

Cowra, NSW (19:00 iTime)

Hale's Station in Cowra, New South Wales, had awakened to a rare dusting of snow that sparkled and danced on the autumn leaves. It was a small ranch by Australian standards. Melinda stepped barefoot onto the veranda and placed the serving tray on the wicker table. She poured hot tea into the mug and waited.

Joel Paynell put the grip on the table next to the rest of the disassembled Sig Sauer 9mm semi-automatic. "Thank ya." He took one of the three biscuits on the tray and tossed it in the air. The yellow-eyed Labrador retriever, Kip, watched intently as the treat arched over, then grabbed it out of mid-air and thumped his tail once in appreciation.

Melinda watched Joel take a sip. The left brim of his faded leather akubra was up and she could see his harsh-lined blue eyes. The corners of his mouth rose as he sipped the tea, put the mug down and wrapped a small, white cleaning patch around a ramrod. "Tea's good. Ya 'membered ta heat the pot."

She smiled politely.

Joel picked up the barrel of the Sig and passed the oiled patch down its throat from back to front, then removed it. He repeated this three more times, a little slower, a little more twist each time. He held the barrel up, caught a beam of light and gently twirled it around. He eyed the spectrum of light spiraling off the telltale boring swirls that gave a bullet its "signature."

"I can go now," she said. "My son arrive after." Her English bore witness to the midlevel education acquired through the New South Wales orphanage system years ago. Growing up in an orphanage was something they had in common, although he had never shared that with her. "Yeah, that's all right." His nod was quick. "I'll be leavin' soon, anyway. Just make sure you run the dogs twice a day. Might take 'em out back first of the week."

She bowed, stepped back a few more paces, turned and left without a word.

Joel sat in the sun and sipped the strong Earl Grey tea, much improved over Melinda's first attempts a year ago. She was his only help. Hale's Station was the favorite of his three homes. Most of the fields here were leased to neighbors for their cherry orchards and vineyards, and Melinda's primary concern was keeping the main house tidy and the dogs fit. He once told her that Hale's Station really belonged to "Kip 'n his pack." He just had a way with dogs. He finished assembling the gun.

He oiled the magazine and tested its springs, then loaded it with hollow point rounds and slid the magazine home. Overhead, a flock of noisy ducks circled in from the east, heading for the holding pond beside the house. Kip's ears perked. Joel chambered a round and slowly stretched his arms out and up until he held the weapon in a two-fisted grip. He took aim and counted down the distance in his head. He sighted in on the lead duck as the flock approached. *Twenty meters*, he thought. *Won't need twenty meters this afternoon.*

The lead duck spread its wings and threw out its chest as it splashed down. Joel squeezed off two rounds in under a second and the cracks reverberated out from the veranda. Kip softly whined as the flock noisily scattered off in every direction but theirs, all except for the lead duck, bobbing in its own wake. He grinned at Kip who was now marking time, prancing and panting and eager to "Go!"

Kip yelped and leapt all three of the veranda's steps in a single bound. He returned a minute later dripping and proud, placing the duck at Joel's feet. Another biscuit sailed and Kip honed in on it. *Young, tender. Two, maybe three*, he judged to himself. He wrote a note to Melinda to clean it and mind any shot fragments; he'd have it when he got back. He tucked the note under the corner of

the tray and looked at his watch. It was a four-hour drive to Sydney and the snow, even though it was slight, would slow things down some. If there was time, he wanted to make one more drive past the yacht club.

He poured another cup of tea, reached into the black case that carried his laptop and removed the photo. He studied the man. *White, middle-aged, bifocals and twenty pounds overweight. Executive-type fella*, he thought, *well-groomed, white shirt, tie*. The picture had a newspaper-type appearance and the man looked vaguely familiar. He took out his lighter as he turned it over and read the name. "Hmm." He lit it on fire, held it between his fingers, and held it to the breeze.

He pocketed the two spent cartridges, picked up his computer bag and flipped Kip the last biscuit. "Keep the station, mate."

Troy, MI (01:00 iTime)

Renee DePerre peered around the corner of the kitchen and saw Michael already back at his desk. She could only see the top of his head over the chair, but could tell he was deep into something on the screen. *Already working*. She went back to cleaning up in the kitchen. *It can wait*. Outside, an ambulance siren cried its way past their second-story apartment. Beaumont Hospital was nearby. After two years, it was just so much white noise now.

Michael Rowe sat back in his chair and glanced across the three monitors. The largest one on the left was his work station, and it displayed a bar graph, sixteen columns of various heights, all of them green, all of them, "fine," he said under his breath. He heard her doing the dishes. He reached in his pocket and took out a waxy envelope, like the kind you got at the post office, only this one didn't have stamps. He took out the gold and diamond ring, glanced over his shoulder, then held it up to the light. There was a *signature*, the jeweler told him, two tiny flaws deep down one of the side facets that were far too small to be seen by the naked eye. The stone looked perfect to him, but the jeweler assured him, were that the case, the price would be much higher. Thirty-five hundred dollars was as much perfection as he could afford. He still owed two grand. Oh, he had the ring and the box it originally came in, just not the certificate or the appraisal form. He wouldn't get those until it was paid in full. He could return it if she said no, but it would cost him three hundred dollars for restocking fees. *Restocking fees*, he laughed under his breath. *What? They flip the lid on the box and put it back in the display case?* He glanced over his shoulder again. *She won't say no*. He put it back in the envelope and slipped it into his pocket. Carrying it around in its box would be too bulky, too obvious. He heard the sink running.

