AND NOTHING BUT

by Brian H. Seidman

Steven Matthews’ family encouraged him to pursue acting, until rejection turns him away. Betrayed by those he trusted—their love keeping them from telling the truth—Matthews closes himself off from the world. Later, as a programmer, co-workers take advantage of Matthews, ruining his career. Disillusioned, unable to accept the help he needs, Matthews hires the company’s doorman as the most unlikely confidant. His request to the wizened James is as initially inexplicable as James’ acceptance, to take a stipend to tell Matthews the truth about himself. What follows is a picaresque San Francisco journey, from the Haight to the Golden Gate Bridge to the Tenderloin, from the minimum wage grind to the jetsetting lives of movie stars. Throughout, praise, criticism, lies, and the truth test their artificial friendship, examining truth in personal relationships and questioning the responsibilities we have to others as employees, as friends, and as human beings.
AND NOTHING BUT

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
by
Brian H. Seidman
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2003

Advisor _____________________________________
Kay Sloan

Reader ______________________________________
Constance Pierce

Reader ______________________________________
Keith Banner
©
Brian H. Seidman
2003
# Table of Contents

## PART I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One</th>
<th>How Much Does a Doorman Make?</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>Majordomo</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>The Thorn Field</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>The Way to a Man’s Heart</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>Houseguests</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Six</th>
<th>A Change of Shoes</th>
<th>43</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven</td>
<td>How Low is Low</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eight</td>
<td>Working Days</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Nine</td>
<td>Favors</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Ten</td>
<td>Cars and Trucks</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eleven</td>
<td>Doors and Windows</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Twelve</th>
<th>It Had To Be You</th>
<th>87</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Thirteen</td>
<td>Breaking and Entering</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Fourteen</td>
<td>Four Glasses</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Fifteen</td>
<td>Care and Care Alike (aka The Big Lie)</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Sixteen</td>
<td>An Unexpected Message</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seventeen</td>
<td>Memories</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eighteen</td>
<td>The Man on the Top Floor</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“You don’t want your friends to care or your co-workers or the women that love you, because anyone who cares is just another obstacle between you and shutting out the world. You had a fine system of being left alone until Mr. Ryan went and fouled things up, and I was happy to be a part of your solution but I don’t think I want to be part of your problem, fixing things so you can hide away from the world and don’t even have to leave the house any more.”

“And you’re telling me you’re any different?”

“What do you mean?”

“At least in my job I’ve got a little bit of autonomy. At least I make my own decisions! You don’t interact with the outside world any more than I do, and all you do every day is what I ask you to. You don’t even have to think for yourself and you’re going to accuse me of taking myself out of society? Please.”

“Maybe you’re right. I could have avoided all of this and I didn’t, and maybe you’re right. Maybe I did the same thing. And maybe there’s only one thing to do about it.”
Chapter One – How Much Does a Doorman Make?

I first met James about three years ago, standing at the front door of WalsTec. The first day I visited, dressed in a suit and tie with a briefcase at my side, the doorman barred the glass front door bodily.

“Can I help you?” he asked nicely, though his thin body tensed. I wasn’t sure exactly how he though he’d stop me if I tried to get past; he looked to be in his mid-seventies, maybe older, with bushy gray eyebrows. His faux gold nametag read “James,” and he wore more the Halloween costume of a doorman than a uniform itself—a long maroon jacket with yellow horizontal buckles, red pants, and a visored hat. His outfit was clean and starched, but his brown, gnarled teeth betrayed signs of poverty.

“I’m supposed to ask for Peterson on the sixth floor.”

“Name?”

“Steven Matthews.”

James visibly relaxed. To the side of the doorway, he flipped open the cover of a panel and typed a series of numbers, then held the front door open for me. “Go on in. The elevator’s programmed to take you right up.”

WalsTec resided in the entirety of a tall, thin building, covered in one-way windows to let in the light but keep out prying eyes. Little hints disclosed the quiet wealth behind the building: the glass elevator on the left side, also with one-way windows, and the doorman at the front entrance. Out in San Jose or Santa Clara, rival software companies might have looked the building over and wondered what the owners were trying to hide; perhaps it was for that reason the owners had set the company up miles away from Silicon Valley, in San Francisco. In WalsTec—Webster, Alexander and Sons Technology, or “Webster” as it was affectionately called—I saw a company that wasn’t interested in either the corporate politics of wondering what its competitors were up to, or being wondered about. What attracted me to WalsTec were the similarities that I felt between the company and myself: it didn’t want fame, just the comfort of its own success.

As I watched on that first day though the clear elevator doors, I saw that floors one to six were identical in layout. After I worked for the company a while, I would learn that this was true for the entire building. The elevators opened to long conference rooms, sunlight shining in through vertical blinds, reflecting off glistening brown tables. Decorative plants manned the four corners of the rooms. Some conference rooms were empty; others held meetings or luncheons. Double-doors on the far wall led to a large area of employee cubicles and private offices.

WalsTec hired me freelance, first as a pinch-hit troubleshooter, and later as an associate programmer—individually contracted and ultimately beholden to no one but myself. While the floor managers assigned the day-to-day work to the WalsTec employees, I would receive the special long-term projects, catching bugs in one certain corner of a program or, later, developing a program’s additional special features. The company specialized in behind-the-scenes programming—“modules” to be used by other companies to write the code for their own products, or databases for our clients to use to record information about customers buying their databases. Working mainly at home, I only went to the office once or twice a month, but after our first meeting, James never failed to recognize me.
“How are you?” I would ask if my day was going well.
“Just fine, sir, just fine,” he’d answer. Once, finishing a project, I remained at the office for twelve hours straight, working with an associate. I hadn’t been surprised to see James when I arrived; I was surprised to see him when I left, long after the sun retreated.
“Don’t you take a break, James?”
“I don’t need much sleep, sir,” he replied.

Before joining WalsTec, I worked at the Hugo movie theater. After receiving their degrees in computer science, most of my graduating class at Bay Area State settled for entry-level jobs at software companies, with little responsibility and little creativity, while to everyone’s surprise, I rejected it all for a job at a theater off Ashbury. Working alongside pimply high school students, I would sell tickets for R-rated shows to wistful pre-teens when I was in a good mood and turned away the sweaty-palmed seventeen-in-a-weekers out on a hot date when I felt a little cruel. I didn’t think any of it was important. I worked a forty-hour week, making just enough money to share a one-room apartment with a shaggy hippie-wannabe who sold homemade beads over in the Haight, found by answering a “Roommate Wanted” ad.

In the evenings, I wrote code.

In the eyes of a computer programmer, a fine piece of code is like a fine piece of music. To the uninitiated, music may be beautiful when it’s played, but only someone trained in the composition’s language can look at it raw and appreciate its intricacies, its delicacies. I had no interest in working nine-to-five for a huge corporation, where my work was just a little portion of the big product, and creativity was negligible. Programming, I thought, like everything else, should allow for personal style, individual flourishes. The plan was that if I could march into a company with software in hand, show that I knew what I was doing, I could skip the grunt work and go on to the good stuff. In the afternoons, I sold movie tickets, and in the evenings, I composed.

I remained at the theater, grossly overqualified, for two years. Others have suffered longer for their art. In some sick way I enjoyed working at the theater, getting off on the feeling of accomplishment from doing my work perfectly every time. It was ridiculously easy—take the customer’s money, pull out the ticket, say “Have a nice day.” Take the next customer’s money, pull out the ticket, say “Enjoy your movie.” Beside me, high school students fumbled with the customers’ change, punched tickets for the wrong movie, and generally made me fear for humanity. The managers heaped praise on me and I smiled back, thinking all the while that their compliments were an insult to my intelligence.

But as much as the management liked me, the teenagers working for extra spending money wondered occasionally what a “grown-up” was doing working at “their” movie theater. For a while I worked the same shift as a girl named Mary, and we’d get stuck in the ticket booth together. She had her right eyebrow pierced, a metal loop toward the edge of her face, often fiery red and infected. We talked, and Mary told me about high school and how the teachers went out of their way to help students as little as possible, claiming “that’s how it will be in college.”

“They say that to scare you,” I said. “College is much easier than high school.”

“Then again,” Mary pointed out, “you’re still working in a movie theater.” I tried to explain how it was a stop on the road to greater success, and Mary nodded, but it was
less a gesture of understanding than a way to end a stupid conversation. I settled on reminding her that daddy wouldn't pay her room and board forever, and took comfort in how far I thought her pierced eyebrow would get her. I'd learn differently later.

As my days at the movie theater went on, I sat down every night at the computer screen feeling like I was trying to pee with the world watching. Nothing came out. I was tired; not that theater work was difficult, but it still required dealing with customers for most of eight hours, much of it on my feet. As I tried to program, I'd find myself pacing the room, or counting the number of pens I had in my drawer. My half of the little apartment was never cleaner.

My goals began to feel like fantasies, where the reality was that I liked working in the movie theater, watching free screenings of the latest computer-generated summer action-fest, eating all the popcorn I wanted, and setting my watch so that I could stick my head in to *Open Blossoms* at just the right moment to see shapely movie star Sally Selvalan bare her breasts to the virile gardener, three screenings a day. At home, I'd started trying to create an ERP, connecting all the different computer systems of a company’s shipping and customer sales and human resources. Usually, it takes a team of programmers to put the thing together on-site for a company. Mine was just a template of sorts, not for any firm in particular, but it would be enough proof to get the kind of job I wanted.

Progress was slow.

One night, I sat paralyzed by late-night talk shows, knowing the computer was behind me but unable to generate the will to face it. The next morning, I confronted myself panicked in the bathroom mirror. It wasn’t even as if I’d had my foot in the door of success and been pushed out. I didn’t even have my figurative shoes on yet. The things I wanted to do and the things that I did weren’t the same. I still felt the impetus to finish my programming, but at the end of the day I didn’t have the motivation to keep going.

Simple time was the solution. It seemed that the more I procrastinated on my project, the more that thoughts of programming began to seep over to my time at Hugo. I started keeping a pocket-sized notebook next to me, writing out little scraps of code in between selling tickets to *Bloodgrudge III: Chokehold* for the wrestling-addicted. Leaning over my shoulder, one of my younger coworkers studied my notes, then asked sympathetically, “Chemistry homework, eh?”

And one night, I finished my code.

Searching for jobs, I avoided the staffing agencies, refusing to share the pay for my freelance work in exchange for their help. Instead, answering advertisements on Internet sites, I found smaller homegrown companies needing outside help to finish their projects. Benefits were generally negligible, but the pay was better. My lack of professional experience put me a step below everyone else at interviews, but when I presented the completed ERP as an example of my programming prowess, projects rolled in. I took great pleasure in tendering my resignation at the movie theater; I spent a day watching free movies, glutting myself on bags of popcorn, inhaling chocolate-covered raisins, then mentioned to my manager on my way out, more as an after-thought than anything else, that I quit. I thought I’d never be back.

At twenty-eight, I was independently employed and living comfortably. I barely saw my roommate as it was; I had to leave a note to tell him I’d gone. Moving to Noe
Valley, I found a larger apartment between the Victorian homes and little coffee shops, enjoying the relative remoteness of the surrounding hills. My freelance jobs suited me well—I bought a stereo with surround sound, an entertainment system, a flat-screen TV—but I never stayed at a company for more than one or two jobs. None of them seemed quite right.

“Steve, what exactly are you looking for?” This, from a co-worker familiar with my work.

“Independence.” I said it without thinking, almost joking. “Independence and comfort.”

He replied, “Try these guys.” And I called WalsTec, and James was there to greet me on my first day.

I started out with WalsTec’s troubleshooting department on the sixth floor. The building wasn’t lavishly decorated, but every floor was nicer than the one below. If the fifth floor had freshly ground coffee every morning, the ninth had a breakfast buffet and the twelfth had an omelet chef. As the company became more impressed with my talents, I was called to assignments on floors higher up the thin building, until I started working for the sixteenth floor. I’ve been told Webster, Alexander and their sons have their offices on the top floor, though I’ve yet to meet them.

On the day I made my deal with James, I was bringing in the last of the programming for a project that the sixteenth floor and I had been working on for the past six months, a database that organized customer records for a client, so the client could then sell their own databases to their own clients, and so on. The redundancy of it wasn’t my problem, only to create the best software I could.

“Afternoon, Mr. Matthews,” James said as I entered.

“Afternoon,” I answered. My cell phone vibrated in my pocket and when I pulled it out, the display read TAGLIERE LAW. Sharon, calling from work. I loved her, but she always seemed to find the worst times to call. I pressed the phone’s “talk” button and said, “Hey. About to step into the elevator.”

“Meeting?”

“Yeah. Hoping to have this project done today. How’re you?”

Sharon groaned over the other end of the line, as expected. “If Cheryl”—a new secretary that Sharon had been telling me about at the tax-law firm—“doesn’t get off her ass and start doing her work, I’m going to shoot her. I can’t do fucking Tagliere’s work for me and her boss’s work for her too, because she doesn’t know how to do anything!”

“Sounds … lovely.” I said, for lack of anything else.

“Lovely,” she sighed. “Yeah.”

James stood by the wall panel, ready to enter the numbers for the elevator to take me up to 16. “Hey, I’ve got to go,” I told her. Her work dilemmas, I knew from experience, were more than I could help with over the phone. “We’re on for tomorrow night, right?”

“Yeah.” She sighed again. “See you then.” I hung up the phone and, nodding to James, stepped inside. The elevator had surprised me at first, sans buttons, with the doorman entering strings of digits on the ground floor to tell it where to stop. Some postmodern exercise in employee efficiency, I imagined. I looked up, watching the floors fall toward me, the ones I’d already worked on and farther, the ones I hadn’t yet reached.
I'd been partnered with the sixteenth floor’s managers for most of the past year; with the completion of this project, I expected not only a healthy bonus, but a call to work higher up the building—the company’s version of a promotion.

I guess what I called “my acting failures” had been in the back of my mind around then. A few weeks before, Sharon and I had seen a flyer outside the local bowling alley for a high school production of “Der fliegende Holländer.” We went, thinking eight dollars a pop was a small price for injecting some culture into our lives. Turns out, this school had some major money behind it, and not only was the production itself amazing—a giant, moving ship, glow-in-the-dark ghost costumes—but the voices of the high schoolers ranked with what I would have expected to hear otherwise at Lincoln Center.

It reminded me of how naïve I’d been, after acting in four years’ worth of school productions at my own high school, applying to a bevy of acting schools for college only to be rejected from every single one. I’d opened one envelope after another in growing horror, until the truth finally became clear. That I hadn’t had any talent never even occurred to me, given the encouragement of my parents and teachers, but I couldn’t deny what the unanimous rejections suggested. I felt shattered; in my mind, the heat of the flames from the bonfire in which I burned the rejection letters in the backyard mixes with the heat of the embarrassment and shame I felt, spending all that time without ever realizing my abilities were so much less than I thought. As the fire died out, so did my ambitions; I’d banked all my plans on attending acting school and now, without it, I had no idea what to do next.

As someone predominantly interested in the arts, I’d never paid much attention to my math and logic skills; those classes were just something to get through before acting class. It ended up that my SAT scores, however, won me enough scholarships to support myself at the local community college. I hopped a bus to campus, refusing any help from the friends and family that I felt had deluded me with their support, as I turned from acting to computer science.

What happens when the person you are and the person you want to be can never be the same? When you realize you can never be what you want to be, how do you live your life?

When your life is over, what do you do the next day?

The elevator stopped, and I regarded the scene on the sixteenth floor before I stepped out. When my earlier co-worker had recommended Webster to me, he couldn’t have been more right. The company gave me my space, allowed me to work at home on my own hours, their only demand that the jobs come in on time, and better yet, they allowed me to compose; they allowed me my creativity. If there was one problem at the time, it looked at me as I walked in the room. Three men, around my age, sat at the table. The sixteenth floor’s managers, waiting there for me to turn in my quarter of the database.

Metal trays, one over a burner, lay atop the table. The lids of each leaned at their side; the tray with the burner held lasagna, followed by a field green salad, hard rolls, butter, and sodas and beer in melting ice—the laid-back world of computer programmers. They’d already begun eating despite the fact that I was a few minutes early.
“Matthews, how’s our favorite programmer?” greeted Brad Ryan, the leader of the group. “Have some lunch.”

His skin perpetually tanned, Ryan's black hair was gelled and spiked, his chin covered by a black goatee. His nose was hooked, but his jaw was firm and pronounced. Brad was good-looking and knew it, but pretended he didn’t. His spiked hair, for instance, was supposed to appear disheveled; instead, I suspected he’d woken up three hours early that morning to style it just so it seemed disheveled. His clothes, too, were meant to be bargain-basement—tweed jackets, seersucker shirts, and corduroy pants—when instead, it seemed, each piece had been carefully, painstakingly selected at top-of-the-line stores just for this effect. He was nouveau riche, hip-to-be-poor, pretentious but maddeningly innocent; you couldn’t call him on it, because he’d just point to himself and say “Who, me?”

“Gentlemen,” I said, by way of greeting.

“It’s a weed salad. Not very good.” This, from the man across from Ryan, John McDaniel. He always sounded angry, even at little things like salad. McDaniel was the oldest of the group, and grossly so. He was undoubtedly the kid who’d grown a beard in junior high, before anyone else could shave. His beard wasn’t long, just unkempt, trailing down his chin and making his neck seem hairy, connecting to creeping chest hairs extending from under his collar. The hair on his head was a bushy mess that, as opposed to Ryan’s, was disheveled for real. McDaniel wasn’t fat so much as he’d just let himself fall apart; his stomach stuck out under his dirty, button-down shirt. Slovenliness wasn’t a crime, but being a know-it-all was. It was impossible to make a suggestion without McDaniel piping up about how he thought he could make it better, and usually his idea only made things worse.

“Who … ever heard of a salad made of … weeds?” asked Scott Simple, next to McDaniel. “I mean … I thought salad was supposed to be lettuce.” Simple was the youngest of the group. The others called him “Scotty” or “Simple.” He didn’t have a chin exactly, so much as his face came to a plateau parallel to his bottom lip, giving him the expression of always smiling. He had this slow way of talking, as if too much acid in college put him in perpetual deep thought. His hair was cut in the latest surfer style. I’d seen him out at bars occasionally; women called his name when he came into the room, ran up and hugged him … generally treated him like one of the girls. Constantly surrounded by women, he was the kind of man guys hate, until they realize women find him completely harmless, and that’s why they flock to him.

“So,” I said, slicing lasagna with a serving spoon and dishing it on to my plate, “what’s new?”

“Oh Matthews, don’t ‘what’s new’ with us,” McDaniel shouted. “Do you have the stuff?” We were all last names and nicknames in the casual way of developers.

“At least try to be civilized, McDaniel,” Ryan said. “Let the man eat his lunch first.” There was a pause, but even Ryan couldn’t stand the suspense for very long. He asked in an undertone, “You did finish the program, didn’t you Matthews?”

I allowed only the slightest pause to get their blood pressures up. “‘Course I finished, guys. What do you think I am?”

A smile passed between the three of them, but I dismissed it then as sarcasm instead of malice.
We ate in silence. I took my time, even after they were done. This was the nice thing about being a freelancer; I had all the time in the world. The field green salad was fine, despite McDaniel’s complaints. The leaves were slightly bitter, but that made it feel healthier to me, like no pain, no gain. An oily vinaigrette worked hard to make it more palatable. The lasagna was oily as well, but adequate; it might have been better had it been hot, but with my companions leaving it uncovered, the mozzarella cheese had congealed to another layer instead of a topping. Simple amused himself by spinning his plate and McDaniel looked like he might fall asleep. Finishing, I took a swig of my beer, then hoisted my briefcase on to the table and clicked it open. Of my first day’s attire, only my briefcase remained; the suit and tie had been traded for a T-shirt and jeans.

“Gentlemen,” I said again, “the finished product.” I had disks, but these guys were trained programmers like myself, smart if uninspired. We dealt in hard copy here. I handed one sheave of paper to McDaniel next to me and passed two to Ryan; he flipped one open and scanned it, holding the other in his hand.

“Hey, man … take one down and pass it around,” Simple drawled. Ryan shot him an annoyed look and pushed the papers down the table. Ryan, I’d come to know, didn’t like the other two either. Simple snatched it up, crunching it with his hand, and started flipping through the pages, maniacally. Reaching a page about halfway through, he read down it with his finger, stopped, then began laughing. Hysterically.

McDaniel was reading through the program a little more slowly. He was tilted back in his chair, one foot resting on the table. The code packet was in his lap, and he had the knuckle of his right thumb resting against his lips, deep in thought. Looked like he was trying to suck his thumb without going all the way. McDaniel, too, came to a certain page, regarded it, then put the sheaf down on the table and stared off into space.

What was going on, I wondered. I hadn’t printed a copy of the code for myself; nonchalantly, I tried to lean back and glance at McDaniel’s discarded copy, but I couldn’t tell at which page he’d stopped. Simple had brought his laughing under control, with only a few little hiccups every couple of seconds. I turned to him and mouthed “What?” and he began laughing full-force once again.

Ryan put down his copy and the other two immediately paid attention.

“This is good work, Matthews,” he said without inflection. He opened his booklet, turned it around, and laid it facing me on the table. “Especially this point.” He gestured to a line. Ah, I thought, that was the crux of the piece, a flourish that made the database call up records a little faster. It had come to me last night, just as I was finishing.

Then he said: “That’s exactly how we did it.”

“Excuse me?” I looked around the table. Simple was still laughing.

“This is exactly how we did it,” Ryan repeated. “Based on your design. McDaniel, Scotty and I completed the job last week. This says we got it right.”

It took me a minute to respond. Ordinarily the floor managers didn’t touch code themselves, leaving it to the employees. “Why did you three finish the project?”

“Matthews,” Ryan spoke slowly, like talking to a child, “the guys upstairs are very interested in our database here.”

“All the way to the top,” McDaniel added.

“It was taking too long, so we went ahead and got it done ourselves.” Ryan was almost speaking baby talk now, trying to pacify me.
“Too long? I’m nowhere close to deadline.”
“We thought they might appreciate it early,” McDaniel said. “We thought they’d be very impressed ... with us.”
“Look, Matthews,” and now Ryan’s tone was completely serious, “we have to work here day in, day out. What’s the harm in letting us snag a little of the glory, huh?”
“The harm? This is my project!”
“Nope ...” sang Simple quietly.
“You’ve been paid very well,” Ryan said, “and you’ll get an excellent kill fee. But if you’re not going to see reason, I think your time with this company is at an end.”
“Now wait a minute.” I thought about threatening to sue and immediately dismissed it. “Programmer sues San Francisco software company.” Every firm would know, and this freelancer didn’t need to be labeled a troublemaker. Looking from one man, to the other, to the third, I tried to find some semblance of reason in any of them. Ryan stared back at me, unabashed. McDaniel, who had never felt remorse in his life, pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. Simple looked at me and his big smile made that flat chin jump; he looked away to keep from giggling.
“Well.” I became aware of the silence in the room. I couldn’t bring myself to just accept what they’d done and keep going. A sudden, impalpable wall had risen, blocking me from the rest of the table. I wasn’t an employee anymore. I was a guy sitting in someone else’s conference room with three strangers. I pushed back my chair and stood, collected the three sheaves from the table and put them back in my briefcase. Walking to the end of the room, I hit the elevator button, busying myself by looking out the window. The doors opened.
“Well,” I said again, took one last look at the men in the room, and walked away.

“Sir? You all right?” James asked from his post as I smacked the glass front door open with my hand. Had he been on the other side, I’d have hit him in the nose with the door. It was murky outside, the San Francisco fog seeping in between the buildings and down the street.
“Fine,” I growled as I walked past.
“What’s wrong with your mouth?” he asked. “Did you lose a tooth?”
I stopped in place and turned on my heels. “What?”
“Your mouth.” He walked closer, peering at my face. “Oh, you’ve got a piece of lettuce stuck in your teeth.”
I felt around with my tongue. Sure enough, there was a large piece of the salad covering one incisor.
“ Weed,” I said.
“What?”
“It’s a weed.” No wonder Simple had found the whole thing hilarious. I turned around and walked on.

I rocketed out of the parking lot, a torpedo headed toward home, my progress halted by a crossing cable car. I slipped my cell phone into its car-cradle and put it on speaker, then called Sharon.
“Oh, honey,” she said after I told her, “it’ll be OK.”
It was exactly what I didn’t want to hear. The cable car went past and I put the car in motion. “How can you say that?”

“You’re a great programmer. Something will come your way.”

“Look, I’ve got to go,” I said, cutting her off. “I’ll call you later.” The phone chirped as I ended the call.

As I drove, I realized nothing I could do at home would be even slightly relevant. Out of habit, I turned the car around and started back toward the office, ending up pulling over to the side of the road.

“Bar,” I said aloud, and did so.

I couldn’t help but think how quickly I’d gone from being someone to no one. Not an hour earlier, I’d walked in the front door of WalsTec, expecting to be congratulated for a job well done and offered a promotion.

I flew into the first bar I passed and landed on a stool. It was late afternoon; the place was empty and the bartender was playing a handheld poker game.

“Got a flush,” he said.

“Got fired,” I replied. He looked at me, looked at the poker game, looked back at me, and put the game on the bar near a puddle of liquid. From behind the counter, the bartender retrieved a bottle of scotch and a glass, sliding it toward me. I downed the shot and put it back on the bar.

“Another one,” I said, “and whatever’s on tap.”

Instead of a new assignment, I’d been tossed out of WalsTec on my ass. I was persona non-grata, that easy. It took me two years to get in, and roughly an eyeblink to get pushed back out.

The dismay from getting rejected from the actors’ colleges had been with me dully for a few weeks, and now I felt it fully in a rapidly increasing drunken déjà vu. Was it so tough to be left alone? Once again, I had no prospects, and no direction.

Damn it. I was right back where I started.

Night’s darkness combined with the day’s fog made it almost impossible to see outside. James stood under the awning at WalsTec.

He turned toward my car as I drove by, staring into my headlights and watching me go past, then looked away. Putting the car in reverse, I pulled haphazardly in front of the building. I was driving pretty well, considering that I’d spent a good part of the afternoon ruining my liver. James started walking toward the car. I imagine now he probably figured I was someone lost and looking for directions. Not completely far from the truth. I rolled down the passenger side window.

“Hey, how much does a doorman make?” I shouted, getting ahead of myself. James stopped his approach, and waving a hand as if to dismiss me, walked back toward the office building. “Kids,” I thought I heard him say.

I took the key out of the ignition, losing the headlights and leaving myself in the dark. James looked at me with alarm when I got out of the car and started moving toward him. His look turned to curiosity when he recognized me.

“Mr. Matthews, I didn’t know it was you!” James paused, then said hesitantly, “Do you need me to ring an office?”
My focus was so intent, my intentions so clear to me then, despite their peculiarity. I can still remember just what we said, as though it was a day ago instead of a year. “I’m here to see you, James.”

“Me?”

“I want to hire you,” I said. To my mind, my voice sounded confident. It might have been the alcohol.

“Hire me? You sure?” He laughed. “Mr. Matthews, I’ve got a job.”

“How much does a doorman make?” I asked again.

James hesitated and told me. Thirty thousand. In a year? I’d made that much on each of my first couple of computer projects, right out of the theater.

“I’ll match it,” I said. “More. Fifteen thousand more. I want to hire you to tell me the truth.”

“The truth?”

“The truth. I ask you a question, you tell me the truth. I have a situation, I ask you what you think about it, you tell me the truth. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you, James. That’s the job. Do you understand?”

The old man paused to cough heartily into a tissue from his pocket. “Mr. Matthews, this is …”

“If it makes more sense to you, you can do other things. You can be my doorman if you want. You can cook, you can clean, you can run errands, you can be my personal valet. But I need——” I stopped. “I’m hiring you to tell me the truth. And I will pay you for it.” James didn’t move. Frustrated, I started to leave, then went back.

“Are you going to stand in front of this building for the rest of your life?” I remember James looked at me, hard, and I thought for the first time that he was considering it. I’d taken a napkin from the bar and written an address on it. “Meet me here tomorrow night if you’re interested.” I stumbled back into the fog, got in my car, and drove away.

Two days later, whomever it was that held the office on the top floor of WalsTec would find that their building no longer had a doorman.
Chapter Two – Majordomo

“You hired him to what?”
“To tell me the truth.”
“Right.” Sharon stood and walked over to the bowling ball return, rotating her green ball until the finger holes faced up. She called over her shoulder before she served, “What the hell does that mean?”
“We’ll talk,” I said. “He’ll help me figure things out.”
Sharon knocked three pins off the right side and waited for her ball to come back. She’s a better bowler than that, when she’s concentrating. Rolling again, her light blue shirt crept up to expose the skin of her lower back.
“What things?” Sharon sat back down, readjusting her jacket on the back of her chair. “Work? You got fired. Honey, you know I feel badly for you, but what’s to figure out?”
“Things.”
“Things. Can’t you figure things out yourself?”
I scoffed. “After yesterday, apparently not.”
Sharon laughed, wrinkling her eyes and showing pearly front teeth. Over time I’ve learned what attracts me: large doe-eyes, a button nose, hair curling in ringlets, an exposed neck. A body, sometimes, but experience has taught that a body without a face never fascinates for long.
But while some fall for a smile, with Sharon it was teeth, perfectly white—natural, as near as I could tell—symmetrical, dainty, exactly spaced. I asked her once, offhandedly, if she’d ever worn braces? Retainers? Nothing. Perfect teeth, like little statues chiseled from marble.
“He’s a stranger,” she said, and at the time I thought to myself, That’s the point. I countered, “He strikes me as an upright guy. Hardworking.”

My standing advice has always been to never take a date to a bowling alley. Aside from the fact that a woman’s hardly going to be impressed by a fancy night at the bowling alley, one person is always standing up while the other one’s sitting down. It’s completely impossible to have any kind of meaningful conversation, and it’s even worse if you’re both bad at bowling, because you can’t even cheer for each other in any sort of halfhearted way. Fortunately, Sharon and I were pretty fair bowlers, and in the year we’d been dating we’d become casual enough that we could get away with bowling for a date. It wasn’t the most fashionable thing we could have done in San Francisco, but when I programmed all day—or used to, until what had happened the day before—and she answered phones behind a desk, it was nice to get out for the evening.

“Why didn’t you ask someone you knew to help you?” she asked. In an undertone, I heard her say, “You won’t even live with me.”

I rolled my ball; it hit the two pin and took out a couple pins behind it. It was a full twenty-four hours since I’d made my deal with James, and in that time I’d put in motion a scheme that I thought would help me win back my job at WalsTec. I considered telling Sharon what I’d done, even as I’d considered asking her for help that night instead of James, but given her “everything will be all right” attitude, I’d ultimately decided against it. I wonder now how things might have turned out differently if I’d hadn’t.
“I didn’t want to bother anyone with my problems.” I said instead, which was true enough.

She sighed, and I retrieved my ball from the return. Behind us, the doors to outside opened intermittently, letting in the Haight crowd with bursts of cold night air. To the left, three stairs led to a restaurant and bar. Stepping up to the lane, I took the ball in my right hand, cradled it in my left, and swung back. As it left my fingers, Sharon called out, “So you got yourself a majordomo instead?”

Sharon was also a better bowler than to call out when someone was serving, and we both knew it. My thumb hooked the wrong way and I rose from the serve prematurely, sending the ball careening to the right. It nicked one corner pin before disappearing.

“A what?” I said.

“A majordomo. A head of the household. A butler.”

I paused long enough to make her look straight at me before I spoke. “He’s not a butler. I just told him he could cook and clean so it would make more sense.” Noise flowed past us: balls speeding down lanes, followed by the hollow sound of pins clacking against one another, a multitude of conversations melting to a din.

She grinned as she stood up, still looking me in the eye. “You’re admitting this makes absolutely no sense?”

“It makes sense to me,” I said, tapping my left fist in my right hand to accentuate each word. Sheepishly, I added, “I just can’t explain it very well.”

“It’s fine.” She hefted her bowling ball with two hands, kissed me on the nose, and went to bowl. I hadn’t been bowling as well that night as I usually did, barely approaching 150, and it was depressing me more than it should, my tiny bowling defeats echoing defeats of a larger stature. I sat, resting my arms on the chairs to my left and right, knocking Sharon’s jacket to the floor.

I’d been wearing that same jacket, her jacket, when I was introduced to Sharon. It was just after I’d taken a spontaneous vacation with a boss-turned-friend of mine, Andrew Peterson, to see a timeshare condo he was thinking of buying off Redondo Beach, one of those “free trip” things. It turned out to be more than awful, from crowded plane to dilapidated condo to sparse accommodations, and we got back to San Francisco International late in the evening. Exhausted, I stood in line for a taxi while Andy went to get us a couple of sodas, figuring the caffeine would help.

It had been pretty cold outside and I was underdressed, but the chill was the only thing keeping me awake. I was leaning on my suitcase and watching families scrape the paint off taxis with their luggage when I felt a tap on my shoulder. Whatever this person needed, I hated it when strangers started up conversations with other strangers just for the hell of it. I’m thinking, “Buddy, I’ll leave you the hell alone, you leave me the hell alone, and we’ll both be happy.” I considered not turning around, but curiosity won out.

It was a woman, blonde hair not-quite shoulder length. Short, squarer in her shoulders but slender at the waist, wearing jeans. She smiled extra wide when she saw I looked pissed. Great teeth.

“Would you like to borrow my coat until you get a taxi?” She started to pull an arm out of a sleeve. “I’m not too cold; I’ve got a sweater, and you look like you’re freezing.”
I didn’t think I looked freezing. “I’m fine,” I said, throwing in a “thanks” because she was kind of pretty. I turned back around. Minute or two later, she tapped my shoulder again.

“You sure? I mean, really, I’d be fine without it.”
“No, no thanks.”
A pause.
“Look, you’re making me cold just looking at you, so either get out of the line or take my damn jacket.”

Again, the smile and the teeth, and this time I had to smile with her. Later, she said my sagging six-foot frame and mess of brown hair had so fully epitomized a position of weariness that she was curious to see, if I smiled, whether my whole body would smile as well as it frowned. “All right, then,” I said, and I slipped on her outstretched black coat. It fell a little lower than waist length, too small in the back and too big in the front, meant to accommodate all the things women have that men don’t. Conversation seemed appropriate if I was wearing her clothing. “My name’s Ste—”
“Sharon?” Andy walked up, a dripping soda bottle in each hand.
“Andy?”

My contribution to the exchange was “Beg your pardon?”
“Steven Matthews, this is Sharon Edwards,” Andy said. “Sharon, Steve.”
“I guess ‘how do you do’ is moot,” I said. It turned out, Sharon and Andy had lived in the same apartment building for a while before he’d moved away. They started talking about the fates of mutual acquaintances, who had moved out and who had moved in. By the time we reached the taxis, I’d stopped paying attention in favor of going home.

“— first,” Andy was saying. “You’ve got to be cold without a jacket.”
“Actually,” Sharon said, and I realized that she, with Andy in turn, was looking expectantly at me. Apologizing, I tried to extricate myself from Sharon’s coat and failed, ending up needing Andy’s help to get out of it. He stared at me, then handed Sharon her jacket and opened a taxi door, while I, feeling outside of the conversation again, went over to another taxi and started loading my luggage in the trunk.

“So, you’ll call me?” I heard Sharon saying.

I started to get in to our cab, nearly tripping over Sharon standing behind me. The piece of paper in her hand went flying, landing on the wet pavement just before a taxi drove over it.

“Sorry. That was mine?”
“Make it up to me,” she said, flashing teeth, and took another piece of paper out of her purse to write her phone number down again.

In the taxi, Andy had just one question. “What exactly were you doing wearing a woman’s coat?”

I bent down, lifting the coat up from the dusty bowling alley floor, and hung it back on the chair. Applause came from a drunken couple in the lane next to us; Sharon had just thrown a strike. She acknowledged them with a bow and sat down next to me.

“Where are you and James supposed to meet?”
“Here, sometime.”
“Why did you tell him to meet you here?”

14
“I don’t know. I figured it was a little less weird than having him meet me at my apartment. We can sit, have a couple drinks, get to know each other.” I’d been looking to the door every time I heard it open, to see if James had come in.

Sharon picked up a small pencil and figured out our score horizontally on a paper scorecard. “You said you were half-crocked when you hired him last night.” She added the numbers in a fluid gesture, all in her head, never stopping to stare at the ceiling or say the numbers aloud. The alley had an automated system, but we asked them to keep it off on our lane; they’d looked at us strangely the first time we’d come, until Sharon showed them how quickly she could do numbers. “You meet him at a bar tonight,” she said, “he’s going to get the wrong idea about you.”

“If he already thinks I’m a lush, why start surprising him now?” She acknowledged this with a bob of her head. “I figured he’d be here by now.”

“You going to bring him everywhere you go?”

“Maybe. Why not?”

“Everywhere?”

I looked at her. She leaned forward and her mouth of perfect teeth purred near my ear. “Even when we … you know?”

I kissed her, and my hand rubbed her neck, playing with wisps of hair below her left ear, when she pulled away. “Steve,” she said, gesturing over my shoulder with her nose, toward the door. “I think that’s him.”

James stood just inside the door, dressed in his full doorman’s uniform—hat, coat, buckles, and all. He hadn’t seen us yet.

“The obvious aside,” Sharon said quietly, “I didn’t realize he was so old.”

“I’m not making him run marathons,” I murmured back, and went to introduce them.

It’s usually a pretty laid back crowd in the bowling alley bar, seeing as how there were at least a dozen bars in the surrounding area and anyone who ended up in this one without being a bowler probably wasn’t in a position to make much of a ruckus. It sometimes gets a little crowded around the Super Bowl and the World Series, but most nights, it’s the best place for a sit-down with your former-doorman-turned-employee-and-newly-christened-majordomo.

“I’m kind of surprised you’re here,” I told him.

It was a good thing that the bar was empty, because it cut down on the number of people staring at the man in a doorman’s uniform sitting in a booth at the far corner of the bar. Sharon had headed home, letting us “tell the truth in peace,” she said, but she already seemed a little put off by James’ presence.

James’ voice was gravelly, but soft. “You certainly caught me by surprise last night, but I figured I could hear you out, at least.” Up close, I could see that deep wrinkles marked his cheeks, and the skin below his eyes drooped. His hat sat on the table in front of him. James’ hair was gray and thinning, combed over to the right. Large tufts of white hair composed his eyebrows.

