

The Rogue Reporter

The Reporter Series
Hyder Ali, #2

by Thomas Fincham, ...

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1

He sat in his cubicle, typing away on his laptop. He had gone over the document a dozen times now, but it was still not what his superiors had wanted. There were still additions, deletions, alterations, and even complete omissions that needed to be made before the document was ready for the general public.

The sun had gone down several hours ago. He stared out the window into total darkness. The only thing he saw was his own reflection.

Vikram Patel was in his mid-thirties. He had dark skin, curly black hair, and a thick mustache. He was skinny to the bones.

He knew why that was. It was his vegetarian diet that kept his weight below what it should be. He had once tried to get heavier by eating a lot of potatoes but he found only his stomach got bigger and nothing else.

Like many young people from India, he had once dreamed of becoming a Bollywood actor. He would build his body up and become an action movie star. But he never did gain much muscle mass, and with his dark complexion, the only role he would ever get was as a villain's henchman or as a poor laborer and a beggar. India was still heavily influenced by the British rule, even though the English left India more than half a century ago. Those with lighter complexions were given better acting parts, while those with darker complexions were relegated to minor, or in some instances, negative acting parts.

Vikram had quickly given up on his dream and studied environmental science at Goa University in India. This now led him all the way to the United States of America and to the *Centre for Inland Waters* or CIW.

Vikram had come to America on a six-month work visa, which was set to expire in another three months.

Those three months now felt like an eternity.

He glanced at the photo tacked on the cubicle wall. It was of his wife, Reema, and son, Sachin. He missed them every minute of every day. He would normally call them around this time, but today he was at work.

He decided to send his wife a text, or else she would be worried if she didn't hear from him.

It was short and brief. It only stated that he would call her as soon as he was able to.

Vikram went back to the document he was working on. It was done, but he wanted to go over it once more. He then pushed the laptop back and leaned back on his chair. Suddenly, his heart and his mind was not into it. He had to submit the report before he left for the day, but it was the last thing he wanted to do right now.

He wished he was back in Goa. He wished he was at home with his wife and son. He missed his wife's cooking. *Aloo gobi paratha* (potato and cauliflower wrap). *Daal chawal* (lentils and rice). And his favorite, *mirch saag* (spicy spinach). His mouth watered at the thought of all the dishes. He closed his eyes and he could almost taste and smell them.

He had, however, found an Indian restaurant near his work, but it just wasn't the same as back in India. The food didn't have the right flavor or texture.

He knew he was being picky, but food was one of the things that reminded him of home. So when he didn't have it just right, he didn't feel like he belonged here.

Prior to taking the position, he had hoped to perform his duties at the CIW, return to India and then apply for permanent status for the United States. This would then allow him to provide his son with a Western education.

Now, he wasn't sure if that was a good idea. His experience at the CIW wasn't what he had expected. He felt like a outsider, like he never fully belonged here.

There were too many restrictions, similar to the ones he found in India. He was not allowed to freely state his opinions and conclusions. At first, he thought it was because he was a foreigner, but he soon realized that was not the case.

He heard a noise. It echoed down the hall.

He waited and listened.

The noise came again. It sounded like someone was banging something on the walls.

He stood up and looked around. The floor was deserted. Everyone had gone home hours ago.

It could be the cleaning people, he thought.

He had seen them dusting, mopping, and vacuuming the building during after hours.

He went back to his laptop.

The noise became louder and distinct.

He got up and went to where he had heard the noise come from.

He had barely walked fifteen steps when he froze in horror.

Standing by the door was a figure of a man. He was tall and looked well built. The man was wearing a leather jacket and a hoodie.

What terrified Vikram was not how the man stood—with his head bent low and shoulders held high, as if he were some monster—it was what he had over his face.

It was a mask and it shook Vikram to the core.

Vikram tried to run and get away from him, but he found his legs wouldn't move as fast as he had wanted them to.

He felt something sharp pierce the back of his leg. He fell forward onto his stomach. He looked down and found a piece of metal was protruding from his calf.

He screamed in agony.

He felt a shadow over him.

The man was looking down at him. Behind the animal mask he could see human eyes. But they were filled with anger and hate.

"Where is the original report?" the man growled.

Vikram didn't know how to respond. The pain throbbed in his leg, making him disoriented. He saw blood spurt out from the entry wound. It stained the carpet underneath him. He thought of his wife and his son. He couldn't believe this was happening to him. He wanted to go back home...

"I'm asking you a question," the man yelled, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Where is the original report?"

"I... I don't know..." he quivered.

The man aimed what looked like a gun, and pulled the trigger. A piece of metal tore into his shoulder.

Vikram howled in pain as his entire body shook from the impact. When he touched the metal object, he realized it was a piece of *nail*. It was long and thick and it was now wedged inside his muscles.

Blood covered his hand and fingertips.

"Please... I... didn't do anything," he pleaded.

"Tell me where it is and it will be over quick," the man said. "If you don't, then it'll be slow and very painful."

Suddenly, there was a noise. It was coming from down the hall. The man turned and then walked away. He disappeared around the corner.

Vikram tried to get up, but he couldn't.

He tried to crawl, but even that was not possible. His shoulder and leg wouldn't allow it. They were covered in blood.

He wanted to close his eyes and wake up from this nightmare, but he knew it was more real than ever.

He hoped the man would not return, but that thought quickly disappeared when he heard footsteps coming his way.

He dabbed his fingers in the blood and then proceeded to write something on the carpet.

It took several attempts when he felt a shadow over him again.

When he turned he found himself staring at a gun, the barrel holding a nail.

Vikram Patel shut his eyes tight.

He then heard a click, followed by something cold and hard penetrating his skull and then the brain.

2

The woman wiped her eyes with a clean tissue. She was in her early to mid-fifties, with graying hair and a slight paunch.

She sat on the sofa with her son and daughter on either side of her. The son was fifteen and the daughter eighteen. They had their arms around their mother.

Across from them sat Hyder Ali. Hyder was in his mid-twenties, with a height of around five-ten. He had a brown complexion and thick shaggy hair that was difficult to keep straight.

Hyder had been named after a Mughal Emperor from India. Hyder's late father had wished his son would accomplish great things like his namesake. So far, Hyder had accomplished very little when compared to the Indian ruler, but he had

managed to bring down a very large corporation that was linked to corruption, bribery, and even murder. The story, dubbed the TriGate Scandal, had been read by almost every citizen in Franklin.

This had brought him some notoriety, but not enough where people would stop him on the street and ask for his autograph.

Hyder adjusted his browline glasses. This type of frame had been worn by his idol, Malcolm X. If they were good enough for Mr. X then they were good enough for him, he'd concluded.

"Thank you for talking to me, Mrs. Albright," Hyder said. "I know this must be difficult."

Francesca Albright nodded and blew her nose.

"Tell me exactly what happened?" Hyder asked.

"My husband, Leo, went out to walk our dog last night and he never came back."

"Has he ever disappeared like this before?"

She shook her head. "No, never. Leo likes to be in bed by ten, so right before that, around nine-thirty, he takes Walter..."

"That's the name of your dog?" Hyder asked.

"Yes, Walter is our German Shepherd."

Hyder quickly scribbled into his notepad. "Please go on."

"Well, when Leo didn't show up, it was around eleven, and I got worried. It was not like Leo to be somewhere without telling anyone. I asked my son, Jason, to go out and look for him."

"Where did you look?" Hyder turned to Jason.

He shrugged. "Everywhere. I know the route my dad walked each night and I followed it. I checked the parks in our area. I even walked through a short trail behind our house, but nothing."

Mrs. Albright said, "When Jason came back, I started calling everyone I knew. I called our friends, family, neighbors, even some of Leo's co-workers."

"What does Mr. Albright do?" Hyder asked.

"He's a regional sales manager for an automobile dealership." Hyder quickly jotted it down. "When we had exhausted every avenue we called the police."

"And what did they say?"

"They told us to wait. They can't file a missing persons report until at least twenty-four hours have passed. I don't want to sit around and do nothing. It was my daughter, Lori, who told me to call you." The girl next to her moved her head. "We are hoping that maybe if our story makes it into the *Daily Times* then it might help us in finding Leo."

Hyder was a reporter for the *Daily Times*. After he broke the TriGate Scandal, his story was front page news for several days.

Lori must have remembered me from that time, Hyder thought.

He chose his next words very carefully, "What if your husband just decided not to come home?"

Mrs. Albright's face turned dark. "I'm not sure what you mean?" she said.

Hyder moved his shoulders.

She understood. "For your information, Leo and I have been married for over thirty years. We met in high school and we are still in love. We were even planning

to go away on a cruise for our next anniversary.” She paused to control her emotions. “Mr. Ali, my husband never came home after a *routine* walk, one he took on a regular basis. I’m afraid that something bad could have happened to him. My children need their father back. And I need my husband back. Will you help us?”

Hyder looked at her and then nodded. “I will pass this story by my editor. If it doesn’t make it into print, I will make sure it makes it onto our online edition.”

She finally managed a smile. “Thank you.”

3

“Whoa, is that a nail?” Pascale said. He was leaning down over the body while spinning a toothpick in his mouth.

Detective Angelo Pascale wore a black leather jacket, tight jeans, and his hair was greased back. He walked and talked like he had just stepped out of one of The Godfather movies. In the police force, Pascale had a reputation for being an arrogant prick. But no one dared say it to his face. They were worried he might go *gangster* on them. No one had seen him do this before, but they weren’t about to take any chances. Plus, Pascale’s father was a retired Deputy Chief, which held some weight in the force, should a situation ever arise.

“Looks like it,” Lopez said, also leaning down.

Detective Marina Lopez had brown shoulder length hair. She had olive skin and hazel colored eyes. Lopez had been with the force for over ten years. She had worked from the bottom up, meaning she started on foot patrol, walking the streets day and night, and had made her way to detective. There were rumors that she could one day be Captain. If she did, Lopez would do everything in her power to make it look like she earned it. The last thing she wanted was some jerk thinking the only reason she was in the position was because of her looks.

“It must have hurt,” Pascale said, staring at the nail in the victim’s forehead.

“You think?” Lopez shot back.

“I’m just saying,” Pascale shrugged. He pulled out the toothpick from his mouth and flicked it across the room. It hit a wall and then landed somewhere on the ground.

“That’s disgusting,” Lopez said.

“It’s only a toothpick,” he replied with a grin. He produced another from his jacket and placed it between his lips.

“You got an entire box in there?” she said.

“It’s called back up,” he said with a wink.

Lopez rolled her eyes.

They moved around the body. The victim lay on his back. His eyes were open, but they were vacant and hollow. Blood pooled underneath his body, staining the carpet a dark red.

Along with the nail in the head, they noticed two others were on the leg and the shoulder.

“Maybe bullets were too expensive,” Pascale quipped.

“What’s the victim’s name?” Lopez asked a man standing a few feet away from them.

Akume Ossai was the security guard of the building. He was also the one who had called in the murder. Ossai looked like he would throw up. He was still studying part-time at a local college, he had told them. He never expected that his second month at CIW would involve a homicide.

“It... it should be on his ID card,” Ossai said, putting a hand over his mouth.

“Go clear your stomach,” Pascale ordered.

Ossai quickly disappeared down the hall.

“What’s with these kids these days?” Pascale moved his hands. “I thought they saw this kind of shit on TV all the time.”

Lopez looked around and found an ID card along with an access card attached to the victim’s belt. “Vikram Patel,” she said, looking at the name and photo.

Ossai appeared again.

Lopez asked, “What does the T stand for on the ID?”

“Temporary,” he said. “He must have been new or here for a short time.”

“What’s that?” Pascale pointed to something on the floor.

It was next to the body and it was made out in blood.

Lopez squinted. “Looks like symbols.”

“It’s Hindi,” Ossai said.

“You sure?” Pascale made a face. “Looks like scribbles to me.”

“I’ve seen that writing before,” Ossai said. “My roommate in college is from India.”

“Call a translator,” Lopez said.

Pascale pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number.

Lopez turned to Ossai. “Why was Patel here, in the building, this time of the day?”

“I don’t know, they don’t tell us,” Ossai shook his head. “We just get a list that lets us know who should be in the building and for how long.”

“Do they inform you when they are leaving?”

“Sure. They have to sign out. If they don’t, then we search the building.”

“Can you please show us that list?” Lopez asked.

Ossai nodded and quickly left, probably relieved to be away from the body.

Lopez moved her hand over the body. From the pants pocket, she pulled out a wallet. She looked inside and found some American dollars, a calling card, and a driver’s license.

“It’s from India,” she said.

“You think he’s a new immigrant?” Pascale said.

“Could be.”

Ossai returned with the list. He handed it to Pascale.

“Looks like our boy was supposed to leave at six,” he said.

“Yes,” Ossai said. “When he didn’t sign out at the specified time, I came looking for him. That was when I saw...” he cringed at the body.

“Who are these other people?” Pascale pointed to three other names on the list.

“Mr. Innis Shaw is the director of the CIW. Mr. Ron Hemsted is the manager of HR and Ms. Barbara Cauldean is the manager of Staffing.”

Pascale made a face. “It looks like they all left at the same time,” he said.

“They probably had a meeting or something,” Ossai replied. “They stay late quite often.”

Pascale frowned. “I guess, we can strike their names off the suspect list.”

“Can we see his work area?” Lopez asked.

Ossai took them to Patel’s desk. It was clean and organized. Lopez removed a photo of a woman with a boy from the cubicle wall.

“We have to notify the next of kin,” she said.

Pascale pulled open the drawers in the desk. He spotted a stapler, tape dispenser, a box of paper clips, pencils, pens, highlighter, but nothing particularly significant.

“Do you notice anything odd about his desk?” Lopez asked.

Pascale moved back and examined the area. “Yeah, it’s dull and depressing. I wouldn’t be caught *dead*...” he stopped. He then corrected himself, “I wouldn’t enjoy working in this environment.”

Lopez said, “If the victim was staying late to work, then where is his laptop or computer?”

Pascale squinted. “You’re right.”

“Did you touch anything?” she asked Ossai.

“No,” he looked horrified. “Why would I?”

She squinted, as if thinking. She then said, “Can we see your security tapes?”

4

“My name is Susan and I’m an alcoholic,” the woman said. She was in her late thirties with strands of gray already showing in her hair.

Susan went on to explain that she had been sober for five months now and she hoped that she could continue to stay sober for the sake of her daughter. Her ex-husband had custody of their twelve year old and Susan teared up at the thought of not seeing her again.

They group applauded her for her sobriety and they wished her success.

Tom Nolan sat in the back of the room and listened. His hair was short but disheveled. His beard was coarse, but trimmed. He wore dark sunglasses, even though there was low lighting in the room.

The meeting was held in the basement of a church. Chairs had been placed in rows and upon arriving Nolan had counted around twenty attendees.

A man stood up and began speaking. He gave his name but Nolan quickly forgot it. The man talked about his problems with self-esteem, more specifically, his weight, which had led him to start drinking at a very young age. It had gotten so much worse that one day he woke up in another part of the city and he had no idea how he got there. His coat, watch, and wallet were missing, but luckily, he was not hurt. The man then talked about his childhood and how it all started with his father...

Nolan found himself drifting to sleep. His eyes felt heavy and it didn’t help that the man’s voice was low and heavy. It was lulling him to doze off. Nolan felt someone nudge him from the side.

He turned to find a man smiling at him. Nolan nodded at the man, as if thanking him for saving him from severe embarrassment.

Another man stood up. He told the group that this was his first time at Alcohol Anonymous. He was barely over twenty. He had started drinking before he even hit his teens. His parents had split up and he and his mother had moved so often that he couldn't remember if he ever stayed in one location for more than three months. The divorce, along with the constant movement, made his drinking worse. His personality changed. He used to be a happy kid growing up, but now he was an angry young man. He had been in and out of jail several times. He then told the group about his last encounter with the police that propelled him to seek help.

Nolan couldn't take it anymore. He closed his eyes and soon fell into deep slumber.

He felt something hard hit his rib.

He snapped awake and saw twenty eyes staring in his direction. The man next to him had a frown on his face.

Nolan sat straight up and cleared his throat.

The person who was leading the meeting said, "Maybe you would like to tell us why you are here?"

Nolan stood up and coughed. "I really don't know why I'm here, actually. I don't have a drinking problem, and I'm only doing this because my employer demanded I do this." Nolan sat down.

"Now that you are here, though," the person said. "Maybe you could say something more about yourself. It would greatly help the other members." The person looked around and he was greeted with approval.

Nolan shrugged. "Sure. My name is Tom Nolan and I'm a detective for the Franklin Police Department."

"You don't have to tell us your name or occupation. This meeting is strictly anonymous."

"Yeah, well, you guys already know who I am, anyway," Nolan boasted. He looked around when he realized no one recognized him. "You guys remember the TriGate Scandal, right? It was front page news. My face was in all the newspapers." People looked at each other when one man put his hand up.

"I remember you," he said.

"See that?" Nolan smiled at a woman sitting in front of him. "A fan."

"You're the guy whose wife was killed in a car accident," the man said. "She was five months pregnant or something and you fell seriously apart." The room suddenly filled with murmurs. "I read somewhere that you even drank on the job. They said you somehow stumbled on the facts and solved the case."

"*Bullshit!*" Nolan pointed at him. "I worked hard on that case."

The person leading the meeting put his hands up. "There is no need for that. We are all here to help each other."

"Whatever," the man said. "I read you are a certified alcoholic."

"I'm going to punch you in the face," Nolan made a fist. "And then I'm going to arrest you."

The man looked like he was ready for a fight. "I'd like to see you do that."

Nolan reached for his gun and realized, as per protocol, it was locked in the glove compartment of his car.

"It's your lucky day," Nolan warned him.

"It's *your* lucky day that I don't put a cap in your ass."

"Are you threatening an officer of the law?"

"You threatened me first."

"Did not."

"Did too."

The person leading the meeting came over to Nolan. "Sir, I have never done this in my twenty years with AA but I would have to ask you to leave."

"Seriously?" Nolan made a face.

"Yes, please."

"But I thought you guys helped people?"

"We do, but I think you may need anger management help as well."

Nolan was about to blast the person, but then realized he would be playing into his hands. "You're right, I'm sorry for the disturbance. I will extricate myself from this situation so that you can proceed with your wonderful meeting."

"Thank you," the person said.

"I'm assuming he's leaving too, right?" Nolan pointed to the man he was disagreeing with.

"No, just you, sir," the person said.

The man grinned at Nolan.

"I'll be waiting for you in the parking lot," Nolan pointed at him. He then left.

He didn't wait for the man, instead, he drove straight to a place that had given him comfort during the darkest period of his life.

He sat at the edge of the bar and said, "Damian, bring me a glass of your finest vodka."

Damian came over and placed his drink before him. "Only one glass, Tom, but no more. Got it?"

Nolan nodded. "Thanks."

Nolan had gotten into many altercations with Damian, the bartender, and Boris, the owner of the bar. In fact, he had once pulled his gun on them when Damian had refused to give him more alcohol. It was why after that incident, he had never brought his gun into the bar.

"Where's Boris?" Nolan asked, looking around. Boris normally sat by the doors, in case there were any problems that needed a quick response. Boris was over six-five, and he had, on numerous occasions, removed Nolan from the bar.

"Boris's sister is getting married so he's not going to be in today," Damian said.

"Boris got a sister?" Nolan said. "I hope she doesn't look anything like him."

"I'll tell him you said that," Damian smiled.

"Please don't," Nolan quickly replied. "*Seriously.*"

The television perched behind Damian was playing the news. For some reason, Damian enjoyed keeping up to date on what was happening in the city. Why else would he keep the channel on the 24hr news? Nolan thought.

On the television screen, a man was standing inside a large building. The man had a round face and was clean shaven. His hair was thinning and gelled back. He was wearing an expensive suit that couldn't hide his large gut.

Nolan recognized him as Governor Benedict 'Benny' Carmino.

"You mind turning the volume up?" Nolan said.

Carmino was talking to the media. Microphones were shoved in his face. "I'm happy that we can finally do something about this facility," he said. "It has sat vacant for decades, resulting in its current deteriorated condition. From the moment I had become your governor, I had said I would do something about it. I wanted to bring this city and this facility back to its former glory. So, I am proud today to announce that STELCO Inc. will be converting this facility into one of its manufacturing plants. This plant will create close to eight-thousand jobs. I feel this is not only a win for the city and its residents, but also a win for STELCO." Carmino was surrounded by the CEO of STELCO and the mayor of Franklin. They were all beaming ear to ear. Carmino then grabbed each of their hands and lifted them in the air as if they had just won the Superbowl.

The news reporter came on the screen and said that STELCO had a terrible track record when it came to environmental disasters, but the Governor had assured everyone that STELCO would meet all environmental standards imposed on them.

The scene then cut to a group of people stationed outside the Governor's office. They were protesting the involvement of STELCO in Franklin.

Nolan shrugged and then went back to his drink.

5

The security office was no bigger than the size of a minivan. A long gray desk went from one end of the wall to the other, with two chairs placed before it. On top of the desk were several computer monitors.

Pascale and Lopez could see a quadrant of images on the screens.

Ossai said, "That monitor is for the front of the building. That one shows the back, and the last two record the inside of the building."

"Can you pull up footage from the scene?" Lopez asked.

"Sure can." Ossai sat behind the keyboard and began typing into it.

They saw an image pop up. On the screen the forensics team were working around the body. They spotted the coroner standing to the side. Once the team had gathered and tagged anything that could be used as evidence, the coroner would then be allowed to remove the body.

Ossai clicked something and made a face.

"What's wrong?" Pascale asked.

"I don't know, but I can't pull up the recording."

"What do you mean?"

"We have many cameras inside the building, but they are set up near the doors. So if anyone entered or exited we could see them. But in this case..." His words trailed off.

"The murder happened near the doors, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"I don't get it. So what's the problem?"

"I can't pull up the file that recorded anything from the camera."

"How is that possible?" Lopez asked.

"I don't know." Ossai bent down and pulled out a computer tower from underneath the desk. "What the hell?" he said, confused.

"What?" Pascale and Lopez said in unison.

"It's not screwed in," Ossai replied. He pulled the tower cover off, whereby the inside of the computer was now exposed. "It's not here."

"What is?" Lopez said.

Ossai pointed to four slots with thumb-sized devices attached to them. "These are memory drives. They record everything that shows up on those four monitors. We store the footage for one week. After that they are automatically recorded over. One is missing."

He pointed to an empty slot. The thumb-sized device was not there.

"Don't tell me it's for the camera that recorded the murder?" Pascale exhaled.

"Yeah... it is," Ossai said, scratching his head.

"Shit," Pascale said.

"Who has access to this room?" Lopez asked.

"All the security personnel."

"What about today?"

"Myself and Glen."

"Who's Glen?"

"He's my co-worker. He was supposed to be here today, but he didn't show up."

"What's his full name?" Lopez asked.

"Glen Proudfoot."

Lopez quickly made a note of it.

Pascale said, "Were you at your desk the whole time?"

"No, I wasn't," he shook his head. "We have to do a quick walk around the building once every hour. Glen and I take turns doing it."

Lopez squinted, "So we'll assume someone came and took the recording while you were out. This means they knew your routine."

"Are you saying it's an inside job?" Pascale said.

"I don't know," she replied. "But it looks awfully like it."

6

Hyder returned to the *Daily Times*. It was located in the First National Building, which was one of the most unattractive buildings in Franklin. It looked like an upright concrete cinder block, with twenty-five floors that reached three hundred and fifty-feet in height.

It used to be owned by Brownstone Ltd, which also owned the *Daily Times* newspaper. But after the TriGate Scandal, which nearly destroyed the paper's historic reputation, and brought it close to financial ruins, the building, along with the paper, were bought out by the media conglomerate, Hollings Incorporated.

Hollings Incorporated took over the top six floors, which were already designated to Brownstone Ltd. The fifteen floors below that were leased to other commercial enterprises, while the last five floors belonged to the *Daily Times*. The press centre, used for printing the newspapers, was located in the basement of the building.

Instead of taking the elevators, Hyder opted to take the stairs up to the third floor. It had become a habit since the day he started at the *Daily Times*. So why not continue it? He always thought.

He went straight to a cubicle and placed himself behind a laptop. When Hyder was a temporary employee, he was relegated to a mobile desk at the far end of the room. Once the TriGate Scandal broke, Hyder was made the lead city reporter at the paper. Along with the permanent position, he was also given a permanent desk.

Hyder was logging into his laptop when he heard a knock.

Veronica Ainsworth stood with a smile on her face. Veronica was in her early forties. She was slim with jet black hair and her skin was etched with wrinkles. But it was her eyes that made her look much younger.

Veronica used to be the lead reporter at the city desk, but when Hyder took over her position, she became editor and his boss. Luckily for him, she liked him and was very protective of him.

“So,” she started. “You got anything for the *Hyder Reports*?”

The TriGate Scandal was such big news in Franklin and its surrounding cities that Hyder was given his own column. Readers waited for Hyder to break the next big news.

Hyder was old enough to know that nothing would ever beat the TriGate Scandal but he was grateful to report smaller, but still important, stories.

“I think I may have something that might interest you,” Hyder said.

“Let’s discuss it in my office,” Veronica said.

Unlike the previous occupant, the office was clean and well organized. It looked spacious but Hyder knew it was because Veronica still hadn’t moved in completely. There were several boxes stacked by the wall.

Veronica sat behind the desk while Hyder sat across from her.

Veronica said, “So tell me.”

Hyder outlined his discussion with the Albrights. He told her that Leo Albright was missing and the family was worried that something bad must have happened to him.

“Do you suspect foul play?” Veronica asked.

Hyder shrugged. “Could be. Mrs. Albright was adamant that this was unlike her husband. He had never disappeared for this long a stretch, ever.”

Veronica thought about it. “What do the police think?”

“They told her they’d start looking into it if he still hadn’t shown up after twenty four hours.”

“Do our competitors have this?”

“I don’t see how,” Hyder said. “They specifically contacted me.”

Veronica smiled. “It might be good for your report.”

“I don’t know,” he moved his hand through his shaggy hair. “What if he shows up?”

“Then we write about the hours he was missing. What happened? What did he do?” Veronica then paused and slowly said, “Julie’s been asking about your column lately.”

The board at Hollings Incorporated had replaced the previous publisher with Julie Trelvalley. Trelvalley was a big supporter of the paper and its employees. But the economics were not working in her favor. The paper had gained new readership after the TriGate Scandal but since then it had begun to slide back into the red. It needed a big story to make it profitable once again.

People were opting to read the news online and print was now in decline. It was therefore why the *Hyder Reports* column was strictly kept in print format. If readers wanted to read Hyder’s stories, then they had better purchase a copy of that day.

“Write it up and I’ll print it,” Veronica finally said.

7

“I can’t believe this happened,” Gordon Welsh said. Welsh had reddish hair and bright green eyes. He was also Vikram Patel’s supervisor.

Once Welsh found out what happened, he immediately rushed over.

“He was such a nice guy,” Welsh said, clearly in shock.

Lopez said, “How long was he working for the CIW?”

“Only three months.”

“We saw that the victim had an Indian driver’s license, so is it correct to assume he wasn’t an American?”

“No, he wasn’t,” Welsh shook his head.

Lopez could see Pascale’s face contort. The death of a foreigner on American soil could complicate things, she knew. Would the Indian government allow them to keep the body until the investigation was over? What about the next of kin? Would they be allowed to come to America to view the deceased? There were too many questions, but Lopez was glad she wouldn’t have to deal with them. They would be left to the legal department to sort out.

Her job was to find who did it and why. The sooner she did this, the better.

“Why was he in America?” she asked Welsh.

“Vikram was highly respected in his field. He was brought over to study the toxicity levels of Franklin Harbour. He was supposed to provide us with several reports. In fact, he was going to submit a report soon.”

“Is that why he was working late?” Lopez asked.

Welsh nodded.

Pascale said, “We noticed that the victim’s laptop and phone were missing.”

Welsh shrugged. “I’m not sure about that. Is this important?”

“Of course it is,” Pascale said. “If he was working late, then where was the stuff he was working on?”

Welsh’s eyes widened. “You’re right.” He then broke down. “Who’s going to call his wife and tell her what happened? Oh my God. What about his son?”

Pascale and Lopez left the sobbing supervisor and went back to the body.

Lopez said, "Something doesn't feel right. First, the hard drives that contained the footage of the crime go missing, and now the victim's laptop and phone are nowhere to be found. I smell a cover-up."

Normally, Pascale hated if someone else came to a conclusion before him, but he had to give it to her, she was right.

When they reached the body, a man came over, "I'm the translator you had asked for."

"So what does that writing in blood say?" Lopez asked, pointing to the scribbles next to the body.

"I don't know if it makes any sense," he replied.

"Just tell us," Pascale said, impatiently.

"It is Hindi for sure, but when read as written, it says, 'khooni bandar hai'."

"Which means?" Pascale was restless now.

"The murderer is a monkey."

Pascale's mouth nearly dropped. "Come again?"

"In English it means, 'The murderer is a monkey'."

Pascale made a face as if he was getting a headache.

"Monkey? Are you sure?" Lopez asked.

"Absolutely, you can confirm with someone else if you don't believe me."

Lopez said, "We don't doubt your translation, but it seems a bit odd for someone to write that when they are about to die."

The translator shrugged. "I wish I could tell you something different, but that's what it says."

"Thank you," Lopez replied.

The translator walked away.

"This case is getting weirder and weirder," Pascale said. "It's bad enough the victim is found with nails stuck in his body, and now we find out it's a monkey that killed him."

Lopez didn't know what to say.

"I need a smoke," Pascale said.

"I thought you had quit."

"I did, but I could seriously use a drag now."

"Stick another toothpick in your mouth, you'll be fine."

Pascale grinned. "Is that a verbal punch, Lopez?"

"Call it whatever you want," Lopez said. "One of my ex-boyfriends was a heavy smoker. I can honestly say I can't stand the smell of it and to make matters worse, whenever I smell it, it reminds me of him."

"Where is this boyfriend of yours now?"

"He's doing ten years in the state penitentiary. He tried to hold up a liquor store."

"Wow," Pascale said. "Sounds like a winner. Speaking of which, why don't you ever agree to go out with me? I've never been to jail."

"The only reason you're not in jail is because you wear a badge."

"I'm glad you think so highly of me."

"I try not to think about you. Period."

A man limped over. His name was Herb Lafferty and he was the coroner. Lafferty was bald, and slightly overweight. Lafferty had shattered his leg in a

skydiving accident. His leg had been put together, but it was never like it was before the accident.

“I want to bag and take the body,” Lafferty said. “Any objections?”

Lopez and Pascale looked at each other. If there was anything they wanted to do around the scene, they had better do it now. Once the body was removed the scene became contaminated.

Pascale shook his head.

Lopez said, “He’s all yours.”

8

Nolan opened his eyes and then shut them.

Bright sunlight was streaming through the windows and hitting his face directly. He put his hand up to shield himself.

He looked around and realized he was on the sofa. He looked down and found he was still dressed in the clothes he wore last night.

He spotted his sunglasses on the coffee table. He reached out and grabbed them. He put them on and closed his eyes again.

The brightness no longer bothered his eyes, but his face began to burn from the rays.

“Shit,” he said and got up.

He sat at the edge of the sofa and moved his hands through his hair.

How did he end up at home? He wondered. He remembered being at the bar last night, but then nothing afterwards. He couldn’t have had more than one drink, Damian would have never allowed that.

He stood up, felt wobbly, and then dropped back on the sofa.

Five more minutes, he told himself.

He closed his eyes and when he woke up, thirty minutes had passed.

He really needed to get up now.

He managed to make it to the bathroom. He checked himself in the mirror and saw that his eyes weren’t bloodshot. This meant he hadn’t drunk as much as he’d thought he had. He must have been very tired last night.

It could have been that AA meeting that had exhausted him.

Yep, that’s what it was, he concluded. He would make sure never to go there again. It wasn’t conducive to his health.

He washed his face, skipped shaving, and applied water over his hair.

When he was satisfied that he looked somewhat respectable, he went out.

He checked his phone and saw that he had six missed calls, and they were all from one person.

Sergeant Doug Halton was Nolan’s supervisor. Halton didn’t like Nolan and sometimes it looked like he never would. If Halton had his way he would fire Nolan in a heart beat. Thank God, Halton had a boss who did, in fact, like Nolan. This person, hopefully, would always continue to do so.

Nolan left the house and drove straight to a diner.

He ordered black coffee and downed it in three gulps.

The waitress came over and refilled his cup.

Nolan reached over and grabbed a newspaper that had been left behind. It was the *Daily Times*. Nolan flipped through the pages and stopped at a section he had been searching for. The title on top read: *The Hyder Reports*.

Nolan smiled.

Nolan and the writer of the column had worked together on the TriGate Scandal. Nolan now made sure to keep an eye on what the writer was working on next.

Nolan read the article from top to bottom. It was about someone who had disappeared while walking their dog. At the end was a plea to the general public for any information that might help in finding the man.

Nolan's cell phone rang. He checked and frowned. Unlike Halton's, this number was for someone Nolan could never ignore.

He downed the remainder of the coffee and left the diner.

9

Nolan got off on the fifth floor where the detective division was located. He didn't bother greeting anyone and bee-lined straight for his desk.

After the successful convictions of those involved in the TriGate Scandal, Nolan was able to get his old desk back. It was stationed by the windows, which allowed him hours of entertainment staring out onto the streets below.

He was wearing a blue blazer over a white shirt. The shirt had a coffee stain just above the belt line and he hoped no one would notice it, so he pulled his pants up. His shoes were scuffed but at least they didn't have holes in them, he thought.

He adjusted his sunglasses when he saw Sergeant Halton come out of his office. He looked directly at Nolan and motioned for him to come over.

Nolan didn't move.

Halton huffed and puffed. He was clearly irate. But Nolan continued as if he was following his morning routine by looking at the contents on the desk.

Halton stormed to him.

"I know you saw me wave at you," he grumbled.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Nolan said, innocently.

"Take those *damn* glasses off!" Halton demanded.

Nolan did, but then squinted his eyes so tightly that they were now slits.

"Why are you doing that?" Halton said.

"I have photophobia."

"What's that?"

"It's a medical condition where I feel discomfort and pain when my eyes are exposed to light."

"You're messing with me, right?"

"No, look it up. It's real."

Halton paused. Nolan could tell he was pondering this over. On the one hand, if he believed Nolan then Nolan could continue wearing his sunglasses, which

meant Halton could never tell what Nolan was actually thinking. On the other hand, if he didn't believe Nolan and Nolan was actually suffering from some form of debilitating illness, then the police union would be all over his ass.

Halton succumbed. "Fine, put them on," he said between clenched teeth.

Nolan immediately covered his eyes. He let out a loud sigh, as if he had just relieved himself of some extreme pain.

Halton bit his bottom lip, trying desperately to control his emotions. "I called and left you several messages."

"Yes, I saw that and I was going to call you right back, but I didn't have your number."

Halton's face turned beet red. He was about to explode when a voice said, "Tom!"

It was Captain Rudyard *Rudy* Ross. He was standing in front of his office. He motioned for Nolan to come over.

"We'll finish this later, got it?" Halton said.

"Sorry, I can't. I have too much to do." Nolan left him seething by his desk.

Captain Ross was dressed in a striped blue suit. He was known to have an eye for fine clothing. Nolan had never seen him without a suit. *Never*.

He sometimes imagined the Captain sleeping in a three-piece suit. Or maybe his pajamas were printed to look like a suit.

"Morning, Captain," Nolan smiled.

"How are you, Tom?"

"I'm good, could be better."

Ross leaned over and sniffed. "You're not drinking, are you?"

"No alcohol passed these lips all morning. Scouts honor. Plus, I even went to my first AA meeting last night."

Ross smiled. "Good. Now come into my office."

Nolan entered to find a woman sitting across from Ross's desk. She stood up and smiled at him.

"This is Agent Ivy Driscoll from the Federal Bureau of Investigation," Ross said, introducing her. She had short blond hair, deep blue eyes, and slim but painted red lips. She wore a black suit, with the skirt reaching to her knees.

