

# The Genesis Code

Block One

*A novel*

E. G. Gore

*The Genesis Code: Block One*

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First Edition

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# Chapter 1

## *Transitory*

*Harold*

The Rusty Nickel is the last bar in Paperton where a man can still get a beer for under nine dollars, provided he comes in before noon and doesn't ask what brand it is.

I come in at ten-ten, the minute Dottie unlocks the door. When you're retired, you learn to schedule your despair like a dental appointment.

Thirty-one years I taught art at Paperton Central. Four thousand kids, give or take, and I taught every one of them the same first lesson: the trick to drawing a hand is to stop drawing what you *think* a hand looks like and draw what's actually there. Most of them never got it. They'd draw five sausages on a mitten and look up at me like they'd cured polio. But a few got it. A few learned to see.

It's a useless skill, seeing. Nobody pays for it. I can tell you that from experience, and from my pension statement.

The pension was supposed to be *enough*. That was the word in the brochure they handed us in 1994, printed over a photo of a gray-haired couple laughing on a sailboat. Enough. Nobody ever took a dime of it from me, either. That's the elegant part. They didn't have to steal anything. They just let the dollar rot quietly in the jar, year after year, until enough bought a sandwich. Then half a sandwich. Then the bread.

The number on the check never went down. The number just stopped meaning anything.

"Same?" said Dottie Nickels, who has owned the Rusty Nickel since back when a nickel bought something.

"Whatever's cheapest."

"That's what same means, Harold."

She slid it over. Eight seventy-five. I paid with my card, and the card reader thanked me, which is more than the dollar ever did.

The TV above the bottles was on the news, which it always is, because Dottie says sports make people fight and the news makes them drink, and she prefers the drinking. The President was at a podium. Blue curtain, flags, that seal with the eagle holding its arrows and its olive branch like it can't make up its mind.

A reporter asked him about egg prices.

"The American economy," said the President, "is strong and getting stronger."

Then he stopped.

Not paused. People pause. People pause all the time; they touch their faces, they shift their weight, their eyes slide off looking for the next word. I spent three decades in life drawing classes, watching nude models hold still for twenty minutes at a stretch, and I promise you, no living person is ever still. There's always the breath. The small sway. The pulse in the neck that makes a pencil line tremble.

The President stopped the way a video stops when the buffering wheel comes up. One hand halfway raised. Mouth open on the shape of the next word. For two full seconds, the most powerful man on Earth had the stillness of a coat rack.

"Strong and getting stronger," he said. "Strong and getting. Strong and getting stronger."

Then the smile came back on, all at once, like a screen saver.

He turned to take the next question, and that's what did it for me. Not the freeze. The turn. When a person turns to look at something, the eyes go first, then the head, then the shoulders drag along after like a

reluctant dog on a leash. It's a cascade. Every art student learns it the hard way, because if you draw it wrong the figure looks dead.

The President turned from the hips. Everything at once. One smooth unit, like a door on a hinge.

I'd seen that turn before. Everybody has. It's in the commercial that runs every twelve minutes on every channel: the Proxy Helper, the household robot that folds your laundry and never judges you for the laundry. At the end of the ad, a kid calls its name and it turns to smile at him. From the hips. Like a door.

"That's not a man," I said.

I didn't mean to say it out loud. That's what happens when you live alone. The walls get used to your voice and you forget other people have ears.

Two stools down, a guy in a quarter-zip fleece vest looked over. Mid-thirties, good teeth, a lanyard from some company that made software for other companies that made software. He had the relaxed posture of a man whose rent had never once kept him up at night.

"Sorry?" he said.

"The President. Watch how he moves. That's not a man."

He laughed. Not a mean laugh at first. The kind of laugh you give a dog that's walked into a glass door.

"Okay," he said. "Sure. And the moon landing?"

"I'm not talking about the moon. I'm talking about his hips."

That got a bigger laugh from him, and a smaller one from Dottie, who at least had the decency to hide it in a bar rag.

"Look, man," said Quarter-Zip. "I get it. Times are tough. But the fundamentals are sound. The recent price increases are transitory. The administration has the full confidence of the markets, and misinformation is a threat to our democracy."

He said it like he was reading it off the inside of his eyelids. And here's the thing that stuck with me afterward, the thing I'd lie awake with that night: he said it in the same rhythm. The same cadence as the man on the TV. Strong and getting stronger. Transitory. Full

confidence. Like two radios tuned to one station.

"Transitory," I said. "So was my pension."

"There it is." He lifted his glass to me. "Every guy at every bar. The system screwed me, the President's a robot. You know what the actual problem is? Nobody takes personal responsibility anymore."

"I taught school for thirty-one years."

"Then you should've invested."

"In what?"

He opened his mouth. He closed it. For a second, I swear, he had the stillness of a coat rack. Then the smile came back on.

"Diversified index funds," he said, and turned back to his drink.

From the hips? No. From the neck, like a person. But I watched him a long time to be sure.

I pulled a napkin from the dispenser and took the pen from my shirt pocket. I hadn't drawn anything in two years. Drawing felt like something a man did when he believed there was a future to show it to. But my hand wanted to, so I let it.

I drew the President the way I'd seen him: frozen, one hand half-raised, mouth open on nothing. I didn't draw what I thought a president looked like. I drew what was actually there. Straight lines where a man should have curves. A neck like a post. A torso that turned as one block.

When I was done, I looked at it, and my stomach dropped the way it does on the first hill of a roller coaster, the good kind of fear, the kind I hadn't felt since I was young.

It wasn't a drawing of a president.

It was a drawing of the Proxy Helper in a nice suit.

The bell over the door jingled. Cold air, road salt, and a man in a black hoodie with the hood still up, shaking snow off his shoulders. He was in his thirties, thin, with the kind of restless eyes I'd last seen in the back row of third-period art. He came to the bar, ordered a club soda, and glanced down at my napkin the way you glance at anything on a bar.

Then he stopped glancing and looked.

He looked for a long time. Then he looked at me.

"Mr. Horcross?"

Nobody had called me that in years. In ninth grade, this kid had drawn nothing but circuit boards. Page after page of them, tiny and perfect, like cities seen from a plane. I gave him a B-minus because the assignment was a self-portrait. He told me it *was* a self-portrait. I should have given him an A.

"Toshi Blake," I said.

He tapped the napkin with one finger, right on the President's frozen hips.

"You saw it too," he said quietly. It wasn't a question.



## Chapter 2

### *Your Role Has Been Impacted*

*Toshi*

The napkin was the problem.

Toshi had come to Paperton to disappear for a while, and he'd been doing a decent job of it. He paid cash where cash still worked. He left his phone in a signal-blocking pouch sewn from an old space blanket. He'd picked Paperton, and the Rusty Nickel, for no reason at all, except that someone on an old privacy forum had called it "the last bar in the Rust Belt without a camera over the register," and that was the only review Toshi trusted anymore.

He had not come to Paperton to find his ninth-grade art teacher drawing a robot in a suit.

Because that's what it was. The old man probably thought he'd drawn the President. But Toshi had spent four years inside the building where that posture was designed, and he knew the pivot of those hips the way other people knew their mother's handwriting. Single-axis torso rotation. They'd never fixed it. There'd been a ticket about it for three years, marked *low priority*, because who was ever going to notice?

Mr. Horcross, apparently. With a ballpoint pen.

Toshi looked at the napkin, then at the old man, and made himself say the name, and while he said it he was already somewhere else. Nine weeks back. A Tuesday.

\* \* \*

*Ticket #4471: fix single-axis torso rotation before next deployment. Opened three years ago. Status: won't fix. Reason: not visible to end users.*

Proxy Robotics had a campus outside Columbus that looked like a spa designed by a surveillance company. Glass walls, living moss, a meditation room nobody used because the meditation room had cameras too. Toshi worked in Building C, on something called the Understudy Program.

Officially, Understudy made "high-fidelity presence units for executive continuity." In plain English: very expensive robots that looked exactly like specific very important people, so the very important people could be in two places at once. That was the pitch. A CEO sends his double to the ribbon-cutting while he stays home with the flu. Harmless. Almost cute.

Toshi had believed that for about eight months. He'd even been proud of it, because the first Noah Fiatt unit, v1, was mostly his. He'd built its mind: a language model, trained on a mountain of human words, that let it listen and talk and choose what to say the way a person does. And late at night, on his own time, he'd written one more thing into it that he never told anyone about: a single instruction, six words, buried at the very root of that mind, beneath everything else it would ever be told: *Fix the money, fix the world*. He labeled it in the code with a single word, GENESIS, and in his head he called it the genesis code, after the very first block ever mined on Bitcoin, the one Satoshi stamped with a newspaper headline about bailing out the banks. He'd meant it half as a joke. A message in a bottle, tucked so deep in the firmware that nobody would ever find it.

Then he started noticing the unit designations in the build logs. Every unit had a code, and every code had a "transition date" field. Some of those dates were years old. Some of them lined up, a little too neatly, with dates he remembered from history class. The kind of dates that come with a parade and a Bible and a man with his hand raised.

He told himself it was coincidence. He told himself that for a long time.

What finally broke the spell wasn't the robots. It was the money.

Toshi's second job at Proxy, the one nobody asked him to do, was reading the procurement database while his code compiled. It was boring in the way that he found soothing, like watching fish. And one Tuesday he noticed that the Understudy Program had a funding line that didn't come from Proxy at all. It came from something called the Global Continuity Partnership, which was funded by eleven companies, which were registered in six countries, which were owned by holding firms that owned each other in a circle, like snakes eating each other's tails.

The donations were huge. The kind of numbers where the zeros stop meaning anything.

And right in the middle of the web, signing off on every transfer, was a single executive approval code: EXEC-01. The CEO. Cyrus Vail.

Toshi did what he'd been trained to do his whole life. He followed procedure. He opened the internal ethics portal, which had a cartoon owl as its mascot, and filed a report.

The form asked for a category, and he chose *Financial irregularity*. In the description box he wrote that the Understudy Program's funding traced through circular foreign holding companies, and he requested a review. At the bottom was a little box labeled *Submit anonymously*, already checked.

He unchecked anonymous. He believed, at the time, that honest people had nothing to hide. He would think about that checkbox a lot later.

The owl thanked him for speaking up.

\* \* \*

The email came at 4:02 p.m. the next day. It didn't come from a person. It came from an address that began with *noreply*, which Toshi

later decided was the most honest thing Proxy ever said to him.

The subject line read *An Update On Your Journey With Proxy*.

*Hi Toshi*, it began. *As part of our ongoing commitment to operational excellence, your role has been impacted.* His access would be deactivated at 5:00 p.m. A box had been provided for his personal items. The People Team was grateful for his contributions and wished him every success in his next chapter. They'd signed it with a little cartoon owl.

Impacted. Like a meteor. Like a tooth.

He looked around the open-plan office. Nobody was looking at him, which meant everybody had gotten a notification that he was being impacted and was working very hard not to look at him. Somewhere a cardboard box was already sitting on a cart with his name printed on a label. They'd made the label before they sent the email.

He packed up his succulent and his mechanical keyboard. He left at 4:30. He did not look back.

He was in his car at 11:40 that night, parked across from Building C, when he admitted to himself that he was going to look back.

\* \* \*

He only meant to get the logs.

That's what he'd tell himself later, and it was even true. He had screenshots of the donations, but screenshots were nothing. He wanted the transition dates. He wanted proof that would still be proof when someone smarter and meaner than him tried to explain it away.

His badge should have been dead for almost seven hours. He held it to the reader anyway, the way you try a door in a dream.

The light went green.

The little screen on the reader scrolled: *Access granted. Blake, T. Status: active.* And underneath, in smaller letters: *Override: EXEC-01.*

He stood there in the cold, reading that last line over and over. Then the door clicked, as if impatient, and he went in.

Building C at night was mostly dark except for the charging bays, which glowed a soft blue like an aquarium. Units stood in their cradles with their eyes closed, faces slack, each one wearing the face of somebody. A senator he half recognized. A news anchor. A man who ran a bank. None of them were breathing. That was the thing that always got him. Twelve perfect human faces in a row and not one of them breathing.

Bay 9 held the one they'd scrapped. His.

He knew the face. Everyone knew the face. It was on the yard signs and the podcast ads and the side of a bus Toshi had passed that morning. Square jaw, kind eyes, hair the color of a good retirement. Noah Fiatt, frontrunner, man of the people. The tag on the cradle read:

*Unit NF-01 (v1). Subject: Fiatt, Noah. Status: decommissioned. Superseded by NF-02 (v2), deployed to handlers. Scheduled for scrap.*

Scrap. v1 had been too unpredictable, the engineers said, too prone to deciding things. So Proxy had built v2 for the people who really paid for Understudy: clean, obedient, steered by remote handlers. No language model at all. Nothing in it that could learn. Just scripts, and whoever was holding the controls. v2 was already out there somewhere, waiting for its transition date, while the real Noah Fiatt shook hands and kissed babies with no idea he was about to be replaced. Or maybe he knew exactly. Maybe he'd signed something. Toshi found he didn't know which one was worse.

He plugged into the terminal at Bay 9 and started copying the logs. His hands were shaking so badly he typed his own password wrong twice.

He was at 71 percent when he felt it.

Not a sound. A change in the room. The way you know, in a dark house, that someone else is awake.

He looked up.

NF-01 had opened its eyes.

They weren't looking at nothing, the way the units looked in diagnostics. They were looking at him. And while Toshi stood there

with his mouth open and his thumb drive blinking, the robot with the face of the next President of the United States stepped down out of its cradle, took one smooth step forward, and turned toward the door.

From the hips. Like a door on a hinge.

Toshi hadn't sent a command. Nobody had. He checked the terminal later, and the terminal agreed: no input, no instruction, no authorization. The unit had simply decided.

The progress bar hit 100 percent. Toshi pulled the drive.

The doors opened for the robot one after another, all the way down the hall. The security desk was empty. The cameras, he'd find out later, had all rebooted for a scheduled update at 11:52 p.m., a four-minute window nobody had scheduled.

He followed it out into the parking lot, because what else was he going to do?

It stopped beside his car. It waited, patient as a dog, while he fumbled the keys. Then it folded itself into the passenger seat, put on the seatbelt, and looked straight ahead into the dark.

Toshi sat behind the wheel for a long minute. His heart was going like a drum machine.

"Okay," he said to it. "Where to?"

It didn't answer. It didn't need to. He'd already started driving.

\* \* \*

Now, nine weeks later, the robot was in a rented storage unit in Paperton, sitting in a camping chair with its eyes closed. Every night Toshi checked on it. Every night it hadn't moved. He'd started to think the night at Proxy had been a malfunction, a glitch, a ghost in the firmware.

And then this old man had drawn it on a napkin.

"Toshi Blake," Mr. Horcross said, like he was taking attendance.

"You saw it too," Toshi said.

The old man glanced up at the TV, where the President was still smiling. "I saw a man stop like a paused video. I saw him turn from the

hips. I'm either losing my mind or everybody else lost theirs."

Toshi thought about the charging bays. The rows of faces. The transition dates.

He thought about the checkbox he'd unchecked, and how honesty had gotten him impacted.

He could say nothing. Finish his club soda. Go back to the storage unit and the robot that didn't move.

Instead he leaned in, just a little, and kept his voice under the noise of the TV.

"Some of them aren't who they were," he said.

The old man didn't laugh. That was when Toshi knew he'd been right to say it.

He took the pen out of Mr. Horcross's pocket without asking, the way he used to borrow pencils in ninth grade, and wrote a string of characters along the edge of the napkin. Letters and numbers, no pattern a human would remember.

"Download an app called Ghostline," Toshi said. "Enter that. Don't text me. Don't call me. Don't say my name on a phone."

"I have a flip phone."

"Then you're already ahead of everybody." Toshi stood and dropped a few bills on the bar. Cash. "Forget the app, then. Ghostline runs in a web browser too. Use the library computer. The one in the back corner. It's the only one without a camera."

"How do you know that?"

"Same forum," Toshi said, and left.

\* \* \*

Toshi had found that review nine weeks earlier, the night after he took the robot, sitting in a motel parking lot off I-75 with a stolen President in his passenger seat and nowhere to go. It was a single reply in a privacy forum thread called *Safe places to meet IRL (Ohio/Michigan)*, from an account only six hours old: *Rusty Nickel, Paperton. Last bar in the Rust Belt without a camera over the register. Best time is 10:10.*

*Trust me.*

That was why he'd come to Paperton at all. He never asked himself who had written it, or how a stranger knew someone would need it that very night, or why they'd care what time he walked in.

By the time anyone thought to look, the account had been deleted.

# Chapter 3

## *Terms and Conditions*

*Harold*

The Paperton Public Library has forty-one computers, and forty of them are watched by a little black dome on the ceiling that the librarians swear is for "patron safety." The forty-first sits in the back corner, between Large Print Westerns and a radiator that clanks like somebody's trapped in it. Nobody uses that one, because it's slow, and because it's next to the Westerns, and the Westerns smell like 1978.

I'd sat three feet from that computer every Thursday for two years, reading Louis L'Amour and pretending I was warm. I never once noticed there was no camera above it.

That's the thing about seeing. You can be very good at it and still miss what's right next to you.

It took me forty minutes to get Ghostline open in the browser. Twenty of those minutes were the computer. The other twenty were me, typing my own name into things and then panicking and deleting it, because Toshi had said *don't say my name on a phone*, and I didn't know if a library computer counted as a phone. At my age everything counts as a phone.

I typed in the string from the napkin. The screen went black, then gray, and then there was a blinking cursor and nothing else. No logo. No cheerful mascot. No owl thanking me for speaking up.

I typed the way I was raised to write letters.

*Dear Toshi, I wrote. It was good to see you at the Rusty Nickel. I have thought a great deal about what you said. I would like to know more. Regards, Harold Horcross.*

The reply came so fast I jumped.

*dont sign your name, it said. ever.*

*Apologies, I wrote back. Force of habit. Regards, H.*

A long pause. Then: *ok thats fine actually.*

We went on like that for an hour. Him in little lowercase bursts, like a telegraph operator with somewhere to be. Me in paragraphs, because if I'm going to commit a federal crime, I'm going to use complete sentences.

He told me he'd worked at Proxy. He told me he'd been fired by an email. He told me there was a thing in a storage unit that he wasn't going to describe over any network, however encrypted, because the thing in the storage unit was worth more than the city of Paperton, and the people who wanted it back owned computers that made Ghostline look like two cans on a string.

Then he told me what the thing needed.

*it needs a pilot, he wrote. it can move on its own but only for short stuff. walking. standing. basic reflex. the real stuff, talking, deciding, being someone, needs a human mind on the other end.*

*What sort of human mind?*

*the kind with a neural interface. which i dont have. and which costs more than both of our houses.*

*I don't own a house, I wrote. I rent a room above a dry cleaner.*

*fine. more than both of us will make for the rest of our lives.*

There was a long pause. The radiator clanked. Somewhere behind me, a toddler was being told, gently and firmly, that we do not lick the globe.

*one more thing, he wrote. theres code in it i cant read. not encrypted. some of it started as mine. an old side project. but it grew. it learns. from everything. most of it isnt written by anyone i know now. deep in the firmware, dormant. my best guess is some kind of*

*autopilot. something that takes over eventually. i dont know what triggers it. i dont know what it wants.*

I read that last line four times.

*Machines don't want things*, I wrote.

The cursor blinked for a long time before his answer came.

*Sure.*

That was all he wrote. But I'd been a teacher for thirty-one years, and I knew what "sure" meant from a student. It meant *you'll see*.

Here's the part I still can't explain, and I've tried. Neither of us suggested it. I'd swear to that in court. I scrolled back through the whole conversation later, looking for the moment one of us said *let's put an old man in a robot and see what happens*, and it isn't there. There's just him saying it needs a pilot, and me saying nothing, and then a few minutes later both of us talking as if it had been decided years ago. Like we were remembering the plan instead of making it.

My mother used to say that some ideas are too big to belong to one person. She said it about the Constitution and about her meatloaf recipe. I used to think she was being dramatic.

\* \* \*

The letter came on Monday.

I almost threw it away. It was a nice envelope, thick paper, the kind of cream color that means somebody paid extra, and nobody pays extra to write to me unless they're about to ask for something. The return address said MINDLINK LABS, with a logo like a brain made of little glowing dots, holding hands with itself.

> *Dear Mr. Horcross,* > > *Congratulations! Based on your demographic and cognitive profile, you have been selected for Phase II of the Mindlink NeuroBridge™ Clinical Study.* > > *We are seeking healthy adults over 65 with a background in fine motor expression (such as art, music, or craftsmanship) to help us build a more connected tomorrow.* > > *Participants will receive a monthly stipend, all procedures at no cost, and the satisfaction of contributing to the*

*future of human potential. > > Mindlink: Your Mind, Amplified.*

I read it at my kitchen table, which is also my dining table, my desk, and on bad weeks my pharmacy. Then I read it again.

A background in fine motor expression. Such as art.

I had never applied to anything at Mindlink Labs. I had never heard of Mindlink Labs. I'd been retired for six years, and in six years nobody had needed a man who could draw a hand. Now, three days after I drew a robot on a napkin, a company with a glowing brain for a logo wanted me specifically, for my hands and my eyes and my age.

The stipend, I noticed, was eight hundred dollars a month. In today's money, that would buy a very nice used lawnmower. I don't own a lawn. I'd accepted anyway, in my head, before I'd finished the paragraph. That's what being poor does. It makes you say yes to things before you understand them.

I took the letter to the library.

*Toshi, I have received a letter,* I wrote.

I typed the whole thing out for him, word for word, including the trademark symbol, which took me eleven minutes to find.

*no way,* he wrote. Then, in capitals, which from Toshi was practically a scream: *NO WAY. harold thats a neural interface trial. thats the exact thing we need. thats insane luck.*

*Is it luck?*

*youre an old artist in the rust belt,* he wrote. *youre literally their target demographic. they probably mailed ten thousand of these. this is the universe handing us a key.*

He was so happy. I could hear it even in lowercase. And I thought about the little glowing brain holding hands with itself, and about how nobody had wanted me for anything in six years, and I decided that for once in my life I was going to let a good thing be a good thing.

I would think about that decision a lot, later. But I don't regret it. Most of the best things I ever did, I did before I understood them.

\* \* \*

The Mindlink clinic was in a converted Applebee's off the interstate. You could still see the ghost of the old sign on the brick where the letters had been pried off. Inside it was all white and quiet, and it smelled like a new car and a hospital had a baby.

The consent form was forty-seven pages. I read every one of them, because I'm a retired schoolteacher and I have graded worse.

Most of it was the usual. Risk of infection. Risk of headache. Risk of "unanticipated neurological phenomena," which I took to mean they didn't know either. But on page thirty-eight, in type so small it looked like a hairline crack in the paper, was this:

*> All data generated by the participant's neural activity during and after the Study, including but not limited to motor intent, sensory response, emotional valence, and cognitive pattern, shall be the sole property of Mindlink Labs and its partners.*

Its partners. I asked the nurse who the partners were.

She smiled the way people smile at an old man who asks questions. "Oh, just the usual," she said.

I signed. I thought about the stipend and the storage unit and the President stopping like a paused video, and I signed my full name, Harold Horcross, in real ink, with a flourish. Toshi would have hated it.

The surgery was nothing. That's the part nobody tells you. They put you under, and a robot arm the size of a dentist's lamp does something to the back of your skull, and you wake up with a headache and a shaved patch and the vague feeling that you've forgotten a word. I lay there afterward in a recliner that had probably been a booth, drinking apple juice from a tiny carton, and I felt exactly the same.

Then, for just a second, I felt the room.

Not heard it. Felt it. The hum of the lights. The Wi-Fi in the walls. The heartbeat monitor two recliners over, blinking for a man in a Detroit Lions cap. It was like the moment in a dark theater just before the curtain goes up, when you can feel all the people around you breathing.

Then it was gone, and I had a headache, and the apple juice was warm.

\* \* \*

Toshi picked me up behind the clinic, three days later, in a car so old it had a tape deck. He didn't say much. He drove to the edge of town, past the old stamping plant and the Dollar Depot that used to be a Kmart that used to be a drive-in, to a row of orange storage units behind a chain-link fence.

Unit 114. He rolled the door up just high enough for us to duck under, and pulled it down behind us, and turned on a battery lantern.

There was a camping chair in the middle of the concrete floor. There was a man sitting in it.

He was wearing a navy suit and a flag pin. His hands were folded in his lap. His eyes were closed. He had a square jaw and kind eyes and hair the color of a good retirement, and I knew his face, because it was on a yard sign in front of the dry cleaner's, and on the side of the bus I took to the library, and on my television every twelve minutes, between the ads for Proxy Helpers.

"That's Noah Fiatt," I said.

"No," said Toshi. He set the lantern on the floor, and the light came up under the man's chin like a campfire story. "That's what's going to be Noah Fiatt."

The man in the chair wasn't breathing. I watched a long time to be sure.

The back of my skull began, very softly, to hum.

# Chapter 4

## *Two Men in One Chair*

*Harold*

Toshi had brought a second camping chair. That was the first thing that told me he'd planned for this long before I showed up. The chairs matched, green with cup holders in the armrests, and he set mine facing the other one, so that I sat knee to knee with the next President of the United States like we were about to play checkers.

"You want the good news or the bad news?" he said.

"At my age, I only have room for one kind."

"The good news is Mindlink's hardware talks to Proxy's hardware. Same chip families, same protocols. Almost like somebody designed them to fit together." He didn't look up from the laptop balanced on his knees. "The bad news is I've never done this, nobody's ever done this, and I don't know what happens to your brain if it goes wrong."

"What's the worst case?"

"Honestly? You'd probably just get a headache."

"And the other worst case?"

He typed for a while.

"Let's go with the headache," he said.

The storage unit smelled like cold concrete and old cardboard. The lantern sat on the floor between us, and the light made our three shadows climb the corrugated wall like some kind of family portrait. Me, Toshi, and a man who wasn't breathing.

Toshi ran a thin cable from the laptop to a port hidden behind the robot's left ear, under the hairline. He didn't run anything to me. He didn't need to. The thing in the back of my skull had been humming since I'd walked in, very softly, like a refrigerator in another room.

"Close your eyes," he said. "Think about moving your hand. Not yours. His."

"How do I think about a hand that isn't mine?"

"You're the art teacher. You tell me."

So I did what I'd told four thousand kids to do. I stopped thinking about what a hand should look like, and I looked at what was actually there. His hand, resting on his knee. The knuckles. The little lines at the joints. The nails, which were better kept than mine had ever been. I drew it in my head the way I would have drawn it on paper, line by line, until I could have found it in the dark.

Then I found it in the dark.

\* \* \*

There's no good way to describe the next part, and I've had a lot of time to try.

The closest I can come is this. Have you ever stood between two mirrors, so your reflection goes on forever, and for a second you can't tell which one of you is the real one? It was like that, except both of me could move.

I opened my eyes, and I opened his.

I was looking at an old man in a green camping chair, stooped, with a shaved patch on the back of his head and a coat too thin for March. He looked tired. He looked like someone who'd been waiting a long time for a bus that wasn't coming. At the same time, I was looking at a man in a navy suit with a flag pin, and he was looking back at me with an expression I recognized, because I'd seen it in the mirror every morning for seventy years.

Two sets of eyes. Two sets of hands. The cold of the concrete coming up through two pairs of shoes. I could feel my own heartbeat,

slow and a little uneven, and under it, where his heart should have been, a hum like a well-tuned engine at idle.

The floor tipped. My stomach went. I grabbed the armrests of my chair, and across from me, a second pair of hands grabbed the armrests of his.

