hours already.

"Hello," I say, thinking to myself that it's a wrong number, because we had decided to cut down on the number of students able to call us by not listing our phone number.

"Is this Neal Slater?" an unfamiliar but scratchy voice asks.

"Yes, it is. To whom am I speaking?" Thinking by now that it must be someone from the University who knows us, but I have no idea who.

"Your brake lines have been severed," this person says and then hangs up.

I'm going a little nuts, then. I quickly dial our cell phone line and wait breathlessly for Molly to answer.

"Yeah, Neal?"

"Hey, yeah, it's me. Everything okay?"

"Pretty much. They don't seem to make any clothing his size. Surely all kids are this size at some point in their lives. I don't see how come they can't make clothes for them. I mean, they don't just go from 25 pounds directly to 50 or something, do they?"

I try to chuckle for her but my mouth is all dry and I'm trying to think of what to say without spooking her.

"Molly, look, some spook just called me and told me our brakes had been cut. It was probably some sort of prank, but . . . but this guy knew my name."

“They seemed fine to me. Jesus, Neal. I’m at the mall. Should I wait here for you?”

“I haven’t checked the other car out. I just got the call. So could you call somebody to pick you up?”

“How about this. I could get ask people at the Toyota place to come and check it out. They’re only just a couple of miles away, right?”

“Do they work on Saturdays?”

“I don’t know. I’ll call Jess and ask if she’ll pick us up. She’s usually home this time on weekends.”

“Okay. I’ll get this one checked out and let you know what’s up.”

“Look, Neal, this could have happened anywhere, you know.”

“I know,” I say, but really I’m convinced that it couldn’t have.

We have security at the apartment complex. It is the ridiculous fake kind of security that you see in the suburbs sometimes, where every pizza delivery person knows the combination to the gate, which is only in good repair about a third of the time anyway. There are some cameras in the hallways, but none in the parking lot, which has assigned parking spaces. Nobody ever really parks in your spot, but they will park a running car behind you to block you in at the drop of a hat. It would have been easy to cut our brake lines, so I hurriedly dress and walk out to the lot.

There is a little line of oily red fluid leaking out from under the front of my car, which I can see before I get very close at all. I duck to look under the thing and I can’t tell if it is the brake line or the power steering or the radiator or an oil leak, for that matter. But it wasn’t there the previous night.

I call the wife to let her know that the whole matter is serious and then try to call the police. This doesn’t seem like an occasion for 911, but I simply cannot get through to the police on their regular number. Surely they have more than a couple of lines. Shouldn’t it go to voice mail or something at least?

So I’m stuck for a minute thinking about what to do. I call a couple of auto repair places until I can get somebody to look at it. The first two say they are too busy with emergencies to handle it. “Isn’t a cut brake line an emergency?” I ask one of them.

“Yeah, it is if it’s on an ambulance, fire truck or a police car, or some sort of critical delivery vehicle. You got one of them?”

“No,” I admit. “Have there been a lot of those?”

“Youah reporta?”

“No, just curious.”

“We got lots of vandalism down here near campus. You should try some place out in the surrounding communities.” He gives me a couple of names of places to try and I eventually get one to come out and look at it. As it turns out there’s a place just down the street. I just had never been out that direction.

The guy comes out with a tow truck but when he opens the hood he sees the problem right away. “Looks like somebody was mad at you,” he says. He pulls at a couple of loose tubes. “They didn’t want to kill you, though. They cut everything in here made of rubber, everything they could reach from underneath, anyways. Probably wouldn’t even have been able to start the car.”

I silently thank whatever passes for gods out here and ask him if he can get it going again.

“Oh, sure. I just gotta get some pahts from the shop.”

I give him my credit card number and an extra key, because I'm feeling a little more urgent about getting to the library to resolve this thing with Scott and all of the other crazies on campus.

"Just drop it in the mailbox when you're done," I say, knowing that the typical method for doing such things out here is to leave it on the front seat, or then ignition, with the window open.

So I call Ned first, because he's the only one I can think of who might be able to give me a ride to town. Seemed to me he lived in one of these towns nearby. He doesn't answer but calls right back and he and Marisa, yeah, they're apparently an item or something, give me a ride in.

While I'm waiting Molly calls back and the Toyota place has checked the entire brake system and there's nothing wrong with it or any other part of the car that they can find. So she says she's going to over to Jessica's place to put the kid down for his nap.

"I should be back home by the time you get back. Make sure you lock the car up good."

"Was yours locked?"

"Yes."

"Then what does it matter?"

"Well. Okay, it doesn't. But so what do we do?"

"I don't know, Neal. But you need to relax a little. Whoever did it obviously felt bad enough about it to call and warn us."

"But they didn't do it in time. You had already gone."

"Didn't you say they asked for you, specifically?"

"I think that's what I said."

"Is there anybody at the office who might have done something like this?"

"You mean besides my boss?"

"Really, Neal. I can't see Paul crawling under your car with some wire cutters or something. Can you?"

"Well, I can imagine it. But it seems pretty unlikely, I guess."

"Did you call the police yet?"

"I haven't been able to get through to them."

"Keep trying. I'll see you this afternoon. I'll call home before I come."

I hang up and try the police a couple of times with no better results. Maybe I should go to the station. I'll try again from the library where Scott's office is.

About then, Ned arrives. Ned is one of those people who is able to carry on a conversation with somebody inside a car and several people outside a car without hindering either to any degree that I could notice. He drives fast, talks fast, gestures fast, but I never get the sense on the drive in that he is putting us in any danger.

Marisa lets me ride shotgun because I'm a little taller than her.

"So they just cut a bunch of tubes?" she asks from the back.

“Yeah, guy said it was anything they could reach. But the person on the phone claimed that he cut the brakes specifically.”

“Coulda been worse,” she says. I look over at Ned and he’s nodding. I turn my head around and give her a mock glare. “What?”

“I don’t know. I mean, sure, it could’ve been worse, but. I don’t know.”

I sit there and sulk for a little bit, but they resume the animated conversation they were having when I got in the car and even though I have no idea what they are talking about the cheerful conversation, when not aimed directly at me, seems to improve my mood.

Ned parks close to the library at a metered space on the street, open because it is the weekend and so many of the kids are going home to party with their high-school friends. “You want us to come up with you?”

“No, I’m fine. You just going to sit here?”

“I thought we’d play some hacky. I brought my footbag.”

I look over at Marisa and she is looking at him like she has no idea what hacky-sack is. But she doesn’t seem unwilling. I get out of the car and see that it is a pleasant-looking day. A few small clouds scoot by under the sun, but they don’t stick around long enough to make it feel cool out.

I walk up the hill to the library, turning around once to look. They have gotten out of the car by then and Ned is kicking the hacky to her. She tries to kick it back but ends up knocking it into the street to his left and he goes to retrieve it.

When I get near Scott’s office I can see that something is not as it should be. There is some sort of film over the windowed part that looks out on the moveable stacks, for one. And when I get closer I see that there is someone inside. I steel myself for some sort of confrontation. I turn the corner on the stacks and see that it is Nolan, the painter. And he is scraping something on one of the walls.

“Hey, Nolan, what’s . . . what’s that smell?”

“Perfesser, fancy seein you here.”

“Neal.”

“Neal, what brings you here on a Saturday? Come to see some of my work?”

I look around and see that there has been some sort of a fire or something. All of the windows have been darkened by a film of soot, except for the one that looks out on the quad, which has been pried out of its frame and set on the floor. Nolan or somebody else has cleaned the walls a little and he is clearly patching them to paint. There are a couple of canvas drop cloths on the floor and over the desks and other furniture.

“What happened?”

“Some kids, they think. Broke in last night early in the evening and had a little party. Maybe they got cold or something, ‘cause they burned a couple of books.”

My eyes go immediately to the spot on the bookshelves where Scott told me the books he needed would be. I walk over and check and they are not there.

“Just a couple of books?”

“They made a lot of soot and smoke. But there wasn’t anywhere else for the smoke to go. This room is separate from the HVAC of the rest of the building, I guess because they want to make sure that it stays dry. But come to think of it the place really should have some de-humidifier or something. Maybe they were going to put one in later. Anyway, there is just a little fan that takes some of the air and pushes it out of the building, like you’d see in a bathroom.”

“So the smoke alarm didn’t go off?”

“No, the fire alarm neither. That’s lucky, in a way, because it would have destroyed a lot of nice books.” He waves one arm around the room. “As it is it looks like they burnt two of the oldest ones in the place.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask, looking back over at where the books should have been.

“I got here before they cleaned up all the ashes. Parts of some of the pages were left around. Not much, but, . . .” He reached into the back pocket of his painters’ pants. “Here. Look.”

I look at the scraps and they look old, but most books would look old if they were burnt on an edge and were in the same room with a bunch of other books that were being burnt.

“You know a lot about old books?” I ask him, because now I’m starting to get suspicious of everybody.

“Not books. No. Ink, though. I know a lot about ink and paint. I just do this as a day job, you know. It keeps me in Scotch, but I’m an artist.”

“So what’s old about the ink? Looks like regular ink to me.”

“Well, you can still find some of this around, sepia, at artist supply places, mostly. Most of them not in the states, but you can find it. Most people wouldn’t use it to write a journal, or whatever this thing was. Mostly people just use it for something really fancy in the way of calligraphy or maybe pen and ink work. Only seen it once or twice before even then.”

“Sepia. That’s squid’s ink, right?”

“Yeah, or cuttlefish, sometimes.”

“Any chance this was new?” I ask, because I can’t remember the exact timing, and I’m thinking that it’s just too much of a coincidence that a squid died on the other side of campus just a day ago and today I’m looking at ink that is pretty rare and they are not connected in any way.

“Well, I don’t know. Paper looked old, too. But no way to tell for sure. Why?”

“I don’t know,” I say, and my head is spinning a little. “Nolan, what else can you tell me about sepia? What’s so great about it, why is it so rare?”

“Think it’s rare because we have so many types of ink that are better now. Despite what people say. There are lots of paints you can’t get that were much better back in the old days, but ink has actually come a long way.”

“What do you mean ‘the old days’?”

“Well, you know. Back in the Seventies, before the EPA and OSHA and all that. You could get paints made from all kinds of stuff that will kill you. That’s why people used to think painters were crazy, you know. Most of ‘em licked the points of their brushes for fine work.” He makes like he’s licking a pencil he suddenly has in his hand. “Titanium white was the one that people still resent having to do without. I buy mine from this bootlegger who has a source in the Czech Republic somewhere. It’s not even legal there,

but at least you can find it. Here in the states there's not even an illicit source." He shakes his head. "Most of the other stuff was made of heavy metals, too, it helped so much with opacity. Lead paints covered really, really well."

"But not inks?"

"No. Most of the really good ones were made from lampblack or squid ink, cuttlefish. But there's lots better today. They got carbon black they use to make tires black. With inks you aren't usually looking for opacity. You're looking for the ability of the ink to dye."

That syllable just hangs in the air while I look around the library. "Nolan, the guy who takes care of this library is really concerned about the books. He's in Idaho right now and he's going to call me later on today. He'll want to know exactly what happened."

