

# The Bad Guy

*By*  
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# Prologue

Bullets began spraying through the mall food court. Chuck McCain tore past the freshly emptied tables, where patrons once sat eating burgers, gyros, pizzas, and other fast food entrées. Sprinting forward, he dove over a planter that lined the edge of the food court. Pushing his back up against the planter, he dropped the empty clip from his gun.

“Oh Chuckie!” a voice called out. “Our game isn’t finished. No time outs!”

McCain grimaced at the bad joke while reloading. “We aren’t in school anymore Hume. But then I never needed time-outs, even then.” With that, he spun and rose in one quick motion, firing two shots with deadly accuracy towards the sound of the voice. The bullets whistled through empty air. Hume had already vacated that space in the time it took for McCain to make his retort.

*So predictable*, Hume thought. “Come now McCain, you don’t expect me to make it that easy do you? If you could stop making smart remarks you might actually get me. But maybe you’d like it if I just hand you the gun instead?”

McCain ducked back behind cover. “Would you? It’d really help me out,” he shouted back. Hume’s Uzi barked out several dozen bullets in reply. Dust and stone broke away from the front of the planter as the bullets ripped into it. The planter – made of sturdy

brick and mortar – continued to provide safe cover for McCain. “I guess he’s not going to let me know where the bomb is either,” he muttered under his breath.

Chuck McCain was 31 and – as the cliché went – tall, dark, and handsome. He’d been with SPD for 6 years, rising to Detective in Seattle’s homicide division fairly quickly compared to the average cadet. Early in his career he had made a high-profile bust of a contract killer. Many on the force had attributed that first bust to luck, but continued successes had allayed all doubters. He had brought down drug dealers, murderers, and even mob bosses, but his latest case had him tracking a friend and former partner: Justin Hume.

Hume had gone to the same grade school as McCain although they never associated much in those years. They lost touch through high school but reunited at the academy. There they developed a fast friendship that carried through to their partnership in their first year on the beat.

Or so McCain thought. Internal Affairs had started up an investigation fingering Hume and several others for taking bribes. Hume’s crime was particularly extreme: information supplied by him had the mob ready for a raid. The ensuing shoot out caused the death of four officers, one a rookie. IA got their evidence from that disaster, but many on the force felt it was too little, too late.

McCain was one of them. He felt responsible for being fooled by Hume, although there was no way he could have known what Justin was doing. Hume was very thorough in his deception. No one in the force had any idea he was one of the informants, not even the other informants. The mob didn’t know his identity either. Hume delivered the information through the Internet, using one of the many free anonymous email services available. His emails originated through the force’s many computers, but never through his own security ID, instead using computers left on by other officers, dispatchers, and janitors. Even McCain’s own computer had been compromised.

The problem wasn’t in the technology itself, but in the users’ attitudes. Computer security was always lax in the force. Many cops viewed computers the same way they viewed crooks: as the enemy.

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Passwords were easy to guess; some cops would share it with others just to make access easier. As such, anyone savvy enough could do a lot of damage from the inside, and Hume made the most of it.

His strength in computer usage also turned out to be his downfall. Since he generally understood computers, he was the first one to be fingered. He constantly helped out other cops with any problems they had with their terminals, giving him access and passwords whenever he asked. When a mob stoolie was caught for a third strike on the ‘three strikes and you’re out’ law, he struck a deal with the District Attorney to shorten his sentence. That’s when it was revealed that the mob had been receiving all their information not in dark alleys, back rooms, or secret rendezvous, but through a simple email from the force’s own computers. A quick investigation led to Hume through nothing more sophisticated than the process of elimination. There were a few who had the expertise but he was the only one who had the access and the wherewithal.

Unfortunately, much of the investigation’s communiqués were done with the very computers Hume had compromised. By the time IA was ready to move in, Hume had made his getaway. Now, years later, McCain had finally tracked Hume down.

It was never too late to bring down a bad guy.

“More smart remarks, McCain? Never could stop talking, could you?”

“C’mon Justin, give it up.”

“‘There’s nowhere left to go,’ is that it Chuck? Please let’s not run through the same tired script.” Hume moved back into one of the food areas behind the counter. McCain may have gotten the drop on him in this mall, but he was no fool. He wasn’t about to press his luck by being reckless. The counter would provide cover. *Besides*, he thought, *after this is over I could really go for a corn dog*. He stooped low behind the counter, which was filled with various condiments, napkins and other fast food accessories. Behind him the stove and fryer were silent. “You know if you kill me, you’ll never find that bomb.”

McCain peeked up over planter, watching Hume attempting to get into better position. Behind Hume he noticed the main gas line running down from the ceiling, along the back wall, into the stove. “Well, I thought I’d at least give you the whole policeman’s spiel. Let you experience it from the other side.” *C’mon, just poke your head up!* he thought desperately.

Hume laughed. “I never was on your side, McCain. Or don’t you remember? Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten those four already. I remember them. They were the biggest idiots on computers there has ever been. Always whining to me because they deleted their own reports. You know what it’s like trying to help people who make the exact same mistake over and over again? It was a pleasure to use those terminals to tell Jimmy just where they would be coming in that day.”

“You bastard!” McCain shouted. “You don’t even care!”

“Well, well, well. A remark made with sincerity. Well let me respond in kind: I do care, Chuck.” Hume laughed again. “They made me a ton of money!”

McCain clenched. *He’s baiting me. Can’t lose my head now.*

“Face it, McCain. I beat the entire force that day! All I need to do today is beat you,” he smiled. “Soon I’ll be rich and free and living the high life on some tropical island.”

“The city will never pay!”

“Oh they’ll pay, unless they want to lose their prize attraction. Not to mention the people in it,” he added wryly.

Prize attraction? *The Space Needle!* McCain realized with a start. Hume never did anything small. He might just try to actually put the Space Needle into space. At least McCain knew what his plan was. Now all he had to do was stop him. He smirked. *Sure. Yeah. Piece of cake.*

That’s when he noticed that a florescent light hung in the area above Hume. Supported by two chains on either end, it was the same kind found hanging over pool tables in bar and grills all over the city. The chains were flimsy and cheap. McCain fired at the right chain. The bullet severed though the thin metal and the light swung

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down towards Hume. He instinctively jumped back towards the stove. McCain shot again, this time into the gas pipe running into the stove. A burst of flame blew out the hole catching Hume in the face. Hume fell to the floor clutching his damaged cheek.

In one graceful motion, McCain vaulted over the planter, quickly closed the distance to the counter, and pointed his gun over it. Hume, his gun thrown clear in the blast, looked at McCain in pain and fear.

McCain's eyes narrowed. "Gotcha Suckhead."





# Chapter I

Hume's expression changed from one of fear to puzzlement. "Did you say Suckhead?"

"*CUT!*" A new voice rang out from behind them.

"What was wrong with that?" McCain said, turning towards the newcomer.

"Gotcha Suckhead? Suckhead? What the hell does the script say Lewis?" The other man's voice boomed through the bullhorn he held to his mouth.

"I know what the script says Marty, but I thought it could use some pizzazz."

"Pizzazz. PIZZAZZ?!!" Marty McGregor dropped the bullhorn, leapt up from his canvas stool, and stomped over to Mark Lewis. He waved script pages in his hand violently. "You just ruined a \$150,000 take! Do you have any idea how long it takes to set up these special effects? Not to mention John's time in makeup to put those burns on his face!" The director's face was red.

"It's okay, Marty. The makeup's not going anywhere." John Duncan had lifted himself up from behind the mock counter, the mad face of Hume gone from his features. It was instead replaced by a softer, more thoughtful countenance. The latex "burn" on his face was the only trace Hume had existed.

Lewis shrugged. “Aw, just burn him for real. It’s cheaper. Anyhow Bruce Willis had ‘Yippe-Ki-yay’, I want a catchphrase too!”

Marty put his head in his hands. “Catchphrase. He wants a catchphrase.” He glanced at John who simply shook his head and shrugged. Marty held the script up in Lewis’s face and pointed at a random line. “Look. The script says for you to say: ‘NOT THIS TIME’. Now listen closely, you high-priced dumb ass. *THAT IS THE CATCHPHRASE!*”

John snickered, but quickly put his hand over his mouth to cover it up.

Not quick enough. Mark Lewis whirled on him. “You think something is funny? I don’t see your name at the top of the credits, Duncan!”

John tried to be reasonable. “Hey, Mark it’s just...”

Mark stepped towards him and poked his finger into John’s chest. “No one comes to see the bad guy.” With that he turned and stalked off. After about ten steps he proclaimed, “I’ll be in my trailer! You think about it McGregor!”

Marty watched him go. “Hell.” He began waving everyone off. “All right everyone, let’s call it a day, it’s late anyways.” A flurry of activity ensued; cameramen put up equipment, soundmen took down boom mikes, technicians shut off stage lights. Marty sighed and looked at John.

“Sorry Marty.” John looked sheepish.

Marty put his fists on his hips and leaned against the camera. “Don’t be. This is one of his good days. There’s more to shoot, we’ll just pick it up with the line and clean it up in editing.”

“If it’s so easy to fix, why did you bawl him out?” John questioned.

“Because he pisses me off.” He shook his head. “Suckhead. Good lord!” Marty looked hard at John. “Don’t listen to his ranting. You’re a good actor. I’d rather have you be the lead.” He sighed heavily. “But studios cast stars these days. Directors don’t have as much say as they used to.”

“Oh, I don’t care what he thinks,” John replied, jabbing a thumb in Lewis’s direction. “Especially from a guy who needs writers for

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everyday conversation. Besides, I'm not really a leading man." John took a deep breath. "Guess I'll turn in too. After I get these taken off." He pointed at his 'burns'.

Marty smiled. "Are you sure? Might help at the bar tonight. Get the Florence Nightingale types."

"You're a sick man Marty," John laughed.

"Hey, I'm not the one who looks like I need a trauma center."

John headed towards the exit. He pointed at Marty on his way out without looking. "Just for that little comment, you're buying."

"Asshole."

John paused at the doorway. "No, I just play one on TV. See you tonight."

\* \* \*

John Duncan stepped out into the hall and headed to make-up. He walked with an easy-going grace that contradicted his current appearance. Anywhere else would have gotten him startled gasps, but here in Cerner Studios he barely warranted a bored glance. Actors moved in and out studio doors that lined the hallway, several with 'injuries' that made Duncan feel very inconspicuous.

He rounded the corner and headed for the make-up department entrance. He paused in front of the bright red door. He took a deep breath and wiped some light sweat from his forehead. He adjusted his shirt, and made a couple of vain attempts to clean up a bit. His current costume, ripped and bloodstained, made the attempt futile. Duncan sighed and opened the door.

"Hello Jan," he greeted the room's lone occupant. The woman turned slowly.

"Duncan. Nice look," she gestured towards his face.

"Yeah. I wanted to thank you for the cigarette earlier, but I had some trouble with the lighter."

"I knew I should've given you a child-proof one. Have a seat, John." She turned the swivel chair and smiled as he sat. "I heard you had a bit of trouble on the set."

"Wow. Word travels fast." He leaned back in the chair. Jan inspected the foam latex burns and began to loosen them off. She

did so delicately as so not to damage them. They might be needed for any re-takes and creating them was an expensive process.

“Ahhh, Lewis stormed by grumbling about catchphrases. He forgot to stop by to have his head wound removed.” She picked a tool off her tray and began sliding it in between the wound and his healthy skin underneath it. “Just as well, I’d have probably removed his whole head.”

Duncan snickered. “Now he isn’t so bad. He just wants the best performance possible.”

Jan snorted in disgust. “C’mon Duncan! His best performances are the tantrums he throws if he doesn’t get his way. You’re too nice sometimes.” She peeled away the last of the adhesive and lifted the burn from his face. “There.” She turned and began the work of storing the prosthetic.

He rubbed his cheek, now unblemished and natural. “Thanks Doc. Does my HMO cover this?”

Jan glanced at him with a smirk and then continued work. It was the most reaction Duncan ever got from her. John was quick with the witty remarks and usually got hearty laughs in most circles. Jan never laughed. Most times his remarks were rewarded with a wry smile at best, no reaction at worst. Maybe that was why John was so intrigued by her.

“Jan, I was wondering...” he began.

The phone rang, interrupting the inquiry. She reached out with one hand and tucked the receiver in between her shoulder and cheek as she returned to work. “Make-up... Yeah?... Well how many stab wounds are we talking?... Yes... Yes... Chainsaw too? Sounds like a quality movie,” she said wryly. That comment apparently elicited an objection on the other end. “Oh, lighten up...”

Duncan smiled at her, even though her back was still turned. Another time perhaps. She was clearly in her element now. He turned towards the door and quietly began to exit.

“Duncan?” she called after him. “Wait.” She turned her attention back to the phone. “Could you hold a second? ... Thanks.” She looked up at John. “Did you need something else?” she looked at him impatiently.

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“Nothing important. You’re busy, I’ll see you tomorrow.” He smiled and waved as he headed out the door.

She held her hand up in a quick wave, re-engrossed. He could still hear her as he headed down the hall. “Okay... five stab wounds, chainsaw, and flame thrower burn. You want fries with that?” He shook his head and smiled.

\* \* \*

“Why don’t you just ask her out?”

Marty sat on the bar stool, head propped up by his hand, and stared expectantly at Duncan. Duncan sipped his drink, not returning the stare. “Marty, I’m just another head wound to her. She never laughs at my jokes, even though she does have a wicked sense of humor. I just don’t think she’s interested.”

Marty shook his head. “C’mon, you’re a Hollywood star. Can’t you get the girl?”

“I’m the bad guy, Marty. Bad guy never gets the girl.” John took another sip of his beer. “I think it’s a law in California. Besides, she applies some major structural damage to big Hollywood stars everyday. There have been more stars in that one chair than any other in Hollywood.” His expression became wistful. “Never been a single star in her eyes, though.”

“Oh please. Let’s not get so melodramatic.” Marty admonished. “Besides, you’ve got as good a chance as anyone else.” He paused for a moment. “You know, maybe I should give that chair a contract,” he murmured thoughtfully. “Or make it an agent. It has a great clientele and would be easy to deal with at the negotiating table...”

“Can we concentrate on the problem at hand?” John interrupted. “You asked me here for a reason.”

Marty straightened up. “Right. Down to business. Ordinarily, that botched last scene is easily fixed in editing. We would just get Lewis to re-record the correct line in a sound studio.” He grimaced. “But then his agent phoned this afternoon. If he doesn’t get to use his line, he won’t finish the rest of the movie. Spoilt brat.” Marty nearly spat out the insult.

“Can he do that? Doesn’t he have a contract?” John asked.

“Yup. Of course it states he can change any line he sees fit.”

“Why would it say that?” Duncan stared at him incredulously.

Marty shrugged. “He’s a draw. Studio wants to make money and Mark Lewis makes money, plain and simple. He wants more creative control. Besides, you know the McCain novels have an incredible fan base. They went ape-shit when they found out Mark Lewis would play McCain.”

Duncan sighed. “That line is so lame. I can see the fan sites on the Internet having a field day with it.”

“Not to mention the critics.” Marty added, staring into his drink.

“They don’t pay for tickets.” John thought for a moment. “I’ve seen his movies, he can’t have been making up his lines. Someone must have found a way to convince him to stick with the script. Question is, do we have time? There is a shooting schedule we have to keep.”

“Well, John, I’m glad you brought that up. The studio has given us the time, in a manner of speaking,” he said with a flourish.

John nearly dropped his beer. “You mean...”

“Yup, we’re going to shoot ‘McCain’ digitally,” he finished, crossing his arms proudly. “We’ve only started on the one scene on regular film and it’s still set up on regular film. It’s a bit of a costly gamble, but McCain’s is Cerner’s summer blockbuster. The studio is banking a lot on it and wants to spare no expense. They think digital quality should more than make up for a lost day of shooting. So we won’t have to worry about fixing it in editing, we’ll just re-shoot.”

John grinned excitedly. “Oh man, I can’t wait to see what it’s gonna look like.”

Marty shrugged again. “Digital cameras. Film cameras. Personally I don’t see what the big difference will be.”

This time the beer did drop. It hit the bar with a loud thud. “Marty! Are you kidding?”

“Look, I don’t know the tech stuff like Ken does. He’s pretty excited though.”

“Ken Scott?” John inquired.

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“Yeah, he’s joining the crew as director of photography. I still think film is fine. But since the decision has been made, we need the best cinematographer there is. Rick Shellee wasn’t too happy, he probably knows the equipment as good as anyone. But he’s young, he’ll get his shot.” Marty took another drink. “Someone still needs to smooth over Lewis though. We have time now before we re-shoot to turn him around. Cerner and I were hoping that you would talk to him.” Marty didn’t look at John, but continued to stare into his drink.

“Me? He hates me!” Duncan exclaimed. “Why me?”

“Look John, you have been in this business for a long time.” Marty turned to look at him for the first time since this particular subject was broached. “But unlike many actors that make it big, you never have had top billing. You’re the biggest face in Hollywood without a name.”

“So? I like what I do. I’ve seen the lives of ‘names’ like Cruise and Ford. Can’t even go out in public half the time. When they are out, they get mobbed by fans or paparazzi or worse.”

Marty snickered. “Yeah people see you, and think you might have been on *USA’s Most Sought After*.”

John shrugged. “So I don’t get top billing, or invited to top parties. What does that have to do with our little problem?”

“SOOO, your attitude doesn’t seem to lend itself to a big ego, putting it delicately,” Marty replied.

“Oh brother.” John waved at the bartender. “Another, please,” he said, pointing at his beer.

The bartender acknowledged with a little salute. “Be right with you.”

John nodded and turned back to Marty. “You don’t think I have an ego? I trained in Kendo sword fighting for 6 months so I could get the lead villain part on Lucas’ *Star Wars* movie. Instead Ray Park got it. Don’t think that wasn’t an ego bruise.”

Marty scowled in mock puzzlement. “Ray Park played Jar-Jar Binks?”

Duncan glared at McGregor. Marty realized he wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“Look John, Park didn’t get three lines in that movie and was unrecognizable under all that make-up.” Marty chucked him on the shoulder. “You’ve had better parts than that.”

John wasn’t convinced. “Maybe. But Darth Maul was also on top of many fan’s lists as their favorite character.”

Marty realized that appealing to Duncan’s ego wasn’t going to work. Duncan didn’t care for the prestige of a particular part. He played parts for the fans and for himself. He switched to another tack and tried to appeal to John’s professionalism instead.

Marty sighed. “Look, you weren’t brought in on this one just because you’re the best villain out there. You know Cerner has a lot riding on this picture. The McCain series could be big. Cerner Studios wanted you because you have a tendency to solve problems.”

John cocked his head to one side. “Eh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh c’mon. Don’t be so coy. Who was it that gave Parker the idea on the last script to make the villain twins? It was a knockout at the box office! And what about helping the director of that space-epic you did? You gave him the idea to have the camera shoot from inside the giant alien. You’ve helped other actors, stuntmen, hell even the special effects guy.” Marty arched an eyebrow. “Mark Lewis is just another problem to solve.”

The bartender returned and set a bottle in front of Duncan. “Just put it on my tab,” Duncan said. He turned his attention back to McGregor. “I’m not a psychiatrist. Okay,” he admitted, “I played a psycho one once, but that doesn’t change the fact I’m just an actor. I work in Tinsel town and sometimes help make a movie look authentic. That’s it. It’s not like I know the technical side that well.”

“Making a movie look good isn’t just technical. It’s emotional. A successful movie is successful because it touches a chord with people. You know how to help movie makers hit that chord.”

“So now you want me to play Mark Lewis like an organ?” Duncan took a swig of his fresh beer.

“Just do what you think is right. Lewis is a good actor. You don’t get to the top without some professionalism. He has to remember



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that somewhere below all that pompousness. So do whatever will help get this project back on track.” Marty swiveled a bit to get a better view of the back of the bar. “Quite a nice setup, don’t you think?” he indicated the decoration behind the bar, an impressive display of 1950’s baseball memorabilia. Gloves, bats, hats, pennants, and jerseys were arranged randomly, but pleasingly on the wall above the back of the bar. His eyes went wistful. “Baseball’s golden years.”

Marty was a baseball fanatic and visited this particular sports bar quite often. Duncan believed the arrangement was Marty’s version of aromatherapy. It seemed to always calm him after shoots like today. “Yeah it’s great,” he replied absently.

Marty glanced back at him. “Something bothering you?”

“What Lewis said today. ‘Nobody comes to see the bad guy.’ Think that’s right?” Duncan asked.

Marty almost choked on his drink. “Lewis? Don’t tell me he actually affected you? Not after your little ‘I like what I do’ speech 30 seconds ago?”

Duncan looked sheepish. “Well, yes, I do like what I do. I mean sure, I want to direct,” he amended, “like every other actor, but he just sort of got me thinking.”

McGregor looked thoughtfully into his glass. He took another sip of his wine before replying.

“Truth be known, I think the villain is the only one who audiences come to see, though they don’t realize it.”

John glanced at Marty askance. “What do you mean?”

“What’s good without bad? Saint without sinner? How could anyone be a saint if no one sinned? What would the good guy do without a bad guy in there screwing things up?” He smiled thoughtfully. “You know, people need the bad guy out there. It gives good something to triumph over, something to cheer for.”

Duncan grinned broadly at him, truly touched. “Marty I’ll be damned. Under that movie director’s callowness, there’s a philosopher hiding there. Sometimes you really surprise me.” He drained the last of his beer before continuing. “Okay. I’ll talk to

Lewis. Let's give him some time to cool off. I got some business I need to take care of anyway."

"Not that Sci-Fi convention." Marty shook his head.

John glared at him with mock offense. "It's not that bad. I happen to like Sci-Fi."

"Like Tammy-Faye Baker likes make-up."

Duncan looked at him with mild reproof. "Don't make me lecture you on how prophetic *Star Trek* was on technology back in 1966."

McGregor pointed a warning finger at John. "You start in on that stuff and I swear I'll fake a seizure right here and now."

Marty may have been a baseball fanatic, but Duncan was a science-fiction geek to the core. He was able to be a part of these conventions thanks to a small role in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. He played a Ferengi, a small nervous creature with an overactive libido, an obsessive desire for money, and ears the size of Buicks. It was a small role, but Duncan treated it like a Shakespeare command performance for the Queen of England herself. He only had three lines, was disintegrated into a small puff smoke, and he couldn't have been happier about it. The biggest perk was the props he got keep as souvenirs: a phaser gun and a medical tricorder, both of which took up prized space in his curio cabinet.

The conventions allowed him to meet many of the bigger stars from other works that he enjoyed. Sometimes he would even talk to real scientists who frequented these events. There was always fascinating research taking place in the real world and these particular conventioners were always happy to discuss it with him.

Unlike Marty, who stared at him in mock panic.

"Okay, I'll spare you." He gestured toward the bartender. "What's the damage?"

The bartender pressed a few buttons on the cash register. It beeped and dinged. "\$15.75, sir."

He pulled out his wallet and threw a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. "Keep it." The bartender smiled in gratitude and put the money in the cash register before turning to another customer. John tugged on Marty's elbow. "See you in a couple of days."

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“Why don’t you just ask Jan to go with you?”

Duncan grimaced. “Bring a beautiful girl to a sci-fi convention? Are you crazy? Why don’t I just feed her to wolves instead?” He put his wallet back into his pocket.

“Wolves? Pekinese you mean. I think she could hold her own,” Marty smirked.

“I liked you better philosophical. See you later.” Duncan turned and strode out.

“Think about what I said.” Marty’s voice trailed after him.

“The talk or the girl?”

Marty grinned. “Both.”

## Chapter II

Duncan slid his key into the lock and slowly opened the door. He looked around warily a moment and carefully tiptoed in. With utmost caution, he stepped forward as the door slowly shut behind him.

*Click!*

Duncan winced as he realized he'd forgotten to hold the knob. An enormous rustling sound came from the down in the depths of his home. Louder and closer it came.

"Oh shit." Duncan shut his eyes and prepared for the worst.

POW! John felt himself knocked on his back. He threw up his hands to ward off the impending attack, but to no avail. The tongue had him. The mail he had picked up before entering flew everywhere.

John's eyes opened to the sight of his dog, Rufus, slurping his cheek. He reached up and began scratching the side of the big dog's face. "Alright, alright!" he laughed. "You win."

Rufus, a large Shepherd mix, leapt aside and sat down next to Duncan, mouth open, panting with excitement. His bright eyes stared at him unblinking. John sat up and scratched the dog around his neck. "Now I know how Fred Flintstone feels. I've got to remember to lock you up during the day."

Duncan sat up and gathered up the mail before heading towards the kitchen. He flicked lights on in the apartment as he went. "Hungry Ruf?" Rufus wagged his tail in acknowledgement. "Okay let's see. Caviar or Alpo?" Rufus stared blankly.

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“Rufus, you’re a great roommate, but we gotta get over this language barrier.” Tossing the envelopes on the counter, he reached into an upper cabinet and pulled out a can.

That did it for Rufus. The Shepherd began sidling up Duncan’s legs and bounding up and down. “Ah, now we’re communicating, eh?” Duncan opened the can and pulled a large bowl closer to him that was sitting on the counter. He began scooping the glop out of the can. This sent Rufus into some sort of delirium. Tail wagging fast, he stood up on his hind legs and put his front paws on Duncan’s back, nearly knocking the man into the cabinet. “Okay, OKAY! Get down!” The big dog sat back down, subdued but still charged with excitement. Duncan finished emptying the last of the food and set the bowl down on the floor. Rufus charged into it with the voraciousness of a wood chipper.

Duncan watched with interest. “Yeah, there you go. Savor every bite.” With a final pat on the dog’s head, he left the kitchen.

He sat down on the couch and clicked on the TV. The news came on with the stock ticker clicking away at the bottom of the screen.

“...today as the Senator continued to deny allegations of impropriety. In other news fighting broke out in the country of Peru as rebel forces continued to stage assaults on the capital. In Greece, the death toll continues to rise from last weeks earthquake resulting...” The anchorwoman continued placidly, recounting death tolls with the same dulcet tones normally reserved for reading stereo instructions. John was amused at how sanguine she could be reporting on all the tragedy in the world. *Better actor than I am*, he thought.

His attention turned to the stock ticker at the bottom. He owned a fair amount of stocks in many companies, some computer, some manufacturing, and even a bit in the studio he was now shooting in. He ticked off the stocks that he owned as they marched across the screen. Microsoft, down. AT&T, up. Dow Average, up. Cerner Studios, down. GRC Motors, down. He thought he might want to sell GRC after a particularly nasty debacle involving bad tires on their cars, but decided to stick with it.

John didn't really use stocks as source of income, but rather as entertainment value. He found the whole process fascinating. Once he had decided on a particular stock, he purchased a bit, and then followed all the company's reports. Sometimes stocks fell due to earnings reports being low. Sometimes they rose due to a pending merger. Sometimes an unfounded rumor could send a price spiraling in either direction. On occasion a stock price could rise and fall throughout the day. He had seen instances of a stock finishing a day relatively unchanged from the start of the day, but take a roller coaster ride to get there. Fortunes were won and lost in a day.

He picked up a notepad he kept on an end table next to the couch and began scribbling the day's winners and losers. Later he would enter all this into his computer to figure his long-term gains and losses.

Rufus emerged from the kitchen, clearly more docile. He rounded the corner of the couch and pranced up to Duncan. Sitting down, he set his head on his master's lap.

Duncan smiled down at him. "Hello boy. Dinner good?"

Rufus belched in reply. Duncan smiled. "I didn't need the special effects. A tail wag would've been fine." He scratched the dog's ear.

Rufus grunted in appreciation and lay at Duncan's feet. Within moments he closed his eyes and fell asleep, snoring softly.

Duncan looked at his watch. 11:27pm. "Not a bad idea, Rufus." He clicked off the television taking one last glimpse at the apathetic anchorwoman before he did so. He sure hoped she was a better actor than he. He felt more than a little sorry for anyone who could be that close to the tragic moments of the day and feel nothing.

With that thought he headed for his bedroom.

\* \* \*

The next morning, John awoke to heavy breathing in his ear. "Rufuuus..." he mumbled. He pushed the dog away and off the bed.

Rufus was having none of it. He immediately bounded back on the bed and began sniffing heavily around and in John's ear.

"I'm up! I'm up." John sat up, rubbed his eyes and looked around the room blearily. The clock on the chest of drawers read 7:13am.

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He sat back and looked at Rufus accusingly. “You’re going to detonate on me if I don’t get you outside, aren’t you.”

Rufus wagged his tail in reply. He made a beeline for the door, stopped short, and bounded back towards John.

“Okay, let’s go.” John led the way down the stairs and to the back door. There he pulled up the shield on the dog door. John had put in that particular item himself and was quite proud of the workmanship. However, he secretly believed that if he ever showed his work to a real carpenter, that carpenter would probably laugh himself into a pants-wetting coma. But well crafted or not, it served its purpose of making it easier to get Rufus in and out of the house. The shield kept Rufus in the backyard during the day when John was gone while also allowing John to enter the house unmolested. It also kept the hole covered so no one could enter through it.

*Might’ve been smart to put it back in place yesterday,* he mused.

Rufus bounded through the door and Duncan lowered the shield. Turning into the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a jug. Pouring the juice into a small cup, he began flipping through the envelopes he tossed on to the counter the previous night. He stopped when saw the colorful pamphlet that stood out in contrast to the other white envelopes.

‘SCI-CON 2000!’ it proclaimed. He continued reading.

*New at the civic center: SCI-CON 2000!  
Meet stars from Star Trek and Bablyon 5!  
Hundreds of vendors selling priceless memorabilia!*

Duncan smiled as he sipped the last of his drink, stuck the pamphlet in his pocket, and headed out the door. It was going to be a good day.

\* \* \*

The first thing Duncan noticed was the noise. Two thousand voices in a thousand conversations creating a dull background noise that permeated the air. The large ceiling and flat walls enhanced the effect. John paused at the entrance to take it all in. Hundreds milled

around in his immediate field of view wearing costumes and clothes from this world and others.

Duncan had been in films for several years and had seen some of the most fantastic work ever put on screen. Yet even he could not help but be impressed with some of the work that went into many of these costumes. While some were nothing more than t-shirts proclaiming: 'I grok Spock', other conventioners looked exactly like the man they 'grok'd'. There were Borg; half human, half machine aliens from *Star Trek*, along with Klingons, Romulans, and Ferengi. They were mixed in with Stormtroopers, Jawas, Tusken Raiders, and various other representatives from *Star Wars*.

He started ahead, noticing for the first time the many booths lining both walls, nearly obscured from view by the heaping throng. He weaved his way through the crowd. The booths were teeming with cards, magazines, models, videotapes, old toys, and even swords.

"Trek, Wars, or miscellaneous?" A voice pierced through the din close by. He turned away from the table he was inspecting to see a weathered man behind a table, his wares strewn haphazardly in front of him.

"That line should be used on mothers buying gifts for their basement-bound sons, not for hard-cores like what's here. Some crazies from the Disc World delegation might be upset to be grouped under 'miscellaneous'." Duncan began inspecting the table noting the odd boxes. To the naked eye, they looked liked high technology, but Duncan knew them for the useless props they were.

The older man saw Duncan's interest and offered one of the boxes to him for closer inspection. "Ah, I see you know your sci-fi! Now this is an authentic scanner from the set of *Aliens*! Just look at the craftsmanship. Sigourney Weaver used it herself in the movie. I'll let you have it for... oh... say... five hundred."

"*Aliens*, huh." Duncan turned the box over and effortlessly popped a small panel off the back. "Do the all props take 9 volt batteries?"

The older man was taken aback. He nervously ran his hands through his thick gray hair. "Of course! Well, not ones that take triple-a's."



“Uh-huh.” Duncan flipped over the battery cover to reveal a white sticker. “‘Distributed by Toy-R-Us’?”

The older man smiled weakly. “Well... how about two-hundred?”

“How about 20?” Duncan dropped the item in amusement. “Dad, you’ll never hustle anyone like that.”

“Hey, I’m not! I thought we were just playing around. And take it easy with this, it really is a first edition toy,” he replied, carefully reassembling the little gray toy.

John raised his eyebrows. “Really? Cool. What else you got here?”

“Plenty. I’m a little surprised you’d say that though. I haven’t hustled in years, John,” the older man gave him a hurt look.

“Yeah, I know. I was just messing with you.” John rifled through the other toys and such.

His father remained indignant. “You know I’m staying straight and narrow.”

John crossed his arms. “Better check your definition of narrow.”

“Humph. You’d think I’d get more respect at my age.”

“Think again.” John looked around the booth. “Where’s Rich?”

The older man glanced around the room. “He’s around. Checking out the other booths. Might be something worth trading.”

“Same old pair. Rich and Charlie.” John crossed his arms and smiled. “Trying to sell or swindle like the old days.”

“Well, no swindling, but it’s good to keep the skills sharp.”

John shot his father a look of mild reproof. “Not too sharp.”

Charlie’s face broke out into a grin. “So, how are you son? That McCain movie coming along okay?”

Duncan grimaced. “Slow.”

“Lewis again?”

John nodded. “Yeah. I get to try to ‘fix’ him this time. Whatever that means.”

“I don’t understand.” Charlie looked at him quizzically.

“Well, the studio wants me to try talk to him. Make him understand reason. I tell you Dad, I’ve heard of the Hollywood prima donnas, but he takes the cake.” John picked another item from the pile and

inspected it absently. "I've worked with a ton of guys and some of them were pretty eccentric, but nothing like Lewis."

"You'll figure it out. You always do." Charlie decided to change the subject. "Signing autographs?"

John set the item back on the display and began looking around the room. "Yeah. Where is that area anyway?"

Charlie pointed towards the back of the room. "That way. I think Rich is over there too."

Duncan peered over at the direction Charlie pointed. "Uh-oh. Better stop him before he sells someone Spock's ears."

"Oh, now that's cold," Charlie said, "We only did that once."

Duncan grinned and started towards the autograph area.

"Lunch later?" Charlie called after him. But the crowd had already swallowed up Duncan. His father leaned back in the chair. "Always on the run," he mused.

## Chapter III

“You do not understand profit, Hew-mon!”

Duncan watched the video without expression. The creature on the screen spoke haltingly. It was a truly hideous visage: small, sharp misshapen teeth; and enormous ears that from a distance gave the viewer the distinct impression that the creature actually had three heads.

In truth the creature was Duncan, though nearly unrecognizable, thanks to a liberal covering of make-up and rubber. He continued watching his alter ego on the screen with feigned interest, having seen this particular episode of *Star Trek* several times. It was ironic that the role that covered his face so completely was also the one that got him recognized on the street. Many actors had regrets for taking similar roles and warned him against it. Being a fan, he had thought them insane.

After the show had aired though, he found himself beseeched by fans. Once he had even had to hide in a coffee-shop restroom to avoid a rather large group of well-wishers. They were intent on finding out the smallest details of the main set: the bridge of the Enterprise. Although his role did not permit him access to that particular set (a big disappoint to him at the time), that didn't matter to these crazed fans. Now, well over a decade later, the hubbub surrounding that role had long since died down, but he still managed to get some

mileage out of it at these conventions. Mostly it gave him an excuse to attend. He dropped all pretense of watching the video and instead watched the various conventioners' reactions to the tape.

He found many of them watching him. Judging from the expressions on their faces he realized they were comparing his face with the one on screen. Clearly there were some who did not see the resemblance. *Small wonder*, Duncan thought, *considering the latex on that face and the decade-plus years on my current one.*

The tape ended to a smattering of applause. Not the big reaction he had the first year he did this convention, but most of the patrons were regulars and had seen this clip nearly as many times as he had. Many had seen Duncan himself at these conventions for the past 7 years. The lights came up. A man dressed in a smart polo shirt and khaki Dockers bounded up the steps leading to a podium set up on stage. John noted how subdued the host's garb was in contrast to most of convention goers' brightly colored costumes.

"John Duncan, Ladies and Gentleman!" the announcer boomed waving his arm in John's direction. A spotlight from above moved across the crowd to come to a rest on John. He stood up and politely waved at the conventioners. The applause started again, far more boisterously this time.

"John will be signing pictures of his character 'Mok'h' for 5 dollars apiece. Don't forget that all the money from these autographs will go to charity." More applause. Duncan knew many of the stars cashed in on autographs, a practice he found abhorrent. But since the conventioners were expecting to pay for autographs – indeed the different admission prices would include the autographs – he decided to put the money to good use.

"But now let's bring him up here to answer your questions!" The announcer waved Duncan on stage as the crowd broke out into cheers.

Duncan's eyes widened, he was clearly unprepared. He had already half sat back down and now was frozen in mid-sit. He slowly rose, smiling uncertainly, and walked up to the podium. The applause volume rose with each step he took. The announcer stepped aside

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smiling and clapping. John leaned forward toward the microphone. “Thank you. Thank you very much.” The applause continued. John smiled and leaned in close to the announcer. “Tom, I’m going to have to shoot you after the show,” he said under his breath.

The announcer shrugged. “Sorry, John, but the headliner cancelled.” He continued clapping and moved back offstage. At this the applause died down abruptly. Duncan glared at him a moment longer before turning back to the crowd.

“Well,” Duncan began, “I’m sure you all have lots of questions, so I won’t waste time with a lot of speeches.” Hands flew up across the crowd. He singled one out near the front. “Yes, you.”

A young man stood up. He was in his early twenties, thin, and somewhat nervous looking. Whether it was caused by the current situation or just the man’s normal state of being, Duncan was unsure.

“Sir, in the episode you were in... number 32 I believe...” Duncan nodded, acknowledging the man’s information. The nervous young man continued. “...You were the first Ferengi to start speaking of profit. Ferengnar culture demanded that profit be prized above all other things, yet profit was not spoken of until episode 32. Other Ferengi had appeared in the show five other times before that. How do you explain this disparity?”

Duncan stared at him blankly. It was only until his tongue went dry that he realized his mouth was open.

\* \* \*

An hour (and several dozen questions) later, Duncan finally escaped the stage to return to his place at the autograph table. There he stayed for another hour signing his name to his Ferengi likeness. Audience members passed by, face after face. Some asked questions, though none as intricate as the earlier question and answer session, some just smiled. Shy faces, eager faces, and amused faces. Later, Duncan would remember the faces not as individuals, but rather as the atmosphere their collective expressions created. The endless parade created a festiveness that was infectious. Duncan couldn’t help but be buoyed by it. So much so that his earlier indignation from being put on the spot faded as if a distant memory.

One of the faces was familiar. “Jan!” he exclaimed.

“Hello Mok’h.” Jan placed a picture in front of John with a raised eyebrow. “You know, this isn’t a bad look for you.”

John began scrutinizing his picture. “It takes a lot of time to look this beautiful.” He held the picture up next to his own face and grinned. “What do you think? A ‘Before and After’ ad for plastic surgeons?”

“Which one is the Before?” she smiled wryly.

John signed the picture and handed it back to Jan. “That remark just cost you five dollars.”

“Good thing it’s for charity, else I’d want a receipt.”

Duncan smiled. “How did you know I was here?”

Jan smirked. “I didn’t. You think I don’t have an outside interest or two?”

Duncan blushed. “No... I didn’t mean...”

