

# **The Russian Crisis**

**Crisis, #1**

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## Chapter 1

The long, sleek, sea kayak glided the last few yards to the dock of Shield Island, a dot of land in the clear waters of Georgian Bay. Jackson Phillips leaned forward to plant one end of his two-bladed paddle on the old wooden slats of the dock. He pulled himself out of the cramped cockpit and onto the planks of the dock. He rolled over, pushed himself to his knees and rose slowly until he was upright. He smiled. Not bad after three hours on the water paddling for five kilometres.

"I'll live," Jackson mumbled to himself as he grabbed the toggle at the nose of the kayak and pulled the boat onto a sand beach.

It was the end of July and the sand was blazing hot as it soaked up the bright sun that bathed the huge inland bay in early afternoon brightness. Jackson hurried across broiling sand and boulders. Climbing the wood steps to the porch of his cabin, he paused for a moment and took in the sight.

Jackson Phillips had bought the island ten years before to ease his way into retirement with the vision of the home he and his wife would build. Now, the vision was real; the words 'cabin' or even 'cottage' didn't begin to describe the place with its 4,000 square feet. It was larger than the cottages on nearby islands or the immediate mainland a couple of football fields away from his two-year-old home.

The cottage had five bedrooms but three were seldom used. Jackson didn't host many sleep-overs. He had two children who had one grandchild each but the 'kids' lived long ways off. He loved the kids and the kids of the kids but, after all, he was retired and had earned solitude when he wanted it. He had earned the cottage as well, with his twenty years as a military officer, twenty more in Canada's intelligence service and more than fifteen years as founder and CEO of Jackson Phillips Incorporated. He had grown the company to be the largest provider of specialized software to militaries through the world.

The cost of his career had been high. Jackson's wife Laurel had died of a heart attack at 58 when Jackson was away in the Middle East as a member of a joint Canadian, American, British team planning security against terrorist bombers threatening soldiers fighting and training fighters in Middle East conflict zones. The heart attack when Laurel was alone in their Toronto home was unexpected and shocking. Jackson could have sent another executive to the planning session abroad but went himself as both an ex-soldier and business leader. He had lived since with twinges of guilt and remorse.

The cabin had been built using plans roughly drawn by Laurel and Jackson just before Jackson had left for the Middle East assignment. It was a memorial of sorts, full of light just as she had been and to the exacting design she would have demanded.

As a soldier, Jackson had risen to the rank of Brigadier General in the Canadian Army but his true prowess came from his position as a senior officer in JTF2. The

name, Joint Task Force 2, may not be as catchy as 'Green Berets', 'Seals' or 'Delta Force' but Canada's special forces match or exceed every skill and talent of their counterparts in other nations. Within JTF2 ranks, Jackson Phillips was still a legend even if he was an ex-soldier these days.

Jackson's tour with CSIS involved highly secret and occasionally dangerous work. With his military training and his physical condition as an ardent runner and swimmer, Jackson had been a natural for undercover work at the highest levels.

As an undercover, Jackson had posed as everything from a buyer of bootleg arms to a drugs and people smuggler. He had also run agents into the hottest spots and turned spies into assets for Canadian, American, British, Aussie and even French intelligence services, since Jackson was fluently bilingual in English and French.

'Double pension dipping' and savings gave Phillips the money to create a company to develop and sell software for use in the world's riskiest military environments. Every ranking officer in any major military on earth would recognize the name Jackson Phillips Incorporated.

Corporate employees were on his mind as Jackson made his way into the luxurious cottage on his island—one among the so-called Thirty Thousand Islands of Georgian Bay in Canada's province of Ontario. He was wondering who in former executive ranks were still at JPI and who had followed him out of the company.

Jackson bypassed his office off the entrance hall and went into the living space, revelling in the view through the windows that made up most of the western wall of the open area. He could look out over a strip of sand and rock into the shimmering water beyond. Jackson's home was located at the extreme eastern end of Shield Island so water could be viewed from three sides with a small wood on the island at its south end.

Jackson wandered into the kitchen section. He still felt that he had let down his staff when he had sold his company for hundreds of millions. He had thought it was time to leave his company to younger and smarter leaders.

Jackson repeated his mantra, time and again, "I'm getting older and I can't do this forever. You will be in the best of hands—better than mine." And the men and women in JPI would smile and nod as they feared his retirement.

JPI had been sold to a private equity firm that specialized in the military sector. Cleanleaf Private Equity, a niche, rich firm, preferred JPI run its own affairs. JPI itself had a small board, composed mainly of women and men in the military provisioning sector, overseeing new executives along with those who chose to remain. All did stay, in the beginning.

The seven men and women in his core leadership team had each received millions in bonuses from the sale money. Still, that had left Jackson with plenty for himself and a host of charities. No one complained; he had hired each one himself and paid them well. They were his employees, his colleagues and his friends. He missed them.

As he opened the door of the refrigerator to see what he could make for supper some hours away, Jackson heard an irritating noise from outside. The noise made it through the thick windows of the cottage so it must be loud. He thought it might be a neighbor in an outboard running into the bay to fish for pike and pickerel or,

god forbid, a neighbor's kid on a new jet ski. He grabbed a beer by its skinny neck and headed out.

A boat was pulling into the beach next to the wooden dock. It was an open rowboat with a small motor on its stern. With the brilliant backlight it was hard to see the boaters. There was a big guy manning the motor and a smaller man in the bow. Both were dressed in suits and each wore a dark, plain tie. Jackson thought they looked like undertakers. 'How did they get this address,' he muttered as he walked to the small sand beach next to his dock.

"If you fellows are selling something you've got the wrong..." Jackson stopped at the waters' edge and peered at the men. "Is that you, Payne?"

The small man stood up but sat down quickly as the small boat rocked. "Come on Jackson, help us out," he shouted. The big man fumbled with the engine controls and the motor sputtered and died. The boat coasted into the dock, causing both men to lurch forward.

"Why can't you live in some place that's civilized," the man named Payne shouted. Jackson stepped into the water to catch the bow of the rowboat and pull it into the sand next to his kayak.

"Aw, Payne, you afraid of a little water? Come ashore."

The smaller man stood up, clutching both sides of the boat and made his way gingerly to the bow and over the side onto the sand. "Gees, this beach is hotter than hell. I can feel it through my shoes."

Jackson still stood in shallow water, soaking his flipflops and cooling his feet. "Who's your friend, Payne?"

The big man left the stern of the boat and stepped over the gunwales into a few inches of water. He walked to the shore. His shoes got wet as did the cuffs of his black suit pants.

"Brownley," the man said. "Bill," he held out a hand to Jackson. They shook and Jackson was impressed by Brownley's strength.

"What are you doing here," Jackson asked of the man who used to be his Chief Financial Officer and was still counted one of his best friends. "Not that I'm not thrilled to see you but..."

"Sure, you are," Payne replied ruefully eyeing the beer Jackson had set on the sand before pulling the boat ashore. "Interrupting your boozing? Sorry about that, Jackson, but the crap has hit the revolving thing."

"The sand is frying your brain; let's go to the cottage." Jackson turned on his heel and walked toward the structure.

"Cottage?" Brownley stood just inside the vast living area and looked around. "This place is a palace."

Payne had been to Jackson's home before but still marvelled at its size and views.

Phillips halted a few steps into the living area and turned toward the other men.

Payne looked more closely at his friend. Jackson was six feet tall without hint of the stoop of so many elderly men. Jackson wore a black Tee and jean shorts on a body that had aged well. But, as he scanned Jackson's face, Payne saw changes.

Jackson had gone several days without shaving and his light beard was white like the thinning hair on his head. His mouth had definite lines. There was a lack of his typical sparkle in the light blue eyes and Payne could count several furrows

across Jackson's brow where, before, his forehead had been smooth. His friend was still as handsome as ever with a sharp-featured look that blended power and compassion but some of his magnetism had diminished and that saddened Payne.

"You look like you bit on a lemon," Jackson said with some anxiety. He looked at Payne with an arched eyebrow. "Want a drink." He included Brownley with a nod of his head to the big man now standing behind Payne.

"Yeah," Brownley said in a rumbling voice. His fleshy face remained expressionless. "Thanks for asking, sir."

"So, you're at JPI?" Jackson turned his full attention to Brownley. His tone was flat. His hands were still against his sides.

"William Brownley. I'm head of internal security at Jack... your former company."

"Where is Starke?" asked Jackson.

"Retired," Brownley replied. "Months ago. I came in from Regal Security Partners." Jackson knew that firm; it was a good one.

Jackson turned toward the kitchen area. "Drinks."

A few minutes later, without further talk, the three men were seated in comfortable leather chairs in a conversation pit focused on the large windows of the rear of the living room. "Looks like a Group of Seven," commented Payne as he sipped from a glass of scotch, referring to Canada's famed artists who painted many works based on the waters and forests of Georgian Bay and Algonquin Park not far away.

After an uncomfortable pause, Jackson continued. "Okay, Ryan," untypically calling Payne by his first name. "What's the problem?"

## Chapter 2

Payne glanced at Brownley before answering. He took a breath. "It's a security thing." Jackson felt the hair at the back of his neck bristle and there was a cold feeling in his chest. He could feel his blood pressure drop and his skin pale.

"Go on." His voice was unemotional.

"We don't know who it is but someone on the inside has taken stuff..."

"What does that mean, Ryan," asked Jackson.

Payne waved a hand toward Brownley and said, "As Bill can attest, our systems are protected with all means available, encryption, fail-safe ..."

"Damn it," said Jackson with some anger, "You think I'm senile, Ryan. I'm not a programmer but I sure as hell know about JPI systems security."

Payne responded with more force than Jackson expected from the usually buttoned-down CFO. "Someone has stolen JPI source code. Don't ask me for more details because I'm not sure anyone except Barry and Jean understands it... They discovered it in the first place."

Payne named the two top developers at Jackson Phillips Inc. Barry Tenant and Jean Villeneuve were among the most knowledgeable, military-focused software developers in the world.

"Source code for what? Jackson asked with a slight break in his voice.

"Machine Learning Defence and Targeting. Pretty much everything."

Phillips had named the division as one of his last acts at the company. 'ML' was first assumed by others as referring to Military, the customer base of JPI. But Jackson meant it as Machine Learning, the process that describes Artificial Intelligence or AI.

For non-geeks, 'AI' refers to the many ways in which machines are thinking more and more like humans. Machines learn how to build cars, vacuum floors and turn on lights. Military software learns how to make war more efficiently. Machines learn like humans—for better or for worse.

"Oh crap," said Jackson and he put his hand to his forehead. "If our solutions are compromised, it could be a catastrophe for armed forces everywhere... Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali..." He mentioned places where JPI clients were actually fighting wars or training fighters.

"I have to remind you," Brownley interrupted, in his gruff voice, "this is no longer *our* when it comes to you, sir. You are no longer the head of Jackson Phillips Inc. even though it's your name on the door." He turned pointedly to Payne. "I'm against this meeting and I must warn you that some of what may be said here could be covered by the Official Secrets Act in Canada..."

Jackson looked at the big man in anger. "You come into my house and insult me? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Brownley recoiled slightly from the sudden tension in the room. Jackson was a soldier, a spy and a powerful CEO—yes, in the past—and his background showed clearly in his manner.

"I apologize," said Brownley grudgingly, "But it is my duty to inform you..."

"Enough," said Payne with a sudden cut of his hand through the highly charged air. "Jackson Phillips is not only a close friend and my former boss, he is as qualified as anyone in the world to hear what I have to say. He knows more about secrecy than you and I put together."

What Jackson knew was, in short, the MLD&T division had developed solutions to prevent terrorist-style bombings and other attacks against allied soldiers or civilians. The targeting part of the division's title referred to locating and removing the bombers themselves before or after they triggered their devices.

JPI solutions could be easily adapted to specific battle fields—Iraq, Syria, Mali—and even to civilian locations like a Middle-East marketplace, a dense urban area in Africa or a North American street where a truck driven by a terrorist could plow into pedestrians.

JPI did produce software that could help destroy enemy installations and kill enemy soldiers, sailors and airmen, but it led the world in software that could prevent death and destruction.

The software could detect bombs being worn by would-be terrorists before they got too close to troops or civilians for an effective blast radius. The software, placed in drones, could locate mines hidden in fields or beside roads long before traffic came near. JPI was a new Blackberry, the Canadian company that once stood for the best in smartphone security.

The targeting part of MLD&T referred to the ability of the digital defenders to identify and guide bullets or missiles to terrorists with their bombs and mines. If one were to wear an explosive vest or plant an IED within the range of software

controlled from a JPI platform, he or she would be guaranteed mission failure and sudden death.

Theft of the source code of any or all of MLD&T solutions would be a nightmare. Source code is the Holy Grail of corporate hackers. Companies guard proprietary source code like gold. And someone inside JPI likely had nefarious plans for that treasure.

Phillips could think of all the ramifications later; now, he had to get the basics and time to think.

"Okay," Jackson interrupted. "I do appreciate your caution, Bill, but not directed at me. Let's calm down and get to the point." He was calm himself again and more determined than belligerent. "Why are you here and not back in the office working your butts off to get this solved?"

"We tried, Jackson. But we couldn't get past our biggest obstacle. Maxim."

"Maxim Blax? That's hard to believe, Payne." Jackson switched to the use of the CFO's last name to let his friend know they were back on friendly ground; Payne hated his first name and Jackson rarely used it except to get his pal's full attention. In return, Payne never called Jackson 'Jack'. Nor did anyone else.

"Why would Maxim stand in the way of stopping a breach like this. He has everything to lose if you're right about this..." he hesitated, "...*crisis*."

"We don't know," Payne answered with confusion and dismay. "Barry and Jean came to us when they uncovered this mess. Jean wrote a note about what it would mean." Payne saw the alarm in Jackson's eyes. "It was on paper—one sheet—and I triple-shredded it as soon as we—me, Maxim and Fred—read it." Fred Nbodo was Director of Technology at JPI, one of few senior managers authorized at this level of confidentiality at the company.

"Blax told us to forget it." There was sudden outrage in Payne's voice. "Forget it! The biggest ... really the only major security breach we've ever had and that son of a bitch tells us to forget it? What the hell, Jackson?"

Brownley looked at the CFO and frowned.

Phillips was appalled. The ire Payne exhibited toward the CEO of JPI was stunning. "Payne, I thought you people were getting along. I wouldn't have sold out if I thought you and Maxim could ever be on the outs. What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to save JPI - all of us," Payne's voice was full of desperation. "This *crisis* can ruin us, Jackson. If it gets out that a major system of ours can't be counted on, we're dead. None of our clients will trust us. They'll rip out all their JPI installs. We're talking hundreds of millions of dollars in defense budgets, down the... bloody drain, not to mention the company."

"But Maxim is the ideal CEO. I picked him. He was approved by the board. All our clients vetted the guy. He has to be on this thing full bore."

"He isn't, Jackson. Believe me, he is not on this thing. 'Forget it' he told us. You heard him, Bill."

Brownley nodded glumly but added, "He may have his own agenda, Mr. Payne. You can't know what he's thinking."

"Bullshit." Payne looked at his chief of security with irritation. "If he has an agenda, it isn't one that is good for JPI or our clients. No one knows what the hell he's thinking, if, in fact, he's thinking anything except protecting his own ass."

Jackson leaned back into the soft leather of his chair. He considered his visitors for a moment before leaning forward again. "What went wrong," he asked quietly and calmly.

Payne collected his thoughts and took another sip of his drink. He leaned forward as well and looked directly into Jackson's eyes. "What went wrong is that the man we all thought would make a superb CEO has fooled us. Including you, Jackson. We thought he was brilliant and he may be. We thought he was a real leader. He has been, up to a point; lots of people at JPI think he walks on water. We thought he was a caring human being and that's where we went wrong. The man turns out to be one of the world's biggest narcissists.

"He is a misogynist, a racist and a xenophile. The only person I can think of who might be worse is Donald Trump but it would be a close contest. The thing about Maxim Blax is that he keeps all his flaws well-hidden and doesn't blast them to the world like Trump. And, the only way I can figure it, he's protecting his ass from a catastrophe that could show up his fallibility and his inflated ego." Payne sat back in his chair, exhausted by his soliloquy and his rancour for his boss.

Jackson considered for a moment before turning his gaze to Brownley. "Do you agree... about narcissism and racism and so on?"

Payne scowled.

Brownley was clearly reluctant but finally shook his head. "Yeah. I can see it but only if I look really hard."

"What's your background?"

Jackson's question startled Brownley and Payne who looked up with new interest.

"Twenty years in the military, like you," said Brownley slowly. "But not near your rank. I left as a Sergeant Major in the Van Doos."

Jackson smiled at the mention of the Royal 22nd Regiment, the vaunted *Van Doos*, the French-Canadian unit that was one of the most famous and storied of the units in the Canadian army. Brownley's military history spoke volumes besides revealing he would speak fluent and colourful French-Canadian.

"Sgt. Majors are often a hell of a lot higher and more useful than generals," said Jackson with a grin. "Go on."

Brownley filled in more of his background.

"I came to JPI just after you jumped ship." Jackson frowned at that depiction of his departure from his company. "Not that I blame you, Brownley hurried to add. "We all have to make sure we don't stay around too long..." Jackson returned a rueful grin.

"I'm in my 50s now so I've got a few years to go but I'll go myself when I feel I've done all I can."

"I appreciate that, I think," said Jackson with another smile. "You've put my mind to rest on a few things, Bill. But why are you against this meeting? I don't like to feel I'm unwanted... or unneeded."

"This is an in-house matter, sir." Brownley took another sip of his beer and met Jackson's eyes. "I just can't believe that an outsider..." Jackson looked offended. "I can't believe an outsider, even a retired company man, can be trusted to keep everything confidential. He could tell his wife or a buddy or whoever and not think about it the way a real company man or woman would."



"My wife is dead. Payne here is my only known friend; everyone else is an acquaintance, some of them fonder than others. I don't know any *whomevers* and wouldn't trust them if I did. And you did point to the Official Secrets Act hanging over my head if I were stupid enough or disloyal enough to talk."

Brownley shook his bald head. "I'm sorry. I didn't know about your wife, sir."

"You should have known. It would be in your research," Jackson castigated the security chief who looked shamed.

"Guilty, sir. Sorry. But it doesn't dismiss my worry."

"Okay. But it might relieve you to know I have a Non-Disclosure Agreement to match any I've ever seen or written myself. So, let's get on with what you want from me instead of worrying about when I'll spill my guts to the Russians, Chinese or Yanks, god bless 'em all."

Payne took the lead in telling the story and making the plea.

"We've gone through the information a great deal, Bill, Barry, Jean and I, and we concluded you may be the only person who can discover what is going on with Maxim and what the hell we can do about it. The equity fund that holds us, CPE, turned six shades of blue and ran for cover.

"You know Blax's job intimately. You read all the vetting of the man for your job so you're familiar with everything in his background. We hope you are one of the few people he respects and to whom he will listen. If not you, who can solve this disaster-in-the-making?"

"Here's all we have and it's not much." Payne reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and withdrew a slim business envelope. "But it's enough to keep us awake at nights. It shows someone has a lot they shouldn't have and we have to believe it's one of our own. No one else could get this close."

"Give me a day," Jackson asked without hesitation, taking the envelope and tucking it under a hip. "I have to think about this. It certainly isn't what I expected in my so-called retirement." Brownley and Payne looked up with consternation. "It isn't what I want to do either. I have to be honest with you." He paused.

Jackson Phillips grinned and made it obvious why everyone at JPI had once admired and often adored this man. His grin was full of good if ironic humour and his tone was gentle when he said, "So, it's back to your yacht, back to the salt mines and I'll call when I have made up my mind, such as it is."

Jackson rose quickly to his feet and waved a hand toward the front hallway. His visitors walked from the cottage, Brownley's soggy shoes making small squishing sounds, and clambered into their motorboat for the short trip to the mainland and their parked car. After seeing them off, Jackson let out a sigh, entered his office and softly shut the door.

## Chapter 3

Ryan Payne and Bill Brownley dropped the rented boat and picked up their car at a dirt-covered parking lot outside a marina on the mainland not long after leaving Phillip's cottage on Shield Island. They drove along a gravel road, slowly to keep the stones from marking Brownley's new Jeep Cherokee. It was a two-hour

trip from so-called "Cottage Country" back to Toronto. The gravel road led them to the wide Highway 400 running north to south, the road back to home office.

While Payne dozed, Brownley kept his eye on a black Ford Explorer that had turned onto the highway from the same sideroad only moments after Brownley's auto.

"Paranoid," Brownley told himself. "You'd think this was Kabul." Within a short time, the Explorer fell far enough behind to permit a line of traffic to separate it from the Jeep and Brownley relaxed.

"He's old," Brownley surprised himself by saying out loud what he had been thinking.

Payne opened his eyes and glanced over at the driver. "Yeah, it's been awhile since I've seen Jackson but he did look older. A lot older. Maybe it's just my memory that's getting rusty."

"No, he's an elderly guy. But he's sharp as a shiny nail. I wonder what he'll decide to do."

"I sure as hell hope he comes down to T O," said Payne using slang for the city. "We won't find anyone who knows the company as well, who knows Maxim and who has the security clearances that Jackson has."

"Is that it?" asked Brownley. "Because he has clearances. Is that why you're bringing him in to help us instead of getting a real pro investigator?"

"Hell no," said Payne, closing his eyes again. "We couldn't find anyone more pro than Jackson Phillips. If anyone can get us out of a real mess, it's him."

Brownley looked into the rear-view mirror. The Black Explorer was back. He spotted the SUV several cars back and was certain it was the one that had trailed them from the gravel road. It wouldn't be surprising since the highway was the only route south for most vehicles leaving Cottage Country. Still, Brownley, a vet of many tours in war zones, was the suspicious type.

He switched to the inside lane of the highway and slowed. The Explorer moved up until it was beside the Jeep. Brownley tried to get a good look at the driver and a passenger in the Explorer. The windows were heavily tinted and reflected the blue sky so that Brownley could see only shapes in the other automobile. He gave up and sped up. When he was ahead of the SUV, Brownley switched back to the middle lane with a car between the Jeep and the Explorer.

Brownley forgot about the black vehicle behind him for a few miles. He glanced, routinely, at his rear-view mirror. The black Ford filled the view from a few feet behind the Jeep.

"Shit. Hold on Mr. Payne." Before he could take any action, the two men felt a heavy blow on the rear of the Jeep. The SUV began to slide into the outside lane of the highway.

Brownley put his foot down hard on the accelerator and the Jeep picked up speed quickly. With a deft turn of the steering wheel, Brownley took the car fully into the outside lane. Two wheels ran into the verge but a light touch on the brakes and a slight turn of the steering wheel brought all four wheels back onto the pavement cancelling the slide.

Within six seconds, he had the speed up to 140 kilometres an hour and the Explorer had fallen out of view in the mirror.

“What’s going on,” asked Payne in a calm voice. Payne was the rare type who would raise his voice if asked to decide what to have for lunch but would remain calm during a hurricane.

“Not sure.” Brownley hesitated. “That was a pro move. We did that in our military training. Clip the bumper and send the other guy into a skid.”

“Road rage?”

“Nah,” Brownley answered Payne’s question. “That Ford has been on our tail since we turned onto the highway. I noticed them up the road. There was more to that than an angry driver.”

“Calling the police?”

Brownley ignored the query. “There’s an OnRoute mall ahead, we’ll grab a coffee. If they want to come after us there, I’ll be happy to make their acquaintance.” Payne had no doubt Brownley meant it.

“Not the time to have the police involved,” Payne said thoughtfully. Brownley glanced at him appreciatively.

The Jeep entered an off-ramp and headed for the gas station and restaurant complex. They walked to the rear of the car and found a dent in the bumper. “Damn,” said Brownley. “That’s two grand. Praise be to insurance.”

Two minutes later the two men ordered coffee from a Tim Horton’s kiosk and found a small booth well away from the other patrons.

“You think that had something to do with the... uh... problem at JPI?”

“Could be?” Brownley sipped his coffee and thought for a moment. “Why would some idiot follow us for close to a hundred kilometres and, then, try to put us in the ditch—or in front of a semi doing 110?”

Payne took out his cellphone and hit a number in its phone dial screen. “Jackson... there’s something we have to tell you.” Payne told Phillips about the collision and warned him to be cautious. Brownley heard his closing words, “Yes, I know your background... just be careful, Jackson. Sorry we might have brought this on you.”

Brownley stared for a moment at his CFO, then turned his face toward the big parking lot beyond the restaurant window.

## Chapter 4

Jackson Phillips spent his afternoon in his den (slash) office just inside the front door of his bayside cottage. Despite his occasional fits of anxiety, he wasn’t at all paranoid. His greatest enemy was himself, not legions of others looking for ways to do him in.

Phillips supposed he had made a slew of enemies during his time in the armed forces, the security service and, particularly as founder and head of a business providing digital materiel to military units and governments around the world. These foes didn’t bother him much since he had defeated or held at bay all of them in various ways while he was ‘active’ in the field. He couldn’t see much profit for any of them in attacking now in his retirement.

He wasn't a fool, however. Jackson's cottage home was as secure as he believed it should and could be because of its location. The water separating Shield Island from the mainland was less than half a kilometre wide. In the summer, it was warm enough for a swimmer in a wet suit and fins to make it across in a short time. A boat would cover the distance in minutes, even if it was rowed. But the water separation made it likely any intruder would be seen by several cameras mounted along the island shore to give Jackson a panorama of his island's coast.

His doors were steel-cored and alarmed as were all the windows. The glass was bullet-proof but mainly to withstand the heavy blasts of wind that sometimes drove in from the bay. It would be difficult for someone to break in even with a heavy sledge hammer. There were also a few other deterrents placed at strategic locations in and around the house, most powered by electricity produced by two powerful generators housed in safe-like enclosures outside of the cottage itself.

There was a boathouse a few metres from the cottage; it was an unobtrusive structure largely hidden by boulders. It had large garage-style doors that opened into a small cove. There were no markers leading to the cove and it was very hard to find for a boater who hadn't been to the island before. A set of carbon fibre rails led from the interior of the boathouse into the cove.

Jackson could launch his 24-foot SeaRay runabout into the cove using these rails and land the same way, hauling his boat into the structure with an electric winch and strong cable linked to a bow ring on the SeaRay. Like the cottage, the boathouse was protected by cameras at all four corners and above the door and by a few other deterrents installed by a military supplier with which Jackson had worked closely for years.

Jackson thought a great deal about the two men as he sat at his desk that afternoon. He had known Payne from the time when he was setting up JPI. Payne had worked for a venture capitalist who had invested in JPI. He had impressed Jackson so much, he hired him as soon as the incorporation papers had been signed. Payne had never let him down.

Brownley he did not know but he was impressed by the man's background. He was also impressed by what Payne told him about Brownley's reactions when the Jeep was rear-ended.

Anyone who could rise to be a sergeant major in the Van-Doos would be among the ranks of the best and brightest soldiers in the world. The man's size was daunting—about six feet, three inches tall and an estimated 225 pounds of what looked like pure muscle. He had a fleshy look to his face but the rest of him seemed solid and his moves were fluid and efficient when he wasn't trying to drive a motorboat. Jackson was used to judging people, physically and mentally, from his years as a successful intelligence agent and 'spy.' Doing so had kept him alive and relatively undamaged for decades.

Jackson wondered about Starke. Emile Starke had been head of security at JPI before retiring and making way for Brownley to succeed him. Emile, like Payne, had been with JPI since its inception. Jackson counted him a friend and felt a twinge of guilt because he hadn't talked with the man since moving to the island.

Jackson picked up his smartphone—an advanced model provided by Apple to a preferred customer needing ultimate security—and pressed Starke's number. After two rings, the phone went to voicemail. "Hi; this is Emile. If I know you, leave a

message with your number. If I don't know you, I don't want to, so hang up and don't call again." Jackson shrugged and left his first name and number. Hanging up, he laughed aloud at Starke's message. Then, he regretted not trying earlier to reach out to old friends.

By late afternoon, Jackson had refreshed his memory about all of the products of the Machine Learning and Targeting division of JPI—at least all the products developed or under development to the date of his retirement.

In particular, Jackson looked at files he kept on his computer on Maxim Blax, the current CEO of JPI. Blax had been born in the late 1970s. He was naturalized after emigrating from Germany with his parents in the 1980s. He had a master's degree in engineering from Queen's University and MBA from another of the best schools in Canada. His background included management stints at Blackberry, onetime leading maker of secure cellphones and now a large array of automobile software, and in executive positions at several other giant tech companies.

There was no neon sign indicating Maxim was a bully, narcissistic, xenophobic, misogynistic or flawed in any important way. There were no complaints against him or his work at other employers. He had been married and divorced twice but apparently it was all amicable. His double alimony payments were hefty but wouldn't put a strain on his substantial salary and bonuses. Maxim was as clean a candidate for CEO as any Jackson had ever encountered.

Jackson had interviewed Maxim for the position as CEO of JPI and had been a strong advocate for the man when the board met to discuss all ten candidates on the short list. His support had helped push Maxim into the post which was one of the most valued and desired in the Canadian technology scene. That had been only months ago and, now, according to Payne and the vacillating Brownley, Maxim was showing quite different colours.

Jackson had liked Maxim Blax and was amazed and distraught he might have been wrong about the man.

Phillips broke off his studying to make himself a simple supper. He chomped on an apple for dessert as he took a seat in one of the leather chairs where he had hosted his meeting earlier in the day. Looking out over the bay, through the rear windows of his cottage, Jackson witnessed a spectacular sunset but thought about the depressing decision he had to make.

## **Chapter 5**

"I told you not to take any action. I just wanted them followed, you moron."

The Ukrainian was raging. The downtown parking garage was deserted and its door were closed and locked for the night. There were no other witnesses to the confrontation except for two heavies and, of course, the target of his rage. The target was young, dark-complexioned, a smaller man than any of the other three but not a shrimp. At the moment, though, he seemed shrunken as he cowered against a cement pillar.

"But, they saw us. The driver looked right at us," the target whined. "You told us not to make them suspicious. I figured..."

"Now they'll keep an eye out, you stupid piece of crap. You tipped them off." Roman Petrenko, the Ukrainian, was marching back and forth in front of the pleading man and his two other crew members.

"So what?" The pleading man seemed confused as well as frightened. "They can't do nothing about it. It was just tailgating."

"Bullshit," yelled Petrenko. "You hit them. I didn't tell you to do that." He kicked out at the man who pulled away even more. "If they ever see you, they'll trace you to me; you don't know how good these people are." Petrenko turned and walked away from the cringing man.

"This is the last time for you." He turned to another man. "Take out the garbage," said the thin, pale-skinned chieftain, brushing a mote of dust from the shoulder of his black suit. He went toward the BMW coupe parked in the garage. The only other vehicle present was a dark blue Mercedes van a few metres from the remaining three men.

"No," the pleading man screamed. "Please. I'm just..." No one would ever know what the man wanted to say. The gun was silenced but the pop was still loud in the cavernous garage. The pleader's face expanded momentarily and then the back of his head exploded as the bullet blew his skull apart.

The gunman unscrewed the silencer and put the smoking gun into a shoulder holster under his brown leather bomber jacket. His cohort moved to a hose coiled at an edge of the garage. He pulled the nozzle of the hose across the concrete floor to the killing place. He dropped the nozzle and hose onto the floor and joined his partner in pulling the corpse onto a large piece of plastic the killer had taken from the van.

The men, one white, the other black, heard the clanking of a garage door opening, then closing as The Ukrainian drove the BMW away into the night.

Victor, the white-skinned killer turned to his black companion. "No loss, I was getting tired of that idiot and his screwups. What about Pavel?"

The black man grunted as he lifted one end of the plastic bearing the body. "He was the passenger? It wasn't his idea, mon; he just sat there. Then he ratted to Petrenko on this fella." He waved at the corpse. "Besides, he is a Russian fella, like you. Petrenko's not going to rough you two up now, is he?" Then, he added, "Grab an end, mon. And you do da hosing next time."

Half an hour later, the Mercedes van was driven out of the garage and the door was left closed but unlocked for the parking attendant when he arriving in the early morning. A large pool of water was drying on the cement and in a large drain.

## **Chapter 6**

Maxim Blax leaned back into the soft, blonde leather of the couch in his penthouse apartment in the new building in downtown Toronto. The tower was more than 70 storeys high and Blax's penthouse unit was the highest. He looked over the sprawling city, the fourth largest in North America, and yawned. He wouldn't go out this night. He had attended two conferences and three parties in

the past week and he was tired. He was also angry. Why was his staff trying to undermine him?

Blax slammed one hand down on the soft cushion of the couch. He leaned forward again and grabbed the heavy glass from the coffee table in front of him. He slugged back the whiskey and swore at the sky outside of his aerie, a sky in which the sun was rapidly sinking toward the horizon. Looking into the late sun gave him a headache so Blax turned away and stared into the amber liquid left in his glass.

His iPhone sounded a piano riff ring tone. He grunted, "Yeah."

"Sir." It was Brownley. Blax had called the man earlier in the day and had left a message to return the call. Now, Blax forgot what he had wanted.

"I'm very sorry to call you so late in the day but Mr. Payne had me drive him to Mr. Phillips' place up north. Boy, that's some place..."

"I don't care about that, Brownley. Why did Payne go there in the middle of the week?"

"Well, Mr. Blax," there was tired exasperation in Brownley's voice. "Mr. Payne thinks Phillips can help us. You know, with the source code problem."

"What! I told everyone to forget that. It couldn't happen. It's just a trick to make me look bad."

"Mr. Payne and the other execs are worried. That code was created under Mr. Phillips so he might have some ideas... I don't think they wanted to bother you further." Brownley took a mediator's role.

Blax was tired of the conversation. If Payne wanted to play games on this non-issue, let him. "I don't give a dog's fart about that bunch; so, what the hell is Phillips going to do? Is he going to come down here to make my life hell?"

Brownley hesitated before responding. "He didn't say whether he's coming. If he does come down, you can ask him yourself." He paused. "Listen, Mr. Blax, I have to be honest. This really makes me nervous. You on one side, Payne and the rest on the other. Me in the middle. Now, Mr. Phillips..."

"Did he look capable? You know, old..."

Brownley was thrown off by the strange question. "Uh, what's that... Yeah, he is older but he's in great shape as far as I could see. Again, I don't like talking about someone like that..."

"You like your job, Mr. Brownley?"

"I wouldn't threaten, Mr. Blax. I can find another good job tomorrow and I've got a contract. I've returned your call. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, yeah. Nothing, now. I have to think about this." Blax sounded distracted.

Blax took a breath. "Okay, I'm going to eat and get some rest. Okay?" His tone had grown cold and abrupt, on the edge of insulting.

Blax re-engaged. "Jesus. Take it easy Brownley. I'm worried, that's all. We've made changes at JPI and I don't need the former CEO looking for ways to take us backward. You gotta admit I've made a lot of steps forward and we'll all be better for it."

"I'm not arguing," said Brownley. "But you have to admit, we've got a big problem if our proprietary code..."

"Stop!" Blax shouted into his iPhone, holding the device away from his face. "Don't say another word! This is not a secure line. If we have a problem, it's people

being careless. We don't have a problem. You shouldn't be saying things like this. I won't be treated like this. This company is mine. Do you hear what I'm saying?" The man was ranting.

"As you say, Mr. Blax," the head of security cut in. "This is not a secure line. So, I'll say goodnight. Have a good one sir."

Blax continued his rant for a moment. He halted and listened to his phone. Finding it dead, he threw the device onto the couch and vented in a stream of foul words. It would be a long night alone in his penthouse.

## **Chapter 7**

Jackson Phillips rose early in the morning feeling much more alive than he had in months. He had been tired in the morning for days, dragging himself out of bed to take an early swim followed by a short turn around the bay in his kayak unless the waves were up. He had worked his way through breakfast like a task and had left dishes dirty on the counter for hours before putting them in the dishwasher.

Today, he dressed quickly in light, tan slacks and a long-sleeved dress shirt. He eschewed sandals for a pair of Cole Hahn deck shoes. He ate breakfast with gusto and moved nimbly to his SUV after setting alarms and locking the cottage. He called his live-out housekeeper and party cook, Graham Carde, and asked him to check the place daily. He called his part-time Toronto housekeeper and asked her to make ready his city condo. He had no idea how long he would be in one place or the other.

Late in the night before, Jackson had come to a decision. He would go to Toronto, where he still kept a condo in the downtown area. He would do all he could to resolve the pending crisis at JPI, the company he had founded and built. He would also find out what the hell was going on with Maxim Blax, the man he had helped handpick to take his place and to safeguard his former company.

Not bothering to pack, since he kept a complete wardrobe in Toronto, Phillips went to the boathouse and, taking care not to get grease on his dressier clothes, released the winch to slide his inboard SeaRay down the rails and into the cove. He unclipped the cable and climbed into the 24-footer from a cement dock. He backed the SeaRay into the bay, turned it with a flourish, and roared off toward the mainland with renewed excitement.

Minutes later, Jackson tied his craft to a dock at the mainland marina at which he kept a berth and made his way to the parking lot where he parked his Audi SUV. Shortly afterward, Jackson was heading south on Highway 400 toward Toronto. He headed toward a challenge that he wanted and needed.

His trip was close to three hours of typical stop and go. Jackson had taken the same military driving training that Brownley had and he managed the traffic and the clear stretches with equal aplomb.

Jackson pulled into the garage of his condo building near St. Clair Avenue and Yonge Street. He parked in his stall and took an elevator to his 1,500 square foot unit on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor.



Jackson found the refrigerator and kitchen cabinets newly stocked with food and the unit ready for a lengthy stay. He took out a container of crab salad and ate lunch at the island of the open kitchen.

Phillips was at the JPI offices on Queen's Quay in mid-afternoon. The offices were in a large, two-year-old office building on the harbour-side street at the southern edge of the central part of Toronto. The street is wide with sidewalks busy during the day with people on the way to and from work, heading for the tourist attractions on Toronto Harbour and going to or leaving their homes in area condos. Phillips felt at home as he entered the large, open and glistening lobby of the building.

JPI occupied a number of floors of the building. Here and in other quarters in the hinterlands JPI space housed its several thousand workers. JPI was still a medium player in the tech sphere but its output was unique, highly specialized and prized by its customers.

