

A decorative border made of dark blue floral and scrollwork patterns, framing the central text. The border is composed of repeating scroll and leaf motifs that form a rectangular frame around the page.

Omaha

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Enter, my noble guest, and you shall find,

If not a costly welcome, yet a kind:

For I myself, like you, have been distress’d,

Till Heav’n afforded me this place of rest;

Like you, an alien in a land unknown,

I learn to pity woes so like my own.

1. Monday January 8

Time: 2 PM

Arms tense and hands clenched nervously onto the steering wheel, Mike rushes to his rented farmhouse several miles north of Des Moines. On a sunless, cold, gray January afternoon, his car rattles and bounces its way west on a nameless gravel county farm road. The outside temperature is -7F, the wind chill is -20F. The car’s heater chatters vainly.

Mike’s beat-up old hardtop heaves and sways over the uneven loose stone surface, passing endless snow patched fields. It thumps across an unguarded railroad grade crossing, a loose old ramp of worn wood bridging shiny rails on which endless trains cart corn, soy, coal, and freight to ports south.

A colorless cluster of silos a few miles north fades dimly in the gathering haze. In the dismal churning sky aloft, flocks of crows scavenge for the last remains of summer. Gusting winds stir dry corn husks into furious small cyclones.

Slowing, he turns onto a stony driveway but quickly halts at the sight of what's down the long path ahead. After several moments of panic and indecision, he takes his foot off the brake and the car creeps slowly forward to the sound of rock crushing beneath its turning tires.

He slows to a crunching halt in a small farmyard. In the leaden winter light, engine idling, he looks numbly at the smoldering remains before him.

Of the old farmhouse, only the chimney and a few pipes remain upright. The rest is a smoking, fallen ruin of charred timbers. Discarded before what was once the entrance are three red gasoline cans.

Anxiously looking to see if anyone's hiding in the small grove of trees, he pulls on his heavy gloves, and stretches his knit stocking cap low over his ears. The rusty hinge creaks as he opens the door and cautiously gets out.

Nervously, he walks up to the blackened remains to see if there is anything salvageable. He hears only the sound of wind and the distant, cawing crows.

The floors have collapsed into the cellar. Burned pieces of furniture, the stove, refrigerator and other debris are scattered across the basement. Around the yard, in the driveway, the bushes, everywhere, he sees his papers and files blowing about. He realizes that the place was ransacked first, then torched.

In frustration, but with a note of despair, he says "Shit," and kicks at small a rock. It sails upwards then arcs downward into the cellar, landing with a metallic thud on the old stove below.

Returning to the car, he leans against its warm hood and surveys the remains. Pulling off one of his gloves, he reaches through his coat into a pocket and extracts a cigarette. Feeling through his pants for his lighter, he slides it out, hunches over, back to the wind, and lights the cigarette. He takes a deep drag then flicks the tiny ash to the wind.

But, in the corner of his eye, something moves. He turns quickly. In the distance to the west, far down the road, a rising, spiraling plume of dust is moving his

way.

Ambush! They were at the west end of the road. They saw my own trail of dust. They were waiting there behind the trees, out of sight of any farms, the way I normally come home!

Mike tosses the cigarette, jumps in the car, shoves the transmission into forward and floors the gas pedal. The rear tires spin on the loose stone and the car fish tails into a quick 180-degree about face. It lurches back down the driveway. Swerving onto the county road, he races to escape.

Picking up speed, he kicks up his own dust cloud. He wants to get to the blacktop a few miles east and the safety of the small farm town beyond. The crows screech and scatter skyward from the fields as his car clatters by.

A bullet pings his bumper, then several more. Some hit the trunk. He ducks when the rear window bursts into a great starry pattern of cracked glass. They're gaining.

His spinning tires on the crushed rock liberate a growing plume of wind borne stone dust that hides him from the pursuing SUV. But, when the road turns and weaves around small hills, the cloud parts and both prey and predator get to glimpse one another clearly.

The SUV is now about a quarter mile behind and closing. He struggles to open the gap but he's going as fast as he can on this bumpy road without losing control. Their SUV is better suited for this terrain.

From behind, they shoot blindly into his spiraling screen of rock powder. Few find their target but the sound of each round grows closer.

Ahead, hidden by a small hill, the grade crossing comes into view. However, to his left, a southbound freight rumbles his way at 80 miles per hour. Both he and a hundred cars of freight, preceded by three soot belching diesel locomotives, are seconds from the crossing.

Panicked, Mike whispers to himself, "This is it."

The silence of the winter wasteland shatters as all three engines' air horns shriek in a thunderous, dissonant, warning chorus. Seeing the inevitable collision, the

engineers quickly shunt the air brakes and flip the emergency overrides to the electric traction motors.

Eight hundred axles scream metal against metal while the giant diesels rev to full power. The electric motors rumble menacingly into reverse. Knowing that it will take the better part of a mile to bring this juggernaut to a halt, the frightened engineers brace for the unavoidable impact.

Mike flattens the accelerator pedal to the floor. The old V8 engine throbs up to redline, the transmission slams down out of overdrive into high, wheels spin, and his car unsteadily lurches forward.

His crushed stone dust plume belches.

Mike's car rumbles up, onto, and airborne over the wood planks just as the first screeching, trumpeting locomotive slices through the crossing.

His car slams back to earth. It jolts up and down and heaves left to right. Mike hits the brakes, fighting to regain control. Finally, it steadies. He made it.

His pursuers had gained to within fifty yards, but, as a result, became fully engulfed by the dust cloud. Greedily focused only on closure with Mike's car, they scarcely hear nor heed the warning horns.

Suddenly, the dust, cut from its source, becomes transparent. They see the rushing leading edge of the second engine and its vivid, speed blurred, red and yellow logo.

The driver screams and slams on the brakes. The SUV tumbles out of control and begins to roll. The four yelling guys inside are thrown around like sacks.

The SUV careens into the second engine just ahead of the diesel's rear carriage. It is swiftly sucked beneath, sliced and shredded. The derailing engine disconnects from the one ahead. The third engine quickly jumps the track along with the first of many cars of heavily loaded rolling stock.

The second and third engines flip on their sides and skid sideways across the tracks. Thousands of gallons of diesel fuel spill. The freight cars tumble and zigzag off the rails, dumping tons of dried corn in great heaps onto the mangled remains of the engines and the SUV.

The gasoline from the SUV's ruptured gas tank ignites. The diesel soaked corn ripples into a tide of flame. Black smoke and flames billow skyward as one car after another continues to pile corn, coal, chemicals and fuel upon the pyre of flaming railway wreckage.

About a mile beyond, Mike slows to a stop, gets out and looks behind him. His hands tremble and his heart races as he lights a cigarette and stares at the growing, wind driven inferno building in the distance. Slowly he regains his composure, tosses the cigarette and resumes his journey east. Fire engines and police cars race past him on their way to the wreck.

A few miles later, he joins the paved road. From there he turns onto an intersecting highway south, then east again and, finally, up onto the I35 South on-ramp. Soon it merges with I80 West for the beltway circuit around Des Moines.

Still shaking, he pulls out his cell phone and taps the dialer for Jessica. Each time it rings, he becomes more afraid that they got her too.

Finally, she answers saying, "Okay, are you at the house yet?"

"No, I'm on the I35/I80 beltway."

"Huh?"

"When I got to the house, it was burned down."

"Burned down? What the hell happened?"

"They torched it. And they were waiting to ambush me."

"Uh-oh!"

"Yeah and they chased me half way across the county."

"So how come they didn't catch you?"

"Seems a train got in their way. It'll be on the news."

"What? You mean the grade crossing?"

“Yep.”

“And they didn’t make it through?”

“Nope.”

“You wrecked a train, didn’t you?”

“Nope, they wrecked a train. I had nothing to do with it. They should’na been driving so fast. I’ll tell you more later.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yep, I’m okay, just a bit shaken up.”

“What did you see at the house?”

“Oh, the place was a mess. My papers were tossing all over the place, the floors had collapsed and there were three empty gas cans outside the front door.”

“Crap! So I guess we’re in trouble?”

“Yep, a whole boat load of trouble.”

“Where are you now, Mikey?”

“Getting the freaking hell out of Des Moines. I’m just past Urbandale.”

“Okay, now calm, down and slowly, tell me, exactly, where are you going?”

“Duh? Down there to get you.”

“Hey, this is my first real big computer conference. How about you just let’em chase you around Des Moines for a couple of days until my geek fest is over?”

“Whaaaat? Are you nuts? I got bullet holes in the back window. Damn it, this is serious. What part of shot dead don’t you understand?”

“All right, already. You’re not dead yet. Don’t stroke out. I’m just kidding. Calm down and stop hyperventilating.”

“This is as calm as I’m gonna get.”

“Good. Hold that thought. Because, while you were out train spotting, I got on my laptop and you’re right, Jack’s on to us, or, more specifically you. I don’t think he ever paid any attention to me. Sexist pig, his mistake.”

“What’d ya find out?”

“I hacked his email account, as usual. He’s put the word out that he’s looking for you and willing to pay well. No specifics, just that he wants you, dead or alive, preferably dead.”

“That’s about how I figured it given my little railway incident.”

“So, exactly where are you now?”

“I’ll be coming up to the I35/I80 split in a couple of minutes. I’ll be in Columbia in about five hours then we’ll go hide out in the Ozarks.”

“Nope, not gonna happen. You are definitely not coming here. First, there’s a blizzard on its way and, second, if Jack gets hold of your cell phone records, he’ll see who and where you called. Then Jack will send some guys over here from St. Louis, and, well you know the rest. And third, no, honey, I’m really not ready for the Ozarks. I’d rather take my chances in a shoot out with Jack.”

“That can be arranged.”

“What about that friend of yours out in Omaha that I looked up for you on the Internet? How about going out there? You think he might be able to put us up until we can make a real plan?”

“Yeah, David? That might work. I haven’t seen him in a while but, yeah, he’ll help us find a place to hide out for a while. Anyway, the further from St. Louis the better, I guess.”

“You got it. Okay, then, when you get to the split, you head to Omaha and I’ll meet you there.”

“So how are you gonna get there if I don’t come get you?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get to Omaha myself and meet you there. Just keep going. I’ll see you there tomorrow.”

“No, I’m coming to get you.”

“No, idiot, if they trace this call, I don’t want to be sitting here five hours waiting for someone to come after me too. I want you to go to Omaha. Now. Is that clear?”

“Yeah, but...”

“I’ll clear out’a here as soon as I can and meet you there tomorrow night. You be at that club he owns and I’ll meet you there.”

“All right, that’s the only address I have for him. You have it, right?”

“Ahh, I was the one who found it for you, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

“Geez, Mikey, let’s put the panic attack on hold. I’ll see you tomorrow night at that club. But I’ll be there late.”

“Why late?”

“I’m in Columbia freaking Missouri. How many travel options do you think there are down here? Anyway, I’m not gonna take any chances. And, by the way, power down your cell phone so it can’t be tracked. Jack may have a few friends or clients working for one of the carriers and it’s not difficult to locate a phone’s signal and trace it to a cell tower. Oh, yeah, and don’t be drunk when I get there.”

“If I can’t use my cell phone, how can I call you?”

“You won’t and neither will Jack. I’m powering down as soon as I hang up. And don’t use the Internet.”

“You sure you can do this?”

“Oh really, give me a break. Geez! The question is, can you get there in a

blizzard in that shit can of a car of yours?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my car that a little body putty wouldn’t fix.”

“A boat load of body putty.”

“All right, whatever. Then I’ll see you at Mo R~~o~~n in Omaha tomorrow night?”

“Eh-yep, that’s the plan. Now hang up, turn the phone off and head west Mikey. I’ll see you in Omaha. And Mikey?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

“You too.”

He powers down the cell phone as ordered and parks it on the seat next to him. Damn, she can be a nuisance. Too damned independent for a woman. At the highway split, as instructed, he veers right onto the ramp to I80 West. Taping out a cigarette with one hand, he puts it in his mouth, punches the lighter and flips on the radio. Next stop Omaha.

Mike’s bullet pocked car thumps west on the segmented concrete road slabs past scattered truck stops, farms, silos, grim towns, endless fence posts and barren winter fields upon which prowl great flocks of black birds. The sky is dark ahead. Fast moving clouds churn above and the wind continues to build from the southeast. The radio station in Des Moines says there’ll be two feet of snow by morning with gale winds along with severe blowing and drifting. Temperatures will drop well below zero. A monster blizzard is building in the Rockies and will soon prey upon the plains.

Buffeted by the growing cross winds, his car veers unpredictably from one side of the lane to the other. He passes long processions of forty ton 18-wheelers and triple bottomed trailer rigs weaving like flags in the growing storm. The gusts are now over forty miles an hour. Just west of Adair, Mike figures it’s about another 60 miles to go. The snow will start soon. If he’s lucky, he’ll just make Omaha before the roads close.

As he motors slowly through Council Bluffs in the gray and wasting light of

dying day, snow begins to accumulate on the road. Giant IA DOT sand trucks with ten-foot plow blades are out in conga lines making a freak show of yellow strobe lights flaring in the horizontal blur of wind driven flakes. His car jerks as it tracks its way west through the icy ruts out of Iowa and into Nebraska.

Crossing the deserted Missouri I480 bridge into Omaha, high above the frigid river below, he struggles to keep the car in lane now that he is fully exposed to the unobstructed fury of the gale. Finally, making it across the bridge onto the elevated interstate, he drives through central Omaha. Scarce window lights on the tall buildings confess that their occupants have fled for the day. A few miles west and south of downtown, he exits the interstate down onto a deserted street in a semi-industrial neighborhood. A few blocks from the off ramp, he pulls into the nearly empty parking lot of a faded motel.

After checking in, he dashes across the road to a convenience store. Returning a few minutes later, he shakes the snow from his coat and settles in for a stale, plastic wrapped sandwich, fries and a plastic cup of cheap wine drawn from a screw top bottle of limited vintage. Retrieving a carton of cigarettes from his gym bag, he extracts a pack. After slapping the top several times on his palm to compress the loose tobacco, he opens it, and taps out the sprout of a new cigarette. Lighting it, he inhales deeply, leans back and chugs another gulp of the wine.

Surrounded by the litter from his bad convenience store supper, he broods over his predicament. He sits still in the dimly lit small room. The only sounds are those of the whistling wind and some metal sign in the parking lot flapping and squeaking in the gusts. Staring at the stippled ceiling above, he wonders what's next. If his former friend in St. Louis finds him, not much.

A few cigarettes and the better part of the wine bottle later, he clicks on the TV and flips between a motley collection of local stations before settling on one. He stares numbly at aging, career-end readers bantering cheerfully about the weather between seed and feed commercials.

The storm sprawls anonymously across a thousand miles of towns, cities, farms, cattle, prairie, and people. Final totals will be measured in feet followed by massive drifting and then an Arctic blast of frigid air. Temperatures will fall to -25F with wind chills to -60F. These are forecast to settle in for the next week or more. Mike winces as he turns to eat the last of the soggy cold greasy French

fries from the oily paper packet.

As a TV commercial drones on, he decides that, despite the entreaties, and many fine examples shown for his edification, in the final analysis, no, he doesn't want any hybrid seed corn this year.

A quick flip to the local weather feed shows the radar with white in all directions. For now, at least, maybe he's safe, hidden by the storm.

Time: 8 PM

He checks his watch. It's eight. Clicking off the TV, he moans and thinks to himself that the time has come to get on with it. He pulls out the street map of Omaha which he bought at a gas station over in Iowa and checks the location of the motel against the address written on a stained small piece of paper he carried in his wallet. The place he's looking for should be about two blocks away, more or less.

Looking out the window he decides that there is no way he can take the car, not in this storm, it'll be buried in a drift. He figures he's got to walk it. It's not really that far, but, in this weather, it won't be nice. Reluctantly, he begins the ritual of winter robing, pulling on his jacket, scarf, stocking cap, hood and gloves.

Finally, draped like a mummy, he steps stiffly out into the parking lot where his face is quickly slapped by a forty mile an hour sub-zero horizontal gale of snow. The flakes hit him like blown sand. Staggering, he stretches the scarf further up over his face leaving just a slit for his eyes between the scarf and the pulled tight stocking cap. Thus girded, driven by relentless fate, he starts hiking the two tortuous blocks up the street.

Trudging up the middle of the deserted, snow swept road, he bends into the gale like some anonymous lumbering animal on the prairie. The wind and snow lash down in turbulent waves. Bathed in the orange light of sodium vapor street lamps, his eyes see only barely a blur through the tightly wrapped scarf. After a block and a half, he finally looks up into the face of the wind.

There it is, he thinks to himself. Through the dense blowing snow and a swaying, lone nearby street lamp, he sees a huge hulking brick building half a block away. A great green neon sign blinks brightly through the near whiteout

blizzard blur, Mo R♦n.

What the hell does that mean?

Infra red sensors and imaging devices automatically begin to track his movement.

Approaching closer, he sees that, whatever it means, it's big. "Holy shit," he mutters under his breath, "Look at the size of it, what the hell is this, a warehouse?" He crunches onward through the ruts of snow, his goal now only a few dozen yards ahead.

Nearing the building, he looks through a small fogged window near the doors and sees the place is mobbed. To himself he wonders, "How many people in Omaha go clubbing in a blizzard? Why are they out on a night like this?"

Now, at the entrance, he pauses and gapes. Before him are massive doors, each maybe fifteen feet high and ten feet wide, old warehouse doors, made of heavy cedar beams and hinged on massive brass fittings.

Curious, he kicks off the top layer of snow and discovers that the wide steps are marble with inlaid brass, the logo of the original owner, he supposes. "On brazen steps the marble threshold rose, And brazen plates the cedar beams enclose," he recites, the flickering memory of some long forgotten English Lit class.

Cut and hinged in one of the ancient huge doors is a portal of more normal size. He pulls on it hard against the battering wind and stumbles in. At once, from all sides, he's jeered, "Shut the freaking door."

Clouds of snow explode about him. Fugitive flakes land and quickly vanish on the bare hot skin of a wave of sweating, dancing couples a few feet beyond. The bouncer asks for ID. He hands it to him. The bouncer swipes it through a reader and then gestures him in.

Mike whacks the caked snow from his coat and stocking cap which he rolls up and pushes in a pocket. He takes his coat and hangs it in a side room with hundreds of others pretty much like it. Combing back his long hair, he shakes the ice from it, kicks the slush from his shoes and whacks at the cakes of snow stuck to his pants. Thus preened, he ventures into the main room.

He looks around and sees lights everywhere, pin spots, lasers, scanners, and moving yokes, all dancing in sync to the roaring music that throbs from all sides in surges. The rhythms pound the head and the lyrics conjure a dream state. The air glitters with swirling, colored, floating flakes suspended in a world of sound and light. He stands stunned. He has passed into another world, in the full glory of its passion while the world outside, the real one of snow, wind, fire, and bullets, fades, if only briefly.

Dressed more like a vagrant than someone out for a night of clubbing, he mixes, unmarked, among the busy throng, borne by the tide, and passes unseen along until, full in the center of the floor, he looks about in awe.

Above him the open atrium rises four or five stories. The interior is the size of a football field. The walls are rough red brick. All around, in the scant light above, he sees balconies.

Everything is wood, brick and wrought iron. The place is windowless except for the few near the entrance and dark reflecting skylights high in the exposed, massive wooden rafters above where fairy lights are set in starry constellations.

On the main level, is a vast, sunken central dance floor. Above this is the open atrium to the beamed roof aloft. All around the dance floor is a fifteen-foot ceilinged area above which are the balconied floors above. Thick, cast iron pillars are arrayed every ten feet to support the parapets above.

Centered on the west side of the building, beneath the floors above, is the main entrance and the bouncer's podium. To its south is the large coat room, partitioned from the rest of the club. At the far south end of the building is a lounge area of tables, chairs, and couches.

Along the east outside wall, opposite the main entrance, is a long polished wooden bar with a massive brass footrest below and fronted by about fifty stools. Above and behind are rows of glass shelves against the polished red brick, laden with multicolored liqueur bottles and crystal glasses. Several bartenders serve the happy throng.

A broad, high, wooden stage platform extends across the better part the north end of the building enveloped in heavy dark, draped, velvet curtains. Above, one of the floors is missing, the area is easily thirty feet high. Mics, amps, cables, floor speakers and music stands are scattered all about.

Mike whispers, “Now purple hangings clothe the palace walls, And sumptuous feasts are made in splendid halls.”

At the south end of the polished bar, furthest from the stage, rises a pulpit-like semicircular array of flickering flat computer screens and keyboards behind which stands a tall, long haired, geeky guy in a black T-shirt emblazoned in white with the logo AYBABTU. The console array faces northwest, diagonally across the expanse of the club. To the right of the console is the bar, to its left is the lounge area. From this perch, the guy in the black T-shirt has a ruling view of the entire scene.

Suspended by many steel cables from the rafters high above and centered over the dance floor is a crisscross array of black painted steel beams. From these hang eight massive black speakers and a huge array of electrical equipment, spotlights, lasers and yokes of all sorts.

Dangling from unseen cords, huge disco mirror balls spin. They glitter and flash in the multicolored pin spots from the central lighting array. Attached to the balconies all around are even more, endless racks of lights and lasers.

Then sudden cheering rises from the crowd, as lasers flicker brightly through the dark. Blasting cords of music engulf the hall. Air guns flash in bright bursts of light and smoke, shooting glitter into the vault above.

Aloft in air unseen, and mixed with night this airy, weightless mist of Mylar flakes, flashes in the wildly splaying lasers. The sound builds and the crowd begins to dance. Visions in the night, he thinks to himself. Thin and aerial shapes, light as a dream.

Retreating to the bar, he finds a stool at the far end, near the computer pulpit, and orders a scotch and soda. As he does a curious canary lands on the bar, tilts its head and eyes him suspiciously. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a small cellophane wrapped bag of soup crackers, opens it, and spills a few before the tiny bird. The bird gives off a happy song of approval and hops forward. Snatching one of the tiny crackers, it flies away. But quickly, three other little birds alight, chirp a greeting and pluck the remaining pieces. They likewise fly away. Looking up, he sees them disappear into their airy kingdom aloft and wishes he could do the same.

Swiveling around and facing towards the dance floor, he leans back to survey the

scene before him. Fully three hundred people are in attendance, he guesses, and it's still relatively early. The crowd mingles in groups, laughing and shouting. The lounge area is mobbed, as is the area around the bar and the great central dance floor beyond. The recorded music from the speakers high above floods the room in the rich cords of an old rock and roll ballad. The great stage is being set by roadies for a band who are yet to appear.

After a few moments, he leans to one side and asks the guy on the stool next to him, "Say, do you know if this is David Shea's place?"

The guy turns, looks a bit quizzical and with a sweeping gesture across the room replies, "Ahhh, yeah dude, this is Shea David's. Really something, ain't it?"

"You mean Chez David's?"

"Whatever."

A bartender places a basket of pretzels on the bar between Mike and the guy he's talking to then nods to the geeky guy at the computer console. A hidden wireless mic activates.

"Anyway, it's quite a show. How long has it been here?"

"Oh, a couple of years, I guess. It's pretty much the most popular place in the city now. David's a legend. Thus, I take it you must be new here?"

"Yeah, just blew into town. Nice blizzard."

"Well, makes you concentrate on indoor activities. Where you from?"

"Most recently, Des Moines. If this is the David Shea I think it is, I need to speak with him. My name's Mike, Mike McAneas."

"I'm Steve Smith, glad to meet you."

"Say, how do you pronounce the name of the place, Mo R♦n?"

"Moas in Joe and R♦nas in swoon, emphasis on the R♦n. Almost like maroon an Ohsound at the beginning."

“What’s it mean?”

“Not a frigging clue. Ask David.”

“You have any idea where I can find David? Do ya’know where he lives or when he’s here?”

“Oh, yeah, he lives here, man. Way up there,” as he points towards to the dimly visible rafters several stories above.

“What’ya mean?”

“There are penthouse apartments up there, man! David and some of the people who work here live up there.”

“Where?”

“See, up there, around the sides, you can see the balconies. Never been all the way up there myself but I know that on the top floor there are apartments opening out onto the balcony. If you look, you can see the same on the lower floors but there are no apartments there, just offices, or so the story goes.”

“How do you get up there?”

The geeky bartender in the black T-shirt eyes Mike suspiciously and begins typing on his keyboard. Quickly an invisible infrared targeting laser and then several unseen cameras focus on Mike.

“Oh, see that door over there, down at the south end of the wall beyond the main entrance? There’s a freight elevator behind it. You go up that way.”

Mike shouts over the sound system, “Here, let me buy you a drink and tell me more.”

The guy at the console scans Mike’s fingerprint taken from a used glass and begins processing it against a database along with the data from Mike’s driver’s license captured by the bouncer at the door. After a few minutes he text messages the results through the club’s encrypted wireless network to others around the dance floor and to David, who’s sitting at the main control console in a massive computer room on a floor above. David scrutinizes the images being

captured by the security cams.

Mike plies Steve for information for the better part of an hour and three double gins and tonic until suddenly he hears a great roar behind him. He turns to see an explosion of pyrotechnics and Mylar glitter shoot from air guns. Over at the far side of the club, people are jumping up and down, cheering and waving. The sound system plays a brassy fanfare as Mike asks his new and somewhat drunk acquaintance, "What's going on?"

"That's probably David," Steve shouts, "He usually makes an appearance around now to introduce the bands."

A huge gong sounds and a cloud of theatrical smoke billows twenty feet into the air. First to emerge from the cloud are three women in their early twenties who sprinkle the path with multicolored Mylar petals as David, bowing theatrically from one side to the other, follows. The crowd screams.

David, dressed in a black shirt and jeans, has short reddish blond hair, thin, on the tall side, about six foot three. While the flower girls toss their last petals in his direction, with sweeping bows, they withdraw behind the dark velvet curtains.

David faces the applauding crowd as shrill whistles pierce the smoky air. He holds a wireless microphone to his mouth and says, "Okay people, we got a little snow storm outside so we need to make our own little storm inside. We've got a great group here tonight, all the way from Kansas City and if it doesn't stop snowing, they may be here until April so I hope you like'em. I want you to welcome for their first trip to Omaha and their first Nebraska blizzard, the incomparable Prairie Mayhem!"

The crowd screams their approval in return. David waves his arm low as the members of the band jog on stage taking bows. They plug in their instruments to the stage amps and spend a minute tuning up. Then the lead singer takes the microphone and says, "Hello Omaha! Hello cold, snowy Omaha! Are you ready for some hot Rock & Roll?"

The crowd cheers, claps and whistles its assent. David trots off the stage. The building shudders as the first guitar cords burst forth from the speakers both on the stage and suspended from girders above. The lasers, keyed to the sound system, splay thousands of colored pencil thin beams in the vault above creating

a luminous canopy of light. After more belches of pyrotechnics and several more Mylar confetti blasts, the evening's entertainment commences.

David makes his way over towards the bar shaking hands and saying hello to some of the regulars. At the other end, Mike takes leave of his seriously drunk new friend who's clutching the bar for balance and looking like a deer staring down a Peterbilt. He threads his way through the crowd.

David and Mike went to a private college near Chicago. David was from east Tennessee and had one of those curious, Elizabethan southern drawls. He was pre-med. Mike grew up in eastern Iowa, near Dubuque. David is a bit taller than Mike. David had long hair then, the same pale white complexion characteristic of his tribe, and thin. Not much has changed except the length of the hair, Mike summarizes. They met during freshman orientation and were good friends the next four years. Mike lost touch with David after they both left college. The last Mike could remember was that David was in medical school in St. Louis while he looked for a job as a reporter.

As David spots Mike, he does an abrupt but insincere double-take, thrusting his arms to each side and shouting, "Hey Mikey? Mike McAnneas? Is that really you?"

They converge and shake hands as David continues, "I can't believe it! How the hell are you man? What'ya you up too? How did you get here? How did you find me?"

"Hey, David! It's been a while. I see you've lost your fear of crowds," replies Mike smiling.

"Well, sort'a, still get a bit nervous every time I introduce a band," says David. "Come on down to the end where it's a bit quieter, I think the band's trying to shake the snow off the roof. They may succeed."

They head towards the south end of the bar, back near the computer pulpit. David says to Mike, "You still drink scotch?"

"But of course."

David turns to the geeky bartender in the black t-shirt and says, "Hey Todd, how about glass of scotch over here, the good stuff." Then turning back to Mike he

says, “So, dude, what’ya been up to? What brings you to the Riviera of the Midwest?”

“Ahh, I came here for the surf boarding?”

“More like snow boarding, if you can find a hill.”

“Yeah, well, maybe it was snow boarding. There are some gnarly drifts out there.”

“Yeah, totally tubular, and the frostbite is free.”

Todd, the guy in the black T-shirt, brings the drink and places it on a white napkin and says, “Here ya’go,” then returns to his computer terminals.

David steels a quick look at Todd and raises his eyebrows momentarily then pulls out a pack of cigarettes, taps it so about three pop up and offers them to Mike saying, “Still smoking?”

“Ahh, right again. Old habits die hard,” as he pulls one out, puts it in his mouth and begins to feel around his pockets for his lighter. Retrieving it, he flicks it open and lights both.

“So, again, what brings you to Snow-maha? People don’t often make surprise visits during blizzards.”

Mike puts the lighter back in his pocket and says, “Omaha? I came to Omaha for my health.”

“What do you mean health? We’re in the middle of a freaking blizzard on the prairie. No one comes to Omaha for their health, at least not in January. What’s the real story?” he says frowning a bit.

“Well, I’m kind’a in a little bit of trouble and sort’a hiding from some people who would prefer to see me little on the dead side of the ledger. That kind of health.”

“Ohh?” says David with a new level of interest.

“Yeah. So, I figured I needed to disappear for a while and this might be the best

place to disappear to. Geez, who the hell would look for anyone in Oma-haha, for Christ's sake?"

"Well, you found me here. So, tell me, have you finally discovered your true calling in life and run off with a mob boss' daughter or something?"

"Ahh, no, not exactly. He doesn't have a daughter but he does have one hell of a bad temper."

"Oh?" says David raising his eyebrows. Todd does too.

"Yeah. Oh." says Mike, sheepishly.

"I got a feeling we need to talk, right?"

"That's probably a good plan," says Mike.

"Come'on, let's go upstairs, it's a bit quieter and there's a few hundred fewer people hanging around," says David as he takes his drink from the bar, turns and says to Todd, "We'll be upstairs."

Todd frowns and says, "Okay, are you sure?"

"Yeah, it's okay. Better get ready for some sleepovers. I don't think any of these people are even gonna go through the motions of trying to make it home tonight."

Todd nods and says, "Way ahead of you. We've already got the cots and blankets out of storage. They're stacked up out back and I'm thawing out stuff for breakfast."

Mike follows as David leads him around the side of the club and over to the far corner door to the freight elevator. Pushing the heavy door open, they enter a large enclosed room. As the heavy steel fire door closes behind them, Mike hears the discrete clicks of bolts automatically sliding into place.

On one side is an old wood-floored freight elevator the size of a bedroom. In its open cage, a single naked bulb hangs from its roof and swings slowly in the draft from above. The exposed walls are old pocked, rough red brick. On the other side is a sliding metal door to an outside loading dock. It hangs on wheels set in

a greased track above and slotted to a metal rail below.

The poorly insulated room is cold. The rising and falling wind outside rattles the heavy steel loading dock door. The squalls wail dissonantly through cracks between the steel door and the brick wall and combine with the muffled rumbles, thuds, and distant filtered notes of the band on the stage outside. Above the elevator cage, the shaft extends into darkness.

“Right this way, if you please,” says David jerking up the old worn wooden gate. As they step onto the elevator, the floor bounces slightly at their newly added weight. The gate drops behind them with a thud. Mike’s eyes flicker about apprehensively. “Don’t worry, it’s safe,” says David as he punches the top button on a worn old brass control panel.

Solenoids clatter followed by the piercing whine of a large electric motor spinning up. The clutch engages, the floor lurches, the cage rattles and they’re jolted upwards. Shadowed bricks and steel beams pass quickly in the dim light of the cage’s single bulb until the motor quits and unseen metal brakes wrest the elevator to an abrupt halt. Mike staggers a bit in the sudden braking. David pulls the gate open and they exit onto an apex of balconies. Behind them, the gate drops with a bang. They walk over to the balcony and survey the dance floor far below.

“What was that about sleepovers?”

“Oh, the blizzard. They can get here but most of them won’t be able to go home. This happens a couple of times a year. I think they look forward to it. That’s why the place is so crowded. It’s the big sleepover at Mo R♦n. They know we bring out the cots and blankets and give’em breakfast in the morning. It’s how they spend the big snow storms. Sometimes, I think I’m running a freaking homeless shelter.”

“Ahh, taking care of the neighborhood drunks?”

“Neighborhood? Some of them drive half way across Nebraska when they hear there’s a blizzard coming.”

The freight elevator is in the southwest corner of the building. On the fifth and top floor where it stopped, two long dark corridors lead off at right angles. A four-foot high brick walled balcony runs around the entire floor and overlooks

the central dance floor far below. Above them are the wood rafters and the fairy lights. Along the corridors, are a few dark solid doors. The floor and walls are polished brick. Dim spotlights recessed into the ceiling every 10 feet or so shine soft yellow circles on the red brick floor.

Mike looks down upon the dancing throng. The music at this height resounds in the echoes of the cavernous vault below. In the dancing colored lights, the floating metallic plastic petals swarm in unseen drafts of air. As the band thunders out an old ballad, the crowd sways to the rhythms of the music. He's momentarily spellbound by the scene of light and motion beneath.

"Over here, to the right, there's my apartment," interrupts David.

They walk about halfway down the corridor to the east until they come to an otherwise unmarked, solid, unlocked door which he pushes open and gestures for Mike to enter.

The door quietly closes behind them. Mike stands at one end of an enormous dimly lit apartment, eerily quiet, given the ruckus below. It's a loft with a floor of polished stone and walls of uneven, old, red brick. Aged polished wood beams above conceal low wattage indirect lighting aimed upwards onto the ancient dark wooden angled roof above. The trussed rafters are two feet thick fastened together with hundred year old decorative wrought iron bars and braced with two-inch thick steel rods joined in heavy steel turnbuckles.

To his left is a raised kitchen area with all stainless steel appliances and cabinets. A long burnished marble counter at one end juts out perpendicularly from the far wall. Along it are set high wooden chairs with low backs.

To his right is a dark sitting area with three long low white leather and chrome couches arranged in a U-shape facing the southern wall. In the center of the couches, is a great dark, polished inlaid wooden table. Incandescent pools of pale light descend from opaque dark shades upon the tops of crystal columned lamps with silver bases sitting in the centers of dark parquet wooden end tables. Upon the tables are ashtrays and bowls of heavy glittering cut crystal.

Against the southern brick wall is a great flat HDTV fully eight feet wide and four and a half high. Below the screen sits a long, low, glassed doored cabinet full of electronic equipment where many red, yellow, blue and green LEDs strobe silently to unseen signals. The silent screen displays several windows with

scrolling news feeds and others with maps and some with security cam shots of the club below.

Further down to the west, the room is dark. A ten foot stretch of wall is covered from floor to ceiling with dark drapes. In front of these is a concert sized polished black grand piano lit by one tiny pin spot attached to a rafter above. Beyond the living room, a hallway recedes into darkness.

David flips a hidden switch. To the low hum of an unseen motor, the drapes begin to part revealing a panoramic window across half the far end of the wall. From the roof, floodlights shine on the street below. In the gathering storm, billows of snow swirl in tiny cyclones as the wind rolls off the roof above. A few lights are faintly visible from the nearby interstate, mainly the yellow strobe lights of the highway crews making futile efforts to keep the drifts at bay.

Pulling a bottle of expensive scotch from a cabinet near the door and handing it to Mike, David says, “Here, go make yourself comfortable while I get some ice and soda.”

Mike walks over and sits on the couch facing east towards the kitchen where David fetches a bucket from a cabinet. He fills it with ice cubes from the freezer half of the big stainless steel refrigerator. Opening the other side, he grabs a couple of bottles of soda water. Returning to the living room area he arranges these on the large central table then grabs a couple of ashtrays from the end tables and places them on the table too.

Mike looks up and says, “Glasses?”

“Oh, yeah, I usually just drink right from the bottle. I guess you want to do it the formal way, right?”

“Clean glasses, please?”

“Geez, we’re getting picky in our old age.”

David returns and tosses him a hundred dollar Irish cut crystal chalice which Mike bobbles a few times before getting a firm grip. “Will that do?” He sprawls on the couch to Mike’s left, facing the big screen.

“Very nicely, thank you. I’m suitably impressed. You can pass the bottle now.”

David scoops some ice for himself, pours the scotch then pushes the bucket, scotch and the soda water across the table. He opens his soda water and mixes it with the scotch.

“Thanks. And how’s the cigarette supply?”

David opens a drawer and extracts a pack and tosses the pack to Mike saying, “By the way, you hungry or anything?”

“Yeah, I could do with some food, I’ve been on the road most of the day. Not a lot of dining options beyond some really bad convenience store crap.”

“What’ya want? We got twenty different kinds of pizza downstairs.”

“Pizza it is. Just no anchovies.”

David pulls out his cell phone, punches in a couple of digits and says, “Hey Todd, can you send up a couple a pizzas? Yeah, everything except anchovies. It seems refugee boy here hasn’t eaten today. Thanks.” and flips the phone shut. “It’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Taking an ashtray from the table and putting it next to him on the couch, he leans back, puts feet up on the central table and lights a cigarette, and, head back, inhales deeply. Then, in an exhaled billow of smoke, asks, “So, what the hell’s up? Who wants you dead?”

“Well, at the moment, one person in particular. The main drug lord for this part of the country. Seems he doesn’t like me anymore.”

“Anymore? He used to like you?” says David, his eyes open saucer wide.

“Yeah, I was his best boy.”

“Then you do drugs?” says David as he glances quickly at a small green LED under a tiny lens just above the big screen.

“No, I spy on drug dealers and expose them. I’m a reporter now.”

“Geez, you had us, er, me worried there.”

“Yeah, well it worries me too. I’ve been working undercover for a news network.”

“And I suppose this makes the drug people unhappy?”

“Very unhappy. I got a bullet pocked car down the street to prove it.”

“Nice. Bet it’ll be a bitch to explain to the insurance company.”

“It’s not insured.”

“So, this explains you’re snowy trek to Omaha?”

“Yep. So it does. How the hell did you end up here? Didn’t you go off to med school?”

“Yeah, for a while but right now I and the rest of the crew are more interested in your story right now.”

“The rest of the crew?”

“Yeah, you’ve been watched from the minute you got within 100 feet of here. When we swiped your ID, you weren’t in our database. Then you started asking questions. That triggered some interest. Now they have a few questions of their own.”

“Questions? You mean that Smith guy at the bar?”

“Yeah, he works for me. He tipped off Todd, the guy in the black t-shirt who immediately put a mic and a camera on you. By now, he and the others have probably collected and sequenced your DNA not to mention captured every shred of online data you’ve ever generated.”

“Who? What others?”

“My colleagues. The nosy ones who are watching and listening to every word we’re saying right now,” says David as he points to the green LED over the screen. “That’s a camera and it’s on.”

“So you knew I was here before you came on stage?”

“Yep. I was watching you from the control room downstairs.”

“So why the big what a surprise ?”

“They didn’t know who you were and I didn’t know why you were here. We don’t get a lot of social calls in a blizzard.”

“Okay. Now I’m the one who’s a little worried.”

“Don’t be. Todd just texted me a message saying you check out okay,” says David as he slips his cell phone back in his pocket.

“I don’t understand?”

“You will.”

A moment later there’s a knock at the door, David shouts, “Come on in, it’s open.”

Todd, the geek in the black t-shirt, comes in with two pizzas trays and a couple of napkins and some knives and forks and says, “Here ya’go. Thought I’d bring it up myself.” He places them in the middle of the coffee table.

“So, curious are we?” say David sarcastically.

“Who me? Just being social,” answers Todd.

“Or got tired of watching on the web cam.”

“That too.”

David says, “Go get yourself a drink and sit down. Like I have a choice, right?”

“No, you don’t, actually. I see you’re using Mary’s glasses?”

“Yeah, don’t break’em or she’ll kill me.”

Mike gets up and shakes hands with Todd saying, “My name’s Mike McAneas, I’m an old friend of David’s, so to speak.”

“Nice to meet you. I feel like we’ve already met. Actually, in fact, I already do

know you. We scanned your driver's license at the door and I've already done a cross check on you with the Iowa DMV, downloaded your college transcript, and hacked your email account. Nice GREs, by the way, you should'a gone to grad school. Oh, one more thing, they over charged you at that motel down the street."

"How'd you know about the motel?" says Mike.

"The motel? I hacked your credit card records and your bank account too, for that matter. Still working on that DNA sample we collected off your drink glass but we did get a good set of fingerprints."

"Geez, I see what you mean about being watched."

"Right," says David. "But we do take security around here pretty seriously."

Sitting down and pulling a slice of pizza, Mike says, "Who's Mary?"

Todd says, "Mary is David's bundle of joy and master of discipline."

"Keep it up and I'll tell her what you said."

"Ha!" says Todd as he flops back onto the couch opposite Mike and adjacent to David. "So? Okay, I'm ready, start talking. What were you saying about drug lords?"

Just as Mike begins to speak, the door swings open and in walks Mary Murphy, one of the waitresses Mike remembers seeing earlier.

Mary is about 27. She's in a dark purple microfiber pants suit with a wing-collar jacket, side slits, turned-up cuffs, shoulder pads and princess seams. Under the jacket she wears an open collar black silk blouse with an elaborate embroidered Chinese dragon design in threads of bright red, blue, and yellow. Around her neck and wrists hang several heavy gold chains. From her ears dangle clusters of thin gold strands bearing tiny diamonds. On her hands are several rings with glittering stones of many colors.

"That's Mary," whispers Todd. "Don't piss her off."

"Quiet you. I already heard that master of discipline . You're on thin ice," she

commands as she strides into the kitchen, opens a cabinet, surveys the contents, then reaches up and pulls down a \$100 bottle of merlot. Grabbing a crystal wine glass and a bottle opener, she saunters into the living room area.

She says, “Don’t mind me boys. The reception was bad. Todd, let’s replace some batteries, okay? I could barely make out what you people were saying,” as she tosses successively the bottle and opener to David. He snatches them from mid air, nearly dropping his cigarette. She sits on the couch next to him. He dutifully opens the bottle and fills the glass which she casually offers then lights her cigarette.

In a slight brogue she announces, “I’m Mary Murphy as you no doubt know.”

“Happy to meet you,” replies Mike as he leans over and shakes her hand.

“Okay, the formalities are over, you can start talking now. I’m ready,” she says taking a generous sip of the wine and then swings the glass back towards David for a topping-off.

“Don’t mind her, she’ll lose interest in a minute and go chat-up some shopping channel,” says David.

Mary gives him a withering gaze as he propitiates her with another topping off.

“And you, hush-up if you know what’s good for you,” she pronounces imperiously.

“Actually, maybe I should put this on a pod cast. Where the hell is Lance?” says David.

“He’s working out the security for the pajama party downstairs,” says Mary.

“Well, he’ll just have to watch the replay. All right already. Begin,” says David

“Am I being recorded?”

“Yes.”

“You people really do worry me.”

“And rightly so, now start.”

“After college, I got admitted to a few graduate journalism programs but didn’t have the money to go. Then my parents died. In the space of about two months, that was it. I was really on my own. My parents didn’t have much, just an old, beat-up car.”

“Sorry, man, I didn’t know.”

“No problem, it’s not your fault. Anyway, I applied for some jobs as a reporter but with newspaper circulation dropping like a rock, there weren’t any to be had. So, I moved just outside Des Moines and got a job at a gas station and convenience store. Not really my dream position but it paid the rent on an old farmhouse that I called home. I thought I might be able to write freelance or something. I sent out a lot of manuscripts. Got a lot of rejection letters back. There I was, 26, and going nowhere until one weekend I got the idea of going down to Des Moines and blowing my savings, about thirty dollars, on some bars. My big night in the big city. Living out in the sticks doesn’t present much in the way of social opportunities. So, into Des Moines go I in my old car for a night of serious bar hopping, up to a thirty dollar limit.”

Mike lights another cigarette and then continues, “But that was where my problems began, more or less. You see, there was this news crew in town from one of the cable news networks, ANN, to cover the run up to the Iowa Caucuses. I got to talking with one of their producers, a guy named Jim Monroe. He remembered a piece I’d sent them earlier in the year. He said he liked it a lot but they couldn’t buy it due to budget limits. Then he said he had something, though, if I wanted it, but was potentially dangerous. I said that pumping gas in a small town in Iowa is dangerous too, to your career. He laughed and then told me what he was up to.”

“It seems they wanted to do an undercover investigative report on drug dealing nationwide and, in particular, in St. Louis, a king pin in the Midwest drug trade, smuggling, distribution, the whole thing. They especially wanted a segment on methamphetamine production and traffic in the U.S., with a concentration on the meth labs in rural America. They wanted angles on the corrupting effect it was having and the impact of smuggled Mexican crystal meth after the crack down on OTC pseudophed and the overall distribution system from the top down to the street dealer. Meth certainly had been a problem in Iowa. He said he wanted

me to try to infiltrate the St. Louis based organization since I looked the small town Iowa guy part, street-wise, that is. I wasn't sure I appreciated that part. Anyway, I agreed and met him again secretly for the next week as he filled me in on what they had so far."

"So, long story, short, I made some contacts. One thing led to another and soon I found myself very much on the inside and feeding stories and details to Joe at ANN. At first, I was mainly doing small time errands around Des Moines but it wasn't long before I was working closely with the boss of the whole show for Iowa, Missouri and Nebraska!"

"Once on the inside, I and my computer geek girl friend, who has a singular talent for hacking computer networks, systematically infiltrated all levels of the Midwest cartel. For the past year we've collected data on every facet of their production, distribution, and money laundering. We have the data that will, when published, wreck havoc on the organization, especially its management, so to speak."

"So what happened? How did the early retirement program cut in?" says David.

"We'll see, a few days ago, my cover got blown. They found out about my connection with ANN. It seems they had their own investigative program and they were particularly interested in ANN since it seemed to have too many inside details. One of their people who worked inside ANN found my name on some internal email and put two and two together. This morning I got a call on my cell phone from a guy in St. Louis whose ass I saved last year. He told me about the email and suggested that it might be best if I got the hell out of town, real soon."

"When I got his call, I was at a farm east of Des Moines where we still cooked some local product. I jumped into the car and headed for my house figuring to grab a few things then split. I didn't need to be told twice. As it turns out, being at that farm on the east side of town probably saved my life, since it meant that my route home was from the east rather than the west as would be the case normally."

"When I got to my house, it had been ransacked and torched. I guess they were looking for any files I might have had, any evidence I might have had on them. They didn't find anything, of course, everything is on my laptop and backed up

on a file server out west and other places.”

“Ah! Good thinking,” says Todd nodding.

“You mean there’s something of mine you haven’t hacked?”

“We’re working on it. It’ll take a few more hours.”

“So, as I said, when they didn’t find anything, they torched the place anyway, just to be sure, I guess. All I salvaged was the stuff in my trunk, my laptop, a few notes and a gym bag of old clothes.”

“Not good,” says David. “I’ve seen your wardrobe on a good day.”

“I’ll ignore that. But, basically, I lost everything and it’s not going to be easy replacing all those cheap Chinese made shirts and pants from DiscountMart or my eclectic collection of farm foreclosure auction furniture,” quips Mike, wryly. “Bottom line, however, I do have my laptop and some other secure copies.”

“Why don’t you just dump what you have to the police?” asks Todd.

“Well, a couple of reasons, actually. First, I work for ANN and my obligation is to see that they get the story. Kind of a professional thing. Secondly, I want credit for this. It’s been a lot of risky work and I’d kind’a like to see my by-line on the result. And, anyway, the police have their own issues. There’s a lot of mob protection money out there. There’s no guarantee there’d be any action as a result and it might give the bad guys time to cover their tracks.”

“Then, why not just let ANN have a copy of your data? Then you won’t be as much of a target,” says Todd.

“I don’t want to contact ANN right now because I don’t know who might read my stuff there, you know what I mean? It’s too risky. There’s at least one mole there. Who knows how many? If they get hold of my raw files, there are people who might pay a price because they talked to me, like that guy in St. Louis who gave me the tip that they were on to me. If I tell ANN where I am or what I’ve got, that might tip off the mob and let them start covering their trail. You see, this is just the first of a series and I don’t want them to know what might come in the next installment. No, I just need a little time to get this data organized, then begin the release in a way that will do the most damage.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. So, what have you got, actually?” says David.

“I have all their computer files. Every last one of them. I scanned every bit of paper that came my way, made notes on every phone call, every name, telephone number. Copied every computer file I had access to and I had access to lots. I scanned everything since I figured from the beginning that I had better not leave physical evidence of what I was doing for anyone to find and, like I said, I don’t want the data to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t you be just as screwed if they got your laptop?” says Mary.

“Every thing’s in a hidden password encrypted volume, so even if they got the laptop, they wouldn’t be able to read them.”

“Yeah, but they’d see the encrypted files and get the password out of you, one way or another,” says Mary.

“No, I said it was a hidden volume. Yeah, the main volume is encrypted but there’s a hidden volume within it that’s at a second level of encryption. Totally invisible. So, if get a password from me and still find nothing except some decoy files with nothing that would interest them. And, it’s all protected with 256 bit AES encryption. I’m pretty secure.”

“That’ll work,” says Todd. “Just don’t forget the password.”

“I’ve got a failsafe procedure. There’s a second server out west which, if it doesn’t get a signal from me in more than a month, will mail the password and the location of the first server to some key people. And, anyway, I’m not the only one who knows about it.”

“So, tell us more about what happened back in Iowa,” says Mary.

“While picking through the remains of my house, I spotted a car rushing towards me down the county road. That’s when I realized they had been waiting for me at the other end of the where I would normally have passed when going home.”

“How did they know you came back the other way?”

“Oh, when you drive those gravel roads you kick up a lot of dust. In those flat fields, it’s visible for a long way off. They must have seen my dust cloud and,

when no car came their way, figured I'd come back from the east side. When I saw them coming, I decided that it was probably time to get out of Polk County."

"Sensible move," offers Todd.

"They chased me towards the main highway but I managed to slip ahead of a freight train at a grade crossing. They weren't so lucky. The bastards are buried under a few thousand tons of smoldering freight at the moment. I expect the wreck probably made the national news tonight. Train wrecks interest people. Probably interested some people in St. Louis too."

"So, I figured it was time to visit Omaha. You're one of the few people this side of the Mississippi I could trust. I got here a few hours ago, just as the snow was beginning to come down heavy. Got a room at that motel down the street. I sort'a figured, seeing as I'm temporarily without accommodations, I'd ask if you'd help me find a place to hide out for a while until I can sort things out a bit. But if you can't, I'll understand. Seems I'm a bit of a hot commodity at the moment. Basically, I'm scared shitless. Never had too many shots taken at me before today."

"Don't worry about it, you get used to it, believe me," says Mary.

"Yeah, some people have more experience in that category. But, no problem, you can stay right here. I got plenty of room," said David.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's no problem. What's one more homeless person around here, anyway?" says Mary as she hands David the glass yet again.

"One more tiny, detail. My girl friend who was working with me on all this. She is, or was, in Columbia, Missouri attending some computer conference. She did all the computer work for me. We were living together at that farmhouse."

"Where is she now?" asks David.

"I'm not sure. After the train wreck I called her and told her what happened. I was gonna drive down there and pick her up but she insisted that I come here instead. She said she didn't want to wait five hours to find out if the head drug lord would send someone from St. Louis to get her too. She said she'd get here

on her own. So, basically, I have no idea where she is.”

“Can’t you phone her?”

“Not really. She made me shut down my phone and she did the same with hers. I guess she’s on the road.”

“Must be. When do you expect her here?”

“She said tomorrow night, late, she said she’d meet me here.”

“Okay, we’ll have the people downstairs keep a look out for her.”

“Her name’s Jessica Gannon. Here, I’ve got a picture of her,” as he pulls out his wallet and hands David a small snapshot.

“Wait a sec, I’ll scan it,” says David as he goes over to a scanner on top of the cabinet beneath the big screen and scans the image. The snapshot appears in a window on the screen. “Todd, see that everybody sees this?”

“You bet.”

“Any idea why she said she won’t be here until late tomorrow night?” asks Mary.

“She didn’t have a car with her. I guess she has some plan to try catching a ride with someone headed this way, I don’t know. I hope she’s all right. You don’t think she actually tells me anything, do you?”

“Join the club,” says David looking crossly at Mary.

“The less you know, the better,” Mary shoots back.

“See what I mean?”

“Anyway, before these two start throwing things, tell me, where’s your laptop now?” asks Todd, changing the topic.

“I locked it in the trunk of my car which is buried under a snow drift by now, I expect,” says Mike. “I can get it in the morning but I think it’s safe right now.”

“Laptop abuse! We’ll need to warm it up slowly. The poor thing will be frozen solid,” says Todd.

“But, one more question, how the hell did you find me? I keep a pretty low profile,” says David.

“Oh geez, that wasn’t hard. I am a reporter you know. Finding things out is what I would like to do for a living. I knew you always posted to that science fiction Internet newsgroup under the name of aliendave. , I went through the group archives online and found some recent posts of yours. Jessica pulled the IP number from the headers and traced it. She said it was a fixed IP address in Omaha. From there it wasn’t much of a problem to look up the domain registration which had a company name and this address, your company, we assumed. We even looked at this place on a satellite map.”

David laughs and says, “Wow, clever dude, I didn’t think those posts would point back here. I’ll have to use proxies in the future. I guess you really are into investigative reporting. And, you’ve learned something about computers since I last saw you. All you did with a computer back in college was play video games.”

“I still play video games.”

“Mike, sorry about the security thing. We just need to be careful. I’ll explain later. But, right now, there’s an empty apartment just like this one down the hall. You and Jessica can have it as long as you want it. You can work on your story all day if you don’t mind the couple of hundred drunks downstairs every night.”

“So, does anyone at ANN know you’re in Omaha?” asks Todd.

“I called Joe Monroe on my way over here from a pay phone to tell him that my cover had been blown and that it was an inside job. But I didn’t say where I was going. I told him I was heading west at the time and to keep quiet. I said I’d contact him when I felt it was safe to do so.”

“Do you have any idea who at ANN might have found you out?” asks David.

“Nope, no idea. I really don’t know anyone there. Malone was my contact. Everything was hush-hush, supposedly. I don’t know how they found out.”

“On your way over, did you use any credit cards besides at the motel?” asks Todd.

“Yeah, sure, I didn’t have much cash.”

“Did you make any cell phone calls?”

“Yeah, as I was leaving Des Moines, like I said, I called Jessica, why?”

“Those things can be traced,” says David.

“Oh-oh. But she told me to shut the phone down and I did. She said that would help.”

“Yeah, good. Keep it off. Let’s hope they haven’t hacked your bank account like I have,” says Todd.

“It’s probably not a good idea for you to be out on the streets, just in case. Todd will have some of the guys go over to the motel in the morning and check you out, get your stuff and bring your car here.”

“I didn’t think about the credit cards. If they can infiltrate ANN, I guess they can buy their way into just about any organization.”

“Exactly right, that’s how they do it, and they use a pretty potent currency,” says Todd.

“So, how long were you doing this?” asks David.

“Pretty close to a year. That’s why I’ve got so much on them. Gigs of data. I kinda purloined the family jewels, as it were. Not just the St. Louis mob, but I’ve got something on just about every crime family in the country, you name it, from the El Salvadoran drug gangs in East Boston to the Mexican cartels that import the stuff. I know where most of the distribution points are, how it’s handled, who handles it, everything. I even discovered a deal between the Mexican drug gangs and Al Qaeda to smuggle in terrorists and weapons. After all, who better to handle shipping than the people who regularly import thousands of tons of contraband right under the noses of ICE. The DEA already knows about this and so does Homeland Security but they’ve kept it secret from the public.”

“Oh, I bet a lot of people want you!” says Todd.

“How much do you think your drug lord friend knows? Does he know how much you’ve got?” says David.

“Well, I don’t know, of course but I’ll bet they’re thinking real careful-like right now about what work I did and for whom. I’m assuming there’s a lot of soul searching going on in St. Louis right now.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet there is. Question is, who else knows? Just your bosses in St. Louis or others,” says David.

“Hard to tell, really.”

“Because, if it’s just the St. Louis operation, there’ll be just one desperate drug lord after you. My guess is that he won’t want his colleagues to know what happened. He’ll pull out the stops. On the other hand, if the whole damned drug network knows, they’re all gonna be coming after you from every freaking direction,” says Todd.

“Either way, you’re gonna be sought after,” says David.

“Can’t argue with that,” says Mike.

“Good! Now come on and I’ll show you the spare apartment. There’s some clothes in there that might fit you for the time being. Seems we end up with a lot of abandoned clothing around here. It’s a regular charitable depository some weekends. Todd, you start sniffing around and see if there are any signs that they’ve traced Mike here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“You got it. Mike, you got your cell phone with you?” asks Todd

“Yeah, why?”

“Do you use it to call people in the drug organization?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Let me dump its memory then you can tell me which numbers are drug related. Then I can tower track the ones that are cell phones and see if any are headed

this way.”

“Sure, here it is,” says Mike as he reaches in his pocket and pulls out his phone.

“Okay, people, I need to go downstairs and check on the arrangements for tonight. Don’t get rowdy or anything, at least not until I get back,” says Mary as she places her glass on the table, gets up and heads for the door.

David says to Mike, “You ready?” They get up and follow Mary out of the apartment. At the elevator, Mary pulls down the gate and waves to them as she hits the button for the ground floor.

Mike and David continue down the west side corridor as the band and crowd roar on the floor far below. At the first door David says, “This is it.” He opens the door and they enter another large apartment same as David’s but with a westerly facing view.

Mike takes one look at it and says, “Geez, this is nice! It looks pretty much the same as yours?”

“Yep, they all are. It’s all yours. Check the closets in the bedroom, I think that’s where they’ve been storing the better droppings, after they’ve washed them, that is. When we get enough, we send them over to the Salvation Army along with a cash donation. Not exactly sure what they do with a lot of club clothes but I guess there’s a lot of homeless dressed to party in Omaha.”

“I think some of them party too much as it is.”

“Ahh, I think that may be so. If you want to wash up, go ahead. Sorry I don’t have a key, we don’t much need them up here. Not a lot of public access. The elevator has closed circuit cameras and no one gets up here without being observed and allowed to. When you’re ready, come back over to my place.”

“Okay, but first, so I told you my story, what’s yours? Why are you in Omaha running a bar with a lot of spy cams and wireless mics?”

“Okay, sit down and I’ll explain. So, yeah, I was in med school down in St. Louis. Did pretty well, nearly finished.”

“So what happened?”

“Change in priorities.”

“What do you mean?”

“I met this grad student my first year in a class I was taking on medical records. His name was Stan Jones. He was doing a doctorate in computer science and wanted to get into medical records software with a built-in artificial intelligence backbone so that it could be used to spot diseases, run treatment protocols, that sort of thing. I got interested too. I took a few courses in computer science and got more and more interested in data mining, artificial intelligence, Internet applications, all that sort of thing. After a while I realized that I was less interested in practicing medicine than in computer based medicine.”

“So then what?”

“We started our own company. Internet based medical records with billing, insurance claim adjustments and a really insane AI engine. It made big improvements in patient outcomes. The insurance companies loved it. It cut costs for basic care by as much as forty per cent. I took a leave of absence from med school and worked on it full time.”

“Ya’know, I never thought of you as being very technical.”

“Yeah, but this stuff I got. So, things went well, I mean seriously well. After a couple of years we sold out to a consortium of insurance companies. So, by the age of 25, I quit med school and was seriously rich.”

“Explain rich.”

“Dude, you don’t wanna know.”

“So how does all that explain Omaha? Weren’t you in St. Louis? Where does this place come in?” says Mike gesturing at the apartment.

“I stayed on in St. Louis after the buyout, had a big penthouse on Lindell Boulevard. Got involved in some civic things, the zoo, Shaw’s Gardens, that sort of thing.”

“Anyway, Stan decided to get into local politics. Whatever they say, the remnants of the old Prendergast machine are still very much entrenched in both

the city and the state. He started a crusade to crack down on organized crime, especially the big drug trade in the inner city which was spreading to the suburbs as well. That was gonna be his give-back. Politics wasn't my thing, but I agreed to help him out."

"And problems ensued, as they say?"

"Right. It wasn't long before he and I were on the wrong side of a lot of influential people, especially some people over in East St. Louis."

"Oh, yeah, I know about East St. Louis. Been through there on the interstate. Drive quickly and do not stop."

"Exactly. Did you know that the school committee there once hired a hit man to kill the superintendent of schools?"

"Yeah, I've heard that story. Problem is, it's true."

"Believe me, I know. Anyway, we started this campaign to clean up the city. The local powers that be, however, decided to do a little campaign of their own. They didn't want any interference in the local political scene and they didn't like what we were up to."

"This was a surprise?"

"Sorta. We were naive. So, long story, short, one night some of their thugs ambushed Stan in a parking garage downtown after a meeting he'd been at. I was supposed to be there too, but something came up at the last minute. He was the last to leave. In the empty garage, out of sight of any witnesses, he was attacked from behind. They stuffed the body into the back of an SUV."

"How did you find this out?"

"It turned out that there was a surveillance camera there. The garage owner didn't want to get involved so he concealed it at first. But the picture wasn't good enough to do a make on the attackers and the SUV was stolen."

"Not good."

"No. They took his body out to a secluded wooded area near Portage des Sioux

along the Missouri River before it joins the Mississippi. They hacked the body to pieces, arms, legs, head, pretty grim stuff. Then dug a shallow grave, buried him and piled rocks to keep the spring floods from uncovering the corpse.”

“Holy shit!”

“When Stan didn’t show up for a few days, I tried calling his cell phone but it rolled over to voice mail, which was unusual. His maid said he hadn’t come home for several nights. He hadn’t said anything about going out of town. Finally, the police got involved but they were useless, mainly on the take themselves. Whenever I inquired, it was always, some tale, some new pretense, they daily coined.”

“Then one day, an old Mexican farm laborer appeared like a ghost on KMOX-TV. In broken English he said that he had seen some guys bury a body out near the Alton Dam. They had a camera crew on the site as the coroner’s office dug up the body. They ID’d the corpse a few days later. It was Stan.”

“Geez, what did you do then?”

“I guess I panicked. I figured, since I worked pretty close with him on his projects, I might be next. I didn’t put much trust in the St. Louis legal system, a bit too marsupial for my tastes. Eagles may soar, but weasels don’t get sucked into jet engines, ya’know?”

“Got it, you got out’a Dodge.”

“Right, I put out some bullshit story that I was going on an around the world cruise. Instead, I loaded up the Jag and headed west, to seek a refuge in remote abodes, so to speak. A few manipulations of some bank records and some fake credit card transactions and as far as anyone could tell, I was on the high and surly seas.”

“Why Omaha?”

“I knew a few people out here from my former computer company. Ya’know, Veni, vidi, velcro, came, I saw, I stuck around. Seemed as good a place as any, at the time. Now I’m sort’a attached to the place.”

“Did they every catch who murdered Stan?”

“Nope, the police never got anywhere. I don’t think they were really too interested, anyway. A lot of people get killed in St. Louis in any given year. Mob hits are hard to trace, ya’know.”

“Yeah, I do, actually. So, you decided to stay here?”

“Yeah, actually, path of least resistance. I kind’a like it though. I bought this old warehouse. Someone had renovated it into an office building with the big central atrium a few years back. They went belly up and I bought it and converted it to what you see. I always wanted to own a bar, you know. Must be the Irish in me. But it’s a cop out. I should’a stayed in St. Louis and fought back. I wish I did but I didn’t.”

“So, besides living upstairs from a saloon, now explain what’s all this security stuff?”

“This place is a bit more than meets the eye. You saw the dance club downstairs but on the upper floors, it’s an office building. I have my own computer operation here. We do a lot of non-public research and development. The bar is sort of a hobby and a cover.”

“How’s that?”

“Mikey, you walked into a cyber-warfare ops center and started asking questions.”

“Huh? Cyber-warfare? Like what?”

“Like terrorist group monitoring, tracing hidden sites and assets, data mining, industrial and sovereign espionage, propaganda, homeland security, infrastructure attacks, intrusion detection, DOS, that’s Denial of Service, and associated counter measures, that sort of thing. Just the basics,” says David with a mischievous grin.

“This is getting complicated. Explain.”

“I got started mainly out of curiosity to see what could be done. There are a lot of naughty people out there and, with the way things are interconnected, the drug war, economic war, or the next world war will probably be fought in cyber space. We build weapons and defenses for that war.”

“You and who else?”

“Two of my main partners live up here on the top floor in apartments like this one. The offices and some of the computer and communication equipment are on the middle floors. From here, we can access and monitor just about any system, network or database in the world. You already met one of my partners, Todd.”

“So, what exactly does this involve? Who do you work for?”

“Mainly, we have contracts with governments, multi-national corporations and large utilities. This is the main office but I have other sites around the world. We also have our own dedicated fiber optic network across both the Pacific to Japan, China, Australia and India and the Atlantic to Europe, Israel and South Africa. I was able to buy these for next to nothing thanks to the dot-com bust. We also have a small private satellite network with optical and multi-band electromagnetic surveillance capabilities.”

“Huh? You own a satellite? A satellite? And I thought this was a bar. What are you, the NSA of Omaha?”

“Actually, in a word, yes.”

“Anyone know about this place?”

“We try to keep a low profile but it’s not a well kept secret in the intelligence community.”

“Is it legal?”

“Sure, why not? If some aerospace company can make missiles to take out the enemy, why can’t we make software to do the same? Do you have any idea how dependent society is on technology right now?”

“Well, sorta, I guess?”

“I doubt it. In the United States alone there are over 14,000 airports, 20,000 airline flights a day, more than 12,000 miles of coastline, 300 seaports and 7,600 miles of land borders. Two million people a day and over two million rail cars, eleven million trucks, and six million shipping containers a year cross the borders. Do you know there are more than 9,000 miles of high voltage electrical

transmission lines in New York and New England alone? All computer controlled. Man, there are over 3 million URLs to drive-by malware download Internet sites alone. One zero pixel iFrame and you're on the way to bot-ville. Any idea what would happen if the wrong people got access to the wrong computers?"

"Something bad?"

"Bad indeed. Do you know that, a few years ago, the Slammer Worm got into the Davis-Besse nuclear plant and shut down all safety monitoring for five hours? That hackers got into the California ISO systems and nearly shut down all electricity for 50 million people?"

"So, I should buy more batteries, and start wearing lead underpants?"

"Dude, if some terrorist or script kiddie makes one of those nuke toasters go critical, a lead jock strap won't help."

"It sounds like you know a lot of bad people too."

"Only at a distance. Now get dressed and I'll see you later," says David as he gets up.

"Well, let's hope all our bad guys keep their distance."

"You got that right."

"Let me take a shower. It's been a damned long day. I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Check the linen closet over there. There'll be towels, soap, and all. I keep it stocked for out of town clients. The fridge should have some frozen dinners and the bar is well stocked. If you need anything else, dial 909 and Todd or who ever is at the console will have what you want sent up."

David leaves and walks back to his apartment. Pausing at the door, he walks over to the balcony and looks down on the tumultuous scene on the dance floor below. More than a few in the crowd are on speed. He knows that crank, meth, crystal, ice, whatever you want to call it, in whatever form it's taken, snorted, smoked or injected, is now mostly cooked in Mexico's methamphetamine

production center in the former Tarascan lands of the state of Michoacan. From there, it's smuggled across innumerable border crossings into Arizona, Texas and California and then onwards through a vast distribution network run by Stan's killers.

David easily spots the crystal freaks in the crowd below. Gaunt, wasted looks, sleepless frenetic activity, obsessions, fever, rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, hallucinations, paranoia, and bizarre, aggressive and psychotic behavior are the fruits of this plague.

He realizes his world is a fantasy world. The real world is churning and writhing on the floor below. Stan believed in something. David believed in survival. Mike's plight is a second chance. David sees that it's time he rejoined the real world, not just look down at it from above. He knows he has the tools to be an unseen ghost in this crystal city of death and to destroy it from within.

Startled from his thoughts, he hears a footstep from behind and sees a motion in the corner of his eye. It's Lance who says, "So, who's this friend of yours?"

"I went to school with him. He's on the run, the drug cartel is after him. Seems he's been a mole in their organization for the past year, collecting a lot of incriminating data about them for a news network. His cover got blown. That train wreck in Iowa? That was them chasing him."

"Really? Nice wreck!"

"Yeah, and now he's here, scared and with nowhere to go."

"So, what are you gonna do?"

"No, what are we gonna do? We're gonna hide him and we're gonna help him. I think it's time I picked up where Stan left off."

Lance gives him a thumbs up and says, "It's about freaking time, man. I was wondering how long you were gonna sit up here in this virtual reality and play stupid. There's a pretty mean real world down there, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Yep, just did, actually. Maybe we can tidy up a little bit of it, what'ya think?"

"Or we could just destroy parts of it, that works too, in many cases."

“You, I worry about. Now go on in, Mike’ll be back in a few minutes, he’s taking a shower. Todd’ll be coming back up in a minute too. The both of you should take his mind off his predicament,” says David, gesturing to the apartment door.

“Sure, But let me check on a few things first,” says Lance as he scrutinizes the crowd below looking for any signs of trouble. Pulling out his cell phone, he pages several of his security people. They all report just a normal blizzard crowd, all planning to make an all-nighter of it, as usual. He tells them to be on the lookout for trouble makers and to be a little bit extra watchful tonight. There may be some extra people who might cause problems. Checking on the status of the cots, blankets and so forth, he has one of the guys double check the motor generator in case the power fails. At these temperatures, the place would very quickly drop below freezing if there were no power to run the heating system.

Lance came from a small town near the South Dakota border. In high school, he was all-state in football and wrestling. But, it wasn’t easy being the gay guy in a small Midwestern town. Life was tough. While Lance wasn’t the kind of guy that got picked on, there wasn’t much in the way of a social life. What few friends he had weren’t very interested in being seen publicly with him. His parents more or less tolerated him. As a result of all this, he tended to be very loyal to his small circle of friends and developed a very scrupulous attention to detail.

After high school, Lance went to U of N in Lincoln where he played football and majored in management. After college, he tried working briefly for an insurance company in Omaha but loathed the tedium of it. A year later, he went back to school at the U of N in Omaha. There, he received an MS degree in criminal justice and, subsequently, a Ph.D. in information technology. Following grad school, he started a successful information systems security consulting business. He met David at a bar late one night. David turned out to be straight but they kept running into one another and eventually became friends.

At the time, David was up to nothing more challenging than hitting the clubs every night. He was filthy rich from the buyout of his startup company in St. Louis and had no specific goals beyond partying. Eventually, Lance convinced David to open his own club, it would be cheaper and easier than wandering around downtown Omaha at three in the morning trying to find his car. He also convinced David to get back into computer work which was the real purpose for

the club, mainly a cover for their cyber warfare work. Todd, who had worked with David in St. Louis, quickly signed on. Lance and Todd are generally at each other's throats. Todd tends to win most of the verbal sparring. They actually like one another but neither would admit to the fact in public.

Lance finishes his round of calls and says to David, "Things sound okay but given your new friend's appearance, I'm gonna make a quick walk around downstairs. I'll be back in a few minutes."

As he says this, the elevator activates. A few seconds later, it lurches to a halt at the top floor. Lance pulls up the gate. Mary gets off and Lance gets on. He drops the gate and hits the ground floor button.

Mary joins David at the balcony, looks down and says, "It's a busy night. So how's your friend?"

"He's okay. He's taking a shower. He'll be back in a few minutes."

"You and Lance got a plan?"

"Nope, since when did I ever have a plan? We'll just play it by ear for the time being."

"Right. Sounds about typical."

"Yeah, look who's talking?"

"Whatever. You know this is gonna get messy."

"Well? What do you want me to do?"

"Just what you're doing, honey. But this time, let's be a bit more careful. I don't want any repeats of the last time."

"You know what they say, history repeats, first as tragedy, then as farce."

Switching into a high brogue she in turn replies, "Well dearie, if it's farce you want, just you count on me."

"I never doubted it for a moment."

She kicks him in the shins and walks off.

Time: 11 PM

Mike is somewhat dumbstruck as he looks around at what can only be described as one of the great luxury lofts anywhere. The layout is the same as David's apartment except the big window faces west. Otherwise, same couches, tables, HDTV, kitchen, two large bedrooms, each with private bath. He enters the larger bedroom and walks into the cavernous closet.

There, hanging in rows, are a few dozen shirts and pants. Stacks of socks and underwear are on a shelf above, shoes on the floor below. He wonders about the underwear but it all looks freshly cleaned. The clothes are mainly club clothes but he finds some that might fit.

He sits down on the bed and lights a cigarette. His hand still has a small tremor to it as he recalls the day's events and broods over his situation. He worries about where Jessica is. He worries about bringing his problems to David and his people. He wonders if he shouldn't have just kept driving west, out to Idaho or somewhere and hidden in some small town. But he's here now and they seem real nice.

He gets a towel and some soap from the linen closet, strips and walks into the spacious tiled bathroom outfitted with hot tub, walk-in shower with more plumbing fixtures than a plumbing supply store.

In the shower he tries all the settings: steam, massage, water from all sides, water spiral, and random jets. Finally, he figures he's done having poured most of the Ogalla Aquifer down the drain.

Squeaky clean, he shuts down the valves and takes the towel from the heated towel rack and dries off. A high capacity ventilation system quickly draws all the vapor from the air while a laminar air flow system has kept the wall-sized mirror fog free.

After trying on a few of the clothes, he picks a shirt, one with a minimum of sequins, glitter and decorative patterns and a pair of jeans. In fact, he notes, looking in the mirror, these fit and look better than the old pair he had on. He finishes dressing, combs back his long, wet hair and walks back down the hall towards David's apartment.

Before knocking, he stops to look over to the balcony. As David did a few minutes before, he easily spots the speed freaks in the swarming scene below. That explains the underwear, he thinks to himself. Speed freaks are lamentably casual about the when, where, and whether of sex, especially in public places. However, maybe in a little while, because of what he's doing, there won't be as much of the stuff to go around. Some of those below may actually go straight. So, it's been worth it, even the train wreck. Now, maybe, things will go smoothly and he can hide out for a few weeks and put together his report.

He turns to David's door, knocks and hears, "It's open, com'on in," shouted from inside.

David's ordered a couple more pizzas with lots of different toppings. The big screen HDTV display is switched on. David is sitting on the couch opposite the big screen typing on a keyboard, Lance and Todd are on the couch to his right watching the display.

"Just exactly how big is that thing anyway?" asks Mike who, mesmerized at the sight of the display in action, walks over to the empty couch to David's left and takes a seat.

"The screen itself is about eight feet wide and about four and a half feet tall. They're specially made for big German Hauptbahnhof's. I bought a bunch of them last year when the Bundesbahn decided to renovate Bahnhof Dresden-Neustadt. They put the sets they'd ordered up for sale on an online auction site. I bought them and had them installed in all the apartments along with the big PCs you can see in the cabinet beneath the screen. It's all wired into the slide out drawers under the top of the table including these wireless keyboards and mice." replies David.

Mike asks, "Two questions, what's a Bahnhof and what's the resolution?"

David laughs and says, "Train station. And the resolution? Oh it's big, about 20480 by 11520. Had to have special drivers written for it."

"Oh yeah, I'll bet. Whatever a driver is. Don't they call them engineers on a train?"

"It's software that interfaces between the operating system and the hardware."

“Nothing to do with trains?”

“Nope. Nothing at all. I want you to meet Lance, Todd you met before,” he says gesturing to Lance and Todd successively.

“Hi Lance, glad to meet you. You don’t play with trains too, do you?” says Mike as he walks around the table and shakes hands with Lance then picks up a plate, pulls a piece of pizza onto it and sits on the couch to David’s left.

Lance laughs and says, “No, I got other toys.”

“What are all these windows on the display?” asks Mike.

“We’re watching the news coverage on your escape from Des Moines. Seems you’ve upset a few schedules on the railroad, just a bit,” says Todd.

“Actually, quite a bit, I suspect,” says David.

“Right. That’s a very busy train line, actually,” says Mike. “I know, I used to hear the damn things blowing their horns at the grade crossing all night long. One of those locomotive horns can carry for ten miles out in the country. By the way, is pizza all you ever eat?”

“Duh? This is a bar. What’d you expect? Soy burgers?”

“No, pizza’s fine as long as there’s some burgers, fries and beer to go with it. Just the basic staples of a well balanced diet.”

David has opened several windows on the big screen. Each displays a different cable news network video feed and channel 5 from Ames. Some windows have color bars with network logos. A couple of others have Internet news sites and online wire services. One window has an aerial surveillance picture of the disaster taken earlier in the day shortly after the wreck occurred.

“How can you receive TV from Ames this far away?” asks Mike, seeing the channel 5 logo.

“They’re doing a continuous C-band uplink loop to the networks from their local coverage,” answers David.

“What’s C-band and what are the windows with the color bars?”

