

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Robert Sells

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Hosea 8: 6-7

For it is the product of Israel - a craftsman made the thing, it is no god at all! The calf of Samaria will be broken to pieces!

Since they sow the wind, they will reap the whirlwind...

Cautionary Note: Please be advised: the story might be fictional, but the threat is real.

Reap the Whirlwind, Robert Sells

This is a work of fiction. All concepts, characters and events portrayed in this book are fiction and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2025 by Robert Sells

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except brief extracts for the purpose of review, without the permission of the publisher and copyright owner.

First Edition, July 2013.

Cover art by www.miblart.com

Published in the United States of America.

A Note about the Second Edition

Reap the Whirlwind was my second book written over ten years ago. The novel was prescient about artificial intelligence and the threat to humanity regarding intelligent computers. Now with artificial intelligence going mainstream, I thought it prudent to present the book to the public one more time...as a warning.

I committed myself to a rewrite three years ago. The present edition was edited by Aaron Lazar with help from Deborah Forst. For their expert work and dedication, I am humbly indebted. The final product is far better than the original version primarily because of their efforts.

- Robert Sells

PROLOGUE

The man played a war game on the computer while he listened to the bouncing melodies of Vivaldi. The game, vividly displayed on a large screen mounted on the wall, would not be found in any store for many years, if ever; it was presently used by the military to train their upper echelon officers. As such, it was the best strategy game available and he always acquired the best no matter the cost or, in this case, the risk.

In the silence between two symphonies, the faint, dissonance screech of the Barrow doors in the basement raised his eyebrows. Heart pumping, his ears became his world. Another noise downstairs: something dropped to the floor.

The chubby little man checked the video feeds from his infrared security cameras in the basement. No sign of intruders. Nothing unusual. Except footfalls on the basement steps. He wiggled out of the chair and waddled to the main monitor in the kitchen. Odd. The perpetrators of the sounds were somehow invisible. *Could he trust his ears or a million-dollar security system? Play it safe.*

He scurried through the bedroom, picking up a bathrobe, a few candy bars and an iPad. Within seconds, he stepped into a nearly empty garage. Scanning the large enclosure right and left and right again, he assured himself the sole occupant was a large, black Mercedes. On his iPad he checked the camera showing the driveway outside. Bright security lights illuminated no car or person. He slipped into the driver's side seat, and in a moment the engine purred awake. The great car screeched out just beneath the rising garage door. Traveling sixty miles per hour down the long driveway the car swerved onto the road. Moments later, his speedometer read eighty. He talked to the car. "Call 911." Blue lights on the dashboard came to life and registered the call.

"Yes, may I help you?"

It was a woman, and he was a bit chagrinned. He didn't like to deal with the opposite sex. They made him feel uncomfortable and the man had little confidence in how they might handle his present problems.

"My house was broken into. 32 Cranbury Street, Watertown. Get the police there and get some police to me."

"Where are you, sir?"

"Traveling down County Road 78 toward Danbury."

"You're in a car?"

"No, you fucking moron, I'm in a goddamn rickshaw! Of course I'm in a car. Get me some help. They may be following me."

Silence for a moment. Shit, I shouldn't have pissed her off. No telling what she might do.

"Sir, do you have a GPS?"

"Yes. Look, I'm sorry. I'm confused and scared."

"I understand. Put this address into your GPS..."

Ten minutes later the billionaire computer expert pulled into a vacant parking lot just outside the busy city. The police station was a few miles away, but he knew city traffic would have slowed him down. The operator assured him the police would meet him in a few minutes. Besides, his pursuers would never guess he would travel down this rarely used road. A single, dim light high on a pole flickered in one corner of the potholed parking lot. The buildings surrounding the parking lot were dark with most of their windows broken.

A line of headlights came down the lonely road toward him. He finally relaxed. The cavalry was on the way. He wondered again about the intrusion. First, how did they know where he lived? No one knew where he lived except a handyman, John, who commanded a six-figure salary. The pair had evolved a comfortable relationship. But who knew? You couldn't trust anyone these days.

Of course, it might have been some druggies looking for a score. More likely, though, it was someone sent to kidnap him. Who had he pissed off? As far as the man knew he was on good terms with all his recent contacts on the web. What did I do differently these last few weeks? Only some minor research into the Event, but the Event was yesterday's story...it happened nine years before, for Christ's sake! Who would care now?

The headlights morphed into four cars which screeched into the lot, surrounding his car. Now that they were closer, he could see they weren't police cars.

Six gaunt, young men with long, leather trench coats flying behind them, brandished shotguns in their hands. Grim expressions fixed on their faces except for the one who was closest. Laughing wildly, he leveled the gun at the cowering computer expert.

CHAPTER ONE

The keys to heaven also open the gates of hell.

Buddhist Proverb

Whit Emerson looked out his wide living room window at Lake Ontario. The small waves in the foreground smoothed out into a light blue sheet which, in the past, he found both relaxing and uplifting. Not today, though. His eyes were pulled back to banking records and once again his stomach was clenched by some unseen cold hand.

Whit viewed the offending screen which highlighted a bill for nine thousand dollars. ClassyGirls.com? Porn site most likely. An automatic withdrawal from his checking account. *How?*

Whit googled the company and found their phone number. His eyes popped wide open when his call was answered with a silky voice on the second ring. *How often does that happen so fast?*

After identifying the transaction, he spoke sharply into the phone. “Look, I don’t know anything about your company. I never had any transactions with you guys. There’s an error somewhere and it has to be rectified before I go to the police.”

“Sir, we can discontinue service. But I’m afraid we can’t give you back money for the months already purchased.”

“Months? This is the first time I’ve seen any bill from you guys. And, I-didn’t-buy-it!”

Silence. He nodded his head, a smile slowly forming on his face. She finally listened. A different voice jolted him from his reverie.

“This is the manager. Sir, we have orders from you for the last three months.”

“Not me!”

“Definitely from your computer, sir.”

“Not me!”

“Well, someone.”

Whit thought for a moment. Maybe someone else came into his house when he was gone.

“Do you have a record of exactly when I tapped into your site?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Okay, when was the last time?”

While the manager paused for a few seconds, Whit smiled. Had to be someone else.

“Ahh, the last time was last Wednesday night between 6 PM and 9 PM.

Whit checked back on his Google calendar and his heart dropped. Liz had gone out with her friends that night and he had been catching up on some episodes from his favorite detective series on TV.

“Sir?

“Yeah, I’m still here. I’ll get back to you,” he said absent-mindedly. Then screamed at the phone, “Or my lawyer will get back to you assholes!