Jan took pity on him. “Relax, Bad Guy, Marty mentioned it. I thought I’d check out where you spend your weekends.”

“This isn’t exactly a weekend thing,” John said defensively. “More like a yearly thing.”

Jan looked at him wryly. “Oh okay. You never go to any of this stuff in your spare time,” she replied with a swing of her arm in a grand gesture to encompass the room.

“Okay, Miss Freedman, you got me there.” John leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

At this point a young teenage boy who had been witnessing their exchange impatiently spoke. “If you two are done, I’d like to get this signed.”

Duncan took the picture from the youth. “Sorry, son.” He turned back to Jan. “Jan...”

She held up her hand. “Not a problem. I’ll meet you for lunch?”  
“Sure.”

Jan smiled. “Okay, it’s a date then.” She turned and disappeared into the crowd.

John stared after her. “Date?” His face slowly broke into a grin.

\* \* \*

“So what keeps you coming back to these things?” Jan asked.

Duncan and Jan had found a table somewhat secluded from the rest of the convention. The food court itself was in an anteroom off the main convention floor. The din from the convention floor still wafted in from the doorways, but was muted and subdued. As such, it was well suited for a lunchtime conversation.

John pointed back at the hall where vendors were selling their wares. “The memorabilia for one. I always hope to run across that little something special.”

Jan nodded. “Okay. That I buy. But why would you subject yourself to that cross examination on stage?”

Duncan chuckled. “That was unplanned. Apparently the headliner got sick. I was the best they had. Someone had to take the slings and bullets.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t rush the stage.” She paused to take a bite of her hamburger. Jan did not subscribe to any notion of healthy living. Her sandwich contained cheese, three strips of bacon, and two slabs of beef. She was already halfway done and showed no signs of slowing down. John had to admire her appetite. “What is it with all those nitpick, overly detailed questions?” she continued.

“I think it helps make it more real.” He leaned forward a bit. “Most of those worlds are a heck of a lot more interesting than this one. The details help make it more real, more complex. Many of these kids are very bright, very smart. Science fiction is not for the stupid. A lot of the concepts in less mainstream novels can be incredibly imaginative, but require a certain base knowledge in the sciences.” He took a sip of his drink. “Kids with those kinds of brains tend to be lacking on the brawn. Science fiction shows like *Star Trek* tend to emphasize problem solving with your brain.”

He smiled and leaned back. “Of course, cool special effects and space battles might also have something to do with it. Point is: this is where these kids want to be. So the more details they know, the more the world of *Star Trek* resides takes on a reality of its own. It gives them a connection to it.”

She contemplated his speech. “I see. So you were a geek, weren’t you?”

“What do you mean by past tense?” he smirked. Jan giggled, nearly choking on a bite of hamburger.

“If you mean my high school days, yes,” he continued. “Oh, it wasn’t like I was bullied day to day, at least not in retrospect. But at the time, being a bookworm was not a way to break into most social circles. It was a bit lonely.”

“So you found *Star Trek*,” Jan finished for him, taking sip of her soda.

“Yup. Found a lot of people who understood what it was like along with it.” He smiled at the memories. “Funny thing is, now that my tastes have changed with age, my appreciation for the show has, too. It’s still there, but different now.”

“How so?” Jan asked, popping the last of the burger in her mouth.

“Well, like all good science-fiction, many of the stories are relevant to today’s problems. One episode of the new show dealt with the morality of cloning. That was over ten years ago, yet these questions are now being asked in reality. I think the popularity of the show, combined with the answers the show offers to these questions, tells a lot about our society.”

Jan nodded, waiting for him to elaborate. While her interest in science fiction in general was rather low, she found John’s mini diatribe fascinating. He continued speaking and she could hear the passion in his voice as he did.

“Let’s say a particular movie tackles an issue like cloning with a moral like ‘Cloning is fine and the results should be treated like cattle.’ Then that bombs at the box office. Why? Maybe it’s just a bad movie, but maybe also because people wouldn’t accept that message. Another movie, same issue, but a message like ‘cloning should be used judiciously to save lives’ and that movie becomes real popular, a real slam-dunk at the box office. Wouldn’t that say something about us as a people?”

Jan smirked. “These are the same people that made *There’s Something About Mary* a big hit. I don’t think a movie represents the culture.”



“Perhaps. However the most popular movies of all times were all family oriented, PG rated films; popular films that stick with all ages. *Star Trek*’s longevity I think is indicative of our values. A little bit, anyways,” he added.

“C’mon John,” she scoffed. “Not to burst a bubble, but it *is* just a TV show. Are you saying entertainment determines our direction as a society?”

“No!” John exclaimed. “Not at all, the complete opposite in fact. The best movies take their cues from the culture. They make stories that reflect it. If they want to make money, anyways.”

Jan sipped her drink and furrowed her brow. “Okay, change of subject. Why the bad guy?”

“What?” John asked.

“Why do you always play the villain?”

“Oh. That. “You know, I’d like to have as impressive a speech as my ‘Sci-Fi is socially relevant’ speech, but the truth is,” Duncan took a long sip of his drink, “being bad is more fun. Plain and simple.”

“That’s it?” Jan contemplated that for a moment. “Okay. I can see that too.” Jan broke out into a wide smile.

Duncan returned it warmly. “I hope to move on and direct, but yeah, that about sums it up.”

“He hasn’t been talking to you about *Star Trek* again, has he?”

Duncan spun slightly in his chair to see Charlie behind standing behind him. “Dad. You still here?” *It was almost getting intimate here*, he thought. “Jan Freedman, meet Charlie Duncan, my father.”

“Oh ho. Please sit down.” Jan pulled a chair from a deserted table and offered it to the older man. “You need to tell me things. Many things. ‘Tiny John’ things.” She leaned forward grinning.

Charlie sat awkwardly. He glanced at John, whose expression was nothing less than panic. Charlie leaned forward towards Jan conspiratorially. He wasn’t about to pass up this rare opportunity to embarrass his son.

*Actually*, he reflected, *the opportunities weren’t so rare, especially in the past*. Back when he was swindling, many of John’s embarrassments came at the hands of Charlie. He was always there for his son, many times whether his son wanted him or not.

Although he was generally a good man, his schemes and cons generally got in the way. One of John's first school plays was nearly ruined due to this. Charlie decided to scalp tickets to make a little cash. Of course it was a grade school play and was free to one and all. Charlie was banned from all future audience membership.

That was long ago and the elder Duncan had made peace with his son since. Still an opportunity for some good-natured ribbing is always entertaining.

"Okay, Jan, I'll tell you something. John's first word was 'action.'"

"Action? As in lights, camera...?" Jan looked incredulous. "Not Dada or Mama?"

"Nope. He was not yet one and could barely keep drool from escaping his mouth. It was one of those lazy Sundays in winter. Too cold to go out, no snow to play in, it was your basic dreary day. We were all watching an old movie. What was it?" Charlie wrinkled his brow, searching his memory.

"*Singin' in the Rain.*"

Charlie blinked and looked at John. "You remember?"

"Of course not. You used to tell this story a lot." John looked at him pointedly.

Charlie looked chagrined. "I guess I did at that. Well anyway there was some scene with the director screaming 'ACTION!'"

Jan interrupted. "Sure, when the starlet could never get her voice acting right. They kept moving the mike and even hiding it."

"Right. They kept trying over and over again, with the director getting more and more exasperated every time. He kept yelling 'ACTION!' louder and louder. Finally at one point, so did John. Right at the TV." Charlie smiled at the memory. "He didn't do it like a baby trying out a new word though, he mimicked the director on the screen. Sounded like he was just as exasperated."

Jan smiled. "Maybe you *should* direct, John."

"Hey, the right opportunity has never come up." John said. "Have they fixed the sound technology since Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor's mishaps?"

Charlie snorted. "I understand they can even use real light bulbs in the projectors instead of candles."

“Okay Dad, I think you’ve embarrassed me enough for one life. How ‘bout we take it easy tonight?” John glared at his father. Charlie caught it and got the message: *Leave us alone, please!*

Jan smirked. “Coward. I think this was just getting interesting.”

“No, the boy’s right. Besides I got to get back to my stand.” He stood up and offered his hand to Jan. “Pleasure meeting you, Jan.”

“You too, Charlie. But you’re not getting off so easy next time. I expect dirt.”

“That’s the problem with John. For a guy who plays villains so well, he’s pretty squeaky clean.” With that he left.

Jan watched him disappear back into the convention hall. She turned back to John. “Your father seems nice.”

“He sure does.” John stared after him even though his father had long disappeared from view.

“You know, you can tell the character of a man by the character of his son.”

John grimaced. “His character wasn’t always so good.”

“Really? How do you mean?” Jan looked at him quizzically.

“That story he tells was one of the last times we were all together as a family. Before Mom left and took me with her,” John replied quietly.

Jan appeared concerned and touched his arm comfortingly. “I’m sorry, John. I don’t know what to say. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Maybe sometime.” John stared at her intently. *Seemed as good a time as ever to ask*, he thought. *Maybe a quiet restaurant...*

But before he could open his mouth again, Jan glanced at her watch, which seemed to have the effect of doubling the size of her eyes. “Shit. I gotta go. I promised I’d meet this guy in an hour and I still need to get ready. I guess time got away from me.” She began rummaging through her purse. “Where are those car keys?”

“Get ready?” John asked as Jan began digging with both hands into the black leather bag.

“For my date. That Foley artist asked me out.”

“Keith? The guy who does those sound effects?” John watched as she continued to dig deeper. The effect was amazing, as the purse

appeared to have far more space on the inside than would seem possible on the outside.

“Yeah, you know: coconuts for hoof beats, fans for wind, that sort of thing.” John nodded. She paused in her excavation. “Think he’d do those sound effects in bed?”

“I really don’t want to know.” John said, crestfallen at this new information. He tried to keep his expression upbeat.

“Me neither. Ah-Ha!” Jan pulled the ring of keys out triumphantly. They hung in her hand, glinting in the light.

“Congratulations.” John smiled wryly. “Those keys would’ve been goners if they stayed buried any longer.”

“You think you’re funny, but you’re not,” Jan said, but John could see the smile that belied her statement. With that she turned and briskly walked towards the exit.

“You’re probably right,” he said under his breath. John watched her go, a somber look on his face. He took a deep breath. Then he gathered up the empty plates, cups, and napkins onto a tray and dumped it into the trash. “But I think I’ll keep trying anyway,” he murmured.

With a final wistful look after the departed make-up artist, Duncan went back to the convention floor.

\* \* \*

The rest of the convention went well. His autograph signing had exceeded his expectations and it felt good that he could make a sizable donation to his charity this year. He tried to let the convention banish his disappointment that Jan was dating someone.

Now that he had fulfilled his responsibility to the convention backers, he could enjoy the event as any other fan. He decided to make the most of it. One thing he enjoyed as an insider was overhearing all the speculation on movies that were either in production or rumored to be produced. Many of these fans had numerous wish lists. Some were fervently anticipating a new ‘Ultra Hero’ movie, which had very little chance of being produced in the current Hollywood climate. Others were talking about new *Star Wars* movies, which were well into production. Such talk was more prevalent than ever, thanks to the Internet.

Websites dealing with movies were extremely prolific. Many of the more popular ones such as *MovieNewz.com* or *iff.com* received hundreds of rumors a day via email regarding upcoming and rumored movie projects. They followed a movie through its production schedule, reporting on every detail until its release.

At that time the webmasters would view the movies and post reviews, much like any newspaper with one important difference: often readers would be allowed to post their own reviews. Some of these sites had thousands—perhaps millions—of visitors, which is the reason John took them seriously. It would only take a bad review from the majority of these sites, coupled with reader's opinions to tank a movie. Marty still may yearn for a thumbs-up from Roger Ebert, but John knew that hardcore fans that went to these sites were the key to his success or failure. These were the customers. They now finally had a voice, and more power than even they realized.

Not to say that they were always right. Many of the hardcore fans panned *Star Wars: Episode I*, yet it earned over 430 million dollars. Only one movie had topped that, *Titanic*, which also was generally panned by the hard-cores fans. *Titanic* was very popular among the teenage-girl set, a group that did not visit the Internet sites nearly as much.

Still, John continued to frequent fan conventions like this one to get information on what was liked and disliked. Going from booth to booth nonchalantly, looking for a particular item to catch his eye, he eavesdropped on the conversations, occasionally sparking up a conversation of his own if rumors were a little light.

It was during one such conversation that the subject turned to his current project. He had come across a prop booth. Prop booths sold replicas of props from popular movies or shows. These props were usually hand made and well crafted, unlike the plastic toys that were mass-produced. He had found a beautiful replica *Star Trek* hand-phaser circa 1966. Unlike the ray guns most commonly identified with the show, this one did not really resemble a weapon; instead it looked like an electric razor, small and compact, easily hidden away in a pocket. This was a bit unusual, since this style was not as popular. John found it unique and was determined to purchase it.

The price was a bit of a sticking point, but John knew that haggling was still a skill that came in handy at these functions. He made an offer, and the merchant countered. This was good, some vendors stuck to marked price without any haggling whatsoever. The give and take continued for a few moments before a price was settled on, each believing he had gotten the better of the other.

As the vendor was bagging the phaser, John asked him what the rumors were on his current project. This was the first movie adaptation of the McCain novels, a very popular series of crime fiction. But since the author had died suddenly, getting the movie made was slow to happen. Buying rights proved very difficult, since no one in the author's surviving family could agree on who owned the rights after his death. After much legal maneuvering (and a huge dollar figure paid out to lawyers), Cerner was able to finally secure those rights. The movie was titled after the book, *Raising McCain*. Anticipation had increased to a fevered pitch since Mark Lewis was cast as Chuck McCain, the main protagonist.

However the vendor said the initial buzz on the progress was not good, now that it turned out that Lewis was holding up production. "I think that Lewis is a great actor," he added, "but not a writer. He'll ruin it if he's given his way."

John was a bit surprised by this. Internet spies were not unusual on high profile productions, but Lewis's tantrum was only yesterday. It seemed unlikely that a spy could have gotten on a closed set.

"Where did you see that?" he asked the vendor.

"[www.mccaindiaries.com](http://www.mccaindiaries.com)," the vendor replied. "Check it out on the Internet."

Duncan was familiar with the site. In fact he had visited it quite often even before he had been offered a part. They had reported on his own casting a mere day after it had been confirmed with Duncan himself. Apparently they had more inside information than he realized.

The vendor gestured at a newspaper that was laid next to his chair. "Did you see that Cerner's stock fell yesterday? They have a lot riding on this project. Bad news on the set means bad day on Wall Street."

THE BAD GUY

John had indeed seen that. He smiled at the vendor. “That’s probably a coincidence.” He held up his sack. “I like your work on this.”

“Thank you. I do work on all the props. Got some light-sabers here, too.” The merchant held up a small silver tube, not too unlike a flashlight.

The vendor voiced Duncan’s thoughts. “Took apart a security guard’s flashlight. Used a small drill with sander on it. What do you think? Another collectible you’d like to add to that phaser?”

John considered it as he turned the saber over in his hand. “Nice, but I think I’ll just stick with phaser.” Duncan handed it back to the man. “Thanks for the conversation.”

“Anytime.” The man put away the light-saber and began speaking with a new customer. Duncan turned to see he was back near Charlie’s booth again. His father was leaning back placidly in his chair, talking quietly with another older man, balding and overweight. What hair he did have was grown long in the back and pulled into a neat ponytail. Duncan stepped over to the booth. Charlie smiled upon seeing his son arrive.

“John. Glad you could stop by before you left.”

“Yeah, I was just about to take off.” He turned his attention to the other man. “How did you two make out, Rich?”

Rich pulled out a notepad and began tallying up the sales. “Pretty good, John. Your dad was on his best behavior.”

Duncan raised his eyebrows. “Even his best behavior is still illegal in 37 states.”

“Okay, fine. He was on *your* best behavior.” Rich shook his head.

“C’mon John, show us what you scored,” his father pointed at John’s bag, ignoring the jibes.

John pulled out his newly acquired phaser. Charlie took it eagerly, but carefully. “Ooh. Type I. Exquisite craftsmanship. Is this Malcolm’s work?”

John shook his head. “No, some new guy.”

Rich took the phaser and examined it with a critical eye. “Look at this, he even engraved the labels. Not many know to do that. Most just use stickers.”

“Really? Cool.” Duncan took back the phaser and put it gently back into the sack. “So what did you guys hear?”

“Let’s see. The big excitement is centered on the new *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* movies. McCain’s movie is highly anticipated, but many think Lewis is going to ruin it, people are divided on whether another Batman movie should be made, and everyone agrees Jan is a babe so don’t blow it with her.”

Duncan raised his eyebrows. “Oh they do, do they?”

“Yup. Don’t be surprised if you see that on the web tomorrow.” Charlie looked at Rich. “I think it’s big news, don’t you?”

“A woman talking to John? It’s a freaking special bulletin.” Rich looked John up and down with the same critical eye he used on the phaser moments ago. “I don’t think he’ll appreciate with age. He’s certainly not in mint condition. He better snag her while he can.”

John crossed his arms and stood glaring at the two older men petulantly. “Are you two finished?”

“Charlie? You got anymore?” Rich asked.

Charlie laughed. “I used up all my digs when I had lunch with the two of them.”

“Okay you scoundrels. I’ll keep you updated on any late breaking details on my love life.” John turned to leave.

“Try to videotape it,” Rich called after him.



## Chapter IV

After the convention, John spent the rest of the day at home. He watched an old movie and spent a few hours on the Internet. He did a little trading of his stocks, and checked the performance of the market in general. As usual there were highs and lows. Some rose; like Intel, Sony, and Time Warner, and some fell; like Microsoft, Pepsi, and even Cerner studios, his current employer. Rufus helped as much as possible by getting under John's feet whenever it seemed necessary.

The next day he went back to work ready to film another scene. He arrived on the set to find it already alive with activity. People milled around behind the set, while others moved back and forth in front of the camera's checking light levels and prop arrangement. One of the cameras looked different from the others.

Duncan examined the new camera with interest. Square and angular, it was a bit larger than the rest. On most cameras the canister magazines located on top or in the back easily identified theatre quality cameras. These holders looked like rectangles with rounded sides. But this particular camera lacked that trademark feature.

"Digital. Newest thing." A bright face popped out from behind the camera. Dark hair and blue eyes, Ken Scott had a handsome face that was rarely without a smile.

"I'll say. What's this thing do, Kenny?" Duncan asked, never taking his eyes off the camera.

Kenny Scott jumped down off the stepstool he was using to access the top of the camera. Ken was the top cinematographer in the field. If a director wanted a shot to look a certain way, Kenny could do it. Dark or light, vivid color or muted hues, Kenny was considered the best there was. He rubbed his hands and appraised the large piece of equipment.

“What can’t she do? The picture is exquisite, and the director can immediately check his work. If he doesn’t like it, we can shoot it again right then and there. We can even edit it up on the control console over there,” he said, pointing at the computer desk sitting near the wall. “No more waiting for film to develop.”

Duncan was impressed. Like all film, theatre quality 35-millimeter film could not be looked at until it was developed. That took a few days at least, a couple of weeks at worst. If a shot had a mistake like a microphone showing up in the shot or a problem with lighting, the entire scene might need to be re-shot. By that time, the costumes would need to be broken back out, sets might need to be re-built, and everyone had to make sure that everything was exactly the way it was before.

Some directors did use video cameras simultaneously, so they could check shots while they were filming, but these were not up to the same quality as the film. There were usually subtle differences. But the hardest thing about working with film was that there was no way to know that the film was correct until it was developed. If there were an error or an overexposure then a re-shoot would have to be done. Re-shoots were very expensive.

To combat this, shots were done repetitively to ensure a good quality shot would be caught. This, of course, cost time and money; the two things studios always had in short supply.

Kenny voiced his thoughts. “Worth the price Cerner paid for them.”

John looked around the set. “Them? There’s more?”

“Oh yeah. They haven’t arrived yet. But since you guys have only filmed a couple of scenes, we’re gonna re-shoot those with this baby.”

*THE BAD GUY*

“Isn’t that expensive?” Duncan asked.

Ken shrugged. “I suppose. But it’s only a few scenes. The lion’s share still needs to be done, and the scene that is really extensive isn’t until later. Besides weren’t those mall scenes screwed up anyhow?”

John shook his head at the memory. “Yeah, Lewis did an impromptu re-write.”

Scott smiled. “What a suckhead!”

“Oh, you heard then.”

“Yeah. I was on set that day,” Ken replied as turned and began fiddling with camera. “Cerner had brought me in to introduce me to my new team.”

John raised his eyebrows as he suddenly recalled that day. “I was wondering what you were doing skulking around here. I should’ve known now that I see you here with new cams.”

Kenny patted the camera. “Don’t tell them, but these new cameras are like re-learning my whole career. In fact there are some things I have to unlearn. The new guys are having an easier time with it.” He pointed over to a tall man talking to Marty. “Rick Shellee is a natural, he’ll run rings around me if I’m not careful.”

If Kenny was worried about that, he didn’t show it. Scott was one the most even tempered men Duncan had ever met. Directors came and went, most screamed and yelled but Kenny took them all in stride, never breaking his cool demeanor.

“Don’t worry, your mystique is safe with me. Rick’s a good man though. He took being bumped by you in stride,” John said, noting the younger cameraman working across the set.

Ken frowned in sympathy as he glanced at Rick. “Yeah, he’s a trooper. It was his first gig. You know Cerner; they were going to give him his first shot at top dog. But with the arrival of these babies,” he said, patting the camera, “they decided they wanted experience. They’ll make it up to him though.”

Duncan walked around the camera inspecting its controls and displays. “So this is the future. These things must’ve cost Cerner a fortune.”

“Yup, but last summer’s blockbuster really put Cerner in the black. This is quite the investment, but should really give them top-notch cinematography.”

Duncan wrinkled his brow. “Hmm.”

Ken looked up from the controls. “What are you thinking, Duncan?”

“Oh nothing. It’s just that Cerner’s stock had been falling lately. I wonder why, if they’re doing so well like you say.”

Ken turned back to the controls, disinterested in the turn the conversation had taken. “Aw, Duncan, you know the market. It bounces around more than the cars the special effects guys toss around. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Yeah but...” John started.

“DAMMIT!!”

Duncan and Kenny both turned their heads at the unexpected curse to see Mark Lewis pulling his leg free of some cables strewn on the floor. “Get this crap off the floor! People gotta walk here!”

Duncan sighed. “You know, I don’t know if I can take his little Mary Sunshine attitude.”

“It’s like working with Pollyanna.” Kenny agreed.

Lewis stomped off the set and out the door.

“I’ll talk to you later Kenny, I need to have a talk with him now. Good luck with these.” Duncan turned and followed Lewis out onto the studio lot.

*I don’t think I’m the one who needs luck, Kenny thought. I don’t envy you, my friend.*

Duncan pushed out the double doors and looked out on the lot for Lewis. People milled all around, with the occasional golf cart passing by, taking somebody from one soundstage to another. He spied Mark heading for the administration building. He jogged a bit to catch up with him and then slowed to match the other man’s stride. “Hey Lewis! Got a sec?”

“Duncan. What do you want?” He continued walking, not breaking stride to talk to John.

*THE BAD GUY*

“It’s about your catch-phrase. The opinion is that it’s not right for McCain’s character. We were wondering if you would mind sticking with the script...”

“Fine.”

Duncan stopped, surprised. Lewis did not, however, and Duncan had to step quickly to catch back up with him. “Sorry?”

Lewis stopped. “Fine. Good. Whatever. Anything else?” he asked brusquely.

Duncan blinked in amazement. “Uh no. That’s all. Thanks Lewis...” But Lewis had already turned around and continued towards the administration building.

Duncan gazed after him and shook his head in puzzlement.

\* \* \*

Duncan walked back into the studio still thinking about his conversation with Lewis. He was troubled by the other actor’s quick acquiescence. So deep in thought was John that he nearly ran over a man walking around a corner.

“Whoof! Hey watch it there, Johnny!”

The voice was familiar. “Dad?”

“Well... yeah,” Charlie replied, a bit miffed. “You put my name on a list, give me an open invitation, and then act surprised when I show up?”

“Surprised you’re here? No. Surprised to find you knocking me over? Yes.” John stepped back and pulled his father closer to the wall. “Watch it. I won’t be the only one knocking you down.” A stagehand rushed by trailing cable bundles, making Duncan’s point. “See?”

Charlie watched the stagehand go. “Yeah, sorry John. But I had to stop by to see how you were making out here.”

John pursed his lips. “And maybe find a prop you could sell.”

Charlie looked at him in mock indignation. “You wound me. Can’t a guy come and watch his son?”

“Not you,” John frowned. “You didn’t get anything, did you?”

Charlie smiled in defeat. “No. They have everything pretty tightly accounted for. But, hey, it is fun to watch you work.”

“You may not get to,” he snapped. “It’s a closed set, you know.” Duncan arched an eyebrow. “You know the rules?”

Charlie looked surprised. “John! Of course I do. You know what I meant. What’s wrong with you? I’ve visited here a ton of times; why are you getting irritated?”

Duncan sighed. He had been a little snippy. “Sorry. Look, there are just some problems I’m trying to deal with. I’ll talk to you later. I’ll see if I can let you watch this scene today. You know how Marty is though, so watch your P’s and Q’s.” With that he turned and left.

Charlie watched him worriedly.

\* \* \*

“He just agreed? Just like that?”

Duncan leaned on the edge of Marty’s desk still shaking his head. “I know it sounds remarkable, but it’s true. I was going to offer him some other lines, maybe work with him on a couple of things, but we never got that far. He just agreed and left.”

Marty stroked his chin in thought. “I dunno. Seems too easy.”

“I agree, but gift horses are gift horses.” Duncan shrugged it off. “Let’s not worry about it and deal with real problems when they occur. This one’s solved.”

Marty was clearly not convinced, but couldn’t argue with Duncan’s logic. “We’ll have more than enough of those. Speaking of new problems, what do you think of the new cams?”

John smiled excitedly. “Very cool stuff. We’re going to shoot McCain digitally now?”

“Hopefully going to make my job much easier,” Marty said doubtfully. “So I’m told.”

“It will. And we’ll be able to see our performances on the spot. Ken was filling me in earlier about some of their features.” The edge of the desk was starting to dig into his thighs uncomfortably. He hopped up on to it and sat, legs dangling.

“Ah, so you saw Ken?” Marty asked.

Duncan nodded. “Yup. He’s onboard now?”

“Director of photography. He’s taken on double-duty with 2<sup>nd</sup> unit direction as well.”

*THE BAD GUY*

John glared at Marty in mock indignation. “So. He gets to go out to all the scenic sights without having to put up with Lewis? Maybe I need a career change.”

Marty gave him a serious look. “You always say you want to direct, like every other actor out there. If you’re really serious about it, then go on location with Ken. Second unit direction isn’t always very glamorous. You have to film what the director wants and very little to go on other than the storyboard sessions. You don’t always get to work with the actors, sometimes no actors at all.”

John chuckled. “With Lewis, that sounds like a benefit.”

“Laugh all you want, you still have to make everything you film fit seamlessly with the rest.” Marty arched an eyebrow. “Directing your vision is relatively easy compared to directing someone else’s.”

Duncan contemplated that for a moment. “You know, that’s a good idea. Ken does it better than anyone.”

Marty saw the distant look on Duncan’s face. “So you really think this ‘Suckhead’ problem is solved?”

Duncan grimaced at him. “Who knows?”

Marty scowled in puzzlement. “What’s eating you?”

John paused, wondering if he should bring up his concerns. “Have you checked out Cerner’s stock lately?”

Marty scowled. “I’m not following.”

“Look Marty, Cerner did well after last summer’s blockbuster, right? The earnings report should have come out last week for the third quarter. Obviously the well must be flowing for them to shell out for those cameras. So why does the stock price keep falling?”

Marty stood up. “You got to be kidding me, John! Stock prices can go up and down like crazy. It’s as much based on the whims of day traders as anything else. Chaos theory at its finest.”

“You’re probably right.” John sighed and shook his head. “Well, we’re not getting anything done standing here talking. Let’s get this shoot finished.”

“Right.” Marty agreed and they quickly headed out the door.

\* \* \*

Marty began the task of getting everyone in their places, props set up, cameras pointing where they should, while John headed to his start position. The mall scene was being re-shot for the new digital cameras and everything was set back up exactly the way it looked originally. The set was clean and unblemished by the damage it had taken from the first shoot.

A day's shoot was expensive, but still within budget since re-shoots were expected and happened on most movies. The crew was accustomed to it, and went about their duties cleanly and professionally. Duncan was already in costume and assumed his place in front of the snack counter, holding his 'weapon' and looking mean. Lewis was back by the planter, smoking a cigarette and looking impatient.

Other crewmembers were busy setting up props in the correct spots, or pointing lights and light shields properly. Special effects crewmembers were ready with the bullet hole strikers that would appear in sync with the gunfire, as well as other more primitive effects of glasses tipping over or lights burning out. Jan's make-up artists put the finishing touches on Duncan and Lewis, completing their transformations into Hume and McCain.

Marty was looking up and down the set, making last minute changes. Moving a table here for a better view, adjusting the rail the camera rode, measuring light brightness. Finally he approached Duncan.

"Okay, looks like we're all set. You do still remember your lines, right?" Marty smirked. This was a private joke between Marty and John. Duncan had only forgotten his lines once in his professional career, a feat many actors envied. But Marty had been directing that one time and relished in never letting him forget it.

Duncan leveled his prop Uzi at McGregor. "Don't make me use this."

Marty held up his hands in mock fright. "Okay Hume, I give up. McCain's over there," he pointed. "Shoot him in the toupee."

Duncan snickered. "Don't tempt me. Are we ready?"

"All set. You?"



THE BAD GUY

Duncan grunted, "Let's shoot this turkey. Again."

Marty turned and headed to his canvas chair next to the new camera. He picked up his megaphone he always kept on the set. "Okay. Places everyone! QUIET!"

The set quieted. The last of the set personnel scurried off. The special effects crew readied their equipment. Lights brightened while microphones dipped down just above camera view. A man ran out in front of a camera and held a marker in front of it.

John loved this part. A marker was as much a symbol of movies as anything. It always gave him a little thrill to see the small plastic board ready to have its black and white striped clapper smack down. It was like a light switch that turned on the make-believe world he was filming.

"*Raising McCain*, Scene 42, Take 2. Marker." The man held the board in front of the camera watching Marty, who in turn waited until the silence reached its peak. Satisfied, he shouted "ACTION!" The man swung the top piece of plastic back onto board with a crack and scurried back off set.

'Bullets' began spraying through the mall food court as special effects men began hitting buttons that knocked over cups, dug gouges out of tables, and even tipped over chairs. Lewis tore past the freshly emptied tables, where the prop department had carefully placed the trash of burgers, gyros, pizzas, and other fast food entrées. Sprinting forward, he dove over a planter that lined the edge of the court, landing gracefully on a foam pad that cushioned him well. Ken kept him carefully in the camera lens and the pad out of the shot. Lewis, pushing his back up against the planter, dropped an empty clip from his gun.

"Oh Chuckie!" Duncan called out. "Our game isn't finished. No time outs!"

"CUT!" Marty yelled through bullhorn. "Okay, that was good. Print it. Line up for the second shot."

And on it went.

\* \* \*

"This is great!"

Marty and Duncan were huddled over Kenny, who was busy playing out their work on a monitor in front them. The last scene of the light swinging down had just been shot, and they watched the results. Marty was ecstatic.

“We’ve been able to edit this together perfectly! Well, it needs a quite a bit of polish, I know,” he amended quickly. “Background music, sound effects and such, but the tempo of the scene is there!”

“It sure is a time saver,” Duncan agreed. “I like the change of some of the dialog too.”

“What did I tell you guys? Wave of the future.” Kenny Scott had disembarked from the crane cam to stretch and decided to give a demonstration of the new digital camera’s capabilities, even though the final scene wasn’t shot yet. Marty had been looking over every scene after it had been shot, and was amazed at how quickly a rough edit could be put together. The ten-minute sequence had been put together in record time. As Marty pointed out, the sound was very primitive, but the quick change in angles and linking together everything in the right sequence made the movie seem halfway finished, at least this 10 minutes of it.

Ken had planned to do this after the next scene but truthfully was so excited to play with the new equipment that he couldn’t wait. Since Duncan had to have his burn re-applied (they had finally arrived at the end of the scene), the time seemed right to try out this little toy.

Duncan smirked at Marty. “‘Film or digital. It’s all the same.’ you said.”

“Aw shut-up.” Marty playfully took a half-hearted swing at him. “Okay, I’m a true-believer.”

“Wow. Does it always go this fast?”

John turned to see Charlie timidly approaching. Earlier John got Charlie permission from Marty to have him observe. Now Duncan had almost forgotten his father was here. It pleased him that he had stayed out of the way so well. Like John’s childhood, Charlie’s last visit almost got him banned from any future visits. His constant questions and interruptions nearly drove Marty insane, and he had

finally demanded that Charlie be removed. But John talked to both of them and promised Marty that Charlie would not be noticed on any future visits. He reprimanded his father sternly and warned him that if he didn't keep his mouth shut, there would be no next time. He was glad that Charlie had taken the talk seriously.

"It never goes this fast, Charlie, that's what's so great about this." Marty answered. "Most of the time, you have dailies. You have some shots put together in postproduction and each day we watch what has been put together to get an idea of the progress." Marty blinked, as if seeing Charlie for the first time. "Have you been here the whole time?"

Charlie jerked a thumb towards the back wall. "I'm sorry, I was just watching in the back. Is this a bad time?"

Marty smiled and winked at John. Apparently he was also pleased to realize Charlie had been silent. "No, it's fine Charlie. We were just taking a moment to study our handiwork. Wanna see?"

"Yeah!" Charlie leaned over. Ken started the sequence from the beginning. Charlie was transfixed. Ken began clicking with the controls. "Watch this..."

Marty looked at Duncan. "Been a good shoot. Get a drink real quick?" he nodded towards his office.

Duncan nodded, looking up from the scene replaying on the monitor. "Sounds good."

Moments later they were closed up in Marty's office. Duncan sipped bottled water while Marty had a club soda. "Nice having a wet bar."

"Yeah, but not so good on location shoots," Duncan said. "We can't take your office with us."

"Maybe we won't need to with these cameras."

Duncan took another swig of water. "I don't think they're that advanced. I'm pretty sure they haven't added full bars to them."

"Yeah I know," Marty replied wistfully, "but still, what a time saver. To top it all off, the picture quality is supposed to be head and shoulders above 35mm." Marty was definitely excited.

"Remember when it was all about art?" Duncan asked.

“No.” Marty replied sarcastically. “Well let’s get the ‘suckhead’ scene finished, and we can start planning for the next shoot.”

“Right. I’ll get going to the ladies room and take off my face. Pieces of it at least.”

Marty raised an eyebrow. “Any excuse to head to make-up.”

John reddened. “Now cut that out.”

“You wuss! Please never ask her out. I’ll never stop being entertained by teasing you.”

John downed the last of his drink. “Well thank God that through all this, you, Marty McGregor, are entertained. I think I can sleep well now knowing that,” he replied with more than a little edge to his voice. With that, he turned and left the room.

“Touchy,” Marty said, grinning.

\* \* \*

The rest of the shoot went nearly flawless. The flaming pipe scene was shot five times from different angles. Ken was able to piece them together into a smoothly flowing shot. The crew watched in excitement at the monitors that were sprinkled around the set. The crude quality remained in the film, with lighting and sound still unfinished but the scene was organized and dramatic. The impact of it could be felt, an impact driven home even further by the immediacy of it.

Even the normally even-tempered Ken was affected. “This is not bad.”

“Try not to gush Ken, it’s embarrassing,” Marty cracked.

“All right, all right, I admit it, I’m impressed.” Ken admitted, breaking into a huge grin. “Watching the scene being filmed was entirely different from watching the actual film.”

John had to agree, “You’re right. The inter-cutting scenes, the dramatic angles; it all looks larger somehow.”

“No, no, it’s a very small screen John,” Marty said. “What is it Ken, seventeen inches?”

“Nineteen. Definitely not larger than watching it live.” Ken smirked.

“Why John, I just watched you live. You’re bigger than nineteen inches.” Marty stood back and scrutinized Duncan up and down. “At least I think you are.”

“Creative contemplation is lost on you two,” Duncan retorted.

Ken laughed. “Okay, I admit it. Seeing it put together *is* bigger. But what I was talking about is how quickly we have a working scene. We just saw it done minutes ago and here we have a workable print. Just tweak it up in post-production. Usually you guys can barely remember exactly what it was like during the shot when you finally see it at dailies.”

“What’s our editor going to do?” John wondered.

“He’ll have plenty to do,” Marty replied. “We might be able to put together a rough cut, but I’m going to need him to get all those special effects shots worked in. Not to mention the exterior shots. Besides, we’ve filmed this from all different angles. He and I will want to try different combinations.”

He knelt down closer to the screen and stared at it scowling. “Run it again will you, Ken?”

Ken began tapping keys. He then moved the mouse and clicked. The image on the screen went black and then the scene restarted. Marty watched it intently.

“There! Stop there. See that?” Marty pointed at the screen.

Ken leaned forward. “No.”

“What are we looking at here fearless leader?” John questioned.

“Lewis. He switched gun hands. Back it up to the previous angle.”

Ken complied. The image rolled slowly backwards. Lewis could be seen from behind having raised his gun to fire a few shots. His gun flashed silently and slowly lowered in his right hand. The angle switched to a reverse, centering on Mark’s face. The gun was now in his left hand.

“Look at that,” Ken exclaimed. “It would be easy to miss since the gun stays on the same side of the screen on both shots.”

“Sure, especially since the cut only lasts about 2 seconds,” Marty added.

Ken studied it for a moment. "I can flip it, left to right. What do you think?"

"No, it won't look right. He'd be facing the wrong direction." Marty snapped his fingers. "Here's where this new technology will pay off. Everything is here. Let's re-shoot those two seconds."

John smiled. Ordinarily a mistake like that may not be spotted for days, if at all. Two seconds of film is generally not worth setting back up everything and bringing the crew back in unless it's a really glaring problem that ruins the entire film. Sometimes it gets fixed in postproduction by reversing the film. Occasionally it's just ignored altogether, left for film buffs and nitpickers to find. Now it could be fixed here and now, and at minimal cost.

Lewis groaned. Standing at one of the other monitors, he had until this moment been silent observing the proceedings. Now he stomped up to Marty. "McGregor! It's just a tiny mistake. No one will notice. It's getting late, let's call it a day!"

Marty rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to keep calm. "Lewis, this won't take that long. You'll still make your party at Spago or wherever the hell you're going."

Lewis reddened and hissed out an angry sigh.

"Stay that color. It will add to the realism," Duncan jabbed.

Lewis fumed silently and went to his starting position.

\* \* \*

An hour later the scene was completed and inserted into the sequence. John, Ken, Charlie, and Marty watched it, Marty with a critical eye. Finally he smacked his hands together in excitement.

"Man! And just like that, we have a working sequence. I still can't get over it." His eyes flashed with triumph. "This will be a great movie!"