He brought up a browser window already open to *eBay*, to one of its thousands of auctions being conducted.

"Ted Williams Collection, circa 1959," this one was titled, with, "Autographed and Certified" as the subhead. The description stated, as the picture showed, the collection consisted of two numbered and dated "homerun" baseballs and one 1959 Topps Card, all signed by the great slugger, mounted and sealed in a glass and mahogany case. And a certificate of authenticity. He glanced over his shoulder again, then to the shelf above his work station, to the very item itself. He had owned it all his life, a gift from his father, who himself had received it from *his* father, who had caught both of those homerun balls that year. He let out a deep sigh and touched the pocket that held the ring. With his other hand, he hit "refresh."

Total bids were now 25, up four in the last couple of minutes and inching closer to his reserve of \$1,750. "Three minutes," he said, too loud as it turned out.

"What?" Renee asked from the kitchen, looking for any way into a conversation.

He quickly brought another browser to the front and turned to the third monitor on his desk, that being his laptop. On it was his Outlook Express email program and he pretended to be reading some mail. "Nothing." He glanced; she wasn't there. *If it doesn't meet the reserve, I don't have to sell it. If it does, and she said no, then I'll tell the buyer too bad, and just live with the consequences. But she won't say no.* The hose attachment on the sink had a very distinctive "cheeeee" sound, and he knew she would be done any second. "What's for dessert?" he called out, hoping to keep her in there just a few more minutes. He refreshed the *eBay* screen again. "Two-twelve," he said, much softer this time. Thirty bids, the highest of which now matched his reserve. *She has to say yes.* He refreshed again.

"What, Hon?" Renee called from the kitchen as she heaped the remains of their dinner into Widow's bowl. The all-black cat jumped down from the windowsill with a single, raspy *merr-ow* for thanks.

Michael called out. "What's for dessert?"

Renee washed the last dish, dried her hands on the towel and opened the window next to the sink. It opened up onto the flat rooftop and Widow, not at all interested in the leftovers, jumped back to her perch on the sill. "Brownies or ice cream. Or both." Renee tossed the dishcloth on top of the pans.

"Both, please." He was out of his chair now, hovering over the monitor like an owl on a mouse. *Sixty seconds.* His long black hair hung to his shoulders. He heard bowls chime together in the kitchen. "And crush up the brownie, okay?" Refresh. He crossed his fingers. The freezer door squeaked shut.

"I suppose you want whipped cream and a cherry on top, too?"

The auction had thirty-one seconds left, and a new high bid of \$2,001. "Yes!" Refresh.

"Ha, ha! We don't have any," Renee called back in her best sarcasm.

Eighteen seconds. "I'll be right in." Refresh. *\$2,125!* He pumped a fist and silently counted down the seconds. Refresh.

She picked up both bowls and turned for the door, but Michael was standing there with the broadest grin she'd ever seen him wear, his dark eyes as big as olives.

He put an arm around her waist and kissed her on the forehead. "When was the last time I told you I loved you?" He blew another kiss in her ear.

She mock-frowned, "What did you buy this time?"

He sat opposite her and smiled across the table. *She'll say yes.*

"So, how much?"

"What?"

"*What* did you buy?"

He hated lying to her. "Ah, a signed Ted Williams. A card. He's dead now, you know."

"The Great Cryogenic." She tilted her head. "How much?"

"Hey, if they clone his DNA the card could be worth..." he shrugged both his hands and his shoulders, grinned and said, "Who knows?" Her eyes sparkled like emeralds.

"You've already got a signed card of his, don't you? *And* two autographed baseballs."

He just wanted to change the subject now. "Brownies are great," he proclaimed between mouthfuls.

"I'll tell my sister you said so. So you're not going to tell me how much?"

"One-fifty," he lied.

She dropped her jaw, got up and took her bowl to the counter. Widow meowed once and came in the window, flicked her tail and licked the remains with enthusiasm.

Shit, he thought, *now she's mad at me for something I didn't even do!*

"One hundred and fifty dollars would have gone a long way around this place." She pulled his

empty plate away from the table and took it to the cat, too. She didn't want to get him mad, though. "Never mind," she said. "I have something else we need to talk about." She sat back down and smiled, then reached across the table and put her hands on his. "I found a car today that I really like," she said enthusiastically. "I drove it and I love it and I think we can afford it!" Her hands were warm, and her face absolutely radiant under her auburn hair and he was lost in her eyes.

"Did you hear me? Are you still thinking about that baseball card?"

"What?"

She took her hands away and dropped her enthusiasm. "I said I found a car I really like and I think we can afford it. Of course, spending a hundred and fifty dollars on an old piece of cardboard doesn't help much for the down payment now, but the guy said we could drive it off the lot for fifteen hundred. Said our monthly payments would be under two-fifty."