“C-band is a 4 gigaHertz satellite communication frequency. The other main service is Ku-band, in the 11 to 18 gigaHertz range,” says Lance. “I prefer C-band, less weather related interference due to wavelength issues.”

“But the birds are lower power,” says David. Turning back to Mike, “Those are the national network internal satellite feeds. When they start their coverage, it’ll show up in those windows.”

“Isn’t that stuff normally encoded?”

The guys laugh. Lance says, “Yeah, they think so. But we don’t.”

“You mean you steal satellite signals?”

“Hey, if it lands here, we own it,” says Lance firmly.

“Oh. How many dishes you got and where are they? I didn’t see any when I came in but, then again, I could barely see the building itself in the snow.”

“You need to see my little roof top array. We got lots of dishes, C-band, Ku-band, big ones, little ones, uplinks, downlinks, most we camouflage so wandering photo satellites don’t get too suspicious,” brags Lance.

“You got any missiles up there too?”

“Not yet but he keeps saying he’s gonna install some real soon,” says Todd. “Personally, I think he already has. Don’t really know what he’s up to half the time.”

“I’m beginning to wonder about this place. Are you sure you’re all on your meds?”

“I take a bottle of them to bed with me every night,” says David.

“Right, no mixer?”

“Spoils the effect.”

Mary rejoins them and resumes her position next to David on the central couch.

He pours her another libation and lights her cigarette. She says, “So, that’s your train wreck, honey? You really do know how to make a flamboyant exit, that much I’ll say.”

“Yep, that was me, or, rather, Jack’s guys chasing me. My old car beat the train, but theirs didn’t. And, I would guess my friend in St. Louis is not too happy at the moment. I think he wanted a nice, tidy, quiet hit job, a little bit less on the national coverage and not quite so much rolling stock wreckage involved.”

The footage of the train wreck north of Des Moines from early that afternoon plays in several windows. A hundred freight cars on fire in a blizzard can be impressive. The wind has reached gale force and the snow is falling, if that’s the term, horizontally. The wind fanned flames roar into the air and swirl in small tornadoes in the fog of white, brilliantly illuminated by large, truck mounted racks of highway construction floodlights. The emergency crews pull through the wreckage looking for bodies and attempt to staunch the fire. Bursts of flaming embers shoot skyward as small pockets of corn explode in the heat. Black sooty smoke pours from the ruptured tanks of the overturned diesel locomotives.

“I’m surprised the train derailed. It was just one SUV,” says Mike.

“Dude, it takes very little to pop a steel wheel off a track. I’m sure the cast iron engine block of that SUV was more than enough. The impact of it being hit would have mangled the rail. Once one carriage is off the line, the rest follow right along,” says Lance.

“Just how do you know that?” asks Todd.

“Let’s just say we did some experiments out in the country when I was a kid and leave it at that?” says Lance.

David turns up the volume as an unseen announcer speaks over the videos of the wreck.

“The engineer and the rest of the crew were unharmed,” shouts the announcer above the buffeting wind. “They were in the forward locomotive when the derailment began and, as luck would have it, they were able to effect an emergency decoupling from the train behind. Not so for the occupants of the car that slid under the traction wheels of the huge diesel. At this time, there’s no

report on the occupants. The engineer said he saw four individuals but their car and bodies were buried under a massive mound of burning corn, coal and chemicals ignited by the explosion when their SUV's gasoline tank was ruptured by the south bound freight. It may be several days before the police and emergency services can identify the bodies. In the meantime, the blizzard now engulfing the upper Midwest is making recovery difficult. North-South railway operations through Iowa are seriously disrupted. Trains are being re-routed throughout the Midwest. The wreck came at a bad time for the railroad. This is the time of year when freight demand is highest as railways move grain to ports and coal is hauled east out of Wyoming and Montana. The effects of closing of this major north-south artery can be expected to soon cause serious disruptions throughout the central time-zone as coal shipments to utilities will be delayed just as a massive outbreak of arctic air descends upon the plains. Authorities are requesting industry and homes to conserve electricity as the railway networks attempt to recover."

"I'm glad nothing happened to the engineers, I was wondering about that. Don't know how many people there normally are on a train like that. Not many I guess," says Mike over the sound.

"Nope, pretty much all automated now. Those big diesels are all computer controlled," says Todd. "Nonetheless, they were lucky the derailment took place behind them. I wonder if those engines are set to automatically decouple when there's an emergency like that?"

The scene changes to aerial footage shot earlier, before the storm began, in the gloom of the wasting winter day. It shows freight cars piled one on top of the other. The freight cars are spread across what seems like several acres and the fire rages fanned by the building gale of the impending storm.

The announcer continues, "In the center of this smoldering scene, looking more like an Hawaiian volcano than a corn field north of Des Moines, are the now visible charred ruins of an SUV which the engineer says held four armed occupants, all dead from the crash. We can also report there was a recently burned farmhouse a few miles west of this scene and police suggest there is a connection between the two events. Interviews with the train crew confirm that there had been a car chase just prior to the crash. Shots were fired from the SUV at a car which made it across the grade crossing seconds before the SUV, according to the crew. The sheriff's department is speculating that it had

something to do with a meth lab, perhaps at the burned farmhouse. Everything seems to point in that direction, they said. Federal officials have arrived from the NTSB because of the disruption to interstate traffic and they have since taken over the investigation. They speculate a possible terrorist connection.”

“Well, this news won’t go down well in St. Louis. Like I said, they don’t like messy hit jobs and that’s one damned messy hit job,” laughs Mike as he chomps on a dripping slice of pizza. “But, I don’t suppose they’ll be asking for a refund, under the circumstances.”

“No, I guess not. Dude, when you wreck’em, they stay wrecked. You made a lot of crows happy today. They’ll be feeding on that mess for the rest of winter,” says Todd.

“Not to mention all that freshly cooked road kill. My pursuers looked well done. Crows, I have learned, are partial to cooked meat, ya’know.”

“No, I had no idea,” David says sarcastically. “Any guess who your hit men were?”

“Nope, just some hired guns, I think. Could’a been from any where. I never got a clear look at them and I didn’t recognize their car. It’s no big deal to put out a hit on someone, ya’know.”

“I’ll have to make a note of that for future reference,” says Mary.

They then go back to watching the news feeds on various web services of his escape from Des Moines. Video of the wreck soon makes its way to video sharing and other download services. The governor of Iowa makes an appearance but the snow storm building from the west makes coverage increasingly difficult as satellite trucks must pull down their big uplink dishes. The building wind is rocking their trailers and they’re losing focus on their relays in space. The old prairie wind-borne empire of the air closes down the electronic one.

Todd returns Mike’s cell phone and, pointing to a window he’s just opened, says, “Okay, see that window over there? Those are the numbers I got from your cell phone. Which of those numbers are drug related?”

Mike identifies the numbers that belong to people in the drug organization and

Todd electronically puts a check mark next to each.

Finally, around one o'clock, Mike says, getting up and stretching, "I gotta get some sleep. Wrecking a freight train makes you tired."

"Okay, we'll see you tomorrow. Maybe you can take on an airline, or something," says David as he walks Mike over to the door.

"Nah, barge traffic."

As David opens the door, a wall of rock music thunders from below. Mike walks over to the balcony and looks down. He turns back towards David and says, "Still party time in Omaha, I see?"

"It's always party time in Omaha, they just don't want to go out and face the snow. I guess we'll end up letting most of them sleep here tonight. Most of them couldn't drive even if they could figure out which drift their cars were in," shouts David over the cacophony below.

"Probably right. Listen, David, I really appreciate you taking me in like this. Jay and I really have nowhere else to go. You don't know how much this means. I just hope I'm not getting you and your people involved in something bad."

"Don't worry about it, we're glad you're here. As for the bad guys, they should be the ones to worry."

"Yeah, I hope you're right. Okay, I'll see'ya tomorrow," says Mike as he staggers towards his apartment. As he does and once out of David's sight, he nearly breaks down, overwhelmed by the events of the day and his sudden change of fortune.

"Yo, tomorrow," says David.

Mary comes out and joins him, takes a drag on her cigarette and recites, "With us, one common shelter thou shalt find, Or in one common fate with us be joined."

"Yep, that's about it," he answers looking over the balcony. It's near closing time and the speed freaks are even more obvious as a chill, dark night descends upon the city. David and Mary retreat to the apartment and shut the door.

Back in the apartment, as Mary gathers up the plates and trays, David drops on the couch, lights a cigarette and says to Todd and Lance, “Well, what do we do now?”

“Depends what you want to do,” says Lance.

“You know what I want, dammit. I just didn’t think it would happen this way.”

“Well, how did you think it would happen? You knew someday you’d have to come to grips with how you dealt with Stan’s death,” says Mary.

“You’re right, I’ve been living in a dream world. I guess that ended tonight.”

“So, you’re ready to fight back?” asks Todd.

“You know that.”

“Well, we’ve been waiting for you to finally say it.”

“Well, there it is. We’re in it now. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” says Mary, Todd and Lance together.

Todd and Lance get up to leave. Mary says she’s going to make one last check of things downstairs. David sits staring at the monitor showing a burning field of wreckage.

The building shudders. A significant gust, maybe eighty miles an hour, buffets the roof. The rafters flex and torque. The walls shake and the floors rumble until the fury of the storm finally dies in the tinkling of small shuddering things. Must be a Bandersnatch on the roof being frumious, he muses. He takes his bottle and himself to the bedroom.

A few minutes later his apartment door swings open then slams shut. Mary joins him and says the storm sounds like the bean sidhe. David says he hopes not as he staggers back to the kitchen in his underwear and bare feet, ordered to fetch a fresh bottle of cabernet sauvignon and a plate of cheese and crackers. She Who Must Be Obeyed instructed him to go peel a grape.

Time: 8 PM

About the same time as Mike visits the club, a battered cell phone chirps an unrecognizable ring tone in a cheap motel room on the outskirts of Omaha. Bob McCarthy picks it up while his friend and partner, Tom Schaffer, reaches over for the remote and cuts the sound on the TV.

“Yeah, Pete, no problem. Can’t get out tonight, there’s a blizzard. First thing in the morning. Right. We can do that. Yep. No problem. I’ll get back to you.” and hits END.

Bob quickly writes an address on a pad of paper and says, “That was Pete. He wants us to go check out something tomorrow.”

“Where is he? Omaha?”

“No, he’s in Des Moines.”

“What’s up? Why did he call us? I thought Joe pretty much handled things in Omaha.”

“Seems Mike McAneas has a problem with the organization. And, since Mike worked for Pete, he’s Pete’s problem, I guess. He doesn’t want Joe involved at the moment,” says Bob.

“Mike? So what happened to him?”

“I don’t know but I guess he’s on the run or something and Pete’s looking for him real bad. He sounded seriously angry. We’re supposed to go check out a lead first thing tomorrow. Mike’s credit card was used at a motel near here. We’re to go see if he’s there. That means we get up early, I guess. The news said the storm would be over by morning. Want another beer?” says Bob as he heads for the cooler in the corner of the room.

“Ya, how many we got left?”

“Not enough, not nearly enough,” says Bob.

Tom laughs and says, “Story of our lives, man. Stuck in a snow storm and no beer. We do have cigarettes, right?”

“No, I have cigarettes. You borrow cigarettes,” says Bob.

“I’ll pay you back, someday.”

“Next carton, you buy.”

“Hey, while you’re up, turn the sound back on and see if there’s anything else on. I’ve had enough cartoons for a while.”

Bob surfs through the channels. When a cable news channel appears Tom says, “Hey hold it. What’s that?”

Bob hands the beer to Tom and sits on the edge of one of the beds and they watch spellbound the aerial footage of the train wreck earlier that day north of Des Moines. Bob, seeing the location described in the creeper at the bottom of the screen, points at the TV and says, “Geez, look at that. You know where that is? That’s just east of where Mike lives, right?”

“Sure looks like it. I wonder if there’s a connection?”

They continue to watch in fascination and drink beer as the wind whistles outside their door. At the announcer’s description of the car chase they look at each other and nod. Tom says, “I got a bad feeling about this, dude.”

2. Tuesday January 9

Time: 8 AM

Tuesday morning dawns to the rosy luster of the rising light as Tom and Bob dig their car out from the snow drift that buried it the night before. Plows are beginning to work the streets but the wind blows the snow back on the road within minutes. The sky is clear and the temperature is well below zero.

They manage to free it from the snow after much jockeying back and forth, pushing, shoving and cursing. Leaving the engine running to get some heat, they wait in the motel lobby drinking coffee, smoking and complaining about the hour.

Figuring that the heater has warmed it as much as possible given the conditions, they jog back to the car and drive off to the address of the motel Pete gave them. Finding it, they park along the curb and trudge across the half plowed motel parking lot.

“Hey look, isn’t that Mike’s old car?” says Tom pointing towards a mound of snow with wheels.

“It sure looks like it, check out the plates. Yep, must be, Polk County, Iowa. He must be here. Hey, wait a minute. Look! Bullet holes,” says Bob pointing to an exposed section of the trunk. He walks over and brushes more of the snow away from the trunk and the rear windshield and says, “Holy shit, man, take a close look at the rear window.”

The trunk is riddled with holes and the safety glass of the rear window has multiple star burst cracks.

“Wow, I guess he is on the run and someone was sure chasing after him. I’ll bet he really was involved with that train wreck yesterday! The engineer said that the car that hit the train was chasing another car that there were shots being fired,” says Tom.

“Yeah, kind’a looks that way.”

“Let’s go see what we can find out from the desk clerk,” says Tom as they walk towards the small lobby. When they enter a bell goes off. Another guy follows them in and waits his turn, browsing through some tourist brochures in a rack near the door. A woman behind the counter stops what she’s doing with a pile of papers and turns towards them.

“Howdy, that’s one big load of snow out there,” says Tom as he and Bob stomp the snow from their boots. “We’re looking for a friend of ours. That looks like his car out there,” as he points to Mike’s car. “He said he’d call when he got in but we’ve not heard from him.”

“What’s his name?”

“Mike McAneas, he’s from around Des Moines.”

“Yeah, I think he checked in last night, let me look,” says the desk clerk as she fiddles with the computer. “I was right, I remember him now. Yep, checked in last evening. Here’s his name, Mike McAneas but I don’t think he slept here last night.”

“How’s that?” asks Tom.

“Well, about eight o’clock, I was working last night, I sees him go up the street towards that big dance club up Howard Street, Mo R♦n, do you know the one I’m talking about, Mo R♦n? Well, I was on until late, my replacement didn’t show because of the storm. But I never did see no one come back. Wait a sec, let me check. We didn’t have many guests last night, storm and all.”

She picks up a small two-way GMRS radio that looks like a cell phone and pages the housekeeper.

“Hello Betty, what’s up?”

“Say June, do you know if anyone slept in room 135 last night?”

“I just cleaned there and no, the bed hadn’t been used. Didn’t really look like anyone stayed there except for a couple of cigarette butts, some wrappers and a cheap bottle of wine. Anything wrong?”

“I hope not. Just trying to figure out what happened to the guy who was staying there. Thanks June,” as she clicks off the radio and puts it back in its recharger stand.

“I guess he didn’t come back. I hope he’s not in any trouble. Seemed like a nice guy. That was a bad storm last night. But I know the owner of that club lets people stay the night when the weather’s real bad. He probably stayed there.”

“Right, he’s probably okay. We told him we’d meet him when he got to Omaha. I’m sure he’s okay. We weren’t sure which motel he said he’d be staying at. Thanks a lot, you’ve been real helpful. We’ll find him real soon, I’m sure. He’ll probably give us a call,” says Bob.

“Do you want me to give him your number?”

“No, thanks, he has it. Don’t worry, he’ll be okay. We’ll check that club up the street,” says Bob as he slips her \$50 and they leave.

The other guy waiting by the door asks directions for a downtown theater and leaves a minute later.

Tom and Bob hike up the snow packed street to the club the desk clerk pointed out, the wind is howling from the north and kicking up plumes of loose snow.

“It looks like it’s closed,” says Bob.

“Wait, here’s a sign, yeah, won’t be open until six pm tonight. I don’t see any signs of life,” says Tom.

“Let’s get back to the car and phone Pete.”

They trudge back down the street.

Bob phones Pete and says, “We found his car at that motel. He left early in the evening and probably went to a dance club about two blocks away. The maid said his bed wasn’t slept in. We went up to the dance club. It’s closed and won’t be open until six tonight. The desk clerk said the owner lets the crowd sleep over when there’s a bad storm.”

Tom pokes him and points to the motel parking lot.

“Shit,” says Bob, “Wait a minute, while we were up checking out that dance club, his car’s been moved. It’s not in the parking lot now.”

“Go back in the motel and find out what you can. See if he checked out. Call me right back,” says Pete.

Tom and Bob go back into the reception lobby.

“Say, did’ya see what happened to Mike’s car?”

“Oh yeah, one of your friends came back and checked him out.”

“My friends?”

“Well, I thought so, there were two of them. One of them was here with you fifteen minutes ago. He was over there looking through the brochures. Wasn’t he with you?”

“Yeah, oh, yeah, that guy, I didn’t remember he came in here. Thanks, that explains it.”

“Oh good. They turned in his key card and got his things then one of them took his car and the other got in a dark SUV and they both drove off.”

“Thanks again, we’ll catch up with them,” and they leave.

Back in the car Bob phones Pete again, “There were two other guys here, one of them was in the lobby when I was there questioning the desk clerk. I didn’t notice him, he was behind me. The desk clerk thought we were together. Anyway, he came back while Tom and I went up to the dance club. He cleared out Mike’s room and turned in his key card. Another guy with him drove off in Mike’s car.”

“Then he’s in Omaha and he’s got someone helping him. Okay, now get over to Joe’s warehouse. I’m gonna fax a picture of Mike there. I want you two to go to that club when it opens and find out everything you can. Show the picture around, show it to the waitresses, bartenders, whoever. See if anyone saw something. That clear?”

“Yep, no problem.”

“Call me as soon as you have anything.” CLICK.

Bob says, “Could you hear all that?”

“Yep, let’s get to the warehouse. And make sure we get paid for that cash you gave the desk clerk,” as they drive off in a steamy cloud of tailpipe exhaust.

Time: 11:30 AM

Late Tuesday morning David knocks on Mike’s door. Mike staggers to the door, opens it and says, “Hey, what time is it?”

“Oh, about eleven-thirty. You want something to eat?”

“Geez, that late? What’ya got?”

“How about cold pizza?”

“I should’a known. Okay, works for me,” says Mike as he follows David down the hall.

At David’s door, he walks over and looks down at the dance floor.

“Ahh, so that’s the sleepover?”

“More like a group pass out.”

Strewn across the dance floor, on blankets, cots and mats, are the better part of last night’s dance crowd, all dead asleep.

“Ahh, the orphans of the night. Looks like you had a full house last night?”

“Yeah, Dave’s motel is full. We’ll give them another hour then blast the 1812 Overture or something over the sound system. Then we’ll give them coffee, aspirin and pizza and send ’em on their way. But they’ll all be back tonight. Mainly to talk about the night before,” he laughs.

“Hey, you were that way once.”

“Once? Hell, still am. Hello? I live above a bar, remember?” says David as they enter the apartment.

David switches on the news which is still running shots of the train wreck from the day before. He flips to a weather station which says the blizzard has passed further east and it’s expected to hit the east coast in a few days. The upper Midwest will be in the deep freeze with temperatures expected down to -20F or lower with wind chills as low as -60F. A cold front from Canada has dropped in behind the storm. Videos are shown of drifts on I80 from Nebraska across Iowa. Some are as high as twenty feet. Aerial footage shows thousands of trucks stranded on the roads. Outside David’s picture window the sun is a glaring, actinic point of light in a dark crystal blue sky. At surface level, there is near white out as gale force northwest winds churn last night’s powder into billows of frozen crystal. The post-blizzard blowing and drifting has begun.

Mike looks out the picture window and says, “It’ll be a while before the roads are back to normal.”

“Looks that way. Did’ya notice the rafters shaking in the wind last night? Happens when the wind is strong.”

“No, I thought it was the band.”

“Well, them too. You want me to heat this up or do you want it cold?” says

David as he pulls a couple of plates from the refrigerator stacked with the leftover slices from the night before.

“Cold’s fine with me. Got any coffee?”

“Yeah, over on the counter.”

Mike pours a cup, drinks it and pours another. He takes a plate, shifts three pieces of pizza on it and heads for the couch where he’d been sitting the night before. David gets a cup of coffee and a plate of cold pizza and follows. They watch the news.

“So, have you recovered yet?”

“No. Yesterday was a very bad day.”

“Yeah, I kind’a figured that. You were a bit panicky.”

“Well? Getting shot at will do that to you!”

David’s cell phone chirps. It’s Todd. “Say boss, time for the wake up call down here?”

“Yeah, go ahead. Give me a minute to bring Mike out so he can see the festivities.” He folds the phone and says, “Come on outside, you need to see this.”

Outside, they look over the balcony. Todd is looking up, David gives the thumbs-up. Then, the floor shakes as the sound system puts forth at full volume the finale of the 1812 Overture, including the cannon fire. The blanketed figures on the floor cringe and shudder in unison. After several bars, they begin to writhe and stir, complaining. The sound quits and Todd’s voice booms, “Okay, people aspirin on that end, coffee in the middle, pizza and sandwiches down here. Let’s get a move on it. Anyone needing a cab, see Jim over there.”

His entreatments are met by a chorus of groans. “People, let’s get moving. I have some Mahler here, today’s selection is Das Lied von der Erde. I guarantee, it will not, repeat, not, improve a hangover. Certainly not at the volume level I intend to play it at.”

Groans, yawning and stretching as the tribe rises and queues for aspirin, coffee and food. They cluster around tables, some sit on the floor in small groups. After a few gulps of coffee, the sound level rises as they waken to the day. After second helpings of the coffee, sandwiches and pizza, they begin to find their jackets and drift out into the frigid sunlit street.

Mike and David return to the apartment and resume eating. Mike asks, “You charge them for this?”

“Hell no, wake up service is on the house.”

“No, I mean for the food and lodging.”

“No.”

“Just as I thought, David’s B&B.”

“Well, I don’t see you complaining.”

“Ahh, about the thread count on the sheets...”

“You wanna go sleep in the back of your car?”

“Okay, I’ll be quiet.”

“Very sound decision.”

Time: Noon

Around noon Tuesday, Tom and Bob arrive at the warehouse to meet with Joe. They park their old car at the curb across the street to the north.

Joe’s warehouse is an old red brick building, about six stories high and a block square. Although largely windowless on the lower floors, the upper floors have regularly spaced openings, mostly made of glass brick. To the south, are the vast Omaha railroad marshalling yards. On the south side of the building, an old infrequently used spur of track runs up to and past a long loading dock. An occasional freight car delivers heavy bulk goods.

For the most part, however, deliveries are made by truck through wide doors on

the east and west sides of the building. The doors are hinged steel plates that large electric motors raise and lower. Trucks drive in from the west and are loaded or unloaded in a large central area that is open to the second floor. Around the side of the second floor is a landing with metal railings and gates. Goods are brought to the second floor and assembled onto pallets. Overhead hoists on tracks raise and lower these to the delivery trucks below. Once loaded or unloaded, the trucks drive out the east door.

On the south side of the warehouse are sliding steel doors to the railway loading dock. On the north side are a few offices and storage rooms off a corridor at the end of which is Joe's office on the northeast corner of the building.

The ostensible business of the warehouse is paper goods. All kinds, from napkins to corrugated cardboard. Joe inherited the business from his father and has run it for many years. His trucks range across most of the Midwest and beyond making pickups and deliveries.

Joe Schmidt is a pasty, paunchy, middle aged guy with a fat wife with unrealistic social ambitions. Joe's personality is essentially that of a dirt lot used car salesman, he'll do anything for a buck so long as it doesn't involve any effort on his part. Joe is partial to plaid sports jackets, heavily patterned ties, and pants of a polyester look.

About ten years ago Joe got into financial trouble and found that his only offer for a bailout came with strings attached. The drug cartel, expanding into the heartland, needed a more efficient delivery system. Joe's location and the territory his business covered made him an appealing recruit. To Joe, business was business. If someone wanted drugs, so what, that was their problem, not his. His job was distribution. He saw no reason to be concerned about what he was distributing. He was only interested in the terms. After a bit of negotiating, he took on a lucrative wholesale distribution arrangement as well as control of the retail operation in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. Joe prospered. A few well chosen gratuities to the local police and political establishment, and his problems are few. He's a pillar of the community.

Crossing the deserted windswept street, Tom and Bob target a nondescript door about midway along the north facing side of the building. Entering, they walk down an old hallway to an office at the far northeast corner.

Joe's office is large, wood floored, and painted in a faded pale yellow. The walls are scuffed and stained. Joe's desk is a big old wooden executive desk. In one corner of the room is a small table with a coffee maker and cups. Several old wooden chairs are arranged around the desk. Near the door is an old fashioned coat tree. Joe is sitting behind the desk which is strewn with papers. An old computer is off to one side and there's a fax machine on a small table to Joe's right.

Now that Pete knows that Mike is in Omaha, he's filled Joe in on what's happened and faxes picture of Mike. Joe doesn't want to get involved but has no choice.

Tom and Bob take off their coats, gloves and stocking caps and pile them on the table in the corner.

"So, what's happened? Is Mike in trouble," says Bob as he and Tom sit on the old chairs across the desk from Joe.

"Oh yeah, he's in one shit load of trouble. Jack caught him passing information to a cable news network. Seems Mike was a reporter. He was spying to do a news feature or something. Pete's people almost took him out yesterday over near Des Moines but he got away. Did you see that story about the big train wreck in Iowa?"

They both nod.

"That was Mike. Pete's guys were chasing him but he beat the train at the crossing. Pete's people weren't so lucky."

"Geez, we saw bullet holes in the back of his car. That must have been from the chase," says Tom as he looks to Bob, eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, well, right now we need to find him. Take this photo and go to that club tonight and ask around. See if anyone saw him. Find out anything you can, okay?"

"Sure Joe but we'll need some cash," says Bob. "We're broke. And I had to give the woman at the motel a hundred dollars."

Joe, raising his eyebrows, pulls out his wallet and counts out six hundred dollar

bills and says, “And this takes care of the motel clerk too.”

Bob scoops up the cash and says, “Sure does.”

“Okay, you call Pete as soon as you know something, got it? If you can find Mike, there’ll be twice that amount, understand?”

“You bet,” says Bob and they get up and leave the warehouse and return to their faded, rusted out old car across the road.

Time: 1:00 PM

After they leave the warehouse Tom and Bob stop at a fast food place to get lunch. Picking up their orders they go to the condiment island for napkins, little packets of salt, paper cups of ketchup and packets of sugar for the coffee. Tom nods towards a table in a corner away from any prying ears saying, “How about that one over there?”

Bob says, “Looks good. Did you want any cream?”

“Nah, just black.”

They take off their coats and pile them on a spare chair and sit down on opposite sides of the table. Bob dumps three packets of sugar into the coffee and says, “Ya’think this might be our big chance to make some real money?”

“Shit, I hope so. We’ve been doing enough crap for the past two years. It’s about time.”

“Six hundred bucks, man. That’s not bad,” says Bob.

“Well, five hundred, really, ya’know. One hundred of that was just repayment for the woman at the motel,” answers Tom.

“Well, anyway, seeing as how I only gave her fifty, at least we won’t run out of beer money tonight,” says Bob deviously.

“No, not tonight. At least I hope not. But, for all I know, you might drink that place dry.”

“Hey, you can down a few yourself, as I recall.”

“So, anyway, when do think we should go to this R~~o~~n place?” says Tom.

“I dunno. Eight or Nine? What’ya think?”

“Yeah, I don’t think they’ll be many people there much earlier. Don’t want to stand around in an empty club drawing attention to ourselves. Speaking of drawing attention, how’s your club hopping wardrobe, dude?”

“Pretty shabby. So’s yours, as I recall,” says Bob.

“No, not shabby, non-existent. Let’s face it, the only club we belong to is the Goodwill Thrift Shop and we’re both charter members.”

“You want maybe to spend a little of that cash and go get some new shirts and jeans or something?”

“Ya’know, I’d think I would. Don’t remember the last time I actually had a shirt with a real price tag on it. That sort of thing impresses the ladies,” speculates Tom sarcastically.

“Ya’know, ya’gotta remove the tag when you wear the shirt. The ladies don’t want to see tags dangling from the merchandise.”

“Oh yeah, but I’ll take it off real careful like, so I can put it back on later. Geez, don’t be a jerk,” says Tom.

“Okay, big spender, we go try to look purdy. Just about anything would be better than our present sad state,” says Bob as he turns towards a big clown decorated mirror hanging on the wall near their table. Tom looks too. The harsh dark outline of reality stares back at them.

Bob leans over and scoops up some ketchup from the paper cup with a French fry and says, “Ya’know, Tom, I didn’t think things would work out this way when we got out of high school. I kinda hoped things take a turn for the better by now.”

“They gotta, man, they can’t get much worse.”

“Ohhh, don’t say that, man. You don’t want to tempt fate, at least not where we’re concerned,” says Tom.

“Yep, I guess you’re right. We’re on our own and there ain’t no one gonna look after us anymore,” says Bob, beginning to get a bit choked up as he thinks back to how bad their lives had been since they were seventeen.

“Don’t worry about it, dude. We’ll get by. Things will be okay, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, no problem. Just some onions in the hamburger, that’s all.”

“Yep, onions here too. You gonna finish those fries?”

“Nah, you take ’em,” says Bob. “I guess, you remember, back when we started high school? You remember that day my dad came by the school to pick me up?”

“Yeah, I remember. Dude, don’t talk about it.”

“Yeah, there I was, with a couple of you guys, just talking and doing nothing.”

“Yeah, I know, leave it man!”

“And outa nowhere he walks up and hits me.”

“Let it go, Bob.”

“In the face. Like an animal.”

“Hey Bob, forget about it. He’s not worth it. We need to focus on other things.”

“Yeah, other things.”

Tom remembers the day. It was brutal. In one quick stroke, Bob was humiliated and knew, from then on, he was on his own. For the both of them, life has been one sucker punch after another. Bob just got his in a real personal way. They finish eating in silence until Bob breaks the mood and says, “Okay, we’re done. Let’s hit the road.”

They get up and pull on their worn coats, gloves, caps and scarves, head for the door, and step out into a blast of cold wind. Jogging over to their car, they hop in and ride off to buy clothes. A short trip later and they’re in the parking lot of

some generic strip mall and are soon picking through the men's clothes at a discount store. Bob finds a dark shirt and casts a quizzical look towards Tom.

"Yeah, that looks good. What'ya think of this one?" says Tom, holding up a cheap red shirt.

"Not bad, you might actually look presentable in that," answers Bob.

They find a couple pair of nearly tight jeans and proudly head for the checkout counter when Bob spies some cheap aftershave and points it out to Tom.

"Okay, just as long as you don't go wearing it around that motel room. You smell bad enough as it is."

Bob whacks him and grabs the aftershave saying, "Ya'know, this might do you some good too."

He twists off the cap and sniffs it and puts the bottle under Tom's nose who sniffs and says, "Okay, it's not that bad."

They spend a total of \$54.23, combined, and go back to the motel hopeful.

Time: 1:15 PM

At Mo R♦n, after finishing off the pizza remains, David says, "Okay, it's time for the tour. You need to see this place in natural light rather than laser light."

"Sounds good to me. Been wondering what goes on here besides drinking," says Mike as they get up.

"You got something against drinking?" as they head back out onto the balcony. David points at the rough wooden roof and says, "This was originally a warehouse for a hardware company back about a hundred years ago. The Punic Emporium. They built things to last back then. Look at those huge beams supporting the roof."

Mike says, "Amazing, I've never seen anything like that. What are these big metal rods going along the rafters going from one side of the building to the other?"

“They help support the roof. If they weren’t there, the peaked roof would transfer some of its weight horizontally against the walls. That would require much stronger and thicker walls. Those rods get around it, they take up the horizontal load by holding the walls together. See the giant turnbuckles on each rod?”

“Yeah?”

“They were used to adjust the pull made by the rods when the building was built. They’ve not been adjusted since.”

“Were the skylights original or did you put them in?”

“I put them in when I remodeled the place. Originally, there were five floors. The company that converted it to an office building knocked out the center section of each to create the atrium. When I bought it, I converted the first floor to the bar and, on what’s left of the fifth floor, apartments. The levels below are all offices and computer rooms,” says David as he gestures across the wide open central area, seventy-five feet or so above the central dance floor with a laser pointer.

“Are those birds I just saw over there? I saw some at the bar last night.”

“Yep, Todd had a pair of breeding canaries. They got loose and, well, one thing led to another. Then the kids started sneaking in their own, canaries, parakeets, damned if I know what they are. I have no idea how many there are now. Lance wants to use them for laser target practice. Todd says he’ll castrate him first. It’s a standoff at the moment. Mary says get a cat. Personally, I like them.”

As David speaks, Mike looks up and marvels as in the beams above his head, an airy nation flies. Then asks, “So, I guess they help clean up at night?”

“Yeah, they love the peanuts, potato chips and pizza leftovers. The crowd downstairs treats them as pets. Most are totally tame and will land on your finger. They’ve become completely immune to the noise and they’ve learned to sing along with the bands. Some of them will fly down to the stage and perch on the mics and chirp right along. I think they’ve figured out what an amplifier is. That’s quite a sight,” comments, gesturing through the rafters with his laser pointer.

“I’ll bet they sing real nice. Any rappers?”

“No, not yet. Not that I know of. The place is becoming a freaking bird sanctuary.”

“Neat! David’s Aviary and Boozer. “

“Now, can we get back to the tour?”

“What are all those things that look like antennas?” asks Mike pointing at short black rods extending from several of the rafters.

“Antennas. They’re part of the Wi-Fi network. We use a lot of laptops so they give us mobility. Now, the old freight elevator over there marks the southwest corner of the building. My apartment is east of the elevator and yours, over there is north of the elevator shaft.”

Mike says, “This is real impressive!”

David says, “You ain’t seen nuthin’ yet,” as leads him to the freight elevator.

They ride to the second level and disembark. David points Mike to the right as they get off the elevator. He gestures towards an otherwise nondescript, unmarked, solid steel door. David swipes an id card through a discretely placed and nearly unnoticeable reader. The door lock clicks and a soft bell chimes. David opens the door and they walk in.

“Whoa! What’s all this?” says Mike in amazement at what he sees.

“This is part of my computer operation. This is where I was watching you from last night,” replies David.

Mike sees that the room runs the length of the south side of the building then appears to turn at the far east end. Mike asks, “How far does this go on for?”

“It runs all around the building. All the way to back to the other side of the freight elevator. It’s one continuous operations center.”

The room, if it can be called a room, is about thirty feet wide and runs the circumference of the building. All along the inner wall, that dividing it from the

balcony outside, are racks of servers. Each server rack is a black steel frame about two feet wide, six feet tall and about three feet deep. Each server rack is packed from top to bottom with computers, each with its own set of blinking lights and switches. Each system is about twenty inches wide and about six inches high and a little more than two feet deep.

Behind each server rack are hundreds of cables: power conductors, Ethernet and fiber optic lines. Large, yellow corrugated round air ducts, suspended from the ceiling, run the length of the wall. Above every server rack, a smaller air duct runs to the rack below and draws off the heat. The fans on the servers give off loud, high pitched whines as they suck air from the room, through the machines and exhaust it to the ducts above. From each server rack rises a web of cables to massive steel cable trays near the ceiling and running the length of the wall.

While most of the server racks consist of arrays of processor units, others are disk farms consisting of a hundred disk drives each. The finish on all the equipment is buff black with switches and multicolored LED lights that twinkle ceaselessly. The effect is that of a wall of blinking lights.

“What’s all the noise,” shouts Mike.

“It’s the cooling fans, they tend to be a bit annoying at times,” replies David.

“Yeah, try threshold of pain.”

“It’s not that bad. You get used to it. A lot of white noise helps you concentrate, anyway.”

Along and to the right of the equipment racks runs the corridor. To the right of the corridor are rows of tables. Each table has four large flat screen monitors, tower CPU boxes, keyboards and mice facing in one direction and four more of the same configuration on the other side facing the other way. Each monitor station has a black swivel executive chair facing it. About half the stations are staffed, some by people Mike recognizes from the club last night including the guy whom he originally spoke with sitting about six tables away. He looks up, recognizes Mike and gives a wave.

David leads Mike through the room and down the corridor between the servers and the tables saying, “On the left you see part of our server farm, CPU’s and disk arrays. They’re all 64 bit multi-core processor based systems and each unit

has about 16 GB of memory. Altogether we have about five thousand terabytes of storage, five petabytes, I guess but I like the sound of a five thousand terabytes better. That's about five times ten to the fifteenth."

"The fifteenth what?"

"Five with fifteen zeros after it, dude. The entire storage network is connected by fiber optic links to an array of main processors. These range from several IBM Z series mainframes, an IBM Blue Gene, a Cray Red Storm and, of course, an old TRS-80 under glass in case of emergency. I have a 10 GB Internet 2 connection to the outside world and other server farms in Ireland and Japan."

"I didn't know anyone used mainframes these days."

"Oh, yeah, they give a great deal of computation per unit of electricity consumed. The problem with a place like this is that it's difficult to get the power company to commit to the kind of load we demand. These blade servers are power pigs. A mainframe uses a fraction of the power for the same computing output, has a smaller footprint and greater uptime."

"Okay, so what the hell do you do here?" asks Mike.

"Oh, a little of everything, actually. Mostly Internet based security work. We build tools to counter Internet infrastructure cyber attacks, espionage, terrorism, black markets, location monitoring and disabling core malware botnets."

"So this is how you earn a living?"

"Dude, I earned a living when Stan and I sold our feeble little company to some venture capital people for \$10 billion. These are just the toys. My daily take in T-bills alone pays for this place!"

"Holy shit. I need to sit down. I don't think I can take this."

"Here, try this chair. It set me back nearly a grand," says David as he slides a rolling, high backed, super executive chair under Mike who falls back into its spring loaded comfort. David drops into another one himself.

"Com'on over here," says David as he scoots across to a massive semicircular table around which is an array of multiple huge high definition monitors.

Mike gives the floor a kick and rolls towards David, braking with his heels, grinning like kid with a new toy. He spins the chair, arms and legs outstretched making the customary “Yaeeee” sound highly popular among 10 year olds and undergraduates.

David says, grabbing the arm of the spinning dervish, “Are we finished yet?”

“Okay, I’ll be serious. Time is money, I guess.”

David looks back at him sourly and says, “So I hear.”

Mike gives the chair another spin anyway. This time David makes a quick thrust with his hand and flips one of the many levers on it causing the back rest to go horizontal. Mike loses his balance and falls off.

Looking up at David he says, “Okay, I’m done now,” and crawls to his feet, a bit wobbly from all the spinning. David hits the lever again and the chair resumes its original orientation.

Mike sits down and says, “Okay, okay, I’ll be good. For a while. Geez, you’re like a parent. Now what is it you want to show me?”

David hits some keys on one of the several keyboards that surround them and the display comes to life. A huge map of the world appears on the largest central display. The nations are outlined and rhumb lines in various colors crisscross the Mercator projection of the planet.

On the inferior displays, only slightly smaller, appear the U.S., Europe, Russia, East Asia, India, and Oceania with rapidly rising and falling bar graphs in many colors near major population centers.

“This, dude, is the DRUID system.”

“And that means what??? You sacrifice a virgin to the disk drive god once a year on the solstice?”

“Close, in fact, you may be next.”

“Hey! I can have sex anytime I want!”

“Yeah? Hands don’t count.”

“Yeah, well, speak for yourself.”

“May we continue?”

“Okay, knock-knock, what’s DRUID?”

“David’s Real-time Universal Internet Discovery system.”

“No ego issues there, no-sireee.”

“None. There it is, dude, the entire global communications network. Internet, telephone, fiber optic, satellite, you name it, it’s mapped there. There it is man, the global spy network. Welcome to 1984.”

“How’s that?”

“Old George Orwell. He thought every home would have a camera and microphone. Was he wrong! Every home has a computer and an Internet connection, the Internet is the greatest surveillance system ever conceived. Everything you do is recorded, everything you search for, every site you visit, all recorded and coordinated by cookies and little one by one GIF files calling home to mother. Then there’s the real spyware like keystroke loggers and the FBI the Computer and Internet Protocol Address Verifier, CIPAV, that scans your registry, identifies your IP, MAC address and just about everything else. Man, if people only knew how much of their lives were on display, they’d scream bloody murder and shut this thing down in a flash.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not in the least. With simple algorithms and only a few site visit cookies, I can figure out your age, gender, income and a lot of other demographics. Give me a little more, I can turn your life into an open book. All your interests, all your email, you name it. The Internet has stripped away the last vestiges of privacy. And, I, like a lot of corporations and governments, can tap into just about any part of it.”

“What about encrypted traffic? It’s not very breakable, even with the machines you have here.”

“We can break some levels of encryption but most traffic is unencrypted. Every time you visit a search engine, follow a link, your preferences are recorded. And, if the bad guys can place a keylogger on your machine, they can read your passwords and anything else you type, encryption or not.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Duh? Illegal? The Internet? Where have you been? Porn itself is a \$60 billion industry on the Internet with over a 100,000 sites dedicated to child porn alone. Add in illegal gambling, drug dealing, terrorism, espionage, intellectual property theft and other scams like Nigerian letters and it’s hard to find much that’s actually legal. It’s all trans-border and nearly impossible to trace. Hell, if it weren’t for all the illegal activity, there wouldn’t even be an Internet!”

“Wow! Can anything be done about it?”

“Most of it, probably not. Too expensive to track down the sites which turn out mostly to be hijacked machines in remote parts of the world. But some of it is downright dangerous. Things like terrorism, nuclear weapons trafficking, espionage and cyber warfare are too critical to ignore.”

“So, how do you fit in?”

“We do several things. At one level, we build and release free GPL open-source software for things like firewalls, virus scanners, that sort of thing to the general public. A lot of the better free tools you see out on the Internet originated here. We use assumed names, of course. I’m not looking for any publicity. We also contribute to a lot of open source projects run by others and provide testing services, all anonymously.”

“What’s a GPL?”

“The GNU General Public License. It’s a license a lot of developers use when they want to release their software for free to the general public.”

“So what’s it got to do with wildebeests?”

“Huh?”

“Gnu? That’s a wildebeest.”

“No, that’s GNU, it means GNU’s Not Unix. guy by the name of Richard Stallman got the ball rolling. It’s been a great benefit to the computer industry.”

“I’m confused but go on.”

“Another goal is to develop methods to identify the origin and, more importantly, the destinations of messages. We try to locate and identify sites that terrorists and criminals use to coordinate activities. Most of these are attached to unpublished IP numbers and can be accessed from anywhere in the world by anyone knowing the IP numbers. The IP numbers change frequently. In most cases, we know who the people are who are accessing the network but we don’t know where the target site is because we don’t know the target IP numbers. Someone with access to a site gets updated IP targets and thus it’s a very fluid situation. Our job is to break into these networks and then we, or others, can easily monitor their activities and even find their physical location.”

“Can’t you just do a basic sniff operation on their network connection?”

“It’s not that easy. They use multi-point routers in an Onion router scheme. A lot use the open source anonymizing packages. These were originally designed by the Navy Department. They encrypt messages and route them through volunteer cooperating routers around the world. Ultimately, the message emerges from an exit router which appears to be its origin. Finding the start and end points of a communications circuit when someone is using a system like this is very complex. It requires a very detailed statistical analysis of message timings and word wide network access to router data.”

“So give me an example?”

“Example? Let’s say your friendly suicide bomber in the Gaza wants to call home to Hamas in Tehran for instructions. We, or, I should say, the Mossad, have a pretty good idea who the potential threat candidates are. What they want to see is the exact instructions and plans. So, Mossad monitors his network activity but he’s using one of these anonymizing routers. That means his machine is receiving and relaying encrypted messages to a randomly changing network of servers around the world.”

“The Mossad know that some of the messages are probably his but they don’t know which ones. They know where the messages from his machine route to, which changes every few minutes, by the way, but the machine receiving the

message also randomly routes the message to another machine and they can't trace that step. The message routes multiple times before it's decrypted and emerges from a random exit router and going to its final destination. Since there are thousands of internal routers, that can be anywhere from Beijing to Berlin and since the route or circuit randomly mutates, it's essentially not possible to determine the destination site that our would-be bomber is accessing."

"Sounds unbreakable."

"Not entirely. We developed an exploit where we run our own multiple, high speed routers located around the world and, because of their speed, we attract a lot of traffic and thus can see the paths of many messages at once. With careful analysis of the timings of messages as they emerge from our candidate in the Gaza, we can develop a statistical picture of the hidden network that the guys use. With any luck, we can find the destination and bingo, fried terrorist and no bombs tonight."

"I think you could make a lot of enemies this way, dedicated enemies, man!" says Mike.

"I think you're right. But I'm very discreet and like you, I've taken precautions. I've got my own dead man switches installed on all this. If they get me, all material we don't normally publicize becomes public very quickly. Also, I have servers in thirty-six different countries. That tends to camouflage our real location. Hey, who would think Omaha? But for the time being, we're gathering a great deal of data and we've mapped a lot of hidden networks around the world."

"You must travel a lot?"

"No, it's all done electronically. I visit the west coast and back east a few times a year but mostly every thing's controlled from right here and a backup site in the west of Ireland. Anyway, that's what I do. I've discovered a few other secrets along the way, I'll tell you about them later. You might have a few more stories to write if you can keep quiet about the source. Some of the stuff will knock your socks off!"

"Sounds like I could make a career here just documenting what you're doing?"

"You probably could, Dr. Watson, you probably could."

Mike now looks much more intently at the large flickering liquid crystal displays mapping the data flow of the planet. He understands now. It's an amazing sight, one only a few people in the world know about and many of them are bad guys.

"In the meantime, dude, we can use tools like this to spy on our mutual enemies and maybe sabotage some of their operations. Drug networks should be a piece of cake. But more of that later. Come on, for now I'll show you the rest of the place."

They get up and David guides Mike past more banks of servers, processors, disk drives, fiber optic network connections, workstations and displays.

After looping the building, they exit from a door only a few feet from where they entered. The freight elevator is now to their right. David points upwards at the next two floors and says, "Pretty much similar configuration up there with more desks, conference rooms and there's general work areas up on the fourth floor. I also have an office suite in LA and DC where I meet with clients sometimes. I don't invite anyone here. This place is not on the map, so to speak."

Looking out over the balcony into the atrium, David points to the top balcony level above and says, "There are two apartments on each side up there. Four of us live here full time, myself, Mary, Todd and Lance. Todd has an apartment on the east side and Lance's is over on the north west corner. Mary's is next to mine. There are four guest apartments, the one you're in, and the one next to yours, the one next to Todd, and one next to Lance."

"So, what are their parts in all this?"

"Todd is sort of the general manager downstairs at night and the systems manager upstairs during the day. He controls just about everything from that console he's always at," he says pointing towards Todd who's working at the computer podium at the end of the bar.

"Todd worked for me in St. Louis. He had some stock options and did pretty well in the buy-out himself. He's our age, did a D.Sc. in computer science from Washington University. He can run rings around anyone on the subject of networks, communications and operating systems. He's originally from southern Minnesota. He has few interests besides computers, the dance club and annoying Lance. He's very good at all three."

Todd is tall, lanky, a bit geeky looking with long hair. He's wearing a black t-shirt with white lettering on the front that says got /root? on the back, All of your base are belong to us.

"What does that All of your base are belong to us on his t-shirt?"

"It's saying from the really messed up translation in the beginning of an old Japanese video game named Zero Wing. It became the part of a techno dance piece named Invasion of the Gabber Robots and it's still popular among gamers and programmers. Sometimes you just see the initials, AYBABTU. Todd has a whole closet of geek t-shirts. He collects them."

David points over towards the stage and says, "There's Lance over there. He runs the security crew, the bouncers and that sort of thing."

"What's with him? He looks like a bodybuilder or something?" Mike asks.

"Ahhh, I think I should fill you in there. He's originally from some small town about a hundred miles north west of here. He played football in college then worked for an insurance company for a while but didn't like it so he went back to school and got an M.S. in criminal justice then did a Ph.D. in information technology. After that, he started an information systems security consulting business here in Omaha."

"How'd you meet him?"

"I ran into him shortly after I moved here, or should I say, he tried to pick me up one night shortly after I moved here. I let him know there was no way that would happen but I got to know him after a while."

"So, he's gay?"

"Seriously. He'd see me at clubs and come over and joke and ask if I'd changed my mind. No, I would say and he'd laugh it off. After a while, we got to be friends. We'd go out and eat sometimes after the bars closed. He's a smart guy and doesn't miss a trick, er, bad choice of words. Anyway, he got me interested in the cyber warfare thing and that's pretty much how things got started. We're partners in this venture along with Todd. The idea of using the club as a front was his idea. It's worked out well. Saving the world and getting drunk every night, a winning combo, if you ask me!"

“Well, at least I know that you’re qualified for part of that job description.”

“So, when did you join the Temperance Union? Anyway, when I opened the club, he wanted to do the security end of things. I think he also likes working in a big bar. He does, however, seem to have a penchant for hiring really big jocks as bouncers. You’ll see them around. He’s put in a gym on the fourth floor.”

“And Mary?”

“Ah, yes, the queen of the plains herself. She’s originally from Ireland but moved to St. Louis to live with her aunt after her parents died in a sectarian bombing. Hence, she’s had some experience dodging the odd bullet. She was a nurse at the hospital I did rotations at. When I began the company with Stan, she followed right along. When I came here, ditto. Her main purposes in life, I think, are to make my life miserable and buy stuff on cable shopping channels,” he laughs but takes a quick nervous look to see no one’s listening. “And she’s outstanding at both. I have emotional scars and invoices to prove it.”

“Aha! Another case of the She Who Must Be Obeyed syndrome. Been there myself. So, not so fancy free anymore, are we?”

“Oh give it a break. I got enough problems.”

Time: 2 PM

David opens the elevator gate and they walk in. When they reach the main floor, he leads Mike over to the bar. As Mike sits on a stool David goes around behind and grabs some glasses. He scoops up some ice then pulls out the mixer dispensing hose and fills each with some cola. He scoops up some brine salted peanuts in the shell into a basket and puts them on the bar. They gossip about people they knew from school while shelling peanuts and drinking the pop.

Further down the bar, Todd is talking on the phone. Mike watches and sees that Todd’s expression is grim. Todd hangs up the phone and quickly walks over behind the bar to David. Leaning over the bar, hand covering his mouth, he whispers something in David’s ear. David mumbles something back. Now they both look concerned. There are a few more exchanges, and then Todd nods and steps back and leans on the bar with his right arm facing Mike.

“You remember Todd?” says David.

Mike says, “Yeah, sure.”

Todd says, “Nice to see you again. But right now, we got a little problem.”

Mike says to Todd, “How little?”

“Big little. First, I was able to track one of the numbers on your phone list. It called a cell phone here in Omaha last night. Still working on the name of the party called.”

“How’d you know that?”

“I cracked the cell tower encryption codes and set some computers to scan all incoming traffic looking for caller ID’s with numbers on your list. One of them called here. Some guy from your cell phone book listed as Pete.”

“Oh crap. This doesn’t sound good,” says Mike with a sound of panic in his voice.

“Any reason he might call someone in Omaha?” asks David.

“Yeah, I’m probably overreacting. Sure, maybe it had nothing to do with me. He does business here all the time. It might just be a normal call.”

“Okay, but that’s not all,” David adds, “The guys we sent this morning over to your motel, Jim and Sean, say that when they went to retrieve your car and check you out, they found some guys there looking over your car. Seems they’d discovered that your car had some bullet damage.”

“Ahh, that would be correct. Hardly noticeable, actually, from the front. Shouldn’t reduce the trade value very much at all unless you’re picky about that sort of thing.”

“Well, at least it didn’t have a steel wheel from a freight train mounted on the hood,” says David.

“So, do you think that means something? But, I mean, a car with bullet holes probably attracts a lot of attention?” says Mike.

Todd continues, “There’s more. Jim and Sean waited then Jim followed these

guys into the lobby. They were asking the desk clerk about you. Jim overheard what they said. The clerk got out the previous night's registration forms and showed them to them. She also said she was on duty last night and saw you head to the club. The guy asking the questions gave her a \$50 bill. He wanted to know where you were. The desk clerk called the maid and she said that you didn't come back because your bed wasn't slept in. Whoever is looking for you, they have a positive ID on you and they've got a strong link to the club. We got some digital telephoto shots of them, the license plate number of their car and a couple of mpeg videos. After the guy from the lobby and his friend left, they walked up here and looked around."

"Here? Oh-oh, they know I'm here?" says Mike.

"Probably. While they were looking at the club, Sean took your car across town to a garage David owns to get it out of sight. Jim went in your motel room and cleaned out your things then turned in your key card to the desk clerk. She asked him if you were okay and he said you were staying with some friends. Come over here and see if you recognize these guys," as he gestures to a computer monitor at the end of the bar.

Mike gets up, walks around the back of the bar to the computer podium. He looks at the photos.

"Yep, I know them. They work odd jobs for the organization. That one's named Tom and the other's called Bob, I don't remember their last names, though. How the freaking hell did they find my motel?" asks Mike in a rising voice of concern.

"Probably from the credit card you used, same as I did. All they needed was access to your online bank statement and they have sources, you know, for that sort of thing."

"Actually, I do know."

"The credit transaction would have appeared within seconds after the clerk swiped your card and would have given the motel's name and address," says Todd.

"That quick?"

“Yep, that quick. I hacked the Iowa DMV network and ran an ID on the plate from Tom and Bob’s car. It’s registered to an address in Waterloo Iowa. According to Lance’s sources in Iowa, the owner’s a small time errand boy for the organization and so is his friend whose driver’s license is listed to the same address. We did some further checking but couldn’t come up with much but we have managed to ID them both. One is named Tom Schaffer, 5’10, blond hair, blue eyes, age 22, and the other is named Bob McCarthy, 6’3”, dark brown hair, green eyes, also age 22. Both originally from Waterloo. Lance’s guess is that they were probably sent to follow up on the credit card record you left at the motel. That might explain the cell phone call last night. So you know these guys?”

“Yeah, like I said, they do odd jobs. They move around, no fixed address that I remember. They mainly worked out of eastern Iowa which is, as you say, where they’re from. I guess they must be working over here now. No way to get here from Waterloo last night or this morning.”

“Okay, so I’m assuming last night’s cell phone call was to one of these guys since, right after they were at your motel, the same cell phone that received the call last night called this Pete guy in Des Moines. So I’m guessing it must be theirs.”

“Sounds like a match,” says David.

“The bottom line is this, now they know you’re in Omaha and they know the last place went is here. Is there anything, anything else we should know?” says Todd.

Mike chokes a bit, Todd reaches behind the bar for a glass and a bottle and pours Mike a glass of scotch and, smiling somewhat insincerely, pushes it across the bar. Mike takes a gulp and lights a cigarette. His hand shakes a bit as he begins, “Well, if you put it that way, I guess you should know who I worked for in the mob. I worked for Jack Meyers of St. Louis, THE Jack Meyers.”

David looks wryfully at Todd, eyebrows slightly raised then back at Mike. Todd pours two more drinks.

“I met Jack soon after I began the investigation. I was doing odd jobs, all legal, at first, as I gathered information. But I became one of Jack’s favorites. I guess he didn’t get too many college guys working for him. One thing led to another and I moved up quickly in the organization, as was my goal, of course. That’s

why I got to know a lot, just about everything as a matter of fact. I was in deep. Very, very deep.”

“And?” interjects David with a cynical tone.

“You gotta understand, Jack’s been running the show in St. Louis for the past 8 years. Jack controls just about every dealer, cooker, maker, pusher, and trucker in the trade from Minneapolis to New Orleans. Suffice it to say, he’s not an easy guy to deal with. And I had access to everything and he knows that. He’s not gonna take what happened yesterday with the train very well.”

“Ahh, probably not. Train wrecks piss people off, I hear,” says David.

“Also, your friend Stan’s murder could not have happened without Jack knowing and approving. For all I know, I might even have a record of what he paid to have the job done on my computer. Like I said, I copied everything and they kept surprisingly detailed records, in code, of course.”

David looks at Todd, Todd at David and both back at Mike then David says, “Well, then, I guess we can assume that they probably won’t give up without a very nasty fight. It would appear that Jack has a vested interest in seeing you become seriously dead.”

“You’re right about that. I’m not gonna be safe until I can get my story written. But, once I publish it and dump all the data on the public record, Jack’ll have other problems, lots of other problems besides me.”

“In the meantime?”

“In the meantime, if Jack knows I’m here, he won’t be fooling around. He’ll send people to get me. A lot of people. And quick, very quick. He won’t want someone with what I know loose on the streets.”

“Full scale attack?”

“Yep. The works. You can assume Tom and Bob are small fish. They’re just the scouts. The big problems will begin when the real troops get here.”

“So you don’t think our friends from the motel are the main event?” asks Todd.

“Hell no, They’re just guys that do errands. They just pick up and deliver the gack, maybe a little ganja peddling. I don’t think they’re the hit men, the real professionals are yet to come.”

“Okay, what’s a gack?”

“It’s Methamphetamine, speed, crank, gack, it has a lot of names. The name gack comes from the gag reflex from the burning sensation you get when you snort it. There’s also a very bitter taste in the back of the throat. If you snort enough of it, they might need to cut your nose off. Though I wouldn’t know personally, however.”

“And ganja?”

“Actually, it’s a Sanskrit word. Most people think it’s Jamaican slang.”

“And what does it mean?”

“Hemp, man, marijuana, pot, cannabis, weed.”

“I live and learn, serves me right for being a druggie in college,” says David, as he rolls his eyes.

“Okay, vocabulary lesson over. You do understand what I just told you? There’s big trouble headed this way,” says Mike.

“I do indeed. For now, we lie low and watch and see what develops. For starters, a lot of extra security. And you, stay upstairs when the club is open. There’s no way they can get up there,” says David.

“And I’ll crack their phone network. I’ve got your list of numbers. My computers will scan for any activity in Omaha on any of those caller ID’s.”

Mike says, “No, man, I can’t drag you into this. Ya’know, maybe when Jay gets here we should really leave and head west. I didn’t want to cause all this trouble here.”

“Don’t worry, after what happened in St. Louis, I’m ready for the chance to take that bastard on. I shouldn’t have caved and run a few years ago. I should have fought back. But, now I’ve got some resources of my own and I think it’s pay

back time.”

David sees Lance walk by on the other side of the bar and calls out for him to come over. He walks over and says to Mike, “Hey, man, I guess some people are looking for you?”

“Yeah, kinda looks that way.”

“Don’t worry, they won’t get’ya. I guarantee it. More or less.”

“Thanks, I think, more or less. Anyway, I appreciate the help.”

“No problem.”

David gets a text message on his phone. He quickly sends an acknowledgment, flips the phone shut and says, “I’m gonna have a talk with Lance about where things stand. But in the meantime, you are to go see the nice ladies up in your apartment.”

“Huh?”

“Okay, they’re not nice ladies, more like a brood of angry badgers. But they won’t bite, well, most of them won’t. Anyway, they’ve had their shots, I think,” says David.

“What’ya mean?”

“You’ll see, it’s a surprise. It was Mary’s idea. She just texted me that she’s ready. I didn’t have any choice in the matter.”

“Exactly what do you mean by surprise and explain what Mary’s up to.”

“Mary’s in one of her deranged leprechaun moods. As I said, she occasionally lets me delude myself into thinking I run this place, but only while she shops online. As to surprise? You don’t think she tells me anything, do you? You go find out. I’m only taking orders here.”

“Shouldn’t she know about this? Don’t you want to tell her what’s happened?”

“What makes you think she hasn’t been listening?” says Todd as he points to a

web cam over the bar with its light glowing green.

“I should’a known.”

Just then a page cackles from the speaker system, “Quite yapping and send him up here!”

“She’s not patient,” says David.

“Geez, is she dangerous?”

“Yes. Now go! She doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Mike walks off and enters the elevator room. Lance asks, “What’s Mary up to?”

“Duh? Shopping, what else. She and the other weird sisters are gonna do a makeover on Mike.”

“And you didn’t warn him?”

“Would you?”

“Ahh, no, I think I’d chicken out too.”

“Well, this better be good, she’s got one of my gold cards. No telling what he’ll be dressed like next time we see him.”

Time: 4:00 PM

Later in the afternoon David knocks on Mike’s door, enters and says, “Is it safe? Are they gone? Did you survive? I hear that Mary takes a serious inside seam?”

“You bastard. You put them up to it, didn’t you?”

“No, it was her idea, really. You don’t think they would do anything I say, do you? Hell, I just work here. They wanted a project, an extreme makeover. You were clearly the candidate of choice. Have you any idea how much they charged on my gold card? Geez, and I still don’t know what they bought off those damned cable shopping channels.”

Mike rolls his head towards David and cries, “You mean there’s more?”

“Yep, overnight delivery. Probably jewelry. I think they bought jewelry. They always buy jewelry. Bling, they call it. Hey, nice hair cut.”

“Do you know one of them wanted to put eyeliner on me? Where did you get them? Some charm school for the depraved?”

David laughs and gets a glass of scotch, lights a cigarette, flops on one of the couches and says, “Well, you needed it. You’re getting a little old for the retro hippie look. Anyway, your own mother wouldn’t recognize you now. Think of it as a disguise, with or without the eye liner.”

“I’d rather not think about it. It was very traumatic. I may need therapy. Ya’know, when they came back, I was only in a towel.”

“Well, I’m sure they appreciated that,” says David.

“Yeah, you’ll pay for this.”

“I already did.”

“Right. Thanks. I appreciate it. I’ll pay you back.”

“No problem. I don’t need the money.”

“Duh? Since when?”

“Since St. Louis.”

“We need to talk about that,” says Mike as he walks over to the panoramic picture window to see the late afternoon scene beyond. David’s warehouse is on the south west side of Omaha. In the distance, beyond the nearby city sprawl, Mike can see the open snow covered fields where the city ends and prairie begins. The farm lands beyond are bathed in a purple and orange light. The rolling prairie is highlighted in shadows cast by the low angle of the sun. Nearer, the tops of buildings glow in the waning light of day but, beneath, they fade colorlessly into the gathering gray shadows of the night.

There is scarce movement on the street below and only lumbering 18-wheelers out on I80 as they pass east and west bearing cargo across a white and shifting sea. A few crows circle above to catch a last glimpse of their frozen domain

before tucking themselves into crevices and crannies to endure the night to come.

Mike turns and says, “Well, did you come up with anything more?”

“Not much. But Lance agrees that we’ll get a visit soon, probably tonight. We hope it’ll be those two guys we ID’d so we can spot them when they come in. Other than that, we just wait and carefully watch.”

“I guess there isn’t much else, really.”

“Nope, not that we can think of.”

“You know, you’ve got quite a view from up here.”

“Yeah, at night in the distance, you can see a few farms, just speckles of yellow windows and a sodium lamp or two around a barn. This time of year, it’s just snow, coyotes and wolves. You know what they say out here, if you climb to the second floor you can see further than you ever did before, and less,” says David.

“Well, some of those wolves may be coming to town right now.”

The northwest gale endlessly churns and rearranges the piles of dry, powdered snow into dunes, as high as twenty feet. Great mounds of snow, pushed up by plows, bracket every street. The roads are solid with packed snow from the traffic. Salt has no effect at these temperatures.

“I can see on that bank thermometer down the street that it’s -10F. I guess with the wind chill, it probably feels about -30F.”

“At -10F, there’s not a lot of feeling left, wind chill or not. Anyway, that’s about typical for winter on the plains after a storm, you know that.”

“Come on, I gotta go downstairs, we’re getting ready to open and there’s a lot to do. You might as well see how things work behind the scenes around here. It’s kind’a interesting, actually.”

David shows him around the club’s first floor as the staff hurries to get ready for opening. All around he sees people cleaning, sweeping, washing glasses, moving tables and chairs, shifting amps. The cavernous place echoes with sounds of

clapping, banging, metal against metal, wood against wood, doors slamming, some tubular piece of metal crashing like a bell on the stone floor. The racket of menial tasks permeates with an occasional shout or shrill whistle, the sound of roadies setting up for the evening's rock act remurmers.

The last shafts of violet and pink light glow through the skylights. The scarce final beams of day reflect on edges of the glass and splay out as wide rainbows of light on the walls high above. The blue sky darkens to purple.

Mike watches as pin spots have their bulbs reloaded. The disco balls are dusted and polished. Mylar confetti guns are loaded and the main stage spots are tested. The sound system blares a screech of shrill audio feedback followed by, "Testing one, two."

Mike takes an interest in the lasers and asks Todd, who's aligning them, "How do they work?"

Todd says, pointing above the dance floor, "Most of the laser guns are up there on that metal cage suspended about twenty feet above the floor. The main colors are green, red, white, and blue but I have multiple sets of each so I can dither them and get just about any color effect. I've also got units up on the second balcony on each side. Here let me show you."

He watches as Todd starts up a program on his computer console and says, "Each is controlled by this master computer console. The full laser assemblies are all on servo mechanisms so I can aim them in any direction around the club."

He demonstrates by having the red laser beam move 360 degrees around the club shooting its shaft of light at each of the walls.

"Each laser unit itself consists of the laser aimed at a small voice coil mounted mirror. The servos make the major alignments then the voice coils do the actual detailed movement. Each mirror can be realigned a few thousand times a second by the computer, thus producing what appears to be a continuous pattern on the target. Here, watch this." Todd demonstrates by writing MIKE on each of the walls with each color.

"Nice, I always wondered how they worked."

"Actually, some of the lasers are just a little on the high power side. I run them at

a fraction of their full output.”

“Define high power.”

“It’s a relative term, depends on which side of the beam you’re on.”

“Example, please?”

“Well, sometimes, I do a little target practice. I’ll show you. Hey, Sean!” he shouts to one of the guys at the other end of the floor. “Can you let go a balloon?”

The reply, “Sure thing,” echoes from across the expanse.

Sean disappears for a moment then reappears with a small lighter than air balloon which he releases then runs for cover.

Todd hits some keys then grabs a joy stick as a pinpoint laser beam begins seeking the balloon. Once the point beam targets the balloon, Todd taps a button on the keyboard. The red dot flares and the balloon explodes in flames.

“Oh, by the way, I use hydrogen balloons,” he chuckles. “More realistic.”

“Well, that looks like fun. I’ll bet it helps with crowd control too.”

“Actually, never turned it on the patrons, yet. But the thought has crossed my mind a few times,” he grins.

“Remind me to stay away from that thing. Why do you have such high powered ones?”

“Oh, I was using them in some experiments and when I was done, didn’t want to throw them out so I put them up in the lighting array. Don’t worry, the high power ones are password protected. Lance, David and I are the only ones who know the code.”

“Say, Todd, how did you get to know David, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“Oh, I met him in St. Louis. I needed money and he and Stan were setting up their company. I was in grad school at the time. They hired me on as a

programmer. One thing led to another and next thing, I had stock options, then the buy out. Finished my degree about the same time as Stan got murdered. When David finally decided to buy this place, he asked if I wanted to join him. He had some ideas on cyber warfare, that sort of thing. So, being filthy rich, I didn't have much better to do so I moved out here a couple of years ago and been doing this part time and running that computer maze upstairs the rest of the time. It's sort'a like being back at grad school, half the time in the lab, half the time in a bar."

"Man, that's every occupation. Where did you come from originally?"

"Oh, Ohio mostly, Columbus to be exact. My parents taught at OSU. They were in history and English, nothing technical but there were a lot of technical people there. I started taking courses when I was a sophomore in high school. By the time I got my high school degree, I had pretty near all the credits I needed for a B.S. degree. Anyway, I went there and took more courses, lots in electrical engineering, hence the electronic toy count around here. I did some work on chip design which comes in handy. I have a lot of the chips we use specially fab'ed. The performance is much better that way."

"What's fab'ed mean?"

"Fabricated, I can send a file of a computer chip design to a company and they make the chip for me."

"Expensive?"

"Not really, mainly gate arrays. Anyhow, after a few years at OSU, I went to Wash-U and did my D.Sc. in computer science."

"Did you ever have anything to do with Stan's crusade against the drug lords?"

"No, I was back in school then. I knew about it but was too busy finishing my thesis at the time. I used to see David and Stan occasionally. We'd sometimes run into one another at a bar or Shaw's Gardens. We were all plant freaks back then. I still do a lot of bonsai's upstairs."

"Yeah, I noticed some when David gave me the tour of the machine room. They're real nice, I like them."

“They love the climate controlled atmosphere up there and the fluorescent lights are perfect.”

“So, basically, you’re a complete and total geek?”

“Yep, total,” says Todd with a grin. “And loving every minute of it. Hey, it beats your line of work. It’s indoors, no heavy lifting and I hardly ever get shot at fleeing across state lines.”

“You may have a point there. Ever want to do anything else?”

“Nope. There isn’t anything else that’s interesting.”

“What was the last vacation you took?”

“International Consumer Electronics Show just last week.”

“Geez! Why did I bother to ask? So, tell me about the cyber warfare stuff? What does it involve?”

“Oh, we’ve really made some neat things there. Not just software tools, but we’ve developed a lot of hardware, like robots, audio and video devices as well as software systems. This problem of yours is an opportunity, ya’know. I’m hoping it’ll give me a chance to test out some of my toys. It’s a nasty world out there, electronically speaking. Every thing is very tightly interconnected. We’re getting to the point where an attacker can shutdown the economy and cause massive disruption in basic services just with a computer.”

“Yeah, David was saying something about that. Here, let me see how you align those laser things, I’m curious.”

Todd then proceeds to lead Mike through the alignment process step by step and shows him the inner workings of the laser guns, their voice coils, mirrors and servos.

As opening hour approaches, the last of the day’s supplies are delivered from various distributors. Mike wanders around watching the provisioning. He asks Todd, “How much stuff gets delivered every day?”

“About half of it. They never bring what I order.”

“No really, how much stuff does this place go through?”

“Well, if you don’t count the truckloads of protein shakes Lance orders, some things we get every couple of days, some things once a week, some things every day. The beer truck shows up Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We get a bigger delivery on Friday, naturally. We get fresh bread for the sandwiches daily. The cold cuts, cheese and that sort of thing, once a week. The pizzas are frozen and they come in once a week. We go through a hell of a lot of pizza slices. The peanuts come in a couple of times a month in hundred pound sacks. That’s another really big item. David insists that we give out peanuts salted in the shell for free. You any idea how many peanut shells we need to sweep up every day? Then there’s the hard liquor and mixers, once a week. The lemons, limes, oranges, onions, whatever, once a week. We also serve hamburgers, fries, tacos, burritos, things like that. They all come in frozen. I have a big walk in freezer behind the bar. The chips and things like that get delivered a couple times a week. We don’t have the space to store much of that stuff, and we go through it quickly.”

“Wow, that’s impressive. I didn’t realize the wall behind the bar wasn’t the building wall.”

“No, it looks like it but there’s a big area behind it where we store stuff. Come’on, I’ll show you.”

They walk around Todd’s console through a passage and Mike sees another large room, like the ones upstairs.

“You can see the walk in freezer down at the other end,” says Todd. “Next to it is a big refrigerator where we keep the stuff that needs to be kept cold but not frozen. Along the walls you can see the storage racks where we keep the other stuff. Along this wall are the cases of beer, organized alphabetically by brand, and other bottled and canned drinks. Most of our beer sales are draught but there’s always some Harp who wants a Guinness.”

“Hey, watch who you’re calling a Harp.”

“Oh, I forgot. You’re Irish too? Crap, the damned place is infested with them. Don’t you people ever hang out somewhere other than a bar?”

“Not if we can help it. We’re big on breweries, too. You know why the Irish

can't donate blood, don't you?"

"Okay, I'll bite, why?"

"Because it has a head on it."

"As I was saying, there's always some damned Harp who wants a Guinness so, as you can see, there's quite a lot of them over there along with just about every other freaking beer known to man."

Mike walks over to the Guinness heap and plucks a tall, black, sixteen ounce can, pops the top, gestures a toast towards Todd, quaffs a generous libation and says, in a brogue, "You don't happen to have any whiskey handy to thin it out a bit, do you?"

"No, the bar's not open yet. By the way, I'll charge that to your room."

"Now, now, let's not get David mad. I'm already into him for who knows how much for the clothes. Not to mention making Mo Ron a major gangland target."

"Well, to be perfectly frank, I think he's looking forward to the fight with Jack. He wants to get even ya'know."

"Yeah, I guess he does. I would too."

"So, seen enough?"

"Just one more thing," says Mike as he strolls over and grabs another Guinness and tucks it into his back pocket. Todd also plucks a Guinness, opens it and takes a drink.

"Hey, we'll make a Celt of you yet, man."

"I hope not. A drunk will do."

"That can be arranged," says Mike as they return to Todd's computer station.

"So, tell me more about this magic console of yours."

"Well, you saw the laser controls."

"Very impressive and probably very illegal."

“The law is a fine point, my dear boy. It very much depends upon how you interpret it. And, one of its finer points is, don’t piss off the guy with the kilo-Joule laser ray guns.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. You were saying?”

“Yeah, this is it. Nice, ain’t it? I can control or access just about every system in the building from here. I know how many drinks have been poured, how many people have come through the doors, and their mug shots, driver’s license scans, security cams, video conferencing with everybody upstairs, audio to all those headsets you see people wearing, you name it. It’s here.”

“Driver license scans?”

“Yeah, we swipe patron ID cards if we’re suspicious that they’re fake or if we’re just plain suspicious, like yours, for instance. Most states have mag strips on the back with a lot of data, sometimes even a JPEG of the picture. We store the data for a few days.”

“So tell me more about what you do with all the toys upstairs, besides the hardware, I mean?”

“The cyber warfare works? We build cyber weapons, defense systems, intelligence, counter intelligence systems.”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, all sorts of things from simple cases of web based vandalism such as defacing web pages or small scale denial-of-service attacks all the way up to international terrorism and cyber war by rogue governments like North Korea and Iran.”

“What’s a denial-of-service attack?”

“A DoS attack mainly attempts to overload a service by making it unavailable to others or costing the target money or resources. It tries to put a service out of commission by using bandwidth, disk space, or CPU time. It can also involve disrupting routing information, disrupting access to sites and sometimes execution of malware to bring down host systems. Sometimes they’re called DDoS’s, distributed denial of service attacks. These use multiple machines,

sometimes thousands of zombies, to bring about the overload.”

“Zombies? What’s a zombie?”

“A computer on the Internet that’s been compromised by an attacker. The owner of the machine may not know it. The zombies are organized into botnets, a collection of zombies on the network that can be controlled by someone.”

“Does this happen often?”

“Oh yeah, all the time. In the last two months there were 20 million attack e-mails carrying the Storm Worm payload. It’s not really a worm but a bot used to organize infected computers into a botnet which can be controlled from a single site. Storm Worm may control up to 10 million machines right now, no one really knows and Mega D is probably even bigger! Other types of cyber attacks include spreading propaganda by altering or hijacking legitimate news sites, disrupting equipment such as military satellites, attacking communications networks, routers and name servers. Also, attacks at infrastructure such as power grids, water supply systems, transportation, fuel systems, nuclear power stations, you name it.”

“Wow!”

“Get on the Internet, for a few hundred dollars you can have your own custom built botnet along with 24x7 tech support. You can host it in a country like China or Russia for a few bucks a month where the authorities look the other way. For less than \$200 you can get spammers to send out a million “click here for naked Brittany pictures” emails to bring the sheep to your malware loaded web site. It’s a piece of cake man, anything you want, it’s out there, cheap and easy to get.”

“I think I’ve clicked on some of those emails.”

“You probably have. But listen man, you know those digital photo frames they sell all over the place?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, many of them come equipped with a Trojan virus so that when you plug them into your computer to upload pictures, the Trojan enters your system and starts sending your passwords back to China.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Hell no. One big disk drive manufacturer discovered that its drives were being pre-loaded in Asia with malware.”

“But why should I worry if some jerk infects his laptop?”

“Any idea how easy it is to take down the air transportation system? Those FAA computers are a hacker’s dream come true. The world is wired, dude, and not very secure. Here, look at this,” says Todd as he turns to his console and brings up an online news article. Todd highlights a section of text with his mouse.

Mike leans over and reads it: “We have information, from multiple regions outside the United States, of cyber intrusions into utilities, followed by extortion demands. We suspect, but cannot confirm, that some of these attackers had the benefit of inside knowledge. We have information that cyberattacks have been used to disrupt power equipment in several regions outside the United States. In at least one case, the disruption caused a power outage affecting multiple cities. We do not know who executed these attacks or why, but all involved intrusions through the Internet”

“That’s a statement from the CIA, man. You know that if they’re admitting anything, the reality is far worse. They were at a meeting discussing SCADA, Supervisory Control And Data Acquisition, things that control critical infrastructure.”

“So, what do you do?”

“I develop counter measures, detection systems, malware detection and removal, network analysis and control. And, I also have my own little kit of attack software systems. We can defend but we can also strike back.”

“Who knows about this?”

“Not many. We have a few friends at NSA and MI5 we keep in contact with. Nothing official but we keep in touch. In other words, we watch them, they watch us.”

“Just the U.S. and U.K.?”

“Mainly. I don’t trust the French. But we do a little business with the Bundesnachrichtendienst and the Amt für Nachrichtenwesen der Bundeswehr from time to time.”

