



# I, Enigma

By Richard Miller

# WARNING

This story has been rated HD for 'highly disturbed'. If you are someone who is easily offended, or has a history of heart problems, you would be well advised to set this story down and move on. The author accepts no responsibility for any emotional trauma or permanent emotional scarring that may result from any reader willingly continuing past this page. If you do decide to disregard my advice and continue past this point, you will do so at your own peril.

You've been warned.

## Chapter 1

Algiers, Louisiana, jewel of the New Orleans west bank. Not only is it a jewel, but is something of a curiosity as well.

Let me explain...

New Orleans is actually divided into two parts - the west bank and the east bank, with the Mississippi River itself defining the boundary between the two. But it's the east bank where the bulk of the city is located. In fact, all of it except for that one tiny stretch of land known as Algiers, the only section of the west bank that is actually a part of New Orleans proper, as if the city looked at everything else the west bank had to offer and said 'thanks, but no thanks'.

And I get that. It makes sense, that Algiers is the only part of the West Bank that the city wanted.

Why?

Because, while the rest of the west bank looks like something someone forgot to sweep up once the sixties were over, Algiers shines like a midnight sun, like a gold coin in a box of old pennies; a true reflection, like New Orleans itself, of everything that is good about the southern way of life here in the deep south - the history, the culture, the architecture, the ancient oak tree lined streets... Not to mention the magnificent homes with their classic New Orleans' styling: porch swings, tall windows, columns, balconies...and, of course, plenty of black ornamental ironwork to go around.

And that's Algiers, true New Orleans tradition through and through, and that includes the lazy, laid-back lifestyles of the people who live there.

Yeah.

Life in the deep south.

And that's where I work, Algiers, Louisiana. The Mississippi River Bank building, to be exact, or, as we call it, the MRB, by far *the* most impressive structure on the entire west bank. Which, in itself, is not all that impressive an accomplishment when you consider that to qualify for that status, you simply have to *not* be things. Things such as:

- ✓ Rundown
- ✓ Old
- ✓ Dirty
- ✓ Horribly dated
- ✓ Unpleasant to look at
- ✓ Poor design

That kind of stuff. Stuff that seems to be a standard of some kind for everything else within the West Bank's sad, tawdry borders.

Not to take anything away from the MRB, though, because the building could easily hold its own even if it were located in the illustrious Los Colinas section of Dallas. It's that impressive.

The building itself is a checkered green and blue glass affair that looks something like a huge, space-age Rubik's cube. Very futuristic. You can easily picture this thing on the cover of some Sci-Fi novel, like maybe a story about an advanced race of one-eyed, three-fingered aliens that come to Earth for the purpose of taking over the planet. No choice. There are no drugs on Venus (their home planet), so they come here to take ours, and they build the MRB to use as their headquarters, their command post – whatever. You know, the place they plot and devise their plans to take over the world? And while I can sympathize with them about the drugs - living on a planet without any - I have but two words for them in regard to taking ours: Not. Happening.

Anyway, that's where I work, or, more accurately stated, it's where I show up every day so I can justify a paycheck. A big one. Not big enough in my opinion, but I'm working on that.

\* \* \* \* \*

I guess at this point I should introduce myself, that simply being the polite thing to do - or so I'm told. Personally, I wouldn't know since I'm not a polite person. Still, I hear things, so with that in mind...

My name is Jason, Jason Roberts, a 28-year-old computer programmer afflicted with the dreaded '2' disease:

2 intelligent

2 good looking

2 arrogant

And

Paid 2, 2 much money

And that's me in a nutshell for better or - as most people would agree - for worse. And that's fine, because the way I always look at it is like this: there's worse things a person could be besides being me...kinda.

Now that's out of the way, let's continue with the story, shall we?

## Chapter 2

Another day in the Big Easy. I take the usual right off General Degaulle Blvd. and turn into the rear parking lot of the MRB.

I have arrived.

I check my Rolex: 7:45 am, exactly. Right on time, as usual.

I park my Jeep, kill the engine, check my tie in the mirror, and grab my titanium Sharper Image briefcase - *AND* the grocery bag. Can't forget the grocery bag. To do so would be, well, not a good thing.

I exit the vehicle and start for the rear entrance of the building, hoping that by this time the Venusians have left. Mainly because I'm carrying a significant amount of drugs in my briefcase, and if they try to take them, things could get ugly. Real ugly. So yeah, I hope they've left.

OK, maybe not all of them. Maybe they left a few of their females behind. I once read somewhere that Venusian women have three pairs of firm, perfectly shaped breasts each. Two pair up front and one on their back that can double as hand grips should the need arise, as it often times does. Also, they have several tiny, puckered orifices located in convenient, easily accessible locations across their body.

Pretty sweet, right?

But the best part? My favorite feature? They can't talk. Not a word.

Uh-huh, that's what I said - my kinda woman.

So yeah, maybe they left a few of them behind.

## Chapter 3

OK, I made that up - about the Venusian women, that is, but c'mon. How cool would that be?

Oh yeah, forgot to mention - I *always* park in the rear.

I park in the rear of the building as opposed to the front because it's much more scenic and I find it makes a lot nicer way to start my, shall we say, 'unusual' day.

Also, I might add that I'm the *only* person who does that, parks in the rear, so I literally have the place to myself, like I own it. Always an available spot and never any door dings.

And I like that.

The reason I'm the only person who parks in the rear is because it's not exactly what I would call a 'health-inducing' thing to do. Far from it, actually, and I'll explain why in a moment. But for now, suffice it to say that it's simply not a good idea.

Like I said, more on that later, but right now, a little more about the building itself...

\* \* \* \* \*

The rear of the property is truly a thing to behold, as beautiful as it is impressive. The grounds are impeccably landscaped, perfectly manicured, and mainly consist of a large, all-encompassing pond that serves as home to no less than three different species of ducks.

And a goose - singular, as in 'one'.

And not just your average every everyday run-of-the-mill goose at that. No. It's a Canadian goose; a Canadian goose of the overly large, overly aggressive, and oftentimes, violent variety.

Very violent, in fact.

Which is the reason I'm the only person that ever parks their car in the rear. Because, in order to get to the building from the parking lot, you have to cross a wooden bridge that spans the pond, and to do that, you have to deal with the goose, the bridge being part of its territory or habitat or whatever.

And therein lies the problem.

You never - I repeat, NEVER - want to have to deal with the goose. Not if you can avoid it. I get away with using the rear of the building simply because I seem to be the only human the satanic beast tolerates, and that's only because I pay its ransom - ransom, in this case, being a loaf of bread. Family size. The blue and yellow wrapper, never the red - red being a mistake you make once and then never again.

For the goose, a loaf of bread is not a kindness; it's an expectation, and trust me, you'd best deliver the goods. Which is why the goose likes me - or tolerates me, I should say - because I deliver the goods, the reason I show up early for work every morning.

Anyway, that's our arrangement, the goose and I. I feed it, and in exchange, it doesn't kill me, and it's an arrangement that has worked out fairly well so far...in a manner of speaking.

But aside from me, the unholy animal has managed to bully and terrorize just about every other worker in the building into a phobia-like fear of him, to the point they avoid the rear property entirely.

And I so admire that about him.

The problem here is that a Canadian goose is huge. I'm talking prehistoric ostrich huge. The fucking thing is nearly as tall as I am and has a beak that can probably cut through sheet metal. Which is another reason no one parks in the rear. The goose has been known to remove and steal body parts from cars. And how bad would that suck - walking up to your Ford Fiesta to leave work only to find a bumper or quarter panel missing, maybe a muffler or a tire, even. Imagine reaching the parking lot to go home, only to see the goose waddling away backwards, dragging your car seat along with it.

Pretty scary shit.

In fact, the goose could very well be the reason the Venusians left. Again, no choice. Had to leave before the goose removed something vital from their spaceship and stranded them here. And for them, that would suck. It would suck because, while they may enjoy our drugs, they'd be stuck with our earth women and their limited anatomy - two breasts, two orifices, end of story. OK, three. Three orifices, if you count the mouth. But the low orifice and breast count wouldn't be the deal breaker; that's something they could work with. No, their main problem with Earth women would be the same one I have - that awful noise their face makes...

"I have an idea, let's spend the evening getting in touch with each other's feelings!"

Or my favorite...

"Oh, hi, my name is..."

Yeah, like I care *what* their name is. Sheez.

So yeah, the Earth women would be a problem for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anyway, I make it to the bridge and, as is the routine now, begin my trek across the pond, which always happens in the same exact way: once I'm halfway across, I stop and set the briefcase down. I do a quick goose check and see that he's exactly where I would expect him to be, at the end of the bridge, eyes zoomed in and closely trained on the grocery bag I'm holding. I see that I have his attention now, so I slowly - ever so slowly - pull the loaf from the bag and hold it up, showing him that I have indeed held up my end of the bargain. Indeed, I have

brought the goods. He just stares at the loaf, clacking his beak, trying to decide whether to wait or cut to the chase and make a mad dash towards me. I don't take any chances. I hold the loaf over the railing where at least three dozen ducks are snapping their beaks like piranhas in the water below, just hoping the goose fucks up and they get the tasty treat instead.

At this point, it's a standoff, like two gunfighters waiting for the other to flinch. I watch the goose's feet for the slightest signs of movement and see one. His right heel slightly lifts, meaning he's thinking about charging me. I hold the loaf further over the railing and bounce it a few times to let him know I mean business. Beads of sweat form on his forehead, and he starts whimpering like a dog. He checks the crowd in the water, and his eyes begin darting back and forth between them and me. It's obvious he's doing the math in his head, but no matter how he works the numbers, he's outnumbered, and he knows it. Sure, he might take a dozen or so of the ducks out, but the odds are not in his favor. *And*, he knows I'll do it.

I use the loaf to motion for him to back the fuck up, and he does, reluctantly, and not without voicing his complaints with that air horn-like squawk of his. Still, he concedes. He waddles backwards away from the bridge and waits.

I stoop, pick up my briefcase with my free hand, and begin cautiously making my way across the bridge, all the while holding the loaf of bread over the water as I do. Below me, I hear the ducks splashing as they paddle to keep pace with the dangling loaf, their mouths drooling, and hoping my grip slips. The goose hoping it doesn't.

The tension mounts.

When I'm within twenty feet of the bridge's end, I again motion for the goose to back up. Again, he complies, and again he complains. Jesus. We do this every day. You'd think by now he'd know the routine.

I step off the bridge and immediately hurl the loaf a good twenty yards past the goose, buying me just enough time to make it safely inside the building. Once I'm on the other side of the glass door, I lean my back against it and breathe a sigh of relief. I'm not dead. I check my Rolex: 7:58. Still on time, and still in possession of all my appendages.

So far, so good.

## Chapter 4

Now, if you've never seen it, I have to tell you - the interior of the MRB is even more impressive - not to mention more lavish - than its exterior. The inside of the building is designed to look something like a huge atrium, though, I think 'prehistoric greenhouse' would be a more apt description. Flush with huge banana trees, rubber plants, palms, and ferns of every size, shape, and description, it's as if someone cut a huge plug out of the rainforest and dropped it square in the middle of the building's lobby.

The overall effect this all has is that it makes you feel that you've somehow traveled back in time to the Mesozoic era, the only thing missing being a layer of mist on the ground and maybe the roar of giant reptiles somewhere off in the distance. Aside from that, the illusion is complete. So much so that it'd be easy to forget you're actually in the 21st century.

And nestled in the middle of all this, this prehistoric landfill, is the elevator, which is something of a contradiction in terms since the elevator itself is about as futuristic as the jungle is primitive. Vveerrrryyy space age, like something the Venusians left behind, would be my guess. I say that because looking at this thing, you can't help but think that you're being given a glimpse into the future and seeing what elevators in space will look like.

Basically, what the elevator is, is this massive, clear acrylic tube that extends from the lobby all the way to the fourth floor; the fourth floor, of course, being the top of the building. You get to the elevator by way of an equally futuristic metal pathway that cuts through the jungle. And thank God for that, the pathway, otherwise, you'd need a machete to get to the elevator. And I don't know, maybe a gun.

And another thing - the elevator is especially unusual inasmuch as there is no car inside the tube, just a clear acrylic platform you step on that shuttles you between floors using nothing more than pressurized air. No cables, no pulleys, no doors, just good old-fashioned American ingenuity and know-how. You simply step on the platform, scan your ID, and away you go, instantly propelled to your destination like a rocket shot into space. Once there, once you reach your floor, you step out onto an equally futuristic walkway that leads from the acrylic tube to the floor's corridor.

The whole thing is way cool, but at the same time, way weird. One minute you're 'Drog the Neanderthal' drumming on a hollow log with dinosaur bones, and the next minute you're George Jetson, like some freaky time machine just took you from 3000 BC to the year 2090 in about the same time it takes you to check your tie knot and squirt breath freshener in your mouth.

Trippy.

But the lobby isn't all jungle, just mostly. There's the side of the lobby, for example, that hosts the bank (hence the name of the building, Mississippi River Bank) entrance and a cafe. More glass and chrome, like a solid wall of it running from front to back. Again, very modern, very contemporary, and all of it keeping within the interior's strange prehistoric/space age motif.

In front of this glass wall is the courtyard, the only part of the building, oddly enough, that doesn't conform to the interior's confused 'I was on drugs when I designed this' theme. Instead, it's fairly conventional. It's a rather large,

and mostly open, area floored in polished, rust-brown, one-foot square tiles set in dark grout and sports a dozen or so heavy, black wrought iron tables with matching chairs. The finishing touch to it all is the red, green, and white paneled umbrellas rising from the center of each table, giving it a distinct European look and feel, like you're having lunch in Florence or something. All very fashionable and all very sidewalk cafe-ish. Quite nice, actually.

Also, adjacent to the bank, on its left side, is a small New Orleans-style sandwich shop whose menu and quality, I find, compares favorably to any other I have ever experienced. An excellent lunch is the expectation, and an excellent lunch is what's delivered. And that's a profound statement when you consider that it's coming from someone who, by this time, is well accustomed to the finest food the city has to offer; a city known for some of the best cuisine in the world.

But anyway, this is where everyone takes their breaks. They lounge in the climate-controlled comfort of the courtyard, enjoying the lush jungle surroundings, the outdoor cafe atmosphere, basking in the warmth of the skylights above, and all the while, savoring a sloppy-good New Orleans-style po'boy from a world-class sandwich shop.

All very nice.

But as nice as the courtyard is, I prefer to take my breaks outside with birdzilla. Why, I'm not really sure. Maybe it's the challenge - you know, seeing if I can come back from lunch with the same number of digits as when I left? Maybe that's it, some kind of adrenaline junky thing: me versus the abomination of evolution. Whatever the case, lunch with the bird from hell is never boring, and boring, in my opinion, is best suited for the geriatric or living dead, of which I am neither.