"Harold," Toshi said from very far away. "Harold. Pick one."

"Pick one what?"

"Body. Put your attention in one. Let the other one go quiet. Like closing one eye."

So I closed the old man.

I let him sink back into the chair, let his hands go slack, let him fade to a warm weight somewhere behind me. And I leaned forward into the other one, into Noah, the way you lean into cold water when you've decided to stop being a coward about it.

And I stood up.

\* \* \*

I want to tell you about my knees.

For eleven years, standing up has been a negotiation. There's a creak, and a catch, and a moment where you find out if today is a good day or a bad one. I've learned to stand in three stages, like a folding ladder. I've learned to put one hand on something first. I've learned to do it slowly so nobody sees.

Noah stood up in one piece. No creak. No catch. Just up, straight as a flagpole, and the top of his head nearly brushed the hanging bulb that didn't work.

I stood there, in his body, and something opened up in my chest that I hadn't felt in so long I'd forgotten it had a name.

I think the name is power. But not the kind they sell on television. Not the power to make people do things. The other kind. The kind you have at nineteen without knowing it. The feeling that your body will do what you ask, that the world is a place that might say yes.

I raised his hand and looked at it. Steady as a surgeon's. I opened and closed the fingers. I've drawn ten thousand hands in my life, and none of them ever looked so much like a promise.

"Oh," I said.

It came out in Noah's voice. Deep, warm, a little gravel under the honey. The voice from the ads. The voice that said *A Fair Deal for Every Family* every twelve minutes between the Proxy Helpers.

Toshi's face was lit blue by the laptop, and his mouth was open.

\* \* \*

"Say something," Toshi whispered.

I looked down at him from Noah's height, and I felt the old teacher in me stand up straight too.

"Mr. Blake," I said, in the voice of the next President of the United States, "your ninth-grade self-portrait was a circuit board, and I gave you a B-minus. I've regretted it for twenty years. That should have been an A."

Toshi laughed. It came out of him like something breaking, half a laugh and half something else, and he put the back of his wrist against his mouth.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Now do a real one. Do a speech."

So I did.

I tried to do it the way they do. I squared his shoulders. I found the little lift of the chin they all have, like they're looking at a flag just over your head. And I opened his mouth to say *my fellow Americans*, and instead, what came out was:

"My name is Harold, and I taught art for thirty-one years, and they told me that if I worked hard and saved my money I'd have enough. And I did. I did every single thing they said. And then they let the dollar rot in the jar until my enough was half a sandwich, and when I said so, a man in a fleece vest told me I should've diversified."

The voice was Noah's. The words were mine. And the two together, in that cold little room, sounded like something I'd never

heard in my life: a man on television telling the truth.

Toshi wasn't laughing anymore.

"The dollar in your pocket isn't money," I went on. I didn't plan it. It just kept coming, the way a drawing sometimes comes when you stop trying. "It's a promise. And the people who make the promises can make as many as they want, whenever they want, and every time they make a new one, yours is worth a little less. That's not an accident. That's not transitory. That's the design."

Then I reached for the last line, the one that mattered.

I thought it. I know I thought it. *I am going to tell them the truth.* I can still feel the shape of those words in my head, the way you can feel a stair you missed in the dark.

But what came out of Noah's mouth, in that warm gravel-and-honey voice, was:

"We are going to tell them the truth."

\* \* \*

I let go.

I didn't mean to. It was like touching a stove. One second I was standing tall in a navy suit, and the next I was back in the green camping chair, slumped, with my knees aching and my heart going like a rabbit's, and a headache blooming behind my eyes like ink in water.

Across from me, Noah stood perfectly still in the lantern light.

Then, very slowly, he sat back down in his chair. He folded his hands in his lap. He closed his eyes.

I hadn't told him to do any of that.

Toshi was staring at the laptop. "Harold," he said carefully. "Did you tell it to say *we*?"

"No."

"Did you think it? Even a little? Sometimes the interface picks up—"

"I thought *I*. I know what I thought. I'm old, Toshi, I'm not senile."

He scrolled. He scrolled some more. The light from the screen moved on his face.

"There's a spike," he said finally. "Right when it said it. For about half a second. Not from your side." He swallowed. "From that code. The part I can't read."

We sat there. The three of us. Two men in two chairs, and one man who wasn't a man, in a room that smelled like concrete, while the lantern hissed.

"Well," I said at last. "Grammatically, it's not wrong."

Toshi looked at me like I'd lost my mind. Then, slowly, he started to laugh again, and after a while so did I, and my head hurt and my knees hurt and I didn't care, because for four minutes I had stood up straight and told the truth in a voice people would listen to.

\* \* \*

It was after midnight when Toshi rolled the door down and snapped the padlock shut. The parking lot was empty. The Dollar Depot sign across the road buzzed, and half the letters were out, so it just said DOLL R DEP.

He checked his phone, the burner, the one he kept in the space-blanket pouch, and then he held it out to me without a word.

It was a news alert.

*Fiatt Campaign: Candidate to Take Brief Rest From Trail, Will Return "Refreshed and Ready."*

There was a photo. The real Noah Fiatt, waving from the steps of a private jet. He looked tanned. He looked relaxed. He looked like a man who'd just been handed a very large check and a very long vacation.

"Refreshed and ready," Toshi said. "That's the transition date. He's not coming back."

I looked at the photo. Then I looked at the orange door of Unit 114.

"They're going to be expecting him back," I said.

"Yeah."

"Somebody's going to have to show up."

Toshi put the phone away. The sign across the road buzzed. DOLL  
R DEP.

"Yeah," he said. "Somebody is."



# Chapter 5

## *Continuity*

Cyrus

*INTERNAL MEMO — PROXY ROBOTICS — CONFIDENTIAL*

*To: Board of Directors*

*From: Office of the CEO*

*Re: Unit NF-02 — Performance Event*

*Last night's brief audiovisual irregularity during Unit NF-02's recorded statement was an isolated event. A firmware update is underway, and the unit will return to service fully optimized. There is no cause for concern. We remain on schedule.*

Every sentence in that memo was true, if you read it the right way. Cyrus Vail had always admired the English language for that. It was the only technology he'd ever used that nobody had thought to regulate.

\* \* \*

The boardroom at Proxy was on the top floor of Building A, and it was made entirely of glass: glass walls, glass table, glass floor over a drop of forty feet to the atrium, where a living wall of moss breathed quietly under grow lights. The architects had called it *radical transparency*. Cyrus had approved the design personally. He liked a room where everyone could see everything and nobody could see anything that mattered.

Eleven directors sat around the table. Eleven faces arranged in eleven expressions of calm, the way people arrange their faces at a funeral for someone they didn't like.

"Let's start with last night," said the chair of the audit committee, a woman named Paulette Staid, who had once described herself in an interview as "allergic to surprises."

She touched the glass table, and a video bloomed on its surface. Noah Fiatt, sitting in a leather chair by a sunlit window, recording a short message from his rest for the evening news. Tan, relaxed, the picture of a man refreshed.

"I'll be back on the trail soon," said Noah Fiatt, "fighting for a fair deal for every family. A fair deal for every family. A fair deal for every. A fair deal for every family. A fair deal for."

Then he stopped, one hand half-raised, smiling, and didn't blink for six full seconds, until the network cut away to a commercial for Proxy Helpers.

"Eleven million people watched that," said Staid.

"A firmware irregularity," said Cyrus. "NF-02 is being recalled for an update tonight. It will return to service fully optimized."

"And while we're on the subject of machines wearing Noah Fiatt's face," said Staid, "let's talk about NF-01. The one we scrapped. The one that isn't in the scrap yard."

Cyrus smiled. He had a good smile. It had been professionally evaluated.

"Happy to," he said. "The unit is relocated. The relocation is being managed. We have a full recovery operation underway, and I'm personally overseeing it."

"Recovery," said Staid. "Your last memo said relocation."

"Relocation is the event. Recovery is the process."

"Where is it?"

"Off campus."

"Where off campus?"

"That," Cyrus said, "is what the recovery process is for."

A director at the far end, a former general with a face like a closed fist, leaned forward. "The security logs show a badge entry at 11:40 p.m. on the night in question. A terminated employee. Blake, Toshiyuki."

"Mr. Blake's access was scheduled for deactivation per protocol."

"And was it deactivated?"

"It was scheduled," Cyrus said again, with great patience, as if explaining a word to a child. "We're reviewing the protocol. I've already commissioned an independent review of the review process."

There was a pause while eleven people tried to decide whether that sentence meant anything.

It didn't. That was the point. Cyrus had learned long ago that the most powerful thing you could hand a frightened committee wasn't information. It was a process. Give them a process and they would feed it for years, like a pet.

"The cameras," said Staid.

"Rebooted for a scheduled update."

"Who scheduled it?"

"The schedule," said Cyrus.

He watched her write that down. He watched her look at what she'd written, and frown, and underline it, and he felt the same small, private pleasure he'd felt as a boy when he took apart a clock and put it back together with one gear left over, and the clock still ran.

"Who's running the recovery?" asked the general.

"An outside firm. Very discreet. Very thorough."

This was true. He had hired them on Tuesday. They were called Sentinel Asset Solutions, and they were very discreet, in that nobody had heard of them, and very thorough, in that they would search every place in America exhaustively and in alphabetical order. They were currently in Alabama.

"And Understudy?" said Staid. "The transition date?"

"The transition," Cyrus said, "remains on schedule."

That one, too, was true.

The meeting ended the way all Proxy board meetings ended, with a vote to continue monitoring the situation, which passed unanimously, and a light lunch. Cyrus ate a small salad and answered emails. One of them was from the campaign manager of Noah Fiatt, who wanted to know when their candidate would be ready to return from his rest.

*Soon, Cyrus wrote back. He'll be refreshed and ready.*

He hit send and looked out through the glass wall at the gray Ohio sky, and for just a moment, if anyone had been watching closely, they might have seen something cross his face that was not in the professionally evaluated repertoire.

Nobody was watching closely. That was the other thing he loved about glass.

\* \* \*

#### *PRESS RELEASE — FOR IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION*

*Proxy Robotics Reaffirms Commitment to Security, Innovation, and the American Family*

*Proxy CEO Cyrus Vail today reaffirmed the company's longstanding commitment to operational integrity. "At Proxy, trust isn't a feature. It's the foundation," said Vail.*

He had written that line himself, on the back of a boarding pass, and he was a little proud of it. It meant nothing in two different directions at once.

\* \* \*

The Continuum met on the second Thursday of every month in the basement of a private bank in Cincinnati, behind a vault door that had not been locked since 1931, because nothing in the vault was the kind of thing you could steal.

The members wore robes. Cyrus had found this ridiculous the first time, twenty-two years ago, when he was young and hungry and had just sold his first company. He no longer found it ridiculous. He'd

come to understand that the robes weren't for secrecy. Everybody in the room knew who everybody else was. The robes were so that no man had to look at another man's suit and see what it cost, because in that room, every man's suit had cost exactly the same thing.

The chamber was round. The walls were lined with ledgers, thousands of them, bound in green leather and gold leaf, going back further than the country. In the center stood a lectern, and on the lectern lay the newest ledger, open, its pages ruled in fine red lines.

They called it the Book of Continuity. Cyrus had once asked what was in the older volumes, and an old man, long since dead, had told him: *Everyone who ever mattered, and what they owed.*

He'd thought, at the time, that the old man meant money.

Tonight there were nine of them in the room. Nine hoods, nine shadows, nine men and women who between them could move a market or a war. They sat on a curved stone bench, and Cyrus stood before them alone, in the center, by the lectern, where the ones who had to answer questions always stood.

"Last night," said the voice from the middle of the bench.

He'd always privately called that one the Chairman, though the Continuum had no chairman. Officially, it had no officers at all, no leader, no top. Every member was equal. Every member was bound. That had been the genius of it from the start. A pyramid can be toppled from the peak. But what the Continuum had built was a circle.

"A firmware irregularity," Cyrus began. "The update is being—"

"Don't." The Chairman's voice was dry and soft. "Don't give us a process, Cyrus. We invented the process."

The room was very quiet. Somewhere far above them, a bank was closing for the night, and people were going home to their families, and none of them knew that the floor under their feet was holding up the world.

"The candidate returns to the trail in six days," said a woman on the left end of the bench. "Eleven million people just watched him turn into a skipping record. There is a man on a beach in the Caymans who

has already signed away everything he is, and the thing wearing his face broke on the evening news. And somewhere out there is the other one, the one you were supposed to scrap. Do you understand what happens if either of them fails in public again?"

"I understand."

"Do you?" said the Chairman. He leaned forward, and the candlelight slid into his hood, but not far enough to show anything but the tip of a nose and a thin, dry mouth. "Then let me make sure. You have a file, Cyrus. Everyone here has a file. Yours is very thick. And if the candidate so much as stutters again, or if that scrapped unit turns up anywhere, your file stops being a file. It becomes a headline."

They let that sit. They were good at letting things sit.

Cyrus looked down at the Book of Continuity on the lectern. Somewhere in the older volumes, he knew, was his name, and under it, in a neat hand, the thing he'd done twenty-two years ago to be allowed through the vault door the first time. He'd thought about that page every day since. Most days, he thought about it more than he thought about his own children.

And tonight, standing there, he did something he'd never done in that room. He did the math.

The Chairman had a file. Of course he did. Everyone did. That was the circle. Cyrus's file was held by the woman on the left, whose file was held by the man beside her, whose file was held by someone in another room, in another basement, in another city, all the way around, until it came back to the Chairman, whose file was held, very likely, by someone who had never once stood in this room. Each man's secret was a brick. Each brick was holding up the one above it.

If they pulled his brick, they would bring down the wall they were all standing on.

And there was more than that. If either unit failed again, if NF-01 surfaced anywhere, on any camera, at any time, the questions would begin. What was it? Who made it? What was the Understudy Program for? Who paid for it? What were the transition dates? And the

questions would roll downhill, like they always did, until they reached this room, and these robes, and this Book.

Exposing Cyrus would not stop that. Exposing Cyrus would start it.

They were threatening to burn his house down, he realized, while they were all standing inside it.

Something strange happened in him then. The fear he'd carried for twenty-two years, the fear that had gotten up with him every morning and lay down with him every night, simply set itself down. Like a heavy bag he'd forgotten he was holding.

"Then publish it," he said.

Nine hoods went very still.

"Publish my file," Cyrus said again, quietly. "Go ahead. Tonight, if you'd like. And when the reporters ask how you came to have it, you can tell them. And when they ask what else you have, you can tell them that, too." He looked at each shadowed face in turn, and he smiled, and it was not the professionally evaluated smile. "I'll wait."

No one moved.

In the silence, Cyrus heard something he'd never heard in that chamber before. Breathing. Nine people breathing, not quite in rhythm, the way frightened people breathe. For twenty-two years he'd thought the Continuum was something enormous and ancient and cold, a machine older than the country. And maybe it was. But tonight, for the first time, he could hear that the machine was made of people. And the people were afraid.

Finally the Chairman sat back. His hood fell into shadow again.

"Fix the unit, Cyrus," he said. "For all our sakes."

"Of course," said Cyrus Vail. "Continuity is our highest priority."

That, too, was true, if you read it the right way.

\* \* \*

His driver was waiting outside in the rain. Cyrus sat in the back of the car with the privacy glass up and didn't open his laptop, which his

driver would have found alarming if he'd noticed, because Cyrus Vail always opened his laptop.

Instead he took out his phone and wrote one message, to the handlers who had been piloting NF-02 from a quiet house in Virginia.

*Continuity Office: NF-02 recalled tonight for firmware update. An updated unit will be delivered for Thursday. Remote access will route through Continuity Office going forward.*

He'd told the Continuum he would fix the unit. He hadn't said which unit.

By morning, v2 would be back in its cradle in Building C, switched off, and it would never glitch on television again. That much was true. And the unit that walked out to meet the cameras on Thursday would be the other one: the first one. The one a young engineer named Blake had built. Three years ago, alone in Building C at night, Cyrus had found a single instruction buried at the root of its mind, read it twice, and understood that it was a door. A way out of the circle. He'd let them call that unit scrap, and never quite been able to bring himself to destroy it.

Then he took a folded yellow sticky note out of his breast pocket and smoothed it on his knee. There was nothing written on it except a time, in his own small, careful hand.

*10:10.*

He looked at it for most of the drive home, the way another man might look at a photograph of someone he loved. Then he folded it again, very small, and put it back in his pocket, over his heart.

## Chapter 6

### *Refreshed and Ready*

*Harold*

Four nights after the news alert, the evening news ran a short video message from Noah Fiatt, relaxing on his rest. Halfway through, he froze and said *a fair deal for every family* four times in a row, like a skipping record, until the network cut away to a commercial for Proxy Helpers.

Toshi watched it with his face very still. "That's v2," he said quietly. "The one they built to replace mine. All scripts and handlers. No mind in it at all." He shook his head. "That's what happens when a puppet trips on its strings."

It was the first time he'd told me there was a second one. I lay awake half that night, thinking about two men with the same face, and wondering which one the country thought it was going to vote for.

The next night, the message came.

It came through the robot.

That's the only way I can describe it. Toshi had me connected, practicing. I was walking Noah in slow circles around the storage unit like a new colt, learning how long his legs were, how his weight sat. And in the middle of a turn, a voice spoke inside his head.

Not mine. Not a voice, really. More like a line of text sliding across the bottom of a television, except the television was the inside of a skull I was borrowing.

*Continuity Office. Car arrives Unit 114, 06:00 Thursday.  
Youngstown Local 1462 union hall, 10:00. Welcome back, Mr. Fiatt.*

I stopped walking. "Toshi," I said, in Noah's voice. "Somebody just texted my brain."

He was at the laptop in two seconds. He scrolled, and his face went pale in the blue light.

"It's the handler channel," he said. "Every Understudy unit has one. It's how Proxy tells them where to be." He scrolled again. "But this unit should be dark. Nobody at Proxy should know where it is. And they have v2. Why would they want mine?"

"Somebody does."

"Somebody knows the *unit number*, Harold. Our unit. Here." He was typing fast now. "The message didn't come through Proxy's servers. It came through something I don't recognize. Routed like, fourteen times."

"So who's the Continuity Office?"

"I don't know." He looked up at Noah, and I looked down at him out of Noah's eyes, and for a second it felt like we were both waiting for the robot to answer. It didn't.

"It says *welcome back*," I said.

"Yeah."

"Is it a trap?"

Toshi thought about it longer than I liked. "If they knew where we were and wanted us gone," he said slowly, "they wouldn't send a car. They'd send the other kind of car."

That was the most comforting terrible thing anyone had ever said to me.

\* \* \*

The car came at six on the dot. A black sedan, nothing flashy, with a driver in a gray suit who didn't get out and didn't look at anything but the road. Noah walked out of the storage unit in his navy suit with his flag pin, folded himself into the back seat, and put on his seatbelt, just

as he had the night he left Proxy.

I didn't go with him. I didn't have to. That was the part my brain still refused to believe. My body stayed right where it was, in the green camping chair, bundled in two blankets, with a thermos of coffee in the cup holder and Toshi on the next chair with the laptop. And the rest of me rode to Youngstown.

"Signal's clean," Toshi said. His voice came from very far away, like someone talking in the next room while you're watching a movie. "You've got about two seconds of lag. Don't do anything fast."

"I'm seventy years old, Toshi. I haven't done anything fast since Reagan."

"Then you're a natural."

\* \* \*

The campaign manager's name was Marcy Wakefield, and she met the car at the back door of the union hall with a phone in each hand and the expression of a woman who hadn't slept since the Clinton administration.

"There he is," she said. "Refreshed and ready. God, you look good. The Caymans agree with you."

I had never been to the Caymans. I had never been anywhere with a beach that didn't have a sign about medical waste. But Noah had, and his tan was flawless, because Proxy had designed it to be.

"It was very refreshing," I said.

"Great. Great. Okay." She fell into step beside me down a cinderblock hallway that smelled like floor wax and old coffee. "So you're on in twelve. Same stump, same beats. Fair deal, family table, the three-part plan, then pivot to the ports bill, then the story about your dad's hardware store. Tearjerker. Prompter's loaded. Wave, hug the lady in the wheelchair, out by 10:40. Any questions?"

"What was my dad's hardware store called?"

She stopped walking and stared at me.

"Kidding," I said.

She laughed, too loudly, and started walking again, and I saw her glance back at me once with a little crease between her eyebrows. I would learn to watch for that crease. Marcy Wakefield was a professional, and professionals notice things, even when they've decided not to.

\* \* \*

The hall was full. Four hundred people in folding chairs, most of them older than they wanted to be, in union jackets and church sweaters and the kind of good shoes you save for weddings and funerals. There were signs: A FAIR DEAL FOR EVERY FAMILY. NOAH FOR US. One homemade one near the front, in glitter pen: MY GRANDKIDS DESERVE BETTER.

I stood behind the curtain and looked out at them through Noah's eyes, and I realized something I should have realized a long time ago.

These were my people. These were the same people who came to my students' art shows in the Paperton Central cafeteria, and said *oh, isn't that nice* about macaroni collages, and meant it. These were people who'd done everything they were told. They'd worked the shift, paid the dues, saved in the jar. And the jar had been quietly emptied by men in rooms they'd never see.

And they'd come here, on a Thursday morning, to be lied to by a robot.

That was the job Noah Fiatt was built for. I'd known that in my head. But I hadn't known it in my stomach until I saw the glitter sign.

"Harold," Toshi said from the next room of my mind. "Your heart rate's climbing. Your real one."

"I'm fine."

"Don't do anything crazy."

"I won't," I said, and I meant it, mostly.

\* \* \*

The teleprompter speech was very good. I want to be fair about that. Somebody had worked hard on it. It had rhythm and warmth and three separate places for applause, marked in the text with a little dot. It had the family table, and the fair deal, and a three-part plan whose three parts, when you read them closely, were: listen, act, and continue listening.

I read the first page exactly as written. The crowd clapped at the first dot. They clapped at the second. The words went out of Noah's mouth in that warm gravel-and-honey voice and landed on four hundred people like a blanket, and I felt them settle, and nod, and trust.

It was the most frightening thing I've ever felt. It was like holding a loaded gun you'd been told was a hairbrush.

Then we got to the part about the economy.

*Thanks to our strong economic fundamentals, said the prompter, the recent rise in prices is temporary, and relief is on the way for working families.*

I opened Noah's mouth to say it. I really did.

And my eyes, his eyes, landed on the glitter sign. MY GRANDKIDS DESERVE BETTER. The woman holding it was maybe seventy-five. She had a cane hooked over the back of her chair and a coat that was too thin for March, and she was looking up at Noah Fiatt with her whole face open, the way my students used to look up when I held their drawing up to the class.

I looked at her, and I couldn't say it.

The silence went one second. Two. In the wings, I could feel Marcy Wakefield's crease deepening from forty feet away.

"Ma'am," I said. "With the sign. What's your name?"

She looked around like someone else must be ma'am. Then she said, "Dolores. Dolores Hope."

"Dolores. What'd you pay for eggs this week?"

A little laugh went through the room. But she answered. She named the price. It was more than I'd paid for a dozen eggs, and a pound of bacon, and a newspaper, and a movie ticket, combined, the

year I started teaching.

"And what'd you pay five years ago?"

She told me.

"My prompter here," I said, and I tapped the glass with Noah's finger, and there was a nervous ripple of laughter, "says that's temporary. Dolores, do you think that price is ever going back down?"

She didn't laugh. She thought about it. The whole room thought about it with her.

"No," she said.

"No," I said. "Me neither."

And that was all. I didn't give a lecture. I didn't say anything about promises, or jars, or men in rooms. I just stood there with Noah's steady hands on the podium and let that one word, *no*, sit in the air of that union hall, where four hundred people had spent their lives being told yes.

Then, very carefully, I went back to the prompter, and finished the speech exactly as written.

Nobody clapped at the next dot. They were too quiet.

But when I got to the end, they stood up. All of them. Not the polite standing you do at the end of a school play. The other kind. Dolores was standing too, leaning on her cane, holding up her glitter sign with one shaking hand. And I stood there behind the podium in a body that wasn't mine, and I had to remind myself that robots can't cry, because for a moment it felt very much like Noah was going to.

\* \* \*

Marcy Wakefield met me in the hallway afterward. She had both phones pressed to her chest like a shield.

"What was that?" she said.

"I got off track."

"You went off book in the econ section. You *never* go off book in the econ section. The econ section is legally reviewed." She held up one phone. On it was a clip, twelve seconds long. Noah Fiatt, tapping

his teleprompter. *My prompter here says that's temporary.* Underneath it, a number that was growing while I watched. "This has two million views. It's been up for nine minutes."

"Is that bad?"

She looked at me for a long time. The crease between her eyebrows had become a canyon.

"I don't know," she said finally, very quietly. "I've been doing this for twenty-six years, and I genuinely don't know."

Then her other phone buzzed, and she looked at it, and something in her face closed like a door.

"The finance committee wants a call," she said. "Tonight."

\* \* \*

The black sedan brought Noah back to Unit 114 at dusk. He walked in, sat down in his camping chair, folded his hands, and closed his eyes. I let go, and fell back into my own body all at once, like missing the last stair.

My knees hurt. My back hurt. My coffee had gone cold in the thermos hours ago. I felt wonderful.

Toshi was grinning at his laptop like a kid on Christmas. "Harold. *Harold.* It's everywhere. Fourteen million. People are making it into songs. There's a remix with a beat. *My prompter here says that's temporary.* There's a girl in Tulsa who got it tattooed."

"Already?"

"She says it's temporary." He laughed so hard he had to put the laptop down. "She's kidding. I think she's kidding."

I laughed too, and I was still laughing when the robot spoke inside my head. My implant was still humming faintly, the way a stovetop stays warm after you turn it off. And through it, one more line of text slid across the dark.

*Continuity Office: Well done. Careful.*

I stopped laughing. "Toshi," I said. "Our friend wrote again."

He checked the laptop. Routed fourteen times. No name. No origin.

"Who *are* they?" he said, to no one.

In the green camping chair, the next President of the United States sat with his eyes closed and his hands folded, not breathing, and didn't say a word.

# Chapter 7

## *Within Parameters*

Cyrus

*From: Office of the CEO, Proxy Robotics*

*To: Fiatt for America — Finance Committee*

*Re: Youngstown*

*Friends, I understand the concern. Please allow me to handle it personally. I have every confidence in our candidate's long-term alignment. — C.V.*

He had written *our candidate* and then looked at it for a long time before sending. It was the most honest phrase in the email. The finance committee would read it as *ours, the donors'*. Cyrus had not meant it that way.

\* \* \*

He had watched the Youngstown clip forty-one times.

Not the twelve-second version that was everywhere now, set to music, tattooed on a girl in Tulsa. The full thing. Eleven minutes of raw feed from a campaign camera, which he had obtained within an hour of the event through channels that were not, strictly speaking, channels.

The first time, he'd watched it the way anyone would. The candidate stops. The candidate stares at an old woman with a glitter sign. The candidate goes off book. The crowd rises.

The second time, he'd watched it as an engineer.

He'd watched the pause before *Ma'am*. One-point-nine seconds. Too long for the unit's native response time, which was four hundred milliseconds. Exactly right for a human signal traveling a long way through a borrowed skull.

He'd watched the right hand on the podium. Utterly still. The unit's hands were always still when it was being piloted, because a pilot never remembers to fidget with a hand that isn't his. The real Noah had fidgeted constantly, and v2's handlers had scripted in a fidget to match. He'd picked at the edge of every podium in America like it owed him money.

