

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE!

ANALOG

SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT

**In The
Moment**
Jerry Olton

JANUARY/
FEBRUARY 2013

www.analogsf.com

Rajnar Vajra • Edward M. Lerner
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The Woman Who Cried Corpse

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Time Out

Edward M. Lerner

Sometimes planning ahead is absolutely essential—but it can only do so much. I'm coughing, choking. Every breath sears my throat and rasps like sandpaper at my lungs. Fire licks hungrily at walls, furniture, equipment. Smoke is everywhere: thick, black, and toxic. The flames hiss, crackle, and...

NOVELLET

The Woman Who Cried Corpse

Rajnar Vajra

Not all research gets published through conventional channels. . . .

On October 10, the fourth time my mom died, I struggled to grab a wait-and-see attitude rather than let myself get so upset again. It didn't help that the nurse who gave me the news sounded so stressed over the phone. To keep things as clear as possible before the murk sets in, our family's pet name for my mother, Clara Weingart, is Gremma. I stopped calling her Ma the day I gave birth to my first child. Her choice. She insisted on "Grandma," which lasted the ten months it took Blaze, my baby, to reach the stage of mangling names.

Also, to be technical, it was only my mom's third death. The first one shouldn't count, except it sure counted for me. Sorry if I misled you. According to Glory, my second and final child so far, a tendency to embellish is one of my many character flaws. She has informed me, and I quote, that "you exaggerate *all* the time, Mom." Blaze currently lives off-campus at her college in Vermont, but Glory is a high school junior, living and criticizing at home.

Sorry again. I'll try to stop sidestepping to avoid painful memories.

That first death, the one only in my mind, was actually a proclamation from the physician overseeing Gremma's hospital care after her devastating stroke with a side order of heart attack. Dr. Douglas McCallister declared that from his vast experience, he knew she couldn't survive more than another hour max, and that surgery wasn't an option considering the extensive brain and heart damage. He practically demanded that she should immediately be put on "pleasure feeding," meaning no IV, and "palliative regimen with morphine liberally applied to ease discomfort," which I translated as "let's put the poor thing out of her misery as kindly as possible." She hadn't yet reached the eighty year mark, but considering her longstanding not-even-slightly-heroic-therapy wishes, I had to agree.

I wound up leaving the hospital after sitting by her bed for eleven hours, my husband and daughter keeping vigil with me until midnight. By that time, Gremma's breathing had normalized, she'd regained the ability to swallow, and her eyes were open although I doubt she knew I was there holding her hand. How bizarre to see this woman who'd been brilliant a year ago, before her mini-strokes began, display no more awareness than the bed she lay on. And she looked so *different*, as if her facial bones had partly collapsed. With all my heart, I wanted her back the way she'd been, practically sparkling with energy, gushing puns that'd make a Beefeater whimper.

Maybe I should mention this right now. Twice, my mother earned her way onto the short list for the Nobel Prize in physics for her work on Harmonic Theory. Too bad she never won.

My numero uno rule while driving: turn off the phone. I got home with the sun just rising and checked my messages. The omniscient Dr. McCallister had called to tell me Gremma's heart had stopped. I

woke Carlos, El Spouse, to give him the news and we decided that he'd better stay home so that Glory could sleep in and not find us both gone. By the time I arrived at the hospital, my mother's ticker had somehow re-started. I left after a mere eight hours of watching her sleep, listening to her breathing grow stronger and clearer. At home again I tried catch up on my own sleep, but at two in the morning someone a lot more awake than me phoned to claim that Gremma had, well, re-died. Carlos drove exhausted me and half-asleep offspring to the supposed deathbed and I wasn't staggered to find Gremma alive although anything but alert.

Then she appeared to stabilize. I took time off from work to visit her daily for the next week, and each day she seemed unchanged. On the eighth morning, Monday, October 10, a hospital administrator with all the human warmth of permafrost let me know that my mom's medical coverage was about depleted and suggested I move her into a nursing home without delay, maintaining her hospice care. I'd already picked out a place far nicer than most and just needed to make some final arrangements. All this health care attention would soon eat up Gremma's savings, which wouldn't have been such a problem a decade ago before our beloved elected officials deflowered Medicare. I started pondering a third mortgage. . . .

The final bout of grimness came early that evening, a few hours after I'd gotten home. Ensnared in the kitchen, where daughter number two was unlikely to venture during the late afternoon for fear of the sous chef press gang, I was chopping yellow peppers, basil, and chives for couscous, my contribution to dinner. To give you a thumbnail of my life, Glory, a creature of primitive tastes, insists on calling my variation "cuss-cous," which, when written, may seem either cute or unpleasantly precious to you depending on your tolerance level, but when heard with parental ears, mainly felt annoying.

Then the phone rang and my heart froze. Sure enough, the hospital was beckoning, but the nurse conveying the latest report of Gremma's passing spoke in a hoarse, shaky voice, as if my mother's death had been a personal and unexpected blow. She insisted I come to the medical center immediately. I refrigerated the cuss-cous, called Carlos at work and Blaze at her college dorm, grabbed my mini-purse, slapped on running shoes for comfort, and drove to the institution I'd begun thinking of as my ugly second home accompanied by a pouting Glory and a blooming headache.

LA traffic was typical for the hour, but for once the I-10's SmartDrive system functioned so perfectly the fifteen minute drive only took a half-hour. No sarcasm, that was a speed record. I'd been involved in developing SmartDrive, so I might've gotten a minor frisson of pride if my heart hadn't weighed a few tons. Off the freeway and nearing our destination, the LA travel grid stopped making me proud. Most of the traffic lights were out and others randomly blinked on and off in all three colors. Festive

My car, thanks to Carlos's opinion of my driving skills, has more than the minimum legal safety features. So I had the joy of noticing that the heads-up speedometer display in my upper windshield, designed to be increasingly obtrusive as the car flouts posted speed limits, never resumed transparency although I slowed down. More funds, I thought, soon to be diverted to Goodwin Subaru. Too bad the shop doesn't offer irony discounts. My husband and I probably know a thousand times more about computer-integrated hardware than our trusty car mechanic, but it takes a special license to legally buy today's automotive diagnostic-and-repair software, and the feds are downright brutal to anyone obtaining it . . . unofficially. Actually, I applaud these constraints. This is software capable of reprogramming vehicle firmware, and you don't want hackers or terrorists anywhere near it.

The front parking lots were packed like metal sardines, partly thanks to extra helpings of cop cars. We wound up in the side lot nearest the emergency room door and entered the hospital that way. Lord, how I'd grown to loathe the smell of hospital air. Not many patients around, and of those few, none had an axe embedded in their skull or an obvious gunshot wound; but an unusually large number of staff security guards and city cops were milling around. Concerned for Glory's safety, I stopped near a cop to ask what was up, but the policewoman just looked irritated and waved me on. We took a door in the hallway that would, if a person trusted arrows, lead to the central lobby.