Not yet, anyway.

## Chapter 5

I reach the elevator.

I adjust my tie and wait for the space disc (as I call it) to return from Saturn or wherever it blasted off to, when I hear...

"Ggggooooodddd morning Jjjjjaaaayyyyy."

Someone just sang me a good morning greeting. It's Tina, one of the data entry girls who's forever looking for a reason to come to my office...

\* \* \* \* \*

(Knock, knock)

"Yes, come in."

"Hi Jay, just wanted to let you know that the summary reports from last night finished printing."

I feign an expression of utter relief...

"Oh my god! Thank you! The suspense was killing me! I so appreciate that important *and* timely bit of information."

And with that, I return to whatever unimportant thing I was doing before Tina's unnecessary news delivery. But the door doesn't close. I look up...

"Yes? Was there something else, Tina?"

She doesn't reply. She just stands there with her head stuck through the gap of the doorway, laughing that stupid laugh of hers - half laughing, half wheezing, with some snorting thrown in for good measure. She looks at me with that 'look', like she's a starving Ethiopian and I'm a Golden Corral...

"No" (laughing, wheezing, snorting). "Bye for now!"

"Before you go - we run that report every night, do we not?"

"Yes."

"Has it *ever* failed to print?"

"No."

"Didn't think so. Thank you."

One last goofy laugh as if to excuse herself, and the door closes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good morning, Tina." I reply. "How are you this morning?" (like I care).

"I'm fine." she sings, as she holds her purse with both hands in front of her and swings side-to-side at the waist like some love-struck teenager.

She's just about to say something else when the platform arrives, rescuing me from whatever nerve-grating noise her face was about to make. We step inside the space tube and Tina scans her ID, telling the overgrown bank canister where it is we need to go.

The fucking thing is fast - *very* fast, making my time alone with Tina mercifully short. The fact that the elevator is fast, not to mention clear, must have, in Tina's mind, ruled the possibility of sex out since she doesn't make her usual advances. I make a mental note to send the elevator guys a Christmas card, and, I don't know, maybe some hookers. They've earned it.

We arrive at our floor, disembark, and travel the walkway to our corridor. We reach the door, and I open it for her. She flashes me a smile and then bounces off to wherever it is she bounces off to. Hopefully, someplace far away, like a hole – a sink hole, black hole...you know, one of those 'no return' types? That kind.

I check in with Claire, the receptionist...

"Any messages?"

"No."

"Appointments?"

"Two."

"Who?"

"Brian."

"Which one?"

"Both."

"Great. What's *your* problem?"

"You."

"Why?"

She finally stops shuffling papers long enough to stop chewing her gum and looks up at me...

"I spent Saturday night alone."

"Then I suggest you upgrade to a wardrobe that uses a lot less material. Maybe good old-fashioned advertising is what you need. That, and write your number on the men's bathroom wall."

She starts back up with the gum chewing because she knows I hate it. She pops a bubble and asks...

"What did you do?"

"Fertilized some eggs."

"Oh, yeah? Whose?"

"Your sister's."

And with that, I turn and make my way down the hall leading to my office. The stapler misses my head by mere inches.

It always does.

She flips me off. I don't see it, but I don't need to. I can feel it burning into the back of my skull. She'll get over it, or not. Either way, I don't care.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm going to digress here a bit and tell you a little more about myself...

I didn't go to a normal school like most people. Well, not high school, anyway. I went to a magnate school for the intellectually gifted instead. Not my idea, my parents doing. Bribed me with a motorcycle, so I mean, what choice did I have?

At any rate, entry into the school is by invitation only, and acceptance into the program is achieved only after you've passed a brutal, month-long battery of intense testing and evaluation. In my case, it was two months.

Why?

Because the panel of professors conducting the evaluation said that the initial test results could not possibly be correct, and surely errors had been made.

But they hadn't. No mistakes had been made. The results of the second testing were identical to the first, and so became the first time I was to ever hear the term 'enigma' used to describe me.

**Enigma:** *An oddity. An extreme deviation from the standard or expected. An anomaly of some significance which defies explanation; something not to be understood.*

That was the first time I had been called that, an enigma, but it wasn't to be the last. I have since heard the term used to describe me a thousand times over.

Why me? Why Enigma?

Because my I.Q., while high - extremely high - doesn't explain my intellectual abilities. And neither can I. My mind simply does not work like the rest of the world. In fact, it doesn't work like anyone else's mind I have ever met, or anyone's *anybody else* has ever met, for that matter.

So yeah, the enigma.

That's me.

## Chapter 6

A little more about my high school...

Since we were already taking advanced college courses in the high school I attended, higher education was a breeze once I graduated. And, short lived. Only two years to earn my master's. But before I left high school, my counselor called me to his office. Said he wanted to see if he could help me select a career path. Said that the whole idea behind the magnate high school was to collect the finest minds in the state and try to convince us to not only use our gifts to benefit the state, but perhaps all of mankind as well.

???

So I ask him how, exactly, I go about doing that, benefiting all of mankind? He answered, saying something to the effect that maybe I should consider a career in medicine and perhaps pursue a cure for cancer, something like that.

Really?

The cure for cancer?

Now there's an interesting notion.

Not that I'm religious or anything, but who's to say that's not God's natural method of cleansing the gene pool, cancer, and there I am derailing the whole process.

Right.

I have enough to contend with in life. I don't really need to be adding 'wrath of God' to that list.

But, of course, I don't tell the counselor any of this. Instead, I shook his hand, thanked him for his time, and told him that I would certainly take his suggestion into consideration. And then I never saw him again.

A cure for cancer.

Imagine that.

Why is he trying to pin that one on *me*, of all people? Is he kidding? No way I'm touching it.

Well, almost no way.

There *is* this one exception - that I myself am diagnosed, in which case, I'd simply drive to Tulane Medical school (not far away), find a vacant classroom with a dry-erase board and map out the chemical pathway for the cure, then call in an anonymous tip. Let someone else take the credit.

Win-win.

But until that day? Not happening.

And you may hate me for that, knowing the cure and not sharing it, but you know what? If I know what the cure is, they should too. So, go put sugar in *their* gas tank, too, while you're at it.

## Chapter 7

So anyway, you now have a better understanding of who I am - or what I am, rather. And this brings me to what it is I do for a living, and that is to make my boss Brian go prematurely bald. I get a paycheck for doing it, but really, I'd do it anyway, like a hobby or something. Vvveerrryyy entertaining, even though he'd be quick to disagree, I'm sure. Like I care.

And why do I feel that way about Brian?

Why? Because he's an impossible, overbearing asshole hell bent on making my life miserable. Always breathing down my neck, and always - ALWAYS - inflicting his unreasonable demands and rules on me...

- Be at work on time.
- Quit smoking weed in your office.
- Stop leaving early - at least work half a day.
- No sex in your office - even if the door *is* locked.
- Meet your deadlines.
- Quit letting the air out of my tires.

Shit like that. Such an asshole.

So, for you, Brian, two words of advice - hair plugs. Buy some.

(sigh)

I learned early on that work and I simply wasn't meant to be. The problem here is that I'm more of a 'spend my days at the beach watching bikinis while drinking rum from a coconut shell' kinda guy. But seeing how that requires more funds than I'm currently in supply of, I still require the services of an alarm clock every morning.

And this is where we left off - me walking to my office to begin yet another workday.

I reach my office, unlock the door, and quickly disappear inside. I throw my briefcase into one of the visitor chairs and make my way around the oak desk and into my plush, leather high-back chair.

A knock on my door.

"Come in."

It's Tina. She steps inside and just stands there looking at me, half snorting, half wheezing. Something tells me that if I let her, this is how she would spend her day - fraying my every nerve. I see that she's holding a single piece of paper of some sort.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tina's not bad - early thirties, slender, leggy, tallish, OK tits, nice ass...not unattractive, but not really attractive either. Just somewhere in between. Not that that's a real problem for me, her being only somewhat attractive, because it isn't. The problem I have with Tina is this: the woman is terminally goofy, and I'm not so sure the condition can't be sexually transmitted. Maybe it can, maybe it can't, I don't know, but until I do, I'm not taking any chances. And the thing is, she's invited me over to her place for dinner several times. Never a restaurant, mind you, that would involve too much wasted time. Not nearly as efficient as the short walk from the dining table to the sofa, bedroom, kitchen countertop, or even the dining table itself.

And maybe you think I'm being a little presumptuous here, assuming that's what the dinner invitations are all about - cheap, gratuitous sex. And maybe you're right. Still, I think when a woman walks into your office, pulls her dress up and her panties down and invites you over for dinner, I'd say that at some point sex will be involved. But who knows? Maybe I'm totally off base here on this one.

\* \* \* \* \*

I finally acknowledge her existence...

"Yes, Tina. What is it?"

She pulls her panties back up and lowers her dress. The wheezing and snorting increases as she steps forward with her hand extended, holding the solitary paper out for me to take. I grab it and begin glancing over the content...

"What is this?"

"A petition."

"For what?"

"To have that goose out back removed."

"Removed? Why?"

"He bit the new girl on the face and took a chunk of skin out. Being new and everything, she didn't know not to park in the rear lot."

I put the paper down and think for a moment...

"You mean the girl with the unsightly growth on her face? Like a tumor or something?"

"Uh-huh, Alice."

"Where did it bite her?"

Well, actually, it bit that growth off."

"Wait a minute. And she's complaining? I think she owes the goose a fee or something. At a minimum, she should thank him, and I don't know, maybe buy him a loaf of bread. Family size. Yellow and blue wrapper, not the red. Be sure and tell her that - NO red."

I hand the paper back to her.

"You're not going to sign it?"

"Of course not."

"Why not?"

"Because he happens to be a friend of mine, that's why. And if he wasn't before, he is now."

She grabs the paper, lets out a frustrated huff, and leaves, slamming the door behind her. I can hear her angry snorting and wheezing as she stomps her way down the hall.

"Just gotta love that thing, agent of Satan or not." I say to myself as I make a note to bring an extra loaf tomorrow morning.

I spin my high-back from the main desk to face the computer workstation and turn my PC on.

Another knock.

"Come in."

It's Brian, my manager, the guy I was telling you about earlier. A little older than me, longish, dirty blonde hair combed back and worn in a stylish ponytail. Today he's wearing his tailored brown pinstripe. Very dapper. Very GQ. Basically, a good-looking guy married to the boss's secretary, Cindy - Cindy being this drop-dead gorgeous, big-titted natural blonde way above his pay grade.

I log in to my computer.

"Morning, Brian."

I remain fixed on my computer screen and listen to the familiar rattle of the antacid bottle he's pulling from his jacket pocket. The routine. He eats so many of those things, I never see how he has room for lunch. I swivel my seat to face him just as he's lighting a cigarette...

"Oh, great. So now you've started smoking? What's next? You gonna..."

But before I can finish, he pulls a stainless-steel flask from his jacket and takes a long pull. I pick up the phone and start pushing buttons...

"Who are you calling?"

"One of those support groups for people whose lives are coming unraveled."

He snatches the receiver from my hand and slams it down on its cradle...

"Don't be an obnoxious ass" he tells me as he rattles out another handful of pink wafers and begins chewing them...

"Bri, you're falling apart here, man. Why do you do this?"

"Do what?"

"This job. It's killing you. You're a mess."

"I wasn't a mess until I hired *you*."

"Now you see, you said that wrong. What you meant to say is 'I was perfectly OK until I started telling you how to do your job'. And look where that's gotten you. Next thing I know, you'll be telling me Cindy's about to leave you."

"WHO TOLD YOU THAT!!!!!"

He bolts out of his chair, furious, ready to fight someone – fight me.

"Calm down, Brian. Sit down and relax, dude. No one told me anything. The writing's on the wall, man. Anybody can see it."

He sits, slumped in depression.

I reach for the receiver again...

"Let me make that call for you. You'll thank me later."

He puts his hand on top of the phone before I can get to it.

"Quit being an ass, for God's sake."

I lean back in my chair and lace my fingers together across my mid-section...

"Did you come in here for a reason? I mean, other than to grate my nerves this early in the morning?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What?"

"Big Brian's latest changes."

"What about them?"

"Where are you with them?"

"They're coming."

"They're coming? *Fuck!* They're due tomorrow, and you haven't even finished them? Then, when you *do* finish them, they still have to be *tested*? FUCK!"

He rattles out another handful, and he can't chew these things fast enough. Also, I notice that it looks like he has less hair today than he did yesterday. I suppress a satisfied smile and return to my 'I'm so concerned about you' face...

"Chill, Brian. Have I ever let you down?"

"No."

"Then why are you falling apart now?"

"This is cutting it close - **too** close."

Another rattle. I tell him...

"Look, go to your office, lock the door, smoke another fifteen cigarettes or so, and maybe some weed, and I'll call you when I'm done."

"Asshole!"

He gets up, leaves, and rattles his way back to his own office.

"Criminy! Didn't think the guy would ever leave" I say to myself as I return my attention back to my neglected computer screen.

\* \* \* \* \*

At this point, I guess a few explanations are in order.

I work for a mid-sized telecommunications company called Dynamics Telecom. Basically, we're in the phone business - pay phones, long distance calling cards, and my product line, long distance service sales, which is the most profitable of the bunch, generating more than half a million a week in revenue. In short, my product line alone pays all the bills and salaries with a hell of a lot left over. A hell of a lot.

But that profit comes at a cost, to me. It is, by far, the most difficult system to develop, and I am the sole developer. No one else involved, just me.

Why? Why is the Dial program so difficult to develop? In a word? Salespeople. That's why. Salespeople and their totally unfounded, borderline insane ideas as to what computers can and cannot do. Ideas that make complete sense to them, but at the same time, are nearly impossible to implement in software - at least for most programmers, anyway. Let me explain...

\* \* \* \* \*

The Dial Program, the name of my product line, is basically a pyramid scheme in sheep's clothing. This is how it works:

You sign up for our long-distance calling service, and we pay you \$25.

Easy enough.

Then, you sign your neighbor up for the service. He gets \$25, you get \$10.

Still pretty straightforward.

Your neighbor, in turn, signs his mother up for the service. She gets \$25, he gets \$10, and you get \$10.

You with me so far?

The mother, in turn, signs up all ten members of her knitting club. They each get \$25, she gets \$100, the son gets \$50, and you get \$50.

That is, unless you have signed up one hundred or more people in the last year, in which case, you receive an additional \$3 per person, making your total payout \$80 instead of \$50.

Then it starts to get weird.

Should three of the knitting club grandmas remain active for less than two months, everyone down the food chain is penalized a certain percent for a certain period of time depending on a multitude of complex factors, including how many people you've signed up, how long those people have been subscribed to the service, how much money they spend on long distance calls every month, averaged, how many people *those* people signed up and when...