He stopped at a security desk in the lobby where alert staff checked his credentials. They issued him a visitor's pass that barred him entry to the company's design and programming workspaces. He arrived at the first executive floor where a pair of young, fit-looking women checked his credentials again, matching the photo ident with his clean-shaven face. Finally, he was taken by a male escort into the executive board room.

The escort pointed to a chair among the number drawn up to the long board table, said, "Sir", and left without another word. Jackson smiled patiently and took his seat at the table. He sat and waited.

It took at least five minutes but a group did come into the room. Jackson recognized Blax, his friend Payne, Brownley and Fred Nbedo, the technology chief. He didn't recognize COO Carmen Flores but she and other newbies had been described to him by Payne. Flores was a Blax hire, replacing the COO under Jackson who had taken her bonus money and moved to Costa Rica. Bringing up the rear was a young black woman with a wondrous head of curly black hair bouncing as she walked. Jackson watched the woman for a few seconds until, not wanting to ogle, he focused on Blax.

Jackson rose as the new CEO approached the end of the table. "Maxim, great to see you again."

Blax held out his hand but his face was expressionless. As his hand met Jackson's, Blax put as much pressure as he could into his grasp. Jackson was astonished to realize Blax was playing a schoolyard game of who could shake harder. He closed his own hand with strength built over years of paddling boats and lifting weights in his home gym. Blax gave up, pulling his hand back with difficulty.

Jackson felt shame at his own juvenile response but smiled even more broadly as Blax stepped back. "How do you like it?" he asked innocently.

Blax was confused.

"The job, Maxim. How are you liking the job? I still miss it. But I hear you're doing well."

Blax maneuvered around Jackson and took the chair at the head of the board table. Before sitting, he said, in a quiet, formal tone, "Yes, I am doing extremely

well. I thank you for giving me this post, Jackson, and hope you are doing well in your retirement.”

“Oh, I am, Maxim. Most of the time. You want to introduce me around?”

Blax didn’t respond.

“Never mind. I see a lot of familiar faces.” Going around the table Jackson shook hands with his old friends Brownley. “Payne, Bill, Fred...” As he greeted each, that person took a seat at the table beginning with Payne who settled next to Phillips’ chair. “Of course, I know who you are Carmen. Happy to meet you in person.” Flores smiled and shook Jackson’s hand before choosing a seat at the far edge of the group. “And this young woman...”

The attractive black woman with the curly hair held out her hand and Jackson took it for a moment. He smiled and realized, up close the woman was older than he had thought - maybe closing in on 30. Ah, to be 30 again, he mused. “And your name is...?”

“Mariah Belo,” the woman said in a low, throaty voice. “Mariah, like the wind.” She grinned impishly, daring Jackson to make the connection.

Jackson quickly took the challenge, “They Call the Wind Mariah, Lerner and Loewe, Paint Your Wagon.”

“Right, Mr. Phillips. Very good. My mom loved that musical even more than Porgy and Bess. A whole other era.”

“1951,” said Jackson, the year Paint Your Wagon debuted on Broadway. “Your mom isn’t that old even if I am.”

“Wow, you know your music. And you don’t look old to me.” Again, that smile. Jackson was charmed. Payne coughed softly.

“Yes, well, if you take your seat, Mariah, we’ll move right along.” Jackson said abruptly and took his own advice.

“I’m head of public affairs,” Mariah said as she claimed a seat on the other side of the table across from Jackson. As she glanced at the CEO at the head of the table, Mariah ditched the smile and took on a serious look. Jackson took note.

“All of you have the highest security clearances but I have to remind you,” said Payne, taking charge of the meeting, “that everything said here must be kept absolutely confidential. That includes from wives, husbands, boy and girl friends, and never to be mentioned around your kids because they will repeat it like little parrots.” The group chuckled in unison, except one.

Blax scowled and said, primly, “It’s not a laughing matter. Rumours like this can destroy the company.”

“It’s not a rumour, Maxim,” Payne said with ire.

“You’ll see,” retorted the CEO.

“Okay.” Payne took a deep breath. “To recap, someone in this company has taken - stolen - source code for our Defence and Targeting solutions.

“As you know these solutions detect and identify all characteristics of terrorist bombers as they approach at distance allied soldiers or even civilians. They allow soldiers to target and kill these terrorists well before they get near enough to detonate and destroy their targets.

“They include platforms and applications that will identify cars and trucks that are carrying explosives or enemy combatants by analyzing things like vehicle

weights, ways they are being driven and, using facial recognition, the people inside these autos.

"Solutions can be used with drones to locate areas where dirt or other materials have been used to cover IEDs and to take out IEDs and those who lay them, using lasers and other weapons.

"The software also can be used to detect any emissions from explosives like fumes or even smells that would test a dog's nose. It'll cut through any camouflage."

Payne was underlining the value of the code so no one could argue the theft was not the number one priority of the company. "This," he ended, "is a fabulous set of software, digital defences that have no equal."

"Enough of the promotion, Payne," Mariah said and Jackson respected the way the young woman interacted with a senior executive nearing twice her age. She smiled to soften her interjection. "We all know what JPI does. Can you get to the point?"

"Right. Thanks, Mariah." Payne took no visible offence. "There is no question the source code was downloaded - copied directly from a server on which it was archived. We have no idea of the how or who, yet."

Even though everyone in the room had been briefed there were gasps from several.

Payne gestured toward Brownley.

"We have another problem," Payne went on. Yesterday, Bill Brownley and I were driving down from Jackson's cottage when Bill's Jeep was almost run off the road. We think it was deliberate."

"Good god," said Fred Nbodo. "That's terrible. But..." he wrinkled his brow, "Are you saying there is a connection?"

"No idea," said Bill Brownley in a gruff voice. Eyes swivelled to the big man who had been sitting quietly at the table. "We think they tried to hurt us. Payne and me. But it could have been a simple case of road rage."

"That's awful," said Carmen Flores calmly. "But, unless we know the two things are connected, can we deal with the theft of the source code?"

Carmen was a woman in her mid-30s who looked 10 years younger. She held a PhD and a business degree from Columbia and was, according to what Payne told Jackson, a highly respected figure at JPI despite having held her job for less than a year. She had a grim look on her attractive face.

"If this theft ever gets out to the military community, we're dead," Carmen said in an appropriate voice of doom voice.

"And," chimed in Mariah Belo in her alto range, "if it gets out to the public, we're even dead."

"What does that mean?" Blax entered the discussion in an angry mood. "Why the hell would the public care about this? And who would tell them in the first place?"

"The news media. The bunch some people call the fake news media. They are still very much around and still very smart. And if they get hold of this, they'll make it public and the public will crucify the people who opened the door to terrorists or Russians or who knows who." Mariah wasn't the kind to back down to anyone. Jackson got her point faster than the rest.

“She has a point, Maxim,” said Jackson calmly but loudly, cutting through the buzz around the table. “Apart from losing most of our clients, this could be a perfect storm if the public finds out we have all this nifty software that could be used by cops and governments as well as the military and we let the bad guys get control of it. Some people would claim we’re cleverly in league with spies. Other people would say we’re careless idiots endangering everyone’s lives. Can’t win.”

“So where do we go with this?” Payne was doing his rationale, practical thing to bring the debate back to earth. “We’ll have the military bailing out of our products and the public and media waiting around the corner to ruin us.”

“It appears to me,” said Fred Nbodo, entering the fray for the first time, “...we should find out exactly who stole what.”

“Agreed,” said Jackson loudly.

Maxim Blax gave a perfunctory nod but he exuded stubbornness.

JPI, after all, was a corporation, so, Payne proposed a committee of himself, Brownley and Mariah, headed by Jackson as the *chair pro tem*. The committee would oversee the initial investigation. Everyone else agreed while Blax stared out the window.

## Chapter 8

After the meeting in the executive boardroom broke up, Brownley approached Jackson. “Want a tour?”

The reply was an eager one. “You bet. Many changes in a year?”

“You’ll see,” replied Brownley. Bill also handed Jackson a new pass that gave him full access to all but server rooms. No one but the CEO and pairs of technicians were supposed to have that level of security. JPI had several other locations in the suburbs, including several server rooms in buildings that were impregnable to all but nuclear attacks.

The tour began with the executive floors, moved to other floors where much of the design, data engineering, programming and other tasks were done. It ended in the cavernous lobby. Jackson hadn’t noticed that many changes throughout the tour and asked Brownley what had been added in the time Jackson had been away from JPI’s headquarters.

“I wanted to see if you noticed. The fact you didn’t is great.”

Jackson raised his eyebrows. “How come?”

“We have added a huge amount of security to this building. And we’ve copied a lot of it in the condo building where Blax lives. He didn’t think he needed it, but, still...” Brownley looked to one side. “Anyway, what you didn’t see are dozens of new and very small cameras. There are more than twenty in this lobby alone.”

Looking around, Jackson saw, perhaps, a dozen obvious CCTV cameras mounted well above them on the atrium ceiling four storeys above. Brownley followed Jackson’s look and chuckled. “They work but they’re mainly for show. The real cameras are all around us. There’s one,” he smiled pointing at the wall behind the large circular security desk.

Jackson saw nothing but a cream-coloured wall on which was mounted a JPI logo in brushed aluminum.

Brownley whispered. "It's in the dot of the I in JPI. One of seven cameras on that wall and I'll bet you can't find any of the others."

The tour wrapped up on the street outside of the Queen's Quay building. Brownley told Jackson the whole area a block in each direction was covered by the camera system. As well, there were sound receivers that would identify noises like gunshots or squealing tires and alert security staff day or night.

It also had 'shotgun mics', microphones that could be aimed, remotely, at sound sources up to one hundred metres away to pick up conversations or screams for help. The system could match faces and voices to separate data bases.

"We're intruding on privacy here, six ways to sundown," Brownley remarked, "but we treat H.Q. like a military installation. Every conversation and video image are scanned for security markers and immediately deleted if nothing suspicious is found. That takes a fraction of a second. And we have top secret status so..."

"So, no one knows in the first place." Jackson said with a quick scan of the area in a futile attempt to pick up any of the surveillance equipment.

"And we're not getting into the rest of the defensive stuff. Then, there's my 15 men and women on the security staff. I wouldn't recommend trying to attack any of our buildings unless you have a death wish."

"All JPI stuff." It wasn't a question.

"Oops..." Brownley looked chagrined. "Of course, you know everything already, Mr. Phillips. I'm sorry to bore you."

"Not at all, Bill," Jackson looked up at the JPI H.Q. rising above them. "I'm proud of the work, too. But all this begs the question. How did someone get to that code?"

Brownley felt foolish until he felt Jackson softly punch his arm encouragingly.

## **Chapter 9**

### ***The previous week***

Roman Petrenko, nicknamed The Ukrainian among his criminal cronies, was in his one-bedroom apartment in a rundown rental building near The Distillery, an east-end arts destination.

He had been born to a Ukrainian father and Russian mother in Kharkiv, a town in Ukraine near the Russian border. Apart from leading a small criminal gang, he was a GRU 'asset' given odd jobs by the foreign military intelligence agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. His major role as a low-level secret agent was to keep tabs on the large Ukrainian diaspora in Toronto and surrounding areas.

Petrenko found little traction among his fellow Ukrainians. Immigrants have been coming to Canada from Ukraine for more than 200 years and to Toronto in large numbers. They are a sizeable and important segment of Canadian and city culture with their churches, restaurants, shops, heritage institutions and events.

Ukrainian Canadians tend to be very proud of their heritage and of the independence of their homeland. Put briefly and bluntly, most are no friends of Russia, particularly after Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014.

Petrenko tried sporadically to recruit from the community but would be rebuffed, sometimes roughly. Most of the time, Petrenko acted like the thug he was and recruited hoodlums with no Ukrainian blood in them but a liking for money and the kind of cruelty Petrenko fostered.

Petrenko was dressed in a smart black suit but it was the one he wore almost every day with a cheap white shirt. He was paid a meagre salary by Russia as an asset of the GRU and made extra through the efforts of his bunch of toughs. The opportunity now presented to him was an unimaginable one. Not entirely stupid, Petrenko seized it like a dog with a steak.

After ten years of playing 'spy', this opportunity could make it all worthwhile. It came in a call to his cellphone, the one he listed on the business card he handed out freely to anyone he met in the Ukrainian community.

"Yeah."

The voice on the other end of the call had been disguised with an application readily available on the Internet. It obscured race and gender and made the caller a cartoon character. "I hear you have friends in the GRU."

Petrenko felt a chill and his stomach lurched. "I don't know this GRU."

"That's not what I hear. But if you want to play that game, you're going to be very sorry."

The Ukrainian juggled the choices. What the hell? Who knows? He had little to lose by listening. "Go ahead."

"I have something for you, Mr. Petrenko. Something important. Something expensive."

"Who is this?"

"Don't be stupid."

"What the hell do you want?"

"Here it is, Mr. Petrenko. Your employer might be very pissed off if you don't listen to me." There was a slight hesitation. Then the offer came.

"I am in possession of source code from Jackson Phillips Incorporated. You know the company, don't you?"

"I know. I am not an idiot."

"Good, you had me wondering, Mr. Petrenko. I will supply your employer with the code from the MLD&T division. Your GRU contact will certainly know what that is."

"I will ask. What do you want for this code?"

"It will cost. It will cost a lot. Do you want a piece of this, Mr. Petrenko?" Pause. "Or do I take this to someone else who will listen better? Maybe China..."

"No." Petrenko was sweating. "No, don't do that. I can... I will take your offer to the consulate. I will do this today. You don't have to worry." Petrenko lost any pretence of control. He was begging now.

"Okay. That's it for now. You can tell your friends that I want a great deal of money for this. And I want a whole new life, meaning they will get their documents people to work. I'll get back to you tomorrow. Do I have a go-between, or should I go talk some Mandarin."

"What is your telephone?" said Petrenko.

"Ha." There was no amusement in the voice. "I'll get back to you. I know your phone and I know you're not recording. Bye, Mr. Petrenko." There was dead silence on the phone. Finally, Petrenko pressed his red button to disconnect. He sat in his chair shivering while perspiration gleamed on his forehead.

"How could they know I am not recording?" Petrenko finally asked himself. He stared at his phone and wondered how secure the thing was. After all, he did work for Russia.

When he came to Canada years before, it was to get to the Golden West. But Canada's streets had not been paved with gold for Petrenko; in fact, many of them were potholed worse than in Kharkiv. Maybe he could finally grab the golden ring after all.

An hour after the mysterious call, Petrenko told his handler all he knew about the offer in a hurried visit to the Russian at the Consulate General's office on St. Clair Avenue in Toronto. Serge Sokolov had been his usual taciturn, almost bored self, but told The Ukrainian he would pass on the information. He gave permission for Petrenko to take further calls from the source.

The call came at the same time the next day. "Well, Mr. Petrenko, are we moving ahead?"

The voice was disguised again, as expected, but this time Petrenko was listening avidly to each word.

"Yes."

"Good. I have a sample for you. To let you know what your employer could get if you're smart. You can pick it up at exactly 8 p.m." The caller gave Petrenko the name and address of a bar on Queen Street not far from his apartment.

Petrenko felt the hairs on his neck rise. "God, they know where I live."

"Just ask the bartender for the *package for Petrenko*. Got it?"

"Yes, I have..." The call had ended.

Just before 8 p.m., Petrenko entered the bar. He flagged down the female bartender and asked for his package. With impatience on her face, the bartender went to the cash register, opened its drawer and pulled out a small envelope. She returned and handed it to Petrenko, holding onto one end. He fumbled in his pocket, withdrew a ten-dollar bill and thrust it at her with his free hand. She took the bill and let go of the envelope. As soon as she was gone, Petrenko unsealed the envelope to find a Secure Digital (SD) card inside. There was no message.

At home, Petrenko pushed the card into the slot in his MacBook Air. He knew enough about computing to know the card held code written in programming language but that was all he understood. He ejected the card and put it back into the original envelope. He sealed the envelope with transparent tape and put it into a drawer of his desk. He locked the drawer and leaned back.

If, reasoned Petrenko, the software was the real deal, and if it were worth it to dear old Mother Russia, Petrenko might also benefit in a big way if he had more understanding of what was in play. His handler wouldn't tell him, obviously, and once the SD card was out of his hands, he might never learn more.

## Chapter 10

One of Petrenko's small successes as a recruiter was a man named Frank. Frank Ostrenko was a Ukrainian-Canadian who lived in Long Branch, an area at the southwest edge of Toronto. Petrenko took out his Ford Explorer from a garage nearby where it was stored. He drove through heavy traffic along Lakeshore Boulevard to Frank's street.

Frank met him at the door of his little house. A lawn sign advertised his business—servicing computers—mostly for Ukrainian-Canadians who trusted him. Once inside, Petrenko handed over the card with a brief description and Frank disappeared into his den, leaving The Ukrainian drinking tea in the kitchen.

Frank told Petrenko after an hour of studying the contents of the card. "Just a bunch of screen shots."

"Huh?"

"You couldn't do anything with it. But it definitely is source code. There are programmer's notes here, too. Side comments that tell you more than the code itself..."

Petrenko cut off the explanation with a savage wave of his hand. "Enough," he shouted. "I don't need a goddamned lecture. And you have to forget all you saw."

Frank studied Petrenko for a minute, thinking about throwing The Ukrainian out of his house. He relented. "Calm down, Roman. I'm not sure what this stuff is meant to do except that it is advanced. I can tell you there's some AI content..."

"Aw, gees. What the hell, Frank?"

"Artificial Intelligence. The stuff can learn as it goes so it does whatever it does faster and better all the time. There were some notes about it. It loses me pretty fast. Frank handed Petrenko the SD card. "I got my own stuff, Roman. Can't fool around with this anymore."

Petrenko eyed Frank for a moment. "How about a hundred?" Frank grimaced but held out his hand as Petrenko carefully counted out five twenties. He trudged back to his little house planning to spend the hundred on beer and Blue Jays baseball.

Petrenko knew how to research. Once back in his apartment, he turned to the Internet and pulled down everything he could find on Jackson Phillips Inc., its software products and services and its personnel.

After thinking about the situation through the rest of the day, Petrenko decided to try his recruiting skills at JPI. There was always someone with a hand out. He knew a sales guy who made the rounds of technology companies peddling memory storage. For a few hundred, the salesman agreed to link Petrenko with a source in JPI.

Barbara Schumacher was a receptionist in the CEO's office suite at JPI. She was a single mom who would go to the cafeteria with the salesman on his visits. She was a good mother but she didn't make enough to live the life she wanted - one where she could hire babysitters while she partied and looked for a new husband. For a promise of a weekly stipend for a month or two, Barbara agreed to keep a close watch at JPI for anything that seemed 'to bother the executives.'



For once, one of Petrenko's recruiting hunts paid off quickly. After a few days, Barbara found a diamond among the dross. She told Roman that Ryan Payne, JPI's CFO, had a short conversation with Bill Brownley, head of JPI security, right in front of Barbara's reception desk in the entryway of the CEO's suite.

"Mr. Payne was going to see the CEO, Mr. Blax, when Mr. Brimley was leaving. Mr. Payne told Mr. Brownley that 'only Jackson' could figure out what to do. Mr. Brownley said that he couldn't talk to Jackson without telling Maxim," Barbara reported in a rush. She said the two men had hurried away in different directions after finding Barbara only feet away.

It took another minute on the Internet for Petrenko to determine that 'Jackson' was Jackson Phillips, the founder and namesake of the company, while Maxim Blax was current CEO. It was worth the effort, Petrenko figured, to find out what Payne and Brownley were discussing. He told his two most reliable hoods to trail Payne, the least likely of the two men to notice the surveillance. Petrenko even supplied his own Explorer for the task.

Petrenko's hoods followed orders. The men followed Payne for two mornings as the CFO drove from his home in Oakville to JPI H.Q. On the second day, Payne parked and went to the building's front door but met Brownley on the sidewalk outside. The two returned to the garage with one of Petrenko's men tailing them. The duo climbed into a car in a reserved section of the garage with Brownley at the wheel of a new Jeep that he drove out to the street. The watcher ran outside and was picked up by his cohort in the Ford Explorer. They followed Brownley's Jeep north for several hours. They lost Brownley and Payne when the men went out in a boat from a marina on Georgian Bay. The hoods waited until their quarry returned and followed Brownley's Jeep when it headed home.

### ***Current time***

Petrenko didn't reveal the stupidity of Petrenko's hoods in ramming the rear of Brownley's Jeep nor the fact Petrenko had taken his sweet time mulling over ways he could exploit the Voice's offer, while trying the patient of the mystery caller. Finally, Petrenko told Sokolov, his handler at the Russian Consulate, that he would receive a sample 'soon' so that the consulate could have its techies assess the value of the deal on offer. He said he could smell a large win on Russia's doorstep. The handler didn't seem impressed.

## **Chapter 11**

Roman Petrenko thought he would take the rest of the day off after ranting at his crew because extortion revenues were falling off. His dream of a day off from the office didn't work out. His cellphone vibrated in his pocket. He hauled it out and answered.

"Yeah."

"It's me again." There was no humour in the disguised voice.

“Yeah.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“What’re you talking about?” Petrenko took instant umbrage.

“You tried to hurt JPI executives. You’re an idiot.”

“That was a mistake. One of my guys went off the reservation. I took care of it.”

“Took care of it? You jeopardized this whole thing.”

“How?”

“JPI knew the code was taken. They didn’t know if more than one person was involved. It could have been a prank or something. Now they know it isn’t somebody’s idea of a joke.”

Petrenko felt fear. “What you mean? Do they know I’m involved?”

“No. Jesus. They don’t know you. But they know someone is willing to attack them for the code. How stupid are you?” The voice was incredulous.

“Okay. So, they know.” Petrenko fought to rationalize the situation. “They can’t do anything about it.” He paused to think. The voice was silent. “Can they?”

“No.” There was some hesitation. Petrenko noted it and felt emboldened. “No, there’s nothing they can do. They can’t just rip software out of client’s equipment. They can’t tell anyone or JPI will go down the drain. They’ll have to sit there while your friends work out ways around the JPI solutions.”

Clearly, Petrenko wasn’t the only one thinking out loud.

“So, we still in business?” Petrenko waited anxiously for the reply.

“Yes. But one more thing,” said the voice. “Jackson Phillips is a problem.”

Petrenko frowned. “He is retired. I saw he lives in a cottage up north. He is no trouble.”

“God...” The voice was exasperated. “He’s not at a bloody cottage. He’s at JPI now. And he’s the smartest guy in the building. He could be a big problem.”

“Okay. I take care of Mr. Jackson Phillips. No worry,” said Petrenko, battling to show calm control.

“Yeah, like you took care of Payne and Brownley. Do nothing yet, I’ll let you know what and when. What did your people say about the sample?”

Petrenko had not turned the sample over to his handler and didn’t plan to for several days as he worked out how he would maximize his profit. “They are studying it,” he said slowly. “They will let me know. Maybe next week.”

“I want an answer fast. Don’t forget there’s always China. Get me an answer.” The call was cut. Petrenko looked at his phone and, with a grimace, confirmed the disconnect. He stared at the phone for a minute. He called up Victor, his best thug.

“It’s me. Got a job for you. I want you to tail a guy.” He listened. “No, he’s an old fart. Take someone with you, if you’re scared. Watch your text.”

## Chapter 12

After his first meeting with JPI executives in the headquarters’ boardroom, Jackson Phillips tried to have a separate meeting with CEO Maxim Blax. When Jackson went to his office suite, a receptionist told him Blax wasn’t in and she

didn't know when he was expected. The CEO didn't answer his cellphone when Jackson placed a call.

Heading back to Blax's office for another try, Jackson met Mariah Bello in the hallway. "Want to help me find Max," he asked her.

The two wended their ways through the passages that led to the various offices and service rooms on the executive floor. Mariah led the way and paused, finally, at the door that once led into Jackson's office. He was about to open the door when a tall, matronly-looking woman hurried down the hall. She drew his attention with a command.

"Stop. Where do you think you're going?" The woman drew up within a yard of Jackson, shouldering her way around Mariah.

"Is Mr. Blax in there?" Jackson asked in a friendly tone.

"You can't go in there. Mr. Blax is not to be disturbed."

Mariah tied to intervene. "Mrs. Laybourne. This is Jackson Phillips... the founder..."

"I am not concerned with who he is. He cannot enter."

Jackson couldn't stop his abrupt laughter. "Okay, Mrs. Laybourne... take it easy," he said, quelling his outburst. Still grinning, he added, "We wouldn't dare intrude."

"If you would move away." She stood aside and glared at both of them.

"Let's go, Mariah," said Jackson, still chuckling. "I've got other things to do."

He passed the guardian, swiveled and said, with exaggerated courtesy, "When Mr. Blax can be disturbed, please let him know Jackson Phillips would like a word. Thank you, Mrs. Laybourne."

The matron continued to glare.

"Well, that was fun," Jackson said over his shoulder as he and Mariah reversed their march through the corporate hallways.

"Par for the course," Mariah returned, with a chuckle in her voice. "Say, have you got time for a coffee with me; there are things I need to know."

A few minutes later, the two were seated in Mariah's office, a room with a single window looking out over the city. "I can see the CN Tower," Mariah commented, pointing out her window. "That's all I need."

Jackson followed her finger and saw the tower rising far above neighbouring buildings at the south edge of the city a short distance from the shores of Lake Ontario. At the base of the tower, he could see the huge, white, retractable roof of the Rogers Centre, home to Blue Jays baseball and site of other major events. "Follow the Jays," he asked.

"When they're good," Mariah said. "I'm a lousy fan."

"Speaking of which. Is anyone a fan of what's going on at JPI?" Jackson was direct and his eyes were sharp as they took in the young, black woman with wondrous hair.

"Well," she responded slowly and carefully. "There are people here who love the place and applaud the changes. Like more choices in the cafeteria. We have a hockey team. Not now, of course, but, you know... in the winter." She was babbling nervously.

"Mariah." His tone was just as sharp as his look into her face. "You know what I mean."

She sat back and composed herself. She morphed into a PR professional.

"A lot of people don't spend time thinking about changes. They just put their heads down and do their work. But, most of the executives and key employees do realize what's happening and they don't like it. Not a bit. We still lead the market. But, many of us question whether we can keep it up."

"Many of us?" Jackson had picked up on her inclusion of herself among the speculators.

"Yep," she smiled ruefully. "I have only been here a few months but I'm a critic too. I know what was done before - when you were here - and I can see the difference even without working under you as the CEO."

Jackson flashed a grin in appreciation. "What do you think of Blax," he asked.

"Mr. Blax..." Mariah gazed at her hands that were fiddling with objects on the desk in front of her. She halted the fidgeting flashing annoyance with herself. "He could be good. Not great but good. He had charm and I've used him as a spokesperson. We get interview requests from military trade magazines and we did one with CBC TV." She broke off.

"You're using the past tense. Do you still use him?"

She thought for a moment. "No. I can't really trust him. He was getting more and more like a mini-Trump."

"How so," Jackson prompted with obvious curiosity.

"He started to praise himself and to ask for praise from the interviewer. He started that on the TV interview but caught himself. I'd say he is narcissistic and, slash, or, a megalomaniac. Or both," she reflected. "You may not notice at first but it comes out in a couple of minutes."

"Is this a universal opinion or just yours?" Jackson leaned forward from his visitor's chair.

Mariah looked sad and Jackson felt sympathy for her. "It's universal among those of us who notice and those of us who deal with Maxim. But that's not all that many. He's becoming... He's... Ah, face it. The guy is a reclusive, power-mad son of a bitch and getting worse all the time."

"Wow. That's blunt." Jackson fell back into his chair. "Let's have details."

The invitation opened the doors to a torrent of written and video information. Mariah went quickly through file drawers in the office, pulling out files, several SD cards and a handful of thumb drives. She would give Jackson a file to print as she inserted the next drive into her iMac.

She would turn the monitor screen to face Jackson as he viewed the next video. The videos were taken from the single Blax interview on CBC, several presentations the CEO had made at internal meetings and a number of conferences across the military tech community. Several were from YouTube but Mariah hurried to assure Jackson the YouTubes had not been distributed. All of these contained Blax's comments centred on himself and his actions.

Jackson fished a pair of glasses out of the pocket of his sports jacket and slipped them on with a sideways glance at Mariah. She didn't notice. Jackson hated the glasses and didn't use them often after his cataract surgery three years before. He had to make an exception for the fine print to come.

In some of the files, Jackson detected monumental lapses in security. There were emails that disclosed top secret details of JPI software. There were margin

notes, in Blax's handwriting, that upbraided designers and engineers in the foulest terms. Some of the notes called on employees to make specific changes in software. Jackson noted some included errors that would have been fatal if actually made.

"Were these taken seriously?" he asked with trepidation.

Mariah glanced at the sheaf of paper in Jackson's hands. "No, by these dates, we all knew to take the words from on-high with a large scoop of salt." There was no smile in her voice. "But we had to tell him the changes had been made or he would throw tantrums. He never checked the stuff afterward so he doesn't know..."

"Christ, Mariah. This can't go on. But, it's not why I'm here. I can't charge in and remove this guy. Even though I brought him in in the first place." Jackson was stricken. He felt sick to his stomach and a tremendous, black cloud of guilt swept over him.

"What I need from you," Mariah summoned her strength. "...is a lesson. I know a lot about JPI in general but I need to know a lot more about MLD&T if I'm to be of help now. And I have my own concerns." She took a breath. "As I said at the meeting, this theft of our software could have ramifications far beyond military."

The two spent the next hour working through the various components in the MLD&T production chain. Jackson put her through a test after his tutorial.

"The military goal for this application is to identify an opponent who is carrying a weapon or has an explosive device attached to his or her body." Mariah repeated what she had learned. "It does so by taking and analyzing video or pictures on a number of cameras. Characteristics like the way the enemy is walking, his hesitations if any, the expression on his face, facial recognition to see if he is a known terrorist..." Jackson nodded encouragingly.

"Also analyzed is the shape of the person's body; if, for instance, there is a square bulge under his jacket or his torso is too fat for his legs and waistline. All sorts of things. When the software adds up the characteristics and checks them against known signatures for a bomber, a determination is made. The person is allowed to go on his way or even to approach friendlies. If enough of the characteristics identify a bomber, to a 99.9 per cent certainty, the enemy is taken out. He's killed." Mariah took a breath.

"Very good." Jackson applauded softly. "Okay, now you know how this all works."

"I hope I remember all of this." Mariah took a sip of water from the plastic bottle on her desk. "What you might not know are the public relations problems inherent in this software," she told Jackson, reversing the learning experience.

"Explain."

"I would be delighted," she smiled with a grin and a tinge of pride. "This stuff—with all due respect to you—is not all that new. Civilian versions of this have been around for years. There is an application for schools. That software uses cameras installed around the campus of a school. There is no problem if kids are moving around during school hours. There's no problem either if a number of kids are seated in the cafeteria at noon having lunch." She took another sip of water.

"But, in the evening or at night, if someone is caught on camera on the lawn or in the hallway of a building or anywhere they shouldn't be at that hour, the cops

or security is called automatically. Alarms go off. And so on. If everyone in the cafeteria gets up at the same time and moves quickly, same thing... alarms, security, cops and the school is locked down because a shooter may be moving into that cafeteria causing the students to run away."

Jackson stared at her, impressed with her presentation and her fervour. "We considered civilian applications when we developed ours," he said. "Where we could, we used existing algorithms and code. And, yes, we're paying a fortune in royalties. And we actually linked our stuff to some civilian applications so they will do double duty. There's a lot of schools in the Middle East and Africa, too. But, so what. How does all this ring bells with a PR person?"

Mariah looked at Jackson with one of her pixie grins that intrigued Jackson so much. "Finally, something you don't know!" She giggled and Jackson was charmed.

Mariah became serious. The shift was immediate and intimidating. This lady is impressive, thought Jackson.

She took one more deep breath. "Okay. JPI software was stolen. God knows where it will end up but we have to figure it will be bad. If it's just a garden-variety thief, JPI will be told to pay a fortune in ransom. Personally, I think that's a non-starter. Someone could steal bank accounts or health records, something a lot easier to take and to hold for ransom than military software. Think of who is going to be after you if you're that thief."

"It could be," she continued, "a competitor. It could be a terror group. It could be another country—think China or, more likely, Russia or North Korea or Iran..." Mariah rose from her desk and stood looking out of her window, back to Jackson. She turned and her face was stern.

"If anyone like that has the software, they will use it themselves and, also, provide it to their military clients. North Korea to Iran; Russia to some African countries or the Syrian regime. Those clients will equip their own troops with it but also will turn it against us and our allies. They will know what we are looking for in a bomber and will change characteristics.

Once all this becomes known, media will kill us figuratively with stories about JPI software literally killing our brave soldiers." There was no hint of sick humour; Mariah was totally serious.

"But," she held up her hand as Jackson drew breath to break into her monologue. "But, it goes much farther. If this software is in enemy hands or if it can be countered by the bad people, it isn't much of a jump for the public to believe all of this type of software is full of holes and even dangerous to us. All machine learning security software will become suspect. CCTV cameras will be treated as spies linked to enemy software and devices. Can you imagine students protesting that AI spies on them everywhere and all the time? They do some of that now. This whole area will become scarier in the minds of most of the public."

Jackson was irritated. Mariah was attacking the basis of the company he founded. She was saying JPI and every other company in the field could be taken down by the carelessness of those within and their own products. She was saying Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning as technologies could become an anathema to the public instead of a protector of the good.

“You are way over the top,” he snapped. Mariah acted as though she had been slapped. Her eyes glistened. She sank into her chair exhausted.

Mariah recovered quickly. Before Jackson could rise and stalk out of the little office, her head came up; she swept at her eyes with the back of a hand. Her voice was steady and loud. “Not at all, Mr. Phillips. Look at Google, Amazon and the rest of the big companies that have been promoting AI. More and more people think they are as much of a threat as a benefit to the rest of us. People are demanding regulation to protect them from AI instead of vice versa. The companies that are struggling with this already are a lot bigger than JPI. Now, it could be our turn and I don’t think we can afford both a huge PR crisis and a security disaster.”

Jackson was astounded. He had learned of the software theft only a few days before. Granted he had no time to digest the situation and to assess the potential damage. But Mariah had presented consequences he never would have considered. She was right. This was a double nightmare about to happen.

“I’m sorry, Mariah. I admit I wasn’t taking you as seriously as I should. Any thought of what we should be doing?”

She smiled softly. “I’m sorry too. I was getting pretty emotional, wasn’t I?”

“Thank god, you were,” said Jackson. “You got through.”

“Doing? She asked rhetorically. “I think we should be finding the thief by looking at motivation. Follow the money or the national interest or whatever might be driving this thing. We also should be looking at all possible fallout and how we can counter it before the fact or make repairs after we get hit. We’ll need a crisis team and it has to get going right away. No more delay.”

“Who’s delaying?”

“Speaking frankly, Mr. Blax has been telling us not to do anything. He has to change his tune or move aside.”

“Kind of disloyal, aren’t you,” Jackson complained. He was a strong advocate of loyalty.

“Maybe Mr. Blax is the disloyal one. He treats the company like a shoeshine stand and most of us like we should be polishing his boots. He may be the CEO but fewer and fewer think of him as our leader. If that’s disloyalty, fire me, but don’t expect me to cover up for a petty dictator who thinks only of himself.”

“I get the point, Mariah.” Jackson stood and made it to the door. He turned. “Get some names together and we’ll get going on the team. I’ll call you later.” He opened the office door and strode into the hallway with renewed purpose. Mariah watched him go, wondering what this ‘later’ call would entail. She didn’t have to wait long.

## **Chapter 13**

Jackson had enough of JPI for the day. It was getting late in the afternoon and he had accomplished little at the office. He visited with Payne for a few minutes. Poking his head into Fred Nbedo’s office, he asked about Fred’s family and smiled at the answer. He waved at Carmen Flores as he passed by her office to find her

door open. She looked at him without a wave but with a crooked grin at the pile of work on her desk.

He made three telephone calls before leaving the building. Two hours later, Jackson Phillips pulled his Audi up to the gatehouse of a small gated community in King City, on the northern outskirts of the Greater Toronto Area or GTA. It was a region of ice cream shops, hobby farms and large rural lots with mansions. Homes in gated communities were in the five million range each and two of the houses in one community belonged to Barry Tenant and Jean Villeneuve.

Barry and Jean were JPI's lead security software developers. Each had several advanced degrees in computer engineering and design. Each was an expert programmer as well as developer of some of the world's most advanced software. Much of their work was in surveillance software. Their workplaces were deep in the offices and labs of the Machine Learning Defence & Targeting division of JPI. Jackson had asked each of them to go home long before their usual quitting times so he could meet them in private.

He parked his SUV in the driveway of Jean's substantial house. A few seconds later, Mariah drove up in her new Hyundai Kona, a small SUV. Jackson waited for the young PR woman to get out of her car, grab a backpack from the rear of the vehicle and join him on the doorstep. He pressed the buzzer. Three cameras focused on the front door area swivelled to capture three different views of Jean's visitors.

A voice emerged from a hidden speaker as Jackson heard thunks of individual locks being opened. "Push and enter." Jackson pushed and the door swung open.

Jean and Barry were already in the living room, a beautifully-decorated room that, like Jackson's cottage, ended in large windows, these overlooking a well-tended garden and lawn. Jackson knew the house and property were equipped with a battery of high-tech security systems.

Mariah was wowed by the home, so much larger and better furnished than her 1,000 square foot condo in the heart of Toronto. "This is outworldly," she enthused.

Jean and Barry rose from leather and chrome chairs and held out their hands to Jackson and Mariah. "Welcome, folks," said Jean with a broad smile. Her face was animated and each time Jackson saw the woman, he was struck by her visual energy and the sheer loveliness of her face. Jean was a technology genius pushing 50, single and childless. Jackson wondered, for the hundredth time, what this woman had given up for his company and her profession.

Barry, on the other hand, looked every minute of his 60 years and every bit a nerd. He peered out from behind rimless glasses and from under wisps of white hair on his head. He hadn't shaved in several days. He wore a blue, white and red plaid shirt and jean shorts and his bony legs ended in white sweat socks pushed into unlaced Nike running shoes. His handshake was weak and perfunctory. Jackson reflected that looks could indeed be deceiving. Barry was every bit as smart as Jean and that made him a hell of a lot sharper, technology-wise, than Jackson and the rest of his executive team put together.