More cops in the hallway and an assortment of hospital workers including some RNs. Glory and I watched for a moment.

"They rearranging storage rooms?" she asked.

"Maybe, or hunting mice." Two open doors revealed large spaces crammed with equipment and stacked hospital furniture. Staff people were rapidly moving everything to one side of each room. I was too worried about my mother to be all that interested.

A nurse I recognized caught my eye, did a triple-take, and hurried over to us. She only had to travel a few yards but sounded short of breath by the time she arrived.

"Mrs. Lopez. They're waiting for you at the main entrance."

"Who is?" I asked.

"Just come with me and we'll get everything straightened out." The lights dimmed for a moment, which emphasized something disorienting: lit votive candles, likely borrowed from the hospital chapel, glimmered here and there.

"Brown-outs?" I asked.

"All I know is that we've had electric problems for hours," she complained. "They come and go."

We followed her, not to the entrance she mentioned, but through several cross-corridors and up an elevator to the fifth floor. This floor, once we reached its chief corridor, appeared presently unoccupied and was mostly administrative offices. It was warmer here than down below. Old-fashioned fluorescents striped the ceiling; only one in four was turned on. We pushed through a double-door at one end then along another hallway, fully lit, but with its own set of currently unneeded votive candles. Faint sounds of drilling and hammering wafted up from some floor below. Finally our tour guide led us through a final door into a small office with a bare desk and three chairs, the best one behind the desk.

"Make yourselves comfortable right here and someone will be with you shortly." She whirled around and departed, practically slamming the door behind her, before I could ask a single question.

Glory and I looked at each other and sat down in the two side-by-side chairs. "What does she think?" she asked. "We've come for our physicals?"

I shook my head. "Got no idea, but let's keep our pants on for now." My heart, already thudding from anxiety about my mother, was getting some extra kick thanks to all this strangeness.

~~Well past "shortly," I heard the dull thuds of multiple footsteps on linoleum approaching. Someone tapped on the door, then threw it open. A mismatched quartet of strangers filed in: a woman with graying blond hair and the clothes of an overpaid executive, a uniformed policeman, and two tall men defying the mild temperature by wearing black jackets with wide pockets over dark suits with boring ties. Only the cop's eyes seemed to hold any sympathy for the recently bereaved.~~

The taller of the coats spoke first. "Alison Lopez, daughter of Clara Weingart?"

"Close," I admitted. "My last name is hyphenated. Campbell-Lopez." My mom never took Dad's family name. "This is my daughter, Gloria. We're only here to find out about my mother. Has she actually passed on, or is this another false alarm?" I tried to sound calm and reasonable but my voice had other ideas.

He responded with an indifferent nod as he stepped around my chair to claim the seat behind the desk. He sat down and studied me for a time before gesturing to the rest of his gang to join him. I appreciated having all this unfriendliness positioned so I could watch it all at once. The female, who took for a hospital administrator, stood nearest the seated man and gave him a look almost as cold as the one she'd given me.

That much I understood. "Apparently chivalry really is dead," I told her and she favored me with a bitter smile.

The seated man ignored the byplay. "I'm Special Agent Byron Forbes." He held out a National Security Service ID badge with enough holographic confection to work as a Christmas ornament. "The NSS, Mrs. Campbell-Lopez, has, as of this month, assumed all functions and powers of both the FBI and the DHS."

"I know." I'd taken him for a police detective and found myself even more confused over his actual status.

"To complete our introductions," he said as though he'd covered the only important one, "this is Doctor Evana Swenson, Mercy Hospital's general administrator." He tilted his head toward the woman without taking his eyes off me. "Next to her, my colleague Special Agent Ronald Hightower, and finally Lieutenant Ridley Brown of the LAPD, our search coordinator." Brown gave me a tiny bow.

"What are you searching for?"

That pinned a frown below Forbes's undersized nose. "We're not here to answer your questions, but I strongly urge you to answer mine. Where were you, precisely, two hours ago?"

I glanced at my link, but the clock display had frozen up. Strange, I'd charged the unit just last night and while this particular link took a lot of charging, it usually held a charge for days. I pressed the reboot tab and time again marched on. "I was at home, having just gotten back from here." Making green tea and grateful to be away from this place.

"You and your husband are firmware engineers. Is that correct?"

I blinked at the brisk switch of direction. "That's how we make a living, although my field is actually

—"

"According to our records, you once broke through the firewalls of the National Emergency Broadcasting System to request aid in locating a lost pet?"

I could feel Glory's stare on the side of my face like incipient sunburn. Or maybe that was just part of my blush. "When I was nine. And I was told that the record of that, um, incident had been . . . expunged."

"Given your extraordinary skills at that young age, wouldn't it be logical to presume that you are now a leading expert in the field of computer science?"

His professorial manner of speech reminded me of how my mom used to talk when in lecture mode. Only he didn't have her trace of British accent, didn't throw in atrocious puns, and didn't sound nearly as pleasant. "I'm a skilled coder, sure, but not necessarily *leading*. What does any of this have to do with my mother?"

Forbes ignored both the lights dimming briefly and my question. "I doubt many programmers even approach your level. And fewer still would find themselves in such a financial bind."

Now it was my turn to frown. "My husband and I earn a healthy income."

"Last year, in July of 2038, you took out a second mortgage on your home." He said this without needing to consult his link or even a sticky note. What else had this man memorized about me and mine?

"That's right. We had a family emergency and didn't care to burn all of our savings."

"Your husband required brain surgery for a non-malignant but growing tumor."

"So? What's your point?"

"His condition required two particularly delicate, long, and expensive procedures. Your insurance paid for three-fourths of the medical costs involved, leaving you nearly three hundred thousand dollars to cover, plus your two thousand dollar deductible. Then your husband had to take a four-month hiatus from work to recover during which your family paid for daily private therapy. At the same time, your reported income level—despite your unexpected overhead—prevented your daughter Blaze from qualifying for scholastic financial aid, which forced you to assume her entire college tuition, study materials, and living expenses."

I could barely stop myself from hissing at this jerk like a furious cat. "She helped by working on campus. Again, what's your *point*?"

"You've been asking about your mother and perhaps it's time to discuss her situation as it affects yours. Both her insurance and personal savings are nearly exhausted. She has been living on funds from a reverse mortgage, the current lowered Social Security benefit, and some minor annuities. You were about to move her to a nursing home and continue providing the hospice care she has been receiving here. Since the latest budget cuts, neither the state nor federal government subsidizes hospice services for the dying elderly. How were you planning to pay for your mother's care if she

survives for more than another few weeks?"