"Honey, we can't afford to buy a new car." His take, after eBay, shipping and insurance would be a little over two grand, just enough to pay off the ring. "Car payments. I just got *rid* of car payments." The fifteen-hundred deposit had come from his savings for a new car. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with the Honda."

She looked at him surprised. "A month ago you were cursing that car."

"It's just old. It's still reliable."

"The heater doesn't work, and it uses almost as much oil as gas, and..."

"That's not true!"

"...And the handbrake doesn't work. There's a headlight *and* a taillight out now..."

"Those are just bulbs."

"Michael, that car has over two hundred thousand miles on it." She stitched her arms across her chest. "I got that flat last winter and had to freeze for over an hour, and - I just don't trust it anymore."

Springing the engagement ring on her was fast becoming, *Not an option*.

"Can we talk about this when I get home from work?" He looked at the clock as he got up. He worked less than three miles away at 1-AV World Headquarters on Rochester Road, right smack in the middle of Automation Alley, Detroit's answer to California's Silicon Valley and Boston's 128 corridor. He liked the work but hated the graveyard shift and anxiously counted the days to his job review.

She got up, too, and gave him a hug. "Well, don't leave angry."

"I'm not angry." He hugged her tight and laughed. "I wish I didn't have to head in early tonight, but we've got a client coming in at ten. It shouldn't run more than an hour."

"Does that mean you can leave early?" she winked.

"I'll try." *That'd be perfect*, he smiled back. *Just slide under the sheets and slip it on her finger*. He kissed her.

During the week, 1-AV World required at least one technician on site round the clock, but Weekends were more lax, and he'd often go home if there weren't any scheduled events. Given that he lived only a few miles away, Shabbir, his boss, let him set up a remote monitoring server in his apartment. The trick was, he had to *stay* home; he couldn't go to see the Tigers play at Comerica Park, even though he had season tickets. Something else he inherited from his Dad. "We're testing 3Wave's new GPS repeater, tonight. Still in beta. Lisa was supposed to run the logs, but I'm subbing for her."

"Where's Lisa?"

"Bar mitzvah in Cleveland."

Renee and Michael met their sophomore year at Michigan State through a friend they hardly ever saw anymore. They met in computer science, a subject Renee easily aced, but she dropped out of

it her last two years in favor of journalism. Junior year, she interned for the *Detroit Free Press*. They found a place off campus that fall and moved in together. From friends to lovers to soul mates in fourteen months. Down at the paper, she was making a name for herself, too, from intern to her own byline within one year, and a front page story her senior year. For sure to be hired. "Well, if it's not too late, why don't you stop by Blockbuster and rent something steamy." He winked his reply and gave her another hug and a kiss.

She listened to his steps on the stairs.

Their apartment was above a liquor store. She called Widow in from the roof and closed the window. It was starting to feel like rain. She plopped down on the leather couch and Widow jumped on her lap. Her eyes fell to the framed front-page story she had penned for the *Free Press*. Widow purred under her stroking. *It's not your writing*, she remembered every word Mike Drennan said to her that last day. *Your writing is excellent. It's the strike. Now that it's over. My hands are tied.* But "P2" ~ as he was known around Fort Street ~ did arrange her interview with MidwestTechnologyEzine.com, where she has written something every month for the past twenty-nine, without a pay raise. She still heard from P2 from time to time, but it had been months now. She placed Widow on the couch next to her and got up.

Her current assignment on her computer stared back at her, a piece about nanotechnology assembly that required more research than quantum physics and still read as dry as yesterday's toast. *Time to pay the rent.*

Sheets of rain stamped across the roof of the one-story building as Michael Rowe surveyed the bank of clocks that ran along the upper edge of the conference room. The one labeled Troy read 11:35 p.m. All were identical except for two. Troy, local time, was significantly larger than the others, but otherwise identical. The clock labeled "iTime" was also larger and further distinguished with a bright orange housing. It read 05:35. iTime, Internet Time, just another term for Greenwich Mean Time. *Blockbuster's only open another twenty-five minutes*, he thought to himself as he walked through the haze of cigar smoke that hung in the air, to the head of the large, horseshoe-shaped conference table where he began the shut-down process. He switched off the audio-out on the control panel, then heard a loud crack of thunder and stopped. He walked over to the window and opened the vertical blinds. His car was only fifty feet away, but through the downpour, all he could make out was the Honda's silhouette. The wind buffeted against the big, double-pane windows and lightning cracked. He jumped back a step and grabbed his breath, and watched the second hands sweep like synchronized swimmers.

At the foot of the table, opposite the mural and clocks, three tiers of monitors were built high into the wall. The top row consisted of four 42-inch monitors framed in gun metal gray, and their clarity was remarkable. Tonight, they had displayed the 1-AV conference rooms of Troy, London, Vancouver and Sydney that had been used for the 4C, or "four cell," event. The other two rows were 19-inch monitors, all twelve of which sat dark and cold.