Nolan just looks at me and nods, waits.

"If he has any questions I can't answer, could I give you a call?"

"Yeah. I don't know what it would be. But I could give you my cell number."

"Thanks, Nolan. I'd appreciate it."

He writes it down and hands it to me. "Are you locking up when you finish?" I ask.

"Yup, I am. But it may take a while, because I'm getting double time today, just like those guys on the hill, unless they're getting triple."

"What guys on the hill?"

"Them roughnecks," he says, "buildin' on that derrick or whatever."

## Chapter X

When I get back to Ned's car he and Marisa have stopped playing, stopped attempting to play, hacky, and they are sitting on the other side of the road on a bench watching the construction on the elevator shaft atop the hill, with quizzical looks on their faces.

"What's the deal?" Ned asks, seeing me approach empty-handed. "Couldn't get in?"

"No, the books Scott sent me for have been burned, so there's nothing for me to pick up."

Both of them raise their eyebrows at this and get up.

"This is just getting too weird, too fast," Marisa says, brushing herself off.

I nod my head and shrug. "So, you might as well take me home so I can be there when he calls to give him the bad news."

We ride mostly in silence, although I can see that Marisa has pulled out a little notebook and begun to make some sort of list. Just before we get to my place she says "Ned said earlier that he's been seeing some strange things around campus, and so have I. If you count the murder of Steve and the thing with Scott's books, I've got a list here of fifteen things that I've noticed that seem different from normal for this time of the year."

Ned, stopped at a light, looks back at her. "What have you got?"

She rattles off her list and Ned adds a couple of things to it that come to mind. I tell her about the owls and Lisa, the electrical engineering professor.

"Do either of you think that it just feels weird today being on campus? It just feels, I don't know. It feels like things are too quiet."

They both look at me, then each other. "Maybe," Ned finally says, but he looks dubious.

I tell them about the opossums, but she doesn't write it down. "Opossums are just like that," she says.

Then she asks if there was anything strange about the books that got burned. "You know. I mean was there anything strange about the way they were burned or what kind of books they were?" she adds.

"I don't know. They took one of the windows out to do it. But I don't know how they burnt them. I guess I should have asked Nolan."

"Nolan?"

"The painter who was there cleaning up and repainting. He's an interesting guy. The books were rare, according to Scott. Nolan says they were pretty old, because they actually used squid ink, sepia."

"He knew it by sight?"

“Yeah, I guess he’s a sort of wannabe artist. Or maybe a real one. I don’t know. He seemed to know his materials, anyway.”

She’s silent for another few seconds, then says “Ned . . .”

“Yeah, it’s okay with me,” he says.

“We weren’t going to tell anyone this until we managed to do it, but somehow this seems relevant. Ned and I have been attempting to synthesize sepia. It might be too hard to do. Chemically it is a lot more complicated than it looks. We ordered a bunch of the ink from a supply house in Boston to test it against. It has some really interesting properties.”

“Interesting because it makes strange designs?”

“Yeah, but it is more than that. Ned, did you tell him that some of the designs seem to repeat?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Repeat. So the ink makes the same designs over and over?”

“Or Steve did. We’re not sure which. I think there is something nano going on there. Ned says that he sees some fractal geometry in the designs. Anyway, we rigged up a machine to release the ink into sea water and it has been running for,” she checks her watch, “about six hours now. And it’s being filmed. If it repeats, or makes the same designs that Steve made, the computer should be able to tell us.”

She adds a couple of items to her list under the general heading “squid/ink” and by the time we reach my place she has got a list that covers two full pages and numbers forty-six items. But none of them seem to connect to anything or even each other very well.

“That pattern recognition stuff is getting pretty robust,” Ned adds.

So then we’ll know what, exactly?”

She looks again at Ned as he pulls up to the gate. “Three one five oh, right?” he asks. Even Ned knows the combination to this place. I nod, and he punches it in.

“We’ll know more about the state of our ignorance . . .” she finally says. They both smile. I get out of the car and we say our goodbyes.

“Let me know what Scott has to say about the books,” he adds.

“Actually,” I add. “We should meet later.”

They both look at me as if to say that they would be happy to, but that they would also like to know why.

“I think that it is possible that Scott knows some things that can tie a bunch of this business together.” I’m not going to spill the beans about that weirdness that Scott handed me over the phone. Not yet. I mean, ancient cults and “Old Ones?” The time just didn’t seem right yet.

Raised eyebrows again, but they seem willing to give me the benefit of the doubt for a little while longer.

“Your ride fixed?” Ned asks, leaning his head towards my car.

“Could be. If not I can borrow Molly’s.”

“We’re going to be at the lab. Just call first so I remember to answer the door. It has some wicked locks now.”

They take off and I’m left to wait at home for Scott to call. I’m hoping he can give me more than I will be able to give him.

I can’t seem to do anything productive around the house. I decide to drink some coffee, which even I recognize is not really a solution to the jitters I am beginning to feel.

I’m just a grant writer at a University, a guy who decided he didn’t want to become an academic because the work is too difficult. Well, there are other reasons, too. I’m not really afraid of hard work, I remind myself. It is probably the fact that I don’t really like to be the center of attention. Add that to the fact that about ten people graduate with a history degree for every tenure track position that opens up these days and a hatred of rejection and it was obviously not the direction for me.

I have no idea what I could possibly do about any of this and I begin to fear Scott’s call, because it seemed clear by the tone of his voice last time that something really needed to be done about all of this stuff. And what’s worse, whatever is going on seems to involve my family now. I just can’t sit by now. But I haven’t any idea what there is to do.

If I had my cell phone I could call the police again and see what they are doing about all of this, or if they even recognize that things are getting a little weird here in town. But then I start to think that aside from the death of a squid, which many people view as part of a balanced diet, and a very tiny book-burning party in the library, and vandalism against my car, there is little I could really say is wrong.

And I’ve had my car vandalized in lots of places. One time a friend’s car was vandalized right out in front of the house I grew up in, when we were in high school. It was a sleepy little western town, too.

But everything feels so wrong. And that feeling seems to get worse now—I finally decide to trust my feelings on this part—the closer I go to the center of town.

The phone finally rings after about an hour of this tail-chasing.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Neal. This is Scott. How are things?”

I tell him about my car being vandalized as sort of an appetizer, warming him up a little before I get to the subject of his call. “Scott,” I finally say, “somebody broke into your little rare books room last night and burned three volumes, the three that you asked me to get for you. So I don’t really have any way to help, I’m afraid.”

“That’s okay, and from what I’ve heard from Quillan over the last day it’s really to be expected.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, he says that he’s relatively certain that one of these Old Ones is in town right now.”

“Okay. So what can be done about this? Is there somebody we can call?”

“Quillan spent the last few decades there studying this stuff and hoping that the weird things that periodically happened around town were just some sort of leftover residue from when the Old Ones occupied that place. He says that since things are getting weirder it means that most likely one of them has been awakened and is being housed somewhere around campus.”

“Apparently very few members of the Anthropology Department have shown themselves lately. Any chance they brought this thing into their building somewhere, or something like that?”

“Well, they are pretty big when they have enough to eat, but they shrink and get a little, well, desiccated, according to accounts, when they have been dormant as long as this one has. So it probably is not much bigger than a man, and probably a little lighter, something they could easily hide in the Anthro building. But there is really little that can be done, I think, in terms of enlisting the help of the “authorities.”

“Why?”

“Come on, Neal, you’re a smart guy. If you tell any of this story to, say the police, what are you going to get?”

“Disbelief.”

“Maybe. But let’s say they do believe you, or they believe you enough to investigate. Have you noticed how things feel different on campus than they did, say, last week at this time?”

“Yeah, I think so. It’s just a little more oppressive feeling. I get anxious. It’s different, but hard to describe.”

“Well Quillan says that as you get close to an Old One this gets a lot worse. But it’s not the only thing that happens. When they are weak they can only affect animals and people who are sleeping. But as they rejuvenate themselves they can start making people do what they want when they get close. So if you bring the police and they see this thing and get close to it, you’ll find that they become its allies.”

“So this is like the ideal situation, then. There are only a handful of people who will believe you and Quillan about what is going on. Anybody else is likely under its control by now or is not likely to believe us until it is too late?”

“Sounds about how we figured it.”

“I’m not really the hero type, Scott.”

“Who is? Anybody you know well enough to try to convince?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know that many people here.”

“Ned will help, I’m sure.”

“Well, so that’s one we can count on. Maybe he knows some others.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“What do we have to do to this thing, then?”

“Well, they are really tough. Apparently, though, they can be killed. You just need some serious firepower. Probably a shotgun will do it, but it might be better if you had something that you could use from a distance.”

“Assuming we could get it in our sights before it is able to control our minds, or whatever. I’m not liking this a whole lot, Scott.”

“Believe me, I’m really glad I’m on the other side of the country right now. But I’ve booked the next flight out, just in case. And Quillan is thinking of joining me, although he hates the thought even more than I do. He knows what these things can do.”

"What about blowing the place up?"

"Could you be sure you didn't take half the faculty with it?"

"No, I guess not. Look, what's the long-run scenario? I'm not really for appeasement, but what's the real danger beyond what we are already seeing? Does this thing keep getting stronger or something?"

"I don't think so. The only time they were ever encountered before they stayed put and just got a little stronger. Then they were destroyed by their enemies. And that sounds nice, but apparently all of the mental effort this thing is putting forth can eventually attract its enemies, which you really don't want to meet. Make these things look like good neighbors."

"So that's one down-side."

"Yeah but there's a worse one to consider. Apparently these things built their own little helpers, called Shoggoths. These were quasi-biological lumps that took on whatever shape was needed to do the job, whether that was building cities, collecting food, digging tunnels, whatever."

"So this thing could build one of these?"

"Well, the records Quillan has seen seem to say that they lost the ability to create these things. But he believes that one of these is also buried somewhere deep below the town, in the same sort of protective shell that the Old One was found in."

"So?"

"And if it somehow is dug out, this thing can multiply and that would be that."

"Meaning?"

"Quillan seems to think that would be the end of civilization, at least unless or until they nuked New England."

"Well I've got good news, then. They have stopped the excavation for the elevator."

"Maybe that gives us some time."

"I hope so. No, wait a minute. How big a hole would need to be made in its little housing or shell or whatever, for this thing to get out?"

"They are really flexible, Quillan says. They can fit into anything, assume pretty much any shape. It wouldn't take much. Quillan served on the city planning board too, not just the University. He as terrified somebody was going to sink a well into one of these things. It's why the City hasn't developed far from the river, he always found a reason to keep them from sinking a well."

"This just isn't my day. Scott, they replaced the excavation with what looks to be some sort of oil-well drilling equipment. The guy who was repainting your rare books room says they brought a crew up from Texas with the rig."

"No offense intended, Neal, but I think this thing just got a little more complicated."

"I'm moving back to Idaho. I've had it." There's silence on the other end of the phone. I am frustrated, but I get the impression that Scott is even more so. At least I'm here and can, theoretically, do something about the whole mess.

"What do we do against this Shoggoth?"

"You have to keep it from getting out. You have to stop the drilling."