It goes on and on and on.

But if that wasn't enough, it gets weirder still. Follow this, if you can...

If you signed up a guy named Joe on a Tuesday (has to be a Tuesday, there's other rules for the other days of the week), and Joe (again, has to be Joe. Not Fred, Dave - different rules) had three (different rules for one, two, four, etc.) sons, the second being born without arms and the youngest being named Thomas, we would pay you \$3 extra above your normal payout amount. *But*, if the son Thomas had a sixteenth birthday within two weeks of his father's sign-up date, that amount would increase to \$4, but only if Thomas had one leg, the left one, the right one having been lost in an auto accident within the last three and a half years.

And, of course, the whole scenario is different for a guy named Sam, who signed up on Friday, who only had daughters, and all three of them born without arms and legs, in which case, the payout scheme would be completely different.

Pretty fucked up, right?

Of course, I'm exaggerating here, but not by much, I assure you.

At any rate, you get the picture.

That said, you can begin to understand why Brian is the mess of a human he is. But why, I don't know. This all falls on *my* shoulders. *I'm* the one who has to write the code. I'm the one who has to test it, and I'm the one who has to make sure everyone in the program is not only paid correctly, but paid on time as well. I'm also the one that makes sure everybody in the plan is properly promoted, demoted, refunded, compensated, rewarded, penalized, notified - everything, every insane, asinine, butt-ass stupid rule implemented and executed to perfection, while all Brian has to do is sit in his overly plush corner office (which is way nicer and bigger than mine, by the way), smoke his cigarettes, chew his antacids and uses his handheld mirror to check his quickly receding hairline.

So in that regard, his part in all this is actually pretty easy - pay me what I'm worth.

And he does.

And he should.

He should because, as I explained earlier, I'm not normal. Far cry from it. I am inexplicably gifted at software development, and my track record remains sterling: I've never once missed a deadline, and my software has never once been found to be in error. What's more is that it only takes me a week to do what it would take the other two programmers *months* to accomplish, and they're good. *Real* good.

But to put it in perspective, I'll explain it this way...

IBM has always been the authority and last word on programmer productivity. According to their studies, a very productive programmer should average approximately 52,000 lines of new code a year. A while back, just out of curiosity, Brian ran an analyzer on my development directories, and it reported I had written some 168,000 lines of new code in the first four months I had been here.

Am I arrogant?

Yes.

Should I be?

Don't know, don't care. I am what I am. Deal with it, is all I gotta say.

Allow me to introduce myself...

I am...

The enigma.

I, enigma.

## Chapter 8

A little more about Brian, my manager...

I really like the guy. In fact, I suppose you could say he's my best friend, even. And I take care of him, I do. I make him shine like the Eastern Star of Bethlehem. The requests and deadlines I'm given are almost impossible to meet; still, I get it done. Perfectly, and without fail - ever.

Like the current list of changes due tomorrow, the ones Brian's freaking out over. The fact is, I had them done only hours after they were assigned to me. Written, tested...perfect. Over a month ago. Would have taken Dave and Joe *weeks* to finish, at least three, and that's only if they worked together on it, putting in the overtime and working weekends.

And tomorrow, the changes will be delivered, and once again, Brian will walk away the hero.

What it amounts to is that I'm Brian's most formidable weapon. I make him look good. I keep him employed. I am, in fact, the only thing his resume ever needs.

And he knows it.

Which, I guess, is why he stresses the way he does...never knowing from one day to the next when he'll walk in my office one morning, and I'm not there anymore. Gone, like the unpredictable loose cannon that I am.

But today, obviously, wasn't that day. Today I'm here, and Brian's all-important changes are done. Been done, so life is good, only he doesn't know it. Not yet, anyway.

So, I guess the obvious question here is - if I like Brian, why do I give him such a hard time? Why do I let him stress out that way? Not telling him weeks ago about the changes being completed so that he could have relaxed and enjoyed his job, instead?

Well, for one thing, because I am a disturbed individual.

But that's not it.

Oh, I'm disturbed, alright, but there's a little more to it than that. The real reason I keep Brian in the dark has everything to do with self-preservation, protecting my own sanity, which I don't have an abundance of to begin with.

You see, had I told Brian the changes were completed five hours after he assigned them to me, he would have marched into Big Brian's office, the owner of the company, and announced the fact. Good for the Brians, bad for me. Bad because the two of them would adjust their expectations of me accordingly, meaning I'd actually have to work every day instead of spending them the way I do - playing video games and surfing porn sites, and I gotta tell ya, I'm kinda fond of my routine.

So you can see my dilemma here. Simple math, really, when you think about it. And the thing is, I like Brian. Imagine if I despised the guy.

The phone rings.

I answer it, but only because I'm pretty sure I know who it is...

"Yeah, sure. No, no, no, come on up. You know the way."

I hang up.

It was the big guy himself, Brian McClure, the owner of the company. *Everyone's* boss.

Now Brian - 'Big' Brian, as we call him, mainly to distinguish him from 'little' Brian, my manager - is an interesting study. One helluva guy. One of the most likable people you're likely to ever meet. A real prince of a person by any measure.

And the thing about it, he's as generous as he is likable. He makes a lot of money and is quick to lavish it on the people who make this fact a reality for him. For example, the managers. Each one drives a brand-new, fully loaded, black Lincoln Town Car. And our offices? All very nicely appointed in stylish, Scandinavian furniture, and have no less than two professionally maintained plants each, typically a corn plant and a Ficus tree.

And then there are the weekly Steak & Ale gatherings, Steak & Ale being Brian's favorite restaurant. As a way of keeping his finger on the company's pulse, the guy treats every employee - and I do mean *every* employee - to a free steak dinner once a week. Anything on the menu, including drinks.

Like I said, helluva guy.

The thing about big Brian is that, well, he actually *is* big. Huge, in fact. The guy must weigh in at the 350-400 lb. mark, easily. *But*, he carries the weight extremely well. So well that he actually seems smaller than he actually is. Part of the reason for this is because of the way he dresses, always the same: dark, impeccably tailored, Italian import suit, white, Oxford button-down shirt, Harvard tie. And, the finishing touch? A rosewood Mont Blanc pen in his top pocket, and a gold Presidential Rolex on his wrist.

The uniform.

I guess another reason you don't really notice the man's size is because of his larger-than-life personality - his 'presence', if you will. He's one of these people who, when he says something, you listen. He simply commands that kind of attention. Something of a rare quality, I find, and something big Brian seems to have in spades. And in that regard, it's easy to see how he got to where he is.

Brian's forty, but he looks younger. And, nice looking, verging on handsome, even. Something of a cross between Jackie Gleason and Raymond Burr - you know, the 'big' leading man look. And, he's married, Brian is, to a super nice, super attractive woman, no less. Just the kind of woman you would imagine Brian being with. I met her once at a company function, and what I can say is, the two make a very admirable couple. Very.

But, admirable or not, they've had no children as of yet. Don't really know why. Which is a shame, in a way, because Brian strikes me as the kind of guy who would make a super dad. Just hadn't been given the chance yet.

You know, thinking about it, if I only had two words in which to describe Brian, those words would be 'first class', and in that sense, two words would be all you ever need. Everything about this guy is pure class, top self, first rate; from his majestic home on St. Charles Ave., to his Carver yacht, his Jaguar XKE, season box tickets to the Saints, Mardis Gras krewes, country clubs, yacht clubs...at forty years old, he is not only someone who knows how to live, but is also wealthy enough to do it right.

Anyway, that was him on the phone. Called to tell me he was within ten minutes of the office and wanted to stop in and visit me once he gets here. Wanted to know if it was OK.

OK?

Jesus! The guy owns the whole mess, and he's calling *me* to find out if something's OK? Sheez. I gotta have a sit-down with this guy and explain the facts of life to him because apparently the man's not grasping the pecking order around here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, the interesting thing about Brian is that he has created four prior start-up companies, all of them from scratch, and in each case, with little or no money, only to have them do fabulously well. That is, until they ended in total ruins, each of them becoming complete and disastrous failures for one reason or the other.

This is business number five.

And one last notable - and weird - fact about Brian: he's a narcoleptic, meaning he can fall asleep at any given moment without forewarning, and without any rhyme or reason whatsoever. Completely unpredictable.

I've been around the big guy a few times when he's nodded off like that, and what I can say about it is that when it happens, it's always an awkward situation. For example, the time he fell asleep mid-sentence during one of his speeches at a weekly Steak & Ale gathering. One minute he's telling us what a fine job we're doing, and the next minute he's face down in his baked potato, out like the proverbial light.

Really awkward.

We all just looked at each other and shrugged. I mean, what else can you do? In the end, what everyone did was, they finished their free steak dinner and went back to work, leaving poor Brian face down in his plate, as it were, to pay the ginormous bill.

That is, everyone but me. I stayed behind. The guy's been good to me, and I just couldn't see leaving him there alone that way. Besides, Steak & Ale has some really hot, slutty waitresses, so it wasn't like I didn't have anything to do in the meantime.

At any rate, I did wait, and eventually the big guy awoke – woke to my shiny smiling face.

The first thing he did was to ask me why I looked like I had just finished having freaky sex. The next thing he did was ask me what happened to everyone. Wait, that's not true. The second thing he did was take a napkin and wipe the A-1 steak sauce off his face, *then* asked me what happened to everyone.

Jeezum. I didn't have the heart to tell him the truth, that everyone abandoned him that way, so I lied. What I ended up telling him was that Tina had unleashed a fart ssooo bad, it actually cleared the room, and it's a BIG room, so I had to exaggerate the immensity of the fart accordingly. At any rate, I must have been convincing because he bought it...

"Oh my god! It must have been bad!"

"Rreeaaaalll bad. And long. Six and a half seconds, I timed it. It was weird, Brian. It was like a fog; you could see it."

"Oh my god, poor girl!"

"Poor girl? Poor us! She got up and ran out in tears. She was safe. Everyone else - the rest of us - stayed behind and tried to endure the stench so we could finish our steaks. Well, at first, anyway, but eventually it got the best of just about everybody, so they gave up, saying something about needing medical attention and stuff. I survived it because I stuck napkins in my nose. No way I was walking out on a free steak dinner."

"It was that bad?"

"Worse. I'm giving you the family hour version. I won't even mention all the projectile vomiting and fainting. *But* I did learn something from it all."

"And that being?"

"Sometimes it pays to be narcoleptic. You slept through the whole thing, big guy. Which is good because it probably saved you from permanent emotional scarring, would be my guess."

And on that note, we both got up to leave, but not before a waitress I had somehow missed, not wanting to be left out, handed me a napkin with her name and number on it, along with a set of red lip prints that formed a big, wide 'O'.

"You know her?"

Looking at my watch...

"No, but I will, shortly."

"Hey, Jay."

"What, big guy?"

"Don't ever change."

"Fat chance, my friend. Fat chance, indeed."

\* \* \* \* \*

A knock on my door. A heavy one.

"Come in."

It's big Brian, on time as usual. I spin my chair around to face him and stand. We shake, exchange pleasantries, and sit...

"Brian, I have to tell you this."

"What?"

"When you own the company, you don't have to knock. One of the perks, big guy. Also, you don't need to call and ask if it's 'OK' to stop in for a visit, for Christ's sake."

"Maybe not, but it's just good manners."

"So I've heard, but I was born without any, so I have no frame of reference."

"Sad."

"Maybe, but life could be worse."

"How so?"

"I could be dating Tina."

"So, what's so wrong with Tina?"

"Oh, nothing really, if you like that type."

"And what type would that be?"

"The type that makes blow-up dolls seem attractive."

Brian erupts in a burst of laughter so intense that he begins choking. I pour a glass of water and hand it to him. He drinks it, recovers, then wipes the tears from his eyes...

"Wow. Didn't see that one coming."

"Sorry."

"So you're comparing Tina to a blow-up doll?"

"Not really. Nothing there to compare. Doll wins hands down every time."

"How so?"

"Think about it - first of all, the doll's low maintenance, cheap to keep. No dinner, no movie, no anniversaries to remember...just cheap, disgusting, porno sex. She springs a leak, you put her in the tub, find the holes, tape 'em up, good as new."

"I see."

"Secondly, they're dumb as dirt. They don't talk, don't need cab fare, never say no to anything, are super flexible, and best of all? You don't have to respect them in the morning. In fact, you don't have to respect them at all. *And*, when you're tired of one model - say you want a redhead instead of a blonde - you just stab her in the chest a few times, fold her up and toss her in the trash compactor. Whereas, if I stab Tina in the chest, I have to drag her to the tub, fill it with acid, wait for the body to turn to goo, flush her down the drain...we're talking hazmat suits, rubber gloves, boots, plungers, eye protection, exhaust fans...you're better off calling a dead hooker removal service."

"They got such a thing?"

I roll my eyes...

"Bri - you need to get out more. Sure, they do."

I reach into my top pocket, pull out a business card, and hand it to him. He studies it...

"Keep it handy. You know, just in case."

He pockets the card.

"But Tina's not a hooker."

"Look, for what these guys charge, you really think they care?"

"You're a disturbed individual, Jay."

"Maybe, but I'm sure you didn't stop by to discuss my deranged sex life or lack of mental health."

"No, you're right. That was just a bonus. Actually, I just stopped in to discuss..."

And then it's lights out; down for the count, closed for the season. The guy's sound asleep.

Another knock on my door. One I don't recognize.

"Come in."

"HEY RICK! I'M LOOKING FOR - GEEOT DAYUM. THERE'S THAT FAT BASTARD! HEY BRIAN..."

I stand up, ready to charge the asshole.

"Shut up, Jimmy! Don't wake him!"

It's Jimmy O'Connelly, one of the sales execs. A true Irishman from - of all places - the Irish channel. So named because it's an almost exclusively all Irish community on the outskirts of the city. Red hair, freckles, a bit on the rotund side, and, of course, the typical loud, boisterous Irish demeanor and attitude - emphasis on attitude. He's carrying a magazine of some sort, maybe the latest issue of 'IRA Today' or something.

"WELL, WAKE HIM THE FUCK UP! I GOT PEEPS WAITING ON THE PHONE, FOR FUCK'S SAKE!!"

He begins to roll the magazine tight as if to use it to bat big Brian back to consciousness. He draws his arm behind him like a quarterback about to launch a bomb. I lunge forward and catch his wrist just as he's about to turn Brian's head into a home run.

He's pissed me off. I stick my face in his and yell at him...

"Look, asshole! This shit might be like sleepwalking or something! You can't wake the person up like that. It might permanently traumatize him or something for all you know!"

"AND I LOOK LIKE I GIVE A FUCK?"

He wrestles his arm free from my grip and cocks it back for another go, but is stopped by Brian, my manager, who just happened to be passing down the hall.

