

# **Becoming Savvy**

by

**Morgan Elliot**

Edited by Melissa Barker

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## DEDICATION

To the people who convinced me I had a story to tell and supported me on my continued life's path.

I am indebted to my wife for her ever-present encouragement, faith in my abilities, and her genial tolerance with my constant requests for proofreading.

I am grateful to my dear friend and mentor who continues to provide guidance and support in my endeavors.

Morgan

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# CHAPTER 1

“Stop! We’ll shoot!”

The figure covered from head to toe in black, carrying a tactical laptop, ignored the hired goons with flashlights and careened along the recently waxed floor of the hallway, skidding around a corner as multiple bullets whizzed by.

*Damn, just got to get to the end of the hallway.* It became harder to breathe through the hooded mask while running at top speed, dodging bullets that were raining everywhere. Two security rent-a-cops were indiscriminately shooting in the dark, as they bore down on the intruder’s position, bullets bouncing all over as they hit the heavy metal walls. *I can only hope one of the bullets ricochets and takes them out.*

*There! Just three more steps!* A bullet nicked the hood of the masked runner but it didn’t slow the figure who was now diving through what appeared to be a solid wall. By the time the rented thugs got to the end of the hall, wondering where their prey was, the figure was already on the edge of the roof, stuffing the laptop into a backpack that had been placed there earlier.

Securing the backpack, the trespasser unzipped the bullet proof jacket to expose a harness outfitted with a Carabiner used by mountain climbers. The intruder’s T-shirt was soaked with sweat and the cold air provoked goose bumps up and down the spine. Ignoring the shivers, the masked figure hooked the Carabiner to a rope thinner than the size of a child’s pinky finger. The make-shift zip line was already attached to a grappling hook secured to the edge of the parapet. The other end was anchored securely to a tree.

Night scope goggles in place, the figure glanced at the industrial heavy-duty drone, equipped with its own night vision, sitting next to the grappling hook. A tiny blinking red light confirmed the drone was ready to take flight. The hooded intruder scaled the buttress, grabbed the steel spring braking trolley, and jumped!

In a matter of seconds, the trespasser's legs skimmed across a twelve foot electric security fence, previously disabled, and glided to the ground just inside a thick copse of trees at the edge of a heavily forested area. Immediately after feet on the ground, the figure removed a lighter, two small aerosol cans, and one large one from the backpack. First the figure sprayed the rope anchored to the tree with one of the small cans. Then the other small can was used to spray about three feet of the cordage up toward the building.

The cloaked prowler waited a moment, then held the lighter to the part of the cordage going up to the roof while holding the braking trolley with the other hand to keep it from falling. In short order, the rope burst into a flame. The flame climbed the rope as if it were skittering along a fuse attached to a stick of dynamite. Only a slight hissing was noticeable. If the security cameras had been working, it would have been a surreal sight. Once the rope was incinerated, nothing was left behind; no ashes, no soot, absolutely nothing to suggest it was ever there, except the grappling hook still on the parapet.

Stowing away the trolley, the small cans and lighter, the figure pulled out a piece of electronic equipment resembling a retro handheld gaming console. One press of a soft-key and the drone ascended, lifting with it the grappling hook. It hovered, waiting further instructions. Three more presses of a numerical sequence and the drone banked, then silently carried the grappling away from Aires International.

The trespasser cut the rope from the anchor in the tree, packed the cut length of cord into the backpack, and removed the eye hook. Stuffing all the tools into the backpack and, with one last look around, the thief went to work removing any traces of human presence. Spraying a gray-like gooey substance would repair any damage done to the vegetation and tree. Once finished, the dark figure donned the backpack and took off silently through the woods running comfortably for more than a mile on a

predetermined path that would not leave any traces of an interloper.

###

Savi groaned when her phone went off at 4:00 a.m., ushering in the fourth day of a complex civil intellectual property trial in which she was representing a well-known Bio-Engineering company, Bio Growth, Inc., BioG for short. BioG alleged a competitor stole a patented proprietary technology which would revolutionize the growing of artificial pancreases and other organs from a person's own stem cells derived from his or her own bone marrow. Until recently, researchers thought adult stem cells could only create similar types of cells. In other words, bone marrow stem cells could only create new bone marrow, but BioG had a breakthrough.

BioG had championed this technology for close to a decade and they had the paperwork to prove it. They were less than a year from going to market when a competitor, "Science for Better Living" known as SBL, announced they had been working on an innovative technique which would virtually cure diabetes, pancreatitis, and cancer of the pancreas with adult stem cells.

Today, Claire Parsons, a whiz-bang forensic computer scientist that Savi often used in cases of this magnitude, would present evidence that proved without a doubt that SBL hacked BioG's server bank and stole the registered proprietary formulas and related documents.

Claire was brilliant, but her real skill was in explaining technical information so that even technology-challenged individuals could understand how she arrived at her data and conclusions. Savi just wished that Claire would dress more professionally. Despite the number of conversations she had with Claire over the years, Claire still dressed like a techie. With a mixed jury, this wasn't too much of a problem, but

with the jury sitting on this trial, the nine men and three women appeared to be professionals and would probably relate better to Claire if she mirrored their appearances. Savi mused, *not fair, but none the less, true. I am going to have to do something to counteract this.*

###

At a small unassuming rustic cabin located on a minor tributary near Foster Creek, a tired but mildly satisfied individual, now dressed in jeans and a pullover, had just finished restoring the security cameras, lighting, motion and sound sensors at Aires International. Next, a combination of keyboard entries restored the electric strike locks. The only locks in the entire building that hadn't been frozen open were old mechanical locks used on supply and janitor closet doors and the special electronic lock on the door to the stairwell that led to the roof.

Finally, the backup generators, biosensors, and pressure-sensitive floor detection, including the roof sensors were restored. The program used to paralyze Aires International was so elegant, that even the best computer nerd or hacker wouldn't have a clue where to start looking for the reasons behind the massive power failure. *They probably don't even know that anything is missing yet. I better get to work.*

###

Savi had just taken off her robe and was entering the walk-in shower when her phone trilled out a familiar ring tone. She took a step back and reached for her phone on the counter.