He returned to his computer and checked his apps. Sure enough, in plain sight, was the button for Classy.Girls.com, a young girl smiling at him. *Damn it! How long has that been there?*

He grabbed his phone and thumbed to his apps. The one most used with the same come-hither face appeared! *What the...*

“Honey, I’m home.”

He reached over to his computer and tapped into an article he had been working on and shoved his cell phone into his pocket.

His girlfriend, a slim woman with short, well-coiffed blonde hair, click-clacked across the tiles into the study. She leaned down and kissed him on the neck. “Missed you.”

He smiled up at her.

“You getting some work done?” She pointed at the computer screen.

“Yeah. About to write a bit.”

She gave an exaggerated frown. “You work too much, dear.” Liz jiggled a Victoria Secret’s bag. “Got a surprise for you. Don’t go away.”

She kicked off her high heels, smiled over her shoulder and sashayed into the adjacent bedroom.

Whit looked out the window again. Storm clouds had blocked the sun and the water had turned into a choppy, angry froth. Though comfortably warm in the condominium, he shivered. *Someone getting into my computer and cell phone. That was on me. But someone somehow got into my bank account. Gotta check tomorrow with the bank. That was on them!*

He heard the bedroom door open and turned toward the hallway. Liz softly padded into his study and leaned against the door frame. Clad in a diaphanous blue nightgown barely reaching to mid-thigh, she watched him for a moment, her eyes looking like black coals in the dark hallway.

“Working hard, honey?” she asked in a husky voice.

Though still distracted, he smiled at her and rose from the chair. “Not working anymore, Liz.”

Ten minutes later, their bed a wreck of tangled sheets and blankets, Liz rolled off of Whit. Breathing hard, she lay beside him. He turned to stroke her gently, an offering of affection. Elizabeth did not return his soft caresses. She never did. After controlling her breathing, she spoke intelligible words contrasting with her grunts a few seconds before.

“I was at my hairdresser’s this morning and opened up Vogue. I saw an article on how to choose *a computer just for you.*” She glanced sideways at him.

He winced. A free-lance writer, he recently wrote an article titled *A Computer Just for You.* He didn’t think it would ever get published and he had not told her about it.

“You got into Vogue, and didn’t tell me!”

Though she smiled as she playfully rubbed his tousled brown hair, he detected irritation. Whit knew the subject did not interest her, but she liked to paint herself as his intellectual confidant. Even to her hairdresser apparently.

“It wasn’t an article I was really proud of. But I did mention it to you a few weeks ago.” He looked at her nervously, hoping she would accept the excuse.

“No, dear, whenever you talk about computers you always complain about not getting *it* into print.”

Whit knew full well which article she was referring to. *It* was a thought-provoking essay on the world’s, the country’s, even his own, over-reliance on computers. Especially artificial intelligence. If *it* could just get published, he knew it would be a centerpiece article. Whit had submitted it to the New York Times magazine section. Their editors loved it, but for some reason did not pick it up. Even with his own paper, the article was shuttled all the way to the CEO and

he received a flattering note from that worthy man. But it never made its way to the pages of the newspaper.

“Yeah, well, I do talk a bit about that one, but I meant when I discussed with you about how you might pick a computer.”

Elizabeth rose without speaking and walked to the bathroom to clean up.

Whit stayed down, his porn-problem commanding his attention again. *First stop tomorrow, the bank.*

CHAPTER TWO

Jimmy Northup, detective, caught himself before he fell off the chair. He shook his head, trying to stay awake. Except for periodic stretching, he had been behind the teller counters in the same fold-up chair, in the same position for over seven hours. *The Ghost Robber hadn't struck any bank in the last three days. Another lost night.* He sighed and let his eyes close again.

The creak of a door opened his eyes wide, his body tightened like the coiled spring of a trap. Looking through the windows barricading this part of the bank, he could just make out the black shadow deftly avoiding the security cameras as it moved closer to the front door. Blending with the natural shadows, the shape disappeared as it neared a metal cabinet. Jimmy looked up at one of the cameras just as its green light winked off. *Hmm...so that's why no one ever saw him. He disables the security cameras momentarily. Then after plucking thousands of dollars, he turns them back on. Clever guy.*

Now, walking casually to the vault, the small black shape kneeled down and disappeared once again. A minute later, Jimmy saw the great door swing open and the thief entered the metal chamber. A few minutes later, he emerged carrying a bag.

Gotcha!

The foyer lights came on, bright and unforgiving in their white stare. The robber, his head covered by a black ski mask and the rest of his slim body black as well, stopped and stared at the middle-aged man with curly, peppery hair who stood making a show of stretching his legs.

“Old basketball injury. Happens when I crouch down for a long time.”

“I have a gun,” warned the masked man slowly reaching into his pocket.

Pushing off the counter, Jimmy straightened up, obviously a painful task. His clothes remained a rumpled mess. He shook his head. “No, you don’t. Look, give me break, will you? I’ve been waiting for hours and my entire body is one giant cramp. Just lean against the wall, hands high.”

The bank robber looked over his shoulder at the back exit.

“And don’t try the back door. We both know it’s locked. By the time you reach the door, I’ll put a bullet in you. I do have a gun.”

The man in black sagged to an even shorter height. He walked a few steps to the nearest wall, spread his legs and put his hands flat on either side of a picture. When Jimmy looked at the picture, he smiled. It showed a fox hunt, the fox treed by a single dog, riders in the distance galloping toward the pair.

The detective, grimacing with every step, walked over to the man, pulled his arms back and clamped metal handcuffs on his wrists. “Sorry about this, but I get in trouble these days when I don’t cuff guys.”

“How did you know I don’t have a gun?”

The handcuffs locked in place, ski mask off, the older man led a young man toward the door where there were comfortable seats beneath a wide picture window.

“You don’t want any trouble. You planned these robberies carefully; precious few clues were ever left behind. You obviously have skills. Gotta travel light. Success for you is not confronting people. No gun.”

“Where’s your gun?”

Patting various pockets, Jimmy appeared distracted, confused. "My gun? Hmm...now where did I put it?" He smiled. "Never carry one. Too damn dangerous...for everyone. Hey, what's your name, by the way?"

The man hesitated and then said, "Tom Smith."

"Well, Tom, have a seat." The detective settled him in a soft chair. Sitting across from the robber, Jimmy reached in his coat pocket and pulled out an open pack of cigarettes. "You smoke?"

Tom Smith shook his head. "How did you know I was going to rob *this* bank?"

The detective took a long drag from the cigarette, his eyes closed. A contented smile shared his face with the frown lines. He exhaled slowly. Another deep puff before he answered.