“The who?”

“No, that’s a classic rock group. The German Federal Intelligence Service, the BND, and the Office for Intelligence of the Federal Armed Forces, ANBw, for short.”

“I think I like the abbreviations better.”

“We also deal with the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, ASIS, sometimes.”

“Geez, is this place a nuclear target too?”

“Yep, I think so. At least that’s what our analysis of the PRC systems we’ve broken into say.”

“Wonderful, I’m not sure I understood any of that but it sounds frightening. Speaking of which, now can we play with the lasers again?”

“Ahh, a one track mind. Okay, hot shot, go out onto the dance floor and toss that empty Guinness can as high as you can.”

Mike does. At its apogee, Todd hits it from four sides with his lasers and it explodes into a spray of aluminum debris. Mike covers his head and runs for cover.

“Well, how was that?”

“I guess that’s one way to get rid of the empties. But it costs a nickel.”

“Not in Nebraska.”

“Okay, no loss then. I think it’s time I went upstairs before you start shooting that thing at me.”

“Good idea seeing as how I was just getting around to that.”

“You’re not really gonna aim that thing at me, are you?”

“Who, me?”

Mike walks across the floor surrounded on all sides by flashing, low power, laser beams. He turns and says, “You’ll pay, just you wait.”

Todd says, “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“I’ll see you at supper.”

“Bring a food taster.”

Mike returns back to his apartment just in time to see the last rosy limb of the setting sun cross the horizon in a blaze of pink and purple. In a moment, only saffron streamers remain. A sudden stillness seems to grip the land. A few crows rush by in the wasting light of day as the sky swiftly darkens. Wisps of steam rush from small smoke stacks on the old industrial buildings around Mo River. He watches flourishes of snow spin off the roof above and vanish in the dry cold. The street lights slowly brighten as frozen sodium vapor slowly warms. Neon signs flicker along the street below. Out on I80, signs mounted on huge round steel masts blaze in the darkness. They beckon the weary and chilled with cheap diesel, gas, hot food, and lodging. A crystal cold winter’s night descends upon the snow covered prairie.

Mike sits down at his laptop and works on his report. He begins to organize the data chronologically with names, dates, places and details of nearly every transaction done in the past four years. His gallery of photos alone would put most of these people away for life. Laboring away at the word processor, he’s startled when his cell phone rings.

“Hey, come on over, supper is ready,” announces David.

He closes out the word processor and shuts down the laptop. Tucking in his shirt, he hurries out of his apartment and down the hall. From over the balcony, he hears music and the distant echoes of excited voices. Just before knocking on David’s door, he pauses to look and sees the happy hour crowd assembling below. The crowd is sparse by comparison to what it was late last night but energetic and boisterous as a busy social night begins.

Time: 6 PM

It’s a little after six pm as he knocks on David’s door.

“It’s open,” David hollers.

David, Todd, Lois, and Jane are in the living room. Mary comes in from the kitchen and hands Mike a scotch and soda then reaches back behind her for a platter of cheese, crackers and nuts which she puts on the table. Mike sits down on one of the couches.

Mike says, "So, where's Lance?"

Mary says, "He has his own diet regimen, mostly soy powder, carrot sticks, seeds and nuts, I think. By the way, I hope you weren't too traumatized by us girls this afternoon?"

"Traumatized? I was terrorized."

She laughs and says, "Honey, we were gentle on you. You got off easy. And the new clothes look nice." She goes back to getting things out for supper.

As they talk, in the wide south facing window, stars rise as the frigid night descends. Overhead, on the glide path to Omaha's airport, coasting planes with red-green blinking lights pass in a sable sky while heavy trailers, edged in yellow lights, lumber out on I80 beyond. Mary rejoins them, sits on the couch next to David, swings her arm around him, lights a cigarette and puffs a large smoke ring towards the beams above.

"So, Mary," Mike begins, "How did you meet David?"

"Oh, I was a nurse at the Vermin Death Lodge in St. Louis when he had visions of curing the world. He was a med student and my job was to follow med students around and undo the damage they did. He was a full time project."

"Vermin Death Lodge? Huh?"

"The nickname for the hospital," answers David. "And, I never actually lost a patient. Misplaced a few, maybe, but, no, never lost one."

"Not after we figured out how to trap you and your kind in the employee elevator, dearie. You fell for that every time."

"What?"

"We nurses used to page you students to the 9th floor then have maintenance

stop the elevator between floors.”

“You what?”

“What, you didn’t know? Didn’t you think it just a tiny bit suspicious that every time one of you got paged to Nine-West you got trapped in the elevator? Nine-West in the page was the code we used to tell maintenance to stop the elevator.”

“What? I thought it was just an old elevator. Why Nine-West?”

“Davey, honey, there was no Nine-West.”

“Geez, Must have been a wonderful place to get sick,” says Mike, rolling his eyes.

“It was when he was on his way to Nine-West.”

“You don’t pull any stunts like that here, do you?” asks David.

“Oh, honey? Would I do anything like that?”

“Yeah, I guess that sort’a thing would cut into your home shopping channel time.”

“Anyway,” as she kicks him, “After he left town I just tagged along. Seemed better than unleashing him on an unsuspecting world.”

“Yeah. Now she runs the place, her and the other weird sisters, hand in hand.”

“Now Davey, I let you play with your toys downstairs, don’t I?”

“She hates computers, ya’know?” David whispers in a paranoid aside to Mike.

“Dearie, as long as they keep you out’a my hair, they’re fine with me,” she says, getting up. “Okay, I’ve had enough of this. You, be quiet or else. Girls, it’s time to cook or we’re doomed to another night of pizza,” and heads for the kitchen. The other women rise and follow her.

Lois asks as she leaves, “Anyone for a refill?”

All three guys nod. She mutters, “I had to ask!” She brings the scotch bottle and

a couple of bottles of soda and puts them on the central table. “Anything else I can get you guys so you don’t have to get up?”

“No, we’re good, for now,” says David.

She glares at him and heads for the kitchen.

Mary starts slapping raw steaks on the large, built-in gas grill. They spit, steam, sizzle and flare as the grease spatters. The big hood above sucks up the billows of smoke. On a side panel, Lois dumps a mass of fat, curved, wedge shaped fries.

More drinks are poured, mainly single malt scotch with and without soda. They all light cigarettes. David mutters something about never dating another Irish woman. From the kitchen, “I heard that!” bellows Mary. David tops off his drink, and whispers, “See what I mean?”

After eating, they sit around the big screen display. The massive TV screen shows multiple windows with images from security cameras around the club. In one, there is a shot looking down onto the main entrance. In others, there are images of the crowd building in the club below. David fiddles with various computer displays that give him the number of people who have entered, the number of drinks vended, and so on.

Finally, Todd says, “Well, I guess it’s time for us to get to work.” and he and the women head for the club floor below. Likewise, Mike says he wants to get some work done. David remains scanning the security cameras.

Time: 8 PM

At about eight pm Tom and Bob dress up and douse themselves generously with the after shave lotion on the theory that if a little is good, more is better. Reeking of a vaguely spicy combination of soap, after shave, cigarettes and the distinct smell of formaldehyde from the unwashed new shirts, they bundle up and run to their car for the short drive to Mo R♦n.

Sitting in the car waiting for the engine to warm up and defrost the windows, Bob jokes, “So, this is like a social evening on an expense account, right? Just like some big time execs at the tractor factory in Waterloo?”

“Ahhh, Okay, I’ll play along Mr. Executive,” says Tom ducking a bit to see through an opening in the ice fogged windows. Outside he sees a squalid, snow covered, light industrial landscape. “I guess we just pretend we’re in the classy part of Waterloo for the night and we’re heading out to meet our dates for dinner at the Red Hawk Club.”

“No, man, dinner at one of those small expensive restaurants in Cedar Falls then the show at the Resound where the women are all over us. And we sit in with the band for jam sessions and the crowd loves it every weekend and, sometimes, weekdays, when we’re not running the diesel engine foundry,” muses Bob.

“That’s just the way I see it too, exactly right, dude. And a couple of nice, big cars,” says Tom.

A feeble stream of heat now begins to emanate from the vents as the heater’s spinning squirrel cage fan rattles with age. Bob carefully shifts into gear, the transmission lurches, and they motor to Mo R in silence, each daydreaming about what it really would be like to star in a band at the Resound.

Tom and Bob both went to Waterloo North High in Iowa. Sons of blue collar workers, they always figured they would follow their fathers and work for the local tractor foundry. But hard times in the farm economy, the recession following 9/11, foreign competition, corporate consolidation, a host of reasons, resulted in fewer openings. So, when it came time for Tom and Bob to take their fathers’ places, there were no jobs available.

They were both the only children of their respective parents. Tom’s parents died in a car crash when he was in senior year. Bob’s father was a drunk who kicked Bob out of the house when he turned eighteen rather than have another mouth to feed. So, both found themselves without family and on their own their senior year of high school.

They teamed up and were able to rent the upstairs of an old house on North Sycamore and roomed together struggling to finish high school by doing what odd jobs they could find. They knew that if they were ever going to get a real job, they had to have a high school diploma.

By day they shuttled from school to any jobs they could find. By night, they schemed to start a landscaping business. They worked at every discount department store and supermarket in town, any jobs they could find. But with

13,000 college kids trying to pay rising tuition at a state university ten miles away, the job market for someone their age was neither good nor well paying.

After graduation, they tried to start the dreamt of landscaping business but were quickly disabused of the idea. Without money to buy the necessary equipment and tools, hire extra people, supplies and so forth, their plan foundered. So they went back to seeking what work they could and making ends meet, somehow.

In time, they found themselves doing occasional errands for a local dealer. After a while, these errands became their primary means of support. The work was mainly go here, go there, deliver this, pick up that. For the most part, they drove around the state and bought out the pseudophed supply at small town pharmacies.

Soon they were doing jobs for a lot of people in the drug trade in eastern Iowa although they never used the stuff themselves. They lived from one assignment to the next. This winter, they ended up in Omaha working for Joe Schmidt who ran the show in Nebraska. They hated the work but they needed the money. They hope this job might pay better and might open up the possibility of better assignments.

The Resound is a dance club in Cedar Falls, a showplace for local bands and well known in the upper Midwest. It draws large crowds of twenty-somethings. Even though Tom and Bob had only been there a few times, they think about it often. To them, it represents a normal life for someone their age, one with regular friends, and meeting girls, a real job and having a home at the end of the day, not a motel room. They each know the other feels the same way but keep their morose thoughts quietly to themselves lest the pain they feel as their lives fall slowly to pieces leads to tears. Tears are for the night when the lights are out.

Tom and Bob park their car in the nearly full lot diagonally across the street from the club. Both look anxiously and eagerly at the club across the street and the crowd of people their age queuing to enter. Tom says, "Well, stud with the new shirt and jeans, are you ready to go meet some ladies?"

"I am indeed, dude. Show me the way."

"Oh yeah, before we forget completely why we're here, you do have that photo, right?" says Tom, remembering their real purpose.

“Yeah, it’s in my shirt pocket. Let’s go.”

They hop out of the car, lock and slam the doors and traipse cockily towards the entrance, each doing his best to pretend that this really is a night out clubbing. They join the line. After a few minutes, they’re at the door. The bouncer Sean checks their ID’s which he swipes through a reader and taps a button on the desk thus alerting Todd. Sean recognizes Tom and Bob from the motel that morning.

He says, “Welcome, guys, the coat room’s just over there,” and points to a long narrow room just next to the entrance with rows of hangers, already full with the bundlings of the assembled patrons.

“Thanks,” says Bob. “By the way, have you seen this guy? He’s a friend of ours and he said he might be here either last night or tonight.” Bob shows him Mike’s picture.

“I dunno, he kinda looks familiar but I can’t say for sure. I see a lot of people. He might’a been here last night,” answers Sean uncandidly.

“Thanks!” says Bob and they enter and turn to the coat room where they take off their jackets, stocking caps, gloves and scarves. These get shoved into pockets and coat sleeves. The coats join a collection of about a hundred already hung in hopes for the night to come. There’s a mirror at one end of the room into which they both peer anxiously. They pull out their combs and try to reverse the tonsorial effects of the stocking caps. Both tuck their shirts in, look at one another, mutually nod and give the thumbs up sign. They exit the coat room and walk hopefully out into the main part of the club.

While Tom and Bob are preening in the coat room, Todd, at his pulpit, pulls up the scan of their driver’s licenses along with the door security cam shots. With other cameras, he watches them as they hang their coats and prep before the mirror. Todd freezes a few headshots and stores them on disk. He looks across the club to where they’ve now entered the main room. He watches them standing near the entrance gawking at the dance floor.

Tom says, “Holy shit, will you just look at this place?”

“Say man, I don’t think we’re in Iowa any more,” jokes Bob. “Oh wow, look at the size of it. And look at all the people. We need to go clubbing in Omaha more often.”

“Yeah, there must be a hundred people here already and it’s only a little after eight. I wonder how crowded it gets before the night is over?”

“I dunno. Seems like it can hold a lot more. I can’t believe this. Look how high up the ceiling is. And what’s all those? Catwalks?”

“I guess they have lights and sound equipment up there. Look, you see the disco balls? I’ve never seen a real one, just on TV.”

“Wow, what a place! So, what’s our plan? The bouncer seemed to think he’d seen Mike. What’ya think?”

“I dunno, he didn’t seem all that sure. We need something more to go on.”

“Well, first things first, let’s get some beer at that bar over there and then we start circulating. Someone might tell us something we can sell to Pete.”

Mike’s working on his laptop in his apartment when his cell phone rings. He pulls it out of his shirt pocket, opens it and reads the incoming text message. It’s a message that says go to David’s apartment quick, there’s something on the computer screen he needs to see.

Mike puts the laptop in hibernate mode and hurries out and down the hall to David’s apartment. He knocks, and enters without waiting, slamming the door behind him. He quickly leaps over the back and onto the couch saying, “I got the message, what’s up? Why didn’t you just call?”

David is poised on the center couch facing the screen and typing on the keyboard. “Oh, I was using the keyboard and it was easier just to type and send it than pick up the phone. I got a message from Todd downstairs, security spotted the guys who are probably the ones from the motel this morning,” says David. “Todd says he’s got a positive ID on the cell phone one of them has. It was the phone that called Pete.”

“Oh crap, I was hoping this wouldn’t happen but I guess it was inevitable. Now they know for certain where I am. Where are they now?” he asks seeing several windows with security camera shots on the big screen.

“I’m just opening a connection to Todd’s web cam.”

Mike sits quietly and watches as the large LCD screen lights up to display a group of new icons, tool bars, and message windows. David, mouse now in hand, quickly moves the cursor to an icon. He quickly double clicks and a window appears with a web cam shot of Todd behind the bar on the floor below. As soon as he does this, the LED on David's web cam on the wall switches from red to green.

"See, there's my web cam," as he points the small lens below the green LED just above the screen.

"Hey David," greets the voice from the animated figure in the window on the screen.

"What'ya got Todd?" David replies.

"Our friends from the motel walked in a little while ago and you might want to take a look. Sean says he recognizes them. I looked myself and they sure seem to match the pictures from the motel. I've got a security camera trained on them. Check out cam21."

With that, David clicks another icon then taps a few keys and one of the security video camera windows enlarges and places itself next to Todd's window. It shows the feed from a group of security cameras mounted above the bar at regular intervals. The image is focused in on two guys near the door. One is leaning to his right speaking to the other with his hand covering his mouth. The other nods and looks around the club then gestures towards the bar on the other side from where they're standing. The first nods in agreement and they head towards the bar.

"How can you see them so well, it's dark and smoky down there?" Mike asks.

"I use multiple night vision cameras with digital interferometry to correct for the distortions. The final image is a composite but more or less real time. I can read the hands on their wrist watches with this rig, if I want to," says David proudly.

He leans over, clicks on the mic icon under Todd's display and says, "Keep an eye on them. They look like the guys in the photos to me too. Mike's here. What'ya think? You recognize them?"

"Oh yeah, that's Tom and Bob, I've seen them before. Dressed a bit better than

usual, however, I might add.”

“Yeah, so are you.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Tom and Bob get a couple of beers at the bar and begin conducting their investigation by meeting people, mainly girl people. After their second round of beers, they’re both feeling like suave private detectives and begin acting the part. They pass around the picture of Mike to a group of girls they’ve joined, one of whom says, “Yeah, I’ve seen him. Last night. Kind’a difficult to forget that hippy haircut.”

“So, what can you tell me about him?” asks Bob.

“What, are you some kind’a detective?” she asks.

“Yeah, we’re working on a drug case,” says Tom as Bob suppresses a laugh.

“Ahh, so that explains the haircut!” as she nods knowingly to her friends. “Well, I don’t know much. Saw him at the bar. Then, after David introduced the band, he and David were talking. They stood over there. I could see that the bartender poured a really big glass of real expensive scotch. They talked for a while and then they went upstairs,” answers Sally.

“Who’s David and what do you mean by upstairs?” asks Bob.

“Hey man, this is David’s, he’s the owner of the Mo R♦n. Up on the top floor. Look. You can just barely see the balconies. There are a bunch of apartments way up there. This guy you’re looking for seemed to be a good friend of David’s but I don’t remember ever seeing him here before.”

“How do you know David?”

“Oh, I see him here all the time.”

“How do you get up there?”

“See that door over there? There’s a freight elevator behind it. It goes to the top floor,” she says pointing.

“Ever been up there?”

“Oh, yeah, but that’s another story,” she blushes.

Then one of her friends calls her away and Bob turns to Tom and says, “I think we hit pay dirt. Pete’s gonna love this.”

They gaze up at the balconies and Bob says, “I wonder what it’s like living up there? Would that be what they call a penthouse?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I need a penthouse. Must be a real chick magnet,” says Bob.

“The only penthouse you’re getting is a magazine and the only magnet will be on a refrigerator.”

“Just you wait, some day I’ll live in a place like that. Mark my words,” says Bob. Tom rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

Mike and David watch Tom and Bob talking to Sally. They see her handing the picture back to Bob and talk to him nodding. Then they see her as she points to the balconies above then gestures towards the door to the freight elevator across the room. At which David exclaims, “Crap, looks like they’ve ID’d you for sure.”

“Kind’a looks that way,” replies Mike.

Tom says to Bob, “Hey, listen, it looks like the entertainment’s about to start. We probably won’t be able to hear anything while the band’s playing. Let’s go get a table and order some more beer until their set is over. Maybe the waitress will know something.”

“Sounds good. Ya’know, we’ve really never done this sort of thing before but I guess we’re really making progress, ya’think?”

“Guess so. We’ve got what Pete wants. Now let’s see if we can come up with anything else. So? I guess we’re big time now?”

“Yeah right, geeez. But right now, I’m for getting more beers as long as Pete’s

paying for them. Hey, we might get lucky and actually find Mike tonight, ya'never can tell?"

"With our luck we'll be lucky if we can find anyone to bring us the beer."

"Okay, I can settle for beer. That would be good. And maybe some pizza."

"Some freaking detectives we are. Somehow I don't see James Bond with a pizza and a beer," says Tom as they head for a quieter part of the club opposite the stage and sit down at a small table with high stool-like chairs.

"Well, if James Bond came to Omaha, ya'can't tell. Maybe he would."

Bob says, leaning over to Tom, "But, ya'know, this is really a nice place. Lots'a nice girls here."

"Well, don't fall in love. This may be our only time."

The band takes the stage and begins plugging in their equipment.

"Hey, look at that band. I know them. We saw them before, remember? A couple of years ago, up in Mason City, right?"

"Yep, right there in Mason City. At least they got one saxophone," says Bob.

"Just be glad it's not seventy six electric trombones," laughs Tom.

Mason City was the supposed site of the musical The Music Man the home of its composer, a trivial fact learned early in Iowa schools.

The entertainment that night is a battle of the bands, mainly local crews but some from other parts of the Midwest. The first is the group from Mason City, a garage band, basically, consisting of five tall guys in head bands, and bandannas. Two are singers and they wield hefty electric guitars. One is the drummer with a somewhat saucer eyed, dazed look, one has a saxophone while another straddles a keyboard. Because there are several bands, the show begins early at nine o'clock rather than ten o'clock as is traditional. The entertainment starts with the usual blast of pyrotechnics, smoke and Mylar confetti shot from air guns. One of the bouncers, Gene Schell, fills in as MC for the night.

The crowd cheers when the playing starts and the dancing begins. The floor of the balcony shakes under Mike who's come out to watch. He wonders if this old building can take it. However, above him he sees the dim outlines of the two foot timber rafters and the two inch thick iron stabilizing rods with the giant turn buckles, and realizes that this place could probably take a force 5 tornado, let alone a few hundred bouncing dancers and a five piece garage band from Mason City.

The place smells like a mixture of Dial soap, testosterone and Clearasil. The keyboard thunders away, the drums pound and the guitars belt out shrill but synced cords. The crowd starts to sway, thrust and jiggle. The house goes wild, the disco balls spin and lasers splay their multicolored fan like rays over the heads of all below. Mike watches the show, scotch in one hand, cigarette in the other hand. The bartenders rake in the cash by the fistful.

After looking over the scene below, Mike returns to David's apartment and says, "Gets a bit loud out there."

"Ohh, you should see it some nights. Shakes the dust off the rafters," answers David.

"What are they up to now? I could see them from the balcony until they got directly underneath. Looked like they were heading for a table."

"Right, that's where they went," replies David as he cues the web cam and says to Todd, "Have Mary serve them and check'em out. She's seen the photos, right?"

"She has, but I'll have her take another look," replies Todd as they see him signal to someone off camera.

"Can you see them?" says Mike.

David hits a few keys and a new window with a different security camera view pops onto the screen. "Oh yeah, and we'll be able to hear, too. Here, I'll focus in on them as Mary talks to them."

He types some more keys and the camera narrows in on the would-be sleuths at the small table. Meanwhile, in the window showing Todd, Mary enters the picture and waves at the web cam. Todd shows her the photos on his monitor of

the two guys they're interested in. He then points across the club in the direction of the table where they're sitting. She looks and nods.

Todd looks back to the camera, keys his mic and says, "Mary's on her way now. I gave her a basket of peanuts with a wireless mic in it."

"Good, we'll listen in from here," says David as he turns to Mike and says, "We use wireless headsets on all the people on the floor, mainly to save time sending orders back to the bar but they're two-way and I can talk into anyone from here."

Another camera now shows Mary walking up to the table where the two have seated themselves. David hits a key and her wireless headset turns on.

"Hey, Mary, can you hear me? We're watching and listening."

She looks up at the security camera she knows must be following her and does a sarcastic imitation of a curtsy and says, "I thought you would be. Voyeurs."

As she approaches the table, Mary says, "Hey guys, what'll it be?" She puts the wired basket on the table.

"A couple of beers and some information," replies Bob.

Mary reaches to the small box clipped to her belt, presses a key and speaks into the headset microphone saying, "Two beers, twenty-two."

"What's that?" Bob asks.

"It's a wireless mic. It lets me call orders to the bar. My server code is twenty-two."

Mary leans over, her mic now in range of Bob, and says, "So, the beers are two bucks a piece, information costs a bit more. What kind of information you looking for, honey?"

Bob begins, "We're looking for a guy, mid-twenties, long, dark hair, tall, thin."

"Honey, every gal here is looking for a guy like that, even some of the guys."

"His name is Mike McAneas, used to live in Iowa. Drives an old car. Got into

town last night. Here's his picture." Bob takes the faxed snapshot of Mike from his shirt pocket and hands it to her. "He was seen here last night. We'll make it worth your while if you can tell us anything about him."

Mary pauses, looks at the photo, knits her brow and says, "Let me think. Last night, you say? During the storm?"

"Yeah, we know he was here, a couple of the women we talked to saw him. They noticed because he wasn't a regular and that hair cut of his kind'a stands out a bit. Any idea where he is?"

David, listening to the conversation, keys his mic and says to Mary, "They already know he was here so you might as well tell them he came in here last night. Say that he said he might come back again tonight. Let's see if we can get them to think he's not living here. Let's see what their reaction is."

Mary nods and says, "Oh, yeah, he was here last night. I served them. He sat over here, for that matter. He said he might come back again tonight. Cute guy."

Bob looks up and says, "Okay, now we're getting somewhere. What's behind that door way over there?" as he points to the door to the freight elevator and slips Mary a \$20 bill.

Mary takes the bill, slips it into the side pocket of her tight jeans and says, "Over there? Freight elevator. I'll go get those beers now."

"We hear that he's living up there in an apartment, any truth to that?"

"Up there? No honey, just me and my boy friend live up there and that ain't my boy friend."

"So he's not living here?"

"Nope."

"Oh, yeah, bring us a pizza too, please. The works," says Tom.

"You got it, honey."

"Hey," Tom says to Bob. "Pete's paying, we might as well eat while we can."

“Right about that. Did you believe her?”

“Nope. He’s here.”

As she walks toward the bar she mutters into the mic, “Well that didn’t work too well. One of the sleepovers must have seen him this morning. And, geez, honey, you do know these guys are packing heat? How the hell did they get in here with guns?”

David replies, “Don’t worry, Lance knows. He figured, maybe they’d just scout the place and find nothing then report back that he wasn’t here. So, Lance didn’t want them to know we were onto them by grabbing their hardware. Don’t worry, though, he’s keeping a close eye on them.”

“So, Davey, what do you want me to do now?”

“I guess just keep bring’em beers and let me know if they say anything useful.”

“Will do but if one of them pulls a gun...”

“With you there, he won’t stand a chance.”

“Damned right he wouldn’t. I’ve disarmed more than my share of hoods in the ER.”

David mutes the mic and says, “I pity the guy that makes a wrong move around her.”

“Yeah, she might do a makeover on them.”

For the next hour Tom and Bob listen to the concert and do what they do best, drink beer, eat pizza, watch girls and ask questions.

Finally, David turns to Mike and says, “Come on,” as he walks over to a cabinet, opens it and pulls out a pair of binoculars. Leaving the apartment he walks down the balcony to get a better angle. He leans over the balcony, he targets the table with Tom and Bob and focuses on them.

“There they are. Just wanted to see them directly. Here, wanna look?”

He hands Mike the binoculars and points towards the table far below. Mike looks and says, “Yeah, I see them. So, what’ya think we should do now?”

“Well, I’m tired of waiting. I think it’s time I went and welcomed them to the club, that’s what, before they’re so drunk they pass out. Let’s see if I can get anything out of them while they still remember their names,” as he turns and goes back into the apartment. He reaches into a desk near the door and pulls out a small wireless microphone which he slips into his shirt pocket.

“You think I should come along?”

“Ahh, no. They may know you’re here but let’s not give the whole store away.”

“And about the guns?”

“Yeah, like either of them could shoot straight after as many beers as they’ve had? Don’t worry, you see how many guys I got working the floor? We got guns too. And then there’s Mary.”

“Still sounds risky.”

“Yeah, but they don’t know Mary. I’ll have Lance arrange some backup, just in case. Anyway, it’ll be interesting to see how they react to the frontal approach. The let’em look around strategy didn’t work too well.”

“I’m not sure I like your idea of fun.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be all right. Go watch on the monitor.”

“It’s your funeral,” say Mike as David leaves the apartment and Mike lights a cigarette and slouches on the couch watching the display focused on Tom and Bob at their table drinking beers and talking to one another, oblivious that they’re being watched from all sides.

David threads his way across the floor to Todd’s command post and says, “Anything new?”

“No, they’ve been just talking to people and drinking for the past hour,” shrugs Todd.

“Yeah, we’ve been watching upstairs on the cameras. Did you see them talking with that group of women earlier when they started pointing over at the elevator door?”

“Yep.”

“Then one of them told Mary someone said Mike was living upstairs. Must’a been one of the sleepover people. They know about the apartments.”

“Yep, Mary told me.”

“So, what’a we got? Assuming that they’re just scouts, they’ll report back that Mike was here last night and spotted here again this morning and that he’s probably living in the apartments up top.”

“That’s about it. I’m pretty sure they’re not here to try anything but if I were Mike, I wouldn’t walk across the dance floor right now. They just might try for the brass ring.”

“You hear that Mike?” says David into his mic.

A text message appears on Todd’s console, “Yeah, I heard it.”

“So, what are you gonna do?”

David picks up a clipboard of receipts, scans them then says, “I think it’s time I welcomed them to the club, don’t you? See if they have any questions for me.”

“How much backup do you want?”

“I don’t know, but they’re armed. I doubt they’ll pull anything in a crowded place like this and they’re too drunk to move very fast. Just to be safe, better call Lance over and see what he recommends.”

Todd hits a key then speaks into the headset microphone he’s wearing and says, “Hey Lance, can you come over here for a minute?”

Lance acknowledges and Todd nods. David sets down the clipboard. Lance jogs around the crowd from the other side of the club. As he arrives at the podium he says, “Hey guys, what’s up?”

“You see those two over there?” says David.

“Oh yeah, we’ve been watching them,” as he nods in Tom and Bob’s direction. David looks over and notices for the first time two of the bouncers about ten feet behind them in the shadows.

“I see what you mean.”

“Well, David here is going over and make them feel welcome, so to speak,” says Todd.

“Is he, now? Need a little backup?” asks Lance.

“Yeah but I don’t think they’ll try to pull anything serious, I’m pretty sure they’re just scouts.”

“Nonetheless, it pays to be ready. They’ve chugged a lot of beer, they might try something stupid. It doesn’t hurt to be prepared,” says Lance as he pulls out a small police type radio, hits a key and says into it, “Sean, Tony, Jim, how about discreetly heading over to table 32 where our friends have parked themselves? David’s gonna go have a little talk with them. We might need a little back up if they pull anything.”

Three muffled and squelched “Okay’s” respond in quick order.

“Give them a minute to get in place,” says Lance as he leaves, taking a circuitous route to the area behind Tom and Bob.

After about two minutes, Todd says, “Looks like everyone’s in place. What channel are you on?”

“27,” says David as he walks towards Tom and Bob. On his way he jovially back slaps some of the regulars. As he approaches the table, Bob and Tom are commenting about the client ♠le.

“Can I get you boys anything?” says David placing both hands palm down on the table and leaning forward menacingly.

Tom looks up uncertainly and slurs, “Yeah, you got any pretty women?” He and Bob burst into giddy, drunken laughs at what they both think is a very funny

line.

“All our lady guests are pretty. That’s not a very nice thing to say. I’m the owner of this place. My name’s David Shea. And who the hell are you and why are you asking questions about my guests?”

“Oh, this is your place?” says Bob, “We’re looking for someone who came in here last night. Someone named Mike McAneas. You know him?”

“I might. What’ya want him for?”

“Our boss has a little business to settle with him.”

“And just who might your boss be?”

“None of your fucking business,” says Tom, trying out his tough guy impersonation.

“Well, this is my club and everything that goes on here is my fucking business.”

Bob, equally drunk, stands up, as does David. Bob weaves closer to David and, in an attempt to be threatening, says, “Listen man, don’t fuck with us. We know McAneas was here last night and that you met with him upstairs.”

“And, what’s it to you?”

“We want to know where he is. If not, things could take a turn for the worse around here, you get my meaning?” says Bob holding on to the table for balance having absolutely no idea where he’s going with this line that he realizes is from an old TV program he once saw. He wonders what happened to the character who spoke it.

“I understand you’re a couple of drunks with an attitude problem. I think it’s time you guys went outside for some fresh air.”

“Hey, don’t call us drunks,” says Bob emphatically as he tries to maintain his balance.

Bob decides that he needs to do something so he fumbles awkwardly to reach into his bulky pants pocket for his gun. But before he can get a grip on it, his

face contorts in pain as David turns and knees him in the groin. He falls over and hits the floor with a thud. It's not clear if he's knocked out or passed out.

"So, ya' wanna play with guns?"

At the same time, there's the sound of a joint cracking. As Tom was likewise clumsily reaching for his gun, Sean, one of Lance's bouncers, has wrenched Tom's arm and jerked it up to the point that Tom's shoulder begins to dislocate. Tom screams in pain but he's drowned out by the band and the screaming crowd on the dance floor a few yards away.

Bob comes to and stumbles uncertainly to his feet only to be grabbed by Jim. From the pained expression on his face as Jim tightens his grip, it's clear he's done fighting.

David and Lance relieve them of their guns and David says, "This is a nice, quiet bar, we don't need trouble makers. Oh, and by the way, tell your boss I don't like having guns pulled on me."

Lance says, "Okay guys, time we sent'em packing."

Sean and Jim unceremoniously frog march Tom and Bob to the door and heave them out into the bank of snow and slush next to the entrance. Jim retrieves their coats from the coat room where they were searched earlier and tosses them on the wet, prone figures below. Jim slams the door which causes snow to dislodge from an overhang and dump upon them, only adding to the unhappy demise of their night's adventures.

For a few seconds, Tom and Bob writhe painfully in the salty slush. Then they scramble to grab their coats as the effect of the sub-zero temperature hits them like a sledge hammer.

"Oh Shit! Oh Shit! My coat's all wet," shouts Bob, suddenly much more sober than a few minutes earlier as he realizes his predicament is not good.

"Yeah, and my fucking arm's broke," whimpers Tom as he struggles to pull the coat on. Bob tries to help him, both now shivering uncontrollably.

Time: 10 PM

They finally stagger to their feet, both now shaking violently in their wet, slush filled coats in the face of the windy, -20F Nebraska night. They scurry, slip-sliding, on the icy pavement in a haze of obscenities across the street to the cold but windless sanctuary of their car.

“That fucking a’hole. He’ll pay for that. Fucking bastard.”

“Fucking shit. I’ll fucking blow his fucking head off.”

Their gloveless hands pull the doors of their car open.

“Oh shit, oh shit, my hands stuck to the fucking door handle,” cries Tom as wet flesh contacts the chilled metal.

He pulls his hand free with more shrieks of pain then pulls the door open using his sleeve and gets in. His shaking hand can barely put the key in the ignition but he does and turns it. The motor coughs, groans then starts. They sit and wait desperately in the dark for heat as the old engine rumbles.

David returns to the apartment upstairs along with Lance and Todd. As they enter David’s apartment Mike is waiting and says, “That was some show. I saw their landing in the snow, too, thanks to Todd switching the camera selection.”

David says, “Oh, but wait, there’s more.”

David leaps the back of the center couch and into position. He clicks an icon on the computer, a small window with a text entry box appears, and he keys in a long number. Next thing a window appears on one side of the screen with a street map of Omaha with a blinking red dot on the street outside. Then another window with jagged sound waves and the speaker crackles with the sound of an engine and some agitated groaning.

“What’s that,” Mike asks?

“Oh, Todd told me he arranged a few of his electronic gadgets to be attached to our friends’ car while Mary kept bringing them beer. Nothing elaborate, just a wireless mic and a GPS tracking bug. That’s the GPS display over there and the middle window is analyzing the sound you hear from our frozen duo huddled in their car about a block from here.”

“How did he ID their car?”

“Outside security cam. He played back the tape after we ID’d them and saw where they parked.”

David clicks the speaker on and they listen in on Tom and Bob who are now shivering, arms crossed, frozen hands in their armpits, Bob says, “Now what the fuck do we do? Pete’s fucking not gonna be fucking happy about this. We might’ve got what he wanted but he won’t be happy when we tell him our cover was blown.”

“Yeah, I know, we’re in deep shit,” says Tom, sadly.

Tom guns the motor trying to get some heat while the fog from their breath quickly crystallizes to ice on the frigid glass.

“Who the fuck is this Shea? You fucking ever heard of him?”

“Nope, never. But he’s protecting Mike, that’s for sure. At least we know that much.”

Some rustling from the speakers as Bob reaches in his pocket for his cell phone and says, “We better get this over and call Pete. He won’t be any happier if we stall.”

“You’re right, do it. Put it on speaker phone so I can hear.”

Bob begins punching a number into his cell phone.

As he hits each key, its tone is analyzed by David’s computer and the digit appears in sequence on a display on the monitor. When the full number has been punched in, a tracking window appears with a map and a street location of where the call is going. The destination is a land line in Des Moines. It matches the calls detected earlier by Todd.

Bob switches to speaker phone mode so Tom can hear but so too can David, Lance, Todd and Mike. They all hear the target phone ring, once, twice, three times, then click, “Hello?”

“Pete, it’s me, Bob.”

“What did you find out?”

“Mike was there last night and he’s probably there now. There are apartments on the top floor and he was seen last night heading up there with the owner of the place.”

“Did anyone see him tonight?”

“No, we didn’t see him and no one we talked to said they’d seen him today.”

“Any sign of his car?”

“None.”

“Well, that checks. He hasn’t used any of his credit cards today either. Anything else?”

“Yeah, they were on to us when we got to that bar. I don’t know how, but they knew who we were. We were there for a couple of hours then the owner, a guy named David Shea, came after us with a bunch of bouncers. They beat us up and threw us out in a snow drift.”

“What the fuck happened?” the angry voice from the cell phone demands.

“This David Shea, the owner, the one who was seen with Mike last night, he came over to us and started asking questions. He as much as admitted that Mike’s there. He got belligerent. Then Tom started to pull a gun on him and then the bouncers were all over us. My shoulder’s dislocated. Then they threw us into the slush in the gutter. We’re all wet and freezing, Pete,” says Bob, almost in tears.

“You fucking dumb shits. You think I care if you’re wet? This was just a simple look and see job. How the fuck did they do a make on you? Clumsy fucks, that’s what. What else do you know about this bar owner who mugged you two?”

Bob sobers up a second time. Pete indeed does not give a damn about him or Tom or whether Bob’s shoulder is dislocated or whether they’re lying in the slush or not. Bob and Tom both know they’re just road kill as far as Pete’s concerned.

“Just his name, Shea, David Shea,” says Bob, taking a deep breath and regaining his composure.

“Ahhh, I think I remember a guy by that name from St. Louis a few years ago. There may be a little unfinished business there,” then the voice in Iowa says, “Hold on a minute,” and they hear a hand muffling the phone.

After a while the phone is unmuffled and they hear someone on the other end talking to Pete saying, “You bet, we can do that.”

The voice on the other end growls, “Okay, shit heads, back to your motel and wait. Looks like I need to go over there and sort this fucking mess out myself. Do you think you can be at Joe’s warehouse at 11 tomorrow without pulling a gun on someone or tripping over your own dicks?”

“Yeah, 11 o’clock, we’ll be there,” says Bob as the line goes dead.

Tom and Bob sit in silence as the engine slowly warms up. Then Bob says, “Man, we better be careful. Real careful. The people we work for don’t give a shit about trash like us.”

“Yeah, I know, I know, guys like us are expendable,” says Tom as he puts the car in gear. Belts screeching, it rattles out of the parking lot and bounces onto the snow covered street. They return to their seedy motel stopping at a convenience store along the way for cigs, beer and chips.

Time: 10:15 PM

At David’s apartment, as he and the other guys listen to Tom and Bob, Mary walks in and sits next to David. “Go peel me a grape, honey.”

“Go peel your own grape, this is important.”

She gives a dirty look and gets up and heads for the kitchen where she opens a cabinet and pulls down a bottle of something red and very expensive. She takes it, an opener and a long stemmed goblet back to the living room and hands the bottle and opener to David who does the honors.

He pours her a libation then shuts down the audio feed from Tom and Bob’s car. He turns to Mike and says, “Who’s this Joe they’re referring to with the

warehouse?”

“Joe runs the show here in Omaha. The warehouse is his base of operations. It’s over next to the railway yards. The place is a front. To the outside world, he runs a paper distributorship. His trucks cover half of Nebraska, South Dakota and Western Iowa with long haul routes to Mexico and the east coast. With the tie in to the freight yards, it’s a perfect cover. He runs a massive amount of drugs of all kinds all across the country. He’s one of the big middlemen nationwide. You know, it takes a big operation to distribute 500 metric tons of cocaine a year not to mention the meth. There used to be 8,000 meth cookers in Missouri alone a few years ago, who knows how many tons? That’s a lot of pickup and delivery points. DiscountMart should have such a supply network!”

“Who’s the guy they called Pete? I’m guessing he was the one who called Omaha last night.”

“That’s Pete Evans, one of Jack’s lieutenants. He’s a guy I worked with for a while in Des Moines. He runs the show there and he’s coming here, it appears. When he needs to have some dirty work done, he travels with a couple of guys named Mark Schultz and Sid Wegin, some foot soldiers he always counts on. I expect they’ll be with him.”

“What kind’a dirty work? You mean, like killing people?” asks Todd.

Mike says, “Yep, if that’s what he wants done, that’s what they do.”

“What’s their full names again and I’ll try to see what I can find on them,” asks Todd.

“Sid Wegin, Mike Schultz and Pete Evans, from Des Moines and Joe Schmidt from Omaha.”

David looks at Mike and says, “Okay, tell me more about the warehouse?”

“Just what it sounds like, an old warehouse near the railroad tracks. They collect and store the drugs there for distribution. Very clever operation. Everything looks perfectly normal. Delivery trucks, regular staff, the police have no idea. Here, I’ll give you the address.”

Mike picks up a pad of paper and writes down the address. David takes it, looks

at it, hands it to Todd who looks at it and then passes it to Lance. David keys the address into mapping program which brings up a detailed satellite view of the warehouse and its immediate surroundings with street names overlaid.

David looks back to Todd and Lance and asks, "Either of you know it? What'ya think?"

"Nope, I know that part of town, probably driven past it but I don't know the place specifically," says Lance.

"Me neither," says Todd as he turns to Mike and asks, "Any idea where they might meet this Pete from Des Moines?"

Mike says, "Sure, in Joe's office. It's on the first floor, south west corner."

"Windows?"

"Yeah, facing south and west but they're painted over."

"Are they storm windows or double-paned?"

"No, just plain old plate glass with putty. That warehouse was built in the 30's."

"Good," then turns to David and says, "I think we can handle it from the cross street next to that parking lot."

"What are you going to do," Mike asks?

David says, "We're going to fasten a small radio transponder on the outside of the window and retransmit the signal from a van parked on the street. We should be able to hear everything they say."

Turning to Mike, David says, "This is getting complicated."

Just then Todd's phone rings, it's one of the bartenders downstairs. Flipping his phone shut he says, "I think your girl friend is here. Sean says there's a girl downstairs that fits her description."

"Come on, let's go out and take a look," says David.

They all get up, and head out to the balcony. Mike scans the floor below. It's

nearly 11:30 pm and the crowd is thinner, and more desperate.

David says, “They say everyone looks better at closing, or so the story goes. It’s just a story. By closing time, they all just look drunk.”

Jessica arrived late that evening by bus. She managed to hitch a ride from downtown Omaha out to an intersection a few blocks from the club. From there, she hiked through the dark streets arriving half frozen a little after eleven. At the bar, she ordered some hot coffee and began anxiously scanning the crowd to see if she could find Mike.

From the balcony above, Mike finally spots her slouched on a bar stool clutching her over sized back pack and drinking her coffee. He points her out to the others. Todd flips open his cell phone, hits a button and, in walkie-talkie mode, talks to someone below. One of the bartenders nods and moves quickly towards Jessica.

The bartender leans over, says, “Is your name Jessica Gannon?” She nods. Then he says, “See that door over there? There’s an elevator behind it to the top floor.”

Jessica gets up, puts her drink on the counter and says, “That door over there? Why do I want an elevator to the top floor?”

“If you look way up there,” as he points to the balcony, “You might be able to see your friend Mike waiving. Go on over, someone will show you the way up.”

Jessica looks up and dimly sees some figures on the balcony high above. She puts her coffee down and, swinging her heavy backpack over her shoulder, walks timidly across dance floor. At the door to the elevator is Jim, one of the bouncers. He nods, opens the door and says, “Follow me.”

Jessica looks at him and decides that resistance is futile and enters, not really knowing what’s going on. Once inside the elevator, Jim drops the gate and hits the button for the fifth floor. The elevator whines upwards.

Jessica Gannon is of average height, straight dark brown hair tied in a pony tail with a yellow beaded elastic loop. She’s wearing a dark red parka with a fur lined hood and jeans tucked inside fur lined boots. Her dark blue bulging backpack heavily strains on its strap hoisted over her shoulder. While her lips show the faint but not recent application of lipstick, there is no other evidence of makeup. A knit red stocking cap with a tattered pompom of red yarn at its apex

is tucked under one of the backpack straps.

Upon reaching the top floor, Jim opens the gate, points across to the right. Jessica steps out and sees Mike and the others. Jim waves, drops the gate and the elevator descends. Jessica rushes to Mike and gives him a hug and says in her northern New England twang, “Hey Mikey, I thought I was being shanghaied. You obviously made it here okay? What happened to your hair? Holy crap, you’ve got decent clothes on too. What? You got kidnapped by yuppies along the way?”

“I’m fine, Jay. Made it here okay. How about you? I was kidnapped by the fashionistas. Don’t worry, I won’t let it happen to you!”

“Ahhh? I’m not sure how to take that.”

“I’ll tell you later,” he turns and says, “I want you to meet David. This is Jessica Gannon, Jay for short.”

“Guys, glad to meet you,” says Jay as she shakes hands and says to Mike, “This is that guy you knew from college, right? Have you explained to him what’s happened?”

Mike says, “Right, that’s him and yes, I’ve filled him in. And this is Mary, the real boss, that’s Todd...”

“Who’s the big guy? This place got a football team or something?”

“My name’s Lance and I keep the pencil necked geeks out’a trouble,” says Lance reaching out and shaking her hand.

“Oh, he’s really our steroid tester,” says Todd.

“One more crack about steroids, and it’s over the balcony, geek-boy,” growls Lance.

Todd glares with an I’ll get even and says, “Okay jock boy, stuff it. My lasers are programmed to protect me.”

“Okay, enough already. Back in the apartment. Let’s go sit down and figure out what happens next,” says David as he points them back into the apartment.

Once inside, Jay, looking around at the apartment, says, “Whoa, what a wicked place, dude.”

Heading for the kitchen, David says, “Glad you like it, I think? What’ya drinking?”

“Got any gin and quinine?”

David reaching into a cabinet and pulling out a bottle and a glass, he pours it out and says, “This is a bar. Yeah, we got gin and tonic. Only in New England do they still call it quinine.” He fetches a bottle of tonic water from the fridge.

“Well, that’s what it is. Anyway, tonic means soft drink or what you provincials call pop. What, no lime? What kind of a bar is this?”

David reaches back into the fridge and takes out a plastic bottle and squirts some green yellow juice into the glass and says, “There, that’s lime.”

Then looking at Mike says, “Geeez, did you invite any more of your irritating limy friends?”

“No, just her. She should be enough.”

“Hey, I’m Scots, watch the limy thing,” says Jay as she wanders around surveying the apartment in detail.

“Hey, if I can get serious or something, Jay, what happened to the last of the data files we collected on Jack? They’re not back in Iowa, I hope, are they?” Mike asks.

“Geez, of course not. I got everything right here,” she says as she reaches deep into her backpack and pulls out an MP3 player. “And I also uploaded a copy to the file server out in California.”

“Mind if I make a backup copy of that?” David asks.

“Is it okay? I don’t trust people who call quinine tonic. He looks suspicious to me,” says Jay.

“Yeah, he’s okay and more or less trustworthy, when sober, which, sadly, is

seldom.”

David gives him a supercilious look. Mike grins and shrugs his shoulders.

“Okay, here. Don’t break it,” as she hands the small device to David. Jay walks over to the big HDTV screen and says, “Wow! That’s one wicked display you’ve got.”

David says, “Thanks, 20480 by 11520 and what’s with this wickedthing?” grabbing a cable from a drawer in the table. He plugs one end into a USB port built into the side of the keyboard and the other into the MP3 player. A window pops open on the big display screen and he begins transferring a copy of its contents into a folder on one of his servers. Once copied, he dismounts the player and hands it back to Jay.

“That’s about 20 gigs worth of data. Lots of image scans?”

“Ea-up, lots of nice pictures,” says Jay.

“Ea-up? Where are you from?” says David.

“Ahh, Laconia, New Hampshire, about sixty miles northwest of Portsmouth.”

“You may need a translator. Jay doesn’t speak American English very well. As I understand it, wickedmeans good, emphatic agreement, or something like that. Ea-up yes or a general acknowledgment,” says Mike to David then to Jay, “So, how the hell did you get here? It took you long enough.”

“Bus, man, the bus. Went from Columbia to Kansas City. Took me the whole frigging night because of the weather. You ever spent an all-nighter on a bus in a blizzard? Then waited half the day until there was one to Omaha. A lot’a roads were closed and buses were stranded all over hell and half of Georgia.”

“I said I’d come pick you up.”

“Yeah, then we’d both be in a ditch someplace covered by a ten-foot drift or dead or both. But don’t worry, I only used cash. They won’t be able to trace me to Omaha.”

“I wish I had done the same,” says Mike.

“You mean Jack’s on to you?” asks Jay. “Didn’t I tell you, no credit cards?”

“Yeah, but I thought you meant just for the phones. I didn’t know they could find my gas charges and the motel bill.”

“Not good, man, this is not good. You have really got to learn to follow directions better. Those are some very nasty dudes we crossed.”

“Don’t I know? So, how long were you downstairs?”

“About half an hour more or less.”

“Why didn’t you ask the bartender for me?”

“What? Reveal my identity? Hell no. I figured you’d turn up eventually, you always do.”

“How romantic, I’m glad to see you, too.”

“I’ll ignore that. So, what’s the play book so far?” she asks, pouring more gin and quinine then rummaging around in David’s refrigerator, “Hey, there’s no food in the ice box.”

“Ice box?” asks David.

“Don’t even bother asking,” says Mike. “She’ll want to know where the outhouse is next.”

“I heard that!”

“What’ya looking for?” calls David.

“Just about anything, I haven’t eaten since this morning. Not a lot’a meal service on a bus in a blizzard, you know. All the vending machines were sold out.”

David calls downstairs. A few minutes later Sean walks in with a plate of sandwiches and French fries.

As Jay downs the sandwiches, fries and gin, she asks, “So, already, what’s the plan?”

Mary rises and says, "Okay people, I gotta get back downstairs. But I'll listen in on one of Todd's bugs. But as for you honey," looking squarely at Jay, "The plan is that I see you tomorrow. During HSN's jewelry hour. Davey, get me another credit card."

"What? You wore the numbers off the last one?" says David.

She glares at him and says, "A girl needs variety. A man needs other things. Get the picture?" Mary wryly smiles, turns and saunters out.

"What was that about?" says Jay.

Mike says, "I'll fill you in on the details later but, right now, here's the deal, Pete's coming to Omaha tomorrow and meeting with Joe. They know I'm here."

"Crap!"

"It's okay. We're gonna bug Joe's warehouse and listen in to see what they're up to."

"What they're up to? That's easy. They want you dead. Me too, probably."

"Oh, well, I wouldn't worry too much about that," says Lance. "We haven't lost anyone, yet."

"You had a lot of practice at this?"

"You'll be the first."

"Oh, great, now I'm really confident."

"Well, we gotta start somewhere. No charge if we fail!"

"Good, I'll remember that. So, Mikey, where are we staying?"

"Here, David let me move into an empty apartment down the hall."

"So where's that lead sled of yours?"

"I had it moved to a garage I own on the other side of town to get it out of sight," says David.

They continue to talk for about an hour then break up and head to their rooms. Jay takes one look at Mike's apartment and says, "Holy crap? He let you stay here? This is just like his apartment!"

"Yeah, I know. He says all the apartments up here are the same."

"Works for me," she says as she tosses her backpack on a couch and drags Mike to the bedroom and says, "Ya'know, if you wanted highlights, I could'a done that. I didn't know you were into high fashion."

"Oh, I've always had a few highlights," as he switches out the lights. "Got one in particular right now, as a matter of fact."

"Animal! Typical! Just typical!"

3. Wednesday January 10

Time: 10 AM

Around ten o'clock Wednesday morning Bob's cell phone rings. After several grunted answers he flips the phone shut and says, "That was Joe. He wants to make sure we're at the warehouse by eleven. He's not too happy that Pete's on his way over here."

"No, I don't suppose he is. I'm not too thrilled myself," says Tom.

"No, me neither. But we got no choice. Let's go get some coffee and something to eat before we go over there."

They pull on their coats, gloves, hats and scarves and dash to the car. Tom starts the motor while Bob brushes the snow that blew on the windows during the night.

After a few minutes waiting for the engine to warm up, they pull out onto the road. A few blocks down the street they turn into a donut shop drive-thru where they buy coffee and a couple dozen donuts. They get back on the road and drive to Joe's warehouse. This might not be a good day to be late. Parking in the lot across the street, they sit waiting, drinking the coffee and eating the donuts.

"Well, what'ya think's gonna happen?" says Bob to Tom.

“We’re not gonna get any prizes, that’s what. First, we missed Mike’s car getting jacked right under our noses then we got our cover blown at the club. I don’t see a prize in that.”

“We really didn’t fuck up that bad, ya’know. But I guess Pete won’t be too happy that Mike’s been tipped off that we’re onto him. But, we did find out what Pete wanted to know. At least we know that Mike is up in one of those apartments,” says Bob.

“Probably so, but, ya’know, how’d they ID us? They were looking for us. I know we didn’t do anything to attract attention, did we? All we did was ask about a friend. What’s wrong with asking about a friend?”

“Well, we were a little drunk.”

“Hell, yeah? We were a lot drunk, but that’s a bar. They get drunks all the time. Drunk does not attract attention at a bar. Sober attracts attention and we were not sober.”

“Score one for us, I guess. The perfect disguise, drunk at a bar.”

“No, man they had us spotted somehow. That proves that Mike’s there. Those other guys at the motel that took Mike’s car while we were checking out the club, they must have spotted us. Ya’know, the more I think about it, that bouncer at the door last night, I think he was the one in the lobby at the motel. It looked like him, I think. Right?” says Tom.

“Hey, yeah, that was it! That was how they did us.”

“Yeah, you might be right. And we showed Mike’s picture to that waitress. She must have known Mike was there. She could have tipped off Shea. It really wasn’t our fault,” says Tom. “We were just doing what we were told to.”

“But I still don’t see how that’s gonna help us much. I wonder what the full story is about Mike. Did you ever think he was really a reporter? Did you ever notice anything?”

“Hell no, I never knew. But I’ll bet he got quite a story. He must’a known everything, man, he was really close with Pete and the people in St. Louis. I’ll bet he’s got enough to fry their collective asses six different ways.”

“He must have. Personally, I wouldn’t mind seeing that happen at all. Ya’know, Mike always treated us okay and Pete’s a fucking bastard,” says Bob.

“No argument there. What’ya think Pete’s got cooked up?”

“Nothing good, that’s for sure.”

“You got a cigarette?”

“Geez, don’t you ever buy your own?” says Bob as he tosses his pack to Tom.

“What would you say if we kinda contacted Mike on our own and told him what Pete’s up to? Cut a separate deal, so to speak?”

“I think we’d be seriously dead men if we got caught. Let’s not make a bad thing worse.”

“Just a thought. Look, here comes Joe’s car.”

At the apartment Mike, hearing Bob’s suggestion on the audio bug, turns and says to David, “Maybe we have some recruits here? They’re really not bad guys. I think their main aim last night was to get drunk and meet girls.”

“Could be, perhaps I should’a told Lance to go a bit easier on them,” replies David.

“You weren’t exactly mister nice guy, kneeing one of them in the groin.”

“Well, he was going for a gun. Duh?”

“As drunk as he was, he probably would have shot himself in the pants.”

“So, there you are, I was only protecting him from himself. Look at it that way.”

Time: 10:50 AM

At about ten minutes to eleven, Joe pulls his car into the parking lot and parks next to Tom and Bob. He gets out and signals them to follow him.

Tom crumples his empty cardboard coffee cup and tosses it in the back seat along with the accumulated debris of about a year worth of fast food wrappers, cups, and plastic utensils. He picks up the partly eaten box of donuts and takes it

with them.

They follow Joe across the street to a nondescript windowless side door which Joe unlocks with a key from a chain holding about thirty others.

The warehouse, on 20th Street, is an aging undistinguished five story brick building with large, arched windows spaced irregularly around the sides, mainly on the upper floors. Some decorative brick work is visible near the doors and at the roof but it's basically a depression era decaying old industrial structure, one of many along the wide old treeless street on which it sits. A few small restaurants dot the area but most of the buildings here are warehouses for the nearby rail yards and interstates.

At the west end of the building are tall, wide doors big enough to accommodate large delivery trucks. Inside is a large central area where the trucks wait to be loaded and unloaded. On the floors above are stored the goods, both legal and illegal. Here, among the boxes and crates of paper goods are hidden neatly packaged, tightly wrapped bundles of drugs destined for delivery to big cities and small towns throughout the Midwest.

Behind Joe's warehouse is the massive Omaha rail marshalling yard with its radiating steel web of switches constantly assembling long freight trains for their runs across the prairies. From these tracks, twenty-four hours a day, a constant rumble of freight trains ply their way south to the Gulf of Mexico, east to Chicago, west to the Pacific and through every state west of the Mississippi.

Across the street from Joe's warehouse, about a half block away, is a white, windowless commercial van with a small transparent plastic half dome on its roof. A few very small discreet aerials are positioned just above the windshield. From an articulated camera mounted in the dome, the unnoticed van transmits video of the scene back to Mo R♦n. It also relays the audio feed from the discrete small wireless microphone fixed to the corner window of Joe's office. The camera is focused on Joe as he unlocks the side door to the warehouse and on his companions who wait, jumping up and down in the cold.

Lance and Todd join David, Mike and Jay to listen in on the meeting. They pour coffee and quietly take their seats on the couches around the display screen as it shows the feed from the van.

"Is the window mic working okay?" asks Todd.

“Not sure yet, but it seems to be. We’re mainly getting street sounds right now. They just went in the warehouse so we should know for sure in a minute. The car mic worked fine and we’re getting good video. I was able to get a real good close up of Joe. Here, see for yourself,” says David as he flashes a still captured from the video feed a few minutes before in a separate window.

Once inside the warehouse Tom and Bob follow Joe through the garage area and down a wood floored corridor to Joe’s office at the far end where Mike predicted the meeting would take place. The microphone picks up their footsteps as they approach. David nods to Todd and gives a thumbs up gesture, the mic indeed is working.

They take off their coats and toss them on a wobbly old wood table in the corner. Bob says, offering the now half empty box, “Want a donut?”

Joe takes one and says, “Thanks. Tom, go fill the pot with water and get some coffee started.” He hands Tom a glass coffee pot. At the club they hear Tom’s heavy footsteps as he retreats down the hall. Joe says, “Take a seat, Pete should be calling soon.”

Bob sits down, Tom returns a minute later. They hear him fumbling with the coffee maker followed by the sound of a chair being moved as Tom sits next to Bob. Joe is behind his big, wooden desk covered with papers. He leans back on his old office chair which creaks and squeaks and asks, “Okay you two, tell me what happened last night?”

They relate the events of the night and their theory of how they were ID’d. Joe finally says, “You’re probably right, the bouncer recognized you. They knew you were looking for Mike. They were watching the motel. They hid Mike’s car, no doubt about it. Yeah, Mike’s there. This all fits. I guess you couldn’t have known that. Sorry about the bum’s rush you guys got,” he says, actually sounding concerned. He pulls out his wallet and says, “Here’s a hundred, go buy some new coats, those look a bit worse for wear.”

Tom takes the bill and says, “Thanks Joe, we appreciate it. Things kind’a took a bad turn for us last night.”

Joe’s cell phone rings. He answers it. It’s Pete who says he’s a few blocks away. “Yeah, Pete, no problem, every thing’s fine. We’re here waiting for you,” says Joe and then hangs up. “He’s a total fucking paranoid, never trusts anyone or

anything. He should be here in a couple of minutes. Tom, go wait at the door and let him in.”

Tom gets up and walks back to the door where he waits looking through a small side window near the door out across the street at the parking lot.

On schedule, a few minutes later a black SUV with Polk County Iowa plates pulls into the lot and parks next to Joe’s car. David’s van camera quickly focuses in on it and its two occupants as they get out and stand in front of the hood waiting. The video appears on David’s monitor. Right behind it, a blue SUV drives in. From it, jumps a guy in his mid-thirties.

“That’s Pete, the one getting out of the second SUV,” says Mike.

“And the others would have to be Mark and Sid. Never met them personally but they fit the description. Pete liked to keep things in separate compartments. He didn’t want too many people knowing too many other people,” says Mike.

Mark and Sid are ordinary looking guys in their late twenties wearing heavy parkas, stocking caps, thick gloves and heavy, laced up, high top boots. Both from Iowa, after high school they wandered from one job to another, not really interested in anything that required getting up in the morning. Eventually, they discovered their calling and began, much like Tom and Bob did, doing odd jobs for the mob. But unlike Tom and Bob, Mark and Sid both truly enjoy the suffering they inflict on others and quickly advance in the art and practice of schaddenfreude.

Pete, in his thirties, is dressed more like a business man in a top coat, creme colored cashmere scarf, thin black leather gloves and a sporty fur lined hat. Pete began as a small time street hood who worked his way up in the organization. He started a small gang in high school and terrorized anyone he thought he could shake down. Quickly cornering the market for drugs and prostitution in his neighborhood, he left his first victim by the side of the road when he was seventeen, a ‘hit and run’ said the police, someone who got in Pete’s way.

After dropping out of school, he was avidly recruited by just about every crime operation in the Mississippi valley. Eventually, he caught the eye of the right people and soon found himself moving up in life.

He adopted the dignified outward appearance of a businessman but if you look at

him up close, you quickly encounter the visible darkness of his feral squint. Ever snarling thin lips, gaunt cheekbones, and beady eyes confess the hungry leer of a natural predator.

Pete looks suspiciously around to see if he's being watched then turns and pulls a laptop case from the rear hatch of the SUV. The only sound is that of wind, the distant screams of steel wheels against steel rails, and a screeching crow circling high above. The threesome walk quickly across the deserted street to the warehouse door which Tom holds open.

At Mo R☐n they hear random noises, mainly sounds from the nearby rail yards and the occasional shuffles of shoes from those waiting nervously in the office. Soon muffled voices can be heard and the building sound of approaching footsteps. Then the rumble of chairs being moved on the wooden floor as Joe and Bob get up to greet Pete and his aides.

Joe says, "Hey Pete, glad to see you. Mark, Sid, come on in and take a seat. Tom, get their coats. You'all know Tom and Bob?"

"Hey Joe, how's it going? You sure have one shit load of snow over here. It's still drifting out on the interstate. Glad I wasn't out driving in it a couple of days ago," says Pete.

"It was a bad storm, lots of wind too. Let's hope there aren't too many more like it this winter. There's some hot coffee and donuts over there."

"Thanks."

The others sit silently while Pete gets coffee and a donut. A minute later with his mouth full he begins, "Okay Joe, let's get right down to business. What'ya know about this bar and do you think Mike's holed up there?"

"I made some calls this morning and did a little research. About the bar, not too much, Pete. Just a big dance club in a converted warehouse in an old part of town. It's called Mo R☐n and it's owned by a guy named David Shea who's pretty well off, I've learned. The place is popular and gets a few hundred people most nights, mainly in their twenties and early thirties. As to Mike being there, yeah, it's very likely."

"Shea, I know that name. What'ya know about him?"

“He moved here a few years ago from St. Louis, I understand. He’s about 27 or 30. He lives in the warehouse in some penthouse apartments on the upper levels. His manager, named Todd Hayes, also has an apartment there too as does his security guy, someone named Lance Anders. I don’t know much more. We think Mike is living up there too.”

“How many apartments?”

“I heard there were eight but I’m not sure.”

“Got a picture of him?”

“No, wasn’t able to find one.”

“Any idea what the connection is between Mike and this Shea guy?” asks Pete.

“No idea, Pete, Shea keeps pretty much a low profile. I’ve got some people asking questions but nothing solid yet. Seems he’s a computer expert who made a killing when he sold his company a few years before he moved here.”

“Joe, I’m on a tight schedule. Certain people want Mike taken out of circulation now and by now, they mean now. Am I being clear?”

“Yeah, very clear.”

“Right. So, if that’s where he is, I want to know what we’re up against.”

“We’ll do what we can, we don’t want any problems,” says Joe.

“Now, you two,” as he turns to Tom and Bob, “Tell me what you saw last night.”

Tom begins nervously, “It’s like Joe said, a big, old red brick warehouse, a block long on each side, about five stories high. When you’re inside, the central dance floor part goes all the way to the roof. Above, around the sides are the upper floors with balconies overlooking the dance floor. It was real crowded, there must have been 300 people there.”

Bob joins in, “On the ground floor, the dance floor is in the middle but around the sides, under the balconies, are areas of tables and chairs. On one side, there’s a big, long bar with some tables at one end. On the third side, there’s the main

entrance and a big coat room and the fourth side is mainly a stage with curtains behind it and to each side.”

“One of the girls we talked to told us about the apartments on the top floor. She said she’d been up there. That’s where Shea lives, she said. We showed her Mike’s picture and she said she saw Mike go up there with Shea on Monday night,” says Tom.

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere,” says Pete. “How do you get up to the apartments?”

“We were told there’s an elevator in a room at the southwest corner of the building,” says Tom.

“Any other way up?”

“We looked around but didn’t see any.”

“What’s the main entrance like?”

“The main door’s steel clad with a small widow at the top with wire mesh glass. It had two sets of deadbolts. Inside, there was a metal detector, a high table with a computer monitor, and two bouncers.”

“Ground floor, emergency exits, windows?”

“Oh yeah, emergency exits, a couple along each wall, all with alarms and steel doors. A couple of small windows near the main entrance also with wire mesh glass but no other windows on the ground floor. From the outside we could see some windows up on the top floor and there are some skylights in the roof,” says Bob.

“Any other way in?”

“There are two loading docks.”

“What about the loading docks?”

“One was closed up. It’s on the south side. There was a steel door across it. It didn’t look like they used it much. It was shoveled but no truck tracks in the

snow in front of it. The other is on the east side where we saw a truck backed up to.”

“Security?”

“Ahh, yeah. Big guys, not the gentle type, as we found out. Probably about six or eight, including the two we saw at the door, we’re not sure.”

“When are they open for business?”

“Six o’clock most nights but four o’clock Thursday, Friday and Saturday according the sign at the door.”

“So, what have we got? Mike’s living in an apartment on the top floor of a fort with regular food deliveries and a security staff?” says Pete.

“Yeah, it kind’a looks that way,” says Joe.

“Not good. Question is, how are we gonna handle it. First, they know we’re onto them. I suppose we could try to break in the place during the day but the main entrance will be bolted and, unless they’re real stupid, the loading dock will be guarded. If we try to go in when the place is open, that’s a whole other set of problems.”

“So what’s the plan?” asks Joe.

“We force him out,” says Pete. “Find out about how they get their electricity. I want to know how to shut their lights out.”

“You bet, I’ll get right on it,” says Joe.

“And I want to do it tonight. Jack’ll like that. Have some guys standing by for around nine or ten tonight.”

“No problem. What’ya got planned?” asks Joe.

“We cut the power, light some fires, set off a few smoke bombs. With a big crowd, we start a panic and get the place evacuated. Your guys take care of him on the street.”

“And if there’s no power, there’s no heat and if there’s no heat, they won’t be able to live there, not in this weather.”

“Exactly. So figure out how to get the power cut so it doesn’t come back on anytime soon. I figure we go for about ten tonight? Any problem with that?”

“Nope, shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll find out which substation feeds the place and have it destroyed,” says Joe, taking notes. “Who’s gonna do the fire and smoke part on the inside?”

“Mark and Sid. At ten when the power goes out, you two will start some fires and set off smoke bombs. Okay?”

“Sure Pete, no problem,” says Mark.

“Tom, you said there was a stage with curtains. What’s it made of?” asks Pete.

“Wood.”

“Good. Was there an emergency exit near the stage?” asks Pete.

“There were exits on both sides.”

“Good. After you set off the smoke bombs, one of you goes out the emergency exit next to the stage.”

“Won’t that set off an alarm?”

“I kind’a guess all the alarms will be going off by then.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

“Once that emergency door is open, I want some big fire bombs tossed in there on the stage and at the curtains. Let’s set it on fire for real.”

“No problem. How many guys do you want outside?” asks Joe.

“My guess is when he comes out, it’ll be from one of the exits nearest the elevator. About six of your guys should do it along with Tom, Bob, Mark and Sid. Make sure everyone gets copies of that picture of Mike so they know what he looks like.”

“Will do,” says Joe.

“Where can we get some smoke bombs?” asks Pete.

“There’s a fireworks store just off the interstate west of town,” says Tom.

“Mark, you and Sid go get some this afternoon. And get some small bottles and fill them with gasoline or something that burns. I want to light that coat room while we’re at it. Parkas probably burn real nice this time of year,” says Pete.

“No problem,” says Mark.

“Okay, then this is it. Ten o’clock, Joe cuts the power. When the lights go out, Mark and Sid set off the smoke bombs, light fires inside the coat room then hit the exits. Joe’s guys toss in some real fire bombs and set as much of it on fire as possible. The club empties in a panic, your guys nail Mike, St. Louis is fucking ecstatic. We all go home happy.”

“I’d prefer it that way,” says Joe.

“Good. We don’t have much time. Mark, I’ll call your cell phone after I’ve checked in and give you my room number. Oh, and Joe, have that place watched in case he does try to leave. If so, you know what to do. Maybe he might make this easy for us.”

“I’ve already got some guys over there covering it. Where are you staying?” says Joe.

“Regency Hotel. Give me the address of that club so I can do a drive by on my way. And call me if anything develops.”

Joe writes out the address and directions on how to get to Mo R²n. The meeting breaks up.

Pete goes to his SUV and drives to Mo R²n. His car slowly circles the place looking at its outside defenses, noting the two loading docks, the emergency exits and the massive front entrance door as video cameras on the roof high above watch his every move. He parks a block away and slowly smokes a cigarette. He studies the place with the eyes of a killer. After a few minutes, he tosses the cigarette out the window into the snow bank and drives off to find his

downtown hotel.

Time: Noon

As Tom, Bob, Mark and Sid cross over to the parking lot, Tom gives Mark the directions to the fireworks store off the interstate. In the parking lot Bob says, “Hey, you guys interested in getting something to eat?”

Mark says, “Yeah, good idea, we’ve been on the road nearly three hours. There was a lot of snow blowing across the interstate, so we didn’t make very good time.”

“Sure, any preferences?” says Sid.

“How about that Prairie Buffet I saw signs for a couple of exits back on I80? Ya’ever been there?” says Mark.

“Yeah, it’s good. All you can eat, I like it. We go there a lot. It hasn’t killed us yet,” says Tom.

“Just the kind of place I like, not deadly,” says Sid. They all laugh.

Bob says, pointing at Tom, “Yeah, but you don’t want’a have him for a roommate after their Mexican Special nights. Sure seems like something died.” Again, more laughs.

“Okay, we’ll risk it. You guys want to ride with us? We need to come back this way anyway,” asks Mark.

“Sure,” says Bob and the all get into Mark’s Jeep. Mark starts the engine and they drive away, all four wheels spinning on the icy packed snow. The Jeep drives back up onto the interstate and travels east for a couple of exits then down onto a commercial four lane road running north south. All along it are the usual collection of gas stations, fast food outlets, supermarkets, and strip malls. Garish, multicolored signs on tall round steel posts wobble in the brisk wind. The brilliant white snow cover beneath a cloudless sky is blinding. Traffic is light as the weather has brought many activities to a halt.

Mark jerks the Jeep into the parking lot, bouncing over the unseen curb, hidden by the snow. He parks the Jeep and all four jump out and jog to the restaurant.

They pay the lunch admission, get a table then help themselves to plates of fried chicken, French fries, meatballs, ribs, ham, mini-corn dogs, Salisbury steak, hush puppies, macaroni and cheese, hash browns, corn, onion rings, and stuffing. A couple of trips later they've surrounded themselves with pop, bread, butter, salads, and fruit bowls. Sitting down they begin the task of eating their mounds of food like a pack of coyotes only not as neatly. A manager in the corner rolls his eyes and cringes as he calculates the fiscal hit.

Mark says, "So, Mike's days are numbered, it seems."

"You ever meet Mike?" answers Tom.

"No, but I've talked to him on the phone a few times," says Sid.

"Same here," adds Mark. "So I guess he won't be able to ID us at that bar. How did they spot you guys again?"

"We think we were spotted when we were at his motel. We found his car and I went into the lobby and asked about him. One of the club's security people was in the lobby when I was talking to the clerk about him," says Tom.

"How did you find out it was one of their security guys?" asks Sid.

"He was the bouncer at the door that night at the club. Didn't recognize him at first, but it was him. Anyway, the woman at the motel told us that Mike had gone to the club the night before in the snow storm so we walked up there to check it out, it was only about two blocks away. By the time we got back, Mike's car was gone but he hadn't been back there. I went back and asked the woman at the desk. She said some other guys had been there and checked him out."

"Ya'should have been more careful. Pete doesn't like his people being overheard. It's bad for business," says Sid.

"So, what's this club like?" asks Mark.

"Mo R♦n? Fucking huge. Really nice, a block on each side, five stories high. Hundreds of people. They had a great band, lots'a women," says Bob.

"So what'ya think Pete'll do if this smoke-out doesn't work?" says Tom.

“I think Mike’s too smart to walk out and let Pete take a shot at him. But Pete knows what’s gonna happen to him if he doesn’t take care of Mike. So if this stunt tonight doesn’t work, Pete will just figure some way to break in there,” says Mark.

“And that won’t be easy. Like he said, it’s a fucking fort. And even if he did get in, I don’t see how anyone’s gonna get up to the top floor? That place has a lot of security guards. We know, we met a few of them and they’ll be ready,” says Bob.

“Well Pete better think of a way because Jack’s bullshit. He’ll fucking blow the fucking place up if Pete doesn’t get Mike real quick,” says Sid.

“So Mike really ran off with the goods?” says Tom.

“Oh yeah, we hear he’s got crap on the mob not only in St. Louis but half of the freaking country. Jack either silences him or Jack’s got problems, real big problems. And right now, that means Pete’s got problems, big problems. You guys are lucky he didn’t line you up against the brick wall at that warehouse and blow your fucking brains out. He wasn’t happy about you two being ID’d,” says Sid, menacingly.

Tom and Bob suddenly look ashen. They turn their heads and look at each other for an instant, both suddenly very scared. Bob’s hand trembles a bit. Tom clears his throat and says, quickly correcting a high pitch for the first word, “You, cough, don’t think he’d really do that, do you?”

Mark leans over a bit and looks intently first at Bob, then Tom and says, “Oh yes, he’d do that. You guys got off easy. If you hadn’t got that information about the apartments on the top floor, you’d both be another couple of blood stains on the floor back at Joe’s place. You did notice the blood stains on the concrete?”

Tom and Bob look quickly at one another and then back at Mark. They had noticed the reddish brown stains on the dirty cement near one of the outer brick walls in the central garage area of the warehouse. And the cement wall had pock marks in it as Tom had once pointed out to Bob. The color drains from their faces and their hearts skip several beats in their long march to the grave which now seems suddenly nearer.

“Sorry guys, but the fact of the matter is, Pete’s not taking prisoners on this one. So don’t fucking screw up again. He’s got a very short fuse at the moment,” says

Sid.

“Yeah, nothing personal guys, just a friendly warning. This time it’s for real. Didn’t mean to ruin your lunch or anything. Just don’t get in over your heads, got it?”

“Thanks for the warning,” says Bob.

“Yeah, thanks,” says Tom.

“Hey, we don’t like this crap either but we do what we’re told. It’s healthier that way,” says Sid also leaning over and speaking in a hushed voice.

“That’s the way it is, guys. We’re on the bottom rung and that means we get stepped on a lot. Just try to survive, that’s all,” says Mark philosophically.

“So, what’ya do for entertainment in Omaha?” asks Sid, changing the topic.

“Drink beer, watch TV, smoke cigarettes and wait for spring,” says Tom with a nervous laugh.

“Geeez, it’s a regular fucking Disneyland,” says Mark sarcastically.

“We like spring. Someday we’re gonna start a landscaping business. Hey, sometimes a train derails over at the rail yards. That’s always interesting,” adds Bob.

“Oh yeah, like that one over in Des Moines the other day? You do know that was Mike’s doing?” says Sid.

“We thought he might’a had something to do with it,” says Tom.

“Yeah, he did. Some of Pete’s guys were chasing him. They didn’t make it through the grade crossing in time and, well, you know what happened,” says Mark.

“We saw the bullet holes in the back of Mike’s car and the star bursts where a couple hit the rear window. We figured someone was chasing him, seemed to fit the description on the news,” says Bob.

“Yep, that’s what happened. We knew the guys who hit the train. Didn’t matter really, if they didn’t get Mike, Pete would have got’em anyway for letting him get away,” says Mark. “One way or the other, they were toast.”

“I guess we don’t have to worry about being asked to do any car chases, not with our car,” laughs Bob.

“Probably not. But good luck tonight, guys. I hope things go better for you than they did for us. That bouncer about tore my arm from its socket, I can still hardly raise it, and the dunk in the slush didn’t make things any better,” says Tom.

“Oh, we’re pretty careful. As long as they don’t spot us, we’ll be okay. Say, what’a they have for deserts around here?”

They graze the desert tables carrying back great amounts of ice cream, cakes, cookies, pie, and more ice cream, until they finally decide it’s time to split up, much to the relief of the manager. Mark and Sid drive Tom and Bob back to the parking lot and then leave to check into their motel.