The group organized themselves with Jean and Barry in their chairs and Jackson and Mariah side-by-side on a dark red sectional sofa, facing the software gurus.



"Hello, Mariah," Barry opened the conversation, with a questioning look at Mariah that was then refocused on Jackson.

"She's cleared six ways from Sunday," Jackson assured Barry. Jean nodded but Barry kept his skeptical look for a moment.

"Okay," he muttered slowly. He didn't mix much with the non-techies at JPI.

"How do you know everything has been comprised?" Jackson was all business.

Jean took over and spelled out their discovery. She explained that she and Barry had run a major 'risk assessment' within MLD&T, a thorough audit of the systems designed and programmed by the division. The assessment involved pressure testing that Jean termed "extreme" of every entry point to each of their marketed systems as well as JPI's own operating system. The assessment was meant to test and block every conceivable attack on any of the software.

"We use machine code, of course, but all that is based on the original source code." She was talking directly to Mariah. One thing we checked, however, was the security of our archives and, particularly, our proprietary source code.

Barry cut in. "It was a complex job in itself. The source code includes a pile of things. We have our Web User Interface. You know, the HTML, style sheets all that. There's Backend Code. Our Database with all the data. Even third-party libraries, for god's sake. So, our third parties would be compromised too." He paused for breath.

"Hold it," said Jean, making the 'Time Out' signal with her hands. "Too much detail. It would take days to explain it all. Jackson, you are familiar with the basics," she said with a grin that implied that even the former CEO couldn't 'get' the technologies Barry and she could discuss. "Sorry, Mariah, but you're a newcomer..." Mariah threw up her hands and made a funny face, accepting the critique in good spirits.

"So," Jean continued. "The assessment took weeks. I forget how many."

"Four weeks, three days and 5 hours, without the minutes," Barry interjected with an expressionless look on his grizzled face. Jean glanced at her work partner with a tolerant look.

She told Jackson and Mariah how the separate systems that made up the product of the division had fared in the assessment and talked a little of the steps they took to block attacks that were identified in the risk-finding process.

"There was a big one. Not in the marketable stuff but in our own system. I won't get into it except to say it involved something like a *vault*."

Mariah looked at Jean quizzically. "A vault? You mean like a password vault?" Mariah referred to an application that could be opened with a single master password. But the vault generated and stored distinct passwords for each site, application and system within it. The master password was so strong, it couldn't be discerned without a Kray computer working for a century to crack it, Jean boasted.

"Our vault was far ahead of anything you could buy on the market but the idea is the same."

"And..." Jackson prompted her. "What happened to your great and wonderful vault."

Barry scowled; his first change of expression since Jean began her soliloquy. "Let me, Jean," he held out a hand facing his colleague. "We're not talking

hacking,” he said defensively. “We had to give up the new master password we had created after the assessment.”

“What the hell?” Jackson turned on Barry. “What does that mean, Barry. You know the importance of...” Barry turned the hand toward Jackson and Phillips stopped dead.

“Of course, we know, Jackson. We had to give it up. We had no choice. He said he would fire us...” Barry shrugged. “We can get jobs in a minute anywhere we want,” he said quite factually. “But we have a lot invested in JPI.” He looked shocked for a moment. “Not money,” he hurried to correct himself. “The software. The stuff we built...”

Jackson smiled warmly and reached out to touch Barry’s bare knee. “I know what you mean, Barry. I felt the same way. Still do.”

“But you left and he arrived.”

“Who, Barry?” asked Mariah.

“You know who,” said Jean

“Max?”

“Yep, Double X,” Barry said in a resigned tone. He used the nickname for Maxim Blax that had become common among JPI employees. “We had to give him the master password. Took it out of the real safe—not the *Vault*—in the secure room we have at JPI.”

Jackson leaned forward. “How do you know our stuff was stolen?”

Jean resumed. “It wasn’t hard. “We found the master password had been used to get into the system. We don’t suspect Max used it but his carelessness may have let someone steal it. We think someone then entered our source code caches, possibly through a maintenance computer directly to servers. The thief copied all source code from one division. We can track these downloads from the servers.”

“Oh, god,” said Mariah breathlessly. “Our proprietary source code is one of our closest held secrets.

“Yes,” said Barry and Jean in unison. “And, said Jean, “because everything comes from the source, an enemy could redevelop all our solutions. It would just take time.”

“Or countermeasures to all our solutions,” Barry added. “Our defensive solutions become porous. Again, it just takes time. Maybe up to a year. But we planned to keep the current version of our software going well past that.”

Jackson felt a rush of sympathy for the tech geniuses. Then, he hardened. “Christ, Jean. You mean the password Blax took did this? That doesn’t make sense.”

“No, no,” Barry cut in. “We can’t say Blax used the password. There’s no proof.”

Jackson turned in shock to the man. “Blax took your password. Who else would have access?”

“That’s just it,” said Jean, tired but patient. “There is no proof Blax used the password at all. We have no idea who did. But whoever it was had to have used that password.”

Barry jumped in. “Again, it is extremely complicated and I won’t get into it. But, access to the servers is the only way we can figure it was done. And if we say it’s the only way, then it was the only way.”

“Couldn’t Blax have done that?” Mariah looked at Barry.

He countered with a strange look but finally answered. "Yes... and no." Mariah frowned. "Yes, he could have gotten into the area—he was one of very few, including us, who could get past security after six checks. No, there is no proof he did that either. It is all a total mystery."

"Who else could get in?" Mariah pushed.

Barry was annoyed but a nod from Jackson worked on him. "Jean and me. Of course, Blax, Brownley, Fred Nbodo and Carmen Flores. That's all the execs. Technicians get in, of course, but only in pairs and with a security person present all the time. Everyone keeps precise records and we can't see them doing this with it being an impossible conspiracy."

The conversation went on for half an hour but went in a circle. The bottom line was that someone used the master password in an unknown way to steal material from JPI. The theft was certain and the material stolen was known down to the last line of code. The thief remained a mystery as did any means of uncovering him, her or them.

The group broke up finally, in frustration, and Jackson and Mariah departed in their vehicles as Jean and Barry remained, with little hope, to go over the mess one more time.

## Chapter 14

Phillips had worked for decades for CSIS, the Canadian intelligence service, as well as in the military. He knew a tail when he saw one. He had picked it up when he drove out of the JPI garage earlier in the day. He saw it again, leaving the King City gated village. It was a black, old model Ford Mustang.

*Idiots*, said Jackson to himself. He wondered what kind of fools would drive such a conspicuous car on a surveillance job. He had already gone through the possible identities of his followers.

He dismissed Brownley; JPI's security man had struck him as a man of integrity devoted to the company. Besides there was nothing to be gained in Brownley keeping track of him. He had only to ask Jackson what he was doing and where he was going. Hell, Brownley could have driven along with Jackson.

The tail could only be the software thief or, more likely, someone working for the thief. Or, as a third thought, the tail could be someone working for the buyer of the purloined code.

Who would have the wherewithal to pay for that software haul? And who would be able to use it? Jackson went through the possible buyers. The lists boiled down to competitors or to a military of a foreign country. The latter made more sense. A foreign state would be quite happy with the ability to copy or defeat the software of JPI clients.

Jackson reasoned that even if JPI reported the theft to its clients, the software was being used in a number of forms by many armed forces. They wouldn't be able to use the software once alerted that control could be wrested from them on the battlefields around the world. The military units wouldn't be able to hold

maneuvers or drills employing the software from JPI. The company would be ruined, not just the division but the whole enterprise.

But, if JPI didn't confirm and report the software theft, it would be doing a huge disservice to its clients and the fallout would be the same or worse when clients were matched exactly in their digital defensive and offensive security abilities. What if all defenses were countered? Jackson could envision scores of deaths of troops and destruction of military equipment and even bases if JPI products were compromised.

The only chance JPI had of fixing this mess was to find the stolen software before it could be used by enemies. It was a very small chance but it was all Phillips and his new team could hope for.

Jackson checked the Mustang again. It was several cars behind in the heavy traffic on Airport Road, his route back to the city. Jackson spotted the coffee shop on the opposite side of the road, across from the massive property of the Lester B. Pearson International Airport. He came to a traffic light and made the U turn taking him to the eatery. He parked in the small lot.

There was a string of people on a small berm at the edge of the lot and lining the roadway. The people were plane-spotters, armed with cameras and binoculars. They would watch and record the landings of plane after plane which flew over the shop and lot as they headed for Pearson's runways a few hundred yards away.

Phillips went to the rear of his SUV and opened the rear cargo compartment door with a wave of his foot under the bumper. He reached into a plastic box of tools he kept in the storage area. After a bit of rummaging, he came up with a two-inch wide, iron prybar about the length of his forearm. He also took out a can of wheel cleaning foam.

He tucked the can into the pocket of his jacket. He shoved the prybar into the sleeve of his shirt under his jacket. He took hold of the curved end of the bar. It fitted well into his hand which kept the bar in place along the bottom of his arm. While he was retrieving the things, the black Mustang had driven into the lot and parked as far away from his Audi as possible.

Jackson closed his car's rear door with a button at its bottom rim and walked purposefully toward the Mustang. There were two men in the front seats of the Mustang and no one in the rear seats.

Jackson used his left hand to tap on the driver's window. The driver, a swarthy man with a two-day beard, looked surprised as he saw Jackson standing outside. Jackson tapped again and the window slid down.

"Yeah. Whaddya want," the driver asked in a guttural voice.

"Having fun following me, pal?"

The man in the passenger seat leaned toward Jackson, across the driver's right shoulder. "We're not following you, pal." He emphasized the last word. "Just grabbing a coffee..."

"Screw you," the driver muttered and started to roll up the window. Jackson grabbed the top of the window as it rose and pulled it outward with his hand. The window broke with a loud cracking noise.

"Goddamned you," the driver yelled and opened the door of the car. Jackson stayed put and the driver began pushing against the door to move Jackson back. Jackson took two steps back and the driver catapulted onto the surface of the lot

as the door opened full width. The man ended up on hands and knees on the paved surface.

The passenger, meanwhile, opened his door and stepped from the Mustang. He moved to the front of the car. "Okay, old man. You asked for it."

Jackson pulled the can of spray out of his pocket, hand on the trigger. He pressed and a stream of thick foam hit the driver's face.

"Acid," Jackson barked. The man began pawing at the foam and screamed "Get it off."

Jackson kicked out with one foot and caught the driver, as he was rising, with a shoe to his left temple. The man collapsed, his nose crunching into the ground.

The passenger was a taller man than the driver. He had white skin the colour of a fish belly and had a shaved bald head. He wore a work shirt and jeans. Jackson looked him over but didn't see a weapon. He waited, standing over the driver with a nonchalant stance.

The passenger suddenly rushed toward Jackson. "I'll bust you open, Phillips," the attacker yelled.

Jackson waited until the passenger was a yard away. As the man swung his clenched fist, Jackson raised his right arm and the fist connected with it.

"Ahhhh." Jackson's assailant screamed in pain as his fist slammed into the iron bar hidden in Jackson's shirt sleeve.

Jackson dropped his arm, allowing the bar to slide down his arm until the bottom end landed in his hand. He took a firm hold of the bar and swung it into the elbow of the attacker. The man had been holding one hand with the other and gasping in pain. Now he used his injured hand to try to grasp his elbow. He screamed again.

Jackson swung his arm again, this time toward the ground. The solid bar hit the side of the driver's knee as the man tried again to rise from the pavement. The driver collapsed again and lay prone on the filthy surface of the lot, his face still covered in grey foam.

Jackson addressed the passenger who was now leaning against the side of the Mustang groaning in agony. "Who are you working for?"

The man grunted unintelligibly. "What was that?" Jackson's voice was calm and almost friendly.

"...yourself," Jackson heard the man say.

"Same to you, pal. Tell your boss that if he gets you to try this again, I won't be so charitable." Jackson shoved the prybar into his sleeve again to hide it from passers-by. He looked at the passenger in scorn. "Amateur."

With a glance at each man, Jackson took a few steps backward before turning and walking to his vehicle. Not a single plane-watcher had turned to watch the brief encounter between the three men.

In a few seconds, Jackson was on his way again. No one followed his Audi as it fought its way through the dense traffic into the city.

## **Chapter 15**

When he was in his early 70s, Jackson was measured at six feet, one inch tall during his annual checkups. The last few times, the nurse measured his height as six feet even. He argued each time to no avail.

The former CEO of JPI laughed at his own childishness as he opened the door of Blax's office the day after the parking lot affray. The current CEO was sitting in the high-backed swivel chair behind his glass and steel desk in the large office. He looked up at Jackson with a look of surprise on his handsome face.

Jackson was struck by Blax. The man had dark brown hair, neatly trimmed. His face reminded Jackson of Antonio Banderas without the pony tail. When Jackson had interviewed the man for the CEO's position more than a year ago, Blax had been slim. As Jackson could see through the glass of the desk, Blax was still slim and, of course, he was only in his 40s so he was still six feet, two inches tall.

"Jackson..." Blax stammered. "Welcome." The tone of his voice belied the greeting. Blax rose from his chair and moved around his desk. He crossed the office, stepping on the pricy area rug covering much of the wood flooring. He held out his hand.

"I was not to be disturbed," said Blax even as he gripped Jackson's hand in his.

Jackson had managed this audience simply by speeding past Mrs. Laybourne's desk and opening Blax's door without knocking. People were caught napping by a white-haired, older guy moving like a 30-year-old.

"Yes, well, don't blame her," Jackson responded referring to Blax's matronly gatekeeper. "I just walked in. We have to talk." He moved away from Blax toward a conversation area furnished with a long couch and two fabric-covered chairs. Without an invitation, Jackson dropped into one of the gray-fabric chairs and waited for Blax to catch up.

Reluctantly, Blax followed Jackson and hovered over the older man. "I don't have time, Jackson. Perhaps, if you came back..."

"Sit, Maxim. We have a lot to talk about."

"Jackson. This is my office. You can't just dance in and..."

"Waltz, Maxim. It's *waltz in*." Jackson smiled up at the CEO.

Blax finally sat on the couch but remained perched on the edge of a red cushion. "I don't have the time," he murmured.

Jackson dropped his smile. His mouth tightened. His eyes bored into Maxim's. "What's going on Maxim?"

The meeting rapidly became a confrontation. Jackson led Blax through recent history and how he had re-entered the picture from his cottage country retirement. Blax questioned Jackson constantly. Why had Phillips come back? What was Phillips planning to do? Jackson shrugged off Blax's questions as he pressed Blax on his recent actions and future intentions.

Blax's face had become darker and darker. When Jackson brought up the fact Blax had demanded the master password to company archives, he broke.

"That is outrageous," he shouted. "What are you saying? Are you saying I compromised security...? I will not stand for this." The man's face was twisted and his eyes had opened wide. Blax's face turned ugly. Jackson wondered what he had seen in this man when he recommended his hiring months ago.

Blax abruptly rose from the couch and Jackson prepared himself for a physical attack.

Instead, Blax began striding across the room. He reached his desk but turned and walked back. Before reaching Jackson's chair, the man turned again and went to the door of the office. He opened it and yelled, "Mrs. Laybourne. Come."

A moment later, the matron filled the doorway. Blax moved aside and she entered. Blax held out an arm and pointed a finger at Jackson.

"Mr. Phillips. You must leave," the woman told Phillips in a trembling voice.

"No," said Phillips. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Call Mr. Brownley," Blax told the woman.

"I'm right here." The three looked back to the doorway to find Brownley, the security chief, standing in it. He moved into the office, shoving between Blax and Mrs. Laybourne. He moved toward Jackson but stopped and addressed everyone. "Mr. Phillips stays, Mr. Blax." Brownley spoke in a firm, even voice. "He has things to ask you and I suggest you answer."

Brownley turned to his personal secretary with a look of distaste. "Get out of here."

"But... but..." she began.

"Out." Brownley pointed at the doorway and the large woman slunk out of the room.

"Gentlemen. I'll leave you to work on things." Brownley strode quickly through the doorway, shutting the door behind him.

Blax and Jackson stared at each other. Jackson waved at the couch Blax had vacated and Blax returned. He was calm again but Jackson studied the CEO carefully. The calm seemed somehow surreal.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Maxim. Not at this stage. But I want to know why you wanted the master password. What could you do with it?"

"It is mine," Maxim retorted. He sounded perfectly reasonable. "Everything..." he swept his hand through the air, "everything is mine. You gave it to me."

Jackson was appalled. "You sound like King Maxim. What's going on?"

Maxim Blax was the one studying Jackson now as though he was studying a bug on a slide on a microscope. He chortled. "That's good, Jackson. King Maxim. I like it."

Max suddenly adopted a reasonable tone. He sat in a chair facing Jackson. "Look," he told Jackson, leaning toward the older man. "I wanted to show everyone I was dedicated to security. I thought I could demonstrate that by taking possession of the password. It seemed a natural act for the CEO to take."

Jackson was surprised and somewhat confused. The CEO had switched from an imperious, outlandish stance to making some sense, however debatable. "I don't agree that you should have taken the password but I guess I can see your thinking," he mused as he contemplated this sudden change of demeanour.

"Explain, if you will Max, how you think the master password got into someone else's hands."

"It didn't," Maxim answered.

"That's not what Jean and Barry have found, Max," Jackson said as he looked into Max's dark blue eyes.

"They are wrong. It did not happen." Blax was adamant.

“Regardless,” Jackson relented. “Someone has stolen our code. Someone can develop or defeat our systems. It’s a huge security problem, Max.”

“I don’t believe that, Jackson.” There was a strident edge creeping back into Blax’s tone.

“The evidence is there. Payne and Brownley were nearly run off the highway...”

“There is no evidence of that,” Blax shot back. “They were tailgated. That’s all.”

“I was followed...” Jackson described his run-in with the two men in the Mustang.

“Perhaps you have a strong imagination, Jackson. Perhaps, you had road rage and attacked two innocent men.”

Jackson reared back in his chair. He was angry now. “Innocent men who knew my name. Where are you getting this, Max? Somebody is doing a lot of spinning.”

“Are you saying I’m wrong.” The loud voice was back. Blax again rose from his chair. “I am never wrong, Mr. Phillips. You don’t seem to understand. You are not the CEO here. I am. Maxim Blax. I am CEO of JPI. You are retired. An old man...”

Jackson stood. He moved in front of Blax, forcing the CEO to stop his pacing across the office.

“I think you need help, Max.” His voice was loud but controlled. “Maybe you should take a rest. Some time off.”

Blax’s eyes seemed to have lost focus. They moved rapidly from side to side. Jackson became alarmed. “Are you okay?”

Blax turned quickly and literally ran a few steps toward his desk. “Of course, I am. I am fine. I am always fine. You had better leave now. I’ll call Mr. Brownley. He will take you out.” Blax moved behind his desk and slammed his body into his large swivel chair. He gripped its arms with both hands and glared out into the room.

Jackson watched the CEO for a few seconds before leaving the office. A feeling of sadness filled him as he left and walked through the hallways to the elevator bank. What had he done to his company and its thousands of employees and clients by putting this maniac in charge? Why didn’t he see all this insane rage and narcissism in the first place?

## Chapter 16

After leaving Blax, Jackson took the elevator to another floor and made his way to the Public Affairs offices. He passed the receptionist with a friendly wave, recognizing him from his time as CEO. The young man waved back and smiled broadly. Passing several small offices with open doors, Jackson stopped at a closed door with a nameplate reading Mariah Belo, Vice President, Public Affairs. He knocked and opened the door after hearing Mariah call out.

Mariah had been writing on a white board behind her desk and glanced behind her. “Oh.” She turned and looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Jackson. I didn’t expect you...”

He laughed and held out his hands, palms toward the young woman. “Don’t worry. I’m just a trespasser.”



She placed a marker on her desk. "Let's go to the boardroom and get coffee. I'm getting claustrophobic in here." Mariah swept up a pile of file folders from her desk.

She stepped past Phillips and the two headed away from the office to the section's boardroom. Within minutes, they were seated at a long table, paper cups of coffee in front of each. A woman came in with a tray of muffins and bagels and left them on a sideboard. Mariah waved at the pastries but neither moved to the tray.

Mariah had piled the file folders on the table. She put her hand on top of them. "This is your fault." She frowned, mischievously. Seeing Jackson's confusion, she said, "Remember the report you wrote before you officially retired from this hellhole."

Jackson grinned. "Took me a month. It was everything I could imagine that might be helpful to the new people. To Blax." He said the name with distaste.

Patting the pile, Mariah smiled. "There was a lot about crisis communications. I read the whole damned thing, Jackson."

Over the next hour, Mariah took Jackson through his report, line by line, pointing to where she had followed his advice. She had conducted a crisis audit, looking for every possible calamity that JPI might experience. This audit covered everything from a fire or explosion in head office to embezzlement of company funds by an employee. It also included the theft of company software through methods like cyberattacks through the Internet and by employees.

For each potential crisis, Mariah's crisis team had noted 'who' might cause the crisis; 'who' would be affected by it; 'What' the crisis would entail and the rest of the 5Ws.

Jackson was impressed by the imagination and thought that had gone into the prep work by Mariah and her team.

Other parts of the report had been followed just as proficiently. Mariah had identified spokespersons for each potential crisis. She had mapped out the processes to be followed in a disaster.

"This is quite the work, Mariah." She had been watching him with a concerned look on her face. Now, she was beaming.

"Thank you, kind sir," she bubbled. "We keep updating it."

"One catch," Jackson said.

Mariah wrinkled her brow.

"You have Maxim down as your main spokesperson. You may want to rethink that one."

Mariah was crestfallen. "Oh, migod, Is that still there?" she mumbled.

Jackson chuckled. "Don't look so sad. I've just confirmed the guy may not be the best one to put out there defending JPI. He doesn't react well to stress."

The two put the files back into a pile on the table as they discussed Maxim and the next steps they would take. They put together a short list of people who had to be kept in the loop. They guessed at how long they might have before the crisis became known by employees in general, suppliers, clients and, ultimately, by the general public. 'Not that long' was their best guess, unless they could resolve problems quickly.

## Chapter 17

Jackson's next stop was the office of Carmen Flores, the Chief Operating Officer of JPI. It was his first one-on-one meeting with the woman who had been hired by Blax. Her personnel record showed she was 36 years old but it was a toned mid-30s.

He tapped on her door and waited. She opened the door and immediately broke into a wide smile. Her olive complexion seemed to glow and her light brown eyes sparkled. "Jackson, how are you?"

She moved aside to let him enter. He found himself in a large space that seemed more a living room than an office. There was a desk but it was small, made of exotic wood of some kind and tucked into a corner of the room. There were several chairs and a dark red sofa with light coloured cushions placed on it. The room had a quaint feel to it. It wasn't what Jackson expected, to say the least.

The woman herself didn't fit her surroundings. Jackson had been impressed by the Carmen he had first met at the boardroom meeting as a modern, highly intelligent, independent, lively woman. He didn't see her as a Martha Stewart clone. Maybe he had misjudged her.

"Grab a chair, Jackson. Fred and I were just going over the little mess..."

Jackson saw the head of technology, Fred Nbodo, seated in a chair facing the couch. He realized how dimly-lit the room was. Fred was black-skinned, a native of Nigeria who had moved to Canada twenty years ago. He was brilliant but extremely shy.

"Hi, Fred," Jackson called out in a cheery voice. He liked Fred as much as any geek he had ever met and admired the man's intelligence.

Fred made to rise but Jackson gestured for him to remain as he was.

"Hello, Jackson." Fred's white teeth glistened as the techie smiled broadly. "Long time."

"Too long." Jackson took one of the chairs next to Fred while Carmen moved to the sofa. She was in a blouse and skirt crossed her legs in a relaxed pose.

"Let's get back to that little mess," Jackson invited.

The trio talked for close to an hour at a technical level far above most mortals, even those in technology. Each was an expert in military software, military tactics, military needs and priorities. Despite referring to the theft of source code as a 'little mess,' the three agreed it was a disaster for both the company and its hundreds of clients through the world.

They dissected the ways in which the source code could be used by an enemy to engineer their own solutions and defeat the functions built into JPI defensive software now on the market. The source code could not be turned into functional solutions without a great deal of work by experienced programmers and other techies. It would take months for anyone, even a nation, to recreate the solutions that JPI was already selling in the military market.

"One huge loss for us is..." Jackson said in a grim voice, "...is that there is a lot of AI in that source code." Carmen looked up in alarm while Fred shook his head

to acknowledge the comment. "Some of it is now common knowledge but I recall seeing some very innovative thinking by our programmers."

Jackson was familiar with the code and all programming because it had been accomplished under his watch. He knew there were millions of lines of code in the source code. A percentage of the work involved Artificial Intelligence, giving machines the ability of cognitive thinking. Machines driven by the code would learn, somewhat like humans.

Fred concentrated on AI for a moment. "Of course, enemies with the source code will know a lot about where we are going with Version 2.0." This version was the current iteration of all JPI military software solutions.

Carmen was nodding her head slowly, her glossy black hair swinging against her neck and face.

Beyond AI was the fact that the stolen source code could provide a foe with a great deal of information about current allied defences and targeting methods.

As a simple example—Fred offered one early in the discussion—software integrated into a camera network could identify explosive devices or armament being carried by a terrorist or enemy fighter and do so from a distance beyond a typical blast radius. This would be done by identifying a number of characteristics.

An app could discern if the bomber was a nervous male walking either quicker or slower than he should be, sweating excessively, gripping a trigger in his hand, wearing an explosive vest under his shirt, robe or uniform, looking around with extra interest in guards, lacking interest in things like shopping or girl-watching.

There were a number of characteristics that could identify a target and each would be noted in the algorithms in the source code. Defeat many of these characteristics by masking them, training them out of bombers or changing them substantially (as in the shape or where to wear explosive vests) and one could fool the software.

Worse, noted Carmen, various programmers who worked on the code in the first place made notes in the margins. These notes could tell enemies a lot of things not explained in the code alone.

"I read one," she disclosed, "that actually names some of the terrorists whose pictures are on file with the U.S. Seals and the SAS in the U.K. Nobody knows these photos exist and will help target these men. Another note said it would be impossible to identify a bomber if he did several things to his appearance and the way he walks. Another one said we need to integrate the software with a minimum of so many cameras or it won't be effective. Take out enough cameras and you blind the solution."

"These are things we cannot allow enemies to know," said Fred in grave tones. "Sorry, that's obvious," he quickly added but Jackson nodded encouragement to his friend.

"It doesn't seem obvious to everyone," Jackson commented, studying his friends carefully.

"Ah, the elephant in the room," Fred chuckled. "Double X."

"Don't call him that." The two men looked at Carmen quizzically. "I just don't like the nickname; I don't think it's appropriate for our CEO. I wouldn't have called you *Jack*, Jackson, because I know you don't like that nickname, and I think we should be just as respectful when we talk about Mr. Blax."

Jackson gave a slight nod in agreement. Fred looked mortified and stammered, "I... I'm so sorry, Carmen. I didn't... uh... think..."

"Okay," Jackson asked quickly. "Why won't Maxim take this seriously?"

This started a conversation that quickly became a debate. On one side, Fred calmly delineated the reasons why CEO Blax should approve a number of steps to identify the thief, list everything taken, discover the way the source code had been stolen and determine who might be a final customer for the code, assuming it was stolen to be sold. "It couldn't be used by the thief himself; what could he do with it? Of course, we would then know who it is."

Carmen took another view saying that Blax might not have all the information he needed to understand the situation. Once he did understand it, she offered, he would first have to confirm the theft occurred.

So far, she said, Barry and Jean were certain the software had been downloaded in a shocking violation of the company's policies and rules but that it may not have been 'stolen' to sell to an enemy. She suggested the taker—she refused to say 'thief'—could ransom the code. Perhaps, someone wanted only a part of the code; for instance, just the AI buried in it. She posed several scenarios which made some sense that Fred could not totally refute.

Jackson acted as the moderator of the debate but finally called a halt. He told Carmen and Fred that they, along with Payne, Brownley, Barry, Jean and Jackson himself, should haul Maxim into the boardroom and give him all the facts. Then, they should recommend actions that Max could and should approve. For one thing, he said, Maxim would have to open the fiscal doors so the investigation and remedies could be properly funded.

"As well," Jackson added, "We are going to need money for Mariah Belo and public relations. We're whistling in the wind if we think we can keep all this quiet."

## **Chapter 18**

Roman Petrenko had called his crew together, in the same parking garage where two of his thugs had murdered and disposed of their colleague who had played bumper car with Brownley's Jeep.

One of his men was the security guard for the garage and made it available after hours for Petrenko's infrequent meets. Six men lolled against a dingy wall. Petrenko had found an old swivel chair to wheel to this area of the garage. He sat in it like a petty ruler in front of supplicants.

There was one black man, two whites and three men with dark features. These three looked something like the common perception of a terrorist as someone with darker skin, black beard and furtive expression but, in reality, they were Canadian-born hoods who held down menial jobs in local car washes. The black guy was a cook at a Jamaican eatery while the two whites were unemployed, native-born Russian car thieves when they weren't doing odd jobs, including three previous murders, for Petrenko and his Russian masters. The seventh member of the crew had been dumped into a deep grave in one of the many forested

provincial parks north of Toronto. Traces of his blood likely remained in the parking garage but who would ever look or care?

Petrenko pulled out paper files from a shabby briefcase. He held them out and called the names of four of the men for each to collect his particular file. The blue file folders contained two sheets of paper each. One sheet had several paragraphs of text giving basic details of JPI executives cribbed from LinkedIn and other public sources. The other sheet held photos of the executives 'assigned' to each crew member.

"You two," Petrenko pointed in turn to the Russians.

The pair was in sad shape. Victor was leaning on an aluminum cane while Pavel had one hand encased in a white bandage with the other arm in a sling. Victor pushed himself away from the wall and groaned as his damaged knee protested. There were no files for them.

"You stay low. Do not let this Jackson guy see you." Petrenko was referring to the run-in between the duo and Phillips in the airport area parking lot. "Idiots," Petrenko muttered under his breath. "Da," he added in Russian, sneering at the men. "He knows you too well,"

"You." He pointed to the black man. "Clarence. I want you to keep watch on this man Brownley and the other guy, this Payne."

"I got to work, mon. I got the day shift," the cook protested, holding up his file folder.

"Then pick them up at night. One on one day. One on the next."

"When am I goin' to sleep?"

"Christ, Clarence. Just see where they go after work. We got to get to them if we have to. It's not 24 hours..."

"Okay, mon. I do dat," Clarence said in an aggrieved voice. "But I got to get paid this time, you know dat, Roman."

"Yeah, yeah. And you three," Petrenko waved his hand at the middle-eastern types. "You find out where the others live. The old guy, Jackson. That broad... what's her name... Belo. Yeah, you'll like that, won't you? And the blackie. Fred something. Work out who does what. I already know where the others live. Blax and the two geeks, the older one, Jean, and that mousey guy Barry."

"And," Petrenko's tone was threatening, "...don't do nothing else until I tell you."

Assignments made, Petrenko stood up and dusted off the seat of his suit trousers. He turned and left the crew still lounging against the concrete wall of the garage. Slowly, they broke up and went separate ways. One of the darker men, the garage security guard, sighed and pushed Petrenko's chair ahead of him as he returned to his little hut at the exit ramp of the garage.

Petrenko returned to his office. He took the thumb drive out of his desk and set it on top of the desk. He stared at it for a minute. Then he called his handler at the Russian consulate. After being passed through several receptionists, he heard the familiar voice.

"Roman. How good of you to call."

Petrenko shivered. He knew what the facetious tone meant. "I'm sorry, sir. I have been very busy," he said in Russian.

"Ah, that Ukrainian accent. How I love it." Petrenko shivered again.

"I have news, sir."

"When you first told me of the offer of code, it was a major opportunity, wasn't it, Roman?" The handler sounded friendly.

"Now it is several days later and I haven't heard a thing." The tone grew sharper.

"Not a damned thing," The handler was angry. "Who do you think you are, you little worm? You think you can play us?"

"No, sir. Not at all sir." Sweat broke out on Petrenko's brow. "I have something for you now. It just came to me. On a card, sir."

"Just came in, did it? You think we're fools?"

"I will bring it myself. Right now."

"Have you done anything with this card?"

"What do you mean. I would not..."

"So, you have viewed it."

"No.... Just a little... I will bring it, sir. I don't understand it."

The handler was quiet for a beat. "Bring it now. Or tell your friends to order flowers."

"Flowers? I don't..." Petrenko paled. The hand around the smartphone began to shake. "I do... right now." He disconnected, grabbed the SD card and scurried to the door and down the hallway.

## Chapter 19

After his meeting with Carmen and Fred, Jackson spent the rest of the day visiting staff members of the MLD&T division, picking their brains about the software but not mentioning the theft of source code to anyone. Some of the staffers refused to discuss anything technical with him because, after all, he was retired and not an active employee of the new JPI. Some were eager to tell Jackson of advances in the software he had inspired a year and more ago.

At the end of the long afternoon, Jackson was looking forward to returning to his condo and resting. He was tired mentally and physically. His knees were aching from alternatively sitting and standing. He found himself forgetting some of the information he had just been told.

Nothing was easy in Toronto traffic. Jackson vowed the next time he had to move around the city, he would do it using the much more efficient public transit system.

Jackson arrived at his condo after 7 p.m. He made a ham and cheese sandwich in the small kitchen and ate it while sitting at the kitchen island. He drank some fizzy water and headed for the couch. He turned on the television with the remote and suffered through five minutes of meaningless commercials before falling asleep with his feet on the ottoman.

The morning finally came with a sunrise that reflected from the windows on the CN Tower and on the golden panes of the Royal Bank headquarters in the downtown core. Jackson thought it would have looked spectacular on the bay from the giant windows of his cottage. He dressed quickly and made coffee. No sugar, just a dash of milk.

Jackson grabbed his workout and garment bags and headed down to the exercise room in his building. An hour later, feeling better, he climbed off the StairMaster and went to the locker room for a shower and change.

An hour after that, Jackson stepped down from the streetcar and crossed to the sidewalk in front of the JPI building. Ahead, he saw Maxim Blax being helped out of a limo by a man Jackson recognized as a company driver. He sped up and said hello to the driver as he passed the limo. That brought a large smile in return.

"Hey Max... wait for me," Jackson called after emerging from the revolving door into the office building. He saw Blax look behind him but the CEO didn't slow.

Jackson caught Blax just as the man was stepping into an elevator. The two entered together.

"You avoiding me?" Jackson smiled disarmingly.

"Just things to do," Blax said in a tight voice.

"Hopefully, one of those things has to do with the thing we discussed," Jackson told his companion and the elevator rose to the executive floors with just the two men on board.

"I have no intention of wasting time on that nonsense."

Jackson was stung by the comment. While he had not expected Blax to go down without a fight, he certainly hadn't expected the CEO to ignore the theft of code completely. It was a theft that could send JPI down in flames.

"Is the board aware of the problem?" Jackson spoke in sudden anger. "I'm sure they won't dismiss this so lightly." He avoided using the term 'stolen' or 'theft'. One never knew who was listening over what device.

"No. I am not going to waste their time either."

"Max. I hired you because you were the best man—or woman—to take over this company. I can't believe I made that big a mistake."

"I am the best person," Blax stepped on the last word. "I am doing this job better than anyone else could. And that," he paused for effect. "That includes you, Jackson. You left this company because you were too old to do the job. I have saved this company and it's about time..."

"Shut up, Max." Jackson was furious. The elevator slid to a gentle stop and the doors opened. "Get out; we're taking this to your office." Jackson grabbed Blax's arm and steered him out of the elevator car and through the hallway.

The two men hurried past a reception desk with Jackson propelling Blax forward. They entered the CEO's office and the door slammed behind them. Several shocked faces looked in that direction, then turned quickly away.

Jackson released Blax's arm once inside the office. Blax began to walk to his desk but Jackson pointed to the conversation area. "Sit there." The former brigadier general's voice brooked no argument.

The two sat in chairs. Blax seemed cowed.

"Max," Jackson was calm now, his voice gentle. "What is going on with you?" He leaned forward.

Blax raised his head. His eyes glistened. "I don't know, Jackson. I try so hard..." he dropped his head again.

"Well, it can't go on like this. JPI has a crisis on its hands. Someone has our source code and we have to deal with it."

“I hear what you’re saying,” Blax mumbled. “I just can’t deal with it. I have so much to do.”

Jackson leaned back and studied the CEO. “What’s more important than the whole future of the company. If it gets out that our proprietary code is out there, we’re dead with a lot of important clients.”

Blax’s head rose once more. His defiant manner returned. “I can’t believe this, Jackson. It looks to me as if you want to take back JPI. Don’t you like retirement?”

The former CEO was disgusted by the sudden changes in the current head of JPI. “The last thing I wanted to do was to interfere with your leadership at JPI. I chose you, Maxim, but it’s obvious it was a horrible choice. I have no option but to take this to the board.”

Blax changed yet again. This time, his eyes grew wide with fear and his upper lip began to tremble. “You can’t do that.” His voice quivered.

Jackson pushed himself to his feet and looked down at the CEO. His look of anger and disgust became one of sad resignation. He turned on his heel and, moving quickly, he was out of Blax’s office and back on the elevator in a minute or two.

He went to the executive boardroom and pulled out his smartphone. He began selecting the numbers of the members of the JPI board and calling each in order of seniority. In less than half an hour, he had arranged an emergency board meeting for the next morning.

## Chapter 20

Hungry. It was getting late in the morning and Jackson realized that he hadn’t eaten much over the past few days. Little wonder. He made his way out of the JPI building and turned toward a small eatery that he recalled from his CEO days. He could beat the lunch rush.

As he walked along the sidewalk, Jackson kept an eye on windows that allowed him to see behind him. ‘Yep,’ the two men were still on his tail. They were total amateurs, he thought. Who would assign characters like this to follow a man with decades of experience in remaining alert to everything around him?

It was easier to keep track of known stalkers than to re-acquire new ones, so Jackson gave the men no reason to think he knew of their presence. Easy to do with this bunch.

He did, however, ask himself, ‘Who are they? Do they belong to the thief or to someone he was trying to sell the code to?’ Jackson dismissed other players. A competitor wouldn’t follow the retired CEO, nor would police or one of the security services that might be concerned with software thefts from tech companies. These outfits were far better than the two men on his coattails. He would find some way of identifying the two behind him—the Middle Eastern types.

Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world. There are people from every one of the earth’s nations living in the 630 square kilometres covered by the city’s spread. More than 225,000 of these people are described as Arab. Not that



every person from the middle-east is an Arab, of course, but Jackson thought of these two as 'the Arabs.'

It made Jackson more comfortable to think of the men in this way; he had worked with many Arabs and Arab-Canadians in the past. Most were solid citizens who were, in the majority, intelligent, well-spoken, extremely polite and fun-loving. He counted many among his friends. Thinking of them made him regret his self-imposed exile from the city in past months of retirement. It also gave him an idea.

He made a mental note to contact some of his old friends. Maybe they would like to meet these two, chat them up and find out what the two characters thought they were doing.

After lunch, Jackson returned to JPI and to the PR offices.

"So, what's the plan?" He and Mariah were in the local boardroom with cups of coffee in front of them.

Mariah looked excited. She pushed her iPad across the table to Jackson. The screen contained a list. "The plan, sir..."

An hour later, second cups of coffee cooling on the table, Jackson returned the iPad and leaned back into his chair.

"Not much more I can say. With the tweaks we just made, I think this will do." He smiled and reached for his cup.

Mariah had begun, she explained, with the crisis communications plan Jackson and his team had implemented when he was CEO. She assumed the role as head of a crisis communication team consisting of just two other people, a senior tech manager named Al Stringer and an office manager named Jia Wong. Mariah described Al as a 'genius and a communicator—a rare combination.' To her, Jia Wong was 'the greatest organizer imaginable.'

The team had looked at every conceivable crisis that could erupt at JPI. Their work resulted in chart after chart of the actions that could be taken in each crisis with the expected results of the actions. No example matched the current problem exactly but several scenarios came close enough to make Jackson shudder.

A theft of critical code or software prototypes would affect the company, its several thousand employees, JPI's board, suppliers who entrusted their products to JPI, customers including a large number of armed forces units in a number of countries, and the public.

Jackson let Mariah's work seep into the crevices of his mind as he sipped his coffee. He put down the cup and looked at the young woman who was shutting down the device. "A hell of a lot of depressing stuff, Mariah."

She looked up in alarm. Jackson was smiling. "This is superb work. Thank your team for me."

"Unfortunately," she said sadly, "...we haven't done much for the past few months. Mr. Blax put a stop to this kind of work." Jackson looked at her in dismay.

She grinned. "Oh, the team still plods along. A few BBQs at Al's place. He lives outside the city on a hobby farm. Long talks on lazy afternoons. But only on weekends."

Jackson didn't smile. "Mr. Blax seems disengaged, to say the least."

“Yeah. He’s changed a lot since I came here about a year ago. In the beginning, he was great. On board with PR and the crisis audit. But, over the months...” She halted and looked grim.

“I like your ideas to meet this kind of crisis head-on,” Jackson told her. “I’ll take them up with the board in our meeting tomorrow. See if I can get them approved for instant action and get funding.”

Jackson stood with a sudden surge. Mariah hurried to follow him and the two left the boardroom. Without saying goodbye, Jackson turned toward the elevator bank. Maria watched him for a moment before heading back to her office, iPad in hand.

## Chapter 21

Lorraine Samuels, chair of the JPI board of directors, took her seat at the head of the long table in her company boardroom. She smoothed her short grey hair and looked around at her fellow directors. There were six of them present today with three absentees. A quorum.

She smiled broadly as Jackson Phillips entered the room and took his seat. She noted that he took a place with his back to the windows. He wouldn’t be distracted by the bright sunlight that flooded into the room on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor of her building.

Lorraine, like the other directors, were top executives of the largest military suppliers in Canada. Little known in the world outside of the military is Canada’s place among the top 15 defence contracting countries. Lorraine’s firm produced sub-systems, mainly for the U.S. military, and earned billions of US dollars per year doing so. She shook her head as she thought of what this meeting was about.

“Well, now that Jackson is here and very welcome, let’s begin. Jackson...” she smiled at her friend, “...the meeting is yours.”

Lorraine’s smile was the last of the morning. Jackson spent the next hour going over all he knew about the theft of source code from the JPI division. He talked about the paucity of information about the theft, about possible thieves and potential buyers of the information. He moved to the potential ramifications of the theft and, finally, into the actions that should be taken without delay to deal with the crisis.

Bill Smitherly, the director seated next to Jackson, spoke to Lorraine, as chair. “I note for the record that Maxim Blax is not here today. This is not only unprecedented, it could be a violation of our duties as directors of JPI.”

Lorraine nodded. “Yes, it could very well be. To hold this meeting without the CEO present, even though he is not a director, is highly irregular. But...” she looked at Jackson, “...I invited him last night, as Jackson had strongly recommended, but Maxim declined that invitation.”

There was an audible gasp from the directors. Bill Smitherly was stunned, his mouth sagging open.

Lorraine waited a beat. “I didn’t mention this at the beginning because I wanted everyone to hear what Jackson had to say. I can add that three of our members—the absent ones—are the ones who asked me yesterday if Max would be here. They

also declined to come when they learned he had refused. We had a quorum so I didn't tell the five who are present—so sue me. But this is something that can't wait for Max to take it seriously.”

“Are you saying Max is not on board?” Smitherly was belligerent now.

“Yes. That's precisely what I'm saying,” Lorraine answered in a sharp tone. She brooked no attempt to undermine her authority. “I spoke with Max for a few minutes last night. I told him what Jackson had told me to prepare me for this meeting. He fought me at every word. He didn't believe Jackson... didn't believe there was a theft... didn't think this meeting warranted any of his time. He told me, ‘if you want to have a stupid meeting, go ahead. I won't stoop to your level.’ I think he called me a name but I was so surprised by his reaction, I stopped listening...”

Smitherly, CEO of an armored fighting vehicle maker, held up his hands, palms toward the board chair. “All of this is so hard to believe, Lorraine. I'm sorry if...” he stopped talking as Lorraine nodded in his direction.

“Hard for all of us,” Lorraine told her fellow directors. Then, she turned to look directly at Jackson Phillips.

“As a special advisor to this board, I am asking you, officially and for the record, what can be done about this calamity?” Her voice was formal and lacked any warmth for her friend.

Jackson reached into a pocket of his suit jacket and withdrew a SD card. He leaned forward to push it into a slot in an elaborate presentation system built into the centre of the board table. He flipped a toggle switch on the control panel. A screen dropped down over the wall at one end of the large room. See-through blinds simultaneously dropped to cover the windows and darken the room. A picture appeared on the large screen; it was a list of items.

Jackson took the fascinated board members through the list of what he would cover—items that would, he hoped, address the crisis that began with the discovery of the theft of source code from his former company. The list was topped with “MLD&T software Version 3.0”.

He began this section of his address: “As you will know, I established JPI a number of years ago after working with a small group of software experts. We had designed and written Version 1.0 of a number of military-focused software solutions including Machine Learning Defence and Targeting solutions.

“Our company was fortunate enough to win customers like your companies in very short order. During the first three years of the company's existence, behind the scenes, we put together a much larger, more experienced team of software experts and developed Version 2.0 across the board. We set up the MLD&T Division during this time to address one major area of our software offerings.

“It is the source code for Version 2.0 that was stolen.”

Jackson paused to change the slide in his presentation and to sip from a glass of water.

“We are looking at the worst problem in the history of the company. This theft puts all solutions from the division in jeopardy. Everything from MLD&T can be compromised by an enemy that gets the stolen code. This includes the AI in these solutions—the things to be learned by machines running our solutions.”

Several of the directors looked physically ill as they thought of the JPI software employed in systems and equipment their own companies were using, reselling to others and servicing as 'strategic partners.'

"Our solutions are, simply put, the best of the best. JPI leads in our fields and particularly in MLD&T." Several directors nodded as they watched the screen and listened to JPI's founder. "But... over the next year, JPI will be developing something even better. We will begin developing JPI Version 3.0 beginning with all MLD&T solutions."

There were more gasps from the directors. Smitherly actually rose from his chair but sank back as Lorraine glared at him. Even in the gloom of the darkened room, the director could see the threatening gleam in her eyes.

"Consider this carefully," Jackson continued as he changed slides again. "Mariah Belo, our public relations VP, has put together an excellent assessment of our problem and a rationale for Version 3.0. Here is how it works..."

Over the next few minutes, Jackson sketched out the future of JPI. To continue the current course, JPI would work to identify the thief and the intended use for the stolen code.

At some point, even if the current investigation was successful, the theft would become known by customers at least and by the public, governments, regulators and the military world in general. In other words, the crisis would go viral. At this point, all JPI software would become suspect. All MLD&T software would be unsalable and clients would be demanding everything from upgrades to refunds all the way to replacement of JPI software with rival products at JPI's expense.

Meanwhile, Jackson told the directors, the stolen code could be in the hands of an enemy nation, a rogue armed forces unit, a terrorist group or even a competitor among JPI's group of 'allies.' Whoever had the code would be scrambling to produce copies of JPI solutions or to develop ways to defeat JPI software in the market or, worst, on the battlefields across the world.

"We can kid ourselves. We can pray." Another sip of water. "But no lying, hoping or praying will do any good. In the end, ladies and gentlemen, JPI will be very badly damaged and there is a possibility that it will go out of business. Assets will be sold, of course, but the value of this company is truly in its people, not in its bits and pieces."

"God," one of the directors breathed. "We will look like fools..."

Another, less self-centred, said, "Thousands of our people will lose their jobs... at JPI and at some of our companies as we lose credibility."

"Exactly," Jackson changed to another slide.

"According to Mariah—and to me—we have our best chance of survival if we begin to push Version 2.0 off the cliff in favour of Version 3.0."

"How is that going to help? JPI clients have 2.0 now; they won't be happy." The remark came from Sonia Hassan, head of a firm that designed and made camouflage clothing for troops, paints and templates for military equipment of all kinds.

Jackson enumerated the benefits of developing a Version 3.0 to replace 2.0 entirely.

First, it would make the stolen software much less valuable and eventually worthless. Would it make sense for a buyer of the code to put a lot of work and

money into creating new code to defeat software that would be totally obsolete within the time to develop Cyberattacks 2.0? Jackson's query was rhetorical.

Second, the move could be used to promote JPL, making it less vulnerable to any attack on its credibility. "We can advertise Version 3.0 as a total redevelopment of the best military software on the market—the renaissance of even better software."

Third, Jackson continued, "We'll have a chance to explain our version of Artificial Intelligence—machine learning that helps keep our soldiers safe and civilians even safer. And our AI will be more advanced than anything in today's software, including the stolen code. Whatever the thief's client could learn from 2.0 source code will be old news compared with 3.0. Who would care?"

Fourth and final, for now, Jackson concluded, Mariah's team recommended that current clients with 2.0 software get priority for Version 3.0 with credit for their used software. In effect, JPI will let clients trade in 2.0 for 3.0.

I just said fourth and final, Jackson said quietly but with a broad smile. But I'll add that this redo will move us well ahead of the Chinese in computer vision and artificial intelligence technology. With that, there was an added glint in many eyes and a couple of board members actually applauded.

Jackson regained his seat and leaned over to change the slides to a financial chart.

"Before anyone ruptures themselves jumping with joy, here are the answers to your burning questions. How much money will all this cost over what period of time."

He waved at the chart on the screen. "I propose developing Version 3.0 for MLD&T, beginning all the way to marketing, in one year."

Jackson waited for the murmurs to die. "To do this and maintain all current activities, we will need to hire at least 200 additional programmers along with a bunch of developers, designers, engineers... you see it all on the chart."

The cost for development of 3.0, Jackson told the board, would begin with \$100 million US in JPI's own funds. "So, we're looking at a tad over \$130 million in Canadian dollars." After that, Jackson announced, JPI would look to equity firm CPE for more on submission of a full development and business plan.

The murmuring grew louder as the numbers sank into the over-taxed brains of the directors.

"Budgeting will be needed for things including extra space to accommodate more people, marketing dollars, advertising money and, of course, funding for all the public relations activities of Ms. Belo and her team." He told the board he couldn't overestimate the importance of public and media relations in the veritable reform of the whole company.

Lorraine spoke up from her position as board chair. "One more thing, people. I want to invite Jackson to join the board as a full member, not in an ex-officio role, and I want a vote on that right now."

Hands shot up around the table. Smitherly's was the last hand up and his face was expressionless unlike others that bore wide smiles.

"Unanimous. Do you accept, Jackson?"

"Subject to my right to re-retire any time I want," Jackson told the board to a round of polite applause and laughter.

“Fine. Then, we appoint you as head of a committee to supervise the development of Version 3.0 of our software. Pick your team, Jackson,” Lorraine told him with a grin.

“Sonia and Bill,” Jackson said without hesitation.

Bill Smitherly looked at Jackson in shock. “I would be the last one I thought you would ask, Jackson.”

Jackson turned his smile toward Smitherly with a short nod to Sonia. “I want colleagues who will ask questions and provide another view when necessary.”

“Then, I accept,” Smitherly said, rising and rounding the table to shake Jackson’s hand. That drew another burst of muted applause from the other directors. He hesitated. “And I’d like to propose Jackson take over the CEO’s role subject to our closer look at Max’s performance.”

“We’ll table that,” said Lorraine.

## Chapter 22

The board discussed the plan and the numbers for another two hours. In the end, having set a record for the longest board session in JPI history, the directors voted. They approved the software development, marketing and new advertising numbers but they refused to approve a new budget for PR even though it was the smallest of all raises.

Jackson thought to himself the denial of PR money showed how much the directors feared ‘going public’ even to defend against a major crisis. They thought they would stay in the shadows instead of being named as directors of JPI or as potential spokespeople. It was a typical reaction of a majority of executives, thought Jackson.

He made another mental note to talk to Lorraine—she had backed the PR expenditure—about choosing a new board down the line. Perhaps a year down the road in line with the release of JPI Version 3.0 for MLD&T.

No one else knew of the board’s discussions. They had to remain secret until Jackson won board approval. They also had to remain secret to deny at least this much inside information to the thief. According to everything discovered by Barry and Jean, the thief had to be among the executive or senior managerial ranks.

Jackson thought for a moment that this definition would include Barry and Jean. He dismissed that idea as simply too much to handle. If either of them was a thief, Jackson would go back to his super cottage and row his whole island out to the middle of Georgian Bay.

As the afternoon progressed, lunch forgotten, Jackson borrowed an office at Lorraine’s company and set to work making phone calls. The first and easiest call he made was to Payne, JPI’s CFO. Payne received Jackson’s news calmly, as he did most monumental information.

“A hundred million. Reminds me when you talked me into joining JPI when it had no money, no offices and, according to me, no hope.” Payne chuckled.

“Back then, a hundred dollars would have looked good. I was looking at draining our savings and pensions. We were nuts.” Jackson’s memories flooded back. They were good.

“Okay, I think we can do it on that,” said Payne as he ruminated. “We can borrow and pay back out of profits.”

“If there are any.”

“We’ll have a long meet with Rebecca in Marketing,” said Payne referring to Rebecca Rollins, JPI’s Marketing VP, “...but I think this could even be good for the company. If we can meet the deadline. One year for a total redo of MLD&T would set some kind of record.”

“Then, I had better move my butt. See you later, Payne.” And Jackson was off and running.

His second call was to Mariah Belo who was ecstatic at the approval of the board for Version 3.0 development but upset by the lack of approval for a special PR budget.

“I guess we’ll have to make do with what we have, Jackson,” she told him in the brief call.

“I was the one who thought crisis communications was a skillset we needed, Mariah. I can top up the funding whenever you need it. I’ve got deep pockets and few places to spend it.”

He told the rest of JPI’s executive staff after advising Jean and Barry of the work they would have in store. Both of them groaned at the news but he could tell, behind the moaning, both of them were tremendously excited and eager to get to work on a whole new set of solutions.

His reception by the rest of the leadership team was muted. It was a lot to take in, particularly for Fred Nbodo and Carmen Flores. The COO bristled at not having a vote in the plan Jackson took to the board. “You should have told us, Jackson. We’re the ones that will spend half of every night in the office up to our necks in unwashed programmers.” Then she asked, “What did Maxim say to the board.”

Jackson revealed that Maxim had refused to attend the meeting and that the board had gone ahead without him. She was aghast. There was no winning this battle, Jackson thought as he told the distraught woman he had to reach others. He told her he would advise Blax about the board’s decisions but he doubted she heard a word he was saying at the end of the tense call.

Maxim Blax was last to be called by Jackson. Phillips had wanted to get buy-in from the rest of leadership before he confronted Blax. As it turned out, Jackson was spared the face-off. Blax refused three of his calls before Phillips gave up and prepared to head back to his condo for the evening. ‘You can lead a horse to water,’ Jackson told himself.

## **Chapter 23**

Petrenko recognized what he had come to think of as The Voice before the second word. It was early evening and the Russian Federation agent was lounging in his apartment, chewing on beef jerky while he watched a Russian language film

on Netflix. The ringing of his cell had interrupted a scene involving a shootout and Petrenko was annoyed.

"Petrenko, we have a problem." The Voice was more urgent.

"Yeah... I have a problem with you..." Petrenko let his ire show.

"You know," The Voice overrode Petrenko, "that JPI is well aware of the taking of their code. But, we thought there was nothing they could do about it. They weren't going to tell the world, were they?" The Voice slowed now that Petrenko was listening. "But that son of a bitch Phillips is screwing around..."

Petrenko frowned. He knew Phillips would be a problem. "How?" he asked.

"JPI will be developing new software. The code we have will lose its importance and that means its value."

Now Petrenko was confused. The Voice kept referring to 'we'. What did The Voice mean. What would it mean to Petrenko? Suddenly, the word value lodged in his brain. "You mean *we* will not get money?"

"Yes, we will," The Voice was reassuring. "But we have to move quickly. You must tell your friends that I need twenty million dollars—that's US dollars—for the code. Half immediately, half when we deliver the code." Petrenko noted the 'we' again, "If I don't get it, I'll go to the Chinese." Desperation was creeping back into the disguised voice. "I swear I'll take it to the Chinese."

Petrenko cut in. "I want half."

Even disguised, the incredulity in The Voice was clear. "You bastard... for what?"

"For dealing with... with the Russians."

After a short silence, The Voice said, "Ten percent. That's it." The Voice went on to provide Petrenko with an account number at a bank in Lichtenstein into which the money could be deposited by wire transfer. "But ASAP or you won't get anything, Petrenko. Got it?"

His stomach was heaving and his head hurt. Petrenko understood now that his dream opportunity was slipping away. "Tell me what Phillips is doing. Tell me what I can do."

The call went on for several minutes as The Voice told Petrenko the latest news. Suddenly, it was disconnected as the caller reached some magic limit beyond which the call might be traced. Petrenko wasn't even trying but The Voice couldn't be sure.

After half an hour of deep thought—or what passed as thought by Petrenko—he called his handler at the consulate. He did not mention JPI's response to the theft of the source code. He could claim ignorance if the handler had knowledge of the development scheme. He restricted his report to the demand of The Voice for ten million U.S. dollars up front 'immediately' with another ten on delivery. Petrenko was astounded when the handler agreed.

"We expected more," Sokolov, the handler said, surprising Petrenko even more. The handler never discussed anything with Petrenko, he just ordered the Ukrainian to do various tasks. Petrenko provided the bank account number and Sokolov said the half-payment would be transferred before end of day. Petrenko would have to depend on The Voice for his share; another detail he didn't reveal.

Disconnecting, Petrenko marveled at the reaction of the consulate, congratulated himself for his brilliance in negotiating the deal and said to himself.



“Not enough?” Petrenko smiled to himself. His two-million-dollar piece of the pie sounded like plenty to him.

## Chapter 24

In his condo, at about the same time, Jackson Phillips switched on his tv and turned to the all-day CBC news channel. But he killed the volume as his phone rang.

It was Gamil Abboud, an Egyptian Canadian man with whom Jackson had worked when the two were member of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Jackson had asked Gamil to follow him at a distance so Gamil could identify the men following Jackson more closely.

“I tailed you yesterday and today, Jackson,” Gamil said. “Indeed, it didn’t take long to spot your tail. What twits.” Jackson wasn’t surprised. Gamil was one of the best surveillance men in CSIS and, in retirement, he still took on PI jobs for wealthy clients.

In a burst of short sentences, Gamil reported on the activities of the two Arabic-looking men doing such a lousy job of surveilling Jackson. They had followed Jackson the previous day and, then, today from his condo building to JPI and then to another office building. “A board meeting,” Jackson explained.

Gamil had tailed the hapless pair to an apartment building near the Distillery District in east-end Toronto. They went to a unit rented by a man named Roman Petrenko. “I have him as a part timer for the GRU,” said Gamil, naming the Russian military intelligence service. Low to mid-level. Recruits—or tries to—in the Ukrainian community. Not the brightest bulb in the chandelier.”

Unlike Jackson and Gamil who had kept secure smartphones when they left public service, Petrenko’s phone could be tapped and Gamil had done so using tricks he had learned at CSIS.

“I got him talking to his crew. A seedy bunch of characters including your two tails.” Gamil then chuckled. “But, the clown has more than one cell and I can’t get into the others. Doncha love mysteries, Jackson?”

“Not much,” was Jackson laconic reply.

“I’m emailing you, as we speak,” Gamil added. “Names, addresses, stuff like that. Light bedtime reading. See you soon.”

The email arrived with more information than Gamil had imparted in the phone call and more information than Jackson really wanted. The bottom lines were that Roman Petrenko worked as a part time agent for the GRU. His handler was housed at the Russian consulate rather than the Ottawa embassy. Petrenko was low level and Toronto-focused.

Petrenko’s crew members were certainly not GRU pros and would not be allowed to work on any missions assigned by Moscow to the military intelligence group.

Three of the crew were Arab-Canadians. One other was a black Canadian who worked at a Jamaican restaurant. Two were born-in-Russia car thieves with long records including convictions for assault. There used to be a seventh member of the crew but he was nowhere to be seen by Gamil and his colleagues.

‘Crew members are unimpressive,’ the email report read. ‘All have records but Arabs have no convictions.’ The email ended with the line: ‘Can exert pressure on Arabs if desired.’ Jackson decided he ‘desired.’ He returned a cryptic email.

## Chapter 25

“Problem.” Mariah’s first words made Jackson groan. It was after ten o’clock in the evening and he had been at it most of the day. He had conducted extensive phone calls from the temporary office in JPI’s boardroom and from his condo.

A great deal of planning was needed just to set in motion development of Version 3.0 of JPI’s software. Human Resources was tasked with finding, vetting and hiring more than two hundred programmers not to mention other techies. Payne’s staff was drawing up a new, large budget for the work. Marketing was working with Public Relations and Sales to co-ordinate promotion, peddling and shipping of the final product. Fred Nbodo, the technology chief had already assembled a team to manage the tremendous amount of work required to create a whole new set of software from source code to compiled machine code in the end solutions. He also was shepherding setup of training for people who would install and configure the new software a year from now.

“Problem?” Jackson repeated.

“As you know,” said Mariah in a voice hinting of exhaustion even over the telephone. “...we have to get out there with an announcement that JPI is developing Version 3.0 to make the code for 2.0 undesirable to any of our thief’s potential customers.”

Jackson wondered if Mariah thought he needed the primer because age made him forgetful or if she was just thinking her way through the spiel.

He heard her take a breath. “I have two of my writers working on news releases for the military media and the general media. We can be more specific with military...”

“The problem, Mariah,” Jackson asked impatiently.

“Sorry. Okay, the problem comes when the writers put in the quotes. We have no one to attribute the quotes to. It doesn’t look like Mr. Blax will want his name used as the source of any quotes. Worse, what happens if reporters call for more and he refuses to be a spokesperson? We’ll look like idiots. And that’s apart from me being fired in the first place.”

“That’s a confusing sentence, Mariah. Why don’t you knock it off for the night?”

“I just sent the rest home,” she responded. “But I have to get this ironed out or I won’t be able to sleep. Who is going to be our spokesperson for the 3.0 kickoff?”

“I’ll make you a promise, if you’ll go home and get some rest. I’ll deal with this first thing in the morning and I’ll get you a spokesperson before noon. Now, get out of there!” Without giving the PR head time for a comeback, Jackson pushed the red button on his screen. A minute later, he took his own advice and made ready for bed.

Jackson rose at 7 a.m. feeling much better. He ate a slice of toast, drank a cup of coffee and, by 8:30 a.m., he was barrelling past the receptionist to push open the door to Blax's office at JPI.

"Max," he said to the surprised CEO who was in the middle of a gigantic yawn. Blax's mouth snapped shut and he began to rise from the chair behind his desk. "Sit." Jackson commanded as he dropped into a chair on the visitor's side of the desk.

"You wouldn't take my calls yesterday, Max. If you had, I would have told you the board has approved development of Version 3.0 of all JPI software, beginning with MLD&T. That part will be finished and launched in a year. I would also have told you that you get on board with everything or get the hell out of this company."

Blax stared at Jackson. The man seemed disoriented. His eyes moved rapidly from side to side until they finally settled on Jackson. His voice trembled as he spoke. "I talked with Lorraine this morning," he said. "She told me the same thing. I don't know why you hate me so much, Jackson. You have turned the board against me. You have turned the other executives against me. I have done great work here but you don't accept that. I don't understand, Jackson..."

"Spare me, Max." Jackson was fed up with the self-absorbed CEO. His voice was even but the disgust was evident. "From what I've been told by most of the staff I've talked with, you were a very capable person in the beginning. But that was a disguise, wasn't it, Maxim. You couldn't keep it up. You turned into the pompous ass you always were, didn't you?" Jackson leaned toward Blax.

"The only reason why I didn't ask the board to remove you for cause immediately is because we can't afford a firing right now. But, if you keep acting like Nero fiddling on your violin while JPI burns, I will make sure you're out of here before the end of week. Have you got that, Max." Jackson's voice rose and his fist rested on the top of the desk. Blax was cringing now.

"I have that, Mr. Phillips." Blax was full of rancour. "Somehow you have seized power again. You can't stand being retired..."

"Give it up, you fool," Jackson shouted but immediately forced himself to calm down. "One more sentence out of you and you are gone."

Jackson waited for Blax's next move. It startled him.

Blax dropped his chin to his chest. "I can't do this. It is too hard." His voice dropped to a murmur and Jackson had to crane forward to hear him. "My head hurts."

Jackson looked around, saw a carafe and rose to pour a cup of what turned out to be plain water. He delivered it to Blax who looked up briefly and took the cup in shaking hands. He sipped the liquid and put the cup gently on his desktop.

"Better?" asked Jackson. "Do you need an aspirin?"

Blax looked up and tried to smile but his attempt was grim and his eyes were moist with tears. Jackson felt a twinge of sympathy that quickly hardened.

"Man up, Max. You have a lot to do so get over the self-pity and the grandiose B.S. and help us out here. Help JPI or get the hell out of our way."

"What do you want me to do?" Max's question had a note of defeat and despair.

Jackson's emotions again swung radically. He felt some guilt for the way he was browbeating the sad man in front of him. More than empathy, he felt confusion. "Was there something seriously wrong with Blax or was he just a warped

personality. Could he be trusted at all to carry out a task without retreating into a petty tyrant or sorry sight as he was at this minute?’

Jackson shook his head to clear it. He began to instruct Blax, almost the way he would a child, as he prepared the CEO to be the face of JPI, at least for the coming days.

A half hour after the discussion began, Jackson placed a call from Blax’s office to Mariah in PR. “The CEO is on board,” Jackson told her, his eyes still focused on Blax behind his desk. “You can use his name on your quotes for the news releases. And he’s agreed to speak at the news conferences you’re setting up.” Blax nodded slowly.

## Chapter 26

This time, The Voice was less harsh or at least it sounded that way to Petrenko. It was still robotic but at least not as loud and demanding. “We have received confirmation of the deposit,” it said.

Petrenko realized he had been holding his breath since this one of his assorted phones had sounded its distinctive ring tone... a tolling bell. He breathed out. There was a kind of chuckle from The Voice. “Surprised, Petrenko?”

He took a moment to recover. “My percentage. I want it.”

“I have deposited it in the account you provided, Petrenko. One million U.S. I assume your employers...” The Voice paused for effect, “...they know you are getting a little bonus?”

Petrenko felt raw fear. “You cannot say to them...”

“Oh, we may do just that unless you do what we tell you.” There was a touch of levity.

“What do you want?” Petrenko was angry now. He did not like to be made fun of.

“Listen closely,” The Voice said. And Petrenko did.

As Petrenko had his ear glued to the phone, a small group was gathered in JPI’s executive boardroom for the launch meeting. Max Blax was seated at the head of the table with Jackson Phillips to his right, back to the windows. Arranged around that end of the table were Payne, Brownley, Flores, Nbodo and Mariah Belo. A young man from PR was seated near the far end of the table with a control panel in front of him. It managed the projection system and the raising and lowering of the large screen that now covered the back of the boardroom.

“First slide,” said Mariah, as she rose to stand in her place at the table. Jackson waved her to sit; it would be a long presentation.

“Mr. Blax, Mr. Phillips and colleagues,” she began formally. For the next forty-five minutes, Mariah provided details of the public relations plan that would launch and constantly update the total rewrite of code for the defence and targeting division of JPI.

The campaign would begin that afternoon with the distribution of news releases to major wire services, all military-focused media, major press outlets in cities across Canada, and other carefully selected news media including business

television and websites. Mariah's staff would call a large number of these outlets to alert them to the release and to offer one or more spokespersons.

Mariah also said she would crank her social media staffers to full throttle and that Barry was already preparing a number of blogs for his large list of followers.

The technologies involved would be explained by Fred Nbodo along with tech geniuses Barry and Jean who would brief technology reporters and commentators. Payne would talk to the business media about finances but JPI was not a public company so that was a blessing. Payne could limit information to whatever would be good for JPI.

Maxim Blax would take part in high level interviews and the two major news conferences scheduled for Monday, five days away.

Carmen Flores, the COO, would speak to employees of the company at several open houses to be held in division boardrooms and the company cafeteria over the next week. She would calm fears and reflect the confidence the executive ranks had in the development plan.

Bill Brownley, head of security, would continue to direct the team seeking the software thief inside JPI. So far, that team had no doubt the thief was a highly-placed insider. The theft had been conducted by someone accessing the company's server racks and copying source code through a maintenance computer. The details were highly technical but the theft could be traced by monitors throughout the whole process. The only thing not monitored was who did it. Brownley also would keep tabs on security at the news conferences and open houses just in case anyone wanted to cause even more trouble for the beleaguered company.

When Mariah concluded her presentation, the group talked among its members for a few minutes before deciding everything that could be done had been done. They congratulated Mariah. Then Carmen Flores asked the question each of them wanted to ask. "And Jackson, what part will you play in this great drama?"

"Sit on my butt," Jackson answered. Then he laughed along with Payne.

"Fat chance," said Payne. "I can answer for Jackson because he's so modest. He is our backup. Jackson is one of the most respected business leaders in the military supply sector. Everyone knows he retired but, if Jackson is needed, he's available to step in to add his credibility where needed. Since we don't know where our weak spots will be, if any..." Payne smiled at Mariah. "...the plan is to keep Jackson in reserve for now."

"Mr. Blax will be our leader in this exercise," Jackson added, rising to his feet and gesturing toward the CEO who remained in his chair.

Blax looked up and his eyes widened. "Yes, of course, of course," the CEO said in a firm voice. "I am the leader here. I will be speaking to the press. It will be a very good day for all of us."

With that confusing pronouncement from Blax, the meeting adjourned and each member moved off to their assigned tasks, except for Payne who moved to Jackson's side.

"So," said Payne, "one of those people could be our thief."

"Yes. But don't ask me which one."

"But, if so, isn't it dangerous to let Mariah trot out the whole PR plan and begin tomorrow. If the value of our source code is going to drop, won't the thief make the sale as fast as possible, if he... or she... hasn't sold the code already?"

“Yes,” Jackson said with conviction, “But if the thief is pushed to act faster, it’s possible he or she will make mistakes. As well, any potential buyer isn’t going to want to pay full price for code that will be obsolete within a year. It would take that long to take full advantage of the source code. We move some problems from our shoulders to the thief’s and buyers like China or Russia or some terrorist group. That can’t be bad.”

Payne thought about it for a moment. “Good thinking, Jackson. But it’s a hundred-million-dollar solution just for starters.”

Payne suddenly grinned. “But, then, my preliminary numbers make it look like a stroke of brilliance. A new version might just work in this hot market.”

Jackson took Payne’s arm. “Come along, my young friend. It’s lunch time and I’m buying.”

## Chapter 27

*NEWS RELEASE: Jackson Phillips Incorporated, one of Canada’s largest suppliers of military software and hardware, announced today the beginning of a redevelopment that will lead to replacement of all the company’s software solutions. JPI CEO Maxim Blax said current Version 2.0 anti-terrorist surveillance programs and civilian protection systems will be replaced within one year with other software products to follow. It will eventually renew the complete line of offerings to military and other clients throughout the world.*

*“This will be a complete redevelopment of JPI software, not an update of current code,” said Mr. Blax. “We will begin by introducing a new, patented ‘surround safe’ environment to protect friendly armed forces and civilian populations from various threats,” Mr. Blax added.*

*“Current military customers will be able to ‘trade in’ existing software from JPI for new advanced product at substantial discounts...”*

The news releases sent to military clients and to mass media continued with more detail about the launch of Version 3.0 but the message was clear in the first few paragraphs. Version 2.0 was on the way out. Version 3.0 would be a total rebuild - complete with state-of-the-art Artificial Intelligence - which would incentivize clients to exchange the old with the new at heavily discounted cost.

What was not mentioned in the news releases, of course, was that stolen source code for the existing JPI software would be about as valuable as a used baby’s diaper.

The first stories re-written from the news releases distributed by JPI’s PR unit appeared online in the afternoon. Military and technology news and information sites headlined the JPI news suggesting that the sector’s software was about to undergo a major re-jig that would considerably advance defence against most kinds of attacks.

Targeting was not mentioned in the original news release to news outlets so targeting was not included in the published items.

The division name, Machine Learning Defence & Targeting, was changed to Safe Environment Division, SED. It wasn't poetry but, as Mariah put it, "It's a helluva lot more people friendly."

Marketing had temporarily re-assigned staff to deal with calls, texts, emails and even visits from JPI clients who had questions about the wholesale changes at JPI. Tempted by hasty but adequate additions and alterations to the company and division websites and a new blog written by Barry, customers contacted JPI in droves.

Most of the calls fielded by Marketing staff reflected budget worries. 'We just installed your software less than a year ago and now we'll have to dump it and put in new software. We can't afford it,' was a constant refrain.

Jackson and Payne had ironed out the details in a midnight session just the night before but the equations worked. The answers were fluid and sounded like they had been worked out over months of careful thought.

"JPI felt it couldn't wait any longer to develop our 3.0 solutions. They will include brand new advances across the board and particularly in Artificial Intelligence. Without them, armed forces and civilians remain exposed to many new threats - vehicles used as weapons, car bombs, hard-to-detect IEDs, chemical attacks, drone attacks and surveillance and on and on. But, you as a client, won't suffer. You can trade in your current software (we'll handle the changeover for you) and get a credit based on its residual value to the user. The average discount will be 75%..."

The size of the discount brought gasps and a few cheerful expletives. "Jesus, mate, how in hell are you going to do that?" from a colonel in that country's Royal Australian Army Ordnance Corps was a typical comment. 'Repeat business', was the mystifying answer from JPI Marketing.

"And service for the first year after installation is free," Marketing would tack on. While the client considered that an amazing plus, Jackson and Payne were covering their asses. A year was borderline madness for the work to be done on 3.0. Free service could discover glitches before they occurred and prepare for inevitable upgrades that would make and keep 3.0 the leading cybersecurity software in the global marketplace.

Calls were fielded through the afternoon and evening of Thursday following the distribution of the releases. And they went on through Friday and the weekend as the news spread, not only among JPI clients, potential customers, suppliers, strategic partners and military-focused media but from governments that bought military equipment from Canada. Interest was 'viral' and far more than Jackson had anticipated.

## **Chapter 28**

The Russian Federation Consulate on St. Clair Avenue in north central Toronto is in an ordinary, low-rise office building. Every morning, as in thousands of offices across North America, a bored employee leafs through various newspapers of the day and clicks through several dozen websites looking for news of interest to

Mother Russia. Most of the time, the search is desultory with few rewards. This Friday was different.

There were items about the JPI software development announcement to be found at many sources. Internet sites included those that covered military and technology news and these carried the JPI trade release in its entirety. A number of the daily newspapers had small items based on the JPI general news release. One major military magazine ran a feature story on its news website, applauding JPI for its plan to redo all its software over a relatively short period of time.

*“With what has been happening recently in Ukraine, Syria, Iran and other Mid-East countries, across Africa, North Korea and even in South America with problems in Venezuela, the world has become more, not less dangerous in the past two or three years,” the magazine piece read. “We can’t wait for technology advances in four or five years. We need a complete re-haul of defence capabilities now and JPI is meeting the challenge.”*

The positive review of the JPI move was dutifully clipped and sent, with the rest of the file, to the consulate’s GRU and the Federal Security Service, the counter-intelligence service that replaced the Soviet KGB. The FSB representative saved the electronic file and moved on to other work. The GRU rep scanned the news reports for the day and immediately fired off several emails to his superiors at the Russian Federation embassy in Ottawa and to GRU headquarters, known as The Aquarium at Khodynka Airfield near Moscow. He also advised the Russian embassy in the U.S. so that the much larger group of GRU agents there would watch for similar stories in world media.

The GRU man at the consulate was also Petrenko’s handler. Serge Sokolov was a junior in Russia’s spy service in Canada. Most of the activity in Canada was directed at Russians, Ukrainians and fellow travellers working at technology and critical infrastructure companies or government agencies. Russia had limited success at gathering ‘assets’ in Canada but it kept trying because of Canada’s position as one of the ‘five eyes’ of the West’s security services and its close relationship with the U.S. Petrenko had been considered a very minor asset and valued mainly for his ties to criminals in Toronto. That had changed a few days before.