"Lucky guess. You never rob the same bank twice. So, it was one of six banks. Been sleeping out here for the last week. Not good for the back, I can tell you that, boy!"

The sirens now drowned out the gentle background noise of the air exchangers. A few moments later, the red blinking lights lit up the outside and the detective slowly raised himself up. "Well, we'd better let them in, Tom Smith."

Ten hours later the same detective was at his desk, yawning while he struggled with his computer. It was a daily battle which he usually lost. He had typed up the report without any problems (a minor victory), but when he pushed *print*, nothing happened. No sheets were coughed out by the dusty printer; its green, "on" light silently mocking him. He pushed one button after another, causing the screen to change its view, but computer and printer conspired to deny him the report.

A younger man, sporting a neat brown Baroni suit, put his head into the office, strolled in, and patted the detective on the back.

"Hey, Jimmy. You got the Ghost Robber?"

Jimmy Northup sat back in his chair, combing his hands through his tightly curled, uncombed hair. Brown eyes, cradled by well pronounced curved bags, fixed on his partner, Al Morelli. In contrast, Morelli's wavy hair was in perfect position. His smooth, handsome complexion, a product of eight dedicated hours of sleep every night, was more appropriate in a fashion magazine than on his photo ID declaring him a detective.

"Just a good guess, Al." Jimmy went back to the computer and jabbed the ENTER button four times. "Stupid printer won't print!"

"Damn it, Jimmy, stop pushing the keys. You know what your problem is? You gotta love the machine. You can't be banging it like that. You gotta love it. The computer knows."

"Yeah, well, I'd *love* to throw this piece of junk into the garbage. Get it to print, before I do just that."

"Watch me again, old man..."

While they were going through the three-step process to print, Jimmy's land line rang. Watching Al slide the mouse here and there and finally push the button, his report magically emerged from the printer. Even more angry, Jimmy picked up the phone. "What?"

"Hey, Northup, we got this guy you brought in, and he won't give us shit! Just stares at us. Not saying anything. Been at it for three hours now."

"Jesus, Sammy, I gotta tell you your job? Go to his house and search it. Start there. Talk to his old lady."

“Yeah, hot shot detective, tell me my job. No license, no identification, not giving any home address. Nothing. Not even asking for an attorney. Nothing. Tom Smith, John Doe. Who the hell is he?”

CHAPTER THREE

The small sign on the desk declared the woman to be Marie West, the assistant bank manager. Positioned across from Whit, wire-rimmed glasses clashed with cleavage far too revealing.

“Mr. Emerson, you included this flashy site on your automatic pays.”

“No, I definitely did not.”

After an exaggerated sigh, she continued. “Sir, your password is known only by you, not us.”

“But I never.” He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “So, the money is gone. Gone to those assholes.”

She shrugged. “Looks that way.”

“So, how much money do I have left in my account?”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s another problem. You are, at this point, overdrawn.”

“What?”

“Yes, the \$3000 you withdrew yesterday.”

“I wasn’t here yesterday.”

“Yes, you were. Here’s the check.”

He scanned the computer screen. His handwriting showing a check for “cash.”

“It’s a forgery! Look, you must have security cameras. Check them.”

Ten minutes later, surrounded by the bank manager, a security officer, and a smug assistant bank manager, Whit watched a video from the day before where he withdrew the money.

“That’s not me. Can’t be.”

There was no response from the three bank workers.

Whit got up. “Look, I—I’ll get the funds out of my 401K. Tomorrow. Okay?”

The bank manager nodded.

Red-faced and bewildered, Whit left the bank quickly. He stopped just outside the door and cocked his head. Barely audible over the din of the city street, he heard an odd whirring sound. He looked right and left but could not find the source. A few more steps down the sidewalk, and he heard it again. Whit looked back at the bank door. There, perched above the door, was a rectangular surveillance camera. He tilted his head, wondering. He side-stepped to the right. The camera followed him, the whirring noise coming from its motor. Like a metal hawk, it followed him as though he was some sort of rodent. Retreating to his car, he noted the camera had turned nearly parallel to the building trying to follow him up the street. Once inside the car, the camera reverted to its normal position.

His head slowly fell until it rested on the steering wheel. *What’s happening to me? Did I blank out and actually write that check? And where’s the money? Maybe I blanked out and ordered that porn shit. Oh, my God! I’m broke now and tapping into my retirement.*

Whit worked for the Rochester paper. Returning to the aged, gray monolith housing the newspaper, Whit noticed the security camera there also riveted on him. He stood outside for a few moments and watched others go in and out. The camera pointed only at him. He casually strolled to the left, stopped, and turned around. The camera had rotated to continue its “stare” at

him. *Odd. Must be a coincidence. God, I hope so. Either that or I'm bonkers.* Whit shook his head, walked back to the front door, while the camera whined its tiny motor to track him.

Once inside, his frown flipped to a grin as he greeted one person after another. An exceptional writer, the magazine industry was just beginning to appreciate his burgeoning talent. Recognizing his ability and, truth be told, his new fame, the Rochester newspaper raised him to the status of editor. The dubious distinction earned him a small office and access to a snack table in the editor's meeting room.

By midafternoon, Whit finished research on a local politician accused of real estate fraud. He found that the allegations were all unsubstantiated. For the next hour he carefully framed an article for submission and proofed it. His cursor arrow was right above the send button when he withdrew his hand from the mouse. The last few articles he sent to the senior editor were riddled with errors from spelling mistakes to grammatical faux paus which only a freshman college student would make. In fact, entire parts of the articles were sometimes missing. The newspaper's email system conspired with his computer to mangle his writing. It was embarrassing and frustrating. *One way to fix that.* He cradled his laptop into his arms and walked to the tech department in the basement.

Jerry Weber, computer tech extraordinaire was alone in his office, his back to the door, hunched over a computer screen.

"Hi, Jerry. How are things going?"

When his friend turned, Whit's eyes widened. Usually fastidiously neat and well dressed, the technician looked like he had been up all night. Jerry's hair was uncombed, his clothes were rumpled, and his eyes darted back and forth, never settling anywhere as though he was still looking for something.

"Jerry, are you alright?"

The man rubbed his eyes as though he was just waking and trying to forget a bad dream. "I'm ahh...ahh...just tied up with this problem now. What do you want?"

Whit cautiously approached the counter. Jerry's eyes darted from Whit's eyes to his computer. The computer technician backed a way as though Whit had brought him some vile creature. Jerry stared at the black box, his nostrils flared and breathing hard.

"Jerry?"