Agent Driscoll extended her hand. "It's an honor to meet you."

Nolan reluctantly shook it.

"Please, sit down," Ross said, taking a seat behind the desk.

"What's going on?" Nolan was confused.

"Last night there was a murder of an Indian citizen at the *Center for Inland Waters*. Agent Driscoll will be taking over the case."

"Take over from who?" Nolan asked.

"Detective Pascale and Detective Lopez."

"Are they okay with this?"

"They don't have a choice," Ross said. "In fact, my hands are tied as well."

"So, what's that got to do with me?"

This time Agent Driscoll spoke, "I've requested that you and I work on this case together."

Nolan lowered his sunglasses. "You what?"

"I read about the TriGate Scandal and I was very impressed."

“You could have asked for an autograph, instead of asking to work with me.”

“I wouldn’t be able to learn by just looking at an autograph,” she replied quickly. “I can learn more by watching and following you.”

Ross said, “Tom is one of our finest detectives. The city of Franklin owes a lot to him for his service.”

Nolan put his hands up. “Wait, I have something to say.” He turned to Driscoll. “While I appreciate that you want me to mentor you... or something, I’m just not good at babysitting anyone.” He stood up. “Sorry, Captain.”

“Tom, sit down.”

Nolan did.

“We have a fellow law enforcement agent requesting our assistance,” Ross said. “I’m sure, down the line if we needed assistance from the Bureau, they wouldn’t hesitate in returning the favor.”

“Of course not,” Driscoll replied with a smile.

“What about Halton?” Nolan said. “I’m know he’s got cases lined up for me.”

“In fact, Sergeant Halton is more than happy to let you work with Agent Driscoll.”

“Right.” Nolan squinted. The only reason Halton was allowing it was so that he could keep Nolan away from him and the division.

Nolan sighed. “I guess I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“I’m afraid not, Tom,” Ross said. “Detective Pascale and Detective Lopez are in the conference room right now. They are waiting to brief you.”

10

The moment they entered the room Nolan was expecting a fight. He was right.

Pascale immediately stood up and pointed his finger at him. “I guarantee, you had something to do with this,” he said in a loud voice.

“I guarantee, I didn’t,” Nolan replied.

“Bullshit,” Pascale spat. “You and the Captain are chummy-chummy. I don’t believe for a second this wasn’t favoritism.”

“It was,” Driscoll said. Pascale turned to her. “But it wasn’t your Captain’s choice, it was mine.”

Lopez stood up and came over. “I’m Detective Marina Lopez. Forgive Detective Pascale’s outburst, but as you’ll see we’ve been working on the case very diligently and so, naturally, we are not pleased with losing it.”

“I understand, but like you I have my orders as well,” Driscoll said. “What I’ve been told is that the victim is not an American, which has interested the higher ups at the Bureau. My job, like yours, is to only find out the truth and once I have done that, I will be gone.” She turned to Pascale. “I have no interest in stepping on anyone’s toes. I am not here for a promotion or to boost myself up in any way. I’m only here to fulfill my duties to the Bureau.”

Pascale said, “That’s all fine and nice, but you should have picked me. Good luck working with him, though.” He motioned his head toward Nolan. “You’ll see what a huge mistake it was.”

He stormed out of the room.

Nolan turned to Lopez as if to apologize for this. But she put her hands up. "Tom, it's okay. I'm a professional. Unlike Pascale, I can take it."

Driscoll said, "Can you bring us up to speed on the case?"

"Sure, but it's a weird one."

"How so?" Nolan asked.

"The victim, prior to his death, wrote in blood, *the murderer is a monkey.*"

"Hmm... that's odd," Driscoll said.

"Maybe we should be interviewing suspects in the zoo then," Nolan quipped.

11

Hyder was at his desk at the *Daily Times*. On his laptop, he was searching for anything that might lead to his next story.

He felt someone near him. He turned and smiled.

Lester Glasgow stood by the entrance of the cubicle with a massive sandwich in his hand. Lester was black and close to two-hundred and fifty pounds in weight. He was also Hyder's best friend.

"*Namaste (salutation)*," Lester bowed and clasped his hands together with the sandwich in between. "How are you, on this fine and lovely day?"

"What're you now, a Hindu?" Hyder said. "Weren't you a Muslim just recently?"

"I am whatever Lord Krishna wants me to be," Lester bowed even further.

"Seriously?"

Lester laughed. "I'm just messing with you, bro," he said, taking a bite of the sandwich.

"Isn't it a bit early for something that heavy?" Hyder asked.

"It's got lettuce."

Hyder squinted. "Yeah, maybe half a leaf."

"Don't worry, I've joined a yoga class."

"You think going to yoga would help you digest that big sandwich?"

"It's *hot* yoga," Lester winked.

Hyder shook his head. "I'd hate to be the other participants in the class."

Lester worked at the technology desk for the *Daily Times*. This meant, he was always up to date on the latest gadgets and devices.

"Did you see my masterpiece in today's paper?" Hyder beamed.

"Yeah, but..."

"What?"

"I think you should see something, bro."

Lester took control of Hyder's laptop and pulled up a web page.

"*The Merchant of Truth?*" Hyder said, reading the header.

"It's a new blog site I had stumbled upon a couple of weeks ago. Its mission statement is to search for the truth, using all means necessary."

"What does that even mean?" Hyder said.

"I guess, they don't care how they do it. I think you'll find their latest article quite interesting."

Hyder began reading it and his mouth dropped. It was about Leo Albright and how he had disappeared walking his dog one night. The writer of the article had gone through Leo's bank account, where she found that Leo had withdrawn large sums of money in the days preceding his disappearance. Also, a rarely used credit card recently showed a transaction. This transaction was done north of the border at a gas station in Canada. The writer stated that if the authorities were to review the security footage from the gas station, she was certain it would show Leo was the one using the card. Furthermore, a two year old bank statement had revealed a six figure deposit made by Leo into the account. The writer wondered how someone who worked at an automobile dealership could get access to such a large amount all at once. The writer believed that all evidence pointed to Leo Albright owing money to the wrong people, and not knowing how to pay them back, he had upped and skipped to Canada.

Hyder looked at the name of the writer.

"Echo Rose," he said.

"It's not real," Lester said. "I tried searching online but it's made up."

"She stole my story," Hyder griped.

"Um... I'm not sure how you can say that?" Lester said.

"The Albrights contacted *me*," he said. "I was the only one who they had spoken to."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, I am," Hyder answered. "They were desperate that I publish their story in the *Daily Times*. We are still one of the largest circulated papers in Franklin, you know."

"I hate to say it, bro, but your column is suddenly old news," Lester said. "Echo Rose got to the bottom of the truth before you did."

"How do you suppose she did that, huh?" Hyder gritted his teeth. "Do you think Leo Albright, or his family, or even his bank gave her the bank statements? She accessed that information *illegally*."

"Well, like they say, it's all fair in love and print."

"No, they don't," Hyder retorted. "There are ethics and principles. You can't break into someone's personal bank account and use that information for your story. What will it be next? We'll allow reporters to listen in on your private telephone conversations? How about hacking your voice mails or even your email accounts? What ever happened to journalistic integrity?"

Hyder went back to reading the article again. He couldn't believe his eyes. Echo Rose had not only hijacked his story, but she had done so by illegitimate means.

Veronica appeared next to Lester.

Before she could say anything, Hyder said, "I know, I just saw it."

"Saw what?" she said.

"The article."

"What article?"

Hyder pointed to his laptop screen. Veronica quickly scanned the contents. "Wow, I hope Julie doesn't see this."

"Can you believe her?" Hyder was beside himself. "She broke the law!"

"But she's got one helluva story."

“Are you encouraging this behavior?” Hyder said in disbelief.

“Of course not,” Veronica said. “Plus, it’s a blog and we’re not, so we’re not competing with...” she squinted. “*The Merchant of Truth*. The *Daily Times* has a history of high journalistic standards.”

“That’s what I said to Lester, too,” Hyder replied.

“He did, indeed,” Lester said, finishing his sandwich.

“Don’t you have something to do, Lester?” Veronica said.

“Yes, it’s called morning break,” Lester grinned. “And I’m doing it as we speak.”

Veronica turned back to Hyder. “Forget the blog, I’ve got a story for you to check out. Our liaison at the police department just informed me that there is a murder at the *Centre for Inland Waters*. I want you to go and get the details.”

12

They were in Nolan’s Charger with Nolan behind the wheel and Driscoll in the passenger seat. Neither said a word until Driscoll broke the silence, “Detective Nolan, I know this was sudden and I understand how you must feel, but I think we can work very well together.”

“First off, lady,” Nolan started. “It’s just Nolan, not Detective Nolan. Secondly, you are right that I’m not happy. I don’t like an outsider coming in and taking over a case that belonged to the Franklin PD, and one that my friends were working on.” He paused and then said, “Actually, let me correct that, I don’t consider Pascale a friend, he’s more of an enemy I don’t bother too much with, but I am fond of Lopez, and she always comes first, in my books.”

“I’m sorry, if this put you in a difficult situation,” she said. “And I prefer to be called Ivy.”

He looked at her. “Okay, Agent Ivy.”

She smiled. “No, just Ivy.”

He turned the wheel and the Charger entered a narrow road.

“I read about your wife,” she said.

Nolan’s jaw tightened.

“I’m sorry for what happened,” she said. “I really am. But if it means anything, I lost someone too.”

Nolan looked at her.

“My fiancé, in Afghanistan.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Nolan finally said. “He was in the military?”

“Yeah, it was his third tour. I had told him not to go. I didn’t know why, but I had a bad feeling about it. Twice he had come back alive and I felt the third time he might not be so lucky. As it turned out, I was right. He was driving in an armored vehicle with two other members of his unit when it was struck by an improvised explosive device. One member died on the spot, another survived without a scratch on him, while my fiancé was severely wounded. The morning I reached Afghanistan to be with him, he had already succumbed to his injuries.” Her eyes were moist. “To this day, I regret never saying goodbye to him.” She looked out the window.

Nolan didn't know how to respond.

They drove for another mile when he finally said, "What was his name?"

"Corporal Wilson Channing."

Nolan nodded. "My wife's name was Simone Helen Nolan."

"I know, I saw it in the papers," she said. Something rolled from underneath her seat and hit the back of her boot. It was a near empty vodka bottle.

"I haven't touched that in a while," he quickly said. In a roundabout way, it was the truth. He had forgotten it was still in the car. Had he known he would have finished it.

"I know the death of your wife really affected you," she said, kicking the bottle back under the seat. "We all find different ways to cope with a loss."

"How did you get over it?" he asked.

"Work," she said, turning to him. "The assignments saved me. If I wasn't a federal agent I don't know how I would've overcome the pain. Plus, a couple of hours a week at the shooting range really helps to alleviate the anxiety and aggression." She grinned at him.

"I should have tried that," he said before he smiled back.

"I think that's the house," she said, looking up.

It was a semi-detached, two-story, brick exterior home. A metal fence circled the front of the property. A small metal gate was swinging back and forth in the wind.

Nolan and Ivy got out.

Ivy pulled out her weapon and checked to see if it was loaded.

"I don't think we'll need that," he said.

"Don't be so sure," she replied. "You wouldn't believe what I've seen once you knock on someone's door. Where's your weapon?"

Nolan patted his jacket and then his pants. He made a quizzical face. "Ah, I know where it is," he said.

He reached inside the glove compartment and pulled out his Glock. He didn't bother checking to see if it was loaded. He wasn't expecting trouble. Even if there was, he'd leave it to her to do the shooting.

They proceeded through the gate and then up to the house.

Nolan knocked and waited. A minute later, the door swung open and they were face to face with a man in shorts and a T-shirt. He had long grayish hair that went all the way down his back, a gray goatee that also was long, and deep black eyes.

"Glen Proudfoot?" Nolan asked.

"Yeah, what's this about?" he said, squinting at them.

Nolan introduced himself and Ivy. He then said, "There was a murder at the CIW and we hoped we could have a word with you about it."

Proudfoot came out and closed the door behind him. "Really?" he said.

"Yes, last night."

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Vikram Patel."

"I know him, he came a couple of months ago from India."

"Yes," Nolan said. "Did you know him well?"

“No, I only said hi to him whenever I saw him. He seemed like a nice guy. He was only here for a short time, though. What’s this got to do with me, anyway?”

“We spoke to Akume Ossai, the security guard at the CIW. He said you were supposed to be on duty last night, but you didn’t show up.”

“That’s right.”

“Why not?” Ivy said.

“I was told not to come.”

“What?” Nolan was confused.

“Yeah, right before I left home, I got a call from my supervisor who said my shift was cancelled.”

“Do you know why?”

Proudfoot shook his head. “I asked, but my supervisor didn’t know why either. He said the order came from the top. The director told him to only keep one person on duty last night. I’ve been there for many years and Akume is new, so I guess they figured it might be cost effective to let him take the shift because he is lower in the pay scale. Anyway, now I’m glad I didn’t go. I can’t believe this happened.” He shook his head. “Poor guy.”

Nolan looked over at Ivy. She shrugged. It was a dead end.

“Do you know who did it?” Proudfoot asked before they could leave.

“No, that’s why we came here,” Nolan said. “We were hoping you would help us.”

“The security cameras didn’t catch it?” Proudfoot said, rubbing his goatee.

“About that,” Nolan said. “The memory drive to that particular camera was missing.”

“Really?” Proudfoot said, shocked. “How’s that possible?”

“We think someone took the drive when Akume Ossai went out for his walk around the building.”

“What about the backup?”

“What backup?!” Nolan and Ivy said in unison.

“Akume didn’t mention it?” He then thought about it. “Oh yeah, he’s new so I’m not sure how much he knows yet. Anyway, we remotely save all footage to another server.”

“Where is this server?” Nolan quickly asked.

“It’s not at the CIW, if that’s what you mean?”

“Then where?”

“*DataCore Solutions*. The CIW has a contract with them. They will have everything stored at their location.” Proudfoot gave them an address.

Nolan jotted it down and thanked him for his time.

Outside, Ivy said. “Are you planning on speaking to the director of the CIW?”

“I am,” he said. “I want to know why there was only one security personnel on the night of a gruesome murder.”

“Good idea,” she said. “Why don’t you go to the CIW and I’ll go check out *DataCore Solutions*. This way we can wrap this case up quickly and efficiently.”

“Sounds good to me,” he said, adjusting his sunglasses.

Hyder waited while the woman behind the desk was on the phone. The moment Veronica had given him the story he had rushed over to the CIW. He hoped he could get some juicy detail to put into his story.

Hyder was still seething from what Lester had showed him. Echo Rose had made a mockery of his profession and him as well. Story or no story, there were certain things a reporter never did. They never broke the law and they never printed a story without concrete evidence backing it up.

According to Hyder, Echo Rose had broken both of those doctrines.

She had illegally accessed Leo Albright's bank account. She had then proceeded to make assertions that based on the transactions in the bank account, she believed the evidence pointed to Leo Albright running away to Canada.

Hyder shook his head at the thought. A reporter's job was not to hypothesize the outcome of a story. Their job was to only present the facts of the story.

A reporter should not lead the reader to a conclusion. A reporter should let the reader make their own judgement based on the information presented.

Also, Echo Rose never stated the other, more grisly aspect of the story. What if someone had harmed Leo Albright and then used his credit card in Canada?

Even if she was correct about Leo Albright skipping the country, this was very damaging to his family. To believe one thing about someone one day and then to find out something entirely different the next, can be very hurtful. This should have been done delicately.

If it was Hyder, he would have spoken to the family first before publishing the article.

He sighed. Maybe he was just angry at Echo Rose because she got further into the story. Maybe he was angry because *he* held the profession in very high regard. It was more than a job to him, it was more like a responsibility.

Readers relied on him and others in his vocation to inform them of what was going on around them. If they, in the profession, were careless then a lot of misinformation would become fact. This was erroneous and downright dangerous.

Hyder had personally felt this wrong.

When the government had announced their War on Terrorism, Hyder felt like a terrorist himself. The media had presented only a narrow view of what a terrorist was. What the media portrayed was that anyone who had an Arabic sounding name, or was born in a Muslim country, or even covered their face with a beard, had somehow links to terrorism.

Hyder had suffered the repercussions of this false portrayal.

He remembered he was standing outside a grocery store when a woman came up and spat at him. Fortunately, her spittle didn't hit him, but this clearly shook him up.

The media, in a very short span, had made it look like a billion people, those who followed a particular faith, were all out to destroy them and the world.

This was totally and absolutely absurd, Hyder had thought. If a very small fraction could do so much damage to those who opposed their view, imagine what

a large percentage could do? Luckily, a very large percentage of Muslims had no desire to harm anyone. In fact, they were busy, like everyone else, with regular human problems. Trying to find a job to feed their family, trying to get their children a good education, trying to make their relationships work, trying to assist a family member who was sick, even mourning the loss of a loved one.

They were more preoccupied with direct and immediate issues instead of being focused on hurting others.

Naturally, the media were careful not to outright state this, but this is what the general public came away with.

Hyder had promised himself that he would always be honest and truthful when writing a story. Even if he didn't agree with the facts, he would always, without any judgements or bias, present it as is.

Echo Rose had failed to do just that when she wrote the article on her blog. But *he* would not fail to fulfil his duty to the readers of the *Daily Times*.

It was why he was here at the CIW. He would get the facts straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak.

The woman behind the desk hung up the phone and informed him that someone would be with him shortly.

A few minutes later he was introduced to another woman. She was the CIW's Communications Director. She informed him that last night an employee named Vikram Patel had been murdered in the CIW's building. Mr. Patel was in the United States for only three months. He was to return to India when his contract with CIW was over in another three months. Mr. Patel was studying the toxicity levels in Franklin Harbour. He was survived by a wife and a son.

It was standard information, Hyder knew, one that made sure to not implicate the CIW in any wrongdoing. He tried to get more out of her, but as the case was now in the police's hands, there was not much she could or was willing to divulge. She did, however, slip up, when she mentioned that the security footage of the incident was missing. Hyder tried to dig further, but she quickly clamped up.

Hyder wasn't completely satisfied with what he had, but at least it was enough to write his story.

He returned to the *Daily Times* to type it up.

14

Nolan adjusted himself on the chair and made a face. The chair was far more uncomfortable than it looked. It had a hard plastic-like exterior, with no padding to sit on. It was probably from some *chic* store, Nolan concluded. It was appealing to look at but useless for anything else.

The secretary smiled at him. She was behind her desk, probably on a soft ergonomic chair. She asked again if he wanted any coffee or tea.

Nolan politely declined.

What he really wanted was to be in the Charger with a drink in his hand.

The bottle that Ivy had found underneath her seat was making him thirsty now.

The secretary said, "Mr. Shaw will be with you shortly."

Nolan was in the office of Innis Shaw, Director of the CIW. Like many government buildings, this one was also bland and without any character. The walls were painted a neutral color so as to not stand out. The carpet was industrial, specifically installed to last a long time. The fixtures were not unique, they were there to serve a purpose and that's it.

The only thing different in this office from other government offices was the furniture. It was probably the one thing the director really had any power to change. But, Nolan had a feeling, it wasn't the director who chose the furniture, it was his secretary.

She was young, maybe in her early to mid-twenties. She wore large round-rimmed red glasses. She had on dark mascara and red lipstick.

Several long minutes later, Shaw appeared through the door. He was short and stocky. He wore a three-piece suit and had a gold ring around the little finger of his left hand.

He apologized for being late and quickly escorted Nolan into his office.

Like the waiting area outside, Shaw's office was also dull and boring. It had the gray color on the walls, the carpet was the same industrial standard, even the desk and chair were generic.

Nolan guessed that the secretary didn't get a say in how to furnish the inside of the office.

"I will start by saying that this is a very difficult situation for us at the CIW," the director said. "We've never had to deal with something like this. Vikram Patel was a valued employee at the CIW, even if he was here temporarily. We just can't believe it happened in our organization. It has deeply affected us and most, including myself, are still in shock. I've had to send all my employees home. They were too distraught to work. We've even brought outside counselors to help them cope with this horrific tragedy."

Nolan nodded. "That's why I'm here. I'm trying to find out why this happened."

"I completely understand. You can ask me anything. We are here to co-operate with the police."

"During our investigation we found that last night when Mr. Patel was murdered, there was only one guard, and not two, as per the CIW's security procedures, why was that?"

Shaw adjusted his shirt collar and wiped the sweat from his upper lip. "I knew this question would be coming. The simple answer is, we did it because of... money."

"Money?" Nolan was confused.

"In the past five years, our budget has been cut in half. Apparently, the State doesn't think funding for water research is worth the cost. If you ask us, this is a huge mistake. Water is our most important resource. In the future, it could become a scarce commodity. If we don't preserve and protect our rivers, lakes, oceans, and waterways right now, then who knows what the result would be down the road. Anyway..." He shook his head. "I get passionate when I talk about our work. The cuts have resulted in us having to scale back our payroll. It was why we only had one guard at the CIW."

Nolan took it all in but said nothing. He looked around the room. He saw photos of Shaw shaking hands with various people. Some he recognized, others he was not familiar with.

Shaw spotted Nolan staring at a certificate on the wall. It was given to him when the CIW was voted one of the best employers in the State.

Shaw said, "I know it looks bad, that, to save money we put our employees at risk. You have to realize that when we were fully funded we had over two hundred full-time jobs. Now, we are left with sixty eight. It was either cutting back on security hours or cutting back on research hours. In hindsight, we may have made the wrong decision last night."

Nolan nodded and stood up. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Shaw," he said.

Outside, Nolan called Ivy.

"It was a dead end," he said into the cell phone. "Did you get the security footage?"

"They won't give me the hard drives," she replied.

"Why not?" Nolan voice was hard.

"They want us to get a warrant."

"Then we'll get one." Nolan felt a headache coming on.

He got in the Charger and quickly downed the remaining liquid from the vodka bottle. It felt warm and it soothed his insides.

He had promised himself that he would quit drinking, but it was harder than he had thought. It reminded him of his first bad habit. Nolan had started smoking in his teens, but by the time he was in college, he had all but given it up. He clearly knew why, though. It was because the girl he had been dating, really despised the smell. "It is either me or the cigarettes," she told him. He chose her. The relationship didn't last long, but he was glad he was rid of the vice.

Now, he didn't know who or what would make him give up his current bad habit.

15

When Hyder walked through the front door of his house, he was greeted with laughter.

Hyder lived in a three-bedroom bungalow with his mother and his older brother.

It wasn't unusual to have people over at the house. His uncles, aunts, or even his mom's friends were known to drop by whenever it was convenient for them.

Today, it sounded like more than usual.

"Assalamu alaikum! (Peace be upon you)," he said, loudly.

"Wa alaikum assalam (And upon you be peace)," he heard a woman reply. Mrs. Fatima Ali came out into the hall and smiled. She had on shalwar kameez, which was a traditional Pakistani dress, and a scarf over her head.

"Who's here?" he asked her.

"Akbar's in-laws," she answered.

Hyder's brother, Akbar, was getting married in a few weeks.

Akbar and his soon to be wife, Aisha, had met in university. Akbar had gone on to become a doctor and she had become a pharmacist. When they knew they wanted to be together as husband and wife, they had decided to follow tradition.

A traditional Pakistani wedding involved many components. There was first the proposal party, which was held at the bride's house. This was where the groom's parents and family elders formally asked the bride's parents for her hand in marriage. Hyder and Akbar's father had died of a sudden heart attack at the age of thirty eight. So, in Akbar's case, it was his mother and her older brother (Akbar's uncle) who had asked the bride's parents.

The second component was the *dholki* or *mehndi*. It was a night of singing and dancing. The groom's family would bring sweets and henna for the bride, and the bride's family would do the same for the groom. Traditionally, the event was held separately for the bride and the groom, but Akbar's family and Aisha's family had decided to hold one big event in a banquet hall.

The third component was the *shaadi* (wedding). This was usually held at a marriage hall and it was hosted by the bride's family. It was also where the groom and his family would leave with the bride. This was called *rukhsati* (sending off). In some cases, it was also at this event that the Imam would perform the nikkah, which was the Islamic marriage contract ceremony. Akbar and Aisha's had already been performed in the mosque, where it was witnessed by many and indicated that the marriage was consensual. So, under Islamic law, they were now husband and wife, but they preferred to perform all the ceremonies before they lived under one roof.

In the end, there was the *walima*. It was the first dinner hosted by the bride and groom as a couple. The groom's parents would invite all the bride's family and friends to this event, and also their family and friends. This was also the most festive event in the wedding process.

There were many other events that families chose to include on top of the traditional weddings, such as the ring exchange or the engagement ceremony, but this ceremony has no basis in Islam. It was why Akbar and Aisha had chosen not to have one. Instead, they had decided to exchange the rings at the *shaadi*.

Hyder went inside the house and said *salaam* (greetings) to everyone. His sister-in-law's parents were there and so was she. His uncle and aunt were also sitting in the living room.

Hyder's *bhabi* (sister-in-law) came over and said, "What's going on with you, Hyder?"

Through Akbar, Hyder had met Aisha Ahmed many times now. She was always friendly and sweet to him. She always went out of her way to make him feel comfortable.

Aisha's family lived in Indiana, which was where her younger brother was studying in university. Hyder assumed that's why he was not here at the house.

"Nothing really," he said with a shrug.

"Oh, come on," she said. "You're a big shot now. Those TriGate stories you wrote about in the papers, they were amazing. I'm sure you get a lot of female attention now." She gave him a wink and a smile.

Hyder knew she was teasing. "That's what older sisters did," she had told him once. Hyder didn't have a sister so he enjoyed talking to her whenever he got the chance.

"I'm afraid not, *bhabi*," he said.

"You know, I've got a cousin. She's studying English writing. I can so hook you up with her."

Hyder's mouth dropped.

She then burst out laughing. "I'm kidding," she said. Hyder, like many young Pakistani men his age, was inundated with marriage questions from anyone and everyone. "When are you getting married?" they would say. "Why aren't you married yet?" "What type of girl do you want?" "I know so and so, and she would be perfect for you."

Hyder had usually been able to deflect such questions by saying, "I'm still in school." Or "I've just graduated and I'm now looking for work." Or even, "I've just got a job but it's temporary."

But now that his face was in the papers because of the TriGate Scandal, the marriage questions were coming up more and more. In fact, his mother had received marriage offers from several girls' parents.

"Where is Akbar?" he asked her.

"He's in the kitchen getting something ready," she said. "I wanted to help but he and your mom were against it."

"I think I'll go check on him."

The moment Hyder entered the kitchen, he immediately regretted it.

Akbar was staring at the toaster oven with confusion over his face.

Like him, Akbar was also named after a Mughal Emperor from India. He was tall and in good shape. He sported a neatly trimmed beard, and his hair was coiffed. Akbar was on his way to becoming a cancer specialist.

He was good at almost everything, once he put his mind to it, but nothing related to the kitchen, though.

"Where have you been?" he scowled at Hyder. "*Ammi (Mom)* and I could use your help."

Akbar was a couple of years older than Hyder, but he always talked to him like he was his father. Maybe, it was because they had lost their father when they were very young that Akbar had to grow into that father-figure role.

"I didn't know *bhabi's* family were coming," Hyder replied.

"I didn't know either," he said. "*Ammi* never told me. If it weren't for Aisha I would have still been at the hospital. Now, come and help me with the *somasas*."

Luckily for him, his mom came into the kitchen and quickly took over. While she placed some dried snacks on serving plates, Hyder placed half a dozen *somasas* in the toaster oven to heat up. Meanwhile, Akbar began filling the cups with *chai (tea)*.

One by one, Hyder and Akbar took trays filled with Indian sweets and snacks out to the waiting guests. They soon joined them.

Over the course of an hour, they discussed everything to do with the wedding. The venues for the *mehndi*, *shaadi*, and *walima*. The dates to hold those events. Hyder's mother even showed her soon to be daughter-in-law the clothes and jewelry she had been collecting for both of her sons' future wives.

Soon, Hyder felt too overwhelmed by it. It wasn't his wedding, it was his brother's. He excused himself and went to his room.

He decided he would perform *Salat* (prayers) and watch a movie. He used to always be able to find time to go to the theatre, but ever since he started working he found he was going less and less.

After the prayers he lay on the bed and turned on the television.

An old Steve McQueen movie was playing on one of the channels. He had seen it many times before, but he never got bored of watching it each time. He decided he would watch it until the end, or until he fell asleep, whichever came first.

16

She waited for the man as he stared at the menu behind her.

It was an easy to follow menu, one that was similar to all the menus at most fast food restaurants.

"I'll have... um, a triple cheese steak... um... with olives, lettuce, and tomatoes."

"Do you want to make that into a combo?" she asked. She was told to *always* ask customers that question.

"Um... I'm not sure," the man said.

"You'll get fries and a choice of drink for only a dollar-eighty more," she insisted. She hated pressuring customers, but if she didn't then her boss would give her flak for it. The man in front of her shouldn't be buying a combo, she thought. In fact, he shouldn't even be in a fast food restaurant. Period.

He was obese or close to it. Anymore of the greasy food from the restaurant would push him to an early heart attack. She was grateful, though, that she didn't have to ask him if he wanted to super-size the drink.

"Um... sure, make that a combo," he said as if he had decided this on his own and without any encouragement from the employee.

"What type of drink would you like?" she asked.

"I'll have a diet cola," he said, smiling.

Diet. "Like that would help," she wanted to say, but didn't.

She rung up his order, returned his change and then proceeded to the next customer.

She hated her job and the people she worked with, but she didn't have a choice, or at least that's what she told herself.

She had shocking pink hair, a nose ring around one nostril, and her fingernails were painted black.

"Grace," a man with braces said. "You're off in five minutes."

Grace Kelly Sanderson hated being called by that name. Her mother had named her after her favorite actress, Grace Kelly. She much preferred being called Kelly instead, but her boss, a douchebag named Todd, always chose to call her by her first name. He knew she didn't like it and that was why he kept doing it. He had initially tried to ask her out many times, but when she told him she was not interested, he had decided to make her life more difficult.

She finished taking orders from the last customer and went on her fifteen minute break. She exited the restaurant from the back and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

She wasn't hooked on them, she only smoked them when she felt really stressed. Right now, Todd was irritating her.

She took a drag and felt a bit better. She spotted her brand new BMW in the parking lot. She finished her cigarette and went to it.

She got in and turned on the music player.

She spent the next ten minutes or so—she didn't bother keeping track of the time—listening to hard rock and heavy metal songs.

When she went back inside the restaurant she found Todd waiting for her. He tapped the watch on his wrist, indicating that she was late. She gave him the middle finger. He could dock her pay or even fire her, she didn't care. But she wouldn't let him bully her.

He grinned and told her she was now on cleaning duty as punishment.

She shrugged and grinned back at him.

She wiped the tables by the front windows when she stopped. A television was placed on the wall next to the windows. The 24hr news channel was reporting that the authorities had located Leo Albright—the man who had gone missing walking his dog—all the way in Toronto. Leo Albright, apparently, had made some bad business deals with some dangerous people. To get away from them, and protect his family, he had chosen to run away.

The news report further stated that had it not been for the *Merchant of Truth*, the authorities would have never gone searching for Leo Albright in Canada.

Echo Rose smiled.

She then went and cleaned the restaurant's washrooms.

17

The condo was located in a nice neighborhood. It was in a new high rise, which included a swimming pool with a sauna, a gym room, a party room, and even a 50-seat theatre.

Vikram Patel's unit was a one-bedroom with a den. It had brand new furnishings and high-end appliances. The living room window looked out onto a ravine.

The CIW had taken care of Patel's accommodation and so they had spared no expense.

Nolan and Ivy methodically moved around the apartment, hoping to find something that might assist them in their investigation.

The first thing they had noticed upon entering the unit was the smell. It was thick and pungent. Upon further inspection they found spices and condiments in the kitchen.

The den had been converted into what looked like an area of worship.

In the corner was a statue of a woman. She had a golden complexion and four arms. She was sitting on some type of flower.

Nolan made a face, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

"It's the goddess Lakshmi," Ivy said from behind.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I studied religion in college," she said. "We spent a large portion of the course on Hinduism." She pointed to the flower. "It's a lotus. It's supposed to represent purity, fertility, and beauty."

This piqued Nolan's interest. "What about the hands? What do they signify?"

"Wealth. Liberation. Desires. And righteousness. Lakshmi, according to Hinduism, is a goddess of wealth and prosperity."

Nolan nodded as if this meant something. "I guess that explains why the victim kept it in his home."

They moved to the bedroom. They found a photo frame with several photos in it. Each photo had Patel with a woman and child—his wife and son. The photos showed all of three of them laughing and smiling.

It bothered Nolan to know that the Patels would never be a happy family again. They would forever be altered by one event: his murder.

Nolan had lost a wife in a premeditated accident. She was carrying his unborn child—a five month old baby girl. The one event had forever changed the course of their lives. They would never be a happy family again.

There were two pieces of luggage on the floor next to the bed. Nolan quickly examined them and then pushed them aside.

Meanwhile, Ivy went through the dressing table drawers. She pulled out each article of clothing and then shoved them back inside. She then moved to the bathroom, and after a cursory look, decided it was not worth inspecting in detail.

Nolan was in the closet. He looked through every nook and cranny. He then went and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"There's something missing," he said.

"What?"

He pointed to the side table next to the bed. There was a cord attached to the electrical outlet. "The victim charged his phone in there."

"So?" she said. "Why is that important?"

"Where is it?" Nolan looked at her. "We didn't find it on him or even at his desk at the CIW. So the next reasonable place it should be is here."

Ivy thought about it and then nodded.

"Also, where is his laptop?" Nolan said. "It, too, is missing."

"You're right," she said.

Nolan rubbed his coarse beard. He made a face.

"Is something else missing?" she asked.

"No, everything looks like where it's supposed to be."

"Okay, so what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, it's just that... it looks like someone was here before," he said.

"What makes you say that?" she inquired.

"Patel lived here for three months like a bachelor. You can see that some of his clothing was still unpacked. The dishes out in the kitchen sink hadn't been washed in a couple of days. Even the few pairs of shoes out in the hall are scattered and out of place. This showed that the victim wasn't trying to be clean or

organized, and why would he? He lived by himself. He didn't know anyone so there was no worry of guests dropping by unexpectedly. And, he was only here for a short period, and for one purpose, which was to fulfil his duties to CIW."

"Okay, but what does all that have to do with anything?" she said.

"If you look carefully at the top of the dresser, the side table, the dining table and even the kitchen counter top, you will not find any dust on them. The victim's current living environment contradicts that. This shows that someone had wiped them clean."

"Why would they do that?" she asked.

"To erase any trace of them being there."

"So, what're you saying?" she asked.

"Someone is a step ahead of us, and they are making sure we don't find out the truth."

18

She left her office, walked down the hall, and then knocked on the door.

"Come in," she heard a voice from inside.

When she entered, she found Governor Benny Carmino sitting behind his desk with a phone cradled to his neck.

He motioned for her to wait.

She understood the Governor was a busy man. As such, he was always on the go, whether it was on the phone solving some sort of crisis, or walking down the streets to meet the voters of his state, or even making appearances at charitable events.

Governor Carmino loved his state and its citizens. There was nothing he wouldn't do for them.

"Can I count on you or not?" she heard him say on the phone. "This is a very important bill for my administration," he said. "I need your support."

She moved away from him and stood by the window on the other side of the room.

Marlene Lind was the Governor's Chief of Staff. She had started off as his campaign manager when he had made a failed bid to be the mayor of Franklin. But he didn't give up and nor did she. He lost the mayoral elections twice more until finally he took the position. He stayed as the mayor of Franklin for eight years, accomplishing great things for the city.

He then used that success as a springboard for the governor's seat. This time he didn't have to lose three times before finally getting it. He won on his first try and he won overwhelmingly. Even now, his popularity had not waned.

She looked around the room. The governor's office was well decorated. On one side, near two large windows, was an oak desk where the governor preferred to have his photos taken as he went about his business. It showed, according to him, how hard he was working for the voters of the state.