"How am I going to do that when everybody who gets close to campus gets under this thing's influence? Cripes, Scott, the Chancellor just spent a couple of weeks reorganizing the budget around completing the excavation for the elevator. They altered the state budget. My boss pulled money out of a slush fund just to get rid of a meddling history professor. Hell, Scott, there's Federal money involved. If we try to stop this thing they'll lock us up and throw away the key. Not to mention the minor fact that I'll lose my job, my wife will lose hers, and anyone else involved will lose theirs. You know how hard it is for people with degrees in the humanities to find anything tenure-track.

"Look, I'm going to go back and get Quillan to come into town. We'll call you back in, say, two hours. Hopefully he can get together some notes to help us answer anymore questions that you might have by then. Right now I don't have any ideas other than what I gave you already. You should in the mean time gear up to get rid of the Old One. The longer he's there the more influence he has. Maybe if you off him some way will open up to stop the project. Best I can do until later."

I hear papers shuffling in the background. "Wait, what about this Nolan guy? Would you trust him to help?"

"I'd trust him, but I don't know if he'd believe us about this stuff."

"But he was talking to you in the Library as if nothing was wrong with him?"

"Yeah."

"Well haven't all of the construction guys been moved to temporary quarters near Engineering?"

"Again, yeah. Where are you going with this?"

"Neal, those quarters are almost as close to Anthro. If this guy seemed like he was relatively normal, maybe he's not as susceptible to the Old One's influence."

"Or he could be completely a spy for the Old One or something like that."

"Did he seem like that to you?"

"No. He seemed the same as he was last time I saw him. And that was off-campus. I'll give him a call."

"Great. I've got one more thing. You mentioned Nolan when you were talking about the books that had been burned." He flips through papers again. "Oh, yeah. Steve. Steve was killed. You think that was connected to any of this?"

"I don't know, Scott. Marisa is making a list of odd things that have been happening on or near campus in the last two weeks . . ."

"Marisa?"

"Friend of Ned's, a new one. She and he have some similar research interests, apparently. Anyway, we could share the list with you later. I don't know which things are connected and which are just weird."

"But what's your gut say?"

"Well, my gut is just churning quietly. But Marisa and Ned are working pretty feverishly on synthesizing sepia. They started the project just after Steve was killed. I don't think either of them could

tell you why exactly they are doing it, but they seem to think that there is something special and important about it."

"Okay, I'll mention it to Quillan when I see him."

I feel my chest getting tight. I realize that I'm in this pretty deep now. No real way to pull out, and I don't know what I'm going to tell Molly about where I'm going tonight.

"Scott, get in touch with us through Ned's cell phone. I might not have mine."

"You got it. Look, Neal, I'm sure that this is going to be really doable. Once the Old One has been taken out, things will go right back to normal. It will all look a little weird, but I promise, between Quillan's influence on people on campus and in town, we should be able to see to it that nobody is permanently harmed by all this."

"I wasn't even thinking of the aftermath. Thanks for reminding me. I guess I just hope at this point that there is an aftermath. I've got a kid to think about."

"That's right. Jeez. We're pulling for you guys. I'll talk to you soon."

We hang up and I stand there at the sink just staring into space for about twenty minutes. Then I remember that I have to call Nolan.

"Noly here," he says.

"Nolan, this is Neal, Neal Slater?"

"Yeah, Hi Neal," he says and I realize that he sounds as if he's already had a few, and it's only three forty-five. "What's up?"

"Well, Nolan. I've got a strange sort of story for you, something you may find it a little hard to believe."

"Oh, yeah, I've got one for you, too."

"Really," I say, a little taken aback. But then, this guy seems like he'd have some strange stories on tap. "Well, you go first, then."

"You remember those guys with the big drill on the hill?"

"Yeah, you said they were oil well drillers from Texas."

"Them's the ones. Well I went up to see what they were doing after I finished painting, and those boys were the biggest bunch of dicks I ever met."

"Really."

"Really. One of 'em grabbed a pipe and lit out after me. Like to beat me to death with it. He tripped over something coming down the steps. Woulda got me if he hadn't."

"Jesus."

"Didn't look nothing like Jesus either. He was screaming something at me, but I couldn't understand a word he said."

"Nolan, have you noticed any other weird things happening on campus in the last couple of weeks?"

"Stranger than normal, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Every night for a while a bunch of maintenance guys would get up and walk around after maybe one o'clock in the morning. A couple of times I saw them and asked them where they were going, because I was hoping they knew about a party or something. But they wouldn't say anything. It was almost like they were sleepwalking."

"For a while. You mean they don't do it anymore?"

"A bunch of them have been gone since about Wednesday. So I don't know if they are doing it or not. The rest of them seem to stay asleep now. They seem pretty tired."

"That's all pretty bizarre, but I think my stuff is going to be a bit stranger than that, Nolan." I find myself struggling with where exactly to start what is fast becoming pretty convoluted tale. "You know that guy who kept the rare book room?"

"Quillan?"

"No, Scott Peterson, the guy who takes care of it now."

"I don't know Scott, but I've seen him around, I think."

"Well he's with Quillan in Kellogg Idaho right now. They both have this strange theory about all this stuff that's going on on campus."

"Well that Quillan guy is all right. I used to talk to him sometimes. He was on top of things. Knew lots of crazy stories, too."

"Okay. Well he thinks that the excavation has unearthed some sort of creature that can control the thoughts of animals and even people." I get silence on the other end of the line. "He calls this thing an Old One. And he says that this thing is behind all the stuff going on." More silence.

"So what do we do about this thing?"

"Quillan says we need to kill it, that we need to shoot it, from a distance if possible, with a relatively powerful rifle or something."

"Oh, I'm in."

"You are?"

"Oh, yeah. This crap's gotta stop. People wandering around all night running errands for some creature that ain't even human. That's just wrong. Burning books. Crap."

"Well, those are good reasons, I guess. They're certainly good enough for me. Nolan, you wouldn't by any chance have anything like that. I mean a hunting rifle or assault weapon or something?"

"I've got something that might just fit that bill, matter of fact," he says. "I think I've got just the thing."

I don't even want to know at this point, actually, so I just take him at his word. "Great. Um, a bunch of us, well, three of us, are meeting later on to put together a plan. Where's a good place to meet?"

"Paige's, on Central."

"Paige's, on Central." I write it down, because I don't remember it or have any idea where it is. Central's a short street, though. "Meet you there around 6:00?"

"You got it. Want me to bring anyone else?"

"That would be great, Nolan. Um, is there someone you think will believe all this stuff, and would want to help?"

"I know a guy who is pretty credulous, I guess. I think he'd help out if he thought it was for a good cause, and if I told him to."

"Well, I'll leave that up to you, Nolan. We'll see you at Paige's, then. At six. Thanks."

Just as I hang up the phone I hear Molly in the hallway, fumbling with her keys.

## Chapter XI

Quickly I run into the bathroom to compose myself, to think of some sort of reason why I have to go out tonight and meet with this group of people, put a high-powered bullet into some world-destroying monster. I flip the exhaust fan on to provide some white noise, which will drown out the voices of my wife and son. My mind is racing, but I usually, on instinct, am honest about where I'm going and what I'm doing. It is not easy for me to fabricate complicated lies. Usually when I am dishonest it is through omission. I am simply not very devious. I like things simple. I have no joy in the complexity that dishonesty requires. I finally realize that this will be my salvation. I will simply tell Molly that I really want to go out and meet with some people tonight at a pub called Paige's.

I pause for a moment to try to figure out whether she can derail that line of thought with a well-aimed question of some sort. I decide that my little half-truth is completely unworkable, because I am not the type of person who usually goes out to bars with friends. Wait a minute. One time I did such a thing in graduate school because I was trying to make friends, and she encouraged that. I had a lousy time, but maybe there is some way to get her thinking of that time. Think, think, think, think. . . .

I wonder for a moment if I should tell her that I forgot about an appointment I made earlier in the week, and can't back out of it now. Yeah, that's the ticket. I could say that I agreed to meet with this grant-maker, who, um, say, Ned said would be in town only tonight, and it is a really excellent potential relationship for the University. Okay, now we're getting somewhere. This guy could be from Washington, DC. And maybe this guy is willing to fund some aquaculture stuff and wants to hear about other things the University is doing, so Ned asked me if I could be there to explain the lay of the land. Yes, this is definitely a good one. I just need a name for the foundation, something that she wouldn't check up on. No, wait, I don't remember the name of it. Better yet, Ned didn't remember the name of it. But he wanted us to meet at this pub, so I'm really sorry.

I think this will work. It won't, I'll be caught, and then I'll have to tell the truth and then what will happen? What if Molly insists upon calling the police? Then the police take us all away until the Shoggoth gets loose and the world comes to an end and we are all eaten by horrible monsters?

I feel like I'm going to throw up. I wash my face and go through a few more iterations of this cyclical mess, my expensively educated brain no more use to me than a hammer in this situation. I look in the mirror and my face is completely pale. There's a knock at the bathroom door.

"Neal, are you all right in there?"

"Yeah, I'll be right out," I claim, though I'm not sure I'll come out at all, having said it out loud. Finally I decide, as with most things in my marriage and family life, that I will do best by just wading in and seeing what will happen. There may be fireworks or a firestorm, but eventually everything seems to work out O.K.

I rush over to where my son is, first. "Hey, Bubby, did you have fun?"

"Dat," he says, pointing at a can of mixed peas and carrots, his favorites.

“Sure, you can have some, let me open them up,” I say and immediately I am sorry, because Molly is shaking her head.

“I told him he couldn’t have any more, because it is past time for his afternoon nap and he had some French fries in the car.”

“Sorry,” I say, and I mean it, although I feel like I have made him a promise now and don’t know what to do.

“Ned called for you when you were in the bathroom.”

The world wobbles once again. I look at her and try to play the whole thing cool. “What did he want?”

“He wanted to know when you were going to be at the lab,” she says, and my position isn’t getting any better here.

“Oh, sorry about that. He called earlier . . .”

“Yeah, he told me all about it. I was sorry to hear about his squid. University students can be so cruel.”

I nod, not having any idea where this is going to take me, but hoping I can forge ahead with vagueness for a few more exchanges.

“Anyway, I didn’t know what to tell him, so you probably ought to call and let him know.”

She gives me that little half-smile that is an attempt to make it less offensive that she is reminding me to do something I should already be doing. She goes to put the kid, who is now crying because he has been promised peas and carrots that he may not have, down for his nap.

I reach for the phone and dial Ned’s lab. Marisa answers again.

“Hi Marisa.”

“Hello, Neal. We figured you might need an excuse to get away. So just listen and say ‘Mmmm’ every once and a while. We already told Molly that we had called you at the last minute to meet with a prospective funder and that your ideas this week on our project were really helpful. We told her that your intuitive grasp of the interdisciplinary benefits of our working together, and your inherent skepticism are going to bring great things to this University. We told her that we hoped to get together with the two of you soon, too, and that we had some suggestions for babysitters, and a bunch of other stuff that doesn’t matter. So here’s what does matter. We are not actually able to leave the lab right now. We barely made it into the lab without being seen. There are people all over campus, and animals as well.”