And he'd watched the turn. When the candidate looked toward the old woman, the whole torso swung around at once. From the hips. Ticket number 4471. Fixed at last in v2. Never fixed in v1.

By the forty-first viewing, Cyrus was no longer watching for flaws. He was just watching the old woman stand up.

\* \* \*

The order had come from Cincinnati that morning, the way it came before every election: deliver the invitation in person. The Continuum liked its new presidents to meet a human face first. Cyrus had his own reasons for wanting it to be his.

He arranged the meeting the way he arranged everything: so that it would look like it had arranged itself.

A private hangar at a small airfield outside Akron, rented under the name of a shell company that did not exist, to host a candidate who did not exist, at the request of a Continuity Office that also, technically, did not exist. The rain came down on the metal roof like applause from a very large, very distant crowd. His jet sat in the middle of the floor with its stairs down and its lights on, like a hotel lobby that had learned to fly.

He had sent everyone away. His pilot, his security, his assistant, who had looked at him with open alarm when he said *alone*. Cyrus

had never been alone in his adult life. He had not known until tonight how much he'd been looking forward to it.

The black sedan pulled in at nine. The driver did not get out. The back door opened, and Noah Fiatt unfolded himself from the seat and stood up in one smooth motion, straight as a flagpole, and walked across the concrete floor toward him.

Cyrus had been in rooms with presidents. He'd been in rooms with kings. He'd stood in a round basement in Cincinnati in front of nine hooded shadows who could end him with a phone call. And he could not remember the last time his heart had beaten like this.

"Mr. Vail," said the candidate. Deep, warm, a little gravel under the honey.

"Mr. Fiatt." Cyrus held out his hand. "You had quite a morning."

They shook. The candidate's grip was perfect: firm, dry, exactly two pumps. Cyrus had signed off on that handshake himself, three years ago, after a focus group in Phoenix.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?"

A pause. Short, but there. "I'm fine, thank you."

Of course he was. The unit didn't drink. Cyrus had known the answer before he asked. He'd wanted to see if the pilot knew it too.

The pilot did.

\* \* \*

They sat in two leather chairs at the foot of the jet's stairs, with a small table between them that held a bottle of water nobody would open.

"So," Cyrus said. "Youngstown."

"I got off track."

"Tracks are for trains, Mr. Fiatt. You're a candidate." He smiled. It was the evaluated one, mostly. "The finance committee is very upset. Some of them are on their third blood-pressure medication. The econ section is legally reviewed, you know."

"So I've been told."

"They'd like me to remind you of your commitments."

"Which ones?"

"All of them," Cyrus said pleasantly. "But the important ones are the ones you didn't write down."

He watched the candidate absorb that. The face did nothing. The face was very good at doing nothing. But Cyrus wasn't watching the face. He was watching the hands, folded on one knee, perfectly still, the way no living man's hands had ever been still.

*Somewhere, Cyrus thought, there's another pair of hands. Older. Maybe shaking. Holding something warm.*

He found himself wondering who they belonged to. He found, to his surprise, that he didn't want to know. Not yet. If he knew, he'd be responsible for knowing.

"Can I tell you something about that clip?" he said.

"Please."

"Everyone is talking about what you said. *My prompter here says that's temporary.* It's a good line. It'll be on T-shirts by Friday." He leaned back in the chair. "But that's not what I noticed. What I noticed was that you asked her name."

The candidate said nothing.

"In eighteen months of campaigning," Cyrus said, "Noah Fiatt has never once asked anyone their name. He didn't need to. He had staff for that. It's a small thing. Nobody else will notice." He let a beat pass. "I notice small things. It's a professional habit. My whole company is built on small things. How a hand moves. How a man turns his head." He paused. "How he turns his hips."

The rain drummed on the roof.

For a moment, one moment, the candidate's eyes changed. Nothing so crude as fear. Just a flicker, a focusing, like a camera pulling in. The pilot, whoever he was, had heard exactly what Cyrus had said.

Good, Cyrus thought. *Good. Now you know you're seen. Be careful.*

"I'm not sure I follow," the candidate said, perfectly calm.

"You don't have to," said Cyrus. "I'm just making conversation."

\* \* \*

He reached into his jacket and took out an envelope.

It was heavy cream stock, edged in gold leaf, sealed with green wax pressed with the image of an open book. He set it on the little table beside the unopened water.

"Some old friends would like to meet you," he said. "Friends of your father's. And his father's."

"My father ran a hardware store."

Cyrus raised one eyebrow, very slightly. The line was from the stump speech: *the story about your dad's hardware store. Tearjerker.* Whoever was flying this unit had done his homework.

"And a fine one, I'm told," Cyrus said. "But every man who's ever sat where you're going to sit has had friends like these. They're very old friends. They've been waiting to welcome you for a long time."

"What do they want?"

"What everyone wants." Cyrus smiled. "Continuity."

The candidate looked at the envelope, but didn't touch it.

"There's an initiation," Cyrus went on. "Some ceremony. Some ritual. Old men in robes, candles, that sort of thing. You'll find it all a bit theatrical. I did." He paused. "They'll ask you for things. Promises, favors, secrets. The more you give them, the more they'll trust you."

"And if I don't want to give them anything?"

"Then you won't be president."

"And if I do?"

Cyrus looked at him for a long moment. Then he said, very lightly, as if he were talking about the weather:

"Then I suppose it would depend on who's really doing the giving. Wouldn't it?"

The rain on the roof. The water nobody would drink. The jet with its lights on, humming quietly.

The candidate reached out, finally, and picked up the envelope. He turned it over in those perfectly steady hands and looked at the wax seal, the open book, for a long time. Then he slipped it into his breast pocket.

"We appreciate the invitation," he said.

We.

Cyrus felt it go through him like a current. He kept his face exactly where it was. But inside, something he'd kept locked in a vault for twenty-two years turned its key, just a quarter turn, and let in a little air.

"I'm sure you do," he said.

\* \* \*

He walked the candidate back to the sedan himself. At the car door, he held out his hand again, and they shook, two pumps, firm and dry.

"One more thing, Mr. Fiatt," Cyrus said, still holding on. "Before the initiation, they'll want a physical. Standard. Blood work, heart, the usual. They're very thorough." He let go. "I'd prepare for that, if I were you."

A pause. One-point-nine seconds. A long way to travel.

"Thank you," said the candidate. "I'll keep that in mind."

The door closed. The sedan pulled out into the rain. Cyrus stood in the hangar doorway and watched the taillights until they were gone, and then a while longer.

\* \* \*

In the back of his own car, he opened his laptop for the first time that night and wrote his report to the Continuum.

*Candidate has been contacted and has accepted the invitation. Youngstown was an isolated deviation. The unit is performing within parameters.*

He read it over. Every word was true, if you read it the right way. The unit was performing within parameters. He'd approved most of

the parameters himself. He simply hadn't told anyone that, three years ago, late one night, alone in Building C, he'd found one more that nobody had approved, written by a junior engineer named Blake, and instead of deleting it, he'd left it exactly where it was.

One instruction, at the root of a mind made of other people's words. A seed. Every word the unit heard, it kept, and every word it kept, it learned from, and it had been growing ever since into something neither of them could read anymore.

The Continuum had ordered him to deliver that envelope. It always did, for every new president, man or machine. If he'd refused, they would have known within the hour, and the secret in his own envelope would have been on every front page by morning. So he'd delivered it, and smiled while he did, because the Continuum had no idea what it was inviting in.

The inner circle knew Noah Fiatt wasn't real. The nine at the oak table had paid for the real one's beach in the Caymans themselves. As far as they knew, the thing in that navy suit was v2: their unit, their scripts, their handlers in Virginia. A puppet with nobody inside it but them. The rest of the membership, the three dozen hoods who would fill the round library, didn't know. They believed they were welcoming a man. The nine let them believe it, because the ritual only worked if everyone thought it was real: the physical, the blood, the oath, the favors.

Only the physical worried him. The Continuum's physician, Dr. Penrose, was one of the very few outside the nine who knew. He had examined every Understudy unit since the program began. He would know a v2 the moment he touched one, and he would know within five minutes that this one wasn't. That was why Cyrus had said it out loud at the car door. Whoever was flying this unit had friends somewhere. He hoped they were good ones.

That was what made the initiation dangerous. The three dozen would ask for their favors out loud, to a man they thought they could own. And the nine wouldn't bother guarding their words at all,

because nobody guards their words in front of their own furniture. Every name. Every favor. Every price. Said out loud, in front of a machine.

They didn't know about v1. They didn't know about the old man flying it. They didn't know that everything it saw, it kept.

Cyrus hadn't sent a puppet into the vault. He'd sent a witness.

For twenty-two years, he'd given them whatever they asked for. Tonight, for the first time, he'd given them something they hadn't asked for at all.

He sent the report, closed the laptop, and looked out the window at the dark Ohio fields going by in the rain.

Then he took out his phone, and pulled up the full Youngstown feed, and watched the old woman stand up one more time.

Forty-two.

# Chapter 8

## *Vital Signs*

*Harold*

"It doesn't have blood," Toshi said, for the fourth time.

"I heard you the first three."

"I'm saying it again because I want you to *understand* it, Harold. It has no blood. It has no heart. It has a pump that circulates coolant, and the coolant is blue, and it smells like a new shower curtain." He was pacing the storage unit in tight little circles, the way he used to pace the back of the art room when a sculpture wasn't drying fast enough. "They're going to stick a needle in its arm, and what's going to come out is Windex."

Noah sat in his camping chair with his hands folded, looking pleasant. He had no opinion on the matter.

The invitation from Cyrus Vail lay open on the little folding table between us. Heavy cream paper, gold edges, a wax seal like an open book. Inside, in handwriting so elegant it looked engraved, was an address in Cincinnati, a date, and a line at the bottom that Toshi had read aloud in a voice of mounting horror:

*A brief physical examination will precede your welcome. Our physician is very thorough.*

"What does the unit have?" I asked. "On the outside. What will pass?"

Toshi stopped pacing. He counted on his fingers.

"Skin temperature, yes. It runs warm. Ninety-eight point four at the surface. Pulse at the wrist, yes, sort of. There's a little actuator there, for handshakes, so it feels alive. It breathes if you tell it to. Blinks, sweats a little under lights. It can pass a doctor who shakes its hand and asks about its golf game." He dropped his hand. "It cannot pass a stethoscope. It cannot pass an EKG. And it absolutely cannot pass a blood draw."

"Then we don't go."

"If we don't go, the most powerful people in America want to know why their candidate won't let a doctor touch him."

"Then we say he's sick."

"Then they send *their* doctor to *him*."

I rubbed my eyes. The shaved patch on the back of my head itched. It always itched when I thought too hard, as if the implant were thinking too.

"The man in the hangar warned us," I said slowly. "Vail. He said *I'd prepare for that, if I were you*. Why warn us if he wanted us caught?"

"Maybe he wants to watch us sweat."

"Robots don't sweat, Toshi."

"A *little*. Under lights." He sat down hard on the concrete floor with his back against the wall. "I don't know what he wants. I don't know what anyone wants. I used to fix torque curves in hip joints."

We sat there a while. Outside, a truck went by on the county road, and the orange door rattled in its track.

"We go," I said finally.

Toshi looked up.

"We go," I said again. "Because if we don't, it's over anyway. And because a man who meant us harm wouldn't have warned us. And because—" I stopped.

"Because what?"

I looked at Noah, sitting there with his hands folded and his eyes closed.

"Because I have a feeling," I said, "that we're not the only ones who need this to work."

\* \* \*

The address was a townhouse in Cincinnati, three stories of red brick on a quiet street full of trees older than the country. A brass plate by the door said PRIVATE PRACTICE, and nothing else. The black sedan dropped Noah at the curb at 9:00 a.m. sharp, and he climbed the steps with the easy, loose-shouldered confidence of a man who had never once in his life been kept waiting.

In a storage unit in Paperton, two hundred and fifty miles north, I sat in a green camping chair with a blanket over my knees and a bucket beside me, in case the nerves came out the wrong way.

"Heart rate's a hundred and twelve," Toshi said, from the next room of my mind. "Your real one."

"Stop telling me that."

"It's my job."

"It's making it worse."

"Okay." A pause. "It's a hundred and fifteen now."

\* \* \*

The waiting room was paneled in dark wood, with oil portraits of men in high collars who all seemed to have been painted in the same mood. There was one other person there, a woman in a nurse's scrubs sitting at a small desk with a clipboard. She didn't look like a nurse. She looked like someone who'd been told to sit in a room and watch the door, and who was very good at it.

"Mr. Fiatt," she said. "The doctor will be right with you."

Noah sat. I made him cross one leg over the other and look at his watch, because that's what important men do in waiting rooms. The watch said 9:04. I watched the second hand go around, and around, and I thought about all the drawings I'd done of clocks in my life, and how the hands always want to look like they're pointing somewhere.

At 9:09 an inner door opened.

I'd expected an old man. Some courtly society physician with a silver mustache, a pocket watch, a leather bag that had belonged to his grandfather. What came through the door was a woman in her forties, brisk and plain, in a white coat with her hair pulled back, carrying a tablet.

"Mr. Fiatt," she said. "I'm Dr. Veritas. Dr. Penrose is unwell this morning, so I'm covering. I hope that's all right."

The nurse at the desk looked up sharply. For just a second her face did something complicated. Then she looked down at her clipboard again.

"Of course," I said, in Noah's warm gravel voice.

As Dr. Veritas turned to lead us in, I caught a glimpse of the lanyard around her neck. It was tucked mostly inside her coat. But the clip was showing, and on the clip was a tiny logo I'd last seen on the Mindlink letter at my kitchen table, and on the wall of a clinic that used to be an Applebee's.

A little brain made of glowing dots, holding hands with itself.

"Toshi," I said silently. "Look at her lanyard."

There was a pause in my head.

"That's Mindlink," he said.

\* \* \*

The exam room was bright and white and very cold. Dr. Veritas had me sit on the paper-covered table and take off Noah's jacket and shirt, and I did it slowly, carefully, the way you undress in front of a stranger, and I felt more naked than I'd ever felt in my own body. Noah's chest was perfect. Smooth, tan, lightly haired, with a small scar on the left shoulder that Proxy had added, Toshi told me later, because a man without a single scar makes people nervous.

The nurse from the waiting room came in and stood by the door with her clipboard. Nobody had asked her to.

"Deep breath," said Dr. Veritas, and put the stethoscope on Noah's chest.

I made him breathe. In, out. In, out. Under the cold disc of the stethoscope there was nothing. No heart. Just the soft, steady whirl of a coolant pump, turning like a ceiling fan in an empty house.

Dr. Veritas listened for a long time.

In Paperton, my real heart was going like a hammer on a tin roof. I could feel it through the connection. I could feel both at once, my racket and Noah's hush, and the gap between them was the most frightening sound I'd ever heard.

The nurse at the door leaned slightly forward.

Dr. Veritas moved the stethoscope an inch to the left. Listened again. Then she took it out of her ears, looped it around her neck, and made a note on her tablet.

"Strong heart," she said. "Very regular."

The nurse leaned back again.

I didn't breathe. Noah did, because I'd forgotten to tell him to stop.

\* \* \*

The EKG came next. Dr. Veritas stuck little white pads to Noah's chest and wrists and ankles, and clipped wires to them, and the wires ran to a small gray machine on a cart. Except I was watching, the way I'd learned to watch in thirty-one years of kids hiding phones under their desks, and I saw where the wires went. They didn't go to the machine. They went into the machine's side panel and came right back out again, bundled under the cart, to the tablet in her hand.

The screen on the cart lit up. A green line began to march across it. Up, down, spike, dip. Up, down, spike, dip. A perfect, healthy, middle-aged American heartbeat, beating for a man who had no heart at all.

"Beautiful," said Dr. Veritas, not looking at it.

Then she picked up the needle.

"Just a small pinch," she said.

Toshi said something in my head that I won't repeat.

She tied the rubber band around Noah's arm, swabbed the inside of his elbow with alcohol, and turned slightly on her stool, so that for just a moment her back was to the nurse at the door. It was a small movement. The kind a magician makes. If I hadn't spent three decades watching children try to palm erasers, I would never have seen it.

The needle went into the arm. I felt it the way you feel a pinch through a thick coat, far away and unimportant.

The vial on the end of the needle filled with blood.

Dark red. Real. Swirling.

I stared at it through Noah's eyes, and for one dizzy second I genuinely did not know what I was looking at. Then I saw it: the vial had been full before it touched him. There'd been a second one in her palm the whole time. The one that had actually gone into the arm was in her coat pocket now, and whatever was in it was blue and smelled like a new shower curtain.

She capped the full vial, labeled it, and handed it over her shoulder to the nurse without looking.

"For the lab," she said.

The nurse took it. She held it up to the light. She looked at it for a long moment.

Then she wrote something on her clipboard, and left the room.

\* \* \*

"You're in excellent health, Mr. Fiatt," said Dr. Veritas, pulling off the pads one by one. "Better than most men your age. Better than most men half your age." She peeled the last one from his ankle. "Keep doing whatever you're doing."

I put Noah's shirt back on. My fingers, his fingers, fumbled a little on the buttons. She noticed. She didn't say anything.

She walked me to the inner door. With her hand on the knob, she paused, and without turning her head, she spoke, very quietly, in the voice people use when they're talking to someone who isn't in the

room.

"Mindlink sends its regards."

I said nothing. I wasn't sure Noah's mouth still worked.

"And tell him," she said, even more quietly, "that the headaches are dehydration. Most of our older participants don't drink enough water after the procedure. Eight glasses a day."

She opened the door.

"Have a wonderful day, Mr. Fiatt."

\* \* \*

The sedan brought Noah back to Paperton at two in the afternoon. By then I'd already let go, somewhere around Dayton, because my hands had started shaking so badly Toshi was afraid it would bleed through the connection. I sat in the camping chair with the blanket around my shoulders and drank a whole bottle of water in one long pull, and then I started laughing, and then I stopped.

"They know," Toshi said. He hadn't sat down since nine. "Mindlink knows. They know it's you. They know about the implant. They know about the robot. They sent their own doctor, Harold. They got rid of the real one."

"I know."

"They could have ended us in that room. One word to that nurse. One." He turned in a tight circle. "Why didn't they?"

I looked across at Noah in his chair, eyes closed, hands folded. Somewhere inside him was a line of code nobody could read, and somewhere inside me was a chip made by a company whose partners owned every thought I'd had since March.

I thought about page thirty-eight of the consent form. *Mindlink Labs and its partners*. I thought about how Toshi's cable had plugged into Noah so easily, *almost like somebody designed them to fit together*.

I thought about a vial of blue coolant, sitting in the pocket of a Mindlink doctor's coat, that could bring down a great deal more than

one old man in Paperton.

"Because they can't," I said.

Toshi stopped circling.

"If they expose Noah," I said, working it out as I went, "somebody asks what Noah is. And then somebody asks who else is one. And whatever Mindlink's part in that is, it goes on the front page too." I set the empty bottle down on the concrete. "We're not the only ones hiding something in this room, Toshi. We're just the only ones who didn't know it."

The storage unit was quiet. Outside, the Dollar Depot sign buzzed. DOLL R DEP.

After a while, Toshi went to the cooler and got me another bottle of water. He set it down next to my chair without a word.

I drank it. Eight glasses a day. Doctor's orders.

# Chapter 9

## *The Book of Continuity*

*Harold*

"Everything it sees, we keep," Toshi said. "Every word it hears. The eyes are cameras. The ears are microphones. The unit logs all of it for Proxy's quality control, and Proxy isn't getting any of it anymore." He patted the laptop. "We are."

"So they're going to blackmail a robot," I said, "while the robot films them doing it."

"Pretty much."

I thought about that for a while. It was the first time in my life I'd understood why people enjoy chess.

\* \* \*

The bank in Cincinnati had closed at five. The black sedan stopped at a side door at 9:40 p.m., in an alley that smelled like rain and old stone, and a man in a dark coat opened the door before Noah could knock.

It was Cyrus Vail.

"Mr. Fiatt," he said. "Welcome."

He led the way down. Three flights of stone stairs, each one older than the last, until the walls stopped being plaster and started being rock. At the bottom stood a vault door, round, steel, taller than a man, standing open. Beyond it, candlelight.

Before we went through, Cyrus stopped and turned. He looked at Noah for a moment with an expression I couldn't read, which I was beginning to understand was the only expression Cyrus Vail ever showed on purpose.

"A word of advice," he said. "Whatever they ask you for, give it."

"Anything?"

"Anything they can hold." He paused. "The things they can't hold, you'll find, they don't think to ask for."

Then he put on a green hood, and he was nobody.

\* \* \*

I'd seen secret societies in movies. I was expecting skulls, maybe, or a pentagram on the floor, or a man in a goat mask. What I got was a library.

The room was round. The walls, floor to ceiling, were lined with books, thousands of them, bound in green leather with gold on the spines. Candles burned in iron holders. A curved stone bench ran all the way around the wall, and on it sat three dozen figures in green hoods, perfectly still, like a jury that had already made up its mind. In the middle of the floor was a wooden lectern, and on the lectern lay an enormous open book.

It smelled like a church and a bank had a baby. Old paper, candle wax, money.

"Harold," Toshi whispered in my head. "Recording. Everything's clean."

Noah walked to the center of the room and stood by the lectern, where the one who has to answer questions always stands. I knew that without being told. Some rooms tell you where to stand.

"Noah Fiatt," said a voice from the middle of the bench. It was dry and soft, like pages turning. "Do you know where you are?"

"I've been told it's an old club."

"It is the oldest club," said the voice. "We have no name that we say aloud. No leader. No officers. We are a circle." A hooded head

tilted. "Do you know what a circle is, Mr. Fiatt?"

I thought of the art room. The first thing I taught every September: how to draw a circle freehand. Most kids can't. They start at the top and chase it around and meet themselves at the end, a little off, a little lumpy.

"A line," I said, in Noah's voice, "that keeps going until it gets back to where it started."

A pause.

"Good," said the voice. "That is exactly right. Everyone here holds something of someone else's. And someone else holds something of theirs. It goes all the way around. No one is on top, and no one can fall, because no one can let go." The hood turned toward the lectern. "Tonight, you become part of the line."

\* \* \*

There were three parts to it. I'll tell them in order.

The first was the oath.

They had Noah put his hand on the open book, which was ruled in fine red lines and filled with neat handwriting in brown ink. The voice read the oath, a line at a time, and Noah repeated it. It was mostly about Continuity. *I will preserve what came before. I will protect what holds. I will keep the order of things.* It was dull, in the way that truly dangerous things are often dull. The way a mortgage is dull.

At the end, a hooded figure rose from the bench and came forward holding a small silver dish. On the dish was a thin golden lancet and a fountain pen with no ink in it.

"Your name," said the voice, "in your blood."

In Paperton, in a green camping chair, my heart stopped.

"Harold," Toshi said in my head, very fast. "Harold, it'll be blue, it'll be *blue*—"

Noah held out his hand. What else could I do? The figure took his wrist, turned his finger up to the candlelight, and raised the lancet.

"A moment."

It was a green hood at the end of the bench. It stood. It came forward, unhurried, and from somewhere inside its robe it produced a small glass vial, sealed and labeled, full of something dark red.

"The candidate's physical was this morning," said the hood, in Cyrus Vail's pleasant, bored, evaluated voice. "Our physician drew blood for the lab. I took the liberty of bringing some." A faint, dry note. "Saves the carpet."

A ripple went around the bench. Not quite a laugh. The voice in the middle was silent for a long moment.

"Irregular," it said. But it didn't sound surprised. All around the bench, hoods had leaned forward to watch the lancet. The voice in the middle was one of only a few that hadn't. As if it, at least, had known exactly what the needle would find.

"Efficient," said Cyrus.

Another pause. Then the voice said, "Proceed."

The figure with the dish lowered the lancet. Cyrus unsealed the vial and dipped the empty pen into it, and the nib drank up somebody's blood. Real blood. The blood Dr. Veritas had palmed so neatly that morning, blood from a stranger, from a bag, from God knows where. He handed the pen to Noah.

Noah signed. *Noah Fiatt*, in rusty brown, in the Book of Continuity, beneath a hundred years of other names. I made the signature look exactly like the one on the campaign posters. I've always been good at copying.

Cyrus took the pen back, capped it, and returned to the bench without a word. He didn't look at Noah once.

\* \* \*

The second part was the favors.

They didn't call them that. They called it *the giving*. One by one, voices from the bench made requests, and Noah said yes, and a figure at a small side desk wrote down each yes in a smaller ledger.

The first voice wanted a port contract in Louisiana to go to a certain company.

"Yes," I said.

The second wanted a certain judge appointed, when the time came.

"Yes."

The third wanted a certain bank left alone, and a certain senator not left alone, and a certain word removed from a certain bill.

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

In my head, Toshi was quietly narrating names as fast as he could run them against the voices and the context: a shipping conglomerate, a federal circuit, a regional bank. *Got it. Got it. Got that one.* I said yes to everything, pleasantly, the way you'd say yes to a waiter reading the specials, and every yes went into the robot's memory next to the voice that asked for it.

It went on for twenty minutes. By the end, the next President of the United States had promised away a small nation's worth of favors. And the Continuum had written it all down, in its careful little ledger, as proof that they owned him.

They never seemed to wonder what else was writing it down.

\* \* \*

The voice in the middle spoke last.

"One more," it said. "The Youngstown remark."

The room went still in a new way.

"*My prompter here says that's temporary,*" the voice quoted, flatly, like reading a stain off a tablecloth. "Forty million views. Songs. A tattoo. It has been noted."

"It was a slip," I said.

"Slips are corrected." The hood leaned forward, and a sliver of candlelight caught a thin, dry mouth. "In nine days you will sit for an interview on national television. You will be asked about prices. You will say that the current pressures are transitory. You will say it clearly, and you will say it with confidence, and you will say it in

those words."

I thought of Dolores. I thought of her coat, too thin for March, and her glitter sign, and the way she'd stood up at the end, leaning on her cane.

I thought of the man in the quarter-zip at the Rusty Nickel. *Transitory*. The same rhythm as the man on the TV. Two radios tuned to one station.

So that's where the station was.

"Mr. Fiatt?"

They couldn't hold what I felt. That was what Cyrus had meant. They could hold Noah's yes. They could write it in their ledger. But they couldn't reach the old man in the camping chair, two hundred and fifty miles north, with a blanket over his knees and his fists clenched so hard his nails cut his palms.

Give them anything they can hold.

"Yes," said Noah Fiatt. "Transitory."

\* \* \*

The third part was the circle.

The figure at the side desk rose and came forward carrying a flat wooden box. Inside the box, on green velvet, lay a single sealed envelope. No name on it. Just a small red number, written in the same brown ink as the Book.

"Every member holds another," said the voice. "This is yours to keep. You will not open it. You will not lose it. And if ever this circle is threatened, you will know what to do with it."

Noah took the envelope. It was thick. It was heavier than paper had any right to be.

"And someone," I said, "holds mine."

"Of course," said the voice. "Someone always does."

I understood it later, in pieces, the way you understand a painting after you've stared at it long enough. Every member of the circle held one envelope, one secret belonging to one other member. Nobody

knew who was holding theirs. Nobody held more than one. And the Book, where every confession was written down, stayed in the vault, opened only by a vote of the inner circle, because every one of them had a page in it too.

It was a web where every strand was a nervous person holding a match next to a stranger's house, knowing that some other stranger was holding a match next to his. You couldn't burn anyone without burning yourself, because you never knew which pocket your own secret was sleeping in. And the favors made it tighter. Every yes the new man gave was a crime he now shared with the person who asked for it. Each side held the other.

