



Susceptible

BY NORMAN THOMAS HOOD

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March 2043

Luke stared at the visor kit and reluctantly pulled it out of his closet. He'd had it for three years, but had never used it. He began entering the code from the card to the touchscreen that was strapped to his wrist.

"What's taking so long? Are you chickening out again?" he heard from his cell phone's speaker.

"No, I'm just... shit. Hang on, Brian. I'm trying to enter the code now... just all thumbs."

"What? All you had to do was hold the controller up to the visor. It would've paired automatically. I can't believe most of the world uses my product daily and I have to walk my *own* brother through it. Three years after I launched it."

"It is what it is. You know I'm not the type to use this kinda stuff. Besides, *you* created it... probably going to fry my brain in ten seconds." Luke said as he fumbled through the directions.

"Wouldn't take ten seconds for yours. Seriously, bro... just think of all the time, money and miles you could have saved if you'd had *any* trust in your own brother's work."

"It's not that... you *know* it's not. I'm just a caveman with stuff like this. I like the old days, like Gramps and Memaw lived through."

“Luke, you weren’t even *alive* for much of that. You’d better hurry up and drag your ass outta the Stone Age. I have a virtual meeting in about four and a half minutes.”

“Ok, it says choose a terminal... t-3498 or t-3481.”

“Either one. It just means there’s two terminals the same distance from the house you’re showing today. It happens sometimes. C’mon, man... hurry up.”

“Ok, I picked one. Hey, the goggles just lit up. Holy shit! This thing is going to make me dizzy.”

“Give it a few seconds, dude. It has a specific path it takes to launch out of the terminal. You’re just seeing the inside of the exit tunnel.”

“Ok, it’s out now. Wow, that’s pretty cool! It shot about a hundred feet into the air and seems to be moving fast.”

“Not too shabby for something not much bigger than a hummingbird, huh? The next model will do almost 75 kph. Just wait til *they* come out. We’ll be faster than a lot of full-sized drones. I take it, you put in the right address?”

“Yeah, it’s headed there now. So, what do I do when it gets there?”

“It’ll descend to almost ground level, drop out of autopilot and hover in the same spot. Then you just tilt your head down half an inch to walk forward... one inch to run. Left, right, backwards... you’ll catch on,” Brian laughed. “Oh, hey... it’s not public yet, so keep it to yourself, but with the next model, you won’t even have to move your head. You’ll be able to just think about a movement and it will happen. So, welcome to the future, Luke. It took you long enough to get here.”

“Haha... and what if I crash it?”

“You *can’t* crash it. It’ll avoid contact and hover in a safe spot if you screw up or fall. The worst that could happen is a bird attacks it. If that happens, a new one leaves the terminal immediately and continues to the address. The first replacement is free.”

“Man, you really thought of everything, didn’t you?” Luke asked.

“A lot of time spent dreaming it up in this wheelchair, little brother. There’s a lot of worse things I could have done with my time.”

“Yeah, no doubt. Listen, I don’t say it often, but I’m proud of everything you’ve accomplished, Brian. Youngest damn billionaire in the country. And you’ve helped a lot of people dealing with their, you know...”

“Just say it, Luke... disabilities. Oh, yeah, you still owe me \$100 from our Superbowl bet. Don’t think I’m letting you slide. Yeah, random thought, I know. Now get in there and sell that house. Are they attending by remote, too?”

“No, and it’s just one lady. She’ll be there in the flesh... like I should be.”

“Well then, don’t use all your driving credits cruising farms next month.”

“I know, I know... lesson learned,” he said. “You’re half the reason credits are so few these days, anyway. No one has to physically *be* anywhere anymore. Just send these damn hummingbirds instead.”

“Micro-drones... get it right. They’re the *size* of hummingbirds. It’s sophisticated shit, little brother. Look, I gotta go. Are you there yet?”

“Yeah, it’s been hovering for about a minute now.”

“Well, shit. I told you I have a meeting to join. When she gets there, just talk to her as if you were standing in front of her. She’ll hear it through the drone’s speaker, or her phone if she prefers. It’s automatic. Later, dude. I have a sabre to rattle!” The call ended.

Seconds later, Luke heard a car pulling up. A nice-looking young lady got out and walked up to the drone.

“Is that you, Mr. Martin?” she asked, staring into the drone’s tiny lens. Luke suddenly felt uncomfortably exposed.

“Yes, it is. Sorry I couldn’t be here in person. You’ll have to enter the lock code yourself. It’ll reset after we’re gone.”

“No problem. I can’t wait to see this place!”

Luke read her the code and she unlocked the door. As she started to walk inside, the drone dropped two feet lower and followed her in. Just inside the door, she turned to see the drone at hip level, just behind her dress.

“Oh, damn! Sorry... I didn’t mean to follow you that low or close. I don’t know what happened,” Luke said.

She laughed. “It watches what *you’re* watching, Mr. Martin. This *is* your first time, isn’t it? Flying a Martin, I mean. Hey, that’s your name, too... Martin. You’re obviously *not* the inventor though.”

“No, not me. But yes, same last name,” Luke said. “Listen, I really wasn’t watching your—”

“Oh, I’m just teasing you. The drones drop to three feet off the ground any time they pass through a doorway,” she said. “I figured you knew that.”

“No, my brother left that part out this morning,” he said. “Probably on purpose! That’s Brian for you.”

“Your *brother*... Brian Martin. Haha, that’s funny. You wish!”

Luke grinned, not ready to brag on that fact yet.

“You have a nice smile, Mr. Martin.”

“You can see me?” he asked, confused now.

“Yeah, the drone’s got two cameras, front and rear. It shows on my phone. Wow, you really *are* new at this,” she laughed.

Luke straightened his hair before answering, “Yeah, I’m a newbie. Sorry.”

“No worries. Okay, Mr. Martin... you wanna show me this house or what?” She sauntered through the living room, aware of the view he was getting. Luke followed her through the empty home, quickly becoming a fan of short sundresses. An hour later, he had the sale *and* her cell number, all without leaving his apartment.

“I have to say, brother, everything went great. She bought the house *and* gave me her phone number. Not bad for a caveman, huh?”

“What’d I tell you?” Brian asked, wheeling himself into Luke’s kitchen. “And there you were, ready to take the transit and sit around for an extra hour and a half, waiting for her to arrive. Just to be there in person.”

“Yeah, I see why people like your drones. They can go for walks without getting mugged, even go to France and explore Paris, all from their home.

“Yeah, I just hope you didn’t let that lady see this ratty, old apartment.”

“I don’t think so... my back was to the kitchen window the whole time. But there’s nothing wrong with *my* place, bro. It’s *old* school. Real wood floors, an air conditioner in the window... I like it.” Brian rumaged around Luke’s pantry, unable to find what he wanted.

“They still make window units?” Brian laughed. “Dude, you make enough money to own *two* homes. You’d better visit that chick at *her* place if you start dating. She sees this place and she’ll swipe left on your ass. Bet on it!”

“Maybe she’d appreciate the classic look,” Luke said.

“Like your ride? Luke... you drive a 2020 Camry. It’s 2043. They don’t even make those anymore.”

“It’s a 2021, and yeah... they don’t make ‘em like that anymore. That’s why it still runs. Almost 300,000 miles, and almost half are mine. Besides, I like a gas engine.”

“You really *are* old school. Dammit, man, do you have any coffee in this place? I can’t find shit in here.”

“Yeah, instant coffee... it’s in the back. I don’t drink it. I got it for you a while back.” Brian unloaded an armfull of things to the counter before finding it.

“What the hell? It’s three years out of date, Luke. You tryin’ to kill me? And sticking it in the back where I can barely reach it? What the hell?”

“First of all, you’ve told me fifty times not to treat you like you’re in a wheelchair. Secondly, it’s coffee, Brian. It’ll still be good ten years from now. What... are you too posh to drink it? Afraid you’ll end up in the newspaper’s gossip column?”

“Dude, there you go again. There hasn’t been a printed newspaper since 2035. They died out, remember? Like everything about your stubborn lifestyle has. I bet you still have a Blu Ray player, don’t you?”

“Three, and they all have their remotes and work. One day you’ll appreciate it when another E.M.P. hits and you lose all your shit for a month. You’ll be reading tea leaves while I’m watching classic UFC fights and eating burgers off the grill.”

“I’m fully shielded now, dummy. The whole damn city is. And yeah, this coffee’s as stale as a mummy’s ass.” He dropped the jar in the trash and made his way into the living room.

“Oh... well, I can’t be right about *every* damn thing,” Luke said. “Wanna beer?”

“No, I gotta roll,” Brian said, grabbing his sunglasses. “When are you going out with that pretty little redhead?”

“Saturday. We’re having dinner on a train, in Fort Myers. It’s a murder-mystery train ride. And no, I didn’t pick the place... *she* did. She’s nostalgic that way.” Brian shook his head.

“Oh, my God. She’s just like you, then. I give up.”

“It’s just a date, bro. No rings involved.”

“Yet. Later dude. I can’t take much more of you today.”

“Someone’s gotta keep you grounded,” Luke said as his brother rolled out the front door.”

“I’m grounded enough,” Brian said.

“Wow, she said... I haven’t seen a train up close since I was a kid. It’s big, but certainly not as big as I remember.”

“You’re one up on me, Carla. This is the first time I’ve ever seen one in person. I’m just glad they didn’t try to convert it to electric, like the others,” Luke said.

“Yeah, the guy who came up with *that* idea sure got fired,” she said.

A young lady emerged from the train and announced they were ready to accept boarding. One by one, they climbed the steel steps onto the train car. An old man wearing period clothing took their tickets upon boarding. Passengers were asked to find tables matching the number of people in their group.

“This one look okay?” Carla asked. “Right in the center, table for two against the wall. Perfect for people-watching.”

“You, too? I’ve always gotten picked on for having to have a table in the corner at restaurants. I like to know where everyone is in a room. Never know when something might happen.”

“Right? Exactly! And besides, it’s just more entertaining,” she added. “People can be pretty hilarious sometimes... especially in public.”

A waiter poured water into their glasses, then took their dinner order. When he’d left, Carla questioned Luke's order.

“All those classic dishes on the menu and you picked a steak and baked potato?”

“I know. It’s the way I’m wired. I could eat steak and potatoes every day of the week if I had to, and never complain.”

“I’ll have to let you taste my Kentucky Hot Brown when it comes. I bet it makes you wish you’d taken a break from steak tonight,” she winked.

“That would be a first,” he laughed. “Wow, how about this train? They’ve fully restored everything, especially the dining car.”

“Those curtains, omg, I think they’re literally a hundred and fifty years old!” she said, amazed. “They’ve been dyed a few times, but they don’t make material like this anymore. I feel like I’m looking back in time.”

“Are you a history buff?” he asked, sipping his water.

“Oh, yeah. That’s why I suggested the train ride. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. You know, we never did ask each other what we do for a living,” he said, grinning.

“Well, you’re a realtor... but yes, I never mentioned what I do. I’m an antiques dealer and appraiser.”

Luke’s grin broadened.

“What... am I too old fashioned for you or something? she asked.

“No, not a bit. I’m actually the Assistant Professor of American History at UF. I just sell real estate on the weekends.”

“Okay, you just won me over, Luke. Wow. Kinda young to be a professor though, aren’t you?”

“Assistant. I’m turning thirty in a few months. Still have a few more years before I’m fully tenured and can drop the *assistant* designation.”

“Nice. So, what are we going to do if date number two happens? Sit around talking about history all night?”

“Well, I mean... I don’t talk about history *all* the time, just once in a wh—”

“Luke, I’m kidding. There’s nothing I’d like better than sitting around talking about history. It’s my thing! Just add some wine to that and it’d be a perfect date.”