Tom and Bob get in their car. Tom coaxes the old lead sled to start then looks at Bob and says, “I don’t think I like this game anymore.”

“Geez, You and me both. Gimme a cigarette,” says Bob.

They go to their motel and watch TV, smoke cigarettes and worry for the rest of the afternoon thinking about the blood stains back at the warehouse.

Time: Noon

At Mo R♦n while Tom and company are cleaning out the Prairie Buffet, David, looks around the table and asks, “Well, now that we’ve been introduced to Pete, any ideas?”

Jay looks up and says, “It shouldn’t be any problem to hack into the hotel net and capture Pete’s room security code, ya’know, the one they use to make the room keycards. Also, I can monitor Jack’s Internet traffic in St. Louis and see if anything turns up, like emails or IM’s. And I can access that fax server in Des Moines too.”

“How do you do that?” asks Todd.

“They use a Virtual Private Network, VPN, running through a proxy server. I’ve got the passwords to the proxy and the fax server. I can monitor all its traffic.”

“Sweet,” says Todd. “In the meantime, after he checks in and we capture his keycard data, I can send some people in and we’ll bug his room. He said he had a laptop. Any idea what kind?”

“Oh yeah, it’s a nice one, wireless, big disk, dual core, built in microphone and web cam too. It’s how he does most of his work. He thinks his disk is encrypted. He’s wrong. I installed a little keylogger a while ago,” says Jay.

“So you hacked it?”

“But of course. That laptop’s got more trojans in it than a drugstore condom aisle,” says Jay proudly.

“Let me see what you got.”

Jay pulls a laptop out of her backpack and plugs a cell phone wireless access card into a side slot and powers it up.

“EVDO?” asks Todd.

“Yep, where there are towers that support it. Looks like it’s working here.”

“What?” says Mike.

“Evolution-Data Optimized, a way to send data high speed over cell towers,” answers Todd.

“Geez, don’t you guys ever use English?”

“Sometimes, like when we need to communicate with the unwashed such as your humble self,” quips Jay.

“Someday, you’re gonna have one too many acronyms and then, boom, you won’t know what the hell’s going on. Tower of Babel, all over again. And you’ll forget all your freaking passwords, too,” pouts Mike.

“He is not a computer person,” says Jay.

“Definitely not,” agrees Todd. “Why are you using Windoze, I would have thought you’d be a Linux person?”

“Oh, I use Linux a lot, especially for server apps, that sort of thing. But the windowing sucks. No freaking fonts worth a damn, crappy interfaces, and a lot of script kiddies writing half-assed crap that doesn’t work most of the time. And don’t get me started on drivers.”

“What about Ubuntu?” says David.

“Oh, it’s okay but, still, pretty primitive. But at least it’s a step in the right direction. The problem with Linux coders is, they play on a ninety yard field but the goal posts are a hundred yards away. Too much of the software is simply not complete. None of it is really tested. Final coding left to the end user. I’m bloody sick of spending half the night fixing some damned uncommented crappy bash script that some juvenile lost interest in before his nap time. No, for me, Linux has too many milk-and-cookies breaks in it. When they grow up and finally finish something, then I’ll use the GUI. Until then, it’s M\$ Bill.”

“Well, I guess that’s true. I do spend a lot of time hacking through scripts every time I do an update just to get back to where I was. And you’re right, the GUI’s suck,” says Todd.

“Okay, system’s up. Let me try to get into the hotel first,” says Jay as she starts probing the hotel’s network then says, “Oh, piece of cake, I’ve been into this chain’s network before. They might as well post their security codes on a neon sign on the roof. Geez, what idiots. I’ll bet their whole in-room wireless network is insecure too. Yep, it is!”

Todd watches and says, “I’ll have to remember to bolt my door tonight. Have you tried to hack my systems yet?”

“Hey give me a chance, I just got here last night. I’ve only been working on it a few hours.”

“I’ll give you \$25K if you can do it,” says David.

“That’s what I like, a challenge. Okay, I’m watching the registration desk computer. What name do you think I should look for?”

Mike says, “Oh, he won’t use his real name. Look for something phony.”

“Yeah, just thought you might know what name he uses when traveling. I’ll keep polling the database. In the meantime, was that a serious challenge? About the twenty-five grand, I mean?”

“Yep,” says David.

“Aha, there’s an easy \$25K looking for me,” as she looks up, grins and then hunches over the laptop again.

Todd says, “Make that \$50K. I’ll match David.”

“Who the hell are these guys?” she asks Mike.

“Oh, they’re good for it, believe me. They also don’t think they’ll be paying you either,” replies Mike.

David pulls up some displays on his big screen. Jay eyes them for a moment, grunts, looks back at David, winks and continues tapping away.

Mike says, “What’s that?”

“That is a firewall, or, actually, one of several. I’m watching your nerd girl friend here trying to get past it.”

“I really don’t know why I bother but, what the hell’s firewall?” asks Mike wearily.

“It blocks access to our internal network. It filters and analyses incoming and outgoing traffic and blocks packets we don’t trust. It also hides the identity and configuration of the machines on our internal network.”

“So it has something to do with keeping out bad packages from UPS and FedEx?” says Mike.

“Never mind,” says Todd.

“Bingo, I’m in.”

“Oh really?” says Todd sarcastically. “Are you now?”

“Yeah, here look,” as she swivels the laptop around to display a streaming video of all of them sitting around the table taken by the web cam above David’s display.

“Ahh, not quite, that’s a honeypot. In fact, we got you,” says Todd on the other side of the table who pulls out a keyboard from a tray under the table. He taps a few keys and a new window opens and on it is Jay’s desktop, icons, windows and all. “I kinda hacked your Windows remote login.”

“Damn, how the hell did you do that?”

“Trade secret, dude. And, Oh, by the way, about the \$50K,” as he hits a key and a loud you lost buzzer sound fills the room. “On the other hand,” now the you wonding sounds, “I won.”

“I will get even. You do know that?”

“Well, it wasn’t a bad try, actually, so David, what’s our consolation prize,” Todd says like a quiz show announcer.

Just then Mary walks in and, shaking her head as she surveys the nerds assembled around the screen, says, “You people ever play with anything other than your keyboards?”

David says, completing Todd’s remark, “Why, what everyone wants, Todd. An afternoon with the one, the only, Mary Murphy!”

“What, this time I won? You got someone normal around here for a change,” as Mary theatrically looks high and low.

David points to Jay, “No, not likely. Will she do?”

“Her again? You lot usually scare off all the women in a few hours,” says Mary.

“We didn’t scare you off,” says Todd. “And God knows we tried.”

“I’m here to maintain discipline, nerd boy.”

“Is she dangerous?” asks Jay eying her suspiciously.

“Oh yes, she’s very dangerous. Watch your step,” laughs Mike.

“Well, honey, I guess your prize is the extreme makeover package for the day. Maybe we can get you some decent clothes and makeup. And a little bling off a nice home shopping channel. I can see that you are very definitely bling deprived.”

“What, these clothes are not nice?”

“At a homeless shelter? Yes. Here? No.”

“Sit down and wait a bit Mary, Jay’s hacking the registration system at the Regency downtown. There’s someone we’re interested in over there,” says David.

“All right, Then I’ll amuse myself,” says Mary as she sits down and pulls out a keyboard of her own and brings up a shopping channel the audio for which David quickly kills. Mary glares sinisterly at him.

He says, “Use the damned earphones!”

She thrusts out her hand with a what are you waiting for and/or do you want to livelook. He tosses her a credit card. A moment later she sees some jewelry that she likes and flips out a cell phone and begins dialing. David shakes his head and rolls his eyes. She gives him the keep it up and you’re in big trouble look. The shopping channel answers, she rises and walks off chatting up her old friend, the on-air host, in some dialect of bling, oblivious to all.

Todd gives Jay a remote login access password for the system running the big display. Jay displays a window showing her laptop screen on David’s console. While waiting for the registration system to record a checkin, Todd and Jay commence to yap about how Todd managed to hack into Jay’s machine. Jay is impressed, so is Todd. Jay likes Todd’s got /root -shirt. She has one like it with the Linux mascot Tux. Mike is catatonic from acronym overload.

Time: 1 PM

By one o’clock there’s a caption across the bottom of the screen showing the shopping network. It says they’re talking to Mary from Omaha. The announcers look very happy as they cheerfully model all manner of gold jewelry for the

camera. Mary in Omaha appears to be buying the stuff by the truckload, much to David's chagrin.

Then Jay interrupts and says, "Hold on, got one, how about a Harold Clayton? Just registered. My map search says the address he gave is that of the old Des Moines landfill. Me thinks that's him?"

"He's definitely seems like a landfill kind of guy. How's he paying?" asks Todd.

"Gift card. No way to trace it. It must be him. Okay, they just typed in his car license, yep, Polk County. There it is, room 924 and here comes the keycard authorization code. Got a mag strip writer?"

"Sure enough," says Todd. "We use a lot of card entry doors and need to change the codes a lot. Text it to me to this address," as his mouse highlights a userid on the screen.

"Sure thing," says Jay as she opens a message window, copies in the codes and transmits the message.

"I'll have it coded downstairs and then have some guys go over, wait for him to leave the room, then install some of my toys," says Todd as he gets up, gives a small salute.

Jay begins taping the keys on her laptop again. Mike asks, "What now?"

"Oh, nothing, I'm just using my credit card in Kansas City. Jack has access to things like that as you know. This will throw him off the trail if he's looking for me."

"How about doing that for me?" asks Mike. "Maybe we could convince them I've left town."

"Too late, that train has left the station. They know you're here. Too much time's past since the last usage. They wouldn't buy it."

"Then why would it work for you?"

"I only used cash on my way here. I know about these things. I don't like leaving a digital trail when I'm on the run. This will be the first transaction they can

find.”

“Are you on the run often?” asks David.

“No, but I’m prepared. You can’t be too careful.”

“What, I’ll bet you’ve got a cellar full of canned goods and water?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes. Mainly tuna and Poland Spring water. Well, I had a cellar until two days ago.”

David says, “Speaking of food, let’s get something to eat. Not much we can do right now. So guys, what’ll it be? I’ll call downstairs and have them send something up.”

“What’ya got on the menu?” asks Jay.

“Get her a can of tuna and a bottle of water,” says Mike.

“Just you wait, someday, when that super caldera in Yellowstone blows, you’ll see that I was right. But I won’t give you any tuna, no sireee, that’s mine,” as she rubs her hands together and assumes the posture of the wicked witch of the west from Wizard of Oz, “All mine, my little darlings.”

“So, why are you in the Midwest then? Isn’t this closer to Yellowstone than Laconia, Never Heard-of-it?” asks David.

“Canary Islands, man. La Palma, Cumbre Vieja, that’s why.”

“You really shouldn’t get her started, you’ll regret it,” says Mike.

“Okay, I’ll bite. What’s with the Canary Islands and all that other stuff and why are you in Nebraska?” asks Mary, taking a brief respite from shopping while she hunts for a cell phone with a charged battery.

“Super Tsunami when Cumbre Vieja erupts, anytime now. It’ll cause half of La Palma, one of the Canary Islands for those of you geographically challenged, to slide into the sea. That will send a one hundred foot wall of water at the east coast.”

“Well, Yellowstone hasn’t blown yet today and we’re too far from the beach to worry about tidal waves so far as I know so I’ll call and see what’s on in the kitchen,” says David as he picks up the phone and dials. “Say, what’s for lunch down there? Okay, Okay, Yep,” and hangs up.

Mary quickly confiscates his phone and tosses him her phone. It seems her battery went dead and this has cut into her shopping spree. David gives her an annoyed look and plugs her phone into a charger. She scrunches up her nose at him and takes his cigarettes.

“So what’s on for lunch?” asks Mike.

“Nothing. They’ve got nothing prepared at the moment so they’re sending up groceries, we’re on our own,” says David.

A minute later Sean walks in the door with a grocery store bag full of things. Mary takes the bag from him and says, “Well if you want some real food I might as well do the honors.” She looks inside the bag and then at Jay and says, “I don’t suppose you can cook or anything?”

“I got a USB coffee mug warmer, does that count?”

“Yeah, she once tried to cook supper on it. Nearly killed me and the laptop both,” says Mike.

“What do you live on?”

“Mikey does the cooking. I put up with it as long as it keeps him out’a my hair. So, let him help, but personally, I don’t think he’s very good at it.”

“You must be a joy to live with,” says Mary, “Okay, then I guess it’s up to me. It looks like it’s gonna be stir fry.”

“Give me a minute and I’ll give a hand. Despite what the girl with the tasty-bake USB socket says, I can boil water, which is more than she can do, I might add,” says Mike.

“Oh! Look! I see there’s an Internet special on stomach pumps. Should I order one or two?” says Jay.

“Okay, keep that up and you’re back on the beef jerky, Twinkie and caffeine diet you were on when we met.”

“One more remark from you and your sex life will be back to beef jerky, if you know what I mean,” says Jay menacingly. Mike gives her a sour look. David stifles a laugh.

Mary laughs, rolls her eyes and says, “Davey, honey, I’m gonna like her.” She turns and heads towards the kitchen making a mental note of the line for future use.

While Jay finds her laptop battery charger in a backpack full of wires and electronics, Mike gets up to go to the kitchen but first goes to check the temperature on the bank sign in the distance. It says -5F. He watches as small snow squalls streak from the drifts. The streets are still mainly snow covered. No signs of life except for a van half a block away whose exhaust plumes reveal a running motor. Mike quickly jumps back from the window and calls David, “Hey David, I think we got company.”

David opens a window and selects a rooftop camera and focuses in on the van for all to see.

“You bet, that’s gotta be one of Joe’s guys. See? He’s got a camera with a telephoto lens too. Doesn’t seem too interested in top floor though, he’s mainly looking at the old loading dock below us and the main entrance. Anyway, with the sun reflecting off this window, I doubt if he could see us anyway. But I wouldn’t give him a target.”

“Hey David, you got an Ethernet port on this table?” asks Jay.

“Yeah, look underneath.”

“Aren’t you the least bit interested about what’s going on outside?” asks Mike to Jay.

“No, honey, not right now. I suspect there are a lot of people who want to blow your head off just at the moment,” says Jay as she crawls around on the floor with a blue cable. She spots the socket and inserts the plug. Lights blink on the back of her laptop as the network interface activates. A box pops up on David’s display.

Jay calls out to David at the window, pointing at the keyboard saying, “Do you mind?”

“No, go ahead says David. Do what you need to.”

“Are you crazy? Are you really gonna let her mess with your computer?”

“Yeah, well, it can be repaired. She seems to know what she’s doing.”

“Yeah, but wait until she tries to cook with it.”

“You know, there are USB rocket launchers available. You might want to be a little more careful in your choice of words,” Jay mutters without looking up.

After watching the telephoto camera shot of the van for several minutes, Mike says, “I guess he’s just gonna sit there.”

“Yep, just watching. Unless you want to take a walk around the block? That might prompt some movement on his part.”

“Ahh, no. I’ve had enough shots taken at me this week already,” says Mike as he finally heads for the kitchen to help Mary.

Mary is taking out a large Teflon coated deep skillet. She pours a layer of olive oil and turns up the flame on the gas stove. The hood fan is humming on low. In a separate pot, she dumps a few cups of instant rice into a like amount of boiling water, turns down the gas and puts a lid on it.

“Despite what Jay says, I can cook. Anything I can do?” asks Mike.

As the oil heats, Mary grabs a large bag of skinless, boneless chicken breasts and tosses it to Mike saying, “Here, cut these up in small pieces, will’ya?”

He gets out a cutting board and quickly reduces the bird to small chunks. Mary takes the board from him and scrapes the contents into the olive oil which sizzles in reply. She quickly covers the pan with a spatter screen and shakes it back and forth to evenly distribute the shards of bird.

“Here, keep stirring this while I look over the veggies they sent up.”

Mike, after a few moments, shakes the pan again, more violently and the chicken chunks tumble over one another redistributing themselves in the hot oil. He takes the wooden spoon and begins stirring them as Mary pulls two packages from the grocery bag, the frozen stir fry veggies. She pops them in the microwave to thaw. The spattering slowly dies down as the water from the chicken quickly boils off. After several minutes, Mary takes the pan back and dumps the contents of the thawed veggie bags and slowly turns the mixture over and over, setting the flame on high. She shakes a generous amount of soy sauce on the mélange and continues the turning. Every few turns, a drop of oil falls into the gas flame and bursts into a yellow flare.

Mary leans and, pointing towards Jay with the wood spoon, whispers in Mike's ear, "She's real nice, ya'know."

He nods in agreement saying quietly in return, "Yeah, I know but the only way I ever get any attention is to hide her laptop battery."

"So, stud, where do you hide it?" asks Mary with a smirk. Mike looks at her and grins deviously. "I can hear it now, Is that a laptop battery or are you glad to see me?" Mike giggles.

"In her case, she'd go for the battery every time."

Jay in the meantime has opened a remote windowing server on David's machine. Mike watches from the kitchen in fascination but without a clue as to what's going on and thinks, silently to himself, "Geez, what a geek."

"Okay, that's it! I'm connected," Jay announces with some flourish, arms raised in a gesture.

Time: 2 PM

The apartment door swings open. Todd returns and says, "Okay guys, how are things at Fort Shea? I suppose you've noticed our company up Howard Street? Well, outside the door, we got four more! Look at cams 5, 18, 27, and 32."

David brings up windows with the camera views. In each shot, they see a van or a car. In each, a punk with a camera. Mike walks over to the display and looks carefully at each. Then turns and says, "Can't we zap them with one of Todd's lasers or something?"

“Actually, they’re not doing anything illegal and shooting them with a high joule ray gun might be construed as unprovoked assault in some quarters. Anyway, too much wind blown snow around between here and their cars, it would scatter the beam,” says Todd.

“So, you’ve tried this before?” asks Mike.

“Oh, a few low power experiments, perhaps,” says Todd. “Lance never noticed the paint blisters on his SUV.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, lunch is about ready. You can get hungry waiting for someone to blow your head off at Fort Shea.”

“Hey, this is Mo R♦n, not Fort Shea,” says David.

Mary calls out, “Yep, it’s just about done, come and get it.” They all get up and serve themselves to the stir fry, rice and some Chinese beer which David gets out for the occasion.

“So, gourmet beer he’s got, food he doesn’t got?” asks Mary leaning on the counter with one arm outstretched and looking very annoyed.

“Man does not live on food alone,” sniffs David.

“There’s other things man may live without if he’s not careful,” says Mary as she stares him down. David ducks behind the counter.

Time: 2:30 PM

They sit around the big table eating. The master display now features a news channel feed. After a while, David turns and says to Todd, “Do you think they’ve finished at Pete’s hotel yet?”

“Probably, I’ll check.” He pulls out his cell phone and makes a call. It connects to one of the guys he sent to the hotel. He asks how things are going. He nods and says “Okay,” a few times then says, “Yep, Catch you later,” then folds the phone and slips it back in his pocket.

“They just finished. Piece of cake, we’re in. Pete went down stairs and got lunch right after they got there and they were able to slip in while he was out. They

planted a couple of audio transponders and reprogrammed his laptop with some patches so that his web cam will relay video back here. We'll also be able to capture the laptop's screen as well read its files. We've also hacked the hotel router so we can copy all his TCP/IP wireless traffic."

"Neat. But how do you get the audio from the bugs back here?" says Jay.

"They're Wi-Fi enabled. They're sending on the hotel wireless net," says Todd. "I've also got a Wi-Fi tap on the room's land line. I still don't have his cell phone. When I get it, I'll put a virus on it. Anyway, bottom line, we have his room covered for sound and video and we own his laptop."

Mike says, "Assuming I understood any of that, what happens when he shuts the laptop off?"

"Nothing, we sort'a installed a root kit on it. Even when he thinks the machine is off, we've got control. When he powers down, my software shuts the screen off, spins down the disk and switches off the status lights so it looks like it's off but it will continue to transmit pictures and sound from the built in web cam and microphone. Here, I'll show you, it should be working now."

Todd leans over pulls out a keyboard and mouse tray from the table then clicks an icon on the main display. This opens a fish-eye view of Pete's room. Pete is not visible but Todd turns up the sound and they can hear an electric shaver in the distance and the announcer on a TV news program.

"Not bad, not bad indeed! A little spyware goes a long way," says David.

"I've also got his email list and, with Jay's passwords, I'm beginning to map the network he uses for conferencing and communications."

"Don't you just love technology?" says Mike. "It makes you feel so safe and secure."

"Also, I'm sending out viruses to all the people in his email address book. The messages will install my spyware then email me here. Then the viruses will propagate to their address books, and so on. I should be getting confirmation from my little bots in no time."

"Ahh, won't you like get half the country in after a few iterations?" asks Mike.

“Yeah, we would, normally. Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon sort of thing, but as they send back the addresses they’ve invaded, after the first three iterations my software will start matching up the lists and only go to sites that appear in multiple address books from the first three levels. It will send kill signals to the others. I’ll also do some Bayesian analysis on the email stored on the target machines and look for recurring patterns that suggest drug or crime activity. The ones that show positive, we’ll harvest their addresses too.”

“Won’t people notice? What about these firewall things?”

“Once we’re in, and we’ve got a few unpublished email exploits of our own, my virus code also installs as a root kit.”

“Geez, this is getting thick. And a root kit is? This is about gardening, right?” asks Mike.

“Well, harvesting, anyway. It’s software that installs itself in the kernel of the operating system and can’t be detected by any normal spyware scan,” answers David.

“Ahhh, tricky?” says Mike, confused.

Todd turns down the sound saying, “Very tricky, man. Okay, I’m switching over to sound monitor mode. If there’s any sudden change in the ambient audio level, like new voices, phone ringing, the speaker will automatically turn up again. In the mean time, however, I’ll leave the picture up.”

“Do we know anything about the room he’s in,” Mike asks.

“Yeah, here’s an email from one of the guys who went in there. It says that Pete’s laptop is on a desk against the wall on one side of the room. To its right, there’s a balcony overlooking the hotel atrium. Very swank. Across the room from the desk there’s a small sitting area, two chairs, small couch, coffee table and a couple of tables with lamps. A wall divider separates the bedroom area from the sitting room. Pete’s room is on the top floor where all the luxury suites are, each with a balcony overlooking the atrium. On lower floors, a corridor and railing wall runs around the interior and there’s an exposed bank of glass caged elevators at one end. The whole thing is about 10 stories high. The lobby is divided into a reception area, a sitting area and a dining room with dividers of plants, water fountains, that sort of thing. The roof of the atrium is all glass

skylights. Here's some digital photos," as he brings up several shots of Pete's room.

"Sounds nice," Mike says, "The drug trade pays well, I ought to know. Nothing but the best for the lads that corrupt our youth."

"What, you mean public school teachers get luxury hotel suites too?" says Jay.

"Ignore her, she's from New Hampshire. They all ride around in pickups with gun racks listening to Rush Limbaugh all day."

"No, unfortunately, he's not on all day, just three hours. Then we listen to Sean Hannity and tape replays. And, what's wrong with a rifle in your truck? Everyone should be armed. It discourages the riffraff."

"You're dangerous, Jay. When the revolution comes, you're gonna be one of the first up against the wall," says Mike.

"Ahh, mush-for-brains liberal, may I remind you that when the revolution comes, we'll be the ones with the guns?"

"I give up," says Mike in an exasperated tone.

Jay ignores him and says, "My impending demise at the hands of a cadre of neo-Maoist thought police notwithstanding, maybe I better erase the record of your guys' keycard entry into Pete's room from the hotel database? No sense leaving any tracks," as she leans over her laptop and begins typing.

"Good idea, we need to remember little things like that. It's nice to have Jay here to remind us that you can never be too paranoid," says Mike.

"Are you sure she wasn't a cat bugler or something before you met her? Where in fact did you find her?" asks Todd.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"A second hand clothing Thrift Shop in Des Moines, during my gas station cumconvenience store period. I used to bump into her there a lot. Seems we had

the same taste in clothes,” says Mike.

“Ahh, that would be, same budget, actually,” interjects Jay. “And, my clothes are much nicer and fit better.”

“Okay, budget. Anyway, she was finishing up college in Ames in computer science. Nothing like poverty to draw people together. So, we hung out. I think she needed someone to annoy. Anyway, when I got the cable news assignment, she began to help me sort out the computer systems I got access to. She’s been working with me on the project for about a year. I guess I must thrive on abuse.”

“And working on my master’s degree. Crime doesn’t pay very well, at least not for me. Especially working for him. Anyway, if our writer boy here can get his act together, I might possibly get paid and get some credit in the big expose’ before I get my head blown off. I figure it might be a good resume’ builder and help me land a real job. What’ya mean, abuse?”

“This is a real job. You’ll get paid when I get paid. Be patient. I’m just a stringer.”

“Oh please, don’t hand me straight lines like that,” says Jay gagging.

They finish eating then stack the dishes and pans in the dishwasher which David switches on. From the living room, a bell sounds from the main display screen and a program automatically turns the sound feed from Pete’s room on. The phone in Pete’s room is ringing. They rush back and resume their seats as though the commercial just ended and the game’s back on. On screen, they can see Pete reach for the phone, pick it up and say, “Hello.” Immediately the land line phone tap cuts in. Another window appears with a jagged audio amplitude graph and now they hear both sides of the call.

“Hey Pete, got a minute?”

“Yeah, Joe, what’ya got?”

“I got the information on their electricity. They’re fed by several high voltage overhead lines that come from a substation about two blocks away. I don’t know much about these things, but it looks like they use one pant load of electricity. Those are very high capacity lines, as I understand it. What’s more, they’re the only building being fed by that substation. All the other buildings in the area are

fed by a different substation three blocks away. Strange.”

“Seems odd but, who knows? Must be a lot’a lights there. So okay, if we cut the club’s power, then the street lights in the area stay on, right?”

“Yep. That substation only feeds the club, nothing else. Like I said, they got a dedicated substation. If you want their lights out for a while, I’ll hit the substation. Otherwise, I can just take out one of the overhead lines.”

“No, I want the power out for a while. I want their heat off too. That will surely make’em come out.”

“Okay, Then I’ll hit the substation.”

“Good. Then we’re okay to cut their power and start the party at ten pm tonight?”

“Right. The substation will be history at exactly ten pm.”

“How many guys will you be able to put on the street around that place?”

“I can round up about seven.”

“Good, with Tom, Bob, Mark and Sid that’ll be plenty. Make sure they all know what Mike looks like. Let’em know I’ll give ten grand to the guy who gets him. Have them there by ten o’clock and keep’em out’a sight until the substation blows.”

“Right, there are a lot of back alleys around there. I also had a guy go down to the city hall and check out the building inspector’s office. He was able to get copies of the building plans from when the place was renovated a few years ago. I just scanned and emailed them to you.”

“Thanks, I’ll take a look at them. Give me a call if anything else comes up.”

“Will do.” They hang up.

“Looks like he’s got what he wanted,” says Todd looking at the others. “No surprise in that, really.”

With that, they see Pete walk towards the laptop which he thinks is turned off. He hits the power up button and walks out of sight. At David's apartment they watch the display of Pete's screen which shows laptop boot messages, totally faked, as it appears to boot.

Pete returns back into the picture, and seats himself before the screen. He opens a browser window, it also appears on David's monitor. He brings up a satellite map of Omaha and targets in on the club. Then he finds the Omaha assessors office and brings up a description of the club including a diagram. Then he opens an email window and displays the plans Joe sent.

David says, "Looks like a complete map of the place, there's not much missing that I can see."

"Just my wiring and electronics," says Todd.

"That would account for about one third the total mass of this place, if I'm not mistaken?" says David.

"Yeah, that's about right, give or take a few tons," says Todd with bemusement. "Not counting Mary's jewelry hoard."

"Hey, it's not a hoard. It's a collection, nerd boy. You need to accessorize more."

Pete is now only a few feet from the laptop mounted web cam.

"Gee, I can see his nose hairs and all," says Mike.

"Thank you for that tasteful observation. Now let's review, honey, we've been over this before. Silence is golden and duct tape is silver," says Jay. Mike sticks his tongue out at her.

Pete studies the diagrams and makes notes on an unseen pad of paper to his side. He scrolls through the data and the satellite maps. After about fifteen minutes, he closes the windows on the laptop and picks up the hotel phone. He calls Joe again, the phone number dutifully recorded from the touch tones. The land line tap switches into action.

Joe answers and Pete says, "Hey Joe! Thanks, I just got your plans. There are apartments on the top floor. Eight of them. That's where they're hiding Mike."

Joe says, "I'm not surprised. Tom and Bob were pretty sure about the apartments. Ya'know, this probably means that if you can't smoke him out, Mike can stay holed up there as long as he wants. And I don't see any way you're gonna get in if this doesn't work."

"Yeah. Let's hope we don't need to go in there. Thanks for the diagrams. Send me anything else you come up with." He says goodbye and hangs up.

He picks up the phone again. This time he calls Mark and Sid at their motel. Mark answers, "Hello?"

"Mark? It's Pete."

"Did you get the smoke bombs?"

"Yeah. Tom gave us the address of that fireworks shop off I80 and we got them a little while ago."

"Will they do the trick?"

"Oh yeah, we got a demo from the guy that owned the store. Lots'a smoke. We got a case of twelve of them."

"Good, and the gasoline?"

"Yeah, we got a couple of small bottles we can use too."

"Sounds good guys. Get to the club a bit early and look the place over just in case this doesn't work. The power station will be blown at ten pm. You know what to do."

"Right, no problem," says Mark. Pete hangs up.

Mary says, getting up, "Well, then, sounds like intermission. So, it's my turn. You!" pointing at Jay. "You're coming with me. We'll see if we can fix you up a bit."

Jay looks around at the others who are grinning. Mike says, "You've gotta go, resistance is futile, dude."

“No, I’m too young to die, save me, someone, save me!” says Jay in a melodramatic Theda Bara pose, palm outwards, across her forehead.

“Nope. It’s your turn. Face it like a geek. Ya’know, whine incessantly, throw a tantrum, hide in the corner curled up in the fetal position and wail uncontrollably. The usual.”

“I only do that when you try to get romantic,” says Jay as she reluctantly gets up and glares sternly at them and then, a bit fearfully, at Mary who grabs her by the shirt sleeve and drags her forcefully out of David’s apartment to the makeover event.

Mary cell phones her waiting accomplices who converge on Mike and Jay’s apartment armed with makeup, clippers and measuring tape. Mary quickly cranks up a shopping channel. One with a jewelry hour.

Mike comments, “I think I’ll hang out here until the re-make mayhem is over. I’m not ready for a fashion cat fight.”

“Is anyone?” asks David as he tosses Mike a pack of cigs. “Ya’know it would be hell around here if those two teamed up?”

“Oooh, don’t even think such a thing. Now let’s see if this system of yours has any decent video games.”

Time: 5 PM

Todd, Mike, Lance and David reassemble in David’s apartment to go over their strategy. Jay makes a late appearance and mutters a lot of epithets, especially concerning a certain sadist named Mary and the amount of bling that’s on order, with overnight delivery. Mary follows her in. Jay is sporting a new silky pink blouse, designer pants, a gold chained belt, new shoes along with several heavy gold chain necklaces, bracelets, and earrings.

“Hey Mike, Jay’s a girl! Did you know that?” says Todd noting Jay’s new attire.

“Yeah, and the next one who makes a remark is gonna be a gelding,” Jay spits out with ferocity.

“You better keep you mouths shut guys, I think she means it,” says Mike.

“Now, she’s all right. She calmed down a lot when we decided that laptop accessories were really fashion statements, sort’a,” says Mary.

“What? What have you ordered now?” says David.

“Nothing much honey. We found a nice techie shopping channel. Just some things called USB drives, flash drives, power supplies with matching lithium ion batteries, memory addons, and a couple’a nice color coordinated Prada bags.”

“Oh geez, how much?”

“We lost count. The bags were a bargain though, not much more than a thousand each. What? Like you can’t afford it?”

“So, have there been any developments since my involuntary incarceration?” asks Jay.

Todd looks around at the others and says, “Not much but it looks like we’re gonna have some company again tonight.”

David says, “Sure does, but at least we know who. Have we printed up copies of their mug shots?”

“You bet, nice and clear, they’re already printed downstairs. I’ll be sure everyone has a copy and keeps close watch on them. I’ll keep a security cam on them too,” says Lance.

“Ahh-hem, what about them cutting the power? Is no one worried about the fact they’re gonna shut the lights out with the place full of people then set off smoke bombs and light gasoline?” asks Mike.

“No,” they others say in unison.

“Okay, humor me, why not? Generally, I’d consider it a problem.”

“I got two gas fired JT9D-3A’s hooked up to a motor generator in the basement,” says David.

“Okay, I didn’t understand any of that as usual.”

“We don’t run off the mains, Mike, the electricity coming in here runs an electric motor that spins a big flywheel that turns a generator. That way we get much cleaner electricity, no spikes or surges,” says Todd.

“And we have two Pratt and Whitney jet engines hooked on the drive shaft. If the power cuts out, one of the engines is on line in less than a second. They each can generate 120,000 horsepower, enough to get a Boeing 747 off the ground,” says Lance.

“They cut in automatically and run on natural gas. They use the same emergency system for the Boston subways without the flywheel,” says Todd. “Both engines at full power can do a total of almost 180 megaWatts. We could power half Omaha if we wanted to,” adds David.

“Oh, never mind. Sorry I asked. They’re not noisy are they? I never did like airplanes.”

“Duh? Yes. But we vent them through the old chimney and anyway, with the racket on the dance floor, who’d notice?” says David.

“Mike doesn’t like noisy mechanical things except that lead sled of a car of his,” offers Jay.

“Hey, watch what you say. That lead sled saved my life! Anyway, I like you and, geeez, the noise I get from you!”

“Oh you love it. I’m the only one who takes you seriously.”

He raises his head and shakes it then says, “Why me, Lord? Okay, Now what about the smoke bombs and gasoline?”

“Oh, I’ll take care of them,” says Lance.

“You do this a lot?” asks Mike.

“You’d be surprised what I do, dude,” says Lance.

“Ahh, don’t fill me in, please.”

Lance and Todd get up and wander off to their duties, Jay continues to fiddle

with her laptop. David sacks out and Mike helps Mary clean up the kitchen.

Time: 8 PM

It's 8 o'clock and Mike is lounging on David's couch, one foot on up on the table, watching the main entrance in one window while playing a video game in another. David's over by the window watching the traffic below. Jay is banging away at her laptop as usual with two cigarettes absentmindedly lit in the same ashtray to her left and a cold cup of coffee to her right. Mike spots Sid walk in through the main entrance and start going through security.

"Hey, it's one of them," calls Mike.

As Sid hands over his ID, another one of the bouncers distracts his attention while the first doorman quickly swipes the ID through a mag strip reader on his podium. A moment later he hands it back to Sid who is unaware that it's been scanned.

Mike chuckles, "I wonder if the ID is real?"

A second later, the record from the Sid's driver's license, complete with his JPEG photo pops up.

"Yep, it's real. Sid Fluegel, originally from Council Bluffs, age 25, 6' 2", 160 pounds, blue eyes, blond hair, yeah, like half the population of Iowa, present address, expiration date," says David.

"Nice bod," says Jay looking up momentarily. Mike shoots a glare in her direction. She giggles and says, "Well, you could work out once in a while too," and goes back to typing.

Mike says, "Idiot, he used his real ID. He actually used his real driver's license. I thought he'd have more sense than that."

"Well, he doesn't know we're on to him and he doesn't know we scanned the ID. I guess he didn't think he'll generate any attention. As far as he's concerned, all we did was look at the birth date," says David.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

“Now, the big question is, what do we think Pete’ll do after this stunt fails? He knows that we know his guys are looking for you. When this doesn’t work, what’s he’s gonna try. What?”

“Some break in attempt, I guess,” muses David.

“Ninja style, helicopters on the roof, rappelling through the skylights. Just like on that old series Shogun,” says Jay.

“Ahh, I don’t think so. Anyway, Lance’s missiles would take’em out,” says David smirking.

“Does he really have missiles up there?” asks Mike.

“Who the hell knows? I gave up figuring what goes on around here a long time ago,” says David.

“So, ninjas up the elevator shaft. A small explosive at the old loading dock door then up the spiral stairs,” says Jay.

“A bit showy not to mention we’d knock’em off like fish in a barrel as they came up the stairs,” David answers.

“She’s watched too many Bond movies,” says Mike.

“Let me just type a note here, no more movies for Mikey.”

“Anyway, ninjas or not, he knows it won’t be easy. He knows we have security. The place is mobbed most of the time. How’s he gonna do it?” says Mike as he pages Todd’s cell phone at the bar.

Todd answers, “Yep, I saw him, Sid Fluegel. I’m already tracking him across the floor with a tight shot from one of the security cams. Can you see him?”

Mike’s actually beginning to get the hang of this system. Earlier Todd showed him the tracking system they use for performers to keep spot lights on them. They aim a computer guided low power infrared laser on the person’s head. Normally, such a system is used for military missile targeting, but in the club it’s used to maintain the focus of pin spots on the otherwise rapidly moving entertainment. It can also be used to aim the laser show. It is very accurate and

can even follow very fast dance moves. In this case, however, Todd's got the tracking system fed into the central security camera system so every where Sid goes, his own private close up follows. Mike says to himself that he does like these toys.

"Yep, we got him, thanks," says Mike as he flips the phone shut.

Jay stops typing, leans back, lights a third cigarette, the other two having smoldered out and watches also.

"So, when's his pal gonna show up?" she asks.

"Who knows? Anytime I guess," says David. "Anyone want anything from the kitchen?"

"How about dumping this coffee? I'm going down there and take a closer look for myself," says Jay as she hands him her cup, shuts down her laptop and heads for the door.

After Sid hangs his coat in the cloak room beside the main entrance, he walks a little way into the club. He stops and looks around and up into the atrium vault above. "Geez," he says quietly to himself, "What a freaking palace. Tom and Bob were right!"

Around him are over a hundred people, mainly under thirty, milling about, laughing, drinking and generally having a good time. In the central dance floor, a few dozen couples are dancing to some recorded music which reverberates through out the open space above.

He wanders over to the middle of the bar, orders a beer and, holding it in one hand, turns to face the dance floor. His elbows lean against the bar behind him. He surveys the growing crowd as a steady stream of people now pours through the main door. Gazing intently upwards, his eyes, starting to adjust to the darkness, begin to see the outlines of the balconies on the upper floors.

One of the bar tenders puts the basket of pretzels with the wireless mike next to Sid.

At about 8:30 pm Mike spots the other one, Mark, enter the club. The doorman and bouncer pull the same routine and Mark's ID is on the screen in a few

seconds. Mark Spencer from Marshalltown, Iowa, 5' 11", 155 pounds, 26, blond (what else?), green eyes. Yep, real also. Todd puts an infrared beam on him too and starts feeding the sequencing output to another cam pod which quickly focuses and tracks Mark. The system is recording both cameras.

Mark also heads for the bar and buys a beer. Walking casually over to Sid, he nods and says, "Geez, what a place!"

"Sure is, never seen anything like this before. Who'd'a thought in Omaha!"

"See anything interesting?"

"Yeah, look up above. It takes a second for your eyes to adjust but you can make out the outlines of balconies all the way up there."

"Yeah, looks like there must be four or five of them," says Mark.

"I think I'm gonna start taking a few pictures with my cell phone. No one's gonna believe this place," says Sid, as he pulls out his phone and goes through the motions of making a call but, in reality, he's snapping pictures of the club.

"They coming out okay?" asks Mark.

"You bet, they look fine on the screen."

"I'm gonna head over towards the stage area and check out the emergency exits. Catch you back here in a while."

"Okay, I'll circle around the other way."

When Mark gets to the stage area he spots the emergency door to its right. With his back to the central dance floor, he takes out his cell phone, and snaps a few pictures of the stage. He pans to the right and snaps again and then takes one of the center of the building from the angle of the stage. He then closes his phone and slips it into the pocket of his shirt.

Todd, Lance, David, and Mike watch as Mark and Sid case the place. Lance is near the main entrance, Jay's now working the bar and Todd is perched at his console. Sid walks south towards Todd's control booth, passing directly in front of one of Todd's monitors which, unknown to Sid, is showing video close ups of

him and Mark. But this affords Todd a good live look at Sid who unexpectedly turns and notices Todd peering at him. Somewhat startled, Sid says, “Hey, how’ya doin?”

Todd smiles and says, “Real good, ya’need another one of those,” referring to Sid’s beer.

“Yeah, thanks,” says Sid as he puts the empty on the bar. Todd slips off his stool. He reaches down into the refrigerated case and takes out a fresh cold bottle, pops the top off with the bottle opener mounted on the bar and hands it to Sid, getting a good long look at him in the bargain. “On the house,” says Todd.

“Gee, thanks,” says Sid as he tilts the bottle Todd’s way in a salute. “Tell me something, what are those balconies up there?”

“Up there? Some levels have offices, top level, apartments,” says Todd now leaning over the bar towards Sid.

“Huh, that must be sweet, living up over a bar. No messy DUI problems at the end of the night.”

“Yeah, pretty nice, actually.”

“What? You live up there?”

“You bet, nice job perk.”

“I’ll say it is. Nice place, Thanks again,” says Sid as he walks further down the bar to wait to meet the returning Mark.

Mark circles around the bar to the area near the main door and takes some shots looking east across the dance floor towards the bar. He continues on his counter clockwise tour. Along the way, he stops and socializes and tries to pump the people he meets for information about David.

Finally, having come full circle, Mark meets up with Sid back at the bar. They sit at adjacent stools, back to the bar, facing the dance floor, observing. After a while, Jay comes over and, playing the part of bartender, asks if there’s anything she can get them. Mark turns and says, “A couple more beers.”

“You bet,” says Jay who returns a moment later with the beer. Mark hands her a ten dollar bill, Jay returns the change which Mark leaves on the bar.

Jay asks, as she reaches under the counter, “Peanuts?” She places the wireless enabled basket of brine salted peanuts on the bar.

“Thanks,” says Mark. “Say, don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“Who me?” says Jay bashfully. “I don’t think so.”

“You ever live in Des Moines?”

“Nope, I’m from Omaha, never been to Des Moines.”

“Could’a swore I’d seen you there once.”

“Sorry.”

“No problem.”

They both turn towards the bar and begin breaking into the peanuts. Jay, wiping her hands in a towel, joins Todd at his console at the end of the bar just as Todd activates the mic. Everyone listens in, including Lance, across the floor, who’s wearing a headset. Jay discretely returns to David’s apartment just in case either of them remembers where they saw her in Des Moines.

Sid says, “Well, see anything interesting?”

“Well, I counted the emergency exits on each side and paced off the distances between them.”

“Yeah, I did pretty much the same. I guess that must be the door to the freight elevator over on the far side,” Sid says.

“Must be, it fits Bob’s description. I wish there were some way to get up there. Found out that four people live up there in apartments,” says Mark.

“The bartender at the computer console, he lives up there. He told me when I was asking him about the balconies,” says Sid.

Todd looks away from the console and down at Sid who’s facing away from him.

“Two of the others are Shea and the guy who runs security here. That’s him, the security guy, over there, the big blond guy near the door. His name’s Lance,” says Mark.

Mark looks briefly over at Lance who’s near the main entrance. Lance looks like he’s watching the dance floor but, actually, he’s keeping an eye on Mark and Sid as well as listening to them.

“Holy crap, what is he? Their fullback?” says Sid.

“Yeah, big, ain’t he? I heard he’s gay,” says Mark.

“Not your typical fairy,” says Sid giving Lance another closer look.

“Ahh, no, I don’t think so,” says Mark.

“Hey, you’re his type. Go over there and talk to him and see what you can find out.”

“You want this bottle up your ass?”

“Now, now be nice. I was just thinking that maybe Lance over there might wanna meet some nice young guy like yourself,” says Sid smirking as he takes a drink from the bottle pitched at a high angle.

“You’re fucking kidding, right?”

“No, not really. Why the hell not? We might learn something. You’re pretty cute when you want to be. Give it a shot? Who knows?”

“Man, they don’t pay me enough.”

“It’s worth a try?”

“I can’t believe I’m listening to this. Anyway, I already talked to him. When I was looking at the elevator room door. He came up and I asked him what it was and so on. He didn’t tell me much. He was okay, though,” says Mark.

“Just okay? How do you know he’s gay?”

“He hit on me, that’s how.”

“Like I said, you’re just his type.”

“Give it a break, will’ya? Anyway, I found out a lot of other stuff while I was walking around. Over there where the elevator shaft is? Well I was standing just outside the door when some guy went in. While the door was open I looked in. Pretty much the same layout as the blueprints that Joe got but I saw the loading dock door was slid open. They were bringing in a dolly loaded with sound equipment. They propped the door to the elevator room open so they could wheel the cases out and I saw a guy slide the loading dock door shut and then lock it. It’s only locked by a dead bolt. Got a good look at the elevator too.”

“Well, that may come in useful if this smoke out doesn’t work. Let’s get another beer and watch. We still got a while before Joe cuts the power.”

David leans back and says, “Well, guys, we want their cell phones. Any ideas? Besides having Lance go put the moves on Mark again?”

“I’m okay with that,” says Lance.

“Down boy. We just want their phones, we don’t want to injure them.”

“Damn,” says Lance.

“Why do you want their cell phones?” asks Mike.

“So Todd can dump their phone books and plant his viruses without them knowing,” answers Lance.

“I only need one of them,” interjects Todd. “Once I have it, I’ll dump its memory and upload a new operating system with my virus scripts. They’ll spread when they use the phone. Then I can do the same to the other infected phones remotely, I won’t need physical access.”

“So, exactly how do you intend to get their phones?” says Mike. “From what I see on the security cameras, they’ve got them in their shirt pockets. A pickpocket job won’t work. They’ll notice them gone right away.”

“Mary, you listening?” says David.

“Yep, I’m listening, Davey.”

“Think you and your accomplices can get one of their phones?”

“Yeah, I’ll see what I can do. Give me a few minutes to get ready.”

A few minutes later, Mary, Lois and Jane, bedecked in jewelry and tight fitting blouses and jeans, stagger up to the bar, laughing and giggling like school girls. They cluster next to Mark and Sid. Lois calls to a bartender and orders a round of drinks then turns and begins flirting with Sid. Mary takes her drink and turns to Mark and says, “Hey, dude, what’s up. You new here?”

Mark displays interest and says, “Yeah, My name’s Mark. This is Sid. This is our first time in Omaha.”

“So, what’ya guys in Omaha for?” asks Mary.

“Oh we’re here to make some deliveries,” says Mark

“What line of work are you in?”

“Ahh, pharmaceuticals, mainly.”

“Sounds interesting,” says Lois.

“Oh, not really. We just deliver packages and pick things up,” says Sid.

Jane is fooling with her cell phone then says to Mark, “Say, honey, could you please let me use your phone? My battery gave out and I need to be sure my sister will pick me up later.”

“Yeah, sure,” he replies as he pulls out his phone and hands it to her.

She begins to pretend to make a phone call, turning and covering one ear as she presses the phone to the other.

Todd, by prearrangement, starts a popular dance tune on the sound system. As many couples get up to dance, Mary says, “Hey, I like that song. Ya’wanna dance?”

“Okay, Sure, I guess so,” says Mark.

Lois says to Sid, “How about you, Sid?” Sid nods.

They put their drinks on the bar and Jane looks up and says, “Don’t worry, I’ll watch’em for ‘ya.” The foursome heads to the dance floor.

Jane hands the phone across the bar to a bartender who rushes it to Todd at his podium. Todd has already identified the brands of both cell phones by intercepting and analyzing the signals they’ve been sending to their local host towers. With this information, he’s already prepared a substitute SIM card. Todd takes the phone and swiftly attaches a data cable into it. In a few seconds, he downloads the phone’s entire memory. Then he writes a copy of the original directory information to the substitute SIM card which is plugged into his console. He then quickly and skillfully pops open the phone case and replaces the phone’s original SIM with the one from his console which has a modified operating system, subscriber data, security information and his virus scripts. He reassembles the phone. Now he owns Mark’s phone. He hands it to the bartender who walks down the bar and hands it back to Jane. She makes a quick call to her own phone number so there will be some record of the phone having been used if Mark decides to check.

A few minutes later Mary, Mark, Sid and Lois return. Jane gives Mark his phone back and says, “Thanks man, that was a big help.” She turns to the others and says, “Listen girls, we gotta go. My sister says she’s not feeling well and wants to go home. She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Oh, damn, do we have to?” says Mary.

“Well, unless you want to walk back to Council Bluffs?” says Jane.

“Okay, well, guys, it’s been nice. Maybe some other night.”

“Nice to meet you,” says Mark,

“Same here,” says Sid.

Mary, Lois and Jane walk across the crowded floor as Todd lowers the main lights and starts a laser show above. Under cover of darkness, while Todd creates a distraction with the lasers on the further wall of the club, they disappear unnoticed into the elevator room and ride to the top floor. They briefly look down from the balcony at their prey then hurry into David’s apartment.

Inside, Mary says, “Well, did he get what he wanted?”

“Yep, worked perfect. Thanks, guys. Get a drink and sit down and watch the power outage,” says David.

“So, what’ya think they’ll do?” says Mary.

“There’s only two ways to do it, either knock out the overhead feeder lines or go for the substation, most probably the substation. That’s what they said before so I assume that’s still the plan. But hitting the feeders is easier. Getting to that substation will be hard. It’s got a pretty heavy fence and a lot of razor wire around it. But, since Pete wants the power out for a long time, the substation is the way to do it.”

Mary, Lois and Jane get drinks, some cheese dip, corn chips and sit around the big table waiting for the non-event. They watch the windows of the display which is showing multiple security camera views of the floor below and a roof mast long shot of the substation that feeds the club a few blocks away.

Mark and Sid sit at the bar for a few minutes watching the crowd and drinking their beers. Mark says, “They seemed kind’a nice?”

“Yeah, real nice. Too bad we won’t be coming here after tonight.”

They go back to crowd watching while the gang in David’s apartment are watching them. Soon Mark looks at his watch and says, “Hey, it’s getting near ten, we better get moving.”

Sid quickly finishes his beer and they head for the coat room. As they pass Lance, he looks at them and says, “Later, dudes!”

Lance heads for Todd’s console where he can get a full view of the events about to unfold and better coordinate his security team in the event of something unexpected. Todd’s already switched over to a battery backup on his control console machines.

Lance says to Todd, “You better get upstairs, just in case. It’s nearly ten o’clock. I can handle things down here.”

“Right, catch you later,” says Todd as he heads for the elevator. Lance takes Todd’s place behind the console.

Time: 10 PM

Mark and Sid give the place one last look and then enter the coat room. They take their coats and put them on. Sid moves over to the emergency exit near the stage while Mark remains near the coat room. They wait for the power outage. Sid checks his watch, it's ten o'clock on the dot.

Todd rushes into David's apartment and hops over the back and onto the couch to David's left. He quickly pulls out a keyboard and starts opening windows. Jay pays close attention as he does.

On David's big display there now appear multiple windows showing the power distribution system for Omaha, including all the substations. A large map appears of the middle United States depicting ISO Midwest which covers the Dakotas, Manitoba, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, parts of Missouri, Ohio, Illinois, even western Pennsylvania. The maps pulse with lines of various colors and thickness showing electrical power being moved throughout the region as well as the major electrical generating plants.

"How many maps have you got?" says Jay.

"Oh, that's just the default display, I'll close some of them in a minute. I just want to watch the power flows when they hit that substation."

Todd brings up a command prompt window and begins rapidly typing commands. Status windows appear displaying the parameters for the motor generator. A window appears showing a shot of the great flywheel in the basement glistening in the spotlights as it spins along with the two idle P&W engines attached to it. Another window shows an infrared image of the street outside where they see strange, multicolored thermal images of Joe's men hidden in the shadows. The mast camera, high on the roof, is tightly focused on the electric substation two blocks away.

Suddenly, a city bus from nowhere careens towards the substation. They see the faint image of someone jumping from the door just before the bus crashes through the fencing and into the array of transformers. A huge explosion of sparks and flames erupts as the bus brings down the massive array of high voltage lines. The loss of these, in turn, causes overloads at other substations. The effect cascades as one station after another trips off-line. Lights in this quadrant of Omaha quickly begin to die. Only the flames, smoke, sparks and

electrical arcing at the substation are now visible in the darkness.

At the club, there is an imperceptible dimming as one of the P&W jets immediately scrambles into action. On the screen, they can see the flywheel in the basement spinning as before but now numerous lights and panels on one of the jets have sprung to life. Todd's status display comes to life as many bar graphs and icons suddenly appear. Needles leap from their idle position on several dials into ranges underlain with green.

"Every thing's normal downstairs. Engine 1 is running at ten percent, no loss of phase. I've disconnected from the outside mains to keep out any surges," says Todd.

"Good," says David. "At least we won't have to reboot any of the file servers downstairs."

"Yeah, I was dreading that. All those damn journals to be re-read. It would take all day."

"That's for sure."

"Oh-oh! Wait a minute, we got a problem. Knocking out our substation caused a cascade. The high voltage feeders into the substation shorted out and it's taking out a bunch of other substations all around the city and they're pulling down a bunch of high tension feeder lines from Iowa. I forgot how much power our substation draws. About a half of Omaha's lost power, so far," say Todd.

Now they all intently study the graphs as Todd says, "Okay, this is really not good. There's a phase inversion starting because of the load imbalance. It's gonna trip Council Bluffs 4 off line if the strain continues. Looks like ISO Midwest is about to lose 790 megaWatts of capacity."

"Oh-oh," says David.

"I don't like the sound of oh-oh. Wexactly does oh-ohmean in English? And what is a freaking ISO?" says Mike.

"Mike, oh-oh a highly technical term meaning that the shit is about to hit the fan. In simple terms, it means enough electric generating capacity for 650,000 homes is about to be lost. Council Bluffs 4 is one of the largest coal fired plants in the

Midwest. The other generating plants on the system won't be able take on the extra load this time of year if it trips because we're at peak demand right now. If it fails, the problems will cascade and the whole freaking upper Midwest electrical distribution system will collapse and this is not a good time of the year to be without electricity," answers David.

"I knew I should have bought batteries," says Mike.

"Once one of these generating plants spins down, it can take hours to bring it back on line, assuming no damage to the plant. And, an ISO is what we call an electric grid operator," says Todd.

Todd furiously types commands to one of the windows. The lines emanating from CB4 are beginning to flicker as automatic circuits attempt to compensate for the phase instability. Red lines are starting to appear across the ISO map as the compensating strain on distant transmission facilities grows.

"The Palo Iowa nuclear plant is indicating that fail safe systems are about to force an emergency SCRAM shutdown. It'll take weeks to restart, even after they flush out the Hollywood anti-nuke crowd," says Todd.

"Looks like a lot'a other stations are also about to trip off line," says Jay as the red lines spread across the map.

Suddenly, a large bolt of green flashes across the map from Texas, through Oklahoma, Kansas and into Nebraska. As it does, lines across Texas turn suddenly yellow.

Todd lets out a "Yee-haw, I did it!"

"What just happened?" says Mike.

"Todd just routed enough power from ISO Texas into ISO Midwest to replace the output of Council Bluffs 4 as it was about to drop off line, that's all!"

The red lines on the ISO Midwest map begin to turn yellow then, one by one, green. The Palo station returns to green. The lines in Texas begin to return to green as gas fired generating stations across the state quickly ramp up to their full mid-summer capacity from their January reduced output level of a few minutes earlier.

“I knew there was a lot of extra capacity in Texas, so I borrowed it. Their systems are designed for air conditioning when it’s 110F in Dallas. They only use a fraction of what they can produce this time of year. You can see their plants spinning up to meet the extra demand,” brags Todd. “Look, now that the strain has lifted, CB4’s phase is realigning.”

“How’d you do that?” asks Mike.

“I told you about how easy it is to break into the infrastructure, didn’t I? Well we’ve done it, of course. Paid off it seems,” says David.

“Sure did but won’t they find out who did it?”

Todd and David laugh contemptuously and David says, “Yeah, right. Even if they could, we did the right thing. Kept millions of people warm who would otherwise be in the dark right now. I don’t think the utility companies are gonna to want to publicize the fact that a bus in Omaha nearly shut out the lights from Pennsylvania to Hudson’s Bay.”

“Well, perhaps not but about half of downtown Omaha seems to be in the dark. What can you do about that?”

“I’m way ahead of you.” says Todd. “I just text messaged the electric company and said we could feed while they fix the transmission lines if they can get some portable transformers set up.”

“I think we better get the cots out again and make an announcement. There won’t be any lights around here for a while, whether we feed or not. Most of the people downstairs won’t have any heat when they go home,” says David. “We’re probably looking at another sleepover.”

“I’ll get on it,” says Todd as he gets up to leave. “Keep an eye on the displays for a while but I think every thing’s fine now. Ya’know, the birds really dig these sleepovers. Seems they like company. They chirp all night long. It’s really amazing.”

Time: 10:15 PM

Mark and Sid continue waiting in the club. Their coats are too warm to wear indoors, so they take them off and put them over their shoulders. Finally, at

10:15 Mark walks over to Sid and says, “I don’t think it’s gonna happen, I’m calling Joe.”

He takes out his cell phone and dials Joe. Joe answers. He tells Mark that the substation was blown at exactly ten o’clock. “But Joe, the lights here didn’t even flicker here. We’re still in the club. Okay, Will do.” He flips his phone shut.

“Joe says they blew the station. We’re to get out’a here to go see Pete.”

They turn and leave. The scene outside is one of total darkness. All the street lights and buildings are dark. They struggle through the faint moonlight and a few car headlights to find their car holding their butane lighters, which were intended to light the smoke bombs, above their heads for light but the wind blows them out many times.

When they get to their car Mark calls Joe again. “Well, nothing happened at the club but it’s pitch dark outside around here. All the buildings and street lights are out. But the lights in the club are on as usual. You must’a hit the wrong substation or something.”

“Yeah, I know, I already got a call,” says Joe. “Don’t know how the hell this happened. I know we had the right substation, I double checked it myself. You guys better hurry over and see Pete. I’ve already called and told him what I know. He wants to ask you some questions.”

Mark says, “Gimme your phone. I’m gonna email the pictures we took in the club to Pete. Maybe that’ll keep him happy. He’s not gonna like this.”

He pulls out his phone and sends his photos then does the same for Sid’s phone. By now, however, Mark’s phone is sending audio back to Todd.

Mark and Sid drive to the Regency through the darkened streets for their meeting with Pete. On the way, Mark says, “You don’t think they were on to us or something at the club?”

“Nah, what was there to be on about?”

“I guess you’re right, but it was weird, man, very weird that Joe got the wrong substation. He doesn’t make mistakes like that. I wonder why the lights didn’t go out?”

“Don’t ask me. I can’t even change a light bulb. I don’t understand those things,” says Sid.

“I wonder what Pete’s Plan B will be? This one sure didn’t work unless his goal was to put half the lights in Omaha out,” says Mark. “That part he sure got right.”

“Yeah, bummer. Traffic signals are dead too. Will you look at this traffic jam?”

Time: 10:20 PM

Lance joins the others in David’s apartment while Mark and Sid drive to the Regency. Jay and Mary have retreated to the kitchen and are giggling about something which makes Mike and David very worried that a conspiracy is brewing.

Mike anxiously asks, “What are you two up to?”

“Nothing, honey. Just girl talk,” says Jay followed by the sound of uncontrollable giggling. Now David and Mike are really worried.

David says to Todd, “Well, while the twisted sisters plot their attack, did you get what you wanted from his cell phone?”

“Oh yeah, lots. I’ve got about a hundred phone numbers, I replaced his SIM card with one of my own with my own operating system and a butt load of virus scripts. I own him, or at least his cell phone. All their base are belong to me,” says Todd with an emphatic gesture.

“What’s next?” asks Jay from the kitchen.

“I infect every cell phone in his address book. Then I have those phones send me their address books and I do the same, and so on. I should own every phone in the organization within a day or two.”

“Ahh, the wonders of technology,” says Lance.

“Nothin’ like good old fashioned spyware, I say. If these people stuck to POPs, plain old phones, instead of these walk-around computers, I wouldn’t be able to do this. But they want games, Internet access, mpeg players, you name it. That

means an operating system, and that means security holes. So I own them.”

Mike says, “So what can you do?”

“Well, read every number they call for one thing. And, I can re-route their calls through my system so I can listen in. I can turn their microphones on even when they think the phones are off and send the voice track back here. Of course, I get all their pictures, all their text messages both incoming and outgoing. And, I can make their phones cheat at solitaire!”

“Ohh, you are the nasty one! Cheating at solitaire, that’s unethical,” says Jay as she rejoins them in a voice of truly false concern. “But, can you make their lithium ion batteries explode? That’s what I really want to know.”

“As a matter of fact, yes! But most times the batteries beat me and do it without my help.”

“They should be getting to the hotel about now. Let’s see what we’ve got from Pete’s laptop,” says David as he brings up a display.

They see Pete’s room and Pete sitting in front of the laptop punching keys. “He’s just got email with the photos those two took downstairs. Here, I’ll pull them up from his hard drive,” says Todd.

A new window appears with a collection of thumbnails. Todd successively clicks on each and a full size version pops up. David says, “Looks about what I expected.”

“Yeah, I think so,” says Todd. “But, Lance, that picture of you, it looks like you’re putting on a little weight?”

“Keep it up dude and I’ll sit on your face. Then guess my weight,” says Lance with a frowning glance at Todd.

“Okay you two, go fight it out downstairs while you get ready for the sleepover. I’ll page you when something happens,” says David.

Todd sneers at Lance as they leave. Jay decides to join them. She likes to feed the birds who get very excited when they see the cots rolled out. Mary, Mike and David wait in David’s apartment.

Time: 10:45 PM

Mark and Sid arrive at Pete's hotel at about 10:45 pm. The lights are back on in downtown Omaha but traffic is snarled in all directions. They park their SUV behind the hotel and walk up a dark alley to the front entrance. Crossing the nearly empty lobby, they ride the glass enclosed elevator to the ninth floor and walk around the building on an inside corridor as all the suites at this level have balconies overlooking the atrium.

"That's it," says Mark as they come to the middle of the hall. "Room 924," as he knocks on the door.

After a few seconds, Pete opens it and says, "Come'on in guys. What the hell happened over there tonight?"

"Nothing, not a damned thing," says Mark and they enter.

They take off their jackets and toss them on a chair. Pete says, "There's some beer in the mini-bar fridge. By the way, thanks, I got those photos you sent loaded on my laptop. They look good. I'm glad you took them, now that we need to do something else tomorrow."

Mark pulls a couple of cans of beer from the small refrigerator and hands one to Sid. Mark begins, "Well Pete, we were ready but nothing happened. We waited until 10:15 then called Joe. He said they blew the substation on time. When we got outside, everything was dark. Something got blown but it wasn't the power to that club. Half of Omaha has no lights right now."

"Geez? Didn't the lights blink or anything?"

"Nope, nothing. Nothing happened at all but outside, pitch black. There was no power most of the way over here. Big traffic jam on Dodge Street. A lot of signal lights are out."

"Well, the lights here went out for a few seconds. Whatever Joe hit was big. They were talking about it on the news. It seems that substation took out several others and nearly caused some big generators to shut down," says Pete.

"I guess they must have had an emergency generator, or something. That's the only thing we can think of," says Sid.

“So, cutting the power’s not an option. Damn it. We’ll need to try something else. Come over here and go over these pictures with me and let me know what you found out about the place.”

Pete sits in front of the laptop and they pull up a couple of chairs behind him. He fills the screen with a mosaic of their photos and begins asking them details about each including which side of the club, north, south, etc, they were taken from. He makes notes.

Mark tells Pete what he learned about the elevator shaft and the sliding door to the loading dock. Pete asks if the door from the elevator room to the main club can be locked. Mark says he saw a shuttle bolt on the inside of the door.

“Okay, is there any way they could have ID’d you two?”

“No, we’ve never met Mike in person, we’ve only talked to him on the phone. So, he doesn’t know what we look like,” says Mark.

“That’s right, I’ve never met him in person either. There’s no way he could ID us.”

“Okay, back to the club. I’m real interested in this loading dock door beside the freight elevator. Tell me more about it,” says Pete.

“Well, it’s a steel door that slides open. There are tracks above and below. It’s bolted shut at one end but the bolt isn’t secured or anything. You could just pull it up and slide the door open,” says Mark.

“So, I guess we can count on that door opening if we want it to,” says Pete.

“You bet,” says Sid.

“What about main door security?”

“Pretty tight. They have a couple of bouncers there and a metal detector. It would probably be tough to get a gun in there, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean,” says Pete.

Finally, he asks, “Anything else?”

“They also have a security camera pointed at the main door so everyone entering is probably being photographed,” says Sid.

“About as I thought, pretty standard practice these days.”

“I guess that’s about all we saw,” says Sid. Mark nods.

At about 11:15 pm Pete finally says, “Good. I guess that’s it for tonight, come back here tomorrow morning at nine. Joe will be here. We’ll have breakfast and I’ll fill you in on what we do next. This time we’ve gotta get this thing done right. Certain people are not patient, if you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I think we do,” says Mark as he and Sid grab their coats and leave.

Time: 11:15 PM

David and Mike watch all of this from David’s apartment while Lance, Todd and Jay see it on Todd’s console on the club floor. After Mark and Sid leave, they all meet up back in David’s apartment to plan what to do next.

Lance says, “Seems like he’s planning to do a break in. So far, no mention of Jay so they probably don’t know about her. It seems they’re only after Mike.”

“Yeah, I agree,” says Todd. “Jay’s off the radar screen.”

“For once, it’s nice to be ignored,” mutters Jay.

“Well, if he’s planning a break in, how’s he gonna get in? He knows the main door is secure. The others doors are on alarms and locked. The old loading dock door is bolted. The door where we take supplies in is guarded and can be bolted shut. What’s he got in mind?” says David.

“He must have some scheme to get in through the old loading dock door,” says Lance. “He seemed more interested in that door than any of the others. If that’s his plan, I can fix it so that door can’t be opened. It’s solid steel. There’s no way they can force it.”

“Whatever they’re gonna try, at least we know they’re coming. But maybe we should let them do their break in and burn them. It won’t make Pete look good and it may make them back off for a while,” says Todd.

“Right, it’s only time we need,” says Jay. “Once writer boy here finishes, poof, no more Jack problem.”

“That’s professional journalist person, not writer boy, if you please,” sniffs Mike. “Anyway, Jack’s not one to back off for long but if we busted them, it might slow him down a bit and make him move more cautiously. That would buy me some more time. Once I publish what I’ve got, he’ll have a lot of other more immediate problems to deal with.”

“So, what have we got? It appears that they might try it tomorrow,” says Lance. “Probably through the old loading dock door. So? We let ’em in and bag ’em?”

“Yep, that’s the general idea until we know more. Maybe by tomorrow we can pick up something more on the audio bugs or the cell phones,” says David.

“What about the timing? Do you think they’ll really try tomorrow night?” asks Todd.

“Oh yeah, that’s what he said and I believe him. I don’t think Pete can wait,” says Jay. “I expect that he’s in a real hurry to deliver. Jack’s not in a forgiving mood. That, I can be sure of. Jack must know what we got by now and he’s shitting a brick!”

“Yeah, tomorrow night most definitely. He’s in a hurry,” says Lance. “We’ll just have to see what they say tomorrow morning. Maybe we’ll find out what he has in mind then.”

“By the way, Mikey, just in case, where’d you put the title to the car?” asks Jay.

“Geez, I’m not dead yet.”

“Just checking, honey. You can tell me later.”

“Just as I thought, it’s really the car you’re interested in, not me.”

“No, you’re good. But I could use some wheels too, just in case.”

4. Thursday January 9

Time: 9 AM

Joe, Mark, and Sid arrive at Pete's hotel room about 9 am. After they toss their coats and sit down Pete says, "Here's some copies of the building inspector's blueprints for that club. Let's go downstairs and get some breakfast and go over them"

Back at Mo R~~o~~n a groan goes up. "Damn, I thought we'd be able to watch them from his laptop camera," says David.

"We might have audio, I'm in contact with Mark's cell phone. I'll send it a command to start transmitting audio," says Todd. "We may still be able to hear them."

Pete and his group get a secluded table and visit the breakfast buffet. Returning to their table, Pete begins, "Okay guys, I've been going over those pictures from last night and the building diagrams. Tonight we're finishing the Mike business. And we're leaving a little message for the news networks not to fuck with us again."

Todd has a control window open on David's monitor and he's making adjustments to parameters on the cell phone of the breakfast party. Only muffled sounds of voices emanate from the speakers.

"It's no use, Mark must have his phone in his pants pocket under the table. I'm getting audio but its way too distorted and I can't clean it up real time. I'll record it and see if I can do something with it later but, for the moment we got no audio."

David suddenly says, "Hey, Todd, try ringing Mark's cell phone and saying, sorry, wrong number. He might leave it on the table."

"Good idea. I'm doing it now," says Todd. Mark's phone rings, he pulls it out of his pocket, answers, Todd says, "Is this the Sloppy Creme donut shop?"

"Sorry, wrong number," says Mark who flips the phone shut and puts it on the table next to him as David predicted. "Someone wanted a donut shop."

Todd now captures the audio clearly. He even grabs a snapshot from the phone's camera but it mainly shows the atrium above. David gives the thumbs up signal.

From the hotel they hear Mark say, "So, how do we get in there?"

Holding up one of the blueprints Pete points to the diagram and says, “Through the loading dock door next to the freight elevator. You said it was in a separate room of its own, the elevator on one side, a spiral iron staircase on the other and the sliding steel door to the south loading dock? That’s how it shows up on these blueprints. Are they right?”

“You bet, that’s right,” says Mark.

“And the door going in there from the club?”

“It’s a metal fire door. Fire code, I guess, because of the elevator.”

“And it can be locked from the inside?”

“Yeah, there was a good size brass sliding bolt on the door. Not a problem.”

“Good. And the door to the loading dock? Dead bolt only?”

“Yep. Just a big old bolt.”

“No lock?”

“Nope, just pull up the bolt and the door will open.”

“And you said the door from the club into the elevator room was unlocked?”

“Yep, I saw a lot of people going in and out the whole time I was there.”

“And Shea introduces the bands at ten pm?”

“Yep, most nights, that’s what I was told.”

“And the other guys that live on the top floor, Lance and Todd, they work in the bar?”

“Yep.”

“So, at around ten pm the only one upstairs should be Mike?”

“Sure seems that way. Except for some woman I heard lives up there too. But I also heard she worked in the club.”

“So here’s the deal. We wait until just before ten pm. Once you’re sure the door to the elevator room is unlocked, that’s when Sid sets off smoke bombs and firecrackers at the northeast corner of the club. That’ll cause a lot’a commotion and distract the security people. While they’re dealing with the smoke bombs, Mark, that’s your cue to duck into the elevator room. Bolt the door behind you, open the loading dock door and let the rest of our guys in.”

“What do I do after I light the smoke bombs?” asks Sid.

“Run out through the emergency exit back there. Things inside the club will get unpleasant.”

“No problem,” says Sid, relieved.

“What should I do?” asks Mark.

“After our guys get in, be sure the door into the elevator room is locked then beat it.”

“Okay.”

“When our guys get to the top floor, they search the apartments for Mike. My guess is that the commotion on the floor will probably bring him out onto the balcony to see what happened anyway. There’s only eight apartments up there. It won’t take long. We have the element of surprise. They won’t know we’re coming,” says Pete.

“Yeah, it’ll take their security a while to regroup,” says Joe.

“What happens when they find Mike?” asks Mark.

“Duh? Kill him and Shea too, if he happens to be there. Toss their bodies over the balcony. That’s a nice touch. Jack’ll love that.”

“I’m sure he would,” says Joe.

“On their way out, they torch the apartments to make sure there aren’t any files left to be discovered. The roof of that place is wood, it’ll burn real nice. Then quick back down the spiral stairs and out through the loading dock. Outside, we have a van across the street and we’re off.”

“Won’t this attract the police?”

“Sure will. That’s why outside we torch a few cars over in that big lot across the street and maybe one outside the front door. The place will be chaos. The police will have a lot of things on their hands. They won’t be able to sort out anything for hours.

“How many guys go in?” asks Joe.

“I figure four to work the top floor,” says Pete.

“Okay, so when my guys get up top, what if Mike spots’em and calls for help?” asks Joe.

“How’s he gonna get help if the only way up there is blocked? Anyway, if there’s a problem, they toss a fucking fire bomb over the balcony. That’ll take their mind off the top floor.”

“That it?”

“Nope, I got a better idea. Jack’ll love this. He’s a sadistic bastard. While our guys go up top, I want Tom and Bob to go to the second floor balcony and wait. When our guys are done and on their way down, I want them to fire bomb the ground floor”

“Geez, that place’ll be full of people,” says Joe.

“Yeah, I know. But we’re burning it to the ground. The fires on the top floor and

a few fire bombs on the first floor should do the trick. This will send a little message not to fuck with Jack. Jack wants the news organizations to know that he doesn't like investigations. He'll love it."

"You told him yet?"

"No, it's a surprise."

"Yeah, he'll be surprised, that's for sure," says Sid.

"Well, guys, that's the plan. Smoke bombs and fireworks first, then the break in, then the fire. Any questions?" says Pete.

"Shit, that's a lot of collateral damage," says Mark.

"Did you clear this with Jack yet?" asks Joe.

"No. I don't need to. Jack wants me to take care of this business. And I'm gonna send a message. This is the message. Anyone got a problem with that?"

"Ahh, no," says each.

"Okay, then tonight at ten," says Pete. "Anyone want seconds?"

"Yeah, I think I'll get some more bacon," says Sid.

"Me too," says Mark who gets up and puts his cell phone back in his pants pocket.

Time: 9:30 AM

Todd says, "Damn, he put the phone back in his pocket. So, unless he gets another Sloppy Creme call, I guess that's all we're gonna get for now."

"Well, they're going for the big time. Public massacre. I guess if he really wants to send a message with some serious shock value, that'll do it. Question is, what do we do?" says David looking around the room.

"Yep, he's sure looking for a lot of dead bodies," says Mike.

"What kind of a maggot is this guy?" asks Todd.

“Dude, you have no idea. These shit heads will do anything. They’re complete psychopaths. You any idea what the crap they sell does to people? Geeez, shooting them would be a mercy in most cases,” says Jay bitterly.

“Yeah, that’s all true but the immediate question is, now what do we do now?” asks Mike.

“I still say we play along and spring a trap. If all we do is thwart them, they’ll just try again,” says Lance. “I say we give them a serious bloody nose. We need to send a message to Jack too.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want anyone getting hurt,” says David.

“Well, we know their plan. We may find out more later. There are still got a lot of listening devices out there. I can be ready with trash barrels to smother the smoke bombs and firecrackers,” says Lance. “And, if they bring’em in and leave’em in their coats like last night, I can you fix’em so they don’t work very well.”

“Why let there be any smoke? Why not confiscate them or turn them into complete duds?” asks Mike.

“Well, because Mark won’t go for the loading dock door until he sees Sid set off the smoke bombs and we don’t get our shot at Joe’s guys unless he does,” says Lance.

“What’s in a smoke bomb, anyway?” asks Mike.

“Oh, just some potassium nitrate and sugar. Easy enough to buy at any fireworks store. All different colors, too, if you want. It’s no big deal to make your own,” says Jay.

“Hello? When did we start cooking school for bombs?” asks Mike.

“Oh really, I just searched for it. You didn’t think I knew, did you?” says Jay.

“Christ, you worry me sometimes,” says Mike.

“So, okay, so I didn’t search for it. I knew.”

“Right then, we give ‘em the smoke bombs, but de-fanged. What about the loading dock door?” says David.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. I’ll have the place nailed down,” says Lance with a smirk.

“You figure you can handle this?”

“Yeah, most plans kind’a fall apart without the element of surprise,” says Lance. “We know they’re coming, I’ll be ready. And, anyway, we may learn more by tonight.”

“By the way, we need to take out their van and have one of our own ready. I want all of Joe’s people out of here as soon as possible. I’ve got a feeling this might attract a lot of attention, police attention. I don’t want any of Joe’s people here when the cops arrive. Too many questions we don’t want to answer right now,” cautions David.

“Right, I can take ‘em over to the garage on 38th Street and hold ‘em there. We can decide what to do with them later.”

“I’ll block cell phone calls with a signal jammer while this is all going down so they can’t talk to one another,” says Todd.

“Good idea,” says David.

Time: 9:30 AM

As Thursday morning breaks, the wind chill is down to -30F and the air temperature is -15F. The stiff northwest winds pour endlessly and unresisted across the barren prairie. The light, powdery snow continues to drift into intricate new arrangements as the snow plows flock daily to reopen closed highways. The wind promptly closes them again in a few hours. Most roads are now just hard packed snow covered surfaces, salt and sand having no effect in sub-zero temperatures like this. But, surprisingly, snow isn’t very slippery when it’s this cold.

To this frosty world Tom and Bob rise at about nine-thirty am.

Bob, in his underwear, peers unhappily out the window of their tiny shared motel

room at a wasteland of cars covered in white. Sighing he says, “It doesn’t look good out there. We should go get something to eat and then buy those new coats.” Retreating from the window, he sits at the edge of his bed and drags deeply on the first cigarette of the day.

“I think I saw a DiscountMart off the interstate, that sound okay?” answers Tom who’s shaving in the small bathroom.

“Yep, just about my speed.”