“Animals?”

“Neal, you are to say ‘hmmmm,’ nought else. There are like, herds, of groundhogs, dogs, birds, and other critters running around campus right now. We’re hoping that things will quiet down, but while we were running to the lab from the car we saw a bunch of stray cats chasing a group of students into the dorms.”

“Hmmm. Uh huh.”

“You got it, Neal. Look, the power has been cut, too. In the dorms and in many of the campus buildings. I don’t think this is really a good place for us to meet.”

“Nolan suggested Paige’s.”

“Nolan, the painter.”

“Yeah, he’s in with us now. Do you know Paige’s?”

Silence for a second, then “Ned does.”

“So if you can get away, we can meet there. If not, maybe we can come and get you. Do you have a good charge on your phone?”

“Yeah, we’ve got some generator power that couldn’t be cut, the tanks, you know. So Ned rigged his charger to it.”

“Let me give you Nolan’s number,” I say, and just after I give it to her Molly is back and I have to shut up again.

Marisa says “we’ll try to figure out some things while we’re here. The experiment was somewhat successful, by the way.”

“Oh, good, well I’ll come to you for all of my ink needs.”

“Hope to see you or hear from you soon. I told Molly—she seems nice, by the way—that you’d have to be leaving soon and would be back, we promised, by ten-thirty.”

“Ten-thirty. Right.”

I put the phone back on the cradle. Molly collapses on the couch and I begin a round of apologies for all the screw-ups I have committed since she got home. She waves me off and I realize that I am one lucky guy. And it is strange to feel lucky about deceiving the one you love so that you can go kill an ancient mind-manipulating monster, but there it is.

I grab a sport coat, thinking that it will look like I am dressing up a little while also potentially offering a place to hide a gun, if Nolan should have such a thing. And after kissing the boy and then the wife goodbye I grab the cell-phone and head out the door.

I drive around a little bit until I find a place to park and then call Nolan.

“Nolan, it’s me, Neal.”

“Hey,” he says, slurring a little bit, “Neal, I’d like you to meet my friend Ronnie. Ronnie say hi.” Ronnie says just that and then Nolan takes the phone back.

“Nolan, some things have changed a little.”

“Damn right things have changed a little. Me an’ Ronnie were just on campus, and things are getting’ kind active.”

“Why were you on campus?”

“Reconnoiterin’, sir,” he shouts into the phone. I begin to wonder if he is going to be any help at all, drunk and disorderly. But I really have little choice at this point.

“My friends are on campus, in the biology building. They’re sort of trapped, actually. You think we can get them out?”

“Sure can. Can do, sir.”

“Could we meet right now?”

“Yep, we’re at Paige’s and you can come on over. Paige! He yells, “I’ll take one of those for the doctor I been tellin’ you about. He’ll be here in just a sec.”

“Okay, Nolan, I’ll be right there.”

Continued

I pull up to Paige’s and was a little surprised to see several open parking spaces on the street. It seems to be the type of place that catered to the locals who lived downtown, the ones in the projects, or the ones in the new and expensive condos they were making by restoring old mill buildings. Then I realize that many of these are rented by artists. Some of them have twelve-foot ceilings and can handle heavy equipment without bothering the neighbors and are let as “Artist’s Lofts.” Maybe this is an artist’s hangout of some sort.

Many people wouldn’t want to park on the street, which is narrow through there, fearing that somebody would hit their car on the way through, driving by feel on a Saturday night. I’ve never been that particular about the exterior of my car, though. I’m much more worried about somebody cutting the brake cables or something at this point, so the street suits me fine, right under a light.

I walk in an notice that it is one of those places that still allows people to smoke. It has been so long since I went into a pub or a bar that I had forgotten they still exist. In fact, my reflexes have been so attuned to keep a blank facial expression when running into those clouds that have cropped up in front of entrances to University buildings that I don’t flash my annoyance at the cloud that greets me at the door—Marlboro with a trace of Borkum Riff, perhaps.

When my eyes adjust, but before they begin to water, I see Nolan, with his friend, in the back of what seems to be an empty pub. The walls are of wooden paneling with dozens, perhaps hundreds of paintings, drawings, cartoons, even some calligraphy, I notice, hung floor to ceiling, all over it. They don’t festoon the walls so much as bury them, and they all seem to be covered with a nicotine patina by which they can be dated.

I wave at Nolan and try not to duck under the cloud, even though I can see that the air looks considerably clearer half-way to the floor.

“Hey, Nolan. How’s it going?”

“Good. Neal, Travis; Travis, Neal.”

“Travis, did Nolan tell you anything already about what we’re here for?”

“Did more than that,” barks Nolan. “We were on campus about half an hour ago.”

Travis nods silently, holding onto a mug of beer with both hands. He looks to be a little younger than Nolan, maybe in his late thirties, tough to tell what kind of work he’s in, doesn’t dress like Nolan, who dresses like a group of housepainters found a derelict artist outside freezing to death and, feeling sorry for him, gave him their winter outerwear. Clean-shaven and not smoking—or smoking second-hand to Nolan’s first so that he can keep both hands on the beer--he seems more put-together, a refugee from the home-improvement channel, perhaps.

“So, what did you see?”

“Saw enough to be in on whatever you got planned,” Nolan says, but I’m hoping to get some commitment from Travis, so I look at him instead of Nolan and he simply nods again. That will have to do, I guess.

“Well, what’s happening there?”

“You go anywhere near the hill and you get attacked by animals,” he says.

I nod, thinking of Ned and Marisa holed up in the biological sciences building.

“Most of the lights are out, ‘cept at the top, where they are trying to get the drill up and running.”

“So it is a drill.”

“Yep,” Travis finally pipes up. “I worked on one just like it once, down in Louisiana. From what we could see I’d say they’re going to have it up and running in maybe a few hours. Six, maybe.”

“Is it the kind they use for drilling for oil, then?”

“Oh, yeah.” He nods again. “It’s a beefy one, too.”

“We got a pretty close look at it, too, afore we was chased off,” Nolan adds.

“How did you guys get out unharmed,” I ask. But the real question almost chases that one out of my mouth, but I’m afraid to say it. I’m trying to figure out how come these guys, and Ned and Marisa, for that matter, aren’t pulled into this Old One’s orbit. Why don’t they become its servants like everybody else?

“We was armed,” Nolan says while I’m thinking these thoughts. He pulls a black bag from under the table of the booth and sets it on top with a clank. I look around for the bartender, but she, or he, is nowhere in sight. Guns make me so uncomfortable, so nervous. I had a cousin who shot part of his arm off cleaning one once, and he seemed really careful. Maybe he was only really careful after the accident, but it happens to so many people. Something that powerful and dangerous just seems to have a mind of its own.

“Check this baby out,” Nolan says as he reaches into the bag, but I hold my hands up to tell him I believe him, that he doesn’t need to show me, and he stops for a second.

“So, what? You waved a gun at people to make them leave you alone? I don’t get it.”

“No, you don’t,” Nolan says, looking a little offended, and reaches into the bag again, pulling out the strangest looking gun I had ever seen. It has a huge barrel and several containers sticking off at odd angles. I can’t imagine what it is, but it doesn’t look legal at all.

“Jesus, Nolan, what is that thing?”

“Paintball gun. We didn’t have to wave it at anybody. Critters just come anywhere near us, we put a nice even coat on ‘em. Or try to. They don’t stick around for long enough to make sure.”

“Paintball gun. I get it.” My fears that these two are double agents lightens a little. They could hardly be working for this old one. Maybe it found them inadequate servants. Maybe it can’t work with crazy people. But the animals seem to do whatever it wants them to.

“So the animals get the hint when you shoot at them?” They both nod and Travis laughs. “What about the ones that you don’t manage to actually hit?”

“With most of them it was like they’re walking around in a trance or something. Sleepwalking, or flying or scamperin’. Once we unloaded a few dozen rounds they started acting like animals usually do. Except when we got really close to the Four.”

By “The Four,” Nolan meant the four Anthropology buildings that were built close together in a group during the 1970s, the heyday of this particular field of study on this particular campus.

“When we got over there they didn’t act like normal animals, but they couldn’t really coordinate very well neither. They would come at us, but slowly. We shot at a few of them, but we saw some people coming and high-tailed it out of there.”

“Okay, Nolan, Quillan is going to call in a little bit and then we’ll know a little more. What I know now is that the well is the real danger here.” I explain to both of them about the Old One, who has been getting more powerful and has begun to bend his efforts to unleashing his servant underground, the Shoggoth. I tell him of the danger of getting too close to the Old One but the absolute necessity of killing it, and then stopping the drilling.

And then I float a few ideas past them. “It seems to me that from a distance this Old One is able to control people and animals as if they were dreaming somehow. But when you guys shot paintballs at them, they snapped out of their dreams.”

“Sure did!” Travis says, chuckling. Nolan chuckles along with him.

“But when you guys got close enough, it could control the creatures directly, only not as easily, or as well.”

“Sounds right.”

I pause for a second, trying to think of how to phrase my next question. “I don’t understand how come it doesn’t affect you guys,” I finally say, looking at Nolan and then I pointedly look at Travis, who Nolan characterized earlier as a follower. I couldn’t remember his actual words, but they seemed to add up to “easily led.”

“Well, I think we’ve got an answer for that.”

“I’d really like to hear it.”

“When we first started up the hill, Travis started acting funny.” Travis seems embarrassed at this, and looks down at his beer. Then he picks it up and takes a big swig from the mug. But I didn’t feel nothin’, so we backed off a little. Now Travis, he doesn’t drink.”

I look over at him as he wipes the foam from his mouth, sets the mug down and holds his right hand up as if ready to take the Boy Scouts pledge. “He doesn’t.”

“But I was thinking about how I wasn’t affected when most of the construction people on campus were wandering around at all hours last week. So I handed my hipflask to him and held my paintball gun on him while he took some medicine. He choked on it a little. But in a few minutes he seemed to be able to handle things better.”

“So you aren’t affected by this thing . . .”

“Because I drink quite a bit,” Nolan finished. “Fact is, though, it could be any of the chemicals coursing through my body. Painters get exposed to all kinds of stuff. I smoke, I drink. I’ve been know to do other stuff as well.”

I nodded, then began to think about the implications. "So we should have a few before we go, I suppose."

"Barkeep!" Nolan belts out.

I ask him for his cell phone to tell Ned and Marisa what we found out, wanting to keep my line open for when Scott and Quillan call. I reach Marisa again and they had both wondered about that, but were not surprised, since they had both smoked marijuana the night before. I urge her to have some more and ask how they were getting along in their plans to get out.

"We were kinda hoping to hear what this is all about, and what you have planned, if anything, before we decide. Cards on the table time, Neal. What's going on? Ned told me some wild stuff that Scott told him a while back, stories about some ancient religion. Any of that true?"

"Quite a bit of it, I think. It seems to tie these things together better than anything else. There's an Old One loose on campus, holed up in the anthropology building, and it is forcing people to drill a hole and unearth its little helper, which is apparently buried a little further down."

"You mean another Old One?"