“So, we’re already setting up date number two? You haven’t even gotten your Hot Brown yet,” he laughed.

“I don’t need to taste the Hot Brown to know this, Luke. We’re *going* on another date. I insist.”

“Wow, Carla... I would never have figured you to be this shy.”

“Very funny. There’s much more to learn, Luke. Hey, our food’s coming.”

The couple ate their selections with a bottle of wine. The vibration of the tracks and the swaying of the car made for a nice evening as the hostess recounted the history of the famous city and locomotive. When the train ride was over, Luke escorted Carla to his car.

“Want to go back in time some more?” he asked, getting in the car.

“I’m a little scared of what’s in that mind of yours, but I’ll take a chance,” she said.

Luke took a moment on his phone, then sat back in the driver’s seat while *Penny Lane* from The Beatles started playing. Carla slowly turned her eyes to meet his.

“Mister, you just landed yourself date number three. Now, quit it before I have to stop you out of sheer principle.”

Luke put his sunglasses on, grinned and backed out of the station’s lot.

Wow, there really is someone for everyone, he thought.

“Then increase the probes’ output, their depth or find better access points. 93% is not satisfactory, Jim. We need over 99% to be considered trustworthy and for the movements to be fluid.”

“And what do we do if we can’t reach 99%, Brian? Scrap everything?”

“If we have to, we’ll start from square one with the interface! I’m not rolling anything out to the public that’ll cause me to lose sleep at night, understand?”

“I understand,” Jim conceded. “We’ll make some more adjustments. Talk to you tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow,” Brian said, patting him on the arm. “I’m heading home guys. Why don’t you call it a day, too. Let’s start fresh in the morning.”

A woman entered the room where Brian sat on the couch, visibly frustrated. Her long, blonde hair brushed his arm as she put a cup of coffee onto a table near his side. Before she sat down, she stood behind him and rubbed his shoulders.

“You’re tighter than a rolled-up fly in a spider’s web,” she said. “Either you’ve been working out your shoulders or you’re stressed out. Which is it?”

“The damn prototype... more freakin’ issues. Seems after every two weeks of progress, we get set back another three!”

“And remind me how many companies in the world have been in the same, unique position Martin Inc. is in right now?” she asked. “Implementing thought control into their products. Doesn’t sound very easy to me.”

“Understood. It just stresses me out, that’s all,” he said.

“I know,” she said, sitting on his lap now, “but you’re blazing new trails, Brian. Lots of rocks in the road to remove before the ride gets any smoother.”

He exhaled fully, then kissed her cheek. “That’s why I love you, Tonya. You always know how to talk me off the ledge.”

“Well, I hope I contribute more to you than just my stellar psychiatric care,” she said.

“You have no idea, hon,” he said, squeezing her thigh.

“Good, then I’ll stick around a little longer,” she laughed. “By the way, how’s Luke doing? Still burning the candle at both ends?”

“Yeah,” Brian said, “he sold a house a week ago and got a girlfriend out of the deal, too. And get this... she’s as big a history geek as *he* is! I haven’t met her in person yet, but I have a feeling about this one.”

“Really? Luke’s head over heels about someone?” she asked.

“He’s called me *twice* to talk about her already. He *never* does that. You know how damn picky he is. But yes, I think he might have met his life partner this time. We’ll see.”

“We should have them over for dinner, then. I’d like to meet the girl who has *Luke* hooked,” she said.

“Can’t do that yet. He hasn’t told her I’m his brother. You remember the last girl he dated? She broke up with him... said he wasn’t as exciting a man as she needed in her life. Told him she was looking for more of a risk taker. Then, when she found out he was my brother, she changed her tune and wouldn’t leave his ass alone. Gold-digging bitch! It took the police to convince her to quit bothering him. So, he’s not saying anything about me to her yet.”

“I don’t blame him,” she said. “I’d be a little careful, too.”

“You weren’t that careful with *me*, babe,” he said, squeezing her thigh again.

“I didn’t *have* to be careful with you, hon. If you remember, I had more money than you when we met. You made yours *after* we married. It was your intelligence and sense of humor that won me over. That, and the fact I prefer being on top.”

"I won't argue any of those things, hon. Just glad you fell for me instead of tripping over me."

"See?" she pointed out. "That's what I'm talking about." She kissed him on the temple and played with his hair. Brian could feel the tension leaving his head and neck. As she swung her leg over his, he turned off the tv and put down the remote.

"Wow, not sure why I had to wait almost two weeks to see your apartment, Luke. I love it! Oh, my God, look at these ceilings. And that fireplace! I haven't seen a real fireplace in twenty years."

"It was allowed to stay unaltered because this is a historic building," he said.

"Are you saying you can actually burn *wood* in it?"

"Well, I signed something promising I wouldn't, but I checked out the flue and broke that promise a few times last winter. It was nice... and no environmental officers showed up, either. I figure I can use it until they issue me a warning."

"One night we'll have to light that bad boy up. My grandparents had one. I remember hearing the wood crackle and pop as it burned. Best sound in the world," she said.

"Yeah, at least they haven't banned outdoor campfires yet. At some point, when I buy a house, that'll be the first thing I do... put in a nice firepit."

"Sweet. Well, this counts as date number three, you know. And now I've seen the apartment you've been hiding. That's progress," she laughed.

"Okay... I have a confession to make about that. I mentioned you to a family member a week ago. He joked you wouldn't want to see such an old-school apartment as mine, especially how dirty it was. So I've been cleaning up a little each night in preparation for you coming over. I had no idea how bad it'd gotten."

"In your defense, Luke... as professional as you are, you're *still* a guy. Most guys don't focus on cleanliness in their living space. If they can walk from one room to another without something sticking to their feet, they figure their place is clean." Luke belly laughed at her assessment.

"Okay, okay... so you have jokes! Let me show you the rest of the place, then we'll eat. Have you figured out what I cooked yet? It's still in the oven."

“Hmmm,” she wondered, “I would have guessed from the smell it was spaghetti, but you said it was in the oven. Considering that, I’m guessing it’s lasagna.”

“Baked spaghetti,” he said. “You told me a few days ago you loved eating pizza while watching Ancient Alien re-runs. I didn’t want to go that casual on our first dinner-date here, so I picked this. It’s basically dress-up spaghetti with everything that comes on a supreme pizza added in. Mix it up and bake it for a while, add a lot of cheese on top and this is what you get.” He opened the oven door and pulled out the bubbling dish.

“Oh, yeah... you’d better have a container to send some home with me later, Luke. It looks awesome.”

After dinner, they spent some time talking about their families and youths. The end of the night found them sitting on Luke’s sofa, watching tv.

“What was that?” Carla asked. “I heard chimes.”

“Oh... don’t worry about that,” he said, glancing backwards.

“What? Oh, come on, Luke... what *was* that? I know it came from inside your apartment.” Luke got up and led her down the hallway.

“Okay, just try to envision what it *could* look like,” he said, cringing. He reached for the closet’s door and opened it. There stood an old grandfather clock, in less than pristine condition.

“I *knew* that’s what I heard! Why is it in *here*?” she asked, touching the sides of the clock.

“Well, just look at it. The wood on the side is broken, there’s a large piece of molding missing on the top, here... and the finish looks like the outside of an outhouse!”

“So what? Are you planning on getting rid of it or doing a restoration?” she asked.

“Restoration. But I’ve never done one before, so I keep putting it off. That’s why it’s in the closet. I keep it winded though. I like the chimes. Keeps great time, too.” Carla lightly tapped his forehead.

“You remember what I do for a living, right? I can totally help you restore this beauty. It’ll be fun! If you want my help, I mean.”

“Well, yeah. That’d be great, Carla! If you can find the piece we need for the top somewhere, I’ll buy it and we can start refinishing it. I’ve looked, but I’ve come up empty so far. The split, though... I think we can glue and clamp it.”

“Okay, give me a few days to see what I can come up with. Looks like for date number four we’ll be wearing rubber gloves and a dust mask,” she laughed.

“Sexiest date ever,” he added, suddenly pulling her close.

“Well, Mr. Martin... I was starting to wonder if you *thought* of me that way.”

“What way? I was worried you might lean into a spider web, that’s all. It’s an old closet.”

“Oh, is *that* what you’re worried about?” she said, standing on her tiptoes now.

“Yeah, that’s exactly—”

Before he could finish, Carla pressed her lips to his. He responded in kind, feeling a rush of adrenaline at the touch of her warmth. He tightened his grip as they continued to kiss. A few quiet moments later, they parted lips. As Luke stared into her eyes, he felt a deep sense of connection. He kissed her again before letting go of her.

“Baked spaghetti, an antique Grandfather’s Clock and a nice kiss. I think you just banked another date, Mr. Martin,” she said, her gaze still on him.

“I thought we already *had* date number four banked... the restoration,” he said.

“It is. I’m referring to date number five,” she said. You might want to be ready for that one.”

With that, they called it a night on date number three.

The lab fell silent with Brian’s arrival. Jim and a colleague grabbed some paperwork from the top of a console and met him in the center of the room.

“97.4% Brian! It was probe placement the whole time,” Jim reported. “A small band of frequencies was cancelling itself out between two of the visor’s probes. And there were some electro-magnetic interference issues as well.”

“Emf? From what?”

“John’s location during the test. He was wearing the visor, and... well, he was sitting too close to the lab’s refrigerator. The field from the appliance broke our connection twice.”

“And what does *that* tell you?” Brian asked.

“We’re changing the shielding now, boss. Switching to a better one. It’ll make the visor slightly heavier, but customers won’t be able to tell,” Jim said.

“Good. Listen guys, I’m happy to get to 97+%, but we’re not done yet. I want at least 99.5% before we launch. Keep working on it... and good job today on what you figured out.”

The room went back to their work. Brian motioned for Jeff and Tim to follow him. Once in the hallway, Brian spun his chair around.

“Six weeks, guys. That’s the time we have left to be ready to start our Christmas launch and have those shelves full in five months. I want your honest assessment. Will we be ready?” He waited for an answer.

“I think we need to change the field transducers, Brian. We need more depth,” Jim said. Tim nodded in agreement.

“Jim, you told me last week we were about as close as we could station the probes on the visor. If you’re wanting more depth, you’ll need stronger transducers, which means *bigger* diameter ones, which screws up the placement distances *again*.”

“Well... we’d have to redesign the top of the visor, yes. So I’d need another centimeter or so between probes. It’s physics, Brian, I need the extra space and power to ensure a constant connection. More diameter to each probe will help. I’ve tried everything else, but I can’t get around it.” Brian’s face showed his disappointment.

“Guys, our visor’s going to end up looking like a Galactus’s helmet if you keep enlarging the design,” Brian said. Tim laughed at the remark, quickly receiving an elbow jab from Jim.

“It’s the last time I’ll ask for more room, boss... I promise.”

“Last time. I’ll remember that,” Brian said before leaving.

When he arrived at his office, he looked at his watch before dialing Luke.

“I figured you’re on your way home from UF by now,” Brian said.

“Not yet. I had a meeting with a student after class. It’s amazing the excuses these kids come up with when begging for extra time on projects.”

“Yeah, I bet. I hear a lot of excuses around here, too. But we’re making progress,” Brian said.

“You mean on your mind-reader helmet?”

“It’s called a neuro-bridge interface, baby brother... and it’s going to take my company to another level. Contactless thought control.”

“Til someone claims they lost their memory because of that thing. No thanks. You need to quit while you’re ahead, bro,” Luke chided. “No one wants their head pinned with probes.”

“These aren’t topical probes. There’s no needles, Luke. They’re wireless. Hell, I don’t know why I even talk to you about my work. It’s like talking to a caveman.”

“Maybe so, but you know I’ll always tell you what I think, whether or not it pisses you off. Unlike most of the people you talk to.”