One-AV World, or just "Juan Avy" to those who drew a paycheck, sold time, Worldwide access time for teleconferencing over a guaranteed secure Virtual Private Network (VPN). Here, in the heart of Automation Alley, were plenty of customers with secrets that needed to be both shared and protected among suppliers and vendors. Michael's employer provided conference rooms virtually identical to this one in the top fifty markets of the world. Every one was capable of translating between six languages – both voice and data. It was data translations that made them unique among peers. One-AV didn't concern itself with what their clients talked about, either, and those clients came in all shapes and sizes and during all hours of the day and night. Most were young executives who had figured out how to harvest the new crops sown in the digital age.

Ironically, 1-AV's largest client was Uncle Sam. Some of Juan Avy's brightest minds were outsourced to the Department Of Defense.

Michael's only job was to make sure the equipment worked. Not allowed to listen in on the actual event, he never entered a room unless summoned. At the close of an event, each location would hand over a CD copy of the recording to its client and 1-AV was done. No archiving, no duplicating, no delayed broadcasts. No breach of confidence. He glanced again at the monitors, and for the first time noticed someone sitting at the table in Sydney. He corked up a frown. A lightening streak illuminated the window and a heartbeat later a clap of thunder reverberated down the walls, shaking the single-story building. He held his breath. An instant later, the Troy monitor played his frozen expression.

Only Sydney's conference room showed any activity. A man was seated at the head of a table and, even though the lights were low, the monitor did a remarkable job and each detail was clear. The man's tie was loose, his sleeves rolled up, and he seemed to be deeply engrossed in whatever he was doing on the laptop. There was writing on a chalkboard behind the man.

Michael knew he wasn't supposed to be seeing any of this, but this wasn't a "real" event, was it? *The guy in Sydney must be asleep at the switch. Or something.* He glanced at the Sydney clock on the wall. *Late afternoon.* He had no way of knowing if the monitor for Troy was still turned on half way around the world, or if the man even knew someone was watching him and listening to him mumble.

He walked around the table to get closer to the monitor and glanced at the Sydney clock again. *Sunday afternoon.* He could see the man's laptop; it was plugged into the control panel on the conference table. That meant he was still logged into the system. There was a new Motorola satellite phone on the table, too, and the chalkboard behind him showed some kind of financial forecast. The image was so clear he could see a spike in the last quarter on the chart, but he couldn't read the writing under it, heavily underlined and in a different color. The man never looked up from his computer, but Michael put his age at closer to fifty than thirty, hair gray and receding.

Curiosity had him. Convinced the monitor for Troy was *not* on in the Sydney conference room, Michael walked back to the head of the table, glanced out the window, and then at the audio-out switch. *Off.* He wiggled the mouse attached to the laptop and it played a short piano solo as the screensaver dissolved. He watched, but the man in the monitor never moved. Michael chose "log file" from the pull-down menu. It confirmed what the four monitors had already told him.

London was quiet, Vancouver showed no throughput, and Sydney showed... *Two open channels? Event's over, dude.*

He synced, or "subscribed," his laptop to Sydney's first signal, and got the same shot the monitor was displaying. He synced to the second signal and it brought up what he figured must be the same image the man had on his laptop. He wondered who he was connected to. *Unless Sydney's made some side deal for this man, the event should be over. Dead air everywhere.* The man never looked up.

On the other end in Sydney, there would have been a slight degradation in the signal as soon as he synced in, but it was so slight that even an administrator might miss it if he or she weren't watching the actual hiccup. All of 1-AV's conference rooms were virtually identical, but short of reconnecting the audio-out feed and asking the man, Michael had no way of knowing if the Sydney monitors were on or off. The only part of the room the camera couldn't see was the wall it was mounted on, which also housed the monitors.

Outside, a crack of lightning lit up the room. Michael's fingers jumped from the keyboard. There was a flash on the Troy monitor a second later and his image jumped again.

"Private and Confidential" was written in bold, red letters across the screen. *Private and*

Confidential. He scrolled down. *The Freya Project.* Below that, *Vanadium Production Estimates* and a string of line items with numbers attached. Below that, a bar chart compared the same four quarters that were on the chalkboard behind the man, and below that, a second chart, identical but for a much more robust fourth quarter.

The man in Sydney still hadn't moved, and Michael thought, *his monitors must be off, only the camera's running. Camera's always last.* He strummed his fingers softly on the keys for a second, then chose "Copy Remote2" from the options menu and sent it to a folder called "Micros Personal." The server would record his copying that file at 05:47 iTime. *Flush that toilet later.*

Besides, this dude's hikin' air!

It only took a few moments to copy the file, which Michael quickly forwarded to his computer at home, then trashed the original from this server. The record of it was still on the server logs, but they weren't going anywhere. *Take care of that from home.*

Outside, the thunderstorm still raged. He couldn't even see the traffic light on Rochester Road. He was about to log off and erase his tracks when someone said, "Hey, Rupert? What do you think you're doing?"

Michael shot a startled look at the door. No one. He glanced across the monitors and saw the man in Sydney looking up from his work. He sighed and relaxed. Even though he had switched off the audio-out feed some time ago, the audio-in was live.

The man in Sydney looked alarmed "What! What are you doing here?" The man called "Rupert" said. An instant later, Rupert sprang to his feet, reached for an eraser and began to frantically wiping the chalkboard. "These are confidential notes!" He turned to say more, but then froze, and for one brief second Michael got a good look at Rupert.