"No, unfortunately there is something a little worse down there. At least that's what Scott and Quillan thing. It is called a Shoggoth, and it is just a helpful servant of the Old One, but apparently it is able to do a lot more damage, in a real, physical sense. And it can apparently reproduce, which Scott says the Old One cannot. The upshot is that we should get rid of the Old One tonight and then stop the drilling. That part should be easy once we have gotten rid of the Old One, because it won't be able to manipulate people and animals anymore."

"Neal, can you hold on for a minute?" She covers the phone with a hand and I hear some mumbling in the background. I look over at Travis and he seems very peaceful. I wonder how much he has drunk. Then I look for Nolan, who got up, presumably to get the barkeep, and see him talking to a tall woman with short red hair who has just returned from the back of the building bearing an armful of napkins.

Nolan had pointed out that we don't really know whether it is necessary to drink alcohol to avoid the influence of this Old One, could be anything coursing around in your bloodstream confuses it enough to do the trick. But I find myself wanting it to be alcohol, wanting to be a little numb for what lies ahead of me tonight. The woman at the bar nods her head to Nolan's gesticulations and begins to set up shot glasses and beer steins, three of each, on the bar.

"Neal, Ned wants to talk to you."

"Hey, Neal," he says, breathing a little hard. "I kinda figured out some of this while we were stranded here. And so Marisa and I have been preparing a little something, just in case."

"Really?" It is a blessing, too, to be surrounded by really smart people who are also really flexible.

"Yeah. You know how this building is connected to facilities?"

"Didn't."

"Well, it is. And it is connected to the Quadanthro, too," he says, Quadanthro apparently being Ned's improvised shorthand for the four anthropology buildings. "They are all connected through underground tunnels. Most people don't know about them, because they are mostly blocked. Some by storage closets and shelves. But they are there."

“Okay.”

“Anyway, Marisa says this thing is in Anthro. Is there anybody in there with it?”

“I don’t know. Nolan and his friend weren’t able to get close enough to tell. Why?”

“Because we can get there from here. And we can get our hands on some explosives, too.”

“Explosives?”

“Yeah. The facilities people ordered a bunch of fertilizer, you know with the nitrogen in it, just before that stuff became, well, controlled. A bunch of us were trying to get them to stop using it at about the same time, cause it’s bad for the environment, so they just stockpiled it here. And I’ve already rigged up a timer. We’ve got those carts that we can move a bunch of it with. Easiest way might be to simply blow the whole building, unless that will take a bunch of others with it.”

At that point my cell phone rang. It was Scott.

“Look, Ned, can I call you right back?”

“Sure, I’ll keep working on this. Let me know.”

I hung up Nolan’s phone and opened mine up.

## Chapter XII

“Scott?” I asked my phone, staring blankly at the tray of drinks that Nolan had just set on the table.

“Yeah, it’s me. I’ve got Dr. Quillan here with me. Can you hear me all right?”

“Yes. So it looks like we’re going to go in tonight and try to do this thing in, before they can unearth the Shoggoth. Nolan found some things out about it.”

“What did he find?”

“Well, he found out that if you are three sheets to the wind, the Old One can’t really get a good grip on your mind. He found this out the old fashioned way, experimentally.”

“So you guys are going to get a little plastered and then go tackle this thing?”

“That’s the plan, so far. I just talked to Ned, who is stuck in the biological sciences building, and he has a variation on that plan, except that he’s a little squiffed, too.”

“What’s Ned thinking, then?”

“He is thinking of blowing up the anthro building where this thing is, or at least all four of the anthro buildings. A bit of overkill, but if there are no people around it, it might be the best way to go, better than tackling this thing in person. So, question for you, do you think this thing has people around it, helping it out, feeding it, guarding it, or whatever?”

“Hang on.” I hear some mumbling in the background as Scott discusses it. I seize the opportunity to slam down the brown volatile liquid that Nolan has placed in front of me. It was apparently Bourbon, which makes me gag a little bit. I never cared for the flavor of Bourbon. I chase it with the beer. “Quillan says that he doesn’t know. There’s nothing about this in any of the books he was able to read. But that doesn’t mean much, because a lot of this stuff isn’t really covered.”

“I guess that we should at least take a look, then. Maybe we can use Ned’s plan as sort of a backup, blow it up if we can’t seem to succeed in any other way.”

“Might be best.”

“Scott, did you find anything else out about this thing. Is there anything else Quillan has that we might be able to use?”

“Yeah, actually. I mentioned something to him about the squid, and what Ned and Marisa have been up to in the lab. Maybe I should let him tell you.”

“Fine with me.”

I down the rest of the beer as Scott puts Quillan on the line.

“Hello, is this Neal?” asks a grandfatherly voice distorted by digital signals making their way independently across an entire continent.

“Yes, Dr. Quillan?”

“Nice to meet you. This is rather sketchy, I’m afraid, but here’s what I remember from my notes. The squid apparently experienced a spectacular evolutionary punctuation right about the time these creatures are said to have first appeared on earth. Most of the records from the University’s polar expedition in the 1920s, where there was some attempt to translate pictorial murals in the city of the old ones, seem to show that the Old Ones primarily lived under the ocean, at a considerable depth. They fed upon squids of a number of different types. This led to a near total extinction of squid several times, of course, which fossil records are unfortunately mum about.”

“Doctor, I’m afraid I just don’t see where you are going with this and . . .”

“Patience, young man. I do have a point, here. It was during this time that the squids evolved their ink sacs, you see.”

“Okay.”

“Neal, their ink sacs evolved in response to the hunting, over a couple of millions of years.”

“So the ink is some sort of defense mechanism against the Old Ones?”

“No, no, not the Old Ones. The Old Ones don’t really go in for physical labor, you see. It would have been a defense against the Shoggoths. In fact, it appears to have been an excellent defense. You see, it is from the development of the ink sacs that we can date the time when the Old Ones and the Shoggoths both went into hibernation. The Old Ones constructed crypts, or maybe cocoons is a better word, for themselves and for the remaining Shoggoths. They constructed both out of materials that the Shoggoths could not penetrate. In this case, of course, they did not construct these out of ink. I believe that they did not have the ability to do this, but I really don’t know. There is a possibility that they constructed these crypts out of lead, which was another one of the findings of the polar expedition. But some of the murals from that expedition, in any case, seem to be showing that the ink actually destroyed the Shoggoths, at least the ones under the water. Pictures seem to show them actually dissolving.”

“But the ink doesn’t work on the Old Ones?”

“I’m afraid we just don’t know.”

“Then why would the Old Ones have made their cocoons out of lead? Maybe they are affected by the same materials the Shoggoths are.”

“They would have had to insulate themselves against the Shoggoths, which unchecked would have simply run out of control and destroyed them while they slept.”

“Great.”

“Well, I’m glad you think that that is great. I’m glad to be of help, Neal.”

I was being sarcastic, a little, but not in an appropriate way, but there are some people, and elderly history professors are prominent among them, who are impervious to irony or sarcasm. And, like I say, it was inappropriate. It wasn’t his fault if we are all doomed. I look over at Nolan and Travis, who seem to be enjoying their drinks, but with somber visages.

“Thank you, Professor. I hope you will keep your fingers crossed for us.”

“I will do no such thing, young man. I hope that you do what needs to be done, but I won’t resort to superstitious nonsense. One does well in these matters to maintain a level head, I find.”

I refrain from any comment about how we are stoking up with Bourbon and beer and reply “yes, of course, Professor. Is there anything else that we ought to know before we get on with this? Any insight from the books on this mystical religion, anything at all they wrote down that might help us do this Old One in?”

“You mean some ancient incantation, something like that?”

“Sure, anything you think might help.” I’m thinking to myself that if he says the people here used to rub themselves with blue mud or dance around naked or whatever, I’m willing to give it a try at this point.

“Neal, the religion of which you speak was not really well documented, I’m afraid. The books, of which I have made copies that reside now in my home in Kellogg, are a hodgepodge of old Sumerian stories and testimony, mixed with accounts of the settlers who first came to that area of Massachusetts. I suspect that you might just get into more trouble attempting to use any of it. Trust in a high-powered rifle. And I always preferred a good cognac—helps you relax with a clear head, I always found.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Professor.”

“Nonsense. Sometimes I wish I had stayed there to help in a crisis like this. I am probably going to come out and stay for a little bit, assuming you resolve the immediate problem. Maybe if I had stayed none of this would have happened.”

“Well, know way to know for sure. We don’t blame you a bit.”

“I’m going to put Scott back on the phone now. Keep alert, young man.”

“Thanks.”

Scott comes back on the line and wishes us luck and Nolan trots over to the bar for another round. I hang up.

I stare into space for just a second and then get up, walking to the bar. “I’d like a double cognac,” I say, “or brandy if you don’t have that.”

When we get back to the table I fill the other two in on the conversations I had with Marisa, Ned, Scott and Quillan. The two of them are mostly silent throughout, but when I get to the part about the ink and the Shoggoth I can tell that Travis has something he wants to say. So when I stop I look over at him.

“So the ink kills these Shoggoth things, permanently?”

“That’s what Quillan says. Not sure it matters, cause we’re not under water or anything. I feel like if we let this thing out at all it will be the end.”

“May be. But maybe we could do something as a backup.”

“Like . . .”

“Well, you said that this Ned guy and that Marisa were making up some synthetic ink, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, I told you I worked on a drilling crew. So I know how these things work. Somewhere on campus they have to have a pool of drill mud.”

“Drill mud?”

“Yeah. When they drill down they need some viscous sort of liquid to pump down that will bring the little bits of rock to the surface. Otherwise the whole process gets clogged up and they don’t make any

headway. So there's got to be a pool of mud somewhere. If we put a bunch of ink in it, just in case, then it will go down into the whole with the drill bit. As soon as they break through into this thing's cocoon, or chamber, or whatever, the bit is going to enter it, and it's going to be covered in this inky mud. So is the hole itself, and the shaft. This thing won't be able to get out without touching the mud, the ink. And maybe a bunch gets poured in."

"And that will seal the deal permanently!" Nolan blurts out and jumps to his feet. "So here's the plan, mah friend. We go rescue your friends in the biosci building. Then we pack up some of this mud. We throw it into the pond. I know where it is. I do! Then we take care of this Old One the best we can."

"Alright," I say, kinda getting into the spirit of the thing after four drinks. "Sounds like a plan." And I hold up my rather large wineglass full of brandy and toast."

Nolan and Travis clink their glasses together with mine and I look down at the bag Nolan had brought. "Have you got one of these for me?"

"I have an old one, sorry, no pun wanted, there, that I don't use anymore. It is pretty powerful, more than the one Travis has, anyway."

"Don't you want it, Travis? I'm not much of a shot, I think."

Travis shakes his head. "No, Mine's full auto, like Nolan's."

"Automatic?"

"Yeah, I can lay down a steady stream of about 15 per second. Nolan's is a little better, maybe."

Nolan nods his head and pulls out a smaller paintball gun, but still much bigger than a regular gun and with additional appendages sticking out all over the place. "Best thing about this one though," he says, "is that it has a laser sight. So you keep calm and steady and you can't really miss either."