“Yeah, well... at least when *we* talk I leave knowing how the slower thinking segment of our society feels. It helps me out in marketing,” Brian laughed.

“I can’t argue that,” Luke said.

“So, how’s the little cavewoman treating you? Still can’t believe you found a professional woman in Florida as backwards as you.”

“Haah! Backwards, she’s not. She could hold her own against you, I’m sure of it.”

“Maybe we’ll find out soon. Tonya wants to have you two over for dinner,” Brian said.

“Yeah, let’s do that. We’d love to come. I’d have to ask her first, of course, but I’m sure she’ll say yes. It’d have to be a weekend, though. Sundays are best.”

Brian was stunned at Luke’s answer.

“I have to tell you, little brother, I figured you’d be putting me off a few months before letting us meet her... considering the last girl you dated.”

“Apples and oranges, bro. This one’s different. She’s an antique dealer and appraiser. It’s not about money or status for her. She’s as easy-going as I am, believe me.”

“How the hell do either of you get anything done, then? To this day, I still wonder how *you*, as a spermatozoa, beat out 200 million of your brothers and sisters to find our Momma’s egg first.”

“Well that was thirty years ago, Brian. I was in better shape back then,” Luke answered.

“Okay... you win. Let me talk to Tonya. We’ll look for a Sunday soon to get together.”

“Sounds good. I’ll talk to Carla tonight.”

When they ended their call, a dark blue sedan parked outside Brian’s office raised its window and slowly pulled away from the curb.

“Told you these clamps would work,” Carla said, wiping off some glue that had squeezed out from the split. Twenty-four hours from now we can replace the missing crowning.”

“Still wondering how you found that piece, Carla. I looked everywhere online and came up empty!” Luke said, shaking his head.

“Don’t feel bad. You don’t know as many clock makers as I do. I never delete a contact in my field, no matter how long it’s been since we did business.” Luke looked at his watch.

“You know, this *could* end up the shortest date I’ve ever been on,” he said. “You’ve only been here fifteen minutes and we’ve already fixed the side of the clock. I don’t know about you, but all this work has made me hungry for tacos. Wanna go get some together?”

“Sure,” she answered. “There’s a place in Newberry that shows old movies on the wall while you eat. They’re known for their burgers, but I think they have tacos, too. It’s about a twenty minute drive from the university.”

“Awesome! Sounds perfect,” he said. “Nothing wrong with a burger joint.”

They arrived at the restaurant to find *His Girl Friday* had just begun playing on the wall. The patrons who filled the lobby looked to be in their seventies.

“Wow,” Luke whispered as he pulled a chair out for Carla, “I feel like a teenager in here.”

“I think we are,” she said. “I love this movie, Luke. The last time I saw it was in college. It was Media History class. I had to answer questions about it for a midterm.”

“1940’s maybe?” Luke asked, looking at the screen.

“Exactly 1940,” she said. “Cary Grant... oh, I had a crush on him after seeing that movie, all the time knowing he’d been dead for decades. It was a real crush, though.” Luke laughed out loud.

“Had to be. I see the look in your eyes.”

“It moves pretty fast. The movie’s dialogue, I mean.”

“I’ll pay attention,” he promised.

“Yes, you will, sir,” she said, squeezing his hand. “There’ll be some questions afterwards.

“By the way, Carla, my brother and his wife asked us over for dinner. I know it’s still early in our relationship, but they want to meet you.”

“Oh? Have you been talking about me to them, mister?” Luke scooted his chair closer.

“Well, maybe just a little,” he whispered. “I said I’d ask you tonight. For a Sunday evening sometime?”

“Hmmm... I don’t know, Luke. Sounds like an ambush to me,” she laughed.

“I’m not going to disagree. My brother is not a shy man in conversation. His wife, even less. But they’re good people. Not a bit of fakeness in either of them.”

“We should get along fine, then. The answer is yes. How formal?”

“Nice casual is fine. They are not the snobby types. Very down to earth folks.”

“Did you just say, “folks”? Where the hell are you from, dude?”

“Oh, we’re covering Kentucky writers in history right now... sorry. Some of it must have rubbed off on me.”

“It was cute... keep it up,” she whispered. But you’re making me miss my movie, buster!” Luke laughed at her choice of words.

“Buster,” he mumbled.

“Interrupt the wireless feed! Not on the *visor*... on the whole system!” Jeff yelled. A flurry of lab assistants ran into the server room and looked around to disconnect the hardline connection from the routers. All the while, three people tried hard to restrain the young assistant who was testing the visor prototype.

“Michael! Michael!” Tim shouted, trying to get his attention. “Michael, it’s Tim!” He snapped his fingers in the panicking man’s face.

“There’s three of them! One’s behind you, Tim! They’re huge!” Michael screamed.

“Michael, there’s nothing behind me,” Tim assured him. “You’re having a hallucination. You need to stop fighting us! Just stay seated. The feed’s getting disconnected. You’re in the lab, Michael... with us.”

“I’m *not* in the lab! I’m somewhere else! You’re here, with me! Jane and William, too... you’re all here!” He continued to fight the scientists who were trying their best to hold him in the chair. Jeff pointed to the data room.

“Cut the signal, dammit!” he ordered.

“We did, almost a minute ago!” someone shouted.

“That’s impossible. He’s still seeing the museum!” Jeff said, removing Michael’s visor.

“They’re here, all around me, guys! They’re eight or nine feet tall! They’re demons... they have to be! They aren’t human! They’re coming towards me! Get me out of here!”

“How is he still seeing the museum?” Jeff asked Tim. “The visor’s off his head now, for God’s sake!”

“I don’t think he’s seeing the museum. It has to be a hallucination. All of it must be, at this point,” Tim answered.

At once, Michael became limp in the arms of the assistants that had tried so hard to restrain him.

“Smelling salts! Do we have any?” Tim asked the room full of terrified employees. No one gave an answer. They didn’t know.

Michael sat unresponsive in the chair, held up by two others. As they began to fear the worst, Jeff grabbed some ice and rubbed it over Michael’s head, trying to revive him.

“Call an ambulance!” he said, rubbing the ice on the young man’s face.

“We did, Jeff. Check his pulse!” William said. Jeff felt along Michael’s neck, trying to find a pulse.

“I can’t feel anything!” he said. “Has anyone here had any medical experience?” Jane stepped in and took over.

The room became completely quiet as she pressed her fingers to his neck.

“Jeff, we need to get him on the floor,” she said, hooking her arm under one of Michael’s.

With help, they got the young assistant to the floor and placed a towel under his head. Jane started CPR as Michael's worried co-workers looked on. After she'd tried several minutes to revive him, the paramedics arrived and took over. Continuing CPR, they tried but failed to bring him back. As a last ditch effort, they administered the defibrillator paddles. There was no response. To the horror of the room, Michael was declared dead at 2:47pm. Tim looked at Jeff and whispered,

"Who's going to call Brian?"

"Brother, I'm sorry," Luke said. "Twenty-four years old? A heart attack? That's terrible! Had he had heart trouble previously?"

"Not that we know of. His last physical was almost a year ago and it reported him to be in perfect shape for a man his age. It just doesn't make sense."

"No signs of drug use, or anything like that?"

"No," Brian said, "not Michael. Jeff and Tim believe he was literally scared to death. It can happen, and from the description they gave of his hallucination, it's more than probable in my opinion."

"Man, I'm so sorry, Brian."

"He had a wife, Luke. And... a new baby." Luke could hear his brother's voice breaking up.

"You want to meet for a drink?" My class is over in thirty minutes, or I can leave right now," Luke offered.

"No, I'm fine. I have to talk to his wife in a few minutes. God, give me strength for that. I've never had to do this before. I don't even know what to say to her."

"You'll do fine. Just be honest with what you know. She'll see your sincerity. Whatever happened in there was an accident... pure and simple. No malice was intended. She'll understand that."

"I hope so. I intend to do my best for her and their child in the future, but money counts for very little in a case like this. He had his whole life ahead of him as of this morning. Now it's been taken away... by his employer."

"Brian, you don't really *know* that yet. Just let things take their course. They'll investigate. There may have been other factors involved that you, or even his

co-workers might not have been unaware of. Just take things one step at a time. Don't take full responsibility for this. At least not until you know more, okay?"

"Wow. My little brother. You should have gone into the mental health field. You're almost as good as Tonya. Look, I'll give you a call tonight or tomorrow when I know more. Thanks for the words."

"My pleasure. Don't beat yourself up tonight. Seeya." Luke ended the call, took a deep breath and walked back into the classroom to finish his lecture.

After Brian finished talking to the distraught widow, he walked into his office and sat down behind his desk. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, trying to ease the headache he earned from the stress of the last few hours. He heard his door moving and raised his head. Two men stood before him in his office now. One dressed in a black suit, and one in tan slacks, a dress shirt and sweater-vest. Before Brian could react, the suited man spoke.

"Brian Martin? I'm Mr. Brown and this is Mr. Green. We need to ask you a few questions about today's events."

"Green? Brown? Is that supposed to be serious? Who are you two, really? I mean, who exactly do you work for and what do you want?"

"We work for *you*, actually. The American citizen. The government, to be precise," the dark-dressed man answered.

"That's not a clear answer at all. What department or agency?"

"Let's just say we're an off-branch of one of the intelligence agencies." He offered no I.D. after he spoke.

"I'm calling for an assistant to listen in," Brian said, reaching for his desk phone. As he picked up the receiver, Mr. Green shook his head no. When Brian tried to dial out, he discovered the line had no dial tone.

"This is to be a private conversation, Mr. Martin," Green said firmly. Brian sat back in his chair, frustrated with the intrusion.

"Okay, okay... this visit has gotten off on the wrong foot," Mr. Brown said. He extended his hand out to Brian. "My name's not really Brown, and his isn't Green. But yes, we do work for a rather small segment of our government that enjoys a certain... anonymity in its function."

Brian refused to shake his hand. Mr. Brown continued.

“I, myself, am a huge fan of your drones... and your company. I use them all the time. My wife as well.”

“I think I get it now,” Brian said. “You two are someone’s idea of the Men in Black we always hear about. So, what the hell do you want? This isn’t really the best time—”

“Maybe not, but it's the right time,” Green interrupted. Mr. Brown waved his hand for him to stop talking.

“I’m sorry... Mr. Green can be quite abrasive at times, but he’s a very honest person. And he’s right, actually. This is not only the *right* time, it’s the *needed* time for a conversation between us. You see, we’ve been assigned to your case since a year after you launched your first visor.”

“Case? *What* case? Assigned to me? For what reason?” Brian asked.

“The Rabbit Hole... that’s what we named your case. You’ve raised our antennas with your research. And without knowing it, that’s exactly what you’ve taken your company down into... the rabbit hole.”

“You’re not making sense, Mr. Brown. My company is exactly what it appears to be. We’re innovators... capitalists. Pure and simple, our goal is to produce products that make people’s lives better.”

“Like Michael Andrew’s life?” The man in black asked. Once again, Brown waved him off.

“I apologise for his comment, Mr. Martin. There’s no way you could have known the risk of allowing humans to test your new prototype. I, myself, am a scientist and researcher, and am sincerely sorry for your loss. If we’d had this conversation sooner, it might have been avoided. We intended to, but you moved very quickly into the trial stage. The bottom line is the shock of what your employee saw was too much for his heart, regardless of health or age.”

“How do you know *anything* about what happened to my employee? Have you interviewed any of my people?” Brian picked up his phone again. Still, no dial tone.

“Let me be completely open with you, sir,” Brown began. “We haven’t talked to *anyone* at your company besides you. But we have been watching and listening, all within the law, considering your company’s research has been declared a potential danger to society.”