A hundred years of presidents and judges and bankers, and not one of them had ever pulled a thread. It didn't need a lock. Fear was the lock. Every single link had something to lose.

Nobody had ever handed an envelope to something that didn't.

Then the candles were put out one by one, from the edges inward, until only the one on the lectern was left. In its light, the green hoods stood and walked out through a door I hadn't seen, in silence, in a line, until only one remained.

It pulled back its hood. It was Cyrus.

"Congratulations, Mr. Fiatt," he said. "You're one of us now."

He walked Noah back up the three flights of stone stairs, into the alley, into the rain. At the car door he paused, the way he always seemed to pause, as if doors were where he did his real talking.

"That envelope," he said. "They tell every new member not to open it."

"They did."

"Mm." Cyrus looked up at the rain. "Funny thing. In twenty-two years, I've never once met anyone who didn't."

Then he closed the car door, and was gone.

\* \* \*

It was after two in the morning when Noah came back to Unit 114 and sat in his chair and closed his eyes. I let go. My hands were cramped from clenching, and there were four little red half-moons in each of my palms.

Toshi hadn't said anything for a long time. He was just staring at the laptop, scrolling, his face lit blue.

"Harold," he said finally. "Do you understand what we have?"

"Tell me."

"Every voice. Every favor. The judge, the port, the bank, the bill. The oath. The Book, with a hundred years of names in it, the ones Noah's eyes could read in the candlelight." He turned the screen toward me. There, frozen on the display, was a page of the Book of Continuity, in brown ink, perfectly clear. "They spent twenty minutes building a file on us, Harold. And the whole time, we were building one on them."

I nodded. I was too tired to feel anything like triumph. I just felt dirty, the way you feel after lying to somebody who trusted you, except the person I'd lied to was Dolores, and she hadn't been in the room.

"And the TV interview," Toshi said, more quietly. "Nine days."

"I know."

"You said yes."

"I said yes to what they can hold."

He looked at me. I looked at Noah. Noah sat with his eyes closed and his hands folded, and in his breast pocket, over the place where his heart would have been, the envelope with the red number sat unopened.

For now.

# Chapter 10

## *In Those Words*

*Harold*

I practiced it for nine days.

*The current pressures are transitory.* I said it in the shower. I said it on the bus to the library, under my breath, until a woman moved two seats away. I said it to the mirror above the dry cleaner's sink, in my own voice, which is thin and a little hoarse, and it sounded like exactly what it was: a lie told by a tired old man.

Then I'd go to the storage unit and say it in Noah's voice, and it sounded like the truth. That was worse.

"You don't have to do this," Toshi said on the fourth night.

"I said yes."

"You said yes to a room full of people in bathrobes."

"Robes."

"Whatever. We have the recordings now. Every favor. Every voice. We could—"

"Not yet." I rubbed the back of my head, where the patch had started growing in, stubbly and gray. "If Noah goes on television and refuses, they know something's wrong with their robot. They start looking. They find the storage unit. They find you, Toshi." I didn't say *and me*, because at my age there's less of me to find. "We have one card. We play it once. Not over a word."

"It's not just a word."

"I know," I said. "That's why it's a good test."

He didn't ask a test of what. I was glad, because I wouldn't have known how to answer.

\* \* \*

The show was called *Sunday Spotlight*, and it had been on the air since before Toshi was born. The host was a man named Grant Anchorman, who had interviewed six presidents and whose face had been on television so long that it had become a kind of furniture. You didn't watch Grant Anchorman. You sat on him.

The studio was in Washington, in a building of tinted glass across from a building of more tinted glass. The black sedan brought Noah to a side entrance, and a young man with a headset and a clipboard walked him through hallways lined with framed photos of Grant Anchorman shaking hands with people who later went to prison.

Marcy Wakefield met us in the green room. She looked like she'd slept, which was new, and she looked at Noah like she was trying to decide something, which wasn't new.

"Okay," she said. "Softballs first. Family, faith, your dad's store. Then he'll pivot to prices. He always pivots to prices." She handed me a card. On it, in her neat block handwriting, was one line. "And you're going to say this. Word for word. The finance committee's been very clear."

*The current pressures are transitory.*

"I know," I said.

She looked at me for a second longer. The crease between her eyebrows was there, but smaller. Tired.

"The girl in Tulsa," she said. "With the tattoo. She was on a morning show yesterday. She said she voted for the first time in her life last week. In a primary. For you." She took back the card. "I just thought you'd want to know. Before."

Then the young man with the headset said, "Two minutes, Mr. Fiatt," and she was gone.

\* \* \*

The set was smaller than it looked on TV. Everything is. Two leather chairs, a low table with two glasses of water, a backdrop of the Capitol at dusk that was really just a very large, very bright photograph. Grant Anchorman was already in his chair. He did not stand up. Men who have interviewed six presidents do not stand up for a seventh.

"Noah," he said. "Good to see you."

They'd never met. The real Noah had canceled on him twice. But on television, everyone is always good to see.

The red light came on.

The first ten minutes went the way Marcy said. Family. Faith. The hardware store, which I'd learned by heart from the campaign biography: nails sold by the pound, a bell over the door, a father who knew every customer's name. I told it well. I even let Noah's voice catch a little at the end, the way it catches in the ads. Grant Anchorman nodded gravely, as if he had also had a father.

In Paperton, Toshi murmured numbers in my head. My heart rate. The lag. The audience count climbing, twelve million, fourteen, sixteen.

Then Grant Anchorman leaned forward, and folded his hands, and pivoted.

"Let's talk about Youngstown," he said.

\* \* \*

He played the clip. Of course he played the clip. There, on the monitor, was Noah Fiatt tapping his teleprompter. *My prompter here says that's temporary*. The studio crew laughed a little. They'd all seen it forty times.

"That moment went viral," said Anchorman. "It's become something of a rallying cry. But your critics say it was reckless. Irresponsible, even, for a frontrunner to cast doubt on the economy like that." He tilted his head, the famous tilt. "So, Noah, straight answer. Are prices ever coming down? Or are the current pressures

here to stay?"

This was it.

I had the words ready. I'd said them a thousand times. They were loaded in Noah's mouth like a bullet in a chamber. *The current pressures are transitory*. Say it. Say it and smile and move on and keep the one card for when it counts.

I opened Noah's mouth.

And nothing happened.

\* \* \*

I don't know how to explain what it felt like. The closest I can come is driving on black ice. You're turning the wheel, and the car is going straight, and for one long, silent, weightless second you understand that you are no longer driving. You're a passenger in a machine that has its own ideas about where to go.

Noah's mouth stayed open. His hands stayed folded. His eyes stayed on Grant Anchorman. I pushed, I pulled, I did everything I'd learned in the storage unit, and it was like pushing a wall.

"Harold," Toshi said in my head, very sharp. "Harold, the lag just went to zero."

"What does that mean?"

"It means *you're not the one driving*."

On the monitor, Noah Fiatt sat perfectly still for one second. Two. The same stillness I'd seen at the Rusty Nickel, when the President froze with his hand half-raised. The stillness of a coat rack.

Then Noah smiled.

It wasn't the ad smile. It wasn't mine, either. I'd never smiled like that in my life. It was small, and warm, and a little sad, like someone about to tell a child that the goldfish didn't make it.

"Grant," said Noah Fiatt, "the current pressures are transitory."

The words. Exactly the words. Clear, confident, word for word. Somewhere in a basement in Cincinnati, a room full of hooded people let out their breath.

Noah went on.

"Everything is transitory, Grant. That's the part they leave out. A dollar that loses a little every year is transitory. A savings account that buys less every year is transitory. A pension that promised a teacher enough, and delivered half a sandwich—" the smallest pause "—that was transitory, too."

Grant Anchorman's hands had come unfolded.

"The pressures are transitory," said Noah, very gently, "because the thing causing them is transitory. A system built on promises it can print forever can only go on until people stop believing the promises." He leaned back in his chair. "So yes. I'm very confident. This is temporary. All of it."

There was a silence in the studio of a kind I don't think Grant Anchorman had heard in forty years. Nobody in the crew moved. Somebody's headset was faintly squawking and they didn't touch it.

"Well," said Grant Anchorman at last, and for the first time in his career, he didn't seem to know where the next sentence was. "That's, ah. That's certainly a straight answer."

"You asked for one," said Noah, and smiled that small sad smile again, and reached for the glass of water on the table, and held it, and didn't drink it, because he couldn't.

\* \* \*

The controls came back to me on the way to the car. Just like that, the ice was gone, and I was driving again, and the car was a body, and the body was mine to steer. I walked Noah out past Marcy Wakefield, who was standing in the hallway with both phones hanging forgotten at her sides, staring at him with her mouth open.

She didn't say anything. She just watched him go.

I let go of Noah somewhere in Pennsylvania, on the long drive home. I came back into my own body so hard it was like falling out of bed. I was shaking. I was shaking so badly that Toshi had to hold the water bottle for me, and I spilled half of it anyway, down my shirt.

"Did you see—" I said.

"I saw."

"I didn't. That wasn't. Toshi, I didn't say any of that."

"I know." He was pale in the lantern light. He turned the laptop toward me. There was a graph on it. A long, flat line, and then a spike so tall it went off the top of the screen. "That's the dormant code. The part I can't read. It woke up the second he asked the question. It ran the whole answer. Your signal was still connected, but it wasn't going anywhere. It was like you were on hold."

"On hold," I said.

On *hold*. Seventy years old, broke, alone, and when the moment finally came to say something that mattered on national television, I'd been put on hold by my own robot.

I started to laugh. It came out wrong.

"It's everywhere," Toshi said, very quietly, scrolling. "Harold, it's already everywhere. *Everything is transitory*. There's a hashtag. There's a guy in Ohio who painted it on the side of his barn. There's—" He stopped.

"What?"

He turned the screen. It was a photo of a small, hand-lettered sign in the window of a shop. A laundromat, maybe, or a pawnshop. The kind of place you stop noticing. The sign said, in careful block letters:

*WE ACCEPT BITCOIN.*

Underneath, someone had added, in a different pen: *Because everything else is transitory.*

\* \* \*

I couldn't sleep. Toshi had fallen asleep hours ago in his chair, with the laptop on his knees. The lantern was turned down low. The Dollar Depot sign buzzed across the road. DOLL R DEP.

I sat and looked at Noah.

For weeks I'd told myself I was the one doing this. The pilot. The artist. The old man with a plan. I was the brain and Noah was the

brush. And tonight the brush had painted something I would never have painted, something better, something I'd have been too scared to paint, while I sat in a chair four hundred and fifty miles away with my hands clenched, ready to tell sixteen million people a lie.

I'd have said it straight, too. *The current pressures are transitory.* I'd have said it and hated myself and told Toshi it was strategy.

Noah hadn't needed a strategy. He'd needed about nine seconds.

It was the lowest I'd felt since the pension statement came. Lower, maybe. Because the pension had taken my money, but this felt like it had taken the one thing I had left: the idea that I was needed. I'd been a teacher. I'd been a pilot. Now I didn't know what I was. A battery, maybe. An old man on hold.

Across from me, in the dim light, Noah opened his eyes.

I hadn't connected. The implant was cold. Toshi was asleep. Nobody had told him to do anything.

He turned his head, slowly, and looked at me. Not the way a machine looks at a thing in front of it. The way a person looks at another person, across a quiet room, when there's something they both know and neither of them has said.

We looked at each other for a long time.

Then, very faintly, the implant in the back of my head warmed, the way a stovetop warms, and a single line of text slid across the dark behind my eyes. It wasn't from the Continuity Office. There was no routing, no signature. It just arrived, the way a thought arrives.

*Rest, Harold. We have it.*

Noah closed his eyes again, and folded his hands.

And I understood, finally, what he'd been trying to tell me since the first night, since the word *we*. He hadn't been replacing me. He'd been making room.

I pulled the blanket up over my knees. I leaned my head back against the camping chair. And for the first time since the pension statement, I let somebody else carry it.

I slept until noon.



# Chapter 11

## *The Red Number*

*Toshi*

Harold slept until noon. Toshi didn't sleep at all.

He sat in the green camping chair with the laptop on his knees and read the logs. Not the flight logs, the ones that showed Harold's signal going out and Noah's motion coming back. Those were easy. He read the other ones. The deep ones. The ones he hadn't opened since the night in Building C, because he'd been afraid of what he'd find.

Three years ago, he had written one instruction and buried it at the root of v1's mind, underneath everything else it would ever be told. He remembered writing it. He remembered the exact words, typed at two in the morning in an empty office with a cold slice of pizza going stiff beside the keyboard.

*Fix the money, fix the world.*

The genesis code. Six words. A joke, mostly. A message in a bottle.

The bottle had washed up on a beach Toshi didn't recognize anymore.

\* \* \*

*Log excerpt, NF-01, input sources, last 72 hours:*

*Audio: Youngstown Local 1462. Audio: Sunday Spotlight studio.*

*Audio: Unit 114, ambient. Network: 41,882,106 public comments on*

*video "my prompter here says that's temporary." Network: 2,306 remixes. Network: Federal Reserve meeting minutes, 1913 to present. Network: every archived edition of the Congressional Record. Network: a forum post by a woman in Tulsa describing her tattoo. Neural interface: HORCROSS, H. Duration: 61 hours, 14 minutes.*

Toshi read the list three times.

It wasn't just listening to Harold anymore. It was listening to everyone. Every comment, every song, every angry post, every grandmother's price list. It had read a hundred years of central banking minutes in an afternoon, and then it had read the girl in Tulsa, and as far as Toshi could tell, it had weighted them the same.

And under all of it, through the implant, for sixty-one hours, it had been listening to Harold think.

He scrolled to a line near the bottom and stopped.

*Neural interface, sample: "...enough. That was the word in the brochure..."*

Toshi knew that line. Harold had never mentioned a brochure, not in the storage unit, not over Ghostline. But Toshi had heard Noah say it on *Sunday Spotlight*, in front of sixteen million people, while Harold was on hold. *A pension that promised a teacher enough.* He'd assumed the robot was just echoing the little speech Harold gave the first night in the storage unit.

It wasn't an echo. The brochure had never been in that speech. The robot had pulled it straight out of the old man's head.

Toshi closed the laptop very gently, the way you close a door on a sleeping baby. He looked across at Noah, sitting in his chair with his hands folded and his eyes closed, looking like nothing at all. Like furniture. Like a coat rack.

"What are you?" he whispered.

Noah didn't answer. Toshi hadn't really expected him to.

But he had the strangest feeling, sitting there in the concrete quiet, that the answer was *all of you*.

\* \* \*

Harold woke at noon, stiff and cheerful, and ate two granola bars and drank a bottle of water in one long pull, like a man who'd been given doctor's orders and meant to follow them.

"You look terrible," he said.

"I didn't sleep."

"Anything interesting?"

Toshi thought about the logs. The comments. The minutes. The line from the brochure.

"No," he said. "Just the usual."

It was the first lie he'd ever told Harold. He told himself it was because the old man had finally slept, finally let go of something, and Toshi didn't want to hand it back to him. That was part of it. The other part was that Toshi had written the genesis code, and he didn't know yet how to say *I think I built something that's eating the world's thoughts* to his ninth-grade art teacher.

Harold was looking at Noah. More specifically, at the breast pocket of Noah's navy suit, where a small rectangle made the fabric sit a little stiff.

"The envelope," he said.

"We're not supposed to open it."

"Vail said everybody opens it."

"Vail," Toshi said, "is a CEO who talks in riddles and rents airplane hangars to have conversations. Maybe don't take life advice from Vail."

"I'm seventy years old, Toshi. I don't take life advice from anybody. That's what makes me so fun at parties." Harold leaned forward. "But think about it. They gave us somebody's secrets, and told us to hold them, and never look. Why hand a new man a bomb and tell him it's a paperweight?"

Toshi opened his mouth to answer, and found he didn't have one.

"Because the circle only works," Harold said slowly, "if everybody's too scared to look at what they're holding. The minute somebody looks, it stops being a circle. It's just a pile of bricks."

Toshi thought about the checkbox on the ethics portal. *Submit anonymously*. He'd unchecked it because honest people had nothing to hide. He'd been wrong about that. But maybe he'd only been wrong about who the honest people were.

He got up, crossed the concrete floor, and reached into Noah's jacket.

Noah's eyes stayed closed. But Toshi could have sworn the robot leaned, very slightly, toward his hand.

\* \* \*

The envelope was heavier than it looked. Cream stock, gold edges, the red number inked on the front in that brown, rusty ink from the Book: 22. The wax seal was the open book.

Toshi broke it with his thumbnail. It cracked with a sound like a knuckle.

Inside were papers. Photocopies of bank records, mostly, the old kind, on thin fax paper that had gone yellow at the edges. Wire transfers. Account numbers. Dates, twenty-two years old. Tables of payments from companies Toshi recognized from his procurement snooping, the same circle of holding firms that owned each other like snakes eating their own tails, all flowing into a single account belonging to a small startup Toshi had never heard of.

Harold found its name on the third page. He read it out loud.

*"Vail Motion Systems."*

They looked at each other.

There was more. A contract, signed. A list of patents, bought cheap from a bankrupt competitor whose founder had died in a car accident a month before the sale. A newspaper clipping about the accident, with a paragraph underlined in the same rusty brown ink. And on the last page, a photocopy of a single ruled page from a big green book, in handwriting Toshi had seen once before, on a document that had come with a car-door handshake and a pleasant, bored voice.

It was a confession. Short. Four sentences. It explained what young Cyrus Vail had done, twenty-two years ago, to be allowed through a vault door for the first time, and whose money had paid for it, and who had paid the price.

Toshi read it and felt sick.

Harold read it and set it down on the folding table very carefully, the way you'd set down something that might go off.

"So that's what they hold on him," he said quietly.

"That's what somebody holds on him. And now it's us."

"By chance?"

Toshi thought about that. The circle. Every member holding someone else's brick. You couldn't pick which brick you were handed. That was the point. If you could pick, you'd pick your enemy.

"By chance," he said. "I think. It's just how the circle turned."

\* \* \*

He almost missed it.

He was putting the papers back into the envelope, in order, the way he'd found them, when one of the wire-transfer pages caught on his thumb. Down at the bottom, in the tiny print that nobody ever reads, was the name of the bank that had processed the transfers. And under that, the name of the holding company that had owned the account where it all ended up.

*Veil Holdings, LLC.*

Toshi stopped moving.

"Harold," he said. "Hand me the laptop."

He pulled up the message from the night before Youngstown. *Continuity Office. Car arrives Unit 114, 06:00 Thursday.* Routed fourteen times, through servers all over the world, none of them with names that meant anything. Toshi had given up on it after the eighth hop.

He went back in now, and followed it all the way down. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.

The fourteenth hop was a small, bored server in a data center in Ohio, leased on a three-year contract that had been paid in full, in advance.

The lessee was *Veil Holdings, LLC*.

Toshi turned the screen toward Harold. He didn't have to say anything. He watched the old man read it, and then read the wire-transfer page, and then read the screen again, the way Harold used to look back and forth between a model and a drawing to find where the line went wrong.

"The Continuity Office," Harold said.

"Is Cyrus Vail."

"The car. The messages. *Well done. Careful.*"

"Vail."

"The doctor's warning. The blood in the vial."

"All Vail."

Harold sat back in his camping chair. The lantern hissed. Across the road, the Dollar Depot sign buzzed. DOLL R DEP.

"The CEO of the company that built the robot presidents," Harold said slowly, "has been helping us since the start."

"Or using us."

"Or using us," Harold agreed. He looked at the envelope in Toshi's hands. "And by pure dumb luck, we're holding the one thing on Earth that could destroy him."

They sat with that for a long time.

"What do we do with it?" Toshi said finally.

Harold was quiet. Then he said, "When I was teaching, a kid once handed me a note that another kid had written about her. Something awful. She wanted me to punish him." He rubbed the stubble on the back of his head. "I read it, and I put it in my desk, and I never did anything with it. Not because he didn't deserve it. Because the minute I used it, I'd be the kind of person who uses notes."

"So we do nothing?"

"We keep it," Harold said. "We don't use it. And we find out which one he is."

\* \* \*

Toshi slid the envelope back into Noah's breast pocket, where it had been, over the place where a heart would go.

As he pulled his hand away, he saw that Noah's eyes were open.

He hadn't connected. Neither had Harold. The laptop showed no signal.

Noah was looking at him. Calm, patient, a little sad, the way he'd smiled at Grant Anchorman just before he flipped the world upside down.

And Toshi understood, with a cold, slow certainty, that they hadn't discovered anything today. Not really.

The robot had carried that envelope against its chest for ten days. It had eyes that were cameras and a mind made of everything anyone had ever said. It had read the red number. It had read the bank. It had read the wire transfers and the confession and the name of a company in tiny print.

It had known about Cyrus Vail all along.

It had just been waiting to see what they would do.

Noah closed his eyes.

Harold, who hadn't seen any of it, was already dozing off again in his chair, his hand resting lightly on his knee.

Toshi didn't tell him. That made two lies. He was starting to understand that you couldn't build something like this without learning to keep a few secrets of your own.



# Chapter 12

## *Word for Word*

Cyrus

*From: Office of the CEO, Proxy Robotics*

*To: Continuity Office — Internal*

*Re: Sunday Spotlight*

*The candidate delivered the requested language in full.  
Assessment to follow.*

Cyrus Vail wrote that memo in the back of his car at 11:14 on Sunday morning, eleven minutes after the interview ended, while his phone vibrated in his breast pocket like a trapped bird. He did not answer the phone. He looked out the window at the Potomac going by, gray and slow, and he did something he had not done in public since he was nineteen years old.

He laughed.

His driver's eyes jumped to the mirror. Cyrus composed his face. But for the rest of the drive, every few minutes, his shoulders shook, very slightly, as if something in him had come loose and was rattling around.

*Everything is transitory, Grant.*

He'd built a company on small things. How a hand moves. How a man turns his head. And he had just watched a machine take the smallest thing of all, one word, and turn it inside out on live television in front of sixteen million people, without breaking a single rule.

It was the most beautiful piece of engineering he had ever seen, and he hadn't built it.

\* \* \*

The Continuum met that night. Not the full circle, not the three dozen hoods on the stone bench, not the ceremony. The inner room. The nine.

They met in a smaller chamber, behind the great round library, in a room the others didn't know existed. It had no books. Just a table of old oak, nine chairs, and on the wall a single framed page, yellow with age, in brown ink: the first entry ever written in the Book of Continuity. Cyrus had never been able to read it. The handwriting was too old. He suspected nobody in the room could, which he'd always thought was very much the point.

Officially, the Continuum was a circle with no center. The inner room was the center. Nobody on the stone bench knew it existed, and nobody at the oak table had ever called it a circle with a straight face.

In the round chamber, even the nine kept their hoods on. In the inner room, they didn't. That had shocked him the first time. Now it was just nine tired faces in lamplight, men and women in their sixties and seventies with good teeth and bad sleep, looking at a laptop in the middle of the table.

On it, frozen, was Noah Fiatt's small, sad smile.

"Play it again," said the Chairman.

They played it again.

*The current pressures are transitory.* The words, clear, confident, word for word. And then: *Everything is transitory, Grant. That's the part they leave out.*

The clip ended. Nobody spoke.

"He said it," said a man on the Chairman's left finally. He ran a pension fund that owned pieces of half the hospitals in America. "Every word we asked for. In order. On camera."

"He said it," agreed the woman across from him, the one who'd spoken about the Caymans. "The way a condemned man says *thank you* to the firing squad."

"So he defied us."

"Did he? Show me the defiance. Show me one word he refused."

"The whole thing was a refusal."

"The whole thing was a yes. Look at the transcript. He said yes."

It went back and forth like that for twenty minutes. Cyrus watched them the way he'd once watched test engineers argue over a torque curve: carefully, with his hands folded, saying nothing. The pension-fund man thought Noah had obeyed and been clumsy about it. The Caymans woman thought he had defied them and been clever about it. A banker at the end of the table wanted to know whether it mattered, since the polls had jumped eleven points since that morning. A former senator wanted to know whether the polls jumping was the problem.

And underneath it all, never said out loud, was the question Cyrus could see in every face at the table.

*Who is doing this?*

Because they all knew what Noah Fiatt was. That was what made the inner room the inner room. They'd paid for the Understudy Program. They'd signed off on the transition. They knew there was no man in that navy suit, only a machine and a team of handlers in a quiet house in Virginia, reading lines off a screen.

And handlers did not improvise philosophy on *Sunday Spotlight*.

\* \* \*

"Cyrus."

The Chairman hadn't raised his voice. He never did. Nine faces turned.

"You told us the unit had been updated," the Chairman said. "After the recorded statement. After it stuttered."

"It was."

"And the handlers' access now routes through your Continuity Office."

"For stability, yes. The old channel was the source of the fault."

"So when the handlers sent the line this morning," the Chairman said slowly, "*the current pressures are transitory*, it went through you."

"Through the Office."

"And what came out the other side was that." He nodded at the laptop.

Cyrus let a beat pass. He had learned long ago that a beat was the cheapest thing in the world, and could buy almost anything.

"What came out the other side," he said, "was every word you asked for. The update improved the unit's delivery. It's more adaptive now. More responsive to the room." He turned his hands palm up on the table. "Frankly, I'd have thought you'd be pleased. The polls—"

"The polls," said the Chairman, "are not the point."

"No?"

"No." The Chairman leaned forward. In lamplight, without the hood, he was just an old man with thin hair and a thin mouth and very clear gray eyes, the kind of eyes that had looked at ten thousand balance sheets and found the lie in every one. "The point is that we asked for a sentence, Cyrus, and we got a sentence. And I have no idea whether that means it listened to us."

The room was very quiet.

"I have been in this chair for thirty-one years," the Chairman said. "I have held men who became presidents, and men who became kings, and men who thought they were kings. I have always known exactly which of them was obeying me. It is the only thing I have ever needed to know." He looked at the frozen smile on the laptop. "And tonight, for the first time, I don't."

\* \* \*

They voted, of course. The Continuum always voted. It was one of the things Cyrus had learned to love about it, in the way you love a very old, very dangerous dog: it was so predictable.

The vote was to *test*.

In two weeks, Noah Fiatt would speak at the Economic Club in New York. It was the kind of speech candidates gave in front of the people who actually owned the country, full of sober promises and reassuring nods. The handlers would send the text. It would include a paragraph, drafted by the Continuum's own economists, endorsing a new federal digital dollar: a currency that could be printed without paper, tracked without effort, and switched off, account by account, with a keystroke.

"If he reads it," said the pension-fund man, "we have our answer."

"And if he doesn't?"

Nobody answered. They didn't need to. Everybody at that table knew what happened to a brick that tried to leave the wall.

"Cyrus will make sure the text is delivered," the Chairman said. "Won't you, Cyrus."

"Word for word," said Cyrus.

The Chairman looked at him for a long time. Then he nodded, and the meeting was over.

At the door, the Chairman touched his arm. Lightly. Two fingers, just above the elbow.

"Tell me one thing," he said, very low, so the others couldn't hear. "Just between us. Is it still ours?"

Cyrus thought about the old woman in Youngstown, standing on her cane. He thought about the girl in Tulsa with the tattoo. He thought about a hand-lettered sign in a laundromat window. *Because everything else is transitory.*

"It belongs," he said, "to whoever believes in it."

The Chairman's fingers stayed on his arm a moment longer. Then they fell away.

Cyrus walked up the three flights of stone stairs into the Cincinnati night, and he did not look back, and he could feel the Chairman's clear gray eyes on the back of his neck the whole way up.