He sat with his back straight, having had trouble bending himself in to the booth with his starched uniform. As it was, it took James a couple of jerky movements to get the bottle of ale to his lips. I was buying; since it was my show, I figured I’d always be buying, and I ordered two bottles of dark ale from a West Coast brewery.
“I appreciate it.”
“I have to say, sir, I’m not quite sure what you need me for.”
“Not ‘sir,’” I said. “No need. Steve’s fine.” Sitting there, I was reminded again of the pride I’d taken in my freelancing with WalsTec. Then, I’d been a “sir.” In the bar with James, I thought, Now I’m just a guy. “The thing is, WalsTec fired me yesterday.”
His bushy eyebrows rose. “What happened?”
“Actually, it’s less of a firing.” I related the sordid incident. “I could have smiled and nodded and done the sixteenth floor’s next project, though I can’t believe they really expected me to go along with it. But I walked out, so I’m essentially fired.” I shrugged. “Or quit-ed.”
“Which is why you stormed out of the building yesterday.”
“Right.”
“Now I understand.” He rolled his bottle in one hand, considering the label. “Well, for the amount of time you worked at Webster, you must be a pretty good programmer. You shouldn’t have a problem finding another job.”
“No,” I said. James sounded far too much like Sharon. “WalsTec.”
“Really? I just assumed, after the way you were treated … ”
“They’re not all bad. There’s Andy Peterson, for one. Others.” I told him about working in the movie theater, about the other freelance jobs before finding the company. “If worst comes to worst, maybe I will have to go someplace else, but I’ve got enough saved that I can afford to take a little time to try to get back in. I’m not leaving just because those guys threw me out. I’m tired of being done because someone else says I’m done.”
James’ breath made a whistling noise, waiting for me to continue. When nothing followed, he said, “So what’s your first step?”
“I already tried something today.” Even without James’ look of earnest curiosity, I was so eager to tell someone the story I’d held back from Sharon that I probably would have gone on with it regardless. It had been earlier, the morning of that day. I had anxiety dreams sometimes, thinking I’d missed a meeting or forgotten to pay a bill, waking up just before dawn with a feeling of cool relief. That morning was the reverse—I’d woken to a quiet early morning peace, and then my mind caught up with a queasy weight, recalling the events of the day before.
“Without a job, I had only two things to do today: meet Sharon and meet you, and both of those were in the evening. I started to roll over and go back to sleep, and that’s when my alarm clock buzzed.” After I’d come home from hiring James, I’d forgotten to shut off the alarm I’d set to wake me to start working—not having a job hadn’t completely sunk in yet. Lying in bed, I thought about the morning before that, how I’d been so excited, so smug, to turn in my last bit of coding for the sixteenth floor’s project. I thought about Brad Ryan, and how he was taking credit for my work. My credit, my work, my success, my comfort. “And I decided I wasn’t going to let Ryan win without a fight.”
By the time I’d jumped out of bed, an idea had hit me, and by the time I crossed the hallway to my office, I had a couple more. Sitting down at my desk, I picked up the phone, thinking, Let’s start at the beginning.
“WalsTec,” said the switchboard operator. I’d never actually seen her; she was somewhere in the building, answering all the calls.
“Can I speak to Brad Ryan, please?”
“May I ask who’s calling?”
“Steven Matthews.” I figured, if I got Ryan on the phone, I could try again to appeal to some sense of reason.
“One moment.”
She put me on hold, and music started. Sickly, the hold music was a muzac version of “I Could Have Danced All Night” from “My Fair Lady.” My acting teachers had forced us to sit through a number of old shows, and I knew more of the words than I cared to admit.
The song finished, followed by a pause, and then the muzac picked up again. It took me a minute to recognize “Ascot Gavotte.” Did they have the entire show? I was humming along when the line picked up and I got Brad Ryan’s voicemail.
I hung up and called WalsTec again. The receptionist answered.
“Hi, is Brad Ryan in today?” There was no reason why he shouldn’t be.
“Who is this, please?”
Damn. “Steven Matthews.”
“One moment.”
“No, wait—” Before I could finish my protest, I was on hold again, back in the middle of “I Could Have Danced All Night.” A little quicker this time, I hit Ryan’s voicemail.
There’s no way this is going to work, I thought to myself, but I waited a minute and then dialed the number for WalsTec one more time. The receptionist picked up and I asked for Brad Ryan, endeavoring to make my voice a little deeper.
“Who’s calling?”
“John McDaniel.”
Surprisingly, she said, “One moment,” and put me on hold a third time. I sang to myself, “—could have spread my wings and done a thousand things,” in time with the music. I was stumbling through “Ascot Gavotte” before the music stopped, and Brad Ryan said “Hello?” cautiously.
“Ryan. It’s—”
Click. There went idea number one.
I called the number again, this time asking the receptionist for Andrew Peterson, my first boss at WalsTec. Aside from being responsible for introducing me to Sharon, Andy led a team of troubleshooters on the sixth floor; I’d helped them clean up almost-final projects coming down from on high. Andy appreciated my ingenuity and self-initiative—when most of his team hit a dead end, they’d stop working until he could help them fix it; I found a way around the problem from home and kept going. For this, Andy saw me as an equal, beginning a friendship that included drinks after work every once in a while, and that awful timeshare vacation.
He picked up his phone halfway through the first ring. “Peterson.”
“Andy, it’s Steve Matthews. How are you?”
“Matthews, you dog! What’s going on? Our guys ten floors up keeping you busy?”
“That’s why I’m calling.” I laughed, keeping the conversation light. “Got fired yesterday.”
“Canned? What the hell happened?”
“Sixteenth floor decided they didn’t need my services any more. Shortly before the project was due and after I’d turned in my stuff.”

“You’re talking Brad Ryan, right? Scott Simple and McDaniel?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit,” he said. “You know how many times those jerks have screwed me, sending down projects they knew had major bugs in them, so they look like they’re done early and we’ve got to take weeks fixing the things?”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

Andy gave a snort of disgust and said, “So whatcha gonna do?”

“Well, that’s kind of why I was calling. Any chance you can help me out?”

There was a pause, and a whistle. I imagined Andy running his hand over his premature bald spot and scratching the back of his head with his hand. “Not really, man. We’re low totem pole down here, fixing their stuff. They’re choosing us, not the other way around, you know that. I may be head down here, but ten floors up? Nothing, man, sorry.”

“Damn.” It was about what I had expected. “No, I understand. You got anything free?”

“Nada. But I’ll keep you top on my list if something comes up.”

(I didn’t tell James the rest of what Andy said: “I tell you, Matthews, it’s crazy around here lately. I had to sacrifice one of my guys to run the elevator from the front door. You hear the doorman up and left?”)

And there went idea number two.

I rifled through my files until I found my contract with WalsTec. Since I did freelance work, I signed an NDA and a contract with a new floor every time I started a project. They were routine things, along the lines of “the undersigned of this document is contractually required to complete the following work …” so on and so forth. It was more, I realized, to keep me from running out on the project, than to keep them from cheating me. There was a clause that said that if I wasn’t paid the amount I was promised, I was supposed to inform the company to make sure I received my full payment—a preemptive strike against litigation, I imagined. Unfortunately, it sounded to me like Ryan intended to pay me my full amount, if only to silence me, but I wouldn’t know that until the check arrived.

“The undersigned understands that failure to complete the following work in the stated length of time is subject to termination of contract and/or separation from Webster, Alexander, and Sons Technology. Termination can include, but is not limited to, payment only for partial services rendered and/or legal action.”

“My,” I’d said aloud. “If I’d stepped out on this project instead of the sixteenth floor doing it for me, I’d be in a lot of trouble.”

Hmm.

There was a phone number at the end of the contract. I dialed. “WalsTec, Legal Department. This is Craig speaking,” said a voice on the other end of the line.

I deepened my voice again. “Yes, this is John McDaniel calling from the sixteenth floor.”

“Mr. McDaniel, how can we help you?”
“We have a freelance employee, Steven Matthews, working on a project for us. Supposed to be due two days ago, and we haven’t heard from him.” I stopped to take a breath. “We tried calling but couldn’t reach him. Is there something you can do?”
“Certainly, sir. We’ll get right on that.”
I hung up the phone, leaned back in my chair, and counted. The phone rang when I hit thirty-two. The voice on the other end said “Steven Matthews?”
“Speaking.”
“Mr. Matthews, this is Craig calling from WalsTec legal department. Are you aware that you have a project due with our sixteenth floor?”
I waited before responding, throwing in a heavy sigh for good measure. “Yeah,” I said, “I know about it. It’s just, you know, I’ve been so busy, and I’ve been sick.” Sigh. “Sick.”
Craig From Legal took a stern tone. “Mr. Matthews, you are obligated by contract to complete this project.”
“Are you sure?” I threw a whine into the mix. “I’ve got to have that contract around here somewhere. They couldn’t just do it without me?”
“You have a deadline, Mr. Matthews.”
“All right.” Craig seemed a bit too satisfied with his motivational skills. “Get started. I’m going to speak to your supervisor. Someone will call you back today or tomorrow.”
You do that, I thought. Call Brad Ryan and tell him you’ve got Steven Matthews back.

“In other words,” James said, “Mr. Ryan’s either going to have to pretend that he’s happily taking you back, or admit that he was the one who let you go in the first place.” He lifted his bottle of ale, drank and mulled over my story. “Interesting; you’re sure going back to them is the best thing to do?”
“There’s something about being told ‘no,’ James. Webster can kick me out and I can say ‘fine’ and go somewhere else, or eventually I can decide I’m not going to be kicked out of places any more, and I’m going to turn around and say, ‘This is where I want to be, so this is where I’m going to be, and I don’t care what anyone else thinks.’”
James tilted a hand to acknowledge the statement. “Just seems to me they’ll do the same thing again.”
“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t know. Maybe. Are you in this, then?”
He paused, and it seemed to me he was still unconvinced. “Sure,” he said at last. “What’s one more adventure?” It amazes me now, and yet makes perfect sense that he didn’t ask “why me,” but neither did I volunteer it. At the same time, I didn’t ask why exactly he agreed, and he didn’t offer that, either.
“Good. Come by my place tomorrow,” I said. “We’ll see if they call.”

Before I left James at the door of the bowling alley, I gave him directions to my apartment. “Do you want to be paid upfront?”
The look on James’ face bordered somewhere between surprise and amusement. “No,” he replied. “I’m sure you’re good for it.”
He started to walk away. “About calling work,” I said, and I remember now the
cold of the air, the broad expanse of the empty sidewalk, the streetlamp shining down,
and James standing there across from me. “I can’t think of anything else I could have
done, can you?”

James stared across the street at nothing. “No,” he said. “I guess not. See you
tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

It was the end of his first day on the job and James, I would learn, had just lied to
me.
Chapter Three – The Thorn Field

I had an inkling something was off when James showed up at my apartment the next morning in his doorman’s uniform.

He rang the bell at seven, and when I didn’t answer, moved to knocking intermittently on the door. The doorbells on my hallway were loud enough for every other apartment on the hall to hear; I knew this from the number of times I’d answered my door, only to find a visitor waiting for one of my neighbors.

It took me a little while to let him in—though I wasn’t happy to have lost my job two days before, I had hoped to squeeze at least the smallest benefit from it, and finally turned off my alarm clock in favor of sleeping a few hours later. I came to the door in an undershirt and nondescript boxer shorts, with a red-check robe evocative of a picnic tablecloth, and looking through the peephole, saw a telescoped view of a maroon figure. Rubbing my eyes, I opened the door. There he was, from his visored hat to his buckled coat to his shined shoes.

“James,” I said, my voice hoarse with sleep.

The apartment door to the left opened and my neighbor stuck his red-haired head out. I decided commenting on the fact that he was wearing my exact same check robe could wait for another time. He stared at us and I smiled back like everything was normal, then pulled James by the shoulder in to my apartment.

“Sorry, just thought I heard my doorbell,” my neighbor said, and shut his door.

“Well, welcome,” I said, holding out an arm in what I hoped was a “welcome” gesture. “This is my place.” James looked around, acknowledging “my place,” but didn’t offer the requisite whether-you-mean-it-or-not compliment, and I appreciated it.

“Here.” I indicated the couch. James had to place his arm across his stomach to sit, creasing the doorman’s jacket and folding it at a 90-degree angle. He rested at the edge of the couch cushion, back straight, his hands on his knees. I stood behind a rocking chair pointed toward the couch. We looked, I thought, in his uniform and my robe, a little absurd.

James broke the silence first. “Any word?”

“No, no problem.”

“Well, welcome,” I said, holding out an arm in what I hoped was a “welcome” gesture. “This is my place.” James looked around, acknowledging “my place,” but didn’t offer the requisite whether-you-mean-it-or-not compliment, and I appreciated it.

“Here.” I indicated the couch. James had to place his arm across his stomach to sit, creasing the doorman’s jacket and folding it at a 90-degree angle. He rested at the edge of the couch cushion, back straight, his hands on his knees. I stood behind a rocking chair pointed toward the couch. We looked, I thought, in his uniform and my robe, a little absurd.

James broke the silence first. “Any word?”

“Not yet, but it’s, you know,” I made a show of yawning, “kind of early. You want coffee?”

“Thanks.” I walked through an entryway to the kitchen. The kitchen opened on my left to a small dining room, really just an extension of the den. I tapped my finger until the coffee machine started to gurgle, heralding the slow drips into the pot. You could pretty much walk around the main part of the apartment in a circle; it worked in the feng shui-ingy way that was popular out here for a while. After filling two coffee mugs, I carried them past the dining table and back to James. The couch where he sat faced the flat-screen TV on the opposite wall.

Once I sat down in the rocking chair, James and I took turns, one of us staring at our coffee while the other stole glances at the other. It was good, that James was there. I had things about my firing I wanted to discuss. But the idea in principle was one thing. This … Finally, I said, “Any trouble finding the place?”

“No, no problem.”

“Good, good.”
Again, silence.
“You know, I’ve got to think Legal’s going to call today,” I said. “The guy I spoke to seemed pretty on top of it.”
“Have you been there before?”
“Once, when I was hired. Not the friendliest of places.”
“I did always wonder,” and now as he put his mug down on the table and, leaning forward, his manner lost some of the earlier discomfiture, “what it said about Webster that they put their legal department in their basement.”
“But you should see it.” I was pleased we had something to talk about. “You step off the elevator and boom, these three rows of desks, each with a lawyer, each staring at you. There’s got to be six or eight guys in there, all wearing the same shirt and tie, all dressed to look as menacing as possible, lined up like a battalion.”
“Never the friendliest to the doorman, either.”
“Really? What was that like?” I cupped my mug between my palms, letting the warmth sting the inside of my hands. “Do you get some grand perspective on the lives of Webster’s employees as they scurry in and out of the building every day?” James smiled and gave a low chuckle. “Or am I just buying into the doorman cliché?”
“Well, I don’t know that I can claim to have any ‘grand perspective,’” James said. “Though, there was this one time. WalsTec had this employee, a Mr. Tezrain, an older man. I believe he’d been with the company about twenty years, if not more. Now, I’m not always privy to what’s going on inside the building, so I was surprised as anyone to see him walking out one afternoon with a box under each arm. Turns out, the company decided to combine the project he’d been running with a project in another division, and now after being a manager for so long, he was going to find himself working under dozens of other people. He decided to resign then, take retirement.” He paused to take a sip of his coffee and clear his throat. “Meanwhile, I’d been at the front door every day, controlling that elevator, sending him to his floor. I’m sure most people believe it’s the employees, the action inside the building, that’s where it’s at. But I couldn’t help but think, when even companies might come and go, it’s the buildings, the institutions, that stand the test of time. They’re what’s important.”
I wondered if I’d done the wrong thing, hiring James away from his post, and I think he saw this uneasiness on my face, because he said, “But even that can’t last forever, I know.” He looked sad, momentarily, and our awkwardness returned; then he waved his hand as if shooing smoke floating in the air. “Enough of my bending your ear. How can I be of service to you today?”
I stood on my toes to stretch the sleep from my back. “I’m going to shower; I want to be ready if Legal calls.” I took his empty coffee cup from the table. “Make yourself at home.”

It was while I was in the shower that the call came. James answered it, telling them he was my roommate.
“They wanted to interview you at one o’clock, down in their offices.” James handed me the message, written on a piece of paper from the pad on the brown wicker table near the door. “Interview?”
“I think ‘review’ was the word they used.”

22
“Figures. Not a problem.” I felt ready. “I go in there, make a good show of things, they send me back upstairs and pretty soon everyone forgets all about this.” I walked down the hallway to the back of the apartment, where I had my bathroom, bedroom, and office. To work lately, I’d been wearing T-shirts and jeans, but now I hung my towel on a hook behind my door and pulled a black suit off a thick hanger in the rear of closet, adding a starched shirt and sharp tie.

I looked, I realized, like I did the first day I went to WalsTec.

And so, it occurred to me, did James.

“Any place you need to be?” I asked as I returned to the living room. He pursed his lips and shook his head “no.” “Do you mind getting something together for dinner? That would save me a stop today.”

“All right,” he said. He stood and smoothed out his doorman’s uniform.

I paused. “Do you have any other clothes with you?” Again, he shook his head.

“OK, come with me.” We walked toward the back.

I showed up at Webster about a quarter to one. I always go to those kinds of things early—first days, important meetings—just like I usually wake up obscenely early on days when I have to be in the office, so that if something goes wrong, I still have a shot at not being late. It’s just the kind of person I am—I don’t understand how other people can leave that kind of thing to chance. Of course, I didn’t think this time that I’d have trouble finding the building, but a habit’s a habit.

It took a second for me to remember, when I saw a doorman standing at the front door of WalsTec, that it wasn’t James. But when James stood in front of the glass double doors, you could see around him, to the small foyer with the elevator; the guy who stood in front of the door now was a gigantic wall: shoulders straight out, arms straight down. The only interruption was his head, dropped equidistant between the ends of his shoulders, without the luxury of a neck. I wouldn’t mind becoming more muscular, but not if my neck is the price I have to pay for it.

He, too, was dressed in a starched doorman’s uniform (“Where do they get these guys?” I thought), but his was a formally imposing black hat, black jacket, and shoes, all with golden buckles and ties. On a leash, secured to one of the awning posts, was a black bulldog with white fur creeping up from either side of his stomach. The thing was the length and width of a gallon of milk, turned on its side; at worst, it looked like the doorman could carry the dog under his arm like a football. It was panting and looking around, bobbing its head, its open mouth resembling a smile. I wondered if they made the guy keep the bulldog to make him seem less imposing.

“Name’s Steven Matthews,” I told the doorman’s chest. “I’ve got an appointment with the legal department.”

Silently, the doorman, sans nametag, looked me over, then flipped open the panel by the door and punched the code for Legal. The elevator arrived almost immediately; I sidled past the doorman and through the front door.

“Thanks,” I tried.

“Yep.”

As the elevator fell toward the legal department, I remembered the desolate white walls of the long single room, glowing under florescent lights that made them feel less
clean than antiseptic. Three-fourths from the ceiling, the walls met wood paneling that circled the whole of the room. The effect failed at elegance, reinforcing the darkness of the carpet in a way that suggested slogging through a foggy swamp.

Therefore, when the elevator doors slid open, I recoiled and checked to make sure I’d stopped at the right floor. The scene before me suggested a lounge lizard had exploded. Two couches guarded a corner, both leather, both overstuffed. A small woman sat behind a raised metallic blue desk, wide at the top and thinning as it went down. The desk matched the new, darker blue paint; the wood paneling was gone. A small lamp sat on a wire table in the corner between the couches, casting a dim pink light. Two other lights, one in the center of each wall, shed a muted glow from the top and bottom of the half-cone shape that covered them, the same color as the wall. Added to it all, it was incredibly humid down there. I stood with mouth agape, slowly walking with mouth agape over to the secretary.

“Help you?” She was young, a smattering of freckles across her nose and brown hair secured in two strips by sparkling clips shaped like butterflies. I was thankful she wasn’t stretching chewing gum out of her mouth with her fingers; the overwhelming kitschiness would have driven me from the room.

I introduced myself and she directed me toward the couches. I watched as she dialed and hung up the phone on her desk a couple times before she reached Craig From Legal. “Sorry,” she said, “new here.”

The couch made a whooshing noise as I sat down; I had to bounce forward twice to keep my rear end above my knees. The girl kept fanning herself and blowing air upward from her mouth to her forehead, trying to dislodge a loose strand of hair that stuck with sweat to her forehead. The strand floated, then fell haphazardly as she doodled on a pad.

Damn it, I thought, feeling drops of sweat fall from my armpits and roll down the sides of my chest. I considered taking off my jacket but decided against it, sticking out the formality. I had spent all that time showering, getting dressed, preparing nicely for an interview, and then at the last second they had to have the heat turned up in the waiting room. I drummed my fingers on my leg, in the absence of magazines, waiting for Craig.

When he finally arrived, walking slowly, he didn’t appear to notice the heat. I appreciated, at least, that he wore the white-shirt-black-tie that had been previously uniform down there. He extended a dark hand in a handshake that exuded confidence; his jaw was rigid and hard, his hair close cropped on his head.

“Glad you could make it,” he said. “Right this way.” He gestured down the hall toward his office, then walked at a quick pace in front of me. I noticed him trying to subtly wipe the sweat from my hand on his pant leg. So he did feel the heat, after all. I blew upward from my mouth to my forehead in the manner of the secretary. Craig said over his shoulder, “Apologies about the heat; we’re trying to get that fixed.”

It was his office, finally, that reaffirmed that this legal department and the legal department I’d visited before were one and the same. Here, the white walls still remained, with the wood trim. The desk was the same standard issue as before; the chair was the personal touch, a nice cushioned job with wheels. Various certificates hung on the wall, and a bookshelf stood in the far corner to my right. Craig sat down and I took one of two slightly less comfortable chairs in front of his desk.

“I like what you’ve done out there,” I said.
“Yeah, we felt like it was time for an update. Join the world and so forth.” I wondered which world.

“Certainly a change from what you had previously.”

“People complained it was too … austere, if you will.” The dramatic pauses in his speech made the ends of his sentences seem almost sinister.

“And yet, in here the change is almost minimal.” He smiled at this. I felt as though he and I were playing a game, and I had just scored a point.

“There are places to be austere, and there are places to be … less so.”

“And the lobby is one of those places?”

“Well, why not lull your enemies into a false sense of security before you attack?”

“Do you get many enemies down here?”

“No.” At this, he seemed almost disappointed. “But even the legal department can’t be austere all the time.”

I wondered vaguely if this small talk was, like the lobby, a ploy to get his “enemy” to relax. I decided to take the bait. “No?”

“We do start to creep each other out, after a while. What do you call a room full of lawyers?” I tilted a hand for him to continue. “A feeding frenzy.” I barely smiled, and from his look I guessed I’d won another point. A cautious knock came on the door behind me. “Enter,” Craig called.

His secretary stuck her head in. “Sorry.” Her face was flushed. “The supply room’s locked. Is there a key?” Metal jingled as Craig fished a key out of his pocket and threw it to her. She missed it completely; it clanged against the wall and slid to the floor. Meeting my eyes for a second as she bent to pick it up, she said, “Thanks, sorry,” and closed the door. Craig’s gaze fell back on me immediately.

“You see,” he said, “most of the work we do down here is human resources stuff. Payroll, contracts with our clients and our employees. It’s rare that we’re actually in a legal battle. Rarer that we have a problem with one of our employees.”

“So basically, I’m your entertainment for the day.”

“Something like that.” All at once, Craig’s manner changed. “Mr. Matthews, I hope you understand the severity of this situation.” Any past friendliness had escaped his voice.

“Only too well.” You snot-nosed, pencil-pushing, could-have-had-your-own-firm-but-no reject. Given the lie I’d created, I had steeled myself for the fact that he might look down at me, but it irked me just the same.

“Frankly, I must say I’m surprised by this lack of responsibility on your part, and I’m curious.” He tapped his left hand on a manila folder at the top of a pile. “I have your file here.” Pushing away from his desk, Craig leaned his cushioned seat to a forty-five degree angle and opened the folder. “Entrance evaluation, contracts, yearly reviews.” He flipped through carbon sheets. “Here’s your old résumé. Experience in acting?”

“I know what it says.” I’d put the acting on there as something of an homage to my past, but hearing it now, I was tempted to snatch the résumé out of his hands.

“These records show you turning in your projects on time, even early, with a great number of complimentary results.”

“You’re damn straight, I thought, and almost said it.

“You like what you do?”

“Absolutely.”
“Not getting bored with it, ready for a change?”
“No. I think I’m fortunate, that my work is something I enjoy. I don’t think everyone can say the same.” I watched his eyes, to see if I’d scored another point. No such luck.

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said. “But I just thought, sometimes, in cases such as yours, where there’s a clear record of over-achievement, there’s a tendency to … rebel.”
“To what end?”

He closed my folder and put it back on the pile, leaning his seat forward. “I don’t actually know, Mr. Matthews. Attention, perhaps? Something unfulfilled by your achievements? I can’t say. But you’re sure developing is what you want to do?”
“I’m sure. I can program you something right now, if you need proof.”

Craig laughed without warmth. “That’s not necessary. But I am curious, then. What happened with this project?”

I had also expected to have to somewhat explain my “actions.” When it came time, however, I found I had trouble vilifying myself. “I had a bad day. Happens to everyone.”

“To most people, maybe.” He tapped my folder again, a gesture I was finding increasingly annoying. “I’ve seen this record. You don’t have bad days.”

“First time for everything?”

Craig shook his head at me. “All right. You don’t want to tell me. Let’s try this another way. With your record, you’ve been invited to join WalsTec full-time on at least two occasions, and you’ve refused. Why?”

With all of this grilling, I thought, you either need to have a goatee, a reclining couch, and a diploma, or be Sally Selvalan on the pillow next to me. I thought about Craig From Legal starring in *Open Blossoms* and decided he didn’t have the chest for it.

“I prefer to work alone.”

“Why?”


“Because other people are inherently unreliable?”

“No, not necessarily.” I felt I was being pigeonholed, and at this I took offense. “This isn’t an elitist point of view. If we’re working on a project together in two different places, it’s necessarily going to take more effort for my work to get to you and your work to get to me than it is for me to just do it myself.”

“What if you need me to get it accomplished?”

“Then … then fine. There isn’t a problem here working and playing well with others. You said yourself, the company’s happy with my work. That’s involved group projects plenty of times.”

“Sure. But in the case of the sixteenth floor, you didn’t hold up your end of the bargain.” Such a smug look on his face. He thought he had a point. “Aren’t you, shall we say, the poster child for the very difficulties you say you try to avoid?”

“Look,” I said, “let me try to make this a little clearer for you. From your perspective, down here in the basement of WalsTec, you’ve got your workers.” I thought of my conversation with James that morning. “Your workers scurry in and out, and to you a good worker is someone who comes in, completes their project, goes out, comes back the next day and so on. When you see an aberration to that, a worker that does his
projects but stays outside the company, never joining, you think, “this worker is obviously less dedicated to the work, or to the people.”” Craig had folded his hands on top of his desk, listening to my monologue expressionless. “You’re thinking about it all wrong. The fact that I’m not interested in being a run-of-the-mill nine-to-five employee of this company doesn’t mean I’m less dedicated; I’m more dedicated. This work,” I looked around for some sort of work to point to, and finding none, continued, “is my life. When I work at home, alone, it’s not out of any kind of self-righteousness. How can I put this so you’ll understand it? It’s almost a spiritual thing. I don’t want to be employed full-time by this company because I don’t want anything to get in the way of that. If I made a mistake once with this project, I apologize, but I’m a damn good, damn dependable programmer.”

The silence that entered now, after my words, remained a long time. Craig From Legal seemed not so much affected, as simply thoughtful. Looking back, I realize now that the entire time it was more than just my programming I was defending to him. When he spoke, a sneer on his lips, I felt what I said hadn’t reached him at all. “Would the sixteenth floor agree with your ‘dependable’ assessment?”

Why yes. They would say I’m so dependable that it was quick and simple to smile big and screw me over. I began to think of a suitably apologetic response so that we could get on with it, when another timid knock came at the door.

“Sorry,” the girl repeated, little droplets of sweat on her cheeks matching the freckles on her nose. “Trying to find a jug to refill the water cooler. I thought it was in the supply closet but it’s not.”

“Second floor,” Craig answered. “They keep them up there.”

She bobbed her head, said “Sorry” again, and departed.

“Mr. Matthews,” Craig continued, “what I’m getting at is, I need to know if we can trust you if this company’s going to keep you in our employ.”

“You can trust me,” I said. He raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “Look, as far as everything I said before, about myself and my programming: no, I do not want to be a full-time employee of this company. I’m happy being a freelancer. But I can program all I want and without a company behind me, I’m a programmer of nothing. If you want my loyalty, there it is, right there.”

And I hated it. The minute I’d said those words, I knew I hated them. I was a programmer and I could sit at home and program and no one else’s opinions mattered as long as my program did what my company wanted it to do, and as long as I was successful, the company was beholden to me and I was beholden to no one. But it wasn’t perfect; it wasn’t entirely true because, in the end, as much as the company needed programmers to be a company, the programmers—I—needed the company to be a programmer. And I hated it.

Craig From Legal was asking, “And you wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize this company?”

“No, never.” What? His thinking that I skipped out on a project is one thing, I thought, but what did I do to jeopardize the company?

“Fine.” He stood. “You’re fortunate that your record here is so good.” Now he was pacing the room, picking at the paint on the wall to my right. “I really had to go to bat for you with the sixteenth floor.” Sounding pleased with himself, he said, “They seemed a little surprised I got you back.”
I bet.
He leaned against the wall to the right of my chair, and I shifted to look up at him.
“Funny, I asked if they saw any outward signs that you and they were having trouble, and
they couldn’t really come up with anything.”

I’d been thinking about nearly the same thing, actually, in the hours between
when I’d left WalsTec and gone back to hire James. Had there been any outward sign
that Ryan and the others were going to steal my code? Certainly, they had the means to
do it; I had been constantly sending them new versions of my work. When had they
made the decision to go ahead and rip me off? Who had been the one to suggest it? And
most importantly, why didn’t I suspect anything? I’d been replaying conversations from
the past few weeks in my head, looking for some over-eagerness to receive my work,
some undeserved flattery to keep me pacified, some unexplained giggle from Scotty
Simple (Explained giggles from Simple were nothing extraordinary). In the end, I kept
returning to one conclusion: I’d been so wrapped up in my own work, so intent on doing
what they needed, making sure they needed me, that I hadn’t kept an eye on them at all.
It was here that I needed someone looking over my shoulder, someone fact-checking my
life if I didn’t have the wherewithal to do it myself. It was there, I had hoped, that James
could help me.

“Loyalty is one thing,” Craig said. “Unfortunately, you might have told me the
same thing before this project, too. How can I know you’re telling the truth now?”
Frustrated, I was about to inquire why, exactly, it was necessary to keep flagellating me
like this, when he provided the answer himself. “You’ll have to forgive me. I just find it
fascinating, the choices people make. The reasons behind actions like this. Maybe that’s
why I became a lawyer.”

“You want to know why a betrayal?” Was that the way to end this? I was
thinking again about the sixteenth floor. “Because I could. Because I thought I’d get
away with it. I don’t think anyone commits a crime they don’t think they can get away
with.”

“Perhaps. It was a show of power, then? That’s your reason?”

“No.” What did Brad Ryan want? I considered it. Stealing my code would only
bring him the praise it would have brought me. In a way he became, by stealing my
project, me. Did he want what I wanted? Could all that Brad Ryan desired be to do his
work and have his work be needed, and in the end be self-sufficient? “Not power.
Maybe, maybe comfort.”

“Comfort,” Craig repeated. “I’ve always found that I can count on comfort if I
don’t do anything to get myself in trouble.”

Untrue, I thought. Because sometimes trouble finds you, too.

He pushed himself up from leaning on the wall and stood straight, all business. I
felt we were coming to the point. “You see, Mr. Matthews, under these conditions,
normally, I wouldn’t argue at all with a floor that didn’t want an employee back after
problems with a project. But considering your record, my superiors feel it best serves
WalsTec to keep you on.”

Here we go, buddy. Make me an offer. Get me back in the game.

“Unfortunately, the sixteenth floor said they finished your part of the project and
they don’t need you any more.”

I was on my feet. “They said they what?”
“Oh, shit!” Suddenly, Craig From Legal wasn’t paying attention to me at all; instead, he was offering a few choice vulgarities as a small wave of water came flooding in from under the door.

I heard his secretary from down the hall. “Sorry, sorry! The bottle slipped!”

“Damn!” He hurried out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

“Wait a minute!” As I watched the door close, it occurred to me dimly that the poor secretary had just poured an entire water cooler on the floor. “Get back here,” I yelled toward where Craig had been. “They said what?” My fist banged against the door. Ryan admitted it? How in the hell did Ryan admit it? “What?”

The entire conversation I’d just had with Craig From Legal, I thought, made no sense. If he was going to fire me, then all that talk about my record, my usefulness? All that talk about trust? About loyalty? What? What the hell?
Chapter Four – The Way to a Man’s Heart

I walked from the door to the desk to the wall, turned around, and walked back past the desk to the door, my feet sinking where the light purple carpet turned dark with the spilled water. Around my shoes, liquid pooled, then hissed as I shifted my weight.

Circling the desk, suddenly inspired, I sat in Craig From Legal’s chair, leaving wet footprints on the carpet. The leather chair leaned back at a forty-five degree angle. I considered putting my damp feet on Craig’s desk blotter, a maze of pen marks filling the calendar squares.

All the while I was thinking to myself, Craig called the sixteenth floor. He called them. He told them I was coming back to work for them. They should have stuttered. They should have stammered. They should have put him on hold, panicked, picked back up the phone and thanked him faux-profusely.

Instead, they had admitted it. As I sat in the, quite frankly, extraordinarily comfortable chair, I began to see where things had gone wrong. The sixteenth floor had gone ahead and told the legal department that they’d finished my project, just not when. It meant they now had a perfect excuse for having finished my project. And I had given it to them, I realized, and vilified myself in the process.

The doorknob started to turn. I jumped up, knocking the chair backward in to the corner, and ran forward, putting one hand on the wall in front of me like “safe” in Hide-And-Go-Seek. As Craig walked in, I pivoted, putting my back against the wall and my hands behind me. Just minding my own business.

“Sorry about that,” he said. His black suit jacket was flung over his shoulder, his shirtsleeves rolled up. The cuffs of his pants dripped, and his black shoes shined with water. If he noticed the seat of his chair shuddering from slamming against the wall, he didn’t mention it. Craig walked past me, hung his coat by the bookshelf, then pulled his chair up to the desk and sat down. I returned to the chair in front of him. “So hard to find good help these days, and all that.” His tone suggested we were old friends, and I resented it. More so, it suggested some sort of shared camaraderie between him and me, some mutual feeling of “us” versus the “help,” the “them.”

Or maybe I was just reading too much into it.

“Now, as I was saying,” he said, “the sixteenth floor finished the project in your absence.”

“Yes, well, you see, I don’t think you understand.”

“How so?”

I did consider explaining everything to him at that point. The worst that could have happened, I thought, was that I looked foolish for having imitated John McDaniel, but the real fault still belonged to the sixteenth floor. But having already in the past week opened my circle of trust slightly to James, I couldn’t bring myself to confide in Craig From Legal as well. Especially when I felt it would only expose me to more of his sanctimoniousness. And there was still the question of his and my loyalty talk—I was curious to know what I’d done to make the company so distrustful of me, the present situation aside. “Maybe I don’t understand.”

“The bottom line is, they don’t need you any more.” Ouch. “But we still have a few things to consider. One, your exemplary service record.” Craig moved my file from the left of his desk to an empty space on the right. Now on top of the left pile was an
envelope, which he took in hand. “Two, this check, which Mr. Ryan requisitioned from finance a few days ago, in expectance, I assume, of your completing this project.” He held the envelope at my eye level. A computer low on ink had typed “Mr. Steven Matthews” in fading letters across the middle. “Third,” Craig continued, and realizing with a quick glance that he’d run out of hands, indicated me with a nod of his head, “is your conversations with other companies.”

“My what?” I didn’t know what he was talking about.

Craig gave a disdaining chuckle. “Mr. Matthews, I’m almost embarrassed to say this, to use someone else’s slip-up against you … but when your roommate took my message this morning, he said how unfortunate he thought this whole business was. I, of course, agreed, and in the course of talking, he mentioned how good it was that you had offers from other companies.”

I wasn’t so dense as to wonder who he was talking about. I’d quite purposefully not contacted any other companies while this was going on, because I didn’t want to alter the proceedings at WalsTec. And now …? For the first time, the seriousness of what I’d done felt heavy upon me, inviting an uncontrollable stranger into my life. I couldn’t think of what would have possessed James to lie like that. “I wouldn’t call them conversations, exactly.”

“Call them what you will. The fact remains, I could rip this check up right now and show you to the door.” For a moment, both of us stared at the envelope, and I actually thought he’d do it. “Frankly, that was what was going to happen, until your roommate got us thinking. You could go to another company, sure, but you really haven’t completed your contract hours due to us. I’ve spoken to some people upstairs, and we feel that despite your recent misbehavior, WalsTec isn’t in the custom of throwing away valuable resources.” He paused, and tilted the check toward me, looking at me like a hunter with his rifle, lining me up in the crosshairs. “So I’m going to give you this check, and you’re going to remain in our employ, and out of anyone else’s, for the time being. A retainer, of sorts. As soon as one of our floors has a project that needs work, we’ll give you a call, and see how things go from there. Should only be a few weeks. How does that sound?”

So that was the reason for the talk about loyalty. They wanted to keep me as some … I didn’t know what. As I sat in that hard chair, in the basement of the building, underground, staring at that check, the enormity of everything that had happened in the past three days swirled around me. The sixteenth floor, the legal department, and now whatever James had done … Hadn’t I been minding my own business, I thought, only three days before? Hadn’t I been content to sit and program and let the world be the world on its own? I may have become a little lightheaded at this point. All the trappings of Craig’s office faded out of my sight, until I saw only Craig, and myself, as if from a distance, sitting across from one another. In the haze, I heard myself say: “So I don’t work for you?”

“Right.”

“I don’t work for anyone else?”

“Right.”

“I just wait.”

“Right.”

“Otherwise, I’m fired.”
“That just about sums it up.”

Like a drowning man willing to grab anything to stay afloat, I reached out and took my only remaining connection to WalsTec out of Craig From Legal’s hand.

I pressed the elevator button and waited. There were no codes needed to leave the building, only to change floors or to enter it. The afternoon sun, like a magnifying glass, had burned away the morning clouds while I’d been underground. The doorman still stood, thick, between the two awning posts.

“Thanks,” I said, a detached, numb reflex, and he half-sniffed, half-snorted. The bulldog sat on its haunches, turning to look at me with bright eyes, panting in an eighth-note rhythm. As I exited the building, I felt a slowness to my limbs, the preposterousness of what had just transpired cresting and crashing over me. As much as I felt an urgency to go to James, to understand what he’d done, there was an airy lassitude, much like after my final meeting with the sixteenth floor, that I had no place to be, nothing to do. I squatted next to the dog. “Does he bite?”

The doorman took his time answering me, and then, his voice was tired and annoyed. “All dogs bite. It’s just a matter of whether you bite him first.” Leaving the thing alone, I started home.

Couples out for a stroll passed me, as I parked my car near my apartment building and walked up the hill. I registered faces in pieces, disconnected combinations of eyes and ears, moving in a dim focus, an artificial calm from acute anger. At James? For whatever role he’d played in this? At myself, for my extreme stupidity, for whatever mess I’d caused for myself. I could see the Bay; the water sparkled at me like a wink or a wave. I stood for a moment, squinting.

As I entered my apartment building, my own doorman glared at me, sucking in his lips. I was walking up the stairs before I realized that after this morning, with James arriving in full uniform, he probably thought I was interviewing some sort of replacement. I reached my hallway. Something smelled … wrong. Different? Good. Thick, meaty, spicy. Familiar. I opened the door. “What is that?”

James emerged from the kitchen. He was wearing the clothes I’d given him before: a gray T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans. Both fit him loosely—he’d cinched the jeans tightly with a belt—reinforcing his thin frame. He said, “Chicken Dijon.”

“That’s my favorite. How’d you know?”