A man walked under the camera and said, "I figured you'd try something like this."

Rupert raised his hands and almost covered his face. Michael could see only the accuser's back, his crew cut and thick red neck. He was dressed in a brown tweed hunting jacket with elbow patches. "*Dude,*" Michael snickered like he was watching a movie and forgot the storm for the moment. "*You're stylin'.*" A taller man came into view under the camera; he was wearing a tan jacket and an Australian outback hat with one brim turned up. And he had a gun!

This isn't funny anymore.

"Did you think I was really that stupid?"

Rupert's lip curled and his expression went from shock to rage, "Who do you think you're fucking with!" But he never got another word out.

"Kill him!" the hidden voice commanded and two shots no louder than a spit could be heard in Michigan. Rupert doubled over, fell backwards and disappeared beneath the table and out of camera's view. The gunman approached the head of the table. He was taller by a good six inches, but the brim of the hat hid his face. An eerie quiet filled the static-rich air in Troy and Michael's heart raced. The gunman dropped a large green-and-white plastic bag next to Rupert, then both men knelt down and disappeared behind the table. Michael still hadn't seen either man's face.

There was another loud strike of thunder, this one so close it shook the building and produced another flash that lit up the room. The taller man stood up and stared at the far wall. Michael watched as the killer scanned the room. Michael could see him clearly now, the one with the gun.

Dark, weathered complexion, he noted.

Michael heard him say, "Keep ya head down," while he walked around the table maintaining a fixed gaze straight ahead. He continued until his face nearly filled the monitor. "*One word and you're dead, Long Hair!*" he snarled.

Michael tripped over his own feet, caught his balance, then ran from the room as another bolt of lightning struck.

Michael had been driving for an hour, trying to decide where to go and what to do. He stared past his speeding windshield wipers without realizing it had stopped raining. He couldn't get the image of what he had just witnessed out of his mind. "*One word and you're dead, Long Hair!*" The words rang over and over in his mind.

Twice he'd driven past the police station, but he didn't know what he'd tell them. He wanted to talk to Renee, but he didn't know what to tell her, either. He tried to calm down. *How's someone in Sydney going to kill me over here?*

The client had the only CD, there was no evidence. *The cigar smoker? The sign-in ledger would have his name. Did London or Vancouver show any throughput?* He tried to remember. Then he spotted red lights flashing in his mirror.

He pulled onto the shoulder, stopped and lowered his window, and realized for the first time it had stopped raining. He started to turn off the wipers. "Keep your hands where I can see them," a distinctly female voice said. The interior of his car lit up with a floodlight and he squinted from the glare in the mirror.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?" the officer said as she shined the light around the car's interior until satisfied he was alone and there were no visible weapons, bottles, cans or drug paraphernalia.

"No, but... ah, no," Michael said.

"You have a taillight out, and you were driving thirty miles per hour. Minimum speed is forty-five. Do you know it's not raining?" She held the flashlight on his face as she leaned in closer to the window and took a whiff to see if she could smell alcohol or dope. Nope. She pulled back a step and looked over the exterior of the car. "Driver's license, registration, and proof of insurance, please." She noticed there was a headlight out, too.

Michael turned off the wipers, and got his wallet. "I'm sorry, I'm pretty nervous. I... I just witnessed a murder!" He stared into her eyes.

"Driver's license, registration, and proof of insurance, please," she repeated without a blink.

She shined the light into his eyes again as she accepted the papers. "Stay in your car," she said in a monotone.

Michael wondered if she even heard what he had said. "Look, officer," he leaned out of the window as she started to walk away, "I haven't been drinking or anything. I'm not crazy. I'm..." Officer Nevis turned around quick; the last person who said that to her had indeed been crazy. "I'm just nervous as hell. I mean, you would be, too, if you just saw what I saw." Michael watched as she stood back by the rear bumper and read his driver's license, while keeping one suspicious eye on him.

She walked back up to his window and said, "Step out of the car, please."

They stood between the cruiser and the Honda and she said, "Tell me what you saw."

"I saw a murder in Sydney, Australia," he said.

She raised one eyebrow. "Australia?"

"In cyberspace. In a cybercast. I saw a man murdered in cold blood! Just gunned down, by two men. I got a good look at one of them. I work for 1-AV World, on Rochester Road," he continued without a break. "We do cybercasts for clients. I'm in charge of the graveyard shift and about an hour ago I was waiting out the storm after a four-cell event when I saw two men walk into Sydney and shoot a guy named 'Rupert!'" He paused for a second. "I saw the whole thing! They called him by name, 'Rupert.' And they shot him. *And he saw me!*"

She listened closely to the clarity of his speech, fast but coherent. His eyes appeared clear and his stance was firm. "Who's Rupert?" She asked as she wrote, "crazy?" in her notepad next to his license plate number.

“The guy they *killed!* They called him ‘Rupert.’ They said, ‘Hey Rupert!’ And they shot him! One of them saw me. Through the monitor. And he threatened to kill me. Said he’d kill me if I told anyone. And that’s why...”

“He saw you?”

“A cybercast is a two-way video conference between remote locations. He saw me in his monitor.”