“Claire, did you just get home?”

“Yeah, and just as you had predicted, someone broke into my condo and made off with my laptop and bunches of useless paperwork that was spread across my workspace.”

“What time did it happen?”

“The security system pinged me at 3:00 a.m. I watched as the guy disabled the bait security system and cameras I installed, grabbed the laptop, then stuffed everything I had left out on my computer table into a satchel.”

“Could you tell if the thief was male or female?”

“Savi, of course I could. I had retrofitted the actual hidden security system and cameras with biometric sensors. Everything about the body screamed man, and besides he had a beard.” Claire was laughing.

Savi silently shook her head. “Have you called the cops yet?”

“Yes. The lovely Sergeant Winslow and her recruit should arrive any time now, and Savi, I already have facial recognition being run by a friend of mine.”

“Tell me your friend didn’t break into any law enforcement database. It irks me when you do that.”

Claire replied, tongue in cheek, “I love irritating you, and no I did not hack into any database I shouldn’t have accessed and neither did my friend.”

“Claire, please tell me that we will be able to use the identification in court?”

“Yeah. My friend is an FBI Tech.”

“How did you manage that?”

“You know I worked for the Feds and other unmentionable intelligence agencies before I went freelance. Some folks still owe me. I told them I was working for an Officer of the Court, and that you are, my dear Savi.”

“Okay. I don’t suppose I have to tell you to cozy up to Sergeant Winslow, get the report filed, then get a shower and come over to my office A.S.A.P. I’ll be there in an hour, and Claire, wear something nice.”

“Savi, one more thing. Do you like glitter?”

“What are you talking about? Maybe when I was nine I might have indulged.”

“Our thief will be covered with practically invisible glitter-like substance. If we get a hit on the ID, it will be easy to get a warrant to search his pad. His clothes will be full of it and guess what? It is picked up by most black lights which are used to find blood and se—”

“You don’t have to say the word. I get the picture. See you later. My shower is getting cold.”

“You are standing naked outside your shower? Damn, I should have installed cameras at your place! I can only imagine your long dark hair falling loosely across your shoulders, your creamy bre—.”

“Goodbye, Claire.”

###

“Your boss wants to see you now.”

“Is that why you are waiting down here for me? Jeez, it’s barely 7:00 a.m. What is Hathaway doing here so early?”

“I don’t know. He is up in the tower waiting for you and I don’t suspect it is with a smile. He was a major grump this morning.”

“Thanks for the warning, Lizzie.” Elizabeth Townsend was Maddie’s assistant and a darn good one—loyal to a fault. Maddie treated her with respect and valued her skills.

Dr. Madeline Mercer, known as Maddie to some of her colleagues, was a top notch expert in *Artificial Intelligence* (AI). She had worked for Aires International for eleven years, coming to the company when she was twenty-seven. Her Ph.D. thesis in computer science was so far beyond the understanding of even the best minds in the field, Aires International snapped her up immediately with an employment package that bordered on obscene. Within a year, Maddie had proven herself to be one of the best assets of the company. Her work had brought in almost a billion

dollars in revenue within the first few years. As a result, she had been fast tracked and now was Senior Director of Aires' Artificial Intelligence Division.

After using her identification badge against the card reader next to the elevator, she placed her eye on the retinal scanner and waited until the elevator door opened. There were no buttons in the elevator. She stood next to the built-in microphone on the panel and said, "Tower, please."

In a moment, a voice answered back, "Good morning, Dr. Mercer. I will take you up now. Have a nice day."

As soon as the doors opened to the top floor of the building, Dr. Lance Hathaway, greeted her gruffly.

"Have you heard?"

"What Lance? I just got here, but it must be big if you are here this early. You usually don't roll out of the wrong side of the bed until 9:00 a.m."

He snarled at her. "Your department was broken into early this morning and so was my office. We need you to tell us what is missing and by the way, where were you? I called you at 5:00 a.m."

"I had a long night. I was with my grandfather who had a medical crisis. You know he has been very ill and is in the hospital. Are you begrudging me what might be the last days with my one and only relative?"

"No, of course not," he said somewhat chagrined, "but let's set that aside and go into Conference Room A."

As Maddie walked in front of Hathaway, he trailed his hand down her back, and settled just below her waist.

"Lance, get your hand off of my body or I will flatten you. You know I can do it."

"Sorry, Maddie. I was just trying to be polite and offer you some human warmth. I didn't mean anything by it."

She knew that it was his way of being dominant. They entered the conference room that was already half full with people milling around.

###

“Savi, don’t you look just delicious,” teased Claire. She grabbed Savi by the upper arms and gave her a big smooch on the cheek. “I don’t know why you won’t go out with me. Tell me again.”

“You are going to ruin my flawlessly applied make up, you nerd.” Savi extricated herself from Claire’s hold and walked to the small conference table in her office. “How many times must I remind you that you would only break my heart like you have done with every other woman that has dated you?”

“Oh, you wound me!” Claire dramatically clutched her chest and feigned being shot.

Savi looked at her with irritation and uttered her name in a mildly warning tone. Claire knew when Savi had little patience for her teasing. “Okay, you’ve made your point. Shall we get to work?”

“Here is your laptop. Now do your magic.”

“Don’t need the laptop, honey.”

“Stop that Claire! One of these days you are going to slip in court and call me honey or sweetie or who knows what and lose the case for me.” She was partially joking but Claire knew if she continued to tease, she would be on thin ice. She knew when enough was enough.

“Got everything we need for now on my tablet. I got an email back from my friend and the name of the dude who decided to visit my condo late last night is Cameron Snyder. Does it ring a bell?”

“Damn. We have got them! He’s the head of security for SBL, but why would he himself do the job?”

“Stupidity, perhaps.”

“I don’t know, Claire. He has been around the block many, many times. That bothers me more than how he knew you liked to use your own equipment instead of the junk the

court provides. Speaking of equipment, where is your projector?”