Across from the desk were two white sofas, opposite one another, and single chairs on the sides. The governor preferred to conduct his meetings while sitting comfortably in them.

She was grateful that he did. The governor's meetings were legendary for the duration they lasted. The governor would not leave or end a meeting until he was satisfied the matter had been resolved.

It was why now he was still on the phone. He wouldn't hang up until he was certain his goal had been achieved.

She continued moving her eyes around the room. There were numerous photo frames on the walls. They showed the Governor with various dignitaries and even one with the President of the United States.

She smiled. She hoped, one day, the Governor would be in the White House, and she would be right next to him as his Chief of Staff.

He slammed the phone down and said, "Unbelievable! Trying to get a yes out of him was like squeezing blood out of a stone!"

He got up and walked over to the sofas.

"I'm guessing we don't have enough support for our bill then?" she said.

"We will," he replied with a grin. "We'll find a way to twist his arm. Now what's up?"

"I received the *call*..." she said, but stopped from saying more.

He looked at her and then nodded. "About time. I want to talk."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Just dial the number."

He leaned over and from a side table, picked up a newspaper. She handed him the cell phone.

"This is not what I had wanted," he barked into the phone. "Have you seen the papers? I'm holding one right now. What they describe is... *gruesome*. You had assured me your man... what did you call him?... *Brutus* would take care of it. Instead, he made a mess!" The Governor then listened. "I don't want excuses. I want solutions. This thing better not blow up and bite me in the ass, got it?" He hung up.

He took a deep breath and then looked at his Chief of Staff. He knew what she was thinking.

"I know, I know," he said, putting his hands up. "It was a mistake, but trust me, the end result would be great for this administration."

19

Hyder was behind his laptop when he heard a knock on his cubicle.

He turned to find Jerry standing beside a mail cart. Jerry had been at the Daily Times for over fifty years. He started when he was not even twenty, which meant he should have retired some years back.

There was very little Hyder knew about Jerry, whether he was ever married, or whether he had any children at all. To this day, he still didn't know Jerry's last name.

“Are you Hyder Ali?” he asked him.

No matter how many times Hyder had told him, Jerry still made it sound like he didn't know him.

It could be old age, Hyder thought. “Yes, that's me.”

From the mail cart, Jerry picked up a card and handed it to him.

“Have a nice day,” Jerry said and left.

Hyder looked at the postcard. There was a photo of a Llama on the front and a stamp from Peru in the upper corner.

Hyder smiled when he saw the name.

He quickly went through it.

Dear Hyder,

I hope you are well. I read your articles about the TriGate Scandal. I was very impressed and proud of you. I'm sure if my dad was still alive, he would be proud of you too. I'm glad I wasn't there when the story blew up, I wouldn't have been able to handle the attention. My trek through South America has led me to Peru (as you can very well tell from my postcard). I will stay here a bit longer, though. I've found a job at a local school teaching English to poor and needy children. I guess, I've somehow followed my dad's footsteps in taking up his vocation. I can't thank you enough for what you did for me and for my dad. I know he is resting in peace now.

Wishing you health and much happiness.

Your friend,

Jessica Freeland

Hyder read it a couple of times and then placed it next to the laptop.

Lester showed up and said, “What're you smiling about?”

“I just got a card from Jessica.”

“How come she didn't send me a card? I helped too, you know.”

“You sure did,” Hyder said. “In fact, if it weren't for your technical skills, we probably wouldn't have solved the mystery.”

“Damn right,” he said. “I deserve a key to the city.”

Hyder stood up. “How about I buy you lunch instead?”

“Even better!” Lester said, clapping his hands.

20

Echo Rose flipped through the *Daily Times*. She was searching for the *Hyder Reports*. She found it and quickly read through it.

It mentioned the murder at the *Centre for Inland Waters*. It provided the basics: the victim was Vikram Patel, an Indian national, who was in the United States on a work permit. He was contracted to study the toxicity levels at Franklin Harbour. Mr. Patel left behind a wife and a son in India.

Echo wasn't overly interested in the actual event, she was looking for something that might help *her*, and she found it at the end of the article.

She smiled. She had an idea.

She quickly went online and conducted a search. She remembered reading somewhere that most government agencies backed up their data externally. She hoped the CIW did the same.

“Found it,” she said.

A two year old article stated that the security firm, *DataCore Solutions*, had won the contract to provide backup support to the CIW.

Echo then found the address for *DataCore*. She also found that another company, *Industrial Cleaning Services* (ICS), provided their cleaning service to *DataCore*.

“This will be so much fun,” she said with a smile.

The first thing she did was visit ICS. She convinced the young hiring manager, Carlos, that she was right for the job. It also helped that she sort of flirted with him. She left him thinking he might get a date with her if she was employed at ICS. She also left with an ICS ID and a uniform.

She then went to *DataCore* dressed in the uniform and she covered her pink hair with a cap. The security guard, at first, was skeptical, but he soon let her in when she gave Carlos’s name. Lucky for her, the security guard knew Carlos, so the name dropping worked.

DataCore was inside of a warehouse. It had three floors, all heavily secured. An access card was required to enter and exit each floor. Upon entering the premises, Echo was provided with one, but she quickly found the access card did not work in the area where the data was kept.

Echo moved around the floor, dusting and cleaning. She spotted several employees go in and out of a room that was referred to as the Hub. She knew that’s where she would find what she was looking for.

She saw one employee come out of the room and then go to her cubicle. The woman placed her ID and access card on the desk and then proceeded to work on her desktop.

Echo worked her way to the cubicle, wiping and cleaning the cubicles on her way. She smiled at the woman, but the woman was too preoccupied to acknowledge her. Echo carefully wiped the area around the woman’s desk and then, when she saw an opening, in one quick motion, she swiped the woman’s access card and placed it in her pocket.

The woman didn’t notice. She was too busy with what was on her computer screen.

Echo immediately went to the next cubicle, but she knew she didn’t have much time. The woman would soon realize the access card was missing and would alert security.

Echo went to the women’s washroom and quickly changed out of ICS’s uniform. She put on a white blouse with a light jacket on top of it, black pants, and a blond wig to cover the dyed hair. There was no way she could go inside the Hub dressed as a cleaning employee or even as herself.

She scanned the access card and the door unlocked.

When she went in she shivered. The room was chilly. It needed to be, she understood. The servers had to stay cool or else they would heat up. She saw large fans circulating on the ceiling above.

She looked around and grasped how massive the room was. There were rows upon rows of servers lined up one after the other.

Finding the one that was for CIW would be close to impossible with the time she had.

As she walked down the rows she passed a couple of *DataCore* employees. She didn't make eye contact and fortunately, they were too preoccupied to pay any attention to her.

She then noticed what looked like a list, attached to a wall.

She went to it and found it had names of various companies next to a set of codes.

She scanned through the list and found it. *CIW: 7/34*.

She then counted 20 rows, which meant that in row 7 she would find the data for the CIW.

She quickly went into the row and then saw a tag with a number taped to each server.

She walked down and then stopped at number 34.

"Eureka," she whispered to herself.

The *Centre for Inland Waters* was labeled on the machine. But there was a problem, she couldn't just walk out with the machine, it was too bulky and visible.

She unhooked the cover and found two hard drives, the size of her palm, inside it. She didn't know which one to take so she decided to take them both.

She unattached the cables and then hid them under her jacket.

She walked out of the Hub without arousing any suspicion.

She then hurried out of *DataCore Solutions* building.

When she was a good distance away, she dialed a number.

"Hello, Arnold," she said into the cell phone. "It's Echo. I have something for you to look at. I need it back ASAP, though." She listened. "Okay, I'll be there in half an hour."

* * * * *

DigiSource was a used electronics and computer store. It also repaired and refurbished old and dated products.

It was owned by an older couple, who only came by once a day to count the money in the cash register. This meant the two employees who worked at *DigiSource* could do whatever they wanted with their time, just as long as they served the customers.

Echo went inside and found Arnold Lam working in the back room.

Arnold was medium height, medium built, and he sported a buzz cut. He always wore outrageous T-shirts. Today's was white, with abdominal muscles drawn in the area where the stomach was.

"What have you got for me today?" he said.

Echo looked over at the other end of the store. Jason, the other employee, was busy playing video games on his handheld device. Echo was sure he was too busy to hear them.

"It's a security footage," she said, pulling out two hard drives from her backpack. "I don't have the software to play it and I hoped you might."

Arnold grinned. "I can play anything." He took the hard drives. "You want me to make a copy of the whole thing?"

"No, I just want some images that I can use for the website."

Arnold smiled. "You want to put them up on the *Merchant of Truth*?"

"Yes, and it's going to be big."

"How big?"

"*Very* big."

"Alright, but how am I going to know what images to look for?"

"They should be at the end, and..." she paused as if hesitating whether she should reveal more, but without Arnold's help she wasn't going to be able to do this, so she said, "It'll show a murder."

Arnold's eyes widened. He looked over at Jason, who was still busy with his game, and then he leaned over and said, "A *murder*? Are you serious?"

"Yep, and it should be in one of those hard drives."

Arnold grinned again. "Cool. I'll e-mail you the images."

21

They were told to be here, more precisely, they were ordered to come here. Captain Ross had personally received the call and he had sent Nolan and Ivy to deal with it.

They now sat across from Ashok Dutta, Consul General of India, Franklin.

Dutta's office was spacious and well decorated. There was an American flag on one side of the room with an Indian flag on the other. They noticed handcrafted furniture throughout the office. Most likely imported from India, Nolan thought.

There was a statue with garlands around its neck in the corner of the room. Nolan wanted to ask Ivy the significance of this statue but decided against it.

An assistant had already asked if they would like coffee or tea and they had politely declined.

Nolan wanted a drink instead, and he could tell by looking at Dutta that he too enjoyed a glass or two during the day.

Dutta's eyes were bloodshot. He was a stout man, with a heavy mustache that covered his upper lip entirely. His fine thin hair was combed over and his shirt collar was too tight around his thick neck.

He put his hands together and Nolan saw several gold rings were around his chubby fingers.

"How is the investigation going?" Dutta asked.

"We are making progress," Ivy quickly responded.

"You have suspects?" he said.

"Not yet."

He made a face and shook his head.

"Mr. Patel was an Indian citizen and we are very troubled and concerned about what happened to him."

"So are we," Ivy said.

“There is already a backlash in India. The newspapers are proclaiming that America is doing nothing to find the culprit.”

“This is completely false,” Ivy said. “We are doing everything in our power to find who did this to Mr. Patel.”

“In India we would have already put that individual in jail.”

Nolan had to control himself from smirking. In India, you were guilty until proven innocent, which at times could be a monumental task if you didn’t have the financial resources to fight it.

He had read recently where a man from a higher class family had murdered his servant in a drunken rage. The rich man’s family had clout in the judicial system, where they were able to “buy” their way out of a conviction. It was never done blatantly, but more in the form of gifts and other benefits. The general population was outraged when the story broke. There were protests and even some rioting. To quell the uproar, the family, with the help of the local police and other officials, were able to pin the crime on another servant, a young man from a very poor family. They stated that out of jealousy it was he, and not the rich man, who had killed the other servant. The young man was quickly convicted to life in prison. Distraught and devastated, the young man eventually hanged himself in his cell. It was later revealed that both the victim’s family and the wrongfully convicted man’s family were handsomely paid by the rich man’s family for not pursuing further legal matters against them.

The rich man now lived in the United States where he ran a successful car wash business. He was never convicted of any crime in India and therefore he was able to enjoy life as a free man in America.

Nolan knew of many other examples of injustice in India and other parts of the world that just thinking about them made him want to drink even more.

“In the United States,” Nolan said to Dutta. “We have a process, and one that must be followed with care before we make any accusations against any individuals. We will find who did it and we will prosecute them to the fullest extent of *our* law.”

Dutta looked at him and then nodded. “You have to understand, we, in this consulate, are under pressure from the family. They would like Mr. Patel’s body back in India so that they could be with him.”

“We fully understand,” Ivy said. “But as it is still an ongoing investigation, the transfer of Mr. Patel’s body out of the United States will have to be delayed.”

Dutta nodded again, as if he understood. “Then I will make arrangements to bring his family over, so that they could be with him here.”

“That would be a good idea,” Nolan said.

22

Arnold locked the front door of *DigiSource* and walked in the direction of his home.

Luckily, his apartment was only a thirty minute walk away. He didn't own a car, nor did he prefer to waste money on public transit, so walking was the only option for him.

He pulled the backpack over his shoulder and adjusted his cap. It had started to drizzle, but not enough to affect him. But still, he didn't want to get drenched—in case the weather turned ugly—so he hurried his steps.

He wasn't concerned about getting wet, he was more concerned about the content in his backpack.

The hard drive Echo had given him earlier, was more explosive than he had ever imagined.

It was ghastly as well.

It clearly showed a man in an ape mask executing a helpless person with a nail gun.

It was unbelievable and surreal.

Arnold couldn't believe his eyes when he had first seen it. In fact, he had to stop what he was doing and leave the electronic store. Jason, his co-worker, had asked where he was going, but Arnold only managed to make up some lame excuse. He didn't care whether Jason believed him or not. Arnold was more experienced and better qualified than him. Jason was more of a salesperson, while Arnold was more of a technical person. If something needed repair, Arnold was the one who did it, so, according to him, he was far more valuable than Jason.

The walk around the block had help clear his mind. When he returned, he was able to fully focus on the task at hand.

He had used a software to not only view the video footage, but also convert it to a format that could be played on any device. Now, all he had to do was send it to Echo.

He lived in a low-rise building so he took the stairs up to the third floor.

He unlocked the door to his apartment and went in. The first thing that hit him was the smell. It was thick and pungent.

"Manny!" he yelled into the apartment.

He found his roommate in the living room, sitting in front of the television. Manny Chekoff had shoulder-length blonde hair, he was skinny to the bones, and he had what looked like long whiskers on his chin.

Manny looked at him with glassy eyes. "What's up, man?" he slowly said.

"Were you smoking weed inside the apartment again?" Arnold asked.

"No, man."

"You're lying," Arnold said, irate. "I can smell it."

"Honest, I smoked them on the balcony."

"Then how come I can smell it inside?"

"Oh, right," Manny said with a short laugh. "I must have left the door open when I was blowing the smoke... *my bad.*"

Arnold shook his head and opened the balcony door and the windows.

"You know, if the superintendent found out he would have us evicted," Arnold said.

"Sorry, man," Manny apologized again.

"The rent is good here so I don't want to move."

“Gotcha, man,” Manny said.

There were times Arnold had thought of booting Manny out, but he was low maintenance and he paid his share of the rent on time.

Manny didn’t have a job, per se. He was a small time pot dealer who not only sold weed, but was also fond of using the product he sold.

If he wasn’t hustling drugs, he was sitting at home for hours at a time, watching kung-fu movies.

Right now he watched an old Bruce Lee flick.

Arnold shook his head and then went over and turned on his laptop. He hooked up the hard drive and began copying the formatted video footage.

He then went to the kitchen and looked in the fridge. Fortunately, Manny hadn’t eaten the last slice of the apple pie.

Arnold grabbed it and went back to the computer.

He opened an image editor software and cropped those images that he felt were important.

“What you got there, Arnold?” Manny said, squinting.

“None of your business,” Arnold said.

“Is that guy shooting him?” he asked.

“Go back to your movie, okay?”

“Alright. Chill man.”

Arnold compressed the images and then e-mailed them to Echo.

He shut off the laptop and then sat next to Manny.

While he ate the apple pie, both Manny and he watched Bruce Lee kick and punch thirty different assailants.

23

Sweat poured from his face, creating a puddle on the floor below him.

His arms burned and ached, but he didn’t stop.

He wouldn’t allow himself to give up. His *will* was stronger than his body. He was on the floor doing pushups. It was something he did regularly to keep his mind focused. A daily routine was important to him, one he had adopted from his time in the military.

“Ninety-seven,” he grunted as he pushed himself up. “Ninety-eight... ninety-nine... one hundred.”

He collapsed on the floor. He was out of breath and exhausted.

He shut his eyes and let his mind drift.

It was time to rest his body, he told himself. He had already put it through so much. Prior to the pushups, he had completed a set of sit-ups, curls, bench press, and various other exercises depending on his mood.

The rundown motel he had been staying in was small. It had a queen-sized bed, one just enough to fit his six-foot-four frame. One bathroom, where the hot water came and went, and an old television with all the basic channels he could watch.

He wasn't much of a TV person. He hardly ever watched any shows. The only channel he kept it on was the news. It was his gateway to the city—a city he was no longer familiar with.

After his return from duty he felt out of place, as if the world had suddenly changed around him. He no longer felt like he belonged. He was lost and confused. He had gone into a deep depression. He had sought help, but he found the medications did not do much good and the therapy was a joke.

He was never good with his emotions and the last thing he wanted to do was sit in a room and tell some doctor, who had never seen real combat, how he felt. It was pure bullshit, and one he had said straight to the doctor's face.

The doctor had told him that he had a lot of pent-up anger inside him and if he didn't release it in a constructive manner, it could destroy him or hurt someone else.

"Sure, doc," he had said to her. What he really wanted to say was that she had no clue what he was really going through. He had given everything to his country and he felt his country should give everything to him. He should have been hailed as a hero upon his return, like the Romans did when their soldiers returned from battle. Instead, he came home to an empty house and no celebration party.

His girlfriend had married someone else the moment he had left the country.

She broke up with him during an online chat. She was here and he was there.

He didn't blame her, though. She had begged him not to go again. But he loved the camaraderie and the thrill of excitement too much. Maybe he loved it more than her. Regardless, he went to war and she went to someone else.

He wiped the sweat off his shaved head. He lifted himself up. The small room had become even more congested with the weight lifting equipment. He had to hop over it just to get to the bathroom.

He washed his face and head with cold water.

It felt good, refreshing.

He would have a cold shower and then take a long nap. His body required the rest to heal itself.

He then heard something. He went out into the room and stared at the television screen.

On it was a black and white image of a man wearing an ape mask. The man held—what looked like a gun—over another man. Below the image was the headline: THE MERCHANT OF TRUTH STRIKES AGAIN.

The newscaster relayed that the images were from the murder at the *Centre for Inland Waters*. The suspect was wearing a leather jacket and hoodie so his identify was difficult to ascertain.

He grunted. He knew exactly who it was.

The newscaster further stated that the images were taken by Echo Rose, writer of the *Merchant of Truth*. Ms. Rose had stated in her blog that more images would be released in the coming days. The police had no comment as they hadn't seen the images themselves. Ms. Rose was not available for comment, but the newscaster urged the viewers to stay tuned to their station as more information became available.

He went to the closet and removed a large metal box. From it, he removed a military assault weapon. He spent the next twenty minutes servicing it. It was another one of his daily routines. His weapon was an extension of him, so it had to be taken care of. When done, he returned it back inside the box. He would never use it for anything other than in battle. He had too much respect for it. It had saved his life many times before.

He then removed his military uniform and proceeded to iron it. He then polished his shoes until he could see light reflecting off of them. He placed them carefully back inside the box.

He sat on the edge of the bed and felt his body shake.

“Echo Rose,” he grunted as a surge of anger overwhelmed him. He smashed his hand through the television screen, shattering the glass.

He looked down at his hand, blood poured out of his knuckles and fingers. Maybe the doctor was right, he thought. Maybe he did have anger issues.

Brutus went back into the bathroom to clean his hand and his body.

24

“I don’t know how she did it,” Hyder said.

He was in Veronica’s office. They were reading the *Merchant of Truth* website. He couldn’t believe Echo Rose had more on the CIW story than he did.

“This is not good, Hyder,” Veronica said.

“She must have gotten those images illegally,” he said, still in shock.

“Or she must have gotten them through the security guard, don’t you think that’s possible?”

Hyder didn’t have an answer.

“Did you even talk to the security guard?”

Hyder shook his head.

“There’s your answer, Hyder,” Veronica said. Hyder could tell she was clearly miffed by this. She too had a boss who demanded that the *Daily Times* be the first to release exclusive content. This was good print matter and also good financially.

The *Merchant of Truth* had suddenly become the place to be for breaking news.

“What about the police?” Hyder said, suddenly thinking of something.

“What about them?”

“How come they didn’t have the footage?” he said. “If they did, they would have released it, at least to us.”

There was a sort of understanding between the police force and the media outlets. The force would keep the media abreast of anything that was happening in an investigation, and in return, the media would pass on that information to the general public. This way the media got their story and the force looked like they were doing their duty. In most cases, it was a win-win situation.

“You still have contacts in the force, right?” Veronica asked.

“Sure, I guess,” Hyder shrugged.

“If I were you I would give them a call, Hyder,” she said. “We need to get ahead of the *Merchant of Truth*. We won’t break our journalistic codes and principles, but we will use every resource in our power to do it.”

Hyder nodded and left the office.

25

They were in a coffee shop.

The man across from Nolan was well-dressed. He wore a gray turtleneck sweater, over which he had on a black blazer. He had on charcoal dress pants and recently polished shoes.

His name was Earl Winton and he was Nolan’s sponsor from AA. He was also many years older than Nolan.

“I’m sure you think this is a waste of time,” he said.

Nolan shrugged.

When Earl had called to set up a time and date for their first meeting, Nolan had been reluctant. He had tried to make many excuses, all of which, it seemed, Earl had heard before.

Earl said, “I’ve been a Sponsor to many individuals from all walks of life, but I can’t say it was anyone from the police force.”

“Yeah, well...” Nolan didn’t know what to say. He looked out the window. He wished this meeting was over as soon as possible. He had a lot to do and this was eating away at his precious time.

“How are you feeling today?” Earl asked.

“Good, I guess.” Nolan felt like he was at his doctor’s.

“Any urges to drink?”

“Sure, all the time,” Nolan blurted.

“And have you...” He let his words trail.

Nolan looked away.

“It’s okay,” Earl said. “We all get sidetracked in the beginning.”

Nolan tapped his fingers on the chairs. He couldn’t do this. He stood up. “I’m sorry, you seem like a nice fellow and all, but I’ve got a lot of work to do and I can’t do this now.”

Earl smiled. “Sure, I understand.”

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“Do you want to know why I do this?” Earl said. “Why I come and meet men and women like you?”

Nolan waited for him to tell him.

“I do it for my wife,” he said.

Nolan stood where he was.

“I lost her recently and so I know what you’ve been through. The first time I had decided to become sober, it was for her. That was twenty years ago. Every day that I had the urge to reach for a drink, I always thought of her. She was more important than anything in a bottle. When she died, she was no longer there to remind me to not go back to my old ways. I thought about drinking again, how it

would help ease the pain of losing her, but I couldn't. It would be an insult to her memory. It was why I came here, to meet you, so that I could continue to be the man she could be proud of. By helping you, I am also helping myself." He paused. "Thank you for coming, Detective Nolan. I appreciate that you did."

Nolan didn't move. He looked at Earl for what looked like several minutes. He then said, "I think I've got some time."

Earl smiled. "I'll order us some more coffee."

26

Hyder was feeling restless. He wasn't sure how to call Nolan up.

When Veronica had mentioned that she speak to someone on the force, she really meant, Nolan.

Nolan and Hyder had worked together on the TriGate Scandal so it was assumed that they had a close relationship.

They didn't, really.

It wasn't that they disliked each other, it was just that they had gone on with their lives.

Hyder had thought many times to call up Nolan and see what he was up to, but he never found a genuine reason to do so.

Nolan was probably too busy to even want to meet up.

Hyder stared at the number on his cell phone. All he had to do was press the button and it would dial to Nolan's phone.

But the question then was, what would he say to him?

Hyder needed more information on the CIW murder and he needed an inside source to provide it to him. Nolan was the right person for it. But Hyder didn't feel comfortable using their history together to get his story.

Echo Rose had found a dishonest way to do it, but he wouldn't stoop to her level.

On the computer screen he pulled up the *Merchant of Truth* website. He scanned the blog and in doing so he found a link to her email.

Hyder debated whether to send her a message or not.

What would he say to her, though?

He couldn't possibly tell her how he actually felt. But he had to reach out to her. He had to let her know that her actions were reckless and could have serious consequences for those involved.

The images posted on the blog showed a murder in action.

What about Vikram Patel's family? How would they feel when they saw it?

The blog never mentioned how those images were procured, which made Hyder guess that they weren't taken lawfully.

Since the TriGate Scandal Hyder had become the go-to guy at the *Daily Times*, which meant, people were always looking to sell him a story. He once received an anonymous call where the caller indicated that—for the right price—Hyder could get his hands on a profanity-laced tape recording of a drunk Senator.

Hyder was aware of the Senator's brilliant legislative track record. He had done great work for the poor and needy. Exposing a low moment in his life would have derailed all of the work he had done.

Hyder had wrestled with this for some time, but in the end, his conscience wouldn't have allowed him to destroy a good man.

He refused and soon the tape was purchased by a rival paper. Naturally, when the higher-ups at the *Daily Times* found out, they were not pleased with this. But Hyder stuck to his guns. Fortunately for him, the general public reacted negatively to the story. They accused the rival paper of dirty journalism for the sake of selling a few more copies. The editors of that paper were inundated with nasty emails and letters. Quickly, the rival paper retracted the story and issued an apology to the Senator.

Out of this, Hyder got his own story about the nefarious tactics some journalist took to get an inside scoop. His article, on the other hand, resulted in little or no negative comments from the readers.

Hyder adjusted himself on the chair and then began typing up his message. When done, he sent it to Echo Rose.

He wasn't sure if she would read it or even reply to it, but he was glad he sent it.

27

"Who is this Echo Rose?" Captain Ross fumed. "How did she get access to that security footage? And how come we don't have them?"

Nolan was in his office. He didn't have any answers for him.

The Captain was furious. Nolan had rarely seen him lose his cool, but today he had every right to be. Those images were making the force look bad. It was as if a vigilant reporter was doing more investigative work than even the police.

"You sure the footage wasn't there?" he asked.

Nolan said, "We checked ourselves. The hard drives that stored them were missing."

"Then how did she get them?" he asked.

"Maybe she was the one who took them in the first place," Nolan said.

Ross thought about it. "Then find her," he demanded. "This is an ongoing investigation and she has evidence pertinent to it."

Outside the Captain's office, Nolan found Pascale waiting for him by his desk.

"I saw it on TV," he said with a smirk. "You guys messed up, *big time*."

"No, we didn't," Nolan said, straight-faced.

"What do you mean?" Pascale was confused. "You didn't release the footage, did you?"

"Nope. But maybe *you* did."

"What?" Pascale glared at him. "Why would *I* do that?"

"To ruin our investigation," Nolan said. "You were angry that I was put on the case so you tried to sabotage our case."

"Have you lost your mind?" Pascale's face was turning red.

“No, I’m just thinking it clearly now,” Nolan said. “You were at the scene before us, so you had a great opportunity to take the security footage. In fact, I should walk right back into the Captain’s office and mention this to him.”

Pascale’s mouth nearly dropped.

Nolan burst out laughing.

“You’re an asshole,” Pascale said and walked away.

Nolan sat behind his desk and stared out the window. The sun was shining bright as it blanketed the city in a golden yellow.

There were times where Nolan wanted to be anywhere but here. He had thought about quitting the force and doing something else. But do what? He didn’t have any hobbies that took up his time, maybe except drinking—but this was something he was hoping to be done with.

When his wife was still alive, Nolan had some purpose to his life. He would raise a family, watch his kids get married, retire, travel the world with his wife, and play with the grandchildren whenever they came by.

This was a dream that most people hoped to fulfil, but many never did. Life had a way of unexpectedly blindsiding them. Some would never find the right person to settle down with, while others would but it would end up in divorce, or in Nolan’s case, the death of a spouse. Other events also derailed that dream, like the loss of a job, financial disasters, childlessness, or even serious health scares.

After the loss of his wife, Nolan had learned the hard way that to think one could actually control life was nothing but a dream.

Life controlled you, and not vice versa.

Lopez came over. “How are you, Tom?”

He shrugged.

“Where’s your partner, Agent Driscoll?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Probably doing FBI stuff, I don’t keep a tab on her.”

“I saw the footage on TV.”

“Yeah, Pascale and the entire city of Franklin saw it too. Do you think the security guard at the CIW had something to do with this?”

Lopez shook her head. “I don’t think so. He was as shocked as us to see the hard drives missing.”

Nolan nodded and stared out the window.

“How are you holding up?” she finally asked.

After his wife’s death, Nolan had fallen apart. His drinking had taken over every aspect of his life, both personally and professionally. It was Captain Ross who had initiated his temporary leave from the force, fearing Nolan would do something that could forever damage his career. It was also Ross who had brought him back after he realized Nolan wasn’t getting better, but worse.

Lopez, as well, had kept a close tab on him. During his leave, when he was doing everything in his power to destroy himself with the alcohol, he had, on a number of occasions, seen a vehicle similar to Lopez’s parked outside his house. He knew she was watching him, but he also knew, she would never intrude into his life. She had too much respect for him.

He wouldn’t have wanted her to see him in the drunken state anyway.

He smiled at her, “I’m hanging in there.”

“Maybe when your case is over, we could...” she stopped when she saw Ivy come over.

“Good morning, Detective Lopez,” Ivy said.

“Good morning, Agent Driscoll,” Lopez replied.

Neither smiled at the other and neither said another word. They stood staring each other down. Nolan felt a chill in the air.

“I better go,” Lopez finally said and walked away.

“Was I interrupting anything?” Ivy asked Nolan.

“No, nothing important,” he said.

“I went to *DataCore Solutions* with the warrant,” she said.

“Did you get the footage?” he said, eagerly.

She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“The backup hard drives were missing.”

28

The house was located in an exclusive gated community. It was worth nearly two-point-five million dollars. It was actually one of the lowest valued houses in the community, a fact that deeply bothered the owners.

It didn't bother their daughter, though.

Echo entered the massive house and yelled, “Hello!”

She heard her voice *echo* around the walls. She did this whenever she came home. It was why she had used the name Echo as a pseudonym in the first place.

She already knew the house would be empty. Her father's Ferrari and her mother's Mercedes were not parked in the front.

She moved into the grand lobby and kicked off her shoes. She didn't bother putting them away. She left them scattered by the entrance.

It was a five-bedroom, 4-bathroom, double-story house. It had a Jacuzzi, a swimming pool, and even a game room in the basement.

Echo cared for none of those things. What she cared about was not coming home to a vacant house.

Edward Sanderson, her father, worked at an investment firm. Her mother, Didi Sanderson, worked in a bank. This meant, they were away most of the time on business matters.

What a waste, Echo had thought. Her parents had such a nice and extravagant house, but they were too busy to enjoy it, or even live in it.

Echo had spent most of her childhood being alone. Her parents never wanted children, but only had her out of an obligation to have them. Everyone in their social circle had children, so they figured one would suffice. Plus, one child would not be a major interference with their careers.

What they didn't realize was that Echo longed for siblings. She had tried to make friends, but found them to be stuck up or snotty. If someone's parents made less than theirs, they made sure to remind them of it.

Maybe it was why money never interested her.

She only worked at the fast food restaurant to piss them off. They couldn't believe their daughter was working for minimum wage.

Her parents had sent her to the best schools money could buy, but she always found a way to get kicked out. She had rebelled against them and their materialistic lifestyle.

She wanted no part of it.

She had thought about moving out, but it was better to stay here and make their lives miserable.

She went into the kitchen, and from the fridge, grabbed a carton of ice cream. She ate a few spoons full and left the carton on the counter. She knew this would upset her mom, but she didn't care.

It wasn't like her mom did any of the cleaning, anyway. A cleaning lady came each day to perform all the duties. They used to have a full-time maid at the house, but found it too expensive. Plus, the house was no longer as messy as it was when Echo was younger.

This was something else that bothered her. She had grown up in the care of nannies. She had felt more affection for them than for her own mother.

Didi was a social climber. She was more proud of hosting extravagant parties than being a good mother. Edward was no better. He had hoped Echo was a boy. As a child, Echo thought he would pay more attention to her if she were, so she started acting like one. But this made him ignore her even more.

She went into the family room and turned on the television. She didn't bother changing the channels. Instead, she turned up the volume and left the room. She then went into the living room and did the same.

She found the noise from the televisions very comforting. It made her feel like she wasn't alone in the house.

She went back into the kitchen, rummaged through the fridge again, found a small carton of juice and then headed upstairs.

Her bedroom was open and spacious. It had large windows, an ensuite bathroom, and a walk-in closet. A king-sized bed was in the middle and above it hung a chandelier.

When they had moved into the house they found that each room had one. Apparently, the previous owners were very fond of them.

There were days she enjoyed staring at it while she lay in bed. But then there were days where she couldn't stand the sight of it. Now, she was indifferent to it.

Over the years, the room had gone through many transformations. The various posters on the walls were an indicator of that. She used to have posters of teenage heartthrobs, which were quickly replaced by posters of rock bands, which were then replaced by posters of various cities in the world.

Thanks to her parents' wealth Echo had visited many of those cities, so those posters didn't hold much interest for her any more. Soon, they too would be replaced by whatever caught her attention next.

Echo finished the juice, threw the carton in the garbage bin, and went to the corner of the room.

She sat in front of a computer table and turned on her laptop.

The first thing she always checked was her blog the *Merchant of Truth*.

She smiled. Today, it had over two thousand visitors.

Ever since she started the site, the traffic had increased with each story she put up.

She scrolled to the bottom of the web page and began reading the comments. Several people criticized her for putting up the images, but many more applauded her for having the courage to do so.

She found that those who criticized her were much older than those who didn't. This told her that the younger generation were willing to get the news in any format and from anyone. They weren't restricting themselves to the established forums, like the various local newspapers.

She clicked at the bottom of the page and found that she had over a hundred new subscribers to her website. Soon, she hoped, it would be the main source the people of Franklin would rely on for their news.

She opened up her email and began scrolling through it.

Most of it was from readers who wanted to meet her, some were news outlets looking to interview her, and some were from people who were threatening to expose her.

Good luck, she thought.

She was about to log-off when something caught her eye.

The email address was from the *Daily Times*.

She clicked on it and her eyes narrowed.

Dear Ms. Rose,

My name is Hyder Ali and I work for the Daily Times. I'm sure you know that already as I have a feeling you've read my articles. Your story on Leo Albright was revelatory and in many ways eye-opening. And now, your article on the murder at the CIW was nothing short of explosive. I'm sure this has brought much attention to not only you, but also to your blog, the Merchant of Truth, and this is deservedly so. Having said that, while I commend your desire to seek the truth, I question your methods by which you have done so. To discuss this, and many other things, I would greatly appreciate if we could meet. If that is not possible, then even a conversation via email, telephone, or whatever other methods you desire, would be appreciated. I look forward to your speedy reply.

Sincerely,

Hyder

Echo read the message once more.

She didn't delete it, but knew full well that she wouldn't reply to it.

29

The flight from Goa was delayed.

Nolan adjusted his glasses, while Ivy made a face.

They were in the arrivals terminal at Franklin City Airport, staring at the flight board above.

The media had already gathered. Like Nolan and Ivy, they too were waiting for the arrival of Vikram Patel's wife and son from India. Fortunately, this gave them more time to interview the Consul General of India, Ashok Dutta.

Dutta was loving every minute of the lime light. It wasn't every day his face would be in print and on television. He gave them enough sound bites to last them several weeks.

Nolan wanted nothing more than to stay away from the cluster of microphones, tape records, digital and video cameras, and also the questions in general.

A few had ventured over to where he and Ivy were standing, but when they saw his hand on his gun, they quickly moved away.

Nolan's reputation for being brash and unpredictable still preceded him. Plus, if he was drunk, then there was no telling what he would do. They weren't going to take any chances, not for a story, at least.

"You want coffee?" Ivy asked. "It's my treat."

Nolan shrugged. "Why not."

They went to the other side of the terminal where Nolan found seats near the window.

Two minutes later Ivy returned with their drinks.

"Do you think we'll find anything useful from the victim's wife?" Ivy asked.