“I see. Wait in your car, please.”

Michael tried to shield his eyes from the spotlight. It was one in the morning but he wasn’t tired. Then he remembered he had never shut down the event before running out of 1-AV World.

“Shit!” he uttered.

A few minutes later, the officer came back with a long, white slip that had a green stripe on the bottom of it. “I’m giving you a fix-it ticket for both the headlight and taillight. Show the repairs to any police officer within ten days. They will sign the back of the ticket and you mail it to this address and the ticket will be dismissed.”

He accepted the ticket and folded it several times. “What about sketching the killer?” He put it in his wallet.

She stared at him with a stern grin. “Look kid, it’s only a fix-it ticket. No points, Okay? Just get it fixed, and save the stories for your friends.”

“You don’t believe me? I saw him as clearly as I see you now.”

Suddenly, the police comm. sounded, “*All units in the area. We have a two-car accident on North interstate 75 at mile marker 74 and a half...*”

She grabbed her microphone and shouted, “Three-o-two in route. Three minutes south.” She broke into a run back to her car, but now started to feel a little guilty about the way she dismissed him. “My badge number’s on the ticket. Call me tomorrow.” She threw it into gear and gunned past the Honda.

Sydney, NSW (06:00 iTime)

The electronic key was taped to the windshield above the Rolls’ mirror, so Joel didn’t even have to lower his window as the gate rose without a sound. He pulled Rupert’s Corniche into the Members Only parking area of the Sydney Yacht Club. There was no guard on duty Sunday afternoons, he knew that, and the surveillance camera would be useless against tinted windows. There were very few other cars. He took the closest available spot, got out and locked it remotely. He walked behind the camera, stepped briskly across the manicured lawn, over the decorative, white, draped-link fence and got behind the wheel of his own Seven-Series BMW. Warren, who had followed the Rolls in Joel’s car, went around to the passenger’s side. Thirty seconds later they were gone. Neither man spoke as Joel drove the quarter kilometer to the marina side of the club. Joel gave him his hat, and with the akubra hiding his face, Warren walked quickly and straight to the *Alley Oop*, Rupert’s 47-foot cruising sloop.

He put on Rupert’s yellow deck jacket. With that and Joel’s hat, he could easily be mistaken for the skipper from a distance. He glanced around, but there was no one. The *Alley Oop*, normally crewed by two, could easily be manned by one experienced sailor familiar with her sails, GPS navigation and nautical instruments. *This was Rupert’s prize possession*, Warren thought as he started the Perkins Diesel and let it warm up to temperature before backing out of the slip. *He loved this boat almost as much as he loved screwing people.* There were no other pleasure crafts on the water this late in the day, this late in the season as he no-waked past the breakers.

He savored the sea breeze and relaxed now that the boat was on the water, but his thoughts

quickly turned to that kid in the monitor. Nerves started pinching at the back of his neck and he tried to think of something else.

Warren had taken the helm of the *Alley Oop* before, and he was glad that it took his full concentration to get around the point and into the cove. He cut the engine and came about as Joel motored the Avon inflatable dinghy alongside. He could see Joel's BMW parked in the lot at the public launch.

"Anyone see you?" Warren asked in an urgent tone as he caught the line from Joel and secured it to the *Alley Oop*.

Joel stared at him cold. "Keep ya voice down." Rupert's body and the rest of the gear stayed in the dinghy. Joel climbed aboard *Alley Oop* wearing surgical gloves. He strung out the line a few meters and let the dinghy tow behind.

Warren throttled the 85-horse diesel as soon as they were in the channel and set a course south by southeast. "So what are we going to do about *him*?" Warren set the auto pilot as soon as they were up to speed. "Who was he?" He looked over the rigging, tested the ropes for tension and the winches for slack, then shook out a cigarette. "You think he'll heed your warning?"

"Wait until we're in the dinghy to smoke." Joel didn't want so much as a single ash out of place when they found the *Alley Oop*. As Joel watched Warren test the gear, he got to thinking about the person who had put him in touch with Doctor Warren Kerwin; an enormous Canadian named Bill Roper whom he'd met trap shooting years ago. Roper had come to be one of his better sources for the highly discretionary clients he catered to, and he wondered what Warren's connection to Bill was.

"He was just a kid." Joel finally answered after a moment, "Long, dark hair, slender face." He turned back to him and asked, "Why'd ya stand up when I told ya keep yer head down?"

"I didn't know you meant the monitor." By the time he realized that, all there was to see was a shadow running out of the picture. "He was *recording it!*" He voice raised an octave with each word.

"Don't know that for certain." *Something* had been recorded; of *that* Joel was sure. He replayed the past couple of hours and thought about what had to be done to fix it.

After bagging Rupert's body and putting it into the trunk of Joel's car, they returned to the conference room, with Joel's laptop. Warren cleaned the stain on the carpet as best he could, then splashed wine on the table, chair and floor. Joel first used the room's laptop to access the log files. That's when he discovered *two* outbound signals still being broadcast. And that's when Warren started getting visibly nervous. Joel recognized the two files had a different extension, one that gave him some concern. He quickly copied digital snapshots of both and copied them to CD, then swapped out that CD with one that had a brand new virus he'd recently acquired in the Philippines called simply "MF."