"It better be." They all whirled at the new voice, except Marty. He remained facing the monitor but was the only one to speak.

"Cliff. I was wondering when you'd sleaze in here." He finally turned slowly and appraised the newcomer, arms crossed, face unsmiling.

“Humph. I can’t believe I get studios to pony up millions of dollars for you to insult me.” Cliff grinned.

Cliff Jenkins was a tall, broad man. His face was square and business-like, an appearance heightened by the small, wire-rimmed glasses he wore. Cliff was the producer of *Raising McCain* and got the crew together. He was left with the task of making sure of the day-to-day tasks of crew assignments and money matters.

Marty returned Cliff’s grin and stepped forward. He grabbed Cliff’s hand and shook it enthusiastically. “Now Cliff, you know we love you. Besides they pony up millions for me to make a movie. The insults are just a fringe benefit.”

Cliff nodded slowly in acknowledgement. “Ah. Here I thought you’d be more interested in a health plan.”

Marty laughed. “So, when did you get in?”

“Just a few hours ago. We had a long flight. Um...” suddenly Cliff started stammering.

But it was too late. Marty had heard Cliff’s slip. John and Ken began looking uncomfortable. Charlie looked mystified by the sudden change in atmosphere.

“Say John!” Ken said, quickly standing. “Shouldn’t we...?”

“Yes. Yes we should,” John replied. “C’mon Dad.” The three beat a hasty retreat, though managing to stay within earshot behind the crane-cam. Charlie was clearly confused, but knew better than to question John at that moment.

Cliff glared after them. Abandoned, he faced Marty.

Marty hadn’t moved one muscle throughout this exodus, keeping his eyes on Cliff. He finally spoke. “We?”

Cliff waved him off, pretending to examine the equipment. “Look, I don’t need your craziness today, McGregor. You know what we’re up against.” He pointed at the camera. “How’s this working out?”

“WE?” Marty repeated angrily.

Cliff’s head snapped back to glare at Marty. “Yes! We! Okay? I brought back Barnhardt. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Of course you had a choice. You could not buy her a ticket. You don’t let her on the plane. You tell her to stay out of the way. There

are all kinds of ways not to bring someone clear across the country.” Marty held up a finger. “In fact, I would lay odds that it is easier to leave someone in place than to bring them all the way across America to drive your director insane!” He plopped down in the console chair in frustration.

John smirked, still listening in case there was anything he could do to help. But he knew that this was a producer/director discussion, and an old one at that. Contrary to the current argument, Cliff and Marty were good friends and partners. When *The McCain Diaries* had first become available to turn into a movie, Marty had enlisted Cliff Jenkins to produce. Cliff was perfect because not only was he very competent at his job, but he also knew enough to leave Marty alone. Marty did his part by not going over budget (much). The two had an impressive pedigree: three blockbusters, ten profitable movies, seven Oscar nominations, and one Oscar trophy. They weren’t the most successful pairing in Hollywood, but certainly were one of the most dependable; they had only one failure between them.

That was a sci-fi epic with a poor plot that Cliff had fallen in love with even though Marty had advised against it. Marty reluctantly agreed to direct it after Cliff had promised him that he would produce Marty’s next two films, no questions asked, if it didn’t do well. It opened at number eight on the top-ten list and was gone from that list a week later. It did achieve a bit of cult status on the Internet, generating frenzied debate. However the debate was not whether the movie was good or bad, but rather the degree of awful it actually was. John was sure he would never see any fans at one of his conventions. Cliff never picked another script without running it past Marty after that.

As bad as his tastes in scripts might have been, he was a top rate producer. He could balance a hundred tasks at once and get them all done correctly, leaving Marty the task of directing. The partnership had been a solid one. But Elisa Barnhardt could be the one to change all that.

Ian Barnhardt was the creator of *The McCain Diaries*. The man was eccentric, British, and the most whimsical man Marty had



ever met. They both shared a love of baseball and had formed a fast friendship from that shared love. Marty and Ian had worked together on one of Ian's other books; a detective novel entitled *Watching Bridgett*. The story involved the perils of being a private investigator. It wasn't a series like *The McCain Diaries*, but a pretty successful book in its own right, enough so that Cerner decided to plunk down 80 million to create a movie based on it. That's how Marty met Ian.

Cerner had its eyes on *The McCain Diaries*, as did every other studio. But Ian had died before the first closed door session could start. The ownership of the rights went into chaos. Ian was divorced and, in his interminable way, had left no will. His ex-wife and grown daughter began a prolonged legal battle for ownership of the series rights. They would be worth millions to whoever got them.

Elisa, his daughter, was a shrewd advertising executive in New York. She had, through questionable legal tactics, won the rights after two appeals. Marty had thought her a little ruthless, but firmly believed she had her father's interests in mind, and had given his testimony in one of the hearings. He believed Lori, the ex-wife, wanted nothing but money and would have sold *The McCain Diaries* to the highest bidder. They in turn could have changed and altered the stories to their hearts content, regardless of the desires of their creator. Elisa was very protective of her father's legacy. She was quite specific in what could and could not happen in any movie that came from the series.

When she got the rights, she began a long process of picking a studio. She did not sell to the highest bidder, but the one who would adhere to the novels' storylines without any major revision. She had decided on Cerner mostly because Marty and Ian had been friends, but also because Marty had personally promised to direct the first two movies. He also had the right to pick every director for any movie made after the first two if he didn't want to direct those himself. Once all the legal dealings had finally been complete, production had begun rapidly.

That's when the other shoe dropped. Elisa began a daily routine of calling Marty to check on the movie's progress. During pre-

production, she approved or denied all story and script changes. She began to insist on certain changes while other necessary changes she denied. Marty found that everything he usually did in a movie was now not good enough to please Elisa. Her demands caused the scripting stage of *Raising McCain* to carry on far longer than usual for that stage of development. Marty several times during that period would have long conversations with Elisa over the phone that would usually end up in shouting. Sometimes Marty would get his way, but more times than not he wouldn't. After one particularly animated argument, Marty stomped into the room, cut the working script into tiny bits, dumped the bits in the fireplace, and set them ablaze.

The saving grace through all of this was 2500 miles of flyover country. Elisa still had her high-profile career in New York while planning and development happened in Los Angeles. The distance helped Marty keep Elisa at arm's length and his sanity intact. Now Cliff had put Elisa right in the thick of things. Deep down, Marty knew that he didn't have much of a choice, as Cliff already noted, but the director was not about to take it lying down. .

"Dammit Cliff, you know what a problem she's been." Marty groused.

"Marty, not only did we get this movie, but we got 120 million to get it done. Now you know as well as I do that that's one helluva budget. For that kind of jack, we put up with eccentricities." Cliff arched an eyebrow. "Even yours."

Marty recoiled. "Me? She's the one..."

Cliff held up a hand. "Right, right. She's crazy and you're perfectly rational all the time. Especially when you're setting things on fire."

Marty wanted to say more, but couldn't argue Cliff's point. Instead he sighed heavily in defeat. "Okay. I guess I should've seen this coming. Once production started she had to show up sooner or later." Marty would often attempt to fight losing battles such as this one. But once he was convinced or reminded he had no other choice, he usually capitulated quickly and without further argument. Sometimes the tirades were nothing more than his desire to blow off some steam.

*THE BAD GUY*

Cliff's countenance softened knowing he had reached that point. "Look, I've had the same talk with her. Neither of you may be able to see it, but I know you both want the same thing: the integrity of the stories to remain intact."

Marty swiveled slightly in the chair and propped his head on the desk with his fist. His shoulders slumped. "I know Cliff. I know." He straightened up. "So. Where is the little b...?"

"Marty!" Cliff interrupted.

"..Barnhardt." Marty finished.

Cliff pursed his lips in annoyance at Marty. "Unpacking. She'll be in tomorrow.

Marty turned around. "Tomorrow. All right then, that's plenty of time for us to get prepared." He motioned towards John and Ken. "C'mere you two."

"Prepared how?" Cliff asked quizzically.

"To deal with her." He stood up as John and Ken joined the conversation. "The four of us shall go out and get liquored up. What do you say?"

Cliff smiled. The tense moment ended, the two began laughing and joking.

"John, you coming?" Marty asked.

"Sure. You want to join us, Dad?"

Charlie had been silently observing this exchange in the background. He'd been so quiet that the others had almost forgotten he was there. "Yeah, sounds like fun."

Pausing only long enough for Ken to power down the equipment, they headed out of the studio.

## Chapter V

An hour later the quintet were gathered around a small table at Gillys, the bar John and Marty had been at just days ago. A variety of drinks and empty glasses littered their table, unnoticed. Anyone listening would hear boisterous conversation with loud laughter occasionally sprinkled in.

It had been a good day of shooting and they were all heady with success. If everything continued the way it had today, *Raising McCain* would finish on time and under budget. They all knew it, and their mood reflected it.

“Ken, How did you ever let yourself get talked into working with these turkeys?”

Ken Scott smirked at Cliff’s query. “Well, I’d like to say something to defend these guys, but I can’t. I’m here for the money.”

“Thank you very much, Scott,” John said. “You can use that money to buy tonight if you going to dispense insults.”

“Oh-ho. Getting a little touchy, are we?” Ken asked.

“Don’t pay any attention to him. He’s just grouchy cause he’s too chicken to ask Jan out.” Marty replied.

John held up his hands to ward off questions. “Okay. We are not going to sit here tonight and discuss my love life. For one thing; if that’s all we can find to talk about, it’s too pathetic to contemplate.” He sipped a drink. “For another...” he paused.

*THE BAD GUY*

“For another is that you just don’t want us to rib you,” Charlie finished for him. “You big baby.”

“YOU are here as my guest. Keep it up and I’ll ban you from the set from now on.” John said.

“Oh no you won’t,” Marty shot back. “I’ll get him back in here just to pick up the slack in case I get too busy.”

“Great,” John sighed. “Cliff, can’t you cut his paycheck or something?”

“Don’t drag me into this,” Cliff retorted. “I got enough woman problems thanks to our lovely Miss Barnhardt.”

The five of them sat in the bar where just days ago Marty and John had discussed what had now become known on the set as ‘The Suckhead Incident’. Instead of the bar however, they sat at a cozy round table surrounded by baseball photographs and memorabilia on the two walls adjacent to the booth. John noticed that Marty had managed to pick a seat where he could still keep the collage behind the bar within his field of vision, further reinforcing John’s theory of Marty-therapy. Obviously the unexpected arrival of Elisa still preyed in the back of his mind.

“Well we are not going to let that mess with our night,” Marty said.

“Right,” Cliff agreed. “I’m sure there are loads of other problems we can bring up to do that.”

“Lewis,” Duncan and Ken spoke at the same time.

“Funny,” Cliff said. He turned towards Marty and jerked a thumb towards Ken and John. “Do they do any other tricks?”

“Pipe down you two,” Marty said instead of replying. “The real problem will be the Space Needle shoot. Or at least it could be.”

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m looking forward to it,” John said.

“Don’t get too excited,” Marty said. “This is one of the most elaborate shoots I’ve ever done.”

Cliff nodded in agreement. “Not to mention expensive. How does it look?”

“Impressive,” Ken answered. “I know in my mind the set is actually about three-fourths the size of the real Space Needle, but when I see it my mouth drops open.”

Charlie leaned forward with interest. “You guys replicated the entire Space Needle?”

“No, no,” Marty replied. “You have to understand Charlie, we only make what the camera sees.”

“It’s only the top part, Dad. The area Lewis and I will be running around and shooting each other on,” Duncan said, taking a swig of his beer.

“Right,” Marty continued, “But it’s still impressive. The entire thing hangs from the top of the warehouse we’re using. The bottom is on a giant hinge contraption. Carson and the special effects guys could explain the whole thing better. Basically the thing can tip on its side. We tip it up and back as much as we want.”

“Until the last take,” Ken chimed in.

“I don’t understand,” Charlie said shaking his head.

“C’mon Dad, I know you’ve read the book,” John prodded, “What happens to the Space Needle in the *Raising McCain*?”

Charlie smacked his face with excitement. “Of course! The helicopter bomb!”

“Give the man a cigar,” John smiled.

The twist in *Raising McCain* was that while it was obvious that the Space Needle was going to be blown up, it was the method by which Hume would do it that was in doubt. It was assumed it was planted on the monument. McCain and the police went nuts trying to find it in all the hidden nooks and crannies. In fact, Hume had planned to have a helicopter drop a large bomb on it. McCain interfered, causing the helicopter to crash into the Space Needle’s supports, exploding on contact.

McCain fans had coined a new term from this incident in the book: The Helicopter Bomb. Any fan could speak this phrase and instantly all other fans would know exactly what they were talking about.

“The helicopter comes underneath. We’ll put that in using models and CGI. Uh, that’s computer generated images,” John added, not sure if Charlie was familiar with acronym. Charlie nodded in understanding, gesturing to John to continue. “The set itself will list on its side. If you remember, it kept tipping as McCain frantically tried to get the tourists off.”

“Which he did, but just at the last minute WHOOSH!” Charlie finished. “Down she went, just after the last hostage escapes.” He paused. “Can you capture that properly?”

“It may look odd during filming, but once it’s all put together, it will be spectacular,” Ken said. “Carson will have explosion effects and such to simulate the helicopter exploding against the supports.”

Charlie nodded, smiling. He then looked at Ken quizzically. “What did you mean, except for the last scene?”

“We can move the thing up and down all we want. But for the last scene, we will drop it hard,” Ken replied, smacking the table for emphasis. “Wreck it beyond any repair. So we only have one chance to get it right.”

“Sounds risky,” Charlie said.

“It is. But Ken’s been looking for an excuse to destroy a priceless American monument for years,” John interrupted before Ken could answer.

“To photograph it, anyway,” Ken said. “We’ll have plenty of time to get everything shot before we destroy it. We’ll rehearse through the final scene several times before we actually do it.”

“How in the heck do you rehearse a falling building?” Charlie wondered.

“Obviously we don’t crash the building. But we do run through the timings. We’ll have people pretend to hit their buttons at pre-appointed times. It’s almost like a choreographer running his dancers through their steps. Everything has to hit at just the right time.” Ken smiled. “Most of the time, we use miniatures for that kind of thing. This will look far more authentic, since it’s the actual set being destroyed.”

“Wow,” Charlie said.

Duncan leaned forward. “The crash scene will be pretty cool, but for my money, it’s the filming itself that is impressive. They’ve strung cables from one wall to another. The cameras will be mounted on special cars that hang from the cables. The cars can roll back and forth from one side to another. It’s like a fast moving, horizontal ski-lift.”

“Right,” Marty joined in. “The angles will be sweeping and revolving. Really adds to the drama. We’ve also surrounded the entire set with green screen. We can superimpose this shoot on any background we want.”

“Which in this case will be the Seattle skyline, as seen from the top of the Space Needle. We photographed it and fed it into the computer. We can rotate it, change the lighting, do whatever we need, and it will look absolutely authentic,” Ken added.

“I thought they used a blue screen. How does that work anyhow?” Charlie asked.

“It really doesn’t matter what color you use, as long as it’s static. The color you pick is a color that doesn’t really exist in the foreground. Since we will have some blue on the helicopter, we needed a different color,” Ken answered.

Charlie took a sip of his drink. “So green is what gets replaced by the background image?”

“Right. If anything in the foreground has the same color, it will also get replaced with the background. We couldn’t have Seattle appearing in a large stripe on the helicopter. So we used green instead,” Ken confirmed. He leaned back sadly. “It’s a shame it will all be destroyed.”

“Will it be any different than the way the novel portrays it?” Charlie asked.

“Not a chance,” Cliff replied. “Elisa would mount Marty’s privates to a wall.”

John snickered. Marty looked indignant. “Well there are a few laws of physics we’ll have to obey, if that’s okay with her.”

“But other than that,” Cliff continued; “it will be pretty close to the original novel.”



*THE BAD GUY*

“Ah, enough shop talk!” Marty said with a final swig of his beer. “There’s a pool table over there with no one playing. This cannot be permitted to continue.” He stood up. “Who needs to be spanked?”

Charlie took one last sip of his wine and stood up. “Okay, but you could at least buy me dinner first.” Together he and Marty headed towards the pool table.

John waited a moment until Marty was out of earshot. “All right, Cliff, give us the scoop.”

“Yeah, Elisa’s here and Marty’s grown a new vein on his forehead,” Ken added. “How bad is this going to be?”

“You know Marty, he’s a professional. He’ll deal and get the job done.”

“Yeah but Elisa’s a...” John paused.

“Domineering bitch?” Ken chimed in.

“Ken,” Cliff scowled and pointed at the man. “Not helping.”

“Ken’s right,” John said, “He may be blunt when he drinks...”

“Hey, I’m blunt sober too,” the cameraman interrupted

“BUT,” John continued, ignoring him, “he’s still right. Elisa will complain about something after every single take. We don’t have the time or the budget to argue that much. Marty may be a bit controlling too, but he’s also the director. Kinda in the job description.”

Cliff leaned back and crossed his arms. “Don’t talk to me about the budget, John. It’s all producers ever think about. Kinda in MY job description.” He took a drink and grimaced. “Elisa will stay in check. We had quite the heart to heart.”

“You sound very sure of that,” John said sarcastically.

Ken smirked. “Yeah. The day Elisa keeps her mouth shut is the day I eat film.”

“Good thing we went digital then, huh?” John shot back.

Ken’s smirk grew into a full grin. “Miracles have been known to happen. I like to cover my bases.”

Cliff wasn’t smiling. “Joke all you want you guys. But we gotta get a movie finished. Production has just begun, with a ton of postproduction and marketing to go. Not to mention the security concerns. I’m sure you both have seen the Internet stories.”

John did his best innocent look at Ken. “What’s an Internet?”

Ken returned the look. “Something to do with fishing, I think.”

Cliff looked at them both deadpan. “Are you two finished?”

Ken feigned a hurt a look. “You said we could joke all we want.”

“Yeah,” John added. “There is liquor here, after all. It tends to increase the desire for humor.”

Ken watched a pretty waitress walk by. “It increases desire, but not for humor.” He held up John’s glass. “What the hell are you drinking?”

Cliff – pleased to not be on the receiving end for once – decided to chime in. “Now we already know all about John’s social desire.”

John surrendered. “Okay, let’s not open up that can of worms again. What about the Internet, Cliff?”

“I think we got a leak. Stories keep coming out onto *mccaindiaries.com*. And they’re usually accurate.”

Duncan grimaced. “You know that explains a lot. I was surprised how quick my casting got on there.”

“Exactly John,” Cliff snapped his fingers. “Whoever it is has been doing it awhile, probably before most of the current crew came on board.”

Ken looked back and forth between them. “So what’s the big deal?”

“Bad publicity,” Cliff replied.

“Aw hell,” Ken replied. “We’re basing this movie on a best-selling novel. One, I might add, that we are not deviating from in any meaningful way.”

“There are plenty in the movie going public that have never read the book.” Cliff picked up his glass, took a sip, and continued to hold it while gesturing. “Take Jurassic Park. It was an amazing bestseller that became an even bigger movie. People that never read the book saw the trailers and wanted to see dinosaurs eat people. This is kind of the same deal.”

“Once these rumors get any credence on the Internet,” Duncan added, “it doesn’t take long for them to appear on *Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*, or *E! Entertainment*. Before long,

the speculation begins on the quality of the movie, and most of the time its negative.”

Ken nodded. “So even if the movie’s good, it might not be able to overcome its negative hype. I see what you mean.”

“I’ve been on a movie like that before, Ken.” John added. “Once the bad publicity got out, every critic was ready to pan it before they’d even seen it. Some were fair, some weren’t. I remember during a screening I attended, I noticed one critic writing smart-ass headlines before the lights had even gone down.”

Cliff looked down. “Cerner has a lot invested in this: new technologies, enormous sets, and high priced talent. We have a responsibility to all that.” He trailed off.

John contemplated that. Cerner was generally doing well because they let their people create. Lewis’s contract notwithstanding, they never interfered in the process, believing that the most profitable movies are ones that were made for the sake of the writer’s vision. It was one of the reasons Elisa Barnhardt had picked Cerner; she knew they would cooperate with her on keeping the integrity of her father’s stories intact. *At least she used to know that*, John thought.

More important for John personally lay in the fact that if he indeed wanted to direct, Cerner would be the only big-budget studio willing to take a chance on a first time director. Not to mention their indebtedness to him for the many profitable movies he’d helped them make.

He gazed into his glass. “I’ll poke around on the Internet and see if I can find out anything for you, Cliff.”

“Yeah, and I’ll keep an eye out on the crew,” Scott added. “See if anyone has heard or seen anything.”

“Should we tighten security?” Duncan wondered.

“If it’s from the inside, what good would it do? We don’t know who it is, and our people still need to get on the set to work. We can’t bar everyone.” Cliff leaned forward. “John, *Raising McCain* has to do well. This is all or nothing. Either Cerner gets its blockbuster and we get to continue to make movies the way we want to or...”

“Or it goes under and we have to take our chances like everyone else. Yeah, Cliff I hear you.”

Cliff nodded. Duncan looked over at Marty, still playing pool with his father. “Have you told any of this to Marty?”

“I think Marty has enough stress with Barnhardt coming to town. Besides, he knows the score.”

They fell silent, each thinking of the potential problems that lay ahead in the coming days. Finally Ken took a long swig of his beer and said, “So. It seems to me all we have to do make a phenomenal blockbuster.”

Cliff grinned. “Right. Though a box office record-breaker is optional.”

Though the mood was dampened a bit, the excitement of a shoot well done overtook the worries of the future. They continued on into the night, joking, drinking and laughing.

## Chapter VI

The next day was a rest day, the last one the crew would have for a few weeks. The final scene would be filmed over that time, even though most of the rest of the movie needed to be done. John attempted to sleep in after a heavy night of enjoyment but Rufus made this impossible. About 8:30 a.m. the large dog's panting breath awakened him. Sighing, he got up, raised the shield on the dog door, and let the dog out.

He set up a pot of coffee and began planning what he should do for the day. There were errands he could run in town. He could go into the studio to make sure things were in order for shooting tomorrow. There were always a million things that could be done or needed tending to.

He decided to stay in and relax for the day.

His days were generally quite busy even in between projects, so he treasured days he could relax without anything pressing to do. He had long ago realized that the most precious thing in the world was time. He made it a point to enjoy himself once in a while. So every so often he would take a day and do nothing, at least, nothing constructive.

He started by watching a couple of his favorite movies. Later on he went out and tossed a ball with Rufus, an activity the dog enjoyed immensely. It also tired out the big Shepherd enough to give Duncan a few moments of peace to take a nap himself.

Inevitably Duncan could not let the day end without trying to get something accomplished. That evening he sat down at his computer to check Internet rumors on *Raising McCain*. Clicking it on, he sat back waiting for it to boot. He preferred to keep the lights out when he used his PC and sat bathed only in the soft blue glow of the screen. Rufus, never wanting to be alone, padded in and plopped down next to the desk. He emitted a large sigh and was generally silent the rest of night. John reached down and scratched him on the head.

The computer beeped and little pictures appeared on the screen. He moved the mouse and double-clicked the button. The PC whirred in response. He waited patiently. His computer was slowing up a bit lately, maybe he might upgrade after he gets this movie done. The screen flashed, and finally the web browser appeared.

He clicked in the address box. He supposed the first place to go would be the biggest rumor page. He began typing: *http://www.mccaindiaries.com*. The tapping keys broke the quiet of the room. Rufus raised his head blearily to the sounds briefly and went back to sleep. John ignored him as he watched the screen fill with data.

Websites lived and died by visitors. Some even kept a counter visible on the first page, incrementing its total every time someone visited the site. Sites got money from advertising. Some would require a subscription, other sites were set up to sell goods and services; but most relied strictly on advertising dollars. Large banners appeared at the top and bottom of the page selling all manner of goods and services. Some ads even advertised other sites. Every time a site was visited, a new commercial would appear and click up a counter. This counter kept track of how many times a site was visited. Often web advertising paid sites by the click. A website with a lot of visitors could charge a premium for advertising dollars and *mccaindiaries.com* was such a site.

Running a subject/news-based site could get very competitive. The number of sites based on the *Star Wars* movies topped out at

just over a thousand. The McCain novels did not have that many, but there were at least a few hundred.

Many of them were poorly organized and rarely updated. These were usually started by a teenager or college student for fun, but later didn't realize the work involved to keep them current. Others were updated regularly but their information was older or already widely available. Then there were the few sites that always seemed to get the inside scoop, that little tidbit of information ahead of the major press releases. It was to one of these that Duncan went now.

The page loaded its graphics. John had always been impressed with the layout of this page. There weren't a lot of flashy pictures or animations, just a nice collage across the top from various magazines and press pictures. Down the left side was a neat list of links one could click and be sent to different categories. Upcoming movie news, upcoming book news, book reviews, user discussion area, 'other sites' list, multimedia; the list went on and on. The main body of the page contained the latest news regarding the status of anything and everything to do with McCain, and more specifically, the new movie: *Raising McCain*.

This area consisted of dated headlines, with the most recent being at the top. As usual the top few headline were dated today, and some looked only hours old. The first one read: '*The first of **The McCain Diaries** movies has begun principle photography...*' Nothing earthshaking there, this had been known for quite a while. The second headline read '*Digital Cameras and McCain, good idea?*' This one intrigued him. He clicked the headline.

A little globe in the upper right hand corner of the screen started spinning, letting him know the page was loading. The window went blank for a moment, then like paint running uniformly from top to bottom, the picture began to redraw. Again the collage filled across the top and the links on the side, but the body filled with some paragraphs of text. The globe ceased spinning, telling Duncan the page had finished; but he took no notice of it having already begun reading the story.

*Digital Cameras and McCain, good idea?*

*Apparently, as the first day of shooting wrapped up today. Star Wars may have pioneered the use of this expensive new technology, but Raising McCain may perfect it. Unlike other studios, Cerner bought several cameras outright rather than renting them from Panavision and other manufacturers. We do know this: Although technically this is the second day of shooting, Cerner – in an effort to stay on schedule – started the production with traditional cams. That day of shooting has now been scrapped in favor of starting fresh now that the new equipment has arrived at your and my favorite studio. Just as well, thanks to Mark Lewis's outbursts that first day.*

John arched an eyebrow. Apparently they knew all about the 'Suckhead Incident,' even from a closed set. He scrolled the window down to reveal more of the story.

*Of course that didn't stop Lewis from making another small blunder today. What it was exactly, we don't know. However our sources reveal that the new technology did its duty today by making it very easy to find and fix. So apparently these cameras have helped save time already. Maybe we can get Raising McCain out in an earlier Christmas release, Mon Capitan McGregor?*

For some reason, most movie themed sites had nicknames for directors. George Lucas was known as 'The Flannelled One' for his choice of casual wear. Steven Spielberg was known as the 'The Great One' and Marty had been dubbed 'Mon Capitan McGregor'; mostly, Duncan believed, because Marty was very controlling on set. He and he alone decided every place an actor stood, every costume, every explosion placement, everything.

None of this ran through Duncan's mind at the moment due to shock about what he was reading. Someone was feeding information to this site, or perhaps another that *mccaindiaries.com* picked up on. It didn't matter. What did matter is that someone on the crew was supplying information, and it had to stop.

John looked at the clock: 11:00 p.m. It was a little late to call Cliff or Marty. Filming was to begin early and they would already be



asleep in anticipation of an early start. Besides, there wasn't much they could do anyway between now and the morning.

Duncan leaned back in his chair and sighed. Rufus glanced up at him, in case this was a sign of possible food dispensation. Seeing none, he laid his head back down and closed his eyes.

John smiled at the large canine. "That's a good idea," he mused out loud. He reached for the mouse and clicked 'Print'. The printer came to life with a quiet whirring. A moment later a replica of the article was printed on a couple of pages. Duncan closed the browser, shut the PC off, and shuffled off to bed.

A moment later Rufus, suddenly aware he was alone in the room, bounded into John's bedroom. A large *thump!* followed by John's tired bellow drifted out of the bedroom.

"RUUUFUUUS!"

\* \* \*

"This is from yesterday?" Cliff was pursing his lips and frowning as he re-read the pages Duncan had brought into him.

John nodded. "The story's dated yesterday. I was pretty surprised to see that kind of detail."

Cliff lowered the pages and looked at John. "We have a mole."

John nodded again and grimaced. "Looks that way. Has to be someone who works on the production."

"Oh, well shit. That narrows it down. How many people do we have on set at any one time? You've seen how long credit lists are getting. The ends of movies read like phone books." Cliff crumpled the paper in frustration and tossed it into the wastebasket.

"Well..." John started, and stopped futilely trying to come up with a solution.

"What?" Cliff said angrily. "It'll be okay? Not if this continues. Rumors are bad enough, but the entire script could be broadcast."

"I don't think *mccaindiaries.com* would do that, they tend to not want to spoil the movies. They do print spoilers, but make it so the reader has to work to find it." John replied.

"If they don't, some other site will. Then it isn't long before things snowball to cable TV like *E!* or *Entertainment Tonight*."

“So what? I still don’t understand the big need for secrecy.” John shrugged. “Half of these blockbusters make their money back in the first weekend, especially something highly anticipated. Look at *Harry Potter*. *Lord of the Rings*. Everyone had read those books a million times and they still made 300 million each.”

“John, they’re still expensive to make. If you take inflation into account, *Gone with the Wind* made over one billion dollars. Do you know how many repeat viewings you need for that?” Cliff sighed. “But repeat viewings of that kind are a thing of the past in this day and age. The VCR, DVD, and now the Internet are killing that. People are downloading pirated copies and watching them all they want at home. The only way a movie makes money anymore is to have a big opening. Advance publicity is the thing that can get a film a big weekend or destroy it.”

“DVD sales help later on though, right?” John asked.

“Sure, but a bad performance at the box office can really affect that.” Cliff looked at Duncan intently. “We got to find this guy.”

John threw up his hands helplessly. “How?”

Cliff had no answer. Anyone who worked for the production had signed a non-disclosure agreement. If the threat of legal action didn’t dissuade this person, he wasn’t sure what would. He wrinkled his brow for a moment. “Maybe we are going about this the wrong way.”

John knew that look. “Your gears are turning.”

“We have an official website – well Cerner does – but we don’t really put a lot of information on it, at least nothing substantial regarding the filming. Maybe we can work out a deal with this *mccaindiaries.com*.” Cliff began typing in his computer on his desk.

“Are you talking about selling info?” John asked incredulously.

Cliff shook his head. “More of a trade. They stop printing from this unauthorized source and in return, we will give them an occasional exclusive.” He clicked the mouse and the official website popped on to the screen.

“They already got an exclusive,” John pointed out. “The mole. Certainly they get all the information they could want from him.”

“True, but there is a lot more credibility to authorized exclusives. Even if they say their source is ‘trusted’, his stories are still perceived as rumor. It would get them a lot of publicity if we gave them more story tidbits on an official basis.” He turned the screen around to face John. “Look at this thing. This is our website and it’s got nothing. We could use the help.” He snapped his fingers. “Sure, think about it. If they get a few good stories from us, a little video footage from the set, and maybe an interview from you, they’ll have the major news outlets beating down their firewall. And we’ll get a website people will want to visit, without the costs of running it.”

John studied the screen. The site was simple, with very few places to go. It looked as if there wasn’t a tenth of the information that *mccaindiaries.com* had. “That’s good, but what’s to stop our spy from just blabbing to another site?”

Cliff brow crinkled again. “*mccaindiaries.com* is the biggest site, isn’t it? The most informative of all the ‘McCain’ sites?”

“Yeah. They’re part of a rather large conglomerate called *iff.com*,” he answered.

“*iff.com*?” Cliff repeated quizzically.

John turned his attention from the screen to Cliff. “Internet Film Fans. They’re like a new kind of magazine. They have tons of sites, some devoted exclusively to one film and its sequels, others are devoted to genres, and others are more general.”

“Sounds well funded.” Cliff arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah.” John answered. “They get revenue from subscriptions and advertising.” He gave Cliff a wry look. “You think they’re paying the snitch.”

“Maybe. I would think he’s not snitching for kicks. They can continue to pay him. We’ll reimburse them. If the rumor isn’t too devastating, they can use it.” He pointed a finger for emphasis. “But nothing gets out we don’t authorize.”

“But if what he gives is really juicy...” John started.

“Not a problem,” Cliff interrupted, “having the ‘in’ on the set is worth a lot more to them. Think about it, we let them in once or twice for exclusive on the set interviews, you think they’d risk that

kind of clout for a few unsubstantiated rumors? Even if they are accurate?”

John smiled. “Not bad Cliff. Not bad at all. They’ll definitely go nuts when you contact them.” He paused. “I got to get back to work. You know we have to tell Marty about the snitch.”

“Leave that to me.”

John held his hands up. “No problem.”

Cliff grinned. “What, you’re not even going to offer to get that monkey off my back?”

John cocked his head to one side. “Sorry Cliff, union rules and all. Nothing I can do.”

Cliff’s grinned wider and shook his head. “Go on, go make my movie.” He turned and picked up the phone on the desk.

John flashed another smile and walked out to the set. He wondered, as he left Cliff’s office, what they would do if *iff.com* wasn’t paying the snitch.

## Chapter VII

John stopped to take it all in.

He had seen it before but still couldn't help being a little awed at the sight. The room was immense. The roof was over ten stories high but there were no walls or supports in the middle. The building started out as nothing more than a large empty warehouse, but now it had been transformed into a bustling hive of activity. What the activity was centered around was what Duncan was marveling at: the replica of Seattle's Space Needle.

The center of the floor was covered with the large cylindrical structure. The top part of the structure had a smaller disk, about 100 feet across. Underneath that disk was a cylinder supporting it, which in turn sat on a much larger cylinder that tapered slightly from top to bottom. A tall spire poked out from the top; however, the spire looked wrong, as if it had been broken off halfway up. *No, not broken*, he amended to himself, *sawed off*. The bottom of the structure also had an unfinished look to it, with whole sections missing from the sides. People could be seen passing through these areas. These areas granted access for people to set up pyrotechnics, check mechanical parts, and touch up anything that would be seen on screen.

John had stepped out of the upper office area on to a gantry, which led straight to the set. It was built to connect the upper level offices to the set without having to climb up and down the stairs.

The bridge was twenty feet above the floor and narrow. It was a bit disconcerting. At the end of the bridge was a wider platform, with another bridge that could be (and was) extended to the set or take a set of steps to the main floor. Rather than continue to the set, he started down the steps. He kept his eye on the set on the way down. As he descended, he examined the underside of the “Space Needle”. It sat on a large post, with several support girders forming an upside-down pyramid. Underneath he could see the machinery that made the set shake and tilt.

Duncan whistled in appreciation as he reached the bottom. The set was more impressive each time he saw it. He started towards the main meeting area. This is where everyone generally came together to start planning out the shots. The time spent on this set would be about two weeks, even though the actual screen time would be less than twenty minutes. Every day had to be planned out properly and fit in with each previous day’s shooting.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and started to the set. He had not taken ten steps when a loud *whizz* sound from above startled him. He recoiled in surprise.

He looked up and saw Ken Scott beaming down at him. “Gotcha!”

“You sure did!” he replied and meant it. There, maybe twenty-five feet above him, was Ken strapped to a chair mounted to a car. The car hung from four pulley-like wheels that rode two thick cables mounted on two adjacent walls. The cables were mounted on movable scaffolds on the other ends, allowing them to easily change the distance from the set, or the elevation, not to mention bringing them back to the gantries where the operators could disembark.

Currently the cables were on all four sides of the set. If viewed from the top, the cables would appear to form a diamond surrounding the faux Space Needle, but were actually at various elevations, giving different angles of the scene. Each pair of cables had similar cars hanging from them, whizzing back and forth. The cars’ occupants sat strapped in their chairs bolted just behind the cameras. Each cam pointed at the set. Ken’s pointed up, being one of the lower cars. It also kept him within shouting distance of Marty, making it

easier to relay instructions via radio to his crew. Marty didn't use the radio, preferring the megaphone instead.

Ken spun the chair to put his back to the camera. He scooted forward in his chair causing the car to bounce on the cable a bit.

"Careful there!" Duncan said loudly, alarmed that the car might tip.

"Oh don't worry." Ken shifted a bit and the car ceased its jostling. "It'd take a lot for this baby to come off the cable. What are you, afraid of heights?"

"Only if I got up there with you in a shaky cable car." John peered up at him and over at the Space Needle set. "You're not above the set though," he observed. "What, about fifteen feet below it?"

"Yeah, I'm getting the shots directly below you hanging from that helicopter." Ken grinned again. "I gotta tell you though, it's a blast to whiz this thing back and forth." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "But don't tell Marty. He thinks I'm working and miserable."

Duncan looked at him askance. "Uh-huh. How many times have you whizzed back and forth in this thing for no discernable reason?"

Ken lowered his head, subdued. "Um... six. No wait... Eight."

"Yeah," John smirked, "I think your secret's already shot."

Ken lowered his head even further in mock shame. "Ah well. If that's the case, then..." he nonchalantly clicked a button and whizzed off towards the far side.

Duncan watched him go, shaking his head. Ken was knee-deep in gadgets and couldn't be happier.

He started over to the set when he saw another large man staring up at the Needle directly in his path. "Check hydraulic two," he muttered in a radio. He half turned around to see Duncan approaching him. "Mr. Duncan! Hello. What do you think of my beauty here?"

"You built this thing?" John asked. He searched his memory but could not come up with the man's name. He felt a little embarrassed by that fact, as he had worked with the man on several occasions during pre-production.

The other man's radio blared, rescuing John. "Carson! Everything's a check."

“Excuse me, Mr. Duncan,” Carson said and clicked the button on the walkie-talkie. “Good. Then let’s shut her down. We don’t need to do any tilting today anyhow. Run the checklist.” He put the radio away and turned back to John. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“Nothing important, Carson,” John replied, vowing to try to remember his name next time. “Just that it looks fantastic. Except...”

Carson looked wounded, his worry showing clearly through his bushy black beard. “What, what’s wrong?”

“Well, the spire on top,” John pointed, “Isn’t it supposed to be taller?”

“Sure is. But we can’t have it in this close quarters, big as this building is.” Carson pointed at the gantry John just came down from moments ago. “If we had it on there full size, we couldn’t tilt it without smacking the gantry and the offices beyond it. The CG guys will just add the rest of it in post production with their computers.”

“Hey, Bad guy!” John winced at Lewis’s harsh call.

“Looks great, Carson. Listen I got to get to the meeting area.” Carson, seeing Lewis, nodded sympathetically. He turned as Lewis caught up with him.

Carson watched the two head towards Marty. “God that guy is a pain in the ass,” he muttered. “Don’t know why Mr. Duncan is so nice to him.” He picked up his radio and clicked the button. “Okay guys, check the strikers. I’m going to head up to the M.A.”

As Duncan got closer to the M.A., Lewis sneered at him, “You going to do your job today or keep showing off for that old coot of yours?”

Duncan whirled. “Lewis, I’m not the one making up lines and ruining takes.”

“Whatever. What are you, 30? 35? Still wanting daddy’s approval? You got him here like it’s a school play.” Lewis snorted. “Hell, if you look close, you can see Duncan sneaking a little wave at his daddy! Isn’t that cute?”