“You get ready while I go start the car and let it warm up. It looks frigging cold out there,” says Tom as he wipes the last of the shaving cream from his face, combs his hair and pulls on a shirt and pants.

Tom wraps himself in his heavy hooded coat, now dry but still dirt covered from two nights before. He pulls on thick gloves and dashes out to the car. Bob shivers in the momentary blast of the open door.

Tom, getting in the car, slams the door and twists the ignition key. The frozen starter motor groans and slowly turns. The engine coughs, and catches followed by the usual shrill sound of whirring belts slipping as is common in old cars left out in the cold.

Tom guns the motor a few times and flips on the heater fan to high. Putting his gloves back on, he retreats back to the motel.

“Gimme a cigarette. Tomorrow you start the car. Geeez, why aren’t we in Florida? You any idea how friggin cold it is out there?”

“Yeah, minus fifteen, wind chill minus thirty. Just saw the weather guy on TV. Gonna be this way for another week, at least. He said stay inside. You should’a listened to him.”

“Where the hell is all this global warming? Hey, get dressed, there isn’t much gas in the tank. Don’t want to burn it all idling in a parking lot.”

Bob, combing his hair, decides a shave would deprive him of much needed insulation. He pulls on yesterday’s socks, pants and shirt. Getting his coat and gloves on he says, “Well, ready when you are.”

Tom switches off the TV and they both run to the car. Tom shoves the car in gear. He applies gas and it thumps forward to the loud crunch of solid snow beneath and the shriek of the slipping power steering belt. As they leave, a waiting car follows them at a discrete distance.

“Hey, how about that place? Looks like a very fine coffee and road kill drive through to me,” says Bob pointing at a fast food place.

“Okay, but if I’m sick, it’s your fault.”

Tom pulls up to the drive-thru window and asks Bob, “What’ya want?”

“Make mine a large lukewarm serving of brown liquid in a cardboard cup and a grilled, greasy, salty, cheap patty of unknown hog parts mixed with what may once have been an egg in a soggy pouch of starchy biscuit, gift wrapped in wax paper and packed in a decorative grease stained white paper bag.”

“You want fries with that?” says Tom sarcastically.

“No, I’ll just chew on the paper. More nutrition that way.”

“Okay,” says Tom turning to the microphone. “Two large coffees, black, sugar, four egg sausage and biscuit sandwiches, one order of hash browns.”

“Do you want ketchup with that?” comes the voice from the box.

“Yeah, thanks,” says Tom.

“Eight fifty-two, please pull up to the window.”

“Here’s four bucks,” says Bob.

Tom takes the order, hands the girl a ten dollar bill, takes his change, rolls up the window and pulls the car over to a parking spot in the otherwise empty lot. Motor running, they feast while the windows steam up and freeze over.

“I don’t see how they can call this coffee. I’ve smelled better battery acid,” gripes Bob.

“Well, maybe we should’a hit some yuppie coffee shop for a twenty dollar latte

and croissant.”

“This’ll do. Let me have part of that hash brown thing.”

“Hell, why didn’t you get your own?”

“Why should I? I can eat yours for free,” laughs Bob as he breaks off half of the hash brown patty and stuffs it in his mouth.

“Bastard, you’ll pay, just wait.”

When they’ve loaded up on carbs, salt and fat, they toss the debris into the back seat with many others and drive out onto the main road. A few blocks later, they pull onto the interstate heading west. After several exits Tom says, “I think it’s this next exit.”

“Yeah, I think so too. Looks like there’s a lot of stores over on the south side.”

Tom flicks on the turn signal and pulls onto the ramp, still snow covered in places. At the end there’s a stop light and he signals left. The light turns green and they drive under the interstate onto a four lane sprawl of gas stations, convenience stores, fast food restaurants, motels, and supermarkets. In the distance he spots a tall sign and says, “There it is, thought I saw one.”

The sign in the distance says DisountMart - Always Open. The car turns right into the massive but nearly empty parking lot before the sprawling flat roofed emporium. Great mountains of snow rise in the further ends, the work of many front loaders. Scattered around the lot and poking from the snow mountains are shopping carts blown by the wind and carried by the plows. A great cart coral has collapsed, a gust of wind catching its Put Your Carts Here and ripping it from its moorings. Its tubular frame lies flattened and collapsed on the snow packed pavement, its once captive carts have fled.

It’s early and the wind swept lot is vacant except for a small number of cars and pickups huddled near the main entrance. Only a few desperate souls find their need for cheap imported plastic crap exceeds the pains of the cutting winds.

Tom finds a parking spot as near the door as possible and brings the car to a lurching halt as the wheels slip a bit in the ice. They pull on their gloves and tighten their stocking caps, get out, and, leaning into the wind, trudge unevenly

towards the main entrance.

Their escort parks a few rows away and follows them in. Four guys enter in succession as the elderly greeter standing on a rubber mat waves each a half-hearted welcome while wishing the damn door would close so he can warm up.

Once inside, Tom and Bob wander aimlessly through the cavernous empty store picking randomly at things that catch their attention. Nondescript, metallic music from speakers mounted in the steel rafters echoes through the building while an occasional squawked page punctuates the drab wasteland of gaudy, low grade merchandise.

Tom and Bob gravitate towards the electronics section, as usual. All around them, on shelf after shelf, nearly all the way to the ceiling, are TVs. Big old glass tubed sets, giant HD LCD and plasma displays, home entertainment system components, TVs with built in DVDs. As the walls of images flash in unison to a common video feed of an action adventure movie, they walk down each aisle and look enviously at the large screens.

Pointing to one in particular, Tom says, “Look at the size of that. It’s huge, man. Did you ever see such a clear TV picture? How the hell do they do that?”

“I dunno. Look how thin it is too. I wish I had one. Can you image what a football game would be like on one of these? It would be like sitting on the fifty yard line.”

“Sure is nice looking. It’s almost like you’re there. Wonder what a porn flick would look like?”

“You’d be in cardiac arrest, dude. Yeah, but look at the price, \$2,400, not on our income.”

“Oh well, it wouldn’t fit in the car anyway. Regular size porn for now, I guess,” says Bob.

Moving on, they spot the MP3 players and accessories. Peering through the plastic window of the display case at each, they wish they had the money to get even one. Everyone their age has one but they don’t.

“Bob, look at this MP3 player. Geez, 30 gigabytes!” says Tom.

“You any idea what a gigabyte is?”

“It’s bigger than a megabyte, I know that. Says it can hold forty hours of video or 7,500 songs. Geez, are there 7,500 songs?”

“Probably.”

“I never could figure how you’re supposed to get the video into it? Do they connect to a camcorder, or something?” Tom puzzles.

“No. You connect it to a computer. That’s how they load them.”

“Ahhh, so you need a computer too. This could run into money. I guess I’ll stick to radio. But I still would like to have one, with or without video.”

Bob pokes through the audio section looking at bulky systems with bulging speakers while Tom wanders over to a large flat panel TV with an electric guitar attached. He picks it up and quickly discovers that he can play the guitar and the music will follow his rhythm as he strums invisible strings. The display shows the cords and animated guitarist gyrating to the tune. Instant visions of being a rock star flash to mind as his face lights in adolescent joy. Acting out the part, he quickly begins a full stage act carrying the concept of the air guitar to a new extreme.

Tom spots him and wanders over. After watching impatiently for a minute he says, “You planning on doing that professionally?”

“Yeah, man,” Bob intones with the music, giving a slashing down stroke across the imaginary strings causing the speakers to bleat out the next cord of the song. “I’m a natural born rock star.”

“Yeah, well don’t give up your day job just yet. And, here, don’t hog the thing. Let me try it too.”

Tom then repeats the experience and they’re both seriously enjoying themselves, lost to their real lonely plight of being on their own in an empty discount store with no audience of any kind other than their unnoticed trackers.

Eventually, Bob moves a few feet further along the aisle and finds a video game console and begins shooting, defending Earth from alien invaders. Tom notices

and joins him taking the other console. They continue to eagerly target bug-like creatures for another ten minutes.

David's guys occupy themselves pretending to look through CDs. They have concluded that these two souls are not a serious threat to society or the club and, that left to themselves, would probably spend most of their day playing with electronic toys, eating junk food and smoking cigarettes.

Eventually Tom and Bob move on to the computer section and fiddle with each laptop and desktop machine they find. Next they try every digital camera and camcorder, looking over all the controls, settings, comparing the view screens and checking the memory capacity. Then they browse through the cell phones, GPS navigation systems, and satellite receivers.

Finally, after about an hour of this, they move on to the luggage section. Tom spots the backpacks and rummages through them until he pulls out a black one and says, "This look okay to you? I need one. It's like one I saw some guy had the other night, what'ya think?"

"What exactly do you need a backpack for?"

"I dunno? All the college guys have them. I thought it might look cool?"

"They carry books in them. You don't have any books."

"So, I can get some books."

"Do you intend to read the books?"

"No. Why should I read them?"

"Then explain to me why the hell do you want to carry them around on your back?"

"It looks cool."

Bob shakes his head and rolls his eyes in an exasperated gesture.

Tom's cell phone rings. He drops the backpack into the bin and flips open the phone. He grimaces when he sees the caller ID. "It's Joe," he says as he clicks

the talkbutton and says “Hello?” David’s trackers slip into the next aisle to listen.

“Hey, Joe, what’s up?” says Tom.

“Uh-ha, uh-ha. Yeah, we’re at a DiscountMart right now, we can get them here. Anything else? Okay, we’ll swing by there after we leave here. What time? Right, will do. See you there.”

Tom flips the phone shut and turns to Bob and says, “That was Joe, he wants us to get some stuff and meet him at the Prairie Buffet at noon.”

“What does he want?”

“A four gallon gasoline container, 16 pint size glass pop bottles, some small dish towels, and we should fill the gas can.”

“With gasoline? Bottles? What the hell does he want that stuff for?” answers Bob.

“Oh, yeah, and a little bottle of liquid detergent.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you know a Molotov cocktail when you hear one? You mix the gasoline with the detergent, fill the bottles and stuff towel tightly through the top. You light the part of the towel sticking out and hurl the thing. It breaks and the gasoline explodes. The detergent makes the gasoline stick to whatever you hit. I saw it on TV.”

“Holy shit! I don’t like the sound of this. What’s he gonna have us do? Fire bomb that place?” answers Bob as a look of fear descends upon his face.

“I don’t know, man. But it sure sounds like something’s gonna get fire bombed!” says Tom as his expression goes grim as well.

They both stare at one another for a moment then Bob says, “Molotov cocktails. Damn, if we start tossing fire bombs, we’re gonna be targets. I just know it. He’s setting us up for target practice. We’re throw aways, man! We’re dead men! We’re getting into some serious shit here. Pete didn’t come all the way from Des Moines for the climate. He’s setting up something nasty. I got a real bad feeling

about this.”

“Yeah, so do I but what the fuck are we gonna do about it? What can we do? Nothing, that’s what.”

“Let’s get out of here. Let’s get the fuck out of Nebraska. Let’s get into the car and drive to California, man. We can make it. If we stay here, I don’t think we’re gonna live very long,” says Bob.

“Listen, we just do as we’re told and hope for the best. Joe’ll take care of us. Forget about running, we’re stuck here. We have no money, no families, no friends, nowhere to hide. Now let’s go get some damn coats, we look like shit. Then we get the other stuff.”

They walk sullenly off towards the men’s clothing section, both realizing that things are not going well. One of their trackers follows them, the other phones Lance and fills him in on what they overheard.

Tom and Bob pay for their purchases, and walk slowly back to the car. They stop for the gas. Bob jumps up and down in the frigid wind trying to keep warm stomping his feet doing the cold weather dance while the gas nozzle slowly pumps into the car’s tank. When the nozzle kicks, he takes it and fills the gas can. He replaces the nozzle into the pump and puts the cap onto the can. He carefully puts the can into the back seat, wedged so as not to bounce around. Bob buys cigarettes and a newspaper then pays for the gas. Their shadows wait patiently at the curb.

Time: Noon

Back on the road, Tom and Bob drive to the Prairie Buffet located in a strip mall just off the interstate a few exits to the east. Tom parks the car in the lot. They sit and they wait for Joe.

“Let’s put the new coats on,” says Tom.

“You got your pen knife? There must be twenty tags to take off.”

“Yeah here it is,” as he hands the small pen knife to Bob. He reaches in the back seat and pulls the bags with the coats into the front, looks in one and says, “Here, this one’s yours.”

They both begin finding, cutting and pulling the tags from the coats and finally decide they are ready to be worn. They hop outside the car and quickly strip off the old coats. They're still both wearing their 'club' shirts from two nights before. Rapidly putting on the new coats, they jump quickly back into the car. Bob says, "Put the heater up, it's cold out there."

"You bet. Hey, that doesn't look half bad."

"Yeah, I guess so. Yours looks okay too. I guess we'll get through this winter if we don't go surfing in the slush anymore."

"I can remember when we did that all the time," sighs Tom.

"Yeah, I also remember how your mother nearly killed us for ruining our coats then, too."

Then they sit there waiting smoking cigarettes and listening to the radio. About ten minutes later, a car pulls in and parks next to them. Joe gets out and waves to them to follow him. They hop out and all three walk to main door of the restaurant. At the entrance, Joe picks up the tab for the buffet.

They hang their coats on a rack near the door. Joe's phone is in his coat, Tom and Bob left theirs in the car. Todd, back at Mo R♦n is monitoring and going nuts. He's recorded the part about the Molotovs from Joe's phone which his viruses have infected by now. He's also infected Tom and Bob's phones. But all the phones are now out of audio pickup range. He contacts David and Lance and tells them about what he's learned but says he's got nothing more for now.

At the restaurant they pick up trays and silverware and start getting their food. Tom and Bob stick together as they browse the steam tables.

Bob quietly says to Tom, "Man, this feels like our last supper."

"Don't be so negative man, we'll be okay."

They sit down at a large table, both on one side. Joe arrives and sits opposite. They take their plates off the trays and Tom takes the trays and puts them on the next table.

"So, how you guys doing? Your arm's feeling better? I see you got some new

jackets, they look nice, real nice. Sorry about the other night.”

“Yeah, the arm’s feeling a bit better. We’ll survive,” says Tom.

“Good. Now how would you like to get even?”

“Ahh, yeah? What’s up?” says Bob, cautiously.

“The plan is to make a quick break in at the club and finish this Mike business tonight. Pete’s figured out the layout. He wants to send four guys through the loading dock door on the southwest side. From there, they go up to the apartments on the top floor and take care of Mike.”

“You gonna do this when the club’s open or closed?” asks Tom.

“When it’s open, at night, when the place is full.”

“So, how are you gonna get in without being seen?” asks Tom.

“Well, we create a little diversion, that’s how. Something that will grab their attention while we get the loading dock door open. In the confusion, we get in.”

“And what’s gonna happen to get the loading dock door open?” asks Bob, biting into a drumstick of fried chicken.

“Sid sets off some smoke bombs and fireworks on the other side of the club. Mark slips into the elevator room and opens the loading dock door,” says Joe as he opens and spills a packet of sugar into his coffee.

“No locks?” asks Bob.

“None, just a bolt,” replies Pete.

“So, what’s our part and what’s all these bottles and gasoline for?” asks Tom as he smears a pat of butter onto a dinner roll.

“You know how to make a Molotov cocktail? You put the gasoline into the bottles, mix in a little detergent so it will stick when the bottle breaks then cut the towels up and stuff them into the bottle tops tightly like wicks.”

“Yeah, I saw that on a program on TV,” says Tom.

“Well, make sixteen of them. Eight of them will go up top and will be used to fire bomb the apartments on the way out to make sure there’s no evidence left. The other eight will be used to hit the ground floor.”

“And where do we come in?” asks Bob.

“I’m providing four of my guys to go up top. Pete wants you two to go in after my guys and go to the second floor balcony and wait. When my guys come down the stairs, you light and hurl the other eight Molotov cocktails out onto the first floor then make a run for it. There’ll be a van outside the loading dock waiting for you.”

“Geez, that place will be full of people,” says Tom.

“Right. Pete wants to send a message. He wants the place turned into an inferno. Says it will discourage reporters in the future.”

“Some fucking message! And what happens to us? Those security guards are armed, we saw that. Won’t they be shooting at us?” asks Bob.

“Not a problem. The security guards will have their hands full with the fire, smoke and the panic after the first fire bomb hits. The exits will be blocked with people covered in burning gasoline. You’ll be done in less than half a minute.”

“How do we get out?” asks Tom.

“Through the loading dock door with the others.”

“Won’t there be crowds of people out there? They’ll attack us.”

“Geez, guys, fire a few shots. Wound a couple, they’ll scatter quick enough. Funny thing about a crowd. One gunshot and it’s a herd stampeding the other way. They’re unarmed. They’ll be no problem. Anyway, half of them will be on fire. Nothing distracts a crowd like someone running by burning like a torch,” says Joe laughing a bit. “Anyway, we’re gonna set off a few car bombs across the street and in front of the club. No one will notice you guys. The place’ll be a mad house. Piece of cake.”

“It still sounds like we could end up being used for target practice,” says Bob.

“Don’t worry, it’ll go down fine. The fires will be their main concern. You’ll have it done in less than 30 seconds then get the fuck outa there.”

“Oh man, this isn’t good,” says Bob. “You really want to kill and maim all those people?”

“Hey, it’s no skin off my back. It’ll be no problem,” Joe says coldly. “Guys, this is your big chance to move up. Don’t worry, things will work out. And another thing guys, you don’t want to cross Pete, do you? He’s still not too happy about the last time you screwed things up.”

“I guess not. What time does this go down,” says Tom.

“Be ready at 6:30. Mark and Sid will pick you up and fill you in the details and give you some untraceable hand guns. Have the Molotovs ready by then and safely boxed. By the way, don’t smoke in the car with all the gasoline fumes, understand?”

“Yeah, no smoking,” says Bob.

“The deal is set to go down around 10 pm. Okay, guys, that’s the job. If you don’t want to take it let me know now and I’ll tell Pete. You in or you out?”

“Yeah, we’re in, like we have some choice?” says Tom as Bob stares down at his plate.

“Very sensible decision, healthier too. Here’s a little entertainment, compliments of Pete.” says Joe, handing a packet of crystal meth to Tom.

Joe stands up and says, “Okay, it’s time for me to go. Enjoy the buffet, guys,” as he puts on his coat and leaves.

Time: 1 PM

Bob looks at Tom and says, “And you said Joe would take care of us? This is how he takes care of us? He gave you meth? I don’t like this. This is a setup. Man, we’re road kill. There’s no way out for us, you know it. I don’t want to throw no fucking gasoline bomb into a crowded night club. What the fuck do you think I am? Some kinda mass murderer? No, Man, California, let’s go, let’s go now? Man, aren’t we ashamed of ourselves yet?”

“Fuck you man, we haven’t got enough cash between us even to get to Denver. Anyway, they’d find us. You know that. We’ve no fucking choice. We have no say in this. We are fucked. And yeah, I’m ashamed,” says Tom.

Bob sighs and they finish the meal in silence. Tom tosses the packet of meth in the trash on the way out.

On the ride back to the motel Bob shakes his head and says emphatically, “No. I’m not going through with it.”

“What?”

“No, I’m done. Let me get my stuff then drop me at the bus station, Tom.”

“What’ya gonna do for money, man?”

“I got some emergency money in my shoe. Always tried to have enough for bus fare home, not that I have a home any more.”

“We’ve been a team for three years, man. Are you really gonna try to make it to California?”

“Yeah. Or somewhere else. Maybe it’s better you don’t know too much. But I ain’t gonna fucking torch no night club.”

“What the fuck, man. You think I’d squeal on you? No fucking way. Geeez.”

“No, it’s just that the less you know the better, ya’know what I mean?”

“Yeah, sure. But, crap, I don’t know. I don’t wanna go through with this either. But we’re in way too deep. I don’t mind being a delivery boy and roughing up some slackers who don’t pay their bills, but you’re right, this is really getting into some big time crap. Shit, a lot’a people are gonna die in there.”

“So? Why the hell don’t we both go? It’s pretty damn sure that if we don’t take care of ourselves, no one else will. We’re on our own, man.”

“I know. But I haven’t got a rich shoe like you,” says Tom.

“Well ya’can have half of what I got but it’s not much. I don’t know how far we

can get but at least it won't be here. I don't want to be here when Joe and Pete take that place down."

"Well, in that case, maybe we need a whole new plan," says Tom.

"How so? What'ya got in mind?"

"Maybe, just maybe, I think we should go back to that club."

"Huh? And exactly how is that gonna improve our situation?"

"And meet with that Shea guy," says Tom.

"What, are you fucking crazy? What part of getting your arm half broken, kneed in the groin and dumped in the gutter don't we understand?" says Bob.

"Ya'know, maybe it's time we tried something different? You heard, this guy Shea is loaded. Ya'know, we were the ones who pulled a gun on him. What the fuck would we have done? Huh? If things were the other way around, we wouldn't have kneed him, we'd have fucking blown his balls off. Anyway, we know something he wants to know. He's the only other game in town. I say we go for broke and make him an offer he can't refuse."

"Yeah, broke. Yeah, man. We are definitely broke, that is true. And we're quickly running out of options."

"So?"

"What the hell? What'a we got to lose? Ain't no one gonna wonder if we don't come down for breakfast in the morning. All right. Let's give it a try. Ya'can only die once as they say," says Bob.

"Right. First, let's go get our things. Look, we're both twenty-one and between us we ain't got enough to fill a decent backpack. We need to make some new career choices."

"If we don't, I don't think we're long for this world, man," says Bob.

"Well, it's about time we changed that."

They return to the motel and swiftly pack up their few things. They get back in the car and drive to Mo R♦n. They park a few blocks away where they won't be seen, knowing full well that Joe has people watching the place.

Parked, Tom looks at Bob and says, "So, what exactly are we going ask for?"

"Well, we want to get to California, right?"

"Right."

"And I don't think this car's gonna make it."

"Probably not. I'm surprised it's lasted this long."

"So, how do we get there?" asks Bob.

"Train?"

"Nah, I don't think they run them anymore. Bus. We want bus tickets."

"Are they expensive?"

"I don't think so but it's a long way. Maybe three or four hundred each? And we'll need money for food," says Bob.

"Well, then that's it, two bus tickets from Omaha to LA and a hundred dollars."

"Geez, each, man, each. A hundred each."

"You think? That's pretty near a grand we're asking for."

"Yeah, no problem, he'll pay. We know a lot," says Bob.

"Okay, let's do it."

Time: 1 PM

"You're on," says Bob and they nervously high-five each other. Tom dials the club.

"Mo R♦n, Omaha's best dance club, how may I direct your call?"

“I’d like to speak with Mr. Shea, please.”

“Whom shall I say is calling?”

“The guy whose crotch he kneed the night before last.”

“One moment sir.” The interlude is filled with generic background music.

“CLICK. This is David Shea, how’s the hangover?”

“Not so good, you bastard. And Tom’s arm’s still in pain. Okay, so we’re fucked. But here’s how it is. We have some information that we think you want and we need some help. Are you interested to talk to us? If you’re not interested, put Mike on.”

“Yeah, I’m always interested in talking. Who is this? Sounds like Bob.”

“How the fuck did you know my name?”

“I know both your names. And a lot more. Now what exactly do you want?”

“We’ve got information and we want to make a deal. We need to talk. What the fuck is so difficult to understand about that?”

“Nothing really. Always open to deals. Where are you?”

“About two blocks from the club. We don’t want to be seen. You know you’re being watched?”

“Oh yes, we know. No problem, let’s see, yep, I’ve got your GPS coordinates. A black SUV with darkened windows will be by in a few minutes to bring you here. Don’t leave anything you want to keep in that car.”

“Yeah, that won’t be hard. What’s gonna become of the car?”

“We’ll take care of it. We don’t want Pete or Joe to come across it near the club, now, do we? Leave the keys in it.”

“No, I guess not. They’ll be looking for us soon enough. By the way, dude, you know we’re up shit’s creek right now?”

“Yeah, I know. Maybe I can get you a paddle. Now sit in the car and wait.”

“You’re kinda our last hope. You’re not gonna screw us, are you?”

“No, you’ve got nothing to worry about. I’ll see to that.”

“Okay. We’re waiting.” CLICK

Tom says, “How the hell does he know about Pete and Joe?”

“Mike must have told him.”

“And how does Mike know Pete’s in town?”

“Good guess, maybe?”

As soon as David hangs up he calls Lance who grabs his coat, gets in his SUV and drives to the address. He pulls up next to Bob’s rusted out, beat up old car, toots the horn and reaches over and opens the rear side door. Tom and Bob scurry and enter.

“Hello guys, remember me?” says Lance as he turns and smiles at the two fugitives.

“Oh shit! Oh shit! I knew this was dumb. Now we’re totally fucked,” says Tom furiously.

Bob groans and lowers his head into his hands.

“Oh give it a break you two. Nothing’s gonna happen. Just sit back and enjoy the ride,” says Lance.

Tom looks at Bob and says, “We’re dead men. I knew this was stupid. We should have taken our chances with Joe. It’s your damn fault.”

“Don’t blame me, you agreed too.”

“Geeez, a couple of fucking drama queens. Will you shut the fuck up back there or daddy’s gonna stop the car and do something nasty.”

Tom and Bob become silent. Tom glares but Bob pretends not to notice. Lance

nearly drives off the road trying to keep from laughing.

About two minutes later they pull up to the loading dock where the beer kegs and other supplies are delivered. It's out of sight from Joe's watchdogs.

"Okay you two, out'a the car and up on that loading dock and into the club. Be quick about it. We don't want any of Joe's spies seeing this."

Tom and Bob dart quickly from the SUV and rush frightened into the club.

Lance tosses the keys to Jim and says, "Will you and Sean take care of their car then park mine across the street?"

Then he turns and follows Tom and Bob into the club where they're standing just behind Todd's console both looking terrified. Lance comes up behind them, leans over between them and says, "Follow me, boys." He walks around them and across the dance floor towards the elevator door.

Tom and Bob follow, looking around suspiciously as the workers in the club, getting ready for opening, pause what they're doing and watch them cross the dance floor, their footsteps echoing in the cavernous open space.

Lance leads them to the door and then onto the freight elevator where they cower in the corner furthest from Lance. On the top floor he ushers them to David's door, knocks quietly, opens the door and says, "Go right in, gentlemen, they're expecting you."

Inside are David, Todd, Mike, and Jay. Lance follows Bob and Tom into the apartment. They look around in awe, clutching their miserable duffel bags, the only possessions they salvaged from the car.

David gets up, walks over, offers his hand and says, "My name's David Shea, but we've met, haven't we? Nice coats. Looks like you've been shopping since the last time you visited us. Lance, can you take our guest's coats?"

With some reluctance, they part with their jackets. No car and now no coats, thinks Tom. He had at least expected to die with a warm coat to his name. They each remember their plunge in the slush a few nights before.

Tom finally says, "Yeah, if you call a knee in the crotch a meeting. My name's

Tom, this is Bob. We need to talk to you. You know, we've taken a lot of risk coming here."

"We know. Sit down. Drink?" as he gestures to one of the couches.

"Yeah, please," says Bob and everybody laughs at the desperate way he says it.

Tom and Bob sit nervously on the couch huddled close to one another. Mike, Jay and Todd are already seated.

"Ya'know, you can lighten up a bit," says Mike. "Your situation is a lot better than you realize, just now."

"That's easy for you to say," says Bob.

"You do know who I am?" says Mike.

"Yeah, I do now. You're Mike, Mike McAneas. You look different," says Bob.

"Yep," says Mike as he takes a cigarette out of a pack and tosses the pack to Bob.

"Geez, you do look different," says Tom, who turns to Bob. "I thought he looked familiar. Yeah, we've got a picture of you but you look different now," as he pulls out the now crumpled fax photo. "I didn't recognize you at first."

"Yep. I'm the one. Well, you've found your quarry. Pete would have been very, very pleased. But, I expect you won't be talking to him any time soon."

"Probably not, man, probably not."

David returns with two glasses and a bottle which he hands to Tom and says, "Okay, tell us something we don't know and we know a lot already."

Tom pours the whiskey into the glasses and hands one to Bob. Bob voluntarily passes him the pack of cigarettes without being asked.

"We don't know what you know about us but we know what Pete wants to do to you and how he plans to do it," Bob begins.

"Go on, we're listening," says David.

“There’s a price. We want two bus tickets to Denver.”

Bob elbows him, “Shit, man, LA. Two tickets to LA.”

David says, “What about your car?”

“Yeah, like that piece of shit would make it back to Waterloo, let alone LA,” says Tom.

“Okay. Yeah. No problem, bus tickets. Anywhere you want to go,” says David.

“And a hundred dollars each,” adds Bob defiantly.

“I think we can manage that,” says David.

Bob looks towards Tom and raises his eyebrows quickly.

“You know Joe? Well, he wants us to fire bomb this place tonight with Molotov cocktails while his guys blow Mike’s head off,” blurts Tom.

“Gee, that doesn’t sound very sociable,” says Mike.

“Anyway, we want no fucking part of this. We’re being set up because of the other night. We may not be much but we’d rather not be dead and we don’t want any part of a fire bombing. We’ll tell you everything we know if you’ll help us get out of here and as far away from Pete, Joe and Jack as possible,” says Tom.

Tom and Bob tell their story. David and the others listen and ask about details.

After a while, David says, “Any other questions? Okay, thanks guys. Sorry about the knee in the crotch but, well, you did try to pull a gun on me?”

“Yeah, we did,” says Bob, “Sorry about that.”

“How’s the arm?”

“Not good, man, not good.”

“Can we get the bus tickets now?”

“I think we can do something about the arm. But, guys, right now a bus trip

might not be the best idea. Pete and Joe are gonna know you crossed them and they'll be looking for you and they have resources. They'll find you."

"Yeah, that's probably right," says Tom. "But we can't stay in Omaha either."

"You know we've been watching you guys," says Mike.

"How so?" asks Tom.

"We've hacked your cell phones, bugged your car and had you followed."

"No shit?" says Bob.

"Yep," says Mike.

"So, I think we know something about you. But what I want to know, right now is this. Who's side are you on?"

"We're not on Pete's side. I thought that was pretty clear," says Bob.

"Yeah, but are you on our side?" replies David.

"Yeah, I guess we are," says Tom. "Up to now, we never had much choice in the matter."

Bob nods in agreement.

"Okay, here's the way it is, you guys will work for me now. Is that agreed?"

"Yep," they both say at once.

"And you can stay here until this blows over. It's not gonna be safe for you two out on the streets after tonight."

They look at each other then back at David.

"Todd, is apartment 7 okay?"

"Yeah, no problem," says Todd.

"I guess you're my responsibility now," says David.

They both nod, hoping for the best. “Yep, we’re flat out of options, once again. Story of our lives,” laughs Bob cynically. “But how do you mean, stay here?”

“In a spare apartment. Todd will take you over there and explain a few things.”

“You mean you’ll take us in?”

“Yep.”

“You trust us?”

“Yep. Up to a limit. You will be watched. But from now on, you’re working for me. Got it?”

“Oh yeah, that’s cool,” says Tom looking quickly at Bob who nods.

“Oh, right man, I got no problem with that,” says Bob choking.

“This way, gentlemen,” says Todd, pointing towards the door.

They quickly finish their drinks. David notices and says, “Take the bottle.”

Tom snatches it quickly without asking any questions, another habit acquired in years of want. They leave David’s apartment with Todd.

To those remaining, David says, “Well, that’s his plan. Pretty brutal.”

“Yeah, that’s quite a show he’s got planned,” says Lance. “Wonder if he’ll try to go through with it without Tom and Bob?”

“I dunno,” says Mike. “He might if he can replace them on short notice, which I doubt. Otherwise, tomorrow.”

“We should know by monitoring their cell phone traffic. Todd can read the GPS signals on Mark and Sid’s phones so we’ll know if they’re heading in this direction. If not, I think we can assume it’s off for tonight,” says Lance.

Mike then asks, “So why did you take those two in? Isn’t it a bit risky?”

“They were the ones who took the risk. They decided to change sides. Seems only right to take them in. They haven’t had an easy time of it, you know. I guess

it seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Yeah, well I see through this. Taking in all the neighborhood drunks and the birds in the rafters. Just more of the lost and helpless camping at Dave’s house. Well, I’ll bet they’re in freaking hog heaven right now. I may not know a lot, but I know that’s what you’re thinking about. Yep, I think I know where their loyalties will be when the time comes. And yours too,” says Mike.

David lights a cigarette and nods as a fugitive canary lands on his shoulder.

Todd leads Tom and Bob over to the east side of the fifth floor. He opens the unlocked door to apartment 7 and leads them in.

It’s like the others but the picture window faces east. Although they’ve seen David’s apartment, they had not expected anything like this. Tom gasps. Bob puts his hand on Tom’s shoulder and says, “We’re hallucinating, right?”

“No, guys, it’s real,” says Todd as he shows them around then asks, “Are you hungry?”

Bob says, “We don’t get fed too regularly, we’re kind’a always hungry.”

“I’ll send up some pizzas. See that phone? If you want anything just dial 909 and ask for it.”

“What, you mean like, room service?” asks Bob astonished looking first at Tom then at Todd.

“Yeah, like room service. Clean yourselves up. I’ll have some of the girls come and see if they can find some clothes for you. Lance will take care of your car. He’ll have it moved to a garage we own on the other side of town. You can have it back anytime you want.”

“So, what’s with this place and this guy David?” asks Tom.

“David owns the place, you know that. He lives up here, so do I and Lance. Jay and Mike are in one of the other apartments for the time being. Mike and Jay were working for a cable news network gathering data for a story on the mob when their cover got blown. David’s hiding them while they put together their story for broadcast. But, as you know, Pete and Joe found out that they’re here.”

“And what about David?” asks Bob. “How did he get involved?”

“He and Mike were friends in college. David’s partner, however, was murdered by Jack a number of years ago. David’s doing this to get back at Jack as much as anything, I guess.”

“I guess we owe him a lot,” says Bob.

“Yep. Now here, I’ll show you how the TV/computer system works.”

Todd spends a few minutes showing them the basics of how to call up TV stations, DVD’s, and video games. They watch with keen interest having spent many hours studying the subject at discount electronics departments throughout Iowa. He shows them the video phone and how to contact the others in the club and how to contact his console at the bar. Then he says, “Give me your cell phones.”

“Okay, but what do you want these for?”

“Because we’ve infected all the phones in Pete’s cell phone calling network with some virus code. I’ll have it removed from yours and send them back up in a little while. When you get them back, don’t use them, because the numbers can be traced. You don’t want anyone to know you’re here, do you?”

“No, definitely not,” says Bob as he hands Todd his cell phone. Tom does the same.

Todd gets up to leave saying the food will be along shortly. After he goes, Bob and Tom stand awestruck looking about at their new found luxury. They gape at the furniture, the massive TV set, the picture window, the kitchen. They wonder at the bedrooms.

“You remember I told you I’d live in a penthouse someday?” says Bob.

Tom jumps on one of the beds and bounces like an eight year old. Then lies there spread eagled and says, “Oh shit, I’ve fucking died and gone to heaven.”

Bob says, “Told’ya so. You glad we came now?”

Tom hops up and says “I’m thinking about it. It was my idea anyway. Now,

where are the glasses? Let's finish that bottle before they come to their senses and chuck our miserable selves from the roof."

"Nah, they would'a done it by now and not wasted the pricey booze on us," says Bob

"I can't believe this. Two hours ago we were living on the street. Now we're living in a fucking penthouse. I can't fucking believe this. What just happened to us?" says Tom.

"Man, I don't know. I guess there must be some nice people in the world after all."

"Geez. I just don't know man, I just don't know. One minute your life is ending in a snow filled gutter and the next, awake thou wintry earth."

"Well, dude, maybe it's time we saw a thaw!"

"Geeez, that's bad. Let's go get some more of that scotch. How many cigs you got?"

They return to the living room and collapse on the couches, drink, smoke and wonder. In short order, Tom and Bob are unspeakably happy, and drunk. They chatter optimistically about the prospects of starting a band and playing downstairs. Unfortunately, the only thing either of them can play is the radio but hope springs eternal. They dream the dream that winter past, and summer scarce begun, invites them forth to labor in the sun.

After a while there's a knock at their door. Tom staggers over and opens it. It's Jane, Mary and Lois sent by David to see what charitable work needs be done. David figures that if Mary's shopping, he's safe.

"Okay, guys, let's see what'ya got," says Mary as she dumps the contents of their duffel bags onto one of the beds.

Lois looks and says, "Geeez, I guess they're right, crime doesn't pay after all," as she sorts through a couple of old shirts, pants, socks with holes and worn underwear.

"How'd you boys get this hard up?" asks Mary.

“Well, things haven’t gone too well for us this past year. Ya’know, with the new laws about pseudophed sales, we don’t get much work,” says Bob.

“What’d ya do?”

“We used to drive around Iowa to drug stores and buy all their pseudophed. Now that’s pretty much over. We never did much in the way of bad stuff, just a lot of errands. But now, there’s not even much of that left. Everything’s crystal meth from Mexico now. We’ve been kinda cut out of the trade,” says Tom.

“Where you guys originally from?”

“Waterloo,” says Tom.

“We did odd jobs around northeast Iowa for a while, tried starting our own landscaping business. Didn’t get too far, we didn’t have much money for equipment. There was a lot of new construction but we really weren’t able to compete,” says Bob.

“So, things went down hill. We didn’t have any job skills so we ended up taking just about any jobs we could find. We’ve been roommates since high school. Too expensive to live on our own.”

“What about your families?” asks Jane.

“None, really, or none that would admit they were related to us,” says Tom.

“We kind’a drifted into doing work for the organization. Pick up this, deliver that, the drug store buys, all that sort of thing. But that’s gone now. So we ended up over here. Our big shot at real crime, I guess,” says Bob.

“Probably our last, too.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure this was a setup. I think Pete wanted this to be our first and last job. I know we’re just a couple of jerks no one gives a fuck about, ooops, sorry. But, well, I don’t want to end up dead just yet.”

“So, we thought we’d try a change of strategy,” says Bob.

“Well, you made the right move, honey. David is a real nice guy. He’ll treat you

right, believe me. Now, let's get some sizes here so us girls can improve that wardrobe of yours," says Mary. "And those are nice shirts, get'em off and we'll have them cleaned."

Tom and Bob are really happy that Mary likes their shirts, even though they are a bit dirty from their fall in the gutter.

"Oh, gee, thanks, but no, we can't afford any new clothes. We don't have any money. We're hoping that David can stake us to the bus fare out to LA and a hundred each for expenses," says Tom.

"Don't worry about it, sweetie," says Lois, "The clothes have already been taken care of."

Jane and Mary begin taking measurements and calling out the results to Lois.

"I think I've got enough information," says Lois as she puts the pad on which she's written their measurements into her pocket.

"We'll be back in about two hours. Don't get too drunk. You want anything else to eat?" says Mary as they leave.

"I wonder if we can have another pizza?" says Bob.

"Sure thing, the works?"

"Yeah."

"It'll be right up."

Outside the door Mary shakes her head and says, "Poor bastards. Let's see what we can do for them," as the three take a quick trip to an upscale mall off the interstate.

After they leave, Tom says, "Hey, I think Mary likes me."

"Oh stop dreaming, man. She was all over me," laughs Bob as Tom swats at him. They both settle in and start playing with the remote control trying to figure out how the giant screen TV works.

After a few minutes there's a knock and Sean comes in and says, "Hey guys, here's your pizza."

Tom recoils in fear remembering what Sean did to his arm.

"Hey, man don't worry, everything is cool," says Sean seeing Tom's reaction.

"Yeah, well I still can't raise my arm over my head," says Tom, plaintively, as he tries to demonstrate.

"Okay, let me look," says Sean, "I did four years in college as a physical therapist, I think I know something about dislocated shoulders," as he feels around Tom's rotator cuff.

"Yeah, just a minor dislocation. Do you mind a little pain?"

"What'ya mean?" says Tom.

"I'm gonna put it back in the socket. It will seriously hurt when I do it though."

"You're not just shitting me man?" say Tom with some distrust.

"No, dude, this time it's for your own good. But it's up to you."

"You can really fix it?"

"Yep."

"Okay, do it."

Bob pours the last of the whiskey into Tom's glass. Sean goes into the bathroom and gets a big bath towel and puts it around Tom's chest and hands the ends to Bob and says, "Here, pull hard on these while I pull on the arm from the other side."

Bob takes the towel ends and braces. Sean takes the arm and in one forceful jerk yanks it out then back into the socket. Tom yelps. Sean feels around the cuff and says, "Good, it feels like it's back in place. Just go real easy on it for a week or so. The tendons are all stretched and you might pull it out again. Otherwise, you'll be good as new. I'll see if I can find a sling. That will help with the

healing.”

Tom looks up at him and says, “The bottle’s empty.”

Sean laughs and says, “Over there, dudes, that’s the liquor cabinet. Let me know if you need more pizza,” and leaves.

Tom says after the door closes, “Ya’know, I think it does feel better.”

“Good, man, I’m glad.”

An hour later the door bursts open without warning and in walk the three fashion sisters, again with shopping bags. Extreme makeovers are becoming a specialty.

“Okay, on your feet, if you can still stand. Sorry about the arm, baby, Sean told me,” says Mary as she gives Tom a peck on the cheek, the first attention he’s had from a woman in quite a while, he thinks to himself.

They stand up and the girls begin setting out the clothes they’ve bought. They both look on in awe.

“Hey, those are really nice,” says Bob as he picks up a shirt that cost the better part of fifty bucks.

“And,” says Jane, opening the last bag, “Shoes. Both of you, get them shit kickers off. I’m personally burning them.”

“Gee, thanks Mary, these are awful nice. I don’t think I’ve had any thing like this in a long time.”

“Me too, thanks, this is really something.”

“Well, you’re welcome boys but we just did the selection. You have David’s credit card to thank for the actual purchases,” says Lois.

“Oh, wow!” says Tom.

“You mean he bought all this for us?” says Bob.

“Yeah but we did the shopping. You guys do what David says. He takes care of people.”

“Wish we’d met him three years ago,” says Tom.

“So, when this is all over, what’ya guys want to do?” says Jane.

“Ya’know, planning much past one day at a time hasn’t been our strong point. We’ve kinda figured things were going well if we got by from one day to the next, ya’know what I mean?” says Bob.

“I guess so. But if you could do what you wanted to, what would it be?”

“I still think I’d like to do landscape work if I had the money to get the equipment.”

“Yeah, that would be real nice. Maybe then we can still do that, right Bob?”

“Maybe in LA.”

Lois and Jane give Tom and Bob a haircut and some highlights, something they never had before. Then they have them dress up in the new clothes and present themselves. The girls pamper them. Tom and Bob are ecstatic. The girls agree, they’ve done their good deed for the day. Tom and Bob are definitely enjoying the afternoon.

Then Mary pulls out a camera and says, “Okay boys, let’s get some pictures.” She takes their pictures together and individually from several angles. They feebly protest but willingly cooperate.

“Okay guys, you can relax now. We’re finished vexing you, for the time being. Talk to you later,” and the women leave.

“Can you remember the last time a woman gave us the time of day let alone talked to us?” says Bob.

“I can’t even remember the last time someone took my picture.”

“Yeah, me neither. I guess people stopped taking our pictures a few years ago. Pictures are for remembering and not many people have wanted to remember us, I guess,” says Bob.

“I know. Stupid thing, kinda made me feel important.”

“Not so much important, maybe just belonging, I guess.”

“You’re right. I can’t believe it but I actually feel at home.”

“Me too.”

They go back to the TV and quickly figure out how to make it play video games. Tom and Bob have died and, at last, gone to heaven.

Time: 4:30 PM

At around 4:30, two groups of two guys arrive separately. These are Joe’s people who are scheduled to be back later in the night. They buy beers and wander around, looking the place over. After they finish their beers, they leave. Lance has had each of their driver’s licenses scanned. Todd builds a database on them and has them photographed from different angles by the security cameras. They’re mainly petty criminals from the metro Omaha area all residing at the same address in Council Bluffs.

Time: 5:00 PM

David, Mike and Jay go to Tom and Bob’s apartment around five pm. David knocks on the door. Bob walks over and opens it and says, “Hey guys, com’on in.”

Tom hops up and walks over as well. David asks, “Is every thing okay?”

“Oh yeah, everything is very okay,” says Tom.

“This place is better than anything we’ve ever seen,” adds Bob.

David says, “Well, I see you’ve figured out how to turn on the video games.”

“Yeah, Todd showed us but we weren’t sure at first but we just kept experimenting. Say, thanks for all the clothes. We’ll pay you back, just as soon as we can make some money,” says Bob.

“Don’t worry about it, it was a gift,” says David. “Let’s sit down and talk.”

They all sit down on the couches around the table. David lights a cigarette and

tosses the pack to Mike who does the same then passes it on. David begins, "Now we need to keep you guys out of sight for a while. Joe's gonna be pretty pissed when he can't find you guys."

"Yeah, we kinda figured that part out," says Bob.

"Okay, just hang around up here when the club's open. During the day, I'm putting you on the payroll. You can help out downstairs when the club's not open. That okay with you?"

"Yeah, sure," says Bob.

"Okay with me," says Tom.

"Good, once this blows over, I'll see that you get regular jobs, if you're willing."

"You mean here in Omaha?" says Bob.

"Yeah, unless you still want to go to LA. It's up to you."

"No, here's fine. We want to start our own business, actually, so we need to save up some money," says Tom.

"What kind'a business?" asks Mike.

"Landscaping," says Bob.

"I'll see what I can do," says David. "In the meantime you work for Todd. Now come on down to my apartment at about six for supper if you're still hungry after all those pizzas." He gazes at the empty trays in the middle of the table.

"Will do, boss," says Bob smiling.

As they get up to leave, Tom says, "Ahh, could we get a little help with this system? There are some things we haven't quite figured out yet."

Jay says, "Yeah, I think I can do that. I'll catch you later, Mikey."

"Okay, see you all at about six," says David as he opens the door and he and Mike leave.

Bob says to Jay, “Todd showed us how to use it but we’ve still got some questions.”

Jay sits at the center of the couch facing the screen, pulls out the keyboard drawer and says, “You ain’t seen nuthin yet,” and begins to show Tom and Bob how to work some of the advanced controls.

By six pm Jay’s shown them how to bring up all the games, more about the satellite TV channels, and how to watch the stage show downstairs as well as instant messaging and email. Jay shows them how to do name lookups on several search engines and several social networking sites. Before long, they’ve got their own pages and looked up people they knew in high school and tried sending email to several.

Finally, Jay, noticing the system clock, says, “Well, it’s near six, I guess we better get going.”

“Right, thanks Jay. This thing looks like a lot of fun,” says Bob.

“You bet, I wonder if any of those people will send us any replies? I’d really like to tell some of them I’m living in a penthouse in Omaha.” says Tom.

“Probably, you can’t tell. Sometimes those addresses are out of date. Just wait and see, I guess.”

They leave the apartment and walk down the hall to David’s but midway, Tom and Bob peer over the balcony at the happy hour crowd below. “Wow, what a view from up here,” says Bob.

“Just wait until the show starts,” says Jay.

“I guess we’re glad we won’t be part of it,” says Tom.

They continue on to David’s, Jay knocks and they enter. Mary, Jane and Lois are in the kitchen arguing about something on the stove. On the big table in front of the couches, they’ve laid out some plates of chips, dip, cheese, nuts and crackers. “Help yourselves, boys, beer’s in the fridge,” bellows Mary. They each get a bottle of beer and sit down on the couches. Todd, Mike and Lance join them and David arrives a few minutes later.

“Well, did Jay show you what you wanted to know?” asks David.

“Oh, yeah, that’s some system,” says Bob.

“Yeah, and we’ve looked at a lot of things on the Internet,” says Tom.

“Good. Have fun with it. Now when were Mark and Sid supposed to pick you guys up?” asks David.

“Six-thirty,” says Bob.

“Time to re-route their phones, Todd,” says David.

“I already have.”

“How’s that?” asks Tom.

“We reprogrammed their cell phones. We can route their calls through here so we can listen in. I’m guessing they’ll be making some calls when they find that you guys are gone,” says Todd.

“Hah! You can bet on it! This’ll be interesting,” says Bob.

“Oh yes, it will be indeed,” laughs Tom in agreement.

Just then Mary bellows, “Okay, it’s food. Come and get it.”

They get up and line up in the kitchen for plates, silverware and Mary’s Mexican offering.

“Hey, this looks great,” says Lance.

“Well, we just hope it tastes as good, we kind’a couldn’t agree on how many chili peppers got added. Either a few or a whole lot. So, it might be spicy or, it might be lethal.”

“So, how’s the guacamole?” asks Todd.

“I’m afraid there may be a problem there, too,” says Jane.

“And don’t worry about the black parts,” adds Lois. “We kind’a cremated some

of the meat. We scraped off as much as we could. Anyway, charcoal is good for the digestion, I hear.”

They cautiously fill their plates and return to the couches each watching to see if anyone else has tried each of the selections. Eventually they gingerly taste small samples. Deciding that it’s not completely poisonous, they dig in more aggressively.

Time: 6:30 PM

Mark and Sid arrive at Tom and Bob’s motel at 6:30 pm as planned, a couple of hours after sunset. Mark knocks on their door but gets no response. He peeks through the window and sees nothing. No lights. He looks around the parking lot for their car which he knows from Joe’s warehouse. Not there. He goes back to his car and he and Sid wait, thinking they may be late coming back from supper.

After about fifteen minutes, Mark says to Sid, “This isn’t right. I don’t think those guys would really be late after what happened the other day. Maybe we should go try to break in and see what’s really there.”

“Right. Seems strange they aren’t here by now. I’ll do it,” says Sid, reaching around into the back seat to pick up a few tools.

Mark watches from the car as Sid skillfully cracks the lock and is in. The light switches on and Mark, looking to see if they’re being watched, jogs quickly to the open door.

Once inside the room Mark looks around and says, “Damn it! Look, they’ve cleared out.”

“Kind’a looks that way,” answers Sid. “They left the gas and bottles though.”

“Let’s get back to the car. You pick up the bottles and rags and I’ll take care of the gas.”

Back at the car, Mark empties the gas can into the car’s tank. Sid shuts out the light, closes the door and returns to the car. Mark puts the empty gas can in the trunk, hops in the car and dials Pete.

David’s screen beeps an alarm and a window opens up. After a few seconds it

displays a phone number followed by Pete's name. Mark's phone is routing through the club's communications systems. David reaches over and clicks the cursor on the loudspeaker icon in the window and the speakers give off the sound of a phone ring tone. David sits back and says, "Well, I guess they know Tom and Bob have skipped town. Mark's calling Pete."

Pete answers then they hear Mark say, "Pete, We're at Bob and Tom's motel. We can't find them. They're not here and their car isn't either. We broke into their room and there was no clothes, no bags, just the gas can, bottles and rags. They've cleared out."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope, they're gone. No sign of them."

"Fucking bastards. They're dead men. Joe said he thought they might pull something. Damn it. Okay, clean the room out and then back to your motel, the deal's off for tonight. I'll talk to Joe and I'll see what we can arrange for Friday," says Pete as his phone clicks off.

"It's back to the motel for us, party's canceled," says Mark.

"Ya'know, maybe we should take Tom and Bob's hint ourselves?" says Sid.

"No money in that, man. Pete's not happy and Jack won't be either. We're only bit players in this. No sense becoming one of the targets."

Although his phone is off, the microphone continues to transmit their conversation back to Mo R♦n. Mark and Sid find a restaurant and a small bar before going back to the motel.

Back at Mo R♦n Tom says, "Ahh, Well, I guess we're off Pete's Christmas card list?"

"We've definitely been moved to a different list, dude," says Bob.

Then the screen flashes again and this time they hear the phone numbers being punched as they see digits appear. The legend promptly identifies the caller as Pete and the destination as Joe. The video from Pete's room appears in its own window.

Joe answers and Pete says, "I just got a call from Mark. He says those fuckups Tom and Bob have split. When Mark went to their motel, they were gone. All they found in their room was the gas can, bottles and rags."

"I don't know how they could pull anything. I don't think they had twenty bucks between them until they finished this job. I'll check around and see if anyone knows anything," says Joe.

"When I'm done with this business, I'll deal with them personally. I wonder if that Shea was somehow involved? Some of his people may have tracked Tom and Bob back to their motel?"

"It's possible. He knew who they were and why they were there. So, what's the plan now?" says Joe.

"This Shea's becoming a fucking pain in the ass. Looks like the party's off for tonight. We'll have to try again tomorrow. I've told Mark and Sid to stand by. Can you tell your guys?"

"No problem."

"And we'll need some people to replace Tom and Bob. Can you get a couple of guys who don't have a whole lot of sense and who won't be missed?"

"Yeah. I know a couple of guys from Sioux City who'll do just about anything for a few bucks and after a couple of meth hits. Let's just say their judgment isn't very sound on a good day. A couple'a snorts and they're animals."

"Just my kind'a guys. See if you can arrange to have them ready for tomorrow night. Meet me at the hotel tomorrow morning at eight and we'll talk. In the meantime, see if you can find those two shit heads. If you do, blow their fucking brains out. In the meantime, I got'ta call Jack and let him know what's happened. I think I better let him know what's going on."

"Okay, probably a good idea. Anything else?"

"Find a couple of untraceable assault rifles."

"No problem."

“Good, see you tomorrow.”

The connection goes dead and the window disappears. “So, the event’s off for tonight,” says David. “But it looks like we’re back on for tomorrow.”

“Yep, looks that way,” says Todd.

“I’m not real happy about assault rifles being brought into the picture. What’s he got in mind now? Any ideas?”

They shake their heads.

“Well, we’ll just have to see if we can tap into their meeting tomorrow. In the meantime, I’m gonna try some more of Murphy’s Revenge,” says Todd as he’s the first to risk seconds. Mary casts him a nasty look. He shrugs his shoulders and grins.

5. Friday January 12

Time: 8 AM

Friday morning is cold and windy but that’s just about everyday in Omaha in January. Joe arrives at Pete’s hotel and parks on the street about half a block away. He spots Pete sitting in a chair reading the newspaper in the lobby waiting for him.

As he approaches Pete he says, “Morning Pete. How’ya doin?”

Pete folds the paper, gets up and shakes hands with Joe saying, “Looks a little cold out there?”

“Oh nothing really, it’s nearly minus ten. Kind’a warm, actually.”

Pete laughs and says, “I kind’a wish I were in Florida right now.”

“You and me both.”

“Come’on, let’s get some breakfast.”

One side of the atrium lobby is a restaurant, surrounded by ficus trees with fairy lights and tropical plantings, somewhat out of place in a Nebraska winter but

they thrive on the abundant light from the glassed ceiling nine stories above. At one end is a small fountain with water gurgling down rocky cascades into a pool with tropical fish surrounded by small flowers. The buffet area is immediately below Pete's ninth floor balcony so he gets the full effect of the aromas from each meal as they rise unobstructed through the open space above.

Joe drapes his coat over a chair at the table they've selected and he and Pete head for the buffet. They get plates and fill up on scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, gravy, biscuits and coffee then return for some side dishes of fruit and little tubs of butter and jam. They return to their secluded table in the corner.

Time: 9 AM

Mike knocks on David's door and he and Jay enter. David is at the table eating breakfast. Mike says, "Did you get anything from the Regency?"

"No. They didn't meet in Pete's room. We think Joe left his cell phone in his coat pocket which he hung over a chair. All we could pick up was room noise and some muffled voices. Sean was in the lobby watching. He tried to get a table close to them but it wasn't possible. They spoke for quite a while but we don't know what the new plan is. Later Joe made a phone call to a number in Sioux City to arrange for two guys to meet him at the warehouse around eleven but he didn't say much on the phone to them. My guess is that they're Tom and Bob's replacements."

"Did you try the Sloppy Creme trick?"

"Yep. Phone must have been on vibrate. He didn't answer it."

"Crap, so now what do we do?"

"Well, now we just wait and hope one of them uses a cell phone or speaks where we've got a microphone. My guess is that they'll probably try to do something like what they planned for last night."

"Where's the coffee?"

"Over there. And don't hog all the bacon, so to speak."

"Any idea about what the assault rifles are for?" asks Jay.

“Not a clue, I’m afraid. Lance is getting a bit worried about them as well.”

“So am I,” replies Jay. “Mikey gets very difficult when there are loud noises.”

“Yeah, I guessed that. Anyway, not much we can do besides wait and watch and try to think of every contingency. They’re coming and there’s no way to stop them.”

Time: 11 AM

By 11 am Joe is back at the warehouse where Mark and Sid are already waiting for him. Once in the office, Joe calls out on the paging system for Dan, Bill, Roger, and Nick to come to the office. These are the guys from the warehouse crew he’s picked to do the top floor tonight. Two others, Steve and Harry, have just arrived from Sioux City. Joe takes them out into the warehouse leaving the others behind in his office. Here he explains the basics of what he wants done and negotiates their price. They agree and he returns to the office with them where the others are waiting.

“Let’s go get some lunch guys. It’s on me. I want to go over the plans. There’s been a few changes and Steve and Harry will be taking Tom and Bob’s place,” says Joe as they get up and head for a diner up the street. Todd records this small bit of news from the mic attached to the window.

Once at the diner, they hang up their coats at a rack near the door and sit at a table apart from the others and order lunch. Joe’s cell phone is still in his coat pocket, Mark and Sid’s are in their pants pockets. The table again blocks their voices and all Todd can hear is muffled noise. He doubts the donut scam will work twice but tries it anyway. It doesn’t. Mark puts his phone back in his pants pocket.

Todd conference calls with David, Lance, Mike, and Jay and gives the bad news, “Joe met with his people but they went to a diner up the street. I don’t know what they said so we’re still mainly flying blind.”

David agrees but adds, “And we still no idea what the rifles are for?”

“None that I know of,” answers Todd.

Lance interjects, “It could be just some extra fire power for the top floor and

nothing more.”

“Let’s hope so,” says Jay.

Time: 5 PM

It’s Friday evening about 5 pm. While Mike, Jay, Tom and Bob carefully observe the security camera feeds from David’s apartment on the big screen, Todd tracks the main door and outside cameras from his command console at the end of the bar. Lance is near the main entrance wearing his mic and headset.

Mike calls down to Todd, “How are things going? You see anything happening yet?”

“Oh, so far so good. About normal for a Friday,” answers Todd.

“I guess we won’t see anything until the smoke bombs at 10 o’clock if they stick to their original plan.”

“One way or the other, they’ll be here. Your Pete’s under the gun, he can’t afford anymore delays and he thinks he’s got the element of surprise. Jack’s not gonna appreciate why it is he couldn’t knock over a freakin dance club, for chrissake.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” says Mike.

As the crowd builds for the night, David and the others watch closely. The camera angles displaying on the monitors switch quickly from one view to another, making the rounds of the club. David is out on the balcony, looking down at the crowd.

Security is high. At the main door, metal detectors probe each patron with electric fields seeking the telltale magnetic eddies of unseen metal objects. Meters and LED’s on the security desk flicker. If they detect anything, one of the security guys does a quick pat down.

The two main entrance security guards are armed and a third is not far away. ID’s of those not recognized as regulars are swiped through the card reader while everyone is photoed by security cameras.

Then Sid is spotted as he enters the main door at about 9:30.

Todd keys a call to all headsets, “Party time, people, Sid’s here and Mark is soon to follow. I guess it’s a GO for tonight.”

“Roger that,” come replies from several.

Mark enters a few minutes later. To a casual observer, they look okay, just ordinary guys, mid 20’s, not together, not packing any weapons, ID’s look fine. Just normal guys back for another night at the club.

David returns and Mike points out that their guests have arrived. They watch as Mark and Sid separately cruise around the club, buy drinks, eat snacks, chat with the crowd, and appear to get progressively buzzed.

Lance pages all from his headset, “We just went through their coats. They brought the smoke bombs and some small bottles of gasoline. Looks like the same plan. I swapped the smoke bombs and replaced the gasoline with kerosene and olive oil. It won’t do much now. It might not even light.”

“Olive oil?” Mike whispers to Jay.

Time: 10 PM

As it nears ten o’clock, Mark and Sid wander back towards the coat room.

Lance keys his mic for all to hear and says, “Hey guys. Sid and Mark are getting ready to make their move. Keep an eye on them. Let’s play this cool. Stay on the perimeter until it’s time. You guys got your trash barrels ready?”

“Roger that,” comes from several unseen voices.

Mike say, “Look! They both have their cell phones out, it’s a conference call, I’ll bet.”

“Yeah, it is, I’m intercepting Mark’s signal and getting the audio feed as well. They’re coordinating with the guys outside, about seven altogether, from what I can tell. They’re confirming that everything’s ready. They’re saying that there’ll be one more call to trigger the event,” reports Todd from his console at the bar.

Mike goes in for very tight shots of their faces.

“Can you get a shot of that van we spotted down the street?” says David.

Jay brings up a window and closes in on the front of the van. Sure enough, the driver is on his cell phone.

“Can you see that, Lance?”

“Yep. I guess the show is about to start. The guys coming for the elevator shaft must be in that van. Look, the van’s starting to move now. Okay, I’m getting into position,” says Lance.

They watch as Mark and Sid fold their cell phones shut. They slip into the coat room and emerge a few seconds later with their coats on. Sid unobtrusively but quickly makes his way towards the northeast end of the dance floor near the emergency exit. Mark moves towards the elevator room door. Sid, now on the other side of the club, pauses and fumbles with a cigarette, looking harmless, he staggers a bit to deflect attention.

They all watch Sid as he reaches into his vest pocket and pulls out what appears to be a cigarette pack but it’s really filled with tightly packed fire crackers. He opens one end of the pack and extends a short fuse. Out of his pocket Sid takes his small butane lighter along with a smoke bomb.

Mark’s phone vibrates quietly, Sid’s does too. Todd says to all, “Incoming.”

The phone call is the cue that everyone is in place. Sid looks around to see who’s looking, the security cameras are, Todd is, David, Lance, Mike and a host of others are, but he doesn’t know that. He lights the fuse on the fireworks and hurls the lit pack into the crowd of couples near the center of the dance floor. As the first of them goes off, all attention in the club turns to the explosions at the center of the floor. People begin to scream and scatter.

Sid quickly lights the fuses and rolls several smoke bombs in different directions about the dance floor. Then he opens the one of small bottles, pulls out the cork and lights a tiny wick. He smashes it hard onto the floor in the direction of smoke bombs. He quickly does the same with a second bottle. They burst into flames that splay out widely across the floor. People start screaming and panicking and running for the exits.

“Well, here we go guys,” shouts David into his mic.

The fireworks exploding in rapid succession, the smoke billowing, the glaze of flames burning across the floor, and the crowd screaming, pushing, tripping and falling over one another create a scene of general panic. There is a roar of shouting and screaming, beer bottles and glasses crashing to the floor. Mylar flakes catch fire and embers rise. The smoke becomes thick. Now there is total panic. From all around the crowded floor, people scream, "Fire!" Todd cuts the sound system.

"And, presto, now the emergency doors open," Mike observes dryly from the balcony high above.

People dash for the fire exits remembering too many cases of club fires, like the one in Rhode Island. Door alarms from around the club begin to shriek and this only makes the panic worse.

Lance's guys, however, are quickly on the spot with the barrels. They cover the smoke bombs which are beginning to fizzle anyway. The fires were minimal and easily quenched with CO₂.

Todd is immediately on the loudspeaker system saying, "Everything is okay, people. It was just fireworks and some smoke bombs."

But the panic continues and few people hear him over the screaming and alarms.

On the north side of the club, Sid rushed the northeast emergency exit door as soon as he finished setting off the second fire bomb. Its alarm sounds but all eyes are elsewhere and one more alarm does not attract any attention under the circumstances, he assumes.

A few people rush out the northeast door with him but most of those fleeing go, instinctively, for the door they entered through. Thus, the main entrance is overwhelmed with the crush of screaming, coughing, gagging people desperately trying to get out.

Harry and Steve rush in through the open exit door while the firecrackers are still exploding. Dressed in heavy coats and ski masks, they carry the assault rifles. They jump up onto the unlit stage and theatrically spread out, legs apart, guns raised. They are totally unnoticed in the fog of smoke and general confusion. Each of them has carefully stuffed four pop bottle Molotovs in their parkas, two to the pocket. Both are seriously tweaked on crystal and irrationally fearless.

They look at one another and shrug their shoulders wondering why no one notices them. They wait a few moments.

As the fireworks quickly sputter out and the smoke bombs are quelled, the alarms begin to time out one by one and the noise level recedes. After the ear shattering racket of a few moments ago, relative silence obtains. The air is thick with smoke. General sounds of moaning and “Oh shit, who the fuck did that? Hey man, were you scared?”

A quick but thunderous volley of gunfire shatters the calm and whips everyone’s stunned scrutiny to the dimly lit figures on the stage. All is suddenly silent again, except for an occasional gasp, a whisper and the sound of crushed glass underfoot. All eyes are now on the stage.

On the other side of the club, in the confusion, Mark has slipped into the elevator room. He immediately slides the locking bolt into place in case someone saw him enter and tries to follow. Next he turns to the loading dock door and pulls the restraining bolt and slides it quickly open.

Four guys rush in. One hands Mark a gun. As they hear the muffled sounds of Harry and Steve letting loose with their fusillades, the four assassins, each brandishing semi-automatic rifles, leap onto the freight elevator, pull down the gate and hit the button for the top floor. The elevator comes to life and begins rumbling up through darkened shaft. Mark waits by the loading dock door.

A monitor shows the security camera view of the first floor elevator room. As the four gunmen enter, Lance says, “They’ll be up here in a few seconds, guys.”

Mike and David from the balcony high above watch Harry and Steve on stage.

Mike says, “Okay, now what? What the hell are those guys doing?”

“Must be Pete’s idea for a diversion, I guess. The smoke bombs were never going to be enough.”

“Well, are we gonna let them shoot people?”

“No, they’re the side show. Their job is to attract attention.”

“Well, they’ve done that. But what if they do start shooting people?”

“We shoot back. But first we bag the guys coming up the elevator. Believe me, man, Todd’s got the place totally covered. I just hope they don’t break any of the skylights. They’d be a bitch to fix this time of year,” says David as he turns back to the elevator shaft.

Mike rolls his eyes, looks at him and says, “Geeez, I wish I were so damned confident with a bunch of guys with guns running loose in my house.”

However, Mike turns and looks over the balcony at the console where he sees Todd calmly observing the guys on stage, one hand on his mouse, the other on his keyboard. Mike wonders what he’s up to.

Harry and Steve, having finally gathered the undivided attention of everyone on the floor, begin to execute the robbery part of the plan. Harry picks one of the guys in the crowd and tosses him a bag and tells him to take it to the bar and have it filled with cash. In the meantime, he and Steve continue to menace the crowd with their guns and joke about how they’ll shoot the place up as they take their leave.

The kid designated to gather the cash nervously picks up the bag and goes to the bar. There, one of the bartenders opens the cash drawers and starts emptying the contents into the sack.

After letting Harry and Steve in, Sid jogs around to the street across from the old loading dock where the waiting van driver hands him a pistol. He then returns to cover Harry and Steve’s getaway.

As the elevator passes the halfway point between the fourth and fifth floor, the motor suddenly quits and the emergency brakes clamp the cage to a shuddering halt. The guys are caught off balance and one falls to the coarse wooden floor. A dazzling array of halogen flood lamps bursts from the landing above. The would-be killers are now blinded and trapped in the cage between the floors.

Lance’s loud voice booms from above saying, “Put your guns at the back of the elevator and step forward with your hands behind your heads. One false move and we’ll blow your fucking brains out.”

In the bright light above, they see the convincing reflections of many gun barrels aimed their way. David, Mike, Lance and Lance’s security guys including Tom and Bob are on the landing above looking dispassionately down into the cage

with the four trapped assassins.

One of the would-be killers mutters, looking up and shading his eyes from the floodlights, “Oh shit.” This succinctly summarizes the thoughts of each.

“Like shooting fish in a barrel,” Lance laughs to the others who chuckle agreement.

Looking down, he says, “What’s it gonna be boys? Drop the hardware or we start shooting your arms off. I am not a patient man.”

“Welcome to Nine-West,” jokes Mike in an aside to David who winces.

Mark hears what’s happening above. He quickly ducks through the loading dock door and runs fast around to warn Sid that there’s been a problem. Outside, a milling, panicked, freezing throng pays him no attention as they are more interested in the scene inside the club being conveyed by cell phone text messages.

Finding Sid lurking in the shadows outside the emergency exit, Mark urgently says, “Come on, man, let’s get out’a here. It was an ambush. They were waiting for us.”

They hurriedly walk away from the club to their car trying not to attract any attention.

In the elevator, Joe’s guys look to one another, mutter epithets in their frustration, and begin tossing their guns to the back of the cage then stepping forward with their hands clasped behind their heads.

When the last of the guns is dropped, the elevator resumes its ascension until it stops at the fifth floor. One of the security guards pulls open the cage. The would-be killers look at one another and at the muzzles of the array of weaponry pointed in their direction and abandon any ideas of escape.

One of the guards enters the elevator and gathers up the discarded arsenal while others fasten the captives’ hands behind their backs with nylon cable ties.

David taps Mike on the shoulder and gestures back towards the balcony where they both return to watch the events below.

Mike's assassins are lined up along one side of the elevator. Lance has his men strip search the would-be killers who are quickly reduced to their shoes and shorts. While it hasn't been decided where to dump them, he figures where ever they end up, it will be more embarrassing to Pete and Joe when they're discovered. When finished, Lance hits the ground floor button and the would-be killers and their captors descend.

Outside, one of David's vans backs to the loading dock. Joe's van driver, however, watches from across the street. He turns to the two guys with military grenades who were about to begin bombing cars in the lot and says, "Better wait. Something's going on over there. Why is that van backing up to the loading dock? I don't like the looks of this."

One of the others replies, "Yeah, I think it might be a good idea to wait. This wasn't in the script."

Across the street, a club security guard hops out and opens the back doors of the van. Suddenly, from the loading dock the would-be killers are pushed unceremoniously out and into the back of David's windowless white van. Its rear doors are slammed shut, and bolted. Several of Lance's men get in the van and it speeds off. One of the security guards stays behind and returns to the elevator room. He slides the door back in place and re-bolts it then unbolts the door to the club. Carefully he checks there is no other evidence remaining of what has recently happened.

From across the street Joe's van driver is spooked and whispers to the others, "Holy crap! Did you see that? Some thing's gone real wrong. I'm calling Mark to see if he knows anything."

He frantically tries calling Mark and then Sid on their cell phones but gets no answer. "Hey guys, I think its time to abandon the mission."

"I think you're right," says one of the others as they quietly drive off.

About two blocks away, the van driver pulls over, flips open his cell phone and calls Joe. He tells him that the plan has failed.

Joe now tries to phone Mark and Sid but they don't answer. Instead he gets an all circuits busy thanks to Todd intercepting his call. He then calls Pete and tells him what he knows. Pete tells him to find out what he can, hangs up and switches on

the TV to see if there's any coverage.

Joe pulls out a police scanner and slowly begins to get some details. He's sure the police and fire department have been called by now. Someone with a cell phone called 911 and said there was a fire. Then another call, shots fired. Police and fire department on the way. These he passes on to Pete in a series of quick phone calls.

Inside the club, the kid nervously rushes back to the stage area with the loot from the cash registers. Harry, not knowing anything's gone wrong and still not getting the signal to leave from the top floor, stalls and lets off another couple of rounds into the air.

Then he improvises, "Okay, all you guys, line up, one by one, and start emptying the cash in your wallets into the bag, now. You women step back to the bar."

The crowd complies. The guys line up, watching Harry and Steve apprehensively as they toss their cash into the growing bag.

David and Mike return to the balcony where Jay is also now watching the scene below. David texts to Todd that things are under control up top. Todd at his booth sees the text message, glances up to the balcony where David and Mike are, nods and silently begins tapping at his keyboard.

Suddenly, just as Todd is about to make his move, one of the guys in the line pulls out a small gun of his own and takes a shot first at Harry, then at Steve, but missing both times.

Time: 10:15 PM

Harry quickly returns the fire. Blood spatters, the kid screams, doubles up, and falls to the floor. Harry lets out a "Yaaahooo, man," and shoots about 20 more rounds up into the rafters. David, Mike and Jay duck although they are not in the line of fire. The crowd lets loose a wave of angry curses. The birds scatter in shock and flee to the safety of the beams and balconies above. One lands on David's shoulder as David cautiously stands up and looks down. Both he and the bird look angry.

Steve taunts, "Hey, anyone else want a little action?" They laugh and menace the crowd with their guns again. The poor bastard who got shot writhes on the floor.

The crowd now seethes with hatred.

At Todd's command many waiting unseen devices around the club and in the lighting array suspended above the floor spring to life.

In a fraction of a second, small servo motors quietly move all the mirrors into alignment. All around the club, the lasers and spots from the light show swiftly converge on Harry and Steve guided to their targets by the two unseen computer controlled infrared tracking beams which have followed them since they bounded on the stage.

As lights switch to green on his console, Todd swiftly types in the password and each laser energizes to full power. Todd clicks the Fire and his computer instantly sends the message to all the waiting devices around the club. As he does, Todd speaks into his wireless mic to David who's listening above, "They're toast."

The smoky air above the club erupts in eerie brilliant diffuse multicolored beams as Todd's lasers erupt. In a flash, Harry and Steve's hands blister and sizzle as the shafts of light roast their skin. Todd hits another key and banks of relays in the sound and light assembly suspended over the dance floor shunt with a metallic thud.

Suddenly, all the Klieg lights blaze brilliantly delivering thousands of watts of intense white light in a blinding flash to the faces of the two on stage. Harry and Steve scream, drop their guns and bring their smoking hands quickly to their foreheads to shade them from the bright lights. The computers automatically command the lasers to follow and continue firing. Blinded and in agony, they lose their balance and fall to the floor, rolling and writhing from the painful burns on their hands. As they fall, Todd cuts the lasers and kills the Klieg lights.

The crowd of guys lined up to be stripped of their cash stands stunned for an instant then rushes the stage. Cheered on by the women from behind, they begin to kick the crap out of the fallen gunmen. The pop bottle Molotovs in their pockets crash together and break under the booted assault.

A moment later a stray kick hits Steve's butane lighter in just the right way so as to produce a spark that ignites his gasoline soaked parka. The fire quickly spreads to Harry's coat which is likewise soaked in gasoline.

The crowd gasps and lurches back as the fire engulfs the two squirming, burning gunmen who desperately try to pull off their jackets. The crowd screams at the sight of the building pyre and growing odor of toasted flesh.

The security guys, caught off guard, take a few moments to regroup and then scramble about to find unused fire extinguishers. Then they rush to the stage. At last, they blast the flames with foam and clouds of CO₂. The fires are quickly extinguished. Steve and Harry are too, due to a combination of incineration and too much crystal meth.

The crowd slowly calms down and mills about. Furious canaries sternly perched on the balconies and rafters above chatter angrily. The security guards disarm the remaining exit alarms and holler to the people outside to get in out of the cold. Many return through the exits out through which they only moments ago fled. Now they rush back in, not wanting to miss the excitement. Anyway, they figure, David always puts them up for the night if there's a real problem. As calm returns, a few brave birds descend to fetch nuts and mingle with the friendly crowd.

The wounded guy on the floor is the main concern now. He's quickly attended to by Mary and several women who are likewise nurses. They cut away his pants. They call for alcohol to clean the entry wound. Todd sends over a fresh bottle of his best 110 proof gin.

"Hey honey, this stuff's a hundred bucks a bottle," says Mary to the wounded guy.

"Well, don't spill it all. Save some for a little oral administration," he replies.

They apply pressure to the wound and the bleeding stops. Some cushions are brought from the side tables of the club and placed under his head. He's conscious and asks for a cigarette and a drink. Both requests are quickly satisfied.

Todd starts the motors on the skylights high above. As they open, a few huddled crows cackle and angrily fly off to another roost. Several of the emergency doors are propped wide open. As fresh air is drawn in and vented aloft, the smoke and stench begin to dissipate. The vapors of Steve and Harry's demise swiftly pass from the building and vanish into the cold, black, windy Nebraskan night.

David and Mike watch all of this from high above. Mike says, “So Todd had them covered with his tracking beams?”

“Yep, all of them, those two, Mark, Sid, all of them. Here, let me call him and find out exactly what happened. I’ll put it on speaker phone.” David phones Todd and says, “What happened? Mike and Jay are here and you’re on speaker phone.”

“I was getting ready to take out their guns when that idiot kid fired at them.”

“How the hell did he get a gun in here?”

“I think he must have come back in through one of the emergency doors that was open. He didn’t come through the main entrance, I know that. Wanted to be a hero, or something. Probably ran to his car and got his gun.”

“Any idea how the fire started?”

“Not completely, the lasers couldn’t have done it. They switched off when the Kliegs came on. It must have been something else. I’m thinking that it was a lighter in the pocket of the guy on the left. That’s where it seemed to start. They had gasoline fire bombs in their pockets, from the smell of it.”

Mike leans over and speaks into the phone, “How come you didn’t take them out earlier?”

“The smoke bombs. Too much residual smoke in the air between the lasers and the stage. It would have scattered the beams. If they hadn’t shot that kid, I would have waited even longer. I wasn’t sure it would work when I did it. As it was, I had to really crank up the power output to punch through the haze. I’m sorry about the fire but that was a fluke.”