He couldn't change the past, but maybe he could erase it.

With MF embedded in the stream of both outgoing signals, Joel then swapped out laptops and plugged his into the table console, and quickly ascertained the destination of both signals. The first had proved to be Rupert's townhouse in Sydney. No problem there, Warren assured him; his wife was out of the country and he had a key. A few minutes later, Joel had the second signal, too; 1-AV World, Troy, Michigan, USA.

Being on the backbone of 1-AV's worldwide server, root access to their Intranet server proved no challenge at all. In less than five minutes Joel was reading their personnel records, which thankfully proved to be on a different server than the teleconferencing server MF was chewing her way through. But, like any good propagating virus, it was only a matter of time. He worked quickly until he was able to find their teleconferencing schedule. There, he found out that a Mr. Michael R. Rowe had been assigned as technical assistant for the video meeting from 03:00 to

05:00 iTime. He copied down a wealth of contact information, but there wasn't a picture of the employee. Seconds later, the screen went dead. Hello MF...

Warren cut the engines. "We're an hour out now. This should be good." He went aft while Joel scanned the horizon with his binoculars. The new moon offered little light on the dead, quiet night. There was not another ship to be seen, only the soft halo of Sydney's coastal lights interrupted the sea from the stars. High overhead, Joel spotted the beacon of a jet liner inching across the stars. Warren came back up and handed Joel a bottle of Rupert's best scotch and his personal snifter, the one emblazoned with the SYC burgee and his gold initials.

"Right," Joel said. "You get to messin' things up right, I'll do the body. Was he left or right handed?" Joel asked as he dumped most of the scotch into the sea.

"Right."

Joel opened the bag about halfway and a putrid stench hit him as he pulled out Rupert's right hand and secured his prints to the glass. The hand felt cold and already waxy.

Warren coughed, took the glass and the mostly empty bottle and brought them back onboard where he placed them next to Rupert's chair and the magazine rack. Then he put Rupert's reading glasses down and turned his attention to the rigging. He had done this before, but always with someone's help, and always with careful attention *not* to tangle the lines. But tonight was different.

Joel tied four cinderblocks to the body bag, then used an eight-inch serrated knife to stick Rupert's corpse, twisting the blade and rowing it. He never looked at his victim's face and left the bag half open. "Right," he shouted to Warren. "Give me a hand with him."

The two of them heaved the body bag, knife and all, into the cold Tasman Sea. Joel pointed the flashlight around the empty dingy, then handed it to Warren and jutted his head. "Up you go, then."

Warren scurried the laminated Sitka spruce mast as best he could, until he was thirty feet above the sea and eye level with the peak of the mainsail. He released the shackle on the halyard and the sail drooped in the shallow breeze. He looked down, picked a spot on the deck and dropped the flashlight. It shattered into several pieces. He inhaled the salty air, held it and listened to the calm waters slap against the hull.

"Hurry up," Joel called, "Shark's 'll be here for this chum any minute."

Warren climbed back down, set the autopilot, then climbed into the inflatable.

At some point, perhaps in a day or two, the *Alley Oop* would be found out of fuel with its mainsail adrift, hopefully by then, torn and tattered. After a few futile days of searching, Rupert Wylie would be pronounced, "Missing at sea and presumed drowned." His wife would be a widow.

On the way back to shore, Joel took out his laptop and Warren lit a cigarette. "How'd you get so good with computers?" Warren shouted above the 10-horse outboard.

Joel could read most modern programming code better than most programmers could read a newspaper. It was an education that had started in the Australian Army, Tactical Forces, but that wasn't something he wanted to share with this client. "Something I just picked up." He looked at the contact information on his screen and said, "Michael R. Rowe,"

"What are we going to do about him?" Warren asked.

"First, we need to find out who he is. Find the employee files, maybe, get a look at him, then I'll be able to tell ya for sure." Warren asked something else, but Joel waved him off, pointed to the engine and said, "Can't hear ya."

Joel thought about Vietnam. He had taken orders from American MPs back then, even though he had worn a Kiwi uniform. Part of the Cooperative Forces Company, his mission had been to eradicate a growing drug trade among the troops. *Eradicate the filth*, was how he still thought of it.

Sometimes, that had meant the persons commanding the troops, like the decorated major outside the rubber plantation near Nui Dat in 1970; he had taken to running *guns* to support his own drug habit. Or the general who had used a diplomatic pouch to courier two kilos of heroin a week. Arrests would have only poured salt on open wounds. Better another casualty of war. In the spring of 1975, Joel Paynell was discharged with honors from the New Zealand Army. Later that year, he took a civilian post with the Australian Army's new electronic surveillance tactical force, where he learned computers, code writing and telephonic trap-and-trace techniques. "How are you going to find him?" Warren lit a third cigarette off of the second. Joel cut the outboard, leaving the dingy to drift silently on the slight chop. The wind was picking up, and that was good. He took Rupert's satellite phone out of his pocket, punched the international code for America and Michael R. Rowe's home number, but held back on hitting Send. He told Warren, "If he answers, I'll talk to him. But if a woman answers, here's what I want ya to say.