“I didn’t.” He seemed as surprised as I was but, at the same time, his face reddened with pleasure. “I just looked at what you had in the house, saw a lot of mustard, it gave me an idea.” I followed him in to the kitchen. “I bought some chicken,” he said. He took a couple bills off the table under the window and handed them to me. “Here’s your change.”

“Thanks.” I’d given him fifty dollars to buy any groceries he needed; I figured, if he was in fact an opportunistic burglar posing as a doorman, better to be out fifty dollars instead of a credit card. Thinking about it now, I realize I’d given him a key to my apartment, too—obviously I trusted him already, despite any pretending on my part toward caution. I picked a perfect cube of tomato out of a wooden bowl on the table and put it in my mouth; it was soaked through with balsamic vinegar and oil. A number of other vegetables—carrots, cucumber, peppers—were mixed, finely cubed, in the bowl.
“Chopped country salad,” James said. “Dinner’s almost ready; I’ve got a wild rice pilaf close to done.”

“This is incredible. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“It’s not much, really. I’ve read a couple of cookbooks; I tend to find myself things to read when I can’t sleep.”

“Well, I’m impressed.” Silhouettes of mushrooms floated in the Dijon sauce. I thought to myself, my instincts had apparently been correct when I’d chosen James. I hadn’t realized how hungry I’d become during all the talking with Craig …

“James. You’ve got some explaining to do.” His face knotted in confusion. I walked away from the food and said, “I’ve found myself in the unlikely position of not only not being able to work at WalsTec, but not being able to work anywhere else, either, and somehow, it seems to be all your fault.”

James’ already pale complexion had turned a little whiter. “This is about the—”

“This is about the fact that you told Craig From Legal that I was interviewing with other companies! Why in the hell would you do that?”

“I actually didn’t think anything would come of it.” His voice was soft. James sat down at the table, leaving the rice boiling in a pot atop the stove. I looked at him expectantly, my eyes wide, my head outstretched toward him. “It occurred to me,” he spoke slowly and tentatively, “that there was a very small flaw in your plan against the sixteenth floor.”

James’ statement only served to rekindle my anger. If there’d been, I’d completely missed it. Stupid, my idiocy. Not enough I don’t notice my own project being stolen. Here, let me give you an alibi, and oh, by the way, I’ll bend over now so you can kick me in the ass.

“Instead of taking you back,” James continued, “Mr. Ryan could compound your lie. If he accepted what you were saying, that you’d failed to turn in a project, then he could then tell the truth, that he and the sixteenth floor had completed your work.”

I couldn’t believe James’ foresight. “If you saw this blowing up in my face, why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were adamant that the only company you wanted to work for was Webster. So intent to get your job back …” He shrugged. “I could have been wrong, and if so, I didn’t want to worry you.”

“But if I’d known, I might have been able to plan for it.” I walked to the entryway between the kitchen and the den as I spoke, and leaned on the counter there. “I hired you, James, because I need to talk to someone I can trust. I’ve been wrong here once, and it lost me a good position at Webster. I need to know that you’re keeping an eye out for when I’m wrong again, whether or not you think I’m going to disagree with you.” He remained silent. “Otherwise, you’re no use to me.”

James seemed to consider this. He inhaled three long breaths and said, “There would seem, if I may say so, to be a flaw in this partnership, then.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“You’re paying me, as you said, to tell you the truth.”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t that put me at a disadvantage? You say you want the truth, but how do I know that if you don’t like the truth I give you, you aren’t going to fire me?”
In my mind, the answer was simple. I just wouldn’t. In retrospect, however, he was right that I’d been pretty adamant about WalsTec the night before—so adamant, I’d learn later, as to keep James from telling me something that might have solved all my problems. I wanted to talk to James, and to listen—otherwise, why hire him?—but there would be some parameters, like Webster, on which I wouldn’t be moved. Which brought up a question of my own. “How do I know you aren’t always telling me what I want to hear so that you can keep your job?” I was silent for a moment, thinking. Thinking of the friends and family I’d left behind, and Sharon. About Craig From Legal holding my résumé, reminding me I was a computer programmer and not an actor. “Can we trust each other at all?”

“I would say you can trust me,” James replied.

“I would say you can trust me.”

We’d reached an impasse. He stood and took the pot off the top of the stove, pouring out the water and then scooping the rice onto a serving dish. It smelled faintly of chicken broth. Gray-white steam rose, fogging the glass of my top oven. James put the pot in the sink and ran tap water into it. Over his shoulder, he said, “So Webster fired you?”

“No. I’m on a hiatus, you might say, indefinitely. There’s no work for me at WalsTec, but I’m not allowed to go anywhere else until I complete some project for them to fulfill my contract. As if I wanted to leave in the first place.”

James carried the dish to the table. A tightness at the corner of each of his eyes made him look deep in thought. “And this is because,” he said at last, “when the legal department called for you, I accidentally”—and he stretched out the word “accidentally”—“told them you were in talks to go work at other companies.”

“Right.”

There was a longer pause. “If WalsTec didn’t think you were looking at other companies?”

This time, the pause was mine. “I might be fired,” I said. Though his hands were still holding the plate, and his body facing the table, James’ head turned slowly to look down at me next to him. I was searching his expression when I realized he, at the same time, was searching mine, with open curiosity. Then, what had just been exchanged occurred to me. Gratitude covered my previous anger like a towel over a spill, and the numbness from before threatened to set in again.

I might have been fired. If he hadn’t done what he’d done, I might have been completely fired.

There was no self-satisfaction in his gaze. If only, a little bit of relief and, perhaps, embarrassment. It was I, instead, who should have been embarrassed, and I couldn’t find anything to say. Turning back to the table, James lifted a piece of chicken on to my plate, then covered it in Dijon gravy. I crossed to the table and pulled out a chair as he dipped a spoon in the salad and served it. As I sat, I bade him to join me. He demurred politely, saying he’d let me eat in peace.

I insisted.
Chapter Five – Houseguests

For the next two days, James and I went bowling. While we were eating dinner that first night, James told me Sharon had called while I’d been with Craig From Legal. I didn’t reply. The next day, bowling, James reminded me that Sharon had called and I hadn’t called her back. I said, “Yes, I know,” and he didn’t mention it again.

On the third day James and I went bowling, he asked if I wouldn’t rather be home, programming.

It had taken some amount of effort to convince James to come out to the bowling alley with me. Or, at least, he was willing to come to the lane, but not necessarily to bowl. “Old bones,” he protested. I maintained that I never knew anyone who broke a hip bowling. When he did play, James was an adequate bowler—a firm serve, a clear eye. Yet, he did seem to tire easily, and if we didn’t take breaks every couple of frames, then we took long ones between games. At the time, I chalked it up to exactly what he said: old bones. He had coughing fits that would last for minutes.

“Programming, no. What for?”
“Just thought you’d want to practice.”
“It’s not like bowling, James. I don’t need to keep up my serve. The knowledge will be there when I get back.” This, during one of our longer breaks. Two beer bottles sweated on a side table under bowling alley lights. A couple of women bowled a few lanes down, and there was a kid’s birthday party at the other end of the alley, with bumpers in the lane gutters. They cheered and cried occasionally; otherwise, the alley was fairly empty, fairly quiet.

“All right,” he said. “You compare yourself to a musician; I thought perhaps you needed to practice your instrument.” I laughed and James said, “I hope I don’t sound like a nagging parent.”

“Actually, I haven’t spoken to my parents in about ten years.”
James voice rose with interest. “Really?”
“Does that surprise you?”
“No.” He shrugged. “My daughter’s your age and she won’t talk to me either; her mother and I haven’t been together for a while. Do you miss them?”
“I guess. They were never around that much when I was growing up, short of an occasional word of support. I guess maybe that’s how I got to be so used to being independent.”

We were silent. I took a long draw on my beer. James sat upright, his right leg crossed at an “L” over his left. I slouched in my seat, my two arms flopped behind my chair. I wondered if James’ daughter ever thought about him, or if she was content to be alone with the distance. James had stared straight at me while we talked; now he looked away, ahead. I opened my mouth to speak and his attention was back on me immediately. “I don’t really see the point.”

“Parenting?”
“No, programming. Even back when I was at the movie theater, I was programming toward something, making myself look better. Now, it doesn’t matter what I do; my next job won’t come any faster.”
The corners of James’ eyes wrinkled. I would learn this was a sign he was deep in thought, usually before some piercing question or insight. “Why do you feel so bad about your Hiatus when it isn’t your fault? I’d think most people would be happy to have a vacation without any responsibilities.” We’d called it a couple of things over the past few days. My Hiatus. My Unexpected Vacation. My Time Off. My Limbo.

“I mean, I know part of this has to do with what I tried with legal not going exactly right,” I said. “But I can’t help but think, the sixteenth floor did what we call ‘the wrong thing’ and they still have their jobs, and I did what we call ‘the right thing’ and yet I’m sitting here. Maybe I brought this on myself somehow, you know? Maybe I deserved this.”

“Do you really think that’s the case? Surely you know bad things happen to good people. When a town is wiped out by a flood, you don’t say the people must have caused it somehow.”

“Maybe I’ve just always believed that good rules out. The majority’s on Brad Ryan’s side—I can’t be so arrogant as to say that I’m the only one who’s right, and everyone else must be wrong.” A round of “Happy Birthday” began from down the alley.

“I don’t think you’re wrong.”

“Well, thank you.” I saw the glow of candles on a cake to my right. “But I just can’t help but think, maybe I could’ve done something more. Given the sixteenth floor less of my programming. Safeguarded it more.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

I said, “I don’t believe that.” James raised his eyebrows in a look of incredulity. “I pride myself on my independence. If I can’t rely on myself to see something coming like what the sixteenth floor did, I’m lost.”

James thought and replied, “We don’t always pick and choose what happens to us. Maybe it still would have happened, despite any preparation.”

“That’s why I have you. When I go back, I’m telling you every little thing that happens, and I’m counting on you to see through to what’s really going on. You’ve got to catch what I miss.”

“And what do we do until then?”

I put my arm on the table and pulled myself to standing. “Until then, we bowl.”

Sharon caught me later that afternoon. James and I were back at home; I was watching syndicated sitcoms on the big-screen television, and James was making dinner. He answered the phone in the kitchen on the first ring and handed it to me.

“Stranger,” she said.

“Hey,” I greeted. “I’ve been busy.”

“Busy. I thought the problem these days was that you weren’t busy.” Her tone was playful. “Well, you’re lucky I’ve learned to put up with your busy.”

The banter was making me feel a little nauseous. Despite what the fact that I’d spent the past three afternoons at the bowling alley might suggest, I was still extremely anxious about the situation at WalsTec, checking my voicemail throughout the day and jumping at the phone when I was home at night. I as much expected a call to arrive at any point asking me back as I did a call to tell me they’d changed their minds, that I was
indeed fired. The last thing I wanted was flak for being preoccupied. And yet, despite it all, I still answered in a lilting voice, “You’re a gem, what can I say?”

“I guess you’ll just have to make it up to me.” Make it up to her. I’d done that a lot, since that first date, knocking her phone number under a taxi. I was being selfish, I knew, but I didn’t feel up to a night of listening to her problems, to telling her things would be all right at her work and receiving the same assurances in return. I felt I’d had my lifetime fill of hearing promises no one could keep. That afternoon with James, talking about what I’d do if or when WalsTec called me back, that was proactive. Talking it over with Sharon seemed like nothing more than wishful thinking. Then she said “Dinner tonight?” and my tone happy, irrespective of my thoughts, I agreed.

Sharon drove over to my apartment after she left work. Under her black coat, she wore a brown dress lush with a white flower pattern, tight at the hips. I met her at the door and hustled her into the hallway, recalling her hurt at James’ presence a few nights earlier. I thought—mistakenly, I would find—that if I limited her exposure to him, it might keep her animosity at a minimum. James, on his end, acted puckishly disappointed at having to refrigerate the rigatoni he’d been hand-rolling.

Sharon, leaning against my shoulder, caught one glimpse of James waving before I shut the door. She said, “Are those your clothes he’s wearing?”

“Yeah, I lent them to him a few days ago and he’s been wearing them. You should know, funny thing about that—”

“Stop. I don’t want to talk about James. This is you and me, out on a date. Let’s just be us.”

At Sharon’s behest, I drove us to Pier 39, mid-evening. Far off, the horizon was solid black, but the choppy water was flecked with white, reflecting the lights that surrounded the pier in a brilliant aura. It could have been day time for the two levels of shops still open in the glow. Sharon was jaunty; walking toward the stores, she held my hand, pulling me suddenly to the side, looking in public binoculars pointed toward Alcatraz without depositing a quarter.

“Touristy,” I said.

She swung my arm back-and-forth with hers in high crescents. “What’s the big deal? You say it like it hasn’t always been this way.”

“And that makes it all right?”

“It’s not as if it’s a small town, where something’s been lost.” She stopped in front of me and put her arms around my neck. “There’s nothing wrong with tourists. Let’s be where the people are excited by the things around them tonight.” With that, she pulled me down the boardwalk, the crowds closing in, old men with cotton pants pulled up too high, mothers with cameras around their necks taking pictures of their children next to a plastic hanging swordfish. Peruvian music floated toward us, a Pier staple, flutes and drums. Sharon stood on the outside of a crowd, dancing quietly to herself. A man with dreadlocks and a half-sized bongo drum saw her and handed her his instrument. I watched amused.

I tried to remember, what did I think of her, during that week after I met Sharon, before the first time we went out? In all the confusion, with Andy unexpectedly knowing her, I found I couldn’t remember what she had looked like as our first date grew closer. I’d been talking to her over the phone; I knew in my mind two facts, that she’d been
pretty and I’d been interested, but in that week I was taking them as pre-established facts, like something someone had told me was true, and not something I could prove on my own. And now, I could barely remember that week at all. What had I imagined our relationship would be like, if at all?

“What are we celebrating?” I asked, when Sharon returned from her drum solo. We continued to stroll.

“One of us is having a good work week, at least.”

“What happened?”

“Well, Tagliere’s been finishing up the Randall account, so he’s happy.”

“And when the boss’s happy, everyone’s happy.”

“When boss turns to secretary and says ‘fax this’ with a ‘please,’ the girls know we might as well hit the champagne lunch hour downstairs, because that’s not going to happen again soon.” Sharon, hungry, chose a restaurant with a view of the water. I ordered the fish and chips; Sharon had a fillet of sole with garlic lemon sauce. Touristy, sure, but the Pier knew seafood.

I started her talking: “What’s the latest gossip in the world of tax litigation?”

“Well, as nice as Tagliere’s being to me, Brice is being a real bitch to Cheryl, and she’s taking that bitchiness out on the rest of us.”

Her white teeth flashed, lighting up her face. I was taken, for a moment, by her radiance. Still I thought back to when we first met. Had I pictured in my head the conversation when we agreed not to see other people, before it happened? When I first slept with her, did fantasy match actuality? Other times, other women, I’d hoped to hit it off, only to be disappointed after one or two dates, when the initial awkwardness never faded, or mutual interests never surfaced. With Sharon, if I’d looked forward to a relationship, I couldn’t recall the depth, the breadth—surprising, since we’d hit it off so well initially.

“What does Cheryl do?” I tasted Sharon’s sole. The fish itself was cooked well, tender; strong on the garlic with a pungent hint of lemon. Maybe James’ culinary sense was rubbing off on me.

“She comes in late, which is a problem anyway,” Sharon stole a french-fry off my plate, “but then she’s says ‘What, no coffee?’ or ‘Didn’t anyone sort the mail?’ and I’m thinking, hello!” Sharon gestured with half the fry. “If you’d come to work on time, you’d know we’ve been too busy for that. And we all try to pick up for each other when someone’s not there, but I can’t answer her phone, my phone, and do Tagliere’s errands all at the same time. And it’s not even as if she says thank you.”

It was a theme of Sharon’s office complaints: she was under-appreciated, and listening to her, you’d believe the entire office would fall apart if she wasn’t there. I wondered sometimes what others said about her; hell, I wondered what the sixteenth floor had to say about me to their own girlfriends and spouses. Sharon was saying: “And I heard that one of Smith’s clients took a special interest in Smith’s secretary, but they’re keeping it very hush-hush for the time being.”

I sat back and let Sharon go. This was one of the things I liked about her. I didn’t have to worry about running the conversation; even if it was office gossip, Sharon always had something to talk about, and she didn’t care if the person across the table contributed or just listened. That was fine; she told me her office gossip and I told her mine, when I had some.
Her self-confidence; in the beginning, I think, I was intimidated by that self-confidence. At the airport, and later, she seemed very sure of herself; I was never that sure of myself and, perhaps—I do remember—in our early days, I wondered if I would ultimately turn out to be interesting enough to keep her interested. I wanted to be seeing her—"keeping company," as James used to say—but despite our repeated dates, I wasn’t sure if she felt the same about me. She held all the relationship’s power—enchanted by our budding casualness, I was the supplicant, and she the queen with a scepter to bid me come or bid me die. In the space between casual dating and a committed relationship, between “two people” and an “us,” is a delicate puzzle, the movement of pieces, creeping slowly. A false move leads to rejection, and the game ends. It was only when I went to kiss her for the first time, on the doorstep of her apartment after a date, just like teenagers, that I knew how she felt.

“Let’s take a vacation,” she said, while we were waiting for the check. I cocked my head at her. “You know I’m waiting for Webster to call.” “So? You have James now.” She put her hand on top of mine. “He can stay here, let you know if something happens.” “I’m not going to do that,” I said. “I want to be right here if anything happens.” “This is that important to you?” I nodded, disappointed in the question. The waiter laid the bill on the table, clearing away dishes, and Sharon pulled her hand back as I reached for the check. Outside, we continued walking, each with a little white wine in us. Sharon bounced less, staying close to me, slipping her right arm through my left and putting her head on my shoulder. “So what have you been doing, while you’re waiting for the company to call?” “Bowling, mostly.” “Really? That serious?” She laughed. “Bowl some good games?” “Pretty good. Not the best.” “Was it fun, at least?” “Yeah, it’s been fun.” “Was it,” she paused dramatically, “enlightening?” I stopped and looked at her. We were on the second level of shops, almost to the wood railing at the farthest end.

What was our first fight? Like so much else, I can’t remember. I can remember fights, sure; one, toward the beginning, when I hadn’t called Sharon in a while. She came to accept this as part of who I was, that occasionally I’d get busy and neglect to return phone calls. Ultimately, she didn’t doubt my fidelity; I never elaborated that my disappearing acts occurred when I found myself unable to take Sharon’s characteristic upbeat nature. Whereas she believed all things eventually worked themselves out, I couldn’t help but feel that those who helped themselves got the best result. “Yes,” I said, “it’s been enlightening.” So much for not talking about James. We moved to the rail and looked down at the sea lions.

Even muted by nightfall, usually, you can hear the barking of the sea lions from across the Pier, but that night, the half-heard fragments of conversations from the crowd drowned out all but a hint of the noise until we stepped closer. People were all around—children trying on funny hats, groups of twentysomethings still entering the restaurants even close to midnight. The sea lions lay huddled on top of one another, wriggling so
that in the dark it was tough to tell where one ended and one began, like a handful of
earthworms pulled from the ground. Sharon said, “Did you know sea lions have two
uteruses?”

I blinked. “Why in the world do you know that?”

She shrugged. “Live in San Francisco a while, you learn a little something about
sea lions.”

“Still.” Lazy barks floated up to us. Their vehemence was nowhere near what I’d
heard on trips prior. “No fights tonight.”

“I guess the harem’s happy.” The wind spread Sharon’s hair out toward the
corners of the earth. “And a happy harem is a … I don’t know.” She stared out into the
horizon. “You have to admire them, though, defending their mates from rival sea lions,
barking and biting, pushing each other into the sea. One big game of King of the Hill.”

“Must be nice to be a lady sea lion.” I see now that I was being obliviously flip.
“Sit back while the men fight and then go off with whoever wins.”

She said “Is that what you think?” with a hint of seriousness in her humor. I felt
I’d somehow insulted her. She grabbed my hand, said “Come on,” and pulled me back
toward the stores. “You know the difference between seals and sea lions? Ear flaps.
Seals don’t have anything blocking up their ears.”

Charm, like the taste of bubble gum, like the smell of something new, fleets. I
remember once Sharon and I were driving and I needed to know whether to go left or
right. She wasn’t sure, she didn’t know, she needed to think. She said left, then at the
last moment changed it to right. I swerved with traffic approaching; the car emerged
unscathed, but I was seething with post-near-death fury. It is here that the change began
to come, most visible in the early fights and the requisite after-fight apologizing. This
creature, once so intimidating, a fickle queen to appease, stood suddenly revealed: I
thought I was dating a deity; I didn’t realize you were just a person. A new person,
insecure, who enjoys spending time and cares and might want to move in, and got hurt
when I didn’t want those same things. I cared for Sharon, I had no doubt, but needing
others hadn’t been my foray for quite some time—my growing partnership with James
aside. It was around then I was beginning to see, as much as I wanted to be with Sharon,
there were times I wanted to be without her, too.

She was looking at a small booth of “earthquake preparedness” paraphernalia. I
doubted the effectiveness of the “Make Your Own Richter Scale.” Coming up behind
her, I put my arms around her waist and standing, we watched a mime approach the next
booth, Alcatraz souvenirs. He proceeded to make lewd gestures with a pair of handcuffs;
Sharon laughed and I kissed her neck, feeling guilty for my ambivalence.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I know. Me too. Want to get out of here?”

“Absolutely.”

It was dark in my apartment, with only a little glow from the window in the living
room. I took Sharon’s coat and hung it by the door. “Just let me check my messages,” I
said.
“I’m going to go to the bathroom.” We kissed once, long, and Sharon walked down the hall toward the back of the apartment. At the door, I searched around the wicker for messages from James, letting me know WalsTec had called, to no avail.

Sharon emerged from the darkness, naked. “Didn’t think you’d mind” stood as the only preamble to kissing me, first with space between us, then pressing her breasts against my chest, then the entire length of her body.

“Sharon.” I had tried to tell her before, and then the night distracted me. One of my hands was on her shoulder; with the other, I pointed toward James, lying with his back to us on the couch, covered with a blanket.

“Jesus!” Sharon ran back down the hallway and into the bedroom, slamming the door. I followed, not waiting to see if James stirred.

She stood with her back to me, looking toward the window, wrapped from below her collarbone to above her thigh in the towel I’d left in my room. I shut the door behind me quickly.

In one motion, Sharon turned, shouted “Are you insane?” and slapped me on the right shoulder with the back of her hand.

“Quietly.”

“You’re right,” she whispered. “We wouldn’t want to wake—” and now she shouted “the strange old man—” whisper “sleeping on your couch.”

“Hey, he needed a place to stay.”

“Well, I guess that makes it all right!” She punctuated her words with the flailing of her arms, but abandoned it when the towel began to slip. “How would you feel, if I had a strange man sleeping in my apartment?”

“I think the connotations are a little different.” I gave a small shrug. “He’s so tired by the end of the day, and it looks like he’s taking public transportation to get here. I asked if he’d like to stay over some times, instead of trying to make his way back.”

Sounding apologetic, I said, “I’m just trying to do a nice thing.”

“All the money you’re paying him, and he doesn’t have a car?”

“Apparently not,” I said, irritated. “It’s none of my business.”

“Christ, Steven.” Now her voice was less angry, more pleading. “What do I tell my friends? ‘Yeah, Steve lost his job, but he’s coping real well. He hired his company’s doorman to sleep on his couch.’”

“If it weren’t for him, I’d be completely out of a job, instead of having a fighting chance now.”

“So he’s astute.” She spat the last word. “But, you know, if you’d spelled it all out for me, maybe I would have caught your mistake too.”

I reached out and rubbed her bare shoulder with my left hand. “I don’t doubt that.” This was point perfect why I didn’t want our involvement to go any further than this. I didn’t need to cause this hurt, any more than I needed to be degraded by the sixteenth floor. “You know I don’t doubt that, Sharon.”

She moved closer, resting her forehead on my shoulder. “I know.” She looked up. “I don’t understand.”

I put my right hand behind her head and kissed her. Still connected, I stepped forward as she stepped back. Three steps and her back touched the wall, my hand cushioning her head. I put my other hand behind her neck. The towel fell to the floor.
Later, I lay awake in bed as I had the few nights before, waiting for the phone to ring even in the middle of the night. Sharon slept on her side, her cheek on my bare chest. The street lamp behind the window blinds sent lines of light across her face. She breathed softly. In the stillness, I listened to James’ wet coughs on the couch.

**END PART I**
Chapter Six – A Change of Shoes

I was bowling alone, two days later. Sharon was at work, suffering through her boss’s mood swings and commiserating with the other secretaries, blasting them all to me behind their backs. That’s fine. That’s human.

James had stepped tentatively out of the kitchen that morning, worrying his left eyebrow with his finger in a gesture of nerves before he spoke. He’d been in the kitchen loading the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher while I watched the ten o’clock news. Looking back, it seems overly decadent, sitting on my ass while James worked, but I felt I needed to give him something to do while we waited for WalsTec to call back. Maybe it was that, in the absence of WalsTec, I wasn’t sure what we’d talk about, and so this was a way to keep James close, but separate. When he finally spoke, it was to ask for the day off, and perhaps out of that same sense of discomfort, I agreed more readily than he seemed to have expected, telling him to take the whole day, if he wanted it.

But, once I was alone, thoughts of both James and Sharon tumbled in my head like the ball down the lane, and I imagined them behind me as the one pin knocked back into the wall. Sharon cheering, James with a quiet approving whistle.

For the most part, however, I didn’t note the number of pins falling, didn’t feel my knees bend as I served. My mind was in the car, parking, riding the elevator up the floors of WalsTec. As much as I’d avoided the office to begin with, I couldn’t help but wonder what my former co-workers were doing that afternoon. How many meetings filled the conference rooms, how many new projects being assigned, proposals being written? What was the entrée on the lunch floors?

The bowling alley was emptier than two days earlier when I’d been there with James. No kids’ birthday parties took the end of the room now; it seemed the lack of children in the alley that day balanced cosmically with the bar being unusually packed. I stopped in for a mid-afternoon beer before my game; most of the stools at the bar boasted occupants. Wasn’t pretty, either; predominantly John McDaniel types, and I wondered briefly if I too would soon find myself sitting glassy-eyed on a bar stool, staring at a TV screen with a warm pint in front of me. It made me glad, momentarily, that I’d hired James, so that at least if WalsTec never called me back, I wouldn’t be sitting by myself.

Another ball in my hand, speeding down the lane, coming back to me. I watched without amusement the cartoon on the overhead scoring screen of a feathered turkey, arms and legs extended, trying desperately to prevent itself from being shoved into an oven. It emerged a moment later on a plate, complete with garnish, stereotypically cooked. I liked the rhythm here—ball, lane, ball, lane, the wooden sound of the ball rolling before it crashed into the pins. As long as I felt myself moving in circles internally, trapped in this Hiatus, I might as well externalize it, ball, lane, ball, lane.

Damn the programming, I thought, I’m going bowling!

It was on the second “turkey,” six frames into the game, when I recognized that I was four frames away from a perfect game. Only now did I look around, expecting to see Sharon or James, disappointed when they weren’t there. The nearest bowlers—two old men in afghan sweaters, a large woman in checkered pants—couldn’t see my score from their lanes; everyone else seemed too engrossed in themselves to bother as witnesses.
Sweat slickened my hands as I hefted my next ball. I’d been better off when I’d been oblivious. Suddenly, I wanted it. Nothing else, I thought, had gone right for me lately; I’d take away from my Hiatus a perfect bowling score. I threw the seventh ball so tentatively, I didn’t think it would have the force to cause a strike. It did. I became overconfident with the eighth serve, snatching the ball and running up to the foul line, stopping myself just before it left my hands. A more careful serve and again, a strike.

Being alone, I granted myself a respite, wiping my hands on my pants as I sat down. Closed my eyes. Breathed. Old tips from my acting classes came back to me: visualize your actions before you do them. I nodded to myself and stood, retrieving my ball and giving it a careful shove down the lane. This, it would be, a sign, it was all worthwhile.

In rapid succession, the lights went out, there was an ear-deafening bang, the lights came back on again, and a wailing siren tore through the bowling alley. The ball I’d just served was ricocheting the wrong way, back up the lane toward me, having hit the metal gate of the pin cleaners—every gate in every lane had fallen when the lights went out (thus the bang, I realized) and neglected to rise. My ball fell into the gutter and, its momentum reversing again, rolled back toward the gate and lay resting against it. When the lights had gone out, a voice, presumably from one of the old men, had said “F’r Chrissakes;” the other had said “Kevalt!” I looked up to see that my score screen was blank. My score! I thought, My damn score!

“Everybody out!” shouted a man’s voice. The alarm continued to scream. From the doorway of the bar, the sorry types I’d seen before were walking out, some stumbling and a few supporting one another. “Everybody out!” came again from the bartender, a stout balding man bringing up the rear of the parade out of the bar. “Let’s go, people,” he said, “that’s the fire alarm.”

I didn’t smell any smoke, and the bowling alley looked relatively normal, short of the closed gates and darkened screens. Nevertheless, the large woman in the checkered pants had an equally large coat buttoned up to her neck and was following the last of the patrons out the door, purse in hand. The bartender stood at the exit, looking stern; next to him, the younger alley employees in matching green shirts stood shifting foot-to-foot, perhaps not wholeheartedly sharing the bartender’s notion that all the customers leave the “burning” bowling alley before they did.

I waited unhurriedly until the two old men passed me, then took my beer and followed them out, paying one last look to my blank score screen. One perfect game, damn it! I hadn’t asked for much. Outside, the alley crowd dispersed; I took a few steps down Waller Street and sat on the edge of the sidewalk. My damn score. I took a sip of my beer and drew a breath as if to sob, but nothing came out.

Of course I knew that losing a winning bowling score wasn’t the same as losing my job, and even losing my job wasn’t the same as being forced to take a short, unpaid vacation. And being rejected from a dozen acting schools wasn’t the same as being maimed in an accident or dying. But in the currency of life, everything that happens to you happens to you, and I couldn’t help the maddening frustration I felt as everything I’d tried to do lately went wrong. I was willing to work, self-motivated. Just point me in a direction and let me go. And yet, it seemed like nothing I did was right.
“Do you really think it would have made a difference?” This non-sequitur had come from James the morning of the day before. I looked up from the coffee maker. He and I had a system, now that he sometimes slept on my couch; he handled all my chores throughout the day, save one: I made the morning coffee. He was standing by the couch, folding his blanket. This was after Sharon had left.

“What?”

“If you had been more careful with your work when you were with the sixteenth floor.”

I remembered the deep-in-thought wrinkling of the corners of James’ eyes, realizing we had just spontaneously resumed our previous day’s bowling alley conversation. I felt a warmth of pleasure at the notion that James had been thinking over our conversation since the day before. “It certainly wouldn’t have hurt. I was so caught up in being as disconnected from the sixteenth floor as possible, preserving my independence, that it blinded me to being taken advantage of. I can’t let that happen again.”

“But is the right way really to start thinking like the sixteenth floor? They’re being duplicitous, so you should be, too? Why not just refuse to act on their level?”

“Except it doesn’t work that way,” I said. “They involved me in their game, whether I wanted to be or not.”

James, his hands working with the conversation’s nervous energy, placed the blanket on one edge of the couch. “If everyone assumes the world is a bad place, it’s going to be one.”

“What does being a moral example buy me, other than being branded a sucker?”

James took a coffee cup from me and sat on the couch. I collapsed myself into the rocking chair, sitting with my legs crossed, my body a nest for the mug. He said, “If you want me to tell you my opinion, I think the best way to escape the sixteenth floor is simply to go somewhere else. Find a different company.”

I said “This again” with more heat than I’d intended. “It doesn’t matter anyway, after my legal deal.”

“All right,” James replied. “But say that phone rings.” The phone remained silent. “The sixteenth floor’s never going to change, no matter what you do. As I see it, the real question is, are you going to let them change you?”

“Last I checked, I wasn’t the problem.” I sighed and looked at the wall above the couch, knowing that my computer was somewhere behind it and down the hall. Office politics. I just wanted to sit at that keyboard, do my work, and not be bothered for the rest of my life. Fuck; I thought I’d found a place with WalsTec, with the freedom they allowed me, where my needing them was less than their needing me. It seemed the freer I felt, the tighter it turned out I was held.

I sat for about an hour on the sidewalk, with the expectation that the bowling alley might re-open. The alley workers left and returned with flavored coffees; vanilla and hazelnut floated past while the inside of my mouth turned sour from the last of my beer. A lone fireman walked up in a hat and boots, slapped the bartender on the back and spoke to him for a moment, then entered the building. When he emerged a few minutes later, he spoke to the bartender again and, after a pause, hugged him; I gathered that the two were friends and the news was not good. The young employees eventually departed,
green bowling shirts fading in different directions. Finally, the taste in my mouth caused me to stand; the best thing to fight the aftertaste of beer is another one. I walked off, still wearing the bowling alley’s shoes.

The Haight had been one of the launching points of the hippie movement in the ‘60s, ultimately ending up as a stomping ground for Charles Manson. I walked the streets past tourists and locals, the former designated by the slow, eyes-wide way they walked, the latter in the singular manner they traveled from point A to B. A little ways in the distance I could see the thin top of the Hobart building, its round 1900s front with a panorama of windows shouldering its way to visibility between two modern skyscrapers. I played a game, trying to characterize the people I passed: “This one’s a Manson, this one’s a hippie.” How many of them had a sense of the history? Going places. All of them, going places, having places to go. I tried to be a tourist, to soak the scenery, to watch the details, but I was too distracted. An orange glow floated from a small store specializing in antique lamps and lights; a woman adjusted a ceiling fan holding bulbs in intricately carved shells. Above it, a curtain silk-screened with an image of the Mona Lisa blocked the view into someone’s apartment. I refused the proffered fruit from a produce vendor, ignored a blanket covered in tie-dye shirts across from a used CD shop. Saw a bar open mid-afternoon, dim inside and smoky. I walked on; I couldn’t have stood the ambiance inside, didn’t want to be held in warm friendliness. I felt numb and edgy, angry at the universe. In acting, you play your own part and the other actors play theirs; the parts fit together as a whole, like computer programming. No one need bother anyone else. Spiced meat wafted from a restaurant and I looked with interest, but kept on.

I walked without thinking about where I was going. When I consider it now, it seems to me that my unconscious took over where my conscious mind gave up; the scenery was familiar from a path I’d walked almost daily, long ago. I fell into my old routine, my feet retracing those steps, past my old apartment with barely a glance. I was running through my options: nothing to do that day. Couldn’t bowl. Couldn’t go to work. There was no one at my apartment. I stopped, thought, “Why not see a movie?” and when I looked up, I had been following my old route through Market Street to the front door of the Hugo Theater where I’d once worked.

The marquee above the ticket booth listed six movies. I knew from television commercials that one was a romantic drama where both man and woman were dying, but neither told the other until it became too apparent to both. Next, the latest children’s show had made it to the big screen, undoubtedly with requisite merchandising; following that, an action-comedy featured robbers at a supermarket and a team of shoppers with bumbling-but-well-meaning cops using the produce on hand to save the day. The fourth was a football movie and the fifth, a pseudo-documentary on an artist who visits Hemingway’s grave. The last was a slasher flick attempting to redeem itself from cliché by advertising itself as a “whodunit.” I thought the title, Whodunit? itself, might have been overkill. It was Wednesday; I knew a few of the movies would change to newer releases on Friday and some poor schlub would be up on a ladder, rearranging the letters.

I walked to the right past the ticket booth, startled to find myself there, and through a set of clear double doors. I hadn’t been back much since I’d stopped working there; Sharon and I usually went to a theater closer to her apartment when we went out.
Red carpet met stucco walls glistening with gold flakes; lights blazed from matching gold shades, mixing with the sunlight. It all had an elegant feel, some mien of importance to the movie you were about to see, like Hollywood premieres or 1920s movie houses. The effect was ruined by the spilt popcorn spread evenly across the carpet, sometimes whole pieces, sometimes bits ground into the floor by parading feet. It smelled of popcorn salt and circus butter. A velvet rope closed off half of the end of the wide hallway that led to the left and the screening rooms. For as long as I’d worked there, I wondered why it was they made the hallway so wide, if they were just going to need the velvet rope to block it off. Next to the rope, a kid about sixteen, his smooth face still supporting the last of his baby fat, dropped ticket stubs inside a hole atop a small gray podium. He wore a square red hat too large for his head.

The smell of popcorn drew my attention and I saw my real addiction, the chocolate-covered raisins. Directly to my left, before the hall turned away, was the snack bar. The concession stand, as the managers used to like to call it. I could still picture myself standing behind it; I’d felt dizzy the first time I’d gone around, suddenly seeing the theater from a perspective until then forbidden to me and all other customers. Three people stood behind the cash registers now, one man and two women. I waited for the present crowd to clear, then walked up.

A short, plump girl with black hair approached. I recognized the old uniforms; the shirts still had the useless flaps on the shoulders that buttoned toward our collars. It used to make me feel like I was a soldier in some sick movie theater Marine Corp. I looked down through the glass counter at the boxes of candy. “Can I get a box of chocolate-covered raisins?” The girl bent down to retrieve the box and in that moment, I recognized her. “Mary?”

She squinted. “Excuse me?” The number of times customers had called me by my first name off my nametag in order to get pally-pally-chummy-chummy with the guy scooping their popcorn, for whatever reason … I could tell Mary was expecting a setup. For the same reason some people give fake names for the phone book to stop telemarketers, I’d often thought about putting a fake name on my nametag so I’d know when to ignore people.

Her body was a lumpy squarish, her hair longer than it had been before, curly and darker—the absence of hair dye. The eyebrow piercing was gone in favor of a third ring in each ear. She said, “I know you”—not a question—and I saw a barbell through her tongue.

“Steve Matthews.” She rolled the name around with the barbell clicking against the back of her teeth.

Like a roller coaster, I saw recognition climb to her eyes—she said the word “You …”—then plummet away.

“I used to work here. Three years back, we had to man the ticket booth together.” Mary’s eyes widened. “That’s right!” She punctuated her remembrance with a click of the barbell. “You were studying to be an engineer!” Almost.

“A computer programmer.” I felt a little dismayed at not having been more easily recalled. I guess I’d only known a few sets of employees while I’d worked at the theater, while she’d probably seen a dozen turnarounds in the time she’d been … “What are you still doing here?” I’d meant the question more politely than it was delivered.
Mary remained cheery. “I’m the manager now.” Her fat cheeks shone with her smile.

“Really?” I’d been gone for three years; if the staff had turned around that much, she might very well have seniority. I said, “Congratulations,” and thought, you’re the manager of all this crushed popcorn. “So this whole place is yours?”

“Yup.” She ran her hand over the glass counter. “All mine.” Something about the gesture made me vaguely jealous, the placing of the hand on the counter with the candy boxes visible inside. Of course, it wasn’t actually all Mary’s—there was still the corporate chain or real estate owner—but Mary was at least the acting sheriff of that there particular frontier town. She placed the box of raisins on the counter. “Anything else?” The smell of the popcorn forced me to add it to my order. As she scooped it, Mary said over her shoulder, “What movie are you seeing?”

No ticket. I hadn’t even meant to go in there, and then with the shock of seeing the old place … Mary was placing a large bag of popcorn on the counter, I didn’t have a ticket, and worse yet, in the shock of realizing my own idiocy, I’d forgotten all the movies that were playing. “The new Sally Selvalan one?” I tried.