John rolled his eyes. “Look, he isn’t even coming in today. So just shut it and do your job for once.”

Lewis seemed taken aback. “I do my job just fine.”



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“John! Lewis!” another voice called out from behind the crowd. John leaned to one side to see Marty in the M.A.

The area was crowded as more and more people filtered in to prepare for the day’s work. Marty stood in the center of it all, looking not unlike a coach surrounded by his players. He waved Duncan in close. “C’mere, you two.”

Duncan pierced Lewis with a withering stare. “We’ll talk later. Let’s get over there.”

The crowd parted a bit to let Duncan in. Lewis remained back, glowering. Marty’s face broke into an anxious smile. “Glad you’re here. Where the hell’s Scott?”

Duncan pointed towards the ceiling. “Last time I saw him, he was up joyriding in your cable cams.”

“Well, he better get his crew ready and his butt over here. As much as I hate to resort to clichés: time is money,” McGregor snapped.

Duncan spotted Ken climbing down the ladder from one of the exit platforms built to accommodate entering and exiting the cable cams. “There he is Marty,” he pointed. “You should know better. Ken’s a professional, above all.”

“Yeah, I know. This shoot will be tough though. Let me have my nervous breakdowns.” Soft laughter rippled through the group within earshot.

Ken quickly worked his up to the inner circle. “Okay. Everything’s set.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to test their braking power? Maybe add a AM/FM/CD?” Marty admonished.

“Well if you think we got the time...” Ken quipped.

“We don’t.” Marty snapped. Ken fell dutifully silent. Marty began to turn, looking at everyone assembled when he saw Cliff working his way into the circle. Cliff flipped up a hand to silence the question forming on Marty’s lips. “I’m not here to interrupt or get in the way. Just want to be a part of the first day on this big dog,” he said, pointing up at the set.

Marty nodded and smiled. He turned and held up his hand. Conversations fell silent as he addressed the group. “Okay everyone. As you all know, this is the helicopter bomb shoot. I’m very excited and I know you all are too. I want you all to know something, something guys like Duncan here” – he gestured towards John – “are very much aware of. *The McCain Diaries* are some of the most popular set of crime novels ever published, second only to James Bond.

“The fan base is enormous. They are chomping at the bit for these books to be turned into movies and we get to do it. I want you all to realize how neat a thing that is. We get to create something so many people want to see. We’ve got three weeks on this set, and it’s going to take all of it to film this twenty-minute climax.” He paused for effect. “Let’s get it right.”

With that he began the planning session, the first of many. This session decided where people needed to be, what effects needed to happen and when, camera positions, etc. First he blocked off the first shot, taking the group through the five storyboards he had brought in. Each storyboard was six feet high, eight feet wide, and covered with illustrations. Each picture was arranged carefully in a particular order that showed every character, movement, and camera angle. Some pictures were denoted with a green ‘x’ some with a red one.

Marty addressed the group, occasionally using a pointer for emphasis. He went through most of the days shoot. Things went well until the end of the session.

“Okay, I know many of you have been through all this, some more than once. But some of you are seeing this all for the first time. So we’re keeping these storyboards here as reference. Those with a green ‘x’ will be ones we need to film. The red ‘x’ed ones will be done completely in post, either CGI or models.

“Now, on today’s schedule is the hostage crisis. McCain will go to rescue the hostages and Hume will drop in from the helicopter. We’ll stay with interior shots. Later this week, we’ll do Hume exterior shots, and Lewis’s scaling up the side after being tossed out the window by Hume.”

“You mean the stunt double’s scaling up the side,” Mark piped up.

“No I mean you. The stunt’s inside and you’ve been trained on this wire work, Lewis,” Marty said, rolling his eyes.

“McGregor, I am not a stuntman. I trained for wire-assisted fight scenes,” Lewis said, crossing his arms.

“This will BE a wire-assisted fight scene,” Marty replied, crossing his arms.

Lewis pointed up at the set. “Forty feet above the floor. Forget it.”

“Ken’s team will be filming the stunt guys hanging off the real Space Needle later on this month. It’s not like you’ll have to do that,” Marty said.

“I don’t think we’re asking you too much, Lewis,” Duncan chimed in. “I’ll be there later on when you get to push me off, you know.”

“Don’t think I won’t relish it, Duncan. But I’m still not hanging off the edge of that thing.” Lewis stabbed a finger towards the structure again for emphasis.

Marty stepped in between them and glared at Lewis. “Oh yes, you will. And you’re not going to pull any of that ‘suckhead’ crap either. These stunts are also in your contract,” Marty said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

Lewis argued anyway. “We’ll see about that. I’m going to call my agent. Lawyer, if I have to.” He turned and stalked off.

“Lewis. Lewis!” Cliff called after him. He followed Lewis off the set.

The group watched Lewis and Cliff go and turned as one to look at Marty expectantly. Marty took a moment to realize the crew was staring. He looked back and forth at them. “What?! Get to work, we got a shoot to do!”

They began filing away. Marty began rubbing his temples. “Dammit.”

“What do you think, Marty, anything we can do without him?” Duncan asked.

“Yeah. Plenty, but it slows things down. Rescheduling is a bitch. I’ll have better luck if I sic Cliff on him.” Marty glanced up at Duncan with a smile. “Guess the good news is that you’re off the hook. Now that he’s back, Cliff can deal with Lewis’s tantrums.”

“But Lewis and I have such a close relationship,” Duncan said.

“Yeah right.” Marty was in no mood to banter. “I swear this thing will never get off the ground.”

“Ah, sure it will.” Duncan stared up absently at the set. “It’s Lewis that won’t get up off the ground.”

“Humph,” Marty sighed. “All right, get to make-up. You know what needs to be done today. Don’t worry about Lewis. He’ll be here. Cliff will make sure of that. Just continue on as planned. We don’t have this building forever.”

“That’s right, that new Shogun movie is building a palace in here, isn’t it?” Duncan snapped his fingers.

“Yup. Most of the props are on the far side.” Marty smiled at him. “You should check out the swords.”

“I just might,” he replied as began to head back towards the stairwell. “See you in a bit.”

Next to the stairs was a double-doorway. He stepped through and headed down a hallway. He turned and opened the second door. Jan was in there working on one of the ‘hostages’. He was reclined in a barber style chair, covered with a sheet up to his neck. Jan stood over him applying a small bruise to his forehead. She worked meticulously, carefully blending the faux contusion with his actual flesh. John stepped up and inspected her work. “Very nice. But wouldn’t it be faster just to bash him a shovel?”

The man’s eyes widened a bit. Whether at John’s suggestion or because Jan seemed to consider it, Duncan wasn’t sure. “Relax,” she told him. “I only reserve face-bashing for John.” She looked up at Duncan. “Especially when he comes in making goofy suggestions.”

“Hey, it just seemed like a time-saver.”

She turned back to her subject. “I don’t know why you’re worried about me.” She glanced over at John. “According to the script, he’s the one that gave you this,” she smiled.

“But he buys beer later,” the man replied. “You just rip ‘em off like a band-aid. There are places I used to have hair.”

Jan finished up the last of the blending. “There. Good as bruised.” She ripped away the sheet covering the man and gestured at Duncan in the manner of a barber on a schedule. “Next.”

The man got up from the chair gingerly. “Man, my legs fell asleep.”

“How long were you in the chair, Dave?” Duncan asked as he sat.

“Only about a half-hour. But you know how it is, you can’t shift around much.”

Duncan nodded knowingly. He had been in a make-up chair several times during his career and knew the importance of holding still. The worst had been the time he did the *Star Trek* episode. He had to sit for over three hours as the alien prosthetic was applied and make-up blended into it. They covered his hands, face, neck, and part of his chest. He remembered having a kink in his neck for a week after. Luckily he was only needed for one day’s worth of shooting, so he only had to do it once. He still winced at the memory.

He settled back into the chair. Jan began applying the make-up. Since this was the beginning of the scene, no bruises or cuts would be needed, save for the burn scar from the mall scene. Otherwise only standard photogenic make-up would be applied. Jan and her team were among the best in Hollywood. She could add anything to a face and make it seem absolutely authentic. She had originally worked under Steve Wilson, the premier make-up and creature effects man in the industry. He had done some of the most recognizable creatures in movies. Jan learned well under him and had caught Cerner’s eye. Before long she was heading up her own top-notch make-up crew. Her team had other chairs in the room with many extras and actors seated in them.

She was alone before John and Lewis shot the mall scene. Since it was just the two actors, she didn’t need much help. But today her

crew was present and worked diligently on all the actors and stuntmen that would be on camera. John relaxed and let Jan do her job.

“Mr. Duncan.”

John sat up at the unexpected voice. Unfortunately this resulted in an ugly streak across his face from the make-up Jan was applying at that moment. Duncan ignored her annoyed look, instead addressing the newcomer that had stepped in.

“Miss Barnhardt. Nice to see you here at our little production.”

Elisa smiled without humor. “Little production? Have you seen the size of that thing out there?”

“Marty’s a stickler for realism,” Duncan answered. Jan pulled him firmly by the shoulder, forcing him back down into the chair. Elisa stepped closer so that he could still see her while Jan began undoing the damage.

“Is he?” Elisa stepped over to the cart and began inspecting items. She picked up an odd shaped tool and began fingering it absently. “It seems all I see is a lot of flash and commotion. I see expensive digital cameras mounted on amusement park rides. I see prima donnas with the ability to change dialogue and walk out. What I don’t see is anyone making sure this movie remains true to my father’s vision. I don’t see the dedication to the integrity of the story.”

Duncan sighed. “Look, Miss Barnhardt, I am as big a fan of your father’s work as anyone. There is a sizable fan base out there constantly scrutinizing what we do. That adds up to a lot of pressure to get it right.”

Elisa looked at him a moment. She tossed the tool haphazardly back onto the cart, much to Jan’s annoyance. “So Clifford told me. Everyone seems to be bending over backwards to convince me of it. It makes me suspicious.”

“Look, movie making isn’t like writing a novel. I know you watched your father work, but translating to screen doesn’t have the same intensity. At least not all the time.” Duncan fixed her with a penetrating gaze; however, she turned and moved out of his field of view, ruining the intensity of it. She paused at the doorway. “It will be great when it’s finished. You’ll see.”

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“It had better, or else I’ll make sure that Cerner will never make another McCain film.” With that she turned and left.

Jan watched her go. “Is she serious?”

“I don’t know. Probably.” John sighed and leaned back in his chair.

Jan set back to work. “I heard Lewis has a case of cold feet. That can’t be helping.”

“Doesn’t matter what his feet are since he doesn’t have a leg to stand on. His contract says he has to do those stunts. I don’t know what his problem is; it’s not that big of a deal. Personally I’m looking forward to it,” John said.

She finished up the last of the make-up. John rose out of the chair, make-up bib still on his collar. He peered at his new scars in the mirror.

“Good luck today.”

He handed her back the mirror, scrutinizing her face. She looked at him sincerely with no trace of the smart-alec look she usually fixed him with. He decided to reply in kind. “Thanks.”

She smiled. “Hey, where’s that father of yours? When the shoot starts I don’t get to do much unless you guys sweat and smudge something. I enjoyed talking with him the other day at the show.”

“He had a show. Trying to sell some more collectables. He should be by tomorrow.” John smiled absently and glanced at her. “Been a little tough for him this year, but I’m sure it will work out.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“You know Dad used to pull scams a long time ago. Some think he might again, if times get too tough for him, but I don’t think he will.”

“Your father loves you very much. I think he enjoys being part of your life finally. I don’t think he wants to screw it up.” Jan crossed her arms and looked pointedly at John.

“I know. But just in case, I told the prop guys to watch him when he’s here. He might try to pilfer something innocuous. Probably not to sell, but to attract attention at his booth.”

“You worry too much. He’s a sweet old coot. Be nice.” Jan admonished.

John threw up his arms in surrender. “Okay, okay.” He checked his watch. “They’re waiting. I’d better...”

“Go on. I’ll talk with you later.” Jan watched him go and continued staring at the door where he had been. One of her crew-persons finally nudged her. “You awake? We still got customers.”

She blinked. “Right. Send the next one in.” She went back to work, her thoughts still with Duncan, Marty and the job ahead of them.

Elisa showing up would definitely complicate things. She hadn’t heard that the author’s contentious daughter would be showing up, but knew it would cause sparks with Marty. Between her arrival and Lewis’s tantrums, she secretly wondered how long it would be before Marty lost it. She was glad Duncan was there to keep him sane.

\* \* \*

Duncan arrived back at the set to see Marty and Elisa in an animated discussion. John sighed. This few weeks of shooting just got a lot longer, he realized. Elisa’s voice was subdued but firm. Marty’s on the other hand was just about to reach a crescendo.

“You can’t expect things to go perfect when your star walks out! What the hell do you want me to do?” he hollered.

“McGregor, you don’t get it. I don’t care if Mark Lewis needs a banana shaved every morning as part of a weird ritual as long as he does what he’s supposed to do on screen. Does he?”

*Banana shaving?* Duncan thought. *That’s a bit peculiar.*

“Of course he does. Everyone here does. I’ll show you the mall scene if you want.”

“Ah yes. The ‘Suckhead’ incident,” she replied coolly.

Duncan winced.

“Now you know that’s not a problem. Lewis decided he would play ball.” Marty said.

Elisa arched an eyebrow. “And where is Mr. Lewis now?”



Marty opened his mouth to speak and shut it in frustration. She had a point Duncan had to admit. Elisa continued. "I'm fully aware of Mr. Lewis's eccentricities. But it's not his I'm worried about. He can tantrum about all he wants as long as the project's integrity remains."

"Meaning I'm the wild card in your eyes," Marty scowled. "Elisa, what is it with you? Your father and I were friends. I loved his stories. I'm trying to make something here that will bring those stories to life. Why would I want to compromise that?"

Elisa stared at Marty for a moment. "You tell me."

Marty blinked, mystified. Elisa continued. "I will not be content until I see the finished product. Until then, I will be keeping tabs on this project from beginning to end. My father's vision will remain true to the fans he loved."

With that she turned and walked to the stairway.

"McGregor! Are we going to do this thing or what?"

John whirled, startled but Marty simply squeezed his eyes closed in frustration at the new voice. "We were ready an hour ago!" He turned angrily at Mark Lewis, who stood placidly with his arms crossed, make-up freshly applied.

"Okay, okay. Keep your panties on," Lewis smirked. "I just needed my coffee." He turned and headed up the scaffolding to his place on the set.

John and Marty stared up after him. "Well can you beat that?"

John shook his head. "I don't get it either. Cliff works fast?"

"Not that fast, he's still in the office." Marty shrugged. "Okay, let's set up. You ready?"

"Yup, all dressed up, with no one to kill."

Marty smirked. "Well you don't kill him, he kills you. Go."

John nodded and followed Lewis up the Space Needle set.

As sets go, John had to admit that this was very impressive. John had visited the Space Needle once, partly in preparation for this role, and partly because he thought the thing was just pretty darn cool. He was amazed at the details that were duplicated on its doppelganger that he stood on now. Handrails, floor color, and wall textures all

looked very exact. He did notice the subtle difference in size, the set being a bit smaller in the actual structure, giving him the distinct feeling of an adult returning to his old elementary school.

Marty picked up the megaphone and clicked it on. It squealed a bit, much to Marty's annoyance. He clicked the talk button. "Alright everyone, settle down." He repeated this until the various conversations quieted down. Soon Marty's was the only voice that could be heard.

"Alright. Now everyone, we're going to be shooting quite a bit of film today and there isn't a lot of 'day' left to do it. Extras, you're going to be asked to do a lot of different things, from acting like it's the most normal day in the world, to acting like it's the last day in the world. Some of these scenes will take less than ten seconds on film, but they're going to be intense. I want to see that intensity out of you."

"Okay, any questions?" He received a few mumbled "No's" and a smattering of shaking heads in response. "Okay then, get to your places. We're going to get everything finalized. I'll be visiting each unit in turn, finishing with yours, Ken." Ken gave him a thumbs-up in acknowledgement. Marty turned back to his assistants and technicians to make last-minute preparations.

Everyone began to get into position. In John's case, this meant hooking up the wires that hung from the ceiling. Others took their spots where they would be when this shot would take place. Some would be running while others might be on the ground, having tripped in the previous scene, yet to be filmed. John walked up the ladder to the set where his stunt coordinator, Leo, was waiting patiently, his hands full of gear.

"This is the real-deal, pal." Leo said. "Let's get you hooked up."

Leo Gellar had been training John long before the production started on the finer points of wire-assisted fighting. He was a patient teacher and a jovial man. John was a quick learner and a little cocky, since he had already trained in many different martial arts. But Leo was able to humble John many times by kicking his butt all over the special training gym set up for these purposes.

Leo was a master of wirework. Since he became a stunt man – or coordinator, as was the more politically correct term now – and had made more people fly, twist, and spin in midair than a skydiving instructor. At least that’s what John always imagined.

Like most who worked at Cerner, Leo had grown up on a steady diet of movies, in his case Kung Fu and Bruce Lee. Everyone at Cerner had some particular genre and a movie that they would watch a thousand times and enjoy it as much the last time as they did the first. Duncan’s favorite was the entire “*Star Wars*” trilogy (*Star Trek* notwithstanding); Leo’s was *Enter the Dragon*, Bruce Lee’s cult martial arts film. Leo actually learned various forms of Tae-Kwan-Do, Karate, and Kung Fu and was quite adept at all of it. It was Leo who helped John learn the kendo sword fighting techniques for his ill-fated “*Star Wars*” audition.

John began to hook up the wires and cabling to the harness he had under his pants and shirt, having put that on before he went to wardrobe and make up. The hooks were in hidden holes that were tough to find in his costume without prior knowledge of their locations. Even with that knowledge, John still had to feel around the areas a bit to locate the holes.

Once he was hooked up, Leo pulled his radio off his belt. “Okay, pull him out.” He wiped some sweat from his dark skin, his short curly hair shining a bit under the hot stage lights.

The wire operator acknowledged, John felt the light tug of the harness, and walked off the edge of the platform. He continued rising, out of Leo’s reach. “Whoa, that’s good!” Leo barked into the radio. “Lower him back down a few feet.”

The operator complied, lowering John back into Leo’s reach. John dangled there, just next to the platform that the other man now stood on. They began double-checking the harness for any loose hooks.

With a *whizzzz*, Ken raced in on his cable-cam to come to a stop just under John. “You almost ready?”

“Just about,” John answered without looking at him. He held up his arms as a stunt coordinator checked his harness.

Ken watched the two men work with interest. "Marty told me you might be accompanying me on some 2<sup>nd</sup> unit work."

"Yeah," John said. "I thought I'd get some tips on camera work. There are some things I still don't quite understand on some of the shots. There's going to be a lot of debris in these shots, how will you maintain clarity in the shot?"

"Who says I will?" Ken leaned forward. "You see John, it's all about mood. The technical part is achieving mood. The clarity is not in the picture, but in the story. I don't mind the debris. It may interfere with the picture, but a clear picture would interfere with the ideas that we're trying to convey."

He turned his attention back to the camera and began fiddling with it. "Light and shadow, John, light and shadow. Too much shadow and you can't see anything, too much light, and you still can't see anything. The debris will add shadows, shadows that will play upon the characters and sets, defining mood. Light and shadow clash and create the picture. As a photographer, my job is to use these things to enhance the mood as much as possible."

"You're ready John," Leo said with a final tug on the cables.

"Oh, thanks, hang on a sec," he turned back to Ken. "Here I thought all you did was point and shoot."

Ken feigned embarrassment. "Well, okay, you got me. I just aim and hold the record button down until they tell me to stop."

John laughed. "Listen, let's get back together after the shot and you can give me more of your Discovery channel presentation."

"Okay, John. Hang in there," he replied with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. He flicked the switch and zoomed off.

John, hanging limply from the wires, shook his head wryly.

"He didn't just say that," Leo said.

"If there's a bad pun to be had, Ken will have it. Have it, wrestle it, and maybe even date it." He gestured at his gear. "So Leo, is this rope, the one that will show up on screen?"

"Right," the younger man answered. "But it's not designed to hold you, the harness will do that. You just pretend. Now for realism, wrap it like this." Leo wrapped the rope halfway around John's leg.

“Oh – okay. I get it, like I’m sitting on it.” John tried to put his weight on it, as much as the harness would allow.

“Right. It’s kind of like mountain rappelling. ‘Course if anyone looks too close, they’ll probably say it’s wrong, but it’ll look good in the scene.” Leo gave the wires a couple of test-pulls.

John smirked. “Well maybe they’ll give me the benefit of the doubt, seeing as I’m hanging from a helicopter, after all.”

Leo stepped back and examined John’s position. “You know, if Hume were to start firing that big gun, wouldn’t the kickback spin him around? I mean,” he amended, “if you were actually hanging from that rope?”

John held his ‘rifle’ out and aimed it in different positions. “Hmm, you may have a point. I guess I’ll keep it close to the body. It might give away the harness otherwise.”

“Yeah, good idea. Keep the stock nestled in you hip,” Leo pointed. “Yeah that’s it.” He stepped back and appraised John’s position.

“Okay,” he said finally, “show me evil.”

John snarled and began feigning anger. He pretended to begin firing away, making the prop rifle kick back as if it was actually spewing bullets.

“Yeah. That’s it. That looks good. If I couldn’t see the harness, I wouldn’t know it was there.” Leo gave him a thumbs-up. “Okay, I’ll get on the pulleys. We’ll lower you down to this level for you to jump on. Now Marty says to bounce you around a bit to simulate the helicopter, so hang on tight to the rope.” Leo gestured to the rope. “Remember, the rope will move with you, you’re not sliding down it.”

“Right.” John checked the rope and centered himself in the harness. He looked up to see the winches and pulleys high above him. The rope he was supposedly hanging from was actually hooked to a small platform attached to the cables, only 10 feet or so above him. He looked down to see Ken in his camera car, peering through the camera and scribbling some notes in a pad, finalizing what he would be looking at and how it would be filmed. He then flicked a switch and zoomed back over to the car’s loading platform.

Marty was there waiting for him. He and Ken began discussing the shot, each pointing to areas on the set and occasionally at Duncan directly. At one point there seemed to a point of contention between them, but Ken paused, stroked his chin thoughtfully and pointed back at the set, starting up a new round of conversation. Marty smiled and began gesturing excitedly.

Duncan watched the exchange with a bored expression, hanging from the harness. The leg straps under his pants were uncomfortable, he would be glad when this shot was finished. He had told Marty earlier he was looking forward to these shots, but he didn't realize how uncomfortable the harness would be with his full costume.

Ken and Marty always were the last ones to speak when a shoot would start. At this point everyone is in place and props are all set up, so it gives them a good idea of how the shoot will look. This is when they finalized the angles and lighting, and sometimes found out that a shot simply would not work.

This time however, Ken and Marty finally nodded in agreement and turned back to their respective duties. John sighed in relief.

"Don't get too relaxed, Duncan. I'm not gonna pull any punches with you in this shot," Lewis said. John didn't notice that Lewis had sidled up to him during Ken and Marty's conversation.

John rolled his eyes. "Tell me something Mark, do you ever say anything that doesn't sound like it was written by hack script writers?"

To his surprise, Lewis simply smiled. "I gotta be me," he replied. He turned and headed to his spot on the Space Needle set.

Before John could wonder about that glib retort, he was interrupted by Marty's megaphone-enhanced voice. "Alright, everyone. We're ready."

## Chapter VIII

“Okay, this scene is where the helicopter is hovering over the Needle.” Bellowing from his megaphone, Marty pointed at Duncan. “Now, John, you’re hanging from the wires which is really Hume hanging from the helicopter. We’re going to buck you around a bit, but remember: You’re mad as hell and trying to get a shot a McCain. Since it’s hard to shoot someone accurately when you’re getting bucked around, I want you to really get irritated. Play it for all it’s worth that the bouncing and missed shots are pissing you off, got it?”

John, sitting way too far from the director to be heard, gave Marty a thumbs-up in acknowledgement.

Marty nodded. Switching gears, he turned back to the set. “Lewis, you are trying to get people out and well... basically ducking a lot.”

Lewis grunted and nodded.

“You people,” Marty swept his hand back and forth and pointed at all the faux tourists, “you run and scream. We’ll have a lot of popping and banging, so react. But remember, keep working your way to that exit,” he stabbed his finger to the doorway on the set. “Do not cross the line we’ve put on the floor. We don’t want anyone accidentally crossing too close to the camera’s view of the action.”

Marty scrutinized his audience carefully to see if anyone looked unsure, but was too nervous to say. Satisfied everyone looked

confident in the job they were going to do, he grunted and sat down in his director's chair. "Okay everyone, places!"

John was hoisted up a bit to come a stop right above the set. He pointed his gun and readied himself. He listened for Marty, whose inevitable command came a moment later. "And ACTION!"

Like a wizard's magical incantation, Marty's shout transformed the quiet scene into a flurry of activity. John lowered slowly, jostling a bit, hair tousled from the fans above to simulate a helicopter's rotors. As the scene came into view, he quickly feigned searching for Lewis (now playing McCain) in the chaos.

But chaos is a relative term as each person was executing a precise pre-planned move. Each one would have to be, as this scene would be shot several more times and could not deviate from one shot to the next. John knew exactly where Lewis was, but pretended to have trouble seeing him amid the fleeing crowd.

"That's it, Hume, now you see him!" Marty yelled through his bullhorn. The director frequently called his actors by their character names during the shooting so not to disrupt their concentration. He wanted them to stay in character as much as possible when precious film (and even more expensive time) was rolling. Granted, there was no film being wasted with these new cameras, but some old habits were unnecessary to break.

John's eyes widened in triumph and began firing the 'gun'. Leo, watching from behind the cameraman, nodded silently in approval at John's gun positioning. Duncan took no notice as he continued to fire away at Lewis, hatred lining his face. The gun popped and barked out harmless muzzle-flash. "You're MINE, MCCAIN!" he screamed over the din. Ken, sitting in his car underneath John and peering at him through the camera, smiled at John's over-the-top performance.

Lewis whirled and ran towards the other side, attempting to duck 'bullets'. Sparks blew out of the floor and the walls as he ran, simulating bullet hits. John tried to aim at those places, giving the impression he actually fired the bullets. Lewis leapt through the narrow observation deck opening, his own wiring harness giving him a gravity-defying spin allowing him to level his gun at Duncan, his



face the picture of grim determination. John smiled inwardly. *He may be a jerk, he thought, but even amidst all that chaos, the man can keep in character as well as anyone.*

‘Gravity’ began to take hold of Lewis as the harness lowered him away. Now out of the scene, Lewis righted himself as the wire operator slowed him down and set him gently on the ground. He turned and looked up at the scene, waiting for it to finish. His arms were crossed and his face looked bored.

Duncan, again with wire help, swung himself on to the set in a single agile move that would put many gymnasts to shame. He felt the wires go slack, giving him some freedom to move. Without pausing he sprinted toward the far side where ‘McCain’ had just made his daring escape.

John had only to reach the other wall, look over it in frustration for Lewis and slap it in anger to end the scene. He got about halfway across when the floor lurched, throwing him on his back.

“What—” he started to exclaim, but the floor lurched some more. He looked around in confusion and scrambled to his feet. Then he realized the floor was no longer level.

“This isn’t right...” He started towards the far wall to get Marty’s attention. The incline increased. *The set was tilting!* he thought. *But this isn’t the time for that!*

The tilting increased at an even pace. “GET OUTTA THERE JOHN! EVERYONE OFF THE SET!” Marty’s amplified sounded panicked. “WE CAN’T STOP THE THING!”

Although most of the extras had already fled the big set during the scene, a few that were supposed to be injured or dead due to machine gun fire lay on the floor. As it continued to tilt, they miraculously healed or resurrected and fled to the exits the others had already vacated. John began to do the same when he was thrown on his back again. He tilted his head back to see the wires being caught on the top edge of the ceiling as the set continued to tilt and drag him inexorably to a nasty collision with the roof. He pulled hard on the wires sliding between them to get some slack.

Leo began frantically yelling into his radio. "He's going to come out the way he came in! Get the decelerator on or he'll hit the floor! That's a 40 foot fall otherwise!"

The floor was becoming steep and the tilting seemed to be accelerating. He ran toward the opening between the half-wall and the ceiling that ran around perimeter of the set. He dove out the opening and began falling towards the floor. He had forgotten about the slack!

He held his hands up over his face when he slowed and finally stopped falling about ten feet above the floor. The harness pulled hard against his legs and snapped him upright. He whipped sideways painfully as he began ascending quickly towards the roof.

"That's it!" Leo was yelling. "Get him up over the whole thing and out of its way!" John, once again facing the set, could now see it tilting towards him. His eyes widened as the spire on top tilted in between his wires.

Leo shouted again into his radio. "Stop ascending! He's gonna hit the spire!"

But it was too late. John reached up at the last second and grabbed the top of the spire, pushing himself straight out. He swung out just enough to watch the top of the spire pass him going down as he went up. But the swing was not quite powerful enough and he realized he was swinging back into it. He split and lifted his legs at the last second and swung back harmlessly over the top of it. He breathed a sigh of relief as the spire whizzed between his feet.

"Woo hoo! Alright Duncan!" Leo slapped his hand to his forehead in relieved shock, forgetting he had the radio still in it. "Ow! Damn!"

Duncan's hand shook as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. He had no idea how he managed to avoid that collision, but was thankful nonetheless. He was still breathing hard when he noticed that it suddenly got much quieter.

He looked down to see the spire was resting on one of the cables Ken's camera car rode on. The set would come to a stop at a right angle from where it started, but the spire still was pointing up a bit. The motors that tilted the set were straining, creating more and more

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tension on the line. Ken's face was white as his car listed to one side alarmingly.

"Ken! Get out of there!" Duncan cried, but Ken was already unbuckling himself. Marty screamed at crewman to get a ladder under him. Suddenly the car jolted, and there was a horrible screech of metal on metal.

Duncan could see the scratches in the paint on the spire as the cable had slipped upwards from the tension. In horror he realized the cable was pulled like a rubber band, inching closer and closer to the end of the spire. Any moment, it would snap off. The motors were getting louder with the strain.

SCREECH! The cable shifted another couple of inches closer to edge of the spire.

"NO!" Duncan yelled, helplessly waving his arms. "Don't unbuckle! Stay in the—"

The unmistakable sound of a tension wire echoed through the building as the cable slipped the last few inches and snapped off the end of the spire like a catapult firing. Ken was flung out of the car head over heels. His arms grabbed uselessly at anything. John reached down instinctively, but Ken's trajectory was far short. He fell thirty feet and hit the concrete floor with a sickening thud. He did not move.

John shut his eyes in horror, but the image wouldn't leave his mind's eye.

## Chapter IX

John opened his eyes, tears escaping. “Leo!” he hollered. Leo didn’t respond, still on the platform looking down at Ken. “LEO!” He wiped his face in frustration. “LEO!!”

Leo appeared to come out of a trance. “What? John? Is Ken...”

“I don’t know! Get me the hell out of this thing!” John was twisting frantically.

“Right. Okay.” Leo barked into his radio and John immediately lowered to the platform. The set was strangely quiet. Relieved of the cable, the set had continued smoothly until it was fully tilted at 90 degrees. The motors shut off automatically and left only the sounds of people on the set, some crying, some helping others, and most in shock.

John began searching desperately for the hooks hidden well in his costume. Leo helped him disengage from the harness and they both made a mad dash down to the floor, taking ladder steps two at a time.

He worked his way through the chaotic jumble of people running, talking, and pointing this way and that. Knots of them were gathered where Ken lay. John pushed through them to see Marty kneeling over him, desperately trying to provoke a reaction from the cameraman.

John stopped short. “Marty?”

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Marty quickly shook his head, as if not wanting to acknowledge the unthinkable as quickly as possible.

John closed his eyes and opened them. "This can't be happening."

"JOHN!"

John scowled in puzzlement at the familiar voice. He turned to Charlie pushing through the cloud. "Dad?"

"Are you all right? I saw you miss that needle point thing up there..." Charlie looked frazzled, his eyes wide with worry.

"Dad, calm down, I'm fine. It's Ken, Dad." John indicated the floor with a glance. "It's Ken," he repeated.

"Get an ambulance!" Marty bellowed. "Now!"

Beeping could be heard as several mobile phones began dialing. "And get back, give him some air."

"I don't think he needs any air, Marty," someone murmured.

Marty launched up as if shot out of a cannon and grabbed the startled crewman by the collar. "Do you know that? No? Then shut your mouth!" He pushed the younger man away roughly and spun back to return to Ken's side.

John could see Ken's neck was twisted at an odd angle. The sight sickened him. He concentrated his attention on Marty, not wanting his last image of Ken to be what lay before him.

He knelt next to Marty and laid a hand on his shoulder. Marty jumped at the touch. "Easy, Marty. Easy..."

Marty looked at John without recognition. "Why?"

John blinked. "It was an accident," he replied simply.

Marty's eyes fell to the floor, as he seemed to consider John's statement. "So I should take it easy because it's an accident?"

John's stared at him confused. "No, I meant... that is..."

"I know what you meant." Marty snapped.

John fell silent. He didn't know what to say or even how to react. He gave Marty's shoulder a final squeeze, bowed his head and looked down.

Marty continued to stay at Ken's side until the ambulance arrived.

\* \* \*

Moments later it did. Paramedics rushed in and began to work on Ken, but the urgency with which they moved subsided as the grim faced men realized the futility of their efforts.

Later, John would have trouble recalling the day, instead only remembering bits and pieces. He remembered things out of order, as if time itself became a random thing. He went on automatic, doing what needed to be done, but detached from the situation at hand. He remembered having Cliff take Marty into his office; the director had turned hysterical as the paramedics tried unsuccessfully to revive Ken.

He remembered the sound as the black bag was zipped up over Ken's face; he thought it sounded deeper than most zippers found on most of his clothes. *A weird thing to notice*, he thought.

He remembered the paramedic telling him how exactly Ken died, but couldn't remember for the life of him what the man looked like.

He remembered Jan, sitting on the floor against a wall, looking up at the ceiling with tears streaming down her face.

He remembered that everyone had been sent home. Later he was told the he was the one who did the sending, but could not remember actually doing it.

He remembered Cliff, looking grim, answering questions from some, asking questions to others. He did remember Cliff gripping each of John's shoulders, telling him that he should take his own advice and go home.

His only vivid memory was leaving Marty in his office, head down on his desk and cradled in his arms next to a poured drink. The drink would sit untouched, small waves bouncing back and forth inside as the desk shook gently with Marty's sobs.

## Chapter X

*Brrring!*

John blinked blearily and sat up in bed. Rufus, lying at his feet, raised his head and looked accusingly at the phone. John reached over and clicked on the light. He glanced at the clock. 4:30 a.m. He grimaced. Good news never comes at this time in the morning. The phone blared out another electronic ring. He rubbed his eyes, grabbed the receiver, and hit the talk button, silencing it in mid-ring. Rufus, knowing that the ringing has now been replaced with the more soothing voice of his master, yawned and rolled over on his side.

“Yeah,” John said flatly. Pleasantries were for pleasanter times.

The voice on the other end sounded strained. “John? It’s me, Cliff.”

“Cliff?” John stifled a yawn and forced himself awake. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Marty.”

John sighed. It had been two weeks since the accident. Shooting had been postponed for that time to give people a chance to deal with the accident, attend the funeral, or simply get a chance to work through their emotions. But life must continue and tomorrow shooting would begin again in earnest. Cliff had talked Cerner Studios into pushing the release date back a week to compensate, but that still

would be tight. If Marty's mind was not in it anymore, the entire production would be in jeopardy.

"What's the problem? Is he okay?"

"I don't know," Cliff's replied worriedly. "He hasn't answered his phone in three days. We're supposed to start today. Everyone's supposed to be there and getting ready in less than two hours."

John understood. "Okay, okay, Cliff," he sighed. "I should've expected this."

"Yeah, me too." Cliff echoed his sigh. "I know I've known him longer, but you and he have always had a connection. I was hoping..."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to him." John replied quickly.

"Thanks." Cliff paused. "How are you holding up, John?" he asked with concern.

John contemplated that. "I'm not sure. How should I be?"

Cliff paused even longer this time. "Hell, I don't know. I've never had anything like this happen before."

John stood up, stretching. "It's funny, Cliff. I've killed people mercilessly on screen for years. But I've never seen anyone actually die before. Even my grandparents were gone before I was born." He wandered over to the bathroom and clicked on the light. He squinted at himself in the mirror. "I've never been to a funeral before, not even my mother's."

"Really? Well it was a hell of a first one. Pretty opulent. You really—"

John cut him off. "Yeah. Listen Cliff, I'll get cleaned up and get out to Marty."

"I appreciate it. Good luck." The phone clicked off.

John laid it down on the sink. He turned on the faucet and waited for the hot water to start flowing.

\* \* \*

"C'mon, open up Marty."

Marty's estate was quite large. Normally bustling with activity when Marty was home, it was quiet and dark when he was away on shoots. Anyone passing by today might assume that no one was home. But John knew better.



“Marty it’s me, John.” John pressed the page button. It *bzzz’d* back at him angrily. He pressed the talk button again. “Marty! Look, just let me talk to you.”

The door lock clicked. “I’m here. Just quit leaning on that thing.” Marty stood in the doorway, looking disheveled. He hadn’t shaved in several days. His bathrobe draped over his shoulders like a cape. The belt-tie had fallen out of one of the loops and trailed behind him as he turned and shuffled back into the house.

John stared after him. He knew Marty would be in bad shape, he hadn’t been seen since the funeral. Still, it was a bit surprising. John was used to an upbeat, crisp appearance McGregor usually wore.

“Are you coming in or what?” Marty’s voice drifted out the door.

John stepped in and shut the door behind him. He followed Marty’s voice into his den. Marty sat in an easy chair, several bottles of eggnog and rum around him, staring at his TV.

John smiled inwardly. Others might drown their sorrow in liquor, but Marty’s depression drink of choice was eggnog. When Marty was depressed, he felt heavy and lethargic. Eggnog was well suited to increasing that feeling. Alcohol helped, too.

The TV blared with the roar of the crowd. John glanced down at baseball game playing on the screen. “Angels World Series tape?”

“Game Six,” Marty answered without looking up.

“So. The boys of summer and the drink of Christmas.” John picked up an empty bottle and examined it absently. “Feeling conflicted?”

Marty continued to stare at the screen without answering.

John decided to try another tack. “Cliff called me. Wanted me to see if you might want to come back to work.”

Marty shifted his weight in his chair, but still stared straight ahead.

John set down the bottle and kneeled down in front of the director. “Marty, you can’t sit here blaming yourself...”

“I don’t blame myself.”

John stopped, puzzled. “You don’t?”

“No. You’re blocking the screen.”

John didn’t move. He figured Marty would tell him more, if for no other reason than to break the silence.

In another minute his patience was rewarded. “Why do we do this, John?”

“It’s what we do,” John replied simply.

“What the hell does that mean? ‘It’s what we do?’” Marty looked directly at him for the first time, angry.

“What do you want me to say? We make movies. It’s what we chose, it’s what we do,” John repeated.