I heft the thing and he clicks a switch that turns on a bright green laser. "Aren't these things usually red?"

"Usually, but the green is brighter. And after all, we aren't trying to paint the place. Maybe just putting the green dot on somebody will keep them from doing anything to us."

"Okay."

"But if you have to shoot, make sure you go for someplace vulnerable," he says, pointing to his crotch.

"You got it. And Nolan, you've got something more powerful for the Old One?"

"Yeahup," he belches, "I couldn't bring it in, though. It's in Travis' station wagon."

Travis seemed a little more animated at this point. "It's an old eight-bore," he laughs, "you should see the mess it makes." Nolan just smiles proudly. I have no idea what they are talking about, but I assume it will do the job.

"Well, I guess we're all set, then." I look at the paintball gun Nolan handed me. It seems pretty straightforward. "You just pull the trigger, right?"

"Well, you take off the safety here, with your finger. Then, you pull the trigger. But you will destroy some of my priceless works of modern art if you pull that trigger in here."

I look at some of the paintings on the wall and think about the modern art we are about to make of the campus flora and fauna. "I guess we should get going. I'll call Ned and Marisa while we are driving and tell them we are on our way."

## Chapter XIII

We pull up to lower campus just as I finish talking to Ned and Marisa. They have gathered the synthetic ink they had made—not much, just about half a gallon—together with the real sepia they bought earlier to analyze. Ned had also wheeled a large quantity of his fertilizer bomb into the tunnel beneath the anthro complex. He rigged a timer to it that gave us just two hours to dump the ink into the pond of drill mud, find and kill the Old One, and either get back to disarm the bomb or get out of that area of the campus. Not much time, but things are moving pretty fast now. It doesn't seem like more time would really make any difference.

With most of the lights out the campus is more than a little creepy. Leaves had already begun to fall from the trees, but they were not yet crunchy, and with the drilling noise coming from the top of the hill there doesn't seem to be any reason to proceed quietly. In fact, we can't hear anything approaching us, either, so we decide that the best way to get to the biological sciences building is to move as quickly as possible and without any lights of our own to make us visible.

On the way over Travis and Nolan talked about who would carry what equipment, and they decided that I would carry Nolan's big gun and the smaller paintball gun with the laser sight. I think they were thinking that that would free them both to fend off any attackers.

When we start unloading the back of Travis's truck, however, I see that they have a lot of things they want to carry. Nolan puts on a backpack with extra paint cartridges and other things in it. And he carries his unwieldy paintball gun with both hands. Travis has his paintball gun in his left hand and a really odd looking flashlight in the other. The thing looks like a miniature spotlight, or a really big radar gun.

"I thought we were going to be going without light," I whisper.

"We are, mostly," Nolan says and then points up the hill. Then he puts his finger to his lips.

We began to move toward the hill while I look up to see what Nolan pointed at. Travis comes from behind us to take the lead, he doesn't even bother closing the back of the truck's shell. Nolan leans close to me and grabs my shoulder.

"When Travis raises his right arm a little you need to cover your eyes for a second," is all he tells me before I see them. A pack of dogs, mostly large ones, the type they were using to guard some of the construction equipment behind a fence, come loping down the hill purposefully. Then Nolan moves forward so he is right next to Travis and I'm behind them both.

I'm protected, but I can still see what's going on pretty well. There is enough residual light from the city to make out about seven dogs, three are possibly rottweilers and four are other breeds. One of the dogs is a terrier of some sort less than a foot high, but the other mixed breeds are midsized and look like fast, smart working dogs, Australian Shepherds, maybe. They way they run towards us is tightly organized and quick, but they are not running frantically. They are almost soundless and barely trotting.

I am scared, almost paralyzed, but when they are perhaps fifteen yards away from me, less than that from Nolan and Travis, Travis raises his right arm.

I remember what Nolan had said just in time and raise my right arm up to cover my eyes and close them at the same time. Just as I do I can see nothing but red, and I fancy I can see the outline of the bones of my right arm, for a split second, and then there is blackness again.

I barely have time to lower my arm when something crashes into my leg and snarls at me, grabbing my pant leg in its teeth. I twirl around and try to get it off as I hear the first volley of paintballs come out of Nolan's gun, like the sound of someone tearing a drop-cloth, I imagine. It is pretty loud and I realize that he is attempting to aim around me at the dogs. The dogs are completely blind, dazzled by the mini-spotlight and turning around by then, looking for something to bite. Most of them take a few pellets broadside or in the rear and start yelping and running for cover.

The terrier still has my pant leg and I hold my leg up carefully. Travis aims a little micro-burst at its rear and it lets go, and races around frantically, seeking revenge. Then he motions to me to follow them and runs up the hill. I follow as quickly as I can while carrying Nolan's siege weapon and catch up with them. Behind us I hear a clunk, followed by "yipe! yipe! yipe!" as one of the shepherds hits a car head-first. Then I hear a car alarm and we duck behind a fence that runs more-or-less towards the biological sciences building.

When I reach them they are laying on the ground and Travis is laughing hysterically, but trying to be quiet. Nolan gets up and shakes his head in mock-sorrow, clearly having fun as well.

That's when the bats hit us.

I was mentally prepared for the dogs, in a way. But the idea of opposition from the air was maybe something I would have only thought of when completely sober. Now I can't so much as smell a beer or bourbon, even cognac, without thinking of the moment we were assaulted by bats.

I am flailing my arms around and trying to get them away when I feel a hand on my shoulder. It is Nolan, who leans in and whispers directly into my ear, "they ain't bitin', let's go."

And we do. I realize instantly that he's right, more bats crash into us, but immediately they seem to recognize that they were having some sort of strange dream and fly away as rapidly as they came. We creep quickly up the hill next to the wall while I scan the skies frantically, hoping that there aren't bigger animals up there on the way. I've seen geese fly at night and if one of those hits you at fifty miles an hour it doesn't matter whether it was all a big dream-induced mistake or not.

Nolan turns towards me and motions for Travis and I to stop. He points once slightly downhill and away from the fence, towards one of the playfields and I see that a group of what appear to be deer are closing in fast. Nolan waits until they get within about forty or fifty yards and then showers them with paintballs. They seem to startle and realize what they are doing, maybe more because of the noise than the paint, although he clearly hit one or two of them. They scatter quickly into the darkness.

Travis then grabs Nolan's shoulder and gets my attention. He points to a spot just past the biological sciences building and I see that there are some men wandering around there, carrying things.

We sit down so that the wall keeps us from being seen and Nolan is the first to whisper "Ned's waiting by the door, right?"

"That's what he said they'd do."

"Any reason we need to keep these guys from knowing that they were in there, once we get 'em out?"

"I don't think so. Can't we just wait and see if they go away?"

“Yeah, we’ll wait for a bit.”

So we wait there, as I scan the air looking for the goose with my number on it and Nolan and Travis talk in a hushed whisper, checking above the wall every few seconds.

“I think they’re going down-slope between anthro and bio,” Nolan says. Travis points to the buildings one by one and asks a question I can’t quite hear, clearly making sure he understands how Nolan is naming the buildings.

Nolan pulls off his backpack and rummages around, pulling out a large canister and setting it on the ground. “I think it’s time for a little field test,” he says smiling at Travis, who nods encouragingly.

I’m still searching the skies but I glance down briefly to see that Nolan is unscrewing one of the canisters attached to his paintball gun and attaching this new one from the backpack.

“What, do they run out that quickly?” I ask.

“Not exactly.” I notice that the new canister clanks a little as he attaches it, while in the stillness of the evening the old one does not. “This one is filled with a special recipe,” he says grinning from ear to ear. “Marbles. Just in case our friends come back.”

I can’t imagine what that would feel like, and I’m hoping that it doesn’t actually kill anyone, but I’m mostly hoping that it works, because all I have is a paintball gun. And we are getting pretty close to the center of things now. If people act more purposefully near the anthro building we are going to be in for a battle, I’m afraid.

As he finishes, Nolan gets up and we begin to move once more.

We manage to reach the biological sciences building without incident. Ned directed us to an exit that is on the side closest to his lab and farthest away from the anthro buildings. I knock on the door in the pattern he suggested over the phone, “Let’s Go,” by The Cars.

Ned opens the door and looks us over briefly before ushering us in. There are no lights inside and he closes the door behind us.

“Hold hands,” he says and we follow up a flight of stairs and through another door, then to the right and through another door, then he closes that behind us and Marisa turns on the lights.

“Dudes,” he says. “You made it!”

I make the introductions while everybody looks around and their eyes adjust. Ned is in jeans and one of those knit cotton ponchos. Marisa is in jeans and a kangaroo sweatshirt. Both have sensible work boots on instead of the tennis shoes I’m wearing.

“Here’s all the ink we have,” Ned gestures to a backpack on the floor that looks like a leftover from the ecology movement of the 1970s, complete with peace signs and a patch that says “Friends of the River.” I walk over to it and pick it up, surprised not to hear any little bottles clinking. I look in it and Ned says “we emptied it all into one big specimen bag. In the pocket’s a Stanley knife. Just cut and pour, dude.”

Travis and Nolan nod, respectful of someone with some tactical sense. Perhaps they’ll realize I’m a burden and leave me here for the next phases of the mission, I think to myself.

“Okay, so we’ve got an hour and a half before some portion of the quadanthro complex blows. Are we going to split up and try to accomplish both of our chores at once, or are we going to stick together?” Ned asks, looking mainly at Nolan.

“I think we should stick together,” Nolan says and looks at me.

“I guess I think we should stick together, too,” I say, mostly thinking that I’d rather stay in the lab, even if I get a little blown up.

“Sounds good to me, but we don’t have any more paintball guns,” says Travis.

“Paintball guns?”

“Yeah, that’s how we’ve been able to fend off the animals. Comes to it we can fend off most people that way, too. Nolan has marbles in his. That stuff hurts a lot, enough to knock a guy out. We could probably move a little faster if one of you carried the eight-bore and the other carried the spotlight.”

Everybody just looks around at each other for a few seconds. Finally I chime in by volunteering to take the spotlight, and the backpack with the bag of ink.

“Great,” Ned says, “I’ll take the eight-bore, unless you want it, Marisa?”

“No,” she says, looking at the heavy double-barreled big-game gun that I had set on one of Ned’s lab tables. “I could probably fire one of the paintball guns, though.”

I hand her the one I carried up the hill and Nolan begins to explain to her how to use the laser sight and to unlock the safety.

She turns on the laser, takes the safety off, sights at a picture of a bunch of meerkats on the far wall, says “Third from the left,” and fires. The red paint makes a large splat an inch above the meerkat. “I’ll call that good,” she says and turns the laser off and holds the gun at her side.

“How many shots do we have with the eight-bore?” Ned asks Nolan.

“It only holds two, one in each chamber. I got four more in the backpack here. But it takes a few seconds to reload it. I figured that we’d only get one or two chances at this thing with it. If we have to start shooting people with it, well, I’d rather not do that, that’s all.”

“That’s cool with me. I was thinking we might have to blow some doors with it to get into anthro, though.”