“The fire wasn’t your fault. It was their show. I’m not gonna lose any sleep over it.”

“Me neither.”

“But you better get some food ready and put a lot of coffee on, no doubt the police will be here in a minute and I think it’s gonna be a long night.”

“Did everything go okay up there?”

“Yep, no problem. Our guests are being driven over to the old garage as we speak.”

“Good, catch you later.”

“I guess we better get ready for the police. Let me do the talking. You and Jay get back to your rooms. If anyone asks, you were in bed when you heard the gunshots and it was all over by the time you got out here to take a look. That clear?”

“Yep, works for me. Okay honey, let’s go roll around on the sheets and make it look convincing,” says Mike.

“Couldn’t we just say we were watching TV?” says Jay with a pained expression.

David calls Lance on his cell phone to check on their captives. Everything is fine.

Time: 10:30 PM

As David’s van drives away, it is unnoticed by the many police and emergency vehicles speeding towards the club. Multiple police cars, fire trucks and ambulances arrive all at once in a blaze of sirens and flashing lights. The streets around the club are all flashing in red, blue and yellow emergency strobe lights. Together with the exhaust from the many cars and trucks, the street is a multicolored swirling fog

David greets the police at the door and quickly explains what happened and points to the bodies on the stage. Todd leads the paramedics to the wounded kid. The police ask everyone to remain so they can get names addresses and statements.

The murmuring crowd mills about watching intently over the crime scene. David has the bartenders set out pots of hot coffee, sandwiches and pizza slices. He figures that they will be there quite some time. A police detective brings in a bull horn and asks everyone to remain in the club. The crowd settles in for a late night adventure.

The emergency paramedics take over from the volunteer nurses. Other paramedics rush to the two on the stage. The guy on the dance floor is conscious and complaining, the two on the stage are lifeless and uncomplaining.

The paramedics quickly determine that the guy on the dance floor is not that badly off. The bullet hit a fleshy part of the leg and missed the femoral artery and the groin. He should be back dancing in a couple of weeks. They quickly apply compression to the gun shot wound. A gurney is wheeled in, lowered and he's shifted onto it and strapped in place. An IV bottle is suspended from a rod and hook assembly that is snapped into place. An oxygen mask is placed over his face and the valve on the small green tank on the side is engaged. The side rails are raised and the entire stretcher is lifted on its X frame and locked into place. The wheel breaks unlocked, he's rushed towards the door and a waiting ambulance. He raises his left arm and gives a thumbs-up sign to the crowd which breaks into applause and cheering. After he's taken from the building, the crowd sounds much more upbeat and turns its attention towards the burnt carnage on the stage.

There, however, the situation is different. Harry and Steve are seriously dead. The paramedics grimace as they look for signs of life on their pummeled, charred corpses. Finding none, they call over the chief detective and report their findings or lack thereof. The chief detective calls over an evidence team that photographs the scene from every angle and makes the obligatory chalk outlines around the bodies.

The two corpses look more like tenderized puppy-chow than people. After several minutes of this and a quick look-see by the coroner who's just arrived, the chief detective signals to the paramedics waiting across the room. They return to the stage with two gurnies and two body bags. They unfold the bags on the floor and shift a corpse onto each then zip the fronts closed. They heave the lifeless sacks onto the gurnies, strap them in and haul their barbecued remains off to the morgue for an autopsy.

In the meantime, the police have set up several tables and are taking names, addresses and telephone numbers from the patrons. ID's are checked and each is given a form and envelope with a list of standard questions. Each is asked if they saw anything that might not have been noticed by others. Some say yes and are sent to different tables where more detailed statements are taken. All are told that they may be contacted for further information. One by one, or in pairs or small

groups, they leave the club, chattering about the excitement. After about an hour, it's just down to the police and the staff. The police interview the staff, give them the same form and ask if they saw anything out of the ordinary in the lead up to the incident.

David walks over to the table with the chief detective and hands over VCR copies of the digital surveillance files. He has omitted those segments that show the kidnappers entering the club and the detailed, close in scans of Mark and Sid. Instead, only fuzzy, smoke blurred long shots are provided.

As for Harry and Steve, David knows the police will eventually get a make from their fingerprints and then their mug shots will be on the news. David tells the chief detective that he believes Harry and Steve had been there before and thrown out for dealing drugs. David says they were able to identify Harry and Steve from voice prints from the previous episode but that he doesn't know their names. He has the surveillance tape of that event included as well. The chief detective is impressed. David explains that it's a fully computerized system.

David has one of the guys bring a small 13 inch TV with built in VCR to the table with the chief detective. He switches it on and inserts the video tape. They watch the events of earlier in the evening.

David pops the tape out of the VCR, puts it back in its case and hands it to the chief detective saying, "Any theories, other than the obvious?"

The chief detective takes the tape and says, "Hmmm, too early to make a conclusive determination but, duh? Robbery? Probably some element of payback involved. You do a big cash business, I gather?"

David nods and says, "Quite a lot of cash on a Friday night."

"From that tape, it appears they may have been high on alcohol or drugs, autopsy will say for sure. It may have been a spur of the moment scheme on their part to get even for before. As to the accomplices who set off the smoke bombs, it wouldn't have been too hard to get some crystal freaks to do that. They'd do just about anything for a hit."

David nods in agreement.

"Anyway, at this point, it's hard to tell. With these two dead and the ones who

started the distraction gone, we probably won't be able to identify the accomplices unless we can ID them from these tapes, or someone in the crowd knew them. We don't have much to go on. As to the corpses, the morgue should be able to get a make on them from finger prints, they weren't carrying any ID that we could find. Knowing who they are will be a big help. I'll keep you posted. I'm glad none of the crowd was seriously hurt, this could have been a way lot worse. As for the dead meat on the stage, just saves the state the trouble of frying them further down the road. Serves'em right for carrying pop bottles full of gasoline. What, so they were gonna fire bomb the crowd? Geeez. Their call, their problem. By the way, I liked the laser show your people did on those meatball's hands."

"Nothing like state of the art equipment."

"Sweet. It will be a big hit at headquarters."

David says, "I think we'll replay it a few times here, too. Anyway, let me know if there's anything I can do. I don't like people shooting up my club. Right now, however, I think we better deal with that mob of TV people outside. Will you be making a statement?"

"Yeah, I'll give them a quick summary then turn it over to you," says the chief detective, shaking David's hand.

It's now about one in the morning and the police have finished, packed up their cases and left the building. The chief detective and David both head towards the main door. The chief detective puts on his heavy coat and one of the bartenders brings David his coat. They both leave the building to face a blaze of TV lights.

The chief detective begins, "Two gun men entered Mo R♦n through an emergency exit and terrorized the patrons at gun point for the purpose of robbery. One patron, a white male, about 25 years of age, was shot. The gunmen were subsequently blinded by the club's lighting system which the general manager had cleverly re-aimed to point at them. In the ensuing aftermath, the crowd attacked the gunmen. The gunmen were carrying Molotov Cocktails in their pockets, apparently to fire bomb the club. The Molotovs accidentally ignited. The gunmen are now at the morgue pending autopsy. Two others remain at large, both white males between the ages of 25 and 30. One created a distraction while the other opened an emergency exit and allowed the gunmen to

enter the club thus avoiding the main entrance which had metal detection equipment and security guards. The obvious motive was robbery. Further information will be available after the autopsy on the gunmen whose identity is unknown, at this time. Unfortunately, we have no usable photos of the deceased. The condition of the patron who was shot is reported to be good and he should make a full recovery. He was transported to Omaha General. His name will be released upon notification of his family. Thank you all, there will be no further information at this time. I'll turn you over to Mr. David Shea, the owner of Mo R☙n."

The chief detective makes his way through the scrum of lights, mics and cameras, deflecting all questions. The mob quickly turns their attention to David who is now joined by Todd standing just behind him.

David looks around and nods to Todd then begins, "I and my staff deeply regret the incident that happened here tonight and we are cooperating fully with the Omaha Police Department. We have provided copies of all relevant security camera files and my staff has given statements as to what they saw. Unfortunately, we are completely baffled by what happened. We are grateful that the young man who was injured will recover fully and I am very proud of the quick thinking and skill of my general manager, Todd Schaffer," he nods towards Todd, "who was able to quickly reprogram the entertainment lighting system so that it was possible to disable the gunmen. Personally, I have no regrets for the actions of the crowd and would have probably done the same were I in their position. I regret I have no further information and am looking forward to the outcome of the police investigation."

The reporters erupt in unintelligible, simultaneous questions, thrusting their microphones at David who says, "I'd like to introduce Dr. Todd Schaffer, the general manger, whose quick thinking probably saved many lives."

David turns towards Todd, beckoning him forward with a sweeping hand gesture and quietly saying so just Todd can hear, "Good luck, buddy. It's feeding time at the zoo."

Todd looks at him with a you're-gonna-pay-for-this look, smiles and moves to the microphones and begins, "Thank you David. As you all know, we take careful security precautions which includes careful ID checks and a pass through our state of the art metal detector. Unfortunately, as a public establishment, we're

subject to the Coconut Grove about fire exits which must be fully accessible at all times. While ours are all alarmed, when the diversionary smoke bombs burst on the dance floor, even though harmless, it sent many patrons for these exits. With multiple alarms going off at once, this made it possible for the gunmen to enter the club. But our laser light show is also state of the art and I was able to reset the system to focus on the gunmen's hands and disable them. The crowd, having seen the young man gunned down, was incensed and rushed the gunmen. It was their own fire bombs that did them in. I also have no regrets that they left here in zipped body bags. That's about all I have to say. Thanks guys, it's late and we hope to be open tomorrow night. Sort of a victory party, as far as I'm concerned."

"Oh, one more thing, the video sequence from our surveillance cameras will be posted on our web site, <http://www.omahadave.com>"

He waves, David waves and, ignoring the shouted questions of the news feeding frenzy, they turn and reenter the club.

The videos they post take a few thousand hits in the first five minutes. They are on video sharing sites in ten. They are seen in St. Louis the following morning courtesy of cable news and entertainment networks.

6. Saturday January 13

Time: 2 AM

By 2 am the crowds of cops and press have finally cleared out. David, Todd, Jay, Lance, Tom, Bob and Mike, a few minutes apart, take separate SUVs from the parking lot and rendezvous at an all night diner several blocks away. After checking that they've not been followed, they then drive to the other side of town.

Pulling up to a large garage door at the side of a dingy old flat roofed cinder block building, Lance hits a remote control and the door slowly rises. The SUVs pull in and the door noisily rattles down behind them.

They are in an old, unheated, auto repair shop with stalls for ten or fifteen cars. The walls are cinder block, painted gray, stained with soot and grease. The windows are dirt covered frosted glass set about 10 feet above the floor. The floor itself is marked by the blackened grease and the tread marks of many years

of use. Old tires are piled in corners. Metal benches are covered with old tools, and tattered manuals. Rusted old car parts lie about in the corners. The remnants of posters and old cheesecake calendars hang on the walls. One shop light with two long tubes hangs humming and buzzing above and provides the only light.

Mike sees the van with his would-be killers in the middle of the floor directly beneath the shop light. His old car is parked in a stall at the far end of the garage, Tom and Bob's car is next to it. David pulls his SUV to within a few feet of the van, the second SUV stops behind his. Lance gets out and walks over to a metal box mounted on the wall, pulls the cover open and flips some switches. More shop lights flicker on, dim at first in the cold but slowly getting brighter as the white tubes begin to warm up.

The rest get out of the SUVs at the same time as Lance's guys hop out of their van and circle around to the rear. They unlock and pull open the door and prod out the captives within. They line them up in front of David and his people. The four are stripped to their DiscountMart underwear and cheap running shoes, their hands are tightly bound behind their backs. They shiver both in fear and from the sub zero cold. Their rapid breathing shows in quick puffs of steam.

David's people stand in a line opposite and examine the four men before them. They're mainly Midwest street trash, farm boys who thought they could make a few quick bucks in the city. Square chins, dirty blond hair, blue eyed, broad shouldered, muscular, a few tattoos, room temp IQ's, all in their mid to late twenties, none recently shaved. They cautiously glare back at their captors.

Lance walks back from the light switches past the row of four when one of the street trash mutters, "Fucking fag."

Lance spins around, targets the guy who said it and menacingly treads towards for him. The guy is tall, lots of muscle, stringy dirty blond hair, blond stubble. He spits in Lance's direction and says, in what might be described as a poor choice of words, under the circumstances, "Fucking queer."

Lance turns and says quietly to one of the bouncers, "Cut him loose, Tony." The bouncer walks over with a set of heavy duty shears and slices the nylon restraints. The blond pulls his arms around, massages his wrists, shakes his hands a few times, crouches slightly, arms forward in a wrestling stance and says, "Okay fag, boy, come and get it." Again, not the best way in which to

make friends and win people over.

Lance casually walks straight towards him. The blond lunges, Lance swings slightly to the right, his arm traveling further back, fist clenched, his huge biceps fully flexed and lets go with a massive gut punch that lifts the lunging blond up into the air. His feet hit the ground with a thud as he doubles up and staggers backwards. He wobbles, straightens up, then lunges again.

Lance's arm is flexed and at shoulder height. He pivots back and to the right then slams his clenched fist full force into the on coming blond's face. There's a crunching sound and a crack. The blond's head spins violently to the right as spit, blood and teeth explode from his mouth. He collapses into a heap of teeth, blood and grease on the stained cement floor and lies motionless.

Lance brandishes his fist at the remaining three and asks, "Anyone else wanna say fag?" They noticeably cringe and nervously shake their heads no.

The blond begins to stir, his face flat on the floor. He tries to prop himself up on one arm but falls. Finally, stumbling to his feet, he spits out more blood and teeth. One of the bouncers tosses him a rag and he begins to wipe the blood from his face now smeared with black grease as well.

Lance looks over at him and sneers, "You wanna go a second round?"

The blond painfully shakes his head, his stringy blond hair now grease soaked as well, flapping against it blood stained face. He will always bear the scars of this night.

David, looking up and shaking his head, says in a low voice, "Well, besides turning them over to Lance for sparing partners, what'ya think, guys? What should we do with them?" asks David. "We need something that will send a message to the organization not to screw with us."

"Why not turn'em over to the cops?" asks Jay.

"No, they've got nothing on them, other than maybe an accessory charge for earlier tonight. Anyway, there'd be too many questions about how we caught them, why we didn't turn them in, why they were at the club, that sort of thing. We need to keep Mike out of the news for now. No, I think we need to work our own solution out."

“Dammit. These freaks are hired killers,” says Mike. “Take’em out in the farmlands and dump’em in a ditch and let them freeze to death. Corpsicles tell no tales.”

“Nah, that would be Jack’s way of doing business.”

“Damned right! And these are Jack’s minions. Duh?”

“No, Mike. Calm down. You can’t go freezing everybody that wants you dead.”

“I say we just dump them at that first rest stop on I80 west of town and see if Joe or Pete can fetch them before they freeze or some horny truckers stuff one or two of them in their Peterbilt sleeper,” Lance offers grinning.

“Ahh, and just exactly how much do you know about Peterbilt sleepers?” asks Mike.

Lance pats Mike on the butt and says, “Be happy to show you anytime, dude.” Mike decides not to ask any more questions.

“Okay. Besides satisfying Lance’s fantasies about three days in a truck to Barstow, that’s not a bad idea,” says David. “And, just out of curiosity, exactly how many Peterbilt sleepers have you been in?”

“Oh, give it a rest, will’ya. It ain’t easy being easy, ya’know?” mutters Lance.

“Yeah, Lance might have stumbled onto something,” says Todd. “Better yet, dump’em and then 911 the highway patrol and tell them there’s a bunch of pervs doing lewd acts in the public rest rooms.”

“Yeah, not bad, maybe call a few TV stations too. Should make for some nice publicity. The kind their employer won’t like. And I want to hear the cover story our boys make up, I don’t think the truth will do them much good. And I sure don’t think Joe wants his name brought into the picture, if ya’know what I mean?” says David.

Looking over at the would-be killers he continues, “That might have consequences, guys, very unhealthy consequences. I think you guys got a problem on your hands tonight.”

“Yeah, they’re totally smoked,” says Todd.

They look to one another and then back at David who says, “Okay, if we’re all agreed?” The others nod assent, “Load’em up. Sean, you know the rest stop we’re talking about? About 30 miles west on I80?”

“You bet, no problem.” answers Sean. “I think that’s the one Lance hangs out at.”

“Grrr, you’re a dead man walking Seanie.”

“Probably is, but I hear he works most all of them,” comments David to Lance’s further annoyance. “When you get there, pull in and dump’em fast. Don’t wait around. But get a good picture of them lined up in front of the building. I want a souvenir to send to Joe, Pete and Jack.”

“What the fuck is everybody picking on me for?” whines Lance.

“You got it, David. I’ll see if there’s any messages on the walls for you too, Lance,” says Sean as he ducks to avoid a cardboard box Lance hurls his way.

They prod their charges back into the van and slam the doors shut. The van starts up, the garage door rises and off they drive into the cold night, exhaust plumes blowing in the wind.

The others get back in their SUVs. Todd jogs back to his after killing the lights. They ride out into the night back to the Ron while the garage door descends.

Time: 2:45 AM

The van with Pete’s assassins drives west on a dark and snow swept I80. It pulls into the deserted rest area and stops parallel to the curb. The captives are released, their nylon binds cut and told to line up in front of the entrance to the small building with the rest rooms. “Smile for the camera, guys,” says Sean to the four guys in briefs and running shoes. In the -40F wind chill, they grasp their chests with criss crossed arms with legs tightly clasped together. Several cell phone camera pictures are taken before the van speeds off.

The four dash into the small building which, smelling of urine, is wonderfully warmer than outside. They look at one another and at the dark lamp lit parking

area beyond dumbfounded. They are cold and abandoned on the prairie standing in a small brick lavatory. The fluorescent light fixtures buzz and the fan in a scuffed, old green built-in electric wall heater rumbles against the cold.

One of them says as he points out at the lot, “That Shea guy was right, we really do have a problem.”

Outside, an 18-wheeler rolls slowly to a stop. It sits and waits. Finally, two bearded truckers alight, and, pointing at the guys visible through the building’s large glassed front, jog towards the building. As they near and pass under one of the sodium vapor lamps, they see that one has a gun.

They panic and rush through the steel men’s room door and barricade themselves behind it. The truckers, now inside the building try pushing on the door but without result. The prospect of three days on the road to Barstow with these drivers made the four very serious about keeping the door closed. A few shots are fired at the door but they fail to penetrate the thick metal panel. After several minutes of unaccepted solicitations, the truckers pee on the floor and stomp back to their big sleeper and drive off.

Cautiously the four creep back into the small lobby when they hear the truck roar off in the distance. They look with relief as they see its tail lights recede. That relief is short as, from their left, about two miles distant, they spot highway patrol cars, lights flashing, heading their way fast. One of the four quickly says to the others, “Okay, here’s the story, we were kidnapped by those two truckers and escaped here. Got it?”

“Where were we kidnapped?” asks one.

“I dunno, back in Omaha a block southwest of that club where we waited in Joe’s van. Say we were going to the club when we were held up at gun point. My car’s near there anyway. Don’t say anything about what happened at the club, we know nothing. Tell’em it happened about 9:30.”

“They’ll never buy it.”

“You got a better story? After that mess at the club, they won’t give damn about us. You heard the shooting and the screaming back there. The police will only be interested in that case right now. Just say we were kidnapped at gun point. Anyway, the bullet holes in the door will prove we’re telling the truth. Tell’em

we got away when they stopped to take a piss. We ran out and beat them in here and barricaded ourselves behind the door.”

“What about our clothes?”

“They made us take ’em off so we wouldn’t be able to run away. They got ’em.”

The others nod just as the cops burst through the door, guns drawn. They are quickly cuffed just as a camera crew in a van from one of the Omaha stations swerves into the rest stop followed quickly by two more. Heavy broadcast quality cameras are hefted into place, banks of high intensity lights pop up from the roofs of the TV stations’ trucks. They blind everyone before them. Quaffed but sleepy news readers pop in front of the cameras, microphones in hand.

Questions are asked of the senior officer, basking in attention not usually afforded to those working patrol on a rural stretch of prairie interstate. The cameramen film the restrained underwear clad would-be killers, one with ominous blood stains on his briefs, surrounded by posing cops with menacing assault rifles. Finally, the show ends and the pervs are stuffed in the back of two of the patrol cars which speed away to a waiting jail cell.

All this will make lurid eyewitness news TV video. A great feature for the morning news farm and food hour. All the next day, at every commercial break, Chyrons will tease: Perverts On The Interstate: Are your Children Safe? More Breaking news at 5, 6 and 10. The videos make Internet and the cable networks in minutes.

Time: 3 AM

The returning SUVs park behind Fort Shea, as Todd continues to call it. It’s nearly three in the morning. The guys enter the main floor of the club. They drag together a few tables and pull up chairs. Mary joins them from upstairs. She goes over to the bar, pulls a bottle of scotch and some glasses and puts them on the table. Jay fetches her laptop from behind the bar. Lance says, “I need some food,” and goes over and grabs a handful of packs of nuts and chips and brings them back to the table. Drinks are poured, the packs of nuts and chips are ripped open, cigarettes are lit.

They all freeze in silence as the first of several small yellow birds, daunted by the events earlier, but recognizing Jay and the others, cautiously descends and

begins to poke at one of the open bags of chips. Eventually it pulls forth a large curled golden slice of fried potato. Others follow. A feathery feast erupts and singing re-commences. That chip and many more like it quickly disappear. Around the table they smile to one another at the spectacle before them.

Jay opens her laptop and powers up. It automatically connects to the club's encrypted wireless network. She quickly downloads a series of incoming messages.

David looks to her and asks, "Okay, what have we got?"

"Our web site has all the video and stills from the club tonight. First, there's the video of the whole Harry and Steve show from when they jumped onto the stage until the cops zip the body bags. Then I got the still pictures of Harry and Steve on the stage, one of the kid getting hit in the groin, several of the lasers toasting their hands, some of Harry and Steve hitting the floor, the crowd attacking them and some shots of what was left of them and, finally, the body bag shots. The site's been hit more than a half a million times and the videos are all over the Internet. Wanna see?" says Jay.

"Yeah, let's see," says David.

Jay hits a few keys and a screen rumbles down on the stage and an overhead video projector switches on. After about thirty seconds, it reaches full brightness and they all watch the replay and view the stills. Jay displays the network and Internet news site pages all with the links back to the club.

Then Jay says, "Okay, I'm just now getting the stills from the I80 rest stop. Here they are."

The cell phone camera pictures appear on the main screen.

David says, "I like that. So will Joe, Pete and Jack. Okay," turning to Jay, "Make sure there's nothing in the files that could identify us as the source and send those rest stop photos to Joe, Pete and Jack."

"Will do," says Jay.

They sit and discuss the events of the night before for a few more minutes until, finally, David says, "And in the later watch of wasting night, the setting stars to

kindly rest invite. In short, let's get to bed. It'll be a busy day tomorrow."

Time: 9 AM

The next morning, the newspapers and TV have full coverage of the events of the night before at Mo R^on. There are lurid pictures and video of Harry and Steve, the shooting, Harry and Steve in the body bags. This, coupled with the seemingly unrelated story of the pervs on the interstate makes for a banner day in Omaha broadcasting. Quickly the news networks pick up the story as do local affiliates. Interviews commence on the cable news channels. The entertainment networks are also on the story to spice up an otherwise dull day of Congressional show trials. The ratings surge.

Pete's day, however, goes downhill quickly. The events took place too late to make the late news but the morning broadcasts consist of nothing but stories of the events the night before. He checks his email and finds the anonymously sent pictures and video from the night before. He has a pretty good idea of where they originated. On the TV he sees even more. He picks up the newspapers that have been dropped outside his hotel room. He knows that when Jack sees these, there will be big trouble, very big trouble. He has seriously screwed up in a line of work that frowns on error and, worse, drawn national attention, another serious no-no. He prays there's no story giving the real reason for the club attempt. It's bad enough as it is.

In St. Louis that morning, Jack, not yet aware of what transpired the night before, switches on TV while he gets first dose of coffee for the day. Jack lives in a spacious condominium in one of the nicer old gated communities near Forest Park. Jack is about fifty. He's been in the crime business all his life as was his father before him. Jack's dad had connections and Jack used them. He started out in Vegas running money laundering then got promoted to dean of discipline in LA. He left an impressive body count and few dissatisfied customers, at least, none that ever complained. He acceded to the Midwest barony when the previous incumbent met with an untimely early demise. Jack was good at arranging that sort of thing. In St. Louis, Jack ruled an inland empire of drugs, prostitution, smuggling, gambling, loan sharking and just about every other vice known to man and beast. He had the political establishment of six states in his pocket. No one messed with Jack. His fuse was short and his reach was long.

But he freezes when he hears the news and watches angrily as the operation in

Omaha collapses in a shambles. By now, the networks have begun to ask whether there's a connection between the small time drug dealers discovered on the interstate and the events at the club although there is no solid evidence of such. Not that the networks need any actual evidence, but because it gives them an excuse to show the lurid footage of four scantily clad guys, one with blood stains on his underwear. It's a ratings game, after all.

Jack now realizes that things have taken a serious turn for the worse. He knows he needs to be very careful and very ruthless. He calls one of his people and tells him to quickly get him some untraceable prepaid cell phones so he can make some very unmonitored calls. Jack doesn't want his caller id on any phones right now. Jack thinks it's about time that he took direct control over the situation in Omaha and that it might be time that Pete took early retirement from the business. He knows too much and screws up too much. Not a good track record. Later in the day Jack receives his prepaid cell phones and begins making some calls.

At the same time in Omaha, Pete anxiously calls Joe and emotionally asks, "Have you seen the fucking TV? What the fuck happened last night? I got some anonymous email pictures and video too. How'd the fuck anyone get my email address? I don't want to talk on the phone about this. Someone may have bugged the line. Meet me at the warehouse and bring Mark and Sid. I'll be there at one o'clock."

He slams the phone, grabs his coat and storms out of the room, the door closing loudly behind him. All this is captured by the Mo Ron's hack of Pete's laptop and dutifully recorded by unsleeping software on file servers back at the club.

Time: Noon

About noon Saturday morning, David and the guys, groggy from the late night before and only limited sleep, stagger into David's apartment for a breakfast of cold pizza, strategy and videos. They watch the recorded scenes from Pete's hotel room laughing and high-fiving.

"Yo, man, he's screwed," says Mike.

"Screwed would be a lucky break, found bobbing in the Missouri, that's more likely," says Jay.

“Totally smoked. Jack’s gonna go postal. Punch up the news networks and let’s see some PDF’s of the newspapers, especially St. Louis,” says Todd.

They watch the news feeds, laughing and clapping at each new one. They cheer at the lurid, above-the-fold, full color shots in the Omaha and St. Louis papers.

After going through all the broadcasts, David says, “Ya’know, I think it’s time I had a little chat with Pete.”

“What, are you nuts?” says Mike.

“No, I just feel that he might be open to a little persuasion to re-negotiate his contract, so to speak.”

“How’s that?” asks Mike.

“Listen, he’s on the ropes. Everything he’s tried has come up empty. My guess is that Jack is not a very forgiving person. Am I right?”

“Oh yes, Jack doesn’t like failure. Neither do Jack’s colleagues. My guess is that right now, they’re not too happy and a little bit concerned as to whether Jack’s in control of things,” says Mike. “Jack knows this too, so, I guess Pete’s got a problem too.”

“Then maybe we’ve got some leverage with Pete right now. We’ve turned other guys in the organization, why not Pete? He’s got incentive and I don’t think there’s a lot of brotherly loyalty here. He may be able to hand us Jack himself.”

“But once we put together our report, Jack’s in plenty of trouble anyway. So why bother?” says Jay.

“Yeah, and then after ten years and a hundred lawyers, he walks free. No, that’s not the way I see it. I want to nail Jack in the act. Give the cops something they can really pin on him, a real crime, not a paper trail he can buy his way out of,” says David.

“Yeah, well, that’s a point. But we can still do our exposé of the organization even if Jack’s up on charges,” says Mike.

“It’s worth a try,” says David.

“So, where are you gonna meet with Pete?” Mike asks.

“His hotel.”

“When?” Lance asks.

“Tomorrow.”

“Are you going alone?” asks Mike.

“No, Lance, you’re coming too.”

“No problem,” says Lance.

“Jay, you willing to come along?. We may need an inconspicuous spotter. Seems like you’re not on anybody’s radar screen.”

“Sure seems that way. I guess Jack never did his arithmetic on me, serves him right for being a sexist pig. Yeah, I’ll come,” says Jay.

“Is this really a good idea?” Mike asks.

“Only one way to find out. And anyway, you can all watch on Pete’s rigged laptop.” says David.

They finish their cold pizza and wait for Pete’s appearance at the warehouse.

Time: 1 PM

Sid and Mark are the first to arrive at the warehouse. They’ve also seen the papers and TV. They suspect that Pete’s days are numbered so they want to distance themselves from him if at all possible.

Joe arrives looking ashen. He knows things are going downhill quickly and it’s just a matter of time before St. Louis goes berserk. He just wants to be sure it’s Pete that gets toasted, not himself.

Sid, Mark and Joe wait nervously in Joe’s bugged office.

Joe says, “I don’t know what went wrong but it looks like everything that could did. Damn, now we’re on freaking TV. St. Louis won’t like this. They don’t

appreciate publicity, ya'know what I mean?"

They both nod knowledgeably. Then they hear heavy, fast foot falls stomping down the wood floored corridor. The door bursts open and in walks Pete in a rage brandishing a newspaper.

"Okay you three, what the fuck happened last night? Have you seen this crap?" waving the newspaper. "How the hell did our guys end up half naked at a rest stop out on the interstate? I want some answers, now."

Mark says, "Everything seemed okay. I got in, locked the door to the club, opened the loading dock door. Then I ducked out to go wait with Sid to cover Harry and Steve's exit, just like we planned. The last I saw, our guys were going up in the elevator. Everything was according to plan."

Sid joins in, "Mark and I were waiting out behind the club when we heard the gun shots. We went and looked in the emergency door and saw Harry and Steve getting the crap beat out'a them by the crowd and then the fire. We split. I saw the rest of it on TV this morning. I don't know what happened to our guys in the elevator."

"Well something sure the fuck went wrong. What the fuck was up with Harry and Steve? Who the hell told him to shoot some kid?"

"I guess they didn't have much choice. The papers say some kid opened fire on them," offers Joe.

"Yeah, and that got the fucking riot started. Now those corpses are all over the TV. Is there any way they can trace them back here?" asks Pete.

"Probably not. But they've both got records. I think the police will put two and two together. But it still shows up as robbery and they had a revenge motive, too. I don't think they'll find out about us. Too much else to go on."

"And what's with your four guys the highway patrol picked up?"

"I had an attorney go and say he was sent by one of their families. He called me and said they put together a story that they were hijacked by some truckers and that they escaped and barricaded themselves in the men's room at the rest stop. Some horny truckers actually did try to take them on and there were bullet holes

in the steel door of the men's room to prove it. One of my guys actually had a broken jaw and a lot of bruise marks, I don't know how, yet. They were released an hour ago except for the one with the broken jaw, he's still at the hospital. The lawyer told them to come here separately once they were sure no one was following them. They should start arriving soon. They'll be able to tell us what happened in the elevator."

"Okay, then we wait for them," says Pete. "Mark, Sid, can you go up the street and get some coffee and donuts?"

Mark and Sid head up the street to the coffee shop. As they leave the building, they see the first of the would be killers approaching. Mark nods at him tilting his head towards the door saying, "They're waiting." The other nods back and enters.

As they walk quickly up the street Mark says, "Pete's in big trouble. He looked desperate, don't'ya think?"

"Dead man walking. I wonder if he's spoken with Jack?"

"Who knows? Does he need to? That operation was supposed to send a message to David but it ended up that David sent a message to Jack. I wonder what other tricks that David guy has up his sleeve?"

"I think Pete's running out of tricks," says Sid. "But I wouldn't sell Jack short."

By the time Mark and Sid return, the last of the four has arrived. Mark and Sid sit back near the wall hoping their interrogation is over.

Pete, stirring his coffee nervously, begins, "Okay what the fuck happened last night?"

One of the four, Bill, says, "We got in the club as planned. Harry and Steve were holding everyone's attention, or so we thought. We got into the elevator shaft, got on the elevator and started it up. But they were waiting. Between the top two floors the elevator stopped and we were blinded by big halogen shop lights from the floor above. They had us covered and we couldn't even see them. They grabbed us, hauled us to a garage somewhere and striped us. We couldn't see where we were, the van had no windows."

Another continues, “That’s where Nick shot off his mouth and one of Shea’s guys beat the crap out of him. Then they put us back in the van and drove us out to the rest stop where they took some pictures and left us. A couple of truckers attacked us but we barricaded ourselves in the men’s room. The highway patrol and TV crews arrived a few minutes later, obviously tipped off. We told them we were abducted at gun point. They bought it. The bullet holes on the men’s room door convinced them as did Nick’s broken jaw. They couldn’t hold us on anything so they let us go an hour or so ago. That’s about it.”

Pete looks at Joe and gives an exasperated sigh and says, “Well, that David guy knew we were coming. How the fuck did he know? That’s what I wanna to know.” He looks towards Sid and Mark and says, “Did you see anything?”

“No boss, we didn’t see anything unusual,” says Mark.

Pete says, “Okay, all you guys get out of sight in case they find any surveillance video showing who lit the fireworks or you guys coming in through the freight door. At least Harry and Steve won’t do any talking.”

Mark, Sid and the four would-be killers get up and leave. Pete finishes his coffee, rubbing the back of his neck.

Joe leans over and in a quiet voice says, “Harry and Steve weren’t gonna say much anyway, Pete. That last batch of meth I gave them would have ended them even if the crowd hadn’t. It’ll show up on the autopsy, though.”

“All the better,” smiles Pete, “The cops will chalk the incident up as a drug OD and probably won’t look much further. Anyway, I’m going back to the hotel and see if I can figure a way out of this mess. You see if you can find out how that David knew we were coming.”

Time: 5 PM

Mo R^on opens again Saturday afternoon at five pm, later than usual because there was a lot of cleanup to do after the night before. The door alarms are reset and new cameras are positioned to watch over them. Several plain clothes police mingle with the crowd to look for anything unusual. For the most part, it’s a quiet night. The crowd trickles in and there’s a lot of subdued talk about the night before. People mill around the stage and gesture to where the guy was shot, all traces of the blood stains now removed. They ogle upwards and nod

approvingly at the light racks trying to spot the laser mechanisms that worked so successfully the night before.

7. Sunday January 14

Time: Noon

A little before noon David and Lance are ready to go to Pete's hotel. They knock on Mike's door. He answers and they ask, "Where's Jay?"

Mike walks over to the balcony and points at Jay who's sitting at one of the tables far below. "There she is. She's down there playing with the damned canaries. She takes more interest in the birds than me!"

On the floor below Jay is sitting at a table banging away on her laptop while five canaries are perched on the top of the screen singing away. Several more are feasting on the peanuts she's crushed and sprinkled on the table. Two more are on her shoulders. Jay has attracted a serious following among the wing'ed set as she brings them seeds and nuts liberated from Todd's larder.

David laughs as they watch the show and says, "Hey, don't knock it."

"Yeah? You know how many she's got living in the apartment now? They fly up to the door and peck at it until she lets them in!"

"Well, at least they knock," says David.

Finally, Lance shouts over to the balcony, "Hey Jay! Lose the birds. Let's go."

She looks up and hollers back, "Okay, I'm ready. Have Mikey give you my coat."

They meet her on the floor, hand her the coat and drive to Pete's hotel. They park David's SUV about a block away. Jay has an EVDO cell phone card plugged into her laptop. This gives her a data rate of nearly 3 megabits per second of CDMA wireless network access. They conference with Todd and Mike back at the club.

Todd tells them that while they were driving over, Pete left his room. He called Joe and said he wanted to meet him for a quick lunch at a restaurant nearby.

Todd says he should be gone for a while.

Lance and David will go to Pete's room and wait for his return. Jay will remain in the lobby and watch then signal the guys upstairs when she sees him. They enter the lobby one by one rather than as a group. Jay arrives last. Lance takes the elevator first. David loiters around the lobby for a minute or two pretending to look at some tourist brochures then follows him up.

Finally, Jay enters and sits on one of the big easy chairs and picks up a newspaper. After a moment, she folds the paper and pulls out her laptop. In addition to her EVDO access, the laptop's onboard wireless transceiver connects directly to the hotel Wi-Fi. She promptly hacks back into the hotel's network and targets its security systems.

Like in most modern hotels, the security system is computer based with digital cameras and controls. Security camera images are stored to disk, not tape. Jay hacks into the control computer and takes the security cameras off line. Then she replaces the files showing Lance, David and herself entering with an innocuous loop she captures from the disk from a few minutes earlier. She also runs a program to multiply rewrite the deleted section with random byte patterns so that it can't be recovered. She disables the camera aimed at where she's sitting and makes it look like a hardware error. She also disables the exit alarms on the top floor and credits her frequent flier account with twenty thousand award points. She waits for the key card system to record the door to Pete's room being unlocked by Lance.

Lance swipes the lock on Pete's room with the key card they made a few days earlier. The LED blinks green and the door opens. Jay sees the transaction appear on the hotel's database and erases it so that the only record of the door being opened will be Pete's. Satisfied, she smiles and looks around her chair for a socket to plug her battery charger into. She finds one and attaches the charger to the laptop. She brings up Pete's laptop camera from the room above and watches David and Lance as they walk into Pete's room. She then pulls out her digital camcorder and fiddles with it like a tourist giving special attention to the penthouse suites up near the roof, one in particular.

Lance and David enter Pete's sitting area. Lance begins thoroughly searching for hidden weapons, under cushions, furniture, behind mirrors. He enters the bedroom and remains out of sight for several minutes. David, meanwhile, goes

through some papers he finds on the coffee table.

After a while, Lance comes back into view and says, "Okay, looks pretty clean."

"Good. There's nothing interesting here," says David tossing the papers back on the desk. "Let's sit down and wait."

David sits on the sofa but Lance walks around continuing to look the place over. Finally, he says, "This is nice, I wonder how much it costs a night?"

"Quite a lot, I expect. Why, you thinking of moving here? Stick with the loft you already have, it's bigger."

"Hey, I got no complaints, just wondering. I like the balcony," he says walking out and rubber necking at the view below. "Maybe I could extend my apartment out so the balcony would be part of it?"

"Might work. You pay for the renovations, though."

David picks up his cell phone, puts it on speaker phone and calls Jay in the lobby, "We're all set up here. Ya'see him yet?"

"Nope, nothing yet. Pretty quiet down here. I can see Lance, though."

Lance hears and waves. Jay nods and says, "Hello Lance. I won't wave in case anyone's watching me."

Todd's voice suddenly cuts into the phone call, "Hey guys, we got a problem."

"What is it?" says David as Lance returns to the room.

"Okay, so you know my phone scripts have been monitoring calls by anyone on the network whose cell numbers we've captured?"

"Yeah."

"And I've had my viruses make their phones send me their pen registers?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it seems two cell phones in Kansas City on our list got calls from a St.

Louis phone early today. I don't have an ID on the St. Louis phone since it's a prepaid phone with no registered owner."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means someone in St. Louis wanted his calls to be untraceable. Always a bad sign. And it gets worse. My hack of the cell phone tower routers says that those two phones from KC arrived in Omaha about forty-five minutes ago. They popped up in a cell near the airport. Now my data says they're within a few thousand feet of where you are. Something's going down, guys."

"What do you think we should do?"

"Jay, have you got your EVDO card plugged in?"

"Yep"

"I'm gonna remote login to Jay's laptop and run some cell signal samples off her EVDO card. This will take about a minute or two, hang on."

David and Lance go over to the balcony and look down towards Jay. David says, "So why is Pete getting visitors from Kansas City?"

"Probably not a social call," replies Lance.

After a few moments Todd says, "Okay you guys, get the fuck out of that room, now! Those two phones are in the hotel. Probably in the lobby very near Jay. I'm getting a strong ID signal off both of them. Jay, stream the best lobby security cam to me."

"Here it comes," says Jay as she quickly types some commands.

"Good, I've got it, I can see you. Now wait, I'll make them reveal themselves. I'll ring both their phones at once. Jay, don't give on but listen closely. They could be anywhere."

Jay jumps a tiny bit as she hears the cell phones on two guys in chairs not fifteen feet away begin to chirp with annoyingly happy ring tones. Jay says quietly into her phone, "We have a winner, two winners, actually. They're about fifteen feet to my left."

Todd says, "I see them."

David says, "We see them too."

The two guys pull out their phones and answer them. Todd's programmed them to receive a recorded sales pitch for a credit card. They immediately hang up and look at one another shaking their heads in annoyance as one mutters something to the other. Neither suspects that they've been ID'd.

David says, "Oh-oh! Look, there's Pete just coming in. This is getting interesting."

One of the guys from KC spots Pete and gestures to his accomplice who nods. They sit quietly watching Pete stride across the lobby to the elevators. They both get up and walk to the elevator and get in with Pete. A family with two small children gets on as does a bell hop. Pete does not recognize the two guys from KC. David, Lance and Jay watch as the elevator begins to ascend.

David says to Jay on the phone, "We're out'a here. We'll duck down the emergency staircase to the next floor then circle back and take the elevator down to the lobby. Can you try to patch the feed from Pete's room into my cell phone?"

Jay says, "No problem, I'll have you on audio and video in about fifteen seconds. Todd, you still there?"

"Yep. Just watching the lobby feed. Keep the channel open. I'm also monitoring Pete's room."

Lance says, "Watch for prints. I think there's gonna be police here soon," as he tosses him a small towel and begins wiping all the surfaces they may have touched.

"What'ya mean?"

"Those are hit men, dude. Pete's about to check out for good."

"Yikes."

"Yikes indeed. Now fucking move it!"

David and Lance quickly dart out of the room and into the adjacent emergency staircase. They begin running down the stairs to the next floor where they reenter the corridor and race to the elevator. Jay disables the security cams in their path as they proceed.

“They got here pretty quick,” says David.

“Well, there are airplanes, ya’know. There’s a commuter run between here and KC about five times a day. With the right incentive, you can have very prompt service and I’m sure Jack paid for the best,” says Lance.

The elevator stops on several floors until just Pete and his two visitors from KC are left. On the top floor Pete gets out. The two follow him. About half way down the hall, he begins to be uneasy. He walks faster. They walk faster. He begins to run to get to the safety of his room. They run faster. They hit him from behind smashing his face against the door just as he tries to swipe the keycard through the lock. One of the two wrenches Pete’s arm painfully behind his back, the other slaps a piece of masking tape over his face as he tries to yelp out a scream.

One of them takes the keycard which has dropped to the floor and opens the door. They shove Pete into the room. Once in the room, they quickly bind his arms behind him and shove him onto the couch. They wrap his ankles together in duct tape. Pete squirms but is trapped and helpless.

As David and Lance get on the elevator the streaming audio and video feed begins to appear on David’s phone. They hear the click of Pete’s door opening and they hear on the speaker phone an unfamiliar voice saying, “Move it, we don’t have all day.”

Then they hear the unintelligible muffled sound of Pete’s terrified voice.

“Jack’s not happy about last night. He doesn’t think he likes seeing his people on TV or in the morning papers.”

Pete knows Jack’s hired these guys to take him out. He knows why these guys are here. That’s the way Jack works, no warning.

“Oh, yeah, but this time Jack wants lots of publicity,” chides one of them. “He wants it known that he can take care of a fuck up like you. We’re here to make

this as messy as possible.”

One of the hit men holds a gun on Pete while the other quickly closes Pete’s laptop, grabs Pete’s loose papers and stuffs them into the laptop bag. He carefully checks around the room for anything Jack might not want the police to see then says, “Okay, I think we’re ready.”

“We’re not gonna shoot you dude. We’re gonna let you fly out’a here on your own.”

At which, one grabs Pete by the legs and the other grabs him by the shoulders. Pete kicks, squirms and emits muffled screams as they quickly carry him over to the balcony, give a couple of practice swings then hurl his writhing body over the balcony and out into the open atrium beyond.

David and Lance exit the elevator and walk over towards Jay. All three are looking up towards Pete’s room. Jay has her camcorder. Suddenly they see Pete fly over the balcony, wriggling frantically, his arms and legs tied, his mouth gagged.

Pete begins his parabolic final descent to the floor below announced with only an inaudible, muffled scream. The two killers stand at the balcony for a brief moment and watch, grinning at their handiwork. No one in the lobby has heard Pete’s soft last cry. Even if Pete were in full voice, the laughter and din of the lunch crowd below, accompanied by an over load piano, would be enough to drown out an opera singer.

Suddenly, a woman spots movement in the air high above and gives forth with a bloodcurdling shriek. Others quickly look up. The screaming becomes general throughout the lobby. The piano player freezes in mid stanza. The hitmen quickly decide that it’s time to beat their retreat and they rush out of Pete’s room and down the emergency staircase.

A second later, the crescendo of screams halts abruptly in a crashing thud of impact that echoes throughout the massive open space. Pete’s descent terminates among the luncheon buffet’s crab dip platters. Little cocktail forks thrust into the flesh of his unconscious corpse.

Plates, silverware, serving trays, bowls and utensils fly upward in all directions. There is, for a fraction of a second, absolute, stunned, dead silence, followed

immediately by the thundering clatter and crash of all those items sent airborne returning back to the earth. Another moment of silence except for the sounds of round platters spiraling about on the floor. Then bottles of wine and liquor that have fallen, finish their roll across the tables and begin to crash on the brick floor beneath.

The sound of shattering glass is followed by the first stunned but now hysterical screams from the formerly contented dining patrons who watch as the spilled alcohol from the upset hot plate warmers blossoms into blue flame. The festive paper winter decorations, linens and napkins join the fire.

Pete's Wagnerian crab dipped immolation rises to an aromatic apotheosis as bottles of very high proof cognac, used to flambé the occasional entrée or desert, topple and burst into vigorous and colorful incandescence. As Pete incinerates, the desert liquors festively join the growing inferno.

The pyre is finally brought to completion by a small propane cylinder hidden beneath the tables used to provide gas for the rotisserie. Its control valve is ruptured from the force of the impact that collapsed the center of the table. The ruptured tank gushes forth a cloud of flammable gas which promptly explodes.

The resulting fireball swiftly surges up through all nine stories of the open atrium until it liberates itself into the cold Nebraska air through the shattered skylights of the ceiling high above. A storm of glass shards, hors'd'hoerves, and little bits of Pete fall at various speeds to the lobby below while people quickly duck under the tables for cover.

David, Lance and Jay stagger and look at one another grinning, and say in unison, "Holy shit!" with enthusiasm.

David says, "I think it's time we checked out too."

Lance says, "Right dude, let's go before something else happens."

They quickly pull on their coats and gloves and wrap themselves in scarves and join the throng pushing for the exits to leave the scene of chaos and fire behind.

When the guys from KC reach the parking lot behind the building, they calmly walk to a main street a block away and hail a cab back to the airport.

However, once they're in the cab, Todd can't resist. He rings both their phones. When they answer in unison, he says, "Nice work guys. Got it all on video. Nice arc on the Pete toss. So, we're awarding you both of Pete's ears. Unfortunately, you blew his fucking tail off. Now, where in Kansas City would you like the body parts delivered?" They flip their phones shut, look in horror at one another and cringe in panic at their discovery.

Jay is first to the SUV and she leaps in the driver's seat. David calls shotgun, Lance says "Screw you!" and off they ride. Jay executes a high-G U-turn and swiftly heads towards the club just as the first fire engines scream to the scene.

Jay says, smirking, "So, I guess Pete's day went down hill, so to speak?"

Lance says, "I think we let him down, man."

"What goes up, must come down," says David.

Jay says, "Yeah, I saw him at the buffet. Seemed to be in a hurry."

"Oh, he's not in a hurry now," says David.

"Well, parts of him aren't. They're gonna have to scrape some bits of old Pete off the walls with a butter knife," giggles Lance.

"And we just wanted to be friendly, but someone beat us to it," interjects David.

"Well, I don't think he'll be switching sides now," says Jay.

Todd phones and tells them he called the hitmen. They all get a big laugh wondering what their reaction was to Todd's greeting.

"Probably wet their pants," says Jay.

They continue to chatter as Jay's somewhat erratic New England driving style careens them merrily towards the club. She parks the SUV in the lot behind. They all go in and straight to David's apartment. Waiting there are Mike, Todd and Mary who watched and heard most of what transpired via Pete's hacked laptop until the hitman stuffed it in the bag. They watched the lobby security cam until the explosion took it out. Now they're waiting for full play-by-play.

David, Jay and Lance collapse on the couches and Todd says, “Wow! Didn’t see that coming.”

“No shit!” says Lance. “Those guys were pros. In, out, quick, and splashy.”

“Jack wanted to send a message. A nice loud message,” says Lance. “He needs to let people know he can do things quickly and decisively, just so no one gets the idea to move in on him.”

Mike chimes in and says, “So tell us what happened up on the balcony? We couldn’t see that part from the laptop cam after they closed it. We saw Pete’s body hit the buffet, then it looked like a bomb went off. The power must have gone off because we lost the signal. The local TV news cut in a few minutes ago saying there’d been an explosion at the Regency Hotel.”

David and Lance fill Mike and Todd in on the details while Jay gets some beers and cold pizza from the kitchen. When she returns, she says, “Okay, now do you wanna see it from Jay’s lobby-cam angle? This you will really like!”

She takes out her camcorder and, sitting next to David and facing the big screen, attaches a USB connector to it. A playback window appears on the screen. Jay hits PLAY on the camcorder and they watch the digitized movie that she captured from her vantage point in the lobby.

Jay was across on the other side of the lobby when she began shooting with the digitally stabilized telephoto lens. She caught the moment when Pete’s bound body was hurled into the atrium. Jay’s video follows him all the way down and catches the entire impact, fire and explosion and the bloody bits falling all around along with shattered glass and the light luncheon hors’d’oeuvres.

David, Lance, Mike, Todd and Jay watch the video over and over again.

“Brilliant! It’s perfect. Captures Pete’s last flight in perfect detail,” raves Lance.

“Definitely a winner,” says David. “I guess we’ll be responsible for another big ratings boost for the networks.”

After watching it several times, some in slow motion, Jay says, “I think it’s time we sent it to the cable news networks, local TV, and the newspapers. Then, in a couple of hours after the cable channels have played it ad nauseum, I’ll upload it

to the usual video sharing sites.”

“And don’t forget sending a copy to Jack,” David adds. “And be sure it hits the KC stations too. I know our hit men will want to see their handiwork. They’re probably already catatonic with fear after Todd’s call. Let’s ratchet up the angst a few notches. My guess is that the police should be able to make out their faces on the video.”

“Don’t worry, Jack’s at the top of my email list. The KC stations are a nice and cruel touch. I love it. Oh, and by the way, do you know that one of Todd’s root kits has already managed to install itself on Jack’s machine in St. Louis?” says Jay.

“Oh really? Hey that’s great,” says David.

“Yeah! And it’s already started propagating itself across all the machines in his email address book. AYBABTU!”

“You’ve told me before, but explain to me again. What’s a root kit?” asks Mike.

“It’s a collection of software, mainly spyware in this case, that operates under the detection level of the operating system and anti-virus scanners. It can access files, hide files, run programs and make network connections without the host machine being able to detect its activity,” she replies pedantically.

“I think I need a geek guide book,” laments Mike.

“Anyway, I started attaching copies of the viruses onto all the email that Pete was sending to St. Louis. I sent them using various buffer overflow and Trojan exploits. I guess one of them finally succeeded and infected Jack’s laptop. I’ve established contact with it and from the messages I’m getting back, everything is okay. The root kit is installed and functioning perfectly. Once it got on his machine, it started hitting other machines in his network since they were all vulnerable to the same exploit. After infecting Jack’s machine, it was easier to do the rest of the network. People were duped more easily into opening infected email if it came through their encrypted VPN and appeared to be from Jack,” explains Todd, obviously proud of his work.

“It sounds impressive,” says Mike.

“I should have gotten updated copies of Jack’s address books by now, let me check. Yep, here they are. And I’m getting copies of his email files. I’ll start sending out messages to the other machines on his network that I’ve compromised and see how many I control. Then I’ll see if there are any new nodes and try to capture those. Soon I’ll have copies of all the files on his machine and see everything he does in real time,” says Todd pulling out a keyboard and logging into a server.

“Got any video?” asks David.

“Well, let’s see if his machine has a web cam. Yep, it does. I’ll switch it on in a low res reduced frame mode. Even though he can’t detect my software, I don’t want any suspicious performance degradation. I’m already loading his machine with a lot of other tasks. Too much might alert him that some thing’s fishy.”

“Geez, this is amazing,” says Mike.

“Just be happy Jack and his boys use a crapware operating system. This wouldn’t be possible with Linux,” says Jay.

“Hey Jay? If it weren’t for crapware, most software security people would be seriously unemployed,” replies David.

While Todd initiates the web cam feed from St. Louis, David punches up the cable networks and local stations in multiple separate windows.

“Here it comes” he says gleefully.

Within minutes there are News Alerts, and Special Bulletins galore as talking head news readers fumble with papers trying to make out what’s being said on their IFBs. Jay’s tape rolls on each. The Omaha stations cut in with the video as well.

They see again the lurid detail of Pete’s descent, the resulting explosion and the fireball. The networks, never missing an opportunity to beat a story to death, replay it over and over again both in regular and slow motion. Shocked quaffed talking heads, with no knowledge of the event, expound endlessly nonetheless.

Finally, after multiple replays, each goes to discussion relating the event they just witnessed to the events in Omaha earlier in the week. The video, however,

continues to cycle in an insert box. Questions are asked and speculation is rampant. They replay the video from the club, the video from the rest stop and then more replays of hotel event.

One of the wire services gets an ID on Pete and moves the story that he's a senior operative in one of the larger drug rings. All the networks flash the details and soon more talking heads appear, now opining on drug lords in the Midwest. Jack's name is mentioned even though he's managed to stay clear of any legal convictions. Soon the speculation graduates to certainty and the news analysts spin webs of conspiracy and made up facts increasingly convincing themselves of their construction of the truth.

The video feed from Jack's machine in St. Louis initiates but all they can see is a grainy static scene with no sound other than street noises in the distance. However, soon the system alerts them when it detects new noises in the St. Louis feed.

Automatically, the video data stream appears in a larger window on David's giant display and the audio from the priority site turns up while the audio from what they were watching mutes.

They hear someone entering the room in St. Louis. A speckled, ghostly picture of a figure, whom Mike quickly identifies as Jack, walks past the laptop and over to a TV. He casually switches it on, punches up one of the cable news networks and sits in an easy chair.

They chuckle as they watch Jack learning the news about the events in Omaha. Jack curses to himself, or so he thinks, then turns from the TV and heads for his laptop. On the way, he mutters, "That'll show those fucking bastards not to fool with me." He brings up his email and begins scanning it for messages from his agents about what has happened in Omaha. Nothing.

Instead, however, he finds that a message with a copy of the video that Jay filmed has been sent to him, anonymously. He curses again and the guys in Omaha laugh out loud as they watch his fuzzy image on one window and his screen displaying the video in the other. Jack freezes in panic when he sees the video closeups of his hired killers.

They hear Jack mutter, "Fucking Shea. It's time to get that little bastard."

“Ooooooh,” they all chorus at once in mock concern over the threat from their antagonist 500 miles away.

“I wonder what he’d say if he knew we were watching him now?” said Mike.

“You know, we can talk to him through his speakers any time we want. Might give him a bit of a shock, though,” answers Todd.

“Yeah, let’s not give him a heart attack yet. Maybe later,” says David, “We need to keep an eye on him for the time being.”

“At least can I write All of your base are belong to us his screen?”

“Sadly, he wouldn’t get it,” laments Jay. “Too bad really, we really do own him right now. He just doesn’t know it yet. He’s like a fish in a tank. But we own the tank.”

Jack instantly figures that the flamb of crab dip in the video was from Omaha and that it was Pete’s airborne demise. He’s not happy that the wire services are revealing that the corpse belonged to a drug dealer from Des Moines. That could be a problem. Jack gives an exasperated sigh and leans back, thinking of what to do next while his TV in the background continues to re-tell the story.

Jack knows he’s lost a lot of troops in the past few days and this is bad for business. His operation is quickly becoming the laughing stock of the trade. If Jack’s not careful, someone else will be moving in to shut Jack down. Jack knows he has a very serious problem and he needs a very serious, very final solution. Terminating Pete was just the first course. Now he needs to go in for the final, real kill.

Jack pulls out one of his prepaid cell phones and begins making some calls. He summons some of his more skillful helpers from the termination department. What he needs are a couple of creative psychopaths willing to do anything and he knows just the guys for the job. This time, he wants it done right and he wants to make an example so it won’t happen again.

He makes his phone call and sets up a meeting with Ed and Jim, two guys that will kill just for the sport of it and won’t botch the job. All this is watched and recorded in Omaha by his unseen audience. Todd’s touch-tone analyzer decodes the phone numbers as they’re punched. Then Jack calls Joe and sets up a VPN

video conference for later.

David says, “Well, It sounds like there’s another onslaught in the works. I wonder what he’s got planned this time?”

“I guess we’ll soon find out,” says Mike.

Time: 4 PM

For the rest of the afternoon, Todd spends his time analyzing the data that Jay and Mike brought from Des Moines. Jay continues breaking into networks owned by the mobs both in St. Louis and around the country. By late afternoon, Todd’s root kits have attached themselves to all Jack’s outgoing messages and installed themselves on the target machines. Subsequently, they spread further using each newly infected machine’s address list, secretly cross checked with the lists being compiled back at Mo R♦n.

With the path now open into these otherwise hidden recesses of the Internet, Todd and Jay further upload more spyware onto the infected machines including keystroke loggers, screen capture utilities, and file capturing programs. Quietly, in the background, on hundreds of machines, Jay’s indexing tools begin to scan files and send back detailed site maps of their contents. These are copied and archived on David’s servers on the floors below and cross indexed with the content extracted from other machines. Soon a vast, interconnected database belongs to Todd and Jay.

The main drug network is a multi-national VPN, a virtual private network, using cryptographic tunneling protocols to prevent snooping or even the detection as to which machines are part of the ensemble. With this facility, the dealers can secretly communicate with one another in real time, normally without fear of detection. Besides email and instant messaging, the system includes multi-point video conferencing capabilities. Drug dealing is big business with the IT infrastructure to prove it.

However, all this security is now rendered meaningless as the root kits, keyloggers and spyware spread inexorably from node to node, undetected by the owners of the machines. The root kits send home to Omaha the decryption keys allowing construction of the complete network map. It extends throughout the Midwest with nodes on the west coast, South America and all the way to Southeast Asia. It’s a gold mine of data. With Mike’s first hand information and

this back door into the organization's data networks, the entire operation lies exposed.

8. Monday January 15

Time: 12:30 PM

Monday afternoon the automatic audio analyzer system alerts Jay that it has detected voices at Joe's old warehouse. She calls the other guys and patches the sound from the warehouse window transponder to their cell phones in conference call mode.

By now, she's also managed to tap into the land lines going into the warehouse as well. But now the action at Joe's warehouse is the video conference on the VPN coming in via DSL.

However, Jay easily captures and decrypts the feed at its source in St. Louis. She sees the same screen as Joe does. She transmits the streaming video signal to the other guys' cell phones in real time.

Mark and Sid are with Joe. The conference is with Jack in St. Louis. Joe, Mark and Sid, seen through the web cam, are visibly nervous.

Jack begins, "Joe, I've had enough of this fucking around. I want that place eliminated. I'm sending two guys up there. I want you to do what they say, is that clear?"

"Yes, Jack, anything you want," replies Joe earnestly.

"First, we need to know about their delivery schedule of beer kegs. Find out who their distributor is, what brands, what size kegs, how many and what days of the week they get delivered. Got that?"

"Yeah, kegs, brands, Yeah, I can get that."

"Once you get me the information, I'll be sending a van to your warehouse with some kegs that will match what's normally delivered. Be careful with these, don't bounce them around or anything. Make sure you use your best and most trusted guys on this. You got that?"

“You bet. I take it these kegs might go bang?”

“You got it. These guys I’m sending will deliver the kegs to that dance club after they attach a little arming device. You’ll need to get hold of one of the beer distributor’s delivery trucks for a while so my guys can make the delivery. Once the kegs are delivered, we blow the place that night.”

“That’ll mean a lot of people, Jack.”

“At this point, I don’t give a fuck. The more the better. Right now, I want this ended and I want it ended in a way that is final.”

“Okay, it’s your call.”

“I understand that this Shea guy introduces each night’s show at ten o’clock. Is that right?”

“Yeah, usually. That’s what I’m told.”

“Then that’s when we do it. I’m personally going up to handle this one. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Okay, now get me the information on those kegs.”

Jack signs off and the video conference ends. Jay, however, continues to capture Joe’s web cam.

Joe looks at Mark and Sid and says, “Well, looks like trouble. Do you guys think you can get the information on the beer kegs?”

Mark says, “Yeah, we’ll get it. We’ll figure out something.”

“Good, get the delivery route too. I want to know where we can hijack the truck. Let’s hope this ends this business once and for all.”

“Any idea who he’s sending?” asks Sid.

“I don’t know but Jack can come up with some pretty mean characters when he wants to. Whoever they are, don’t cross them. Anyone willing to blow up a night club full of kids is not someone whose bad side you want to be on.”

“You got that right. But I thought he didn’t want a lot of collateral damage?” says Mark.

“I guess he’s changed his mind. Right now, he needs to show he’s in control. After the last week, he’s probably getting a lot of pressure to do something final. Things are getting complicated and that’s bad for business. Okay, you guys get going, get me that information as soon as possible.”

Mark and Sid walk out of the warehouse and across the street to Mark’s car. The wind is picking up and the sky looks like it may snow again soon. When they’re sure they’re out of sight and hearing of anyone at the warehouse, Sid says to Mark, “Well, what the fuck do we do now?”

“Jack wants information, we get Jack what he wants.”

“So, how do we find out about the beer deliveries?”

“Let’s go get some food then park near the club and see what kind’a deliveries they get. If not, we start asking around, I guess.”

Mark starts the engine, and, with the steering belt shrieking, they pull out of the parking lot, make a stop at a fast food joint and then head to the club to watch.

Back at Mo R~~o~~n Mike says, “Listen guys, you didn’t sign on to this. Me and Jay are gonna clear out’a here and tell Jack we’re gone. I don’t want to have anything to do with bombs going off.”

“I agree,” says Jay. “We can’t let you people take this kind of risk for us.”

“No one’s going anywhere,” says David. “Just stay put. We’ll handle it.”

“Right,” says Lance. “This fight is more than just about you two. It’s about those kids downstairs every night. Jack’s everybody’s enemy. Running won’t change things.”

“Don’t worry, Jay. They won’t succeed. We’ve got ’em nailed six different ways. They won’t set off any bombs around here, mark my words. We’re way ahead of them and that’s ninety percent of the battle.”

“Thanks guys. We just don’t want to be the cause of more problems,” says Jay.

“Don’t worry about a thing. We can handle it,” says David.

The meeting breaks up and Jay and Mike go back to their apartment. Mike says, “I’m still worried. What if something should go wrong and they actually do bomb the place?”

“I know. I think we should keep our eyes open and if things look bad, we clear out of here quick and let Jack know we’re on the move. I don’t want to do anything that would get anyone else hurt,” says Jay.

“I agree. But if we do make a run for it, no canaries.”

“Oh yeah? We’ll see about that.”?

Time: 1:30 PM

Mark and Sid sit in their car parked a block up the street from the club eating their burgers and watching the loading dock. Several trucks arrive and off load supplies.

A little after two o’clock a beer delivery truck pulls up. The name on the side says Arrowmark Distributing. A driver with a clipboard gets out and goes in the club. A few minutes later he returns and begins offloading kegs of beer, delivering them and returning with the empties. They count the kegs, ten in all. Mark has a pair of binoculars and sees that they’re all Millers, the name he remembers seeing on the taps inside. That’s the house beer. Eventually the driver closes up the truck and returns to the club with his clipboard. A few minutes later, he’s back, gets in the truck, cranks up the diesel and rumbles off. Mark and Sid follow.

A few blocks away, he pulls up to a bar and grill and goes inside. Mark and Sid pull up and park a hundred feet away.

Sid says, “See that? No clipboard and he locked the door to the cab. This doesn’t look like a delivery. This might be our chance to talk to him. Let’s go.”

“Yeah, and that place is more like a restaurant. Must be a late lunch.”

They hop out of the car and quickly jog up the street. Sid pretends to look at the menu in the window while Mark stays to one side. Inside, Sid sees the driver

sitting at the bar with a menu. Sid says, “Yep, he’s ordering food. Let’s go.”

They enter and head to the bar. There are stools to the right of the driver. They take off their coats and hang them on hooks near the door. Mark goes over and sits next to the driver while Sid sits next to Mark. Mark signals the bartender and says, “Couple’a beers and some onion rings?”

Sid says, across Mark, “Say buddy, is that your truck outside?”

The driver, drinking a cup of coffee looks over and says, “Yeah, it not blocking anything, is it?”

“No, no, I was just curious, how much does one of those weigh when it’s fully loaded? I’ll bet that beer weighs a whole lot?”

“Yep it’s pretty heavy. One of those kegs alone weighs over a hundred sixty pounds. But the truck weight is limited by zoning. Usually not more than ten tons.”

“Must take a pretty big engine?”

“Oh, yeah, big old Cummins diesel.”

“You been driving for long?”

“No, I’m just filling in today for a guy on vacation. I normally drive a package delivery truck.”

“You ever deliver to that big dance club a couple’a blocks east of here? I’ll bet they take a lot of beer?”

“Oh yeah, just stopped there. Ten kegs of Millers on Monday and Wednesday and twelve on Friday. They sure do go through an awful lot of it.”

“Sure sounds that way. You say Monday, Wednesday Friday, so, is it pretty much always the same route?”

“Oh yeah. Well the truck does the same route, anyway. But I just do this on Monday through Wednesday. Some other guy does the rest of the week. But yeah, with a truck that long, you don’t have a lot of flexibility. I go one route

Monday and Wednesday and another on Tuesday. Not a lot of variety except when the city tears up the street.”

“Yeah, I guess with a load like that you gotta know the way. Not a lot of room to back up, I guess?”

“No, that’s not a good idea.”

“Hey, it’s been nice talking to you. We gotta run,” says Mark as he and Sid finish their beers.

They get up, get their coats and head outside where Mark says, “I need to get in that truck and look at the clipboard. That’ll have his exact schedule on it.”

They quickly jimmy the truck’s door lock and grab the clipboard that’s sitting on the passenger seat. Mark scans it while Sid acts as lookout. After a few seconds, Mark says, “I got it. We need to pay a visit to Mack’s Grill. It’s the stop before the dance club.”

They drive a few blocks away and park and go into Mack’s. Once inside the nearly empty place, they sit at the bar and order two more beers.

Mark casually asks the bartender, “I’ll bet the snow makes it hard to get beer deliveries?”

“Nah, they’re as regular as clock work, snow or no snow every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 1:30.”

“I guess beer’s too important,” laughs Sid.

The bartender laughs and says, “You got that right.”

After a while, they finish their beers and leave. Back in their car, Sid says, “Geez that was easy.”

Mark says, “Right about that. Now let’s go get a couple of six packs and take a break,” as they head for their motel.

9. Tuesday January 16

Time: 10 AM

The next morning, Mark calls Joe from his cell phone and says, “We got that information you wanted. The distributor is Arrowmark Distributing and they deliver on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The usual run is about ten kegs on Monday and Wednesday and twelve on Friday, all standard 15.5 gallon domestic kegs of Millers draft.”

“How did you get the information? It’s pretty detailed. Anyone suspicious?”

“No problem really. We found the delivery driver and had a few beers with him. Then we broke into his truck while he was eating and looked at his schedule so that’s how we know his route.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll get back to you. Just hang low.”

Joe immediately emails the data to St. Louis over what he thinks is an encrypted network. Todd reads the email before Jack does and forwards copies to Lance, David and Jay.

When Jack reads it, he begins making some phone calls. First, he calls Ed and Jim and says be ready to head out of town for a few days, probably Wednesday night. Then he places a call to Denver where the mining industry makes explosives more readily available.

His contact in Denver recommends RDX, Royal Demolition Explosive, or cyclo-trimethylene-trinitramine. When mixed with plasticizers, it’s called C4. When mixed with PETN, it’s called Semtex. It’s one of the most potent of the nitramine class of explosives.

Early Thursday morning a van begins its 550 mile journey from Colorado to Joe’s warehouse in Omaha carrying three standard sized ordinary looking Miller Draught kegs packed full of RDX.

Meanwhile, Jack has had his local tech expert buy another untraceable prepaid cell phone and re-wire it so that when it rings, it will trigger a detonator. The cell phone, the detonator and about half a pound of RDX are packed together into a black soft plastic tube about eight inches long and about two and a half inches wide. The bottom end of the tube is sealed while at the top end there is a plastic plug from which the cell phone can be removed to turn it on. When the tube is

placed between the kegs and the number is dialed, the resulting detonation of the kegs will result in a blast with enough force to bring down five warehouses the size of David's club. Jack doesn't want to take any more chances.

Time: 2 PM

Ed and Jim visit Jack Tuesday afternoon. Ed and Jim are a couple of feral psychopaths that do odd jobs around the Midwest, generally leaving a wake of corpses. Jack feels they are just the boys to handle this job and handle it the right way, no slip ups, no one left alive and not too particular about the body count.

He explains to them the problem and the nature of the solution he's contemplating. He gives them the cell phone detonator, explains how to arm it. He hands them each several thousand in cash and tells them to meet with Joe at the warehouse in Omaha. He tells them to get out of Omaha as soon as they've planted the bomb. They leave an hour later for their 435 mile road trip to Omaha, planning to spend the night somewhere along the way.

10. Wednesday January 17

Time: 8 AM

The next morning, Ed and Jim check out of a motel just off I29 in a small town north of Kansas City, about a hundred miles south of Omaha. The parking lot is still covered in packed snow from the blizzard the previous week and it's cold. The snow crunches and grinds when it's this cold, it isn't slippery, more like walking in sand on a beach.

They rub their gloved hands together, hop in the car and start the engine. The windshield is iced on the outside and steamed on the inside. Ed looks at Jim, laughs and says, "Where the fuck are we?"

Ed replies, “Fucking Frost Bite Falls, man!”

Jim chuckles, his breath all puffs of steam, his arms clasped across his chest and replies, “Well it ain’t Palm Springs, I know that!”

Ed guns the motor a few times in a futile effort to encourage some heat from the car. Slowly, after several minutes, the air from the vents begins blow lukewarm and makes headway against the frosted frozen windows.

Ed reaches forward with an old cloth and rubs the windshield in circles, mainly smearing grease on the already blurred view. Then he hops out and tries clawing at the ice on the glass. Finally, as the glacial frost begins to break up, he switches on the wipers. Small chunks begin to slide and fall away, then larger ones until finally there’s enough of a hole big enough to see through.

He pushes the shift into drive and hits the gas. The tires whine and spin in the loose snow. The car slowly fish-tails into motion and they head out of the parking lot and down a frozen, deserted street. The cloud of exhaust steam caught in the cross wind streaks away to their right as they head north for the interstate entrance ramp.

On I29 north, the road surface is mainly bare except where the wind has blown narrow, tapered drifts randomly across the passing lane. They figure they should be in Omaha by noon. The sun’s reflection glares from the waves of snow on the fields on either side, a white desert of snow dunes with an occasional house, barn, and a few barren trees.

Big 18-wheelers lumber along, the smoke from their stacks blowing furiously to the east. Every now and then, a great shard of ice rips off some trailer’s roof. It tumbles and sails in the air until it smashes to pieces on the road below.

Somewhere west of them, RDX explosives are carefully packed for their rendezvous in Omaha.

Half way to Omaha, they pull off the interstate and into a truck stop for breakfast and coffee.

Truck stops in that part of the world are small cities. In the late morning hour, hundreds of trucks and cars are huddled before a massive complex of low, flat

roofed buildings. There are truck washes, restaurants, a fast food court, laundry, barber shop, show room, garages, motels, row after row of diesel pumps, gas pumps, cashier booths and even a dentist. Giant signs fifty feet high mounted on massive tubular steel pylons blink today's price of diesel across the prairie for all to see. A giant coffee pot, the offer of private showers and an animated neon cowboy entice the diesel rigs to stop and buy.

Once in the massive main building Ed and Jim behold a sprawling complex of restaurants [breakfast served round the clock], a gift shop, truck parts store, CB store, novelties, magazines and videos, groceries, snack food, liquor, beer, ATM's, and rest rooms. Other services available upon request.

There's a whiny country song blaring over the ceiling speakers and a lot of fat guys in denim jeans and plaid, flannel shirts lumbering around in high heeled, shit kicker, leather cowboy boots. The women are mainly fat with big hair and dressed in white uniforms with red and white checkered aprons. They have pens on retractable chains and many souvenir badges pinned to their blouses.

Jim grabs Ed's arm, looks at him, rolls his eyes and staggers back a step. Ed laughs and leans over and in a low voice says, "Hey dude? These are your kind of people." Jim kicks him in the ankle.

They spot a table across a sea of truckers eating greasy margarine soaked plates of mashed spuds, gravy, grits, fritters, and brown meat and sopping up the drippings with pasty dinner rolls and thick slices of white bread. Sitting down, Jim runs his hand across the table, looks at his palm, then wipes it on his pants and says, "Nice place. Real clean."

A middle aged woman with a butt the size of a truck tire waddles up to their table holding a gold chained pen and an order pad with several pink pages flipped over. She greets them in an Ozark drawl, "Okay boys, what'll it be?" Her badge reads Daisey.

Ed looks up and says, "Little late for breakfast, how about a cheeseburger platter and a large coffee."

Jim says, "Same but with bacon."

Daisy says, "You want coleslaw or salad?" They both say coleslaw in unison. "You got it boys, be right back with your coffee," as she wobbles off sticking the

pad in her apron pocket while her bosom mounted broach reels in the pen.

A few minutes later she's back with a tray from which she slaps down two printed paper place mats, two sets of napkin wrapped silverware, two glasses of ice water, two steaming coffee cups and one mini pitcher of cream.

"Where y'all from?" she asks casually.

"St. Louis," says Ed, "We're heading to Omaha. Any idea how the roads are up there? The snow's drifting badly out on the super slab."

"Hey Leroy," she turns and calls a trucker at the next table, "Didn't you just come through Omaha? How'd the weather look over yer shoulder?"

Leroy swings around, smiles, a couple of teeth missing, and says, "Okay, wind's a bit strong but they're keeping the road clear. Just watch out for the ice on them overpasses. Saw some bears taking pictures on the north side, just over the Iowa line."

Ed waves and says, "Thanks, that's a big help." Leroy turns back to his dinner.

After she leaves, Jim says, "Super slab? Exactly when did you learn trucker English?"

"It's a gift, man, it's a gift."

They light cigarettes, drink the coffee and, amused, survey the noisy scene around them. Their order arrives and their coffees refilled. Surrounded by the dingy clatter of a prairie truck stop, they silently sit eating burgers. When they finish, Ed heads to the men's room while Jim waits next to a display of key chains. A passing trucker looks him over then grabs his crotch and says, "Need a ride, boy?"

Jim reacts instantly. He swivels and heaves his knee into the trucker's balls with full force, just as Ed comes out of the men's room. The trucker's eyes bulge as he doubles up in tear filled pain. Jim smiles, and says to the driver, "How's that for a ride, bubba?"

Ed sees the scene and says, "What the fuck's up?" Just as two drivers across the room begin to rush over, one saying, "Let's get the mother fucker!"

Ed and Jim bolt to the exit and race to their car. Jumping in, Ed flips on the ignition and guns the motor. The tires screech and the car speeds off just as the first of fat flannel clad trio get within a few feet of their rear bumper.

Ed quickly pulls back out onto the interstate heading north and says, “What the hell happened, man?”

“He grabbed my dick!”

“And you didn’t like it? Oh, come on. Since when?”

“Since now.”

“Dude, you need to stop hitting on guys at truck stops. No more bears at truck stops.”

“Will you shut up, damn it.”

Ed smiles and they drive on through the bone dry, frigid white wasteland of empty drifted fields, past occasional farmhouses, silos and buildings in the distance. Here and there is a dark derelict piece of farm machinery marooned in a bleak field. Every ten miles or so they pass a small town, a tiny cluster of houses, maybe a store, gas station and a water tower. Every town has its name on its water tower, probably so you can tell them apart. One looks pretty much like another.

They pass huge trucks, some with two and three trailers hooked together and weaving in the brisk west wind. The truck tractors all have tall chrome exhaust stacks and high vertical mirrors on each side held in place by heavy chrome tubes. From their high points extend four foot CB whip antennas, waving taughtly in the wind.

But from these mirror mounted masts, relayed CB messages track Ed and Jim’s passage. The three drivers from the truck stop have called ahead.

In the road before him, Ed sees a long line of trucks in the right lane and another line further on in the passing lane, a traffic jam of trucks.