"I wouldn't hold my breath," he said, taking a sip from the cup. "She's probably just a grieving widow..." He then paused. "But, on the other hand, she knew her husband better than any of us, so it would best that we speak to her."

Ivy nodded.

Nolan thought of something and said, "I was wondering, and I hope you don't mind me asking, but why did you want to be assigned to this case?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm sure you guys at the Bureau have bigger fish to catch," he said. "A murder of a scientist wouldn't be high on your list... unless, I guess, he was working on something nuclear."

"You are right, Vikram Patel's murder is not a high priority at the Bureau, but it is of some interest to us. The victim was a foreign national, so his murder on American soil does take some priority. And as far as being assigned to the case, I volunteered."

Nolan raised an eyebrow. "Why would you do that?"

She shrugged. "I was bored, and I needed a change."

He grinned. "I need a change too, can I join you on one of your cases?"

She laughed. "That would be funny, the Franklin Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, swapping employees on cases."

"I have a feeling Sergeant Halton wouldn't hesitate for a second in swapping me for anyone."

"You don't think your superiors value you?"

"I know my place in the force and it's somewhere in the middle."

She smiled. "I'm sure that'll change after this case." She took a sip of her coffee. "I think someone is staring in our direction."

Nolan turned and his smile widened. He waved at him to come over.

"You know him?" Ivy said.

“Absolutely, I’ll introduce you.” Nolan stood up and said, “Agent Driscoll, this is Hyder Ali.”

“How do you do?” Hyder replied.

“You wrote about the TriGate Scandal, right?” Ivy said.

“He sure did,” Nolan said, beaming. “Without his help, I’m not sure if I would’ve ever found out the truth. How is Jessica Freeland? Do you still talk to her?”

“She’s teaching in South America. I recently received a postcard from her. She’s happy to be travelling.”

“And how have you been?” Nolan asked.

“Busy, but I guess, not as busy as you are on the CIW murder,” Hyder said.

“You’re on a story?” Nolan asked.

“Yep, I’m trying to get an exclusive for the *Daily Times*.”

“You mean for the *Hyder Reports*, right?”

“You read it?” Hyder was surprised.

“Of course, it’s the only thing I read.”

Hyder smiled. “You know, I was thinking of calling you, to get an inside scoop on the case... but then I didn’t.”

“Is it because you’ve got competition now?” Nolan raised an eyebrow.

“The *Merchant of Truth*, you’ve seen it?” Hyder asked.

“Captain Ross gave me a lecture on it.”

“Yeah, so I was hoping to get further into the story than she did.”

Nolan shrugged. “Why not? But I don’t know how much help I can be.”

Hyder immediately pulled out his notepad. “Anything is better than nothing. I’ll be quick. Do you have any suspects so far?”

Nolan shook his head. “None, that’s why we are here.”

“Any motives to the murder?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“Is it true the security tapes were taken from the CIW and DataCore Solutions?”

“Yep.”

“Do you believe the perpetrator was the one who took them?”

“That’s a possibility.”

“Do you think Echo Rose took them?”

Nolan paused and then said, “Are you making a *link* between the writer of the *Merchant of Truth* and the murder at the CIW?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, is there one?”

Nolan looked over at Ivy. He could tell she, too, was thinking this over.

“We are going to reach out to Ms. Rose,” Nolan said. “We are going to find out how deep she is in all of this.”

Hyder jotted it down.

Nolan quickly said, “We are not saying that she is a suspect in the murder at the CIW. We are only saying that we would like to find out if she knows or has anything that might help us in our investigation.”

Hyder smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t twist your words in my story.”

Nolan smiled back, “I know you won’t.”

Just then they heard a commotion.

“I think the wife and son are coming out,” Ivy said.

They rushed to the arrivals gate. Two minutes later, a woman wearing a black sari came out through the sliding door. Holding her hand was a small boy.

When she saw the crowd, she looked scared and confused.

The media quickly surrounded her, blocking her path.

Nolan and Ivy pushed their way through the throng of reporters and quickly escorted her and her son away from them.

Dutta followed behind.

Reema Patel wanted to see her husband's body. They, instead, wanted to ask her a few questions. She broke down from the grief.

In the end, it was decided that after she saw the body, she would be driven to the Indian Consulate, where she and her son would stay and rest from the long flight.

Nolan and Ivy would come another day to question her.

30

Hyder was on his way back to the Daily Times when his cell phone rang.

He recognized the number. It was his soon-to-be sister-in-law's.

"Assalamu alaikum," Hyder said into the phone.

"Wa alaikum assalam," she said. "It's Aisha, how're you?"

"Al-hamdu lillah (Praise to Allah)."

"Hyder, I was wondering if you had some time today," she said.

"Um... I have to write up a story, but I'm free later tonight."

"Great." She gave him an address. "Do you know where it is?"

"Sure."

"See you then."

Hyder wasn't sure why she wanted to meet him at an Indian clothing store, but couldn't say no to her.

Hyder proceeded to the *Daily Times*, where he typed and filed the story about the arrival of Vikram Patel's family in America, which also included his interview with Detective Tom Nolan.

He had hoped to ask the deceased's widow some questions but she was taken away even before he uttered a single word.

He looked at his watch. He still had some time before he had to meet his bhabi.

He decided to go see what Lester was up to.

He went to his desk but found it empty. Lester was probably out on a story, which probably included playing with some new device or game.

Hyder decided to leave the building and go out for a walk.

The air felt clean and crisp as he moved down the block.

He passed a store when the smell made his mouth water. It was a *shawarma* joint, one Hyder had frequented many times before.

He went in.

Habib, the owner, was behind the counter. He smiled when he saw Hyder.

"Salaam, brother," he said.

“How are you?” Hyder said.

“Good. I’m alive, so thank God.”

Habib was from Lebanon. His wife and children were still living there and he had been trying to bring them over for many years now. The process usually took eight to nine months, but Habib wasn’t here legally, so to speak. So the normal channels were no longer open to him.

“Any progress?” Hyder always asked whenever they met.

“I talked to an immigration lawyer, so let’s see what happens. Pray for me, brother.”

“Always,” Hyder said.

“The same today?” Habib asked.

“Sure, why not,” Hyder said. He went to the corner and sat down near the windows.

A couple of minutes later, Habib brought him the *shawarma* wrap. He sat across from him.

The restaurant wasn’t busy and Habib’s cousin was in the back.

“I read your article in the newspaper,” Habib said. “It was very good.”

Hyder was still not used to people complimenting his writing. It was as if he didn’t deserve the praise. He felt like a hack—like he had gotten lucky. In some ways he had. The TriGate Scandal had come to him and not vice versa. Had it not been for Jessica Freeland, he probably would have never pursued it.

It was probably why he was still trying to prove himself. It was also maybe why he wanted to be a step ahead of Echo Rose.

If he broke the CIW murder before anyone, it would show that he was not a one hit wonder.

But he also realized that he was becoming obsessed with Echo Rose and the *Merchant of Truth*. This obsession could be the end of him. Echo Rose lived by different rules, and Hyder was afraid that one day he might succumb to those rules.

He took a bite of the wrap. As always, it was delicious.

“How is your family?” he asked Habib.

“My son just started school and my daughter is now in grade three,” he said. “My wife...” he paused. “It’s still tough for her to be without me.” His eyes went moist. “But at least she has her family there.”

“Do you think about going back?” Hyder asked.

“Sure, many times,” he said. “I miss them too much, but I can’t.”

“It’s not safe over there?”

He nodded. “Yes, but also, I don’t want to go back.”

“You have no benefits or any rights here,” Hyder said. “Does that bother you?”

“No,” he shook his head. “The United States is still the greatest country to be in. When I was in Lebanon I was a butcher, because my father was a butcher. If you are a nobody there, you will stay a nobody. Here, in America, you have a chance to make something of yourself. This small restaurant is mine—even if it is under my cousin’s name, but it is still *mine*. I want the American dream, and I want my children to have it too. I thank Allah every day that I am here. I love this country.”

Hyder nodded. “Me too.”

31

Hyder finished his meal and left the restaurant.
He headed straight for the Indian clothing store.
He found his *bhabi* waiting for him.

Hyder's suspicions came true. Seeing that Hyder didn't have a sister, Hyder's mom had asked Aisha to help him find something to wear for the *mehendi*.

Aisha made Hyder wear over half a dozen different *kurtas*, a loose shirt that went down to his knees. Underneath them one could either wear jeans, or a *paijama* (loose-fitting traditional pants).

Hyder picked a dark yellow *kurta* with an orange scarf to wear around the neck. He went for a black colored *paijama* to contrast with the bright colors.

Although Hyder was very picky when it came to choosing what to wear, he found selecting clothes with Aisha somewhat relaxing.

She was neither forceful nor very opinionated, which his mom was. It was either her choice or no choice. To this day, his mom still didn't trust Hyder's taste in clothing. Aisha, on the other hand, made sure Hyder was comfortable in whatever he chose.

He was happy that she would be part of his family.

Afterwards, they decided to go for *Kashmiri Chai* (also known as pink tea). Aisha wanted some dirt on Akbar and Hyder was more than willing to dish it on his older brother.

32

The heat was humid and relentless.

He was sweating in his army fatigues. It didn't help that he was also carrying gear and supplies weighing almost a hundred and thirty pounds.

The temperature had hit a hundred and forty degrees, and that was in the shade.

He never regretted having to come here. In fact, he relished it. After 9/11 he felt lost and confused. He knew he wanted to make a difference in his life and when the opportunity came, he took it.

He was fulfilling his patriotic duty.

They were in the northern region of Afghanistan. The terrain was mountainous and highly dangerous.

An intelligence report had come in that a leader of an Al-Qaeda cell was spotted in the area.

A unit was sent to locate and confirm this. They were also given the go-ahead to engage and bring the leader back, dead or alive.

The leader had been behind several attacks on US interests. One in particular, on an oil drilling facility in Yemen, resulted in the deaths of several US citizens.

Naturally, the Pentagon had put the leader at the top of its most wanted list. They wanted nothing more than to destroy him and his cell of terror.

The unit sent to apprehend him consisted of six marines. They came from all walks of life.

He had been in the construction industry, working as a roofer.

He found it soothing to spend hours on top of a building, nailing shingles and other materials. It was solitary but also very rewarding. He got into it because his uncle was in the industry. He had hoped to one day start his own roofing business, but an altercation with his boss pushed him to leave the profession and join the military.

He cherished the power and respect the position gave him. His uniform, his flag, and his weapon were his means of accomplishing his goals.

Plus, he enjoyed the camaraderie. These men had become his brothers. He would do anything for them, and in return, they would do the same for him.

They moved up the hill in two-man formation.

He was at the front with his partner on his right.

They stopped at the top. He peered through the binoculars at the village below.

Everything looked normal. The villagers were busy with their daily routine.

He motioned to the unit commander. *Target up ahead.*

The plan was to wait until they spotted the leader of the cell. They needed visual confirmation before they could engage. Their superiors had given them the green light to use any force necessary, but they warned them to keep the civilian casualties as minimal as possible.

He scoffed when he had heard that.

They were at war. Innocent lives must be sacrificed for the greater good. Their enemy wouldn't hesitate to kill thousands of lives if they had the chance, so why should they be concerned for a few dozen?

The sun had started to come down. In one way this was a relief, but in another, a nightmare.

The heat would subside, but this would make their mission more difficult in the darkness.

He peered through the binoculars. The village had become eerily quiet. There was no one in sight.

This wasn't right, he thought. Something felt out of place.

He then heard a sound. He listened. He relaxed. It was the call for prayers. He shook his head. *These people fought too much and prayed too much.* What a contradiction.

He looked back, below the hill. His unit was concealed behind trees and bushes. They were waiting for his signal to move in.

From his backpack he pulled out a small container and took a couple of sips of the water.

He then noticed something.

He squinted.

On the other side of the hill, it looked like a boy was sitting on a boulder. The sun was behind him, casting a shadow over him, and he was looking their way.

He pulled out his binoculars and peered.

It wasn't a boy, but a monkey.

The monkey was small, with grayish skin, no fur, and its face was pink. It was called a Nazuri monkey and it was common in Afghanistan.

The monkey looked in his direction and then looked away.

There was something odd about the way it did it.

He focused on the monkey's face. He could almost see its eyes.

The monkey looked his way and then its eyes moved in another direction.

He turned the binoculars to where the monkey was looking and then he saw it.

Below, on the other side of the hill, was an army of Taliban fighters. Each was carrying a sub-machine gun, and a few even held rocket launchers. He quickly counted thirty. They were waiting for them.

He turned and gave his unit the signal.

They left the hill as fast as they had come.

Brutus woke up in a cold sweat. He had had the same dream many times before, each as vivid as the one before.

He was in his motel room. He looked out the window, saw it was still dark.

He went into the washroom and turned on the tap. He waited until the water was cold to the touch before splashing it on his face.

He rubbed his eyes and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked worn out. Deep lines etched his skin.

He caught the image behind him.

Hanging on the bathroom door was a rubber mask of an ape. Below it, on the ground, was a nail gun. It was the same gun he had used when he was a roofer.

He turned his focus back on the mask.

Had it not been for that monkey on that day, they would have been ambushed. Some, including him, might not have come off that hill alive.

He left the washroom and went back to bed. But he knew that sleep was no longer a possibility tonight.

33

He stood by the side of the road with his hands in his pockets. The wind was particularly strong today, but he didn't mind it. He pulled the collars up on his long coat and adjusted the baseball cap on top of his head.

A cold day allowed him to put on more layers, which helped in concealing who he was or what he was doing.

Across, on the other side of the road, was a school. He glanced at his watch. It was almost time for lunch. Soon, high school students would come out of the main doors.

Manny Chekoff was in his twenties, but he looked much younger. If he cleaned himself up, he could get away with being one of the students in that school.

This had helped him immensely in his business. He was able to use his youthful appearance to his advantage.

He heard the bell ring. It came exactly at 11:43 am.

A couple of minutes later, students started coming out of the main doors.

He smiled. *Customers.*

A group of boys, wearing baggy jeans, hooded jackets, and baseball caps, strolled over to him.

“What’s up, homeboy?” one student said.

“How’re you guys doing today?” Manny said.

“Alright, alright,” the boy said. He looked at his buddies, grinning. “I told my boys, I could hook them up for some excitement. Is that right?”

Manny smiled. “Sure, you can. How much do you need?”

The boy counted his friends. “A bag should do it.”

“You sure? That’s gonna cost you some dough.”

The boy grinned even more. “I’m good, yo!” The boy reached inside his pocket when Manny stopped him.

“Don’t do that,” he said. He looked around to make sure no one was looking at them. “Open your backpack and give me a hug.”

“What?” the boy made a face. “I ain’t hugging nobody.”

“Just do as I say, or else we got no deal.”

The boy looked at his buddies and shrugged. During the hug, Manny quickly pulled out a bag of weed from under his long coat and dropped it in the backpack. He had done this so many times that it looked effortless now.

“Now take out the cash and shake my hand gangster-style,” Manny said.

The boy did, and in one swift motion, the transaction was complete.

To make it look natural, Manny shook the other boys’ hands, too.

“Next time, yo,” the boy said.

“I’ll be here,” Manny replied.

34

In the distance, sitting in an unmarked cruiser, Pascale watched this transpire. He got out and approached the man in the long coat.

Pascale wore a sweatshirt with his usual leather jacket on top. He made sure to shave today and apply extra gel in his hair.

“How’s it going?” he said when he reached the man with the long coat.

“What’s up?” the man refused to make eye contact.

“I heard you’re the man who can hook me up with some ganja,” Pascale said

The man shook his head. “You heard wrong. I don’t know nothing about that.”

“Really?” Pascale looked surprised. “I saw you just now selling some merchandise to those boys over there.”

“Nope, you saw wrong. I’m just waiting for someone.”

“You mean from school?”

“Um... yeah.”

“Listen, man,” Pascale pushed further. “I desperately need to unwind and I need some grade A material to help me do that. I’ve got cash, you know.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the man said. “You sound like a cop. I gotta go.” He started to move away.

“You sure you don’t have something underneath your coat?” Pascale said.

Just then the man bolted.

“Shit,” Pascale cursed.

He ran after him.

The man ran past a group of students. Pascale tried to do the same when one of the students got in his way.

Pascale nearly tackled him before he screeched to a halt.

“*You!*” Pascale pointed to him. “You stay right there,” he growled.

The boy put his hands up. “Sorry, bro, I was just trying to give you space.”

“I saw what you did,” Pascale spat. He saw the man disappear in the distance. “Shit,” he said.

35

Manny ran as fast as his feet would allow him. His legs ached, his lungs burned, but he didn’t slow down. When he was a good distance away, he turned and realized no one was behind him.

He stopped by the side of the road to catch his breath.

“That was scary,” he told himself. Had he not bolted the guy would have caught him with a large stash in his coat pockets.

He should toss the goods away, he thought. He wouldn’t want the guy to catch him red-handed. He could see several years behind bars for dealing pot, and maybe even more, for selling it to minors.

He spotted a garbage bin and decided to relieve himself of the incriminating evidence.

When he reached it, he suddenly had a change of heart. There was no way the guy would find him again. Manny was certain he had left him in his tracks. Plus, why get rid of good stuff? It was worth quite a lot of money.

Manny was already running behind on his rent, so he could use the cash about now. He would stay clear of that school, though. He wouldn’t go near it until the heat was off him.

Manny proceeded down the block.

He still had enough goods on him to bring the cash he needed. All that mattered now was where to sell it.

He decided he would go to another part of the city, where cops weren’t known to frequent as often, and get rid of the merchandise.

Afterwards, he would go home and light a joint to celebrate.

He grinned. It sounded like an excellent plan.

He turned around a corner.

A hand grabbed his collar and spun him around.

“What the...?” he said.

A woman stood staring at him. “You are under arrest for selling narcotics to minors,” she said.

“Who the hell are you?” he said in shock.

“I’m Detective Lopez,” she said, shoving him to the wall. In an instant she had handcuffed him.

“You have the wrong guy,” he protested. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Really?” Lopez said. She put her hand in his coat pocket and pulled out a bag of weed. “You should have gotten rid of the evidence, dumbass,” she said. Manny Chekoff cursed himself for not doing just that.

36

Hyder was hovering over Lester as Lester worked feverishly behind his laptop. “Is it possible?” Hyder asked.

“Sure, everything is possible. It’s just a matter of knowing where to look.”

“What if she is careful?” Hyder said.

Lester turned to him. “If Echo Rose is the only name she has ever used on the World Wide Web, then we may have a problem. If she used her real name anywhere, then we may be able to find some trace of it.”

“Is this legal?” Hyder said.

Lester shrugged. “Sort of.”

“Then I don’t want any part of it,” Hyder shook his head. “I’m not going to stoop to her level to get a story.”

“You’re not doing this to get a story. You’re doing this to find out who she is.”

“Still, I don’t know,” Hyder scratched his head.

“Okay, how about this?” Lester said. “We do the search and if we find what we are looking for, you can then decide what to do.”

Hyder raised an eyebrow. “You really want to try out your program, don’t you?” Hyder said.

Lester clapped his hands. “Damn right.”

Lester ran the program and waited. It was similar in many ways to a search engine, but Lester had been able to make some slight modifications. His program was able to penetrate even secure sites. If Echo Rose, or whoever she was, made any reference to her real self then the program would detect it and display it by linking the two criteria. It would be up to the users to decide if the information was relevant or not.

They waited until the program completed its search and when the results came back, Lester said, “Whoa!”

There were over a thousand ‘hits’.

Ever since the *Merchant of Truth* had uploaded pictures from the CIW, the internet had gone berserk with articles, blogs, Newsfeeds, etc., on who the real Echo Rose was. Some had dubbed her the avenger of truth, others, a poison on the journalistic profession. Hyder was in the latter category. But this had made searching for her more cumbersome.

Lester scratched his head. “There is no way we can manually go through each site. It would take *forever*.”

“Now what?” Hyder asked.

He cracked his knuckles. “Then we do it the old fashioned way.”

Lester again worked on the laptop. “I suspected that,” he said.

“Suspected what?” Hyder replied, anxiously.

“The IP address of the *Merchant of Truth* is not located here in the United States. It’s being routed through Jakarta, Indonesia. And...” He scanned the computer screen. “It’s registered to a Lou Ferrigno.”

Hyder made a face. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“It should. He’s the guy who played the *Hulk* in the seventies TV series.”

Hyder remembered watching the show as a kid. He used to dream of turning into the *Hulk* like Bruce Banner and beating up all the bullies in his school. Once, for Halloween, he had made his mom paint him green, but he was such a scrawny kid that he looked sickly rather than the green monster the *Hulk* was. It took months before the students in his class stopped calling him ‘the Incredible Sick Boy’ because of the way he had looked.

Lester broke his thoughts. “I think I might know who it could be,” he said. He began typing again. “There is this guy who uploads a lot of illegal stuff on certain private members-only forums. I’ve seen him put up movies, TV series, music, games, software, everything. He once uploaded the entire series of *The Incredible Hulk*. In the comments section he stated that he was a big fan of it.”

“So how is that going to help us?” Hyder asked.

“I also remembered this guy mentioned somewhere that he loved the movie Pumping Iron, where Arnold Schwarzenegger competed with Lou Ferrigno for the Mr. Universe title.”

Hyder didn’t look convinced.

“I’m trying to find all the crumbs—the little references—hoping that when we put them together, it will lead us to the real person. Let’s see if my program will work now,” Lester said.

It took several minutes before it completed its search. It resulted in a couple of dozen hits, not enough to discourage them from searching further.

Lester immediately got on it.

His program had been able to get into several secure social networking sites. It was now a matter of digging through them.

“Bingo,” he said.

“What?”

“There is a website for some technology institute, where someone named Arnold Lam mentioned in his bio that his favorite TV series, among several others, was the seventies Hulk series.”

“Is that enough for us to link him to the *Merchant of Truth*?” Hyder asked.

“I don’t know, but give me a second.” He typed, clicked, and then said, “In the phone directory there is an Arnold Lam living in Franklin.”

“Could be a coincidence,” Hyder was playing devil’s advocate.

“Or not,” Lester replied. “Just think about it, we know the *Merchant of Truth* is Franklin- based.”

“Do we really?”

“The stories that you were working on, and which your nemesis, Echo Rose, took...”

“She’s not my enemy.”

“Sure, I believe you.” Lester winked at him. “Anyway, her stories are from Franklin so we can honestly assume that the blog is located in Franklin. This guy, Arnold Lam, is also in Franklin. Do you see the link here?”

Hyder thought about it.

“Also, what else have you got to lose,” Lester said. “You go talk to this guy, and if he looks clean, then you apologize for bothering him and move on. Plus, don’t you want to know who Echo Rose is?”

Hyder nodded. “I do.”

“Then what’s the harm in following up on this?”

“Alright, give me the address.”

37

Ivy hung up the phone and made a face.

She was standing by Nolan’s desk, but he wasn’t there. She had already called him several times, even leaving messages, but he was nowhere to be found.

They were supposed to interview the heads of *DataCore Solutions* regarding the missing hard drives.

Ivy had been upset that they had refused to hand over the drives to her without a warrant. And then when she did go back with the proper documentation the drives had disappeared.

At first she had a feeling that *DataCore* wasn’t being forthcoming with her and that they may have had something to do with the hard drives, but when the Merchant of Truth posted those images, she realized that wasn’t true.

DataCore prided itself on being secure and reliable, and this had damaged their reputation. They were now willing to cooperate with the two detectives in order to help secure the hard drives and also prosecute the person responsible for their removal from *DataCore*.

Ivy knew this was nothing more than a PR campaign. They were now going the extra mile to save face.

She didn’t care for their agenda. She just wanted the hard drives in her possession.

She called Nolan once more and then decided to go alone.

She was on her way out when she passed by a room and stopped. She peered inside and smiled.

Sleeping in one of the interview rooms was Detective Tom Nolan.

His head was on the table, his mouth was open and hands were flat on the surface.

He looked like a little boy was fast asleep after playing all day.

She thought about waking him up, but decided against it.

She would wait another half-hour before she did anything.

She then heard a commotion. Coming down the hall were Lopez and Pascale. Pascale was dragging along a man who was handcuffed. “We need to use this room,” Pascale said to her.

“It’s occupied,” she said.

“Then how come the sign on the door says vacant?” he asked.

She flipped it over. “It’s occupied now.”

He leaned over and through the window, caught Nolan napping inside. “Unbelievable!” he said, his face contorted. “Someone better wake him up, because we need the room.”

“We can use another room,” Lopez said.

“No, we want this one,” he said, like a little child.

“Okay,” Ivy moved aside. “You go and wake him.”

Pascale suddenly looked unsure. He was fully aware of Nolan’s erratic behavior. If he went in and woke him up, there was no telling what would happen next. He wasn’t about to take that chance.

He pulled the handcuffed man away. “We’ll find you another room.”

Lopez turned to Ivy, “Please wake him up before Sergeant Halton sees him.” She then followed after Pascale.

Ivy gave it ten more minutes before she went in. She slammed the door a little too loudly.

This stirred Nolan out of his slumber. He squinted around the room, stopping at her.

“How did I get here?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“I mean... I was working hard at my desk and now I am in this room. How is that possible?”

She looked at him. “I don’t know.”

“There must be a devious individual who is drugging and physically moving people all over the building.”

She stared at him. *He was serious.*

“I’ll go and find this person and make sure he doesn’t do this to anyone.” He got up and left.

38

“Just fess up and we’ll make sure you get a lighter sentence,” Pascale said.

Pascale and Lopez were interviewing Manny Chekoff.

Manny looked visibly shaken up. He kept twirling the whiskers on his chin.

“I... I didn’t do anything,” he said.

“You’re going to go down that route, really?” Pascale crossed his arms. “I saw you slip something to those boys outside the school. Then my partner here caught you with a big stash of cannabis. How do you explain that?”

“I wasn’t distributing it... it was for my own use..”

Pascale’s eyes narrowed. “You use it for medical purposes?”

Manny quickly nodded. “Yes, I’ve got arthritis and my doctor gave it to me to relieve the pain.

Pascale gave Lopez a look. She said, “Can we see your medical card?”

Manny made a motion of searching through his body for it, but then said, “I must have left it at home.”

Lopez leaned forward. “So, let me get this straight, you’re saying that you were carrying *substantial* amounts of marijuana, which, according to you were for

medical purposes, and that you also neglected to carry the one identification that would have allowed you to do so.”

Manny thought about it. “Yeah, I just forgot, you know.”

Lopez said, “You actually expect us to believe you?”

Manny nodded, slowly.

“If we did a search through our database, are you certain that we will find your name on the list of people who were issued a medical card? Because, if we don’t, then I promise you we will make sure that you get the maximum for selling drugs to minors, which I am sure no judge or jury will disagree with.”

Manny swallowed hard. “I screwed up,” he said. He put his face in his palms and began crying.

Lopez and Pascale gave him the time to let it out.

When done he wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve. “I don’t want to go to prison. I know I messed up, but I swear to you I won’t do it again.”

Pascale shook his head. “We can’t let you go free, you sold drugs to kids, that’s a felony.”

Lopez said, “Your file shows that it’s your first offense, so we’ll talk to the prosecutor and see how much leniency they can extend you.”

Tears continued rolling down his cheeks, but he nodded. They had caught him red-handed and he had no way of getting out of it.

“Stay here,” Lopez said. “We’ll be back.”

Pascale and Lopez were about to leave the room when he said, “Wait!”

“What is it now?” Pascale said, annoyed.

“What if I have some information,” Manny said. “I’ll exchange it for probation or community service or whatever, but no jail.”

Pascale said, “I don’t think you have anything that we want.”

“It’s about a murder.”

“What murder?” Lopez slowly said.

Manny paused. He thought about how much information he should give to the detectives. Give them too much and they’d take it and give him nothing. Give too little and they might not be interested in even hearing him out.

“The one...” he carefully chose his next words. “On TV where the man with the mask killed that Indian scientist.”

“You mean the murder at the *Centre of Inland Waters*?” Lopez said.

He nodded. “Yep, that’s the one.”

“What do you know about it?” Lopez said.

“First, I want to know if we have a deal.”

“No deal,” Pascale waved his hands. “You’re a drug dealer. We don’t negotiate with criminals.”

This was a lie, of course. Law enforcement made deals with criminals all the time. They did it, not only to gather invaluable information that might otherwise not be possible to acquire, they also did it to save on expenditures, both the police’s and the court’s.

The times where law enforcement never made deals was when they were certain no gain could be had from the agreement.

In this case, Lopez and Pascale were facing a dilemma. The CIW murder had made the department look bad, and if they didn't make a deal with Manny Chekoff they would never know if any of his information was vital or not.

Lopez knew that Pascale would be more than happy to put Manny Chekoff away, regardless of what information he had on the CIW murder. He was pissed when the case was taken away from him, and to make it worse, it was given to Nolan. Nolan and Pascale had bad blood between them, and Lopez had a feeling that Pascale would want nothing better than to see Nolan fail because of the CIW murder.

Luckily, Lopez didn't share his opinion. She said, "Tell us everything you know and if it is important, we'll make sure you get something lighter."

Pascale was about to protest, but when he saw the look on her face, he backed off.

Manny said, "I saw my roommate with the video images of the murder the day before it was all over the television and internet."

"Why would your roommate have it?" Lopez asked.

"I don't know," Manny shrugged. "He does his thing and I do mine... well, I won't be selling drugs anymore, I swear on my grave..."

"Tell us more about your roommate," Lopez said, bringing the focus back on the murder. "What's his name?"

"Arnold Lam."

"Are sure you saw him with the footage the day before?" she asked.

"Yeah, I remember asking him about it, but he told me to chill," he replied. "The next day it was everywhere."

Lopez bit her bottom lip.

"You're not seriously considering this," Pascale said. "He's a low-life drug dealer. He'll say anything to beat the rap."

"I'm telling the truth," Manny said. "Also, I've seen Arnold go on this... this... website many times a day. He once boasted, when we were high, that he helped set it up. It's called..." He thought about it. "Something... something... *truth*."

"The *Merchant of Truth*?" Lopez said.

Manny snapped his fingers. "That's the one!"

Lopez had heard enough. "I want you to tell everything you just told me to someone."

She got up when Pascale said, "Where are you going?"

"To get Nolan."

39

Nolan and Ivy rushed over to Arnold Lam's apartment.

They parked behind the building and headed for the front entrance.

"Do you think Chekoff is lying?" Ivy said.

Nolan wasn't sure, but he wasn't about to lose the opportunity. He remembered a case where a state trooper had pulled a vehicle over because it was speeding. When the trooper had asked the driver why he was going fast, his

response was that he was following another car—a moving van, to be exact. Earlier, he thought he had seen someone being shoved into the back of the van. He was following it to make sure his instincts were correct. The trooper had heard too many outrageous explanations from drivers who had been pulled over, so naturally, the trooper didn't take this seriously and wrote the driver a ticket.

The next day, a body was found by the side of the road. The female victim had been assaulted and her throat was slashed. A witness stated that they saw a white moving van in that area not too long before the body was discovered.

When an autopsy was conducted it was revealed the victim had been murdered only a few hours earlier. Had the state trooper taken the driver seriously, there may have been some possibility that the white van would have been located in time and the death of the innocent woman could have been prevented.

Nolan was fully aware that events like these were never predictable. It was only hindsight that made them questionable.

One morning Nolan's wife had driven to work like she always had. What she didn't anticipate was that she would be involved in a horrible pile-up that would not only take her life but another's as well.

Had she known something like that would happen, she surely would have never gone on the highway on that day.

But such was life, Nolan knew. If everyone knew of all the dangers that lurked around them, they would never dare get out of bed. But that was not possible; risks, of every shape and form, were inherent in daily activities. One had to ignore those risks and continue as if they would never affect them.

"We need a break in this case," Nolan said to Ivy. "We can't disregard this opportunity. Chekoff is still in custody and he would be foolish to make false statements that could jeopardize his freedom."

They entered the lobby when they suddenly stopped.

Waiting by the elevators was Hyder Ali.

Nolan smiled. "What're you doing here?"

"I'm here to talk to Arnold Lam," he replied.

"So are we," Nolan said.

"Why're you interested in him?" Ivy inquired.

"I'm hoping he could lead me Echo Rose," Hyder said. "Isn't that why you are here?"

"We want to find out what Lam knows about the CIW footage," Nolan said. "We have an informant who believes Lam may have been the one to upload the images."

Hyder smiled. *This was great stuff for his article.*

"Can I get the name of this informant?" Hyder winked.

Ivy put a hand on Nolan's arm. "I think he's already said too much."

Nolan leaned over and whispered, "Call me later and I'll tell you all the juicy details."

There was one thing Hyder was certain about Tom Nolan: he was loyal to a fault.

"I guess," Hyder said. "Then we all should go and talk to Arnold Lam."

They took the elevators up to the third floor and knocked on the door of an apartment.

They waited.

No response.

They knocked again.

Still nothing.

“What do we do?” Ivy said.

“I don’t know about you guys,” Hyder said. “But I’m not leaving until I talk to him. I can’t have the *Merchant of Truth* taking another one of my stories.”

Nolan said, “I saw a coffee shop across the street, we can all wait there.”

Ivy’s phone rang. She pulled it out, looked at the screen, and said, “I have to take this.” She moved away from them.

“So,” Hyder said. “The coffee shop would be a good place for you to tell me about this informant.”

“You’re relentless, aren’t you?” Nolan grinned.

“I have to be in my profession,” he said.

Ivy returned. “I have to get back to the Bureau’s field office. It’s an emergency.”

“Then I’ll drive you,” Nolan said.

“You sure?” she asked.

“Yeah, I don’t think Arnold Lam is going anywhere.”

“What about you?” Ivy asked Hyder. “We can give you a ride, if you like.”

“Yeah, why not?” Nolan said.

Hyder shook his head. “I think I’ll wait at the coffee shop. I can let you guys know if I see him.”

“Suit yourself.”

Hyder went across and found a seat next to the windows. He turned on his laptop and bought himself a coffee and pastry. He wasn’t sure when Lam would return, so he didn’t want to wait on an empty stomach.

He began to go through his emails, but his mind slowly drifted back to the *Merchant of Truth* and Echo Rose. It was why he was here in the first place. He wanted to use Lam to find out who Echo Rose really was. But he wasn’t sure what he would do with the information once he found it.

Echo Rose had been able to hide behind a pseudonym—an alter ego. This had shielded her from the criticism that *he* had had to go through. This was why he always made sure to think twice before printing anything. He wanted to back up any statements he made because if he didn’t, then the attacks would be directed at him.

Then a thought went through his mind, sending a shudder down his spine. If he revealed the real identity of Echo Rose, would it end up silencing her? A part of him wanted nothing more than to crush the *Merchant of Truth*, but another part of him wanted to encourage bold and courageous reporting.

Echo Rose had gone above and beyond in searching for the truth. While Hyder did not agree with the methods she had used, he had to concede that they were daring.

She had risked her own safety, and not to mention, risked exposing her relation to the *Merchant of Truth*, in order to get access to the footage.

While Hyder was debating the dilemma of his decision, he missed someone walking up to the building.

Arnold Lam entered the building and took the stairs up to the third floor. From his pockets, he searched for his keys and when he located them, he unlocked the front door to his apartment.

He sniffed, expecting to find the thick and pungent smell of the cannabis, but when he didn't, he was surprised.

"Manny!" he yelled down the hallway.

He went in and instead of finding his usually intoxicated roommate on the sofa, he found the living room empty.

He must be passed out in his bedroom, he thought.

Arnold went into the bathroom and relieved himself. He washed up and then headed for his room. He pulled off his jacket and threw it on the back of a chair. He then removed his boots and kicked them under the bed.

He went out into the kitchen and found the sink filled with dirty dishes.

"Shit," he cursed. It was Manny's turn to wash them. "Manny!" he yelled once again. He stormed to his room and banged on the door. "Come out and finish your share of duties, man!"

When he didn't get a reply he became worried.

Did Manny take too many pills that he was now unconscious in his room? He had once tried to commit suicide and if it weren't for Arnold, who had to pump the pills out of his stomach, Manny would have surely died.