The news about JPI chilled the agent to his core. Sokolov had been the one to recruit Petrenko, one of his few successes in his Canadian posting. He had fielded Petrenko’s initial information about the Ukrainian’s contact with The Voice. He had taken the offer of stolen software to his GRU superiors in Ottawa and they had depended on his information and opinion when they, in turn, passed the opportunity on to The Aquarium. The heads of everyone in this chain were on the block if anything went wrong. Literally.

Over the coming weekend, a group of GRU agents were due to trek from Ottawa to Toronto to take control of the handover of JPI software to Petrenko by someone known only as ‘The Voice.’ They would know by now that the source code they were coming to get would be worthless in a year and of marginal value until then. Would it be worth twenty million dollars or even the ten million already paid, Sokolov wondered?



The young man held his hands out in front of him. He saw the trembling. 'Will they blame me?' He studied his hands again. 'Of course, they will. They always need someone to blame.'

## Chapter 29

"The numbers are saying this wasn't such a bad idea for all the wrong reasons," Ryan Payne told Jackson on Sunday afternoon as they shared a table at a bar near JPI's offices. Bottles of beer sat, untouched, in front of them. They were both too tired to drink alcohol.

"The calls to Marketing make me think it could be a good thing for JPI. The global economy is pretty good. Governments need to show they are putting more money into defence—particularly across NATO. The money is there. The will is there if this stuff does a better job against terrorists..."

"And bloody Russia. Don't forget what happened in Syria, in the U.K. ... nerve agent poisonings, gas attacks killing kids," Jackson's anger was stirring. "We'll have chemical agent detection into 3.0..."

"Take it easy, Jackson," Payne patted his friend on the arm. "You're sounding like a grouchy old fart. You're right, but methinks you're in need of sleep."

Within the next hour, Jackson had climbed into his bed in his condo and shortly after that, he was dreaming of sitting on his porch watching the sun set over the tranquil bay 'up north.'

And, about three hours after falling asleep, Jackson's phone rang. Groggy, he picked it up, moved the slider on the screen and answered. "Phillips."

"Jackson, my man." Gamil's voice was loud and annoyingly cheerful. "You ready for hot news?"

Jackson swung his legs over the edge of the bed and felt the aches in both knees. He set his bare feet on the floor. "I guess, Gamil. Speak."

"I had a chat with one of our three Arab friends."

"Huh?"

"Wake up Jackson. There are three Arabs who work for Petrenko, the Ukrainian agent for GRU. These are the guys who were tailing you all over town."

"Okay. I'm with you," Jackson said alertly.

"Talked with one of them. Surly asshole named Ahmed. I took along the team."

"What team, Gamil?" asked Jackson with a sigh. Gamil was the type that expected one to know everything. It was his days in the intelligence service that had done that.

"The Pyramids. It's five guys that I coach in the YMCA's basketball league. We all love the Raptors and..."

"Gamil. Stick to the point, willya," Jackson told him.

"Anyway, Ahmed now thinks we're a crew of Egyptian expats rounding up fellow Arabs to send back to Cairo for trial."

"That's nuts," Jackson muttered.

"We thought so too. But Ahmed took it seriously. What does he know? He's a Canadian with Syrian parents—probably nice people with a creep for a kid." Gamil took a break and Jackson could hear him chewing on something.

"Late supper. Sorry. Anyway, it took a while but Ahmed confirms he works for Petrenko. Doesn't like the guy but he pays the grocery bill. Mostly criminal crap; boosting car parts, trying to intimidate Arab shopkeepers. He knows Petrenko works for the Russians and lately, he's been assigned work related to JPI."

Jackson took a deep breath and held the phone tighter to his ear. "About the software?"

"This guy wouldn't know software from Zalabya." He named the sweet Egyptian doughnut that, coincidentally, he was consuming while talking. "He was just told to take his two friends and keep an eye on you. Follow you home, to work... you know. Anything he could find out about you. It's your allure, I guess, Jackson."

"Yeah, I'm beautiful for an old guy," Jackson said resignedly.

"Not so much. But Ahmed says Petrenko is out of his tiny little mind at the moment. He knows a lot about JPI and about recent news. He's raving about losing a lot of money because of a guy named Blax. He's in the press. You're on the bench. What else could it be? Petrenko is the go-between in a deal. He's getting a commission. That has to be story. Right?" Gamil paused, then said, ominously, "Everyone in the Petrenko crew is looking at Blax and this news conference coming up."

"That's tomorrow. About 15 hours from now," said Jackson after a quick glance at his bedside clock. "It's at 2 p.m. and Blax is the spokesperson," he added with alarm.

"I hope he has protection," Gamil wasn't kidding. "Ahmed tells us Petrenko mad as hell at JPI and Blax. Mad enough to do something about it."

"What does that mean, Gamil?" Jackson was frustrated.

"That's all our Arab friend knows. He did make us a promise though," Gamil added with a touch of glee. "If we don't grab him and his friends and ship them off to Egypt for hanging for making Arabs look bad, he and his buds will quit Petrenko ASAP. They'll tell Petrenko they've got something better and he can shove the chicken-bleep stuff."

"Great work," Gamil. Jackson was elated. "Gotta go. Talk more soon."

Jackson dropped that call and immediately made another. Soon afterward, Bill Brownley was wide awake as well and was calling together his security staff. Most were ex-military, three with JTF-2 special forces backgrounds. All were no strangers to duty calls at any time of day or night. All had been on high alert since the discovery of the software theft.

## **Chapter 30**

Over the weekend, there was no tranquility either in Petrenko's office or in the parking garage that was his favorite meeting place. The garage had been closed for the day hours ago but the smells of auto exhaust and leaked oil blended with those of the cigarette smoke that swirled over the heads of the four men who sat

on a cement curb and one chair at one of the ramps. The chair was occupied, at times, by Roman Petrenko. He would sit for a time but, then, leap up to conduct a harangue.

"Those bastards," he ranted as he paced up and down in front of the remnants of his crew. "Can't trust Arabs... those scumbag, rotten sons of..."

"They're Canadians, not Arabs, Mr. Petrenko." The Jamaican, Clarence Strong, was trying to be helpful.

Petrenko's face grew crimson. "I don't give a goddamn what these scum... scum..." Petrenko lost his English and began raving in Ukrainian. Clarence looked at the other two men but they were still focused on Petrenko. The two Russians had enough Ukrainian to understand some of what Petrenko was saying. One of them snickered and tried to raise his hand to cover his mouth. The pain from his damaged elbow stopped him.

"They tell me they have something better. I'll give them better." Petrenko sputtered, returning to English. "I'll kill them." He took a few paces and returned to his chair. He seemed to collapse into it and dropped his head into his hands.

One of the Russians turned to Clarence. "What the hell?" he asked, rolling his eyes.

"Ahmed, Yasser, Riad. They aren't going to work for him anymore." Clarence nodded his head toward Petrenko. "They called him to say they've got something better. Wish I did."

The two Russians looked at each other. "I am going back to Moscow," one told the other. "Couldn't be worse than this crap." The other man gave a curt nod of his head and glanced down at his injuries.

Petrenko took his cell phone from his shirt pocket. He poked at it until his call went through. The phone rang repeatedly until Petrenko terminated the call with another burst of profanity, English and Russian mixed. This was the first time his handler had ignored a call from Petrenko. He would never admit it to his crew but this scared him more than anything else.

The Voice had called him two days before to tell him the down payment had been paid by Russia to the Voice's account in Liechtenstein. To Petrenko's delight, the Voice had even paid his ten percent 'commission' into his account. One million dollars. He had spent some of it getting drunk in a local bar and he had plans to spend some more on the weekend.

The Ukrainian had a habit of stealing copies of daily newspapers from outside the doors of fellow tenants in his rental building. He would read them at the table on the nights he ate at home. The previous day, he had seen the stories in both the Toronto Star and the Globe & Mail that Jackson Phillips Inc. was dumping its current software to replace it over the coming year with Version 3.0.

Petrenko had ignored the items at first. It was all technology baffle-gab to the part-time Russian agent. But he began to think and the more he did, the more the stories seemed important. Finally, after re-reading them several times, he slammed his hand on the table, spilling the glass of vodka that was his dessert.

"Oh, Christ," he cursed. It became clear why the Voice was in a hurry for the deal to be concluded. The Voice had known what was coming; the company must have moved more quickly than the Voice thought it would.

“Blax. Maxim Blax,” Petrenko pronounced the name with bile. “You piece of shit.” He poured out all his blame on the JPI CEO quoted in the news articles. The Voice was just a robot making almost unintelligible noises on the phone. Blax was a real person. He had screwed Roman Petrenko and nobody did that to him.

Petrenko looked at his spilled vodka. He turned his glass upright and poured another shot. He drank it in one gulp. Then he threw the empty glass at the kitchen cupboards in front of him. It hit and bounced off to land, unbroken on the wood floor. He grabbed the bottle and drank directly from it. His stomach lurched. He was getting drunk but he also was terrified.

Petrenko considered the mess he was in. He had delivered the deal to his handler. He had taken a million dollars in a secret commission from the Voice. The Voice hadn’t turned over any software yet but had nine million of Russia’s money. Even if the Voice came through with the code, the software wasn’t worth anywhere near twenty million U.S. dollars. Bottom line, Petrenko told himself, his life wasn’t worth a pot of piss. And he had no idea who the Voice was or how to reach and kill the son of a bitch before the Russians killed Petrenko.

## **Chapter 31**

Serge Sokolov, Petrenko’s handler, met the men from Ottawa as they left a terminal at Pearson Airport on the northwestern outskirts of Toronto. Sokolov had to circle the terminal several times before finding a place to stop at the Arrivals outdoor curb. The delay angered the slim man at the head of the little group.

“You are late,” the leader told Serge as he scrambled out of the black SUV and around to the tailgate. “You were told 9:15 p.m. It is 9:45 p.m.”

It was also Friday evening, a very busy time at the airport and a day before the GRU cadre was scheduled to arrive in Toronto.

“I did not expect you so soon. I’m sorry to be late but...” Sokolov lifted the suitcases into the cargo area. While the other three men climbed into the vehicle’s rear seat. The handler heard grumbling as the men squeezed themselves into the two and a half seats in the rear.

“Enough excuses,” the slim man ordered. “Let us go,”

With the leader next to him in the passenger seat, Sokolov drove the consulate car out of the airport on onto Highway 427 heading into the city. As he drove, he grew more curious about this gang. Two of the men in the rear seat were white; they were still complaining and spoke in Russian. The third man, the one compressed into the middle seat, was black. Sokolov assumed the man was speaking Spanish and didn’t understand a word. Sokolov hadn’t known there were any black people at the Ottawa embassy or, for that matter, in the ranks of the GRU.

The slim man in the front seat rounded out the quartet. He sat erect in his seat and stared straight ahead through the windshield. He hadn’t spoken a word since entering the SUV.

“Good trip?” asked Sokolov with his eyes glued to the fast-moving traffic ahead. A speeder shot by on one side, too close for comfort.

“Just drive,” the slim man commanded in a sharp, high voice.

The bitching from the rear seats died away and the rest of the 30-minute trip was spent in silence.

The slim man told the handler to drive to The Four Season’s Hotel in Toronto’s Yorkville district. The hotel was several miles from the consulate and Sokolov knew rooms in the hotel went for more than \$600 a night. But his was not to reason why; his was to do whatever he could to keep from dying. He pulled the SUV into the laneway and into a parking space for cars to be unloaded.

After the bags had been taken out of the vehicle and placed on the sidewalk by a uniformed doorman, the group’s leader told Sokolov, “Get the valet to park the car and come to the lobby.”

Sokolov found the four men seated on a long couch in the lobby. Their suitcases were gone, supposedly taken to their rooms. “Gentlemen,” Sokolov told them. “I hope everything is okay.” The slim man said nothing but pointed to a bar that made up part of the lobby. “Order. Just coffee.” Minutes later, the five men were seated around a table set by a large window with a view of the sidewalk on Yorkville Avenue. A steady stream of people passed by the window but they were ignored. Coffee cups sat on the table but no one was drinking.

“So,” the slim man began in Russian. “You have screwed up, haven’t you?”

Sokolov felt an icy touch on the back of his neck.

Over the next half hour, the slim man carried out a review of everything he knew about what he called “the JPI file.” His knowledge surprised and shocked Sokolov; it was far more extensive than even he had known as Petrenko’s handler. Sokolov realized he was a minor cog in a large and complex machine.

The leader summed up. Petrenko, he said, had been contacted by a person who must be a high-level executive or key manager at Jackson Phillips Inc. That person or several persons working together had stolen source code of all the platforms and solutions developed by a division of JPI. Sokolov had ‘vouched’ for Petrenko and, therefore, for the software thief or thieves. The GRU at the highest level had approved a down payment of ten million dollars to keep the thief from going to the Chinese, North Koreans or Iranians. The GRU also approved a further ten million once the source code was actually delivered into its hands.

“But,” the leader went on. The theft had become known very quickly by JPI which, of course, has leading edge software constantly monitoring all its data including all access to its dedicated servers. Only a key employee at JPI could get to and copy the code.

It probably didn’t matter that the theft was known to JPI, said the slim man, since there was no way JPI could change the machine code derived from the source code. No way it could protect JPI clients who had the software embedded in their military equipment. No way could JPI make a huge amount of its product immune to those who had the source code.

“No way that JPI could make the stolen software worthless to us.” The slim man slammed his fist on the table causing the cups to jump and coffee to spill onto the tabletop. Several people at the other end of the bar area looked over but quickly looked away. “No way except that they found a way,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

“So JPI is developing all new software to replace the current version. We planned to produce code within a year or less. Now, by the time we are ready to

take control of all existing systems, JPI will be delivering brand new solutions. They will be well in advance of us instead of only a little. He glared at Sokolov who had shrunk into his padded seat at the table.

"Your thief has made things worse. Was this your plan against Mother Russia, Serge Sokolov?"

"My plan? God, no," blurted Sokolov, instantly regretting calling on the deity.

"So, Sokolov? Who is this thief?"

"I don't know. I swear, I don't know..." Sokolov was close to tears. He glanced at the other men hoping for sympathy but their faces were made of stone.

"You look at our black friend," the slim man observed. "He's Cuban, you know. And you also know what the Cubans can do to you, don't you?"

Sokolov was totally confused as well as petrified with fear. "I don't know..."

"He can find out what you know even faster than the rest of us." He waved at his white companions across the table and flanking Sokolov. "Shall I tell you the details?"

"No," gasped the handler. "Please, I can find out where the money went. I will ask Petrenko..."

The slim man laughed suddenly. The two other white men smiled broadly. The black Cuban remained expressionless. "We don't give a shit about the money," the GRU man made a dismissal motion with one hand. "Who is the thief?"

"And," he referred to Sokolov's comment, "Petrenko won't know. Our thief is very smart and Petrenko is very stupid. Even more stupid than you, Sokolov. No matter, we are smarter than even our thief. We'll find him or them ourselves and the code—for what it might be worth now."

Sokolov was allowed to go and the four men retired to their rooms. Once back at the wheel of the SUV, heading north to his condo, the handler wondered why these clever GRU men had talked so freely in the bar of a hotel. That bar could have been bugged. Any place could be bugged, he reflected. The consulate was wired for sound and video. Moscow was full of bugs. God, not Moscow, the handler thought. Please, not Moscow. He didn't want to be sent there.

## **Chapter 32**

Jackson, Mariah Belo, Bill Brownley and Payne got together on Saturday morning. Jackson wanted to go over the plans for the Monday news conference and any follow-up. They met at Payne's home, an expansive house in Oakville, about 30 miles west of Toronto. The group sat around a large table on the deck overlooking Lake Ontario.

Brownley, the security chief at JPI, took the floor. The others picked at plates of appetizers and sipped from glasses of fruit juice or sparkling water. He told the rest he had his 15 staffers on call and on overtime. The conference would take place in the huge lobby at JPI headquarters. All of them would attend the news conference or stand guard on the perimeter.

"There's no great reason to expect a problem but the news has created quite a stir. We could get protestors opposed to any military equipment or AI or both. As

well, there may be some intruders trying to get all the information they can about our plans. This could include competitors but it might even be clients wanting to get a jump on ordering Version 3.0. This is a conference restricted to news media and Mariah expects a lot of them, a full house, in fact.”

Brownley sketched some of the preparations before turning to appetizers and turning the floor back to Jackson.

“Bill knows what I’m going to tell the rest of you.” He looked, in order, at Mariah and Payne. “Some friends of mine have done some good surveillance work. They tracked down three guys who were keeping tabs on me and maybe some of you.” Mariah and Payne raised their eyebrows at this. “The three are Arab Canadians but that doesn’t mean anything. They are just thugs.”

Jackson took a sip of sparkling water. “These three worked for a Ukrainian named Roman Petrenko. I say ‘worked’ because my friends persuaded the hoods to take a hike. So, Petrenko is now down to a crew of three, a Jamaican and two Russians.”

“Sounds pretty low level, Jackson. How does this connect with JPI and why were these bad guys following you?” Mariah looked puzzled.

“According to my friends and a few contacts at CSIS, Petrenko works part time for the Russians, the GRU. Military intelligence and I use the expression advisedly since Petrenko is about as intelligent as a brick.” Mariah opened her mouth to speak.

“Hold it,” Jackson said, plunging ahead. “We figure that our thief—or thieves—is using Petrenko as a go-between trying to sell the source code to the Russians.”

“But,” interrupted Maria, “would the Russians want the code now? It’s not worth much because it will be obsolete before the Russians could do anything with it.”

“Good question.” Jackson poured some more water into his glass. “We think, from what the Arabs said before they hit the road, Petrenko has been talking about him getting quite a bit of money recently. Maybe a commission on the sale. It’s possible the Russians made the buy before we announced 3.0—when the Russians still believed the source code was valuable.”

“Now they know,” mused Payne, “what are the Russians going to do if they’ve already bought the code?”

“Put it this way. I wouldn’t want to be in Petrenko’s shoes,” said Brownley. “Or the shoes of the thief if the Russians know who that is. Jackson’s plan to develop 3.0 may have put these people in a great deal of trouble.”

“Wouldn’t that be a shame?” Jackson’s voice was full of irony.

Mariah was next up. She went through the details of the upcoming news conference and reported on the success of the news releases she had released two days before. It was picked up by several major wire services including Canadian Press, Reuters and Associated Press. Many newspapers had published articles. It was read by anchors on various television business shows and reprinted on a number of websites. Millions of people, including all JPI clients, would have access to the news.

She gave the group more insight into her philosophy and why reporters hadn’t worked harder on the reasons behind a complete and expensive replacement of JPI’s current software version.

“We took the initiative, before anyone leaked information. Media see this as JPI’s launch and promotion. It’s a good story because of our niche and size. How could there be a problem if we’re blowing our own horn and doing it first? If, however, the dirt ever comes to the surface, some media will jump on it—and we’ll have to deal with it. By then, I hope, we’ll have 3.0 up and running and 2.0 will be, as they say, ‘old news.’

She turned to the actual coverage. “There’s no doubt the Russians will see it,” she told the group. “If they bought the source code before our announcement, they would be some pissed off now.” Payne led the laughter.

## Chapter 33

That morning, Petrenko had his own meeting. Present were his two Russian gangster types and Clarence, the Jamaican cook who doubled as a Petrenko accomplice. Absent were the three Arab Canadians who had been frightened off by the threat of being kidnapped and sent to Egypt. Since one of the three had been the security guard at Petrenko’s favorite parking garage and his access to the place, today’s meeting was in a Tim Horton’s coffee shop.

Petrenko had just begun to talk when four men entered the shop and strode to Petrenko’s table. The four were casually dressed—jeans, Ts and light jackets in the types worn by runners. Each wore black training shoes. They walked purposefully and had the look of former soldiers down to their short haircuts and alert eyes.

The slim man heading the new group addressed Petrenko in Russian. “We have to talk.”

“Says who?” Petrenko remained seated and peered insolently at the newcomer.

The slim man pulled back his jacket front to disclose the butt of a gun tucked into his waistband. “We are GRU,” he growled.

Petrenko grew pale. He looked, desperately, at his men around the table. They were confused and unmoving. Petrenko nodded slowly. He stood. His men stayed seated. “Hey assholes,” Petrenko told his men in a forced tone. “Move it, will ya.” His voice squeaked.

The seven men were led down the street by the slim man until they reached a small park. He turned into the area, found a bench and sat on it. The others trailed him. The GRU team sat on the long bench. Petrenko’s Russians pushed a large waste bin on its side and sat on it. The Jamaican sat on the ground and crossed his legs in front of him. Petrenko shoved his way onto one end of the waste bin. The slim man leaned forward.

“We want the thief.” He was curt.

Petrenko gaped at the GRU men. “I don’t know this thief. It is a voice, a disguised voice on the phone.”

“We have your bank account details. You got one million from this voice.” It wasn’t a question.

The three members of Petrenko’s crew glared at their boss. “What the hell, mon,” said the Jamaican. “You get a million and you don’t give us nothing. Hey Mon. Whatcha do dat for?”



“Who is the thief who gave you one million dollars?”

Petrenko’s eyes opened wide. “That is my money. And I don’t know who the thief is. It is The Voice.”

The GRU team rose as one. The Jamaican looked at Petrenko, then at his two fellow crew members. There was alarm in his wide eyes. Petrenko was staring at the GRU leader but the other two were as startled as the Jamaican.

The crew stood as one and faced the four GRU men. “Hey, mon. This is on Petrenko,” the Jamaican protested, pointing at his boss. “We are walking away...”

The Cuban peeled off from his team and took two steps to the Jamaican, forcing the other black man to step back. The Jamaican put up a hand to push back but, with incredible speed, the Cuban’s hands shot out to grab the extended arm. There was a sharp crack and the Jamaican screamed in pain. His arm dropped to his side with the palm of his hand facing outward. The ulnar had been twisted and snapped.

The Jamaican looked at his arm in disbelief before the incredible shock and pain drove him to his knees where he grabbed his broken arm with the other hand and crooned in agony.

The two Russian hoods were frozen, transfixed in horror. “Shit,” one breathed. The other opened his mouth but no sound came out.

The leader of the GRU team smirked as he took in the two bandaged Russians. “Heroes,” he said in derision. “You are Russians so we will not hurt you. Unless you are foolish enough to fight us.”

Both Russians shook their heads vigorously. One held up a hand and said in Russian, “We are not with him, any more. We won’t fight...” He quickly dropped his arm to his side, remembering what the Cuban had done when a hand had been offered.

“Good,” said the slim man. He motioned to his team and each paired with a hood to march them out of the park toward a white van parked by the curb. Their leader nodded his head at Petrenko and, when Petrenko finally stood, the GRU man walked out of the park, expecting Petrenko to tag along behind him. In a minute or two, the van was loaded with the eight men and, with the Cuban at the wheel, it pulled away from the curb.

During the drive, the slim man used a secure cell phone to call a number assigned to the Russian consulate. Sokolov answered within two rings. “Da,” said Petrenko’s handler after his GRU commander had spoken briefly. “I know where...” he confirmed in Russian but there was no one to hear him.

## **Chapter 34**

Half an hour later, Serge Sokolov parked his consulate SUV outside the abandoned plant off Commissioner’s Street in the Port Lands area of Toronto. The Port Lands were being transformed from an unused section of Toronto’s lakefront into a futuristic community. This abandoned building, however, wasn’t much more than a pile of filthy bricks waiting for final demolition.

One of the GRU Russians was standing outside the plant. He waved Sokolov to the building and the two entered it through an old wooden door that sported a shiny new padlock and hasp.

Sokolov was met by a strange sight. The three other GRU men were seated on upturned crates in one corner of the huge, empty space that was lit with sunlight filtered through dirt-covered windows high on the concrete walls. Against the wall, Petrenko and his three remaining thugs were sitting on the concrete floor, their backs against the wall. Their hands and legs were bound.

The black man Sokolov knew as the Jamaican member of Petrenko's little gang sagged against the wall and something seemed to be wrong with his side or his arm. Sokolov also noted how the man's face had changed from coffee-coloured to greyish brown.

The slim man, the GRU leader, pointed Sokolov to a fifth crate and the handler moved to take the offered seat.

"We have asked them who the thief is but it seems they do not know," said the slim man. "I thought you might want to add your... what's the expression in English... your two cents." The leader then glared at Sokolov. "About what our source code is worth. Two cents."

Sokolov was petrified. He had never been put into such a spot in his years in the GRU's diplomatic service. True, he had acted tough when speaking to recruits like Petrenko, but he had never been tested in combat or even a barroom fight.

"I do not think they know," he found the courage to say. "Petrenko has said nothing that would identify the thief. He called him The Voice—like the television program." The GRU men looked blank at the reference.

"So," said the slim man, "How do we find this thief? And, when we do, what do we do with him?"

Sokolov was speechless.

The slim man smiled benignly. "Never mind, my little diplomatic coward. I will tell you. We will definitely identify this thief. We will ask him to deliver the source code in person." Sokolov frowned quizzically. "We will meet him. He will introduce himself politely. Then we will pay him the rest of his money. Another ten million dollars in United States money."

Sokolov was rocked by this. "His money... but... but you said the code was not worth anything. Why would we pay...?"

"Because," answered the slim man with a smug smile, "we want this thief to keep working for us. We want him to steal the new solutions as they are developed over the next year."

Sokolov's mind was churning. He was still frightened but he was also confused. "But, JPI says it will spend more than one hundred million dollars in this year to develop those solutions..."

That was met by another look of disdain. "See what a bargain we will have," said the slim man with glee. "We will get one hundred million plus worth of value from only twenty million dollars and we will still get this source code for whatever it's worth. We are so clever, Sokolov. Don't you think so?"

The handler shifted his body on the crate. It was very uncomfortable. "Yes." He murmured after bringing some order to the thoughts swirling in his brain. "Yes, that is clever." He looked at Petrenko and saw the man had understood Russian

and had been appalled. The plan would make Petrenko irrelevant and, therefore, worthless.

Sokolov nodded toward the four men against the wall. "And them?"

The slim man looked at Petrenko's gang with false pity. "Ah, our criminal friends. What of them. We'll have to see, won't we? Perhaps they will be the ones to identify our thief after all." With that enigmatic comment, the slim man rose and walked away. The Cuban remained as the white GRU men followed in their leader's wake. Sokolov looked once more at Petrenko, shrugged, and followed the GRU group.

One of the GRU team ran ahead and returned driving a black SUV similar to the consulate vehicle. Another grunted to Sokolov, "Four Seasons".

Shortly, both vehicles were parked in the underground garage at The Four Seasons Hotel in Yorkville and the four GRU agents were seated around the same table by the window of the lobby bar.

"What will happen to Petrenko and his men?" asked Sokolov of the man sitting next him.

"Ask Vasily," the man said glancing across the table to the team leader.

"Vasily... uh, sir," Sokolov began.

The man revealed as Vasily looked at Sokolov as though the consultant worker was an insignificant insect. "They will be fine."

"Can I know your names?" the young man asked the team leader.

"All you need to know, Serge, is that I am Vasily Grigoryevich Zaytsev and I am a Captain in the GRU.

"Ah." Sokolov was awed. "You are named for Zaytsev, the sniper?"

"And..." smiled the Captain, impressed at Sokolov's knowledge of military history, "...and a Hero of the Soviet Union. My great uncle. You know, of course, that during World War II he killed 32 of those Nazi bastards with an ordinary rifle."

"Yes, sir. I know."

"Then," Captain Vasily Zaytsev said in a menacing voice, "you realize what could happen if I get angry with you."

Sokolov reared back in his chair. He began to shiver noticeably.

Zaytsev's men began to laugh loudly. "Ha," said one with tears in his eyes from the sudden merriment, "he scared the crap out of you, little man. Didn't he—our hero Captain?"

Zaytsev waved his hand and the others stopped laughing. In a few sentences, Zaytsev explained to Sokolov that they had simply taken Petrenko and his men out of the picture so they would not interfere with the work the GRU team had to do.

It was the job of this team to find the software thief. It was also their job to assess the situation at JPI. They were to determine if the source code for 2.0 had any value at all to Russia. They also were to assess the new value of Version 3.0 to be developed by JPI over the coming year.

"Our main task, should we agree to accept it," Zaytsev said lightly, quoting the famous line from Mission Impossible, "is to see if this thief would like to work for Russia some more by putting hands on Version 3.0 for us."

Sokolov saw the genius of it and was impressed. He had wondered if the GRU team from Ottawa knew which end was up in Toronto. Now he knew he was in a

different league. His remaining question was whether he would survive the encounter with these pros.

Zaytsev laughed. "Don't worry, Serge. We would very much like your help on these tasks." He paused. "And if we succeed because of your help, you may even get a free trip home to Moscow."

Sokolov smiled but, internally, he was sick to his stomach at the prospect of being rewarded with what he dreaded.

## Chapter 35

The group retired to the suite the team had booked. No sooner than they entered the room, a cellphone rang. Zaytsev had collected all three of Petrenko's phones and he took one out of his jacket pocket. He looked at the screen. It read 'number blocked.' He sighed and accepted the call.

The Voice was heavily disguised. "Petrenko. I have to talk to you."

Zaytsev didn't respond.

"Petrenko. Are you there." There was a sudden alarm in the Voice that came through in spite of the robotic sound. "It's about the code."

"This is not Petrenko but don't hang up. I, too, would like to talk about the code... and about money."

The Voice was silent and the silence went on until Zaytsev said, "Don't be alarmed. I am a step up from Petrenko. I am someone you will want to speak with."

There was a full minute of more silence but Zaytsev was patient. "Alright. I can talk for two minutes only."

"Fine." Zaytsev introduced himself by giving his name and rank. "Let me be blunt." Zaytsev was speaking in unaccented English. "We all realize the source code for Version 2.0 is almost useless to us. You have our money and we have nothing. Not only that but you have given Petrenko one million of our money. We are not happy."

The Voice cut in. "I can give you back your money except for that one million. I thought he worked for you so that's your problem."

Zaytsev was quick to reply. "Okay. Forget the million and forget Petrenko. He's out of the picture in any event. Here's the bottom line." He let this sink in for a moment. "You keep your nine million and we give you the other ten million you demanded."

There was a sharp intake of breath that slipped by the voice changer application. "What do you want?"

"We get the source code even if it is not worth ten thousand, much less twenty million. But we also find out who you really are. And you get hold of Version 3.0 as it is developed and give it to us." Zaytsev glanced at his men and grinned as he waited for the response.

Again, the Voice was silent, running over the two-minute limit. "I am not going to tell you who I am."

“That’s non-negotiable. Besides,” said the Captain, “you know we will find out eventually. If you don’t get to know you, we can’t trust you. If we can’t trust you... well, you understand what that will mean.” He left the threat hanging.

“And I get the money? All of it?” Zaytsev could feel the greed.

“Yes. You will hand over the source code in person. You can tell us your name when we meet.”

“I can’t...” The Voice began.

“You can and you will or you will not get another ten million. We will find you. We will get back our nine million plus Petrenko’s million. And JPI will get you—or what remains of you—to do as they want. Am I clear?”

The Voice mumbled something. There was silence. Then there was a peculiar sound, like a muted scream. “You are clear. You’ll get your code. We will meet. But, no more threats. Not one more. Am I clear?”

“You certainly are, my friend. And no more of these silly robot games. Call me when you pick the meeting place.” Zaytsev disconnected before The Voice had the opportunity.

## Chapter 36

Sunday morning, Jackson was up before 7 a.m. He never slept past that time anyway and often awakened every hour on the hour. Sometimes he would think himself back to sleep; other times he would visit the bathroom and get distracted on his way back to the bedroom by the television, a book lying on his coffee table or staring into the night from his balcony. This morning, he was thinking about the next day’s scheduled news conference and Maxim Blax’s role in it.

Max had agreed to be the corporate spokesperson. It made sense that he would be the face of the JPI going into the company’s largest development project. The problem was that Jackson didn’t trust the CEO to handle the duties entailed.

Over a microwaved egg, single slice of toast and large cup of coffee, Jackson went over the day ahead. He went to his building’s small gymnasium and used the rowing machine for 45 minutes. Then, he called Mariah, Payne, Fred Nbodo and COO Carmen Flores. Within an hour, all four of them gathered in his condo unit.

Mariah brought the script that would be put up for Blax to read from a teleprompter. She also brought a list of questions and suggested answers that Blax would give to reporters.

“Good reporters don’t often give lists of their questions and, even when they do, they don’t submit the juiciest ones,” Mariah told the two men.

“Juicy. What’s that mean?” Payne was edgy. “We’re fighting for our lives here and reporters see it as ‘juicy.’”

Mariah nodded. “The media thinks negative events are juicy because, quite simply, negative is rarer than positive. Rare is more interesting. Therefore, negatives are ‘juicy.’ But don’t forget, the media doesn’t see this news conference as a negative. We’re promoting a big positive for JPI—the development of a whole new list of products in a very short period of time. It’s a first for our industry.”

“And,” added Jackson, “You say yourself, Payne, that it’s looking more and more like a smart thing to do. A profitable thing. So far, media see this as a positive story—okay but not all that juicy. And that’s a good thing.”

Payne thought about Jackson’s words for a moment. Then, he agreed that the redevelopment exercise could be very profitable. It’s a great time to do it, he said, because the economy is at a zenith having built steadily since 2014. The money is there for the military to spend more. As well, with the instability around the world and the growth of domestic terrorism, there’s an acceptance by civilians that more defence is a good thing.

“Sure,” he added, “there are anxieties about intrusions on their privacy but the trade-offs more than outweigh the worries.”

“That’s debatable,” Carmen argued. “And we might get questions tomorrow on that very thing.”

Mariah waved several sheets of paper at Jackson. “But we have good answers.”

Fred, the technology chief, put down his coffee cup and frowned. “Speaking of which,” he said in his quiet voice, “how about the big question of the day. Did JPI suffer the theft of its software code? And is this why we’re dumping out current stuff because it’s compromised?”

“Jesus, Fred,” Payne sputtered, trying to swallow his coffee and speak at the same time. “Where did that come from?”

Jackson interceded. “We can’t assume someone won’t get that story. Good question, Fred. So, what’s our answer... no, what’s Max’s answer if he gets that question?”

Everyone looked at Mariah. Her mouth turned down. “A very good question with a very bad answer. I just don’t know what Max’s answer will be—to anything. My team has sent him everything from the news releases to a fairly long list of Q & A for the news conference. He hasn’t replied. He won’t even confirm receipt of our emails.”

“Maybe he’s worried about security. Are the emails encrypted?” Carmen Flores looked directly at Mariah.

“Of course. And they are sent through a protected server, internal use only. No, that’s can’t be it because Max uses the system all the time. He just doesn’t respond.” Mariah sat back in her chair with a resigned look on her face.

Jackson poked a finger at the screen of his phone. A few seconds later, he spoke into the device. “Max. Jackson. Sorry to call you on a Sunday but I’ve been talking to PR and they wonder why you aren’t responding to their emails about tomorrow’s news conference.”

He put the call on speaker phone. Max’s voice was clear to all. “I didn’t respond, Mr. Phillips, because I will not be scripted. I am an adult and CEO of JPI and I will say what I want to say. Not something put in my mouth by...” His tone was demeaning. “...by underlings.”

“These are professionals, Max,” said Jackson with anger in his tone. “They know how to talk to media and they are offering you good advice. They are not underlings and I won’t have you speak of them like that.”

“Oh, you won’t. Well, Mr. Phillips, listen to me carefully. I will suggest to the press that JPI is thinking about updating its software. We have not decided we will spend a stupid amount of money redoing everything. Maybe we will. Maybe we

won't. And I will be the one who will tell them what we will do when I determine what we will do."

"Max," Jackson cut in. "You are insane. If you think..." There was only dead air. Blax had disconnected. Jackson looked at his phone before slamming it on the table.

He looked chagrined as he took in the others around the table. "Sorry. That guy just gets me down."

Payne looked back at Jackson. "He gets us all, Jackson. I think you're right. He's as crazy as a loon. What do we do about it, Mariah? It's your party tomorrow."

Mariah shrugged. "I'll figure something out," she said disconsolately.

Carmen Flores stood up. There was a stern look on her face. "We should be patient and wait until the conference before we judge him. I'm sure he'll do what is best for the company." With that said, Carmen picked up her purse from beneath her chair and left the table. "I have to go now. I've got company coming." And off she went.

The rest chatted on for a few minutes but the meeting broke up and Jackson was left alone in his apartment studying the notes Mariah had left for him.

## Chapter 37

It was late in the day on Sunday. Max Blax was a creature of habit and his habit on most Sundays was to have dinner at a marvelous fish restaurant about eight blocks from his condo building. He would walk to and from the eatery unless it was raining and this late afternoon it was glorious outside.

He dined on sea bass and watched the celebrities who frequented the place come and go with their retinues. Afterward, he made his way homeward. Vehicular traffic was busy, as usual in downtown Toronto, but the route had little to attract pedestrians. He had the wide sidewalk largely to himself. It was now growing dark.

Blax didn't notice the person in the dark-coloured hoodie and black track pants who came from the dark doorway of an office building to trail behind him. He walked next to a low concrete wall topped with bushes that separated the sidewalk from a children's playground. Traffic zipped by to his left. He had almost reached a plexiglass bus shelter when the figure behind him began to run. He heard a few footsteps just before he felt a severe pain in his left knee. As his leg collapsed, he felt another blow, more a push, on the right side of his back. He fell toward the roadway. The last thing he heard was a blast from a car horn and a screech of brakes.

"Jackson?" It was Payne on the phone. Jackson had just turned off the tv. The Blue Jays had lost another game. "It's Payne."

"What are you doing up at..." Jackson checked his watch. "...10:30 p.m."

"Very funny," Payne retorted. "But this is serious. Max is in hospital."

"What?"

"Max. He was run over by a car on Davenport Road. I just got a call from a detective. Detective Sergeant Jaya Kumar."

“A detective? For a traffic accident?” Jackson knew detectives didn’t deal with such things even when they were ‘PIs’, personal injury accidents.

“She said Max was pushed into the path of the car. Someone tried to kill him.”

“How bad is it?” Jackson asked, trying to recover from his astonishment.

Payne told Phillips what little he knew from his conversation with the Detective from 53 Division of the Toronto PD. Blax suffered a broken kneecap, a bad bump on his head and the car apparently had run over his arm, breaking bones and dislocating it from the shoulder. His injuries were not ‘life threatening’, the officer told Payne but they were serious. He was in ‘fair’ condition at Toronto Western Hospital.