Brain grabs hold of the asshole's arm.

"Stop it, Jimmy!"

"SEZ YOU, MOTHER FUCKER!"

And with that, Brian grabs Jimmy's collar and pulls him into the hallway, well out of striking range. He puts his body between Jimmy and the slumbering giant like a human roadblock of some sort.

"Move on, Jimmy. I'll personally see to it that Brian calls you as soon as he wakes."

"YOU DAMN SURE BETTER, YOU PONY TAILED HOMO FUCK, OR I'LL BUST YOUR GEEOT DAYUM DOOR DOWN AND SHOVE THIS UP YOUR STUPID LOOKING ASS, YOU HEAR WHAT I', SAY'N?!"

He shakes the magazine in an up and down motion as if to graphically illustrate the threat, then spins on his heels and charges down the hallway, spewing nonstop explicatives as he does.

Brian looks at me, says nothing, and then continues on his way.

He says nothing, but his 'nothing' look says it all.

As for me, my first inclination is to coax the killer goose up to Jimmy's office with a loaf of bread, throw the loaf inside his office, and then hold the door closed and enjoy each blood-curdling, murderous scream.

But that's not what I did.

Instead, I grab a pack of cigarettes from my desk drawer and head to the elevator. As far as I'm concerned, I'd met my drama quota for the morning, and it was time for a break.

And maybe a joint.

And some cocaine.

And maybe some LSD, or whatever else I can find left over in Brian's car. Last time I raided it, his company Lincoln, I didn't have to buy drugs for a week. Besides, his tires are overdue for deflation. He made me promise not to do that anymore, and I agreed, but I never said when the promise would go into effect, so technically, I'm good here.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few words about my use of drugs...

The thing is, I find life much more agreeable when I'm high. Take Brian, for example, when he comes into my office all red-faced and angry about one thing or another. I can see his lips move, but I have no idea what he's saying. Probably something important, I imagine, at least to him, anyway, so I let him drone on, nodding my head every now and then and issuing an occasional 'uh-huh, uh-huh' until finally, he goes away. And eventually he does.

Works every time.

It's not that I've got something against sobriety or anything, because I don't. It's just that it's not for me, is all. Not that I'm endorsing the use of drugs, mind you, because I'm not. In fact, my personal feelings on the matter is that drugs aren't for everyone. Hell, they may not be for me, even, I don't know. But until I do, until I figure it out, I feel obligated to continue their use so that I can make an informed decision.

But until that time, two things...

1. Yes, I have a drug problem.
2. No, I don't want a cure.

## Chapter 9

I reach the elevator and begin my descent, watching the floors rush up around me as I travel back in time to the ground floor. It's a weird illusion, a see-through elevator - traveling downward, while at the same time, watching the floors rise upward. Like, it's not so much a matter of me going down to the lobby as much as it's a matter of the lobby coming up to me.

Like I said...trippy.

Anyway, once in the lobby, I head to the sandwich shop and buy two large, oven-fresh, piping hot cinnamon rolls, both wrapped in that waxy yellow paper they use for po'boys. The rolls aren't for me, though; rather, they're for a friend of mine. A hungry one, I'm sure.

I leave the sandwich shop and head for the rear of the lobby. I stop just short of the back door and do a quick gut check. I peer through the glass and spot the goose, right where I knew he'd be - standing in his usual sentry position on the left side of the door, patiently awaiting whatever new opportunity might come his way. In other words, his next victim.

I step outside, and the fucking thing instantly energizes. He bolts upright, erect, and fully alert. He cocks his head to the right to get a full, unobstructed view of me with his left eye. His head begins darting in these short, staccato jerks as he scans me head to toe, like the avian version of the Terminator or something.

He recognizes me.

I can tell because he stabs his beak in the air several times, snapping as he does, to remind me of the penalty should I fail to produce tomorrow's extortion payment.

I nod in acknowledgement.

I have a seat on the bench opposite the goose's side of the door and begin unwrapping the deli package on one end. Doing this prompts the beast to spin around to face me in a full-frontal attack posture, unsure at this point what my intentions might be. He studies me intensely, watching and evaluating my every move, not quite sure, as yet, how to interpret the activity. Could be friendly, could be hostile. The jury's still out on this one, so he waits and watches.

Closely.

I extract a single roll from the package and hold it up for him to see. His radar homes in on the object, and he instantly identifies it as a food item, prompting him to respond with that deafening, prehistoric squawk of his. He leans forward as if contemplating a charge, but I keep him in check by arching my arm back as if fully prepared to toss the roll into the pond where a horde of his adversaries were floating around waiting to see what my decision will be - him or them.

'Him' won. I toss the roll to the goose. He leaps and strikes the pastry midair, swallowing it whole, and the roll is never seen again. Gone just that fast in a single gulp. I watch as a softball-sized lump travels down his long, skinny neck and into his stomach.

Amazing.

And then the goose does something strange, something I've never seen him do before. The best way I can describe it is that the bird, well, belched.

"That was a little something extra for removing that girl's tumor" I tell it. The goose, in response, gives me a slight nod and then returns to his sentry duties.

I pull a smoke from the pack and light up.

Such a nice day. Way too nice to be working. I take a second long drag and gaze out over the property in the direction of General De Gaulle Blvd., the road that runs in front of the MRB building.

Gazing out at nothing in particular, I notice something, or, rather, don't notice something - traffic. There is none.

And I find this disturbing for several reasons. For one thing, it's Tuesday afternoon on a perfectly good weather day, 10:45 am, to be exact. Second, it's the busiest street in town, by far, the busiest thoroughfare in all of Algiers.

So, where's the traffic?

I continue to smoke and watch, but nothing about the lack of traffic changes, and I just don't get it. I don't. I look to the goose for answers, but that's a waste. He just shrugs and gives me his 'fuck if I know' look. He's as stumped as I am.

The way my mind works is that things simply need to make sense, and this doesn't. The dots just don't connect on this one, no matter how I bend the lines. Still, I know there must be an answer. No matter what, there is always an answer - always. Even if you never find out what it is, it's still out there, somewhere.

I finish my cigarette and light another. I hold the pack out and offer one to the goose, but he waves it off. I think this mystery's bothering him even more than me. I say this because he seems nervous. He lifts his tail feathers and dumps a huge, watery load that looks like it could have been a cinnamon roll at one time, although you couldn't tell that from the smell.

So anyway, there the two of us are, me smoking, the goose shitting, and both of us trying to make some kind of sense of the puzzling traffic situation when all of a sudden, something happens.

Finally, a clue to the mystery.

The goose stabs his head to the left to show me where to look, and now I see it too, slowly coming into view down our side of the road. It's a procession of some sort, made up of a conglomeration of different colored limousines, some silver, some white, some black. In front of the limos are a dozen or so police Harleys with blue flashing lights leading the way. Immediately following the limos are another dozen or so state police SUVs with red and blue flashing lights, and everything - motorcycles, limousines, and SUVs - all arranged two abreast, side-by-side, parade style.

I have no idea what this thing's about, but whatever it is, it's certainly in no kind of a hurry. The string of vehicles is moving slowly. Very slowly, almost at a walking pace, and making matters worse is the fact that it's making frequent stops - stop, go, stop, go, stop, go.

Now, in New Orleans, a city that looks for any excuse to have a parade, this is not at all an uncommon sight. Just the opposite. It's almost commonplace, even. Especially here on General de Gaulle Blvd., whose four lanes and super-wide median make it a perfect parade route. In fact, it's the most popular parade route in Algiers during the carnival season.

But this isn't a parade, I know. I would have heard about it on the radio during my drive to work. The local radio stations *always* announce parades and their routes just so that their listeners can avoid the traffic closures and other cluster fucks they cause - always a problem in the city.

But there was no mention of any parade scheduled for today, none. Which means this is something else, but what, I have no idea.

So anyway, curiosity finally gets the best of me, and I decide to walk to the road for a closer 'look-see'. There's something to all of this, and I need to know what.

## Chapter 10

I make it to the sidewalk bordering the street, and the first thing that catches my attention is the menagerie of blue and red flashing lights at the intersection two blocks up. No doubt the SUVs and Harleys I noticed earlier now blocking off traffic and securing the 4-way just up the road. Standard procedure for funerals, but I don't think that's what this is.

Off to my left, in the opposite direction of the blocked intersection, I see a second procession of limos, only these are all black, black with dark windows. Government stuff, and doing the same sporadic starting and stopping thing the previous line of limos were doing, only these are all single file, one behind the other. It was becoming obvious that whatever this thing was, this whole procession of vehicles, had something to do with this second set of single-file limos I was looking at, the black ones. I still wasn't sure what all this meant, so I continued to stand where I am, smoking my cigarette, and waiting to see what all the fuss was about.

And the strange thing is, I'm the only one doing so - standing alone on the sidewalk watching something that, ordinarily, would attract more attention than this. A lot more. But yet here I am, by myself with no one around me. And this is true of the neutral ground across the street - nobody there.

Strange.

And making things stranger still is the fact that it's a completely different story just one block down the road, where the black limos are currently passing, slowly making their way toward me. There, both sides of the road are crowded with people, at least four or five deep, with everyone cheering, blowing kisses, chanting, and waving small American flags at the black limos as they pass.

And this makes sense - the difference in the crowd between where I am and where they are. Where I am begins the business section of De Gaulle, meaning office buildings and whatnot; in other words, places where everyone's busy working. However, a block further down, where the black limos are currently passing, is all commercial, a part of De Gaulle congested with strip malls, banks, restaurants, specialty shops...whatever. So yeah, it makes sense. At least that part, still, I have *no* idea why the crowd is even there to begin with.

So, anyway, in no hurry to rejoin the drama I'm sure is awaiting me back on the fourth floor, I stand where I am and continue to watch. To pass the time, I light another cigarette and watch as the vehicles come closer and closer to me with every puff I take.

A few minutes later, I see that the string of limos has finally made it past the crowd and is now slowly inching its way toward me. As they get closer, I notice something - each of the black limousines has two flags on the front of it, one sticking up from the right fender and another on the left. Whatever it is, it's definitely political, something I have no interest in, politics.

My curiosity satisfied, I turn to make my way back to the building, but stop. I change my mind. I decide, instead, to stay and finish my cigarette before I return to work. After all, I've invested this much time, may as well stick around and see what the big deal is.

By this time, the limos are close enough to where I can clearly make the fender flags out. The right one is a miniature American flag, while the one on the left, about the same size, is a blue flag with the presidential seal on it, no less. And another thing - I can see that the last limo in line has clear windows in the back, and is, in fact, the only one that does. Also, there seems to be a lone figure sitting in the rear of this limo, on my side, and I can only imagine that it must be the president himself, whoever that is. Like I said, I really don't keep up with politics.

About that same time, I hear sirens wailing, a bunch of them. Also, I notice that the number of flashing lights at the intersection up the road has almost quadrupled. There seems to be a disturbance of some type, and it appears to be centered around a black Lincoln sedan, the same type our sales execs drive. There's a cop on a bullhorn yelling orders to the driver, but I can't make out what he's saying.

In the meantime, the caravan of black limos has reached me and slow down even more, and then stop altogether, with the last one, the one with the clear windows, parked directly in front of me. My guess is that they're waiting for the disturbance ahead to clear before proceeding any further. Some kind of security thing, I would imagine.

At this point, I'm still alone, standing on the curb with one arm across my chest, holding the elbow of the other arm holding a cigarette to my mouth. The passenger door of the limo in front of me is about five feet away, and I can see the rear passenger clearly. He's on the opposite side of the seat with his right hand held up, peering left and right searching for someone to wave to, but he finds no one. That being the case, he then scoots over to my side, and again, looks left and right, and again, finds no one to greet. No one, that is, except for me, a seemingly uninterested bystander more concerned with smoking his cigarette than some guy's need to wave to someone.

Be that as it may, and despite my obvious lack of interest, the passenger holds his hand up to me as if to do that Indian 'how' thing. I disengage my right hand, the one holding the cigarette, just long enough to 'how' him back, and then return to my previous smoking posture. The lone passenger, in turn, lowers his hand and watches me.

Watches me intensely.

As best I can tell, the guy looks to be in his forties, late forties, maybe early fifties, even. Well-groomed, nice-looking, and wearing a dark gray suit with a small American flag pinned to the jacket's left lapel. He looks familiar, but I can't place him, not exactly. I think I've seen him before, like maybe on TV or something, like on a game show, maybe, because that's what he looks like, a game show host, only, I can't remember a game show host with hair like that, that color, if it *is* a color. It's like gray, but at the same time, isn't. Hard to explain, really.

At any rate, the guy just looks at me - or, my cigarette, rather, following it's every movement with his head and eyes like a lizard following a mosquito it's about to pounce on and eat. Too weird.

So anyway, I look at him, and he looks at me. I check the situation up the road and see that it's gotten even worse. There are at least three SWAT trucks there now, and at least two helicopters overhead with snipers hanging out of the doors. Still not sure what's going on, but from the looks of it, I can only gather that somebody's not having a good time at camp.

But...whatever.

So I work on finishing my cigarette, blowing cloud after cloud of smoke in the guy's face (well, the glass in front of it, anyway) when the window suddenly rolls down, and the rear seat passenger sticks his head out. He says something to me...

"Say, you got another one of those?", motioning toward my cigarette with a nod of his head.

"Sure."

I take a step forward and shake a cigarette out of the pack far enough for him to grab. He snatches it and wastes *no* time sticking it between his lips. He's done this before, a lot. I can tell.

He pats his jacket pockets pretending to look for a lighter, but I know it's just an act. He doesn't have one and is too embarrassed to ask for a light, having just bummed a cigarette from me, and now what? A light, too? It's like the kid at school who has no paper, and even if he did, doesn't have a pencil to write with. That kind of thing.

I save him from the awkward moment by fishing my BIC out and lighting him up. He then proceeds to take the longest drag I've ever seen anybody take, causing the end of the cigarette to glow like the exhaust end of a jet engine. He closes his eyes, tilts his head slightly backwards, and slowly - ever so slowly, and deliberately - exhales, thoroughly savoring the moment as he does. It's like I'm looking at a junkie who's just pushed the plunger.

He opens his eyes...

"Man, that's good! Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

I tell him he can have the pack, that I've got another, but he just shakes his head...

"Appreciate it, but no can-do. My luck, I'd forget them in my pocket, and my wife would find them, and, well, that would suck. *A lot.*"

He takes another drag from his cigarette, and I do likewise.

"She really does that?" I ask.

"Do what?"

"Your wife - go through your clothes that way?"

"You kidding? Bitch tries to catch me doing anything she can. She finds a pack of smokes in my jacket, and ten years from now, she'd still be throwing it in my face! That, and everything else I've ever done since the day I was born, for Christ's sake!"

He takes another drag. I comment on the dilemma...