I chewed my lip for a moment. "We'll work that out, we always do."

"Haven't you already done so? About two hours ago, this hospital's power went out for a few seconds. After that, a nurse, checking up on Clara Weingart, discovered that she had died and that her medical monitors were off-line. She pressed the emergency button but that system, too, was offline. She then went to report these matters to the charge nurse. When she reached her supervisor, Mercy Hospital's power went down for over ten minutes." He gave me a prolonged and particularly icy stare. "What's more remarkable is that the emergency generator failed to take over. During that time, neither lights nor mounted security cameras were operational. When power resumed, the nurses discovered that someone had removed your mother's body."

"What? You're saying my mother's . . . missing?"

"We are conducting a complete search of the hospital to be thorough, but it is entirely clear what happened." He leaned forward as if preparing to dive at me right over the desk between us. "Believe me, a full confession from you right now is the only way to ensure the most positive outcome for you and your family."

For too long a moment I couldn't talk as confusion, fury, and a sick emptiness in my stomach fought for dominance. Finally fury won and there was nothing cold about the way I looked at Forbes.

"What, exactly, are you accusing me of?"

The two agents exchanged a glance, Forbes gave a little nod, and for the first time Special Agent Hightower spoke up. For such a big man, he had a high-pitched voice. "Before you supposedly left Mercy a few hours ago, you must've hacked into the local mainframe, remotely, you know? That way you could shut down your mom's monitors without setting off any alarms. Then you killed her. Maybe smothered the lady—hard to know 'til we find the body. But that's when you blew it. Bad timing. You didn't expect that nurse to check in so soon, did you? We figure you heard her coming and only had a moment to hide, behind that empty bed near the window maybe. When the nurse took off, you used your remote to shut off the building's power and keep the backup from taking over. Then you just grabbed a wheelchair from the hall and wheeled your mom out of here, possibly with help although you look tough enough to manage on your lonesome."

I was getting some idea of how a trapped rabbit might feel. Hightower started to add something but after one syllable, Forbes shut him down with a look, then aimed his eyes back at me, just staring without saying a damn thing. After a minute, I realized his silent focus was a technique, but still felt so damn rattled that it took me another minute to remember, with great relief, that I had an easy alibi.

I cleared my throat, not trusting my vocal chords. "Look. All you have to do is check my car's driving logs. Everything is time-stamped and there's GPS routing data logged for every trip." I sent a glare Hightower's way. "You can even check my logs *remotely*."

Forbes retained control. "That's where matters become interesting." Seemed to me his eyes suddenly held an odd gleam. "You and your husband own a Subaru Spark, California vanity plate 900d c0d3." He pronounced each alphanumeric, not the words. "Have you driven any other car today?"

"No. My husband usually takes the—"

"Our agency has already downloaded your Spark's driving logs, or rather tried to download them. The relevant data has been erased including present location."

"Not by me!" So much for my relief.

"I find that implausible. The truly remarkable aspect to this turn of events is that *every* car we've checked that's come within a mile of this hospital in the last several hours has also lost its routing record and GPS tag. You needn't feign surprise. Weren't you chief designer of the LA traffic safety grid? And don't you firmware jockeys always leave, ah, a backdoor in your systems for your private use?"

"Hardly! Besides, twelve other coders worked with me on that project and we all checked each other's work."

He made a sound a little too harsh to come off as a chuckle. "Nevertheless, your success in accomplishing something that my agency's experts inform me should be impossible suggests an opportunity for you. I strongly urge you to use it while you can. Due to your actions, three patients here have died, two from life-sustaining equipment failures when the power went out, and another during surgery when the surgeons could no longer see."

He waited for a moment, perhaps to see guilt condense on my face.

"I can offer no guarantees," he continued, "and surely you will be spending considerable prison time, but I shouldn't need to remind you that California reinstated the death penalty for exceptional crimes. Between your reckless disregard for life and the actual murder of—"

The light went out. Then terrible things happened very, very quickly.

I heard the door thrown open behind me and felt the breeze of it. My eyes couldn't get much traction from the hallway candlelight, but I got an impression of three man-like creatures with insect heads rushing into the room firing guns. I reached over to pull Glory out of the way and found her reaching for me. The sounds were horrible: yells, screams, and ugly grunts somehow worse than screams, all too audible because the guns produced gassy little snaps rather than ear-bursting bangs. And it instantly stank in the room, fireworks smoke mixed with a fecal stench and the metallic tang of fresh blood.

The dim figures of my four interrogators slumped forward or dropped to the floor. Not even Doctor Swenson was spared and I felt spatters of something warm and wet cooling on my face and hands. The next instant, someone gripped my arms and dragged me backwards and through the door before I could react.

In the hall, my eyes had adapted enough to see that the big man who'd grabbed me didn't actually have a bug's head but was wearing optical gear over his eyes. Another man came after us, half carrying my daughter.

"Not one word," my capturer threatened. I didn't see his gun, but knew he still had it so I didn't argue

"Come with me as quickly as you can."

We started down the hallway and my new worst friend extinguished every lit votive candle we passed. I could still see a little thanks to random car headlights reaching the distant windows and a general glow from outside. One hell of a bang behind us made me jump. I whirled around in time to see a figure lurch across the hallway, and my spin freed me for an instant. My captor hurriedly grabbed my other arm while emptying at least four bullets into the collapsing figure while Glory's chaperone followed suit. Then both men ran out of bullets or finally noticed the buggy goggles on the dead man's face. Two more terrifying bangs shook the air and both my captor and my daughter's grunted, fell, and lay still.

A brighter-than-usual passing headlight revealed another man prone on the carpet near the office I never wanted to go back into, pointing a very large pistol my way. As I watched, he lowered the weapon and slowly rose to his feet.

"You two all right?" he called out softly, and I recognized Hightower's squeaky voice.

It took that long for me to figure out what had just happened. Somehow, the agent had survived the attack and blasted the third assassin who'd lagged behind. Then he'd picked up the man's corpse and hurled it across the hallway. While the assassin's cronies were busy making their pal redundantly dead, Hightower had snuck from the office and gotten into sniper position to rescue my daughter and me. A risky business for us considering that I doubted he could see well enough to shoot accurately.

"Glory," I called out, probably louder than I needed to, "are you hit?"

"Just scared, Mom. But not hurt."

"We're fine, Agent," I lied, knowing that when the numbness wore off, the trauma wouldn't. By that time, he'd reached us. "Thought you'd been killed."

"PPT8 vest." He breathed in little gasps. "Vests are mandatory for all field work, but they're not perfect. 'Fraid I've got a busted rib or three."