The computer technician pulled his eyes away from the computer and shook his head. "It's okay. I'm okay. What's the problem?"

"Trashes my documents when I send them via email."

Jerry nodded. And kept nodding like a miniature bobble-head.

Whit tried to divert his friend's attention from his particular black box. He pointed to the laptops on the back shelf.

"Jerry, I don't know how you get any of these machines to work. It's all a mystery..."

The man shook his head violently, eyes wide. He interrupted Whit. "No. No! That's not the problem. The problem is the damn things work."

Whit eased away from the counter. Jerry took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair, neatening it a bit.

"Whit, look, I'm sorry, buddy. I have a problem with computer problems." Then he laughed. "A problem with problems."

Whit's eyebrows narrowed.

"You mean you're confused the computers work after you fix them?"

Jerry reached across the counter and grabbed Whit's sleeve. "No! Whit I don't fix these things. They're fixing themselves."

The editor pried Jerry's hand from his arm. "Explain it slowly to me."

Jerry pointed to one of the computers on the back table. "Whit, all I do is connect the damn computer to the internet. Then something happens within a few seconds and the problem or problems are all fixed."

"Maybe that's not a bad thing, Jerry," Whit said gently.

"It's a problem if you can't figure out how it's being done. Something's screwy, Whit. Definitely screwy."

Whit worried his friend might be a bit "screwy."

"You must be doing something, Jerry. Do you know what they call you upstairs? The Computer Maestro."

Jerry smiled for a moment and then frowned. "But I'm not doing it. Don't you understand? I'm not doing anything anymore." After a deep breath, he focused on Whit again, the strained smile on his lips. "Alright. This is my problem. I'll figure it out." Jerry gave a great sigh and looked earnestly at his friend. "In the meantime, let's fix your little baby."

Whit described his problems while Jerry attached an electronic umbilical cord from his machine to Whit's laptop.

"Okay, Whit. I'll connect your computer to the web in here. Now watch."

Jerry didn't touch the keyboard or the mouse. The cursor raced across the screen and the screen flashed off. *Oh, great. Crashed my laptop with all my articles on it and not backed up.* As soon as Whit finished his thought the home screen reappeared, the scattered files now neatly placed in various categories.

"Try sending me a copy of the article, Whit."

Whit maneuvered the mouse into position and a few seconds later he hit the send button. Jerry, in turn, went to his mail box and downloaded Whit's file and printed it. There were no mistakes.

"See? Fixed and with zero moves from... What do they call me? The Maestro."

"But, a few minutes ago..."

Jerry laughed. "Yeah, tell me about it. Crazy, huh?"

Jerry was still laughing as Whit walked away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Detective Jimmy Northup looked through the two-way mirror at "Tom Smith." Head up, hands folded, the short, young bank robber looked around trying to find something of interest in a barren room. Where the pimp or the drug dealer might be yelling for a lawyer, this man seemed quite content letting the unemotional bulldozer of the law roll over him.

Jimmy kept staring at the prisoner even as Al Morelli spoke. "Doesn't seem too concerned about doing ten years in prison." Jimmy turned toward his friend who was carefully removing a piece of white lint from his suit coat.

"You're right, Al, but why?"

After they returned to the car, Jimmy gripped the steering wheel, staring straight ahead.

Al watched some cops escorting a scruffy, T-shirted man into the basement doors and then turned to his partner. "Uh, this is when the key goes into the ignition, Einstein."

Jimmy nodded, started the car, and slowly drove away.

Al studied his partner. "Hey, you wanna grab a beer before we get back to the station, buddy?"

Jimmy looked over to his partner for a moment, blinked his eyes, and shook his head.

"Jimmy, forget this nutcase. You think too damn much." They had been partners for over twelve years, back far enough that Al knew June, Jimmy's wife. Back far enough that Al had been a guest in the log cabin the couple had built together. Then one spring day June had cut herself gardening and a week later died of an infection. Jimmy lost his mind. The night after she died, the cabin burned down. When the fire department came, Jimmy was wrapped in a blanket in the front yard watching it disappear in smoke. The report simply cited faulty wiring, but everyone in the fire and police departments knew what really happened and why.

"Then, let's you and me go out to the new Italian restaurant downtown."

Jimmy again shook his head, fingers tightly squeezing the steering wheel. "Why doesn't he care?"

"Whatever," said Al, shaking his head as he looked out the window.

The next morning Jimmy focused on the "Tom Smith" case. After six hours of phone calls to countless companies, an electronics firm acknowledged that one of their employees had not shown up for work the last two days. Weaving his way through different departments of the company, the detective put the pieces of the puzzle together.

"Tom Smith" was actually Pat Fallon, who had a doctorate in electronics. His doctoral thesis: "Computer Controlled Safety Systems."

Jimmy smiled. Apparently, such "safety systems" were not safe from the good doctor. He was a happily married engineer making six figures with a beautiful wife and a ten-year-old daughter, who just happened to be recently sick. Very sick. Leukemia.

As Jimmy stashed the papers into a file, he smiled to himself. One phone call tonight after he got home, and he could pretty much close the case on this one.

Home was a small apartment furnished with a futon and an easy chair facing an old tube TV. Hanging on the wall outside his bedroom was a single picture of a younger Jimmy and attractive brunette, both smiling.

Jimmy picked up the phone and called his doctor who was also one of his few friends.
“Hey, Doc. Got a question for you.”

“Damn it, Northrup! I’m just getting ready to go home. Call me tomorrow.”

“No. Need the information today. Anyway, leukemia. Byrnes leukemia. You’re a cancer guy, what can you tell me about it?”

The phone was silent on the other end for a few seconds. “What’s up, Jimmy? You okay?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. Case I’m working on.”

“Hmm. Well, it’s curable. There’s a new treatment being pioneered at Strong Hospital, right here in Rochester. Experimental. Works on most of the cases. Clears it up entirely. Costly, though, very costly.” They chatted for a few minutes about the local soccer team and then grumbling about being late for dinner, the doctor hung up.

The next morning, Jimmy was back at his desk and on the phone. “Yeah, Byrnes leukemia. How much does this new treatment cost?”

“Sir, are you calling about your child?”

“No. No. Calling for a friend. His kid is, you know, sick and all. How much?”

“Well, first, our treatment is experimental and not yet covered by many health insurances. Out of pocket expenses are about six hundred thousand dollars, and that’s just the upfront money. There are additional costs. Total cost about a million dollars.”