“Oh shit, look, one lane’s going 58 miles an hour and the other lane’s doing about 58.5 miles an hour. Why the fuck do they think they own the fucking

road? Looks like we're blocked."

He pulls over into the left lane and closes in behind the last truck. To their right, the lane of trucks extends a quarter of a mile back. Ed begins blowing the horn and flashing his lights.

"That won't help, man, they don't even see you and in those cabs, they don't hear anything but Tammy Wynette."

Then Ed notices that there's a truck behind them now. They're boxed in, one to the right, one ahead, one behind and a high snow banked median to their left. The truck behind pulls up closer. Ed pulls closer to the one ahead and slightly to the right asking, "Can you see any opening on the right ahead? I don't like this."

Jim swings around and sees the truck behind then leans to his right and says, "No, there's no space for a car ahead either. No, man, this ain't right. What'ya think's up?"

"Fucking assholes at the truck stop, that's what. They've called ahead on their damn CB's. They've boxed us in and can't move. I think we're in deep shit, dude!"

They ride this way for about fifteen minutes, trapped between Kenworths, Peterbilts, Macks, and Volvos each pulling 80,000 pound trailers. Suddenly Jim says, "Hey, look, the truck on the right is pulling ahead, we might get out of this."

But as that truck moves forward, another one closely following behind it slides into place. There is no chance to pull into the right lane and off onto an exit or into the breakdown lane. Then another truck passes on the right, and then more. After several trucks parade by to their right, Jim looks up at the driver in the truck that's now next to them. The driver looks down and grins at him as he slowly passes.

Then Jim looks behind and at the truck next in line and says, "Oh shit, it's that cock grabber from the truck stop! And I'm not putting up with this shit any more."

Without hesitating, he quickly flips his seat down flat and scurries into the back seat. He reaches to the floor saying, "Okay mutha fucker, you want it, you got

it.”

He pulls out an assault rifle from under a blanket and loads a clip of armor piercing rounds. Busting the rear window with the gun stock, he swings it around, flips the safety off and sprays several rounds towards the high, flat windshield of the truck behind them on the right.

Blood explodes in the truck cab. Jim pulls off a few more rounds into the truck's front tires which rupture. Huge straps of tire sail high into the air. Then he blows the front tires on the truck immediately behind them and takes out the rear tires on the trailer whose cab is next to them.

The trucks behind veer violently from one side to the other. The one next to them immediately begins to slow under the drag of its deflated rear tires. He can see the panic in the face of the driver directly behind as his truck smashes into the truck next to it. Both rapidly jackknife. The collision is joined by the decelerating truck to their right. 80,000 pound trailers shear their mounts and tumble over one another crushing the cabs.

Behind, in both lanes, are clustered the better part of fifty more trucks, all come for the entertainment of some four-wheeler getting his due. These too smash at highway speed into the first wreck with millions of pounds of force. Fuel explodes. A gasoline tanker ruptures and a searing red fireball balloons into the blue sky. A propane tanker splits and blows. The wreckage covers more than a mile.

The blocking trucks ahead and to the right of Ed and Jim quickly pull over onto the breakdown lane. The fast lane trucks pull right and slow down. Ed has a clear road ahead. He guns the motor.

Ahead, as far as they can see, all the 18 wheelers are pulled over to the side. As they pass one, a few shots ring out.

Jim says, “Son of a bitch!”

He lowers the window, and sprays each cab as they speed by. No more shots are directed their way. All the drivers are crouched down in their seats or hiding behind their wheel hubs away from the highway. A few diesel tanks rupture from the shots and ignite.

Jim, returns to the front seat and raises the seat back. Ed slyly says, “Now, wasn’t THAT special!”

The smoke can be seen for miles across Iowa, Missouri and Kansas

Jim says, “Oh yeah, that was special, very special.”

“Dude, we better get another car. I think this one might be hot. How about this next exit?”

“What’ya have in mind?”

“Let’s drive out some county road and find a farm. People out here don’t suspect nuthin. We can take their car.”

“And what about the farmer?”

“He won’t be missed, dude, at least not for a while,” chuckles Ed.

Ed pulls off the interstate onto a short strip of blacktop and drives east for about a mile where it intersects a north-south gravel county road.

Jim says, “See, out there in the distance? Looks like a prosperous little farm. Let’s see if anyone’s home.”

Ed guns the motor and they bounce along on the uneven pavement heading towards and unsuspecting occupants of a small cluster of farm buildings a few miles distant. A few minutes later they arrive at the long crushed stone driveway leading to the main house and buildings. Ed turns left and heads north towards the farm. A late model car is parked outside the house.

They pull their car up next to the one in the farmyard, get out, and trudge through the snow to the front door. Jim knocks on the door while Ed stands to one side. After a minute, they hear footsteps and the door opens. It’s the farmer, a guy about fifty years old holding eyeglasses in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

“Howdy guys, what can I do for’ya,” greets the farmer as he holds the storm door open.

Jim says, “I think we’re lost, could you give us a hand reading this map?” as he pulls out a map that he picked up at the truck stop.

“Sure thing, come’on in. Margie? We got some company. You guys want some coffee?”

Jim says, “You bet.”

“Can you bring out some coffee, honey?”

From the back of the house they hear a woman’s voice say, “On my way, dear. How many?”

“Two, Come’on in the dining room and we’ll open up that map. Those IADOT maps are very detailed, some of the best maps you can get.”

He leads them to the left into the dining room. The house is the traditional four-square design found in farms throughout the prairies. The farmer flips on the overhead art deco chandelier and unfolds the map as his wife joins them with a tray with a coffee pot, cups, cream, sugar and a plate of sugar cookies that she’s recently baked. She sets the tray out and says, “Help yourselves, boys.”

The farmer says, “Well, here’s where we are,” pointing to the map.

The farmer is pointing at a faint gray line slightly east of the dark red interstate line. “Now where’ya trying to get to?”

“Omaha,” says Ed.

“Well,” laughs the farmer, “You sure are on the wrong road. Omaha’s over there. You need to be on the interstate. Just go down this road and it’ll put you on the interstate.”

“Oh, yeah, and we want your car,” says Ed who’s now pulled out a gun.

Jim says, “Yep,” as he pulls out his gun too.

The farmer’s wife gives a horrified but soft cry. The farmer drops his reading glasses, steps back and says, “What’s this?”

“I guess you’d call it a stick up, that right, Jim?” says Ed.

“I think that’s what they call it, Ed.”

“Where are your car keys?” says Jim.

The farmer reaches in his pocket, pulls them out and hands them over.

“Now you two, on the floor, face down,” says Jim.

The farmer and his wife comply, heads flat on the floor facing one another in terror. Jim says, “You wanna do the honors?”

Ed says, “Okay,” and casually shoots both in the head in quick succession. Then he says, “Now, how about that coffee?”

“Sounds good to me,” says Jim.

They drink the coffee and finish off the cookies. Then, carefully wiping for any prints and taking the map, Jim says, “Out here, it’ll be days before anyone finds them. Leave a light on in case someone notices the house is dark.”

Ed, replies, “You bet. Let’s go.”

They leave the farmhouse and transfer their goods to the farmer’s car. Carefully they wipe down their car for prints with towels from the house then get in the farmer’s car and drive off towards the interstate. Winter crows circle curiously above.

Time: 1 PM

On the interstate, traffic is very light due to the carnage a few miles south. Traffic there is blocked in both directions. Ed and Jim have the road to themselves and they make good time. They cross the bridge at Council Bluffs into Nebraska a little after one in the afternoon.

After passing thorough downtown, Jim says, “Hey, I think that’s our exit just ahead.”

“Yep, 126th Street,” as he pulls the car onto the exit ramp and heads south then

east on Giles Road a few miles to the motel where they made reservation the night before.

Jim pulls into the parking lot and they register using phony ID's. They pay cash which upsets the desk clerk. She gives them a room on the far side of the building. They pull the car around and take several dark canvas suitcases into the room.

Jim sits down at the small table in the room and pulls out a map of Omaha saying, "Let's see where we go from here. I've only been out here once before, I'm not sure I remember the way."

"It's near the railroad yards, I remember, right next to them, I think," says Ed. "Here, you want a pop?"

"Yeah, and toss me that ashtray, this may take a while."

Ed slouches on an easy chair, takes the remote and turns the TV on. He flicks his lighter and draws on a cigarette then starts channel surfing. He quickly finds an all news channel which, like all the others, is doing wall-to-wall coverage of the wreckage on I29 from a few hours earlier.

"Hey, look at this, man! You're fucking famous," says Ed.

Jim looks up at the TV and sees helicopter shots of the bloodshed on the interstate. There is wreckage everywhere. They watch burning cars and trucks, fire engines, helicopters airlifting casualties, blood drenched snow, police cars from half of Iowa, it seems. Small herds of hogs, escaped from their rolling hog lots, wander aimlessly and dazed in the chaotic scene.

The Chyron banner at the bottom of the screen screams in bold white letters on a blood red background, "Mayhem on I29."

The announcer in a breathless and emotion filled voice says, "It all happened early this afternoon when an unidentified sniper from a speeding car began shooting and killing the drivers of these big rigs. The resulting chain reaction crash has left hundreds injured and nearly 40 people dead from both the trucks you see around me but also from the many smaller cars caught in this maelstrom of destruction. Several gasoline tankers were involved creating the massive fireball that engulfed both sides of the highway."

The announcer begins to walk down the highway and the camera follows. She gestures to the road beyond and continues, "And further down the highway, the unidentified snipers began randomly shooting into the cabs of trucks whose drivers had parked along the side of the interstate, alerted to the murderous spree behind them by their CB radios. State police from Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska have converged on this scene of mass destruction. They've posted a description of the car which you see in the box on the screen along with the license plate number. It belongs to a car reported stolen this morning near Kansas City. Right now, I29 is closed in both directions and not expected to reopen until at least tomorrow. Due to the extreme cold and the blowing and drifting snow from the blizzard last week, the state police have opened the cross-overs in order to move traffic. They hope to clear the cars from the road before the night sets in with expected wind chills down to minus sixty."

"Wow, me and my little gun caused all that?"

"Well, I did the driving," says Ed.

"And very well, too. Hey, look at all them dead hogs and the burnt out tankers. Must have been some fire, dude."

"Too bad there wasn't a truckload of pork chop helper."

"Or trucker helper, hee-hee."

They both watch in awe at their handiwork until Jim notices the time in the lower corner of the screen and says, "Hey, look, we gotta go or we'll be late. I figured out the directions. It should take about fifteen minutes to get to Joe's warehouse."

They get up, pull on their jackets, gloves and stocking caps and head back to the car. A quarter hour later they arrive at Joe's warehouse.

"That must be the parking lot Joe talked about over there," says Ed.

"Yep, I think I recall it," says Jim as he pulls into the lot and parks behind another car so the license plate won't be visible from the street.

They hop out of the car and instinctively look suspiciously around them to see if someone is watching then jog across to the warehouse in the howling wind. Sid

is waiting for them at the door. Once inside, they are taken to Joe's bugged office where their conversation is recorded.

Waiting inside the office for them are Joe, and Mark. Jim and Ed introduce themselves then Jim says, "Our car's hot, we kind'a borrowed it after that little road rage incident on I29 in Iowa."

"Yeah, I heard about that. That was you guys? Geeez, let's not start that over here. We're gonna have enough publicity before this is over," says Joe as he rummages around in his desk drawer.

"When you say borrowed, does that mean there are bodies involved?"

"Yeah, well, they won't be talking. But it's cool. They won't be found for a while either."

"In Iowa?"

"Yeah, about fifty miles south of Council Bluffs."

"Okay, here's the keys to that red Grand Am out on the lot. It belonged to a guy named Harry who won't be needing it anymore," says Joe as he hands a ring of keys to Jim. "Give me the keys to your car. I'll have it wiped for prints and ditched on some county road back over there. It'll be drifted over in an hour and won't be found till March. We'll let the Iowa police sort it out. They should be getting good at handling wrecks after today."

At Mo R♦n Todd flips open his cell phone, hits a memory dialer sequence and says, "Can you get a GPS locator and an audio bug on that red Grand Am in the lot across the street from the warehouse, Sean? Thanks." He flips the phone closed and looks at the others and says, "Sean says he can do it."

At the warehouse, Jim tosses the key to the farmer's car which has a little plastic locket key chain with a picture of the farmer's wife in it. Joe looks at it for a moment, then up at Jim, then pockets the keys.

"Looks like he had a wife?"

"Yeah, she's won't do any talking either. But she made us some nice cookies," says Ed casually.

Mark and Sid eye each other uncomfortably and squirm a bit in their chairs.

Joe picks up the phone and punches a number. When it answers he says, “Come down to my office, I got a job for you and Roger,” and hangs up.

Joe pulls out a file of papers from his desk and says, “Here is the basic layout of the club. It’s a renovated old five story warehouse. The central part is an atrium up to the roof. Around the sides at each level except the top there are offices of some kind, we don’t know what. On the top floor are apartments where the owner, David Shea, and some of his partners live. That’s where we’re sure Mike’s holed up.”

Pointing to one of the diagrams he continues, “This is the main entrance which has a lot of security. These are fire exits which are probably much more secure after the other night, and here is the service entrance where they bring in the beer, food, and so forth. This is where you’ll be making your delivery. There’s a short ramp up to a back room where they store the beer and other things. This is where you’ll drop off the kegs and then put the detonator between the kegs. Make sure the RDX kegs are far to the back so they won’t be used first. We don’t want them trying to tap them, ya’know?”

“Well, at least not while we’re still there,” says Jim.

Joe continues, “Here’s some pictures of the interior and exterior of the club. This is a satellite view of it and the surrounding streets and here’s a map of that part of town. This is a picture of the loading dock where the beer is delivered.”

“Looks good,” says Ed.

“Now the beer deliveries are usually around two in the afternoon and Friday’s calls for about 12 kegs, all Millers Draught. But first the truck stops at this bar a few blocks away to make a delivery before heading to Mo R♦n.”

Pointing to a picture of the alley behind the bar where the truck stops just before going to Mo R♦n, Joe says, “Here’s the plan. Mark and Sid will take a van with the RDX kegs and wait on the street for the beer truck to pull into this alley. This is a good place to take the truck. There are no overlooking windows and it’s not visible from the main street.”

“While the driver is making his delivery, Mark and Sid will pull in behind the

beer truck. You two will park your car and wait up here. When the driver comes out, Mark and Sid will grab him and put him in the van. Then they'll load the RDX kegs onto the beer truck. You two will take it from here. Give Mark your car keys and he'll bring it back here and park it across the street while Sid takes care of the van. Take the beer truck to Mo R~~o~~n, make the delivery then bring the truck back here and park it in the warehouse. Mark will give you your keys then you two can then hit the road. Got it?"

"Sounds like you want us out of town?" asks Jim.

"The fewer people here, the better."

"What happens to the beer truck?"

"Jack says the blast will be around 10 pm. Afterward, when every cop in Omaha is focused on the club, Mark and Sid will take the beer truck and the driver a few miles south of here. They overdose him with meth then run the truck and the driver off an old bridge into the Missouri River. It'll look like an accident by some twinked out temp on dope. No one will care anyway. They'll have more pressing problems with a few hundred casualties and a bombed out warehouse. Any questions?"

"Nope, it sounds good to me. Are the RDX kegs the same weight as the regular kegs?" asks Ed.

"Yes, they'll put weights in the bottom and top so they'll have the same feel as the regular kegs in case anyone tries to give you a hand. The RDX kegs will, however, each have a little red sticker on top. That's how you'll know them. I'll show you when they arrive tomorrow afternoon."

"How friendly is the driver with the bar staff?" asks Jim.

"Good news there, the regular driver is on vacation with his kids in Florida and they've been using substitutes. They won't ask any questions if they don't recognize you. You don't need any uniforms either. Not in this weather."

"Lucky bastard who gets Friday's run, then," says Ed.

"Yep, I guess he won't be going home this weekend. Luck of the draw," says Joe.

There's a knock at the door and Nick, one of the warehouse men enters. Joe says, "You and Roger take that white car across the street and dump it in Iowa so it won't be found for a while. Got it?"

He hands Nick the keys to Ed and Jim's stolen car. Nick is one of the guys who tried to abduct Mike and so is Roger. Nick was the one who called out Lance. His jaw is still wired and his face still shows the swelling from the beating he took.

"Okay boss," mumbles Nick as he takes the keys and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

Joe collects the maps, pictures and diagrams and puts them in a manila envelope which he hands to Jim and says, "Okay, let's look at the detonator."

Ed picks up the small bag he brought in with him, reaches in and pulls out the black rubber coated detonator.

"This is it. Neat, ain't it? Just one phone call and, poof, no more problems. Jack can just dial his worries away, hee-hee."

Joe picks it up, looks it over carefully and says, "This is gonna cause a lot of kids to die. I hope it's worth it."

Jim says, "Hey, this is the fun part. We don't get to do too many really big jobs. This will put us in the record books, right ahead of the Oklahoma City job a few years ago. That job only killed 168. We'll beat that record."

Ed laughs, "Sure will, dude."

"I guess we're done here for today. The kegs will be here tomorrow afternoon. Come by around three and look them over. You might want to scout out the club and the streets around it too," says Joe.

They get up. Ed puts the detonator back in the bag and zips it shut. They grab their coats and follow Joe, Mark and Sid out onto the warehouse garage floor. Joe points out the door at one end through which they'll bring the beer truck and tells them where to park it.

"So, it's all right if we go look the place over tonight?" asks Jim.

“Have either of you ever met Mike? He’s probably watching the security camera photos from the entrance,” asks Joe.

“No, I’ve never met him,” says Ed.

“Me neither,” adds Jim.

“Yeah, I guess it couldn’t hurt. Just don’t do anything obvious.”

“Got it, see’ya tomorrow,” says Jim as he and Ed shake hands with Joe, Mark and Sid. They pull on their coats, gloves and caps and exit through a different door than they entered. Crossing the street, they head for Harry’s car. The car they arrived in is now on it’s way to a corn field in Iowa.

Joe looks at Sid and Mark and says, “Those two are real trash. For as long as I’ve been in this business you don’t see many like that. I’ll be happy when those two are out’a here.”

Mark says, “Ya’know, there’s gonna be a lot of dead people after this?”

“Yeah, I know, but there’s nothing I can do about it. Better them dead than me and, the way Jack’s acting right now, well, ya’ all know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Pete found out the hard way,” says Sid.

Mark and Sid pick up their coats as Mark says, “Okay, so we’ll see you here tomorrow afternoon?”

“Right, see’ya then,” says Joe as Mark and Sid leave for their car.

Once outside, Mark says, “This is deep shit man. I don’t like it at all.”

“Me neither, man. Just keep a low profile and do what you’re told. You wanna pull a Tom and Bob?”

“Hell no, there’s no money in that. No, I just don’t want to get caught. There’ll be one hell of a lot of cops working on this.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We need to stay out of the spotlight.”

Back at the club, Lance says, “So, how’s the signal from Harry’s car?”

“I’m getting a good reading,” says Todd. “Here’s a map with their current location.”

A street map of part of Omaha opens on the screen and a blinking red dot is seen moving on it.

“And here’s the audio feed.”

The sound of a car engine plays through the speakers and they hear Ed say, “Well, this doesn’t look too hard. Just deliver the goods, set the detonator and then we head to Salt Lake. Piece of cake.”

“Right but I really wish we could be here for the blast. You don’t get a chance to do this sort’a thing very often.”

“Don’t worry, Jack will be sure it’s photographed and there will be a shit load of news by the time we get to western Nebraska that night,” says Ed.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right but I do like fireworks, ya’know?” says Jim.

“Yeah, I know. So does everyone on I29. So, in the meantime, what’s up?” says Ed.

“Back to the motel I guess? Something to eat then we go see this club for ourselves?”

“Hey, I’ll call Mark and Sid, see if they want to come along,” says Ed. He calls Mark’s cell phone and Mark agrees and they arrange to meet in the parking lot across from the club at about eight pm.

Lance turns to David, “Well, I guess we get to meet them first hand tonight?”

“I guess so. Give the staff their mug shots. So, what are we gonna do about their kegs of RDX?”

“Oh, I think I can handle them,” grins Lance.

“What’ya mean?”

“Now, you don’t want me to spoil the surprise, do you?” chuckles Lance.

“Actually, yes. I’d prefer not to be surprised when it comes to a very large bomb.”

“You know I’m not gonna tell’ya, so live with it. I’ll take care of the RDX. So, what about Jack? His batting average so far isn’t very good. Is Jack wrong all the time?”

“Ahh, no, he’s not that consistent. Let’s hope this is his swan song,” says Mike.

“I’ll see that my guys know what’s up. Now I need to go make a few arrangements,” says Lance as he gets up and heads for the door.

Time: 7 PM

Ed and Jim get something to eat and cruise the area around the club. After a few hours, they return to their motel. They lounge around the motel room, watch TV, smoke dope, and drink beer. They watch all the news coverage they can find of their shootout on I29. The road is still closed in both directions and not expected to re-open until late Thursday.

Around 7 pm they go out again. By now Lance has ID’d their motel and has them followed. They eat at a Tex-Mex restaurant a few miles away. While they eat, audio bugs are installed in their motel room.

They return about half an hour later don their club attire. Ed wraps his neck in a long knit scarf with UNO colors and logos that he bought at a strip mall store. He pulls on a parka with hood and red knit gloves. Meanwhile Jim wraps his neck in a white silk scarf, slips into a seriously expensive leather jacket with matching black leather gloves and a red stocking cap over his head from under which a generous amount of blond hair shows. Ed waits while Jim preens in the mirror. They look around the motel room to see if they’ve forgotten anything and then head for the car. A few minutes later they park in the lot across from Mo R♦n where Mark and Sid are already waiting.

“Geeez, aren’t you a bit over dressed?” asks Mark.

“What’ya mean? We dress like this all the time at the clubs in St. Louis. What’ya wear to a dance club out here? Bib-overalls?” quips Ed.

“Maybe something a little less conspicuous, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry man, two days from now, nobody will recognize us and, if they do, so what? We’re temp drivers, remember?”

They all trot across the snow covered street and join the shivering line queuing at the door. As they reach the entrance, they take off their gloves and stash them in coat pockets. They pull out their fake ID’s to hand to the bouncer. He looks at the ID’s, swipes them, and passes them through. They were not happy that their ID’s were swiped but they were fake anyway. Lance’s bouncer knew they were fake too.

Once inside, they survey the club. It’s more than they expect despite the descriptions and the pictures Mark and Sid took. The place is filling up with a milling, boisterous crowd.

Ed steps to one side while Jim takes off his leather jacket. He pulls off the stocking cap and stuffs it into a sleeve. All four head to the cloak room and hang their coats and stomp off the caked snow from their shoes. Mark and Sid lead them over to the stage while cameras follow their every move. Jim attracts attention, as girls turn and watch him pass.

Mark, seeing the turning heads, says, “You sure attract the gals.”

“I try to,” says Jim. “Maybe I’ll get lucky, what’ya think?”

“I think luck will have nothing to do with it,” replies Mark.

They edge towards the front of the stage. Sid points and says, “That’s where the Harry and Steve show was. You can just barely see a trace of the police chalk outline and a faint blood stain over there.”

“Did you know them?” asks Ed.

“Nah, we only just met them. They worked for Joe. We didn’t know them very well. Joe must have thought of them as expendable and they were, as the case turned out.”

“You mean he sacrificed them trying to get this Mike guy?” asks Jim.

“Yeah, that’s about the way it happened. You know, the cause of death wasn’t the beating they took or burning. According to the coroner, it was coronary arrest.

They'd been given a lethal dose of meth," says Mark.

"Huh, that so?" says Jim.

"Yep, that's so."

"Nice to know who your friends are," says Ed who turns and looks to the laser equipment suspended from the dark scaffolding hanging high above the club.

"That's where the lasers are, or at least some of them. They're all computer controlled and can be targeted to hit just about anywhere in here. That night, they got targeted on Harry and Steve. Made a nasty mess of them too. Then their coats caught fire, according to the news reports," says Mark.

"That's when the crowd rushed them?"

"Right, nothing like a couple of hundred enraged drunks to ruin your night out. They beat the shit out of them. That's how the gasoline caught fire."

"What's that I see up there? Birds?"

"Yep, the song birds. Canaries I guess. Tame, too. They come down and sing with the bands, some nights. The noise doesn't seem to bother them."

They head towards the bar and Ed orders some beers, lights a cigarette, and they lean back on the bar and watch the crowd. The sound system comes to life with a disco standard. The crowd begins to bob up and down in sync with the rhythm.

Ed says to Mark, "So you guys were here that night?"

"Yeah," says Sid. "I was the one who started the first distraction with the firecrackers and small fire bombs then I let Harry and Steve in through the emergency exit door over there near the stage. Once the panic began, Mark slipped through into the elevator room and opened the loading dock door for the guys who were gonna hit Mike. But somehow they were on to us and they were waiting. In the meantime, the lasers and the crowd took out Harry and Steve. We were outside by then so we didn't see the real fireworks."

"Is that the back room where they store the kegs?" asks Jim pointing to a door behind the bar at the further end.

“Yeah, I think that’s it,” says Sid. “Say, what the hell happened on I29 today anyway? Did you guys really cause all that mess?”

Jim chuckles and says, “Oh yeah! We did that. Did’ya ever see so many dead truckers and hogs? Not that there’s much difference.”

“No, I never saw so many overturned trucks either. Hope none of those dudes ever catches up with you,” says Mark.

“That won’t ever happen. Them assholes are all stupid, like the hogs they haul,” say Jim as he takes a long drink from his bottle of beer.

They stand around, drink beers, and comment on the local talent for about an hour.

“It’s nearly 10 pm, the show should begin about now,” says Sid. Right on cue, the band starts wandering on stage. David comes out and introduces them.

Mark elbows Ed and says, “That’s David Shea.”

The band begins to play and David quickly makes an exit to the elevator.

Jim leans over and yells above the music, “The band’s pretty good. Too bad their engagement is limited.”

After a while, Jim says, “I’m beat, too much time on the road this week. I think we better head back to the motel.”

Ed nods in agreement and they all head for the cloak room where they grab their jackets, gloves, scarves and caps. After a minute of putting the cold weather gear back on, they all walk out the main door.

At the parking lot Mark says, “Okay, see you guys tomorrow afternoon over at Joe’s.”

“You bet,” says Sid. “We’ll be there.”

11. Thursday January 18

Time: 3 PM

Around 3 pm on Thursday Joe, Mark, Sid, Ed and Jim converge in pairs on Joe's office. Joe looks forward to when Ed and Jim will be out of Omaha, the sooner the better.

Once they've all arrived and taken their coats off, he says, "Okay, let's go take a look at the kegs." He gets up and walks down the hall. The others follow.

"We hid the kegs in one of the storage rooms. Mark, Sid and I moved them here ourselves when they arrived an hour ago."

Joe takes out his keys, opens the door and flips on the light.

"So far as I can see, the kegs look completely normal except, if you look closely, for the small red dot on the top of each. See?"

Jim says, "Yep, I see them. You're right, they sure do look like regular beer kegs. Here, let me see how much they weigh." Jim and Ed take turns moving the kegs around a bit to get a feel for their weight and bulk.

"They feel pretty normal too," says Ed. "I doubt anyone would notice the difference."

"Not weight-wise. They weigh the same as a standard keg and the weight is distributed pretty evenly. Be sure offload them first and get them put furthest back so they won't be used right away. With the number of kegs you'll be delivering, it shouldn't be a problem," says Joe.

"No problem."

They leave the storage room and Joe flicks out the light then locks the door. They walk to the main receiving area of the warehouse. Joe says, "Call us if you have any questions. Here's my number," handing Ed a slip of paper.

"When you get back here with the beer truck, just pull in the west entrance, you can see it down there, park it, and then get out'a Dodge. We'll take care of it from there."

12. Friday January 19

Time: 11 AM

Around eleven Friday morning, Mark and Sid arrive at Joe's and park their car across the street. They jog over to the warehouse. Mark pulls out a set of keys and unlocks the door. Normally it would be open but today, Joe's given everyone the day off so it's locked. Joe does not want any witnesses, even his own guys.

Once inside, they walk through the garage area towards Joe's office, their footsteps echoing in the cavernous empty central open space. Before them they see a large, white, windowless commercial van parked in the main garage area with a large sliding door on one side and a pair of doors at the back. The roof is translucent permitting light but obscuring the contents.

"That looks like our ride," says Sid.

"Kind'a looks that way," says Mark.

They leave the garage area and walk down the wood floored corridor to Joe's office. Joe is there waiting for them reading the paper, smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee. "Hey guys, I though I heard you come in. Did'ya see the van?"

"You bet, looks good," says Mark.

"So let's get the goods loaded then we can get some lunch," says Joe.

Mark and Sid take off their coats and Joe leads them to the storage room where the kegs are. He unlocks the door and Mark and Sid carefully put the first of the bombs on a two-wheeler and push it slowly to the van. Sid opens the back doors as Mark steadies the two-wheeler. Inside the van are some heavy padded quilts like moving companies use, along with some heavy woven fabric straps with buckles and a tarp.

Sid spreads out a couple of layers of the quilts then they lift the first keg in and place it on its side with its top facing the rear. They get the two other kegs and place them similarly but with a quilt between each keg and between the side kegs and the walls of the van.

Mark says, "No sense irritating the merchandise."

"No, I wouldn't want to do that!" says Sid.

"But I hear it's pretty stable unless detonated," says Joe.

“I’d just as soon rather not find out the hard way?” says Mark as he runs one of the straps from the floor on one side across the tops of the kegs to a fitting on the floor on the other and then securely tightens the strap. Next he threads another strap through the kegs’ handles and through fittings on both walls of the van and tightens again.

Sid successively grabs each of the keg’s handles and checks if they’re secure then pronounces, “Looks okay.”

Sid closes the van doors while Mark pushes the two-wheeler over to one side of the garage area alongside some others.

Sid says, “When I get back here with the driver, where do you want the van?”

“Park it inside but be sure to leave room for the beer truck.”

“Okay, will do.”

Joe says, “So, how about lunch?”

“Sure,” says Mark.

They go back to Joe’s office, grab their coats and leave the building. Joe bolts the door behind them. They lean against the wind and walk quickly to the diner up the street. At the diner they sit in a small booth at the end. Joe orders a hamburger, Mark wants a grilled cheese and Sid opts for a bowl of beef stew.

“So, what’ya think’s gonna happen tonight?” asks Mark.

Joe leans back and says, “At about 10 pm Jack says he’ll make the call. He wants to wait until the place is the most crowded so the death toll will be impressive. And he wants to pull the trigger.”

“Geez, at 10 pm? There might be 300 or more people there. That building’s gonna come down on them, isn’t it?” asks Sid.

“Yep, there’s enough RDX there to take down three buildings that size. It’ll make Oklahoma City look like a dry run,” answers Joe.

“So why does he want that kind of kill count? It’s just Mike he wants,” asks

Mark.

“I dunno, probably to make a statement. Don’t fuck with the mob, I guess. Maybe to impress the other bosses around the country that he can take care of things himself. You know, he’s a laughing stock right now. One more screwup and, bang, no more Jack. His colleagues don’t like mistakes. So, where you gonna be when the ball drops?”

“Gee, I dunno, I guess we should find someplace with a good view. What do you think it’ll look like?” asks Sid.

“Like Baghdad. Mushroom cloud, the works. The flames will be huge, I’m told.”

“Then I guess we won’t watch from across the street. How about you?”

“Jack wants a blow by blow description so I’ll be back at the warehouse and watch from an old office on the top floor. I should see the whole show perfectly.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet that’ll be the best view in town,” says Sid.

“That’s for sure,” agrees Mark.

“You two wanna watch?”

“Yeah, sure do!” says Mark as Sid nods in agreement.

“Okay, be here about 9:30.”

They finish their lunch and hurry back to the warehouse. It’s a little after noon and time to get started. Mark and Sid get in the van. Joe says as they leave, “Call me if anything goes wrong.” He heads back to his office to nervously wait.

Time: 1 PM

At about 1 pm Friday afternoon, a long low slung beer delivery truck squeaks to a halt in a narrow, deserted alley behind a small bar a few blocks from Mo Rn. The old anonymous brick buildings on either side of the alley are largely windowless except for a few frosted glass metal framed openings high above street level. Various conduits and pipes creep up the sides and electrical wires connect to a motley assortment of poles running down one side of the alley. Soot

covered snow is pushed in random piles up against the walls on both sides. The main streets are a hundred yards or more away in both directions.

The driver jumps out. He's in his late thirties, balding, somewhat heavy set, wearing a thick parka with a fur rimmed hood, worn jeans and heavy, laced, high-top rubber soled boots. He normally drives a package delivery truck but, since the holidays are over, there's not much delivery work this time of year so he fills in as a temp wherever he can find work. The package delivery pays a lot of overtime around Christmas but in the early months of the new year, things are lean, especially with a wife and two kids to support.

He reaches behind the seat and pulls out a clipboard. He checks the order and then the address. He gets out and tosses the clipboard onto the seat of the idling diesel and walks around to the rear where he unhitches a two-wheeler attached to one of the back doors. Unlocking the doors with a key on a long chain, the other end of which is clipped to his belt, he opens up and climbs in.

As he begins to unstrap a keg from its mooring, Tom backs the van up the alley to within about twenty few feet of the rear of the beer truck. The driver notices the van but thinks nothing of it. Probably just another delivery.

The driver wrestles two kegs onto the two wheeler, one on top of the other, then realizes he's forgotten the invoice sheets that he needs to have signed. He goes back to the cab and picks up the clipboard of papers from the seat. Returning to the two-wheeler, he places the clipboard on the top keg and shoves the heavy two-wheeler with the kegs up the ramp and into the bar.

"He's right on schedule," says Sean while he, Tom and Bob wait quietly in the van watching through the large side mirrors. A few minutes later the driver returns and reattaches the two-wheeler to its door mounting then climbs back into the rear of the truck to secure the lose straps.

"I don't see anyone around, let's go," says Bob.

Tom and Bob pull on ski masks and hoods and hop out. Tom darts for the beer truck only a few feet away while Bob opens the sliding right side door of the van.

Tom jumps into the back of the truck and pulls out a gun with a silencer. The startled driver turns quickly. He sees Tom's gun and freezes, holding his hands

up slightly, the strap he's holding dropping to the floor, its buckle making a metallic clang.

"Hey, what's this? Ohh, no, man, I don't want no trouble. There's no money on this truck," says the frightened driver.

"Don't lose your head and you won't get hurt. You see that van with my friend? You're going over there and getting in. We want your truck, that's all, you got that?" says Tom.

The frightened driver edges nervously past Tom. Tom follows closely behind him as they move towards the open van door.

Bob, a few feet away, points to the open door. The terrified driver gets in while Tom continues to hold the gun on him. Bob hops in behind the driver and binds his hands and feet with nylon cable ties then puts duct tape over his mouth. He pulls a stocking cap down over the driver's eyes and runs duct tape around it to blindfold him.

As Bob detaches the key chain from the driver's belt, he leans over and says to the driver, "Just lay still, man, this is all about your truck. You'll be okay, I guarantee it, you understand?"

The driver nods and assumes a fetal position on the cold metal floor of the van. He wants to believe Tom but knows things don't always work out. He hopes his wife and kids will be okay and he silently begins praying and shivering.

The side door slides shut with a metallic thud. Bob gets in the passenger side of the van as Tom swaps places with Sean in the driver's seat and tosses him the truck keys. The van drives off while Sean jogs back to the beer truck, shuts the rear doors and locks them with the large padlock. He gets in the driver's seat, puts it in gear, and the cab wobbles a bit left and right and the truck slowly drives off. Sean drives the beer truck to Mack's Grill.

Pulling out onto the main street, Tom calls out to the driver curled up on the van floor behind, "Hey? You doing okay back there, buddy?"

He hears a muffled set of noises that he takes to be affirmative and says, "I'll take that as a yes. Don't worry, this will be over soon enough. Well, by later tonight, anyway. Just take it easy, you're gonna be okay. You'll be fine."

The driver bouncing on the hard metal floor, lets out a deep sigh. Life is crap, he thinks, then someone ties you up like an animal and tosses you into the back of a van. You're born naked wet and hungry, then things get worse. He thinks about his kids and wife, they're all he has now. He hopes what Tom said is true, but at the moment, things could be better.

Tom takes out his cell phone and dials Lance at Mo Rn. Lance answers, "Yo? Tom? Everything go okay?"

"Went off with no problem. We got the driver."

"Good, I'll call you later once they make the delivery."

About fifteen minutes later, Tom pulls into David's garage, now bright from the sunlight streaming through the dirt streaked windows high in the walls but still sub-zero. He pulls the van to a squeaky stop and turns off the ignition. Bob hops out and slides the side door open.

Tom phones Lance and tells him they've arrived. He gets out, still wearing his ski mask, looks through the open van door and says, "Sit up man, I'm gonna remove that duct tape from your mouth. He carefully pulls the duct tape off his face and says, "You okay? Hope that didn't hurt too much. We're gonna be here a while. It's best you don't look around too much so I'm leaving the blindfold on for a while. You'll want to forget most of this, if ya'know what I mean?"

The driver says, "Yeah. I'll be happy to forget the entire day."

"I know. Here, turn around and I'll cut the cable ties," He cuts the restraints around the driver's wrists and ankles and says, "Don't worry, it'll get better."

The driver retrieves his arms and begins rubbing his wrists. "Come'on, let's get into the office where there's some heat," says Bob as he helps the blind driver get out of the van and leads him to the office enclosure.

Once inside, Bob closes the door. Tom flips on an electric heater with a noisy fan. It soon glows bright red. Bob leads the driver to a faded blue plastic upholstered couch. The office has been sterilized of all identifying marks so Tom says, "Okay, now I'm gonna remove your blindfold. Just don't get too interested in your surroundings." Once it's removed he says, "Do'ya want some coffee?"

The driver says, “Yeah, thanks.” Bob offers him a cigarette which the driver gratefully accepts. After taking a deep drag, he looks at his two masked captors and thinks to himself that maybe he might get out of this alive, just maybe. After all, they wouldn’t be wearing masks if they were going to eliminate the witness.

At the club, Lance walks over to Todd and says, “Tom and Bob are at the warehouse and Sean’s in the truck. He should be at Mack’s pretty soon.”

“Yep, I’m listening in on his mic. Here, I’ll put it on speaker.”

Sean drives the beer truck down a nondescript alley and cuts the motor. The truck shudders to a halt just forward of the rear entrance of a small bar. Sean picks up the clipboard and goes in the bar then re-emerges a few minutes later. He sees the white van back in about thirty feet behind him. He opens the rear doors of the truck, pulls out the dolly then unfastens a keg. He rolls the keg to the end of the truck then hefts it onto the dolly and pushes it up the ramp and into the bar.

At the club they listen as Sean speaks softly, “I just came out of the bar and there’s a white van about thirty feet away. I’m putting the empty keg on board now. I expect they’ll make their move any time now.”

Mark and Sid have pulled on their ski masks and are waiting. They watch Sean come out, toss the empty keg onto the rear deck of the truck, climb in and start stowing the keg. Mark jumps into the back of the truck, gun drawn and says, “Okay, drop it.” Sid backs the van up close to the rear door of the beer truck.

Sean says, “Hey, what is this?”

“Keep your mouth shut and go get in that van.”

Sid has come around the side of the van and opened the side door. Sean jumps down off the truck and walks towards Sid. Sid says, “Turn around and put your hands behind your back.” As he does, Sid quickly cuffs his hands with some nylon cable ties then he slaps a piece of duct tape across Sean’s mouth.

Mark says, “Okay, in the van and lie on the floor.” Then he ties Sean’s feet with cable ties as well. Mark grabs the beer truck keys then slides the door shut.

Mark and Sid open the rear doors, pull off the tarp and carefully transfer the

three RDX kegs, one by one, from the van to the beer truck.

When done, Mark shuts beer truck doors and locks them with the large padlock while Sid closes up the rear of the van. They spot Ed and Jim walking quickly down the alley towards them.

Ed says, “Everything go Okay?”

“Fine, piece of cake. Here are the keys. This one is for the rear door padlock. The kegs are near the door so they can be off loaded first. Here’s the clipboard of invoices you’ll need to get signed at Mo R♦n. The driver’s in the van. Where’s your car?”

“It’s back on the street up there. Here’s the keys,” says Jim as he hands them to Mark.

“Good, I’ll have it in the parking lot across from Joe’s warehouse waiting for you.”

“Good luck,” says Sid as he heads back for the van. Ed and Jim get in the cab of the beer truck as Mark jogs up the alley to Ed and Jim’s car. Behind him he hears the beer truck’s diesel engine grind as the truck lurches forward. He steps aside as they pass him and turn onto the main street beyond. Mark finds their car and drives off to the warehouse.

Sid gets in the van and drives to Joe’s garage. Once inside, he parks the van off to one side. He slides open the van door and checks the bindings on Sean then slams the door shut and heads for Joe’s office.

Joe says, “Everything go okay?”

“Yep, no problem.”

A moment later they hear footsteps and Mark arrives and says, “I put their car across the street. I guess we just wait around until Ed and Jim show up,” says Mark.

Joe says, “I’m guessing they won’t be here for at least an hour. In the meantime, let’s go up the street and get some coffee.”

They get up and head for the diner.

Time: 2 pm

At the club, they wait for Ed and Jim to arrive with the RDX kegs. “Here they are now,” says Lance as he sees the beer truck pull up to the loading dock and squeak to a halt. Todd retreats across the club to the computer displays near the main door. From there he watches the security camera views of the loading dock. Lance will handle the delivery.

Jim jumps out of the truck and hits the buzzer on the door while Ed unlocks the back of the truck. Lance slides open the door as Jim says, “Hey man! We’re from Arrowhead and I got twelve kegs for you guys right?”

“Right, is Billy still in Florida?”

“Yeah, lucky dog. Sure beats this fucking weather. Where do you want ’em?”

Lance slides the door all the way open and gestures to where the incoming kegs go and says, “There’s the empties over there,” pointing to a group of ten kegs on the other side of the room.

“You got it,” says Jim as he heads back to help Ed move the first of the RDX kegs. Lance watches as the first, then the second, then the third of the red dotted kegs are neatly arranged in a triangle with a slot in the middle where he knows the fuse will go. He heads back into the bar but watches on the closed circuit TV as the rest of the kegs are delivered and placed so that the RDX kegs are furthest away. Then he spots Jim slip the detonator out from his heavy coat and place it in the opening.

When all the empty kegs have been loaded, Lance goes back to the dock and says, “All done?”

Jim, with the clipboard, says, “Yeah, I think that’s about it. I just need a signature here and we’ll be on our way.”

Lance says, “Don’t lock up just yet. Come on inside for a minute. I need to make a quick check of the computer inventory. I think I might need an extra keg or two.”

They enter Mo Ron and Lance goes behind the bar to a terminal. He looks down and says to one of the bar tenders, "Give these guys what they want. Take a seat guys, I'll be just a minute."

Jim and Ed take off their coats and put them on an empty stool as they sit next to one another. Outside in the storage area, Chris and Tony begin shifting the kegs back onto the truck in place of three of the empties.

A curious canary lights on Mike's shoulder as he watches from the balcony high above. The bartender walks up, drying his hands on a towel and says to Jim and Ed, "What'll it be, guys?"

Ed says. "A whiskey and soda."

Jim says, "Same here."

The bartender tosses a few packs of beer nuts across the bar and places a clean ashtray in front of Jim.

A small bird descends on the bar and skips happily towards the bag of nuts. Ed swats it away.

The bartender pours the whiskey generously and squirts the soda from the head of the multi-buttoned dispensing hose. He adds in a couple of plastic swizzle sticks and places the drinks in front of Ed and Jim then attends the discarded small bird and feeds it seeds and nuts.

Ed lights up a cigarette. He turns on the bar stool, drink in one hand, cigarette in the other and looks around the empty club, now illuminated by shafts of light from the skylights high above. In the bright sunlight, the balconies at each level are clearly visible. He nudges Jim and points to them.

Finally, Lance says, "Looks okay guys. I think we can get by on what we got," as he takes the clipboard and signs the invoice, taking one copy for himself.

Jim and Ed quickly finish their drinks and stub out their cigarettes. Jim takes the clipboard, pretends to look at the signature and says, "Thanks, see ya next week," as they put their coats back on and head out through the loading dock door.

Jim steals a quick glance at the RDX kegs with the red dots visible and sees they are just as he left them. Ed locks the back doors of the truck then joins Jim in the cab, the motor chugs to life and the truck lurches away.

Jim says, "Well, that was easy."

"Well, what'ya expect? Unless they actually put a tap into one of those kegs, there ain't no way anyone could know."

David joins Lance and they watch on the monitor at the bar the GPS locator signal that was planted in the truck. The truck turns towards the warehouse where Mark has brought their car.

David says, "Well, what now?"

"The interesting part is yet to come. Just keep calm," says Lance.

"Oh, yeah, man, real interesting. That's one shitload of RDX we've got. I sure hope you know what you're doing."

"Now don't get you shorts all in a knot. I'll handle it." says Lance.

"So you're still not telling what you've got planned?"

"Nope, it's a surprise. You'll know when the time comes."

David shrugs his shoulders and heads back to his apartment wondering what Lance is going to do with the kegs. Probably move them to his apartment and keep'em for souvenirs, he muses.

When Ed and Jim get to the warehouse, Mark and Sid are waiting for them. Mark hits the button that opens the large motorized garage door and the truck rolls in. As the door closes, Jim cuts the motor. He and Ed hop out.

"Everything go okay?" Mark asks.

"No problemo. We got the kegs delivered, placed the detonator. Bunch of dumb asses, no one suspected a thing," says Jim as he tosses the keys to the truck to Mark, including the key to the padlock on the rear doors.

“Good. Here’s your keys. You guys better get going,” says Mark.

Jim says, “Yeah, we want to get into a motel in time to see the news bulletins. You do think it will make the news?”

“Oh yeah! It will make the news. Big time. That’s gonna be one fucking big blast,” says Mark.

“Well then, see’ya. We don’t want to miss it,” says Ed as he and Jim leave the warehouse and jog across the street to their car. Mark watches for a moment from the side door. Jim and Ed head for the I80 westbound on-ramp bound for Salt Lake.

Mark shuts and bolts the side door while Sid checks on Sean tied up in the back of the van. They then go to Joe’s office. As they enter, Joe says, “Everything go okay?”

“Every thing’s fine. We got the truck, the kegs have been delivered, the driver’s safely tied up in the back of the van. All we do now is wait until after the blast.”

“Think anyone saw the truck pull in here?”

“Nah, they came in real quick and that door faces the railroad yards. No one out there except a passing freight train. Anyway, one more truck driving in here is no big deal.”

“Driver secure?”

“Very, he’ll be no problem,” says Sid.

“Good. I’m heading home. I’ll meet you both back here at nine-thirty then we’ll watch the show,” says Joe as he gets up, puts out his cigarette and reaches for his coat.

“Okay, see you then,” says Mark as he and Sid walk out the door and down the hallway with Joe.

“I’ll be glad when this business is over,” says Joe.

“Ditto, man. But it won’t be long now,” says Mark.

They both leave the warehouse, walk to their cars across the street and drive off. Joe goes home, Mark and Sid go to their motel to wait.

As Jim and Ed's car pulls onto I80, Jim guns the motor and says, "We need to get to a motel before 10 o'clock so we can watch the blast coverage. Most of cable systems in Nebraska carry the Omaha TV stations so we should be able to see what happens right away. The cable news networks will probably cut in pretty quick too."

"Yeah, man, we'll be famous, too bad no one will know it was us."

"Oh, word will get around, man. This will be the biggest fucking blast in history. All ours."

"Right on, this is our ticket, dude, we'll really be in demand. No more small time hits, we're in the big time now. This is our big night, I sure don't want to miss it." says Ed as the car gets up to highway speed, heading west towards the low winter sun.

"You are so right, Ed, this is our big night. We'll never forget this night, that's for sure."

Lance and Tony arrive at David's garage in Lance's SUV. They wait while the motorized door opens then Lance pulls in and parks. Tony puts on his ski mask and walks over to the small office where Tom, Bob, and the driver are sitting around eating potato chips and watching TV.

"Looks like you got kidnapped by a potato chip company," laughs Tony looking at the driver. Then, turning to Tom, he says, "I take it he's not been any trouble?"

"Hell no, we've just been watching TV and eating, mostly," says Tom.

"Where'd the food come from?"

"Tom went out and got it."

"Geez, give me some of those chips."

Tony leans over and grabs a handful of chips. Then he says, "I'll take over for you. Your ride's waiting."

Tom says, “Okay, catch you guys later.” Tom heads out and over to Lance’s SUV, gets in and they drive off.

The driver looks up at Tony and asks, “How long are you gonna keep me?”

Tony says, “Until about 10 o’clock tonight, I guess. Then we’ll drop you off and you can call your wife to come get you.”

“Yeah, but what’s this all about, really?”

“Probably better you don’t know too much,” says Bob.

“Ohh, right, okay,” says the driver.

“Where do you live?”

“Council Bluffs.”

“We’ll drop you over there. When you get home, you can call the cops and tell them what you know. By the way, you do know your truck was hijacked?”

“I kind’a figured that part out on my own.”

“When you talk to the cops, leave out the part about the coffee, chips and cigarettes. Just say you were held blindfolded and tied up in a storage room of some kind and that you know nothing. Okay?”

“Works for me. I don’t fucking know anything anyway.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way.”

Tony gets a cup of coffee and some more chips and sits on one of the old couches. Bob gets up and walks to the old TV in the corner and flips the channels until he gets one with a re-run of some sitcom. Thus they spend the evening watching TV and waiting for the kegs to explode.

Time: 3 PM

Lance and Tom drive to Joe’s warehouse. From a block away, Lance calls Todd who’s been monitoring the audio from Joe’s warehouse, “Hey Todd, what’ya got?”

“The place is empty. It’s all yours. They won’t be back until nine-thirty.”

“Good, catch you later.”

Lance pulls up next to the side door and Tom hops out, takes out his keys and opens the door. He hurries over to the van and cuts Sean free.

“Let’s go, Lance is waiting outside,” says Tom. Tom re-locks the side door and hops in the SUV with Sean. They return to the club.

Time: 5 pm

Late Friday afternoon, driving west across the frozen prairie, Ed says, “Let’s get something to eat. I saw a sign for a truck stop just outside Grand Island.”

“Sounds good to me, we need gas anyway.”

A few miles later they pull off the interstate and into a vast truck stop. The lots are filled with trucks, hundreds of them, all parked in parallel facing the exit ramps. About thirty huge diesel pumps are arrayed one next to the other under a massive, garishly colored steel canopy.

They park their car and walk to the large central building. Within its confines are the usual gift shops, convenience store, banking and electronics kiosks, showers, groceries, snack bar and restaurant.

Ed and Jim opt a restaurant populated by the usual fat middle aged guys in boots with too many tattoos and scraggly beards. They get a table. Jim orders some fried chicken with French fries, coleslaw, a small side salad and a beer. Ed gets a well done steak with fries and salad and ditto on the beer. They receive the customary, “You got it honey,” from a nice but disinterested middle aged haus frau of the plains.

They lounge back on their chairs, the smoke from their cigarettes rising slowly in curling tendrils, musing what will happen later that night. Jim leans forward and laughs, “Ka-boom,” making a gesture to imitate an expanding cloud.

Ed laughs and likewise leans forward and says, “And then no more club, dude!”

Their order arrives on several plates. They each ask for another beer. Ed says, “I

wonder how much TV coverage we'll get? We really need to be in a motel before ten o'clock, Jim, I don't want to miss the news break ins on the networks."

"Right, dude, we'll be there. It's not that far now. You won't miss your Special Bulletinmoment," replies Jim.

As they eat their supper, across the room one trucker says emphatically to another, "It's them, I know it. Damit, I was there. I saw what happened at the truck stop north of Kansas City."

"You really sure, Merle?" says the other.

"Yep, wait, there's my partner, he saw them too," as he waves to another driver coming out of the men's room across the diner.

The other driver crosses the room and says, "What's up Tony?"

"Ya see those two eating at that table over there?"

"Yeah, I see them. Holy shit! I know them! They were the ones down on I29 who shot up all those trucks, aren't they?"

"That was my feeling as well," says Tony as he turns to the third driver and says, "Well, it's them."

The third says, "Come with me, we need to talk to a few people," as they head over to another side of the diner, tapping a few drivers and beckoning them to come along.

The drivers, about ten of them, talk intently, nodding to themselves and periodically looking in the direction of Jim and Ed who are oblivious to the attention being lavished on them. The group finally agrees on a plan, nods all around. They separate and watch Ed and Jim, drinking coffee until they see them getting ready to leave.

All the conspirators head to their waiting trucks, idling in the cold outside. In that part of the world in winter, you don't want to try to start a diesel at twenty degrees below zero. One by one, they shift the gears and hit the pedals causing columns of black soot to shoot skyward. The sound of the rumbling idling

diesels is broken by multiple sharp blasts of releasing air breaks. Many big rigs start rolling towards the exit ramp. All CB's now switch to channel 38.

The first six trucks pull out onto the highway and start gaining speed while one waits back at the parking area to watch for Jim and Ed to leave the diner. Another positions himself just to the side of the ramp leading onto the interstate.

When the lookout sees Jim and Ed get in their car, he clicks his CB mic and says, "They're on their way." The truck waiting at the side of the ramp begins to roll slowly onto the ramp. The lookout now also begins to move.

As Jim and Ed pull onto the ramp they're delayed behind the big truck that was waiting for them. It slowly accelerates with both stacks blowing smoke. The driver's CB is also blowing smoke, as he calls ahead to the trucks already on the road. When the ramp finally merges with the highway, Ed impatiently pulls around the truck that has been blocking them. But the delay has given the other trucks already enough time to get to highway speed. This time, they won't make any mistakes.

Jim and Ed aren't interested in attracting attention so they cruise along at the legal speed of 70 MPH. The lookout truck and the ramp truck are both dead heading home thus empty and faster. They soon catch up with Ed and Jim. They follow a few hundred yards behind, relaying the mile marker locations to their friends further ahead. Ed and Jim soon catch up. The caravan of trucks now paces their prey.

This odd caravan rolls across the western Nebraskan night for about an hour. Just east of North Platte, the beers Ed and Jim drank earlier find their way to their bladders and Jim says, "Hey, how about that rest stop ahead?"

Their SUV pulls into the deserted rest stop.

"There they go!" flashes from CB aerial to aerial.

Ed parks the SUV. They hop out and enter the small deserted building.

Their escort of trucks just behind flashes turn signals. Five pull into the truck parking area across from the small brick building. Two of the trucks stop on the entrance ramp thus blocking it.

While Jim and Ed are in the men's room, six drivers scurry across the frozen parking lot and silently position themselves outside the restroom door.

When they hear blow dryers, they nod and ready themselves. First Jim walks out and is grabbed by three of the truckers. One quickly duct tapes his mouth shut while one clamps his arm firmly around Jim's neck whispering, "Relax kid. Keep squirming and I'll break this skinny little neck of yours."

The third trucker quickly binds Jim's hands behind him with more duct tape and then all three quietly drag him out into the dimly lit parking area.

Unawares, Ed now exits the men's room and is likewise bound and gagged. Both Jim and Ed are dumped into the trailer of one of the empty trucks, the one whose drivers recognized them.

One of the drivers looks into the trailer before he slams and latches the door and says, "You fuckers killed some friends of mine the other day back on I29 just so you know. You took some shots at me and my partner too. Now we're gonna even the score. Say your prayers, guys, this night's gonna be your last."

He slams the tall metal door with a clang. They hear the latches, attached to a rod the length of the door, slide into place. Outside they hear the crunch of the driver's boots on the snow as he walks to the tractor. The tractor door slams and the air brakes wheeze. The big diesel roars and the truck lurches forward.

The other trucks have begun to roll west too. There's some comments on the CB's but mainly it's a silent convoy heading into the empty spaces of western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming. At the I80/I79 split, all but one truck head south on I79 towards Denver. The lone truck remaining goes west onto the deserted stretch of I80 towards Cheyenne. Jim and Ed writhe in its otherwise empty trailer.

Ed and Jim manage to squirm around until, with their free fingers, they manage rip the duct tape off their mouths leaving their faces scared with bloody, red welts which, in the darkness, they do not see but certainly feel.

Jim says to Ed, "Man, I'm scared. Where the hell are they taking us?"

"Out in the middle of nowhere and then shoot us, I guess."

“Can you try to pull the duct tape off my hands? They wrapped it around about ten times and I can barely feel my fingers in this cold.”

After some more squirming and rolling about Ed says, “No way. I can’t find a start to it and there’s too many loops to rip. Try mine.”

After a while Jim says, “It’s no use, there’s nothing I can do. At least let’s pull together, it must be fucking -30F in here.” They huddle together in silence trying to conserve body heat knowing that it probably won’t matter much longer.

Just inside Wyoming, the truck pulls off the interstate onto an old state route heading north. The outline yellow trailer lights are cut and just the headlights and small red tail lights are visible. Finally, miles from the interstate and many miles from any settlement, the truck stops.

Moonlight bathes the snow covered rolling high prairie. A few small, dark clumps of trees can be seen here and there in the distance. The drivers get out and open the rear of their trailer. Jim and Ed are huddled next to each other in the sub zero cold.

As one driver climbs up into the trailer, dim lights on the trailer roof switch on. He grabs Ed and Jim by their coat collars and drags them towards the rear opening. His partner is waiting on the ground with a hand gun pointed at them. The guy on the truck takes out a knife and slits the duct tape binding their arms and legs then slips it back into its sheath attached to his wide leather belt. He hops down and his partner pulls another hand gun from his belt and hands it to him.

They both stand back and one says, “Okay you two, out of the trailer.”

They jump to the ground. Ed stumbles and lands on his hands on the cold icy road surface, cutting his palms in several places. He quickly stands up, folding his arms and placing his hands under his armpits. Jim starts whimpering. The driver slams and bolts the door.

One of the drivers laughs and turns to his partner and says, “They’re not as tough without a gun in their hands shooting the tires out from under a 56 year old guy with a wife and three kids, are they?”

“Guess not. I guess not.”

Jim says, “You can’t do this, it’s cold blooded murder. You’ll hang for this. You won’t get away with it.”

One trucker laughs and says to the other, “Ya’know, he has a point. Do they still hang people in Wyoming? Maybe we should let them go?”

“It’s okay with me. It’s up to you guys? Do you wanna go?”

“Yeah?” says Jim not understanding where this is leading to.

“All right you guys, you start running. You got till I count to twenty before we start shooting.”

Jim looks quickly at Ed and they both start running back down the deserted road away from the truck while one of the drivers calls out the numbers slowly until they both start laughing. Both truckers head back to the idling tractor and, in a burst of soot, clanking gears, and the roar of the diesel, it resumes its trip north.

One of the drivers says to the other as Jim and Ed recede in the rear view mirrors, “If they’re lucky, maybe their bodies will be found by spring thaw.”

The other laughs. The engine grinds, gears rattle and air brakes chatter. The truck rumbles off into the distance. Jim and Ed stop running and turn and stand watching as its red tail lights fade in the frigid, moonlit, snow covered wasteland.

Jim looks at Ed and, shivering, says, “Shit, I thought they were gonna do it. What now?”

Ed says, pointing south, “That way I guess. It must be the way back to the interstate.” And they begin silently walking south.

After about a mile, Ed looks to one side and, placing his hand across Jim’s chest, freezes with terror, and says one word, “Wolves.”

Panicked, they look about them and see on either side of the road, in the pale moonlight, six slowly moving dark shapes spaced at even intervals about a hundred yards away. Then ahead of them, the largest faces them on the road, the red-eyed alpha male.

Ed and Jim clutch at one another gripped in total fear. There's nowhere to hide, no trees, no phone poles, no branches to make weapons from. Their nervous motion only emboldens the hungry pack.

Then the alpha male ahead of them howls and lurches forward. The entire pack attacks.

Jim and Ed are dead within seconds. Just bones and shreds of torn clothes in blood stained snow remain by morning. The tracks of the 18 wheeler are long since scoured away by the constant wind. Crows pick through the bone pile.

As Jim and Ed meet their end, it's just about ten o'clock. Dinner time on the prairie. Party time in Omaha.

The next day, a passing pickup truck will spot the kill zone. Not unusual in these parts, the driver knows. Lots of deer don't make it through the winter. But he knows this wasn't a deer when he sees a human skull by the side of the road being picked at by a huge, black crow. Normally, this is the sort of story that makes gruesome headlines on the cable news networks but other events that night diminish its impact.

It will be several weeks before Ed and Jim's remains are identified and linked to several arrest warrants for various crimes in several states. The coroner rules that the death was caused by the wolves but no one can come up with an explanation as to why they were alone on that stretch of highway in the middle of the night. The small bits of duct tape recovered a few hundred yards away lead to suspicions but, given their criminal record, there was little interest in wasting Laramie County resources pursuing the investigation further. Case closed. No one claims their gnawed remains which, after a year, will be buried unmarked in the county cemetery.

Time: 8:30 PM

At eight-thirty, Tom and Sean go back to Joe's warehouse. They park Lance's SUV a block away. Tom opens the door and they quickly enter. Sean resumes his position in the back of the van and Tom reattaches the cable ties to his wrists and ankles. Lance expects that Joe will want the driver checked when he returns. Tom retreats up to the second floor which overlooks the garage area below. He finds a small folding chair, disappears into the shadows and waits to release Sean once Joe, Mark and Sid have returned and checked on their captive driver. Sean

has a sharp knife concealed in his rear pocket, just in case.

At about nine-thirty Joe arrives at the warehouse and parks his car in the lot across the street as usual. The neighborhood is deserted. Mark and Sid pull in at the same time. They cross the dark and deserted street with the wind howling from the west and the wind chill something unspeakable.

Joe says, “Jack wants a first hand description of what happens. I figure the top floor is the best place since we’re only about a two miles from Mo R♦n as the crow flies and there are no tall buildings in between to block the view.”

“We brought some beer and chips,” says Sid holding up a plastic bag. “Might as well enjoy the show.”

At this point, Joe doesn’t give a damn but the prospect of seeing that club gone heartens him. Now he can get back to his real calling, selling dope. He says to Mark, “Go check on the driver, will’ya?”

A moment later, Mark returns and says, “Just as we left him.”

“Good, let’s get upstairs, we don’t want to miss Jack’s big phone call.”

They take the freight elevator to the sixth floor and head down a corridor to a dark corner office that faces the north towards Mo R♦n. The only light in the room is from the corridor. They pull up some chairs and face a low window sill looking out over the industrial outskirts of Omaha.

To the east, in the downtown area, the buildings are all lit. Lots of night time office work in one of the country’s largest financial and insurance capitals. On Joe’s end of town, however, there is scant activity. The buildings are all dark. It’s an old freight and industrial part of town. On the south side of Joe’s warehouse are hundreds of acres of railway staging yards. Omaha is still a major freight junction. The only lights are street lights, an occasional neon sign and the headlights on a passing freight headed out onto the high prairie.

Tom quietly opens the van door and cuts the cable ties. He and Sean slip out the side door and run to Lance’s SUV parked a block away. They hop in and drive quickly back to the club.

At Mo R♦n, Lance invites the crowd at David’s apartment to go to the south

facing picture window and wait for an event of some interest. Mary says, “This better be good, honey.”

Lance says, “Oh, I think you’ll like it. Just look to the southwest,”

Mark and Sid drink beer and snack on the bag of chips. Joe pulls out a quarter liter of whiskey and takes a short swig saying, “Okay, I guess it’s time guys.” He double checks the time on his cell phone then punches Jack’s number in and hits talk.

Jack answers and, seeing the caller id, says, “Are you in position?”

“Yeah, Jack, we’re here. Anytime you’re ready.”

“All right, I’ve punched in the phone number. Another thirty seconds and it will be exactly ten o’clock and then I’ll hit TALK.”

The seconds tick by, Joe wonders why he’s here. How would Jack know if he weren’t?

Then Jack says, “Okay, I’m hitting TALK now. Let me know what happens next.”

Through fiber optics the deadly digital signal flashes from St. Louis to Omaha. Phase locked loops in the small receiver in the black rubber tube capture a radio signal. Small semiconductor chips decode its content. It recognizes its ID. It responds. Incoming call. Semiconductor gates latch, the ringer activates. The detonator does too. And milliseconds later, so do three kegs of RDX.

The resulting blast pulverizes every support pillar on the ground floor. The upper floors of the building rapidly begin to pancake. Flames thrust outward driven by the immense shock wave through every ground floor window. Moments later the walls are blown out. As the second floor reaches the ground, it crumbles into rubble, followed in close succession by the third and others. More rubble ensues. In seconds, all six stories have flattened into one.

Jack hears the explosion on his cell phone and whoops, “Wow, I can hear it, must have been loud,” but then he hears Joe, Mark and Sid’s last screams. Joe’s cell phone hits the floor followed by the sound of breaking glass, bricks falling and the roar of the disintegrating warehouse’s last upright seconds. The sixth

floor hits bottom and the roof flattens upon Joe, Mark, Sid, their chairs, cell phone, beers, snacks and Joe's small broken bottle of whiskey.

The fireball, now unencumbered by the building above, bursts freely into the cold, cloudless Omaha night sky. Nearby brick and mortar buildings begin to collapse from the seismic blast. Joe's car is blown away and its gas tank explodes. An underground high pressure gas main ruptures and a torch of flame shoots a hundred feet into the air. Water mains disgorge, their spray falls as ice in the frigid wind. A nearby electric transformer station is hit by debris. Its coiled high tension interconnecting cables short circuit, producing clouds of sparks until the transformers themselves explode from the overload. Across the south end of the city, buildings and houses darken as the electric grid collapses. Then a propane railway tanker car on a passing freight train is hit by the debris and explodes taking with it two others. The south end of Omaha is in flames.

From across town, the guys, David, Lance, Todd, Tom, Mary and Jay watch from David's picture window. David grins at Lance and give the thumbs up signal saying, "So that's where you put the kegs? Back on the beer truck? At Joe's?"

"Yep, return to sender. I guess Jack dialed home, so to speak," grins Lance.

"I'll tell ya honey, that's one hell of a wrong number," laughs Mary.

The blast is so strong that David's warehouse shakes a bit. They watch in amazement, their faces illuminated by the distant fire, knowing that what they see was intended for them and the three hundred or so souls downstairs. Out in the club, the birds, sensing the blast, rush high up to the skylights to see the terrible sight that has illuminated the night time sky.

Emergency vehicles rush from all directions but they cannot approach the inferno. It will take most of the night to get the gas mains turned off and to stabilize the fire now burning throughout the rail yards. Using high pressure water when the wind chill is -50F is not an easy job. By morning, there will be an ominous black cloud of soot still rising from where Joe's warehouse was. The plume, caught in the winds aloft, will sheer east towards Iowa like a distant flight of black birds.

In St. Louis Jack sits dumbstruck. He suddenly realizes what's happened. Now he's in seriously big trouble. His colleagues are not going to be impressed. He

was not supposed to destroy his own warehouse and, along with it, a large part of Omaha. This will be viewed as very careless. He desperately wishes he knew how this could have gone wrong.

The cable news networks flare into special alert mode, delighted to have a disaster in prime time. Even the national entertainment networks cut in. This beats reality shows of people eating insects. Traffic copters from the major stations in Omaha and Council Bluffs scramble into action and flock like vultures around the scene. Within minutes, satellite uplinks are established around the world. Remote broadcast trucks converge on the site and transmitter masts and dishes are quickly deployed. The helicopter video feeds commence with the muffled shocked commentaries from the disoriented onboard news personalities recently roused from several downtown bars.

People from New York to Los Angeles are riveted to their sets. The whole world is watching Omaha. Another ratings triumph for Jack and his special effects gang. And yet another railroad line shut down because of Mike.

Time: 10 PM

At the garage, Bob and Tony remain with the beer truck driver. At about 10 pm, they hear a distant rumble.

Bob jumps up, leaves the office and goes out through a side door to look. In the distance, he sees a tower of flame. He comes back into the office and says, "Let's go guys, it's time."

They put their jackets on. Bob says, "We're gonna tie your hands and feet again. When we get over to Council Bluffs, we'll leave you in the van and make an anonymous call to 911. Okay?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Well, if you put it that way, no, actually."

They lead the driver back to the van and fasten the cable ties on his wrists then tell him to sit on the van floor while they restrain his ankles. They blindfold him again with the duct taped stocking cap.

"You're not gonna put the duct tape on my mouth again, are you?"

“No, if you promise to keep quiet.”

“Like a mouse.”

“Okay, then in you go,” says Tony as the driver rolls into the back of the van on his side. Tony and Bob get in. The garage door opens and they drive out. One overhead florescent shop light remains lit.

Tony heads for the interstate and over into Council Bluffs. He takes the third exit ramp and pulls into the parking lot of a burger place. Tony parks the van in a dark part of the lot out of sight of any security cameras.

Bob turns around and says, “We’re in a parking lot. We’re gonna put you out next to a parked car. Count to 100 then you can start screaming. If the police ask you what happened, you don’t know. We’ll make a 911 call so you won’t be here long.”

“Got it.”

They quickly and carefully move the driver next to a parked car and drive off. A minute and a half later, the driver begins shouting. Tony pulls out a cell phone, hits *67 then 911. He reports someone screaming and gives the address. A few minutes later, a police car arrives and finds the driver. The cop unties him, removes the blindfold and takes him to the police station. There, the driver recites his experience of the day.

Bob and Tony retrace their route back to Omaha. As the van crosses the bridge, the fire south of town is still lighting up the horizon. The gas main is still gushing fire and the burning propane tanker has set fire to several other nearby freight cars.

The driver calls his wife from the police station and tells her that he’s safe and will be home soon. He calls his boss and recites his story again verbatim. After an hour at the police station, the police take him to his house.

He and his wife then watch the TV coverage of the biggest explosion in Midwest history. The news people can’t understand why an empty warehouse was bombed but later in the evening, the story develops that it was a cover for a drug gang. Some form of gangland retribution may have been at play.

She asks, “Do you think what happened to you had anything to do with that explosion?”

He says, “I don’t know. It doesn’t seem likely. How could a beer truck do that?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s silly.”

The next morning, the police will arrive at his house and interview him again. He will play dumb and repeat the story exactly as Bob told him to. He will show them the marks on his wrist. He will then ask them what happened in Omaha. They will say it was drug related and that parts of his truck were found in the rubble of the warehouse. His wife will get a bit hysterical, the police will decide they’ve gotten all they can from him and will take their leave.

At Mo R[◆]n, the guys watch the TV feeds running on David’s big screen and occasionally go back to the window. By now, copters from all the TV stations are sending footage of the fiery disaster. Nationally and around the world, people are riveted to their TV’s watching the holocaust in Nebraska. The cause is a complete mystery. The Tokyo stock market plunges on speculation that there’s been another terrorist attack and that this will disrupt trans-continental rail shipments.

At Mo R[◆]n in the rafters and on the beams above, small birds chatter excitedly and randomly soar back up to the skylights for another look. Below, the band plays on.

Lance says, “I wonder if this ends it?”

“No, it’s not over as long as Jack is out there and he knows Mike is here,” says Todd. “But his claws are a bit mangled, just now. He might think twice before he sticks his paw back in here.”

Mike says, “Right. I don’t think Jack has many assets left to play. His colleagues, so to speak, aren’t going to be very happy about this. Believe me, I know. They’re probably reaching the end of their patience with this bungling. It won’t be long before it’s Jack who’s the target. He may not be as much of a threat going forward. He has his own ass to think of now. I’m guessing, however, that he’s kept quiet about what he thinks I have. If the rest of the mob knew, they would have taken him out by now and moved in on me themselves.”

Mary says, “Any idea of where those two scum bags Ed and Jim are?”

“The last audio and GPS tracking signals I got pointed to a rest stop in western Nebraska. The audio analysis indicates that right after the car pulled into the rest stop, several trucks pulled in then all left a few minutes later. Then nothing. The car’s been quiet and stationary for a long time and no sounds,” says Todd.

“You think?” says David.

“Yep, I think some truckers ID’d them from the other day. That’s the only thing that fits. I don’t think Ed and Jim will be coming down for breakfast anytime soon,” says Todd.

“And they won’t be missed,” says Mary.

David says, “But, in the meantime, I think it’s time we took the war to Jack’s door. Todd and I have worked up a few tricks of our own,” says David. “We’ll call you tomorrow when we’re ready to strike.”

13. Saturday January 20

Time: 10 AM

Saturday morning around ten o’clock David pages Jay and Mike from his cell phone, “Can you guys come to operations center on the second floor?”

“Sure, what’s up?” asks Jay.

“We have a few computer exploits we’re gonna initiate and you may want to watch.”

“What’ya want me for? All that computer stuff gives me a headache,” asks Mike.

“Oh, you’re here to observe revenge being exacted.”

“Cool, works for me! Be right there.”

David and Todd are seated at keyboard consoles around the main system displays. Lance is lounging on one of the executive chairs at a desk nearby,

leaning back, hands clasped behind his head, legs up on the desk top watching.

The huge map of the world is on panoramic central display. On the other displays, only slightly smaller, arrayed in a semi circle, appear the U.S., Europe, Russia, East Asia, India, and Oceania. On them are rapidly rising and falling bar graphs in many colors. These show world telephonic and Internet traffic.

As Mike and Jay approach the entry door, a chime tones telling David that someone is at the door. David checks the door cam then hits a key. The door unlatches. Mike and Jay enter the main control room of David's digital empire. They walk quickly down the corridor between howling blowers cooling racks of hot CPU's and busy disk arrays.

Arriving at the main system console, David says to them, "Pull up some chairs, people," as he points to well padded executive chairs in front of consoles.

Jay hops into a chair whose dampened spring mechanism bounces briefly as she rolls the chair up to the console and studies the screens arrayed in a semi-circle before them.

Mike says, "Don't swivel, David has those chairs rigged and he hates swiveling."

"Only when adolescents can't sit still."

Todd begins keying in coordinates saying, "Okay, you two, settle down. This is the fun part. I'm switching to the main north American graph." As he does, the large screen changes from a world view to a view of Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, the U.S. and Canada.

Jay says, "Okay, what's up?"

David replies, "Now we go on the offensive. You're about to witness a cyber world war. We're gonna shut those bastards' financial empire down. Todd, it's all yours."

"Okay, here's their weighted cell phone call traffic network thresholded at a thirty per cent probability."

A multicolored network of lines flash on the screen with major star-like

intersection points clearly visible, like a highway map with lines emanating from city to city. Some lines point off the display, some east towards Europe but most south towards South America.

Jay asks, “What’s this?”

“We’ve been monitoring cell phone traffic since we got control of Mark and Sid’s cell phones. We installed viruses on them, as you know, and they’ve propagated themselves to the phones they called and phones they called and so on. The phones began sending me the numbers they were calling,” says Todd.

“Then I analyzed the calling patterns. The colored dots are major incoming or outgoing cell phone traffic sites. The size and brightness of the dot indicates its level of activity. The lines connecting the dots represent the traffic between major hubs in the network. The thickness of a line indicates the amount of traffic,” adds David.

“So, as you can see, it’s basically a hierarchy. Here, let me super-impose the states and city names,” says Todd as he makes a few keystrokes. The map changes. It now shows faint outlines of the states and, in small text letters near the dots, city names.

“For example, look at Omaha. It’s a relatively small dot and nearly all the cell phone traffic from here goes either to Des Moines or St. Louis, with St. Louis being the primary connection point,” says David.

“The lines are thresholded, that is, I’m not showing low level traffic. In fact, there’s a lot of low level traffic from Omaha phones to almost everywhere but it’s not significant so it’s not shown, just the repeated, high volume traffic. You can see that St. Louis is heavily involved with Chicago, New York and Los Angeles which, from the amount of traffic through them, are higher up on the hierarchy,” says Todd.

“Sweet,” says Jay. “Now what are you gonna do with this?”

“Well, first, you’re gonna look through my file of names and addresses and compare them with what you’ve got stored as a result of your investigation and find out how many match. We extracted these from the network analysis as the most probable mob phones,” says David as he transmits a file to Jay’s console.

“Hang on a minute,” says Jay as she logs onto a server half a world away and begins writing an SQL script. She compares the format of David’s file with her script several times then says, “Okay, I’m running your file against my database.”

A few seconds later she says, “Okay, here’s your file back with asterisks in front of the names that matched. The second line is indented with a quick summary of what I have on them,” as she transmits the file to David and Todd. “Next, I’ll run the names through a Soundex algorithm and run it again. That way I can allow for possible spelling differences.”

“Okay, here’s the Soundex match. Names from your file first with asterisks, my spelling indented on the second line,” as she sends the second file as before.

“Great, looks like our filtering project worked pretty damn well, Todd.”

“Yep, very well indeed. Okay, you wanna strike North America first or do you want to wait and do the rest of the hemisphere as well?” asks Todd.

“Let’s bring in South America. Just the confirmed links from Jay’s list,” says David.

Todd hits a few keys and the map expands to show the western hemisphere as far south as northern Argentina. The lines reform to connect dots with especially bright ones in Columbia and a few other countries well known for the drug trade. The national borders appear faintly and the city names affix themselves to the dots.

“There it is,” says Todd. “And we own every one of their phones.”

“Okay, shut’em down,” says David.

“What’ya gonna do?” asks Jay.