“I left it with your highly capable assistant,” Claire said sarcastically. She couldn’t stand the guy.

Another raised eyebrow from Savi clued Claire that she had better keep to business. “To answer your other question, I have not made it a secret that I have great disdain for the court’s outdated technology. However, how come he did not know that I had begun to keep the primary laptop locked here before each trial?”

“I haven’t a clue, Claire. Why don’t you call Sergeant Winslow and ask her to request a warrant for the search of Snyder’s apartment? If she doesn’t want to do it, then I still have time to request a summons from the court.”

“Oh, she’ll do it. I already showed her the secondary security system and the glitter, plus I promised dinner again and whatever else she might want.”

“Do I want to know where you were while waiting for the break-in at your condo?”

“Probably not. It could compromise the warrant.”

“Claire, by the way, should I ask how you finessed leaving your girlfriend for the night?”

“Iris left me a week ago. Remember the tickets I bought to St. Martin? She threw them at me with a ‘never call me again’ shout that shook the rafters.”

“The usual?” Savi had a lopsided grin plastered on her face and tried to wipe it off before it became impolite and upset Claire.

“Yeah. I’m never home, I flirt too much, etc., etc. I’ve heard that a time or two. All right, let me go call Winslow.”

###

Maddie took the seat at the head of the table and addressed the contingency in the conference room. “Who wants to give me a briefing on what happened last night?”

Spencer Najee, Aires International's head of security, stood up. "The truth is Dr. Mercer, we really don't know. All of our systems read normally up until 2:00 a.m. and at about 2:15 a.m., I got a call from one of the guards that patrols this floor advising me that the systems were down. About fifteen minutes later I got another call telling me there had been an intruder, and a short while later, a third call advising me that they lost him."

"So, everything down; no power at all?"

Spencer nodded and continued, "Even the emergency generators were off line."

"How could they lose him, Spencer? There is no place to go up here unless he took the elevator down or broke through the door to the roof. Did he?"

"Dr. Mercer, the guards said they chased him to the end of a hallway around the corner to the door of the stairway that leads to the roof. Then he just disappeared. They checked the door to the staircase. It was still locked and with no power, the elevators were frozen on this floor. In addition there is nothing in the elevator log that shows anyone going up or down except for the two guards at the beginning of their shift at midnight and of course, all of us coming in early this morning. By then all systems were up and functioning. We really have no idea the extent of what systems were down and for how long."

"Hans, do you have people working on the data and computer systems?"

Hans Schumer was the Director for all of Aries' vast mainframe and multiple networks that were housed in a very precise environmental vault located one floor below the main lobby. Entry to the suite was rigorously controlled.

"Yes, Dr. Mercer. We haven't found any breach or even an attempt to breach so far."

"Hans, what are you doing to make sure that we don't have a second episode?"

“Forgive me, Dr. Mercer, but we can’t find any evidence, no digital footprints, nothing, that would confirm a breach of any kind.”

Maddie pursed her lips, took a big breath of air and forcefully blew it out. “You need to tell your people to search every bit and byte in all the systems. I expect a report by the end of the day. If you need more experienced people, then take whomever you want from my team. This is all hands on deck until we get to the bottom of this. Is this understood everyone?”

“All right, then we had better check and see if everything in the vaults is accounted for, and if all laptops, computers, and external storage are still here. I’ll get Lizzie to run the inventory. Hans, please run one in your own shop.”

She smirked at Hathaway and under her breath as she passed him said, “Stay out of the way.” He didn’t look perturbed, so she continued walking and over her shoulder called out, “Spence, come with me. The rest of you please get to work.”

###

“Spence, take me to the hallway where your guys lost the intruder.”

They walked silently, Spencer knew that calling in a forensic team would prove useless, since any number of people had already trampled evidence that might have been left.

Spencer stopped in front of the beige wall and said, “Here, Dr. Mercer. This is where they swear they lost him.”

“Did you have the two guards tested for drugs and alcohol?”

“As soon as I got here, I called the twenty-four seven lab and had one of the other guards drive them over. The tests came back negative about ten minutes ago.” He handed over his smart phone so she could read it herself.

“Okay good.” She returned the phone to Spencer and approached the wall. Studying it with an intensity that was familiar to Maddie’s colleagues, she walked back and forth in front of it, then at the end closest to the hallway, she placed her hand on the wall. She walked back and forth parallel to the wall several times and each time, moved her hand to a different location on the wall. When she was finished, she turned to Spencer and said,

“This seems pretty solid to me, with the exception of the bullet dents. Grab the construction plans and see if it is made of the same materials as the other walls. Now, let’s go around the corner.”

They walked a few steps around the corner. To their left was a security door constructed out of heavy steel and outfitted with a retinal scan reader attached to an electronic maglock. It was a standalone lock not tied into the system and only Aires’ CEO, Jason Russo, had the ability to open it.

“You say the guards tried this door and it was locked?”

“Yes, Dr. Mercer. That’s right.”

“So, no chance of him escaping up to the roof on a helicopter, right?” Maddie smirked, but Spencer knew her smile was as deadly as a cobra swaying to a punji flute, a wind instrument used to charm snakes.

“Do you want to go up and look? You know it will take an act of God to get that door open. I don’t know what is hidden up there, but it is clear that Jason doesn’t want anyone to know,” he chuckled lightly.

“Go arrange for it and come find me when you get God’s permission; bypass Hathaway. He will only slow things down.”

“Yes, Dr. Mercer, but I don’t want to risk being fired for stepping over Hathaway.”

“Let me tell you something, Spencer, with this kind of breach, you are in more danger of losing your job from the

breach itself rather than from jumping command. I'll stand behind you for bypassing Hathaway."

"Okay Dr. Mercer. What am I looking for?"

"I honestly don't know, Spence."

## CHAPTER 2

Savi was dressed to the nines in a navy tailored suit with a lightly starched light-blue shimmering button-down. Mother of pearl cufflinks adorning her French Cuffs peeked out from under her jacket sleeve and caught the light as she stood and acknowledged the judge.