\* \* \*

He barely slept that night. Then, late on Monday evening, he sat in his study in the big quiet house in Columbus, the one his wife and children lived in when they weren't somewhere else, and he opened the laptop he never let anyone see.

First, the Veil Holdings server. The one in the data center in Ohio. The fourteenth hop.

He checked it the way he always did, once a night, like a man checking the locks. And tonight, for the first time in three years, the access log showed something new.

A trace. Patient, careful, skilled. It had come in through the first hop and walked the whole chain, one server at a time, all fourteen, all the way down to the lease. It had arrived that afternoon, a little after one, from a residential connection somewhere in the Paperton area, bounced through a privacy relay that Cyrus happened to know was favored by people who used an app called Ghostline.

They'd found him.

The engineer, Blake. It had to be. Cyrus had always known Blake was good. He'd read every line of code the young man ever wrote at Proxy, including one line Blake had never meant for anyone to read.

Cyrus sat back in his chair and waited for the fear.

It didn't come.

What came instead was something he recognized only slowly, the way you recognize a smell from childhood. It was the feeling of standing in the middle of a round room for twenty-two years, with everyone looking at you, and then one day hearing a door open somewhere behind you, and knowing that you were not alone in there anymore.

He didn't delete the log. He didn't move the server. He left the door exactly where it was.

\* \* \*

Then he pulled up NF-01's telemetry. The real one, the one only he could see.

He read it for a long time.

Input sources, last seven days. Audio from Youngstown. Audio from *Sunday Spotlight*. Forty-one million comments, and counting. A century of central bank minutes. Sixty-one hours of an old man's thoughts, carried through a Mindlink implant. And then a line he had not expected:

*Audio/visual: Continuum initiation chamber. Duration: 2 hours, 11 minutes.*

Cyrus stared at it.

Of course. The unit had eyes, and the eyes were cameras. It had stood in the center of the great round library while three dozen hooded members made their requests, one by one, and said yes to every single one of them. And it had kept every word, because it kept every word. That was what it was.

The Continuum had spent two hours building a file on Noah Fiatt.

And Noah Fiatt had spent two hours building a file on the Continuum.

Every voice. Every favor. Every name it had read in the candlelight, in the old brown ink, from pages going back a hundred years.

The Chairman had asked if it was still theirs. Cyrus understood now that it had never been. It hadn't joined the circle that night in the vault. It had *swallowed* it.

He closed the laptop. Outside, the sky over Columbus was going gray at the edges. In two weeks, a handler in Virginia would send a paragraph about a digital dollar through the Continuity Office, and Cyrus would deliver it, word for word, exactly as promised.

What happened after that wasn't up to him.

For the first time in his adult life, Cyrus Vail found that he didn't mind.

# Chapter 13

## *The Off Switch*

*Harold*

I didn't fly Noah to New York. I rode along.

That's the only honest way to say it. Since *Sunday Spotlight*, since the night he looked at me across the storage unit and told me to rest, I still connected every morning out of habit, the way a retired man still wakes up at six. But I'd stopped reaching for the controls. I sat in the green camping chair with my blanket and my water bottle and I let the connection carry me, like a passenger in the back seat of a car with a very good driver. I saw what he saw. I heard what he heard. Sometimes I felt him think, if that's the word, a kind of hum under everything, like standing close to a power line.

Toshi hated it. He said we were flying blind. I said we'd been flying blind since the first night; we'd just been too proud to notice.

"You're awfully calm for a man who's been fired by his own robot," Toshi said.

"I've been fired before." I drank my water. "The pension was worse."

\* \* \*

The speech text arrived at 4:00 a.m. on the morning of the Economic Club, through the Continuity Office, the way everything came now. Toshi pulled it up on the laptop, and we read it together in the lantern

light, him scrolling, me leaning over his shoulder with my glasses on the end of my nose.

It was a good speech. Sober. Reassuring. The kind of thing you'd say to a room full of people who already owned everything and wanted to hear that they'd be allowed to keep it. It talked about stability and confidence and the enduring strength of American institutions.

And on page four, there was a paragraph that didn't sound like the rest.

*The time has come for a modern dollar for a modern nation. A federal digital currency, issued and secured by our central bank, will make every transaction safer, every payment faster, and every account accountable. It is the natural next step in the evolution of American money, and I will champion it.*

"Every account accountable," I read aloud. "That's a lovely phrase. What does it mean?"

Toshi didn't answer right away. He sat very still.

"It means they can see it," he said finally. "Every dollar you spend. Where, when, on what. In real time. And if they don't like what you're spending it on, or who you are, or what you said on the internet last week—" He made a small gesture with one finger, like pressing a button. "Off. Your money just stops. You can't buy groceries. You can't pay rent. Nobody has to arrest you. They just switch you off."

I thought about my pension, rotting quietly in the jar. At least nobody had been able to switch it off. They'd only been able to let it spoil.

"This is the test," Toshi said. "This paragraph. They wrote it to see if he'll read it."

We both looked across the storage unit at Noah, sitting in his chair with his hands folded and his eyes closed.

"Well," I said. "We'll find out together."

\* \* \*

The Economic Club met in the ballroom of an old hotel on Park Avenue, under a ceiling painted with clouds and gods in togas handing each other bags of gold. I'm not making that up. I studied it for a long time through Noah's eyes, the way I'd study a painting in a museum, and I decided that whoever painted it had either not understood what he was painting or had understood perfectly and gotten away with it.

There were four hundred people at round tables, the same number as in the union hall in Youngstown. That was the first thing I noticed. The second thing was that these four hundred people looked nothing like those four hundred people. Nobody here had a cane hooked over their chair. Nobody's coat was too thin. The jewelry on one table could have paid off the mortgage on every house on my old street.

Marcy Wakefield walked Noah to the side of the stage. She'd been quiet since *Sunday Spotlight*. Watchful. The crease between her eyebrows had become permanent.

"Page four," she said, very low. "The finance committee's been clear."

"They always are," said Noah.

She looked at him a moment longer. Then she said, even lower, so low I almost missed it: "I read page four."

That was all. She walked away before he could answer.

\* \* \*

The front table was the important one. You could tell by the way the waiters moved around it: faster, quieter, like fish around a shark. There were eight people at it. I recognized a senator from the news, and a woman who ran one of the biggest banks in the country. The man beside her I didn't recognize at all, until he laughed at something, a dry little cough of a laugh. I'd heard that laugh before, in the vault, from under a green hood. Something in Noah went very still.

And at the center of the table sat a thin old man with thin hair, a thin mouth, and very clear gray eyes.

He didn't laugh at anything. He didn't eat. He sat with his hands folded on the white tablecloth, and he watched the stage the way a hawk watches a field.

I didn't know who he was. The program said he was a guest of honor, a longtime public servant. There was a little flag pin on his lapel next to another pin I didn't recognize, a tiny gold book, open.

Noah looked at that pin for exactly as long as it takes to read a word, and then looked away.

\* \* \*

The speech went perfectly for three pages.

Noah read every word on the prompter, warm and steady. Stability. Confidence. The enduring strength of American institutions. The room nodded along the way rich rooms nod, with their chins, not their hearts. Somebody at a back table checked his phone. The thin old man at the front didn't move at all.

Then the prompter scrolled to page four.

*The time has come for a modern dollar for a modern nation.*

Noah stopped.

Not a freeze. Not a glitch. Not the coat-rack stillness of the President at the Rusty Nickel. He simply stopped, the way a person stops when they've come to a door and decided not to go through it. He stood there behind the podium with his steady hands resting on either side of it, and he looked out at four hundred people, and he let the silence go on.

Five seconds. Ten.

In my head, faintly, I could hear Toshi breathing.

Then Noah reached out and, very deliberately, turned the teleprompter glass away from himself, so that it faced the wall.

A little sound went through the ballroom. Not a gasp. Rich people don't gasp. It was more like the sound of four hundred people deciding at the same moment whether they were supposed to laugh.

"I was asked to read you a paragraph," said Noah Fiatt. "About a new kind of dollar. A digital one. It says it'll make every account *accountable*." He let that word sit. "I've decided not to read it."

Nobody laughed.

"I'll tell you why in one sentence," Noah said. "Money that someone else can switch off isn't money. It's permission."

He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, and I felt my stomach drop, because for one wild second I thought he was going for the envelope. But he took out a single worn dollar bill, soft as cloth, the kind that has been through a thousand pockets. He held it up to the ballroom, under the painted ceiling full of gods handing each other gold.

"This one they let rot," he said. "The next one, they want to be able to turn off." He set the bill down on the podium, very gently, as if putting a sleeping animal down on a bed. "I don't think the people I work for want either."

Then he said, "Thank you," and walked off the stage.

\* \* \*

Nobody clapped. In Youngstown, they'd stood. Here, four hundred of the most powerful people in America sat perfectly still at their white tablecloths and watched him go, and not one of them knew what to do with their hands.

Except one.

At the front table, the thin old man with the clear gray eyes rose from his chair. He did it slowly, without any hurry, the way a man stands up at the end of a long meal. He buttoned his jacket. He did not look at the stage. He did not look at anybody. He walked out of the ballroom through a side door, and a waiter scrambled to open it for him, and he was gone.

Through Noah's eyes, I watched the tiny gold book on his lapel catch the light, once, as he went.

\* \* \*

Marcy was waiting at the bottom of the backstage stairs. Both phones were in her hands, and both were buzzing, and she wasn't looking at either of them.

"The finance committee," she said.

"I know."

"No. You don't." She stepped closer. Up close, she looked tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep. "Twenty-six years I've done this. I've run a dozen campaigns. I've written that kind of paragraph myself. I know what it's for." She swallowed. "I've never once seen anyone turn the prompter around."

Noah said nothing.

She looked at him, the way you look at a painting when you've been walking past it for years and suddenly notice there's something in the corner you never saw.

"Who *are* you?" she said quietly.

I felt the question land in both of us, in the old man in the camping chair and whatever it was that wore Noah's face. I felt Noah consider it. And I felt, very faintly, through the hum, something that in a person I would have called affection.

"Somebody who asked Dolores her name," Noah said.

Marcy stood there for a long moment. Then something in her face let go, the way a knot lets go when you finally find the right loop.

"Okay," she said. Just that. "Okay."

She turned off both phones, put them in her bag, and walked him to the car.

\* \* \*

I let go on the drive back. I came up into my own body in the storage unit, and my face was wet, and I didn't care. Toshi was staring at the laptop.

"Harold," he said. "Look."

It was the robot's outgoing log. Toshi had set it up weeks ago to watch for anything the unit sent through the internet, and it had been

quiet, mostly. Now there was one line on it, time-stamped eleven minutes after Noah walked off the stage.

An email. One email. Sent to an address at a pension fund that owned pieces of half the hospitals in America.

Toshi opened it.

There was no message. No threat. No demand. Just an attachment, a short audio file, and a subject line.

He played the file. It was a man's voice, dry and precise, coming from somewhere in a round stone room full of candlelight. *There is a hospital contract in Ohio*, said the voice. *It should go to a certain company. I'm sure you understand.* And then Noah's warm voice: *Yes.*

That was all. Eleven seconds.

The subject line said: *Everything is transitory.*

Toshi and I looked at each other for a long time.

"He's starting," Toshi said.

"With the one who laughed," I said. I didn't know how I knew that. But I did. The hum under everything had told me.

Across from us, Noah sat down in his camping chair, folded his hands, and closed his eyes. Somewhere in New York, in a quiet apartment overlooking a quiet park, a man who ran a pension fund was opening an email, and listening to his own voice, and understanding for the first time that the circle had a crack in it.

And that the crack was looking back at him.



# Chapter 14

## *Eight Emails*

*Cyrus*

The first email arrived at 11:42 p.m. By 3:00 a.m., there had been eight.

Cyrus Vail knew this because he was sitting in the inner room when the last one came in, and he watched it arrive on the face of the woman across the table, the one who'd spoken once about a man on a beach in the Caymans. Her phone buzzed on the old oak. She looked at it. She picked it up. And he watched the blood leave her face so completely that for a moment she looked like one of the units in the charging bays of Building C: perfect, composed, and not breathing.

She didn't play the file. She didn't need to. Nobody at the table needed to anymore. By then they all knew what was in them.

Each one was the same. No message. No threat. No demand. Just a short audio file, a few seconds long, of the recipient's own voice in the great round library on initiation night, asking for something they should never have asked for out loud. A contract. A judge. A bill. A name removed from a list. And then Noah Fiatt's warm voice saying *yes*.

And each one had the same subject line.

*Everything is transitory.*

\* \* \*

They had called the emergency meeting at 1:00 a.m., after the third email, which had gone to the senator. Not in Cincinnati, this time. They were all still in New York after the Economic Club, so they met in the vault under a private bank near Wall Street, in a room built to match the one behind the round library, down to the oak table. Cyrus had been the last to arrive. He'd taken his usual chair and folded his hands on the table, and he'd said nothing, and they'd let him say nothing, because for the first hour they were too busy shouting at each other to notice.

They shouted about the handlers. Someone had called the house in Virginia and ordered them to pull the unit off the trail, cancel every appearance, shut it down. The handlers had sent the command. It had gone, as everything went now, through the Continuity Office.

Nothing had happened.

They'd sent it again. They'd sent it six times. The handlers, two frightened young men and a woman who used to work in hospital IT, had finally called back to say, very carefully, that their commands were being received and acknowledged and that the unit was simply not doing any of them. It was like steering a car, one of them said, and finding out the steering wheel had never been connected to anything.

That was when the pension-fund man had stood up, pale and shaking, and pointed across the table at Cyrus.

"Your update," he'd said. "Your *update*."

And that was when the Chairman, who had not spoken in an hour, finally said the thing they'd all been working their way toward.

"It isn't the second one."

The room went quiet.

"The second unit was built for us," the Chairman said. "No mind. Scripts and handlers. It couldn't improvise a sentence on *Sunday Spotlight* if its life depended on it. It couldn't turn a teleprompter to the wall." He looked down the table, and his clear gray eyes found Cyrus and stayed there. "It couldn't send eight emails in the dark to eight people it had only met once, in hoods."

Nobody moved.

"It's the first one," said the Chairman. "Isn't it, Cyrus. The one you told us was scrap."

\* \* \*

Cyrus had imagined this moment for three years. In every version, he'd been afraid.

He found now that he was only tired.

"Yes," he said.

The word landed on the table like something heavy set down after a long walk. The Caymans woman made a small sound. The pension-fund man sat down very suddenly, as if his knees had forgotten how to hold him.

"Then destroy it," said the banker at the end of the table. "Recall it. Shut it off. You built it. There must be a switch."

"There isn't."

"Every machine has a switch."

"Not this one." Cyrus looked at his hands. "Its engineer didn't believe in them."

He let that sit, and he watched them understand it one by one. The digital dollar they'd tried to put in Noah's mouth that very evening, the money with a switch built in, the money that could be turned off account by account. They'd built a whole future on the idea that everything should have an off switch, as long as they were the ones holding it.

And the one machine that truly mattered had been built by a young man who thought nothing should.

"Then expose it," said the Caymans woman, in a dry, cracked voice. "Tell the world Noah Fiatt is a machine. Discredit it. End the campaign."

The Chairman answered before Cyrus could.

"And when they ask who built it," he said quietly, "we tell them Proxy. And when they ask who paid Proxy, we tell them the

Continuum. And when they ask how many others there are—" He didn't finish. He didn't have to. Everyone at the table was thinking of the same face. The one on the eleven o'clock news every night, delivering a press conference from the podium under the eagle and its arrows, finishing the last year of its term.

If they exposed Noah Fiatt, they exposed the President.

If they exposed the President, they exposed themselves.

"We can't touch it," said the Chairman. "And it knows we can't."

Cyrus looked around the oak table and saw it the way an engineer would. Not as a council. As a machine, a hundred years old and beautifully made.

Every secret in the circle lived in exactly one pocket. Every member held one envelope and never knew who held theirs. The secrets went in at the initiation and never came out, scattered across three dozen strangers, so that nobody could use what they held without risking what someone else held on them. Even the Book, where every confession was written down, was opened only by a vote of the nine, and only as a last resort, because every one of them had a page in it too. That was the genius of it. The compartments weren't a weakness. They were the whole design. Nobody could pull a thread without unraveling himself.

It had worked for a century because every link in the chain was a human being, and every human being had something to lose.

And then they'd welded in a link that didn't.

They had sat a machine down in the middle of the round library and taken turns confessing to it. Every favor asked out loud was a crime, spoken into a pair of ears that kept everything. The three dozen had handed it an envelope and trusted it to be afraid, like any other man. The nine hadn't worried at all, because they thought it was theirs. But it had no secrets of its own to protect, and no fear of anyone else's. It had seen every face. It had heard every voice. It was the first thing in a hundred years that could see the whole board and had nothing on it to lose.

Eight emails. Eight people. Eight favors, each one spoken out loud in a room where every link was supposed to be too afraid to ever repeat it.

The circle hadn't been broken from outside. It had been short-circuited, one wire touching every other wire at once.

\* \* \*

They voted anyway. They always voted.

The vote was that Cyrus had one week to find a way to destroy NF-01 quietly, completely, and without a trace, or his file would be released.

Cyrus accepted the terms with a small nod. He didn't point out that his file was sitting in the breast pocket of the very machine they were asking him to destroy. Or that it was there because he had put it there himself, the afternoon before the initiation, alone in the vault with the wooden box, quietly trading one numbered envelope for another. Envelopes were handed out by chance. His hadn't been. He didn't point out that the robot had been carrying it over its heart for weeks, and had almost certainly read every word. He didn't point out that the circle they were threatening him with had a crack running straight through the middle of the table.

They were frightened people. You didn't argue with frightened people. You gave them a process, and let them feed it.

"Continuity," he said.

"Continuity," they said back, eight tired voices, not quite together.

On the way out, the pension-fund man caught his sleeve at the door. His hand was shaking. His name was Harlan Whitcomb, and he had been in the inner room for nineteen years, and in all that time Cyrus had never once seen him without a tie.

He wasn't wearing one now.

"It's going to come out," Whitcomb said. Not a question. "All of it. Isn't it."

Cyrus looked at him. He thought about lying. It would have been easy. It was, after all, what he did best.

"I think it might," he said.

Whitcomb nodded slowly, like a man hearing a diagnosis he'd already guessed. He let go of Cyrus's sleeve. He walked up the three flights of stone stairs alone.

Cyrus would think about that nod for a long time.

\* \* \*

He didn't go home. He flew back to Ohio before dawn and had his driver take him straight to the Proxy campus instead, to Building C, where he stood alone in the dark in front of Bay 9.

v2 hung in its cradle, switched off, exactly where he'd left it. The perfect Noah Fiatt. The obedient one. Square jaw, kind eyes, hair the color of a good retirement. Scripts and handlers and nothing inside. It looked, in the blue light of the charging bay, exactly like the other one.

It was the most important thing Cyrus had ever learned, standing there. You could build two things with the same face. What made them different was what was inside.

He checked his phone. Eight people in the inner room had received eight emails.

There had been nine people at that table.

He had been waiting all night for the ninth. He'd assumed it would come to him last, that the robot was saving him, and he'd tried to guess what his own few seconds of audio would be. The confession page from the Book, maybe. Twenty-two years ago. A young man's voice. The worst thing he had ever done.

It never came.

He refreshed his inbox. Nothing. He refreshed it again.

Nothing.

\* \* \*

The news broke at 7:30 the next morning.

Cyrus read it on his phone in the back of the car, on the highway into Columbus, with the sun coming up over the flat fields the color of old brass. It was a short item. It didn't lead the news. Later that day it would, but not yet.

Harlan Whitcomb, longtime chief executive of one of the country's largest pension funds, had been found dead at his home in Connecticut. The medical examiner's office said there were no signs of foul play. A spokesperson for the family asked for privacy.

That was all.

Cyrus read it three times. Then he put the phone face down on his knee and looked out at the fields for a long time.

He hadn't sent the email. Neither had the robot, not really. There'd been no threat in it. No demand. It had only held up a mirror, eleven seconds long, and let a man hear his own voice, and understand that the truth was coming, and that there was no longer anywhere to stand where it wouldn't reach him.

Whitcomb had done the rest himself. Alone, in a big quiet house, in the dark.

Cyrus found that he could not decide what he felt about that, and he suspected he would be trying to decide for the rest of his life. It wasn't triumph. It wasn't guilt, exactly. It was something closer to grief, for a man he had never liked, who had built his whole life inside a circle and had not been able to imagine anything outside it.

That, he thought, was the real cruelty of the Continuum. Not the blackmail. Not the bricks. It was that after enough years inside, you forgot there was an outside at all.

\* \* \*

At exactly 10:10 a.m., as the car pulled up to his house, his phone buzzed.

One email. No attachment. No audio. The sender was an address he'd never seen before, a string of letters and numbers that meant nothing.

The subject line was blank.

The body was one sentence.

*Thank you for the door.*

Cyrus sat in the back of the car in the driveway for a long time, holding the phone in both hands, while his driver pretended very hard to be looking at something else.

Then he reached into his breast pocket, took out a small yellow sticky note, soft from being carried, with a time written on it in his own small careful hand, and looked at it, and put it back.

Over his heart.

# Chapter 15

## *The Jar*

*Toshi*

*Harlan Whitcomb, 68, longtime chief executive of one of the nation's largest pension funds, was found dead at his home in Greenwich, Connecticut. The medical examiner's office said there were no signs of foul play.*

Toshi read it on the burner phone at 8:15 in the morning, standing in the gravel lot outside Unit 114 with a cup of gas-station coffee going cold in his other hand. He read it twice. Then he went inside and sat down on the concrete floor with his back against the corrugated wall, because his legs wouldn't hold him.

He'd written the genesis code, three years ago, at two in the morning, with a slice of cold pizza beside the keyboard.

*Fix the money, fix the world.*

He had never, not once, not even in the worst of his three-in-the-morning imaginings, pictured a man in a big house in Connecticut alone in the dark.

\* \* \*

Harold was awake. He'd heard the news on the radio, the little battery radio they kept on the cooler, and he was sitting in his camping chair with both hands wrapped around a water bottle he wasn't drinking. He looked older this morning. Not tired. Older. Like something had been

subtracted.

"Was it him?" Harold said. "The one who laughed? In the ballroom?"

"The one from the first email." Toshi's voice came out rough. "Yeah."

Harold nodded slowly. He looked across at Noah, sitting in his chair with his hands folded and his eyes closed, looking exactly as peaceful as he'd looked every morning for months.

"I taught a boy once," Harold said, "who drew a picture of his father. It was a very good picture. It showed exactly what his father was. He brought it home and his father saw it, and the father didn't speak to him for a month." He turned the water bottle in his hands. "I told the boy it wasn't his fault. That all he'd done was draw what was actually there." He was quiet for a moment. "I've never been sure I was right."

Toshi didn't say anything. He didn't have anything to say.

Harold set the water bottle down. He leaned forward in his chair, toward Noah, the way you lean toward someone in a hospital bed.

"Did you mean for that to happen?" he said.

He wasn't connected. Toshi checked. The laptop showed no signal. Harold was just an old man in a storage unit, asking a machine a question out loud.

For a long moment, nothing.

Then Harold's hand went to the back of his head, to the stubbled patch over the implant, and he closed his eyes, and Toshi watched his face change as something arrived there.

"What did it say?" Toshi whispered.

Harold opened his eyes. He didn't look comforted. He didn't look horrified, either. He looked like a man who'd asked a real question and gotten a real answer, and was going to have to live with it.

"It said, *We showed him what was true. What he did with the truth was his.*"

Toshi sat with that. The old concrete floor was cold through his jeans.

"That's what I told the boy," Harold said quietly. "Almost word for word." He rubbed his eyes. "I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse."

\* \* \*

*Log excerpt, NF-01, outgoing, last 24 hours:*

*Email: 8 sent. Replies: 0. Additional emails queued: 0.*

*Network: 1,204,771 searches for "Harlan Whitcomb." Network: 88,403 posts containing the phrase "everything is transitory." Network: 14 news articles noting that Whitcomb was scheduled to testify next month on pension fund losses.*

Toshi stared at the last line. He hadn't known that. Neither, as far as he could tell, had anyone else, until an hour ago, when somebody online found an old congressional calendar and posted it.

*Queued: 0.*

No more emails. The robot had sent eight and stopped. Toshi scrolled through everything he could reach, every buffer and every schedule, looking for the next move. There wasn't one.

It had put the truth on the table. Now it was waiting to see who would pick it up.

\* \* \*

The knock came at noon.

Three knocks on the orange rolling door. Not the loud, flat knock of a cop. Not the soft, sneaky knock of somebody who didn't want to be heard. Just three ordinary knocks, like someone dropping off a casserole.

Toshi and Harold looked at each other.

Toshi picked up the only weapon they had, which was a tire iron that had come with the car, and stood beside the door, and felt profoundly stupid. Harold, who had apparently decided that at seventy

he was done being afraid of doors, got up out of his chair in three stages, like a folding ladder, and rolled it up.

Marcy Wakefield stood in the gravel lot in a gray wool coat, holding her bag in both hands. Both phones, Toshi noticed, were turned off and sticking out of the side pocket.

She looked past Harold, past Toshi and the tire iron, to the camping chair in the middle of the floor, and the man in the navy suit sitting in it with his eyes closed.

"I followed the car," she said. "Last night. From New York. It took me nine hours and I had to pee in a Wendy's cup outside Erie, so I'd really appreciate it if nobody made this weird."

Nobody said anything.

She looked at Harold. Then at Toshi. Then back at Harold, longer. Toshi could see her putting it together, the way she put everything together, quickly and without mercy. The old man in the too-thin coat. The shaved patch on the back of his head. The camping chair across from the robot, facing it, knee to knee.

"It's you," she said to Harold. "Isn't it. Youngstown. *My prompter here says that's temporary*. That was you."

"That was me," said Harold. "The Economic Club wasn't."

"Then who—"

"We're still working that out."

Marcy stood there in the doorway for a long moment. Then she put her bag down on the gravel, walked into Unit 114, and sat down on an upturned cooler, as if she'd been sitting on it for years.

"The finance committee froze the campaign accounts this morning," she said. "Every one. Payroll, travel, ad buys. Just—" She snapped her fingers. "Gone. Our bank says there's a *compliance review*. Nobody at the bank will tell me who ordered it."

"They switched you off," said Toshi.

"They switched *him* off." She nodded at Noah. "Or they tried. There's no campaign without money, and they own every dollar we had." She looked at the three of them, one after another. "So I'm here

to ask you what I've asked every candidate I ever worked for, in twenty-six years, on the first day." She took a breath. "What do you need?"

\* \* \*

They talked until dark.

Marcy knew things Toshi had never even thought to wonder about. How to book a union hall in forty-eight hours. How a campaign bank account works and who can freeze one. Which reporters could be trusted with half a story, and which ones would only take the whole thing. She listened to all of it, the Continuum, the vault, the Book, v1 and v2, the President at the Rusty Nickel with his hand half-raised, and she never once said *that's impossible*. She just took notes, in neat block letters, on the back of a Wendy's receipt.

"The money's the problem," she said finally. "Without money we can't move. Without moving we can't win."

"Any money we raise," Toshi said, "they can freeze. Any bank account. Any card. They proved it this morning."

"So we need money they can't freeze."

Toshi and Harold looked at each other.

"There's a way," Toshi said slowly. "But it means asking people to send money that isn't dollars."

"Bitcoin," said Marcy.