“A potential *what*? You’re crazy! We’re not exactly sure what happened in the lab today, but I assure you we operate a safe research facility here. No one knew Michael would react to our new visor the way he did!”

“We knew,” Mr. Green said. “We knew if your visor worked the way it was designed to, under certain frequency settings there was a distinct possibility for it to happen.”

“How would you know anything about the design principles of our prototype? Do you have access to our computers?” Brian asked, his neck red with anger now.

“Let’s just calm down a little, okay?” Brown suggested. We’re not here to prompt an altercation with you, Brian... can I call you Brian? (no answer) We’re just here to share information. Information we’d hoped not to have to share with anyone. To be frank, your approach to your new visor is not new, nor was your idea for a wireless and pinless neurolink. My mentor, whom I can’t name as of yet, was the first to discover the effects your team experienced earlier today, but in 2020. I’d be happy to share a portion of the information I have concerning his research, but I’ve been asked that you accompany us to our facility in order to fully brief you first. There are things you need to observe in a *safe* environment for you to really understand what you’ve inadvertently stumbled upon today.”

“No one knows what happened today yet, or what, if *anything*, was discovered,” Brian stated. “It’s under investigation right now. And as for accompanying you two anywhere alone, I’d need more information than what I’ve heard in order to comply.”

“Fair enough,” Brown said, “Let’s start at the beginning, then. Have you heard of the recently discovered 80th human organ, Mr. Martin? I’m not referring to the Interstitium. That’s actually the 81st, and is well known to the public and medical community. What I’m referring to is *not* known to the public. It’s called the Nexus Body and was discovered by a military-run research team. Previously thought of as just a body of dense tissue, it’s been chiefly ignored by the medical community since the dawn of anatomical medicine.

Surgeons cut around it or through it all the time, never knowing what they’re actually operating around. You see, the Nexus Body has functions unknown to anyone except select military scientists, and now, in the next minute or so... you.” Brown paused for a moment, as if he expected a reaction from Brian. He received none.

“It contains neuro connections directly tied to the brain stem Mr. Martin. It even has its own, dedicated blood supply. But the next attribute is the reason it’s significant to today’s events; it produces its own electromagnetic output and can receive as well. In simpler terms, it connects your body to the natural energy fields surrounding you. Where do you think human intuition comes from? Or telepathy? Or the ability for someone to just *know* they’re being lied to?”

“Energy fields?” Brian asked. “What does that have to do with the hallucinations Michael experienced while wearing the visor? The high emf fields near him in the lab explain the hallucinations better than your theory.”

“It wasn’t emf fields, Brian. This is something different. That visor emitted a very small band of frequencies close enough to the Nexus Body to stimulate his pineal gland. Being young, with a pineal gland that isn’t substantially calcified yet, Michael was susceptible to the gland’s response to the frequencies. In short, he was able to see into another realm, or dimension, as people today like to call it. I prefer the term “realm”, myself. Regardless, it’s one you and I can’t see, but is *there*, nevertheless, occupying the same space as we do. There are beings in the realm he accessed that are truly frightening, and dangerous. Let me rephrase that... *overwhelmingly* frightening and dangerous, especially for someone who’s seeing them for the first time.”

“Okay, I believe you’ve lost *all* your credibility with me now. I was told, by a *doctor*, that Michael died from an unforeseen, severe heart attack. His family has a history of—”

“Michael died from fright, Brian... pure and simple. We’ve seen it happen a few times in our research. It’s a truly terrible event, but not uncommon. Michael saw across what many speak of as “the veil”. Different frequencies emitted near the Nexus Body can open a susceptible person up to different dimensions. The one your team opened responds to the widest of any neuro-frequency bands we’ve used. It’s a horrifying realm, full of terrifying inhabitants.”

Brian sat in silence as he processed the man’s words. There was a recognized ring of truth to what he said, as unbelievable as it sounded.

“I... I have questions,” Brian said quietly.

“I’m sure you do, sir. And we are willing to give you the answers to those questions. We want to *show* you, in a secure and safe way, exactly what you’ve stumbled onto. We’re not here to shut down your research. If we wanted to do

that, it would have happened just after the first anniversary of your company's launch. We have an idea of how we can work together for both of our benefits, without you ever suffering another painful loss as you did today. For that, you'd need to see our facility and meet our scientists."

"When and where?" Brian asked.

"Well, we *had* a Sunday planned to ask you to dinner, but Brian's company just had a... well, they had an event that required his attention. Brian's going to be tied up with it for a while, and I'd rather you meet him when he's not so tunnel-visioned on his work."

"Are you still messing with me? We've been together almost a month, Luke. Your brother's name may be Brian Martin... but he's not *the* Brian Martin. Quit playing around."

Luke pulled out his wallet and dug around for a minute before handing her three pictures of himself with Brian.

"There ya go... wheelchair and everything," he said as she looked at the photos.

"Holy shit, Luke. I'm sorry. I thought you were teasing me when you told me that."

"It's okay. There's thousands of Martins in the U.S. I'm sure I'm not the first to claim him."

"Wow... it's just so hard to imagine. You're so down to earth and—"

"Practical? So is he, believe me. You'll like him. And he'll like you, too. You may be the first girl I've ever dated he'll actually like. He's a good judge of character."

"Great. Now I'm *really* nervous about meeting him and his wife," she said.

"Her name's Tonya... and that'll pass in less than five minutes after introductions, I promise. When I said "down to earth", I meant it. The man owns the largest tech company in the U.S. and he rarely even wears a tie. He's just a person, like you and I. You'll see."

"On that, I'll just have to trust you, babe."

Brian was asked to meet the men at the airport after lunch, though the location of the facility was supposedly local. A dark blue sedan approached the East entrance and honked its horn twice for him to follow them. Soon, they arrived at what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse, where a black van waited, engine running.

“Is this where you blindfold me so I can’t identify where you’re taking me?” Brian asked, unbuckling his seatbelt.

“Do you *want* to be blindfolded?” Mr. Brown asked with a laugh. Mr. Green’s face remained stoic.

“Not particularly,” Brian said.

The men opened the side of the van to reveal an onboard wheelchair lift.

“I assure you, Brian, we’re not driving to the Batcave or any other subterranean location. You’ve seen too many movies. As far as our facility? We’re lucky every morning to find the air conditioning still working, so don’t expect a whole lot. Damn... I hope I didn’t just jinx the A/C.”

Thirty minutes later, they arrived at their destination. Mr. Brown was right. Brian couldn’t believe his eyes.

“An old shoe manufacturing company? Really?” Brian asked.

“Hey, don’t minimize it, buddy. They used to make leather purses and belts here, too,” Brown said. “Infact, the belt I’m wearing right now? Found it in the plant.” Mr. Green chuckled at his remark.

The van driver pulled into a visitor’s spot near the front of the massive building and shut the engine off.

“This is it, Brian. Low key... in the center of the city, but not recognized by the public.”

After a long distance down the hall and a short elevator ride, Brian and the men arrived at the research floor. Before being shown anything, Brian was led to a small conference room. A tall, lanky man entered. Brian noticed how he ducked to keep from banging his head while entering.

“This is Mr. Gray,” Brown said as he sat down.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Martin. Nice to finally meet you. My advisors told me they thought it’d be sometime next year before you got this far in your

research. You've beaten their expectations by ten months at least. That's very impressive. They're usually on target with their predictions. Sorry for the colorful names we use here... it's necessary. You can call me Alan, though. I've been the director of this facility for almost thirty years now." He extended his hand in friendship.

"Nice to meet you, Alan. You'll have to forgive how strange all of this is for me. I'm a business man, pure and simple. I don't deal in wild theories or other-worldly concepts. But the things I've been told by Mr. Brown in the last two hours have left me equally speechless and skeptical."

"I imagine so, Mr. Martin. I felt the same way when I was assigned here and told of my objectives twenty-nine years ago. It shook the foundation of everything I'd come to believe before this assignment. You've seen only a sliver of what's currently known on the function and abilities of the Nexus Body. Let me catch you up a bit. In 2012, a facet of our government was working on a weapon to disorient enemy ground fighters during battles. For that, they experimented with directed high emf beams. The idea was to initiate a dangerously high emf field amongst enemy troops that would cause distress and confusion long enough for our men to advance and gain the advantage. We researched and tested many different ways to deliver the effect we wanted. We painstakingly reviewed and documented each band of frequency's effect, if any... along with different amplitudes and durations. During trials in our very first year, we had an event that closely paralleled your own. Over the next two years, we conducted three more tests. Two of our subjects died, while the other one lived. One of our fatalities was nineteen years old, the other was twenty-three. We discovered the affected subjects were susceptible to the event because of the condition of their pineal glands. We didn't have anything as technologically advanced as your visor, but made due with a copper-based apparatus we constructed and placed at the temples of the subjects. A band of transducers crossed over the crown of their heads. Eventually, with no repeatable success, the weapons aspect of the project was abandoned. We were never able to create a field large enough to affect more than just a few square feet. Instead, the decision-makers chose to explore and eventually control the unintended byproduct of our experiments; the ability to observe foreign dimensions. When we learned of your idea for a new, wireless visor operating in the range of frequencies we use, we initially intended to shut

your company down for national security reasons. Under my guidance, though, it has been decided instead to *enlist* your assistance with our ongoing research and development. In return for your services and the occasional use of three of your scientists, we're prepared to offer you some of our latest, military advances in the area of eye-tracking control that can be used in your current visor design. The tracking sensors would be similar to ours, in that they'd be part of the visor's frame, less than five millimeters from the perimeter of each lens."

Brian couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So, you're asking me to work *with* you... share information, settle for eye-tracking technology in lieu of thought control... or what, you'll shut me down?"

"That's a very blunt way of putting it, but yes. We may also be persuaded to share some technology you are *not* aware of that could take your company to the next level in ways you couldn't imagine. We wish to be partners with you, Mr. Martin... not adversaries."

"Adversaries? Wow, nothing vague about that term, huh?" Brian turned his wheelchair around. I think it's time for me to go, unless you plan to wax me right here and now!" Mr. Gray motioned for his security personnel to allow Brian to pass and escort him to the van.

"Think about my offer, Mr. Martin. I had to fight to convince my superiors to even *make* the offer! And it goes without saying you are to tell *no one* of our meeting today, not even your brother Luke."

Brian got to the van as fast as he could, all the while wondering what they may have installed on or underneath his vehicle at the airport.

"Luke, what are your plans for tomorrow evening?" Brian asked.

"Tomorrow? Eh... I'm showing a house at 2pm. Other than that, I was just going to spend the rest of the day with Carla. Why?"

"Tonya has a thing Sunday, but we're both off this Saturday evening. If Carla isn't busy, it'd be a good night to do dinner together. We have a bunch of frozen Whitefish we want to cook."

"That sounds good. I'll give Carla a call. Unless she has an appointment in the evening, I'm pretty sure she'll be a yes."

“Okay, just let me know. I realize we’ve been shooting for a Sunday, but tomorrow would work best for us.”

“Gotcha. I’ll give you a call this afternoon.”

When Brian ended the call, he dialed #21# to see if there was any unauthorized call forwarding set up on his phone. There wasn’t. He called his security head.

“Ron Thompson here,” a voice answered.

“Ron... I need to see you asap. Can we grab a cup of coffee in the cafeteria? And when can you be there?”

“Sure, Brian. I can head there now if you want.”

“Sounds good,” Brian answered.

“On my way.”

Five minutes later, Ron spotted Brian at a table and sat down across from him.

“What’s going on, boss? Something happen?” he asked.

“My office is bugged. Maybe the conference room, too. I need you to arrange for someone to sweep the building.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of square space. Yes sir. Any idea who did it?”