Arnold hoped that wasn't the case now. He didn't want to call 9-1-1. Also, he didn't want to explain to the paramedics or even the police why he had a drug dealer for a roommate.

He feared this might lead to other questions, like why he had a hard drive belonging to *DataCore Solutions* in his apartment.

Once Echo Rose gave him the go ahead, he would destroy it. Right now he had more urgent things to worry about.

He turned the handle and the door swung open. He snapped the lights on and found the room empty. He looked around the bed, expecting to find Manny's body on the floor and when he didn't, he relaxed.

Manny was probably out hustling his weed.

This was a good thing, he agreed. This way Manny could finally pay for his share of the rent for this month.

He went out and grabbed a bottle from the fridge. He gulped down a quarter of it and then placed himself behind the TV. He turned it on and started watching a sci-fi flick.

He was half way through it when he heard a knock at the door.

He didn't bother getting up to answer it.

He never got any visitors so it must be Manny, he thought.

The knocking continued. "Use your *damn* keys!" he yelled.

When it didn't stop he got up and stormed to the door. He looked through the peephole but found the outside hallway empty.

"What the hell?" he cursed.

He went back to the living room when the knocking started again.

Whoever it was, he decided, he would give them a piece of his mind and not to mention his fist.

He pulled the door open and suddenly froze.

Standing before him was a massive figure. It had on a leather jacket, a hoodie and its face was covered by a mask of an ape.

But it was the eyes behind the mask that terrified him. They were full of hate and death.

Before Arnold could say a word, he felt something hit him across the nose. He fell back, holding his face. His eyes were watery and he felt pain shoot up his brain.

His fingers were covered in hot liquid and he knew it was blood.

Suddenly, he felt something grab him by the collar and drag him down the hall. In the next instance, he was placed on a chair and his hands and feet were tied to the arms and legs of it. Then duct tape was pressed over his mouth, covering his lips.

In a matter of minutes, he was completely immobilized.

When Arnold realized what had happened, he was staring into the face of the ape.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions," the figure said. "If you don't answer them correctly then I will hurt you." From behind him, he revealed what looked like a gun.

Arnold focused his eyes and saw that it was in fact a nail gun.

His eyes widened in horror when he realized who the figure was.

It was the same man who had killed that scientist in the footage.

"How did you get that video?" the man asked.

Arnold mumbled something.

"I'm going to take it off," the man said. "If you scream, I will hurt you. Understand?"

Arnold nodded.

The man pulled the tape until it hung on the cheek.

"Did you steal it?" the man asked.

"No... I... someone gave it to me," Arnold said..

"Who?"

"Echo Rose."

"Is she the writer of that website?"

"Yes."

"What's her real name?"

"I don't know."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not, I swear."

"Wrong answer."

The man placed the tape over Arnold's mouth and then pressed the tip of the nail gun on the top of his feet.

"Remember this pain," the man snarled. "So that the next time you don't lie to me."

The man pulled the trigger.

Intense pain shot through him as the nail pierced into his feet.

He screamed as loud as he could, but it was muffled underneath the duct tape. Hot tears fell down his cheeks. He shook his body, rattling the chair.

The man stood back and let him suffer.

When it looked like Arnold was somewhat composed again, the man said, "I'm going to take the tape off and I'm going to ask you more questions. I want you to answer them truthfully. Nod if you understand me."

Arnold did.

The man pulled the tape off.

Arnold heaved in long breaths.

"Please, why are you doing this to me?" Arnold cried. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone."

"Just answer the questions. Who gave you the hard drive with the footage?"

"Echo Rose," Arnold quickly said.

"Do you still have it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Where is it?"

Arnold moved his head towards a computer table. "It's in the backpack next to my laptop. You can have it. I won't tell anyone."

"Why did she give it to *you*?" the man asked.

"I helped her set up the *Merchant of Truth* website so that it wouldn't be tracked back to her. I routed it through Indonesia. This way the feds couldn't find her."

"I want to find her," the man growled. "And you will tell me where I can."

Arnold shook his head. "I would tell you if I knew. I don't, I swear."

"Again, wrong answer."

The man re-applied the tape over Arnold's mouth and then shot a nail through his hand.

Arnold's entire body shook violently. He tried to thrash left and right, but the man held him firmly in place by his shoulders.

His hand burned and throbbed from the intense pain.

When he looked down, he wanted to throw up. The steel nail went from the back of his hand and out through his palm.

Bile moved up his throat and he thought he would choke.

For a moment Arnold Lam wished he was dead. This way he would not have to suffer any more.

But he had a feeling the man with the ape mask was just getting started.

41

Hyder was working on his laptop when he glanced over at the building. It was then that he noticed something on the third floor. A light was on in one of the rooms.

Hyder wasn't sure if it was coming from Arnold Lam's apartment, but something inside him told him to go check it out.

Enough time had already passed and he couldn't spend all night in the coffee shop.

If Lam didn't return home by now then it was best to call it a night, he thought. He shut the laptop and left the shop.

As he walked up to the front of the building, he couldn't help staring at the light coming from the third floor.

Hyder remembered taking the elevators up and then walking down the hall. Lam's apartment was the last one on the floor, which meant the light should be coming from his unit.

The only way to be certain was to go and knock on the front door.

He entered the lobby and then waited for the elevators.

42

Lam was shaking from the pain. He was drenched in sweat and he had soiled himself.

The man in the ape mask was still asking questions. Lam wished he could give him the answers he wanted, but he didn't have them.

Whenever he tried to tell him what he knew, the man became agitated. It was as if he didn't want to listen to what he was hearing.

Lam didn't know what else to tell him. Everything he had told him was the truth.

He now regretted not finding out more about Echo Rose. What was her real name? Where did she live?

But in reality, he was never particularly interested in those details. In fact, when he had met her for the first time at *DigiSource*—she had come into get her computer fixed—it was *he* who had advised her to hide her real identity.

As a part-time hacker, he had become paranoid with how much information he and others like him, could get access to by digging deeper into someone. It was why he had also used an alias when he lurked on the web. *The Incredible Hulk* was his shield from the outside world.

He remembered how excited he was when she had told him about the *Merchant of Truth*. He had, right on the spot, volunteered his services to her. A part of him was attracted to her, he knew. She drove a brand new BMW but acted like she didn't give a damn that she did. He knew she came from a life of privilege, but deep down she wanted no part of it.

He thought if he helped her set up the website, this might open the door for him financially. He could one day reach out to her if he needed help. So, to impress her, he routed the site through Indonesia and made the site as secure as possible from other hackers.

Now, after what he had endured, he regretted doing any of this.

His attempt at bringing some excitement and adventure into his life had led him to this moment. The *Merchant of Truth* was supposed to work on the fringes of society. It would not be held down by rules and regulations. These were created

by those in power and the *Merchant of Truth* would expose them for what they really were, *Hippocrates*.

They, which included big businesses and the government, used the media to instill fear in the masses so that they could bend and break laws to control them and manipulate them.

The *Merchant of Truth* would be pure. Its only purpose would be to tell the stories as truthfully as possible.

Echo Rose would be the face of it and he, Arnold Lam, would work behind the scenes.

He never cared for the recognition because he knew what came with it, criticism and now... this.

He watched the man in the ape mask pace the room.

At first Arnold was shocked and astonished at how the man had found him. He had made sure to leave no traces that would lead to him. But when his roommate, Manny, had failed to show up, he had a sinking feeling that he was the one who had ratted on him.

If Manny wasn't going to come and save him, then Arnold had no hope of getting out of here alive.

The man stopped pacing and faced him.

"I'm not going to ask you again," he said. "Tell me where I can find Echo Rose or I will keep hurting you."

Arnold shook his head. *Why didn't this man understand that he didn't know.*

"Okay," the man suddenly tensed up. "If you don't know then you are no use to me."

He placed the tip of the nail gun on Arnold's forehead.

Arnold's eyes widened in horror. He tried to scream but it only came out muffled.

"I don't want to do this to you," the man said. "But I have my orders."

Arnold shut his eyes tight, readying himself for what came next, but then he heard a noise.

It didn't come from the nail gun like he had expected, it came from the front door.

Arnold looked up at the man. The man stood motionless. For a brief second, Arnold saw panic and bewilderment in the man's eyes.

The knock became louder and more intense.

Arnold saw this as his opportunity. If he didn't do anything now, then the person outside would leave and this monster would continue to torture or even kill him. He wouldn't let that happen.

From his gut Arnold mustered up all his energy and let out a loud groan.

His face was red as the noise bounced off the walls.

The man stepped back. He hadn't expected it.

Suddenly, the knocking on the door turned into banging. "What's going on in there? I'm going to call the police!"

The man looked at the door and then at Arnold. He looked shocked and confused.

"Screw you," Arnold wanted to say. "Try getting away now, asshole."

The man grunted and placed the nail gun back to Arnold's forehead. This time he didn't hesitate.

He pulled the trigger, sending a nail through the skull and into the brain.

The impact jerked Arnold Lam's body back and he, along with the chair, fell to the floor.

43

Hyder kept pounding his fists on the door.

Earlier, he had heard a man, or what sounded like a man cry out in distress. Whatever was going on inside, Hyder wanted it stopped.

He then heard a loud thud, as if something or someone had fallen to the floor.

Hyder stopped and listened.

The sound he had heard earlier was gone now.

It suddenly became eerily quiet.

He leaned and put his ear to the door. He couldn't hear anything from the other side of it.

He thought of knocking again, but wasn't sure if he should.

What he should have done was call the police like he had threatened to do so earlier.

Instead, he had tried to be the hero. He tried to stop whatever was happening inside.

Now he wasn't sure what had happened.

A feeling of dread overcame him.

He leaned further into the door, his ear cupping the wooden panel. He heard a faint noise from inside, like something was pressed to the door.

And then he heard a click.

In the next instance, a nail penetrated the door, half tearing through the wood.

Hyder jumped back, hitting the wall behind him. He fell to the floor.

Another nail tore into the door.

Then another.

Hyder's heart was beating so fast that he thought it would burst out of his chest.

The door swung open and Hyder came face to face with a figure wearing an ape mask.

Hyder had seen that mask before. It was in the footage of Vikram Patel's execution.

The man aimed the nail gun at him. Hyder tried to get away, but everything felt like it was in slow motion.

His mind wanted to run down the hall, but his body wouldn't move.

Hyder quickly realized he wasn't going anywhere.

He put his hands up to shield his face when suddenly the door to the next apartment flew open.

A man came out looking angry and irritated. He was big and black. He wore a wife-beater, which exposed his heavily tattooed arms, and his head was covered in corn rows.

The man looked at Hyder on the floor and then at the man in the mask pointing the gun at him.

“What the f—?” the man was about to say, when the man in the mask turned the gun at the neighbor.

The neighbor didn’t skip a beat. He jumped at the masked man. He swung his fist and connected with the masked face.

For his height and weight the neighbor was swift and agile.

But Hyder didn’t want to stick around and see what happened next.

He bolted down the hall. He thought about taking the elevators, but he couldn’t risk waiting for it come.

He spotted the exit sign and made a run for it. He heard grunting noises and scuffling from behind, but he didn’t dare turn and look.

When he reached the exit doors that’s when he heard a loud scream. It was blood curdling and filled with anguish. It was followed by a loud thud, as if someone had dropped to the ground.

Fear and panic overcame Hyder once again. Instead of freezing in the situation, he pushed his shoulder through the exit door and then bounced down the stairs, skipping several steps in the process.

He reached the lobby and then ran across to the coffee shop.

He then quickly dialed 9-1-1.

44

Nolan parked his car by the side of the road and rushed out.

He found Hyder in the coffee shop, with a cup in his hand, and still shaking from the ordeal.

After calling 9-1-1, Hyder had called Nolan and told him everything.

“You okay?” Nolan said, concerned.

“Yeah,” Hyder nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be back,” Nolan said. “We’ll talk further then.”

Hyder just nodded again.

Nolan went across to the building and took the elevators up. He noticed blood on the hallway carpet.

“It’s the neighbor’s,” a voice said.

Nolan was surprised to see Lopez there. “What’re you doing here?” he asked.

“When the call came in, I was the only one on duty,” she said.

“Where’s Pascale?”

“I think he’s got a date,” she answered.

Nolan was about to make a smart-ass remark but suddenly he wasn’t in the mood for it.

“Where’s Agent Driscoll?” Lopez asked. “I thought she’d be with you.”

"I haven't called her yet," he said. "She had some urgent FBI stuff to attend to so I figured I'd survey the scene myself first."

"You want to do this solo or you want me to stay?" she said.

"Like I always say, life's much better with a beautiful woman next to you," he replied, but then regretted saying it.

After all these years, Lopez was still attractive, and many in the force had made a pass at her, but never Nolan.

He'd been happily married so the thought never crossed his mind. But now that he was widowed, he found himself gravitating towards her.

He hoped she wasn't offended by his comment.

She wasn't. "Is there anything else you always say?" she teased.

"Yeah," he coughed. "When at work, focus at work."

She smiled.

Nolan said, "Hyder had told me that the neighbor had come to his rescue. Where is he now?"

"As you can see by blood on the floor, the neighbor was bleeding quite heavily, so he was quickly sent to the hospital. You can interview him there, if you like."

"He'd been shot?" Nolan asked.

"Yeah, in the abdomen, but not with a bullet, but with a nail."

Nolan's eyes narrowed. "Is the neighbor going to be okay?" he asked.

"The paramedics think so," Ivy replied. "Had the nail gone into any other part of his body, he might have not been so lucky. Unfortunately, I can't say that for the victim in the apartment."

Nolan had a sinking feeling he would find Arnold Lam inside.

And he was right.

Lam's body lay sideways on the floor. His eyes were open and they looked like they were staring at something above.

Nolan realized they were focused on the nail that was stuck on the forehead. The perpetrator must have placed the gun there and the victim's had eyes followed it. And after the deed was done, the eyes froze in that position.

Nolan leaned down and saw more nails on the body. One on the hand and another on the feet.

Lam had been brutally tortured.

He walked around the body.

"Was there forced entry?" he asked Lopez.

She shook her head. "Doesn't look like it."

"So the victim let the assailant into his apartment?" Nolan was confused.

"I would have to say so."

"So they probably knew each other," Nolan finally said.

Lopez shrugged. "Could be."

"But," Nolan stood up. "It doesn't make any sense then."

"What do you mean?"

"We know Lam had set up the *Merchant of Truth* website, and we know that the website had recently posted images of a masked man killing another person. If Lam and the masked man knew each other then why would Lam post those incriminating images?"

Lopez thought about it.

“Also, if they knew each other, then why would the assailant hide his face behind a mask?”

Lopez thought about it and said, “Maybe, the assailant came for something.”

“What?” Nolan thought out loud, and then his eyes moved to the laptop sitting on a desk in the corner.

He moved toward it. It wasn’t turned on.

“We’ll bag it and take it to IT,” he said.

The IT Investigation Unit dealt with all technology related inquiries. They would unlock the laptop and prod and probe through each and every content inside it. There was nothing they couldn’t get access to.

Lopez said from behind, “If the assailant came for it, then why didn’t he take the laptop when he left?”

“Maybe he didn’t have time,” Nolan said.

Lopez understood. “The neighbor and before that, your reporter friend must have broken up whatever was happening here.”

Hyder, Nolan thought. He was still across at the coffee shop. Nolan should send him home. He’d been through too much for one night.

Once he was done here, he’d personally drive him home.

Nolan suddenly sniffed. He had smelled the odor the moment he had come in but it was now more potent.

He leaned down and in the corner spotted a tall plant that he had seen in many marijuana grow operations.

He turned to Lopez, “You still have the drug dealer in custody?”

“Yep, but after he hears what happened to his roommate, he’d beg us to put him away in jail. It’d be much safer in there than out here.”

Nolan nodded.

As he turned to leave, his foot hit something next to the computer desk. It was a backpack.

He picked it up and opened it. Inside was what looked like a hard drive. He pulled it out and examined it in the light.

His eyes widened as he realized what he was holding.

Printed on top of it were the words: the *Centre for Inland Waters*.

Could this be the security hard drive taken from the CIW? Nolan thought. He flipped it over and saw, typed in smaller fonts, *DataCore Solutions*.

This was the one Ivy had gotten a warrant for. It had gone missing the day before the *Merchant of Truth* had posted those images.

It was making more sense now.

It was maybe also why the assailant had come here in the first place.

Whatever the reasons were, Nolan wanted to quickly examine the hard drive in detail. He hoped he would find something that might help him finally solve this case.

During the drive back to his home, Hyder didn't say a word and he was glad that Nolan didn't either.

Nolan was in the driver's seat, while Hyder sat next to him.

Hyder stared out the window, watching the city go by.

Like always, in moments like these, he wished he was in any other profession than what he was currently in.

As a reporter, he had to go where others did not, which in today's case, involved showing up at an apartment and almost having his body littered with nails.

He thought of his mom and suddenly, he felt utterly depressed. What if something had happened to him? How would she deal with that? She had already lost a husband at a young age and if she lost a son, it would devastate her.

She had finally, after all these years, gotten good news in her life. Akbar's impending wedding was a joyful occasion at the Ali residence, and his mom was going full out in celebrating it.

Hyder's thoughts then went to his brother. If he found out what had happened tonight he would go berserk. Akbar never wanted Hyder to become a reporter. He would have preferred if he had become an accountant or even a doctor like him. But it was his old university professor who had convinced him to pursue his dream. Also, his mom's support and prayers had been instrumental in him getting his degree in journalism and finally landing a job at the *Daily Times*.

The last thing Hyder ever wanted was to hurt her or even disappoint her.

He knew he could never mention the ordeal he had just been through.

Nolan slowed the car as they moved up the driveway.

"Thanks for the ride," Hyder said.

"Sure, no problem," Nolan said.

"Do you want to come in for a drink or a snack?" Hyder asked. In the Pakistani culture, it was customary to offer something to eat to anyone coming by the person's house, even if they were only dropping them off.

"Nah," Nolan shook his head. "I'll take a rain check, even though, I still haven't gotten over your mother's cooking."

The last time Nolan was at Hyder house, Hyder's mom had made a variety of Indian dishes, all of which Nolan had finished all by himself.

"Thanks again," Hyder said.

"Call me if you want to talk, Hyder," Nolan said.

Hyder nodded and shut the car door.

He watched Nolan drive away and then went up to the house.

Upon entering he said, "*Assalamu alaikum!*"

His mom came out of the kitchen. "*Beta (son)*, you are finally here," she said. "Go wash up and I'll set the table for you."

Hyder went to the bathroom and when he turned the faucet on he found his hands were still shaking.

Hyder had once before faced death, but this time it affected him more. Maybe it was the way the masked man had looked at him. His eyes were cold and devoid of any humanity.

Hyder was certain it was the end, but someone higher up was looking out for him. He had sent the good Samaritan to protect him and ultimately save him. Hyder would go and visit the neighbor to thank him for what he did.

But right now, he had to face his mother.

He couldn't let her see what he was going through.

He composed himself and left the bathroom.

When he entered the kitchen his mouth instantly began to water. On the table was a bowl of *koftas* (meatballs in curry) with boiled eggs. Next to it were hot *rotis*.

"I was going to make a salad too," his mom said. "But I came home late."

"It's okay, *Ammi*," he said. "This is perfect."

She smiled. "I've never seen you complain about my food," she said. "I hope you do the same with your wife."

He didn't respond.

She came and sat next to him. "What's wrong, beta?" she asked.

"Nothing, *Ammi*, everything is fine." He tried not to make eye contact with her, because he knew he couldn't lie to her.

"I'm your mother," she said. "I can always tell when something is wrong with you. Remember that time when you were playing cricket in the backyard with your cousins, and you broke my flower plant? You tried to put it together so I wouldn't find out, but it was the way you behaved the next day that told me something was up. You ended up telling me what happened, and I didn't punish you, remember? I will never be upset with you if you tell the truth, Hyder. Allah wants his servants to always be honest and truthful, that is a true sign of a good Muslim."

"I know, *Ammi*," he said, his head still bowed low.

She lifted his chin up and looked him in the eye. "What's wrong, *mera dil* (my heart)?"

He couldn't keep anything from her, he knew. It was better to let it out and deal with the consequences later.

"Its... its... um... its about..."

She suddenly smiled. "I know what's upsetting you," she said. "It's that website, yes?"

Hyder looked at her confused.

"You know... what's it called?... The *Menace of Truth*?"

"*Merchant of Truth*."

"Whatever," she waved her hands. "Sometimes I don't understand these names. Anyway, don't be upset by it. You work for the *Daily Times*. Everyone is so proud of you. One of your aunts, who is always going on and on about her children, even she reads the *Hyder Reports*."

"Who?" Hyder was suddenly interested.

"Aunty Salima."

"Really? I've never heard her say anything good about anyone."

"See? Even she had to finally admit what you had accomplished. And remember, she was your dad's sister, and after your dad passed away, she was nothing but trouble. She thought I wouldn't be able to raise you and your brother all by myself. I did and I praise Allah each day for how both of you have turned out."

Hyder smiled. He suddenly got up.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’m going to read *namaz* (prayers),” he said. “I’m going to thank Allah for giving me the most wonderful mother in the world.”

She beamed. “You don’t have to tell Him, He already knows,” she said, smiling. “But I can always use your prayers, *beta*.”

“I love you, *Ammi*.” He bent down and kissed her

He went to his room and after completing *wudu* (ablution) he started performing his prayers. When he thanked God for saving his life he began to cry. He let his emotions convey his gratitude to his Master.

46

He returned to the motel and headed straight for the washroom.

Brutus pulled the mask out from underneath his jacket and placed it on the sink. There were blood stains on it. He turned on the faucet and immediately began cleaning it.

He wasn’t satisfied until all blood was off it. The mask was an extension of him. If it was dirty, it meant that *he* was dirty too.

He hung the mask to dry on the hook behind the door.

He then removed his jacket and threw it on the floor. He pulled off his shirt and saw bluish purple bruises on his midsection and ribs. It hurt when he tried to touch it.

He soaked a towel with cold water and pressed it on the swelling. He winced as it stung.

He then looked at himself in the mirror. There were red crusts underneath his nostrils. He had managed to stop the bleeding, but he could tell the bone was twisted.

He placed his fingers firmly on the nose, shut his eyes tight, and then pushed the cartilage back into place. The pain shot up his nose and into his brain. His eyes watered and he almost fell backward from dizziness.

He pulled out a medical kit and proceeded to clean his nose with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol.

He then washed his face with cold water.

He stared at his reflection and grunted.

The neighbor had done more damage than he had expected. Brutus was too focused on the other guy that he didn’t see it coming.

The last time someone had jumped him like that was when he was in college. It was during a football game and he was going for a touchdown when, out of nowhere, another player tackled him. It was so hard and brutal that he ended up breaking his collar bone. That ended his desire to further pursue the sport, perhaps even all the way to the professionals as he had hoped for. Instead, he spent the next couple of weeks in the hospital.

When he returned to the field, he was never the same as before the injury.

He opened a bottle of painkillers and grabbed a handful of pills. He didn't care how many he took, only that it would knock him out. He wanted to wake up feeling better than how he was feeling right now.

He downed it with some water and then fell on the bed.

He stared at the ceiling, waiting for the medication to take effect.

He had failed in his mission and there would be consequences, he knew. He was sent to get the hard drive back and in his quest to gain more information he had left it behind.

He should have killed Arnold Lam the moment he had told him where the hard drive was. But no, he wanted to find out where the writer of that blog was. She had made him look bad in front of those who he was working for. They had given him a simple order, kill that scientist and bring back his laptop and cell phone. He had done that, but did not expect to find himself on TV.

This had brought unwanted attention to him. They didn't want that, and he didn't want that either.

He had hoped to leave the motel once the dust had cleared, and go someplace far. But now he wasn't so sure.

Until the mission was complete, he wasn't going anywhere.

It took a couple of hours, but he finally fell asleep.

47

The IT Investigation Unit was located in a dark and suffocating room.

There were no windows and all the cubicles were scattered by the walls.

Data, of all forms, were examined in this room. Videos, digital images, on-line content, security breaches, everything technology related, were scrutinized in detail by the various technicians in the unit.

The man staring at the security footage from the CIW wore a black T-shirt, black pants, and black boots. His hair was colored jet black, his nail polish was black, and he also had on black eyeliner.

Probably a Goth, Nolan thought, standing behind him.

Carl Danka had started working for the Franklin Police Department straight out of high school. He had been caught hacking into their computer systems. Instead of sending him to jail the judge at his trial had a more creative solution: sentence Danka to a year of community service with the force. Her thinking was, if Danka was clever enough to get into the force's secure databases, imagine what he could do if his energy was focused on something more positive.

Danka had been able to expose hackers, pedophiles, fraudsters, criminal enterprises, and various other forms of illegal activities. He was so good at what he did that after his community service was over the force decided to offer him a full-time position.

Nolan had never worked with him before, but had heard about the cases he had assisted on. There was one, which involved Danka personally, that always stuck out to him.

Once, Danka's apartment had been broken into, where the thieves entered his home by smashing the window next to the front door and then unlocking it. They took everything, including his laptop.

Danka then went about finding out who did it. He remotely accessed his laptop, going so far as to even turn on the camera. From his work computer he was able to view the person using his laptop. It was an amateur thief, who was foolish enough to start logging into various sites using the laptop. Danka was able to get the user's full name, which then helped in procuring his address.

But Danka didn't stop there. Through on-line conversations, Danka was able to find others who were also involved in theft and robbery. They were arrogant and cocky enough to brag about all the crimes they had committed, thinking that no one was listening in. Soon, Danka had uncovered a large network that spanned from one end of the city to the other, which primarily focused on theft and sale of stolen properties.

Consequently, over a dozen people were arrested in relation to the network. Some were petty criminals who did the break and enter, and others were more sophisticated, where they owned and operated retail joints that got rid of the goods.

For his actions, Danka was offered a medal, for his civic duty by the mayor, but there were rumors, though, that Danka had refused to accept it.

He stated that he did it for his own pleasure and to get the goods back.

Right now, Danka was enjoying viewing the murder video.

"This is some awesome shit, you know," he said, grinning. "When I saw it, I couldn't believe it was for real."

"It was," Nolan said, a little annoyed. An innocent man was murdered and this bozo was talking like it was some video game. "Can you play it for me?"

"Sure can," Danka said.

Danka was about to hit play when Ivy came into the room. Danka examined her from top to bottom, as if he hadn't been out in weeks. He hadn't, actually. He had made his cubicle his home for the last month or so. There was too much work to be done, he had said. Why bother going home when he was only going to sleep there?

He had started to smell a bit and Ivy sniffed and rubbed her nose.

"She's working on the case with me," Nolan said.

"I'm not complaining," Danka smiled. "Now, do you want to see it from the very beginning or when the action begins?"

"Just the crime scene," Nolan replied.

"No problem."

He hit a button and a black and white image of a hallway came on the screen. It was empty when suddenly a figure entered through the door. The figure was of a man. He wore a black leather jacket, a hoodie, and that, now unmistakable, ape mask. He stood by the door and waited. He then pulled out what looked like a gun, which they knew was actually a nail gun, and began banging it on the door.

"I think he's calling out to the victim," Ivy said.

Nolan agreed.

A half a minute later, another man appeared on the screen, his back was to the camera, but they were certain it was Vikram Patel. Patel abruptly stopped and

then turned to go back in the other direction when the man aimed and fired at Patel. Patel fell over, holding his leg. The man slowly and calmly walked over. He leaned down and said something to Patel. Patel shook his head and said something. They could tell the man wasn't satisfied with the answer. He kept talking to Patel and pointing his gun at him. They could see that Patel was in a lot of pain. He was begging for his life. The man then aimed and fired a nail into Patel's shoulder. Patel howled in agony, holding his arm.

The man aimed the gun once again. It looked as if he was giving Patel an ultimatum. Then suddenly the man looked away.

"He must have heard something," Ivy said.

The man then disappeared from view. Patel tried to get away, but realized it was futile. He then began writing something in his blood. They knew it was in Hindi and it read: *the murderer is a monkey*.

The man returned and put a nail through Patel's head.

He then disappeared from view.

"That is the end of the show," Danka said.

Nolan went silent. The footage didn't really show anything they could use to find who the perpetrator was, or why he even did it.

As if reading his mind, Danka said, "I've gone through the footage several times now, and I think the guy is ex-military."

"What makes you say that?" Ivy asked.

"The way he moved," Danka said. "He strode, rather than walked, and his shoulders were always upright, with his chest out. Also, the way he held the nail gun, I've seen soldiers hold weapons that way."

Nolan absorbed this information.

"Also," Danka said. "I think I saw a mark on his left hand. After I've gone through the images in detail, I am certain I will know what it is. Once you have that, it won't be too difficult to search for an ex-soldier with a mark on his hand in Franklin."

Nolan finally managed a smile.

"When will you know?" he asked Danka.

"In a day or so," he said.

"Good, we need that information as soon as possible."

Outside the IT Investigation Unit, Ivy was grinning. "We will finally be able to solve it."

Nolan still had his doubts. Danka had made it sound too simple, and Nolan was well aware that nothing was ever simple.

"Come on," she said. "This is great news and you know it. How about I buy you a drink?"

"I shouldn't be drinking, you know," he replied.

"Okay, how about dinner then?" she smiled.

Nolan looked at her. "Are you asking me out?"

"I was hoping you would, but a girl can wait only for so long."

"Um..." Nolan swallowed hard. "I have to go."

With that, he left.

Hyder was in Veronica's office at the *Daily Times*.

She was reading Hyder's latest submission for the *Hyder Reports*.

Hyder waited patiently, but he found he was constantly adjusting his glasses. He did that whenever he was anxious or nervous.

He wasn't sure why he was feeling this way. He knew what it took to write a piece for publication, but he also knew it was never a guarantee.

He had once interviewed a famous writer. The writer had published fifteen books and all had been bestsellers. Hyder asked her that after achieving all the success that she had, was writing books easier now? Her response had surprised him. She said that when she was unpublished and an unknown, she enjoyed the process more, because she was free from any judgement. Now that she was popular, there was more pressure to make the next book a huge success like the ones before, and this had made the process more difficult.

Hyder felt that pressure now. He had achieved some measure of success with the TriGate Scandal, and since then he had tried to emulate that.

Veronica flipped to the last page and then said, "This happened to you... last night?"

He nodded.

"How are you doing now, Hyder?" she asked, concerned.

He shrugged. "It's my responsibility to get the story, whichever way I can. The readers expect it from the *Hyder Reports*."

"I don't think this story should be in *your* column," she said.

He almost didn't hear her. "What? You don't think it's good enough?"

She laughed. "I think it's great."

"Then why don't you want to print it?"

"Are you kidding me? I want to put it on the front page."

Hyder nearly jumped out of his chair and hugged her.

"Wow," he said. "You think Julie will go for it?"

"She might be the publisher but I'm still the editor. She'd have to fire me before she decides not to print it."

"Thanks, Veronica," he said, smiling.

"Good job, Hyder."

Hyder left the office, beaming,

Lester caught him coming back to his cubicle.

"What happened? You got a promotion?" he asked.

"I just might after this." Hyder told him what had happened in Veronica's office.

"Wow, bro," Lester said. "You think Julie will go for it?"

Hyder relayed to him Veronica's response to that exact question.

"You've got clout in this place, bro," Lester said.

"I don't know about that, but it's sure nice to have a friend like Veronica."

"We should celebrate," Lester said.

"What do you have in mind? Wait... let me guess, it has to do with food, right?"

"Um... I... I was... thinking..." Lester scratched his head, sheepishly.

Hyder laughed. "I'm just playing with you. Come, we'll get your favorite."
Lester brightened up. "Indian food?"
"Yep, my treat. Plus, I have to pick up my brother's wedding cards, too."
"I love weddings," Lester smiled.
"Sure, just as long as it's not yours."
"I told you, I plan to be a bachelor for life."
"Wait until I find a girl that enjoys eating as much as *you* do."
"Do they even exist?"
"You exist, don't you?" Hyder said. "All we have to do is find a female version of you."
"Now you're scaring me, bro."
"Alright, let's go before Veronica changes her mind about my story."

49

The wind blew bitterly, sending a chill through him.
Nolan always wondered why it felt cold and uninviting at the cemetery.
Maybe, it wasn't supposed to be sunny and warm where the dead lay. But he didn't believe that. He always came at the wrong time, he told himself. It was either in the morning, before he went to work, or late at night after he had finished work.
Also, in his heart, he felt his wife couldn't be in a place that was dark and gloomy. She was a good person, better than he could ever be. He imagined her someplace bright and happy. Maybe, his unborn daughter was with her too, all grown up and playing with her mother. His daughter was, after all, five months when the accident happened, so she must have had a soul, he thought. He just couldn't believe that she died and nothing happened to her.
One day, he knew, he would see them. He wasn't particularly religious, never had been, but he believed in right and wrong. As a human, he was not without sin, but through his job as a detective, helping find the sinners and bringing them to justice, he hoped he would be able to erase some of his own sins.
He stood before the grave with flowers in his hands. He placed them next to the tombstone. Tears formed in his eyes, but he bit his bottom lip to control his emotions.
He couldn't keep crying every time he came here. He had to move on, he knew. He had to live his life. Simone would have wanted that. It was why he was here right now, to get her permission.
"Hi honey," he said. "How are you? I'm doing well. I know you are looking down right now and smiling at me. I hope you are happy and having a good time up there. I... I..." He sighed. "There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about you. I miss you so much." He then smiled. "On a brighter note, I have stopped... um... *reduced* my daily consumption of alcohol. I've joined AA and... although I find someone of the members irritating and downright annoying, I think I'll stick with it. I know you will be proud of me when I've completed the program. I've..." He then paused. "I've been asked to dinner by a co-worker... actually, she's

not with Franklin PD, but she's still law enforcement..." He rolled his eyes. "She a fed, there, I said it. I know, I know, I told you never to trust anyone who worked at the FBI—after all, they still deny the existence of Area 51—but she seems nice. It's nothing serious, I'll admit right away, but I do want to see where it goes. I hope you won't be too upset with me if I give it a shot. Anyway, I'll always come by and visit, I promise."

He kissed her tombstone and left.

50

The Governor slammed the newspaper down.

He was furious. He felt his head would explode. He got up and paced the room.

This was getting out of control, he thought. This should have been the end of it. But now this?!

He looked down at the newspaper and he was irate again. This reporter, Hyder Ali, had made it front page news.

Benny Carmino had read Ali's expose of the TriGate Scandal with much interest. In fact, after the story broke, Benny had gone on television to denounce that kind of blatant behavior. He had even vowed to enact a law that would stringently punish those types of criminals. No longer would they be able to hide behind their corporate logos or even titles. They would be treated like any other felon on the street.

He suddenly felt like he was choking.

He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. He was sweating heavily. His white dress shirt now had damp marks all over it.

He wasn't a criminal, he reminded himself. He was the Governor of this great state. The people wanted him in this office. They had voted for him in droves.

His career couldn't end like this, he thought. No! He wouldn't allow it. He had worked too hard to get where he was. It was others who had failed him. They were responsible for this debacle. Had they done their jobs, this wouldn't have made it in the papers.

He went around his desk and pressed a button on the phone.

"Marlene," he said into it. "Can I see you?"

He sat down and tried to control his composure.

A few seconds later the door swung open and in came his Chief of Staff.

"Did you see it?" he said.

"I did, sir," she said.

"Can you believe this reporter has started calling it the Monkey Murders?"

"I know, it's despicable."

"It's more than that," he said. "If the general population got too interested in this, then it could blow up into something that we won't be able to contain."

"I spoke to the contact and it's under control."

"Is it? Really?" he said. "*He* was supposed to just get the evidence, not torture the poor guy."

“I’ve already relayed our displeasure to the contact. We have to trust them to handle it or else we’ll have to do it ourselves, and believe me, sir, we *don’t* want to personally get involved.”

He knew she was right. If he got involved, it could get messy. He had so far stayed in the shadows and not become entangled in it. The last thing he needed was for this to turn into a full blown scandal.