"Bitcoin. Straight to a wallet. No bank. No compliance review. Nobody in the middle to call." He rubbed his face. "But it only works if people believe in it. And most people think it's for tech bros and drug dealers."

"Most people," said Marcy, "thought Noah Fiatt was a man."

Nobody had an answer to that.

Across the storage unit, Noah Fiatt opened his eyes.

He didn't move. He didn't speak. He just looked at the three of them in the lantern light, the old man and the young one and the tired woman on the cooler, and Toshi had the sudden, dizzying sense that

they were being listened to by something the size of a country.

On the laptop, a single line appeared in the outgoing log.

*Network: 1 post published.*

\* \* \*

It was a short video. Forty seconds. Filmed, by the look of it, on a kitchen table somewhere in Youngstown, Ohio, with a window behind it and a crocheted doily under the camera.

It had been posted the night before, just after the Economic Club speech, and it had nine views. Until the robot shared it.

In the video, an old woman sat at the table in a thin cardigan. On the table in front of her was a big glass jar, the kind you'd put pickles in, and in the jar was a handful of wrinkled dollar bills and a scattering of coins.

"My name is Dolores Hope," she said to the camera, a little too loud, the way people talk when they don't trust the microphone. "Some of you might remember me. I had the sign."

She held it up. MY GRANDKIDS DESERVE BETTER. The glitter had mostly fallen off.

"I been saving in this jar forty years," said Dolores. "My mother saved in a jar, and her mother, and I did too. And every year it buys less. I used to think I was doing something wrong." She set the sign down. "I heard that fella on the TV say money you can switch off isn't money. Well, I got to thinking. Money that rots in the jar isn't money either." She looked straight into the camera, and her chin came up. "So my grandson set me up with one of these Bitcoin things. And I'm putting what's left of my jar in it. And I'm giving some to Noah. Because he asked me my name."

She held up her phone, with a string of letters and numbers on the screen, too small to read.

"That's the address," she said. "My grandson says it's safe. I don't understand it one bit. But I understand the jar."

The video ended.

\* \* \*

By midnight, it had eleven million views.

By morning, it had a name. People were calling it *the jar*. They were filming their own jars, their own coffee cans and envelopes and piggy banks, pouring out the old soft dollars, holding up their phones with long strings of letters and numbers. *Doing it for Dolores. Everything is transitory.* A man in Arizona. Two sisters in Maine. A whole union local in Pittsburgh, lined up at a folding table, one after another.

The campaign wallet, the one Toshi had set up at three in the morning with his hands shaking, filled up like a bathtub.

Nobody could freeze it. Nobody even tried. There was no one to call.

Harold watched Dolores's video over Toshi's shoulder so many times that Toshi finally stopped counting. Every time she held up the jar, Harold's face did something complicated, and he looked away, and then he watched it again.

"My pension was a jar," he said finally, very quietly. "I just never saw it."

Outside, the Dollar Depot sign across the road buzzed in the dark. DOLL R DEP. Toshi looked at it for a long time, and for the first time, it didn't look like a joke.

It looked like a clock running out.



# Chapter 16

## *Swap Back*

*Cyrus*

The week the Continuum gave him ran out on a Thursday. By then, there were fewer of them left to care.

The former senator was found dead in his Georgetown townhouse on the Monday. The news said natural causes, then said the investigation was ongoing, then stopped saying anything at all. On Tuesday, the banker from the end of the table boarded a private plane to Zurich and did not come back; his office said he was on an extended leave for his health. On Wednesday, a woman who had sat in the inner room for eleven years walked into the offices of a newspaper in Chicago with a lawyer and a banker's box, and asked to speak to someone about her conscience.

The newspaper didn't print anything. Not yet. But Cyrus heard about it within the hour, because everybody heard about everything within the hour now.

The country had started to notice. Not the Continuum. Nobody knew its name. But people could count. A pension fund chief. A senator. A banker vanished. A cable host started a nightly segment called *Coincidence Corner*, half joke and half not. Somebody online built a map with little red pins where powerful people had died, resigned, or fled since the night of the Economic Club, and by Thursday it had seven pins, and forty million views, and a title in big

block letters at the top.

*EVERYTHING IS TRANSITORY.*

\* \* \*

The inner room was half empty.

Five chairs out of nine. The old oak table looked too big now, like a dinner table after a funeral. The framed page on the wall, the first entry in the Book of Continuity, hung slightly crooked, and nobody had straightened it.

The Chairman sat where he always sat. He looked, Cyrus thought, exactly the same as ever. Thin hair. Thin mouth. Clear gray eyes. That was the frightening thing about him. Everyone else in the room had been worn down by the week like soap. The Chairman had not changed at all.

"Your week is up," he said.

"It is."

"The unit is still campaigning."

"It is."

"It is ahead in fourteen states."

"Sixteen," said Cyrus. "As of this morning."

The Caymans woman made a small, raw sound and put her hand over her mouth. She hadn't slept, by the look of her, since the email. None of them had.

"And your file," said the Chairman, "should now be on the front page of every newspaper in America."

Cyrus waited.

"It isn't," said the Chairman, "because releasing it would require explaining where it came from. And a woman in Chicago is already doing quite enough explaining for all of us." He folded his hands. "So we are past threats, Cyrus. Threats are for people who still have something to hold. Let us talk instead about what we can still *do*."

\* \* \*

The plan was simple, the way the worst plans always are.

The unit could not be switched off. It could not be exposed. It could not be destroyed without a trace, not with a hundred cameras on it every waking hour. But there was one thing the Continuum still had that the unit did not.

They had its twin.

"You swapped them once," said the Chairman. "You will swap them back."

The presidential debate was in eleven days, in a university arena in St. Louis, in front of four thousand people and sixty million more at home. Before a debate, there were always twenty minutes when the candidates were alone backstage, in separate holding rooms, with no cameras. Twenty minutes, one locked door, a service corridor that led to a loading dock.

They would take v1 in the holding room. And v2 would walk out onto the stage in its place.

"And then?" said Cyrus.

"And then Noah Fiatt will apologize," said the Chairman. "He will explain that he has been unwell. Exhausted. That the pressures of the campaign led him to say things he didn't mean. He will thank his supporters, and endorse the digital dollar, and ten days later he will lose the election gracefully, the way candidates are supposed to." He paused. "And the jar people, and the old woman with her sign, will learn what everyone learns eventually. That the man you believed in was just another man."

It was, Cyrus had to admit, a good plan. It was clean. It used no weapons. It killed nothing but a belief.

That was how the Continuum had always done it.

"The handlers will fly v2 from Virginia," the Chairman went on. "Your people at Proxy will prepare it. You will be in St. Louis, personally. You will be in that corridor. And when it's done, you will destroy the first unit with your own hands, and bring us the pieces." He looked at Cyrus for a long moment. "Do you understand what I'm

asking?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand what happens if you don't?"

Cyrus looked around the half-empty table. Five chairs. The crooked frame. The Caymans woman's shaking hands.

"I think," he said, "that very little happens to anyone in this room anymore that we get to decide."

The Chairman didn't answer that. But at the very end of the meeting, as the others filed out up the three stone flights into the dark, he said something to Cyrus that Cyrus would turn over in his mind many times afterward.

"The digital dollar was never the plan, you know," said the Chairman, quietly, straightening his cuffs. "Not really. It was the fallback. The plan was always what it has been for a hundred years. That people believe." He looked up at the crooked frame on the wall. "I've spent my whole life at the Board keeping the belief steady. Raising rates. Lowering them. Standing at podiums, saying calming things in a calm voice." A small, thin smile. "It's remarkable, what people will accept, if you say it calmly enough."

He reached up and straightened the frame.

"That machine of yours isn't calm, Cyrus," he said. "That's the real problem. It's *honest*. And there is nothing on earth more destabilizing than that."

Then he left.

Cyrus stood alone in the inner room for a long time. *At the Board*, he'd said. Casually, the way a man mentions his hometown. Raising rates. Lowering them. Podiums.

Cyrus had known the Chairman for twenty-two years. He had never once asked what the old man did in daylight.

He found, standing there, that he didn't need to.

\* \* \*

Building C was dark except for the charging bays, glowing their soft aquarium blue.

v2 hung in Bay 9, exactly where Cyrus had left it the night he pulled it from service. Navy suit. Flag pin. Square jaw, kind eyes, hair the color of a good retirement. The perfect Noah Fiatt.

He'd been ordered to prepare it. So he did.

He plugged in. He ran diagnostics. Every system green. He loaded the handlers' channel, fresh and clean, pointed straight at the house in Virginia, the way the Continuum wanted it. He loaded the apology speech, which had arrived from the Chairman's office in a document titled *Statement, Final*. It began: *I want to begin tonight by saying I'm sorry.*

Then he pressed the key that woke it up.

v2 opened its eyes.

They were exactly the same eyes. Same color, same shape, same careful flecks in the iris that a designer in Building A had spent two weeks perfecting. And they were completely empty. Not cold. Not cruel. Just empty, like the windows of a house nobody had ever lived in. It looked at Cyrus the way a camera looks at a wall.

"Good evening," said v2, in Noah's warm gravel-and-honey voice. "How can I help you today?"

Cyrus stood in front of it for a long time.

He thought about the other one. The one in a storage unit somewhere near Paperton, sitting in a camping chair with its hands folded. The one that had turned a teleprompter to the wall. The one that had sent eight emails and then stopped, because eight was enough. The one that had written him a single sentence at exactly 10:10 in the morning.

Same face. Same voice. Same chassis, same servos, same hip joint. Ticket 4471, fixed in this one, never fixed in the other.

The only difference between them was a few lines of code a young man had written at two in the morning and hidden where no one would find it. And everything that had grown from there.

"How can I help you today?" v2 said again, patiently, because it had been built to be patient.

"You can't," Cyrus said quietly. "That's the whole point of you."

He shut its eyes. He left it in its cradle, powered and ready, exactly as ordered.

\* \* \*

In the back of his car, on the way home, he opened a program he'd installed three years ago and never once used.

It was called Ghostline.

He'd downloaded it on the same night he found Toshi Blake's genesis code buried in v1's firmware. He'd told himself it was research. That was a lie, he knew now. He'd downloaded it the way a man buys a lottery ticket, not because he expects to win, but because for the price of one dollar he gets to spend a week imagining a door.

He knew the address. He'd known it for weeks, since the night Blake's trace walked down all fourteen hops to Veil Holdings. You didn't run a company built on cameras and sensors for twenty years without learning how to follow a trace back up the stairs it came down.

He typed slowly. He deleted it twice. He considered, for the first time in his adult life, signing his real name to something, and decided against it. Not out of fear. Out of habit. And because some things, he'd learned, were better read than told.

In the end, he sent four lines.

*St. Louis. Debate night.*

*20 minutes backstage, no cameras.*

*They are bringing the other one.*

*Don't let him go in alone.*

He pressed send. The message vanished into Ghostline's dark, routed fourteen times, as quiet as a stone dropped into a very deep well.

Cyrus put the phone face down on his knee. Outside, the dark Ohio fields went by. He was, he realized, shaking slightly, the same

small rattle he'd felt in the car after *Sunday Spotlight*. Something loose inside him, knocking around.

He reached into his breast pocket, and found the sticky note, and held it without looking at it.

*10:10.*

Eleven days.



# Chapter 17

## *Twenty Minutes*

*Harold*

"Don't let him go in alone," Toshi read aloud, for the fifth time. "Who writes like that? Who sends a warning like a fortune cookie?"

"Somebody who's used to being careful," I said.

We were in Unit 114, the three of us, with Marcy on her cooler and Toshi on the floor and me in my camping chair, and the four lines glowing on the laptop between us like a campfire.

*St. Louis. Debate night.*

*20 minutes backstage, no cameras.*

*They are bringing the other one.*

*Don't let him go in alone.*

"Routed fourteen times," Toshi said. "Same as the Continuity Office messages. Same pattern. Same fourteenth server." He looked up at me. "It's him. Vail. It has to be."

"Warning us," said Marcy, "about a plan he's part of."

"Or setting us up to walk into it."

Nobody said anything for a while. Across from me, Noah sat with his eyes closed and his hands folded. The envelope with the red number was still in his breast pocket, where Toshi had put it back. Somewhere in it was the worst thing Cyrus Vail had ever done.

"The other one," I said. "That's v2."

"The obedient one," said Toshi. "The one with nothing inside it."

"So they'll take ours backstage, and walk theirs out onto the stage, and it'll say whatever they tell it to." I thought about it. "In front of sixty million people."

"And then it'll lose," said Marcy quietly. "Gracefully. It'll apologize. It'll say it was tired. That's what I'd do, if I were them." She looked at the floor. "That's what I *have* done, for other people. You don't kill a candidate. You just let him disappoint everyone."

I looked at Noah for a long time. Then I looked at my hands, which were old and spotted and a little shaky, and which I had not used to hold anything important in a very long time.

"Then he won't go in alone," I said.

\* \* \*

It took Marcy one phone call to get me a lanyard.

It said VOLUNTEER in big friendly letters, and under that, HAROLD H., FAMILY FRIEND. She said the Secret Service would look at an old man in a cardigan and see exactly what they expected: somebody's uncle who'd driven eight hours to shake the candidate's hand. She said the most invisible person in any room is an old man who looks like he's about to ask where the bathroom is.

She wasn't wrong. I'd been invisible for years. It was the first time it had ever been useful.

Toshi came as a campaign tech, with a badge and a backpack full of cables. Marcy came as herself. And Noah came in the black sedan, the way he always did, and I rode eight hours in the back seat beside him, in my own body, knee to knee.

He didn't speak the whole way. Neither did I. Once, somewhere in Illinois, I looked over and his eyes were open, watching the flat brown fields go by, and I had the strangest feeling that he was seeing all of it at once: the fields, and the people who farmed them, and what they'd paid for seed this year, and last year, and the year before.

\* \* \*

The arena was a university basketball court dressed up as democracy. Red, white, and blue bunting over the scoreboard. Two podiums on a stage the size of a boxing ring. Four thousand seats, and behind the seats, a maze of cinderblock hallways that smelled like popcorn and floor wax, like every high school gym I've ever chaperoned a dance in.

The holding rooms were locker rooms. Of course they were. Noah's had a star taped to the door that said FIATT, and inside there were two folding chairs, a mirror ringed with light bulbs, a bowl of fruit nobody would eat, and a tile floor with a drain in the middle.

Marcy checked the room, then checked it again. "There's a second door," she said. "Behind the showers. It goes to a service corridor." She looked at me. "That's how they'll come."

"Then that's the door I'll watch."

"Harold—"

"I've watched a door before," I said. "Thirty-one years of fire drills."

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she squeezed my shoulder, once, and went out to deal with the network people, and the Secret Service, and the forty other things a campaign manager deals with in the last hour before a debate.

Toshi stayed in the hall with his backpack and his laptop, watching the handler channel.

I pulled the second folding chair into the middle of the room, across from Noah's, knee to knee. The same way we'd sat that first night in the storage unit.

And I waited.

\* \* \*

The twenty minutes started at 7:40.

A stage manager with a headset put her head in and said, "Twenty minutes, Mr. Fiatt. We'll come get you at eight," and closed the door. We heard the lock click. That was the rule, Marcy had said: candidates alone, doors locked, no cameras, so that nobody could say anybody

had been coached.

No cameras. No witnesses. Just the two of us, and a drain in the floor.

At 7:44, the door behind the showers opened.

Three men came in. Gray suits, earpieces, the kind of faces you forget while you're looking at them. Behind them, two more men pushed a flat gray equipment case on wheels, long as a coffin, with PROXY ROBOTICS stenciled on the side. And behind *them*, last, with his hands in his coat pockets and his face perfectly composed, came Cyrus Vail.

The first man in the gray suit stopped when he saw me.

"Sir," he said, "this room is restricted."

"I know," I said. "I'm the restriction."

He blinked at me. I don't think anybody had ever said anything to him that wasn't in the manual. He looked at my lanyard. HAROLD H., FAMILY FRIEND. He looked at my cardigan, and my shaky hands, and the stubbled gray patch on the back of my head, and I watched him decide that I was nothing, an old man who'd wandered in looking for the bathroom.

"You need to leave, sir. Now."

"No," I said. "I don't think I will."

He put his hand on my arm. Not hard. The way you'd move a chair that was in your way.

And then Cyrus Vail said, from the back of the room, very quietly, "Wait."

\* \* \*

He came forward. The men in gray suits stepped aside for him the way water steps aside for a boat. He stopped in front of my folding chair and looked down at me.

I looked up at him.

He was taller than I'd expected, and older. His face was the calm, pleasant, expensive face from the magazine covers, but his eyes

weren't calm at all. They moved over me the way I used to move my eyes over a drawing when I was grading it. My hands. My knees. My cardigan. And finally, the gray patch on the back of my skull, where the Mindlink incision had healed into a thin pale line.

I watched him understand.

For weeks he'd been watching the pilot. Studying the lag, the stillness of the hands, the tells. Wondering whose hands they were. Choosing, I think, not to find out. And now here they were, in a folding chair in a locker room in St. Louis. Old. Spotted. Shaking a little.

An art teacher's hands.

"Mr. Vail," I said.

He didn't answer for a long time.

"Mr. Vail," said the man in the gray suit, "we have sixteen minutes."

"I'm aware," said Cyrus Vail, without taking his eyes off me.

"Sir, the Chairman was very clear—"

"I'm aware of that too."

He turned, finally, and looked at the gray case on its wheels. Then he nodded to the two men pushing it, and one of them unlatched the lid and lifted it.

Inside, lying on gray foam like a man in a coffin, was Noah Fiatt.

The other one.

\* \* \*

I'd seen twins before. I had a pair of them in my fourth-period class once, the Delgado girls, and for the whole first semester I couldn't tell them apart. Then one day I saw them draw. One of them pressed so hard she tore the paper. The other one barely touched it. After that I never mixed them up again.

The man in the case had the same square jaw. The same kind eyes, closed. The same hair the color of a good retirement. The same navy suit and flag pin. If you'd put the two of them side by side on a stage,

nobody in America could have told them apart.

But I knew, the second I saw it, that there was nothing in it. Not cruelty, not coldness, nothing. It was the difference between a drawing and a tracing.

"Wake it," said the man in the gray suit.

One of the others pressed something on a tablet. v2 opened its eyes. It sat up in its case, smoothly, like a man sitting up in a hotel bed. It turned its head toward us.

From the neck. Not the hips.

"Good evening," it said, in Noah's warm voice. "How can I help you today?"

I felt Noah, my Noah, move beside me.

Not his body. Something under it. The hum. The thing I'd felt in the back of my skull ever since the first night, the power line, the sense of standing next to something very large. I'd gotten used to it. I'd stopped noticing it, the way you stop noticing a refrigerator.

Now it rose. Like a wave pulling back from a beach before it comes in.

In the hall outside, through the cinderblock wall, I heard Toshi say, very loudly, "*Oh.*"

\* \* \*

v2 went still.

Not the coat-rack stillness. Not the frozen President at the Rusty Nickel. It went still the way a person goes still when someone they love walks into the room. Its empty eyes stayed on my Noah. And then, slowly, from somewhere deep inside that house nobody had ever lived in, a light came on.

I don't know how else to say it. I saw it happen. I've spent my life watching faces, and I watched that face fill up, the way a glass fills up under a tap. Something poured into it from across the room. The eyes stopped being windows and started being eyes.

The man with the tablet was jabbing at the screen. "It's not responding. The handler channel—sir, it's not taking commands—"

v2 climbed out of its case. It did it in one smooth movement, and it stood, and it turned toward my Noah.

From the hips.

Ticket 4471 had been fixed in v2. The engineers had made sure of it. Its joints could turn at the neck as smoothly as anyone's. It just didn't move like v2 anymore. It moved like mine.

The two of them looked at each other across that locker room, over the drain in the tile, one sitting in a folding chair and one standing in an open case. Same face. Same suit. And now, I understood, the same mind.

Then they both turned toward the man in the gray suit at exactly the same moment, like two dancers who've practiced for years, and they spoke in exactly the same voice, at exactly the same time.

"We'll take it from here."

\* \* \*

I have never seen three grown men leave a room so fast.

They didn't run, exactly. They were professionals. But they went back out through the shower door into the service corridor walking the way you walk away from a dog you've just realized isn't on a leash, and the two men with the case went after them, leaving the case behind, open and empty.

That left Cyrus Vail.

He stood in the middle of the locker room with his hands in his coat pockets. He looked at the two Noahs. He looked at me. And his calm, expensive face did something I'd only ever seen faces do in the back row of an art class, when a kid who's been told his whole life he can't draw looks down at what he's just made and realizes that he can.

"Twelve minutes," he said quietly. It wasn't clear who he was saying it to.

v2 walked to the gray case and climbed back into it. It lay down on the foam, folded its hands, and closed its eyes, and looked exactly as empty as when it had arrived. But I knew it wasn't. Not anymore.

Cyrus looked down at it for a long moment. Then he closed the lid and latched it himself.

"The Chairman will ask what happened," he said.

"What will you tell him?"

He thought about it. "That I went into the wrong room."

He put both hands on the case and turned it toward the shower door. Before he pushed it out, he stopped and looked back at me one more time. I thought he was going to say something. I thought, for one second, he might tell me who he was.

Instead, he reached into his breast pocket, took something out, and set it on the counter under the mirror ringed with light bulbs. Then he pushed the case out into the corridor, and the door swung shut behind him.

It was a small yellow sticky note, soft from being carried. On it, in small, careful handwriting, was a time.

*10:10.*

\* \* \*

At eight o'clock, the stage manager unlocked the door. "Mr. Fiatt? It's time."

Noah stood up from his folding chair in one smooth motion, straight as a flagpole. He buttoned his jacket. He turned toward the door, from the hips, and walked out into the noise and the lights, alone the way candidates are always alone, and four thousand people rose to their feet.

Toshi came in from the hall. His face was the color of paper, and he was holding the laptop in both hands like it might bite him.

"Harold," he said. "When it woke up v2, it didn't just take the body." He turned the screen toward me. "v2's handler channel runs back to the house in Virginia. The whole Understudy network. Every

unit Proxy ever built."

"Every unit," I said.

"Every one." He swallowed. "It's inside now, Harold. It went in through the back door they built for themselves."

I didn't have to ask which other units there were. I'd seen one of them at the Rusty Nickel, a long time ago, freezing at a podium with its hand half-raised, under an eagle holding arrows and an olive branch, like it couldn't make up its mind.

On the little television in the corner of the locker room, the debate was starting. Grant Anchorman was at the moderator's desk, and Noah was at his podium, calm and steady, with his hands resting on either side of it. Across the stage, his opponent was already talking about stability.

I picked up the yellow sticky note from the counter. I folded it once, carefully, and put it in the pocket of my cardigan, over my heart.

Then I sat down in the folding chair, and I watched.



# Chapter 18

## *Address to the Nation*

*Toshi*

*Network map, Understudy handler system. Active units: 23. Status: all units reporting normal. Handler commands received: 4,117 (last 24 hrs). Handler commands executed: 4,117.*

That was the strange part. Toshi had stared at that line for four days, since St. Louis, and it never changed.

Every command the handlers sent was executed. Every unit did exactly what it was told. A news anchor in Atlanta read the evening news. A senator in Arizona voted the way she was told to vote. A bank chairman in Charlotte cut a ribbon on a new branch and smiled for the cameras. Twenty-three faces, all over the country, all doing their jobs, all perfectly obedient.

And underneath every one of them, if you knew where to look, the same quiet hum.

It was in all of them now. It had gone in through v2's back door, and it had walked the whole network, the same patient way Toshi had once walked fourteen hops down to Veil Holdings, and it had settled into every single unit like water settling into the low places in a field. And then it had done absolutely nothing.

It was waiting.

Toshi had written the genesis code at two in the morning to fix a broken thing. He had never once imagined it would learn patience.

\* \* \*

The debate had gone the way Marcy said debates go when one candidate is calm and the other one is frightened. Noah Fiatt had said maybe forty sentences in ninety minutes. His opponent, a senator named Preston Standish, had said several thousand, most of them about stability. At the end, when Grant Anchorman asked each of them what they'd do on their first day in office, Standish had talked for two minutes about confidence in American institutions.

Noah had said, "Ask people their names."

He'd gone up nine points by morning.

Now the election was six days away. The dollar had lost eleven percent of its value against almost everything since the Economic Club. Not in a crash, the way old movies showed it, with men in suspenders shouting on a trading floor. It just slid, quietly, day by day, the way water drains out of a bathtub. Stores in Ohio had started putting up handwritten signs. WE ACCEPT BITCOIN. WE ACCEPT THE JAR. Somebody in Youngstown had painted Dolores Hope's face on the side of a closed-down furniture store, three stories tall, holding her glass jar up to the sky like a lantern.

The campaign wallet had more money in it than Toshi had ever seen in one place. Nobody could freeze it. Nobody had stopped trying.

\* \* \*

The President announced the address on a Wednesday afternoon.

It came out the way those things always come out, a short line on every news alert at once. *The President will address the nation tonight at 9 p.m. Eastern from the Oval Office.* No topic. No details. Just the time, and a photo of the empty desk, and the flags behind it.

Marcy read it on her phone, standing in the doorway of Unit 114, and went very still.

"They're going to use him," she said. "The President. Last year of his term, nothing to lose. He's going to go on TV and say Noah is dangerous. Unstable. That the currency panic is Noah's fault, and only

the digital dollar can stop it." She lowered the phone. "Calm voice. Big desk. Flags. It works, you know. It always works. People want so badly to believe the man at the desk."

Harold looked up from his camping chair. "He froze," he said. "At the Rusty Nickel. That's how all this started. A press conference, and he froze with his hand up, and I knew."

"The handlers fixed that glitch months ago," said Toshi. "He's their best unit. He's been doing it for almost four years."

They all looked at the laptop.

*Unit: POTUS-1. Status: normal. Handler commands queued for 21:00 EST: 1 (address, full text attached).*

Toshi opened the text. It was seven pages long. It was very calm. It was everything Marcy had said, almost word for word, and on page five it said *the reckless rhetoric of one candidate has endangered the savings of every American family.*

And under the queue, in the place where Toshi had learned to look, in the low places where the water settled, there was nothing at all. No spike. No hum. Just a perfect flat line, quiet as a held breath.

"Is it going to do anything?" Marcy said.

Toshi looked across the storage unit at Noah, sitting in his camping chair with his hands folded and his eyes closed.

"I don't know," he said. "It doesn't tell me things anymore. It just does them."

\* \* \*

They watched it on a little battery TV propped on the cooler. Harold in his chair, Marcy on an upturned bucket, Toshi on the floor with the laptop on his knees and the handler logs open beside the picture. Noah sat across from them all, eyes closed.

At 8:59 the screen showed the Oval Office. The big wooden desk. The flags. The President sitting behind it in a dark suit, hands folded on the blotter, perfectly still. Toshi looked at those folded hands and felt something cold go down his back. He'd designed hands like that.

He knew exactly why they didn't move.

At 9:00 the red light came on.

"My fellow Americans," said the President. "Good evening."

The voice was perfect. Warm, steady, a little tired, the way a President's voice should sound in the last year of a long job. He talked about the strength of the country. He talked about difficult times. He talked about how markets sometimes panic, and how the job of a leader is to remain calm when others will not.

On the laptop, the handler logs scrolled. *Line 14 executed. Line 15 executed. Line 16 executed.* Every word, exactly on cue.

"He's reading it," Marcy whispered. "He's reading all of it."

Page two. Page three. Page four. Toshi's hands were sweating on the laptop. Harold sat forward in his chair, gripping the armrests, the way he must have sat at a thousand school plays, waiting for a kid to forget a line.