"So is Agent Forbes—"

"Shot in the head." His voice sounded stiff, as though keeping something big pent up. He tucked his gun away in a shoulder holster then bent down to check the condition of his victims using a shocking callous technique. With each man in turn, he pinched their nostrils shut while sealing their mouths with a palm. Satisfied, I suppose, by the result, he peeled off one assassin's bulging eyewear and examined its interior. I couldn't imagine how he could see details. Then he went through the pockets of their garments and unzipped one man's . . . jumpsuit, if that's what it was. I could barely make out the undergarment, but thought it might be a bloodstained nurse's outfit or possibly scrubs. Hightower pulled back enough of the material to reveal a third, darker layer.

"Kevlar," he snorted. "Heavy as hell and useless against what I'm carrying." He stood up again. "We got a problem."

"You think?" Glory said, her sarcastic tone ruined by the way her voice broke.

He ignored her. "Look down the hall, ma'am. See how bright it is outdoors?" Didn't look bright to me.
"Other parts of the hospital must have power, so this can't be just another outage."

My mind was too numb to understand. "What are you saying?"

"Thought you were supposed to be smart. Look, someone cut the juice to this floor so that hostiles could take us out without much worry about us firing back. But these guys—" he waved an arm toward the dead assassins—"couldn't have killed the power and attacked us almost at the same moment. Now do you get it?"

"We have more enemies somewhere in the building."

"Count on it. By now they probably know something went wrong and are on their way for a second strike. No way I can get an extraction team here fast enough, so we've got to get off this floor pronto."

"But what do they *want*?" I hadn't meant to sound so forlorn.

"Lady, you really that naïve? Just come along." He started down the hallway almost at a sprint, but slowed down either so that we could catch up with him or because running hurt his ribs. He waited until we'd all reached the elevator door then pushed the elevator button. The button didn't light up and he leaned to hold an ear against the door.

"Please," I said, "pretend I'm exactly that naïve and explain."

"Sure, why not. Whatever you used," he said, panting a little, "to kill all local power and screw with vehicle records amounts to a new kind of weapon, one badass weapon in the wrong hands. And some terrorist group or foreign power was on the ball enough to catch on too damn quick. Whoever these people are, they're smart and organized even if they don't have the best tech." Keeping his ear in place he reached over to jab the button a few more times. "Figures, nothing doing. For sure they'll have the doors to the rest of the floor blocked or guarded, but we'll check before trying anything . . . extreme."

I grabbed his arm. "Wait. I did *not* murder my mother and had nothing, *nothing* to do with cutting the power. This is all some horrible mistake."

He hesitated for a second. "You sound like you mean it, but how many coincidences can you expect me to swallow? That fact that you just happen—never mind! Getting you out of here is job one right now. This way, and try to move quiet."

He herded us to the stairwell door but held out an arm to stop us before we'd quite reached the doorway. He put his mouth close to my ear and whispered, "We'll wait right here until I check this out. This thing has an inset window and we don't want to be seen by a hostile posted outside."

He reached with one long arm to tug on the door's vertical handle and I could tell he was doing so gently. Then he tried a soft push. He whispered again, "Like I thought, blocked. That's better for us than only guarded, because we might have more time. Duck way below the window level as we move along. Pass it on to your kid."

I repeated the message in Glory's ear and we didn't so much duck as crawl past the stairwell. Beyond the door, we all stood and Hightower led us down the hallway to the huge window where it ended. Th

glass was framed in two tall sections, each almost three feet wide, divided by a sturdy-looking vertical bar. Enough light snuck through for me to see the spatters of dried blood on Glory and on my arms and clothes. I could also see Hightower's face and its own collection of spatters; no dark stains showed on his overcoat, but it must've had plenty. He kept his expression stony, but to me it looked like worried stone.

"Can you two handle heights?" he asked after examining the window and its trimmings.

My daughter and I exchanged glances. "What," I wondered, "do you have in mind?"

"Maybe you noticed that the hospital has like a stepped stone coating? That'll give us handholds and footholds."

I shook my head hard enough to risk concussion before I could find the right words. "Can't speak for Glory, but I'm not strong enough to hang onto to those tiny ledges. And aren't we more than forty feet up?"

"I don't like heights," Glory offered.

"Didn't mean you'd be, uh, unsupported. You'll be using a rope and standing on a ledge; there's one beneath every window."

I looked around. "Got a rope hidden somewhere? This is an administrative floor. No bed sheets or towels, far as I can tell."

"Leave that part to me and get ready to move out. Don't go anywhere."

He rushed off back the way we'd come, silent as moonlight. My daughter voiced a sort of nervous growl. "Let's not trust that man." I could barely hear her. "He really thinks you killed Gremma."

"I know, but who's the lesser evil right now? How you holding up?"

"I'm scared, mom. A lot."

I pulled her in for a hug and could feel her trembling. Much of my own fear evaporated along with countless layers of day-to-day grind, exposing just how precious Glory was to me. Write it off to maternal instinct if you like, but the need to protect her steadied me like nothing else could. My brain started working again.

Faint rustling and clicking sounds drifted down the hallway, and soon Hightower reappeared with a chair in one arm and a bundle of some kind in the other. He released the bundle, which spread out on the floor into three dark jumpsuits.

"Picked up your purse while I was at it," he said. I'd mentally abandoned the poor thing. "We'll leave it in my pocket for now. You'll be needing both hands."

He left again, and just as Glory asked, "Where's he gone this time?" I heard a soft thud then an extended hissing noise. He returned dragging a huge but thin double panel, the sort of thing used to construct office cubicles. Looked heavy. He muscled it upright, unfolded it far enough to stand on its

own, and turned it to block our view of the hallway.

"That'll give us privacy," he said, panting fast and rubbing his ribs, "if any hostile comes out to play." He flopped down in the chair and began knotting the suits into a series. "They'll figure at least one of us is armed and won't know where we are. Should slow them down."

"That last one," I commented, "could be a granny."

"Nope. Square knot for sure." He tugged on the ends and the knot held. "See?"

"Fine, but how do you plan to get us out the window? Break the glass in case of someone firing at you?"

He glanced up at me. "You got your sarcasm on again. That's good if it means you've settled in. Anyway, we got no tools to pop the frame, so breaking is our only choice. It'll make noise and some enemy might notice glass falling, but maybe we'll be lucky."

"Hang on, we might have other options."

"Yeah?"

"Look, it will probably make you even more suspicious of me, but this link on my wrist is a bit . . . unusual. Built it myself. Give me a moment and I should be able to call up the schematics—I mean blueprints of this building. Could be an easier way down, maybe, ventilation shaft or something."

He snorted. "Ventilation shaft. Not in real life, lady. As for checking out blueprints of a building this size, your link screen is too damn small."

"Sure about that?"