Troy, MI (06:00 iTime)

Michael Rowe took the Adams Road exit and doubled back to 1-AV World on the side streets, paying close attention to the speed limit. When he got there, the parking lot was so packed it could have been 1:00 p.m., not a.m.

Vijay's car was there and so was George's truck and Shabbir's Caddy. *Shit.*

Vijay was standing out front smoking a cigarette. "Where have you been, Micro?" He greeted Michael without his usual warm smile. "Your cell's off and Renee said you hadn't come home." Michael didn't answer; instead asked, "What happened?"

"We got hit. Bad." Vijay displayed a calm disappointment for how nervous he really felt. "The whole of Alamo and half of Mount McKinley," he added, referring to the servers by name.

"How?"

"Virus. Nasty."

"Damn!"

"You are not going to like this. It tracked back to your Sydney event."

Michael watched Vijay's mouth moving but could only hear, "*One word and you're dead, Long Hair!*" Vijay was staring at him. Michael blinked twice. "What?"

"It came from your event. Where have you been?"

"I... just wanted to get to Blockbuster before they closed. But then the storm..."

Vijay's slight smile melted. "The storm has long since passed." He shook his head. "Blockbuster has been closed for two hours."

"I got a ticket."

"It took two hours to write a ticket?"

Michael changed gears. "How much damage?"

"We do not know yet. It is just a mess right now. Luckily, George and I had just returned when it happened. You left the door open, too - Shabbir does not know about that. We stopped the virus before it got to any client servers. At least, we think we did. But, of course," he pleaded with his hands.

Michael just stared at Vijay. "*One word and you're dead, Long Hair!*"

"Come," Vijay turned for the door.

Michael backed away. "Look, just don't say anything, okay?" He turned to his car. "About seeing me, I mean. Okay? I need some time to think. Say you *just* remembered I was going out of town. To the U.P. Yeah! The U.P. Okay?"

"I can not lie for you, Micro." He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "Not without some very good reason."

"Renee!" he said and turned for his car, calling over his shoulder as he ran, "You gotta trust me on this one, Veejer. I'll call you tomorrow morning, okay?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I'll call you."

Widow meowed as she recognized Michael's footsteps on the stairs. He opened the door a crack. "Honey?" he called softly and pushed the door open. The only light was from the television. Widow rubbed against his leg. He saw Renee on the couch, curled up in her long night shirt. He let out a deep sigh of relief as he closed the door, walked up and shook her by the shoulder.

"Honey?"

She jumped and Michael saw a look of more than just concern.

"I've been worried sick!" She started to get up. "The phone's been ringing all night."

"What?"

"First the call from the restaurant where you left your credit card, then..."

"What? I wasn't in any restaurant tonight." He slid his hand over his hip pocket. "What did he say?"

"He asked if you were white and skinny and had long, black hair, and if you were working at 1-AV World tonight."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said, 'Yes.' He told me you left your credit card on the table and he wanted our address so he could return it..."

"Oh, God! You didn't give it to him! *Did you?*"

"Of course. You want your credit card back, don't you? Michael, what is going on?" She eyed him up and down.

Michael held her by the shoulders. "What did he sound like?" *One word and you're dead, Long Hair!*

"What? Normal, I guess. What do you mean? Michael, you're scaring me!"

"Did he have an accent, an Australian accent?"

"Not him but the other person, maybe. They both sounded long distance."

The phone rang and they both tensed. It rang a second time, then a third. Michael picked it up and listened to just static on the line. "Hello?"

"Michael Rowe?"

It was him! He wanted to hang up but he could not let go of the receiver.

"Yeah, it's you, ain't it? I got ya name, Michael. I got ya address, too. Even got ya wife's name. Renee." The voice paused for a second then said stone-cold, "You keep ya mouth shut, Mr. Michael R. Rowe of 2652 John R Road, Troy, Michigan, U - S - of - A or you'll both be dead before sunrise!"

Michael heard the line click off.

"Michael, what is it?"

His palms were sweating. *You'll both be dead before sunrise!*

"What is it?" She approached him slowly.

Michael looked at her, blinked twice. "Pack as much stuff as you can in five minutes; we're getting out of here *right now!*" He headed for his computers.

Renee just stood there open-mouthed.

"Hurry up! Put some clothes on and grab all your money. All you've got!"

"What is going on?" she stared at him. "Michael, it-is-the-middle-of-the-fucking night!" she screamed, *what is going on?*"

"I don't know!" he shouted back as he downloaded the *Freya Project* and sent one copy to his laptop. He went to the window and looked in the liquor store parking lot for anyone hanging around. He made another copy of Freya and sent this to his CD burner. He went back to the window. "Michael, you're scaring me!"

He ignored Renee, paced back to the computers and trashed the original file as soon as it was done copying. He emptied the computer's recycle bin. "He even knows *your name!*"

"Who knows my name?"

"The bastard's got this address, too!" He wrote "FP" on the Freya CD and tossed it onto his desk. He went to the window and checked the 7-Eleven parking lot across the street.

"Michael!" Renee said in desperation.

How does he know Renee's name? He grabbed her by the arm. "Come on!"