“Well it’s a real worthwhile endeavor, isn’t it,” Marty replied flatly. “We get to pretend like little kids. Play with neat toys and get paid obscenely. What do we really contribute?”

John opened his mouth, but Marty continued, cutting off any reply. “I’ll tell you what: Nothing. If movies dried up and fell off the face of the earth, the earth would get along just fine without them.”

“You’re wrong,” John retorted. “Look, I agree that making movies isn’t the same as curing cancer, but there is a place for them. I’m not going to sit here and let you denigrate my profession just because you can’t deal with loss.” John started to turn to leave.

“Are they worth the loss? Is a movie worth a man’s life?!” Marty shouted as he leapt to his feet.

John stopped. “No, Marty it isn’t. A movie isn’t worth a man’s life. But Ken’s life was the movies. He loved them. And he died doing what he loved.”

“Oh, how nice and sentimental. ‘He died doing what he loved.’ Well that just makes it all better.” Marty flopped back into his chair.

“Marty, we all do what we do. What we’re suited for. We can’t all be doctors. We can’t all be servicemen defending the country. We give those people something to escape to when they get done.” John sat down on a couch. “We may not be saving lives, but what we do matters to people.”

John gestured aimlessly outside. “You know the Internet? You don’t go there. You don’t read what these people, regular people,” he emphasized, “write about the movies they love. Legions of people congregate and discuss how this will look on screen, or how that will sound, on and on. This is what they do when they aren’t working.”

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John leaned forward, staring at Marty harshly. “You want to matter? You think sitting in here, feeling sorry for yourself, matters?” John kicked over a few bottles.

John waited for a reply, but Marty had none. “What we create out there—” John gestured again, “—matters. What we do matters. There are people out there who would give anything to be able to do what we do.” John stood up. “We are going to do it. You are going to do it.”

He waited for a reaction. Marty appeared to be contemplating what John was saying. John decided to go for broke.

“So what are you going to do? Matter? Or sit here?” John stared down at Marty angrily.

Marty looked up. “I miss him John.”

John’s expression softened. “I know. I miss him too. But as the cliché goes: Life goes on.”

Marty smiled slightly. “Okay, I’m coming. Just no more clichés.”

John gripped his arm. “Call me if you need me.”

“Why? You come over anyway, whether I call you or not.”

John shook his head, smiling.

“John.” Marty stared intently at Duncan.

“Yeah?”

Marty looked down uncomfortably. “You’ve always been the best friend I got.”

Duncan smiled even wider. “You should get more friends.”

Marty snickered. “I should, shouldn’t I?”

Tender moments were generally not part of their friendship, and John had diffused the moment quickly. Marty understood.

“I’ll let myself out,” John finally said after a moment. “Do me a favor before you leave though.”

“What’s that?” Marty asked, stretching.

“Take a shower.” With that, John flashed him a final grin, and left.

Marty sat for a moment, perturbed. “Take a shower?” he repeated. “I’m not that bad.” He sniffed defiantly at an armpit and quickly turned away, nose scrunched up in disgust.

\* \* \*

A half-hour later, John walked into the massive set. He hadn't been here since the accident. Activity was apparent but subdued. People moved this way and that, taking things to the set, getting props ready, checking lighting, and anything else that might be required. But a cloud hung over the set, the smiles usually seen in the midst of the bustle were missing.

He stood at the entrance and began looking around the room for Cliff. His eyes fell on a couple of men talking to the chief special effects technician. They were writing in small notepads and looked bored.

John's eyes narrowed. He stroked his chin absently, watching the men. They continued talking to the technician, nodding here and there. The technician was waving his arms and speaking animatedly.

The two men exchanged skeptical looks. Finally they snapped closed their pads, smiled and shook hands with the technician, who clearly looked unsatisfied. The two briskly turned around and walked out of the building, passing John on the way out.

"...Looking for bad guys where there aren't, Joe. These Hollywood types, they think everything's a movie," the older man said.

"Yeah, I hear you," the other replied, shaking his head. "I mean look at that thing. They build half the Space Needle and then rig it to crash? It's amazing more accidents haven't happened." The two continued out of earshot, leaving John scowling after them in puzzlement.

He stared after them for several moments after the door closed behind them. Then he looked back at the technician. Forgetting about telling Cliff that Marty was on his way, he headed over to the large bearded man.

The man's eyes widened slightly. The stars never usually spoke to him. "Mr. D-duncan? Can I help you?" he asked nervously as John reached him.

John searched his memory. "Taylor?"

"Yes sir. But people usually just call me Carson."

John snapped his fingers. “Carson. Right. Sorry, I forgot that.”

The man nodded in understanding.

“Carson, people usually call me John. Not even my father was Mr. Duncan,” John said. “Much less ‘sir.’”

Carson chuckled and exhaled a small sigh of relief. Taylor Carson was a large man. His dark, unkempt beard hid a face that could only be described as jolly. John felt as if he was talking to a young Santa Claus. “I suppose you want to know what those policeman were doing here?” he asked.

John jabbed a thumb back towards the door. “They were police?”

“Yeah. They were following up on the accident. They believe something was wrong with the set. It malfunctioned, and that is that.” He wiped his hands together for emphasis.

John shrugged. “So? What was wrong with it?”

“Nothing, John. That’s what I keep telling them. There is nothing wrong with this set.” He looked up at the big set. Lights were on now, people were milling back and forth. “I went over that thing backwards and forwards. I checked every wire, every hydraulic. I can’t find a single thing wrong with it.”

John scowled again. “What are you saying, Carson?”

“This set is designed to be simple to operate. Punch two buttons, disengage a safety and slide a lever to tilt. That’s it. Anyone could’ve done it,” Taylor said.

“Anyone?” John held up his hand, cutting the other man off. “Anyone who? How?”

“Well... I don’t know. I mean, no one was manning those controls that day because we weren’t scheduled to be doing any tilting. No one saw anything and the controls were off.” Carson pursed his lips. “But the slider was in the down position. It would’ve been if someone had not bothered to move it back after they turned the system back off.”

“Wait a minute, slow down. The lever was in the down position?” John interrupted again.

“Right. But that might not mean anything. It’s an electronic lever, right? If the safeties are on, then sliding the lever will have the effect

of changing the volume on an unplugged stereo: nothing. Here, let me show you,” he gestured at John to follow him.

They walked a short distance to a small booth. The booth faced the set with a large open window. John crossed around the front of the booth and paused to peer in the window. It was dark, save for the light streaming in from the window, and bathing the consoles just below the windowsill. During shooting, people could be seen sitting at a console, which was littered with controls. There were monitors inset into the countertop and chairs on wheels neatly pushed under the console and surrounding desks.

“The entrance is around the back,” Carson pointed. “We keep it locked until shooting, to avoid accidents.” He stopped, realizing what he said. “Really helped, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, well... Oomp!” John’s reply was cut off as he tripped over something, nearly falling to the floor. He grabbed the windowsill to steady himself. “What the...”

He looked down to see a myriad of cables and hoses scattering out from beneath the booth like a squid’s tentacles reaching out from its lair. “Watch your step there, Mr. Duncan,” Carson warned, forgetting to drop the honorific.

“Right,” he answered, stepping gingerly over the rest of the cabling. He rounded the corner to see the burly man pulling his keys out and wrestling with the lock. “Dammit, which one?” he muttered to himself. He flipped through the keys, one by one. “Ah!” he finally exclaimed. Finding the one he wanted, he held the key, letting the others fall together with a jingle. He gave a knob a quick jerk and the key slid in with a soft click. The door opened and he gestured for John to enter.

John stepped in the cramped booth and let his eyes wander across it. There were more monitors inset above the window, dials, and computer readouts. They were all dark, save some small lights on the computers.

“Okay, show me,” John said, stepping up to the control panel.

Carson stepped in the doorway. “Can you move over? The controls are right in front of you.” John complied and moved up against some equipment to his left. The big man stepped in and

pressed himself against the counter to let the door swing closed behind him. "It can get a little cramped in here when things really get going," he commented.

He pulled out a chair and John bent over beside him, propping himself on the counter with one arm. "Okay, here are the lighting controls," pointing at a series of dials, "this simulates lights going out as the Needle falls. You know, like the electricity is going out as the cables snap. We flash 'em and here and there, for effect. Over here—" he pointed at a row of keys not unlike a piano, "—are the bullet makers. We call them strikers. We can hit one at a time for a random bullet or run our fingers across them in either direction for a machine gun."

"Weren't you using strikers that day? Who was in here then?" John pointed out.

"No one. Those were interior shots. We do those from a closer control panel," he pointed out the window. "Look, from here, you can barely see the interior. We couldn't use monitors either. The set is too expansive. The cameras couldn't see everything."

"Yeah," John agreed. "Debris would probably complicate things too." Peering up at the set thirty feet above the floor, he couldn't see much further inside than a foot or so, and that was just the ceiling.

"The bullets we simulate from here are bigger, anyways. Like from a large gun mounted on a helicopter, not the popguns you and Lewis use," Carson explained. "Real cool looking too, big lines of bullet holes we can fill back in as many times as..."

"Carson. The tilt controls?" John interrupted.

"Oh, right. Sorry, I kind of like showing off this rig." He pointed down at two buttons and a slide bar. "Nothing special, click these two buttons here, one powers it on and the other arms the slide bar. Move the slide bar down to tilt the set the full ninety degrees, move it up to make it level, like it is now," he pointed out the windows at the giant set.

"Now watch," He grabbed the lever and slid it down.

"Yeah, nothing happens. I get it." John answered the unspoken question. "The lever is meaningless unless the buttons are armed."

“Right. Now if I arm the buttons with it down, the whole shebang will start tilting. Like I said, kinda like if you crank the volume before you turn the stereo on. Nothing. But leave it like that and leave the room and POW! The next person that turns it on gets blown through the wall.”

John thought he knew where this was going, but wanted to hear more. “Okay, so what?”

Taylor swiveled his chair and leaned back to face John. “Well, only my crew and I can work this thing properly, and we all know to slide it back to ‘0’ position before we ever turn it on. It’s part of a checklist we go through before we start *and* after we finish.”

“Why didn’t you just put a safety on it? Keep it from accidentally tipping if it’s in the wrong position?” John challenged.

Carson looked a bit sheepish. “Uh, well...to be honest, it’s a bit more of an undertaking than you might think. We were racing just to get everything working. There’s only so much budget. Putting safety catches into everything without messing them up, and then testing everything, would take too much time, especially for a three-week shoot.”

John raised his eyebrows expectantly. “Fine. Then someone forgot to raise it?”

“That’s what the cops said: just a mishap. But we didn’t. There are only two people that ever touch this thing. Well three, including myself,” he amended.

“So one of you forgot to check it off,” John stated. “It happens. That’s what the police concluded, right?”

“They’re wrong,” Carson replied and John noted that the jolliness he saw earlier disappeared. The other man looked intense and determined. “Look, we were here quite a while before you and your crew showed up. We supervised the building of that thing. Hell, I designed it.”

“That still doesn’t mean you might not have made a mistake,” John retorted.

“I thought you’d understand.” Carson looked hurt. “You always had that perfectionist reputation.”



*THE BAD GUY*

John stared at him askance. "I'm here, Carson. I'm listening to you. Convince me you didn't make a mistake." He crossed his arms, fixed his gaze on the other man, and waited expectantly.

Carson nodded slowly and continued. "We had a competition. Anyone who missed a checklist item or checked one wrong was fined. Usually the guilty one would buy beer in the evening, or maybe lunch. Mostly it was an opportunity to rib each other mercilessly, especially if I did it. By the time all you actors got here, no one had missed an item on the checklist in over a month."

He pounded the counter lightly. "Dammit, this is a black eye for my crew. They're good people, John. We pride ourselves on our safety and our knowledge of our equipment. Ask Cliff."

John considered that. Cerner always tried to get the best people for the crews. He wasn't familiar with Taylor's work, but he knew Cerner had selected Ken and Jan, and that they were the best in their fields. He doubted they would have done any less for the practical effects crew.

"Have you told anyone else this?" he asked finally.

Carson shook his head. "No. I wanted to talk to Cliff, but he's been unreachable. When you came up to me, I thought I'd tell you, and maybe you could get me to Cliff."

John nodded. "Okay, I believe you. You and I will go talk to Cliff. In the meantime, don't say anything to anybody, okay? I know you're taking a hit here, but I don't want wild rumors to go running around the set. And no more police," he added. "At least not yet."

"Okay, John," the man leaned back in chair and let his shoulders slump, as if a weight suddenly lifted off him. "But what rumors? That we didn't make a mistake?"

"No. That someone did this on purpose," John replied, shaking his head. "If they think there is someone out there hurting people..." he trailed off. "Well, I don't know what they'll think, but right now, it's an accident, plain and simple."

"Okay. Let's go see Cliff," Carson responded, rising out of his chair.

\* \* \*

After meticulously checking the dials and switches in the control room, Carson closed and locked the door. The two hiked back across the set and into the interior offices. They finally arrived at Cliff's office, where Cliff was sitting at his desk with a phone pressed up against his ear.

"Good, Marty. Okay.... We'll see you in a few then." Cliff hung up the phone and turned to the newcomers. "Good job, John."

"He just needed a kick in the ass," John grinned. "Got a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?" He leaned back his chair and crossed his legs, pushing himself out from the desk.

John glanced at Carson for a moment before starting. "First, did you know the police were here?"

Cliff grimaced. "Yes. But they seem to think it was a simple mistake."

"Well, Carson here doesn't seem to think so," John retorted. "He tried to tell the police, but they laughed him off."

Cliff's eyes narrowed. "What did you tell them, Carson?" He spoke slowly and suspiciously.

Carson retold the story he had finished explaining to John a moments earlier. Cliff kept his expression even, nodding here and there, questioning facts in the same places John did. When the big man finished, he sat waiting expectantly for Cliff's decision.

Cliff waited for a long moment before he finally responded. "Alright. Let's go with John's recommendation on this and keep it quiet. Carson, I need you to do something for me."

"What?" Carson asked amicably.

"You're not going to like it." Cliff added.

"Uh-oh. What is it Cliff?" the big man turned suspicious.

Cliff gritted his teeth before answering. "I want you to say it was a mechanical failure, if anyone asks."

"WHAT?!" Carson exploded. "I went over every inch of that damn thing!"

"Calm down, Carson," Cliff admonished the other man.

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John was mystified. “I have to agree with him, Cliff. I’m not one hundred percent convinced it wasn’t a human error,” he ignored the other man’s livid glance, “but this is an out-and-out lie.”

“I know it is,” the producer answered. “Trust me, Carson. I can’t tell you everything now, but please do as I ask. I promise you, I’ll make it right before it’s all over.”

Carson was breathing heavy with fury. Cliff stood up and stared down at him hard. There was intensity in those eyes John had never seen. Finally Cliff said, “Carson, you’re the best. I know that. It’s only temporary.” He leaned forward and his face softened a bit. “I promise you,” he repeated.

Carson seemed to calm down a bit. When he spoke, it was barely more than a whisper. “If it was anyone else, I’d tell you to go to hell.”

“You can tell me to go wherever you like, as long as you agree.”

Carson’s expression hardened again. “OKAY, I’ll do it.” He scratched his beard irritably. “I’ll probably regret this, Jenkins...”

“You won’t. You have my word.”

Carson headed towards the door. “If you’re playing me, my reputation will be worth as much as your word.” He stomped out and slammed the door behind him.

## Chapter XI

John winced as the door slammed. “Okay. What was that all about?”

Cliff went over to the door and locked it. “I didn’t want to get into it all with him here.”

John was incredulous. “You think he did something?”

“Who knows?” Cliff said, moving back to his desk. “The members of his crew were the only ones there.” Cliff sat back down heavily. “Oh, hell, I’ve been with Carson forever. I doubt he had anything to do with it, but I do believe we have more than just a mole now. Someone hit the power on the set. We have a saboteur.”

“What? Cliff, we gotta go to the police then!” John said loudly.

“No. And lower your voice.”

“No? Cliff, there has to be... I mean... We have to do something...” John began sputtering.

“Calm down before you jettison your tongue,” Cliff scolded. “There is a method to my madness.”

John stopped in mid-sputter. He sat down and took a deep breath.

“Okay?” Cliff asked. “Calm down?”

John glared at him. “Start explaining.”

Cliff smiled slightly. “I’ve been working with Carson for years. Gave him his first crew. He is the most meticulous son of a bitch I’ve ever met.”

“Yes, I noticed.” John recalled Carson’s rechecking all the controls in the booth earlier, even though they only touched one.

“If he says he checked everything, I believe him,” Cliff continued. “But we have problems. You know Cerner is in bigger trouble than people realize.”

“The stock prices...” John began.

“That’s only a blip. The publicity department is keeping investors bullish based on the future success of McCain, but the costs are increasing. Remember what I told you at the bar the other night?” John nodded. “It’s worse than I let on. Cerner could go under if this isn’t profitable.”

“What?” John exclaimed, shocked. “You’re kidding!”

“I wish I was.” Cliff replied sadly. “John, bad publicity isn’t just a problem, it could mean the death of Cerner Studios.”

“Really? I had no idea! That’s not generally known, is it?” John asked.

“No, which is why the stock prices have only dipped a little bit.” Cliff pointed out his window at the set outside. “But can you imagine what will happen if some rumor got out that someone was trying to sabotage McCain? They wouldn’t even have to stop the movie, the publicity would be so bad that Cerner’s stock would be worthless.”

“But if the movie succeeded after that, everything would be fine, right?” John pointed out.

“Yeah. But that doesn’t stop some big media conglomerate from swooping in and buying out all the outstanding shares in the meantime. People would be desperate to sell.” Cliff swung his arm in an encompassing gesture. “And if that happens, you can kiss all this goodbye.”

“They would keep the studio going, wouldn’t they?” John wondered.

“Maybe. But probably not. Cerner has a good name as a high quality moviemaker. They don’t crank out as many films as other studios do over a year, so they tend to stay stretched financially. A big corporation will put a stop to that. They’ll cut every expense and double the workload. Hell, they might even just break everything up

and just keep the name. Either way, they've eliminated some competition." Cliff finally plunked down in his chair.

John searched for words before he spoke. "Cliff, a man died. Your friend and mine. Even if everything you're saying pans out, it doesn't lift our responsibility to get him justice. If he was murdered, that is."

"I know that. I don't need you to preach at me!" Cliff closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "It's not that simple. There are a lot of people who work here, depend on Cerner for their livelihood. We need to find that mole. It's obvious that's who's sabotaging this project. We find him, expose him, and we minimize any bad publicity."

"Once we expose him, you clear Carson's name," John finished. "Exactly."

"Oh 'exactly,'" John repeated sarcastically. "How do you suppose we find him?"

Cliff held his hands up in a gesture of defeat. "I don't know."

They sat in silence for several moments. Suddenly John snapped up straight in his chair. "Hey, have you talked to *iff.com* yet?"

Cliff leaned his head on his arm. "No, with all that's happened, I haven't had a chance."

John snapped his fingers. "I may know how to find this guy."

Cliff straightened up. "How?"

"Leave that to me."

Cliff looked perplexed. "Okay. I hope you know what you're doing."

"You still want me to offer them official website duties?" John asked.

"Absolutely, if it will help get us that mole. At least, it'll get them to stop printing his stuff." Cliff opened his drawer and pulled out some documents. "Here's some stuff I was going to take to them. Official contracts, non-disclosures; all the usual stuff. Now remember, if they're our official website, that means we'll grant interviews. So you might as well start with yourself when you get over there."

John wrinkled his nose in displeasure at the suggestion. “Oh goody,” he said sarcastically but did not argue the point. “Anything else?”

“Oh, you know, we’ll debut the trailer with them, give them some ‘exclusive’ set photos, whatever you think.” He jabbed a finger in John’s direction. “Just call me the minute you find out anything, got it?”

John nodded and picked up the documents. “Got it.”

They were interrupted by a loud knock at the door. Cliff motioned to John to open it. John clicked the lock and opened up to reveal Mark Lewis impatiently standing in the doorway with his fists balled into his hips. Seeing Duncan, he let his arms drop and looked subdued.

“Duncan. Uh – look. I’m sorry about Ken. I know I can be a pain sometimes, but this is different. I’m really sorry.” He extended his hand.

John cautiously returned the handshake. “I appreciate that, Mark.”

“He always made me look good on screen.”

“Well, that’s always a plus.” John figured that was a close to sincere as Lewis got. He turned back to Cliff. “Listen, I got to get back out there.”

“Go.” He stood up and directed his attention to Lewis. “What is it this time, Mark?”

John closed the door behind him. *As if Cliff didn’t have enough problems*, he thought.

\* \* \*

As he emerged on the set, he caught sight of Marty, back at storyboards, having an animated conversation with a cameraman. The man was one of Ken’s crew, but had not worked with Marty directly very often.

Marty smiled broadly as he caught sight of John and waved him to join them. “John, help me out here. I need another opinion.”

John trotted up to the two men. “Okay, what?”

Marty gestured to the other man. “Have you met Richard? John Duncan, this is Richard Shellee.”

John smiled warmly as he shook the other man’s hand. “Hi.”

“Rick,” the other man corrected. He was a young man, perhaps twenty-seven at the most. His hair was short and he wore a freshly pressed shirt. His clean-cut, conservative appearance was belied by his pierced ear and forearm tattoo. Clean-shaven save for a small patch below his lower-lip, he shook John’s hand enthusiastically.

“John, Rick is now our lead cameraman.” Marty continued. “But I need a new director of photography. What do you say, John? Want to take the next step?”

“Marty,” Rick piped up before John could answer, “I can do it.”

Marty waved him off. “One day, yes, you will. But not now, kid. You get the shots as well as Ken ever did. But Ken had a knack for planning the shot. Technically, you’re awesome. Creatively, well...that’s something only experience can teach you. Experience John has.”

“But not in the technical end, Marty,” John answered. “Especially with all this new digital technology. Maybe you should give the kid a chance.”

Marty sighed. “In a smaller movie, with not so much riding on the outcome, I would in a heartbeat.” Rick started to protest again, but Marty cut him off. “We’re already behind schedule. I don’t have time to re-explain things. I need someone who knows my thinking better than I do. With Ken gone, that leaves John.”

Rick opened his mouth to try to plead his case again, but thought better of it. “Okay, Marty, you’re the boss.” John noticed that Rick was clearly not happy about the situation, especially since Ken had bumped him at the onset of filming.

John thought for a moment. “I’ll do it, Marty, but I’ll need his help. Why don’t we partner a bit. I’ll take the creative end and you get the shots. You can teach me how to get the film to match what Marty wants, and I’ll show you why a particular scene should look the way it’s going to look.”

Rick considered. “What choice do I have?”

“None. But it’s a chance for both of us to learn.” He turned to Marty. “Fine by you?”



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Marty wrinkled his brow. “Two directors of photography? No, no. I can’t have you two squabbling and wasting time. Someone’s got to have veto power here.”

“Alright, I will,” John replied. “I’ll also take responsibility if anything goes wrong.”

“Fair enough,” Rick nodded reluctantly.

“Good. It’s settled. Then let’s get to work on this scene.” Marty turned back to the storyboards. “We didn’t get what we needed the other day, so we’re going to have to push it hard today. We need to get back on schedule.”

John nodded. “Okay, then I’ll get back into the rig. Leo’s around, right?”

“Everyone’s here who needs to be. Cliff and I decided to re-shoot today. After which, we’ll remake up the schedule. Between the mall re-shoots and the accident...” Marty paused in memory. He pulled himself back from the momentary sadness to concentrate on the matter at hand. “Between those two things, we are really behind.”

“Okay, I’ll get the cams ready,” Rick replied. “And coordinate the other guys. Same as last time, right?”

Marty nodded. Rick turned and hurried off to the set. John watched him go. “This is not what I was expecting today. You bounce back quick.”

Marty was staring at the storyboards. “I appreciate you getting me out of that chair.” He switched a couple of placards around and stepped back to inspect his handiwork. “But don’t think I’ve just ‘bounced back’, John. If I don’t bury myself in my work, I’ll just bury myself in depression and eggnog.”

John wrinkled his lips in understanding. “I know. It’ll get easier.”

“It shouldn’t. He was a good friend. It should stay difficult.” Marty shook himself out of his reverie again. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Get out there, we’re burning daylight.”

John patted him on the shoulder and headed briskly towards wardrobe and make-up.

\* \* \*

After getting his costume on, complete with harness and hooks, he headed over to make-up. He realized he had not seen Jan since the funeral. He took a deep breath. Life was too short. Ken's accident taught him that. No more waiting and wussing out. He decided he was going to ask her out right here and now. He set his jaw and walked in.

To chaos. With Marty coming back at the last minute, everyone was roused up immediately to begin the re-shoot. That meant everyone ended up in make-up at the same time, including himself.

"Okay, get up. You... get in the chair." Jan was shouting directions at cast members and her crew getting people moving. One of her crewmembers quickly presented a newly deformed cast-member to her. "No... no... he didn't have such a big gash last time. Look at the chart." She grabbed a clipboard hanging behind a chair and pointed at some information. "B1, you see?" The crewmember nodded hastily and dragged the extra back to his chair.

Another crewmember hurried up to John. "Mr. Duncan? Ms. Freedman wants to handle your prep personally. Wait here and I'll let her know you're ready."

"Okay." John sat in a chair surrounded by other actors and extras, waiting their turn, some reading papers, and some just watching. It was very much like a barber's waiting room.

"Hey, Bad Guy," John turned his head to see Lewis sitting across from him, legs crossed. His smirk had returned. John sighed. *Guess the new attitude couldn't last*, he thought.

"Big craziness, eh?" Lewis cracked. "That director of ours needs to get his head on straight. I don't know why Cerner puts up with that stuff."

"He just lost a friend, Lewis. I did too, if you remember." John shot back. He picked up a magazine left from a previous cast-member and pretended to read.

"Yeah, I know. But there is too much money on the line here to waste time." He waved a hand. "Look at everyone running around here like headless chickens. If I were running this place, we wouldn't get into this position in the first place."

“Well, it’s too bad you’re not in charge. We’d all be much happier.” John answered.

“Yup. Too bad,” Mark said, missing the sarcasm.

“Rudy!” a voice rang out.

“Right here!” the man sitting next to John leapt up, grateful to no longer be sitting in between the two men. He scampered off and disappeared in all the activity.

Lewis got up and took the now empty chair next to John. John looked straight ahead, his face an expression of bored annoyance. “The way I hear it, Duncan, Cerner may be under new management if things keep up like this.”

“How do you know that?” John asked.

“I have a few stocks too, you know.” Lewis said. “Way more than your little hobby. I keep up with market reports. And, yeah, I have some Cerner stock. I don’t need it to tank.” He leaned in close to John. “Why do you think I gave in to you the other day about the suckhead line? I know what’s happening out there.”

John forced himself not to react. “Things are stretched. It’ll be okay if this movie goes well.”

Lewis leaned back in his chair. “They shouldn’t be so stretched. If they churned out more movies, they’d profit more.”

“Sacrificing quality. Cerner usually puts out better films than your average frat party flick, you know.” John continued to pretend to read, wishing Lewis would just go away.

“Yeah? Well, if Cerner doesn’t do well, it will all be moot. Someone will buy their butts up this spring. Especially if someone keeps leaking the information.”

John looked at him questioningly. “You know about that?”

Lewis jabbed a thumb back at the offices. “Cliff told me what was going on.” He changed the subject. “You know you never got a chance with her.”

“Who?” John asked innocently.

Lewis scoffed, “Yeah, she doesn’t know you exist either.”

Duncan scowled but did not reply.

Lewis put on his best nerd expression. ““Oh poor me. Big movie star and I can’t get up the nerve to ask out a make-up girl.”” He began to laugh. “And you call me a piece of work.”

“I don’t think the word ‘work’ and you ever have come up in the same sentence, you overrated ham!” John hissed.

John immediately regretted the remark. He hated losing his temper and name-calling was not exactly the most mature way to solve any conflict. But since that’s the level Lewis usually wallowed, at least he would get the satisfaction of seeing Lewis redden.

To his surprise, Lewis simply smiled. “So. Touch a chord, did I?” He laughed again, picked up magazine and fell silent.

“Duncan!” a voice called out, cutting off any reply John might have made. *Just as well*, he thought. *If I gave him a black eye, the make-up crew would really be mad at me.*

“Yeah, coming,” he mumbled as he dropped the magazine he was reading and headed towards the make-up chair.

The chaos has lessened considerably as most of the minor cast-members and extras had been herded out, leaving Lewis and Duncan last to be fixed up. He was still scolding himself when Jan stepped in front of him.

“Where you going, John?”

John started at her appearance, his conversation with Lewis instantly forgotten. “Oh... hi. Uh... I’m going over...” he looked around helplessly. “Where the hell was I going?”

“Uh-huh. You better check your dosage,” Jan turned him by the arm and pointed at her chair. “That way. Remember?”

“Right.” He marched over and sat down, leaning back in the barber-style chair. She trailed after him, grabbed a cover-up and whipped it over him, covering him up to his neck. As she began preparing the make-up, she looked at him with concern.

“How are you doing John? You know, since...” she began.

“I’m good. I’m alive, Ken’s not. So I don’t have a thing to complain about,” he replied. “I’m sorry I haven’t been able to talk with you since it happened, though.” She turned the chair to face the mirror. Standing behind him, she looked at his face in the mirror. He returned

the look with equal concern. "I tried to see you at the funeral, but I couldn't find you after the service."

"Yeah, I couldn't stay long." She began inspecting his face. "I heard you picked up the tab for the funeral." John looked at her quizzically. "Ken's sister told me."

John looked down in embarrassment. "Well, it was no big deal. Ken didn't save much. He didn't believe in life insurance either, apparently. It would've been left to her to come up with the necessary costs. Shana and her husband don't need those kind of expenses, especially in this town."

"It was nice of you," she smiled at him as she began applying the small prosthetic.

"Thanks." He decided that now was the time. "So, Jan. I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner some time."

She looked up quickly. "Are you asking me out?"

His eyes glanced up quickly and then straight ahead again. "What? Did I do it wrong?" He tried to keep the conversation light but gulped inwardly.

She smirked. "I'll give it a 10 for directness, but only a 3 for atmosphere."

He snapped his fingers. "Damn, I knew I should've waited for the chance meeting in the hallway."

"So what took you so long?"

"What?" he turned his head quickly, causing Jan to leave a streak across his cheek with the brush she was using. She grabbed his head firmly and turned his gaze back towards the mirror.

"Don't do that." She quickly repaired the damage before continuing. "You heard me. You never could have a halfway serious conversation with me. I can only take so much banter, you know." She rounded the back of his chair and began applying some finishing make-up on the other side of his face to blend the new forehead wound with the natural color of his face. "I finally had to go to a sci-fi convention to get to know you a little bit."

"Well... um, you see..." he stammered, but she cut him off.

“Honestly.” She turned the chair and bent over him slightly, propping herself up on the armrests. “Just how many Foley artists do I have to go out with to get your attention?”

John stared up at her. “Look, I was just...”

“I’m going to have to think about this. I don’t usually go out with guys that dense,” she teased. She straightened up and nonchalantly began working on his make-up again.

He admitted defeat. “Okay. I get it. Carpe Diem. Right?”

She glanced at him with mock puzzlement. “Seize the dime?”

He laughed. “No, no. Seize the carp.”

She winced. “So I enjoy the bantering a little.” She added a couple of more brush strokes and examined her work critically. “There. You’re finished. You better get going.” She glanced over at her assistant, still cleaning up the aftermath. “Get Lewis for me, would you?” The man nodded.

He looked at the new scrape on his forehead. It wasn’t much of a wound, but it was necessary for continuity. He would get it in a previous scene, which ironically had yet to be filmed. “Looks real, as usual. Almost hurts to look at it.”

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?” Lewis jibed as he entered the area. “Freedman would be a waste of money if she didn’t make ‘em look real.”

John ignored him and leaned over surreptitiously to Jan. “If you want me to give him an actual black eye, I would love to arrange it.”

“Get going,” she whispered back as Lewis sat down in the chair. “And pick me up Wednesday. It’s an off day for both of us.”

“Okay. I’ll see you at two o’clock. I’ve got a little errand you might enjoy accompanying me on.” John left the make-up area trying unsuccessfully to hide his grin.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day was uneventful. Marty had ordered the power cut to the tilting mechanism as a precaution. Each shot went smoothly and, thanks to the digital cameras, quickly. John and Lewis were even able to throw in a few shots that were later on the schedule. Marty had returned to his intense self by midday, Elisa still huffed

here and there about shots and lines she didn't like, and Cliff still played peacemaker with all involved. Lewis, true to his conversation with John earlier, chewed through his scenes quickly and professionally. Apparently he had decided to stop whining about his lines, in order to keep his portfolio healthy.

John, buoyed by his conversation with Jan, hit all his cues and turned in one of his better performances. He really relished the humor of Hume and the lines he was able to throw out through all the violence that was happening around him. Fake though it all was, the details on the set and the grandness of it all made for a lot of fun pretending. He attacked the role like a child playing cops and robbers rather than as an actor doing his job. Everything moved along smoothly, and even Marty cheered up as the day wore on. So much so that Elisa's appearance in the late afternoon failed to dampen his spirits.

Marty wrapped up late in the evening and John (after removing make-up and changing back into his street clothes) went home. After having a bite to eat, (and avoiding Rufus's abundance of affection,) he clicked on his computer.

It hummed to life, clicking and whirring. "Okay, let's see if our friend was at work today," he murmured.

He started up his web browser and clicked [mccaindiaries.com](http://mccaindiaries.com) in his bookmarks. The screen blanked and filled with colorful text and pictures. He scanned the headlines:

*Shooting resumed after the untimely death of Ken Scott, noted cinematographer for 'Raising McCain' and whose film credits reach back over 2 decades. (See the 'In Memoriam' story below)*

John looked to see that indeed, an earlier story had been posted remembering Ken's works throughout the years. He smiled sadly and continued reading.

*Even though Mon Capitan McGregor was supposedly 'despondent' he managed to get in a decent day of shooting. Some wonder though if he can commit to the project properly with all the problems that have been plaguing the production. He is believed to still be on the edge of depression. We hear it's affecting his 'noggin'.*

So, John thought, *they know Marty was a mess this morning.* They even know about his eggnog fetish, although that had been chronicled in gossip magazines for years. Having it known that the director's heart might not be in his project is not a story that inspires confidence. He grimaced. After clicking off his computer, he stretched and yawned.

Rufus looked up at him contently, happy to have his master back home. John headed to bed, scratching his head on the way by.

*Time to put a stop to this nonsense once and for all,* he thought as he went to sleep.



## Chapter XII

Three days (and several long shoots) later, John picked up Jan at her home. After exchanging the usual first-date pleasantries, they were out the door and on the freeway. They chit-chatted about the weather (not too warm for this time of year), how the movie was going (much better lately), John's sci-fi collectables ("I still want an actual working ray gun"), and Jan's weirdest make-up designs (half-alien, half-rabbit) before falling quiet. After driving along in silence for several minutes, Jan finally gasped in frustration.

"All right. Are you ever going to tell me where we are going?"

John smiled. "We are going to *iff.com*."

"*iff.com*? What's that, some government organization?" Jan asked.

John smirked. "No, it's a website dedicated to movies. One of their subject-based sites is called *mccaindiaries.com*. They've been printing a lot of unsubstantiated rumors on the movie and we need to get them to stop."

"Why? If they are putting out a pack of lies, let them." Jan scoffed.

"They're not lies, that's the problem. In fact, the rumors are completely true. We just haven't substantiated them." Duncan glanced out the window. "Where's the Concord Parkway exit?"

"It's still a little ways up." She crossed her arms. "Where are they getting their information?"

“We don’t know. But it’s someone on the production, we know that much at least.” He flicked on his turn signal and changed lanes.

“Does that happen a lot on the Internet?” she asked.

“Sometimes. Depends on the production. Some big productions really have a problem with security, especially if they do a lot of filming on-location. It’s hard to keep people out of a public place.”

Jan nodded. “So you’re taking me to see a bunch of computer geeks on our first date. You really are quite the romantic, aren’t you?”

John glanced at her, amused. “It’s only a first stop.”

“It better be,” she warned. “I pride myself on being high maintenance.”

“I didn’t think any woman described herself as being high maintenance.”

She leaned over to him. “Let me let you in on a little secret, John. We’re all high maintenance.”

John rapped his hands on the wheel. “I suspected as much.”

She pointed out the window. “Here’s your exit.”

He cocked his head to one side briefly. “Maybe I should take it.”

She glared at him playfully, realizing he was also talking about their date. “Oh, that’s going to cost you.”

They took the Concord exit ramp and sped onto another highway. Another exit and three turns later they arrived at a business park. Marble signs along the entrance proclaimed ‘Information Woods’.

The road was quite scenic. Trees lined each side with large patches of grass sloping away from the road to parking lots for large, modern, glass and steel buildings. The buildings were tall and spread apart. From a distance it looked as if a remote forest had grown the occasional ten or twenty-story skyscraper.

“We’re looking for 14450 Silicon Acres Avenue.” They came upon signs that pointed directions for ranges of addresses. “Let’s see, 12000-13500 to the left. 13500-15000 to the right.”

The car turned up the road, winding around a small lake. It was sky blue with a complex fountain dancing merrily in its center. At the

end of a road stood a building covered with dark smoked glass. The fountain could be seen reflected clearly in its side.

“Classy setup,” Jan remarked.

“Yeah. *iff* survived the dot com bust at the beginning of the decade quite well.”

He turned the car into a free space and shut it off. A short walk and even shorter elevator ride later, they entered the suites of *iff.com*.

A tall white counter greeted them with large red words “Welcome to *iff.com*, The Leader in Interactive Entertainment News” emblazoned on its front. Behind the counter was a half-wall. Cubicles could be seen stretching back to the windows for nearly fifty feet. People were busily whisking back and forth on various errands. Endless one-sided conversations could be heard from the cubicle-bound employees on their phones.

Jan leaned towards John, still surveying the activity. “What did you say *iff* stood for?”

“Internet film fans,” he answered.

She whistled, impressed. “It should be called *hcc.com*. Huge Corporate Conglomerate.”

John chuckled in response. The two stepped forward towards the counter. As they got closer, they saw a prim looking woman sitting behind it; headset nestled in her shoulder-length blond hair. She busily clicked buttons on the phone console that sat blinking in front of her and spoke brightly into her headset.

“*Iff*, please hold.” Click. “*Iff*, please hold.” Click. “*Iff*... Can I tell him who’s calling? ... One moment.” She continued clicking away, not acknowledging the two’s presence.

John finally cleared his throat. The woman, not looking up, held up one finger in his direction and continued taking calls. John fell silent and waited impatiently. Finally the blinking lights on the console diminished and she turned and looked pleasantly at them.

“I’m so sorry, it’s been a real mad-house today.” Her eyes widened and her expression changed to one of fear. “You! I’ve seen you before! It was on the news, or *USA’s Most Sought After*, or something...” she backed up in her chair quickly.

John held up his hands and smiled. “No, no, you just saw me in a movie. Probably killing the hero, or blowing up innocent people, or some such thing.”