“I can’t say at the moment. But listen, I don’t want them to disable or touch anything they find, just document what and where they are. I don’t want the other party to be aware we’re looking.”

“Sure. I have a buddy who does this for a living. He has a company in Ocala. If there’s anything in here, he’ll find it. He’s discreet, too... and trustworthy.”

“Okay. Let’s get it done, and fast. I’d like him to scan my area first. Then he can work his way down, floor by floor. Soon, okay? I’ll pay him to drop whatever he’s doing and get started.”

“I’ll call him asap and meet you back here, say... in two hours?” Ron checked his watch and made a note of the time.

“Perfect. I’ll be here.”

“Good Lord, Luke! This place is huge!” she said. “Gated, with armed security? I thought you said he was down to earth!”

“He is, I promise. All that’s necessary considering his net worth and the size of his business. It’s not like he could just move into a subdivision, babe. We’ll be fine, trust me.” He continued up the lane toward Brian’s home.

The grounds were perfectly manicured, with large flowered gardens on both sides of the home’s entrance. The entry steps were marble. Before they reached the door, Tonya emerged to greet them.

“You must be Carla! I’ve heard a lot about you. Come in. I guess you can come in, too, Luke.” He laughed and hugged her before stepping inside.

“Perfect timing!” Brian said. “I’ve got the fish wrapped in foil, ready to go on the grill. The rest of it we’ll do in the oven. Hope you like fish... I’m cooking 8lbs of it!” Brian washed his hands and left the kitchen to greet Carla.

“Well, well. My guess is you already know this, but Luke’s told me a lot about you. An antique dealer... *and* historian?”

“Antique dealer first... history as a hobby,” she answered, shaking his hand.

“Don’t let her fool you, Brian. She knows enough about America’s history to take over my classes. She’s just humble, that’s all,” Luke said.

“Quit it,” Carla said. “Actually I was thinking of getting in the drone business, Brian.”

“At this point, I’d *trade* you businesses... yours for mine,” Brian said.

“Oh, Lord... I wouldn’t know what to do with it.” she said.

“Neither do I right now,” he said. Luke could tell by Brian’s tone there was some seriousness to what he said.

After a pleasant dinner, Brian asked Luke to join him on the patio for a cigar. Luke took the hint Brian wanted to talk, since he didn’t smoke cigars very often.

“While they’re poisoning their lungs, come sit by the pool with me so we can talk!” Tonya said, leading Carla in the opposite direction.

Brian lit his cigar and handed one to Luke. They sat on the patio, free of listening ears.

“I don’t expect you to smoke that whole thing, brother. I just need to talk to you for a few minutes,” Brian said. Before he went any further, he turned on the outdoor sound system and turned up the music.

“Are you afraid the girls might hear us?” Luke asked.

“Not the girls... our government,” Brian answered.

“What? Oh, come on... are you serious?”

“Yes, and it’s not paranoia. I heard it from their own lips.” Luke sat back in his chair and gave his brother time to elaborate.

“I’m being spied on, Luke. Spied on and blackmailed by our government. Can you believe it? Two of their agents paid me a surprise visit a couple days ago. After a very upsetting conversation, they had me follow them to a secret facility they run in the old part of downtown to speak to their superior, Mr. Gray. By the way, their names were Mr. Brown and Mr. Green... like they picked them from a box of crayons. Seems they’ve been researching whatever the thing was that caused Michael Andrews’ death for decades, now. Their knowledge of it is way beyond ours. They’ve lost several of their own agents testing the same bands of frequencies we’ve been using on the new visor, including the band we tested the day Michael died. They were initially trying to build a battlefield weapon to disorient enemy fighters. They stumbled upon the same thing we did... something no one ever expected.”

“Damn, brother... you’re starting to scare me. What could be so dangerous that the government would watch your research and progress... and blackmail you?”

“Aliens... or interdimensional beings, to be precise.”

“What? Come on, Brian. Are you pranking me right now?”

“I seriously wish I was. It sounds bat-shit crazy, I know, but apparently the frequency we used to establish our neurolink stimulated a little-known organ inside the human body. An organ that sends and receives electromagnetic energy. It’s connected to the brainstem and stimulates the pineal gland at certain frequencies. The pineal gland then opens the person up to see into another dimension that shares the same space as ours. The beings in that dimension are supposedly terrifying. Michael’s heart couldn’t take the shock of seeing them. To his perception, they were *inside* the lab with him.”

“I don’t even know how to respond to all this. I believe you, of course... but my God! Interdimensional beings? I can see the government wanting to protect that information at all cost.”

“Yeah. They were planning on shutting my company down! Can you believe that shit? How, I don’t know... but I wouldn’t put anything past them. I was told to tell no one about this, but I know I can trust you not to say a word. I need any advice you might have for me.”

“So, they’re *not* shutting you down, then?” Luke asked.

“Oh, yeah... I didn’t tell you why they haven’t. They said they wouldn’t shut me down if I played ball with them; team up, as in a partnership! They even want to borrow three of my top scientists! Oh, and they sweetened the deal by offering to share secret technology with me.”

“Or else... right?”

“Yeah, or else.”

“So, what are you thinking of doing?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m half afraid to tell my own lawyer about this.”

“So, they bugged you? At the company?”

“Yeah, probably here, too. I have a guy checking out the company for me. I’ll probably have him check the house next.”

“That would be a good idea. No wonder you turned the music up and pulled out these cigars. Was it the FBI?”

“No... worse. An off-the-books facet of our intelligence agency. The kind that doesn’t report to anyone, let alone the President.”

“Ouch,” Luke said. The kind that disappears people.”

“Exactly,” Brian said. He noticed footsteps behind them.

“How long does it take to smoke two cigars, fellas?” Tonya asked.

“Depends on the cigars, honey,” Brian said.

“Yes, I see how much you enjoyed yours, Luke.” Carla said. His cigar butt was lying in an ashtray with a three inch ash tail.

“Oh, yeah... I must have lost track of the time between inhales,” Luke said.

“Yeah, you must have,” Tonya laughed.

“Ughhh...” she said, picking up the ashtrays. “I’m dumping these out now. They stink!”

“I’ll go with you,” Carla said.

When the girls were far enough away, Luke continued the conversation.

“Can you go public? Surely they wouldn’t touch you if everyone knew the truth,” Luke said.

“For a while, maybe. Then, one day, a few years down the road, I’d get hit in the arm with a poisoned ice dart that gives me a fatal heart attack. These people don’t care about life and death, Brian... unless it’s their own.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Brian. I’ll think it over, and we can talk again tomorrow night. Can you come to my place around 7pm?”

“Okay, will do. See you then.”

The girls approached them again.

“Hey Luke... you better not let this one go!” Tonya said. “I like her.”

“I’m not planning to, but thanks for the advice.” he answered.

“Thanks for the wonderful food tonight, Brian. Your wife’s awesome. I think I found my soul sister.”

“Well, good!” Brian said. “You’re much better to share a meal with than those uppity gossipers at the country club. It’s like being in an episode of Beverly Hills Housewives when they’re around.”

“Haha! That’s one thing I’ve never been called... uppity,” Carla said. “Maybe a smartass, but not uppity.”

“On that note... I think we’ll be leaving, bro.” Luke said. “Thanks for the fish, it was great.”

“Yes, thanks again for dinner,” Carla said as she and Luke left for their car.

Brian waited patiently in the cafeteria to learn what Ron’s friend discovered over the weekend. Soon, he saw Ron approaching his table. His face looked worried.

“I almost don’t want to ask what you’ve found, Ron. Your face says it all,” Brian said.

“Oh, it doesn’t say *all* of it, boss.” He put a notebook on the table in front of Brian. He spun it around and opened it.

“The first few pages are a list of the audio bugs they found, then the cameras... all of which record audio as well.

“You’re kidding me. Bugs in all these locations?” Brian asked.

“Boss, they’re literally everywhere. My guy wants to do another sweep this weekend just to make sure he didn’t miss any. Took him a total of 22 hours to

complete the job! About the only place that wasn't bugged was here... and the front lobby."

"This is what I get for paying my taxes," Brian said, slamming the notebook down. "Thanks, Ron. I'll be in touch."

"You don't want us to remove them yet?" he asked.

"Oh, we're going to remove them alright... but not yet. I'll let you know when and under what circumstances. Of course, keep this to yourself."

"I have, and will do, boss." Ron left Brian at the table, staring at the notebook. *The gloves are coming off now, Mr. Gray!* Brian thought.

Luke had been asleep for almost five minutes when he felt Carla squeezing his hand. He woke up and dropped the TV remote.

"Oh, sorry dear. I think I was starting to doze off," he said, sitting up straighter.

"You didn't feel the apartment shaking?" she asked.

"Shaking, no... I don't think so. What happened?"

"It was like a small earthquake, Luke. I was really scared!"

"Wow, I'm sorry. I guess I fell asleep. We had an earthquake? On the west coast of Florida?"

"It was *you*, Cassanova! Your snoring almost vibrated my glasses off my face!" she laughed.

"Oh, that... sorry. Funny thing, I never hear it myself."

"Haha... yeah, that's not funny. Well, I've been the sole recipient of your terror tonight. If this relationship goes any farther, we might end up like Rob and Laura Petrie."

"You mean single beds?" he asked.

"Yep, at the least. Maybe separate bedrooms if you don't get that taken care of, my dear."

"I'm surprised your palette for classic TV goes back that far, Carla. *The Dick Van Dyke Show?*"

"Boy, do I need to bring over my Ultimate TV Trivia boardgame? I will whoop your ass six ways to Sunday."

“Sounds like a challenge,” Luke said. “Do I have to spot you, though? You know... since you’re a *girl* and all?”

“A girl? Hmm... I think you may need reminding that you have a grown-ass woman sitting next to you, mister, not a girl.”

“5’2” doesn’t sound very grown, Carla.”

“5’4”, thank you! Okay, that’s it... you need reminding.” She stood and pulled him out of his seat, then led him to his bedroom. Forty minutes later, they were back on the couch, watching TV.

“Wow,” he said. That was efficient. We only missed one episode.”

“I only gave you what you can *handle*, Professor. Start working out and you’ll earn extra time. I don’t want you stroking out in the bedroom. That’d be something to explain to the paramedics, wouldn’t it?” Luke smiled and shook his head.

“Assistant...” he said, “and I think they’d know what happened when they saw the smile across my deceased face.”

“Still, I don’t want to go through that, buster!”

“Got it,” he agreed. “Going to the kitchen. Want anything?”

“A bottle of water, please.” Luke’s phone rang. He handed the bottle to Carla and answered the call.

“Hey, a little late for your call, bro. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, listen, I need to talk to you soon... about family matters. Can you meet Friday for a beer at Klasky’s on 5th and Main? Around 7pm. Just you.”

“Yeah, no problem. Is Mom okay?”

“Yes, everyone’s fine. It’s nothing like that. Just family business.”

“Sure, 7pm Friday.”

“Thanks Luke.” He ended the call. Carla sat up. “Everything okay, dear? I heard you mention your mom.”

“Oh, yeah, everyone’s fine, apparently. Brian wants to meet me for a beer Friday night, that’s all. He must have something on his mind.”

“You too are pretty tight for brothers in their thirties.”

“Hey now... I just *turned* thirty... not like I’m pounding on death’s door.”

“Old man,” she laughed, “can barely handle thirty minutes in the sack.”

“Maybe so, but with a short break I can go another round. It’s all about pacing myself.”

“Oh, really? Okay, follow me, mister. Let’s put that to the test.”

Brian was already seated and sipping a beer when Luke arrived Friday evening. He quickly wheeled himself around the table and met Luke in the center of Klasky’s, turning him toward the door again.

“Thanks for coming, bro... let’s take it somewhere else though, okay? Smoke’s gettin’ to my eyes,” Brian said.