“Could. It’d do the job. Why don’t you take the spares, then?” Nolan pulls these roller-deodorant-sized shells out of his backpack and hands two to Ned and says “guess we got it all sorted out, now. We go straight up the hill, fast as we can, we see any groups of animals or people in a tight formation, Neal lets ‘em have it with the spot. He warns us by holding up his arm for the count of two before he turns it on. That’s when you all cover your eyes. Right?”

I nod to show that I will do my best to count to two.

“And if there are any people out there running around alone that want to oppose us, Travis hits ‘em with paint. Marisa can fire at will, then. That doesn’t work I hit ‘em with something harder. That doesn’t work, we try to figure out something quick. We can’t, it’s up to you, Ned.”

Ned nods solemnly at this point and I wonder if he has the heart to fire that piece of artillery at a human being.

“Anybody want to top off the tanks before we go? Or go to the bathroom?” Travis asks, pulling a bottle of tequila from his backpack. It passes around silently while we check our shoelaces.

“Okay, spotlight, paintballs, marbles, retreat and think about it, then, whatever. Right?”

We all nod, and Travis puts his paintball gun down on a counter and claps his hands, “clap, clap, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap-clap-clap, Lets go!” he shouts and we all laugh with tension. Ned walks over to the light-switch and pauses, waiting until we all are ready. And then the lights go out.

Nolan decides that the best course for us is to go immediately over the fence, so that anthro is on the other side of it. That will leave us unshielded from anything upslope towards the drill and the excavation, but will keep us away from anything that guards the Old One’s place. There are two buildings between us and the excavation, but neither is very large, so if we have to turn on the spot we might be seen from the top of the hill, or somewhere else. I don’t realize this until we are outside, though, and I see where Nolan is leading us. It took about fifteen seconds for me to begin to doubt our plan, but I don’t see any way around it. Maybe I’ll get a chance soon to tell Nolan, I think to myself.

As we come out the same door we went in I can see no people or animals about. I can only hear the grinding of the machinery at the top of the hill, which seems louder than before. The night is darker, too. There is less cloud cover, so the lights of the City have nothing to reflect off onto the powerless campus.

After getting over the fence we see some movement up along the fence near the top of the hill, but can’t see what it is, something small, though. We move away from the fence quickly and trot, almost run, up the slope towards the first building. I keep trying to catch up with Nolan, assuming that I should be near the front if there is an opportunity to use the spot. But then I realize that maybe he figured out the weak part of the plan.

We come up to the first building and it feels like a real victory. Nolan peeks out around the side, though and then motions Travis up. They both stand there looking and whispering to each other while the rest of us wait and get nervous in the back. I keep checking behind me now, as well as the air above, wishing I had told Ned and Marisa about the bats and about my fears of rogue geese. They don’t seem concerned at all, although they are scanning the grounds.

We are all hunkered down behind this building but completely exposed to the campus down-slope and towards the dorms and I see that there are some people wandering around between the dorms and the parking lot. Just as I turn around to point it out to Nolan I see that we are moving once again.

Nolan and Travis race towards the second building. I don’t have any idea what it houses, but it seems to have some sort of loading dock on the down-slope side and he heads us directly for that. It is cut out of the hillside a little, giving us some shelter from the direction towards the dorms as well as towards anthro, which is now level with us on the slope.

I start thinking to myself that I should have some sort of plan for introducing the ink bag to the drill mud. If anybody is watching, shouldn’t I make it look like an accident or something? I wonder if there’s a way to cut the corner off the bag and hurl it into the pool, but then they’ll see the bag in there, won’t they. As I’m puzzling over this stuff I look over towards anthro and notice what it was that I saw moving earlier, near the fence.

In the real world, skunks don’t run around in herds. But there have to be at least twenty of them, and just as we get settled in, they begin to waddle towards our group. I turn to warn Nolan and can see that he

and Travis are looking at several groups of people in the direction of the dorms. I tap Nolan on the shoulder and point out my discovery and he pushes the spotlight, and my arm, down towards the ground.

He taps Travis on the shoulder and Travis turns around and looks at the skunk army and chuckles, looks quizzically at Nolan, who shrugs his shoulders.

Travis tries to judge the distance and lets fly with a volley of paintballs. It's not clear whether he hits any or not, since little tufts of grass and dirt mix with paint and the animals scatter a bit. Then they must realize where they are and what has just happened, because, almost as one, twenty skunk tails rise in unison and spray in random directions.

I look around at our group and see that most wear a grimace, but we can't smell anything, yet.

Nolan begins moving around the building, then, on the dorm side, and I hope that we can't be seen well, and that there is as yet no reason for the people towards the dorms to look closely in our direction.

Moving up past the second building, which claims to be Holt Hall, we can see the excavation and drilling equipment very clearly, and there are at least fifteen people milling about on the top of the hill. They don't look very threatening, they are just going about their business and haven't seen us yet. But there is no doubt they will soon.

We are about fifty yards away when Travis turns around towards me and shouts something I can't hear over the noise of the drill. When I get up closer to him he stops me with a hand, leans in and yells "mud!" and points up to the left of the drill machinery.

There are no people near the mud pool and I head directly for it, while the others continue up straight and veer slightly to the right. They seem to be anxious to create a diversion, or are ready for a fight, at least.

When I get to the pool there is still nobody around, so I slip off the backpack, dropping the spotlight and unzipping the pocket with the razor knife. I then pull the bag out and slit the top and get some of the ink on my hands. It is suddenly very slippery and I hunt for a good place to pour it in, seeing that water is being fed into the pool close by. I pour the contents of the bag into the water jetting into the pool, put the bag back in the backpack and then wash my hand off in it as quickly as I can. I grab the spotlight and race to join the others.

As I run up the hill I realize that I just need to make it clear to them that I am done and we can all beat a hasty retreat down the hill. So I run as quickly as I can, thinking I'll run past them. As I top the hill, though, I can see that I will do no such thing. Past the group there are about fifteen big guys, standing around.

It seems that they are protecting the equipment when I get there. But they seem to have decided at the same time that our group isn't much of a threat to the equipment, because a smaller group, maybe seven of them, begins to walk towards us.

Just then I see a green light spring up between the legs of the nearest and this is quickly followed by a red splotch. Then Travis unloads a stream of paint at the group. This is not as well-aimed, but it seems to slow them down. Then Nolan seals the deal with a volley of marbles.

About then our group notices that I have joined them and Nolan shouts something that is not clear. What is clear, though, is that he has begun to run down-slope, towards the direction from which we came.

## Chapter XIV

When we get past Holt Hall on our way down Nolan spins around the down-slope corner and turns around to see if there is any pursuit. I am still scanning the skies, waiting for that killer goose, the one with my name on it, but I spare an eye for the dorms, and I see that they still have a bunch of people milling around them.

"Nobody's following," Nolan says, and just then somebody comes at us from around one of the dumpsters.

Marisa is the first to see him coming, and she shines her green laser right at his head and fires. He turned his head when hit with the laser, though, so he takes it right in the left ear instead of the eye.

"Ahhk!" he shouts, "Doctor!" and falls to the ground.

Everybody looks at everyone else, astonished that he is not still coming at us. The paintball must have startled him out of it, so something must have weakened the Old One."

Marisa is also the first to go over to him to make sure he's all right. "I don't think we can get you to a doctor right now," she says. "Might not be any need."

"Christ," he says, "that really hurt. I meant to say Dr. Pinella. I'm in your rheology class. Don Ergot?"

"Oh, sorry, Don, I didn't recognize you." At this point she finally aims the laser somewhere else. As concerned as she is she kept it trained first on his head, then on one of his kidneys, then on his stomach, the green dot searching for the most vulnerable spot exposed.

Everybody goes back to scanning around looking for more enemies at this point except for Marisa.

"Um, looks like none of it got in your ear canal," she says. "Can you hear okay?"

"I think so. My ear just hurts like hell. What are you guys doing?"

"It's a little hard to explain at this point, Don."

He looks at the rest of the group and sees Ned with what looks to be an elephant gun. "You're not just out for a game of paintball, though."

"No."

"There's been some crazy stuff going on here. Some of us have been kinda held hostage?" Most of his sentences seem to have that rising intonation at the end, which makes him sound unsure if what he's saying, or perhaps like he thinks we won't believe him.

"Really?"

"Yeah, like not kept or held, but walking around in a sort of dream all the time doing stuff that doesn't make any sense?"

“Like what kind of stuff, Don?”

“Like for the last twenty minutes I had been running through anthro locking all of the doors.”

Nolan and Ned both hear this and come over to listen in. With them so absorbed I try to scan the horizon and the hill even more carefully for attackers, still not finding any.

“Do you still have the keys, Don?”

“No, I dropped them in the sewer grate just outside the building, just before I was released?”

“What do you mean released?” Marisa says.

“That’s what it felt like. I am standing outside anthro two and all of a sudden I’m throwing up from the smell and I don’t know what’s going on. So I was going to go back to the dorms.”

We all just stand there looking at one another, Marisa, Nolan, Travis, Don, and I.

“What smell?” I finally ask.

“Skunk, I think?”

“Oh, right.”

Nolan looks at me and then at the others and all at once the lights return to much of the campus, at least the main streetlights and some of the buildings. With the lights on I can see that the people milling about the dorms are some wondering what they are doing outside and others coming home to get some sleep. None of them are making any motions to come up the hill. The lights continue for a few seconds and then, with the power back on, some of the auxiliary generators, which had been adding to the noise of the drilling, cut out.

We’re all just listening and looking around until Nolan speaks up. “The drilling’s stopped.”

“That’s all we need,” Ned says, “Kid, Don, can you do us a favor?”

“I’m kinda tired,” he says, but Marisa stares him down until he says, “yeah, okay, will it take long?”

“No, not long. We just need you to run up the hill and ask those guys why the drilling stopped. All right?” The kid nods. “And don’t tell him why you want to know, or who put you up to it, all right?”

“Yeah, okay,” he says and then heads up the hill. We are all hiding in the loading dock area, feeling more stupid about our position every second, because business-as-usual seems to be returning to campus. We look down the hill at the dorms and there is a hacky game forming. I think I see somebody throwing a football.

“What could this mean?” Ned asks me. “It seems like this thing has stopped messing with people, and animals, I guess.”

“I don’t know. It could be just hiding, I guess, maybe hoping that we’ll go away. I wonder if the skunk smell was an alarm or something.”

Marisa nods. “I was wondering the same thing, she says. What did Scott say about this thing’s ability to move?”

“He said that a long time ago they had some weird abilities, like the ability to move through space on these giant diaphanous wings, but that they seem to have lost the secret. Actually it was Quillan that told

me that. Nothing either of them said made these things sound like they could move very fast on the ground. So I would think that this thing is probably still around, probably still in the anthro building.”

“Hmm, . . . you think they have stopped permanently?” I ask Travis.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Maybe they’re shutting down the equipment to come hunt for us.”

I look around for an escape route and try to figure the distance to the truck. Nolan sees me and chuckles. “I don’t think they’re in a hurry to come after us,” he says. “We’ve still got the eight-bore.”

I look over at Ned and he seems to be thinking.