"You'd have to zoom way in, and then it'd take hours to scroll through the place. So unless you got a bigger screen in your purse—"

"Not in my purse." As I fiddled with my wrist-toy, its hidden panel sprang out, unfolded twice into a four by six inch LEP, and lit up. Hightower emitted a low whistle. With one touch, I activated my network-infiltrating stealth app. "Big enough? While I'm cuddling up to the system here, why don't you call for, um, backup or whatever the 'real life' term might be."

"Already done."

It wasn't easy to keep my eyes on the screen. "When? Not while you were playing possum in that office." He wouldn't have had time, and unless he used some kind of magic voice silencer, a phone call could've seriously dented the notion he was dead. Probably *his* link had a call-out-the-troops button.

"Spoke with headquarters while grabbing these soon-to-be ropes."

"Really? But you weren't that far away, and I didn't hear . . ." I had an odd notion and examined it from a few sides before committing myself. "You know, there's been some online chatter about new military bio-implants. You wouldn't happen to have something like that for communicating on the

down-low?" Implants would also explain how he could see so well in the dark.

He ran silent for a long moment. "I'd like to know who was doing this chattering."

That was answer enough, but I wasn't about to give him names even if I weren't busy testing ports to access the local system.

"Ropes are ready," he said. "Nylon, I think, and a bit slippery, but the knots will support your feet on the way down."

"Just a sec." How I adore legacy components. So easy to find a vulnerable port here because the hospital's current operating system had been installed over an open source platform that was beyond geriatric, and a chunk of the creaky old system remained active and accessible.

"Let me get this straight," Glory said too loudly. "You expect us to jump out a window a million miles in the air, and climb down slippery, *blood-soaked* clothes to the next floor?"

Hightower did a kind of reverse sniff. "Lower your voice. You won't be jumping. I'll just lower you to the ledge right beneath the window we'll enter through. You'll untie yourself and then hang on until I climb down and make us a new entrance. Simple. Good thing you're both wearing sport shoes."

"Found the blueprints," I announced.

"Any ducts big enough for us to crawl through?" he asked with a scorn coating.

"Hang on. Um. Can't find any."

Glory wasn't done. "Why don't we just wait here for your buddies to show up and rescue us?"

"They have to organize and get here. Even by copter, ten minutes at best and I'd say we got no more than five left, if that. The *hostiles* can figure how long they got before my people show up."

"If my mom is so important, why didn't you bring more than two agents to begin with?"

That was a damn good question, and one I should've thought of. Apparently Hightower didn't appreciate it much because he mumbled something under his breath that didn't sound cheery.

"Look," he said, "we got no time for this. Unless you want to die or get captured again, we need to get out of here *now*."

I'd figured he'd brought the chair along for window-smashing purposes. Instead, he used it as a perch for reaching the highest part of the right-hand window to tap it with an oddly shaped hammer. As he started bashing one corner of the glass, not too hard at first, I realized that his tool was actually one of the assassin's guns. I trusted he'd remembered to latch the safety.

Gradually, he increased the force of his blows until, suddenly, the window's corner crazed, but didn't quite crack.

"Yes!" he muttered with real enthusiasm. "God bless California earthquakes and contractors who cut

corners. This is the cheapest kind of safety glass and it's going to make all this much easier."

"What do you mean?" Glory asked. He didn't reply and began hammering the window again, hard, all around its edges until the entire window seemed to be framed with crackled glazing.

"Stand back," he ordered. "Don't bother covering your ears." Using the same gun, he carefully aimed the window's center and fired off four quiet shots. To my surprise, the result was only a small and irregular hole with an extra notch where one bullet had accidentally gone slightly astray. Still, Hightower's soft grunt sounded like satisfaction.

"Go further back and to the left, ladies. Even more. Okay, you're good."

After flipping the safety he turned the gun sideways and eased its barrel through the hole. I could tell that the front sight wouldn't have cleared without that notch; so much for it being there by accident. He twisted the gun upright, pulled it back far enough for its sight to catch on unbroken glass, flashed us a smirk possibly meant as reassurance, then simply tugged. The entire window broke into countless tiny blocks, mostly cascading inwards.

Hightower shook off hundreds of these tiny tiles like a dog shaking off water. He reversed the gun, and began hammering on the right bottom side of the left-hand window, this time continuing until the newly crazed section fell out, leaving a respectable hole while keeping most of the window intact thanks to the special if cheapo glass. I watched him tie, so very carefully, his improvised rope around the freshly exposed section of the central vertical support. After grabbing the rope with both hands, he tucked his legs up so that the rope supported his entire body weight. Everything held so I didn't resume back-seat knot-making.

He emitted another pleased grunt then dangled the loose end of the rope from the window, sticking his head outside, probably to judge the needed length more than to enjoy LA's fresh air. After a third grunt, he pulled the rope back inside.

"You first," he said quietly, pointing to me, which I had to admit made sense since having me waiting below should make my daughter feel more secure on her own trip down. He shook glass off the chair and then gestured for me to climb and stand on it, which I did, trying not to show Glory how much I cherished the idea.

"Grab this knot right here," he said, grabbing another for himself, "and then just put your feet on the last knot as you step outside. I'll be your elevator, don't worry about that part. When you reach the ledge, put one foot at a time on it and keep holding the rope with one hand until you get a good grip on the wall with the other hand. Okay? Then let go and work your way to the right to give your kid room. When she's down, both of you move further to the right and wait for me. Got all that? Good. Hurry now, I think I just heard someone sliding out whatever was barring the double door."

"Should we still do this?" I asked.

"They won't be here quick, unless they're too stupid to worry about an ambush. So yeah, get going. Be super quiet, they might have EARs."

"Why wouldn't they?"

"EARS, dammit. Enhanced Audio Receptors. Go."

If I had to list my all-time favorite experiences, this one wouldn't have made the top million. The knots weren't easy to hang on to; too small and slippery, and I managed to cut a finger on some exposed zipper teeth before I shifted my grip, doubtless adding more blood to the mix. The mild wind felt anything but mild, eager to pull me off. So did all the empty space beneath me. And I had a really bad moment before my feet could find that bottom knot. Luckily, the modest ledge a few inches beneath the broken window gave me support for one shoe while the other went knot-hunting.

I held on somehow, and Hightower let the rope down steadily, supporting my hundred and thirty pounds without any obvious trouble despite his cracked ribs. He'd done a great job in estimating the distance as well. I only had to step down a few inches to reach the destination ledge, but letting go of that damn nylon was the second hardest thing I've ever done—only because giving birth is an untouchable league of its own. At least the uneven façade, which I'd never appreciated until now, did provide little outcrops to grip. I hung on like a particularly motivated limpet and watched the rope ascend, and then with infinite care, shuffled a few feet to the right. After a long moment, Hightower lowered Glory. She was in such an obvious panic that I felt ashamed of my own fear.