“Sally’s movie’s not out for a few months,” Mary said.

“You say it like you know her.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be a kick?” Mary shifted her weight on one foot. “Are you thinking *Halftime Quarterback*? That’s got a girl who looks kind of like her.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Well, enjoy.” She nimbly amended the price of my food on her register with the employee discount, “for old time’s sake.” After paying, I took my popcorn in one hand, the box of candy in the other, said, “Take care,” and as nonchalantly as I could, walked away.

“Steve,” she called. Almost to the front door of the theater, I looked back. “The movies are over there.”

“Yup.”

“ Aren’t you going the wrong way?”

“ Nope,” I said, and walked out the door.
James rubbed his eyebrow, this time in a gesture of worry, looking down and shaking his head. He stood in the doorway of my apartment the next morning, having slept at home after his day off. When I told him I wouldn’t need him that day, he seemed to take this as a sign of trouble.

“I thought this would happen,” he said. “A person can’t just go around telling someone exactly what he thinks. Now you’re sore with me. Well, I can’t just take your money if I’m not going to be around you. Then you’re paying me to be quiet, and I’m not sure I feel right about that.”

I had an appointment to keep, and I needed to end the conversation as quickly as possible. “I’m not angry with you James, I promise. Sharon and I are spending the day together.” Though it was Thursday, I hoped it wasn’t completely unbelievable to him that she could be off from work to see me in the middle of the afternoon.

I stepped aside and James came into the apartment, sitting down on the couch. “Do you mind if I stick around while you’re out?” he asked. “No sense in me going home now just to turn around, come back tomorrow. I might as well give this place a good cleaning.”

“Sure,” I said, feeling a blush rising at the thought of someone else cleaning my apartment for me while I went out.

James, misunderstanding my embarrassment, said, “She’s not too keen on me, is she?” The morning after Sharon discovered that James was sleeping in my apartment, I had tried to put together some semblance of an elegant breakfast to garner good feelings between the two. I got up before either one of them and tiptoed into the kitchen to make omelets with chunks of green pepper and tomatoes, and the cinnamon pancakes Sharon liked. I set the table with a glass carafe of orange juice and brewed coffee in a French press, hoping to delight Sharon into comfort. She acted outwardly pleasant but at the same time diffident; James’ attempts at conversation hadn’t lasted more than two sentences. Looking back, I see how difficult it all must have been for her.

“I think she’s still coming around to the arrangement,” I said to James.

His lips paled, pressed together, as if preparing to ask me about our arrangement himself, but the color returned after a moment. “Well, I’m sorry about that,” he said. “And I just wanted to make sure that this,” his finger wiggled between the two of us, “wasn’t a sign of something. I know you disagree with me about whether you should go back to Webster.” He rubbed an eyebrow. “Tell me, were you happy there?”

“I was happy with the work I did.”

“Is that enough?”

“I had some success. Enough to keep me safe, I thought. That’s enough for me.”

“Success won’t keep you warm at night,” and for a second, his eyes were off me, then back. “Well, I guess that’s why you’re going out now.”

I laughed despite myself. “If you only knew,” I said, and left.

I drove the car to the bowling alley, which was still closed, and walked to the movie theater. I’d stepped out of it the day before with popcorn in one hand and chocolate raisins in the other, not really knowing what I was going to do. I could have hopped a trolley to Pier 39 and fed the popcorn to the birds. I could have gone home, set
up a makeshift bowling game in the hallway of my apartment building and played until
the neighbors complained. But the cool shadow that the lip of the marquee cast over the
pavement was comforting; I’d stepped over to the Hugo ticket booth, bought a ticket to
the romantic drama, and gone back inside, ignoring Mary’s confused look. A day later, I
was headed back again. After all, I still had five more movies to see.

The kid who had been taking tickets inside the day before sat outside in the booth,
selling them. His peach fuzz bothered me above all else; the fact that there were people
in the “work world,” insofar as the movie theater qualified, who didn’t need to shave,
brought clear to me exactly how removed from it all I was. Like kids bagging groceries
at the grocery store, kids at every register of the discount superstores. When I wanted to
talk to a manager, another kid. It made me feel too old to still be trying to find my place
in the world. There had been a manager and an assistant manager when I’d worked at the
movie theater before. Neither one was young, I had been twenty-three and they were
both older than I was. Yet I was the anomaly; no one questioned a twenty-six, twenty-
seven year old manager, but a twenty-three year old theater worker? A shock! Of

course, these were managers from elsewhere, brought in by corporate. I’d never seen a
manager rise up through the ranks, from grunt to boss—at least, until Mary.

In my PDA, I’d made an APPOINTMENT note to get to the theater by 11:30,
before all the afternoon movies began. I looked up at the marquee, trying to chart a
schedule in my head; I really did need Sharon now, and her head for numbers, but she
was at work, unaware. I felt a little guilty for lying to James, I thought, as I took money
for the movies out of my pocket. But just the same as I was having trouble explaining to
Sharon why I’d chosen James in the first place, I didn’t quite feel comfortable telling him
I was going back to the movie theater where I used to work to see every movie they were
showing; I didn’t want to be talked out of it. “I need a noon for Whodunit?, a 2:30 for

Halftime Quarterback”—I rattled off the movies I wanted to see.

The kid’s pasty complexion faded even more so. His nametag read “Mike.”

“You serious?”

“I’m serious.” I pushed the money through the open slot on the counter under the
glass. “Here.”

“I’m not sure if I can do this,” Mike said. “I think I have to check with my
manager.” A small line had formed behind me, and I heard a man’s frustrated sigh as
Mike began to walk out of the booth.

“Hey, whoa,” I said. Mike turned to look at me with his hand on the doorknob.

“You manager Mary’s a friend of mine. I just want to watch a couple movies; I could
keep walking back and buying tickets, but why bother, you know?”

The man behind me, dark thinning hair and a plaid shirt, muttered “Come on!”
loud enough for both of us to hear, and Mike’s complexion flushed from pale to red. I
felt bad for the kid; I shuddered at the number of times I’d eyeballed a customer, trying to
figure out whether they were trying to pull something over on me, from exchanging
possibly used tickets to presenting presumed vouchers from the manager. I could see
Mike’s ambivalence: he risked pissing off the customers and bothering the manager for
no reason, or getting tricked in some unimaginable way and having it taken out of his
pay.
In the end, he let go of the door, walked back to the counter, and punched in my show times. The machine spit the tickets out one by one; Mike took my money and slipped them under the glass. “Thanks,” I said.

He didn’t look at me. “Have a good movie.”

I stood in the concession line and ordered a large popcorn, wondering what the statute of limitations on the free refills would be, when Mary came up behind me. “Hear you’re the big spender today, Steve.” She smiled, I smiled, and I felt like a murder suspect being questioned by a detective. “ Couldn’t stay away?”

“I had a day to waste.”

“Don’t you have to work?”

“Day to waste,” I repeated slowly.

She leaned in. “Look, I’m a couple guys short. You want to take a shift in the ticket booth? I bet we could swing you some pretty good money.”

Work at the theater again? I thought. “Thanks, but I’m just going to watch my movies.”

“Suit yourself.”

I sat down near the back-center in the screening room showing *Whodunit?* The projector flashed still advertisements on the screen—the pre-previews. Most customers will go into the same screening room of their local theater twenty or thirty times and never be able to say if it was that room they’d just been in or another. Back when I’d worked there, as I swept dropped popcorn and gummy bears with my giant broom, I’d learned the signifying marks of the rooms, which we differentiated by letters: “A” had a broken chair in the back-left corner; this one, “D,” still had that gouge in the wall above the light fixture. I thought someone would’ve taken spackle to that thing in the three years since I’d been gone.

The lights dimmed and a group of kids toward the front played a game of shushing one another, the next louder than the one before. Though it was an R-rated movie, it looked to me like a mostly underage crowd. I sometimes thought they made a movie R just so kids were more likely to try to get in to see it than if the movie was PG-13.

But at that point I didn’t care who the movie was aimed at. The point was hardly the movie. Something had happened while I’d sat on the curb the day before, waiting to see if the bowling alley would reopen. I’d told myself that I’d made my peace long ago with not becoming an actor. I’d tried my best to remain at WalsTec, and I attempted to wait out my Hiatus as patiently as I could. But when that score disappeared from the bowling screen, I couldn’t help but think, if nothing I attempted worked out, why try? I quit. I could tell when the universe was giving me a hint. I quit. I’d go to the movie theater and stay there until WalsTec called me back. On screen, the requisite murder in the first five minutes involved a bully, after picking on some kids, going home, getting chased by the killer, finally escaping outside … until he tripped over a garden hose and the killer strangled him with it. Fade to opening credits.

This, I thought, was the lowest I could go. And then I considered, No, the lowest I could go would have been to take Mary’s offer to come back to work at the theater. I didn’t need the money, certainly. To come back to the theater would be to say that I didn’t think WalsTec was going to call me back. It was one thing to bowl all day; that
indicated spending time, waiting. The same as watching movies, though I did have to admit, there was something comforting in being back in the theater. When I was working there, I set my own deadlines, created my own panic and I really was my own boss, at least as far as training myself so that software companies would hire me. No bosses to steal projects, and no acting school rejections.

Blood spattered across the screen. I wondered how many times they’d had to wipe off the camera lens before they got that right. Watching movies while working in the theater had made me jaded; when a car chase began in the middle of the film, we all knew the hero was going to live, but still everyone sat rapt to see what would happen. Never underestimate the audience’s ability to fall for the same thing every time.

The movie finished with four possible endings; I had to give the writer credit for making them all decently feasible. Of course, the character I thought did it wasn’t even implicated. I sometimes wondered, when watching halfway plausible action movies, what I’d do in a similar situation, say, were I to be held up at knifepoint, or were my car to be tipping precariously at the edge of a ravine. Would I panic, sealing my own fate? Or could I keep my cool when it really counted, long enough to save my own life? On a smaller scale, I felt like letting the sixteenth floor run me away from Webster was that kind of situation. I’d failed once, trying out for acting school. If there was any reason to go back to Webster, it was for the chance to do something right and erase that failure. If getting tossed from Webster hadn’t indicated I’d failed again, going back to the movie theater certainly would.

I had fifteen minutes before my next movie, Halftime Quarterback, and I hit the concession stand for a popcorn refill. Mary was behind the counter again, serving; the managers I’d known had stayed in the back office their entire shifts if they could help it, hidden from the customers. I didn’t think Mary was that much more responsible; instead, her presence underscored how much busier they were if they were missing employees. I felt vaguely guilty for the second time that day; I knew what it was like to be busy behind that counter, getting snapped at by patrons, feet aching, and hungry an hour past break. But it wasn’t my job anymore. A girl with red hair refilled my popcorn quickly, probably grateful for a customer who didn’t require a monetary transaction.

More customers filled the next screening room, an afternoon crowd that for whatever reason, like me, didn’t have to work. I took the back row again and put my feet up on the seats in front of me. As ushers, we were told to discourage people from doing just that, but I never did. Be comfortable in the theater, I thought. Why not? Short of one customer complaining about another, once they were in that darkened theater, I felt like it was more or less live and let live.

The movie began; it was about a male dancer in a halftime routine with dreams of being a professional football player. The way I saw it, the movie was supposed to be a double-draw, a football movie to bring men in with a dancing aspect for their dates. It ended well enough, with both sides acknowledging their dual inner dancers and football players, and the Halftime Quarterback got to throw the winning touchdown. I left the theater amused, though my eyes took longer adjusting to the brighter hallway lights after nearly four hours inside darkened rooms, and I tasted peeling skin on my lips from all the popcorn salt. I bought a soda from the still-bustling concession and walked to Mr. Fluffy Visits China.
This room was unmistakably filled, the sounds of children’s voices reaching me before I opened the door. I took an empty seat next to a boy, maybe around five, in a green, yellow, and orange striped shirt.

“This is mine,” he said, placing a protective hand on a small soda in the cup holder of the armrest between us. His brown hair was mussed and he had a scab on his nose, indicating a recent trip-and-fall. There was an older woman next to him, perhaps a grandmother or a nanny, and then a girl, her chubby face putting her at maybe three. The old woman eyed me suspiciously when I sat down without any children of my own; I gave her a closed-mouth smile and looked away.

The cup the boy was protecting had a picture of Mr. Fluffy printed on it, the furry blue puppet in a top hat that was popular among very young children; as I understood it, parents liked it because the puffball taught the kids about a different foreign country each time. It was ridiculous for me to be there, but at that point I didn’t care what movie I saw, just so long as it took up time. Still, I was beginning to wonder what I was going to do after I saw all the movies at this and every other theater around town. I’d been cursed with only being able to watch so much TV per day before I was struck with a headache. Could I find a new bowling alley? How many days a week could a person bowl before their hand fell off? Maybe rent every movie I’d never seen or read every book in the bookstore alphabetically by topic? I thought about how James would have rather stayed and cleaned my apartment than go home and do nothing. I needed WalsTec to call me, if only to save me from my leisure time.

It began to seem as though I’d been sitting in the screening room for a while, and when I checked the time on my cell phone, it turned out that the time that Mr. Fluffy was supposed to start was ten minutes past, and despite the lights dimming and a couple flickers on the screen, nothing happened. A child toward the front row started to cry; a group of older kids began a cheer of “We want the movie!” until their mother stopped them. I marked time with the regular intervals of the children next to me asking the old woman when the movie would start. Just as I was worrying that if the movie started late, it wouldn’t end in enough time for me to make my next film, there was a sound like a cassette tape played backward with a metallic crackling behind it, and the screen lit up with the previews. Only, the top and bottom of the image wasn’t being projected, leaving a moving image in the middle that jumped every couple of seconds.

Projector’s on the fritz, I thought, or the distributor sent them a bad reel. Either way, those things usually fix themselves before the movie starts. But when the sugary Mr. Fluffy theme began, the screen was still wrong.

The little boy leaned toward the woman. “Nana,” he said accusatorily, “the picture’s messy.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she answered him sweetly, then said more loudly, “Somebody should go tell them.” I heard the order in her voice and balked at being “Nana’s” personal slave. Then again, I had paid for my ticket, too, and I was entitled to a movie, even if it was Mr. Fluffy. I left my soda in its cup holder and walked out. As I moved down the hall, I saw the ticket-booth guy, Mike, going the other way.

“Hey,” I said, waving a hand to get his attention, “movie’s not right in there.”
Rivers of perspiration pooled near his eyebrows, and he was breathing hard. “I know, I’m trying to get it fixed.” He started back down the hall at a jog, then turned around. “Wait, you used to work here, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with the thing and everybody’s busy. Can you take a look?”

“I can’t help you,” I said on reflex, and immediately regretted it. His face had held such open pleading, but my instinct, as with Mary, had been to refuse. I could help, I thought, and took a step forward, then stopped myself. It wasn’t my problem. If possible, Mike looked sadder than before. Feeling badly for the amount of grief I’d caused him that day, I added, “Sorry.”

“I’m sure we’ll have it fixed shortly,” he said, and ran off. I went back into the theater and sat down; in the glow of the half-screen, the old woman looked at me expectantly.

“They’ll have it fixed shortly,” I repeated.

As we sat for another ten minutes with no change—Mr. Fluffy fumbling with chopsticks—I felt for each of those minutes that if I’d only agreed to help, the problem might have already been fixed. Then, the room brightened as the top and bottom of the image appeared on the screen. As one, the audience began to applaud, a cheering that, for a moment, drowned out even Mr. Fluffy. I imagined, somewhere, Mike must have been grinning.

I sat through Price Check, the supermarket movie, laughing only half-heartedly as a cop juggled zucchini onscreen, inside feeling a kind of regret born from having made the wrong decision and not being able to change it. I wished I’d agreed to help Mike, wished that applause had been for me, that I’d been a part of something going right. Twice that day, people had elicited my help with honest need, perhaps for the first time, I thought, since I’d left the theater. But what would I do, I asked myself, go back to work for them? Technically, it didn’t break my agreement with WalsTec; it wasn’t another computer company. The movie ended—one of the robbers took a checkout girl hostage, and the stock boy who could never get the prices right redeemed himself by taking out the bad guy with a frozen pizza—and I walked out to the lobby. The concession stand buzzed again with the beginning of the evening crowd. I felt an unbelievability in my own actions, like I was still sitting, watching myself on the screen. Knowing what it would bring, I stood in the hall until Mary looked up and made eye contact, then went into my final movie. The lights had just lowered when the red-haired girl from behind the concession counter walked in and kneeled by my seat.

I said, “Mary wants to know if I’ll come work the concession stand?”

“Someone already been in here?” the girl said. I shrugged. She shifted her weight from one bent leg to the other. “Will you?”

I looked around. “Apparently, I’m just that low.” She squinted, trying to see my expression in the dark.

I expected James to be asleep when I returned, after the movie theater closed, and I turned the key in my apartment’s lock slowly, trying to be quiet. The lights were on when I entered. James sat on the couch reading, of all things, one of my computer books
from the shelf next to where the TV hung on the wall. He wore the jeans I’d lent him, and the kind of V-neck T-shirt I always associated with old people. What little I could see of his chest was slim and skeletal, with scraggly chest hair like vines trying to survive in the winter. He looked up, his expression as disinterested as if I’d only gone out to the store.

“Hi.” His voice had a mild, atonal quality. “How are you?”
“Good.” There was a moment where we just stared at each other. He wasn’t blinking. Something seemed wrong. I ventured, “How are you?”
“Fine.” He continued that matter-of-fact tone. “Anything I can do?”
I was halfway down the hall when he said, “Sharon stopped by tonight.”
I walked back, stood behind the rocking chair, laid my arms on top of it. “What happened?”
“I made her a cup of tea,” he said. “We talked for a while.”
“You.” He closed the book and set it on the coffee table. “She cares about you very much.”
“I know.”

There were sounds of the apartment creaking, people moving around upstairs. Finally, James said, “I told her you were following up on job leads.” He gave me the same plain gaze, and I felt that if I walked away, he would simply turn right back to the book. All the weight of his unspoken accusation lay in his preternatural calm. Our previous conversations came back to me: James, worried that if he told me the truth I’d fire him, and me, warning him against lying. His silence acknowledged that he knew he held no such reciprocal power over me, and saw clearly those limits now.

In the end, though, I thought, he’d told Sharon more of the truth than he meant to. “You’ll come with me tomorrow,” I said. “I want to show you something.”
Chapter Eight – Working Days

“One or two ‘S’s in ‘buses?’”
“It’s spelled both ways, actually. But I think they’re spelling it with one for the movie.”
“Thanks.” I pulled the letters from the pouch at my belt, slipping them under the plastic tabs that held them in place on the movie theater marquee.
“That’s an F,” James called up. I looked; where I’d meant to place an E, I’d placed an F instead.
“I knew that.” Below, where James held the ladder in place, I heard him chuckle quietly.

I turned my face up to the light San Francisco drizzle, letting it soak my nose before I turned away. The humid air felt good after being stuck behind the concession stand of the refrigerated movie theater for most of the morning. Changing the sign, taking the bank deposit—these things were like extra breaks, bestowed upon the theater’s most trusted employees. Changing the sign meant you could get out of your uniform into regular clothes, and however long it took, it meant that much less time I had to stand behind the counter and deal with customers.

I appreciated James’ spell checking; the last thing I wanted to do was climb down the ladder, go inside, and change back into my uniform, only to have to do it all over again in reverse because I spelled something wrong. I’d said when I worked at the theater three years before that they should install the kind of sign where you could put the letters up from the ground using a pole instead, but the suggestion had gone ignored.

Looking back on how nonchalant James acted when I brought him to Hugo and told him I was working there again, I think he understood how strange it was for me to be back, and his lack of a reaction was meant to make the transition easier on me. He remained mute, taking in the concession counter and my standing before him in the red and yellow uniform, as I finished explaining. “This seemed like the right thing to do,” I said.

“All right,” he replied simply, and that was all the discussion required.

Next, I introduced him to Mary. “James used to be my company’s doorman, but he works for me now, and he’ll be hanging around while I’m here.” Mary, on her way to handle a customer dispute at the concession stand, said only “The number of boyfriends, girlfriends, friends-of-friends, parents, and general entourages I’ve got hanging around everyone who works here, you want to bring your valet, your chauffeur, and your personal masseur too, that’s fine, as long as you get your job done,” and then she hurried away.

Over the next few days, I bought James a couple of books of Hugo Theater gift certificates to use however he wanted; sometimes he’d watch movies, and other times he’d walk the streets around the theater or sit in the lobby, examining the people. On more than one occasion, one of the other employees or I would wake James in a screening room where he’d fallen asleep during a film. Toward the end of the second week, as I used my employee discount to purchase the tickets, Mary, standing nearby, waved her hand and said, “Just let him in.”

I’m not sure what Mary saw in him, only that she, like the rest of the movie theater employees, like Sharon would later, took if not an instantaneous grandchild-like affection for him, then it grew after just a few encounters. He learned everyone’s names
without needing to look at their nametags, far faster than I did. He always had a
compliment for the ladies, something sincere and genuine, and a weird fact or clean joke
to tell the men. Daily he displayed the wisdom and tact that I’d hoped he’d had when I
hired him.

Waking up to go to Hugo each morning, it was as if three years of my life had
disappeared. But whereas when I worked at Hugo the first time, I was constantly restless,
always feeling I ought be working on my programming so as to get a new, better job,
now I felt a kind of pleasant peace of timelessness, because the next move was in
Webster’s hands, and not mine. It was a peace only occasionally broken by bouts of
guilt—all my life, and I only had working in a movie theater to show for it?

“Letter!” I yelled, as an M slipped from my hand. By the time I braced myself
against the sign and looked down, the plastic slip completed one last end-over-end flip,
W to M to W, and smacked the concrete. James, who had darted out of the way, leaving
only one tenuous hand on the ladder, brought back his other hand and stared up at me. I
called down an apology and he answered a genuine “No harm done.” It wasn’t the first
letter I’d nearly dropped on his head.

James had taken to being at the theater well. He still made breakfast every
morning—sometimes he ate and sometimes not, though at that time I didn’t see it as my
place to nag him about his eating habits—and got into the car without questioning the
day’s activities, understanding that for the foreseeable future, it was all movie theater, all
the time. Often I saw James at the concession stand, laughing with the red-haired girl,
Stephanie, and some of the other cashiers, and he and Mike had a cribbage tournament
going on the break room table for about two weeks, long enough that the staff began
making wagers.

I descended from the ladder, hands and feet decreasing one rung each before I
paused, made sure of my balance, and continued, so my movements jerked like a cube
being rolled. I reached the bottom gratefully, shoes pressing into the steadfast pavement,
and James stepped away from the ladder. We stood for a moment, staring at what I’d just
completed.

“Bowling alley still looked closed,” James said.

“Yeah.” The black letters glowed against the white sign. “You know, this thing
was vandalized once, when I was here before.”

“No kidding.” James’ eyes moved from the marquee to me to the marquee.
“While you were in the ticket booth?”

“No, we were closed. They knocked off letters, tried to spell stuff.” I tried to
recall it. “Don’t remember any of the good ones. We were showing The Tourist Trap
and they knocked off the TO to make ‘urist,’ which looked dirty at first but didn’t really
make a whole lot of sense. Can’t imagine figuring a way up there just for vandalism.”

We continued to stare at the sign, until finally James said, “But not everything
really has an explanation, you know?”

“Like the bowling alley?”

“Right,” he said, but he sounded unsure of himself.

I found that one of the things I’d missed most about the movie theater, and began
to look forward to, was the unpredictability—the day’s ability to eject the most random
problems from the chaos. It was, in a way, one of the same things I’d enjoyed about computer programming, never knowing what might go wrong. At the end of an eight-hour theater shift, knees unsteady, feet burning, there was a wide-open space in my chest where my lungs should be, winded and—I realized—exhilarated.

About two-and-a-half weeks after I was hired, I was on my break, sitting on Mary’s desk in her office, leaning against the wall it faced, chatting. Mary rested in the desk chair. She’d changed in three years, no doubt, both in general and by virtue of her new responsibilities—a little less flip, a little slower in her speech, thinking over what she was saying before she said it. I enjoyed talking to her, enjoyed the antics between the other employees, the camaraderie.

In the next room, the break room, Mike sat at the table, his uniform fiery against the paleness of his skin, eating one of those damn microwave dinners that made the whole back area smell like burnt shrimp and tomato sauce. The break room opened to a hallway that led behind the concession stand counter; Stephanie entered, passed Mike, and stood at the doorway of the office.

“Hey, are parents allowed to bring a toddler into an R-rated movie?”
Mary’s eyebrows rose. “Why?”
“’Cause a couple just walked into ‘B’ with one.”
Mike leaned over from the break room and jabbed Stephanie in the hip with a finger. “Their choice.”
She didn’t turn. “What if it starts to make a fuss?”
I looked at Mary. “Do you wait to see if that happens?”
Mary shrugged. “I think that’s all we can do. Put someone by the phone in the projector booth and tell them to keep an eye.” Stephanie left; Mary turned back to me, eyes wide, cheeks puffed with air. “I tell you, manageering isn’t as easy as they said.”
“They said it would be easy?”
“I think their exact words were ‘Good luck, see you later.’” Mary ran a clawed hand through her thick hair, shaking her head so the curls fell loosely over the back of the chair. “Me, I always thought you’d be in this job someday.”
“Not me.”
“You seemed so good at it all, I just figured you were headed that way.”
“Never occurred to me,” I said. “I was always on my way out.”
“Why?”
“I guess working at a movie theater just never seemed like a stopping point to me.”
Mary’s voice held a hint of offense. “I don’t know.” She put her feet on the edge of the desk, near where my legs hung off, and used the leverage to rock back in her chair. “When it came time for college, I had more experience at the theater than anybody else. It just didn’t make sense to leave to go spend money somewhere to get a college degree, so I could be looking for another job in four years when I had a perfectly good one right here.”
“Yeah, but managing a movie theater, there isn’t a whole lot of …” I searched for the word, deciding on “prestige.”
“Is there prestige involved in being a computer programmer?” She smiled, proud of herself.
“No,” I said slowly, “but at the end of a project I could say this was mine, something I made myself.” And neither, I thought, had the prestige of starring in a movie or leading in a play.

“Yeah, I mean, my folks, as much as they care, weren’t too thrilled that I didn’t go to school, and I heard some stuff from other kids and the teachers, but you know what, I’m happy, so screw them.” Mary laughed a bawdy laugh and I nodded, made uncomfortable for some reason by her assuredness. She said, “What about you? If there’s not enough prestige, why are you back?”

The intercom buzzed on Mary’s phone, saving me. “Mary? Stephanie.”

“Yeah?”

“Some guy just got shot on screen and the kid’s pitching a fit. Parents aren’t moving.”

“All right, thanks, I’m coming.” Mary rocked her chair back to the floor and looked at me. “Shit, this place is weird.”

Then there were the customers.

About five weeks into the job, I was selling tickets in the booth when a guy came up, maybe early twenties, stubble in the shape of a goatee and tan pants with lots of pockets. He asked for two tickets and slid a student discount card under the glass. “I’m sorry, this is expired,” I said, and slid it back to him.

“Really?” He examined it. “Only two days ago. I haven’t got my new one in the mail yet. Can’t you just take it?”

There was a laminated piece of paper, actually, hanging in the break room, next to the “Employee Rights” and “Federal Minimum Wage” posters, that said “Do Not Take Expired Coupons (The Theater Loses Money!)” with a picture of a frowny face and a dollar sign floating away. In retrospect, maybe I should have explained that to the guy. Instead, because I was tired and because I’d been in the booth for a while and because I hadn’t had my break yet, and really for no good reason, I simply replied “No, I can’t.”

The guy smacked his wallet down on the counter, took out some cash, and shoved it through the slot in the glass so brusquely that some of the change rolled off my side of the counter and hit the floor. I punched out the two tickets and handed them to him.

The guy pushed his face close to the window, his mouth fogging the glass. “You know, you think you can just treat people however the hell you want because you’re back there and we’re out here. Well, fuck you.” I watched the pane silently as he walked away, the steam from his breath slowly fading.

But that wasn’t all. What was worse was the dismayed look on the woman’s face behind him—directed toward me. “I didn’t mean—” I started to say, but deciding that arguing would only make it worse, I gave up and let it go. It happened a lot; for every happy customer I had no problem with, there’d be at least two that would result in an argument, usually for no one’s fault—their problems with their spouse, my overtiredness, a desultory junction of events that ended in a fight. Most employees felt a sort of mothering instinct toward the customers, a want to help these lambs who were essentially helpless themselves, asking about show times or needing gift certificate information. It was a pleasure, a challenge sometimes, to see how thoroughly you could help a customer in need (“See when that movie’s playing at our rival theater? Sure!”).
Then there were the customers who couldn’t be helped. I was with poor Mike another time in the booth when he got a middle-aged woman with crow’s-feet, large round black glasses, and an adenoidal voice. I’d seen her approaching in the line, berating her droop-eared husband for not fixing something, not buying something, and not remembering something, in alternating shifts. I was helping other customers, so I wasn’t paying much attention while Mike took her money, punched out her tickets, and passed over her change, until she let out a screech, followed by “Excuse me, but I gave you a twenty and you gave me back change for a ten.”

And Mike, poor stupid Mike, made the mistake of replying, albeit in a flustered voice, “No, ma’am, you gave me a ten.”

I already knew what would have to happen after that, but it took me a full five minutes to extricate myself from the woman berating Mike, me, and inexplicably, her husband, with other customers growing impatient behind her, before I could page Mary over the intercom to come put in the register codes to “cash out” Mike’s register. I thought briefly of the Webster elevator, how you needed the official codes to work that, too. Mary took another register position in the booth while Mike walked his till to the back to count it out; it was a pain in the ass, because, without a recent bank deposit, it meant Mike’s till was probably twice as full as it would be at the end of the day when we cashed it out properly. But when Mike counted it out, if he came up ten dollars over what the register computer thought he should have, it meant he had the woman’s money. If it came out normal, then he didn’t.

Though I had no love for the angry woman—who stood to the side pacing, swearing to her husband that she had, in fact, given Mike a twenty, and telling her husband loud enough that Mary and I could hear, at least a dozen times, that she intended to sue—I half-hoped that Mike would turn out wrong. I felt badly for him, because I’d been in his situation before, but I knew it would be easier on all of us if we just gave the woman the money she wanted. I didn’t think this was a shell game, though I’d had those before, too, people with unsigned credit cards and checks with no ID, stolen or altered gift certificates, people who wanted to make complicated change in order to trip the cashier up—and, then, when I’d try to be more careful on the next customer, old men would mutter under their breaths that in their day, people knew how to count change in their heads instead of relying on the register.

Mike came back, no fear on his face, and Mary groaned “shit” quietly. Apparently she’d been thinking what the easier outcome would be, too. She said to Mike, “Stay here and keep working” and took two discount coupons for popcorn out from under the register, our standard offering to what we expected to be angry customers, before she exited the booth. A minute later, I heard the angry woman screaming at Mary, and I couldn’t help but smile at this life we’d chosen for ourselves.

“You want to be assistant manager?” Mary asked.
“No thanks,” I replied, “I’m fine with this.”

Another day, I sat with the projector above screening room “B” when James opened the door. “Steve,” he said gravely. “You should come out here.”

I checked the projector—it would run fine for a while without me next to it—and followed him. As we neared the concession stand, James stopped and indicated with his
hand. There was a man at the counter in a suit and tie, going bald straight through the
title of his scalp like a bite mark. “Just started,” came James’ voice in the same
undertone. “I’m not sure.”

The counter seemed to be unmanned, and then I saw Tabitha’s head sticking up
just above the counter. “Tabby,” her nametag read; Mary had hired her only one or two
weeks before, a small grayish-blonde-haired high schooler who only worked a couple
hours during the week. She did her job well, eager to please, but her unsullied happiness
struck me as the naïveté of inexperience. At that moment, she had two hands inside the
glass display, sorting through the candy, with the man leaning over. I heard him say,
“You know what? I changed my mind. Let me just get popcorn.” Tabby stood and
turned to the popcorn machine; when the guy laid his elbows on the counter and rested
his head in his hands, leering, I decided it was time to step in. Perverts. Bane of retail
life. Twice, three times a week we’d get guys coming in, just wanting to stare at the girls
in uniform, like they were paid to be on display. Had one guy actually proposition
Stephanie to illicit activities in the dark of screening room “C.”

“Help you?” I said as I came around the corner, Tabby jumping at my sudden
presence and the inordinate loudness of my voice.

The man’s nose wrinkled slightly. “Waiting for popcorn.”

I typed in the price of a large popcorn without looking to see what size Tabby was
giving him, took his money, and tried to be as large as possible until he took his food and
walked off.

Tabby looked up at me, eyebrows pinched together. “Did I do something
wrong?”

“No,” I answered. “Not important.” I went out from behind the counter and
down the hall; James stood where I’d left him. As I moved past, I put my hand on his
shoulder and said “Good call,” before returning to the screening room.

It occurred to me as I walked back to the projector, that I never got to save the day
like that as a programmer, but I dropped the thought to the floor and quickly stepped on
it.

I was pleased to find that I’d pulled permanent bank deposit duty. We called
them “bank deposits” even though what we were really taking to the bank were
individual register receipts once the registers went over a certain amount; at the end of
the day, the main register would print a small receipt reflecting the deposited sums,
making for more ease at closing time’s final count. Like fixing the titles on the movie
theater sign, taking the deposit to the bank allowed you about thirty minutes’ break from
the theater, though there wasn’t the precedent for taking off your uniform. The bank
tellers found this infinitely amusing.

Like fixing the sign, taking the bank deposit also required a certain amount of
trust, mostly that the employee would in fact go to the bank and wouldn’t take three
hours to return. I think it was the fact that I’d been working at the theater already when
Mary had been originally hired that made her trust me so implicitly; I was imbued with
an aura of authority in her eyes even though she was the manager now and, in truth, I had
only been working at the movie theater a week when she was first hired, so we were
really equals. But if good leaders stock their cabinets with people whose judgments they
trust, Mary seemed to have named me de facto Chief-of-Staff, and the benefits included sign-changing and bank-deposit-taking.

I’d been re-hired at the movie theater a little over a month at that point. As I went for the door, the packet of receipts in my hand, I found James sitting on one of the red cushioned benches in the lobby. “Take a ride?”

“Sure.” He stood slowly, steadying himself. Lifting his shoulders toward his head, James stretched out his back, coughed heavily, and ambled toward me. “You want me to drive?”

“Nah,” I said, “I’ve got it.” I’d been in the ticket booth all morning, and I relished the idea of speeding through traffic, feeling free.

James sat silently in the passenger seat, staring out the window. I saw him in my peripheral vision as a blurry circle of white, distinctly gray. Stopped at a traffic light, I glanced at him. “You’ve been pretty mute about this whole thing.”

He turned in his seat. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, nothing to say about me working at the movie theater? Come on, earn your keep here.”

The light turned green and I looked back to the road, so I only heard the vocal simplicity of his five words: “I like the movie theater.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. In a sense, I was infuriated; it might have validated my own feelings of guilt at how much I was enjoying being at the movie theater to have James criticize me for it—I wanted him to tell me I was wrong, so that the nagging voice in the back of my mind, the one that said this was right, might go away. Looking back though, I think James was just being honest: he liked the theater, liked the people there, liked what he saw in me working there. We remained silent through the entire trip to the bank and making the deposit, only speaking again on the way back. “You know this is only temporary,” I said, “until WalsTec calls back, don’t you?”

“I know,” came the same simple tone.

“And they will call back, you know.”

“I know.” He covered his mouth with his hand to hide the grin that was forming, wrinkling the lines around his eyes.

“They will!”

“I know.” James started laughing, a rasping tone underneath, and after a moment, I joined in.

“I think you’d make a good assistant manager,” Mary said.

“I appreciate it,” I told her, “but no.”

Rainy days in most businesses, I expect, mean fewer customers; that was never true in the movie theater. I opened the movie theater one morning with a supervisor named Phil; Mary rarely opened the theater herself at nine in the morning, but let a supervisor and an employee do it, getting the popcorn popping and catching any floor in need of vacuuming. Other employees would trickle in for their eight-hour shifts starting at 10, with the movies beginning at 10:30.

It was about 10:20 when lightning flickered out the front windows and we lost power, followed by a vibrating thunder we felt under our feet. I was behind the concession stand at the time, setting up the cash registers; the only light came from the
grayish sky outside and the red EXIT signs, still illuminated. I cursed and started to walk around the counter.

“What happened?” I didn’t recognize the voice. A man approached, mid-forties, a face that broke to jaw and chin at rounded angles. It was a customer; there were three or four already in the building as far as I knew, now wandering around in the dark.

“Power went out,” I said, for a moment considering making up something more impressive.

“Does that mean the movies are cancelled?”

“No, we can run them on generator power.”

“We can?” Staring straight at the customer, I was surprised not to see his lips move when he spoke, only to realize that the voice had come from behind me. Phil stood in the doorway to the offices.

“Should come on any second,” I said, and to punctuate my point, the lights on the popcorn and drink machines snapped on. “We’ve got food and projectors. Overhead lights and registers stay dead.”

“What do we do?”

Phil was a little older than I was, a little taller, with hair tied back in a ponytail that resembled a dusting brush, and pince-nez glasses. I looked at him expectantly.

“Don’t you know?”

“This has never happened to me before.”

It had happened to me twice, during the first time I was an employee of the theater, and the manager then had known the procedure. “Mary didn’t tell you what to do?”

“It didn’t come up.”

I sighed and felt a little outraged. It wasn’t the time to pick a fight, but did he mean to tell me that if it had been just some employee there with him, no one would have had any idea how to handle a power outage? “All right,” I said, “we need the crash kits.”

Across from Mary’s desk were shelves, and on the top shelf rested a large cardboard box, labeled “c.k.” Phil stood on Mary’s chair, lifted the heavy box, and handed it down to me; I laid it on the desk and emptied the contents: flashlights, calculators, receipt pads, and ten manual credit card machines. I handed Phil one of each.

“Take these and give them to whoever’s in the ticket booth. Unlock one till with your key so they can get change, and tell them to just write receipts for checks and we’ll run them through the register when the power’s back.”

Phil left and I followed him out, stopping at the concession stand and putting the crash materials at each register. Phil would have to unlock one of the registers for change; the chances of getting held up during a power outage were fairly slim, but the rules said to only keep one register permanently unlocked during power outages just in case. Though, it wasn’t like a guy with a pistol couldn’t get a manager to unlock another register if he wanted to; I think Hugo corporate was more concerned with grab-and-go.

“Trouble?” I jumped, startled out of dark thoughts. James appeared from the gloom, the wrinkles of his face splaying shadows over most of his features.

“You could say that,” I said, as Phil pulled the front door open and held it for a couple of customers to enter. They dripped on the carpet, making small black spots, clothes wet from the rain I could hear outside. A half-hour later, I was still at the concession and the power was still out, my hand aching from shoving the slide back and
forth on the manual credit card machines. Mike, who had come in about twenty minutes
earlier and taken the other concession register, stood taking care of a customer.

“I don’t know how they stood this before you could run credit cards through the
machines,” he said.

From the benches, I heard James laughing softly. “What?” I asked toward his
direction, invisible in the lightless lobby.

“Just remembering when credit cards didn’t even exist,” came his voice. “And
wondering how the two of you would handle it.”