The woman relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief and recognition. “That’s right, I saw you in *Justice Held Hostage*. You were really scary.”

Jan began to giggle. “I don’t know... he looks pretty shifty. I think you might want to call the cops anyway.”

“Very funny,” John rolled his eyes.

“Wow, so you’re... um... oh, this is embarrassing. I can’t remember your name!” The lady blushed.

John smiled disarmingly. Being second banana in the movies usually didn’t give him as much name recognition as the actors who played the heroes. He didn’t mind and didn’t want the receptionist to be embarrassed. “Don’t worry about it. It’s Duncan. John Duncan.”

Jan began to laugh harder. “The most evil man you’ve ever known! Old what’s-his-name!”

John raised his eyebrows in amused frustration. “Thaaat’s it,” he said. “Get it all out of your system.”

The receptionist finally rescued him. “How can I help you, Mr. Duncan?” She slid a large book towards him. “And can you sign in here, please?”

“We’re here to see the Webmaster for *mccaindiaries.com*.” He opened up the guest book and signed it. He motioned Jan to do the same.

“He usually doesn’t see people without an appointment... but I’m sure he’ll make an exception in your case. I’ll let him know you’re here.” She punched a button on the phone. “David? John Duncan is here to see you. Yes, that John Duncan... Okay. I’ll tell him.” She looked back John. “He’ll be right up. Please have a seat.”

With Jan still unsuccessfully trying to suppress her giggling, they sat in the waiting room chairs; which were plush, leather, and extremely comfortable. John had hardly a moment to enjoy it when he had to stand as a wild-eyed man rushed into the room.

“John Duncan! Wow!” He grabbed John’s hand and shook it enthusiastically. “Really an honor to meet you. I’m a big fan!”

John returned the handshake in a more subdued fashion. “Thank you, Mister...?”

“Bauer,” the other man answered loudly. He realized he was getting over excited and forced himself to calm down. “David Bauer. I run *mccaindiaries.com*. Didn’t you ask for me?”

John nodded. “I apologize, I didn’t get a name. I just asked for the Webmaster.” He gestured to Jan. “This is Jan Freedman.”

Although John wouldn’t have thought it possible, David’s eyes widened further. “Ahhhh! Make-up effects supervisor for *Raising McCain*, right?”

She nodded, clearly surprised to be recognized. “Yes. You know my work? You really know your movies.”

Bauer’s grin widened. “Hey, this may look like a soulless corporation, but we really are all fans of everything cinema. Creature effects are a niche interest for me in particular.” He waved his hands excitedly. “Well, let’s not stand around here, come on back! Let’s see what I can help you with. Can I give you a tour?”

He turned and headed back towards the interior with Jan and John in tow. John could see that the cubicles were surrounded on three sides by offices. The three of them stayed along the wall passing office after office. People in their cubicles began to realize they had some guests. Some turned, surprised to see John here at their office. Others (like the receptionist) were shocked, thinking they recognized him from somewhere else. Soon he could hear excited whispering bouncing back and forth between the cubicles.

John ignored the looks and followed David. They rounded a corner and continued on between the seemingly endless cubicles and the offices. Finally they stopped at the last office before the windows. Bauer turned and walked in.

“Please, come in. Have a seat,” he offered as he quickly pulled out his guest chairs in front of his desk.

“Thanks,” John said, sitting heavily. “I suppose you’re wondering why I’m here,” he ventured as Bauer rounded his desk and sat.

Bauer smiled thinly. "I think I have an idea. Though to be honest, I'm surprised any of you Hollywood types actually read us. Or any rumor site for that matter."

"We're just like everyone else. Some of us really like computers and the Internet in our off time. Some of us don't," John shrugged.

Bauer smirked. "And some are frightened of computers."

"Perhaps. But even those people know what bad rumors would do to a production; even it's from..." he paused, searching for the right words, "an unorthodox source."

Bauer's realization came quickly. "You asking me to stop printing my leads?"

John nodded. "To put it bluntly, yes."

Bauer laughed. "Look, as much as I appreciate your work, you can't ask me to do that. Just the fact that you're here means my source is definitely on the set."

John cocked his head questioningly. "You mean you weren't sure?"

Bauer shrugged. "We always have people who email some tidbits here and there. Extras stay a day and report what they see, that sort of thing. But this one was printing some real intimate details, some of which we corroborated from several other sources. But, no we weren't a hundred percent sure."

John looked intently at Bauer. "I guess you are now. So stop."

Bauer started laughing again. "You've got some nerve, Duncan, I'll give you that."

John didn't react. "We could sue. This is confidential information you're printing. This is not the 'public's right to know' or any other such platitudes."

Bauer immediately stopped laughing. "Sue?"

John smiled. "We own the rights to the properties, and we paid a lot of money for it. This isn't any different from other corporate properties."

"But, we've been reporting on Cerner for years!" Bauer exclaimed. "You guys got a lot of hype thanks to us. You would do that now?"

John's expression softened, but he still penetrated Bauer with his intense gaze. "We could do that. We don't want to, but we will as a last resort. Quite honestly, I'd rather work out something that's more mutually beneficial rather than lawyer-beneficial."

John leaned back in his chair. He began to feel like some of the super-villain or mob boss parts he played so often. He hoped Bauer was buying it. "Here's the deal. We'll make you the official website of the production. You'll get interviews, video clips, and set pictures. We'll even debut the trailer on your site." John leaned forward. "Think about it. Exclusive sources. Thousands, perhaps millions of hits a day, clicking up those advertising counters, generating revenue."

Bauer stared at John, eyes wide. "You already have a site."

"You've seen it?" John asked and Bauer nodded. "Then you know it sucks. There's hardly anything on it. Believe me you'd be doing us a favor. We have a budget like anyone else. Cutting web marketing out of it would help us out a bit. And since the name is registered, it will appear on all our TV commercials. What if that name went to your servers instead?"

Bauer's eyes widened. "And all we have to do is stop printing the spy reports we've been getting?"

John sucked in his breath through his teeth. *Here's where I go for broke*, he thought.

"I need one other thing. Do you archive all your contacts?"

"Yeah," Bauer replied, "every email we receive gets backed up to tape and CD-Recordables. Why?"

"I need to see the emails that you received from that spy." John winced inwardly as he waited for Bauer's reaction.

David sat back in his chair and turned to look out the window for several long moments. Finally he turned back to face John. "Give up our sources? You want me to give up our source?"

John smirked. "Oh, come on. You get your stuff from emails. You don't even know who sent half of them."

Bauer thought for several moments. His brow furrowed as he considered what John was offering. He turned his chair and stared

out the window. John waited silently. He'd offered everything he could.

Finally Bauer spoke. "Okay, you got yourself a deal." He broke into a wide grin, stood and extended his hand out over his desk. John stood and shook it. Bauer broke into a laugh again. "Okay! This is great! Let's get you back to the server room and we'll round up those emails."

He led them out of his office. They retracted their steps back the way they came and kept going past the receptionist. Jan and John spoke softly as they followed David to the server room.

"Are you sure this will work? What's to stop him from printing stuff from the mole anyway?" she whispered to him.

"Prestige. Bauer made a show of heavy consideration back there, but the truth is he was wetting his pants at the idea of being our official website." John replied.

They rounded a corner, letting another employee pass by. "Would Cerner really have sued him?" Jan asked.

"Are you kidding? We don't have the time, and the publicity would've been horrible. They would've avoided that at all costs." John grinned conspiratorially and whispered, "But Bauer doesn't know that, does he?"

Jan returned the grin. Then she thought of something. "Can he give you those emails? Aren't there privacy laws or something?"

"I don't think so. It's like if you get a letter from someone, it's yours to show anyone you want, unless you would be breaking a prior contract. Since he prints his emails for the world to see, I don't think privacy is an issue." John said.

"Here we are." Bauer interrupted them as he stopped in front of a door. The handle had five buttons on it. He punched in a four-digit code and turned the handle. They walked up a slight ramp onto a raised, white floor.

Jan shivered. Bauer noticed and looked apologetic. "Sorry about the temperature, but we have to keep it colder in here with all the equipment."



John stared in admiration. There were dozens of cabinets, each over six feet high and filled with servers. Each of the servers fit neatly on top of one another, with small green lights flickering away on their fronts.

“How many websites do you do here?” he asked.

“Not as many as you might think from all the equipment. Most of the servers are mirror images of one another. One server can’t handle a million hits, but several dozen servers can share the load,” Bauer replied, pointing at a couple of cabinets.

John nodded in understanding. “I see. Then if you need more capacity, you simply replicate the setup on more equipment.”

“Exactly.” Bauer crossed in front of the cabinets and sat down at a console.

Jan stood behind him. “This monitor and keyboard can control all these servers?” she marveled.

“Yeah. Although most of the servers have software that lets the administrators control them from their desks. We don’t come in here very often unless we need to check something physically on the server.” He rubbed his arms in irritation. “It’s too damn cold.”

Bauer tapped a combination of keys on the keyboard and a menu popped up on the screen. He scanned the choices and tapped the keys quickly. The screen changed and John noted the screen that appeared was not unlike his home computer.

David moved the mouse and clicked on a few menus. “Okay, let me bring up the tape archive. Emails are all stored in a single file, but the tape software can backup individual emails within that file. Let me just do a search on it...”

John pointed at the screen. “Can you tell me what the address is?”

Bauer looked at John helplessly. “I can, but it won’t do you any good.”

“Why not?” Jan asked.

“Because the address they used was a dummy address.” He resumed tapping on the keyboard. “They could send to us, but we couldn’t send back.”

John pursed his lips. "I figured as much. But there might be something in the headers."

"Headers? What are headers?" Jan asked.

Bauer looked up at Jan. "Headers are instructions within an email. Every email sent on the Internet has headers in them to tell the computer where to deliver it, where it starts, where it ends, who it's from..."

"And where it's from." John finished. "Email originates from and moves between post offices." He gestured at the cabinets. "A post office is just a server where your mailbox is located. Even if you mask your name, you still have to send it from a post office somewhere."

"So you want to find the server that the spy's email originated from," Jan said.

Bauer shook his head. "That's a long shot, John. Anyone could set up a free account on the public servers on the Internet. They'd have no way of knowing where it came from."

"When someone sends an email to that server, which relays it to you guys here, a connection is made," Duncan replied. "If we can find that address, we can figure out a location."

"Now you lost me again," Jan said.

"Every computer, server, or dude sitting at home in his underwear has a unique address on the Internet. These addresses are doled out to providers from a central agency in blocks," John said.

Bauer snapped his fingers. "Right, I see where you are going. A person gets Internet service to his home, he's going to get one that's local."

"Why?" Jan asked.

"When your computer calls another computer, it's still subject to long-distance charges," Bauer replied. "If a guy dials up the Internet, he'll be on the phone a long time. Those charges would eat you alive. So he's going to dial up someplace local. When he connects and sends a message, we can get the address and figure out from which service he is calling."

“Once we get the Internet Service Provider, we get the physical location. We might be able to narrow it down from there, based on who is in the production,” John said.

Bauer had a sudden thought. “Wait. What if it’s a nationwide service? Like Nation’s Online?”

“They’ll still have a record of the account. Nation’s Online uses local numbers in every city. They should be able to narrow it down, too. Hopefully they’ll work with us,” John replied.

“I don’t know,” David answered doubtfully. “Those ISP’s aren’t going to just hand over their customer’s names. You don’t have a warrant and you’re not the police. They’ll lose business fast if their clients find out they’ll give information on their customers activities to the first John, Dick or Harry that asks for it.”

John grimaced. “I know, but it’s all I got.”

David nodded. “Fair enough.” He began typing. “I’m asking the backup program to search through the archives based on the email address alias they used. It should find all the messages we received.” The screen blinked “Searching...” for several minutes. Finally a list appeared with a little over two-dozen entries.

“Here you go.” David pointed at the screen. “Want me to bring one up?”

“Yeah,” John said. “Open up the earliest one.”

Dave complied and a window opened. John read the message.

*Dear iff,*

*I am an insider on the production of the new McCain movie. I know you are already aware of the casting of Mark Lewis as McCain, but you are not aware of the casting of Hume. I can confirm that John Duncan will be offered the part. You will see the story break the entertainment wires in two days. I will understand if you don’t break this early, so use it as a test of my veracity.*

*In the future you will know me as:*

*Red Scorpion*

“Red Scorpion?” Jan scoffed. “A little corny, isn’t it? I’m surprised he didn’t want to be called ‘Deep Throat.’”

John smiled. “You obviously have never read *The McCain Diaries*. Everyone uses aliases on the Internet. Red Scorpion was one of McCain’s most dangerous foes.”

He remembered that *iff.com* had reported on his casting only a day or so after he knew himself. Now he saw how they knew. This person was there from the beginning.

He tapped the screen. “David, can you reveal the headers?”

“No problem.” Bauer clicked a menu and checked off a couple of choices. Suddenly the message became infused with other messages and symbols.

Received: from gfi (mail.libertynetworks.com [250.40.64.240])  
by mail.iff.com with SMTP (Linux Internet Mail Service Version  
7.5.2)

id YW33J12T; Fri, 13 Dec 2003 14:42:55 -0600

Received: from mail.libertynetworks.com ([172.16.3.240])

Fri, 13 Dec 2000 14:56:32 -0600

Content-Class: urn:content-classes:message

MIME-Version: 1.0

Content-Type: text/plain;

charset="iso-8859-1"

Content-Transfer-Encoding: quoted-printable

Subject: Raising McCain

Date: Fri, 13 Dec 2000 14:51:10 -0600

Message-ID: <E0EDC9B3C760B44DADD96F6D4F1CAE  
96F3940B@Mail.iff.com>

X-MS-Has-Attach:

X-MS-TNEF-Correlator:

Thread-Topic: Raising McCain

Thread-Index: AcKi6ViXNxD3vWu9TDWXML8dcjobXg==

From: “Red Scorpion” <rscorpion@McCainspy.com>

To: <webmaster@iff.com>

Return-Path: <>

X-OriginalArrivalTime: 13 Dec 2003 20:56:32.0277 (UTC)  
FILETIME=[1D9E8450:01C2A2EA]

*Dear iff,*

*I am an insider on the production of the new McCain movie. I know you are already aware of the casting of Mark Lewis as McCain, but you are not aware of the casting of Hume. I can confirm that John Duncan will be offered the part. You will see the story break the entertainment wires in two days. I will understand if you don't break this early, so use it as a test of my veracity.*

*In the future you will know me as:*

*Red Scorpion*

"Are those the headers?" Jan asked.

"Yup. That's all the stuff that goes with every email you send," David said. "It tells your email program how to display it, and your post office where to send it."

John studied the screen. "Look at the 'from' field. It says `rscorpion@mccainspy.com`. Is *mccainspy.com* a registered name?"

David shook his head. "No. We checked it out, it was just one he made up. Looks like he also blanked his return-path. Ordinarily, that would give us the actual email address."

"So he sends to you, but you can't send back." John scanned the page some more. "Who is *libertynetworks.com*?"

Bauer squinted at the screen. "Good question. Let me look it up." He clicked open the web browser and began typing. A few moments later the screen blinked and filled with text. "Liberty Networks. It's a local internet service provider based in New York."

"New York?" Jan said. "Does that mean the spy is in New York?"

John shook his head. "Maybe. He could've relayed it from other email servers though."

Bauer shook his head. "I doubt it. Junk email has become a real problem. Any provider worth his salt would've shut down that function on their server. Otherwise these spammers would send out gobs of email to anyone and everyone selling anything and everything."

"They do that anyway," John admonished.

"It would be ten times worse." Bauer shook his head.

"So, if it says it came from *libertynetworks.com*..." Jan began.

"Then that's probably where it originated," Bauer finished.

John pointed at the screen. "Can you print that out for me?"

"Sure," Bauer replied, hitting a few more keys on the keyboard. "Does this tell you anything?"

"I don't know." He smiled warmly at David. "You've been a big help. I really appreciate it. I'll leave you a number you can get a hold of me at. We'll set up interview times and get you some limited access to the set. Get me a proposal on how you want to design the site, and we'll get this rolling."

David jumped up, even more excited than when he first met them. "Set access! Wow! This will be great!"

"LIMITED set access," John reiterated. "And by invite only. But I promise we'll make it worth your while."

John watched David lick his lips. "Great. Absolutely. I look forward to working with you!"

"And please forward anymore of these emails to me. Don't post them. Agreed?" John asked.

"No problem. There's nothing he could give us that could even compare to set access! Don't you worry, those reports will die here," David promised, shaking John's hand vigorously.

A man ran up to David and handed him a piece of paper. "Oh, thanks." He handed the paper to John. "Here's the printout you wanted."

"Great. Well, we've got to get going. I'll be in touch." With that he turned and hurried out of there.

\* \* \*

Jan hurried to keep up with him. He breathed a heavy sigh on the elevator. He looked at the printout he held in hand intensely, finally crumpling it in his hand.

"Hey, wait," Jan finally caught up to him and grabbed his elbow gently. "What was all that about? What did you see in there? You bolted like you were shot out of a cannon."

"New York, Jan," he said, holding up the printouts. "The emails came from a New York-based Internet service provider."

Jan's eye's widened in sudden understanding. "Elisa. You think she's your mole?"

*THE BAD GUY*

John stabbed the lobby button on the elevator. “She’s the only one this close to the production that lives there.”

Jan waved her hands in disbelief. “Wait a minute. So what? So she’s giving information to the Internet press. What does that mean? What would she have to gain?”

John started to reply, then stopped. “No, you’re right,” he finally said. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves. I need to talk to Cliff.”

“Good idea,” she replied. She smiled teasingly at him. “But not today. I’ve geeked out long enough.” She gently poked a finger in his chest. “Time for you to lasso me to the moon, or at least a good lunch.”

He grinned. The elevator door opened and they headed out to the parking lot.

## Chapter XIII

A few moments later, Jan and John were speeding back down the highway. They were both hungry and so John suggested she pick a restaurant. After a few minutes of indecision, she decided on a seafood place just off the coast.

John turned on the radio and they drove along in silence. While Jan was tapping her fingers to the tunes, John was lost in thought, disturbed over what he found at *iff*. Jan finally interrupted his thoughts. “You wanna go to a movie after we eat?”

“Why?” John replied irritably. “You want to find one with me in it and throw stuff at the screen?”

“I was trying to think of something we both could do,” she replied quietly.

“We’re both going to eat together,” he pointed out.

“Yes. But if it’s anything like this car ride, I’ll be eating food, while those emails will be eating you.”

John looked sheepish. “I should let it go, shouldn’t I,” he admonished himself.

She smiled at him. “Put it on standby, at least. Let’s have some fun! We won’t get another day off on the schedule for quite a while.”

Several moments later they arrived at the restaurant. John got out of the car and locked the doors with his key remote before Jan could open up the door. He ran around the back of the car and



opened her door. He made a sweeping bow and held out his hand. "Please my lady, let me show a little chivalry. It's a lost art in this day and age."

She took his hand and stood with a flourish. "My pardon, dear sir. Please accompany me to this fine eating establishment."

They crossed the parking lot laughing and joking. It was still early in the evening and the restaurant was not yet busy. A few moments pause and soon they were sitting at a secluded table. Small enough for two, it was lit with a by a small candle and neatly supplied with napkins, condiments, and a small basket of cracker packages. A waiter scampered up quickly to take their drink orders, promising to return momentarily to get their food order. They each took a cracker out of the basket sitting on the table and munched absently while reading the menus.

Moments later the waiter reappeared. He politely took their orders and their menus, replacing them with the drinks they had requested. After he finished writing down Jan's order of sea bass, to which she made several changes, he thanked them and left.

John watched Jan as she munched on another cracker. "So tell me about yourself."

"Not much to tell," she said between bites. "Girl raised in middle suburbia. Graduated high school with a B-average, went to college, dropped out of college, went to California, and worked on my first movie as a caterer. That got me into make-up effects."

John blinked. "Whoa, back-up. You went from catering to destroying actors faces?"

"You'd be surprised what some cranberry sauce can do to people in a pinch, and boy! – Were they in a pinch! After destroying a guy's chest with some cheap food, the creature effects crew leader saw some potential in me and offered me a chance to intern in the creature shop." She took a sip of her drink. "The rest is history as they say."

John nodded slowly. "Cranberry sauce?"

"Mixed with ketchup. The color and texture gives it a nice congealed look." She grinned at the memory. "Of course it didn't take long on the outdoor set for the bugs to find him. Since he was

supposed to be dead, it really lent to the realism.” She began giggling at the memory. “Of course, his twitching didn’t.”

John snorted. “I’ll bet.” He took a drink and changed the subject. “So where exactly is ‘middle suburbia?’ Can it be found on a map?”

“Yes, but no one wants to,” she said, and John detected an edge to her voice.

John grimaced. “Uh-oh. Did I just arm a land mine?”

“No, no. I’m being unfair. I don’t have any big, horrible, Oprah-moments. I was raised in your typical suburb. Twenty minutes from your typical city, surrounded by typical housing developments, typical mini-malls, typical maxi-malls, and typical fast food restaurants.” She sighed. “It was just so...”

“Typical?” John quipped.

“Bland.”

“I could’ve done with some of that blandness,” John said.

“Oh, right,” she recalled. “Your dad kept things interesting at least.”

“Interesting is not what I would call it. In and out of jail, never could have a normal job like the other kids, he was always trying to get the ‘big score’. He’d sell things that didn’t work, or scalp fake tickets or God knows what else. He even dabbled in telemarketing scams.” He shook his head. “He was a good father. He just wasn’t a very good man. He wanted the best for me, and didn’t want me to follow in his footsteps.”

Jan nodded. “But he’s reformed now, right?”

“So far. He’s doing those sci-fi collectables sales now. Taking stuff to conventions and stores, buying things here, selling things there, and always hoping to find the big dollar item. Don’t know if I’d call that reformed, but at least it’s legal.” He took another drink. “I wonder if he doesn’t still have the same attitude anyway, it’s just that the work is legitimate.”

“So why do you let him on the set? What if he pilfers something? With the publicity surrounding *Raising McCain*, it really could be his big score.” Jan picked up another cracker packet and snapped off a piece.

“He and I reconciled somewhat a few years back. He’s been trying to earn my trust. He can’t do that if I don’t let him.” He sipped at the glass, letting some ice swirl in his mouth. “But just in case, I have the prop guys keep a close count of everything. Not that they already don’t, what with the publicity surrounding this beast.”

She was about to reply when the waiter scampered up with a tray. He set the plates down in front of them, and asked if they’d like anything else. After assuring him that everything was satisfactory, he smiled politely and left.

“Your dad drives you crazy, doesn’t he?” Jan said, shoveling in a mouthful of pasta.

“What happened to finding out about you?” John said pointedly.

Jan spoke between chewing. “Being high-maintenance means I get to pick the conversation topics. Besides, we did me already. We determined my life was boring. Let’s move on.”

“I didn’t think you were boring,” he said quietly.

She stopped eating and looked down, blushing slightly. “Thank you John. That’s sweet.”

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand affectionately. “But I really am interested in your story. You have this father who obviously has a shady past, yet you seem to genuinely want to keep a relationship with him. I’m just wondering why.”

John shrugged. “Parents are to kids what kids are to parents. They drive you insane and you want to strangle them, but mostly you just want their approval, and they just want you to do well.” He took a bite of his fish. “I just don’t understand him sometimes. If he’d put half the effort into an honest job as he did his silly schemes, he could’ve had all the success he wanted by now.”

“People can’t see their own problems even if everyone else can. Look at me, I’ve been told I overeat. Personally I don’t see it,” she said, glancing down at the large pile of food. “Look, he didn’t want you to follow in his footsteps, but he couldn’t change his own path.”

John snorted. “I don’t buy that. People can choose to do whatever they want. No one is on a ‘path’. They set their own journey.”

Jan chewed thoughtfully. “You think your father’s finally on the right journey?”

“I don’t know. It’s something that has to be sustained; he can’t do anything illegal...ever. This isn’t something that happens overnight, he has to keep proving it every day.” He sighed. “But, since he’s my dad, I want to give him the chance to try.”

“So far, so good?”

“So far.” He took another bite and stared at the flickering candle in the center of table. “So far.”

She took another bite. “You know, you’re right.”

“About what?”

“About choosing your own path.” She lowered her fork. “I resolved to live every day like my last.”

John smiled slightly. “Doesn’t everyone? I mean, that seems kind of obvious, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Yeah, I know,” she acknowledged. “But I can back it up. I nearly died once already, so every day since has been gravy.”

“What?” John exclaimed. “Wait a minute, whoa! You almost died?”

She sighed. “It was so stupid.” She took a long drink before starting. “I was fourteen. We had this little lake nearby and a friend of mine had a sailboat. It was one of those tiny little ones, you know, a Butterfly? Or was it a Sunfish?”

John nodded. “I know the type.”

“Anyway, I would borrow it sometimes. I loved going out on it, just me and the water,” she sighed wistfully. “It was the only place to go where I could just be alone.”

“Must’ve been peaceful.”

“Yeah, but not very smart. Once I turned the boat around from north to south. The sail whipped around and I ducked under it as usual. But for whatever reason, I forgot to un-cleat the line. Instead of continuing on to the other side of the boat, it caught the breeze and capsized the boat. I ended up under the sail.”

John said nothing, transfixed by her story.

She continued placidly. “I didn’t get a good breath before getting knocked in and the sail didn’t have any air under it. Even pushing above the surface didn’t make a difference because of the suction. I tried to dive down, but my lifejacket wouldn’t let me. I started to panic.”

“Geez.” John said. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like.”

“Just when I thought, ‘This is it. I’m done for,’ the sail’s edge must’ve come loose off the water because it made a sh slurping sound and I suddenly had air. Not much,” she amended, “but enough. Enough to get my life jacket off and dive down to get away from the sail. I righted the boat, got back in, and sat for about an hour, just trying to get my wits back. Then I sailed back and went home,” she finished simply. Smiling she took another bite of her food.

John digested her story as they ate in silence for several minutes. Finally he spoke. “And that’s why you live your life as if each day is your last?”

“Not exactly. Living your life as if there are no more days left is foolish,” she said. “But I did decide that I wasn’t going to be typical. If I wanted to do something, I was going to try it. I’ve made some dumb decisions here and there, but I never tried to anything intentionally foolish.”

She took another drink and looked at him coyly. “Except maybe tonight.”

John nearly choked on his food as he suppressed a laugh.

“Point is,” she continued, “I’m never going to waste a moment doing something that isn’t fulfilling or enjoyable.”

John nodded slowly. “Does that include today?”

She smiled slyly. “I’ll let you know.”

\* \* \*

They finished up their meal in due course, sat and chatted for a while. John truly enjoyed Jan’s company and hoped she was enjoying the conversation as much as he was. He found out about her childhood, (only set fire to the rug once), high school (prom queen and homecoming queen), and college (partied too much and forgot to go to classes).

Later, John drove her home, having decided to pass on a movie due to their early schedule. Night had fallen by the time they arrived, and the cooler January air kept the smog down and stars bright.

Jan stopped at her door. She crossed her arms and looked John up and down. "Well Bad Guy. It was a good date."

"Thanks," he said. "Hope we can do it again sometime."

She leaned forward and touched his face gently with her hand. "Absolutely," she whispered and kissed him lightly at first, then more fully.

John closed his eyes, letting himself fully enjoy the moment. His lips were still tingling long after the kiss ended.

"Good night," she said demurely. She turned and inserted the key into her lock. It wouldn't budge. She turned and strained and yanked the key out in frustration, swearing as she did so. John hid his smile. She examined the key ring and sheepishly selected the correct key. "So much for an exit with a flourish," she grouched.

He reached forward, mimicking her gesture moments ago, and touched her face. "I thought it was perfect. Especially the cuss words." He kissed her lightly and turned back up towards his car.

"John!" she called, stopping him in his tracks. He turned around to see her still standing on her porch. "It was both. Fulfilling and enjoyable, that is."

He smiled nonplussed for a moment, then nodded in understanding. "Thanks. For me, too." He got into his car and drove home, a smile painted on his face the whole way.

## Chapter XIV

The next day John arrived early at the set, eager to tell Cliff what he had found out the day before at *iff.com*. Before he could get far, a voice stopped him in his tracks.

“JOHN!”

He blinked. “Dad?” John cursed himself. He hadn’t talked to his father since the accident. *I should have at least phoned him or something*, he thought.

“Yes! Where have you been?” He turned to see Charlie half-jogging up towards him.

“I’ve been working,” he replied. He took Charlie by the shoulders and moved him quickly to the side to avoid an electrician hurrying by with bundles of cables.

“What?” Charlie said, startled. “Oh, sorry.”

John pulled the older man to the far wall. “You know you’re supposed to stay out of the way.”

“I know, but I haven’t seen you since...” he trailed off sadly.

He had forgotten that Charlie was there the day of the accident. He realized that Charlie had not only seen Ken die, but very nearly seen his son die as well. “I’m sorry, Dad. I should’ve called.”

“Damn right you should’ve called.” Charlie snapped. “I was worried about you. I couldn’t believe you were in the middle of all that.”

“Well, we had a small change in schedule that day, Dad.” He looked at him quizzically. “What with Ken and now Elisa maybe leaking information... well you know how it is.”

“Leaking information? You mean she’s the one going to that website you mentioned?” Charlie asked.

John shrugged. “I don’t know. I shouldn’t have mentioned that, I don’t know for sure. It’s getting tense around here.”

“Yes, I guess so. It’s just that... I mean... I just don’t want to see you get hurt.” Charlie squeezed John’s arm. “You’re the only reason I stayed out of trouble as long as I did.”

John arched an eyebrow. “Stayed out of trouble? You didn’t exactly stay out of trouble.”

Charlie glared at him. “You don’t know, boy. The stuff I passed up, the big scores.”

John began to get annoyed. “Look. I didn’t invite you here trying to re-ignite our relationship, trying to give you a chance to make things right, just so you can come here and tell me about the ‘big scores’ that you know damn good and well would still have you rotting in some federal pen today.”

Charlie sighed, chastened. “You’re right. I know and I’m sorry. I’ve just been a little stressed out lately, what with collection sales down and now your accident.” Defiance set in his brow. “But you never contacted me and I was really worried.”

John grimaced. “Let’s just drop it for now. How about we get together tonight?”

Charlie nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Good. Oh, wait,” John suddenly snapped his fingers. “I’ve got to see Cliff tonight.”

“Then I’ll join you again. We had fun that night at Gilly’s.”

John shook his head. “It’s not another social get-together.”

Charlie frowned. “Tomorrow then?”

John thought a moment. “Yeah, that will work.”

The older man brightened. “Good. You can tell me how your date with Jan went.”

John’s eyes widened. “How the hell do you know about that?”



Charlie's eyes twinkled and wandered over to the doorway to Jan's makeup area. "Oh... a little bird told me."

"Bird, huh." John pursed his lips. He gently nudged his father to follow him and they started walking together towards the exit. "Look, you better head out of here. They are definitely tightening up on security. I'm going to be too busy keeping everything on schedule, what with lost shooting days, not to mention Ken's... well... I've been made director of photography."

"Why John, that's great!" Charlie exclaimed.

John arched an eyebrow. "What, the bird was mum on that one?"

Charlie shrugged. "Hey, that's nature. Who can guess what birds will do?" he chuckled. "Actually I think she wanted you to be the one to tell me."

They continued walking in silence until they reached the exit moments later. Charlie stopped suddenly and gripped John's arm. "Are you sure I can't stay? Can't I lend any moral support or anything?"

John shook his head and disengaged gently from Charlie's grip. "I appreciate it, but I really don't want to rock any boats right now."

Charlie sighed again, dropping his arm. "Yeah, okay. I hear you." He opened the door.

John snapped his fingers. "Hey wait. If you're having problems, we can talk it over tomorrow night."

"What? Oh, the collectables," Charlie remembered. "I forgot I mentioned that." He stabbed a look at John. "And you forget it, too. I'm fine. Rich is out scouting new buyers. I'll be fine. Father's supposed to be helping out his son, not the other way around."

John held his gaze for moment. Finally, he relented. "Okay. Then I'll see you tomorrow."

Charlie flashed him a smile and closed the door behind him.

\* \* \*

"New York?"

John nodded. Cliff sat down heavily. "Elisa Barnhardt's the mole. That's just perfect."

"I didn't say that, Cliff," Duncan said.

Cliff snorted. "You didn't have to. Who else would be based in New York who knew this much?"

"Yeah, but there's no proof. Just a trail," John pointed out, "that leads to New York. There are thirteen million people there."

"Only one that works here. Only one that has the knowledge of what's going on around here. Hell, I'm the one who's been keeping her updated." Cliff slammed his hand down on the desk.

John stood up quickly. "Don't get started Cliff. There are a lot of people on this set. Everything really started once shooting began. You don't really know that someone isn't calling that provider from L.A."

Cliff calmed as he contemplated that. "The casting leaked well before shooting. But..." he amended, quickly cutting off John's protest. "You're right. We need proof."

John smiled and sat back down. "I think I can get it if you can get Elisa out of her office for a while."

Cliff's hands gripped together on the desk. "I'll do you one better. We're supposed to be in with the Cerner executives this morning."

"When? This morning?"

"Yup. How would you like to do a little recon?" Cliff raised his eyebrows and smiled conspiratorially.

"What? Recon?" John scoffed. "What do you think I am, a Navy Seal?"

"I just want you to check out her computer. You're the one who knows all this stuff," Cliff said.

John stood up in surprise. "Are you kidding me?"

"No," Cliff replied flatly. "Please John, we need to know. Carson's reputation is on the line, and I don't need to remind you about Ken."

The two men stared at each other. Finally John sighed. "How long will you be gone?"

"It's supposed to be a short meeting. We both want to be back here when shooting begins." He scowled in thought. "Better figure no more than an hour to be on the safe side."

John snapped his fingers. "Okay, that should be perfect. I'll get into her office and check out her computer. It will be before the first

shot is scheduled. If there's any record of the emails sent to *iff*, I'll find them."

Cliff's smile faded. "You have to find more than that. Look for anything that will let us know if she sabotaged the set."

John sat back down in the chair in front of the desk. "If she did it, what does that mean? We have her arrested?"

"It means about a million different things, John! It means that we get rid of a potential thorn in our side. It may mean she forfeits the rights, too. It means the publicity will go through the roof that we found a murderer on the set of the biggest action/crime drama to come to theaters." Cliff pounded the desk in triumph. "Good publicity, for once."

John looked doubtful. "Calm down there, cowboy. First of all, I don't really relish the thought of a murderer on the set. Secondly we don't know she's the one yet. Third of all, you hope it's the biggest movie to come to theaters. You seem to have this all planned out."

Cliff nodded, subdued. "You're right. She's just a major pain in my ass. There's not much good in this no matter what though, is there?" He shook his head slowly in wonder. "She must be a truly twisted individual though if she did. All that stuff about protecting her father's legacy." He looked at John. "How are you going to find out?"

John appeared uncomfortable. "Uh...well...I got a bunch of illegal hacker tools that should let me break into her laptop."

"Why do you have...?" Cliff stopped himself. "Never mind. I don't want to know."

"No, no, it's not what you think," John said hurriedly. "The tools are illegal, but I only used them for myself. I accidentally locked myself out of my computer once."

"Okay, whatever you say," Cliff teased. He changed the subject. "What about *iff.com*? Are they onboard now?"

"Yes. Pretty excited about it too." John chuckled. "I though Bauer was going to have a stroke."

“Bauer? Is he our main contact?” John nodded. Cliff scratched his chin. “If we can get the mole, we’ll have closed the leak on both ends, and we get free publicity to boot.”

“*iff* has plenty of capacity,” John said. “They can handle a ton of traffic. I told him we could debut the trailer with them.”

Cliff blanched slightly. “Uh-oh. I forgot about something when I told you to offer that. Apparently we’re supposed to debut it with *Hollywood Tonight*.”

John blinked. “Can’t you just do it simultaneously? It’s not like you’re debuting it on two TV shows. They’re different mediums.”

“Yeah, that should work. At least I hope H.T. sees it that way. I’ll schmooze them, it’s what we producers do.” Cliff sighed. “You’re sure they’ll be able to handle the load, right?”

“Easily,” John replied. “They probably get a hundred thousand visitors a day.”

Cliff smiled, relieved. “Good. One less thing to worry about.”

John got up and headed out of the office. He paused at the doorway. “What time are you and Elisa going to be gone?”

Cliff flipped open his desk calendar and scanned it for a moment. “About nine o’clock,” he finally replied.

“Alright, I’ll be ready,” John nodded and headed out the door.

\* \* \*

John stepped out on the balcony and quickly padded his way down the steps to the stage floor. He looked around for Marty but could not see him out in the crowded set. He sauntered up to the storyboards. He stared at each of the scenes, reorienting himself to the scenes being shot today.

“Looks like a busy day today,” a voice drifted down from above him. He looked up to Rick sitting in one of the cable cars. The cable had been moved to a different position to accommodate the wider angles that camera would be using that day. “I’m glad to see you. I need to talk to you about some of the shots tomorrow.”

“Of course.” John replied. “C’mon down and we’ll get started. I want to use these storyboards as a starting point.”

Shellee gave him a thumbs-up, clicked a button and whisked back over to the gantry. John returned to studying the storyboards. A few moments later Rick joined him.

“Look at these shots,” John said, pointing at a set of pictures. “He wants a revolving camera in this one, top-down in this one. This is going to be a nightmare.”

Rick shook his head. “No, it’s not bad at all. We’ll use the crane cam on a circular track for that one and just position it overhead for the other one.”

“Oh right,” John said, feeling a little stupid. He had forgotten about the crane-mounted cameras, being pushed around on tracks, since the cable cars were being used so much lately. Those would indeed solve those issues.

Rick scrutinized John’s expression for a moment. “You don’t know the equipment that well, do you?”

John didn’t meet the other man’s gaze. “What tipped you off?”

Rick patted him on the back. “Don’t worry. I wasn’t sure I liked being passed up on the director of photography position, but I understand why he did it. I’ve seen your work on the creative end. Your eye for drama has impressed me. I’ve learned a lot. So let me help you. Let’s start with the basics and I’ll work you up from there.” He looked back and forth conspiratorially. “But make sure you tell McGregor how cooperative I was, will you?”

John nodded appreciatively. “Deal.” He looked thoughtfully up at the cable cars. “You know, I can be with you when you’re on the floor, but when you’re up there, we’re going to have a tough time communicating.”

“That’s why we use these. Here.” He handed John a small device.

“Two-way radios? Perfect! I love these things.” He handed it back to Rick. “Keep them up on the platform so anyone who’s up there can use them.”

Rick pointed at the radio’s various plugs and outlets. “They have those headphone microphones so there’s no chance of the set mikes picking up our conversation.”

“Excellent,” John replied excitedly.

Since the shoot was still being prepared by the prop men, special effects men, sound men, and every other department; John and Rick decided to use the time they had to go over the equipment.

Rick showed him lens techniques, lighting techniques, terminology, and more information than he could assimilate. John found it all fascinating. He had had only a cursory idea how film speeds, different lenses, and now digital technology all worked to radically change a scene. They continued talking for a long time.

Too long, John suddenly realized. "Crap. What time is it?"

"You got the watch, man."