"Bummer."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

I take a pull from my own cigarette and think about what he just told me...

"Look, not to tell you your business or anything, but maybe it's time to kick that one to the curb. Plenty more where she came from. I could hook you up with a couple of replacements I'm sure you'd like. Or, maybe you and I

could cruise the methadone and abortion clinics. Great place to meet the 'low self-esteem, no self-respect' types, if you know what I mean."

I take another drag. He lets out a pitiful sigh and says...

"If only."

Sad.

He says this with the pathetic look of a puppy who's just been beaten for peeing on the carpet. I feel sorry for the guy, so I tell him...

"Look, just so you know - should she, well, 'meet' with an unfortunate accident...you know, like trip and fall down the stairs? I know people that can - shall we say - make her 'go away'."

His eyes suddenly grow wide, and his whole face lights up...

"No shit?"

"Shit, you not."

"Who?"

"Dead hooker removal service I use."

"They got such a thing?"

(Sheez, not that again). "You bet. And they're good. *Rrreeeaaalll* good, if you know what I mean."

I give him a wink...

"But she's not a hooker."

"Don't kid yourself. Every woman is a hooker. Only difference is how much they cost, how they get paid, and how long you have to pay them. There is no such thing as free pussy in this world. Trust me, I know."

"I hear ya, brother! You got their number?"

I extract a business card from my top pocket and hand it to him...

"That's my business card. Probably be best if you call me and let me handle it for you, should the need arise. Keeps you out of the loop - you know, plausible deniability and all that?"

"Yeah, yeah! Good idea!"

He pockets my card. He takes one last drag from his smoke and flicks the butt away. I hand him another and light him up, and then check the intersection up ahead for an update.

I see the driver's door of the black sedan is open now, and some guy - the driver, I'm guessing - is standing near the hood, threatening the army of cops surrounding him with what looks to be a rolled-up magazine. Whoever it is, he has red hair and is yelling loud enough that I can clearly hear him from where I'm standing, two blocks away...

"I DON'T GIVE A FUCK IF HE'S THE PRESIDENT OF MOONPIEVILLE! I GOT PLACES TO GO, MOTHER FUCKER! YOU HEAR ME!"

In addition to the cops, I see an equally large army of men dressed in black suits, all of them with wires hanging out of their ears, quickly moving in. I tell the guy in the back seat...

"Looks like you're stuck for a while. Seems to be a problem up ahead."

The rear passenger, the president, I guess, sticks his head out of the window and takes a look for himself. He takes a deep breath, lets it out in the form of a frustrated sigh, and pulls his head back inside...

"Yeah, probably some pain in the ass protestor trying to save the ozone layer or some stupid shit like that. Hell, I don't even know what an ozone layer is. Like, what is it? An endangered species or something?"

"Something like that."

He takes another peek down the road...

"Well, whoever it is, one thing's for sure. He's gonna wish he never met the Secret Service. Let me tell ya, those cats don't play around."

He returns his attention to me and sticks a hand out the window...

"I'm Bill, by the way."

I grab the offered hand, and we shake.

"Jay."

"You work in that cool looking building?"

"Yeah. Computer programmer."

"Dayum! No shit! That's what I wanted to be!"

"So what happened?"

"Dead-fuck wife of mine made me go into politics."

"Double bummer."

"Tell me about it. You know who I am?"

I study his face for a moment...

"Hhhmmm. You kinda look like that guy from Jeopardy. Don't know what his name is."

Bill laughs...

"Alec Trebek. Yeah, I get that a lot!"

"Wait, don't tell me."

I study his face for a moment...

"Yeah, OK. Sure, I recognize you. You're Hillary's husband, aren't you?"

Again, he laughs...

"Yeah, well, that's one way to put it!"

"OK, so that makes you President Clintok, right?"

"Clinton" he corrects me...

"Sorry, I'm not much on politics."

I check the intersection again for an update. The guns have disappeared, and in their place, every non-lethal weapon known to man: billy clubs, black jacks, combat batons, night sticks, tasers, stun guns, pepper spray, mace, tear gas, and an assortment of other devices whose sole purpose is to inflict unspeakable agony and misery on someone. That someone, in this case, being an unfortunate redhead now curled up like a fetus in the road and obviously experiencing a great deal of discomfort right about now. Everyone's arms are a blur of motion as clubs, batons, and even a few baseball bats rain unimaginable pain down on the suffering bastard. I almost feel sorry for the poor guy, seeing how his 'good days' have now come to an abrupt and ugly - if not permanent - end. At some point, I could swear I heard him yell...'someone please kill me!'. But who knows? My mind sometimes plays tricks on me when I'm sober.

Just about that time, the limo's sliding window, the one separating the front seat from the rear, opens, and Bill leans forward, his head cocked to one side as the driver, a Secret Service agent, whispers something in his ear with a cupped hand. Bill nods, and the window closes. He takes one last drag from the cigarette and regretfully flicks it away. He turns his attention to me...

"Seems the protestor is a worker in your building, a James O'Connelly, I believe. Know him?"

"Yep, I know him. A real obnoxious prick."

"Well, from what I understand, his attitude is currently being adjusted, so you may find him a little more agreeable now."

"Doubt it."

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have some breath mints, would you?"

I reach into my pocket and produce an unopened container of spearmint Tic Tacs and hand them to him. That, and a handful of after-dinner mints I grabbed from the deli earlier.

"Man, you're the best, Jay. Any questions you want to ask your president before we move on?"

I think for a moment...

"Yeah, one."

"Shoot."

"Why would you smoke perfectly good weed and not inhale? I mean, how does that happen?"

He lets out a boisterous laugh and motions for me to come closer using a curled finger, and I do. He then looks left and right to make sure no one else can hear, and he tells me...

"Just between you and me, I don't remember a single day of college, man. I stayed zombie-stoned the entire time. Don't know how I graduated. Of course, I'll deny it if you ever tell anyone."

I give him a wink and a nod...

"Your secret's safe with me, Bill."

"Figured that. Thanks. Hey, want my autograph? You know, to show your friends?"

I didn't, really, but he was a pretty cool guy and I didn't want to hurt his feelings, so I handed him the only thing I had on me, the pack of cigarettes. He pulls out a pen and begins scribbling... *To my really cool friend, Jay. Your bud, Bill. 408-991-7828.*

He hands the pack back to me...

"You're one of the coolest people I've ever met, man!"

"You need to get out more, Bill" is what I wanted to say, but didn't. Instead, I tell him...

"Same here, Bill."

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yeah."

"Name it."

"Your agents, they got torture devices?"

"Not really, why?"

"Just thought you could keep Jimmy awhile and maybe teach him some manners, is all."

"Don't know about all that, but I'll tell you what I *can* do."

"What?"

"I can send his stupid ass to Guantanamo Bay for a good long time. They got shit out there that would curl your toes. I mean, freaky, medieval shit. First time I saw videos from there, I didn't sleep for a week. They take that national security shit to a whole other level. Serious shit, bro. Real talk."

"Cool. Do that, and maybe I'll get out and vote for you come election time." I lie.

"Done!"

He extends his hand, and we shake to seal the unholy pact.

"Oh yeah, one last thing."

"What?"

I hand him another one of my business cards...

"Make sure Jimmy knows I'm the one who arranged his little vacation."

Bill slips the card in his top pocket and pats it, then gives me a reassuring wink. I nod and return the wink, and I think to myself...'maybe I *will* get out and vote'.

Or not.

I check the intersection again. By this time, most of the law enforcement vehicles have thinned out, and the procession of cars is beginning to move again.

"I think you're about to start moving" I tell him.

He sticks his head out and takes a look for himself. I ask him...

"By the way, why are you even here?"

"Had a speech to give at Xavier University. We're on our way back to Alvin Calendar airfield, and then it's off to Saudi, I think - or some shit like that. I don't know. I can't ever keep it straight."

"Busy guy. Anyway, you got my number. You ever make it back to town, you look me up."

He pats the pocket with my business card in it again...

"You know I will, my friend. You know I will. Bank on it!"

The divider window opens again, and the agent/driver announces that they're about to move. Bill nods in acknowledgement and then turns to me...

"Well, this is adios, I guess."

"I guess."

He holds his clenched hand out and we fist pump. The rear window rises, and the black limo begins to roll forward, but then stops. The window lowers, and Bill's head emerges...

"One last thing, Jay, just out of curiosity."

"What's that?"

"If you aren't into politics, what *are* you into?"

"Melting dead hookers in my tub."

His expression dissolves from one of curiosity into one of dismay, and maybe shock, even.

"Jus kidding" I say and wave the notion away with my hand. The expression of shock gives way to uncertainty, and I can see the wheels inside his head turning. He gives me a forced smile, and his head disappears back into the limo. The window rolls up, and the presidential limo pulls away to carry the most important man in the world to his next destination. I watch as it disappears from sight.

The most powerful man in the world, huh.

Somehow, I expected more.

I turn and make my way back to the Rubik's Cube.

## Chapter 11

Excitement over, I approach the wooden bridge, about to cross over, when I notice something odd. Really odd. It's a white van with ASPCA written on the side pulling out of the rear parking lot and heading in the direction of General De Gaulle.

Strange. The first car besides mine I've ever seen park in the rear lot.

A little *too* strange.

My Spidey senses start to tingle, and alarms begin going off in my head. There's no reason for the ASPCA to be here; no stray cats, no stray dogs - nothing. Nothing but the ducks and...

THE GOOSE!

Suddenly, the dots connect.

I race across the bridge to the other side of the pond, but, of course, I'm too late. The bird was gone, and the only evidence that he was ever here at all was the immense scattering of feathers everywhere. And I do mean *everywhere*, like a giant pillow had exploded. And blood. Blood everywhere, everywhere you look, and lots of it. Way too much to be from a bird, which meant it had to be human.

And something else - small, white plastic cartridges, roughly the same size as .410 shotgun shells, scattered everywhere - on the concrete, on the grass, in the bushes, floating in the pond...everywhere.

I reach down, grab one of the spent cartridges, and examine it. It's an animal tranquilizer dart. Must have been three dozen or more strewn about. It became obvious from all the carnage - the feathers, the blood, and the spent cartridges - that whatever happened here was epic, like a battle of biblical proportions, between man and beast had taken place; a battle that, obviously, the goose had lost, but not without a fight, and a viciously brutal one at that. I later spoke to a window cleaner who had witnessed the entire episode from above. Said it was the single most violent, bloodiest thing he had ever witnessed in his life. So violent and bloody that it actually made him nauseous and he ended up vomiting on some woman below. Tina, he thinks her name was.

According to the window cleaner, the goose had every advantage until it finally succumbed to the twenty or so darts it had sticking in its body. Once subdued, the ASPCA guy tied a rope around the bird's leg and then, badly limping and barely able to walk himself, dragged the unconscious animal away.

I thanked the guy for the information and tossed him a fifty, telling him that the money was for vomiting on the woman. Would have given him a hundred, but that's all I had on me at the time. I then walk away, gritting my teeth so hard my jaws ached.

That rancid whore.

Apparently, that heaving, wheezing, snorting bitch Tina must have collected enough names to turn the petition over to the building's administration.

A mistake.

A big one, only, she doesn't know it.

Not yet.

But she will, bless her goofy, soon-to-be-melted heart.

## Chapter 12

I make my way through the jungle, and instantly, the elevator jettisons me back to the 4th floor. I make my way down the corridor to the office's main entrance and place my hand on the doorknob, but I don't turn it. I hesitate, instead, dreading what I know is waiting for me on the other side - Claire and the usual dose of attitude she always seems to want to dump on me, like it's some kind of hobby of hers, like I'm the only guy she knows with a penis or something. Sheez!

I take a deep breath, hold it, and crack the door open just enough to peer inside, ready to slam it shut at the first sign of an incoming desk accessory. But I'm in luck. She's not at her desk, so I waste no time making a mad dash for my office.

And I make it.

I close the door and lock it, then put my ear against the wood and listen for the sound of hostile high heels heading my way. But I don't hear any. Probably still busy writing her number on the men's bathroom stalls, is what I'm guessing. Either way, I'm safe - for now, anyway.

I turn to make my way to my desk and nearly trip over the massive mountain of humanity still sound asleep in my visitor chair. I'd completely forgotten about him, but there he is, still out cold and in the same exact position as when I left.

Amazing. Simply amazing.

I tiptoe past him, careful not to wake the slumbering giant as I make my way to my desk chair. Once comfortably seated, I grab the phone and dial information. A sweet, sexy young voice instantly answers...

"How may I help you?"

How can she help me. My mind races through the thousands of immoral possibilities...

"Hello? Are you still there?" she asks.

I snap out of my trance...

"Sorry. This phone's been acting distur...er, funny lately."

"I'm sorry to hear that. My name's Samantha, how may I help you today?"

"Well, Sama...wait, mind if I call you Sam?"

"Sure."

"Well, Sam, I need the number to the local ASPCA office."

"One moment while I look it up."

The words flow from her delicate, sweet lips only to travel miles and miles through phone lines just so they can reach my ear. I'm in love. I don't even need to see her naked to know what every inch of her skin looks, feels, tastes, and smells like. Her voice tells me everything I need to know. She returns...

"The number is 504-499-2783. For a small charge, I can connect you."

She wants to 'connect' me. My thoughts exactly. Surely this is fate.

I propose a counteroffer: she can have her small additional charge, or, if she prefers, dinner with me tomorrow night at Steak & Ale. Anything on the menu, including drinks. *Especially* drinks.

She considers my offer, asks about dessert, so I tell her - my place afterwards for excessive drug use, followed by cheap, gratuitous sex you'd never admit to.

She chooses the latter.

Smart girl.

I grab the calendar and add her to my schedule. I then check my bank balance online and make sure I have enough money for bail - you know, in case she's the type that presses charges. One can never be too careful these days.

She connects me. My call goes through, and I hear the other end ringing...

"Algiers ASPCA, how may I direct your call?"

"I'm calling in reference to a large Canadian goose I believe you apprehended from the Mississippi River Bank building this afternoon."

"That would be field agent Nunez. He just arrived. I'll connect you."

She'll 'connect' me, and I think...so many eggs to fertilize, so little time.

And then a voice...

"Agent Nunez speaking."

"Yes, Agent Nunez, my name is Jason, Jason Roberts. I'm calling from the Mississippi River Bank building."

"You calling about the goose?"

"Yes."

"What is it you want to know?"

"Just curious. What is your procedure for processing captured birds such as that one?"

"You mean, what do we do with them?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what I'm asking."

"Well, first we keep them in captive quarantine for two weeks, during which time, we test them for any dangerous and/or communicable diseases, you understand. Then, once we've determined that the bird is healthy and disease-free, we transfer the animal in question to a suitable habitat, usually a wildlife refuge, and set them free."

"I see."