“Stone age,” Mike replied, and James continued to laugh, clearing his throat on
occasion. Then Mike said my name and, when I looked, motioned me. He held his credit
card machine by one end. “Damn thing’s stuck.”

I took it in two hands, attempting to pull free the jammed slide, which was caught
with the customer’s credit card underneath. Next, I laid it down on the counter, tearing at
the thing unsuccessfully.

James stepped up to the counter in front of me and said, simply, “Can I be of
service?” I handed the machine to him; he pushed the slide farther in, pulled it back
almost imperceptibly, pushed it in again, then beat the thing, once, against the counter.
The slide shot outward, back into place, as the customer’s card popped out, landing on
the counter. I raised one eyebrow at James and he grinned back.

The power came back on about 11:15; Mary arrived around 11:30. I was in the
break room, exhausted already from having to take charge earlier, my head resting in my
folded arms on the table, a lukewarm reheat of James’ pancakes before me. Cheerfully,
Mary asked, as per usual, “Morning go all right?” The crash kits lay on the table, not yet
loaded in the box; taking up a credit card machine, I shoved the slide across its surface
and let it go, snapping back into place as the other one had with a loud bang, in what I
hoped was a tired “up yours” gesture.

“Be my assistant manager,” Mary said.

“No, I don’t think so,” I answered wearily. “No.”
Chapter Nine – Favors

Mary’s voice buzzed through the intercom on the ticket booth phone. “Steve, field trip?”

“Sure.” This was her shorthand for my taking a bank deposit. I walked through the door into the lobby. James sat on a lobby bench, spindly arms across his chest, his head down. I could see liver spots on his scalp through his thin white hair, and he looked to be dozing. “James,” I said, as he woke, “take a ride?”

“Not this time,” said Mary’s voice, and James and I both glanced to where she’d come out, behind the concession stand. “Take this one alone.” She stepped around the counter and leaned in toward us conspiratorially. There was a small piece of cardboard in her hand. “Look, I’m in a bind. I’ve got a friend coming in at the airport and Phil’s just called in sick, so I can’t leave this place alone to meet the plane. Can you do it?”

“No uniform?”

“No uniform. And I promise you won’t get the early shift next week.”

“All right.”

“Great!” Mary handed me the cardboard. Written in magic marker on the back was one word: “Wilson.” “Here’s the flight number,” she said, offering a small piece of paper. “And you have a cell to call me if you can’t find the plane or something, right?”

“It’s in my car.”

“OK.” She didn’t move, as if she had something else to say. For my part, I gave James a nod and began to walk to the back to get my clothes from my locker. “Steve?” Mary touched my arm. “Be good.”

I made a face now, but she ducked into the break room and disappeared.

I hit some traffic on 101 South as I approached San Francisco International, ending up parking toward the back of the car lot, in the sun. With the cardboard sign under my arm and the note from Mary with the flight number in my pocket, I headed inside. Pushing my way through the line of travelers waiting for taxis, I thought of Sharon. It had been hard enough to bring James to the movie theater and say “This is what I’ve been reduced to”; I hadn’t been able to bring myself to do the same with her.

I stood in front of the security area, waiting for them to announce that the passengers from this Wilson’s flight were coming out. I held the cardboard sign chest high; next to me, a man in a limousine driver’s hat hoisted a sign that read “Dr. Schmidt.” I smiled at him, feeling important to be holding a sign to pick someone up at the airport. He turned up his nose in a bit of limousine driver snobbery and looked away.

As people started filing into the waiting area, I tried to figure what Wilson would look like. There was a dark-haired woman gingerly carrying a baby, a man in a herringbone jacket with white hair sprouting from his ears. I narrowed the search to people I thought might be visiting Mary. Yet, even as I dismissed him, the man in the jacket was still walking toward me, his gait not seeming to waver. “Wilson?” I asked finally.

“No, Dr. Schmidt,” he said, gesturing to the limo driver.

“Sorry.” Then, as he moved past, I saw Wilson, unmistakably.

In a long olive trench coat, brown fedora, and black sunglasses, Wilson looked to all the world like someone trying to hide something. The coat was too thick to betray
gender, the hairstyle packed up under the hat, but there was a curve to the neck, an extraordinary swelling of the lips, that said female, definitely female. No sweat on her forehead, despite the heavy clothing.

She walked right up to me, her nose rising to just below my chin. “Mary couldn’t make it?”

“Got caught up at the theater.” I squinted, trying to see through her sunglasses. No avail.

“All right, then let’s go.” She started off without waiting for me to follow, walking as fast as she could without breaking into a run. I jogged a few feet to catch up.

“Do you have luggage?” I asked.

“Couple pieces,” she replied, never looking back, never stopping.

When we reached the baggage claim, Wilson told me what to look for, a large suitcase with flowers on it and a matching smaller bag, and then she moved away, over to the phones. I glanced toward her every couple of seconds; she didn’t seem to be making a call, just standing with her back to the world, hiding from prying eyes.

I dragged the bags over to the phones and Wilson turned before I arrived; apparently, she’d been watching, too. At the door, a squat, middle-aged woman with her hair in a number of mismatched braids was comparing claim tickets with bags. I couldn’t see the name on Wilson’s ticket when she handed it to the attendant, only that the attendant squinted at Wilson with more than innocent curiosity, scrutinizing every inch. I could only guess what she was looking for. I put my hands in my pockets and figured I’d find out the story from Mary when we got back; Mary was unconventional, but her decisions usually had an underlying rationale. Besides, I thought, who was I to complain about strange behavior?

Stuck behind a flock of cars leaving the airport, I said, “Sorry, traffic.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Wilson answered, and without even considering it, I repeated the phrase, “Don’t worry about it,” and then wondered, why did I do that? Even as I pondered, the phrase kept echoing in my thoughts, “Don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it.” Where had I heard it just like that before? Why did it sound so familiar?

“You’re a friend of Mary’s?” I ventured.

“Yeah.” She was slouching down in her seat, her hat catching against the headrest and lifting, showing wisps of blonde hair. The traffic, the closeness of the other cars, seemed to make her nervous. “Mary and I grew up together, but our careers have taken us in different directions.”

I knew Mary’s “career,” and the fact that it hadn’t taken her anywhere but San Francisco. “What do you do?”

She seemed surprised by the question, as if she hadn’t thought about it herself. Thinking about it now, I realize it was probably because she was hardly ever asked that. Finally, she said, “Actress.”

I perked immediately. “You know, I used to want to be an actor—”

Then, a great space opened up in the traffic in front of us and, distracted, I sped the car forward. Suddenly, we were on a clear patch of 101, sunlight illuminating everything, road stretching ahead and behind for miles, barely anyone around.

With a sigh, Wilson said “Finally,” and knocked her hat off to the floor. Golden hair rained over her shoulders and the back of the seat. She pulled her left jacket sleeve
forward with her right hand, freeing her left, then shook her right arm to dislodge it. She wore a shoulderless puffy white shirt, elastic just under her collarbone and across her stomach, and blue jeans, giving a country-western feel. Arching her back—the seatbelt pulling tight over her shoulder and between her breasts—she pulled the coat out from behind her and flung it on the backseat.

Now, looking at her profile, the nose and lips and eyes semi-visible inside the sunglasses, I started to speak, as she took off the glasses and laid them on the dashboard.

“Sally Selvalan.”

“Hey, watch out!” She pushed at my arm on the steering wheel. The car was drifting off the right side of the road; I swerved and returned to my lane.

“Sorry,” I tried to say, eyes back on the road; instead what came out was, “You’re Sally Selvalan.”

She looked at me. “Mary told you, didn’t she?”

“No.” I couldn’t manage much more.

“You want to say ‘You’re Sally Selvalan’ again, don’t you?”

“Yes,” actually.

She smiled. Sally Selvalan was smiling in my car. Sally Selvalan was in my car. As I tried to keep one eye on the road, I mentally parsed through what I knew. She had to be about twenty-two then; maybe too young for me to consider seeing romantically, Sharon aside, but man, was she gorgeous. All the primary colors accounted for, the yellow of her hair, the dagger blue of her eyes, the red lips. Her nose, a liability on most people, but here, slightly upturned, the selling point. I realized with a startle, with a frozen mental image, that I’d actually seen this woman half-naked, less than five years ago, up on the big screen.

“Mary didn’t tell you. That bitch.” She said it with levity; I got the feeling these women were used to playing jokes on each other.

“You know Mary?”

“I said that, didn’t I? We grew up together near here.” She had said it, but that had been Wilson, and now it was Sally Selvalan. In my car. I snapped back to attention before I started veering to the side again. I recalled a magazine article I’d read, that Sally had in fact grown up here, before landing a part as a child on a family sitcom, and from there movies. That, I realized, was what I’d been reminded of when she’d said “Don’t worry about it,” the “o” of the “don’t” stretched out, rising in octave from low to high, followed by “worry about it” almost run together, the catchphrase of her character on the TV show Number One Son, where she’d been the youngest of six daughters with only one brother.

There was a five-second silence and I felt the heat of a blush on my face; I’d never imagined the possibility of sitting next to Sally Selvalan, let alone what I might say to her. I think I was still trying to get my mind around the fact that this movie star, one that I’d watched on the screen for months during my first stint at the theater, was right in front of me. “Why are you here?” I started to say, and then thinking that sounded a little accusatory, tried, “So you’re in town to visit Mary?”

“Yeah,” she said unconvincingly, and then more strongly, “I’m going to be appearing at your theater next week when my new movie opens, as a favor to Mary.”

Really? I thought. “I hadn’t heard anything about that.”
She shifted slightly in her seat. “You know now. We’re keeping it kind of quiet, trying to avoid the hype. We’ll announce it a little while before it happens.”

“I thought movie premieres were all about hype.”

“Well,” she said, “there’s hype and there’s hype.”

“Not following you.” Sally made no attempt to explain further, and we were silent again. I still have trouble deciding what it was about her that had made her so outstanding to me, maybe the fact that she’d spent so long portraying a child in the public’s collective unconscious that it was fascinating to see her play an adult. Maybe it was what I’d discover about her as we talked, her own sense of independence, which was already beginning to show through. Or maybe it was nothing more or less than the fact that she was, in the end, gorgeous. After a moment, I said, for lack of anything else, “I thought you were good in *Open Blossoms.*”

“Really?” She turned, one golden-brown eyebrow raised, and there was mockery in her voice. “What was your favorite part?”

And damn me that I hesitated for just a second. I could have done it, could have said that the scene where Sally’s character and her character’s mother fought was especially powerful, but I paused, and said a preparatory “Um,” and Sally started laughing.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“No,” I said, “I did enjoy it.”

“Look buddy, it’s all right. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Steve. Matthews.”

“Look Matthews, you and half the men in America came to see that movie because of these.” She cupped her hands under her breasts when she said “these” in a way that caused me to look away for fear of looking too closely. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

I thought about trying to disagree with her further, but gave up. She was right, and there was something about that I respected. I didn’t see the point in trying to lie to her.

This time it was Sally who broke the silence. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. It was all fine, the director was fine, the cameramen were fine, Stefano was fine”—this being the actor who had played the gardener—“I just didn’t expect my breasts to be the one thing people remembered from the movie. Maybe that was naïve.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her turn to me again. “What is it, anyway, this fascination with breasts?” Now I was feeling decidedly uncomfortable; I had a feeling no answer I gave her was going to be the right one.

I opted for the coward’s way out. “You know, I wanted to be an actor.”

“You said that,” she said, then softened. “Why didn’t you?”

“No talent.”

Sally snickered and I turned my head to her, lost for a moment in her grin, which quickly disappeared when she saw I wasn’t smiling back. “Seriously?”

“Why was that funny?”

“You said you wanted to be an actor, I said ‘Why weren’t you,’ and you said, ‘No talent.’” She waited for a cymbal crash, but none came. “Well, why not? No talent! Get it?”

“No.”
“I could have been a great doctor. Know why not?” I stayed quiet, unwilling to provide the answer she obviously wanted; after a minute, she blew a raspberry at me and stared out the windshield. The car in front of me had slowed; I pulled into the left lane, drove ahead of him, then ducked back into the right, like a puzzle piece sliding into place. As I did so, two things she’d said slipped together in my head, suddenly making sense.

“Your nude scene,” I tried tentatively, “is that the kind of hype you’re trying to avoid now?”

Sally’s rueful tone said I’d hit the mark. “Yup.”

“Do you have another one in the new movie?”

“No. I figure, everyone’s seen them, what do they need to see them again for?” She scratched her neck, seeming to focus on something, and pulled away a loose strand of hair that had apparently been tickling her. She stretched it out to see how long it was, then opened the window a crack and let it go. “I’m thinking I want to control the gossip this time, is the thing. A little less press, a little more me.”

“Is that why you’re doing all this Wilson stuff? You’re trying to keep all this from the press?”

Sally shrugged. “Least until it’s too late.”

“Lord,” I said. “Mary and I are going to have a talk when I get back. You two pull this kind of stuff all the time, don’t you?” Sally grinned. “But the press knows about the movie.”

“Yeah. But I’m saying to hell with my damn agent. None of these prefab interviews with my people feeding the newsmagazines the questions, where ‘What’s it like to be all grown up?’ is really ‘What’s it like to have your boobs on display?’ First time I talk about the new movie, it’s gonna be me straight to the fans, and my agent can live with it or walk.”

I couldn’t quite, though I tried, feel too guilty for having objectified this girl. In the end, it had been she, of legal age, who decided to take her shirt off onscreen. If in some way a moral crime had been committed, I shared the blame with so many other people—with the values of society, perhaps—as to make my personal share of it virtually negligible. Still, I felt, I owed something. “How did the people you know take Open Blossoms?”

“I told my folks right off the bat,” she said, “before I even took the part, so they knew what was coming. I’m not sure they really got it, though, you know? We didn’t really talk about it again until it got closer, like they thought it wasn’t actually going to happen. I think my father didn’t want to think about whether or not he was going to watch it.”

“Did you see if they could do the scene another way?”

She hit me lightly on the arm with the back of her hand. “Don’t be stupid, Matthews. I demanded they do it that way. No way in hell anyone was going to take the little girl from Number One Son seriously for a career in movies unless I did this as soon as I could.

“The funny thing was like, after the Hollywood premiere, at the reception, I was wearing this strapless black dress that came to about here”—she put her hand, palm down, fingers out flat, just below where the swell of her chest began—“and I swear to you, I caught thirty people staring at them. It’s like, they just saw them up on the screen for two seconds at best, so now they think they’ve seen them for good. You know, a …”
she paused before deciding on the word “couple … of boyfriends have seen them, my
mom, and then the director and Stefano and the cameramen. That’s it. But now it’s like
thousands of people saw them. Anyone who wants to can go find a picture on the
Internet and look at my breasts. It’s weird, you know? I’ve seen myself on film
hundreds of times, but it’s different when you’re naked. It’s like, in a way, people I’ve
never met know me better than some of my closest friends now. Some days, I’m not
quite sure if I’m here or there.” She stopped. “Sorry you asked?”
“No,” I said quickly, then, “I just never gave it that much thought before.”
“Well, when you’ve got to sit there while the makeup lady puts foundation on
your tits, you tend to go over these things in your head.”
I had to laugh. “True,” I said, though I’d never really know if it was or not.
Sally reached to the right side of her seat and lowered it back two clicks, then put
her feet up on the dashboard. She’d taken off the olive shoes she’d been wearing at the
airport, and her feet were bare. Her toes, contrary to what I and everyone else might have
expected, were not painted. “So short of driving around movie stars,” Sally said
playfully, “you work at the movie theater. How long have you been there?”
“Couple of months. This is my second time there, actually.” Her eyebrows came
together in an unspoken question. “I started there around the same time Mary did, but I
left for a while. I actually freelance as a computer programmer; I’m just between jobs.”
“Actor, computer programmer.” Sally made a show of weighing the two options
with her hands. “I don’t know, Matthews. I know which one I’d rather be.”
“Which one you could be,” I said. “Not all of us are so fortunately blessed.”
“Yeah, but computer programming?”
“Look, you’ve got to figure, there I was, rejected from every acting school I
applied to—apparently, the monologues I prepared didn’t go over so well. I didn’t know
how to do a damn thing in the world really except memorize lines and pretend to be
someone else, and what else was I going to do with that? I went over to the community
college, and you could get in on the ground floor with computers. You didn’t need to
know how to do anything; they’d teach all of it to you. And I hated it—loved the
computing, I seemed to be able to get a handle on that and it felt nice to have a skill, of a
sort—but I hated the idea of wearing a suit and tie every day and going to work at some
company. So I became a freelancer instead; a lot of people didn’t think it would work,
but I went over to the movie theater, stayed until I got my first computer job, and there
you go.” I repeated what she’d said before: “Sorry you asked?”
She gave my reply back. “No.” Crossing her legs, she asked, “So, do you like
it?”
“Yeah,” I said. “In the end, it’s still me, getting praise for a good job. Nobody
bothers me.”
Sally was quiet, brushing her long hair behind her ears. “But you’re not doing it
right now?”
“No.” My routine, checking the voicemail each night, after two months, still no
word from WalsTec.
She didn’t press any further.
We turned toward the movie theater, drove past it; Sally clicked her tongue in recognition. I was at the stoplight on the block before the parking lot when the cell phone rang.

“Steve? Mary. Keep going, don’t come to the theater, keep going.” She spoke quietly, as if her teeth were gritted, as if she were trying not to move her lips.

“What? We’re right here. We just went past.”

“You did? Shit.” There was the rustling sound of a person moving with a phone. Then, urgently, “Shit, shit. Go, go go go, get out, keep going.” The stoplight turned green and I made a left, past the parking lot, and drove on.

“What the fuck?” I asked the phone, and now Sally was watching the conversation intently.

Mary said, “Tell Wilson that there’s some press here, showed up like five minutes ago. Did they leave?” She seemed to be talking to herself. “Fuck, hold on.”

“Press,” I mouthed to Sally, while Mary made rustling noises again. She returned to the phone two seconds later.

“Fuck, yeah, someone saw you, they’re gone. Look, Steve, you’ve got—”

“Sally Selvalan, yeah, I know.”

“All right, look, there was some media just here looking for her. I don’t know how they found out she’s in town, but we don’t want a three-ring circus taking over our movie premiere, any more than we want Hugo corporate complaining that we didn’t go through the right PR channels for this thing until after it’s over. Can you take Sally and lay low for like an hour or two, see if they all go away?”

“Mary …”

“Come on, be a friend, please?” I pictured Mary’s face, pleading. I looked to Sally, watching me, and saw Mary’s face again.

“Fine,” I said, and hung up. “We’ve got problems.”

“Yeah …” Sally was turned in her seat, looking out the back window. “Shit, there’s a news van behind us.” Sure enough, I saw in my rearview mirror a white van from the local TV station.

Taking the next right, and then a left at the following block, I headed for the highway. “Still behind us?”

She stared for a moment. “Yeah … no. Didn’t catch that last turn … wait, yeah, it’s a little behind us.”

“Shit. All right. I can’t believe I’m doing this.” I picked up the cell phone, called the movie theater back. “Mary? Yeah. Put James on. I need a favor.”
Chapter Ten – Cars and Trucks

“Tell me again why I’m doing this.”

We were back on Highway 101, heading toward the Golden Gate Bridge. Sally had clipped most of her long hair up near the top of her head, high and puffy, with wisps falling down the sides, her ears sticking through, eyes taking in a gray with their blue, and the slightly upturned nose, giving her all the appearance of a winsome cartoon kitten in the passenger seat of my car. She was precious, but moreover, she was gorgeous.

“It’s going to fuck up the entire premiere if the media catches us.” She repeated this like a mantra.

“Yeah, but won’t they end up catching you anyway? You’ve got a week or two here, right?” A disturbing thought occurred to me. “I’m not going on the run with you for two weeks.” For a minute, actually, I thought about going on the run, just Sally Selvalan and I, for two weeks, then crumpled the thought and threw it in a mental wastebin. This was insane.

“Look, if we can just lose them, get me over to Mary’s apartment, I can drop my stuff, unpack, lay low for a day or two, see if anyone’s still looking for me, then start letting the papers know in time for the premiere without giving things a chance to get out of control.”

“Or, just confront them now and get it over with.”

“Look, movieboy.” The annoyance in her tone was different, darker, than the annoyance she expressed when followed by a laugh track on TV. “Drive or don’t drive, OK?”

“Hey,” I warned. “Movieboy” my ass. Still, it was Sally Selvalan. I couldn’t imagine going to bed that night knowing I’d had a fight with Sally Selvalan, and let her down.

We pulled into the parking lot of the Golden Gate Visitors Center, Sally turning in her seat to look at the beige wheel-shaped gift shop as I maneuvered around a shuttle bus and parked at the far corner near the end of the lot. Sally got out and stepped from the concrete to the dirt, lifting her legs and pointing her knees straight, stretching. It was early evening, around six; there was a little haze in the sky behind the green and golden leaves, a fog teasing the water, barely touching it and wrapping back around the bridge, rising orange in the horizon. A red truck that had been sitting idle at the other end of the parking lot started its engine and drove toward us; Sally looked at me wide-eyed when it pulled up next to my car. With my palm facing toward the ground, I made a motion of “calm.”

James got out of the truck and stood quietly, leaning against it. He was breathing very deeply, his chest rising and falling slowly, trying to stand so still his body shook slightly in rebellion. Damn. I could see in his slightly tense hands, his shoulders, that he was angry, and his silence begged me for an explanation. I had feared as much. I began to speak, but Sally stepped up behind me and James’ attention was on her, his eyes wide.

“That’s…”

“If you say ‘my daughter,’” I said, “the sheer irony is going to force me off that bridge.” I hoped that humor, perhaps, might diffuse the anger I think I probably deserved.

“No, she’s…”
Sally stepped in front of me. “Yeah, I know, the girl from Open Blossoms.” She did that breast-cupping gesture again. “Let me guess, you went for the plot, too.”

James’ body had loosened, and his eyes darted between me and Sally, obviously bewildered. “No, I was going to say, you’re the daughter from Number One Son.” He looked at me. “What’s she talking about?”

Sally smiled. She pointed a thumb toward James and said, “Him I like.”

I jingled my keys out of my pocket, holding the one for my car between thumb and forefinger. “Here,” I said to James, dropping the keys in his open hand. He did the same with the keys to the truck behind him, his eyes purposefully not meeting mine, but he was unable to keep a small sigh from escaping as he crossed past me. I put one hand around his bony arm, stopping him. “Go ahead, say it.”

James faced me and turned away again, shook his head. I didn’t let go of his arm, and after a moment, he shrugged and said very quietly, “I just can’t believe it.”

Sally was watching from my other side; the poor kid had no idea what was going on.

“It’s just the way,” I started to say, and James made a noise.

“Two months.” For the first time in all the time I’d known James, there was anger in his voice. “You haven’t spoken to Sharon in two months, and then you send me to borrow her truck. How do you think that made her feel?” What he didn’t express, I believe, was his own anger at being sent to Sharon’s for that reason, without he himself knowing how unexpected and disappointing it would be to her.

“I’m sorry,” I said honestly, though I think at the time I was sorry more that the situation existed than what I’d done. “I should have told you.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he replied, “but you owe that woman more than this.” And he got in my car and shut the door, and began driving away.

Sally’s voice from behind startled me. “Who was that?”

“He works for me.”

“Works at the theater.”
“No, for me.”
“Doing what?”
I sighed and took a momentary glance at her, then back to the road. The perspective from the truck was higher; I wasn’t used to staring down at the other cars. “Look,” I said, “it’s complicated.”
“OK.” There was a note of insult in her voice. She drew her legs up to her chest, sinking slightly in the seat, and crossed her arms. The skin across them was a light dawny tan. After a few minutes, she said softly, “I’m sorry if helping me out got you in trouble.”
I felt a headache approaching from the back of my head concurrent with the guilt in my stomach. “You didn’t get me in trouble.” She gave a little disbelieving chuckle. “Or, at least, it was trouble I was going to get in sometime, anyway.”
She said, “Tell me about it,” and I thought the statement was rhetorical until she repeated it, more directly.
Why not? I thought. She was a stranger, and there was no harm in telling a stranger. I laughed as that occurred to me—wasn’t that what got me into this in the first place? James annoyed and the Hiatus still going? “I haven’t called my girlfriend in two months,” I said.
“Shit.” Sally’s reply had more awe than the disgust I’d expected. “Doesn’t that make the two of you broken up?”
“No.” I tried to be matter-of-fact; I knew I was on shaky territory as far as other people’s ideas of right and wrong. “I’ve gone a few weeks without talking to her before.” Maybe if I’d been that upfront with James in the beginning, I thought, things would have gone better than they did.
“Shit,” Sally said again. I imagined, yeah, when Sharon finally heard from me, through James, she probably was pretty pissed. But I’d needed to change the vehicle Sally and I were driving somehow, and Sharon was about the best I could think of. It had appeared to be the most practical solution—my intention had never been to hurt anyone, but I seemed to be doing so in spades.
The actress’s voice was a pin to the bubble of silence that formed. “And why, since you’re making me ask, do you treat your girlfriend this way?”
“I didn’t want to tell her I’d gone back to work at the movie theater.”
Sally raised one eyebrow. It was a look of incredulity I’d seen elsewhere, on the screen. “Are you saying there’s something to be ashamed of, working at the movie theater?” Briefly, it wasn’t Sally Selvalan, movie star, sitting in the seat next to me, but Sally Selvalan, friend of Mary’s.
“No,” I said begrudgingly, then, with a note of self-righteousness, changed my mind. “Yeah, there is something wrong with it. I was once an actor, and now I’m working for minimum wage at a movie theater. Yeah, I have every right not to want to call my girlfriend and say ‘Hey, honey, guess what I’m doing!’”
“A computer programmer.”
“What?”
“You said you were an actor. You never were an actor; that’s why you became a computer programmer.”
Sally thought a second, then lifted a finger again, a detective on a case. “But wait. You said you’ve gone weeks without calling your girlfriend before. Is it always because you’re embarrassed about something?”

“No.” I thought about how to explain it. “You have a boyfriend?”

She smiled, and in that moment glowed, entirely the movie star. In a bubbly voice, she giggled, “Every Hollywood newsmagazine wants to know!” and then the façade was gone and she said, very simply, “No.”

“I know Sharon loves me very much.” I looked at Sally for a second, added, “That’s my girlfriend, Sharon. But maybe she loves me too much, if that makes any sense. I feel a little too perfect in her eyes, a little too wanted. We’re a couple, you know, but I like being two people who function well together, and I feel like, if Sharon had her way, we’d just be this single entity. Sometimes it just gets to be more than I can take for a while.”

“And she thinks you’re so perfect, you didn’t want to ruin it by telling her you’d gone back to the movie theater?”

“No.” I knew this pretty clear. “It’s just the opposite. She’s so positive about everything, she’d probably just repeat the kind of thing she said before: ‘It’s fine, enjoy it, you’ll go back to programming eventually.’” I smacked the leather steering wheel with the flat palms of my two hands, causing the truck to swerve momentarily. “Look, no offense to you and Mary, but my working in the movie theater is not OK, and I don’t want to be told that it is just because a person loves me.”

“Boo-hoo.” Sally wiped an imaginary tear from her smooth cheek and regarded me through squinted eyes. We were driving through areas of dense trees, the foliage closing their ranks against the car. “This woman’s crime is that she cares about you too much? We all should have such problems, you know.”

“Whatever.” It didn’t seem worth it to try to convince Sally and then, at the same time, I felt indignant at being vilified. I wanted to be understood. “Have you ever been bad at anything in your life, or have you been a successful actress so long that you can’t even remember?”

“Don’t be an asshole,” was Sally’s response. But we drove under an overpass and down the hilly road, and shortly thereafter she said, “A gymnast.”

“You wanted to be a gymnast?”

“Yeah. When I was a kid.” She was still a kid, I thought, but I didn’t say it. “And then I got the TV gig and stopped thinking about it.”

“You still want to be a gymnast?”

She shrugged, extending her red lower lip slightly. “Not really.”

“What if you did?” The look she gave me was devoid of an answer, only tired. It struck me as kind of absurd, unreal, water slish-sloshing in a knocked-against glass, that of all the impossibility of driving around for an afternoon with Sally Selvalan, I should be making her mad. “What if you wanted to be a gymnast so bad, you always felt a little sick, always felt a little out of it, always kept coming back to it in your mind, never forgot, every day?”

“You’re obsessed.” The annoyance still crackled in her voice. “This is about acting, isn’t it? What about, like, community theater? Acting clubs? Don’t tell me that one round of rejections just knocked you out of it completely.”
“No talent.”
She made a snorting noise, dismissive. “You were saying something about your girlfriend.”
“You know, when I got those acting school rejections, it was the first time? Before that, growing up, people only told me how great I was. It wasn’t until after I auditioned for acting schools that I heard otherwise. But when I look back on it, all the praise was from friends, family, teachers I’d known for a while. Tell me, for which one of them was it even socially acceptable to tell me I was no good? There wasn’t a person who cared about me who could tell me the truth.”
“Your girlfriend?”
“Can’t trust her.”
“So you sent that guy to go get her truck instead of doing it yourself? I don’t understand.” Sally rubbed her eyes with both hands. “You can’t trust absolutely nobody.”
I turned my head to look at her so fast, I felt a pain in the back of my skull like my brain rocking, and Sally actually froze, lips open at the next question she was going to ask, stopped by the intensity of the look I gave her. “Oh yeah?” I said.
Her lips flapped once, inaudibly, before she spoke again. “What about that old guy, anyway. James? You trust him?”
“I used to,” I said. “But I’m starting to worry.”
“What’d he do?”
I saw his fingers curling in anger as he stood across from me in the parking lot. “Lately, he’s caring a bit too much for my tastes.”
She shook her head. “God, this is weird. Who is he, anyway? Your dad?”
“No.” Saying more, I knew, was going to set her off. But her look now out of the corner of my eye was rivaling the one I’d given her in intensity and fury, so feeling the last semblances of sanity falling off a cliff, I said, “He’s the doorman of the computer company I used to work for.”
“And you two were friends?”
“No.”
She smacked her head with the palm of her hand. “You want to tell me what the fuck we’re talking about?”
“I hired him after I got fired, to tell me the truth.”
“The truth?”
“Yeah.”
“Like, ‘there is no God’? What do you mean, the truth?”
“I acted for almost eighteen years without anyone telling me the truth, and look how that turned out. Then I lose my freelance job because my co-workers were lying to me. I figured, if I paid someone to tell me the truth, made it worth their while, give them a motive to be honest rather than love or caring or everything that makes a person lie, I might finally have someone I could trust, someone to give me an honest opinion, tell me I was no good as an actor or warn me when my co-workers were taking advantage of me.”
Sally’s voice softened considerably. “What’s going wrong?”
“I feel like he’s getting emotionally involved. Couldn’t tell you why.”
She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “You sell yourself too short, Matthews.” I shrugged, dismissive, and turned on the radio. Sharon had it preset
to a talk show; I scanned the channels, settling on a woman singing about the affair she
never had with a car accident victim whose picture she saw in the newspaper. With a
sigh, Sally reached over and turned the volume down. “So what’s he telling you the truth
about?”

“He was helping me get my job back, for a while. There isn’t much he can do
while I’m waiting at the theater for my next job to come around.”

“You got your job back?”

“No. I managed to set up a deal where the company will give me new work as
soon as they have some.”

“I don’t get it. If the company treated you so badly, why do you want to go back
there? If you’re such a good computer programmer, why not go somewhere else?”

“Plain and simple,” I said, “I got tired of being told ‘no.’” She raised her
eyebrows at me. “I wanted to be an actor, but whether I could ended up being someone
else’s decision, not mine. I went into computers, tried to make myself invaluable, figured
that was pretty safe. I didn’t want to get kicked out of another place again.”

“And you ended up getting kicked out of another place again.”

“Yeah.”

“You know,” Sally started, then remained quiet for a beat, thinking, before
continuing. “I don’t think anybody can really be invaluable. I mean, if I can’t do a
movie, they’ve always got another actress lined up.”

“That’s why I went freelance. I was thinking, they’d need me, but I was always
my own boss in case a place got sick of me.”

“Can’t you just move on from here?” Then Sally snapped her fingers, mocking.
“Oh, that’s right, it’s the whole not getting kicked out again thing. I should have had you
with me when I was trying to get into clubs, before I was famous.”

“Laugh all you want,” I replied. “Sometimes, you just can’t keep taking ‘no’ for
an answer. You’ve got to be willing to turn around and say ‘I don’t accept that.’”

“Selvalan—” The word suddenly hung in midair, the echo of having been heard,
and for a second, neither Sally nor I moved, until we each suddenly realized the bouncy
male voice had been that of the radio. Sally reached over and turned it up, just as the
man said “after this” and a commercial started.

“What the hell?” Sally said.

“That was your name.”

“What did he say about me?”

“I couldn’t hear it.” We both stared at the radio as if it was going to repeat itself,
but it didn’t. “Must be weird, hearing your name on the radio.”

“Sometimes.” She stretched the word to suggest she was only half-kidding. “No
weirder than seeing myself on TV.”

“True.” The radio started in again on music. “Well,” I said, fishing my cell
phone out of my pocket and handing it to her, “one way to find out.”

I kept driving, every once in a while taking exits on the highway and turning
around at random. Sally called Information to get the number of the radio station, then
called the station itself.

“Hello, yes, you just said something about Sally Selvalan?” Her voice was
musically sweet. I could hear the deep tumbling of the DJ’s voice replying. “She is?”
Sally asked. “You don’t say. OK, thank you.” She hung up.
“What?”

“Apparently, I’ve disappeared from New York and people don’t know where I am. There was a possible sighting of me in San Francisco, but I may very well be missing or kidnapped.”

“You don’t say.”

“Yeah.”
Chapter Eleven – Doors and Windows

“Well,” I said.
Sally was staring down at her lap, wide-eyed. “I’m missing. I’m a missing person.” She stuck her lower lip out, seemed to be mulling it over. “I’ve never been missing before.” I pulled into the mostly-abandoned lot of a fast food restaurant. Children played on a plastic playground in sun-faded primary colors, below a sign that warned them never to take a ride with strangers. Sally said, “They’re going to put my face on milk cartons.”

She didn’t move when I leaned toward her, only shaking herself to consciousness after I spoke. “You’re not actually missing, you know.”

“You might as well take me back,” Sally said softly, then, looking at me, repeated in a firmness of voice reflected in her eyes, “Take me back. This is all too much to do so Mary and I can pull off our own movie premiere. I’m going to get you in trouble; just take me back.”

“You sure?” She nodded rapidly, and without speaking. Driving around the restaurant, skirting the drive-thru lane, I headed back toward the highway at a defeated pace.

“There was this time on the set of 
Number One Son.
” Sally rested her head on her shoulder, against the window, vanquished. She seemed to be speaking directly to the windshield. “I was pretty young. There was this dress I was supposed to wear for this upcoming scene, and I really liked it. I was really looking forward to the chance to wear this dress. And right before we filmed, the costume ladies noticed it had this stain on it, and I couldn’t wear it. And I was doing the scene and I was just pissed, and I was delivering my lines pissed, and I was pissed at all the other girls playing the daughters because they all got to wear the dresses they wanted and I didn’t. I was pretty young. And the director calls ‘cut’ and starts yelling at me because I’m obviously ruining the scene, and I went running out of the room.

“And the acting coaches for the children are all running after me, and I end up in this sound stage a little bit over, set up like a forest, and I’m hiding in the forest and one of the coaches saw me go in, and I guess if they took long enough they’d probably have found me, but instead she stands at the edge of the woods and says that if I don’t come out, she’s going to call my parents and I’ll be fired—of course they weren’t going to fire me, but I didn’t know that—and then she starts counting, and it took until ‘three’ and then I came out of the forest.”

Fuck, I thought. “Don’t go back.”

Sally shook herself and looked at me, put her hand on my arm. “No, I didn’t mean … seriously, give this up. Abort. I’ve been being selfish and I really need to grow up sometimes. That’s all I meant.” She tapped her fingers against my arm once. “Give me your cell phone; I’m going to call Mary.”

“Or,” I said, “you could not call Mary and stick with this.”

“Matthews.” Sally’s voice was low, warning.

“Look, don’t you see? This is exactly what I’m talking about. You get a ‘no,’ you give up. You let someone else decide whether you can have what you want or not.” Sally took her hand from my arm, but still looked skeptical. With one hand on the steering wheel, I took the cell phone out of my pocket with the other, holding it out to
her. “Here. Call Mary if you want. Or you could be the gymnast, Sally. If for no other reason than they told you that you couldn’t.”

She dropped her hand and sighed. “Let’s say you’re right. What do we do first?”

“Well, apparently they’re looking for us, so we’ve got to find some way to—”

“Matthews,” Sally said again, interrupting. Before, she’d only seemed depressed. Now the blood had drained from her face completely. “They’re not looking for us. They’re looking for your car—with James.”

“Oh. Shit.” And then I began to doubt it all a little bit myself.

I called the movie theater on my cell. Fortunately, Mary answered. “Hugo Theater.”

Static crackled on the line, and I pulled up the phone’s antenna. “Mary, it’s Steve.”

There was a pause, Mary stammered, and I heard the click of her pierced tongue. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s Steve. You haven’t seen James, have you?”

“No, no,” Mary replied, her normally deep voice higher than normal. “I’m sorry, that movie’s not playing here. You might try the art theater down the block.”

“Thanks,” I said without feeling, and hung up. As I pushed the antenna down, a thought occurred to me, and I cursed as I turned off the phone.

“What?”

“If the police got my name from my license plate number, they might be able to find us through the cell phone signal.”

“Do you think they’d do that?”

“Depends on how much they want to find you.”

Sally eyed my cell phone ominously as I slipped it back in my pocket. “What did Mary say?”

“I don’t think she’s seen him,” I said, “but it sounds like she’s still got media there, so I don’t know.”

“What do you think James would do?”

“That’s the thing. He’s loyal. If he knows he’s in trouble, he’s not just going to pull over and turn us all in. And that’s if he knows—he could just as easily have missed news report and have no idea people are looking for the car. Shit, I’ve got a GPS in my car, and I’m sure James has no idea how to turn it off—they might be able to track the signal of that, too. If the media, or hell, the police at this point, get a hold of him, I don’t know what he’d do.”

“You think James would actually run from the cops?”

“No. But I don’t put it past him to keep his mouth shut until he knows we’re in the clear.” I switched lanes and rubbed my face with my hand. “I’m not a big fan of letting old men sit in jail for me.”

“No,” Sally granted, “me either.”

What a mess. “Damn people,” I said, and for once, she agreed, “Damn people.”

I circled the truck around a couple of highway exits for an hour longer, thinking, arriving physically and mentally at nothing. “Whatever, there’s a million fucking places he could go in this town, let alone heading for the desert and not stopping.”
“You know any of the places he usually goes?”

“My place? Hell, it’s my car, he’s got to know not to go to my place, unless he leaves the car there and hoofs it, but I don’t think James can move real fast on foot. His place?”

“You think he’d go to his place.”

Sally’s statement reflected the certainty in my voice; now that I’d mentioned it, it did seem fairly likely. “Maybe,” I said. “If he was trying to get the car off the street, maybe he’d go to his place.”

“All right, where is that?” I didn’t answer, hoping perhaps that Sally had meant the question rhetorically. She paused, looked at me expectantly, then realized. “Oh Matthews, you’re kidding me. How can you not know where James lives?”