Judge Duckstein, a man in his fifties with the type of graying hair that makes a man look distinguished and a woman look old, addressed her. “Ms. Lahiri, please call your witness.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. I call Dr. Claire Parsons to the stand.” She had added a black blazer to Claire’s khaki slacks and maroon shirt. Claire didn’t protest as much as Savi expected.

After Claire was sworn in, Savi approached the witness box, and began her questioning. The two of them had done this dance dozens of times and it was perfect with each partner relinquishing the lead to the other in a practiced rhythm.

“Good morning, Dr. Parsons.”

“Good morning, Counselor.”

“Dr. Parsons, would you please give the jury a summary of your qualifications today since you are acting as an expert witness?”

Before Claire could answer, opposing counsel for SBL interrupted with, “Your Honor, the defense will stipulate to Dr. Parsons’ qualifications.”

Judge Duckstein looked over at Savi and asked, “Do you agree, Ms. Lahiri?”

“Your Honor, while I appreciate Mr. Riggie’s willingness to stipulate to Dr. Parsons’ qualifications, I would prefer to let her tell the jury. Then if there are any questions, members of the jury can address them to you, Your Honor.”

“As is your right, Ms. Lahiri. You may continue,” ordered Judge Duckstein.

“Now that we have that straightened out,” smiled Savi, mostly for the benefit of the jury, “Why don’t you start, Dr. Parsons, by telling us at what age you graduated from high school?”

She not only wanted the jury to find Claire likeable and impressive, but she also was stalling for time waiting for Sergeant Winslow to execute the search warrant she had obtained earlier.

Savi led Claire through graduating from high school when she was fourteen, to graduating from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in three years with a Bachelor’s in computer science and network engineering.

“Impressive. Let’s see, that would make you seventeen when you graduated from college, right, Dr. Parsons?”

“Yes, Counselor. That is right.”

Savi continued to lead Claire through the next several career accomplishments, which included graduating with a Ph.D. in computing and information sciences from Stanford University, earning another Ph.D. at the Chinese University in Hong Kong, and working for various national security government agencies.

Once she rolled through everything, she was ready to set the jury up for perhaps the most important piece of background information. First, she feigned an astonished look, though she had heard this dozens of times. She observed the jury and when she thought the timing was right, said, “Well Dr. Parsons, that is quite a career. Would you explain to us what you are qualified to do with all these degrees?”

“Certainly.” Claire adopted an “ah shucks” demeanor and said, “All these degrees are just pompous titles to describe using advanced mathematics and contemporary trends to make decisions with computers. It’s called Artificial Intelligence.”

“Dr. Parsons, could you give us an example?”

“Of course. There are many uses in all walks of life, but let me give you one that you probably already know; face detection and recognition. You might use this every day with your smart phone. The computer is given a set of instructions and allowed to make ‘intelligent’ decisions to grant or not to grant access to your phone. The computer is sufficiently ‘smart’ enough to make a judgement call and that is why we call this Artificial Intelligence. This same type of Artificial Intelligence is used in police facial identification programs.”

*Ironic*, thought Savi, *that she chose that particular example*. “Dr. Parsons, you use the words ‘Artificial Intelligence’ and I understand that it means computers making decisions. Could you explain how that happens?”

“Artificial Intelligence is a fancy phrase for a set of rules for computers. Those rules mimic human decision making. A computer specialist needs to have mathematical skills to develop rules which are called algorithms. It is these algorithms that make Artificial Intelligence possible.”

“Thank you, Doctor Parsons. You told us that you worked for many federal national security departments. Is that what you still do?”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean, Dr. Parsons? Did you leave your last government position?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you get into trouble, or do something wrong?” The attorney put a hand on her hip and adopted a contrived accusatory stance.

Claire lightly laughed, shook her head “no,” and answered, “Oh no, Counselor. I never was in any trouble. The Department of Justice didn’t want me to leave, but I wanted to be back in Charleston, you know, nearer to my family. At the time, my mother was very sick.”

She smiled and paused, giving the jury time to process what they had heard. “I see. Go on Dr. Parsons.”

“The government worked out consulting agreements with me so I could work from here and take care of my mother. I am a frequent contributor when they need me. I really like being on the side of what is ‘right and just’ for our country.”

“Thank you, Dr. Parsons.”

It was almost the lunch hour and in a very unexpected, but calculated move, Savi went back to the plaintiff’s table and addressed the judge instead of continuing to question Claire.

“Your Honor, I have many more questions for Dr. Parsons. In fact, it may take all afternoon, all day tomorrow and most of Monday. I am willing to let Mr. Riggie cross examine Dr. Parsons on her expert witness status before the lunch break and then of course, he may cross examine her after the rest of her testimony is completed next week.”

The judge, no stranger to Savani Lahiri, was intrigued by this turn of events. With a cocked eyebrow he said, “Fine by me. Mr. Riggie, would you like to cross examine now?”

Riggie answered, “Ah, Your Honor, would you allow me a moment to confer with my client?”

The judge agreed and Riggie and his three other co-counsels formed a huddle around the CEO of SBL, William White.

Savi knew if the defense had no questions, the jury would wonder why, especially since she was being so “nice.” If they said yes, the Defense had no possible way to impugn Dr. Parsons’ credentials because everything she said was true. In addition, it would give Dr. Parsons another opportunity to hammer just how trustworthy she was. While she sat relaxed at the plaintiff table, one of the guards from the exit doors walked to her and gave her a note. She thanked him, opened it, read it, and resisted a smile that was inadvertently growing on her lips. She stuffed the note into her jacket pocket and jovially thought, *never had a bomb in*

*my pocket before. Can't wait for Monday morning. The timing couldn't have been more perfect.*

###

Judge Duckstein received an urgent message and decided to adjourn the proceedings until Monday morning. This was great news for Savi. She hated starting important testimony, building momentum, and then having it interrupted by a weekend. She had gone back to the office to tend to other cases and business and it was almost 9:00 p.m. when she decided to pick up something to eat and go home.