John flipped up his sleeve. "Shit, it's 9:45. We really ate up the morning. I've got an errand to run. I'll be back." He turned and trotted back up the stairway.

"Don't take too long," Rick called after him. "First shot should begin at 10:30."

"Gotcha," John's answer could be heard behind the door shutting behind him.

He walked briskly down the hall, pulling a silver compact disc case out of his jacket pocket. He opened it up to check on the gold CD inside, with HACKER TOOLS written illegibly across it. *I've really got to start printing my disk labels*, he thought.

He scampered down the hall, noting a wall clock reading 9:47. She might be back by ten. Damn, I would have to space out now, he cursed. Turning down a series of hallways and corridors, he finally arrived at her office.

Checking to make sure no one saw him, he quietly opened the door and stepped in. The office was quiet, save for the commotion that could be heard through the single window looking out to the set. He quickly crossed the floor and sat down at her desk.

The screen saver was running, keeping a steady stream of simulated stars moving out from the center. He moved the mouse. The screen changed, not to a password request screen, but to a desktop ready for instructions.

"Huh. That's secure," he remarked sarcastically to no one in particular. "Wonder if she leaves her house unlocked too." He glanced

wistfully at the now useless CD in his hand and put it back in his pocket. “Oh well, this will make things easier.”

He gripped the mouse and began clicking at the screen. Within a moment, he had her email up. He opened the sent items folder. A list of emails sent from her stretched from top to bottom. He clicked on a column. The emails re-sorted themselves to date order.

He began scrolling down the list, scanning for the dates that he thought the emails started. The list was endless; she apparently did a lot of communication. He continued scrolling back. “December, December,” he mumbled. “Where is December?”

He finally reached his destination and found that there were hundreds of emails sent that month. “Oh boy. This will take forever,” he groaned, glancing at his watch. 9:55.

He was suddenly struck by sudden inspiration. Clicking at the screen, he changed the sort order from originating date to sender name. After a few more seconds of searching, he spotted what he was looking for. All emails sent to *tips@iff.com*, all knotted together. Grinning, he selected all of them and forwarded them to his email address at home in one large bundle. Then he set to deleting the record of his communication.

He blinked. His email address was set up like most people; it consisted of his first initial and last name. After he sorted the Sent Items folder in the same manner he sorted the Inbox, he found it immediately.

He blinked. Under his email was a knot of emails that were listed right under his. They were all addressed to the same person, *jrandolph@wilkesrammel-media.com*. He had heard of this media conglomerate, they had swooped in and taken over many radio and television stations in the country through corporate buyouts. Here were all the emails sent to this person. *Why would Elisa be talking to W&R?* he wondered.

Quickly he grabbed the emails and sent those to himself as well. He’ll dissect them later. He closed the email and checked the screen saver timer. Three minutes. *Good*, he thought. *It should be just the way I found it by the time she gets back.*

He carefully positioned the mouse where he found it on the desk and started to rise when he heard the voice waft in the window from the set.

“Clifford, you may come in and discuss it with me, but my answer is still ‘no!’” He bolted to the window. Elisa was down there on the set floor with her back towards John, talking with Cliff. He checked his watch. 10:01. He waved frantically at Cliff.

Cliff noticed John’s waving at the window and his eyes went wide. John held up three fingers. Cliff nodded in understanding.

“Elisa,” he said, “before you go up, uh... why don’t you and Marty discuss your idea. He’s just over here.” He started to gently lead her by the arm, but she recoiled.

“I don’t have time right now. Besides, I don’t think Martin would find me very good company right now.” She turned towards the stairwell and started up.

“Elisa!” Cliff yelled desperately. She stopped and turned waiting impatiently. He stole a quick look at John who shook his head. He held up two fingers. “Uh, look. I’ve been wanting to talk to you a long time about something, but... well, it just never seemed like the right time.”

She glanced at her watch. “What is it? I’m really in no mood for shenanigans.”

“Um, well, it’s about Marty,” he stammered. “I think he... how can I put this... I think he’s attracted to you.”

John smacked his forehead. Elisa, for her part, stared at Cliff in total surprise. Then her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Really Clifford,” she said, “If you want to have fun at my expense, try not to make it so personal.”

“No, I’m not kidding! He gets really belligerent with women he’s attracted to! Tortured genius and all that,” Cliff stammered.

John looked at his watch. 10:03:55. He looked at the laptop. Five seconds ticked away. Nothing happened. “Dammit,” he whispered to himself. “Timer must’ve started at 10:01:40 or something.” He looked out the window and held up one finger. He then pulled his hands apart in a stretching gesture.



*THE BAD GUY*

Cliff nodded surreptitiously. Elisa didn't notice and continued lecturing Cliff. "Clifford, I know how Martin feels about me. I think he'd just as soon I was the one on the floor instead of poor Kenneth."

Cliff looked shocked. "Now look, Elisa, I know you two have had your differences, but Marty does not want you dead. He has a great deal of respect for you. He really does."

Elisa softened a bit. "Really?"

Cliff touched her arm. "Yes, really."

John pumped his fist as he saw the stars finally blink on. "Yes!" He bolted back to the window and gave Cliff a thumbs-up. Cliff nodded again.

"Of course, you're probably right about his being attracted to you. Sorry to take up your time. See you later." He bounded up the stairs past her and dashed into the offices.

Elisa remained on the stairs, watching Marty for a quick moment more, before finally retreating up to her office, lost in thought.

\* \* \*

Quickly glancing out into the hallway to make sure no one was there, John stepped out of Elisa's office. He breathed a deep sigh of relief. But before he could take a step, Elisa rounded the corner and spotted him.

"What are you doing loitering here?" she asked, opening her office door.

John attempted to sound nonchalant. "Oh, nothing. I went to see Cliff, but he wasn't in his office. He mentioned he had a meeting with you, I thought I might find him here."

"He did have a meeting with me and we just finished it," she replied, sitting down at her desk. "He should be back in his office now."

"Oh. Okay, thanks," he replied and started to leave.

She tapped at her computer. "That's odd."

John's heart shot into his throat and he froze. "What's odd?" he asked carefully.

"What?" she looked up at him quickly, just realizing he was still there. "Oh, nothing, just usually my laptop powers itself down after

forty-five minutes.”

John swallowed hard. “Oh. Well, you know, sometime those laptops have a mind of their own. My own computer will work a hundred times correctly and screw up one time for no reason.”

She nodded in recollection. “Yes, I’ve had that happen occasionally myself.” She looked up at him impatiently, her computer forgotten. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, no. I’ll go find Cliff. Thanks.” He beat a hasty retreat out the door and wiped his brow with a shaking hand. He cursed himself for not thinking of the power down features of the laptop. *That’s all I need, he thought, a heart attack now before I’m scheduled to get killed later today.*

Taking a deep breath, he headed to the set, to his character’s death scene. Rounding a couple of corners, he nearly ran over Cliff. “Whouff!”

“Oh, sorry, I was making sure you were all right,” Cliff said, catching John and steadying him. “Hey, calm down. You didn’t get caught, did you now?”

John leaned up against the wall. “No thanks to you,” he chided. He changed his voice to do his best impression of Cliff. “‘Marty’s attracted to you, Elisa.’ What the hell were you thinking?”

Cliff smiled sheepishly. “I panicked, okay?”

John took another deep breath and calmed down a bit. He scowled at Cliff, but his anger was slipping. “Brother. You make studio deals worth millions all the time, and you can’t think on your feet better than that?”

Cliff’s shoulder slumped a bit. “I usually have a plan going into those deals. It’s a pretty strict road map in fact. Even my ad-libbing is planned.”

Duncan shook his head and attempted to feign anger. But his face cracked and finally he began laughing. Cliff smirked and joined in the laughing. The two continued chortling all the way to the set.

\* \* \*

“Where the hell have you been?”

Marty stood amidst all the activity, an island in a sea of chaos. John hurried up to him. “I had an errand to run. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Marty scrutinized John’s face. “You’re up to something, aren’t you.” It was not a question.

“Oh, don’t be so suspicious,” John laughed. He patted Marty on the back reassuringly and trotted over to Rick.

Marty held up his hand and started to follow John. “Hey, wait a minute!”

Cliff intercepted him. “Marty, let it go. Finish the scenes you have to and get together with us tonight.”

Marty stared incredulously at Cliff. He started to argue but thought better of it. “Oh, fine. Cliff. I’ll meet you tonight.”

John smiled as he went out of earshot of the rest of the conversation. *It ought to be an interesting evening tonight*, he thought.

John looked at his watch, cursed, and sprinted back to the camera platforms. He took the stairs two at a time, bounding up faster and faster. Marty’s megaphone-enhanced voice suddenly cut through the din of voices and activity.

“Is everyone in place? John? Rick?”

John hopped up to the camera car where Rick was already strapped in. Rick nodded at him. John gave him a quick nod back and leaned over the rail scanning the crowd below. He found Marty and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Alright everyone, this is a McCain-only shot. He’s going to be running across the set platform with bullets flying around him.” Marty pointed to each side of the set. “There’ll be flash explosions on each side. There’s going to be a lot of smoke so you F/X guys, you make sure you’re on top of it. Mark’s going to have a tough time seeing through it and I don’t want any more accidents, you got it?”

Carson popped up from behind a console. “Don’t worry Marty, he’s in good hands,” he shouted so Marty could hear him from across the set.

Marty nodded. He turned up to John. "John? Did you and Rick talk about the shot composition?"

"Yeah," John hollered. "We got it all finalized this morning."

"Did you learn anything?"

John smirked. "Not a blessed thing."

"Good. Those nuts would have you filming through a tie-dye t-shirt or something." Marty scanned the set. "Alright, places everyone."

John picked up a small radio sitting on a table on the cable car platform. He clicked the button. "Rick, can you hear me?"

The radio spat out a burst of static, replaced quickly by Rick's voice. "Gotcha loud and clear, boss."

John spoke back into the speaker. "Okay, just like we talked earlier. You know how we blocked it; now just use a nice sweeping movement. Any problems working the car and camera at the same time?"

"Nope, the car has foot controls," the answer came back.

"Great. Let me know if you have any problems and I'll relay them to Marty. Are you a 'go'?"

Rick pulled away from the eyepiece and looked back across the chasm to John standing on the platform. "Where do you think you are, NASA?"

"I'll take that as a yes." John leaned back over the rail and shouted down at Marty that they were ready.

Suddenly the radio belched out some static. "John! John, we got a problem!" came Rick's panicked voice through the noise.

John waved down at Marty. "Hold up a second." He clicked the radio. "What is it, Rick?"

"The camera's dead! All the cameras are dead!"

John frowned. "What do you mean, dead?"

Rick punched a button and zipped his car back to the platform, futilely punching buttons on the camera as he went. John caught the car as it arrived. Rick punched the controls in frustration. "It's erased! All erased!"

"What do you mean? Not the movie?" Duncan exclaimed.

The other man unbuckled and jumped out of the car. “No, the movie’s fine. The footage we’ve shot is stored away. At least I hope it is.” He began sprinting across the gantry with John in tow. “It’s the code, John. The code’s gone! This camera won’t boot up.”

John pulled alongside him. “Oh shit!”

Rick flew down the stairwell two steps at a time. John stepped a little more carefully. Rick ran to the control station that Ken sat at days earlier. He flipped the chair out and began rapping at buttons. John pulled up next to him, panting.

“What are you two doing?” Marty charged up, red faced. “What the hell is the hold up?”

“The code’s been erased from the cameras,” John huffed. “They don’t know how to work anymore.”

Marty looked mystified. “They’re cameras. Just point and shoot, what’s the problem?”

Rick continued tapping without looking up. “It doesn’t work that way, Marty. They’re like computers. Hell, they are computers. They just have a very specific function. Dammit!” Rick finally hit the countertop in frustration and leaned back in defeat. “It’s gone, all gone.” His shoulders slumped and he looked at John helplessly.

Marty rubbed the bridge of his nose. “All right, slow down. Start at the beginning. What’s gone?”

John grimaced. “I think I can explain. It’s like a computer. You buy a computer at the store, it’s just a pretty box until you load something on it.” He glanced at Rick for confirmation.

“That’s right,” Rick nodded morosely. “Each camera has programming on it that tells the camera how to work. This code is stored on chips inside the camera. Without the code, the camera is just a pile of parts.”

Marty shrugged. “Can’t you just reload the code? I mean, surely there’s a contingency for this sort of thing?”

Rick nodded morosely. “Oh, we can reload the cameras, but it takes a day for the code to reset and recalibrate the hardware.”

Marty’s arms dropped slack to his side. “Oh shit.”

“That’s what I said,” John murmured.

Rick tapped a few more keys. "The good news is the control center is fine. I can reload the software from here."

"How long do you think you can cut the time down?" Marty asked.

"Um, well... since the cameras were pretty much calibrated before hand, maybe sixteen hours? But it's no guarantee, Marty," Rick added hastily.

"Do it." He grabbed his megaphone. "Alright everyone, we got a problem. Take off and be back here, ready to go in twelve hours!" Clicking off the megaphone, he threw it across the floor in disgust. It clattered loudly as it skidded on the concrete.

"How in the hell did this happen?" he bellowed.

Rick leaned forward and began typing, looking more than a little uncomfortable. "The cameras send their shots to here and this station can run diagnoses, calibration and load the software. This station, in turn can be remote controlled from any computer networked in the complex."

"Any station? But there's a password or something, right?" John asked.

Rick didn't answer and hunched over in his chair.

Marty cocked his head to one side expectantly. "Shellee?"

"I'm sorry, Marty. We were so enthralled with the new stuff, Ken and I never bothered to change the factory password." Rick hunched further in his chair. He seemed to be attempting to disappear completely.

Marty threw up his hands. "So any schmoe could just pick up an owner's manual and get right in. Son of a bitch." He kicked at the air. "What the hell did everyone think we meant by tightening up security?!"

Rick looked chastened. John stepped between them. "It's my fault Marty. I don't know the equipment, and I should've found out more about it. If I'm the director of photography, then it's my responsibility."

Marty's eye's narrowed. "Damn right it was," he snapped. "Damn right!" He shook his head. "I'm really disappointed in you, John."

John nodded, bracing himself for more retribution. Marty started to open his mouth to yell some more, but stopped. He walked slowly over to his megaphone and picked it up. He began turning it over in his hand, spotting a small chip in the horn. He smiled sadly and looked up at the set for a long moment and then walked back to stand in front of John. He took a deep breath and gripped John's shoulders.

"No one's thinking straight these days," he said slowly. "What with Ken and all. I should know that more than anyone. I guess I can't get too mad at you. It's alright."

He stepped back. "I don't mean this," he amended, pointing at the control board, "This is bad. But I'm not going freak out about it. Won't change anything, and we don't have the time." He looked back and forth at Rick and John. "I don't care if it takes all night, fix it. And call me the nanosecond it's ready."

John smiled. "You got it."

Marty turned and headed over to his assistant director, who was trying to get his attention. "Marty, why don't you decide on some of these costumes for the next scenes," she asked. The two wandered away from the set and back to his office.

"What's going on?" John glanced to see Cliff and Elisa approaching.

"The cameras are down," Rick muttered.

Cliff and Elisa exchanged glances. "What do you mean? How?"

John explained the problem, trying to take the blame as he had moments ago. When he finished, Cliff rubbed his temples before finally speaking. "Okay, never mind whose fault the whole password thing is. It can be fixed? You're sure of that?"

Rick piped up, "Definitely. Not a problem there. There's no damage, they just need to be reprogrammed."

Elisa scowled, planting her fists into her hips. "What do mean, never mind whose fault it is? Shouldn't we find out who did this?"

Cliff nodded. "Yes, she's right. Can you tell who did this?"

Rick arched an eyebrow. "Well...since they used the built-in username and password, we can only tell by the address of the computer they connected with. At least it has to be in this building."

“Why do you say that?” Cliff leaned over Rick’s shoulder watching him work.

“Just because our computers are networked together here in the studio doesn’t mean that they’re all sitting on the Internet. We use the same infrastructure as the rest of Cerner, and they have a firewall blocking Internet access to them. Almost every company does.”

Rick tapped and clicked for several moments. Finally he smiled in triumph. “Ah! Here’s the address of the last terminal that remotely accessed it. Now, if that computer is still powered on, I can figure out its name.” His fingers flew across the keyboard. “Here we go, a computer named IAN.”

Elisa coughed suddenly. “But...but my computer’s name is IAN. I named it after my father.”

Cliff turned slowly. “So. You *are* the mole.”

Elisa backed up, wide eyed. “What are you talking about?”

Cliff tch’d. “Don’t insult my intelligence. We know about the emails to *iff.com*.” He walked towards her slowly, deliberately. “But that wasn’t enough. Now you’ve destroyed the cameras.”

She recoiled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve only wanted...”

“You’ve only wanted to tear this project down since we started.” He began shaking his head. “Boy, I used to think I understood you. When Marty was being driven nuts with your constant phone calls, I defended you!” Cliff was yelling now. “Did you kill Ken too?!”

Elisa took a step back, looking like a cornered animal. “Clifford, I just want this to work. My father loved this world he created. I only want it to be a success.”

“Do you?”

Her eyes were shining with tears. “I don’t know what you think you found or what you think you know. But I swear, I do want this to be perfect.” She hung her head and took a deep breath. “I know I can be demanding. My father was wonderful to me growing up. He had two loves, his work and me. After he died, all I saw were people tearing after his work like wolves. Even my mother.”



Cliff smiled thinly. “That’s touching. But the evidence is against you. How do explain the emails to *iff.com*? Hmm?” His expression tuned to rage. “Now your computer is used to erase all our cameras? Do you know how much money a wasted day’s worth of shooting costs? Do you have any idea?”

Elisa’s mouth opened, but she had no reply.

“Get out,” Cliff snarled.

She turned and ran back to her office, wiping her eyes as she went.

“What was all that about?”

Marty had seen the commotion and now re-joined John, Cliff, and Rick. “We traced the computer that erased the cameras. It was Elisa’s,” John replied.

Marty’s expression remained blank. “Wasn’t her.”

Cliff’s eyes grew wide. “What?”

Marty smiled and nodded, acknowledging everyone’s thoughts. “I know, I know. ‘Marty hates her,’ right? Well I don’t. She drives me crazy,” he admitted, “but I’m telling you, she’s not your problem.”

“Marty, I’m not even going to pretend I understand you,” Cliff started, mystified, “but we have evidence she’s been collaborating with *iff.com*. Her computer was the one that erased the cameras.”

“Cliff, you didn’t know Ian. He wasn’t just my partner with McCain; he was my friend, damn near family. He was like a father or an uncle or something. I spent a lot of time with him and I can tell you that he and Elisa were nearly inseparable. She loved him dearly and he loved her. When he died, she fought like a lioness to keep the greedy paws of her mother off of the McCain properties, and it wasn’t because of money.”

He began walking slowly up to the set. “This,” he pointed. “This is why. Seeing this on the big screen, seeing her father’s vision up there and knowing it would’ve made him proud.” He turned and smiled. “She wants this to be perfection. I can’t make perfection, but I’m sure going to try. Not for her,” he amended, “but for Ian.”

Marty turned and walked back up to Cliff. “You want me to back you up? Agree that she’s a big pain in the ass? You got it. But if you

want me to support the idea that she's some kind of saboteur, well, I can't. I just don't believe it."

Cliff shook his head. "Okay Marty. I think you're nuts, but we'll do it your way."

Marty smiled a crooked smile, turned and went back to his assistant director, ready to reorganize thanks to the delay.

John looked at Cliff, who was still watching Marty. "What does that mean, we're going to do it his way?"

"It means we need to get him out of the way." He turned his and leveled his gaze at John. "Elisa's the problem. Marty may have some romantic notions about a daughter's love for her father, but I know what I see. The daughter is not the father. No matter what he thinks, she's the problem."

"I don't know, Cliff. Marty seems awfully sure," John replied doubtfully.

"Then let's enlighten him. Go through those emails tonight. Print them out and bring them in tomorrow. In the meantime, get these cameras working." Cliff patted him on the arm. "I need to stop these situations now. Before we lose everything we work so hard for."

John took a deep breath. He sat down slowly with Rick. "Okay, let's get these cams back up."

## Chapter XV

The work was long and quite boring at times, but Rick and John were able to get the cameras back on-line without any problems. The procedures were complex and John was able to absorb a ton of information on their operation. He enjoyed the process so much that he nearly forgot all the problems of the day that put him in this position. The entire ordeal taught him more about the cameras' operation than a full week's training course.

Each camera came back on-line one at a time. Once the first one was reloaded and working, Rick began taking John through some of the finer points of filming. Since the digital cameras didn't actually use any expensive film, they could take all the shots they wanted with out any cost.

John would take shots of crewmembers getting ready, Marty managing the tasks, or even stage lights to practice contrasting the brightness against the more dimly lit areas. He and Rick would watch John's test shots on the control panels, (with the calibrations running in the background, always within sight) and Rick would show him how he could improve or change the shot to change the mood or atmosphere, depending on what Marty wanted. John, in turn, would explain to Rick why Marty would want what he wanted.

The hours began to stretch and the two men lost their enthusiasm to fatigue. They deleted their test shots and concentrated on finishing

the rest of the cameras. At one point John left and picked up some dinner.

Once the cameras were finished and tested, the shoot began again in earnest. They were finally able to start after midnight. They decided to cram in the lost time and continue through the next day. Scenes were set up, shot, re-arranged, and shot again. John flipped back and forth between shooting with Rick and playing Hume. By mid-afternoon, crewmembers were walking around in a stupor. At one point Marty was seen snoozing quietly in his director's chair. But finally, they finished the two days worth of work, catching back up to the schedule. They gratefully went home to get what sleep they could before the shoot began again the next day, 5:00 a.m. sharp.

John yawned as he stepped into his house. He let in Rufus who was ecstatic to see his master. John had left a lot of food outside in case of a long absence, but could not leave a supply of ear scratching, which Rufus desperately wanted now. John was only too happy to oblige his furry friend.

After a bit, he sat down at his computer and opened his email. Sure enough, the messages he had sent two days before were there and waiting for him. Selecting them all, he sent them to his printer. Then he turned off the screen and crawled into bed. The regular whirring of the printer lulled him to sleep.

\* \* \*

"Dammit. Of all days," John huffed. The day before had worn him down, both mentally and physically. He had overslept. Consequently he rushed his way through the morning, barely remembering to snatch the pile of papers the printer had spat out the night before. He clutched them now as he jogged onto the set to a red-faced Cliff.

"Glad you could make it," he said sarcastically. "I see you got all the emails?"

"Yes, I got them," John retorted indignantly. "It was a long day yesterday, okay? Give me a few moments to look over the schedule

and talk with Rick. I'll meet you in your office and we'll go through them."

Cliff smiled and softened. "Okay, okay. I'm just a little edgy." He looked around the set worriedly. "God knows what's going to happen today." He gave John a quick pat on the back, turned and headed to the stairway. "Don't be long," he called over his shoulder as he trotted to his office.

John did not have any shots that day; most of his were done during the long day before. Or was it two days ago? A thirty-hour work shift tended to throw off his time sense. He chuckled as he briskly strode across the set to the camera console where Rick was already set up.

"Hey, sleepy head," the other man greeted him warmly. "How are you doing?"

"Peachy," he replied. "I got my ass chewed a little by the boss, but other than that..."

Rick glanced back at Cliff's office. "Ah, don't worry about that. He just gets grumpy if he doesn't get breakfast."

John grunted as he sat down in a wheeled chair at the console. "So how's the day looking?"

Rick pulled out the schedule and a three-ring binder full of pictures that mirrored the pictures on the giant storyboards Marty was studying across the set. "Looks like mostly atmosphere shots before the big shot on Monday. Some crowd reactions, hostages crying, debris flying, explosions...all things that happen without you and Lewis in the shots. Marty may get a wild hair and decide to re-shoot you two or add something though."

John's brow furrowed as he scanned through the book. "Yeah, I see. Well, let's go through the first three. We'll get it prepped and then I'll leave the shot to you. That'll keep you busy while I meet with Cliff."

They switched back and forth between the control console and the cameras on the set, briskly striding to and fro, making notes and changes as they went. Occasionally Rick would stay at the camera while John manned the control console, using the radios to

communicate. His long day of reloading gave him ample time to learn most of the basic functions, and he used them now to check the lighting on each shot Rick lined up, confirming each one on the radio. After about an hour, they had completed the set up of four shots.

“Great, one more than we planned,” Rick said, making a few last minute notes. “I think you’re free to go.”

John picked up the radio. “I’ll bring this. Call if you need anything.”

“Or to give you a head start if Marty loses it again?”

“Exactly.” John spun on one foot and strode off to Cliff’s office.

\* \* \*

A half-hour later, Cliff and John sat in the producer’s office, poring over the emails John had brought in that morning. Cliff read through all the correspondence with Wilkes & Rammel, while John read all the Red Scorpion emails to *iff.com*. Finally Cliff tossed some aside in disgust.

“Jeez, she had the whole thing planned out. Correspondence with W & R, plans on getting the McCain properties ownership transferred, even receiving a tidy bit of ownership. Not to mention a cash payout.” He sighed heavily.

John continued reading through his stack. “She’s been corresponding with *iff.com* since the first casting announcements. Here’s mine, Lewis’s, everyone.”

“She was lying the whole time.” Cliff stared out his window.

“Looks like it.”

Cliff shot an angry look at the papers. “You know I still got Carson breathing down my neck? Cerner is sweating. Marty can barely keep up with the schedule.” He sighed again in exasperation. “I just don’t understand her. On one hand she gives Marty ulcers. On the other hand, she seems to want get movie done more than anything in the world. You know, the day you were poking around her office, she sits in that meeting for two hours and told me and the Cerner execs the she was confident that this would be a long and fruitful relationship.” He picked up his soda sitting on the desk; its ice long since melted, its color pale.

John looked puzzled. "Two hours? I thought you left at 9:00."

"No, the meeting got moved up at the last minute. We had a few more items to work out, so we thought we'd kill two birds with one stone and take two hours instead of one."

John began looking through the emails. "So you left at 8:00? Wait a minute." He continued shuffling, checking papers and tossing them aside. "No, not this one. A later one..."

"What? What is it?" Cliff leaned forward watching Duncan with interest.

"The last email she sent. It was on the day of the meeting...aha-ha!" He pulled one up and handed it to Cliff. "Look at the time and date on it."

Cliff scanned the sheet and then lowered it slowly. "This one was sent while she was at the meeting with me."

John thought for a second. "Did she ever leave the meeting?"

Cliff nodded. "No one left until the meeting was over."

John rubbed his chin in memory. "When I left there, she caught me in the hallway. She didn't suspect anything, but when she went into her office, she mentioned she thought it was odd her computer hadn't powered down, just the screen saver."

Cliff looked puzzled as he searched his memory. "Screen saver. Is that those cute little animations that come on if you don't touch the computer for awhile?"

"Right," John continued, "The idle time is set by the user, Elisa in this case. Once that goes off, the laptop powers down some time after. When she noticed it hadn't gone off, I about had a heart attack."

Cliff raised his eyebrows. "I can imagine. So what's your point?"

John began talking faster in earnest. "My point is the laptop was on when I came in. I assumed it was because you had left at 9:00, so it wasn't sitting idle long enough. But if you left an hour earlier, then why was it still on before then?"

Cliff glanced back at the email John had handed him. "And here is some email sent from her computer before she got out of the meeting. She was with me the whole time, she couldn't have..." He smacked the desk. "Aw, son of a bitch."

John shook his head in doubtfully. "I don't think it was her, Cliff."

Cliff crumpled the paper. "Shit. I hate it when Marty's right."

"Yeah, me too," John replied. "So if it's not Elisa, who is it?"

"Hell, I don't know! Who else knew you were sniffing them out?"

John shrugged. "Only Jan, but she..."

"Why would she know anything?"

John gulped. "Uh...She went with me to *iff.com*."

Cliff slammed his hand down on the desk. "Jeez, Duncan! What were you thinking? She knows everything that you found out there!"

John scowled. "Now wait a minute! You're jumping at shadows now. Besides, she drew her own conclusions. For all you know, it could've been Rick. He knows more about those cameras than anybody here. Maybe he's peeved because he got passed over for the director of photography gig. Twice."

Cliff took a deep breath and resumed staring out his window. "This is nuts. I just want to make movies. I just want to put something on the screen, have a little fun, and make a little money. That's not too much to ask, is it?" He swiveled around in his chair. "I'm not having any fun here," he said to no one in particular.

John nodded sullenly. "I know what you mean."

"So, let's recap, shall we? We have a spy and saboteur, possibly a murderer. We have no idea who it is, but we can find reasons for several people who might have a grudge. Cerner's stock continues to drop with every bad bit of publicity that keeps leaking out. Now we find out W&R is ready to pounce and destroy everything we work for here. That about it?"

John smiled weakly. "Well, actually... I haven't been sleeping well, if there's anything you can do about that."

Neither laughed. They sat in silence for several moments. John absently picked up Cliff's stack and began reading through it.

"When we found out which provider the spy's email was coming from, that information wasn't incorrect," John began slowly.

"Yeah, so?" Cliff said absently.



“*iff* had to receive it from somewhere. It may have been the same provider Elisa uses, but probably not her account.” John began speaking faster as he thought through the problem.

“How can you be so sure?” Cliff asked turning to John.

“Even if her laptop was stolen, getting the password off the email program is very difficult if you don’t already know what it is,” John replied. “So maybe they didn’t bother. The person or persons who sent them could’ve just set up their own account with the service. They figured that would be enough to frame someone, especially if you plant emails on Elisa’s computer.”

Cliff looked back and forth at the paper strewn across his desk. “Wouldn’t they have needed that password to plant all this email on her computer?”

“No, the password is just to send and receive from your provider. If there is mail already delivered to your computer, it’s open to anyone who sits down, assuming you don’t lock the entire computer down when you’re not using it.” He smirked. “Judging from what I saw when I was in her office, I’d say she doesn’t.”

Cliff propped his chin in his hand. “Okay, so every time they needed to send a spy report, they just used her computer when she wasn’t looking.”

John thought about that for a moment. Finally, he shook his head in doubt. “Damn Cliff, you’d have to follow her all around the country. That can’t be it.” He searched through the paper and snatched one up off the desk. “Yeah, here... look at this one. Sent at 3:34 a.m. They’d have to break in her apartment to do that.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” Cliff said. “I don’t understand why she isn’t more careful though.”

“Why weren’t we more careful with the cameras?” John shrugged. “Passwords are a pain. I bet you my salary that over half the people here use their kid’s or pet’s names as their password.”

Cliff turned red and glanced away quickly. “Yes, okay, I used my daughter’s name. Point taken. But if passwords are that easy to decipher, then why didn’t they just use her account from their own computer?”

“They probably tried. Thing is, some providers issue their customers pre-configured random passwords. The saboteurs probably gave up and got their own account and figured it was good enough.”

“It almost was. Led us to her quickly enough.” Cliff got up and stretched. “Getting stiff sitting in that chair.” Suddenly a thought came to him. “Wait a minute. If that’s true, how did the emails get on her computer?”

“Same way I got them off. That’s why her screen saver hadn’t powered off the computer. Someone brought in a disk with the altered emails and merged them into her email program.” John replied.

Cliff picked up the emails again. “And while they were at it, why not destroy our cameras?”

John nodded. “Most likely.”

They sat in silence for several moments. John picked up an email and began reading. Suddenly he dropped it on the desk.

“Cliff, we get the weekend off. How about I take a little trip to New York?” John asked.

“To...” Cliff scratched his head. “What was the name of her provider?”

“Liberty Networks.”

Cliff snapped his fingers. “Right. To Liberty Networks?”

“Yes,” John replied. “No more false accusations. We need to get to the bottom of this.”

Cliff looked skeptical. “Okay, fine, but why would they give you any information?”

“I am the Bad Guy, you know. Maybe I can scare ‘em.” John smirked. When Cliff didn’t smile, John grew serious. “I need to try something. They’re not going to give me anything over the phone.”

Cliff grinned. “You sure scare the hell out of me sometimes. Keep your expenses. You figure this all out and I’ll go to Elisa with my hat in my hand. I hope I can smooth this all over.”

John nodded and smiled.

Cliff’s face went suddenly somber. “John, we are running out of time. This set will be stricken next week. That Shogun movie moves

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in the following week. We're crashing the needle Thursday. It has to go right or the movie is ruined. If that happens, Cerner is done. W&R will tear it to pieces."

John nodded again, more slowly, and this time there wasn't a trace of a smile on his face.

## Chapter XVI

“Where to, Mac?”

“2437 Murray Street,” John replied. He settled in the back of the cab, and looked out the window as the airport terminal rolled away and was replaced by the large buildings of New York. *Did he really call me Mac?* he thought with amusement.

He sighed and leaned back in the cab. Less than eight hours ago he was racing around his home with piles of clothing hanging from his arms. A call to the airport revealed that the only flight to New York City would be leaving within the hour. Dropping the phone, he frantically threw together a bag, put Rufus outside with enough food and water to get through the weekend, and flew out the door. He wondered now if he actually hung up the phone.

The cab wove its way down the city streets. John watched the streets and buildings weave by absently as his thoughts drifted back to the day before. After he and Cliff finished he spent the rest of day finishing the shoot. Afterward they brought Marty to Cliff’s office to plan things out for the next week. They also had the unenviable task of letting Marty know exactly where things were with the saboteur, W&R, everything. They told him about their initial suspicions of Elisa, John’s adventure at her office, and the realization that they may be back at square one.

Marty wasn't happy, but he wasn't surprised. He looked through the email piles that were still on Cliff's desk. He let them sift through his hands and drop lazily to the desk. "We've been lucky, haven't we?" he mused. "We really have been able to do anything we wanted with this studio carte blanche. They had a lot of faith in us. We always tried to put out our best too." He smiled at them. "It worked too. For a while..."

"Marty, nothing's over yet." Cliff said. "We can still save Cerner."

Marty snorted. "Oh please. Who do you two think you are, Kojak? Some hero from our movies? Sneaking around, playing spy, hacking computers... You are an actor John! This is real life!"

"Yes it is, Marty," John replied calmly. "Do you remember sitting in your house, gulping your eggnog? You were lamenting that what we do doesn't matter. Well this is my chance to really do something that matters."

He stood up and pointed out the window at the now darkened set. "There are a lot of people who work out there. Some have families, some are getting a chance to break into the business, and others get to try things they wouldn't otherwise get to do. This place is something special to these people. Don't ask me not to try, Marty. Don't tell me what I can't do."

Marty was unimpressed. "John, a man is dead. Maybe it was an accident, maybe it wasn't planned, but the people responsible will not be taken down quietly. In for a penny, in for a pound. Believe me, they will pound you if you get too close. W&R is a monster company. Billions of dollars run through that company. People like that play for keeps."

"How do you know so much?" Cliff said.

"Look, either they get what they want, which is Cerner's demise; or they go to jail. Now I ask you: if it were you, and people were getting close to sending you away from a life of Mercedes' and caviar to a life of possible daily rape in a federal pen, how would you react?" Marty replied coldly. "You'd fight like a jackal, destroying anyone who got in your way."

"Marty, I don't think..." John began.

“No,” Cliff interrupted. “Marty’s right. This isn’t a movie John. You need to be careful out there.”

John started to protest, but fell silent. “Okay. Point taken.”

The cab lurched on a pothole, shaking John out of his reverie. It turned down a street and started slowing down. It finally stopped in front of a large skyscraper. “Okay, Mac. Here you are. That’ll be \$34.65”

John handed him forty dollars. “Keep it,” he told the driver. “Thanks for the ride.” He slung his bag over his shoulder and stepped out the back of cab. As the cab sped off, he looked up at the huge glass building reflecting the skyline. He took a deep breath and went through the revolving doors. He found the building directory and began scanning through the dozens of names.

“Okay,” he muttered under his breath, “Liberty Networks. Probably up on the thirty-seventh floor...” A moment later he found it. To his surprise it was on the first floor. “Suite 122.” He scanned the map next to the directory. Finding the suite, he headed to the back of the building.

\* \* \*

“Can I help you?”

The receptionist sat behind a desk very similar to the one at *iff.com* and looked at him expectantly.

John smiled warmly. “Yes, I need to speak to whoever manages your accounts.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “You look familiar.”

John sighed. “*Justice Held Hostage.*”

Her expression didn’t change. “Oh right. That movie wasn’t very good.”

He pursed his lips. “Thank you. Can I see your account manager or not?”

She gestured towards some chairs. “Wait there. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” *Don’t put yourself out,* he thought.

Moments later the door opened. A large man stepped through, looking down at some files. “Hello, I’m Robert Cole, manager of

accounts. How can I help you, Mr...?" He looked up and his eyes went wide. "John Duncan?!"

"Yes, that's right," John replied and extended his hand. The other man dropped the files he was reading. "Oh my God!" He glanced at the bored receptionist. "Judith, do you know who this is? *Justice Held Hostage!* *Alien Crossfire!* Even that *Star Trek* episode!"

She didn't look up. "My heart's a-flutter," she said flatly.

"Aw, don't pay any attention to her," Cole said, his enthusiasm unabated. "Come on back! Wow, John Duncan here! In my office... this is great..." he turned and led John down a long hallway, still muttering excitedly.

John adjusted his bag and followed the man down the hallway. The corridor smelled slightly musty. The building may have looked modern, but it could've easily been over twenty years old. Several tenants may have been in and out of Liberty's suite, but he was pretty sure he was treading on the original carpet, judging by the well-worn track in the center. The walls were a bit dingy, and smelled faintly of tobacco. Must've been a smoking office not too long ago, he mused.

Robert stopped suddenly at a door. Pulling out a card, he held it up to a featureless gray box attached to the wall next. It beeped and the door clicked. Cole pushed it open. "Come in, have a seat."

John stepped into the office. Cole sat down at a desk close to the door; John could now see that there were several desks in the room, divided by cubicles. He sat in a guest chair across the desk Cole sat behind, leaning back in his chair and grinning self-consciously. "I'm sorry, I must seem like a silly fan."

"It's okay. It's you fans that pay my salary," John said. "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here."

Cole raised his eyebrows. "Now that you mention it. I mean, a big movie star like yourself coming to an Internet service provider like us..."

"I need information. But first I need you to swear to this confidentially agreement," he replied, pushing a piece of paper across the desk.

For this first time since John arrived, Robert Cole's smile faded. He stared at the piece of paper, puzzled. "What is this?"

"You seem to know about my career," John said.

"Yes, a little. I like to hit the sites that tell about the new movies that are coming out." Cole smiled sheepishly. "Most of my salary goes to DVD's it seems."

Duncan smiled slightly. "Are you aware of my current project?"

"Oh yeah, of course. Even if the Internet sites weren't covering it, you can't turn on a TV without some entertainment show yammering on about *Raising McCain*. It's supposed to be the biggest blockbuster in a long time."

John nodded slowly. "Ever go to *iff.com*?"

"Sure. That's who owns *mccaindiaries.com*." Cole replied in acknowledgment. "They have had a lot of great information on what's been happening on the set. They seem to have a lot of access."

John grimaced. "Yes, they are our official site now."

Cole was surprised. "Now? You mean they weren't always?"

"No."