“So, he’s in good hands,” Jackson remarked after Payne had finished the litany of damages to the CEO. Jackson had undergone hip surgery some years before at Toronto Western. It was a large, high-quality institution.

“But, Jackson, what does this do to the news conference?”

The two discussed the conference planned for 2 p.m. the next day but agreed, eventually, that it would be up to Mariah to determine whether to reschedule the event or go ahead with another spokesperson. Jackson asked Payne if he would do it but Payne flatly turned down the suggestion. He argued that he didn’t have the technical knowledge to deal with questions from technology press.

That took Jackson to a late-night phone conversation with Mariah. The PR woman was a quick thinker. “There’s one good solution,” she said in a tone that brooked no dispute. “You will be the spokesman, Jackson.”

While Jackson’s first impulse was to argue against him representing the company, his first emotion was relief. ‘Hell, yes,’ he told himself. “Well,” he told Mariah, “we don’t have much choice, do we? I’ll do it.”

“See you at 9 a.m. at the office,” she said in a voice that sounded suspiciously delighted. She cut the call.

Jackson looked at his watch and yawned. He was planning his remarks as he dropped off to sleep.

## **Chapter 38**

Jackson took a taxi to Toronto Western Hospital at 8 a.m. He found Max’s room in the Intensive Care Unit and was allowed in under strict orders to stay no longer than ten minutes.

Jackson found Blax hooked up to several machines, lying in a bed with raised sidebars. The man’s body seemed encased in bandages and his head was swathed in a gauss fabric. His eyes were shut and his breathing seemed regular.

“Hello, Max,” Jackson spoke quietly as he bent forward at the bedside. There was no reply.

A nurse entered and Jackson and she exchanged pleasantries. “He was awake earlier but didn’t say anything,” the nurse said. “He’s mildly sedated while we determine the extent of injuries to his brain, if any.”



Jackson looked at Max again for several moments but seeing no activity, he waved goodbye at the busy nurse and exited the room and the hospital. By 9 a.m., he was in the PR unit at JPI waiting for Mariah Belo.

She came in with her laptop computer and a few sheets of paper. Jackson marveled at the woman's morning look; she seemed cool, collected and quite striking regardless of the stress she must be under. She put down her laptop on the board table and handed the papers across to Jackson before taking a chair.

The top sheet on the slim pile of paper was the introduction to Jackson that Mariah would give to open the news conference. He was identified as the founder and former CEO of JPI and as a current board member and acting CEO in the absence of Maxim Blax. She would explain that Mr. Blax had been involved in an accident the night before and had suffered serious injuries but was expected to recover fully, according to doctors. The intro did not go into detail about the accident and did not mention the police investigation into it or the hospital in which Blax was being treated.

"If they ask, we'll answer," she offered when Jackson raised his eyes, "But if they don't, we won't."

During the morning, Jackson and Mariah went over the material for the conference. Others were asked to come by to suggest questions while the two figured out answers. Payne's questions were the only ones Mariah hadn't anticipated and Jackson doubted if they were queries journalists would make.

"How many clients does JPI have today and how many do you think you'll have in a year?"

"Is that a trick question, Payne?" asked Jackson with a show of annoyance.

"Nope. The trick question would be how many clients will JPI lose over the year as they think they are using obsolete and maybe vulnerable software."

"Point taken." Jackson began to worry.

"Yes," Mariah observed, "but look at it this way. By announcing new software a year in advance, we're competing with what is in place today. We're competing with ourselves, in fact. But what would happen if a rival company announced they were bringing out brand new product across the board..."

"Ouch," said Payne. "You're right. Whatever we lose now and over the coming year, we'll make it up in spades when 3.0 hits the market."

Finally, Mariah closed her laptop and brushed her hands together. "That's it. Done, Finito."

Jackson was tired. The pouches under his eyes had blackened and his mouth drooped. He looked his age.

"Lunch and a rest or vice versa," Mariah ordered.

Jackson took the versa with a short nap on a couch in a spare meeting room on the PR floor. After that, he went for a light lunch by himself, saying he wanted solitude to think about his role in the conference. In reality, he also wanted a splash of water on his face and a couple of aspirins to quell the aches in his knees, having been sitting for three hours.

Promptly at 2 p.m., Brownley's security men crossed the lobby of the building housing Jackson Phillips Inc. and stood beside the long velvet rope hanging on a dozen stanchions. One of the men unhooked a six-foot section of the crowd control rope and stood aside to allow a parade of journalists to enter the area set aside for

the news conference. Another two men from Brownley's team checked the media credentials of the reporters and photographers as they passed.

Reporters took their seats in rows of chairs set out in front of a raised platform that contained a lectern with the JPI logo emblazoned on its front. Several one-way mirrors were mounted so that the speaker could see words projected on the glass while the audience saw only clear panes in front of the spokesperson.

Mariah took her place behind the lectern at 2:05 p.m. and waited until the hubbub in the rows of reporters died out.

"Thank you for coming to Jackson Phillips Incorporated's announcement of the development of Version 3.0 of all of our software..." Mariah spoke for three minutes. She told the surprised audience of the accident the night before that had hospitalized Maxim Blax, JPI's CEO. "In his place, I am very gratified to be able to introduce Jackson Phillips. Mr. Phillips agreed to fill in for Mr. Blax while he is recuperating. As you will know, Mr. Phillips is the best person to speak for Mr. Blax because Jackson—he likes the name—founded this company some 15 years ago, served as CEO until just over a year ago and, in fact, helped choose Mr. Blax as his successor."

After her introduction of Jackson, Mariah said, "As you also know, JPI develops, maintains, upgrades and markets software for a large number of military purposes. We are expected by our clients, including many government bodies, to apply the highest levels of security to our products, our work and, in this case, to our announcements. You will have questions for us that we will answer freely and truthfully. You will have questions—we know you will—that we cannot answer for reasons of security. When you ask questions that would cause us security worries, not only won't we answer, we will tell you only that 'We decline to answer.'"

Mariah listened to the groans from various journalists before continuing. "I ask you not to misquote us. When we say, *We decline to answer*, we are not saying the premise of your question is right or wrong. For instance, you might ask us why we decided to replace Version 2.0 with 3.0 across the board. For security reasons, we won't answer that question at all. We decline to discuss our reasons, period. If you ask us about any rumours you may have heard, we will decline to answer. If you ask us for specific elements or functionality to be included in 3.0, we will decline."

"Will you answer any questions?" A reporter in the front row had risen and shouted out his query.

"Hi, Jerry. Don't get too excited. Although this is an exciting occasion." Mariah's quip was greeted with laughter from a lot of the journalists. As you will hear, there is plenty of news here. And plenty of questions will be answered. So, let's get to it. Here is Jackson Phillips." She emphasized his name.

There was only one way in which an honest reporter among the hundred or so in the group could describe Jackson Phillips as he moved to the podium and that was 'dignified.' He stood erect at his full six feet, one-inch height. From the short grey hair on his head to the stylish black shoes on his feet, he was the picture of self-confidence. He had a smile that was warmly inviting. His suit was perfectly tailored, obviously expensive but refined. His tie was a Holt Renfrew with a flash of colour but modest in all of that.

"Good afternoon, and I can say I'm delighted to see a lot of familiar faces among you. Given the state of the news media today, I am glad so many of you are

surviving.” This comment was met by a wave of chuckles. Layoffs were constantly on the mind of each reporter here as media cut staff to keep themselves alive in the face of online competition.

“Speaking of survival, I want you to know I was in happy retirement a week ago and here I am back in best bib and tucker, dragged onto this platform to deal with a roomful of lions.” More laughter. “But, I am even happier to be here with you to make one of the most welcome announcements I have ever made. The development of Version 3.0 of JPI software is going to be the most outstanding achievement of this company and I am overjoyed to be part of it.”

Version 3.0 is also going to be, I have no doubt, the most advanced software in the world to ensure the best safety and security possible for members of our allied armed forces and...” he verbally underlined ‘and’ and paused for a heartbeat, “...civilians who are caught in war zones or who may be targets of terrorist acts anywhere.”

The faces of many of the reporters turned from their notebooks, cellphones and video cameras or monitors to the podium and Phillips. Foreheads creased as many processed Phillips reference to ‘civilians.’ Did this mean JPI was expanding its customer base to include civilian-centric products or that it would cut back on military marketing or...?

Phillips went on for several paragraphs of his teleprompter script. He was a practiced presenter and his reading from notes was as fluid as if he were adlibbing the speech. He explained the basic purposes of 3.0 but did not get into details of its functionality.

“In general, as you will know, warfare and acts of terrorism have been changing in dramatic ways. We at JPI believe we can identify and understand these changes—and we have incorporated some of this, of course, in current software. We have the learning, the opportunity and the obligation now to get in front of all these new methods of warfare and terrorism with Version 3.0 of all our software. We have a clear vision of how to build solutions that will be the new base for military and civilian defence.”

Phillips spoke for several more minutes but concentrated on risks faced by soldiers, sailors, aviators and civilian populations. He talked about the skills of JPI personnel. He also gave a brief overview of JPI’s abilities in Artificial Intelligence or Machine Learning. He omitted the word ‘targeting’ from the discussion of JPI software. He introduced the new name of the MLD&T Division to the Safe Environment Division. “And now I have told you about SED in what I’ve said, I’ll turn the floor over to you and your incredibly incisive questions.”

## **Chapter 39**

A chuckling reporter in the front row was selected by Mariah to ask the first question. “Mr. Phillips, your current solutions are, in general, only two years old. Why would you want to spend a large amount on a whole new version for all of that instead of just issuing upgrades?”

The answer came quickly with an admonition. “I’ve known you for years, Everett. It has been *Jackson* until now so don’t change that. You make me feel so much older than my 45 years.”

He waited for Everett to nod and grin. “As I said, we realized we have the learning, the opportunity and the obligation now to get in front of all these new methods of warfare and terrorism with Version 3.0 of all our software.”

Mariah quickly pointed to a videographer in mid-audience, calling her “Stephanie.”

“Jackson,” Stephanie pointed her video camera at Phillips and zoomed into a close-up. “Is there something wrong with the current software that would cause you to dump everything and start over?”

“Jackson looked at Stephanie with a relaxed smile. “Thank you, Stephanie. We decline to answer.” He nodded to Mariah to choose another questioner.

Stephanie didn’t give up that easily. She refocused to a wider shot and raised her voice. “Does that mean there is a problem at JPI?”

“We decline to answer, Stephanie.” By including the name of the reporter in his answer, Jackson was lessening even more the chance of the video being used in a number of news reports. It would be hard for another reporter or outlet to re-use the video clip when it was obviously made to a journalist named ‘Stephanie.’ The question and answer were quotes Jackson did not want used by any outlet.

At the same time, most journalists in the room knew they couldn’t do much, if anything, with Jackson’s “We decline to answer,” quote. They couldn’t any good conscience, use the quote to write, “Phillips refused to discuss any negative pressure at JPI...” given Mariah’s introduction to the conference. If they did use such an allusion to Jackson’s refusal to answer, journalist would be at the mercy of JPI and other commentators. *We decline to answer* meant that and only that, period.

There were more questions, notably many asking for details about Version 3.0 developments. ‘How would anti-terrorist solutions work to detect IEDs. How would camouflage be redesigned? How would solutions be integrated into drone technology?’ In all such cases, Jackson decline to answer with specifics but, then, broadened the question to give a generalized answer.

“There are things that may not be fully addressed in defensive measures against terrorism. These things *will be addressed* by Version 3.0—and AI will help to keep the version refreshed and ahead of terrorist abilities far into the future.” That repurposed answer would be sufficient for many of the journalists in the lobby, including military media staffers and freelancers.

Finally, the news conference wrapped with Mariah seemingly begging for more questions from the crowd of flagging journalists. Bottles of cold water were set on several long tables at the back of the crowd. Some of the journalists quenched their thirsts while most left in a rush, not realizing the air conditioning in the lobby had been turned off half an hour before.

“Whew,” said Mariah to Jackson as they gathered notes and other evidence of the conference. Technicians were unplugging and unmounting the teleprompter and JPI’s own video recording equipment. “Very few horrible questions. You did an amazing job, Jackson. Thank you so much.”

“Just following the teacher,” Jackson gave a small bow to the PR woman. “I thought it went as well as possible.”

Payne came to the two and heard the last comment. “It was a thing of beauty... like well-aged wine,” he enthused with a mocking glance at Jackson. “I could feel our stock going up and up—if we had stock. At worst, we aren’t going to lose a hell of a lot with this crazy idea. And we might make a buck or two with 3.0.”

“Gee,” Jackson retorted, copying Payne’s backhanded compliments, “Let’s have a crisis every year.”

Mariah moaned softly. “God... you two,” she scolded.

Mariah and Jackson walked through the lobby together. “It’s like a chess match, isn’t it?”

Jackson looked down at her. He raised an eyebrow.

“The media is looking several moves ahead, thinking about how to turn the quotes and questions into an interesting story. The interviewer should be looking several moves ahead, thinking about quotes and answers that will make the story both interesting and positive. That’s harder to do. Much harder if you lie.” Mariah stopped at the elevator. “We can’t do that.”

Jackson looked down again, impressed as usual with the woman. “But,” he added, “Fox and Trump lied incessantly to make him President of the United States.”

“Yes.” Mariah’s pretty brown face turned upward, poignantly sad.

Before the elevator came, Jackson’s phone dinged. He checked his email and turned away to make a call. Mariah boarded the elevator and was gone.

Media accounts began to flow with an hour of the conference, in a trickle, a stream and then a flood at least in military and business trade press. It began to appear in mass media web sites in the late afternoon and on the front pages of business sections of major dailies the next morning.

Jackson had fretted, thinking he had jammed too much promotional blah into his statements to the media. As usual, however, reporters simply dropped the ‘outstanding’ and ‘overjoyed’ adjectives and adverbs and concentrated on the facts.

Many outlets, newspapers, TV, radio and the web, used the Canadian Press article distributed by the wire service.

*‘Jackson Phillips Inc., a military technology company based in Toronto, will spend the next year developing Version 3.0 of its entire line of software. Founder and former CEO Jackson Phillips announced the project today promising “the most advanced software in the world” to provide safety and security for allied armed forces and civilians caught in war zones or targeted by terrorists.*

*‘Mr. Phillips told about 100 journalists, “Warfare and acts of terrorism have been changing in dramatic ways. We have the learning, the opportunity and the obligation now to get in front of all these new methods of warfare and terrorism with Version 3.0 of all our software.”*

*‘Mr. Phillips said the results of the development will be “solutions that will be the new base for military and civilian defence.”*

The CP article talked about the change of name of a JPI division to the Safe Environment Division (SED).

The question that had most worried Jackson and Mariah was asked. "Is there something wrong with the current software that would cause you to dump everything and start over?" Jackson had answered, "We decline to answer." From the coverage they saw, the answer did the trick. Without an answer, reporters lost interest in the query.

Mariah might have felt a twinge of guilt in having skirted around a question that could have unravelled the conference and even the company. But that guilt was assuaged when she and Jackson determined that the media should not have decided the future of the company and its thousands of employees with a single, random question. She knew the answer was still out there if anyone chose to do their homework.

In a short debriefing session after the conference, Mariah's summation was, "You saved the company, Jackson. I can't imagine a news conference with Max having nothing positive to offer. I'd be looking for a job at Google, just like everyone else."

"And I'd be in my cottage looking at the bay, with my feet on my ottoman and a cold beer in my hand. You're right," Jackson said sardonically. "It would be a disaster."

## Chapter 40

Barbara Schumacher, a receptionist in the CEO's office suite at JPI and Petrenko's mole in the company, was in a stall of the washroom serving the top executive floor. She was making a phone call as she sat on the toilet. The news conference going on at the same time far below was, figuratively, well over her head.

Barbara's call went to one of Petrenko's three cellphones but these phones were now in the possession of Vasily Grigoryevich Zaytsev, the GRU captain who was now in his suite at The Four Seasons Hotel. He answered with a simple "Da."

"Is that Mr. Petrenko?" The woman was whispering and Zaytsev had to hold the phone tightly to his ear to understand her.

"Yeah."

"This is Barbara. At JPI. You know. I have something for you."

"Go ahead," Zaytsev said, with an encouraging tone.

"We just got a call from a hospital. Toronto Western. You know... where they took Mr. Blax. Uh... well..."

"Please. Don't be nervous. Just tell me"

"Okay. Well, it was a nurse. She didn't know who to call. Mr. Blax didn't list any next-of-kin. They just had his office number. So, she said the tests on his head have come in. They showed no concussion or fractures. That's good, I guess." The woman paused.

"Is that all she said?"

"No. She asked if we had any information about his treatment. Uh, for the tumour..."

"What tumour? Barbara, what are you talking about." Zaytsev was frustrated and growing angry.

"I don't know any more. The nurse said she couldn't tell us any more because of confidentiality. Probably said too much as it was," Barbara was conversational now but Zaytsev simply grunted into his phone.

"She asked me to find someone who could call and discuss the patient with the doctors. I said I would and that was all."

Zaytsev bit his tongue. "That's good information. You have done well, Barbara. Now..." The GRU captain wanted to get off the call but Barbara broke in once more.

"Can I get my birthday card today? I have something to do..."

"Yes, yes. The card. Okay. I will arrange it." Zaytsev broke the connection.

He placed another call on his own phone. "Ernesto. Ask Petrenko about a *Barbara*. Ask him what she means by getting her card. Get back right away. Ah. Did you set that guy's arm?"

The Cuban snorted. "Si. He screamed like stuck pig. These Jamaicans. They are weak. Cubans are strong. I keep our friends good. I sing to them." Ernesto laughed. "Good thing Cubans have good medicine. Like Canadians. All free. Even for Jamaicans." He chortled again.

"Just get back fast," Zaytsev told him.

Five minutes later, the Cuban called with the information about Barbara's card. Zaytsev called in one of his men who had been lounging in a bedroom of the suite. "Get a birthday card. Stick this in it and deliver it to a woman named Barbara." Zaytsev told the man how to do that. From his well-stocked wallet, he handed his man a hundred-dollar bill and another ten dollars for a card.

## Chapter 41

Late in the afternoon, a few hours after the news conference and debriefings, Jackson found his way to JPI's extensive internal security section to thank Bill Brownley and his group for provision of security for the lobby conference. He slipped off his tie, folded it and stuffed it into a suit jacket pocket. It was time to get casual, even if he was still dressed in a pricy suit and Hugo Boss shirt.

Bill Brownley was dressed, as usual, in light tan trousers, white shirt and blue plaid sports jacket. He looked harried. "Hi, Jackson. Come along. Got things to show you." He turned and led the way. The two arrived at a door marked A/V UNIT / PRIVATE DOMAIN / LEONA & DAVID.

Seeing Phillips glance at the sign, Brownley smiled and said, "Leona and David are my audio and video operators. They're a little... uh... innovative and they like their privacy. Brownley rapped on the door and opened it slowly. "Hey guys, it's just us," he announced

Brownley introduced Leona and David who were seated several feet apart at a huge and intimidating control panel. The panel was full of levers, keypads, backlit

buttons and a mouse or two for each operator. Jackson remembered the layout. He and Brownley took their seats on a large leather sofa set along one side of the studio. The opposite wall in front of the control panel was covered with screens. Some were blank, some displayed JPI logos and some showed street scenes.

"You'll recognize a lot of this," said Brownley. "Hell, you had it installed when you were CEO. Unfortunately, Mr. Blax threw a monkey wrench into it a few months ago when he banned us from, as he called it, 'intruding on the privacy of JPI employees and our visitors.' He told us to stop use of audio and video in and out of the building. We had it watching the streets within a block of the building all sides and a block of Blax's own condo on Yonge Street. And he told us to stop using voice and facial recognition technology as well. He really hamstrung this operation."

Jackson was stunned at Blax's actions since given the reins at JPI. Jackson had not intended the security technology to be invasive unless circumstances warranted. But, for a technology company like JPI totally invested in confidentiality, it was hard to justify eschewing your own capabilities to protect the company and all its employees.

"Nobody told us to get rid of the equipment or stop the recordings... just not to use them." Brownley underlined the word 'use.' As acting CEO, do you give us permission to do so now—if we have to?" Brownley's face was turned toward Jackson and there was a broad smile on it.

"I give permission for limited purpose," said Jackson formally. "If it helps us to figure out what the hell is going on here, it's worth a bit of intrusion."

"Run it, David" Brownley said. A street scene replaced a JPI logo on a large screen directly in front of the male operator. "Zoom in on her."

Jackson watched carefully as the video zoomed in on the scene that had been captured by one of JPI's cameras mounted on a building next to the JPI headquarters. The scene was of the wide sidewalk of Queen's Quay with its bicycle path and busy road on one side and a row of buildings on the other. A woman was walking slowly along the sidewalk and was in the centre of the zoomed shot.

"Barbara Schumacher. She's a receptionist. Works in the anteroom to Blax's office but isn't privy to anything really confidential. Maybe his visitor's list... Anyway, watch this."

"Who is that?" asked Jackson. A man had entered the frame. He was walking toward Barbara and seemed to recognize her as he approached.

"That's Roman Petrenko, our Ukrainian pal with GRU connections," Brownley told Jackson. "We scanned all our video from the past month looking for anything suspicious. One of a lot of things we've been doing. Petrenko popped up in a facial recognition scan of everyone who has passed near H.Q. in that time. He's in there because CSIS has him as an associate of the GRU and we have a lot of CSIS military personnel images in our system."

"I made that deal with my old employer," remarked Jackson, leaning forward. "He's one ugly guy."

"But a generous one," David commented as he kept his hand over a lever control on his panel. Petrenko took an envelope out of his pocket as he reached Barbara. The two stopped on the sidewalk for a moment. Petrenko handed the envelope to Barbara. His lips moved. Then, he moved past Barbara and disappeared from the



video. Barbara opened the envelope as she stood with people passing by on both sides. She pulled out the corner of something and looked at it. David zoomed in even more until the envelope all but filled the frame. It was some kind of card. Jackson caught sight of a portion of a balloon on the card.

"Leona," Brownley called. The woman operator hit something on her part of the panel as David backed up his recording and replayed video to match the audio that Leona had added.

"Happy birthday, Barbara," Petrenko told the woman in their brief sidewalk encounter.

The video played with traffic and random voices heard in the background. It showed Barbara smiling slightly and putting the envelope into her shoulder purse.

"Interesting," Jackson said. "When was that shot?"

"Lunchtime, the day someone tried to kill Payne and me on the road from your cottage."

"Wow," Jackson said.

"I remember talking with Payne right in front of her desk the day before, so it's on me," said Brownley with an abashed look. "We were talking about the drive."

"Don't let it eat you up, Bill. You saved your lives with smart driving. This woman will pay for it. I guarantee that." Jackson was grim as he looked at the freeze frame on the monitor.

"That's not all," said Brownley. "Run the next one, David."

Again, the operator did his tricks and the video again showed Barbara Schumacher wandering down the same sidewalk. She was approached again, in the same way, but this time it was by a different man.

"Who's he?" asked Jackson again.

"Don't know," Brownley replied, "but we're checking with CSIS to see if they do. Looks military, doesn't he?" Jackson nodded his head in agreement.

The man stopped in front of Barbara. She looked surprised and tried to move around the man. He quickly reached into the inside pocket of his light jacket, pulled out an envelope and held it out to her. This time, audio was synced to the video and Jackson heard, "Happy birthday, Barbara."

She closed her mouth and carefully held out her hand to collect the envelope. The man moved quickly past her and vanished from the video. She repeated her act by pulling the corner of a card out of the envelope. She looked around and pulled the rest of the card out. She opened it and took out a hundred-dollar bill. It was indeed a birthday card. She walked to a trash bin on the sidewalk and threw the card and envelope into the bin. She shoved the bill into her purse and reversed course, heading back to the JPI building.

"When was this shot?" Jackson asked Brownley.

"Literally minutes ago."

"What!"

"Yes. Brand new. We have a flag on her face so the system logged this with an alert right away." Brownley grimaced. "We don't know what she did for the hundred but I would bet it was connected in some way with some news we've just received about Max."

"Max? What the hell, Bill. Why didn't you tell me..."

Brownley spoke quickly. "Jackson, I didn't want to get into a discussion about Max before you saw this. This..." he pointed at the bank of monitors "...keeps everything in context."

Bill Brownley took the next few minutes explaining part two of the incredible news to Phillips. Brownley had been contacted by Barbara Schumacher's superior, Mrs. Laybourne. She had been in tears. Max had been seriously injured in the accident, as Brownley knew well, but, in assessing his head injuries, doctors at Toronto Western had discovered a brain tumour.

Brownley called the hospital and spoke with a doctor who was seeking information to help his patient. Max must have had the tumour for several months, the doctor estimated. It was a fast-growing one and was now the size of a golf ball. The doctor who talked to Brownley said the prognosis was not promising. Max could be dead within the year. The doctor could find no evidence Max had been treated for the tumour but wanted to confirm this.

"Did you get the impression the tumour could be the cause of Max's erratic behaviour," asked Jackson, his mind trying to deal with the news.

"As a matter of fact, the doctor asked why we hadn't realized Max was sick a while ago. He wasn't thrilled about our ignorance," said Brownley. "I asked him if a brain tumour could cause someone to turn from a good guy into a raging Nero-type. The doc said anything was possible and why didn't that mood change tip us off."

"I called Max's secretary back and she said Max had been complaining about a number of things like headaches and no appetite over the past few months but she thought it was a weight thing. Max was trying to exercise and he took some pain pills. She didn't think it was serious and he didn't confide in her."

Jackson took it all in. This could bring some sense into all the confusion of the past week. He needed time to process the information and figure out next steps. He and Brownley talked about details for a time but arrived at no conclusions. Agreeing to a later meeting, they parted company and Jackson headed for his condo. He would be better to think about this on his own before deciding how to move forward instead of sideways.

## Chapter 42

Captain Zaytsev was chatting with the two other Russians on his team as they knocked back ice-cold vodka.

"I love The Four Seasons," said Niki, one of the GRU operatives, lounging on a sofa. Zaytsev was seated in a leather wingchair. Andrei, another team member, leaned on the bar at the end of the room. He wolfed down cubes of cheese from a tray on the bar.

Zaytsev laughed. "Poor Petrenko," he told the others in Russian. "I think he believed we would kill him and his sad lot of damaged hoods. Ernesto tells me they were swearing and yelling when he brought out his medical bag. They thought he was going to cut them up."

His companions joined the laughter. The man at the bar, Andrei, sprayed the bar with cheese bits as he guffawed. His laughter was high, almost cartoonish. All had been in the Russian armed forces for years as members of Spetsnaz, the elite special forces controlled by the GRU. Now they were full time GRU agents or operatives. For the moment, the three along with Ernesto, the Cuban, were based at the Russian Federation Embassy in Ottawa but more as a convenience because of its proximity to the U.S. They went in and out of the States on missions.

The Cuban member of the team was attached, officially, as a trainee on an international exchange program. In reality, a black man had been needed for several tasks in the U.S. so Ernesto had been recruited from the Cuban army and placed on loan to Russia.

As a soldier, Ernesto had medical training for battlefield injuries. He had reset the Jamaican's broken arm, bandaged and splinted it and had dosed Petrenko's man with pain killers. The Jamaican had been bewildered at the Cuban's care since it had been the fellow black man who had broken his arm.

The two Russians on Petrenko's crew were totally cowed when told by the Cuban that his colleagues were Spetsnaz veterans. The unit had a fearsome reputation with all Russians. Besides, they were licking their own wounds from the encounter with Jackson near the airport. They had begged pain killers from the Cuban and were now groggy as they sat on the debris-strewn concrete floor in the abandoned building on Commissioner's Street.

Petrenko himself was sitting in a corner. He alternated between being outraged and thanking his stars that he wasn't dead. He realized he was of little use to the GRU now that the pros had arrived in town. He didn't deserve this, he whined to himself.

Zaytsev, back in his hotel suite, wondered what he would do with Petrenko and his crew. They were a sad, redundant lot but they may have their uses, he reminded himself. At least, they could be blamed for anything that went wrong, blamed either by Zaytsev's superiors back in Ottawa and Moscow or by JPI and the police if they became involved here in Toronto. The Ukrainian would keep.

Niki had delivered payment to this Barbara, the JPI mole who had brought news of Maxim Blax's brain tumour.

'A hundred dollars? Moles came cheap these days,' Zaytsev reflected. 'But what did Barbara's information mean?' A cellphone rang. Zaytsev took the phone from several on a nearby table and waved at his two men to keep quiet.

"Hello, Captain." It was The Voice. Zaytsev began recording the call. "I have considered your offer. That I get you details on Version 3.0. And I also get another ten million dollars in U.S. funds. I agree to this. However, there has been a development..."

Zaytsev interrupted. "Yes, I know. Maxim Blax has a brain tumour."

There was silence. It went on and Zaytsev thought The Voice had disconnected. Finally, the Voice returned. "How do you know this?"

"A little bird," said Zaytsev, getting impatient. "Look. Forget how I know things. I know almost everything and I'll find out the rest. What does this brain problem mean to us? Tell me what you think."

"I have known about Mr. Blax's tumour for quite a while. I made use of it. But, I admit I didn't think Phillips would come back to run JPI. This could be very bad for our... our new partnership."

"How?"

"Phillips is not Blax. Far from it. Phillips is brilliant; he built JPI. It will be very difficult to get the data you need about Version 3.0 if Jackson is running the place." There was a break before The Voice continued. "Maybe ten million will not be enough..."

Zaytsev had his own file on Jackson Phillips. Yes, with Phillips as CEO it would be harder for The Voice to steal 3.0 while it was being developed. But, Phillips' presence as CEO would guarantee 3.0 would be completed on time and would be the best software possible. Which would be best, eliminate Phillips and solve The Voice's problem or keep Phillips and make The Voice work harder. It was a problem Zaytsev was not ready to solve yet.

"Come on, Mr. Voice, do something to earn the millions we have already paid to you. Deliver the code. We want it now. No more delays." Zaytsev was speaking loudly. His two men exchanged looks across the room.

"Okay. I will give you the code but we have to think what we can do about Phillips."

Zaytsev brought himself under control with difficulty. "Yes. Okay. In time. But, the code..."

Apparently, The Voice no longer fretted about calls being traced or recorded as the two discussed arrangements for the transfer of source code from The Voice to the Russian GRU team.

They also discussed the payment of the remaining ten million dollars to The Voice. The Russians would wire one million per month beginning in September to accounts specified by The Voice. Payments would continue as long as details on Version 3.0 development continued to be provided to Russia. The talk went on for many minutes.

Zaytsev's brain was churning once he left the call with The Voice. Should he consult with the Ottawa embassy? Nyet. They would tell him to talk to Moscow. Should he contact GRU H.Q. near Moscow and ask for advice from the big brass there? Nyet again. They would tell him to stick an umbrella point into Phillips and be done with the man. And they likely would tell him to drop some Novichok nerve agent into The Voice's coffee to eliminate that nuisance as well. Then what?

The best plan, the captain determined, was to delay making a big picture plan. He could manage one step at a time and the next steps were to tidy up loose ends, get the source code from The Voice and identify that thief. Once that was done, he could worry about Phillips.

Zaytsev didn't have to figure out all the steps immediately but he knew what his last step would be. By the end of the journey, he would be a colonel. No doubt about it.

The GRU captain sat back in his chair, content for the moment. He beckoned to his men to come closer. They perched on the coffee table in front of their leader and leaned forward. "Here is what I want you to do," said Zaytsev. "First tell the Cuban to let Petrenko's crew go. If they learned their lesson, they won't get in our way. I need Ernesto back here."

## Chapter 43

“Detective Sergeant Jaya Kumar.” She held out a business card after telling Jackson her name.

He had arrived at Toronto Western Hospital a little after 10 a.m. Wednesday, a day after the news conference at JPI H.Q. He had been directed by the Information desk staff to a recovery room instead of the ICU Maxim Blax had occupied a day before. The police detective had been in Blax’s private room and was closing her grey notepad as he entered.

“And you are?”

“Jackson Phillips. I’m... I’m with JPI,” Jackson said, realizing he didn’t know how to introduce himself in his new—or old—role at the company.

“You don’t seem too sure,” said DS Kumar. She was grinning but Jackson realized the East Indian woman before him had already seized command. He also realized that the tall, black-haired, brown-skinned and handsome woman had intelligence shining in her eyes. Her brown eyes were bright and penetrating and her smile didn’t seem to reach them as they remained fixed on Jackson’s face. She was putting him in the right box.

“To tell the truth,” Jackson began and felt foolish saying, “I’m officially retired so I’m out of practice identifying myself. I will say that I find myself filling in for Max in his...” he paused to look at the patient in the bed. “...enforced absence.”

Max was free of tubes connected to machines meaning that he was breathing on his own and was able to process real food instead of intravenous liquid. He still had a large bandage around his head and an arm and shoulder were heavily bandaged. In short, he was a mess. After being run over by a car, what else was new?

“So,” said the detective, watching Jackson closely, “you are the new CEO at JPI?”

“I’m the founder and former CEO,” answered Jackson with a steady gaze into DS Kumar’s eyes. “So, I’m the logical, temporary replacement for Max.”

The detective broke off the staring contest and opened her notepad again. She made a note.

“You could do that with your smartphone, you know,” Jackson casually said.

The police woman glared at him. “Just being helpful,” he grinned.

She held her look for a beat. Then she matched his grin. “Enough of the repartee, Mr. Phillips. Did you want to chat with Mr. Blax?”

“Sure, after you’re finished here.” Jackson stood aside to allow her to reach the door in a straight line.

“Just a couple of questions,” Mr. Phillips.

Jackson completed his takeover of the environment. “Outside, detective. Be glad to.” He swept his hand toward the door and she took the heavy hint.

Jackson moved to Max’s bedside. “Hey, Max. How are you doing?”

The man in the bed had his eyes closed but Jackson noted the movement under his eyelids. He gave Max a few seconds.

"Hello, Jackson." His voice was weak and hoarse. His eyes opened slowly. They were dull but focused. "How are you?"

Jackson couldn't help a chuckle. "The real question is how you are, Max. I hear you had a battle with a car."

"And the car won," Max murmured. "Yes. Heard that one."

Jackson was surprised at Max's tone. It seemed friendly and relaxed, unlike the ridiculous arrogance of the man Jackson had last encountered at JPI.

"I'm full of drugs, Jackson. Also, very tired." Max's eyelids closed again.

"I won't be long, Max. Just here to pay my respects. And I really mean that. I'm very concerned about you."

With his eyes closed, Max was still alert enough to speak, albeit in a barely audible voice. "...don't blame you, Jackson. I've been a jerk. Going to go..." Jackson thought the man had fallen asleep again and turned slightly to leave the bedside. "Tell her I'm so sorry," Max muttered. "...so very sorry."

"Who?" asked Jackson but there was no answer.

After stepping out of the room, Jackson was confronted by Sergeant Kumar. "Mr. Jackson. I need to talk to you." She held up her hand and pointed a finger down the hallway. She turned and marched off, expecting Jackson to follow her. He did.

He sat on the couch in the visitor waiting room at the end of the hall and waited until the detective returned with two cups of steaming coffee. Milk, no sugar. She placed his cup on the table at his elbow and took a seat in a chair facing the couch. "We won't be disturbed," she said glancing at the now-closed door to the room.

"You've got pull," Jackson commented after sipping his coffee.

"Cops have pull all over the place. We find it comes in handy, Mr. Phillips."

It was a reminder of the positions they were playing and the beginning of an inquisition that left Jackson annoyed and impatient.

"You finished, detective?" She had asked Jackson a list of questions that sounded like they had been prepared for Jeopardy. 'Where were you the evening of...? Who told you about the accident in the first place? What do you think happened? Why would someone push Mr. Blax into traffic...?'

In each case, Jackson had answered curtly with one or two words or denied any knowledge. He had interrogated many people himself and knew the game well. He could have called a lawyer but, number one, he didn't know of any criminal lawyer off the top of his head and, number two, he didn't feel he was under suspicion—at the moment. Number three, he thought to himself, was that he was finding out a great deal through Kumar's questioning.

"Well, Mr. Phillips, you've been a great help," said Jaya Kumar, snapping her notepad shut and dropping her ballpoint into a black shoulder bag. She took a light, reddish brown jacket from the chairback, picked up the bag from the floor and stood over Jackson, hand out.

He ignored her offer of a handshake and looked up at her. "Irony." He smiled. "One question, detective. Do you have any idea who did push Max into traffic since I didn't?"

She returned the smile but there was no humour in it. "We will have a good idea, Mr. Phillips. I'm sure of that." DS Kumar withdrew her hand and departed.

Jackson didn't mention the mystery 'her' to whom Max had apologized. He wasn't going to point police to someone who apparently was important to Max alone. Was the 'her' Max mentioned one of his two former wives? Was it a current girlfriend? An ex-girlfriend? Jackson had no idea but intended to find out. He would take Max's message to 'her' once he found her and perhaps would fill in another blank on the page that was Max's life as JPI's CEO.

## Chapter 44

Mulling over all he had learned over the past few days, Jackson made his way to JPI and had another coffee with Bill Brownley and Payne in Payne's office. They put everything they had, figuratively, on the table and stirred it well. Top of the list was the still-unknown identity of the source code thief followed closely by what to expect next from the assumed Russian buyers of the stolen code.

Brownley talked of how his team was now scanning all pedestrian and vehicular traffic captured on JPI and other cameras in the area of H.Q. and around the building housing the Blax penthouse. He said that David and Leona, his A/V operators, had used facial and voice recognition tools to track the person who had paid off Barbara Schumacher, the receptionist. "Ah, Jackson had remarked, "our birthday boy," alluding to the birthday card the man had handed to Schumacher.

"He's a Russian GRU man usually based at the Ottawa embassy," Brownley announced.

"Your CSIS contacts were great," he added with an appreciative nod at Jackson. CSIS identified Nikolai Popov—nicknamed Niki—and his former rank as a corporal in Spetsnaz. He was one of a unit of former soldiers based at the embassy and led by Captain Vasily Grigoryevich Zaytsev. Brownley also said the unit had 'adopted' a Cuban soldier named Ernesto Lopez de Gamboa, possibly for tasks involving people of colour. All were highly trained, including targeting and execution of enemies of Mother Russia.