“It didn’t come up in conversation.”

“It didn’t come up? Oh, for the love of—”

Maybe, I thought, it was my day for my just rewards. My distance from Sharon had caused James to be angry with me, and now my distance from James might land him in jail. “Look,” I said. “We’ve already established in your opinion that I wasn’t very good to James. He worked at my place; where he went in his spare time never came up, OK?”

Thankfully, Sally let it go. “So what do we do?”

“I—” Shit. I didn’t even know enough about him to call Information, I realized, but I wasn’t going to mention why not to Sally right then. Had I screwed up with James? I hired him for a purpose; never in this deal was this supposed to be a friendship, though perhaps I was naïve to believe that wouldn’t come regardless. Looking back on it, no one at Webster, or the theater, would know where I lived without looking it up; they were probably split 50-50 as far as knowing my first name or my last. Was I truly wrong to have treated James no differently? “I know who I can call,” I said suddenly. “But it’s going to get me in a shitload of trouble.”

“James,” Sally insisted.

“Well, quite possibly, him too.”

“Steve, what the hell?”

I scratched my forehead and Sally squeezed my shoulder for reassurance. On the phone, my conversation with Andy Peterson was going about as well as I expected. “Everything’s fine, Andy, I swear. I’ve just been biding my time here and there, you know, ‘til Webster decides to finish out my contract. And the doorman and I are,” I paused, “friends. I just need his address to drop off something to him.”

“If you’re friends, don’t you have his address?” Everybody and their fucking uncle, that day!

I let a little bit of my frustration show in my tone. “Buddy, meant the nicest way possible, but if I had his address, I wouldn’t be calling you.” I saw Sally’s face and reeled in my tone. “I had it and lost it, is what it is.” Threw in a chuckle. “Stupid me, you know, always losing stuff.”

The chuckle infected Andy’s voice, too. “Oh yeah,” he said. “You and the way you never lose things, ever.” The levity was gone and his tone was severe. “I have it. I can get it. I’ll go down to personnel. Five minutes. But give me the credit of knowing that I can tell when you’re giving me the truth and when you’re lying to me.”
“Andy,” I said warmly. I gave Sally a thumbs up. “More than words can say, buddy, just know that.”

“This have anything to do with getting those assholes on the sixteenth floor back for screwing you over?”

“No,” I replied, “but if it ever does, I’ll let you know.”

We took 101 into the Tenderloin, my guilt piling on top of itself as the amount of people on the street lessened while the graffiti increased, the windows barred, old women with kerchiefs on their heads pushing shopping carts and muttering to themselves. A man stood atop a blue milk crate on a street corner, orating to an audience of the pavement. Spotting address numbers where we could find them, I parked a block away from James’ building, leaving the truck against the sidewalk and hoping, with all else that I would owe Sharon, a new truck wouldn’t be added to the bill.

James’ building was squarish, gray, as uninviting as all the others. Thankfully, there was no lock on the front door itself, nor, I laughed ruefully to myself, a doorman. The stairway lay narrow enough for Sally and I to walk up single file, the floor carpeted in shiny green translucent plastic, almost like a bath mat.

The apartment was 3B. No doorbell. Sally rapped on the door with the back of her fist. I was reminded of James’ arriving for his first day of work, waking me early at the door to my place.

“James?” I said to the door, mid-volume, thinking perhaps he was inside but screening his visitors under the current situation. Nothing happened.

Without even discussing it, Sally reached out and twisted the doorknob. It rattled stiffly. “Locked,” she confirmed.

“Not here,” I said.

“Unless he was here and left.”

“Or he hasn’t been here yet.”

“Do you think we should wait?” Sally craned her neck up and down the hallway suspiciously.

“I’m just wondering if we’re in front of James or behind him in this.”

“Well, we can’t wait out here, Matthews, and we can’t go back to the truck. Someone’s bound to see us.” Sally stared at me, and it took me a moment to get her meaning.

I waved the idea away with a hand. “No way. Sorry. You’re nuts.”

“Look, we get the door open quick, we can wait inside and no one will know. It’s no big deal. I’ve seen guys do it on movie sets plenty of times.”

“Movie sets! Where the doors aren’t real!”

“It can’t be that different. The movie people had to have gotten it from somewhere.”

“You’re fucking nuts,” I told her, but in fact, the door frame seemed pretty flimsy; chips of wood flaked off the upper part of the side that held the locks. I saw a bit of sawdust, the suggestion of termites. A crack ran a little ways down the doorframe.

“How do you want me to do this?” The hallway wasn’t especially wide, maybe about four or five conservative steps; there was only solid wall across from James’ door, with other apartments beginning down the way.
“Running leap?” Sally suggested. “I guess that’s the way I’ve always seen it done.”

“Running leap,” I mumbled to myself. Sally backed down the staircase, and I stood with my back to the opposite wall. Taking a few preparatory steps as fast as I could, I jumped slightly at the last moment to slam my shoulder into the door. I felt an angry pressure in the bone of my shoulder, followed by a crackling pain, numbing my arm. There was a sound of wood breaking and the door seemed to have given slightly; I stumbled back, holding the bruised area.

“Jesus.” Sally returned to the hall, putting her hand near where I was holding myself, causing the spark of pain again, and I shied away. “Did you break it?”

“No, just bruised,” I said, unsure if she’d been referring to the door or my arm. She scuffed her foot against the green plastic, making a rubbing sound like tires on the ribbed section of the highway’s edge. “Well, what do we do now?”

“I’ve got another shoulder.”

Sally looked up, eyebrows together in concern. “You’re kidding. You want to do that?”

“Why not?” I said, and indeed, I thought, why not? Words of James’ floated through my head, from the bowling alley, back when he’d agreed to work for me. “What’s one more adventure?” I’d come to him, a person in need, the same as Sally had come to me, maybe he and I both suckers, neither able to say “no.” As little as I was realizing I knew about James, looking at the dilapidated building around me, was it altruism that was motivating him, or greed?

Sally took her place down the stairs again as I braced myself for a second time across from the door, ran, and crashed into it. This time, I felt the vibration through my newly bruised shoulder sparking the pain again in the first one. The door did not, as I had dreamed, miraculously fly open, but it was definitely loose; unfortunately, I wasn’t sure if my shoulders could take another jolt without doing real damage.

“That really sounded like it,” Sally said, pressing on the door. It seemed to give just a little. “You OK?”

I nodded, out of breath. The hallway was silent; we hadn’t heard any voices through the walls when we arrived, and hopefully this meant that any neighbors who might interfere were out for the day.

The movie star was still playing with the door, her back to me. I made my best attempt not to stare at her ass hugged by those blue jeans. “Feels like …” she said, and stepping back, placed a kick firmly between the lock and the doorknob with the bottom of her foot. I stared at her. “Stunt training,” she smiled. Sally stood, preparing, then drawing her foot up, let loose a fast sidekick and a small yell in unison. There was a pop of her foot hitting the wood, so fast that the sound seemed almost after the fact, and the door swung open, the lock mechanism crumbling out of the wooden door frame and hitting the floor with a thud. She walked in and I followed.

“Loosened it up for you,” I said, as I pushed the door closed behind us. “So totally loosened it up for you.”

The color of the walls remains with me the most; in my head, I would later confuse the bright gray of James’ hair with this musty gray of the walls. Only one room, the bed sticking out perpendicular to us from the center of the left wall, seemingly
anchored neither to the front or the back of the apartment, just floating in between. Closer to us, the right wall jutted out and back again in the smallest suggestion of a kitchen, a miniature fridge and an oven of some doubtful consciousness. On the back wall was a window and what I mistook for a small closet; closer inspection revealed it as a bathroom.

“Place is …” Sally sat down on the only resting spot, the bed. Next to it, a rickety dresser displayed the only pictures in the apartment, a blurry photo of a woman and a man, arguably James, and a small one of a baby. The engraved frame held a date in the center, only two years after I’d been born. I placed the picture back on the dresser and sat down next to Sally. “… a dump,” she finished. “Think James will mind if I use his bathroom?”

“What the hell,” I said, “you already broke his door.” She rose, the bed lifting slightly with the give of weight. I looked around. It was, in fact, as Sally had said, a dump. The austerity of the whole place radiated sadness; everything about it seemed to remind itself that it wasn’t larger, wasn’t brighter. The dimness of the center of the room spoke of a lack of human presence visiting to light the place up.

I heard a flush and, momentarily, the bathroom door opened. Sally said, “Did you see all the pills he’s got in ther—”

“I just want you to know, I’ve called the police,” interrupted a thin, nasally voice. The door was open, and a small, stooped old man in a white T-shirt and boxer shorts stood in the hallway. “They’ll be here any minute. Get out of here! Nobody’s robbing our building!”

“We’re friends of James,” I said, rising. The old man sidled backward, as if to run to his own apartment—outside, I could see a door across the way open—if I came near him.

“Friends of Sieler? You don’t look like any friends I’ve ever seen.” The man suddenly stopped and stepped farther into the room, surprising me, peering at Sally. “Anyone tell you that you look just like—”

“That’s OK, Mr. McConnick.” I’d never been happier to hear James’ voice as he stepped through the doorway. There were dark pools of perspiration under his arms on the gray T-shirt he wore. “I know these people.” McConnick looked from James to us with a sour expression, then threw down his hands as if to say the hell with it all. As soon as he disappeared, James closed the apartment door again, his expression panicked. “Go out the fire escape, now! I’ve got television people and police officers right behind me; I didn’t think if I led them here I’d be leading them to you!”

Sally was already opening the window. “Are you going to be all right?” I asked James.

“Yes, I’ll be fine, go!” He looked from us to the doorway frantically. I hurried to the sill, following Sally on to the platform outside. Stairs lead to the ground. “Going to need a new door,” I heard James saying, “but I’ll be fine.”

The fire escape dropped to an alley I’d noticed on the way in; Sally and I turned left and ran toward Sharon’s truck, a minute too late—a police car rushed by, sirens in a frenzy, followed by a news van. “Go, go!” I yelled, though Sally, to her credit, hadn’t stopped running yet.

Over her shoulder, she asked, “Do you think they saw us?” and as if in answer, the sound of the rapidly receding sirens became a half-crack louder. Down the street, the
police car had made a U-turn and was trying to get past the news van that, mimicking it, had done the same thing. By this time, Sally and I were at the truck, and her door had only just closed as I put the truck in gear and went tearing toward the highway.

“You got any ideas?” Sally stared out the window at our rapidly gaining entourage.

“Plan B.”

“Do we have a Plan B?”

“Sure hope so,” I said, and pulled out my cell phone one last time.

Thankfully, the California police never set up any roadblocks for us, nor were we ever followed by more than one police car, because, as I’d learn later, they couldn’t be entirely sure if they were in fact pursuing the kidnapping of a famous movie star, as those in the news van claimed, or simply a case of mistaken identity. The unexplained events ended up winning Sally a couple of mentions on Hollywood Today, and the weekly late night comedy show did a skit called “Where in the Hell is Sally Selvalan now?” It was enough publicity for her agent to forget about demanding royalties for the Hugo Theater appearance he hadn’t been told about, and then Sally let him go a few weeks later.

About a half-hour after we left James, Sally and I parked Sharon’s truck in the lot of an old motel I’d spent a couple nights at when I moved from the Haight to Noe Valley. At the time I hadn’t really known anyone locally, and lived in perhaps a too-perfect solitude, going to the motel at night to watch TV or read a mystery novel, without even the option of calling a friend to go out for a beer if I felt like it. I remembered most the ceilings, with a cement floral pattern as I stared up at it from the bed.

Sally and I ran toward a motel room door on the bottom level of the two-story building. It was already unlocked. I shut it behind us just as everyone else arrived.

There was a pounding at the door. Wisely or unwisely, I didn’t say anything, thinking at this point that it would be tough for me to be in any more trouble than I already was.

An effeminate man’s voice at the door said, “Steven Matthews? This is Channel 16 news. We’d like to speak to you, would you open the door?” I saw shadows moving back and forth behind the window curtain, as if someone were trying to peer inside.

Next came a thundering voice—the source, I imagined, of the banging on the door. “Mr. Matthews? Police! Open up.” The woman next to me shifted slightly with concern, but I put my hand on her knee to settle her. In truth, I felt gigantically nervous myself, wondering if Plan B was taking it too far, but it was too late to stop at that point.

To her credit, Sharon played her part perfectly despite her concerns, and the fact that even though things weren’t quite right in our relationship, she still not only lent me her truck, but also came out to the motel when I called her, was a greater testament to the wonder of Sharon than anything I can relay. We heard a scuffling noise, followed by silence, and then as the door broke open—the second one that day I’d been responsible for—and a mob of police officers and television cameras crowded in, Sharon pulled me down on top of her so that all the people at the door could see was a man deep in a mutual kiss with a blonde-haired woman.

I rolled off and got to my feet, looking startled. “Steven Matthews?” said the first officer.

“Yeah?”
The second one put his hand on the shoulder of the first. “Elliot? That’s not her.” Sharon and I stared with looks of confusion and embarrassment, and I could only hope that by that point, Sally was far, far away.

I returned to my apartment a few hours later, my car in its usual spot in the lot of my building. I still had Sally’s luggage, which I’d have to deal with later. It seemed a very long time since I’d left, though it was really only that morning. A day’s work, I supposed. Nearing my door, I smelled chicken Dijon—the smell of reconciliation, though it was I, I knew, who needed to apologize.

Inside, James was bent over a bowl of salad, a shaker of spices in his hand. He turned when I entered. “You get out OK?”

“Yeah.” I lifted my jacket off tenderly, trying not to put pressure on my bruised shoulders. “They wanted to hold me for a while, but without Sally around there wasn’t really anything to charge me with, so they let me go.”

“And Sally?”

“Out the motel room’s back door and into the car Sharon picked up from Mary. The cops never saw her go. I got a call from Mary a little bit ago, she said ‘the premiere’s still on,’ so I assume that means everything’s fine. It’s just a good thing Sally and I ended up driving past that motel on the way to trade you my car for Sharon’s, otherwise I never would have remembered that back door setup.”

“And how did Sharon take it?”

“Not too well. On top of everything else, I think she wasn’t too pleased with finding me carting around a movie star all day, but at least she could see there was a method to my madness. I promised I’d give her a call in a day or two to talk it over.”

James gave me a very long stare. “I’ll call her!” I protested. “I swear!”

“All right.” He moved back to the table, pouring spices into his hand and rubbing them over the bowl.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be here when I got back,” I said. James didn’t stop what he was doing, but his shoulders hunched slightly, revealing his attention. “Maybe I haven’t handled all this as well as I could, I’m not sure. If that’s the case, I’ll try to do better. If you’re tired of this and you want to leave, I’ll understand.”

Now James did turn around again. “No. I want to see how this turns out.” Something in his voice caught my attention.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You got a call from WalsTec while you were out,” he said. “They’re ready for you to come back now.”

END PART II
Chapter Twelve – It Had To Be You

I looked “crisp,” I thought to myself, as the elevator drew me upwards. I’d transformed my wages from the movie theater into a new suit, black, double-breasted. Especially for this occasion. Just for the looks on their faces. The “ding” as I remembered it, the shuffling of the elevator doors like a sword returning to its sheath. One step forward, back on the sixteenth floor.

In a little over two months, I hadn’t expected much to change. The furniture still stood as I remembered it, the long table mirrored by identical tables on the floors above and below it. A new shade above the windows with a receiver to lower by remote control. And, in perhaps an intentional attempt at irony, the sixteenth floor’s three managers sat in exactly the same places they’d been when I left. An unspoken message that no apologies would be made. That was fine. I was back.

Brad Ryan, his hair still perfectly mussed, had a small folder next to him, reminiscent of Craig from Legal’s file on me. “Gentlemen,” I thought, but didn’t say it. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of speaking first, of setting the tone for them to respond. I took the chair at the head of the table, closest to the elevator, farthest from them, pleased to have seen when the elevator opened, for just a moment, a look of uncertainty on their faces.

“I want to hear it.” The first words came from John McDaniel, looking down, as if addressing his portly stomach. His shirt sleeves were unceremoniously rolled up, as if they too had landed on his bad side. The second time, he spoke to Ryan and Scott Simple. “I want to hear it.” I could have just as easily not existed, except that they were discussing me. The two men said nothing; Simple shrugged as if to suggest that it wasn’t his decision, and Ryan only held McDaniel’s gaze, not saying “no,” giving permission. McDaniel looked at me. “Do it. At least have the balls to sit here and do it.”

Fair enough, I thought. They’d screwed me, I’d screwed them back; at least in the confines of the room, why not admit it? Filling my lungs, I shaped my throat for a lower octave and said, in my best John McDaniel voice, “Legal department? This is John McDaniel on the sixteenth floor.”

Simple’s smile shown like a lighthouse. “That’s perfect! Do me!”

McDaniel beat me to the retort. “What’d be the point, Simple? Not like your voice gets anything done.” That McDaniel said nothing about the imitation itself suggested that he was flattered by the attention.

“Enough.” Ryan let the word echo long enough for the two men to look sheepish, then faced me. “Here are the specs for the new project.” He slid the folder across the table. I examined it, a database to collect customer information for a baking company selling pastries online. Some parts challenging, but not impossible. “Questions?” Ryan asked.

“Right,” I drawled, and he nodded as if that was what he’d been expecting.

“You’re not seriously going to do this,” James said. He scratched now above the tuft of his eyebrow, and I wondered what emotion that signified.

“Of course I am. Haven’t I said all along this is what I was going to do?”

“Sure. But I didn’t think you were serious.”
I groaned and threw my hands up. “I’ve been waiting for this for nearly three months.”

“What about your job at the theater?” James had scallops in a skillet, flipping them at random intervals interspersed with the sprinkling of a seemingly random combination of spices. A Cajun air filled the kitchen. “You’re just leaving that behind?”

“How I might feel about leaving the theater is irrelevant.” I sat at the kitchen table, a couple hours after work, my new suit stowed away in a closet garment bag, traded for a brown T-shirt and jeans. James had gone with me to buy the suit and, having seen his near-empty closet, I’d bought him a couple of shirts and jeans, too. I didn’t ask about his apparent poverty; I’d never smelled alcohol on him other than when he and I drank together, and I’d certainly never seen any evidence of drugs, so I had to assume that there was a good reason for his financial state even with what I’d been paying him, and didn’t inquire further. Despite my promises to Sally, I still felt it was all none of my business, and hesitated to pry. Even with what came later, I’m still trying to hold on to the belief that it was James’ choice whether to broach the subject, and not my own. “If I have a chance to go back to the way things were at WalsTec,” I said, “I have a responsibility to myself to take it.”

“Why? What’s so good about having things the way they were?” James turned his head from the skillet to cough heavily. “Why not move on, see where this new life takes you?”

I lifted a finger. “One, the movie theater is barely a new life. If anything, it’s an older life than working at Webster. And two, I need to go back to show that what was done to me didn’t stick. If I don’t take the job, it means the sixteenth floor won.”

James leaned in close, his voice low. “Consider this with me. Why is failure so bad? Yes, you think, if you don’t go back, it’s a sign of having failed a second time. You never went back after being rejected from acting school, and you’ll be damned if you don’t go back after this. But things were OK after that so-called failure; solely the fact that you got the job at Webster in the first place proves life can go on.”

“But what’s next? Say Mary leaves the theater and we get some new manager we don’t like, who cuts back my hours or assigns me all bad shifts. Do I get out of the theater then, or is that where I finally make my stand? If I let the world keep pushing, James, it’s going to keep pushing. Got to be a point where I push back.”

“Fine.” He turned, spatula in hand, to lift the scallops from the stove. “But I think there’s something to be said for noting where you were happiest.”

My computer took a while to boot, the next day, slow from weeks of sitting idle. Opening the program compiler, I typed a few lines, warming up, my fingers buzzing. Then, all at once, like an airplane on a runway, I took off. My hands skated over the keyboard, leaps and bounds and twists, private flairs, the conductor once again in control of his orchestra. As I’d said to Sally, programming wasn’t my first choice, but it was there, and I was good at it. Would she have me leave something I had a knack for and liked, for acting, something I loved but stunk at? Passion paid no bills; practicality had to rule out. And James, to see me leave prestige, despite its tenuousness, at Webster, for security without glamour at the movie theater? If I could be cowed by the sixteenth floor, I could be cowed by anybody. I’d taken someone else’s decision as gospel before and I’d promised myself never to do it again.
I nipped the program here, tucked it there, all without blinking. If there’d been any concern before that I’d lost my touch, I still had it.

Sharon reached for my hand and pulled me gently toward a cart of flowers, the small man at its head pushing it doggedly down Market Street. The pavement sparkled with the brightness of the sun, the city warm with a cool breeze. As she bent to smell a gathering of tulips rising from a plastic bucket, the man looked at me out of the corners of his eyes, one eyebrow raised in a question. He had small features, his whole body compact like a jockey. I shook my head almost imperceptibly; I’d surprised Sharon with a bouquet of orange wildflowers that very morning, and sent her a gigantic array of roses only three weeks earlier, a few days after the Sally Selvalan debacle. It was Sunday afternoon, nearly four weeks since I’d gone back to Webster, the programming hitting no real snags, and the few confrontations I’d had with my co-workers, unusually pleasant. The man took hold of his cart again and pushed on.

“Down that way’s my old apartment.” I gestured with my free hand toward the wood-paneled building I knew to be somewhere in the distance.

“The place you’re in now sounds a little homier,” she said. She wore a gray tank top and khaki pants that ended mid-calf, her blonde hair in a ponytail.

“It is.” This was the first time I’d pointed out to Sharon any of my old neighborhood, except for the bowling alley. I figured, as long as I was showing her the movie theater, I might as well show her everything.

Hugo’s marquee had changed since I’d left, and I was struck with a moment’s curiosity as to whom Mary had chosen to climb up the ladder and change it in my absence. I didn’t recognize the kid in the ticket booth, with a fat face and a skinny nose. Already there’d been a personnel turnover since I’d quit, employees who would have no idea who I was, like waves washing away any trace of my having built a sandcastle.

Sharon and I walked through the glass doors and down the red carpet, stopping in front of the concession stand. Tabitha was at the counter, her hair so tightly French braided that her scalp showed. She watched us with interest, probably wondering why I was back. I stretched out two arms to say to Sharon, “Here it is.”

“This is what you were so embarrassed to show me?”

“I guess.”

She smiled at Tabby, who blushed. “Did they let you keep the uniform?”

“No, I gave it back.”

“Think they’d let you borrow it again?” Her voice took on a seductive tone. “I always love a man in uniform. Maybe someone has a picture?”

“I sincerely doubt it.”

She smacked me lightly on the arm, walked a few feet away, and turned back, this habit she had of taking a moment to quell her anger or consider what her next words would be. “You know, I’m not the one who shut you out, so you could at least humor me if I try to have a little fun with this.”

“I’m sorry.” I put my arms around her, but my regret only lasted a moment. Into her hair, I said, “But really, I don’t come to the law firm and make fun of how you dress for work.”

She pulled back to look at me. “Why is this such a big deal to you?”
“Because this is exactly what I thought would happen. I would have brought you to the theater because it was a serious change in my life, and the first thing out of your mouth would have been ridicule.”

She took a few steps toward the screening rooms and returned. “I guess I have to have a sense of humor, Steve, considering everything you throw at me, doormen and job changes and movie stars. Got a thing for blondes, do you?” Her face flushed with this last comment, as if she hadn’t meant to say it, and I saw there an unspoken question.

I looked over at Tabby, who was examining the popcorn machine with a little too much interest. I lowered my voice. “Nothing happened between Sally and me. I promise.” I took her hand now, steering her toward the concession stand. “I never got the chance to thank you, for giving us your car and standing in so she could get away.”

“And for sitting and getting questioned by the police,” Sharon amended.

“That too.” I stepped up to the register. “Tabby, there should be one last paycheck for me under there.” The girl pulled open a drawer near the cash register and sorted through a pile of checks until mine came up. I asked, “Mary here?”

“She’s out today. Phil’s in; you want me to get him?”

“No, thanks.” Saying hello to Mary would’ve been the polite thing to do, and I was glad she was out. I didn’t need another maudlin scene like when I’d told Mary I was leaving, nor her final assurance to me that I’d be back. For that reason, I hadn’t attended when I’d read a week earlier of the premiere of Sally’s new movie at the Hugo Theater. The press seemed so excited by this unexpected opportunity to gain access to Sally Selvalan that little mention was made of the controversy a few weeks before over whether she’d been missing. Sally, for all I knew, was back in New York by that point.

Besides, Sharon already had her suspicions about me and Sally Selvalan; I didn’t need to make it worse by adding Mary to the mix. I folded the check into my pocket and turned to Sharon. “Ready?” I’d said my good-byes to the theater on my last day, and my last day years before that; I didn’t bother to look back as we walked out.

Sharon, still holding my hand, leaned toward me. “If you thought I was going to laugh at the theater and didn’t want me to, Steve, you could have just told me. I will listen to reason, you know.”

I walked alongside her silently. I was not, necessarily, sorry. What did it make our relationship, I thought, if she always acted one way when I wished she’d act another, and I didn’t act the way she wanted either? “Always” was a strong word, and that was part of the problem—most of the time we got along fine, when things weren’t serious. It was only in times like those that problems arose. We had a lot of fun, but asking her for advice was another matter. What did that make our relationship, trying to change each other? Honest, or artificial?

She continued, “Of course, I was out of the loop when you hired James, too.”

“And yet,” I smiled ruefully, “somehow you’ve managed to work your way into the partnership.”

“I see what you like about James. He’s very insightful. Generous.” She pulled my arm to the side, into the dark of a building’s shadow and through the open door of the bowling alley. A friendship, it seemed, had been born between Sharon and James in the two times they’d been alone since Sharon’s initial misgivings, once at my apartment and once at hers.
As if the bowling alley had its own opinions about my career choice, James and I had found it magically reopened a few days after I quit the theater. We walked through the alley area, past a couple teenagers with pink and green hair who seemed more interested in lounging than bowling, and into the bar. The place seemed overly dim after the brightness outside. Sharon sat down while I bought two mugs.

I remembered when James had sat there the first night he’d worked for me. He’d been certain that, if I went back to Webster, the sixteenth floor would simply try to use me again. I’d dismissed him out of hand, I realized, even as I was hiring him to give me advice. “And very nearly all I’ve done since I started with James,” I said, sitting across from Sharon, “is not listen to him.”

“Do you think you’ve been wrong?”

“Well, so far, so good. I got my job back, that’s got to say something.”

She took her mug in two hands and shook it side-to-side slowly, watching the liquid spin, then looked at me. “Steve, does James seem … ill to you?”

“He’s been slow the entire time he’s worked for me. Weak, tired. I mean, I’ve got no way to know for certain, but he looks to be on the far end of seventy. Sally saw a lot of pills in his place. I don’t know if he’s just old, or what.”

“You know, you could always just ask him.”

“It’s none of my business,” I said, and drank. She glared at me around my mug.

“What? Sharon, he’s very obviously infirm. None of us are stupid. If this was something he wanted to talk about, don’t you think he would have by now?”

“All those pills must cost a lot of money,” she said, and then paused, looking much as she did when she added great sums in her head in her mystical way. Slowly, she asked, “Was he like this when you met him?”

“I said, he’s been slow the entire time he’s worked for me.”

“Yeah, but when you met him.” It was my turn to give her a look, uncomprehending. “How long have you known James?”

“Known of him? What do you mean? You left just before we had that first conversation here.”

Her voice was sharp. “Steve, when I said he was a stranger, I didn’t think that meant you two hadn’t even had a long conversation before. You’re telling me the bowling alley was the first time?”

I nodded hesitantly, feeling as I had with Sally that I was about to get in trouble, and feeling guilty about it, and then resenting that guilt. Yes, James had been a stranger. Yes, when the sixteenth floor made me doubt my own judgment, I hired a stranger to be there for me to talk it over. Yes, by exchanging money with this man, I attempted to create for myself an impartial observer through which to work out my problems. If my crime was that this was unconventional, I thought, well, forgive me if the conventional routes of turning to loved ones for help seemed flawed to me. So many people went to psychologists—it was nearly the same thing. The weirdest part, perhaps, was not why I was so unconventional, but why so many other people weren’t.

“How could you have any idea,” Sharon was saying, “that this guy wouldn’t beat you to death with a billy club the minute you got him inside your door?”

“You just said he looked sick. You know it, and I know it. I was pretty sure my life wasn’t in danger.”

“Yeah. But why him?”
I thought back to my first months as a freelancer at Webster, how James would always tip his hat, whether I bothered to stop to say hello or not. “You know what? He always said hello.” Sharon had lifted her mug; it came back down on the table with a disbelieving thud. “It may sound silly,” I said, “but don’t you have those people in your life, you never really get to know them, but you see them every day? Your doorman, or the guy you buy coffee from? I’ve worked in a lot of different places, and I find that on my last day, it’s always them I feel like I’m going to miss the most. Maybe you won’t remember them two or three jobs down the road, but when you leave, those people, so much a part of your daily life, don’t you wish you could just take them with you?” I shrugged and scratched the back of my neck, looking down at my drink. What else could I say? “I chose him because he said hello every time I went in, Sharon. Maybe I’m a fucking idiot. He said hello every time I went in.”

I looked up to see Sharon staring at me, with an expression not of cynicism, but something more tender. Her hair fell forward around her face, as if creating her own little space in which to think. She put her hand on top of mine and spoke softly. “Methvin, the night security guard at the office. You’ve seen him, sometimes, when you come pick me up late. When he does his rounds, he always says ‘Good morning’ and laughs like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard. I guess mine’s Methvin.” She rubbed my hand quietly. “Of course, I’m not about to bring Methvin to sleep on my couch.”

“Well,” I replied, “you know.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m beginning to. A lot of things.”

And I’m still not sure whether, at that moment, she loved me or hated me. Or both.

In contrast to the bowling bar, the address Brad Ryan gave me a week later was a flashy restaurant-bar number, waiters with napkins over their arms serving haute cuisine to white tableclothed tables peeking out from alcoves along the walls. The lights were bright, the bar polished to shine a light brown, almost orange. Ryan had his back to me, but turned on the cushioned swivel chair when I approached. He wore a silver shirt with a black tie. I ordered a scotch rocks, same as the half-empty one in front of him. He signaled to the bartender. “On my tab.” To me, he asked, “How’s the project?”

“No big problems. Should be done by next week.”

“Any chance of seeing anything early?”

I laughed. Since I’d returned to Webster, Ryan had been unnaturally friendly, losing some of the all-business tone he’d addressed me with previously. Regardless, I kept my guard up, accepting his offer for drinks but suspecting a trap all along. The thing about Brad Ryan, he was tricky, but he was suave in his trickiness. I knew everything I heard could be a lie, every step a device toward Ryan’s own ends. A chance of my turning in even a piece of this project early? “Not hardly.”

“Yeah, well.” He raised his glass. “To knowing your enemy.”

I clinked my glass against his and took a sip. “I never really saw us sitting here, having a drink.”

Honestly? Me either.” The light stubble on his cheeks showed the barest flecks of gray. He finished what was left in his glass and pushed it toward the end of the bar for a refill. “But more likely you than with Simple or McDaniel.”

“Sometimes feel like a schoolteacher?”
Ryan gave a dramatic rolling of his eyes. “Constantly. Good thing they’re both competent programmers.” His laugh came from his chest, deep if not hearty. “I walk by Simple’s office, find him staring off at nothing, got to snap my fingers in front of his nose before I can get him to come to—turns out, he finished all his work for the day hours before everyone else.”

“Too smart for his own good?”
“Pain in my ass, is more like it. But I’m stuck with him. Talent and no brains, sixteenth floor’s about his limit.”
“And that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Rising up. Taking that elevator one extra floor.” I raised my glass. “To vertical promotion.”
He knocked his glass against mine. They did not clink this time, but smacked somewhat dully. “To vertical promotion,” Ryan said.

We stared at ourselves in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar, around the gathered bottles. We could have been anyone, strangers, friends, brothers, brought into each others’ lives and set in opposition only by the places our careers had taken us. For what reason had we each joined WalsTec at the right time, so that I could be promoted to the sixteenth floor and Ryan could be the floor manager? How would our lives have been different, without each other? There was silence, and I said to Ryan’s mirror-image, “It was you. Simple’s too clueless and McDaniel—I think, his attitude aside, McDaniel wouldn’t have the guts, not to think of the idea on his own.”
Ryan kept staring straight ahead. “They helped, of course.”
“Of course,” I agreed, “but it was your idea.”
He drank for a while, the ice cubes rattling in his glass, the raindrops forming on the glass’s sides soaking the unwitting bar below. His voice was quiet. “I’d like to think I’m not Scotty yet, still got some upward momentum. But I’m pretty sure the day will come. I’d like to get there, soon as I can, sit at my limit instead of always reaching for it.”
“Wouldn’t we all.” I understood how he felt; hadn’t I become a freelancer for just that reason, so as not to have to worry about getting ahead? Of course, though I’d learned to ignore the siren song of false compliments from my loved ones, I’d not gained mastery over the draw of praise in business; I’d been as enchanted by the possibility of upward mobility at Webster as Ryan had—only he’d targeted me as an obstacle in his path, while I hadn’t been paying any attention to him. I was facing Ryan directly now, and he swiveled toward me.
“Now, I’m not admitting anything here.” He raised two hands in false innocence. “Officially, I have no idea what we’re talking about.”
“Of course,” I said again.
“You didn’t have to leave the company three months ago, you know. You could have stayed—hell, they’d hire you full time in a second. Say I move up on this next project. Say I leave it all behind. How’d you like to take my place?”
The words were so unexpected, for a moment they wouldn’t coalesce. “You’re saying I’d be a manager of the sixteenth floor?”
“Sure!” His voice was cheerful, possibly somewhat liquid. “McDaniel and Simple wouldn’t be too happy about it, but they’ll survive. I doubt the company would let those clods be managers unsupervised anyway, so it’s bound to happen. You’re a
miles better programmer than they are—I mean, I can’t promise this, I’m just saying I’d recommend it if I did happen to get promoted.”

“Tempting,” I said, without any doubt in my mind, “but no.” The point of being a freelancer had been to set my own schedule, have a symbiotic relationship with a company instead of a codependent one—I wanted to do my work and get paid for it, not get sucked into a world of office politics, nor have to rely on the whims of a company to make-or-break my life. As a freelancer, I was my own boss. I tried to explain this to Ryan.

He swirled the remaining ice in his cup. “You may not believe this, but I’m actually a little envious of you.”

Brad Ryan? With his fashionable goatee and his avant-garde glasses? “I have a hard time believing that.”

“It’s true. You’re a freelancer. You’re out there on the edge. You’re controlling your own life. I could never do that. Always on the lookout for new jobs, never knowing if it might all fall apart tomorrow, leaving you with nothing.” I decided it wasn’t worth interrupting him to point out that the worst-case scenario he’d described was exactly the one he himself had foisted on me.

“Why not?” I asked him. “I’m sure you’ve got enough client contacts from working at Webster. Why not quit and start working from home? I bet you can find yourself a few jobs.”

“I can’t,” he replied, his eyes glossy. “I don’t have the courage.”

I thought of the managers of the sixteenth floor, how Ryan always seemed so in control, and compared it to this, a well-dressed man in a high-priced bar, still just a man. Forgive the way I’d been treated by the sixteenth floor? Never. But begin to understand it? Maybe a little. I signaled the bartender for a refill. “So, McDaniel. Why’s he so angry?”

“I don’t know. He had a wife, left him.”

“Is losing his wife what made him so angry?”

“I think he lost his wife because he was so angry.”

“So what made him so angry in the first place?”

“No clue,” Ryan said.

“And the winner is …” Simple drummed his hands on the table, commentating while Brad Ryan opened the memo we’d received through company mail.

“‘Pleased to inform you,’” Ryan read. “‘Webster project #53432 accepted for pre-production to sixth floor troubleshooting and on to the marketing division.’”

It’d been a month of hard work for all of us, my taking care of the grittier details of the program at home while the sixteenth floor took care of the framework. We’d turned in the project a few days before, and Ryan had called me that morning to say we’d received news from on high. The four of us sat comfortably around the conference table. It almost appeared, in fact, as though a score had been settled between me and the sixteenth floor. Resisting their effort to drive me out had been a rite of passage, making me one of them.

“‘Below,’” Ryan continued, “‘please find initial specifications for your new assignment. Thank you for your hard work and effort.’ We’ve got our new stuff right here, boys.” McDaniel gave an uncharacteristic whoop of delight.
“Does it say anything about me?” I asked.
“You’re on here with us.” Ryan laid the memo on the table. “For the new project.”
“What’s the matter, Matthews?” McDaniel’s voice took a slight edge. “Tired of working with us?”
I was not tired, necessarily, so much as wary. I had hoped, rather assumed, that the forward momentum I’d had previously at Webster would continue uninterrupted. Having successfully completed a project with the sixteenth floor, I’d counted on moving to the seventeenth floor and leaving these three men behind for good.
“Why, Matthews.” Ryan, in contrast to McDaniel, was once again the voice of innocence I’d heard on that day so many months before. “We’ve all been working so well together lately, we just thought you’d want to stay. Were we wrong to request you?”
I sat looking at three cherubic faces, and in a moment of déjà vu, I knew.

“They’re going to do it again,” I said. James was reading a newspaper on the couch when I stormed into my apartment, slamming the door behind me. He folded the newspaper, patient; he’d learned in our months together to wait out my non-sequiturs for further information. “The sixteenth floor is going to screw me over again.”
That James’ face betrayed no amount of shock underscored that what I’d just said had been, essentially, what he’d been saying all along. In my blind optimism, I’d refused to believe it, and yet, that was why James was there in the first place. Perhaps I’d been listening to James more than I thought, because standing in that room, staring at the sixteenth floor’s managers, I’d seen it with perfect clarity: they were going to do it again.
Chapter Thirteen – Breaking and Entering

It all started with a client meeting, and little did I know how going into the office that day would change things. The companies that hired WalsTec to do their programming might never be heard from until the project was complete, if the work was very general, while others might stare over our shoulders the entire time. This new client was the latter, and I found myself going back to the Webster building at least three times a week, far more than I might have liked.

There was nothing overt telling me not to trust my fellow co-workers, other than precedent. But I had a sense that I was a cash cow, being kept around in case of emergency. Brad Ryan’s discussion of wanting to get ahead as fast as possible kept resounding in my head. I was a sheep in a room full of wolves, biding their time.

This was on my mind as I drove to the office that day. At the door, the new doorman stood, stock-still and thick. I’d never seen him sit. The bulldog, still tied by his leash to the left pole of the awning, panted at me as if to say, Why all the fuss? The doorman turned only his head to look at me with casual disinterest, before coming to life and moving to the elevator panel. What the man lacked in friendliness, I could say that he—like James before him—always remembered what floor I needed. He opened the panel and began punching in numbers.

I saw the nylon leash go from loose to taut first before I realized the bulldog, whose biggest movement previously had simply been to roll over to expose its belly, had taken off at a gallop toward the woods that circled the Webster building on three sides. Single, sharp barks sounded as the dog ran, its belly expanding with each breath, so the noise shot out as if from a dog-shaped revolver. The leash pulled taut, jerking the dog back, but this only seemed to deepen its resolve to run. I couldn’t see what, if anything, it was headed for.

The doorman spun from the panel and took two steps toward the dog. The leash stretched all the way from the first pole of the awning to the second.