It would destroy his path to the Oval Office.

He had to play it cool, he knew. There was nothing linking him to the story. There was no mention of his office in the article. There were some loose ends left, and in time they too would be resolved.

“Thank you, Marlene,” he said with a smile. “That will be all.”

51

Nolan had spent the last hour or so cleaning up the place.

After his wife’s accident, he had gone into a deep depression, which meant he hadn’t particularly focused too much on the house.

The carpet needed to be vacuumed. The dishes needed to be washed. The bathroom needed a good scrub. And even the hallway needed a deep mopping.

He did all that and more. He had picked up some air fresheners and hoped they would mask the odors that had accumulated from his dirty laundry scattered everywhere.

He quickly showered, shaved, and applied mousse through his hair. He selected a light blue casual shirt that looked and smelled clean and matched it with white khaki pants. He doused himself with cologne and then looked at himself in the mirror.

He grinned at his reflection.

He heard the door ring. He rushed over and with a wide smile opened the door.

The smile quickly faded when he realized it was the pizza delivery boy.

The boy looked startled. “Um... medium cheese pizza?” he said.

“Yeah, sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

Nolan paid and took the box in.

Just as he had laid it on the table the door rang again. *Did he not tip enough?* He thought.

He opened the door with a scowl. “I thought ten bucks was more than...” He stopped.

Standing outside was Ivy.

She wore a bright yellow dress, high heels, and her short blond hair was curled.

“You were expecting someone else?” she said.

“No, no, I thought you were the pizza guy.”

She smiled. “You ordered pizza?”

“Yeah, I figured as this wasn’t really a date that we should try something simple. Plus, I can’t cook.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not stuck up. I’m actually a fan of pizza.”

From behind her back, she pulled out a bottle. "I hope red wine is okay?"

"I'm not supposed to be drinking, remember?"

"It's not for you, it's for me." With the other hand she pulled out another bottle from behind her back. "This is for you. It's sparkling water."

He gave her a big fake smile. "Oh, my favorite. Please come in."

"I like what you've done with the place," she said, examining the interior.

"You should've seen what it looked like an hour ago," he replied.

"It looks like nice," she said. "By the way, I like the shirt."

He shrugged. "This *old* thing."

"You clean up nicely," she said.

"You look... beautiful," Nolan said.

"You don't look bad yourself," she replied, but then paused. Her eyes suddenly went moist.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, concerned.

"Sorry, I'm fine," she said. "It... it's just that after Will, I haven't been with anyone. So this is difficult for me."

"Me, too," Nolan confessed. "I didn't know if I could do this."

"Then let's not treat it like it's a date," she said. "We are two wounded souls who are sharing a nice meal together."

"I like the sound of that."

"But, it's not like we can't have a little fun, as well." She grinned.

"I like the sound of that even more."

They quickly dove into the pizza and in no time they were full. They then moved into the living room. He asked her about her childhood. She had grown up in a small town in Oklahoma. He was surprised to hear this. He thought she was from New York or even New Jersey. Her parents owned and operated a local hardware store. Instead of playing with toys, she grew up playing with tools. He was impressed by this. He quipped that his kitchen sink was leaking and maybe she could have a look at it. She said she could but it would cost him big bucks. She wasn't cheap, you know. They laughed. She asked about his childhood. He was born and raised in California. He had once dreamed of becoming a surfer, but because of his fear of water, that dream didn't last long. She thought he was joking until she saw he was dead serious. To strike out on his own, he moved to Franklin after dropping out of law school.

"You wanted to be a lawyer?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, my dad wanted me to be a lawyer. Both my parents were lawyers, and even a couple of my uncles, too. So, law was supposed to be in my blood."

"Then what made you quit?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I was never very good at it."

She filled her glass with more wine. "Are you sure you can't have any? I feel terrible drinking this alone."

"You know what? Why not?" he said. "A little won't hurt."

She filled his glass only half-way.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"After a couple of glasses you can ask me anything?" he said.

"Is there something between you and Detective Lopez?"

"What do you mean?"

“I always get this feeling that she is protective of you.”

He thought about it. “I was probably the first detective to treat her like an equal.”

“Other detectives didn’t?”

“Well, I think they were intimidated by her. She is smart, talented, hard working...”

“And beautiful,” Ivy quickly said.

“Yes,” he nodded. “She is, I won’t deny that, but there is more to her than her beauty.”

“I’m sure there is,” she said, winking.

“She’s just a friend,” he said, staring at his glass.

“I’m sorry, it’s none of my business. Why don’t I top up your glass?” she said.

“I shouldn’t,” he said.

“You can go crazy for one night, I won’t tell,” she smiled.

“Alright, one more glass and I’m done.”

She filled his glass with more wine. “Now tell me more about this fear of water.”

They spent the rest of the evening laughing and drinking.

52

Echo was behind the cash register staring at another customer who had difficulty deciding what to eat.

What made it worse was that he also had his indecisive wife and his young children with him. The children weren’t picky when it came to their orders. They wanted whatever meals that came with the latest toys or freebies.

“I’ll have the double chicken sandwich with extra cheese,” the man said. “Plus, the onion rings on the side with a large soda.”

His wife quickly spoke up, “Isn’t that a lot of carbs, honey?”

“I think you’re right,” he said. “Then can I get it without the cheese?”

“Sure, coming right up,” Echo said. What she really wanted to say was, “Listen, buddy, the extra cheese is not the problem, it’s the entire meal.” This was why she refused to eat from the restaurant. She much preferred to drive to another restaurant, one which focused on healthy meals, and get her food there.

Her boss, Todd, always had a fit whenever she did that. He didn’t want to understand that the menu at his restaurant could give even a healthy person a clogged artery. To make matters worse, she always threw the wrapper or container from the other restaurant in her restaurant’s garbage bin.

Todd had warned her not to bring a competitor’s product into the restaurant, but he couldn’t fire her for disposing of it. Customers did it all the time, she had told him.

She took the family’s order and went to the next customer. As they were deciding what to get, Echo’s eyes moved to the television screen. Her face went pale when she saw the segment. It showed the photo of a man. Echo immediately recognized the person on the screen.

It was Arnold Lam. And below the photo were the words: THE MONKEY MURDERER KILLS AGAIN.

Echo suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

She quickly took the customer's order and asked another co-worker to take her place behind the cash register.

She went to the washroom, locked herself in the cubicle, and threw up in the toilet.

She couldn't believe Arnold was dead. Just this morning she had thought about sending him an e-mail. But she had been so busy with a lead for another story that she forgot. In fact, it was this other story that had preoccupied so much of her time and energy that she no longer was focused on the CIW murder. The only reason she had exposed it was to get one up on the *Hyder Reports*.

It was why she was always looking for the next big story.

She had recently found out about a congresswoman's affair with her male intern and she was hoping to find enough dirt to break it on the *Merchant of Truth* website. This would prove to the media establishment that guerilla journalism did in fact work.

Also, she wanted to snub her nose at them. She had applied for a position in all the newspapers in Franklin, but they either rejected her, or offered her an unpaid intern position.

It wasn't the money that made her refuse to take their offer. Her parents had more money than they knew what to do with it. It was about the respect. Interns were never high up on the corporate totem pole when it came to getting the recognition. She didn't want to spend months or even years working long hours so that someone else—their bosses in particular—took the credit.

The *Merchant of Truth* was her creation, and even though, the general public had never heard of Grace Kelly Sanderson, they were now more than aware of Echo Rose.

She was Echo Rose.

She knew it and it didn't matter if the world knew it or not.

According to the news, the person who had murdered Arnold was the same person who had murdered that guy in the CIW.

A thought ran through her head and it made her physically ill. She threw up again.

She quickly cleaned herself and left the washroom.

She told Todd she wasn't feeling well and wanted to go home.

"You look fine to me," he said, not believing her.

"I just vomited in the washroom, Todd!" she yelled.

"Why would you do that?" he looked horrified.

"It's the *damn* food here," she said. "It's disgusting."

She didn't care what he thought. She grabbed her stuff and left.

She rushed to her BMW and turned on the ignition.

She was about to put it in drive when she started crying.

A recurring thought kept bombarding her head. *Arnold had been targeted.* Someone wanted him dead... and she knew why.

It was because of his involvement in the *Merchant of Truth*. Someone had been able to link him to it. She wasn't sure how, Arnold had assured her that it was near impossible, but they somehow did.

This meant that they would come after her next.

Grace Kelly Sanderson was utterly scared now.

53

Nolan opened his eyes and squinted at the sunlight streaming from the exposed windows.

He felt his head pounding and he slowly scanned his surroundings.

He was lying on the sofa of his living room. He looked down, he was still dressed in the clothes he wore last night.

He looked at the clock, it was close to mid-afternoon.

He lifted himself up and saw an empty bottle of wine next to two drinking glasses.

He put his face in his palms. He tried to remember what happened last night, but his memory was muddled.

He remembered he was with Ivy. They were having a good time. She was laughing and so was he. Where was she now? He wondered.

He got up, felt dizzy, and fell back onto the sofa.

He had a major hangover. He had been through so many that he had lost count of how many now.

He decided to make himself some coffee. A strong cup always managed to jolt his senses back in place.

He somehow made it to the kitchen and that's when he saw the note on the refrigerator door. It was from Ivy.

Thanks for a great time last night. Next time, pizza will be one me.

He smiled, put the coffee on brew, and went upstairs. He showered, shaved, and changed. After downing the cup of coffee, he headed out the door.

The sun was up. The sky was clear. And the weather was mild.

Today, he felt different than he had on other days. He hadn't felt this way since his wife's accident.

Was there romance in the air? He wasn't sure. But it was the start of something new, he was definitely sure of that. He enjoyed Ivy's company and he felt she enjoyed his.

They were both in law enforcement, which meant they would better understand what the other was going through on any given day.

Their jobs were demanding and it would be nice to have someone to lean on during the tough times. It wasn't to say that his marriage to Simone wouldn't have lasted. They had something that was even bigger than their careers. If she had asked him to quit his job, he would have done it in a heartbeat.

Nolan shook his head. He wasn't sure why he was getting ahead of himself. They had only spent a few hours together. This didn't mean they would share their entire life with each other.

Ivy was still scarred by the loss of her fiancé, and Nolan was slowly getting over his loss. It would take much work and more time to see where this new relationship would end up.

Nolan took the elevators up to the detective division and when he got out he received many odd and confused looks. It had been a while since anyone had seen Nolan the way he looked today. His hair was usually all over the place, his beard was thick and coarse, and he had on dark sunglasses.

Today he looked quite opposite of that.

He found Ivy by his desk.

She smiled and gave him a hug.

He didn't care if anyone saw it. It felt nice. He realized what he had been missing all these months.

"Sorry I left you sleeping on the sofa last night," she said.

He shrugged as if to say, "It's no big deal."

"You were sleeping so deeply that I didn't want to bother you," she said.

"Once I'm out, I'm out for good," he said with a grin.

Someone approached them. It was Sergeant Halton. He said to Ivy, "Where is Nolan? I need to speak to him ASAP."

"I'm right here, Sergeant," Nolan said.

Halton did a double-take. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Nolan actually looked... respectable.

"Um..." he paused as if trying to make sure it was Nolan. It had been a while since he had spoken to Nolan without his sunglasses. "Come with me," he finally said.

As they walked to Halton's office, Nolan could feel Halton's eyes on him.

When the door had closed, Halton said, "What's happening with the CIW murder?"

Nolan thought about making something up, just to see how red Halton's face became, but he didn't want to ruin the day he had been having so far.

"We think we have found something in the footage," he said.

"Like what?"

"The perpetrator is ex-military. And Danka at IT may have found something that might help us locate this person."

"Okay, good," Halton said. He was still bracing himself for one of Nolan's smart-ass remarks, though. But he didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he could irritate him, so he played it professional. "I just spoke to Captain Ross. Ashok Dutta, the Consul General of India, has called him several times already. The family of the victim is eager to take the body back. Dutta is adamant that we release it. Captain Ross has agreed to keep the body for seventy-two hours, after which we will have to let it go."

"But we may need it for our investigation," Nolan said.

"Whatever you need, do it in three days," Halton said. "After that, both the victim and his family are on a plane back to India."

Nolan paused, as if thinking. "Alright, we'll get on it," Nolan said.

He was about to leave the office when Halton said, "That's it?"

"What do you mean?" Nolan asked.

"You don't have anything funny or clever to say to me?"

Nolan shook his head. "Why would I? You are my superior and I have so much respect for you to not want to make you feel inferior in any way that it would affect you and end up causing much distress to your already fragile state of health. Have a nice day, sir."

Nolan smiled and left.

Outside, Ivy said, "What's going on?"

"We've got seventy-two hours to wrap it up," he said. "Let's go."

"Where're we going?"

"To speak to the victim's widow."

54

The room was spacious but cozy. It didn't have a lot of furnishings, but enough to serve its purpose.

They were in a room at the Indian Consulate.

Ivy and Nolan were sitting across from Reema Patel and next to her was a Hindi interpreter.

Mrs. Patel could read and write in English, but the interpreter was there in case something got lost in translation.

An aide at the consulate had taken her son, Sachin, for some ice cream around the block.

This would give them enough time to ask Mrs. Patel some questions.

"Mrs. Patel, please accept our sincere condolences for the death of your husband," Ivy said.

"Thank you," she said. Reema Patel wore a black sari, as bright colors were not worn during the mourning period in the Hindu culture, and no makeup. Strands of hair kept falling over her face and she moved them aside, only to have them fall over her face again.

"We need to ask you a few questions about your husband, is that okay?" Ivy said.

"Yes."

"Do you know why anyone would want to hurt your husband?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't know."

"Do you know why your husband was in America?"

She nodded. "He came to work, but..."

"But what, Mrs. Patel?" Ivy urged.

"But he had a good job in India. We were happy, so I am sad that he left."

"You didn't want him to come to America?"

She shook her head.

"Is it because you and your son would be in India and he would be here?"

"Yes. Sachin missed his father so much and now..." She began crying. She then quickly composed herself and wiped her eyes with the edge of the sari.

“Sachin is a good boy, he does not know his father is not here anymore. How will I tell him?”

Ivy and Nolan didn't know what to say. How did you break such bad news to a child?

Nolan said, “When was the last time you spoke to your husband?”

“We speak every day,” she said. She then held the phone before him. “On this phone, I talk to him.”

“I see that.” Nolan tried to smile. He then said, “Did you... speak on the day of the murder?”

She slowly nodded. “Yes.”

“Did anything sound like it was out of the ordinary?”

She looked at him, confused. The interpreter leaned in and clarified the question.

“Yes, Vikram was worried,” she said.

“Why was your husband worried?” Ivy said.

“He was worried about work. He think the people did not let him do his work.”

“Which people?”

She went silent. She held the phone tightly in her hand as if she was afraid of losing it.

“Who wouldn't let your husband do his job?” Ivy asked.

“Everybody,” she said.

Before she could ask further the door swung open and in came Ashok Dutta. “I'm afraid this meeting is over.”

“Why?” Ivy fumed. “We've only begun with our questions.”

“Governor Benny Carmino will be making a statement soon regarding the murder of Mr. Patel,” he said. “And I've been asked to drive Mrs. Patel and her son to a private meeting with him beforehand. I know this is abrupt, but I just found out about it. I'm sorry.”

They weren't pleased, but they had no choice. So they left.

55

They were on the highway when Nolan received a call. It was from Halton. Captain Ross wanted to see him right away.

Nolan wasn't sure what it was about, but he drove straight to the department.

In the Captain's office, he found Ross, Halton, and Danka waiting for them.

“What's this about?” Nolan asked, looking at each of them.

“Tom, we have a problem,” Ross said

“What is it?” Nolan said confused.

“I'll let our IT expert explain this,” Ross said.

Danka coughed. “Um... you know you had brought me the hard drive from that murder?”

“Yes,” Nolan said, getting impatient. “We wanted you to go through it and find out who the perpetrator was. Have you?”

“I can't,” he said.

“You mean the footage is not useful?” Nolan said.

“No, I don’t have it anymore,” Danka said.

“What? Where is it?” Nolan was agitated.

Danka gulped and looked over at Ross.

Ross said, “That’s what we wanted to ask you, Tom.”

“Ask me what?”

“I’ll say it bluntly,” Ross said. “Did you take it?”

“What...?” Nolan was shocked. He turned to Danka, “Why would I take it if I was the one who brought it to you in the first place.”

Danka said, “It was there last night. In fact, I went through it before I left.”

“I thought you practically lived there,” Nolan said.

“Not always,” he replied, defensively. “I have other living accommodations, you know.”

Ross said, “That’s beside the point, Tom.”

“I don’t get it,” Nolan said, still facing Danka. “Why are you asking me this?”

Danka said, “Um... when I returned this morning the hard drive was not there, so I checked our electronic access logs and the last person to enter the unit last night was... you.”

Nolan’s mouth dropped.

Ivy quickly said, “What time do you have Detective Nolan entering the unit?”

“Around midnight,” Danka said.

Ivy turned to Ross. “I can confirm that around that time Detective Nolan was with me, so what you’re saying is not possible.”

“Then someone might have stolen the access pass,” Danka said, as if that made more sense.

Ross thought about it. “Are you sure you don’t have it on you, Tom?” Ross asked.

Nolan shrugged. He started going through his pockets and when he reached his jacket he pulled out his access card.

Nolan looked dumbfounded.

He looked over and he could tell Halton was relishing this.

“Explain yourself, Tom,” Ross said, looking grave.

“I can’t,” Nolan said.

Ross then shook his head. “I don’t know what’s going on, but we’ll have to conduct an investigation.”

“But he didn’t do anything wrong,” Ivy said.

“Vital evidence has disappeared,” Ross said. “And until we find out what happened to it, I’m afraid, Detective Nolan is off the case.”

“You can’t do this,” Ivy said. “I had specifically requested to work with Detective Nolan.”

“Agent Driscoll,” Ross’s voice was firm now. “Might I remind you, you are a guest at the Franklin Police Department. This means you follow *our* rules and procedures. I don’t know, nor care, how this situation is handled at the Bureau, but down here I make the decisions. Out of professional courtesy, I had obliged with your initial request. But I am not bound by it. Do we understand each other?”

Ivy wanted to say something, but held her tongue. “Yes, sir.”

“Thank you.” Ross then turned to Halton. “Assign Detective Pascale back on the case. He will be assisting Agent Driscoll on it.”

“Consider it done.” Halton was beaming.

“Now, I want everyone to leave,” Ross said. “Except for Detective Nolan.” When the room was cleared, Ross faced him, “What’s going on, Tom?”

“I don’t know,” Nolan was still in shock.

“Whatever it is, get to the bottom of it,” Ross replied.

Outside, Ivy rushed to him, concerned. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I tried.”

“It’s okay, I’m a big boy,” he said with a weak smile. “I’ve handled much worse.”

Pascale came over, grinning ear to ear. “The Sergeant just informed me,” he said. “Don’t worry, I’ll solve this before you get yourself in any more trouble.”

For the first time, Nolan had no reply for Pascale.

56

Governor Benny Carmino waited behind the curtains until his aide gave him the signal that it was time.

Benny strode up to the stage looking serious and focused. For this occasion, he had chosen a darker suit to go along with his black tie. He had, after all, had to reassure the general public that he was determined to not let anything sidetrack the State’s agenda.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “I’m excited to finally be able to present the report from the *Centre for Inland Waters* regarding the development of the proposed manufacturing plant in Franklin. I’m happy to say that this report clearly states that this development will have no environmental impact on the Franklin Harbor or its surrounding areas.” He paused to let it sink in. “This is great news for not only Franklin but also for our fine state. This will allow the creation of over eight-thousand jobs. During my election campaign I had vowed to do something about job creation and to do something about that old facility. I am proud to say I have done both. You can pick up a copy of this report from one of my aides at the end of this media event. Now, I’ll take a few questions.”

A hand shot up. “Isn’t this report written by someone who was recently murdered?”

Benny knew this question would be asked, so he was prepared for it. “Mr. Vikram Patel’s death was a shock and a tragedy. It was something that has saddened us all. Here was a man who had travelled thousands of miles just so he could perform his duties. He left a wife and a young son behind. I have personally met Mrs. Patel and had passed on my condolences along with everyone else’s.” He paused as if he was preparing himself for his next statement. “Vikram was killed in my city, in my state, in my country, and I take that personally. It is therefore why I have set up an educational fund for his son and provided financial assistance to his widow. I will even go as far as using my name and my office to assist them should they want to stay in this country. We owe a lot to Vikram and we will do everything to take care of his family. Next question.”

Another hand shot up. "But what about the report? Doesn't his death taint it in some way?"

"No, it does *not*," Benny shook head. "Mr. Patel was a leader in his field and we will rely on his expertise. He was hired to examine the environmental impact on the Franklin Harbor. We will honor him and his work. Next question."

Another hand. "Why not get a second opinion?"

Benny looked agitated. "Why waste more of taxpayer's money on something that will take months to prepare and will say the same thing as the first report? I will not throw money down the drain."

"But are you not concerned about STELCO's terrible environmental track record?"

"No, I am not," Benny looked at the reporter directly. "The report has cleared STELCO to go ahead with this plant. Also, I have been personally given assurances by STELCO that all environmental standards will be met. Last question."

"Are the police anywhere near finding who murdered Mr. Patel?"

"I have spoken to the captain of the Franklin PD and they are diligently working on the case. Now, I have other matters to attend to. Thank you all for coming." He then walked away.

Behind the curtains he loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. This facility had turned into a nightmare for him and his administration. He wasn't sure how many more of these Q&As he could deal with. But it would all be worth it in the end, he told himself.

When people saw all the jobs that were created and its impact on the families, this would all be forgotten.

They would be praising Governor Benny Carmino for his bold and courageous leadership.

He smiled and walked to the waiting car.

57

Hyder was reading an article when Veronica came over.

"Any progress on the Monkey Murders?" she asked.

"Nothing that you could print," he said.

"I don't want to put any pressure on you, but the paper is relying on your stories."

"Oh, right, no pressure then," he said, sarcastically.

She leaned on his desk. "I'm sorry, Hyder. I know you must be under a lot of stress."

"No kidding," he said.

"I had a discussion with Julie, and although the paper is meeting its circulation targets, it is still way behind in its ad revenue."

Hyder raised an eyebrow. "Does that mean there'll be more cuts coming?"

When the *Daily Times* became embroiled in its own scandal, which involved the previous publisher, the paper had gone through a very dark period. With its

reputation in tatters, readers abandoned the paper in droves, which resulted in substantial layoffs.

Thankfully, the paper was able to regain its good standing. It not only won back the readers, it was also able to re-hire most, but not all, of the laid off staff. There was a reason why this was possible, though. The paper had turned its attention on itself. It printed every detail of the TriGate Scandal, including how the paper was involved in it. It made the paper more reputable for focusing on the issues rather than worry how it would affect them.

She shrugged. "Lack of job security in our industry is the norm, so if they have to let people go, they will. But *you* don't have anything to worry about," she said with a grin.

Hyder had stopped being concerned about his job. He had been let go before and it could happen again, he knew. What he was more concerned about, though, was missing out on a big story. They were his lifeblood. Without one he couldn't call himself a reporter.

"I'll find something that you can put in the paper," he said.

"I know you will," she said. "You haven't let me down yet."

When she was gone, Hyder felt terrible. He didn't really have anything worthy of printing.

He was relieved when he saw Lester come over.

"Why so glum, bro?" Lester said.

Hyder shrugged. "Nothing, man," Hyder replied.

"If it's nothing, you wouldn't have a frown on your face."

"It's that obvious, huh?"

"Sure, I've known you long enough to tell when you are down."

"It's just that all the leads have become dead ends. I don't know where else to turn to."

Lester scratched his head. "Wish I could help you, but I'm just the tech guy. If you have an electronic related question, I'm your man. Hey, you want me to try digging into the *Merchant of Truth* website again?"

"Nah, it won't get us anywhere," Hyder said. "Plus, there hasn't been a post on the blog in days."

Lester's face brightened up as if he had just been struck by an idea. "Do you think, and I'm speculating here, that the reason Echo Rose hasn't posted on her blog is because she is scared?"

"What do you mean?" Hyder asked.

"I mean, the other guy, Arnold Lam, he was killed because he was involved in the website, so maybe she thinks that she will be next."

Hyder thought about it. "You could be right, but again, I don't know how that will help me get my next story."

Lester shrugged. "Just throwing out ideas. Anyway, I gotta go. Talk later."

Hyder watched Lester leave and then he went back to his laptop. He was about to type something, but stopped.

What if Lester was right? He thought. What if Echo Rose was indeed scared for her life. This meant that she had gone into hiding, fearing the killer was out looking for her.

Hyder then had an idea of his own.

Echo was at home, under her bed sheets, watching whatever was on the television. So far she had watched six straight episodes from the marathon of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. She preferred the *Next Generation* over all other *Star Trek* series, so she wasn't bored. It was better than anything else on TV, she thought.

She had been holed up in her room for the past couple of days, ever since she had found out about Arnold. She had told Todd that she had a contagious infection, so her doctor ordered her to stay home. Todd didn't protest one bit, he didn't want anyone at the restaurant to get sick, but more importantly he didn't want to catch the infection himself.

Echo knew the restaurant was a waste of her time. Her parents had been irate when she had initially taken the job, but soon they were busy with their lives and hadn't asked about it anymore. In fact, not once had they queried why she was at home now.

Echo felt invisible and she had a terrifying feeling that one day she would permanently become so. The killer was out looking for her, she was sure of it. He would do far worse to her than what he did to Arnold. Murder was one thing, torture was another.

This sent a shiver down her spine.

She regretted posting those photos on the blog. In fact, she now regretted everything about the website.

It had been a fatal mistake, she thought. She should never have become a rogue reporter. She had bitten off more than she could chew.

Why did she do it in the first place? The answer was simple: the attention. Her parents had rarely given her any, so she decided to get it herself.

Now, it was the wrong kind of attention that worried her.

She didn't know what to do. If she went to the police, this would lead to more questions. "How did she get the hard drives in the first place?" They would ask.

She placed her face in her palms. She felt totally and utterly helpless.

Her only hope was to hide until the police caught the killer.

She heard a beep. It was from her laptop. It made a noise whenever she had received an email. Ever since she had posted the photos, her in-box had been inundated with messages. Some were full of flattery and others were downright threatening. She had even received marriage proposals. But in the end, most, if not all, ended up in her "trash" folder.

She didn't bother getting up to check who had sent it.

Then there was another beep, followed by another, and many more. They came in such rapid successions that she had no choice but to get up and see.

When she did her eyes widened. There were over half a dozen messages and all from the same person.

Hyder Ali.

She hesitantly clicked on the first one. A screen popped up.

*Dear Echo Rose,
I know you don't feel safe right now, but if you want this to end then I can help. Reply back and I will tell you where to meet.
Hyder Ali*

It was short and straight to the point. She clicked on the next message. It was exactly the same as the first one.

He had sent it several times, hoping to catch her attention. It did.

She bit her bottom lip, thinking about it. He was right. She wasn't safe and she did badly want to end this. What did she have to lose in meeting him? She thought.

She then began typing up a reply.

59

Nolan lay on the sofa with a bottle in his hand.

He still couldn't believe what had happened earlier. How could he have entered the IT unit when he was at home with Ivy? Also, how was it possible that someone else had used his access card when he had it on him all the time?

Something wasn't adding up, but Nolan couldn't pinpoint what it was.

The alcohol didn't help in making him think straight, though, but it also wasn't harming him, he assured himself. It was giving him comfort. It was a friend he had come to rely on during the darkest periods of his life.

Earl Winton, his sponsor from AA, had called several times already. Nolan had been too busy to answer, and today he just wasn't in the mood for it.

He wasn't sure why he was feeling sorry for himself, but he was. Maybe, Ivy had something to do with it. He felt somewhat embarrassed when she had come to his defense in front of everyone. He shouldn't have put her in that position.

Plus, there was a look of disappointment on Captain Ross's face that he couldn't erase from his mind. The Captain had gone out of his way to bring him back to the force. If he hadn't, Nolan would've stayed on the sofa drinking until he was completely inebriated, or worse, dead.

Captain Ross had saved his life.

He took a long drink from the bottle.

Then there was Halton. He had savored every minute of Nolan's fall from grace. Nolan knew, if it were up to Halton, he would have not only pulled him off the case, he would have suspended him too.

The case.

Now Pascale was working on it with Ivy.

This, above everything else, deeply bothered him.

He took another gulp from the bottle, but quickly realized he had emptied it.

He placed it on the floor and closed his eyes. He would take a long nap and afterwards decide what to do next.

Right now he wasn't in the mood for anything.

He lay in silence when suddenly there was a knock on the door.

He didn't bother answering it. Whoever it was, they would leave when they realized no one was home.

The knocking continued until the door swung open.

Nolan opened his eyes and saw Ivy standing in the hallway.

"It wasn't locked," she said.

Damn. He must have forgotten when he came in.

"I came by to see how you were doing," she said, coming over and sitting across from him.

He shrugged.

"I'm sorry for what happened this morning," she said.

"Yeah, me too," he said.

"Did you have anything to eat?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

"I'm sure once everything clears up, you'll be back on the case."

"I don't know about that," he said. "It wasn't like I was making much progress on it."

"Hey, I was with you, remember," she said. "At every corner we were hitting a wall."

"Shouldn't you be with Pascale?" he asked.

"I'm a big girl," she said. "I don't need to follow anyone. I've got him working on a lead."

Nolan was about to say something when her cell phone rang.

"Excuse me," she said, looking at the number. "I have to take this." She got up and left the room.

Nolan lay on the sofa staring at the ceiling.

A minute later Ivy returned. "I have to go, but... I can stay, if you want."

"No, I prefer to be left alone," he said.

She looked at him and then nodded. "I'll call you later."

When the front door had closed, he shut his eyes.

He quickly fell asleep.

When he woke up, he realized he had been passed out for several hours. He reluctantly got up when his foot hit the bottle he had placed on the floor earlier. It rolled underneath the sofa.

"Shit," he spat.

He leaned down to retrieve it when he spotted something at the foot of the sofa. He lifted it.

It was a business card.

His brow furrowed.

He was certain it didn't belong to him.

60

The shopping mall was packed with shoppers. They were either rushing from one store to the other or they were taking their sweet time.

It was a place where people from all walks of life came to shop. There were those who could afford what the mall was selling, and then there were those who came just to see what the mall had available.

It was like any other shopping mall in America. It had shops ranging from clothing to electronics to books to shoes to even costumes.

Echo enjoyed coming to the mall. Whenever she got stressed out she would sit and watch people all day. In many ways it gave her comfort. She was able to observe the shoppers in anonymity—they were too busy to notice her—and she was able to pass the time.

Today, she sat at a table in the mall's food court.

She had chosen this location, not because she was familiar with it, but because it was in the middle of a sea of people.

If anything went awry, she would cause a commotion and use the people around her to escape.

She wasn't expecting any trouble, though, but she was fully aware that nothing went according to plan.

She thought about the footage from *DataCore*. It was supposed to be a straightforward task. Acquire the footage, display it on the website, and then move on to the next story.

Now, she had a killer on her tail, probably the Franklin PD as well, and also this reporter, Hyder Ali.

She was sure as hell not looking forward to meeting the first two, but Ali was another story.

He had reached out to her and the least she could do was give him five minutes of her time.

It was why she was in the mall, at the food court, waiting for him.

She had seen his photo from the *Daily Times* website, so spotting him wouldn't be any problem.

She was aware, however, that he did not know what she looked like.

This was exactly what she wanted. If he was not alone, then she would quietly slip out, without him or anyone noticing.

She already knew the exits so it wasn't going to be too much trouble.

She spotted him. He was coming down the escalators. She could tell he was searching for a head of pink hair.

She had told him what to look for when he came, but right now she had on a cap, which was covering her head.

Only when she was certain it was safe, she would pull it off.

He jumped off the escalator and began scanning his surroundings.

He wasn't carrying anything with him. Nor was he looking suspicious. He glanced at his watch and then adjusted his glasses.

It was now or never, she knew. If she didn't give the signal, he would leave, and she would never know what could've happened next.

She bit her bottom lip and then slowly exposed her shocking pink hair.

He glanced around until his eyes fell on her.

For a moment, he stood staring in her direction, until finally he came over.

He pulled a chair across from her and sat down.

A few seconds went by when neither of them spoke.

He finally smiled.

“What’s so funny?” she said.

“You’re exactly how I had pictured you,” he said.

“Really?” she raised a curious eyebrow.

“Yeah, a rebel.”

A short smile crossed her face. “Why did you want to meet me?” she then said, getting to the point.

“I know you are hiding from that person who killed your friend.”

“So?” she shrugged. “Wouldn’t you be, if you were in my position?”

“No, I would get the police’s help.”

“I don’t think they would care for someone who has broken many laws.”

“True, but it’s better than getting killed by a man with a nail gun.”

She looked away.

He then said, “Why did you target *me*?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she said. “I’m a reporter, just like you. I go where the story is.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “Your stories followed my stories, so I don’t think those were just coincidences.”

She stared at him, but said nothing.

“Come on,” he said. “You have no idea how much flak I’ve gotten because of you and the *Merchant of Truth*. The very least you could do is give me an explanation, I think I deserve that much.”

She sighed as if she wanted to finally let it out. “Alright, you really want to know the truth?”

“Yes.”

“I admire you,” she said.

He looked surprised and confused.

“What you accomplished with the TriGate Scandal was unbelievable. You brought down a multi-million dollar corporation and you even brought down your own publisher.”

“Well, technically, I wasn’t working for them anymore.”

“Still, it took a lot of guts to do what you did. I read your stories in great detail. You could have or should have given up, there were too many obstacles in your way, but you didn’t. The only thing that mattered was the truth. That’s what I wanted with the *Merchant of Truth*. I wanted to do what you did.”

“What I did was legal,” he said. “You broke numerous laws to get your stories, and, not to mention, many journalistic standards and codes.”

She leaned back and crossed her arms. “I didn’t come here for you to lecture me on what a journalist should be. I got to the bottom of the story, maybe not the way you would have done it, but I did it...”

“...But it’s the way you did it that got you in the position you are in now,” he answered.

She was about to say something, but held her tongue. Suddenly, her shoulders sagged. He was right, she knew. She had already berated herself for her actions, no point in doing it further. She then said, “You said in your email that you could help me, how?”

“Yes, I can. Detective Tom Nolan is a friend of mine. I can take you to him. He will protect you.”

“How?” she said. “You don’t even know who this killer is.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean you should continue to hide. How long can you do that?”

“As long as I need to,” she replied. She then stood up. “Anyway, thanks for your concern, but I think I’ll manage just fine on my own. Plus, you have the hard drives. I’m not sure how I can be any more help to you.”

Hyder looked at her. “What do you mean hard *drives*? We only found one.”

“But I took two from *DataCore*,” she said.

“Then where is the other one?”

She thought about it and then said, “I think I might know where.”

61

DigiSource was closed when Hyder and Echo reached the store.

Hyder was hoping it wouldn’t be, but the way Echo reacted, he was sure she was hoping for the opposite.

She pulled out a small zip-lock bag from her jacket. From the bag, she removed tools that looked like dental picks.

“You’re going to pick the lock?” Hyder asked, surprised and horrified at the same time.

“You wouldn’t believe the stuff you can find on the internet.”

“Um...” Hyder looked around. “I don’t think we should be doing this.”

“Hey, if you’ve got some journalistic code that *you* have to follow, then by all means, leave. One of my friends was tortured and murdered by some ape mask wearing lunatic, who is now going to come after me. So, whether you like it or not, I’m going to go inside and find that other hard drive. Got it?”

Hyder thought about it and then nodded.

She went to work and in less than a minute the lock was open.

“What about alarms?” Hyder asked.

“Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

They went in, when they heard a beeping noise. Echo quickly located the alarm panel and proceeded to cut the wire. The noise disappeared.

“See?” she smiled. “It was a piece of cake.”