CSIS had provided photos and short backgrounds of the Russians and Cuban on the grounds that JPI was a 'strategic partner' of CSIS in military matters. CSIS also was putting something in the bank of mutual favours. JPI now owed them one—or more than one.

"Could one of these guys have pushed Max into traffic?" Jackson's question was rhetorical. Jackson, Brownley and Payne concluded that this would be last on the list of ways the Russians would have murdered Blax. It was, literally, a hit or miss method. It didn't fit the typical Russian murder by gunshot, poison or old-fashioned, fatal beating.

It was mildly interesting that the attempt on Max's life had taken place out of the range of the JPI cameras installed up to a block away from the Blax condo building. Did this mean the 'pusher' knew about the cameras and wanted to avoid their coverage? The three had no firm opinions.

The trio also kicked around Max's mention of a woman (or girl) to whom he wanted to apologize. Who was she and why was Max 'sorry'? Was there any

connection between ‘her’ and the attempted murder? Was there any connection between ‘her’ and the software theft at JPI? Who knows?

One thing the three did conclude was that the source code was no longer of much importance. The Russians—or the Chinese or North Koreans, for that matter—wouldn’t get much from the source code and its margin notes that wouldn’t be outdated in short order. They couldn’t develop and compile working code in less than eight months. It would be a year before any significant cyberattacks could be mounted. The ultimate prize in a year would be Version 3.0 of JPI’s defensive solutions and Brownley was certain that 3.0 could be protected better than any software in history.

“That’s still not 100 per cent,” Jackson observed. “But it will have to do.”

“One last thing,” Bill Brownley threw in as the three rose from their seats. “CSIS added some stuff on Petrenko.”

Jackson looked up with sudden interest. Brownley took the point and went on. CSIS had provided his security people with the short form of Petrenko’s biography including his known address, favorite hangouts, known associates and criminal record. CSIS explained how its interest was confined to Petrenko’s relationship with the Russian consulate in Toronto. The brief report described Petrenko’s role as ‘minor’ and on an ‘as needed, when needed,’ schedule.

“Get a few of your best people together, Bill. We’re going visiting.” Jackson had a wide smile on his face and an eager look in his eyes. Payne took a long look at his friend and thought he saw ten years drop from Jackson’s age.

## Chapter 45

Roman Petrenko was at home but had no intention of receiving callers. It was late in the evening and he was exhausted after spending many hours cooped up with the crazy Cuban in a dismal derelict building on the lakefront. He had been filthy and starving as well when he got home. He was in recovery mode.

The front door of his apartment slammed open and the short hallway into the living room was filled with the bodies of five men. It took only an instant for the ‘visitors’ to flood into the living room to surround Petrenko as he sprawled on a seedy green couch.

The men didn’t display guns or issue orders. They simply stood around Petrenko watching him. The five men were alike; each was of average height with slim but muscular builds. They were perfect examples of special forces soldiers even though it had been years since any of them served with JTF-2. As part of the JPI security unit, they had to keep in shape.

Petrenko wasn’t armed but wouldn’t have reached for a gun or knife if he had one nearby. The man wasn’t a genius but he knew when he was outmanned. He sat up but remained on the couch. His mouth tightened to a thin line and his eyes were open wide.

Jackson Phillips strode into the room. He was dressed in jeans and a dark grey shirt and had a stern look on his face.

“Mr. Petrenko, glad you’re home. We have a few questions for you.”



"You are Jackson Phillips. I know you but I have no idea why you are here in my home." Petrenko tried to sound aggrieved but his voice betrayed his nervousness. Phillips laughed in his face.

It had been some time since Jackson had been in CSIS and much more since he served as a soldier in some of the world's hottest spots but he regained his skills as an interrogator in short order. He sat on a wooden kitchen chair drawn close to the couch and took Petrenko through a series of questions while the five security men stood around the Ukrainian. Their lacks of expressions and complete silence was more threatening than yelling or shaking fists. Petrenko kept throwing sidelong glances at the men as Phillips asked him question after question.

In the end, the whole story came out. Petrenko told how he had been contacted by a person who disguised his voice with a voice changer application. Petrenko had called the person The Voice.

"How innovative," Jackson commented.

The Ukrainian hood and his crew had been middle-men between The Voice and, first, the Russian consulate and, then, the embassy. Petrenko took some pleasure in telling Jackson about the GRU team that had been shipped to Toronto to take over dealings with The Voice.

"They are hard men," Petrenko told Jackson. "And they are stupid. They think they can take over from Petrenko," he complained, speaking of himself in the third person. "It has cost them twenty million dollars and they are to get obsolete code. That's how smart they are. Idiots!"

When Petrenko said that, Jackson had trouble masking his excitement. "Wait," he said holding up a hand. "You said *they are to get the code*. What does that mean? Do they have the code or not?"

"Ah," replied Petrenko sensing the chance of bargaining with Phillips. "...you don't know, do you?"

Jackson got up from the chair and shrugged. The men standing around Petrenko's couch moved in. "No... no," Petrenko pleaded as he pressed himself back into the sofa cushion. "I will tell you."

Jackson sat again as Petrenko explained how The Voice had delayed in handing over the source code. Apparently, the code was contained on a high capacity SD card and would have taken a simple hand-off but The Voice had insisted on a down payment and continuing anonymity. The GRU leader had demanded to know the identity of The Voice so he could keep up relations with the thief. Surprisingly, especially to Petrenko, the GRU captain didn't care about the millions paid and to be paid to The Voice.

"Putin wouldn't care about a measly \$20 million," said Jackson. Petrenko nodded his head in agreement but said nothing.

"And you got some of it, didn't you?" Jackson sneered at the cringing crook.

"No. I did not get anything. I was loyal to Russia..." He was petrified that someone would take away the million dollars he had netted as his commission.

"If you want to keep anything out of this, you'll answer all my questions."

It took a while but Petrenko finally admitted he had banked the million-dollar payoff. He also pleaded with Jackson not to mention the money if his security team planned visits to Petrenko's own crew. "They don't deserve any of my money," he argued. Jackson promised nothing.

After Petrenko had spilled everything he knew, Jackson told his men to search the apartment. They rummaged through the unmade bed, unwashed dishes covering the kitchen counters, cupboards and closets full of junk and drawers stuffed with papers and assorted tools. They turned up a Glock automatic, several clasp knives and a baseball bat with mysterious stains on the barrel. They took all the bullets out of the Glock and pocketed all they found among the hoard. Among Petrenko's papers, Jackson found a printout of bank accounts and, on one, he discovered Petrenko's million dollars.

The Ukrainian's eyes narrowed as Jackson read the critical document. "Well, Petrenko. It looks like anyone could get a payout if he had the right password and, guess what? This looks like your password." Jackson jabbed his finger at a scribble on the paper and Petrenko began to tremble.

"Never store your password where it can be found," Jackson advised Petrenko as he and his men completed the search.

As the men prepared to leave the unit, Petrenko regained some of his bluster. "You cannot use anything you found here. You did not have a warrant."

Jackson laughed bitterly. "We aren't the police, Petrenko. And we won't be telling them. Neither will you. We will keep all this between us." He stopped and pinned Petrenko with a searing look. "Won't we?"

In a moment, the men were gone and Petrenko remained, quaking, on his couch. He feared Phillips, the security men, the GRU team, the Russian consulate, the embassy in Ottawa, Moscow, his own motley crew and even The Voice. Police were the least of his worries.

The security group dispersed when they left Petrenko's rental building, heading home. Jackson called Bill Brownley who had other duties and reported on his visit to Petrenko. He thanked Brownley for the loan of his men, then went to his Audi and drove away through the city streets. Before arriving at his condo, he stopped at a coffee shop with a parking lot. Over a cup of hot brew, he thought about next steps.

Leaving the thief in place somewhere within JPI was not an option. The Voice would continue to steal information and put the new software at risk. He mulled over the possibility that Maxim Blax had been the thief. He had full access to everything at the company including all its servers except those in outsourced data centres. He knew what the other side would pay for. Finishing his coffee, Jackson stared into the empty cup. He dismissed Blax as the thief.

There was little doubt Blax had been affected by the brain tumour. He was a completely different person from the one Jackson had recruited in the previous year. There was no other reason why Blax had become a petty tyrant and Trump-like narcissist. While the tumour could have caused him to take any weird actions, the theft took too much organization, too much caution and contacts Blax was unlikely to nurture given his state of mind.

But, Jackson figured, Blax's illness was responsible, in part, for the theft. The CEO had not retained security measures that would have stopped the theft in the first place. He refused to act after Barry and Jean had discovered the theft. He, in fact, fought against any action and forced Brownley to go behind his back to protect JPI as well as he could.

Did someone use Blax? Did the thief put the fierce resistance into Blax's mind? And who was the 'her' he was saying sorry to? Was there any connection?

Jackson's mind was still going through permutations as he went home and turned in for the night. The coffee kept him awake for several hours and, in the morning, he felt as tired as when he had fallen asleep.

## Chapter 46

As Jackson was having a late breakfast, Petrenko was waking up on his couch. He had fretted late into the night after the intrusion by Jackson and his security men. He wore the same clothes as he had the day before and had a four-day growth of whiskers. His hair was greasy and he smelled of sweat and fear.

There was a banging at the door of the rental. 'Not again,' thought Petrenko. He rummaged through the junk thrown about the living room until he found his Glock. The gun had no bullets in it but no one else knew that. He also found a knife and flicked it open. He went to the door.

As soon as Petrenko released the lock, the door was pushed open and Petrenko was shoved back into the hallway. For the second time in a few hours the apartment was being raided by men but, this time, it was Petrenko's depleted crew that entered.

"Hey. Stop it," yelled Petrenko recognizing the two Russians in the lead with the Jamaican following on their heels. "Are you crazy?"

The Jamaican closed the door behind him while the two Russians continued to shove Petrenko into the living room. The three crew members looked like patients escaped from a prison hospital. Each had bandages on arms or legs or both. The Jamaican had one heavily bandaged arm in a blue sling. He had the other arm behind his back.

"You got one million dollars," one of the Russian men screamed at Petrenko. "Where is our share?" The second Russian shoved Petrenko onto the couch where the Ukrainian fought against the soft cushions trying to rise again. "You give?" The Russian was red-faced and spittle shot from his mouth as he shouted a stream of invective in Russian.

"That is my money," Petrenko yelled back in the same language. "You did nothing."

Clarence, the Jamaican, was thoroughly confused since the others were screaming at each other in Russian.

"He's a shit, mon. He never gives us nothing but crap." The Jamaican's free hand appeared from behind his back. It was wrapped around a machete. The black man shoved Pavel aside and moved toward Petrenko.

"No. Okay, I give you money," Petrenko screamed. He pushed himself back into the couch. He put his hands in front of him as he stared in terror at the machete in the Jamaican's grip. He continued in Russian. "I give you everything. You can't..."

The machete rose and fell with a thunking sound as it cut into one of Petrenko's wrists. The Ukrainian screamed again, this time in pain. The furious Jamaican

yanked the machete out of the horrific wound and swung it again. The large blade cut into Petrenko's neck and blood began to pump out onto the couch and floor.

"Aw, Christ," said Victor. "It's getting all over the place." He looked at the blood in disgust and stepped quickly away.

The Jamaican pulled the machete away from Petrenko. It had cut through about half of the man's neck. The pulsing flow of blood slowed and stopped as Petrenko's heart gave out.

"Let's get the hell out of here, mon," Clarene said. He grabbed a shirt from a pile of clothing that had been tossed on the floor by Jackson's men. He wiped the blade of the machete and wrapped the weapon in an undershirt he found in the pile.

The three men left the apartment as quickly as they could. There was no one in the hallway leading from Petrenko's apartment but several neighbours behind their bolted doors were dialing 911 to report the screams.

## Chapter 47

Captain Vasily Zaytsev received the call from The Voice on Thursday morning. "I want to have our meeting today," The Voice told Zaytsev through the very efficient voice changer.

"Are you ready to tell me your name?"

There was a pause. Zaytsev studied a mole on his hand wondering if it would turn into a cancer some day. After a minute or more, The Voice returned. "Yes. But not you."

"What do you mean?" Zaytsev was careful not to be too aggressive.

"I'm not a fool," said The Voice in an equally level tone. "You are GRU and you won't be my 'handler' if we do a deal. I want someone less..." Pause. "...less military and more permanent."

Zaytsev reflected that JPI executives dealt daily with military customers; they knew who GRU were. The Voice, doubtless, was a high-ranking person at JPI.

Zaytsev put his ego aside. "Yes. That makes sense. How about..." The GRU officer thought for a moment. He had limited resources to call on without a long string of approvals from the Ambassador and the GRU generals. "Petrenko's handler at the consulate... Serge Sokolov?". Sokolov was also GRU but Zaytsev didn't jump into that briar patch.

"Fine," The Voice agreed quickly. "Him."

The Voice spent a short time dictating the terms of the meeting and turnover of the source code on its SD card. The thief would meet Sokolov in the lobby of The Westin Harbour Castle hotel on Harbour Square, a short distance from the JPI H.Q. Zaytsev thought the meeting place was uncomfortably close to the scene of the crime but he wasn't going to dispute anything at this stage. A hotel anywhere would be acceptable because of people going back and forth, holding short meetings, chatting in the lobby and passing things back and forth.

"Okay," Zaytsev agreed reluctantly.

They set the time for 3 p.m. the next day. That would give Sokolov time to be briefed by the GRU team and to set up surveillance to make sure The Voice became The Face and The Name. Enough with nicknames.

Zaytsev put his men on alert and called Sokolov at the Russian consulate. "Sokolov," he ordered. "You will accept the package tomorrow on our behalf." He was being cryptic. "You know what I mean?" The young man breathed a sigh of relief as he received the instructions on his consulate phone. The task meant that he would live another day and, if lucky, would see his job as a 'handler' go on.

After talking with Zaytsev, Sokolov called Petrenko. He wanted to make certain The Voice had not made any alternate deals with The Ukrainian. He also wanted to make sure Petrenko would keep his distance from the consulate, The Voice and the GRU men while they were in town. Sokolov was protecting himself now there was hope on his horizon.

"Detective John Chambers." The man answering Petrenko's phone was matter-of-fact. Sokolov was stupefied.

"Petrenko. I want to speak to Mr. Petrenko," Sokolov said before fully comprehending the man's reply.

"What's your name, sir?"

"I think I have the wrong number." Sokolov punched his cellphone screen to disconnect the call.

Detective Chambers noted the ID of the caller and wondered why the Russian Consulate wanted to speak to his victim. Petrenko, of course, was in no shape to take a call now or ever again.

Sokolov shuddered as he hung up. He looked at the phone wondering if he should inform Zaytsev that police were answering Petrenko's phone. No, he told himself. Let Petrenko explain it. Sokolov's job was to get himself in shape to finally meet The Voice tomorrow.

## Chapter 48

Jackson Phillips burst into Payne's office just before 9 a.m. Payne was on a phone call but made short work of it as his friend plopped himself in a visitor's chair in front of Payne's desk.

"Hey Jackson. Don't break my furniture."

Phillips bounced up again, like a 20-year-old, and began pacing across the office and back. His hands were behind his back. Payne thought he looked like a slim Winston Churchill.

"Get Bill in here," Jackson said in a cheery voice. "I've got something for both of you. And get me a coffee, will you, Payne?"

Payne gave him a tortured look but summoned a young man from the reception area to get them all coffee. He added a big "Please."

As Jackson roamed around the office picking up and putting back books, photographs and various decorative pieces, Payne and Bill Brownley moved to the conversation area and began drinking their coffee. A television set was mounted

on the wall and Brownley looked up at the screen. The sound was muted but the set was on, tuned to CBC's news channel.

"Hey," said the startled man. "Look at this; Petrenko's dead." The eyes of Payne and Jackson shot to the screen. The crawl at the bottom of the screen announced the death of Roman Petrenko in 'a home invasion' at his downtown apartment. A following line said 'businessman' Petrenko had been stabbed.

"You didn't..." Brownley looked hard at Jackson. Payne followed the look and was aghast.

"Not us, Bill. He was alive and well when we left. I'm sure your guys would have told you if we had chopped him up."

Payne shuddered but Brownley was relieved. "Okay," the security chief said. "But who?"

"The Russians. His own guys. A stranger. Our thief..." Jackson threw up his hands. "Take your pick." He thought for a moment. "We took care not to leave any trace of our visit, Bill. I doubt if anyone will come after us. If they do, I'll take the heat but I'm not volunteering anything because we don't know any more than they do." He gestured at the tv screen and the CBC anchor.

Jackson took up his coffee cup, spilling a few drops over the rim and onto Payne's expensive rug. The news had shaken him.

"Hey. Careful. That's real money."

Jackson ignored Payne's protest. "Bill, can you get Leona and David working..." Over the next five minutes, between gulps of coffee and a refill from the young man with the forced smile, Jackson explained what he wanted done by the A/V experts. They were to scan video and audio recordings going back six months of all A/V from cameras aimed at the sidewalk in front of the JPI building. They were to employ the JPI software that analyzed various characteristics, mannerisms and actions of people using the sidewalk.

The functionality of the current software was marvelous even though it was Version 2.0. It was built to recognize any person who exhibited nervousness, unnatural mannerisms like sudden shivers, excessive sweating, wiping brows, trembling hands and many others. It would analyze the clothing and body shapes of persons looking for bombs, guns or even knives hidden under clothing. It would look closely at the gait of each person. Using technologies like infra-red, vibration monitors, radar and some so secret they didn't have recognizable names, the software could determine threats at considerable distances—beyond typical blast ranges.

"We're not under threat," Payne remarked at one point, confused and a bit alarmed by Jackson's enthusiasm for the process he was describing.

"We could be." Jackson was enigmatic. "But the main point is to find the thief."

Jackson explained to Payne and, particularly, Brownley, that the thief was no doubt a senior executive or technology leader at JPI. No one else could have access to company servers and archives without being identified by the monitors. The thief likely worked at headquarters for the same reason. If this were true, reasoned Jackson, the thief would likely know of the cameras set around the building. "It wasn't a secret from the higher echelons," he said. "It was a point of pride to them."

"But," asked Brownley, "how does that help us?"

Jackson went on to say that any executive or technology officer with a guilty conscience or something to hide would find it hard to walk past all these cameras every day without an errant glance at them or concerns about being observed. He pointed out that there were key dates such as the days during which the theft occurred, the days on which Petrenko actually spoke with the thief who was using the voice changer.

As well, Jackson told Brownley to have his team check the cameras set at Blax's condo building. Have them check the last couple of weeks for a person or persons determining the positions, directions and ranges of the cameras. "Someone would want to see where camera surveillance stopped so they would be beyond that distance when they... he... pushed Blax into traffic. That was only a few blocks from his home," Jackson reminded his companions.

"We could see who shows up on both," Brownley mused. "This is going to take time though." Jackson frowned. "A couple of hours, at least."

"Now we're cooking," enthused Jackson.

Payne grinned and told his friend, "Good for you, Jackson. Right out of the 1980s."

The time went by quickly as Payne and Jackson worked on budgeting the first round of development on Version 3.0.

Payne invited into his office Rebecca Rollins, JPI's Marketing VP, and Mariah Belo from PR.

Mariah was too buoyed up to wait for Payne to start the meeting officially. She began the moment everyone was seated by extolling the work of her social media staff. "They are everywhere, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and the rest. And Barry's blogs are doubling and redoubling followers on a daily basis. And the news conference is all over YouTube..."

Not to be outclassed, Rollins talked in an excited voice about the reaction of the marketplace to the announced development of Version 3.0.

"It's going to cost clients a fraction of what they would have to spend over the next, say, three years in upgrades followed by a new version down the road. In fact," she added, "we're getting calls and visits from clients of other providers wondering if they can switch to JPI without complete retools."

Payne had thought for minutes about that. "We could," he suggested, "create a conversion pathway for them. We'll have our strategic partners handle the changeover. We'll charge the partners to train them to do the work; then we'll take a cut of their service charges from the new clients on top of full price for 3.0."

"Wow," exclaimed Rollins. "How about you working for us in Marketing?"

Mariah reached over and patted Payne's arm. "Me first, Payne. You're too smart to be an accountant." Payne grimaced and looked to Jackson for a comeback but the acting CEO was too busy scribbling on a notepad with his Montblanc pen.

It was nearly noon when Bill Brownley called Jackson to come to the A/V room. Jackson rushed to the security unit and entered the control room where David and Leona were punching and pulling levers, buttons and switches on their panels.

"We have a number of candidates," said Brownley pointing toward the monitor screens covering one wall.

Jackson groaned as he took a seat on the leather couch. Payne settled in beside him and Mariah, who had tagged along, took the end cushion on the sofa.

"However," Brownley smiled as he walked up to his operators and put a hand on David's shoulder. "...we have a winner." He stood back to take a longer look at the picture on one of David's monitors. It was the only sidewalk shot among a collection of screens sporting nothing but the JPI logo.

There was a collective gasp from the couch sitters. "It can't be," said Mariah in her throaty voice. Her eyes were wide and blazing in the dim light.

Payne and Jackson, obviously fighting to get their emotions in check, peered studiously at the monitor.

"It's hard to believe, I know." Brownley spoke in a quiet voice. "But it's the only person that showed clear signs of distress when looking at the cameras around H.Q. at least half the time. And this is the only person, except for Blax, who we caught looking around near his condo building. We have several longish looks directly at cameras and a couple of glances at the far reaches of our cameras on the day Blax was pushed into traffic. It's pretty obvious, the subject was checking the camera layout without realizing how we've continually updated the system to be super sensitive."

Brownley attempted to be professional in his reporting but there was no mistaking the man's pride in the system he had maintained and improved in spite of Blax's orders to ignore the whole network. He was getting a measure of revenge.

Jackson pondered for a few minutes as the others drew closer to the monitor. "You said," he addressed Brownley, "...that the subject was caught looking around his condo. Ever go into the building?" Brownley nodded. "Yep. I was going to mention that. A couple of times. But we don't know what apartment."

"When?"

"In February. We only went back six months but there were three times with two in February and one in March. That's all we saw." Brownley glanced at Phillips to see if he was satisfied by the answer.

Jackson was deep in thought. "I have to make a call," he said abruptly. He launched himself off the couch and left the room with his colleagues staring after him.

Finding a vacant chair in a reception area near the security unit, Jackson sat down and dialed a number. "Detective Kumar? It's Jackson Phillips." He asked the detective sergeant if she had leads on the person who had pushed Blax into traffic. When she refused to discuss the case with him, he said, "We may have something for you. If we could meet." She agreed.

"One question, detective," he said. "Did Max say anything about who pushed him?"

"I told you, Mr. Phillips, we can't discuss the case. I will tell you that we're not looking at anyone specific."

"So, that's a no, Max didn't say anything about the pusher."

"Funny, Mr. Phillips."

"Just one more thing."

"You said one question, Mr. Phillips. But, go ahead."

"Did anyone other than me visit Max in hospital?"



"We always check visitor's logs, Mr. Phillips. You could probably do the same so I'll tell you he had visits from an ex-wife and from someone at your company. A fellow executive." She told Jackson the name.

The detective said, of the ex-wife, "She wanted to know if he had sent the last alimony cheque before being run over. If not, she wanted him to sign one she conveniently had in her purse—with her own pen. He went to sleep before she could give it to him."

Jackson made a face to himself and pushed his luck. "What did the executive say?"

"She was only there a few seconds. Just long enough to see if Blax was still there. But, Mr. Phillips, there are limits." There was frost in her voice.

Mindful of the tone, Jackson thanked the officer after setting a meeting time for late the next day.

Jackson made his way back to the control room. He met Payne and Mariah coming out. He herded them back and gathered them and Brownley into a circle around the couch and coffee table on which he perched. "It's consistent," he told Brownley. "A probable—even if it's not positive." Brownley's face fell. "Congratulations—we're farther than we've been, Bill."

Payne offered to buy them all lunch as a grisly form of celebration. They trooped off leaving Leona and David with their sincere thanks and four hours of overtime each. Brownley also asked the two to keep watch on their banks of H.Q. cameras 'just in case.' In case of what, Brownley had no idea.

Over lunch and not surprisingly, they dissected the discoveries of the morning. While there was disbelief, none could explain how all the signs pointed at one person as the best candidate for thief of the year at JPI.

Mariah was already planning how the company could explain how a senior executive stole code from JPI and offered it for sale to the Russians. "Difficult but not impossible," was her opinion.

"First, we hope it doesn't come out but, if the police lay charges, it will be impossible to avoid publicity so we admit everything. Second, if it does come out we can now point to the stolen code as slated to become obsolete quickly. Third, we can say it was a plot to dupe the Russians into paying a bundle for a card full of junk code."

Payne, Brownley, Rebecca and Jackson turned to her with disbelief in their eyes. "Kidding," laughed Mariah. "At least on the last one. We may have to admit everything but, thanks to Jackson's brilliant idea, we can say what they got was raw code headed for the dumpster."

"Sucking up to the boss," Rebecca said with a smirk, "Jackson's *brilliance*?" Even Jackson smiled at that.

Jackson then said, "There is one thing we can add. The source code was, indeed, stolen but it was never delivered to the Russians or anyone else."

"My god, is that right?" Mariah brought her hands together in a clapping motion.

"According to our pal Petrenko, it is," Jackson answered.

As if on cue, his phone chirped. "Should have shut it off." He picked it out of his pocket. "Phillips."

“Mr. Phillips, we really do have to get together.” It was Detective Sergeant Jaya Kumar. “You, me and Detective John Chambers, a colleague of mine.”

“Is it urgent?”

“You could say that, Mr. Phillips. Do you know a Roman Petrenko?”

“I know who he is, Detective. But, don’t forget, I used to be with CSIS. There are certain things I can’t talk about, especially not on the phone.”

“Nice try, Mr. Phillips. But CSIS was a while ago and Roman Petrenko was murdered early this morning. I don’t think there’s a conflict. Do you?”

“Oh,” said a very surprised Jackson Phillips. “Murdered. By whom?”

“A good question. But I’d rather ask it in person. Detective Chambers has the case and has a lot to do with the preliminary investigation. We can get to you tomorrow. You will be available, won’t you, sir?” Despite the politeness, there was no challenging of the police woman’s orders.

“Yes, detective. I’ll be at JPI any time you want me tomorrow.”

“No, Mr. Phillips. You’ll be at 53 Division station any time we tell you to be. Goodbye, sir.”

He told the group what the officer had said and what she was commanding him to do.

Mariah piped up. “How could they connect you to Petrenko, Jackson?”

“We, uh, paid Petrenko a call last night. Me and some of Bill’s people. But we didn’t kill him. We didn’t touch the little crook. I think the cops know that or I’d be getting a ride in a car with locking back doors. What’s the real story?” He threw up his hands. “Not a clue.”

After lunch, Jackson and Bill Brownley returned to the security unit’s offices at JPI. Jackson spent the afternoon there mostly with David and Leona in the control room. Jackson tried to recall as much as he could about the advanced surveillance capabilities the operators were putting to use.

## Chapter 49

At about 5 p.m., Jackson took public transit again to Toronto Western Hospital and walked through a number of hallways and rode elevators to reach Max’s room. The man himself was seated in a chair at the side of his bed. He was bandaged but without tubes. A nurse was just leaving. “We have him sitting up to prevent bedsores and other things. But it doesn’t mean much,” she warned.

“Hi, Max,” said Jackson, not expecting an answer.

“Hello.” The voice was weak but audible.

“How are you feeling, Max?”

“Fine.” The word was slurred. “I am fine.”

“Great. I have a question, Max.”

“I am fine.” The phrase came again in exactly the same way.

“You wanted me to say you were sorry to someone. I forgot who that was, Max. Can you tell me again who you want to apologize to?”

Max lifted his head and stared at Jackson. His eyes lacked any spark; they were dull and seemingly covered with a thin film. “I’m sorry,” he slurred. “I’m so sorry.”

“To whom, Max?” Was it...” Jackson whispered a name into his ear.

“I am fine,” Max said with the robotic voice he used the first two times. “I am fine.”

Jackson made a few more attempts to get more from the CEO but Max soon drifted away into a semi consciousness and said nothing more than “I am fine” half a dozen times.

A doctor came into the room and Jackson turned to him. “Ah, doctor. We’ve just been having a good chat.” Jackson introduced himself and shook the doctor’s hand.

The white-coated doc took in Jackson with a skeptical look. “Is that right?”

“No, it isn’t right. He just says *I am fine* over and over again. I’m his replacement as temporary CEO at his company so it’s crucial that we know what’s happening.”

The doctor wrestled with his sense of confidentiality before answering. “As I’ve discussed with Mr. Payne, there isn’t any brain damage that we can find, from the traffic accident.” The doctor didn’t term the accident a ‘crime’. He continued. “There is, however, a brain tumour unrelated to the accident. It has been there for an estimated six months. Unfortunately...” The doctor dropped his voice and turned his body away from Max’s slumping figure. “...it is a very aggressive tumour that is difficult, if not impossible, to treat. The shock of the accident to the rest of his body has kicked the tumour into high gear or, rather, his body into low gear. That’s why he is, er, unresponsive.”

“Are you saying it’s terminal?”

“We never say that, Mr. Phillips. We’re planning on moving Mr. Blax to Princess Margaret’s. That is a superb cancer hospital, as you might know. Maybe they can do something for him.”

There was very little hope in the doctor’s words. Jackson left the hospital thinking of the uncertainties of life. Maxim Blax had been a highly intelligent, motivated, energetic man a year before. Now, he may be dying, with a grasping ex-wife and an undelivered apology his memorials.

## Chapter 50

On a bright, warm, Friday morning in July, Jackson got to the JPI office early and feeling great. He had risen at sunrise, ran and bicycled on exercise equipment in the condo gym, showered, had a full breakfast and had driven from his condo in Forest Hill to his newly-reserved parking spot in the JPI building on Queen’s Quay. He ran a few steps in the garage to the elevator and bounced up and down in the elevator car as it rose to the executive floors.

There was no reason for Jackson’s high spirits except for the weather and the fact that he was free of aches and pains. Physical and mental exercise had given him pep and purpose. The vision of Max in hospital bothered him when he let it intrude but he was pushing it from his mind with thoughts of re-development work ahead at JPI.

He moved his laptop and a few paper files from the boardroom where he had his temporary office into Blax’s CEO suite of offices. He had ordered Mrs. Laybourne

to clean the office of the man's personal belongings and mementoes as well as some of the more garish decorations. He couldn't do much about the desk, which he disliked, but he like the view over the big lake and several islands rimming Toronto's harbour.

Jackson fielded a phone call from Bill Brownley who asked him to come to his offices. When he arrived, Brownley shepherded him into David and Leona's lair again. The two were fixed in place.

"Hi, guys," Jackson greeted them. They twiddled their fingers over their shoulders while keeping their eyes on their monitors. It seemed every screen was in play.

Bill stood over the two while speaking to Jackson who stayed a few steps back. "My colleagues here," there was fondness in his voice. "They have been watching a military parade of sorts. They have been using facial and voice recognition with images and recordings provided by your CSIS contacts. Thank them for us."

Jackson moved closer and found himself looking at zoomed-in views of a certain type of men mingling with the crowds on the sidewalk. Each man was dressed in white Tees and jeans with New Balance running shoes in different colours. There were four separate men on four monitors. The rest of the dozen or more monitors in front of David and Leona held more general shots of people on their ways to work or boarding streetcars. Bicycles and cars whizzed by.

"This is live," said David over his shoulder. The men are all GRU operatives based at the Embassy in Ottawa. That's according to the images we got from CSIS."

"Wait," David added with an urgent tone. "See this guy." A new scene appeared on yet another monitor. "This is Captain Vasily Zaytsev. He's head of the unit. A clever cookie, CSIS says."

Leona watched her monitors as she interjected. "Each one is armed. It looks like pint-sized flat automatics tucked in their jeans under the shirts. The software tagged the guns but they're not really visible to the naked eye."

Jackson and Brownley leaned toward the monitor showing Zaytsev. "They're all pretty fit guys. Spetsnaz?"

Bill Brownley replied to Jackson's query. "Yep. CSIS says they all were soldiers before moving to the diplomatic service. I have a hunch they're not all that diplomatic."

"Do you think they're the ones who knocked off Petrenko?"

"I doubt it." David took the question. "They don't have the body language of men who have killed someone recently. They look focused on whatever their task is. No nerves. No remorse. No excitement that you get in thrill killings."

"I'd forgotten a lot of what the software will do," Jackson said as he recalled his days at CSIS and then helping to develop JPI software. "Too much soft living on Georgian Bay."

"And there's a new catch," said Brownley suddenly. Everyone looked at the monitor to which his finger was pointing. There was a red line around a man who was walking along with a gang of office workers. "That's a GRU man from the consulate here in Toronto. His name is Sokolov. Serge Sokolov." Brownley was reading from a block of type overlaying Sokolov's image. "CSIS has him as a

handler. Wait a minute.” Brownley read farther. “Well.” He drew out the word. “He was Petrenko’s handler.”

“Holy...” Jackson stared at the young man who had stopped on the sidewalk and was now looking around, as if seeking something or someone.

Sure enough, Sokolov met Captain Zaytsev on the sidewalk to one side of the JPI building.

Leona’s hand was hovering over a level. “They’re speaking English. Probably to blend in with the crowd. Do you want to hear them?”

“Of course,” said Jackson with some glee.

Her hand pulled the small lever down and the audio came up.

“...so, we’ll scope out the ground. You’re set for the meeting at 4 p.m. in the lobby of the Westin.” Jackson watched a monitor as Zaytsev’s hand came up and his finger pointed in the direction of the large hotel a few blocks east of the JPI headquarters. “You two will meet in the lobby in a conversation area to the left of the reception desk. We can keep that area in sight. You understand, Serge?”

Sokolov nodded. “I understand, Captain. How will I know this person?”

“Our thief?” Zaytsev laughed in derision even as his voice dropped to a whisper. “The great and powerful Voice. Nothing but a cheap thief in the end.”

“Not so cheap, Captain.” Sokolov was bantering. “Twenty million dollars is not cheap.”

Zaytsev skewered Sokolov with a penetrating look. “What did you say, Serge,” he said in a low, threatening tone and in Russian.

In the A/V studio, Leona switched on a new feature, instant translation from Russian to English. It wasn’t a perfect translation but close enough.

“Nothing, sir. I didn’t mean anything...”

Whatever Zaytsev muttered was short and not at all sweet. Sokolov fell silent.

“The thief will say, ‘My mother has been very ill but now she is better.’ You will reply, ‘Please give me your full name and address and I will send flowers. *Roses.*’ If you see anything wrong, you will say *lillies* and both of you will move away as quickly as you can. Get the card with the source code and meet me immediately afterward. Can you remember all that, Serge?” Zaytsev studied him with cold eyes.

“Lillies? But what could go wrong?” Sokolov was close to panic.

Zaytsev slapped the young man on his back. “Nothing will go wrong Serge. I will not allow it. Everything will come up roses.”

He told Sokolov to go and wander around the waterfront. Have lunch. Go to the art gallery. Watch the girls. Zaytsev waved him off with a stern admonition to be in place on time.

## Chapter 51

The three GRU men gathered around Zaytsev. He had picked up a paper bag from a bench along the sidewalk. He led them to a square of grass under a small tree. There was some shade in the 33-degree heat. He told them, with the JPI staff listening in via a shotgun mic on the side of a nearby building, that they had come to Queen’s Quay early for two reasons. One was to ensure the safety of the Westin

Hotel as a meeting spot for the thief and Sokolov. The other was to try to spot the thief before the meeting.

"If we can discover the identity before the meeting, we will have an advantage. If The Voice does not give Serge the card or provide a real identity, we will already know who this person is. Maybe we will have Serge greet this Voice by name. This would underline the message that this person had better help us in the future or else. We can find out anything."

"It's not like Serge Sokolov will issue much of a message," Andrei said with a snide chuckle. "Maybe he should break a leg or an arm of this Voice. Make certain this thief will continue working for us."

"How can we identify this person," Niki asked.

"Just ask," said Zaytsev. When his men frowned in puzzlement, Zaytsev explained. "We have here (he handed each man a sheet of thumbnail pictures) the pictures and names of executives and managers at Jackson Phillips. Study them and, when you see one on the sidewalk between 3:30 and 4:00 p.m., walk up and say, 'Do you have a card?'"

"If the person is calm and asks you what you mean or simply walks by, just hold up this." Zaytsev reached into his paper bag and pulled out a stack of cards bearing an advertisement for a Cuts R Us hair salon on King Street. He had dug the cards out of a local dumpster the day before. "The person will think you meant this card."

"However," Zaytsev held up his index finger, "if the person looks frightened... tries to hurry away... says something strange... this is probably the person we want. If that happens, choose the one it was from your sheet of pictures. Then call me on the cellphone and tell me who it was. I will get information from the embassy and we will know everything about this person before the meeting."

One of the men looked worried. "But," he asked, "won't this scare the person away from the meeting with Sokolov?"

"Nyet," Zaytsev dismissed the idea. "This person wants ten million dollars and won't be scared away by a card from a barber shop. Just make sure you show it after you have asked 'do you have a card?' and watch what our brave thief does."

"What a clever idea." Jackson Phillips was punching a fist into his open hand.

Brownley bent over his operators and explained they would piggyback on Zaytsev's idea and, if it worked, find the identity of the software thief at the same time as the Russians.

"And, if it doesn't work, we'll just blame the Russians," quipped David.

Jackson had been quiet for several minutes, thinking about the situation. At David's remark, Jackson softly said, "We have a conundrum." Everyone looked at him. "We are witnesses as Russians test the loyalty of our employees by trying to scare one of them. We intend to use the results of this test to help brand one of our employees as a thief. What does that make us?"

The group members looked at each other in confusion. "I don't know," said David. "But what's the alternative?"

Jackson shrugged. "By the way." He addressed the security chief. "What about the Westin lobby?"

Brownley smiled. "Video and audio. We have bugs we'll place around the conversation area now we know where the meeting will be. Keeping an eye on this whole area really paid off. We can put people on the ground too."

"They're good?"

"They're the best. Better than Spetsnaz any day of the week."

"Then, they must be good." Jackson returned the smile.

"Lunch," Leona called out.