"I don't understand."

John shook his head. "Sorry. I can only go into that more if you sign the agreement. There is a lot information I need to give you, and I can't let it go further than this office."

Cole picked up the paper and read it. John waited patiently, absently looking around the office. Finally the other man set it on the desk and signed it. "This looks reasonable. Now. What can I do for you?" He pushed the paper back to John.

John told Cole the story of leaks on the Internet, the visit with *iff.com* and the subsequent revelation of Liberty Networks as the source of the emails. He didn't reveal Elisa's name, but finished the story with the discovery of planted emails.

Finally John got to the point. "So, basically, what I need to know is whose account is sending these emails?"

"Aw jeez, I don't know if I can tell you that," Cole replied uncomfortably. "There are privacy issues here. I can't just reveal



what my customers are doing, where they're going to, and who they're talking to."

"But it's possible?"

Cole winced. He hadn't meant reveal that. "Yes it's possible. After 9/11, the government has mandated that all email correspondence must be archived. But they can't get it unless they have a warrant, and we can't really get into it unless it's absolutely necessary."

John was surprised. "Really? Does everyone do this?"

"No, it's expensive. The storage alone cost us a pretty penny. If we were in a smaller city, we wouldn't have the customer base to keep up with the costs. But everyone will have to soon, or go out of business." Cole leaned back. "It really sucks. The local telephone carriers and nationwide services are all that's going to be left."

John pulled out a pile of papers. "Look, we already have the emails. I have a softcopy of them on disk too. We know what the correspondence has been. All I want to know is who is sending them."

Cole looked through the emails half-heartedly and then pushed them away. "I'm sorry, I just don't think I can do that."

John rubbed his forehead and squeezed his eyes shut. "Have you ever lost anyone, Robert?"

"I'm sorry?" Cole blinked uncomprehendingly.

"Lost anyone," John repeated. "Had a friend die. Has that ever happened to you?"

Robert paused for moment, looking uncomfortable. "Yes. A friend of mine was killed in a random street crime several years ago. "

"Did they catch the guy?" John stared at him intently.

Robert looked away. "No."

John nodded. "I'm sorry. But if you could've found the guy, and brought him to justice, would you have?"

"You're talking about Ken Scott, aren't you?" Cole ventured.

"You probably don't realize how many of us in front of the camera become good friends with those behind the camera," John replied. "Ken was one of mine."

Cole clasped his hands together in front of his mouth and stared down at the emails. Finally air escaped from his lips in a loud sigh. "Okay. This will probably get me in some trouble, but okay." He slumped in defeat. "I guess since you already have the emails, it shouldn't be that big of a problem."

"Thank you. Thank you so much," John said and stood up and shook Cole's hand.

Cole returned the handshake uneasily. He glanced at the diskette John was still holding. "I'll need that to track them down."

John pulled it out of his inside jacket pocket and handed it to him. "I have some experience in this area, anything I can do to help?"

"No, just wait here, I'll have to keep this quiet. Bringing a movie star back there will attract too much attention. I'll be back in five minutes." With that, he left out a back door, straight across from where the two had entered. John rubbed his palms nervously and forced himself to wait patiently.

His cell phone suddenly chirped loudly. He fumbled around his jacket searching as it continued to ring merrily. Finally he pulled out the small silver box and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"John? It's Cliff. How was your flight?"

"Good. Long, but good. I'm at Liberty now."

"Already? How's it going?" Cliff's voice sounded strained, even through the tiny speaker.

"Fine," he replied, shifting a bit in his seat. "He's finding the information on the account now."

"You sweet talker. He did sign the non-disclosure, right?" Cliff asked worriedly.

"Of course."

"All right. I'll let you go. Call me when you get the name."

The phone clicked and went dark. He flipped it closed and put it back in his pocket, just in time to see Cole stride back in.

The other man sat back down at his desk and gave John back the disk and the emails. Unfolding a new piece of paper, he leaned back in his chair and put a small pair of reading glasses on. "Okay... I got the name of the account, but I'm not sure it will do you much good."

John took a deep breath. “Why not?”

Cole lowered the paper. “It’s a corporate account, under the name of Wilkes & Rammel Entertainment. The user name was WRE. There wasn’t a particular name connected with it. They just opened the account and began dialing in from time to time. It could’ve been a bunch of people of there. Any employee could have access to it. They always pay their bill on time.”

“I see,” John muttered, deflated. “Okay, that helps.” He stood up and extended his hand again. “Thanks for your help, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

“Just don’t go broadcasting it,” he replied, shaking John’s hand. “You can do one thing for me though.”

“What’s that?” John asked, slinging his bag back over his shoulder.

Cole cleared his throat self-consciously before answering. “Can I get your autograph?”

\* \* \*

Moments later, he was out in front of the building, looking for a cab to hail. He cursed to himself. *A long trip for nothing*, he thought angrily. *I could’ve figured that out for myself if I’d ever bothered to turn my brain on.*

A cab pulled over and he hopped in. “Hyatt Regency, Stanhope Park,” he told the driver. The driver grunted and they sped off. John flipped open his phone and hit speed dial. “Well? Who is it?” Cliff’s voice crackled through the speaker.

“Hello to you too,” John replied sarcastically.

“Skip it,” Cliff said impatiently. “Who is our troublemaker?”

“Wilkes & Rammel Entertainment.”

The phone was silent for several minutes. “No name? Just the entire company?”

“Just a corporate account,” John replied. “That’s it.”

“Son of a bitch,” Cliff swore. “We have an employee of W&R on the set?”

John braced himself as the cab whipped around a corner and zipped down the city street. “Maybe just a contractor. Someone they bribed. Either way, it doesn’t give us much.”

Cliff's dejected sigh hissed in his ear. "Okay. Come on back. We'll figure out something."

"Can't we..." John began helplessly, "I don't know... sue W&R or something?"

"For what? Having an email address in New York? Until we have proof that someone on the set is a part of W&R, we got nothing."

John paused at the elevator. He stepped aside and leaned up against the wall. "But they are disclosing information on the set, aren't they?"

"Coincidence. At least, that's what they'll say. And we got nothing to prove otherwise. Besides, we don't know who it is, and they aren't going to tell us. It doesn't matter. A lawsuit like that would get us more bad publicity than we need." Cliff's footsteps could be heard through the phone. John realized he was pacing. "Besides, attorneys cost more money than Cerner can afford right now."

John flipped through the pages. "What about the addressee, this jrandolph?"

Cliff snorted. "Oh yeah, I checked into that. It's Jesse Randolph, a big vice-president in charge of acquisitions. A real barracuda, that guy. Ex-lawyer. He'd probably sue you a hundred different ways for parking in his spot."

John watched the buildings and cars zip by. "So, we're screwed? Just wait for the next catastrophe to happen, suck down the bad press, watch Cerner's stock tank, and wait for W&R to destroy it?"

"I..." Cliff started to reply. "I don't know. Get back here. Maybe we'll think of something."

"Right. See you Monday," John closed the phone with a loud snap. The cab slowed suddenly, screeching its tires slightly. John had to throw his arms up against the seat to avoid tumbling over it.

"Here you are. That's 22.35," the cabbie said gruffly, holding out his hand.

John handed over the money wordlessly and got out of the cab. As he walked into the hotel, a dark thought washed over him like a wave. Whoever it was, they would act when they crashed the Space

*THE BAD GUY*

Needle set. If it didn't go off just right, the movie would be ruined and seal the deal for W&R to take over Cerner. It was not a pleasant thought indeed.

## Chapter XVII

Other than taking a trip to Wall Street, John spent the rest of his time in New York in his hotel room. He knew that the stock exchange would be closed on Saturday but thought buying a Wall Street Journal at its namesake would be a novel souvenir. He also figured it would be something to read on the plane ride back.

The next day on the airplane he was recognized by the flight attendant, who took it upon herself to let everyone on the plane know who they were flying with. After cheerfully signing several autographs, he settled in and opened up his paper. He checked his stocks, (they were mixed) and Cerner's. It was only down a couple of points from what it had been only a few weeks ago. He felt as if he was watching a car just hanging over the edge of cliff. Just a few more days and the whole thing would crash down.

"Play the markets?" his seatmate queried.

John didn't turn to look at the man sitting next to him, a large balding businessman, but continued reading the statistics. "Mm-mmm."

"Yeah, me too," the other man replied. "Any sectors in particular?"

John glanced at him without turning his head. "No, not really. It's mostly a hobby."

The other man snorted. "Expensive hobby."

“I don’t put that much into it.” The other man snorted again and fell silent. John pulled out the news section. On the front page a headline leaped out at him:

***Celebrities entertain stockholders at Wilkes & Rammel Entertainment***

*Stars shone at the quarterly stockholder meeting for W&R this year. Stars from many of their hit shows and news programs were on hand to give speeches and autographs to shareholders invited from around the country. W&R’s shares have been rising steadily with the many acquisitions over the past year, most notably the UBC network. Investors were also... – continued on C4.*

John opened up the section, scanned down the page and found the article and an accompanying picture that puzzled him. He stared at the picture for several moments before continuing.

“Hey, that looks like some party,” the other man piped up. “Course us common folk don’t get invited to great parties like that.” He leaned in close to get a better look at the picture, much to John’s annoyance. “Isn’t that Mark Lewis?”

“Yeah,” John replied distantly. “It is.” Ignoring the other man, he continued reading the article.

*...given an impromptu speech by superstar Mark Lewis. (See above picture) He garnered quite a few laughs when he admitted that his first name was Mel. “I decided to use my middle name when I got into acting. My rationale was there could never be a successful action star named Mel. Who knew?” Mel Gibson’s moniker notwithstanding, Mark’s career has been quite successful. W&R’s success can be measured by the caliber of guests at stockholders meeting....*

John stopped reading. “Excuse me,” he told the other man. “I need to make a phone call.”

\* \* \*

When John arrived home, he found Charlie waiting for him. “Well, I’m here. Where have you been?”

“New York.”

“New York? You leave for two days, no one knows where. Do you know Jan is a little worried?” Charlie began backpedaling as John stepped past him and went up his front door. “Until you called me tonight, I was getting worried too.”

“I couldn’t tell anyone on the set, Dad. Not even her.”

Charlie stopped short. “You were looking for your spy.”

John pulled out his keys and searched for the front door key. “Yeah, and I think I found him. Come on in, I think you can help me with something.”

“What?” Charlie asked as he took one of John’s bags. John gratefully rubbed his shoulder in relief.

He opened the door and dropped his other bag without stopping. Charlie nearly tripped on it as he hurried in to follow John, dropping the other bag next to it. “Look Dad, you’re good with scams. It’s time you put that to use for me instead of yourself. I need you to look at something.”

“Okay. What?” Charlie repeated.

John plopped trotted into his office and clicked on his computer. “Check this out,” he said, tossing the newspaper into Charlie’s hand.

Charlie read for a few moments. “Lewis was at W&R’s shareholder’s meeting?”

“Yeah. Now, he’s not on any of their shows, none of their movies. So what’s his relationship?” John clicked on his computer and started his Internet browser. “I need to find out.” He clicked away at the screen.

“What are you doing with that?” Charlie wondered, plopping down on a chair across from him. He pulled a pencil out of his pocket and began writing on the paper.

“It’s the Internet, Dad. It has information. Surely you’ve heard of it,” John said sarcastically.

Charlie shot him a ‘very funny’ look. “Well, you can bang on that thing all you want, but sometimes the answer comes just with the clues you have in front of you.”

John looked up from the screen. “What do you mean?”



“You’ve heard of that old saying, ‘A rose by any other name?’” Charlie scratched out something and then continued writing.

John began to get impatient. “It’s not just an old saying Dad, it’s Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet.”

“Okay, so I’m not an educated man. But I do know a con when I see one. Look,” he handed John the paper.

John looked at the writing. “Oh you’ve got to be kidding me!”

Charlie shrugged. “It matches up. Mel Mark Lewis, Wilkes & Rammel. It’s play on words, whaddya call them?”

“Anagrams.” John answered. He stared at the paper, checking the letters over and over again. Every one matched up. “I’ll be damned. Mark Lewis owns W&R?”

“Or maybe started it and sold parts. CEO? Who knows? You can probably search it on that Internet of yours,” Charlie replied, pointing at John’s computer. “But my guess is you’d be confirming what I just told you.”

“I think you’re right. It makes sense. Mark’s been a multimillion actor for years now. He definitely has the capital and the clout to create this kind of company.” John shut off his computer. “Finding out the right information isn’t my strong suit anyway. I better see Cliff, tonight.”

Charlie shook his head incredulously. “How can he keep it a secret that he’s really running the whole organization?”

“What are you kidding?” John replied matter-of-factly. “If WorldCom can hide four billion dollars in losses, Mark Lewis can hide his role with W&R.”

Charlie arched an eyebrow. “WorldCom got caught, you know.”

John grinned. “And now so will Mark Lewis.” He got up and headed to his garage. “Hey Dad, check on Rufus for me, will ya?”

“Sure thing, John.”

John started to step into his garage and paused for a minute. “Thanks Dad.”

“No problem.”

John took a step back in the house. “No, I mean it. Thanks for your help here.”

Charlie swallowed. “Well...er... You better get going.”

John held his father’s gaze a moment longer, a connection passing between them that had been broken for many years. Finally he stepped back out into the garage and hopped in his car.

\* \* \*

A half-hour later, he was at the set. It was nearly deserted. Only a lone security guard was on duty to let him through the gate. He jumped out of his car and ran through the double doors. “Cliff?”

Cliff was there, waiting near the big set. “Over here!”

John hurried over. The double doors closed behind, the lights of the parking lot outside dwindling and leaving the set in near darkness. Only a couple of dim lights on control consoles allowed them to see each other.

John could see Cliff was waiting impatiently as he got closer. “All right, what is it you couldn’t tell me over the phone?”

“Probably the fact that he’s figured it all out,” another voice interrupted loudly. Both men whirled to see Lewis coming out of the shadows, a pistol in his hand and leveled at them.

## Chapter XVIII

John was surprised, but refused to be intimidated. “Aw, gee Mark, you ruined my surprise.”

Lewis shrugged. “It’s the least I could do, since you’re doing your best to ruin my plans.”

Cliff looked from one man to another. “Can someone please tell me what’s going on here?”

Mark waved the pistol about lazily. “It’s simple Cliff. I own W&R. Soon I’ll own Cerner. Any questions?”

Cliff stepped back in shock. “It was you! The whole time, it was you!”

Lewis sneered at him. “Well of course it was me, you moron! I’m the jerk actor who’s hard to get along with. I make weird decisions and then change them. I’m arrogant, unlikable, everything you look for in – dare I say it – a villain.” John scowled at that remark. Lewis was amused by his reaction. “Don’t you guys ever watch the news? The most likely suspect is usually the correct one.”

He began to chuckle. “But, oh no. You guys are so steeped in bad Hollywood scripts, you think it’s the least possible suspect, or the butler did it, or some damn thing. Hell, if you did any research at all, you would’ve probably found my connection with W&R way before this.” He smirked at John. “But no, you have to take the long

way. Emails that are basically untraceable back to me, as you found out.”

John held up his hands and Cliff followed suit. He watched Mark carefully, unsure of what to do. “I don’t understand; why do you want Cerner so badly?”

“Power, control, money, take your pick. I own the studio; I can make the movies I want to make. Direct, produce, it’s all there for the taking.” He began poking his chest for emphasis. “What I want! When I want! How I want!”

John shook his head sadly. “You’ll never make that work. You will destroy Cerner.”

Mark humphed. “Says you.”

“Yes, says me!” John roared. “You have no idea what makes a movie great! You have no idea what it means to people!” He pointed a finger at Lewis, getting angrier by moment. “Do you cry every single time you watch E.T.? Do you clap every time the Death Star blows up? Do watch in horror every time Scarlett walks through the wounded soldiers? Do you?”

John waved his arms around the set in an encompassing gesture. “People here do. People here have a deep love of the characters they watch over and over again. It’s like... like...” he fumbled for the right phrase. “It’s like visiting family. Every time you live and die with the characters. You know how it’s going to turn out, but you don’t care. It’s the journey that’s the thing.”

John penetrated Lewis with a deep gaze. “You’ve never known that feeling. You never will, either. The only thing you are about, is you.”

Lewis was unimpressed. “Wow. Well I’d love to sit here and listen to you philosophize, romanticize, and psychoanalyze, John, but I just don’t have the time. No wait, strike that. Even if I did have the time, I wouldn’t do it. You bore me.”

“Look, Lewis,” Cliff muttered, attempting to defuse the tension. “What do you want from us? How did you know we’d be here anyway?”

Lewis smiled broadly. “Well, those darn loose lips of John’s tipped me off that he was checking me out. Went all the way to *iff.com*, didn’t you? Didn’t take long for me to figure out that I was going to have to take some drastic steps.”

John scowled. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Johnny boy, you didn’t think I was doing all this by myself, did you?” He laughed. “Oh, wait a minute. You didn’t think it was me at all, did you? Apple didn’t fall far from the tree when it came to smarts, did it?”

“You leave my father out of this,” John snarled.

“Touchy. Touchy. You think you’d treat me with a little more respect, me having a gun and all.” He held the gun up and aimed at John’s head. “Say ‘please’ next time you demand something of me.”

John gritted his teeth. “For god’s sake, Lewis, what do you want?!” Cliff yelled.

“I already told you what I want. And, quite honestly, there’s not much to stop me from getting it.” Lewis replied in a menacing whisper. “Now shut up.”

He tapped the pistol to his own head, pretending to search his memory. “Where was I? Oh yes. My help. See, I was on that thing up there when Ken bought it. Tch, tch, tch. Shame about that! Really wasn’t supposed to happen like that. But that’s what insurance adjustors are for, am I right?”

John wanted to rip out his throat at this point, but forced himself to remain calm. Lewis kept on talking, as if it was over coffee at a nice outdoor café. “See, John, I couldn’t do it all by myself. And being on that monstrosity when it went haywire, well... it does tend to throw the dogs off the scent, if you know what I mean.”

John heard the office door suddenly open, the harsher florescent lights from the hallway flooding in. He squinted to see who it was.

“Jan?” John sputtered.

“I’m sorry, John” she began and then stumbled forward. “Stop pushing!” she snarled.

“Sorry,” another voice spoke behind her, and John’s blood ran cold, “but if you don’t move, Lewis may do something drastic. He

does have the gun, so keep moving if you don't want anyone to get hurt. Please."

It was his father.

Lewis grinned maniacally at John's reaction. "I stand corrected. I guess the apple does fall far from the tree."

## Chapter XIX

John gaped in astonishment.

“Dad?!”

Charlie gave Jan another push and she stumbled over to stand with John and Cliff. She brushed her hair off her face and shot daggers at Charlie. “And to think I defended you to John.”

“Hi John,” Charlie began uncertainly. “Don’t be too mad, I did take care of Rufus like you asked.”

“You were there that day,” John realized. “You weren’t supposed to be there, but you were there when Ken was killed. It was you.”

“Yes, John,” Charlie began, and there appeared to be genuine sorrow in his voice. “It wasn’t supposed to happen like that, I swear.”

“What the hell did you think was going to happen?” John snapped. “Every time I think you’ve turned it around, you kick me in the teeth.”

“Yeah, you think you would’ve learned by now,” Lewis snickered. “Even a rat can be taught not to touch an electric shock. Guess you’re not that smart, huh.”

Duncan ignored him. “You used my access. My trust. For what? What did he promise you? Thirty pieces of silver?”

“More like a piece of the silver screen,” Charlie replied. “Ten percent ownership of Wilkes & Rammel, plus a generous contractor’s fee for my work here.”

“I don’t understand. You just helped me not one hour ago,” John asked, puzzled. “Why did you do that?”

“When you figured it out, it was time to take the offensive. It was dumb luck you seeing that picture. Since you found there was a connection between Lewis and W&R, you would’ve figured the rest out soon enough. So I called Mark and told him you were coming. If we could keep this quiet, he told me we could make you an offer, cut you in on the deal.”

“Offer we can’t refuse, eh?” John deadpanned.

“No, John it’s not like that.” Charlie stepped closer to him and spoke in earnest.

“You’re right. Reasonable people always make reasonable offers using reasonable guns,” John said sarcastically.

Charlie ignored the crack, still trying to persuade his son. “Think about it John, it’s your chance to direct. You play ball and you could have your own movie! What do you think?”

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks,” Lewis broke in. “He either plays ball or he doesn’t play at all.”

“What does that mean?” John pulled Jan slowly closer, trying to get her behind him.

“The accident at the McCain set will happen today instead of Thursday. Only this time, there will be a few more deaths associated with it. Three, it looks like.” Mark began laughing. “Aw hell, why waste a good set? I’ll just shoot you three, and let the bad publicity do the rest.”

Charlie whirled at Lewis. “Now, wait a minute. This is my son you’re talking about.”

“Don’t get soft on me now, old man,” Lewis snarled. “What do you think this is? Huh? How much money do you think we got riding here? Cerner will be mine.”

“At least let Jan go,” John offered, trying to buy some time.

Mark shook his head. “Hey, she wandered into this. Tried to play detective on your own, didn’t you sweetheart?”

John looked at her. “You did?”



“I was just reading up on stocks,” Jan said still keeping her gaze on Mark’s gun. “After our date, I wanted to see what was so fascinating. So today I picked up a paper. That’s when I saw a story about W&R with Lewis. I called Cliff to ask him about it. He told me he was meeting you down here and to join you.”

“Nice work, Cliff,” John said sarcastically.

“Hey, let’s not forgot whose relative made this possible?” Cliff said, exasperated.

“Look, I’d love to hear your idiotic stories all night, but I need to get home. We got an early day tomorrow,” Lewis said, looking at his watch nonchalantly. “Or maybe we won’t. It’s up to you. Here’s the deal: you three can be a part of this, the new Cerner studios. Just keep your mouths shut and let us ruin the shot on Thursday or...” Lewis paused and stepped up close to John, standing nose to nose with him. “Or we ruin the set right now. With you three in it.”

“You can’t be serious,” Cliff stammered. “You’d never...”

“... ‘Get away with it?’” Lewis finished for him. “Let’s not run through the same tired script. Of course I’d get away with it. ‘Another accident on the accident prone set,’ they’d say. Like those cops that were here the other day, remember them John? Wasn’t it strange they seemed to have no interest in following up? Not so strange if the W&R has a presence on the city council.”

“Someone will investigate!” But John’s blood ran cold. No one would investigate, no matter what happened.

Lewis kept on goading. “Sure they will, John. Sure they will. Money and power have always run second to justice and morality.” He laughed mockingly. “Of course, once the set is ruined, there’s no way to complete *Raising McCain* properly; at least not without a major infusion of cash. That’s when W&R comes in to ‘rescue’ the failing studio.”

Lewis grinned intently. “*When* this happens is up to you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” John said incredulously. “I will never work for you.”

Lewis shook his head. "Somehow I didn't think so. Self-righteous twit. Willing to die for a movie." He snorted derisively and waved the gun towards the set. "Alright you three, get in there."

"No." John crossed his arms defiantly.

Mark shrugged. "Okay, I shoot you right here. You think I couldn't make it look like you and Cliff cooked up this scheme and then shot each other because one of you tried to snooker the other?"

"John," Jan touched his arm. "Don't. Just get in there."

Charlie stepped forward. "Now wait a minute. You said they'd play ball. You said it wouldn't go this far, that we were just going to scare them."

Lewis shrugged. "Then talk to your son, old man."

Charlie grabbed John by his shirt. "John!" he hissed. "What are you doing? We can be rich! You can direct! It's everything we wanted!"

John looked at Charlie sadly. "If he would do this to us, imagine what he would do once he had the studio. Dad, you always wanted the big score? Well, a score this big is take no prisoners. He won't stop with this. Guys like him don't care who they hurt. He's only giving us time to get him where he wants."

Charlie began pleading. "It's not worth dying for John!"

"Uh, John?" Cliff cut in, "I'm kinda with him on that."

John ignored him. "Isn't it Dad? You keep flushing your life for these things. Dead or in jail. Either one, it's a wasted life. I should've known, Dad. You just can't stay away from it, can you? The big score." John gripped his shoulder. "There is no big score, Dad."

Charlie faltered. "I just wanted to be successful like you, John. I just wanted to be a part of all this. I just wanted you to be proud of me for once."

"You define success wrong. You were a part of all this. But that's all gone now, isn't it?" John refused to look at him.

"I..." Charlie's eyes started welling up with tears. "I never was a good father."

John scowled. "Well, that was the paradox. You could be a pretty good father, but you're just not a good person."

*THE BAD GUY*

“I just can’t change, John!” Charlie said. “I try every time, but I can’t”

John rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to hear that. You could change, but you decided what’s important to you. This... addiction is what’s important to you.” John let his hands drop and took a step back. “I promise you, I will never make the mistake of forgetting that again.”

Charlie stepped forward, but John turned his back to him. Lewis waved his pistol impatiently. “C’mon old man, he’s made his choice. This is all or nothing. They gotta go, so load them in the set.”

Charlie turned slowly and his face hardened. “First things first,” he said. “I want my son to realize what he’s missing.” He walked over and took his place next to Lewis. “I want to be on the winning side for once. This is my big score.” John shook his head sadly. Charlie turned to Lewis. “Thanks for the opportunity.”

Lewis smirked. “Looks like I’m the son he always wanted, eh Bad Guy? Too bad you were never more like your characters.” He turned to Charlie. “Good to have you aboard, Charlie.”

Charlie smiled. “Thanks,” he replied and lunged forward, grabbing Mark’s hand. The two struggled violently. “RUN!” Charlie yelled.

Cliff grabbed Jan. “C’mon John, let’s go!” he roared.

John started to take a step when he heard a loud crack. He stopped dead and turned to see Charlie sink down to the floor. Lewis ran out of the room, leaving Charlie lying on the floor in a small pool of blood.

“DAD!” John hollered and sprinted the few steps to his prone father. He fell to his knees, frantically turning Charlie over. “Oh, dammit, Dad. You picked a hell of a time to get heroic.”

Charlie turned over to reveal the gun clutched in his hand. His face was a mask of pain. He groaned.

“Hang on, Dad!” He looked him over frantically. “Where are you hit?”

“UH! My foot! Ow!”

John’s face turned from concern to disgust. “Your foot?!” he said incredulously. “You gotta be kidding me.”

Charlie gritted his teeth. “Oh shut up. Just go get him.”

John looked up at Cliff, who had joined him. "Take care of him. Wrap the foot to stop the bleeding. And get an ambulance."

Cliff looked at the wound, his face pale but resolute. "I will." He pointed towards a darkened doorway. "He went into the Shogun's set storage."

John nodded and began running. "John!" Charlie yelled after him. "I'm sorry."

"I'll say you are," John snarled and ran out.

\* \* \*

It was dark, but John's eyes were already adjusted for dim light. "Lewis!" His voice echoed across the room. "Lewis, you shouldn't have run in here, this is the only exit." He had no idea if that was true or not, he never had a reason to come in here. He hoped Lewis never did either.

He heard nothing. He walked forward cautiously. Rows and rows of Japanese costumes extended out as far as he could see. Looking from left to right, he spotted a row of swords propped up against the wall. Looking in all directions, he carefully walked over and picked up a Katana blade.

Some props were for fighting scenes. The blades were quite harmless to avoid people getting harmed in a mock battle. But others were for show, and therefore stressed authenticity. These three-foot blades could cleave through a watermelon in one stroke. *Maybe I can intimidate him*, he thought.

He started to search the room again when he was suddenly struck hard from behind. He tumbled through racks of costumes, the sword skittering from his hand.

"You're not going to stop me," Lewis said, standing over him. John leapt up and tackled him, sending Lewis flying back into the sword rack. Lewis shook his head, stunned. Realizing where he was, he picked up a sword of his own.

John looked around quickly, spotting the sword behind him and just to his left. He spun on his stomach, lunged forward, grabbed it, and kipped up onto his feet. He grasped the sword with two hands and lowered his center of gravity on his feet.

“John!” Both men turned to see Jan in the doorway, worriedly looking from one man to the other.

“Stay back, Jan.” John swiped the sword in the air. *If I can just scare him a little*, he thought, *maybe he’ll just give up.*

To his surprise, Lewis ran through a small Kata with his sword. The blade whisked through the air easily and gracefully. He handled the blade with practiced ease. “What?” he finally mocked, seeing John’s disbelieving look. “You think you’re the only one who had to take up a martial art for a role?”

John waited, unsure of what to do. *This isn’t a movie*, he thought. *What am I going to do, run him through?*

Lewis took advantage of the John’s hesitation and lunged. John parried, the swords clangs echoing loudly through the room. John reversed his stroke, attempting to slice Lewis’s arm, hoping to just disable him, but Lewis block his stroke easily. They disengaged and circled.

*This could be worse than I thought.* John’s felt a slight queasiness in the pit of his stomach. *He might be more skilled than I am.*

“Lewis, this is insane,” John said. “The police are coming. It’s over. What do you think you can prove with this?”

“That I’m better than you! A small trifle at this point, but I’ll take my victories where I can get them.” He lunged forward with a series of thrusts and swings, which John barely blocked. “If I’m going down, at least I’ll get the satisfaction of killing you!”

Jan yelped in fright as the swords clang together again. “Lewis,” she yelled. “Stop it! You’ll kill him!”

“Ooo, she’s really on top of things,” Lewis sneered. “Didn’t I just say that?”

John scowled and swung his sword over his head. Lewis held his sword over his own head to block the blow. But at the last moment, John flipped the sword around and switched the stroke across Lewis’ side. Lewis reacted and blocked it with a clang, but the force of the blow caused him to stumble back.

John pushed forward, swinging. But Lewis somehow recovered and blocked each blow. John began to breathe heavy. He wasn't used to this kind of intensity. His sword fights in his movies usually were swing, wait several minutes or even hours to block out the next shot, and then finally swing again.

*Not to mention, he thought grimly, I always lose in the movies.*

Lewis smiled insanely. He swiped back and forth, John blocking his blows. "Come on, John. Join me and together we will rule the movie business."

John turned his mouth down in disgust. *He's losing it, he thought.* "Lewis, you need help."

"Not really, I just need you out of my way!" He swiped back, and reversed his stroke, much the way John had done earlier. John didn't see it this time and was thrown off balance. The sword flew from his hand and he fell to one knee.

Jan screamed. Lewis turned and regarded her for a moment. "I may go to jail, but if I got to go, at least I get the satisfaction of this." He held the sword over John's head for the killing blow.

And sneezed.

## Chapter XX

“Aw hell...CUT!”

Lewis let the sword drop loosely as John got up from the ground. “Sorry, John. I guess some dust got up nose,” Lewis said sheepishly helping “John” up from the ground. “Was that how Mark Lewis was that day? Was it good?”

Duncan got up from his chair and regarded the two actors for a moment. “It was great, Greg. But remember, Lewis was always arrogant. He never would show much fear or doubt so don’t you do it either. And no more sneezing!” He snickered and looked at the other actor. “Jim, I’ve never looked so good. I wish I could handle that sword half as good as you. Thanks.”

“Thank you, Mr. Duncan.” Jim stepped off the set and sat down in his folding chair near John’s own director’s chair. He picked up a water bottle sitting on the ground next to the chair and took a deep drink.

John watched him for a minute. “You know, I think we all could use a break. Take ten everyone.”

John watched as cameramen pulled away from the set and prop masters pick up the swords that the two actors were using.

“John!” a voice called. He turned to see Leo and Rick Shellee trotting up to him. Leo was holding a booklet with storyboard pictures.

“Look, I don’t want to mess with your vision and all, but I can’t figure out a way to get you out of this.”

“Me?” John asked.

“Well, that you,” he pointed at the set, indicating the actor playing John. “I mean he’s on his knee with the sword about to cleave him in two. No one’s gonna buy him getting out of that. We need to rethink the choreography a bit.”

John thought a moment. “Well, how about he doesn’t lose the sword. Instead, we’ll just make the fight last longer.”

Rick shook his head. “Oh great. I better re-block everything, then.”

John arched an eyebrow. “C’mon, we’re just going to extend a few shots, that’s all. Get the storyboard artist out here. You two work with him and get me a couple more shots to pick from.”

The men nodded and headed out of the set. John walked over to Greg Andrews, the actor playing Lewis. Jan was there with him, touching up some cuts and scratches. “He looks great, Jan.”

“Thank you. By the way, Cliff called a moment ago, while you were filming your ‘swordfight,’” she said, stifling a laugh. John shot her a look and she obediently fell silent. But amusement continued to dance in her eyes.

John watched her suspiciously, but let her crack about the swordfight drop. “And what does our illustrious producer want? Us to be more budget conscious, I’ll bet.”

Jan nodded. “Well, that and to tell you that Marty was stopping by.”

John grinned in surprise. “Marty! Did he say when?”

“Right now,” a voice piped up behind him.

John turned to see Marty standing there, grinning. “How do you always sneak up on me like that?”

Marty shrugged. “Cause it’s loud on these sets, and you don’t have eyes in the back of your head.”

John feigned indignation and waggled a finger at him. “Don’t you come in here on my set giving me grief.”



Marty stepped forward and extended his hand, which John shook enthusiastically. “Okay, fine, but I do need you to do some extra publicity for *Raising McCain*.”

“Ew, boy. What is it?”

Marty crossed his arms. “Oh, don’t be such a baby. I just need an interview with Hollywood Tonight. Oh, and *mccaindiaries.com* needs another ‘exclusive’.”

John wrinkled his face in mild disgust. “Oh man, that’s the fourth one in as many months.”

“You got them on board, so you get to keep them happy.” Marty grinned.

“So how’s it doing so far?” John asked. “I’ve been so busy lately, I haven’t kept up since the premier.”

“It’s been great. Four weeks at the top of the box office. We’ve already made up the original budget. A couple more weeks to take care of marketing costs and we should profit from then on out.” Marty smiled. “Thank God, too. Re-shooting so much was a mess, not to mention getting another McCain on such short notice.”

Jan snickered. “At least you didn’t have to pay Lewis’s horrendous salary.”

Marty nodded. “That really did help. Sure, we had to push the movie to a Christmas release, but it was worth it.”

John blinked. “Jeez, has it really been a year and half since all that went down?”

Marty smiled. “Time flies. Things move fast in this business. Speaking of which, how are the newlyweds doing?”

Jan blushed. “We got married three days before production started on *The Bad Guy*. We haven’t had time to do anything yet.”

John leaned forward and kissed Jan lightly. “At least we get to work together.”

“Good thing too, else we’d never see each other.” She turned back to Greg. “I need to finish those up.” She hugged Marty warmly. “It’s great to see you again, Marty.”

“You too, sweetheart.” Marty replied. He and John turned and strolled up the set.

“Speaking of sweethearts working together, am I to understand that you and Elisa Barnhardt are now an item?” John asked, a knowing smile on his face.

Marty blushed. “Er—well... don’t believe everything you read in the tabloids, John.”

John arched an eyebrow. “Cliff isn’t a tabloid, Marty.”

Marty sighed. “Alright, alright. Once we got past the shooting – and the attempted murder – we started getting along pretty well.”

John was amazed. “How did it happen? You guys hated each other.”

Marty shrugged. “She really has quite a mind. Once we got into editing, we spent a lot of time together trying to get it all right. She started seeing how well we shot it and she gave me some excellent ideas on pacing.”

John shook his head. “Miracles never cease.” The two started walking towards the set. Marty looked up at the replica set in wonder.

“This is some set up you got going here, John.”

John marveled at all the activity around them, as if seeing it for the first time. “Thanks. Cerner’s been pretty generous to me.”

“They should be.”

“Course it helps when you re-use the sets from a previous movie,” John said.

“Hey, it’s still expensive, no matter what. They know you saved their studio.”

John snorted. “I had the star of their movie arrested. The delays cost them millions. I almost ruined Cerner.”

“You didn’t. When Lewis’s real motives were found out, W&R dried up. There wasn’t anyone else in a position to get their hooks into Cerner. Now *McCain* has made up all that lost revenue.”

They continued walking. John shook his head sadly. “Yeah, I know. Still, it could’ve been worse.”

Marty snorted. “Yeah, you three could’ve been killed. Thank God, for...” He stopped suddenly, uncomfortable.

“It’s okay, Marty, you can say his name.”

Marty looked at John, concerned. “Do you know how he’s doing?”

John shrugged, tried to look like he didn't mind talking about his wayward father. "Yeah. I visit him once a month. More, if my schedule permits."

Marty looked astonished. "Really? After everything that's happened?"

John frowned. "It was as much my fault as it was his. I knew what kind of man he was, what kind of man he always was. But I still let him in a place I shouldn't have." He chuckled. "And to think, I was worried he'd steal a prop and sell it."

Marty smiled sadly. "Why do you still visit him?"

John shrugged. "He's still my father. I can't forgive him, but I can't just toss him out of my life. I guess..." he paused, reflecting on the events. "I guess I need to be the bigger man for myself, you know what I mean?"

Marty nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

They continued walking together for several moments. John pointed out the different sets and showed him the re-creation of the big Space Needle set. Marty laughed in delight. "So is it the same set? It looks different from what we had then! I had forgotten..."

He walked around the big set, looking at it in wonder. "Wow. You have the gantry and even the..." he stopped.

John looked up at the cable car cams. "We couldn't really tell the story properly without Ken." John stared up at the car. "I'm dedicating the film to him."

Marty nodded. "I was going to do the same with *Raising McCain*. But when I heard you doing this, I thought maybe it was more fitting." He scratched his head. "You can't dedicate two movies to the same guy, can you?"

John thought about that. "Good question. Why not?"

Marty stepped around the set one more time, finally stopping next to John. They didn't speak for several moments. Finally Marty took a deep breath. "Well, I gotta get back to it. I have several interviews today. But since I was in the neighborhood, I thought I'd drop by. I just had to see all this."

John shook his hand. "It's great to see you again. Amazing how much we lose track of each other when a picture goes to post-production."

"Yeah. We'll just have to do another picture together. Take care of that new wife of yours," Marty said. "And give Cliff a smack in the face for me."

John laughed. "You don't want to know what he told me to give you if I saw you."

"I can imagine." Marty gave him a little wave and headed to the exit.

John watched him go for a few minutes and then headed back to the shoot. The actors were there getting back in place. Rick and Leo showed him a series of new storyboards, which he liked immediately. After an impromptu planning session with the two actors, they were ready to continue.

John settled back into his chair. "Places, everyone!" he yelled. Jan sidled up next to him and took his hand in hers. She squeezed it briefly and then let it go. "Are they ready, Hon?"

John smiled excitedly. "Yup. Leo and Rick came up with a great ending."

Jan began to snicker again. "John, I've been meaning to ask you."

"What's that?" he replied absently.

She went around the back of his chair and put an arm around his waist. "What's with the sword fight? You and I both know that when you tackled Lewis, he hit his head on the rack and was knocked out. Police came, end of story. Shouldn't you tell it like it was?"

John grinned at her with a twinkle in his eye. "Now, what the hell fun would that be?"

She nodded and returned his grin. He turned back to the set. The assistant ran out with the clapper. "The Bad Guy, Scene 75, Take 2." The clapper bar swung down with a crack causing John to smile. He held the megaphone to his mouth.

"Action!"