“Brutus,” he said, in a voice higher than any he’d used in our short conversations. “Brutus! Quit it!”

He took two more steps under the awning, and that’s when it happened. I’d always assumed the poles of the awning were cemented into the ground; instead, the left pole came right out of the ground, tilted at an angle with the pull of the leash, and I saw that the pole had only been fitted into a small indentation into the ground. The awning came flopping down over the doorman’s head, immediately entangling him. I started toward him to help; at the same moment, the loop of the leash slipped out from under the pole. Brutus took off toward the woods, moving much faster than I would have imagined for a dog of his heft. I wasn’t sure what to do first, help the man or chase the dog.

The doorman pushed the awning aside with jerky, frustrated movements and began to chase the dog at a stilted run; unlike the dog, this was a man built for strength alone, not speed. The dog, meanwhile, had disappeared into the woods, while the awning listed precariously to the right, all its weight on the standing pole. I expected it to collapse at any moment. “Your elevator’s there,” the doorman called over his shoulder.

“We.”

I began, “Can I help—”
“Go!” he shouted again. I shrugged, ducked under the titled awning, and went through the doors to the elevator.

After having visited the Webster building so much—and I think it’s true after anyone visits a place a number of times—I’d become attuned to certain sounds, certain feelings. When the elevator stopped, even before the doors opened, I knew something was wrong. Something hadn’t progressed the way it normally did. Still the long, round table, still the potted plants in each of the corners of the room, still, coincidentally, three men sitting expectantly at the table. But they weren’t the managers of the sixteenth floor. It wasn’t the sixteenth floor. It was the fourteenth.

“So what did you do?”

“What could I do? Excused myself, told them the doorman made an error, rode the thing back down. Of course, the doorman didn’t show up for an hour, and by that time the client meeting was supposed to be over, so I called Brad Ryan from my cell phone, apologized, and came home. He was pissed, but what’s done is done.”

James shook his head. “I’m proud to say, never once did I send an employee to the wrong floor, the entire time I was working there.”

Perfect. “That’s what I was thinking.” I’d ushered James to the kitchen table as soon as I’d got home, intent on telling him the story toward one very specific purpose. The plan had come to me as I left the building, and I sat before James giddy, barely able not to grin, trying not to let my excitement scare him away. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What are the chances,” I said, “that Webster changed the elevator codes between the time you left and when the new doorman came in?”

James shrugged. “Well, I couldn’t say.”

“Do you still remember all the codes?” There was a dangerous edge to my voice, and for the first time in the conversation, James sat up a little straighter.

“Yes,” he said slowly.

“In other words,” I said, “you can get us into the building after hours.”

I will swear to the end, when I hired James, I only intended for us to sit and talk. Never did I imagine James running from the police as I hid a movie star in my girlfriend’s car. Never did I imagine how involved he would become. And never had I imagined using the information James had stored in his head for breaking into WalsTec.

It was about 3:30 AM, one month later. James and I stood under the awning before the front door, fixed since Brutus’s great escape. Employees working late usually cleared out of the building by 10, and the cleaning staff and the doorman went home around midnight.

James, it seemed, was a fount of information concerning the building. It had alarms, apparently, but no security cameras, and the alarms would go off when I punched in the elevator code. The computer systems would still register that someone entered the building, but from what James understood, the mainframe that controlled it was in the basement if I could get down there and clear the elevator log.

Of course, getting James to go along with this hadn’t been easy. “No,” he’d said as I explained the plan that day at the kitchen table, his arms crossed firmly. “I’m not helping you break in to the Webster building.”

“Why? Loyalty?”
“Because it’s against the law, for one.”
“That’s only a problem if I get caught. And if I have the elevator codes, I won’t get caught.”
“What do you think breaking into the building is going to accomplish?”
I told him.

James pushed the hairs of his eyebrow back and forth. “If you do this, won’t you be just as bad as Mr. Ryan and the rest?”
“Hey,” I said, “at least they kept their jobs all these months. Maybe the only way to get ahead is to do things their way.”
“You yourself told me how much you want the company to let you work in peace. If this fails, won’t you be right back where you started, without a job? Or worse?”
“And if it works, I shouldn’t ever have to worry about the sixteenth floor again.”

Now James used his thumb and forefinger to scratch at both eyebrows simultaneously, as if massaging away a headache, in a gesture that made clear his better judgment was against this, even if he was going to go along with it.

It frightened me most that the police might eventually trace the break-in back to James if I couldn’t erase the elevator log before we left. If someone caught us by sight, it wouldn’t be a problem until we were down in the basement; I could more or less explain away my right to be on the sixteenth floor. Regardless, James and I each wore black shirts and pants, on the off chance of having to hide in the shadows. A seventy-something ex-doorman and a computer programmer with an axe to grind, sulking around the front of the Webster building—at worst, we could run away from anyone who found us while they were doubled-over laughing. I felt sweat running down my sides in the sweatshirt I’d found in the bottom of one of my dresser drawers.

Had I my druthers, it would have been just me breaking into Webster, and not me and James. Once I’d convinced James to help out, however, he’d been obstinate about keeping the codes to himself.

“There’s no need for you to risk yourself, too,” I told him.
“If I’m getting involved,” he said, “I’m getting involved the whole way. All or nothing.” Whether this was out of loyalty to me or guilt toward betraying Webster that made him take such an active role, I couldn’t be sure, only that, if he had such strong feelings about it, I was willing to let him do whatever it was his pride required.

James opened the square panel and paused, perhaps remembering standing there in his doorman’s uniform in the sunshine. Then, he pressed four numbers with a gloved hand—I’d insisted on gloves for each of us, even though the goal was to never give anyone a reason to search for fingerprints. The building came alive, the locks of the front door clicking open, the chime of the elevator at ready, both sounding operatic in the silence of the night. Thankfully, the building’s lights were controlled elsewhere, so it remained dark in the small elevator foyer, only a little dim red light glowing from the EXIT sign. I held the front door open for James, then scurried inside behind him.

Through the elevator doors, we could see vague shapes outlining the floors, a little moonlight coming in the windows, reflecting off the tables. “What a way to spend an evening,” I kidded James quietly. He stood with two hands holding the bar behind him that went around the sides and back of the elevator, and didn’t reply. Even though
I’d checked and double-checked what time the security guard left the building—thank God the guard wasn’t twenty-four-hours—James still looked as though he expected alarms to go off at any moment.

“I tried Sharon to make plans for tomorrow,” I told him, hoping perhaps a change of subject might take his mind off what we were doing. “Couldn’t reach her.” As a matter of fact, I realized, with all the planning for the night’s escapade, it had been about two weeks of my calling Sharon without her ever calling back. “You heard from her lately?”

He shook his head.

“Maybe,” I said, “maybe tomorrow, if you wouldn’t mind taking a drive over there, making sure she’s all right, I’d appreciate it.”

As he nodded, the elevator slowed, and the doors slid open on the sixteenth floor. I stepped out, James behind me, and crossed immediately to the double doors on the far side. The air conditioning hummed in the cold room. The doors were unlocked, as expected, and opened to a wide rectangular room—the inner offices. Crisscrossing the center were rows of cubicles; this was where the employees of Webster sat, each desk with a terminal. I’d been back there only on the sixth floor, visiting Andy Peterson’s office, but if the layout was the same, it meant Brad Ryan’s office was probably the one across the room in the far left corner. As the head manager, he was the only employee on the floor to get an enclosed office to himself. We walked down three short steps into “the pit,” as it was called, and made our way over.

For the past few weeks, I’d been steadily letting my trust in the sixteenth floor grow—at least as far as they could tell. When Ryan asked again if he might see an advance copy of my work, I was only too happy to share, “for the good of the team.” On one of these occasions, I mentioned to Ryan that I’d rethought his offer about joining WalsTec, and that if he should “happen” to get promoted after this next project, I’d be happy to take his place. I handed Ryan a CD with a yellow note attached: “MY WORK IS YOUR WORK.”

And now I stood at the door to Ryan’s office, the night before the completed program would be sent down to troubleshooting for verification, a similar CD in my pocket. I turned the knob on Ryan’s door. Locked.

James gasped, as if afraid this meant the break-in was ruined. Two thoughts seemed to come to him so quickly that he spoke them both at once, almost overlapping: “Does that mean trouble?” first, and then “Are you going to break another door down?”

I laughed at the idea of it. “No,” I said. “I thought this might happen. There’s another possibility.”

Turning around, I entered the cubicle right behind me. The desk was empty, only the flat screen of the computer sitting at eye level, the ergonomic keyboard poised under it. It could have been that the cubicle was unoccupied, only that, when I opened the desk drawer, there was a business card holder, containing cards printed with John McDaniel’s name.

“Wrong one,” I said to James, who stood leaning against the cubicle’s entrance. He shifted to allow me to pass. I sat down in the cubicle one to the right of McDaniel’s. Here, unfortunately, there were no business cards in the top drawer denoting the cube’s occupant. Pictures of a small gray-and-white cat lined the desk in frames or taped to the desk drawers. “No,” I thought aloud. “If I were Scott Simple, where would I be sitting?”
I rose, looking over the tops of the cubicles, all of them more-or-less the same from that vantage point. Moving past James again, I went by McDaniel’s cubicle and around the corner. What struck me first was the miniature plastic Ferris wheel, the base in fluorescent pink and the wheel in fluorescent green, sitting on the cubicle’s corner. On one side of the computer screen stood a lava lamp; on the other, a set of wind-up chattering teeth.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Simple.”

Scott Simple had been my contingency plan. Recalling Ryan’s story about Simple, that he often sat in his cubicle with nothing to do after finishing the day’s work early, I volunteered to teach Simple some of my more dynamic programming skills, again “for the good of the team.” Sitting at the conference room table, a laptop in front of us, I found Simple easily distracted, his attention immediately diverted by someone walking through the room or noise from outside—until I realized that, by the time he was distracted, Simple already understood, and could do, exactly what I’d been teaching him. He learned almost instantaneously. It seemed unjust to me, in a way, that it was not for lack of brains, but perhaps an excess of it, that Simple was not more successful than he was.

Turning on his computer, I entered Simple’s network password—he’d given it to me so I could get on his computer to look at his work while I was teaching him. There, still on the hard drive, was the one already-completed piece of our upcoming project that I’d given Simple instead of Ryan.

I pressed CONTROL, followed by a series of keystrokes. Changing the date and time on Simple’s computer wasn’t enough; fortunately, years of fooling around with computers had taught me how to hack through the computer’s operating system to the network-controlled timeclock, changing it to the last time Simple had accessed the file I’d given him. Then, I took out the CD I’d brought with me and placed it in Simple’s CD-ROM drive. Among other things, it contained near-duplicates of his files for the project. Replacing his file with my own, I removed my CD, reset the date and time, and logged off. I spun in Simple’s chair toward James, my arms up in a cheer. I saw James’ frantic look and I quieted. “That’s it.”

“Feel satisfied?”

“Not as much as I will when this works.”

Still, I felt lightheaded as we rode the elevator down to the lobby, drunk with the ease with which my plan had worked. I couldn’t help smiling. James peered out and, seeing the coast clear, tiptoed to the elevator panel and typed the code for the basement. Without working lights in the elevator, nor windows in the underground basement, we were immersed in darkness as soon as the elevator began its descent. The doors opened to nothingness, as much the possibility of the legal department’s shag carpeting as a bottomless chasm. I hesitated, but seeing as how this was my harebrained scheme, it was mine to take the risk. I stepped out, as expected, onto carpet, and I felt my way forward until I reached the secretary’s desk. I smacked my shin against the desk with a noisy clatter, cursing aloud, and I immediately heard a “ding” and the elevator doors closing. “No, wait, James!” I called, and the doors slid back open. “I only hit my leg.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “Nervous reaction.”
I put my arm straight out and bade James to walk toward my voice; he bumped into my arm after a moment. “Now,” I whispered, “where was the elevator mainframe?” Something about the dark made it seem appropriate to whisper, even though we’d been speaking normally before.

“Last door down the hall on the left,” James said.

“All right.” I guided him over to the desk. “Might as well stay here and let only one of us stumble around.” Putting my arms in front of me again, I walked until I reached the elevator, then turned right, down the hall I remembered from having been there for my meeting with Craig from Legal. Laying my hand against the wall, I counted the doors as I went past. Craig’s had been the fourth door on the right, I recalled, and I confirmed it by tracing my fingers over the nameplate on the wall.

Pausing at his door, a strange urge overtook me. I tried the knob and the door creaked open. It was just as dark inside as in the hallway. Walking forward, I felt one of the two chairs in front of his desk against my leg, then maneuvered around it to the desk itself.

I put my palms flat on his desk, fingers outstretched, moving my hands in circular motions to try to find his computer. One hand hit something round and plastic, which toppled before I could move away. The sound of pens and pencils rolling across the desk and crashing to the floor echoed throughout the room. I froze, as if those small sounds would bring the entire building toppling down on top of me—but nothing happened. My other hand alighted on Craig’s keyboard, and from there, his computer monitor. I pressed the small button on the front to turn it on, and the room was lit with the gray-white glow of the monitor’s blank face. I was momentarily blinded by the sudden brightness; the room was by no means illuminated, but after having been enveloped in so much darkness, it took a moment before I could make the room out clearly.

First, I ducked down and retrieved the writing utensils on the floor, uprighting the pencil holder and returning what had fallen. Hopefully, if the next morning Craig found the pencil holder in a different place than where he’d left it the day before, he’d only blame the cleaning service. Then, I turned toward my real target: Craig’s filing cabinets. The second drawer banged against its frame when I pulled the handle, as locked as Ryan’s door. Returning to the desk, I found a set of keys in Craig’s top drawer, the smallest of which opened the filing cabinet immediately. Apparently, Craig hadn’t been expecting much in the way of burglary.

It took me a few minutes, but I eventually found the manila folder that Craig had held in front of me, back before my Hiatus—my “file” as it were—and lifted it out. There were only a couple of items inside: receipts for my paychecks from each of my freelance projects, brief memos from the floors that had recommended me for future work, Craig’s write-up of my fabricated incident with the sixteenth floor, and the résumé that I’d presented to WalsTec, back when the company first took me on. Here, I’d listed all my work experience, the programs I knew and programming languages I was fluent in—and then, at the bottom, in an effort to make myself seem well-rounded, I included my interest in acting and the few plays I’d done in high school, glossing over my rejections. I’d nearly forgotten about including it until Craig had brought it up, and now, with my freelancing at Webster restored and a scheme to leave the sixteenth floor, it felt like time to put all that behind me.
Looking back, I think something about my experiences with Sally, my time working again at the theater—perhaps that James and Sharon and everyone else seemed to see it as such a good thing—made what I could never have feel repulsive to me. I took the résumé out of the folder—Craig might miss it, whenever the next time it was that he looked in the file, but there was no more evidence to connect me with taking it than there was to Craig having simply misplaced it—and began to tear it in half.

At the sound of the first rip, there was another sound, which coincided so well with the tearing of the paper that, for a moment, I couldn’t place what I’d heard. Then came the slow but hurried beat of footsteps—James’ version of running, I realized—and I recognized that what I’d first heard had been the elevator’s “ding,” signifying a car’s arrival. James came to the door of the office, wordlessly, but he looked at me with eyes wide in panic.

“Get in here and shut the door,” I said. He did, rushing over to me. I reached to turn off the computer monitor. There wasn’t much to hide behind in the office. “Go under the desk,” I told him.

James tilted his head to look behind the desk. “I can’t get under there,” he said. “I can barely stand up from a chair without help.” His voice held levity at the thought, despite the situation. Then, seriously, he said, “You hide.”

“My mess,” I replied. “I’m not hiding if you’re not.” As I heard the elevator doors open, I hit the monitor button, hoping whoever was coming down would see only darkness and not investigate further.

We heard the elevator doors close, then nothing. I prayed in vain that the elevator movement might have been some automatic reflex, just a fluke in the system. For a minute, there was silence, except for James’ raspy breathing beside me. His breaths seemed to consist of a series of small gasps for air, the congestion apparent when he exhaled, but I didn’t have time to worry about it.

There was a flash of light under the door, as if someone had circled a flashlight across the lobby and down the hallway. James very nearly stopped breathing entirely. Then, we heard someone beginning to walk down the hallway. The beam of the flashlight appeared and disappeared as whoever it was began opening doors all along the hallway, peering inside. I very nearly stopped breathing myself. There was no room, even, to hide behind the door when it opened; whoever it was would probably open the door far enough to touch anyone standing there, and besides, there wasn’t enough room for both James and myself to hide behind it together.

I saw the flashlight brighten and then disappear, and heard noises of a person in the office next door. The beam returned. I heard the knob turn on Craig’s door. It creaked open, and then there was a flashlight pointed straight at the two of us. A figure stood in the doorway. I squinted into the light.

“Steve?”

I had been expecting the police, summoned by some security measure James and I hadn’t accounted for. Instead, I recognized the voice immediately. “Andy?”

He turned the flashlight upward to illuminate his face, then shone it back at us. Seeing me squint, he pointed it down toward our waists, but not before shining it at James for one protracted second. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “And is that who I think it is?”
“God, am I glad to see you.” I circled around Craig’s desk and leaned against the front. James sat down in Craig’s swivel chair. “James, this is Andrew Peterson, head of the troubleshooting department on the sixth floor. Andy, this is James, yes, our former doorman.”

“I take it the address I gave you was right, then,” Andy said.
“Yeah.” I indicated the flashlight in his hand. “Why are you still in the building?”
“We’ve got a program we need fixed by tomorrow and we’re still pretty far from done. I know it’s against company policy, but I figured I’d pull an all-nighter. I was just taking a little nap break when I heard the elevator, thought I’d see who else was here.”
“Well, you found me.”
“Doing what, exactly?”
“I just replaced the working version of my part of the sixteenth floor’s current project with a faulty version.”
Andy looked at his shoes, shook his head, then pulled out one of the chairs in front of Craig’s desk and sat down. “This is all tied up with the whole mess a while back? It’s revenge time?”
“It’s ‘get myself the hell out time.’”
Andy flicked the flashlight beam toward James. “Where’s he fit in?”
“He’s just along for the ride,” I said quickly.
“I’ve got the elevator codes,” James added.
Andy and James stared at each other across the desk. “I have to say,” Andy said, “I liked you a lot more than our new doorman and his dog.”
“Thank you.”
“Are you making sure Steve is taking care of himself?”
“I’m trying,” James replied.
“Good enough,” Andy said. He turned to me. “And what do you need down here?”
“I’ve got to erase the elevator log before we leave.”
Andy scratched at his bald spot. He regarded me for a while with one squinted eye. “And who’s erasing the record that shows you left?”
I looked to James, who looked back at me just as bewildered. We couldn’t help but smile. A doorman and a computer programmer breaking into a building, indeed.
Andy laughed. “All right, get out of here, and I’ll erase the log after I hear the elevator go. Otherwise, I wasn’t here, I never saw any of this.”
“Thank you,” I started to say, and he interrupted, “Hey, so long as you get those guys, just buy me a round sometime and we’ll call it even.”
He shined the flashlight for us as I returned Craig from Legal’s file to the cabinet, and then James and I walked back to the lobby and into the elevator. “Well,” I said to James, “that was lucky.”
He nodded his chin toward the half-torn résumé, which I’d picked up when we left. “What were you doing?”
I smiled. “Taking care of some old business.” I crumpled it into a ball and stuck it in my pocket. “Come on,” I said. “Let’s go home.” James followed behind me out to the street, and in the dark, I wouldn’t know until later if the look on his face was one of agreement or consternation.
Chapter Fourteen – Four Glasses

A bottle of champagne lay half-submerged in a silver bucket of ice, next to four long champagne glasses. Tied by twine to the bucket’s handle was a note on off-white paper, reading “Congratulations on your newest success. I’m watching you. A. Webster.” It had arrived by elevator from the top floor, Simple told me, moments before I arrived.

As was becoming routine by then, the four of us sat around the conference room table, a laptop glowing in the center. McDaniel was copying the various pieces of the database from the sixteenth floor’s employees off the network and combining them into the compiler. When he pointed at me, I took a jewel case from my briefcase and handed him the CD. The laptop’s drive whirred as he accessed my work.

Ryan eyed the champagne up and down, then leaned toward me. “Apparently, we’re making a fair impression upstairs,” he said, and I answered, “Apparently.”

McDaniel pushed back from the table. “We’re good to go.”

“Wait, wait!” Simple drew the champagne from the ice and began tearing the foil from the cork. McDaniel, closest, pulled Simple’s shoulder back so that his eye wasn’t right above where the bottle might explode open. Simple finished, thankfully without injury, and poured, each of us taking a glass. “OK, now,” Simple said, and McDaniel, rolling his eyes, wheeled his chair back to the laptop. We raised our glasses as his finger came down on the RETURN key.

I put the glass to my lips and sucked the champagne down, as the laptop suddenly crashed.

“What the hell?” McDaniel slapped the side of the laptop’s monitor. It blinked once and returned, still displaying a list of all the files on the hard drive, followed by an ellipsis and the word “deleted.”

“Stop it!” Simple said, moving to stand over McDaniel’s chair.

The larger man tried the keyboard reset, and then hit the power button. “Won’t respond.”

Simple turned to look at Ryan and me, his lazy eyes now wide with panic. “A bug!”

“A goddamn computer virus.” Ryan set down his glass, came around the table and slammed the laptop closed. “I told upstairs that we’d have this ready for them today, and we’ve got a goddamn computer virus?” I’d never seen Ryan’s veneer of calm slip so completely.

“Could be anywhere,” McDaniel murmured. “No way to know with it all put together.”

“How the hell long do you think that’s going to take to fix?”

It was Simple who spoke up, his brilliance rearing its head. “Couple of weeks if the problem’s clear. Might be months if it’s hidden.”

“Months!” Ryan began pacing in front of the inner offices’ double doors. “Do you know how much shit we’re going to get for this?” His eyes rested on me, standing calmly at the end of the table. “I don’t know why you drank that champagne, Matthews,” he said. “We might as well send it right back up.”

I put my glass down on the table with a noisy bang. McDaniel and Simple turned from the laptop. “Maybe I can save you some time,” I said. Though nervous, I tried to
sound firm—the same firmness they’d had when they revealed what they’d done to me. “Most of the virus is combined in the pieces I turned in.”

Simple’s voice emerged as a high-pitched shriek. “What?”

Brad Ryan walked around the table and I took a step back, momentarily fearing violence. “You stupid fuck,” he shouted. “Is this your idea of revenge? What makes you think we won’t just cut out your parts of the database and fire you now?”

“Because my stuff’s only half of it. The rest of the virus is somewhere else. Fire me if you want, but it’ll still take months for you to fix the problem.”

I held Ryan’s angry glare. The bug had been generated by a combination of elements in both my work and the work of Simple’s that I’d replaced, welded together in the compiler. Even if they took my part out, they’d still have to sift through what had been created in the compiler to extrapolate it back to Simple’s work, where a glitch would still reside even without my files, making the database run slower. In their cockiness, they’d scheduled the project to be completed so close to WalsTec’s deadline, that by the time they finished, they’d be hopelessly late. There was silence around the table. It was McDaniel, of them all, who took my hint first. “Or?”

“Or, I give you the files to fix all of this right now in exchange for you recommending—and I mean ‘demanding’—a promotion for me when this project is over. I want to be rid of you.”

Ryan stood right in front of me, his finger wagging in my face. “You stupid fuck,” he repeated. “And here all this time I thought you were starting to see reason. You think we’re just going to bend to your blackmail—”

“Brad.” John McDaniel spoke the name clearer and calmer than anything I’d ever heard McDaniel say before, a world of meaning in his voice and in the look on his face when Ryan turned around.

Ryan stared at him, but seemed to shrink after a moment, his shoulders hunched in defeat. “John,” Ryan said, pleading, but the choice had already been made.

When Ryan sat down, I wondered briefly if he would indeed remain head manager of the sixteenth floor, or if the power would shift to McDaniel after all, despite Ryan’s predictions that night in the bar.

“Fix it,” McDaniel said to me. “You’ll get your recommendation.”

I allowed myself a small smile, but I wasn’t going to let success override common sense. “You start the letter,” I replied. “We’ll send it and the fixed program together.”

I sped home, loving the velocity at which I traveled and at the same time wanting to make the drive last as long as possible, cherishing the freedom. Every San Francisco hill I left behind me felt like an obstacle overcome, something else that couldn’t stop me. Feeling refreshed, feeling indestructible, feeling—perhaps for the first time—in control, I bounded up the stairs to my apartment.

The door was open, and I wondered momentarily if I’d forgotten to close it when I’d left that morning. After the previous night’s breaking-and-entering adventure, I’d given James the day off, though it was possible he’d returned early. I was too excited to really be adequately concerned; sticking my head through the doorway, I called, “James?”

“He’s not here.” Sharon came out of the kitchen. It was going on about two-and-a-half weeks since I’d seen her, and she sparkled in my sight with the nostalgia of
something half-forgotten and now remembered. She was dressed unusually nicely, a long tight navy blue dress with a thin V-neck, but it couldn’t disguise the look of discomfort on her face as I shut the door behind me. She said, “James told me you were looking for me.”

“Yeah.” I put my arms around her waist. “I hadn’t heard from you in a while. I know I’ve never been the best at calling back, but when I couldn’t reach you, I got worried.”

She relaxed momentarily in my arms, but the look of discomfort returned, and she put her hands on my shoulders to push me away. “I came because I needed to give this back to you,” she said, walking to her purse on the kitchen counter. She took out her keyring and slipped off the key to my apartment, holding it out to me.

I kept my hands by my sides. “What are you doing?”

“Tagliere’s paying for me to take some pre-law classes out near Berkeley for a while to see if there’s any chance I might start taking more responsibility in the firm. I’ll probably be there a few months before I’m back in town again.”

“You’re leaving? Why didn’t you tell me you were thinking about this?” I watched her stare at the key dangling from her fingers while she sucked on her bottom lip nervously. “Why are you giving me my key?”

“Tagliere’s offered this before and I turned him down because I didn’t want to move, but lately I’ve been thinking it’s time to make a change. I would have told you but, hell, like you said, you aren’t the easiest person to find. There’s too much you and I aren’t talking about, Steve. It’s getting too easy for us not to talk about things, and maybe we shouldn’t have free access to each other’s lives right now.”

“Is this because of Sally Selvalan?”

She sighed and looked away. “It’s since you explained this whole James thing to me. He’s a really sweet man, no question about that, and I love the time I’ve spent with him. But you don’t need me. You never have. And for a while I thought that was fine and modern and the way it should be, but lately I’m thinking maybe it’s just not for me.”

“Sharon, look, I don’t have to tell you things have been pretty complicated lately.”

“That’s just my point. When things get rough, your natural reaction is to shut me out instead of letting me help.”

“That’s just the way I am,” I started to protest. But when I saw the finality of her hand holding out the key, I felt a guilt similar to that from facing James’ anger at the Golden Gate Park. I’d been blessed in my life with people who cared about me, but that caring so quickly turned to disappointment. I could see how for months this had been coming inevitably, though my heart sank at the thought of letting her go. I took my key out of her hand and slipped it into my pocket, retrieving my own keyring. There was something unseemly, I felt, about trying to reason with someone who was breaking up with you, as if finding the right path of logic might make them change their mind. And what then? Would I remain with her, knowing that I’d talked her in to staying with me? I struggled to pull her key off my key ring’s metal hook; it popped off with a reluctant snap. “I wish you the best,” I said, trying to keep my demeanor cool. “Good-bye.”

“I didn’t want this to be bitter,” she said. “I don’t want to leave you with hard feelings.” She stood behind the rocking chair, echoing the positions James and I had sat in on his first day, so many months before. “Can’t we keep in touch, see how things go?
We’re good, Steve. I’m not saying we’re not. But maybe we both need to see if this is it or if there’s something that’s a better fit out there.”

“I don’t know how to change!” I said, starting to feel frustrated, panicky. The words hung there. “I don’t.” I thought of James’ critique of my putting a virus in Simple’s work, how all he thought I’d accomplish was lowering myself to the sixteenth floor’s level. But what other choice did I have? “I wish I could be the kind of man you want me to be, but I don’t know how. If we’re making a break, we should make a clean one.”

“Damn it!” Her hand came down with a muffled thump on the top of the rocking chair’s upholstery. “Can’t you see I care about you? Could I break through that rock-solid, thickheaded exterior long enough for you to see that I’m coming from a position of caring about you here?”

“If caring about me is leaving, you’ve got a funny way of showing it.” She said my name, but I interrupted her. “Sharon, you shouldn’t be my be-all-and-end-all any more than I should be yours. Relationships shouldn’t be about need. We shouldn’t be looking to each other to make us whole people. We should be able to do that on our own.”

“Maybe that’s the case. But everybody’s got to lean on someone sometime. Or are you going to keep paying off strangers all your life?”

“That’s not fair.”

“It is fair. Or if it isn’t, tell me why. Are you that bad at needing people that you had to resort to this?”

I didn’t know what to say, and I watched as she clenched her eyes shut, then paced away, from the door to the chair and back. “Tell me,” she said. “I’m asking you a question for the first time in this relationship and by God, I want an answer. We’ve been smiling and laughing and accepting James being here without question, and I’m sorry, you know what? I need to know.”

“All right, you know what?” I moved to the rocking chair, kneeling on it, facing her. She held the chair steady so that it didn’t dip toward me, the two of us in a sudden tug-of-war between ourselves and gravity. “When things are good, Sharon, you and I are great. We’re fantastic. But sometimes things are bad. When the sixteenth floor passed my work off as their own, that was bad. Now, maybe that was a time when it was true to say, ‘things will get better,’ but it’s not always the case. Sometimes, things won’t get better. Sometimes, that’s the truth, and we don’t do each other any good feeding each other lies instead of helping each other accept what’s what.”

She shrugged, defeated. “I’m sorry, Steve. I care about you, and if you’re looking for someone to tell you that you can’t do things, maybe you’re right and that isn’t me. And if you consider that lying, then fine, you’re right, I’ll lie to you day and night until the sun doesn’t shine, and I’ll never once feel guilty about it.” She let go of the chair, letting it rock forward, and I stood up.

“The bottom line,” she continued, coming around the chair, “is that we’re together and I’m in your life, or I’m out of it, and I’ve already seen how it’s going to be if we keep on.” She put a hand on either side of my face and gave me a long, hard kiss on the mouth. With more will than I think I’ve exerted on anything before, I tried to remember it, to keep every contour and sensation for the months and years I knew then that it would never again be there, but I had no more luck holding onto it than I did holding on to the
sensation of our very first. “Take care, Steve,” she said, starting for the door, turning once more before she left for good. “What you call lying, I call love.”
Chapter Fifteen – Care and Care Alike (aka The Big Lie)

“What’s up?” I envisioned Andy pushing his chair away from his desk on the other end of the phone.

“Bored,” I replied. My home office was dim as daylight receded. James was asleep on the couch. “Tried your apartment, but I got the machine, so I figured you were still at work. Want to get a beer tonight?” In the day after Sharon left, there had been no word from Webster, either to announce a new project with the sixteenth floor or a promotion to the seventeenth, and I felt restless, a tightness in my chest and arms at the prospect of a night in front of me like an empty computer screen at the start of a project, waiting to be filled with whatever fate might bring.

“Sorry, man,” Andy said. “Wish I could, but I’m swamped with work.” We hung up, and I watched the last light slip from the room.

James had returned the morning after Sharon left, with a cautious look that said he expected to find me in heartache, the apartment a realm of despair. I was sad, yes, but the sadness was a recurrent, not continual, thing, stabbing more at the times when I would silently rebuke myself for reaching for the phone out of habit, having forgotten that Sharon was gone. James, in a way, seemed vaguely disappointed, as if he’d hoped Sharon’s departure would effect some change in me that he didn’t actually see.

My salvation came early the next morning in the form of a call from Craig From Legal, telling me to report to WalsTec’s seventeenth floor later that afternoon.

The sole manager of the seventeenth floor was as hands-off as the sixteenth floor had been grimy-hands-on. “Here’s your assignment,” he said, a slim dark-haired fellow a couple of years younger than myself, his pants held up with black suspenders. He didn’t even bother to introduce himself, just stood waiting for me in the meeting room with a folder outstretched. “Email if you have any questions.” He swiveled perfectly on his heels and started toward the inner offices.

“Wait!” I hurried after him. “When do you need me in again?”

“I can send instructions and design specs to you by messenger.” His eyes fluttered, looking slightly alarmed at having extended conversation. “I run a very efficient floor here. I see no need for freelancers to be working in the office.”

The projects from the seventeenth floor were grander, larger in scale than anything I’d had to work on before. The floor offered grand dinners to the employees and their visiting families because, most nights, the employees were so busy that they couldn’t spare the time to go home. I was finding that I had no need to stop by, however; Andy said he’d heard the manager of the seventeenth floor eschewed conversation with the majority of his employees, preferring to work more by memo than actual contact, and that my two minute meeting had actually been something of a phenomenon.

It was fine with me. I was working—creating—as I’d wanted, with the company encouraging, even forcing upon me, my independence. I still felt Sharon’s absence, but I think I would have found myself too busy to see her even if she had been around. I could easily have worked straight through the night many times and still not made headway on the programming I had in front of me. But the money—for the time Webster demanded, they made it worth both my and their employees’ whiles. I could only imagine what might be in store for me one, two, three floors up, but as the days went on, I gave
promotion less and less thought. The fires of my ambition seemed to have been sated, dying down to hot coals. This was what satisfaction felt like.

I heard rustling in the hall before James called “Steve,” and I swiveled my chair around to find him supporting himself against the doorway. This was unusual—usually James waited to ask me questions until I came out to the living room. “Let’s go out,” he said. “Go bowling.”

“You can barely stand.” It was true. It seemed as though he was trapped in the doorway, too weak to go forward or back. He looked down. I felt embarrassed to have pointed out his infirmity and searched for another reason. “Besides, I have too much work to do.” I stood and put one arm around his waist, leading him back to the living room, feeling his bones knocking together underneath his skin like a half-full duffel bag. I lowered him back down to the couch. “Maybe you should go home, get some rest.”

“No, no.” He sat back on the cushions, staring at me through slitted lids. “Someone’s got to make sure you come out of there for dinner.”

“Why don’t you call Sharon?”

We sat at the table, eating a seafood ravioli with lobster marinara. Though James had grown weaker, he still insisted on cooking dinner, of qualities exquisite. It was about two months since Sharon had left, and in that time James and I hadn’t talked about her once. I looked at him with wonder. I had taken his silence as an acknowledgment that he did, in fact, know all the details of her and my break-up, through whatever means of communication he and Sharon had set up between themselves. But there was something in his manner when he said that, however, a plain curiosity to his face and an innocence in his voice that had otherwise been missing lately, which suggested to me that right then, at that very moment, he had no idea. “James, Sharon and I broke up.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. With my workload, I could have eaten dinner in front of the computer each night and still have had plenty to do, but I made myself come out and eat with James, to make sure I got at least a small change of scenery each day. The metro section of the newspaper lay on the table beside him. With James usually staying in and sleeping most of the day while I worked, I added to his list of chores reading a newspaper each night before dinner, just so we would have something to talk about. “I know,” he said softly, almost petulantly. “You should call her anyway. She cared about you.”

“I cared about her,” I said. He looked at me expectantly. “Caring’s not enough. Attraction’s not enough. There’s an ineffable thing working relationships have, and ours didn’t have it. It’s not fair to keep bringing her back if that’s never going to be there.”

“Fair, shmair,” James said. “You’re far too worried about too many things that just don’t make a difference. You care about her, she cares about you. Be together, let the rest take care of itself.”

“I was perfectly happy to do that. She’s the one who left, because that wasn’t enough.”

“Do you really think that? Or do you think she was looking for you to make a change in the relationship?”

“James, if I tried to be what I’m not, how long do you think that would last?” I put down my fork. “How long until consciously or unconsciously the energy I was
exerting to be Sharon’s ideal man boiled over into resentment and the whole relationship went to hell? At least here it was slightly amicable.”

He shook his head. “You talk about change like it’s such a bad thing. ‘She’s trying to change me, I’m trying to change her, we might hate each other if we can’t be …’ blah blah blah.” Leaning forward, he looked me in the eye, tapping the table with his words. “You love each other. You certainly don’t not love each other. A little change here and there, who cares? You love each other. When you get to be my age, you learn, all these thoughts of being yourself, they don’t matter. They’re not important. You love her, that’s what’s important.”

“I think you make it sound too easy.”

“It’s easier than you think. Call her.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, but I didn’t, nor did I call her, and James never brought it up again.

James’ continued presence was, in some ways, an anachronism. Maybe I didn’t need him there as I had before, without the looming danger of the sixteenth floor’s next move. He still arrived every morning, though, and had lunch and dinner ready as I worked through the day, so the question of a change never came up and I didn’t broach it.

“I got a call,” he said one morning. I was on my way from the kitchen to the bedroom to get dressed. “Webster wants to know if I’ll come back.”

“Be the doorman again?” I already knew the answer. I’d been with the seventeenth floor about two-and-a-half months, and in that time I’d seen a string of temporary doormen come and go. Quiet, shy ones, and ones who’d talk so long I’d have to excuse myself to get into the building. Ones who slept on the job. Ones who paced like guards at Buckingham Palace. There was a cute redhead, the only woman the entire time, whom I considered asking out until I decided the irony might be a little much.

“They weren’t mad you left so suddenly?”

“It looks like my replacement just quit for good.” James lowered himself gingerly on to the couch and remained still for a moment, his eyes closed, before opening them and leaning back. He’d seemed larger the first time he’d sat on that couch. “Something about losing his dog.”

“You thinking about taking them up on it?”

“Too tired,” he said with a little half-smile and, as if illustrating his point, his eyes drooped closed again. I walked down the hall and when I returned he was asleep, eyelids barely fluttering as he breathed. I tiptoed past him to the kitchen, and he didn’t stir. I would remember him there, his hands closed across his chest, relaxing as though the couch was meant for him all along, the soft comfort of another presence existing nearby as I went to continue my solitary work.

“James?” Those days, it wasn’t like him to be gone from his perch on the couch, and if not there, then immediately visible in the kitchen. A few days later, I had agreed to go for a run after breakfast, a compromise between James’ increasingly frequent complaints that I never went out and my maintaining that I had too much work to do.

“Back here,” came his voice, from the direction of my office, and I followed. The door to my office was closed, something I never did, and James leaned against it, his knees bent as if using all his energy to keep himself up. He was clothed, head to toe, in
his old doorman’s uniform, the padding and starch making him look bigger than he had in
months. “Office is closed,” he said. “No work today.”

“James—”

“No work today. All this working, being inside all day, isn’t good for you. Look, see, I’ve got the door.” He smiled, trying to make a joke out of it. “No entry. The office is closed.”

“Very funny,” I said. “But seriously, I’ve got work to do.” I started toward him, and to my surprise, he didn’t move.

There was a crackle of tension, each of us looking at the other as if for the first time. James stood straighter, his persistent weakness for a moment fading away, and I was reminded of when we met, when he seemed prepared to bodily block my entrance into WalsTec, despite his frailty. I stared at him, and it felt for a moment as if we might come to blows, that I might actually have to try to move him in order to get into my office, and that he might actually try to stop me.