“What? Okay, sure... you good, bro?” he asked as they left.

“Yeah, I’m good. You can drive. Room in your truck for the chair?”

“Plenty,” he said. “It’s an old Camry, remember?”

After a short drive, they arrived at another pub. Luke grabbed Brian’s chair from the trunk and they went in to get a table.

“What’s with the cloak and dagger routine? You’ve had me worried since your phone call,” Luke said.

“Sorry about that, it was necessary. Well, it’s confirmed. Those bastards have wired my whole building, Luke. Cameras, microphones... everywhere. Hell, they’re probably using one of my drones to follow me around!”

“Damn, sorry to hear that.”

“My guy told me there was a substantial layer of dust on the ones they found in the lab and in my office. They’ve probably been there at least a year or two. Those assholes have listened to every conversation I’ve *had* at work, whether about business or to my doctor.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Luke asked.

“Take your advice and burn them. I have something they don’t have... trust and likeability from the public. I’m going to expose their surveillance to the whole country. I’ll run so many ads against them, their heads will explode. I’ll shut *their* asses down!”

“When are you going to start?”

“Already started. I’m friends with Ben, the owner of Klasky’s. I didn’t tell him what was going on, but I asked him if I could put a couple hidden cameras in his dining room, promising to pixel out any customers’ faces from the recording. He’s a vet, in his late seventies. He said his customers are lifetimers and wouldn’t

stop coming in, anyway. I had my guy put two cameras in place an hour before I called to ask you out for a beer. A day later, my cameras caught the feds placing *their* own cameras inside the room, under the pretense they were from the cable company and needed to upgrade his modem. I have them on video doing all of it, even joking about how they'd catch every word I'd say tonight. Saturday morning, I'm sending a film crew to record my security team removing every government bug the feds put in my building."

"Are you putting any of that in your ads?" Luke asked.

"Every bit of it. I'm going to address the public myself and explain that our recent research had prompted the government to abuse my rights as a private businessman and citizen. I'll show everything they've done. By the time I'm done, everyone in the country will know *exactly* what they did, including the threat they made against me."

"Shit, Brian... that'll cost you a fortune for all that media time."

"I don't care a damn bit. I'll get news coverage, too. I run commercials for my drones on all major networks already. They'll cover the story... I'll make sure of it."

"You're not worried about repercussions, then? You said yourself they may come after you."

"Yeah, they could, either way. And I'm not working with those bastards just to know they could still kill me at any time. I'm fighting fire with fire! Listen, would you let my guy sweep your apartment and car for devices?"

"Yeah, sure. I'd rather not be included in any ads, though. I don't want my students to know anything about this."

"No problem. Listen, Tonya's my beneficiary, of course... but just so you know, there's a big amount directed to you, too if anything happens to me."

"Don't even talk like that, Brian. Look... anything you need from me, just ask. If they mess with you, they mess with me, too! I don't want to live in a country that can get away with the shit they're pulling on you. You're right in fighting back." The two shared a hug.

"Thanks, little brother. I knew I could count on you."

"Always," Luke agreed. "But yeah... our government isn't known for letting people who've burnt them off the hook. There's an aspect of danger connected to you now. You and those you associate with. If things start to get weird, there will

come a time I'll need to tell Carla the details that the public won't hear. Then she can make her own decision about continuing our relationship."

"I understand. Just don't say anything to her until the night the ads are to run. I can't afford anything to derail this before I go public."

"No problem, Brian. Let me know when your guy's coming out to sweep the apartment."

"And your car," Brian added.

"And my car."

"What do you mean, don't open the door?" Luke asked, confused.

"Just unlock it, and go sit at the table," Carla said, standing outside his front door. "When you're seated, cover your eyes... and I mean covered, buddy! Then tell me when I can come in," Carla said. Luke did as he was asked, not knowing what she was up to.

"Okay, I'm sitting here like an idiot, with my hands covering my eyes. You can come in now." Carla walked in and sat a cake down in front of him.

"Don't look yet!" She opened a package of birthday candles, placed them on the cake, and lit them.

"Did I just hear a lighter being flicked?" What are you doing? Setting me on fire?"

"Okay, you can look now," she said. Luke opened his eyes to find a chocolate cake sitting in front of him. The candles burnt bright, but sparked every few seconds. He immediately realized what kind they were.

"Is this a late birthday cake? You didn't have to do that, babe."

"It's actually for a couple things," she said. Today's our two month anniversary. And since I missed your birthday... Happy Annibirthary!" she laughed.

"Annibirthary? Really?" he asked. "I'm kinda thinking you made that up."

"Yeah, do you like it? I know you eat chocolate... so?"

"I love it, babe. You're too damn sweet for me," he said.

"Well, that's not a lie. And you're welcome. Let's eat it all together... right now! I skipped lunch and dinner for this."

“Okay, let’s do it. Two chocolate overdoses, coming up,” he said.

“First, blow out your candles,” she giggled.

Luke took a napkin, dipped it in his drink and snuffed out the candles.

“”You party pooper! You knew!” she said.

After they destroyed most of the cake, the two lay together on the sofa, both full to the point of sickness.

“I really thought I’d be okay, having skipped two meals first,” she said.

“You? I’m dying over here, babe. I think my toes are twitching from the pound of sugar I just swallowed.”

“Wasn’t it worth it, though?” she asked.

“Every last bite,” he conceded. “Two months, really? That’s a record for me.”

“Bullshit!” she responded.

“No, really. I think six weeks is my longest relationship. And that was in high school.”

“Are you serious? Only six weeks? Were you a jerk in high school?”

“No,” he said, “I was just kinda shy. And picky. My parents had a great marriage up until the day My dad died. Even as a kid, I knew I wanted that in a relationship, too. If I felt the girl wasn’t someone I’d like to sit next to and sip lemonade with when I’m old, I’d break up with her. Stupid, huh?”

“So, you had a lot of short relationships, then, huh?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t say “a lot”. Brian was the outgoing of the two of us. Before his accident, he was the man of the school. The girls stood in line for him,” he laughed.

“I read he had a car accident or something. That’s how he lost the use of his legs, right?”

“Motorcycle. He was crossing an intersection one morning. It had stopped raining, but the streets were still wet. It happened in Tampa. He was in college. A jacked up truck on the cross-street ran the light. Brian tried to stop, but started sliding. He opted to put the bike on its side, hoping to slow it down some and avoid the truck. He ended up underneath it. Tore his legs up and injured the base of his spine. He had several surgeries.”

“Oh, God, I’m sorry,” she said.

“Yeah, he had a hard recovery. The doctor said he’d never walk again. Brian thought differently... but the doctor was right.”

“That must have been horrible for him.”

“Well, he’d say something different. He was a terrible student before the accident. After his recovery, he buckled down and decided he’d direct his own future. He wouldn’t allow his non-working legs to ruin his life.”

“I’ve got forty-eight video clips, boss. We filmed the location and removal of everything they put in the building,” Ron explained.

“Does that include my home?” Brian asked.

“No sir, we found eleven at your house. We haven’t filmed there yet.”

“Well, get it done... tomorrow, if your guy is available.”

“He’s available,” Ron said. After that, we’ll get your brother’s apartment.”

“There’ll be a lock box on Luke’s front door with a key inside. I’ll give you the code that morning,” Brian told him.

“I’m on it. I hope we nail these bastards, boss.”

“I’ll make sure of it, Ron... or die trying.”

Brian worked with a local studio to shoot the commercials. Ron’s associate found three cameras in Luke’s apartment. One in the living room and kitchen, and one in the bedroom. Luke was furious, and knew at that point he needed to tell Carla what’d been going on.

“Your bedroom? Are you serious? Those pieces of shit. That’s our privacy they stole! They watched us! Oh, my God. I hope Brian exposes what they’ve done to him... and to us! And interdimensional beings? As crazy as it sounds, I believe it. No wonder they want to keep that under wraps. And they’ll *kill* to keep that a secret, Luke. I know enough about our three letter agencies to know they’ll murder their own citizens without any remorse... and for damn near any reason. And those cameras... who knows how long they’ve been there! You tell Brian if he needs me for any of the ads, I’m in. I’ll make those douches look like the sick degenerates they are!”

“Holy meltdown, Batman! Babe, I’ve never seen you like this. It’s kinda scary, but kinda sexy, too,” Luke said.

“This is serious, Luke! Aren’t you upset? They’ve violated all of us!”

“I know, babe. Listen, I was furious when I heard about it, too. I’ve just had longer to process it, that’s all. Believe me, I’m still pissed about it.”

“Well, here’s a little insight into your girlfriend, hon. I won’t feel any less pissed about this in a few days. This kind of government bullying really pisses me off! It always has.”

“I get it, babe. If anyone can make them pay though, it’s Brian. He’s relentless.”

“When’s he doing the ads?” she asked.

“They’re being put together right now. He said he has already bought time from all three networks, plus Fox and CNN. Oh, and he bought a ton of ad space on Facebook and already has a following on X. Believe me, he’s got it covered. Within forty-eight hours of the first ad airing, 60% of Americans will have heard about it. By the end of the week, he said it’d be closer to 80%.”

“Good. Let’s get those bastards! Luke, the bedroom... are you absolutely sure they’re—”

“They’re gone. The apartment’s clean now. They swept it twice and filmed them being removed. The one in the bedroom was in my alarm clock. The bastards had disassembled it, installed a camera and put it back together. Sneaky shit.” He took her hand. “Babe... I just realized. I haven’t apologized to you yet. I’m so sorry this happened, and so sorry you’ve been violated like this. Brian’s going to sue them bigtime. Win or lose, he’ll make an example out of them.”

“I’m suing them, too... separately. I want them to see my face and hear my words in court as I turn every woman on the other end of the TV against them!”

“I pity them. Babe, I’m really sorry you got dragged into this, though.”

“It wasn’t you, it was *them*. The same people who are supposed to be working for us! Don’t apologize,” she said.

“Brian will have the government apologizing before long,” he said. “What they did was immoral and unethical. It’d be illegal if any of *us* pulled that shit, but they’ll try to hide behind national security concerns, I’m sure.”

“No doubt. And I changed my mind. Instead of eating out again tonight, what do you say we order in?”

“You’re not going to feel weird spending time in my apartment now?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t give those jackholes the satisfaction, Luke. On the contrary, we’ll have a very nice dinner *right here*. I’ll order it. And afterwards, you’ll need to be ready, babe. I’m going to graduate you to an hour of very angry sex. So don’t eat too much.”

“What’s that saying? Lemonade out of lemons?” he laughed. I’ve never had angry sex.”

“You’ll learn I’m a fighter, babe. All 5’4” of me. For me or for you... I’ll fight.”

“I’ll never tease you about your height again, babe.”

“Good answer,” she winked.

“I’m sorry, Brian.. He insisted on waiting in your office,” his personal assistant told him.

“It’s okay, Linda,” he said, looking through his office window. The door was open. It was Mr. Gray.

“Yes, I’m an early bird, Mr. Martin. Gotta get those worms, you know.” Brian shut the door and moved behind his desk.

“Worms, yeah... you mean those dirty, little slitherers that hide underground? The ones you never see until they come out to feed... or the rain comes to wash them away?”

“Yes, those are the ones. Forgive my unannounced visit. I’m here for your answer, Brian. I’m hoping you’ve accepted our offer. We can do great things together as partners, you know, and make a lot of money for you and your company.”

“Usually, and correct me if I’m wrong, Mr. Gray, when two parties decide on whether to become partners, it’s not under the preface that one party will destroy the other party if they refuse... right? Oh, and in every good partnership *I* know of... whether it’s business or marriage... there’s a level of trust present. A *mutual* level of trust.”