"You can do this," I crooned to her, releasing an outcrop with one hand to grab my daughter's arm and pull her closer to the wall. It took some nearly silent but desperate coaxing, but she finally managed to join me on the ledge. I kept a reassuring hand on her back, trying to make her feel more secure although it left me less so. I hoped she wouldn't ask the classic question: who is holding *you* up? She released the rope as if losing her best friend, which I fully understood, and stared only at the wall as we both waddled sideways at something damn close to zero miles per hour. I wondered if like me, she tried to pretend there was no such direction as down.

From one corner of my eye, I watched the rope rise. I worried about the coming assassins. Be interesting if they shot our protector while we were out here. I worried a lot. Suddenly, Hightower jumped horizontally from the window above, and I mean *jumped*. He got as far outwards as the rope would allow, coming within kissing distance of a ninety degree angle from the wall, then he twisted his body around as he and the rope swung downwards. He raised his legs just in time to smash against the window he planned to turn into an entrance.

I felt the shock through the wall and got a second shock when I realized the window had crazed but hadn't broken. Swearing softly but sincerely, Hightower pushed hard off the glass and hit the window again. This time, he burst into the building but was gone only for an instant. His head and arm popped out of the ex-window and he silently held out a hand for Glory to grab.

A minute later, to my utter relief, we were all inside. Different layout on this floor. Rather than being in a hallway we stood in an expansive office, no one here but us daredevils. Hightower had both arms wrapped around his chest, but didn't complain. I heard a soft inconsistent rumbling and faint bouts of hammering. Despite the cool air now flooding in, it was too warm. The lights were dimmed but brightness streamed under a door ahead, and the window behind us shed almost enough illumination to read by, now that my eyes were dark-adapted. Wondering when my knees would stop wobbling, I studied the terrain. Our hero must've nearly stubbed his body on a large desk when he'd come crashing through the window. Despite the racket he'd made, I didn't hear anyone coming to investigate. I tried not to imagine assassins peering downward from the broken window above.

"You hurt?" I whispered to him.

"I've felt better. Got those blueprints?"

"I can call them up quick enough."

"Do it. Try to spot the closest stairwell going all the way to the basement parking lot."

"Why? Shouldn't we hide somewhere and, and wait for your team to show up, or surround ourselves with cops?" I made myself stop sputtering. "Or at *least* tell them what's been happening?"

"Talk quieter. No. I'll explain later."

"You'd better know what the hell you're—sorry, you've done fine so far." Actually, he'd been spectacularly competent, but I'm not a big enough person to admit that to someone who'd believe I was a murderer.

As I worked my link, my lower lip hurt until it dawned on me that I could stop chewing on it. "Okay, we turn left right outside this room, move down a short hallway, then take the first door at the end. No other stairs near here go all the way down."

"Good. You two stay behind me and out of sight until I say we're clear. Got it?"

Glory and I scuttled sideways to keep hidden as he lurched ahead without waiting for a reply. This office must've been super soundproofed, because when he cracked the door open, the vague rumbling and pounding clarified into the un-music of power tools running off of a portable compressor and there was nothing vague about the hammering.

"Your blueprints are out of date." Hightower announced in a normal voice. "No hallway, but we can move out now."

I assumed, despite the racket, he meant that nobody else lurked in the immediate vicinity. So as we left the room and stepped into a large and messy area that was either half torn down or half rebuilt, it gave me a shock to see more than a dozen people who could see us. Most of these were construction workers; two were cops.

We weren't a pretty sight, but only the cops noticed. They started hurrying toward us but Hightower waved them off and they shrugged and stopped. The blueprints hadn't lied about everything. We found the stairwell door where it was supposed to be and started down.

We passed two more cops who were going up. They gave us a pair of horrified stares. Hightower gave them no more than a polite nod. I couldn't imagine why he wasn't enlisting their aid or warning them of danger, and it frightened me. Instead, he sped up until we were almost running down the steps. We wound up in a broad descending hallway with two doors, one to an elevator and the other conveniently labeled "Level A Parking."

Hightower rushed us into the multi-level garage, which had its own elevators and stairwells, and where, if I may paraphrase my grandfather's favorite baseball player, no one ever parked because it was always full.

"Oh, shit," Hightower hissed. "I forgot. Forbes had the key."

"Key to what?" I asked.

"The car."

"Seriously? With all your tech, your car needs an old-timey *key*?"

"Yeah. Company vehicle. No way to guess who might need to use it or when; too many agents to imprint. We'll take yours. Where you parked? Your car's still off grid."

Interesting, I thought. Someone from his agency must be updating him through his built-in radio. "South lot, first space in the last row."

He threw a scowl my way, apparently displeased with my taste in lot selection. "We're not going back into the building, so follow me."

He led us to my parking spot as if he despised straight lines, obviously trying to minimize our exposure to hostile eyes. I had another bad moment when the Spark was slow to respond to my bio-signature; something definitely wrong there. But the doors grudgingly unlocked. I got behind the wheel and Hightower grabbed shotgun. Even if he'd been registered in the car's biometrics, I wouldn't have let him drive, but I followed his directions without arguing. Instead, I spent my breath on questions beginning with the most urgent ones.

"What about my husband and daughter? My other daughter."

"Both safe. Already at headquarters with people I trust."

"That's good to know. So why didn't we wait for your agents? Why not alert the cops?"

"Turn left just ahead, we won't be taking the freeway. Police *are* getting warned, carefully and through LAPD channels. Trouble is, we can't be sure if every cop is legit; we got uniforms here from different bureaus and they don't all know each other. Think about it. If your, uh, abductors got to the hospital before me and Forbes, someone in my agency could be compromised and we're safer going to headquarters on our own. And if they didn't get here early, how did they get past so many cops?"

I shook my head but kept my eyes on the road. The windshield heads-up display flickered, then went out entirely. At least it couldn't criticize my driving. "You saw what they were wearing. Looks like they came disguised as hospital workers of some kind, but I see your point."

"No matter what," he said quietly, "they showed up damn fast. Keep going straight but get into the left lane. Now it's handy your GPS is down. Otherwise hostiles could trace us."

"What I wonder is how *you* arrived so soon." The car's interior wasn't smelling any too fresh, and not just from stale fear-sweat. It made me queasy to realize that the blood on us had begun to rot. I cracked a window. "Was the NSS keeping tabs on my mother for some reason? Or do you have a secret office at the hospital in case terrorists come in with a stubbed toe?"