###

Maddie no sooner opened the door to the room and she heard, "Hey baby, I have been thinking about you all afternoon."

Maddie shrugged off her jacket, laid it across the back of a chair and sat on the edge of the bed. She smiled, leaned forward, and kissed the cheek of the person whose voice she loved to hear. "Hi. How are you feeling?" She ran her hand over the love of her life's cheek. "You need a shave. Will you let me do it for you?"

"Yes, my love, but first visit with me for a while." The old man clutched Maddie's hands with his own and sighed deeply.

"I know, Grandpa, it's hard for you to be here, but if there is any chance for you to improve, you have to stay for a few more days."

"Maddie, I just want to go home and not to that place full of old decrepit people where I have been for the last year."

"Grandpa, when the doctor says you are strong enough to leave, I am going to bring you home with me and we can

hire someone to help if we need to do that. What do you say?"

"That's awfully nice, honey, but why can't I go home if we are going to get help anyway."

"Grandpa, when you moved into the assisted housing at the Ecumenical Care Campus a year ago, you told me to put your place up for sale." Maddie was beginning to tear up.

"Did we sell it, honey?" His voice faltered.

"You know that your house was very desirable. Please Grandpa, say you will come home with me."

"Maddie, do I have enough money to buy it back?"

Maddie was taken aback. Her grandfather wasn't a wealthy man, but he was very comfortable. However, he never questioned her management of his accounts, which she had controlled over the last several years.

"Why Grandpa, all your money is sitting in the Trust we set up for you several years ago. I can show you on my hand held computer so you can see it if you want."

Tears were rolling down Maddie's cheeks. She didn't need her grandfather's money, but felt terrible that he might think she was mismanaging his nest egg. In truth, she hadn't touched a cent of his assets. All his expenses were paid from her pocket.

"No, no baby girl. I trust you. I was just wondering if I could go there and not have to disrupt your life."

Maddie wiped her eyes with a clean hankie she had stuffed up her sweater sleeve before going to visit her grandfather. Clearly, he didn't remember that he had plenty of money.

"Grandpa, you would never disrupt my life. I love you more than anyone on this earth."

"But what if you meet a fella? He won't want to stick around while you nurse a sick old man."

"I would never be interested in anyone who would make leaving you a condition of their affection. So, let's just wait and see what the doctor says, but meanwhile, I'm going to

get your shaver and make you look handsome for all the dotting nurses.”

Maddie shaved her grandfather, helped him eat a little pudding, and left his room to get a snack just before 8:00 p.m. She had talked to her grandfather’s doctor before seeing him and knew full well there was very little chance that her grandfather would leave the hospital. He might be experiencing what the doctor called an “end-of- life rally” which referred to his unexpected return of mental clarity and sudden burst of energy often experienced before death. She planned to stay with him throughout the night.

###

She couldn’t concentrate. Maddie realized she was feeling adrift and her mind kept focusing on her grandfather. He had raised her since she was twelve when unexpectedly, her parents died in a freak avalanche while skiing on a family vacation in Switzerland. Maddie remembered that “whumph” noise that announced an avalanche was imminent. Being avid skiers, her parents knew that this was the sound of powder compressing, shifting, and beginning to slide downhill. She had never seen such terror on her parents’ faces.

They raced to a thick copse of trees at the side of the main groomed slope, took off their skis, and hunkered down there in hopes that the sea of snow would be blocked partially by the dense fir trees. All three turned on their personal locator beacon in the event that they were buried by the snow.

When the rumbling stopped and the river of snow slowed, Maddie was alive. Her parents were not as lucky. The fast moving snow had barreled through the trees and unlike Maddie, who had been tossed up into the soft branches of a fir tree, they had been tossed around several

times, slammed into tree trunks, then buried in several feet of snow.

Maddie spent close to a month in a hospital recuperating from head injuries, broken bones, and bruised internal organs. Her grandfather flew out immediately to take charge of her care and the return of her parents' bodies for burial in Charleston. She was musing about how her grandfather and she were alike in many ways, which may have made her hormone-laden teenage years easier for him. She came out of her reverie when someone tapped her shoulder.

“Dr. Mercer, I think you might want to come back up. Your grandfather is showing signs of slipping back into a coma and it may be the last lucid moments you have with him.”

“Thank you. I will be right there.”

###

Savi had just finished with her light supper when the intercom signaled there was someone at the street level door to her building. She had purchased the building from a company that ran a textile business on both the first and second floors. The second floor had already been turned into a living space when she bought it, but she didn't care for the industrial look so she hired a contractor and decorator to turn it into a space more suited to her tastes. She had also installed an elevator, a three car garage, and professional office space with the rest of the first floor footage.

She looked on the monitor mounted closest to the loft entry door and saw a woman she did not recognize. She was dressed in black jeans and dark polo shirt with some sort of emblem over the heart pocket. A huge bunch of flowers partially hid her face. Savi pressed the “speak button” and asked, “What can I do for you?”

The woman looked around and saw a built-in camera embedded in the metal panel next to the door frame. She

tilted her face a tad and answered in a slight accent that she was there to make a flower delivery to Savani Lahiri.

She wasn't expecting flowers but was curious enough to tell the delivery woman that she would unlock the door. She gave her instructions to take the elevator to the second floor and watched the monitor as the woman strode over to the elevator and walked into the lift.

Savi remained standing by the monitor. She pushed a button that switched the camera view from the first-floor street entrance to the foyer outside of her loft entrance.

"You can just leave the flowers by the door," said a cautious Savi through the intercom.

The woman answered, "Ms. Lahiri, I need a signature, if you don't mind."

"Okay ma'am." Before she had a chance to say anything else, she caught a movement out of her periphery. Just before Savi dove for the floor, she saw the muzzle of a gun come up. Bullets riveted the door and tore the dead bolt lock to pieces. The chain lock was still attached, but she knew it wouldn't last long. She flew to her bedroom, grabbed her Smith & Wesson 9mm from the nightstand drawer, removed the safety, and took a position with her back against the wall next to the bedroom doorway.