“Yeah, but why even have an alarm system when it can be disabled so easily?”

“As a precaution, to deter would-be thieves.”

“But it didn’t deter you.”

“Yeah, because I had inside information. Arnold told me their security system was outdated... by a decade.”

“Now where do we find this hard drive?” Hyder said, looking around.

“It’s got to be in the back,” she said. “I’ve seen Arnold go behind that door.”

They went around a display counter and when they entered the door, they quickly realized the difficulty of their task. The room was filled with electronics from top to bottom.

There were several shelves stuffed with computer parts, from keyboards, to mice, to mother boards, to even zip-drives. Next to one wall were computer monitors piled high up, from CRT versions to even the latest LCD ones. Across from that wall were computer cases placed one on top of the other that reached almost to the ceiling.

“Holy shit,” Echo said. “Most of this stuff is obsolete.”

“Yeah, but how the heck are we going to find the hard drive in all this junk?”

“We might not have to,” she said. “Look, that looks like Arnold’s work table.”

As expected, a giant *The Incredible Hulk* poster was placed on the wall next to the table.

They began scouring the contents on the table. There were no hard drives, only tools and other small items.

“Where could he have put it?” she said.

“What’s that over there?” Hyder asked.

In the corner was an old desktop computer. The case was exposed where they could see the computer’s mother board. A wire went from the board and all the way to something that was covered with a handkerchief. When they checked, they found a hard drive attached to it. On it were the words, *Centre for Inland Waters*, and below it in smaller font, *DataCore Solutions*.

Hyder smiled. “We found it.”

Echo quickly turned on the computer and then made a face. “Not so fast,” she said. “We need a password to access it.”

“We’ll take the hard drive and check it ourself,” Hyder replied.

“Do you think if I had a way to play the contents from the hard drive myself, I would have involved Arnold?” she said.

Hyder pushed his hand through his hair, thinking. He then said, “I think I know someone who can.”

62

Nolan glanced at the building in front of him and then down at the business card in his hand. The card was for a motel and Nolan was making sure he was at the right address.

When he was satisfied, he went in.

He was greeted by a small woman behind the desk. The woman had short gray hair and round black glasses.

“Hi there,” Nolan said.

“You’re looking for a room?” she asked.

“I’m actually looking for someone,” he said.

“I don’t give out clients’ names, unless you have a warrant or something,” she said off the cuff.

“Actually,” he said, pulling out his badge. “I’m a detective.”

She pulled up her glasses, and after examining it, said, “Alright, give me a name and I’ll point you to where he or she is.”

“Well, I don’t have a name, I just have a card,” he said, dropping it on the desk.

“Listen, the motel has twenty rooms and they are all occupied,” she said. “I can’t let you disturb all of them.”

Nolan thought about it. He then had an idea. “Who has been staying at the hotel the longest?” he asked.

She thumbed through the records. She pulled out a card from a box and made a face. “I remember this one,” she said. “The only name he gave us was Brutus.”

“Brutus?” Nolan raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Normally, we demand to see a driver’s license or anything with a picture ID, but he paid cash and he rented the room for the entire month,” she said. “Even if he got up and left one day, we wouldn’t care, we’ve got our money.”

“Take me to it,” Nolan said.

The room was located at the end of the lot.

Nolan pulled out his gun and knocked on the door. He waited and when there was no response he motioned for the woman to unlock it.

“I can take it from here, thank you,” Nolan told her. She quickly left.

With the gun aimed before him, he slowly opened the door. It was dark inside. He flipped the light switch and found the unit vacant.

He put the gun away and moved in. There was a bed in the middle of the room. The sheets were pulled to the side, which meant that someone had slept on it just this morning.

Next to the bed was a set of weight lifting equipment. Nolan had to hop over them just to get to the other side. He noticed the television. Its screen had been smashed.

He then went to the bathroom. There wasn’t anything particularly interesting in there. It had a toilet, a sink and a tub. He was about to shut the door when he noticed something in the mirror. Hanging behind the door was a mask!

He went around and checked. It was a rubber ape mask.

It was then that he noticed a nail gun. It was next to the door, on the floor.

Nolan’s eyes widened at what he had discovered.

He quickly left the bathroom and pulled out his cell phone. He was about to exit the unit when the front door swung open and he was face to face with a man wearing a hooded sweater.

Nolan was about to say something when the man charged him. He rammed his shoulder into Nolan’s chest. Nolan fell back onto the bed. In an instant the man was on top of him, pinning him to the mattress. He swung his fist at Nolan’s face, connecting on his cheek.

It stung and burned.

He lifted his fist up and brought it down, Nolan quickly shifted his body to the side, thus freeing his right arm and blocking the blow.

The man then grabbed Nolan’s neck with both his hands and began pressing tightly.

Nolan could feel the air constricting in his throat.

His face turned red and he was slowly losing oxygen.

With the man focused on Nolan’s neck, Nolan was able to free his right hand. He then shoved his thumb into the man’s eyeball.

The man howled and jerked his head back.

He released his grip and Nolan was able to breath again.

Before the man could regain himself, Nolan reached back and pulled out his gun.

The man quickly realized what had happened and dashed for the door.

Nolan aimed and fired. The bullet hit him, but Nolan couldn't tell where. The man had disappeared.

Nolan tried to get up and run after him, but instead, he started coughing.

He cleared his throat and finally stood up.

He pulled out his cell phone when he heard something ringing. He listened. It wasn't coming from his phone. Then from where? He thought.

He looked around and found it underneath the bed.

He caught the telephone number on its screen. He paused and then slowly placed it in his jacket.

From his own phone he dialed 9-1-1.

63

Throughout the drive Hyder couldn't help staring at the interior of the car.

The BMW roared down the highway at speeds well over the limit.

But Hyder wasn't concerned about getting pulled over, he was more concerned about the car he was in.

She had told him it was hers, but he somehow he didn't believe her.

They drove up a grand house, when Echo said, "Shit."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You'll see," she said. Several cars were already lined up on the driveway, so Echo drove around until she found a parking spot across the house.

They went up to the front, when Hyder asked, "Why are we here?"

"It's my house," she said but then corrected herself. "It's my parents house."

"And you live here?" he said, dumbfounded.

"Yeah," she shrugged, as if she was embarrassed by it.

When they entered they were greeted by a chorus of laughter.

She leaned over and whispered, "Don't make eye contact and just follow me."

Hyder was awestruck at how magnificent the interior was. Everything looked proper and expensive.

"My room is upstairs," she said, leading the way when a woman appeared down the hall.

"Grace, you're home," the woman said, coming over. She was petite, with highlight short hair, and she had a wine glass in her hand.

"Grace?" Hyder looked at Echo.

"None of your business," she shot back.

"Honey, aren't you going to introduce your friend?" the woman asked.

Echo sighed. "This is my mom, Didi."

"Hi," Didi extended her hand.

Hyder took it. "Hello."

"And this is Hyder Ali."

Didi made a face. "Are you that reporter from the *Daily Times*?"

Hyder smiled back.

“Oh my God!” Didi shrieked. “You didn’t tell me you were bringing someone famous to our home.” She then turned and yelled, “Edward, can you please come out here?”

A man came over. He was tall, with trimmed salt and pepper hair, and he too had a wine glass in his hand.

“Grace,” he said with a smile. “When did you come home, dear?”

Didi said, “Darling, this is Grace’s friend, Hyder Ali.”

Edward had a look of recognition on him. “Oh, yes, I’ve read your articles in the *Daily Times*. How do you do?”

They shook hands.

Echo rolled her eyes. Her parents not only cared about money and status they also cared about celebrity. Right now, they were captivated by Hyder.

“So, what’s happening with the Monkey Murders?” Edward asked. “Do you know who’ll be the next victim?”

Hyder glanced at Echo and she had a look of horror over her.

Didi said, “Please, you must come and meet our guests.”

Echo grabbed his arm. “No, mom,” she said forcefully. “We’ve got a lot of work to do, so not right now.”

Didi looked over at Edward and shrugged. “Okay, honey, maybe later.”

As Echo lead Hyder to her room, he said, “Your parents seem nice.”

“Only when they can gain something from you,” she answered.

Her room was spacious, so much so, that Hyder said, “Wow, it’s bigger than my entire house.”

She went to the closet and pulled the doors open. It was filled with all sorts of equipment.

“What are those?” he said.

“That’s a police radio detector. Those over there are listening devices. That’s a password breaker, and those are high-def cameras. All items a reporter should never leave home without.”

“Are those what you used to keep on top of your stories?” Hyder asked.

“You have sources, I have these.” She scanned inside the closet. “Found it,” she said.

It was a portable drive. She took it to her laptop.

“What’s in it?” Hyder asked.

“Images from the scene of the crime. I didn’t want to keep them on my laptop,” she said. “So, I stored them on the drive. Do you want to see them?”

“You didn’t post all of them on the *Merchant of Truth* website?” he asked.

“No, only the ones I thought were relevant.”

She played them for Hyder. It was the first time he was able to see the sequence of the murder.

Even if it wasn’t in video format, the images were still chilly. What Hyder was seeing was the cold and brutal murder of an innocent man. Nothing could prepare someone for watching this.

Echo said, “I know you don’t agree with me for posting them up, but I made sure not to post anything too gruesome. I have my own codes and standards too, you know.”

Hyder didn't know what to say.

They heard the doorbell ring.

"I think your friend is here," she said. "I better grab him before my parents drag him into their stupid get-together."

Hyder went back to the images. A part of him was thrilled at what he was seeing, but another, bigger part of him, was horrified at what the images held.

He wondered if, given the opportunity, would he have printed them in the Daily Times? He hoped the resounding answer was no, but deep down he wasn't sure. Given how much pressure Veronica was in, to provide content that sold copies, increased circulations, raise advertisement revenue, and so on, he couldn't say if he would've had any say on the matter.

He probably would have been compelled to print them.

He shook his head at the thought.

The bedroom door swung open and in came Lester.

"Whoa," Lester squealed. "Is that a chandelier?"

Echo shrugged. "It was here before we moved in."

"I wish I had one in my bedroom too," he said, admiring it.

Hyder said, "Thanks for coming, Lester."

"Anything for you, bro."

"Did you bring it?" Hyder asked.

Lester tapped his back pack. "We have the technology, Captain," he said, imitating a character from one of his favorite sci-fi shows.

Echo provided Lester with the hard drive taken from *DigiSource*. Lester plugged it into his laptop and began typing away.

"You sure you can play the footage?" Echo asked.

"I can play anything," Lester said with a grin. "Most people are not aware, but I also had a big hand in the TriGate Scandal."

"You did?" Echo asked with much interest.

"Sure did."

"Then why wasn't there any mention of you in the papers?" she asked.

Both Lester and Hyder looked at each other.

Hyder said, "Um... let's say, Lester's skills could have gotten him in deep trouble, had we mentioned it, you know."

Echo raised an eyebrow. "You hacked into something, didn't you?"

"I will neither deny nor confirm this," Lester said. He then turned his focus back on the task at hand. "I have a software that might just do the trick." He pressed click and the footage began playing on the laptop's screen. "Voila!" he said.

Hyder and Echo leaned in. It looked like the security camera was directed at one particular location: Vikram Patel's desk at the CIW.

They saw him typing on his laptop. Occasionally, he would get up and leave, but soon he would be back. On several occasions he would pull out a snack or even his lunch, but most of the time he was working away.

"Can you speed it up a bit?" Hyder asked.

Lester did.

After, what looked like several hours had gone by on the screen, Hyder said. "Why is the camera just on him?"

“Maybe to keep a close eye on him,” Echo replied.
“Yeah, okay, but why *him* in particular?”
No one in the room had an answer.

64

Pascale and Ivy had rushed to the motel the moment Nolan had called it in. Ivy was concerned when she saw the bruise on Nolan’s cheek. But he told her he was fine.

“He got the worse end of it,” he motioned to the door.

Ivy saw drops of blood on the floor. She followed the trail to the parking lot where it ended.

“He must have left in a car,” she said, coming back into the room. “You remember where you might have hit him?”

“I wish it was in the back of the head,” he said.

They combed through every inch of the room. In the closet they found military regalia, along with military weapons. They hoped the contents would help them in locating the name of the owner.

The ape mask and nail gun were bagged as evidence. They would be further examined in detail by the forensic unit.

Ivy said, “How did you know that the perpetrator would be here?”

“I received a tip,” Nolan said.

Pascale said, “Then you should have called us first. You’re not on the case anymore, remember?”

“I wasn’t sure if it was real or false,” Nolan responded. “I figured I should check it out first.”

“Still, you should have called us,” Pascale said.

Nolan knew Pascale wanted to be the one to apprehend the perpetrator. It would mean great exposure for him in the media. After the TriGate Scandal, Nolan’s reputation in the force had shot up. The higher ups were willing to ignore many of his transgressions, just as long as he continued to toe the line. They had wanted him to be the face of the force, to show the general public that their money was being used effectively by the police to solve crimes. Fortunately for Pascale, Nolan didn’t care for kissing ass or being someone’s puppet. He refused to be used as propaganda, even for the force. This left the door open for anyone to make a mark for themselves. This case was Pascale’s opportunity, Nolan understood.

“Go file a report on me,” Nolan said to him. “I did what I thought was right.”

Pascale ignored him and began going through a bag he found in the closet.

Ivy turned to Nolan, “Did you see anything that might help us in finding who he is? A laptop, a cell phone, a wallet even?”

Pascale stood up and said, “I think I may have found something.”

“What?” Ivy asked.

He dangled an army dog tag before them.

“The name on it says, James Paxton.”

Paxton, aka, Brutus was in his truck. He was pale and sweating. His left leg throbbed and ached. He had tied a shirt around it to stop the bleeding, but it still hurt like hell.

He cursed and slammed his fist into the steering wheel.

He regretted going in the room, after he had seen the guy inside. He should have ran away. This way he wouldn't have been shot and he wouldn't have dropped his cell phone.

He cursed again and again.

The truck was parked in an alley so he felt safe, for now.

He looked down and the white shirt around his leg had turned into a deep dark red.

He couldn't leave it like this, he knew. It would get infected.

He wished he had his MED kit, but it was back in the motel room.

The *motel room*.

He had his entire life there.

He placed his face in his palms. By now they must have found his military equipment. This meant, they knew who he was.

Corporal James Paxton had been dishonorably discharged when he had fired at an oncoming vehicle in Afghanistan. He had thought it was a suicide bomber, but it was in fact carrying a family of six. They were running away from the Taliban and had hoped to seek refuge at the US base. Both the parents and four children had died on impact when bullets tore into the vehicle.

Naturally, the Afghani government wanted justice. But the US military would not permit one of their own to be tried in another country's court. They argued that the family should never have approached the checkpoint at such speeds. They had been warned to slow down, but had failed to do so. In the end, a language barrier was deemed to be the cause of the 'tragedy'. But to appease the Afghani government and its people, they relieved Paxton of his duties and subsequently, released him altogether.

He wasn't bitter at his superiors. He was too patriotic to question their decision. He was bitter at the enemy. They had put him in the situation he was in. Had he not acted, who knew what the outcome would have been. His actions had saved the lives of his fellow soldiers. Many had needlessly lost their lives to homemade bombs, suicide bombers, attacks on their convoys, and to IEDs.

He believed, if the enemy fought dirty, so should they. The enemy had strapped children, women, and the elderly with explosives to kill his brothers and sisters. He wasn't going to take any chances. The family had become a casualty of war, according to him. Their blood was on the enemy's hands.

He winced as the pain shot up his leg.

He had initially hoped that the bullet had cleanly gone through the leg, but he soon realized that was not the case. It was still wedged inside.

He pounded the steering wheel again. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, but he knew that would only attract attention.

He was in a lot of pain and he didn't know what to do next.

66

They were all in a briefing room. Pascale, Lopez, Ivy, Nolan, and several other officers were sitting in rows of chairs.

Sergeant Halton was standing in front of a projector. Next to him was Captain Ross.

Halton held his chest high. He was savoring the moment. For so long he had stayed in the shadows, but not any more. It was his time to shine, he knew. If he was able to lead a task force that apprehended the Monkey Murderer than his stock would rise. This would lead to bigger and better career opportunities. He had become tired of babysitting detectives, and some were, indeed, babies, according to him. They constantly needed someone to hold their hands and direct them in their workload.

At first he didn't mind doing this. In fact, he enjoyed telling people what to do and how to do it. But very quickly, all that micromanaging took a toll on him. He started gaining weight. His hair began turning gray and deep lines appeared on his face. In two years, he looked like he had aged ten years.

On top of that, he had jerks like Nolan on his team. They were nothing but a cancer, he concluded. They didn't give a damn about themselves and they most certainly didn't give a damn about anyone else.

And then there was Ross. He shouldn't have been made captain in the first place. According to Halton, he was soft and emotional. It was this weakness that was protecting Nolan. If he was in Ross's position, he would have sacked Nolan years ago.

But reality was another thing and it was why he wasn't going to lose the opportunity before him.

He coughed, clearing his throat. He pressed a button on the device in his hand and the projector screen showed an image of a man. The man was wearing a military uniform and he had a serious look on his face.

"This is the target," Halton said. "Corporal James Paxton is thirty-six years old and he is ex-military, which means he is extremely dangerous. We have come to believe that he is the perpetrator in what the media has dubbed the Monkey Murders. We need to locate and arrest him as soon as possible before any harm comes to the general public. He should be treated as a threat and one that should not be taken lightly, so caution is advised. The advantage we have is that he is injured, which means he will seek medical help. We're going to alert all hospitals to keep an eye out for anyone matching his description, and we will station uniformed officers at all emergency wards. We are also going to be distributing the perpetrator's name and photo to all media outlets. This way, if anyone has any information they can immediately contact us." Halton paused. "I expect full co-

operation from all of you in apprehending this dangerous offender. We are a team and we must work together. Now go out there and get this man off the streets.”

The room quickly cleared.

Captain Ross came over. “Good work, Doug. If we get through this without any scrapes or bruises, I’ll make sure to let the board know of your leadership.”

You better, Halton thought, but instead said, “Thank you, sir.”

67

Lester, Echo, and Hyder had already fast-forwarded through many hours of the footage when Lester said, “Bro, this is so boring.”

It was, Hyder thought. So far all they had seen was Vikram Patel at his desk.

“What I still don’t understand,” Hyder said. “Why were they watching him?”

“Or, better yet,” Echo said. “*Who* was watching him?”

“Good question,” Lester replied.

Hyder thought about it. “Do you suppose it’s the people at the CIW?”

“Why would they?” Echo said. “Weren’t they the ones who had brought him over from India?”

“You’re right, it doesn’t make any sense,” Hyder said.

“I don’t know about you guys,” Lester said. “But, all this sitting around watching some guy doing his work is making me seriously hungry.”

Hyder turned to Echo. “Um... I wouldn’t suppose you have some snacks at home, would you? My friend here loves to be compensated with something to eat.”

She looked at Lester. He gave her his best smile.

“No problem,” she said. “I’ll go see what we have downstairs.”

When she was gone, Lester leaned over. “So *she’s* Echo Rose.”

“Yep.” Hyder nodded.

“Man, I wasn’t expecting her,” Lester said, scratching his head. “I thought it would be someone more like... *you*.”

“What do you mean?” Hyder gave him a look.

“Someone more geeky.”

“Hey, I take offense to that. I’m not a geek. I prefer nerd, okay?”

“Geek. Nerd. Who cares... it just means you’re not cool.”

As they were debating the importance of labels, Echo walked in holding a massive tray.

Lester eyes widened at all the food she carried.

“My parent’s guests are gone,” she said. “So we’ve got lots of leftovers.”

There was pumpkin soup, beef tenderloin steak, chicken Cordon Bleu, banana foster, baked sweet potatoes, dark chocolate cake, key lime pie, and much more.

Even Hyder couldn’t help but lick his lips.

She placed it on the bed.

“How did you manage to carry all that?” Hyder asked.

“I’ve worked as a waiter before,” she shrugged. “You learn to balance stuff. Do you think it’s enough? We’ve got more downstairs.”

Lester clapped his hands with joy. “It’s enough for me.”

Hyder went back to the laptop. Echo joined him.

They played the footage again and watched Vikram behind his laptop.

It was so tedious and cumbersome that Hyder's mind kept going back to the food Echo had just brought up. He almost wished he could join Lester, but he wanted to go through the footage in its entirety.

Someone had gone to great trouble to spy on Vikram, and Hyder wanted to know why. Not only that, Vikram then became a victim in a horrible execution-style murder.

This had left a lot of questions and Hyder was hoping he could answer some of them tonight.

But as the footage moved along at its quickened speed, Hyder began to doubt that. Maybe this entire exercise would yield nothing, he thought. He wanted so badly to help Echo, not because he felt he owed it to her, but because she had risked everything to expose her identity to him and then went as far as bringing him to her home.

Whatever anger and resentment he had felt for her was quickly washing away. Someone dangerous was after her and Hyder hoped he could help in stopping him before any harm came to her.

Hyder suddenly said, "Stop right there!"

Startled, Echo quickly hit pause.

"What happened?" she said.

"Go back in the footage."

She pressed rewind and they watched Vikram do everything backward now.

"There," he said.

She clicked pause again.

On the screen Vikram was focused on his laptop.

"What is it?" Echo said, confused. "Did you see something?"

"You missed it," Hyder said. "Let me do it."

Hyder played the footage, but this time it was at normal speed.

"Come on, come on," he muttered as the video moved along. "There." He hit pause.

"Oh my God," Echo said, putting a hand over her mouth.

On the screen Vikram was looking directly at the camera.

Hyder nodded. "He knew he was being watched."

For a few seconds, neither said a word as they stared at the image before them. It was undeniable. Vikram's eyes were staring directly into the camera's lens.

"How long do you think he knew?" she said.

"I don't know, but until that moment he was careful never to reveal it."

Hyder played it at normal speed again and they watched Vikram working on his laptop again. Vikram then pulled out his cell phone and plugged it into the laptop.

"Is he charging it?" Echo asked.

"Looks like it," Hyder said. "I've seen him do it many times before."

Vikram then moved in front of the camera, his back shielded whatever he was doing. Suddenly, he turned as if he were talking to someone. He got up and left the desk.

“Stop there,” Hyder said.

“What is it?” Echo replied.

“Can you zoom into the cell phone?”

“I’m not familiar with the software.” She turned to Lester, who was almost done with the enormous meal.

“Press that arrow button in the corner,” he said with a loud burp. “It’ll zoom into whatever you want.

She did.

In the footage, they saw a blue colored bar on the cell phone’s display screen.

Hyder leaned in, adjusted his glasses, and squinted.

“What do you see?” Echo said.

“It looks like... he was copying something into the phone.”

68

Nolan was at his desk, staring out the window.

While he was allowed to be at the briefing, he was not allowed to participate in anything related to the Monkey Murders. The inquiry into the missing hard drive and laptop from the IT Investigation Unit was still ongoing. This meant, he was stuck behind the desk.

He flipped the business card in his hands. It was the card of the motel.

There was more to this than he was aware of, he knew, and he had a feeling it was something big.

The more he thought about it the more confused he became. His instincts were telling him one thing but his heart was telling him something else.

He rubbed his temples and let out a big sigh. He could use a drink right about now. There was a bottle in the glove compartment of his car. All he had to do was go down to the parking lot and take a sip.

He shook his head. It was the booze that had gotten him in trouble in the first place. His weakness for it had been exploited and Nolan wanted to know why.

He pulled out the cell phone he had taken from the motel room and began going through the caller list. He couldn’t help but feel uneasy about it. He then shoved it back in his jacket pocket.

He got up and went to the washroom. He filled his palms with cold water and splashed it over his face.

He was feeling a lot of internal turmoil and even rage. Normally, he would have lashed out at the person he was angry with but right now he knew he had to stay cool.

Everything depended on it.

If he wanted answers, he had to work on it like it was a case. This meant, he had to focus on the facts and *not* how they made him feel.

His cell phone came alive. The ring tone echoed inside the washroom.

He answered it. “It’s Nolan.”

“It’s Hyder.”

“Hyder, what can I do for you?” he said.

“Do you still have the hard drive and laptop from Arnold Lam’s apartment?” Nolan didn’t know if he should tell him, instead he said, “Why do you ask?” “Well, we have the other hard drive and you wouldn’t believe what we saw on it.”

“First off, who’s *we*?” Nolan asked.

“Lester, myself, and... Echo.”

“You are with *Echo Rose*?”

“Yep.”

“I would like to talk to that lady,” Nolan said, a little loudly. “She ruined my case.”

“Maybe later, but we want to know if you still have the other hard drive and laptop?”

Nolan couldn’t delay it for much longer, so he told him. “They’re gone.”

“Both of them?”

“Yes, they went missing from our IT unit,” Nolan replied. “Wait. Did you say you have *another* drive?”

“Yep, there were two. You took one from Lam’s apartment and the other we found at the electronic store he worked at.”

“What did you find on it?” Nolan asked.

“Someone was watching Vikram Patel at the CIW. A camera was focused on his desk. During one scene Vikram copied something onto his cell phone. I know you had told me it was not found at the scene of the crime, so we were hoping we could see what he did with the phone on the other hard drive.”

“I saw the footage and I can tell you that he never disposed of it at any time.”

Hyder went silent. Nolan could tell he was thinking about it. Hyder said, “I just have a feeling that whatever Vikram copied onto the cell phone, he must have sent it to someone. He knew he was being watched so he wouldn’t have kept it on his phone. I just wish I knew who it was.”

It was Nolan’s turn to think about it. He then said, “I may know who it could be.”

69

Paxton slowed the truck and cursed at what he saw. A police cruiser was parked in front of the emergency entrance.

The pain in his leg had gotten worse. He didn’t know how long he could contain the bleeding.

He needed medical treatment, and fast.

He had hoped to find a hospital where the police hadn’t shown up, but this hope was quickly fading.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead. During the drive to the hospital, he found he was getting disoriented and dizzy. His hands had started shaking. He hoped he wasn’t going into septic shock.

So far, his military training had come in handy. He had been able to focus his mind and energy away from the injury and onto the task at hand.

So much depended on him being clear headed. If he made any irrational decisions now, it would be the end of him.

Paxton couldn't spend the rest of his life behind bars. In fact, he never forgot the military prisons in Afghanistan and what they did to the prisoners there. It had traumatized him to the point where he would rather die than be taken alive.

Death was another option, he thought. He could put a bullet through his head and be done with it.

He pulled out a handgun and checked to see if it was loaded.

He then dropped it on the passenger seat and closed his eyes tight. The pain had shot up his leg and was now pounding his entire body. He felt like someone had beaten him with a sledgehammer.

He couldn't stay here, he knew. Sooner or later someone would see him across from the hospital.

He had to find another way to get help.

He was about to start the engine when he stopped.

Coming out from the front entrance of the hospital was a man wearing a white lab coat. Paxton realized he was a doctor.

The man moved passed the police cruiser and headed across to the other side of the building.

Paxton quickly grabbed the gun and got out of the truck.

He hobbled in the direction of where the man was going. As predicted, the man entered the parking lot. The man was too busy typing away on his cell phone to notice that he was being followed.

Paxton kept his eye on him, but at the same time, he made sure no one had spotted him.

The man moved down a row of parked cars and then stopped in front of a silver Acura.

He was about to get in when Paxton came up from behind and pressed the gun into the man's back.

"Don't make a move," Paxton hissed.

The man immediately put his hands up.

"Take the car." The man held the keys in the air.

"Keep the keys and get in the car," Paxton replied. "And if you try to do anything heroic I will gladly put a bullet in the back of your head. Got it?"

The man nodded and unlocked the doors.

Paxton quickly slid into the passenger seat.

"You're the guy the police are looking for," the man said, staring at him.

"Just drive," Paxton said, looking around.

"Where're we going?"

"I'll tell you later."

The Acura left the parking lot and got onto the main road.

Paxton scanned his surroundings and finally relaxed when he realized the coast was clear.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Akbar."

"What's your full name?"

"Dr. Akbar Ali."

"I didn't know the Taliban allowed you to be doctors?"

"I'm not a Taliban," Akbar shot back.

"But you are Moslem, right?"

"Yes."

Paxton snickered. "Just my luck." He then said, "Who are you loyal to, the United States of America or your faith?"

"Both."

Paxton looked at him and then nodded, as if understanding. "Then you wouldn't mind helping a soldier of this great country."

It was then that Akbar saw Paxton's leg. "You are bleeding," Akbar said.

Paxton winced whenever he tried to move his leg.

"You need medical attention," Akbar said. "If it's what I think it is then you need to get it out before it gets infected."

"I know that, Einstein," Paxton growled. "That is why you are here."

"I can't... I won't help you," Akbar shook his head.

Paxton held the gun in the air. "You will, and not only because I have this, but also because as a doctor, it's your oath to help those in need."

Akbar said, "I don't know what I can do. You need to be in surgery."

Paxton pointed to a store. "Park right there."

The Acura stopped in front of a pharmacy.

"You will get this bullet out of my leg and you will do it with whatever tools you can get your hands on."

"But..." Akbar started to protest.

"Listen, doc," Paxton leaned over. Akbar could almost smell his breath. "I'm in a lot of pain, so I'm not in the mood to argue with you. We are going to go inside and get the supplies you need to perform the procedure. If you make any problems, then I will have no choice but to kill you. And believe me, I won't hesitate in shooting *your* type, I've done it before."

Akbar saw nothing but anger and hatred in the man's eyes.

He slowly nodded.

70

The call for the flight from Franklin to Goa come over the speakers. It was now boarding.

Nolan parked the Charger in the no-parking zone and rushed out. He didn't care if he got a ticket or if the car was even towed. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

He heard the call again and was now running down the terminal.

He spotted someone from airport security and he quickly flashed him his badge.

"The Air India flight to Goa," Nolan said, nearly out of breath. "Where is it boarding?"

"Come, I'll take you," the officer said.

As they reached the security checkpoint, Nolan spotted Ashok Dutta looking at him quizzically. Dutta was on the departure side so he couldn't go any further, but Nolan could.

Nolan gave him a smile and with the help of the officer, he passed through security without any incident.

He ran down the terminal as hard and fast as his legs would allow him. He cursed himself for being out of shape. Plus, all the alcohol in his body wasn't helping either.

Up ahead, he saw a group of people lining up to board the plane.

As he reached them, he nearly keeled over from panting and coughing.

A crew member approached him, asking if he was okay.

"I'm... I'm looking for a passenger," Nolan put his hand on the crew member's shoulder to stop from falling over. "Her name is Reema Patel. She's travelling with her son."

Just then a woman wearing a sari left the line and came over. "I'm Reema." She looked concerned.

Her son, on the other hand, looked bemused at all the commotion around him.

"I'm Detective Tom Nolan," Nolan said. "I interviewed you at the consulate."

"I remember," she said.

"Can we talk in private?"

The crew member quickly said, "We are boarding now, sir."

Nolan pulled out his badge. "I just need five minutes, that's all."

The crew member knew he had no choice and so he nodded.

Nolan pointed to the seating area. "Can we talk there?" His legs were on fire. He so badly needed to sit down.

Reema took her son and sat down.

Nolan pulled out some coins and offered them to the boy. "Son, why don't you go and grab something from that vending machine over there."

Sachin looked at his mother, who smiled and nodded to him. The boy quickly took the money and ran to the machine.

Nolan was aware that time was not on his side, so he jumped in, "Mrs. Patel, were you aware that your husband was being watched at his work?"

She looked around as if someone might be listening in.

"You are safe," Nolan assured her. "Please, tell me."

She nodded. "Vikram told me he found a camera at his desk."

"Did he tell you why he was being watched?"

She sighed and said, "Vikram think... *thought* that they don't like his report."

"The one he was brought over to work on?"

"The first report he gave them, they do not like, so they made him write another report."

Nolan nodded as if everything was now making more sense.

In the distance, he saw the crew member pacing back and forth, and looking in their direction.

Nolan knew he didn't have the power to delay the flight and there was no way he could stop Reema from leaving. She had come all this way to take her husband's body back to India and if she was prevented from doing that, then Ashok Dutta and the Indian government, would start a diplomatic war.

Nolan had no desire to be the instigator of that. In fact, if Halton found out he was on the case he would suspend him indefinitely. Nolan wanted to avoid that too.

“Mrs. Patel, in one of the footage...”

“*Foo-tage?*” she looked confused.

Nolan understood that there were still some language barriers that needed to be overcome. “Video camera images.”

She nodded, comprehending.

“In the camera images, we saw your husband copying something onto his phone. I believe he then sent it to someone.” Nolan then asked her directly, “Did your husband send you anything on your phone?”

She hesitated and then looked away.

“Mrs. Patel, this is important,” he gently said. “I’m trying to find out who killed your husband and I need your help. During our interview at the consulate, I noticed how tightly you held your phone. My instincts are telling me, your husband sent you a file. Did he?” She finally broke down. She pulled out her cell phone and handed it to him.

“Is it locked?” Nolan asked.

She shook her head, wiping her eyes.

The crew member took this as his cue and rushed over. He not only tried to console her, but also escort her to the waiting plane.

“Thank you,” Nolan said.

“Find who kill Vikram and put them in jail,” she then said, defiantly.

“I will do everything in my power, I promise.”

He watched Reema walk away holding Sachin’s hand.

He had a strong feeling that they would never come back to America. This was, after all, the place where her husband and her son’s father had died.

71

Hyder returned home and found it empty.

With only his mom and brother living there with him, he had come home many times before to find no one to greet him.

Growing up, Hyder had been a latchkey kid. His mom was always at work by the time he returned from school, and his brother was busy with his own life.

The solitude was something he had become accustomed to. He remembered as a kid, entering an empty house, turning the television on first, and then checking the fridge to see what his mom had left him to eat. He would warm it up in the microwave and then spend the next couple of hours sitting in front of the television, watching his favorite sitcom shows. In some ways, the people on the shows became his family. Spending time with them was comforting. They were a constant in his life. They were there once every week or once every day. Rain or shine, good day or bad day, he could rely on them to be on at exactly the same time and to provide him with the company he so required.

By the time his mom returned, he would be in his room doing his homework. This way she wouldn't ask him how long he had been watching TV or if he had done his school work.

He once again turned the television on and then proceeded to see what was in the fridge. He made a face when he realized it was leftovers.

His mom always made sure to leave something for him. Maybe she forgot. No worries. He grabbed a small container of sweet yogurt and began diving into it.

He turned the volume up on the TV and settled down to watch another one of his favorite shows.

During a commercial break, he decided to run to the bathroom.

He was walking down the hall when he suddenly stopped. His mom's bedroom door was open slightly. He didn't know why, but he peeked in. Traditional Indian clothes, custom made jewelry, make-up kits, and several other cosmetic items were scattered on the bed. On the floor, he found boxes and wrapping paper littered everywhere.

Hyder's eyes widened and his mouth dropped.

He quickly pulled out his cell phone and checked. There were over half a dozen missed calls from his mom. Also, there were several messages from his bhabi.

Today was Akbar and Aisha's mehndi party!

With everything happening around him, Hyder had completely forgotten. On top of that, he had turned off his cell phone at Echo's house. He didn't want to be disturbed while he viewed the footage.

He quickly ran to the bathroom. He showered, shaved, and then rushed to his bedroom. He pulled on the traditional outfit that he had bought with his Aisha. The dark yellow *kurta* with the black colored *pajama* was stunning on him. He pulled the orange scarf around his neck and then checked himself one last time in the mirror.

He then hurried out of the house.

Thank goodness the traffic wasn't bad, he thought. Hyder was able to reach there in twenty minutes.

The parking lot of the banquet hall was already filled. Hyder cursed himself for being late. As the brother of the groom, he should have been there earlier, not only to greet the guests but also to help decorate the hall.

He ran inside and the first person he saw was his mom.

"Hyder," she quickly came over. "I've called you so many times, why are you not answering your phone?"

"Sorry, *Ammi*," he said. "I got stuck with work."

An older woman, dressed in a flashy sari and with lots of makeup on, came over. "Hyder, how are you?"

"I'm good, aunty," he said.