We stood frozen like this. Then, I shook myself, as if waking up, and with a little gesture of dismissal from my hands, I walked back to the living room. I heard James follow, moving from the doorway of the office to that of the bedroom, and from there supporting himself against the wall to the living room. I knew I should have waited and stayed to assist him, but I didn’t. Instead, I sat down on the couch and he eased himself into the rocking chair a minute later.

“What’s the problem?” I said.

“I thought getting away from the sixteenth floor was going to make things better for you, not worse.”

“James, I’m really very happy. Why is it so hard for you to accept that?”

“If you’re happy, you don’t seem that way to anyone but yourself.”

“And how do you define ‘me as happy?’”

He waited a long time before responding. “At the movie theater, let’s say. You were more energetic. You were making a difference. You were working with other people.”

“Making minimum wage at a retail job,” I said, slamming my hand down on the couch cushion not unlike Sharon a few months before. “My God, I thought you of all people, seeing me day after day, would be immune to this, James. Just because you can’t out-and-out immediately see what I’m doing on my computer at every given minute, just because my work involves me being inside alone in an office instead of outside in the sun, you conclude it’s somehow lesser work. Well, I’ll have you know, I am a damn fine programmer, maybe better than a theater usher or an aspiring actor. You think what I do doesn’t make a difference—”

“I didn’t mean—”

My stream of words continued, rushing out before I could think about what I was saying. “—but don’t forget what I do pays your salary.”

The statement hung there. James had a look of surprise on his face, the unexpected hurt as palpable as the after-mark of a slap. Finally, James said quietly, “I didn’t mean to suggest that what you do doesn’t matter.” He paused, regrouping, before he spoke again, even quieter. “You know, for a person who said he wanted the truth, you certainly are living a lie.”

“What?”
“The thing I can’t figure is, if you’re aware of it or if you’re fooling yourself.”
I stood from the couch, looking down at him. “That’s enough. Go home for the night.”

James kept his gaze pointed straight ahead. “This isn’t about being good or bad at programming. This isn’t about what you do for a living. This is about retreating from the world.”

“Go home.”

“You’ve been trying to escape ever since you got rejected from those acting schools, and if you want to do that, well, I guess that’s fine. Just don’t pretend it’s not what you’re doing.”

“What do you care whether or not I leave the house? You still get paid either way.”

“That’s exactly my point. You don’t want me to care.” Except that I knew that he did care, cared sooner and faster and stronger than anyone paid to care should, cared so strongly that I suspected, had always suspected, just like I knew Sharon and Sally Selvalan had, that James had more reason to care than he ever let on. And I could see this conversation, this argument, through to its necessary end like a long dark tunnel, and I knew what we’d find at the other side and yet I was helpless to stop us.

I saw the tightness in James’ face, his pain at saying these things we both knew he’d been thinking for so long, and I walked away to the window as he continued. “You don’t want your friends to care or your co-workers or the women that love you, because anyone who cares is just another obstacle between you and shutting out the world. You had a fine system of being left alone until Mr. Ryan went and fouled things up, and I was happy to be a part of your solution but I don’t think I want to be part of your problem, fixing things so you can hide away from the world and don’t even have to leave the house any more.”

It was still outside, no cars driving past. I turned around to face him. “And you’re telling me you’re any different?”

The pain on his face turned to surprise. “What do you mean?”

“At least in my job I’ve got a little bit of autonomy. At least I make my own decisions! You don’t interact with the outside world any more than I do, and all you do every day is what I ask you to. You don’t even have to think for yourself and you’re going to accuse me of taking myself out of society? Please.”

Now he stood, walking away from me, toward the door. He shook slightly, bent in a way that appeared as if he’d been wounded. He opened his mouth, stopped, looked down, and then looked at me, shame-faced, and his voice reflected it. “Maybe you’re right. I could have avoided all of this and I didn’t, and maybe you’re right. Maybe I did the same thing. And maybe there’s only one thing to do about it.”

“James—” I took two steps to the couch.

“You recall that first night we met at the bowling alley and you asked me if I knew anything else you could do about the sixteenth floor?”

I saw him dressed the same as he was then, Sharon at my side, the chill night air following him in. “Yes.”

“I lied to you.” He was fingering the small notepad on the wicker table near the door as he talked. “I had an idea what you should do and I didn’t say anything because
you seemed so sure of yourself with the legal department, but the truth is I had an idea and if I’d said it at the time I probably could have saved you a lot of this.”

I remembered that I’d asked him if he had any other ideas, how he’d paused—All that time, and he hadn’t said anything. “How could you?”

“You were so disconcerted by what the sixteenth floor had done, and you seemed so sure of your plan, I didn’t want to disagree with you. That was before we got to know each other better.”

“So all this time, I’ve been paying you to tell me the truth, and you’ve been keeping secrets?” I felt frozen to the spot, unsure if I wanted to walk away or take the few steps to reach him, to beg him to stay or show him the door. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Because eventually you ended up at the theater, escorting Ms. Selvalan around, and I thought maybe everything would work itself out. I didn’t think it would end up like this.”

“I trusted you!” My voice echoed around the small room.

“And chances are I let you down. Like Sharon did, like everyone who ever told you that you were good whether you are or not, all of it in what we thought were your best interests. And if we were wrong, I’m sorry.” He took up the notepad and a pen from the wicker and tried to write, but his shaking impeded him. He leaned against the rocking chair and wrote, then tore off the piece of paper. He started toward me, but I folded my arms, and he laid it on the coffee table instead. “Use this if you ever get in trouble at Webster again.”

“James.” There was everything in the word: a curse, a question, a plea.

“There’re leftovers in the freezer,” James said.

Then he turned, opened the door, and left.

“Did you encourage Sharon to take that promotion?” I yelled after him, the words unbidden. There was no answer.

I sat staring at the doorway for a long time. A sudden rage took me, and I snatched up the paper from the table, crumpled it and threw it as hard as I could. It hit the wall softly and fell behind the wicker, disappearing. “How dare you,” I whispered.

I sat down on the floor until the noise from traffic outside roused me, and then I stood and went into my office. There was work to do, after all.
Chapter Sixteen – An Unexpected Message

I kept expecting to see James around every corner. In the silence of the apartment, sitting in my office, I’d forget that he was gone and, coming into the living room, the white couch appeared strangely foreign to me, absent a vital piece. In the first week, I skipped dinner twice, forgetting to prepare something because I thought James would do it, and only realizing my mistake when hunger pangs would startle me from programming hours later. I began eating dinner in front of syndicated sitcom reruns, watching whole seasons go by in weeks. It was a placebo, but a poor one. I missed James, missed his conversation, missed his presence. What he’d said about escaping the world hadn’t been true because he’d been there, because in him, I’d had society represented.

On my knees, I scrubbed a rag across the coffee table, leaving the scent of oranges behind. The fingerprints there disappeared—mine, James’, or Sharon’s, I’d never know—but one translucent watermark ring remained behind. I hadn’t really had a lot of time to worry about what James had said. Work kept me as busy as before and now, without James, there were the added concerns of cooking and grocery shopping, as well as cleaning the apartment—something, I admit, I did far less than James had, now that I was the only person regularly residing in the apartment. How had he made these water rings go away? In truth, looking back, I think I believed for the longest time—far longer, perhaps, than I should have—that James would return at any moment. He hadn’t returned his key when he left, as Sharon had, and I may have made too much of this, seeing it as a hint of his intention to return, instead of what I finally understood it to be at the end of those few months—merely an oversight.

I threw the rag in a bucket I kept at the bottom of the coat closet, near the mop I used on the few occasions when I shined the kitchen floor. I barely went into the kitchen, formerly James’ domain, at all. Now that the responsibility of meals, on top of work, reverted back to me, I had begun taking the seventeenth floor up on their dinners more and more. Though most of the employees ate with their families, there were a couple of guys eating by themselves who didn’t mind my taking up the empty seat at their table. They were all of them bland-faced, formless men with dark hair, dark beards, T-shirts with slogans and blue jeans, and I was undoubtedly no more vivid to them than they were to me. We engaged in the conversation of the displaced, the light inconsequential talk of those whose only connection to each other is to be passing through at the same time. I got a sense that I was making my neurotic manager even crazier by showing up at the office so much. When he’d spot me at dinner—always passing through the meeting room, never staying—he’d greet me with a rapid blink of his eyes and an adjustment of his glasses, as if trying to reconcile himself to seeing something that didn’t quite belong.

In truth, I started going to the dinners hoping I might find James at his previous front door post, despite his claims that he was too tired for the job. He never appeared. Sitting with this group of men, together for the moment but ultimately apart, I thought, it was only one way of looking at things to say I’d been trying to shut out the world. I understood what James had charged, but I couldn’t plead guilty to the accusation. If anything, I’d been trying to carve out my own niche in the world. The American dream was to be your own boss, and I’d achieved that as best as I could. Was there a line between self-sufficiency and isolationism, and if so, where had I crossed it?
And even if I had, why was that necessarily a bad thing? Who was the world? Sharon? In what way had I been shutting the world out that it had been trying to get in? And what did it hurt? It wasn’t as though I lived on the street, or needed those around me to take care of me. I kept a roof over my head and food on my table. What other responsibilities did I have as a human being? If I was healthy, what did it matter how many times a day I left my apartment?

And yet, I kept hearing one thing James had said. “You don’t want me to care.” Why had I known at that exact moment that he was leaving? “Anyone who cares is just another obstacle between you and shutting out the world.” What James called shutting out the world, I called seeking the truth. I’d hired him because I’d wanted to know, had it been something I’d missed that had allowed the sixteenth floor to take advantage of me? And it wasn’t something I could have entrusted to Sharon, or anyone else, because I didn’t need to be told that I’d done fine, that everything would be all right. I’d needed the unadulterated truth, unperverted by the ties of those that cared about me. As a matter of fact, I’d paid him solely to ensure that he would not care, to ensure that his interest would be purely financial and never personal. But James had begun to care, it was clear to me then, even if I’d known it before but hadn’t acknowledged it. What his reasons were, I couldn’t say, but I think we both knew the experiment had failed.

“You had a fine system of being left alone until Mr. Ryan went and fouled things up,” he’d said. He was right. I’d had exactly the kind of life I’d wanted, and then when the sixteenth floor threw a roadblock in the way, my instinct had been to seek out someone else’s help. For as long as I’d been holding on to my independence, when trouble began, I’d brought someone else in. I’d agreed to help out Sally Selvalan when I barely knew her at all. I’d taken the job at the Hugo Theater, despite my reservations. It was like the days of first trying to make a name for myself in programming, where work would be the most important thing to me, but I couldn’t convince myself to get up and do it. I pushed my chair away from the table, leaving a mound of pâté on my plate untouched. For a person who prided himself on self-dependence, one of the most disturbing things I could face was the absence of self-comprehension.

It was four months and a week after James left that I found a message on my voicemail from Sally Selvalan.

I remember the date so accurately because I’d finished my first project for the seventeenth floor, and I was just starting my new one. As tight-lipped as my boss seemed to be when there was work to do, his praise flowed like a waterfall at the project’s completion—by email, of course. Still, I considered printing the note and framing it—I’m not sure Nobel Prize winners ever had themselves or their ancestry praised so vehemently.

I’d gone to throw a few frames at the bowling alley. The final specs for the new project were unusually slow coming from on high, and I suddenly found myself in the midst of a rare occurrence—a completely blank space in my work schedule. I hadn’t been bowling since James left, and I nearly skipped all the way there. My arm was rusty—most of my first frames were gutterballs, a far cry from my once near-perfect score—but my serve was back in shape before long.

After two rounds, I sat down on one of the orange plastic chairs behind the lane to check my voicemail messages at home. It had been a while since I’d done so—I received
nearly no phone calls, so I’d stopped picking up the phone to listen for the interrupted
dial tone that indicated a message. But since I’d gone out for the evening, I’d
electronically directed the company’s email server to forward my emails to my home
voicemail system. I knew the seventeenth floor’s manager would never deign to leave an
actual voice message on my phone, so if I wanted to see if the new project was ready for
me to start, my email was the way to go. I could have had my email patched directly into
my cell phone, but I figured I’d reward myself for having finished the first project with at
least two rounds of uninterrupted bowling. If James had waited, surely he’d have seen
that I wasn’t anti-break, just a proponent of taking breaks only when I had the time to
take them.

One message, left only an hour before.

I expected to hear the monotone, frog-throated voice of the spoken e-mail’s
automated system. Instead, the voice was airy, bubbly, out of place in the solitude of the
bowling alley.

“Matthews? It’s Sally Selvalan.” Static marred the line. “Listen, I’m out in
Florence shooting my next movie and they need some extras. Nothing big, just a walk-on
role. They’re using the people around here, but if you happened to be in the crowd, you
could get your name in the credits and who knows? I’ll introduce you around and maybe
something’d come of it. You can call me back …” Her voice faded, then returned.

“Know what? We’re going to be moving around a lot and I’m not sure how you can get
me. I’ll call you back in a few days, OK? Talk to you then.” There was the beep of a
foreign dial tone, then nothing.

I took off my shoes in a daze, carried them up to the counter and paid for my
games. I walked out to Market Street, heading for the Hugo Theater.

The answer, unquestionably, was “no.” Sally had been right—all these years, I
could have tried out for independent acting companies, could have gone to other
auditions, could have joined a community theater. But that first round of acting auditions
had confirmed what I’d feared all along: even if friends and parents and teachers said I
was great, what if I was only great compared to the people around me, and lousy
compared to the world? Why should I unswervingly go to audition after audition like a
bird smacking its head against a plate glass window when my time could be better spent
getting on with my life? While the thought of going to Florence with Sally Selvalan
sounded appealing, I’d made my choices long ago and I’d stick to them.

James, I knew, would say Italy! With Sally Selvalan! If the only thing keeping
me in San Francisco was my job, he’d argue, then I really had nothing keeping me in San
Francisco. These doubts you’ve had, he’d say, about your thoughts versus your actions,
maybe it means you gave up on acting too easily. Sally certainly thought so.

It was not, however, as if I could call Sally right up. What was I supposed to do,
put off starting the new project to pack a bag while I waited for Sally to call me back?
What if her next call said the offer had been rescinded? I’d end up hopelessly behind.
Not to mention, would James really expect me to break another contract with WalsTec—
this time for real? I watched the Hugo box office from across the street, a few steps back
in an alley. A red-suited employee took tickets in the booth—I couldn’t even tell gender
from where I stood, only that I didn’t recognize the person. It could just as easily have
been me. After everything I’d done to get back in to Webster, if my acting attempts with
Sally were a resounding flop, I’d be back looking for programming jobs in no time, without even being able to list WalsTec as a reference.

Maybe if Sally were to make her offer in a year, after I completed the new project and another. With the troubles in my record at Webster expunged, I could take a leave of absence, see what she was doing then. But I’d fought far too hard for this job to let it go now, to chase dreams I thought I’d given up a long time before. I walked back to my car, still replaying my arguments in my head, fighting with a James who wasn’t even there.

I met the phone’s ring this afternoon, three days after Sally’s message, with a bit of eagerness, even though I knew I’d have to refuse Sally’s offer. It would be good to hear from her.

“Sieler’s dead.” It was Andy, and he was nearly whispering. Even though the words at first meant nothing to me—Sieler? Where had I heard that name before?—I knew what he meant, knew what he was saying even before he explained it to me. “Your friend. James Sieler. He’s dead.” Andy paused, then added, “I’m sorry.”

The death itself, I couldn’t process the death. It had been nearly five months since I’d seen James. I couldn’t settle on how to feel about the death. “How do you know?”

“He gave the hospital Webster as his next of kin. Legal’s still got his file. Word’s been passing through the hallways. I heard, thought you would …” Andy’s voice trailed off, and we stayed on the phone in silence. “I’m sorry.”


“No,” I said. “I mean, yes, I did, but no. I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry,” Andy said.

“Yeah,” I replied, answering questions he hadn’t asked. “I don’t know.”
Chapter Seventeen – Memories

Earlier this evening, I found a bottle of single-malt scotch that I’d kept from a Christmas fruit basket from the fifteenth floor, and lined up every shot glass I had in the apartment, repeating the row of golden-brown liquid over and over, five, six, seven, ten, eleven, until I stopped counting. Anything to quiet the swirling in my head, the hurt that wouldn’t abate, because it couldn’t reconcile itself. He’d been gone. He hadn’t been going to come back. As far as I’d been concerned, he’d already been dead. The room spun dangerously when I stood from the couch, the hallway disappearing behind me. He’d been gone, made himself dead to me, and now he was actually dead. Should I feel different? Sadder? I collapsed on my bed, fully clothed.

I woke hours, minutes later, just a few minutes ago, and sat straight up. It was still dark outside. I heard James. “We don’t always pick and choose what happens to us,” he’d said. “Maybe it still would have happened, despite any preparation.” I’d said, “Are you going to stand in front of this building for the rest of your life?” and later he’d replied, “What’s one more adventure?” I’d said, “I’m tired of being done because someone else says I’m done.”

We don’t always pick and choose what happens to us.

“Not everything really has an explanation, you know?” he’d said, and when I asked, “Like the bowling alley?” he’d replied, “Right,” in that tone that said it wasn’t what he meant.

“What’s so good about having things the way they were?” he’d asked. “Why not move on, see where this new life takes you?”

What’s one more adventure?
He’d said, “There’s something to be said for noting where you were happiest.”

We don’t always pick and choose what happens to us. Success won’t keep you warm at night. Maybe it still would have happened, despite any preparation.

And now, I just can’t stop thinking, what had James thought that night when I came to him in front of WalsTec? What had he known then about his own death? When he learned he had far fewer days than he ever imagined to become the person he wanted to be, what did he do? When he realized he could never be what he wanted to be, how did he live his life?

When James found out his life was going to be over, was going with me what he did the next day?
Chapter Eighteen – The Man on the Top Floor

When my parents brought me home from the hospital the day after I was born, I imagine that they had one pervading wish, that when I left that home for good eighteen years later, that in those eighteen years they’d done their best to ensure that I was greater, smarter, and more prepared to take on the world than the defenseless baby they brought home. Three hours ago I left my apartment, believing that when I returned, I would know more, understand more about the last year of my life than I had when I’d left. I do not. And all I have to show for that venture is a brown paper bag and a sticky-note, and a chance, which may be all anyone can really ask for.

I felt the alarming sensation of the Webster elevator speeding upward at two, three times its normal pace. The tenth and eleventh floors blurred past so quickly I couldn’t make out any details. I saw the seventeenth and then higher, panic overtaking me, the nineteenth, the twenty-second, the twenty-third, fearing the elevator would crash through the ceiling or worse, be crushed against it—and then the whole space was condemned to darkness. Still rising, the shadows complete, and then, an easing in my gut, the elevator slowing, and a square passageway of light floated down into view before the doors. The elevator opened.

The room was cavernous, much larger than anything I thought the building could contain. It’s only piece of furniture, aside from the trademark delicately placed plants, was a great raised desk, not unlike the silver-blue one in the legal department basement, but this was a deep brown mahogany, clear on the other side of the great room. Behind it, a woman sat staring at a computer screen, and above her, in gilt gold letters, the wall bore the words WEBSTER, ALEXANDER, AND SONS. The door on her right led undoubtedly to the CEOs’ offices.

She glanced up from her desk as the elevator doors opened and our eyes met, before I ducked to the side within the elevator and began frantically pushing the lobby button. I didn’t know why James had sent me there, but I wasn’t going to be milling around the CEOs’ offices without a reason.

“Sir?” came the woman’s voice, polite but insistent. “Sir?” I pressed the lobby button in staccato time, and when the elevator didn’t move, I began to alternate between “lobby” and “door close,” “lobby” and “door close.”

“Sir?” rang her voice again. I began to feel ridiculous, hiding within the elevator when we both knew I was there.

I stepped to the side and into the room, giving a little wave. “Hi,” I said. Only a few weeks earlier, the decision-making brains of Webster had finally automated the elevator system, removing the need for a doorman altogether; an employee simply typed the code for their own floor, and the elevator took them up. How could I explain my access? I didn’t even know what I was doing there myself.

“Can I help you?” The woman wore small glasses with perfectly round frames, and her hair was pinned up above her head, as if she was expecting to be busy and had preemptively removed all distractions. She studied the flat screen monitor while her fingers raced over an keyboard, searching for something. “I’m sorry, but it doesn’t show that Mr. Webster has any appointments this afternoon.”
The intercom on her phone buzzed, startling us both, and a man’s voice said, “It’s all right, Jeannie. Show him in.”

The woman eyed me suspiciously as she came from behind the desk and turned the knob on the wooden door, saying, “Right this way.” The instinct to run hadn’t left me completely, and I considered trying again to move the halted elevator. But it appeared I was effectively trapped—trapped and, apparently, expected. Though the voice on the intercom had sounded fairly young, in a fugue state as I passed through the doorway I imagined that I would find James within, that he would be Webster, or Alexander. That the whole thing, his death, would turn out to be an elaborate hoax—because, of course, what other kinds of hoaxes were there?

Why else had his parting gift been an elevator code, which lead to the top floor of Webster? Sitting up in bed, the night I learned James had died, I was gripped by the want for things unfinished, that special ache people have for what they can’t get, to make sense of his death in light of what little part of his life I shared with him. Then I remembered, like finding undeveloped film with new pictures of a relative long departed, there was one last unrevealed bit of James still left in my apartment—the note he’d written, crumpled and abandoned behind the wicker. I snatched it from the floor, finding it contained only a number, and the number, a code.

Stepping through the doorway, I had a feeling similar, I imagined, to Dorothy finally seeing the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain. The room spun slightly, not unlike when I saw the Hugo Theater from behind the concession counter for the first time.

The man who stood in front of the near side of his desk, considerably lower than the secretary’s outside, was not, however, James. His dark brown hair was cut short and rounded above his neck, betraying not the slightest hint of gray. He had his back to me, rifling through papers that rested on the desk’s green blotter.

As the secretary closed the door, the man seemed to conclude with the papers, lifting them and smacking their ends on the desk to get them in line, and then laying them down. He turned and his face was smooth, fit and affable, with a smile that spoke of having enough confidence in himself to be able to afford his look of confidence. “Steven Matthews!” he said, stepping forward to extend a hand with a car salesman’s eagerness.

“I must say, I’ve been waiting a good long while to finally meet you.”

I shook his hand instinctively, but I sensed I was failing at keeping my bewilderment from showing outwardly. His handshake, unlike the roughly firm one Craig From Legal had given, was strong but loose in friendliness. He wore a white shirt and suspenders, like my boss on the seventeenth floor, but this man was broader, with wide arms that seemed set to grab the world in a hug. “I’m sorry,” I said, “but I don’t know who … or how …”

He let out a laugh, infectious in its sincerity and lack of ridicule. I still felt ill at ease; this was, presumably, Mr. Webster or Mr. Alexander, though I had to admit, I had always expected someone older.

“Oh, but Mr. Matthews,” he smiled, “you’re exactly what I hoped. Cutting right to the quick. Because of course, what two more important questions are there in life than ‘who are you’ and ‘how do you know me?’ ‘Who is everyone else,’ who are these people outside myself that I can see but never really know, and ‘who am I,’ what’s my place in the world, who does everyone think I am and what do they think of me?’” He stopped to inhale and, suddenly sheepish, indicated two padded chairs in front of his desk and
lowered himself into one. He had this smile that kept reoccurring, even as he tried to keep a straight face, like a quarter of the sun trying to fight off the blocking presence of a lunar eclipse. The CEO’s façade had slipped and, in its place, the embarrassment of an overexcited child. “You’ll have to forgive me,” he said. “It’s just that I get so few visitors with whom I can speak freely. I tend to get carried away.”

I was utterly bewildered. “Were you expecting me?”

“Not exactly,” he said, “though I had it in my head to bring you up here sooner than later.” He uncrossed his legs, stood, and went around his desk, appearing to press some sort of button in the front. A small screen rose from the desktop, so seamlessly embedded that the console had been nearly invisible before it ascended. On it, a gray image appeared, which I recognized immediately: the Webster elevator. “I had the security cameras patched through to my computer screen. Any time the elevator goes above the twenty-third floor without my expecting someone, I can check to see who it is.” He laughed. “Kind of an über-doorbell.”

That he had so few visitors surprised me. I guess I had always imagined the top floor as resembling all the others, only around the conference room would sit a gray-haired Webster, a gray-haired Alexander, and their many sons—adults, teenagers, toddlers, hell, infants. The thought brought insight. “You’re A. Webster,” I said. I remembered now the champagne bottle sent to the sixteenth floor, and the note: “I’m watching you.” “Alexander Webster.” He came back around the desk and sat down. “My father, George Webster, started this company with his best friend, Richard Alexander. My name was meant to be something of a tribute.”

“Is there a Webster Alexander?”

“No, Francis,” he said, and shrugged. “Don’t ask me why. We were both supposed to take over the business after our fathers retired, but Francis has never had much of a head for computers. I send him the necessary paperwork, he signs off on it, his stock portfolio keeps him comfortable, and we don’t bother one another.”

“I just assumed there was a chairman and a board of directors running Webster. It sounds like Francis got the better end of the bargain.”

Webster squinted, and he hummed briefly in thought. “Not exactly. I’m not very content, really, unless I’m working.” He leaned forward with an easy familiarity. “Like you.”

I smiled back at him. He had a point. Then, the uncomfortable feeling returned, and I shifted back in my seat, away. It had been slowly dawning on me throughout the conversation that Webster seemed to have been studying me for some time, and at great length. The thought that he and James might have had some connection returned. “Where is your father?”

“On the beach in Maui. Pop felt he’d put enough years into the business, finally took Mom and built her that house she always wanted. Spoke to them yesterday. Pop’s talking about learning to surf, and Mom’s got a weekly bridge game going with some of the other wives down there. The Alexanders are with them this week, and it sounds like they’re living it up.” He gestured to the computer screen. “Of course, that’s why I’ve got to have all these high-tech gizmos around. Stock might take a turn if the shareholders knew it was just the upstart ‘son’ in here, instead of ‘Webster, Alexander, and.’”

“Not even your employees have any idea,” I said in awe.
“No.” He leaned back in his chair, shifting his shoulders as if to find the chair’s most comfortable spot, and smiled. “By the way, perhaps it’s completely inappropriate for me to cut to our chase, as it were, in the middle of our rising action, but you do know that before you leave here I’m going to ask you to be my business partner, don’t you?”

I resisted the urge to stand up. “Is that it?” My voice was loud with the surprise that I very nearly didn’t feel. All along, I had been waiting for something like this. “Is that why James sent me to you?”

“James? I was so sorry to hear of his passing. He was such a nice man, so friendly. But I didn’t tell James to send you here. If anything, you know him better than I do.”

“Then why am I here? You make it sound as though you’ve been watching me. Weren’t the two of you … ?” I could barely articulate what I’d thought, the little half-completed fantasies that had been surrounding me since I’d stepped off the elevator. Webster, seeing my distress, shook his head in response. “I don’t understand,” I said.

Hadn’t it been some kind of conspiracy, George Webster doubling as his building’s doorman, ushering his employees to their floors, and when I’d come to try to hire him, he’d gone along with it, out of curiosity or something else? When I walked into his office, I’d find that James wasn’t really dead; that his death had simply been a ruse to draw me up there. Or maybe George Webster posed as his building’s doorman, and then faked his own death to send me to see his son, Alexander. Maybe he really was dead. Maybe none of this had ever been about me—it had all been about finding a business partner for his son. Or maybe James wasn’t a Webster at all, maybe he really was the building’s doorman, but also Alexander Webster’s personal assistant, spying on me and reporting back, leaving me when the time was right, faking his death to serve as a catalyst when I didn’t read his note and come to the top floor right away. Maybe Andy was in on it, and the amount she and James had talked, maybe Sharon was, too. Maybe James really was dead, but the rest—the hardest thing for me to accept, suddenly, was that there hadn’t been a reason. That James hadn’t had an ulterior motive at all.

“You’re turning pale,” Webster said, his words rushed with worry. “Do you want me to ring for some water? Tea?”

“No,” I said. “You. How do you know me?”

“I know all my employees,” he said. “Circumstance keeps me from interviewing them all, but that only makes me have to be extra vigilant.” Webster reached into his left pants pocket, shifting his weight to his right to give himself more access, and withdrew a thin handheld computer. He made a few adjustments with the stylus. The monitor on his desk went blank, and I noted a small infrared receiver in its right corner, matching that on the top of the handheld. Webster held the small computer out to me, and I saw that its screen now contained the image of the elevator, which was taking a woman to an unseen floor. Webster manipulated a dial on the handheld’s side, and the perspective shifted to show the woman entering a conference room. Another turn of the dial and another conference room, and another.

“I’ve memorized the names of all my employees and all the freelancers,” Webster continued, “and all their specialties. I knew the day my best doorman quit and I knew John McDaniel called the next day to complain that Steven Matthews was late with a project, and I knew something wasn’t right because Matthews’ work was always exemplary, and McDaniel wasn’t the type to call legal when something wasn’t going his
way. I talked to the legal department and they said it sounded like whatever the problem was, you had offers from other firms, so I told them to do their best to keep you on, because I’m not in the habit of losing good employees. When they said you said you’d come back the next time we had something for you to do, I forgot all about it.”

He feigned heavy breathing, as if the complexity of the story had tired him, pretending to wipe the sweat from his brow. His attention turned from me back to his handheld, pressing a series of buttons. I was beginning to feel as though he’d forgotten my presence entirely when he held the screen out to me again, his brown eyes shrewdly examining mine for a reaction.

The screen showed a still shot of the Webster elevator, time dated seven months ago. Clearly recognizable inside were James and I, dressed head to toe in black, having broken into the Webster building. “It wasn’t until my cameras picked up this, a little while after you were rehired, that I put two-and-two together.”

I couldn’t believe it. “We were caught?”

“Oh,” he laughed, “you were caught red-handed.” He allowed his bright smile to return. “I even knew you’d made an unauthorized entry on Scott Simple’s hard drive. Once I found out there was a connection between your leaving and James leaving, I went back to look at that piece of software McDaniel claimed you abandoned those months ago. Your programming fingerprints were all over it. Between that and your tampering with Simple’s files, it looked to me like there must have been some kind of tit-for-tat going on there, the sixteenth floor doing something to you and you doing something back.”

It seemed, in retrospect, somewhat childish. “You knew about all that, and you just let it go on?”

“Oh, I could have stopped it if I needed to. I had original copies of the work on Simple’s computer. But my unique position forces me to be cautious, and besides, I wanted to see what would happen. I considered it a test, for you. Were you actually out to ruin the company, or just to put yourself in a position where you could continue to work for the company unhindered? I couldn’t really fault you for the latter, could I? And now I want you to do the company one better, by agreeing to stay up here as my partner.”

“And that’s everything?” I still felt as though the whole encounter were one grand joke; as if, at any moment, even more hidden cameras would be revealed, these to capture the disbelieving look of my reaction.

“I’m sorry, you seem disappointed.” The look of dismay on Webster’s face apparently mirrored that on my own. “Have I said something wrong?”

I considered what it meant, that all that time, a higher power had been watching out for me. From receiving the Hiatus to the ease of the break-in, something had kept me going back to WalsTec, despite the logic of simply finding another job. All that time, I’d felt some purpose, some safety, some relevance … even as, in some ways, it had been Webster, I’d attributed it to James.

“No, it’s all right,” I said. “I guess I was just expecting you to be able to tell me more.”

“How so?”

“James and I parted under … less than perfect circumstances. Now I find out he’s died, and I guess … I’m just not sure what that means. I knew he was sick, but he never mentioned anything about dying.”
“Do you think he knew he was dying?”

“Then’s just it. I don’t know if he knew or not. Maybe he didn’t. When James came to work for me, as … an advisor of sorts, he might have already known he was going to die, or he could have found out while he was there and not told me, or didn’t learn until afterward.” I felt my cheeks flush. “He took days off a couple of times. Lord knows if those were doctor’s appointments, or what.”

Webster regarded me sadly. “What would it change, if you knew?”

“It just … it opens so many questions. How did his dying affect our being together? Did he come to work for me just because he was dying? Is that why he left?”

“Weren’t you curious about his reasons before you knew he’d passed away?”

I rubbed my temples, feeling the pressure in my ears that I’d been feeling since the day before when Andy called, a result of holding back tears. “I think I just figured, you know, I was willing to pay him more than he was making here. I thought, between that and being a doorman, why wouldn’t he?” A small smile played on Webster’s lips, and I couldn’t help but smile as well. “I know, that sounds really stuck up, doesn’t it?”

“At least you’re willing to admit it,” Webster said kindly. “There are enough stuck up people out there who aren’t.”

“James called it an adventure once,” I said. “I don’t know, maybe I was just one last thing to do before he died.”

“It sounds to me like he cared too much for you for that to be the only reason.”

“Simple altruism? Could it really boil down to he did it just because he was a good person?”

“You have trouble believing that.” Webster had this way of speaking that allowed statements that, from anyone else, might have seemed a criticism, to arrive instead as a simple offhand statement of fact. I did have trouble believing it.

“He mentioned once an estranged family. Maybe staying with me was some kind of universal penance.” I shrugged. “And then there was the money. He never seemed very well off. For all I know, maybe he was using me all along just to pay his medical bills.”

Webster was silent. The talk of James’ death, it seemed to me, saddened him, and at the same time his eyes remained bright. He appeared exhilarated to be talking about it. The way he remained up there, closeted in his office, it reminded me of how I’d asked James to read the newspaper, so that we’d have something to talk about, given my own sheltered state. At last, Webster said, “Why are you so convinced there must have been something behind it?”

The answer knotted my stomach. “Because otherwise I’ll never get answers.”

“And what do you think the truth is?”

“I don’t know,” I said, looking away. “I always thought there’d be time to find out. I thought that’s what this was.” I indicated his office. “Answers.”

“Did he say anything at all to explain why he sent you up here?”

I saw James standing above me, holding out the piece of paper. I’d refused to take it from him, to let his resignation be something dignified, as if we agreed on it. “Nothing,” I said, and then I heard James, the paper in hand, saying, “Use this if you ever get in trouble at Webster again.” To Webster, I said, “I think he thought I should have come to you originally, instead of letting the sixteenth floor toss me out and trying to get back in myself.”
“He thought you were too independent?”
“Yes, but it’s strange. He thought sending me to you was the right thing to do in
the beginning—”
“Not to handle it yourself,” Webster interrupted, “but to tell the boss and stay with
the company.”
“—but when he finally gave me the code, it was when he was leaving.” I stood,
walking past Webster to stare out the window. “There was this other job he seemed to
like better for me—maybe it made him think twice about sending me to come talk to you.
He all but told me, he thought my continuing to work for you was the wrong thing to do.
But before he left, he gave me the key to keep on doing it.”
““He disagreed with you, but he helped you anyway. That sounds like the best
kind of friend you could have.”
I watched the lush greenness of the San Francisco hills, the myriad cars driving
the streets below. People, I thought. In another lifetime, my loved ones had supported
my acting aspirations even though I didn’t have any talent, even though none of them
ever let slip that maybe I wasn’t good enough to really go anywhere. I’d been too blind
to see it myself, and when I finally realized it, I resented them for supporting me when it
wasn’t the truth. Who knew how altruistic James’ motives, or how selfish? He’d done
his job. He’d remained loyal even in the face of his own disagreement, even when the
rules of his job and the execution of them became a conundrum, like a snake eating its
own tail, James had remained loyal. What more could any of us do?
“But James didn’t know,” Webster was saying, “that I’d offer you the opportunity
to come work directly with me, to come be my partner.”
I turned around to look at him. “I don’t understand why you’re offering me that.
I’m only a freelancer. There must be dozens of people working here better qualified to
be your partner than me.”
“You’re right. I’m sure there are people working here with more experience than
you, especially in management. But hell, if it were just management experience I was
looking for, I’ve been doing fine on my own. The thing is, I can’t run this place in a
vacuum. It’s no good sitting in this office, talking to myself. Beyond experience and
beyond business sense and beyond anything else, I need someone I can trust and someone
I can rely on and someone I know is only interested in doing a good job and being done
with it.”
“But you don’t know me.” His praise felt wrong, undeserved. “I broke into your
building, for God’s sake. What makes you think you can trust me?”
“You do good work, Steven,” Webster said, another of his matter-of-fact
statements. “You turn it in on time, with a minimal amount of problems. Do I know
much more about you than that, and that you broke into my building and hired away my
doorman to be your confidant? Not really. But I find it charming.” He sighed, crossing
and uncrossing his legs. “You know, my therapist told me that we all have a tendency to
attract certain people into our lives. And I said that’s ridiculous. How can I know, before
I’ve ever really spoken to someone at length, if they’re a certain kind of needy or
inconsiderate or whatever my neuroses might require at the moment—or that they’re
caring, or trustworthy. And my therapist said, ‘You just know.’” He held his arms out
broadly. “You just know, Steven. Argue all you want. You just know.”
I tilted my head appreciatively, but inside I was skeptical. I looked out the window again. Could I ever really say I’d “just known” about James? The trust I’d given a complete stranger, that it had turned out so well—had I known from the beginning? Had James? What had it been about him?

“Whatever it was between you and James,” Webster said, “I need that kind of loyalty. A partner, and a friend. You turned to James when you needed someone, and now I’m turning to you.”

Webster was talking about, in essence, my being James. An independence born of dependence—all I had to do was whatever Webster needed. It was self-sufficiency; I could do my job and go home, separate from any of the dangers freelancing might have brought with it. It seemed that all this time I’d been with James, this is what I’d been looking for—not to hire James, but to be hired, as I’d hired him.

I knew, up to that point, that James would have continued to insist that I take Sally Selvalan up on her offer. She waited for me in Florence with a job I had no doubt I wasn’t good at. The bottom line was, I didn’t need anyone to lie to me or tell me the truth—I knew I wasn’t an actor. Going with her would be calculated failure. No gain—but then again, no risk? Why not? Why not leave it all behind and float on the waves of whim? James would say I’d be doing what I’d always imagined, while Webster offered a lucrative position without ever having to think about failure again, because all I’d do was what he wanted. Which to choose?

As I considered it, I couldn’t help but think, maybe James’ job wasn’t exactly what I’d thought. I peered out over the city and wondered where he was buried. For the past few months, I’d found myself wishing, sometimes, that even after James told me he disagreed, he’d stayed.

And still that didn’t feel right.

I wished, if he only had a few months left to live, maybe he could’ve just shut up, you know? Maybe he could’ve just lied, and lived, and stayed.

I turned to look at Webster sitting behind me.

And I didn’t know what to do.

Now I’m back in my apartment, with the contents of the brown paper bag and a sticky-note and a choice to make. I told Webster I needed to think about it. Before I left, he offered a gift, and I asked for one more on top of it.

His gift: the wooly, almost flannel, fabric bowing into the black plastic visor. I reached into the paper bag and pulled out James’ hat, and set it on the kitchen counter. A maroon piece of fuzz came off in my hand.

And the note: another number, like the elevator code James had wanted to give me when we first met, only this was a telephone number.

I’m sitting in a kitchen chair, the portable phone cradled in my hands. Parents, hoping that when their children leave, they’ll know more than when they arrived. When I explained it to Webster, he’d been only too happy to help me track down the number. For answers. Perhaps, in providing them to someone else, I might find them myself.

James’ daughter. I wondered again, did she think of him, or was she content to be alone with the distance? Would I ever be, again?

The hat sits on the counter across from me, a mute witness of all my time with James. For answers, I’ve dialed the number.
A woman picks up.
“Hello?”