Hearing the front door crack and splinter, she knew the woman was in the loft. With nervous sweat pouring down her face and back, she waited for the intruder to enter. She was ready. Once the woman made her way through the loft to the master bedroom, she stopped just before entering. Only her forearms and hands holding her gun with a silencer were showing through the doorway. Savi pivoted, got into a crouch, and pulled the trigger two times, dropping the woman. The intruder's automatic fell from her hand as Savi's bullets entered her chest. Savi kicked it away and waited until it skittered down the polished bamboo floor to the end of the hallway before she checked to see if the woman was still alive. She wasn't.

###

Sergeant Winslow was the first on the scene. Claire arrived shortly after Winslow, but prior to the portly homicide detective who reeked of retirement on the horizon. The detective didn't bother to call for crime scene technicians, but did summon a photographer, the *ADA* (Assistant District Attorney) on call, and the coroner.

By the time the circus was wrapped up, it was well after midnight. The ADA did not know Savi, but knew her reputation was sterling. She advised that no charges would follow but to please arrange to give a statement as soon as possible.

###

“Savi honey, I ran you a bath,” yelled Claire. She left the bathroom and found her sitting on the edge of the couch in her sparse condo living room nursing a glass of wine. “Come on sweetie, let's get you into a bath, and then bed.”

Savi mutely nodded, took Claire's outstretched hand and followed her into the guest room. It hadn't taken much convincing to have her leave her loft and stay with Claire. She knew once word got out that a hired assassin had been killed, whoever hired her might try again.

###

Maddie had fallen asleep in the recliner next to her grandfather's bed. She heard her grandfather calling and shook the fog from her brain. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was almost 4:00 a.m. She got up and bent over the bed. “Yes, Grandpa? I'm here.”

“Baby, I don't feel so well,” Maddie's grandfather wheezed. It took him a moment to catch his breath before he

said, “In case you don’t know, I loved you more than I loved your father.”

His chuckle came out as a strangled rasp. Maddie recognized her grandfather’s attempt at a joke, one they had shared between the two of them since she was a small child. She was about to respond, but remained still as she watched him close his eyes and expel what she thought might be his last breath.

Maddie used the call button to summon medical personnel. Her grandfather had a Do Not Resuscitate order. She waited for the nurse to listen to her grandfather’s heart, then say, “I’m sorry Dr. Mercer, he is gone. Do you want to sit here for a while?”

Maddie nodded her head and sat back down, while the nurse left her alone with the husk of her grandfather.

###

“Maddie, where the hell are you?” yelled Lance Hathaway into his phone. “I’ve already left three messages for you. If you don’t call me back within the hour, consider yourself fired!” That was the fourth voicemail he had left. She knew that no matter what she did or didn’t do, Jason Russo, the CEO of Aires International, would never let Lance fire her.

The next voicemail was from Spencer. “Dr. Mercer, I wanted you to know that we have reviewed the construction plans as you asked me to and the wall is constructed with the same materials as the other walls. Do you want to see the plans or should I return them to the vault?”

The third voicemail was from Hans. “Dr. Mercer we think we may have found how the intruder got into the network. We also finished the inventory of network equipment. Nothing was missing. When you get in, come find me and I will bring you up to date.”

The final voicemail was from Lizzie. “Maddie, I finished the inventory and all the non-network equipment is accounted for and the schematic inventory is complete too. Nothing is missing. Do you have any further instructions for me?”

Maddie finished with the funeral home and once outside, paced in front of the portico as she took deep breaths of air. She hit the speed dial button for Lizzie and when she answered said, “Thanks for the update, Lizzie. Would you do me a favor? I’m going to be out of the office a week or so. My grandfather died last night and I need some time to sort things out.”

“Oh Maddie, I am so very sorry. Please tell me what you need and I will see to it.”

“Thank you and as soon as I have all the arrangements, I will let you know. Meanwhile, talk to Spencer and tell him he can put the plans back in the vault. He will know what I mean. Then, please get hold of Hans, and tell him I will be out of the office but he can send me a screen shot of where he thinks the network was breeched. Finally, call Hathaway and tell him to stuff it.”

“Ah, Maddie, I can do the first two, but not sure I want to be fired for doing the third. You aren’t serious, are you?” Lizzie experienced a smidgen of anxiety waiting for Maddie’s answer. Maddie and Lance had a very explosive relationship since day one when Jason Russo, their CEO, hired her in spite of Lance’s objections.

“Lizzie, tell him my grandfather died last night and I have to take a few days off from work to attend to matters. Also, could you get the same message to Jason before you tell Lance?”

“Sure. I’ll drop you a text when I finish with everything. Now, is there anything I can do for you?”

Maddie thought a moment and said, “Make sure all my desk drawers are locked as well as the file cabinets and double check to see that my desk top computer is in

lockdown. I have my laptop. Finally, tell Hans not to let anyone have access to my computer, not even Lance. Can you handle that? I know Lance can be quite a bully.”

“I know how to stop him dead in his tracks,” said Lizzie chuckling just a little.

“And how do you do that?” asked Maddie.

“You really don’t want to know, boss.”

“Okay then, I guess I don’t want to mess with your secrets. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Thanks for everything.”

###

Maddie slipped into the seat of her car and pondered her next move. In truth, there was nothing more to be done. Her grandfather had arranged his own funeral when he left his home and went into assisted living. He was to be cremated after the statutory waiting period. She would return tomorrow morning to witness the cremation and take home his ashes. He did not want a wake, nor a funeral reception, but if Maddie wanted to hold a memorial for him at a later date, he was okay with that. Maddie doubted that she would do that though, because most of his friends had either passed or were in care facilities themselves. She thought she might make a sizeable donation to his favorite charity, the Charleston Animal Society, in lieu of a memorial.

## CHAPTER 3

Claire drove Savi straight to work. She was met by her father who escorted her upstairs and directly into her office.