“We’re gonna make it impossible for them to call one another. Their phones will still work but whenever one of them tries to call another, the call will be randomly re-routed to some call center by the receiving phone.”

“So you mean if some guy in New York calls Medellin, Columbia he gets a TV cable company?”

“Right, something like that. And gets put on hold for hours,” laughs David.

“Won’t they suspect something?”

“Probably, they might even go out and get new phones. But when they do and they try calling one another, the new phone will be infected too. I doubt that they’ll call customer service and say they can’t phone their dope suppliers, not a good PR move.”

“Are you ready?” asks Todd.

“Make it so,” quips David.

Todd makes a few key strokes and says, “Okay, here’s the current point to point traffic of phones on our list. I’m now sending messages to all of them to reject calls from the list of numbers that I’m transmitting. It’ll take about ten minutes to propagate the order through all the phones.”

“Anyone want coffee?” asks David as he gets up and walks over to a table with a coffee maker, a tray of donuts and a lot of cups turned upside down.

“Yeah,” says Jay as she jumps up and joins David. Todd does too and they all return to their consoles a few minutes later with coffee, donuts and napkins.

“See?” says Todd, “Their communications network is beginning to crumble. Those little flashes you see next to the city dots are calls being rejected.”

They watch as the lines between the cities begin to fade and disappear and are replaced by multiple multicolored bursts that quickly grow more frequent.

“They’re getting desperate, watch,” says David. “Every call that doesn’t get through, they’re trying other numbers in succession. They’re out of touch. It’s all breaking down now.”

Soon, all the lines are gone now totally replaced by star bursts that are now dominating the display.

Mike says, “This is freaking great. But what will they do now?”

“Well, as a general rule, they don’t like land lines, too easy to wiretap. Cell

phone traffic is encrypted and it's more difficult to do a wiretap warrant on. I expect we'll see new phones being brought in including a lot of anonymous, prepaid phones. But they won't help much. I'll update the reject list with them as soon as they start phoning one another. Soon, they won't even know one another's phone numbers, their whole network is going to hell in a hand basket."

"But next, they'll try the Internet," says Jay.

"True," says David, "But as you know, we're cracked their VPN's and we've loaded root kits on their machines world wide."

Todd keys up another western hemisphere display and says, "Here's their computer network."

"It looks similar to the phone network for obvious reasons," says David.

The screen displays a similar pattern of dots and lines. Todd says, "Let's switch to a cumulative real time display and see how many are trying to get through with their laptops now that their phones are dead."

The screen lines darken then start to reappear as messages are being sent point to point and multi-point.

"Yep. That didn't take long. Okay, I think it's time to shut down their VPN network."

"You got it," says Todd as he sends out messages to his root kits on a few thousand machines at once. The root kits begin to halt VPN traffic making the lines on the screen begin to fade. Eventually they go dark with just each dot and adjacent flashes showing. "Each flash is a message trying to be sent to another on the VPN networks. And, my root kits are now routing unencrypted copies of all their email messages to the DEA. Should make for interesting reading if any of the bureaucrats there are working, probably not. We're also getting copies, wanna see some?"

"Yeah, let's look at some," says David.

The screen flashes to text and messages begin to slowly scroll by with desperate, what the fuck is going on texts from one bad guy to another. Some are funny, most are clueless as to what is happening.

“Hee-hee, that’s sweet man, real sweet,” says Mike happily.

“Okay, Act II. Now they’re deaf and blind, let’s make them poor too,” says David.

Todd hits a few keystrokes and a world map appears with various sized and brightness dots appearing randomly. “These are where their major off-shore banking accounts are. All numbered accounts in tax havens with very lax banking laws and no data exchange agreements with major governments.”

“How did you get their account numbers and passwords? All that stuff is encrypted. You couldn’t have broken the code in a week,” asks Mike.

“Didn’t have to. Remember, I’ve got root kits on their machines. I’ve been keylogging all their transactions. I’ve been capturing their account numbers and the passwords as they type them in before the encrypting takes place,” says Todd.

“Cool,” says Mike.

He hits a few more keys and white stars appear on the map. “These are banking sites associated with major non-profit charitable organizations around the world, Red Cross, Red Crescent, UN agencies, you name it.”

“And now, Todd, if you please, let’s give our friends a taste of the rule that it’s better to give than receive,” says David.

“Because their banking accounts are so secretive, once I’ve got the account number and password, I can make non-reversible transactions in total anonymity. I’m about to drain every one of their private accounts and send the cash to the non-profits who will never know where the money came from. On the other hand, when the bad guys check their accounts, they’ll find them empty with no transaction record as to where the money went. Nice little feature of secret off shore accounts, no history tapes.”

He hits a few keys. On the screen arrow lines begin to flash from the bank accounts to the charitable organizations. “Those are the transfers taking place.”

“Watch. After a while the bank account dots will vanish. When a dot disappears, the account is empty,” says David.

Soon, all the bank accounts are gone and only the charitable organization stars remain.

“Well, wasn’t that fun?” asks David.

“Holy shit, man, that was unbelievable! You really did it!” shrieks Mike.

“Wow, man, great, just fucking great! They’re out’a business!” adds Jay.

“Well, they’ll regroup eventually, I’m sure. But for the time being, they’re in trouble, serious trouble. They’ll be late with their payments to a lot of cops and politicians this month. Could have serious repercussions,” says Todd.

“You got any other tricks up your sleeve?” asks Mike with a smile.

David replies coyly, “Well, ya’never can tell, can’ya. I think we’ll let this exploit settle in for a while before we move to the next level.”

“This should nuke’em pretty well. I wonder if they’ll trace it back to Jack’s little problem?” asks Jay.

“Oh, they will, I’m sure of that,” says Todd. “Before we screwed up their email, I sent everyone a little picture postcard jpeg of Omaha with the caption, Weather sucks, Wish you were here, signed, Jack. should be a real hit. And I do mean, a real hit.”

“There’s gonna be a lot of unhappy people when they check their balances tomorrow,” says Todd.

“Yes, and a lot of happy charities too. Any idea how much got transferred?” says Lance.

“A couple of billion, I guess, more or less,” says Todd. “I’ll have a full total in a day or two when all the transactions clear.”

They all laugh and then David says, “All in a day’s, er, morning’s work.”

“Okay, one more trick,” says Todd. “I’m sending, anonymously, to Customs, the DEA, FBI, the cable news networks, and wire services a schedule of all large shipments of dope into the U.S. for the next month including port of entry,

means, amount, couriers, carrier, *etc.* and also a schedule of large cash shipments going out of the country for the next few weeks. This should mess up their supply network.”

“Wow, the last straw!” says Jay.

“More like the last joint for a lot of places,” says Mike looking over the manifests on the display screen.

“And now, anyone for lunch?” says Todd.

Time: 2 pm

After lunch, Mike returns to his apartment and switches on one of the cable news networks. Jay joins him. The explosion and its aftermath still dominate the news but there are no clues as to what was behind it. The true purpose of Joe’s warehouse is now known as the police find large quantities of various drugs and a mass of paperwork in fireproof safes detailing the distribution operation in detail.

The police have discovered the bodies among the rubble along with Joe’s cell phone. The cell phone is still functional and indicates it was receiving a call at the time of the blast. A check with the cell phone carrier records confirms this and points to a phone number in St. Louis but it’s a prepaid number, not traceable to anyone individually. A more detailed analysis of tower data indicates the cell in St. Louis where it originated, which, the police reluctantly note, includes the address of someone well known in the drug trade, Jack Meyers.

They wonder what his involvement was, if any. They speculate that this was a hit job. Blowing up the south end of Omaha, however, seems a bit flamboyant, even by drug lord standards. Perhaps Joe wasn’t the real target. If all they wanted was Joe, a simple bullet to the head would have been much cleaner, not to mention, neater.

Perhaps this was a hit that went wrong and the bomb went off prematurely. Perhaps the real target was somewhere else in town. They shudder to think of what would have happened if that blast went off in the basement garage of one of the downtown hotels.

They continue to check leads. They check the route the beer truck took. When

they get to Mo R²n, Lance confirms the truck showed up and that there were two temporary drivers, the usual driver being on vacation. Lance says there was nothing unusual about the delivery. The police are baffled.

Mark and Sid's bodies remain unidentified. Their wallets are found but the ID's are fake. Forensics will attempt to determine their identity from dental records.

Jay and Mike spend the rest of the day collating their material and working on the expos².

14. Sunday January 21

Time: 2 PM

Sunday afternoon around two pm Todd pages David, Lance, Mike and Jay and asks them to meet him in the command center. They arrive, grab some coffee and sit down as they were the day before. David brings a plate full of donuts which he passes around.

Finally, Todd says, "Okay, you ready for this?"

"Okay, what'ya got?" asks David as the jelly filling of his donut leaks out onto the desk.

"Well, I'm getting email attempts from a lot of sites. Their VPN's are still shut down so they're resorting to unencrypted messaging."

"IM's or email?" asks Lance.

"Both. Seems they've begun to find out their bank accounts are drained and they don't know why but they're sure it's Jack's fault. Jack's fighting back saying it wasn't him but it was us guys in Omaha. They're not buying it. Lot'a crap about hayseeds and computers. HA-HA!"

"Little do they know," says Jay.

"Anyway, here's some of the messages," says Todd as he brings up a screen full of angry text. "Nothing specific about drugs that could be used as evidence but, to someone who knows what's going on, very frank and obvious."

They read through the cryptic messages as they scroll by on the screen. It's clear, despite the oblique language, what they're talking about.

"Well, I guess we got their attention. Not much they can do about it, though. They're kind'a decapitated without their communications networks and bank accounts."

"So what nefarious plot have you cooked up to make their day even worse?" asks Jay.

"Well, Jay, I'm glad you asked! I've been going through all this data that our little root kits have been sending. Seems there's a real gallery of JPEGs here, nice family photo album, it would so appear."

"And?"

"I sorted through the pictures and extracted the finest mug shots of all the major players. Then I hacked the computers of several big city dairy companies."

"Dairies? You mean milk companies?"

"Yeah. Starting tomorrow morning milk cartoons all over the country will feature pictures of drug lords with appropriate caption, name and address."

"Milk cartoons?"

"Yeah, with the DEA phone number on each to call if you spot the subject."

"Jack's is not going to be amused," says David.

"Hey, but I will," says Todd.

"Well, me too," says Mike.

"And so say all of us," answers Jay.

15. Monday January 22

Time: Noon

By Monday, chaos rules the drug underworld. Unencrypted messages are flying

back and forth expressing total confusion and fear. The milk cartoons have begun to appear in larger cities. The local police are both amused and embarrassed.

Politicians, who only days before were on the take, are obstreperously demanding investigations as their payments dwindle. Several drug lords flee the country for safer havens in South America. Jack is holed up in his apartment in St. Louis and desperately trying to reestablish connections with his former colleagues. Mike and Jay work diligently on the data producing a detailed revelation of the unseen underground world. The threat from Jack at last seems to be over.

Monday, a little after noon, Todd and David decide to drive to an electronics parts supplier to buy some gear. Todd's got some ideas for a new stealth computer controlled robotic camera and he and David are going to build a prototype. They head to downtown Omaha, preoccupied and arguing most of the way over how the system should be built.

"Java's for wimps, I don't want 20 different layers of interpretation. I want this thing to respond in real time, not snail time, Todd," says David as they drive across town.

"No, Sun's just bought this company that has a native Java virtual machine kernel, there are no more layers than in your Linux kludge. It's available now. Small memory footprint and full Java code functionality."

"Yeah, I've seen Java functionality. As soon as you get an application running, they change all the freaking libraries. I never could get any performance out of one of those applets. This isn't a browser, we're building. No, I want a Linux core and a real programming language, C, not some bastard version for people who can't program."

"C's old, man. Too error prone, no security, no neat network interfaces. Lots of buffer issues in the libraries. Most aren't even thread safe."

"Yeah, but it's efficient, isn't interpreted and it's got pointers. How the hell am I supposed to write controllers in Java?"

"Well, you can write the drivers in C and then link to them."

“Why not just write the whole damn thing in C? Anyway, a Linux kernel has a lot more functionality including really hot runtime thread facilities. And, a better scheduler.”

They park the car in a lot behind the store, slam the doors and stomp up the alley still arguing. Inside, they quiet down as they troll through the aisles of electronic hardware picking out parts, sockets, chips, amps, gate arrays and other toys.

Once back outside, the argument resumes where they pretty much repeat themselves, as usual.

“I still think it should be Java based, it’s the only way to go,” repeats Todd.

“Yeah, what about Ruby on Rails, or whatever the next fad language is? No, Linux and C, that’s the only realistic way. Anyway, Java’s a pig on memory and they keep changing the library specs,” replies David.

“C’s obsolete.”

“Bullshit, it’s the only language that gives full control of the hardware. How the hell am I supposed to do that in some language without pointers?”

As they turn the corner and start back down the alley towards the parking lot, it’s blocked by a large van. Four guys suddenly surround them, two from behind and another two who jump from the van. Three have guns drawn. David and Todd immediately recognize them as the four erstwhile killers they last saw at the garage.

They quickly tie Todd and David’s hands behind their backs and shove them to the van where they push them into the second row of seats. One kidnapper gets in the driver’s seat, one gets in next to David and the other two climb into the third row of seats. The van pulls out of the alley and heads for the interstate and the bridge over to Iowa.

Once in Council Bluffs, they make for an old secluded wooden farmhouse on the edge of town. They pull down a gravel driveway into the trashy back yard. On one side is an old car repair shop and on the other, the back of a drugstore. The far end of the yard ends in a corn field. Two old snow covered rusted cars are on the side. They drag David and Todd out of the van and up some worn unpainted wooden stairs and into a side door.

The house is about 80 years old. Once an imposing structure for this part of the country, it served as the residence for the family that owned the farm land around it. Now, it is just an old dilapidated eyesore, unpainted, and slowly falling down on the outskirts of town. The interior is mostly trashed as the present occupants are not fussy about appearances.

The side door leads into an old kitchen. The walls are faded wallpaper, peeling in places. An old gas stove and rust stained sink are along one wall, a refrigerator against another. Dirty dishes, pots, glasses, empty cardboard pizza boxes litter every surface in the room. An old table sits in the middle surrounded by four old wooden straight back chairs. The floor is scarred, stained yellow linoleum with burn marks from dropped cigarettes.

They prod David and Todd down the dark central hall towards the sitting room in the front of the house. The room is a collection of reject furniture covered in bedspreads over exposed springs and frayed upholstery.

One of the abductors, Nick, the one Lance took on, points to a beat up old sofa with his gun and says, "Sit down."

David and Todd sit. The old couch sags under their weight.

David says, "I guess we caught you on your maid's day off?"

Todd whispers under his voice, "Must be her year off."

"Shut your trap, Shea. We're doing the talking now," says one of them in reply.

Nick says to the others, with swagger, "Well, I guess we got 'em back, eh, guys?" while one of them, Dan, returns from the kitchen dangling a six-pack of beer from its plastic noose.

Bill, Roger, and Dan, join in agreement as Dan snaps the beers free from the plastic and passes them out. They flop onto a motley collection of old chairs and couches, prop their scuffed boots up on old tables, light cigarettes and complement themselves on their great good luck.

"I knew if we waited long enough we'd get a shot at them, man!" says Roger nervously, as he gulps beer from the can too fast. A rivulet trickles down his neck.

“So, what’a we do next?” asks Bill.

“We call that guy in St. Louis and tell him what we’ve got, that’s what,” says Nick.

“You know his number or how to get in touch with him? Joe used to talk about him but he never gave any details,” says Bill.

“I got the number. It’s his land line too so it will work, not like all the damn cell phones. I saw it written on a piece of paper on Joe’s desk once. Thought it might be useful someday so I wrote it down,” says Nick.

“I guess he’ll be okay with this?” asks Roger.

“Okay? He’ll be fucking delirious, man. We got the goods. These are the guys that fucked him. Oh yeah, he’ll be okay with this,” says Nick loudly. “I’ll call him now, you’ll see.” Nick pulls out a slip of paper and picks up the phone. He carefully dials the number.

Jack’s land line phone rings. He picks it up and looks at the caller-id display. He doesn’t recognize the incoming number but the caller id says it’s from northwest Iowa so he takes a chance.

After a few rings, Nick in Council Bluffs hears, “Yeah, what is it?”

“My name is Nick. I work, uhh, used to work for Joe. I got this number from him before things happened. There’s four of us here. We all used to work for Joe. We’ve got something you might be interested in.”

“Go on,” says Jack, “I’m listening.”

“We got a certain bar owner from Omaha and his chief bartender as our guests, so to speak. Thought you might be interested,” says Nick.

“I don’t want to talk on this line. Hang up and I’ll call you back,” says Jack cautiously but to himself thinking, Holy shit! Mother-fucking-load!

They hang up and Jack takes out a fresh prepaid phone. He’s had to buy several of these since the communications breakdown a few days earlier. For some reason, as soon as he begins using a new one, it stops working a few hours later.

He dials the number in Council Bluffs that appeared on the caller ID. Nick answers and Jack says, “Okay, go ahead, I’m listening. What’s your connection to all this?”

“We were the guys Joe sent into the club a week and a half ago to take care of that Mike guy. We got ambushed by Shea and his people and left out on the interstate. I’m the one with the broken jaw. You probably saw me on TV. Half the fucking country saw us on TV in our underpants. You know the story.”

“Yeah, I know the story. Buy some better underwear or stop getting dumped at rest stops with TV cameras.”

“Well, when Joe’s warehouse went bang, we figured this Shea guy might not be so careful, seeing as how he pretty much shut the business down around here, ya’know what I mean? We figured this might be our chance to even the score.”

“How’d ya do it?”

“We just waited and watched around the club until we saw the two of them drive off today around noon. We followed them to a store downtown. When they came out, as they went down an alley to get to their car, we nabbed them. Simple, really.”

“Well, this is interesting.”

“So, what do you want us to do with them? We were thinking a swim in the river with a few weights attached.”

“No, don’t do that. I’d like to meet Mr. Shea and his friend, I’d be very interested to meet them. Do you know the old farmhouse in Iowa where we keep supplies and collect the goods?”

“Yeah, it’s about sixty miles from here, just west of Fontenelle, out in the middle of fucking nowhere,” replies Nick.

Good, Jack thinks, now he knows these guys are legit. Not many people know about that particular farm.

“Bring them there and wait for me. I’ll be on the next plane to Des Moines then head out there. It’s about sixty miles from Des Moines. I should be able to get

there by about six or seven tonight. You got that?”

“Yeah, boss, we got that, no problem.”

“Great, good work guys, very good work. At last something goes right up there. I’ll call you back in a few minutes once I make some reservations,” says Jack.

In Council Bluffs, Nick hangs up the phone and looks at his three roommates and says, “We’re gonna deliver them to the farm near Fontenelle. Jack’s gonna meet us there.”

“How’d he sound?” asks Roger.

“Happy, real happy. We might have jobs again real soon. So let’s pack up and load the van. He said he’d call back in a few minutes once he got some travel arrangements.”

Jack quickly gets on a travel web site and finds a commuter flight to Des Moines. It’s 2 o’clock and the next flight leaves at 3:30 pm, he can make it. He buys an e-ticket and prints out the boarding pass. He grabs his coat, wallet and his prepaid cell phone. He rushes out the door for Lambert Field.

The phone in Council Bluffs rings as Jack calls back, “This is Jack. Okay, I got tickets. I’ll be there around 7 pm. I’ll rent an SUV and drive over. Be sure you get some food and booze on your way out there,” says Jack.

“Okay, 7 pm. We’ll leave the light on for ya. Any preferences in the food department?”

“Can any of you guys cook?”

“Ahhh, no, not really.”

“Okay, get some pizzas and burgers or something and make sure there’s donuts and coffee for the morning.”

“Okay, sounds good. See’ya at the farm,” says Nick and hangs up.

Nick looks to David and Todd, points his gun in their direction, and says, “Okay, you two, time for a little road trip.”

They pile back into the van that had once belonged to Joe. Roger opens both rear doors and David and Todd, arms behind them tied at the wrists, sit on the back deck then pull their legs up and squirm into the cargo area where they sit, backs against the rear row of seats, knees at their chins. Roger slams the doors and he and the others load into the front rows. They pull out of the driveway and onto Highway 92 east.

At the club, Lance becomes increasingly concerned that David and Todd haven't returned. He tries David's then Todd's cell phones. No answer, just a roll over to voice mail. Then he calls the electronics store and speaks with the manager, an old friend, "Hey George, this is Lance Anders."

"Hey Lance, how'ya doing? I just saw David and Todd. What's up?"

"Are they still there?"

"No, they left a while ago, about three quarters of an hour, I think."

"Did they say where they were going?"

"I think they said they were headed back to the club. Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. They're not here and I can't raise their cell phones. I'm getting a bit concerned, after the trouble we had here the other day."

"Yeah, I understand."

"Say, have you still got that security camera on your parking lot?"

"You mean the one you installed? Yep, works fine."

"Would you mind letting me look at the video for the last hour?"

"No problem. I'll copy the file to my server's anonymous FTP directory under the name seccam.mpg then you can copy to your machine."

"Hey George, thanks."

"You bet."

"Catch you later."

They hang up. Lance waits a few minutes to give George time to copy the file then he does an anonymous FTP to George's server and starts the file transfer. The file is large and it takes several minutes to complete.

When the transfer finishes, Lance brings up a viewer and begins scanning the images. A date time stamp in the lower corner flickers by as he fast forwards through the data.

He sees David's SUV in the parking lot. Then he sees a large white van pull in. He slows the display. Four guys get out of the van. He recognizes them as the ones who were trying to get to the top floor to kill Mike. He watches them head for the alley that leads from the parking lot to the front of the store. They disappear into the alley.

He speeds up the display. After several minutes of elapsed time, he sees them re-emerge from the alley, this time with David and Todd whom they quickly hustle into the van and drive off.

Lance pages Mike, Tom, Bob, Mary, Jay and Sean and tells them to meet him in his apartment ASAP. When they arrive he quickly fills them in on what's happened.

Mike looks at Lance and says, "Holy crap."

"This is not good, guys," says Lance. He turns to Tom and Bob and asks, "Those guys we left out on the interstate, do you know them very well?"

"Yeah, we know them. You mean Nick, Roger, Bill and Dan? Nick is the one whose jaw you broke, ya should have broken his neck," says Tom.

"I'll agree with you there," says Lance. "You know where they live?"

"Yeah, some dump over on the far north side of Council Bluffs, a part of town called Kaneshville," says Bob.

"Yeah, that's what all of Council Bluffs used to be called. They have an old beat up farmhouse there. It was once outside the city but the city kind'a crept up around it. We know how to get there, you want directions?" says Tom.

"Here, on this map of Council Bluffs, point where."

Tom gets up and walks to the screen and points. Lance blows that section up and says, “Okay, now where?”

Tom studies the map a bit and points again. Lance blows the map up one more time and Tom points again. Then Lance switches over to a satellite view and Tom says, “That’s it,” pointing at an old house with what appears to be a couple of abandoned cars in the back yard.

“Yep, that’s it,” says Bob. “A real pile of shit, like the guys that live there.”

Lance records the GPS coordinates from the database and sends them to the GPS unit in his SUV and then says “What’ya know about them?”

“Thugs, foot soldiers. Real low lifes. They’ll do anything they’re told,” says Tom.

“We didn’t have much to do with them, they mainly worked in Joe’s warehouse and drove his trucks, that sort of thing,” add Bob.

“Dumb as dirt,” adds Tom. “They are seriously brain dead.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely not dealing with rocket scientists here,” says Bob.

Jay says, “Let me see if I can find anything going on in St. Louis.” She opens a window on Lance’s display and taps into the data stream that’s still being captured from Jack’s laptop. She says, “There’s no current voice traffic but, wait a minute, I just scanned his web browser cache. He just logged on an airline web site then a car rental site. Let me scan his cache further. Yep, there it is, he just bought a ticket to Des Moines and arranged for a rental car, a big SUV it looks like. His plane leaves at 3:30 and gets to Des Moines at 4:30.”

“So, he’s heading to Iowa to meet them I guess?” says Mike.

“Sure looks that way. Question is, where is he gonna meet them. Are they going to Des Moines or is he driving to Council Bluffs,” says Mary.

“I guess we would have flown to Omaha if he were gonna see them in Council Bluffs. It must be in Des Moines or somewhere near there,” says Jay.

“Yeah, but where?” says Tom.

“Could be a lot’a places,” says Bob.

“Just to be safe, I’m gonna log into the rental company and make sure his car has that nice GPS based roadside emergency service. That way I can track him,” says Jay as she brings up the rental company’s web page and pastes Jack’s confirmation number into the Modify Reservation .

She quickly upgrades his car. “When he checks in, I’ll get the vehicle ID and start tracking the onboard GPS system. Those systems really run through cell towers although they market them as satellite based.”

“Well, I guess we’ll be able to tell where they’ll be meeting eventually,” says Mary.

Jay interjects, “But maybe I get something quicker. Lance, you say you tried their cell phones?”

“Yeah. I got voice mail.”

“Did they ring first and then roll over or did it say out of service then roll over?”

“They rang first.”

“Sounds like the phones are still turned on. If they’ve got them with’em, maybe I can find out where. Do you know if they’re usually set to ring or vibrate?”

“Vibrate. They can’t hear them ring around here most of the time.”

“Good. First, let me get into Todd’s cell phone tower cracker.”

“I thought all his stuff was super password protected?”

“It was. Not anymore, at least not for me,” say Jay with a grin on her face. “I finally hacked my way into Todd’s system.” She quickly brings up several screens and the system begins scanning for the ID’s of David and Todd’s phones.

“Now, while I’m scanning for locator data, I’m gonna try sending them a message. First I send a script to their phones that will let me take control of the vibrator function. Done. Now I can send a pattern that will let them know we know. Any idea on what I should send? Some code like 1 pulse, 2 pulses, 3

pulses?”

“I know Todd knows Morse. Probably the last person on earth who does,” says Lance.

“Morse it is and, no, he’s not the last, second last. The last is me.”

“Geez, finally a hidden talent that’s good for something,” says Mike.

“You be quiet. Okay, here goes, I’m sending ‘Jay MSG - scanning cell towers - cellphone mics are on.’ will take a while to transmit since those vibrators aren’t the fastest way of sending code.”

“Anyway to know if they got that?”

“Not really unless one of them says something and I pick it up on the microphone.”

“What if the bad guys got it?” says Mike.

“Yeah? Like they know Morse? It’ll just seem like an incoming call. They won’t know the difference.”

“What if the ringer is on?”

“Same thing, just a funny ring tone. Unless they know Morse.”

In the van Todd smiles and winks at David. He whispers, “I guess we owe Jay that \$50K prize. She’s hacked my system which means she’s tracking us. Just got a message in Morse on my cell phone.”

David whispers back, “Is that what that was? I thought the vibrator was broken.”

Todd begins singing something unrecognizable, a lot of daa-daa-dit-dit’s. David gives him a weird look but Jay hears it and decodes Todd’s Morse reply as ACK.

“They got it,” says Jay.

After a few more minutes Jay says, “Bingo. I found them. There they are. I got a hot signal from a tower near Griswold, Iowa. The GPS on Todd’s phone says they’re moving east, apparently on Highway 92. But that’s not the way to Des

Moines. Any ideas, guys?”

“Oh yeah,” says Tom. “They’re heading for Fontanelle.”

“Yep, that’s gotta be it,” says Bob. “Definitely Fontanelle.”

Mike chimes in, “Yeah, I think so, that’s the only place that makes sense. It’s about halfway to Des Moines and it’s real secluded. Adair County, damned smiley face water tower in Adair City.”

Lance asks, “What’ya know about it?”

“Plenty, we’ve been there lots’a times. That was a big collection point for the meth they used to cook in Iowa. Very remote, that county has a really small population but it’s not too far from the interstate. Ideal place for distribution. They used to cook meth there too,” says Tom.

“Yeah, back before it became tough to get the pseudophed,” adds Bob. “We used to go around the state to chain stores and buy up all the pseudophed and bring it to Fontenelle. Ya’know, the farm’s not really in Fontenelle, that’s just the nearest town. The farm’s out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yeah, we used to go there a lot to bring supplies. Not just pseudophed but a lot’a other chemicals too. Then we’d pick things up and deliver them to other places around the state. That’s mostly what we did, ya’know, deliveries,” says Tom.

“So, you been inside the place and all that?” says Lance.

“Oh sure, lots of times. Know most of the old county roads around there too. You can’t be too careful. It’s always a good idea to have a second or third escape route. We also know the small towns around it,” says Tom.

Lance brings up the map. Tom and Bob point out where the farm is. Lance says, “Anyone actually live there?”

“Not in winter. They have some guy farm there in the summer to make it look legit. But this time of the year, like a lot’a farms out there, it’s closed up. Even at the real farms, the families go to town for the winter. You ever been on an Iowa farm in the winter? I guess not. It’s not very nice, I’ll tell you,” says Bob.

“But not much worse than Nebraska, I guess. Now tell me about the roads and the terrain,” says Lance.

“Well, it’s mainly flat, some rolling hills but, ya’know, flat. The roads out there are all gravel. Probably pretty drifted over right now. You’ll need a good 4-wheel drive to get in there.”

“I got one.”

They proceed to discuss the roads and their probable condition. In winter, even after a big snow storm, some places are bare because of the way the winds blow. Tom and Bob know these patterns from three years of driving there.

Lance says, “Okay, Mike, let’s see the satellite shot of the farm yard. Hmm, not very clear. I guess satellite imaging of corn fields isn’t a high priority. So, tell me the layout of the place,” as he enlarges the aerial image of the farm yard and surrounding buildings.

“Well, as you can just about make out, there’s the main farmhouse, a big long barn, a few out buildings and some silos. There’s a lot of supplies still stored in the barn. It was the distribution center for all the meth labs in western Iowa. The main house is a standard four-square farmhouse. There’s a large wrap around porch. A dining room front left, big living room front right, center staircase, hall running from the front door past the stairs through to the kitchen in the back, pantry between the kitchen and the dining room. There’s a back door in the kitchen,” says Tom.

“Tell me about the pantry.”

“It’s about six feet wide and about eight feet deep, shelves on both sides, with a small window at one end and the door at the other,” says Bob.

“Can the door be locked?”

“Yeah, it’s a standard door. But they all have those old door handles with locks that take those big old fashioned iron keys. I don’t think anyone knows where those keys are. I asked about them once.”

“How about the upstairs?”

“Three bedrooms and a bath.”

“Is there a bathroom downstairs?”

“Yeah, half bath, under the stairs off the hall just before the kitchen.”

“Any dogs?”

“No, Jack hates dogs.”

“Good, no barking. Okay, so where do you think they’ll put their prisoners?”

“Don’t know. Dining room, pantry, kitchen, who knows? I don’t think they’ll worry much about them escaping. It’s a long way to the next farm and it’s way below zero out there this time of year.”

“Yeah, that’s true. And they probably won’t expect anyone knocking on their door tonight, either,” adds Lance.

“Right, the last thing they’ll expect is company. That’s probably why Jack picked it. Totally isolated.”

“That’s our ace in the hole.”

“What are you gonna do?” asks Mary.

“The guys and I are gonna head over there and kidnap them back,” says Lance.

“You got a plan?” asks Mike.

“Sorta. I’m working on it. We’ve got a big element of surprise and we’ll seriously outnumber them. Basically, we break in and take them. Details to follow.”

Turning to Tom and Bob, Lance says, “You guys do know there’s gonna be a lot’a risk here. Maybe a lot’a shooting, who knows?”

“Fine with us. We’ve been shot at before. You can count on us. We’re cool under fire,” says Bob.

“And don’t worry, Lance, we know how to handle ourselves. We were on the

school rifle team a few years ago. We made all-state in marksmanship. Either of us can put a bullet in the eye of a crow at a hundred yards,” says Tom confidently.

“That’s a skill we might just be able to use. Okay, people, now go get your coats and dress for cold weather. We all meet me down at the loading dock in fifteen minutes.”

“Will do,” says Tom as he and Bob get up and hurry to their apartment.

Turning to Mike and Jay, he says, “You two stay here and work the communications. We’ll keep in touch. Keep tracking them if you can.”

“You got it,” says Jay.

“I should go,” says Mike.

“No, you stay here. You’re the one with the goods on Jack. I’m not taking any risks with you.”

Once in their apartment, Tom and Bob put on heavy jeans and a second layer of polyester sweat pants. They put on two layers of long sleeved jerseys and a double set of heavy socks. They’ve been out in the Iowa cold before. They get out heavy coats and thick gloves. Tom says, “Remember to pick up a couple’a pair of latex gloves from the bar before we leave, they’ll help keep our hands dry.”

“Right, I almost forgot,” says Bob.

They take their scarves and two stocking caps each. Then they put on tall boots. Bob says, “So, are we ready to brave a frigid night of cloudless climes and starry skies?”

“I am indeed. And at last we may at last get a shot at Jack. Now let’s get the hell out’a here.”

They rush down the corridor and onto the elevator. On the ground floor, Tom darts behind the bar and grabs several pair of latex gloves. He hands a pair to Bob and stuffs the rest in his pocket for the others.

As the kidnappers pass through the small town of Massena, Iowa, not far from

their destination, they park in a remote section of the parking lot of the local supermarket while Roger and Nick run in to load up on supplies, mainly junk food supplies, a bunch of frozen dinners, ice cream, donuts, boxes of frozen pizza, pop, cheese, crackers, mixer, steaks, and frozen French fries along with a lot of whiskey and beer. Supermarkets sell booze in Iowa. They push two shopping carts wobbling in the snow covered lot back to the truck and pile the stuff next to David in the cargo area.

Around 4 pm, just as it's getting dark, they arrive at the old farm and drive down the long gravel road to the farmhouse. The county road isn't in bad shape, a plow has made a pass at it and it's only drifted over in a few places.

The road to the farm is bare in spots but heavily drifted in others. Nick runs the van fast but skillfully through the drifts and manages to make it to the farm yard. One of the guys jumps out and pulls open the big doors to the huge barn, flips on a light and the van pulls in.

The farmstead consists of the old main farm building, a smaller house once used by a married son or daughter, the large barn and a few smaller buildings and several silos. It's rimed on the north and west by fir trees to cut down the wind in winter. The main building is the traditional four-square design. There is an old twelve foot C-band satellite dish with several panels missing along with its much smaller KU-band cousin, each looking to the south west sky. A small wind mill spins in the cold breeze of the dying day as wisps of snow swirl over the frozen landscape.

The barn in which they park the van is a long building, full of old farm equipment as well as three large propane tanks used to dry corn along with several tanks of anhydrous ammonia. There are several of barrels of industrial chemicals including toluene, acetone, aqueous sodium hydroxide, ether, and other tools of the drug trade. Two large tanks containing diesel oil and kerosene stand on metal stilts and several bales of straw line the walls.

Since the supply of pseudoephedrine dried up, not much cooking goes on here anymore except when they manage to get a shipment of pseudoephedrine out of Mexico. Then they crank it up and start making crystal meth in bulk. This time of year, however, it's mainly shut down.

Nick says, "Okay, Roger, you go get the furnace started, I hope there's enough

propane in the tank out back, I don't want to try hooking up one of those from the barn. Dan and I got the groceries. Bill, you run that pickup with the snow plow around and get the road passable for Jack."

Nick opens the back of the van and says to David and Todd, "You two stay put unless ya wanna try to make it ten miles to the next farm in this weather."

Nick and Dan unload the groceries in a few trips, leaving the frozen stuff on the porch where there is seriously no danger of it thawing. After a few trips they head back to the van and prod David and Todd to the house.

Once inside, Roger joins them from the cellar where he's been starting the furnace. They can hear it running but it will take hours before the house is up to a comfortable temperature. Roger says he checked and there's plenty of propane in the tank. In the meantime, he'll light a fire in the fireplace.

"What'll we do with these guys?" asks Dan.

"Put'em in the dining room, I guess," says Nick.

"Shouldn't we guard'em," asks Dan.

"Yeah, where they gonna go? It's -20F outside with a wind chill about -30F and the nearest house, probably unoccupied, is about ten miles from here. Yeah, like they're gonna run?" replies Nick.

"Yeah, I guess they aren't going anywhere," says Dan as he motions David and Todd towards the dining room and pulls a couple of straight backed chairs away from the old table.

David and Todd sit on the chairs next to one another. After Dan leaves, sliding the door closed behind him, David whispers, "I didn't see this coming."

"Would'a if you used Java like any normal person," Todd whispers back and they both break out laughing and lean back on the wobbly old chairs.

"So, what was in the message?"

"They're tracking our cell phone signals. I guess Jay finally hacked her way into my system."

In Omaha, Lance has three heavy duty SUVs parked at the loading dock. When Tom and Bob get to the dock they see five of the security guards, Chris, Sean, Jim, Gene and Phil. Some of them are loading arctic weather gear into the back of the SUVs while others are attaching cross country skis, poles and snow shoes to the roof. Another is packing flare guns and a box of flares. Sean brings a couple of cases of beer, two cartoons of cigarettes, and a big box of nuts, chips and beef jerky. The others pause, nod approvingly and say, "Right on!"

Lance and Tony show up with three heavy cases.

"What's in those?" asks Chris.

"Take a look for yourself," says Lance as he puts one of the cases on the rear deck of one of the SUVs.

Chris opens the box and says, "AK47's?" Then he opens the other, "Grenade launchers?"

"Yep, six of each. And several extra clips, not that we'll need them all."

"Holy shit, Lance. You got enough ordnance to take out a small city. Where'd you get that?" says Chris.

"Oh, I collect stuff like this, it's a hobby," says Lance with a big grin.

"There is a very fine line between hobby and mental illness, ya'know?"

"Yeah, well then don't piss off the crazy person with the guns."

Pulling out other equipment he says, "Here, Sean, Chris, Jim, take these night vision goggles. You'll be doing the driving and we may need to run without headlights for a while. There's a quarter moon tonight and the forecast is for clear skies so these should work fine. Here's a GMRS transceiver so we can communicate between cars." He hands them small cell phone like radios with stub antennae. "Use channel 625, duplex. Be sure to stay off 675."

Just then Sean shows up at the loading dock with a small case and says, "Are these what you're looking for?"

Lance opens one and says, "Yep, here they are," revealing twenty XM84 stun

grenades neatly packed in foam rubber. He takes out four and puts them in the back of the SUV and says to Sean, "I don't think we'll need the rest of them, better put them back."

Tom and Bob have been watching all this and now walk up to Lance and Tom says, "Can we have the AK47's, please?"

"You do know how to use them?"

"Oh, yes, want a demo?" says Bob.

Without waiting for an answer, Tom pulls the top rifle, checks it, reaches in, grabs a clip from the box, slaps it on and neatly drops a crow circling a hundred feet overhead.

As bits of crow fall from the sky, Bob says, "That was sloppy. How many times have I told you? I don't like plucking lead out of my supper. Now give me that thing and I'll show you how it's done."

He takes the gun and downs a passing crow through the eye.

Lance says, "That's nice shooting."

"Well, I always say, if you can't dazzle them with brilliance, riddle'em with bullets," replies Bob.

"Okay, I'm convinced, you guys can shoot. Just stop firing. The Omaha police are a little jumpy these days."

"But, there'll be a third crow. They always hunt in groups of three," says Bob.

"Two's enough for now. You can get the third one later," says Lance.

Bob carefully puts the rifle back in the case and says. "The Avtomat Kalashnikova is one of our specialties."

"Ya'know, I really need to do some more checking on you two. I think there's a few things I may have missed. Now get in the car and stop shooting birds."

"Don't we get to play with the grenade launchers too?"

“In the car, you two, now!”

They ignore him and watch as Lance opens the other case which has ten small cylindrical plastic devices. “These are radio controlled detonators,” he says.

Taking one out, he says, “You first twist the top ninety degrees to activate,” as he points to the articulated head. “Then, when you push the button on this clicker,” as he pulls out what looks like a car door remote opener, “The detonator blows. They’re all set to the same frequency and so are these remotes. Click it and all the detonators will blow at once.”

The clicker is gray with the logo of a flying hawk on the back. Lance has placed a red plastic tape on the back of it with the word detonatorembossed in raised white letters so no one, in fact, will mistake it for a car door opener. He puts the clicker in his coat pocket.

“What’ya gonna do with those? They’re way too small to do much damage,” asks Tom.

“Put’em in gas tanks. They’re big enough to blow a gas tank.”

“Oh! Not bad,” admires Bob.

“Or,” says Tom, “A kerosene tank?”

“Definitely a kerosene tank! Tom,” says Bob. “Maybe even a tank of, Oh, I dunno, propane, diesel fuel or anhydrous ammonia?”

“Maybe Bob, maybe!”

“One way to warm up a cold night! A little barn burning, I always say.”

“Okay, you two comics, you’re having way too much fun.”

“Yes, we are. We’re off to crystal city to blow fucking Jack’s head off. When the time comes, Lance, baby, we’re gonna do the deed. David and Todd will be free and Jack will be chillin in the cold Iowa winter moonlight. We are on a mission!”

“Right, I got your point. Now let’s hurry with this, shall we?” says Lance.

Finally, Lance looks around and says, “Okay, I think we got everything. Let’s see, nine of us going out and eleven returning. I guess we got enough seats, five per SUV?”

“Easy, even more if someone wants to ride in the back,” comments Sean.

“Not so fast, boys,” says Mary as she stomps out onto the loading dock bundled in a great puffy bright blue parka, red mittens, scarf, large knit multicolored jester styled stocking cap with two floppy peaks, each with a bell and high boots over green leggings. “Move over, I’m coming.”

“Geez. What are you made up as? An elf on steroids?” says Lance.

“Well, you’d know!” says Mary.

“Well, no elves and no women! This is a rescue mission, not a shopping trip to the North Pole,” says Lance desperately, knowing full well he hasn’t a chance.

She glares at him and says, “I had Lois and Jane confiscate your porn collection including those USB external hard drives with all the videos. If you ever want to see them again, shut up and drive.”

The other guys on the loading dock quickly stand back.

“But you’ll just be in the way!” he pleads.

“Sonny, you’re gonna need a nurse, someone who can provide caring, gentle attention to people in pain. Like extracting my shoe from your fat butt. Now, are you gonna shut up and get in or am I gonna start kicking ass?”

Lance realizes that it’s hopeless. He opens the door and Mary snatches his hand gun from his pocket and hops in.

Lance says, “Hey, what’s with the gun?”

“Geez Lance, where I grew up we learned to shoot before riding a bike.”

Lance shrugs his shoulders, grabs another gun and, turning to the others he says, “Okay, let’s get all this gear stowed and on the road.” He turns back to Mary and says, “If any of my videos are missing...”

“Don’t worry, honey, Lois has copies of them all. Even a few of you, thanks to a few of Todd’s little gadgets.”

Lance groans and mutters under his breath as they scramble to finish packing. After a while, everything is ready. Lance tells Tom and Bob to ride with him so they can tell him more about the layout of the farm.

They get in and drive to a nearby gas station. Once loaded up on gas, the caravan of SUVs rushes over the bridge and into Iowa. Rolling east onto highway 92, Lance says into his GMRS radio, “Remember guys, stop lights timed for 35 are also timed for 70.”

They bounce along the old two lane state highway over frost heaves and pot holes and around small drifts of snow that have blown onto the road surface. They pass endless farms and through tiny towns, Carson, Treynor, Griswold and Lyman where the highway makes a turn north then east again a few miles later.

Lance’s cell phone rings. He looks at the caller ID, clicks TALK says, “Hey Jay, What’ya got?”

“David and Todd’s cell phones have stopped moving and they are indeed somewhere just north of Fontanelle, Iowa. Here’s the GPS coordinates.” She text messages the numbers.

“Great. Got’em.”

“I’ll let you know when I get a signal on Jack. Later,” says Jay as she hangs up.

Lance uses the GMRS radio to tell the others that David and Todd are definitely at the farm in Fontanelle.

“Okay, so where do you guys think they’ll have David and Todd?” says Lance.

Tom says, “There’s only two places I think. The dining room and the living room. The only other place on the first floor is the kitchen and that’s not very big and it has only a couple of chairs. My guess is that Jack and his guys will mainly be in the living room and they’ll have David and Todd in the dining room.”

“That would be my call too,” says Bob.

“And when you enter from the front, which way is the dining room?”

“To the left,” says Bob.

“And the living room is on the right. Straight ahead is the hallway and stairs on one side,” says Tom.

“Okay, so when does this go down?”

“I’m guessing we get there between 6:30 and 7:00, right?”

“Looks that way right now.”

After about an hour, Lance calls the other drivers, “Okay, according to the GPS, we’re not very far from Fontenelle. Before we get there, we’ll hit, on your left, just after we pass through Massena, Highway 148. Turn right there. We’ve made good time so I think we can stop and get something to eat in Massena.” He gets two squawked “Affirmative” replies from the other cars.

Time: 4:45 PM

A mile in the distance they see the outline of a water tower with a blinking red light on top and the dimly lit words Massena Iowa around the side. When they reach the water tower, Lance’s caravan makes a right onto Main Street past an old 1930’s gas station, now a small museum. The town is about five blocks long. There’s a modern gas station, convenience store, a drug store, a bank building with a time and temperature display, and a few old, miscellaneous stores. Most of the buildings are from the 1920’s, mainly three story brick with shops on the first floor and offices above. The street is wide and parking is diagonal. A few cars and pickups are clustered here and there.

They spot a restaurant that’s open and decide to eat there. Synchronized, all three SUVs pull into adjacent slots on the street in front. Through the large glass windows, they see the diner is mainly empty except for a few guys drinking coffee at a table near the window and a waitress talking to an old guy at the lunch counter.

As Lance’s squad enters, he calls to the waitress, “Mind if we push a few tables together?”

She looks up at the gal and nine guys and says, “No problem honey,” quickly calculating the tip potential and grabbing up a handful of menus.

They push together a couple of tables then take off their outerwear and sit down. Lance sits in the middle, Mary sits next to him. He pulls out his laptop and powers up. He slips in a cell phone wireless card and makes a good connection to the nearby cell antenna array on the water tower. He brings up the satellite images of the farm and sets it further down the table so all can see while he pulls from the laptop case printouts of maps of the area including a terrain map with topographical features.

The waitress comes up and passes around the menus. Somewhat curious about such a large group of guys she doesn’t know with maps, laptops and arctic gear all arriving at once asks, “Where’y’all from?”

Lance replies, “We’re from All-American North, we’ve been out helping restore electric power after that storm. What a mess. Seems like every other pole is down in some towns.”

“Ahh, that explains all this. Yeah, I guess there’s still a lot’a places without electricity. Happens every year. I finally bought a generator a few years back. Best investment I ever made. It’s not easy livin out in the country without heat once the wind begins to blow.”

“Yep, it’s hard to keep the lines up in wind like we had,” says Tom.

“You bet,” says Lance.

“How bout you honey? You don’t look like the type that’d climb a utility pole?” she says looking at Mary.

“Shhhh, I’m not s’posed to be here,” whispers Mary in an aside to the waitress. “I’m Lance’s girl friend from Sac City.” She leans against Lance and strokes his bicep. “Some stud, ain’t he?” Lance groans. The others nearly split a gut.

“Sure is honey. Bet he’s big in Sack City, ya’know what I mean.”

Sean begins to wet his pants. Lance gives him the you’re a dead man .

“So, what’ll’ya have? Got a nice meat loaf special tonight? Corn, potatoes, green

peas, gravy and pie.”

“Sounds good to me,” says Lance mentally calculating and regretting the cascade of carbs about to unavoidably happen, there being no obvious source of a protein shake.

The rest nod approval and she says, “Nine specials, comin right up. Be right back with your coffee, boys,” as she bounces back to the kitchen, happy that she’s finally unloaded yesterday’s meatloaf. A minute later she brings out a tray of ketchup bottles, two coffee pots and three small pitchers of cream.

“Ya’ all call if ya’ need anything else.” She returns to the kitchen.

“Okay, Sac City?” says Tom.

“Yeah, honey, Sac City is about 45 miles west of Fort Dodge. And Lance is not from Sac City. At least not my Sac City,” says Mary.

“You are no longer on my friends list,” says Lance to Mary.

She looks at him and says, “Hey, that was a complement. How many times do you get to say you’re with a woman? I’m gonna go powder my nose. You boys behave yourselves.”

Lance recovers and leans over and in a low voice only the guys at the table can hear, pointing to the map, begins, “When we get out on the road, I say we ditch her. Let the wolves put up with her!”

“I’m not taking her on. She’s your problem,” says Sean.

“Okay, I’ll worry about it later. Back to the plan. I figure we can get to within about a quarter mile of the farm in the SUVs without being detected. There’s a small hill here and we should have a commanding view of farmhouse. From there, we can get the rest of the way on snow shoes. The snow may be deep in places.”

“Yeah, and real powdery too, not good to try to walk through,” says Bob.

“Okay, then what?” says Sean.

“If everything checks out okay, then three of us will take the front door, three the back. We toss a couple of stun grenades and go in. Bob, Sean and Tony, you’re on the back door, me Tom and Chris will be on the front. Jim, Gene and Phil will stay with the SUVs and charge the place when the grenades go off.”

“You want us to enter the house when we get there with the SUVs?” asks Jim.

“No, it should be over by then. Have your guns ready but I don’t think we’ll need them. But turn the SUVs around so we can get outa there quick-like when we’re done.”

“You bet,” says Gene.

Lance continues, pointing at the map, “Now, after we eat, we go wait, here on G27 with lights out, until Jack passes right about here. He’ll be coming south from I80 on N54. It’s real dark out there, so we’ll see his headlights from a long way off.”

“Once he passes us, we follow slowly, lights out. You drivers will need your night vision goggles. When Jack gets to the farm, we give them a few minutes to get inside then we quietly move up to about a quarter mile of the farm yard and, if all goes according to schedule. Then, Tom, Bob, Sean, Chris, Tony, and I will snow shoe up to the farm. I’ll scout the place to see if we’re right about where everybody is.”

“Is there enough room in that yard to turn the SUVs around?” Jim asks Bob.

“You bet,” says Bob. “It’s plenty big enough.”

“When we go in, I want lots of noise, a few shots into the ceiling, that sort’a thing. Listen guys, we totally have the element of surprise. They won’t know what the hell hit’em.”

Mary returns and sits down and asks, “Well? You figured it all out now?”

“Yeah, I figure we play dirty. We send you in. They won’t survive,” says Lance.

“Well, if you want a job done right, you need a woman. Now where’d I put my gun?”

The waitress comes over and starts serving. She walks around and puts plates, cups, saucers and silverware wrapped in napkins in front of each then says, "Since you're all having the same thing, I'll just serve family style and ya'all can dig in as you please."

With that, returns to the kitchen and brings out a big tray with a platter of sliced meatloaf, a great bowl of mashed potatoes, another of peas and carrots and a pitcher of gravy. In another trip she brings water glasses, rolls, butter and two coffee pots which she places at either end of the table. She asks, "Ya'din't want de-caff, did'ya?"

Lance says, "No, thanks, that's fine."

They all dig in and clean the plates. She brings the pie. Lance asks for one bill. She brings it and he hands her \$150 and says, "Keep the change"

"Thanks, honey. Y'all have a safe night now, y'hear? Watch out for them electric wires."

Lance's cell phone rings. It's Jay again. "Hey Lance, Jack got to Des Moines and he picked up the rental. I got the cell ID on the car's emergency service and he's on his way. He's on I80 right now just coming up to Dexter, Iowa."

"Thanks, keep us posted. We're just finishing supper and we'll be back on the road in a few minutes."

"Yeah, I know, I'm tracking you too."

"Okay, later," says Lance as he turns and tell the others.

At about 6 o'clock, they get up, put on their heavy coats and head for the door. Once outside, Sean belches and Lance says, "Geez? What'ya trying to do? Wake up half the county?"

They pile back into the SUVs and in the still darkness, quietly drive north to their target. Once there, they find a small grove of trees on a slight rise where they can pull over and park. They wait facing east watching for Jack's SUV to pass by on its route south from I80. To their southeast, they can make out the dim light from a sodium vapor lamp in the yard of the farmstead about five miles distant.

At about 6:30 Jay calls, “Hey Lance, Jack’s about five miles north of your position and closing.”

“Thanks,” says Lance closing the phone.

“Okay, he’s in range, Jay’s got him about five miles north of here,” says Lance to the others.

A few minutes later, in the distance, they see the headlights of Jack’s SUV flickering as it bounces over the uneven, frost heaved road surface. Lance signals the other SUVs.

Jack’s SUV passes a few hundred yards away from them. A few moments later, Lance’s vehicles power up and, lights out, begin following Jack’s tail lights as they bob up and down the old uneven road ahead of them.

Jack’s car approaches the old unused silo at the end of the farm driveway. A tree grows through the center of it. Jack turns left and drives east on the freshly plowed road. When he reaches the farmyard, he pulls his SUV into the barn where a single naked light bulb hanging from a high rafter gives a dim view of the interior. Jack gets out and walks briskly to the farmhouse.

Lance signals the others that it’s time to move. The SUVs creep up the driveway towards the farmhouse and stop about a quarter of a mile away as planned. Lance and the others have pulled on their thin insulating coveralls.

Inside the house Jack asks, “Where are they?”

Nick replies, “In the dining room.”

Jack says, “Get me a whiskey and soda,” as he tosses his coat on a chair in the hall and walks towards the dining room door.

Nick follows Jack into the dining room. He sees David and Todd sitting on chairs around the old table with a worn, aged lace table cloth.

Jack looks David and Todd over. “So, at last. Which of you is Shea?”

“That would be me and you would be?” says David.

“I’m you’re fucking worst nightmare. You really screwed my organization royally, you prick. But now the tables have turned and I’ve got you and Mike’s next.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that, if I were you. Mike’s got enough on you to put your fat little neck in a very tight noose.”

“We’ll see whose neck ends up in a noose,” says Jack as Roger brings Jack his whiskey.

“So, these are the guys all the trouble’s been about,” says Jack. “You sure it’s okay leaving them here in the dining room? Won’t they escape or something?”

“Sure, let’em climb out the window. They wouldn’t even make it to the county road in this weather,” replies Nick.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, the dining room’s okay. It is a bit cold for a walk,” Jack laughs as he turns and leaves. Back in the entry hall, he says, “What have you got to eat? I didn’t get anything on the plane.”

“We just pulled some pizza out of the oven,” says Nick.

“Good. Get me some and fill this up again. Where’s the heat?” says Jack as he hands Nick his empty glass.

“It’s on but it’ll take a while. The house was shut down when we got here. But we started a fire in the fireplace and it’s beginning to warm up the living room a bit,” says Nick.

While Jack walks into the living room and heads for the chair nearest the fire, Nick walks down the central hall past the stair case into the kitchen. He pushes a few slices of pizza onto a plate and grabs a beer which he tucks into his pocket. He gets Jack’s refill and takes the plate of pizza and delivers it. Jack is asking the guys from Council Bluffs the details about how they grabbed David and Todd. He has his supper of pizza washed down with rye.

One of them asks, “So, Jack, what’ll you do with them?”

Jack says, “I’ll hold them ransom and trade them for Mike. Either I get Mike or those guys back in Omaha get two of their own back dead. I think they’ll see

reason. In the meantime, I wanna find out what these guys know and how they did what they did. That information could be useful.”

Jay calls again. “Hey Lance, I got audio from Todd’s cell phone of someone saying that David and Todd were in the dining room.”

“Can you communicate with them?”

“Yeah, I don’t hear anyone talking right now. I’ll give it a try. Hang on and I’ll text them a quick burst of Morse and ask where they are. I’ll patch their audio through to you.”

There’s a pause then Lance hears what sounds like static but is really Jay’s Morse signals. Then he hears a whisper from Todd, “We’re in the dining room.”

“Bingo,” says Lance, we know where they are. “Hey Jay, tell them when we come in we’ll be using stun grenades so they need to shut their eyes and cover their ears if they’re untied. And tell them we’ll let them know when we’re coming.”

“Will do, sending now.”

Todd whispers to David, “They can hear us. Lance is here and he’ll use stun grenades so shut your eyes when you hear the show start.” David nods.

At 7:10 Lance, Tom, Bob, Chris, Sean and Tony hop out of the SUVs that are now about a thousand feet from the farmhouse. They quietly remove the snow shoes and ski poles from the roof racks above. They strap on the snow shoes. Lance fills his pockets with two stun grenades and about eight of the radio controlled detonators. He gives the other two grenades to Bob. They all carry assault rifles and cell phones set to conference mode with attached Bluetooth headsets on their ears.

Stealthily, they begin their trek across the snow covered barren waste of winter towards the farmhouse. A couple of curious coyotes watch silently in the distance. The wind is now still. The clear, frigid, faintly moonlit night is silent except for the crunch of cold snow under twelve snow shoes. Lance and his squad advance on the house. High above, in the starry night, are the red and green flickering lights of a few passing aircraft leaving wispy ghostlike contrails lit by the moon.

At 7:20 Lance, Tom and Chris are near the front door, while Bob, Sean and Tony are closing in on the back door. They ditch their snow shoes and ski poles and fade into the dark shadows of the house.

Lance silently jogs across the dimly lit farm yard through the half open barn door. Inside, he quickly arms and drops his small radio controlled detonators into the gas tanks of the cars and trucks as well as the kerosene and diesel tanks for good measure. He sets a few others on the barrels of solvents. Catlike, he retraces his steps back to his men near the front door.

They all carefully move into their final positions. Bob and his guys make their way to the back porch and crouch below the back door window from which a shaft of light from the kitchen pierces the darkness. Lance and his guys carefully tip-toe to the front porch.

Lance leans over and peeks through the aged lace curtains into the living room. He sees Jack and the guys from Council Bluffs huddled near the fireplace. Through the dining room window, he sees David and Todd. Go time.

Lance, wearing his Bluetooth headset, whispers a message to Jay saying that they're ready and to tell Todd. She acknowledges. Todd's phone begins vibrating and Todd whispers to David, "Here they come." David nods.

Lance whispers into his mic to the guys at the back door and says, "Now!"

Both he and Bob take out two stun grenades, pull the pins, count down then hurl them. Bob sends his through the rear window of the living room just as Lance's crash through the front window. Lance's land on the floor a few feet from Jack. Jack and the others, startled, turn quickly towards the shattered window. They briefly see the grenades at their feet. David and Todd shut their eyes and cringe. Lance ducks back away from the window and turns towards the front door which Tom is poised to kick open.

A fraction of a second later the grenades detonate in massive flashes of blinding light and deafening concussions. Jack and the CB4 who were looking directly at them are instantly rendered blind and deaf.

Tom thrusts open the door as Bob does the same from the rear. They charge through the doors and into the living room from both ends taking up positions all around the stunned occupants. Lance lets lose a few shots into the ceiling, Tom

and Bob do the same.

As Jack's vision slowly returns, he sees he's surrounded by eight guys with large guns all trained on him and his minions. Jack drops his drink and makes a fleeting instinctive lurch for his gun. Lance brings his assault rifle to a full aiming position and, pointing it dead at Jack's skull, says, "Go ahead, dirt bag, I ain't half unloaded this clip yet."

Jack freezes then quickly raises his hands in submission. The others also raise their hands except Nick who charges Lance. Lance gives him a gut punch that sends him across the room where he lands in a heap. Lance's detonator clicker, however, falls to the floor near Jack's foot. Jack sees it and quickly kicks it under his chair.

Tom and Bob dash across the corridor and into the dining room where they cut David and Todd's hands free. Outside, the sound of the SUVs rapidly pulling into the yard can be heard.

A door slams and a moment later Mary stomps through the front door and into the living room. She looks around and quickly focuses on Jack. "So, you're the shithead who's caused all this, you son-of-a-bitch! You've maimed and poisoned a lot'a kids. You're filth. Thank God for people like Mike McAneas who'll expose you and all your kind. I've treated enough of your victims, you fucking piece of scum. I only hope I'll see the day when you get what you deserve. Okay David. I just wanted to look on the face of the Devil for once. I wanted to see what evil really looked like. He's not much really. Pasty, flabby, not very appealing with a wet crotch where he's peed in his pants. I guess the Devil hasn't got much bladder control."

David walks up next to her and puts his arm around her, tears now pouring down her cheeks.

She continues, "Ya'know, one kid I took care of, he died in my arms from an OD. If for no other reason than that poor soul, you will burn in Hell. Now David, get me the fuck out of this place." She turns and walks majestically out.

David, pulls on his coat, and says, "Hey Jack, I guess we'll be taking off now. She's right, ya'know. Catch'ya next time, when they give you the lethal injection. We both want to be there." He turns to Lance and says, "He's definitely a dirt bag. Okay, let's go guys."

David and Todd jog out to where Lance's SUVs have rushed the yard and are now turned facing back. The large black cars sit there, engines idling, their exhaust plumes forming orange clouds in the light of the sodium vapor lamp. Mary points David to one and Todd towards another. One of the SUVs sounds its horn several times, a signal that they're ready. Lance and his men begin to retreat towards the door. Jack and the CB4 are disarmed.

While the others jog to the waiting SUVs, Lance, Tom and Bob remain in the house. Outside, Sean hurls the confiscated guns irretrievably far into the drifted fields of snow beyond. They won't be found until April. This startles three watching coyotes who scatter in the darkness. Two of the SUVs shift into gear and drive off.

Tom and Bob, then Lance, back out.

"You'll do better if you sit tight guys. I don't recommend a walk outdoors this time of year," says Lance as he walks out of the farmhouse. Outside the door, they leap into the remaining SUV where David and Mary are waiting and Sean has taken over as driver. He guns the motor and all four wheels spin in the packed snow. He races to join the others.

As the last SUV roars off, Jack and the CB4 leap to their feet and rush out into the farm yard. They hesitate a moment and watch the departing SUVs. Then Nick says, "There's more guns in our van." He turns and points towards the barn.

Lance reaches for his detonator clicker but realizes it's not there. He tries his other pockets. "Damn," he says, "Anyone see the detonator clicker? Is it in the car?" He pulls out his LED flashlight and they look quickly around the floor and seats to no avail. "Oh, crap," he says, "Now they'll be able to use their cars."

"I don't think they can catch us," says Sean. "Anyway, we out gun and out number them."

"Well, I just didn't want any Keystone car chases through Messina, that's all," says Lance. "Don't worry about it."

While Jack stands waiting in the farm yard, he pulls out Lance's clicker. Seeing the label, he's curious why there's an image of what looks like a crow on it. He clicks it to see what happens, believing it controls some bomb still in the SUVs

that Lance brought but didn't deploy.

At Jack's command, Lance's detonators explode in multiple gasoline, diesel and kerosene tanks where, in fact, they were deployed. The resulting blasts sends burning gasoline, kerosene and diesel fuel throughout the barn and out onto the farm yard where it soaks two of the CB4 just as they reach the door. The barrels of acetone and toluene rupture as they burst into brilliant flame. In seconds, the old, dry bales of hay catch fire. The ancient arid wood beams above, drenched in the burning fluids, likewise quickly ignite.

"Lance, I think we've found your clicker," says a startled Sean looking through the rear view mirror. "You wanna go back and get it?"

"Nah. Never mind. Keep driving. I think they figured out how to use it. I'll get another one," laughs Lance as his and all other heads quickly look to the rear.

Jack freezes and looks at the barn he's just detonated. The two guys who were approaching the barn door when the blasts began are now writhing on the snow covered ground trying to put out their flaming clothes. Jack watches the barn burn and says plaintively, "Are there no other cars around here?"

"Nope, they were all in the barn to avoid attracting the interest of the state police planes that used to make fly overs looking for meth labs."

"We're fucked," says Jack, accurately assessing the situation.

Just then something in the corner of his eye distracts him. He turns and sees, through the window, the living room of the old house in flames. One of the old upholstered chairs tipped into the fireplace as they ran out after Lance. "Oh shit," he exclaims. "The barn's gone and now it looks like that farmhouse is too."

He and the bewildered, shivering CB4 watch both fires and occasionally look back down the gravel road at the dim receding shadows of Lance's darkened caravan. Then, two of the guys from Council Bluffs decide on a last desperate effort to try retrieving their coats from the burning farmhouse. The flames, however, have rapidly spread through the living room where they began and into the kitchen and beyond.

Just as they enter, the entire house explodes. It seems there was a large metal

container of highly unstable triacetone peroxide, a white crystalline powder, used by cooks during drug raids to destroy evidence. It was, unfortunately, carelessly stored in the pantry.

Two of the CB 4 have no further need for coats. The remaining two and Jack are buffeted by the shock wave and lacerated by the flying debris.

In the distance, Lance's SUVs rumble on. They bounce west over the uneven but frozen gravel surface. No plume of stone dust this time. All heads but the drivers' are turned east watching the flames soar behind them. Finally, when they get to the county road, the SUVs turn left but quickly roll to a stop at the road side and shut their motors down. Lance, David, Todd, Mary and the rest get out to survey the growing fire storm in the distance. The barn and farmhouse are completely engulfed and the flames shoot high into the still night sky. Glowing embers descend slowly back to earth.

Mary looks with satisfaction upon the fiery scene beyond. Casually she plucks a cigarette from David's pocket, lights it, takes a deep drag and pronounces in a long loud smoky singsong voice, "O Muse! the causes and the crimes relate! What goddess was provoked, and thence her hate?"

"Now, isn't this much better than watching a satellite TV shopping channel, honey?" asks David.

"In your dreams, dearie."

"Wow, sure lights up the night," says Sean. "Is that what a burning barn really looks like? It seems like a pretty big fire."

"They had a lot of chemicals in that barn not to mention the hay and the dry timber. In the winter, it's dryer here than in the desert. I wonder what Jack and the boys are doing now? No cars, no shelter. Certainly not calling the police," says Lance as he grabs an image stabilized camcorder with telephoto lens from the rear of one of the SUVs. "I need to get some footage of this," and begins recording. The flames continue to build.

"Yep, that's one hell of a marshmallow roast. The old boy must be pretty pissed, I expect," says Bob.

"Not exactly the outcome he expected," adds David.

“They shouldn’t have played with my toys,” says Lance. “Let that be a lesson to you guys, stay away from my toys.”

“Lance, none of us have ever wanted to play with your toys,” says Todd. Lance gives him a sour look.

Then, suddenly, a vast, brilliant and engulfing explosion thunders across the empty landscape. A second equally large concussion follows a fraction of a second later then several more. A three hundred yard wide yellow and blue fireball mushrooms up into the dark and cloudless prairie sky. The shock waves follow a few seconds later. The flaming ball can be seen for a hundred miles in all directions. The surrounding countryside is lit. The farmhouse, the buildings and the figures standing dumbfounded in the farm yard are all incinerated in the flash.

“What the hell was that?” says Tom, covering his eyes. They all stand bathed in the brilliant light and feel heat from the rising inferno a few miles east.

“Duh? I should have known. My guess, it was the anhydrous ammonia tanks they had in the barn,” says David.

“But ammonia doesn’t burn, does it?” asks Todd.

“No, not normally. But if you heat it above 450F, it decomposes into hydrogen and nitrogen.”

“That barn and its gasoline, kerosene and barrels of chemicals got a lot hotter than that,” says Bob.

“Right. Once the ammonia breaks down, the pressure in the tank quadruples. Then, bang, no more tank. When the tank ruptures, now you’ve got one humongous cloud of explosive hydrogen. Ka-boom.” says David.

“Seemed like more bangs than ammonia tanks,” says Tom.

“My guess is that the exploding ammonia tanks caused the propane tanks to burst. That would add a few hundred thousand cubic feet of explosive propane to the mix. And that makes for one hell of a fireball! I hope Jack wasn’t standing too close,” says David.

“How do you know all that?” asks Lance.

“Well, I was pre-med, ya’know. I did learn some chemistry,” comments David as he tosses and steps on his cigarette in the snow.

“Geeez, now he remembers his chemistry,” says Mary, her arm around his. “How come you couldn’t tell the difference between a liter and a quart back in St. Louis?”

Todd turns to David and says, “I guess there’s one less meth lab in Iowa tonight?”

David chuckles and says, “You know Todd, I think you’re right! A few less drug dealers too.”

“Well boys, Here Pluto pants for breath from out his cell, And opens wide the grinning jaws of hell,” recites Mary in a singsong voice exhaling a cloud of smoke as she does.

They laugh and lean against the SUVs and bathe in the glow of the burning distant scene. One of the guys opens the rear hatch on an SUV, opens a cooler, and passes around some beers. The embers in the distance still rise far into the night sky.

All at once they hear and feel the tapping of small pellets landing on them and clattering on the hoods of the SUVs. Lance holds his hand open and catches one. He shines a tiny LED flashlight on it. It’s a small red pill.

He looks up and says with a smile, “Hey guys, what’ya know, it’s pseudophed!”

“A suitable denouement, under the circumstances,” says Todd.

“The new what?” asks Lance.

Todd shakes his head, laughs and says, “I give up.”

Over half of Adair county it’s raining decongestants. The trove of so many drug store visits by Tom and Bob, the prime building block of meth, is now just tiny red polka dots on the snowy white landscape. Jack, who paid for those pills, and his minions are now charred barbecue. What remains of them that the coyotes

don't drag off lie in wait to surprise the morning crows who will be happy for fresh road kill, nicely cooked for a change.

Finally, David says, "And in the later watch of wasting night, the setting stars to kindly rest invite."

"Until the rising morn with rosy light, adorns the skies, and puts the stars to flight. When next the Sun his rising light displays, And gilds the world below with purple rays," adds Mary

"Now, when that rosy morn begins to rise, And waves her saffron streamers thro' the skies," Todd starts to say.

"Okay, let's cut the crap, people. This ain't no poetry contest. It's time to go back to Omaha. That fireball has, no doubt, attracted some unwanted notice. I'd rather not be here if anyone comes by asking questions," interrupts Lance.

"Hey? We were just getting started!" says Todd.

"Yeah, and now we're finished. We gotta go," says Lance.

"I'll bet that blast could be seen from Omaha to Des Moines," says Tom.

"Right, and there's a special later tonight on cubic zirconium," says Mary.

"I wonder how they came up with the name Fontanelle. Seem strange to name a town after the soft spot on an infant's skull?"

"I wondered about that too," says Mary.

"No, man, the place is named after Logan Fontenelle, last high chief of the Omaha," interjects Tom.

"Also known as Shon—, Chief White Horse," Bob adds quickly.

"How'd you know that?" asks Todd.

"When we get bored, which is most of the time, we hang out at the library a lot," says Bob.

"Well I'll be damned," says Mary. "I live and learn. You two missed your

calling.”

“Yeah, we know that,” says Bob.

As they speak, aircraft seven and more miles above and for nearly a hundred miles in all directions are alerting FAA en route Area Traffic Control Centers in Chicago, Minneapolis, Kansas City and Denver to report a massive fireball somewhere west of DSM and east of OMA. National Guard helicopters from Des Moines are dispatched. They report back that it’s a fire at a farm, probable propane tank explosion and the local sheriff’s office is alerted.

The sheriff’s office for Adair County in Greenfield has already been alerted. They, like the rest of the county, heard the concussion and saw the fireball on the horizon. From reports he receives by phone, he quickly triangulates its location and concurs, it was probably a propane tank. Since they know the remote farm is unoccupied during the winter, the understaffed sheriff’s office defers investigation until daylight.

The caravan of SUVs turns onto Highway 92 and drives west back to Omaha. David grabs a bottle of scotch from Lance’s all purpose rescue kit and clicks the MP3 player in his SUV which repeats over and over again, all the way to Omaha, the simultaneously triumphal and melancholy ending of the Schubert Quintet in C. The other occupants mentally debate the option of getting out and walking or riding on the hood, dead deer style.

Lance gives Mike and Jay a blow by blow description of what happened. Mike paraphrases to Jay, “The forecasters were right. The pseudophed, indeed, was general all over Iowa. It fell upon all the living and the dead.” Jay gives him a quizzical look. He winks at her in his best imitation of Joyce.

Time: 10 PM

The caravan makes it back into Omaha by ten pm. They all head for David’s apartment for a victory celebration. David takes Todd aside and tells him to put a spot on the balcony and open the sound system. David walks out on the balcony, several spots simultaneously converge on him, the band stops playing and he begins, “Listen folks, we’ve just had some real good news and we’re sharing it with you. We have reason to believe that the guy responsible for the attack here and the bombing over near the rail yards won’t be doing that any more. He’s met his end, we hear. So, for the rest of the night, drinks are on the house.”

An instant later, the guys back in the apartment hear the roar of approval of the crowd to the new price list, or lack thereof. The band begins to play a brief, discordant, Jimmi Hendrix-like version of For he's a jolly good fellow.

And from the rafters high, Todd's fugitive wing'ed army can be heard in chorus to sing along. David looks up, and decides to add sunflower seeds to the freebies at the bar. David waves in appreciation to the crowd below and smiles at the airy nation above.

Lance gives Jay the digital camcorder and says, "How about an anonymous upload of the video I shot to the cable news networks, the usual? Yeah, and with a narrative that this was a meth lab belonging to Jack Meyers, the drug lord, uh-hh, former drug lord, from St. Louis who was incinerated in the explosion. And, put something in that links him to the explosion in Omaha, and the death in the Regency Hotel."

"You got it," says Jay as she begins to happily stream the video into the computer system. "By the way, do you want the Iowa and Nebraska cell phones turned back on?"

"I was thinking, maybe we should turn them all back on. That way, we can continue to monitor them. If we keep 'em off, they'll just start up a new network," says Lance. "And it won't be easy to break into it again."

Jay starts the video on the big screen and they watch it several times. David says, "Not bad, for night photography?"

"Well, I guess Mike and Jay can finish putting together their opus magnus no more interruptions," says Todd.

"Of course, you kind'a torched my main character," says Mike. "But not to worry, I have the goods on a lot of Jack's friends. They're probably contemplating their early retirement options about now. If not, I'll see if I can't arrange some state sponsored assisted living arrangements."

16. Tuesday January 23

Time: 9 AM

The next day, the sheriff of Adair County drives over from Greenfield, the

county seat, to investigate. Since that particular farm was known not to be occupied, there was no rush the previous night. But now he's seen the reports on TV that it was a meth lab so what he and his deputy discover does not surprise them.

The TV was right, just another meth lab. Good riddance to them. They let the crows have their feed and call the coroner back in town. There's no rush now. A TV crew from Des Moines, tipped off by Jay's uploads, arrives about two hours later and gets footage of the crows finishing off what pieces of Jack and his colleagues the coyotes left behind.

The networks have a field day with the video of the explosions in Omaha and Adair County, Pete's demise at the hotel, and the scene of the crows picking at Jack's remains at the farm near Fontanelle. The identity of Jack's body is confirmed late in the day by the Adair County coroner who makes a quick check of the dental records that are faxed his way by the police in St. Louis. The other four are also quickly identified.

Another snow storm races across the central plains and soon the scene in Adair county is buried under a fluffy blanket of white flakes. Only a few timbers from Jack's farmhouse, barn and the wreckage of a few cars are visible. Nothing of Jack remains.

Drug kingpins in other cities, as Mike predicted, feel a considerable degree of unease as they begin to confer discretely. They now realize they are up against a very formidable opponent. Some degree of paranoia is normal in their line of work but each time they see a replay of the farm video, especially the sequence with the crows, their anxiety grows. They confer discretely as to whom or what in Omaha could bring their operations to such a shambles in fifteen days. There is talk of retribution but none want to take the lead lest they themselves become prairie crow treat.

Epilogue

And in the aftermath, Mike and Jay write their exposé and produce a series for cable TV which establishes them as experts on the subject. Mike finally locates the bookkeeping entry that proves that Jack arranged for Stan's death. Mike and Jay are hired full time as investigative reporters with an open assignment book. They continue to live at the club as they begin an investigation on international terrorist organizations. Jay develops an interest in home shopping channels.

David buys Tom and Bob the equipment they need to start their landscape business which does very well. They continue to room together at Mo Ron. By day, they work on their landscaping, by night they serve tables, tend bar and do odd jobs. They've each been admitted to a local college and will begin night courses in the fall. They're also recruiting a band of their own. Tom starts dating Jane and Bob is seeing Lois.

Mary begins her own translation of the poem. David continues to use Dryden's. The wind shifts around to the south and the crows are displaced by birds from warmer climes.

The canaries prosper prodigiously on the sunflower seeds. At times, Todd shuts down the sound system so the crowd below can hear chorus of birds above. Their singing of rock anthems becomes widely known. They are particularly adept at ballads from the early 80's.

On a warm early May evening, the gang are all up on the roof where there's a large deck overlooking Omaha on one side and the prairie on the other. Tom and Bob have begun landscaping it with flower boxes and decorative shrubbery. The skylights are open and many little yellow birds join them, flying about and happily nesting in the new ornamental potted trees. Mary serves drinks and they sit around and talk in anticipation of the spring night and all the stars that gild her sable throne.

And as the dusky sun sinks in the west and bathes the sky in rosy beams, Mike says to David, "I always meant to ask, what does Mo Ron really mean?"

"Oh, I thought you knew it was my secret?" answers David.

“Geeez, after all we’ve been through this past winter!”

David looks around at the others, smiles and tilts his head and flicks one eyebrow up in amusement. As the others laugh and the canaries chirp, Todd reads an incoming text message on his cell phone and frowns. But that’s another story.

Friends daily flock; and scarce the kindly spring

Began to clothe the ground, and birds to sing.

Aeneidos, P. Vergilius Maro, J. Dryden, trans.