The way he shifted in his seat told me I'd scratched a nerve. "You got any idea how many bogus tips

we get every day? And we're obligated to check out every damn one. Anyway, we got a—a semi-anonymous note naming you, saying you were about to shut off part of the traffic safety grid to cover up the murder—"

"*Total* BS. Who the hell would send something like that? And what the hell is a semi-anonymous note?"

From a corner of my vision, I saw him shrug. "It had a signature, sort of. Couple words in Spanish, some in German."

"Huh. Odd combo. Translation?"

"Something like, 'the chicken that must make a decision.' I don't know German so—hey, stay in the left lane."

I felt a rush of energy. For the first time this evening, I had a goal of my own.

"I know who sent that note, although God knows why he did it, and we're going to see him right now. Got to turn around, we're headed the wrong way. Unless you're not interested in getting to the bottom of all this?"

Here is one persistent myth: only young nerds can be computer experts. This meme has been burned into the public mind through a half-century of TV and movie repetition. So I wasn't surprised by Hightower's reaction when I told him about the man responsible for the note, one Simon D. Krause, a retired math professor in his late seventies known in elite circles as the Auracle. I spelled out "Auracle" but didn't spill Simon's last name.

Cue incredulous tone. "There are geezer hackers out there?"

Cue two of my buttons getting pushed. "Look, don't confuse your barely pubescent, cola-guzzling, acned computer tech with someone like Simon. Hell, none of the people who *invented* computers or smart ways to instruct them were toddlers when they worked their wonders." I made an effort to lower my voice. "Take John Bachus or Bjarne Stroustup—you probably never heard of either even though they've shaped your world. They didn't even *begin* their important work until they were thirty or so. Same goes for John Atanasoff and Konrad Zuse, who only pioneered the entire field. Google 'Grace Hopper' some time."

Yeah, young coders abound, but most only string together preassembled digital beads, and even today's brightest young nerdlets aren't immune to eventual wrinkles. As for real experts, well, as the dawn of the computer age recedes, so too have the hairlines of your true computer wizards, the males mean. We females never change, we are eternally young.

Having set Hightower straight on one fact of life, I had to deal with his other idiocy. "Also the Oracle isn't a 'hacker' in the sense you mean, although he might call himself one. In his day, it used to mean someone who enjoyed . . . fiddling around with computers and knew plenty about them. Now it's turned ugly, synonymous with 'cracker,' the word for assholes who build key-loggers or go phishing or screw up other people's networks. You know. The reason we all have to run resource hogs like real-time virus protection."

"Okay, okay. I stand corrected."

He was sitting but I figured he'd been tweaked enough for now. Besides, I heard clicking from the backseat.

"Who are you texting, Glory?"

"Blaze, mom. Just checking."

"Good idea." I didn't trust our pet agent's assurance of my family's safety either. "Dad'll be worried. But better not say where we're going; we can't be sure Blaze is the only one who'll get your message."

"I told you," Hightower complained, "your husband and daughter are with people I can count on."

"But I can't. You'll find out where we're going when we get there."

"How do you know this Auracle sent the message? And why would you trust someone who'd rat on you? Especially if the message lied, as you say."

I smiled a little. "I've known Simon most of my life and can count on *him* no matter how things seem. He put in that weird signature for my benefit, so I'd know he'd sent it."

"Explain."

"He has this bad habit of playing Socrates. One time we were talking, and I told him about a programming issue that should've been easy to work around but had been giving me headaches for weeks. So he asked me why the chicken crossed the road. I gave him the stock answer and a few others, like because it was too long to go around."

"I get it."

"Not yet you don't. He said that all my answers were reasonable, but what if he'd added details to the question? A chicken comes to a road and sees stuff lying on it: a spoon, a full ketchup bottle, a box of matches, and a screwdriver. Why did this chicken cross the road?"

"Okay. So what's the answer?"

"You tell me. But ask yourself, does the added information make a difference? I'm making a pit stop at the next charging station so we can all scrub some of the gore off. Can't wait to see the attendant's face after getting a good look at us."

I knocked on the door and it opened sooner than I'd expected.

The old man grinned like a rising sun, ignoring our spattered clothes and the wet smudges where soap and paper towels had almost entirely failed to work any magic. "Alison! And Gloria too; what a splendid young woman you've become! My, how time sails. She told me you'd both be here. Welcome and who is your friend?"

"Professor Simon Krause," I said formally, biting back my questions for the moment because I knew

that Simon wouldn't answer them until all social rituals had been completed, "this is NSS Special Agent Hightower. He saved us from getting kidnapped or worse half an hour ago. Sorry we're such a mess."

"Just Simon, please," the Auracle suggested, beaming approvingly and offering his hand.

Hightower hesitated for a second before shaking paws. "Your call, Simon."

"Honored, Agent Hightower. Won't you all come in? May I take your jacket, Agent?"

"Thanks, but no."

Glory muttered to me, "Probably stuffed with grenades."

Simon closed the door behind us. "Don't concern yourselves with dirtying my furniture, it all cleans up easily."

If the name Krause in association with an elderly math teacher suggests to you a lean and white-haired Teutonic, you'd be right about the hair. Simon's father may have fit the cliché, but Herr Gunter Krause moved to Mexico and took up polluting Aryan purity by marrying an Afro-Mexican schoolteacher and making three kids as a team effort. As a result, Simon is one handsome, racially ambiguous dude with a Hispanic accent stronger than my husband's. He's also brilliant and my mother's closest living friend.

Still, the most extraordinary thing about him, at least to me, is this gentle inner light that sometimes seems to glow so brightly that I swear he could hire himself out as a lantern. Just being near this man was a comfort, and I've seen entire herds of nervous students about to take an important test relax the moment he entered their classroom. I glanced at Hightower and even his clenched face had softened a little.

I parked my tongue until we were all seated in Simon's Danish armchairs, the kind of wood-and-leather furniture that Midcentury Modernistas would kill for and probably have. We visitors sat on one side of the room with me in the middle; Simon faced us from the other side.

Hightower reached into an overcoat pocket, extracted my purse and handed it over, earning my grateful smile for remembering it when I hadn't. But I wasn't so grateful that I allowed him to squeeze more than a few words out before I rode right over him. "Abuelo Simon." An honorary title. "Who told you we'd be coming?"

He smiled again. "Clara. She dictated the note that brought you here."

Hightower leaned forward, ready to take charge. I didn't let him.

"You *know* where my mother is?"

"Ah, my dear. I can't provide you a simple answer."

"How about yes or no?"

"In one sense, Clara should be joining us soon. In another . . . it would be best to let her explain."

"Wait a second! She's, um, up and about? *Talking?*" For most of this last month, she'd been less responsive than mud.

Complexities chased each other across Simon's barely-wrinkled face. "I fear you are in for something of a shock. And perhaps likewise for you, Agent. Clara gave me a message intended for your ears specifically."