“When were you going to tell me?” Her father was angrily tapping his toe, “and how did you get to work? Surely you didn’t drive yourself or worse, walk?”

“Claire drove me and I was going to tell you this morning when I got into the office, but it looks like you already know.”

“Damn right I know. How do you expect something like this to stay quiet?”

“Was it the detective that called you? He was barely alive.” She was trying to remain calm.

“No, it was the medical examiner. Remember, the one who went to medical school with your brother?”

*My brother, the doctor in Houston, still has long arms,* she mused. “Well Dad, then he told you I was a good shot!”

Her father ignored his daughter’s snide retort. “Savi, I am worried about you. I want to hire a bodyguard to accompany you wherever you go at least until the police catch whoever is responsible for this. I also sent someone to install a new door. They will drop off keys here at the office.”

“Dad, no bodyguard dogging me, please. However, I will let you hire someone to keep guard in the first floor foyer, if it makes you feel better. Honestly, I didn’t think this trial would create this type of discord.”

“Please, Savi, promise me until the trial is over, you will keep a low profile.”

“Okay, I promise. I have work to do now. The judge postponed the trial until Monday, but I have other cases. I will see you later Dad.” Savi turned her back to her father, unlocked her credenza file drawers, chose certain files, and sat down at her desk.

###

“Geez, you are one incompetent idiot. Why the hell can’t you get anything right? We had to sneak Snyder out of the country. Did it ever occur to you that they might have set a trap and do you have any idea how expensive it was to send him half way across the world? Now, on top of that, we have a dead assassin. Can she be traced back to you?”

“No, no way she can be traced back to me. I used a burner which is now at the bottom of the Cooper River, and I used an iPad, which is at the bottom of the Wando river, and I paid her from the bank account in the Caymans you told me to use.”

“Where did you buy the phone and iPad? Hopefully not in the same place?”

“No, I bought one in Georgia and one in Florida all with cash.”

“Let’s rethink this. We thought if we removed the hotshot lawyer, we could disrupt everything, but maybe we are looking at this all wrong. Why not remove the twink tech?”

“The twink tech is a girl, not a gay guy.”

“Everyone is so damn politically correct. Who cares? Just deal with it. Make sure there are no more loose ends, because you won’t fare well if there are.”

“Fine. I will deal with it my way. They won’t have time to find a replacement.” He got up to leave and headed for the door without looking back.

###

Savi heard the door buzzer and checked the monitor in the kitchen before she went to the front door of her loft. Her phone rang. It was the beefy guy, whose name, Tank, was more than suitable for his physique. Her father hired him to sit in the downstairs foyer.

“Ma’am,” said a deep voice over the phone, “there is a Claire Parsons here for you.”

“Thank you. Please let her in and send her up.”

“Yes ma’am. Can you describe her?”

“Tank I can see her. It’s Claire.”

He responded, “I’m sending her up right away.”

Savi checked the monitor next to the loft door and once again, confirmed that it was Claire. She opened the door, locked it after Claire came in and asked if everything was okay, to which Claire answered, “Yes, dearest.”

Ensnconced in the kitchen, she put on an electric kettle to make tea, pulled homemade chocolate chip cookies out of the freezer, and popped them into the microwave to thaw.

“So, what’s on your mind that couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

“I’ve been thinking about this case. First the fake computer and papers are stolen from my place and then they try to kill you. It’s obvious that your opponent is trying to derail the case. I wonder if I might be their next target.”

“Wow! I hate to think that you could be right about that. Maybe we better get you a bodyguard or you can come and stay here with me. What do you think? Would you have any objections to that?”

“No, not to either, but I was also thinking of a backup, just in case.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someone who could fill in for me on short notice, that is, if something were to happen to me.”

“Claire, I don’t think anything is going to happen to either of us. It would be pretty stupid for them to try again, don’t you think?”

“I do, but back to my substitute idea. I really think we should cover all bases. There is someone that I know, and before you ask, I know her professionally. She is a whiz at AI and all other things computer. Her name is Dr. Madeline

Mercer. She works for a company called Aires International. I think we should call her and get her prepped, if she agrees.”

“Tell me about Aires. Isn’t that a pretty big government weapons contractor?”

“Not exactly. They employ a group of private international spies to find out what our so-called enemies are making in the way of weaponry.”

“Really? I thought that was a thing in movies and novels,” Savi joked, knowing full well that corporate espionage was real and flourishing, especially in intellectual property cases. “Sorry, go ahead Claire.”

“Government intelligence agencies also provide information to Aires. Then they design counter weaponry systems to render offensive attacks impotent. They are one of the leading companies that incorporates proprietary AI into their defensive weapons systems. Seems that not even the Russians nor the Chinese have been successful at hacking anything that Aires designs or builds.

“I have several questions. First, how do you know about the Aires spies?”

Claire just stared at her with a mild smirk on her face.

Savi guessed that Claire might have been one of the contract spies. “Oh damn, Claire. I don’t want to know how you know.”

“I thought that’s what you’d say,” laughed Claire a bit too cavalierly for Savi’s taste. “What else?”

“How do you know their systems have not been hacked so far?”

Claire looked up at her best friend through thick eyelashes, a grin painting her whole face.

“They hired you to try, didn’t they?” Savi rolled her eyes. “That’s how you know Dr. Mercer.”

“There is another reason. Most coders and designers have huge egos.”

“Yes, I know. I have experienced that personally, Dr. Parsons.” Savi grinned knowing full well Claire would catch her drift.

“Let me finish, Counselor. Coders, good coders get cocky and sometimes plant little identifiers into their work and would-be hackers can begin to identify the work, and subsequently the coder. Follow?”

“Yes, I understand, but so what?” She loaded loose tea into an infuser and looking up said, “Your favorite okay?”

“Yes. Great. Now, back to the coding. Dr. Mercer doesn’t want her code to be recognizable and risk being kidnapped, so she has another brilliant coder work on pieces of the system. It’s sort of like when you have two authors writing a book. They weave back and forth into each other’s work to make the book seamless and no one can tell who wrote what.”