"Anything else?"

"No, that's about it. You've been most helpful. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He hangs up.

Good. I'm glad I called. I feel much better about things now. My blood pressure lowers, and my heart rate begins to return to normal.

Still, there's the matter of Tina.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nunez hangs up the phone and returns his attention back to the now subdued bird, having gagged and bound the satanic creature to the metal folding chair next to him, a roll of duct tape still in his hand. He sticks his face mere inches from the goose's and a sinister grin forms across his cut and swollen lips...

"How about that? Would you like that, huh? Set you free? Huh? Huh?"

He bursts into uproarious, insane laughter...

"BBBWWWWAAAAA HHHHAAAA HHHAA HAHA. SET YOU FREE! OH, MAN! THAT'S RICH!  
BBBBBBWWWWWAAA HHHHAAAA HHAA HHAA!!! S-S-SET YOU FREE! BBBBWWWAAA HHAAA HHAAA HA HA  
HA HA!"

\* \* \* \* \*

I grab a Post-it note and make a list of the items I'll need to pick up from the industrial supply store after work: hazmat suit, disposable booties, face shield, latex gloves, plunger, respirator - in other words, the usual stuff, all of it standard procedure by this time. In fact, the people at the supply store keep a bag already prepared for me, just waiting for 'the call'. Family-owned businesses, you just can't beat them. They make it a point to know their customers.

The only thing I'm *not* sure about is what wine goes best with melting goofy women? I'm about to make a call and find out when I suddenly hear a voice...

"... why I came in here in the first place..."

It's the giant. He's snapped out of whatever coma caused him to short out and picks up *exactly* where he left off. *Exactly*.

I finish his thought for him...

"Probably wanted to give me a raise."

"I just gave you one."

"Yeah, but that was last week. Costs have gone up since then."

"Costs? What costs?"

"This lifestyle I'm burdened with."

"And what lifestyle is that?"

"Tragically hip."

"And it takes that much money?"

"Sure, it does. There's the drugs, the high-class hookers, five-star restaurants, Italian sports cars, trips to Europe...gas alone for my cigarette boat eats me alive. I'm hurting here, boss. I'm living paycheck to paycheck, Brian!"

"Something tells me I could double your salary tomorrow and we'd still be having this same conversation this time next week."

"True, so what's your point?"

"My point is that every time I leave your office, I have this urge to call the rape crisis line. Remind me - why do I keep you around?"

"Why? Because I'm the cheapest date *you'll* ever take to the prom, is why. Face it, I make you rich. Wait, I said that wrong - I make you *richer*, and you don't even have to bring me flowers and candy, or remember my birthday, even. Lose me, and you have to hire at least four other programmers to replace me. We're talking serious damage to payroll, leasing and furnishing four new offices, and then what? Four months of learning curves for the new hires, meaning no productivity, missed deadlines, cost overruns, endless payout corrections..."

He holds a 'stop already' hand up...

"Alright already. I get the picture. (sigh) You're hurting my head, and I don't think my balls will ever be the same. How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make me feel like I've been sexually violated every time I leave your office."

"You exaggerate."

"Maybe. Still doesn't change the fact that the first thing I want to do when I leave your office is light up an 'after sex' cigarette, and I don't even smoke."

"Then my work here is done. Anything else, big guy? Because I have your unreasonable demands and impossible deadlines to meet, you know."

"Speaking of which, how are you doing on the latest payout changes?"

"I suspect that Brian will be giving you an update shortly."

He smiles that million-dollar smile of his...

"Outstanding."

Brian rises to leave, and I shake his enormous hand. He opens the door but suddenly stops...

"Oh, one more thing."

"What? More changes?"

"No, something else. The president is due to pass in front of the building this afternoon, in case you're interested."

"Old news."

"What do you mean?"

"I met him already."

"You what?"

"Met him. While you were sleeping. Didn't want to wake you up. Want his autograph?"

I reach into my pocket for the pack of cigarettes and toss it to him. Dumbfounded, he inspects the personal note from Bill to me...

"What's the number for?"

"His personal cell, should you ever have the need. Just tell him you're a friend of mine."

"I need some Tylenol. First you, and now I have to see Jimmy next."

He starts to walk away, but I stop him...

"Brian, about Jimmy..."

"What about him?"

"I don't think there's any hurry to see him."

"Why not?"

"He's on an extended vacation for a while, I hear. Cuba, I believe. I don't think you'll be seeing him anytime soon, if ever."

He looks at me, part amazed, part puzzled. Amazed because he knows what I'm telling him is true. Puzzled because I seem to always know this stuff.

"How?"

"How what?"

"How do you always...you know what? Never mind. I don't even want to know. Steak & Ale tomorrow?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, big guy."

"Good."

And with that, he does the finger pistol thing and shoots me. I shoot him back, and he leaves, closing the door behind him.

Helluva guy, that big Brian is. Helluva guy.

I pick up the phone and speed dial Brian, my manager...

"Yes?"

"It's done."

He's chewing antacid tablets in my ear, and it sounds something like a horse chomping oats.

"Tested?"

"Perfect. No errors."

"And a day early. Big Brian will be happy."

"I'm sure he will."

"Heard about Jimmy?"

"Got arrested or something, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

More chomping, then he continues...

"Secret Service got him. Tried to kill the president, or some shit like that. The official press release is calling it an assassination attempt. Can you believe it?"

"Oddly enough, I can. Guess you'd better type up a help wanted ad."

"Yeah. Something else."

"What?"

"Cindy's sister is coming down for a couple of days. You think maybe you can take her out on the town? Maybe show her a good time?"

Show her a good time. Interesting way to put it...

"Sure, why not?"

"Thanks."

"Oh yeah, one more thing..."

"What?"

"Just remembered - there's something I need to attend to, so I'll be leaving early."

"When?"

"Now."

"What is it you have to do?"

"Don't remember, but it'll come to me by the time I get to my car."

(click)

He hangs up on me.

And that's my cue to leave before he runs out of tablets. But first, one more call...

"Yes?"

She's smacking her gum in my ear, something I hate, and she knows it. It's the only reason she even chews the stuff, to grate my nerves, knowing fully well how much I hate gum chewers. You see, I have this theory about people who chew gum, that it lowers their I.Q. by 70%, and Claire, the girl on the other end of the phone, serves as undeniable proof that my theory is spot on. I tell her...

"I have your stapler."

"So?"

"You can have it back on one condition."

"And what's that?"

"You quit throwing it at me."

"Why?"

"On the off chance your aim should one day improve."

"You called me about a stapler?"

"That, and Saturday night."

"What about it?"

"My place."

"For what?"

"Chinese takeout and sex that'll leave you needing orthopedic panties for the rest of your life. Or, do I need to call your sister - again?"

"Do I have to talk and be all charming and shit?"

"I'd prefer you didn't."

"I'm there."

She pops a bubble in my ear as if to formally end the phone call and hangs up. I grab my keys and briefcase and prepare to make my exit, but not fast enough. There's a knock at my door...

"Yes?"

It opens. It's Tina.

"Hi, Jay."

"Hey."

"You about to leave?"

"Yep."

"OK, then I want keep you. Just thought you might want to know."

"Know what?"

"About Jimmy."

"Being arrested?"

"Uh, huh."

"I heard."

"OK, then you have a nice evening."

"Speaking of which, what are you doing after work?"

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing, really. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was just thinking."

"Uh, huh, about what?"

"Well, there's a lunar eclipse tonight, and I was thinking about picking up a couple of bottles of wine, maybe some good Chinese takeout, and watch it from my balcony tonight. I'm going to have a perfect view of it and was wondering if you'd be interested in joining me - that is, if you're not too busy, of course."

"TOO BUSY! OH MY GOD! ARE YOU SERIOUS!"

"Of course, I am. So, whaddya say?"

"OH MY GOD!"

"You said that."

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?"

"Said that, too. Look, I'll take that as a yes. Pick you up at 8:00? Never mind, don't answer that."

I push her out of the door, and she zombie walks away down the hall, running into just about everything she could possibly run into. Sheez. You'd think the woman's never been on a date.

And then I think about that goofy heaving, wheezing, snorting, laughing thing she does and think...maybe she hasn't. In which case, this would make it her first.

And last.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a pair of earbuds that aren't really plugged into anything. Don't have to be, just the illusion that they are, so people will assume I can't hear them and won't try to talk to me on my way out. I stick them in my ears and prepare for Claire. Reason being is that to get to the front door, I have no choice other than to pass in front of her desk.

And sure enough, there she is, dead ahead. She sees me walking toward her, and instantly, her hand begins inching toward the three-hole paper puncher on her desk. In the absence of the stapler, which I'm still holding hostage, it's always her next projectile of choice.

I start humming to myself and begin rocking my head to an imaginary song. It works. She doesn't try to talk to me. Instead, she forms her mouth into the shape of a big, wide 'O' and starts bobbing her head like a sewing machine - her way of illustrating the talents she intends on applying during our upcoming date. I wink at her as I head out the door.

I exit the rear entrance of the building, and as I do, stop to watch as one of the janitors cleans up the last remaining evidence of the battle that took place here earlier today. I bow my head and dedicate a moment of silence to the fallen warrior - an overly large, overly aggressive, and now, overly absent Canadian goose.

My friend.

OK, maybe friend isn't the right word. It doesn't change the fact that in some strange way, I'm going to miss the insidious beast from hell.

I cross the wooden bridge to the parking lot, and as I do, my thoughts turn back to Claire and her obscene gesture. I gotta admit, it hit its mark. I'm so shallow and transparent that way. But you know what? I never once said I was some kind of monument to upright living, because I'm not. Look where that's gotten Martha Stewart - an unused, dried-up prude; a woman who has never once considered the merits of birth control because the topic is a non-issue for women who are, themselves, a deterrent to sex:

*Martha:*

"Would you like me to remove my clothing, folding the various articles neatly at the creases as I do, and then lie on the bed so that you may perform sexual acts using different parts of my body?"

*Claire:*

"OH GOD, YES! FUCK ME HARDER! RIP ME IN TWO! USE ME LIKE A DIRTY, FILTHY CUM DUMPSTER, YOU DIRTY BASTARD!!!! JUST FUCK ME, FOR GOD'S SAKE! FUCK ME GOOD!"

I rest my case.

OK, I admit it. I'm a sucker for morally impaired, sexually disturbed women. So, go ahead and think of me what you

will, but you know what? What the *real* truth of the matter is? You *wish* you were me. Why? Because I, at least, own up to who and what I am, and what's more is, I'm OK with it. I am very comfortable in my own skin, as disturbed as that skin may be. Whereas *you* continue to live the same old tired lie day after day. You know it, I know it, and the man in the mirror laughing at you as you shave knows it, too. So quit writing me, already, and quit sending me your twelve-step program brochures. They are neither wanted nor needed, because in my case, they simply don't apply. I am who and what I am by choice. Allow me to introduce myself.

I am...

The enigma.

I, enigma.

## Chapter 13

Later that evening, somewhere across town...

The Algiers ASPCA substation has long since closed for the day and is now void of any personnel save for one single employee, field agent Sherman Nunez, a thirteen-year veteran of the service. It is here, in a small, sparsely - if not cheaply - furnished back room that serves as his office, that we find the public servant tonight. We watch on as he busies himself with a gooseneck lamp, bending and twisting it this way and that, until finally, its 100-watt bulb glares squarely into the subdued bird's face. The bird in this case, being a Canadian goose of the overly large, overly aggressive, and *extremely* violent variety, now heavily bound by duct tape to a metal folding chair, its beak fastened shut by a heavy rubber band designed specifically for that purpose.

The glaring bulb of the lamp, being the only illumination in the room, throws cold, harsh silhouettes of the madman and his captive on the painted cinder block walls. On the floor next to the metal chair sits an industrial 1400-amp, 12-volt DC battery typical of the type used by commercial trucking. Attached to the battery is an equally massive set of industrial jumper cables, the copper clamps of which are currently being held in Nunez's depraved hands. Nunez, of course, being the person whose face is now the owner of a dozen or so long, unsightly gashes, gashes that have since been Frankenstein-like sutured closed, leaving him a new look that even a mother would find hard to love. In addition, there is a large gauze bandage folded in quarters and taped over an area of his face that was once the end of his enormous nose. Likewise, his once all white uniform is now a collection of large, gruesome bloodstains, and there are sizable sections of material missing from the thigh and calf areas of the legs, all of which sport their own assortment of insidious wounds. When he walks now, he does so with a very pronounced limp that causes him to grimace in pain with each excruciating step he takes.

Looking at him, not knowing any better, one would think the man had been dragged a few miles under a bus. A Canadian bus.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nunez limps to the stool where the lamp is situated and lowers its aim a bit so as not to affect his own vision as he holds the battery clamps in front of the goose's face. He taps the two clamps together, causing them to erupt in an explosion of sparks, the sound of which, the intense crackling of electricity piercing the air, is enough to make every hair - or feather, in this case - to stiffen with fear.

The madman repeats the horrifying exhibition several times for effect, with each eruption lighting the room like an arcing welding rod, throwing cold, exaggerated shadows on the bare walls. In all, it's like a scene from an ultra-low budget mad scientist movie, the kind they show on lame, local VHF channels at 3:00 in the morning just after the Perry Mason reruns.

Nunez backs off for a moment and relaxes, pleased beyond pleased with the results of the evening thus far. He carefully sets the clamps on the floor for the time being, and as he does, smiles at the thought of the things to come. Bad things. Very bad things.

He limps his way to his institutional grade metal desk and slowly, and quite painfully, lowers himself into his equally cheap swivel chair. He sits back and finishes the remainder of his current Bud Lite, his fifth of the evening, sucking down the last gulp and crushing the can in his grip. He studies the bound and gagged bird for a moment. He can see from the burning hate in the animal's eyes that his message for the evening has been duly noted and understood. Likewise, the goose has *no* pretensions as to what the evening has in store for him, his only regret being that - with his wings duct taped the way they are - he can't flip the stupid fucker off. Bound as he may be, the bird remains defiant and not the least bit intimidated, which only serves to infuriate his disfigured tormentor even more.

Taking this into account, Nunez decides it's time to move on to 'Phase II' of the night's festivities.

He limps his way painfully and ever so slowly to the side of the metal chair where the battery sits on the floor. He bends over and disconnects the positive lead of the jumper cables from the battery's terminal. He then grabs both clamps and positions himself in front of the goose. He attaches one clamp to the goose's left foot and the other to its right. He carefully double-checks the connections and, once he's satisfied that the clamps are securely attached, reaches down and grabs the disconnected cable lead. He turns to the goose...

"How do you like your balls cooked? Crispy, extra crispy, or burnt?"

He holds a cupped hand to his ear, but, of course, the bird doesn't reply...