“Oh, yes... I know you found and removed our little devices, Mr. Martin. I *do* hope you haven’t damaged or discarded them, though. That would be destruction

of government property, and a felony in your case. Ten years in a federal penitentiary. Plus fines, of course.”

“All of your illegal bugs are safely stored in a cardboard box, in our security office, Mr. Gray.”

“Perfect. Thank you. We’ll be in touch about picking those up. But illegal? No, sir. We have the right *and* the power to ensure the safety of our citizens, Mr. Martin. You are not unique. We have eyes and ears in every corner of our country, I assure you. Surveillance *with cause* is one of the tools we *can* and *do* use... especially in a case like yours. We surely can’t have a private company dicking around in other dimensions, can we? That’s a very dangerous game you’d be playing.”

“No more dangerous than yours, Mr. Gray. And for your information, you should know we’ve abandoned our wireless thought-control visor. One casualty is more than enough for us to know when to change directions.”

“I wish I could be certain of that, Brian. But being unmonitored leaves you free to pursue whatever you want with that technology, putting us all at risk. We can’t allow that.”

“I’m surprised you’d even *use* a word such as “free” in this situation, Mr. Gray. Or even understand what the word means.

“Sir, if certain facets of our government didn’t exist and operate in the fashion we do, you would have no freedom at all to belly-ache about.”

“I think I’d take that risk,” Brian said.

“I take it then, that we’ll *not* be working together?”

“See now, Mr. Gray? There’s something you *do* understand,” Brian answered.

“Well then,” Gray said, standing, “there’s no need for us to waste each other’s time any longer. Please don’t worry about any more devices appearing, Mr. Martin. If we need to know anything, we’ll arrive with a search warrant. If you’re still in business, that is.”

“Fair enough. That’s the *proper* way to respect the Fourth Amendment,” Brian said.

“One more thing, Mr. Martin. I *am* glad to hear you’ve abandoned your latest project. If I were you, I’d be sure to forget *all* about what your team stumbled onto.”

“Tell that to Michael Andrews’ widow, Mr. Gray.”

“Oh, I certainly will... if I need to.” He walked out, leaving the door wide open. Brian watched the elevator doors close behind him.

“Asshole! Did you get all that, Linda?”

“Yes sir, loud and clear through the office intercom. I made notes on everything.”

“Thank you. Please keep those safe and make a copy for me if you don’t mind.”

“Yes sir, I’d be happy to.”

“Want me to go get some popcorn to eat while we watch?” Carla asked. Luke laughed half-heartedly. He couldn’t smile.

“Hell, I might have trouble keeping this pizza down tonight, babe. I didn’t know I’d be this nervous over an ad on TV.”

“Well, it is your brother’s ad... exposing a nasty segment of our government. You have a right to be nervous,” she said. “So... 8pm, right?”

“Yep, Eastern time. He told me there’d only be a few channels *not* airing it tonight. “Going for the throat” is how he described his ad placements for the next few days.”

“Three minutes to go, then. So what happens after these ads run?” she asked. “We start wearing bullet proof vests? If so, I want a pink one.”

“He offered free security for both of us. Basically, we’d each have an armed tail for as long as we felt we needed it. That, and someone watching our homes while we’re away. You can refuse the protection, but I’d take him up on it... at least for the time being.”

“As long as they stay outside on the curb, I don’t care,” she said. “I trust our government like I trust a fish dinner from Fukushima.”

“Wow, look at him... all dressed up,” Luke announced, pointing to the television.

Brian appeared on their TV screen donning a suit and tie, speaking directly to the audience.

“Hello, I’m Brian Martin, founder and president of Martin’s Surrogate Drones. I’m here to share an upsetting series of events that occurred

recently at my headquarters in Florida. As you may know, my company is a pioneer in creating new technologies for our customers. But I'm not here to talk to you about our products. I'm here to address a serious breach of trust recently committed by our government. Since 9/11, we've seen a steady increase in unwarranted government surveillance on innocent American citizens. No one is immune to our government's prying eyes, and in my opinion, encroachment of our basic right to privacy. My company recently learned this fact the hard way. During private testing of a new product we'd planned to release just before Christmas, our team stumbled upon a very dangerous new technology... one that cost the life of a loved and valued employee. We abandoned the project and its research immediately. That tragic discovery, it turned out, was and is of great interest to a dangerous and secret facet of our government, who'd discovered it themselves decades ago. I was paid a visit by the head of this secret agency immediately following our loss. I was told they knew all about our research and resulting death. He asked me if my company would partner with them to explore the dangerous technology further. I was not at all interested. He then offered me access to technologies not known to the public if my company would agree to the partnership. He basically said it was my only option or they could have my company shut down! So there I was, being blackmailed by my own government! Again, I want you to know I thoroughly refused their offer. But considering all they already knew of our research, I hired a company to sweep our building for hidden surveillance devices. They uncovered just short of fifty listening devices and cameras that had been planted there by this man's agency! They also found thirteen devices in my home... even in my bathrooms and bedrooms! The footage you are watching right now is from our cameras, filming the removal of their spy equipment. You will also see footage of these people planting surveillance equipment into a local tavern, thinking I'd scheduled a private meeting there. It's disgusting that we cannot trust our own government to honor our privacy! It's more than just an infringement, my friends, it's a downright breach of trust! I encourage every American to call

their elected officials and demand a congressional hearing on this matter. It is not only my company being affected by this, but many others across our nation, along with thousands of innocent individuals as well. We need to root out these tyrannical, clandestine facets of our government. They apparently answer to no one. What they are doing is un-American. They're a cancer on the neck of the American people. Please help me bring resolution to this matter, and thank you for listening."

"Luke, that was two minutes long. It must have cost Brian a fortune."

"Well, don't tell anyone, but he's spent over \$350 million on just five days worth of ads. He's running them nearly every hour of the day this week."

"Your brother surely poked the hornets' nest with that speech. He's the one who *really* needs protection, Luke. They'll probably come after him hard."

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm worried about. I'm glad he didn't mention the bugs they found here."

"He's put himself in the direct line of fire," she said. "I'm really worried about him and Tonya."

"Me, too." Luke turned the television off. The sudden silence in the room punctuated the seriousness of the situation.

Brian's ads were the talk of the nation. Fox covered the public's reaction to them, as well did several other news agencies. Someone even organized a city walk and protest that ended at the Whitehouse. A new bumper sticker was making the rounds as well. It read, *Don't Tread On Me!* and featured an image of a camera following the phrase.

"You wouldn't believe the support I've received after placing those ads, Luke," Brian said from his patio. "Congressmen, senators and especially the public. Our website has crashed three times in the last two days. People are really sick of the nasty side to our government. Like me, they've had enough. Florida's governor called me two hours before holding his own press conference. He publicly demanded an investigation into these black budget agencies. Regardless of what comes of it, I think we made our point and exposed a very bad group of people."

Luke took a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator, his phone still pressed to his ear.

“Yeah, but every time I use my phone now, I’ll wonder if someone’s parked outside my apartment, listening.”

“They were already listening. And listen, that feeling will go away, little brother. There’s no way they’re spying on us any longer. I’d bet a million bucks that Mr. Gray, Green and Brown are all out of work as we speak. And it serves them right if they are.”

“Yeah, but I’d bet the research they were doing will continue. Probably just in a different location now,” Luke said.

“I won’t argue against that. Just more dangerous secrets to hide from the American people.”

“So, forgetting about the spying, what do you think are the chances they may retaliate against you?” Luke asked.

“There’s always a chance, but Tonya and I agreed we didn’t want to live with those creeps holding my business over our heads as blackmail. I’d rather close everything up now than let them do that to us. There’s no freedom living under the government’s feet. Instead, I’ll keep a pistol on my side and dare them to try something.”

“I get that way of thinking, and I know you did the right thing. I just worry about you, that’s all,” Luke said.

“I’m glad you do, but I wish you wouldn’t. We need to put those bastards in our rear view mirror and keep on keeping on. They want us to fear them, Luke. I won’t give them the satisfaction!”

“Damn, Brian... there’s like three new bumper stickers in what you just said.”

“Haha! You print ‘em, I’ll sell ‘em. Hey, hold on a sec. I think I hear a helicopter.”

“Yours?”

“No... mine’s on the pad. Hold on another second. Okay... I guess it was nothing.”

“Hearing things in your old age?” Luke joked.

“Shit, dude... I’m literally only sixteen months older than you. I’ll bet you a bottle of whiskey you’ll turn gray before I do.”

“Hell, no. You’d just have one of those scientists of yours come up with a potion for you to keep your hair forever.” Brian didn’t answer.

“Hey, you still there? That was funny!” Luke looked at his phone and saw the call was still connected.

“Hey, Brian,” he said into the phone, “can you hear me?” Luke turned his volume up. He heard some men yelling, but couldn’t make out who Brian was talking to. Just then, he heard Brian scream out Tonya’s name. Then two gunshots.

“Brian... Brian!” The line was dead.

Luke put on his shoes and ran to his car. Fumbling for his keys, he dialed 911 and told them what he’d heard before the call was disconnected. He sped to his brother’s home, his mind reeling at what he might find. He arrived in less than twenty minutes and saw three police cars parked on the street. In front of the house sat a sedan with another patrol car parked behind it. Two officers were standing next to the Sedan. Luke ran over to them.

“Hold on, mister! Stop!” an officer said, raising his hand in the air. Luke slowed down and tried to explain that he was Brian’s brother and was the one who called 911. As he reached the sedan, he noticed a man was slumped over in the seat. He’d been shot in the head!

“Where’s my brother?” Luke asked frantically. “Is he okay?”

The officers quickly glanced at each other. Luke took off past them, running to the backyard. As he turned the corner, another officer met him midway, tackling him to the ground.

“My brother... where is he?” Luke asked, his wind almost gone.

“He’s not here. Just stay down, okay? Are you Luke?” an officer asked him.

“Yes. I was at my apartment, on the phone with him when everything suddenly went quiet on the line. He had just told me he thought he heard a helicopter.”

“A helicopter?” the officer repeated.

“Yes, but not very close, I guess, because he told me a second later he must have been mistaken. Next thing I know, I heard him yelling Tonya’s name. Then I heard gunshots! Brian never said another word on the phone, so I called 911 and drove over here! So, where is he now? Was he taken to the hospital?”

“We don’t know *where* he is, sir. We’re trying to find that out ourselves.”

“Well, his wheelchair is on its side, right there! So you know he couldn’t have left here unless he crawled!” So, where is he?” Luke looked toward the house and saw two officers standing over something. He ran over to them.

“Hey, stop him!” an officer said. Luke slowed down and put his hands in the air as if to show he wasn’t dangerous. Behind one of the officers was a body on the ground. The long, blonde hair told Luke who it was.

“Tonya!” She didn’t move. An officer stepped between her and Luke.

“She’s gone, sir. I’m sorry,” he said, holding Luke at bay.

One of the first pair of officers Luke saw when he arrived stepped out of the house and onto the patio.

“I checked everything again,” he said to the other officers. “The house is empty except for the victim.” Luke ran toward the house but was stopped again by an officer.

“It’s *not* your brother, Luke! It’s another security guard.” Luke stopped trying to get past the officer and collapsed on the grass.

He pulled out his phone and called Carla.

“Hey honey, can I call you right back? I’m finishing up an appraisal for a customer.”

“Brian’s gone, babe! I think he’s been kidnapped! Tonya’s dead. She was shot!”

“What? Tonya? Oh, my God! Where are you? Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes. I was at my apartment, talking to Brian on the phone when it happened. I got here as fast as I could. The police were already here.”

“So what happened? Do you think those government people took Brian?” she asked.