Jimmy whistled softly and hung up. Even if the young engineer mortgaged his modest home, there wouldn’t be enough money. Pat Fallon, alias Tom Smith, had been robbing banks to make up the difference between what he could borrow and what he needed to get his daughter the treatment. There was no paper trail with those particular cash transactions. Put the money into an account and no one was the wiser. As to why he didn’t put up a squawk in jail, any connection between him and the three hundred thousand already stolen would end up with the confiscation of the life-giving money. Jimmy knew the why. Now, he had to figure out the what. What to do about Pat Fallon.

CHAPTER FIVE

Except for a weekly staff meeting, the wunderkind of the Rochester paper was left alone to ferret out stories and write articles. Today, however, a phone call interrupted his research into a medical mishap at a local hospital. Whit's only words in the ensuing conversation were "Hello" and "Be right there." Stepping out of his office, he walked through the noisy press room.

At the end of the gymnasium-sized room he stopped in front of a door marked prominently with *Saul Bromberg, Editor-in-Chief*. After he knocked, a loud, "Come in! Come in!" came from behind the door. As he opened the door, Whit was accosted by a short, white-haired man whose rapid approach threatened collision.

"Whitman, how are you, young man?"

The "young man," nearly thirty, shook Saul's hand, a piston promising perpetual motion. At the same time, Whit was pushed by the other hand toward a sofa, which he knew from many previous meetings was hard and uncomfortable. As usual, it was already occupied with folders and loose papers. The small, strong hands abruptly disengaged as the older man scurried to his desk. Whit cleared a space for himself and sat down.

Shirt sleeves rolled up and tie loosened from his neck; Saul ruffled around the papers and books haphazardly strewn across his six-foot long desk. He snagged a single paper and pulled it from the mess as though he was plucking it from the jaws of a hungry brown alligator. "Look at this," the scowling man commanded, flicking the paper with his finger.

"Paper subscriptions last month. Down again. Less than thirty percent of the adults in America read the paper, Whitman. Less than thirty percent! Worse here. When I started in this business there were three papers in the city and nearly everyone read the paper. Nearly everyone! Now there's just one paper and less than thirty percent read it! Why, Whit, why?"

Saul leaned forward and glared at him. For a moment, Whit worried he might be the culprit. "I'll tell you," Saul continued. "The goddamn internet! Everyone gets their news off the web, the few who care anyway. Quick, easy, cheap, and riddled with errors. Riddled with errors. Stories aren't checked by editors; they are just thrown out there. Doesn't matter. Could be fact, could be fiction. Hell, it could be both. People love the wild stuff, true or not."

Saul yanked the young editor off the sofa and dragged him to the computer screen on the desk where an internet article highlighted accusations about the same liberal politician Whit had researched a day before. The information was taken out of context, twisted to present an unflattering picture of the politician, and at least one assertion Whit knew was patently false. Whit, aghast, looked at Saul. He was about to protest when the older man smiled and pushed a button on the computer and Whit's just submitted article appeared.

Saul wearily shook his head. "We're printing yours, boy. Not as sensational, but accurate. Someone," he pointed with his thumb to the upper floors, "tried to foist this crap on me. Angers me, Whit. Angers me."

The older man walked back to his desk, leathery, veined hands supported him as he leaned over the desk, his head down. When he turned around, Saul's face was twisted as though he was in pain.

"Hate this part of my job. Hate it! We have to let some folks go. You are the lowest on the totem pole, boy. Sorry."

Saul was never one to spare feelings with flowery statements. The band aid came off fast, a rip, a sharp sting, and done. Whit gulped. He'd sensed this might be coming. Fortunately, the

lion's share of his income came from the articles he sold to magazines. But it still hurt. Saul seemed to be searching Whit's eyes, looking for some sort of absolution. Whit shrugged and gave a half smile. "Tough times, sir. I understand. But I can manage as just a reporter."

Saul looked down at the floor, shaking his head. "You're out, Whit. Fired."

Whit's eyes opened wide. "What—what have I done?"

The forlorn expression gone, anger dominated Saul's face. "Nothing, damn it. Nothing! Not from me, my boy. Not from me." Saul, his eyebrows raised, again put his thumb up in the air. "Damn it, Whitman. This is crap. Simply crap. Crap. Crap! But I don't have a say in this. Sorry."

Saul pulled him off the couch again, pushing him toward the door. "Look, take the rest of the day off. You have two weeks coming anyway and I managed to squeeze out two more paid weeks. Find another job. Check Syracuse. I'll email some folks."

Whit looked down at the little man hurrying him toward the door. "Thank you, sir. I have enjoyed working here. You were one of the main reasons. I'll get back to you after I've had some time to settle with this."

"You do that, boy. You do that. Me? I'll do what I can. Syracuse. I'll get in touch with them. Do what I can." He patted Whit on the back and pushed him into the threshold of the door. At the opened door, Whit paused a moment, staring back at the miniature dynamo who was his mentor.

"Sir, a couple of times we chatted about the article I wrote...you know, the one about the computers having a bit too much of us?"

"I remember, boy. Damn good article. Damn good. Editorial staff loved it. Especially about how AI could be dangerous. But it got chucked back for some reason." His eyes flashed upward. Gripping Whit's hand, he pulled the taller man closer.

"Listen. Let me do this for you. I'll slip it in myself. The staff already gave it the OK. Whoever has a bug up their rear, well we'll just end run them. I'll paste it in sometime this week. Maybe tomorrow, young man. Maybe tomorrow."

"Thanks. Out with a bang, I guess."

"Out with a bang. Yes, out with a bang. I'll give you a call, Whitman and let you know the day."

Whit's hand was finally released from the vigorous handshake. Saul's fierce look dissipated, replaced by the sad expression Whit witnessed a few minutes before. "I'm sorry, boy. Sorry for you and sorry for us. Sorry for me."

The door closed in his face. The conversation was over.

Whit looked at the sign on the door for a moment. Saul Bromberg was the best boss he ever had. Gruff, quick, but always going the extra step for his staff. And, he had done even more for Whit as he championed him up the ranks from reporter to editor. To pink slip. Whit shook his head and returned to his office. He spent the rest of the day sorting his few belongings into a box.

The last item he picked up was a fountain pen Saul had given him the previous year. He thought it was just a novelty item until an older reporter gasped when he saw Whit spinning it on the desk. He called it a Pelikan. Whit looked for an emblem of the pelican bird but found none. When he looked up the pen on the internet, he was shocked to discover it was worth over a thousand dollars. A pen! A fountain pen, no less. Whit smiled and slipped the pen in his pocket. With briefcase stuffed with his belongings, he walked out of the office.