"What? No preference? Want me to choose for you, you say? Very well - *BURNT IT IS!*"

He touches the disconnected lead to the battery terminal, and instantly, the goose lights up like a sign on the Vegas strip, violently convulsing as 1400 hot amps of DC power race through its body, jolting him against the restraints. The massive surge of electricity causes the bird's entire body to shudder like a gong.

The bird sizzles for a while until finally, the stench of singed feathers and burning flesh becomes even too much for Nunez to stomach, so he disconnects the power. At least for now. After all, for him, a dead goose is a useless goose, and the night is only just beginning.

At this point, Nunez can no longer limp, even. Instead, he hops forward using his left leg while dragging his useless right leg behind him. It's in this fashion that he manages to hop/drag his way to the mini fridge and grabs another beer, hoping it'll help dull the pain. He pulls the bottle of pain pills from his pocket and pours a small pile of them into his hand. He pops the top of his current beer, dumps the pills in his mouth, and washes them down. He stands where he is, studying the goose, and smiles as he admires the results of the animal's - for lack of a better term - 'attitude adjustment' so far. As for the goose, he remains motionless for the moment. He's slumped forward with his head hung down as far as the restraining tape will allow, while at the same time, tiny wisps of smoke rise from his scorched and smoldering carcass.

But as satisfying as all of this is, Nunez can't help but feel that there's more entertainment to be had here. Something's missing, but he's not quite sure what, so he thinks about it for a minute and it comes to him...

"Yes, that's it! Sound! I must have sound! I must hear him! I must hear his every blood-curdling squawk of agony!"

Matter settled, he hops-drags his way to his desk and rummages through an empty mayonnaise jar that serves as his pencil holder. There, amongst the pens, pencils, and markers, he finds what he's looking for, an Exacto knife. He grabs it and then slides one of the desk drawers open and retrieves a pair of heavy leather gloves he uses for handling vicious dogs and the like. He closes the drawer and, with gloves and knife in hand, makes his way to the goose.

The decision has been made. In Nunez's mind, it was time now to turn this dial all the way up. He will cut the rubber band holding the goose's beak shut, thus allowing him to hear the unholy beast suffer.

And suffer, he will.

At this point, the bird remains motionless and apparently unconscious, meaning he has to act fast before the animal has a chance to regain its senses. He slides the heavy leather gloves on and begins moving his hands slowly and cautiously toward the bird's head, ready to pull back at the first sign of movement.

Now, as observant and cautious as Nunez was being, he wasn't quite observant and cautious enough. Certainly not observant enough to notice the goose's left eye open ever so slightly into a barely perceptible slit, just wide enough to see what the field agent was up to, and wide enough to notice the sharpened pencil in the idiot's top shirt pocket.

The goose quickly does the math in his head: once the beak is cut free, a single, lightning-fast downward stroke to sever the tape holding its neck, followed by an upward swoop to grab the pencil. After that, it was a simple matter of going to work on this asshole's neck like a woodpecker on a tree. By his calculation, out of twenty or so stabs, he should hit the jugular no less than seven or eight times. Maybe nine, depending, his record to date being ten.

Plan in place, the goose closes its eye and waits. A moment later, it feels the gloved hand steadying his beak while the other hand uses the knife to cut the rubber band. The goose hears the soft pppffttt of the rubber snapping in two. After that, the last memory field agent Sherman T. Nunez had, the one he would take to his grave, was the image of the goose, pencil protruding from its beak, showing him the sharpened end of the instrument that would end his pathetic existence.

The goose stabs the pencil in the air with lightning-quick precision several times to make sure his message to the ASPCA worker was clear and fully understood - that he was, in fact, living his last moments.

And just as he arched his neck back to begin the assault, the goose notices something, Nunez's terror-filled, saucer-wide eyes.

...his saucer-wide eyes.

The goose changes his plan of attack; the jugular would have to wait.

But not for long.

And outside the ASPCA's substation, in Algiers, Louisiana, on a beautiful summer evening, a single employee vehicle still parked in the lot was the only thing to hear the last sounds field agent Sherman Nunez would ever make.

Life in the Big Easy.

For all of us here, it one day ends.

Some sooner than others.

## Chapter 14

I sit on my balcony, alone, slumped in my favorite wicker chair, basking in the glow of the evening's charm. It's a beautiful, deep South summer night, a night typical of every element that gives New Orleans its nickname, *The Big Easy*.

Why 'The Big Easy'?

Because...

Unlike the rest of the world that seems to be stuck in the same tired, worn-out rut - a rut where people live to work, sometimes until their last dying day - we here in the deep south take a somewhat different approach to life. Here, we work to live. We are a people who tend to work *just* enough to support the lifestyle that seems to suit us best - slow, laid back, and easy, just the way we like it.

We listen to our jazz, drink our Café Latte's, and eat our beignets. We boil our crawfish, hold our parades, attend our festivals, and at night, listen to the wonderful sounds of jazz as we dance in the streets of the French Quarter.

We ride our streetcars and riverboats, we do, and practice our voodoo. We dangle our feet in the slow-moving waters of the bayous, walk hand-in-hand with our lovers on top the levees, and at Christmas time, gather around the bonfires on the banks of the Mississippi and sing our Cajun Christmas carols.

We don't really know what the rest of you do, or how you do it, even. Nor do we really care because if you aren't here, you aren't anywhere, and you simply don't matter, as if you don't exist at all.

It's the southern way. It's why so many of us died in the Civil War: to preserve this way of life.

And we'd do it all again.

It's simply the culture New Orleans seems to breed so effortlessly in each and every one of us who call this city our home, myself included.

And that's life in the Big Easy.

It's not for everyone, but remember, I was born into it. The city, in all its decadence, courses through my veins. I'm as much a part of it as it is of me, and that's just the way it is.

So, if you ever plan to pay us a visit down here, remember two things:

1. Bring your summer clothes, and
2. Check your morals at the door. None needed, none wanted.

In the night sky, the last sliver of the moon disappears as the Earth deprives it of sunlight. The lunar eclipse is in full effect now, and the view from my fifth-floor luxury condo is unsurpassed. It's a shame Tina missed it.

Speaking of which...

I check my Rolex and calculate that by this time, the ex-goofy bitch is now the consistency of watery pudding.

Do I feel bad about that?

I know I should, I really do, but no, I don't. I don't feel bad about it at all. Just the opposite. I feel society owes me a debt of gratitude. I mean, it was practically my civic duty - if not my responsibility to all of mankind - to ensure that this woman never reproduced. And seeing how every egg she possessed had just undergone severe and excessive fertilization, it was, in my opinion, the safest course of action to take.

The world can thank me later.

Or not.

No matter. Soon enough, I will pull the tub's drain plug and all she will be is a leftover scent on my bedsheets...and sofa, and kitchen countertop, treadmill, bathroom sink, clothes dryer, exercise bike, entertainment center, credenza, coffee table, nightstand, living room floor...

I take a long sip from my Hurricane and let the sweet elixir sit on my tongue for a moment, relishing both the taste of the drink as well as the memories of Bourbon Street it brings to mind. I finally let it slide down my throat as I gaze down at the lights of the French Quarter below. So peaceful and serene. It's the kind of night that reminds a person of just how good life can be at times.

For me, anyway.

I lean further back in my chair and simply lose myself to the enchantment of it all. As I do, I begin to feel myself slowly drift away as the combination of Hurricanes and soothing jazz transports me to another place. At this point, I'm well on my way to becoming lost in a fog of blissful intoxication when suddenly, something rips me from my stupor and snaps me back to the here and now. It's a sound. More precisely, it's the unmistakable squawk of a goose, and not just any goose, mind you, but a Canadian goose. A Canadian goose of the overly large, overly aggressive, and overly violent variety. I jump to my feet and scan the night sky, but without the benefit of moonlight, it's hard to make anything out in the darkness. Still, I know he's out there.

Somewhere.

Then, out of nowhere, and completely without warning, the bird from hell lands on the balcony's handrail in front of me.

Christ! This fucking thing knows where I live now?

I think fast.

I hold a 'wait right there' hand up and then run inside. I return a moment later with my briefcase and set it on the patio table. I quickly pop the latches and extract the uneaten cinnamon roll I had purchased earlier that day at the sandwich shop.

The goose sees this and responds by lowering its wings. He then cocks his head to one side to better study the situation. It was at that moment, the moment the beast lowered his enormous wings, that I saw it was missing sizable patches of feathers from both its wings and torso. What's more is, I can see small wisps of smoke rising from its body. Apparently, I'm not the only one who's had an eventful evening.

I proceed to unwrap the package, careful not to make any sudden moves the goose could possibly perceive as threatening. I peel the paper back slowly so that he can see that there are no hidden weapons inside or anything else that could possibly cause him harm. He sees this and relaxes a bit, but still continues to watch me carefully, and with a lingering degree of suspicion.

I pull the paper all the way back, and, pinching the roll between my thumb and forefinger, slowly lift it from the wrapper. I hold it up in front of me in the most nonthreatening way I know how so he can examine it.

The goose, in turn, instantly erects and begins darting his head the way he does when sizing up a situation. This goes on for a few moments, and then, after a while, convinced it's not a trap or setup of some type, he opens his beak and waits for the tasty treat.

But I don't make him wait.

I toss him the roll, and like before, he snatches it out of the air mid-flight and swallows the thing whole. And as before, I watch in utter amazement as the lump travels down the long, narrow neck and into the bird's stomach.

The goose clacks his beak a few times like someone smacking his lips, and just like before, issues a loud, deafening belch of satisfaction, his way of letting me know that I've done good. I was going to offer him some after-dinner mints to go with the roll, but remembered that I gave them all to Bill. Oh, well. Maybe next time.

Quite satisfied with himself at this point, the goose stands there, perched on the railing as he were, and studies me for a moment. He then gives me this odd, sideways kind of look as if to say, 'We aren't so different, you and I'. In response, I give him a look of my own, one that tells him 'You could be right'.

And with that, the goose then stabs his head in the air several times, snapping his beak as he does, letting me know that nothing has changed between us and that he fully expects payment as usual in the morning.

...or else.

I think about Tina, the creature's arch nemesis, melting away to goo in my tub, and point a somewhat irritated finger in the ungrateful bird's face...

"Yeah? Well, you know what? You owe me, dude! Whether you realize it or not, you owe me big time, so I think a little gratitude is in order here."

As if to say 'yeah, right', it unleashes one of its deafening honks. It then spreads its wings, and just as suddenly as it had appeared, disappears.

By this time, the moon was in full view again and silhouetted the satanic animal as it flew off to wherever it is beasts from hell go to at night. After that, once I was sure he was gone, I resumed my previous slump in the wicker chair and return my attention back to my neglected drink.

And as I raised the glass to my lips, for a moment - just a moment, mind you - I could swear I caught a whiff of thanksgiving dinner, like a turkey roasting somewhere.

Too weird.

I dismiss the notion, writing it off to my excessive drug use, and take a sip of my Hurricane. Once again, I get lost in the evening, and my mind begins to wander.

My thoughts turn to Tina.

Incredible lover. I quit counting her orgasms at forty, and that was within the first two hours of an all-night marathon. Hell, I never knew a woman's body parts could even bend and stretch that way, or do the things hers did, but then, neither did she...probably. Not until she regained consciousness and I showed her the Polaroids.

And then there was the shit that came out of that woman's mouth. Tttoooh funny. Like when we are lying next to each other, enjoying an 'after sex' cigarette. She looks at me and says...

"That was the best sex I ever had in my life!"

"You're welcome."

She laughs that goofy laugh of hers...

"But you know what?"

"What?"

"If you would have told me beforehand what you were going to do, I would have run and called the police."

"Why?"

"That was some pretty freaky stuff."

"Well, you're a pretty freaky girl."

She laughs, snorts, heaves, and wheezes all at the same time...

"Yeah, I know, huh?"

"Yep."

"Do you still respect me?"

"Don't be silly, Tina. I didn't respect you before. Why would I respect you now?"

"Dunno. Just wondering, is all."

\* \* \* \* \*

Strange. In some odd way, I'm going to miss her.

About that time, the song 'Closer' by Nine Inch Nails begins to play. It's my cell phone's ringtone. I grab it from the wicker and glass table next to me and check the caller ID: POTUS, meaning President of the United States.

It's Bill.

Can't imagine what the guy could possibly want at this time of night. Doesn't matter. Since I never set up voicemail, he'll just have to do what everyone else does, call me in the morning.

But then the phone chimes letting me know I have incoming text messages, so I change screens...

"Hey, Bro! Just got some video of Jimmy and thought I'd share it with you. Poor guy. Doesn't look like he's enjoying his vacation *at all*. Oh, well. Hope he doesn't ask for a refund! LMFAO!"

"Oh, and by the way, you are exempt from any and all taxes now and forever. Least I could do for my bud! Stay cool, brother!"

I return the phone to its previous resting place and again, give my Hurricane the attention it deserves.

(sigh)

The Big Easy.

Like no other place I know.

Life here isn't for everyone, though they wish it were.

Me? I was born into it. It's all I know, and by this time, I'm numb to it all. It's just life as I know it now.

And think of me what you will, but deep down, in that dark place you go to in your mind, the place you'll never admit to, you *wish* you were me.

I know it, and you know it.

But a word to the wise: don't try any of this at home, folks. I'm a professional.

And who am I?

You know who I am.

I am...

...the enigma.

I, Enigma.

I pick up my drink and phone and go inside. I'm done. But you know what?

Tomorrow is a brand new day.

## Epilogue

I realize you're probably curious to know, so here it is, the 'Where are they now' part of the story, and it goes something like this...

### ***Dynamics Telecom, Inc:***

Big Brian's fifth company went from hugely successful to total ruins almost overnight, and I was there to witness it, all of it. In fact, during the last days, Big Brian's personal secretary, Cindy (little Brian's wife), and I were the last two employees remaining. Everyone else had either jumped ship or been unceremoniously let go.

Interesting story about the company's downfall, but is more than I care to write about in this final update. What I will say is this - the ending was so bad that Cindy was actually giving people tours of my office so that they could make offers on the furnishings and equipment even as I worked.

Sad.

Really sad.

### ***Little Brian:***

When the collapse came, Brian, unfortunately, became the designated fall guy and was the first to be sent packing. He was the first, but certainly not the last.

He did eventually lose all his hair, but aside from that, he did OK. A week after he was fired, he landed a cushy, high-paying manager position in Dallas, so all's well that ends well.

Almost.

In time, he managed to quit smoking and drinking, but Cindy left him anyway. Said she doesn't do bald guys.

Should have taken my advice and gone with the plugs.

But, all water under the bridge now.

Last I heard, he's still attending AA meetings and belongs to at least one support group for people whose lives unraveled in a bad way. He called me and thanked me - much later - as predicted.