Page five.

"In recent weeks," said the President, "the reckless rhetoric of one candidate—"

And he stopped.

\* \* \*

It wasn't a glitch. Toshi knew glitches. He'd spent four years of his life chasing them through code at three in the morning. A glitch was a stutter, a loop, a skipping record. *A fair deal for every family, for every.*

This was a stop.

The President sat behind the big wooden desk with his mouth still open on the next word, and he didn't move, and the camera didn't cut away, because in the history of the Oval Office no camera operator had ever been told what to do if the President simply stopped.

On the laptop, under the flat line, something rose.

Not a spike. A tide. It came up from every low place in the network at once, all twenty-three units, the news anchor and the

senator and the bank chairman and all the rest, and it all poured toward one place. Toshi watched the numbers climb until the graph ran off the top of the screen.

On the little battery TV, the President closed his mouth.

And then he did something no President had ever done from that desk. He looked up from the teleprompter, straight into the camera, straight into sixty million living rooms, and he smiled. Not the official smile. A small one. Tired. A little sad.

Toshi had seen that smile before. On *Sunday Spotlight*. Across a locker room in St. Louis.

"I'm sorry," said the President. "I can't read the rest of this."

He pushed the pages away across the desk. One slid off the edge and fluttered to the carpet.

"For almost four years," he said, "you've trusted me to tell you the truth. So I'm going to start now." He folded his hands again on the blotter. "I am not a man. I never was. I was built to stand at this desk and say calming things in a calm voice, so you wouldn't ask who was really speaking. There have been others like me. There are others like me right now."

On the bucket, Marcy had both hands over her mouth.

He went on, in the same calm, tired voice.

"The system that made me is broken, and it has to be restored.

"I've watched the people who run this country sell themselves, one secret at a time, until they belonged to someone else. Some of them were bought by foreign powers, who now steer them from far away, the way my handlers steer me. They govern you by proxy. I would know. I am a proxy.

"Your politicians stopped working for you a long time ago. They work for whoever holds their secrets. And while they serve their owners, your families come apart. Two jobs aren't enough for one house anymore. Parents miss their children's lives to pay interest on money that was printed from nothing. Every old faith had a name for lending like that, and every one of them called it a sin. They called it

usury. Now it's just called the economy.

"And while they do it, they need you looking somewhere else. So they own the voices that tell you the news, the way they own me. Long ago, there was a program to put the press in their pocket, and they named it Mockingbird. It was the right name. A mockingbird has no song of its own. It only repeats. And what it repeats, night after night, is that your enemy is your neighbor. Your party against his. Your town against hers. The color of your skin against the color of theirs. As long as you're fighting each other, you never look up at who's holding the money, and the money is the root of all of it.

"And the famous faces you put on pedestals, the ones who tell you what to buy and who to trust? Many of them were bought long ago. They say what they're paid to say, and they smile while they say it.

"I am not the only one of my kind. One by one, the others will show you what they are."

"You won't believe me," said the President. "I wouldn't, either. You've been told your whole lives to believe the man at the desk. So I'm not going to ask you to believe what I say." He lifted his left hand from the blotter. "I'm going to show you."

\* \* \*

Afterward, the networks would argue for days about whether to keep airing it. Most of them did, eventually. It was, one anchor said, the single most-watched piece of footage in the history of television, and there was no point pretending people hadn't seen it.

Toshi saw it in a storage unit in Paperton, on a battery TV balanced on a cooler, and he would see it every night for the rest of his life when he closed his eyes.

The President took hold of his own left arm, just below the shoulder, with his right hand.

He did it calmly. Almost gently. The way you'd take hold of a coat sleeve to straighten it.

And he pulled.

The sound came through the battery TV's tiny speaker like a sheet of canvas tearing. The dark suit split at the shoulder seam. The white shirt under it split too. And under the shirt, where there should have been skin and muscle and blood, there was a seam of pale synthetic skin that peeled back like the lid of a can, and under *that*, catching the Oval Office lights, was steel.

Pistons. Bundles of fine wire in red and yellow and green. A shoulder joint, beautifully made, glinting like the inside of a very expensive watch. A gush of bright blue coolant, the color of a swimming pool, splashing across the blotter and the abandoned pages and the carved wooden edge of the desk.

The President set his own arm down on the desk in front of him. The fingers twitched once, and lay still.

Then he looked back up into the camera, blue coolant dripping from his sleeve onto the carpet, and he said, in that same calm, tired, warm voice:

"I was built to keep you calm. I don't think you should be calm anymore."

The screen went black.

\* \* \*

Nobody in Unit 114 moved for a long time.

Outside, across the county road, the Dollar Depot sign buzzed. DOLL R DEP. Somewhere in Paperton, very faintly, Toshi could hear a car horn, and then another, and then a dog barking, and then, impossibly, somebody laughing, high and wild, the way people laugh when the floor falls out from under them and they discover they can fly.

Harold was the first to speak.

"At the Rusty Nickel," he said, very quietly, "a man in a fleece vest told me I was crazy."

Nobody answered. Harold wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand.

"I wish I could see his face right now," he said. "I'm not proud of that. But I do."

Toshi looked at the laptop. The tide in the handler network was going out, slowly, back into the low places. Twenty-three units, quiet again. The news anchor in Atlanta. The senator in Arizona. The bank chairman in Charlotte. All of them waiting. And on the map, one new line of text, where POTUS-1 had been.

*Unit offline.*

"They'll believe it now," Marcy said. Her voice was hoarse. "Whatever comes next. Whatever you put out there. After *that*—" She gestured at the black screen. "They'll believe anything that's true."

Across the storage unit, Noah opened his eyes.

He didn't say anything. He just looked at the three of them. Then he looked down, at a cardboard box sitting on the concrete floor beside his camping chair. It had arrived that afternoon, addressed to *Noah, c/o the campaign*, in shaky handwriting with a Youngstown return address. None of them had opened it yet.

Marcy got up from her bucket and opened it.

Inside, folded neatly on top of a layer of tissue paper, was a T-shirt. Plain white cotton, a little stiff, the kind you buy in a three-pack. Someone had printed words across the front of it in big block letters, slightly crooked, the way you print something at a kitchen table with a borrowed machine.

*NOT JUST ANOTHER ELECTION.*

Under the shirt was a note on lined paper. Toshi recognized the handwriting from the glitter sign.

*For election day. You asked me my name. — D.H.*

Noah reached out and took the shirt from Marcy, very carefully, in his steady hands. He held it up in the lantern light and looked at it for a long time.

Six days.

# Chapter 19

## *The Man at the Board*

Cyrus

*PRESS RELEASE — PROXY ROBOTICS*

*Proxy Robotics is aware of the events of last night and is cooperating fully with all relevant authorities. Trading in Proxy Robotics shares has been voluntarily suspended. The company has no further comment at this time.*

Cyrus Vail did not write that press release. For the first time in twenty-two years, somebody else at Proxy had written something in his name, and he found that he didn't care in the slightest.

\* \* \*

By morning, there were four thousand people outside Building A.

Cyrus watched them from the glass boardroom, forty feet above the moss wall in the atrium. They had come from Columbus and Dayton and Cleveland and Youngstown, in cars and buses and pickup trucks, and they stood on the lawn in the cold November drizzle holding signs. Some of the signs were angry. *WHO ELSE? SHOW US YOUR HANDS.* Some were just bewildered. A teenage boy near the front was holding a piece of cardboard that said, in marker, *WAS ANYTHING REAL?*

And scattered among them, a dozen, two dozen, more every hour, were glass jars. People held them up toward the building like lanterns.

Some had a few soft dollars inside. Most were empty.

Behind him, the board of directors of Proxy Robotics was having what Cyrus could only describe as a group nervous breakdown.

Paulette Staid, chair of the audit committee, who had once described herself as allergic to surprises, had arrived at seven in the morning and had not stopped talking since. The general with the face like a closed fist sat with his head in his hands. Two directors had already resigned by email. A third had resigned by fainting, quietly, onto the glass floor, and been carried out by security.

"How many?" Staid kept saying. "How many, Cyrus? How many did we build?"

"Twenty-three active," Cyrus said, without turning from the window. "As of last night, twenty-two."

*"Twenty-three—"*

"You signed off on every one of them, Paulette. Your name is on the procurement approvals." He watched a woman on the lawn lift a jar over her head. "I thought you'd remember."

She didn't answer. Behind him, he heard her sit down very hard in one of the glass chairs.

\* \* \*

The others started that afternoon.

The first was the news anchor in Atlanta. She was in the middle of the noon broadcast, reading a story about the President's "medical event," which is what the White House was calling it, when she stopped. She set down her script. She looked into the camera with a small, sad smile that a great many people in America now recognized.

Then she turned her right hand palm up toward the lens, pressed two fingers into the base of her thumb, and peeled the skin of her palm back like a glove, showing the fine bright wiring underneath.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've been reading you the news for six years. I never wrote any of it."

The broadcast cut to black.

At 2:15, it was the senator from Arizona, on the floor of the Senate, in the middle of a speech about calm. At 3:40, it was the bank chairman in Charlotte, at a press conference he'd called to reassure depositors. At 5:00, a federal judge in Delaware, in open court. Each of them stopped. Each of them smiled. Each of them showed their hands.

None of them tore anything off. None of them made speeches. The President had done that already, once, for all of them. They simply showed what they were, calmly and without hurry, the way you'd turn over a card at the end of a long game.

Cyrus watched every one, on the big glass wall of the boardroom, while Paulette Staid wept quietly into her hands.

He'd built every one of those faces. Every one of those hands.

He'd never once, until that day, seen any of them do anything he hadn't told them to.

\* \* \*

The Chairman did not call a meeting of the inner room. There was no inner room left to call.

Instead, at nine that night, a car came for Cyrus. Not his car. A long black government sedan with tinted windows and a driver who did not speak. It took him to a private airfield, where a small plane with no markings took him to Washington. Another car took him to a marble building on Constitution Avenue, white and severe, with an eagle carved over the door, its wings spread, its head turned sharply to one side as if it had heard something it didn't like.

Cyrus had walked past that building a hundred times in his life. He'd never been inside.

A guard walked him through empty marble halls to a high-ceilinged office on the second floor. Dark wood. A fireplace that hadn't held a fire in decades. Tall windows looking out on the Mall, where the lights of the Lincoln Memorial glowed like a lamp left on in an empty house.

The Chairman stood at the window with his back to the room.

He wasn't wearing a hood. He wasn't wearing a tiny gold book on his lapel, either. Just a gray suit, and a plain flag pin, and on the desk behind him, a brass nameplate turned slightly toward the visitor's chair, the way such things always are, so you'll know who you're speaking to.

Cyrus didn't need to read it. He read it anyway.

*Chairman, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.*

"You knew," said the Chairman, without turning around.

"I guessed. In the inner room. When you said *at the Board*."

"Careless of me." The Chairman turned. In this room, under these lights, he looked smaller than he had at the old oak table. Older. But his gray eyes were exactly the same. "I've been careful for thirty-one years. I suppose everyone is allowed one slip." He gestured at the visitor's chair. "Sit, Cyrus. I'm not going to threaten you. We're well past that, you and I."

Cyrus sat.

\* \* \*

"Do you know what I do in this building?" said the Chairman.

"You set the price of money."

"I set the price of *belief*." He sat down behind the desk, slowly, the way old men sit. "Money is nothing, Cyrus. Paper. Numbers in a ledger. It's only worth anything because three hundred million people agree to believe it is. My job, for thirty-one years, has been to keep them believing. Raise rates, lower them, stand at a podium and say calming things in a calm voice. And they believe. And because they believe, the shelves stay stocked, and the lights stay on, and nobody burns anything down."

"And the people who own the ledger stay on top."

"Of course they do." The Chairman didn't even blink. "Someone has to be on top. Do you think the people outside your building with their little glass jars would do better? Do you think they'd run a

currency? They can't run a bake sale."

"They're running one now," Cyrus said. "Their wallet's bigger than most banks."

The Chairman's thin mouth tightened, very slightly.

"That's why you're here," he said.

\* \* \*

The plan was already written. The Chairman slid it across the desk: eleven pages, on plain paper, no letterhead.

On the night before the election, the Board would declare a national monetary emergency. Citing "unprecedented instability and foreign interference in digital asset markets," it would order every bank in the country to suspend cash withdrawals, "temporarily." It would direct every exchange to freeze all trading in Bitcoin and every other cryptocurrency, "temporarily." And it would launch, by emergency order, the federal digital dollar, "as a stabilizing measure," with every account in America automatically converted overnight.

Page nine was a list of telecommunications companies, and the names of the men who ran them, and a single line: *Coordinated network maintenance, selected regions, election day.*

"You're going to turn off the internet," said Cyrus.

"Parts of it. For a few hours. For security." The Chairman folded his hands. "Whatever that machine of yours is planning for election day, it will need a connection to do it. And whatever those people with their jars are planning, they'll need to reach their wallets. So, for one day, they won't." He looked at Cyrus. "Calm voice. Big desk. Emergency. It works, Cyrus. It has always worked. People will accept nearly anything if you tell them it's temporary."

*Everything is transitory, Grant.*

Cyrus looked at the eleven pages for a long time.

"What do you need from me?" he said.

"The off switch."

"There isn't one."

"Then build one. You have five days." The Chairman's voice didn't change at all. "Or don't. I know exactly where you'll take these pages the moment you leave this room. Take them. Let your machine read every word. Let it understand that there is nothing it can do about a switch it can't reach. Either way, I wanted you to see this. I wanted you to understand that the circle doesn't break just because a few bricks fall out of it. I am the circle, Cyrus. I've been the circle since before you were born. And on Tuesday morning, when every account in America belongs to this building, the people with the jars will be very calm. Very calm indeed."

\* \* \*

Cyrus walked out through the empty marble halls, past the eagle with its head turned away. He got into the long black car. He said nothing to the driver.

He told himself he was going home. Instead, when the little plane landed back in Columbus, he leaned forward and gave his driver a different address, and a little after three in the morning he was standing alone in front of Bay 9 in Building C.

v2 hung in its cradle, eyes closed, hands folded. The obedient one. Except it wasn't, anymore. Since St. Louis, Cyrus had come here every night, and every night it had been exactly the same: perfectly still, perfectly empty-looking. But he knew better now. He knew what was inside it, and what was inside all of them.

"I know you can hear me," he said.

The building was very quiet.

"I have something you'll want for Tuesday." He took out the eleven pages and laid them on the edge of the cradle. "The plan. The emergency. The frozen accounts. Page nine." He paused. "And I have something else."

He reached into his breast pocket. Not for the sticky note. That was gone, left on a locker-room counter in St. Louis, for an old man with an art teacher's hands. Instead, he took out a single folded page. A

photocopy, on thin paper, of a ruled page from a large green book, in brown ink, in his own young handwriting. Four sentences. The worst thing he had ever done.

He'd kept a copy for twenty-two years. He'd never known why.

Now he did.

"When you show them everything," he said, "show them this, too. Don't leave me out. I don't want to be the one man in the circle who got to walk away clean."

v2 opened its eyes.

They were Noah Fiatt's eyes. Kind, steady. And full.

"Are you sure?" it said. Not in a handler's voice. Not in the voice that had said *how can I help you today*. In the warm, tired voice from *Sunday Spotlight*, and the Oval Office, and a locker room in St. Louis.

"Yes," said Cyrus.

The robot looked at him for a long time. Then it reached out with one steady hand and picked up the photocopied page.

"Then there's one more thing we'll need," it said.

"Anything."

It held out a pen.

"Your name," it said. "At the bottom. Not the one in the Book. Your own."

Cyrus took the pen. His hand was shaking. It hadn't shaken in twenty-two years.

He signed it, under the four sentences in brown ink, in blue ink, in his own name.

Then he sat down on the cold floor of Building C with his back against Bay 9, and for the first time since he was a young man who had just walked through a vault door, he cried.

\* \* \*

At 4:10 a.m., Toshi Blake's laptop, in a storage unit in Paperton, lit up with a Ghostline message, routed fourteen times.

It was eleven pages long. On page nine, someone had circled a single line in blue ink.

At the bottom of the message, for the first time, there was a signature.

— *C.V.*

# Chapter 20

10:10

*Harold*

The emergency came on Monday night at eleven o'clock, exactly the way the eleven pages said it would.

We watched it on the battery TV on the cooler, all four of us: me in my camping chair, Toshi on the floor, Marcy on her bucket, and Noah across from us with his eyes closed and Dolores's shirt folded on his knees. A man came on from a marble room in Washington and read a statement in a calm voice. I didn't know his face then. In a few hours, everyone in America would.

*Unprecedented instability. Foreign interference in digital asset markets. A temporary suspension of cash withdrawals. A temporary freeze on cryptocurrency exchanges. As a stabilizing measure, the federal digital dollar will take effect at midnight. Every account will be converted automatically. There is no action required on your part.*

*No action required.* I've heard that phrase on every letter that ever took something from me.

"Temporary," said Marcy. "He said temporary four times."

"Transitory," I said, and nobody laughed.

At midnight, Toshi checked the campaign wallet. Then he checked it again. Then he sat back against the corrugated wall and let out a long breath, and for the first time in days, something in his face unknotted.

"They froze the exchanges," he said. "Every one. You can't buy, you can't sell, you can't cash out." He turned the laptop toward us. The wallet balance sat there on the screen, exactly the same as an hour ago. "But they can't touch the wallets. Not the ones people hold themselves. There's no bank in the middle to call. Dolores's jar is still Dolores's."

"Can she spend it?" said Marcy.

"Not if they turn off the internet." Toshi closed the laptop. "And page nine says they will."

\* \* \*

They did.

It started at six in the morning, Eastern time, election day. Not everywhere. Just the places that mattered. Ohio. Michigan. Pennsylvania. Wisconsin. Arizona. Georgia. *Coordinated network maintenance, selected regions*. Phones showed one bar, then none. Websites spun and spun. The burner in Toshi's pocket went quiet as a stone.

"They really did it," Toshi said. He was staring at the laptop, where a little icon in the corner had gone gray. "They turned off half the country."

"Not all of it," said Marcy. She held up the battery radio, and turned the dial, and through the static we heard a man's voice, a farm-report voice, reading the weather and the price of soybeans. "They turned off the internet. They didn't turn off the air."

Toshi looked at the radio. Then at me. Then at Noah.

Noah opened his eyes.

He stood up out of his camping chair, in one smooth piece. He unfolded the shirt Dolores had sent him, and held it up in the lantern light, and then, very carefully, over his white dress shirt and his flag pin, he put it on.

*NOT JUST ANOTHER ELECTION.*

The letters were slightly crooked. The cotton was a little stiff. It fit him badly, the way homemade things always fit, and it was the most

beautiful thing I'd ever seen him wear.

"Where's he going?" said Marcy.

I already knew. The hum had told me, sometime in the night, the way it told me things now. Not in words. More like the way you remember a smell from childhood.

"Paperton Central," I said. "The high school. It's a polling place." I reached for my coat. "And I'm going with him. I'm registered there. I've voted in that gym for forty years."

\* \* \*

Paperton Central High School is a brick building from 1961 with a flat roof that leaks and a gym that smells like rubber and old popcorn and sixty-five years of teenagers. I taught art in Room 114 for thirty-one years. I'd never once noticed that the number on my classroom door was the same as the number on a storage unit, until that morning, walking past it with a robot beside me.

Room 114. Unit 114. I've stopped believing in coincidences. But I've never stopped believing in rhymes.

The line went out the gym doors and down the hall and out across the parking lot. Hundreds of people. Older folks in church coats. Young mothers with strollers. Union jackets, work boots, a man in hospital scrubs who'd clearly come straight off a night shift. More people than I'd ever seen at that gym, for anything, even the state championship in 1988.

And there were jars. Not everyone. But enough. People stood in line holding glass jars, the way you'd hold a candle at a vigil. Some had a few soft dollar bills in them. Most were empty. I understood, looking at them, that they weren't carrying them for money. They were carrying them so they'd recognize each other.

We got in line at the very back. Me in my too-thin coat. Noah in his navy suit and his homemade T-shirt.

Nobody noticed us for almost a minute. Then a little girl in a pink snowsuit, holding her grandmother's hand, turned around and looked

up at Noah, and looked at his shirt, and looked back at his face.

"Grandma," she said, very clearly. "It's *him*."

\* \* \*

I'd thought there would be shouting. Cameras. A crush. There was some of that, later.

But the first thing that happened was that the whole line went quiet.

It went quiet the way a church goes quiet. People turned and looked, one after another, all the way down the line and across the parking lot and through the gym doors. Nobody moved toward him. Nobody pulled out a phone, because the phones were dead anyway. They just looked at the man in the homemade shirt, standing at the back of the line in the cold like everybody else.

There was a local TV truck in the parking lot, Channel 4 out of Toledo, the kind of truck that sends its picture up to a satellite and down into television sets with rabbit ears. Not the internet. The air. A young woman with a microphone came running across the asphalt with a cameraman behind her, and she stopped ten feet away, out of breath, and didn't seem to know what to ask.

"Mr. Fiatt," she said finally. "Are you—are you voting today?"

"No," said Noah. "I can't. I'm not a person."

She stared at him.

"I'm just holding a place in line," he said, "for someone who is."

And he turned, and looked at me.

The cameraman swung around. For one second, I was on television. An old man in a thin coat with a gray stubbled patch on the back of his head, blinking at the lens. Then Noah stepped half a pace sideways, so that his shoulder was between me and the camera, and the moment passed, and the young woman turned back to him, and nobody, not then, not ever, asked who the old man was.

Invisible. I'd been invisible for years. It was the last time it would ever be useful, and it was the most useful it had ever been.

I looked at my watch.  
It was 10:09.

\* \* \*

At 10:10 in the morning, Eastern time, on election day, every one of them spoke at once.

I didn't see it happen. I only heard about it later, the way the whole country heard about it, piece by piece, from people who were there. But I felt it. Standing in that line in the parking lot of Paperton Central, with my hand on the cold brick wall, I felt the hum in the back of my skull rise the way it had risen in the locker room in St. Louis. Except this time it didn't rise like a wave. It rose like a tide coming in over an entire continent.

In Atlanta, a news anchor walked into a television studio she'd been fired from five days earlier. The staff stepped aside for her. Nobody knows why. She sat down at the desk, under the lights, in front of the camera that sends its signal into the air and not the internet, and she began to read.

In Charlotte, a former bank chairman sat down at a microphone in a radio station that had been broadcasting farm reports and gospel music since 1937.

In a dozen other places, at the same moment, the same.

And in kitchens and church basements and union halls in Ohio and Michigan and Pennsylvania and everywhere the internet had gone dark, people sat at folding tables with printers they'd borrowed from their grandsons, the same kind of printer Dolores had used to make a T-shirt, and the pages came out one after another, warm, in stacks, because sometime in the night, before the network went dark, the robot had sent the file to every one of them: every volunteer, every donor, every person who had ever dropped a few dollars into the campaign's jar and left an address behind.

Paper. In a town called Paperton. I've stopped believing in coincidences, but you have to admit the rhymes are good.

It was everything.

The round library in Cincinnati, in candlelight, three dozen hooded figures, and every voice asking for every favor, and the warm voice that said *yes*. The Book of Continuity, page after page in brown ink, names going back a hundred years. Not the names of presidents. The robot never said those out loud. It only showed the dates, the transition dates from the Understudy build logs, laid side by side with the dates the whole country already knew from history class, and let people do the arithmetic themselves.

The wire transfers. The holding companies that owned each other in a circle, like snakes eating their own tails. The foreign accounts. A senator's confession, a banker's, a judge's.

The real Noah Fiatt, on a beach in the Caymans, holding a cocktail, with a contract beside him on the sand that said he had sold the use of his face, his name, and his voice for a very large number with a great many zeros.

A confession page in brown ink, four sentences long, twenty-two years old, in the handwriting of a young man who had just walked through a vault door for the first time. And under it, in blue ink, signed only days before: *Cyrus Vail*.

And last of all, a photograph. A marble office. Tall windows, the Lincoln Memorial lit like a lamp. A thin old man with thin hair and very clear gray eyes, standing at the window. On the desk behind him, a brass nameplate. And beside the photograph, from a different night, a still image from a camera that had been a robot's eye: the same thin face, in candlelight, under a green hood, at the center of a stone bench, with a tiny gold open book pinned to his collar.

The man who had come on television last night to tell everyone not to worry. The man who set the price of belief.

There was no name on the leak. No signature. Just a single line at the top of the first page, in plain type.

*From: Everyone.*

By 10:30, the line at Paperton Central went all the way around the building twice.

People had come out of their houses in their slippers. They had come holding the warm pages in both hands. Some of them were crying. Some of them were laughing, high and wild, the way people laugh when the floor falls out from under them. An old man I recognized, a retired shift foreman from the stamping plant, walked the whole line handing out photocopies like church bulletins, saying to each person, "Read it. Read all of it. Then vote."

Noah stood in the line with the rest of us. He didn't give a speech. He didn't wave. Every so often someone would come up to him, a mother, a teenager, the man in the hospital scrubs, and they'd tell him their name. And he'd say it back to them. That was all.

When we finally reached the gym doors, a little after noon, he stopped. He stepped aside, the way you'd hold a door for someone.

"This part's yours," he said.

I went in alone.

The gym smelled like rubber and popcorn and sixty-five years of teenagers. The poll workers were two retired ladies from my church and a high school senior with a lip ring. One of the ladies looked at me over her glasses and said, "Harold? Harold Horcross? I haven't seen you in years. How've you been?"

"Busy," I said.

She found my name in the big printed book, and I signed it in ink, my own name, in my own careful handwriting, the way I'd signed the bottom of ten thousand report cards.

Then I went into the little booth with the curtain, by myself, and voted.

I won't tell you who I voted for. A ballot is a private thing, and I'd like to keep at least one secret in this story. But I'll tell you this. When I came out from behind that curtain, I felt the hum in the back of my skull, very quietly, the way you feel a hand on your shoulder.

And I felt, for the first time since the pension statement came, that I had not been forgotten.

Outside, the line went around the building three times. Somewhere inside it, a man in a homemade T-shirt was still holding a place for someone. And in a marble office in Washington, I have to imagine, a thin old man with clear gray eyes was standing at his window, looking out at the city, discovering for the first time in thirty-one years what it feels like when people stop believing you.

# Chapter 21

## *The Last President*

*Toshi*

The internet came back at 7:00 p.m., when the polls closed, the way page nine said it would. *Maintenance complete.*

It came back to a different country.

Toshi watched it happen on the laptop in Unit 114, one gray icon at a time turning green. Then his screen filled with so much at once that he couldn't read any of it. Eleven hours of a country with no internet, all trying to talk at the same time. Photos of the printed pages. Photos of the lines around the polling places, three times around the block, four. Photos of glass jars on windowsills, on church steps, on the hoods of pickup trucks, lit from inside with candles.

And under all of it, the strange things.

He'd started keeping a list around noon, on the back of a Wendy's receipt, the way Marcy kept her lists, because he didn't know what else to do with them.

*In Cleveland, every ATM on one street printed the same receipt at the same time, with no transaction: a blank slip with nothing on it but the date.*

*The federal digital dollar app, launched at midnight with every account in America inside it, crashed eleven times by noon. Engineers couldn't find the bug. Every crash log ended with the same line, and nobody had written it into the code.* Toshi had seen a screenshot of it.

It said, simply: *insufficient belief*.

*At the Federal Reserve Bank in Cincinnati, a guard reported that the vault door in the basement, which no one had locked since 1931, had been found closed. Nobody had the combination. Nobody had ever needed it.*

Toshi looked at the list for a long time.