“Who else? His security guys are dead. They were shot in the head, execution style!” Luke was up and pacing the yard now.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but you can’t be here right now. This is a crime scene!” a policeman shouted. “An officer will escort you to the police station. We’ll need to get a statement from you.” An officer motioned Luke toward the front of the property.

“I’ve got to go to the police station, babe,” he told her.

“I’ll meet you there! I’m so sorry, Luke.” She ended the call.

Luke hurried to his car and followed the officer to the station.

“I’ve told you everything twice now, detective, and that’s after I wrote it all down in a statement! Why am I still sitting here? Have you looked into that agency?”

“The agency that doesn’t have a name, right? Look, we’re just trying to get everything documented accurately, Mr. Martin. We appreciate your patience.”

“Patience? I don’t have any patience! It’s not the time for patience, Detective. It’s time to take every lead seriously and find my brother!” The detective’s face was stoic, seemingly uninterested in Luke’s rant.

“That’s it. I’m outta here! If you need me, you have my phone number and address.”

“That’s fine, we’re not detaining you, Mr. Martin. You’re free to go, for the moment.

“For the moment? What... am I a suspect?” Luke asked, his head spinning.

“No sir, you are a person of interest to the case, that’s all. We hope you’ll continue to help us get to the bottom of what happened out there today.”

“That’s why I came here! Goodbye, Detective. Please let me know if you hear anything.” Luke returned to the lobby, where Carla sat waiting for him.

“Two times, Carla! Two times I had to recount word for word what I heard on the phone with Brian. That, plus the detailed statement I’d already written out! It’s pretty easy to understand what’s going on here. They were checking my stories to compare versions... catch any inconsistencies. They consider me a suspect!” Carla took his hand and walked him out of the station.

“Babe, calm down. They don’t know *what* to think yet. They’re covering all of their bases, that’s all. Isn’t that what you *want* them to do?”

“Yeah, I do... I do. It’s just frustrating. I don’t know if Brian’s alive or dead, and no one seems to be trying to find out.”

“Babe, they would have killed him and left him at the house if that was their intention,” she said.

“Yeah, I understand that... but you don’t know Brian’s mouth... how stubborn he is. Whatever reason they took him... whatever they wanted... they’re not going to get it from him. So he’s as good as dead. Probably already.”

“You don’t know that, babe. Just be patient. I’m sure we’ll find out something soon.”

“Patience... yeah, patience. I keep hearing that word tossed around,” he said.

After three agonizing weeks of no news from the police, Luke received a phone call from Brian’s headquarters.

“Mr. Martin? This is Reginald Troxell, Brian’s personal and business lawyer. I’m very sorry for the loss of your sister-in-law and the disappearance of Brian. Mr. Martin recently put a plan in place in case of his death or verified absence for more than 20 consecutive days. Brian named his wife first in line to succeed him, but named you second if something happened to her. Because of his disappearance and her death, you are named to lead the company as CEO until his return or until you have legally been benefited ownership of the company via his will, at which time you’d become owner *and* CEO.”

“What? I don’t know anything about running his company? Brian wouldn’t have done this. There’s a mistake somewhere.”

“There’s no mistake, Luke. I have the documents in my hand. Brian had a team set up to assist you while you become acclimated to the position.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m not qualified. And if I say no?”

“Then the company is to be sold, with you, of course, being the beneficiary.”

“Sold? How soon?” he asked.

“Within 180 days of your refusal. Of course, we’d have to begin the process soon to make that deadline.”

“Sold? I can’t see how that’s what Brian would want.”

“It’s not what he *wanted*, sir. He hoped you’d take the company over. He told me he trusted no one else but you to lead it in the right direction if he and Tonya were not able to.”

Luke was floored. The call went quiet for several seconds before Troxell spoke again.

“Brian, I know what I’ve told you comes as a shock. Your brother is severely missed at the company. His employees feel like they’re on a ship without a

captain now. Brian thought you could be that captain, at least for the time being. He left a note for me to read to you.

Six months, brother. That's all I'm asking. I know you think you're not equipped to do this, but I think you are. If in six months you decide you don't want to continue, I have a short list of people for you to interview for a new CEO. In the case of my death, my people will be anxious and nervous. You can help heal that. Six months, bro. You can do this.

Brian

"I know the note adds a lot of pressure, Mr. Martin, but your brother made me promise to read it to you. I'll hold the note for you."

"When did he decide this? Luke asked.

"As soon as filming for the commercials was complete." Save my number and give me a call in a few days with your answer. If I don't hear from you by the end of the week, I'll contact you again."

"Okay, thanks Reginald." He ended the call and stared at his phone, feeling in the pit of his stomach he'd never see his brother again. At that moment, his emotions took over and he sat down and grieved.

Sitting at his kitchen table that evening, Luke told Carla about his conversation with Troxell.

"So, what are you going to do?" she asked.

"What *can* I do? This is what Brian wanted... for me and the business. Over two thousand people depend on that company for their livelihoods. I think he thought I'd be a good bridge to the future... for the company I mean. I'll give it six months, like he asked. It's the least I can do for him."

"I know you love your brother, but just promise me you'll only do this as long as *you* want to, Luke. Your life is just that, Luke... *your* life. I don't want to watch you give up your dreams for someone else... *anyone* else."

"I promise, babe. Brian wouldn't want me to continue this if there was no real happiness there for me. He'd want me to pass the torch... and I will, when the

time is right. I think Brian knows I would run the business as close as possible to the way he did. That I'd have no aspirations to take it in a different direction than his vision. He also knows I can't be bought any more than he could."

"I know he'd be proud of you for doing this, Luke," she said.

"I've been holding onto hope that he's still alive, babe. Every time my phone rang, I'd look down at the screen hoping it was him." Carla tried to hide her tears from him, but he caught a glimpse of her wiping them away.

"Come here, darling," he said, taking her into his arms. "I didn't mean to put my grief onto you. What would you say to dinner out tonight? Let's try to clear our minds of the stress for a few hours. I want to sit close and talk about old Ancient Aliens episodes later. Maybe even rent an old movie. Are you in?" he asked.

"Oh, I am so in, Luke. That's a great idea. We have to find a way to maintain balance right now or we won't be good for anyone."

"Agreed. So, no more talk of the last few weeks or the company tonight. Tomorrow morning I'll call Troxell and give him my decision. Then we'll go from there."

Luke took a six month leave of absence from the university and informed Troxell of his decision to accept his brother's offer. He explained he would honor it for a minimum of six months. Luke knew that would give him adequate time to choose between the three candidates his brother suggested before stepping down as CEO. All that was left to do was to hold a company meeting so he could explain to his employees what was happening and why. The meeting was set for Monday morning. When the time arrived, Luke stepped onto the conference room stage and spoke to all the team leaders and management personnel.

"Thank you all for attending this meeting and allowing me to introduce myself. I'm Luke Martin, Brian's brother. I was contacted a few weeks after Brian's disappearance by Mr. Troxell, the man standing to my right. He is Brian's personal lawyer and the company's lead counsel as well. I was informed it was Brian's wish that I lead the company as we push forward as he would want us to. I'm *not* a businessman. I'm a teacher of history and a part time real estate agent.

If you ask me whether I'm qualified to step into his shoes, my answer will be no. I'm here for one reason. Brian left instructions with Mr. Troxell that it was his wish I lead the company. For the time being, I've agreed to his request. Brian loves this company. He loves you. You are his friends and valued coworkers. I said that in the present tense for a reason. I'm praying every night he'll return to us. I know if he could, he would. So, friends... if he *can*, he *will*!"

The room erupted in clapping and cheers.

"While we hold onto that prayer, all I ask is that you continue your work in the way Brian would expect. We're a very special company, run since the beginning by a very special man. I only hope to do him justice in fulfilling his last wishes. Please help me succeed with that. Thank you."

Once again, the room was filled with positive banter. Luke stepped down onto the same level as the employees. One by one, they approached to shake his hand and thank him for leading the company.

After the meeting, Troxell walked with him to Brian's office.

"You did well, son," Troxell said. "Your words were exactly what the team needed to hear. I understand now why your brother insisted on having you step in if the situation he feared ever occurred. He made the right choice."

"Well, I hope by the end of six months you still feel the same way." Troxell shook his hand before leaving.

"I'm sure I will, Luke."

Luke stood alone in his brother's office now. The weight of his new role and the despair he felt for his loss overcame him once more. He closed the office blinds and sat down in his brother's chair to grieve again.

Luke spent the day preparing for a meeting with the three managers Brian appointed to help familiarize him with the company. At 4:30pm, he called Carla to let her know he was on his way home. She answered on the first ring.

"Babe! Why hadn't you called me before just now? I've been on pins and needles wondering how your first day was going."

"I'm sorry, babe. I felt like I owed it to Brian to focus every minute on getting off to a good start. I have a meeting planned early tomorrow morning with the managers Brian suggested I use to help me through the next few months. I think I wrote down about a hundred questions for them."

“You’ll do fine, honey. My guess is that by the end of your first month you’ll know most of what is needed to keep the company profitable.”

“You have a lot of faith in a guy who is probably going to need to google half of what they’ll try to explain to me.”

“If you have to google it, then google it. You’re resourceful. You’ll find a way to succeed.”

“Babe, I can’t think of a person on this earth I’d rather come home to after a day like this. One of these days, *one* of us is going to have to decide to ditch their place and live with the other if we keep this up, you know.”

“Well, just so you know, I got a bargain on a house three months ago from a *very* handsome real estate agent. He *assured* me it was a wonderful home and that I’d have many, many wonderful years there. Considering that, I *could* be convinced to consider you as a partner in that happy ending he sold me on... if you play your cards right, Mr. Martin.”

“Fair enough. Wanna grab something to eat later?”

“Nope. I need a break from eating out. I’m presently at a strange man’s apartment, making a big pot of chili.”

“Chili? In this heat?” he asked.

“Yes, chili in this heat... this heat or any other heat. You better get used to this happening occasionally, Luke. I could eat this stuff year round. You’ll love my mom’s recipe. I’m making enough for you to take a bowl to work tomorrow if you want.”

“Awesome, just please turn the air down in the apartment so I can at least pretend it’s Winter tonight?”

“Amature. Yes, I’ll turn it down right now.”

“Home in 15 minutes, then.”

Luke shut off his alarm, kissed Carla and took a hot shower before breakfast. He wanted to get to the office early to make sure he was prepared for his meeting.

Day two, he realized as he took the elevator to the 5th floor. The new excitement he felt for his new position fueled his commitment even more to carry out his brother’s wishes.

The next six months are for you, big brother.

Just then, Luke's phone rang. It was Carla.

Shit... I forgot the chili! "Hey babe. I know what you're going to say... I left my chili on the counter. Can you put it in the fridge for me?"

"Luke, there's some—" Her connection started breaking up. "They're insi—"

"Babe, you're breaking up! I'm not getting everything you're saying... probably because I'm in an elevator right now. Can you hear me, Carla? Listen, I'll call you back from a landline in a couple minutes."

When he arrived on his floor, Linda wasn't at her desk yet.

That's right... I'm early.

He walked to his office and saw the door was partially open. Three men sat patiently across from his desk.

Dammit. They're already here! I should have figured on that. Brian always started early.

"Sorry, gentleman. I should have realized this would happen when I told you to be here first thing in the morning. Brian was known for getting a lot done before 9am."

"It's okay, Mr. Martin," one of them replied, "we haven't been waiting too long." The oldest looking man stood and shook Luke's hand.

"I'm Mr. Gray, and these are my associates, Mr. Brown and Mr. Green. Please forgive the intrusion, Mr. Martin." Luke, stunned by the names he'd just heard, slowly eased into his seat.

"I'll make this brief, Mr. Martin. We have Carla." He paused a second to let it sink in.

"We'd like to offer you and your company a partnership."

The End