“Some of those guys get triple-time for Sunday work,” Nolan says. “I don’t think they’re going to shut down for long.”

Travis nods and says “Yeah, I wouldn’t.”

I’m thinking that I don’t know whether it is better to let them drill into the Shoggoth’s cocoon so that they finish it off. It seems like we’re taking a big chance that the ink will work. And I wonder if that’s what Ned is thinking about.

About then the kid comes back. “They say they ran into some sort of cave or something? It drained the pond or something? And so they have to wait for more water to build up? Can I go back to bed?”

We all smile, and Marisa says “we must have got it. So either we are all dead for sure, or that thing is, flooded with inky mud.” She turns to the kid. “You can go home now Don. Go get some sleep. You’ll probably need your rest for the quiz on Friday.”

He starts to wander down the hill and a couple of us shout thanks after him, but he just keeps walking.

## Chapter XV

Three of us look at our watches at the exact same instant, and I resist the silly, tequila-induced urge to yell “jinx,” which is probably not even appropriate. We have about an hour to look for the Old One, and I don’t relish the thought of that, even with the lights on in the Anthropology building. But actually we have less than that, because Ned will have to go disarm the bomb with plenty of room to make sure that he can get to it in time. So we start to stroll down the hill and across toward anthro, with no plan at all. Just before we get to the stone and cement fence that borders the walkway we hear a noise, startling in the silence there. It sounds like a diesel truck starting up, which is a pretty odd thing to be happening on a campus that has been through what ours went through in the past week. I start to wonder who it could be, but Ned leaps to the ground with the eight-bore and yells “somebody help me hold the end steady while I draw a bead.”

I’m closest to him so I get down on the ground to help, but I also say “wait a minute, Ned, what’s all the shootin’ fer?”

And everyone is apparently thinking a lot more clearly than I am, because Nolan kneels down, says “it’s escaping,” and then starts to give Ned instructions. This takes a second, and Marisa sits down on the walk and pulls out her cell phone, presumably to call the police. While Ned and Nolan are discussing how to bring down a large truck in a populated area with an ancient hunting rifle the ground leaps up at us and the wall comes down. The next thing I can remember is looking at my family in the hospital.

“Jesus, Neal, you had us worried,” Molly yelps and bursts into tears. This makes the kid cry too, because he doesn’t know what’s going on. So she must have held things together pretty well. So I wonder to myself how long I was out of it and try to calm her down at the same time.

I wasn’t seriously injured, nor were any of the others who were there on the hill with me. We all sustained mostly bruises and scrapes, and Travis caught a brick on his side and got a few broken ribs. Three of us had concussions, maybe from the blast, maybe from chunks of brick and building and such. The fence apparently saved us from some super-sonic chips of the anthropology building that scarred some of the buildings across the way. I was mostly just tired, and I woke up within a couple of hours.

The next morning I was able to talk to Scott, and he filled me in on what happened to the others. There may have been some casualties in the building itself, but the truck with the Old One in it got away and was still at large.

The drilling had stopped permanently once the administration woke up and saw what was going on. The Chancellor and some of the others involved with the building projects had a number of things to explain, not the least of which were the destruction of several campus buildings and a few missing faculty. Classes were canceled for a couple of weeks until they could be certain the place was safe. No telling whether the kids and their parents would ever be certain of that, though. They’ll drift back when they find out that no-place is ever really safe.

Scott had brought Quillan. The old guy dropped everything to come out and tie up some loose ends in town that he felt guilty about leaving in the first place. For a while, federal authorities would be swarming all over campus, and Quillan wanted to make sure that he got to the right people to tell them about the problem the campus had had.

I couldn't imagine the campus recovering from all of this, but somehow I felt better about things while I slept, a great deal, on Sunday. I continued to feel better on Monday, although I called in sick, just to make sure.

Despite the fact that I had a concussion, I was in better shape than the school itself. I felt like I was almost certain to be fired, since I was on campus for what could only be nefarious purposes at the time it suddenly blew up. And there is nothing like knowing you are about to be fired to make you feel like you have nothing to lose. Monday I slept a lot and played with my son, recovering. But Tuesday morning I got dressed and headed for the office, intending to give my boss a piece of my mind before he fired me. After all, it was the day I was supposed to present my strategic plan to the boss and his expensive lapdog consultant. How could I miss that?

I looked pretty rough, still had scrapes on my face that looked a little raw and a bruise on one cheek that looked ghastly. But I smiled to myself as I put on my stupid suit, thinking that this would probably be the last time wearing it before my next job interview. Something nice about looking like you have been in a fight. It can make people think twice about hassling you.

I got to the office a little early and pulled out my notes, the ones that realistically appraised the funding environment that the school faced, and read them over one more time. They were a little sketchy, still, but they were probably a good enough start. A couple of people stopped by my office to gawk at my face a little, and Sid stopped by once to make sure I was okay. I told him I was fine. And I was.

When I got to the big boss's office his secretary made me wait while she phoned him, even though I could tell there was nobody in there but he and the consultant. He made me wait a few minutes anyway.

I walked in and sat down at the stupid glass conference table with the two of them, a stupid smile hanging from my damaged face, and prepared to launch into my plan. But he preempted me.

"Neal, we met with Quillan yesterday, and he gave us some story about what had happened. Just to let you know, I don't believe one word of it, not a word. But he has assured us that you have been instrumental in securing a large foundation donation for this campus, so I'm willing to overlook these lies, for the time being. Keep them coming and I'm willing to look the other way. Remember that."

I just stared at a place about a foot behind his eyes thinking thoughts like "foundation donation, story, lies. Which are the lies? The foundation donation? The story? Who knows?" His consultant-toady nodded, so he kept going.

"Now this gift is all restricted money, which is really unfortunate. As you know, the Chancellor really wants us to find more unrestricted money to devote to the excavation project, which we believe will continue as planned."

More nodding, pretty much the same sorts of nods as before, and I just sit there, stupid smile, although I have no idea what he's talking about. I can't imagine Quillan telling this guy what really happened, but, again, who knows? Not me, that's for sure.

"So I hope your plans will take that into account," he says, and I realize that it's a question, maybe even a prompt, and I prepare to launch into my plan. But I realize that, having brought in some sort of

large gift about which I have no knowledge casts this whole enterprise in doubt. I don't know how I can say anything, but he saves me from having to. I find that fundraisers are pretty uncomfortable with silence. They abhor it like nature doth a vacuum.

He starts in again. "Neal, I'm sure you'll understand, we have Kyle something-or-other, the maths prof, coming in to talk to us about a great-and-lucrative-new-business-possibility-that-we-may-be-able-to-capitalize-upon. So I'm going to have to cut this shorter than usual so we can fleece the guy. Keep up the good work, and get us some unrestricted money." He stands up to shake my hand, and I hate that, because he's got one of those dead-fish things going on there.

My head spins a little. Did he really say "fleece the guy"? I turn around just before I open the door to leave. "Hey, Paul."

"Yeah," he says, already chatting with the consultant, having dismissed me he's surprised I still exist.

"This guy, if he puts you in a tough spot, just mention that the University could be persuaded to revisit the issue of eminent domain with him."

Just then Ted breezes through the door and apologizes for having nearly run me down. "Hey, Neal," he says, "heard about what happened. Say what-the-hell were you doing up there, anyway?"

Probably the question is rhetorical, most of his seem to be. But as he joins the Exec and his toady I feel like I should answer. "I don't know, just trying to help, I guess."

The three of them give me this puzzled look. Then the Exec speaks again.

"Help. Neal, you know what the road to hell is paved with, don't you?"

They go back to their conversation and I shake my head and walk out, almost bumping into Kyle as I turn. I smile at him and apologize, and then I close the door behind me.

A couple of hours later Ted comes into my office, white as a sheet. I was just sitting there staring into space and trying to process the last week, not in an active way, but more like staring at the wall and leaning back in my chair. "Say Neal, have you got a second?"

"Sure, Ted. What's up?"

"I don't know if I should tell anyone this, but you saw what happened with Kyle in the cafeteria last week, so I'm hoping you'll believe me."

I just look at him. Then I feel a little bad, although I'm wondering what the hell has happened to make him turn white like that. Hopefully this whole thing isn't happening all over again. So I ask him "what's up, Ted? I'll keep it quiet. Did Kyle give another one of his demonstrations?"

"I guess you could call it that."

"Didn't it go well?"

"Depends on how you look at it. We talked a little bit and then Paul wanted to see a demonstration, but you know how he could be a little demanding?"

"Yeah."

“So Kyle didn’t want to show him. And then Paul got this attitude about the whole thing, like he had a right to see what the fuss was about, and since the University was paying his salary when he got this idea, and, well, you know how he could be?”

I just nod.

“Well he got to the point where Kyle really had him flustered, I guess, because Kyle wasn’t saying anything. Not yes, not no, not anything. So Paul started into how it would be a shame if the University had to push its eminent domain suit against him.”

I almost choke at this last part, but I manage to blurt out “there’s nothing to that suit, and he knows it.” I had asked Scott about it on Sunday, for some reason that still escapes me.

“Yeah, nothing to it. Anyway, so Kyle says to him ‘when Neal left you reminded him of an old saying, that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.’ And then Paul said ‘that’s what they say.’

Then Kyle got this look in his eye, though. And he got up from the table and then started acting more like a professor. He said something about there being many roads to Hell. And then he said that these roads are paved with all sorts of different materials. And then he walked over to the whiteboard and started drawing some things. And he kept lecturing us and I wasn’t really paying attention, never was when it came to math, you know. But when I looked over at Paul he was in this sort of trance. He was just staring at the whiteboard. Well then Kyle stopped talking, ended up with the words ‘as you can see.’ And Paul just looked terrified. And then suddenly he got up from the table and took a step. But as he took that first step he just vanished—vanished.

Ted’s sweating now and I have no idea what to say to him. No idea. “Congratulations,” is what I finally decide on.

The next couple of days were a blur, with a whole range of investigations into what had happened. It didn’t take long for everybody to decide it was a federal matter, though, and then things got pretty quiet again, except for my job.

Quillan asked me to head up a private foundation he put together in the wake of the disaster. He and a couple of other professors got together and found a few commercial applications for things that were inspired by dreams the week before and then money began to pour into the fund. He wanted me to keep talking to professors on campus and fund projects that looked promising in terms of their ability to keep the world safe from bug-eyed monsters. Top of my priority list was figuring out where that Old One went and making sure that somebody put it out of commission. It was a cause I could really sink my teeth into.

There were at least forty-odd professors on campus who were working on projects that were significantly bizarre, which they had started that semester under the influence of the Old One. I now had an interesting job, one that felt pretty important and vital.

I guess there’s something to be said about being in a place that you find really strange, and then being confirmed in that opinion, being validated. At least there is for me. So this place, this town, wasn’t the western suburban paradise that I grew up in. So what? So its weather was too muggy in the summer and there were too many bugs, and the drivers are jerks and the roads are a living hell. The most important thing to me in my life, I had come to find, was being right—and I was right about this place. Suddenly, I could forgive the rest.

I began to feel like I was making a home here at last.