“Might you have collaborated on a project or two with Dr. Mercer?”

“Counselor, I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“Okay, you dweeb, and I call you that out of love, or at least ‘like’. I get it and wouldn’t want you to break any *NDA* (Nondisclosure Agreement) you may have signed. So, let’s get to the good stuff. Can you give me an example of what you mean by defensive weaponry?”

“Yeah, sure, as long as you don’t ask how I know.”

Savi nodded her agreement, poured boiling water into a tea pot, and added the tea infuser she had ready.

“Now, let me tell you about one of the cleverest uses of AI, and I bet it was Dr. Mercer who wrote the AI algorithms and interface. It has earned Aires billions of dollars from our government and allies. The AI and interface work with Google-like glasses to provide troops on the ground with never before seen capability. The glasses can measure distance, display 3D building layouts, and transmit and receive video, just to name a few of the capabilities. In addition, the AI can map out all aspects of the mission and

provide alternatives or escape routes right in front of the ground troops' eyes, if anything were to go wrong. No one has anything that rivals this right now. Can you imagine the potential lives that can be saved?"

"Claire, can someone reprogram the AI to act offensively?"

Wiping the cookie crumbs from her mouth with the back of her hand, Claire continued. "Possibly, but it would have to be someone like Maddie or myself, but I am sure that there are fail-safes to prevent that. I also know that she won't work on anything offensive."

"All right, I'm sold, but what makes you think she will agree?"

"I don't know if she will, but we'll never know unless we try, right?"

"Fine. Call her and let's see what she says."

Claire checked her phone, then dialed the number on Savi's land line, put the phone on speaker, and waited.

"Hello. This is Dr. Mercer."

"Hello Maddie, it's Claire Parsons."

"Is it really you? I didn't recognize the caller ID."

"Yes, Maddie. It's Claire."

"Prove it. What was your code name on the last project you consulted?"

"Oh, God, Maddie, really. I'm calling from Savani Lahiri's home land line and she doesn't need to hear this."

"Let's hear it Claire. No stalling." Maddie was chuckling.

"Fine, but you will hate the payback down the road. It was 'Casanova.' Are you happy now?"

"Yes. Very much so. What can I do for you?"

"Maddie, I told you I was on Ms. Lahiri's line and she is with me on speaker phone."

"Ms. Lahiri, pleased to meet you. What are you doing on a Friday night with Claire?" There was a measure of slight amusement in Dr. Mercer's question.

“Nice to meet you Dr. Mercer. I appreciate your taking time to talk to us, and to answer your question, Claire and I are working on a case.” Savi didn’t want Dr. Mercer to think she was another of Claire’s girl toys. She outlined the entire situation and Claire filled in the technical aspects as Dr. Mercer listened intently, stopping to ask a question every now and then.

“It sounds like you have quite a predicament on your hands, and I would like to help, but my grandfather passed away early this morning and I don’t think I am up to it right now. You will forgive me, won’t you?”

Savi was first to answer. “We are so sorry to have disturbed you Dr. Mercer. Please forgive us for this intrusion. Is there anything we can do to assist you?”

“Thank you both, but everything has been arranged. I hope that perhaps we can meet in the future when the timing is better. I would really like to make your acquaintance Ms. Lahiri. Good night to the both of you.”

“Damn,” breathed Claire. “Terrible timing. I really wanted a backup.”

“I think you just want to date her. Who wouldn’t with that buttery voice?”

“Not so. For as long as I have known her, I have never witnessed or seen her date anyone, male or female. She was very devoted to her grandfather. When she wasn’t working, she was with him.”

“Okay, I won’t poke the Claire-bear. Do you want to stay here tonight? I don’t like the idea of you going home in the dark. I promise I won’t wake you early to go to the office.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Got an extra T-shirt you can lend me, unless of course you are inviting me to stay in your bed?”

“Won’t you ever give up? How can your ego be intact after all the times I have shot you down?”

Claire laughed and said, “Oh my dear Savi, I have enough ego to last me until you do say yes. After all, my code name is Casanova.”

###

Savi’s home phone rang and she struggled to grip the handset. “Who in hell calls at 7:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning?” she said out loud.

“Hello, who’s calling please?”

“Ah, Ms. Lahiri, it’s Dr. Mercer. Do you have a moment to talk?”

“Yes, of course Dr. Mercer.” She thought, *now that I have heard a few words I would recognize that voice anywhere and anytime. It was full of warmth and oozing with sensuality. I wonder if it changes when she is angry or when she is—*. Savi reined herself in and said, “What’s on your mind, Dr. Mercer?”

“I was thinking about our conversation last night and I decided that perhaps it would be a very good time for me to get immersed in something new and a little different. If you haven’t found someone else, I would like you to consider me.”

“I would be delighted to bring you on board. However, are you sure about this? You must have so much to do.”

“Ms. Lahiri, I loved my grandfather very much, but true to his slightly obsessive nature, he made all the arrangements himself over a year ago. Truly, there is nothing I need to do, and I would be grateful for something to occupy my mind.”

“All right, Dr. Mercer. Would you like to meet today to hammer out the conditions of joining the team? It’s the usual, you know, an NDA, a contract for services, and a no-conflict agreement.”

“Yes. Where would you like to meet?”

“I don’t know if I am being followed, but I suspect no one’s eyebrows will be raised if I go into my office.

However, to protect you, I don't want anyone to see you coming in to the firm. There are estate attorneys that lease the first floor from us, so I think it would work if you parked in the underground parking garage and once in the lobby, enter through the offices of Myers and Myers. I will have Claire waiting there for you to open their doors and walk you up the back staircase to the second floor where we have our law offices. Would 1:00 p.m. work for you?

“Yes. That would be perfect. Will you text me the address?”

After Savi texted Dr. Mercer her office address, she ran on the treadmill for thirty minutes, and headed for the shower where she thought about that voice, over and over.