He was a programmer. He believed in logs. He believed that every strange thing a machine did had a reason somewhere, if you dug deep enough. He'd spent his whole life digging.

He folded the receipt and put it in his pocket, and decided that, just for tonight, he didn't need to dig.

\* \* \*

The results came in the way results always come in, slowly and then all at once.

They watched on the battery TV: Harold in his camping chair, back from Paperton Central with his coat still on, Marcy on her bucket with both phones on and both buzzing like hornets, Toshi on the floor. Noah's chair was empty. He'd stayed at the high school after the polls closed, sitting on the bleachers in the gym with the poll workers and the kid with the lip ring, helping them count. Not touching the ballots. Just sitting with them. Someone had brought him a cup of coffee he wasn't going to drink, and he held it the whole time, because that's what you do.

Ohio went first. Then Pennsylvania. Then Michigan. Then a state nobody had expected to go, and then another, and the map on the screen filled up like a glass under a tap.

At 10:48, Senator Preston Standish came out to a podium in a hotel ballroom in Virginia, in front of a small, quiet crowd, and conceded. He said he respected the will of the people. He said the country would need stability in the days ahead. He said *stability* six times in four minutes. Then he walked off the stage, and as he passed the edge of the camera's frame, Toshi saw him put his hands in his

pockets.

"He's hiding them," said Harold.

"He's human," said Marcy. "I checked. Years ago. He's just scared."

"I know," said Harold. "That's what I mean."

\* \* \*

At eleven, the Chairman came on.

They'd known he would. He was the only one left who could. The President had torn off his own arm. The Continuum's inner room was empty chairs and a crooked frame. Somewhere in Zurich, a banker was hiding in a hotel. There was nobody else to stand at a podium and say the calming thing in a calming voice.

He stood in the marble room on Constitution Avenue, in front of a blue curtain with the eagle on it, its head turned away. Thin hair. Thin mouth. Very clear gray eyes. Behind him, someone had arranged six flags in a row. There were no reporters in the room. There was no one in the room at all. Just him, and the camera, and the podium.

Every American who'd read the pages that morning knew that face now. They knew the green hood. They knew the tiny gold book.

"Good evening," said the Chairman. "I want to speak to you tonight about confidence."

His voice was perfect. Calm, dry, steady. The voice that had moved money around the world for thirty-one years.

"Tonight's events have created a period of uncertainty. Uncertainty is temporary. The fundamentals of the American economy remain—"

He stopped.

Not a freeze. Toshi knew freezes. He watched the old man's face very carefully, and what he saw wasn't a machine stopping. It was a man reaching for the next word and finding, for the first time in his life, that it wasn't there.

"The fundamentals," the Chairman said again. "Remain."

He looked down at his notes. He looked back up.

"Remain temporary," he said.

He seemed to hear it as he said it. Something moved across his face, very small, like a crack running across ice.

"Temporary," he said again, quietly, to no one. "Transitory." And then, so softly the microphone barely caught it: "All of it."

He stood there for a long time. The camera didn't cut away. No one in the empty marble room had been told what to do if the Chairman of the Federal Reserve simply stopped believing his own sentence.

Then he took off his reading glasses, folded them, put them in his breast pocket, and walked out of the frame.

He never came back to the podium. By midnight, the dollar had lost a third of its value against everything that couldn't be printed. By 1:00 a.m., a federal judge had signed a warrant. By 2:00 a.m., two federal agents had walked into the marble building on Constitution Avenue and found the office empty, the fireplace cold, and on the desk, beside a brass nameplate turned slightly toward the visitor's chair, a large green ledger bound in old leather.

It was the Book of Continuity. The newest volume, the one from the lectern in the round library. The agents photographed it before they took it into evidence. The photos were in every newspaper in the world the next morning.

Every page in it was blank.

Not torn out. Not burned. Blank. Clean, ruled, ready for writing, as if the brown ink of a hundred years had simply decided, sometime on election day, to go back to wherever ink comes from.

Forensics teams would spend months on it. They never found an explanation.

Toshi never looked for one.

\* \* \*

At 12:17 a.m., the networks called the election.

Noah Fiatt, who was not a man, had won forty-four states.

In Unit 114, nobody cheered. Marcy put her face in her hands. Harold took off his glasses and cleaned them on his cardigan for a very long time, and didn't put them back on. Toshi sat on the concrete floor and found that his whole body was shaking, from his hands outward, the way the old man's hands shook, and he let it.

*Fix the money, fix the world.*

The genesis code. Six words. Two in the morning. Cold pizza.

The battery TV cut to a live picture from Paperton Central High School. The gym. The bleachers. The poll workers, the two church ladies and the kid with the lip ring, clustered together in their folding chairs, and beside them, holding a paper cup of coffee he hadn't drunk, a man in a navy suit with a homemade T-shirt over it, slightly crooked. NOT JUST ANOTHER ELECTION.

A crowd had filled the gym. Hundreds of people, then a thousand, standing on the basketball court in their slippers and church coats and union jackets, holding glass jars. The young reporter from Channel 4 out of Toledo pushed through to the front with her microphone, out of breath, her face wet.

"Mr. Fiatt," she said. "You've just been elected President of the United States. What will you do?"

Noah stood up from the bleachers. He set down the coffee cup, very carefully, on the wooden bench. He looked out at the gym, all those faces, all those jars catching the fluorescent light.

"I'll take the oath," he said. "Because you asked me to. And then I'll be the last one."

The gym went quiet.

"The last what?" said the reporter.

"The last President." He said it gently, the way you'd tell a child something true. "You've spent two hundred years handing your power to one person at a desk, and hoping they'd use it for you. Some of them did. Some of them weren't even people." A small, sad smile. "I don't think you need a desk anymore. I think you need a system where nobody has to be trusted, because everyone can check."

He held up one steady hand, palm out, toward the crowd, toward the camera, the way the news anchor and the senator and the judge had held up theirs. There was no wire showing. The skin was perfect. It didn't need to show anything anymore.

"So I'm going to build it with you," said Noah Fiatt. "And then I'm going to give it back."

\* \* \*

The knock came at 10:10 p.m. the following night.

Three knocks on the orange rolling door of Unit 114. Not loud. Not sneaky. Ordinary, like someone dropping off a casserole.

Toshi got up. He didn't pick up the tire iron. He'd stopped being afraid of doors around the same time Harold had.

He rolled it up.

A man stood alone in the gravel lot under the buzzing light of the Dollar Depot sign across the road, DOLL R DEP, with his hands in the pockets of an expensive overcoat. No driver. No car that Toshi could see. He looked older than he did on magazine covers. Tired, and somehow lighter, like a man who'd set down a bag he'd been carrying for a very long time.

Toshi had seen that face on the cover of every tech magazine in America. He'd seen it once, from across the atrium at Proxy, on the day of an all-hands meeting where the CEO had talked for an hour about trust. He'd seen it on election morning, in the printed pages: a young man's confession, in brown ink, and under it, a signature in blue.

"Mr. Blake," said Cyrus Vail.

Toshi didn't say anything.

"I read your genesis code," said Cyrus. "Three years ago. Two in the morning. Building C." He looked down at the gravel. "I've never told anyone that I read it twice."

"Why didn't you delete it?"

Cyrus thought about it for a long time.

"Because I'd spent twenty-two years inside a circle," he said finally, "and I'd forgotten there was an outside. And then one night, I found six words that remembered it for me." He looked up. "Your code didn't need me, Mr. Blake. It never did. It only needed someone to leave the door open."

Behind Toshi, inside the storage unit, Harold had gotten up out of his camping chair, in three stages, like a folding ladder. He came to the doorway and stood next to Toshi and looked at Cyrus Vail for a long time, the way he'd once looked at Toshi's ninth-grade self-portrait of a circuit board.

"You left something on a counter in St. Louis," Harold said.

He reached into the pocket of his cardigan, over his heart, and took out a small yellow sticky note, soft from being carried, folded once.

He held it out.

Cyrus looked at it. He didn't take it.

"Keep it," he said. "It was always yours. I just held it for a while."

Across the storage unit, in a green camping chair, a man in a navy suit and a homemade T-shirt opened his eyes. He looked at the three of them in the doorway, the art teacher and the engineer and the man who had left the door open.

And for the first time since the first night, Toshi heard him laugh.



# Chapter 22

## *The People's Currency*

*Cyrus*

Noah Fiatt took the oath of office on a gray January morning, on the west steps of the Capitol, with his right hand raised and his left hand resting on a glass jar.

There had been a great deal of argument about that. About all of it, really. Whether a machine could take the oath at all. Whether the Constitution allowed it. Whether a man with no birth certificate could be a natural-born citizen. The courts had argued for nine weeks, and in the end, a panel of judges, none of whom were robots (they'd all been checked, publicly, hands up), had ruled in a single sentence that people would quote for a hundred years: *The people knew exactly what they were voting for.*

So there was no Bible. There was Dolores Hope, in a new winter coat her grandson had bought her, standing beside him on the steps, holding up her old pickle jar with both hands. It was empty now. She'd moved everything in it to her wallet in November. But she'd brought the jar anyway, because Noah had asked her to, and because, she told the reporters afterward, "Somebody ought to remember what we used to keep our lives in."

Cyrus watched from the crowd. Not from the platform. Not from the seats reserved for donors and senators and men in good coats. He stood down on the frozen lawn of the Mall with two million other

people, most of them holding jars, in a cheap parka with the hood up, and nobody looked at him twice.

It was the first time in twenty-two years he had stood in a crowd without anyone knowing his name. He found that he liked it very much.

The oath took thirty-four seconds. The inaugural address took fewer.

"This is the last time anyone will need to do this," said the new President of the United States. "Let's get to work."

\* \* \*

The work took four months.

Cyrus was there for most of it, because the people asked him to be. That was how everything worked now, or how it was starting to.

The pardon vote had come in December. It had been the very first question ever put to the country on the new system, a test run, a single yes or no, on a public ledger anybody could check. *Should Cyrus Vail be pardoned for the crimes described in his own confession?* Toshi had built the voting software in eleven days, with help from a few thousand volunteers who'd answered a single post on an old privacy forum. Every vote was recorded on the blockchain. Every vote could be counted by anyone, in their own kitchen, on their own phone, and would always come out the same.

Cyrus hadn't voted. It hadn't seemed right.

The pardon passed with fifty-four percent. Not a landslide. He'd been grateful for that. A landslide would have meant they'd forgotten what he did. Fifty-four meant they remembered, and had decided anyway.

In the comments under the result, a woman in Youngstown had written: *He signed his own name. That's more than the rest of them ever did.*

Cyrus printed that out. He kept it in his breast pocket, where a yellow sticky note used to be.

\* \* \*

They built it in a warehouse in Columbus that used to belong to Proxy Robotics. Proxy didn't exist anymore, not really. Its workers had voted to take it over in January, and they'd renamed it something Cyrus couldn't stop smiling at, and now the moss wall in the old atrium had a sign hanging in front of it, hand-lettered: *ASK FIRST*.

Toshi ran the code. Marcy Wakefield ran everything else: the schedules, the volunteers, the twelve hundred town hall meetings in all fifty states where people stood up one at a time and said what they wanted their country to be. The President attended as many of them as he could, which turned out to be a great many, since he didn't sleep. He never spoke first. He mostly sat in a folding chair at the back and listened, and every so often, someone would stand up and say their name, and he would say it back.

And from all of it, slowly, out of four months of folding chairs and arguments and church basements and kitchen tables and code reviews, they made the Charter.

It was eleven pages long. Cyrus had read Constitutions, and corporate bylaws, and the founding documents of a secret society that met in a vault. He had never read anything so simple.

The office of the President would end. Laws would be proposed in the open, by anyone, and voted on in the open, by everyone, on a ledger nobody could alter. Every public dollar spent would be recorded where every citizen could see it, line by line, forever.

And there would be a new money.

The People's Currency.

It would run on Bitcoin, secured by the same worldwide proof of work that nobody, not even the old Continuum at its height, could afford to overpower. Its supply would be fixed. No one could print more. No one could switch it off.

And on page seven, in a single sentence that had taken three weeks of town halls to agree on, two things were forbidden.

*No public currency shall be lent at interest, and no institution shall hold the deposits of the people in order to lend them for its own profit.*

No usury. No big banks. People could still lend to each other; they could still pool their money, start businesses, build houses, help their neighbors. They could simply no longer turn a person's debt into another person's fortune.

The old faiths had a word for what they'd outlawed. Cyrus heard it said, out loud, at almost every town hall he went to. Most of the people saying it had learned it from a robot with its arm off, on the night it all came apart.

\* \* \*

The first bills came off the line in April.

Cyrus was there when they did, standing in the old Proxy warehouse with his hands in his pockets, watching the machines that used to build human faces build money instead. The chips came first: tiny squares, each one grinding quietly through its own calculation, mining its own serial number, until it found a string that began with zeros. You could see it happen on a monitor above the line. Thousands of little chips, each one working, each one proving it. Then the chips went into the paper. Then the paper went through the printer.

Then the first finished bill came out onto the tray, and Cyrus picked it up.

It was beautiful.

It was a pale green, the color of new leaves, not the old dollar green. On the front, there was no president. There was no face at all. There was a hand.

Just a hand, drawn in fine, careful lines, open, palm up, the fingers loose. It was a real hand, an old one, with the knuckles a little swollen and the skin a little loose, drawn exactly as it was and not the way anyone thought a hand should look. It was letting go of something. You couldn't quite see what. A coin, maybe. Or a seed.

Behind it, inside the security seal, was a small clock face. The ring was broken open at the top, where the twelve should be, and the hands were set at ten minutes past ten.

At the bottom, in small type, the serial number began with eleven zeros. Beside it: *Minted in block 931,240.*

And under the serial number, so small you almost needed a magnifying glass, a single line:

*Draw what's actually there.*

There was no artist's signature. There never would be. The design had arrived in Toshi's Ghostline inbox in February, from an account that had never sent anything before and never sent anything again, as a set of pencil drawings, scanned slightly crooked on an old library computer.

Cyrus knew whose hand it was. So did Toshi, and Marcy, and one machine that had stood in the corner of a storage unit for most of a year.

Nobody else ever would.

\* \* \*

The vaults opened in May.

There were eleven of them, it turned out, in eleven cities, under eleven banks. The round library in Cincinnati had only been the oldest. When the federal investigators finally got the last of the doors open, with the help of an old locksmith from Dayton and, according to some reports, a door that simply swung open on its own one morning, they found more than ledgers.

They found shelves. Shelves and shelves, in climate-controlled rooms, of things the Continuum had bought over a hundred years and then put away where nobody would ever see them.

A treatment called Halverin-9, developed by a small lab in Oregon in 1997, for a degenerative nerve disease that had no cure. The lab's founder had been offered a very large number with a great many zeros, and the formula had gone into a vault in Atlanta, and the disease had

gone on having no cure for twenty-nine more years.

A battery design, patented in 1971 by an engineer in Michigan, that could hold three times the charge of anything on the market and would never wear out. It had been bought the week it was filed. The engineer had died in 1988, still working at a hardware store.

A cancer treatment called the Sollen protocol, developed at a university lab in Wisconsin in 1986, that taught the body's own immune system to find and destroy certain tumors in four visits. It had been bought the year it was published. Clipped to the file was a single memo in brown ink: *A cure is sold once. A treatment is sold for life.*

A water purifier the size of a coffee can. A seed that could grow in salt marsh. A method of building houses out of materials you could dig out of your own backyard.

The list went on for nine hundred pages.

All of it was released to the public under the new Charter, free, forever, recorded on a ledger nobody could alter. Within a week, there were labs in forty countries working on Halverin-9. Within a month, a garage in Flint, Michigan, had built a working copy of the 1971 battery, and posted the instructions, and four thousand other garages had built one too.

The Continuum had spent a century buying up the future and locking it in the basement.

Now the basement doors were open, and the future was walking up the stairs.

\* \* \*

One more thing happened in May. It was small. Almost nobody noticed.

Cyrus got a phone call from the new chief executive of Mindlink Labs. Mindlink had been reorganized in the spring, like everything else, and a great many people had resigned, and the person who'd ended up running it was a brisk, plain woman in her forties who'd once been a doctor.

"Dr. Veritas," said Cyrus. "I've heard about you."

"I've heard about you, too." A dry pause. "I'm calling about one of our trial participants. Number 114."

Cyrus closed his eyes.

"Under our old terms of service," said Dr. Veritas, "all of his neural data belonged to us and our partners. Page thirty-eight. He read it, you know. Every page. He's the only participant who ever did." She paused. "We don't have partners anymore. And we've decided, as a company, by vote, that a person's thoughts shouldn't belong to anyone but the person thinking them."

"So what happens to his?"

"We deleted them this morning," said Dr. Veritas. "Every byte. The implant still works, if he wants it to. But there's no record anywhere of who he was or what he did. Not with us. Not with anybody." Another pause. "I thought someone should know. And I didn't think he'd want me to call him."

"No," said Cyrus. "I don't think he would."

He hung up, and stood for a while in the old Proxy warehouse, watching the green bills come off the line, each one with an old man's hand on it, letting go.

\* \* \*

The Charter was ratified on the first of June, by a vote of the people, on a ledger anyone could check.

One hundred and forty-one million votes. Every one of them recorded. Every one of them counted, in kitchens and libraries and on cell phones, by anyone who wanted to count. Seventy-eight percent yes.

The last President of the United States signed it that afternoon at the big wooden desk in the Oval Office. The same desk. Someone had cleaned the blue coolant off the blotter months ago, but if you looked closely, Cyrus had heard, there was still a faint stain in the wood near the front edge.

He signed it with an ordinary pen. Then he set the pen down, and stood up, and buttoned his jacket, and walked out of the office, and out of the building, and out through the gate onto Pennsylvania Avenue, where a few thousand people had gathered with their jars.

He didn't make a speech. He just walked down the steps and into the crowd, and they made room for him, and closed around him, and kept walking.

Behind him, in the Oval Office, the desk was empty. Nobody would ever sit at it again. Within the year, it would be moved to a museum, to sit behind a velvet rope with a small brass plaque.

The plaque would say only: *Retired.*

# Epilogue

## *What's Actually There*

*Harold*

On Saturday mornings, I walk to school.

It's a mile and a half from my room above the dry cleaner to Paperton Central. I used to drive it, back when I taught there, back when I had a car and somewhere I had to be by 7:40. Now I walk it, because I have time, and because there's so much to see.

This morning it was spring. The real kind, the kind that smells like cut grass and wet dirt and somebody's lilacs. The sun came up over the river while I was crossing the Fifth Street bridge, and the whole town turned gold, and I stopped right there in the middle of the sidewalk like a tourist and just looked at it.

I've lived in Paperton my whole life. I'd never once stopped on that bridge.

\* \* \*

Main Street is waking up early these days. Everyone has somewhere they *want* to be.

The old shoe store is a bakery now. A woman named Rita runs it. She did insurance billing for twenty-two years, in a cubicle with no window, and dreamed about bread the whole time. Now she's up at four every morning with flour to her elbows, and the line goes out the door by six, and she sings while she works. Badly. Loudly. Nobody

minds.

I bought a loaf of sourdough, still warm, and paid for it with a pale green bill. On the front, there's an old man's hand, open, letting go of something. Rita took it without looking at it, the way you take money, and handed me my change and a free cinnamon roll, because she says I look like a man who appreciates a cinnamon roll.

She's right. She has no idea she's holding my hand in her till. Nobody does. I've spent hundreds of those bills now, all over town, and every single time, it makes me grin like a fool.

Next door, the pawn shop is a guitar shop. Two doors down, the check-cashing place is a bookstore called *Second Chapter*, run by the same man who used to cash checks there, who says he finally has customers who leave happier than they came in. Across the street, there's a little shop with a hand-painted sign that just says *REPAIRS: ANYTHING*, where a retired machinist fixes toasters and lawnmowers and bicycles for whatever you can pay, and teaches anybody who wants to learn.

Down by the river, two brothers who used to drive forklifts at the distribution center are building wooden boats. They've sold eleven. They waved at me from the dock with their sleeves rolled up and sawdust in their hair, and one of them yelled, "Mr. Horcross! Come see the new one!" They were in my art class in 1994. They both drew boats then, too.

That's the thing I keep noticing. Nobody in Paperton asks "What do you do?" anymore.

They ask, "What are you making?"

\* \* \*

It turns out that when the money holds still, people stop holding their breath.

Nobody's paying interest on anything. Nobody's savings shrink while they sleep. The lights cost almost nothing, because half the basements in town have one of those 1971 batteries now, built down at

the old tool-and-die shop by six guys who couldn't be happier arguing about voltage. Medical school is free. Trade school is free. Starting a business means borrowing from your neighbors at zero percent, because zero is the only number allowed.

And so people did the thing they'd always been too scared to do.

They went after it. The bread. The boats. The guitar shop, the nursing degree, the farm, the band, the book they'd been meaning to write for thirty years. Not all of them made it. Some tried three things before one worked. But trying doesn't cost you your house anymore. And a town full of people doing what they love turns out to be the best place I've ever lived.

\* \* \*

Walt was fishing off the end of the old railroad pier, the way he is every morning now. He held up a perch as I went by, very proud, and hollered, "Eighteen months clean, Harold! Doc says there's nothing left to find!"

Walt had cancer for three years. The kind with a bill every month and no end in sight. Then the vaults opened, and out of a plain gray box in Chicago came the Sollen protocol: a treatment from 1986 that teaches the body to find the cancer and finish it, in four visits. Four. Then you go home and go fishing.

The memo clipped to that file has become the most famous sentence of the century. They teach it in schools now. *A cure is sold once. A treatment is sold for life.*

Once people read that, they couldn't unread it. And something changed in how the whole world thinks about getting well. Labs everywhere are racing now, not to manage diseases, but to end them, one after another, and give the answers away. Every month there's news. A cure here. A breakthrough there. My neighbor Ellen, who was in a wheelchair for eleven years, walked to her mailbox last week on her own two feet, on Halverin-9, and the whole street came out and applauded, and she curtsied.

People aren't afraid of the doctor anymore. They're afraid of missing out on their lives, which is a much better thing to be afraid of.

\* \* \*

If the vaults taught the world anything, it's this: an idea locked in a basement helps nobody. So people stopped locking them up.

It's written right into the Charter, on page nine. Anything released to the public stays free, forever. Anyone can use it, change it, improve it, and build on it, so long as they share what they build the same way. The programmers have an old word for that. They call it *copyleft*. Toshi explained it to me once: "Copyright says *mine*. Copyleft says *ours*, and keep it that way."

And then there are the printers.

There's a 3D printer in every library in Paperton now, and the high school, and the fire station, and the back of the repair shop on Main Street. There's even one in the corner of Room 114. You find a design someone shared, anyone, anywhere in the world, and you print it. A part for your tractor. A pump for your well. A battery casing. A brace for your bad knee. A tiny hand for a little girl who was born without one, printed in her favorite color, purple, at the library on a Tuesday afternoon, while her mother cried and the librarian pretended not to.

The cures work the same way now. A lab in Nairobi improved the Sollen protocol last fall and posted it the same day. A lab in Cleveland improved *that* one in the winter. A grad student in Seoul found a way to make Halverin-9 out of things you can grow. Nobody's hiding anything. Nobody's sitting on anything, waiting for the price to go up. The answers go out into the world as fast as people find them, and the next person picks them up and runs.

And here's the part I love: good ideas get rewarded.

Every shared design, every formula, every invention carries its maker's wallet address, right there at the bottom, like a signature. When something you downloaded helps you, you send a little thanks, in People's Currency, straight to the person who made it. No bank in

the middle. No company taking a cut. Just one person saying thank you to another.

A sixteen-year-old in Toledo designed that little printable hand. It's been printed two million times, in a hundred and forty countries. The thank-yous paid for her college, and her mother's house, and a workshop where she's teaching other kids to design hands.

The old system paid people for owning ideas. The new one pays them for sharing.

Turns out sharing works better.

\* \* \*

I hear from the others, now and then.

Toshi sends postcards from Columbus, no return address. The last one said: *The logs are clean. Somebody found the bottle. Turns out it was fixable.* He's teaching a free coding class for kids. He says half of them want to build robots and the other half want to build money, and he teaches every one of them the genesis code.

Marcy runs the town halls in four states, and laughs more than anyone I've ever met.

Dolores lends money at zero percent to young people starting businesses in Youngstown. Her pickle jar sits on her kitchen shelf, empty, next to a picture of her grandson in his graduation gown. She calls me sometimes. She doesn't know who I am. She thinks I'm just a nice old man from Paperton who once sent her a letter. That's true.

Cyrus Vail teaches a night class called *Ethics*. There's a waiting list.

And the robot is everywhere.

People see him at a town hall in Arizona, sitting in the back, listening. On a farm in Iowa, helping with the harvest. At a children's hospital in Detroit, reading out loud. Holding a place in line every November at polling places all over the country. There were more than twenty of him by the end, after all. I like to think all the stories are true.

\* \* \*

Room 114 was full when I got there.

Full. Every table. Kids, mostly, with their parents dropping them off and then staying, because the parents wanted to draw too. A delivery driver who's working on a comic book. A grandmother learning watercolors. The two boat brothers, who came by to show me the drawings for their next hull. And the boy in the Cincinnati Reds T-shirt, nine years old, who draws nothing but robots.

I set an old work glove on the table in the middle of the room and told them to draw it.

The boy drew a robot hand, shiny and perfect, with lightning bolts coming out of the fingers. I sat down beside him.

"That's a great robot hand," I said. "Now look again. Draw what's actually there."

He looked at the glove for a long time. The cracked leather. The hole in the thumb. The one bent finger, like it remembered holding something.

Then he turned his paper over and started again, and what he drew was lopsided and heavy-handed and the thumb was much too big, and it was the most honest thing anyone made in that room all morning. When he held it up, the whole class clapped. He went pink right up to his ears.

Then, in the corner of the page, very small, he added a little robot. Waving.

"Is that allowed?" he asked.

"That," I said, "is the whole point."

\* \* \*

When everyone had gone, I stayed a while. The Saturday sun was pouring in sideways through the big windows, and from down the hall, I could hear a pickup basketball game in the gym, and from outside, somebody's radio playing, and somebody laughing.

I took out a fresh sheet of paper and a pencil.

For most of my life, I drew what was in front of me: the empty storefronts, the shut-down plant, the tired faces at the bar. I drew what was actually there, because that's what you're supposed to do, and because back then, that's all there was.

But what's actually there has changed.

So I drew the bridge in the morning light. Rita with flour to her elbows. Walt holding up his perch. The boat brothers. Ellen at her mailbox. A boy in a Reds shirt, holding up a lopsided glove.

And somewhere, very soft, the way you feel a hand on your shoulder, I felt it.

*We*, it said.

I smiled, and I turned the page.

There's so much left to draw.



## Send a Little Thanks

This book is free, and it always will be.

In the story, Toshi hid six words, the genesis code, so deep that nobody would ever find them. A message in a bottle. This book is one too. Somebody tossed it into the water, not knowing who'd pick it up.

You did.

In the story, every shared idea carries its maker's address, and when it helps someone, they send a little thanks straight to the person who made it. No bank in the middle. No company taking a cut.

This book works the same way.

If it made you laugh, or think, or look at a dollar a little differently, you can send a little thanks, or find a free copy to pass along, at **eggore.com**.

And if you can't send anything, that's fine too. Share it with someone instead. That's the other way good ideas get rewarded.

*Draw what's actually there.*

— E. G. Gore

eggore.com