Hightower finally had his chance to get a full sentence out. "That's not—what message?"

"She told me that by now, you'd have arranged for a contingent of federal officers to arrive in my neighborhood. She requested you to ask them to observe without interfering."

More a bombshell than a memo. This day just kept getting weirder. For a moment, I thought Hightower might freak out. Maybe he thought so too, but Simon radiates calmness the way a fireplug radiates heat. I could almost see the agent clamp down his bewilderment and make a decision.

His face went blank and his lips formed silent words. Then he nodded. "We'll play along for now, sir. Maybe just in time because I hear something coming up your driveway. What the—don't tell me you got one of those hybrids they stopped making back in the twenties. Sure putts like a methane engine." I strained my ears but heard nary a putt.

Simon's white eyebrows lifted. "My, you have superb ears, Agent! Or perhaps mine are finally failing." A gleam of humor brightened his eyes as he glanced my way, but I couldn't guess the cause.

We all heard a car door slam. My mother had been hell on doors of all kinds before she'd had her first stroke; she didn't believe they'd stay shut otherwise. But there was no way, I told myself, she could operate a car. All road vehicles, ancient or otherwise, were legally required to have at least the basic current safety systems pre-installed or retrofitted. Even if Gremma had miraculously regained the physical and mental capacity to drive, her license had been revoked, and despite any biometric permission Simon had given her, the engine wouldn't run. . . .

Simon shifted his attention between Glory and me. "That," he said happily, "will be Clara now."

Someone opened the front door and slammed that one too. I heard a light and familiar tread in the hallway. Despite Simon's warning, I felt the symptoms of real shock—blood rushing from my head, heartbeat going nuts, dizziness and the rest—as Gremma joined us in the living room. Only this wasn't the Gremma I'd last seen in the hospital, not by twenty, maybe even thirty years. She wore a long white blouse discarded two decades ago after an unfortunate incident involving coffee and a cracked mug. The blouse looked brand new.

For a few seconds, I discovered that the term "speechless" wasn't necessarily an exaggeration. So this time I didn't get in the first volley.

"Ma'am, I'm NSS Special Agent Ronald Hightower. Who are you?" He shot a dark look at Simon for misleading him.

I could understand his confusion and he wasn't alone. "Ma," I said, reverting to an almost forgotten

habit, "how—why do you look—so *young*?"

"Are you really my Gremma?" Glory asked in a tone of innocent wonder that I hadn't heard from her since she passed her earliest teens.

"Who else could I be, Gloria?"

My brain tied itself into tighter knots. If my mother was anywhere near the age she appeared to be, she should have no idea who Glory was. If she was a full thirty years younger, she might not be any too sure about me. I was eleven then and Dad had just come down with the condition that killed him four years later.

Simon wasn't about to let impossibilities make him neglect propriety. He stood, relieved my mother a canvas shopping sack she gripped by its straps after a soft "allow me, dear" and departed for the kitchen. I'm not sure why, but no one spoke in his absence and tension kept building. I heard the fridge door open, close, then a scraping sound. Our host reappeared carrying a kitchen stool, less cushy than his former seat that he offered to Gremma with a flourish. She handed him a few bills that I guessed were change from her shopping spree before accepting his offer. Simon parked himself on the stool and broke the awkward silence.

"Agent Hightower, permit me to introduce a fellow professor, Clara A. Weingart."

That cleared up nothing. Hightower turned toward me. "This woman isn't really your mother, right?"

Gremma's loud and infectious laugh, the one she'd gradually lost during this last year, rattled the windows and my heart accepted what my mind still struggled with.

She eased down to a chuckle. "This is more fun than I'd remembered!" She held up a restraining palm. "But I'm getting ahead of myself—something I've become quite adept at recently. Don't any of you get all flustered and red above the neck; I shall explain."

"Great." I meant it.

"What was in the bag, Gremma?" Glory asked, surprising me because that question lay below the bottom of my list.

"That's for later." She gave Simon a sort of half wink.

He nodded. "We could use my large sartén to heat—"

My mother squelched the rest of his comment by interrupting. "Let's not concern ourselves with that yet." She turned and gazed at Glory, then me, so tenderly that my own years seemed to fall away. I couldn't tell if she even noticed our gory clothes.

"But Ma, how could *you* drive Simon's car?"

"Carefully." She laughed.

"That doesn't—please, start from the beginning."

She nodded and pushed her dark hair behind her ears, a gesture so familiar it gave me goose bumps. "Let's get a few things established first. Do you recall my personality . . . changing abruptly while you were growing up?"

"Well, yeah. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Bear with me."

Staring at her only made my eyes water. "I must've been six, maybe seven, when you suddenly got a lot nicer." In most of my earliest memories, my mother had been a little stern and a lot distant; then one day she was a different person, warm, playful, and present.

"You were six and there's a reason I changed. One final issue before I Reveal All. She put a comic spin on those last two words, but then grimaced. "Know what area of research I focused on after your father passed away?"

I frowned, thinking back. "Area? I sure remember getting snatched out of school," which I resented, "and transplanted to Switzerland so you could play with the big collider. At the time, you told me you were hoping to confirm HT."

"Initially, that was my entire focus."

Retrieving memories from this period of my life always brought heart-pangs. "Hard to believe that Dad wasn't even sick when you invented HT. He would've been so proud of you when your first paper —"

"Excuse me, Professor Weingart," Hightower broke in, "if that's who you are. I'm miles out on a limb letting your family come here, and I only allowed it because of getting to know your daughter a little. Got any idea how much easier it would be to keep everyone safe at headquarters? We got thirty agents outside this house right now alert for hostiles. That's a lot of resources committed. My supervisor has let me run with it so far, but for sure I'd better be ready to justify my decisions. So I can't afford to be kept in the dark. What's this HT?"

"Harmonic Theory," Gremma said, a faint smile forming. "In brief, my idea that fermions and bosons of all flavors result from the interaction of primal, non-particle-mediated forces rather than possessing independent, inherent existence. Quite Tibetan Buddhist, according to Simon. In HT, nothing plus nothing can equal something. No strings attached. Of course HT gives rise to subsequent questions concerning the identity and origin of primal forces. Does this help, Agent?"

"Uh. Sure. I'm good." Judging from the fresh glaze over the man's eyes, I doubted that.

Perhaps I made a noise. Gremma expanded her smile and aimed it my way. "Don't be impatient, dear. His question is pertinent. Without the math behind HT, I couldn't have—ah, but you asked me to begin from the beginning; not a straightforward pathway, as you'll learn, but I shall try.

"Remember your fifteenth birthday, Ali? That was a hard day for me. I missed your father terribly, but I tried to shield you from my grief because you had too much of your own."

"Oh, I knew how you felt."

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