In the evening when he told Elizabeth about his termination, she was angry. She kept pacing back and forth in his study. Whenever she was irritated the soft blonde hair and sensuous curves, subtly highlighted by her fashionable clothes, were eclipsed by a severe face.

“Fire you? You’re the best writer they have, Whit and everyone knows it. And, I don’t understand why you didn’t stand up for yourself. Tell the old goat you’re getting a lawyer! Unfair practice. Put a scare into the little Jewish shit.”

Whit looked at her as though for the first time. Not the stunningly attractive face. Not the voluptuous body. Rather he looked into her eyes and saw ugly anger.

“Liz, this is from the board, not Saul.”

“Bullshit! Wake-up, Whit. And, get a goddamn backbone! This is a goddamn Jew screwing you.”

She stomped out of the apartment without a word to Whit.

Wearily he walked to the couch and sat down. Elbows on his knees, his face was cradled in his hands. This was not his best week.

CHAPTER SIX

Right after a spartan dinner, Saul Bromberg gingerly tapped small buttons on a wireless medical device which read his blood-sugar level. A brittle diabetic, he was meticulous about when and how much insulin he injected. He pressed his finger to the opening of the device, and a miniature blade jabbed and retracted, piercing a millimeter into his alcohol-prepared fingertip. A crimson drop appeared close to his fingernail. He put a thin white strip into the detector and dabbed the blood on it. Instantly his blood-sugar levels were read, duly reported, and an order appeared on the screen for how much and when to take his next insulin shot. Wirelessly routed to the computer in his study, the information was immediately uploaded to his medical records.

“Computer says I need another shot, honey. Another shot. Hmm. Larger dose this time. Must be off-balance.” Saul pulled out a fresh needle, filled it to the prescribed level, and injected himself.

Ten minutes later he staggered into the living room. “Jen, I’m not feeling well. Need to take another blood test. Help me, will you?” The results told him to take another injection.

An hour later a frantic wife called 911. An ambulance raced the convulsing man to the hospital, monitors already attached. A medical technician stared at a computer screen. “Jeez, Frank, monitors are reporting high blood sugars. But this guy looks like he’s in insulin shock.”

The ambulance driver, talked over his shoulder, as he focused on the road, racing down choked streets, cars pulling to the side. “Yeah, well, you’re not the doctor. Give him more insulin if you’re supposed to.”

Saul clenched his teeth, his head shaking wildly, and tried to protest, but only grunts came out. The medic, however, watched a monitor and proceeded with the computer’s directions.

When the man turned to the thrashing patient, he patted him on the arm. “Don’t worry, sir. This will fix you up fine.”

Saul closed his eyes as the technician injected the third dose of insulin. Two minutes after the injection, he was wildly contorting as the paramedic tried to hold him down. Then EEG machine sounded its death knell.

Few words, and those few perfunctory, passed between Whit and Elizabeth before she went to work the next morning. Alone, he looked at the bright blue water for a while, trying to find a modicum of equanimity to start his first day out of work. Finally, with a shrug, he turned to his computer and began a depressing search for a new job.

Two hours later the sun disappeared behind ever increasing clouds, the lake now leaden. Whit combed his hands through his thick hair. Over a dozen inconclusive phone calls, all answered by voice, but none human, prompted him to contemplate a trip to Syracuse to touch the inside of a human hand instead of the outside of a phone button. The shrill ring of his cell phone snapped Whit from his reverie. He picked it up, hoping someone was returning one of his calls. Instead, it was Saul’s secretary crying on the phone.

“Oh, Whit, he went to the hospital last night. Acute insulin shock. He died, Whit. He died.”

Whit did his best to console her, but he was devastated. The little, white-haired man who always seemed to be moving, talking, and directing was an elemental force at the newspaper. Death was inconceivable. After hanging up, he grabbed his coat and ran to his car.

Whit's long walk through the building was broken by fellow workers, many in tears, relating in hushed conversations the mosaic of Saul's last hours. Insulin overdose. The paramedics disregarded symptoms and followed the directions of the computer instead. Later a computer malfunction was ruled as the cause.

A stupid, stupid computer error, resulting in an unnecessary and senseless death. Whit retreated to the cocoon of his small, empty office, closed the blinds, darkness his refuge. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket to text Elizabeth. A phone number from the newspaper the previous day diverted him. It was a text message from Saul.

Found article. Tomorrow's paper. Direct insert.

The floodgates open, Whit finally cried. Even to the end, the old man had tried to do right by him. After getting control of himself, he opened his door and grabbed today's paper from a nearby desk. He turned to the editorial page. The article wasn't there. Well, it was longer than most editorials so he scanned the entire paper, looking in all sections. There was no article. He walked over to the assistant publisher's office. They chatted briefly about Saul.

“Saul wrote me a note yesterday saying he put an article of mine in the paper. But I didn't see it. Know anything?”

“Yeah, got spat out by the computer. Something about inappropriate line space. I couldn't configure it the way the computer demanded so I had to table it for tomorrow's edition.”

Whit went back to his office. He took Saul's pen out, looked at it, and gently tapped it on the table. Computer being finicky about his article. Computer error with Saul. Jerry complaining about computers which self-fix themselves. Computer error with his bank account. Coincidences? He wondered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Whit felt like he was being watched when he left the building. *Great, add paranoia to the list of my problems.* He glanced over his shoulder. The security camera was pointed directly at him. Again. To the left of the edifice was a smaller clothing shop that hosted another security camera. That security camera turned toward him as well. He looked across the street. *I wonder.*

Whit walked between two parked cars to see if any cameras across the street had locked on to him. A mini-van suddenly swerved directly toward him. The vehicle crashed into the gap between the two parked cars. Whit leaped backwards landing painfully on his rump. The van screeching to a stop, the driver stumbled out of the car and hurried over to Whit. "Are you alright? The car just swerved on its own."

Whit looked at the man's mangled hood and recognized the logo on the van. *Computer Safe.* It was one of the inexpensive, new models, which had the option of a computer-directed autopilot. The advertisements cited a nearly perfect collision-free record.

Someone picked him up, and a moment later an ambulance arrived. *Wow! That was fast.*

Though he was not hurt, except for what would later turn into a huge black and blue spot on his derriere, he conceded to be checked by the paramedics. They loaded him into the ambulance, and hooked up the appropriate monitors. Uneven beeps from the equipment, and nervous stares between the two medics signaled a problem.

"What's wrong?" Whit asked nervously, looking from one paramedic to the other.

"Sir, how does your head feel? Are you feeling nauseous?"

"No. I feel fine. Well," He pointing to his buttocks. "It hurts here."

"Why don't you lay your head down, Mr. Emerson. Just rest."