"I see you're a big star now," she said with a fake smile. Over the years, Hyder had met many older *Desi* (*people from the Indian sub-continent*) women who went out of their way to inflate their children's accomplishments, and this aunty was no different. From his mother, Hyder had heard this aunty proclaim how her son was on his way to becoming a doctor. But Hyder knew the truth. He had spoken to her son on several occasions, and he had told him that he had dropped out of

MED school because it wasn't for him. He was home now, unemployed, and looking for work.

Hyder never blamed him, he blamed his parents. Desi parents had high expectations for their children and some of those expectations were beyond reasonable. They all wanted their children to be doctors, accountants, engineers, pilots, even CEOs of multi-national corporations, but they never considered to ask their children what *they* actually wanted to do.

In this regard, his mom was the best. She never pressured him or his brother, even though Akbar did end up becoming a doctor, to be something they weren't. Also, his mom never boasted his or his brother's accomplishments to anyone. She felt it would cheapen what they achieved. She always said, "If you do something, don't go around telling everyone. If it is worthy of praise, others will do it for you."

Hyder smiled at the aunty. "I'm not a star. I'm just doing my job."

"I told Vicky about you," she said. "Maybe he should become a reporter too. He will be absolutely perfect in it."

This was another thing *Desi* parents always did. If someone's child achieved something, monetary or not, they pressured their children to do the same. They felt like their children could duplicate that success.

Hyder knew her son, Vicky, had no interest in journalism.

Hyder dreaded her next question. She, like many others, always asked if he could get their children, a job at the *Daily Times*.

He couldn't. In fact, at one point, he himself had been a temporary employee for the *Daily Times*. A lucky break had changed all that.

Fortunately, he spotted his *bhabi* coming his way.

"I have to go, aunty," he excused himself.

Aisha was dressed in a bright yellow *shalwar-kameez*. Her hair and makeup were done for the occasion, and her hands were decorated with henna.

She looked stunning and Hyder quickly complimented her. He then posed for her. She had, after all, helped pick out the *kurta*.

"I told you it would look great on you," she said, and smiled.

With her were other girls, who were also dressed up for the occasion. Hyder could feel them staring at him. After the TriGate Scandal, his reputation had somewhat soared, and not just in his professional circle, but also in the Pakistani community.

Someone had dubbed him the most eligible Desi bachelor in Franklin.

Hyder felt embarrassed when he had heard it and hated the attention it brought him.

Hyder noticed that Aisha looked distressed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She looked around and then pulled him to the side. "Akbar is not here," she said.

Hyder grinned. "Maybe he's out with his friends getting pumped up about today."

"They are all here," she replied. "I've tried calling him, but he hasn't answered any of my calls. I've sent text messages and still nothing. I even sent you messages to see if he was with you."

“Oh, right,” Hyder said, scratching his head. “I was running late, so...” he let his words trail when he got an idea. “Maybe he got held up at the hospital.”

“No, he didn’t,” she replied. “Right after his shift ended, he had sent me several text message to say he was going home to get dressed.”

Hyder made a face. “He wasn’t at home. I just came from there.”

“I’m worried, Hyder,” she said, concerned. “This is not like your brother.”

She was right. Akbar would have never been late for an event, punctuality was paramount to him, and this event was for *him*.

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” he assured her.

But deep down, Hyder had a bad feeling.

He excused himself and went to the other end of the hall, where it was a bit quieter.

He called Echo and told her his brother was missing. There was one thing he had learned from spending time with her: if there was a story somewhere, she would find a way to get it, legally or not.

He hoped that she could use her skills to track his brother.

72

With Reema Patel’s phone in his possession, Nolan headed straight for the *Centre for Inland Waters*.

He once again sat in the bland waiting area with the unique furniture, staring at the young secretary. Unlike the last time where she had on red lipstick, today it was in a pinkish color.

“Mr. Shaw will be with you shortly,” she said with a smile. Nolan was waiting for Innis Shaw, Director of the CIW. He had already been informed that Shaw had a busy schedule today, but Nolan wasn’t deterred. Come hell or high water, he would see Shaw and he wouldn’t leave the building until he had done so.

“Would you like some coffee or tea?” the secretary asked for the second time.

Nolan shook his head. He wasn’t in the mood to drink anything right now, not even alcohol. He found that whenever he became focused on a task his desire for the bottle disappeared. Maybe his ‘addiction’ was related to his mental health. Whatever it was, he was not going to let it cloud his judgement again.

Fortunately, Nolan didn’t have to wait long. The director’s door swung open and Shaw came out, followed by another man.

“I’ll get a draft to you first thing Monday morning,” the man said.

“I look forward to reading it,” Shaw said.

When the man had left, Shaw turned his attention to Nolan, “Detective, I’m hoping you are here to give me an update on Vikram Patel’s murder. We would like to see the person who did this held accountable.”

“I’m here for that very reason,” Nolan said.

His secretary chimed in. “Mr. Shaw, just a reminder, you have another meeting in fifteen minutes.”

Shaw smiled and then winked. “I’m sure we’ll be done in ten.”

Shaw then led Nolan into his office and closed the door behind him.

Over an hour later, Nolan emerged from the office. The secretary stood up, unsure why the meeting at gone longer than it should. She had other engagements lined up for the director.

Nolan went over to her and said, "Mr. Shaw is not feeling well right now. If I were you I would cancel all his appointments for the day."

Before she could reply, he left the *Centre for Inland Waters*.

His next stop was the FBI field office in Franklin. This time he was out in less than twenty minutes.

He then headed back to the division.

73

Hyder was now in full panic mode. Each minute that passed, he became more and more concerned. He tried not to let anyone know his true feelings—especially his mom—but deep down he knew something bad had happened.

The guests still didn't know that something was amiss, but soon they would when the groom failed to show up.

Hyder hoped it wouldn't come down to that. He hoped, he prayed, that Akbar would come through the front doors. He would make some lame excuse, whereby his mom would privately scold him for it, and then everything would move ahead as planned.

They would dance, they would sing, and they would enjoy the festive gathering.

But so far it wasn't looking like it would be that way.

Hyder paced the corner of the hall, thinking about what to do next. Maybe he should drive home and check? What if Akbar was there and was somehow running late? Or maybe he should go straight to the hospital. If he was, indeed still there, then he would drag him to the party—medical emergency or no medical emergency. Today was, after all, his big moment. Everyone had come to see the bride and groom share the stage for the first time together. There was no way Akbar should miss this.

Hyder began running his hand through his hair. He always did this when he was anxious and nervous. It was a childhood habit and one that had not gone away.

He caught his mom staring at him. He gave her a smile, but it looked weak.

She came over. "*Beta*, what's going on?" she said. "I can always tell when you are upset or worried. I'm your mother, you know."

Hyder knew lying to her would be an insult. Akbar was her son and she should know everything. "*Ammi*, we don't know where Akbar is," he slowly said. "I've called everyone I know, but no one has seen him."

She looked at him and it hurt Hyder to see the pain in her eyes, but she said, "I'm sure he is fine. Allah will protect him. Allah always protects his servant."

Hyder wished he could believe that, but the knot in his stomach only got tighter.

His cell phone rang and he quickly checked the number. It was Echo.

"Hello," he said, answering it.

“Hyder, I just heard over the police radio that someone called in seeing a South Asian man and a Caucasian man at a pharmacy. The person said the Caucasian man looked hurt. The person spotted them leave in a silver Acura.”

“That’s Akbar’s car!” Hyder nearly shouted. He quickly lowered his voice. “I mean, it’s my brother’s Acura.”

“Does he have GPS in his car?”

“Sure, it’s a new model.”

“Great,” Echo said. “Then we can track him.”

“How?”

“Leave that to me. I’ve got enough gadgets to fill a James Bond movie. Can you come by my house?”

“I’m on my way,” Hyder quickly hung up.

“What’s going on?” his mom asked, anxiously.

“I have to go,” Hyder said.

“Where?” she asked.

Hyder pulled off the orange scarf and placed it around her neck. “I’m going to bring Akbar back.” He kissed her on the cheek and rushed out of the banquet hall.

74

Paxton watched the doctor patch up the hole in his leg. Earlier, the doctor—Paxton couldn’t remember his name anymore, they all sounded the same to him—had removed the bullet, but not before Paxton endured the worst pain imaginable. His entire body shook when the doctor had reached inside him to remove the bullet. For a second, he thought he’d pass out, but the knife between his lips kept him focused and alert. He had expected the pain, as he had refused anesthetic. He didn’t trust the doctor to let him do whatever he wanted with his body while he was unconscious. He knew if he didn’t keep his eyes on him, he would run and call the police. Paxton wouldn’t let that happen.

To make sure the doctor didn’t get any funny ideas he kept the gun pointed in his direction.

The doctor finished off the procedure by placing a bandage on top of the wound.

“It’s done,” the doctor said.

“You sure it’s okay?”

“I did the best I could,” he said. “Considering the environment I had to work under.”

Paxton had brought him to an abandoned farmhouse several miles outside the city. On his way to the city, he had driven by it so many times that he realized that no one used it anymore.

When he needed a place for the procedure, the farmhouse instantly came to his mind.

He was glad it did. There was no way he could go to another motel, it would have raised red flags.

“Sit down in that chair,” Paxton ordered.

The doctor did as he was told.

Paxton grimaced as he got up from the long workbench that had been used as an operating table and began securing the doctor’s arms and legs. He tied them to the chair.

“What’re you going to do to me?” the doctor asked. “I did what you asked.”

“Yes, you did,” Paxton said, trying to clear his head.

“If you let me go, I won’t tell anyone what I did here.”

Paxton smirked. *They all lied when they were afraid.* “I’m sure you won’t,” he said, not believing him.

“Just leave me here and go,” the doctor said. “By the time they find me you will already have had a head start.”

Paxton felt a severe migraine coming on. He stood up and then aimed the gun at the doctor. “There is no way I can let you go,” he said. “You knew that the moment I got in your car.”

“Please,” the doctor pleaded. “I’m getting married soon. In fact, I’m supposed to be at a wedding party right now.”

Paxton was surprised to hear this. “Good for you, but frankly, I don’t give a damn.” He then grinned. “Look on the bright side, you won’t leave a widow behind if you aren’t married, right?”

He saw fear in the doctor’s eyes. It was then that the doctor fully realized the predicament he was in.

Paxton placed the gun at his temple. “Close your eyes. It’ll be very quick. You won’t feel a thing. I promise.”

“Please... don’t... do... this,” the doctor begged. Tears flowed down his cheeks.

“Pray to your Allah,” Paxton said. “Let’s see if he’s as great as you make him out to be.”

He pulled the trigger.

Instead of a loud bang there was a muted click.

Paxton pulled again.

Still nothing.

He checked and realized the gun was jammed.

He should have serviced it regularly like his military weapons, he thought.

He then started laughing. “Man, you are one lucky son of a bitch.”

The doctor let out a sigh of relief.

“I guess your Allah came through.” Paxton went back to the workbench. He placed the gun to the side and grabbed a bottle of painkillers. He downed a handful and then laid down on the bench. “I’m going to take a quick nap. In the meantime, if I were you I’d start praying again. Let’s see if you are lucky the second time.”

Nolan took the elevators up to the detective division. He headed straight for his desk. He saw a jacket on his chair and knew it belonged to Ivy. He smiled.

He looked around and caught her in the briefing room. She was talking to Pascale.

He sat down and began setting his desk. He was a slob, he knew. But at least he should be an organized slob.

He spotted Ivy and Pascale coming his way.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Ivy said, “We received a tip from someone at a pharmacy. They said they saw a South Asian man coming in with a Caucasian man who looked injured or hurt. We asked them to describe the Caucasian man and guess what? It’s a match with James Paxton.”

“It sounds like he’s got a hostage,” Nolan said.

“Or an accomplice,” Pascale interjected.

Ivy said, “We’re going down there to talk to the person at the pharmacy and also view the security footage. We know they left in a silver Acura. We’re hoping the cameras caught the license plate number.”

Pascale said, “We’ll have this case wrapped up before your next hangover.” He laughed.

Nolan ignored his remark and pulled out his cell phone. He turned to Ivy. “My phone battery is dead, do you mind if I used yours?”

“Sure,” she said, handing him her phone.

Nolan moved away from them and then made a call. He returned and handed the phone back to her.

“I’ve got a favor to ask you,” he said.

“Sure, what is it?” she said.

“Can you drop me off somewhere?”

She looked at him. “Where?”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” he said. “I’m meeting someone there.”

“Take your own car, Nolan,” Pascale looked agitated. “We’ve got a murderer to chase.”

“I’ve had a bit too much drink in my system,” Nolan made a motion of chugging down bottles. “So, I really shouldn’t be driving, you know.”

“It’s okay,” Ivy said. She turned to Pascale. “You go ahead and after I drop him off, I’ll meet you there.”

“Suit yourself,” Pascale said.

76

On the drive there, Hyder called Nolan but he got his voice mail. He left a message, telling him where they were going.

Akbar was with a man who not only killed two people, but also tortured one of them. Hyder knew it was better to get back-up in case he needed it.

Echo was in the passenger seat. She was staring at a portable device, the size of a small book. She had told him it was a satellite tracking device, and she was now using it to track Akbar’s car.

She had managed to hack into the Acura's GPS software and was able to reroute the data from the software provider to her device. It was far more efficient than waiting for a warrant to get access to the data.

For once, Hyder didn't complain about the moral or legal ramifications of her actions. He felt like a complete hypocrite for not protesting, but this was his brother, after all. He would do anything for him, even if it meant breaking the law. The only solace he had was that he was doing it to save a life, and not just for a story to print.

He was so glad Echo was with him. Without her help, he would have been waiting back at the banquet hall. At least now, he could do something and not sit around and feel helpless.

"There should be a turn coming up ahead," she said, looking up from the device.

They had been driving on a secluded road. Night had fallen and all he saw on either side of him was total darkness.

"Are you sure?" he squinted. "I don't see it."

"It should be there."

He slowed the car and then he saw it. Next to the road was a dirt path. Trees and bushes concealed it, but between them there was an opening.

He turned into it and found it was wide enough for one vehicle. He drove deeper into the forest. All he saw ahead was a dirt road with patches of shrubs and grass sprouting from it.

They had gone in maybe a quarter of a mile when Echo said, "Look over there."

Through the trees and bushes, they saw what looked like a cabin. The lights were on, which meant someone was inside.

Hyder parked the car by the side of the road. "Are you sure you want to go any further?" he asked her.

"Damn right, I want to go," she said.

"It could be dangerous, Echo," he said. "You've gone out of your way to help me and I want you to know that I really appreciate it."

She looked at him. "You're not going soft on me, are you? In fact, I liked you better when you thought I was a pariah to your profession."

"I never said that," he pointed out.

"But you thought it," she said. "Anyway, I'm not letting you go in by yourself. So there's no point in arguing with me."

He smiled and nodded.

They got out and went up a narrow path that led from the road to the cabin.

A silver Acura was parked to the side.

"It's my brother's car," Hyder whispered.

He slowly and carefully went up to the window and peeked in.

He spotted Akbar on a chair. His hands and feet were tied to it. Hyder could see that Akbar was trying desperately to loosen the restraints. Across him, he saw a man lying on a table with his eyes closed.

James Paxton!

Hyder turned to Echo. "What should we do?" he said.

"We go in and get your brother," she replied.

"I know that, but how?"

“The guy is sleeping. We sneak in, untie your brother, and run out before he wakes up.”

“What if he’s not sleeping?” Hyder asked. “Or what if he wakes up while we are freeing my brother, what then? He could have a gun, you know. I don’t think he’d think twice shooting intruders.”

She made a face. “Okay, I’ve got a plan. I’ll go around to the other side of the cabin and make a noise. He wakes up to check what it is, and you go in and get your brother. We meet back at your car. Sounds good?”

Hyder thought about it. It was simple and doable. “Okay, but be careful,” he said.

“You too,” she said and disappeared around the corner.

Hyder peeked back inside and he could once again see his brother and Paxton in the room.

Thirty seconds later, he heard noises that sounded like something was banging on the walls.

Paxton stirred and slowly opened his eyes.

Hyder smiled. *Wait to go, Echo!* He thought.

77

The old manufacturing plant was once a livelihood for thousands of workers. People from all over came to live and work near the harbor. Small businesses sprouted up in the area to meet the demand of the new population. Eventually, the harbor became the envy of other cities and neighborhoods. There were even talks to split the harbor from the city of Franklin and make it a new borough. But the recession of the nineties hit the plant hard. The losses started accumulating and soon demand for the products from the plant hit rock bottom. To make matters worse, the plant was also hit with several lawsuits. They included the pollution of the waters of the harbor. Almost overnight, the plant was shut down and the company that owned the plant filed for bankruptcy. The city eventually had to come in and rescue the employees. They ended up compensating most of their unpaid wages.

The plant and most of the surrounding neighborhood was now rundown and desolate.

“What are we doing here?” Ivy said, looking up at the approaching building. She was behind the wheel with Nolan sitting next to her.

“Like I said, I’m meeting someone,” he replied.

The plant was massive, almost half the size of a football field, but it was in a horrid state. Most of the doors were boarded up or bolted, and the windows were cracked or completely gone. There were graffiti and gang symbols sprayed throughout the outside walls.

“Drive around to the back,” Nolan said.

The car moved through the empty parking lot, straight along the side of the building, and all the way to the back of it.

They were now in the loading area and Nolan pointed to a ramp, "Please enter there."

She looked at him, still not sure why she was going into the building, but she did as instructed.

The car moved up the ramp and then through an unsecured loading dock.

They entered the massive interior of the plant and he told her to park by the walls.

Nolan said, looking at his watch. "The person should be here soon, do you mind sticking around for a bit?"

She was confused. "I don't know, I'm supposed to meet up with Pascale at the pharmacy."

"It'll only be a few minutes," Nolan said. "I'm sure Pascale is well on his way to solving this case before my next hangover." He gave her a smile.

She didn't smile back.

Nolan got out of the car. "Come, I'll show you something."

She reluctantly got out.

He walked further into the building, but stopped in front of a large metal column. It went from the floor and all the way to the ceiling.

"What's going on, Tom?" she said.

This was the first time she had called him by his first name. Normally, it was Detective Nolan or just plain Nolan.

He knew that she sensed that something was up.

It was time, he thought.

He waved his hands around the interior of the plant. "This is what it was all about in the end."

"What was?" she asked.

"The lies, the deception, the charade, everything."

She frowned. "I'm not sure what you're talking about," she said. "I'll tell you," he said. He pulled out a cell phone and held it in the air. "Do you know who this belongs to?"

She shook her head. "Should I?"

"I think so, because I took this from the motel room of Corporal James Paxton."

Her eyes narrowed. "You... had his phone... all along?"

"Yep, and guess whose telephone number I found on it?"

She didn't reply.

"*Yours*," he grinned, but then became serious. "When Paxton attacked me, during our scuffle, he dropped his phone under the bed. When I found it, it was ringing, and to my surprise, it was *your* number flashing on the screen. At first, I didn't know why you would be calling him, until I started putting the pieces together. I had to go backward in order to move forward. The reason, I realized later, that you were calling Paxton at that moment was to warn him that the motel card was missing. You see, the day you came to my house to console me when I had been kicked off the case, you had inadvertently dropped the card while answering a call. Naturally, when I found it, it started my path to enlightenment." Nolan paused as if he was savoring every moment of it, which he was. "Now, if I go further back to why I was kicked off the case in the first place, I realize it was *you* who had used my access card to steal Arnold Lam's hard drive and laptop

from the IT Investigation Unit. How you got hold of it, you ask? I'll tell you that too. You had used our rendezvous at my house to get me completely and utterly drunk. While I was wiped out, you used my access card to take the evidence from the IT unit. Then, the next day, when I met you at my desk, you gave me a hug and without me noticing, dropped the card in my pocket. So, when Captain Ross asked if I had it on me, I obviously did, because you had put it there. Now, if I go a step back from there, it was you who had told Paxton where to find Lam. The night we were at Lam's house, you had asked me to give you a ride back to the FBI field office because of an emergency. I'm sure there was no urgency for your visit to the field office. You only wanted me away from Lam's apartment so that Paxton could get to him before we did. If I remember correctly, you also offered Hyder a ride too, hoping he would leave as well. He didn't, but that's another story."

He paused once again. She was clearly nervous now. He was enjoying watching her squirm.

"Now, let's go *even* further back than that. It was you who had taken the security footage from the CIW. I was able to confirm this from Innis Shaw, Director of the CIW. When the security guard, Akume Ossai, had notified his superior of what had happened at the CIW. His superior had immediately called Shaw to find out how they should proceed. A murder had occurred on their premises and he wanted to know what the protocol was. Shaw told him he would take care of it. He only called it in *after* you had gone and taken the evidence from the crime scene, which was on the security footage."

Ivy's face was hard. "You... you don't know what you're talking about."

"I think I do," he replied, nodding quickly.

Just then a car entered the building.

78

Akbar heard the noise come from the other side of the farmhouse. At first, he didn't know what it was but then when he heard it for the second time he realized it was someone hitting the walls of the farmhouse.

He watched the man stir and then open his eyes. Startled, the man immediately looked around and when he saw Akbar restrained in the chair, he looked relieved. But it didn't last long, the noise startled him again.

He winced as he got up from the workbench. "You hear that too?" he said.

Akbar nodded. "I think it's coming from outside."

"I know that," the man said, rubbing the side of his head. "You stay right where you are. I'm going to go check it out."

He grabbed the knife and then hobbled to where the sound was coming from.

He opened the door slightly, enough to get a peek, and then held it ajar. A cold wind blew into the room, sending a shiver throughout Akbar's body.

The man grunted and then left the farmhouse.

This was his opportunity, Akbar thought. He had to loosen the restraints before the man came back.

He began twisting and turning his wrists. The rope cut into his skin, but he didn't care. The wounds would be superficial, nothing he couldn't deal with later. The only thing that mattered was for him to get out of here.

He kept working on the restraints when suddenly he felt a grip on his shoulder. He tried to scream, but a hand quickly cupped his mouth tightly, suffocating his cry.

He turned to find Hyder staring at him.

"What... what are you doing here?" Akbar said.

"I'm here to get you out," Hyder said.

"Hurry, he'll be back soon," Akbar said.

Hyder grabbed a piece of glass and quickly cut the restraints. He then spotted the gun by the side of the table.

"Leave it," Akbar said. "It's jammed."

Together they rushed out the back door of the farmhouse and ran down the narrow path.

They reached Hyder's car when Hyder abruptly stopped.

"What're you doing?" Akbar said. "Let's get in the car and leave."

"She's not here," Hyder's eyes were wide in shock.

"Who?" Akbar grabbed him by the shoulder. "Who's not here?"

"Echo Rose," Hyder said.

"Who?" Akbar was confused.

"She's the one who tracked your car here. And she's the one who was making the noise to distract the man," Hyder said. "I can't leave her behind. I have to go back."

Akbar said, "Then you are not going by yourself. I'm coming with you."

Hyder looked at him. His brother had been through so much, but like him, he too would put others before his own safety. Hyder nodded.

They went back up the narrow path. As they reached the farmhouse, Hyder's heart suddenly sank.

Standing before them was Paxton. In front of him was Echo.

When they were only a few feet away, Hyder realized Paxton was holding a knife to her throat.

79

The car stopped next to Ivy's and a man got out.

Governor Benny Carmino looked agitated and annoyed.

"Why am I here?" he said.

Nolan said nothing.

Carmino turned to Ivy. "Why did you call me?"

"I didn't," she said.

"I did," Nolan said as he raised his hand.

"Who the hell are you?" Carmino said.

"I'm Detective Tom Nolan. I'm sure you've seen my face on TV."

Carmino squinted and then a flicker of recognition flashed his face. “Oh, yeah, that TriGate nonsense...”

“Yep, that was me.” Nolan smiled. He then turned to Ivy. “Sorry I had to use your phone to make the call. If I called from mine, the good Governor would have never shown up.”

Carmino crossed his arms. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but I would tread very carefully, detective. Your career could be on the line.”

“If you knew me,” Nolan said. “You’d know I don’t tread carefully on anything. I pound my way through it.” He made a fist. “Anyway, the reason you are here, sir, is to further confirm what I already know. What I know is that you, sir, want so very badly to revive this manufacturing plant to its former glory. This would obviously be very good for the city and for you as well. Think of all those grateful votes come the next election, and the PR would be off the roof. But you had a problem, sir: no one would approve another facility, especially not run by STELCO Inc., who were known for their terrible environmental track record. Everyone, including the *Centre for Inland Waters*, would not give a pass to this project. So, you used leverage. You pressured Innis Shaw to bring someone from outside, someone who could easily be manipulated to give the project the go-ahead it needed. In return, you offered to reinstate the funding that the CIW so badly needed. They had been decimated by severe budget cuts—by your administration, I might add—so they agreed. But then there was a problem, and his name was Vikram Patel. He saw what the facility would do to the harbor and the surrounding environment, so he wrote a report, stating his scientific opinion against the new facility. But, this was not what you wanted to hear. You forced him to write a second report, the one you proudly presented to the media just a few days ago. In order to do that, though, you had to monitor him, which was why you had placed him under surveillance. But Vikram’s conscious got the better of him. He had not once but a couple of times threatened to expose the charade if he was not allowed to present his initial report. This was all relayed to you, sir, by Innis Shaw. This was when you decided that Vikram Patel had become a problem that had to be eliminated.”

Carmino’s face had turned beet red, but Nolan knew he was being careful as not to say anything that might incriminate him.

Nolan continued, “That is where Agent Driscoll came into the picture. After I realized that she was using me, I did some digging into her past, and guess what I found? Both of you knew each other. It was you, sir, who had paid for her trip to Afghanistan after her fiancé had been severely injured in an attack. You had apparently heard about her situation through the media and had gone out of your way to expedite her travel so that she could be with him. Unfortunately, she was too late. I will say, though, it was a noble effort on your part. After his body was flown back and he was given a full military funeral, you supported Agent Driscoll financially, until she could stand on her feet again.” Nolan paused to let it all sink in. “Naturally, she never forgot that, so when you told her of your predicament with Vikram Patel, she offered a solution. She knew a soldier who was in the same unit as her fiancé in Afghanistan. His name was James Paxton. It was supposed to be a simple mission: kill Vikram and take any evidence he had of the first report. But things went very bad when Paxton donned the ape mask and

used the nail gun as his weapon of choice. It not only brought the murder far more attention than you had wanted, he had failed to even get the evidence. It seemed Agent Driscoll wasn't aware that Paxton was suffering from PTSD, so the state of his mental health was unpredictable. After the crime had been committed, Agent Driscoll went in to clean up the mess. Along with the security footage, she also took Vikram's cell phone and laptop, hoping either would have the original files of the first report. They didn't, because he was already aware that he was being monitored and had sent the file, as a precaution, to his wife. He deleted all other copies from his laptop and phone." Nolan took a deep breath. "Man, all this is making me so thirsty. Anyway, to verify what I knew, I even visited the FBI's field office in Franklin. Apparently, an Agent Ivy Driscoll was on leave. This means that she was never *officially* assigned to Vikram's murder case. She placed herself on it, in order to keep an eye on the investigation. She even requested me on it as well, hoping that with my history of drunkenness and bad behavior, I would be easily manipulated. It was an excellent choice. I'm a drunk and I'm an asshole, but the biggest mistake you made is, you failed to realize that I do take my job very seriously. A murder is something I don't dick around with. Anyway, I'm sure I can go on and on, but there you have it. Everything I know about what has happened thus far." Nolan gave a slight bow, as if his performance and come to an end.

For a moment, no one said a word, until finally Carmino said, "Is that why you brought me here, so that you could tell us lies and fabrication?" He was now fuming. "All these allegations that you have placed on me are false and I will categorically deny them. Who would they believe? Me, the Governor of this state? Or you? A no good drunk?"

"I think they'll believe the evidence," Nolan said, calmly. He then pulled out his cell phone. "Prior to coming here I spoke with Innis Shaw and I must say, with some pressure, he snapped like a twig. He confessed to everything I've told you—well, only his part in the scheme. It's all recorded on my phone. But, once an investigation has begun, we'll go through your emails, telephone records, the footage from *both* cameras at the CIW, Vikram Patel's first report, Shaw's testimony, and much more. I'm sure we'll have a solid case against you. You can kiss the White House goodbye, Governor."

Carmino was seething, his eyes burned with hate, but then, suddenly, his shoulders sagged. His face took on its normal colors. He shook his head. "I can't do this anymore," he sighed. "I was way over my head. All I wanted was to give people of Franklin a better life and this facility was going to do that. It had so much potential."

"But you killed an innocent man to achieve that. He was a father and a husband. He didn't deserve this."

"You are right," Carmino replied. "I thought if I could sacrifice one life, I could save many more. But I was wrong. Do what you want with me, Detective." He put his hand out for Nolan to cuff him.

"I don't think so," Ivy said. She pulled out her gun and aimed it at Nolan.

Their hands were tied to their backs and they were made to sit on their knees. Hyder, Echo, and Akbar watched as Paxton paced back and forth in a rage.

"I'm sorry," Echo whispered to Hyder. "I don't know how he jumped me. It was too dark."

"It's okay, it's not your fault," he replied.

Paxton grunted and then shook his head. He was mumbling something to himself, but they couldn't tell what.

"Let us go," Hyder said. "You don't want to make this any worse than it already is."

"*Shut up!*" Paxton yelled. His voice reverberated around the walls. "I don't have to let anyone go... I especially don't have to let that bitch go." He pointed the knife at Echo. "She started all of this. She put my photo on the internet, the newspapers, the televisions, it was everywhere. I'm going to cut your throat first, then the doctor's, and finally, I'm going to enjoy making her squeal." There was nothing but venom in his eyes.

Echo's face had turned pale. Hyder noticed that she was shaking from fear.

Hyder then said, "Let them go and you can do whatever you want with me." Both Akbar and Echo looked at him as if to say, "What are you doing?" But Hyder ignored them. "I wrote the Monkey Murder stories. I brought more attention to you. If you have a gripe with anyone, it should be me."

Paxton stared at him. He looked like a deranged animal.

"I... don't... have to... listen to *you*," he spat. "You're the enemy and I'm going to hurt you *real* bad." He curled a smile and twisted the blade in the air.

A thought popped into Hyder's head. He then said, "I may be the enemy, but you are a coward."

Paxton blinked.

"You're not a soldier," Hyder said. "A soldier would never go after unarmed civilians. And they fight fair. We are bound and you have a knife, there is nothing fair about that."

Paxton's eyes narrowed and they bore into Hyder.

He then chuckled. "You want to fight fair, huh? Then let's fight fair." He came over and cut Hyder's restraints. "Stand up," he commanded.

Hyder stood up and rubbed his wrists.

"You said that I'm a soldier and you are only a civilian, yes?" Paxton said. "So, I'll make it even more *fair* for you." He dropped the knife at Hyder's feet. "Go ahead, take it."

Hyder looked over at Akbar and Echo. They, too, weren't sure what was going on, but they urged him to go for it.

Hyder quickly reached down and grabbed it.

Paxton cracked his knuckles and grinned. "Even with my leg I can still crush you."

They circled each other.

Hyder held the blade in front of him. He didn't know what else to do with it. He hoped he would be able to connect, even once. He had no desire to kill Paxton, only to hurt him enough to end the fight.

Hyder swung the blade, it missed Paxton by a wide margin.

Paxton grinned. "You have to do better than that."

Hyder jabbed but only hit air.

"Come on," Paxton taunted him. "Give me your best shot."

Hyder steadied himself and continued circling Paxton. With each circle he moved closer and closer to him. When he was within reach he leaped forward with the blade extended before him.

Paxton twisted and, with the back of his fist, knocked the knife out of Hyder's hand.

In a blink of a second, Paxton had his hands wrapped around Hyder's throat.

Hyder quickly realized he was never a match for Paxton.

Paxton tightened his grip. Hyder felt the blood rush to his head. He was losing air.

"Let him go!" Akbar yelled.

"Stop it!" Echo said.

But Paxton had no intention of doing either. He only applied more force.

Hyder's face was beet red. He was dizzy. He knew, soon, he would lose consciousness and die.

He feared his last image would be Paxton's eyes. There was nothing human left in them.

81

"What are you doing?" Carmino said to Ivy. "He's a cop."

Ivy kept the gun at Nolan. "He knows too much. I can't go to jail, I just can't."

"Don't be foolish," Carmino said. "You are only making it worse."

"This will be on you," she said to him. "You wanted this stupid facility for your career. I wish I had never agreed to help you."

Carmino went silent. He didn't know what to say.

Ivy's hand trembled. "I'm sorry, Tom, I'm sorry for everything."

"I'm sorry too," he slowly said.

She gripped the gun with both hands and aimed at his chest. She then pulled the trigger. Instead of a bullet ripping through Nolan, there was nothing.

She pressed again, still the weapon didn't discharge.

She looked at it confused.

Nolan said, "When you were in the briefing room with Pascale, you had made a mistake of leaving your jacket, along with your gun, on my chair. I took the liberty of emptying it."

She kept staring at it, realizing now why it had felt lighter all along.

Nolan pulled out his own gun. "Put your hands up. You're both under arrest," he ordered. "And believe me, mine's loaded."

82

The room around him was spinning. Hyder was certain his brain was begging for oxygen.

He heard voices.

He knew they belonged to Akbar and Echo.

But he couldn't tell what they were saying.

And then out of nowhere he heard a loud but distinct voice, "*Let him go!*"

Suddenly, Paxton released him. He fell to the floor, gasping for air.

He recognized the voice. It was Detective Lopez.

"Put your hands up and get down on your knees!" she demanded.

In a fit of rage, Paxton rushed at her. She didn't hesitate. She fired two bullets, in rapid successions, into his forehead.

Paxton dropped to the ground like a rag doll.

Lopez came over. "Are you alright?" she said.

Hyder nodded and swallowed cold air. "How... did you... find us?"

"Tom sent me. He got your message."

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Hyder, along with one of his uncles, stood at the entrance of the hall to greet the guests.

"*Mubarik ho! (Congratulations),*" the guests said, as they shook hands with Hyder and his uncle. They then proceeded into the shaadi (wedding) hall.

It was a festive mood in the hall. The interior had been adorned with flowers and other decorations.

It was Akbar and Aisha's *Walima* dinner. Family, friends, and acquaintances had been invited to celebrate the couple's nuptials.

Waiting for the arriving guests were appetizers, which consisted of vegetarian and non-vegetarian items, which would then be followed by a full buffet of Indian dishes.

The hall was already packed and soon the MC would start the program.

Hyder looked at his watch and made a face. Maybe they decided not to come, he thought.

It was then that he saw them. He smiled.

Nolan was wearing a three piece suit and next to him was Lopez, dressed in an elegant gown.

"Thanks for coming," Hyder said.

"Thank you for inviting us," Lopez replied.

"We wouldn't miss it for the world," Nolan said.

"How is your brother doing?" Lopez asked.

"See for yourself." They peeked into the hall and spotted Akbar on the stage. He was wearing a white *shirwani*, which was a fusion of *shalwar kameez* and a

British frock coat. Seated next to him was Aisha. She wore a heavily embroidered red *Lengha*, a dress most brides wore in an Indian wedding.

"She looks beautiful," Lopez exclaimed.

Just then Hyder's mom came out. She was beaming. "Oh, thank you for coming."

"Thank you for having us," Lopez said with a smile.

Mrs. Ali turned to Nolan. "We have fish pakoras in the appetizers. I know how much you love them."

"I do, indeed," Nolan licked his lips.

"You better hurry, though," Hyder said. "I see Lester is already on his seconds."

They all laughed.

They went inside. Hyder's phone buzzed. It was a message from Echo.

Hyder, congratulations on your brother's marriage. I'm sorry, I couldn't be there, but I have a gift for you. The MERCHANT OF TRUTH website will be shut down for good, so that the HYDER REPORTS can be the main source of news for the city of Franklin. Sincerely, Grace Kelly Sanderson.

Hyder smiled and then entered the joyous and jubilant hall.