### ***Dave, Joe, and Manny – the other programmers:***

The exact cause of the company's failure was blamed on us, the IT department, and as such, the other three programmers were fired two days after Brian's departure. I was spared simply because the Dial program, my product line, was the only thing left that was still making the company money, which meant I was still needed. I was kept around to make sure the program continued to run properly, and it did. To the very end.

***Big Brian:***

I don't know. Once the dominoes started to fall, he quit speaking to me, seeing me as part of the cancer that claimed the life of his beloved company. I never heard from him or anything about him again. Interestingly enough, though, I still think the world of him. Probably always will.

You take care, big guy.

***Tina:***

Down the drain.

***Claire:***

Dead Hooker Removal Service got this one. I got lazy and didn't feel like messing with it. She still had a pulse when they showed up, but like the true professionals they are, took care of the problem with a silenced Beretta 9mm they carry with them just for these types of situations.

Charged me extra.

***Jimmy:***

Last time I checked, he's still alive and living - or suffering, I should say - in Cuba, his home for the last ten years now. Bill sends me videos and pics of him from time to time, and from these, I can only surmise that his 'extended stay' there isn't much to his liking.

Oh, well...

***Bill:***

He and I remain friends to this day. Got to finally hang out with him once, years later. It happened when Hillary was making her run for the presidency, and her campaign trail included a stop in New Orleans. Busy as she was, Bill managed to sneak off, and the two of us ended up spending the night at world-famous Pat O'Brien's on Bourbon Street. Expensive place, but Bill picked up the tab, seeing how I was supplying all the drugs. And for our money, we got an exclusive private booth normally reserved for rock stars, Hollywood A-listers, and those kinds of folks. Got a discount, even, when Bill told the manager that he was Alec Trebek. After that, we spent the evening snorting, smoking, and swallowing enough drugs to intoxicate the entire population of Bosnia, wherever that is. Bill's words, not mine.

I think, though, the evening went especially well for Bill after receiving, and I quote, the best damn blowjob this country-ass boy ever got!

I don't know. I missed the whole thing, thankfully, because it happened while I was settling our tab with a stack of cash Bill had given me. When I returned, this knockout brunette had just finished up and was dabbing the corners of her mouth with a linen napkin from the table. She gave Bill a farewell peck on the cheek, me a ta-ta wave, and then excused herself and made her exit. Bill would later remark that she was the best-looking piece of ass that ever polished his knob. Again, Bill's words, not mine.

Poor guy. He enjoyed the blowjob so much that I just didn't have the heart to tell him that his dream date was actually a star performer from the female impersonator strip club just up the block. Sometimes, I believe, it's better to just live the lie. Live and let live, I always say.

A few months after that, I got the call I always suspected I would one day get. Seems Hillary met with an unfortunate accident, something to do with excessive alcohol consumption and a particularly nasty set of stairs. The result of which was, simply stated, that the back of her head was now the front and vice versa. I, in turn, made my own call, and a half hour later, the Dead Hooker Removal Service team was boarding a private jet bound for Washington. Four hours later, Bill's wife was never seen or heard from again.

Now, you would think 'problem solved', right?

Wrong.

The fact was, the problems had only just begun. What happened next was something none of us could have possibly seen coming or predicted.

You see, the problem here was that Hillary was a presidential hopeful, which, under normal circumstances, on its own merit, would have been a big enough deal in its own right. But the *real* problem was that not only was she a presidential candidate, but was a woman as well. Not a desirable woman, true, but still, the first female who stood even a remote chance of holding the most powerful office on the planet. In the public's eye - that is, the female portion of it - it was yet another example of the exclusive political men's club holding women back by pressing their oppressive foot down on some hopeful, aspiring neck. A female neck. In this case, Hillary's neck.

Conspiracy theories ran amok, and tabloids had a field day with it all. Almost overnight, women's activist groups became the largest consumers of firearms in the country. The entire nation was about to ignite, it seemed, and if things weren't bad enough, you had Oprah Winfrey using her talk show as the match that threatened to light the powder keg's fuse.

It was bad.

At first, the democrats blamed the republicans. The republicans, in turn, blamed China. China blamed the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union blamed the CIA. The CIA, running out of places to point fingers, blamed it all on Cuba, which was only more than happy to shoulder the blame - or, as they put it, 'take the credit'. And this made sense. I mean, when all you have are cigars and refugees, you grab at anything you can that could possibly put you on the map. Any headline at all.

But no one was buying the Cuba thing for the simple reason that a well-executed disappearance such as this one would require, at a minimum, intelligence, something Cuba has never been known for. Simple math, really.

The whole thing got out of control to the point that, in the end, I don't think there was a political group, religious persuasion, race, country, or continent that didn't come under the microscope. Even the NFL had been eyed with a degree of suspicion for a while.

Yeah, what a mess.

The whole thing started a political avalanche, the likes of which had never before been seen. It launched a new chapter in this country's history that ultimately broke all the records - longest, most expensive investigation; largest, longest running manhunt; most watched news coverage in the history of television...and on and on and on it went. In the end, the affair would end up costing taxpayers close to a billion dollars and was eventually ranked as the second all-time most significant unsolved mystery in this country's history, with the JFK assassination holding its place at the number one spot and D.B. Cooper still firmly in third.

And the thing is, to this day, not a single shred of evidence related to the disappearance has ever been uncovered. Not one. Which means that only two people on the whole planet actually know what really happened.

Bill and I.

Ordinarily, I would say five people, but the fact is, the Dead Hooker Removal Team never returned from Washington, and what's more, not a word has been heard from any of the three members since. Not an email, text message, phone call...nothing. The last person known to have seen them alive, oddly enough, was Bill himself as they drove away in the rental car with Hillary shrink-wrapped in the trunk. But when I asked him about it, he told me he had no idea as to what could have happened to the team. Said he was as shocked and puzzled as I was by the news.

...said the politician.

Do I fear for my own life?

Not at all.

Why?

Because first of all, Bill's an idiot. How the guy managed to run this country for eight years, I'll never know.

Secondly, Allen, DHRS's team lead and owner, secretly records every cleanup operation he conducts using a GoPro camera hidden in his hard hat. Moments after leaving Bill's place, Allen sent me a copy of the video, his way of making sure he had an insurance policy in place should things go sideways on this one.

Smart guy, that Allen, but obviously not smart enough. You see, for that kind of insurance policy to have any effect, the potential threat, in this case, Bill, must know that the evidence exists, which he did not. A tragic, and ultimately, fatal oversight on Allen's part.

Bill didn't know about the video then, but he does now. Just like he knows that it's currently in the hands of an attorney with instructions to release it to the media in the event of my early demise, early demise meaning I don't make it to a ripe old age.

At first, Bill was insulted, saying that I hurt his feelings, not trusting him any more than that, but I was quick to point out that when you lead the kind of lifestyle I do, one can never be too careful, and the fact that I'm still alive to write this only confirms the correctness of this policy.

So, as you can see, it is definitely in Bill's best interest that I stay nice and healthy, which is why, I suppose, he calls me at least once a day.

And will probably continue to do so for some time to come.

\* \* \* \* \*

As for myself, what can I say?

I left Dynamics after the meltdown and, like Brian, my ex-manager, I ended up in Dallas, where I became something of a rock star in the corporate world.

What a place.

Seems that Dallas's corporate life agreed with me almost as much as its high life. Not only that, but I found the corporations to be every bit as generous as big Brian when it came to money, the difference being that the corporations had a lot more of the stuff. A *lot* more. So much more that after ten years, I had enough money saved (remember, I don't pay taxes) to where I could walk away from it all and never look back. Hell, I could have done that on just the bonuses I was paid.

But there's more to the money story than that. There's also the investment I made that ended up paying off - still paying off - like a Vegas slot machine gone stupid. The investment I'm talking about is, of course, my time. Simply put, I wrote a virus so sinister and so destructive that the federal government pays me monthly to ensure that none of their machines will ever become infected. 'Insurance' payments, they call it, which is so much nicer a term than 'extortion', and probably a lot more legal.

And I realize that you're probably curious to know just how much they pay me for this... this... 'protection', but I think prudence and modesty - both elements of my southern upbringing - prevent me from telling you (2.8 million a month, in addition to the initial 100 mil they paid up front).

And maybe you see it that way, that I'm extorting the federal government, but then I'd be quick to point out that I never asked these people for a dime. Not one. All I did was send them an analysis of what would happen to the country were the virus to somehow find its way into the different government computer systems, systems like the IRS, Department of Defense, Treasury, Department of Justice, CIA, FBI...*they're* the ones who freaked out and insisted on paying me. Like, what was I supposed to do? Tell them no?

Yeah, right.

And something else, too. The government became so concerned with my wellbeing - essentially, that I stay healthy so I can keep the virus in check - that they assigned me a permanent protective detail of five Secret Service agents, something I vehemently protested against at first until they introduced me to the them - five females, all in their twenties, single, and each one a Victoria's Secret model in her own right.

Yeah. That's what I said.

So anyway, I packed up what few belongings I had, grabbed the girls, and the six of us ended up here, on this Caribbean Island I now call home.

And that's how I spend my days now - sitting in my beach chair, drinking rum from a coconut shell, and listening to the hypnotic roar of the surf rolling in.

Pretty sweet.

Incidentally, Bill drops in from time to time to relax and spend a few days with me and the girls. At least once a month. Says he does it because he enjoys my company so much, but I suspect there's a little more to it than that. Probably just wants to make sure I'm not about to croak or something. Either way, I don't mind. Bill's a cool enough guy. A real drug pig, but still, fun to hang out with. But the thing about Bill is that the guy never shuts up. Always complaining about how my security detail all look like Playmates-of-the-month while his all look like Tommy Lee Jones from *Men in Black*. That, and the fact that my team all wear black thong bikinis as their standard uniform...

"But Jay, these agents are nearly naked. How are they supposed to protect you when they don't even have side arms?"

And I understand his concern, I do. Something happens to me, he spends the rest of his life in a two-man cell being raped twice a day by some Caucasian hating, 300 lb. black guy named Tiny. And I get that, so to ease his fears some, I give him a little demonstration. I turn to one of the girls stretched out on a beach towel nearby, the one rubbing tanning oil on her naked breasts...

"Oh, Alicia. I do believe that coconut over there just threat..."

But before I could finish my sentence, she had lost the thong, spread her legs, elevated her hips just so, and launched an exploding dart that took out the top one-third of the tree and left the rest of it in a four-alarm blaze.

A thin trail of smoke leading from her crotch to the tree still hung in the air as she got up and sauntered her way over to me. She kneels down next to my chair and kisses my cheek with those incredibly luscious lips of hers, and then whispers in my ear...

"I don't think those nasty ole coconuts will be bothering you again, boss."

"Thank you, my dear" I tell her. "There'll be a little something extra in your 'envelope' this week."

She smiles at the thought, winks at me, and then returns to her tanning activities on her fireproof beach towel.

Bill finally unfreezes from his dumbstruck stupor...

"Whoa, holy fuck! Did you see that shit? That coconut had to be a good forty yards away, man!"

"Forty-eight" I correct him. "She's good for seventy-five on short notice, a couple of miles if you give her time to aim."

"Fffuucckkk me! What the hell kinda weapon was that!"

I put my drink down and turn to face him...

"Bill, you were president for what, eight years? And you *still* don't recognize your tax dollars at work when you see it? C'mon, man."

Still stunned by it all, he leans back in his chair and returns his attention to his drink. But he just won't let it go...

"How many of those things can they fire?"

"Well, lessee...five girls, two orifices each...you figure it out, Einstein."

"OK, I get it, I get it. But is one of those things enough to stop a serious threat? And what about range?"

This is getting old. Again, I set my drink down and turn to face him...

"Tell you what, Bill. Talk is cheap. The keys are in my crotch rocket over there, and it does 200 mph all day long. Get on it, and I'll give you a twenty-second head start before I have Veronica over there (motioning a thumb toward a topless redhead in a beach chair) target *you*, and once she's done, I'll walk the two to three miles to the smoking crater that used to be you and ask *its* opinion. Whatcha say?"

I watch as his expression melts from drug-induced stupor to sobering concern...

"Think I'll take your word for it."

"You sure? Because Veronica over there hasn't blown anybody to smithereens in, let's see...two days? So, I'm sure she's just aching for the chance. Real twisto, that one. Always complaining about having too much ammo. Bitch costs me a fortune because I'm always having to buy death row inmates from the prison just so she can get some target practice in. Ssssooo, how about it, sport? You game?"

No reply, just like I thought. Instead, he returns to nursing his drink and putting a dent in the mountain of cocaine piled on the glass and wicker table in front of him. He lifts his head, and his entire upper lip is caked in white as if he just bitten into a powdered donut. He wipes the excess away and then slumps back into his chair with his arms draped over the sides. Off in the distance, we both watch as a bucket brigade douses what remained of the burning coconut tree...

"Hey, Jay."

"Yeah, Bill."

"Don't ever change, man."

"Fat chance, my friend. Fat chance, indeed."

Oh, yeah. One last thing...

To shut him up - his constant complaining about how I have a security detail that wears thongs for a uniform, and he doesn't - I tell him that the girls have plenty of extra 'uniforms' and that his detail is more than welcome to borrow them. As expected, he declines the offer.

And another thing – still goes on and on to this day about the incredible blowjob he got at Pat O'Brien's that night.

Yeah, still living the lie.

And that's life with Bill.

\* \* \* \* \*

So anyway, here I sit now, soaking up the tropical sun, studying my bikini-clad bodyguards, and think about what it is I will do next with my life.

And what will that be, you ask? What will I do?

(sigh)

Don't rightly know yet.

I don't need the money, really, so I lack motivation to do anything at all. At least anything meaningful, that is, like curing cancer or something. My virus stands as a trophy to my genius; I stood the corporate world on its head, and it will never be the same. My accomplishments in software development are things of legend now, so I dunno.

I was thinking about writing a book about my time in the corporate world, but you're probably choking on this short story alone; no way you'd survive a book. Besides, I really don't feel like hiring a team of lawyers to combat the flood of lawsuits the book I'd write would no doubt generate, all of them citing permanent emotional trauma as the basis of their claims. Ssssooo, wanna know the rest?

Buy the rights.

(takes a sip from the coconut shell and then blows a huge cloud of marijuana smoke out)

I don't know.

I don't know what I will do next. But until I figure it all out - that is, what my next move will be - I will probably simply do what I do now, enjoy my favorite pastime.

And what is that, you ask?

Exploring the boundaries of the female sexuality. In other words, finding the things they *won't* do, and so far, I have been woefully unsuccessful in the attempt, so I continue the quest. Surely there must be *something* they simply refuse to do, but what it is, I don't know. Haven't found it yet, so I continue the effort.

Who am I?

You know who I am.

I am...

The enigma.

I, enigma.