In a few seconds, he was reclined in a speeding ambulance, siren blaring, and wondering if his head really *did* hurt. Whit watched one of the paramedics prepare an intravenous feed. It was like he was in some bizarre nightmare unable to stop the fatal juggernaut. The attendant rubbed alcohol on the inside of his wrist as he held a long, ugly needle.

"Just relax, sir. Quick sting and then it's over."

Saul's death in an ambulance. Computer malfunctions. This is crazy, he thought, bolting up into a sitting position.

"No! Stop right now. I don't want you sticking anything in me. I'm fine."

The ambulance screeched into the emergency area of the hospital, the door flung wide and Whit faced a small army of doctors and nurses. The medics started to strap him down in the ambulance gurney. Whit tried to push himself off, but one of the male nurses from the group held him down.

"Stop it! Stop it! Get away!" he cried.

A doctor had already grabbed his wrist to check his pulse while the ambulance medic forced the gurney through the crowd and toward the emergency room door. Everyone was staring at Whit. *They think I'm acting this way because of the fall.*

He spoke more slowly, more calmly. "Listen. I wasn't hit by the van. I jumped away." The procession in white and blue slowed and then stopped, heads cocked now.

"Look at my head! No blood, no bruises. My head is fine." The two men holding him down relaxed a bit. "Let me go for a second, and I will show you my *only* injury."

He got off the gurney, pulled his pants down a bit and showed them the bruise now forming on his buttocks. "That's where I landed. My head wasn't hurt at all."

“But, sir, the computer monitor...”

“Can make mistakes,” Whit finished. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the medic from the ambulance with the needle, elbowing his way closer.

Whit reached into his pocket and withdrew his cell phone. He hit the speed dial for his lawyer. No answer. *Damn it, Sam, pick up!* Now another nurse, bald and brawny was moving toward him from the other side.

Whit talked loudly into the dead phone.

“Hey, Sam. Gotta a problem here at the hospital. Seems they are insistent I accept their care without my consent. Yeah. Okay.”

A brawny male nurse grabbed his arm. Instead of jerking away, Whit casually turned and spoke calmly. “Could you move a bit closer? My lawyer wants a few names.”

The nurse let go and retreated backwards. Doctors and nurses looked at each other. A slow retreat began. Whit turned to the medic brandishing the needle. “You, ahh, Middlebee, ID number 453. Wait, come back.”

For the medical profession, a summoned lawyer was the same as a cross for vampires. Within seconds the group vanished, leaving Whit facing a middle-aged woman with a wrinkled face and hair frozen with what must have been lacquer rather than hair spray. She was angrily shoving a sheet into his face.

“You refused care, young man. Now you *must* sign this form stating that you refused care.”

The crone from accounting had no fear; the paper she brandished was a sufficient talisman against any lawyer. Delighted to absolve the hospital from any negligence, Whit quickly signed the document.

“The ride in the ambulance cost \$386. Sign this document agreeing to pay.”

“But I didn’t even ask for an ambulance. It just...”

Arms folded she stared at him. Exhausted, Whit shook his head and signed. A few seconds later he was alone, the automatic door to emergency room closing behind the woman clutching two sheets of paper.

Whit wanted to get far away as fast as he could. As he rushed along the sidewalk to the main entrance, he checked his cell phone to find a taxi service. The low groan of a moving car distracted him and he looked back over his shoulder. A coal black car glided out of the visitor parking lot. It was moving toward Whit. He picked up his pace alongside the thin sidewalk which ran adjacent to the brick building. If he could just reach a side door about forty feet away, he could duck in and be safe. The black car had tinted windows and was picking up speed. Whit sprinted to the door and tried to open it. Locked. He looked across the street at another car, his only other cover. Not enough time, he realized. He turned around to face the oncoming car, crouched slightly, ready to jump. The car angled toward him. For a moment he was paralyzed as the car approached. Then it pulled up directly beside him.

The passenger window slid down and Jerry, the computer technician, smiled. “Hey. Need a ride?”

Whit’s whole body sagged, the tension dropping out of him.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Whit opened the door. “Hey, what are you doing here, Jerry?”

Jerry checked the rearview mirror and started down the long driveway. “Counseling session with some group. Apparently, there are a number of people who are just as delusional as me about computers.”

Whit looked out the window as the bricks of the hospital zipped by. "Maybe I should join the group."

"Whaddya mean?" probed Jerry as he turned into the stream of traffic.

"Computer problems with my bank account. And, you know. Saul's death. Computer malfunction."

"Yeah, great guy, Saul. There's a lot of death due to so-called computer errors, Whit. Too many, if you ask me."

Indeed. And, I'm beginning to think I could have been one of those deaths.

"I'm telling you a lot of strange things are happening. Not just to me, Whit. Other people as well. Today in the group a mother said her son just disappeared."

"Did she contact the police?" asked Whit.

"Whit, she meant disappeared from everything. There is no record of him ever existing. She claimed he worked out of his home for some computer firm. The computer firm apparently doesn't exist. There aren't any records of him from his high school. It's as though he never was born."

"Maybe he never existed at all, Jerry."

"You're saying she's wacko. Maybe. Jesus. I don't know anymore. But there are other stories like hers. And don't forget my little problem, the computers fixing themselves."

Whit didn't offer up his own unique problems. A month ago, he would have written Jerry off as being nuts. But now he wasn't so sure.

After Jerry dropped him off at the newspaper parking lot, Whit gingerly eased himself into the driver's seat of his own car. Once positioned so the pain in his rump was minimal, Whit decided to risk Elizabeth's ire and phoned her. He settled back into his seat. If she picked up it would most likely be a long and much needed conversation. Fortunately, she was not in a meeting and, another happy surprise, she was pleasant with him. He told her of Saul's death and his own near-death experience.

"Oh, poor baby! Sounds like you had a bad day. Saul was old and sick, honey. Those things happen, Whit. But this could be a good thing for you, dear. Why don't you go talk with Saul's boss and find out if you can get your job back? I mean they *are* down an editor."

Whit's head sank to his chest. He raised it back up and looked at the phone, hearing her call him.

"Whit? Whit? Are you still there?"

He pressed the END button.

Whit returned to his office one last time three days later. After he transferred some files from his work computer to a thumb drive, he went down to say goodbye to Jerry. A young man, maybe still in high school, greeted him.

"Hi. Whit Emerson, right? Trying to get to know everybody."

"Well, don't worry too much about me, I got my pink slip a few days ago."

"Ouch, tough luck. Sorry."

"Where's Jerry?"