## Chapter 52

Zaytsev's plan went into effect at 3:30 in the afternoon. His three men were positioned along the sidewalk on the way to the Westin. They had surveyed the hotel lobby and, at a few minutes to 4 p.m., they would converge on the lobby to monitor the handover of the SD card to Sokolov. They knew from The Voice that the card would be SanDisk's newest 2 Terabyte SDXC card, with capacity for millions of lines of source code. But that card could be secreted almost anywhere on a human body or in a bag.

The three operatives would listen to Zaytsev through ear buds connected wirelessly to their special smart phones—like hearing aids. Tiny transmitters connected to their phones were integrated into their watches so the men could speak directly to their commander. Or they could simply use their phones, just as the hundreds of other pedestrians on the sidewalk were using their phones. Sokolov had been equipped with the same gear and was listening intently as he walked slowly toward the Westin. He would take up his post in the hotel lobby just before the 4 p.m. meeting time.

Ernesto, the Cuban in Zaytsev's group, immediately spotted Fred Nbodo. He was hurrying as fast as he could through the throng on the sidewalk. He was carrying a laptop in a blue fabric case and was moving in the direction of the Westin. So... maybe...

Ernesto stepped in front of Nbodo. JPI's technology head tried to move around the man but he sidestepped as well, forcing Fred to a stop.

"Please," said Nbodo. "I am in a hurry."

"Do you have a card?"

Nbodo looked closely at the man. "What did you say?"

Ernesto felt a surge of excitement. "Do you have a card?" He repeated the words returning the close look. Nbodo's face was filled with confusion and impatience.

"A card? I have no card. Look, I'm really in a rush. I have to go."

The Cuban's excitement faded quickly. He held his short stack of hair salon cards in front of Fred's face. "This card?"

Fred pushed past the man with a mild oath and continued along the sidewalk. Ernesto watched him go, still conflicted. But Fred got on a streetcar that had just discharged people at a marked stop. The streetcar's doors shut and it moved on soundlessly.

The Russian nicknamed Niki tried the same examination of Rebecca who was on her way to a marketing meeting at Cisco Systems in an office building across from the Westin. She calmly brushed him off and went on her way.

Several other executives were tested and all passed. JPI's people had a lot of off-site functions every day so there were employees of all levels going back and forth around H.Q.

Andrei had little to do. He kept checking his pages of thumbnail photos and names but none of the pedestrians passing him were matches. That is, until he noticed a woman approaching. He almost ignored this one. She was dressed in workout clothes, not business attire. Granted, it was nice clothing. New Balance, all in black. Like his own runners. That was what drew his attention. She carried a dark grey hoodie—nothing that she needed on such a hot, cloudless day. He looked carefully at her face and matched it with a thumbnail on Page 1.

The Russian reached into his pocket and took out his packet of Hair Salon cards. He held them in his hand, under the folded papers of photos and names.

"Do you have a card?" he asked as he blocked the woman's path.

In battle or spy craft, a great plan lasts until the first shot is fired. In this case, the shot was the question.

"Oh." The woman was clearly stupefied by the man standing suddenly in front of her with his question. "Oh, god." Her voice grew loud and shrill and caused him to step back a pace.

"Do you... uh," he was stunned himself as the woman threw the hoodie into his face. She grabbed it back and turned, swivelling away from him. Her head turned in several directions as she sought her escape path. She began to run away, back in the direction from which she had come. Toward JPI headquarters. Her hoodie streamed out behind her as she ran.

The man raised his wrist to his face and began to whisper into it in rapid Russian. His other hand tightened around the package of folded paper. The stack of hair salon advertisements fell from the hand and scattered over the sidewalk to be trod on by a score of pedestrians.

In the A/V at JPI H.Q. David shouted. "We got her."

Jackson, Brownley and Mariah had been sitting chatting on the brown leather couch in the room, biding time and idly watching the monitors. Gluing one's eyes to a couple of dozen monitors showing crowds of pedestrian was not conducive to alertness. They were relying on David and Leona and it worked.

The three rose as one and moved to form up over the operator's chair. "Hey back up guys, I can feel your hot breath." David pointed with a stabbing finger at a large monitor onto which he had shifted the main action. He reran the recording so the group could witness the whole event.

Jackson and the others watched as one of the Russian GRU men stepped in front of a woman. She had long black hair tied in a ponytail. She was dressed in what looked like a black workout top with a small white logo low on one side and black pants with a white slash halfway down one leg. The woman carried a dark grey jacket that might be a hoodie.

"New Balance," Mariah murmured. "Nice."

"But not for the office," Brownley observed.



They watched in awe as the woman threw her hoodie at the man. Leona turned up the volume on her audio array. Outside mics picked up the sounds of the sidewalk but the woman was in a full run by then, back in the direction from which she had come.

As the cameras on JPI picked her up in full face running straight for them—live—Mariah said in a loud, clearly distressed voice, “It’s Carmen. Carmen Flores.”

“Still not enough,” said Jackson.

“You can’t get much better—or worse—than that,” Brownley said in a low voice. “Why else would she react like that?” Then Brownley asked Leona to play the recorded sound from a few seconds ago. Immediately, the sounds, synced to recorded video on a separate monitor, filled the room.

“Do you have a card?” Andrei’s question came with a slight Russian accent.

“Oh.” Then “Oh, god.”

David zoomed a shot to the hair salon cards lying on the concrete under a parade of footfalls.

The foot race in live action continued on the largest monitor. Flores was leading as the Russian dodged pedestrians.

“Okay. You can’t get much better,” said Jackson in a grim tone.

Leona turned and asked, “Would you like audio from the Russian coms?”

“You’re kidding,” Mariah looked at Leona in amazement.

Bill Brownley and Jackson just glanced at her. “Sure,” said Brownley.

“We just eavesdrop on the wireless transmissions,” Leona explained to anyone listening. “Not a big deal.” As she was talking, audio from the Russians’ network could be heard. Being in Russian the auto-translator kicked in; they didn’t get exact English but they got the sense of the calls. The Russian voices were not panicked but they certainly were urgent.

On the monitor, Jackson could see the Carmen Flores, the Chief Operating Officer, still running toward JPI. At least she was dressed for it, thought Jackson, noting the woman’s black New Balance shoes pounding on the pavement as she sped around and through plodding pedestrians.

Leona craned her neck to look at a small information box on a monitor. “We’re showing a break-out of something small and rectangular in her hoodie. I think it’s in a pocket. Is that important?”

“Wow,” enthused Mariah. “It’s that sensitive?” She looked at the control panel. “If this is 2.0, what will 3.0 be?”

“Yeah, it’s important,” said Jackson. “And Mariah, you don’t have to write a news release on this, you know.” Mariah glanced at Jackson and saw he was grinning.

The Russians and the Cuban showed up on other monitors. Three men were moving, at fast walking speed, toward JPI H.Q. in the wake of Flores. They were converging now and Zaytsev was taking the lead.

“Look at this.” Brownley pointed to another monitor where Serge Sokolov could be seen. He was coming away from the hotel. There was a red line around Sokolov and his name was superimposed on the screen. “What’s up with him, Leona?” The letter ‘I’ showed up next to the name. Leona clicked it with her mouse. An extensive biography was now superimposed on the monitor over Sokolov’s image. It showed his history with the Russian Federation consulate.

Jackson looked over and asked Brownley, "CSIS?"

Brownley replied, "Nah. Sokolov is GRU but consulate-based. He's one on the long list of spooks we ban from our conferences and sales meetings. We don't want our stuff to be on their shopping list."

Jackson's lips turned up. "A little late this time, Bill. He was Petrenko's handler and it's looking like he's the contact guy for Carmen."

Leona poked a button and audio from the monitor screen could be heard. It was in Russian but anyone could guess what Sokolov was saying into his transmitter. 'What's happening? What's happening.' He wasn't getting answers. The Russian handler began running along the edge of the sidewalk.

## Chapter 53

"Clear the lobby." Brownley giving orders into his phone. Announce a maintenance issue and ask people to leave the lobby. To go outside. Now!"

David pulled up video on a monitor. People were in the lobby looking around as they heard an announcement to leave. They were slow acting.

Brownley spoke into his phone again. "Tell them we have a maintenance issue in the lobby that could affect their safety and they should go outside immediately." In a few seconds, the announcement boomed over speakers in the lobby. The slow pace of the people in the lobby quickened and the wide doorways became filled with the flow. The mass exodus pushed Zaytsev and his men back onto the sidewalk.

Inside the lobby, Carmen had reached the elevator bank and was repeatedly pushing the UP button to summon one of the cars.

"Take Elevator 6 to the lobby now." Brownley's eyes were fixed on the monitor showing Carmen.

The door of Elevator 6 opened to an empty car. Carmen ran in.

Brownley gave another order. "Close that door. Fast." The monitor showed the door sliding shut. Another screen showed Andrei moving quickly into the lobby. The Russian ran to the elevator bank and just missed putting his hand into the closing door of Car 6. He pounded on the UP button on the wall to no avail.

"Check Elevator 6 and tell me where it's going." Within two seconds, Brownley announced "Executive floor. Her office, I would guess." He punched another call into his cell phone. "Shut down the elevators, except 6. Put out a general broadcast that we have an unknown disturbance in the lobby. Do not use the elevator or stairs until we sort it out." He paused. "Got it. No elevators, no stairs for a few minutes. No panic."

With the mention of the 'stairs', Jackson shifted his look to that door off the lobby. Niki was opening it with Andrei hard on his heels. "They'll be coming up the fire stairs," said Jackson. "Bill?"

"Coming?" Bill Brownley took off at a run looking for Jackson over his shoulder. He needn't have bothered. Jackson was keeping pace. The two men burst out of the A/V room and raced down the hall toward the door to the east fire stairs.

Slamming through the door to the stairs, Jackson and Bill stopped on the stair landing and listened. "I think they're coming up. Yeah, here they come. You want to go up or down?"

"Let's wait for them. Keep the high ground," said the former brigadier general. "It's four floors up to the executive floors. We don't want them getting up there. We're the front and rear guard."

They didn't have to wait long. Andrei charged up the stairs. He had his head down and was puffing after running up more than 20 floors. He didn't expect to be met by the large and hard fist of Bill Brownley.

The Russian collapsed as though he were clubbed with a baseball bat. He tumbled back down the last half flight of concrete steps and bumped into Niki. Niki extricated himself from the tangle and looked up. He saw Jackson heading down the stairs. He ran up toward Jackson.

Jackson was a slim, healthy man but he didn't look like a fighter. He would be no match for a trained operative. That's what Niki was thinking until Jackson's hard-toed shoe caught him in the throat. He gagged and his hands went to his neck.

Jackson was afraid that he had crushed the man's trachea. He wanted to incapacitate the Russian, not kill him. He was relieved to see the man cough a few times and start taking breaths. He would have a sore throat but he probably wouldn't die from the kick. But, Jackson knew his own knee would feel the kick in the morning. He also thought it was lucky he wasn't wearing his sandals.

Brownley pushed past Jackson and went to the two men. Andrei was still huddled on the landing crippled by a damaged ankle and holding his bleeding mouth. Niki was on his hands and knees on the landing trying to get more air into his lungs.

Brownley yanked the guns out of the small holsters at the men's backs. He handed them up to Jackson. He pulled a handful of plastic ties out of a pocket. "Always carry them," he told Jackson who stood above him on a stair. He moved to the man with the injured throat and, as though he were hogtying a steer at a rodeo, he secured the man's hands behind his back, leaving him to hack and cough to clear his breathing tube. He pushed the man aside and did the same with the other.

There was quiet below them. Two of Brownley's men, called by David, arrived to take the guns from Brownley and to keep watch on the Russians. Leaving Andrei and Niki nursing their injuries but able to go down the stairs with their escorts, Brownley and Jackson headed back to the A/V room.

"Where's Mariah?" Jackson was looking around for the PR woman as he entered. Leona told him Mariah had left, saying she was going to Carmen's office.

"Oh, damn." Jackson took out his phone and called Mariah's number. There was no answer.

Bill and Jackson checked the monitors and found that Zaytsev and the Cuban were still in the lobby. Sokolov was there as well but stood away from his colleagues holding his hands in the air. There were a few other people in the lobby.

As Jackson and Bill looked more closely, they saw, with dismay, that Zaytsev and his companion seemed to be in some kind of confrontation with Brownley's

security people. No guns were being flashed but Jackson knew the GRU men were armed. Brownley's staff also included armed guards.

Jackson and Brownley issued instructions, then left the A/V area and went to the elevator bank on the floor. Brownley called security control and ordered an elevator car to be put back in service. He and Jackson took the car to the lobby and, after stepping out, Brownley ordered the elevator shut down again.

The men walked through the lobby and stopped at the large security desk. It was more a pillbox than a desk, a circular, waist-high affair that could seat five guards in its centre. There were a number of panels in that centre along with a bank of monitors that oversaw the garage, the outside grounds and much of the inside of the whole structure. While the building housed more companies than just JPI, most were small so JPI provided all security needs.

Brownley spoke to his men and women. Three male guards were inside the 'desk' while two women and two men had faced off with the GRU duo.

As Jackson and Brownley stood at the desk, the handful of civilians left in the lobby moved, as a group, toward the exterior doors. Ernesto, the Cuban suddenly reached out and grabbed the arm of a young woman. She wore a company card on a ribbon around her neck identifying her as a JPI employee. She swore at the Cuban and tried to pull her arm back.

Before anyone else could move, Serge Sokolov quickly lowered his hands and went the several yards to the pair of GRU men. He stopped by Ernesto. "Let her go."

The Cuban sneered at Sokolov and held on to the woman's arm. She was squirming and trying to pull away.

"I am a representative of the consulate. You will let her go, now." Sokolov's voice was not loud but it was firm and seemed to have all the authority of the Russian Federation behind it.

The Cuban looked at Zaytsev who shrugged. He dropped the young woman's arm and waved his hand toward the doors. "Go." She ran the few steps to the doors and ran out as a man from the departing group held one open for her and followed her out.

## Chapter 54

Brownley made a chopping motion with his hand. There were various noises that amounted to the lobby doors being locked and blinds between the panes of glass in the huge windows lowered to make activities in the lobby invisible to those outside on the sidewalk.

"Okay, Captain. We're all alone. Now tell me what the hell you think you are doing?" Jackson was furious but kept his voice level but loud. He grinned inwardly as he saw Zaytsev's shock at the fact Jackson knew the Russian's military rank. But the captain recovered quickly.

"I must admit," said Zaytsev in a confident, almost insolent manner, "My men got a bit carried away. We were chasing a woman who has stolen millions of dollars from our government. We were just trying to apprehend her." Inwardly,

Zaytsev was seething; Niki and Andrei, the impetuous ones, had charged ahead of him, caught up in the chase. Zaytsev would have abandoned the effort once Flores escaped into the building. After all, she was theirs once they knew her identity.

"And what the hell were you going to do with her when you *apprehended* her?" Jackson matched the captain's sneering. "Take her back to Moscow?"

"Not at all," Zaytsev said calmly. "We would turn her into your police. We would get our money back. Then we would all be friends again."

"We were never friends in the first place, pal," said Jackson. "And tell us about the SD card the woman is carrying. Did you want that too?" Zaytsev blinked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You do realize we have diplomatic immunity?"

"Diplomatic my ass. How did Ms. Flores come to have millions of your money if it wasn't paid to her for source code stolen from our company? You are full of bullshit, Captain Zaytsev."

"Stolen code? What a tale, Mr. Phillips. Why don't you bring Ms. Flores here so we can ask her where she has our money? Or would you rather have an international incident that would tarnish the reputation of your company?"

Jackson whispered to Brownley. Brownley turned and spoke to a security man behind the desk. The security man deftly took something from a drawer hidden behind the desk and, covering it with his hand, he passed it ahead to Brownley.

Jackson continued. "You will collect your two men from us. You and your thug who likes to grab women will leave this building and go back to Ottawa. I'm sure the embassy will have a good reception waiting for you there. Mr. Sokolov here seems to be a decent sort so we'll tidy up loose ends with him. Got it, Captain?"

Zaytsev laughed, more of a sharp bark. "Don't be stupid, Mr. Phillips. You cannot make us do anything. Even if this woman has a card to give us, you cannot touch us when we take the card. Now bring her here." The captain crossed his arms and stood staring at Jackson. At least, thought the GRU captain, he would have something to show from this mission. Maybe the woman would come with them; she would know a great deal.

Brownley revealed the gun in his hand surreptitiously and gave it to Jackson. He whispered, "What are you going to do...?"

Jackson took a few steps toward the three Russians. "Move over there, Mr. Sokolov." He waved the gun at the consulate staffer. Sokolov glanced at Zaytsev and moved away from him.

Jackson raised the gun and shot Ernesto. A red blood spot appeared high on the shoulder of the Cuban's T-shirt. The man cried out and grasped his shoulder. Some of his blood had sprayed on Zaytsev standing next to him.

"What have you done?" yelled Zaytsev. "Are you crazy. We are diplomats."

"You're as much as diplomat as I am crazy, Zaytsev. You're nothing but a cheap thug trying to lay your thieving hands on Canadian software. You can hide behind your diplomatic immunity all you want but I've just shown you're not immune to a bullet. This lobby is sealed tight. It is soundproof. Your communications have been jammed."

Zaytsev took his cellphone from a pocket and looked at it. It was blank. He tried to restart it. It stayed black and silent.

"You can't kill us, Phillips," said the captain but he was sweating and there was a shake in his voice.

"Why not?" The curiosity in Phillips voice drew smiles from Brownley and his people. The security staff were all ex-soldiers with overseas service. They were no strangers to violence or to the psychology of Russians. They could be counted on for confidentiality.

Zaytsev looked at his man, blood now slowly spreading on his shirt, his face pale. Shock was setting in. The Cuban was still on his feet but he was sagging. While Ernesto's physical condition didn't concern Zaytsev a great deal, he was very conscious of the situation. How would the Russian Federation view the powerful GRU being held at gunpoint in a foreign country. How would the GRU take to a tough, trained Cuban, a guest of the GRU, being shot by an old man? How would Russia greet a captain who couldn't deal with this retiree and a bunch of security guards? This was all about him, not the mission, thought Zaytsev.

"We will go." Zaytsev made the concession with a raised chin but no confidence. "I have to get help for my man."

"I don't give a damn what you do but you will go now with your men. And we won't hear from you again. Forget the money. Forget the card. Forget Ms. Flores. And forget Mr. Sokolov who looks like he will be glad to see your backside."

Sokolov couldn't help himself. There was an appreciative glance at Jackson and a slight smirk on his thin lips.

Brownley's men and woman dragged the two injured men from the stairwell and out of the lobby through the back entrance which accessed the garbage dock. Zaytsev supported the Cuban out of the building in the same way. A black SUV with dark windows and diplomatic licence plates, called by Sokolov, picked up the four men and took them away.

Jackson Phillips was still in a foul mood. He led Sokolov to a sitting area in the lobby and plopped him into a chair. He stood over the handler. "I was nice to you back there but I am not a nice person. I know intelligence people who make your FSB look like amateurs. Putin doesn't scare me or my former mates in JTF2." Sokolov knew who the special forces were and what they could do. His eyes widened involuntarily.

"You think Captain Zaytsev is a bad guy. Named for a sniper. You know the longest sniper shot in history was made by a Canadian with my old outfit, don't you?"

"Da." Sokolov's eyes blinked.

"You know what you can do with diplomatic immunity. It means nothing when you're trying to steal our stuff and assault our people and send thugs like that..." Jackson shot a thumb in the direction of the exit doors "...to cause us grief."

Jackson spent the next couple of minutes mentally torturing the Russian GRU agent. A lot of the talk was strategic. He knew Sokolov would write a report for his superiors that would shift blame from himself to anyone he could think of. But the report would, ultimately, advise the consulate, the embassy and the GRU to leave JPI alone because its current code was going to be obsolete soon. Version 3.0 likely wasn't worth the trouble to try to penetrate. It was mostly hype, Sokolov would claim. And, the report would suggest Jackson Phillips was an old man who

might not be long at the helm of this company, so be patient. It was B.S. but the Ruskies might buy it from the handler.

## Chapter 55

Jackson had been mindful of Mariah and worried that she might be trying to deal with Carmen Flores on her own. After all, Carmen seemed the prime suspect as the person who shoved Max in front of a car, almost killing him. She might be armed. She might still be homicidal. Mariah might be with her. As soon as Zaytsev had agreed to leave the building, Jackson had asked Bill to go to Carmen's office to check the scene and to corral the impetuous Mariah. He had heard nothing since.

Jackson made his way to the office of the COO. On his way, he heard loudspeaker announcements telling residents of the building that all was back to normal. Residents were being told a group of unwanted protestors had entered the lobby of the building and services were shut down quickly to keep them away from building residents and their visitors. The protestors had been escorted off premises and everything was back to normal, the explanation went. The announcement had holes but was adequate to explain the quarter hour or so of disruption in the building.

There was an eerie feeling to the hallway and reception area outside Carmen's office. Not a soul was there. Jackson assumed they may still be making their ways up from outside or may have been moved away by Brownley's security staff. Brownley stood in the hallway. When he saw Jackson, he shrugged but told the CEO he had heard a conversation going on inside Flores' office.

Jackson tapped at the door. When there was no response, he banged on the door with his fist. Mariah opened the door and smiled reassuringly.

"Hi, Jackson. Come right in."

"God, Mariah. I was worried sick."

"No need. We're having a nice chat." Mariah turned and walked back into the office. Jackson followed her. It was dim in the room. A single table lamp was lit. The room was as Jackson recalled, an over-decorated living room, not a working office. He felt like he had entered his aunt's home or even an upscale home for the aged. He felt a touch of claustrophobia and his skin itched with the mustiness of the whole place.

"Carmen?" Jackson could make out a figure in a wing chair drawn up to a fireplace. Thank god there was no fire in the thing in late July, Jackson thought. He moved toward the chair.

"Hello, Jackson." It was Carmen's voice but it had a strained quality. "I'm sorry I caused all this trouble." It sounded as if she were playing a role in an amateur theatre production of a bad costume drama. It failed to raise any sympathy in him.

In anger, Jackson stood in front of the woman and looked down at her. "Sorry doesn't begin to cut it, Miss Flores. You've stolen from this company. From 3,000 and more of your co-workers. You tried to sell our secrets to the Russians. The

Russians, for god's sake. Those bastards. You could have got thousands of soldiers and civilians killed, blown up... What the hell were you thinking?"

Mariah touched Jackson's arm. She asked him, in a quiet, concerned voice, to sit down. She even offered tea, that he refused. He didn't want any bloody tea. He wanted explanations.

"Carmen has been talking to me," said Mariah. "She was in love with Maxim. From the day she came to work here last year. He was her ideal mate. He asked her to marry him. Isn't that right, Carmen." Mariah looked at the woman who was still sitting, cowed, in the wing chair. Carmen gave a slight nod and there was the sound of a snuffle.

"Then, it all changed. Max treated her terribly. He would tell her how wonderful and great he was and how she didn't deserve him. He hit her once, in the face. He told her he didn't want her around and threatened to fire her if she came near him again."

Jackson gave Mariah a disgusted look. "Look. I don't care about Romance on Yonge Street or whatever tale she's spinning. None of that justifies what she's done. You two are mixing up a little love affair with multi-million-dollar commerce and the dirty end of international affairs." He sat back realizing how tired he was after the busy day he had endured.

"Where's the card?"

"I've got it," said Mariah, digging the SanDisk 2T Card out of blazer pocket and handing it to Jackson. "Carmen gave it up right away." It sounded like Mariah was congratulating the thief for returning a sucker instead of licking the thing to the stick.

Jackson thought for a moment. He called Payne and asked the CFO to come to Carmen's office. He told the two women to give him a minute to get his thoughts together.

The three sat in the gloom of the office in silence except for the odd sob from Carmen. Jackson couldn't tell if she was faking with the occasional croc tears or weeping without a break. By the time Payne arrived, Jackson was fed up with the whole thing.

Jackson let Mariah repeat her explanation of the love affair to Payne. At the end, Payne turned to Jackson. "Did she push Max?"

"How about it, Carmen," Jackson asked. Did you push Max into traffic? Did you try to kill your ex-boyfriend in a fit of pique?"

Mariah broke in. "Maybe we should wait for the police. And get Carmen a lawyer. She'll need one." Jackson turned to her with a look that spoke of betrayal. Mariah put her chin up.

"I feel like a lawyer, god forbid. I'll tell you nothing said in this room would be permissible in a court," said Jackson. "From you, Mariah, me and Payne, it'll be hearsay and from Carmen, it's not under oath and probably will be remembered in three different ways anyhow. For my curiosity, did you, Carmen, push Max into traffic?"

Carmen raised her head. "Yes. I pushed him and I'm glad. That son of a bitch put me through hell." Once she began it was like a flood from a broken tap. She explained how her affair with Max started to wither. At that point, she hatched a plot, partly in anger and partly to replace the future she envisioned with Max for a



future with enough money to live in style. She suspected something was mentally wrong with Max. He was acting like a lunatic. She preyed on his illness to make him both narcissistic and paranoid. After all, the woman did have a PhD.

"But," said Brownley, "the guy had a brain tumour, for crying out loud."

"I didn't know that, did I?" Carmen argued. "Besides, why should I suffer because he got sick?"

"Weird," Brownley told the room. Carmen glared. Brownley went out saying he had 'real business' to handle.

Carmen continued. "When I was ready and certain he wouldn't do anything about it, I stole that goddamned code using his access to the servers. I offered it to the Russians because it was the worst thing I could think of doing to this company and to Blax. I deserved the twenty million. I would have had that and more as Mrs. Blax. He should have married me even if he was sick..."

She cried this time. The sobbing and retching went on for three or four minutes as Payne and Jackson squirmed and Mariah held the woman.

Payne held up his hand. "Okay. Here's what is going to happen." Slowly, Carmen stopped her weeping, responding to the command in Payne's voice. "Just shut up and listen. We have the source code back. The Russians may have a little sample as Barry and Jean think but it's not serious. So, we are not going to press to prosecute Carmen for theft." Carmen's head raised at this. Mariah clapped her hands together.

"This is not a favour to Carmen. You..." he pointed directly at Carmen. "You will be going to jail for trying to kill Mr. Blax. We'll all testify."

"I thought you said it wasn't admissible." Mariah was incensed.

"I may have lied," said Jackson. "So, sue me. But our testimony won't be needed because Carmen will confess to get the lightest possible sentence. But you know that already, don't you Carmen. You're not fooling anyone."

Mariah frowned. Payne took over from Jackson.

"We want the money you got from the Russians as a down payment. Since Petrenko got a million of that and we have that already, we'll be giving most of your nine million to Toronto Western and other major hospitals in the city. Anonymously."

Jackson smiled at Carmen. "You'll appreciate that, won't you, Carmen?"

Carmen glowered at Jackson.

"If you don't give us your bank account details, the code theft charge will magically reappear with an Official Secrets Act rider that will put you in prison for life."

Payne licked his lips. "Petrenko's million also goes to a hospital. I'm thinking Sick Kids."

Mariah actually smiled.

"Can I keep..." Carmen began to ask question in a feeble voice.

Jackson answered. "What you will get, Carmen, is enough to pay your lawyer's bills and not a penny more. Those bills will come to me and I'll pay them or you get nothing."

"I don't know whether to tell you this or not, Carmen." Jackson avoided looking at Flores as he spoke. "Max said something."

Carmen took her hoodie off her lap and wrapped it around her shoulders. Even though her office was uncomfortably warm, she shivered. She stared at the floor in front of her wingchair.

"It may not be you but he asked me to tell *her* he was sorry." He waited a beat. "Does that mean anything?"

Carmen raised her head slowly. Her black hair hung over a side of her face. The visible side was twisted into a mask of sheer hatred, something like the mask of the Phantom of the Opera.

"It means nothing to me. Tumour, no tumour. He treated me like dirt after I worked so hard to make him marry..." She threw out a hand and swept it over her cartoon of a living room. "I'm glad he's dying."

A small cry could be heard from Mariah. Jackson looked at her. She turned to Carmen. "I see what Jackson means, Carmen. You are a vicious creature." She turned to Jackson. "I'm sorry, Jackson..."

There was a knocking on the office door. Payne was nearest so he got up and opened it. Bill Brownley filled the entrance but, as he moved into the room, he was trailed by a quartet of police officers. Two were in plainclothes while the two behind were in their blue uniforms.

"Welcome, detectives," said Jackson in a cheerful voice. "I'm afraid I stood you up."

Detective Sergeant Jaya Kumar stopped in front of Jackson's chair. "I understand you've been busy. Mr. Brownley tells me you had some unwanted guests—unlike us. Demonstrators?"

Jackson simply looked at Kumar.

"The good news, Mr. Phillips. You're off the hook for the murder of Mr. Petrenko. We have three of his hoods for that. The idiots were covered in blood spots and had the murder weapon in their car when they were stopped near the U.S. border."

Ontario Provincial Police had pulled over a car when they saw it speeding along the Queen Elizabeth Way about five miles away from the turnoff to the Rainbow International Bridge at Niagara Falls.

"They wouldn't have gotten across the border, even without a wall there," said Brownley with a chuckle.

"Yeah." The second plainclothes officer laughed. "Especially with Russian and Jamaican passports. Like we said, idiots."

Kumar backed up and formally introduced herself and Detective Sergeant John Chambers to the JPI group. She distributed business cards.

"The morons tell us they were trying to get their shares of a million bucks Petrenko had been paid for something. Said they deserved some money. You know anything about that?" Kumar kept her eyes on Jackson.

"No idea." Jackson seemed mystified. "Anyway, you have your killers. So, let's move on to what we have for you." Jackson stood and moved to hover over Carmen Flores.

He introduced the figure in the wingchair. She had put her legs up and was curled in a fetal ball in the chair. Dressed in her black track clothes with a dark grey hoodie over her shoulders, she was almost invisible in the dimly-lit room. Brownley flicked a switch on the wall near the door and overhead lighting turned

the office into day. Now, Carmen came into plain view in the red fabric wing chair. There was no place she could hide.

"Carmen has something to tell you about the attempted murder of Maxim Blax. You want to give her the warning?"

"Mr. Phillips. You shouldn't be dealing with a suspect..." Kumar was outraged. Behind her, DS Chambers reached out to touch her arm.

"Don't be so serious, Jaya," said DS Chambers. "He's giving you a present, all wrapped up."

DS Kumar moved to Carmen and read the Canadian warning to the suspect. "You have the right to remain silent. If you do say anything, what you say can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to consult with a lawyer and have that lawyer present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be appointed for you if you so desire."

"You understand," the officer continued, "that anything you voluntarily say can be used in court. My advice is to get a lawyer before you tell us anything. But," she peered closely at Carmen's clothing, "considering your clothing and this hoodie, I would like you to accompany us to 52 Division."

"Hey, my division is closer," said Chambers in a light tone.

"You have yours, John. This one is mine." Kumar relaxed as she faced Jackson. "Maybe you'll find time to join us, Mr. Phillips, since you blew us off for your last appointment." There was a hint of a smile on her face.

## Chapter 56

The uniformed police officers took Carmen in a cruiser while the two sergeants shared an unmarked car to return to 53 Division on Eglinton Avenue. Jackson planned to join them in an hour, given that he would take the subway after walking to the Union Station subway stop about ten minutes from JPI's H.Q.

"The walk will give me time to get my thoughts together," he told the cops. Kumar had silently raised an eyebrow.

After the police had gone, Bill Brownley, Jackson, Mariah and Payne couldn't wait to get out of Carmen's bizarre and cloying office.

"That place gives me creeps," Payne told the others.

Mariah's voice was soft. "She was desperate for a relationship. Her mom used to tell her a comfortable home and a prosperous marriage was everything. A career for a woman was just a temporary condition." Mariah shuddered. "Right out of the 1950s."

"Ouch," Jackson admonished, "I'm out of the 50's and I don't think that way."

"Sorry." Mariah wasn't at all contrite.

Once seated in the main boardroom with hastily arranged coffee and bagels, the group rehashed the unbelievable day.

Mariah's head shot up in alarm when Brownley asked Jackson why he had shot the Cuban. "You didn't actually shoot someone?"

Jackson leaned forward and lowered his voice. "It's the only thing the Russian GRU would understand. I worked against these guys years ago and it has only

gotten worse. Putin poisons people. I shot one of them. They will get that message; that we won't roll over when they steal from us or try to corrupt our people. The alternative was to just let them go or give in to 'diplomatic immunity.' Bullshit. I won't do it."

"I don't agree with it but I get it," Payne said.

"I think it's nuts," Mariah said without concern that she was criticizing her boss.

"I liked it then and I like it better now," Brownley added. He said his security team would not mention the stairway battle or the lobby face-off to anyone. There was no crime because the GRU officer declared diplomatic immunity, obviating any criminal investigation - a specious reasoning but one that worked for JPI and Jackson. It was all spy craft.

Brownley did worry that Russia or the GRU would come after Jackson for revenge but Jackson disregarded the concern.

"They will keep coming after JPI, especially after 3.0. But they've been doing that since I started the company," Jackson reminded the group. "As for me. I'm an old guy who doesn't get too worried about the future. What's the point?" He left it at that except for the warning, "We'll just have to make sure everyone stays on their toes."

They talked for a time about Carmen's fate. Payne concluded that she would do some prison time for the attempted murder of Blax but 'not enough.' It would be a first offence and mitigated circumstances. She'll bargain down to attempted manslaughter. But, he added, she would likely never work again for a tech company or in a senior position.

Max's condition had worsened because of the tumour aggravated by his total physical decline and injuries, Mariah reported. His time was likely short but a bump-up to a murder charge for Carmen was a remote possibility.

As for charges of any sort against Jackson, others at JPI or in the Russian ranks, "Forget it," offered Jackson. "But I'll get a lawyer the minute police start to get bothersome."

With that, the people at the table gulped the last of their coffee. Jackson and Payne headed for 53 Division. Brownley returned to his office to clean up the security section. Mariah went to her office to get staff working on overtime on news releases and statements with carefully crafted stories about the day's activities.

Unwanted visitors. Temporary clearing of the lobby. Arrest of a senior executive in the aftermath of a relationship breakdown. The re-ascension of Jackson Phillips to CEO of the company he founded. Phillips to oversee development of Version 3.0 as he did for Version 2.0. JPI was headed for a busy news day. Unless the true tale slipped out through a very small sieve, the company and its people would survive it all.

Mariah's prediction was that JPI would launch 3.0 to great and profitable acceptance one year from now. Jackson would find a great successor within that year and head back to his wonderful bayside cottage. Payne would continue keeping a tight hand on JPI's budget. Mariah would struggle to do a superb job even with her deficient budget.

Life would go on despite the collapse of romance, failed protests, Russians, police, and the free press, Mariah thought to herself as she typed on her laptop and returned phone calls as daylight waned outside her office window.

## Epilogue

Jackson Phillips and Ryan Payne sat at the end of the dock with their feet in the cool waters of Georgian Bay. They were looking into the small, forest covering the interior of Jackson's Shield Island. The leaves on the deciduous trees were in glorious reds and golds while the conifers were in various shades of green. It was late September in Cottage Country.

"Last time we'll do this for a while," said Jackson looking down at his feet that were getting numb.

The two men dropped into the shallows and waded along the length of the dock to the sandy shore. It was late afternoon and the sand was only lukewarm.

Payne had driven up for the weekend to Jackson's huge cottage for the 'changing of the leaves' across this part of northern Ontario. He really wanted to spend quiet time with the interim CEO and namesake of Jackson Phillips Inc. He had questions.

"When do you think the Russians will try again?" The men had moved to the porch and sat in green-painted, wooden Muskoka chairs.

Jackson turned to his long-time friend and considered the question for a few seconds. "I'd be surprised if they aren't figuring that out now. I think they'll try to hack us at every turn. They'll try to turn our people. Will they come after us personally? I hope they don't touch the others..." He was referring to other executives at JPI. "...but I, personally, wouldn't mind meeting Captain Zaytsev again. He's a piece of work who needs another lesson in diplomacy."

Payne laughed but grew serious quickly. "Come on, Jackson. What's he? Maybe forty. And in good shape. You're pretty healthy but get real!"

"His guys were suckers for a quick punch and a swift kick. And I have a few bullets that are less than forty."

Payne shook his head. "This is Canada, not the wild west. And you're not Buffalo Bill even if you met him in his prime."

Jackson gave Payne his evil-eye glare.

"Granted. Besides, I don't like guns. Should ban them."

"Why in hell," said Payne, "did you shoot the goon with our good captain and not Zaytsev himself?"

"Don't poke the bear too much. Zaytsev would have a hard time explaining a bullet hole in his shoulder. I wanted Zaytsev in one piece to make up the best story possible, protecting his own ass and not putting ours in the crosshairs."

"Nice picture, Jackson." Payne grinned again.

"Okay," Jackson leaned forward and looked directly at Payne. "What about the numbers?"

Payne's brow wrinkled. "Development is eating up money at a fantastic clip. But, then, we're ahead of schedule. No trouble getting the private equity people to come up with what we need."

A sip of coffee from the mug on his chair arm. "On the plus, plus side, Marketing just reported a continuing surge of orders from clients. But that's pretty much at cost so no profit there."

Jackson leaned back. "But new orders."

"Yes, that's the good news. Marketing says we're getting so many new customers, they're going to have to hire new reps to keep up. We're stealing customers from the competition like crazy I'm afraid of being labelled a monopoly."

Payne went on, buoyed with his enthusiasm but Jackson cut him off. "Like Trump, we can thank the Russians."

Payne changed direction. "And thank Carmen and Maxim."

Jackson looked away. There was pain in his eyes.

"I'm heading down on Monday for Max's funeral. The cause of death is stroke resulting from his brain tumour. At most, Carmen will get manslaughter and spend maybe six years in jail or on parole. Doesn't seem fair. Apparently, she kept Max from getting medical help for the tumour. But there's no proof it would have been effective."

"Canadian justice. Better than locking up everybody forever, like the U.S." Payne grimaced.

"My big worry is finding a new CEO for JPI," said Jackson. He paused and slapped his forehead. He looked at his watch.

"Damn... I have to make sure my cook Graham has everything ready for Mariah and her new guy. Remember, they're coming up to join us for dinner and a stayover."

"Who's the guy?"

"Head of a startup tech company. Offices near us. Smart and funny."

Payne looked at Jackson and raised his eyebrows. "New blood? New CEO?"

Jackson laughed out loud. "Send the old people to an island. Bring in the kids."