"Didn't you get the email? Yesterday, he ahh, well, he kinda lost it. White jacket ride in the ambulance."

"Oh, my God. What hospital?"

"I dunno." The scruffy-haired technician replied and went back to his tinkering.

Whit started to leave, but stopped at the door and turned around.

"Hey, do you actually fix those computers or does the internet do it automatically?"

Red-faced, the kid replied, "Of course I fix them. What are you talking about?"

Whit backed out, "Just asking. Just asking."

Rushing through his front door, he checked his contact file on the phone. He pushed the button to call. "Hey, Maude. It's Whit."

The weak voice, barely audible replied. "Whit? I don't know any Whit."

Whit looked at the phone. "Whitman Emerson, from the newspaper. We went to the Dinosaur Diner together a few months back?"

"Oh, of course. You ordered the twenty hot wings, didn't you?"

"Yeah, that Whit. Big mistake. How's Jerry doing? I heard he was in the hospital."

"He is, but they won't let me see him. They say he's too violent." Maude was completing a doctorate in math and she was an expert with fractals but frighteningly deficient with common sense.

"So, you haven't seen him since he was admitted?" Whit asked incredulously.

"Well, yes. They let me contact him through a computer monitor, Whit. We talk. He's tired, confused, sometimes agitated."

Computers again. "Maude, try to see him face to face. You're his wife. You have the right to see him."

Silence for a moment. "Yes. That makes sense. I'll go there this afternoon."

"If there's anything I can do, just call me." But she had already hung up. She didn't score high with social graces either.

He recalled the short drive he had with Jerry a few days before. To be sure, he talked about some pretty wild stuff, but he was coherent and in control. He even joked about his computer paranoia. These were the trappings of a sane man, not one who "lost it."

What is going on?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Whit spent the next week trying, unsuccessfully, to at least get an interview.

Frustrated, he looked out the broad living room window, this time taking no joy in the view. His mind was consumed with the travesties of the recent days, from his depleted bank account to Saul's death to Jerry's...My God! Jerry is in the hospital! He found Jerry's cell phone number and called. No answer, a crazy message joking about calling back "much, much later." He called the hospital.

"No, sir. He was released a few days ago."

He hung up, grabbed his keys off the table, and went out the front door. Twenty minutes later he pulled up to a condominium complex, considerably less expensive than his. Getting out of the car, he walked to the door and knocked. No curtains on the windows, he could see that Jerry's and Madge's apartment was empty.

A few doors down, a middle-aged man shuffled out in slippers to retrieve the mail.

Seeing Whit hovering by Jerry's former apartment, he yelled, "Moved."

"Where?"

"I dunno. Never saw them to say goodbye. Moving van people said Illinois." The man put his hand to his chin momentarily, and then looked at Whit. "Joplin. That was it. Joplin. Joplin, Illinois."

"When?"

"About two, maybe three days ago. Heard Jerry lost his job at the paper."

Job. Sanity. Maybe his life.

"Thanks."

Whit sped home and immediately got on the internet. Using Jerry's name, he found Jerry's new number in Joplin, Illinois. He dialed the number. Please be there. Please be there, Jerry. Four rings passed as Whit clenched the phone tighter and tighter.

"Hello."

"Jerry. Oh my God, it's great to hear your voice, buddy. Whit Emerson."

"Oh, hi Whit. What's up?"

"What's up? My God, you moved away, dude. That's what's up."

"Yeah. Hospital put me on some meds and I'm much better now. Total control, Whit. No more worries about computers."

"Why did you leave Rochester?"

"Doc thought a change of scenery might do me good. So, Madge and I just up and left. Nice place, Joplin."

Whit was quiet for a moment, thinking.

"Kinda scared me. Reminds me of that time you left the Red Wings game right in the middle of the seventh inning. Man, you scared us all that day."

There was silence on the other end for a moment.

"Yeah. I had some weird in me back then. I mean leaving a Red Wings game. Stupid, huh?"

Whit gulped and answered. "Yup, stupid alright. Well, good to hear you're feeling better. Keep in touch, okay?"

“Sure. Take care, Whit.”

Whit put the phone in the cradle slowly, like he was handling some explosive. Then he just stared at it. Jerry hated baseball and they had never gone to any sports event together. *Who had I been talking to? What, in God's name, was happening?*

Elizabeth came home an hour later. Seeing Whit on the couch, his body bent over and hands clasped together, she raised her eyebrows.

“Great, just great. Mr. Wonderful and his cheery ways.”

She walked through the kitchen to the bedroom, yelling at him on the way. “Damn it, Whit! Can't you clean up your mess on the counter?”

He slowly got off the sofa and walked to the kitchen to put away the soiled lunch dishes. Coming back from the bedroom, she brushed past him, deliberately pushing him against the counter. He smelled liquor on her breath. She reached for a wine glass and filled it to the brim. Then she settled down and turned on the television, a phone in her hand, a muffled conversation with someone. He wondered if she was seeing someone else. He was surprised he so easily accepted the possibility. He was not surprised that he really didn't care.

After wiping down the counters, he went to the liquor cabinet, the door wide open from Elizabeth's withdrawal. Instead of closing it, he reached for one of the unopened bottles. Before he could pour himself a heavy dose, the doorbell rang. Bourbon bottle in hand, he trudged to the door and opened it to red blinking lights of half a dozen police cars. He was pushed aside as black-suited officers forced themselves past him. Whit's arm was grabbed by one of the officers as a detective recited his Miranda rights. Within moments he was handcuffed and led outside. Overwhelmed by the invasion, Whit watched his computer and Elizabeth's get placed in a small van along with a steady stream of paraphernalia from their condo. He looked over his shoulder and saw police officers roughly emptying drawers of his desk into transparent plastic bags. As he was led to a waiting car, a detective reached in his front shirt pocket and confiscated his cell phone.

“What's this all about?” he finally demanded.

“Child pornography.”

“But, I never...”

The man looked at him, concerned. “Sir, you have been read your Miranda rights, correct?”

“Yes, but...” Then he shut-up. He had to get to his lawyer.

Elizabeth, uncuffed, was led outside by a police woman. Whit was about twenty feet away. Seeing him, she wrenched herself free and ran to him.

“Goddamn bastard. Child pervert.”

“Liz, you know better.” She started hitting him.

Two officers dragged her away. Whit was pushed into a police car, his neighbors blatantly gawking at the drama. Elizabeth yanked away from the officers again and ran alongside the moving car, pounding on his window. Her face, contorted in anger, lost all of its beauty and the raw, ugly truth of their relationship wrenched his heart.

As the car sped away from the screaming woman, Whit closed his eyes.

